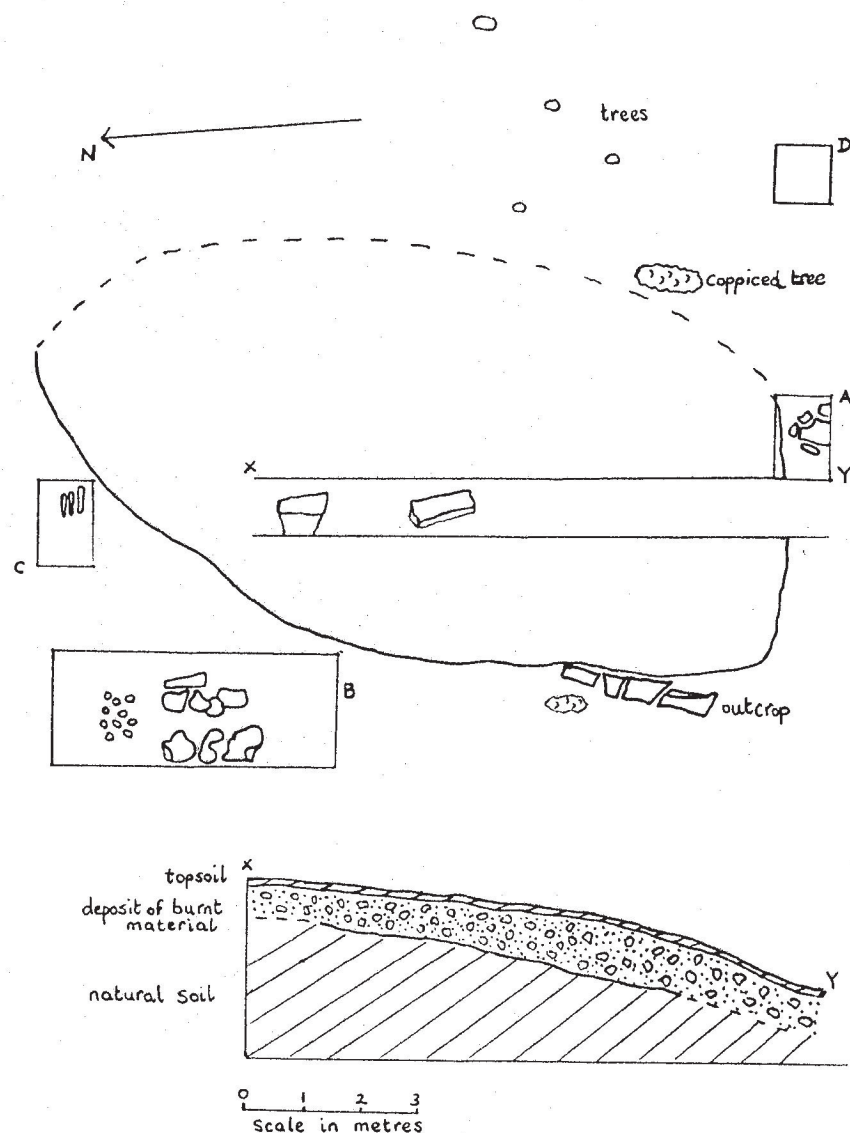




Burnt Mound, Mecknoch Farm.

THE PLATFORMS IN BARMORE WOOD

Elizabeth B. Rennie

Barmore Wood on the West side of Loch Fad is a remote wilderness which is seldom visited. The usual access is by permission through the grounds of Woodend House. The ground rises steeply from the Lochside to the moor above. Three hundred yards beyond the Woodend garden there is a spectacular stand of Douglas Firs — now mature, some fallen but many rising to 100ft in height. Below the fir trees a promontory of serpentine rocks juts into the Loch. Apart from the comparatively open area among the firs, the wood is almost impenetrable — choked with rhododendrons at the North end and interwoven between the trees at the South end with brambles and honeysuckle.

Scattered throughout this wood are thirty-two Recessed Platforms. These are flattened near-circular areas ranging from 18ft to 30ft in diameter. They have been built by digging out material from the steep hillside and throwing it forwards on to the down slope and so forming a small level area.

