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8. Urban prehistoric enclosures: empty spaces/busy places*

Kenneth Brophy

The archaeology of emptiness

What does emptiness mean to archaeologists? Actually, emptiness is something we are used to. We work within lengthy timescales of centuries or even thousands of years and the majority of this, like the inside of an atom, is empty space and time. Our datasets have many gaps and holes; and our interpretive theories may appear to have surface cohesion but beneath often lies empirical emptiness. The task of archaeologists is to resist emptiness, to fill in the gaps and the holes (often, ironically, by digging holes), to piece together rubbish, ruins and refuse into coherent narratives that are not entirely full, but satisfactory – a blend of ‘fact, fiction and comment’.¹ Our explanations about the past (and present), hovering on this boundary between fact and fiction, truth and belief, emerge from ruins, fill empirical vacuums and coalesce in the empty spaces of what we call the archaeological record. This is important, because with voids come room to think and space for the creativity we need to write our narratives about the broken past encountered around (and beneath) us today. And these voids are especially evident in prehistory, where we work without words, relying

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¹ M. Shanks, *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology* (London, 1992), p. 183.

K. Brophy, ‘Urban prehistoric enclosures: empty spaces/busy places’, in *Empty Spaces: perspectives on emptiness in modern history*, ed. C. J. Campbell, A. Giovine and J. Keating (London, 2019), pp. 179–200. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0.

instead on material culture, architecture, scientifically derived data and dead bodies. Archaeologists used to despair about how little we knew and how little we could infer about the empty spaces between facts and data, most famously Hawkes's despairing characterization of the limitations of what we could say about people and society in the past, symbolized by his 'ladder of inference'.² However, over the past few decades 'the unknown', the emptiness, has become less problematic as the status and nature of archaeological narratives have shifted from a positivist to a hermeneutic framework.

What happens when we try to make sense of emptiness in the archaeological record? This chapter will reflect on this question, first, by suggesting that traditional models of archaeological enquiry have struggled to deal with this scenario; second, by reflecting on recent fieldwork during which the author has been forced to confront what appear to be empty spaces; and, finally, by exploring how methodologically and conceptually emptiness might be reconsidered within archaeological and other narratives. It will do this by taking as an example large prehistoric enclosures in the past – and the present. Neolithic earthwork and megalithic enclosures in Britain, built between 4,000 and 2,500 BC, offer a conceptual challenge because they are frequently characterized by archaeologists as large empty spaces.³ These are often very big enclosures, with banks and ditches, or standing stones, defining spaces of many hectares; and are difficult to make sense of because excavations can only ever sample a small proportion of interior areas or simply focus on entrance zones and the boundaries themselves. Just as problematic is that a good number of the activities that probably went on within these enclosures, such as processions, ceremonies, gatherings, dancing and fire-lighting, left few or no physical traces which could survive for the thousands of years that have passed since those activities took place. For instance, one of the earliest monumental enclosure forms in Britain is the cursus monument (very long rectangular earthwork enclosures), built in the fourth millennium BC. The biggest example is the Dorset cursus, on the Cranborne Chase, Dorset, which is some ten kilometres long and on average 120 metres wide, the same area as around 110 maximum-sized football pitches laid side by side.⁴ Yet almost nothing that is contemporary

² C. Hawkes, 'Archaeological theory and method: some suggestions from the Old World', *American Anthropologist*, lvi (1954), 155–68.

³ See reviews of Neolithic enclosures such as *Neolithic Enclosures in Atlantic Northwest Europe*, ed. T. Darvill and J. Thomas (Oxford, 2001); and R. Loveday, *Inscribed Across the Landscape: the Cursus Enigma* (Stroud, 2006) for typical discussions of large, apparently empty spaces.

⁴ Loveday, *Inscribed Across the Landscape*, pp. 183–91.

with the earthwork boundary has been identified within the interior of this enclosure, other than a single long barrow (a burial monument) and some stray stone tools. It is a huge, empty space, in other words.⁵ In the absence of tangible evidence, archaeologists fall back on vague explanations that amount to 'rituals' to describe what such enclosures were used for and what people did inside them. For some archaeologists, Neolithic cursus enclosures literally were empty spaces along which the ghosts of the ancestors processed, floating along good-quality farming land sacrificed to the gods and inaccessible to the living.⁶ To make sense of what large enclosed spaces were used for some five thousand years ago therefore offers an interpretive challenge for archaeologists because they *appear* to us to be empty spaces through our methods and taphonomic (site formation) processes.

To explore this further, this chapter will recount the author's own fieldwork at three enclosures in Scotland which have Neolithic associations. These enclosures all occur within urban landscapes, which is unusual because urban development tends to destroy or hide traces of prehistoric activity. The author also diverges from normal archaeological practice to concentrate on the modern biographies and uses of these monuments. In other words, the interest is not what these enclosures were used for in the Neolithic period, but rather *how they are used now*. This approach is called urban prehistory.⁷ Two of the monuments discussed below – Balfarg henge and Broich cursus – can be traced back some five thousand years, deep into prehistory,⁸ but both also have rich and traumatic modern biographies. The third site to be considered, Sighthill stone circle, is not prehistoric at all, but rather an impressive modern replica although it is used in peculiarly prehistoric ways. Crucially, as with Neolithic enclosures encountered in more traditional archaeological studies, these three sites all appear to be empty spaces. However, the key difference here is that they can be studied from the luxury of speaking to those who built and use them; and how people use these enclosures can also be observed. Therefore, although, as noted, these sites *appear* to be empty spaces, the author's own fieldwork at these locations suggests that this is far from the case.

