

Fig. 6.1. Map of Latheron parish showing distribution of buildings surveyed.

SOME SMALL FARMS AND COTTAGES IN LATHERON PARISH, CAITHNESS

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INTRODUCTION

In May 1971 Caithness County Council announced a proposal to demolish 84 ruinous or derelict small farms and cottages on either side of the A9 road between Berriedale and Wick. The buildings in question were accordingly examined by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, and the principal aim of this paper is to present the results of this rescue-recording operation. By coincidence, a select number of buildings in this district had been inspected and recorded in the previous year, and a special report on Laidhay at Dunbeath had been compiled in 1968. A few of these items were included in the list of proposed demolitions.¹

The cumulative material arising from these surveys does not thus represent the results of a programme of systematic research. The circumstances under which this work was conducted precluded any detailed attempts to relate the buildings to the land by which they were supported,² and it was not possible to explore any of the upland remains associated with older farming practices.³ The main 1971 survey was perforce focussed on those buildings that lay under immediate threat, and although these buildings were heavily concentrated in certain coastal areas [Fig. 6.1], there were known to be many other dense clusters of ruinous buildings that could not be inspected in detail; these were found between Dunbeath and Houstry, in the strath of Latheronwheel Burn, and further north in the vicinity of East Clyth. Even with these limitations, however, the bulk of recorded evidence is a sufficiently valid sample from which some general conclusions can be drawn about building customs in this south-eastern coastal district of Caithness.

PLAN-FORMS AND LAYOUTS

The distinctive type of surviving small farm in this parish is a single-storeyed and gable-ended building which contains both domestic and non-domestic accommodation within a linear plan-form. Use of the term 'long-house' has been eschewed in descriptions of this arrangement, but this does seem an appropriate description for what might be considered as late 18th or early 19th century surviving prototypes. Alterations or modifications have been made to most structures of this kind and there appear to be at least three major stages in the building history of this type, perhaps partly

reflecting a process of adaptation from older-style group-farms to individual tenancies. These stages are not easy to date, often varying from croft to croft as needs arose. In general, the changes seem to have begun in the first half of the 19th century, and in some cases have continued to operate right up to the present day.

Single Compartment House-Byre Dwellings

The first stage is represented by the remains of two slightly differing long-house types at Torbeg, about 1 mile north of Dunbeath. The larger of these two croft-houses [Fig. 6.2/1], which occupies lower-lying ground to the east, consists of an original long-house nucleus with a later north-west extension and long steading range to the south-east, thus forming an overall L-shaped layout. The nucleus consists of a single compartment, formerly under one roof and entered by a doorway in the west side-wall. To judge from surviving slots the building was cruck-framed throughout its length, and there is no indication of any window openings. The north end of this building is identifiable as the kitchen; it has a raised and partly flagged floor-level which terminates near the middle of the building in a stone kerb about 0.31m in height, and contains the remains of a centrally-placed open hearth. The hearth comprises an ash-pit with a small brick platform but no vestiges of a flagstone back; one specimen fire-brick was stamped with the maker's name 'Ramsay'. A local crofter's wife, Mrs Skene of Markethill, recalled that the hearth had still been in use until about 25 years previously; she also confirmed that the lower level had been a byre, and there had been common access for animals and humans through the single doorway. This type of structure seems to be comprehended within Captain Henderson's early 19th century statement to the effect that 'the smaller tenants, or the occupiers of farms from £5 to £20 or even £30 rent, usually reside in low thatched houses, with their horses and cattle in the one end of them, and a fire on the hearth placed equidistant from each wall'.⁴

The arrangement of the other croft-house at Torbeg [Fig. 6.2/2] consists of a similar layout of kitchen and byre with a single entrance in the side wall, and a drop in floor-levels from kitchen to byre made good with stone steps. In this instance the building stands on a slope and there is an additional room at the upper end; this apartment was separated from the kitchen by a stone mid-gable which contained an intercommunicating doorway. The straight joints in the masonry indicated that original building operations had been continuous on the south-west side-wall, but that the opposite wall had been returned to form the partition before work proceeded with the main north-east side-wall. The construction of the *ben* room was thus a secondary phase in the initial building operations, and a post-1800 date is suggested by the existence of a mural fireplace in the gable-wall.⁵ Miss Cormack of Clashvalley Cottage, Dunbeath, had occupied this house during her youth over 50 years previously, and was able to give some precise details as to its arrangement. At that date, according to her testimony, the bedroom had contained two box-beds, and

