

Rediscovering LOST CROMARTY

A community group in Ross-shire investigating the lost remnants of its historic medieval centre has uncovered evidence of a catastrophic burning event along with a wealth of information about the development of a small Scottish burgh, as **Mary Peteranna** and **Steven Birch** explain

The archaeological site in Reeds Park, Cromarty had been buried below a farmer's field for over 120 years, before the Cromarty Medieval Burgh Community Archaeology Project began investigations in 2013 after coastal erosion revealed hints of settlement. The project, which has attracted over 700 volunteers and thousands of visitors, has been dubbed by medieval specialists 'one of the most important medieval excavations happening in Scotland.'

Although the core of the medieval burgh of Cromarty was thought to have been located at the base of the castle brae, to the southeast of the present town, the presence of any surviving remains of the settlement were completely unknown before digging began. Now, working with a range of specialists, including historians and artefact experts, archaeologists are piecing together the exciting archaeological results spanning periods of settlement between the 13th and 19th centuries. In 2015-16, after several seasons of digging, the excavation has come down to the earliest layers and provided a detailed look at the layout of the medieval town.

The burgh of Cromarty was set in a strategically important location, controlling the entrance to the Cromarty Firth and the ferry crossing on the coastal route north of Inverness via Nigg, the most direct route to the medieval shrine of St Duthac's in Tain. Cromarty was a natural location for a medieval power centre, with good coastal access and rich agricultural hinterland, strategically located on a key frontier zone in northern Scotland.

Unlike other areas of the north and Highland regions that were under clan control, Cromarty fell under the feudal

Burnt wooden artefact, possible a barrel stave or bowl fragment, from the burning event



authority of the Scottish crown. Although there is little documentary evidence for the town's medieval history, it has been suggested that it was the logical location for a thanage in the 11th to 12th centuries. A castle situated at Cromarty would have been a sensible location to establish royal authority on this borderland. While it was documented that the town's sheriffdom had been established by 1266, little was known about the early history and layout of medieval Cromarty.

The archaeologists' work from 2013-16 has provided a detailed picture of the transitioning burgh, showing the buildings, property boundaries and zones of activity within an area focused on a former road alignment, referred to mysteriously as Thief's Row in the 18th century. The latest buildings recorded on the site, dating to the 19th century were located on the north side of the road; rectangular stone-built structures running parallel to Thief's Row and set within plots of land demarcated by single coursed stone boundaries.

The earliest buildings

The foundations of earlier buildings, most likely constructed during the closing stages of the 17th century mirrored the footprints of those latest buildings, displaying multiple phases of restructuring within these centuries. Artefacts associated from this period consist of low status ceramics and glass, and personal objects representing general subsistence living.

In the preceding centuries, the layout of the settlement was completely different, with the gable ends of the buildings aligned on an earlier road in the same location. The excavations uncovered six of these houses; smaller buildings comprising inner and outer facing stones with a clay bonded core. Thicker gable end walls on some of the structures suggest that these buildings may have been built primarily of stone with the slightly bowed long walls comprising a stone base and upper structures of timber and daub reaching up to at least two storeys high.

These buildings opened to the east onto an adjoining stone-laid path, or vennel, and were laid out in regular



plots. Pottery, glass bottles and clay pipe fragments from these layers have helped to provide 16th- to 17th-century dates for these buildings, with high status materials indicating the presence of a thriving economy.

Landscaped layers of wood ash and shell middens covered the 13th to 15th century medieval buildings which comprised mostly post-hole alignments and ditch slots representing large timber buildings respecting property boundaries running off the former medieval High Street (now the Causeway). Gravel and cobble surfaces marked paths between buildings, with slabbed settings and stake-holes showing activity areas.

The earliest structures appear to have been manufactured from timber and turf, followed by structures with wattle and daub panels using a combination of cruck-frame and upright timber post construction. In Cromarty, the transition in the burgh construction shows a general progression from mostly timber buildings in 13th to 14th centuries to mostly stone buildings in the 18th to 19th centuries. At various times, the roof structures comprised turf, thatch, pan tile and slate.

This brings us back to Cromarty's fire. Within the sequence of 13th- to 15th-century occupation, a widespread burnt layer showed up across the site. Intense areas of burning mirrored the locations of medieval wattle and daub structures across a continuous horizon, indicating that a major conflagration event took place in the town. Whilst it is tempting to interpret the fire as a deliberate attack, there is as yet no indication that the fire was anything other than a disastrous accident that spread rapidly between timber and thatched buildings.

Other structural evidence for

medieval life in Cromarty included slab hearths, metal-working hearths, stone-lined storage pits and a beautiful stone-lined well – one of the highlights for visitors in 2016.

The 3m-deep well was accessed by a well-constructed flight of sturdy steps. It was a surprise to archaeologists to discover that the well went out of use after disposal of a pony carcass in its base. This event may have been a deliberate act of poisoning of the well.

Another surprise to the excavators was the prevalence of disused grain grinding quern and mill stones found in unusual abundance across the site. Many such stones had been reused in cobbled surfaces, building walls, as post bases and for hearth settings in buildings. One house contained two querns and a larger millstone representing different phases of use of the building, but all in slightly different locations in the structure.

The most unique discovery was a vertical stack of three querns used as hearths with slab-type hearths located below and above, representing five different phases of occupation and use.

Medieval artefacts included spindle whorls for wool thread making, bronze and iron objects such as buckles, knife blades and sickles, and a bone tuning peg from a musical instrument – most likely a harp. The tuning peg is an internationally important find being only the second such object to be recovered from a medieval context in Scotland (the other having come from excavations at Edinburgh Castle).

Economically, the archaeological evidence points to the medieval town being sustained by targeted sea fishing based primarily on Cod. Large numbers of iron fish hooks and boat rivets, together with the fish remains,



Above, from top: looking north west over the excavation site in 2015, showing the road running through the middle of the site and buildings to the right side of it (photo by Garry Mackay); Cromarty's medieval well, looking north

shellfish bait middens and wood ash layer indicate that industrial-scale fish processing, including smoking and drying, was taking place on the site. This is also reflected in the huge amount of locally made ceramic jugs and stone disc stoppers that may have been used within the industry.

Analysis of animal bone has also shown that cattle hide and sheep wool processing formed part of the town's medieval industry. Fish, beef, mutton and pork were all being consumed by Cromarty inhabitants.

Ceramics from England and the European Low Countries found in Cromarty reflect significant trade links in the burgh. Combined with the 13th- to 14th-century coinage recovered by metal detecting in other parts of the town, the evidence shows that Cromarty had been a well-established settlement at this time.

The excavations overall have provided a snapshot of the layout of the burgh and its transition between 13th to 19th centuries. The changes in building construction and alignment reflect the development of the town, its economy and trade. Cromarty appears to have started out as a significant medieval town with substantial trade links in the 13th to 14th centuries, before going through alternating periods of economic prosperity and catastrophic decline.

For more information on the project, visit: www.medievalcromarty.org