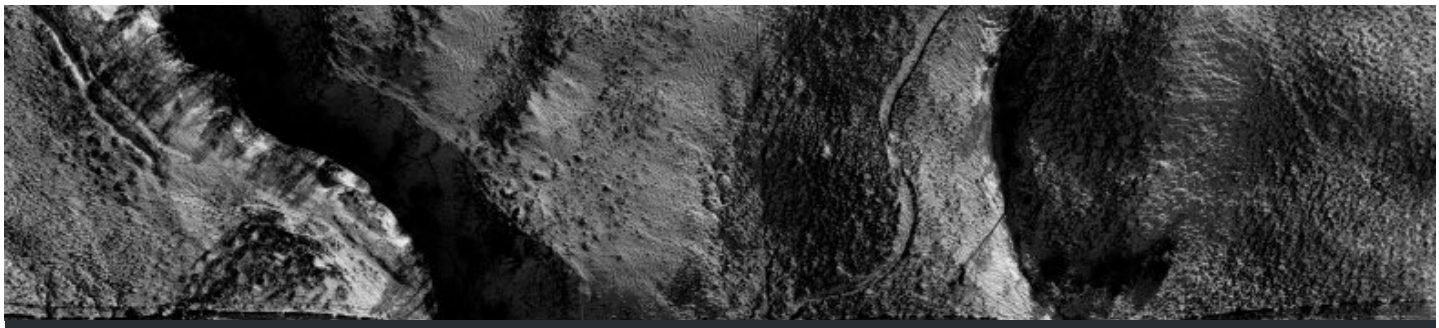
Part of Historic Environment Scotland

CANMORE

NATIONAL RECORD OF THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

Archaeology InSites

Return to Archaeology InSites



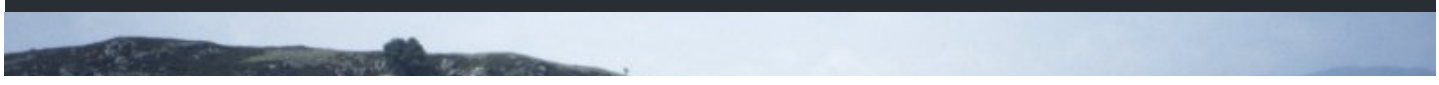
Curious buildings

Two hundred years ago prehistoric burial mounds were thought by many to be the homes of fairy folk; groups of small piles of stones (cairns) created by farmers clearing land were considered to be evidence of great battles; and Iron Age forts were often wrongly presumed to be the work of the Romans. Today, our understanding of Scotland's archaeology is very different. Much of this new understanding is based on programmes of extensive fieldwork followed by excavation, and the results of this work usually have a slow and gradual affect on the way we think about the past and interpret its remains. Every now and then, however, there is a huge discovery that both excites the profession, and radically changes how we must consider a particular topic.

One such discovery was made in the late 1980s by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS). And it was a discovery about the Picts. Over the course of two years (1987-88) the RCAHMS archaeologists carefully observed and recorded thousands of structures on the moorland and in the glens of NE Perthshire (RCAHMS 1990). During this work they gradually became aware that amongst the many hundreds of buildings recorded there were about 48 of a type that was very different from any other structure they had encountered elsewhere in Scotland. At first, no-one had much idea about their date and purpose. These curious buildings were long, round-ended and were usually broader at one end. Many had partly sunken interiors and enclosures attached to them; all of them were reduced to little more than wall-footings. These building survive mainly because they are situated on poor quality marginal land that was generally beyond the limit of medieval and modern cultivation. It is a position they shared with the very different circular houses of the Bronze and Iron Ages.

Having ruled out a prehistoric date for these strange buildings, the RCAHMS archaeologists were equally confident that they were not late-medieval or of more recent date. None of them were square-ended or contained partitions, and none could be shown to be contemporary with medieval cultivation remains. About half the buildings contained drains in their lower half, strongly suggesting that they were byre-dwellings -- houses designed to be occupied by a family and their animals. The enclosures attached to many of the buildings was another indication that animal husbandry was important to the builders.

Whilst the official publication of the survey (RCAHMS 1990) was rather vague about the possible date of these buildings, the archaeologists who undertook the fieldwork and who affectionately referred to them as 'Picty Houses', were more confident. To them, it seemed obvious that these structures must date to the late 1st millennium AD. In other words these buildings were most probably the remains of Pictish farmsteads. This was an important recognition because for the first time archaeologists could start discussing Pictish settlement based on the physical remains not just of individual sites but of sites within their contemporary landscapes. Discussion no longer needed to be dominated by the evidence of place-names and the distribution of carved stones.



Excavation

The confidence of the RCAHMS' archaeologists' identification of these structures as Pictish was borne out only a few years later when excavation was undertaken at Cultalonie on the Pitcarmick estate in 1993-5 by Glasgow University (Carver et al 2012). More recently similar results have been achieved at Lair in neighbouring Glenshee to the east (2012-16), as a result of an excavation commissioned by the Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust (http://www.glenshee-archaeology.co.uk).

These excavations have informed us that the inhabitants of the buildings so far examined lived in the second half of the 1st millennium (AD 500-1000) and were essentially stock farmers who raised sheep and cattle, and, if soil conditions allowed, probably cultivated a small area of crop. The walls of their dwellings were built largely of turf above a stone footing and their timber-framed roofs were probably covered with heather, turf or thatch – whatever material was at hand. If, at the end of its life, the organic matter and degraded turves (soil) from these buildings was spread as a fertiliser over cultivated ground, this would help explain why few of the buildings today are marked by anything more than low, grass-grown foundations.

