

Staffin's Archaeological & Historical Background

by Martin Wildgoose (*Archaeological and Ancient Landscape Survey, Skye*)

- Around 10,000 years ago with North-west Europe's climate slowly warming the ice sheets covering Scotland began a slow withdrawal northward. Gradually, pioneer trees such as Hazel and Birch invaded the area. They were followed by Oak and Pine. This diversifying natural habitat attracted animals and birds and there were plentiful fish in the sea. Soon after, Man arrived in Skye.
- The first arrivals on Skye's north-east coast were small bands of hunter-gatherers known as Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age peoples. Their presence here on Skye has recently been established by the shell midden at An Corran in Staffin dating to around 6500 BC. This is the earliest evidence for human activity so far found on Skye.
- The introduction of arable cultivation around 5000 years ago encouraged more permanent settlement. This settled farming culture of Neolithic peoples spread throughout the region. The many Chambered Cairns and Stone Circles scattered about the landscape attest to the people's dispersal.
- Around 2000 BC the use of copper and bronze working spread throughout the area, rapidly replacing stone in both tool and weapon manufacture. The introduction of a Bronze Age technology coincided with profound changes in religious expression. In the place of the earlier multiple burials, single interments in small stone boxes or kists now appear. The deceased was often accompanied by a highly decorated pottery vessel known as a 'beaker' and containing drink ostensibly for use in the afterlife.
- The Iron Age which began about 700 BC has left the area with a large number of remains, ranging from Brochs and Duns to numerous Hut Circles. In Staffin, as in Skye generally, Brochs and Duns are usually sited near the coast, often on the furthest edge of promontories where natural defences lend added strength to man-made walls. Hut circles however, although found close to fortified sites, also occur as undefended open settlements, often some way from the coast. An interesting monument often found associated with hut circles is the underground passage better known as a Souterrain. These monuments were well-built and very obviously important structures but it is not clear what they were used for.

- It was Christianity, first in its Celtic form and later directly from Rome which provides the theme for much of the archaeological evidence for the succeeding thousand years. The monastic site of St Columba in nearby Kilmuir is traditionally regarded as one of the earliest foundations on the island. Many of Staffin's settlements bearing the place-name element 'Kil-' or 'Cille-' (Kilmartin etc) date from this period.
- The Medieval period from c.900 onwards was dominated by the coming of Norse invaders and the subsequent period of relative stability provided under the Lordship of the Isles. By the early tenth century few inhabitants can have remained untouched by the impact of Norse expansion. The high proportion of Norse place-name elements in Trotternish, such as *stadt* (stadir or dwelling-place/farm), *bost* (bolstadr or farm unit), *shadder* (setr/saetr or shieling/dwelling), indicate a particularly dense intrusion in the area. Not until 1263, with the defeat of Norway's king at the Battle of Largs, was Scandinavia to be deprived of its possession. Even then it was to take the Scottish crown a further two and a half centuries to exercise any control over the internecine squabbles between powerful clan chiefdoms.
- Following the defeat of Prince Charles Edward Stuart at Culloden in April 1746 the clan system began to crumble. The clan chiefs were now forced to operate as businessmen in respect of their hereditary lands, leaving the clans without their traditional patriarch. Crippling rents and a succession of poor harvests meant destitution for many from the late 1760's onwards, and during the next twenty years, it is estimated that 2000 persons emigrated from Skye. These tragic conditions continued and were exacerbated by the man-made "Clearances" and the natural disaster of the Potato Famine of 1846. Abundant evidence of depopulation can be seen in the area's many deserted settlements.
- The people of Valtos, one of the area's townships, were among those at the centre of the struggle for land in the late 19th century. Their collective efforts resulted in the Crofting Acts of 1886. This legislation and the security it provided have left a profound impact in the landscape of Staffin and other crofting communities. Around this period there was the beginning of extractive industry in the area, notably involving Diatomite.

A full inventory of the area's archaeological resources and assets was made. As is evident from the summary of research findings that there is particular significance in Staffin of sites relating to the Mesolithic period, the Iron Age, the more recent "crofting" period and to Industrial Archaeology.

