

Alexander Ormiston Curle and the Archaeology of Caithness: An Evaluation

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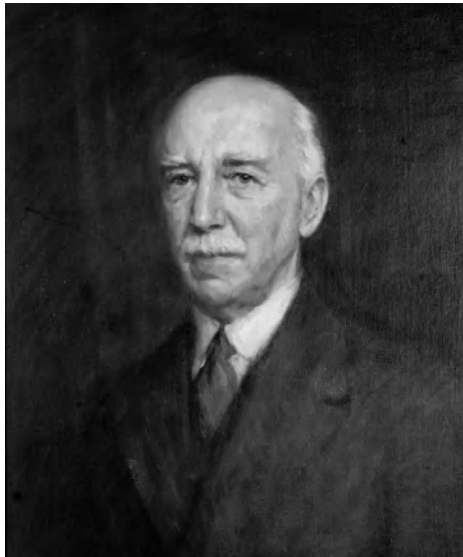


Figure 1: A O Curle, Secretary of RCAHMS, 1908-13 (Canmore, 1128640 ©HES)

Introduction

ALEXANDER CURLE spent the summer of 1910 surveying and recording the ancient and historical monuments of Caithness. During this period he kept a daily journal and fieldwork notebooks and this three-volume daily journal has been preserved at Historic Environment Scotland (HES). The journal and fieldwork notes were central elements to a report published in the following year entitled the *Third Report and Inventory of Monuments and*

Constructions in the County of Caithness by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS).

The journals, which are the principal focus of this article, have now been digitized under the auspices of Scotland's Places. Curle did not entirely confine his journal entries to monument recording but they also contain descriptions of his social encounters with local people, and his struggles, successes and disappointments. His methodology was partly about a model of fieldwork which was a social discipline where he used the knowledge of different local people to find previously unrecorded monuments and to pursue his interest in the artefact record. He also recorded observations on a wide variety of matters from social conditions to local superstition and legend, providing a picture of life in the county on the eve of the First World War.

This article briefly uses both the diaries and the *Third Report* to demonstrate Curle's approach to monument protection by focusing on his writings on the brochs in Wick Parish. He was concerned about brochs being excavated but not planned or recorded properly or being excavated then simply left open to the elements.

Finally, reference is made to Curle's return to Caithness in 1937 in pursuit of his research interests and his discovery at Freswick Links of the first Norse settlement site ever found on mainland Scotland.

Curle's early career

Letters Patent established RCAHMS in 1908 with a remit to make an inventory of the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions of Scotland. Alexander Curle was a trained solicitor with a rising reputation as a prominent antiquary (though we will discuss the aptness of this term later), whose fieldwork was widespread and published papers numerous.¹ Several of his well-researched historical and archaeological papers had appeared in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (PSAS)*, examples of which include a description of the fortifications and Roman remains at Ruberslaw, Roxburghshire and his examination of prehistoric kitchen middens at Archerfield Estate, near Gullane.² Such was Curle's reputation that he appeared to be 'the perfect candidate' for Secretary of RCAHMS.³ Previously in 1905, he had been elected one of the two secretaries of the Society of Antiquaries. In that role he had contact with

1 Ritchie 2002, 27

2 PSAS 39 (1904-5), 219-32; 42 (1907-8), 308-19.

3 Crawford, 2016, 22

eminent figures such as Sir Herbert Maxwell, who became the first RCAHMS chairman, and Thomas Ross who became a Commissioner⁴. Apparently under the influence of Curle himself, RCAHMS decided to create an inventory not just from existing maps and publications but by physically visiting every monument in the counties chosen.⁵ Curle was known as a man of robust disposition and abundant energy and, accordingly, he was given this survey task and he completed five county surveys beginning with Berwickshire in 1908 and Sutherland in 1909.⁶ He spent the summer of 1910, principally walking and cycling, all over Caithness. He then surveyed Wigtownshire, The Stewartry and Dumfriesshire from 1911-13, before leaving RCAHMS to become Director of the National Museum of Antiquities.

The Caithness Survey: the continuing journals of a 'Wandering Antiquary'

In Berwickshire in 1908, Curle began a daily journal which he described as 'The Private Journal of a Wandering Antiquary'.⁷ In a modern context 'antiquary' has become something of a pejorative term with overtones of amateurism and intermittent effort, but this can conceal a measure of competence, particularly in field survey, possessed by many by the end of the 19th century. Additionally, as we will see, Curle's labours in Caithness were anything but intermittent and the term, 'antiquary' can do him less than justice.

