

**The Archaeological Remains of
the Aird Mhoir and Dubh Aird peninsulars
Loch Torridon**

**A survey by members of NOSAS
Sunday, 30th January 2005**



The Archaeological Remains of Aird Mhoir and Dubh-Aird, Loch Torridon, Ross-shire (Applecross Parish)

Introduction

This small project was undertaken with the aim of discovering more about the herring fishing in the Loch Torridon area. NOSAS has, for the last few years, been involved in a survey of the Inner Loch Hourn area where remains associated with the herring fishing in the 18th and 19th centuries have been identified. It was thought that a visit to Loch Torridon might help in our understanding of the buildings recorded at Loch Hourn.

John Knox's account of 1787, "A Tour through the Highlands of Scotland", reveals that a Curing House and fishery had been established on the south shore of Loch Torridon in 1786. Thomas Newte also describes the fishing station in detail in 1788, following a tour in 1785 (see Appendix), although Newte admits to relying on the words of others, having never actually visited the site! In fact there is firm evidence to show that the stone Curing House wasn't built until 1786. Newte's description and drawing of them then perhaps refers to a wooden building which preceded it.

No record of a building, fishing station or Curing House at Loch Torridon had been found on the National Sites and Monuments Record.

Six members made the trip on Sunday 30th January, 2005. The weather was dull and overcast, but the rain stayed away until half way through the afternoon. The two peninsulars of Aird Mhoir and Dubh-Aird on the south shore of Loch Torridon were targeted. Both are rough going but there are some useful paths and tracks and it was not difficult to deviate from these in order to inspect the shoreline. In total we covered approximately 4 kilometres of shoreline and located 18 sites.

The Curing House was identified, it was of similar size to one of the larger buildings at Loch Hourn. A kiln close by proved to be a bit of a mystery.

Topography

Loch Torridon has three reaches. On the south shore of the Innermost reach, Upper Loch Torridon, there are several good anchorages, in particular the Ob Gorm Mor and Ob Gorm Beag, currently being used for shellfish farming.

Between these two harbours the Aird Mhoir peninsular projects northwards. It is approximately 1km in length and half a kilometre in width. The smaller Dubh-Aird peninsular is to the east of the Ob Gorm Mor. The two peninsulars are very different. The Aird Mhoir peninsular is rough and rocky and reaches a height of 67m. It is predominantly heather covered and is well wooded with birch and pine. The Dubh-Aird is flatter, has some pine trees, but is rapidly becoming overgrown with rhododendron.

The Aird Mhoir has a winding track along the centre, accessing a roofed cottage at its NE corner. Circumnavigating the peninsular there are several well constructed paths (of the type built by stalkers). These are probably associated with the Estate, which appears to have been developed as a shooting estate in Victorian times (also no doubt, responsible for the rhododendrons!). The rhododendrons make the Dubh-Aird peninsular almost inaccessible, but a new road has been constructed on its east side giving access to the Dubh-Aird, where ground had been cleared for a new house.

Most of the shoreline on the north and west of both peninsulars are exposed and drop steeply to the water, but to the east there are some sheltered bays and beaches.

Photo front page - Ob Gorm Mor from the south, Aird Mhoir to the left and Dubh-Aird to the right

Historical Background

Donald Morrison of Stornoway, was employed by Kenneth Mackenzie of Torridon to set up the Torridon Fishery Company. In a letter dated June 1786 to Mackenzie, he writes: *"I have together with Mr Syeds examined the harbour at Ardmore which we find to be a most excellent one and the point to the North to be the properest place to build on whereon we are this day busy landing"* This would suggest that some fishing activity was already in place at Ardmore

John Knox in his "Tour through the Highlands of Scotland" writes in 1787: *"Here (Loch Torridon) are several anchoring places and 2 good harbours, called Great and Little Ardmore, with water from 4 to 14 fathoms, and good anchorage. They are situated contiguous to each other on the south side of the loch, near fresh water and at the bottom of sloping country, which though covered at present with heath could be cleared and drained with great facility.*

Here Mr Mackenzie has erected a large and commodious curing house after the model of those on the coast of Labradore and other northern parts of America. It is the first of the kind that has been erected in Scotland. The principal design of the building is to dry cod and ling in any weather under cover, an improvement of the greatest importance in that watery climate.

