

Archaeological remains on Clairinch: an interim report

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SUMMARY

The remains of several stone buildings on the island of Clairinch in Loch Lomond are described, and the results of excavations in 1935, 1978 and 1980 presented. The finds are few but a mediaeval date is suggested. The fact that a charter was granted on the island in 1225 suggests that the settlement was of some significance.

INTRODUCTION

The small island of Clairinch in Loch Lomond lies approximately 1 km SW of Balmaha and measures 440 m NE-SW and 200 m at its widest point. Unlike its neighbour, *Inchallioch*, it is flat and featureless, standing nowhere more than 6 m above the mean water level of the loch.

The island is a Nature Reserve and is thickly covered with trees, bracken and other undergrowth; there is no trace of any arable farming on it.

Despite its small area and apparent uninviting character to would-be inhabitants, the island has been known to history since the 13th century. It was mentioned in 1225 when a charter of Maldonus, Earl of Lennox, granting it to Absolon, his seneschal, in return for a pound of wax yearly, was given on Clairinch itself. The charter was confirmed by Alexander II in 1231. The fact that these events took place on the island suggests that it had an importance of its own and that buildings existed on it in which ceremonies, such as granting a charter, could take place. No buildings, however, were shown on early maps, such as Blaeu's Atlas (publ. 1653), or on the first edition of the OS 6 inch map.

In the 1930s the conspicuous crannog (known as 'The Kitchen') built on a foundation of stones lying 80 m off the NE point of the island, and obvious humps in the soil in the NE of the island, attracted the attention of the Glasgow Archaeological Society. A prominent member of the Society and future President, Lieut. Col. J M Davidson, OBE, FSA, undertook work in co-

operation with the owner, Mr W G Buchanan. Four buildings were identified (A, B, D and F on Plan I) but material remains were scarce and the study was abandoned in 1935 after a single season's work. Colonel Davidson, however, lists the head of an iron ring-headed pin, which Ludovic Mann thought was Iron Age,¹ an iron ring 1.9 cm in diameter, a flint flake, and three sherds of glazed (probably mediaeval) ware as found during his excavation. All except two of the glazed sherds were found while excavating Building D. Colonel Davidson wrote up the narrative of his work for Mr Buchanan, including in it observations about the bird and plant-life of Clairinch. While he never published a full report, he sent a brief account of his discoveries to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, and these are recorded

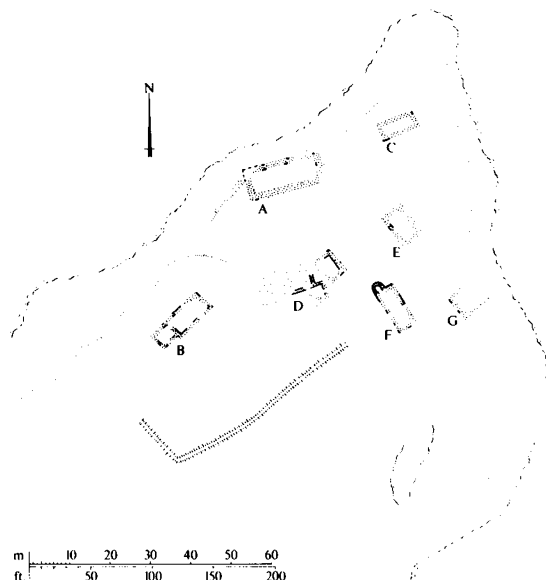


FIG. 1. General plan of the structures at the NE end of Clairinch.

among 'Indeterminate Remains' (RCAHMS 1963, vol. 2, no. 584, 447–8).

In 1978 and 1980 the writer carried out further work on Building F and identified a number of what appeared to be ancient dry-stone jetties, constructed, particularly at the shore end, of large partly shaped boulders. Two prominent jetties project into the small bay on the W side of the island, three others are to be seen around the corner of the S side, and the low water of the loch in 1983 revealed the traces of two others on the NE side, just E of the crannog. These discoveries were reported by him to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, and in February 1981 investigators of the latter carried out a survey of the visible remains on the island. This now revealed seven structures or groups of structures at the N end of the island, identified provisionally as remains of dwellings or associated agricultural buildings (fig. 1). The present Note is based on this survey, together with Colonel Davidson's record, and notes made by the writer.

