



WE WISH YOU A VERY HAPPY CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTH OF SCOTLAND ARCHAEOLOGY SOCIETY

December 2016

The committee following the October AGM.

Chairperson – Roland Spencer-Jones, **Treasurer** – Alan Thompson,

Vice Chair & Secretary – James McComas.

We welcome new committee members – Tim Blackie, Paul Hancock and Rosemary Jones

NOSAS web site – www.nosas.co.uk

DATES FOR THE DIARY

Winter Activities

MAD (Monthly Archaeology Discussions)

Tuesday, 24th January 2017 - Martin Curruthers on Cairns Excavation, South Ronaldsay

Tuesday, 21st February 2017 – Tertia Barnett – Plans for the Rock Art Project

Tuesday, 21st March 2017 – Stratford Halliday – Hut Circles

WINTER WALKS

Saturday, 7th January 2017 – Walk lead by James McComas James@comacodirect.com

Buntait and Lochletter, Glen Urquhart. ***Please read preview and background on page 21-23***

Saturday, 11th February 2017 – Walk lead by Duncan Kennedy Duncan.w.kennedy@googlemail.com

Around Fort Augustus/Glen Moriston, Military Roads.

Sunday, 12th March 2017 – Walk lead by Susan Kruse cruachan.hts.@googlemail.com

Area in the Dornoch Firth (car tour) Telford roads, bridges and churches.

Saturday, 22 April, 2017 – Walk lead by Anne Coombs annecoombs1@gmail.com

Battle site in Glenshiel (Kintail) plus sheilings recording and early Christian site at Morvich.

ANNUAL EVENING DINNER (LAST FINAL CALL)

Friday, 27th January 2017 – Organizers - Elizabeth Blackburn and Marion Ruscoe

elizabeth@riverford.fslife.co.uk and mcrusco@mypostoffice.co.uk

Kinkell House Hotel, 18:30 for 19:00. Three course meal for £27.95. Cheques made payable to the hotel for the full amount but these must be sent to Beth beforehand to book a place. A menu is now in place and please contact the organizers. Contact Kinkell House if you wish to stay overnight, special price of £60 double or £40 single occupancies before 20th December.

(www.kinkellhousehotel.com). Previous information about on the above was circulated to all the membership by email on 11th December from the Secretary.

CENTRAL BELT LONG WEEKEND FRIDAY 7 APRIL - TUESDAY 11 APRIL

Lead Anne Coombs annecoombs1@gmail.com and Anne Cockroft ann.cockroft@googlemail.com

The plan so far is to have a programme for a long weekend of 3 days with possible add-ons and a wet day alternative. The focus of the weekend is to get a real flavour of Roman Scotland however there will be other things included e.g. Atlantic Wall and other suggestions could be included.

- Dates - Friday 7 April to Tuesday 11 April, meeting up on Friday night and dispersing Monday night (or Tues morning whichever people want). People also welcome for shorter times.
- Bar Hill fort, Roman fort, Castle Hill fort Iron Age, walk along Antonine Wall and return along Forth and Clyde Canal 12km. Possible car arrangements to create 6km one way walk.
- Atlantic Wall, Sherrifmuir WW2 mock-up of German defences, other sites in area. If people had not been to Ardoch it could be included in this day.
- Rough Castle fort with walk from Falkirk Wheel along Antonine Wall and back along Forth and Clyde Canal. Plus Seabegs Wood section of Wall and tunnel under Canal.
- Suggestions for getting the mood on way south - Ardoch Fort and Gask ridge and wind down on way north – Dupplin Cross and Forteviot.
- Wet day alternative Linthigow Palace and if at appropriate time on Sat or Sun Torphichen Preceptory.
- Centre for the weekend to be around Stirling.

Depending on numbers, we would hope to book a self-catering house for the 4 nights - first come first served. Please contact **Anne Coombs** asap if you would be interested in this - no commitment at present, but once we have numbers and cost we would need a firm booking and payment. Or you can make your own arrangements/use your campervan.

VISIT TO TIREE

Saturday, 3rd June to 10th June 2017 – Lead John Wombell john.wombell@btinternet.com

Each day's activities will be led by John and/or Roland and will include a mixture of walks, "fossicking", surveying, and enjoying the many aspects of this large island. There will be specific focus on coastal sites, including some early chapel sites, the ringing stone and unrecorded duns. For more information contact John.

ARCH lecture Series for 2017 has already been emailed to all the membership on 4th December by the secretary. www.archhighland.org.uk but check out other events here.

9 January 2017 - Talk by Meryl Marshall 19:30 - **Distilling in the Black Isle** and surrounding area in the 18th century at **Seaforth Club Rooms, Station Square, Fortrose.**

Dingwall Community Centre 19:30

25th January 'A summer on Hirta - working as the St Kilda Archaeologist'

Jonathan Wordsworth of the NTS describes his work on St Kilda.

22nd February 'Rosemarkie Caves, some finds and a puzzle'.

Simon Gunn provides an account of the past 10 years of archaeology in coastal caves near Rosemarkie, including the latest in September 2016.

29th March 'The Prehistory of Skye: An overview including the results of recent archaeological discoveries'. Steven Birth summarises recent work.

26th April '**Highland Vernacular Buildings**'.

Malcolm Bangor-Jones provides an introduction to vernacular buildings as they developed with changes in economy and society and with new construction techniques and materials.

28th June '**Discoveries at Tornagrain**'

Lachlan McKeeggie will cover the main findings of the excavation at this prehistoric site, including post-excavation results.

ARCHAEOLOGY SCOTLAND SUMMER SCHOOL

19th to 22nd May this year to be based in Ross-shire.

Archaeology Scotland has been running a 'Summer School' since 1952 when it was established by what was then the Scottish group of the Council for British Archaeology. Each year we visit a different part of Scotland (and it has on occasion been south of the border).

The tour is led by experts in the field and aims to explore the local archaeology, history and heritage of a particular area. Combining informative field trip excursions and an evening lecture programme, it is also a fabulous way to socialise and share knowledge and experiences. The programme is distributed to our membership in the early Spring of each year.

