

IV.

AN ACCOUNT OF SEVERAL ANTIQUITIES IN GAIRLOCH PARISH,
ROSS-SHIRE. BY WILLIAM THOMSON, F.S.A.Scot.

DUN ON CREAG AN FHAMHAIR, GAIRLOCH.

No mention of Creag an Fhamhair—the Rock of the Giant—or the ruins on its summit is to be found in any book on Gairloch, yet one would have thought its suggestive name, striking appearance, and picturesqueness would have attracted attention, and led to some record having been made of it before the hand of the road-making vandal had reduced it well-nigh to the level of the surrounding ground. No history attaches to it, though local tradition makes it the scene of battles in the far distant past, doubtless between the native races and insurgent Norsemen, the latter having given Kerrysdale, in which the fort (fig. 1) is situated, its name.

Creag an Fhamhair, a mass of Hebridean gneiss, projects westward from the adjacent hills to the River Kerry, its bold cliffs, nearly perpendicular to west and north, forming a striking object in the landscape. Its summit is almost level and grass covered, rising about 100 feet above the Kerry. Here the Fingalians of old found a shelter, and, by continuing the bulwark Nature had given them on west and north with an artificial structure round east and south, enclosed a space of 480 square yards wherein to erect their huts and shelters.

At the west end next the river the cliff drops sheer for 50 feet, and a precipitous face to the north, of like height, makes the place well-nigh impregnable from these sides. Even on the summit Nature has lent her aid, for a projecting ridge of rock, running from points 6 to 7 on plan, renders wall-building almost unnecessary there. Before the road to Gairloch by the side of the Kerry and between that river and the western face of the headland was constructed over seventy years ago, the walls of the fort are stated to have been “higher than a man,” and persons still living remember when they were from five to six feet high; but since that time, and indeed till quite recently, the place has been used as a quarry for material for the highways.

From the west cliff front to the east or rear—points 4 to 6 on plan—the distance is 100 feet, and from north to south—points 6 to 10—103 feet. The entrance to the fort has been between points 1 and 2, and the extra large boulders there would doubtless be used to give additional strength to this part. A continuation of the south wall, shown at point 9, has

formed a protection for the doorway. From the latter, the shaded lines indicate a slight hollow which continues to point 13, where, on digging, the soil was found to be brown earth, then sand, and lastly, soft clay, at a depth of 30 inches. Water gathered here in the course of a day to a

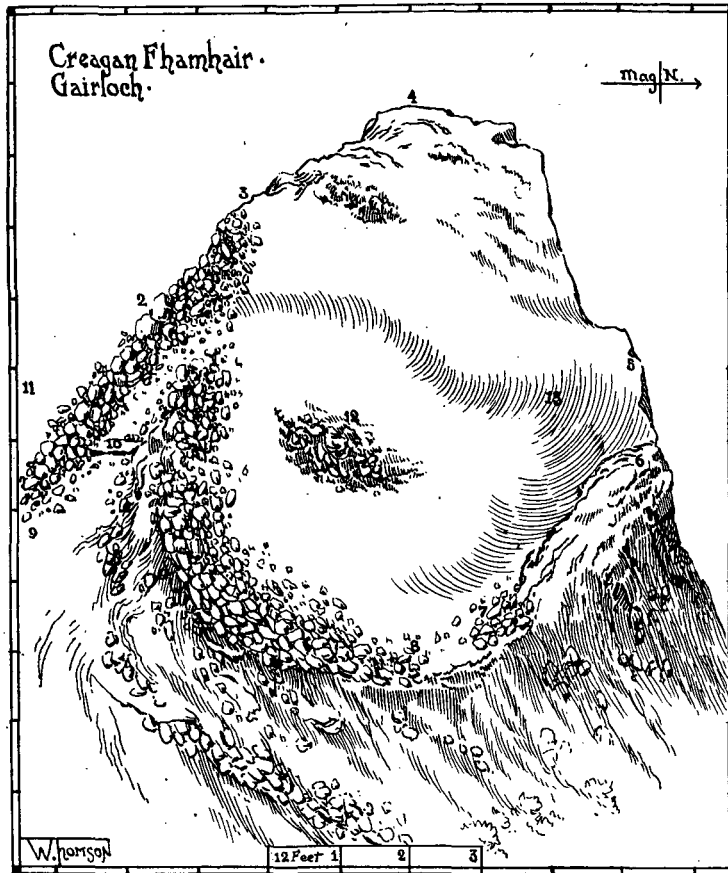


Fig. 1. Dun on Creag an Fhamhair, Gairloch.

depth of nearly 1 foot, but whether from a spring or merely surface draining was not ascertained. In the centre of the enclosed space is a projection of rock and stones, and at point 7 is a flat rock surface which may have been a hearth.

