

BURNT MOUND, MECKNOCH FARM

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In the 1970s, Mr Johnston of Mecknoch Farm noticed a mound on his land which he felt was probably not a natural feature (NS 043 591). Under the topsoil the earth was noticeably darker. In 1986, Mrs Johnston invited Miss D.N. Marshall and Mr W.F. Cormack to investigate the site. Mr Cormack recognised it as being a Burnt Mound.

During recent years, many Burnt Mounds have been identified and many more are coming to light as people realise their significance. They are widely distributed throughout Scotland, particularly in Orkney and Shetland. In many places, such mounds must have been ploughed out without being recognised and recorded.

Description and functions

Typically, Burnt Mounds are situated beside water and are composed of split stones mixed through with a charcoal-rich soil. It is generally accepted that the mounds are an accumulation of debris from a cooking process. A hearth and trough are often found in association with these mounds. They probably date back as far as the Bronze Age.

The cooking process is thought to have been as follows. Stones would have been heated in the fire. The hot stones were transferred to the water-filled trough (made either of wood or stone) until eventually the water was hot enough to cook whatever food was available. Any heat-cracked stones and other debris were thrown away from the hearth and over the years this formed the Burnt Mound.

These cooking places were communal and perhaps used seasonally or for ceremonial feasts. How long it took to form the mound would have been dependent on the frequency of its use.

Modern experiments using this cooking method have been carried out. It was found that a large amount of water (in excess of 400 litres) could be brought to the boil in thirty-five minutes. By adding a few hot stones at intervals, the water could be kept boiling for two hours, long enough to cook joints of meat. The debris from these experiments — broken stones, charcoal etc. — was indistinguishable from the actual deposits at the Burnt Mound.

At a small minority of excavated sites, evidence of enclosing structures have been found. This has led to the tentative theory that there may have been a secondary function for these sites, such as a bathing place (an early form of sauna?).

Situation of Mecknoch Burnt Mound

In 1988, a party of volunteers from the B.N.H.S. excavated a Mecknoch Burnt Mound. The mound lies on a rough piece of sloping ground in a small steep-sided glen with a flat bottom. The Mecknoch burn runs at the south side. The present distance of the mound from the burn is about 10 metres.

However, the size and course of the burn may have altered since the time when the cooking place was in use. It is quite conceivable that, in the Bronze Age, the burn followed a different course through the glen. In the 1820s, Robert Thom constructed a dam at the Dhu Loch and also dammed the stream just above the Mecknoch-Ardscalpsie Road. Aqueducts took water to power the cotton mills in Rothesay. This would have resulted in a dramatic reduction in the volume of water. The stream as it is today is much smaller than it was prior to Thom's work. Evidence, found during excavation, of alluvial deposit some distance from the mound seems to support the theory that the stream has altered since the Bronze Age.

Excavation

Our investigation began with the digging of a trench through the mound, to discover the depth of deposit. The topsoil was approximately 0.1 metres deep. At its deepest, the burnt material was found to be 1.2 metres. It consisted of heat-cracked stone (largely sandstone) in charcoal-rich soil. Exploratory trenches were dug to ascertain the dimensions of the mound. The presence of coppiced trees made it difficult to determine the eastern edge. Overall it was found to be oval in shape. It was approximately 12 metres by 7 metres.

Most of the rock in the area was schist. It was therefore of interest that the mound material was predominantly sandstone which must have been brought in for using in the hearth.

A number of features appeared during excavation and these are marked on the plan as sites A-D.

Site A

This feature had no overlying burnt material. It comprised an upright stone set against a large flat slab. Another nearby stone may have originally also been upright. The setting had the appearance of having been man-placed. All the stones were smooth schist.

Site B

An arrangement of large, flat stones. These were beneath soil with no overlying burnt material. Just to the north of these stones was, at 10 centimetres depth, a deposit of apparently water-rolled stones.

Site C

A setting of three upright stones, one behind the other, of 0.2 metres in height. These lay beyond the burnt material.

Site D

A pit approximately 1 metre square was dug. The cross-section of the pit displayed alternate layers of coarse and fine alluvial deposit with flat and water-rolled stones at the bottom. This is evidence that the stream once flowed here.

Dating

Burnt mounds are generally accepted to date from the Bronze Age. Insufficient charcoal was obtained from the site for a Carbon 14 dating to be carried out. However, the possibility remains of a thermoluminescence test on stones from the mound.

