



NEWSLETTER April 2013

Dates for your diary

25, 26, 27 May - long weekend in the north, Bettyhill/Tongue

Fri pm ***Spotty rock spotting***

Sat ***Boat trip to Eilean nan Ron and Shorewatch surveying***

Sun ***Shorewatch***

Mon tbd

14-27 July

Research & dig at Wester and Easter Rarichie Hill forts, Tarbat Peninsula near Seabord Villages - part of University of Aberdeen student summer school

Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) update

In the February newsletter Anne Coombs explained the background to this, and mentioned that a sub-committee had been set up to look at the changes required before we can apply to become a SCIO.

The sub-committee has now drafted a revised constitution and presented it to the main Committee on 9 April. The Committee has reviewed it in detail and asked for a small number of changes. Once completed the draft will be circulated to members, with an explanatory note, for comment. The sub-committee also recommended that all the Committee should in due course become trustees, and this was accepted by the Committee.

Once members have been consulted on the draft constitution we will make any necessary amendments, and submit an application to OSCR asking for approval in principle to become an SCIO. Assuming we get a positive response, an Extraordinary General Meeting will be called at which the members will vote (2/3 majority needed) on whether to wind up 'old' NOSAS and become NOSAS SCIO.

In drawing up the new constitution, we have sought to minimise any changes from the current constitution. In order to satisfy OSCR requirements it is however a longer and more formal document, but as Anne noted in the last newsletter, we do not expect there to be any great change for the members in how we operate.

If you have any questions or comments please direct them to Anne or to me and we will do our best to answer them.

Alan Thompson

Urchany

In my very limited experience, one of the nice things about archaeology is trying to photograph it.



Urchany

Alan Munro

This is Urchany, just as the sun is beginning to melt the white frost, and while the shadows are long. At low centre is the enclosure of the old township graveyard probably, and adjacent at 2 o'clock is the enigmatic Roland's Mound. Still there are no very credible suggestions as to its nature. I think it's a flying saucer which has crash landed at a slight tilt, west to east.

But then, I am a beginner.

Alan Munro.

Loch Buidhe Longhouse Excavation April 2013

Scottish Hydro Electric Transmission (SHE Transmission) are in the process of building a 275/132kV electricity substation on moorland above Bonar Bridge near Loch Buidhe. This is part of an upgrade of power lines carrying electricity between Dounreay and Beaully to allow increasing quantities of onshore and offshore energy to be transmitted from the North of Scotland to centres of demand. During ground preparation a stone built feature, a suspected longhouse, was discovered in the area where the substation is planned, the construction of which would skim the feature. AOC are leading an excavation to determine what this feature was and to provide dating evidence. No longhouse is evident on the 2003 Ordnance Survey map, although there are two other buildings in the vicinity named as Garvary (an intact but empty building) and Sallachy (a ruin). This was a commercial excavation but AOC obtained permission from SHE Transmission to conduct a public dig as members of the local community were involved in the site selection process. NOSAS members were invited to participate. Anne, Adrian, Beth, Alastair, David and Karen took part. Rob of AOC directed the dig alongside Kevin, Ben and Lewis. We were made to feel very much wanted and welcome on site.

The site is approximately 6 miles past Loch Migdale in rough moorland close to the single track road linking Bonar Bridge to the A9 at the Mound. It is a lonely spot: the road is not gritted, and therefore it is often cut off in winter. It would have been a hard place to make a living in the past. It is a drive I am particularly fond of, mainly frequented by fishermen and osprey heading for nearby Loch Buidhe. Forgive my digression but on the road beside the excavation I recall an osprey dropping a large brown trout in the path of my car then swooping down and stopping by the roadside in an attempt to retrieve it. Immediately behind me was a fisherman in a hurry, clearly very cross when I had to stop quickly to avoid hitting the osprey. I got out to explain and was very amused by his response "Never mind the osprey, what type of fish is it?" I suspected that he planned to pinch it from the bird.