This group of Platforms is one of many which are widespread over the West of Scotland. There are twenty-five known groups or single Platforms in Cowal and Bute and about fifty known groups outwith Cowal. The nearest set to Barmore are six Platforms in Balnakeilly woods. Across the Kyles at Ardentraive Farm, Colintrave there is a large group of forty-four. The largest group in Cowal is at Lephinchapel, on Loch Fyneside, between Otter Ferry and Strathlachan. South of the farm the Platforms spread for about one mile and here eighty-two Platforms have been counted. North of the farm fifty-eight are recorded.

Until recently the Platforms were classified as charcoal hearths — areas on which wood was baked to convert it into charcoal. The theory was that the charcoal was produced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for use in two iron-making furnaces at Bonawe, by Loch Etive, and at Furnace on Loch Fyne. However, ten Platforms have now been excavated or partially excavated and of these ten, five have shown that they were used secondarily, as charcoal hearths. Primarily, excavation showed that each of the ten Platforms was built as the foundation for a round timber-framed structure. Post holes built into the banks and cut through the floors constituted the chief evidence and on the hearths the post holes were found to underlie the charcoal debris.

Platform 2 of the Barmore group was partially excavated by members of the Buteshire Natural History Society and their friends in four days in August 1987. It was set on a natural terrace and therefore

did not have high banks to front and back. Each was about 0.5m. (1ft.6ins.); the front was stone built and the rear of earth. Partial excavation showed that no charcoal burning had taken place on this Platform but it did uncover a section of the floor and some of the post holes of a round structure 8.5m. (28ft.) in diameter. On each side there was evidence of doorways. On the South, four post holes showed that the doorway had been porched; on the North a porch and even an extension in the form of a yard or annex was probable but time did not allow for further excavation.

Neither domestic hearth nor artifacts were found. The hearth may have been there but still uncovered in the unexcavated area or there may not have been one. This lack of evidence of both hearth and of artifacts, necessitates using the general term "structure" rather than "house", for "house" implies domestication and domestication cannot be assumed without a hearth or artifacts.

Charcoal taken from the rear of the floor gave a C.14 date of -UB 3037 -904 100 b.p. - i.e. between A.D. 1020 and A.D. 1240.

