

SCOTLAND'S RURAL PAST IN THE FORTH VALLEY

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Introduction

While many parts of the Scottish countryside are sparsely inhabited today, this pattern was established only within the last two centuries. Until the mid 19th century, and later in some areas, the vast majority of the population lived and worked close to the land. Thousands of abandoned buildings, overgrown walls, old field systems and enclosures litter the countryside and present eloquent reminders of this rural past. The wealth of archaeological material, especially that dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, is unparalleled in northern Europe and encapsulates a vital period of social change during the agricultural and industrial revolutions.

Despite the frequency of physical remains and documentary evidence for rural occupation during the later historic period, little is known about these settlements or the lives of the people that occupied them. Until recently, they have been considered of limited archaeological significance and have rarely formed the focus of serious academic study. The vast majority of sites are unprotected, and this marvellous material resource is deteriorating through neglect, the impact of construction work and the changing demands of modern land-use. There is now growing concern over the urgent need to locate, identify and document abandoned rural settlements across the country if we are to better understand this important part of Scotland's past, make it available for further study and help preserve it for the future.

The Forth Valley in later history

These concerns are no less true for the Forth Valley, which was extensively settled and farmed into the later historical period. The First Statistical Accounts record, for example, populations of 1865 for Port of Menteith parish in 1755 and of 1777 for Kippen parish in 1793. While a small proportion of the population was occupied as merchants, craftsmen or physicians, most people were farmers or farm labourers, working rented land to nurture a relatively meagre crop of oats, barley, potatoes and beans. Although industrialisation, especially in the weaving industry, had an early grip on this region (Shaw 1984), the farming way of life was slow to change. In the late 18th and early 19th century, improvements to the system of agriculture, such as more effective crop rotations, tree planting and the enclosing of fields, enabled many farmers to prosper (Devine, 1994). These developments, combined with the draining of the carse (Cadell, 1913) to reclaim rich soils for crops from beneath the mosses, raised the standard of living for some land-owners and farmers, at least temporarily. However, despite the relative affluence and longevity of farming in this area, very few of the farmsteads, townships or related structures such as kilns, grain mills and enclosures have been researched or documented in any

detail, if at all. Again as an example, for the parish of Kippen there are no records of townships, and only six farmsteads and two mills documented in the national database of ancient and historic monuments, the National Monuments Record (NMR) curated by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS). This seems unlikely to be a true representation of the density or distribution of settlement documented in the First Statistical Accounts (RCAHMS/Historic Scotland 2000).

Furthermore, the records in the RCAHMS database are brief in the extreme and provide only a cursory view of the evidence for and patterns of historic rural settlement. All the records in the NMR of farmsteads in Kippen were created in the years between 1995 and 2001 during recording by the RCAHMS for the First Edition Survey Project (FESP) (2002). The FESP project was developed to address the dearth of evidence on the ground for medieval and later rural settlements in Scotland. Information on all structures (for instance, farm buildings) depicted on the First Edition six-inch Ordnance Survey maps of Scotland as being unroofed, and features associated with these unroofed structures, was added to the RCAHMS database. As the First Edition Ordnance Survey maps were created between 1843 and 1878, they provide a crucial snapshot of a dramatically changing landscape and way of life. Over 25,000 townships and farmsteads with abandoned buildings were recorded across Scotland by FESP, representing over a fifth of all known archaeological sites in Scotland. Although their locations and cursory information drawn from the First Edition maps have been added to the RCAHMS database, very few such sites have actually been visited to check if the locations and brief records are accurate, and only a handful have been archaeologically surveyed in any detail. Many more rural settlements remain undocumented, either because they were abandoned after the creation of the First Edition Ordnance Survey maps, or because they were already in an advanced state of ruin when the area was mapped during the 19th century, and were not thought worthy of record.

A typical entry (this one for Arngibbon farmstead in Kippen, NMRS number NS69SW 29) reads:

Arngibbon

A farmstead, comprising one unroofed L-shaped building and one structure is depicted on the First Edition of the OS six-inch map (Perthshire 1866, sheet cxxvi & cxxvii), but it is not shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1979).

Entries such as these add valuable data to the distribution map of rural settlement (Figure 1), but tell us little about the history of the farmstead or the varied fortunes of its inhabitants. Because many farms in the Forth Valley appear to have been relatively prosperous as a result of the 18th and 19th century improvements, it is perhaps likely that few buildings were unroofed or abandoned at the time of the First Edition mapping programme (Figure 2), and so were not identified and added to the RCAHMS database during the FESP project, thus lacking even cursory entries. Consequently, we lack even very brief records for many of the rural settlements in this region.