⁵ C. Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 170–3.

⁶ E.g., R. Johnson, 'An empty path? Processions and memories in the Dorset cursus', in *Pathways and Ceremonies: the Cursus Monuments of Britain and Ireland*, ed. A. Barclay and J. Harding (Oxford, 1999), pp. 39–48.

⁷ <<https://theurbanprehistorian.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 26 Aug. 2016].

⁸ Prehistory refers to the period of human existence when writing was not in use. In Britain, prehistory ended with the Roman invasion of England, although it could be argued that prehistory did not end in northern Britain for several centuries after this.

The objective in this chapter, then, is to discuss how we might understand and account for the varied and dynamic ways that prehistoric enclosures are used today. In turn, this sheds light on the challenges of understanding how big enclosures may have been used in prehistory and casts doubt on the notion of these simply being empty spaces: here, emptiness can be seen as a product of the archaeological gaze rather than any past reality. Archaeology presents paradoxical and complex interactions between the past and present; and it is by tacking back and forth between now and then (whenever then might have been) that we can perhaps begin to see empty spaces afresh.

Urban prehistory and prehistoric enclosures

What is urban prehistory and what purpose might it serve? As noted already, this is not about saying new things about the past. Rather the author's concern is exploring contemporary engagements with traces that survive from prehistory in places that have become developed, urbanized or industrialized, as well as edgelands, which Farley and Roberts have defined as post-industrial places.⁹ This process of foregrounding prehistoric sites and monuments can, in turn, be used for the benefit of the local community. The definition of what can be included under the label 'urban prehistory' is broad. It could be surviving prehistoric monuments in urban places that are tangible and perhaps even well-known, such as standing stones, earthwork fragments or burial mounds. Or it could be intangible in nature and invisible, with enclosure ditches, pits and post-holes beneath houses, gardens, car parks and roads being common examples. Specific find spots can also be included here, especially sites that were discovered and excavated in advance of development and urbanization, most commonly Bronze Age cemeteries, but could also include stray material culture such as polished stone axes. Prehistoric sites can also have a traumatic modern history that is worth (re)telling, including damage, rearrangement, being moved, vandalism and the addition of concrete. In some cases, standing stones have been moved from one place to another, or temporarily put into storage; there are examples of earthworks slighted to make way for roads or given modern purposes (such as the green on a golf course). Finally, urban landscapes frequently have modern equivalents of prehistoric monuments erected within them, most commonly megalithic in form, such as standing stones and stone circles,¹⁰ which usually fall within categories of art,

⁹ P. Farley and M. Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands* (London, 2012), pp. 4–5.

¹⁰ See C. Holtorf, *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture* (Walnut Creek, Calif., 2005), pp. 119–27.

landscaping or memorials.¹¹ These may or may not relate to archaeological traces once found in these locations.

The inclusive nature of urban prehistory opens up many opportunities for conversations and activities with local communities, with demystification of little-understood prehistoric sites being one of the key aspirations of this author's research. Using any of these prehistoric traces or essences as a starting point, it is possible to explore intersections (those places where the ancient past intrudes into the contemporary, which on occasion literally are road intersections), documenting how these sites are being or have been used, or proposing ways in which forgotten and unknown prehistoric sites could be foregrounded once again. Urban prehistory has an interest in how people (and importantly, people who are not archaeologists) negotiate these points of fusion between past and present. It also allows us to ask how this information might help improve landscapes, attract visitors and offer educational opportunities. Through the adoption of amended versions of archaeological field methods, and drawing on experiential approaches such as phenomenology, walking and psychogeography, it is possible to explore the utility and meaning of prehistoric sites and traces within urban and industrial landscapes.

In particular, psychogeography¹² is helpful in framing engagements with prehistory in urbanized places precisely because traces of past activities and ancient ways of moving around the landscape have been almost completely concealed or destroyed by modern urban planning. Prehistoric pathways, sites and monuments lie hidden or obscured within housing estates, brown-belt land, transport links and industrial estates – a secret and invisible network that endures today only in a fragmentary form known only to a few disciplinary specialists. One way to understand this almost occult secret geography is through the psycho-geographical act of what Richardson called 'critical urban walking'.¹³ This is explicitly an act of subversion (and

¹¹ H. Williams, 'Antiquity at the National Memorial Arboretum', *International Jour. Heritage Studies*, 20 (2013), 393–414.

¹² Psychogeography was famously defined by Guy Debord as 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (G. Debord, 'Introduction to a critique of geography', in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. K. Knabb (Berkeley, Calif., 1981), p. 5). This has played itself out as a series of creative practices that emerged in the 20th century and enabled practitioners to subvert monotonous and restrictive urban planning landscapes either through walking along highly stylized and planned routes, or wandering randomly (the so-called *flâneur*) (M. Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Harpenden, 2010), pp. 10–11).

