

## **SFS survey – talk Applecross.**

Scotland's First Settlers was set up in 1999 as a small scale regional study of the Mesolithic around the Inner Sound and Sound of Raasay, between Skye and the mainland. Given the importance of the sea in the Mesolithic, both as a resource and for transport, the project was conceived and organised as a seascape project. **Slide – a general view of survey area** This means that work was targeted around the varied coastline and many islands.

We initially split the fieldwork up into 3 main strands which were:

- coastal survey, to identify potentially Mesolithic sites,
- test pitting to assess preservation and dating of sites;
- and at least one detailed excavation.

We also did some shovel pitting of raised beaches. We began this around Applecross when we were there and then expanded it later.

The aim of the survey was to look at all the coastlines of the Inner Sound –**MAP SLIDE 1** this includes the main coastline round the Inner Sound from An Corran up in the north-east corner of Skye, round the coastline and up to Torridan. It also includes the islands of Pabay, Scalpay, Longay, the Crowlin Islands, Raasay and Rona.

This area seemed appropriate for a few reasons. Firstly, three Mesolithic sites were already known about in the area; An Corran in the north east corner of Skye – which is a large shell midden with two raw material sources nearby, Shildaig at the head of Loch Torridan, and Redpoint, to the north of Loch Torridan, both of which are large lithic scatter sites – and secondly, the Inner Sound provided a compact, almost enclosed, area of sea interspersed with islands

The topography of the area is very varied. ( POWER POINT 1) Mountain summits reach to 1000 metres while in several places these fall away sharply into sea lochs. The south of the area is dominated by wide coastal plain which stretches from Broadford around the south coast of Skye round to Kyle. The Sound is 20 km wide at it widest point, but is divided by the islands of Rona and Raasay. The distance between Raasay and the mainland narrows down to less than 2 km in the south.

### **Method**

Deskbased survey produced very little in the way of results and over a period of 4 years, the whole of the coastline has been walked by our team of surveyors, Steven, Martin and George, who will all be turning up in a short while – they are doing things for HAW this morning.

The survey work can be split into two – the first and largest part was carried out between 1999 and 2001. During this time all the Inner Sound was walked except for the sea loch coastlines and Rona which had to be postponed until last year due to foot and mouth. A second project, which we set up as an independent project we have

called SLS, - the Sea Loch Survey – and this has allowed us to complete the survey of the Inner Sound sea lochs.

During the survey, all caves and rockshelters in the survey area, that is in sight of the coastline, were recorded. **This slide gives an example of the type of coastline around much of the survey area. 2** In this area rockshelters are far more common than caves **SLIDES 3,4, 5** –. The surveyors also looked for lithic scatters where they could - this is obviously much more difficult. They concentrated on areas where erosion has taken place, on paths, molehills, cattle rubs, pipeline trenches, excavations for new buildings, breakdown of coastal cliffs, and ploughed fields. **SLIDES 6,7,8.** In order to be consistent, we asked them to record every rockshelter and cave in the survey area, whether it had obvious evidence of past human occupation or not. The surveyors recorded a series of details about the sites they visited. **Power point 2 & 3 PICTURES OF BOTH SIDES OF SURVEY FORM** This ranged from details about the sites themselves and about the local setting, the distance to the sea and so on. We also took information about the state of the sites, and we recorded threats to the sites according to Historic Scotland's coastal survey threat categories. Based on a combination of all this information, we selected a sample of sites for test pitting.

For the Sea Loch Survey and the survey of the Island of Rona, we used a slightly different working method. We had a limited amount of time in which to carry out the fieldwork, and much of it was in areas that were quite remote. Rona in particular was difficult - the surveyors were taken there and back by the Navy and it was very rugged and difficult to walk. They also encountered a problem that may be significant in terms of its past occupation – they struggled to find water and were reduced to catching drips from the ceiling of a cave to make tea **slide 9 -Rona.** We decided therefore that here and around the sea lochs, the surveyors should test by shovel pitting any sites that looked interesting as they were surveying them, and carry out a full test pit if necessary.

