

The programme of public outreach demonstrated that there is much local interest about archaeology on Islay and that many people would like the opportunity to become involved in archaeological recording and research. The formation of a local group bodes well for the future and provides a new point of contact and for the dissemination of information between locals and archaeologists. To help this group to succeed in its aims will require regular input from professionals and bodies concerned with archaeology. While many of the individuals within the group are extremely knowledgeable about archaeology and local history, they have as a group expressed a desire for more information from specialists in all fields of archaeology. In particular, they would welcome more opportunities to visit sites in the company of archaeologists to help develop skills in the identification and interpretation of archaeological remains. They would also like public lectures and meetings with archaeologists visiting or working on Islay. The potential good to archaeology that local groups can bring should encourage all archaeologists, particularly those within statutory bodies, to engage with and encourage them in their endeavours.

Islay Background

Geography, Geomorphology and Land Use

Islay, the most southerly of the main Hebridean islands, lies at the entrance to the Firth of Lorn to the west side of the Kintyre peninsula. With its neighbouring islands of Colonsay and Jura and smaller isles, it forms the Islay group; a distinctive set of islands which share cultural and historical as well as geographic links.

The island measures some 40km in width by 25km in length, but with a heavily indented coastline and the deep bays of Loch Gruinart and Loch Indaal, the land area amounts in total to about 600km². These bays, arranged back to back, almost divide the island in two.

Much of Islay is low-lying and fertile although it also has high moorland and hills, the highest of which is Beinn Bheigeir at 491m OD. The variety evident in the Islay landscape is due to its underlying geological structure. Hard quartzites form the rugged uplands while the lower lying, more fertile land is underlain by limestone and mica schists. There are extensive

raised beach deposits within the bays and substantial areas of blown sand both on the coast edge and extending into the hinterland. There are numerous fresh water lochs in the hinterland, and abundant streams, some of which form falls on the higher parts of the coast edge.

This varied geology supports a range of natural environments, ranging from heather moorland, peat bogs, wetlands and salt marsh to deciduous and coniferous woodlands, rich grassland and scrub forest. This green and fertile place has a relatively mild climate, being warmed by the waters of the gulf stream and largely sheltered from the open waters of the Atlantic. While snow and frost occur relatively rarely, gale force winds are not uncommon.

Agriculture forms the largest single economic activity on Islay. Much of the farmed land is used as grazing for cattle and sheep although some arable cultivation is also carried out. Large tracts of the higher moorland and hill land is incorporated into deer shooting estates. Several of the peat bogs are regularly cut, providing fuel both for the distilleries and for private use. There are coniferous tree plantations, concentrated mainly to the south east and eastern parts of the island. The area around the head of Loch Gruinart is a designated nature reserve managed by RSPB.

Archaeology and History of Islay

Chance finds of several distinctive Mesolithic flint tools and working debris, together with shell middens and occasional structural remains, indicate that Islay was occupied from at least as early as 8000 BC. Many of these finds can be seen at the Museum of Islay Life in Port Charlotte. Occupation at this time may have been of a seasonal nature, taking advantage of the rich wild game and coastal food resources. Remains such as those found at Kilellan (Burgess, 1976) and Newton (MacCullagh, 1989) indicate that the buildings of this period were rough shelters dug into the sand.

As the climate improved, the fertile lands of Islay attracted the first farmers to come and settle. The remains of their houses and tombs are scattered throughout the island. Often, sites of this period first become visible through the exposure of middens, the accumulated refuse

generated within settlements. A Late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age round house dating from around 2000 BC, excavated at Ardnave (Ritchie & Welfare, 1983) was found to contain food vessel type pottery and a wide range of stone tools. The Neolithic chambered cairn tombs found on Islay are part of a group known as the Clyde tombs and would have contained a long narrow passage with a chamber to one end. While seven such tombs are known on Islay, none lie within the coastal zone.

From the mid-second millennium BC onward, the archaeological record indicates social and cultural changes occurring. Not only is there a change in burial practice, from burial within communal tombs to individual burial in cists, but this is also the time when metal working technology and metal goods arrived on the Island. Several cist burials have been excavated at Ardnave (Ritchie & Welfare, 1983) and a probable funerary pyre was excavated by the authors during the course of the coastal survey (Moore & Wilson, forthcoming). A few chance finds of bronze artefacts are recorded from Islay, although little is known of the context from which they came.

The Iron Age on Islay, extending from the mid first millennium BC to the mid first millennium AD, is poorly researched. The only known broch site on the island is located at Dun Bhoraraic near Ballygrant. While there are numerous fortified dun sites throughout the island and especially on the coast edge, the period of their construction and use is little known, although it is probable that a proportion are of Iron Age date. Further work will be required to determine if some of these sites were used as settlements or if they served exclusively for defensive purposes, such as look out positions. At this time, it is also likely that settlements on artificial islands within lochs, known as crannogs, were also in use. Even if all of the dun and crannog sites known to exist on Islay were in use during the Iron Age, which is unlikely, this leaves a large gap in our knowledge of how and where the bulk of the population lived at this time.

