

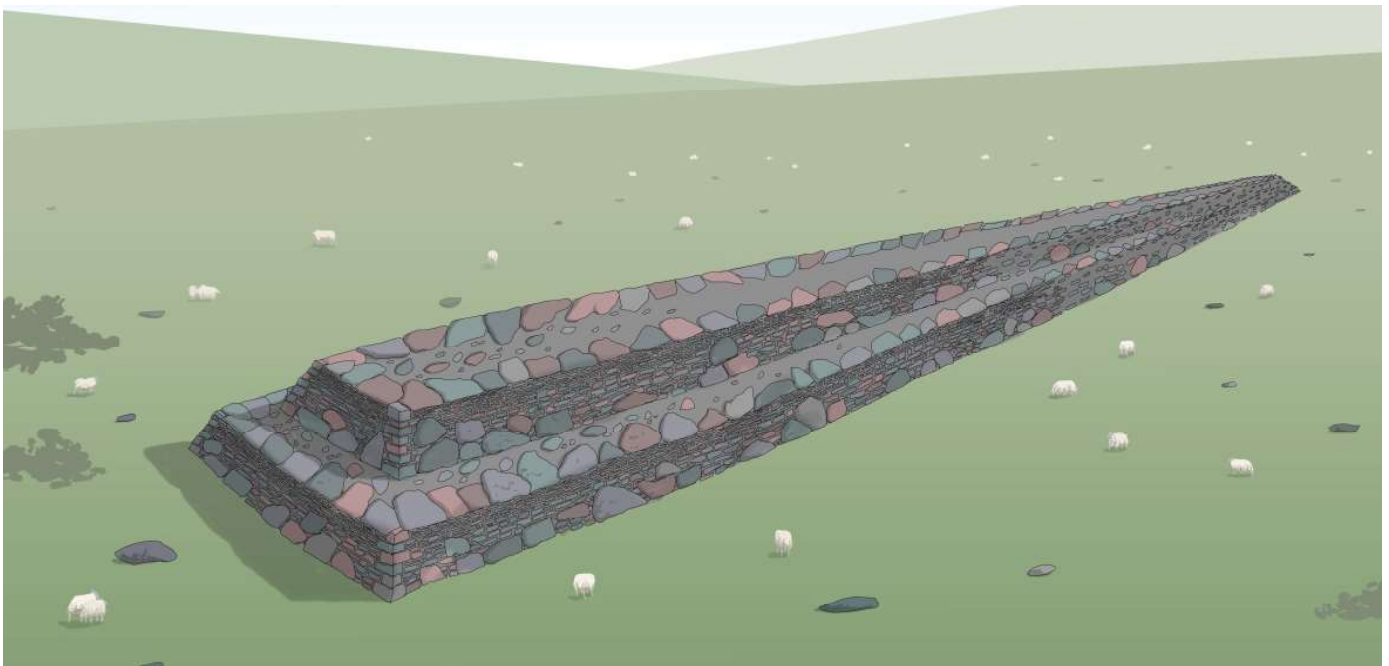
# TEACHERS' NOTES: NEOLITHIC CHAMBERED CAIRNS

## Neolithic Burial Practices

In the Neolithic period, burial cairns featured internal chambers in which the remains of the dead were interred. Some of these cairns were round and others were long, with a tiered profile. Low doorways gave access to passageways leading to chambers which held the remains of the deceased: sometimes the bodies were placed inside while still articulated (i.e. complete), but often the remains were disarticulated. The bones were moved around or even removed and replaced according to custom, and through this interaction between the living and the dead, the deceased retained a presence and a place in their community. The practice of permanently burying individuals intact, in their own graves, emerged only at the end of the Neolithic period, representing a shift in thinking that saw the grave as the point at which the deceased became removed from society, both in place and in time.

## Mutiny Stones

A long cairn known as the Mutiny Stones is perhaps the most impressive prehistoric cairn within the study area, high on moorland some 4.5 miles north-west of Longformacus. This Neolithic long cairn is over 85m long, and tapers from 23m in width at the east end to 7.6m at the west. It is a stunning example of this classic prehistoric monument type, and the only of its kind in south-east Scotland.



Mutiny Stones as it might have appeared in the Neolithic period

The origins of the name are unknown. The earliest reference to it is on Armstrong's 1771 Map of the County of Berwick, where it is marked as 'Mitten full of Stones'. It has also been called the 'De'il's Mitten' and 'Mittenfu' Stanes', perhaps in reference to a common legend that tells of the devil's unsuccessful attempt to carry stones across a river in his mitten. You can find this legend told by storyteller and educator Tim Porteous over on the project's Facebook page, from 27 minutes in: [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=695727911241917&ref=watch\\_permalink](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=695727911241917&ref=watch_permalink).



Like many long cairns, the Mutiny Stones survives today as a fairly ambiguous stone spread, but it was illustrated on Armstrong's map of 1771 as a two-tiered structure. Careful excavation of similar sites often reveals a stepped profile, disguised by the deterioration of the monument, with the highest stones tumbling down and hiding its true

form. Armstrong's map suggests that the Mutiny Stones retained its stepped shape until at least the 1770s. It is possible that the long cairn was built around an earlier, smaller cairn. There is no evidence of an entrance into the cairn, so it might be that the earlier cairn was incorporated into a later, larger cairn, perhaps evidence of a change in practice away from chambered cairns which were accessed by members of the community, towards cairns which were sealed off, a separation of the living at the dead.

The site has been excavated twice: first in 1871, revealing "nothing of interest"; and again in 1924, when internal details suggestive of the division of space into chambers were discovered. This might represent an earlier cairn which was incorporated into the long cairn, as suggested above. On both occasions, the excavators suspected that the cairn material had been disturbed already, and indeed these monuments were often targeted in antiquity by treasure hunters hoping to find riches within. They were always unsuccessful, though, because chambered cairns never contained what we might consider to be treasure. Sites such as rich early historic burials, like those at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, were more fruitful for thieves.



Mutiny Stones from the air (with later circular sheepfold) © J Dent/HES

### Corbelling

Chambered cairns are of drystone construction, and they feature cells and passageways which feature corbelling. Corbelling relies on counterbalanced weight to create stepped, domed or arched features. Corbelling is found in architecture of all time periods, from Neolithic cairns and Iron Age brochs, right up to medieval castles and beyond. Corbelled arches or domes rely on there being more weight on the back of each building block than at the front, to prevent the arch from toppling inwards. This results in very thick walls.



Corbelling in action

### Talking Points

Neolithic burial practices were very different to ours. Explore how your learners feel about this. NB discussion of death and the dead might be upsetting for some learners, particularly if they have recently been bereaved, so this topic should always be treated with caution and consideration.

### Activities and Resources

On the website you'll find a video about corbelling, an architectural technique employed in the construction of chambered cairns. Encourage your learners to try to create corbelled structures using building blocks, or even dominoes, books, LEGOs or DUPLO.

### Useful Links

There are 3D models of numerous chambered cairns on Historic Environment Scotland's Sketchfab: <https://sketchfab.com/HistoricEnvironmentScotland/collections/hes-properties-in-care>