

DISCOVERY & EXCAVATION IN SCOTLAND 2014.

LOCAL AUTHORITY: Dumfries & Galloway

PARISH: Colvend and Southwick

SITE NAME: The Newbarns Project

NAME OF CONTRIBUTORS: Lisbet & Alastair Penman.

TYPE OF PROJECT: Excavation of three Neolithic and E.B.A. Burial Cairns with later Iron Age, Roman civilian, Anglian and Medieval use.

NAME OF ORGANIZATION: The Stewartry Archaeological Trust. (SC 040018).

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE: NX 8810 5485

REPORT

A thirteenth season of excavation by volunteer diggers under the auspices of the Stewartry Archaeological Trust has continued on the South Cairn at Newbarns. This was the first season since 2008 that the water table and surrounding drained areas of the ancient Barnhourie Loch allowed access to the remains of the cairn. Previous excavation work at Newbarns has been reported in *DES* 2003, 44: 2005, 42: 2006, 48: 2007, 60: 2008, 51: 2009, 54-5: 2010, 52: 2011, 59: 2012, 56-7: 2013, 60.

The South Cairn:

As this was the first dry season for a number of years it was decided to excavate only the South Cairn and the first thing to be looked at was the medieval field drainage system which stretched from the drained field system overlying the previously drained loch which surrounding the cairn from time to time. Three drains were constructed across the cairn from north-east to south-west in three parallel lines. A date of c.AD1200-1300 was arrived at by measuring the depth of peat which had been disturbed by spadework digging a channel down through the peat to the north of the cairn. The spade marks were still clearly visible. The construction consisted of a channel lined with flat faced stones of granite and shale – mainly shale - and these were covered by granite capstones. They in turn were covered by a layer of smaller stones mixed with boulder clay from the loch bottom and this was rounded off by another layer of clay on top. Unfortunately, over the years, parts of the upper surfaces of the drains had been used as a walkway by both visitor and digger and had set into a surface as hard as concrete making initial excavation extremely hard resulting in not few minor wrist and hand injuries. Just what the purpose of draining the cairn has not been yet determined, but some authorities who have seen the features have put forward a supposition that this cairn may have been used for the cultivation of various herbs and grasses which would have been beneficial in the production of medicaments for giving to sheep. The Project is aware that there were thousands of sheep being

grazed at Newbarns and in the neighbouring parish of Kirkgunzeon in the 12th and 13th centuries under the auspices of the Church.

Three previously excavated burials, which had been examined in the past under bad weather conditions as the water table rose, were re-excavated. One, an E.B.A. one, exhibited very careful cobbling and the placing of a huge capstone of several tonnes the remnants of which lay around the perimeter of the burial pit. These had been destroyed by later robbing and still bore the marks of the Victorian builders method of splitting the stone – “feathering”- when iron spikes were inserted into drill holes and struck with a hammer thus splitting the stone into very straight sections for building. Written evidence of this robbing was confirmed by a local farmer who informed the team that he had seen a document of the 1870’s which referred to the source of granite building stone of a local house as having been obtained “from Newbarns”. Two other previous burials which were incomplete due to flooding were reinvestigated and only one of those yielded further evidence of having had a tea-cup sized cremation pit inserted into the base of the original burial. No dateable evidence was found.

Five new burials were identified and excavated. All contained at least one cremation pit and two contained votive deposits in the form of a flint tool in one and a stone hammer with striations on it in another. These burials had a headstone at either end and it is presumed that when completed there would have been a covering of granite and shale boulders in the form of a mound, since robbed, between the two headstones. Dating of those burials was not easy, but they would appear to be somewhere in the Iron Age – possibly c.600-500 BC - as a huge saddle quern was placed adjacent to the perimeter one of the pits and may have some ritualistic relevance yet to be determined. We are aware that this type of household implement was virtually redundant by the above mentioned date.

Only one feature remained to be totally excavated when the weather finally broke and that was a large perimeter burial in the south-west quadrant of the cairn. Excavation got as far as uncovering the upper layer of a cremation pit sited on a cobble and clay platform in the north-east corner of the burial pit. The huge capstone of several tonnes weight, when dragged aside, had preserved much of this feature, but the wet weather dictated that further excavation could not be carried out. This will be the last feature to be excavated in the future on the South Cairn before it is closed down for good and returned to the vagaries of nature

LOCATION OF ARCHIVES & REPORTS:

The Stewartry Museum, Kirkcudbright.

SPONSORS: Lt. Gen.Sir Norman and Lady Jillian Arthur. Mrs Margaret Powell. Hamish McCrae, Esq., Dr Donna Moore and Mrs Jane Elvy. .

