

Assynt's Hidden Lives Project

During a three-week period in November and December AOC Archaeology with a number of local volunteers and NOSAS members conducted preliminary surveys of more than 220 sites as an integral part of the Assynt's Hidden Lives Project. The sites selected for survey were already known and lay within a few hundred metres of roads. The surveys were to note many new features and a number of new sites were also discovered close by. A visit to the web diary and gallery pages of the project website at www.aocarchaeology.com will give a flavour of what has already been achieved.



Four areas were then selected for further work:

- Glenleraig, Ardvar, on the north coast of Assynt.
- Inchnadamph, in the centre of Assynt and a few more scattered sites like Inverkirkaig on the SW coast. and
- Ledbeg and Lyne, in the southern part of inland Assynt.

The second stage of the project' fieldwork has now taken place – no thanks to the weather!

The original dates for January were abandoned because of the persistent snow and ice and revised dates set for February. So naturally the snow melted just before the original start date and returned for the revised ones! Conditions from then on varied from so appalling that no work could be done, to so magnificent and beautiful that it was tempting just to stand and stare.

A range of survey techniques, from Plane Table to Laser Scanning were employed to provide the best possible recording of each feature chosen. Led by staff from AOC Archaeology the work was done by local and NOSAS volunteers and by local traditional skills trainees from the Culag Community Woodland Trust.

It was also intended that John Wombell would lead a small NOSAS group in a search for rock art alongside the extended survey, but this had to be postponed because of the persistent snow cover and eventually took place in mid March.

Between now and the end of June all the survey data will be processed and prepared for dissemination to national and local archives. The Project will be producing reports, exhibitions and schools packs for local and wider use and the results of the surveys will be used to guide our planning of further projects. These projects will investigate and publicise some sites more fully, providing interpretation and (in some cases) improved public access.

For further details about the Project visit the website (www.aocarchaeology.com) or contact Gordon Sleight (01571 855207) or Robin Noble (01571 833246).

Gordon Sleight

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An Aerial Survey of Strath Sgitheach

Extensive and prolonged snow cover during the past winter provided an opportunity to take a fresh look at prehistoric sites from the air. While too much snow can have an effect similar to cake icing, concealing minor surface irregularities, there are times when, as the snow melts, such features may be enhanced. Normal vegetative cover having died back in the autumn is compressed by the snow pack and upstanding stone foundations, warmed by the winter sun, stand out clearly against the white background. In these conditions 'lumps and bumps', which in summer are difficult to identify on the ground (or from the air), can be seen fairly readily.

An aerial reconnaissance of the Strath Sgitheach area in 2009, at the suggestion of John Wombell, had revealed numerous trackways and field boundaries, as well as evidence of earlier occupation. The area lies some 4 kilometres to the NW of Dingwall, at heights of around 200 – 300 m. Traces of rig and furrow, and several abandoned crofts, show that attempts had been made to farm some of the land until quite recent times, but relatively little modern cultivation – with the exception of some forestry ploughing for conifer plantations – has taken place. The greater part of the ground is now utilised as rough grazing, mainly by sheep.

The snow cover of winter 2009-10 presented further opportunities to investigate the area, and in January and February 2010, conditions were ideal for further reconnaissance. Several sites noted on OS maps were recognised, while other 'new' features were found and photographed, using a digital camera.



Photograph 1. Blackmuir Riding School

Of particular interest was a concentration of hut circles on the banks of a small stream flowing south to the River Sgitheach. The current 1:25,000 OS Explorer Map 437 shows 'Sheep Pens' to the E of the site, which is at NH 526 634, and carries a Canmore ID 12924, describing a group of three hut circles. It appears that this settlement may be more extensive,

with possibly twelve hut circles in the immediate area (See Photograph 1). To the north of Blackmuir Riding School, the outline of field boundaries can be seen in a recently forested area (Photograph 2).



