

1. NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

- 1.1 AOC Archaeology Group undertook an archaeological excavation and survey under the terms of the Historic Scotland Human Remains Call-off Contract between the 21st and 22nd May, 2007. Human remains had been discovered by a householder, Mr. Aspinall undertaking landscaping for a garage in the garden of his home at Cliff House, Main Street, Benderloch, Argyll (NGR: NM 9051 3799). The find was reported to the police and the West of Scotland Archaeology Service (WoSAS). Dr Jennifer Miller (GUARD) consequently visited the site and confirmed that the disturbed bone was of some antiquity. Historic Scotland was subsequently contacted by WoSAS with the request that the find be dealt with under the terms of the Human Remains Call-off Contract.
- 1.2 The landscaping had impacted on a rock shelter located above a raised beach. Inspection of the site revealed that the vast majority of the previously *in situ* deposits, including midden material, had been disturbed and removed from site. Examination of the remaining *in situ* soils recovered a small quantity of decorated prehistoric pottery (most likely from a Food Vessel), a single worked bone tool and a small amount of human bone. Extensive quantities of small mammal bones and marine shells were identifiable within the disturbed material. The location of the remaining human bone was located by EDM survey and all the remains encountered at the site were collected. Initial examination of the human bone assemblage collected by the police and Dr. Jennifer Miller, and subsequently examined by Dr Stuart W. McDonald, Glasgow University, indicates the presence of two adults with a single adolescent bone pointing to a third individual. After undergoing conservation assessment these will be stored at AOC Archaeology Group's laboratory.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

- 2.1.1 Landscaping works carried out with a mini-digger by the landowner at Cliff House, Main Street, Benderloch near Oban (Figure 1) led to the disturbance of cave deposits which in turn led to the discovery of human remains. The landowner informed the police and the West of Scotland Archaeology Service (WoSAS). Dr Jennifer Miller, (GUARD) consequently visited the site and confirmed that the disturbed bone was of some antiquity. Historic Scotland was subsequently contacted by WoSAS with the request that the find be dealt with under the terms of the Human Remains Call-off Contract.

2.2 Location

- 2.2.1 The site lies immediately due east of the A828, less than 150 yards east of the present high tide mark. The site was until the recent landscaping works was visible as a very small, c.0.5 m high cave entrance at the top of a rocky, slope some 3.5 to 4.0 m high.

2.3 Geology

- 2.3.1 The area around Oban is dominated by tertiary Basalt or Old Red Sandstone in andesitic lava flows (Bibby et al, 1982, 6). The soil deposits in this area of western Argyll are primarily shallow drift of principally colluvium and cryic deposits with Benderloch comprising sands and gravel from raised beaches, fluvio-glacial and lacustrine deposits (ibid, 13).

2.4 Archaeological and historical background

- 2.4.1 Creag An Eig, Ledaig (*NMRS* NM93NW 13) is a cave site (NGR: NM 9046 3757) lying c. 175 m to the south of Cliff House. About 1869, a food vessel was recovered from this cave but with no record of any burial remains (RCAHMS 1975). Rock shelter sites in Oban may provide analogies to the Cliff House find as at Uamh nan Claiognn: "Cave of the Skulls" (*NMRS* NM82NW 2) RCAHMS 1975 or Carding Mill Bay (*NMRS* NM82NW 30). At the Carding Mill Bay site, rescue excavation of a shell midden was undertaken after its discovery during construction work. The site showed evidence of disturbance prior to excavation but it clearly consisted of two main elements, a shell midden containing 'Obanian' artefacts and, at the top of this, a fragmentary second millennium cist burial (Connock, Finlayson & Mills 1993). The immediately adjacent Carding Mill Bay II site, containing midden material and ossuary deposition (excavated by Clive Bonsall), provides a further possible parallel in the local area.

3. OBJECTIVES

The 'Project Design' (Gooder 2007) gives a full account of the project objectives and provides a thorough account of the excavation methodology to be undertaken at the site. Prior to the excavation and survey the working assumption was that the site was already significantly disturbed and thus much of its contents compromised by potential contamination. Therefore the objectives were:

- i) to plan, photograph and excavate the human remains;
- ii) to carry out an examination of the spoil on site in order to identify further disturbed human remains;

- iii)* prepare a data structure report and a costed single phase post-excavation research design.

