



## North of Scotland Archaeological Society

### NEWSLETTER

September 2012

#### WeDigs

Anna Welti

The WeDigs project in Wester Ross is investigating six roundhouse sites centred on Achiltibuie, Ullapool and Gairloch by digging small pits at each site. 4 digs have been completed of the 6 planned. All results so far are detailed on website [www.wedigs.co.uk/](http://www.wedigs.co.uk/)

An exhibition will run in Gairloch from Sept 23rd to end of October covering the basics of 'what is a roundhouse, to the survey project and finally the WeDigs project'. The exhibition will be shown in Ullapool and Achiltibuie next year. A leaflet will be available at the exhibition to take away and also at HAF seminar days.



## **“Tain Tarbetness and the Duke 1833” by Hector Mackenzie**

### **Book Review by Meryl Marshall**

The author of this book is to be congratulated on a fine piece of work. Although it is essentially a piece of historical research, it involves a description of the topography, state of the land and the tenants in the Tarbetness peninsular by the Duke of Sutherlands “agent”, George S Taylor, following a “clandestine” visit in 1833. The report, in the Cromartie Muniments, is quoted widely and gives a remarkable snapshot of the landscape, one which was perhaps not untypical of East Ross and the Black Isle at the time. Some quotes:

“Meikle Tarrel, Taylor reported, is a splendid farm so far as the quality of the soil is considered; this fine farm however has no enclosures. All the land is open and the fields only separated from each other by a deep furrow. The farmer has erected a steam thrashing mill which is slated and appears substantially built with a tall brick chimney. The dwelling house is large, all slated, but the farm steading is inferior and the roof thatched with straw.

“At the farm of Arboll there was an extensive steading covered with tiles, store-houses and houses for the farm servants and a tall brickbuilt windmill which is very conspicuous”

At several points Taylor noted concentrations of small tenants or cottars. “In Easter Ross generally their cottages are built of round small stones embedded in thick layers of clay and the gable ends are formed of straw and clay interwoven with upright posts”

“On the shore west of Portmahomack the small tenants were only permitted to cut the sea-weed at stated periods in the Spring for their potatoe land.....the crowd of persons on the shore was an unexpected and singular scene, full of bustle and life, all being anxious to work hard before the flowing of the tide. I counted upwards of 300 men and women engaged in pulling the weed; their horses and small carts were standing on the beach waiting to carry off what might be collected”

There are other useful bits of information too; detailed descriptions of the fishing village of Portmahomack and its harbour and of Ballone and Loch Slinn Castles (*Taylor was an antiquarian*), and we learn that until 1810 horse racing took place annually on the commonty of Morrichmore (*now part of the Tain bombing range*) for example. In addition there are some amusing, if concerning, anecdotes; “the landlady at the Portmahomack Inn apologised for the badness of the accommodation telling him that his bed was one in which three cholera patients had died”

The book is amply illustrated with contemporary paintings and relevant pictures of people and places, pride of place however must go to the sketch map drawn by George Taylor in 1833 in the centre pages; it gives a fascinating picture of ownership and landuse on the Tarbetness peninsular.

This excellent book and its new research on an area of Easter Ross at a time of great upheaval and change will be very useful to those interested in the archaeology (or absence thereof!), it is very welcome and well recommended.

## Structure on Mam Sodhail

Keith Bryer

The September 2010 newsletter had a report on a stone building on Tigh Mor na Sealga, at 910m, which is believed to be a 'Colby Camp'.

A similar structure had been reported on Mam Sodhail, which is a 1181m mountain about 10km NNW of Tigh Mor na Sealga, on the north side of Glen Affric. This is Highland Council HER ID nr. MHG9288, RCAHMS ref NH12NW 1 and Canmore ID 70716..

Keith recently visited Mam Sodhail and found the ruin south-west of the summit at NH11888 25199, at 1146m. While of similar construction, this is of a different layout to the Tigh Mor na Sealga building, with external dimensions approx. 4.5m x 4.5m. A stone lintel remains above the doorway, which faces NE, out of the prevailing wind, as does a small window, which too has an intact lintel. There is a fireplace with a well-constructed chimney structure. Lying nearby were the broken remains of a cast iron grate and an 'S' shaped iron hook, which would have been used to hang pots over the fire. There are still remains of wooden dowels used to fix internal timber lath or cladding to the internal walls.

Finally, there are some glassware remains but these may be of more recent origin. Very closely to the east lie remnants of lesser structures.