In Curle's Caithness journals, there was an entry for every day, though it is important to realise that the journals might not have been completed daily. They are predominantly given over to writing up the monuments he had surveyed during the day but his journals are also partly a social document and he did not intend them to be confined to purely archaeological matters. At the start of his Berwickshire journal, Curle stated his intention was to 'keep a journal wherein I may record my various experiences and adventures as such may from time to time befall me'.⁸

Preparation for the co-operative approach Curle would use began before he reached Caithness. For instance, on 17 May 1910 Curle, as RCAHMS Secretary, wrote to all Caithness landowners seeking permission

4 Dunbar 1992, 17

5 Dunbar 1992, 18

6 Dunbar 1992, 19-20

7 RCAHMS, MS 1, 1

8 RCAHMS, MS 1, 1-2

to visit 'such ancient and historic monuments as are on your estates'. Helpfully, he added, that if a visit of his coincided with the shooting season he would communicate with 'officials' at the time 'to avoid disturbance of the game'.⁹ But besides 'officials', Curle showed he was also able to relate to ordinary people with no particular role, those who simply had an interest in their county's past, and he was interested in the artefacts that had been discovered and retained by these local people. What also comes across in his writings is Curle's interest in local people and their way of life in Caithness. This is shown in his pen picture of John Nicolson and his account of a visit to the island of Stroma which has the feel of an exotic traveller's tale. He also engaged with excavation work that had previously been done and of particular relevance was the work of Sir Francis Tress Barry. Barry was a retired mining engineer, owner of the Keiss Estate, and an enthusiastic excavator.¹⁰

Additionally, Curle recorded material on local customs, practice and superstition and how these related to the process of monument preservation. He also reflects on the changing weather and on his own moods. Overall, as Geoffrey Stell said about Curle's work in Dumfriesshire and Galloway in 1911-13, Curle provides a vivid picture of countryside life on the eve of the First World War.¹¹

Common concerns of the fieldwork practitioner

Most modern-day field archaeologists embarking on a summer long piece of fieldwork probably have a number of basic preparatory questions in their minds such as what will the accommodation, quality of help, and weather be like? What can be done if bad weather makes fieldwork impossible? In 1910 too, these were the initial and continuing concerns of Alexander Curle. From 22 May he took up residence at Thuster House, which he described as 'a gaunt, ugly farmhouse' which was sparsely furnished, and Curle found that his luggage, due to arrive by boat, had not been delivered. Initially, he also found himself 'without groceries, silver nor linen'.¹² However, he was planning ahead already and, on 28 May, he met with Peter Keith, the agent for Sir Tollemache Sinclair, and a number of other agents, looking for a base from which to survey the western districts of the county. Through them he secured a cottage on the

9 RCAHMS, 1910 Secretary's Letter. Unpublished.

10 Fraser 1988, 5

11 Stell 1983, 85

12 RCAHMS, MS 17, 1

outskirts of Thurso called 'Tigh-na-Mara' which was available for August and for as much of September as he required. Curle found Thurso 'a clean attractive town contrasting favourably with Wick'.¹³

Another consideration for Curle that would resonate with modern fieldworkers was whether the new location would offer any opportunities to meet up with old friends. Thus, on 31 May, Curle recorded that he travelled on the Wick railway with its secretary Mr J L Smith, 'an old friend'.¹⁴ Then on 6 June, he cycled to Yarrows to meet Mr Midwood, an old school friend who he had not seen for twenty-five years.¹⁵

Curle knew he would need some assistance in carrying equipment and measuring, and he had mixed fortunes in acquiring this throughout the summer. 'Labour is scarce here' he recorded on 23 May, but he hired a sixteen-year-old boy to accompany him daily and this proved to be a beneficial hiring.¹⁶ By 12 July Curle had moved to Lybster and had to part with his assistant 'who had become most useful and showed intelligence and interest in his work'. There must have been few to choose from to replace this assistant because the day after, on 13 July, Curle recorded that he had secured another assistant who he describes as 'an uncouth youth with neither intelligence or manners'.¹⁷ More successfully, on 4 August, he recruited a schoolteacher, John Weir from Wishaw, to carry his satchel. Weir had an MA, and Curle recorded he was 'a botanist, geologist etc. and comes from interest in archaeology'.¹⁸

There is no subject mentioned more frequently in the diaries than the weather and Curle often began his daily journal with entries about the weather. A typical entry is for 24 May, 'a lovely day - the first summer day we have had this year', but 26 May was 'stormy and wet with a falling glass'.¹⁹ Often Curle would record how the weather was affecting the amount of physical exertion he needed to expend. On 26 May he recounted how, by the end of the day, they had 'walked about 12 miles under most unpleasant conditions and were glad to get home about 4.30'.²⁰ Occasionally, Curle also mentioned concerns about his own health, such as on 23 June when he recorded 'the tendency to headaches which bothered me in Sutherland is again troubling me'. He resolved to make more use

13 RCAHMS, MS 17, 21

14 RCAHMS, MS 17, 23

15 RCAHMS, MS 17, 36

16 RCAHMS, MS 17, 1

17 RCAHMS, MS 18, 16

18 RCAHMS, MS 18, 108

19 RCAHMS, MS 17, 7, 14

20 RCAHMS, MS 17, 16

of cars where possible as 'the daily bicycling 20 odd miles besides much walking is evidently telling on me'.²¹

However, the bicycle remained the predominant mode of transport, partly because the rail network was so sparse. On 1 June, he cycled westwards to Watten parish 'against a most unpleasant wind' and, on 2 June, faced 'a stormy day'.²² At the end of July and in August, he recorded wet weather, which on a number of days prevented any field survey at all and on 19 August, the weather being wet, Curle wrote notes all day.²³ On 27 August he recorded the weather as 'still wet - finished notes and plotting plans'.²⁴ Finally, field archaeology was, and remains, an outdoor pursuit and Curle often recorded his love for beautiful places and showed his knowledge of nature, and botany in particular. On 28 July, he recorded that it was very beautiful in the valley of Dunbeath Water. He lyrically described how the river 'rushes round great white boulders which stud its bed, and fleck with foam the surfaces of the dark pools which sleep beneath the rocks'.²⁵

