

IV.

SOME ANTIQUITIES IN BENDERLOCH AND LORN.

BY WILLIAM THOMSON, F.S.A. SCOT.

Ere the railway from Oban to Ballachulish spanned the Kyles of Loch Etive and Loch Creran, Benderloch was almost *terra incognita* to the outer world, and even yet retains much of its old-time seclusion and isolation. Sea-girt towards the cardinal points, the neck of land between Creran and Glen Etive is closed by a mountain barrier, where lived Campbell of Glenure, of Appin tragedy fame, and through which, in 1547, Donald (Stewart) of the Hammer led his men by age-old drovers' paths to Bridge of Orchy and thence to the bloody field of Pinkie.

Worthy of preservation is the Gaelic saying once known to every crofter there, but now well-nigh forgotten, "Cha robh leithid riamh ra innseadh eadar an Sian is Lag-Chomhain."¹ It attests the insularity of people whose world was bounded by the hill at Shian Ferry on the west, and the mysterious Lag-Chomhain (hollow of the shrine), which looks toward Cruachan from Etive's shore, on the east.

Prehistoric man founded very early settlements here, and the evidences of his activity range from the "Làrach Guail"² of Lorn charcoal-burners, through mediæval keep and early Christian settlement, to vitrified fort and memorials of megalithic times. In the Black Moss of Achnacree or Ledaig alone lies wealth of archaeological treasure still awaiting systematic and thorough exploration.

Unfruitful projects to utilise the vast stores of peat for commercial purposes have drawn public attention to this moss in recent years. It covers a tract of land about a mile and a half square, projecting southward into Loch Etive from the lower slopes of Ledaig Hill, sometimes called Beinn Lora. Its surface averages 50 feet above sea-level, rising naturally but only slightly to north and east, and the peat varies from 6 to 8 feet in depth and over. I have seen a "cuaran" found by a peat digger behind the Black Crofts at a depth of 6 feet, made, even to the

¹ "The like was never heard tell of betwixt the Shian and Lag Chómhain." This saying, which is now known to very few, was in common use in Benderloch fifty years ago among the older natives as indicative of the limits of the district as well as amazement. Shian Hill, behind the ferry house on the south side of Loch Creran, represents the western, and Lag Chómhain the eastern, limits of Benderloch. Lag Chómhain may mean the Hollow of the Shrine, or, as I am inclined to believe, the Hollow of Chómhain, an actual or mythical person. The saying will be found in a poem by James Shaw, the Ledaig bard, in Turner's *Collection of Gaelic Songs*.

² Charcoal-burning platforms, where charcoal for the Lorn Iron Works was made. They are numerous in the district.

things that bound it on the foot, from one piece of deerskin. Seven deep moorland lochans occur, including Lochan na Beithe (small loch of the birches) and the significantly named Lochan na Rath (small loch of the fort) and Lochan na Carn (small loch of the cairn).

From North Connel Station a public road on the crest of an old elevated beach takes eastward to Achnaba, Ardehattan, and Bunawe. A little over two miles from the railway another highway leads off to the left in a north-westerly direction straight athwart the northern edge of the moss to Ledaig. Looking westward from the junction a clump of trees, dark-topped firs and planes, is silhouetted against the sky, making, with the blue hills of Lismore far away and the picturesque cliffs of Creag

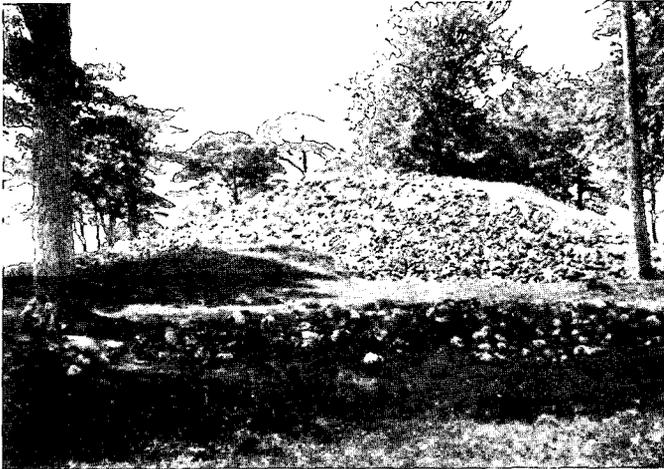


Fig. 1. Chambered Cairn, "Carn Bàn," Achnaecree, Argyll.

