

Dod Law

On this open hill you can find some of the most unusual ancient cup and ring marked stones in the UK. We've chosen three interesting spots we'd like to share with you.

What are cup & ring marks?

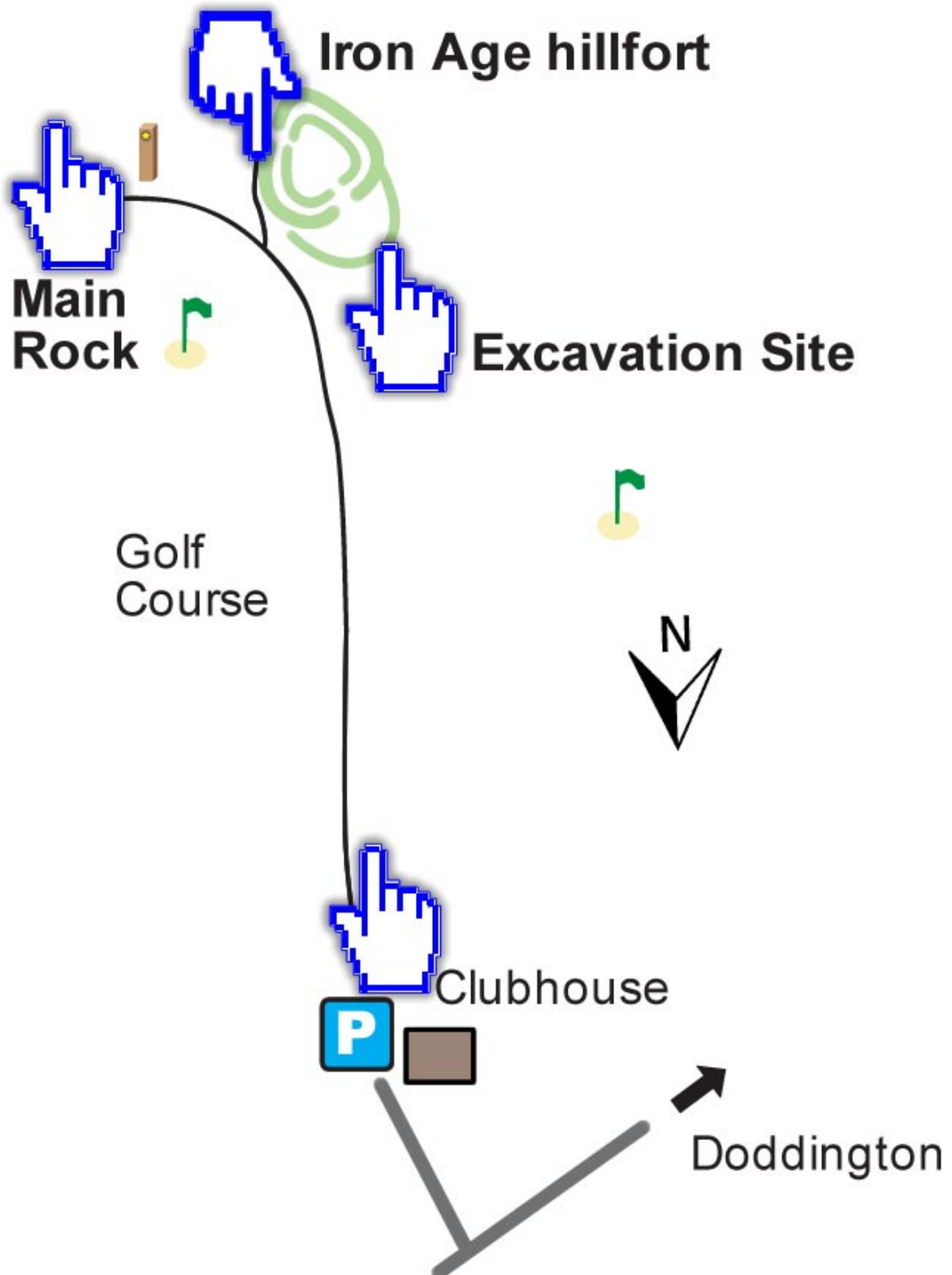
The curious hollows and grooves we call 'cup and ring marks' or 'rock art' were pecked onto outcrops and boulders across Northern Britain and Ireland by Neolithic and Bronze Age people between 6000 and 3500 years ago.

