

NOTICE OF SHELL-MOUNDS AT LOSSIEMOUTH. By E. G. DUFF,
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In September last, whilst in Morayshire, I visited the shell-mounds situated to the west of the town of Lossiemouth, near Elgin. These shell-mounds or rather shell-layers lie facing the sea, that is towards the north, and are about twenty yards from high-tide mark, but at a very much higher level, the shore there being rocky and steep. There are two distinct layers, and a very good section for examining has been made by the blasting operations in connection with the new lead mines recently opened there. They lie in a black loamy soil, which begins at a depth of 8 feet from the surface of the ground, and at a depth of half a foot in this soil lies the first layer, consisting of shells and bones of various descriptions, but containing little, if any, remains of pottery. Below this again, at a depth of 13 feet from the surface, comes the second layer. This consists of shells and bones in a much worse state of preservation, mingled with quantities of small fragments of earthenware vessels. The earthenware, as may be seen from the specimens exhibited, is similar to that known by the wide term of "mediæval." It is coarse, roughly made pottery, coated in many cases with a strong green glaze, and in some specimens which I possess very much over-fired, producing a metallic brown appearance; most are without patterns, and any there are, are simple.

But now comes an important question, Whether are these shell-layers natural or artificial? The latter seems the most probable explanation for

several reasons. One is the large quantity of animal and fish-bones and pottery, which it seems impossible for the sea to have collected there in such abundance ; (2) the shells are all of varieties which may be used for food, and it is highly improbable that the sea should collect the edible, but reject the other shell-fish, of which there are quantities on the coast ; (3) the character of the soil is of a peculiar description, like that produced by decaying animal matter, and is confined to this spot.

Very few metallic remains are to be found, the head of a large nail or bolt, and a small fragment of some implement (?) in copper or bronze, were all I unearthed in several searches. Mr. Grant, however, the school-master at Lossiemouth, who has also searched on various occasions, informed me that all he had found in the way of metallic objects consisted of a small S-shaped piece of iron, which he imagined to be part of a chain. The shells and bones are in a very advanced stage of decay, that is, in the lower layer ; the shells, on the slightest pressure, crumble to atoms, and the bones break almost as readily.

There is a tradition that in olden times the part of the sea immediately in front of the shell-layers, and which is now called the "Hive," was used as a harbour, a purpose for which its natural advantages well fit it, as it is almost surrounded by a natural bulwark of rocks. And as there was a good, or comparatively good, harbour erected at the mouth of the Lossie, about a quarter of a mile distant from the shell-layers, at some date prior to 1698, the use of the natural harbour probably ended somewhat before that date. Although no traces of old buildings remain on the surface of the ground near the shell-layers, yet on the surface of the loamy soil large slabs, or pieces of them, are found, composed of the Old Red Sandstone, the prevailing rock in that quarter, and in size and thickness very similar to what you may find the floors of cottages made of at the present day. From what I have before said, it is probable that these remains are "kitchen-middens" of some considerable age, though the exact date cannot at present be determined, but perhaps other objects may be discovered, which may give a definite date to remains so interesting to archæologists.