

NEWSLETTER June 2014

Dates for your diary

For further details about these events see the WHAT'S ON section of the NOSAS website.

Friday, 20 June - 13 July 2014

Cnoc Tigh Dig, near Portmahomack

- Candy Hatherley

Thursday, 26 June 2014, 19:30 at Seaforth Lodge, Station Square, Fortrose, IV10 8SZ

The Annual Groam House Museum Lecture: To Die a Pict: barrows, carved stones and the landscape

- Adrian Maldonado

Saturday, 28 June 2014, 14:00 - 15:00

Creating Christianity: Burial in Scotland's early monasteries

- Adrian Maldonado

Sunday, 29 June 2014, 10:00 - 16:00

Kinlochourn - A Guided Walk

- John Wombell

Saturday, 12 July - 3 August 2014

Cromarty Mediaeval Burgh Dig

- Mary Peteranna

Tuesday, 15 July - 1 August 2014

Tarlogie Dun Dig, near Portmahomack

There is also a series of workshops on archaeological skills from the Tarbat Discovery Centre over the summer.

- Candy Hatherley

Tuesday, 29 July 2014, 19:30 at Seaforth Lodge, Station Square, Fortrose, IV10 8SZ

Groam House Lecture: The Archaeology of Fortriu – recent discoveries in Easter Ross

- Candy Hatherley

Friday, 1 August 2014, 19:15

Archaeological investigations on the Tarbat Peninsula and beyond

Find out what the team have discovered this summer in their excavations on the Tarbat peninsula and beyond.

Speakers will include Cathy Hatherley and Gordon Noble of the University of Aberdeen.

Tuesday, 26 August 2014 19:30 at Seaforth Lodge, Station Square, Fortrose, IV10 8SZ

Groam House Lecture: From hunter gatherers to Robert Bruce – the Archaeology of Tarradale in the west of the Black Isle

- Dr Eric Grant of Tarradale

NOSAS and the HES Bill

We notified you of the request for 'evidence' or comments on the new Historic Environment Scotland Bill that is beginning its progress through Parliament. Some of you sent me comments on the Bill and I wrote a response which is on our web site. I was notified they had received the NOSAS response and expected to hear nothing more. However one of the staff assisting the Education and Culture committee did contact me to clarify a point and I was able to expand my written comments. As you will see from my response one of our main concerns is about our own HER and its compatibility with CANMORE. I emphasised this during my conversation. While it is unlikely that there will be many changes to the wording of the present proposed Bill I think that our comments will be noted when the new body is created. If you would like to read our response and those of the other responders the link is <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/29800.aspx> (Click on the Historic Environment Scotland Bill under Current Business.)

The bill will be going through Stage 1 on the afternoon of Thursday 19th June. If this stage is passed the bill will move to Stage 2 where the amendments can be proposed and made. Stage 2 may take place in August. I will put the most recent information on the NOSAS website with details how to see Stage 1 and other information and I will continue to update the website when I get further emails.

Anne Coombs, Chair

Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) update

We now have everything in place (signed forms from members, new bank account, etc.) and we will go ahead with the changeover to NOSAS SCIO on Friday 1 August 2014.

The very few members who have not signed up will not become members of NOSAS SCIO. From 1 August they will remain members of the old but dormant NOSAS, and from September all renewals of membership will be to NOSAS SCIO. For the rest of us it's business as usual, and for the great majority there'll be no discernible change other than the slight change of name.

Many thanks in particular to David, Roland and Alan for all their hard work.

Anne Coombs, Chair

NOSAS Library

NOSAS has a small but growing collection of books which are kept in Dingwall Library. A list of current holdings can be found on the NOSAS website. Only NOSAS members are allowed to borrow them – and now we have arrangements in place for you to request books from your local branch of Highland Libraries.

In order to do this you must be a current member of the library. Please note that some of you have lapsed memberships or may never have joined. If in any doubt, contact your local library and make sure your details are up to date.

