

IV.

CORN BYKES OF CAITHNESS. BY MRS L. DUFF DUNBAR
OF ACKERGILL, F.S.A.SCOT.

In 1774 Thomas Pennant wrote in his tour through Caithness: "Here are neither barns nor granaries; the corn is thrashed out and preserved in the chaff in *bykes*, which are stacks in shape of beehives thatched quite round, where it will keep good for two years."¹

This method of storing grain, though now apparently obsolete, was in use up to twenty years ago at any rate. The last I saw was in 1910. The accompanying photograph, taken in July 1905, shows a byke at Mirelandhorn in the parish of Wick.²

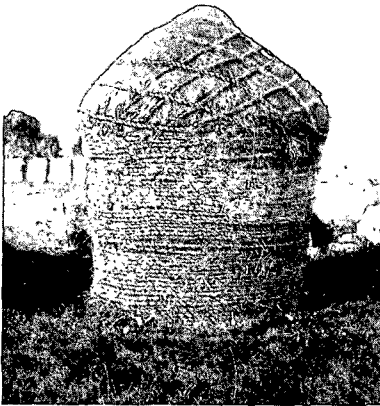


Fig. 1. Corn Byke at Mirelandhorn, Caithness, in 1905.

The manner of construction was as follows: A site was chosen on a spot of bare ground in a dry situation, and a ring, "a perfect round circle," is made of common spars or "stabs" driven into the earth, close together barrelwise, with a "mell" (hammer).

Chaff or "shillings" (husks of oats) to the depth of about a foot are then put in to cover the beaten earth, and above these a little straw, and then old bags. That

completes the flooring of the byke.

Next straw from sheaves threshed with the flail, termed "gloy," is put round the outside up and down or round the structure.

The byke is then filled with corn. When the grain is nearly up to the top of the stakes, "simmons" (straw ropes) are wound round and round outside, and the whole is thatched over with a very deep thatch, and made firm with more simmons bound crosswise. This ingenious and simple granary keeps corn in an excellent condition, and it is said to have the merit of being rat-proof.

A byke that I measured in 1910 was 16 feet 2 inches round at the

¹ *Tour*, 1774, vol. i. p. 182.

² In fig. 1, beyond the corn byke, are to be seen two examples of the Old Red Sandstone slab fences so often met with in Caithness.

base and 19 feet at the eaves. The height to the eaves was 6 feet. It held about ten quarters of corn. It was made by an expert, Mr Alexander Doull, Mirelandhorn.

Such bykes were sometimes used as cornbins in a barn—of course much modified in construction and without wooden spars.