### **Test pitting**

47 sites were visited with the aim of test pitting between 1999 and 2002. **Slide of test pitted sites around Applecross 10** Out of these 5 were immediately discounted as inappropriate for test pitting, due to being too wet, too small and so on. A total of 42 sites have been test pitted altogether of which 35 were found to contain archaeological remains of some kind. Sites were selected for test pitting on the basis of their suitability for human habitation and on their threat category. We were careful not to select only sites with visible deposits, as many sites have deposits that are hidden and Sand itself is a case in point. It would never have been found without that helpful mole who carefully placed a microlith on top of its molehill the day Steven our surveyor happened to be walking past as I think you will be able to see that for yourselves when we go there this morning. Most of the test pitted sites are around the Applecross peninsula and on the Crowlin islands though 2 sites on Rona and 2 sites on the sea lochs were also test pitted as well as the rockshelter site of Loch a Sguirr at the northern end of Raasay. We have had a number of test pitted sites dated and we

have an interesting range of dates. Patrick's going to talk about this this afternoon and we look forward to hearing what he will say.

Test pits measured 1 x 0.5 metres and where possible two test pits were dug at each site, one inside the rockshelter or site, and one outside. **Slides 11,12 - power point 2 dsr p44** The aim of the test pitting was to try to evaluate the site by taking the test pit down to bedrock to try to find datable or diagnostic material. 30 of the test pitted sites were rockshelters and 4 were open air sites, - one of the open air sites lies close to Sand - based on the metalwork this may be a Norse site and it seems to be eroding out from under a huge sand dune – you can see it from Sand so we can point it out when we are there.

There are many potentially very interesting sites that we haven't been able to test pit, notably a series of very big shell middens along the east coast of Raasay, in sight of Sand, and a large shell midden on Pabay

We also did some shovel pitting on areas of raised beaches - in 4 places here in Applecross and 5 around the sea lochs. From a methodological point of view, the shovel pitting was very successful, of these 9 sites, we recorded 5 hits – that is locations that produced lithics.

Shovel pitting was done by laying out a 10 metre grid across the area to be shovel pitted. **Slide 13** Shovel pits measuring 250 x 250mm were dug down to the underlying beach layers at grid intersections, that is normally at 10 metre intervals, though this was reduced sometimes to 5m intervals. **power point 3- 17** The entire contents of each shovel pit were dry-sieved through a 3 mm wire mesh. Where lithics were recovered, the pit was recorded as a hit. Shovel pitting took place initially at four locations around Applecross (Applecross Manse, Springfield – 400m inland to the NE of the Manse, Mains of Applecross and Rugha na h-Uamha at Uags, 10 km to the south of Applecross) **power point 4 p 15** The survey team of three did this work, they dug altogether 109 shovel pits, excavating and sieving 50 pits per day. 10 hits were recorded at Applecross Manse and 2 at Springfield. The same method was used at the 7 sea loch sites where hits were recorded at 4 sites.

**The results** that I will talk about now combine all the different survey methods used – visual survey, test pitting and shovel pitting and will cover the whole Inner Sound coastline including the sea lochs.

All together the surveyors have filled in 196 survey sheets, that is they have visited and examined 196 places. Of these, 139 were rockshelters or caves, 11 were find spots or raw material sources, 25 were lithic scatters, 10 were open air sites or shell middens and 11 were shovel pitted raised beaches. – **power point 5 – table 1**

Of these 196 sites, 117 have visual evidence of past human activity - apart from the lithic scatter sites - this is mostly in the form of shell middens though a few sites have walls in them. Almost all the sites that do not contain evidence of human activity are either waterlogged, sea caves or too shallow or too exposed to be habitable. So what

I am saying here is that virtually every rockshelter that was visited by us and that was habitable in the Inner Sound area has been used at sometime in the past. Exceptions to this are the island of Rona that has very little water so may have been less easy to live in, and the sea loch coastlines where many rockshelters appear not to have been used at all, despite being suitable - warm and dry and sheltered.

Of these 117 sites with evidence of past human activity, 72 have so far produced lithics. Apart from the sites that we knew about at Shildaig, Redpoint, and An Corran, all these are sites that we have picked up in the survey. **Power point**

Sites with lithics are a follows:

25 lithic scatters

4 open middens

29 rockshelters/caves

5 raised beach areas

9 findspots/raw material sources

A small number of sites have produced microliths, but many of the lithic sites have so far produced no clear diagnostic lithic evidence, though they are presumably prehistoric.

One thing that is interesting is that many of the sites that have produced non-prehistoric radiocarbon dates, also have lithics. It seems there may be a kind of generalised but widespread non specific scatter of evidence for prehistoric occupation as lithics may have become mixed with later deposits, by use and reuse of the rockshelters, over time – this is something that might be interesting to discuss further.

