



NEWSLETTER October 2015

Dates for your diary

MAD evenings Tuesdays 7.30 - 9.30 pm at Strathpeffer Community Centre

17th November **Northern Picts** - Candy Hatherley of Aberdeen University

8th December **A pot pourri of NOSAS activity**

19th January 2016 **Rock Art – Phase 2** John Wombell

16th February

15th March **Bobbin Mills** - Joanna Gilliat

Winter walks

Thursday 5th November

Pictish Easter Ross with soup and sandwiches in Balintore
- David Findlay

Friday 4th December

Slochd to Sluggan Bridge: military roads and other sites with afternoon tea - Meryl Marshall

Saturday 9th January 2016

Roland Spencer-Jones

Thursday 4th February

Caledonian canal and Craig Phadrig Fort- Bob & Rosemary Jones

Saturday 5th March

Sat 9th April

Brochs around Brora - Anne Coombs

Training

Sunday 8 November 2 - 4 pm at Tarradale House

Pottery identification course (beginners repeated) - Eric Grant

Archaeology Scotland Summer School, May 2015

The Archaeology Scotland Summer School for 2015 covered Kilmartin and North Knapdale. The group stayed in Inveraray and included a number of NOSAS members who enjoyed the usual well researched sites and excellent evening talks.

The first site was a Neolithic chambered cairn in Crarae Gardens. This cairn was excavated in the 1950s when it was discovered to contain inhumations and cremation burials. The chamber is divided into three sections by two septal slabs with the largest section at the rear.

The next site was Arichonan township which overlooks Caol Scotnish, an inlet of Loch Sween, and which was cleared in 1848 though there were still some households listed in the 1851 census.



Arichonan township

Marion Ruscoe

At Kilmory Oib we looked at another cleared township, well and cross-slab, though the detail on the cross-slab is hard to see.



Kilmory Oib

Marion Ruscoe



Chambered cairn Marion Ruscoe

Later maps indicate some roofed buildings as late as 1898. A sheep fank had been built in the interim, presumably using stones from some of the unoccupied buildings, and the site has 16 structures, some of which have interesting architectural detail.



Cross slab

Marion Ruscoe

The effects of the weather on such monuments creates something of a dilemma for their care and preservation and this slab has deteriorated considerably in the last 70 years.

After lunch we visited Kilmichael Glassary where there is a fine example of rock art as well as late mediaeval grave slabs in the churchyard.

The final site visit was Ballymeanoch stone settings, henge and kerb cairn and Dunchraigaig Cairn.



Kilmichael glassary Marion Ruscoe



Dunchraigaig Cairn Marion Ruscoe

The cairn, dating to the early Bronze Age, was excavated in 1864 when three cists were discovered as well as the remains of 'an unburnt body' lying on the cover slab. Two food vessels were recovered which are now in the National Museum. Nearby is Ballymeanoch stone settings, henge and kerb cairn.

The standing stones are arranged in linear rows of four stones, two stones and one outlier. The outlier fell and its stump was removed in 1977. Two of the stones have cup marks. In the corner of the field is a very damaged kerb-cairn and the henge is situated to the south-west of the stone settings. This has an outer bank with an internal ditch and entrance causeways to the north and south.



Ballymeanoch kerb cairn and stone settings Marion Ruscoe

We were mostly very lucky with the weather but at this last site there was a heavy shower of horizontal sleet which sent everyone scurrying back to the buses.



Carnasserie Castle Marion Ruscoe

We spent day two in Kilmartin Glen, starting at Carnasserie where some of the party explored the castle and others climbed the hill to look at the standing stones and Bronze Age cairn. The present castle dates from the C16 but was blown up when it was attacked by the MacLeans following the rebellion of the Duke of Argyll in 1690 and it was never rebuilt.

The standing stones are above the castle and oriented north/south. One leans at an alarming angle and may well fall in the near future.



Carnasserie standing stones Marion Ruscoe



Carnasserie Cairn Marion Ruscoe

The cairn is further up the hill to the south-west and has a commanding view of the glen. It has been robbed, but excavation in 1930 discovered a cist with a food vessel, which is now in the National Museum of Antiquities.

