

SOME SHIELINGS IN NORTH SKYE

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INTRODUCTORY

The two peninsulas of Trotternish and Vaternish in North Skye contain many ruined shieling sites. Many of the huts in these sites have developed mounds between three and eight feet in height but in contrast other hut remains are close to ground level. During a detailed examination of the peninsula of Vaternish in 1958¹, the opportunity arose to examine in detail one of these sites, and to carry out a trial excavation of one hut which had developed a mound three and a half feet high. In large part this study complements a detailed examination, already published, of the shielings of Trotternish, viewed in relation to the eighteenth century joint-farms (MacSween 1959: 75-88), see also Pl. I, figs. 1 and 2.

THE SITE OF THE EXCAVATED HUT

7th Series O.S. 1:63, 360, Sheet 24, Nat. Grid. Ref. 256626.

The hut excavated was in a group of ten (possibly eleven) separate shieling huts. The group is situated in the Abhainn a' Ghlinne valley on the east side of Vaternish. The valley is wide and developed in Tertiary basalts, the stream being divided into three distinct stages by two main breaks in slope at the edges of individual lava flows. The group is situated on the second and lower of these breaks where the stream is cutting back into the minor basalt escarpment. This provides a relatively dry site in an otherwise damp peaty valley floor. Within the same valley three other sites are found, each comprised of two huts. The first, at 254623, a third of a mile upstream from the major group, is on the upper break in slope in a position analogous to that of the main group.

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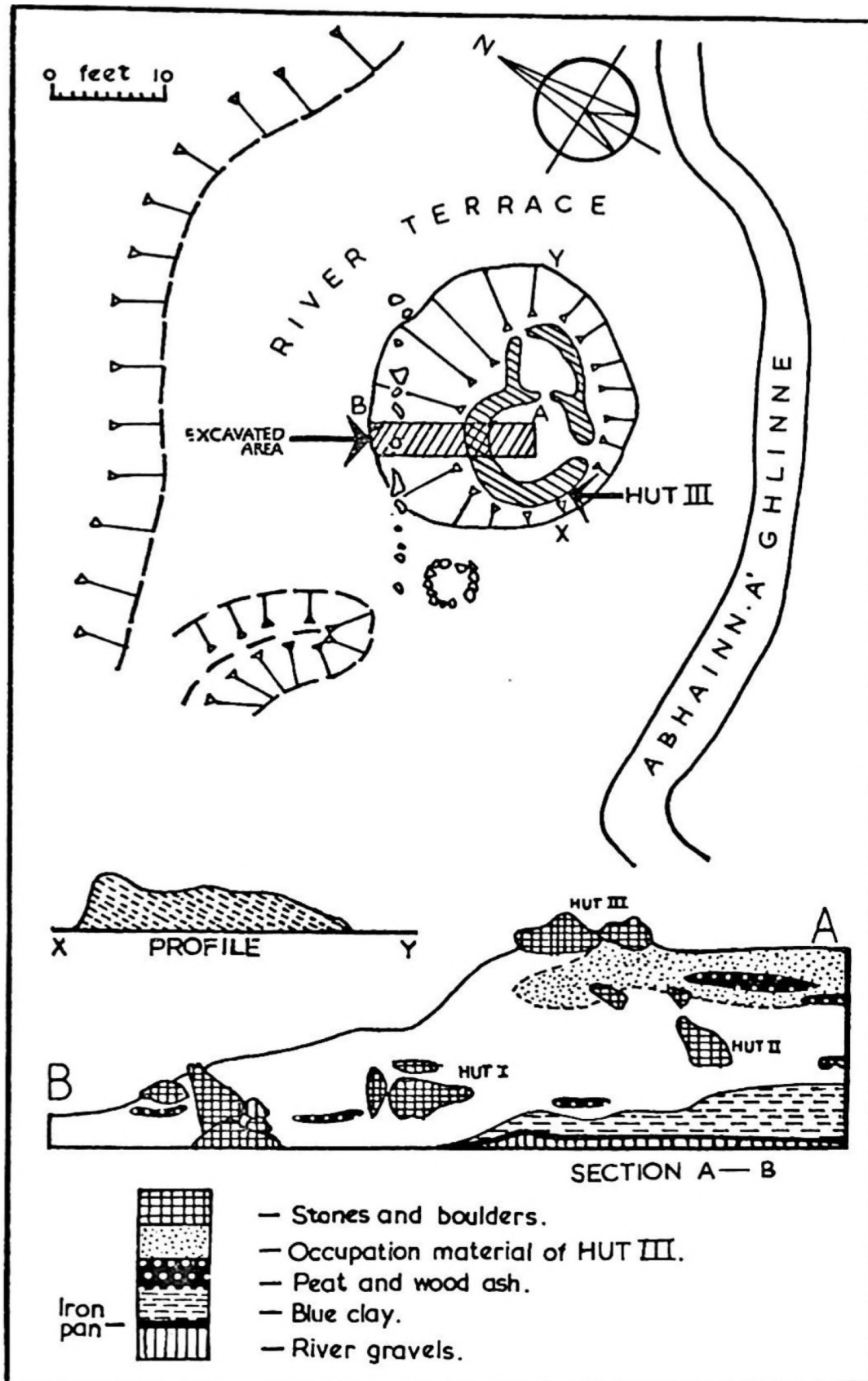
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On this same escarpment, but on the tributary stream which joins the Abhainn a' Ghlinne on its north bank is the second group of two hut sites at 255629. The third group is a third of a mile downstream from the main group at 259627.

