Biggar Archaeology group

Bringing the past to the present

Clydesdale Bastle Project

Shielings and Buchts in Southern Scotland

Tam Ward 2012

Abstract

The re-appraisal of certain sites (shielings and buchts) sometimes formerly described as farmsteads and the introduction of structures now known to be sheep milking buchts and dating from the late 16th to the early 19th centuries is given.

Introduction

Sheep milking buchts were first briefly introduced to Scottish archaeology in 1926 (Fairbairn 1926), and then in the mid 1980's (Christison et al 1985) and later (Ward 1998) when they were being recorded in association with bastle houses in Clydesdale (now part of South Lanarkshire). Since that time they have been recorded by the writer over much of southern Scotland, from Girvan in the west to Langholm in the east, mostly as part of pre-aforestation surveys on upland unimproved pasture land, and also as part of the ongoing surveys by the Biggar Archaeology Group (BAG) in Clydesdale and Tweeddale. Shielings sites, some of which were previously recorded but described as 'farmsteads' or 'houses' have been visited and re-interpreted, and previously unrecorded sites have now been surveyed.

Apart from Galloway, shielings are not found in substantial numbers compared to the buchts in southern Scotland, and although shieling sites abound in the western highlands and islands, buchts are not recorded. True shieling systems seem to have been abandoned much earlier in the Lowlands compared to further north and west although 'shiel' place names may indicate they were more common.

It became evident that in Clydesdale many of the buchts were associated with bastle farms and in other places they were most likely also to be associated with 17th and 18th century sheep farming.

The subject of bastle houses will not be considered here other than by reference to certain relevant sites. This paper is an interim discourse on the buchts and shielings in southern Scotland, because further survey and research is ongoing into the three types of buildings; bastle houses, shielings and buchts.

Sheep milking buchts

The Scottish National Dictionary gives numerous references to the use of the word, however, it comes in various forms; bucht, boucht, bought, bught. The usage adopted here is primarily because that is the phonetic modern use to describe sheep fanks in southern Scotland, a fank being a multi purpose sheep enclosure, normally built with drystane and dating from the 18th to the early 20th centuries, some of these have the earlier traditional open ended buchts incorporated within their design (Pl 1). The National Dictionary references date from the early 18th to the early 19th century; unfortunately examples earlier than 1700 are not cited.

The first time these structures were encountered by the writer was at Windgate Bastle House (Christison et al 1985, op.cit.) where excavation of the house was under way. Lying to the north of the bastle lay three rectangular open ended turf structures (Fig 1). Their purpose was not understood at that time and a single trench through the bank of one showed that they had been constructed entirely with turf and there were no other building details involved, the interior was the natural ground. A single piece of faceted haematite was found in the excavation. The soft maroon coloured, iron oxide mineral had been found in some quantity in the nearby bastle along with the actual stones used to

Plate 1: Drystane bucht as part of sheep fanks at Over Menzion Farm, Tweedsmuir, Peeblesshire.

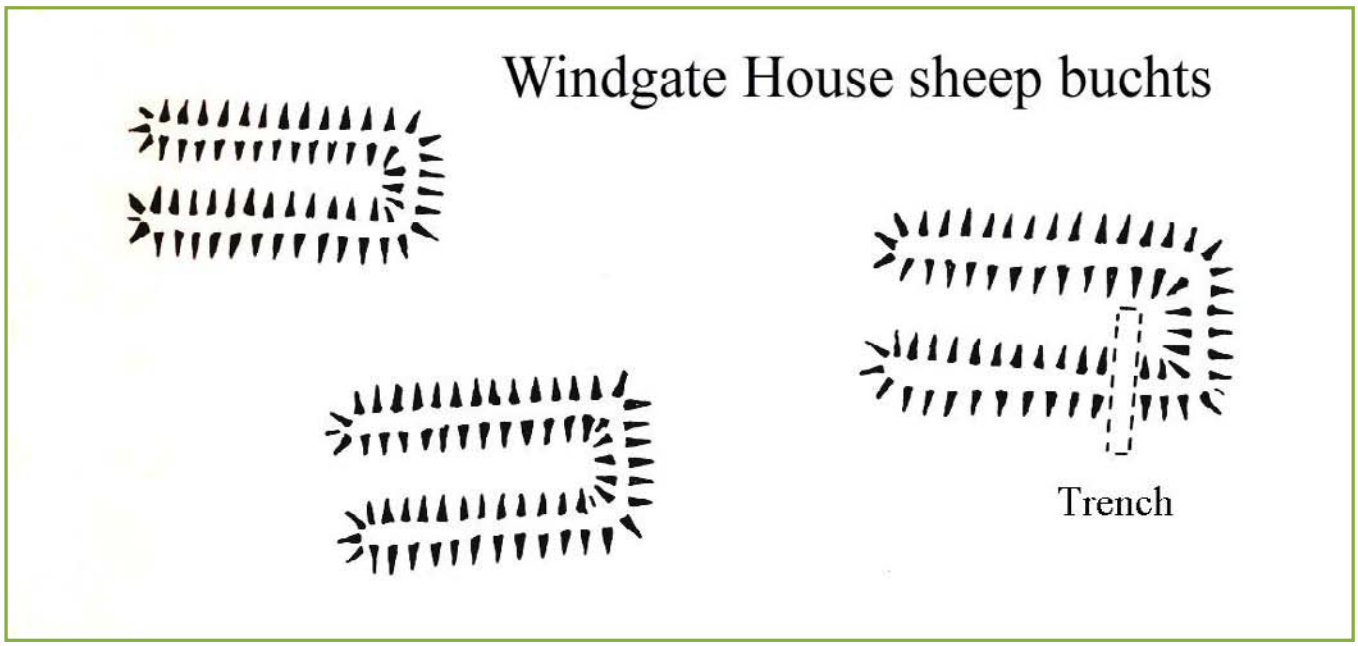


Fig 1: Turf built buchts at Windgate House showing excavation trench.

grind it to a powder. The assumption by the excavators was that a colouring agent most likely used to mark sheep had been prepared. The same material has since been found in every excavation of post medieval date in Clydesdale and Tweeddale, including several buchts, making the haematite a common denominator of these sites. The open ended enclosures were therefore judged to be associated with the bastle, but at that time their purpose was still unclear.

