

I.

EXCAVATION OF A MEDIEVAL SITE ON DONALD'S ISLE,
LOCH DOON, AYRSHIRE. BY ARCHIBALD FAIRBAIRN,
F.S.A.Scot.

Of Donald's Isle, the following notice appears in Smith's *Prehistoric Man in Ayrshire*, p. 186—Straiton District:—

“On the west side of Loch Doon, two miles north of the Castle, there is an island called Donald's Isle, a moraine of granite blocks and debris, and on it there are two structures called Monks' Graves.

“Both are formed of boulders and are hollow in the centre, and although called graves, they may have been Monks' cells; some of the Monks having probably been buried in or near them.

“When they were opened, several relics of antiquity were obtained, including a bit of red and yellow bead, a polished stone, fragments of pottery, bits of iron, etc.”

The writer has no knowledge of who opened those so-called “graves,” nor of what became of the relics recovered at that time.

His attention was called to the site by the late Mr W. R. Stewart, F.S.A.Scot., of Merrick, Dalmellington, who had a thorough knowledge of the district and in whose company the site was visited.

Donald's Isle is near the west shore of Loch Doon, and is of no great extent, measuring in length, when the waters of the loch were low, 190 paces north and south, and in breadth 95 paces east and west. The structures in question occupy the highest point of the island, which takes the form of a slight ridge, running north and south, with the ground sloping gently from the crest on every side.

It was seen that the lay-out of the site was cruciform on plan, and although this may have been quite fortuitous, yet it is in keeping with the site's association with monks. The structure at the south end, or head of the cruciform arrangement, resembled a large oval-shaped cairn, heavily banked all round, except on the west, with massive boulders overgrown with heather. The centre was hollow, while the line of the structure lay due east and west. To the north, at a distance of 10 feet, the shaft of the cruciform lay-out was a large stone structure showing above the turf, the whole interior filled with soil and overgrown with grass.

It was noted that the east wall of this structure was massively banked and heather-clad, while on the west side the surface of the ground was more or less flat, and carried a green sward. The orientation of the building was due north and south.

The base of the lay-out, immediately north of and attached to the central structure, was an artificially flat area, the chief interest of which lay in its level appearance and grass-grown surface within a framework of heather—a sure sign of the effects of spent ash from the fires of occupation of long ago. Near by, on the west front, where a narrow channel of the loch separates the island from the shore, there is still to be seen the foundation boulders of an ancient jetty, 33 feet in length and 9 feet wide, but now well above the high-water mark of the loch.

It was ascertained that, many years ago, the level of the waters of the loch had been considerably lowered, and a portion of the shore laid bare, by the combined operations of the proprietors in having the rocks at the outlet blasted and the channel deepened. Following this operation, the erection of sluices regulated the discharge, which in turn prevented serious flooding of valuable meadows along the course of the River Doon, which issues from the loch. This is mentioned to suggest that previous to this undertaking Donald's Isle would in all probability be permanently an island.

Since then, in times of prolonged drought, the narrow channel on the west side, between the island and the shore, is dry, or nearly so, while in wet seasons, and during the winter months, the flooded loch still provides a defensive deep-water moat for the site, of from 50 to 80 yards in width. On all other sides, at all seasons, the loch surrounds the island as from the earliest times.

The writer has been unable to glean any information, historical or otherwise, which would explain the reason for the island's name of "Donald," and no mention is made of it in "A List of Place-Names" of the district between the years 1547 and 1800. In the midst of a district where Celtic place-names are common, he strongly suspects that modern usage has been at work with the name of this small isle. Every land-name has a meaning, or once had, usually appropriate and descriptive, when not modernised out of keeping with the original meaning. In the Gaelic, a language common in Ayrshire in early times, as may be realised from the wealth of Gaelic land-names within the county, we have *dun* and *dúnan*—a hill or fort, or both combined. There is, however, no hill on the island, and, apart from the defensive advantage of the surrounding loch, neither is there any visible signs of a fort in ditch and rampart. Getting slightly nearer to Gaelic-speaking times

in Ayrshire, we have the seventeenth-century map of Carrick by the Rev. Timothy Pont, and here the island is named "Ylen Donan," or Island Donan. In pronunciation and in meaning this is almost identical with an Eilean Donan farther north. Pont doubtless took the name as he heard it pronounced in the district. In modern usage it would be an easy transition from "Donan" to "Donald," easier because there seems to be no local history nor tradition to support the latter name. There are many Donans in the west of Scotland, beginning in Wigtownshire, through Carrick in Ayrshire, and continuing as far north as Ross-shire, Caithness, and the Hebrides. These sites are chiefly Kildonans—meaning church of Donan, or dedications to Saint Donan—and Eilean Donan—*island of Donan, or Donan's Isle*. Many of these primitive ecclesiastical sites are characteristic of the early missionary practice of choosing an island, however remote, as safe headquarters for the time being. Bearing in mind this ancient custom, and the island's reputed association with monks, it was thought desirable that the site should be excavated.

