



NEWSLETTER November 2014

Dates for your diary

For further details about these events see the WHAT'S ON section of the NOSAS website.

Special MAD Tuesday 2 December 7.30 pm at the Lovat Arms Hotel, Beaulieu. Doors open 7 pm.
The changing landscape of Orkney in early pre-history

- **Caroline Wickham-Jones** of Aberdeen University

NOSAS members £3, open to the public £4, including refreshments

Friday 12 December, 6.30 for 7 pm at the Culloden House Hotel

NOSAS Christmas Dinner 3 courses, £35

followed by a talk on the history of Culloden House by Norman Newton

and preceded by viewing of remains of old house in the basement at 5.45 pm.

Special rate for NOSAS for B&B at the hotel is £60pp double/twin, or £85 single, bookable direct with the hotel: reservations@cullodenhous.co.uk. Or arrange your own accommodation if you prefer, ready for the winter walk next day.

MADs Tuesdays 7.30 - 9.30 pm at Strathpeffer Community Centre

20 January 2015 **Embo boats and other SCHARP activities including Sanday**

- Ellie Graham-Allsop of SCHARP/SCAPE

17 February Natasha Ferguson of the Treasure Trove team

17 March **An eclectic mix of NOSAS activities**

Winter walks

Saturday 13 December **Neglected cairns at Clava** followed by light lunch at Cawdor Tavern

- Anne Coombs (Book lunch with annecoombs1@gmail.com)

Sunday 11 January 2015 **Rosemarkie Caves** - Simon Gunn, contact simonjgunn@hotmail.com

Thursday 12 February **Around and about Glenmarskie, Strathconon** (note change from 5 Feb)

- Meryl Marshall, contact mm.marshall321@btinternet.com

Sunday 8 March **Whitebridge Pictish Cemetery** and other sites east of Loch Ness

- Roland Spencer-Jones (note change from 7 Mar)

April **Dun Lagaidh and adjacent sites on the south side of Loch Broom**

- Lachlan McKeggie

Achanalt Station to Dalnachroich in Strathconon via Badinluchie - an old route through Ross-shire

What is believed to be an old droving route from Badinluchie, south of Loch Achanalt in Strath Bran, to Dalnachroich in Strathconon was followed by several NOSAS members on a sunny day in October.

The Roy map of c. 1750 has two roads from the east coast to the west through Ross-shire, one through Strathconon and one through Strath Bran. At this time they would hardly have been roads but more probably bridle ways easily traversed by ponies; a road from Contin to Poolewe through Strath Bran first appears in the records about the year 1760. From the late 1700s, and probably even earlier, communication with the Isle of Lewis passed through the tiny port of Poolewe. Cattle were shipped from the Islands to Poolewe to join the droving routes which led eastwards to the tryst at Muir of Ord. John Knox reported that he sailed from Stornoway to Poolewe in a small unworthy vessel used for the transport of cattle (*Tour of the Highlands and Islands 1786*). Cattle export reached its height in the early 1800s during the Napoleonic Wars.

The main route by which the drovers headed east for Muir of Ord was via Loch Maree, Achnasheen and Strath Bran, although there were other routes to the north. Maps of the late 18th and early 19th century - John Ainslie 1789, Arrowsmith 1807 and John Thomson 1832 - indicate a branch road heading south over the hills from Achanalt in Strath Bran to Strathconon via "Baud Leuchie"; this route would have made eminent sense for drovers wishing to avoid hazardous river crossings on their way to Muir of Ord. There were Inns at both Dalnachroich and Scatwell in Strathconon and evidence of an Inn at Badinluchie; a list of householders in 1798 has Murdoch Matheson, "vintner" living there. Osgood Mackenzie writes about his father travelling from Conon House to Gairloch via this route in about 1800:

A troop of men and some 30 ponies came from Gairloch ... everything had to go west ... and I have heard that my father was carried to Gairloch on pony-back in a kind of cradle when he was only a few weeks old. The plan was to start (from Conon House) in the afternoon for the little inn at Scatwell at the foot of Strathconon; and as there was a road of a kind thus far, the old yellow coach carried the quality (the gentry) there before dark. There were several difficulties in those days. One was the crossing of the various fords over the rivers and the next was keeping dry all the precious things. Next morning the start was made at 6 o'clock up Strathconon and across the high bealach into Strath Bran and on till Kenlochewe was reached. (*A Hundred Years in the Highlands, Osgood Mackenzie (1921).*)