During the successful search for further bastle sites (Ward 1998, op.cit.) these open ended enclosures were discovered at each of the bastle locations and also in many other remote upland places. They were found in groups and as single examples and also as integral structures being part of enclosures and old turf head dykes. Eventually when surveys were undertaken for different purposes, for example for pre-aforestation, and in other parts of the south of Scotland, the same features were recorded regularly. A pattern of types, distribution and association with other buildings began to emerge. Although there are many known but as yet unrecorded examples known to the writer, it is now considered time to introduce the subject matter formally and for the first time.

It has been the policy of the writer to carry out fieldwork in advance of research, the reason for this is that there are then no pre-conceived perceptions of what one may find and where it may be found. By using less experienced people in some cases, it was discovered that walkers were inclined to concentrate on locations where sites were already known, and in a few cases walk past unrecorded features. Research of these enigmatic structures has therefore been left on the backburner for too many years.

Sheep milking buchts as found on the landscape are basically rectangular or 'U' shaped enclosures which always have one end open. This particular characteristic defines the building type and differentiates them from any other rectangular buildings which may for example have been habitations, whether permanent houses or temporary shielings. Most locations with multiple examples show slight variations on the theme, for example at Traboyack Farm in Ayrshire (Fig 2). References in the Scottish National Dictionary (SND) tell us that the open end was closed by movable gates called flakes or flecks which were latticed hurdles; these were also used to pen sheep when feeding on turnips. The folding of small groups of sheep with hurdle fences dates from medieval times. In some cases (Fig 3), there is a smaller side entrance along one of the long walls and these are judged to have been for ejecting sheep, one at a time, after whatever handling purpose they had been penned in for was completed. Although all references are for milking, other activities may have included lambing, shearing or smearing, perhaps even folding, and possibly keeling with haematite, however no mention to such latter practices have so far been found.

Buchts come in a variety of sizes between 4m and 15m long and by between 1.5m and 3m wide internally, all are quite narrow. This was presumably to allow the operator ease of catching sheep simply by stretching out rather than running about.

There are many examples which have an extended side, sometimes straight but more often curved; it is believed that this functioned as a 'catchment' wall to help drive the sheep into the open end (Figs 2 & 4). Interestingly, this is exactly what is done by shepherds at sheep dog trials; holding the gate of the catchment pen open with a short length of rope, the shepherd then extends his arms out and with the further extension of his crook in the other hand, an appendage to the gate is created, thus forming a barrier and a guidance for the sheep, to control their movement and hopefully to pen them.

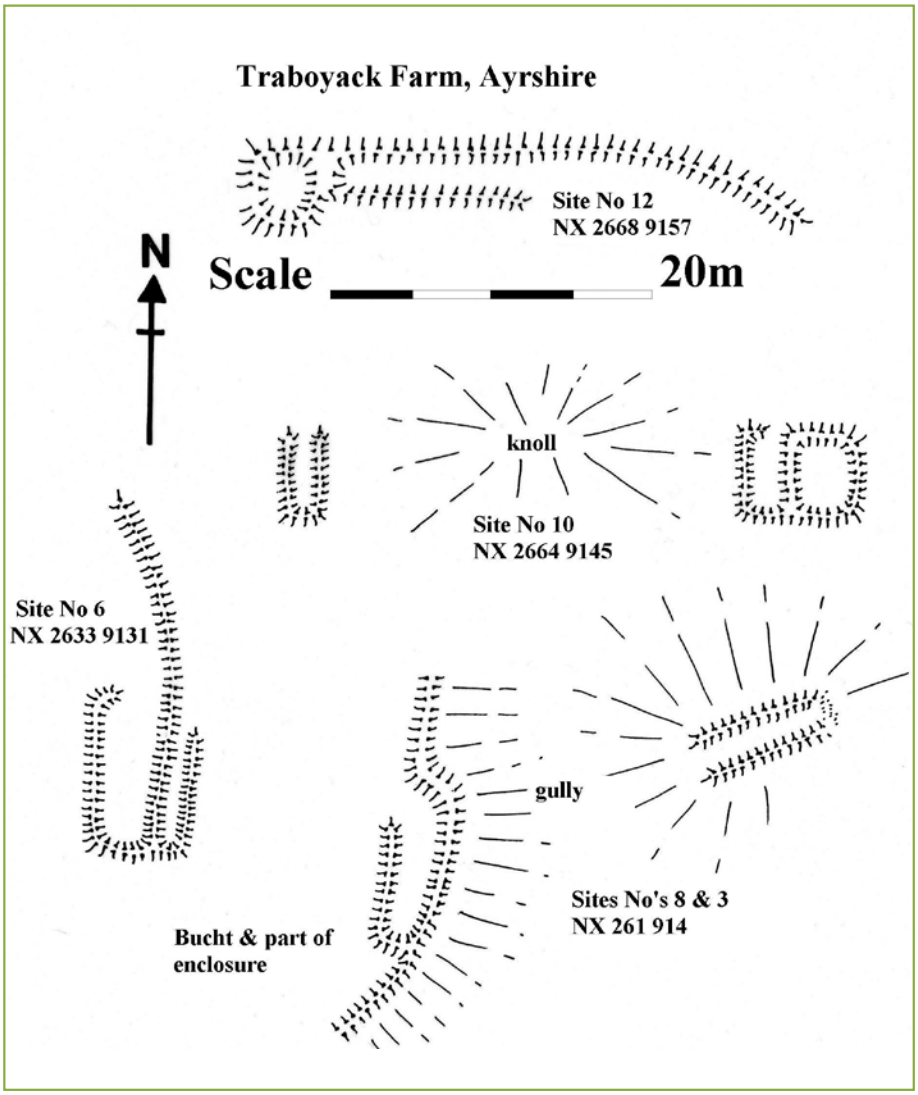


Fig 2: Variety of bucht types and sizes at Traboyack Farm, Ayrshire.

Fig 3: Impression of a bucht in use, an example with a side entrance.