The walls were 6 feet thick and built of rough, undressed stones, gathered in the vicinity and piled up without mortar of any kind. The largest stones formed the outer and inner faces of the walls. From

point 7 the wall is roughly semicircular; and from there to point 3 is 120 feet long. The outside line of the wall is clearly traceable, and at the rear the height, externally, is in places 2 feet. In the course of demolition many large stones from the walls have fallen down the steep slopes to the east and rear and lodged at various points. On this side the ground dips rapidly to a marshy hollow, and rises again beyond to another and higher bluff about 100 yards distant.

At a distance of 20 feet, or thereby, down the rear slope there are evidences of an outwork similar in structure to the wall of the fort above. This outer wall, or rampart, can be traced in the bracken and heather for a length of 60 feet.

Strategically, Creag an Fhamhair occupied a very strong position. During the period of its occupancy marshes would extend on every side; it was protected by the River Kerry in front on the west, and by the Allt Dhonnachaidh, a considerable stream, on the immediate north. It commanded the passes of Kerry and Shildaig, the only avenues of access from sea or shore.

Professor Watson, in his description of the circular forts in Lorn and Northern Perthshire (*Proceedings*, vol. xlix. p. 17), some of which appear similar to that under consideration, states that they were occupied by "a pastoral and agricultural people," and further, that "every one examined is near a pass or passes." The latter fact is characteristic of Creag an Fhamhair, and agricultural land would in all probability exist even then on the area to the north, covered presently by the fields of Kerrysdale Farm.

OBHAIR LATHA (THE DAY'S WORK).

At the north-western end of Druim Obhair Latha, on a truncated cone of rock, 120 feet above the Flowerdale Burn, stands the curious ruin called Obhair Latha, meaning "The Day's Work." The sides of the eminence on which it stands drop steeply to the banks of the stream, on the opposite side of which the rocky slopes rise again to the cliffs of Craig a Chait, behind Flowerdale House, the seat of Sir Kenneth Mackenzie, Bart., of Gairloch. Through the screen of foliage you look away beyond Longa Island on the north and Badachro on the south side of the Gairloch. Immediately below is the landlocked Charlestown Bay, with its pier and some few boats near by, and the old inn, now the post office, at the base of the hill on which Obhair Latha stands.

Beyond the persistent tradition that it was built in one day for urgent defensive purposes against some enemy coming from seaward, there is no history attached to the ruin, which is known to few and is not

recorded in any history of Gairloch. Yet it has obviously an intimate connection with the troublous times when the Macbeaths, M'Leods, and Mackenzies were struggling for the mastery in this wildly beautiful country.

The ruin consists of four columns of rude, strong masonry, each 3 feet 4 inches wide by 5 feet 6 inches thick, separated one from the other by narrow openings, each 1 foot 10 inches wide (fig. 2). These apertures, measured from the ground level, are 6 feet high; they pierce the wall from front to back, and have heavy lintels, slabs of undressed schist 4 feet



Fig. 2. Obhair Latha (The Day's Work), Gairloch.

long and 5 to 6 inches thick. Only one aperture remains complete, generations of Gairloch boys having reduced the remains to their present condition. The building is finished at both ends—side or back walls never existed, though a wooden erection may have been built on the landward side. It is definitely stated that the wall was continued upwards, sloping, pyramid fashion, to a central apex. The highest part is now 9 feet above ground level at the south-west end. Some very large and heavy stones have been used in its construction, the interstices packed with slaty fragments. No mortar has been employed. It dates, possibly, from the fifteenth or sixteenth century.

