Biggar Archaeology group

Bringing the past to the present

The Lowland Clearances as seen in archaeology

Tam Ward 2012

Summary

Survey and excavation projects on south of Scotland upland farms of the 17th and 18th centuries has revealed the archaeological evidence for widespread clearance of populations in the areas of the Upper Clyde and Tweed rivers

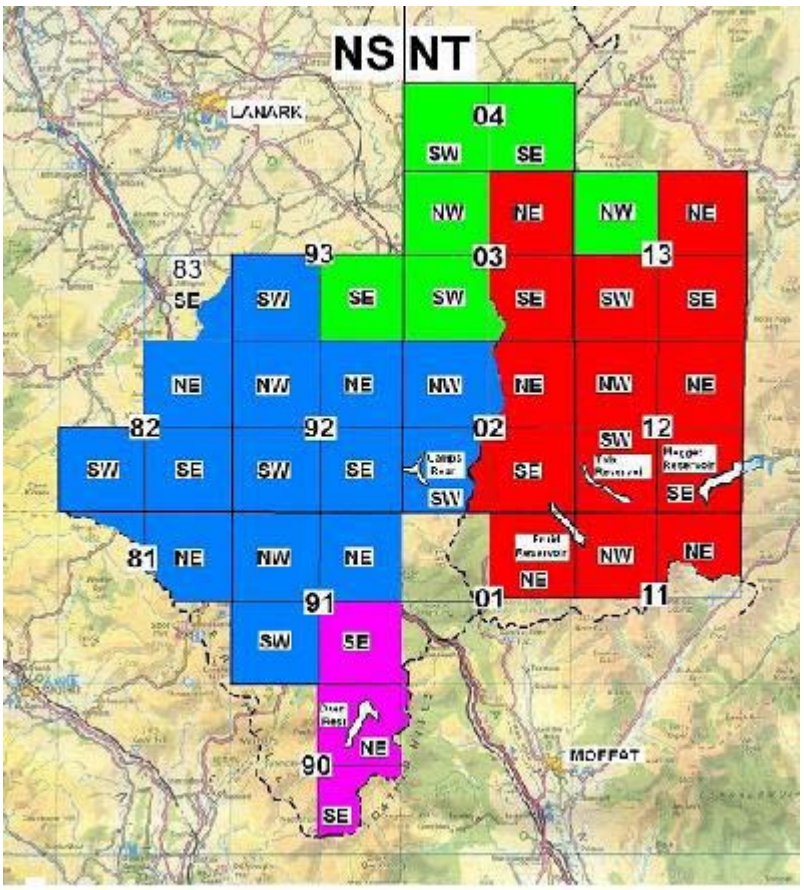
Introduction

Since 1981 the local voluntary archaeologists from Biggar have been involved in archaeological fieldwork in Upper Clydesdale and Upper Tweeddale and in the Southern Uplands of Scotland (Pl 1). The work has involved extensive survey and excavation programmes on a variety of site types and periods and in particular on post medieval settlements.

Principally because the area of the Southern Uplands is one where development until recent times has had minimal impact on the landscape, a remarkable legacy of archaeology has survived as both visible and buried sites and monuments.

This short paper introduces one aspect of the work concerning upland settlement in the area during the 17th and 18th centuries (Ward, 1998), and presents what is believed to be the first archaeological evidence for the depopulation of the rural landscape in the mid 18th century.

Plate 1: Map of BAG Project Area



Survey

The survey of a large tract of landscape (Pl 1) in the two areas considered here was a consequence of a gradual development of local knowledge, stimulated by the realisation that many previously unrecorded sites remained in a fairly good state of preservation, and with visible features begging study and interpretation, none of which had previously been done.

The formal survey programme which eventually developed was directly as a result of the excavation of Windgate House (see below) (Christison et al); a bastle house and the first building of its type to be recognised so far north of the Anglo Scottish border, and the first ever to have been excavated. Upon the realisation that the building was a bastle, an exploration was made for other similar sites and several were found, subsequent research has shown that many others have disappeared from the landscape (Zeune, 1992).

During the search for bastle houses (Figs 1 & 2) an astounding previously unrecorded palimpsest of sites and monuments has now been discovered and which make up the thirty year history of the work of Biggar Archaeology Group.

The survey of post medieval sites has run concurrently with that of sites and monuments of nearly all the periods which are represented on the landscape under discussion, but which do not concern the purpose of this paper.