As Loch Doon was to be raised to a higher level as a storage loch for water-power, and, in consequence, the island in question would possibly become submerged, leave to excavate was readily granted by the proprietor. The Most Hon. The Marquis of Ailsa and a small party of voluntary excavators commenced operations on the 17th June 1933, continuing the work at intervals, till the final visit on 21st August 1936.

It has already been noted that the immediate west front of the site, looking across the narrow channel to the shore, was grass-grown, beyond which the ground was heather-clad; this, with the presence of the ruined jetty, enabled the excavating party to decide that here was the original frontage and line of approach.

It was expedient to have the earliest evidence as to the nature of the large oblong structure which formed the centre or shaft of the group, and which at the moment measured outwardly 52 feet in length and 20 feet in breadth, and a gap in the west wall, just appearing through the sward, provided this opportunity (fig. 1). The turf was taken up over a large section in front of the opening and the soil underneath trenched over.

Almost with the lifting of the first turf a sherd of medieval pottery was obtained, to be followed by many fragments of a similar kind. The pottery lay at a depth of from 9 to 18 inches, and for the most part within short range of the opening in question, which proved to be the only entrance to the structure. All the pottery fragments were unmistakably medieval and domestic, and they represented several vessels, as

seen from rims and handles. Several fragments carried a faint greenish glaze, others were buff-coloured, and some were dark brown, and almost all were without decoration.

The trenching was continued down to undisturbed soil, and carried forward through the entrance, which was cleared out along with a section of the interior. Here, from under a depth of fully 2 feet of loamy soil, foreign to the island, a more or less level floor was exposed, and from this portion of the floor several flakes of flint of different colours were obtained. The floor was strewn with charcoal and stained

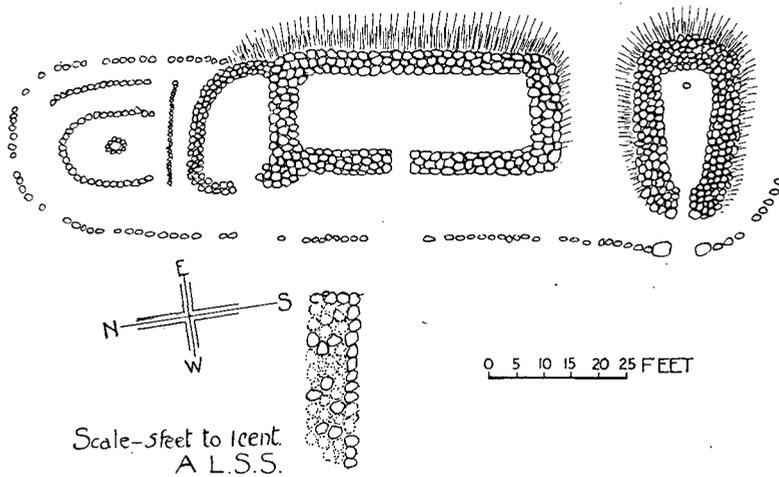


Fig. 1. Plan of Structures on Donald's Isle, Loch Doon.

with peat ash, traces of this continuing through the entrance to the ground outside.

A trial trench was now opened over the flat area north of and adjacent to the large structure, and here the soil under the turf was unmistakably that of occupation, dark in colour and plentifully intermixed with charcoal and peat ash, with a sprinkling throughout of burnt bone—probably domestic.

It was on the third visit to the island that the excavating party concentrated on the excavation of the lesser stone structure at the head or south end of the site. At a point 13 feet west of the centre of the structure, two large stones just appearing above ground lay fully 2 feet apart. At 12 feet outwards from these, two conspicuously large boulders were sufficiently wide apart to suggest an entrance. The turf was removed beyond the two outer boulders and this section was carried up to and over the two inner ones. Each turf was very carefully examined

for relics adhering to the roots of the under portion, and the excavators were well repaid by observing this rule. Many large fragments of a grey or buff-coloured ware were obtained over this section, where the potsherds were outstandingly thicker and belonging to larger vessels of a more substantial quality than the pottery recovered elsewhere over the whole occupied area.

