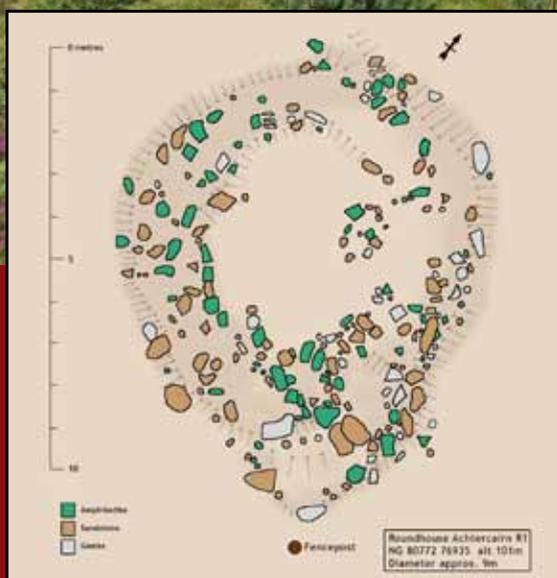
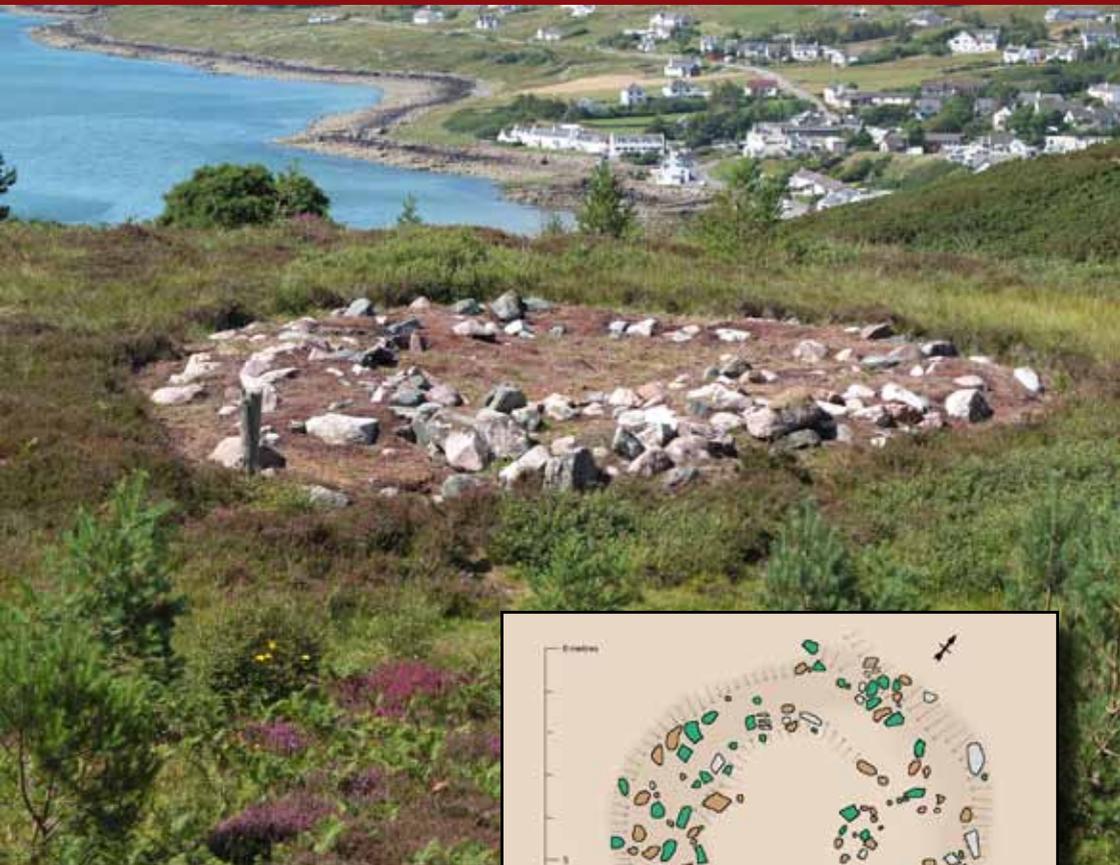


Prehistoric ROUNDHOUSES of Wester Ross and parts of Skye



The first guide to the houses of Bronze and Iron Age people in the North West Highlands



Imagine walking across a typical piece of moorland in the Scottish Highlands, and stumbling on a raised ring of stones in the heather.

Would you be surprised, or even excited, to learn that these stones may be the remains of a building from before the time of the Greeks and Romans?

The study of prehistoric remains in Wester Ross and Skye has been heavily biased towards Brochs and Duns, probably because they are clearly visible. The ordinary houses, on the other hand, tend to be covered in grass or heather or peat, but they are far more numerous.

In the last six years an effort has been made to find, survey and record these “roundhouses”. The project was initiated and is led by Anna Welti of Ullapool, with the guidance and advice of Martin Wildgoose, an archaeologist based in Skye. This booklet is a provisional guide to what has been found.

Archaeology can be both frustrating and stimulating. It aims to discover the past by examining physical remains. But it can rarely be certain about the meaning of what it finds: almost every sentence of interpretation has to begin with the word *perhaps* or *possibly*, or at best *probably*.

On the other hand, archaeology gives plenty of scope for the imagination: it is a jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces missing, but it can be enjoyable to guess what the whole picture looked like. However, this booklet will avoid such speculation as far as possible!

For a short glossary of technical terms, see the inside back cover.

(p16) means “See page 16”.



Where else are roundhouses found?

Compared with some areas, there are relatively few roundhouses in the area of Wester Ross covered by this booklet; about 400 have been found so far. The coastal plains and inland glens of Easter Ross and Sutherland had much larger populations than the rather rocky and thin-soiled west; over 2000 roundhouses have been identified in Sutherland. Dartmoor in Devon, another rocky area, has a huge number of mostly Bronze Age roundhouses: at least 5000 have been found!

In much of Britain, however, trees were more plentiful than stones, and roundhouses had wooden walls (p6). This makes them much harder to find: the only evidence may be crop marks, and post-holes when excavated.

WHAT IS A ROUNDHOUSE?

For the last 1200 years or so in Britain, we have lived in **rectangular houses**. But before that, for nearly 3000 years, most people lived in **round houses**.

In this booklet, the word **roundhouse** refers to a building whose ancient circular (or sometimes oval) walls, more or less ruined, are found here and in other parts of Britain. These walls were originally 1-2 metres thick and perhaps about 1 metre high, usually with stone inner and outer facings filled with soil or rubble, and built on a natural terrace or an artificial platform.

Most of them were originally the walls of **dwelling houses** with **thatched roofs**, probably conical; their internal diameters ranged from 3.5 to 15 metres. But many were not houses: they were **storage sheds**, **byres**, **workplaces**, or even **ritual sites** or **temples**. The last three of these may have been unroofed.

So what should we call them?

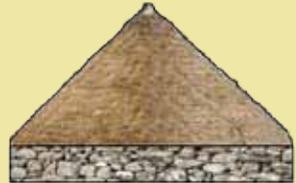
- “**Hut circle**” is the usual term used by archaeologists and on maps to refer to the ruined wall; but not all were dwellings, and the houses were more than huts (although the round houses still built in Africa, for example, are often called huts).
- “**Circular structure**” would be more accurate, but it’s not very user-friendly.
- “**Roundhouse**” is the name used throughout this booklet, but only for simplicity and convenience; bear in mind that many of these ruined walls did not belong to houses!

Round houses have been popular in many parts of the world, for several reasons:

- A circle is easier to draw than a rectangle (just tie string to a post and walk round).
- A round building is more wind-proof.
- There is more usable space in a round building, because there are no corners.
- A circle is symbolic: sun, moon, sky, horizon, life...

800 to 2000 AD

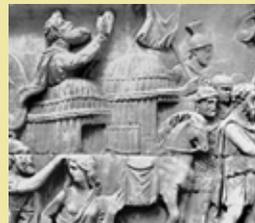
2000 BC
to 800 AD



Not a house!



African round hut



In central Europe: left, Roundhouses appear in Roman sculpture; right, this clay model is a funeral urn

FINDING



Can you see a roundhouse here?



Or here?

Over 400 roundhouses have been found in Wester Ross and the selected areas of Skye so far (2015), and no doubt there are many more to be found. But as you can see above, they are not always easy to spot.

They are all more or less ruined. Some have been adapted for use by later farmers, for example as animal enclosures. Some have been used as quarries, robbed for later walls or buildings. Some have been wholly or partly buried by soil creep or damaged by agriculture with deep ploughing. Some have been destroyed by forestry. Many have been covered by peat or by vegetation, especially heather or bracken. Those which were originally made of turf or soil have rarely survived.

Some hints on how to find them:

- Study vegetation, looking for differences: e.g. an area of grass or bracken in heather.
- Look for a flat platform, perhaps raised; or a raised ring of vegetation.
- Look for a shadow: a low sun is best for spotting suspicious shapes.
- Study aerial photography such as Google Earth.
- Feel for stones with your feet, and find out if they make part of a circle.

Look at the picture above left. The roundhouse was only found by examining online aerial photography, where it showed up as a clear circle. The wall beyond is misleading: it was built later and crosses the edge of the roundhouse. On site a few stones can be seen, and a slight platform has been dug out, but to trace the wall you need some imagination!

In the picture above right some of the the stones are obvious, but they could be a natural outcrop. It would be easy to walk past without noticing that people used to live here.

Warning: the great enemies of roundhouse-finders are **Bracken, Heather and Fences!**

This roundhouse showed as a “nest” in the heather, and could only be seen from above. Many people had walked past it without noticing anything, and it needed a low sun and shadow to reveal it.

On the front cover you can see what it looks like now that the heather has been removed. See also page 26.



What do you do when you think you have found a previously unknown roundhouse? In Wester Ross and Skye, Anna Welti of Ullapool Field Club is making a database of all roundhouses, and their positions are being put on the HER website (p28). If it is not there, you could contact her (annawelti@btinternet.com), giving a map reference so that she can tell you if your discovery is really unknown.

Most of the roundhouses have been surveyed, using a standard form. If a roundhouse seems especially interesting, it may deserve to be mapped using a plane table, producing a detailed and accurate plan.



Surveying

Placing flags round the inside and outside edges of the wall may be helpful to make its outline clear. Then a survey form is filled in with measurements, orientation, notes on vegetation, sketches, etc; photographs are taken. At least 400 roundhouses have been found and surveyed in Wester Ross and Skye so far, all of them by volunteers, often in poor weather and on rough ground in remote spots.

Plane-tabling

This is a simple method of mapping the structure on paper. A paper sheet is taped to a horizontal board (table) on a stand. Selected stones are marked on the paper: one person uses a special sight and a ruler to fix the direction; the other measures the distance with a tape-measure. The scale is usually 1cm to 1m.

You can see some of the resulting plans on the cover, page 15 and pages 21-24.

On the right is the original plane-table plan for the roundhouse shown on the cover. The marks at the top show the direction and distance of selected stones from the reference point, the dot at the bottom which shows the position of the table. The selected stones and some others have been drawn in.

The final version on the cover has the remaining stones added (unusually, colour-coded with geological information), and hachures to show slope.



EXCAVATING

NB This needs the landowner's permission, and preferably guidance from a professional archaeologist!