The following sites have been selected from the overall work of BAG to best demonstrate what is purported in this article.

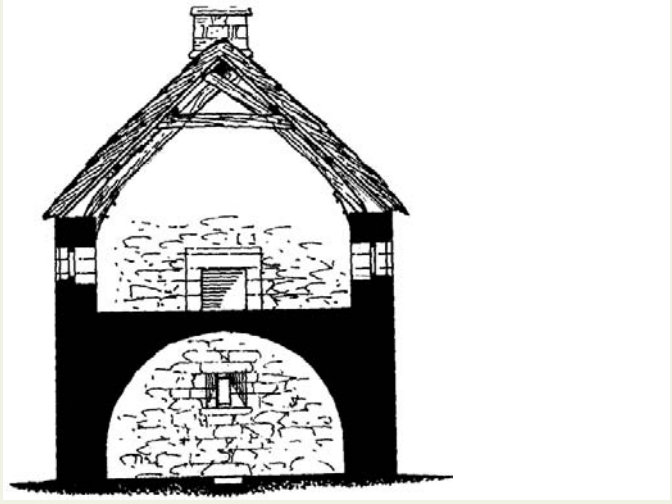


Fig 1 Hypothetical view of a bastle house

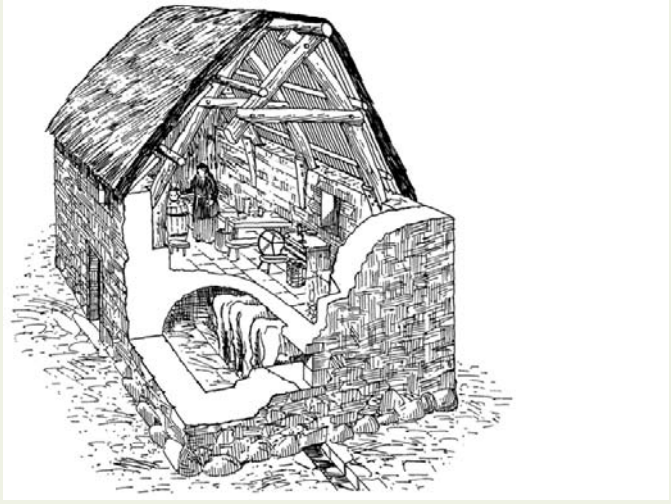


Fig 2 Hypothetical view of a bastle house

Plate 2 Windgate House after excavation

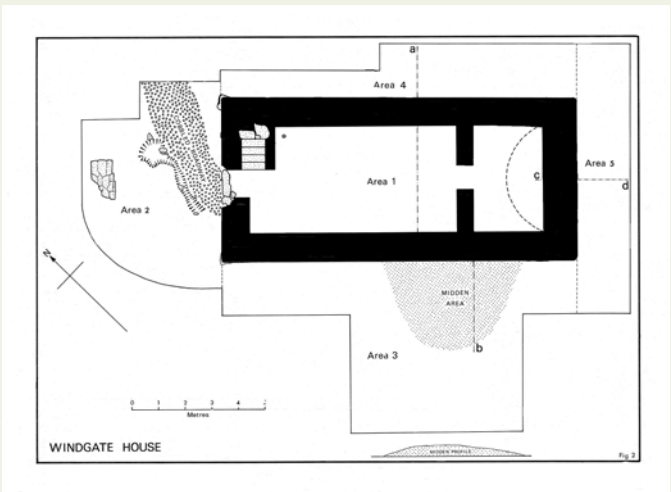


fig 3 Windgate House plan

Windgate House

Bastle House

NGR NT 016273 (Pl 2 & Fig 3)

Windgate House is somewhat of an anomaly regarding its surroundings, because of the restricted position at the utmost head of a glen; no farming landscape of features is present other than three nearby sheep milking buchts (see footnote 3 below). The house appears to have been constructed with concealment in mind rather than forming the nucleus of a farm and which is seen on most other sites, nevertheless, the buchts are now recognised as integral features of all of the 17th/18th settlement sites investigated by BAG and indicate the importance of sheep in the area.

The house was a 'long' type with an internal mural stair in the form of scale and platt, and had a doorway in the north gable which was reinforced by at least one draw bar. The long vaulted basement had been sub divided to form a double chamber. Lime mortar was used throughout its construction and dressed sandstone was used as door and window frames while the roof had been clad in Southern Uplands slate fixed by wooden pegs.