From the 16th century Strathbran and Strathconon were held by Mackenzie of Seaforth, Chief of the Clan. By the 1830s they had been sold to James Balfour of Whittingham who turned over some of his estate to the sport of shooting. The census of 1841 has a gamekeeper in residence at Badinluchie and in 1851 two families are noted, one of a gamekeeper and one of a shepherd. A plan of the Strathconon Estate (NRAS RHP 2525) of 1825 has a track between Badinluchie and Dalnachroich; today a well-made track takes exactly the same route. This track is marked on the 1st Edition OS map of 1875 and in the 1870s was traversed by none other than William Gladstone, the Prime Minister:

Mr Gladstone was staying in Strathconon (at Dalbreac Lodge) with his wife and daughter as a guest of Arthur Balfour. He was very fond of the outdoor life and reluctant to leave when it came to the end of his visit. Mr Gladstone was due in London for a cabinet meeting but put off his departure, sending his luggage the 16 miles to Muir of Ord and deciding to go overland the 5 miles to Achanalt (the document actually says "Achnasheen" but this is clearly a mistake) to catch the train. He lingered until the last possible moment and then made a rough hurried journey over moor and loch to Achanalt only just managing to make the train in time – Arthur Balfour got the blame! (NAS E433-2-85 *Memoirs of Arthur James Balfour*)

We journeyed by train too for the outward journey on "our" day, always an enjoyable experience; and we felt quite intrepid as we alighted at the remote request stop of Achanalt. A short walk along the road and across moorland found us at Badinluchie.

The two obvious buildings here were designed by Joass, the Dingwall architect, in 1878 and were falling into disrepair.

But we were more interested in the remains of another building beside the burn; could this be the old inn? A roofed building appears on the first edition OS map but very little is left of it and what did remain was badly wasted;



Two buildings at Badinluchie Bob Jones

there was however evidence of a fireplace with two side slabs in the only wall of any significance. The structure was marked on the 2nd Edition OS map of 1903 as a kennel.

The track southwards was easy going and climbed gradually.



Fireplace with side slabs Meryl Marshall

We had noted several bench marks on the 1st edition OS map and we were to find two of them.



Climbing up from Badinluchie Meryl Marshall

Two sites, both comprising enclosures with roughly built structures adjacent, were also located; these were probably connected with sheep-farming ... or cattle droving? On the descent to Strathconon there was a much more interesting site: a cluster of shielings in a small hollow at the junction of two burns. The six grassy dished mounds beside the burn were a token of a way of life long since abandoned and overtaken by the sheepfold alongside them.



Spot the benchmark Bob Jones

Also of interest were rig and furrow cultivation strips neatly "sectioned" by the track – did this indicate permanent settlement?

The problem with a linear walk such as this, where one ends up in a remote location, is that the homeward journey has to be carefully planned; on this occasion we were met by a very kind support team, our thanks to them for a super day!

Meryl Marshall



Rig and furrow sectioned by track
Meryl Marshall

Banchor training days, September 2014

We had two training days exploring and surveying Banchor, a deserted settlement near Tomatin. Many thanks to Eve Boyle, Piers Dixon and Alison McCaig of RCAHMS who assisted us.



Hard at work

Meryl Marshall



... still

Meryl Marshall



The lime kiln

Meryl Marshall



Preparing to fly

Meryl Marshall

Experiments with aerial photography and photogrammetry

This year I fitted a Quadcopter ('drone') with a camera set to take a picture every 7 seconds. Over a ten or fifteen minute flight over 100 pictures will be captured.

I have flown the quadcopter at various sites such as Belladrum, Banchor, Scotsburn and Garbeg and you may have seen some of the pictures on our facebook page.

One of the problems with all aerial photography is that you need exactly the right lighting conditions, usually low angle winter sun, to get really good photos.