It was surmised, as the soil increased in depth on approaching the two inner stones, that these were the portals of a passage leading into the structure; and so it proved to be. Within this passage, and 18 inches above the original passage floor, a silver penny of Edward I. was picked up from the loose soil. On identification, it proved to have been minted in London in 1260, and from its position, so far above the floor-level, the structure must have been in a ruinous condition long before the coin was lost.

The passage was completely filled with soil, evidently from walls and roof-covering, as well as with heavy boulders fallen inwards, and the whole interior, of what eventually proved to be a hut-dwelling, was in a similar condition; a second attempt had to be made before the interior was successfully cleared out. The dwelling exposed was of considerable interest, resembling in several details the Bronze Age hut-circles discovered and excavated at Muirkirk.¹

The level floor was of compacted clay, and the fireplace, which was near, but not against, the end wall, was a hole in the floor, measuring 2 feet in diameter and 1 foot deep. Out of this the writer removed the remains of the last fire—as he did those of the hut-circles—and found that the residue consisted of charcoal of wood and peat ash. Several kerb stones remained on one side of the fireplace, which was very similar to the cooking-holes of the Bronze Age dwellings above referred to, while the customary flat stone hearth of medieval habitations was not in use.

The primitive dry-stone walls, rudely but strongly built, had their foundations laid on virgin soil. The walls were still about 4 feet in height, and banked on the outward side to a width varying from 8 to 12 feet. The greater width faced the eastern exposure and the wide expanse of the loch.

The internal plan of the dwelling resembled a big-bellied bottle laid on its side—straight at the far end and gradually closing in towards the long narrow entrance. The measurements of the interior are as follows: the width of the chamber across the end wall is 9 feet, across the centre 8 feet, closing in to 7 feet, and gradually closing to 5 feet

¹ *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. lxi, p. 269.

at the inner end of the passage. The length of the chamber is 15 feet, to which may be added the length of the passage, 6 feet 6 inches, giving a total length of 21 feet 6 inches. The width of the passage is 2 feet at the portal and 2 feet 3 inches on entering the chamber. Doubtless, when the dwelling was in occupation, the rafters had been covered with turf, and doubtless also, the dry-stone walls had several feet of turf built on them above the stonework. This custom, a practical one, still prevails in the maintenance of outlying sheep-bughts in moorland districts. The turfs or divots are lighter to handle and safer to build above the height of from 4 to 5 feet as compared with heavy rounded boulders—where there is no other choice—as these are liable to get dislodged and fall, probably with disastrous results. It is difficult to account in any other way for the great accumulation of soil which had lodged within the dwelling, as here wind-blown soil may be ruled out, since the waters of the loch closely surround the site, and the island is destitute of sand, being wholly composed of granite debris.

With the exception of the silver coin, one fragment of pottery, and several flakes of flint, no relics were obtained within the dwelling. The occupation layer of the floor was carefully trowelled over and scrutinised, and it was also ascertained that no earlier floor lay beneath.

So far as the excavation had gone, sufficient evidence had been forthcoming to prove that the site at both extremities had been occupied as dwellings; and now the exploration of the central structure remained to be completed.

To clear out the vast accumulation of earth and fallen boulders within its interior was a formidable task, yet to do anything less was to hazard the loss of valuable evidence. The voluntary excavating party, having no appliances for removing the debris clear of the excavation, fell upon the plan of first carefully trenching the ground to undisturbed soil outwith the walls, and then depositing the debris from the interior on the trenched and explored ground outside, where each spadeful was carefully examined by a member of the party. In the trenching operations outwith the structure it was discovered that the ground between the hut-dwelling and the south end of the large structure held quite a deep deposit of peat ash and wood charcoal from the cooking-hole fireplace in the hut-dwelling. The trenching was continued along the whole west front of the large structure, and this exploration yielded occasional fragments of pottery and several much-corroded and unrecognisable objects of iron.

It was only after several attempts had been made, involving much heavy labour, that the interior of the large structure was finally cleared

out down to floor-level. It was now possible to take the following accurate measurements: internal length and breadth of the structure, 43 feet and 12 feet 4 inches; external length and breadth, 53 feet and 20 feet (fig. 2).