Excavation of the site showed that sheep were the principal diet of the occupants in the 17th C; however this is the only site where little evidence of abandonment was clearly shown to have been in the mid 18th century although occupation throughout the 17thC was apparent.

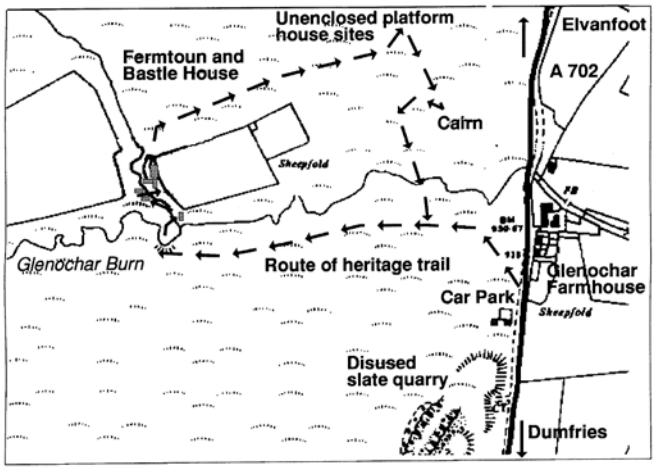


Fig 4 Glenochar site plan with Trail

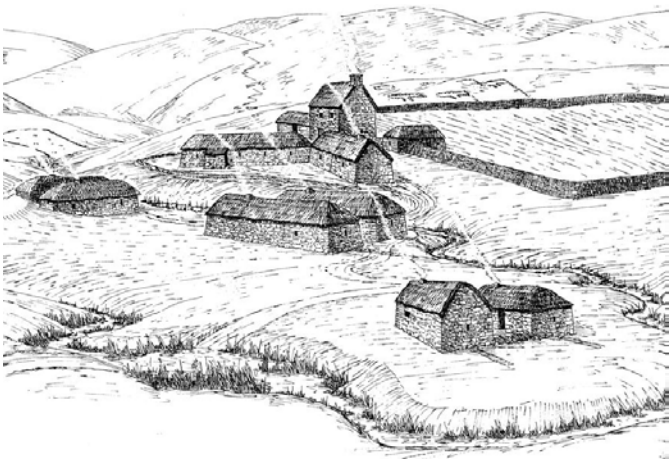


Fig 5 Artists impression of Glenochar c 1650

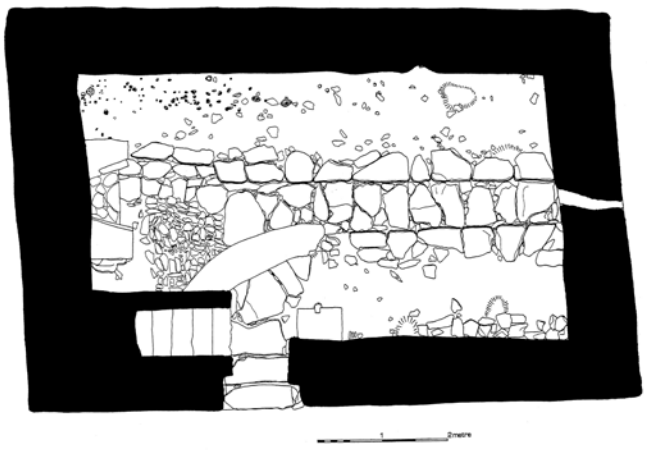


Fig 6 Glenochar bastle plan

Glenochar

Bastle House
NGR NS 946139 (Figs 4, 5 & 6)

The site at Glenochar could be described as a bastle house and fermtoun, the bastle being a 'short' type with a mural stair identical to that of Windgate. The ground floor entrance had also been protected against forced entry by a draw bar and the basement which had a byre drain was vaulted, the position of one slit window in a gable wall survived, the walls were constructed with high quality lime mortar, however in this case although slates were used as floor surfaces, the bastle and all other buildings on the site must have been roofed with some form of thatch.

