

## **The Silent Shores Speak: Maritime Landscapes in North Argyll**

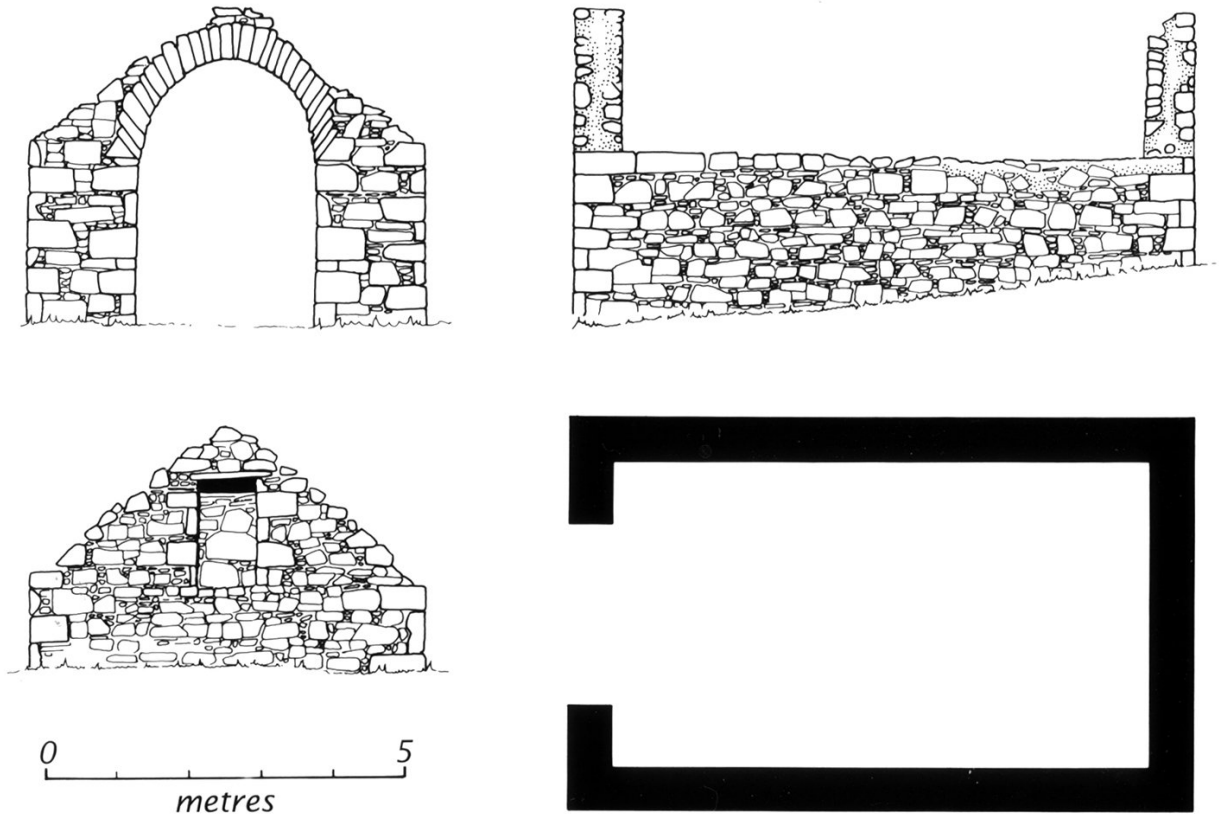
Paula Martin, Cupar and Lochaline

For the past five years or so my husband Colin and I have been investigating and recording features along the shore and in the inter-tidal zone in north Argyll. We have known the Sound of Mull for a long time, having worked on the wreck of the 1690 frigate *Dartmouth* off Morvern in the 1970s, and the Cromwellian wreck off Duart Castle, in the 1990s.

Most archaeologists do not give much thought to monuments standing below the high-tide mark, and most maritime archaeologists want to get under water. The inter-tidal zone is often ignored, although it was the scene of a wide range of activities. Most of what survives to be seen today is less than 300 years old, and until recently most features were considered both too ordinary and too modern to be recorded. Things are changing, but there is a lot to be done.

Our attention was drawn to the boathouse belonging to Lochaline House, in Morvern. As one visitor wrote *c.*1902, 'people travelled very much in their own sailing boat from place to place. Indeed there was no house of any pretensions without its boathouse. It was as necessary as stables, and more so'. So we surveyed it, and then another four boathouses on the Morvern side of the Sound, and one on Mull (Martin and Martin, 2003a and 2003b). These were all estate-built structures, with square corners, gables, and slate roofs, in contrast to the vernacular cottages of the same date, which had rounded corners and thatched roofs.