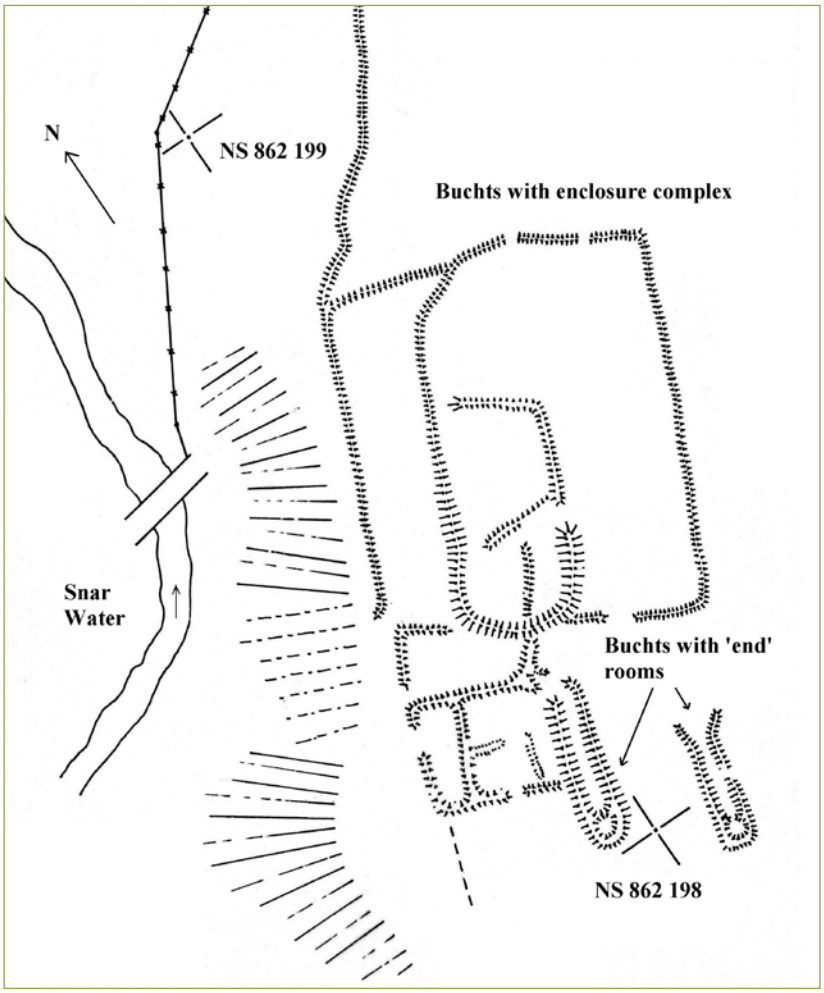


Fig 4: Turf built buchts with 'end rooms' and enclosures at Snar bastle, Crawfordjohn, South Lanarkshire.

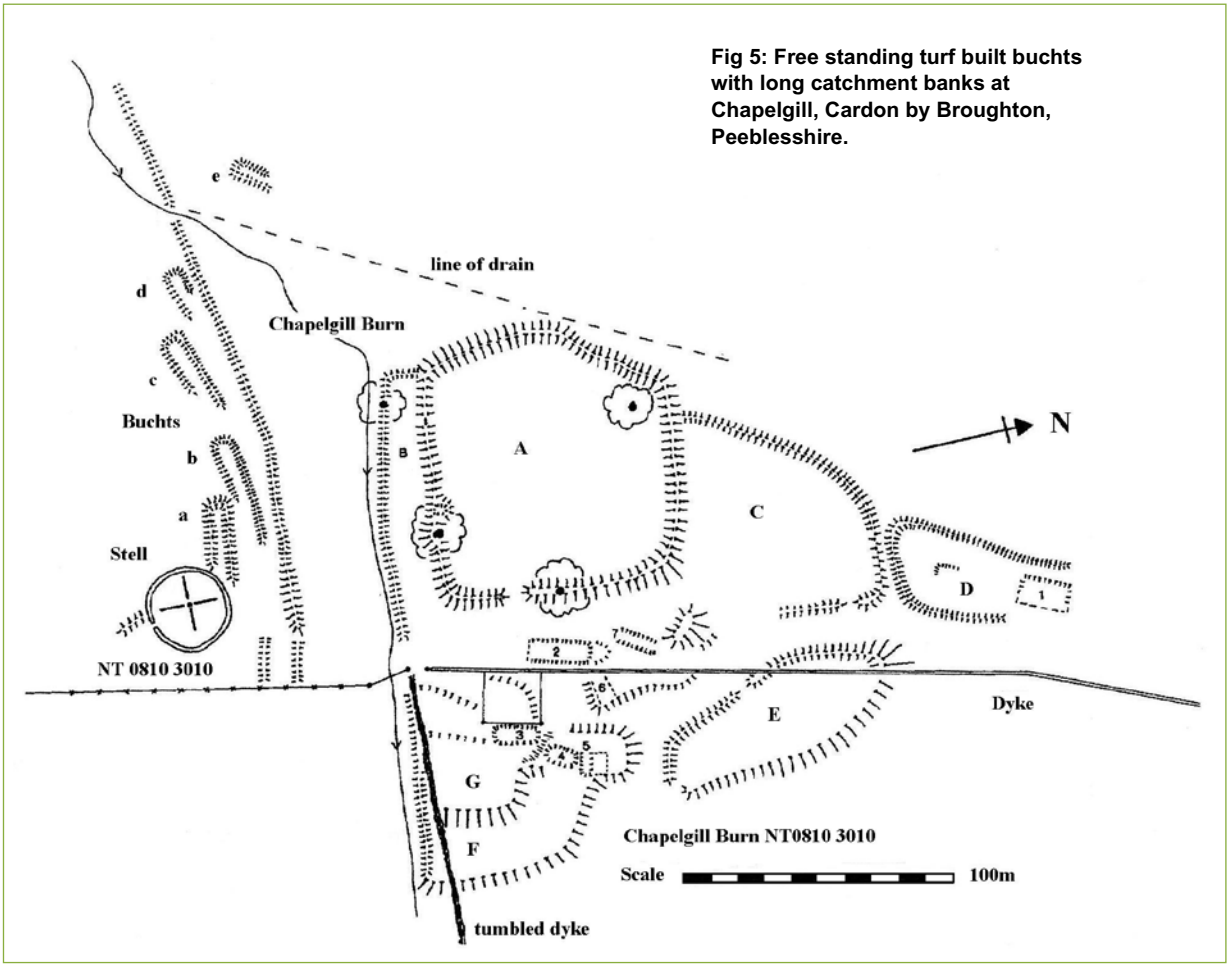


Fig 5: Free standing turf built buchts with long catchment banks at Chapelgill, Cardon by Broughton, Peeblesshire.