Mhòr rising to right and north, a truly beautiful scene. That group of trees, on the south side of the road, surrounds the notable chambered burial mound known as Carn Bàn, the White Cairn.

The late Dr Angus Smith made prolonged investigations in this region, and in our *Proceedings*, vol. ix. pp. 81 and 396, we find his notes on "Antiquities near Loch Etive, Argyll, consisting of Vitrified Forts, Cairns, Cromlechs, Circles, and Crannogs." Appended to his description of Carn Bàn is what appears to be a carefully drawn and accurate section, but owing partly to reproductive limitations of half a century ago the pictorial presentment of the cairn scarcely does it justice. Our photograph (fig. 1) gives a fair conception of its size and the bleached aspect of the rotund boulders which gleam with dazzling whiteness in the sun.

From Dr Smith's description we learn that the cairn was 75 feet

in diameter and 15 feet in height, and that on the side furthest from the road was a ditch forming part of a circle of 135 feet in diameter. From the south-east margin of the cairn a low entrance passage gave access to a tripartite burial chamber. The total length of the latter was 20 feet, the compartment on the south-east end being 6 feet long, 4 feet wide, and 7 feet high.

The illustration shows the firmly built retaining wall of the great circular platform on which the cairn is raised. This huge dais is artificial and packed with rounded stones bedded in the earth. Several dark stones, noticeable on the photograph close to the root of the fir tree on the extreme right, are roof-slabs of the passage noted by Dr Smith. The natural ground-level therefore corresponds with the base of the encircling wall. Twelve feet or thereby from the line of this wall an encircling embankment has been piled, and on it grow the trees which guard the shrine.

A slight dip near the crest of the cairn indicates where entrance was gained. The opening in the wall of the burial chamber is there to-day at the bottom of a crater of boulders, though well-nigh choked with brambles, ferns, and decaying vegetation. With difficulty, and at some risk, I forced a way in and made a few measurements, but the prospect of sudden and complete inhumation did not encourage prolonged study by a lonely itinerant. This fine example of a chambered cairn of the late Neolithic period would well repay exhaustive study. The urns found within, it is satisfactory to know, are in the Scottish National Museum of Antiquities, to which they were presented, in 1874, by Dr Smith.

DOLMEN-LIKE STRUCTURES AT ACHNACREE BEAG.

Returning to within a hundred yards of the meeting of the roads, a primitive wooden gate gives access to a rough track which, bending and descending, crosses the Abhainn Achnacree at a ford, climbs the opposite bank, and debouches in an open field with the farmstead of Achnacree Beag, or Little Achnacree, beyond and to the right.

At the entrance to this field stand the considerable ruins of an old croft built entirely of water-rolled boulders, a detail to be referred to later. These buildings were tenanted at least till 1885, when Dr Smith aforesaid writes of them as "Duncan Stewart's cottage" in the book he published at that date (*Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisneach*). Keep along by the cottage walls for a hundred yards or thereby, and there, in the shade of a wooded bank, concealed in a dense jungle of briars, thorns, alders, and giant bracken, are two fine examples of dolmen-like structures (fig. 2).

Of these venerable monuments Dr Smith, in the paper specified (p. 99), writes:—"Two memorials of ancient times on the farm of Achnacridhe beg. They are cromlechs (*sic*) I suppose." He continues on the next page, "They are megalithic structures, the largest and most easterly has ten large boulder stones arranged somewhat in form of a grave. These have over them two large blocks of granite; one has slipped off the boulders a little. Each may be about a couple of tons weight. The smaller cromlech is only a few paces to the west of the larger. It consists of five large boulders with one large mass on the top. The use of five and ten is worth remarking. Around these cromlechs there is a circle of small



Fig. 2. Denuded Chambered Cairn, showing the two Chambers at Achnacree Beag, Argyll.

stones, evidently the remains of a cairn, which has covered the whole. It is a case, such as has been often observed of a greater and lesser burial in one cairn. The cairn stones are removed, except at the lowest layers; they are of the usual small boulder class, 6 to 8 inches diameter, used for the other cairns." The other cairns mentioned were Carn Bàn, already briefly dealt with, and Carn a Bharain, or the Baron's Cairn, also in Ledaig Moss.

