

**Stewartry Archaeological Trust**  
**Newsletter No. 9, December 2011**  
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**The Newbarns Project**

*Due to the calamitous digging season this year, the committee have decided not to publish an Interim Report for 2011 and instead an extended Newsletter is being sent to all regular recipients of the Reports. The 2012 Interim Report will be an extended 2 year one.*

**Background:**

The experts have told us that this summer of 2011 was both the coldest and wettest for the last eighteen years! This statement would certainly seem to apply to Newbarns and to our other two excavations neither of which even got off the ground this season. 4000 years ago, when Newbarns was being used as a prehistoric cemetery, Galloway was warmer. It had got warmer and then the weather had declined a bit and then it declined a great deal, but even so the temperature was some 2° higher, c. 3500 BC, than it is today. A change occurred c. 1200 BC when there had been a drop of 2° which made a big difference to living conditions and by the time that the Imperialist Aggressors arrived from the Mediterranean climate of the city of Rome we, in North Britain, were experiencing wet summers and stormy winters. Juniper and shrubland first appeared in Galloway around 9000 BC, then Hazel c. 8250 BC followed by the appearance of Elm c. 7500 and Oak by c. 6700 BC and last of all, Pine.

In 1159 BC Mount Hecla, on Iceland, literally blew up and enormous quantities of dust and ash were thrust into the atmosphere and carried by the winds to cover Britain and much of the Northern hemisphere. This, again, radically changed the weather almost immediately as volcanic dust obscured the sun for several summers in a row and thus caused a further drop in temperature so that the cultivation of crops at a high level had to cease. This eruption set in train a downward spiral during the Copper and Bronze Ages and some historians believe that the failure of agriculture led to widespread famine and a dramatic drop in the population of the affected areas – by as much as a half – as people moved southwards. Not all the local population left the area, it is more than possible that some brave souls stayed on and lived in the sea caves along the Solway coast where, at least, some food was obtainable. The uplands were the first areas to be deserted as 18 years of bad weather followed before any recovery started. It was during this period that large layers of peat were formed at Newbarns as the flooded areas began to recede – peat cannot form in the wet. There was a nuclear winter scenario with the rays of the sun blocked out causing a worsening climate with the whole of North Britain covered with a layer of volcanic ash which killed off all plant life. Harvests failed and so people had to move or starve and large quantities of acid rain were precipitated upon the land – caused by the sulphur in the atmosphere – and doomed the settlements by turning the soil acid. Animals died of such things as a rotting disease called fluorosis ( a crippling bone disease caused by the fluoride expelled from the volcano which the beasts got from foraging on contaminated fodder) and the crops all failed.

Water was everywhere and the levels were as much as 6 metres (20 feet) higher than those of today in both river and in the sea. We do know that in the prehistoric era our own River Urr was 25 feet higher than today and you can still see the old river bank levels of both prehistoric and medieval (12 feet higher than now) levels if you walk the river course. The lochs, like Newbarns (or as it was previously called, Barnhourie) would also be much higher and much of the kerbs of the cairns would be under water. The power of the weather was already recognized in religious beliefs and practices and locations of worship moved to the watery places where votive offerings, usually of metalwork, were made and these ancient sites were the link of sanctity and sacrifice which lasted through until the coming of Christianity sometime in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD at the earliest. Artefacts which survive are mainly stone and flint tools which are of prime importance in any assessment of the origins and contacts of any group living on shores of a loch or on the coast and of their material equipment. If we had bones or vegetable matter surviving in the cremation pits it would be possible to get Radiocarbon dates from them, but the rising and falling of the water table over five thousand years has, to date, denied us any evidence due to the continually changing levels allowing too much oxygen to get into the deposits. A chemical reaction has created sulphuric acid which has dissolved any evidence of cremated remains. The stone deposits in the pits are all that survive. Similarly, up to the present, there have been no artifacts recovered on site of wood, leather or antler for the same reason.



*Doors Open Day September 2011*

Without any knowledge of the Early Bronze Age religion we can only guess at what happened, we can only guess, too, at the ceremonies associated with the interment of the ashes of the dead and there may well have been other ceremonies taking place under the roof of the shrine over burial No 30 not directly associated with the dead ancestors, but with the necessity of the illustrious ancestor being involved or just present and it may well explain the large paved area constructed around the capstone of Burial No 30. What can be said is that the effort expended in constructing burials and locating and installing the huge capstones over them and the fact that many were in use for long periods and even re-used over lengthy periods of time, shows that they were of great importance to

their builders and must have played a central role in the organization of Galloway society between 2150 BC and 1000 BC.

### **Excavation 2011:**

The season commenced with the removal of more trees from the base area of the medieval motte hill which exposed the northern end of the supposed water feature in Area 10, which was set in front of and north of the wall of the Anglian/Medieval building. That the clay-lined feature still holds copious quantities of water attests to its success as a container in the heyday of its use. Just what it contained has yet to be determined and once the water table has receded it may be possible to sample the bottom of the feature. The present hypotheses is that it may have been an agricultural feature such as a sheep dip or a wool washing or bleaching area – it could even have been a pit lined or filled with timber planks which were laid out there for seasoning. The raw material for this operation was aided in its seasoning by all persons passing by who were asked to urinate into the pit. The resulting chemical treated, preserved and hardened the timbers which were then suitable for building purposes. The smell could have been interesting! Could be interesting during a Dig tour!