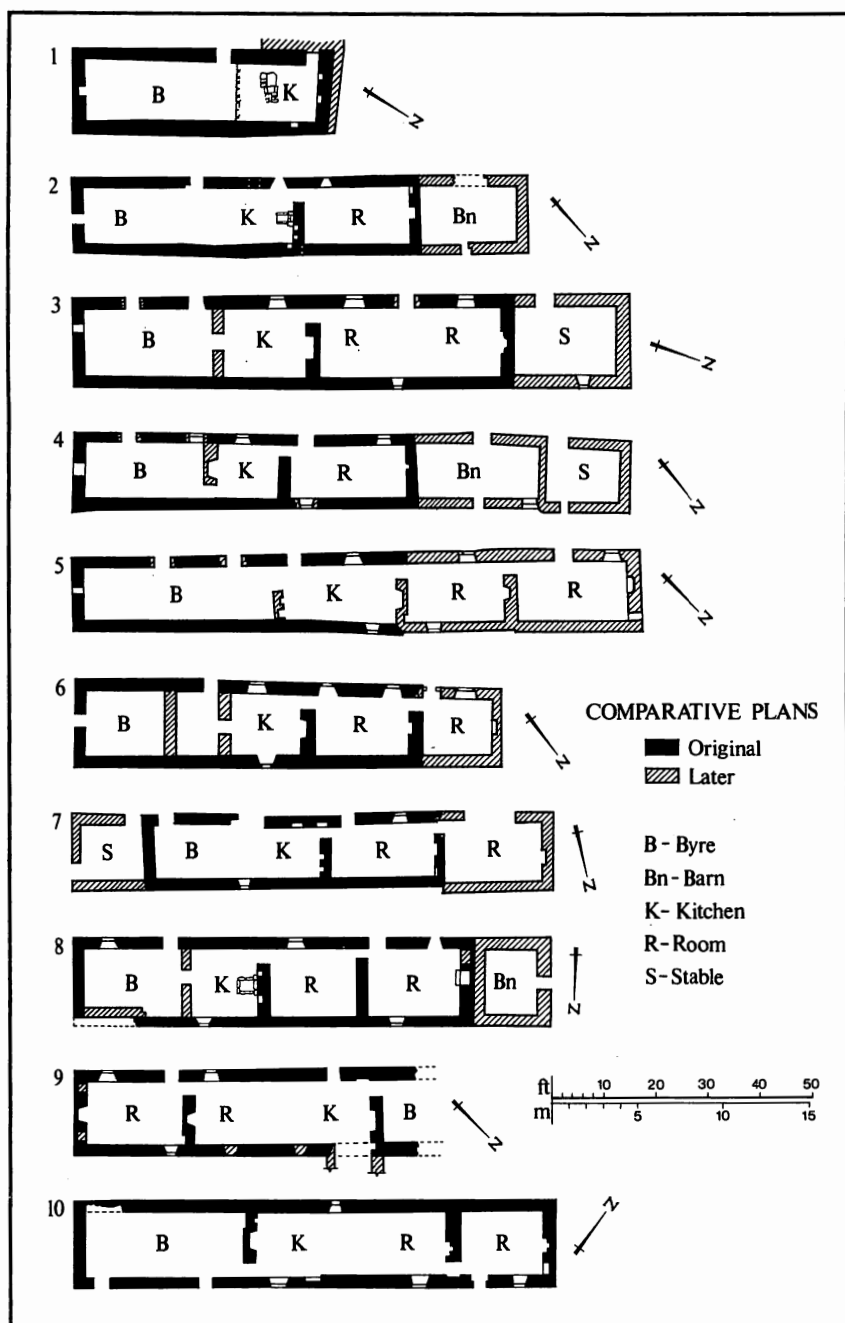


Fig. 6.2. Comparative plans and building sequence of selected croft-houses. The designations 'original' and 'later' simply refer to each particular case, and are not to be interpreted as a constant throughout. 1. Torbeg I; 2. Torbeg II; 3. Laidhay; 4. Claiscainn; 5. The Buaile; 6. The Corr; 7. Bruan; 8. Skaill (Lybster); 9. Achalibster; 10. Knockinnon.



Fig. 6.3. Torbeg II. Open hearth (imperial scale).

a partition between kitchen and byre had been formed by means of another box-bed and a short timber screen containing a doorway. Despite the ambiguous archaeological evidence of a possible doorway-opening in the side-wall of the bedroom she was adamant that this part of the house was entered only via the doorway from the kitchen, and that there had always been only the one entrance for animals and members of the family as long as she had known the building. The byre had apparently included stabling for a horse.

The building was originally cruck-framed throughout, and the hearth, instead of being in the middle of the floor, was built against a low dwarf-wall abutting the mid-gable [Fig. 6.3]. An ash-pit or *lazy-hole* was set into the flagstone floor, and the dwarf-wall formed part of the hearth-back or *brace*.⁶ A substantial deposit of lime that was discovered at one side of the

hearth was apparently the result of a regular practice of limewashing the brace. Miss Cormack also affirmed that a chain had been suspended from the roof timbers above the hearth, and that the smoke had escaped through two square timber-lined openings in the crown of the roof; these were arranged in series, one having been placed near the mid-gable and the other closer to the byre.

A similar type of hearth was uncovered at a small ruinous croft-house at Skaill [Fig. 6.2/8] in Lybster village, but in this case the fire had latterly been laid on a low rubble platform, not iron fire-bars, and there was no ash-pit. According to the former occupants, Miss Forbes and Mrs Hogue, Main Street, Lybster, the smoke escaped through two roof-vents that were placed in sequence slightly in front of the hearth. The possible existence and position of an open-hearth came to be inferred within buildings of an arrangement and plan-form similar to those of Torbeg, and in some of these cases the adjacent walls incorporated mural recesses or *aumbries* [Figs. 6.2/7; 6.4], possibly for brushes and other utensils.

Fig. 6.4. Bruan. Partition-wall.



Inter-communicating House-Byre Dwellings

A second stage in the development of this house type seems to be marked by an increase in size and complexity, and rather more frequently by a closely-defined distinction, but not always complete physical separation, between dwelling and byre [Figs. 6.2/3 - 2/8]. In place of a timber screen, a stone-built partition might be erected between kitchen and byre, and an area was thus created for use as a scullery or back-kitchen. The replacement of the open hearth can also usually be ascribed to this phase, and a mural kitchen fireplace might be inserted either in the mid-gable between kitchen and room, or more easily into a newly-inserted cross-wall between kitchen and byre. A completely separate entrance to the dwelling might be formed and sometimes, too, a new entrance for the byre. The domestic accommodation might also be sub-divided upon the creation of a closet or middle room, usually formed by thin timber partitions within the area of the old parlour-bedroom. Increased domestic needs, perhaps arising from extended family groups, appear to have been met by the simple expedient of tacking on an additional dwelling, which usually possessed a separate external door but also had through-access to the original portion. This linear type of structure was thus subject to organic growth and mutation as needs arose, and some multiple-unit dwellings and steadings attained lengths of over 30m. The main range at Laidhay [Figs. 6.2/3; 6.5] is about 31m in length, that of Claiscairn [Figs. 6.2/4; 6.6] 32.6m, The Buaile [Fig 6.2/5] 33.2m and one un-named example on the higher ground at Borgue [Fig. 6.7] was about 35m in length, the longest of the examples that were encountered in this survey.

Additional units of the steading might also be built on to a detached original wing which could be aligned roughly parallel to or diagonally across the axis of the dwelling range [Fig. 6.8]. The new buildings could also form an entirely separate free-standing group, and might take advantage of the local terrain, perhaps being tucked into the slope of a hill. In its most developed form the layout of the small farm or croft could appear something like that at The Corr [Fig. 6.9], about 1½ miles north of Latheron village. Many of the ancillary buildings at The Corr are of comparatively recent date, but the complex appears to have originated from a structure of long-house type incorporating *ben* room, cross-wall and kitchen, with a step down to the byre and an original entrance in the side-wall. It is unlikely that the long threshing-barn and stable in their existing form are contemporary with the original dwelling-range, and they probably date from a later phase when the open horse-gang was introduced.

A derivative type of long-house which probably made its first appearance towards the middle of the 19th century retained intercommunication between the kitchen and byre but the intermediate cross-wall between these two compartments was an integral, not a secondary feature [Figs. 6.2/9 - 2/10]. In these cases the kitchen and room tend to form one central compartment divided by partitions, and there is usually an additional room at one end. The changes in plan-form and



Fig. 6.5. Laidhay, Dunbeath, from south-west.

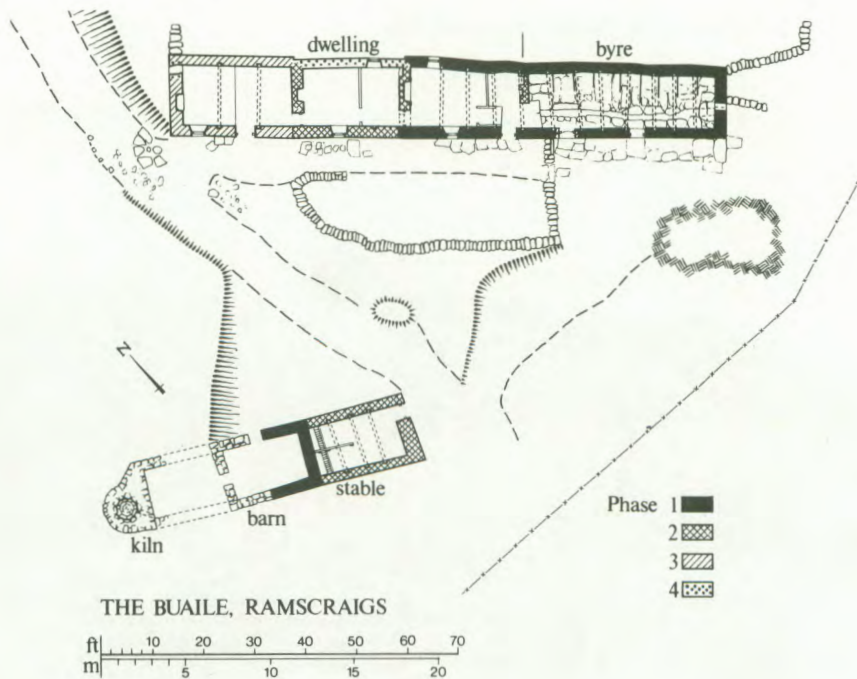


Fig. 6.6. Claiscairn, Ramscaigs, from south-east.