Photograph 2. Field Boundaries

Traces of an early drove road descending from the high ground through the Coire Buidhe, and leading on down towards Dingwall, show up clearly, with the well-worn tracks holding deeper snow. In some cases shadows cast by the low winter sun enhance the feature (Photograph 3).



Photograph 3. Coire Buidhe

The evidence available suggests that the Strath may have supported a significant population from prehistoric times to the early 20th Century. There are numerous hut circles and field systems, as well as the remains of a chambered cairn at Balnacrae, while drove roads, enclosures, and croft-house foundations attest to later use. Given that Strath Sgitheach is rich in such remains, a NOSAS project to re-examine, map and record the various sites might be worth consideration.

James S. Bone

Linear Features in Easter Ross

The ways that people travel, whether by land or water, are crucial to an understanding the history of the Highlands. The Linear Features in Easter Ross Project has been exploring a network of relic roads and routeways between the Beauly and Dornoch Firths, extending from the Spittal Shore area to the Burgh of Tain, for the past two years and is now widening its focus to include the features in the landscape that surrounds this route.

The long-term aim of the project is to characterise these routeways, exploring their purposes and, perhaps, original dating. Members of the project team have been working with Archaeology for Communities in the Highlands to advise upon the development of 'Pathways into the Past', a series of courses that should help progress towards this aim; involving people from communities throughout Easter Ross in researching, surveying, recording and sharing findings about the fragments of the route that occur in the vicinities of Muir of Ord, Conon Bridge, Dingwall, Evanton, Aness, Milton and Kildary and Tain.

'Pathways into the Past' participants will learn how to carry out desk-based research, field survey, measured recording and report writing and exhibition composition. The programme offers an introduction to landscape archaeology, building confidence for all those who want to research, record and share knowledge of archaeology in their area and who might want to become further involved in the NOSAS Linear Features Project. People of every age and ability are welcome – no previous experience necessary. To find out more about these sessions, starting this May, contact Cait and Janet at info@archhighland.org.uk or call 01349 868 230.

A further programme of Linear Features events for NOSAS members will be publicised this autumn.

Allan MacKenzie and Cait McCullagh.

Hut Circle Recording;

Anna Welti will be in Skye, April 28th – May 4th, to record hut circles near Uig and at Kingsburgh, staying at the campsite at Uig Bay.

Anna is then going to spend a few days camping at High Pasture Cave as a volunteer for Stephen Birch and Martin Wildgoose in the recording of hut circles near to the cave. If anyone would like to join in the fun for a few days please let Anna know! annawelti@btinternet.com

Over the Bank Holiday weekend it is intended to record the circles at Kingsburgh, near Uig, which might make it easier for some folks to come.

As always, Gin and Tonic is on tap when the day is over!!

Anna Welti

Brora Excavation 2010

Provisional dates, Saturday 17th July to Sunday 8th August have been set for this year's dig and we hope that this will help participants plan ahead to ensure they can come to Brora again!

An extra week has been allocated to the timetable, as this is our final year. We will be concentrating our efforts on the very badly eroding remains of the old late 16th/early 17th century salt works, as well as finishing the other buildings if time allows. At the tail end of last year's excavations we were able to determine that much more of the possible salt pan survives than originally thought and monitoring of the eroding walls has identified a possible collapsed furnace structure on the inside of the building.

It is hoped that some of the 'finds' experts will descend on Brora during the excavation to give us talks and workshops and the results of their work - definitely not to be missed!

We will be inviting the school and the public along to see the team at work again and maybe try another archaeological experiment – thinking caps on!

Please feel free to make enquiries now. I will be sending out volunteer booking forms to all past participants in the near future and I would be grateful if volunteers could send me current contact details if they have changed over the last year. All enquiries to jacquieaitken@btinternet.com or call 01408 621338.

Jacquie Aitkin

Applecross Broch, June 1st- 15th

The Applecross Archaeological Society will be running one more community archaeological excavation at the Applecross Broch from the 1st to the 15th of June.

