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Trust gets big cache from Burns Cottage

Recent archaeological work carried out at Burns Cottage in Alloway revealed a buried and forgotten hoard of bone china objects, thought to date around the closing years of the World War I.

The objects were found during archaeological excavations, undertaken for the Trust by Addyman Archaeology, aimed at locating a series of field boundaries shown on early maps. The boundaries would have been contemporary with William Burnes – father of the celebrated Ayrshire poet, who occupied the 18th-century building and farmed the surrounding land.

As well as revealing evidence of these earlier land divisions, along with the surviving remnants of an even earlier medieval field system, the work uncovered an unexpected cache of Burns memorabilia, thought to date between 1916 and 1920. Forty-four complete bone china objects were found, plus numerous other fragments. The hoard is dominated by miniature dog kennels, but



WWI souvenirs from Burns Cottage

it also includes representations of binoculars, hand-held lanterns, suitcases, and WWI tanks.

The objects would have been made to raise money for the war effort, and most are marked with the coat-of-arms of the Federated Burns Clubs and the legend 'Arms for Burns'. Some of the dog kennels are also marked with a reference

to one of Scotland's most celebrated regiments, The Black Watch.

Several glass picture frames were also recovered. Most were empty, but isolated examples contained souvenir postcards which depict either the Burns Cottage, the Burns Monument or a portrait of Robert Burns himself.

Archaeologist Dr Louise Turner of Glasgow University commented, "I've worked on a wide variety of sites during my career, and this has to be one of the strangest and most unusual collections of objects I've come across. What makes it all the more extraordinary is the fact that so many of the items survived intact."

The finds may have been dumped in a rubbish pit behind the museum after the war was over and they could no longer be sold as souvenirs.

Derek Alexander
NTS Archaeologist West

The NTS has been one of the key players over the past decade or so in raising awareness of the importance of MoLRS – medieval or later rural settlement – in Scotland, with major high-profile initiatives like the Ben Lawers Historic Landscape Project, and the World Heritage recognition of St Kilda's cultural landscape.

With the Scotland's Rural Past project (www.scotlandsruralpast.org.uk) now up and running, it's time to ask 'where should we go from here?'

In order to give people a chance to stand back and take stock, the Trust organised and hosted a MoLRS Research Seminar in March 2007, on behalf of the Historic Rural Settlement Working Group. Despite a train strike on the day, more than 35 people came from all over Scotland: from the Northern Isles down to Dumfries and Galloway; from amateur groups to university professors; and from private contractors to charities and government agencies.

Scotland's Rural Past: where next?

Everyone recognised that safeguarding sites and gathering information about them should not be an end in itself: we need to take this information and weave it into stories: local stories, to put the sites on our doorsteps into context; and national and international stories so that we can get a better understanding of how ordinary people from the countryside lived and the part they played in shaping our nation.

During discussions at the Research Seminar it became clear that the diverse audience had many common interests, and lots of ideas were sparking off one another. One of the most exciting suggestions was a research project based around 'living with environmental change'. This is something that people have had to cope with for thousands of years – there was a 'Little Ice Age' in the second millennium AD – and there must be lessons we can learn from how people responded to the ups and downs of the climate in the past.



The information we collect through fieldwork needs to feed into wider research and interpretation strategies

The notes of the MoLRS Research Seminar will soon be completed and circulated to those who attended, and many others who couldn't come on the day have asked to be kept informed and involved. NTS archaeologists are keen to play their part in helping turn our stories into histories.

Robin Turner
NTS Head of Archaeology

Pulling evidence from the ploughsoil

Fieldwalking is not a widely practiced archaeological technique in Scotland, but it lends itself perfectly to public participation. Over the last two years, during Scottish Archaeology Month (September), fieldwalking has been carried out on small areas of ploughed ground at the National Museum of Rural Life, Wester Kitchside, on the outskirts of East Kilbride.