Fairly thick lying snow preceded the first day of the excavation followed by a day of rain but the sun shone brightly after that making for enjoyable excavating conditions. We even got to sunbathe during lunch breaks. AOC Archaeologists were on site at 0800. Tardy volunteers like me arrived later and were readily forgiven. The de-turfing was well under way when I arrived (thank goodness) and there was no back filling required at the end of the dig – hooray!

The post-medieval building was of dry stone construction. The first structure revealed was a probable byre adjoining a likely later addition house. The house featured a substantial hearth, unusually against the wall at the byre end. One of the most memorable sights of the dig was watching our esteemed char (oops) chairlady Anne conscientiously cleaning and wire brushing the aforementioned hearth. And, yes folks, it was captured on camera for the benefit of this article.



Cha(i)rlady Anne

Anne Coombs

In the centre of the house was a handsome, large stone feature which would grace any hallway. Initially it appeared to be a central hearth. Much discussion amongst archaeologists and historians ensued and it was decided that it was most likely a central base for the post which held up the roof.

A small building of undetermined origin adjoined the far side of the house. It featured a drainage channel and a stone structure with a flat raised area and hole suggesting that this building might be a privy or another byre but it did not seem likely as the effluent would have drained into the house.

Just as Ben came to the end of his drawing and was running out of paper another structure was revealed adjoining the aforementioned building. It was turning out to be a very longhouse – a veritable terrace! The purpose of this probable outbuilding was also debated. Finds across the site included two buttons (potentially datable), glass fragments indicating that the house might have had windows, contemporary glazed ceramic fragments, a large metal utensil base, nails and a large horseshoe, all of which seemed consistent with the building being a longhouse c1830.

Excavators wanted to know more about the history of this well constructed building and there had been little information in the way of local knowledge so we considered ourselves fortunate when renowned Sutherland historian (and NOSAS member) Malcolm Bangor-Jones visited the site. He explained that the land immediately to the West was common between two of the five estates that owned the whole of Sutherland at the time of the building under excavation. Our building was just outwith the common area and had been lived in by a shepherd who originated from England. I recall he said it was called Easter Sallachy. He was very pleased to see it revealed.

Electricity company employees visited on most days and participated with some of their family members. I understand that the excavation site will remain exposed for the next 19 months. As the excavation was so recent there are no results as yet but no doubt AOC will post them on their website in due course.

Karen Clarke

Shieling walk in Strathconon

In spite of frequent snow showers, a good number of us hardy souls met to explore several shieling sites at Corrievuic, at the west end of Strathconon. The glen had seen large populations, particularly in the mid 1800s, living in small subsistence farming settlements, and so it's not surprising that the hill sides supported a variety of shieling sites.

Most sites were on grassy knolls in clusters of 6 or more: the more experienced among us sometimes spotting more shielings. At each we paused to exchange ideas and queries. One lovely south facing site, on apparently good land, had been developed later as a farmstead. We had our lunch there in an interval between the snow showers and felt that perhaps it was a good place to live.

Then Meryl led us up the hill by a burn to an illicit still site, beautifully hidden away from the eyes of the excise men.

By contrast the last shieling site we reached, after a long trudge contouring round the hillside, was on high grassy knolls in an inhospitable area of heather and wet poor ground. But there was enough snow to make a snowman:



The still

Alan Thompson



The snowman

Meryl Marshall

We'd all like to thank Meryl and Anne for arranging such an interesting and enjoyable day.

Beth Blackburn

Historic Assynt Inchnadamph Excavation February 2013

Historic Assynt was formed in 1997 to oversee the restoration of the old parish church of Assynt at Inchnadamph alongside other sites which were all threatened with ruin at that time. As part of Historic Assynt's Fire and Water Project Historic Scotland approved the excavation of a moated site proximate to Inchnadamph Kirk, which was surveyed in conjunction with NOSAS members in 2005. Gordon Sleight of Historic Assynt invited NOSAS to join in with the excavation conducted by AOC between 18 and 22 February 2013.



Inchnadamph dig site Charlotte Douglas, AOC

Gordon promised us inclement weather in the form snow, sleet, hail and rain. Fortunately we were disappointed in this respect and enjoyed five days of early morning ground frost (which initially made digging and trowelling challenging) followed by brilliant sunshine. I gained an unexpected slight sun tan.