4. METHOD

4.1 In agreement with Historic Scotland, the following methodology, as outlined in the Project design, (Gooder 2007) was carried out:

- i)* All bone currently held by the local constabulary, Mr Aspinall or Dr Miller was collected;
- ii)* Upon arrival pre-intervention photography in digital and conventional formats was be undertaken;
- iii)* The spoil heap was searched;
- iv)* Loose spoil was cleared and sections cleaned;
- v)* Standard bulk soil samples, soil chemistry samples and marine shell samples will be taken, as appropriate;
- vi)* All locational recording was by means of EDM survey;
- vii)* Throughout the above stages a comprehensive photographic record was maintained;
- viii)* A draft Data Structure Report (this document) was produced;
- ix)* A costed single-phase post-excavation research design will be produced and presented to Historic Scotland for approval. The document will contain a table clearly setting out the major themes to be explored within the post-excavation programme and methods for addressing issues identified.

5. RESULTS

5.1 The fieldwork was carried out between 21st and 22nd May, 2007 under generally favourable working conditions. Examination of the disturbed material in the immediate area did not locate any further human remains. Whilst a small amount of bone was visible within the disturbed material on site and the spoil heap all of the remains were obviously derived from animals, mostly small mammals.

- 5.2 A single long bone and lower jaw were the only definite human remains recovered from the site during AOC's work. The long bone came from an *in situ* position whilst the jaw bone came from disturbed material. The assemblage recovered by the Police and Dr. Jennifer Miller have been examined by Dr Stuart W. McDonald, who wrote the following,

“The assemblage of human bones consists of at least two and probably three (or more) individuals. On the basis of pelvic morphology and arthritic change of the vertebral column, one was an aged female. The vertebral column containing T6 – T12 vertebrae, all the lumbar vertebrae and the sacrum and paired hip bones were all from this individual. The presence of a second individual is deduced from the presence of a second right femur and right hip bone. I am uncertain as to the sex of this second subject and also to which subject the mandible belongs. The likelihood of a third subject is indicated by the presence of a left metacarpal bone that showed an epiphyseal growth plate that had nearly closed, indicative of late adolescence. No other growth plates were seen in the material suggesting that this single bone might be the only bone representing a third individual. (There is a possible juvenile pubic bone.) An intact thoracic vertebra and a fragmentary one also seemed likely to be from a separate and smaller person than the other vertebrae.”

- 5.3 The bones recovered by the police and Dr. Jennifer Miller are derived from disturbed material and the contexts of origin are unclear beyond the fact they derived from the cave. Amongst the bones collected Dr. McDonald's assessment noted the presence of numerous sheep/goat and cow bones along with rarer pig bones. Of these species both long bones and mandibles were present. Additionally bird bones and a selection of marine shells including, limpet, oyster and mussels were also identified.
- 5.4 The inferred stratigraphy, based primarily on sediment stains on the adjacent cliff face (Figures 3 & 4) of the cave would suggest two periods of midden activity - [101] (Figure 5) and [103] - with an intervening event consisting of the deposition of a sand layer [102] being laid across the cave floor. The midden layers lay directly over a rocky scree talus, [104]. Either side of the cave entrance the cliff face slopes outward. Between the base of the cave [108] and the vertical cliff face a fissure, present only on the northern side, was infilled with deposit [105] which contained a decorated prehistoric pottery sherd and a worked bone tool. Also from [105] came a long bone presumed to be human. Examination of the cave walls would suggest that context [105] is an extension of context [103] though due to the removal of material prior to the archaeological works any actual stratigraphic link was lost. Similarly context [106], derived from crevices and fissures within the cave roof and walls to the northern side of the cave entrance. As with context [105] by using the sediment stains as indicators it would seem that [106] is the same as context [101] (Figures 3 - 5).

