

ARCHAEOLOGY

Map on Cover

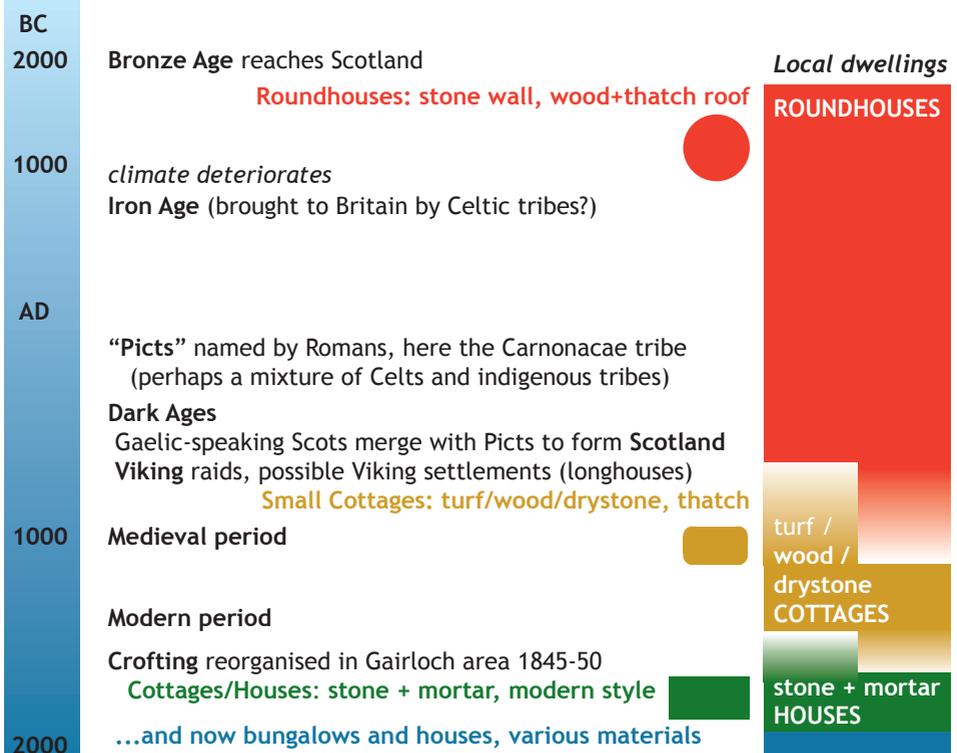
The Gairloch area as a whole is rich in archaeological remains, especially of Bronze/Iron Age roundhouses and 19th century crofts.

The remains of more than 125 roundhouses have so far been found within 8 miles of Gairloch, with the biggest concentration inland from Big Sand. The relatively high number surviving and visible is partly explained by the lack of disturbance by forestry and farming in comparison with elsewhere, but also it must have been a popular district.

After the roundhouses, the evidence at first is scant: shielings, traces of simple cottages, walls and signs of agriculture, surprisingly no Viking remains yet found. Then in the mid-19th century the crofting was reorganised by Gairloch Estate, and the improved cottages (or their ruins) survive in large numbers.

The small, accessible and fertile **Achtercairn Paths** area gives a good picture of the earlier stages: ten roundhouses, associated field systems, later shieling huts and animal pens, re-used fields with rig and furrow agriculture, one probable cottage foundation. But there was no crofting here; instead it became part of Achtercairn Farm and was used for grazing of cattle and then sheep. In 2002 the area became part of the Baile Mor tree planting scheme.

WARNING! In Archaeology, the key word is “perhaps”! Unlike History, it does not deal in precise facts or dates. Theories and interpretation of the evidence are always open to question.



