

Visit to 2 corn-drying kilns and settlements in Boath

As part of the Highland Archaeology Festival, in association with Evanton Oral History Project and Alness Heritage Centre, a small group of people recently visited 2 examples of corn (or grain) drying kilns and associated settlements between the end of the Boath road and Loch Morie.

Walk leader, Adrian Clark of Evanton, had first visited each site some 30 years earlier with Willie Munro of Clashnabuiac. As many readers will remember, Willie was a fount of knowledge on local history and culture, which he shared in print and in oral collections. He had been delighted to reacquaint himself with these kilns in his latter years.

The pleasant walk from the end of the Boath public road takes one along the River Averon. A mile along one comes to an area of flat ground with scrub grassland surrounded by small hillocks that are glacial deposits. One needs to look carefully for an indent in a central mound to discover the stone-built corn-drying kiln. Of the circular funnel-shaped bowl, only the rear wall remains to a height of about 1.5 metres. The stone walls of the adjoining rectangular building are largely collapsed. However, enough remains to give the idea of how the kiln would have operated. The fresh grain would have been taken up the gentle slope and deposited in the mouth of the circular, stone-built bowl; the grain would have sat upon a rack with a bed of straw. Heat from the fire at the front of the bowl would have been drawn in by a flue to underneath the grain (corn) to allow it to dry slowly. There is no surviving evidence of the roof structure but it is most likely that the bowl would have been covered; a basic structure may have been wattle and divots; a thatched roof would have been used for superior models.

Nearby are the remains of several houses and enclosures (MHG Boath Farmstead). It is thought that most settlements would have had at least one such corn-drying kiln, many had several (eg.7 in the cleared Strathnaver settlement of about 17 families). Professor Niall Logan (in *Vernacular Buildings* no. 44) suggests that some may have been used for malting barley, others for lime burning.

Back at the Old Glaick settlement, above the current farm, the kiln is in much better condition, as are the remains of the old settlement. The bowl is intact, so too the lintel stones of the fireplace and flue. Willie Munro had reflected on how these small buildings would have been a good place for a ceilidh on a cold winter's night. There is evidence from elsewhere of accidental fires, also of irregularly dried grain. It would be good to know how long they had been in use. Typically, they have been seen as been in use in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many till later. Radiocarbon analysis of grain deposits of kilns in Kincardineshire and Perthshire indicate eleventh and thirteenth century use. But basic versions would have been in use for centuries before.

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