

II.

NOTICE OF THE EXAMINATION, BY MEANS OF A DIVING-DRESS, OF THE ARTIFICIAL ISLAND, OR CRANNOG, OF EILEAN MUIREACH, IN THE SOUTH END OF LOCH NESS. BY THE REV. ODO BLUNDELL, O.S.B., F.S.A. Scot.

In the bay at the western end of Loch Ness, and near the shore on the northern side, are two spots known by tradition as Eilean Muireach and Eilean nan Con. Eilean nan Con, or Dog Island, can seldom now be seen above the level of the water; hence an iron post has been affixed to one of the rocks of which it is composed, in order to warn off the boats that pass with their freight of salmon fishers. Prior, however, to the making of the Caledonian Canal at the beginning of last century, Loch Ness was 6 feet lower than at present. Under these circumstances Eilean nan Con would have been about 20 yards long by 15 wide. The formation, however, of the rock, as it is seen in very dry weather, points to this being merely one of the many rocks which raise their heads along the sides of Loch Ness. No artificial material can be detected about it, whilst the water between it and the shore is so shallow that Eilean nan Con would have afforded no protection in the days when crannogs were so safe a refuge for the dwellers upon them. It may be of interest to note that in other cases where an island-castle or fortress has existed, a small isle in the immediate neighbourhood is still known as Eilean nan Con, from the fact that when the castle was a hunting-seat, the Dog Island was the home of these faithful beasts. I believe this to be the case with the islands on Loch Laggan in Badenoch.

Eilean Muireach (fig. 1), properly Murdoch's Island, but popularly Cherry Island, is of much greater interest. It is situated about 150 yards from the shore; its highest portion is about 4 feet above the average level of Loch Ness; whilst, though at present only about 60 feet by 48 feet, there are several fair-sized trees growing on it. In former times there would have been many more, but one result of the raising

of the water of Loch Ness was to submerge the stems of the trees nearest the island shore, so that they soon decayed and broke off, leaving the stumps to deceive the casual observer with the idea that these are some of the old piles on which the island was built.

In 1907 the suggestion was made that Eilean Muireach would probably prove to be a crannog, and with this object in view the following

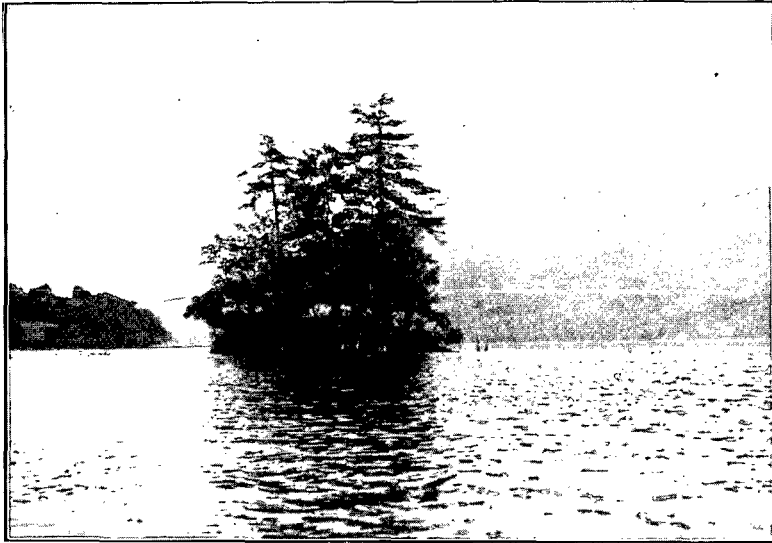


Fig. 1. View of Eilean Muireach, Loch Ness.

investigations were carried out in August 1908, at a time when Loch Ness was unusually low and the water fairly warm.

The first discovery of interest was the fact, ascertained by means of a long pole, that at a regular distance from the margin of the island the rubble ceased, and the pole struck the soft bed of the loch. Moreover, it was found that the bed of the loch was struck at a depth of 12 feet, and at a distance of about 112 feet from the island shore. This led to the conclusion that the banks were at a regular pitch of about 1 in 10.

In order, therefore, to determine the original size of the island prior to Loch Ness being raised 6 feet, about 60 feet must be added to the radius or 120 feet to the diameter of the present island. Taking this now as 60 feet by 48 feet, we find that formerly the island must have measured 180 feet by 168 feet.

It had occurred to me that advantage should be taken of the canal diving-suit, which could be hired at a small cost, and accordingly on 7th August a start was made soon after 2 o'clock. By the time the island was reached and the diving-dress adjusted it was about 3. The first descent was made in about 12 feet of water on the west side of the island, but, owing to the inexperience of the amateurs at the air-pump, little serious work was done. The excess of air which was supplied to me had the effect of making me so buoyant that I was floating over the tops of the stones instead of stepping firmly on them, and that despite the two lead weights of 56 lbs. each attached to the already very heavy helmet and boots. Yet, even with this disadvantage, some points of interest were ascertained. First, the pitch of the rubble was perfectly even, evidently laid down on some regular plan, for under the first layer of large stones, all about $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet long, there was the great mass of rubble, composed of much smaller stones 6 to 8 inches long. The larger stones were evidently intended by the original builders to be a protection to the smaller. Secondly, it was interesting to observe the clearly defined line between the rubble building and the mud of the loch bottom. This was absolutely clear of stones, except in one case where a large mass, apparently of vitrified matter, lay about 20 yards from the rest of the stones. The third point of interest, which I noticed only a few minutes before it was time to ascend to the surface, was a spar about a foot in diameter, the one end of which was embedded in the floor of the loch, whilst the other end ran right into the rubble building, leaving about 4 feet exposed to view. Expecting to find this easily on my next descent, I returned to the ladder and mounted to the open air.