The surrounding landscape and remains of other buildings are what allows this site to be described as a fermtoun; at least another eleven long buildings, made with stone footings and with turf walls can be seen on the site and of which eight were excavated. The surrounding features include enclosed field systems, lazy beds and sheep milking buchts, all of which are testament to a mixed farming economy of perhaps some arable but certainly fodder cropping and both sheep and cattle husbandry. Horses were numerous as is evident by cast shoes but the extent of cattle was somewhat surprising; each excavated building had a byre drain and in some cases the positions for stalling and feeding the animals was found. Judging by the space available the cattle were a small breed and these were clearly being over wintered and fed in sheltered accommodation, the bastle byre was below the house while all the other buildings had animals and people living side by side on the same level, in house byres, where one third of the space was for human occupation and the rest given over to the animals.

The material evidence gathered from the site was unambiguous and shows the life styles of the occupants throughout the 17th century and up to the mid 18th century when the site appears to have been abruptly abandoned. Surprisingly no evidence of earlier occupation was found despite the fact that the place is named in medieval land charters recorded under the Great Seal of Scotland, this is the same for all other sites investigated by BAG.

Objects found show that course green glazed pottery was used in the beginning but later in the 17th C Delft made an appearance and in the early 18th C red slip wares of Staffordshire type were used along with course wares, but fine quality pottery in the form of small (tea?) cups was acquired. The rise to some affluence is also shown by the increasing use of tobacco in the third quarter of the 17th C and extending up to at least 1720 (Gallagher 2011). Wine and medicines were consumed and arrived in appropriate bottles (Fig 7) in the early part of the 18th C (Murdoch 2006), and so far in the research of the project, the bottles have supplied the best evidence of abandonment period, although it is expected in due course that a study of the latest pottery will corroborate that conclusion. The three find types of pottery, glass and tobacco pipes are the key to understanding the site occupation and abandonment.

The following is taken from the glass report for Glenochar by Robin Murdoch (Murdoch 2006)

Looking more objectively at the wine bottle assemblage from Glenochar, the dating spread is as follows:

1	1690-1700	3.5%
2	1700-1720	15%
3	1720-1740	54%
4	1740-1760	27.5%

The lack of any earlier 17th century bottles should not be regarded as an indication of a lack of occupation of the site. Glass wine bottles were high status, scarce and very expensive items at the time of their introduction around 1630 and it is quite likely that they would have been beyond the means of even the Bastle House owner until the end of the century. A resultant scarcity is also a factor.

Once into the 18th century, however, glass wine bottles become common, particularly on urban sites. Their presence in the rural fermtoun of Glenochar does seem unusual but the number of similar sites so far excavated is small and objective comment premature.

What is clear is that the usage of wine bottles, on the Glenochar site, ends abruptly around 1760. Just about this date the lip shape on wine bottles assumes a much heavier, enhanced profile. There is only one possible example in the Glenochar assemblage. (End quote)

However other strands of historical data have been gathered to support the archaeological evidence of the site; testaments (wills) which have survived give the names of occupants and their families and neighbours, relationships between them all and crucially between the land owners to whom rents were paid. The whole economy of the site can be reconstructed from these vital documents but unfortunately they cover the 17th C and only one survives for the beginning of the 18th C. Nevertheless, another vital piece of evidence for clearance comes from an estate map of 1760 by Wells (SRO) which shows the place as 'old Glenochar' and with the surrounding fields as 'meadows' and a new steading built where the present farms is now located.

Glengieth

Bastle House NGR NS 947166

The site at Glengieth has not been excavated but the plan shows the area around the undoubted 'long type' bastle house is similar in detail to neighbouring Glenochar.

Wintercleuch

Bastle House NGR NS 980114

The bastle here has been excavated and is shown to be a 'short type' very similar to Glenochar. Once again the surrounding landscape indicates sheep management and the finds from the site are exactly the same as other locations where the evidence shows 17th C occupation and ending in the mid 18th C when Staffordshire pottery types were used.