The assistance of local people

As we saw above, Curle needed an assistant, but it is evident from the journals that he realised he required all kinds of other help from local people with different knowledge. An interesting feature of the *First Report* on Berwickshire is that few people are thanked in its 'Introduction'. This changed radically in Sutherland where the less well-known archaeology, mostly of a prehistoric type, probably made Curle realise he needed more help from local people. The 'Introduction' to the *Caithness Third Report* acknowledged that proprietors and tenants had offered full facilities to inspect monuments and the Commission was also indebted to 'Ministers of the Gospel as well as the Parish Schoolmasters'. Interestingly, thanks are expressed also to people with 'no official position'.²⁶ We will see how Curle was able to use all these different people in Caithness to inform his work.

The Commissioners seemed particularly conscious of parish ministers as important sources of local information. For instance, at their meeting of 14 October 1908 they resolved that the Secretary should complete the

21 RCAHMS, MS 17, 91
22 RCAHMS, MS 17, 24, 28
23 RCAHMS, MS 19, 39
24 RCAHMS, MS 19, 55
25 RCAHMS, MS 19, 89
26 RCAHMS, 1911a, vi

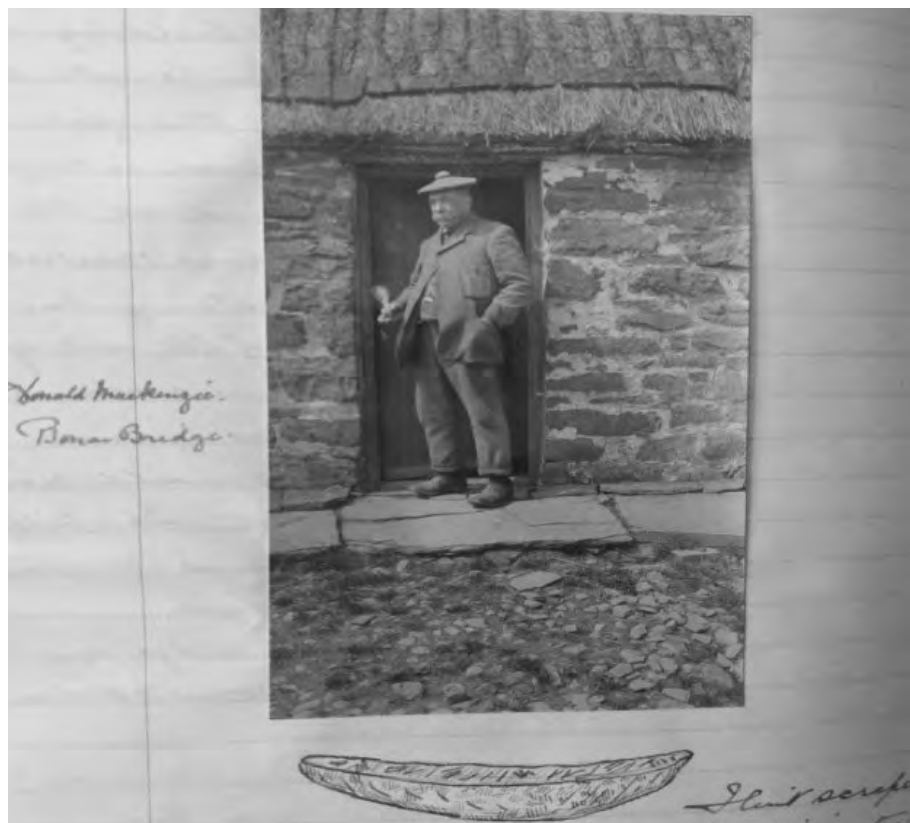


Figure 2: Mr Donald Mackenzie and Curle's drawing of the flint scraper (RCAHMS, MS 17, opposite p.30 © HES)

Sutherland and Caithness surveys next and 'circularise more widely among the ministers of various denominations', presumably because the ministers were not exclusively affiliated to the Church of Scotland and Curle did record productive contacts with other denominations.²⁷ On 21 June, he met a Free Church Minister, the Rev Angus Mackay who told him about a small stone circle near Dirlot Castle and a standing stone near Tullochans'.²⁸

27 RCAHMS, Board Minutes 1908. Unpublished

28 RCAHMS, MS 17, 84

The artefact record

Second only to his function as the surveyor of monuments Curle was interested in pursuing the artefact record, wherever it was in Caithness. His interests covered all periods, though he had a particular fondness for prehistoric flints and arrowheads, the only artefacts for which he used the adjective 'beautiful'. This search would bring him into contact with a wide variety of people and places, highlighted by a prolonged hunt through pottery fragments with John Nicolson.