THE BUILDINGS

The buildings are clustered in an area 100×70 m at the NE corner of the island.

Building A, the most northerly, is situated on a terrace of sand gravel about 1.5 m above the present level of the loch and 7.25 m from the water's edge. The building is rectangular, 19.00×8.5 m overall (fig. 2). The line of the wall can be followed fairly easily, one course of rough stonework 1.2 m wide being visible all round, but the N side of it consists of five courses of small rubble and survives up to 0.6 m high. The NW corner is missing, probably due to winter flooding by the loch. Colonel Davidson dug a trench 4.5 m from the W end of the building and parallel to it but found nothing. The structure is relatively well-built and the surviving corners are well defined. It resembles the remains of some rectangular stone buildings on Inchalloch, and would seem to have been a dwelling rather than a fold for animals, as Colonel Davidson proposed.

Building B lies 26 m SW of A and is the most westerly of the group and the most substantial. It is basically rectangular in shape, with its long axis NE-SW, and is divided into two rooms of unequal size. The overall length is 15.5 m. The internal length of the larger NE room is 9.25 m and the width 4.5 m, enclosed by dry-stone walling 0.75 m thick. The SW room (3.7 m by 4 m) is noticeably

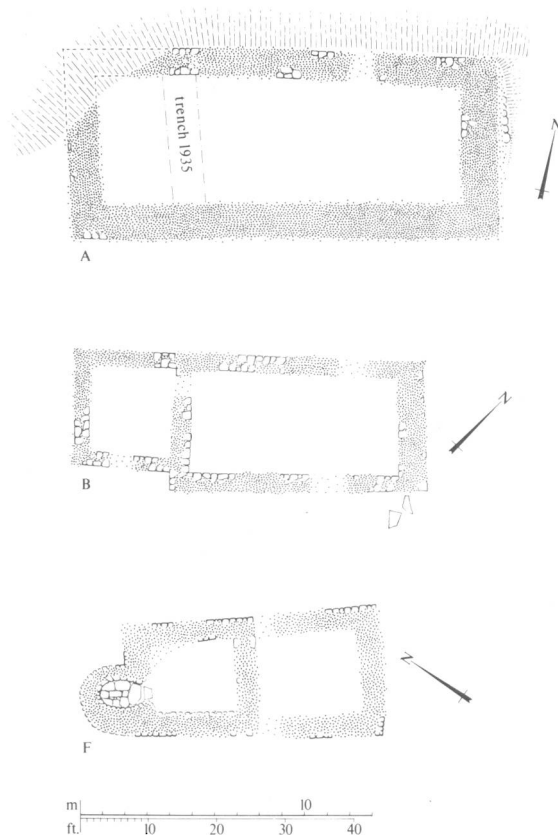


FIG. 2. Plans of structures identified on Clairinch.

less well constructed, the walls being only 0.6 m thick. Another feature is that, though it appears to have been built at the same time as the larger room, and the wall on the NW side is continuous, there is a rectangular return 0.8 m long on the E side where the wall joins the dividing wall between the two rooms (see fig. 2). The NE wall of the larger room is slightly thicker (0.8 m) than the two others and may have had to support a greater weight, for instance a chimney. The domestic character of this building is also indicated by the presence of a flat stone slab built into this wall at ground level, perhaps a hearth-stone. Colonel Davidson investigated this building, found two sherds of glazed pottery and one sherd of grey unglazed ware, perhaps mediaeval.

Building C is a small rectangular structure lying on the same axis as A but nearer the NE point of the island. Its overall length is 9.25 m and apparent width 4.25 m with walls approximately 1 m thick. No internal features are visible among

the thick undergrowth that covers it, and its purpose is unknown.

Building D consists of two separate structures. One of these (DI) is evidenced by the remains of a well-preserved dry-stone wall running roughly EW for 10 m with a return for a wall on the N side. It is 1 m wide and the two courses visible stand 50 cm high. Colonel Davidson had attempted excavations in this area but had made nothing of it and had christened it 'the Clairinch Maze'.