Dr Graeme Cavers led the excavation alongside Charlotte Douglas of AOC. Kate provided artistic insight. NOSAS members including John, Trina, Beth, Anna, David and Karen took part alongside members of the Assynt community and folk such as Gareth who had travelled from as far afield as Nairn staying at the nearby comfortable hostel. The lure of community archaeology is that it is a seemingly democratic subject area which respects local knowledge and allows people from diverse professional and social backgrounds to have meaningful input. There is good potential for exercise also.

The site was magnificent. The excavation was a very productive, happy community dig with plenty of opportunity for "civilian archaeologists" to gain excavation and recording skills from Graeme, Charlotte and experienced fellow excavators. A steady stream of visitors arrived every day including the very hospitable Helen, the Kirk key holder, who has a wealth of local knowledge. Helen kindly allowed us to turn vehicles and park in her drive-way. She also cared for the coach drivers awaiting their visitor charges. There was supervised access to the Kirk during the dig and site visitors and excavators alike took the opportunity to look about the fascinating archive and interpretive display. The back of the Kirk houses a large fragment of a carved stone cross, believed to be similar to those used for early Christian open-air worship, and more usually found on Scottish west coast islands. I found this exhibit particularly poignant and hoped, along with fellow excavators, that we would discover the other half during excavation. The graveyard and burial enclosure are also of great historical interest.



Dig at Inchnadamph

Beth Blackburn

Apart from school children and their teachers from across the Highlands, visitors included holidaying families from England. Charlotte and Graeme conducted vast numbers of tours of the site including the restored Kirk. Excavators demonstrated tasks such as spoil sieving; we sieved every 3rd bucket of spoil in relevant areas. Someone suggested that Charlotte resembles the much admired actress Scarlett Johansson. This was debated but we rest our case as it seemed to encourage the visiting "Dig Dads" accompanying children to find her and join in with enthusiasm. It was good to know that some of the young folk expressed a desire to pursue a career in archaeology following their experience of the site.

With respect to the excavation we were made extremely welcome by Gordon, Graeme and Charlotte. Supervision and teaching was provided by Graeme, Charlotte and more experienced excavators at all stages of the excavation including the recording process. This was something I benefited from personally with respect to my section drawing skills. Trenches were dug across the moat and platform with the aim of locating finds and dating evidence. The lower trench filled with water and required regular pumping out: at times it seemed more like Glastonbury than Assynt, with wellingtons definitely the order of the days. Glastonbury, wellingtons, "Dig Dads" - what's not to like about archaeology?

Pottery from the upper ditch and wood fragments from the lower ditch caused excitement whereas the trowelling of slag in the upper ditch encouraged the usual naughtiness about whether excavators preferred to work with slag or hoes. Beth was even brave enough to pose with a large boulder of slag. Upon encountering a sizeable, distinctive flow of slag I informed Graeme (who alongside Charlotte was constantly patiently responding to calls of, "What do you think of this?"). I said that it appeared as if someone might have buried a motor bike. I recall him responding warily with the words, "I really wish you had not suggested that".



Beth holding slag

Beth Blackburn

Fortunately it appeared I was wrong, as demonstrated by the information kindly provided by Graeme about the early excavation results:

"AOC have been working on the samples and finds from Inchnadamph and do have some initial results, although we are still waiting the full analyses which will follow in coming weeks. Finds included a good number of pottery fragments, which appear to be most closely related to Craggan ware, a type of Hebridean pottery that was in use from the late Iron Age to the modern period. Unfortunately for this reason it is difficult to date these sherds closely, but they do provide a very useful basis for the construction of a local pottery sequence for Assynt. Other finds included a fragment of a disc quern, a folding knife probably of 17th century or later date and a large quantity of iron smelting slag, including furnace base fragments.

The lower ditch deposits proved to be as well preserved as hoped, and contained barley, oat, hazel nut shells and fragments of burnt cattle bone. A well preserved sloe stone was also recovered from the waterlogged samples. A sizeable beetle assemblage contained species typically associated with human occupation debris, including spider beetle, which is often an indicator of long-lived, often high-status, buildings. Decomposer species in the ditch suggested that decomposing occupation material had been dumped there. Waterlogged wood fragments included Scots pine, alder and birch. A large pine fragment was an off-cut from wood working.