The first roundhouse digs in our area were done in Skye by Roger Miket and Martin Wildgoose. Martin later developed the technique of “test-pitting” during the High Pasture Cave Landscape Survey. The first mainland digs took place in 2012, and were an initiative of Anna Welti: the “Wee Digs Project” (p20). These digs used Martin’s technique, and were supervised by him; they involved many local amateur enthusiasts. The plan was to dig three pits or trenches at each roundhouse:

- (1) a metre-square pit in the middle to find the hearth, which might provide charcoal for carbon-dating;
- (2) a metre-wide trench across the wall to discover its structure and also the inside floor (occupation horizon) which might provide evidence that people lived here.
- (3) outside the roundhouse, a metre-square soil test pit, to study the layers of soil and take samples for later analysis.

In practice, especially when plenty of people turned up eager to dig, trenches were sometimes extended or extra ones dug. These pictures from some of the Wee Digs (p21-26) illustrate the process.



A lot of kit has to be carried to the site. There are gardening basics like spades, buckets, kneelers and gloves. The specialist kit includes: small trowels, brushes, tape measures, metre grids, string and pegs, drawing boards, measuring poles and sticks, flags. Also waterproofs and midge repellents!

Dig p23



First the trenches are marked out with pegs and string; here the wall trench is seen, a metre wide. Then the surface soil or peat is stripped off. Some random stones are appearing, and the wall is beginning to show as a line on the right. The random stones have mostly fallen from the wall, and are called tumble.

p22



The soil is removed carefully with trowels to reveal all the stones. It is not always easy to tell where the wall begins or ends. There may be a surprising amount of tumble spreading a surprising distance: it has fallen or been knocked off the wall by human or natural causes. Careful note is taken of the different contexts (layers).

p26



Once all the stones have been revealed, they are carefully cleaned, then photographed and drawn. Only then is the tumble removed, in the hope of revealing the base of the wall itself. This is usually a double wall: inner and outer stone facings with a filling of smaller stones, rubble or soil. Here the inner facing is reasonably clear. The amount of tumble may give an idea of the wall's original height. *p26*



Meanwhile the smaller central trench, a metre square, is being dug. Here an area of paving has been revealed, with no sign of fire. This was interpreted as belonging to a nearby later shieling hut; it was photographed and drawn, and then removed. As expected, evidence of a much earlier hearth fire was found beneath it, with some charcoal. *p23*



Outside the roundhouse, a pit is dug to reveal the layers of soil. Here markers separate the different types. The stony layer at the bottom is the glacial till which underlies most of the land. On the left a Kubiena Box has been pressed into the wall; this will be removed with a cube of soil which will be sent for laboratory analysis. Soil samples are also taken from within the roundhouse. *p24*



Here a careful plan drawing is being made of part of the wall trench, using a metre grid. Plan drawings are made at each stage of the excavation. When the wall trench is complete, a section drawing will also be made of its side (*p24*); this involves using a tape measure and plumb line. After the dig the trenches will be filled in, and the drawings preserve information about what has been buried. *p24*



Perhaps the most important skill for an archaeologist is interpretation, based on experience. This means working out what the layout of stones or the pattern of soils means. For example, what would you say about the stones shown here? Is their formation natural or artificial? If artificial, what was their purpose? *p25*

DESIGN and CONSTRUCTION

Little is known for certain about roundhouse design. As is usual in archaeology, it is necessary to add the word “perhaps” to most statements, because there is no written evidence from the time when they were built and no complete buildings survive.

What do we know for certain from studying the remains?

- A roundhouse was built on a flat platform, either natural or artificial. An artificial platform may be revetted, i.e. the slope is shored up by stonework; it can be positive (built out of the slope) or negative (cut into the slope), or both.
- The wall was more or less circular, 1 to 2 metres thick. It was made of stone, or rarely of soil (p26) or turf. It usually had inner and outer facings with a filling.
- There was an entrance which usually faced roughly SE. At the entrance the walls often had an extension or a thickening to make a sheltered passage.
- There was a hearth fire in the centre, either on the ground or on stones or slabs.
- There was often a ring of wooden upright posts about a metre inside the wall to support the roof. This is known from the post-holes which have been found.

That’s it. Unknowns include the height of the wall and the design of the roof.

WALL

About 85% of roundhouses are circular, 15% oval or sub-circular (with rounded corners). 76% of the walls are between 1m and 2m thick. They were probably about 1m to 1.5m high. Almost all (98%) are double-skinned: inner and outer drystone facings, with a filling of smaller stones, rubble, soil or turf. The facings often include vertical slabs, known as orthostats. Some walls may have had a stone base with turf on top of it.

The wall would provide good insulation, and was strong enough to help support the weight of the roof (up to 20 tonnes). The inside might have been lined with wattle panels.

The inner diameters of roundhouses vary from 3.5m to 15m; 58% are in the range 5.6m to 8m.

Where there was danger of slippage, walls could be supported by an extra buttress. Some roundhouses had ditches round them for drainage.

In many parts of Britain, where there are fewer stones, roundhouses had **wooden walls**. These consisted of a ring of upright posts with wattle and daub panels attached. Wattle is a mesh of wooden branches or twigs (e.g. hazel); it is daubed with a mixture of clay, soil, animal hair, straw, etc. In one reconstruction in England, ten tons of daub were needed.

The statistics in this booklet come from Anna Welti’s research project (p20). All percentages are approximate.



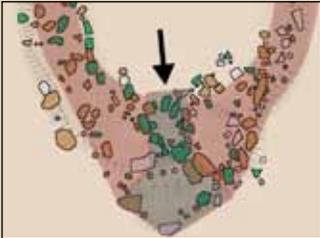
This cross-section shows the outer and inner facings made of large stones, infilled with smaller stones



A model roundhouse (unfinished!); note the large extended entrance



Extended terminals



The very extended entrance area of the roundhouse shown on the front cover (and p26) is hard to interpret, and may have been blocked; this is a possible interpretation, with a platform outside the door



Blackened soil indicates the hearth



Reddened soil indicates a very hot fire

ENTRANCE

80% face E, SE or S; about half face SE. The reason is uncertain. It may be to do with the sunrise, either for light or for reasons of belief or ritual; or, more likely, it may be to avoid the prevailing weather (it came from the same direction then as now, W/SW) and cold northerly winds.

About two thirds of walls have extended terminals (wall ends) to form an entrance passage: the wall grows wider as it approaches the entrance on each side, sometimes to a surprising extent (was there neighbour rivalry?). The passage or porch so formed may have been roofed. Other roundhouses have standard terminals with no porch.

The entrance was often paved or cobbled to prevent mud. Some seem to have had a raised platform or paved patio area outside the entrance.

Sometimes the entrance was deliberately blocked off when the building was abandoned.

HEARTH

The hearth fire was normally at the centre, on stone or bare soil, and smoke filtered up through the roof. The exact position can only be found by excavation; evidence includes charcoal, useful for carbon-dating; soil blackened by charcoal; or soil and stones reddened by higher temperatures (oxidised) – the deeper the reddening reaches, the hotter the fire.

This was the centre of the household, for heating and cooking. Water was heated in pots or in a small pit lined with stone and clay, by putting pot-boilers in it: i.e. stones heated on the fire.

Around the hearth small post-holes are sometimes found: these might relate to fittings such as a screen or pot-holder.

Size

Perhaps surprisingly, **larger roundhouses tend to be older**. The most likely reason for this is that before the late Bronze Age there were more and bigger trees available for building the roofs (p19).

It is also possible that extended families lived together more in earlier years. A 15 metre roundhouse, for example, might have fitted as many as 30 people.

ROOF

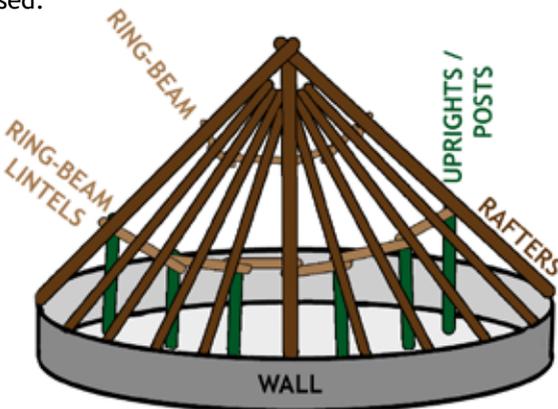
We know that **upright posts** were used to support the roof in most roundhouses, because post-holes have been found (*right; also p13,21*). These formed a ring 1m to 2m inside the wall. It is assumed that they were linked by horizontal **lintels** which formed a **ring-beam**.

The shape of the roof is debatable. It is most likely that it was a simple cone, with many **rafters** sloping from the wall to the apex at about 45 degrees. The apex would be too crowded if all of them met there, so perhaps only four or six went the full height. Another ring-beam would be needed at about two-thirds height to support the rest. To join timbers together, rope or wooden pegs would be used, or perhaps mortise and tenon joints.

Hundreds of smaller sticks called **purlins** were attached to the rafters to hold the thatch. Thatch would be up to 30cm thick, and consist of straw, rushes, bracken, heather or whatever was available. This can be surprisingly waterproof.

Reconstructions have shown that a well-made roof like this is remarkably stable, strong, windproof and spacious; it can actually stand up without the wall's support. A reconstruction at Butser Farm, England, survived the 1987 hurricane, a tornado, and heavy rain.

The only weak point in this roof is the entrance, where the cone is broken. Many designs are possible to make this reasonably strong and weather-proof, but we do not know which were used.



Post-hole: packing stones have been driven in round the post to hold it steady



A reconstruction: rafters, and the upper ring-beam with extra tension beams



Another reconstruction (wooden-walled) being thatched

Round houses were often rebuilt on the same site. In the Wee Digs Project (p20), two examples of this were found. One had a smaller stone wall built inside a larger (p24); the other had a stone wall built on top of an older wall which, unusually, was an earth bank (p26).

There are other theories about the shape of the roof. One is that it might have been a double cone: a truncated steep cone at the bottom, and a small shallow cone above. This would give more space and need shorter tree trunks, but would have structural disadvantages.

Another idea, surprisingly, is that the rafters met at a ridge, not a point; this is based on models used as funerary urns, found in central Europe (see also page 1).



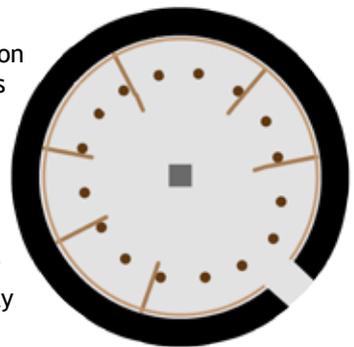
INTERIOR

The inside of a roundhouse would have been dark and smoky. Smoke from the fire simply filtered through the roof (as in later highland cottages). Light would come from the door, the fire, and simple rush lamps. The smoky atmosphere must have had a damaging effect on life expectancy.

The floor might have been hard earth or smoothed with clay, and kept clean by brushing: many finds come from beside the wall, which implies the ancient equivalent of “brushing under the carpet”! Most rubbish was taken outside and put on the nearby dump or midden. Middens can, if found, be useful sources of evidence for the archaeologist: broken pottery, discarded artefacts, bones of animals or fish which were eaten. But they are not often found; most of their contents could be used as fertiliser.