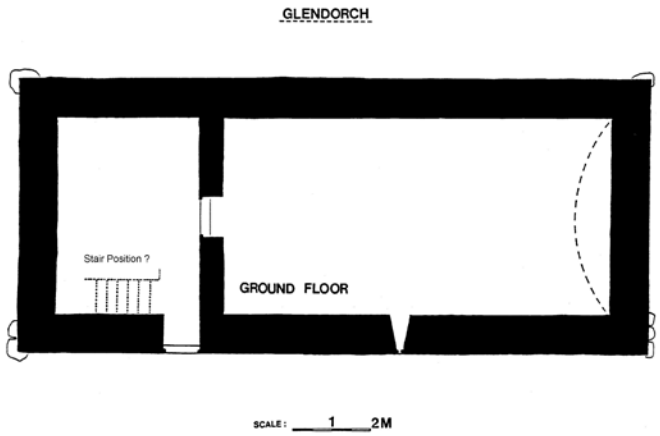


Fig 7 Glendorch bastle plan

Glendorch

Bastle House NS870188 (Fig 7)

The bastle site at Glendorch is a cut above all others given in this report in terms of architectural detail, and this is easily understood as the occupants in the 17thC were the wealthy and powerful Foullis family, whose interests in the local lead mining and retrieval of alluvial gold in the Leadhills area effectively bank rolled the Scottish monarchy. The need for a strong defensive house was obvious under such circumstances in a land and at a time where the Law was simply ignored.

It seems that the 'long type' bastle was built near to the lead mines but also functioned as a farm house associated with sheep and some cattle. Glendorch is the only example other than Windgate to have a slated roof and here the evidence is for wooden pegs being used originally but in the early 18th C repairs were done using iron nails to re fix slates. The use of dressed sandstone here extends to quoins, doors and windows, eave drip stones, ridge stones, unique gun loops (for a bastle) and perhaps even a large fire place mantelpiece. Much of the dressed stone was robbed to build a now ruinous 19th C cottage on the site. Finds from the limited excavation are similar to those from neighbouring bastle sites.

Plate 3 Smithwood bastle after excavation

Smithwood

Bastle House NGR NS 959093 (PL 3)

The 'long type' bastle house is very similar in plan to Windgate House but here the remains of further buildings and enclosures may be seen. Once again the archaeological evidence is perfectly clear in showing the occupation from the beginning of the 17th C and ending in the mid 18thC. Almost identical to Glenochar in that pottery, glass and tobacco pipes allow for this interpretation

The following is taken from the bottle glass report by Robin Murdoch (Murdoch 2006 op. cit.)

True onion bottles and their immediate derivatives are represented as mallet types of the second quarter of the 18th century. These latter, along with mid 18th century types are the most numerous present and indicate a likely peak of wine bottle acquisition from 1730-1760. Around 1760-70 a quite significant change took place in lip shape. p until then the lips were often just sheared off, slightly reheated and given a slight out-turn. his meant that the thickness of the glass at the lip was not significantly different to that of the neck below. However around 1760 lips suddenly assumed a much wider and sloped profile, frequently being enhanced with more glass. These forms are unmistakeable and there are none within this assemblage with the possible exception of SMWB119. The lack of widened/enhanced lips indicates beyond reasonable doubt that none of the wine bottles from Smithwood could have been any later than about 1780 and this is perhaps erring slightly on the cautious side. (End quote)

Chapelgill

17th/18th C settlement
NGR NT 0810 3010

The site of Chapelgill in Peeblesshire has all the hall marks on the ground for a fermtoun of 17th C date; with several buildings, enclosures and prominent sheep milking buchts. The evidence gleaned from numerous slit trenches shows the typical pattern of occupation as the sites given above. It is unclear if a bastle house was the main residence here but certainly high status buildings did exist with lime plastered walls and plaster and lathe ceilings in the 17th C. Chapelgill is the only site where occupation did take place in the 19th century but this was in a single small building nearby, and after the rest had been demolished.

Logan

Bastle House NGR NT 10851 29586

The Peeblesshire site currently being investigated shows the all too familiar picture as described above and here there is a 'short type' bastle house with associated buildings and surrounding features.