The original meaning of the symbols is now lost but they provide a unique personal link with our prehistoric ancestors.

Let's find some rock art.

Setting Out

Follow the track all the way to the top of the hill (1km). Keeping an eye out for golf balls, cross the mowed green and look for a waymarked post slightly to the left.



Main Rock

You should now be almost at the top of the hill. There are extensive views over the Millfield plain. To orientate to the diagram, stand facing towards the golf course with the rock art panel in front of you.



Take a closer look

Please treat the rock with care.

This enclosing groove is almost triangular in shape (scale in cms).

This is an uncommon motif in Northumberland rock art and may represent the work of an innovative carver.

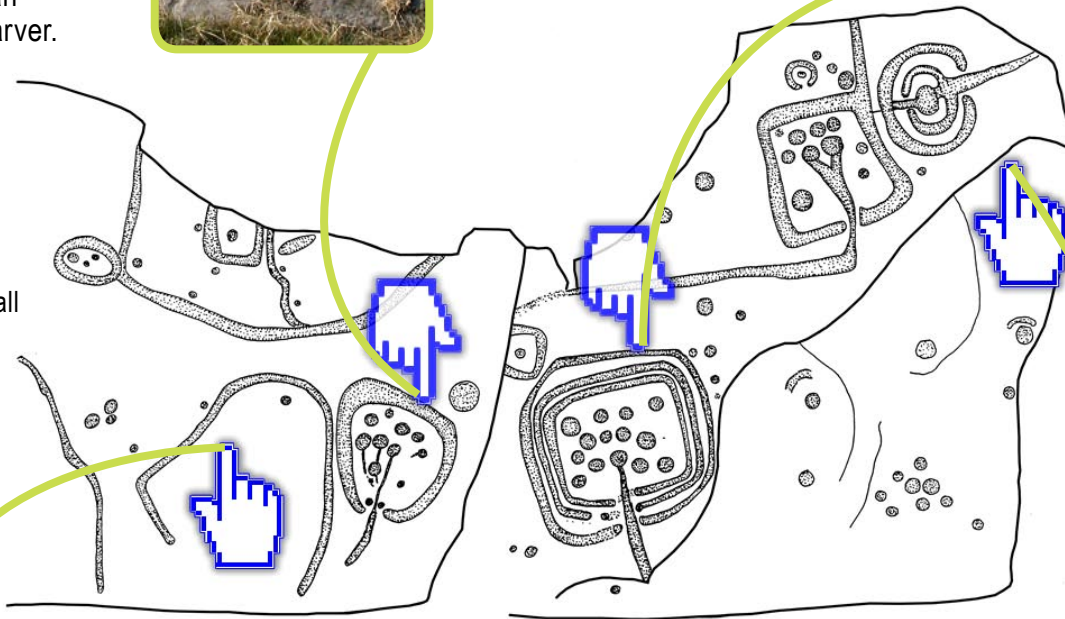


These rectangular grooves are rare and may represent a local style.

Rectangular grooves are also found at the Amerside Law rock art area which is close to the village of Chatton.



Adapted from Stan Beckensall original.



Alternative drawing of the rock by Collingwood Bruce in the 1860s.

It is interesting to compare the drawings made by Collingwood Bruce and Beckensall over 100 years apart. While they both generally present the same motifs there are notable differences such as the spatial relationship of the different motifs to each other.



The motifs on the lowest level of the rock may have been protected by peat and turf. It is possible that some of the rock was quarried away during Neolithic or Bronze Age times and that the exposed rock was then redecorated. This may also explain why the lowest rock appears to have the freshest looking carvings.

Read about Main Rock

(please note that this is an audio transcript)

Phew! That was a steep walk, but it's worth it for these views!

From just a little bit higher you get a full panorama from the sea to the east right round to the Cheviot Hills in the west.

The rock art is hard to find though, especially with the long grass – you'd be unlikely to stumble across it by accident!

Hmm. Can you see the cup and ring marks? Or, should I say the 'cups and squares'?

Ah yes – some of them are square. Isn't rock art normally round?

Guide: Yes, that's right. We're not sure why this is different – maybe it was a local 'style'. Similar rectangles have been found at a couple of other sites in the area but they are unusual.

Does the shape maybe mean something? Perhaps it matters how many cups are inside the square – or how many grooves there are. This one has three grooves and, let me just count, er, fourteen cups! It looks like a plan of a settlement. Maybe the cups are houses and the grooves are boundaries.