The earlier buchts appear to have been built using turf only, and some of that has been taken from the interior thus forming a slightly sunken floor. Some buchts are built with a foundation of boulders if they were to hand and then the wall was completed in turf. More often than not the examples with stone footings only have a single layer of boulders along the internal faces of the walls. Occasionally boulders were used to define the entrances.

Certainly later on from c1800, buchts were being built with drystane and ultimately they were incorporated into the well known sheep fanks seen all over the country and which are still called buchts by the current shepherds and farmers, nearly all of whom are unaware of the earlier existence of sheep pens and the activity of milking in them.

Because the upland Tweeddale landscape abounds with surface rocks, their use in building buchts is more prevalent that in neighbouring Clydesdale, which is mostly devoid of such surface boulders. Judging by the higher ratio of open ended buchts incorporated in the later drystane fank (sheepfold, Scots) complexes in Tweeddale, it is likely that the practice of milking sheep persisted into the 19th century there, perhaps when it had been abandoned in Clydesdale. Indeed, only a single small example of a drystane bucht has been recorded in Clydesdale, lending support to this suggestion.

The original heights of the bucht walls are unknown, but in a minority of cases the existing banks can measure up to 3m – 4m spread at the base and be 1.5m high. Clearly if such a presently round topped bank were drawn into one with vertical sides of say 1.5m thick, a height of c2.5m would be possible, therefore banks of 1.5m – 2m in height would be possible but c1.5m were probably the norm. The internal sides must have been maintained to be vertical to discourage animals leaping out; the examples with boulder footings would make a better facing.

It is possible that a fence, perhaps of wattle hurdles was used along the bank tops to enhance enclosure, however, no evidence for that has been found. There are many examples where the banks are relatively low and it does seem reasonable to conclude that some further structure would be required to discourage animals from escaping. It is however known from many historical sources and also corroborated by the archaeology of bastle houses that there was a severe dearth of timber in the southern uplands landscape in the 17th and early 18th century. Shrubbery such as gorse, broom and juniper may have been available for use on the bucht walls; this was also conjectural (but see below).

It is possible that low walls may have sufficed in any case, just as modern cattle can be trained to walk daily, often even unsupervised to their milking parlour and even sort themselves out on automated milking machines, the sheep may have been willing participants in their milking, to be relieved of the burden of milk which was not being suckled by their now weaned lambs.

Some buchts have small chambers forming an extension to the 'closed end' (Figs 2 & 5). Entrances to these areas seem to be entirely absent. It is suspected that these may be storage areas, perhaps for keeping pans or buckets in, or even the daily produce until it was carried to the house. Limited excavation has so far thrown no light as to the true function of these areas which never appear to have been more than 3m square internally.

The location and distribution of the buchts varies. Most are built on slopes or on higher points of land, especially along the sides of burns. A few are built on what appears to be ridiculously difficult places to work, such as high spurs of ground with restricted access.

The alignment is usually dictated by the land form they are built upon and often the open ends of multiple buchts point in the same direction as may be seen from the plans given here (Figs1,3,4 & 5), this however varies from site to site.

They may be found as single examples or in groups of up to seven, and some are incorporated as appendages to linear banks (Figs 2 & 6), some of these banks being head dykes which help to enclose a plot of land, while other banks are simply unconnected lengths but always aligned with the hill contours. It is evident that where buchts are built against such banks, they are contemporary with them and they are always built on the upper or outer side of the banks or enclosures (Fig 6). Free standing buchts are also seen outside enclosures (Fig 4) and it appears that the sheep were being driven down from the hill to the buchts, excluding them from the enclosures which may have been for arable but which were certainly used for fodder crops of hay; for example the two principal enclosures at Glenochar bastle are described on an estate map of 1760 as 'old meadows' (Fig 7).

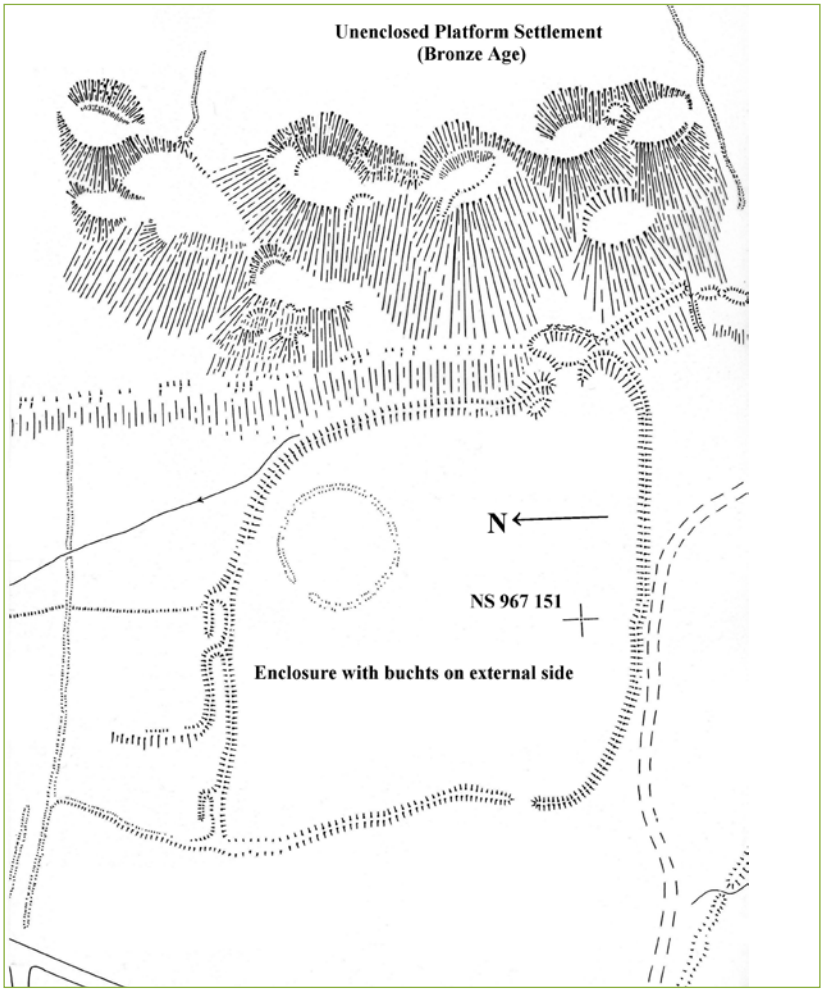


Fig 6: Examples of turf built buchts appended to enclosure bank at Crookedstane Farm, Elvanfoot, South Lanarkshire.

