

## **The Kilninver Ice House**

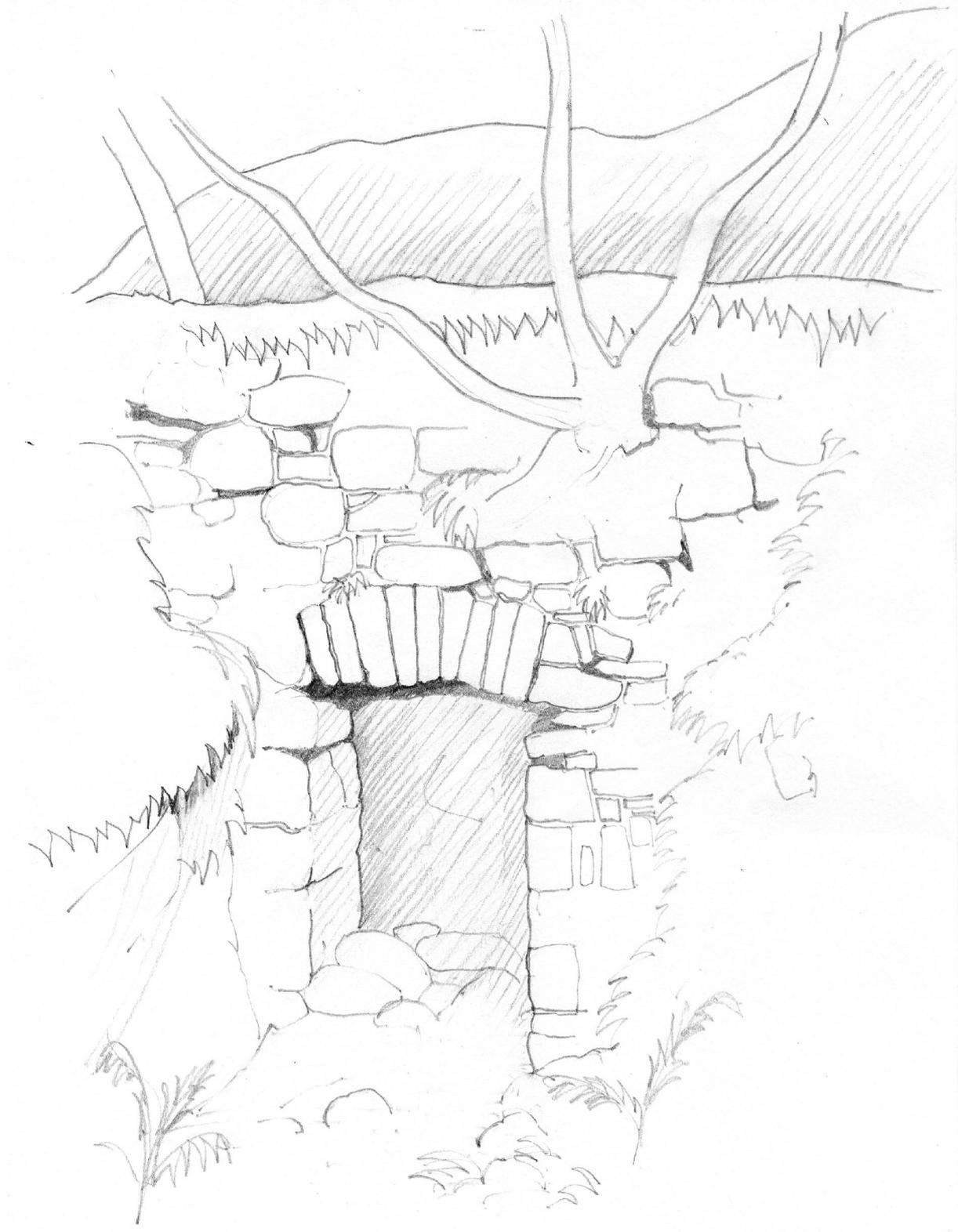
by Martin Petrie, Kilninver

About five years ago during the course of work, I was instructed to whitewash a small bothy on the shoreline close to the mouth of the River Euchar near the entrance to Loch Feochan. Some people even asked me if it was a new building. I assured them it had been there for over thirty years and indeed there were foundations of earlier wooden and stone buildings nearby. Undoubtedly many will know or remember that this was one of Loch Feochan's fishing stations, which was primarily used for netting of salmon by the landowners and tenants until 1996. Records back to the 18th century mention some form of regular fishing practices here.