The huts are all of the usual Skye type of shieling as described elsewhere (MacSween 1959: 76-79) and nearly all of them are twin-chambered. All were partly stone built and are now badly tumbled. Many are now completely turf-covered. Most are circular or oval but some incorporate rectangular features. The diameter of the main chambers varies between eight and ten feet and the subsidiary chambers in some cases are as little as four feet across. Most of the hut remains are low-lying and close to the ground, but three of the huts in the main group, and both at 254623, had developed mounds between three and four feet in height. This development is similar in nature to, but smaller in scale than that typical of many of the huts in Trotternish.

The hut excavated had developed a mound three and a half feet high, on a terrace within an abandoned meander at the foot of the break of slope mentioned above. It is on the north bank of the stream. The site is subjected to flooding in winter and spring, but is quite dry in normal summer conditions. The terrace is fifty feet wide and the hut about centrally placed (see p. 79).

The hut consisted of two chambers, the larger seven feet internal diameter and the smaller four and a half to five feet across. The north wall of the latter is straight, otherwise the walls are curved and all well covered by turf. The latest hut, just described, is on the top of a mound three and a half feet high, and the entrance to the main chamber opened out on the steepest slope of the mound, facing south to the stream. The two chambers are connected by an internal entrance, and the smaller chamber has an independent entrance at its northeast corner, though this may be a secondary feature associated with the ultimate desertion of the hut. There is a secondary break in the north wall of the main chamber. At the foot of the mound on the north side are the remains of a section of straight stone walling, but there is no clear indication of its original purpose. Close to this at its west end, and again at the foot of the mound, are the basal stones of a small oval structure, three feet by four feet, but not covered by turf in the way that the remainder of the structures are covered.



Measured and sketched by A. Gailey (1958) and drawn for publication by Miss M. R. Holmes (1961)



FIG. 1.

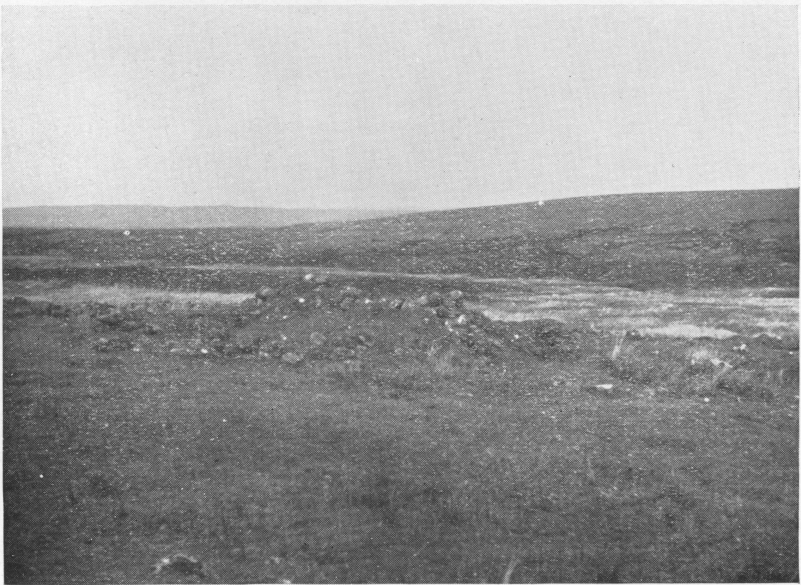


FIG. 2.