Large roundhouses may have had an upper floor in the form of a wooden platform supported by the uprights. This could have been used for storage, or for smoking meat, or perhaps for sleeping, although smoke might make this difficult.

The use of upright support posts lends itself to division of the perimeter into compartments, an idea which is supported by evidence from some roundhouses. There could have been rooms for sleeping, working (e.g. spinning), storage, food preparation (e.g. grinding corn with a quern) etc. It has been suggested that daily activities may have followed the sun round the circuit of the house. The partitions might have used wattles or animal skins. It is thought that the inside of the wall may have been similarly lined for comfort and warmth.



A roundhouse might last several generations, or even centuries (the dating results on page 21 may be evidence of this). But in the groups which have been found, we can not assume that all were contemporary: i.e. the “villages” were not necessarily as large as they look today. New houses might be built using abandoned ones as quarries for stones, but still leaving behind a visible circle for us to find.

LOCATION

The locations in which roundhouses were built satisfy some or all of the following conditions.

Glacial moraines

The Scottish Highlands were heavily glaciated in the Ice Ages. The final stages of glaciation included two “re-advances” after retreats: the important Wester Ross Readvance about 16,000 years ago, and the smaller Loch Lomond Readvance ending about 11,500 years ago.

Glaciers left moraines: heaps of rocks, rubble, and sandy soil (glacial till) which had been carried by glaciers and dropped at their edges (lateral) or, when they melted, at their foot (terminal). **Rivers** carried the moraine and their own eroded material to form alluvial deposits.

The builders did not have tools for quarrying rock for roundhouse walls, and relied on finding stones of suitable sizes: the moraine gave these, especially before peat started to cover the land (about 1500BC). So most roundhouses were built on or near moraines or on alluvial deposits. For example, the many roundhouses near the Sand River, Gairloch, follow lines of glacial deposits from the Wester Ross Readvance.



Sand River area, North Gairloch: 30 RHs here with plenty of building stone and good soil in the glacial moraine.

Fertile soil

The builders were farmers, growing crops such as barley and oats and keeping animals such as cattle, sheep and goats.

The **glacial till** and alluvial deposits referred to above made fertile soil. Some **bedrock** erodes to form more fertile soil than others: for example, the basalt of Skye or the amphibolite of Achtercairn (Gairloch).

Near hills

Hill country would be good for hunting and for upland grazing, especially in summer. It is possible that transhumance was practised (p16, shielings). In early years the climate was warmer and roundhouses could be built on higher ground.

Well drained land

Valley bottoms were swampy and poorly drained, and houses tended to be sited well above on hill slopes and gravel ridges. Today this situation is reversed: for example, see the Dundonnell group (p30): here the valley bottom is now fertile and farmed, and the roundhouses are on relatively poor high moorland.

Near the sea

There are few roundhouses far inland (>3km) in this part of the world. No doubt the people fished the sea and collected shellfish. Seaweed was useful as fertiliser. There was certainly some trade and travel by sea. Travel by land would have been difficult: there were no roads and often thick woodland or scrub and boggy ground.

A good view

A majority of roundhouses have an open outlook. This may be for **security**, enabling them to see enemies approaching, but there is no other evidence that these were dangerous times here. It may be for **communication**, so that signals could be sent or local activities seen. The outline of a mountain horizon might have had **ritual** meaning or acted as a calendar. But perhaps the builders simply liked a good view!



Dundonnell: a roundhouse with a fine view of the mountain An Teallach

Near fresh water

Water was needed for cooking, drinking and washing, but oddly many roundhouses are some distance from a stream. Either water had to be fetched, or there were wells or springs nearby which are now dry. Also note the burnt mounds found beside streams (p14). Large rivers or lochs could also be used for travel.

Plenty of trees

Trees were needed for building the roofs. Areas where there are roundhouses but which are tree-less today were no doubt originally wooded. A typical roundhouse might have used fifty trees with straight trunks. Woodland was also good for hunting. This area was thickly wooded during the climatic optimum period, up to 3200BC. After about 1500BC the number of trees declined seriously due to climate change (p19), and later also due to human felling for timber and burning for agriculture.

Fuel for the fire

Wood was the main fuel for the hearth fire. After about 1500BC, as the climate became wetter, peat formed more quickly (mostly from moss), and so in the Iron Age it could have been used as a fuel.

Neighbours

Most roundhouses are in local groups or communities. 77% are in random clusters, 15% in lines; only 8% are on their own. Some Iron Age communities had an enclosing boundary wall.



Ancient tree in peat

Today the nearest trees to this roundhouse are 6km away, but there must have been more when the house was built

Bracken

This remarkably successful fern, which makes it hard to see many roundhouses from June onwards, is also a menace to archaeologists. Four of the six sites investigated by the Wee Digs project (p20) were infested by it. Its fronds, dead or alive, cover the ground; but the bulk of the plant is underground in the form of a huge network of rhizomes. In a quarter kilometre square the rhizomes can weigh up to 500 tons! In the digs they were found spreading through and confusing all the contexts (layers), both making digging very difficult and destroying the finer detail of the archaeology. But at least they had not managed to destroy the walls.

FINDS

According to the law, any portable find has to be reported to the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh and may be claimed by the museum. Metal detecting needs the landowner's permission.

The location of any find is carefully recorded, including the **context**: i.e. the layer in which it was found. For example, Context 1 may be peat, Context 2 brown soil, Context 3 orange glacial till. One of these may form the **occupation horizon** (the floor level).

Stone

Even after the Stone Ages (p18), stones were put to many uses; and they have survived better than other materials for us to find. For most tools, water-smoothed pebbles (normally from the shore) were favoured: smooth round stones which are cleaner, less likely to break or flake, and comfortable to the hand. These are often found discarded in the floor or against the wall.

- **Packing stones and post-pad**: a post-hole may be found by careful digging: a hole filled with out-of-context soil, perhaps with packing stones round its edge to keep the post steady (p8 picture), or with a post-pad stone on which the post rested.
- **Hammer stone**: perhaps showing signs of chipping on one end; used, for example, for hammering in packing stones or wooden pegs or for shaping other stones.
- **Anvil**: a larger stone on which things were hammered.
- **Polisher or Rubber stone**: smooth on one side; used for smoothing leather, wood etc, or grinding corn on a saddle quern.
- **Quernstone**: a large smooth stone used for grinding corn; with a rubber, backwards and forwards (saddle quern, *right*), or later with a rotating quernstone on top (rotary quern).
- **Pot-Boiler**: a small stone heated in the fire and then put in cold water to heat it; water-smoothed pebbles were preferred. When they split (because of the violent temperature change) they were discarded. They may show small cracks on the surface, reddening by fire, and jagged edges where broken.
- **Stone artefacts**: arrow-heads, blades and scrapers made of imported flint or local quartz; axe-heads; a stone lamp was found near Gairloch (*right*); also the discarded chips from the manufacturing processes.

Other materials

- **Pottery**: clay pots were made throughout the period for cooking, storage, drinking, burial rites, etc. Usually these can be dated by an expert. In Wester Ross fragments may be difficult to distinguish from the local Torridonian sandstone.
- **Metal**: bronze from the Bronze Age, about 2300-700BC, iron from the Iron Age, about 700BC to 450AD. Axe heads, swords, spears, ornaments. These are uncommon here.



bronze
spear-head
(1000-600BC) ⁶



a large water-smoothed stone acting as a post-pad in a shallow post-hole



large two-handed hammer stone: with a close-up of its point, showing damage



smaller hammer, one-handed

possible polisher, smoothed on the top right



broken pot-boiler



polisher (smoothed upper surface) which has been used as a pot-boiler and cracked apart



part of an "assemblage" of quartz stones and chips, found close together (p26): evidence of Neolithic tool-making



bronze axe-head (1800-1600BC) ^G



beaker found in a cist grave at Poolewe (1800-1600BC) ^G



what is this? iron slag?



saddle quern with rubber (reproduction) ^G



stone lamp (400-600AD) ^G

^G these items are in Gairloch Heritage Museum: we are grateful for permission to photograph them

RELATED STRUCTURES

There are many other prehistoric structures in Wester Ross and Skye; some are closely associated with roundhouses, some are developments based on their design, some relate to later farming practices but use stones from the roundhouse remains.

The stone-walled roundhouses found here are sometimes called **Atlantic Roundhouses**: these are either **Simple** (the type with which this booklet deals), or **Complex** (including wheelhouses and brochs).

Contemporary

WALLS. More than half the roundhouses are within or next to a walled field or field system which is probably of the same period; however, walls are notoriously hard to date unless they can be definitely associated with a datable building. Typically these walls are: (1) not straight but irregular; (2) made with large stones, including orthostats; (3) with gaps in them. This style is sometimes called “dog’s-tooth”. Some may be no more than boundary markers, or they could have been completed with turf, smaller stones, sticks, gorse etc to make walls capable of keeping livestock in or out.

CEREMONIAL AND RITUAL SITES. Warning: archaeologists tend to use the word “ritual” to explain any structure which they do not understand! But probable ritual sites have been found, typically places with distant views. We can not tell what kind of rites were performed here. One possible larger Iron Age ceremonial centre in the form of a roundhouse wall has been identified (p23 and *right*). The most impressive prehistoric ritual centre found in the study area is in Skye at High Pasture Cave. Look on the internet for the extraordinary story of the work here in 2003-10.

BURNT MOUND. In many places water was heated in a tank beside a stream, using the same method as in the houses: heated pot-boiler stones. The discarded stones form large heaps, often in a kidney shape round the water tank. The purpose of this outdoor hot water is not certain: it might have been used for cooking or washing or even as a sauna. Cooking



Two sections of dog's-tooth wall



Orthostat and stone circle: a ritual site?



Midwinter solstice sunset, seen directly through the entrance of a very large Iron Age circle at Achtercairn: is this significant?



A burnt mound

might be done more easily in a dry pit: the meat was placed on hot stones and covered over.

BURIALS. In some areas there are Bronze Age burial mounds or cairns, and a few cist burials have been found (small stone-lined graves capped by a slab). Both these were probably for people of special status. It is not known whether or where everyone else was buried; it is most likely that “sky burial” was used: i.e. bodies were left in the open air for birds and animals to devour.

ENIGMATIC STRUCTURES. This useful phrase covers any as yet unexplained structure. For example, the excavation at Braemore (p20) revealed a roundhouse wall which incorporated cellular structures containing charcoal-rich soil, and the entrance faced NW. A stone circle at Achtercairn with Neolithic charcoal in it may have been a work area (p26 bottom).

Developments

WHEELHOUSE. These are Iron Age roundhouses with built-in radial stone subdivision of the interior into compartments. They are found in the Outer Hebrides and Shetland, but only two possible ones have been recorded on the mainland, including the very large roundhouse at Mellon Udrigle (p30 and *right*).

DUN (*doon*). This rather loose term usually means a defensive area with a rampart, built from about 1000BC. Some enclosed one or more roundhouses, some were hill forts or refuges.

CRANNOG. The name is a Gaelic word for “a wooden structure”, and these are wooden roundhouses built on wooden platforms over water. They are sometimes seen now as islands, consisting of the stones which were used to support the often replaced wooden posts. They were built from before 1000BC and on into historical times.