If you want to borrow a NOSAS book, go into your library, and explain that you are a NOSAS member. The library staff will check your record, which lists you as a member in the Analysis Field. They will then email Dingwall Library with your details and the book details, and the book will then be placed in the Highland van delivery system. This may take up to a couple of weeks, depending on how frequently your branch gets deliveries. You can return the books to any Highland Council library branch.

The NOSAS library is happy to take donations if you have some archaeology books you no longer want. Contact Susan on cruachan.hts@googlemail.com if you want to discuss – or if you have problems with requesting books to other locations. If you would like to join an informal group which will assess donations and identify gaps in the library, please let Susan know. We'll correspond by email.

NOSAS has a membership with SCRAN - to use this login to the members' area and look under MEMBER MATTERS. However you can also access it with your Highland Library card. Connect to <http://www.scran.ac.uk/login/librarycard.php> At the login screen, choose Highland from the Local Authority list and type in your library card number.

Susan Kruse

Rhu Arisaig – Neolithic hide and seek.

In the autumn of 2012, Jean and I were asked, because of our experience in survey and archaeology, to join Elizabeth and Allan MacDonald and half a dozen others from Arisaig, about twelve miles north of where we live, in order to do a walkover survey of the Rhu Peninsula, a virtually-deserted five by three miles stretch of very rough ground immediately south of Arisaig. Many people will know this area by the winding coastal road that runs along the north side of the peninsula and round the western tip to the old ferry pier at the end of the public road. Beyond this a track continues for a mile or more to the only two permanently-inhabited houses on Rhu. The ferry to the Small Isles berthed here in the days of sail because the way into Arisaig harbour was, and still is, very dangerous, with huge areas of drying reefs.



The current 1:25000 OS maps mark only a dozen or so features on Rhu Arisaig. In January 2014, as the survey restarted, we had over three hundred on the list, mostly townships, shielings, feannagan, cairns, enclosure walls and the like. But there is relatively little of real note on the peninsula, probably because until very recently it was too inaccessible even for the Antiquarians, with the one exception of the Reverend Jolly, who specialised in looking for cup-marked stones on his days off, and in 1885 very accurately recorded one of the very few west coast examples at Gaodeil, on the eastern border of our survey area.



Cup-marked stone

Ken Bowker

Rhu is part of Na Garbh Criochan, the Rough Bounds, an apt name; it is very volcanic, with massive basalt dyke swarms emanating 60 million years ago from Sligachan, on Skye, although the native rock is sandstone schist. Raised beaches occur all around the edge, with pebble beaches 100 feet above the sea. Having said that, there was enough cultivable land to support almost four hundred people prior to the 1850s, when there was the usual widespread emigration.

One sunny day in April 2013 the four of us were heading back at the end of the day's walk, when Elizabeth MacDonald rounded the corner of a ruined house. She glanced towards the sunlight, which was slanting along the wall of the ruin, and she spotted distinct markings on a smooth basalt stone, just off the corner of the eastern wall; she looked closer, wondering aloud if they were Viking runes – but Jean and I were far more excited, because we had other suspicions.



Ruin with stone in situ

Ken Bowker

I took photographs and started by sending them off to Jonie Guest for a NOSAS opinion. A couple of weeks later John Wombell arrived and confirmed what we suspected – the markings on the stone looked Neolithic. Subsequent exchanges with ten carved-stone specialists in Scotland and England confirmed this; one, Caroline Wickham-Jones, didn't even bother to suggest what it was but merely asked "Where's the Neolithic cairn?" We'd found an incised Neolithic stone.



Stone in good light

Ken Bowker

Since flint does not occur naturally around here, the incisions, which are only 2mm or so deep, were probably made using quartzite; they are so shallow that Alison Sheridan of the National Museum of Scotland (NMS) later said it was a million-to-one that they were ever spotted. They can only be seen in good lighting conditions – on a grey day they are virtually-invisible, and a torch of some kind is invaluable in that situation.



