

ARCHAEOLOGY DIG AT *CNOC AN FHOIMHEIR*

Cnoc an Fhoimheir 'hillock of the giant' on Fiona MacKinnon's croft in Kirkapoll has long been known to contain bones, having been partially opened several times over the years. On the east side of the track leading up to Lodge Farm, the small rise in the ground topped by a massive flat stone attracted the attention of Dr Colleen Batey from Glasgow University, a leading expert on the Viking period, and Dr Heather James from Calluna Archaeology when they visited the site last year. The cigar-shaped mound suggested a Viking boat burial, something that is uncommon in Scotland.

An Iodhlann set about raising funds for the £14,000 excavation project. They succeeded in winning a £10,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, with additional funding from the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, the Windfall Fund and An Iodhlann itself. The University of Glasgow lent geophysical equipment and Northlight Heritage, Glasgow, provided some excavation equipment.

In September 2017, the team started work, clearing the turf and trowelling back the soil, layer by layer. In often atrocious conditions, with lashing showers and strong winds, Heather James, with archaeologist Peta Glew from Northlight Heritage in Glasgow, and two archaeology students from the University of Glasgow University, Kate McConnell and Mathilda Sjöberg, bent their backs to the task.

The response from the island was also fantastic, with around twenty volunteers digging, scraping, cleaning and holding survey poles, and over fifty visitors coming to inspect the dig. Almost all the pupils at the school were given a tour of the site. Several cakes were donated; they did not last long. The volunteer excavators included Catriona Smyth, Myra MacArthur, Dorothy Connor, Fiona Dix, Flora MacArthur from Moss, Duncan Urquhart, Mairi Forbes, Bella Bremner, Peter Knapman, Peter MacFarlane, Sandy Payne and Jeannie Fisher.

At first a number of smith-wrought nails and some fragments of Stockholm tar around the cist raised hopes that this indeed was a boat burial. However, further excavation found quite modern material, like commercial china, below this, and it looks as if the area around the cist has been thoroughly churned up by ploughing in the past. All the indications are that this is a Bronze Age short cist.

The stone chamber itself was beautifully constructed using four massive and unusual slabs of stone, under a huge capstone. As several people remarked, these rocks must have taken some finding amongst the boulders of Tiree gneiss, showing how much effort had gone into making this monument. Removing the sand a trowelful at a time from the inside of the cist, the archaeologists discovered more bones and a flint

thumbnail scraper. We found that the capstone, as we found it, was not aligned with the structure of the cist. In addition, one of the smaller stones blocking the side of the cist looked very much like a piece of pink granite from the Ross of Mull. This must have come from Alan Stevenson's workshops in Hynish some time after 1838. A team on the island, lead by Myra MacArthur, laboriously wet sieved the sand found inside the cist, finding several teeth, fragments of pottery, charcoal, a cowrie shell and pieces of modern slate! All of this suggests that the grave has been opened several times in the last four thousand years, sometimes through the side, but at least once by taking off the capstone – not an easy task without modern machinery. Two other trenches were opened nearby after magnetic tests suggested structures. In these, we found more pottery and flint tools, as well as buried plough marks from fields lost under the sand. The land we have called Lodge Farm since Lady Victoria Campbell lived next door in The Lodge, near a stream and a medieval mill site as it is, has been home to people for thousands of years.

The cist itself has now been re-covered and temporarily turfed. Our aim is to restore the bones carefully back in the grave in a few months time, and then replace the capstone.

The project has been made possible by a wonderful £10,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. This was augmented by £1,970 from the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, £1,500 from An Iodhlann and £500 from the Windfall Fund. An Iodhlann also gratefully thanks Fiona MacKinnon and Argyll estates for permission to dig their land.

Dr John Holliday