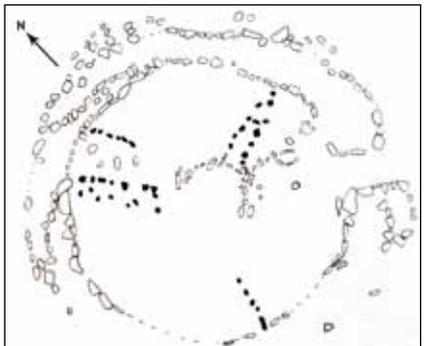
BROCHS. The best known prehistoric buildings in Scotland, these are grand versions of the roundhouse design with high double walls (shaped like a cooling tower) and upper floors.



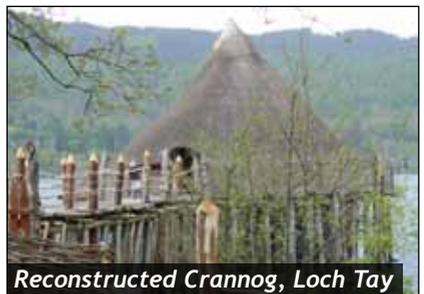
Cist Grave in Skye, built in a Neolithic burial cairn



This stone ring may be a work area



Plane-table plan of Mellon Udrigle roundhouse. It is possible, but now thought unlikely, that this was a Wheelhouse: note the stones marked in black. External diameter about 17.5m.



Reconstructed Crannog, Loch Tay

About 500 have been found, mainly on the west coast, the islands and Caithness. Most date from about 200BC to 100AD, and all are of similar design. Their purpose is unclear: defence or ostentation? In our area there are brochs at Achiltibuie, Applecross, Loch Broom and Skye.

Later

Roundhouse remains are often confused or damaged by the works of later farmers...

SHIELINGS. Transhumance is the practice of taking the livestock in summer to a high pasture or “shieling”, away from the crop fields. This was certainly done in medieval and early modern times, and quite possibly in roundhouse times. About a third of roundhouses have shieling remains overlying or near them. The roundhouse remains were a convenient source of stone for building the small tent-like huts (also called shielings) or animal pens. The roundhouse wall itself was often adapted for use as an enclosure.

FIELD RE-USE. The walls built by the “old people” were gratefully used and adapted by later farmers. Many have clear cultivation banks and ditches in them: “lazybed”, made by hand with soil and seaweed between turf walls; or “rig and furrow”, made by ploughing.

STONE CLEARANCE CAIRNS. When fields were cleared, the unwanted stones were sometimes piled up and formed cairns. These could come from any period.

COTTAGES. The ruins of later pre-clearance or pre-improvement cottages are abundant: dry-stone walls, often originally topped by turf.

SHEEP FARMING. After 1750AD sheep became common, and the remains of structures such as small lambing or twinning pens or large “fanks” are found.



Interior of a Broch at Glenelg (conserved 1902)



Shieling hut built later inside a roundhouse



Old lazybeds



Clearance cairns: they had a bad stone problem here!

Carbon Dating

Charcoal is often found at the central hearth of a roundhouse, and can be used for carbon dating. It is the most likely organic matter to be found intact in roundhouses.

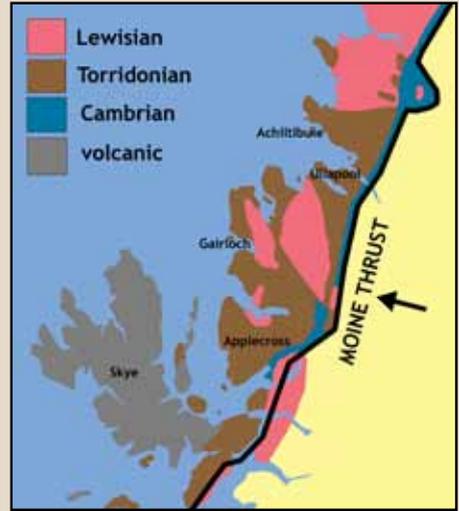
Carbon 14 is found in all organic material: wood, bone, shells, etc. As soon as the living matter dies, the carbon starts to decay at a steady rate. Using Accelerator Mass Spectrometry to measure the state of decay, the matter can be dated. For the past 5000 years the dating can be reasonably accurate within about 50 years.

GEOLOGY

As you study roundhouses, you can not help noticing the rocks used to build them. Almost all of them were plucked from the bedrock by glaciers, carried some distance, and deposited by the melting ice. Without this glacial moraine, there would be few stone roundhouses.

The very simplified map (*right*) shows the source of these rocks. In Wester Ross the building stones are most likely to be Lewisian Gneiss (3 billion years old) or Amphibolite (2 billion), or Torridonian Sandstone (1 billion); the Cambrian Quartzite is rarely found. Skye is more complex: a varied series of younger igneous rocks and earlier sedimentary rocks.

The North West is defined by the Moine Thrust: a huge tectonic earth movement 430 million years ago which almost smothered the ancient rocks with Moine Schist.



This picture from Achtercairn shows part of a roundhouse wall's inner facing with a cairn which was built inside it using stones from the wall, possibly by the last inhabitants as they abandoned it; it may be a burial site. The local rock is the grey-green Amphibolite; the reddish brown stones are Torridonian sandstone; the white stones are Gneiss. It is likely that the builders enjoyed the varied geology and selected their stones with care.

What Archaeology can discover is very limited...



This tumbled ring of stones, half heather-hidden, is no accident but the ancient bones of a home where flesh and blood lived and loved, worked, raised children, endured and enjoyed. With trowel and trench we may exhume the bones, sift and sample and study, measure and map, searching out tiny traces of people past, the precious discards from their daily life: peeping through the keyhole of their home, knocking vainly at their silent door. But no, the house is dead; its soul has flown far beyond the limits of our vision. Of lives lived here three thousand years ago, the empty shell is all that we can know.

WHO and WHEN

Prehistory means the period before written records tells us what happened. Here in the North West, partly because the Romans never came here, there is no written history until early Christian times (about 600AD). The whole period of roundhouse use is shrouded in mystery. We do not even know who the builders were!

But deductions and guesses can be made based on what happened elsewhere, on discoveries about climate and vegetation, on genetic research, and on archaeological finds.

The dates of the “Ages” given here are the accepted standard dates for Scotland. However, these was no sharp division between Ages: change was gradual.

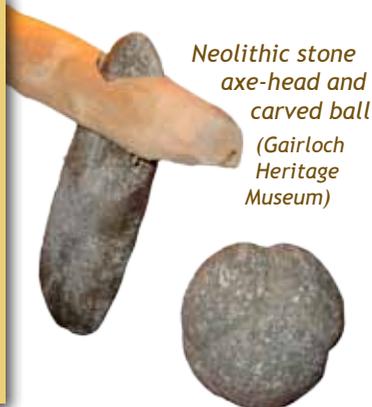
ICE AGE: to 9500 BC. Ice scours the land, removing all plant and animal life, and making it impossible to say if people lived here before.

LATE MESOLITHIC AGE: 8000-4000 BC (Late Middle Stone Age). Life returns, and a small number of nomadic hunter-gatherers reach here (Britain is attached to the continent, so movement is easy). People live in caves or portable tents (but an oval building from 8000BC has been found in East Lothian, perhaps winter quarters: the oldest structure found in Scotland). The first evidence of people in the NW is on the island of Rum about 6500BC (so they must have had boats). The climate improves steadily. Two stone-working sites have been found in our area (Redpoint near Gairloch, and Camas Daraich in Skye), which continued to be used in Neolithic times. Other materials used were wood, bone and animal skins.

NEOLITHIC AGE: 4000-2300 BC (New Stone Age). New ideas spread gradually north: people start to settle in one place and farming begins. The climate is at its best about 3200BC, and trees cover much of the land, but many are cleared to make fields. The population grows. A few possibly late Neolithic roundhouses have been found in Skye, but most houses are wooden (compare Orkney, where the slabby sandstone makes building in stone easy); traces of large rectangular wooden halls have been found elsewhere. Pottery is first made. Great monuments are built in some areas (e.g. megalith circles), but not here. See page 26 (bottom) for evidence from this period.

Who were these people?

They must originally have migrated from Europe, when Doggerland existed as a land bridge in the southern North Sea; some may have sailed up the west coast. DNA analysis suggests that 80% of British people are descended in part from these original hunter-gatherers. The language, right down to historical times, is thought likely to have been a form of P-Celtic, coming from the Welsh rather than the Gaelic (Q-Celtic) side of the Celtic family. The so-called Bronze and Iron Ages and the Pictish period did not involve changes of people, only gradual changes of ideas, culture and technologies.



*Neolithic stone
axe-head and
carved ball
(Gairloch
Heritage
Museum)*

In 2008 Anna Welti of Ullapool attended a lecture by Rachel Pope on the prehistoric circular structures of north and central Britain. This inspired her to make a detailed investigation of roundhouses in NW Scotland, an area which had been largely neglected. A chance came later that year to arrange a dig at Braemore Square, near Ullapool, as part of an investigation of an interesting area beside the river; it turned out that the “hut circle” there was not a dwelling house.

Anna’s ground-breaking investigation took the form of a 30,000 word undergraduate Dissertation for Aberdeen University, based on field survey and the production of a database. She decided to limit the area covered in detail to: Achiltibuie, Ullapool, Gairloch and Loch Ewe, and those parts of Skye where Martin Wildgoose had already been working.

Each roundhouse found was surveyed using a standard form: size, siting, GPS position, orientation, vegetation, with photographs and sketches (p3). A network of about 100 keen local volunteers developed, and many previously unknown roundhouses were found. Results were transferred from the survey forms into the database. From the database many statistical results could be extracted; some of these have been quoted in this booklet.

Field study alone told little about the use, structure or date of the roundhouses, so in 2012 Anna set up the **Wee Digs Community Archaeology Project**. With the help of Ullapool Field Club, a programme of exploratory digs was arranged, funded by Highland Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund. Six roundhouses were selected, in three areas, and test pits were dug in each (p4). 55 local volunteers and seven schools were involved, and Martin Wildgoose (*right*) was the professional archaeologist. There were also two artists-in-residence, Mrs G Rex and Viveca Port.

Remarkably, each of the six roundhouses proved to be quite different; two, as it turned out, are unlikely to have been dwelling houses.



Anna Welti had a career as a physics teacher, earned a qualification in personnel management, and showed an early interest in archaeology. In 1989 she moved to Ullapool. In 2003 she started a distance learning course in archaeology with Aberdeen University; this led directly to the work described in this booklet.



Martin Wildgoose was a farmer in Derbyshire when he took up amateur archaeology, playing a key part in the Royston Grange project (1976-86). For his work there, in 1986 he won the Pitt-Rivers Award for Amateur Archaeologist of the Year. He went professional in 1987, moving to Skye in 1988. Since then he has been much in demand as a free-lance archaeological surveyor, as well as doing restoration work (including 12 chapels or churches). In 2002-10 he was co-director of the High Pasture Cave dig near his home.

1 Achiltibuie: Loch Raa ^{p28}

Date: 1257 / 424 BC
Early Bronze / Iron Age
charcoal from hearths 1 and 3



This roundhouse is one of about 45 found so far in the Achiltibuie area.

