

NOTE ON THE CARBONISED DEPOSIT ON THE BANK OF THE DRUMACHLOY BURN

Dorothy N. Marshall

The Drumachloy Burn meanders in a delightful way along the flat bottom of Glenmore. Following its course and seeing the banks of shingle and sand, the ox-bows, the shallow banks and the steep banks one realises the force of water even in this small burn. In the winter of 82 – 83, there must have been some fierce floodings as just upstream from Auchavoulig road, a scouring has left a verticle bank some 2m high on a bend of the burn. About half way down it is a continuous band of black carbonised vegetable material on average .070m deep. Mr Robertson, forester, of Croc an Raer told me of this and showed me some hazel nuts he had found perfectly preserved in the deposit. Below are bands and pockets of pebbles and shingle, sand and some clay. Above the deposits are much the same but in May 85, after further denuding, they were much obscured by a covering of clayey sand.

Dr. J. H. Dickson of the Botany Department, Glasgow University, after examining the band, took samples for pollen analysis. The result shows that the vegetation of the time of the deposit was an alder woodland rich in ferns with bog moss, meadow sweet, devil's bit scabious, sedges, and other herbs. Hazel, birch and willow were also present. Nearby slopes supported oak and elm. The pollen analysis shows that the deposit is post glacial and its age probably between 4500 and 3000 BC. The Neolithic people who built the burial cairn at Glenvoidean near Kilmichael lived about 3000 BC. This scrub moss vegetation shows that the climate was wet but it must have become even wetter and colder in the following centuries for that growth to die out and become compressed into the band of near peat.

Grass
Humus and earth
Bands and pockets of shingle, sand, pebbles and some clay
Deposit
Pebbles, shingle, sand and some clay
Present bed of burn

A SHELL DEPOSIT NEAR BLACK FARLAND BAY (WEST KYLE). NS 59 993728

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It seems perhaps worth recording that in 1978 Ian Hopkins found a deposit of shells in a situation which is difficult to explain.

It lies under a massive fallen rock as big as a cottage. One has to crawl under this great rock to reach the shells so that it seems probable that the shells were put there before the rock fell. As no soil covers the deposit, it cannot have been there for long before the rock fell. On a Bute Estate map of 1824 the hill behind is called "Split Crag." This name has been adopted by the Ordnance Survey. The massive block of rock may have been part of this split crag.

Julian Hill, Geologist, when he visited the site, found it impossible to assess the length of time since the crag split but that it definitely was not a recent fall.

The shell deposit stretches 3.00 x 3.300m and is on average from 5 – 7 cm deep. It is very unlikely that it could have been left by birds or animals. A sample of shells was made up of Whelks 115, Dog Whelks 2, Mussels 12, Limpets 45 (these were very small), Oysters 5. After the severe frosts of 1872 (circa) and 1895 the native oysters died out.

It is always difficult to estimate how long it would take for a deposit of shell midden to accumulate or how many people would be involved. Charles Young who was brought up on a croft on Mull where whelks were eaten freely thought that at least 3 sacks of shells would be carted away each season. When digging at Little Dunagoil we found a pocket of shell midden about 25 cm in diameter of which an American student said: "Sure I could eat all that at a sitting."

There are Bute Estate records of settlements in the area and walls can be traced under the cliff but the deposit is hardly large enough to have been refuse from a crofting family. It lies some 280m from the shore at Black Farland Bay so fishermen could have taken the shells to the shelter of the cliff to eat but why take them so far from the shore? Who could have consumed them? It is a puzzle.