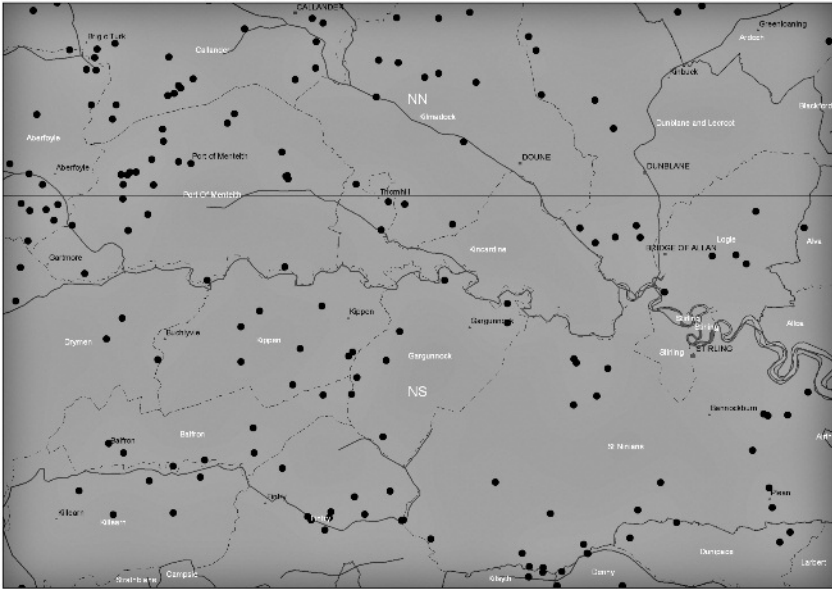


Figure 1. Map of part of the Forth Valley, including Kippen and Port of Menteith parishes, showing the distribution of FESP sites i.e. settlements that were recorded as being partially or wholly abandoned on the First Edition six-inch Ordnance Survey maps of Scotland dating between 1843 and 1878. (RCAHMS ArcGIS plot of FESP sites)

Scotland's Rural Past project

Building on the results of the FESP project and following the initiative of the Historic Rural Settlement Group, a research organisation comprised of academics and heritage agency representatives, a partnership between RCAHMS, the Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland, and Highlands and Islands Enterprise launched the Scotland's Rural Past project (SRP) in October 2006 to address this gap in our knowledge.

Based at RCAHMS in Edinburgh, a team of four staff has been recruited to run the SRP project until September 2011. The aims of the SRP project are chiefly to work with local people of all ages to investigate, record and raise awareness of medieval and later rural settlements across Scotland and so improve our current knowledge of rural history and elevate the conservation value of the archaeological remains.

Through a programme of training and support, the team enables groups and individuals to develop their own projects which focus on investigating and recording local sites of interest to them, and researching the history of the area and the lives of past rural communities. The majority of projects are fieldwork based, but volunteers are also encouraged to explore historical