The buildings have likewise all manner of conveniences for curing herrings, a branch that may be carried on to any extent, for which employ, nature has formed a creek where some hundred boats may lie in perfect safety, under any winds, from whatever quarter they blow."

Thomas Newte made a tour of the West Coast in 1785, and although he never actually visited Aird Mhor, he has left a detailed description and a drawing of the curing station, almost certainly an earlier one constructed of wood. It is however possible that Newte has got it wrong, or at least inaccurate and that he has exaggerated the importance of the place. (Herring - A History of the Silver Darlings, Mike Smylie, 2004) - see Appendix

Murdoch Macdonald in his book "Old Torridon" (1997), reports that by 1788, wooden warehouses, a wharf and salt storehouse had been built as well as houses for tradesmen (this information from Newte?). But the Torridon Fishery Company and its project were beset by difficulties. Mackenzie was short of funds, there was the notorious red tape involved in adhering to the Salt Laws and the Customs procedures of the day meant that all nets and boats had to be checked by the nearest Customs Officer at Isle Martin on Loch Broom. He was still employing fishermen in 1795, but by 1797 he had sold the estate to his younger brother John *"excepting the fishing station established on the lands of Annat by which is understood the buildings and stores of the late company"* - implying that the fishery continued to operate, but that the Company had been disbanded.

The herring came and went. Some years there was plenty, an article in the "Inverness Courier" 14th Oct 1840 states: *"From Loch Torridon, about 1000 crans (of herring) are taken every morning. Salt and casks are unfortunately so scarce that the vessels there purchase as many as they can get cured in a day at 3 shillings a cran and a vast quantity has been thrown into the sea. Vessels have congregated there from Ireland, the Clyde, Caithness, Stornoway and the coast near Loch Torridon. The herrings are smaller and richer in flavour than those of the Caithness coast and there are about 1000 to the barrel. It is difficult to procure labourers to cure the herring, but a number of women and boys are employed, who earn from 3 to 4 shillings a day. The "Speedy" cutter is stationed at Loch Torridon preserving order and regularity among the men and Captain Wright the commander is umpire in all disputes. Hundreds of carts are engaged in driving the herring to the east coast, and in this town (Inverness) we are almost inundated with herrings, hawked through the town at very low prices"*

The Curing House was still active at the end of the 19th century and probably fell into disuse in the early 20th century. ("Old Torridon", 1997)

Gazetteer of Sites

Aird Mhoir peninsular

AM1. Boundary wall

NGR - NG 86260 54490(west end)
NG 86450 54440(east end)

SMR or NMRS No. -

Situated in the SW of the Aird Mhor peninsular, this wall appears to separate the peninsular from the land to the south across a narrower "neck" of land. The wall is approximately 200m long, obscured by vegetation/bracken for the most part and may be a continuation of AM12 situated to the east.

AM2. ?Cleared beach - Port an t-Saoir

NGR - NG 86070 54880

SMR or NMRS No. -

Situated at the foot of a steep slope this small NW facing bay is quite exposed. It is difficult to discern whether or not this beach has been cleared of larger stones. However there appears to be a stone setting in its west corner, this could be the edge of a constructed path giving access to the beach

AM3. ?Cleared beach and path

NGR - NG 86340 55190 SMR or NMRS No. -

Situated in a small bay at the NE tip of the Aird Mhoir peninsular, it is difficult to determine whether or not this beach has been cleared. Any larger stones may have been used in the construction of the path, which at this point has a substantial rising ramp with a faced wall of height 3m.



?Cleared beach and path
from west

AM4 - Building (Fish processing/curing house)