On 27 May, just five days after his arrival in Caithness, Curle recorded a meeting with a Mr Sutherland, of the schoolhouse at Gersa, who produced a full box of relics from the Cogle Broch.²⁹ Curle noted that the excavation of the broch was planned by John Nicolson and that Mr Sutherland would write up the details of the excavation for the Society of Antiquaries and select suitable artefacts for the museum in Edinburgh.³⁰ On 3 June he visited a Mr Donald Mackenzie from Bonar Bridge who was visiting a nearby croft, and Curle recorded that Mr Mackenzie had found 'a beautiful flint knife or scraper' only a few hours before (see Figure 2).³¹

Curle's interest in artefacts, who had them, where they were found and how they are recorded, continued throughout his journal. As late as 31 August, he recorded that 'Returning from Thurso I sought out Mr John Anderson the engineer at the flour mill as I heard he was a collector'. John Anderson owned a stone axe and a bronze axe and Curle considered these 'articles of extreme importance as both having come from the same cairn'. With his assured eye for detail he added, 'the bronze axe is notched on both sides near the butt, a feature I have not seen before'.³²

Curle was also quite happy to record artefactual pursuits that lead to not very much. On 11 June he met Donald Mackenzie again and recorded that Mr Mackenzie had located the Ring of Killimster. Curle returned to Mr Mackenzie's mother's croft to see several flints that he had picked up. In one of his typical pen portraits Curle described Mr Mackenzie as a retired excise man, an omnivorous collector and man of unusual intelligence. However, Curle also recorded, perhaps rather bluntly to the modern ear, that the collection in Mr Mackenzie's lodging house had 'nothing exposed of any taste whatever'.³³

29 Canmore, ID 8738

30 RCAHMS, MS 17 21 - 22

31 RCAHMS, MS 17, 30

32 RCAHMS, MS 19, 62

33 RCAHMS, MS 17, 55 - 56

It is with John Nicolson's pottery collection that Curle vividly conveyed what a messy and disappointing business the pursuit of artefacts can be. Meeting Nicolson at Nybster on 23 June, Curle noted that Nicolson had a lot of pottery from excavated brochs and resolved to see it before he left the county. So, on 30 August, Curle went to Nybster to examine the pottery from the Keiss brochs, which was stored in Nicolson's barn. He recorded that, 'for hours we stood bending over an improvised table passing sherds of the coarsest pottery through our hands. As the pots lay in boxes crawling with maggots of some type, the task was not a pleasant one'. And the hours produced a disappointing result, '... only one fragment ornamented in any manner whatever' (see Figure 3).³⁴

Successes and disappointments

In an age long before video 'Daily Dig' diaries, Curle uses his journal to reflect on the successes or the failures of a day. On 7 July, Curle went with John Nicolson to Tullochans cottages. There the gamekeeper, Kenneth Sutherland, took them to look at a stone lying among the ruins of a cottage. In his journal, Curle recorded that 'to our delight it proved to be a fragment of runic inscription'.³⁵

Clearly, the search for runic inscriptions was important to both Curle and Nicolson. On 16 September both men went to look, unsuccessfully, for a 'suppositious runic stone' that Nicolson had found two years earlier near the Isauld Burn.³⁶ Curle recorded in his journal the different reactions of the two men to this. Nicolson was disappointed but Curle was less so because his sceptical nature had doubted that a photograph Nicolson possessed of the stone showed a runic inscription at all. He thought the marks on the photograph were more like ice scratches 'than runes cut by the hand of man'.³⁷

One of Curle's most notable successes came on 24 August following up information from a schoolmaster, Mr Gunn, who had said there were stone rows at Dirilot. Curle hired a car to go and find them, and recorded that he 'had the satisfaction of finding them. They are unnotted'.³⁸ Clearly considering this an important find, on 6 September, Curle recorded that he 'wrote up notes and completed plan of survey of stone rows at Dirilot'.³⁹

34 RCAHMS, MS 19, 57 - 58

35 RCAHMS, MS 18, 2

36 RCAHMS, MS 19, 89

37 RCAHMS, MS 19, 91

38 RCAHMS, MS 19, 49

39 RCAHMS, 19, 66

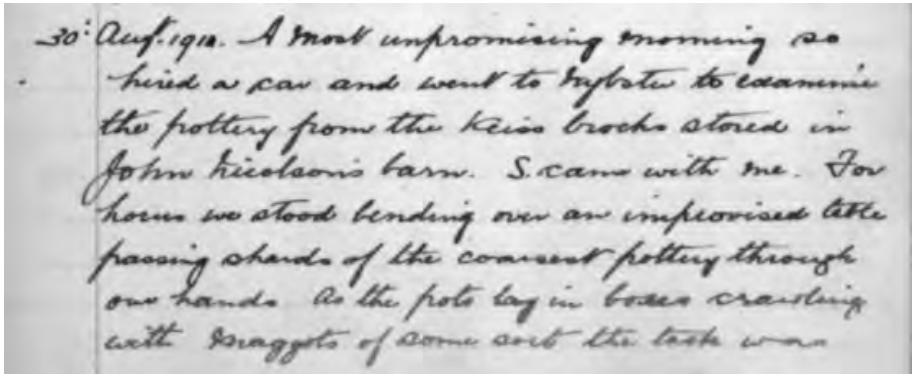


Figure 3: 30 August 1910. 'A most unpromising morning ... For hours we stood bending over an improvised table ...' (RCAHMS, MS 19, 57 © HES)