There is only one entrance, 3 feet wide, through the west wall, which is 4 feet in thickness. This entrance is not in the centre, but 22 feet from the north and 28 feet from the south end of the wall. The rear



Fig. 2. Oblong Structure, Donald's Isle, Loch Doon.

wall, facing the eastern exposure, is banked to a width of fully 10 feet, in like manner to the east wall of the hut-dwelling.

The floor was of compacted gravelly subsoil, and was from 12 to 18 inches below the level of the foundation boulders, all of which had been laid on soil of an earlier occupation, as seen from much charcoal of wood in the dark-coloured loamy soil beneath the foundations. The floor-level was very carefully examined with spade and trowel over the whole interior, and a minute search was made to the undisturbed soil beneath. It was then discovered that there were neither constructed hearths nor a cooking-hole fireplace within the whole interior. Neither were there any divisional foundations, nor any vestige of partition walls, even of wicker-work and clay. A few feet inwards from the entrance, and beside an earth-fast boulder, which rose above floor-level, a fire had burned, which was seen from scorched earth and charcoal remains; it was carefully noted that this fire had been laid several inches above the

original floor. The primitive dry-stone walls, rising over massive foundation boulders of granite, had, when cleared, a present height of nearly 4 feet. They still carried three to four courses of somewhat crude building, more or less intact, and they were free from lime or clay, and showed no traces of tool-marks of any kind.

The absence of hearths, constructed or otherwise, within the interior, and the absence outside the entrance of any deposit of spent ash, as well as the conclusive evidence of a large and entirely open interior, is not in keeping with a structure originally intended to be a dwelling, or which had been in use as one. Yet the walls at their foundations were fully 5 feet in thickness, in stonework alone, suggesting a place of substantial security, but very different in point of view from the snug hut-dwelling, with its narrow entrance, suggestive of warmth and comfort. The relics recovered from the interior were surprisingly few. Inwards from the entrance, they included fragments of a thinnish medieval ware, a stone disc or pot-lid, and some flakes of flint. Near the north end of the interior, a segment of an armlet of opaque yellow glass was discovered above floor-level, having probably been moved by the former opening of the site.

The excavating party now concentrated on the level area already referred to, measuring 41 feet north and south, and 38 feet east and west, extending outwards from the north end of the larger structure, which area formed—so to speak—the base of the cruciform lay-out of the site.

Here, there was no vestige of the remains of walls in stonework, nor in the accumulation of soil from decayed turf walls; the surface was perfectly flat, yet a practised eye could trace a slightly raised line on the sward, which proved to be a stone setting bordering this area, extending thereafter in a line along the whole west frontage up to, and beyond, the two large boulders referred to in front of the hut-dwelling.

On removing the turf over a large section, a double line of stones came to view, occupying in horseshoe formation about half the measured space.

Beyond these, there was a single line of stones running parallel with the margin on the east side. In the centre of the double row a large flat stone was exposed, supported by lesser stones, and all of them free from fire-stains or marks of burning.

These were taken up and the ground underneath tested to virgin soil.

It was evident that this group of stones had carried a central roof-tree and that the lines of stones in question had formed the foundations for timber structures.

This surmise was supported by the finding of many rust-corroded, large, flat-headed iron nails in the surrounding dark-coloured soil of occupation. Over the portion next to and abutting on the north end of the central structure, a wall 2 feet in width was exposed, and cleared to its full length of 17 feet, forming an annex 11 feet 6 inches in internal width, and opening to the west. It was seen, from the depth of fine soil intermixed with charcoal, which lay beneath the foundations, that this wall had been of secondary structure.

A passage 3 feet wide, and of equal length to the wall and running parallel with it, had on the outside margin a kerb of rough stones to mark it off, beyond which the timber structures would stand.

Close to the front of the annexe, and beneath ground-level, a deep deposit of spent ash from burnt peat and wood was exposed.

The iron relics recovered over this area included a socketed leaf-shaped arrow-head, a much-corroded tanged knife or dagger blade, a bolt or pike-like object pointed at one end and squared at the other, a fragment of a pot showing a mend neatly executed with bronze, as well as many large nail-heads and pieces of iron slag.

The medieval pottery fragments included a large handle, many sherds of a light buff-coloured ware, and a fragment of a brown rim with a double lip, all of which were of a plainer type as compared with the pottery from the stone structures.

All timber on the site had completely decayed, or it may possibly have been destroyed by fire.

An interesting relic in the form of a rounded freestone sharpener was discovered during the excavation of the annexe. It is unique in having three slightly raised and smooth ridges for sharpening purposes, and between the ridges the stone is roughened and dotted by tool-marks. Three short and smooth whetstones of primitive type also were recovered.

