

I.

ON THE EXAMINATION OF TWO HUT CIRCLES IN THE STRATH OF KILDONAN, SUTHERLANDSHIRE, ONE OF WHICH HAS AN EARTH HOUSE ANNEXED. BY ALEXANDER O. CURLE, *Secretary*.

During my survey of the ancient monuments of the county of Sutherland in the summer of 1909, I was much impressed by the extraordinary number of hut circles to be seen there. The existence of such objects has been noted from time to time, especially in relation to hill forts and other constructions of a defensive character, but there is little information in regard to them in the volumes of our *Proceedings*. In Scotland no antiquary so far has made these interesting remains a special subject of study. In 1866 Mr John Stuart, then Secretary of this Society, conducted excavations in a number of hut circles and adjacent mounds on Balnabroch, Parish of Kirkmichael, Perthshire, but with almost negative results. Much charcoal was found on the floors of the former, and in one instance a fragment of bronze like the pin of a brooch.¹ On the Gallow Hill, at Auchterless, Aberdeenshire, others destroyed by cultivation, along with mounds in their near vicinity, were described in 1871 by Mr James Forrest, Auchterless. Quantities of ashes and charred wood were found in one hut circle, and a hole in the centre about 1 foot in diameter and 2½ feet in depth, in which was some decayed wood.² In several mounds, composed of stone and earth, and situated near the circles, were found urns of the cinerary type, some of which are now in the possession of Mrs Duff Dunbar, Ackergill, Wick.

Hut circles in the South of England have attracted much attention, and the labours of the Exploration Committee of the Devonshire Archæological Society, extending over a number of years,

¹ See *Proceedings*, vol. vi. p. 402.

² *Ibid.*, vol. ix. p. 157.

among those of Dartmoor, have demonstrated that there, at least, they are dwellings of the Early Bronze, if not of the Late Neolithic period. Excavations in the island of Anglesea, conducted by the Hon. Owen Stanley as long ago as 1865, led to a similar conclusion.

In Sutherland they exist for the most part by the sides of the straths forming the natural highways into the interior, by the shores of the lochs, and on the slopes of the hills, often at an elevation of some 500 to 600 feet.

The variety of plan met with is considerable, and peculiar features are not infrequently restricted in their occurrence to limited areas. In no case is this more evident than in the Strath of Kildonan, where, in several instances, an earth house, or underground gallery, forms a part of the plan. While in two or three cases the earth house is accessible, in others its existence is clearly indicated by a peculiar increase, on one side only of the hut circle, in the dimensions of the bank which formed it. As a rule, the bank in its present dilapidated state, and overgrown with vegetation, measures some 6 feet to 8 feet in breadth, but in the instances referred to it has a breadth of 20 feet or more, and a height of 4 feet to 6 feet for about one-third of the circumference.

Situated near the upper end of the strath of Kildonan at the foot of Kinbrace Hill, and some fifty yards S. of the cultivated land at Burnfoot, is a hut circle (fig. 1) (No. 352 of the Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Sutherland). In form the interior is oval, measuring some 30 feet in breadth by 35 feet in length towards the entrance, which is from the S.E. The passage leading to the interior is 15 feet in length, some 4 feet wide at the exterior, and 2 feet at the inner end. The thickness of the bank or wall is some 5 feet, where it projects outwards on either side of the passage, and about 11 feet on the east side of the circle. On the west it is some 9 feet in thickness for the first 19 feet from the entrance, whence it rapidly expands to a width of 24 feet, decreasing thereafter to 8 feet at the back of

the circle. On the N.E., abutting on the outer face, is a small oblong enclosure, the banks of which are much worn down. At no distant date the bank or wall has been much dilapidated by the removal of

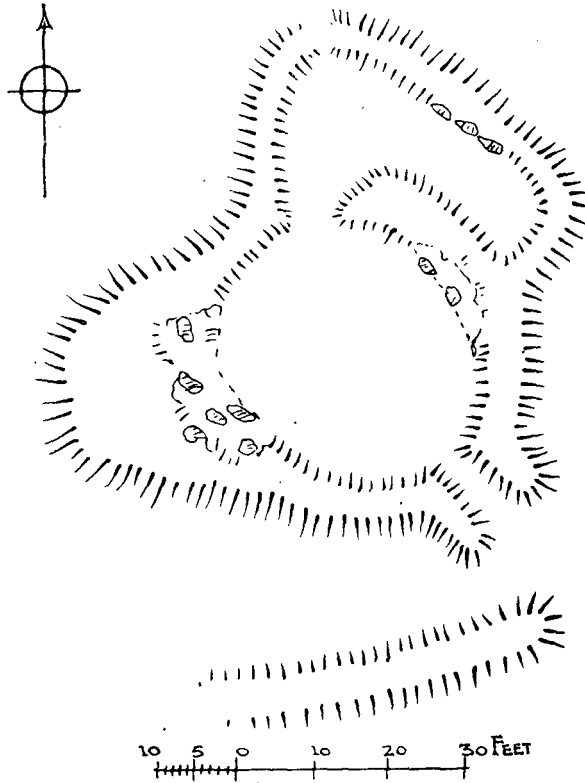


Fig. 1. Plan of Hut Circle at Kinbrace, Sutherlandshire.

stones, probably for road metal, but no earth house has been exposed.