At lunchtime we had an opportunity to explore Kilmartin church and churchyard and also see some of the finds from the excavation at Upper Largie quarry.



Grave slabs, Kilmartin Church Marion Ruscoe

The final visit of the day was to Nether Largie South chambered cairn, the Temple Wood circles and the Nether Largie stone setting.

Nether Largie South chambered cairn was excavated in 1864 and the chamber is divided into four compartments. The neolithic finds included a pot similar to the one found at Culduthel.

The cairn appears to have been reused in the early Bronze Age when a cist was added.



Nether Largie South Marion Ruscoe



Nether Largie South cist Marion Ruscoe

The Temple Wood circles are situated south-west of Nether Largie South Cairn and show a sequence of development which starts with the construction of a timber circle at Temple Wood North. This was followed by the construction of a stone circle on the site and a second stone circle, including spiral and concentric ring designs on two of the stones, at Temple Wood South.

The southern stone circle was reused with the construction of cists each covered with a small cairn outside the stone circle. In the early Bronze Age the southern circle was reused again with the construction of a large cist in the centre of the circle and the whole was converted into a ring-cairn.



Temple Wood South central cist Marion Ruscoe



Temple Wood South stone circle Marion Ruscoe

There was a third reuse of the site for burial in the middle Bronze Age.

Nether Largie stone setting is situated south-east of the Temple Wood circles and this too has some examples of rock art. There are about forty cups on one of the standing stones.

The evening lectures covered Kilmartin, West Highland mediaeval sculpture, mediaeval rural settlement in Mid-Argyll, and an interesting overview of whole weekend by Eve Boyle.

Marion Ruscoe



Nether Largie standing stone Marion Ruscoe

Skye weekend June 2015 Day 1

Our first day on Skye was spent at sites centred on Kilmalie where we parked by an interesting churchyard. In the morning we crossed the river by an attractive wrought iron bridge and stopped to look at the Neolithic cairn which has a large hole in the top giving access to a stone cist.



Wrought iron bridge

Marion Ruscoe



Cist

Marion Ruscoe

We walked to Dun Ringill, noting as we passed indications of use of the various clefts on the coastline. At one point steps led down to a cave and a little further on an enclosure had been constructed by building walls across the space between the cliffs. Inside was a small pen, possibly for sheep.



Steps down to cave

Marion Ruscoe



Walled enclosure with pen

Marion Ruscoe

Dun Ringill is built on a cliff and some of the walling has clearly fallen to the beach below. The entrance has bar holes, but no access to the intramural chamber. As recognised in the HER this structure is in a very deteriorated condition, and some of the features identified in the plan and description on the HER are very difficult to find. But it is an impressive structure and a very suitable place to have a coffee break. We spent some time exploring the broch and surrounding area.



Dun Ringill

Marion Ruscoe



Dun Ringill entrance Marion Ruscoe



Dun Ringill wall Marion Ruscoe

Near the broch was a farmhouse and enclosure wall, where it's clear some of the stones from the broch had ended up. The enclosure has a fine example of lazy beds.

Our final task on the morning walk was to look at what may be kelp kilns. These are semi-circular scoops by the path and the consensus was that they were not like kelp kilns seen elsewhere, and so the group was doubtful about this suggestion. We had lunch sitting by the shore and returned to the other side of the river for the afternoon walk. The intrepid members of the party used the stepping stones.



Farmhouse Marion Ruscoe



Stepping stones Marion Ruscoe

The afternoon walk focussed on Dun Liath which is just a circle of stones though the outer edge is quite clear on the west side. The wall is as much as 12' thick in places. This was a good place for another tea break before the walk back to the cars.

On the return walk we explored an unnamed township near Drinan. Here we found a number of buildings, one of which had been adapted for modern use.



Dun Liath Marion Ruscoe

Marion Ruscoe

Skye day 2: Rubh an Dunain

Day two of the NOSAS Skye weekend dawned a perfect blue sky day. We were privileged to have Martin Wildgoose as our guide; Martin is a retired archaeologist who lives on Skye. The object was to visit the Rubh an Dunain peninsula, starting from the campsite in Glen Brittle. This amazing landscape was settled and used by a succession of people from Mesolithic times to the 19th century.