Quadcopter

Alan Thompson

To overcome this I have experimented with using photogrammetry. The method is to process a large number of overlapping aerial pictures to create a virtual 3-D surface of the ground. This can then be presented in the computer with shading as if the sun were at any chosen angle. Below are the before and after results:



Overhead lighting

Alan Thompson



Low level lighting

Alan Thompson

There is a lot more to aerial photography than simply taking pictures from the air! This and other methods have a lot of potential and I hope to experiment further. Let me know if you have any suitable sites you would like to try.

Alan Thompson

Glenarigolach Abandoned Township, Wester Ross

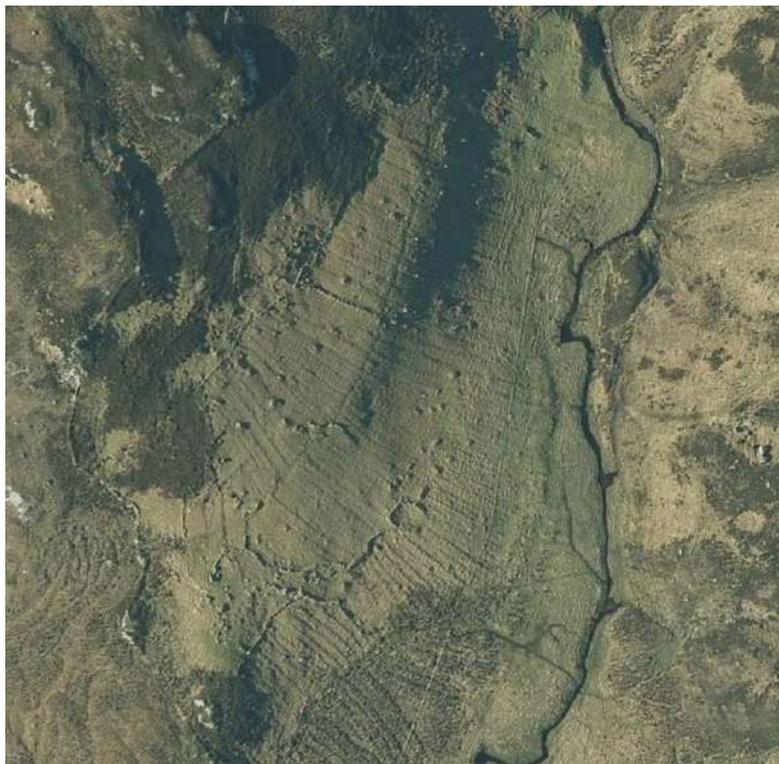
Glenarigolach meaning 'glen of the forked shieling' is accessed by a stalkers' path leading up the hill on the east side of the Gruinard river. The area is centred on NG 98237 89963 and lies at a height of 100 m. The glen was once well populated and Glenarigolach lies on a path between the smaller settlements of Ridorcha and Craigour.

During the Highland Archaeology Festival 2014 NOSAS led a walk to the site on their second visit to the area. We were not quite so lucky with the weather as in April, but still enjoyed exploring the ruins and features, although some were submerged in bracken.



Looking down the glen at Glenarigolach

There is little documented detailed history on the area, but Meryl Marshall is on the case so all will eventually be revealed! She has found that Glenarigolach is marked on the Pont 4 map 1583–96 as Ary Gaulach. We do know that the glen was cleared for a sheep run around 1840. Jim Buchanan has mapped the visible walls in the area using aerial photographs, and a walkover survey with Anne and Terry Doe has so far listed 33 buildings and features. An extensive muir burn in 2013 has revealed more walls and field boundaries and a roundhouse, so further surveying will hopefully take place in early 2015 before everything is once again submerged in grass and bracken.



Aerial view Bing Maps Copyright 2014 Nokia, Microsoft

We have established that this is a multiperiod settlement site. There is a 9 m diameter roundhouse with associated field wall and possible burial cairnfield with at least five cairns.



Possible burial cairns

A classic horse shoe shaped burnt mound lies beside a small burn.



Surveying the roundhouse



Burnt Mound



Lazy beds and clearance cairns

There are five large enclosures with turf and stone walls, plus numerous smaller enclosures, extensive lazy beds, stone clearance piles, lynchets and lots and lots of walls! The footings of thirteen small shielings/buildings lie on the slopes around the main township which is built on the top of a group of knolls above the boggy moorland.