Beyond Charlestown Bay below is the Dun of Gairloch, round which circled the fighting between the Macbeaths, M'Leods, and Mackenzies.

About the year 1480, in consequence of a terrible crime committed by the M'Leods, the King granted a commission of fire and sword, directing the Mackenzies to exterminate the M'Leods. The latter were finally driven out of Gairloch about 1569, but in the interval between 1480 and the latter date they made several attempts to regain their lost territory. It may be that Obhair Latha was built by the M'Leods in their slow retreat before the pressure of the Mackenzies, or by the latter to enable a watch to be kept seaward, to guard against any sudden attack by the M'Leods.

In his admirable *History of Gairloch*, Mr J. H. Dixon tells (chap. xii. p. 46) of one such effort on the part of the expelled M'Leods prior to 1569. On this occasion they had ventured into Charlestown Bay in their biorlinns, but were foiled and defeated by the marvellous archery of a celebrated Macrae called Donald Odhar. Donald is made to discharge his arrows with deadly precision from Craig a Chait, behind Flowerdale House, but there is a strong presumption that he may have been concealed in the recesses of Obhair Latha. From the secure protection of its massive walls he could with safety pick off the M'Leods on their warships below. The range was close, the archer well concealed, and the incident would agree with the tradition which clings to Obhair Latha.

“AN DUN,” THE VITRIFIED FORT OF GAIRLOCH.

In his *History of Gairloch*, p. 98, Mr J. H. Dixon states that:—“The only vitrified fort in Gairloch stood on the rocky eminence near the volunteer targets, at the south-west end of the largest sandy beach at Gairloch. Slight traces of vitrification are said to be still found.” And again:—“The stronghold most frequently mentioned in the traditions of the country is the Dun or Castle of Gairloch. It occupied the same site as the vitrified fort just referred to. Probably it was more a fortification than a castle. Some of the low banks or lines of stones on the rocky eminence are said to be the ruins of the castle walls. This dun is said to have been a stronghold of the Macbeaths, and subsequently of the M'Leods.”

The presence of the M'Leods in Gairloch, according to the same careful narrator, may date back to the time of the Norsemen, from whom they were descended, while the Macbeaths came from Assynt in Sutherland, probably in the thirteenth century. A struggle for the mastery between these clans resulted in favour of the M'Leods, and, in 1430, King James I. granted the lands of “Gerloch” to Nele Nelesoun “for homage and service rendered.” With this authority in his possession, “Nele,” the son of Neil M'Leod, took steps to drive the Macbeaths from their three Gairloch strongholds, including the dun.

Fifty years later, for a foul murder perpetrated by two of the M'Leods, King James III. gave Hector Roy Mackenzie a commission of fire and sword for the extermination of the M'Leods, and in 1494 this same Roy received a grant of Gairloch by charter from the Crown. This was followed by a new charter under the Great Seal, dated 8th April 1513; but Hector Roy never succeeded in driving out the M'Leods, whose final expulsion took place between 1569 and the end of the century, after which the Mackenzies held, and still hold, the lands of

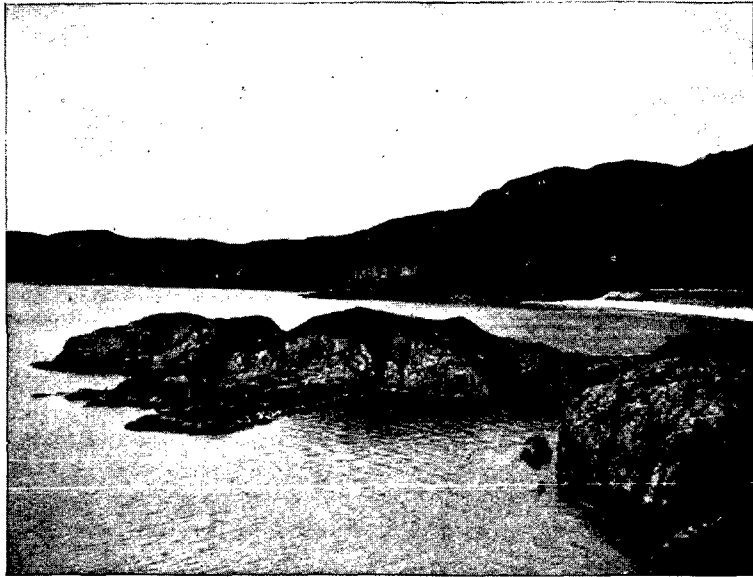


Fig. 3. Vitrified Fort, "An Dun," Gairloch, from the south-west.