Our Summer School Director: Geoff Waters has been working hard on the 2017 programme. Please check out their web page www.archaeologyscotland.org.uk

Other News

UNIVERSITY OF THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

The University of the Highlands and Islands Archaeology Institute are pleased to be teaming up with Digit 2017 for a World Heritage Day event in Orkney as part of the 'Scotland in Six' on 18th April 2017. Scotland wide including Orkney.

The Year of History, Heritage and Archaeology 2017 will begin on 1 January 2017 and end on 31 December 2017. For more information, please visit: www.visitscotland.com/hha2017.

BBC 2 PROGRAMMES

BBC 2 new mini series is entitled "**Britain's Ancient Capital: Secrets of Orkney**" and explores archaeology across the islands, includes experimental archaeology investigation how the Orcadians could have moved huge blocks of stone, studies the intriguing geology and the area and reveals the DNA secretary of the Orkney vole.

- Episode 1: Monday 2nd January BBC 2 at 9 pm
- Episode 2: Monday, 9th January BBC 2 at 9 pm
- Episode 3: Monday 16th January BBC 2 at 9 pm

Presenters Neil Oliver, Andy Torbet, Christ Packham and Dr Shini Somara.

KIRKWALL CONFERENCE (CHAT)

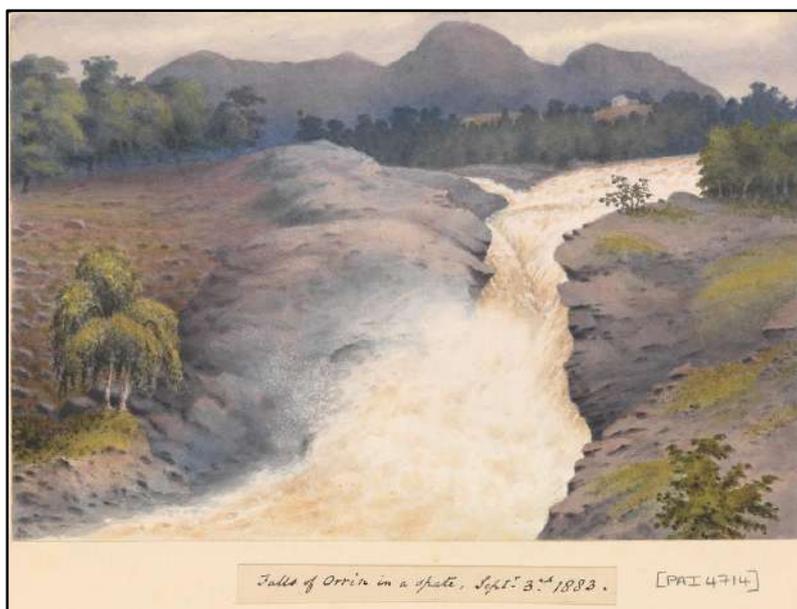
The Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory (CHAT) conference hosted by the University of the Highlands and Islands Archaeology Institute in Kirkwall was a great success. Now the papers are available as video presentations. CHAT 2016 Conference Videos Go Live.

<https://archaeologyorkney.com/author/seanlisle1/>

THE DISCOVERY AND RECORDING OF THE ORRIN FALLS HYDRO SCHEME, ROSS-SHIRE

Aultgowrie, west of Muir of Ord, is a favourite area for short walks and I have been aware of a hydro scheme at Orrin Falls for many years but never given it much thought. However when I was browsing the Fairburn Estate website <http://www.fairburn-estate.co.uk/history.html> looking for something else I came across a photograph c1900 (*below*) and the following comment: *John Stirling used estate workmen to build a turbine house at the Orrin Falls and one further up river under the supervision of Mr Bagot from Glasgow and electric light was installed (in Fairburn House) in 1898.*

The hydro-scheme was much older than I had thought and was worthy of more attention! For many years, it had been overgrown with rhododendrons and overhung with trees however a few years ago, the estate had carried out a programme of clearing these and it was more accessible. The site is marked on the current OS map as “weir” but there was obviously much more to it than that. It was unrecorded on the Local database



<http://her.highland.gov.uk/> and on the National database <https://canmore.org.uk/>. So 18 months ago, I set about gathering more information.

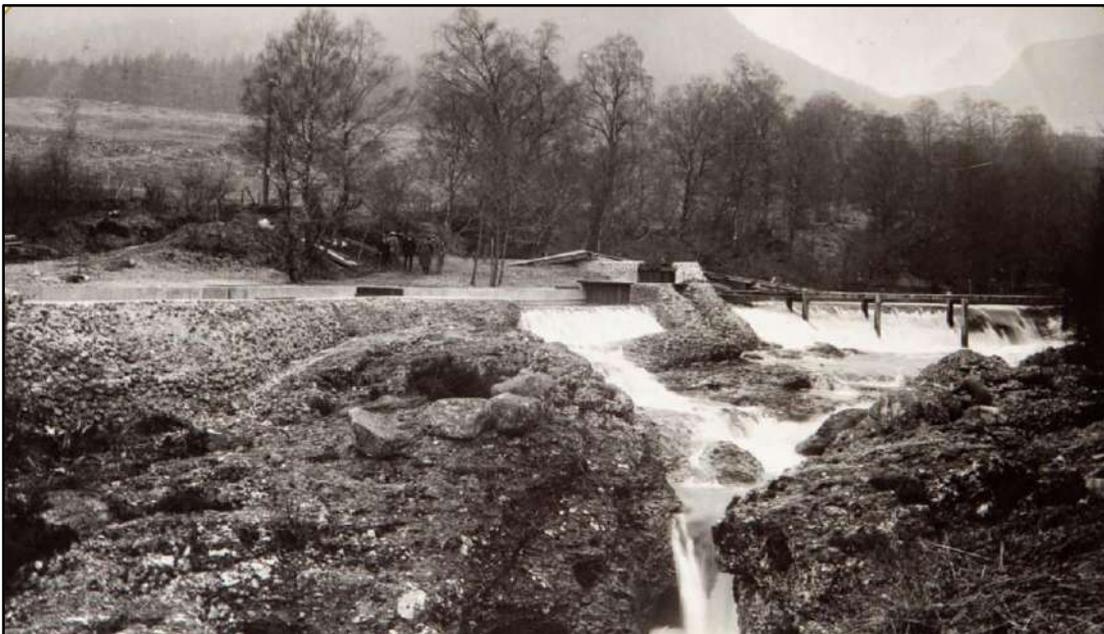
The Orrin Falls, GR NH 469517, are (or were) a series of attractive waterfalls (*see painting above from internet*) within a gorge of the River Orrin. The natural rock is conglomerate and the total height drop from top to bottom of the gorge is roughly 15m. The hydro scheme is on the south bank of the gorge and comprises

1. a dam
2. the remains of an earlier dam
3. a lade or channel
4. a generator house.