The later township consists of a row of buildings with terraces built out from them downslope. The walls are still upstanding to a maximum height of 2 m. These are

substantial buildings and some have what look like gargantuan byre drains. Are these for huge cattle or modified for some other purpose? Associated with the township are potato pits, a corn drying kiln, and a still tucked in behind another knoll up slope and out of sight. In the middle of the township is a more modern circular sheep pen with the stone taken from nearby robbed out buildings.



Main township



One of the byre drains



Explaining the workings of the kiln



Looking at the still

There is more to be done: walls to be surveyed, and a decision taken about more detailed surveys of the buildings. A feature that Anne Coombs has found needs to be investigated, and no doubt there are more to be found. This is a fascinating and fairly remote site. If you would like to help with further surveying please get in touch with Meryl Marshall, Anne Coombs or Anne MacInnes.

Anne MacInnes

Highland henge trail

Henges in Highland seem to be a bit different from other UK henges: smaller, later, and less flamboyant. More akin to the quiet steady Highland temperament, perhaps?

A henge is usually defined as a circular enclosure, surrounded by a ditch, surrounded by a bank, with one or two entrances. They can be, but don't need to be, associated with internal burials, or standing stones, or posts. They are generally a varied lot. Although the earliest known UK henge is at Stenness in Orkney, from around 3100 BC at the start of the later Neolithic, the biggest and most spectacular henges in the UK are dated to 4-500 years later, around the middle of the 3rd millennium BC. They are part of that fundamental change from square or rectangular monuments in the early Neolithic to a variety of round monuments in the later Neolithic.

What seems special about the Highland henges is that when they've been dated they turn out to be middle to late Bronze Age, i.e. 1500-1300 BC. Radiocarbon dates have been obtained from excavated henges at Pullyhour, Portree and Lairg. The latter two sites are now built over. The latest known henge is the Hill of Tuach in Aberdeenshire, dated to around 1000 BC.

This article is meant to enthuse you to take to the roads and do the Highland Henge Trail. It'll take you round ten of the best henges that Highland has to offer. The clickable numbers take you to the relevant entry in the Highland Council's Historic Environment Record (HER). And please note that although there is a "Right to Roam", you should still be respectful of the landowner's rights and property as you access these sites: close gates, etc. and respect the shooting season.

1. Start with Conon Bridge [MHG9059](#), the archetypal and easiest henge to see in Highland. Park at the roadside, pop over a low wall, and you're there. It's good to get your eye in for the other henges you're about to meet.

2. Next stop is Achilty, near Contin, [MHG7792](#) where a reedy but unmistakable henge is just inside a field wall, opposite Loch Achilty (with a crannog, but don't get too distracted).

3. Back the way, through Tore to Culbokie [MHG9064](#) where the henge is a bit more of a challenge to get to, and is seriously vegetated. It needs a NOSAS haircut, so maybe in 2015...



Culbokie henge

Jim Bone



The "reedy" Achilty henge

Roland Spencer-Jones

4. Then head north, over the Cromarty Firth, over the Dornoch Firth, and turn sharp right to Sydera Wood [MHG11795](#) just outside Dornoch. This varies from the three you've seen so far in that it has two entrances, is oval rather than circular, and has a Home Guard trench through the middle of it. Read the story on the HER.

5. Turn west now, along the north side of Dornoch Firth, through Bonar Bridge, to find the Loch Migdale henge [MHG10021](#). This is the only one with its own sign off the road, famous since the Time Team Dig in 2003. A small and lovely henge overlooking the loch (also with a crannog).

6. Head north, through Lairg, to the Baddhu henge [MHG17847](#). This was recorded but little visited until recently. A perfect henge, on a heathery ridge, looking north. And it requires a satisfying walk to get to it.



Migdale henge

James McComas

7. Off east now along the A839, turn left at Rogart, and over the hills to enter the upper end of Strath Brora. Head east down the strath, and just before Loch Brora, the road cuts Ascoile henge [MHG11021](#) in half. The half that is left is well worth the detour.

8. Continue down the glen to Brora, and then a long haul up to Pullyhour henge [MHG1368](#) just south of Halkirk. This henge was excavated by Richard Bradley and team in 2008 and is a perfect under-stated remote henge that amply repays the long drive to get to it.