During my residence in the North last summer I was given an

opportunity by Mr Sykes, the shooting tenant of Borrobol, and now a Fellow of the Society, to explore this circle. The permission of His Grace the Duke of Sutherland having been obtained, we started operations on a cold stormy day in the beginning of September. The time at my disposal did not permit of a thorough examination, so the tasks I set myself were to ascertain if an earth house really existed beneath the broad portion of the bank, and to examine a part of the interior in the hope of finding some fragments of pottery that might furnish an indication of the period to which the structure belonged. Clearing an area about 10 feet square near the centre, we found at a depth of some 16 inches below the present ground-level a stone-paved floor. From this came a small quantity of charcoal and minute fragments of burnt bone, but no relics of importance. An excavation made along the inner face of the bank on the W. side showed that it had been faced with large stones, and produced a small fragment of coarse hand-made pottery, red in colour on the outside, and much blackened in the interior. The fragment, which is unornamented, measures half an inch in thickness, and has evidently been a portion of the wall of a large vessel broken off at the base. As this cutting failed to locate the entrance to an earth house, as I had hoped, I was compelled to dig into the mound. It had previously been much disturbed, and many large stones lay exposed in pockets dug into it on the top and about the inner face. At its thickest point, where I thought the back of the earth house might occur, a hole was dug in from the outside, but, though a built wall was met, no trace of the gallery was found. Judging, then, that the entrance would probably be in a position similar to that in other hut circles, an excavation was made into the bank on the left of the interior some 20 feet or thereby from the inner end of the main entrance, and here, as the search was being relinquished at the close of the afternoon, the gallery was found. The workman had dug a pit some 3 to 4 feet deep and the same in diameter, from the bottom of which his

spade had passed horizontally inwards. Lighting a candle and entering, the walls, built of boulders, were found to be intact, and the great slabs which formed the roof *in situ*. A talus of loose soil stretched nearly to the back, which was reached at 20 feet from where the gallery was entered. At the inner extremity the width was 4 feet and the height 5 feet 6 inches. As the opening was discovered some 4 or 5 feet from the inner face of the bank, the original length of the earth house must have been longer by that extent, and the depth at which it was found indicates that it was dug out of the solid ground, otherwise the wall of boulders could with difficulty have withstood the thrust of the heavy flagstone roof. It is remarkable that, instead of passing to the right under the great bank which suggested its existence, it turned towards the left. Unfortunately, time did not permit of us either clearing out the gallery or making a cut through the mound to see if a second earth house had existed there, both of which operations would have involved much labour. The opening was therefore filled up again, as it was dangerous to leave it open, and we had reluctantly to bequeath the completion of the exploration to other hands at some future date.

On removing the turf from the main entrance, and from the interior just within it, further rude paving was laid bare and another fragment of pottery recovered. This was a small portion of the lip of a vessel of thick black ware with a smooth surface, also apparently hand-made. In the composition of both these fragments of pot are many minute flakes of mica, suggesting that the vessels were of local manufacture, the rock of the district being micaceous schist. The only other relics recovered were a round sandstone pebble, measuring superficially 6 by 5 inches, slightly concave, and polished with rubbing on one face, also a segment of an annular armlet of unpolished lignite amounting to about one-third of the original. In section it is flat on one side and slightly rounded on the other, and is much

marked with cuts made with a blunt tool. The diameter of the armlet when complete has been about $3\frac{3}{8}$ inches. It was picked up on the top of the thickened portion of the bank, and had probably been scraped up by a rabbit.

These relics are few and of little value, but they are probably sufficient to prove that this class of hut circle belongs to the period of the Early Iron age. Shale or lignite is a product of the district, and is to be found on the shore near Brora, and rings or armlets of it were found in the brochs of Carrol and Carn Liath, as well as in the cruciform earth house at Culmaily, near The Mound.

The pottery and the fragment of an armlet have been deposited in the Museum.

HUT CIRCLES, ETC., NEAR LOCH ASGAIG.

On a low shoulder of the hill to the west of Loch Asgaig, and about 2 miles W.S.W. of Borrobol Lodge, is a group of hut circles and mounds to which my attention was directed too late for their inclusion in the Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Sutherland. The group consists of one or two hut circles and about a dozen mounds, the latter from 16 to 22 feet in diameter and from 2 feet to 3 feet 6 inches in elevation. As one of the hut circles, situated about 300 yards W. of the loch, was especially well preserved and approximately of a plan which I had noted on several previous occasions, I decided to examine it with the assistance of the labourers which Mr Sykes had kindly provided. The construction in reality consisted of two circles approximately concentric, the one some 5 feet within the other, but connected for a distance of about 15 feet on either side of the entrance passage by a stony bank or rubble wall. The entrance (fig. 2), which was entirely blocked with stones, was from the E.S.E. through a passage 11 feet in length and 2 feet 6 inches in width. At the outer end two large stones, which might have formed a portal, lay prostrate, while the opening

into the interior was flanked on either side by a large boulder, 2 feet in height and 9 inches in thickness, with a breadth of 1 foot 1 inch and 1 foot 5 inches respectively. Between these the passage narrowed to 2 feet 2 inches, and a sill projected some 8 inches from the floor. The interior was almost a complete circle, with a diameter of 22 feet. To the right of the doorway in the interior, and standing against the wall, was a large heavy slab measuring 2 feet 6 inches in