The dense tangle of vegetation having been cut away, a careful survey of the site was made. When the burial-place was planned and built the Achnacree Burn, now some 30 yards distant, ran close by on the south under a steep bank 12 feet high. A thicket of hazel, alder, thorn, and birch covers this intervening space and threatens to envelop

the site. Several good oaks grow on the top of the bank to the west. Arable land, very stony, has taken the place of the moss, and cultivated fields lie to the north, whither the ground rises steadily up the slopes of Ledaig Hill. The peaks of Cruachan over Loch Etive close the view to the east.

There are two burial chambers, 35 feet apart, measuring from centre to centre, and this line shows the orientation to be north-west and south-east—not due east and west. Twenty-five feet out from each centre a rude peristalith is clearly traceable, formed of rounded boulders from 12 to 18 inches diameter and correspondingly high. Thus, the longer axis



Fig. 3. Chambered Cairn at Achnacree Beag, Argyll—west chamber.

(the structure was elliptical) is 85 feet; the shorter 50 feet. The limits of the cairn extended over and beyond the peristalith, how far it is hard to say, the whole super-structure having been removed, leaving a denuded area paved with round cobbles at least 100 feet long by 60 feet wide. Between this and the fields is a slight hollow, which may have been a surrounding ditch; southward the denuded area comes close to the old bank of the stream. Much of the material formerly composing the mound may be seen in the walls of "Duncan Stewart's cottage" hard by.

The west chamber (fig. 3) is the more perfect. Five upright slabs enclose a space of 3 feet 6 inches from north to south by 3 feet from east to west and 3 feet high. The roofing slab is a pentagonal mass of granite 5 feet by 5 feet by 16 to 24 inches thick containing at least 40 cubic feet and weighing over three tons. Originally poised on all uprights, it now

rests on three only, and has tilted upwards at the east end, where the extreme height above ground is 5 feet 6 inches.

The greater or east chamber (fig. 4) has suffered more than its companion. Seven supporting blocks (not ten, as stated by Dr Smith) remain *in situ*, though it is probable that an eighth (seen in the foreground of our illustration) filled the vacant space where the young ash is growing. This chamber is 4 feet 9 inches from north to south by 8 feet from east to west, internal measurement, and has been at least 4 feet in height. A peculiar feature is the building by means of small rounded boulders wedged firmly in earth between and within the pillar masses evidently to



Fig. 4. Chambered Cairn at Achnacree Beag, Argyll—east chamber.

resist inward pressure due to the weight of the enormous roofing blocks. Of these there are two, both displaced; the greater to such an extent that its west end has slipped between the uprights into the chamber so that it now lies at an angle of about 40° , the upper end resting on the lesser slab. Both are erratic masses of coarse-grained granite, such as may be seen to-day in the high corries on Ben Starav far up Loch Etive. The superior, roughly triangular in shape, its sides varying from 6 feet to 7 feet 6 inches long, averages 18 inches in thickness, contains about 50 cubic feet, and must weigh nearly four tons if not more. The second and inferior block is 7 feet 6 inches long by 4 feet 6 inches wide, of irregular thickness, and will be about half the weight of the larger.

The stones and boulders used in the construction of these burial chambers are of rough-texture granite—white, grey, pink, or blue (the

latter probably diorite). They are all of slab-like formation, showing the tendency of this rock, under great ice-pressure, to fracture (as Bunawe quarrymen say) "with the reed." In this they resemble many other erratic blocks in Loch Etive district. The outer contours are worn and rounded, the inner faces, without exception, quite flat and smooth, without artificial markings of any kind.

It is to be regretted that these fine examples of early megalithic art are given over to neglect and decay. The smaller chamber particularly is a most beautiful structure, and is perhaps the nearest approach to a true dolmen to be seen in Scotland.

CLACH NA CARRAGH OR NELSON'S MONUMENT.