Fig. 6.7. Croft-house, Borgue, from south.

Fig. 6.8. The Buaile, Ramsraigs. Layout.



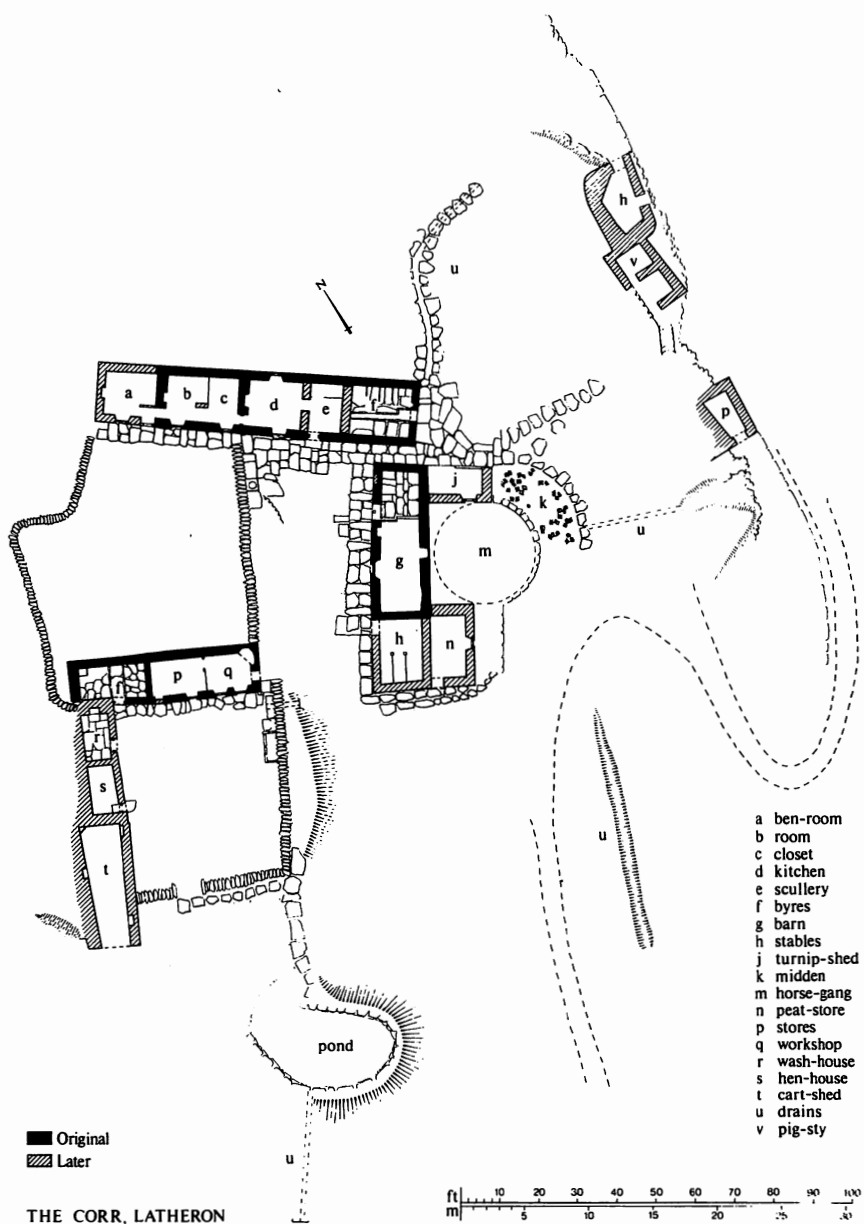


Fig. 6.9. The Corr, Latheron. Layout.

internal arrangements were matched by alterations to roof-structures, and the traditional forms of cruck construction became increasingly restricted to the byre and outbuildings.

Separate Buildings: Dwelling and Byre/Steading

A further stage in the development of the small farm layout is distinguished most clearly by the complete physical separation of the dwelling and the steading, which is a common enough feature of later 'improved' small farms throughout Scotland. Croft-houses of this kind in Latheron are single- or 1½-storeyed oblong dwellings built in local materials and usually thatched. The standard accommodation consists of three ground-floor apartments, a kitchen and room separated by a central partitioned closet which is lit by a window in the rear wall. The buildings of the steading frequently remain grouped in a linear plan usually on a slope, and sometimes incorporating the old redundant dwelling-house converted to less dignified uses. Cruck framing, if it occurs at all, is restricted to the steading. Houses of this type in Latheron can probably be ascribed to a period from about the middle of the 19th century, and examples noted at random in Borgue were dated 1865 and 1900.

The external appearance of these later croft-cottages cuts across the social and architectural distinctions which had previously existed in the days of the group-farms, when the small tenant-farmer occupied a dwelling of the long-house type, and the various categories of sub-tenant had cottage-residences. According to Captain Henderson,⁷ the traditional type of cottage in Caithness was of the 'but-and-ben' type, one of the apartments having an open hearth in the middle of the floor. The walls were built largely of turf, above stone footings, and the roof was supported on a framework of *Highland couples*. He also records⁸ that at about the beginning of the 19th century a slightly larger cottage, which contained two apartments but which had stone walls and often a small byre at one end, made its appearance. A good example is situated at Badereskie [Figs. 6.10; 6.11], Sheppardstown, four miles north of Lybster. It is a single-storeyed and gabled cottage, and has a timber cruck-framed roof covered with straw thatch. There is a small byre at the north-east gable and a later lean-to shed adjoins the south side of the byre. The small-holding was also served by a now-ruinous steading placed at right angles to the dwelling, and possibly comprising a barn and a store. The cottage itself is oblong on plan, and the domestic accommodation consists simply of two apartments, a kitchen and room, separated by two wooden box-beds which are placed back to back and form a passage in front of the entrance-doorway. Each apartment is provided with a fireplace; the large kitchen fireplace and flue are contained within a projecting chimney-breast, and the flue appears to penetrate the gable only at the uppermost level. An idiosyncratic local feature is the kitchen roof-light which is cut from a single flagstone, but in other respects the cottage is similar to those of a transitional type that were being constructed in most parts of rural Scotland during the later 18th and early 19th centuries.⁹

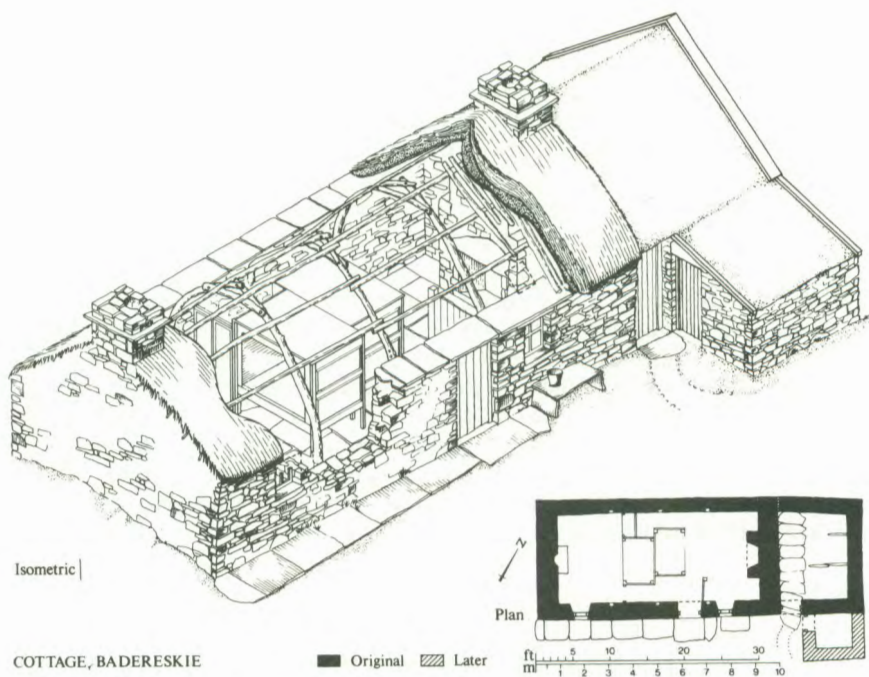


Fig. 6.10. Cottage, Badereskie. Plan and isometric.