¹³ T. Richardson, 'Introduction: a wander through the scene of British urban walking', in *Walking Inside Out: Contemporary British Psychogeography*, ed. T. Richardson (London, 2013), pp. 1–27, at p. 4.

within archaeology, seeking out and celebrating ruinous, partial, invisible, reconstructed and completely modern prehistoric monuments is in itself a subversive act). Seeking out time-depth in mundane urban places could be viewed as akin to the urban explorer ethos: 'to find deeper meaning in the spaces we pass through every day'.¹⁴ It is clear that modern urban planning has been at best unkind, at worst destructive, when it comes to prehistoric sites, such as the trapped and thoroughly changed garden-landscaped stone circle reconstructed in a cul-de-sac at Sandy Road, Perth and Kinross (Figure 8.1). The best way to encounter urban prehistoric sites is on foot, which also affords the collection of found items and chance conversations with locals. Walking is a powerful tool for mediating explorations of ruins and pasts-in-the-present¹⁵ and has thus far mainly been used in archaeology as a means to carry out experiential phenomenologies of landscape of the type advocated by Chris Tilley.¹⁶ However, walking urban prehistory is more concerned with revealing the invisible and lost today, rather than projecting back to how these landscapes may have looked and been used in the prehistoric past. The author's interest here is with the contemporary



Figure 8.1. The Sandy Road stone circle, reconstructed in its original form and location in a cul-de-sac in the town of Scone, Perth and Kinross, after housing built here in the 1960s caused complete excavation and temporary removal of the standing stones (photo: author).

¹⁴ B. L. Garrett, *Explore Everything: Place-Hacking the City* (London, 2014), p. 6.

¹⁵ G. Nicholson, *Walking in Ruins* (Chelmsford, 2014).

¹⁶ C. Tilley, 'Phenomenological approaches to landscape archaeology', in *Handbook of Landscape Archaeology*, ed. B. Davis and J. Thomas (Walnut Creek, Calif., 2008), pp. 271–6.

landscape rather than trying to see through or beneath it and back into the past. (This does not preclude observations having some utility in the understanding of prehistoric incarnations of these sites and monuments.) Walks in built-up places are very much constrained bodily by the urban in terms of access: boundaries, pathways, railway lines and busy roads all stand in sharp contrast to the 'disorderly space of the ruin'.¹⁷ Psycho-geographic practice can also be difficult and uncomfortable: spending time standing in the middle of roundabouts, walking up and down suburban streets in the middle of the day with a notepad, sitting in a car reading an excavation report outside a specific house or photographing standing stones in gardens can all result in uncomfortable encounters with locals or create a sense of 'loitering'.¹⁸

Most of the sites worked with to date are standing stones, rock-art panels or the locations of Bronze Age cemeteries, but there are also many examples of prehistoric earthwork enclosures in urban places. The scale of Neolithic enclosures and the preference of their builders for locations on flat, good-quality farming land, near rivers, on valley floors and along routeways, all combine to ensure that urban sprawl and road building have swallowed up many such enclosures. More often than not, the relationship between relic Neolithic monuments and urbanization has been one-sided and destructive, although many earthwork enclosures had already been ploughed flat by the time urban expansion began. Typically, Neolithic enclosures are not marked on town plans and maps and remain unknown to local people even if the enclosures were fully excavated and documented in advance of destruction (as has been the norm in the UK since the 1980s).

One such site is a cursus monument known as Broich, which is located at the southern edge of Crieff, a town in Perth and Kinross. This massive earthwork enclosure was identified during aerial survey as a cropmark site in the 1980s (the buried ditches impact on crop growth patterns during drought conditions and are visible from the air in the summer). This was a truly huge, early Neolithic enclosure, built soon after 3,600 BC, being at least eight hundred metres long and some hundred metres wide; intensive agriculture over the past few centuries means that this enclosure is no longer visible on the ground at all,¹⁹ an invisible space as well as an empty one. This emptiness was disturbed between 2007 and 2010 when a local community campus was constructed over the middle portion of the cursus.

¹⁷ T. J. Edensor, 'Walking through ruins', in *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*, ed. T. Ingold and J. L. Vergunst (Farnham, 2008), pp. 123–41.

¹⁸ Edensor, 'Walking through ruins', p. 124.

¹⁹ K. Brophy, *Reading Between the Lines: the Neolithic Cursus Monuments of Scotland* (London, 2015), pp. 51–2.



Figure 8.2. Pupils from Strathearn High School marking the route of the western ditch of the Neolithic Broich cursus, which runs beneath the school campus and playground (photo: author).

This large building includes a secondary school, leisure centre and public library and yet is still dwarfed by the cursus enclosure which it straddles. Excavations in advance of construction located stretches of cursus ditch still surviving beneath the car park of the adjacent old secondary school; and investigations of the monument in the location of the new building concluded that the interior of the cursus survived but was almost wholly empty, although only a very small proportion of this area was investigated.²⁰ Positively, there have been attempts since the excavations to foreground this enormous, and yet invisible, enclosure for the local community. The author has worked with children to try to help them visualize the scale of the ancient cursus in relation to their school and classrooms (Figure 8.2), while a reconstructed Neolithic timber monument²¹ and a planned archaeological

²⁰ R. Cachart and D. Perry, 'Archaeological works: Strathearn Community Campus (Crieff High School), Pittenzie Road, Crieff' (unpublished data structure report produced by Alder Archaeology, 2009).

²¹ <<http://www.northlight-heritage.co.uk/conc5/index.php?cID=152>> [accessed 26 Aug. 2016].

trail are attempts by the school and campus community to make tangible the deep time beneath their feet and to populate this massive, apparently empty space with active learners.