Pullyhour henge Roland Spencer-Jones

9. The last two henges are over on the west coast. Although they don't connect, they're maybe worth doing as you head out that way for other purposes. The small degraded henge on the Ullapool Braes [MHG40618](#) has only recently been identified.

10. And lastly the majestic Auchtertyre [MHG9208](#) henge, the largest on this list, just west of Stromeferry. It's so much more impressive than any of the henges listed so far, thereby reflecting the bigger henges south of the Border. And, it may not be a henge at all. The HER record describes the uncertainty.

Torboll Farm, outside Dornoch, has one final henge [MHG11761](#) that you don't need to visit: there is nothing visible on the ground, just a field.



The Torboll Farm Henge RB Gourlay, Highland Council (HER)

Now you're fired up about henges, there are more on the Highland HER, although many of those are only identified as crop-marks or are now sitting under development. Books? Richard Bradley's *Stages & Screens* is good, as are Gordon Noble's *Neolithic Scotland* and the *Set in Stone* book, edited by Vicki Cummings and Amelia Pannett.

Roland Spencer-Jones

Belladrum excavation, September 2014

The Belladrum drama has a Prologue and two Acts, three main protagonists, and a horde (sic) of extras.

The Prologue

Enter first Joe Gibbs, landowner at Belladrum and host to the annual August Tartan Heart Festival. During clearing his fields after the Festival, he employs a metal detectorist to identify and get rid of all the left-behind tent pegs. Enter next that said detectorist, Eric Soane, who in August 2009 scanned the site and discovered a scatter of Roman denarii and some mediaeval coins. Enter third, Fraser Hunter, a principal curator at the National Museum of Scotland, with an interest in hoards and Roman coins. He excavated the site in October 2012 to see if there were any more coins and to identify any obvious archaeology. Enter last, the cast of thousands – well, maybe 20-30 – human diggers from around Scotland.

There are two possible narratives, Fraser says. The coins were a hoard, a cache. Someone in the Iron Age wanted to find a good safe place to store his (presumably his) treasure. Or, second narrative, these scattered coins were a votive offering to the gods. There is evidence from other sites such as Birnie, Fraser says, that the hoards of coins do seem to have been placed in special previously holy places.

And, why place the coins here? Birnie and Rhynie had hoards placed within settlement areas. Is there evidence of that at Belladrum? Or, if the coins were a votive offering, what was there at the time to focus the offering? A spring? An ancient site? And, most intriguingly, why 1000 years later were some mediaeval coins placed in the same area?

Act 1

A few NOSAS members were part of the cast for the 2012 showing of "Find the Belladrum Archaeology". That 2012 trench disappointingly revealed little archaeology, although it did show the remains of a wall running through the trench.

Act 2

With a return of the show at the end of August 2014, more NOSAS members turned up, ready to kneel before the modern god of field archaeology. It proved to be a great show!



James enjoying drawing Roland Spencer-Jones



Diggers on their knees Roland Spencer-Jones

This year, two 20 m square trenches were cut into the sloping field in which the coins were originally found, close by the 2012 trench. There were two additional trenches – a small trench in the middle of the field to demonstrate soil stratigraphy, and a larger trench at the top of the slope.

The first new trench this year – the one nearest the 2012 trench – had much more on offer – a continuation of the wall, a probable turf wall parallel to it, a possible cairn in the top left corner, and some interesting finds. Towards the top end of the trench fragments of (probable) Neolithic pottery turned up, together with numerous flint and quartz fragments.

