

An Open Day at Portkil Cave no 1 Excavation November 16th 2014

We were fortunate that the day was bright and sunny but we certainly did not expect the local community to be so interested in our project. In all approximately 80 people and 7 dogs visited the site.

Tam Ward had previously visited the local primary school and told some of the pupils about the excavation and this coupled with an advert in the Helensburgh Advertiser and "word of mouth" on the peninsula ensured that many people were aware of the event.

Preparations had been made in advance with some of the more steep, slippery and boggy slopes cordoned off. There was also an information board with details of finds and general information about the site and we provided some trowels and shovels for some of the children who wanted to try some excavation work.

Our first visitors, a family of 4 arrived at 10am and Tam was able to tell them about the site and the 2 children were keen to climb down, trowels in hand to do some excavation with Sandra supervising them.

Gradually a trickle and then a steady flow of families and individuals were seen coming along the track. Ages ranged from a baby on her mums back to grandparents spending a few hours with their families. Nobody seemed to mind the mud and indeed some younger visitors wallowed in it!



By 11.30am the site was busy with visitors. Sandra and Catherine did sterling work supervising those that wanted some digging action, whilst Nick, Tam, Alasdair and Anne were kept busy explaining the site and what we had discovered. A few boys got busy with decorating their faces with some clay

from the cave, and then moved on to styling their hair! Move back a few thousand years and the same scene would have been observed, just the clothes and language were different.



There was a short lull when we were able to have a quick sandwich before another wave of families arrived and once again we were all involved in helping children with some excavating and talking to our visitors about what we had found. Some parents who arrived remembered playing dens in the caves when they were children and remembered it as a magical place where they had the freedom to play without adult supervision. Another visitor was also a member of the Kilcreggan photography club and asked if they could come up and take some photos. At about 2pm one of our NCAS members arrived with a large container of cake which was most welcome and enjoyed greatly.

Our



final

visitors arrived at 3pm when it was time to start packing up and tidying the site as the daylight hours are limited at this time of year and there is no artificial light on the site.

As we walked back to our cars we reflected on the day. No-one had expected

so many people to come along and show so much interest in the project. It was particularly welcome to see the childrens' involvement and realise how much they wanted to learn about their local history. We had also made contact with a local photography club and with a local scout and brownie group. A few people had shown an interest in coming along to one of our regular Sunday digs. All in all it was a very successful day and thanks in particular must go to Tam and Sandra for ensuring the safety of the site and for providing the information and photos displayed.



A few stats:

- The day ran from 10am – 3pm
- 6 members of NCAS were on site to supervise the day
- Approximately 80 people came in equal proportion to adults and children
- Ages ranged from 6 months to 80 years
- About 7 dogs brought their owners along with them
- Most of the children had a go at excavating on the site
- Most of the adults watched their children enjoying getting muddy!
- Everyone was interested in finding out about the project and were enthusiastic about the local history
- Good links have been made with the local primary school, brownies, scouts and photography club
- One cake was devoured with relish

Portkil Cave No 1 excavations

The geological strata at Portkil were laid down as massive flood debris in the Devonian Period about 350M years ago. At that time Scotland was joined with New Foundland as a single landmass and the whole lot lay near the equator. Portkil cliffs were formed by waterborne material from the north, from a desert environment; you can see the beds of sand and gravels in the cliffs walls. When the floods were powerful, stones came rolling down and when the floods were weak, only fine silt or sand came down, you can see these beds in the rock face beside the cave.

This was an important time for life on Earth, as the first fish, insects and plants evolved and it is also the time when creatures left the sea to become land animals.

The geology has since been subject to all sorts of effects such as tilting and folding causing cracks and fissures to form, and it is at these weak points that the caves were formed. Around 12,000 years ago the sea level was against the cliffs and waves washed out the caves. The sea has retreated some 300m to its present position by land mass uplift causing the cliffs to now lie on a 5m raised beach.

Occupation of such caves in pre historic times was common, especially in the Mesolithic Period between 6000 – 10,000 years ago, and we yet find evidence of that.

However we have travelled back in time to the beginning of the Bronze Age around 4000-4500 years ago by finding pottery dating to that period in the form of a beaker sherd. Such pottery is usually associated with burial sites and we also have pottery which is usually associated with domestic use. The other BA object we have found is part of a napkin ring, which were cloak fasteners and made from coal. Coal was used to make jewellery.

We have also found bone which has been burnt and unburnt bone, all of it is diagnostic in the hands of specialists. If any of the bone is human, we will have funerary activity in the cave, perhaps cremation, alternatively if the bone is animal, we will have the remains of their dinners! We will find out in due course.

The black charcoal is important as we can determine the woodland species and also radio carbon date it giving a more accurate date of the various layers.

Incredibly we have found the remains of an owl's dinner in the form of tiny rodent bones.

So the sequence we have so far found and seen in the main section is; beginning from the lowest levels:

1. People were using the cave in the Bronze Age between 2500-4500 years ago. An owl flew in at some point to eat its dinners of small rodents.
2. A rock fall covering the BA deposits, this could have been caused by an earthquake.
3. At some unknown time people came back into the cave to eat sheep and pigs, as the bone testifies.
4. Around 150 years ago someone broke his tobacco pipe with pictures of a steam paddle ship and an early steam engine, possibly the Comet and the Duke. Around that time someone lost two farthing valued trade tokens, one from a Glasgow merchant and the other from a Glasgow Doctor.
5. Around 100 years ago people came to have picnics and accidentally broke their tea pots, cups and bowls. Some jam and beer was also consumed.

Our next dig will take place outside the cave where we hope to find even earlier evidence. We may do some work in other nearby caves.