Such examples need hard work, however, to foreground invisible or even destroyed enclosures in modern urban landscapes. The Broich cursus had not actively been used by anyone in this community since its modern discovery because no one could see it, few knew it was there and nothing above ground survived. Extant and visible prehistoric enclosures offer different challenges. These usually exist in partial or ruinous forms and are situated in a disciplinary and classificatory limbo, neither wholly understood nor appreciated by those who live nearby, belonging to neither the past nor the present. Often, such monuments are hemmed in by roads and houses, or located in the corners of small urban green spaces and are not taken seriously by archaeologists due to the perception that the enclosures have been ruined or devalued by the processes of urbanization and the emergence of an urban setting. As Tilley wrote so memorably, a 'megalith in an urban environment does not seem to work'²² and the same could be said for enclosures, although the author does not agree with this position. These are hollowed-out places, monuments and enclosures that provide little direct evidence for their original purpose and now exist out of time and without context in unexpected (but geographically correct) locations. But that does not mean they do not have a role to play in society today or that they are truly empty spaces. To return to the theme of empty spaces, this chapter will consider the non-emptiness of two apparently empty enclosures in urban locations in Scotland: one a prehistoric replica, the Sighthill stone circle in Glasgow; and the other a reconstructed henge monument at Balfarg, Fife.

Sighthill stone circle

The Sighthill stone circle, a monument that was, until April 2016, located in an urban park ten minutes' walk from the centre of Glasgow, was an empty space (Figure 8.3). Or at least that *appeared* to be the case. Constructed in 1979, the brainchild of astronomer and author Duncan Lunan,²³ this circle of stumpy grey monoliths was supposed to be a device to help to teach the people of Glasgow about some of the key principles of astronomy, as well as to demonstrate that stone circles in prehistory could have acted as calendars

²² C. Tilley, 'Art, architecture, landscape [Neolithic Sweden]', in *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*, ed. B. Bender (Oxford, 1993), pp. 49–84.

²³ For the full story of this remarkable monument, see D. Lunan, *The Stones and the Stars: Building Scotland's Newest Megalith* (New York, 2012).



Figure 8.3. The Sighthill stone circle, Glasgow, in 2013 (photo: author).

and astronomically aligned monuments, an explicitly anti-establishment gesture.²⁴ The whole ethos of this megalithic enclosure, therefore, was not to enclose or contain, but rather to guide the eye outwards towards the sky and the horizon line. This was done through the creation of a circular space some seventeen metres in diameter defined by a cobbled path and sixteen whinstone megaliths, with a central tall standing stone.²⁵ The project was never fully completed, however, due to government cutbacks from 1979 onwards; and so the stone circle was left in limbo, lacking signage and guidance on how to use the monument, but also physically incomplete, with a number of standing stones left lying to the side un-erected.²⁶ The

²⁴ Astronomical explanations for prehistoric sites such as stone circles have very much been on the fringes of mainstream archaeology for decades, with Sighthill stone circle dedicated to, among others, Alexander Thom, a figure whose highly complex and specialized astronomical and mathematical understanding of prehistoric monuments has never been accepted by the archaeological establishment (A. Thom, *Walking in all of the squares – a biography of Alexander Thom* (Glendaurel, 1995)).

²⁵ Lunan, *The Stones and the Stars*, p. 187.

²⁶ K. Brophy, H. Green and A. Welfare, 'The last days of the Sighthill stones', *British Archaeology* (July–Aug. 2014), 44–9.

stones that did stand were set into large subterranean concrete blocks to avoid them toppling. There is a long tradition of using concrete to shore up actual prehistoric standing stones in Britain, notably Stonehenge, but even by 1979 this practice was frowned upon²⁷ and could only happen at Sighthill because this was not a truly ancient place. Nonetheless, concrete in such contexts offers a tantalizing fusion of horizons between ancient past and industrial present, something embodied by the Sighthill stone circle and within urban prehistory.

The stone circle was dismantled in advance of redevelopment of the area in 2016, the stones buried nearby until such a time as they can be re-erected in a new setting. The circle sat in scrubby Sighthill park, which is dominated by sickly yellowish-green to brown vegetation, with the incessant, low drone from the M8 motorway just one hundred metres or so away to the south offering a vehicular urban soundtrack. Several high-rise tower blocks built in the 1960s dominated the horizon to the north and east until recently: a scheduled demolition programme ensured that all high rises were demolished by the end of 2016. Therefore, the stone circle sat within an urban landscape in flux and in a sense was a microcosm of modern Glasgow, erected in the wake of the renewed hope of high-rise living and a better environment four decades ago and now fallen apart like that dream of urban renewal, swept away in a new phase of regeneration. New Sighthill – and the new Sighthill megalithic monument – are planned to emerge towards the end of the decade.²⁸

This author has visited the circle many times since 2012, documenting (along with Helen Green) the various uses of the stone circle and its gradual abandonment and decline into untidiness, swamped by overgrown vegetation. One of the strongest sensory associations with these visits is how quiet this place was (aside from the hum of the motorway) and how few people were ever there, at least when we visited. In late 2015 the author spoke to a student who had been working on a short documentary film about the Sighthill stone circle. He said that he had gone on site one day to film some time-lapse footage and had been in the stone circle, with his camera, for six hours. He had seen no one that day at all. Not one person had visited the circle or even walked past it with a dog. It was an empty, lonely space. The only occasion this author has ever been there when anyone else was actually within the circle – as opposed to walking a dog nearby (other than those visiting with me) – was during the solar eclipse of spring

²⁷ H. Wickstead and M. Barber, 'Concrete prehistories: the making of modern megalithism', *Jour. Contemporary Archaeology*, ii (2015), 195–216.