A series of 10 x 10m grids were set out with canes and volunteers divided into groups. Each group was given 5 minutes in each grid to pick up as many artefacts as possible before moving on to the next one. Large numbers of volunteers can be used in this way (we had up to 50 one day!). The volunteers are asked to collect all the artefacts they see



The mysterious ceramic ball

including modern material, which means they don't have to be finds experts to join in. Indeed we had a wide range of ages, from 6 to over 60.

Most of the finds are 19th century, and had probably been spread on the fields from the farmyard midden. They give an insight into what was happening on the farm which, being part of the Rural Life Museum, is of particular interest. Finds include sherds of mass-produced ceramics such as transfer-printed wares, sponge-decorated wares and stoneware jars.

Glass forms a major element of the collection, including window glass and bottle glass. Fragments of clay pipes, small glass beads, buttons, keys, slate pencils, buckles, and lead toy soldiers were also found. A few sherds of medieval and post-medieval pottery were recovered, plus a number of pieces of flint.

One intriguing find is a small ceramic ball with what appeared to be circular decorations on it. Initially this was thought to be a bottle stopper; then perhaps a decorated pin-head of later prehistoric date. Eventually, however, experts at the National Museum of



Local volunteers searching for finds

Scotland pronounced it most likely to be a 19th- or early 20th-century kettle de-furrer: a small marble put inside a kettle to stop the build-up of scale.

With such a large number of artefacts being collected during fieldwork it was important to get the volunteers to help in the washing and cataloguing of the finds, which makes preparing the final report a lot easier. It is hoped that a selection of the artefacts recovered from the fieldwalking will be put on display at Wester Kitchside farmhouse.

Derek Alexander
NTS Archaeologist West

A glimpse of 18th-century magic: the Hermitage Grotto

On an autumn day in 1757, John Murray of Strowan conducted his uncle, the second Duke of Atholl, through his newly laid out pleasure gardens along the banks of the River Braan, which he christened 'The Hermitage'.

The ladies and gentlemen of the Duke's party were amazed to find a wilderness garden full of dramatic surprises in what, only a few months before, had been farm land. One of these was a fashionable grotto – a magical cave with a sparkling interior. After partaking of a wonderful banquet in the summer house now known as Ossian's Hall – including a great many fine wines – the party (by now quite jolly!) discovered the new grotto. A near-contemporary account describes what happened next:

"... Mr Murray, placing them in and about the Grotto, ... set ... Water Works a playing in their Front, which heightened the Entertainment greatly, and made the Company give a hearty Plaudite of cheerful Laughter. While the Water Works were in motion, Mr Murray jokingly desired the Ladies to Walk if they pleased, but that they could not do, as the playing of the Water hemmed them in."

Very little else was known about the Hermitage Grotto from documentary sources. Substantial traces of the mortar used to attach minerals and shells survived on the walls, but no detailed analysis had ever been undertaken. So when, in a record spate, the river rose some 15 feet, revealing

the edge of a quartz pebble floor in the grotto entrance, the opportunity arose to expand our understanding of this rather disregarded garden feature, with a combination of rescue excavation and analytical survey.

We discovered that although it seemed natural from the outside, a great deal of 'art' had gone into the making of the grotto. Sections of rock had been drilled from either side of a narrow fissure in the



Investigating the grotto, with part of the white quartz floor exposed

rock face, and then placed at the top of the opening, supported by iron struts. This made the entrance more cave-like.

Two phases of decoration were found in the interior. The first, dating to 1757, was composed of shells and sparkly, ore-like minerals. The second dates to 1763, when John Murray wrote to his brother that he was putting in a few hours every morning before breakfast decorating the grotto, "which will be pretty but will be a good deal of work"! This scheme was much more elaborate, with the addition of broken fragments of mirrors and wine glasses, and the glistening blue residues of iron smelting. The materials are identical to those used in the Shell House at Newhailes, which was created in the 1780s: another cave of jewels, newly illuminated by archaeological investigations.

Shannon Fraser
NTS Archaeologist North-East

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