Fig 7: Complex of buchts beside Glenochar Bastle and Fermtoun (this site is a trail), Elvanfoot, South Lanarkshire

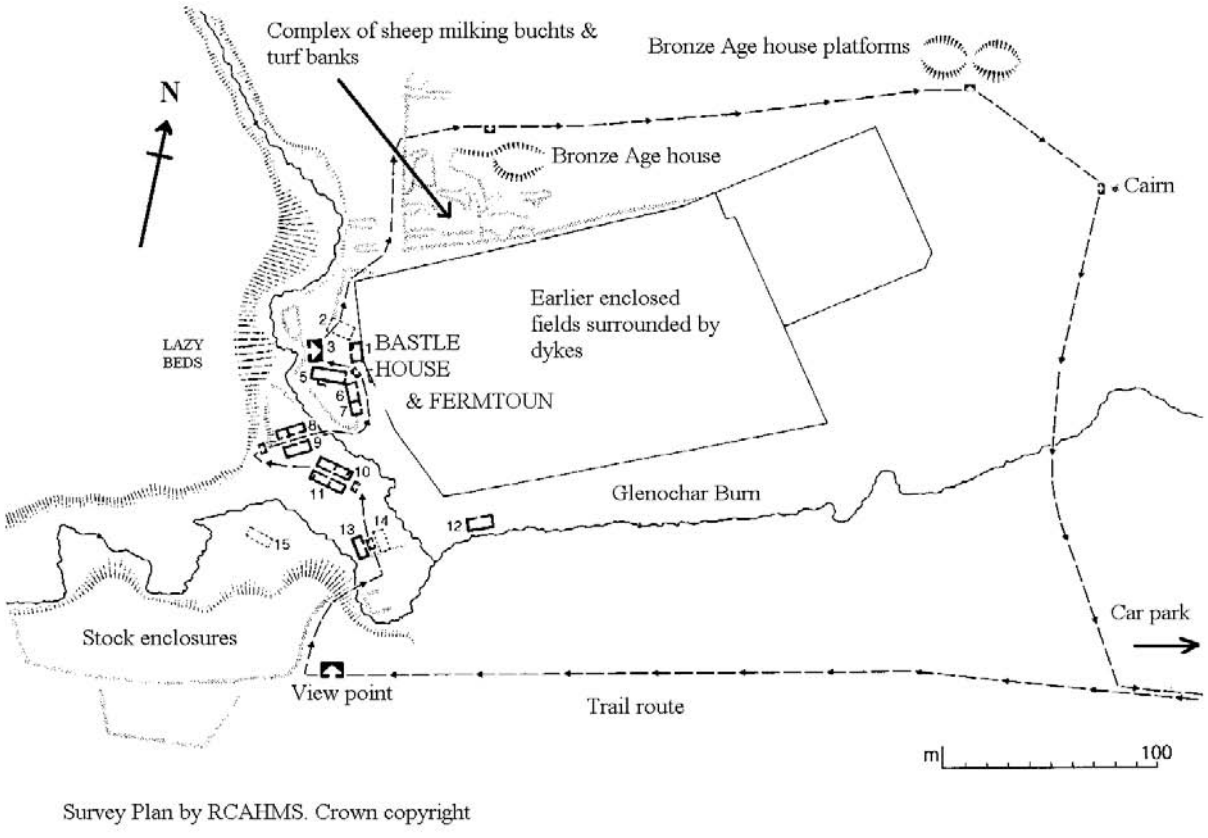
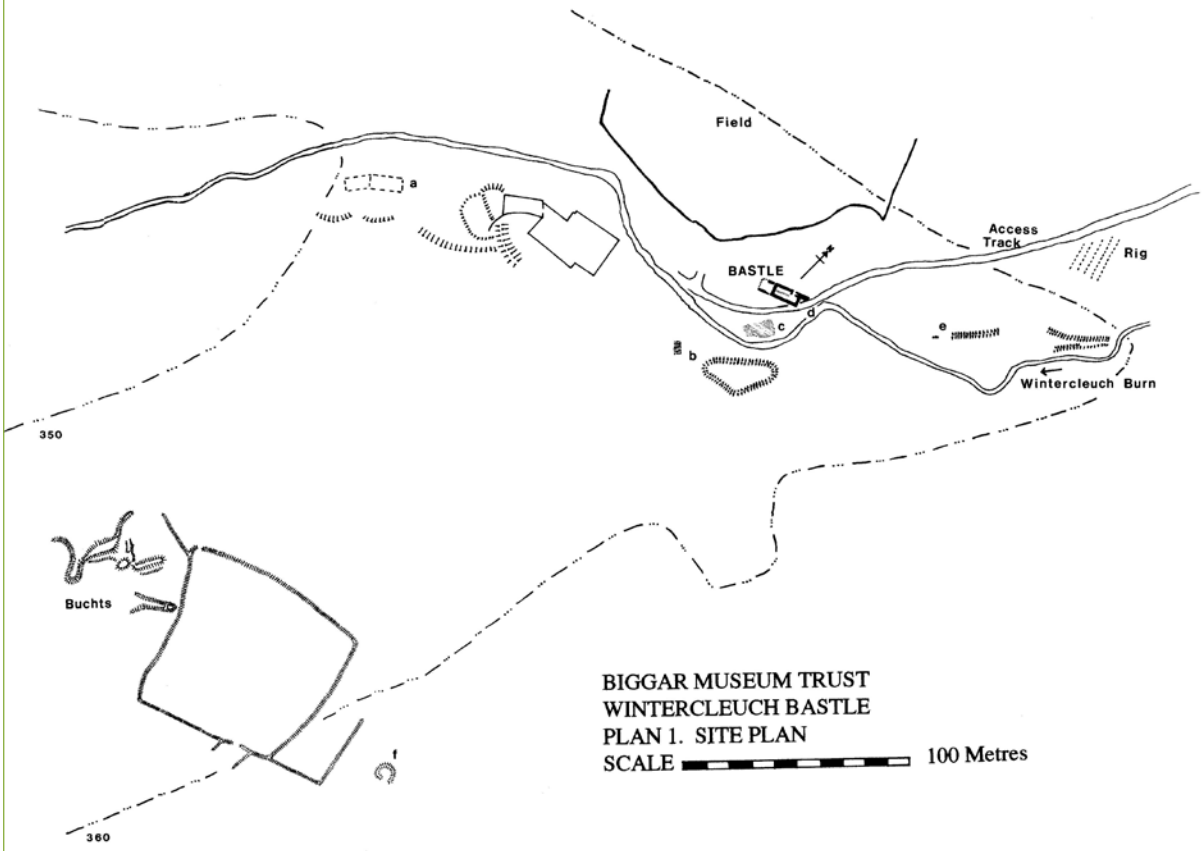