²⁸ For information on the Sighthill development, including the fate of the stone circle, see <<http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/sighthill>> [accessed 26 Aug. 2016].



Figure 8.4. Solar eclipse at Sighthill stone circle, 2015: for once, not an empty space (photo: author).

2015: a modest crowd gathered, mostly consisting of students from nearby halls draining a box of red wine and large bags of crisps. A few bystanders with fancy cameras leaned on the standing stones, while a Glasgow band, Colonel Mustard and the Dijon 5, shot footage for a video promoting their new song (Figure 8.4).

So, the Sighthill stone circle seemed to be an empty space, hidden in plain sight, existing in classic urban edgeland along a motorway belt, near a canal and industrial units.²⁹ Bizarrely there were no signs or information to tell anyone where the circle was, even in the park itself, which perhaps explains the isolation to an extent. Despite this unpromising context, however, it is clear the circle was used and indeed was a place of some significance to various groups of users, almost all subversive and on the margins in their own way. (This is over and above the regular astronomical measurements taken at the site by Lunan and associates.³⁰) To acquire a sense of how the circle was being used, Green and this author undertook improvised archaeological work – walking, surface survey, photographic

²⁹ Farley and Roberts, *Edgelands*, pp. 17–22.

³⁰ Lunan, *The Stones and the Stars*, pp. 252–63.

recording, careful documentation of evidence for human activity, the collection of found objects and the interpretation of material culture and symbols.³¹ (We also documented the dismantlement of the stone circle with the co-operation of the local authority.) The material evidence suggested something very different from the empty, quiet, disconnected sense we and others have experienced.

The circle was a place for gathering, for drinking, for socializing. Drink cans, vodka and Buckfast bottles, crisp pokes (bags), cans of highly caffeinated drinks and so on were found in the stone circle and on its fringes. This author's sporadic daytime, weekday visits were unable to pick up on these illicit evening and night-time activities, something also true of the fieldwork at Balfarg (see below); and this suggests that in order to see beyond emptiness a more embedded approach is required. It is also clear that people were visiting the stone circle at other times; and so the impression of emptiness was directly derived from the author's own fieldwork methodology, something that could also be said of prehistorians attempting to make sense of Neolithic enclosures through the sporadic sampling of excavation and the detached gaze of the aerial photograph or plan. The stones were adorned with an ever-changing gallery of graffiti, dirt smudges and sinister markings, hard to interpret and often transitory. In late 2015 someone used white gloss paint to daub a crude hexagram on the cobbles beside the stone circle before discarding the paint tin to one side. The circle had other uses, too. It was the setting for pagan activities and ceremonies, largely based around solstices and equinoxes (including a large equinoxal gathering a few days before the circle was removed), which involved performance, fire, chanting, sticking large candlesticks and other props into the ground and possibly deposition.³² Traces of these activities were occasionally found, notably the small fire spots and placed flowers, and excavation would surely reveal more. A rowan tree immediately beside the stone circle became a rag tree, with string, ribbons and scraps of material hanging from its branches. More transitory encounters were suggested by worn paths that wound around the stone circle, presumably created by dog walkers as well as visitors to the monument.

Perhaps the most remarkable role the stone circle played was as a memorial to two deceased local women. Their ashes were scattered at the stone circle and the central standing stone became a shrine to them, with an ever-changing series of offerings and deposits placed at the base of this megalith (Figure 8.5). These have included photos, postcards, crosses, candles, colourful stones,

³¹ Brophy, Green and Welfare, 'The last days of the Sighthill stones', p. 47.

³² J. Reppion, 'Stones in the city', *Fortean Times*, cccxix (Oct. 2014), 42–7.



Figure 8.5. The central stone of the Sighthill stone circle has increasingly come to be a focus for the memorialization of the deceased for one local family (photo: author).

cigarette lighters, coins, fruit and flowers (both artificial and real). Other objects of presumed sentimental value were placed at the base of the stone, such as a child's money box, photos carefully wrapped in plastic, a metal candelabra and a small painted card. At times, ribbons of varying colours were tied around the stone and sometimes objects hung from these, such as an empty mobile-phone casing and wreaths. This curious assemblage of objects suggested frequent visits by family and friends of the deceased women, but also revealed a strong emotional attachment to this place played out in material form. Jack Forbes told the BBC about one of the women, Lily, his wife, that '[s]he just loved the place. Two or three times a week I'm up here [at the stone circle]. I just get solitude and contentment, this is like a church to me'.³³ Intriguingly, the role of the stone circle in its final days appeared to be increasingly one of memorialization: on a visit in October 2015 the central stone had a piece of paper appended to it with the name, date of birth and death of Mr. Forbes's wife, suggesting the increasing appropriation of this as a place of sanctity, something confirmed in conversations with him. The

³³ <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-24186525>> [accessed 26 Aug. 2016].

transformation of this monument-to-science into a shrine is one of the more curious aspects of the story of the Sighthill stone circle.