Insert Fig 8 & Pls 4 – 11 here

Plate 4 Glenochar wine bottle

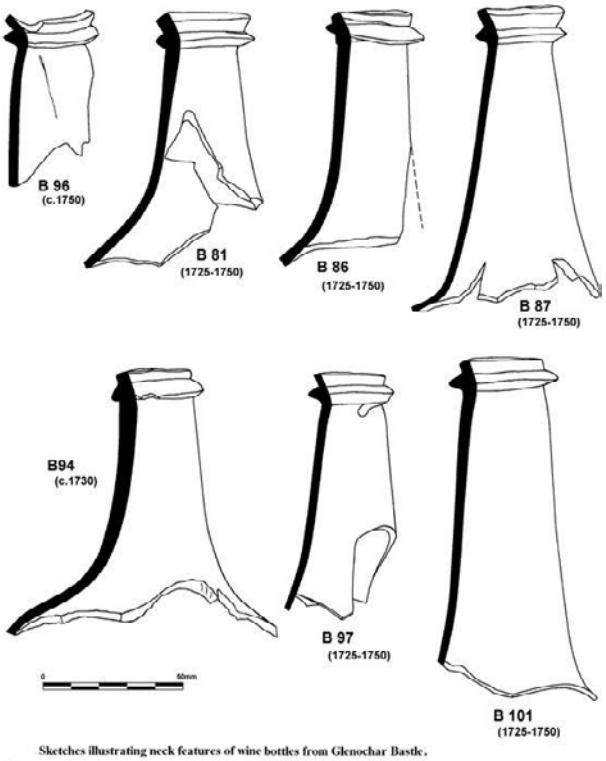


Fig 8 Glenochar wine bottle necks

Plate 5 Logan shoe buckles

Plate 6 Smithwood slip wear bowl

Plate 7 Smithwood slip wear plate

Plate 8 Chapelgill slip wear plate

Plate 9 Smithwood (tea?) cup

Plate 10 Smithwood chamber pot

General

In each of the locations given above the site and excavation interpretations have gradually built into a convincing and very similar story. All of the sites had a principal residence of strong house built with high quality lime mortar, in some cases a larger community of other house/byres and associated agricultural remains existed. However the most striking similarity has been the finds assemblages gathered from the sites, in every instance the same interpretation seems unavoidable; the sites were occupied throughout the 17th C and all perhaps with the exception of Windgate House, were abandoned in the mid 18th C. Furthermore, in every case, the main house can be shown to have been deliberately and systematically demolished with much of the stone and lime mortar being removed from the locality.

The Scottish bastle houses under discussion here have a clear distinction in construction details to the many now recorded examples over the Border and nearby to it. The southern examples were mostly built using sandstone blocks having slightly thicker walls but using inferior cement to that in the northern houses. Sandstone being an exotic rock for most of the northern houses was generally only used sparingly for doors, windows and stair mouldings, the rest of the buildings were made in the random rubble method using the abundantly available greywacke rock and which also was used for stair treads, but, with the added distinction to those examples further south in that the quality of the lime mortar was of the highest. The northern houses also have internal mural stairs leading to the house above while the southerly houses mostly have an upper and lower entrance, the former being reached originally by a retractable ladder kept within the house, later, a stone forestair was built to reach the house.

Discussion

Until the last half of the 20th century the uplands, that is to say unimproved ground, was almost entirely given over to the grazing and management of sheep. Gradually beef cattle have been introduced on some farms because of their hardy nature and ability to survive the rigours of the severe winters of the uplands, something which sheep have endured since at least the 12th century when the Border monasteries were paramount in creating the uplands as 'sheep' country. However, as will be seen above in the many house/byres, cattle did play an important economic part in the agricultural economy of the hills and glens of southern Scotland, prior to the so called 'Agricultural Revolution', these cows were a small breed and probably the black cattle mentioned in documentary evidence.

The survey, excavation and historical evidence now gathered in this project demonstrate a level of society in the Scottish Southern Uplands which appears to have been forgotten; the tenant farmers and cottar communities which made up large and small farming systems in the hills and glens of Upper Clydesdale and Tweeddale. It seems equally strange to the writer that in this part of Scotland the last defensible houses in Britain; bastle houses have been all but ignored by social and architectural historians since 1981 when the work of BAG first appeared in annotated form.

Surveys by the writer further afield in Dumfries and Ayrshire for forestry projects have also produced similar results of upland farming but without recourse to excavation the exact periods of occupation can only be assumed.

As the project developed the data began to show the picture and time of abandonment, and given that the main houses would still be standing today had minimal maintenance been done, it was inexplicable as to why these sites were abandoned and buildings of superior quality to any others on the landscape were demolished! Since BAG's interest began in 1981, a plethora of books and articles have been produced to discuss the apparently long forgotten but re discovered Lowland Clearances.

The realisation that the local archaeologists were busy producing the archaeological evidence for this event in Scottish history began to dawn. Nearly everything published from historical evidence can be overlaid on the archaeology of BAG to demonstrate that the clearances took place in the upland farms (and others) given above.