The use of byre-dwellings – essentially animals sharing a sheltered living space with the family, has a long tradition in Scotland, lasting well into the 19th century in the NW. Such a building could keep animals safe in times of strife and sheltered in poor weather -- it was especially important to keep milking cows relatively warm in order ensure a good yield. Keeping animals indoors also provided the family with an important source of heat and it has even been said that the ammonia content of the animal urine helped to keep the house disinfected.

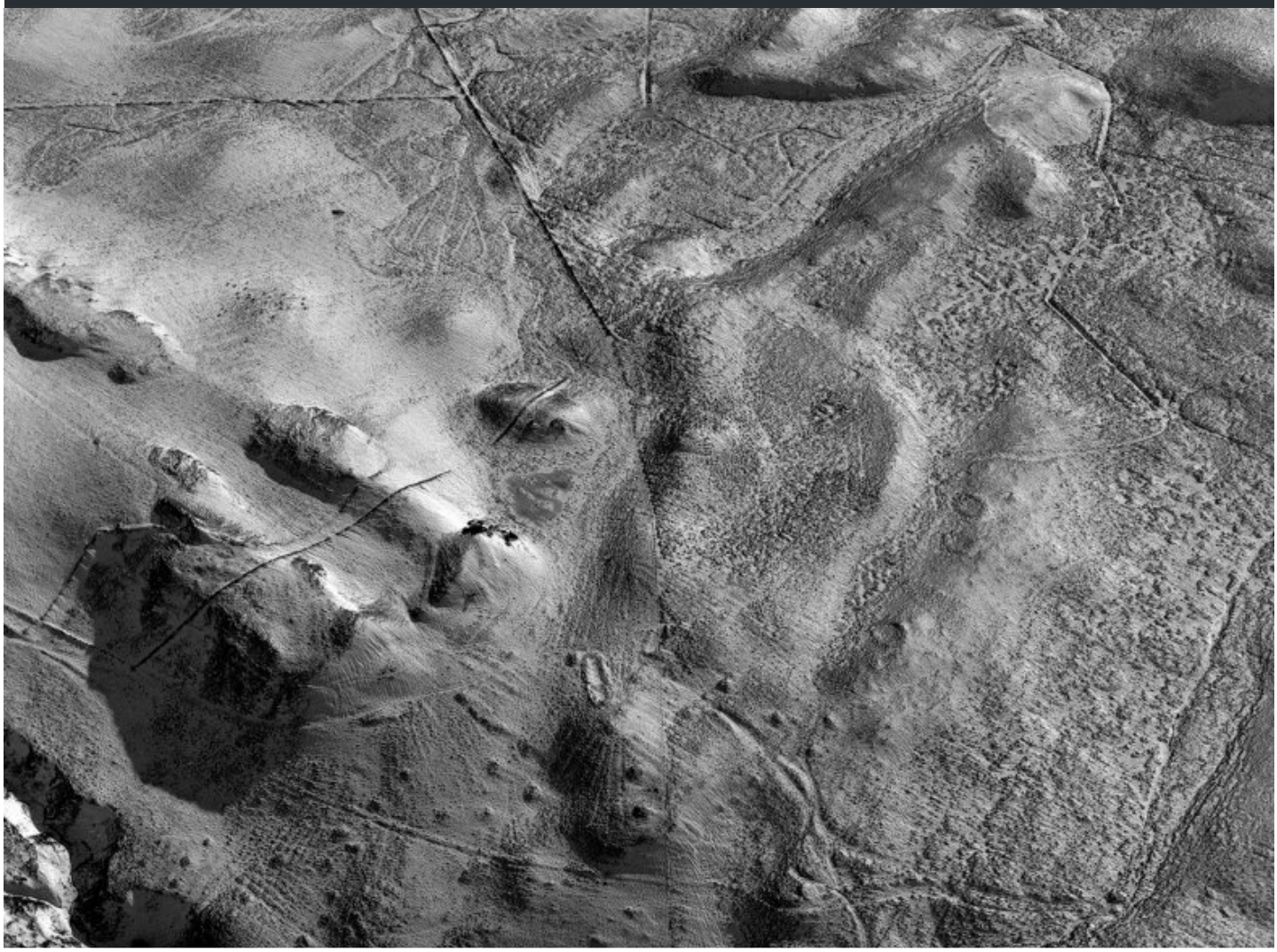
References

Carver, M, Barrett, J Downes, J and Hooper, J 2012 Pictish Byre-houses and their landscape: investigations 1993-95, Proc Soc Antiq Scot 124 (2012), 145-99.

RCAHMS 1990 North-East Perth: An Archaeological Landscape, HMSO.

John Sherriff - Operational Manager (Landscape Survey and Marine Section)

https://canmore.org.uk/site/search/result?SIMPLE_KEYWORD=pitcarmick%20burn&site_results_page=1
http://www.glenshee-archaeology.co.uk
https://canmore.org.uk/site/27339/cultalonie



#ArchInSites

Please be aware that this site may be on private land. For more information regarding access please consult the Scottish Outdoor Access Code

SUPPORTING
year of young people
bliadhna na h-òigridh
2018

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND | ÀRAINNEACHD EACHDRAIDHEIL ALBA