NGR - NG 86404 55117

SMR or NMRS No. -

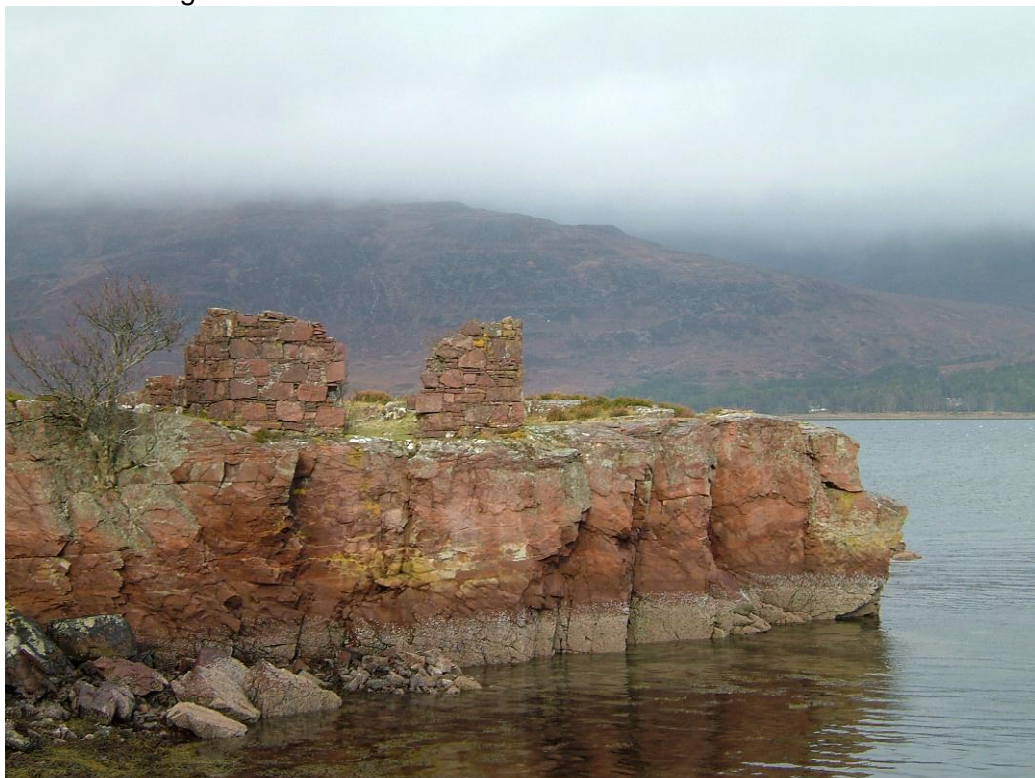
This site is almost certainly the Curing House described by John Knox in his "Tour" of 1886. It is situated on the northeast side of the Aird Mhor peninsular, with the large sheltered anchorage of Ob Gorm Mor lying to the east. It is on a rock headland to the north of a small bay, Port an Aird Mhoir, the beach of which appears to have been cleared.

The rectangular building is on a NW-SE alignment and has an internal dimension of 17.9m x 5.1m. The grass covered footings of an extension, internal dimensions roughly 4m square, are barely discernable on its SW side. The majority of the building is defined by



Building AM4 from north

the stone footings of the walls which are 0.5m width, although on the south side these are less evident. It would appear that the stones have been robbed from the majority of the building, most probably to build the neighbouring roofed building to the west. At the south end of the building the remains of the walls are upstanding to maximum height of 2.2m

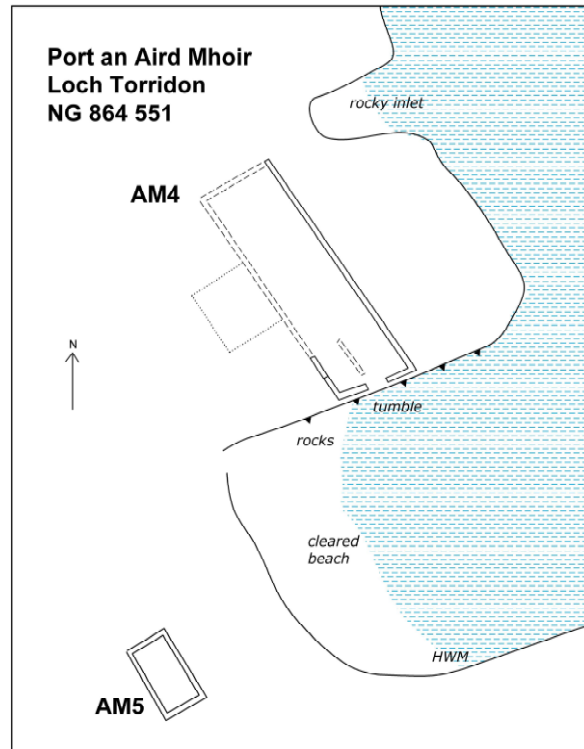


SE end of AM4 from SE

These mortared walls are 0.5m in width and carefully made of dressed red sandstone. The SE wall (which is not at right angles to the rest of the building) is parallel to and situated on the edge of a cliff, with a vertical drop of 4m to the high water mark. In the centre of this wall there is an entrance of 1.55m width. To the south, in the sea below, there is tumbled material from the wall.