Fig. 6.11. Cottage, Badereskie, from south-east.



HOUSE AND STEADING : COMPONENTS AND FEATURES¹⁰

Parlour-Bedrooms

Within the dwelling the parlour-bedroom usually had a compacted earth floor, which sometimes retains a covering of deals. The most consistent single feature of this apartment is the mural fireplace which may exist alongside an open hearth in the kitchen, reflecting the social and functional aspects of the two apartments and not necessarily a difference in date. Where the masonry has been exposed in ruinous buildings many of the fireplace openings are found to be spanned by massive slab lintels, sometimes associated with two or more relieving-slabs above, and the technique of lining the internal walls of the dwelling with an insulating mud-plaster sometimes also becomes apparent.¹¹

At the date of survey few of the dwellings remained complete with articles of furniture,¹² and the best pair of surviving box or *close* beds were in Badereskie cottage. They were of a free-standing type, constructed on a simple box framework, and ceiled and panelled on three sides with a fascia beneath the open side. They measure a standard 6ft (1.83m) by 4ft (1.22m) by 6ft 9in (2.06m) in height.

Kitchens

In the kitchen or *firehouse* the later mural fireplace usually retains an ash-pit or *lazy-hole* beneath the iron fire-bars of the hob-grate, one of the characteristic features of the open hearth. These fireplaces frequently incorporate hinged smoke-boards and sweeps, or are infilled with cast-iron oven ranges. The floors are generally flagged, and the kitchen sometimes incorporates a small roof-light. Glazing of these lights appears to be a refinement of an earlier practice in which the opening was covered by a turf divot or slab when not in use. The association of the kitchen with Orcadian-type outshots that serve as bed-alcoves or storerooms is not a particularly common feature among buildings in this district.¹³ The scullery or back-kitchen, like the central closet, is a secondary intrusive element, and a scullery at Claiscairn, Ramscaigs, represents an adaptation of the upper end of the byre that had taken place as late as the 1950s.

Byres

The byre [Fig. 6.12] is usually situated at the lower end of the linear range for the purposes of drainage. They vary in size between the smallest which housed only one or two beasts and the largest which probably held no more than about a dozen, usually tethered in rows along one wall between wooden or flagstone partitions. They are generally open to the roof with no hay-loft, and contain no window-openings except for an occasional roof-light. In most cases the floor is cobbled and incorporates a dung-channel leading to a drainhole in the lower gable-wall. In the same wall there might be a central aperture, or *muck-hole*, for cleaning out the byre into the area of the midden. As at Torbeg the byre is known to have accommodated



Fig. 6.12. The Buaile, Ramsdraigs. Interior of byre.

horses as well. Purpose-built stabling facilities were provided as, for example, at Laidhay, Claiscairn, and The Corr, but it was usually for no more than about two or three horses in wooden stalls together with a larger loose-box. Some means of ventilation were usually fitted.

Barns and Kiln-Barns

The barn [Fig. 6.13] occurs either as part of a long range or detached from the other buildings. If it is grouped in a linear plan it tends to occupy a position at the drier or upper end of the range, whereas if it is free-standing it seems to be aligned across the general direction of the prevailing winds. It is normally oblong on plan with a pair of opposed doors in the side-walls, an entrance door and a smaller door on the opposite side which creates a natural draught for winnowing purposes. A high-collared cruck-framed roof was also of practical benefit in permitting plenty of overhead space for these operations [Figs. 6.14/1, 14/3, 14/4]. The barn most commonly has an earthen floor, and flagstones, if used, are restricted to a central threshing area. Hand-threshing seems at one time to have been common in this district, but here as elsewhere these processes underwent subsequent mechanisation. Horse-powered threshing-units usually have an open



Fig. 6.13. Laidhay. Barn.

raised platform of earth and rubble adjacent to the barn. A specimen at The Corr is 26ft (7.93m) in diameter, apparently a standard size for the earlier enclosed type of two-horse gang,¹⁴ and a smaller example in Ulbster still preserves an underfoot drive-shaft from the hub of the platform to a threshing-machine within the barn. Water-powered threshing in the coastal area is confined mostly to the larger farms, although there is an interesting small-scale building of this kind at Brickigoe near Yarrows Loch.

It was customary to dry the grain prior to milling, sometimes even prior to threshing, and a number of small corn-drying kilns and kiln-barns are distributed throughout the parish. In size and sophistication this smaller variety contrasts markedly with the more spectacular bottle-shaped kilns that are associated with the larger farms.¹⁵ The kiln-barns are similar to conventional barns with the addition of a circular kiln at one end which sometimes, but not invariably, takes up the full width of the building [Fig. 6.15]. The internal wall of a typical kiln [Fig. 6.16] incorporates the features associated with the corn-drying process: steps leading to a central doorway at the level of the drying-floor; the fireplace or *sornie* at the mouth of a horizontal flue; and on the opposite side a grain store with a chute leading from the drying-floor. The drying-chamber itself is in the form of an inverted and truncated cone and the drying-floor was formerly

