

Weetwood Moor

On this small stretch of moorland you can find some of the most recognisable ancient cup and ring marked stones in the UK. There are three interesting spots we'd like to share with you.

What are cup & ring marks?

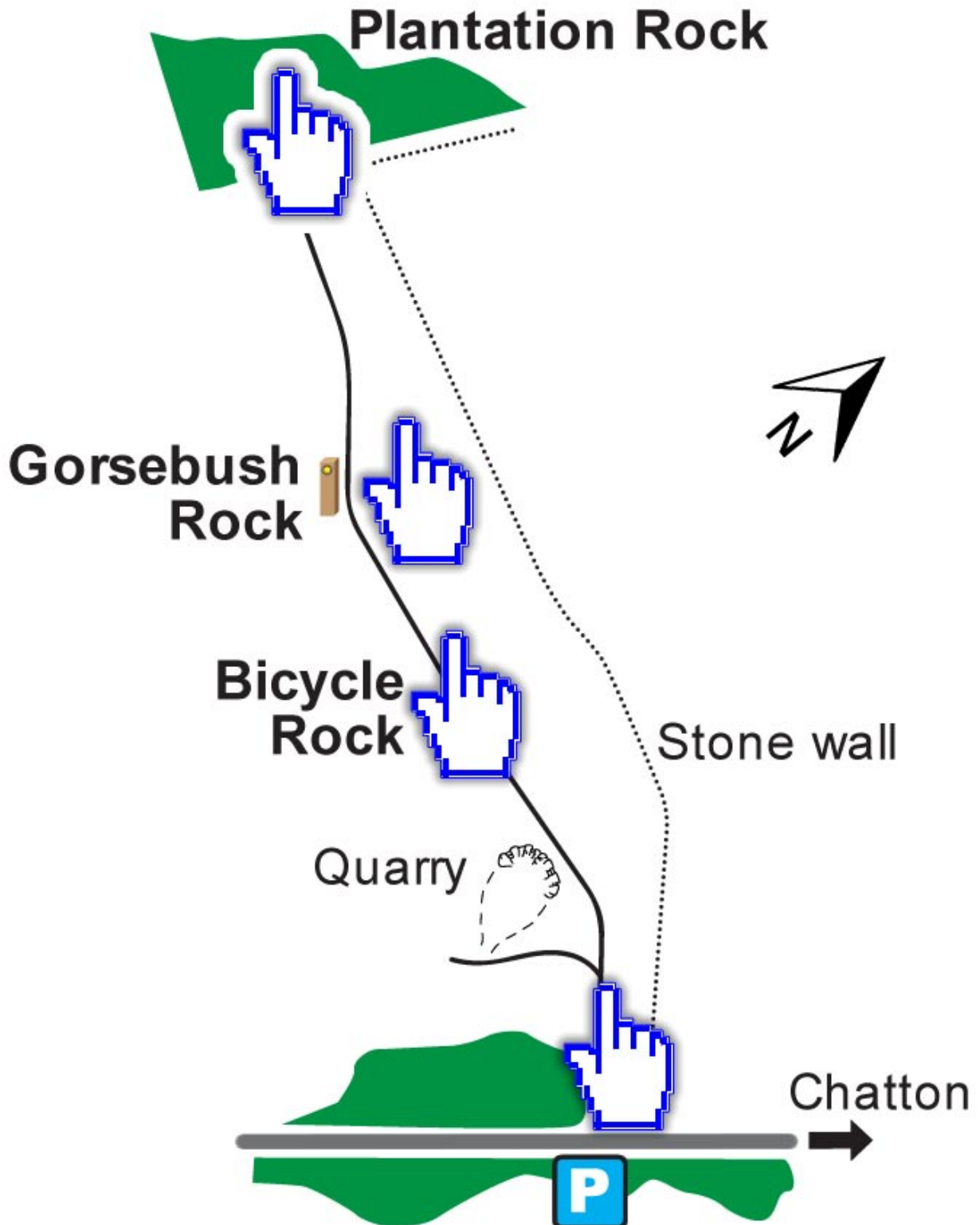
The curious hollows and grooves we call 'cup and ring marks' or 'rock art' were pecked onto outcrops and boulders across Northern Britain and Ireland by Neolithic and Bronze Age people between 6000 and 3500 years ago.

