

**JOHN BEL STONE STABILIZATION PROJECT
CASTLE FRASER
ABERDEENSHIRE**

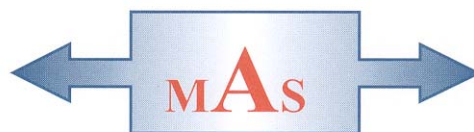


**- Archaeological Excavation -
CAF/09/1**

Carried out 1st and 2nd April 2009

by

Murray Archaeological Services Ltd



for

The National Trust for Scotland

Report No: MAS 2009-7

by

HK & JC Murray

H K Murray BA, PhD, MIFA, FSA Scot

J C Murray BA, MIFA, FSA Scot, FMA

Hill of Belnagoak, Methlick, Ellon, Aberdeenshire AB41 7JN

Telephone: (01651) 806394 e-mail: cmurray@btinternet.com

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CAF/09/1

1. Background

1.1 In 2009 the National Trust for Scotland commissioned a small excavation to be undertaken in the immediate environs of the John Bel Stone, a standing stone on the Castle Fraser Estate, Aberdeenshire. Observation in 2007-8 had shown there was considerable rabbit activity around the stone and a major consideration of the project was to identify the extent of the rabbit disturbance and to record any archaeological evidence prior to the stabilisation of the base of the stone.



Illus 1 Base of N side of stone showing burrows below the supporting horizontal gatepost

1.2 It was also hoped that excavation might produce evidence to indicate if this was a prehistoric standing stone or a 17th century memorial stone.

1.3 Murray Archaeological Services Ltd was commissioned by the National Trust for Scotland to undertake the excavation as part of the John Bel Stone Stabilization Project (CAF/09/1).

1.4 Prior to excavation the top of the stone was wrapped and the stone was supported by four guy ropes pegged to the ground.

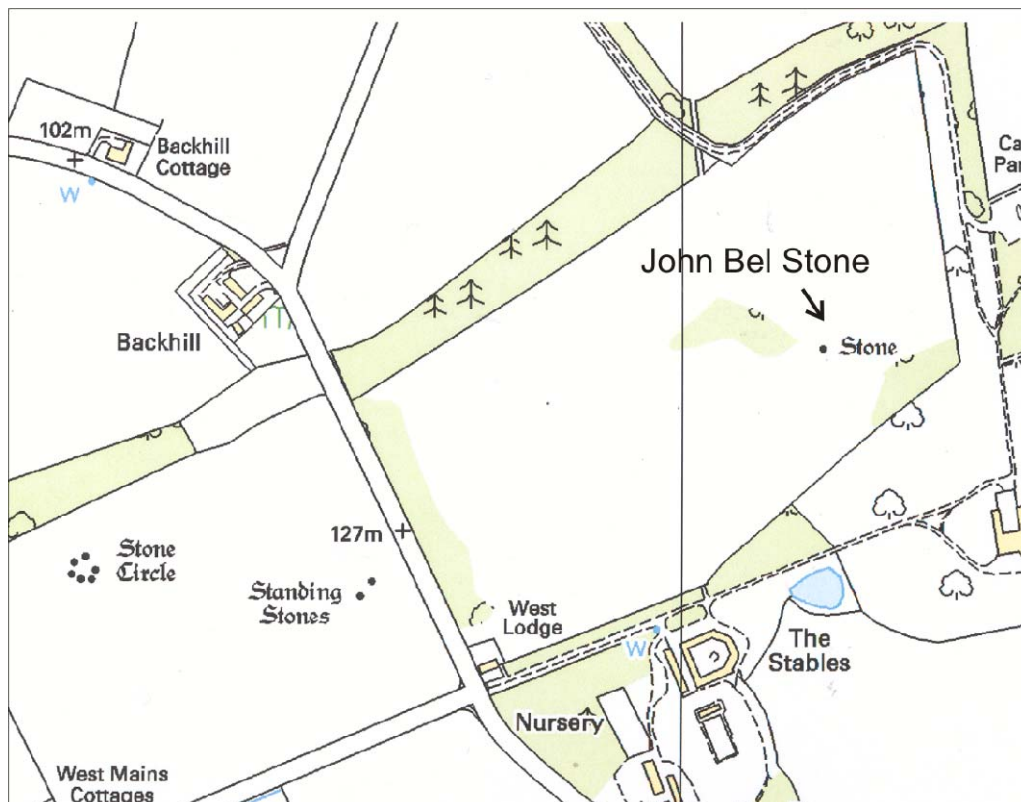
1.5 The excavation took place on the 1st and 2nd April 2009.