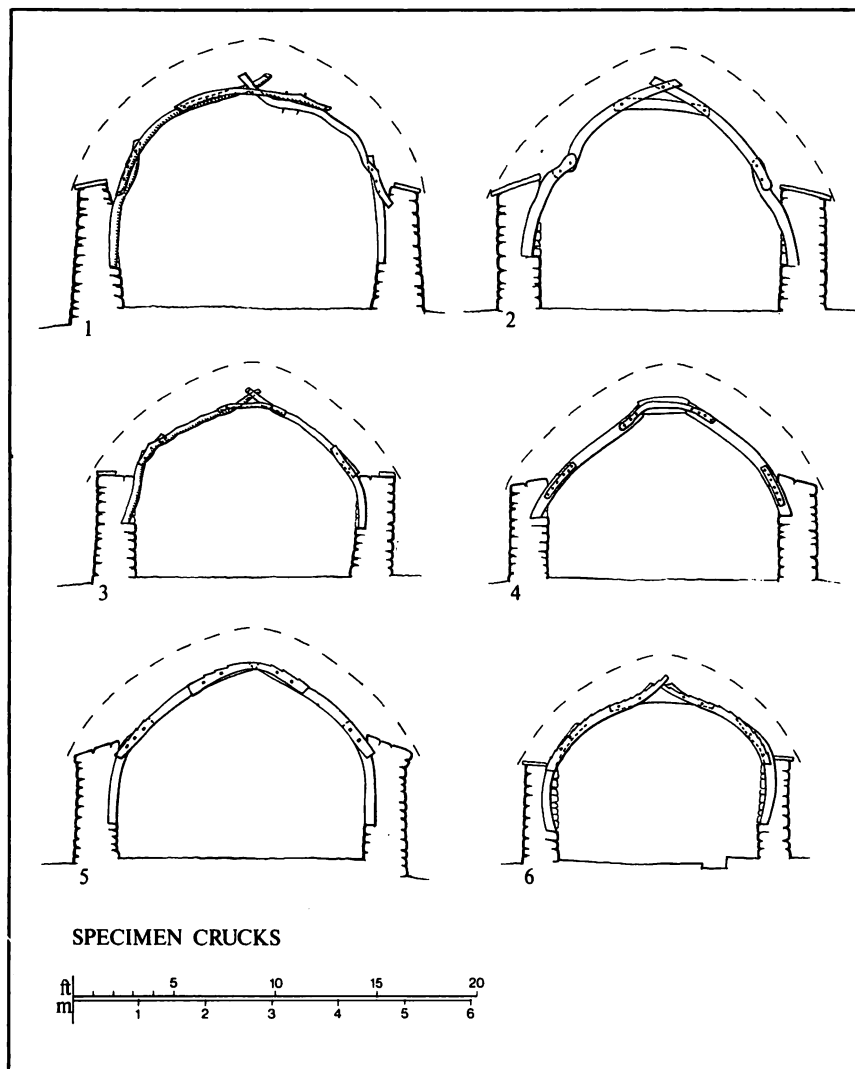
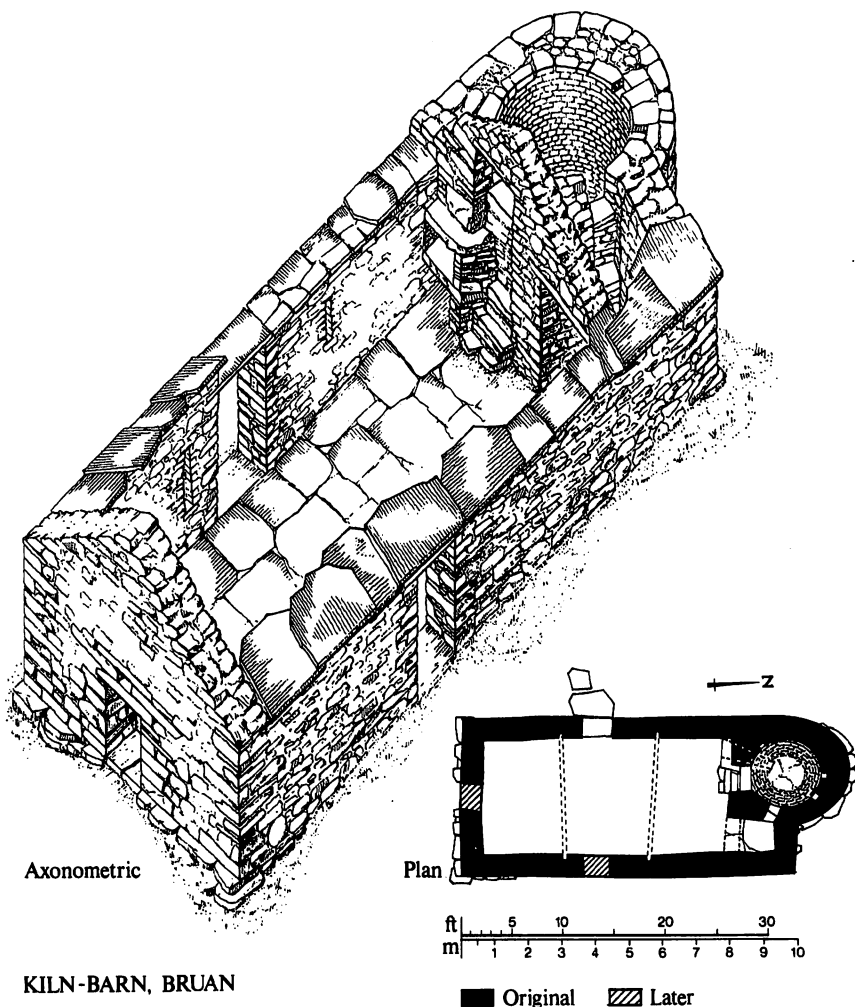


Fig. 6.14. Specimen crucks: 1. Laidhay, barn; 2. Badereskie; 3. Claiscairn, barn; 4. East Clyth, barn; 5. Torbeg I, later extension; 6. The Buaile, byre.



KILN-BARN, BRUAN

Fig. 6.15. Kiln-barn, Bruan. Plan and axonometric.

supported on wooden joists or *simmers*, of which at most only the sockets can now usually be seen about 6ft (1.83m) above the base of kiln, The practice of grain drying is best described by Captain Henderson:¹⁶

‘About six feet above the bottom of the kiln, there are four or five beams set across, parallel to each other, and upon these there are small sticks or laths laid one or two inches asunder; upon these there is a quantity of oat-straw spread, about one inch thick; and lastly oats or bear is spread upon the straw, a few inches thick; then the ingle [fire] is kindled, and the fire is kept up, and the corn frequently turned on the straw, until it is thoroughly kiln-dried, say about 12 hours for each quantity the kiln can dry. This is the most general mode of kiln-drying corn in this county, but is a very bad one, and many accidents happen, owing to the straw taking fire, and burning the whole building to the ground. Some tile-kilns are now erected, which is a much safer, and more expeditious mode of kiln-drying corn.’



Fig. 6.16. Achalibster, Watten parish. Interior of kiln-barn (imperial scale).

Once dried, the grain was ready for grinding either by hand at home¹⁷ or at a local estate mill, of which there were a number in this parish.

BUILDING MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES OF CONSTRUCTION

Walls and Foundations

The walls are constructed of a local whinstone or gritty sandstone,¹⁸ probably quarried for the most part on or near the sites. It is generally of a tractable nature and often lends itself readily to coursed rubble walling. The stones are bonded in mud mortar, but, where the walls have not been pointed with lime, weathering and leaching give the impression of drystone construction. Variations in this general pattern of masonry technique depend upon the local availability of materials, the quality of workmanship and the use of the building. According to local tradition, for example, the stones for the West Byres at Latheron and other buildings in the vicinity were removed from a site in an adjacent field known as the 'Chapel Stones'. Its walls contain uncharacteristic rectangular blocks of masonry, and a fragment built into the outer face of the west side-wall is

part of an incised cross-slab; a carved stone with an Ogham inscription was also recovered from an internal wall in the same building in 1903.¹⁹ Another variation in coursed rubble masonry technique, which is especially noticeable on the external walls of corn-drying kilns, consists of alternating courses of flagstones and rounded boulders.

In general, no dating criteria can be found in the character of the masonry.²⁰ A particularly striking example of this difficulty can be found at The Corr where buildings known to have been erected at the beginning of this century bear a close resemblance to those of an earlier period. Straight joints in the walls seem in many cases to represent interruptions in one progressive phase of building operations, and in this area cannot necessarily be taken to indicate distinct periods of construction.