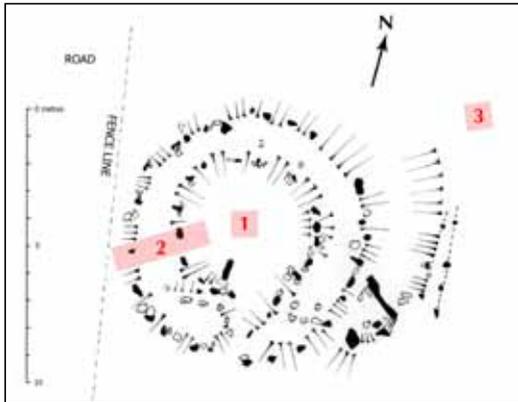
Trench 1: central. Not one but three hearths were found in a stack, with charcoal and ash deposits. Beside the lowest hearth there was a small well-preserved stone tank.

Trench 2: wall. A stone-built wall was found, about 2m thick, with inner and outer laid faces and a core of earth and rubble. A post-hole with packing stones was found.

Trench 3: soil sampling pit.

The results from this first dig were encouraging, with three hearths of different ages, a small water-tank, a well-defined wall section, and a post-hole.

There were a few small finds: nice examples of broken pot-boilers, a quartz flake, and two small fragments of pottery (p27). Charcoal samples were collected from each hearth for carbon dating.



Trench 1

Artist's impression (Mrs G Rex)



Right:
Trench 2 with
post-hole

Below right:
Trench 3

Below:
from visit of
Achiltibuie
Primary
School

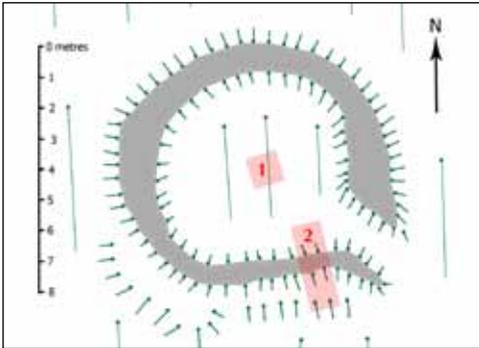


2 Ullapool: Rhue^{p29}

Date: 512 BC / 275 AD

Early / Late Iron Age

charcoal from hearth and wall



Above: Trench 2 Below: Trench 1



This roundhouse is a raised ring covered with peat and heather, and with no stones showing. It is on a moderate slope facing Loch Broom.

Trench 1: central. A large stone slab was found, set directly on the natural soil. It showed no sign of heat, but it was surrounded and partly covered by a 10cm black charcoal-rich layer, indicating occupation.

Trench 2: wall. The trench crossed a well-preserved section of turf bank. Once the heather and peat were removed, a tumbled stone wall appeared with the inner face surviving four courses high. The outer face had tumbled down this slope.

Trench 3: soil sampling pit.

The results were satisfactory, although the unburnt slab and the thin burnt layer in the centre were a little puzzling; possibly occupation was short-lived. But this and the clear wall at least showed that it was a lived-in roundhouse.

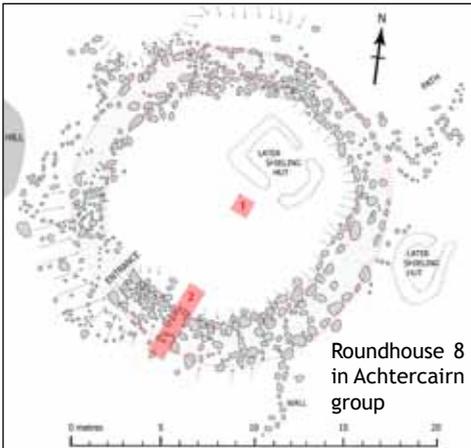
Small finds included a good pebble polisher, and a pebble hammer and a much-used pebble anvil from the core of the tumbled wall. The position of these may indicate earlier occupation here.



Achtercairn 1 (opposite): by Viveca Port

3 Achtercairn (1) ^{p32}

Date: 254 / 213 BC
Middle Iron Age
charcoal from 2 hearths



This roundhouse is one of the biggest in Wester Ross: outside diameter 17.5m. It is high above the sea with a view of Skye.

Trench 1: central. First an area of slab paving was found, assumed to belong to the nearby shieling hut. This was demolished, and below it was an area of burnt orange soil and stones which indicated a very intense fire, with two hearths one above the other.

Trench 2: wall. This trench revealed the monumental well-built base of a 2m thick wall. But inside the house there was no trace of an occupation horizon (floor).

Trenches 3 & 4: two soil sampling pits.



Above: Trench 1. The colour means a very hot fire

Below: Trench 2. Inner and outer wall facings



Four pieces of evidence point to an unusual conclusion about this roundhouse:

- (1) The apparent lack of a floor in Trench 2.
- (2) The evidence of intense fires in Trench 1, too hot for a thatched roof.
- (3) The fact that the entrance faces SW, into the weather and different from most other houses.
- (4) The impressive size of the circle and of the stones used to build the wall.

It seems most likely that this was not in fact a “roundhouse”, i.e. not a dwelling. Rather, it may have been a roofless structure in the form of a massive roundhouse wall. Its purpose is not currently certain. It may have been a ceremonial centre: the entrance faces the midwinter solstice sunset, and the fire may have been a beacon lit then and at other times (picture p15).

4 Achiltibuie: Achnahaird ^{p28}

Date: 395 BC
Early/Middle Iron Age
charcoal inside later wall

This roundhouse is scenically positioned looking across to Achnahaird beach.

Trench 1: central. A rubble-stone hearth was found with much reddened stone surrounded by areas of char and ash. The rake-out from the fire spread across a compacted sandy earth floor forming a well defined, charcoal rich, occupation horizon. Below this occupation was a layer of clean sand which sealed an earlier, similar occupation horizon which lay directly on the levelled summit of a 350mm deep sand dune.

Trench 2: wall. This revealed a tumbled stone wall with an inner face made of laid boulders and slabs. The later phase of occupation butted up to the foot of this wall, but the earlier phase ran under it to butt up to the remains of an earlier wall consisting of orthostatic facing stones with rubble fill. The later roundhouse appeared to be built within the earlier.

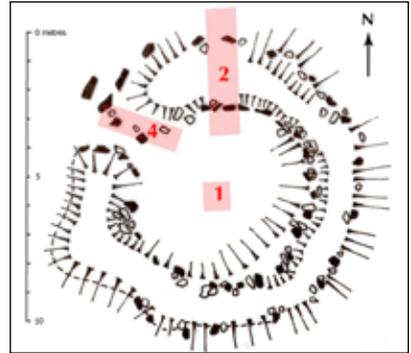
Trench 3: soil test pit. Post glacial soils and an old ground surface were sealed below lazy-bed cultivation.

Trench 4: wall. With plenty of diggers, a second wall trench was dug. A well defined post hole was recorded, below the later wall and associated with the earlier occupation.

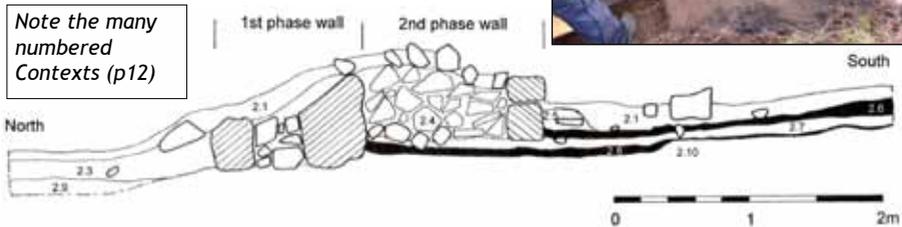
Results were again interesting with the fourth completely different site being revealed. There was plenty of evidence that a second roundhouse had been built on top of and within the first.

Small finds included several pebble hammers broken pot-boilers, and a polisher (p27).

Right: Trench 2, a wall within a wall
Below: cross-section of two walls and floors



Trench 1: two hearths and the sand foundation



Note the many numbered Contexts (p12)

5 Ullapool: Srathain ^{p29}

Date: 529 BC

Early Iron Age

charcoal from soil sample

The fifth roundhouse was on an exposed hillside in An Srathain, a small glen some 3km to the north of Ullapool.

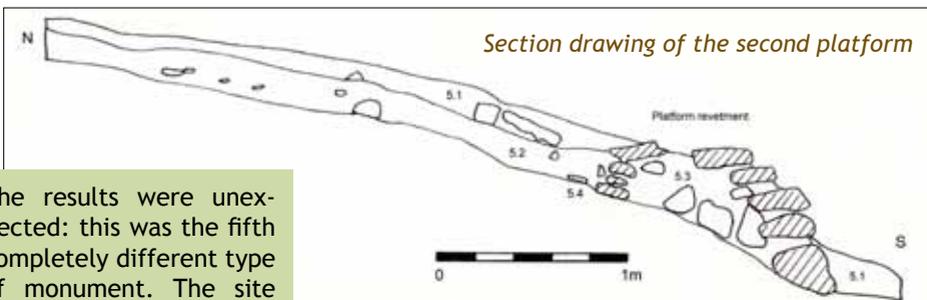
Trench 1: centre. This revealed a shallow and very greasy black horizon lying immediately below peaty turf and resting on the natural clay. There were no features, other than a small arc of stones (p5 *picture*), and no finds.

Trench 2: wall. This was dug across what appeared to be a collapsed wall, but proved to be a random pile of stones which overlay and so postdated the greasy black context. A random collection of flat slabs lay at the western end of the trench. White quartz pebbles were found in the black horizon.

Because of the shallowness of the deposits and lack of results, a second nearby platform in the group of three was tested with similar results. This platform had been revetted at the front with a five course wall, behind which was a fill of small stones. A cut had been made into the hill slope to complete the platform. Later a small peat fire had been built at the centre. There were no finds.



Trench 2: the wall appeared to be natural



Section drawing of the second platform

The results were unexpected: this was the fifth completely different type of monument. The site proved to be a recessed platform with no apparent associated structure. Its age and purpose are a matter of speculation. It is possible that there was a wooden structure on it at some time, but there was no evidence of this. It was not a roundhouse!

Platforms

Platforms built out of or cut into a slope (p6) with banks supported by stonework (revetted), but with no sign of a building on them, have been found in Argyll, where they are thought to have been made by charcoal-burners. There are also two south of Torrinn in Skye where Early Bronze Age pottery was found, along with stone tools and charcoal; it is possible that they had wooden buildings on them.

6 Achtercairn (2) ^{p32}

Date: 726 BC
Late Bronze Age
later (stone-walled) house

This small (8m outside diameter) roundhouse is seen on the front cover. A single trench was dug right across it, along with two soil test pits outside it.

Trench 1 revealed a fine orthostat faced wall with a boulder fill at both ends. A well built buttress supported the downhill north wall. A compacted clay floor butted up to the inner face of the walls. In the centre black earth showed an oval hearth area. Oddly, a hearth had been built of stone against the inner face of the N wall.

Below the clay floor, some 1.25m in from the south wall, a truncated posthole was found which still retained its post pad (p13), and another posthole 1.25m inside the north wall.

Removal of the wall stones showed that the stone wall was a secondary feature and that an earth or turf bank had been built below (i.e. before) the stone structure.

Finds included a broken sandstone rubber which had been used as a pot-boiler (p13), a pebble hammer and a quartz flake.

Interpretation was not easy, but the conclusion was that this roundhouse at first had an earth or turf bank with a ring of upright posts some 1.5m inside it. On this earth bank was later built a stone wall, and a new clay floor was made (truncating the earlier postholes). Later, when the roof had gone, a stone-built hearth was built and used within the structure, for some unknown purpose.