Immediately NE of this wall are remains of another structure (DII) aligned differently from it. It appears to be sub-rectangular, measuring about 4.3 m by 4.0 m with its long axis NW-SE. A length of inner facing stones is visible, at one point standing 20 cm high in two thin courses. There is a considerable amount of fallen rubble, some of it spoil from Davidson's excavations in this area. Davidson found the head of an iron ring-head pin, thought to be Iron Age, an iron-ring 1.9 cm in diameter, a flint scraper and a piece of possible mediaeval pottery on this site.

Among the collection of objects which belonged to Ludovic Mann, and which is now in the Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum, is the head and part of the shaft of an iron ring-headed pin, of Iron Age type, reported as found on Clairinch. The attribution, however, cannot be certain.

Building F is the most enigmatic of the structure at present found on Clairinch, and has been studied by both Colonel Davidson and the writer. The building lies 8 m SE of DII and consists of a two-celled rectangular structure, the walls of which were dry-stone built; it was mistakenly recorded by Colonel Davidson as an 'oblong drystone building' (RCAHMS 1963, col. 2, 448). At the N end was a sub-circular feature constructed on a higher level than the floor of the cell.

The site has been disturbed by trees and plants, but the writer's examination in 1980 revealed a building 11.5 m by 5 m (external) divided into rectangular rooms; the NW room measures 3.7 m by 3.1 m and the other room 4.5 m by 3.5 m. There appeared to be a narrow passage 1.5 m between them. A large tree-stump embedded in the cross-wall of the NW room may have concealed an entrance (fig. 2). The wall foundations were comparatively well built, especially at the corners where dressed stone was used. The NE site survived to three courses along its length, giving a height when cleared of about 50 cm above ground level. The NW side was more disturbed, but the line of walling could be traced

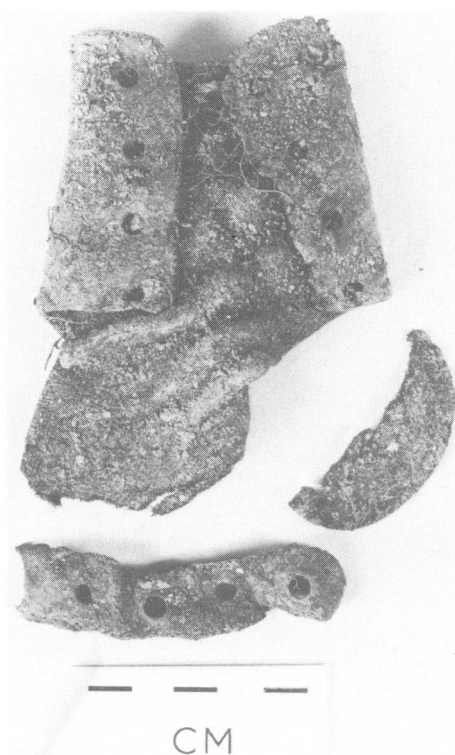


PLATE 1. Fragment of leather shoe found in Building F.

at ground level. Within the NW room and in the 'passage' was found a spread of cobbles and flat stones 30 cm below the surface, perhaps the final floor-level. In the rubble overlying this level, near the line of NW wall, part of a leather (ceildh?) shoe was recovered (pl. 1).

At the N end of the NW room, there was a curious, carefully constructed sub-circular feature built 70 cm above the floor level. Two courses of large, shaped limestone slabs were found, on which the sub-circular feature had been built to raise it above floor level; the dimensions of the top slab were 1 m × 68 cm. The feature, however, had not been placed centrally. On the W side it formed a continuance of the wall which had been thickened at this point to 1.4 m, compared with 75 cm for the other surviving foundations. On the E side, however, the wall formed a right-angle to extend 1.5 m E before joining the NE wall of the building, an arrangement somewhat similar to that of the smaller room in Building B. However the whole of the outer wall surrounding the feature had been stoutly constructed with smaller

stones than those used for the walls of the remainder of the building.