PLUS several other features;

5. a rock-cut channel (on the north bank) probably intended as a salmon ladder

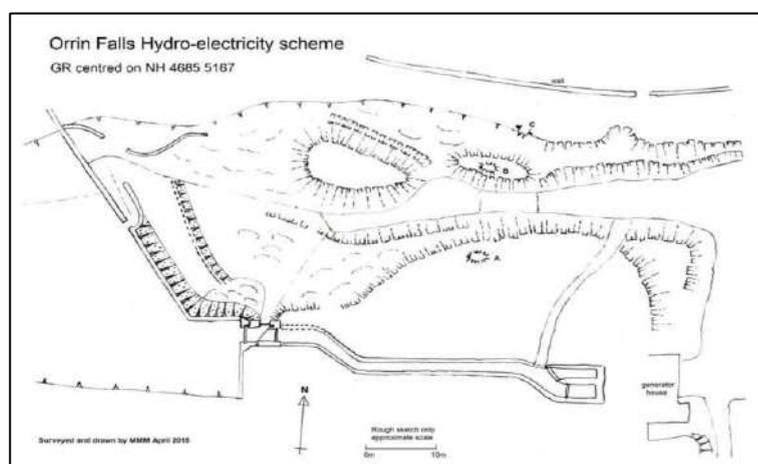
6. and the abutments of a footbridge



The early photograph of the dam circa 1900 – reproduced with the permission of Fairburn Estate

The scheme seems to have gone through several phases before being abandoned probably in 1961 when the flow of water down the river was reduced due to the construction of the Orrin Dam, part of the wider Conon Valley Hydro scheme, in the higher reaches of the river. Nevertheless, the Orrin Falls hydro-scheme was revived in the early 1980s and now provides electricity for Fairburn House.

My first task was to survey it and make a sketch. The survey was done by using a combination of compass and pacing with GPS Way Points to confirm (or otherwise) significant points. Once home I “drew-up” the sketch on polyester film using the survey as a template. I have often drawn up sites using a CAD programme (equivalent “Inkscape”) but in many respects I like the finished result of a hand drawn plan better, so I decided to go with this. Two years ago, Ian Parker of the Survey and Graphics Dept, RCAHMS (now retired), had talked me through his method of hand drawing sites giving me hints and tips along the way, I now feel much more confident.



The next task was to take photographs and details of the features. Drawing the sketch first had enabled me to become very familiar with the place; I had discovered all its little features and the best angles from which to take the photos

The dam is circa 50m in length and crosses the river obliquely from NW to SE. It is constructed of concrete and 3.5m height at its highest. On the downstream side, there is sloping concrete buttressing with inclusions of rounded stones.



The dam with the remains of the earlier dam in the foreground

At the north end a fish ladder, a sloping ramp of 1.5m to 2m width, has been damaged by a recent spate (April 2015)

The remains of an earlier dam are seen to the east/downstream side of the present dam. Although ruined, it appears to be of similar construction to the present one; it is probably the one in the c1900 photo.

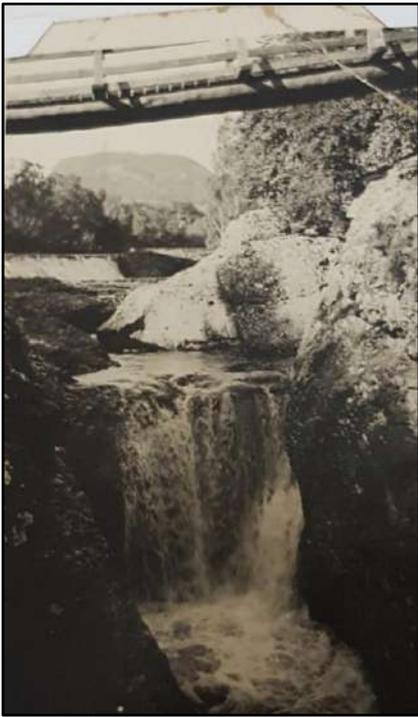
The lade is a concrete “box” channel roughly 50m in length; it is c.2m deep and 1.5m in width. There are three wooden sluices; two at the west end and one at the east end, two metal grids for catching floating debris (the one positioned diagonally is controlled by an overhead hoist) and two overflows, the one at the west end appears to be redundant. The east end of the lade

comprises a split channel of two short parallel sections; the S section has a sluice part of which is covered by wooden planking, the N channel appears to be redundant and is blocked off by a concrete wall.



The generator house was built in 1926 by Gilbert Gilkes & Co Ltd, Kendal (*information from Fairburn Estate*) probably on the site of an earlier one. It is constructed of dressed stone, roughly 11m x 5m x 12m high. **A rock cut channel** on the north bank may be an early fish ladder possibly predating the hydro-scheme; it is at a higher level than is necessary today and roughly 20m in length, 1m in width and 1m deep.

The abutments of a bridge are situated in the middle part of the gorge above a waterfall. The bridge was probably built at the same time as the hydro-scheme to provide access to it. It is in two sections, at a slight angle to one another; the south abutment, (A on the sketch) is constructed of 2 large boulders with infill of concrete and small boulders. The north abutment (C) is a small platform 2m² with stone faced sides built into the north bank of the river and the middle abutment (B) is a small concrete and stone structure with evidence of old cables and pieces of wooden deck on top of a rocky knoll on the edge of the gorge.