Two of the four radiocarbon dates submitted for analysis have been returned - these are for samples from the upper parts of the ditch and indicate deposition between the later 15th and earlier 17th century. This is somewhat later than hypothesised, but raises interesting questions about the nature of the site and its relationship to the Kirk at Inchnadamph, which was probably founded in the 13th century, and the Macleod vault, which dates from the 16th century. Two further radiocarbon dates, including one from the earliest deposits in the ditch, are still awaited."

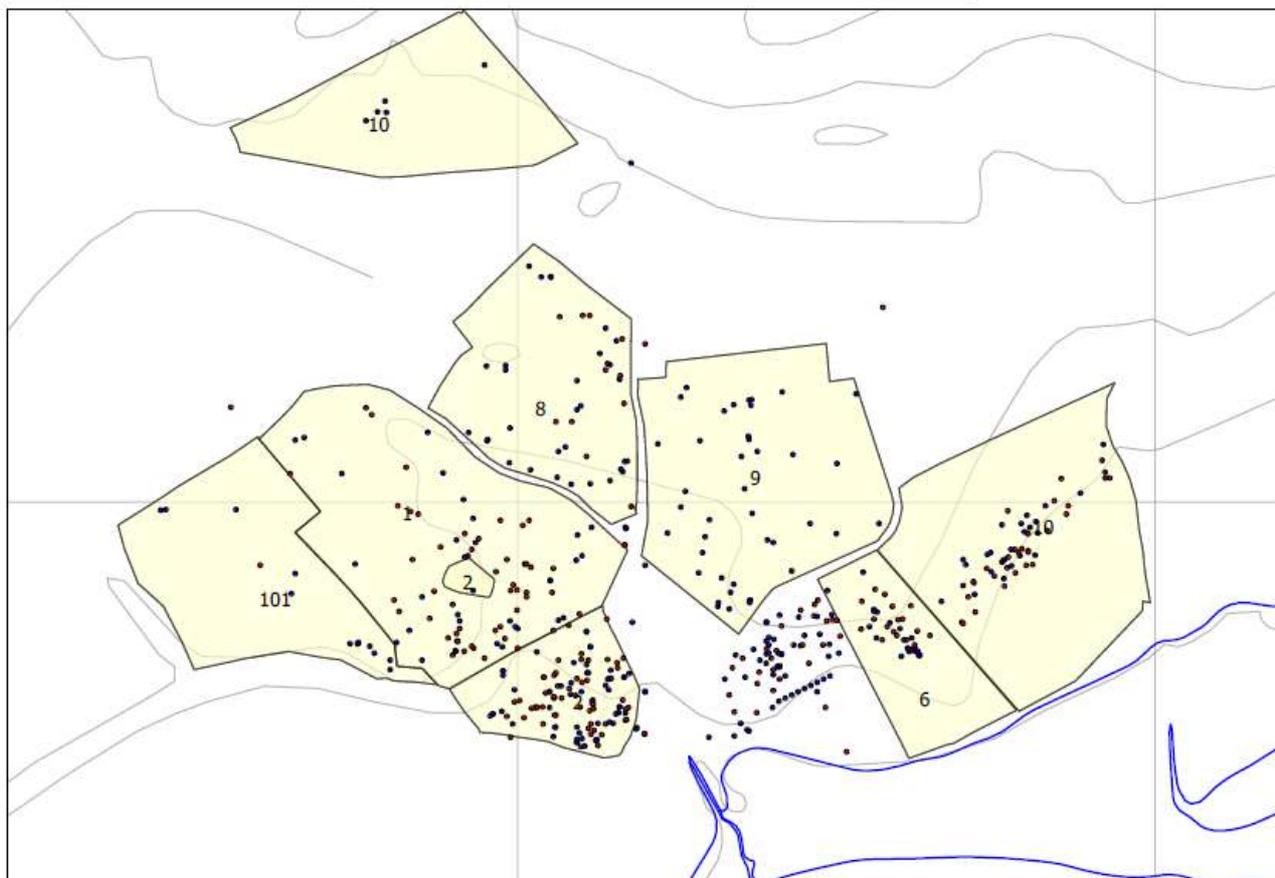
Graeme concluded by saying that the excavation was very successful in demonstrating the potential of the site, adding a new angle to our knowledge of medieval and post-medieval Assynt and that he will place the full results on the project web pages at