The Sighthill stone circle was not prehistoric, but was used in the kinds of ways that we imagine prehistoric enclosures to have been utilized – for social gatherings involving food and alcohol; for the recording of the movement of the sun, moon and stars; for pagan ceremonies; and for the memorialization of the dead. (This is perhaps not surprising given that these are the kinds of behaviour that most people associate with stone circles and so could perhaps be explained as acts of conformity rather than subversion.) The archaeological recording of the Sighthill stone circle, the collection of material culture and the documentation of change have all demonstrated that this enclosure was far from an empty space – despite the numerous anecdotes heard by the author and his own personal experience of ‘no one ever being there’. The realization that this place matters to people has been one of the key reasons why Glasgow City Council has agreed to resite the stone circle in the future. Such empty enclosures, whether ancient or new, are never truly empty, but often full of life, death and meaning, not all of which leave much trace behind. As a pagan user of Sighthill stone circle told *The Scotsman* newspaper in 2013: ‘To the fool this looks like wasteland. But this is sacred ground to us’.³⁴

Balfarg henge

Balfarg: a place ‘where a New Town is built on a 4,000 year old henge’,³⁵ a place where within a housing estate can be found the remnants of one of the most significant prehistoric ceremonial and burial enclosures in northern Britain. Situated in a northern suburb of the New Town of Glenrothes, Fife, are the remnants of three closely situated Neolithic enclosures, all excavated, reconstructed and rearranged in order to accommodate urbanization. The monuments – two henge enclosures and a stone circle – were all originally built in the third millennium BC, but the gradual creep of urban living in the form of house-building and road-upgrading meant that between 1970 and 1985 all three were fully excavated.³⁶ The excavation of these sites and

³⁴ <<http://www.scotsman.com/heritage/people-places/stones-of-destiny-the-sighthill-stone-circle-1-3008490#ixzz3yFuaLF9g>> [accessed 26 Aug. 2016].

³⁵ Fife Psychogeographical Collective, *From Hill to Sea* (2015), p. 7.

³⁶ Excavation reports, in chronological order: G. Ritchie, ‘Excavation of the stone circle and cairn at Balbirnie, Fife’, *Archaeological Jour.*, cxxxi (1974), 1–32; R. Mercer, ‘The excavation of a late Neolithic henge-type enclosure at Balfarg, Markinch, Fife, Scotland’, *Proc. Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, cxi (1981), 63–171; G. Barclay and C. Russell-White, ‘Excavations in the ceremonial complex of the fourth to the second millennium BC at Balfarg/Balbirnie, Fife’, *Proc. Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, cxxiii (1993), 43–210.

the creation of new suburban communities allowed the opportunity for the monuments to be reconstructed, eventually becoming stopping points on an archaeological walking trail, accompanied by a popular booklet³⁷ and five noticeboards. However, each monument had to undergo a radical transformation – a rebirth – in order for this to happen. Balbirnie stone circle was entirely removed from its original prehistoric location by crane then rebuilt in exactly the same arrangement amidst grass and flowers one hundred metres to the south in advance of road construction.³⁸ The ditches of Balfarg riding school henge (those that had not already been destroyed by a road) were cleaned out and an internal timber setting reconstructed from cut-length telegraph poles. The noticeboard for this site was set on fire, melted and thrown into the enclosure ditch in the late 1990s by vandals, an unintentional echo of burning and depositional events for which we commonly find evidence when excavating Neolithic enclosures.³⁹

The focus here, however, is the third and largest of these monuments, Balfarg henge, an enclosure that was one of the largest of its kind constructed in Scotland in prehistory (Figure 8.6). Henge monuments are circular enclosures dating to the late Neolithic period onwards, typically defined by substantial earthwork boundaries with an internal ditch and external bank; one or two entrances are normal.⁴⁰ The Balfarg henge was a massive example of this type, measuring sixty-five metres across internally within a ditch eight metres wide and bank up to ten metres across, enclosing an internal area of 3,318 square metres.⁴¹ The earthworks bounded a space which was filled with at least two standing stones (perhaps an entrance arrangement) and several circles of timber posts. When the henge was several centuries old, the burial of a teenager with a rare handled Beaker pot and flint knife was placed in a pit in the centre of this monument. In other words, Balfarg was not an empty space in the late Neolithic or early Bronze Age, although we cannot be sure what rites and ceremonies took place here, nor how many participants were permitted to enter. The afterlife of this monument was less assured, with millennia passing accompanied by the processes of erosion, slumping, silting and, finally,

³⁷ G. Barclay, *Balfarg: the Prehistoric Ceremonial Complex* (Glenrothes, 1993).

³⁸ G. Ritchie, 'Destructions, re-erectments and re-creations', in *From Sickles to Circles: Britain and Ireland at the Time of Stonehenge*, ed. A. Gibson and A. Sheridan (Stroud, 2004), pp. 40–63.

³⁹ K. Brophy, 'Ruins in the landscape: modern monuments', in *Scotland in Ancient Europe: the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age of Scotland in their European Context*, ed. G. Barclay and I. Shepherd (Edinburgh, 2004), pp. 143–54.

⁴⁰ See J. Harding, *The Henge Monuments of the British Isles* (Stroud, 2003).

⁴¹ Mercer, 'The excavation of a late Neolithic henge-type enclosure', p. 64.