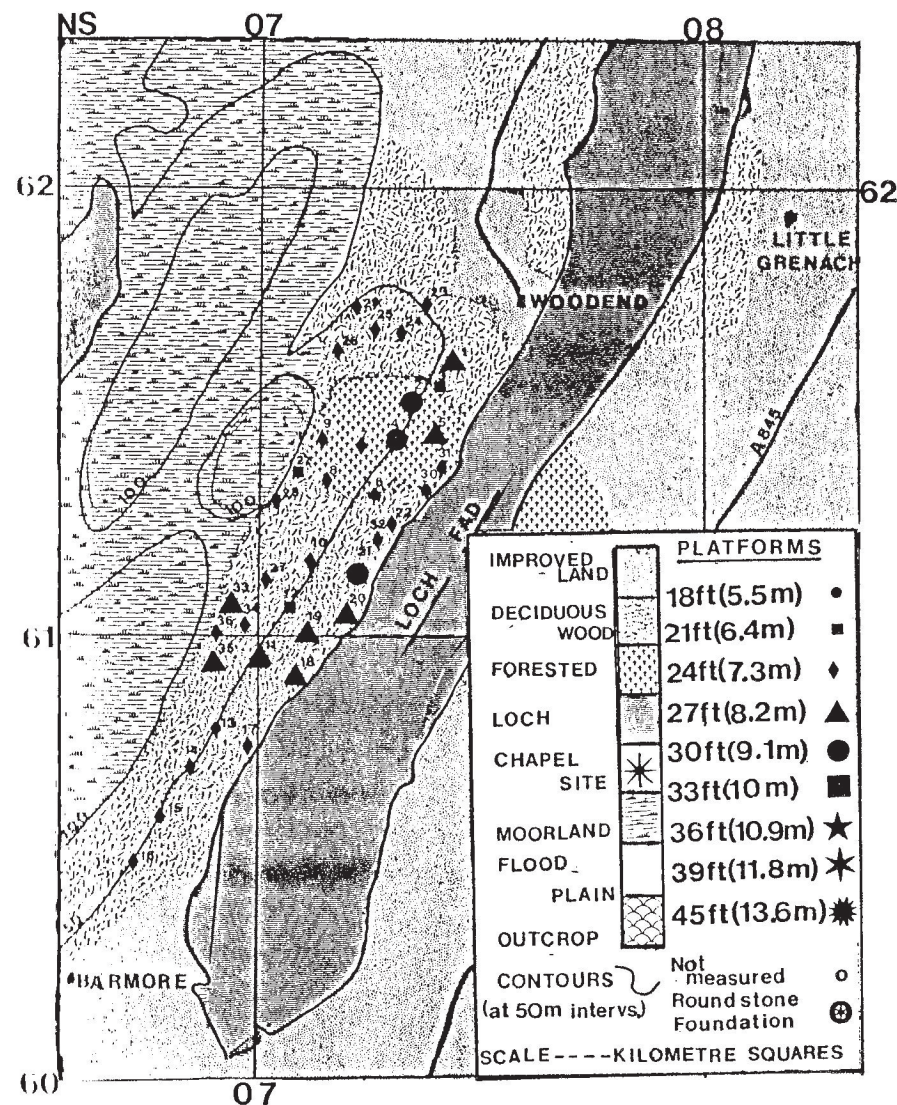
It is possible that the surface of the Platform continued to be used after the structure had been abandoned as a secondary floor sealed the post holes. This is to be expected as the probability is great that all of the other thirty-one Platforms are also foundations for round "structures" and that some of them must be "houses". These would not necessarily all be used at the same time and Platforms abandoned as hut stances would serve as useful level areas. In fact, evidence suggests that the groups of Platforms are actually the settlements of the people of the Dark Age Period and such a settlement (or village) stood on the hillside above Loch Fad one thousand years ago.

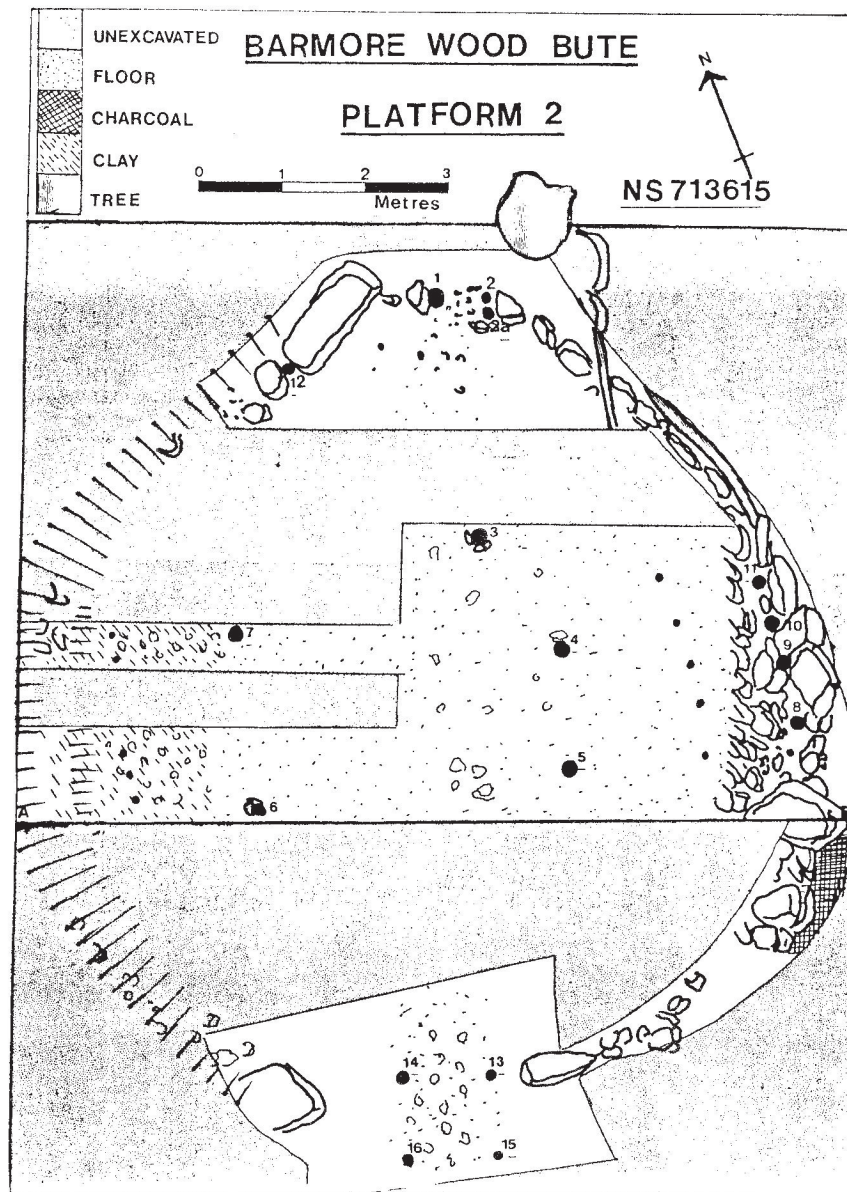
Only a few dates have been obtained from the floors and post holes of excavated Platforms. These dates all point to the Dark Age or Early Mediaeval Period. Two dates, taken from a Platform which was destroyed when the new Colintrave-Strachur road was built, were earlier. They were third century A.D. and ninth century A.D. A "house" (with a hearth) excavated on a Platform at Ardentraive, Colintrave, produced a date in exactly the same time bracket as Platform 2 of Barmore Wood.