In December 1683 the Commissioners of the Privy Council of Scotland, considering at Killin the extent to which "guids stolen from the Lowlands" were being "conveyed over passes of lochs and rivers by ferry boats in the nycht tyme," decreed that the boats on all the passages were to be put under security and caution. Among the ferries specified occurs that of "Kyllasturius," by which the lowland scribe meant Kyle Duirinnish, an obsolete name for the narrow channel dividing Upper from Lower Loch Etive.

Passing along the north shore of the loch from Achnacree and crossing at this ferry, a path leads along the curving sweep of Airds Bay beach to the immense travelled boulder of granite called Clach mo Neasáig, in memory of St Nessog, who is reputed to have landed here to take up his ministrations in Lorn.

Eastward, a few hundred yards from Clach mo Neasáig, a road leads southward to the Oban highway. Following this road we see, to right and west, in the field behind Airds Bay house, a long, low ridge bearing the name of Barra na Cabar, the field being known as Moine a Charragh (moss of the pillar). This "Cabar" or "Carragh" was a large, prone monolith of grey granite, 16 feet long by 3 feet broad by 1 foot thick. It may originally have been a solitary standing stone or part of a circle. Other pillar stones are said to have lain in the field long ago.

Tradition associated it with a witch or "cailleach," who, bringing it on her back from the upper reaches of Loch Etive (the most probable source by the way), stumbled when stepping over the water at the Kyle or Island Ferry and broke one of the "gads" or withies by which it was bound. Staggering under her burden she held bravely on along the shore of Airds Bay to Barra na Cabar, where the other withy broke and the stone fell to the ground.

There it lay till the glorious story of Trafalgar reached Bunawe. The

iron-workers at the Lorn furnace, then in full blast at that place, marched in a body to Barra na Cabar, mounted the four-ton block on wooden rollers, and dragged it a mile eastward to a prominent knoll called Cnoc Aingeal (knoll of the fire), and there raised it—the first monument to Lord Nelson in the British Isles (fig. 5). With nearly 12 feet of its

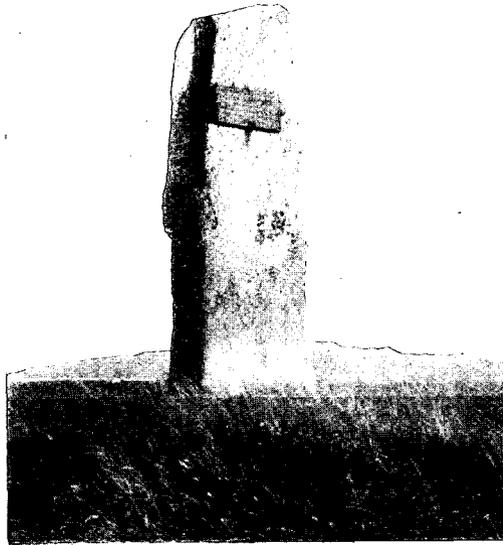


Fig. 5. Nelson's Monument, Taynuilt, Argyll.

length above ground it stands there to-day, albeit somewhat obscured by the houses which have sprung up around. For years it bore no inscription, but at a later date a slab of slate was affixed near the top bearing this legend—

TO THE MEMORY OF LORD NELSON
THIS STONE WAS ERECTED BY THE
LORN FURNACE WORKMEN,
1805.

It is close to the railway station at Taynuilt.

CLACH NAN TOLL.

From the station at Dalmally the road to Inverary bears away south-westward past the site of the M'Nabs' historic smithy at Barr a

Chàistealain, or Barachasan, immediately south of the railway, and, leaving the recently discovered Tom na Ceàrdaich¹ on the right and half a mile out, continues with many windings and always ascending to the 450 feet level. This is two and a half miles from our starting-point. A hundred feet above the road-level, on the summit of Dun Eigheach (hill of shouting), rises the conspicuous memorial (of Bunawe, not Cruachan, granite, as is commonly asserted) to the Burns of the Gael, Duncan Ban Macintyre. From this point is visible perhaps the most magnificent landscape in Scotland, comprising Glenurchy and Glen Strae, Ben Cruachan, and the whole length of Loch Awe with its tree-clad isles.

