

## Out of Place in the West? Excavations at Kiltaraglen, Portree, Isle of Skye

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On the northern outskirts of Portree on Skye, sites ranging from Iron Age post-built roundhouses to an undated circular enclosure were identified late in 2006. The area was located on a low south to north ridge which lies between the River Leasgeary to the west and the River Chraicraig to the east. This knoll overlooks Portree Bay from the north and commands the low-lying access route from Portree on the east coast, through to Skeabost on the west. The excavated sites comprised two post-built roundhouses, one with a smaller ring-ditch structure within it; three mini, or proto souterrains, two of which conjoined to form one feature; three post-alignments; a post-setting; a pit containing a variety of Beaker pottery; metalworking pits; and a circular ditched enclosure. Features associated with this included sockets for standing stones. Several of these sites have parallels on the east coast of Scotland, whereas others have no ready comparisons.

Located on the gentle west-facing flank of the ridge, the first of the roundhouses to be discovered was in fact rather more oval than round and had a diameter close to 7m. It was defined by a perimeter of seventeen relatively small post-holes and had an internal setting of three further post-holes. A larger off-centre feature contained heated stones and may have been either a hearth or a post-hole. What may be a sunken entrance passage had a door post and a finely pebbled floor and faced south-west. Two steps led up into the interior. No floor levels were preserved and the finds consisted solely of a few lithics in the fill of the sunken entrance passage.

The second post-built roundhouse was much more substantial and of different character to the first. It was located some 100m to the north, on



The enclosure and post alignments

the spine of the ridge. This had a diameter of 9m and was defined by eighteen very substantial post-holes, each up to 1m in width and depth. A porch, defined by further massive post-holes, also faced south-west. Smaller post-holes within it may represent the location of a door structure. Eccentrically placed within this post-ring was a horseshoe-shaped ring-ditch with a width of 1.5m, enclosing an area with a diameter of 5m. This area contained ten features displaying no clear pattern. A group of over 40 stake-holes was recorded. Spatial, stratigraphic and depositional evidence combines to suggest that the primary post-built roundhouse had a later ring-ditch roundhouse constructed within it. Finds were restricted to a few sherds of Iron Age pottery from both constructional and occupational contexts and small numbers of hammerstones. Quantities of well-preserved charcoal were recovered. A large, circular feature with a pebbled base outside the porch is interpreted as a working surface and numerous mudstone lithics were incorporated into this surface with further similar artefacts being recovered from the fill.

The souterrains were located over 50m from either roundhouse and were similar in size to several excavated by CFA at Dubton Farm, Brechin in 1998. One was banana-shaped, with a length of 7.5m, and a width and depth of at most 0.5m. The second feature was 9m in length and contained two distinct compartments, entered from either end. A smashed pottery vessel from the feature had finger impressions under the rim and is similar to one recovered by Roger Miket from Tungadale Souterrain on Skye and dates to c.300BC.

Two of the three post-alignments at Kiltaraglen were parallel and around 15m apart. One consisted of three massive post-holes, whilst the other contained at least seven. Most were capable of accepting telegraph pole-sized posts but some grading of the widths and depths along their lengths was recorded. A third, curvilinear alignment was recorded to the north of these two and one of the post-holes had been cut by a pit containing quantities of iron slag and charcoal. A second post-hole contained Beaker pottery. Three post-holes forming a triangular setting less than 2m in

diameter within a shallow ditch were also recorded. All of the post-holes forming these alignments were vertical sided and flat bottomed and many had packing stones around the edges.

A ditch-defined enclosure was almost perfectly circular with an internal diameter of 20m. The ditch was 3m wide and about 1.5m deep and had been cut through the boulder clay with little regard for any massive boulders that were encountered. At several points these had clearly either been broken up in situ to achieve a smooth internal face or had been levered out and the sockets filled with excavated material. After an unknown period of time, the lower portion of the ditch was backfilled with boulder-clay from which the stones had been removed. Later, the upper part of the ditch was filled in with a much more silty, topsoil-like material containing lenses of charcoal, a couple of lithics and Late Bronze Age pottery. Finally, quantities of stones formed the upper fill. Most of the stones appeared to have entered the ditch from the inside of the enclosure, so that might suggest that the excavated stones were banked up around the inner edge of the ditch and were put back in from there later.

This ditch may be classed as hengiform, placing its origins in the Middle to Late Neolithic. If so, it appears to have been maintained for centuries before being filled in quite rapidly during the Late Bronze Age. Alternatively, it may have been dug in the Late Bronze Age and used for a very short period of time, possibly only for one event, before being partially back-filled, with the upper fill occurring naturally and derived from material containing the Late Bronze Age pottery. If hengiform and Neolithic in date, then this enclosure appears unique in Britain by reason of not having an entrance. Some possible evidence for a wooden structure across the ditch was recorded, but the evidence is tenuous. The ditch was emptied by hand, hundreds of tons of boulder clay and stones!

After the ditch had been completely filled in, the final activity was the cutting into the upper fill of about 25

roughly parallel sausage-shaped features. The nature of these is uncertain but they may conceivably be graves. Several of them contained teeth or possible long bones, but analysis of these has yet to be carried out. Whatever their function, this seems to indicate that the ditch was still partially visible and perhaps of importance after it had been backfilled. Pieces of prehistoric pottery were found in the fills, but these sherds could easily have been disturbed from the underlying ditch fill.

A large circular pit just outside the enclosure ditch, around which the ditch deviated slightly, cut an earlier charcoal-rich pit and was aligned with two irregular standing stone sockets within the ditch, both containing many small rounded cobbles in their bases, which would allow micro-positioning of the heavy orthostats. These were also aligned with an irregular internal pit, vaguely phallic in plan, which, though largely backfilled, contained lenses of charcoal and peat ash. There was also a shallow pit in the middle of the enclosure.

Just on the outside of the ditch, another pit had three distinct parts and contained two types of Beaker pottery within it. One of these had a cord-applied (AOC) decoration, whereas the other had the much more familiar Beaker decoration, with a geometric design incorporating triangles and herringbone motifs. Several beautiful scraper-type mudstone lithics were recovered. This feature may have been a burial, but no bones were found. An unusual feature was the presence of a linear deposit of very hard iron-pan, which had clearly formed after the objects had been put into the pit, as pieces of pottery were concreted into it. Possibly this had been formed by water dripping through now-vanished covering planks or stone slabs.

The whole site was notably artefact-poor. The majority of the lithics were retrieved from the banded topsoil after heavy rain, an all too frequent occurrence during the fieldwork. Apart from the lithics, lumps of iron slag were recovered, including several furnace bases, as was a silver groat of

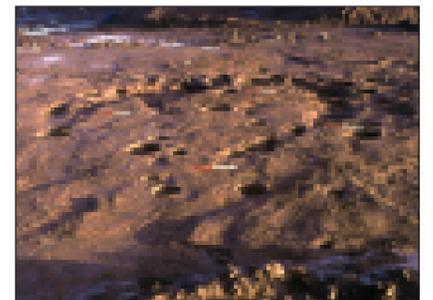
either Robert II or David II, dating to the second half of the 14th century.

Kiltaraglen proved to be a most interesting site, marred by dreadful winter weather. Post-excavation work remains to be done and in the absence of diagnostic artefacts, much reliance will be placed on radiocarbon dating. In the final analysis, this site, along with High Pasture Cave near Broadford may fill in many of the current gaps in the archaeological record of Skye.

The Project was funded by Robertson Homes and the Lochalsh and Skye Housing Association.



The souterrains



The larger of the two roundhouses



Section through the enclosure ditch

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