Before the days of Kilninver Bridge it appears a track forded the river near the bothies (Military Survey of Scotland 1747-55); by the time of Alexander Langland's estate plan for Breadalbane in 1809 there was no sign of the ford, but a township is marked nearby and may have been known as Lagaig. I am uncertain if these buildings were the bothies marked on the early O.S maps. Later census records from 1850 onwards show salmon fishermen resident at local estate properties. No doubt the later bothies were temporarily occupied during fishing seasons. The statistical accounts of 1790s and 1840s both mention the considerable fishing in Loch Feochan including fishing for salmon, herring, mackerel and many other sea species.

Often associated with such activities were Ice Houses, which appeared in communities and villages for the storing of ice to pack and transport fish. A most miserable job it must have been, the collection of ice from lochs and rivers. In addition some larger country houses would use icehouses. Common during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, they gradually fell out of use by the early 1900s with the introduction and advancement of refrigeration techniques. Kilninver may have been no different. Located on the south side of the Euchar on the line of an old dyke and visible from the bothy lies a small entrance over 1.6m in height and 0.9m wide. Tucked back from the shore the slightly arched entrance conceals a wide area cut back over 5m into the hill, the rear rock face being over 6m in height. At about 1.2m thick the masonry at the entrance rises to around 3.5m in height and extends to approx 6m in length. Excavating must have produced a reasonable amount of useable building material. Within the structure lies

loose rock, and small trees grow out from the rock face helping to camouflage the site.



Whilst in Edinburgh I visited West Register House in Charlotte Square hunting down local maps and plans stored there. I was pleased to uncover correspondence to Sir Alexander Campbell Bart. at his London address referring to an Ice House. Alexander Pitcairn, Breadalbane's factor at the time (April 1852) was explaining proposals to divert the course of the river after the winter's extreme damage to the banks and how it might improve the fishings. Pitcairn also mentions bringing in suitable materials by boat from Barnacarry Bay. The factor then apologises that the Ice House was still not complete partly due to Capt Meynell's unwillingness to continue. Meynell had recently been in dispute over fishing rent payments. The 1851 census shows Francis Meynell as an English born landed proprietor living with his family and 2 female servants at Kilninver; he was probably the first sporting tenant to stay at Kilninver Lodge (built around 1845). The factor further explains that the contractor had the couples on the roof but he was 'presently ill' but stressed that completion was imminent.

I checked the RCAHMS website map reference NM8224 2214 (Pastmap). Descriptions from the 1875 O.S. map states it was 'an unroofed building attached to the field wall'. So that posed the question, was the Ice House ever finished? It was suggested to me that without a roof, ice could be still be deposited from the top and then be covered with straw and turf to seal and insulate. 19<sup>th</sup> century records of some netting returns in the Loch Feochan area do survive and it seems Archie MacIntyre of Kererra who netted at the entrance of the loch from the 1880's rowed to Oban daily with his catch (Nancy Black, 1999). No doubt some of his fish would go by rail as Oban station opened in 1880. Augustus Grimble in his 1913 book mentions netting at the river mouth, poaching by scringers and the affects on angling in the river. It seems to have been a productive and useful netting station involving two boats until more recent times.

So far the letter is my only reference to an Ice House other than a story from WW2 when some local residents are said to have kept a pig hidden at this building evading officialdom during the food and rationing crisis of the time.

## **Bibliography**

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