6. DISCUSSION

- 6.1 The excavation has revealed the remains of what appears to be multiple burials, with at least three individuals identified. The fragmentary nature of the remains and the unfortunate circumstances of discovery mean that little can be positively concluded at this time about the burial rite, or even the age of the burials, given the lack of clear stratigraphic sequence or relationships. However there are hints that the bodies are incomplete and that possibly the cave acted as an ossuary in similar fashion to the Carding Mill Bay II site. The presence of the decorated prehistoric pottery, from a possible Food Vessel, hints at least some Bronze Age activity at the cave site but the relationship of the burial to the pottery is unknown.
- 6.2 Dating of the human remains via radiocarbon dating would allow the burial to be placed within its proper archaeological context alongside the Food Vessel sites and the various other burial and cave sites investigated in the Oban area.
- 6.3 The very small quantity of surviving archaeological deposits is of unknown date. This consisted primarily of stony deposits with rarer midden material present. The upper surface held a ceramic teapot lid and from the pictures of the site prior to the works it is clear the cave was still open and visible. It is possible that the last vestiges of the cave fill, given its height, relate to more recent times with the earlier material, lower in the sequence, being completely lost.

7. CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 A full specialist report on the human remains and a programme of radiocarbon dating will be the essential requirements for the post-excavation phase of this project. However there are other items worthy of examination, such as the finds of pottery and worked bone tool as well as the marine shell and animal bone assemblage. Examination of material derived from the *in situ* midden deposits may lead to the recovery of material suitable for dating. The full post-excavation process will lead to a fuller understanding of the burial and allow it to be understood in relation to the other excavated and known archaeological remains from around Oban and the west coast in general.

8. REFERENCES

Bibby, J S, Hudson, G, & Henderson, D J 1982 *Soil and Land Capability for Agriculture, Western Scotland* The Macaulay Institute for Soil Research

Gooder, J 2007 'Benderloch, Oban Project Design' Client report for Historic Scotland

BENDERLOCH, OBAN HUMAN REMAINS CALL-OFF: DATA STRUCTURE REPORT

APPENDIX 1: CONTEXT REGISTER

Context No.	Context Description
101	Upper midden layer. A dark brown fine grained sand matrix up to c.1.0 m thick. Contains c20% sub-rounded and angular stones. Layer contains numerous marine shells and small mammal bones. Upper surface covered by layer of angular stones from which 20 th century teapot lid was recovered. Layer overlies [102].
102	Sand layer. Light brown coloured fine sand matrix with c10% large sub-rounded stones up to 0.1 m in size. Can be seen extending out of the cave on the southern cave wall. Overlies [103].
103	Lower midden layer. A dark brown fine grained sand matrix with narrow dark banding up to c.0.8 m thick at cave entrance though much narrower at back of cave. Contains c20% sub-rounded stones. Layer contains numerous marine shells and small mammal bones along with charcoal flecks. Lies over stony basal fill [104].
104	This appears to be a predominantly natural deposit of angular stones and scree filling the base of the cave. The upper surface and upper portions of this deposit has seen the percolation of possibly anthropic material such as marine shell and small mammal bones into voids. Some stones up to nearly 0.8 m in diameter with most around 0.3 to 0.2 m in size.
105	Midden like material positioned along northern side of cave entrance in gap between [108] and cliff face. A dark brown fine grained sand matrix with marine shell, mammal bones and pottery/worked bone finds. Single long bone from this deposit. Possible associated with [103].
106	This deposit is possibly associated with [101]. A dark brown fine grained sand matrix with marine shell and mammal bones, located within crevices within the cliff face/roof.
107	Material consisting of redeposited raised beach material. Very gritty matrix with rounded cobbles. Presumably derives from road working material from 1960's. Contains some marine shell. Lies over [104], [105] and [108].
108	Bedrock/solid material at cliff base. Under [104] and [107].

APPENDIX 2: FINDS REGISTER

Find No.	Context No.	Material Type	Description
1	U/S	Bone	Human bone, lower jaw
2	105	Bone	Worked bone
3	101	Bone	Bone from midden 101
4	105	Ceramics	Pottery, fine, decorated – possible food vessel, very fragile
5	101 / 104	Stone	Flint x 1
6	U/S	Bone	Bone from cave entrance – highly disturbed material dragged from cave interior
7	104	Bone	Bone from upper surface of 104 – was exposed in cave close to midden section
8	105	Bone	Bone from 105
9	101	Ceramics	From upper surface of 101

BENDERLOCH, OBAN HUMAN REMAINS CALL-OFF: DATA STRUCTURE REPORT

APPENDIX 3: SAMPLE REGISTER

Sample No.	Sample Type	Context No.	No. of bags
1	SBS	101	2
2	SBS	102	1
3	SBS	103	1
4	SBS	103	1
5	SBS	105	2
6	SBS	106	1