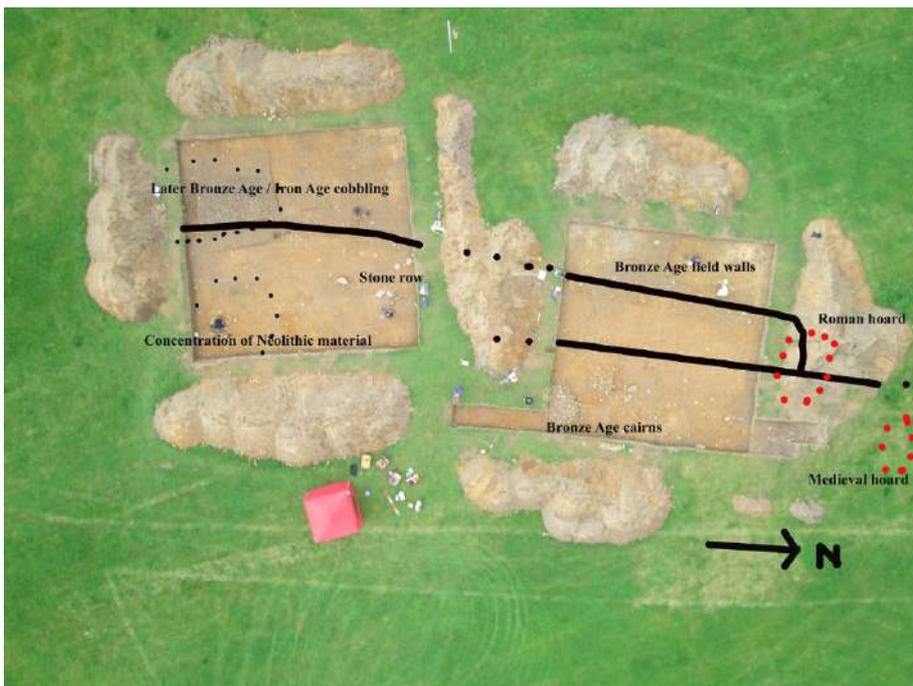
The next trench up the slope had three large stones in a line, towards the bottom left corner. Were these orthostats? Two of them seemed to have been carefully placed in scooped holes with packing stones. And across the trench ran a wall, associated with a large area of cobbling.

So, in summary, what did this dig find? Well, lots of structures of uncertain nature. But the Neolithic pottery is important. It is beginning to answer the question of why these coins were found here in the middle of a now featureless field. It seems there is evidence of a Neolithic something, possibly a cairn, near to where the coins were found. Further post-ex work, including radiocarbon dating, should in time provide more evidence.



Trench 2

Roland Spencer-Jones



Trenches 1 and 2

Alan Thompson, annotated by Fraser Hunter

The show's cast this year was led by Fraser Hunter and his wife Tanja Romankiewicz, ably supported by Dave Anderson, Lisa Brown and Lynne McKeggie. The unpaid extras were people from Edinburgh, Moray, NOSAS and a couple from Caithness. And even the weather was good! It only rained on the day that Alan turned up with his drone.

Epilogue

The following summary of the dig was supplied by Fraser Hunter. It complements the narrative drama above:

The story now goes back to the Neolithic, the time of the first farmers in the area c. 3500-4000 BC, with some typical early Neolithic pottery and a flake of pitchstone – a volcanic glass imported from Arran. Around this time or a little later, a row of small standing stones was erected – we have three of them, and one disturbed by the plough.

A thick soil layer was then deposited over the site, up to 250 mm thick. This was most likely caused by erosion elsewhere (higher up the slopes), perhaps from over-cultivation, and partially covered some of the remains. However, the tops of the stones still poked through, and people respected them when they used the area for farming in the Bronze Age (c. 2500-1500 BC) – this is represented by a series of long field walls, constructed over an extended period of time, and two cairns.

Over one end of one wall, a cobbled surface suggests a slightly later settlement in the vicinity – the style of pottery implies a date in the period c. 1200 – 400 BC i.e. late Bronze Age or early Iron Age.

Interestingly, there is no trace of settlement dating to the later Iron Age – the time when the coin hoard was buried. I'm sure the land was still used for farming, but the settlement was elsewhere. This does give a context for both of the hoards though – it is likely both were buried here because there were local landmarks – cairns or standing stones. The valuable coins could either have been buried for safety in a memorable location (the most likely explanation for the Medieval hoard) or on a place seen as sacred and mysterious (a possible explanation for the Roman hoard).

Our trench at the top of the field showed that there is archaeology here too – cobbled areas and a couple of stone features – but we didn't have time to get any dating evidence. The small trench in the hollow showed that the area had been heavily landscaped in the mid-19th century, but did preserve traces of the earlier rig-and-furrow pre-improvement agriculture.

Roland Spencer-Jones