www.aocarchaeology.com/assyntfireandwater

Tarradale Archaeological Project: End Of Term Report, April 2013

The TAP had another very good field season, walking some of the same fields as last year but also some new fields. The pattern established last year of finds of microlithic artefacts above the old raised beach coastline became even more apparent and particularly so where expected small lithic finds suddenly were absent, possibly due to the erosion of the old coastline by the river Beaulieu. A thinner distribution of larger lithics immediately inland from the relict coast was again discernible.

Tarradale : 2012 + 2013 Lithics finds



Bob Jones

Although most lithic finds are debitage, the field walkers found some good tools and in particular three arrowheads to add to the single one found last year. The four Tarradale arrowheads (perhaps better described as projectile points, as they are not necessarily all fired by a bow) comprise one tanged and barbed point, one broken tanged and barbed point, a triangular butt ended point and a narrow leaf shaped point (see next page).



Arrowheads/projectile points found this year

Eric Grant



Leaf shaped point

Eric Grant

At the beginning of March, Oskar Sveinbjarnarson from the University of Aberdeen undertook geophysical surveying in the field that contains the largely ploughed out barrow cemetery. Initial magnetometry results showed some surviving barrows under the plough soil.



Dedicated volunteer Karen

Anne Cockroft

interesting results and particularly finding that although oysters appear to predominate owing to their size, periwinkles survive best owing to their rounded shape, while mussels, despite their fragile survival, are numerically the most numerous mollusc collected by the shell midden makers. Some charcoal samples from the shell midden have gone for radiocarbon dating and it will be very interesting to see how old these deposits are.

The Tarradale volunteers are now released to attend to their gardens and social lives, but there may be an opportunity for some exploratory investigations in the late summer.

Eric Grant

Scrapers, both microlithic and somewhat larger, were also found and at least two notched flakes/blades also turned up. Other potentially significant finds included a lot more slag than last year, and although slag is notoriously difficult to date, it may be that the slag is the only cultural indicator we are finding for evidence of the Iron Age. Medieval ceramics and post-medieval coins added to the variety.



Oskar setting up

Anne Cockroft

A few dedicated volunteers attempted to do more detailed resistivity surveys of these, but the wet and cold weather made it a difficult task. We are awaiting results of the surveys. However, Oskar was able to say that some of the round barrow cropmarks seen on aerial photographs were no longer detectable, probably due to their being completely ploughed out.

Sorting, analysing and counting shells from the shell midden test pits undertaken in November 2011 continued in somewhat warmer surroundings. Again a small band of dedicated volunteers has been finding

Photogrammetry Experiments

Photographic recording of Rock Art can be difficult as exactly the right (generally low angle) lighting conditions are needed, and also because patterns in lichens growing on the rock can distract from the rock art itself.

One technique which can to a degree overcome such problems is the use of photogrammetry. This may be seen as a development of stereo photography, but rather than using two images multiple (up to 40) images of the subject from different angles are taken. These are processed by computer to produce a 3D surface which can be displayed in any chosen orientation and lighting conditions.

Until recently this required specialised equipment, and expensive software. However there are now a number of websites which allow photographs taken with a normal camera to be uploaded and processed, and the results returned.

