

The visual survey and history of a hard rock quarry near Portincaple, on the west side of Rosneath Peninsula, Argyll.

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Abstract

A hard rock quarry and associated features was photographed and is visually described with a historical supplement.

Introduction

The complex of quarry, spoil heaps and jetty remains are centred Circa NS 2260 9230, OS Explorer map No 347, Loch Lomond South. They lie on the steep sloping west flank of Rosneath Peninsula approximately 0.5 km SW of the southern extremity of the village of Portincaple. Access to the site is precarious because of the steepness of the ground both by landward and beach approaches which lie on MOD land.

The survey given here is a *visual and pictorial* description only as measurements were not taken on the day of visitation, dimensions are therefore approximate. Geological descriptions should be read as ‘non-specialist’ as neither author is qualified as such.

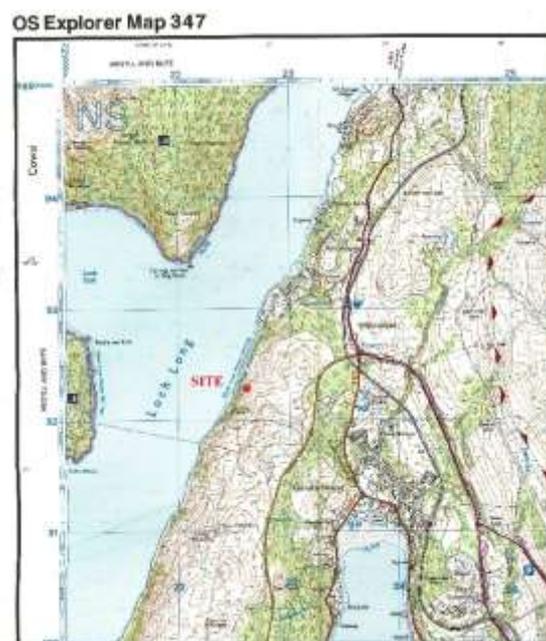


Fig 1. Location.

The remains

The remains which are nearly all embraced within scrub woodland are described beginning with the quarry which is uppermost in the sequence of features:

The quarry

The single quarry (Pl 1) is c20m high by c20m in diameter and is entered through a c4-5m wide gap in two walls of schist (Pl 2), presumably being the flanking rock of the felsite dyke whose extraction was the purpose of the quarry. Felsite rocks of varying size now choke the interior of the quarry, whether these have been abandoned by the operators or fallen since is uncertain.

Quarry features

Leading out from the quarry front are two structures built with dry stone; The larger one of the two (Pl 4) is on the southern side, and is a level topped rectangular platform, measuring approximately 5m wide by 20m long and 2m high, it runs off at an angle from the quarry entrance. Neatly built into the floor of this platform but nearer the quarry, is a pit (Pl 3) which measures 2m square and is seen as 2m deep. Certainly, the presence of this pit would severely impede access to and from the quarry when in use, its purpose is not understood but it is assumed to be a later feature in the overall scheme of things.

On the other side of the quarry frontage is a ramp like construction (Pl 5), which similarly leads off at an angle to the quarry entrance. It starts from its upper side at 2m high and drops down to the level area in front after c 6m long.

		
		
<p>Pl 1. The quarry.</p>		<p>Pl 2. The quarry entrance.</p> <p>Pl 3. The pit in front of the quarry.</p>



Pl 4. The level platform.



Pl 5. Sloping ramp.

Spoil heaps

A significant spoil heap (Pl 6 & 7) fronts a level area of c25m in diameter, the obviously worked rock is all felsite and appears flaked or angular for the most part, mostly less than 0.3m in size. The spoil heap has been created on a very steep slope and it would appear that the upper surface has been maintained as a level working area, probably for dressing the rock.

Further downhill and below the 'Blondin' platform, and straddling the unnamed spring which runs down, there is another spoil heap (Pl 8) but considerably less in size and volume. It is composed entirely of smaller angular chips up to a maximum of fist size and while obviously the product of stone dressing, it is completely different in character from the main spoil heap further uphill, indicating a different product being manufactured there.



