

A PACKMAN'S BIVVY IN MOIDART

The packman is still a familiar figure in the rural landscape. He travels from house to house with his wares—mostly small articles of haberdashery, buttons, thread, ribbons and the like—slung over his shoulder in a pack or bundled together in a kerchief. In some houses he is offered a meal; in others a bed in the hay-loft or barn. Sometimes he sleeps in the open, taking advantage of whatever shelter can be got from trees, banks, dykes or other such features.

SITE PLAN and DETAIL

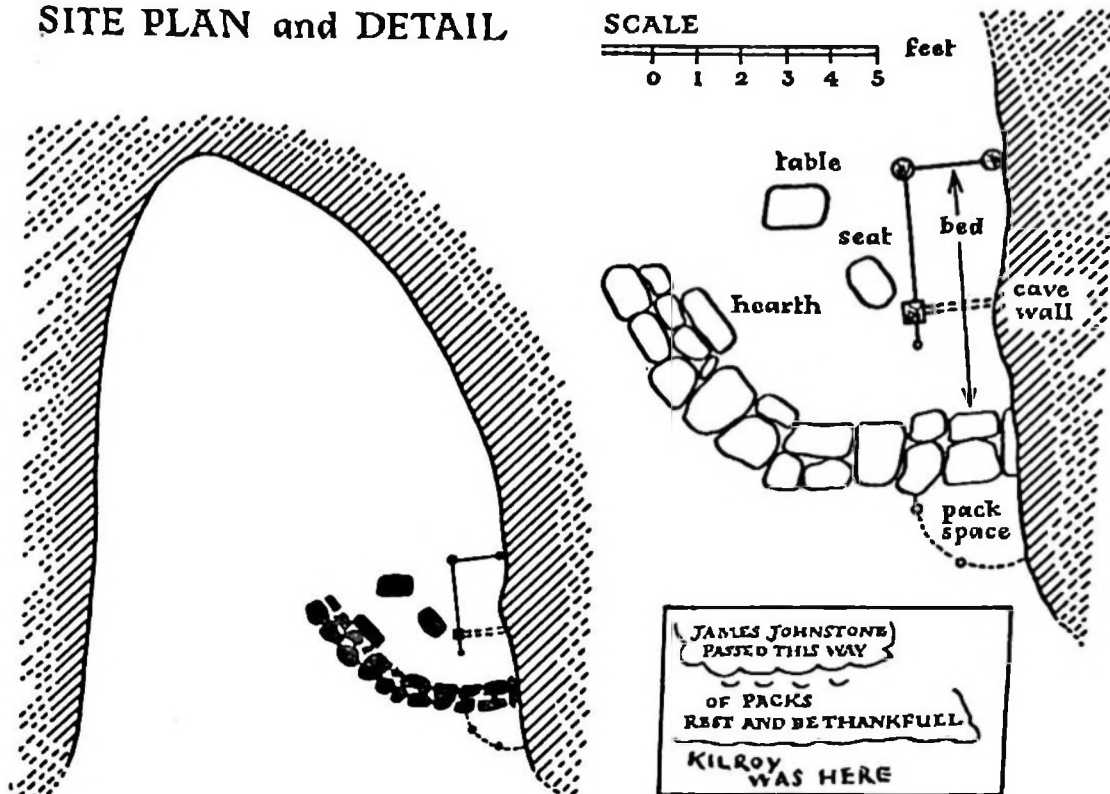


FIG. 1.—A packman's bivvy in Moidart.

A cave occupied intermittently by packmen was noted in September 1956 on Meall na h-Uamh on the northern shore of Loch Moidart, along the footpath leading to the remote crofting township of Glenuig. A crude dry-stone wall about 2 ft. 6 in. in height had been built out from the cave-wall to form a protective screen across part of the mouth of the cave. Two flat stones, one serving as a seat and the other presumably as a table for the packman's plate or cup, were placed conveniently before a hearth-stone set at the base of the screen wall towards its outer end. A bed-space was formed by three timber posts wedged between the cave floor and roof. The two headposts were undressed lengths of fir trunk: the third post

had been squared and was braced at shoulder level by a horizontal spar whose other end was wedged against the cave wall. These posts supported a screen of sacking, and the bed was furnished with a thick carpet of straw. At the foot of the bed, outside the curtain wall, a screen of sacking and tarpaulin supported on sticks enclosed a space for the pack.

A board by the bedroom entrance bore the following legend in pencil: JAMES JOHNSTONE PASSED THIS WAY — — — — OF PACKS REST AND BE THANKFULL. A bolder hand had added underneath in yellow chalk: KILROY WAS HERE. The four — may be purely decorative,



FIG. 2.—A packman's bivvy in Moidart.

or they may have some meaning: is it too much to hope that they indicate a bivvy of four-star comfort? Certainly the whole structure is an admirable example of functionalism in design. Unfortunately none of the recent occupants was in the district when the cave was noted, and no other information about this temporary dwelling has been collected.

The building of a protective wall across a cave-mouth is a practice of which an elaborate example, complete with two fire-places and flues, was found near Dirleton (*Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*), the wall in this instance being probably a late addition to a cave showing traces of successive occupation from pre-historic times. Protective walls

were built across the mouths of the caves occupied by homeless unemployed men at West Kilbride in 1937 (*Antiquity*). Reference is made to the occupation of caves near Wick (Mitchell 1880) and near Cruden in the nineteenth century (Pratt 1858), while Mr. Hamish Henderson has collected oral references to the use of the Aberdeenshire caves by tinkers in the early years of the twentieth century. He has also recorded a lengthy account of life in an Aberdeenshire cave from a tinker who claims to have spent a year of his childhood in it.

John Campbell, the Ledaig bard, is said by Mr. R. MacLeod to have furnished a cave with benches and to have conducted religious services in it before the village hall was built.* It would be interesting to learn of other recent instances of the use of caves for human habitation, as shelter for animals, or for storage.

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* Information supplied by Mr. R. MacLeod, Benderloch.