The internal "floor area" of the structure is very uneven, with bedrock forming a large part of it and the level ranging over a metre. Immediately to the north of the building there is a small rocky inlet, on the sides of which there appears to be evidence of quarrying.

At the head of the small sheltered bay to the south there is a further building (AM5) probably associated with this one.



Building AM4 from NW

AM5 - Building

NGR - NG 86386 55071

SMR or NMRS No. -

Situated on the northeast side of the Aird Mhor peninsular, at the head of a small sheltered NE facing bay, Port an Aird Mhoir, about 15m above HWM (the beach appears to have been cleared). The building may be associated with the Curing House (AM4) which is about 50m to the NE

The building is rectangular and on a NW-SE alignment with internal dimensions of 8.5m x 4.1m. The heather covered stone footings of the walls are of dry construction. They are 0.7m in width and 0.3m maximum height. There is no evidence of an entrance or of internal partitions.

AM6. Kiln and barn - Aird Mhoir/Ob na Glaic Ruaidh

NGR - NG 86337 54987

SMR or NMRS No. - NG85NE 16



Kiln and barn from north/above

Situated on the NE side of the Aird Mhor peninsular, at the head of a sheltered E facing bay, Ob na Glaic Ruaidh (OS 1:10,000 map), This structure is about 5m above HWM. A platform/?jetty (AM 7) to the east may be associated, as may a wall/?fish trap in the bay to the east. The structure is at the foot of a steep south facing slope. There is an area of bracken covered, ?improved land to the west in a small east facing valley.

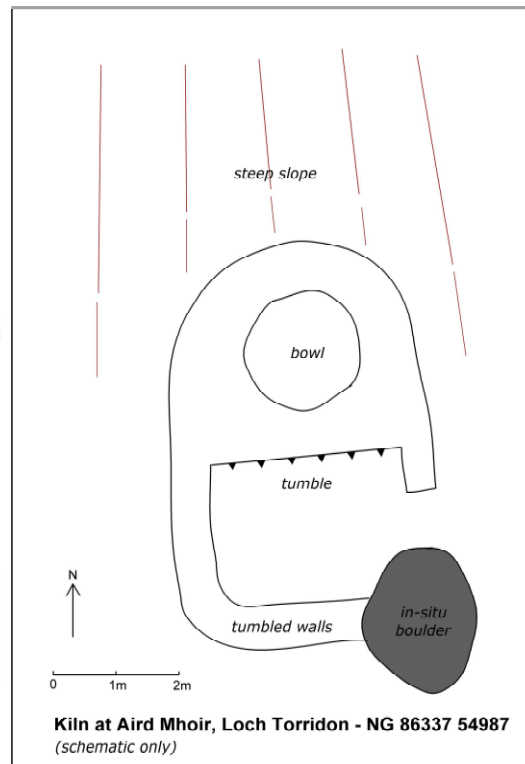
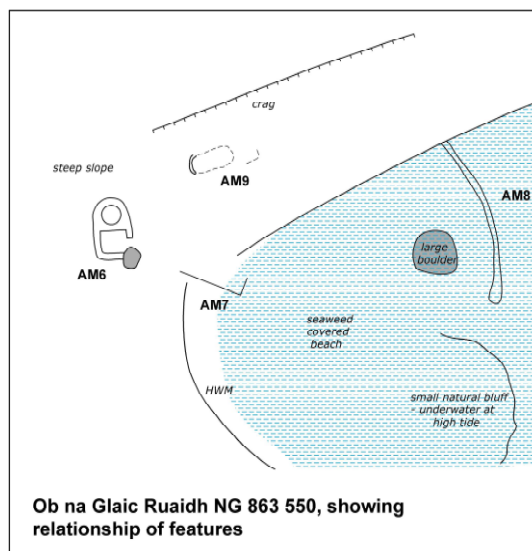
The structure is on an alignment NNW-SSE and comprises of a circular bowl in the north part with a ?barn to the south. The structure is ovoid and measures 6.5 x 4.3m externally.