Stone in dull light

Ken Bowker

The ruin is a rebuild of an earlier house and was lived in until 1900 by Duncan Moffat, a ditcher on the Arisaig Estate. The stone may have been chosen simply because it was the right shape – or it may be, as has been suggested by some, particularly Antonia Thomas of the UHI on Orkney, that it was apotropaic – set there to ward off evil - because it was perceived to have a magical history. Antonia sent me an image of an almost-identical stone found on Orkney in 2013 and has seen others in similar settings to that on Rhu. (photo 'Orkney stone')



Orkney stone

Antonia Thomas

John Wombell pointed out the potential for theft – the stone was easily-removed and only 50m from a driveable track; so we kept the find quiet, apart from consulting the specialists, until we had a professional come and look at it.

It wasn't until October that John Borland of RCAHMS arrived to identify and record the stone, on a day so wild that three people had to hold the drafting paper steady while he drew it. Even after this, things moved slowly. I contacted the Trove specialists in the National Museum who said it was "a difficult one". The stone was not in its original context, and, set in the wall, it was still part of a building with a known owner and therefore (probably, they thought) not Trove. If we moved it without permission from the owner, that would be theft – but if the landowner moved it, he could quite legally keep it on the mantelpiece. In the end it was agreed that if the landowner moved it to a place of safety, Trove would not apply.

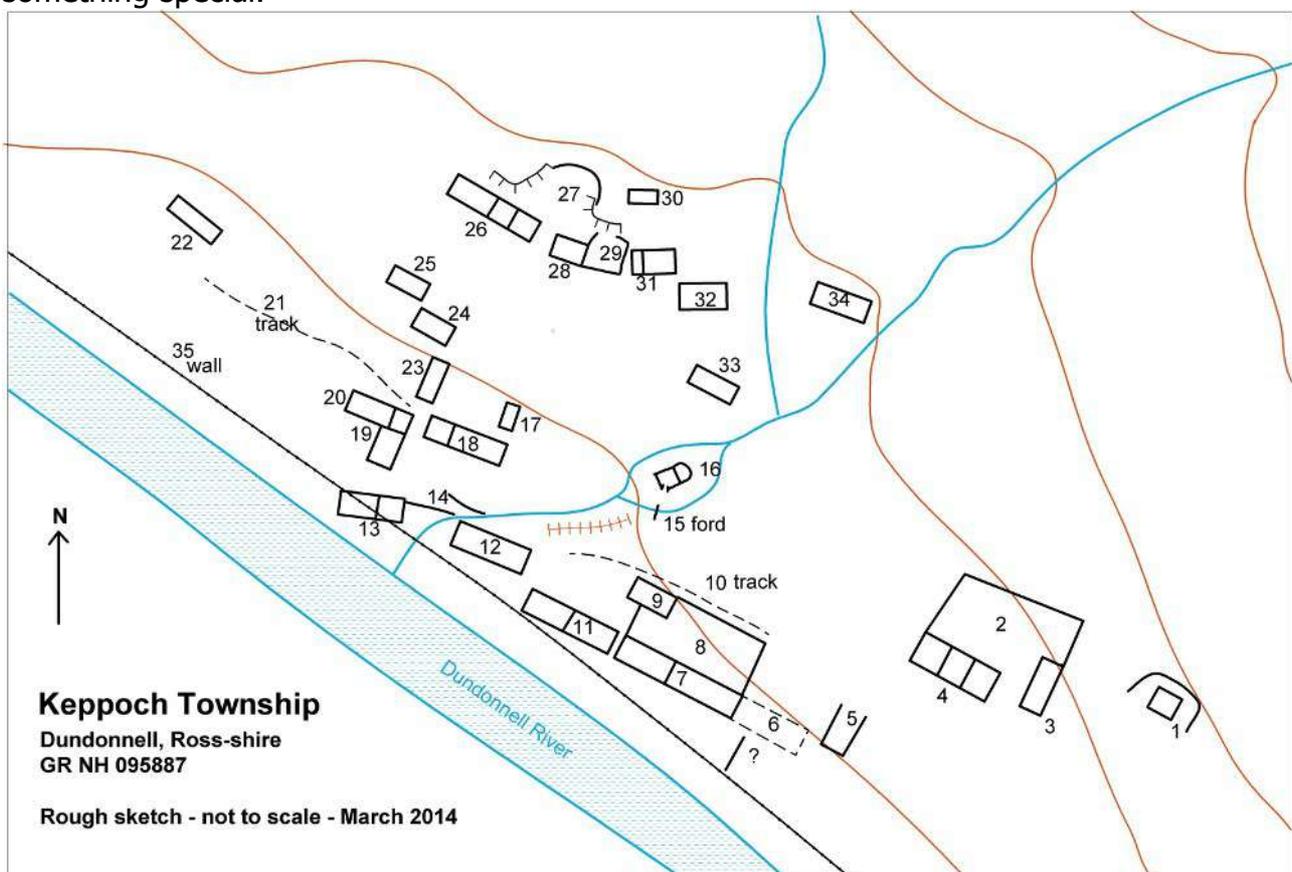
The ruined building is owned, by good fortune, by an elderly local historian who said immediately that the stone should be on public view; even then, he went through the same hoops with Trove because, as he said he "wanted to do everything right".