Shieling sites:—Trotternish, Isle of Skye, probably last used about 1860.
(See pp. 77-84).

EXCAVATION

A trench, three feet wide and fourteen feet long was driven into the north side of the mound, through the secondary break in the walling, and terminating at the centre of the main chamber. Apart from the concentrations of ash mentioned below, the occupation material throughout was poorly stratified, containing a high proportion of heather remains and peat and wood ash, together with some straw fragments.

At the top of the mound was hut III the hearth of which was found in the corner of the cutting at A. The hearth consisted only of a concentration of ash and was not stone-lined. Underneath and within hut III was found a portion of walling, clearly associated with which was a stone-edged hearth (one stone of which is seen in the section). The centre of this hearth was about two feet from the inner edge of the associated wall, and two sherds of "craggan" type pottery were found between hearth and wall at this level. Almost at the bottom of the section, and between the wall of hut III and the outer straight wall, was found the wall of a third and earliest hut, hut I. Two courses remained in situ with a third slipped down against the outer face (see section). Outside was a layer of ash three inches thick and level with the base of the wall.

The outer straight wall was evident from the surface, but only excavation gave any clear indication of its relatively massive nature. It was constructed of large boulders many of which were set on edge, there being clear evidence for at least two courses. Outside and half way up this wall was found a layer of peat and wood ash about a foot wide and two to three inches deep.

The natural deposit at the bottom of the section consisted of a sticky blue fluvial clay, up to one foot deep, below which was a well-developed iron-pan overlying river gravels and rotted basalt. Hut I had evidently been excavated into the edge of these clays, and a small patch of peat ash was found in a hollow in the clay on what presumably was the floor of the hut, as the section indicates.

INTERPRETATION

The site examined is typical of many in North Skye. Most of the Abhainn a' Ghlinne valley is bog-covered, with heather on the slightly steeper and drier slopes. Really dry ground is found only on the main breaks of slope and in the lower reaches

of the main stream where small riverine terraces have developed and here the shielings are found. The proximity to a stream and the lack of indications of cultivation are typical, one might say constant features. The mound is of moderate size when compared with some of the sites in Trotternish, but nevertheless impressive. Excavation suggests that the mound is entirely due to the successive re-occupation of the site, but the application of this conclusion to other sites needs further evidence. Here two phases of rebuilding, giving three major phases of occupation, are clear. The total duration of any one of these three could not be estimated on this site, but more extensive and careful excavation of a similar site might prove rewarding in this respect. Almost certainly annual re-occupation entailed some re-building but how many times this could occur without involving a major re-building operation, two of which are here indicated, is not clear.

Owing to the trial nature of the excavation, little of the detailed structure of the huts is known. The stone walling of huts II and III seems to have been only two courses high, but there were three courses, probably, in hut I giving a total height of about eighteen inches. Surface indications and the evidence from the excavation both suggest curvilinear two-chambered huts for all three phases. Almost certainly the stone walls were supplemented on their outer sides with sods (one of the authors has seen this in extant rectangular shieling huts in Ness, Lewis). It is impossible to suggest a total height for the walls. The macro-remains included in the occupation material suggest a heather-covered roof, and also some straw bedding in the interior. The lack of any wood in the occupation material probably means that, as in Lewis, roofing timbers were carried seasonally to the shieling, and removed again on return to the permanent settlement.

The precise purpose of the straight wall to the north of the hut mound is unknown. It may have been part of a small enclosure, used possibly for separating young animals from the flock or herd at milking time. The small oval structure at the foot of the mound may reasonably be associated with the latest phase of occupation but its purpose is unknown.

THE SHIELINGS OF NORTH SKYE

The North of Skye contains many examples of the type of shieling hut excavated in Vaternish. The adjacent and larger peninsula of Trotternish is probably richer in these remains

than is Vaternish itself (MacSween 1959:75), groups of up to thirty huts occurring in some of the western glens, for example in Glen Haultin and Glen Conon. Most commonly groups of four or five occur, these probably representing the shielings belonging to individual joint-farms or clachans. Most sites lie at a distance of two miles or more from the permanent settlements in Trotternish. No reliable evidence exists which can be said to link the group of shielings in Abhainn a' Ghlinne to any particular clachan, although several abandoned settlement sites lie within a radius of about three miles.