## Ruighe Fearchair Township, East Shore of Loch Glass

Simon Gunn

First brought to the attention of Nosas by member Adrian Clark, this post medieval township has been of interest to me since I first stumbled on the ruins, well hidden in forest, while on a walk with the dog. There is the remains of a substantial sheepfold and, 200 metres to the north, the remains of two dwellings and a field enclosure.

Situated at NH 527721 & 527722 (HER ref: MHG20655, NMRS record NH57SW6), the township is recorded on the Roy map of 1747-52. I recently went with a friend and photographer Andrew Dowsett to record the ruins. Part of the sheepfold can be seen below.



## Launch of the Strathpeffer Archaeological Trail App

John Wombell

The new App was launched by the Strathpeffer Initiative at Castle Leod on Thursday 21st September. It links the new with the old by using the latest App technology for smart phones or other touch screen devices, to guide visitors around six archaeological sites in or near to Strathpeffer.

We believe that it is a first for such a trail and is a complete breakaway from traditional on site interpretation panels that can be subject to deterioration and vandalism. Mary Peteranna and Lynn Fraser of Ross and Cromarty Archaeological Services, have done a brilliant job researching and scripting all the material for the App, HCVF Television from Inverness did the filming and editing also with a lot of input from Mary and Lynn, then ATS Heritage turned the edited material into an App. Kirsty Macdonald is the presenter. A big thanks also to Cait MacCullagh and Matt Ritchie who star in different chapters on the App.

Smart phones and iPods are not everyone's cup of tea and I took a bit of persuading at the beginning, but the Strathpeffer Village Tour - a tour of some of the Victorian architectural delights in the village was already fully committed to being an App, so the decision was made to follow this lead and change direction with the archaeological trail. In hindsight I am certain it was the right move as before long smart phones will be the norm, everyone will be up to speed with them, download speeds will go 'supersonic' and who knows what lies around the corner that will handle audio visual material with ever improving ease. So dinna be feart, if you have never tried the technology before iPods can be hired in the village with both the village tour and the archaeological trail Apps on them. If you have a smart phone or other touch screen device you will already be up to speed with the technology, and the Apps are currently available for both Apple and Android operating systems for the princely sum of £1.99.

Short trailers of both Apps are available free on [www.strathpeffervillage.com](http://www.strathpeffervillage.com) The project could not have been completed without the support of LEADER, the Highland Council, Awards for All, Scottish Communities Foundation, private trusts and members of the public all of which assistance is gratefully acknowledged. But you know, this project would never have been conceived even, had it not been for the existence of NOSAS which has brought so many of us together with a common interest that has blossomed in many different ways. I shall not say more about where the trail goes and the stories it tells or it will spoil the experience but I shall have a stand at the HAF conference to promote the App. If you can't manage the HAF conference then nothing else for it - you will just have to buy the App or visit Strathpeffer and hire an iPod! For those who cannot be persuaded to try the new technology there is a complete set of leaflets that guide you to each site and give the briefest of information about it. No one I hope will go away disappointed.

## Assynt fire and Water

Gordon Sleight

An investigation of prehistoric life at Stronechrubie, Assynt 3rd – 10th October 2012

The Assynt Fire and Water Project is an exciting new investigation of prehistoric archaeology in the north Highlands of Scotland. Building on the success of previous public archaeology projects, Historic Assynt is conducting the excavation of a burnt mound at Stronechrubie. Excavation will be led by archaeologists from AOC Archaeology Group, who will provide on-site training for volunteers and will assist Historic Assynt with their programme of experimental archaeology workshops and finds roadshows.

Further information is available at

<http://www.aocarchaeology.com/assyntfireandwater/>

## A mystery site

Meryl Marshall

With the focus recently on cup marked rocks imagine the excitement at finding this - is it the biggest "cup" ever? It is 70cms in diameter and 50cms deep!! and situated on a smooth slab of rock on top of a small knoll at Achad Mhor.

Anybody got any ideas? Contact Meryl Marshall or John Wombell !



## Rosemarkie Caves, Further Investigations

Simon Gunn

The members of the Rosemarie Caves Project have an interest in 19 caves along 2 miles of the coast northeast of Rosemarkie on the Black Isle. There have been two excavations to date, at Learnie 2B and the Cairds' Cave in 2012. This last excavation revealed evidence of the cave's use back to the Iron Age, 300BC. During the last 2 two years we have surveyed all the caves and will soon be starting digging test pits in some of them.



The engraved slab shown below was found at the entrance to one of the caves. Any suggestions as to what is represented?