(Museum in the Environment, Feasibility Study, Staffin Trust, 2003)

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<u>Period/Name</u>		<u>Site description</u>	<u>OS grid ref.</u>	<u>OS SMR No.</u>
Mesolithic	circa	7000 – 3000 BC		
An Corran		Shell Midden and lithics quarry.	NG 4910 6860	NG 46NE 17
Staffin Bay		Dispersed occupation	-	-
Staffin Island		Lithic Scatter (Stone tools)	-	-
Staffin Basin		Lithics raw materials source	-	-
Neolithic	circa	3000 – 2000 BC		
Carn Ban		Burial Cairn	NG 4870 6820	NG 46NE 02
No Name		Burial Cairn	NG 4955 6757	NG 46NE 12
Artefact		Stone Axe	NG 4880 6740	NG 46NE 14
Artefact		Stone Axe	NG 4900 6300	NG 46SE 02
Bronze Age	circa	2000 – 700 BC		
Balmeanach		Burial Cairn	NG 4618 6809	NG 46NE 13
Tobhta nan Druidhean		Burial Cairn	NG 5080 6450	NG 56SW 13
No name		Burial Cairn	NG 5186 5898	NG 55NW 05
Artefact		Bronze Spear	NG 5000 6300	NG 56SW 14
Artefact		Bronze Sword	NG 5100 5600	NG 55NW 02
Artefact		Flint Arrowheads	NG 4969 6554	NG 46NE 15
Iron Age	circa	700 BC – c550 AD		
Dun Grianan		Broch	NG 5055 6529	NG 56NW 01
Dun Raisaburgh		Broch	NG 5032 6427	NG 56SW 01
Dun Flodigarry		Broch	NG 4630 7190	NG 47SE 06
Druim nan Slochd		Dun (fort)	NG 4630 7210	NG 47SE 07
Dun Beag		Dun	NG 4607 6827	NG 46NE 03
Dun Connavern		Dun	NG 5085 6284	NG 56SW 03
Dun Dearg		Dun	NG 5137 6430	NG 56SW 02
Dun Grianan		Dun	NG 5222 5982	NG 55NW 01
Dun Hasan		Dun	NG 5262 6262	NG 56SW 05
Dun Smail		Dun	NG 4890 6670	NG 46NE 05
Dun Vallerain		Dun	NG 4647 6943	NG 46NE 01
Loch an Dunan		Dun	NG 4690 7070	NG 47SE 08
No name		Dun	NG 4474 6793	NG 46NW 11
No name		Dun	NG 4506 7390	NG 47SE 01
Rigg		Dun	NG 5239 5790	NG 55NW 06
Staffin Lodge		Hut Circle	NG 4858 6833	-
Breum Phort		Hut Circle	NG 4942 6800	-
Dun Beag		Hut Circle	NG 4607 6827	NG 46NE 03
Digg		Hut Circle	NG 4659 6957	NG 46NE 08
Balmaqueen		Hut Circle	NG 4506 7390	NG 47SE 01
Dun Grianan		Hut Circle	NG 5222 5982	NG 55NW 01
Rigg		Hut Circle	NG 5220 5630	NG 55NW 08
Storr		Souterrain (lost)	NG 5123 5524	NG 55NW 04
Artifact		Keg of Bog Butter	NG 500 630	NG 56SW 15
Artifacts		Craggans (Pottery Vessels)	NG 4990 6760	NG 46NE 16

Early Christian circa 500 – 900 AD

Kildorais	Early Cell or Church	NG 4645 6262	NG 56SW 13
Kilena	Early Cell or Church	NG 5162 6250	NG 56SW 04
Kilmartin	Early Cell or Church	NG 4872 6682	NG 46NE 06
Kilmary	Early Cell or Church	NG 4627 6793	NG 46NE 04
St. Turo's Chapel	Early Cell	NG 4627 6793	NG 46NE 04
Rubha nam Brathairean	Early Monastic site?	NG 5262 6262	NG 56SW 05

Medieval**- Post Medieval circa 900 – 1850 AD**

Garafad	Deserted settlement	NG 4930 6780	NG 46NE 09
Sartle	Deserted Settlement	NG 4550 6760	NG 46NE 07
Rigg	Deserted Settlement	NG 5190 5630	NG 55NW 03

Interestingly there are no recorded sheilings, though the evidence of Norse places names locally (-shadder etc) would suggest that they were a feature of the landscape during their time at least.¹

Industrial circa 1750 to present.

Lealt	Diatomite works	NG 520 605	-
Lealt	Railway	-	-
Staffin Island	Salmon Fishery	NG 494 687	-
Inver Tote	Salmon Fishery	NG 520 605	-

Crofting and Farming circa 1850 – present

Sites are many and varied and spread all over the study area.

(Martin Wildgoose, Museum in the Environment, Feasibility Study, Staffin Trust, 2003)

¹ Note the local observation, “Seachd bostan deug an Diuirinis, seachd siadair dheug an Trondarnais.” – seventeen bosts (farms) in Duirinish, seventeen saeters (shielings) in Trotternish.