Unrecorded excavations and encounters with John Nicolson

There are several references in the journals to John Nicolson, a local artist and farmer who had assisted in excavations undertaken by Sir Francis Tress Barry. Nicolson's work as 'one of the unsung heroes of Caithness archaeology' is discussed in Heald and Barber, and the same authors also discuss the sometimes-controversial work of Tress Barry.⁴⁰ Curle looked to Nicolson to assist with the problem of unrecorded excavations, an issue which he had encountered the previous year in Sutherland. The 'Introduction' to the Sutherland Report had pointed out how such unrecorded excavations caused in the loss of information about 'the culture of the prehistoric inhabitants'.⁴¹

On 23 June, Curle met Nicolson at Nybster and recorded that Nicolson retired to his rooms and 'sought out a collection of several unpublished plans of brochs which he has kindly lent to me to make use of'.⁴² On 27 June, Curle visited Broadhaven Broch, which was excavated by Tress Barry, and recorded 'I have a plan by John Nicolson from which a description may be obtained'.⁴³ On the same day he visited Staxigoe Broch, also excavated by Tress Barry, and noted 'the plan by J Nicolson is in my possession'.⁴⁴ In these circumstances, we can safely assume that the concern of Curle

40 Heald and Barber 2015, 29-33, 77-84

41 RCAHMS, 1911, vi

42 RCAHMS, MS 17, 91

43 RCAHMS, MS 17, 98

44 RCAHMS, MS 17, 99

was not just that there were instances of excavated brochs where no plans existed, but also that, if it were not for his own efforts, a number of plans which did exist would probably never see the light of day.

Additionally, the personal qualities of Nicolson made a considerable impact on Curle. In his 5 July entry over two pages, Curle provided a vivid pen portrait of Nicolson, calling him 'one of the most amusing characters I have met in my wanderings'. He described him as a small farmer who has 'neglected farming, it is said, for archaeology'. Nicolson clearly impressed Curle as being a man of many talents who can 'draw, paint and sculpture' and, though his paintings were 'amateurish', he judged them to be 'full of humour'. He was also impressed with Nicolson's drawings of antiquities, which he considered 'neat and accurate'. Nicolson's speech is recorded in detail as 'pronouns and articles are freely dispensed with as superfluous' and he described his accounts of how he got many of his artefacts as 'delightfully humorous'. Curle concluded that Caithness is much indebted to Nicolson for the 'exploitation of its ancient structures'.⁴⁵ On his return to Edinburgh, Curle formalised his thanks to Nicolson in a letter with which he returned the 'numerous plans and sketches which you were good enough to lend the Commission'⁴⁶

Social conditions and a visit to Stroma Island

Curle derived interest from the insights his work gave him into the lives of local people. At a general level, he compared Caithness social conditions to those he had found in Sutherland the previous summer: Curle recorded, 'the crofters here are a pleasanter more intelligent looking race than those in Sutherland, though their condition appears no better and their accommodation worse. They seem even less clean in their houses and persons'.⁴⁷

On 15 July, Curle recorded that he cycled to Rangag as he had heard that the font from the chapel site at Ballachly was at the croft of Rhianacoil. He noted that Mrs Sutherland, the crofter's wife, was a 'dark eyed, sad looking woman with flattish features and black hair' who invited him in for a glass of milk. Inside he noted the house originally had a hearth in the centre of the floor but now the fire burned on an open fireplace beneath the chimney. Like many crofters' houses, the 'roof timbers and thatch were exposed, there being no ceiling'. Curle gave the dimensions of the 'so-

45 RCAHMS, MS 17, 128- 129

46 RCAHMS, Secretary Correspondence 1911. Unpublished

47 RCAHMS, MS 17, 5

called font' at the end of the building but concluded it is a modern trough.⁴⁸

Curle's longest piece of social commentary came on his visit to monuments on the Island of Stroma on 17 September 1910 with Professor Bryce, a Professor of Anatomy at the University of Glasgow and one of the Commissioners. It is a journal entry which to the contemporary mind, reads like a travelogue from a visit to a rather strange tribe. Curle recorded that the two-mile sea crossing could be perilous as the tides can 'rush and boil', however, conditions on the day were favourable and made with four mariners, 'one of them with his shaggy white locks, blue eyes and ruddy colour, a veritable Viking'.⁴⁹

Curle recounted how there were no fences on the island and all the animals were tethered. The crops seemed good and the houses comfortable and clean. However, though 'people live to a great age', the population was diminishing at the time of his visit due to 'emigration to the colonies' and 'no new blood comes to Stroma'. He noted the presence of consumptive illness among the population and attributed this to 'too much intermarriage' and observed of the population that 'racially they appear to be of pure Scandinavian stock'. These sentiments may sit rather uncomfortably with the modern mind but Curle was only using the current terminology to describe and explain the differences between people. However, we have no reason to doubt Curle when he speaks of the reputation of Stroma islanders as boat builders and that many of the fishing boats used on the mainland were built on Stroma. When speaking of Stroma men's skills at sea he adds the intriguing fact that 'the loss of a Stroma man at sea is almost unknown'.⁵⁰

Local superstition and legend

Curle was interested in all forms of local eccentricity whether it was in speech, legend or superstition. He clearly did not think it was in any way beneath a man of his education to record and preserve knowledge of such matters. Indeed, such matters could have an effect on the preservation of monuments, for instance, a belief that ill would befall anyone interfering with the houses of the ancestors.