Figure 8.6. The reconstructed Balfarg henge, Fife – this view shows the entrance to the henge and one of the internal standing stones (photo: author).

mechanized agriculture, which meant that by the turn of the twentieth century all that was visible on the surface were ‘two monoliths in a flat meadow’.⁴²

Impending urbanization and the earmarking of this location for housing development entailed the complete excavation of Balfarg henge, a substantial undertaking which took place in 1977 to 1978. Initially the plan was to completely remove the site to clear the way for housing, but as the project developed plans emerged to preserve the henge *in situ* and eventually it was literally written into the housing-estate architectural plans.⁴³ This was very much in character with the local government ethos in Glenrothes at the time, the employment of town artist David Harding between 1968 and 1978 ensuring an urban landscape of ‘dinosaurs, henges, flying saucers, pipe tunnels, giant hands and other curios which all “do something” to social space for those who

⁴² Mercer, ‘The excavation of a late Neolithic henge-type enclosure’, p. 167.

⁴³ Roger Mercer has told me that changes in plans for the future of the henge at Balfarg were very much driven by enthusiastic staff of Glenrothes Development Corporation, not the heritage sector (interview, 18 Jan. 2016, Edinburgh).

stumble across them'.⁴⁴ Balfarg henge was therefore retained as a central green space with houses and streets arranged concentrically around it and the road around the henge called, appropriately, The Henge, with an offshoot of this being Henge Gardens (Figure 8.7). This urban henge is no longer the original prehistoric monument – rather, it is the ruin of a ruin, left in a deliberate state of semi-collapse and partiality. The ditches were cleaned out and given flat bases by machine, while the two standing stones were removed, then erected again (falling apart and being stuck back together in the meantime) and telegraph poles were used to reconstruct one of the timber circles. This radical (and no doubt expensive) change to the development proposals created a wide and open space at the heart of the new housing estate, a leisure resource giving this new town a quasi-prehistoric heritage. This was an explicit attempt by local government to offer an educational heritage resource, with the monument subsequently becoming part of the archaeological trail in the early 1990s, developed by the Fife Council archaeologist at that time, Peter Yeoman.

Despite being in a suburban space, Balfarg is – like Sighthill – remarkably quiet, something noted by the many students taken there on field trips since 2001. Two rather dirty noticeboards and a small parking area on one side of the henge are the only indication that this is anything other than a typical urban green space, while the re-erected standing stones and timber-post reconstructions have the look of being landscape furniture of no clear utility, or examples of the public art so commonly found across Glenrothes. On many visits over the past two decades documenting Balfarg henge (as well as the other monuments on the archaeology trail), this author has almost always found Balfarg henge to be an empty space. For instance, pedestrians and dog walkers tend to circumnavigate the henge using the surrounding pavement rather than walk directly across the enclosure. However, also like Sighthill, evidence for this being an enclosure that is well-used by local people abounds in the form of material culture, fabric alterations and use-wear patterns. Indeed, the perceived emptiness of this space almost certainly relates to the fact that the henge/green space has the same life-cycle and daily routine as the suburban housing estate within which it sits – flurries of activity at commuting time; dog walking at dusk and early morning; children playing in summer evenings; with perhaps a bit more activity at the weekend. The henge is, in fact, the ultimate commuter monument, almost certainly with a rush hour this author never sees because he visits on Thursday afternoons or early on sleepy Saturdays. This suggests that at the very least emptiness is time-dependent and contextual; and it

⁴⁴ Fife Psychogeographical Collective, *From Hill to Sea*, p. 131.



Figure 8.7. Henge Gardens, Glenrothes (photo: author)



Figure 8.8. Wear marks indicating the use of the timber posts at Balfarg henge for goal posts. My interpretation of these marks – caused by a diving goalkeeper – was subsequently confirmed by conversations with local people (photo: author).

is perhaps self-evident that places can sometimes be empty and at other times full; these states are not mutually exclusive. This author's gaze, as the *archaeologist-flaneur* making occasional visits, is contingent on the cycles of use of this and other spaces, as well as personal patterns of activity.

And this empty space does have a rhythm of use, usually for play. This author has observed the physical remnants of this during visits, confirmed by conversations with local people. Sporting activities take place within the henge, digging into the very fabric of the monument. The short posts that form the timber circle are used as goal posts, sometimes with pairs of timbers painted white, while wear patterns caused by a relentlessly diving goalkeeper are often evident between these uprights (Figure 8.8). The slope of the henge bank near the entrance on the north side of the enclosure became, at one point, badly worn and rutted, presumably by bikes rushing in and out of the ditch. This was remedied a few years ago by the erection of a low fence at the bottom of the slope to stop this damaging activity. Such little alterations, responding to circumstances, continue to change the character of this place, the biography of which is dynamic and usually reactive. The henge is often covered in litter associated with eating and drinking, too, although this is more juvenile in nature than the objects found at Sighthill – more likely to be soft-drinks packaging, sweet wrappers and pizza boxes than any sign of alcohol. This makes sense, as the henge is a panopticon, surrounded by an almost unbroken circle of houses, meaning that anti-social behaviour cannot be concealed. Stranger objects have turned up within the henge as well, such as condoms, rubber gloves, burst balloons and broken car number plates. Graffiti are also evident, with faded painted letters, bright-yellow paint blobs (see Figure 8.6) and occasional chalk doodles all evident on the standing stones at one time or another.