ROUNDHOUSES

The ten Bronze/Iron Age “Roundhouses” in this area are the meagre remains of the original houses, also called “hut circles”. They should perhaps be called “round buildings” because they may not all have been houses: some roundhouses elsewhere have been found with no sign of habitation, but used for storage, livestock, or even ritual. They may date from any time between 2000 BC and 800 AD or later; surprisingly, larger ones tend to be older. It is unlikely that they were all built or used at the same time, and some may be replacements of others. The inhabitants were farmers; this area was certainly once good farmland as is shown by the evidence of all the walls and the later rig and furrow agriculture (p18).

The circumference was normally a thick stone wall, or more commonly two walls filled in with turf or rubble, about a metre high. The roof was more or less conical, on wooden beams resting on the wall and normally supported by an inner ring of wooden posts; it was thatched with heather, bracken, rushes etc. Large houses may have had a wooden platform as an upper floor. There was one entrance, often with an extended porch to shelter it, most commonly facing south-east. In houses there was a hearth fire on a stone platform in the centre of the floor (this may be used for carbon-dating); smoke filtered through the roof. Water often had to be carried some distance.

This design was remarkably popular all over Scotland. Its advantages were that it is strong, quick to build, and easy to plan (rectangles are harder to draw!). The shape is also found in the Crannog (a roundhouse built over water; possible examples on Loch Tollie and Loch Kernsary) and the Broch, which is probably a status-enhancing and defensive development of the roundhouse. Oddly, no Brochs have been found near Gairloch (the nearest are at Applecross and near Ullapool).

Later, stones from old roundhouse walls were often used for building field walls and huts. As a result the roundhouses in this area are typically visible only as low rings on a flat platform. Some have been more or less cleared of vegetation; some may be covered by heather, grass or bracken but if you walk round the circle you may be able to feel stones underfoot. There may be others still to be found!

In the following descriptions, the outside diameter is given first. In the pictures the area of the roundhouse is highlighted when unclear and the path is a white line. *Words in ITALICS are speculation, not fact.*

Roundhouse 1

8m. 5m from the Hill Path above an old fence-post. In a prominent position on a slightly raised platform, peat-covered. A probable large extended entry and ramp, which has been blocked by two boulders, *deliberately? (if so, why?)*



Roundhouse 2

6m, the smallest. 3m from the Hill Path. Very irregular stones, and possibly a single wall. Two possible entrances. *May not be a dwelling.* Signs of a small later structure inside? Below it in a complicated rocky area is a possible shieling hut/pen.



Roundhouse 3

10m. The Hill Climb path crosses its edge. Rough, damaged by tree-planting. *Perhaps most stones were robbed for building the Fank.* Has a fine outlook, sited on the only flat space on this hillside. The large field **F4** probably belongs to it.



R3

Roundhouse 4

12m. 30m from the main path along a side path. A clear hollow, the walls buried. Entrance probably towards the Old Wood. Small structure, *perhaps a lambing pen*, attached NW. Field **F5** may have been first developed by it, although the field walls are later.



R4

Roundhouse 5

9m. 3m from the path, 10m before a rock outcrop which gives it shelter. Some stones visible on one side, but on the other it is little more than a raised platform. *Most stones have presumably been taken for nearby later wall-building.* Also in Field **F5**.



R5

Roundhouse 6

8m. 5m from the path, beyond a mysterious line of boulders, sheltered by a small hill. Appears to slope, but the floor must have been flat originally. Clear thick or double wall. *Ruin of what might have been a stone hut/pen* just inside it. Rough, damaged by tree-planting. Clear entrance on the opposite side.



R6

Roundhouse 7

11m. 11m from the path, south of a small hill. Unclear, in heather. Close to the Field **F6** on the other side of the path, *which may have been associated with it.* Like R8 it would be visible from the sea.



R7

Roundhouse 8: See the next page.

Roundhouse 9

13m. Over a slight col to the south of R8, along an animal path. A “join the dots” one: a platform with few remaining stones: *largely dismantled to make the field wall which crosses its edge and possibly R8, of which it may have been a predecessor.* Entrance SE with probable extended porch.