The boathouses could be dated to between about 1800 and 1850, probably mostly to the 1820s and 1830s. After that, boats got bigger, and public steamer services and an improving road network made private boats less essential. The boathouses stood on the high-tide mark, were linked to the big house by a well-engineered track, and were located in safe, sheltered spots, and had quays or jetties for landing at all states of the tide. Similar examples survive all around the west coast.



Plan and elevation of the boathouse belonging to Drimnin House, Morvern, NM 547,548. (Colin Martin)

The boathouses are also part of a much wider maritime landscape, which we started to explore. Initially our main reconnaissance was by sea kayak. But the distances we could cover, and the equipment we could carry, were limited, so we returned to the sites we wanted to survey in a 4-wheel drive vehicle or an inflatable boat. As we realised we would have to look at a wider area than first envisaged, we added a smaller inflatable boat which can be transported on the roof of the car.

The Roman historian Tacitus (97) described Scotland thus: 'nowhere does the sea hold wider sway; it carries to and fro in its motion a mass of currents, and, in its ebb and flow, is not held by the coast, but passes deep inland and winds about, pushing in among highlands and mountains, as if in its own domain'. Though frightening to outsiders, for locals who understood the tides and currents, these waters presented a great opportunity for communication. Water transport was quicker than overland, and for heavy goods it was the only practical option. Most

archaeologists and historians fail to appreciate how important water transport was until the very recent past.

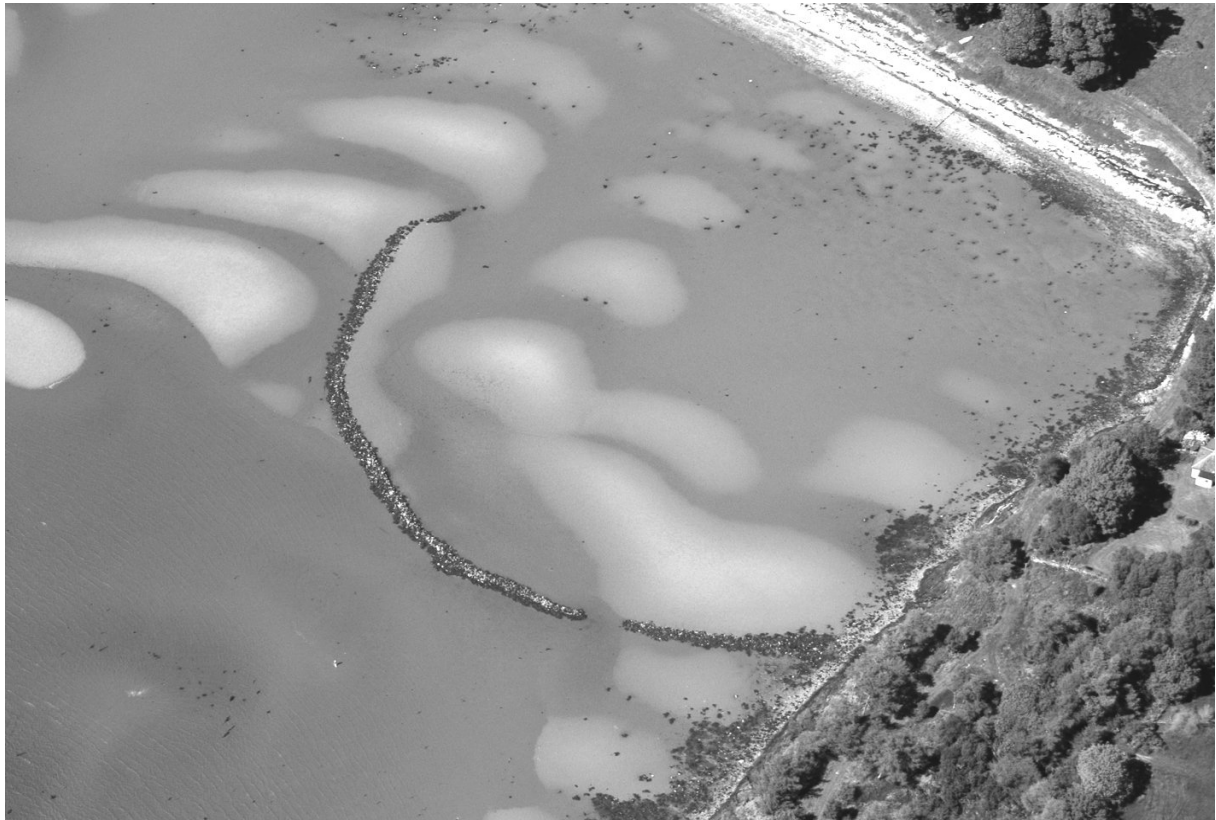
Argyll is full of evidence of prehistoric settlement, and it is clear that the earliest settlers used boats, probably skin boats like the surviving Irish currachs. Early Christian sites tended to be on the coast, which was later dominated by a network of castles, many of them intervisible one from another. Their occupants controlled the surrounding waters by the use of galleys. Similar to Viking ships, these vessels can be seen on late-medieval graveslabs and on the banners of many clan chiefs.