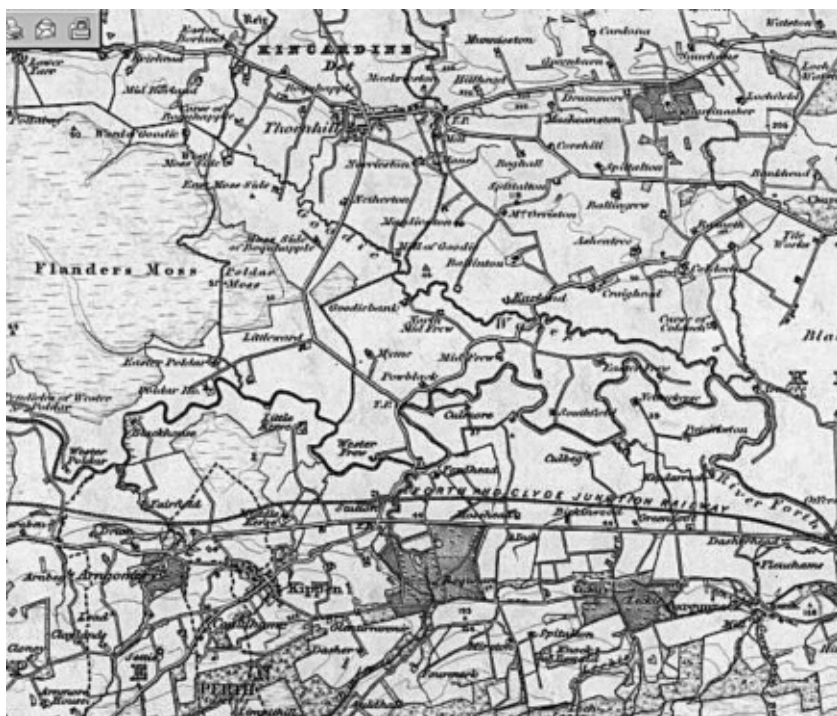


Figure 2. The First Edition six-inch Ordnance Survey map for the Forth Valley (1860-1863) depicts a more densely populated, ordered and improved landscape around Kippen, with scattered settlements interconnected by a complex of roads and the Forth and Clyde Junction railway. (National Library of Scotland)

documentary evidence, and to raise awareness of their findings more widely through publication and interpretation initiatives. In tandem with adult members of the community, the SRP team also runs an education programme with schools and Young Archaeologists Clubs across Scotland. The SRP project aims to develop and complete at least 40 projects with local communities and 15 projects with young people by September 2011.

Sharing ideas and forging partnerships

The SRP team has enjoyed a very busy time since the project was launched in October 2006. The popularity of the project with local communities across Scotland has far exceeded expectations, and is still gathering momentum in 2008 as it becomes more widely publicised. It provides an exciting opportunity for people to develop their interests with the benefit of expert support and advice, and a context for sharing their ideas and results with other like-minded people. As the number of projects grows, new links between groups and

communities are being forged, and valuable new partnerships are taking shape. This can be true for local communities in the Forth valley.

The end of the first year of SRP was celebrated in October 2007 with the launch of the project website www.scotlandsruralpast.org.uk. The website has been designed to be a valuable resource for anyone wanting to find out how to get involved with the SRP project, and contains extensive practical advice and guidance on how to set up a project, carry out historic research and undertake archaeological survey of rural settlement remains. The website enables all volunteers who are participating in SRP projects to publicise and discuss their findings online. A specially designed electronic form, accessed through the website, allows trained volunteers to submit their digital records, photographs, site sketches and detailed plans directly to the RCAHMS database after validation by the SRP team. These records in turn become publicly accessible through *Canmore*, the RCAHMS web-based database.

Sharing skills and expertise

Fieldwork to survey and record rural settlement remains lies at the heart of SRP. To encourage all communities and individuals to develop fieldwork programmes, the SRP project provides training for all volunteers. The SRP team is able to draw on the immense depth of expertise within RCAHMS in order to build skills and confidence with local groups (e.g. Figure 3). The demand for training has been overwhelming since the project started. The original target of completing 19 training courses during the five years of the project has been exceeded within the first two years. At the time of writing this article, the team have completed 25 two-day courses, and one week-long course on Arran in partnership with the National Trust for Scotland. In total, over 400 volunteers have so far received training.

The majority of SRP training courses are fieldwork based, covering a range of survey and recording techniques from identifying and interpreting rural settlement remains, to creating detailed site plans and records. In most cases, the training provides exactly the right catalyst for groups and individuals with an existing interest to develop their own fieldwork projects. Following volunteer demand, the SRP team has also developed a new two-day course focusing entirely on research into historical documents. This course helps volunteers to learn where to access archives, old maps and aerial photographs, and how to use them effectively to interpret the fluctuating history of rural settlements. This course is now being run twice a year and has had a very enthusiastic response. At present, it is run from RCAHMS in Edinburgh, but the intention is to work with local libraries and archives in other regions.

