

NORTH EAST FOLKLORE SOCIETY

DUDDO STONES



FACT

“On a lonely knoll near the River Tweed, five wonderfully weather-sculpted, chunky monoliths of an original seven form a small circle c.10m in diameter. The monoliths are substantial blocks of sandstone, standing up to c.2.3m in height. They not only taper in towards their bases but are also vertically grooved as a result of thousands of years of weathering, where rain has eroded vertical channels in the relatively soft rock. At least one of the stones was re-erected in 1903, hence the local nineteenth-century name, ‘Four Stones’.

An excavation in August 2008 revealed that extensive burning activities preceded the erection of the circle, and charcoal found in soil packed around the northern monolith produced a date of 2140–1980 cal BC. This burning may represent a cremation pyre, which parallels similar deposits within stone circles in eastern Scotland that are roughly contemporary. An additional two stone sockets were uncovered in the north-western area of the circle, confirming an original number of seven monoliths. Unusually, their bases appear to have been dressed and shaped to sit in fairly shallow stone sockets, c.0.6m–0.7m deep. Burials were inserted into the circle several hundred years after it was erected, again displaying similarities with the eastern Scottish circles. A central cremation burial was dated to c.1770–1610 cal BC.

When visiting, check the stones for possible cup-marks as despite erosion several have been claimed. Apart from the wonderful monoliths, the circle is worth a visit for its situation alone, as it assumed a very striking and dramatic location and commands far-reaching views in all directions except eastwards where the ground rises slowly. This is a good site to consider the relationship between the stone circle and its setting within the larger landscape especially in relation to prominent landmarks such as the Eildon Hills and Yeavinger Bell, which are visible in good weather. We can confidently dismiss a local tradition that the stones were set up in 1558 to commemorate a victory by an army led by the Percy family over a Scottish army.”

- *From Stone Circles: A Field Guide by Colin Richards and Vicki Cummings, 2024
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FOLKLORE

Set on a lonely ridge with wide views of the Cheviots and the Tweed Valley, the Duddo Five Stones have always inspired story and imagination. While only a small number of tales are recorded directly about the site, much of the traditional folklore attached to ancient circles across Northumberland and the Borders has gathered here over time, drawn by the stones' striking form and the atmosphere of the moor.

The Singing Stones

The best-known Duddo tradition says the stones "sing" or hum in the wind, especially at dawn or in stormy weather. Visitors and antiquarians describe the ridge creating a natural resonance that gives the stones a faint, eerie tone.

The Watchers

Farm workers and walkers in the 19th and 20th centuries informally called the Duddo stones "The Watchers", believing they stood guard over the valley below.

Ghostly figures

There are scattered oral accounts of a man seen standing at Duddo at dusk or a white figure moving between the stones – ghostly figures who vanish when approached.

Although not specific to Duddo itself, the following themes are common in standing stone folklore across Britain:

People turned to stone

Many stone circles were believed to be dancers, musicians or workers turned to stone for breaking the Sabbath.

Ancient portals

Some see the stone rings as gateways to the Otherworld. There are also stories of travellers losing track of time, and of animals refusing to cross a circle, including here in Northumberland and in the Scottish Borders.

Solstice alignments

Duddo Stone Circle is said by locals to align with the winter solstice, and many people gather here at midsummer and midwinter to greet the sun.

THANK YOU

It has been so lovely to have you here this evening – thank you to all that came along, to Fiona for being our guest speaker, to Hwaet for the loan of their stone circle and to Billy Mitchell for the beautiful music.

Join the Society

If you are interested in local folklore, stories and traditions, and would like to be involved in a friendly group who organises these events, please get in touch!

The email is northeastfolkloresociety@gmail.com and we'd love your ideas, creativity or company to make more of these gatherings happen in the future.

Support Northumberland Wildlife Trust's "Save Rothbury" campaign

Profits from tonight's event will go to the campaign to buy the Rothbury Estate and protect it from being sold off and broken up. This area is home to loads of nature and Neolithic sites. You can find out more, and donate, by scanning the QR code or visiting www.wildlifetrusts.org/saving-rothbury-estate