Of flints and chert, upwards of 120 flakes and chips were picked up from the occupation layer, and also rain-washed out of the loose soil.

Several of the flints had been worked, and these may be referable to an earlier occupation, evidence of which was found in the nature of the soil underlying the foundations of the central structure.

The pottery fragments, after a lengthy period of drying in sun and wind, and after cleaning with a soft brush, were then found to be almost wholly without glaze and for the most part of a bluish grey and buff-colour. As already noted, the pottery associated with the stone hut-dwelling—the foundations of which rested on virgin soil—was of a thick and heavy type, somewhat soft in texture and representing vessels of large size. That of the central structure was less substantial, but still of a superior

class as compared with that recovered from the site of the timber structures.

It was from these two latter sites that the few fragments of slightly glazed pottery were obtained.

The general excavation of the whole occupied area yielded—with the exception of a small segment of an armlet—no personal ornaments of any kind, nor evidence of medieval glass, nor of beads.

The tradition which associated the site with “monks’ graves” was happily refuted, nor were there any visible evidences of sepulchral rites anywhere on the limited available ground of the island.

There was nothing to be seen to indicate the means of livelihood of the original occupiers, since there was neither soil for cultivation nor room for the grazing of livestock on the island.

It is significant that no relics pertaining to agriculture were obtained.

Neither were there signs of early cultivation on the moorland of the near-by shore, where granite boulders, peat, heather, and bog-myrtle still remain in primitive state.

Surrounded by the waters of the loch, the occupiers of the island may be absolved from any idea of an agricultural life in such an inconvenient situation.

If we accept tradition, a better guide than inaccurate history—or the want of it—we may reasonably regard the site as that of “monks’ cells,” chosen for remote security, in common with the ecclesiastical customs associated with monks in early missionary times. It has been pointed out, however, that the orientation of the site is not in keeping with this custom; but it was clearly seen by the party of excavators that no other orientation was possible, otherwise both extremities of the occupied area would have been flooded by the loch at high water.

After three years’ digging at intervals, and in the absence of inscribed and tool-marked stones of any kind, it has been deduced from general observation on the ground, and from the relics recovered, that the primitive but strongly built stone hut-dwelling had been originally the headquarters of the site.

The large central structure, with its open interior and absence of hearths, represented, to the writer, not a dwelling but an early missionary church for the followers of some faith; just as the massive stone structure itself suggests the handiwork of the followers of a strong and inspiring leader.

The level area, with its timber dwellings, was possibly the quarters of those followers, as may be deduced from the nature of the relics obtained from it. A parallel can be found on the island of Eigg, where,

at the martyrdom of Saint Donan, the primitive church, we are told, was a stone structure, and the refectory one of timber, into which, after leaving the church, Saint Donan and his followers retired, and which was set on fire by the Scandinavian pirate assassins.¹

On the island of Iona, the actual site of Saint Columba's original church is as yet unknown,² and when discovered, and excavated, a new light may be thrown on early missionary establishments.

Bearing in mind the tradition still surviving in the district, associating monks with this island on Loch Doon, the "Ylen Donan" of Pont, those medieval structures may very well have been a monks' missionary establishment, and, in this respect, in keeping with similar island sites along the west coast of Scotland and on the Western Isles.

The excavating party would wish me to record their deep sense of gratitude for the hospitality extended to them at 'Merrick' by the late Mr W. R. Stewart, F.S.A.Scot., whose interest in the excavation was a great source of encouragement.

To Miss A. L. Shaw Smith for preparing the accompanying plan of the site, and to Professor M. Stewart for the loan of early maps of Loch Doon district, my grateful thanks are due.

I desire also to express my appreciation of the zeal and enthusiasm of the excavating party, consisting of Mr J. M'Crindle, J.P., Mr A. G. M'Leod, M.A., F.S.A.Scot., Mr Wm. Macintyre, F.S.A.Scot., and Mr Mair, whose untiring efforts brought the work to a successful completion; and my thanks are due also to Mr Campbell of Beoch Farm, Loch Doon, to Mr Armour for the use of his fishing coble, and to many friends who took a helpful interest in the excavation.

¹ *Archæological Light on the Early Christianisation of Scotland*, G. A. Frank Knight, M.A., D.D., F.R.S.E., F.S.A.Scot., vol. ii. p. 100.

² *Antiquity*, O. G. S. Crawford, December 1933, p. 453.