Over the course of the dig there will be 4 camping huts available, free of charge, to accommodate volunteers as well as free camping pitches and hook-up points for volunteers who have their own camping van. These should be booked through me, Owen Kilbride (not the campsite) and will be allocated on a first come-first served basis.

I would ask that anyone interested in joining us for this dig to email me (owen.kilbride@gmail.com) so I can put together a list of interested parties.

Ken Bowker retires

Ken Bowker retired from his position as NOSAS 'Webmaster' at the end of March, passing on responsibility for maintaining the Society's presence on the Internet to Alistair Morton. Our thanks, and good wishes for the future, go to Ken who has done so much to raise awareness of the Society through the quality of the website.

“The Romans beyond Moray – where’s the credible evidence?”

Strathpeffer Community Hall

7.30 pm

Friday 16th April 2010.

Love them or hate them the Romans and their possible presence in Highland have been the subject of heated debate for a number of years. We hope you will come and add your feelings and ideas and this time we might get some definitive (and credible) evidence to settle this controversial argument.

Of the available work on the Romans, *Beyond the edge of the Empire - Caledonians, Picts and Romans* by Fraser Hunter. (Groam House Museum, 2007) and Ian Keillar’s *Romans in Moray* (Moray New Horizons, 2005) are relevant to the discussion.

We will be busy with digs and outdoor events during the summer so this will be the last meeting until the autumn. We will publish the winter programme of discussions drawn from your suggestions in late summer but we still need more ideas for the future.

If you have a burning question, theory or just an idea let us know and we will put it into the programme. If you have a local hall and would like the event in your area please let us know and we will arrange to have it at a venue near you.

Anne Coombs

New Members

NOSAS membership continues to grow and we would like to take this opportunity to welcome the following new members.

Jamie Henderson, Robin Seymour, Meg Sinclair, Roland Spencer-Jones, Richard Guest, Rose-Mary Cussen, Natalie Tompsett, Adrian Clark, Christine Lea, Cerian MacInnes, David Baldwin, Rebecca Somers, George Munro, David Allan, Iphthime Millward, Martin Cragg, Rachel Tidey, Judith Meads, Peter Pritchard, Jill Hooper and Keith Bryers.

Details of members and membership can be found in the Members’ section on the Society’s website.

Trina Wombell

Easter Aviemore.

Now that the snow has gone from the low ground it will be possible to conduct a walk over survey of Easter Aviemore, which is at the north end of the village.

Anyone interested in helping should contact Anne Wakeling (ann@dancing-dog.co.uk or 01479 810 818)

Ann Wakeling

The Rosemarkie Caves Project



The entrance to Caird’s Cave, Rosemarkie

In August 2006, an enthusiastic band of NOSAS members became accustomed to using a cliff path to a cave on the south shore of the Black Isle. Led by John Wood, we made an exploratory excavation in the cave Learnie 2B (one of about 20 along this coast) over a long weekend. Ann Wakeling even took her camping equipment and guarded the site overnight.

This summer, there is an opportunity for NOSAS members to carry out something similar but without the long walk-in along the cliff path, as access to the new site is from the beach at Rosemarkie.

Between 1907-12, Dr William MacLean, the local GP, excavated Caird’s Cave and found bone tools and a pin, inset with amber, dating from around 800 AD.

As far as is known, there was no written record made of the dig and it is planned to excavate the cave again this summer to locate MacLean’s trenches and any human occupation levels, to investigate the use of the cave by travelling people, and to try and ascertain the condition of the cave with regard to its future conservation.

Excavations will take place from 21st June to 4th July and we would like to have up to 10 volunteers at the site, for excavating and wet sieving. We ask for commitment to a minimum of 3 days digging. A professional archaeologist will lead the dig and there will be a daily expenses allowance for travel and food. Please contact me, Simon Gunn, simonjgunn@hotmail.com or 01381 610309.