Achtercairn (3). A trench was also dug in a small neighbouring site. This is an irregular stone circle on a revetted platform, and was not a dwelling. In it were found: evidence of a fire including Neolithic charcoal, a cobbled area, and an assemblage of quartz chunks (p27). A follow-up dig in 2014 revealed that there had been two periods of activity, and that the stone circle had been added after these; its purpose is unknown (p15 picture).



The trench revealed a surprising amount of tumble

Date: 2769/1391 BC
Late Neolithic/ Middle Bronze Age

Results and Conclusions (see also www.wedigs.co.uk)

Post excavation analysis of the finds, charcoal samples and soil samples was performed by AOC Archaeology. Pollen analysis was done by Dr Scott Timpany of UHI Orkney.

Carbon-dating: Results are given on each site page; they are accurate to within 30 years. Dates ranged from 2769 BC (p 26 bottom) to 275 AD (p22).

Small Finds: These included a number of general purpose pebble stone tools with pitting due to percussion damage, indicating use for pounding; many cracked pot-boilers; a heavy duty maul/working surface; and a small assemblage of quartz chunks.

At Loch Raa a fragment of steatite-tempered pottery (clay mixed with soapstone) was found. Its shape suggests a shouldered vessel stylistically consistent with the Early Iron Age date from the upper hearth. Loch Raa also produced a fragment of a carved steatite vessel, probably a small cup or bowl. (Steatite is found not too far away, at Achmelvich.)

The assemblage of 82 quartz flakes and cores recovered from Achtercairn 3 suggests an unskilled craftsman with little experience in the working of quartz. Most of the pieces were debris, but there was one modified tool, a borer with a strong point formed on a thick flake – such as might have been used, for example, for making holes in leather.

Micromorphology: Samples of soil were taken from the trench sections. Under microscopic analysis these revealed details of occupation, abandonment and usage of the roundhouses sampled.

Pollen Analysis: Soil samples taken from Achtercairn 2 and 3 indicated a progression from an open heathland landscape in the Neolithic to a landscape of cultivated clearings within a wooded environment indicative of settled farming in the Early Bronze Age.

A sample taken from a soil trench outwith Achtercairn 2 yielded a post-medieval date. The pollen sequence gave valuable insight into the landscape at that time.

Structural Interpretation: 11 circular structures in all on 6 sites were investigated. Only 6 were occupied roundhouses. 3 were revetted platforms of uncertain use, probably working areas. 2 were unoccupied circular structures, also of uncertain use. All the walled structures showed evidence of occupation apart from Achtercairn 1 which stood apart from the other sites due to its size, construction and position. Its wide SW entrance directly faced the mid-winter solstice sunset.

4 structures had discernible entrances. Only the structures with S or SE entrances showed evidence of occupation.

In several of the structures there was more than one hearth, indicating periods of occupation and re-occupation. Micromorphology analysis has indicated that occupation was occasional, not continuous.

The above results are similar in many aspects to those obtained from recent targeted excavations of circular structures in the landscape around High Pasture Cave on Skye.

Before excavation the appearance of the chosen ring banks in the landscape seemed to indicate that all were similar roundhouse forms. However, each was discovered to be distinctive, in structure, in size and in dating. The project has shown how much breadth and depth of information can be obtained from a series of targeted small trenches together with the micro-interpretation from pollen analysis and micromorphology.

More detail about post-excavation findings is given at www.wedigs.co.uk where the Final Report and the Specialist Reports are filed.

The following pages give a brief summary of where most roundhouses are to be found. Those which are more accessible or worthwhile are indicated. The numbers are approximate: more are being found all the time! **P = Parking**. N.B. Do not park in “Passing Places”.

Many **map grid references** are given. In most areas orienteering skills are needed; you will need a **GPS** instrument, preferably one which will take you to a given grid reference. An Ordnance Survey **map** is usually necessary: the 1:50,000 Landranger (**OSL**) or, better, the 1:25,000 Explorer (**OSE**); both mark “hut circles” in some areas, but they are not always accurate or consistent. **Note the “Map square” prefixes (e.g. NG), needed for GPS.**

The best **website** is Highland Council’s comprehensive “Historic Environment Record”: her.highland.gov.uk (no www). Use Advanced Search to look for “hut circles” in your area.

Under Scottish Access Law, you may walk anywhere so long as you use common sense and follow the Countryside Code. Be warned that many roundhouses are in areas which are now covered with peat, heather, bog or bracken, and give rough walking.

ACHILTIBUIE

45 Roundhouses. Access: from minor roads off the A837. Map square NC, **OSE 439**.

This remote area shows much evidence of both prehistoric and later habitation and farming.

1: Inverpolly

2 RHs, 0771 1351 by the road but hard to see; 0787 1328 higher and good (*right*), with a Dun above.

2: Three bays

Three worthwhile walks and nice coastal scenery.

- **Lag na Saille.** **P** at quarry 0444 1259, pass wood and bear right to rocky bay. 2 RHs, 0536 1308 (adapted; *bottom right*), and 0546 1291 uphill.

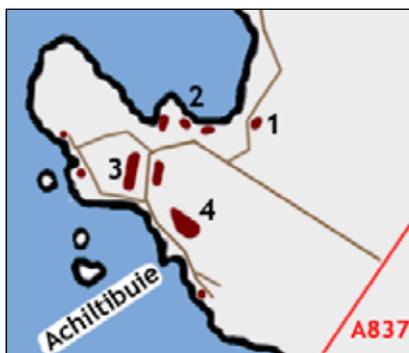
- **Garvie Bay.** **P** at road bridge 039 130, follow W bank of river and loch to RH at 0390 1369.

- **Achnahaird Bay.** **P** at junction 020 124. RH at 0229 1265 visible to NE (**p24 Wee Digs**). 0230 1280 is beyond.

3: North of Achiltibuie

- Various RHs on **OSE E of Lochs Raa and Vatachan**, but **P** and fences difficult. Try Loch Raa 0213 1189 (**p21 Wee Digs**), 0219 1185, 0207 1211.

- A fruitful area **West of Loch Vatachan**; best **P** on coast road at 0023 0990 and walk the **Polbain Peat Track** NE from Blair. At a bend L, drop downhill to rough ground. Many ruins, lazybeds and walls for 2km N along the overgrown slope, including RHs (some on **OSE**): 0094 1035, 0102 1030 (adapted), 0104 1037 (is it a RH?), 0106 1060, 0104 1115 by waterfall; etc.



4: Behind Achiltibuie

• **P** at the **Post Office**, walk back to gate, up to ruined cottage, W to fence corner and gate, track to an interesting green raised area. RHs here tend to be buried in soil with just stone tops showing. Try 0262 0882, 0281 0888 (**OSE**), 0295 0873 (**OSE**), 0318 0882 near Sheepfold (*right*). Also from Sheepfold S: 0321 0854, 0315 0853, 0317 0850; and NW: 0300 0910, 0308 0894, 0303 0896. Some way N, 0265 0929 (**OSE**, *right*).



5: Outliers

• **Alltandhu**. (1) Below the Reiff road, 9752 1301. (2) S of village (walk from campsite) RHs at 9918 1194, 9908 1199.

• **Achnacarinan**. 0457 0479 with the Dirk Stone (**OSE**).



LOCH BROOM

23 Roundhouses. Base: Ullapool on A835.
Map square NH, **OSE** 435-6.

Many of Loch Broom's RHs are challenging to reach; Rhue is a notable exception.

(1) **Rhue**. The most accessible small group in Wester Ross. Take the side road 2 miles N of Ullapool, **P** on bend at 105 967. Immediately above is an easy trio of RHs on grazed ground. 1056 9683 is large and clear. 1054 9683 is just L of it and less clear; it may have been robbed to build its neighbour, or it may not have been a house. 1055 9689 is nearby up the hill (**p21 Wee Digs**). There are several mounds in the area which may be burials.

(2) Three platforms at **Srathain** proved not to be RHs (**p25 Wee Digs**).

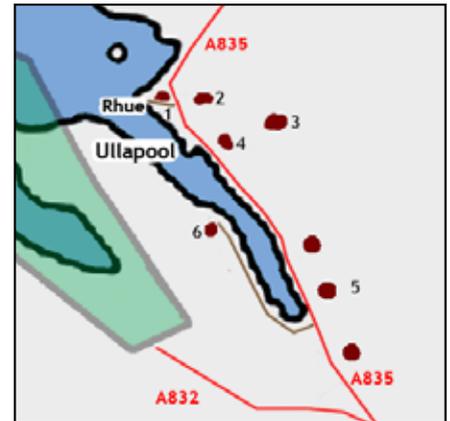
(3) Five RHs cluster around the W end of **Loch Achall**, E of Ullapool.

(4) Three are on the W slopes of **Ullapool Hill**: 1388 9393, 1376 9399, and 1385 9400.

(5) Six are on the high slopes E of Loch Broom and Strathmore:

- **Ardcharnich**: 1762 8919.
- **Lael Forest**: 2027 8119, 2014 8164.
- **Inverlael**: 1870 8658, 1883 8650, 1881 8656.

(6) One is at **Loggie**, above the end of the West Loch Broom road, 1431 9072.



LITTLE LOCH BROOM

13 Roundhouses. Base: Dundonnell on A832 and minor road from Dundonnell to Badrallach. Map square NH, OSE 435.

Dundonnell gives one of the best RH walks, with fine views, especially of An Teallach. Limited **P** before bridge at 114 856 on “Badralloch” road. Cross bridge, track R through gate, R through another gate, climb grass slope to find old path (post road) in trees. Follow up through a gate, then up fence to a group of 3 RHs (on **OSL**): well preserved 1207 8560 (picture p11); cross fence to 1201 8564 in a superb position; up and across slope to 1199 8574. Continuing depends on being able to cross the burn Allt an Duibhe. Traverse across slopes to burn and beyond it up to 1280 8583 below a small crag (on **OSE**); then S to a heathery knoll, where tiny 1273 8569 is perched on top. Down to the path and 1272 8543 just above it; up the path by a bridge is small 1299 8531. Finally, on the way back, past a gateway divert up to 1228 8549 (probably 2 RHs, confused by shieling structures).

There are also 5 RHs in the very remote Scoraig area, needing a walk in from Badrallach.

GRUINARD BAY

15 Roundhouses. Base: Laide A832; road to Mellon Udrigle. Map square NG, OSE 434-5.

1: Mungasdale

A neat line of 3 RHs up the slopes above the A832. **P** at lay-by 961 929, cross road, ditch and fence, traverse R to a small crag: 9610 9285 is above it. Above that, 9616 9279 is clear with a deep hollow (*right*). Continue up to small RH at 9624 9272 above the power line.

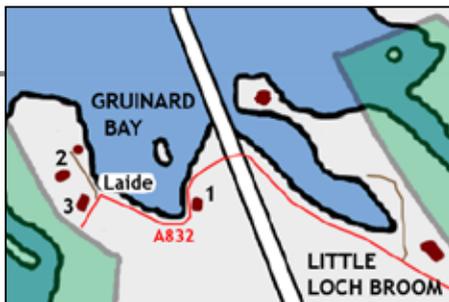
2: Slaggan track and Mellon Udrigle

- **P** 887 941 and walk the track to Slaggan beach; half way, 8650 9412 is just above the track; another built-over RH 20m uphill. 120m further, the track is built over the edge of 8639 9413; 8635 9412 has almost vanished.