We have also found 37 shell middens, 5 of these are open air sites, and 32 are in caves or rockshelters. Eighteen midden sites produced surface lithics, though of course we have only test pitted a few sites so its possible that many more middens do contain lithics. Several sites also had shell middens that we could see but couldn't get at as they lay under rockfall. Rockfall also prevented test pits reaching bedrock on quite a few occasions.

### **Distribution of sites - MAP**

The distribution of sites is not regular around the survey area. I'll start at the top : There is a concentration of sites around An Corran. Apart from the rockshelter itself, there are a number of lithic scatters - based on the widespread nature of the scatters we think that the area around An Corran must have been pretty intensively visited presumably for raw material collection. Caroline will be talking about whether there is any suggestion of a timescale to these visits or whether they appear to have occurred throughout the prehistoric period but its worth noting that the shell midden in the rockshelter at An Corran has evidence of use throughout the Mesolithic and also for burial purposes well into the Neolithic.

To the south of An Corran, and right around the coast of Skye to Kyle, we found very few sites. This is probably partly due to the geology, in that the coastline between An

Corran and Portree is made up of steep cliffs. To the south of Portree, really right round to Kyle, there is a wide coastal plain. This is the busiest area of Skye today and the lack of sites in this area may be due to the destruction of archaeological sites by more recent developments such as farming and building.

Around Loch Carron there are quite a few sites – this is where some of the shovel pitting of raised beaches occurred, then going into the Applecross peninsula, there were sites really all around the coastline up to Loch Torridan- with fewer sites again on the northern shore of Loch Torridan until you get round to the huge scatter at Redpoint.

There are also a lot of sites down the central islands, particularly on the eastern side of Raasay.

**When we look at the distribution of the lithic sites it becomes a lot more specific.  
Power point**

An Corran; 15  
N of Loch Sligahan 1  
Ashaig 3  
Central islands (Raasay, Rona, Pabay, Scalpay) :10  
Loch Torridan: 4  
Loch Carron 6  
Applecross peninsula: 32

North Applecross – 6  
Mid – 12  
South - 14

**SO there appear to be concentrations – at An Corran  
Central islands  
South Applecross/Crowlins and Carron**

One thing that has become apparent by doing the Sea Loch survey as well as the main Inner Sound survey, is that there seems to be a difference in the types of occupation that we are finding: . While all the available rockshelters seem to have been used around the main coastline, at least at sometime in the past, up the sea lochs this is not the case. Many apparently ideal rockshelters had no evidence for habitation. This is why we decided to extend our survey by shovel pitting on selected raised beaches. The shovel pitting programmes have suggested that these areas were used, but that possibly they have evidence of a different kind of occupation, based on open air sites rather than rockshelters. What this might mean, is again open to discussion – **these slides give some idea of the different types of landscapes – the sea loch areas tend to be more protected. – 1 = east coast Raasay 2 = Diabeg**

We also have one intertidal site on Raasay that Sue is going to talk more about – it is a partially submerged site containing peat interspersed with tree trunks – lithics have

also been found here. The site has been partially destroyed by peat cutting but Sue was able to take a core and we are looking forward very much to hearing what she has to say.

Looking at a few more detailed aspects of the lithic sites: **power point**

26 sites lie within 30 m of the sea

8 sites lie between 30 – 100m

and 13 sites lie over 100m

Almost all the sites, both lithic and otherwise face either north or south – which may be to do with the geology.

### **Locations of sites**

Most sites lie on slopes above open rocky beaches – but its difficult to read anything into this because much of the coastline around here is open and rocky. Sand, as you will see is an exception, lying as it does right next to a huge sandy bay.

Their heights above sea level is as follows – **power point**

Up to 5 m = 10 sites

5 – 20 = 29 sites

>20 – 14 sites.

This is interesting and I look forward to hearing what Sue has to say about sea level as we were told by the geomorphologist not to look at sites that lay below 5 metres OD as they would have been inundated at around 5500 years ago – and so we did no test pits on these low sites around Applecross. It could be that our lithic sites that lie below this height are not Mesolithic - however, 6 of the sites below 5 m also have limpet middens some of them really huge.

Using the Historic Scotland coastal survey threat categories, we have found that 34 lithic sites are eroding or under threat of some sort, including all the lithic scatter sites.

The survey has produced a mountain of data which is difficult to cut down into a few minutes but I hope I've given a general background to what we have and before I move on to the excavation, is there anything anyone would like to ask about or comment on?