The stone was finally moved just before Christmas and loaned permanently to the Land, Sea and Island Centre in Arisaig, where it will be on display as soon as suitable lighting is installed – as I said earlier, it is very difficult to see in normal light. If you're in Arisaig, drop in and see it – it's worth a visit.

Ken Bowker

Keppoch: Recording a Township

Keppoch is a cleared village near Dundonnell in Wester Ross (NH 09519 88665). I have a visited a few such settlements before but it did not take long to realise that Keppoch was something special.



Meryl Marshall

This was partly the situation: it overlooks the wide valley floor of Strath Beag near the entrance to Little Loch Broom, with the snowy shoulders of An Teallach looming on the horizon. However the number and extent of the buildings easily identifiable was the real draw. Also poignancy was provided by the historical information we had, largely compiled by Cathy Dagg, which showed that the settlement had been apparently cleared of its tenants between the 1820s and 40s. Only four households were listed as remaining in the 1841 census: a weaver, a carpenter, a fisher and a cotter.

Anne MacInnes (who originally suggested the site), Meryl Marshall and Beth Blackburn between them had organised a four day programme running across the last weekend of April. Friday and Saturday would be taken up with clearing the site, whilst Sunday would be the meat of recording and drawing the features. Monday was reserved for a trip out to another nearby cleared village at Glenarigolach.

I did not manage to make it down until Saturday lunchtime and by this point clearing operations were well under way with a few newly discovered buildings being added to Meryl's original drawing. The afternoon was spent disposing of the remaining brambles and gorse, and was finished with a tour of the village during which each building had numbers attached for easy identification the following day. After this everybody was more than happy to get washed and changed before reconvening for a very pleasant meal at the Aultbea Hotel.

Meryl had prepared a fearsomely comprehensive information booklet for the weekend. This had been emailed to all the attendees with stern warnings to thoroughly digest the contents prior to Sunday. Meryl had actually done a fantastic job of producing a simple but effective guide to recording and surveying a township, including handy "top tips". (The whole document can be accessed at <http://s3.spanglefish.com/s/12654/documents/digs/keppoch/recording-keppoch-manual-april-2014.pdf> and is well worth checking out). It informed us that standard of information to be collected could range from a "one star" up to a "five star" treatment. We were to give Keppoch a four star treatment, which would involve a full written description, photos and a dimensioned sketch of each building.

Sunday morning was started off with a talk by Meryl which covered the basics of writing a site description and then went on to talk through the sketching and labelling of the buildings. I had had some previous drawing experience at a couple of digs, and in recording the fishing boats wrecks at Loch Fleet. However, I had not taken part in a NOSAS recording project like this before, though the majority of other attendees had. Also I have to confess it is not my favourite job, I generally feel much more comfortable with a trowel or a shovel than with a pencil. Any trepidation though was quickly dispelled once the work got under way.



Meryl in lecture mode at Keppoch
James McComas

We had all been paired off and given a group of buildings to record. Michael Sharpe and I had been given building numbers 17, 18, 19, 20 and 24. We decided it would easiest to establish a baseline in order to quickly plot the corners of buildings using the tape and offset method. This made sense since our structures was close enough together to allow them all to be drawn on same piece of paper at a scale of 1:200. Once these basic points had been plotted the more involved task of drawing in the detail of each building could begin. Michael and I took turns to draw and annotate while the other took measurements.