Well, that's one of many suggestions that have been made. Your idea might work for these carvings, but maybe not for others. Perhaps rock art in different places had different roles, or its meaning changed over time. We think that cups and rings were made over a period of at least two thousand years.

Would all of this panel have been carved at the same time?

It's difficult to know. Can you see how this outcrop has three different levels? It may be that some carvings have been removed from the original surface, and new ones added at a lower level. The lower ones look less weathered. It could be that they are newer or they were protected by turf.

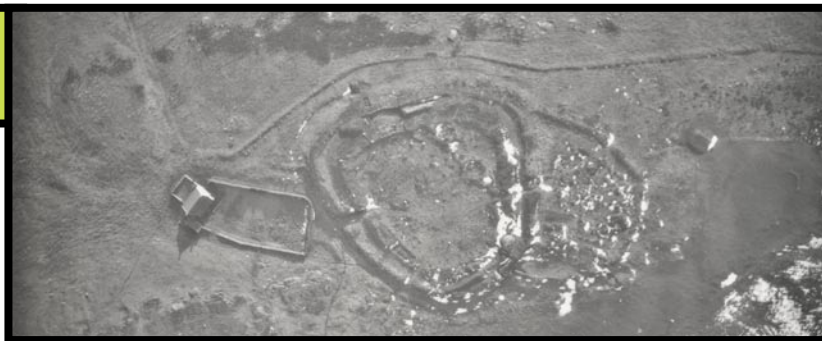
I wonder what would have happened to the carvings if they were removed?

Main Rock to Hillfort

Make your way back to the waymarked post. With your back to the golf course and the post to your left, you should be able to see the rampart banks of the hillfort to your right. Follow the wide gravel track up to the ramparts.

Hillfort

You should now be facing the rampart banks of the hillfort, about 30m from the Main Rock.



Aerial photograph of Dod Law hillfort, 1987. ©Photo by Tim Gates, copyright reserved.

Read about Hillfort

(please note that this is an audio transcript)

Where are we now? Is this bank archaeologically important?

Yes, that's the remains of an Iron Age hillfort.

I thought I recognised the rampart banks!

It was excavated in the 1980s by Newcastle University. They discovered that the fort was probably occupied between two and half thousand and nineteen hundred years ago. They also found evidence of three different building phases.

How do they know this?

Well, by their careful excavation of the ramparts and also by radiocarbon dating some of the organic remains.

Organic remains?

Mmm. The archaeologists also found bits of burnt barley and wheat which tells us that the hillfort residents grew crops.

Right. Did they find any interesting physical artefacts?

Well, they unearthed lots of pottery fragments, which belong to the Iron Age and Roman periods.

I wonder why the hill fort was built here?

Archaeologists think it was a good location for defence. What do you think?

I can certainly see why they would say that. It commands a fantastic view and you'd be able to see people coming towards it from a long way off!

Hillfort to Excavation Site

Return to the mowed green, and follow the outside curve of the hillfort to the left. The excavation site rock art is a few metres off the mowed green. (90m)