The walls are frequently erected on large foundation-stones, and there is usually a projecting footings-course at the lower end of the range. The side-walls rise to an average height of around 2m and among buildings of earlier date the window- and doorway-openings are usually confined to one wall. These openings are normally spanned with slab lintels just below the level of the wall-head, and the windows have through splays from the external arris. The wall-heads are finished with a course of flagstones projecting slightly forward to form a drip-edge for the thatch, and where the building is erected on a slope the lines of the eaves and the roof-ridge tend to follow the fall in ground-level. Free-standing barns and kiln-barns more frequently retain horizontal eaves- and roof-lines.

The buildings are uniformly gable-ended. The gable-walls are usually stone-built but the upper portions of some gables are constructed with thin courses of turf divots or *feals* bound with heather [Fig. 6.17]. The survival of this technique brings to mind Captain Henderson's remarks regarding late 18th century cottage-building practices in the county:²¹

where stone is easily had, perhaps about 2 feet high of the walls and gables are of stone, and earth thrown in, to fill up the crevices, *vice* mortar; above that the whole walls and gables are built of feal or sods of two feet long, and seven inches in the side of the square. Of these materials the walls and gables are made ready for the roof, which is a Highland semicircular couple, made of birch, with rafters, to support the thatch of divots.'

Roof Timbers

This earlier and probably long-established association between roof-structures and non-load-bearing walls of turf or inferior masonry explains the existence of a local cruck-farming tradition which in this district persisted well into the 19th century. A multiple-jointed or composite cruck truss is the typical form in this parish [Figs. 6.14; 6.18].²² It consists of a number of short members, usually about five including a collar, and these are lapped or notched and profusely pegged forming an overall semicircular or hooped roof profile. The principals usually comprise two jointed members, the wall-post being set into the lower third of the side-walls. The upper members overlap at the apex and are joined by a short high collar-beam or *baak*. The joints are occasionally bound with heather



Fig. 6.17. Claiscairn, Ramsraigs. Turf-gable.



Fig. 6.18. Claiscairn, Ramsdraigs. Interior of barn.

rope or *simmans*, while the pegs are rounded, and secured either with expanded squared ends or wedged split ends. The timbers are most commonly birch of a twisted and slender section, sometimes merely branches, and because of their relatively poor quality, individual trusses tend to be quite closely spaced. However, some variations occur within the same building, even within the same apartment, but their average clear internal span of around 3.5m seems the principal determinant of structural width of most buildings.

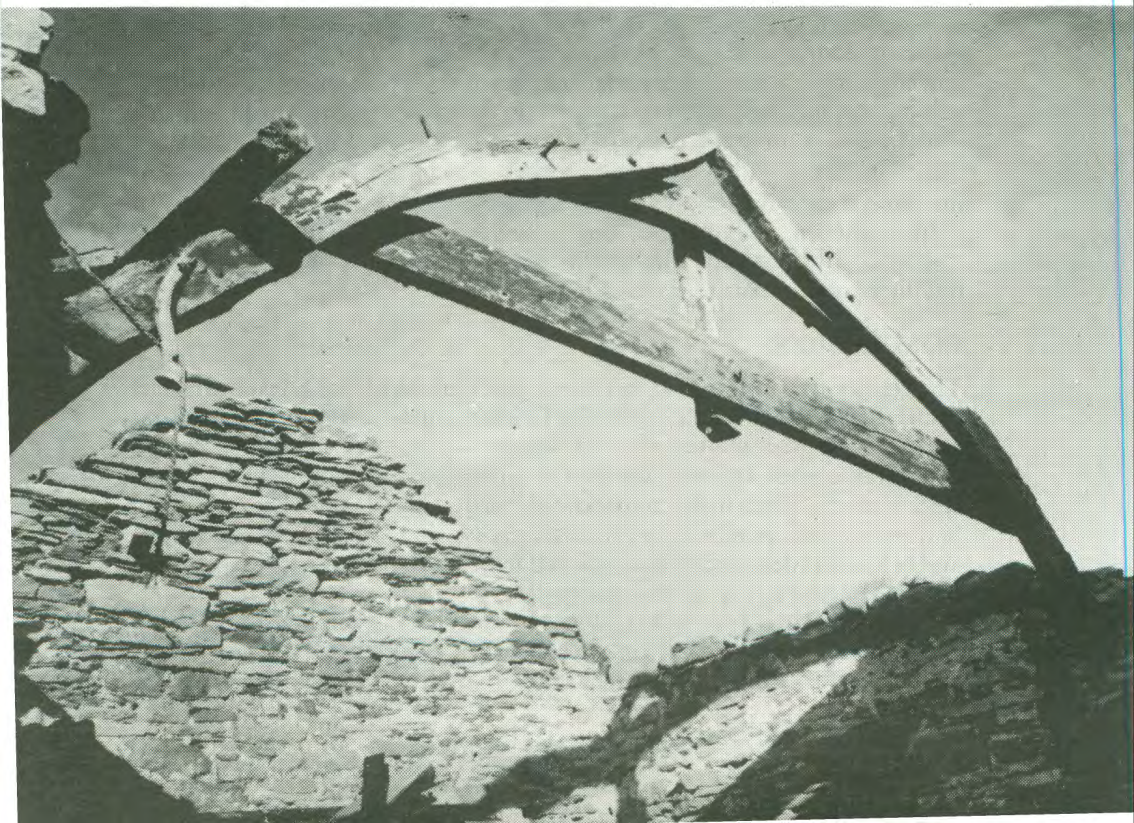
Taking together the evidence of cruck-slots, fragmentary wall-posts, and complete specimens, cruck framing clearly once enjoyed a widespread distribution in this district. Most topographical descriptions and travellers' accounts agree that this area was, and still is noted for its relatively treeless landscape except for the (mainly birch) woods in the sheltered valleys at Berriedale, Dunbeath and Latheronwheel.²³ By the early 19th century these limited resources were still being severely plundered for house-building and general agricultural purposes, and where the trees survived they tended to be no better than shrubs or brushwood.²⁴

Timber of reasonably good quality was thus scarce and probably beyond the means of the average tenant. Some assistance was provided in an arrangement between the owner and tenant whereby at the first construction the landlord would find timber for the roof. The value of this *master-wood* would have to be maintained by the tenant on each change of tenancy, and according to Henderson,²⁵ 'in all such cases the tenant has a written note from the landlord, certifying the amount of wood belonging to the proprietor... The walls and gables ... are seldom if ever valued.' The following example of a certificate or *comprising* of this kind relates to the house of one William Gun, a tenant in Ramskraigs in June 1798:²⁶

'To 1 cuple room of a cellar, 2s. 6d.
To 3 cuple room of a firehouse, 3s. 6d.
To 3 cuple room of a byre 3s. 4d.
To 3 cuple room of a threshing barn 6s. 6d.'

The total amount of 15s. 10d. represents the true value of the 'rooves above mentioned and, excepting the small cabers, is the master's wood'. This is a fairly modest valuation compared with some in the same collection which include stables, outer rooms, and kiln-barns, and others which comprise furniture and fittings right down to wooden hinges, door-snecks and locks. If no such arrangement existed almost any available timber would be

Fig. 6.19. Croft-house, Ramskraigs. Composite boat-rib cruck.



employed, and for roof construction the re-used materials were mainly adapted to the traditional cruck form. A common reflection of this state of affairs is the re-use of boats' timbers, especially boat-ribs, whose curved ogival form lends itself well to roof construction with the keel forming the roof-ridge [Fig. 6.19].