There is a sharp bend on the road just below the monument, and it descends rapidly, turning again three hundred yards further on. On the right (N.W.) side of the highway is the site of Caibeal Chiarain, the chapel of St Chiaran, and on the opposite side, quite close against the margin of the road, and surely associated with the chapel, is a block of dark-coloured granite. It is 9 feet long, 5 feet high, and 3 feet thick, tapering to 2 feet. Should road-widening take place here it may be destroyed, since it abuts right on to the carriage-way. It is named Clach nan Goistidhean (stone of the godfather); its purpose is clearly indicated by the English name "The Christening Stone." Local tradition links the officiating clergyman's Gaelic name "Goistidhean" with the times when Episcopacy held sway in the district, and hither doubtless came Dugald Lindsay from Clachan Dysart (Dalmally), the last Episcopalian minister there, to christen the children brought thither by their parents from Claddich and even further south. The custom was maintained till at least the middle of last century.

Half a mile past the Christening Stone, on the right or west side of the road, and by the bank of a little stream, stands a cottage (marked on the 1-inch O.S. map) named Ardteatle. A few hundred yards on and over the first rise of the highway, just where Loch Awe comes in sight, there is an opening in the dry stone dyke bounding the road on the west side. Fifty yards within this gateway, on a patch of level ground, backed to the north by a bracken-covered eminence, stands the very remarkable boulder named Clach nan Toll (stone of the holes). It could not have a better name, and has hitherto been unnoted. The field it stands in is called Pairc Bhuidhe.

Originally one block, this travelled boulder of diorite, termed by hewers "bastard" granite, very hard and close-grained, has split into three

¹ Iron slags of the earliest or wind-blast type and traces of charcoal were found here recently by Mr John Macdonald of Dalmally. These proofs of early iron-smelting are of special interest in view of their proximity to the smithy of the famous M'Nabs, the Breadalbane armourers, from which they are but half a mile distant.

parts. Two of these remain upright, separated only by a narrow fissure varying from a few inches to a foot in width at the top; the third and most westerly has fallen outward, and now lies at an angle of 45° or thereby. The stone is 9 feet 3 inches high, 11 feet broad at the base in front, and 15 feet on the parallel face behind, with a thickness from front to rear of 11 feet 4 inches. At ground-level the circumference of the group is 41 feet. There is a clear grassy space round the boulder measuring 32 feet from east to west, and 27 feet from north to south. This space is bounded by fourteen natural boulders irregularly placed or spaced, which suggest a probable stone circle and invite expert examination. The long axis of the group lies north-west and south-east.

On every surface of the central masses circular indents, cup-marks, blow-holes, funnels, call them what you will, occur. Some pass through parts of the stone; others, as on the upper surface of the sloping mass, pierce the corners so that the hand can grasp the central ridge. These bear a striking resemblance to holes drilled through projecting ledges in the prehistoric cave-dwellings at Wemyss in Fife. Some pierce the rock to a depth of 9 inches or thereby and are full of rain-water. The opposing faces of the central fissure bear similar markings, the positions of which do not coincide. In one instance, on the top of the stone three holes, each 5 inches in diameter, are separated by bridges of stone, behind which the hands can be inserted and joined. The edges of the openings are smooth and rounded. Over seventy holes were counted, varying in diameter from 2 inches to 5 inches, and in depth from $\frac{1}{2}$ inch to 3 inches in the case of the cup-like markings.

No tradition clings to this boulder, but a few hundred yards directly east across the Inverary road, on a knoll partly tree-clad, are the ruins of a building associated with the name of a cleric. The ruins among the trees bear the name of *Glaic an Duin* (hollow of the man), and their occupant was called *Bonnaid Odhar* (grey bonnet), from the colour of the headgear he wore. It is not implied that this ecclesiastic, whether a Grey Friar or not, was in any way connected with *Clach nan Toll*, but the fact of religion being so closely linked with its immediate vicinity might point to a much more remote time when the strangely marked boulder, whether these markings be natural or artificial, made it a centre of attraction and possibly worship by prehistoric man.

In preparing these notes I am indebted to the Rev. Gillespie Campbell of Muckairn parish for information relating to his native district of *Benderloch*; to Mr John Macdonald of *Kinechreckine*, a veteran native of the district, for notes about *Dalmally*; and to Mr Angus Murray of *Taynuilt* for correcting Gaelic words and phrases.