The kiln bowl is shallow and has a maximum diameter of 2m, with a depth of 0.45m (at its deepest where there is a small amount of tumbled material). The bowl is contained within a raised sloping structure, a plinth, which is abutting the slope to the rear and has a vertical face of 0.9m height at the front (south). In the centre of this face there is an aperture of 0.9m width and 0.27m depth (it is considerably shortened by tumble). The aperture, which has a large lintel stone of 1.3m width, opens into a small chamber which is at least 1m in depth and 0.45m in height.

The southern compartment/?barn has internal dimensions of 3m x 2.3m and tumbled walls of spread 0.7m. The entrance at the east (seaward end) is 1m in width and bounded by a large in-situ boulder on its south side.



Kiln and barn from south



Comment - This structure is a bit of a mystery!. It has been previously recorded and interpreted as a corn-drying kiln. Certainly there is a small area of ?improved land to the west, but very little other cultivatable land within the vicinity. It may be a "regional variation" of a CDK, but the aperture is more like that of a lime kiln. However it does not appear to be a lime kiln either, the shallow bowl is not appropriate for this. Considering its situation, close to the shore at the head of a small inlet and its possible association with several features close by - ?jetty (7), wall/?fish trap (8) and building (9), also, possibly more importantly, considering its proximity to the fish Curing House (AM 4 - 150m to the NE), and the paucity of salt in the heyday of the herring fisheries, perhaps the most likely interpretation for this feature is a small Salt Pan. This structure could post date the repeal of the Salt Laws in 1825.

AM7 Platform/?Jetty - Ob na Glaic Ruaidh

NGR - NG 86345 54980

SMR or NMRS No.

Situated on the HWM, at the head of a sheltered E facing bay, Ob na Glaic Ruaidh (OS 1:10,000 map), The kiln (AM 6), 5m to the west may be associated, as may a wall/?fish trap (AM 8) in the bay to the east.

This roughly rectangular sloping platform, facing east, is comprised of angular stones. It is on a NW-SE alignment and measures 8.1m in length. It has a face of between 0.4m

and 0.6m height on its SW side but merges with the slope to the NE. There is a "return" of 2.3m at the east end.

The platform from the west



AM8 - Wall/?fish trap - Ob na Glaic Ruaidh

NGR - NG 86371 54979 (north end)

SMR or NMRS No.

Situated in a sheltered E facing bay, Ob na Glaic Ruaidh (OS 1:10,000 map). Most of the time the feature is below water and only exposed at very low tide.

It comprises of a circa.20m length of wall, curving from NW to SE. There is a gap of 3m at the south end of the wall before a small natural escarpment, much of which lies underwater. The wall has a thickness of 0.8m (although wider at south end) and a max height of 1m. It is made up of large angular boulders now barnacle encrusted and covered in seaweed.



Wall (under water) from NW

Comment - This feature seems unlike other fish traps in that it is only exposed at very low tides. The pool which it "contains" may have been scooped out. It is possible that the feature is associated with the kiln (AM6) and the platform (AM7) - if AM6 is a salt pan then this wall could have contained the pool from where water was collected!

AM9 Building - Ob na Glaic Ruaidh

NGR - NG 86345 54991

SMR or NMRS No.

At the head of a sheltered E facing bay, Ob na Glaic Ruaidh (OS 1:10,000 map). Roughly 10m to the NW of the kiln (AM6) and lying just 1.6m to the south of a substantial crag. May be associated with the kiln (AM6), the platform (AM7) and the wall (AM8)

The structure is rectangular and on a SW-NE alignment, it measures 4.2m x 1.9m. The short west wall is of rough dry stone construction. It is rounded, 0.7m thick and 1m in height. The east wall is poorly defined. The SE wall is defined by a moss-covered stone setting. A platform of slabbed stones and width 3m is to the south of the building(?a work area). There is a further small oval structure to the east of the building. It uses 2 in-situ boulders.

AM10 Cleared beach - Ob Gorm Mor

NGR - NG 86631 54816

SMR or NMRS No.