- An important RH (on **OS**) beside Mellon Udrigle beach (**P**). Follow the beach as far as a stony slope on the right and go through a gate beyond into the campsite. This large Listed RH may be a wheelhouse (p15, with plan); if it is, it is one of only two found on the mainland.

3: Laide

A good group of 6, but beset by fences. **P** at Laide Wood car park 892 907 (2.1m height barrier), cross road and small stile, bear R to 8930 9082 (*right*); 8912 9066 near a gate; 8901 9074 above next fence; 8895 9070, if a RH, is the biggest in this booklet, 18m; 8891 9068 nearly invisible; 8889 9059 beyond fence.



1: above A832, 9616 9279



2: Mellon Udrigle - a wheelhouse?



3: Laide, 8930 9082

LOCH EWE

48+ Roundhouses. Bases: Poolewe and Aultbea on A832; B8067 to Inverasdale. Map square NG, OSE 434.

Roundhouses are scattered round the loch from Naast on the W shore to Aultbea on the E.

1: Aultbea

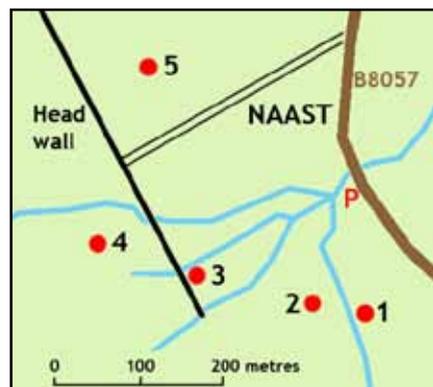
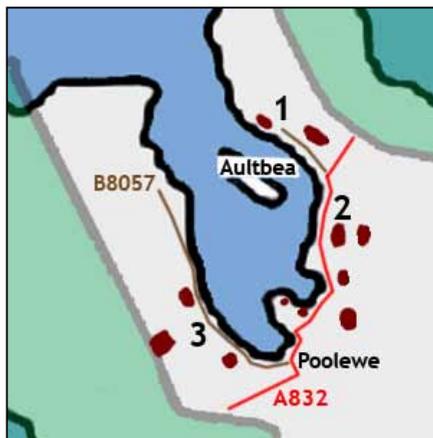
- Groups of RHs have recently been found behind Aultbea, but access is difficult and local knowledge is needed.
- If you walk the coast N from Mellon Charles, look out for: 8398 9264 perched above the first bay, ruined and brackened; and 8354 9333 with its standing stone, a mystery building (was it ever a RH?).

2: Above A832 to Poolewe

- There is a good group of 3 RHs at **Leathad Mor** above the roadside wood 3km S of Aultbea, shown on **OS**; limited **P** in small lay-by just S of wood. 8764 8628, built overlapping an older RH (*right*); 8762 8632; 8772 8631 above fence. Beyond the hill above there are RHs in a fenced wood above the large Goose Loch, also on **OSE** but inaccessible.
- There are 2 RHs on the NTS **Inverewe Estate** shown on **OSE**, neither easy to reach: 857 834 and 871 833. Ask at the Garden about access.
- About 12 RHs are in the area W of **Tournaig**, but parking and access are difficult.

3: West Loch Ewe

- **Boor Burn**: **P** at cattle grid 846 810 (or walk from Poolewe). 3 clear RHs N of the burn. Climb up new hydro path from building: (1) 8442 8103 above first level section of path; (2) 8400 8086 above dam; (3) 8402 8116 further north with a fine view (*right*).
- **Naast**: **P** opposite first house at 827 831. A good short circuit of 5 RHs in an interesting area: *see plan right*. (1) 8277 8295 beyond old field wall; (2) 8269 8295; (3) 8250 8297; (4) 8237 8305 high; (5) 8244 8328 with clearance cairn.
- **Inland from Naast**: 8 RHs; area burnt in 2013. Path shown on **OSE** from Naast **P**, mostly vanished but route marked by posts. RHs and numerous shieling huts SW from 810 812 for about 600m. Almost adjoins Gairloch North 3.



GAIRLOCH NORTH

66 Roundhouses. Base: Gairloch village; A832 to Poolewe, B8021 north to Melvaig.

Map square NG, **OSE** 434.

Abusy area. The inland areas where roundhouses are found are mostly poor moorland now, but must have been fertile in the past.

1: Upper Achtercairn

The 10 RHs here may be the clearest group to visit in Wester Ross, though all are damaged by farming etc. They can be seen on a walk (*right*) from the Gairloch Information Centre (GALE, 804 767). A **guidebook** or **map** is available here or at the nearby Museum which also has a small prehistoric display. The RHs have mostly been cleared and are kept bracken-free. Three (1,2,8) featured in the **Wee Digs** project (p26,26,23).

2: North of A832

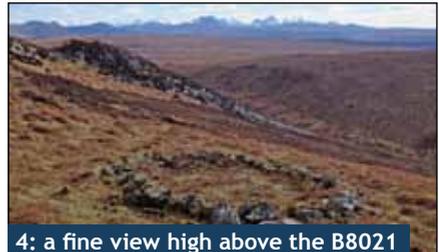
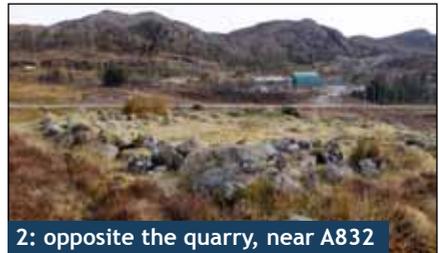
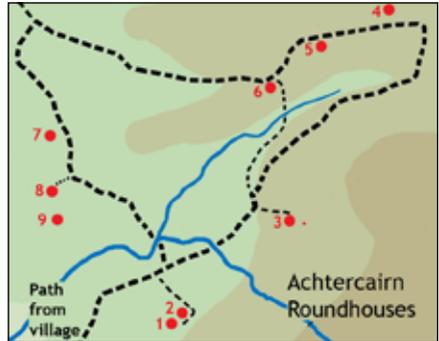
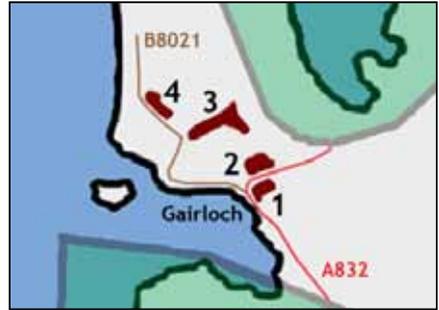
12 RHs in an easily accessible square mile north of the A832 to Poolewe, opposite woodland; **OSE** shows 6. Access involves crossing the small Achtercairn River. **P**: best at 822 781. Suggested RHs: 8182 7805 120m from road, opposite quarry entrance (*right*); 8102 7873; 8042 7794. Alternative access is from the top of Mihol Road in Strath: 2 RHs within 1km of here are 8041 7857 and 8038 7871.

3: Sand River

About 30 RHs in this area E of the B8021, a mile N of Sands Holiday Centre; **OS** maps show 24. They take advantage of the moraine from the Wester Ross Readvance (p10). The Sand River Archaeological Trail (**P** 763 802, sign) was set up here by Highland Council and includes 7 RHs along with many later farming remains. The route starts at a ruin on the sharp bend at 763 802 and is arrowed. There is a **guidebook** (out of print, but copies can still be found: try Gairloch Museum). Beyond the Trail the RHs are widely scattered. Many are hard to make out, and many have been adapted by later farmers. Most are on the slopes north of the river or above the NE corner of a large fenced plantation.

4: North Erradale

On the slopes above the B8021, near North Erradale, there are 7 RHs. Suggested: 7569 8075, **P** at track foot (*picture right*); 752 812; 7482 8179, **P** difficult.



GAIRLOCH SOUTH

28 Roundhouses. Access: B8056 from A832 to Badachro. Map square NG, **OSE 434.**

The roundhouses here are scattered, mostly hard to find or reach, many in thick woodland or bracken-covered. Only a few which are relatively easy to access are selected here.

(1) Walk 700m up the track left before Shieldaig Lodge Hotel (**P** beyond hotel). Cross the small burn to left and climb to find RH in the right edge of a birch wood at 8037 7177.

(2) From **P** beside Loch Bad a' Chrotha at 787 729, walk uphill: there are 4 RHs across the slope in trees and bracken before the power line, 7866 7307 to 7874 7312; hard to see.

(3) From the bridge where the river leaves the above loch (small **P**), follow the new track to 7829 7342, a clear RH shown on **OSE** (next to a cattle feeding station).

(4) Two RHs are shown on **OSE** up Badachro River S of the loch: harder to reach.

APPLECROSS

24 Roundhouses. Base: Applecross village, via the Bealach na Ba or the north coast road from Shieldaig.

Map square NG, **OSE 428.**

This isolated area, reached by two spectacular roads, has some good archaeology. There is a Heritage Centre (museum) N of Applecross Bay, but it is not RH-aware!

1: Rubha na Guailne

There was a settlement on the once fertile plateau above this point. 7 RHs have been recorded, but few are now visible, and the **OS** maps are unreliable. Try **P** at 6877 4585, road S to power lines and follow them up to 6918 4588 and 6922 4589, damaged by shieling building. Beyond, 6924 4640 has many confused stones: look for orthostats.

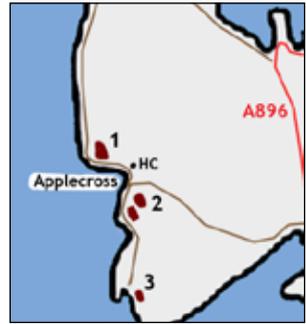
2: Above village

• There is an Archaeological Trail here. Take the track from **P** near campsite SW past farm buildings; notice the ruined Broch (a Time Team project), and an attempted RH reconstruction. Through woods, before Torgarve (cottage) turn L on Archaeological Trail. At 7154 4369 a good RH next to the path. From here 7148 4363 and 7146 4348 are in bracken; 7139 4339 looks good beyond a new deer fence; 7146 4333 is a bracken hollow.

• On the coast road S, turn left to the Village Hall. Above here 2 accessible RHs (on **OSE**): 7091 4307 beside a small tree, 7091 4304 nearby. Further S, 7094 4294 is damaged; 7094 4292 is brackened; 7099 4293 is unclear; 7099 4291 is clear.

3: Toscaig

Reached by a footpath SE from Toscaig, but hard to find, are 2 remote RHs: 7180 3680 and 7181 3700.



1: Rubha na Guailne, 6922 4589



2: near Torgarve, 7154 4369



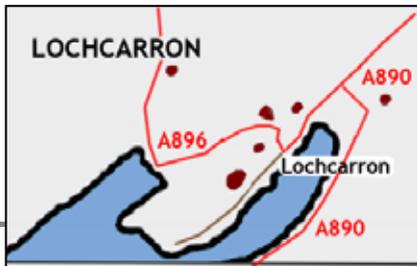
2: above the Hall, 7091 4307

LOHCARRON

16 Roundhouses. Base: Lochcarron village, A896. Map square NG, OSE 428-9.

This area has a scattering of RHs across the slopes above the lochside township, and two outliers. Many of these are hard to access, and increasingly buried in now ungrazed vegetation.