The central part of the gorge with the abutments A and B seen on either side of the waterfall, the dam can be seen in the distance, and (left) an undated photograph of the bridge (reproduced with the permission of Fairburn Estate).

After this other matters took over and Orrin Falls was forgotten about!!

It wasn't until 4 weeks ago, with deadlines for submission to the Discovery and Excavation annual publication coming up, that I thought I had better write the report up and submit it to both the databases. Writing up was easy because I had done all the hard work; it was just a matter of putting the data together. But I also needed to contact the landowner for permission to use the old photo c1900. She was most interested and kindly provided me with supplementary information and additional photographs, one of the bridge and one of a Victorian painting (*not reproduced here*) of the Orrin Falls.

The final stage was submission of the report to the databases. Highland Council HER was easy it was just a case of sending the information by email to Ian Scrivener-Lindley or HER@Highland.gov.uk And incidentally our own Tim Blackie has recently volunteered to help with uploading information submitted by NOSAS members to the database so we have a direct link. As far as Canmore is concerned submitting information was done by filling in the on-line forms for Discovery and Excavation Scotland (the Archaeology Scotland annual publication)

<http://www.archaeologyscotland.org.uk/our-projects/discovery-and-excavation-scotland> Not only will the site appear in the publication but it will also be transferred onto the Canmore website automatically. www.nosas.co.uk blog.

Access to the land on which this site is situated is covered by the principles set out in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. For further information go to www.outdooraccess-scotland.com TAKE CARE if visiting: the site has many Health and Safety issues – cliffs, deep water, uneven slippery surfaces.

Meryl Marshall

A CRANNOG AND A CIRCLE - NEWS FROM HISTORIC ASSYNT .

Loch na Claise Crannog



Many thanks to those NOSAS members who came over to Assynt in August to help with a small-scale excavation at this crannog at Clashmore. Led by Dr Graham Cavers of AOC the excavation was designed to complement the work planned at Clachtoll Broch over the next three years. In particular we were interested to discover whether the crannog was in use at the same time as the broch.

The main finding was; As expected the island was predominantly artificial although there may be an underlying natural ridge. A stone walled round house had been built on the island and at some unknown point in time it had been partially refashioned on a smaller scale. The projected diameter of the original building extended beyond the surviving island, perhaps indicating that both island and round house had slumped below the water line to the south, necessitating the alterations.



No artefacts were found that might help date the construction or occupation of the site, but near the centre of the trench a waterlogged deposit contained charcoal and burnt bone, often

indicators of occupation. This was confirmed by subsequent analysis which found birch, alder, hazel, heather and burnt peat with some unidentifiable fragments of burnt bone. Two samples of charcoal were sent for dating returning calibrated dates centred on the mid first century BC and thus contemporary with the broch.

A possible stone circle and alignment

In spite of several reported 'discoveries' of stone circles in Assynt most have turned out to be random collections of natural boulders. One site suggested by several local people as worthy of



further investigation looks more promising and we are in the process of recording it. It consists of a 15m diameter ring of stones encircling a domed outcrop on top of a ridge at Achnacarnin. Along the ridge to the SW there is one very large and prominent stone and another smaller vertical stone further to the SW. They are directly in line with the centre of the circle and we will be out at midsummer to see where the sun emerges over the mountains further north in case this alignment points towards it. Eastwards are open views to the

Assynt mountains and we suspect that the midwinter sun will emerge from behind Suilven. More research is required but everything found so far is encouraging.

There are fuller reports in Historic Assynt's latest newsletter and if any NOSAS members would like a copy contact **Gordon Sleight** gsassynt@gmail.com

CROMARTY SUMMARY: THE EVOLUTION OF A SCOTTISH COASTAL BURGH 2016 SUMMER EXCAVATION

by Mary Peteranna - check out the web site.

<http://www.medievalcromarty.org/blog.asp?blogid=13256> and [NOSAS Blog](#)

We had a rapid 3 weeks this summer to finish-up digging in the open area excavation at Reeds Park Cromarty! And thanks to our fabulous experienced team, the work produced some amazing results. Some of the highlights include: the identification of the burning event across the whole of the settlement on the north side of Thief's Row - showing definitively how it predated our 4 stone-built NE-SW aligned buildings and how substantial buildings lay below this; earlier paved venal surfaces; we found heaps of diagnostic medieval pottery, many fragments of bronze objects, spindle whorls; we excavated a structure containing a substantial deposit of burnt grain (kiln or storage?); and we recovered some fantastic stone tools, including stones probably used for fish hook sharpening. Which leads us to the quern situation. The presence of querns on the site has been overwhelming, with there being some particularly intriguingly rare quern types. The querns are reused in hearths,

post settings, building walls, floor surfaces...but the most intriguing had to be the sequence of quern
hearth settings at the west end of the site!



We would like to say a HUGE thank you from the project team to the 2016 volunteers and all of the visitors and local Cromarty residents who continue to show interest in this amazing archaeological project!



spindle whorl

Courtesy of Pat Haynes



CROMARTY DIG SEMINAR - NOVEMBER 2016

The Cromarty dig committee organised a FREE seminar for the public to hear about the results of an amazing 4 years of digging on the Cromarty Medieval Burgh dig site!



The project directors were joined by local historian David Alston, and the team of artefact specialists, Derek Hall and George Haggarty (ceramics), Gemma Cruickshanks (small finds, National Museums Scotland), Ann Clarke (stone), Robin Murdoch (glass), Triin Aadli (animal bone, University of Edinburgh) who presented a comprehensive summary of the interpretation. A most amazing seminar attended by over 80 people.

RHYNIE ENVIRONS ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

Please check out the blog for the Rhynie Environs Archaeological Project. The project began in 2005 and started excavation in 2011 around the base of the famous Craw Stane, a Class I Pictish symbol stone. Further years of excavation in and around the site and the village of Rhynie found evidence of a Pictish Cemetery and Iron Age Enclosures. The blog regarding the 2016 excavation is accessible from the link below.

<http://reaparch.blogspot.co.uk/2016/08/2016-season-begins.html> and [NOSAS Blog](#).