The West Highland world changed when central government managed to assert its authority, using large guns mounted on ships. During the 17th and 18th centuries the west highlands came increasingly under the control of a central government which exercised its authority by control of the sea. In the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellions, boats were destroyed and woodland burned, in a deliberate attempt to reduce the ability of locals to communicate by sea. Roads were built to get troops into the area, but they also encouraged trade and travellers, and the area gradually opened up to outside influences. This continued with the advent of steamships and then railways.

In 2003 we turned our attention to fish-traps. They are found in many places, and appear to be vernacular, not built by landowners. We surveyed four around Morvern, two on Mull and one near Ardgour. They varied in size and shape, and apparently in how they functioned. There were few clues as to their date. Initially we had assumed that such features could not survive for centuries, though they might date to the first half of the 19th century, to the phase of the Clearances when people were moved from inland areas to the coast, where subsistence was slightly easier.

To try to find some answers we widened our survey area and visited Lismore. There we surveyed three traps. Because of the existence of 1:2500 (25 inches to 1 mile) Ordnance Survey maps for the island, surveyed in 1871, we could see how they appeared to those surveyors, and the answer was remarkably similar to their appearance today. This suggested that the traps might be older than we had first thought. Two of those on Lismore and two on Morvern are close to castles, so perhaps they are associated with them. In Appin there is a very large fish-trap in Airds Bay, which is presumably older than Airds House, built in 1738, as it

seems unlikely that the owners would have allowed a fish-trap to be constructed within sight of the house.



The large fish-trap in Airds Bay, Appin, NM 906,448, from the air.  
(Colin Martin)

Fish-traps in the archaeological and ethnographic literature are nearly all constructed with one or more gaps, which can be closed when desired with a net or wicker basket. Some of those we have surveyed have gaps, which are clearly intentional, and not the result of collapse or later damage. The terminal is quite distinct, marked by a large stone, or a wider platform. Some traps have evidence of gaps which have later been blocked, while some seem to have been constructed of one continuous wall. While appearing curved from a distance, most of these walls are actually made up of short straight sections. So far the precise method of operation, as well as the date, of the fish-traps we have surveyed is still unclear. In 2006 Colin's aerial reconnaissance picked up several more, including two near Benderloch.

These fish-traps are an example of the many ways in which man has used the coast. In some places you can see a sequence of landing-places as boat technology developed, from skin boats which could easily be carried ashore, through oared, plank-built boats, to sailing and then steam vessels. In front of many cottages you can see a cleared strip of beach, where stones have been carefully moved aside to make launching and landing small boats easier. Usually the stones have been used to make a simple boulder quay on one side. By the 19th century some wider quays or jetties were built, for ease of loading cattle. In places such as ferry points, rock was cut away, or gaps in the rocks filled with boulders, to produce simple quays which facilitated landing at all states of the tide, just as we had found near the boathouses.

By the later 19th century, long narrow stone jetties, often topped or lengthened in concrete, were built near big houses so that the gentry and their supplies could be landed safely. Steam passenger services needed to be able to berth at any state of the tide, and without turning, so steamer piers were built out into deep water and in places chosen so the minimum time was spent manoeuvring. At the same time, wider strips of beach were cleared for puffers to sit and unload their heavy cargoes, mainly coal. While there is often no archaeological evidence for where puffers beached, there is oral testimony, and some surviving infrastructure, such as weighbeams or sheds.