From the Early Historic period, after c. 500 AD, onwards there is an increasing body of documentary sources with which to supplement the archaeological record. During this period, Christianity came to Islay, leaving its mark in a remarkable series of churches and carved stone crosses. Columban missionaries came from their base on Iona, building churches and monastic foundations. Many of these early churches, such as the consolidated example at

Kilchiaran and the unconsolidated example at Gleann Na Gaoith, remain in existence. This early Christian heritage is also witnessed in the carved crosses such as those at Kildalton and Kilnave. At this time the political landscape was being redrawn, with the establishment of the Kingdom of Dal Riata in Argyll under the hegemony of powerful dynasties whose influence spread from Northern Ireland to Western Scotland. Documentary sources record that the chief group at this time on Islay were called the Cenel nOengusa who claimed descent from the high king of Northern Ireland.

By the latter part of the first millennium AD Scandinavian Vikings had arrived on the shores, first as raiders but later as traders and settlers. Communications and long distance trading increased since Islay lay on the sea route between Viking colonies in Ireland and the Isle of Man and their homelands in Scandinavia. In time, the invaders married in to local families and settled down, being thereafter known as the Gael-Gall. While Scandinavian place name elements may be found on Islay, few traces of their settlements have yet been found, although a few pagan Norse graves, such as at Ballinaby, have been found.

From this society there came a number of powerful men, of which Somerled emerged pre-eminent. Of probable mixed Gaelic-Norse ancestry, Somerled came to prominence in the mid 12th century. Taking advantage of opportunities provided by the death of King Olaf of Man, Somerled invaded the southern Hebridean isles in 1156 and established himself there as ruler. As a powerful warrior with a fleet of war ships to his name, Somerled continued to campaign in Ireland and against the King of Scotland. After his death, his son Ranald took his place, naming himself as King of the Isles and Lord of Argyll. In turn, his son Donald, founder of the Clan Donald, inherited the kingdom of Islay.

Following defeat in battles against the Scots, the rule of the isles was ceded to the Scottish crown under the Treaty of Perth, signed in 1266. It was not until the MacDonalds under Angus Og, a descendant of Somerled, supported Robert Bruce in the Scottish Wars of Independence, that their fortunes were to rise again. On claiming his victory, the new King Robert granted back both forfeited and new lands to Angus Og in the early 14th century. Angus's son John is credited with being the first to give himself the title of Lord of the Isles. The power base of the lordship was centred at Finlaggan on Islay. Here, two islands in a freshwater loch surrounded by rich and fertile land, served as the lord's residence and court.

For over one hundred and fifty years it was at Finlaggan that new lords were inaugurated and that the administrative Council, a quasi- parliament, met and deliberated.

The lordship was ended in 1493 when the last lord, John II was found to have acted treasonably in treating with the English king against King James III of Scotland and was defeated in battle by James IV. In the political vacuum which followed the fall of John II, there followed numerous rebellions and order was not restored until King James IV returned lands on Islay to John of Ardnamurchan, a MacDonald. Under his rule, a new court system was instigated, land valuations were carried out and the church was reformed. These changes were not universally accepted, however, and the threat of insurrection remained ever present. It is likely that the castle at Dunivaig near Lagavullin, already a well used stronghold which may once have been used by Somerled, was refortified during this period.

On the death of John of Ardnamurchan, administration of the Islay estates was passed firstly to Sir John Campbell of Cawdor and latterly in 1528, to The Earl of Argyll, Alexander MacIan. Finally, after disagreement, much of the lands fell to King James V in 1542. A rebellion led by Donald Dubh to regain power was put down and, with it, the hopes of restoring the lordship for ever.

Feuding continued on a smaller scale, however, culminating with a battle at Loch Gruinart between the MacDonalds and MacLeans over the ownership of the Rhinns. The battlefield site can still be located and burials said to represent the slain from this battle have been reported nearby.

The downfall of the MacDonalds provided opportunities for the rise of the Campbells, who acted both as representatives of the crown and as chiefly rulers. They continued to expand their influence and land holdings, including those on Islay, until by the 17th century they occupied a dominant position and Islay gradually came under Mainland Scottish influence. The Campbells acted largely as absentee lairds and despite some attempts to improve farming and introduce new industry, Islay languished for much of the 17th century.