I have been helping John Wombell with planning the North of Scotland Rock Art Project (NOSRAP), and we wondered whether such photogrammetry would be of use. I have therefore done some experiments. When I was on holiday in Dumfries & Galloway I took 40 pictures of a particular rock art panel at Drumtroddan, see RCAHMS

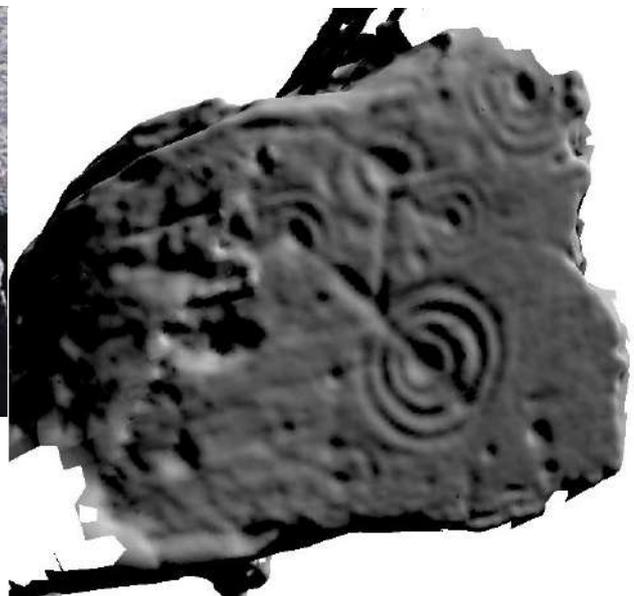
<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/62751/details/drumtroddan/>

Comparing the relevant part of the RCAHMS picture with my photogrammetric image we have:



Drumroddan rock art

RCAHMS



Drumtroddan rock art

Alan Thompson

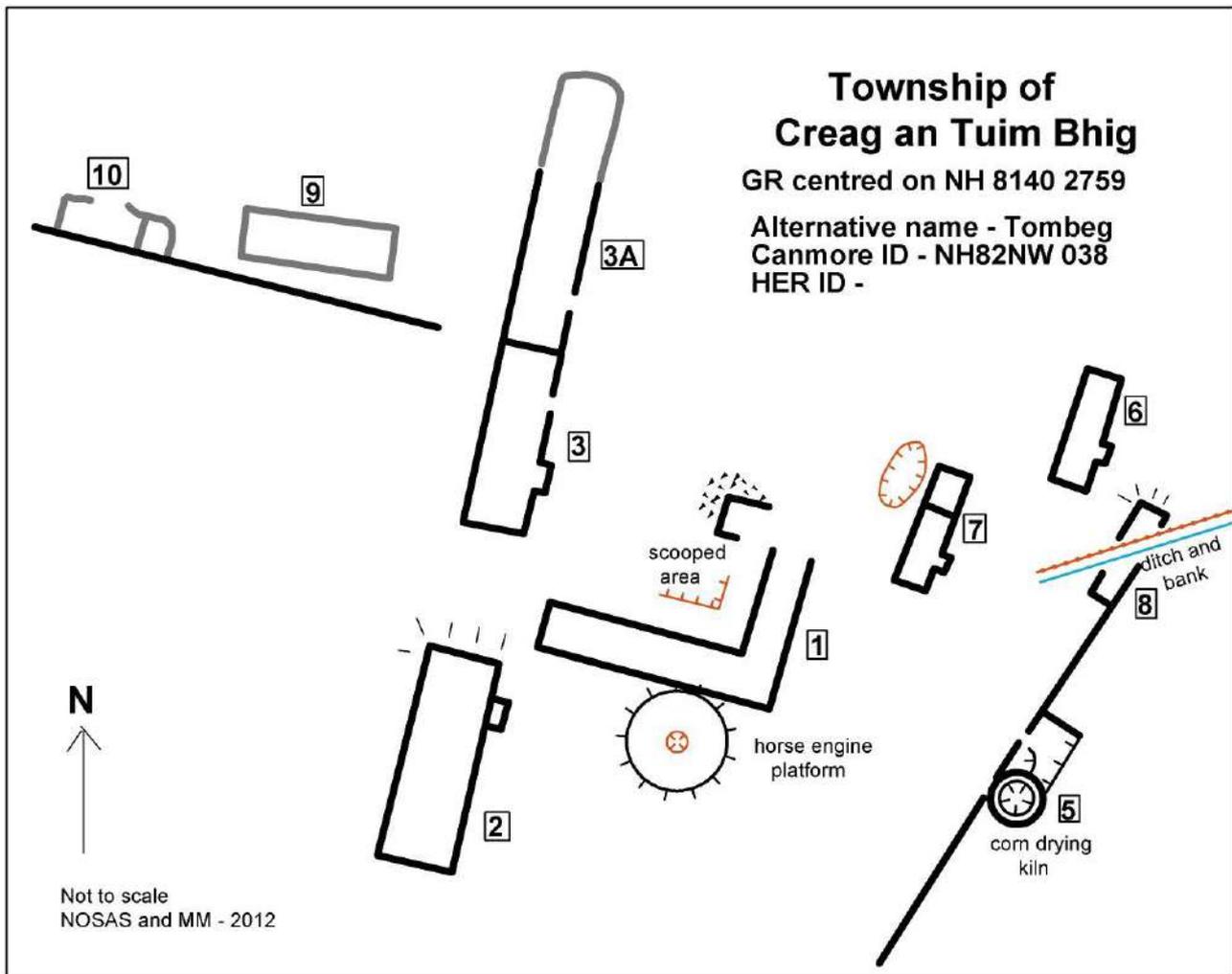
The software used to process the image was ARC3D, and Meshlab was used to display it.