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 footpath to the Bicycle Rock, bearing right when the path branches at the waymarker. (200m)



Bicycle Rock



The path should have led you to a relatively large area of exposed bedrock near a prominent modern cairn.

The rock art is striking, but don't forget to take in the extensive views too!

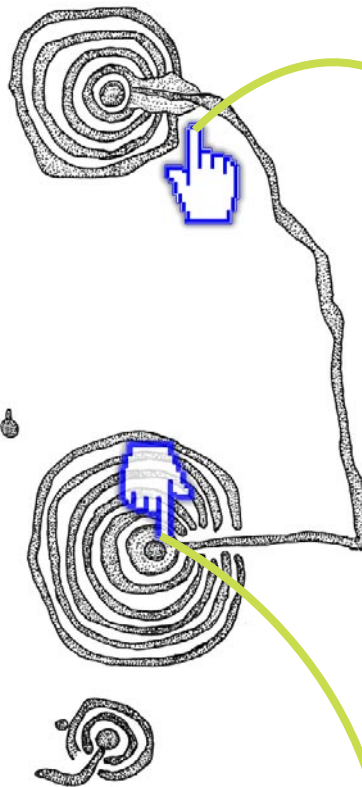
Take a closer look

Please treat the rock with care.



Alternative drawing of the rock by George Tate in the 1860s.

It is interesting to compare the drawings made by Tate and Beckensall over 100 years apart. While they both generally present the same motifs there are notable differences such as the size of some of the motifs in relation to each other.



Incomplete or gapped rings are known as 'penannulars'. They are a common motif at Weetwood. These appear to be slightly flattened, like mushrooms.

It is possible that Weetwood Moor has the largest concentration of penannulars in Northumberland. All together there are about 50 penannulars on Weetwood Moor and they occur on about 75% of the panels.

Note the N-S alignment of these three motifs. Could this be significant?

More research is still required to establish whether patterns are evident in the alignment of the carvings at Weetwood and other areas of Northumberland.



Counter-sunk cup: a cup within a cup!

There are fewer than 20 counter-sunk cups known in Northumberland rock art.

Read about Bicycle Rock

(please note that this is an audio transcript)

This is much bigger than I expected. Is it well known?

Weetwood 3a is one of the most famous rock art panels in Northumberland and the UK!

Is this the only panel here or is there more rock art in the vicinity?

Actually, we're in the middle of an incredibly rich rock art area. At Weetwood there are around 30 carved panels. We'll look at a few of the most interesting ones today, but keep your eyes peeled and you may spot others. Some of them are marked by small modern cairns.

Is rock art all over the place?

In the distance you can see Chatton Park Hill where there are more cup and ring marks. There are 1500 carved stones in Northumberland and Durham alone.

It seems that this panel is quite elaborate.

Some panels are definitely more complex than others, but we don't know what inspired the carvers to use these designs.

Do we know how they made them?

Well, rock art was first made during the Neolithic period—before metal tools, so they would chip or 'peck' the rock with a harder stone. On some of the better preserved panels we can still see the small indentations of the tool marks.

I see. Would everyone have had a go at making rock art or would it have been a special job?

Neolithic people would have been used to working with stone, but there might have been some people who had a special role in making the carvings.

From Bicycle Rock to Gorsebush Rock

Continue along the path, turning right at the waymarker (80m), and go round the back of the large gorse bush.

The rock art is inside the gorse bush, so be careful!

Gorsebush Rock

You should be standing in front of a large gorse bush. You might need to squeeze through the prickly bush to get a good view of the carvings. There's really only room for one at a time! Please do not remove any vegetation.



Take a closer look

Please treat the rock with care.

