

Pròiseact Loch Croispol - Loch Croispol School History Project

PRESS RELEASE

Getting Down and Dirty in Durness!



The pace is picking up at the ruined old Parish School on the shores of Loch Croispol in Durness. Archaeologists from Glasgow University are in their second week of excavations at this fascinating site. In advance of their arrival local volunteers worked hard and fast to clear fallen masonry and other rubble out of the building to prepare the way for the archaeological investigations.

Work this week and last has been assisted by school pupils from Tongue, Durness and Kinlochbervie Primary Schools and Farr and Kinlochbervie High Schools. These archaeological trainees have had some exciting times and finds down at Loch Croispol in recent days – more on that soon! Day to day the excavation team has sentenced a number of other local assistants to hard labour. These stalwarts include Graham Bruce, currently on a sabbatical from the post of Headteacher at Durness Primary School and Sheila Frazer, normally Treasurer of Durness Development Group but currently putting her archaeological skills into action down at the old school.

Last Saturday some 30 people attended a delightful guided walk and talk at the site of the old school in beautiful sunshine. On 4th and 5th September the Mackay Country team will be camped down at Keoldale Farm at the southern end of the study area with the Bough Tent and Marquee. Look out for an illustrated chat and amble about *'Planting the Past - Medicines, Maladies & Daily Life in 18th & 19th Century Durness'* led by author and historian Mary Beith on the morning of Sat 5th. The same afternoon the team will be exploring the life and times of the old Parish School and the surrounding townships through *'Stories and Srupag'* with Essie Stewart and *'Tinsmith's Tales – Craft Working Through the Ages'* with Arthur Dutch at the Bough Tent at Keoldale. Friday night is Archive Film Night and Saturday Night is Ceilidh Night – bring your dancing shoes, your fiddles and boxies, a chair, a jumper and a dram for yourself. Check out local posters and the website for full details.

The school is believed to have opened for business around 1760 after significant campaigning and efforts by the late Reverend Murdo MacDonald, more commonly known as a great supporter of the Bard Rob Donn's work. The abandoned Schoolhouse is located at the southern end of Loch Croispol not far from the modern Balnakeil Craft Village and would have originally sat within the township of Cnoc Breac. It was constructed in the early 1760s and appears to have fallen into disuse in 1861.

The study area which extends north from the Kyle of Durness to Balnakeil Bay is an area of Durness Limestone. That means it is a very fertile corner of Mackay Country so not surprisingly there are a number of ancient remains such as hut circles, a chambered cairn and old homesteads already identified.

Archaeological excavations in the Loch Borrallie area in 2004 and 2005 revealed buildings of late medieval origin. This work yielded evidence of the sites being reused from the Norse period through into the 1600s. Pottery shards, a spindle whorl and pieces of worked red deer antler reveal early industry, Norse links and later trading links.

The current work focuses on a later period from the mid 18th into the late 19th centuries and will reveal evidence of what are often called 'pre-clearance' settlement and landuse patterns – patterns from before the creation of the crofting system and associated settlement patterns with which we are so familiar today. The current townships were laid out in the course of the early 19th century and are organised in a very different way socially and spatially from the previous tenure system.

This is a project created and run by Durness Development Group, a registered Scottish Charity. Aspects relating to archive searches, contextualising the findings within the region and exhibiting findings are being carried out in partnership with The Mackay Country Community Trust, another local charity operating in the north west mainland formerly known as The Province of Strathnaver or Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh. Over a 2 year period (2009 – 2010) a team of academics, local experts and interested volunteers are investigating the history and archaeology associated with this rather unusual Schoolhouse in the parish of Durness.

For more information, to attend events or to get involved:

[www.durness.org/Loch Croispol/](http://www.durness.org/Loch_Croispol/)

www.northsutherlandarchaeology.org.uk

e-mail: mackaycountry@arcinfo.co.uk Facebook Group: Loch Croispol School History Project

Facebook Page: Mackay Country - Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh

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