Fig. 2. View of the Hut Circle after excavation.

width by 2 feet 2 inches in height and from 5 inches to 7 inches in thickness, of such dimensions as would have exactly covered the space between the inner portal stones. The surrounding wall was of rubble, roughly faced with boulders in the interior, measuring about 5 feet in thickness and about 2 feet 6 inches in elevation. It was entirely overgrown with heather, and the stones for the most part were concealed beneath a thick coating of peat. Almost in the centre of the interior lay a large slab some 3 feet 6 inches square which had evidently formed a hearth; and at one side,

from 2 inches to 2 feet 6 inches out from it, two slabs set anglewise and on edge in the floor, projected to a height of some 6 inches, forming a kerb. The greater part of the interior was cleared of turf, the part left being indicated by the diagonal lines on the plan (fig. 3). The floor was hard and compact, but did not appear

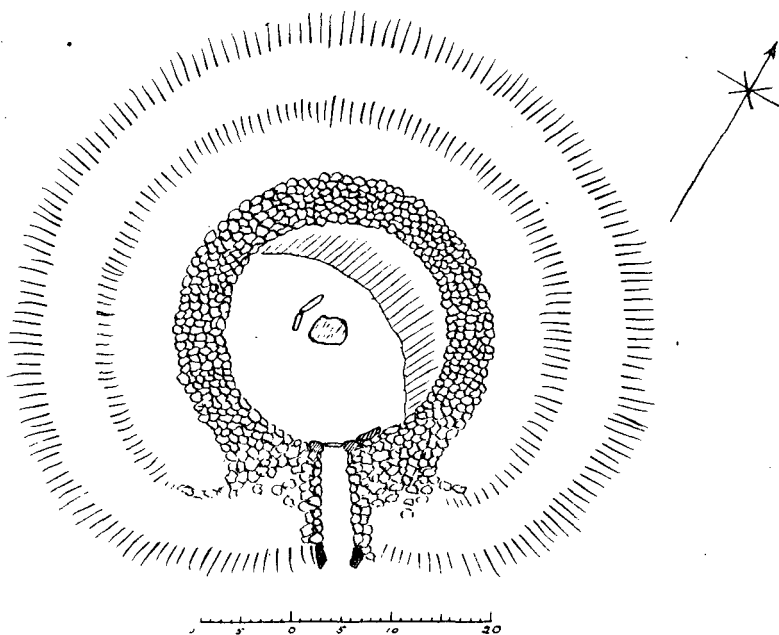


Fig. 3. Plan of Hut Circle, West of Loch Asgaig.

to be paved. Unfortunately, the flow of water from the higher ground, which rose freely in the interior, prevented its complete examination. A few particles of charcoal were found, but no food; refuse, or relics of any kind. The outer circle was formed by a bank some 10 feet in thickness at base and some 2 feet in height, rounded on the top, and constructed of compacted earth and stone. The

interspace between the inner wall and this bank measured 5 feet across, and had clearly not been utilised for occupation. The bank appeared to have been carried right round to the entrance, though the walls of the passage had been lined with stones. Its purpose was probably to afford protection from the elements, and also

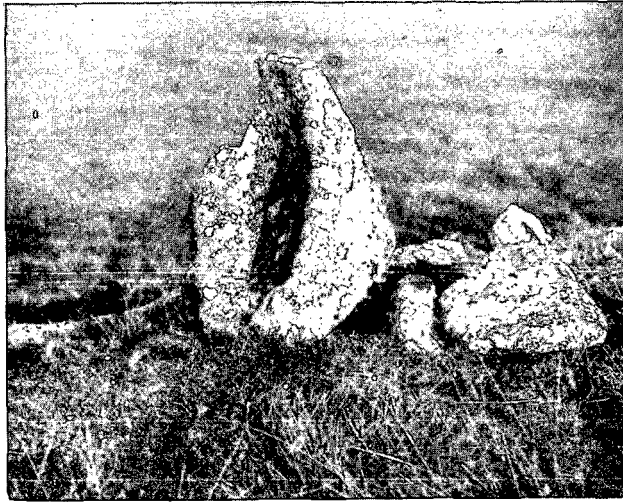


Fig. 4. Saddle Quern found near the Hut Circle.

from the cattle, whose rubbing would easily have damaged a wall built without any mortar, and not of very large stones. It is to be regretted that the state of the weather prevented a more complete examination of this circle. An attempt to excavate one of the mounds was similarly frustrated, as the moment the soil was opened the water commenced to flow into the excavation in a continuous stream.

The saddle quern (fig. 4) was found in a low heap of stones, probably the ruins of a small hut, in the neighbourhood of the hut circle last described.