The Craw Stane with Tap o'Noth hillfort in the background (Photo courtesy of Cathy MacIver).

STILL LIFE AROUND SCATWELL

Archaeological sites connected with the production of illicit whisky in Strathconnon by Meryl Marshall. <https://nosasblog.wordpress.com> there is more information on the Blog.

Background

In 2006 NOSAS embarked on a project to explore Strathconnon and record its archaeology. One of the many highlights was the discovery of over 50 illicit still bothies. Quite clearly the glen was a hot-bed for the illegal activity. Many of the stills are in remote mountainous terrain but within the small wooded glen of Allt Dubh in Strathconnon there is a discrete landscape which appears to be devoted almost entirely to the production of illicit whisky. In an area of roughly half a square kilometre there are 4 still sites, 10



THE HIGHLAND WHISKEY STILL (1827).

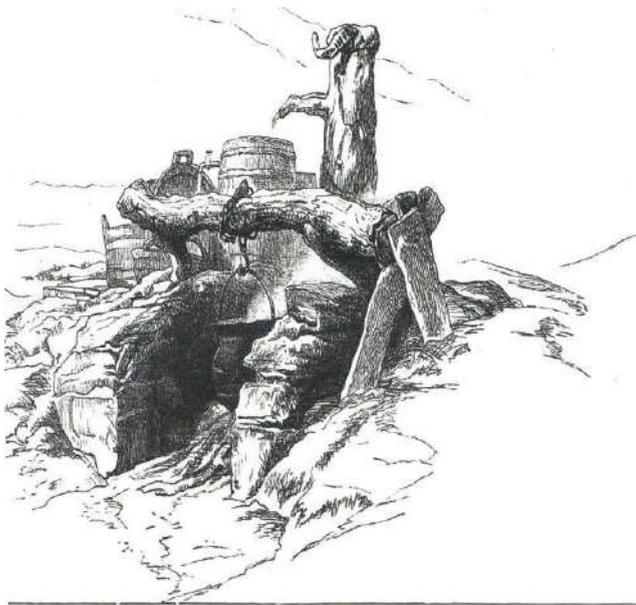
small farmsteads, 2 kilns and a further site which as yet remains a mystery! In a wider area of 2 square kilometres a further 8 still bothies have been identified. Most of the sites are not impressive in themselves, they were never substantial in the first place and after 200 years they are in a pretty wasted state and, in the summertime, they are covered by bracken or heather.



Historical Background – There was a tradition in the Highlands of household distillation of whisky on a small scale for family and local consumption, but in 1780 the government made small stills illegal in the Highlands and increased the tax on the malt used. The quality of whisky became inferior but yet it was more costly. The production of whisky went underground and illicit distillation flourished from 1780 to 1823. Highland whisky was in

great demand and satisfying this demand provided an important source of revenue for a burgeoning population. In 1782 over 1000 illicit stills were seized in the Highland zone – a figure that represented only a fraction of the total number in operation. The area at Scatwell gives us an

impression of the illegal activities of a certain section of a population in the glen which at that time was very numerous.



A WHISKEY STILL (1827).

retire being confronted by a large party of smugglers who were escorting spirits with nearly 20 horses.

Sir George Mackenzie of Coul (near Contin) says

The farms are reduced by sub sets to mere patches the occupiers of which live by smuggling.....It was reported that, in Strathconan, 15 bottles a day are distilled by smugglers, amounting to 120 ankers of nine gallons each week. The whisky is openly carried to market by smugglers escorted by armed men in defiance of the laws..... When going about here I often meet smugglers returning with their empty casks.

The distilling process was usually carried out in the Autumn after the harvests. During the rest of the year, the people would have worked a farm on a small scale producing some of their needs by growing crops and keeping a cow or two. A farmstead comprised one or two buildings, an enclosure and an area of improved ground often surrounded by a dyke – 10 such farmsteads are found in this glen, all are very small and give an idea of how marginal the existence was. The people must have been pretty confident of not being discovered. The whole family was often involved, the womenfolk playing a big part in producing the spirit with the children keeping a look-out, while the men were at work in the fields. There are numerous stories recounting the adventures of the illicit distillers and their accomplices in the execution of their trade. Fake “funeral processions” or wakes travelled long distances with the spirit concealed in the coffin, women were seen going to market with sudden advanced pregnancies.

The archaeological remains of illicit stills are difficult to identify. By their very nature the stills are improvised affairs – a sketch by Sir Edwin Landseer is dated 1827. The apparatus of pot-still and worm will have been removed from the sites and the only consistent features of the remaining bothies are that they are in secret, remote locations (often in woods where the smoke would not be easily seen) and they are close to a source of running water. We know that the distillers formed co-operatives, with several banding together in a group, protecting each other and jointly taking responsibility for any fines imposed. **Meryl Marshall**

NEWS FROM THE BBC



The link below in the BBC news is regarding the Illicit still site in Glen Affric. Illicit stills were a response to the Excise Act of 1788, which banned the use of small household stills. The site has been recognised as a monument of national importance and scheduled by Historic Environment Scotland.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-38328873?intlink_from_url=http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/1b508152-6d1f-46d4-80b2-a2d670e5f660/archaeology&link_location=live-reporting-story

A site where whisky was made illegally in the late 18th and early 19th centuries has been recognised as a monument of national importance. The site of the illicit still near Badger Falls in Glen Affric in the Highlands was found by Forest Enterprise Scotland staff in 2008. The footings of the small building housing the still survive today. The site has now been formally designated a monument by Historic Environment Scotland. The still would have set up inside the small building, which was hidden from view by an overhanging rock face and was next to a small burn. The building's footings - part of the foundations - survived in woodland in a secluded gully above the River Affric.

NOSAS FIELD TRIP TO THE STRUY LEAD MINES - 6th November 2016

There aren't too many industrial sites in the Highlands, and fewer still that provide stunning views of Glen Strathfarrar. The trip to the 19th century lead mines above Struy in Strath Glass proved popular. On a day in early December with a bitterly cold north wind blowing straight at us from across the Glen, twenty NOSAS members and friends walked the 5 kilometres from the Struy steading car park steeply up and then along the southern ridge of Strathfarrar. The views to snowy hills were some compensation for the early blast of winter that met us that day.



