

Bronnoch:

A Short Case-study in Settlement History

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This paper is intended to complement the account of the Bute Deserted Settlement Survey (Hannah and Proudfoot 1996) on pages 37-56 of this volume. From the hundred and odd sites that the Settlement Survey has explored over the last five years, I have chosen one of the least spectacular and least documented, one whose name and very existence had been almost entirely forgotten. The aim is to show from the inside how settlement study can proceed, and how much it is possible to discover by careful detective work from inauspicious beginnings.

In May, 1994, I was walking along the forest road above the East Kyle, looking for the then still unlocated settlement of Bullochreg. The crown of a tree of striking reddish colour stood out above the newly-leaved birch canopy below me. It was an oak: not a tree I usually associate with a settlement site; but the mere fact of its distinctiveness induced me to clamber down the steep slope to investigate.

There proved to be three oaks, of no great size but considerable age, and, more excitingly, a small enclosure with a turf dyke. A short search revealed a little rickle of stones that must have been gathered by human agency; that might even, with a deal of imagination, be the remains of a tiny building.

There were other features which helped to persuade me that this was indeed a site of former habitation. An old, mossy dry-stone dyke came down the hill close by, and in it there was a large and solidly constructed gateway, through which the traces of a roadway could be seen. This led down to what looked like a ford over the nearby burn, and could be followed a little further before being lost in a close stand of birches.

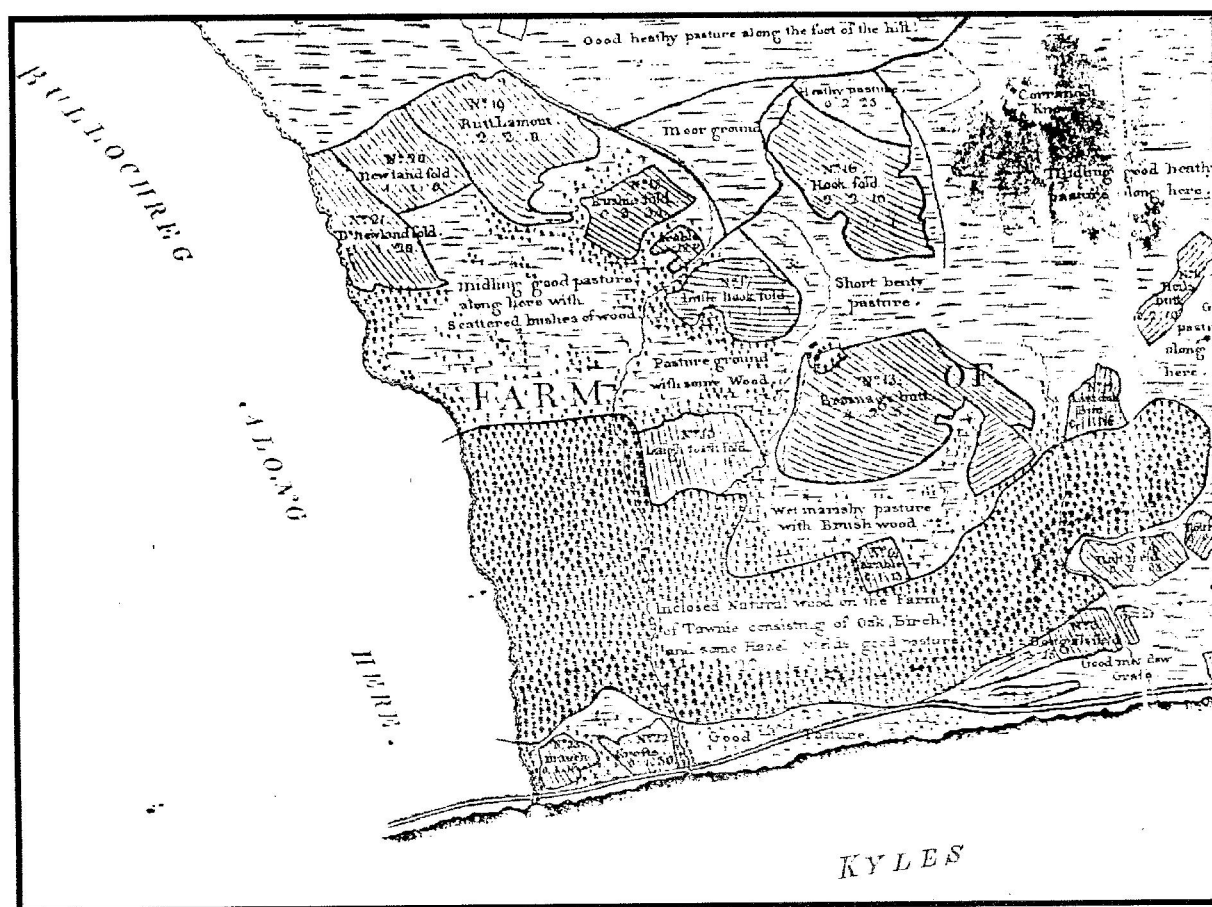
I assumed this site, *NS 034 725*, 60m *OD*, must be Bullochreg, though the small size and poor condition of the remains puzzled and disappointed me. I knew Bullochreg had been a settlement of some importance, and had hoped to find something a little more impressive.