R9

Roundhouse 10

Well away from the others and very unclear! Discover it yourself if you can get at it (p3). What is inside it?

Roundhouse 8

17.5m outside diameter. 30m from the main path along a side path. It has been cleared of vegetation to reveal the scale of the walls, and the various other structures which have been built in it or around it. It is one of the most impressive in Wester Ross (the one at Mellon Udrigle is about the same size): in a prominent site, exceptionally large, with a 2m thick wall and a floor area of about 133 m². Collecting and moving the heavy stones of which it is made must have involved a lot of manpower.

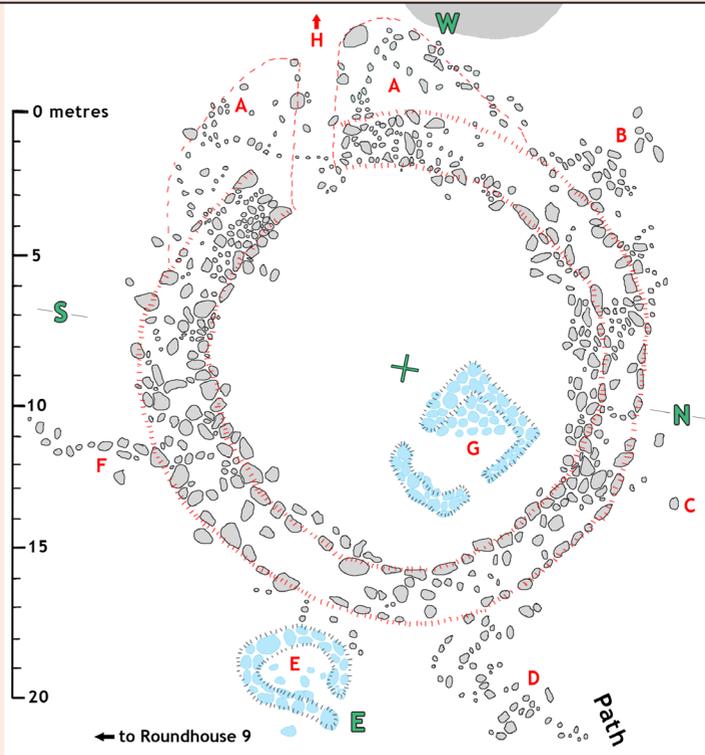
Try to work out where the inside and the outside of the wall were: there are places where they are clear especially on the inside (why?), but many of the stones have fallen or been removed. Also speculate on all the stones inside and outside the circle: have they tumbled off the wall? are they remains of contemporary or later buildings or walls? if so, what was their design and purpose? More than two stones in a line may be chance or may be significant!

This roundhouse invites many questions. We can only guess at the answers to most of them, and your interpretations may be as good as anyone's!

- **Who built it?** Its commanding position and its size imply that it was built by someone of high status who wanted to be noticed, from the sea as well as the land. He may have had a large extended family, in which case it may have had a wooden platform as an upper floor. Alternatively, it may have been used not as a dwelling but for communal purposes; the fact that the entrance faces SW may support this idea (most were SE).
- **When was it built?** This remains to be found out. Large ones tend to be early.
- **How big were the walls?** The highest part now visible is in the north, perhaps 1.5m above the original ground level, and the wall may have been about this height. Its

Other Structures

- A:** possible extended entrance giving shelter - - - - -
- B:** ?
- C:** field wall, probably contemporary **F7** "home field"; partly buried
- D:** ?
- E:** shieling hut, old style (D-shaped)
- F:** field wall, probably contemporary **F7/8** "home fields"; buried beyond here
- G:** shieling hut, newer style (rectangular, two entrances)
- H:** (20m down hill) wall, perhaps contemporary but rebuilt, and animal pen? 70m beyond is a probable cottage (p18)





View from the small hill to the west

2m thickness was two walls with a filling of turf and rubble. The inner wall may be clearer because it was preserved to be used as an enclosure by later farmers.