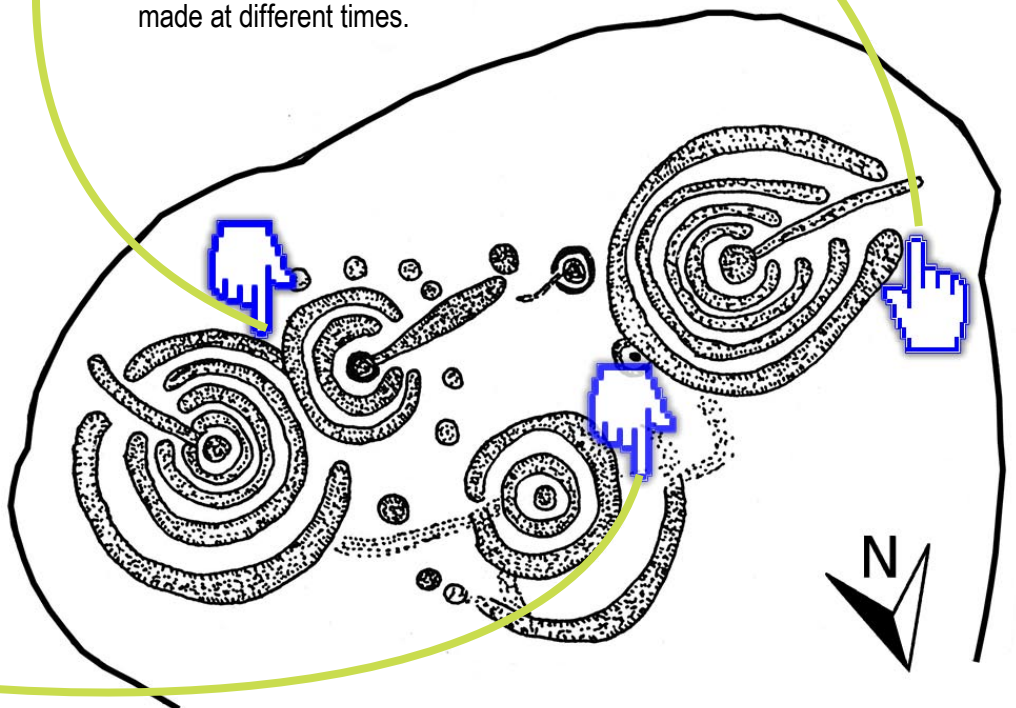


The smaller penannular (gapped ring) seems to cut into the edge of the larger one - was it added later or is this part of the original design?

It is difficult for people studying the carvings to know whether the small penannular motif was made at the same time as the larger one or whether it was added much later.

This penannular (gapped ring) appears elongated and 'pear'-shaped compared to others at Weetwood.

There appears to be a greater proportion of penannulars at Weetwood than other at rock art areas in Northumberland. This might reflect differences in the groups of people who made the carvings or that they were made at different times.



There is a wide gap between the rings of this penannular (gapped ring) and the outer ring is incomplete. Do you think the design is unfinished?

Weetwood contains a larger proportion of penannulars when compared to most other rock art areas in Northumberland. This may partly explain the variety of penannulars found in this area.

Read about Gorsebush Rock

(please note that this is an audio transcript)

This would have been difficult to find by myself! I suppose this gorse bush wouldn't have been here when the rock art was made.

Not this exact one! But the name Weetwood means 'Wet Wood' so the moor might not always have been as open and well drained as it is today.

So would this have all been covered with trees at some point?

Yes, there would probably have been more woodland, although over time people cleared small areas for farming. Soil samples from the Wooler area tells us that the moor was probably wooded in the early Neolithic period but later on most of the trees would have been removed.

Do you think there could there be other carved rocks on the moor which we don't know about? Maybe it's possible that some of them are covered by turf or vegetation...

You're right, but as far as I know there are no plans for excavating or lifting the turf here. Further up the path among the trees there are some more carvings for you to look at.

Gorse Bush Rock to Plantation Rock

Return to the waymarked path and follow it to the tree plantation (180m). Just inside the tree line, turn left towards an outcrop of rock.