APPENDIX 4: PHOTOGRAPHIC REGISTER

Colour Slide and Black & White Print

Shot No.	Description	From
1-2	Registration shots	-
3-4	General view of site on arrival from NW	NW
5-6	General view of site on arrival from SW	SW
7-8	View of site showing extent of cave	W
9-11	View from cave looking out towards west	E
12-13	View of in situ midden section	W
14-15	View looking NW from cave	SE
16-17	View looking SW from cave	NE
18-19	View of in-situ bone under overhang to N side of cave	W
20-21	View of southern wall-cave entrance showing contexts 101, 102, 103	NW
22-23	Detail of above	NW
24-25	Natural crevices in north cave wall	S
26-27	Ledge where bowl/vessel was found	S
28-29	Machine teeth marks in natural stone	W
30-31	Detail of midden material in cave crevice	SW
32-33	Overall south view of cave entrance	W
34-35	Overall north view of cave entrance	W
36	Overall view of main entrance way	W

Digital Camera

Shot No.	Description	From
6	Benderloch site on arrival	NW
7-8	Benderloch site on arrival	SW
9	Benderloch site on arrival	W
10-11	View from cave looking out to west	E
12-13	View of in-situ cave deposits	W
14	View of in-situ midden deposits	W
15-16	View of in-situ bone to north side of cave under overhang	W
17-18	View of contexts 101,102,103 visible on southern entrance wall	NW
19	Detail of remaining midden material 101	W
20	View of rock crevice from which samples taken	W
21-24	General views of cave after rain	NW/W

BENDERLOCH, OBAN HUMAN REMAINS CALL-OFF: DATA STRUCTURE REPORT

APPENDIX 5: DISCOVERY AND EXCAVATION IN SCOTLAND ENTRY

LOCAL AUTHORITY:	Argyll & Bute
PROJECT TITLE/SITE NAME:	Cliff House, Benderloch, Oban
PROJECT CODE:	4077/28
PARISH:	Ardchattan & Muckairn
NAME OF CONTRIBUTOR:	Lindsay Dunbar & Sarah Lynchehaun
NAME OF ORGANISATION:	AOC Archaeology Group
TYPE(S) OF PROJECT:	Archaeological Survey and Excavation
NMRS NO(S):	N/A
SITE/MONUMENT TYPE(S):	Rock-shelter with human remains
SIGNIFICANT FINDS:	Human skeletal remains
NGR (2 letters, 6 figures)	NM 9051 3799
START DATE (this season)	21 st May 2007
END DATE (this season)	22 nd May 2007
PREVIOUS WORK (incl. DES ref.)	N/A
MAIN NARRATIVE	<p>Human remains were discovered by the householder undertaking landscaping for a garage in the garden of his home at Cliff House, Main Street, Benderloch, Argyll (NGR: NM 9051 3799). AOC Archaeology Group thereafter undertook an archaeological excavation and survey under the terms of the Historic Scotland Human Remains Call-off Contract between the 21st and 22nd May, 2007.</p> <p>The landscaping had impacted on a rock shelter located above a raised beach. Inspection of the site revealed that the vast majority of the previously <i>in situ</i> deposits, including midden material, had been disturbed and removed from site. Examination of the remaining <i>in situ</i> soils recovered a small quantity of decorated prehistoric pottery (most likely from a Food Vessel), a single worked bone tool and a small amount of human bone. Extensive quantities of small mammal bones and marine shells were identifiable within the disturbed material. Initial examination of the human bone by Dr Stuart W. McDonald, Glasgow University, indicates the presence of two adults with a single adolescent bone pointing to a third individual.</p>
PROPOSED FUTURE WORK:	Post-excavation analyses and publication
CAPTION(S) FOR ILLUSTRS:	N/A
SPONSOR OR FUNDING BODY:	Historic Scotland
ADDRESS OF MAIN CONTRIBUTOR:	Edgefield Road Industrial Estate, Loanhead, Midlothian, EH20 9SY
EMAIL ADDRESS:	lindsayd@aocscot.co.uk
ARCHIVE LOCATION	Archive to be deposited in NMRS.