On 26 June he was at Camster Farm where the local farmer gave him information about a low mound surrounded by a trench. Curle recorded that the farmer was a man aged about fifty years but with the superstitious

48 RCAHMS, MS 18, 28-29

49 RCAHMS, MS 19, 96

50 RCAHMS, MS 19, 97 - 98

beliefs of a former age. The farmer said the mound had been much higher but a former laird had taken many of the stones for re-use. The farmer said that because of the laird's temerity many of his stock had died.⁵¹ Curle was 'delighted' to be told in all seriousness that, as recently as one hundred years ago, Picts still occupied the Caithness 'Picts Houses' and if the farmer's grandfather listened carefully, he could hear them sharpening their knives. Curle humorously suggested that perhaps the 'Picts' had disappeared because they had all been rounded up by the School Boards to attend school but this suggestion 'was not well received'.⁵²

In a 1912 *Scottish Historical Review* article, Curle reflects on tales, myths and legends. He clearly has regrets that 'education has slain all these wonder folk with the hard logic of facts'. However, he observes that there is still a harvest of legend and lore to be gathered in Scotland by 'those who have the opportunity and the will to use it'.⁵³

Completing the Caithness survey and Curle's self-evaluation

An interesting feature of the journals is that Curle mentioned other people much more frequently in the first two volumes than in the final one. It may be that he was still meeting people but that these meetings were taking a secondary place in his recordings as pressure mounted on him to complete his task that summer. On 3 August, he had caught up with his notes but decided to take an afternoon off 'as I have worked continuously through the last three Saturdays'.⁵⁴ Another concern was that the weather was holding up his work. On 16 August, he recorded that 'the weather for the last month has been most disagreeable'.⁵⁵ One of the main pressures seems to have been relieved in September as Curle did record 'the weather has improved of late and we seem destined to enjoy a fine September'.⁵⁶

On 22 September, Curle left Thurso for the eleven-hour journey back to Edinburgh. In his journal entry, he reflected on his own achievements and the major obstacles he had faced: 'It has been a bad summer as far as the weather was concerned, worse even than that of last year'. Yet there is no hiding Curle's tone of quiet satisfaction with the archaeology he had

51 RCAHMS, MS 17, 101

52 RCAHMS, MS 17, 102

53 Curle 1912, 267

54 RCAHMS, MS 18, 107

55 RCAHMS, MS 19, 25

56 RCAHMS, MS 19, 82

surveyed and recorded: 'The county has yielded much more than I expected that was unknown. I have increased the list of brochs to nearly 150, I have added some twelve long cairns to those already known and I have found a class of structure in the Parish of Latheron previously unknown. These I shall call "galleried dwellings" as the most descriptive term I can think of'.⁵⁷

The brochs in Wick parish

Using these brochs as an example, we can explore in Curle's journals and the *Third Report*, Curle's approach to monument protection in the specifics of one class of monument in this particular parish. In the final published *Third Report*, of the twenty-seven brochs in Wick Parish, seven were deemed specially in need of protection, eleven deserving protection but not at imminent risk of demolition or decay, and nine fell into neither category.⁵⁸ Of relevance is the somewhat controversial excavation work of Sir Francis Tress Barry. Curle noted twenty-four brochs in the county had been excavated 'a larger number than in any other county,' and Heald and Barber confirm that Barry did excavate more brochs than any other individual.⁵⁹ They assign fifteen of the twenty-four broch excavations to Barry with the proviso that modern interpretation might not interpret all the sites as brochs.⁶⁰

Killimster Broch is good example of a broch especially in need of protection and the subject of excavation by Barry (see Figure 4).

Partly excavated by Barry, Curle noted that the interior of Killimster Broch was ruinous and the shaley stone was rapidly disintegrating. Further, with his focus on the archaeological record, Curle would have been concerned that there was no published report of the 1904 excavation and Nicolson's plan was the only record. Of the seven brochs specially in need of protection, Barry had excavated six and Dr Joseph Anderson had excavated the remaining one in the 1880s. In the 'Introduction' to the *Third Report*, the Commission was particularly hard hitting and reflected Curle's concerns. The numerous excavated brochs in the county needed urgent attention or they would be reduced 'in a few years' time to crumbling heaps of stone'.⁶¹ The same 'Introduction' deprecates interference with monuments 'unless

