

IV.

EARTH-HOUSE AT PORTNACON, SUTHERLAND.

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In the *Report and Inventory of Monuments and Constructions in the County of Sutherland*, No. 160 of the Parish of Durness is a description of "Earth-house, Portnacoon." This lies close to a road bridge, half a mile north of Portnacoon Pier on the west side of Loch Eriboll, and was visited in 1909 when some measurements were taken, but these have since been found incorrect. In 1927 my brothers, Mr Alexander MacDonald, and I determined to explore it in spite of fearful warnings from the local inhabitants, some of whom assured us that the place was haunted and to meddle with it was courting disaster, and others that it was a great underground loch of unfathomable depth.

Despite these rumours, however, Mr D. M. Reid, of Harrow School, had been excavating at various times, and had discovered the roof of the building. Mr Donald MacDonald showed us a small hollow in the ground with a large heavy stone in it. At the lowest part of the hollow we could just see an opening. With the help of motor-jacks we removed this stone, which was 3 feet 6 inches long and 2 feet 6 inches high, and probably used for blocking the entrance. It now lies just outside it. Having removed the slab, we were able to dig out the heap of earth and stones which was blocking the tunnel. At length after many days' digging we came upon a small flight of stone steps between 17 inches and 28 inches wide, with a stone wall on each side. There was no mortar, and we could see no tool marks on the stones. Seven steps led down to the entrance of the gallery and then five more to a mud floor (fig. 1). These varied from 2 inches to 9 inches in height.

The entrance is 2 feet 4 inches wide and 3 feet high with no traces of jambs or bar-holes. At the foot of the staircase was a gallery filled with water, but we ventured a little way down the tunnel, and by tapping on the roof others outside were able to mark its direction so that we could examine it from the surface.

The roof was soon exposed, but before the gallery could be farther explored it was necessary to get rid of the water. We dug a trench from the end of the gallery to a burn nearby. This took us no little time as we were only able to work at it for a few weeks each year. Eventually

it was finished. The trench dug was some 23 yards long, crossing the old road to Durness, the outline of which can still be traced. The structure was about 10 feet deep at the upper end, and from here we

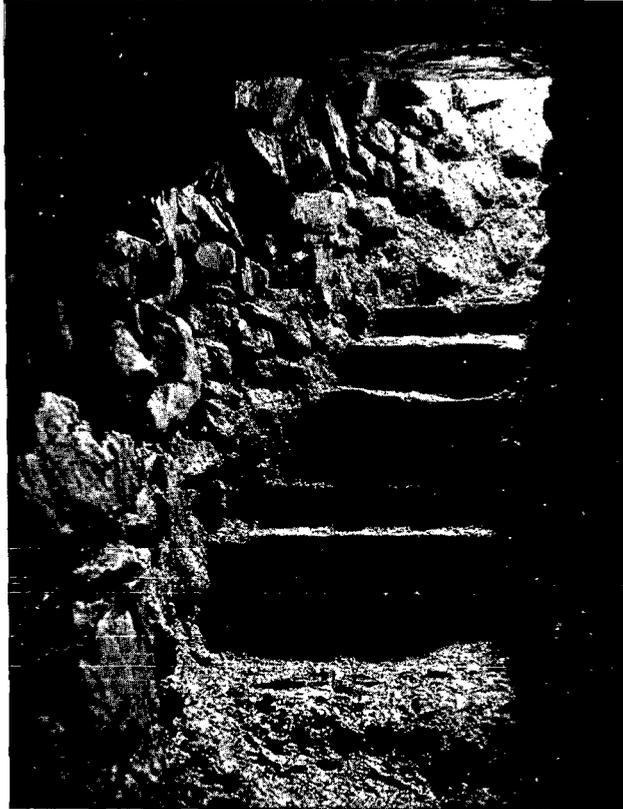


Fig. 1. Portnacon Earth-house: entrance from interior.

drained most of the water away, leaving a long low gallery from 4 feet 4 inches to 5 feet 5 inches high.

The floor is of earth covered with loose stones and the walls stoutly built of undressed blocks of all shapes and sizes, rising in an outward curve, so that while the width at the floor in the middle of the gallery is 4 feet 3 inches, half-way up it is 5 feet, and at the roof 3 feet 5 inches.

The roof is formed of stone lintels spanning the building; these average about 4 feet 8 inches in visible length, 1 foot 8 inches in width, and 8 inches in thickness.

The gallery itself is 27 feet in length along the middle of the floor and at the inner end 4 feet 9 inches high, with a width of 5 feet 7 inches (fig. 2). In the north-east corner of this widened part is a hollow in the floor, 4 feet in diameter and about 2 feet deep, by which the



Fig. 2. Portnacoon Earth-house: inner end.

gallery may originally have been drained. To avoid its refilling we have put in a drain-pipe from this hollow to the burn.

Nothing of archæological interest in the matter of relics was found during our excavations, but the earth-house is in a remarkably good state of preservation and can easily be visited by anyone passing along the road from Durness to Portnacoon. Subsequently, when the structure was drained, Mr Alexander MacDonald examined the deposit on the floor, but he found only some fragments of bone too small to be identified.