Many questions remain but some may be answerable through research, for example who built the bastle houses? Which must have been a significant investment of resources, was it the landowners or the tenant? The landowners for the most part are known and it is the tenure of these farms which is understood, rent paying tenants would not build tower houses, only local lairds would surely do that, but were the tenants given long leases to enable them the confidence to build an expensive bastle? which is really just a cut down version of a tower.

Such questions may be answered in due course. However, it could only have been the landowners who took the decision to demolish these superior buildings and the inferior cott houses surrounding them, thus effectively clearing the sites of human occupation. Considerable work and perhaps expense were expended in the demolition and removal of the bastles, and it is clear that in every instance the materials have been re cycled to somewhere else. Therefore the tenants who are presumed to have occupied the bastle houses have been move off as well as the labouring class. The tenants may in some cases have continued to operate as farmers with larger holdings and in newly built nearby farm steadings. Certainly at Glenochar we have both the old and new Glenochar's depicted on the estate map by Wells in 1760 (SRO).

Through the relatively recent work by eminent historians such as Prof Tom Devine and others (Devine 2012) the history of this forgotten aspect of lowland Scotland has come to light and much of that story springs from the invaluable 'Old' Statistical Accounts for Scotland (OSA) (Sinclair 1791 - 1799). The various ministers for the parishes in Upper Clyde and Tweed valleys in the OSA bemoan the fact of diminishing populations, and often compare their own census results with those of Rev Webster who conducted his equally invaluable survey in 1755 (SHS 1952). Almost without exception the rural population in the upland parishes of Clyde and Tweed declined between the two periods when we can see that old settlements, often in rather offbeat locations, were being abandoned and new farm steadings were being created, the latter beside the main routes or roads through the valleys, a good example being Glenochar.

Unfortunately since the group are voluntary with extremely limited resources, and who also carry out continuous major projects of rescue archaeology covering many periods, research into their various projects is a stop-go process and has necessarily been low profile in the face of more demanding work to save Scottish heritage under threat in the Southern Uplands.

This report merely intimates the basic findings of their work in order that others may benefit from the data available and which for the most part is still unpublished, but can be made available.

Conclusion

From the fieldwork of BAG it seems inescapable that the evidence for Lowland Clearances may be had from the ground, probably in the form of survey and certainly through archaeological excavation. The work of the Group is unique in that respect. Surveys in the Southern Uplands by BAG and by others have also a great deal to offer in interpreting the landscape history of southern Scotland, and if the settlements so recorded can have an overlay of historical research applied to them, then the story will be further unravelled. Some publications already make reference to well known sites in the Borders such as Lour near Peebles (Aitchison & Cassell 2012) where the survey evidence appears to point to a bastle house with associated settlement and being abandoned in the mid 18th century. Indeed the finds from the excavation there (Dunbar & Hay 1960-61) of one house, closely parallel those from the sites given here, with finds of tobacco pipe bowls and glass bottles of early 18th C date.

The possibility of overlaying the historical data with archaeological fieldwork evidence is considered here to be enormous and given the increasing interest in the subject would certainly be rewarding.

The writer of this article continues to pursue the matter as best time permits and would be interested to engage with anyone on the subject.

Notes:

1. Glenochar and Wintercleuch bastle sites are now heritage trails with on site interpretation and others are soon to follow, beginning with Smithwood.
2. Bastle houses have long been a recognised building type and may be described as the last defensible houses in Britain. Until the work of BAG they were exclusively recorded in England or just over the Border into Scotland by the English, Royal Commission for Historical Monuments (Ramm et al 1970) and described as bastle houses. The Scottish, Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland also published early accounts of bastles in their inventories; however, recently the latter organisation has inexplicably re recorded various sites with the appellation of pele house! The writer believes this is misleading nomenclature in the study of these fascinating buildings.
3. Sheep milking buchts were first recorded in archaeological terms by Fairbairn (1926) and then in somewhat profusion by BAG (Ward 2012) and numerous examples and variations on the theme have been recorded by them in the National Monuments Records of Scotland. They are mostly associated with remains interpreted as post medieval settlements and/or agricultural features. The buchts are usually open ended turf enclosures where sheep were driven specifically to be milked after lambing time. They are found nearby settlement sites and on shieling sites. The word ‘Bucht’ abounds in Scottish literature and appears as numerous place names on the OS maps of southern Scotland.

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