The first point of interest was chronologically the most recent, a beautifully preserved early 18th century Tacksman's house. One end was squared with a fine stepped gable and fireplaces, the other was rounded - the servants quarters we wondered?



Walk in to Rubh an Dunain Beth Blackburn



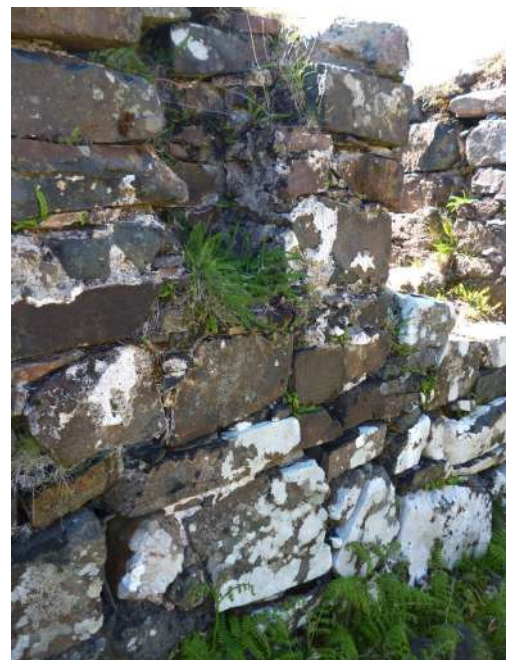
Tacksman's house

Beth Blackburn



Tacksman's house gable Beth Blackburn

The slots for the half crucks supporting the roof were still visible. Surrounding it were the ruins of the large associated settlement. This was Clan MacAskill land, finally vacated after the clearances.



Slot for half cruck Anne Cockroft

Then we had a leap back in time to the Mesolithic. We picnicked near a rock shelter which was excavated in the 1920s, revealing an Iron Age smithing hearth and numerous lithics.



Picnic by rock shelter

Beth Blackburn

The highlight of the day was the stone "Viking" canal, an amazing feat of engineering. It joined Loch na h-Airde to the sea, and enabled the building of a shipyard and protected moorings. Martin told us that the remains of a birlinn found on the floor of the loch have been dated to the 12th century.

Even more remarkable was Rubh an Dunain itself, standing sentinel above the canal, an impressive Iron Age broch style wall with an intramural guard cell. It has never been excavated and its purpose remains unclear.



The "Viking" canal

Beth Blackburn



Rubh an Dunain wall

Beth Blackburn



Intramural guard cell

Beth Blackburn



Chambered cairn

Beth Blackburn

As if our day hadn't been exciting enough, Martin took us to a beautifully constructed Neolithic chambered cairn.



Searching for lithics

Beth Blackburn

As we started the long walk back we paused for a happy half hour of scrabbling in a burn near the rock shelter where Martin had previously found lithics. Guess what, we found more! What an end to the day.

Many thanks to Martin for so capably guiding and keeping us together....more or less!

Beth Blackburn

There is also an article about Rubh an Dunain written by Martin Wildgoose in the NOSAS blog at <https://nosasblog.wordpress.com/2015/06/23/rubh-an-dunain-skye-8000-years-of-history>
Note that there is no need to log in to read this.

Skye Day 3: exploring High Pasture Cave and seventy sheilings

On the third day of Beth Blackburn's fantastic three day trip to Skye to explore the exceptional archaeology of the area Martin Wildgoose and George Kozikowski guided us through Uamh an Ard Achadh (High Pasture Cave, HPC), the recent focus of Bronze and Iron Age archaeological research. I had wanted to visit this unique location since reading Martin's excellent article in Skye Magazine 2011/2012 and hearing his colleague Steven Birch speak on the subject.

At least sixteen of us wanted to enter the cave so Martin and George patiently guided us through in alternate groups of four. Not surprisingly this took most of the day especially as some of the more naughty groups were unwilling to return to the surface (guilty as charged!). Those waiting on the surface were able to study plans of the area and photographs of the excavation and artefacts provided by Martin and George - but some chose simply to relax.