One of the constant features of these shieling groups is the utilisation of a dry site in an otherwise damp environment. The surface of these higher areas of moorland is frequently boggy. Favoured sites in the basalt country of North Skye are on the minor escarpments caused by the differential erosion of individual lava flows. Other sites are found where steep well-drained hill-slopes give way to the more gently-sloping valley bottoms, as in some of the west-facing glens in Trotternish, or again in Glen More in Mull, where the shieling huts are of the same general type as the Skye ones. The huts are normally in close proximity to a burn, for constant supplies of water were needed in the making of butter and cheese.

In the field the shielings are readily recognisable as bright green, often circular patches among the purple-brown swells of heather moorland. The better drainage of the sites, together with many generations of activity and consequently fertilisation by cattle and sheep, have brought about the establishment of a close sward of succulent green grass, in marked contrast to the tough heather and moor grasses.

As in the Vaternish example, the majority of the Trotternish huts are circular in form, usually consisting of two chambers connected by a narrow internal doorway. The purpose of the smaller of the two chambers appears to have been as a store-house for the milk and butter, products of the dairy industry which the shielings existed to serve. The larger of the chambers constituted the living quarters of those who accompanied the cattle from the clachans each summer. Furnishing and utensils were relatively simple (Moffat-Pender 1926; 25), and according to tradition the latter were manufactured almost exclusively of wood. In this respect, the discovery of pottery in the Vaternish hut is of particular interest. It is known that crude pottery, akin to the "craggan" ware of Lewis, was made in various parts

of the Highlands until a relatively recent date—in fact, one authority reports that it was manufactured at Uig, Trotternish probably within the present century (Curwen 1938: 281). It may be that such finds will provide dating evidence.

The system of transhumance represented by the Skye shielings is one which has long since disappeared. In North Skye, at least, the use of the shielings ceased so long ago as to leave few traces even in local tradition. It is fair to assume that the practice has not existed since 1850, except in isolated instances (MacSween 1959: 76), and probably not on a large scale since 1811; the latter date corresponds with the end of runrig in Trotternish, which was shortly followed by widespread evictions. These not only removed large numbers of tenants from the land but more seriously from the point of view of transhumance, removed extensive areas of hill pasture from crofting tenure. Associated with these developments went a considerable decrease in the cattle population of the region, a decrease well attested both in local tradition and in the findings of the various official commissions of the late nineteenth century. Certainly, the largest concentrations of shielings in Trotternish are to be found on land which, in 1880, formed the grazing land of the larger sheep-farms, although earlier, unquestionably, the common pastures of groups of joint-tenants or crofters. The conclusion to be drawn is that the intensive use of hill-ground, represented by the shieling system, had died out at a comparatively early date in North Skye—offering a vivid contrast to the Isle of Lewis.

The origins of the system certainly lie in the remote past (MacSween 1959: 86-7) and one of the objects of the trial excavation was to see whether it might be possible to obtain dating for shieling sites in this way. A great number of Trotternish shielings have developed mounds, presumably of ash and other occupation material. Those in the valley of the Rha are particularly noteworthy, the latest huts being built on mounds some eight feet above the level of the flood plain on which, apparently, the originals must have been constructed. Where meander scars had exposed sections of the mounds, they clearly consisted of material of the same type as found in Vatarnish. Elsewhere, it has been suggested (MacSween 1959: 78) that the association of huts without mounds, with the others, may be due to a more intensive use of the hill pastures during the later phases of transhumance. This is one of the problems systematic excavation might be expected to solve.

With regard to the shielings at Abhainn a' Ghlinne itself, it seems safe to assume that they are of approximately the same age as their counterparts in Trotternish. The clachans at Unish, at the northern tip of Vaternish, were cleared to form a sheep-farm during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and it is to these that this particular group of huts may be attributed most convincingly. There is a strong local tradition, verified by the local landowner, that the inhabitants of the rather barren Ascrib Islands a few miles off the coast were resettled on the mainland of Skye in the mid-nineteenth century on what were probably shieling sites some miles to the south of Abhainn a' Ghlinne, at a place called Forss a' Breithamh. If this be correct, it may indicate that the use of shielings was declining, if it had not already ceased at this time.

The excavation of similar structures in future may shed some light upon a rather neglected feature of old Highland life. This will be even more effective if linked with the exploration of the abandoned sites of the permanent settlements of the Highlands (Fairhurst 1960: 75). At the moment, techniques for this sort of work are in an experimental stage.

NOTE

- ¹ Glasgow University Geography Department, Field Excursion, September, 1958. The authors were associated with this Department and are indebted to Professor Miller for making this study possible, and also to Mr. Hamilton Thompson for his able assistance in the field.

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