Pl 6. Spoil heap of flaked and broken stone.



PL 7. Spoil heap looking towards the quarry.

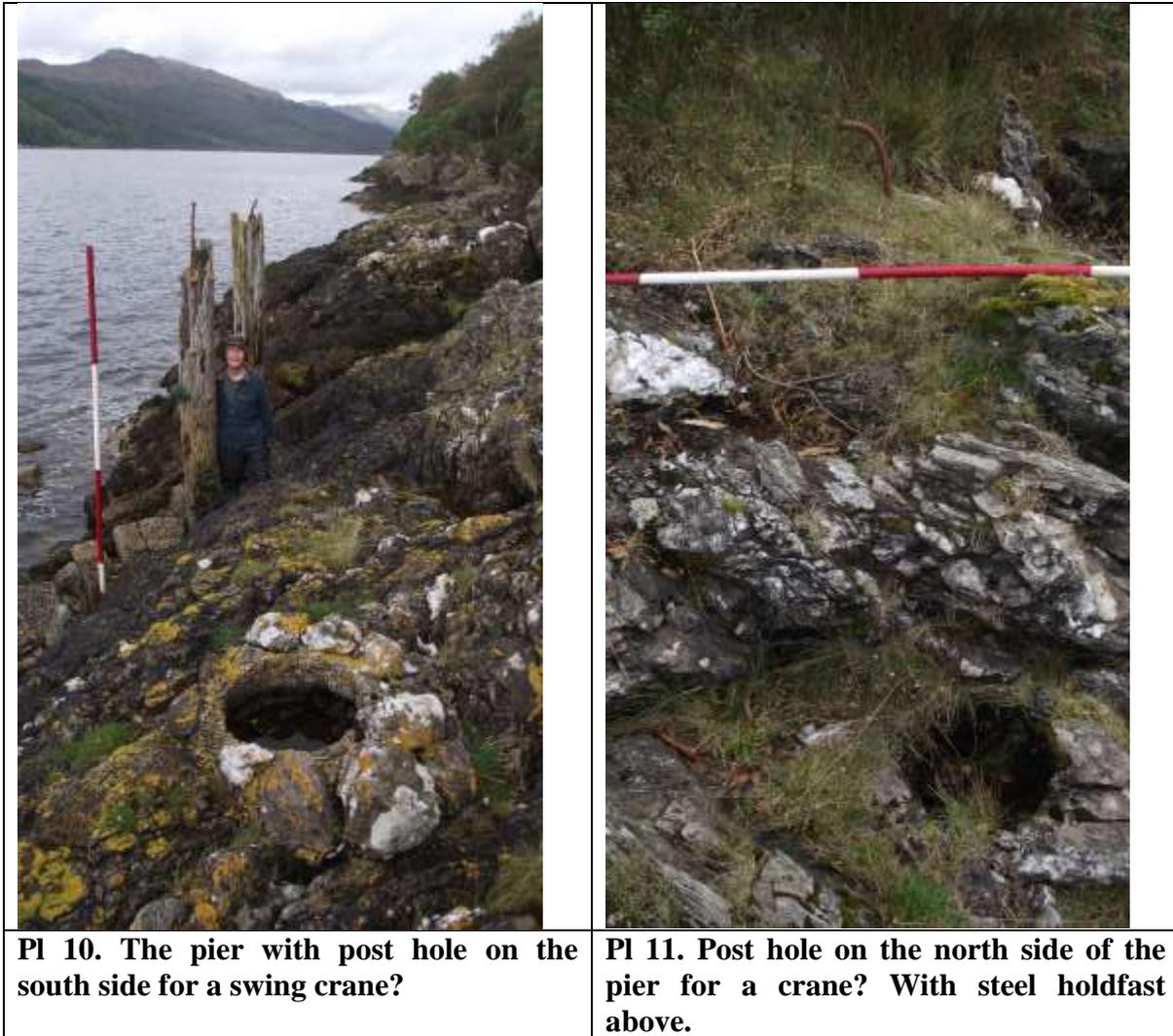


Pl 8. Spoil heap of smaller stones.