2. The site

2.1 The John Bel (or John Bell) Stone is on the Castle Fraser Estate some 200m to the NW of the castle.

Parish: Cluny NGR: NJ 7212 1270

NMRS ref: NJ71SW5 Aberdeenshire SMR ref: NJ71SW0005



Illus 2 Location of the John Bel Stone ©Crown Copyright License No. 1000023880



Illus 3 John Bel stone from the N. March 2009

2.2 The stone as it stands today is an upright natural boulder on the top of which there is a pyramidal capstone. Formerly this was surmounted by a ball finial (now lost). (According to the mason who wrapped the stone prior to excavation, the pyramid is secured by an iron pin.). Horizontal stones lie to the N and S of the stone, in an attempt to stabilize the base – these appear to be re-used stone gate posts (Appendix 5).

2.3 Traditionally the stone has been regarded as a memorial stone to John Bel or Bell), architect of the upper works of Castle Fraser in the early 17th century. However the documentary evidence (section 3 below) suggests that the stone may have been so named only after the addition of the capstone pyramid and finial, possibly around the end of the 18th/ beginning of the 19th century.

However, the proximity of the John Bel Stone to the Castle Fraser stone circle (NMRS ref: NJ71SW6.00) c. 650m to the WSW and its two outlying stones (possibly part of a second circle) in between suggests that the stone was a prehistoric standing stone that had simply been reused as a memorial due to its prominence in the estate landscape. This interpretation has been recorded by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments Scotland (RCAHMS) after a visit in 1994 (www.canmore.rcahms.gov.uk).

3. Documentary sources

3.1 The main documentary resources for the John Bel stone are summarised below. The excavators are grateful to Dr Shannon Fraser for access to this information and to the images of the estate plans.

3.2 Summary of main documentary references

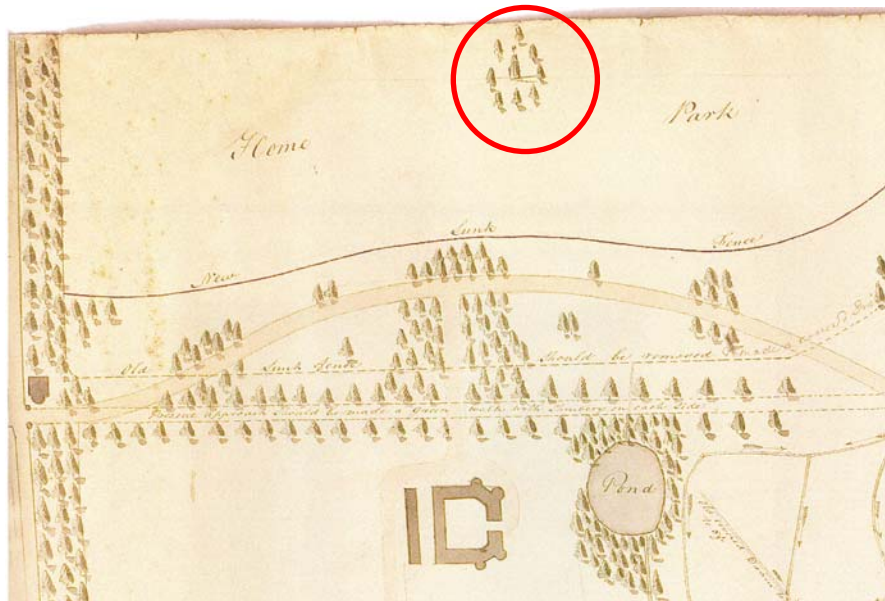
1788 The stone is shown in its present position on the earliest estate plan of Castle Fraser dating to 1788.

Between 1788 and 1799 The capstone pyramid and ball finial derive from one of a set of four obelisks that formed part of a 17th century ceremonial entrance to the castle, shown on the 1788 estate plan but demolished by the 1799 plan. At that time much of the stone was re-used to make a landmark obelisk on the top of Gallow Hill. The finial may have been placed on the John Bel Stone at much the same time. Dr Fraser (pers.comm.) considers it probable that the finial was placed on the stone around the end of the 18th/ beginning of the 19th century and that it was at this time it was transformed into a memorial for the architect John Bel.



Illus 4 Detail from 1788 Estate Map. Red circles indicate the Stone circle, the outliers to the stone circle and on the RHS the John Bel Stone. © Copyright Aberdeen University. Reproduced with permission.

1799 J. Johnston's Estate Plan of 1799 shows the stone, with a possible indication of the ball finial.



Illus 5. Detail of 1799 Estate Plan. Red circle shows the John Bel Stone with possible finial © Copyright Aberdeen University. Reproduced with permission.