The wall enclosed a sub-circular paved floor consisting of nine symmetrically laid slabs which sloped slightly inwards towards the centre. The slabs had been carefully selected and trimmed to fit together closely, covering an area 2.2 m NW-SE by 1.3 m; the slab at the centre of the pavement had been carefully cut and measured 52 cm long by 34 cm wide. The outer edge of the pavement was lined with small stones, some of which were wedge-shaped, perhaps the foundations of a dome.

Neither Colonel Davidson's nor the writer's excavations recovered pottery or other remains from the area, nor were there any traces of burning visible through the discoloration or flaking of the paving slabs. This would argue against the suggestion made by the investigators of the Royal Commission that their feature could be a large domestic oven, and that the building itself might have been a kitchen. To date, however, no trace of flues, fire-places or finds which would indicate a kitchen have been discovered. Yet the building's proximity to the large complex described as 'D' suggests some type of domestic usage. The most likely suggestion is that of a corn drying kiln, fed by hot air from a fire in the room adjoining. The rear room would be a threshing area, with opposed doorways allowing for a through draught. The solid and relatively careful construction indicates a mediaeval or even later occupation. The building, however, must have been out of use when the layer of rubble that contained the leather shoe formed above it.

Buildings E and G are rectangular features, barely discernible amid the bracken and other vegetation covering this part of the island. 'E' is of similar type to 'C', measuring 9 m by 5.75 m, but revealing no internal features. 'G' is larger though similarly rectangular, lying 10 m E of Building 'F'. It stood on a slight natural terrace, but its long axis NE-SW faces the loch and has resulted in its steady erosion. An overall width of 7 m can be established and 9 m of surviving length.

All these buildings appear to form a unit, occupied as such during the mediaeval period and perhaps with earlier phases. One feature, however, seems to bear no relation to them, namely a low, wide earthen bank 20 cm high in places that runs from a point W of Building F and some 50 m W before turning sharply NNW and continuing another 15 m in that direction. There is to date no

means of telling whether this precedes or is later than the settlement.

THE STONE JETTIES

A number of these exist, mainly on the W and S sides of the island, the two largest and best-preserved being in the bay at the SW end. They have been built of large water-rounded boulders, pairs being laid together over most of the length, and exposing flat surfaces. Those in the bay extend from the point where the shoreline meets a clay bank marking the land's edge to some 15 m into the loch. Trial investigation on shore showed that the boulders had been very firmly embedded in the clay covered by the sand. The construction of these jetties was a considerable undertaking and would hardly have been carried out except by individuals who attached importance to their permanence and stability. While no buildings were found associated with them, they must presumably be regarded as contemporary with the buildings on the island.

THE CRANNOG

Neither the buildings nor the jetties can be divorced from the crannog lying off the N shore of the island. The fall in the level of the loch in 1983 allowed an unusually clear view of its construction, and showed that it is almost perfectly circular and is built up on a foundation of rounded stones to form a base 27 m in diameter, sloping slightly towards the SW. Normally the top stands about 1 m above the water-level and is covered with vegetation. No excavation has as yet been attempted.

CONCLUSIONS

The various structures on Clairinch invite further study and excavation. Indications are that there may be more buildings than the seven recorded here, especially south of 'F' and 'G'. Except for the shoe, however, all finds made in the excavations have been lost, but the meagre evidence points to longstanding occupation from perhaps as early as the Iron Age into the Middle Ages and even beyond. The choice of the island for the signature of a charter, and the adoption of its name as the battlecry of the Buchanan Clan, suggest associations derived from a remote past. Clairinch takes its place with the monastic and mediaeval settlement on Inchallioch, and the *dun* and Christian building on Cashel Point, among

the archaeological remains on the E side of Loch Lomond that promise most in the quest to reconstruct the history of the area.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTE

1. I am grateful to Miss Helen Adamson, Keeper of Archaeology in the Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum, for information about the Clairinch pin.

REFERENCE

RCAHMS 1963 *Inventory of Stirlingshire*, 2 vols. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. HMSO, London.

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