With the exception of the boat-rib cruck, the traditional roof has no sharply defined ridge. About six or eight rows of purlins with no identifiable ridge-tree are secured with the minimum of wedging on the backs of the cruck frames. Fir is commonly used for the longitudinal members, but boat oars are also found in use for this purpose. The common rafters usually consist of short branches, often incorporating broken strakes or re-used barrel staves, and above the rafters the roof groundwork normally consists of a layer of turf divots, which are sometimes laid in a diapered pattern.

Roof Coverings

The characteristic roof covering, where it still survives, is straw thatch which overhangs the eaves and gables. Thatching is still practised in parts of the parish, and a more systematic investigation of intact rather than ruinous structures, to which the present survey was mainly directed, would produce a more comprehensive indication of the materials and techniques employed. In most cases the thatch is secured either by wire-netting and anchor-pegs, or by ropes tied to *benlin stanes* or planks; and at Claiscainn there was surviving evidence of *simmans* of heather having been used to rope the thatch. Beneath the thatch at the wall-head there is usually a single cloaking-course of flagstones which are inclined at a relatively steep angle and supported by the lower rafters and purlins.²⁷ Rush thatching, which is recorded as having once been common in the parish, was not observed, nor were there any surviving traces of the practice of coating and bedding straw thatch in clay, a widely-acclaimed technique which is known to have been introduced into this county a little before 1795.²⁸

In Latheron, complete or partly flagged roofs are not particularly common, and are generally confined to lean-to roofs of small ancillary buildings of comparatively recent date.²⁹

CONCLUSIONS

The traditional buildings in this south-east district of Caithness bear some similarities to their counterparts in Orkney, but in a number of respects, especially in the matter of roof construction, they are more closely comparable with known examples in Sutherland and other areas of the Highlands.³⁰ Superficial impressions also suggest that the surviving buildings in this parish are not necessarily typical of Caithness as a whole, and other detailed studies are required in order to obtain a fuller picture of the rural architecture of this region.³¹

Judged on their own terms, however, these small buildings in Latheron parish are impressive by reason of sheer density alone. In some cases they are also noteworthy for their makeshift character, although the processes

of decay and ruin are always more apparent in areas of thatching than in those where more durable roofing-materials prevail. The general social, economic and tenorial conditions which conspired to keep the buildings of the lesser tenantry at a fairly low standard applied in this district where the landed estates were fairly small, entailed and usually in debt.³² Probably few landowners were in a position to meet their responsibilities in materials and money, and this state of affairs might also attract, or less easily prevent, a more casual process of settlement alongside the formal creation of farms and crofts. And the particular problems of building were compounded by adherence to traditional methods of roof-construction in an area where there was an acute lack of native timber. Nevertheless, it was probably the increased use of mortared stone, 'English' roof-couples and the provision of mural fireplaces that led the minister of the parish in 1840 to observe that 'the old hovels are fast disappearing, and neat and substantial houses having vents and chimney-tops in one or both ends, are occupying their places.'³³

The nature and number of the buildings might thus to a large extent reflect the circumstances under which they were erected. A rough estimate of the population of the parish in the 1720s placed the figure between 1,500 and 2,000, and by the end of the century the estimated figure had reached 4,000.³⁴ Within the next forty years the population had again dramatically doubled to 8,000, reaching a peak of 8,500 in the census of 1861. In 1840 the minister of the parish commented on 'the extraordinary density of population', attributing the more recent increase to the success of the herring fishing which attracted both a seasonal and a permanent migration of labour to the coastal districts of the county from distant parts of the Highlands and Islands. He noted 'the importation of several colonies of Highlanders from the heights of Kildonan and other parts of Sutherlandshire', whilst a contemporary in Sutherland observed that 'lads when they can handle an oar remove to Caithness'.³⁵ At a time of rising population and social distress, exacerbated by the clearance and conversion of tracts of the Highlands into sheep-walks, this area clearly had positive attractions.

Some Caithness landowners and the British Fisheries Society set out to attract 'young able-bodied and married fishermen' to the new and reconstructed fishing-stations, which included Dunbeath, Latheronwheel, Lybster as well as the settlement at Wick.³⁶ But, judging from the evidence of the buildings alone, the population growth seems to have comprehended a large casual or squatter element whose settlements fell outside a formal system of village and croft divisions. A considerable number are found on the moorland edge of this relatively narrow, fertile, coastal strip of land, but all are situated within relatively easy reach of a road that had been re-aligned and improved by the Parliamentary Commissioners in the early 19th century.³⁷ The largest clusters of buildings are also found within equally easy reach of the few harbours on this rocky stretch of coast, an intimate association that is appropriately symbolised by the use of old boats' timbers in the construction of the houses themselves.

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Appendix

A Select List of Principal Sites

This is a select list of those buildings that are directly or indirectly referred to in the text. Their inclusion here does not necessarily imply either that the buildings were threatened with demolition or that they are still in existence. They simply represent some of the principal case-studies dealt with by the Commission in 1970-1.

Borgue

ND 128260 Un-named croft-house and steading [Fig. 6.7].

Ramsraigs

ND 138272 Claiscairn [Figs. 6.2/4; 6.6; 6.14/3; 6.17; 6.18].

ND 142270 The Buaile [Figs. 6.2/5; 6.8; 6.14/6].

ND 142274 Un-named croft-house with boat-rib cruck [Fig. 6.19].

Dunbeath

ND 167304 Torbeg I, Markethill [Figs. 6.2/1; 6.14/5].

ND 166304 Torbeg II, Markethill [Figs. 6.2/2; 6.3].

ND 174305 Laidhay [Figs. 6.2/3; 6.5; 6.13; 6.14/1].

ND 176313 Knockinnon [Fig. 6.2/10].

Latheron

ND 198332 West Byres

ND 203357 The Corr [Figs. 6.2/6; 6.9].

Lybster

ND 202399 Cottage, Badereskie [Figs. 6.10; 6.11; 6.14/2].

ND 249353 Skaill [Fig. 6.2/8].

East Clyth

ND 308397 Croft-house and steading, including cruck-framed barn [Fig. 6.14/4].

Bruan

ND 312396 Croft-house and steading, including kiln-barn [Figs. 6.2/7; 6.4; 6.15].

Wattin parish

ND 243492 Achalibster [Figs. 6.2/9; 6.16].

Wick parish

ND 301448 Brickigoe. Water-powered threshing-barn.

ND 322405 Ulbster. Horse-gang.

Footnotes

[Because of the detailed nature of most of these Notes and References, they are appended to, rather than inserted in the text - Ed.]

1. A select list of the principal sites that are referred to in the text of this article is contained in an appendix. Further details on all buildings will be found in the full collection of reports, survey-drawings and photographs lodged in the archive of the National Monuments Record of Scotland. For a brief summary of some of the findings see also Geoffrey Stell and Donald Omand, *The Caithness Croft* (Laidhay Preservation Trust, 1976).

2. From casual observation it appeared that the modern agrarian landscape obscured even some of the 19th century croft and farm field-divisions, which had themselves overlaid an earlier system of 'rig and rennet'. (*Stat. Acct.*, xvii (1796), 31).

3. Groups of shieling-huts have been noted at, for example, the south end of Loch Ruard and at the north end of Loch Meadie in Halkirk parish, *Original Name Book of the Ordnance Survey, County of Caithness*, no. 15 (1872), 9 and 61. For sites further west see also R.J. Mercer (ed), *Report of the Field Survey of areas subjected to the threat of afforestation in Caithness and Sutherland 1977* (typescript copy in N.M.R.S.), and for pastoral farming in Highland areas of the parish, see John Henderson, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Caithness* (1812 edition), 145-6.