- **What was the roof like?** There is some controversy about roundhouse roofs: they were probably either a cone or a flattened cone. There were upright supporting posts, wooden roof beams and joists. Where did the wood come from? There is no evidence of large trees having grown anywhere in this area, but there may have been woods around the coast or perhaps a predecessor of the Old Wood.
- **Where was the entrance?** The only possible place seems to be in the SW facing the sea; unfortunately this part has lost most of its stones. This is an unusual direction, facing the prevailing weather, but there was probably an extended entrance (walls or heaps of stones) to give shelter (A). Also the weather may have been better then!
- **Where did all the stones come from?** The whole area was covered by boulders dropped by glaciers, mostly now buried under soil and peat. These must have been collected over the centuries to build walls and houses; and each new building scheme used stones from earlier ones. The builders of this roundhouse may have cannibalised the neighbouring R9. They may also have cleared new fields and used the stones found there. Compare the equally massive 19th century Fank.
- **What has happened to the missing stones?** Many stones have simply tumbled off the walls. But many have been robbed to build later structures and walls. For example, those around the entrance must have been rolled 20m down the hill to make the later wall (or wall improvements) and structure there.
- **What work did the residents do?** If this was a dwelling, they were basically farmers. There are walled fields in all directions, and some or all of these may have been made or used by them (p18). F7 and F8 seem to be “home fields”; F8 may also have had a defensive (or ostentatious!) purpose, with a cliff-top wall.
- **What are the other structures in and around it?** The roundhouse served as a useful quarry for later builders (see the plan opposite). The clear structures (E,G,H) were built later, using stones from the roundhouse, and are assumed to be shieling huts and a pen (p19). The unclear ones (B,D) are no more than vague lines of well buried stones; they may have been outbuildings of the roundhouse, or shieling huts or pens which are older than the others.



An archaeological dig is taking place in June 2012 which may answer some of the questions posed here: watch for news in the Museum and Information Centre.

FARMING

Post-Roundhouse Dwellings

Roundhouses may have continued in use surprisingly late, but they began to be replaced by small rectangular one-room cottages with rounded corners, made of turf, wood and wattle-and-daub on a stone base, or later drystone (stone with no mortar), thatched, no windows (“hovels”, said outsiders!). This change of shape may have been influenced by the Vikings who built turf longhouses with stone bases, although no Viking remains have yet been found near Gairloch, in spite of Norse names ending in *-dale*, *-aig* etc. There is one site in this area, NW of R8, which is probably the remains of the stone base for such a **cottage**; it is impossible to date it – perhaps 18th century. There is no other sign that anyone lived permanently in this area.

Walls

Prehistoric. There are a lot of walls here! Most of the old walls which criss-cross this area seem to have been built originally by the roundhouse builders. These consist of rather large stones: (1) separate, sometimes called “dog’s tooth”, which were either simple land boundary markers, or may have been filled in with turf, wood etc to make walls; (2) more continuous stones making a wall (or the base of one).



Prehistoric “dog’s tooth” wall

Later. Many of the original walls were adapted by later farmers by adding more stones, turf, wattles etc. The youngest walls are drystone (mortar-less) dykes, mostly now ruined (e.g. up the hill from An Achlais, and probably **F5**); the Fank is a fine example of the technique. There were also probably some turf dykes in boggy areas, which barely survive (e.g. **F6** north). It is, as usual, hard to date most of the walls!

Fields

The eleven or more fields (**F1-11** are on the map) may all have been created by the roundhouse builders, for barley or (AD) oats and rye, or for their cattle and sheep.

Many were re-used later. **F4, 5, 6, 10 and 11** and some other places now show evidence of post-roundhouse **rig and furrow** ploughed cultivation (ridges and ditches, **A** on the map); this is best seen when a low sun casts shadows and the bracken is down. To thicken and fertilise the thin soil, seaweed was spread on it and then soil from the ditches on top of that. Smaller ridges made by hand rather than plough are called “Lazy Beds” (*lazy* here means *uncultivated*: the ground below the ridges was not dug up). Crops such as oats, barley, and (from about 1750) potatoes would be grown.