Fig 8:Turf buchts and enclosure at Wintercleuch bastle (this site is a trail), Daer valley, South Lanarkshire



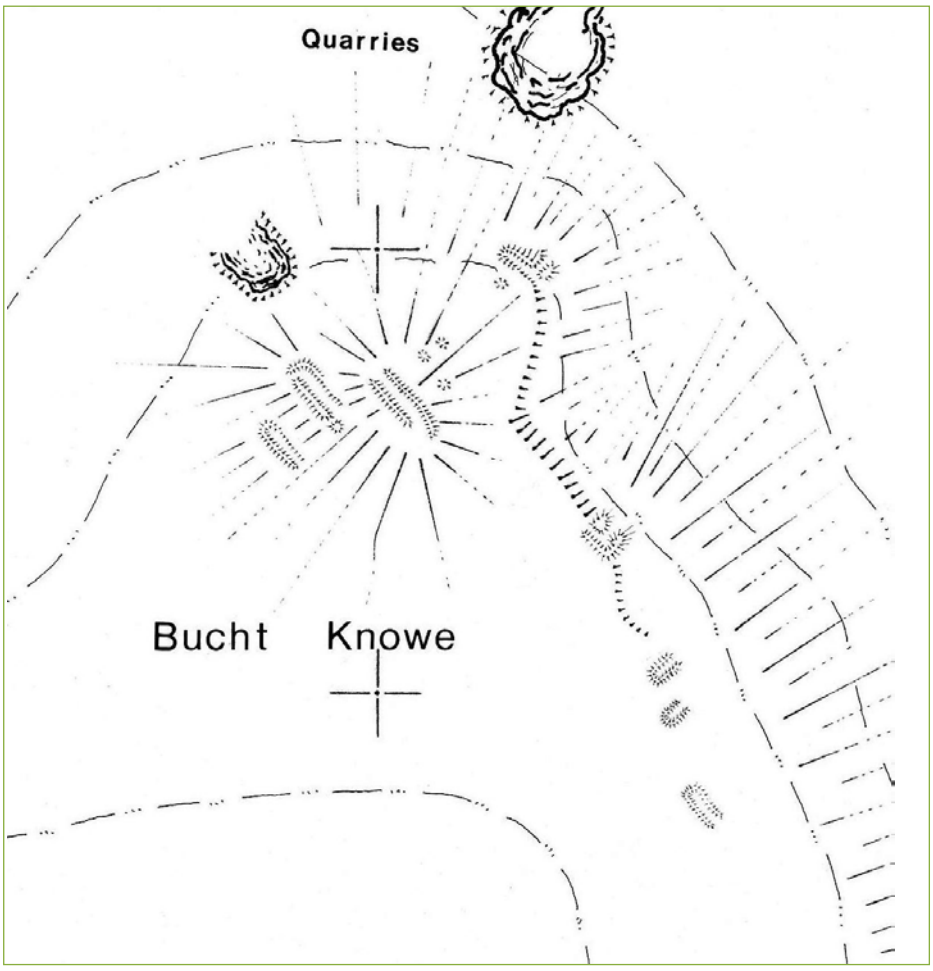


Fig 9: Place name evidence at Elvanfoot, South Lanarkshire

Most buchts are found within a few minutes walk from the settlement (Figs 7 & 8), although some have been used in association with shielings and therefore are removed from the houses. Very few shieling sites are recorded in Clydesdale or Tweeddale; the main areas of research for this paper, despite systematic and comprehensive surveys of the respective landscapes. The presence of so many buchts nearby to the settlements may indicate that transhumance in connection with sheep was not a common practice in those areas.

Only in the longest glens could it have been possible anyway and two factors may explain why it may not have been practised to any extent in parts of southern Scotland; one is the fact that permanent settlements have been recorded over much of the landscape, reaching far up the relatively short glens, and the other is that transhumance and the use of shielings partially implies a need to get animals away from cropped areas. Although in the well known areas of transhumance in the north west of Scotland, a primary consideration was taking advantage of large tracts of good pasture land far from the settlements.

It does appear strange that buchts are not recorded in areas where traditional husbandry of sheep and cattle are known to have involved shieling activity, for example in the West and Northern Highlands. Indeed, buchts on the landscape appear only to have been recorded in the Southern Uplands of Scotland and perhaps only by Biggar Archaeology Group.

The bucht name

The use of the word 'bucht' is well documented from the early 18th century in Scotland as given by the Scottish National Dictionary (Scot Nat Dict), but the dictionary really only deals with references after 1700 (Scot Nat Dict. 1976) and earlier references are more scarce. There is a reference to destroying buchts in the Privy Council records (Reg Priv Council, Vol IX, 202); in 1611, Janet Stewart of Dawick, in Peeblesshire, complained to the Council that an armed gang of local men from Posso, came to Glenwrath and demolished her whole "bouchtis and fauldis", and cast the stones from them into the burn of Glenwrath. Here is a distinction between buchts and folds, and of course the contemporary use of the word 'bucht'. It is also interesting that stones were used in the construction of the enclosures, a fact borne out by field survey in Peeblesshire.