Simon Gunn

North Of Scotland Archaeological Society



Mulchaich/Ferintosh and Strathconon Fieldwork, Spring/Summer 2010

We still have to complete the survey of the upper settlement at Mulchaich. Last year we tried to planetable the site in the summer but it was difficult to see the subtle changes in slope because, much to our surprise, the dockens were knee deep and we had to give up. This is a very interesting complex site and worthy of a "good job" so the plan is to go back in May or June.

I have "called time" on the Strathconon Project and have been working on the two outstanding reports which are due to be printed soon. Inevitably the project has thrown up some interesting results which invite further investigation. One of those is the number of pits that we have recorded, 78 in total at 6 different locations. These pits are thought to be for the storage of potatoes (for further information see my article in the last newsletter). Very little work has been done on the subject of pits such as these and it would be an interesting to excavate one of them.

It is proposed to organise a small scale one or two day project to planetable a settlement where there are lots of pits and then half-section one, or possibly two, of the pits. Invermeinie, in the middle section of Strathconon, is thought to be a suitable settlement to target. It has 19 pits, at least one or two corn-drying kilns and a large substantially constructed (possibly estate-built) dwelling house or farmstead; a strange mixture of the old communal township and the more recent post improvement settlement.

No date has been fixed for either of these projects but they will probably take place in May or June.

More information will be circulated when we have a date but it would be useful to know who is interested in helping. Numbers in the working parties may have to be limited if the days prove popular. If you are interested in either (or both) of these projects please contact me in the usual way at 01349 861824 or at Meryl.Marshall@tesco.net

Meryl Marshall

Strathconon Project Exhibition at Dingwall Mart

The Display of the results of our Strathconon Project, held in the glen last September and October, was so successful it has now moved to stand alongside the Drovers Exhibition at the Dingwall Auction Mart.

Entrance is free and members are encouraged to 'spread the word' among their friends and contacts. Dingwall Auction Mart lies between Maryburgh and Dingwall on the A862.

Meryl Marshall

Struie Hill and Creag an Fhithich.

There was a verbal tradition in Edderton that the "The Old People cut a notch on the Struie". It was on the strength of this story that Colin Leslie of the Forestry Commission went up Struie Hill in the spring of 2001 and re-discovered the fort (NH 685 867)

Dr Joanna Close-Brookes climbed up there the next summer and confirmed that it was indeed a fort of some importance and probably Pictish. The derivation of Edderton is 'Eadar Dun' (Between the Forts) and, indeed, four forts or look out posts guard this parish.

Historic Scotland was informed but it was two years later before the fort was finally scheduled (Ref. SAM 10942). "This monument is of national importance as a fine example of a small hill top fortification, which has escaped antiquarian notice until recently". The fort is sited high up on the ridge of Struie Hill in a commanding position looking out eastwards over the Dornoch Firth and westwards over the Kyle of Sutherland. It would be up there that any military commander charged with the protection of Edderton would certainly site his picket for lookout duty.

Four years ago Edderton Community Council approached the Forestry Commission in Dornoch to see if a path could be built from Commission's car park at Ardvannie, up through the woods to this fort. There has followed four years of meetings, discussions and fund raising followed this initial approach and there is now firm agreement that a path some 600 metres long will be built this spring.

Edderton Community Council has raised the necessary funds and work is expected to start in April, The Forestry Commission overseeing the work. Hopefully this path will be completed before the summer and will provide ready access for walkers.

Reay Clark

Office Bearers and Committee Members 2009-2010

Chairperson - Anne Coombs
Vice Chairperson - Dave Rendell
Treasurer - David Findlay
Secretary - Meryl Marshall

Committee Members

Brian Duff, Lyn Fraser, Brigitte Geddes, Janet Hooper,
Susan Kruse, Cait MacCullagh, Allan Mackenzie and
Alistair Morton

Trina Wombell continues to act as Membership Secretary