Breaking new ground

At the time of writing in September 2008, 40 separate local projects have been initiated, of which seven have been completed. Further projects are due to start by the spring of 2009. Volunteer projects are spread across Scotland and vary in size and ambition. At one end of the spectrum, dedicated amateurs



Figure 3. A group of volunteers explore a crofting township overlying a pre-improvement settlement at Naast in Wester Ross with experts from RCAHMS as part of a typical SRP two-day training course (copyright RCAHMS).

with considerable archaeological experience from the North of Scotland Archaeology Society (NOSAS) are making a detailed record of all the rural settlement remains along the length of Strathconon. When completed, this project will have researched and made detailed records of over 60 previously undocumented archaeological sites and will have rewritten the history of an entire glen. At the other end of the spectrum there are a number of smaller groups with more limited archaeological experience, but with boundless enthusiasm and aptitude. Many of these groups have taken on more modest projects, at least initially, such as researching and recording the histories of single farmsteads and townships. To develop a better understanding of and regard for land-use and settlement history over time, volunteers are encouraged to be aware of all aspects and traces of rural life. This can result in unexpected and exciting spin-offs from rural settlement – one SRP group on Mull recently identified the remains of an early Christian chapel near Tobermory, entirely unknown until their work. Staff from RCAHMS are working with the group in October 2008 to make a detailed record of the site, which will also feature in a forthcoming BBC Radio Scotland broadcast.

SRP has had particular interest from groups in and around the Cairngorms National Park. Here, projects have been set up investigating settlements in Glen Clova, Strathavon, Glen Clunie and Glen Fearnar. Another is under development with the Balmoral Estate ranger service to record and interpret a township at Spittal of Glenmuick and shielings in the surrounding hills.

Several projects are also underway in Argyll and Bute and in the Highlands, and a number of projects have recently begun in the Lowlands, especially in Dumfries and Galloway. This year interest in SRP is spreading even further and projects are already established on Skye and in the Western Isles, while in 2009 the SRP team hopes to work with volunteers on Shetland and Orkney in partnership with local organisations.

Given the historical and archaeological potential of the Forth Valley, there are many valuable opportunities here for detailed study. Two projects only are currently running in the whole of Perthshire and Stirlingshire, and there is ample scope for a further project, or projects, aimed at improving our understanding of rural settlement in this area. Archaeological fieldwork and research by local historian John Harrison and the RCAHMS (2001) in Menstrie Glen in the Ochils, and by the RCAHMS in the Braes of Doune (1994) both demonstrate what can be achieved through such an approach. Surveys of these areas identified a considerable number of prehistoric to post-Medieval structures for which no previous record existed: the identification of the rare remains of possible medieval homesteads in the Braes of Doune was a particularly exciting result of this work. The surveys also provided the opportunity to study the history and morphology of the pre- and post-Improvement steadings and shieling sites, of which little was known previously. Such studies change our perceptions and drive research forward; SRP provides the means for wider contributions to this process.

Raising awareness

The Scotland's Rural Past project is not just about building an accurate and well-researched record of rural settlement. Inspiring more people to take an interest in local history is key to improving understanding and appreciation in both the short-term and the long-term. A number of SRP volunteer groups are encouraging other members of their communities to learn more about their rural heritage through local events based on their projects, including guided walks, 'hands-on' days, talks and exhibitions. For example, the Heights Heritage – a community-led project on the Heights of Keppoch between Dingwall and Strathpeffer – held an event in September 2007 during which over 60 adults and children worked together to create a drawn record of a deserted croft settlement which had been researched in detail by members of the group. The results of their work were put on display in the village hall alongside photographs and anecdotal records of what life had been like on the Heights in the past. This successful idea has now been adopted by other SRP groups. Elsewhere, some groups, such as the newly formed Strachur Local History Society, have even started running their own training sessions for other members of the community, based on the skills they acquired during the SRP training.

Looking forward

As the SRP project takes shape, the team is developing new ideas for training and expanding local skills. A partnership with woodland experts is

raising exciting opportunities for exploring the landscape legacy of historic woodland management, while partnership with the Forestry Commission aims to improve access to sites on the Forestry Estate as part of the Year of the Homecoming in 2009. In November 2008, the SRP team is holding its first annual conference at the Birnam Arts and Conference Centre in Dunkeld. This promises to be an exciting opportunity for volunteers and professionals from across the country to get together and share their results through talks, discussions and displays, and to talk more informally during the conference dinner and site visits.

As the SRP team becomes more involved with volunteer groups across the country, it is clear that the real aims of the SRP project are being achieved – a high standard of work being submitted to the RCAHMS database, often from people who have little or no previous experience; real enthusiasm and growing capacity in the community; new initiatives emerging to raise awareness more widely; and engagement of the younger generation. Further details about the Scotland's Rural Past project can be found on our website or by contacting the team at srp@rcahms.gov.uk. We would be delighted to hear from readers of the *Forth Naturalist & Historian*.

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