Waiting to enter the cave

Karen Clarke

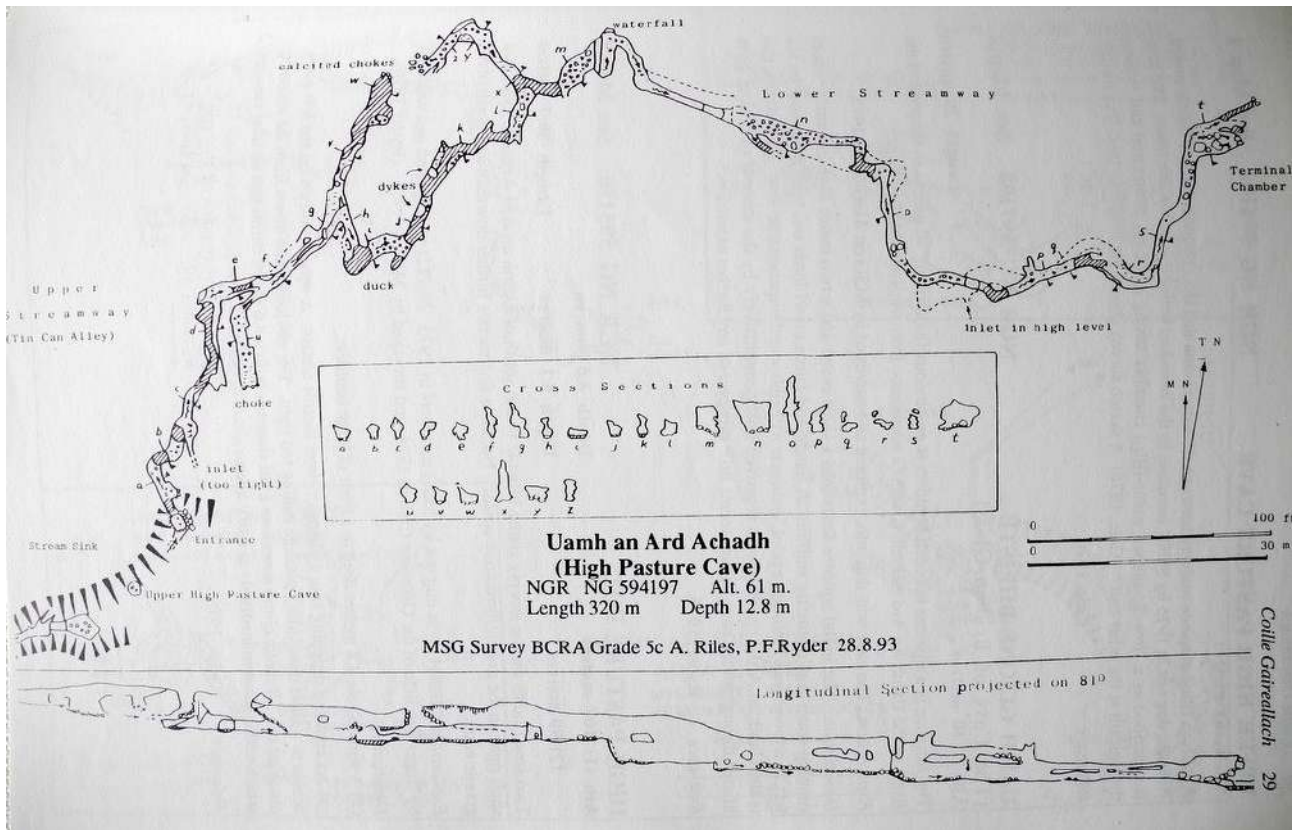
Martin also guided us around structures within the landscape surrounding HPC which was the focus of ongoing research and excavation after the cave itself was backfilled. There are two other caves in the area where archaeological evidence was also found. Dating and examination of the archaeological evidence removed from the cave is still ongoing. There is also evidence for metalworking. HPC lies within a natural amphitheatre and Martin's sketch depicts how it might have looked c.600 BC with the horseshoe shaped midden behind the cave entrance.



Sketch showing High Pasture Cave entrance

Martin Wildgoose

HPC is 320 metres long, the second longest cave system on Skye. Cavers first penetrated the site in 1972 and named it High Pasture Cave. Archaeologist and caver, Steven Birch, observed evidence of human activity and he and his colleagues Martin Wildgoose and George Kozikowski commenced the excavation alongside many others including volunteers. The excavation lasted from 2002 to 2010. During our visit we penetrated as far as 'The Duck', approximately one third of the way along the cave system.