Gairloch. Such, very briefly, is an outline of the history circling round the Gairloch Dun.

The peninsula on which the ruins are found is a mass of Cambrian gneiss, projecting into the Gairloch in an almost north-westerly direction from the southern end of the beautiful sandy beach in front of the golf-course (fig. 3). Behind the golf-course, nearly opposite the centre of the beach, stands the Established Church, and on the golf-links, in front of it, is a remarkably symmetrical, oval hollow, covered with soft, green turf. In this hollow, which at other times serves as a bunker for the disciples of Braid and Vardon, the Gairloch Communion Services are still held annually. But legend has it that Fingal himself scooped out the depression for a bed where his white cow might calve.

Thus it is still called *Leabaidh na Ba Baine*, or "the bed of the white cow," and Fingalian lore comes, therefore, very near the site of the ancient dun.

The peninsula (fig. 4) is from 120 to 130 yards long, and from 33 yards at the landward end to 70 or 80 yards broad at the seaward extremity. Divided into two unequal parts by a geological fault, forming a gully from 10 to 15 feet wide, these are named respectively *Dun a Muigh* (the outer dun) and *Dun a Stigh* (the inner dun).

The latter is precipitous on every side, and accessible only from the south. The figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 on plan mark lines of walls enclosing a space of 270 square yards or thereby. A narrow chasm or fissure—in line with the flagstaff on photo—now choked with debris from the ruins of the walls, separates the first from the second enclosure, indicated by the figures 5, 6, 7, and 8. This, undoubtedly, has been the principal stronghold, and is roughly oval in shape. At point 6 the grassy vallum is 6 feet high, and from 3 to 5 feet elsewhere, these measurements applying to the inner sides. Here the enclosed area runs to 370 square yards. One or two fragments of dressed *Torridon Red Sandstone* were noted on this site, but local vandals have removed practically all the superstructure, the last addition to the Parish Church being to a large extent built of material taken from this fort. There are indications of an outer line of defence on the west seaward side. To north and east externally, the mounds drop steeply to margins of cliffs and gully. Everywhere on these slopes stones show through the grass, and, since sand has accumulated to the depth of several feet in places, excavation would, in all likelihood, reveal considerable masses of wall.

Proceeding outward, the edge of the gully nearest the central fort has been surmounted by a wall throughout its whole length, and, before leaving *Dun a Stigh*, it is important to note that a spring of clear water was detected, and is marked on the plan.

To facilitate communication between the two duns, a bridge of some description, probably of wood and easily withdrawn, must have extended across the gully. Nowadays the cliffs on the southern side are 10 feet high and 24 feet on the opposite side, but accumulated debris has reduced the original depth or height. Encircling the whole grass-covered surface of the outer dun are foundations of walls, enclosing a space exceeding 1000 square yards. Covered with soft verdure and with a spring, the water from which runs out among the rocks at the north-eastern extremity, this part of the dun may have been used as pasture-ground. The course followed by the mural lines is shown by figures 12, 13, 14, and 15.