Situated on the SE side of the Aird Mhoir peninsular, in a sheltered NE facing bay. The remains of a boat (AM11) are lying on the NW part of this beach.

The cleared beach is aligned SW-NE and is roughly 22m in length (to low tide). It is 18m in width at the upper/SW end and 13m at the lower/NE end.



Cleared beach from the east

AM11 Wreck - Ob Gorm Mor

NGR - NG 86631 54816

SMR or NMRS No.

On the SE side of the Aird Mhoir peninsular, in a sheltered bay, this wreck is lying on a cleared beach (AM10)

It is on the same alignment as the beach - SW-NE. The remains of the wreck - rotting ?oak timbers, metalwork (including engine flywheel, galley stove and ?boiler) pots and ballast of stones etc. are strewn over a 18m stretch of the beach.

AM12 - Boundary wall - Ob na Caillich

NGR - NG 86750 54650

SMR or NMRS No.

Situated in a small estuary at the SW corner of the natural anchorage, Ob Gorm Mor. This feature lies within the tidal zones. It is almost certainly part of a boundary dividing off the Aird Mhoir peninsular from the land to the south and may be the continuation of the wall (AM1)

Comprises a ?100m length of wall on a SW-NE alignment, lying parallel and 5m from the south shore of the small estuary. At the NE end there is a "return" at right angles of ?12m. A further length of wall, in line with the return, can be seen on the north side of the small estuary.



"Return" of boundary wall from the east

Dubh-Aird peninsular

AM13 - Buildings - Lub Dubh Aird

NGR - NG 87146 55036

NMRS No. - Under NG85SE 21

At the west end of the bay, Lub Dubh Aird, 50m from the shoreline and at the foot of a NE facing slope.

Thesubstantial remains of a rectangular building on a NW-SE alignment with two annexes/?byres one either end of the main building. The SE annexe has had its corner cut by the new road. The annexe to the NW is rapidly becoming overgrown with rhododendrons. The main building has upstanding walls to 1 - 1.2m height and the NW corner s rounded



Main building from east

AM14 - Building - Lub Dubh Aird

NGR - NG 87151 55097

SMR or NMRS No. - Mentioned under NG85SE 21

At the west end of the bay, Lub Dubh Aird and 5m from the shoreline. A rectangular building with rounded corners on a N-S alignment. Internal dimensions 6m x 2m

A new road has been constructed close by and an area has been cleared of vegetation, possibly for a new house.



Building from north

AM15 - Pen - Dubh Aird

NGR - NG 87215 55097

SMR or NMRS No.

On the east most headland of the Dubh Aird peninsular, close to the shoreline. This rectangular pen is on a NE-SW alignment. It has squared corners and internal dimensions of 7m x 4m. The low tumbled walls are 0.8m in thickness. Heather covered in the main and threatened by rhododendrons.

AM16 - Building - Dubh Aird /Sron Ghlas

NGR - NG 87155 55255

SMR or NMRS No.

On the northeast shore of the Dubh Aird peninsular a rocky outcrop is connected to the main shore by a stony beach. This building is situated at the south end of the beach and is tucked under a crag using the crag as its rear wall.

The substantial remains of this small well constructed building rise to a height of 1.6m. It appears rectangular from the outside, but internal the dimensions are 3m square. It has a doorway in the east wall and the rusting iron frame of a small window is still in-situ in the west wall.



Building AM16 from NW

AM17 - Structure/Shelter - Dubh Aird /Camas a'Bhodaich

NGR - NG 86929 55214

SMR or NMRS No.

In the NW corner of the Dubh-aird peninsula, at the head of a NE facing bay, Camas a Bhodaich. The remains of this roughly rectangular shelter are on the shoreline. Dimensions are 3.5m x 1.5m. Natural bedrock forms the rear wall and a stone setting forms the east wall.



Shelter AM17 from NE

AM18 - Cleared beach - Dubh Aird/Eilean Cnapach

NGR - NG 86861 55256

SMR or NMRS No.

Situated in the NW corner of the Dubh Aird peninsular, at the head of a N facing bay on the east side of a small island, Eilean Cnapach. This small cleared beach is NW facing



Cleared beach AM18 from SE