Place names

Perhaps the best evidence in upper Clydesdale for a place name indicating its past use is at Bucht Knowe (Fig 9), which overlooks the village of Elvanfoot in Crawford parish. The summit of the hill has no fewer than seven buchts disposed on it, with others beside the nearby bastle house of Glengieth to the west. There are many places named Bucht Knowe in southern Scotland. One is given on Forrest's map of 1813; it lies immediately north of Biggar town, the cottage there has been re-named Firknowes, presumable as a consequence of Victorian plantations in the area, the entire locality is now developed arable land.

In Tweeddale another good place name is Bucht Cleuch, down which flows the Bught Burn, interestingly using two different spellings for the same location, this location is in Glencotho near the village of Broughton. Where the cleuch opens out onto the valley floor there is a group of buildings including buchts and others which may be shieling huts, however the latter is less certain due to the poor state of preservation (Ward, 2004).

Place name evidence has to be followed through to earlier sources, repeatedly, we are finding that names have changed, sometimes giving an entirely different connotation as to their origin. For example the deserted farm of Bidhouse, also near Elvanfoot, was once called Buchowis, and is given as such in a charter by Robert II between 1370 -1390 (RGSS Vol I No 763).

The above is the fieldwork evidence coupled with limited research, however further work on literary sources has now been accomplished and verifies much of what was deduced from the fieldwork.

Historical references

The earliest use of the word 'bucht', so far located, dates to 1327, when David Lindsay of Crawford grants the Monks of Newbattle certain lands including "the little burn of Buchswyre", this is confirmation of an earlier charter dated 1170 (swyre being a pass or hollow between hills).

There are 21 'bucht' place names on Forest's map of Lanarkshire in1813. They are all north of Biggar, mostly between Carluke, Forth and Shotts, land now heavily modified by industrialisation, forestry and agriculture. However, we have only seen actual sites south of Biggar, where they are found in abundance, and, as already stated they are also to be found all over the Southern Uplands, reaching from Girvan in the west to Langholm in the east..

Strangely, buchts have been recorded for some time; Fairbairn was using the term and describing their function in 1926 (Fairbairn 1927). The Royal Commission for the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland has been photographing and surveying buchts since the 1960's, but research as to what they were appears never to have been followed up. The examples surveyed by the Commission in Peeblesshire hillforts and published by them (RCAHMS 1967) are all certainly buchts; the Biggar Group have checked them out in their own re-surveys of that area.

Buchts are still being described as houses, even Viking houses or worse still as was recently read, a suggestion of Pitcarmick Type houses! They are also described or recorded but without any meaningful interpretation, being labelled as 'enclosures' or 'pens'. Some of the sites in the Southern Uplands which the writer has visited are described in the National Monuments Record for Scotland as 'farmsteads', 'settlements' or 'shielings'. So here is the hub of the problem, people studying the landscape will be entirely misled by older descriptions or by none at all. This will be especially true for researchers in Medieval or Later Rural Settlement in Scotland (MOLRS). Buchts are perhaps important not so much because they are sheep milking pens, but because they are not houses.

The best published evidence for sheep milking buchts and their use comes from Findlater's General View of the Agriculture of the County of Peebles (Findlater 1802), and which is an invaluable document on all of the agricultural practices in the Borders at the end of the 18th century. Findlater was the minister for the Parish of Newlands near Peebles, and describes in minutiae the appearance and the use of buchts, for sheep milking only, and of the product gained from the practice.

For example he states that the use of gorse branches set under the top layers of turf and on the internal side helped keep the sheep in the pen, this is an invaluable answer to questions raised in the fieldwork regarding the enclosure walls.

Regarding the product he explains how sheep droppings, urine and sweat from the wool, all added to the contents of the milk bucket, giving a "peculiar pungency" to the cheese when made. He advises those who indulge themselves in it, in the interests of their appetite, not to enquire too much about its manufacture. A similar picture is painted in one reference in the Scottish National Dictionary: boucht curd, "the droppings of the sheep, which frequently fall into the milk-pail, but are soon sans ceremonie taken out by the fair hands of the ewe-milkers. This in a great measure accounts for the greenish cast assumed by some of the cheeses".

The term 'bucht' was also adopted in some churches to describe enclosed pews (Scot Nat Dict), however, it and ewe milking appear in many songs and poems dating from the 18th century, often dealing with romance and even sex as the milk maids were less supervised on shielings and also because the work of milking sheep was a nocturnal employment.

Materials and quantities of turf required to build buchts

From a small experiment during excavations, the volume of turf removed from trenches was recorded in an attempt to calculate the area of turf which was required to build walls; the following results may be taken as a rough guide:

13.5m square gave a volume of 1.5m cube.

This allowed a wall 3m long by 1.5m high by 0.75m thick to be built.

Using this equation, to build a bucht c 10m by 5m total, and with walls 1.5m high and 0.75m thick, it would take an area of 135m square stripped of turf (10m x 13.5m). This would be 28m cube in volume. The turf used in this experiment was about 150mm thick overall including some soil.