1816 According to the Historic Landscape Survey (McGowan 1996) the Plan of 1846 is a copy of a plan dated to 1816.

1846 The earliest designation of the stone as the John Bell stone is on the 1846 Estate Plan. At this point it is shown in a small triangular enclosure on a field division line.



Illus 6 Detail of 1846 Estate Plan showing the John Bel (l) stone named (outlined in red). © Copyright Aberdeen University. Reproduced with permission.

1864-7 The stone is shown on the 1st edition Ordnance survey map surveyed in 1864-7, published in 1869. It is labeled as the John Bell stone. The Ordnance Survey Name Book (1866) describes it as '*An upright and partly hewn stone surmounted by a ball, erected at the time of the building of Castle Fraser (1617) to commemorate the architect John Bell*'. (As quoted in Canmore RCAHMS)



Illus 7 Detail from 1st edition Ordnance Survey map surveyed 1864-7, published 1869 (www.nls.uk)

1971 The stone was given Category B listed status. The listing mentions that the ball finial was awaiting replacement at that time – it is unclear if this means that the ball was somewhere around at that time, or whether intention to make a new ball had been expressed by the landowner. There is no record of the exact time at which the ball finial was lost. The present location of the ball is unknown (pers. comm. Shannon Fraser).

4 The excavation

4.1 The area excavated was restricted by the necessity not to destabilize the stone and as a result it was considered unwise to move either of the horizontal stone gateposts from the N or S faces of the standing stone. Rabbit burrowing was extensive to the S of the stone so, in order to look at the possibly least damaged stratigraphy, a trench was laid out to the NE of the stone, extending 2.5m N of the midpoint of the N face and 3m E-W. The E side of the trench extended 2.9m N-S, extending W to the midpoint of the E side of the standing stone. A further small sondage c.750 x 400mm was excavated between the W ends of the horizontal stone gateposts, up to the W face of the standing stone.

4.2 All basic surveying was related to the N face of the John Bel Stone and all levels were taken relative to a temporary datum in the middle of the top of the N gatepost lying beside the John Bel Stone.

4.3 The grassy sod and topsoil were removed by hand. Prior to this all the loose soil from rabbit burrows had been examined and no artefacts were observed.

5 Results

TOPSOIL: The turf had been considerably cut by visible rabbit holes, when it was removed it was clear that the associated burrows were interconnected and burrowed through much of the topsoil and subsoil (illus 9), sometimes leaving a thin layer of undisturbed ground over the 'roof' of the burrow.

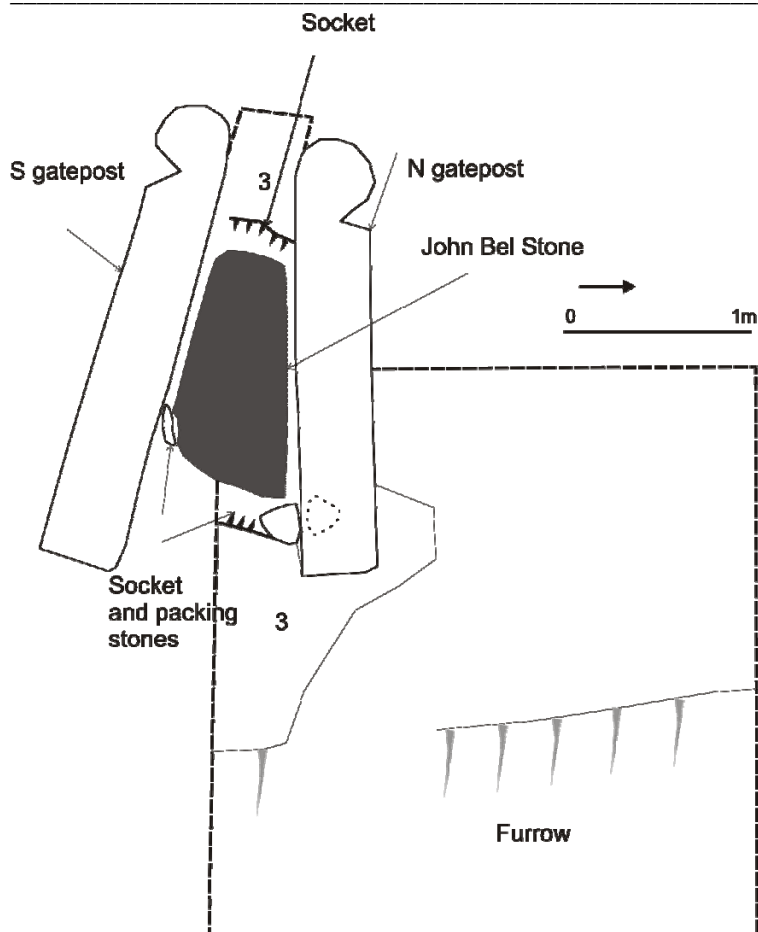
As the burrows tended to collapse the topsoil (1) was taken off in two spits – the total depth of topsoil varied between 220 and 260mm. The topsoil was a humic loam, outwith the line of the former enclosing fence this was heavily compacted and rich in cow dung.