57 RCAHMS, MS 19, 112-113

58 RCAHMS, 1911b, vii-xii

59 RCAHMS, 1911b, xxxi

60 Heald and Barber 2015, 78-79

61 RCAHMS, 1911, iv

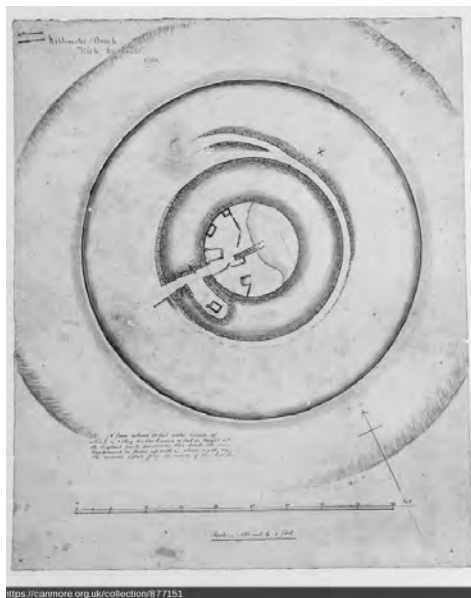


Figure 4: Plan of Killimster Broch by John Nicholson, drawn in 1904 (Nicholson Archive 146/2/1, Cat. No. SC877151 © HES)

under the supervision of persons skilled in archaeology' which would ensure they were carefully planned and recorded.⁶²

Having surveyed Sutherland brochs, a question on Curle's mind in Caithness was whether all brochs were more or less the same. He in fact noticed several differences between the two counties, and this also clearly influences his thinking on monument protection. Two stairs on either side of the entrance court existed in Caithness but were 'not observed anywhere in the neighbouring county'.⁶³ Equally, outbuildings were rare in Sutherland but numerous in Caithness, an example being Nybster broch with Nicolson's plan shown in Figure 5.

Three out of the seven brochs especially in need of protection had either substantial out-buildings or two stairways. Therefore, we can see how the adverse effects of Barry's excavation and the unique Caithness broch features influenced his views on monument protection. There is an irony when considering the brochs deemed not at imminent risk or not in need of protection. Grassy mounds substantially covered many of these and it seems they were considered to be in less danger under this natural protection than those exposed to the elements by excavation. This could be said to be consistent with modern preservation ideas.

The return to Caithness

Curle did not just abandon Caithness after the survey was completed but returned later in pursuit of other research objectives. His first Caithness

62 RCAHMS, 1911, v

63 RCAHMS, 1911, xxxii

excavation had been the Wag at Longwell in 1910.⁶⁴ His research objectives were pursued notably from 1937 at Freswick Links and he also produced, for instance, several reports on excavations at the Wag of Forse where he was working until he was eighty-one years old.⁶⁵

Curle had visited Freswick Links in 1910 and identified a broch there. However, nothing of Viking or Norse date was noted in the whole 1910 survey. In the 1930s Curle excavated at the important Norse settlement site of Jarlshof in Shetland. He thought the most likely place for such settlement in Caithness was on the Wick and Thurso River estuaries

but the modern towns had most likely buried or removed the evidence. The gently shelving beach he knew at Freswick seemed a possible candidate. In the 1920s and 1930s, a number of Norse artefacts had been handed in to the National Museum from Freswick and it is worth noting the role of a local man Simon Bremner in recovering several of these artefacts.⁶⁶ Bremner was a significant figure in his own right, included in a list along with Nicolson of people that Heald and Barber say, 'are the real champions of the county's stunning archaeology'.⁶⁷ Returning to Freswick in June 1937, Curle made an outcropping wall a starting point and found it was the north face of 'a typical Viking wall', a metre in width with a core of compacted earth.⁶⁸ Again Simon Bremner was a key contributor, supervising locals in the excavation work.⁶⁹

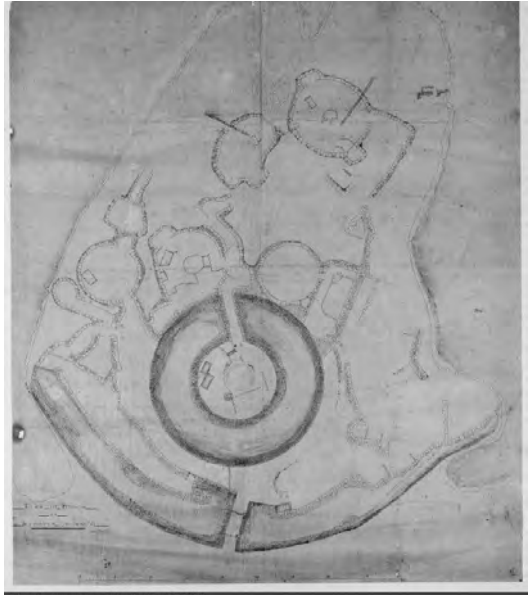


Figure 5: Plan of Nybster Broch by John Nicolson, drawn in 1896 (Nicolson Archive 146/2/1. Cat. No SC877283. ©HES)

64 Heald and Barber 2015, 123.

65 Heald and Barber 2015, 123-126.

66 Heald and Barber 2015, 132

67 Heald and Barber 2015, 151.

68 Curle 1939, 73

69 Heald and Barber 2015, 132



Figure 6: Curle in his Drawing Room at 24 Learmonth Gardens, Edinburgh (Ritchie: 2002, 19. Canmore, SC1128460 ©HES)

Curle identified three groups of buildings at Freswick and offered various interpretations for these structures. Batey completed a major re-appraisal of Curle's excavations in 1987 and she developed a revised phasing for the different elements of the site. Batey supported Curle's interpretation of one building as a smithy, but Curle's identification of a 'bath house' required further scrutiny because of stratigraphic evidence and the absence of parallels elsewhere.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, Graham-Campbell and Batey confirm the buildings are clearly of Norse date 'showing a concentration of activity in the Late Norse period'.⁷¹ Curle's discoveries at Freswick added a completely new dimension to the history of Caithness and, as the first Norse settlement discovered on mainland Scotland, was arguably a seminal contribution to the archaeology of Scotland as a whole.