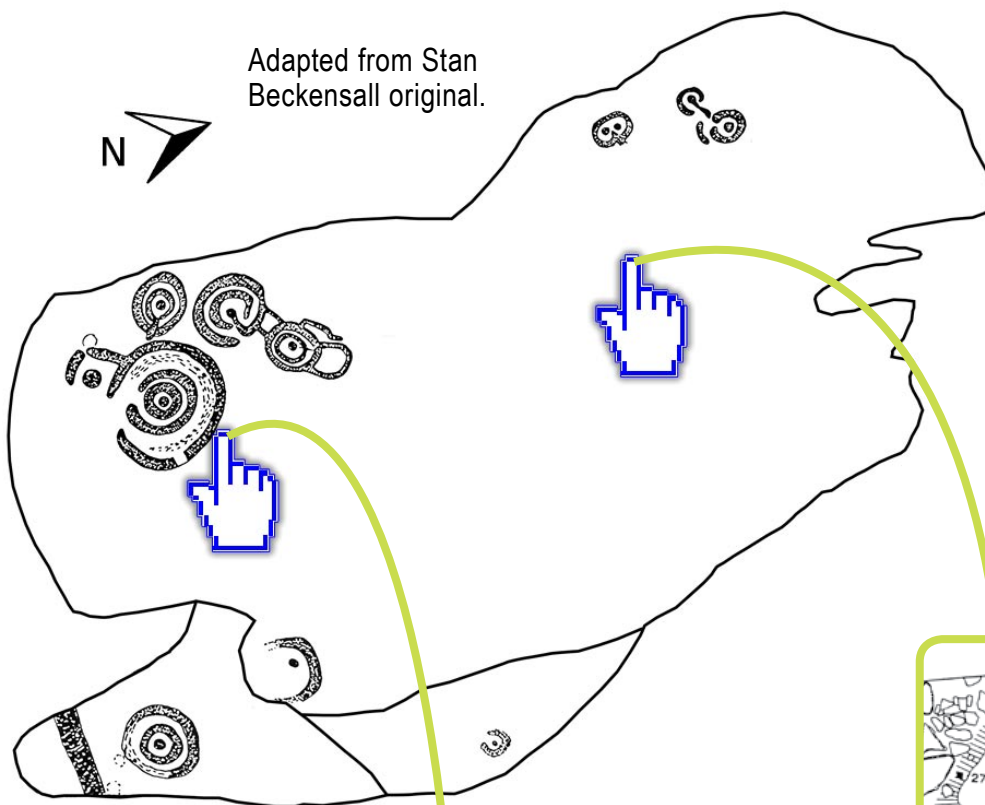
Excavation Site



You should now be on the right of the path as you face uphill, and on a small grassy knoll. The rock art panel is a flat area of outcrop, just off the mowed green.

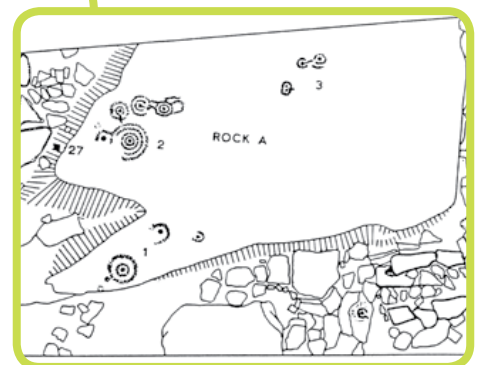
Take a closer look

Please treat the rock with care.



Excavation plan shows motifs on outcrop that were overlain by the Iron Age hillfort.

People have pondered for many years as to whether the Iron Age people would have recognised the carvings as the work of earlier people.



Unusual motif with third ring only lightly pecked. Could it be unfinished?

There are several instances in Northumberland rock art where some of the imagery is lightly pecked. We may never know whether this was part of the design or whether the carver was interrupted and never returned to complete it.

Read about the Excavation Site

(please note that this is an audio transcript)

So is this just rock art or is there something else here?

This area was once an Iron Age hillfort. It would have commanded a very strong position and looked really impressive from the valley below.

But wasn't the rock art here first?

Yes, the rock art was made at least 1000, maybe 2000 years before the hillfort. In fact, an excavation in the 1980s discovered that some of the walls were on top of the carvings.

So the Iron Age people didn't really respect the rock art then.

Perhaps by building the fort on top of the rock art the Iron Age people may have believed that they were drawing on its power. There was a hut circle excavated which had a carved rock at the entrance way. It's also possible that the carvings were convenient building material.

Did they uncover any rock art in the excavation?

They found a number of portable carved stones. They also found a hammer stone next to cup and ring marks, which might have been used to make rock art, but it's impossible to know. Have you any thoughts about why this place was important to prehistoric people?

Well I'm guessing they didn't play golf. But I'm sure this hill must have made them feel on top of the world and exhilarated. Just as I feel now!

There's also a theory that rock art is found in places that are close to where the Gods or the Ancestors lived. Dod Law would fit this theory quite well.

GPS Coordinates for the site

Car Park

- * Decimal 55.58784 -1.99275
- * N 55° 35.270 W 1° 59.565
- * British Grid: NU 00555 32689

Main Rock

- * Decimal 55.57917 -1.99372
- * N 55° 34.750 W 1° 59.623
- * British Grid: NU 00494 31724

Hillfort

- * Decimal
- * N 55° 34.742 W 1° 59.656
- * British Grid: NU 00460 31710

Excavation Site

- * Decimal 55.57964 -1.99517
- * N 55° 34.778 W 1° 59.710
- * British Grid: NU 00403 31776