



A story of rabbits and masons

The John Bel Stone is one of a number of memorial monuments on the Castle Fraser Estate. The massive granite monolith is dedicated to the master mason who helped the first Lord Fraser transform his family seat into a major architectural statement of power and nobility. The stone was recently investigated as part of a stabilisation project to keep it standing.

The stone is particularly interesting, as it is formed by elements of widely different function and date. The standing stone itself was almost certainly raised in the late neolithic or early bronze age. Its scale, its close proximity to a well-preserved recumbent stone circle and the remains of another circle, and the fact that it appears to be surrounded by medieval rigs on our earliest estate plan of 1788, all suggest that it is an *in situ* prehistoric monument.

Perched on top of the stone is a granite pyramid, with an iron pin for a ball finial, now lost, recorded in position in 1866. These were the capstone and finial of one of four granite obelisks which ornamented the formal approach to Castle Fraser in the 17th century. These obelisks were dismantled at the end of the 18th century or the very beginning of the 19th, when the linear design of the estate began to be transformed into a more fashionable informality. The stone was re-used to construct a new, tall obelisk on the crest of a nearby hill as an eye-catcher in sweeping parkland.

It was around this time that one of the redundant pyramid and ball finials was placed on top of the standing stone, transforming it into a memorial to John Bel, who created the castle's elaborate upper works in the early 17th century. Perhaps at the same time, or a little later, two massive worked granite gateposts were placed at the base of the stone to give it added support. It is possible that these also formed part of the grand, 17th-century approach to the castle.

Recently, the monument has been undermined by rabbit burrowing. Prehistoric standing stones sometimes



John Bel Stone: Carefully digging out the warren of rabbit burrows to stabilise the stone.

have cremation burials associated with them, so as part of a project to assess the extent of damage and potential instability, and to resolve any problems, Murray Archaeological Services undertook a small-scale excavation. Rabbits had removed most of the earth around the base of the stone, but in one small area the old ground surface into which the stone had been set survived underneath the ploughsoil. No prehistoric artefacts or features were revealed, but medieval redware pottery

was found in the ploughsoil, over a medieval cultivation rig which cut through the old land surface.

With the help of structural engineers, NTS Rangers and Conservation Volunteers, the John Bel Stone has now been stabilised and enclosed by a rabbit-proof fence, so with any luck it can look forward to another few thousand years!

Shannon Fraser
NTS Archaeologist East

Farewell to Jill

As part of the recent staff reductions in the Trust we regret the loss of our North Archaeologist post and with it its post-holder Jill Harden.

Since joining us over 8 years ago Jill has proved to be an enormous asset to the Trust, working tirelessly for our properties, and bringing a wealth of experience and wisdom to the Archaeology Team. We have particularly benefited from her enthusiasm to work with volunteers in the office and at properties, and from her extensive museums experience.

While Jill's services as an archaeological contractor are much in demand,

she will be continuing to help the Trust on various project-based work.



Culross house leaps back in time

Archaeological survey carried out as part of a rewiring project at one of the Trust's properties in Culross has revealed exciting new evidence of the building's history.

When Tron House was protected as a Listed Building in the 1970s, it was thought to have been built in the 18th century. However, archaeological analysis of the structure while areas were being opened up for the electrical works has revealed that it probably dates back to the early 17th century, making it one of the oldest houses in the burgh.

The building started out as two separate dwellings, one of which may have been a shop or workshop with tradesman's accommodation upstairs. One of these houses had a window which must have been blocked by the construction of the Town House next door, in 1626 – which suggests Tron House was built before that time.

The subsequent history of the house is very complicated, with several alterations and extensions over the centuries, as the fortunes of its inhabitants rose and fell. A huge amount of historic fabric survives, including evidence for early interior decoration and fittings, and an almost entirely intact pine roof, which has strong potential for tree-ring dating.

What was once considered an attractive but rather ordinary building has now been recognised as an exciting time capsule ... and there's so much more to learn.

Shannon Fraser
NTS Archaeologist East



Two early plaster surfaces (one on top of the other) revealed after 19th-century laths were removed. The 17th-century stone fire surround was just visible behind the later mantelpiece.

Too Much Information: The Trust and Royal Commission team up to tame the NTS Sites and Monuments Record

As part of the Trust's ongoing commitment to the sharing of archaeological information in Scotland, a new and exciting partnership is being developed between the Archaeology Team and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS). The project is being guided by Dr Daniel Rhodes as part of his NTS Workplace Learning Bursary, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund through the Institute for Archaeologists.

The project involves creating a new Historic Environmental Record (HER) system, designed to help with the management of the Trust's important archaeological resource. The first steps

have now been taken to allow the Archaeology Team a web-based feed into the online database of the National Monuments Record for Scotland (NMRS).

Through a close partnership with RCAHMS, and as part of the Trust's current IT development, it is envisaged that the Archaeology Team will be able to input archaeological data directly into the NMRS, thereby immediately making the records part of the nation's heritage archive. World-wide accessibility of this data through the RCAHMS website (<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk>) will add to public and academic understanding and appreciation of the exceptional

archaeological sites and landscapes cared for by the Trust.

With the aid of volunteers it is hoped that the Trust's archaeological records can be uploaded onto the new system within a couple of years.

Daniel Rhodes
NTS/IfA Workplace Learning

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