Therefore, this urban Neolithic monument, which is largely reconstructed and presented as a green space for urban leisure activities, is used commonly for a range of social and anti-social activities, usually when archaeologists are not around to witness them. What also seems likely is that the monuments around Balfarg are not being used as intended by archaeologists and planners in the 1980s, with the archaeology trail fragmented by continued housing development and the noticeboards declining in cleanliness and relevance as time passes. Interestingly, as with Sighthill the aspirations behind the modern construction of these monuments have been lost or subverted through time, victims of urban living.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the role of emptiness at various levels within archaeology. It started by discussing archaeological thinking and suggested

that emptiness entails room to think; and that it is the spaces between what we know – the data – within the archaeological record that allow our imaginative and distinctive interpretations of past people and society to emerge. This is not to say that emptiness and empty spaces do not present interpretive challenges; and prehistoric enclosures from the ancient past and within contemporary landscapes are used as examples to illustrate this. Such enclosures appear to us to be empty: Neolithic sites such as the enormous Dorset cursus, populated by ghostly figures that acted but left no traces for us to find via excavation and survey; or the reconstructed Balfarg henge monument, seemingly devoid of human interaction and shunned even by dog walkers. To counteract the impression of emptiness in such enclosures in contemporary urban spaces, this chapter recounted psycho-geographical engagements with late twentieth-century variants on Neolithic enclosures in Glasgow and Fife, suggesting that surface emptiness need not lead to interpretive shallowness and that emptiness may simply be a product of the ways in which the fieldwork has been conducted. Although the challenges are all the more substantial in the analysis of 5,000-year-old enclosures, it is clear that reflection on our methods and assumptions about empty spaces is urgently needed. In other words – and perhaps this is a given among other archaeologists although is rarely expressed – archaeological emptiness and absence in the archaeological record do not mean actual emptiness, do not mean that no people were present, that no one did anything here.

The three sites discussed in this chapter are versions of the more typical prehistoric empty spaces which were reflected on at the start but which occur in modern urban contexts and have been shaped by contemporary processes such as urban development and renewal and mechanized agriculture. This makes them ideal for an approach using a psycho-geographical gaze as the very acts of visiting, studying and moving around and within these enclosures are acts that subvert urbanization and urban planning. The slow-motion destruction of elements of the Broich cursus by a railway embankment, road, ploughing and the construction of two large schools does not mean that we cannot still trace the lines of the ditches in the landscape and utilize them to inform school children about prehistory in the unlikeliest of places – beneath the grass and tarmac of the playground and rugby pitch. The urban spread of Glenrothes led to the complete transformation of a complex of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments, but that does not mean that the underlying prehistoric logic cannot still be followed (and indeed this logic in part informed the shape of urbanization). Sighthill stone circle was a product of political expediency (built as part of a job creation scheme) and its dismantlement was down to forces of urban planning and regeneration, which has caused

much tension.⁴⁵ These enclosures are therefore entangled in contemporary landscapes, a state which makes them both challenging but also exciting to visit and bring back to life. Yet such urban prehistoric sites have for too long been hidden from the gaze of archaeologists who regard such sites as ruinous, degenerate, empirically empty places. This is despite the fact that we know from explorations of ruins in historical contexts, whether they be industrial⁴⁶ or urban,⁴⁷ castles⁴⁸ or the Berlin Wall,⁴⁹ that there is much to be gained by such engagements, notably through bodily and sensory interactions and novel forms of recording. This does not mean, however, that we should not reflect on these stylized and academic engagements: the collection of objects and the documentation of change and use all suggest that potentially difficult empty spaces are far from empty if we know when, where and how to look.

None of the activities recorded at these urban prehistoric enclosures have left any traces that would survive for a decade, never mind centuries or more, confounding the proverbial future generations of archaeologists who are supposed to find these kinds of remnant. Scuff marks in grass, fire spots and gloss paint may seem dramatic when initially recorded, but will almost certainly be invisible and undetectable within a few years. Therefore, the impression of emptiness can also be a product of the kinds of things people do within enclosures. Our gaze into the empty spaces of archaeology – in this case enclosures, but there are other examples – is probably more likely to identify emptiness than rule it out, whether we are considering prehistoric or contemporary landscapes. Archaeology is full of enclosed spaces and empty spaces, but too much focus has been placed on making sense of the ancient ones (a very difficult task) and not enough work done with those that still survive and are either relevant to communities today or could become so (a far simpler task as this chapter has shown). Empty spaces need not be a source of despair: emptiness is often simply an illusion caused by the processes we use to look at the past and the ways that we look at the world around us, even today.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., a petition against the removal of the Sighthill stone circle with many thousands of signatures by spring 2016 <<http://www.change.org/p/glasgow-city-council-should-scrap-their-plans-to-demolish-sighthill-park-and-its-stone-circle>> [accessed 26 Aug. 2016].

⁴⁶ Edensor, 'Walking through ruins'.

⁴⁷ Garrett, *Explore Everything*.

⁴⁸ Shanks, *Experiencing the Past*.

⁴⁹ A. Klausmeier and L. Schmidt, 'Commemorating the uncomfortable: the Berlin Wall', in *Re-mapping the Field: New Approaches in Conflict Archaeology*, ed. J. Schofield, A. Klausmeier and L. Purbrick (Berlin, 2014), pp. 22–7.