Conclusion

The Burnt Mound at Mecknoch Farm is the first to be identified and investigated on Bute. There is evidence of Bronze Age activity in the area in the form of a cairn and cup-marked stones.

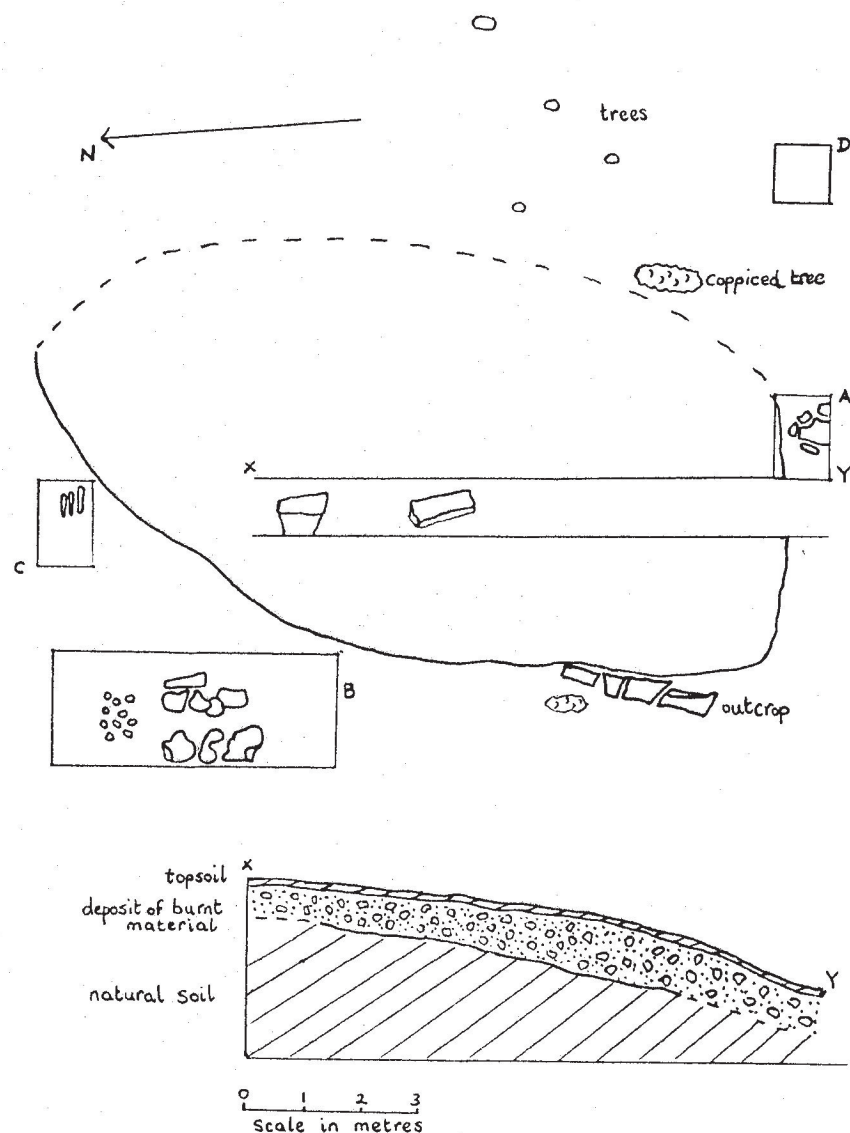
Due to the growth of trees on the eastern edge of the mound, it was not possible to excavate thoroughly in this area. No hearth or trough were found but they may have been situated on this eastern side. There was no evidence of a building or enclosure associated with the mound.

The deposit found was very similar in composition to that of other Burnt Mounds. The most notable feature of this mound was the depth of burnt material. At 1.2 metres, the deposit is much deeper than at other sites investigated in the south of Scotland.

There is more evidence of Bronze Age activity between Scalpsie and Kilwhinlick than anywhere else on Bute. There are three cairns — two at Scalpsie and one at Little Kilmory; there are three burial cists at Little Kilmory and a Standing Stone at Mecknoch. At Kilwhinlick, Mecknoch, on the shore at Little Kilmory there are outcrops of rock with cup and ring carvings. There are plain cup marks at Ardscalpsie.

References

- Scalpsie Cairn. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 11:53.
- Cairn Little Kilmory. *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, 21:19.
- Cists Little Kilmory. *Transactions of the Buteshire Natural History Society*, 11:73.



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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