A brief history of NCAS

NCAS was founded in 2013 and from its inception it has run a continuous programme of winter lectures, summer excursions, exhibits, events, and fieldwork all year round. Membership has been steady at around 45. Now entering our 5th season with another varied programme of speakers, the future of the Society bodes well.

For the purposes of fieldwork and research a fairly large landscape was adopted, stretching from Erskine to the top end of Loch Lomond and everything in between including Rosneath Peninsula. The area ensured that the Society would have a reasonable chance of producing new evidence of the local past, and indeed, perusal of the various reports on our web site will show that several new discoveries have been made while previously known, but perhaps not very well-understood sites, have been brought to some prominence by the work of the Society.

Four previously unknown areas of pre-history have been discovered; firstly, on Ben Bowie where new forestry exposed several previously unknown sites and various random flint finds, and then at Millbrae where similar forestry operations revealed further prehistoric sites. The latest forestry work in Glen Douglas has resulted in the discovery of a bloomery site, where iron was being smelted. A similar bloomery was found at Millbrae and at both Millbrae and Ben Bowie, four burnt mounds have been located; these sites are all the first of their types to be found in the area.

Perhaps the most dramatic pre-historic discovery so far has been the evidence of Bronze Age occupation in a cave at Portkil, dating back over 4000 years, beaker pottery and part of a rare cloak fastener made from coal were found. Further work is intended in this area including a search for ‘stone coffins’ reported over 150 years ago.

Millbrae was also the site of a major excavation on a long forgotten double cottage site, which was occupied by Argyll Estate game keepers in the first half of the 19th C. A large assemblage of finds adequately show what life was like at the cottages and, taken with historical research, has almost brought the place back to life. Particularly pleasing has been the pottery from the site which includes much Scottish wares including some from the Clyde Pottery in Greenock. However, perhaps more importantly, pottery and bottle glass dating back to around 1700 shows people were living at Millbrae much earlier than is historically recorded.
Bringing the story a bit more up to date has been various investigations on coastal defence sites. Amazingly, prominent sites exist which date from WW I, WW II and even the Cold War; these are all gun locations either to protect the coast from enemy ships or to protect the skies from enemy planes. An entire WW I camp for the incredibly well preserved Portkil Battery has lain unnoticed for almost a century, it is now recorded for the first time on the ground. Five heavy anti-aircraft (HAA) gun sites were built from Cove to Geilston to protect the Clyde during WW II. The remains have now been surveyed for the first time, and gradually, research is producing the meat on the bones as it were, regarding their important local and national story. The lonely sentinel of the tower at old Cardross church tell of the night in May 1941 when the church was blown to pieces, shattering many grave stones in the cemetery in the process. The golf clubhouse at Cardross and nearby Mollandhu farm house are built in ‘art deco’ style, suggesting to non-local building historians, that they belong to the time between the two 20th C wars. The original buildings on each site suffered the same fate as the church when stray bombes demolished them, each was rebuilt after the war, but in the characteristic earlier style.

The most surprising site is at Rosneath Castle Farm where another HAA gun site exists. It has been entirely recorded by NCAS and the amazing story here is that it was built in the 1950’s as a deterrent against Russian bombers delivering nuclear bombs on Glasgow. More extraordinary is the fact that the site was completed and then immediately scrapped as being unfit for purpose, technology having moved on to intercontinental missiles. Most people naturally thought the site dated to WW II, but survey and re-investigation tell a completely different and surprising story.

The need to present local heritage has been a priority, and to that end one major exhibit in Helensburgh Library was installed, while other events such as open days on digs have been staged. A pioneer and permanent local heritage display panel was installed at the cup and ring marked stone above the town of Helensburgh, and others are planned.

All of NCAS work is regularly published on the web for the benefit of all, it used to be said “the job isn’t done until the paper work is done”, the same sentiment applies, and NCAS ensure that their discoveries reach a worldwide audience very speedily. Check out the various reports for more details on any of the above.

New members are heartily welcomed whether to listen to a lecture or contribute personally to Scotland’s story by fieldwork.