Pl 9. The 'Blondin' upper platform.

At the base of the main spoil heap and created precariously on the edge of a cliff there is a concrete structure (Pl 9) which has once supported timber and metal structures. This is the cable crane or 'Blondin' support platform and which enabled the quarriers to transport the finished products down to the beach pier in suspended buckets.



Finally, at the water's edge there has been a structure forming a pier and probably which had swing cranes beside it (Pl's 10 & 11). Two large posts and a third stump where the ranging pole in Pl 10 is shown must have supported a platform for loading the rock into boats. Two prominent post holes created by cementing rocks around the poles lie at each side of the former pier, these are assumed to have been for swivel cranes to load the boats. Lying below water level in front of the pier uprights are several concrete blocks circa 2m long by 0.5m square section. They have a series of centrally placed holes to accommodate iron bars and may have been a grill of some sort or a fence line. The 'Blondin' line would terminate at the pier.

Geology

It is evident from the spoil heaps that felsite was being quarried and worked at the site, a few examples of sets lie about the area. The rock lends itself to being split into brick shaped

pieces (P 12). To the NE and along the shore near Portincaple the rock strata are described in a geological excursion book (Lawson and Weedon 1992). Similar felsite there is described thus “Three roughly N-S trending dykes labelled here are – pale brown in thin section, consisting largely of an interlocking mosaic of cloudy feldspar laths and some quartz, and are highly altered with much calcite and chlorite”. Strangely no mention of the above quarrying activity is given.

History

THE WHISTLEFIELD GRANITE CO. LTD.

The quarry that is the subject of this account was worked by the Whistlefield Granite Co. Ltd. The firm was registered as a Company in 1912, according to the London Gazette. It seems to have been wound up in 1927, as it appears along with a list of others in the London Gazette of 11 October of that year.

Records of the Company are held at the National Archives, Kew, Ref. BT 31/20698/12283. The Company itself is identified as Company no. 12283.

A Valuation Roll of 1919 has an entry against the Company as being owners and occupiers of a bungalow at Portincaple, per J. White, London.

Very little other documentary material has so far come to light in relation to the Company, with the only other relevant information coming from interviews with the late Mrs Louise Work and the late Bryce Watson, both of whom had long-standing family ties with the hamlet of Portincaple, which is located by the shores of Loch Long about a mile north of the quarry workings.

According to both, the quarry was worked for not much more than ten years, around the time of the First World War, which accords well with the information obtained from the London Gazette. Mrs Work stated that the quarry workforce had lodgings at Portincaple and walked from there to work every morning.

Bryce Watson reported that the “setts” as the rectangular blocks that were produced were called, were used in the building (or perhaps repair) of Customhouse Quay at Greenock, as well as being used as cobblestones or edgings on some Glasgow streets.

It is obviously no simple matter to access the Company records, if only because of the geographical location, but there is some hope that some relevant information might be found in sources like reports on mines and quarries, and in coastal shipping records- the remains of a pier at the lochside below the quarry shows that the finished stone was taken away by means of sea transport, most likely in the form of small coasting vessels such as the famous Clyde puffers.

With the quarry being opened not long before the outbreak of the First World War, one would wonder how that might have impacted upon the workforce- as well as the possibility that at least several might have enlisted in the Armed Forces as volunteers, there would also have been the factor.



Pl 12. Showing cleavage of the rock.

Discussion

The authors believe this is the first record of the remains described above. The means of transporting dressed rock down the considerable steep hill to the beach is assumed to have been by way of a cable crane, often referred to as a 'Blondin', named after the famous French acrobat who walked across the Niagara Falls in 1859 on a tight rope. At Portincaple buckets would be pulled to and from the beach and the quarry on high wire ropes, the concrete block up the hill would be the anchor point for the mechanism which must have include a motor winch. The same system is often used to bring trees down from high places during clear felling of mountain forests and was used in dam wall construction for large reservoirs.

References.

Lawson, J. D. and Weedon, D. S. 1992. *Geological Excursions around Glasgow & Girvan*. Geological Society of Glasgow. ISBN 0 902892 09 6.