By the early 18th century, following years of hardship and famine which brought poor returns to its owners, the Cawdor Campbells were forced to sell their estates on Islay to

Daniel Campbell of Shawfield, a wealthy tobacco baron and member of Parliament. With the change of ownership, the fortunes of the island began to revive. In addition to introducing improved farming methods, the new proprietor also introduced flax cultivation and mills and weavers to engage in linen production. His successor, Daniel the Younger, was responsible for further improvements, including the laying out and construction of the village of Bowmore, the development of the fishing industry, the provision of schools and the promotion of the church. From 1777, under the lairdship of his brother, Walter Campbell, the pace of change was to increase, as new roads and transport links were made, opening new markets. Further agrarian reform took place and the fishing industry was further promoted with the construction of new quays.

By the time that Walter Frederick Campbell took over from his grandfather in 1816 the population of Islay had expanded greatly and while many people chose to emigrate to the New World, those remaining at home required the means of earning a living. To meet these needs, Walter Frederick Campbell embarked on a programme of development which was to see the setting up of the villages of Port Ellen, Port Charlotte and Port Wemyss, widespread land improvement in favour of individual small holdings and land reclamation, and the more commercial development of the distilling industry. While this set in place many of the factors which today contribute greatly to the economy and infrastructure of the island, it did not stem emigration from the island and by the 1840's, when the potato famine began to hit Islay, emigration to the New World and New Zealand, in particular, was promoted by the laird.

In addition to inherited debts, the hardship of the potato famine and low returns from the land led Walter Frederick Campbell to bankruptcy in 1848; his lands were sequestered and held in trust on behalf of his creditors. There followed a less benign rule, overseen by accountants and administrators, during which land clearances were carried out. The estates of Islay were eventually sold off in 1853. Over time, the estates were split up and sold off to private individuals, many of whom promoted emigration and most of whom had little long term concern with the development of the island or the condition of its inhabitants.

By the 20th century many of the private lands were owned by absentee landlords and either rented as tenant farms or developed as shooting estates. Much of Islay remains in the ownership of a few individuals to this day. The successful distillery industry, with seven

functioning distilleries and a maltings, and increasing revenue from tourism has, however, provided new sources of income in addition to farming. The improvement of the road network and the instigation of a daily ferry and regular air service has opened the island up to new markets and new influences.

Previous Archaeological Work

The first systematic study of the archaeological sites on Islay was published by The Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland in 1997 (RCAHMS, 1977). The findings are now also presented on the web-based CANMORE database. This records some 134 sites within the coastal zone of Islay and incorporates many of the site observations made by members of local historians and archaeologists and Mr. W.D. Lamont, in particular.

Relatively little archaeological fieldwork has been carried out within the coastal zone of Islay in modern times. There have been a small number of excavations, namely of a Late Neolithic- Iron Age house at Ardnave and cist burials nearby (Ritchie and Welfare, 1983), and further cist burials at Knockangle Point (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1975) and Traigh Bhan (Ritchie and Stevenson, 1982). A multiperiod settlement site at Kilellan (Ardnave), which includes remains ranging from the Mesolithic to the Iron Age, has been investigated and the analysis of the results should throw much new light on to our understanding of the prehistoric period on Islay (Burgess, 1976, Ritchie, forthcoming).

Away from the coast, excavation at An Sithean on the Rhinns investigated the remains of a farming settlement comprising both of houses and associated fields which dates from the latter part of the second millennium BC and which remained in use for some considerable time (Barber and Brown, 1984).

At Newton, another multiperiod site known from cropmarks, sample excavation uncovered a range of features and artefacts (MacCullagh, 1989). These included the remains of huts or shelters containing numerous hearths and microliths of a type thought to have been in use

around 7000 BC, features such as pits and gullies associated with Neolithic pottery and circular ditched enclosures, thought to be burial monuments of later Iron Age date.

Several new flint working sites have been discovered through a programme of field walking directed by S. Mithen under the aegis of the Southern Hebrides Research Project (Mithen, 1989). Currently, a programme of research is investigating cave sites on Islay for evidence of their use in earlier times (Hardy, 2002).

Excavations were carried out at a chambered cairn in Port Charlotte in the 1970's (Harrington and Pierpoint, 1980). This work found that the cairn was trapezoidal in plan and was constructed from massive boulders framing a central passage and chamber. Several flint artefacts such as knives and arrowheads, together with Neolithic pottery were recovered. Traces of an earlier phase of activity were found beneath the cairn.

The largest scale excavations to have taken place on Islay in recent years have investigated the site at Finlaggan, centre for the Lords of the Isles in the medieval period (Cauldwell and Ewart, 1993). Here, work has revealed remains on two small islands in Loch Finlaggan. On the largest, Eilean Mor, traces of a wooden palisade, together with the foundations of some twenty small buildings and a probable hall were identified. The ruins of a small chapel, thought to be of 14th century date, also stands on this island. It is surrounded by graves, some of which are covered with Medieval grave slabs. On the smaller island, Eilean na Comhairle, traces of an Iron Age dun were found beneath a group of medieval buildings, thought to have served as the council chambers.