- **Rassal Ashwood.** A good outlier. P 8405 4324; gate and climb in trees to top fence, gate 8461 4306; RH 8465 4315 along to left (copper mines nearby).
- **N of A896.** From P at quarry 8867 4037: S to 8849 3973; N to 8867 4051, 8910 4054, and others (on OSE).
- **W of Golf Course** are 9092 4171 and 9083 4177.
- **Above coast road.** A group of 7 RHs in square 88 38 are hard to access, a mile S of the road, N of the inhabited coast.
- **Eas an Tempuill:** another interesting outlier. From Strathcarron Station follow N bank of river to near hidden waterfall, RH at 9516 4220.



LOCHALSH

20 Roundhouses. Between Dornie and Kyle of Lochalsh, A87. Map square NG, OSE 428.

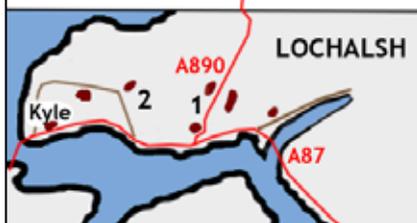
The RHs are divided between the NTS Balmacara Estate, and the A890 north of the junction at Auchtertyre, with one eastern outlier.

1: A890

- **Above the Lochalsh Dam reservoir** there are 2 RHs (on OS): P near gate 8525 2903: 8488 2913 is a grass platform, 8521 2950 under heather; more impressive is the Tumulus at 8512 2940.
- **Over the dam** (crossable) are 3 scattered RHs: 8601 2924 (on OSE), 2584 2856, 8574 2813.
- **Above Auchtertyre.** A good, accessible but sadly bracken-infested trio (on OSL), easily reached from large P at 849 276. Cross to the large shed, pass it to L to reach 8459 2777 and nearby 8462 2780; go E and 8475 2778 is just below the fence.
- **Conchra** on the N Loch Long road has a good outlier (OSE). P at barn 891 279, cross field W to cross burn, 8892 2800 is up above fence.

2: Balmacara

- On the minor road just NW of Balmacara Square, roadside P at Coillemore 804 287. Follow the Achnahinich footpath. Soon after a tree-less area, a large RH 30m below the path at 8057 2911 makes a clearing. Further on, 8071 2943 is well above the path, a group of mossy stones.
- If you like a challenge, you might try to reach: 7704 2740 and 7695 2729 near Kyle; or 7842 2910 and 7842 2909 in the dense Palascaig jungle!



1: Above Loch Long, 8892 2800



2: Balmacara woods, 8057 2911

Skye is richer than the mainland in archaeological remains. Two parts of Skye are included here, although they are not in Wester Ross. These were where Martin Wildgoose did his pioneering work, test-pitting 29 roundhouses and surveying others.

SKYE SOUTH

23 Roundhouses. Base: Broadford on A87, Torrinn on B8083. Map square NG, OSE 411-2.

These two areas contain a wealth of remains from all periods. The most important site is High Pasture Cave (594 197), although there is nothing visible there now (p15).

1: Strath Suardal

Access is from the B8083 between Broadford and Torrinn. **P** at many points. A useful footpath follows the line of the former Skye Marble quarry railway. A selection of easy RHs:

- Near the ruined Neolithic cairn at 627 221 there are 2 indistinct boggy RHs: 6278 2215, and 6270 2215 (Late Bronze Age). On the railway path near here over a wooden bridge is 6330 2206; oddly, 19th century: perhaps a shieling?
- Some way south near the railway path are: 6215 2062; 6212 1967 above the terminus next to a quarry (*right*); 6227 1997; 2 RHs at 6225 2023 (one late Medieval!).
- Near High Pasture Cave is 5977 1988 (Middle Iron Age).

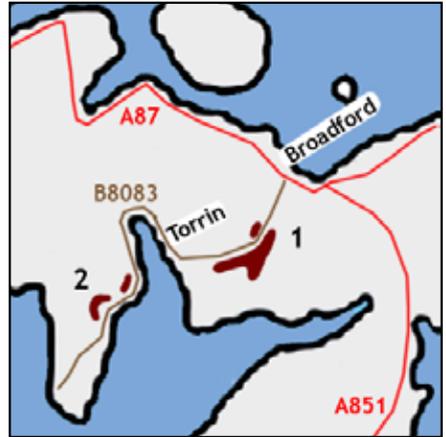
2: Strathaird

On the road to Elgol there are RHs on Druim an Fhuarain (56 19) which are hard to reach; but most are on the slopes surrounding the glen inland from Kilmarie (Cille Mhaire, named for the ubiquitous St Maelrubha).

P at 546 172, the car park for the footpath to Camasunary. Follow the path west for 1km, then work round the rough slope to the north. There is a series of mostly indistinct RHs (and many shielings):

- 5365 1791 overgrown by rushes;
- 5382 1809 neatly sited on a mound;
- 5400 1825 2 RHs;
- 5427 1832 2 RHs, one with a shieling inside;
- then an area with moraine ridges and 4 RHs: 5426 1842 before the moraine, very unclear; 5432 1840 robbed to make a shieling; 5431 1841 small but clear (*right*); 5431 1846.

There are also RHs on the NE and SW slopes of the glen.



1: near the quarry, 6212 1967



2: on Druim Fhuarain



2: in Cille Mhaire glen, 5431 1841

SKYE NORTH

43 Roundhouses. Base: Uig, A87 and A855. Map square NG, OSE 408.

On the A87 south of Uig and the A855 north of it, there are roundhouses and old farm remains, mostly set in easy grazing ground (but some muddied by cows).

1: South of Uig

A much-farmed and archaeologically rewarding area.

- **P** north of Romesdal at 406 543 where a track goes left to a B&B; cross the road. The RH at 4074 5440 is now only a semi-circle. 4068 5449 is clear (*right*). 500m north 4063 5492 is good, and 4066 5498 is visible beyond a forestry fence.

- **P** opposite the Kingsburgh turning. Walk NW then N by tracks and climb the S end of an obvious rocky ridge, a hill fort: 4023 5551. There is one clear RH here inside the fort, and several vestigial ones: how many do you think there were? (The N end has been quarried: beware!) There are other RHs 500m NW: 4075 5563, 4064 5572, 4077 5586.

- **P** at Community Woodland, 398 572. Cross the road and walk a farm track N of River Hinnisdal W to about 392 570, then strike S to a very fine RH at 3914 5658 (clear extended entrance). There are 6 other RHs within 150m of here: can you find them? Descend NW to 3878 5693 where a RH has been overbuilt by a later farm. **OS** shows some archaeology around here: RHs on **OSL**, inaccurately; a Broch (unlikely); a Dun on the coast. There are also interesting old farm buildings and many walls. Exploration is recommended; and there are more RHs to be found!

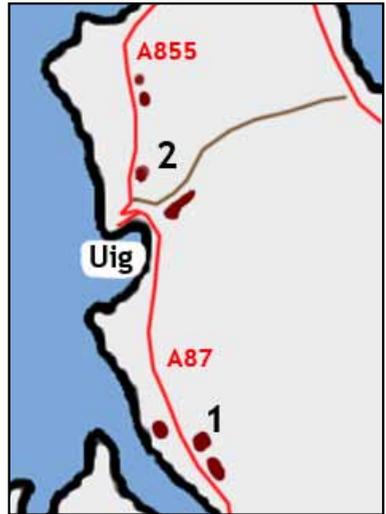
2: Uig and north

- 11 RHs are shown on **OSE** above Uig (8 on **OSL**), not easy to get at and unclear. Access easiest from road bridge on minor road at 408 665; **P** nearby.

- Just north of Uig on A855, there are 3 RHs on **OS**; **P** at sheep enclosure 386 649, walk road to next field, go over or through fence to find the earth banks at 3876 6474, 3874 6476, 3873 6476.

- Further north, 4 RHs are on **OS** at Balgown; **P** S of school at 388 690, walk road S to gate near Linicro sign, cross field back to 2 clear grassy circles at 3892 6894 and just above; other 2 unclear at 3899 6889 and 3904 6889 (feel with your feet!).

- Further north again, a Souterrain is signed at 389 696; there is a RH associated with it, L of a wall.



SOME ARCHAEOLOGICAL TERMS

bog-iron	nodules of poor quality iron ore which form in boggy ground
broch	a grand and showy Iron Age form of roundhouse (p16)
Bronze Age	in Scotland, 2300-700 BC (p19); bronze is an alloy of copper and tin
burnt mound	a mound composed of broken pot-boilers around a tank (p14)
cake	found to be a vital component of a successful dig
carbon dating	analysing the carbon in organic remains to date them (p16)
charcoal	coal-like burnt wood, mostly carbon
cist grave	a slab-lined Bronze Age grave (p15)
clearance cairn	a heap of stones cleared when making a field (p16)
context	the layer of soil in which a find is located (p12)
crannog	a roundhouse built over water on wooden piles (p15)
drawing	a plan is drawn from above, a section from the side (e.g. p24)
dun	a defensive area with a rampart (p15)
facing / face	the skin of a wall, inner and outer (with a filling)
glacial till	sandy glacial moraine, the mineral basis of soil
hut circle	the stone remains of a roundhouse (p1)
interpretation	forming a theory to explain archaeological evidence (p5,26)
Iron Age	in Scotland, 700 BC - 450 AD (p19)
midden	rubbish heap, perhaps quite close to the door (p9)
natural	the lowest soil level, unaffected by man
occupation horizon	the level of the floor of an inhabited roundhouse
orthostat	an upright stone or slab, e.g. in the wall facing
peat	compressed and altered vegetable matter, mostly sphagnum moss
pebble	a rounded stone, from shore or river, used for tools (p12)
phase	e.g. a two-phase site = two buildings at different periods
platform	an artificial flat area: positive (built up) or negative (dug out) (p6)
polisher	a stone used to smooth leather etc (p12)
post-hole	the hole in which the base of a post was set (p8,12)
pot-boiler	a stone heated in the fire and then used to heat water (p12)
prehistory	the period before history was written down (p18)
quartz	a white mineral, apparently thought special by ancient people
revet	to build a retaining wall to support an earth bank (revetment)
ritual	religious activities, about which we know almost nothing (p14-15)
rob	to take stones from one structure for use in another
rubber	a stone used to grind corn, or as sandpaper (p12)
shieling	the land or the hut used by farmers for summer grazing (p16)
soil test/sample	soil taken for laboratory analysis to test soil fertility etc
terminal	the end of a wall: it may widen (extended) or not (standard) (p7)
trench	a hole dug by an archaeologist
tumble	stones which have fallen from a wall (also a verb)
wattle and daub	woven sticks forming a wall, plastered with mud etc (p6)
wheelhouse	an advanced type of roundhouse found in the islands (p15)

CONTENTS

- | | | | |
|----|-------------------------|----|-----------------------------|
| 1 | What is a Roundhouse? | 12 | Finds |
| 2 | Finding | 14 | Related Structures |
| 4 | Excavating | 18 | Who and When |
| 6 | Design and Construction | 20 | The <i>Wee Digs</i> Project |
| 10 | Location | 28 | Where: <i>pages below</i> |

This booklet has been produced by Jeremy Fenton, but would not have existed without the inspiration and initiative of Anna Welti, and the experience and advice of Martin Wildgoose, not to mention the hard work of 100 other volunteers involved in discovering the roundhouses of Wester Ross