It is now therefore possible to visualise with some confidence the seventy groups of Platforms from Kintyre to Loch Sheil as being the settlements of people living in Dalriada in the millennium between the third century A.D. and the thirteenth century A.D.

BARMORE WOOD

ISLE OF BUTE





A SMALL STRUCTURE ON ARDROSCADALE FARM Andrina Ross

In a corner of a field at Upper Ardrosdale farm (NS 042 649) is an interesting but puzzling site which was first investigated in the 1920s. According to local legend, this was a place where witches were burned. This rather doubtful explanation failed to satisfy Dr J.N. Marshall who showed the site to the eminent archaeologists Professor J. Ritchie and Ludovic Mann, in the hope of finding a more satisfactory explanation of its use. Each had his own interpretation of the site and these will be discussed later.

By the time the site was investigated again, in 1987, the area was overgrown and there had been a large accumulation of soil. The site had to be re-excavated and it was noted by Miss D.N. Marshall that there had been a general deterioration since she had first seen it with her father about sixty years before. However, the main features still remained intact.

The site comprises a circular hollow, approximately 0.7 metres in depth and with a diameter of 2.5 metres. The north side of the hollow is lined with a well-built semi-circle of orthostats but the rest of the hollow has no such definite walling. At the east side is a tumble of large stones. At the south of the hollow is a break in the circle, perhaps forming an entrance.

In the centre of the circle are three placed upright stones, a fourth stone lies flat, close by the three uprights. These stones would probably have supported a square post. There is evidence that the floor of the hollow had been paved. This, however, had deteriorated since the early investigation but Miss Marshall remembers it as having more extensive paving than is now evident.

No firm conclusions were drawn in the 1920s. Ludovic Mann suggested that a pillar might have been placed in the posthole for astronomical sitings. This explanation is unlikely because of the position of the site.

Professor James Ritchie suggested an agricultural use for the site. He had knowledge of whin-crushing mills in the north-east of Scotland and he saw some similarities at Ardrosdale. In much of Scotland, whin shoots were used to feed cattle and horses. In the north-east, these shoots were crushed by means of an upright stone which revolved in a shallow circular trench. A wooden post acted as a pivot in the centre of the circle. A horse or ox turned the stone by means of a beam which passed through the centre of it.