In Lismore we were introduced by the local heritage society to two boatbuilding sites (Port Moluag, NM 871,433), and unpublished cave site at NM 836,417). What interested us was the simplicity of the set-up, and the fact that neither site would have been easily identifiable archaeologically without the local oral history. The main site, at Port Moluag, consists of a cottage, a workshop, a saw-pit and a stony beach. The other is a large, dry cave with a sawpit outside, on a rocky coast with no obvious access for boats. Clearly the free space provided by the cave made access problems worth overcoming.

What drew us back to Lismore for a second summer was the lime-kilns. Lime-kilns can be found all over Scotland, where there is limestone to be burned for local use as fertiliser. Lismore is a limestone island, which meant that the bulk of the production was destined for coastal shipment. Each site therefore represented a complete unit, consisting of quarry, kilns, storehouse, sometimes housing, and quays or jetties for shipping the coal

in and lime out. It was the self-contained and maritime nature of these monuments which made us feel they were worth recording.

There are seven sites on the island, and an eighth on a smaller island just to the north. At all of them we have surveyed the ground plan, drawn elevations of the kilns, measured the sections of the pots where accessible, and produced a written description, photographs and a condition report. The kilns are small by mainland standards, and of very varied construction. They are built into the hillside, the top level with the quarry floor. Kilns were loaded from the top with layers of limestone pieces and coal, and a fire lit at the bottom. Once the lime was burned it was removed via the draw-hole at the base. There was a track from the shore to the top of the kiln to carry up the coal up, and a track from the front of the kiln to carry the lime to the shore.

There was some lime-burning in the late-18th century, but the first identifiable site is at Kilcheran, built *c.*1803 to help finance a recently-established Roman Catholic seminary. In September 1814 Sir Walter Scott, a guest on the annual inspection tour of Scotland's lighthouses, wrote: 'We coasted the low, large, and fertile isle of Lismore, where a Catholic bishop ... has established a seminary of young men ... and ... a valuable lime-work. Report speaks well of the lime, but indifferently of the progress of the students'.

The boathouses, fish-traps and lime-kilns are examples which demonstrate how much there is to record, and how many questions there are to be asked. There are other types of monument to be found on the coast, many of them industrial. There are the slate quarries at Ballachulish, and at Seil, Easdale, Luing and Belnahua, with their associated housing and quays. There are numerous smaller quarries around the coast. There are charcoal burning platforms in the woods, providing fuel for iron-working, as at Bonawe, its raw materials brought in and its finished product shipped out by sea. Every landowner in the 18th and 19th centuries tried to maximise the profit from his land by diversifying, in much the same way as farmers are having to do today.

Many industrial monuments survive in this area because they were small-scale and were abandoned, rather than being buried under later industrial sites. One industry for which we have failed to find much evidence is the burning of seaweed to create an alkali which was used in the manufacture

of glass and soap. There is plenty of documentary evidence, but little seems to remain on the ground.

Other significant structures on or near the coast are the country houses which eventually replaced the castles. They, and their complexes of ancillary buildings, were often constructed with materials brought in by sea, and were subsequently supplied with everything from furniture to food by sea. The coast became important after the Disruption of 1843. When land was refused for building new churches, some ministers resorted to preaching from a boat to a congregation assembled on the beach. In Loch Sunart there was even a Floating Church.

We hope our work has demonstrated that there is no substitute for observation, questioning, and recording. Simple survey with plane-table and tapes can easily be done by two people. The advantage of working locally is that you can go back to a site as many times as necessary, see it in a range of conditions, and perhaps catch a feature in just the right light.

The maritime landscape is an area where archaeology is particularly important. Documentary evidence is extremely sparse, and the more ordinary a monument is the less was written about it. The creation of boat-landing-places, for example, is so obvious a thing to do, and does not need plans or an instruction book, so was rarely recorded. Of course there is some evidence to be found in paintings, drawings, photographs and estate plans.

These examples are just a small part of the maritime landscape. We hope that by highlighting the importance of the coast, others will be encouraged to record things in their locality. We also think that by demonstrating how much the coast and its resources were used in the recent past, some of the ideas and conclusions can be applied to earlier periods, for which there is less surviving evidence. For there is no doubt that man has always used the coast and its resources, and that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

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Tactius 97 *Agricola* 10.6 (Transl. H. Mattingly).

\* A reprint of this article is available from the LAHS librarian - Ed.