4. Henderson, op. cit., 29-30.

5. Cf. the plan of the principal building in complex A at Rosal, Strath Naver, in which the cross-wall was not bonded into the side-wall and the parlour-bedroom was regarded as a relatively late addition, H. Fairhurst, 'Rosal: a deserted township in Strath Naver, Sutherland', in *P.S.A.S.*, 100 (1967-8), 135-69, at 145-8.

6. Some local vernacular building terms will be found among the glossaries compiled by D.B. Nicholson, 'Dialect', in J. Horne (ed.), *The County of Caithness* (1907), 60-88; J. Ross, 'A selection of Caithness dialect words', in D. Omand (ed), *The Caithness Book* (1972), 241-60; and J. Geddes, *Caithness Dialect* (n.d.).

7. Henderson, op. cit., 34.

8. *Ibid.*, 33.

9. Cf., for example, *Dumfriesshire Trans.*, 3rd series, 49 (1972), 39-48, and R.C.A.H.M.S., *Inventory of Argyll*, ii, Lorn (1975), no. 342.

10. This summary account refers only to some of the principal components of the steading such as byres, stables, barns and kilns. Details of other ancillary units such as cart-sheds, stores, pig-sties and nesting-boxes will be found among the survey-material in the N.M.R.S. For the introduction of wheeled carts into the county, see Henderson, op. cit., 65.

11. John Firth, *Reminiscences of an Orkney parish* (1920), 13, records that a mixture of cow dung, clay and 'scrubbs' (husks of oats) was used to plaster the internal walls of dwelling-houses in the township of Redland in the 19th century.

12. Cf. Sir Arthur Mitchell, *The Past in the Present* (1880), 119-20, for a description of a stone table in a turf-built house at Ramscaigs.

13. Outshots were noted only at Overton in Clyth (ND 288366) and Achalibster (ND 243492), and in both cases were of secondary construction. Two known examples at Smerral (ND 17333-) were not inspected, and see also the croft-house further north near St. John's Loch (ND 217724).

14. Henderson, op. cit., 62-3.

15. A cut-down and much-altered vestige of one of these larger kilns was noted at Clyth Mains (ND 280362), but better examples are to be found outwith this area at, for example, Hillhead Farm at Wick, Hill of Harland and Sibster.
16. Henderson, op. cit., 106-7.
17. A pair of hand-querns were noted in a ruinous croft-house at Borgue (ND 128260).
18. Although this coastal district falls within the general area of Middle or Orcadian Old Red Sandstone rocks, it lies outside the principal flagstone outcrops and in places its geological succession is rendered complex by several fault-lines. In general, much of the stone is marginally less flaggy than in some other parts of the county. See C.B. Crampton and R.G. Carruthers, *The Geology of Caithness* (Memoir of the Geological Survey of Scotland, 1914), 19-47, 165-9.
19. *P.S.A.S.*, 38 (1903-4), 534-8; R.C.A.H.M.S., *Inventory of Caithness* (1911), nos. 298-9; *Old Lore Misc.*, vi (1912), 124-9, 198-9.
20. Cf. R.C.A.H.M.S., *Inventory of Orkney and Shetland* (1946), i, 56-7.
21. Henderson, op. cit., 34.
22. G.D. Hay, 'Some aspects of timber construction in Scotland' in Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group, *Building Construction in Scotland* (1976), 28-38, at 35, and cf. Sir Cyril Fox, *MS Notes of a Visit to Caithness and Orkney in 1947* (copy in N.M.R.S.) 64, 74, 83. Comparison is commonly made with jointed cruck construction in Wester Ross, but the overall roof-forms and detailing in these two districts exhibit distinct differences, cf. D. McCourt, 'Two cruck-framed buildings in Wester Ross, Scotland', in *Ulster Folklife*, 13 (1967), 75-8, and an unpublished survey of buildings in the Applecross peninsula carried out by the R.C.A.H.M.S. in 1975-6.
23. J. Brand, *A brief description of Orkney, Zetland, Pight-land-frith, and Caithness* (1683), 152; MacFarlane, *Geog. Coll.*, iii, 83; Pennant, *Tour* (1769), 175-6; Henderson, op. cit., 152; and R.C.A.H.M.S., *Inventory of Caithness*, xix.
24. Henderson, loc. cit., refers to 'the remains of woods, which, half a century ago, produced large trees, sufficient for building highland houses... but now, no better than brushwood', and cf. MacFarlane, *Geog. Coll.*, i, 164.
25. Henderson, op. cit., 30.
26. Scottish Record Office, *Sinclair of Freswick Papers*, GD 136/810/1, the first in a collection of 27 papers containing similar valuations dating from 1798 to 1850, and cf. *ibid.* GD 136/778 for a similar collection relating to the Lochend estate 1768-79. For the cost and importation of timber see Henderson, op. cit., 32 and 157-8, and S.R.O. GD 136/939 contains notes about thefts of timber by the tenants of the Sinclairs of Freswick in about 1830.
27. Cf. the combination roofing of thatch, straw rope and flagstones noted among better-class Caithness houses by Bishop Pococke in 1760, Pococke, *Tour*, 159-60.
28. Scottish Women's Rural Institute, Latheron Branch, *A History of Latheron District* (1968), 13, where the rushes are said to have been obtained from Shinval, Acharaskill and Tachar. For clay thatch, see Henderson, op. cit., Appendix, 192-3; Sir John Sinclair, *General View of the Agriculture of the Northern Counties* (1795), 211; and A. Fenton, 'Clay building and clay thatch in Scotland', in *Ulster Folklife*, 15/16 (1970), 28-51, at 41 ff. Henderson estimated a life-span of 3-4 years for a roof covering of ordinary thatch (op. cit., 27) and 17-20 years if clay was used. (Thatch bedded on pantiles was noted outwith the main survey area at Sarclet.)

29. The southernmost example of flagstone roofing noted in this survey was at Knockinnon (ND 176313). For the expansion of the Caithness flagstone industry in the 19th century see D. Bremner, *The Industries of Scotland* (1868), 420-4, and J.T. Calder, *History of Caithness* (1887), 250-4. Also John Porter in this volume.
30. Cf. A. Fenton, *The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland* (1978), 110-204 and J.G. Dunbar, 'The peasant-house', in M.W. Beresford and J.G. Hurst (eds.), *Deserted Medieval Villages* (1971), 236-44.
31. The distinctive geological, topographical and even linguistic character of the parish which sets it apart from north and west areas of the former county has long been recognised, cf. *NSA*, xv (Caithness), 86-7, 93.
32. Cf. J. Henderson, *Caithness Family History* (1884), 36-8, 51-9, 67-74, 83-92, 128-41, 163-70.
33. *NSA*, op. cit., 93.
34. MacFarlane, *Geog. Coll.*, i, 169; *Stat. Acct.*, op. cit., 23.
35. *NSA*, op. cit., 92; *ibid.*, (Sutherland), 104.
36. For the general background to the herring fishing industry in Caithness see M. Gray *The Highland Economy 1750-1850* (1957), 159-62; M. Gray, *The Fishing Industries of Scotland, 1790-1914* (1978), 27-38, 80-1, 210-11, and Jean Dunlop. *The British Fisheries Society 1786-1893* (1978), 154-66. See also Jean Dunlop's chapter in this present volume.
37. Henderson, op. cit., 236-7; *NSA* op. cit., 105.

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