Finds: A number of sherds of late 18th/ 19th century glass and china were found throughout suggesting midden manuring. Of perhaps greater interest was a single much abraded sherd of medieval/late medieval redware pottery which indicated earlier cultivation and manuring.

SUBSOIL: The subsoil (2) was similar to the topsoil but slightly sandier with some mixing with the underlying natural glacial till. It varied in depth between 80 and 300mm. There appeared to be a greater concentration of small (to fist size) stones (2a) in the base of the subsoil at the E side of the trench, where there was also a noticeable dip in the level of the top of natural of some 110-130mm.

Interpretation: This is interpreted as being part of an N-S furrow of rig and furrow cultivation. Rig and furrow can be faintly seen in parts of this field in certain light conditions (pers. comm. Shannon Fraser) and is shown on the 1788 Estate Plan.

Finds: A number of sherds of late 18th/ 19th century glass and china were found throughout suggesting midden manuring.



Illus 8 Plan of the excavation

CONTEXT 3: There was an area of small stones in a hard gritty matrix directly overlying the natural in an area extending to c 1.4m from the E side of the standing stone. The same material was observed in the small sondage at the W side of the stone. There was some disturbance of the top of this layer with a small sherd of glass and flecks of charcoal.

Interpretation: This is too compact to have been ploughed and is interpreted as the old ground surface. It would have been impossible to plough right up to the face of the stone and this would appear to be the unploughed ground, cut along the E side by the furrow 2a. Rabbit burrowing at the N side of the stone left only remnants of the layer in that area. In the 1788 Estate Plan the stone stands unenclosed in the field but by the 1799 plan there are a few trees alongside it and by 1846 a small triangular enclosure surrounded it.



Illus 9 Plan with yellow overlay showing rabbit disturbance



Illus 10 Trench to natural in foreground. Context 3 visible at back. Furrow to LHS.

CONTEXT 4 – THE SOCKET FOR THE STANDING STONE: Beside the E and W faces of the standing stone the socket for the standing stone was cut into the original ground level and more clearly through the natural glacial till. The fill was a mixture of yellow natural

and grey gritty loam; with a number of small packing stones in the fill (one felt in burrow below the N gatepost is shown dotted on plan).

At the E side the socket extended c.260mm maximum from the E face of the standing stone and was excavated to a depth of 170mm from the top of natural, c 360mm from the top of the packing stones. However the base of the socket was not revealed as it narrowed to the face of the stone before reaching its base.

At the W side the socket extended c 170mm maximum from the W face of the standing stone and was excavated to a depth 220mm from the top of natural. As with the E side, the base of the stone and the socket could not be revealed.

At the unexcavated S side of the stone a rabbit burrow extended down the S face of the stone which could be seen and felt below the S gatepost. The stone appeared to extend at least 450mm below the grass level and its base was not visible. At no point was it possible to cut a wider section that might have revealed the base of the socket.

NATURAL: The natural (5) was a yellow glacial till some 300-400mm below the grass level.



Illus 11 Socket at W side of standing stone.



Illus 12 Socket at E side of standing stone with packing stone on RHS (and edge of the horizontal gatepost at RHS edge).

6 Interpretation

PREHISTORIC: There was no direct evidence to prove that the standing stone was prehistoric. However its proximity to the nearby stone circle remains a very strong argument for regarding it as a prehistoric standing stone. Dr Fraser (pers.comm.) also notes that it is unlikely to have been an antiquarian erection as the map evidence shows it to have been in a cultivated field by the 18th century.

MEDIEVAL: A single sherd of medieval/late medieval pottery suggests cultivation in the vicinity of the stone prior to the Improvement of the estate. The furrow (2a) also related to pre- Improvement medieval cultivation of the ground beside the stone – the fact that the furrow avoids the stone suggests it was already in position in the medieval period.

POST MEDIEVAL/MODERN: The excavation revealed nothing to suggest that the stone had been erected in 1617 and the best evidence for the date of its transformation into a memorial stone comes from the documentary evidence which appears to indicate that this probably occurred at the end of the 18th century or beginning of the 19th century.