Plan and sections of High Pasture Cave

Grampian Speleological Group

High Pasture Cave is extremely attractive, reminiscent of a long grotto with stalactites and gour formations as the detailed photographs taken by Bob Jones show. Gour formations occur when minerals including calcite build up in cave pools leaving deposits above and below which flow sinuously and seem to drape surrounding rocks like frilly curtains or coral formations. It is tempting to think that prehistoric people also responded to the natural forms of the cave interior. As water tables and levels changed wide channels were carved into the cave floor. Large blocks of basalt lie across and block some of the channels.



Gour formations

Bob Jones

The cave is accessed via a chimney-like drop through a hatch followed by a squiggle through a narrow entrance and a crawl along a channel.



Hatch over the cave entrance Karen Clarke



Inside the cave

Bob Jones

We were fortunate that the weather had been dry preceding our visit but in places there were wet sumps to be negotiated.

The eight year excavation provided evidence for activity around and within the cave over c.7000 years. Midden heaps and stone and bone tools found during the excavation suggest that Mesolithic folk (5000-4000 BC) utilised the cave and camped in the area. Charcoal deposits suggest that the cave was used throughout the Neolithic (4000-2000 BC) and Bronze Age (2000-700 BC). During the Iron Age (700 BC-100 AD) activity around HPC seems to have increased and a path was constructed approaching the cave entrance. The excavation found evidence of a large fire and burnt mound in this area which seemed to result in the entrance eventually becoming buried under centuries of ash. Further archaeological evidence suggests that HPC might then have been used as a votive site. A stone stairwell was constructed allowing access into the cave and deposition of domestic items within the cave. These items were mainly female related including needles, spindle whorls, beads and querns. Some items were found in clusters and others deposited singly. Martin pointed out that HPC is in the township of Kilbride (Bride's cell or holy place). Bride was the Celtic goddess of the hearth and childbirth.

The cave acoustics are of interest. About forty metres within the cave there is an area where sound has a noticeable, pleasing resonance. Using his voice George demonstrated this to great effect. It is tempting to wonder whether ancient people were also aware of the acoustics. The fragment of what is probably Europe's oldest string instrument, the bridge of a 2300 year old lyre, was found in the ash of the surface fire, suggesting that complex music was an important part of ritual life around HPC.

From 350 BC-100 AD it appears that many small fires replaced the single large fire and the burnt mound grew larger. Personal and domestic items were buried throughout HPC and there was grain scattered over the cave floor. Broken pottery, the remains of forty pigs and an adze (axe like implement) all dating to 150 BC were also deposited within the cave. At around this time three cows were buried. The stairwell was also filled with clay and stone, on top of which were placed the skull and torso bones of a foetal pig, a human foetus and a child of approximately two months old. Above these remains was laid a bed of catkins, white holly and water lily and a woman of 25-40 years was placed on top with the remaining limbs and bones of the human foetus placed in the area of her abdomen. The bones of the baby were placed between her legs. The foetus and baby were genetically linked to the adult female. Further clay and boulders were laid on top to cover them and close the stairwell. The site was then abandoned until the nineteenth century when there is evidence of crofting activity commencing in the area.

After the final group entered the cave mid afternoon I remained in the vicinity of HPC to explore the surrounding landscape and later joined Anne Coombs who had led others on the surface to the site of seventy enigmatic sheilings further along the Torrin Road.



James in a small shieling Karen Clarke

Some of those sheilings are very small, as my photograph with James for scale shows. It is suggested that they may be storage or milking cells.

We ended our day with tea and cakes in the Blue Cafe before heading home to widespread destinations on the mainland. We are indebted to Beth to organising the very successful trip and to Martin, George and Anne for acting as our guides.

