

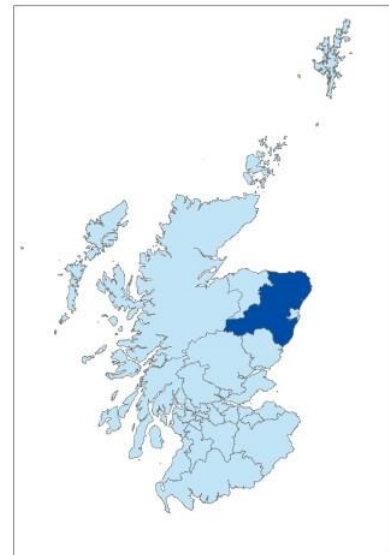
IAIN FRASER (RCAHMS) – ABERDEENSHIRE

July 26, 2013 Historic Environment Scotland Archaeological Prospection, Buildings, Day of Archaeology 2013, Landscape Archaeology#myarchaeology, Aberdeenshire, Archaeology, Grasslands,Iain Fraser, James Ferguson, John Bolton, Mavisbank, RCAHMS, River Ugie, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Scotland, Water-meadow

I'm Iain Fraser. I work at RCAHMS as the Cataloguing Programme Manager, documenting our collections of archaeological and architectural archives so that they are available for public consultation.



Vertical aerial photograph of the meadows at Baluss, Longside, 1988, showing the pattern of rigs and drains. Copyright NCAP



Aberdeenshire 'Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2011'

My chosen site is an inconspicuous one, the need for which is perhaps not immediately obvious under Scotland's cloudy skies. The site is an area of water meadows, near Old Deer and Longside, in Aberdeenshire. From any distance at ground level these look relatively featureless, an unremarkable expanse of low-lying coarse grass blending into the surrounding country.

Standing on top of them, however, the meadows are revealed as low rigs, separated by reed-choked drains. Every now and again one encounters stone pillars set into the drains – slotted for now vanished wooden sluice gates.

Seen from the air, all these features resolve themselves into a complex of skillfully shaped and engineered blocks of rigs and drains running along the low ground on both sides of the River Ugie. With the help of historical maps, field-walking, and contemporary accounts, one can piece the process together. Upstream a wear, now breached, diverted the water of the Ugie into a lade, running along the upper side of the meadows. A series of small sluices, or hatches, then allowed the farmer to release the water of selected areas of meadow, as he required. The water was distributed across the area of the meadow by narrow feeders that ran along the crest of each rig, from which the water would then gently overflow across the sloping grassy surface of the rigs. The intervening drains would then carry the water away, either directly back to the river, or else to a second, lower, section of meadow.



The slotted stone pillar of a sluice gate to control the flow of water over the meadow.



Two simple bridges at Mavisbank constructed of granite sleepers, providing access over the drains to the rigs. Copyright Iain Fraser

Although the use of irrigation had a long history in Scotland, the agricultural improvements of the period 1790-c.1840 saw a renewed interest in the subject, inspired by the highly successful water meadows of southern England. Several highly skilled English practitioners were engaged by Scottish landowners to construct meadows on their estates. The meadows at Mavisbank, Baluss and Inverquhomery, shown here, are part of a series of some 90 acres

constructed by the English ‘flooder’ John Bolton along both the South Ugie, for James Ferguson of Pitfour.



Aerial photograph of meadows at Mavisbank. Copyright NCAP



Aerial photograph of meadows at Inverquhomery. Copyright NCAP

The meadows appeal to me as an overlooked and largely forgotten aspect of Scottish agricultural history. Easily dismissed by the casual observer as simple drains in an area of wet ground, with a bit of detective work, and having ‘got your eye in’, meadows emerge as a distinctive and intriguing element of the Scottish landscape.

This is what I’ve chosen for Day of Archaeology, but why not tell us your favourite archaeological sites in Scotland on Twitter using [#MyArchaeology](#).

For further information you can also contact the local authority archaeologist. Contact details in this case are:

Bruce Mann – Regional Archaeologist
Aberdeenshire Archaeology Service
Aberdeenshire, Moray & Angus Councils
archaeology@aberdeenshire.gov.uk
www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/archaeology