Meryl drawing the ruined chimney

The first historical record of lead mining at this site relates to the first of probably three phases of excavation in 1818. The price of lead at that time, at the end of the Napoleonic wars, was at an all-time high, thereby making the cost of setting up a mine worthwhile. It is not known, however, if mining had occurred on this site before this time. Further explorations and excavation occurred in two later phases: 1838-45 and probably 1864-7. Commentators since then suggest that the mines were never very profitable.

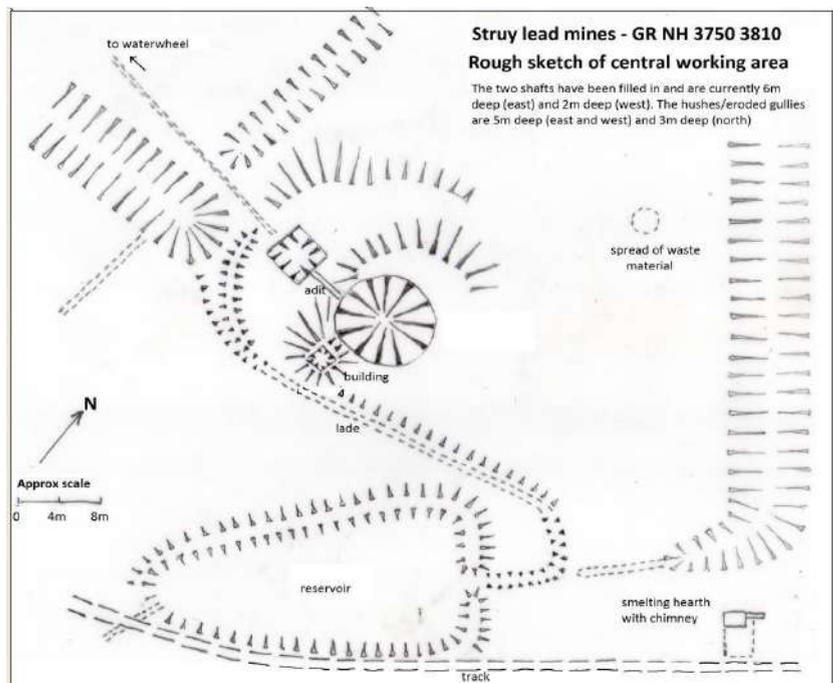


Jonie and Alan inspecting the wheel house

Historical documents in the public arena are limited, so it proved hard to correlate the fragments of history, maps and plans available to us with what we found on site. A preparatory reconnaissance had identified two reservoirs feeding a maze of lades with, lower down the ridge, two holding tanks, the tops of two vertical mine shafts, the remains of a chimney and an impressive water wheel. Both in preparation, and on the day of the visit, we all tried to understand how lead mines worked, and what part the lades, water wheel and buildings played in the process.

We were fortunate that our two resident geologists – Anne and Alan – demonstrated some of the minerals found on both the spoil heaps and the dressing floors. Galena, from which lead is smelted, is indeed heavy and glistens. Even barytes is impressively heavy compared with the “native” granite from which it was separated.

So, after an hour’s walk in, a wander over the site, and a cold lunch sheltering from the wind, we all walked along the feeder lades up to one reservoir, and then the other. The earlier, western, reservoir is now breached and shallow, and yet still demonstrates the impressive peat bank that contained it. The second, newer reservoir is larger with an impressively constructed retaining dam. And then, to keep warm, a brisk walk back along the ridge and back down to the cars.



Meryl’s plan of the central mine workings

The co-leaders of the walk – Meryl and Roland – have done some preparatory recording of the site, and intend to write up a summary of history and archaeology for the archaeological record.



Roland Spencer-Jones

GLEN BANCHOR AND AM FASGADH, 3RD DECEMBER 2016

The NOSAS Western Group turned up in force, both of us, at the Glen Banchory car park, in good walking weather. We joined sixteen others, some of whom we hadn't seen for quite a while. Meryl Marshall and Anne Coombs led us up the hill on the east side of the Allt a'Chaorainn, on a track notable for some eccentric recent drainage works which gave us a glimpse into local stratigraphy. At the top of the hill we had a panoramic view of the walk – the shielings to the north, the 'palisaded enclosure' to the south. This is a classic post-glacial landscape. At this point the walk left the track and took to the hill as we descended to the rickety bridge over the Allt a'Chaorainn. The aim was the shieling group at NH 6900 0178, on the western slopes above the burn, interesting features for Jean and me since shielings in Lochaber are often much more ephemeral – the Allt a'Chaorainn ones, the lowest of the shielings in the glen, are roomier and better-built than Lochaber's; some even had fireplaces. The quality of these may simply be because they are within 2.5km of not one but four townships, and would be useable for a longer period of the year or different purposes than other shieling groups deeper into the hills, at least six of which are shown on the 1:25,000 map. It's worth pointing out that if the rickety bridge disappears, the burn is an easy crossing immediately east of and below the shielings - if it isn't in spate!

Now we headed south across the heathery moss, with Sidhean Mor Dail A' Chaorainn looming large, just like a child's drawing of a flat-topped cone, with the outer palisade trench visible just below the summit. On the way, Karen Clarke, encouraged by others, found a stone with an oval cupmark – or was it natural?

We laboured (well, I laboured) up to the top of the 190 foot high knoll, where there was a double palisaded enclosure, with superb views all around. Little apart from the outer palisade ditch can be seen, nor can Jonny Blair's garden, where the eponymous chap used, supposedly, to grow potatoes right on top of the mound. Palisaded enclosures can be anything from Neolithic to Iron Age; this one is undated, as are 225 of the 232 recorded on CANMORE.