General conclusions

In his 1910 survey, his contribution to a monument protection framework, and his return to Freswick Links later, Alexander Curle made a hugely important contribution to the archaeology of not just that county but to that of Scotland as a whole. Curle's self-evaluation of what he had achieved in Caithness was reflected in the 'Introduction' to the *Third Report*

70 Batey 1987, 92 - 93

71 Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 201

which recognized the prolonged physical exertion and the 'indefatigable zeal' of Curle in surveying the county and 'transacting the clerical work of the Commission with thorough efficiency'.⁷² Davidson and Henshall regarded the completion of the survey and the publication of the report in less than a year as 'a staggering achievement especially in such rough terrain and at that time'. What was also noticeable to them, writing in 1991, was the comprehensive nature of what Curle had recorded. Forty-six chambered cairns had been added to the fourteen already known. Ten amorphous mounds described by Curle had since been recognised as chambered cairns. This meant that only four sites unrecorded by Curle had been subsequently recognised as chambered cairns.⁷³ More recently, Heald and Barber have described Curle's survey as 'a remarkable piece of work' and 'the cornerstone of any understanding of the county's archaeology'.⁷⁴

Although this study has discussed the brochs in Wick parish, there was, arguably, an important and unexpected consequence from Curle's achievement in recording and extending the known prehistoric monuments in Caithness (and in Sutherland). The consequence was in his surveys redirecting attention to the importance of all the other prehistoric monuments besides brochs. Batey argues that this counter-weight 'was the first departure from the obsession with broch examination'.⁷⁵

Ritchie describes Alexander Curle and (his brother James) as 'pillars of the establishment'.⁷⁶ Ritchie's description does suggest a figure who was very remote and conservative, and Alexander Curle probably did move within very distinct social circles for most of life, but the Caithness journals do show that Curle, though to an extent an authority figure, could also relate to, and win the co-operation of, a wide variety of people at different levels of society as he carried out his task. They show he wanted to understand how local people lived and thought and demonstrate his belief that many local people had an important role in recording and preserving the material remains of the past.

Of course, monuments were his focus, but we have seen, for instance, that he was interested in the artefact record, and where it was held and by whom. Clearly Curle was interested in more than 'Ancient Monuments and Constructions' to use the official RCAHMS terminology, and the journals demonstrate that he had a particular view of the past - not as a

72 RCAHMS, 1911b, v.

73 Davidson and Henshall 1991, 8

74 Heald and Barber 2015, 123.

75 Batey 1987, Part 1, 7

76 Ritchie 2002, 19

static, 'lost' past, but a past which lived on in the present. It lived on in the knowledge and interest of the local people, like John Nicolson and Simon Bremner, in the monuments and artefacts that were around them and were open to continuing discovery. Heald and Barber see John Nicolson and 'his equivalents in the twenty-first century' as the people and process through which county archaeology is 'discovered preserved and disseminated'.⁷⁷ Arguably, the assorted gamekeepers, ministers and other local people who assisted Curle, were in their own small way contributors to such a process.

The journals are valuable because none of these beliefs come across from the published *Third Report* and, as a survey of monuments, we would not expect to find them there. What also comes across from the diaries is Curle's own authority and learning. He also displays a degree of humility in acknowledging the contribution of people who often had much less formal education than himself. His tone may sound a little patrician at times to the modern mind and his views on 'racial' characteristics sound distinctly outmoded, but he was of course living in much less-egalitarian times. However, through his contacts with local people and his own 'wanderings', what he helped to build on was a method of discovering the past, which did not depend only on excavations, museums, libraries and learned articles.

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Illustrations

- Figure 1: A O Curle, Secretary - 1908-13 (Canmore: 1128640 ©HES)
- Figure 2: Mr Donald Mackenzie and Curle's drawing of the flint scraper (RCAHMS, MS 17, opposite p.30 © HES)
- Figure 3: 30 August 1910. 'A most unpromising morning ... For hours we stood bending over an improvised table ...' (RCAHMS, MS 19, 57 © HES)
- Figure 4: Plan of Killimster Broch by John Nicholson, drawn in 1904 (Nicolson Archive 146/2/1, Cat. No. SC877151 © HES)
- Figure 5: Plan of Nybster Broch by John Nicolson, drawn in 1896 (Nicolson Archive 146/2/1. Cat. No SC877283 ©HES)
- Figure 6: Curle in his Drawing Room at 24 Learmonth Gardens, Edinburgh (Ritchie: 2002, 19 © HES)