There the matter stood, until further study of MacKinlay's map of 1823 and the Ordnance Survey 1st Edition of 1865 persuaded me that this site could not after all be Bullochreg, which plainly lay further to the South. So it seemed my site would be nameless after all, if indeed it had ever been more than a small field, and nothing would be known of its history.

And so it would have remained, had I not happened shortly afterwards to turn up the Rev. McLea's Examination Roll for 1775 (in which interesting and useful notebook this former minister of Rothesay listed the names and addresses of his parishioners on the occasions of his visiting and catechising them), and notice that between the lengthy entries for Tamnighe (Tawnie) and Buailleachreag, was one with a single name for Broineag, a place name I had never met before. On these rather skimpy grounds I ventured to identify my site tentatively with this name, and concluded that it was occupied in 1775, but deserted shortly afterwards. It is not mentioned in the *Militia Notices* of 1808 or McLea's second surviving notebook of 1814.

There again the matter rested, until one night in the Museum I was looking at the copies (which the Bute Estate Office had kindly allowed us to make) of the 1780/1 series of Estate Plans, attributed to Peter May. Studying the sheet which shows the farms of Rue and Tawnie (in marvellously rich detail, as on all these maps), I spied the name Broanag's Butt, at the very

spot where I had found the oak trees; and there was the tiny enclosure drawn on the plan, along with the building whose ruins I had seen. This confirmed my somewhat rash earlier identification, bringing together as only an accurate map can, the documentary evidence of McLea and the actual remains on the ground.



Map 1: Estate Map of 1781, showing part of the farm of Tawnie. Broanag's Butt is near the centre of the area shown in the illustration.

I now had a clear picture: a small butt or cottar's house on the edge of the farm of Tawnie, close up to the boundary dyke, as such places often are, with just four acres of land belonging to it (according to May's map), and surely four of the steepest, boggiest and most intractable acres on the island: a butt founded, probably, under pressure of rising population in the mid 18th century, and soon abandoned when found to be unworkable. A simple hypothesis, accounting for the poverty of visible remains, and seeming to be further confirmed by an entry in the *North End Roads Statute Labour List* of 1769 - *Bronnog: 1/6d arrears* - this being the charge payable by a cottar in lieu of three days work. I could picture the cottar, too ill and tired to work, too poor to pay his dues. It all fitted together, and made sense of what I had seen.

Imagine my astonishment, then, some months afterwards, to find on reading the charter of King James IV to the landholders of Bute (*Reg Mag Sig*) "lands of Bronnoch to Maurice Macnaughton.." So far from being a cottar butt of mid 18th century foundation, my settlement had already been a farm 10 generations earlier, in 1506.

In fact, Maurice Macnaughton appears to have been a gentleman of some importance. He was one of four Bute men appointed to act on the king's behalf at the granting of sasine, and his name appears frequently on documents of the period relating both to Bute and to places on the

mainland. As a man of education, he was able to perform what later became strictly notarial functions. It seems unlikely that his farm would have been among the least productive on the island.

To complete the picture to date, a study of the *Exchequer Rolls of Scotland* reveals that, in the same year, Bronnoch was reckoned as a 25 shilling land, on a par with Rue, Tawnie and Bullochreg. Going further back, in 1436, though not individually named, it was clearly one of the four parts into which the £5 land of Caunoch (Tawnie) was already divided.

It is unlikely that, without excavation, we could ever know whether the farmstead of this earlier time was on the same site which I discovered, but it cannot have been far away. We know that the land in its vicinity was farmed for at least four centuries, and perhaps much longer. The slightness of the surviving ruins of Bronnoch results not from its being occupied for only a short time, nor from deliberate destruction, but from its never having been an *improved* farm. Thorough fieldwork in the vicinity of the site will be the next stage of our survey, to see if there are any clues about the nature of the farming carried on there. But as Bronnoch is only one of over 100 sites of deserted settlement on the island, it is likely to be some time before any further conclusions are reached.

Since writing the above, I came upon a reference to Bronnoch in *Trans BNHS Vol I* (1907). Mr. Macbeth, in his article on the McCaws of Garrachty, has occasion to mention M. MacNaughton "of Bronnoch", and he speculates correctly, on the basis of the Exchequer Rolls, that it probably lay on the East Kyle shore between Tawnie and Bullochreg. Plainly, by 1907, all memory of it had been lost.

References

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