Shielings

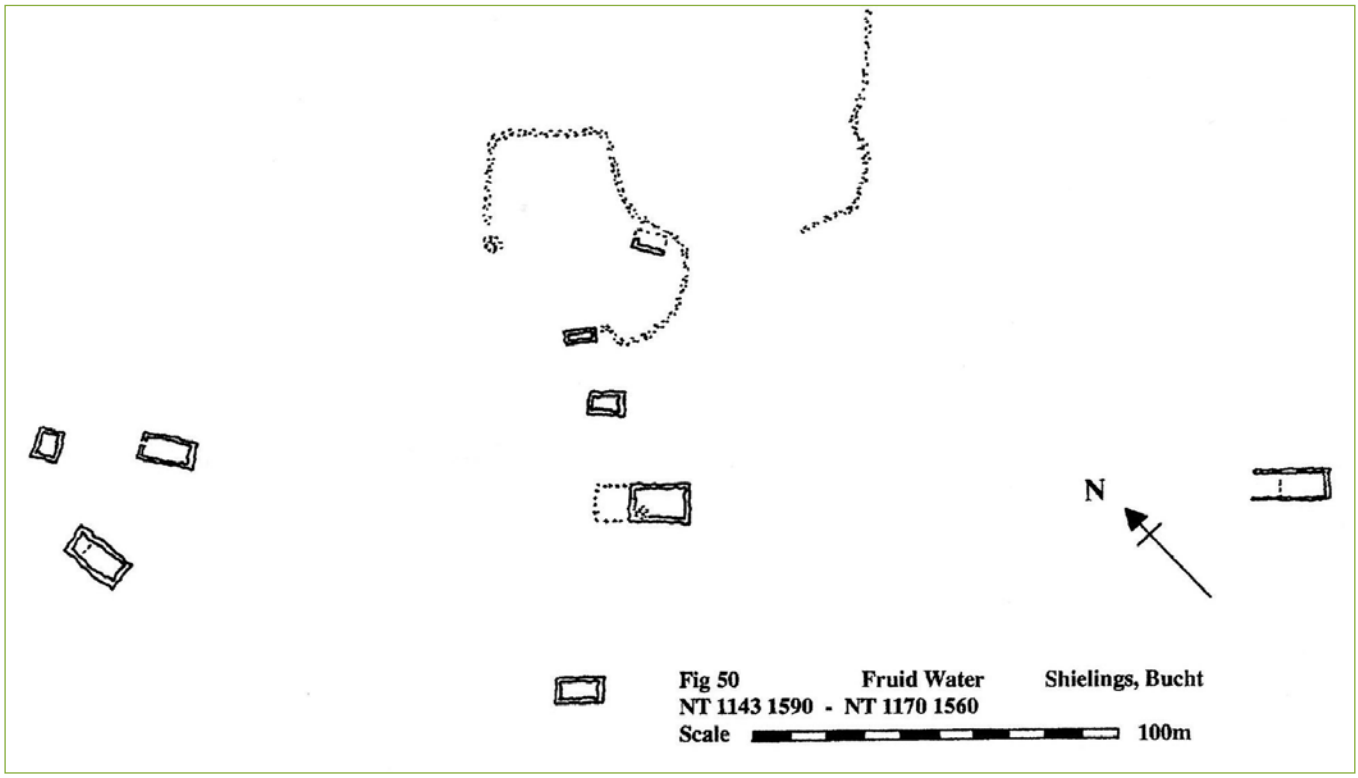


Fig 10: Shieling group and bucht at Fruid, Peeblesshire

Only recently the Group have recorded what they believe may be true shielings in the Clyde and Tweed valleys. These are the typical little huts measuring about 6m by 4m, with an entrance and built at least in part with stone. Most of these have been found in Tweed and only a few have been recorded in Clyde.

However, there are 24 'shiel' place names on Forest's map of Lanarkshire in 1813. With the exception of three, all are north of Biggar and most are places where the ground is now extensively arable. Whether these represent the sites of true shielings will never be known, but in many cases it seems unlikely, since the inference is that such places were associated with the practice of transhumance, the seasonal movement of livestock to pastures, away from the settlements and unenclosed crops, thus preventing damage to the crops and also taking advantage of the distant pastoral ground.

In some parts of the country, for example in the north west of Scotland, shielings may be several miles distant

from the settlements, but in other places, such as the Southern Uplands, the distances may be less than a mile.

In the Southern Uplands, 'shiel' place names of, for example, hills and gullies are often without any visible remains of such huts. Presumably the meagre construction elements of the huts may have been totally removed. Sometimes, drystane sheep folds and enclosures now exist at these places, and perhaps this would explain the removal of earlier and less substantial structures.

Although most people would take shielings to be associated with temporary summer pasture settlement, the actual word shieling only means a hut. Is it possible that some of these huts were more permanent homes than previously thought? This may be an idea worth investigating.

At Fruid (Fig 10), a tributary of the Tweed, there are a series of shieling huts with side entrances in the stone walls, along with open ended buchts (Ward 2004 op.cit.), so the difference can clearly be seen, this site is described in the NMRS as 'farmstead', other sites are similarly described in the record. It may be the case that many upland sites in southern Scotland are candidates for research and possible re-interpretation.

Perhaps unlike the buchts considered above there are many good published references to shielings and the activities which took place around them. This is especially true for the Highlands; for example Mr Duncan Campbell, editor of the Northern Chronicle delivered an excellent and comprehensive paper to the Inverness Scientific Society in 1896 (Campbell 1896) wherein everything one would wish to know about Highland transhumance is presented. Similarly Alexander Fenton (1976) provided a shorter but equally interesting account of Highland shielings and both authors agree that Lowland shielings went out of use considerably earlier than the northern ones and, that cattle were more important than sheep in the north. The latter comment may explain why buchts are apparently not to be found outwith the Borders where sheep undoubtedly played the major role in the animal economy of the upland farms from the 12th century.

The Old and New Statistical Accounts tell us that the practice of milking sheep was abandoned in most places by the mid 19th century, because it was thought not to be good for the animals. By this time, more dairy products were being derived from cattle and as such the product would have been free of 'bucht curd'.

In the Southern Uplands of Scotland, it is now possible for the most part, to differentiate between the sites of houses, buchts and shieling huts that dated to the period between the 17th and the 19th centuries. There will always be problems when a small house might be confused as a shieling and vice versa, but it is getting easier as a consequence of recent fieldwork. It may soon be possible to understand the function of various other enclosures, when they are all finally planned. It can be stated that houses with shielings do not exist, but houses with buchts and shielings with buchts are now being recorded.

This paper merely presents the current research by the writer and the product of many years of local fieldwork by the Biggar Group; it is not given as a comprehensive study of the subject matter but merely a miscellany of the point where we have arrived at. Considerable work is still required but the time is nearing when all the strands of evidence can come together, and produce a more meaningful statement on the lives and times of the forgotten upland farmers, and their shielings and buchts in Southern Scotland.

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