Further experiments will continue.

Alan Thompson

"Porch" Poser

During a recent archaeological survey of Corrybrough Estate, near Tomatin, we recorded five townships, most of which are almost certainly post Improvement. Only one appears on the Roy map of c1750 and the other four have substantial stone footings and are all on marginal land at an altitude of between 380m and 400m.



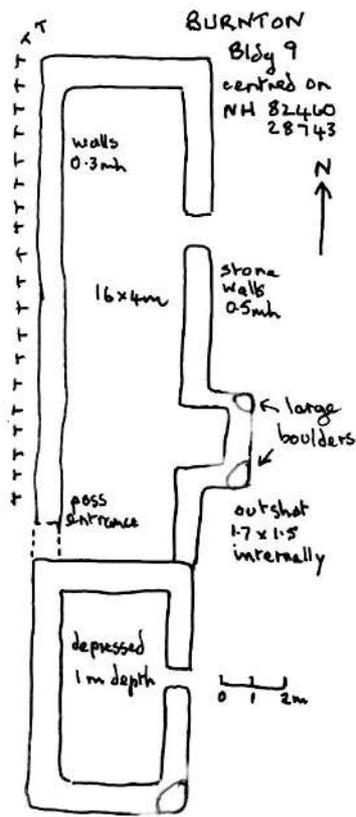
Several buildings at each of these townships have the footings of a small outshot, usually part way along the east or southeast wall (see examples at Tombeg above).

The outshot may only measure 1.5m x 1m internally and is not necessarily associated with an entrance to the building, although on a very few occasions it is. Other similar outshots have been noted on the buildings of the townships at Farigaig and Dunmaglass in Strathnairn, another area which is relatively high in altitude, in this case 250m.

A typical example was recorded recently at Burnton, on the Corrybrough estate.



Outshot on building 9, Burnton Meryl Marshall



Meryl Marshall

Building 9 measures 24m x 5.5m overall and has an outshot in the east wall which is 1.7m x 1.5m internally. The space is integral to the interior of the building i.e. there is no evidence of entrances or doorways either to the outside or the inside. The double faced stone footings of the outshot are 0.8m thick and 0.5m high and at each corner there is a large prominent boulder, presumably to prevent the structure from falling down when animals rubbed up against it.

Are these outshots a particular characteristic of the townships in this area - a regional variation? And if so what purpose did they serve? Or are they porches - a practical solution to a hostile winter environment? It would appear that this is the obvious answer but yet it's not so simple: there is nearly always an entrance to the building in addition to the outshot, and as stated no evidence of an entrance was seen in many of them. Several other suggestions have been made. Did they hold box beds?!? - rather cold with three outside walls! Were they for storage? and if so of what? - a south or southeast wall is not necessarily a cool place for storing foodstuff, although it may have been suitable for winter storage of tatties.

Does anyone have any other ideas?

Meryl Marshall