After resting a quarter of an hour (during which the two experienced divers, who had charge of the life-line and air-tube, heartily congratulated

their new apprentice on his successful performance from their point of view) I went down again, with the intention of following up the clue afforded by the embedded spar. The half-inch of sediment, however, which covered everything, had been disturbed by my previous visit, so that the water, instead of being perfectly clear, had a muddy appearance, only allowing one to see about a foot in front of one. For twenty minutes I walked to and fro, feeling for the spar, but had to return to the open without finding it.

The third descent was made on the north side of the island, and proved most interesting. Traces of the old causeway could be distinctly seen, starting at a point at the north-west corner of the island and going straight in the direction of three large boulders on the mainland, which were known from tradition to be part of the approach from the land side; but as a castle certainly existed on the island in the fifteenth century, it is uncertain whether this causeway formed part of the original building or not. Of still greater interest was it to find the floor of the loch at this point covered with beams of wood about 8 inches by 4, and 10 feet to 12 feet long. Every effort to dislodge one of these was unsuccessful, so tightly were they fastened together. A broken piece about 5 feet long was at last secured, and carried with one hand to the ladder, in mounting which it proved to be no obstacle. But when one end was handed to the two strong lock-keepers, they found it so heavy that they were scarcely able to lift it into the boat. This beam, which is of oak, is perfectly sound, and is preserved in the Abbey museum. It appears to have been roughly squared, and the beams on the floor of the loch had the same appearance.

This floor of beams can be traced all round the north side of the island, whilst at intervals large trunks measuring 3 feet in diameter and 10 to 12 feet long were found lying along the line of rubble building. From these trunks, spars similar to the one seen at the first descent were observed running into the rubble building. The same even pitch of the building was very marked, as also the sharply defined line between the artificially placed stones and the muddy floor of the loch.

During the days following this first investigation, I thought over what I had seen, and decided, before speaking much or writing about the peculiar floor of oak beams, to make a second investigation, and if possible to confirm the results of the first. Accordingly, on 31st August, a start was made in the early afternoon, and on reaching the island a descent was made on the north-east side. It was not without considerable satisfaction that I found the flooring of planks in this direction also, as well as two very large trunks of trees, lying, like the ones described above, along the line of rubble building, which they were evidently intended to

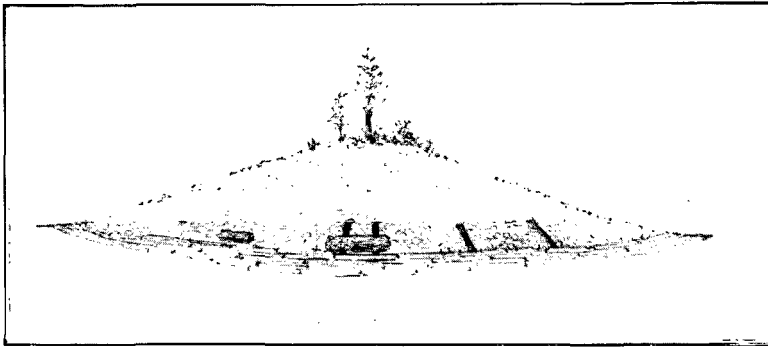


Fig. 2. Sketch of the appearance under the water of Eilean Muireach.

keep in place. From these large trunks the same arrangement of spars extended into the stonework, which on this side was more irregular, due, no doubt, to the high east winds and large waves which beat on the island in this direction. Indeed, at the south-east corner of the island a long narrow ridge of stones was very noticeable, evidently intended as a breakwater to protect the stonework.

By the kindness of Rev. Cyril von Dieckhoff I am enabled to submit a sketch (fig. 2) which gives a very good idea of the construction, though the pitch of the rubble has been exaggerated to 1 in 5.

The floor of the loch, which on the west side of the island was covered with verdure, was almost devoid of vegetation on the east side, the clay

mud being nearly bare. Mud, however, it was, and not rock, for I repeatedly embedded my hand in it, though the clammy nature made considerable effort necessary to effect this. Indeed, on one occasion the small anchor which held the coble stuck so fast in this clay that it needed three men with all their force to raise it. On reaching the surface the anchor was found to have about thirty pounds weight of clay sticking to it.

On none of the four sides was the natural rock to be seen, always the verdure-covered floor of the loch, except in those cases where the clay was bare, that is, on the storm-swept side of the island. Taking, therefore, the points above mentioned into consideration—the wooden flooring, the trunks of timber lying along the circumference of the building, and not to be seen elsewhere, the gentle and symmetrical pitch of the rubble, the even surface presented by the layer of large stones with the smaller ones underneath, and the clearly defined margin between the rubble and the floor of the loch quite free of stones—there seems to be ample proof that the whole island was originally of artificial construction.