Another mystery is the name of the knoll. The First Edition Six-inch OS map calls it “Sithean Mor Mic Spad-Shronach” which could translate as the “Big Flat-nosed Fairy Hill” but by the Second Edition it had become “Sidhean Mor Dail A' Chaorainn”, the “Big Fairy Knoll of the Glen of the Rowan Trees”; and in ‘Place name discoveries on Upper Deeside and the far Highlands’ (Murray & Watson: 2015) it is parsed as “Sidhean Mor Dail a’Dalhuaran” or “Fairy Knoll of the Big Haugh”, a haugh being a a piece of flat alluvial land by the side of a river. I leave it to you to decide but I know what my preference is; and to confuse matters further my in-house Gaelic consultant tells me that none of the Gaelic actually mentions a hill or a knoll and that both dail and sidhean are spelt wrongly ...

Back down on level ground as the weather began to close in, we wandered along to the mill settlement (see Meryl’s pre-walk notes) where some of us stopped to admire (or scoff at) another discovery, a giraffe scratched on a path side rock. This is obviously recent, but there is lichen on top of the scratch ... it is archaeology, albeit recent.

The corn-drying kiln in this little complex is a delight, and unusually deep, a good 1.5m. or more. Having the kiln next to the now-vanished mill sounds like a sensible idea to me, as did a flat platform right by the kiln, handy for storage.

Back to the car park as the rain arrived and on to the highlight of the day; Am Fasgadh, the outreach department of the Highland Folk Museum, where soup and sandwiches warmed us up before a guided tour of the Store, which is a cross between a museum and a bazaar which holds over 12,000 artefacts of all kinds ranging from flint brooches to horse-drawn fire engines; an incredible, fascinating collection and not fully open to the *hoi polloi*. Our thanks go to Rachel at Am Fasgadh, as well as to Anne and Meryl for organising things so impeccably.

Ken & Jean Bowker

GARBEG REVISITED



At the 2015 HAF conference I felt privileged to be introduced archaeologist Laurie MacLaggan Wedderburn, who excavated Garbeg cemetery over 40 years ago. As many of you will know Garbeg, near Drumnadrochit is generally thought to be the site of one of the finest upstanding Pictish barrow cemeteries ([Canmore ID 12281](#), [HER](#))

[MHG3361](#)) consisting of 23 square and round barrows with surrounding ditches. The barrows are thought to cover single long cist burials.

I live only a mile or two from the site and the very first NOSAS event I ever attended was a HAF walk there led by Jonie Guest and John Wombell. Subsequently I led a walk there in 2014 and I also volunteered full time for last year's Aberdeen University dig just north of the cemetery site.



The site was initially recognised in 1974 after the landowner JLM Younie found a fragment of a class 1 symbol stone (c. 7th C AD) whilst digging in one of the barrows and reported to this to the authorities. The site was excavated by soon after by Laurie and

Dorothy Grime (later Wedderburn).

A few weeks ago Jonie organised another visit to Garbeg with Laurie and Dorothy, and a few interested NOSAS folk were asked along to hear first-hand about the excavations. Although the weather was quite challenging (and the terrain there is never easy), it proved to be a fascinating couple of hours. We found out interesting tidbits of information, such as the fact that Pictish stone fragment was already removed to the back of Mr Younie's truck when the archaeologists first saw it.





As well as the cemetery, we also had a brief look at the nearby group of hut circles, several of which are unusually sub-rectangular, which were dug in 2015. The original theory was that these might be contemporary with the cemetery, but they yielded only solidly Bronze Age dates c 1500 BCE.

Some time back I had asked Laurie by email if he had any photographs of the original dig to add to my Garbeg and Whitebridge article on the NOSAS blog (<https://nosasblog.wordpress.com/>). What the Wedderburns brought with them though was not one or two snaps but a whole bag full of prints and negatives. Even better, they generously gifted them to NOSAS so that they could be archived appropriately.

I have since digitally scanned all the prints, which include fantastic detail of the barrow features and of the human remains found, and Alan Thompson has scanned the negatives. Just a few of the resulting images are featured in this article.



With much thanks to Laurie and Dorothy MacLaggan Wedderburn.

James McComas

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GLEN URQUHART WINTER WALK 7TH JAN 2017: A PREVIEW AND SOME BACKGROUND

Although I have now lived in Drumnadrochit for some years, it was only a few months ago that I first visited Buntait, a few miles up the glen just to the north of the Clava type chambered cairn at Corrimony. This was despite me hearing from a number of local people about the amount of

upstanding archaeology that was there. I think I must have presumed that because there are no scheduled monuments at Buntait it could not be that interesting – an assumption I will no longer be jumping to in the future!

I spoke to local archaeologist Jill Harden at the recent Pictish conference in Inverness who very



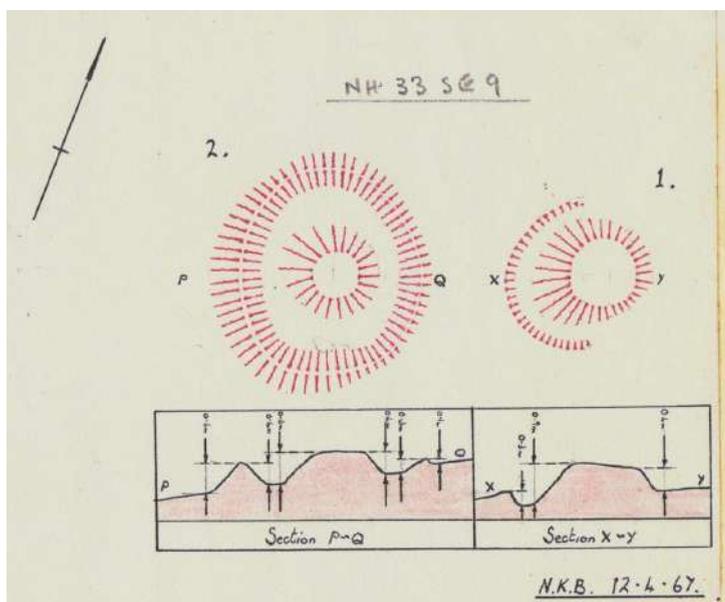
helpfully spent some time listing the extensive features there and drawing rough maps for me. Later research confirmed that Buntait is in fact stuffed full of prehistoric (and post medieval) features – including hut circles, field systems, cairn fields, burnt mounds and rock art. In the glen only Garbeg is comparable in terms of the amount of upstanding remains.