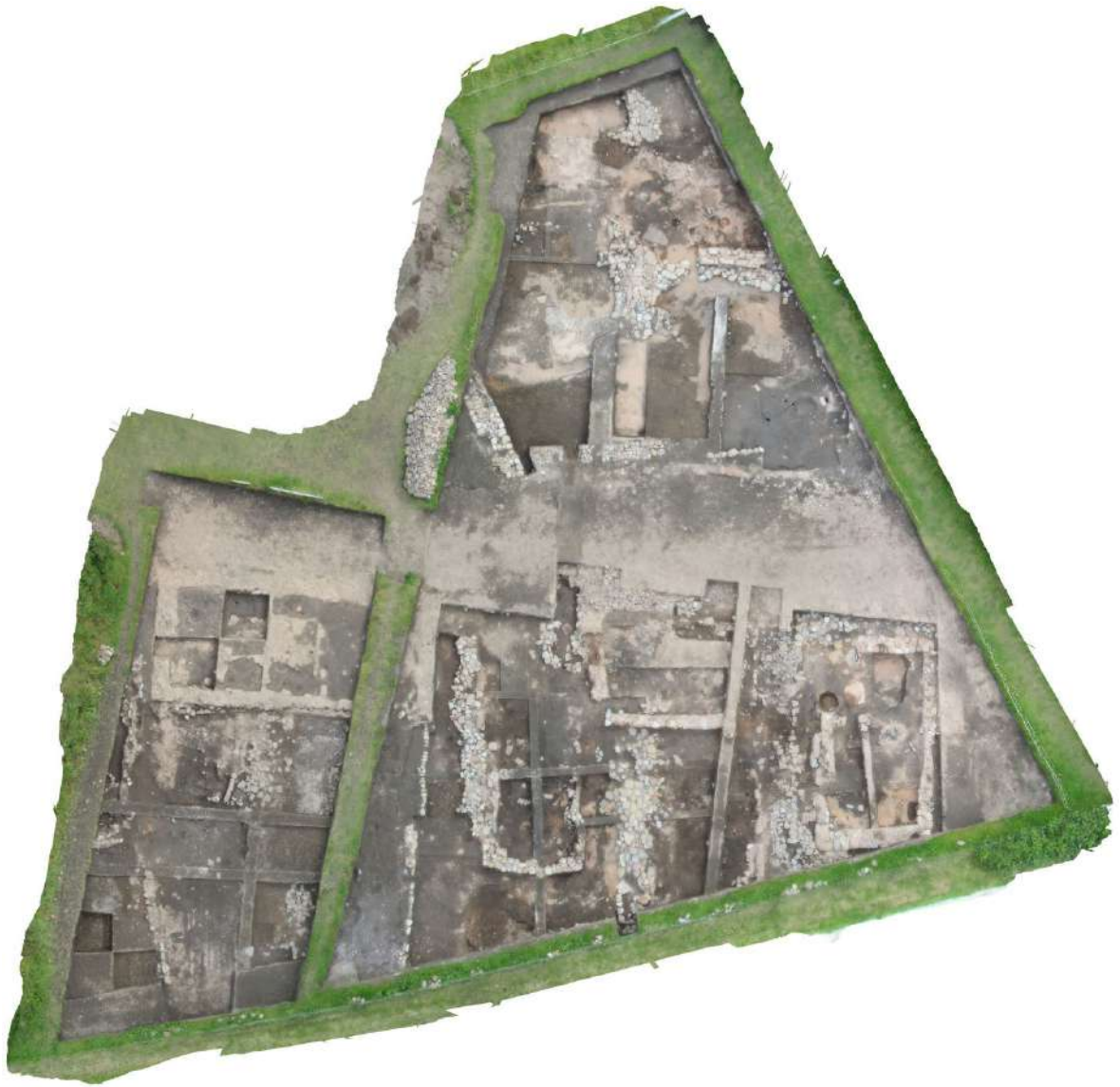
Further information on High Pasture Cave may be found at <http://www.high-pasture-cave.org/>

Karen Clarke

There is also an article about High Pasture Cave, again written by Karen, in the NOSAS blog at <https://nosasblog.wordpress.com/2015/08/20/exploring-high-pasture-cave-with-nosas/>

Summer digs

Many NOSAS members have been out digging over the summer. These photographs produced by Alan Thompson from his Quadcopter pictures show the results of some of your work.



Cromarty

Alan Thompson



Garbeg

Alan Thompson