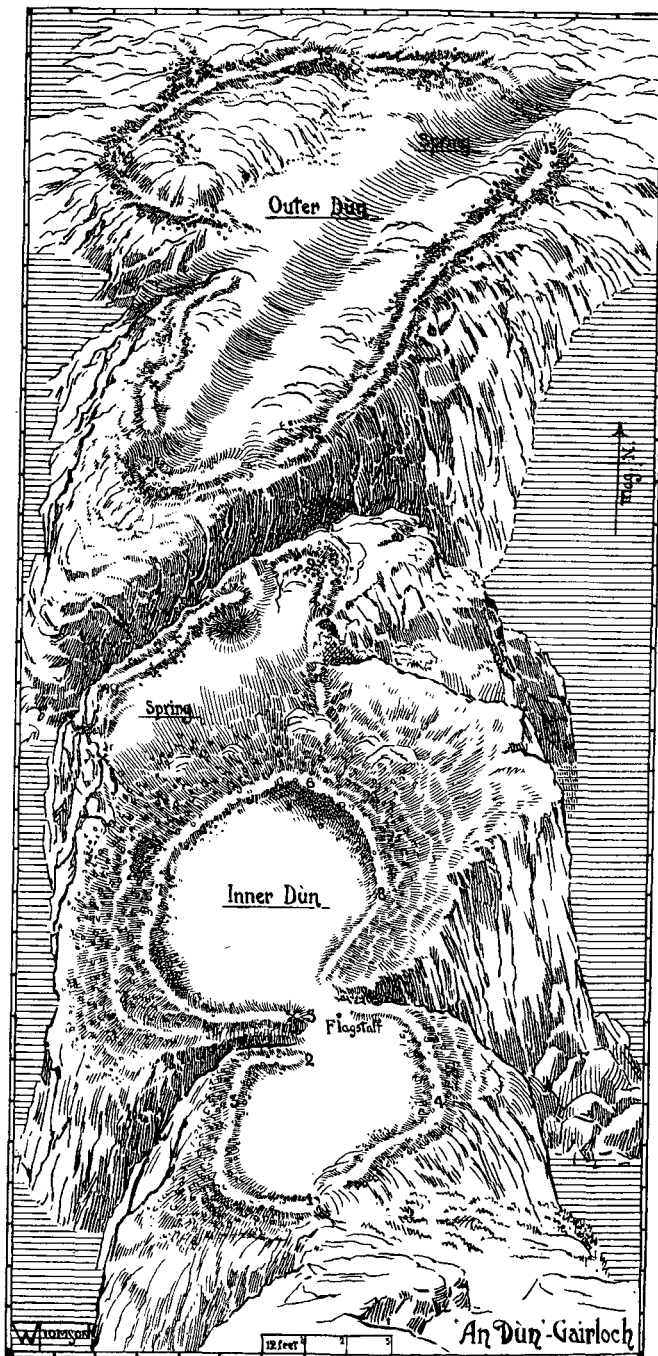


Fig. 4. Vitrified Fort, "An Dun," Gairloch.

Careful observation proves that the whole of this spit of wind-swept rock was an encampment and a stronghold for many centuries. Evidence of vitrification is observable everywhere, and clusters of partly fused stones were found at a dozen different places (marked by crosses on plan). A solid mass about 5 feet long, 5 feet high, and 3 feet thick remains *in situ* and exposed at point 5, its situation showing that it had formed an integral part of the walling of the central fort.

The stone used was fragments of the Torridon Red Sandstone and breccia, both of which form the cliffs at the northern end of the sandy beach. The pieces are small, and lie scattered about in profusion all along the boundary lines—an indication that here, as elsewhere, the fusing process was neither perfect nor thorough. On the outer dun, the walls were carried almost to high-tide mark on flat-topped rocks but little above sea-level, and within reach of the waves when strong winds prevailed.

The examination and measurements showed a total length of over 1000 feet of wall foundations, all of which appeared to have been subjected to vitrifying processes. Superimposed on these, in the middle fort, was a structure non-vitrified, and this close association of earlier and later buildings offers a tempting field for exploration and excavation. The busy mole, driving his tunnels through the soft, sandy soil within the chief enclosure, had thrown up dozens of whelk shells, obviously buried for a prolonged period, which were probably one item of the fare of the first occupants of the Gairloch Dun. In their huts they braved the storms of centuries, and lived and moved and had their being till the fierce Norsemen swept them away and took possession. Local nomenclature demonstrates the presence of Norse rovers in this neighbourhood for many generations, till they in turn were displaced by Macbeaths, M'Leods, and Mackenzies.

The quotations given from Mr Dixon's *History of Gairloch* are the only references to vitrification on the site described and planned. That it belongs to the vitrified forts in Scotland is established, and the Dun of Gairloch should be included in the ever-lengthening list of these remarkable centres of the communal life of the early inhabitants of Caledonia, which, discovered first by John Williams, and described by him in 1777, have ever since proved intensely interesting to the antiquary and archæologist.