The following is a quote from “The Glenurquhart Story” by Alastair MacKell – discuss!

“Not far from the Corrimony Burial Cairn, on Buntait lands, was a settlement of some considerable size where clearly marked hut circles and cairns suggest a community practising primitive agriculture and a boundary wall, which can still be traced, may have served to protect domestic animals from prowling wolves or other marauding wild animals. Some of these circles are 30 feet in diameter and in the centre of at least one, is a depression which may have been a fireplace. These circles are low banks of stones covered with grass or heather about 2 feet high and 4 feet wide at the base. It is difficult to imagine one large roof covering such an expanse, but if so, it would probably have been formed of wattles and thatched with heather or turf, giving, when complete, a dome - shaped appearance. In each case, there is a break in the circle at the south east which indicates the entrance. In other parts of Scotland where these structures have been carefully examined, hearth paving stones have been discovered, but we are unable to reconstruct much of the everyday life of the people of these long bygone days, and we can merely conjecture that they combined hunting with their primitive agriculture, for the Highlands were rich in wildlife - deer including reindeer, wild oxen, bears and wild boars being sufficiently abundant to counterbalance the poverty of the soil. It is not unreasonable to connect these circle dwellings with the chambered cairn at Corrimony, for it is known that hut circles go back to the Early Bronze Age, though they were still being built centuries later, and indeed were not so very unlike the circular thatched houses of the 18th Century. It can never be proved that the chambered cairn at Corrimony was the burial place of some renowned chief of the Buntait settlement, but it may easily have been so, and the proximity alone between the cairns and the circle is about half a mile, and the proximity alone suggests a connection. Buntait, however, is not the only place where hut circles occur. At Shenval, on the other side of the river, there are two circles of diameter greater than those at Buntait, and others may be seen in the moor behind Beamock and Balnalick, and further east near Culnakirk. They all follow the standard pattern with an entrance facing the south-east though they vary in size.

Some have argued that large solitary circles in the moorland were really man-made shelters for animals in storms, as the entrance facing south opened in the direction least exposed to winds. Sheep a cattle, it has been pointed out, soon get to know the place of greatest safety in storm and can seek out shelter without the assistance of man.”

After my first visit to Buntait I was so enthused that I immediately decided that this was a very suitable location for the upcoming NOSAS winter walk I had volunteered to lead. Not only are the field systems extensive and some of the hut circles very well preserved, but also there are a couple of curious large ditched cairn features. One of these cairns is also surrounded by a 15m diameter surrounding bank, so that it almost resembles a hut with a big cairn in the middle, albeit one without any obvious entrance. In discussions with various learned folk a number of different interpretations for these features have been proposed, therefore I am hopeful that the January visit will provoke some



debate! (see RCAHMS drawing right; description at <https://canmore.org.uk/site/12259/buntait>).



I was lucky enough to have NOSAS grandee Anne Coombs with me on further visit to Buntait and on this occasion we very quickly located a rather nice cup marked panel which had eluded RCAHMS on their previous visit.

The cup marked rock (<https://canmore.org.uk/site/12251/midton>) is close to Char's stone, a standing stone which unfortunately broke within living memory. Clearly the site was one of some significance in prehistory.

I returned again much more recently to find a track had been mechanically cleared over the top of the cup marked rock, obviously a circumstance of some concern. After brushing off the churned-up earth, I took some photographs to process for photogrammetry. The differences to the surroundings can clearly be seen in the first image below and I think conservation of such sites will inevitably be another discussion point on the upcoming walk. Neither is this kind of occurrence anything new; recently I have been chatting with two old time foresters turned local historians, who tell me that historic forestry work caused significant truncation to some of the hut circles in the area

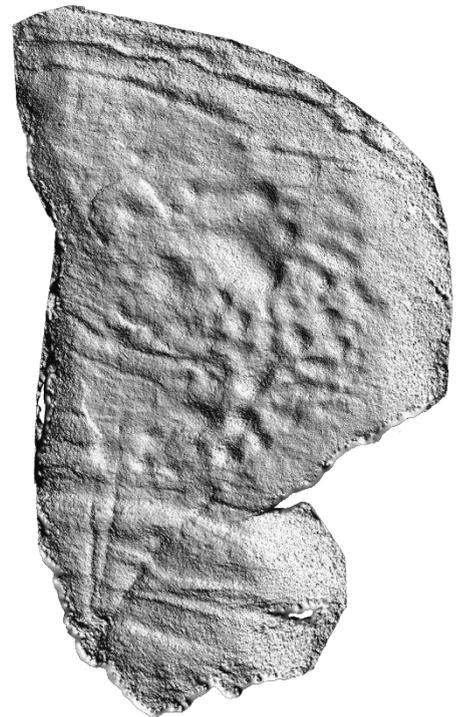


The site that I had originally invited Anne Coombs out to look at for a second opinion was at Lochletter by Loch Meikle, a few miles down the glen from Buntait. I know Mhairi Gordon, the owner of Lochletter Farm, socially and in the summer, I visited the listed 18th century garden pavilion (described by some as a doocote) on her property.

The pavilion formerly belonged to nearby Lochletter House, built by the Grants shortly after the 45 and destroyed by fire in the early 20th C. The pavilion, recently reroofed by Mhairi, is interesting. However, what really sparked my interest was the very artificial looking mound it was built on. It was not hard to picture an earlier larger medieval structure there and other commentators have described the presence of stonework to support that thesis.

Consequently, a visit to Lochletter (hopefully followed by tea) will form the concluding part of my upcoming walk.

I look forward to hearing some stimulating debate and will keep my fingers crossed the weather is sympathetic!



If you are interested in joining us on Saturday 7th January, please let me know on james@comacodirect.com.

James McComas

Please remember you can access the members' area on the NOSAS web page with the appropriate password, if you have forgotten this please email the webmaster Alan Thompson alanrossthompson@hotmail.com

I would like to thank all those who contributed to the newsletter.

Jonie Guest, Editor