The foundations of the above Anglian/Medieval building have attested to two stages of construction some 600 years apart. Evidence of a domestic hearth was found on the inside of the building to the west of the cobbled surfaced doorway.



**Medieval hearth c1300**

Further evidence of burning was identified at the wall base to the extreme west where Area 10 joins with Area 6/8 pointing to destruction by fire, deliberate or accidental, at some time during the Anglian period of occupation contemporary with the heyday of nearby Mote of Mark. To the south of the wall on the south perimeter of Area 10 and the north perimeter of Area 9, posthole evidence of a large rectangular timber building of the medieval era was uncovered. Running west to east it was not completely excavated at the time of going to the press, but comprises two rooms with cobbled flooring supposedly separated by a wattle partition wall. One room, the western one, would have been for the use of animals and the other, the eastern one, for the use of the humans. Initial examination puts the dimensions of this “house” at 11.0 metres from east to west and 9.0 metres from north to south. Some of the cobbling, underlaid with a base of boulder clay, survives in the western room and a section of reconstructed floor has been constructed in the eastern room for the benefit of the visitor to the site.

A number of Bronze Age cremation burials were excavated after the removal of several very heavy capstones with the aid of Dave Wright's Land Rover and slings. As a reward Dave was given the first burial of the season to excavate and plan (Burial No. 59) and to his surprise he found that someone had been there before him in antiquity and had inserted a later cremation deposit into a newly constructed subsidiary pit covering it with a mini-capstone before returning the main capstone into its original position resting on its cushion stones. The interior was cobbled with great care and comprised small granite and shale flat-topped stones and each cremation pit was outlined with small coloured beach pebbles. That the two deposits are almost contemporary must be considered as their design is very similar – there is no way of knowing how many years passed between each cremation being made, but the similarity of design points to them being not too far apart. Later examination of the cremation pits revealed a small shale oval rubbing stone (5 cms x 4 cms) set into the uncovered top of the earlier pit although it must be considered at this stage of investigation that this artefact may have been deliberately utilized as a cover stone.

A further cremation burial (No. 61) was excavated and planned but again failed to yield any dateable deposits. This differed from previous burials of this type as, instead of numerous small pebbles and stones being used in the internal cobbling, the lower level of this grave comprised 12 large flat granite slabs with the cremation pit situated at the western end of the feature on its own in a small annex delineated with a further deposit of small granite and shale pebbles.

Two further cremation burials have been identified for excavation when, hopefully, the present level of the water table, which covers them both at this time, recedes in 2012.

The Satellite Cairn (Area 9) immediately adjacent to the North Cairn produced two further cremation deposits in a stone-lined pit under a large granite capstone. Two pits were identified, one large and one small, the larger one had granite and shale cobbling round it and a larger, flat shale stone placed directly over the deposit, the other pit was cobbled with the usual small stones. The initial impression was that the smaller pit had been deposited beside the larger one at a later date. This was excavated and planned. On present investigation where we have found evidence of several cremation burials having later deposits next to them - our classic case being Burial 9 in Area 6/8 which had five later burial deposits in additional annexes - it must now be assumed that the final sealing of the burial – the setting in place of the capstone – must have taken place at some date long after the initial cremation deposit was most likely put in place to allow for additional deposits, perhaps of immediate family, to be added into the grave before final closing. There is no evidence to point to the capstones having been removed and then replaced to accommodate further interments. In fact it would have been a very difficult task to do this and to replace the capstones in their exact previous positions above the interments as evidenced by the unmoved positions of the supporting cushion stones.

Unfortunately, due to the adverse weather conditions, work could not be carried out this season on either The Ingleston Motte Excavation or at the Barnhillies 13<sup>th</sup> Century

Farmstead site. Excavation will continue on all three sites during 2012. Volunteer diggers are already applying.

Our thanks must go to the “The General” - Sir Norman and to Simon Arthur – and to the Smiths and the Peels for having to put up with unscheduled visits between storms and to those who have sponsored us through very adverse conditions – to Hamish McRae and the Dumfries & Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society (D & G N H A S) to Eddie Peterson and Margaret Powell for their contributions and to Broughton Anderson and Douglas Phoenix. Our thanks, too, to John Picken and David Devereux for professional input and to all our girls - Lana, Emily, Shona and Lisa for equipment to ease our aching bones. Our thanks must go to all our student diggers, volunteers and anyone who took part in any way including “visitors” who visited the site, many of whom had to put on their wellies to get there. Finally to Dave Wright, always our “Man of the Match” - what would we do without him, his muscles, his land Rover and all the items of equipment which he brings with him each year.

Next season (2012), it is intended to dig at Newbarns in July (for students) and September (for volunteers) and to leave the month of August free for the team to concentrate on our other 2 sites at Ingleston Motte and Barnhillies Farmstead. It will still be possible for members of the public and interested parties to access Newbarns for guided tours by appointment.

Updated website has all of Keith Clark’s pencil illustrations. Please take a look at [www.sat.org.uk](http://www.sat.org.uk)

### **Lizzie & Alastair Penman 2011.**

All pictures are © of SAT and Google Earth



*Aerial view of South site with mystery features appearing to the south and west..*