7 Appendices

Appendix 1: Catalogue of digital photographic record (on CD)

Photo catalogue	
Digital frame no	Content
John Bell Stone 1	
1-12	The stone 2/3/2009
13-24	Rabbit damage 2/3/2009
John Bell Stone	
1-8	Stone wrapped and supported
9-23	Rabbit damage
24-32	Wrapped stone and gateposts prior to excavation
33-35	Packing stone at SE corner of standing stone
36-39	Turf and upper spit of topsoil removed
40-43	Burrow below N gatepost
44-47	General views looking S
48-53	W sondage showing loose stone in topsoil between N ends of gate posts
54-59	Context 3 in W sondage. Yellow natural in fill of socket (4) just visible beside stone
60-63	Trench excavated to natural, furrow on LHS. Context 3, cut by cultivation and burrows in background
64-72	W sondage, socket (4) of the standing stone
73-82	E face of stone, socket (4) of the standing stone

Appendix 2: Discussion of finds

Sherd of medieval/ late medieval pottery from Topsoil (1: spit 1) at the E side of the trench.

Small number of sherds of L18th/19th century bottle glass and china. Not catalogued.

Appendix 3: Context data

Context No	Keyword	Description	Finds
01	Topsoil	Turf and humic topsoil	L18 th /19 th C glass and china 1 sherd medieval
02	Subsoil	Humic/sandy mix	L18 th /19 th C glass and china
03	Old ground	Small stones in gritty matrix	1 surface sherd glass
04	Stone socket	Mix of 03 and natural	None
05	Natural	Yellow glacial till	None

Appendix 4: Levels

All levels are relative and all are below the Temporary Bench Mark (TBM) which was the centre of the top of the roundel at the W end of the N horizontal gatepost. In the table below they are quoted as metres below the TBM.

Context	NE of trench	NW of trench	SE of trench	SW of trench	Centre
Surface of grass	0.22	0.19	0.32	0.25	-
Context 1, base of spit 1	0.37	0.41	0.43	0.38	0.32
Base of context 1, spit 2/ top of context 2	0.48	0.45	0.56	0.49	0.46
Natural	0.62	0.53	0.87	0.61	0.66
Furrow	Top N	Base N	Top S	Base S	
	0.58	0.67	0.66- 0.75	0.88	
Context 3	W side	E side			
	0.28	0.53-0.59			
Socket	W top of cut in natural	W top packing stone	Excavated base	E top of cut in natural	Excavated base
	0.51	0.34	0.67	0.56	0.71

Appendix 5: The gate posts

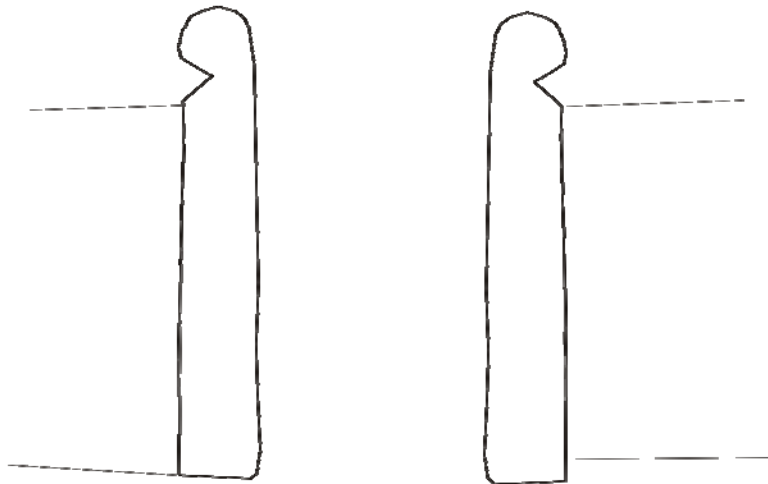
N gatepost: 2.25m long. 380x260mm at base. Roundel 330mm diameter.

S gatepost: 2.46m long. 370x260mm base. Roundel 330mm diameter.

There was c 110-190mm of topsoil below the gateposts above the undisturbed soil context 3.

A small stone 350x280x120mm lay in the topsoil between the roundels of the gateposts at the W end; it was removed.

There did not appear to be any iron fittings in the gateposts (although they were not rolled over). They are of a size that could have been used in the gardens at some point although no posts of this pattern have been noted on the estate (pers. comm. Shannon Fraser). The upper faces visible in 2009 are in fact the backs of the original stones, the front faces appear to have been more finely finished (this is by feel as the stones were not turned over).



Illus 13 Reconstruction of gateposts in use

8 References

P McGowan 1996 *Castle Fraser: Historic Landscape Survey*. Unpublished report for the National Trust for Scotland.