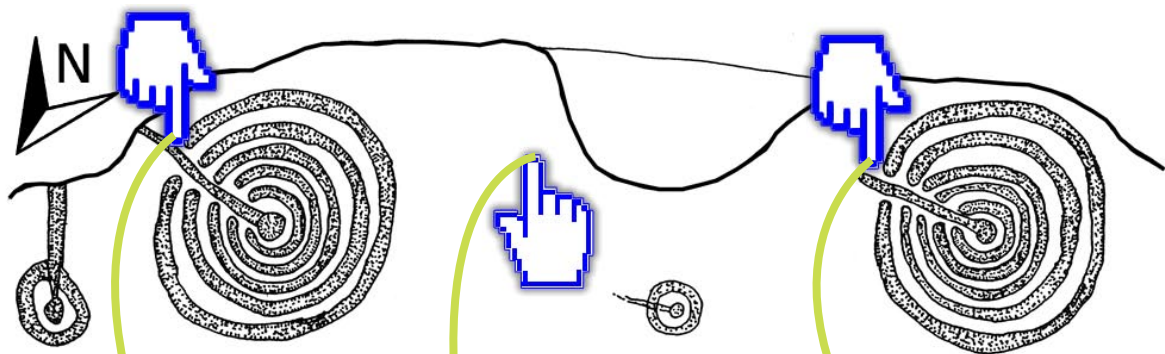
Plantation Rock

You should now be in the plantation and facing towards the edge of the outcrop with the rock art in front of you. You may need to gently brush away the pine needles to see the marks clearly.



Take a closer look

Please treat the rock with care.

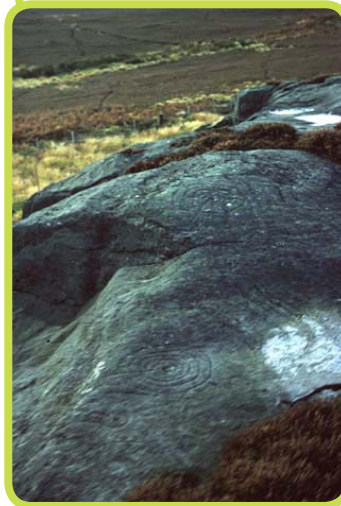


Adapted from Stan Beckensall original.



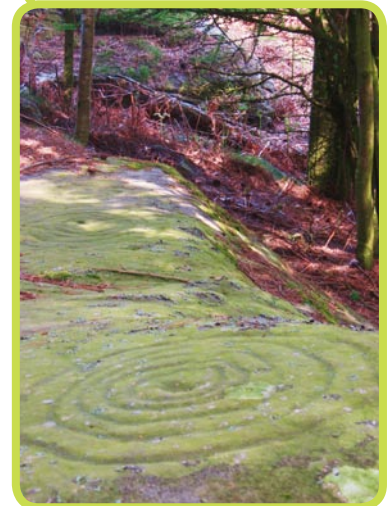
'Radial' grooves run from the central cup. This is a common design at Weetwood.

It is interesting to note that in some instances, such as Bicycle Rock, radial grooves connect different motifs to each other but this is not the case at Plantation Rock. While the meaning of this difference is unknown to us it might have been significant for the carvers.



See how the rock looked in the 1970s before the trees were planted!

Without the current plantation it is possible to see how only a small area of the rock was carved.



Both radial grooves point in an easterly direction. Could this be significant?

More research is still required to establish whether patterns are evident in the alignment of radial grooves at Weetwood and other areas of Northumberland.

Read about Plantation Rock

(please note that this is an audio transcript)

It's amazing to think that I'm so close to the rock someone carved so long ago. The dappled sunlight makes them quite difficult to see too, but they are beautifully done. The grooves are very even and symmetrical, and a lovely shade of green, they look almost soft!

So, have you got any thoughts about what they might mean or why they were made?

Well I don't think they can be just decorative. Here in the trees they seem to have an almost mystical or spiritual feeling.

You could be right about them being spiritual, but keep in mind that the trees were only planted in the 1970s. We sometimes find rock art in stone circles, tombs and burial cairns, so it may well have had a religious significance, but that's just one of many theories. Over the long time that the carvings were made and used they may have had different meanings.

Mmm, I see. So they may have started out as boundary markers, but later people thought that they were sacred and used them in burials.

That's possible.

On the way here I've noticed that many rocks aren't carved. Why is this?

We don't know, but this happens all over the world and is another thing to think about.

GPS Coordinates for the site

Entrance

- * Decimal 55.54688 -1.96396
- * N 55° 32.813 W 1° 57.838
- * British Grid: NU 02372 28131

Bicycle Rock

- * Decimal 55.54752 -1.96633
- * N 55° 32.851 W 1° 57.979
- * British Grid: NU 02223 28202

Gorse Bush Rock

- * Decimal 55.54782 -1.96745
- * N 55° 32.869 W 1° 58.047
- * British Grid: NU 02152 28236

Plantation Rock

- * Decimal 55.54847 -1.97033
- * N 55° 32.908 W 1° 58.220
- * British Grid: NU 01970 28308