



## Leith Hall shows her colours

Works to a chimney flue in the oldest part of Leith Hall, at Kennethmont in Aberdeenshire, have revealed exciting evidence for a long history of internal redecoration.

The north wing of the Hall is a tower house built around 1650 by James Leith of New Leslie. Rewiring works in 2001 showed that original plaster surfaces survived in some rooms, sandwiched between original timber beam ceilings and later plaster ceilings. The recent work has proved that hidden in the fabric of the tower house is a wonderfully complex record of changing times and changing fashions.

Work in the 1980s to line one of the chimney flues in the north wing involved opening up a number of walls to gain access. In those days the Trust did not fully recognise the amount of valuable historical information that could be retrieved during invasive building work like this, and thus made no record of the earlier wall surfaces that were broken through at the time. It was a surprise, therefore, to discover what lay beneath when, twenty years later, the same areas were opened up.

The original, mid-17th-century plaster remains in place, with a brownish surface wash – just like that noted in the rewiring project. Later, another plaster surface was put on the wall, this time with a creamy surface. But possibly the most exciting discovery was what lay on top of that, in one of the second-floor rooms. A deep blue wallpaper, stamped with a design of white, black and green sprigs, roses



Duty stamp: 'first account taken' written around a crown, with a number beneath.



The wallpaper revealed over a fireplace: the missing area was removed in the 1980s.

and garlands, survives in remarkable condition underneath the lath and plaster supporting the present 19th-century wall surface.

Work is in progress to analyse this wallpaper, but already it is clear that this is an exceptionally rare survival. The design, colour scheme, type of paper and method of applying the colours all point to a mid-18th-century date.

We have also discovered that some of the paper that had been removed from the wall in the 1980s was rescued by the Property Manager, only to have disappeared into an archive box and been forgotten. Having happily relocated these fragments, we discovered that a duty stamp is beautifully preserved on the back of the paper. Wallpaper was a luxury item in the 18th century and attracted high rates of tax. Along with analysis of the characteristics of the paper itself, the

duty stamp should help to confirm the precise date and origin of the paper, which probably comes from France or England.

This discovery is extremely significant for our understanding of Leith Hall's history, particularly the changing function and status of rooms in what was to become the north wing. The 1750s saw significant developments at Leith Hall, commissioned by John Leith and his wife, Harriot Steuart. They began to transform the tower house and its associated ranges into an elegant country mansion. It seems highly possible that, at least in one room, the whole of their 18th-century decorative scheme still lies relatively intact, beneath the lath and plaster.

*Shannon Fraser*  
NTS Archaeologist East

# The enigmatic Coroghon Castle, Canna

A story of the imprisonment of a wife by a jealous husband, and an illustration as *The Witches' Home*, confirm the mystery that surrounds this ruined building, perched precariously on the side of a rock stac.

However, these are 'romantic' associations – folklore – rather than a fact-based history of the 'castle', so as part of a repair and stabilisation project experts have been helping the Trust understand it better.

First referred to by Pennant in 1772, the structure could be of 17th-century date, but a trawl of the archives has confirmed that there are no specific sources to advise us further. A survey of the surviving masonry has been equally unsuccessful in teasing out the origins and use of the building.

Perhaps the most challenging question resulting from this research is still: what exactly is Coroghon Castle? Was it really a castle, was it a prison, or was it something else?

Based on the evidence so far, our best bet is that today's structure might in fact have been the entrance to the



1. 'The Witches' Home' (Coroghon). Sketch by Dickey Doyle, 1875. Doyle visited Canna in 1875 on Viscount Sherbrooke's yacht. 'The Witches' Home', Coroghon, by Dickey Doyle, 1875.

main part of a timber castle that once stood on the top of the stac.

One day we may be in a position to test that hypothesis. In the meantime we aim to consolidate the ruin so that

people can continue to mull over its mysteries.

*Jill Harden*  
NTS Archaeologist North

## Investigating a prehistoric rubbish pit on Iona

### Trust archaeologists and volunteers

recently spent a couple of days recording the remains of a 2000-3000-year-old rubbish pit on the west side of Iona. The site was discovered eroding out of the sandy bank of a burn on the west side of the island when natural sheep erosion had cut the pit in half.

The pit was filled with dark soil containing limpet and whelk shells, burnt and unburnt animal bone, sherds of pottery, flint and a large cobble stone tool. It is clear that the remains are domestic rubbish or a midden, but whether they relate to a settlement in the immediate vicinity is unknown.

The pottery looks to be of later prehistoric type and could be Late Bronze Age or Iron Age in date. Soil samples were taken for scientific analysis, while the animal bones have already been identified as mostly sheep or goat. However, one large chunk of bone appears to be a scapula of a grey seal and must either have been hunted or collected after washing up on the beach. Two pieces of red deer antler were found nearby by the farmer several years ago, and these display obvious signs of cutting.

Although only a small site, the finds



Volunteers sieving through the pit fill that had eroded into the burn. Worked flint fragments may suggest a date as early as the Late Bronze Age.

are exciting as they suggest a settlement close by. Despite the obvious Early Christian history of Iona very little is known of its prehistory, so this is an important addition to our knowledge of this remarkable island.

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NTS Archaeologist West

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