Initially it took me a little while to get the hang of providing the appropriate level of annotation for each drawing: I found I had a tendency to write more detail than was really necessary. Also there was a certain amount of rubbing out engendered by my tendency to write annotations where the drawings of adjacent buildings would need to go! Another challenge was deciding how the building walls should be drawn. With two of the buildings there were substantial courses of stone remaining which obviously suggested representation by a continuous line. However, in the three other buildings the walls were frequently sketchy and in places represented only by sequences of rough boulders. In these cases we chose to draw in the individual stones, and used dashed lines to show where wall lines appeared to continue below the exposed surface. All in all we found that most issues could be resolved by employing a degree of common sense.



*Building 18, with the remains of a twinning pen
in the corner*
James McComas

Annotated drawings completed and tidied up, we next completed a written description for each building. For this a pro-forma was used which Meryl had helpfully provided. Although this might not have been suitable for all applications in the field, filling it in was nevertheless a helpful exercise in that it forced one to consider the kind of information that was needed. Fortunately most of the pertinent facts were already in the drawing annotations. Photographs, another essential element of the recording process, also had to be taken for each structure and these noted with the descriptions.

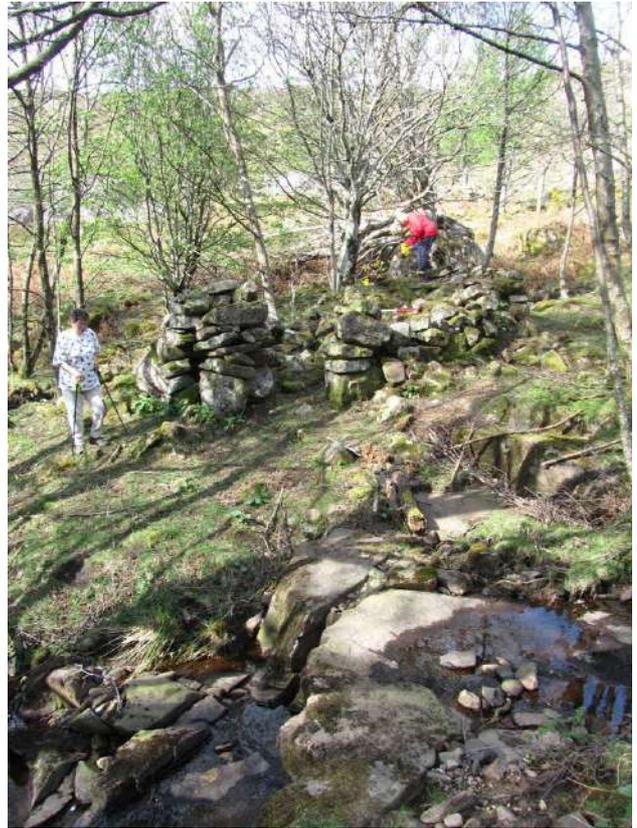
By mid afternoon everyone seemed to have finished their allotted tasks and there was the opportunity to compare notes with other teams and further explore points of interest in the village.

One building (no. 16 on the plan), situated on an island between two branches of the burn, was clearly revealed to be a kiln or furnace of some sort. Superficial cleaning revealed a flue leading in to a raised kiln or furnace bowl at the North East end of the building. Interestingly slag was spotted in the burn immediately upstream by a sharp eyed Hazel Keiro. This obviously suggested an alternative or additional source of iron working to the north of the site. John Wombell quickly identified a likely looking apron of land below building no. 34, where one of several small test pits revealed further slag deposits of a different composition to those found in the burn.

The walk back to the road was filled with a buzz of conversation about the implications of the slag finds. On the way Anne MacInnes took the opportunity to point out some old cultivation rigs plus a trio of impressive round houses. This made for a very satisfying end to an absorbing day's recording at a fantastic site.

A vote of thanks is due to everyone involved in organising the weekend.

James McComas



Building 16 - the furnace or kiln

Meryl Marshall