F1 and **F3** are very small, and may have been animal enclosures. The rigs just north-east of the Fank in **F4**, crossed by the Shortcut path, are virtually terraces. **F6** has clear rigs, but appears to be a very poor, boggy field; it looks as if there has also been peat cutting here. **F8** seems unsuitable for animals (cliffs) or crops (little soil): was it a defensive area for R8? **F11** is the clearest field, and south-facing.



F11: Walled rig and furrow field



The rigs and furrows we can see now represent the most recent cultivation. They may have been part of the “runrig” system: communal fields whose rigs were allocated annually by lot. Or they may have been made by the Farm (below).

Shielings

The most important domestic animals were small black cattle, along with sheep and goats. They were taken into the hills in summer to the summer pasture areas,

the “shielings”, while crops were grown in the fields below, and then back down to the fields in winter (this process, called transhumance, is still seen in the Alps).

There is evidence that there were shielings in this area, in spite of its closeness to wherever the farmers lived. They are from before 1800, when Achtercairn Farm was set up and took over the whole area (see below).

- There are the remains of various **small structures**: at least three around R8 (p16), one near R2, two a short way up the Hill Path on the right, possibly one in R6. These could be **shieling huts** for those who looked after the animals; or **stores** for equipment used for farming or milking or cheese-making, or indeed for cheeses; or **shelters** or roof-less **pens** for animals. All the livestock, even hens, would be brought up here in summer: it was a busy place!

- Two of the **fields** have traditional shieling names given on 1875 OS map: **Achadh Airigh nan Eun** (Field of the Shieling of the Bird, F5); and **Achadh Ruigh a' Ghobhainn** (Field of the Blacksmith's Shieling land), now just inside the Old Wood.

How the shielings relate to the arable fields here is a matter of speculation, although there were sometimes hill fields on shieling land used for growing crops.

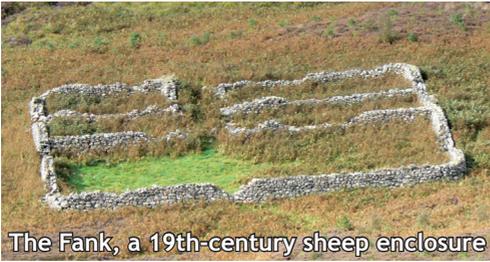
Achtercairn Farm: 1800

The New Farm. The Gairloch Estate records of 1800 tell of the setting-up of a farm, rented by Kenneth MacPherson from the estate for £30 a year and taking in all the former 17 smallholdings of Achtercairn plus “all the Shieling and Grazing belonging to them”, i.e. this area. (One hopes that the former inhabitants were employed by the farm or given new homes!) The main farm comprised the lower fields, which are half built over today by the village, but this area was presumably used as hill grazing for the farm's cattle; perhaps some of the fields were also still used for crops.

The farmer was to build “stone dykes of four foot high on either side” as a boundary. This probably explains the extraordinary ruined **wall** which climbs from An Achlais high up round the east side of the hill, and eventually descends beyond R10 (it makes a challenging exploratory scramble to follow it, although much is buried). Like many walls around here it makes use of naturally placed rocks and cliff lines where possible.

Crofting. In **1845-50** the Gairloch Estate reorganised crofting, replacing the cottage and runrig system with separate four-acre smallholdings and improved houses; some people were relocated, but there were no serious “clearances” on this estate. The crofts were all beyond Achtercairn River, and the farm and this area were unaffected.

Cattle. Each year a proportion of the cattle from local crofters, and now also from the farm, were driven to market in Easter Ross, whence they might be taken on to the south; the income paid the crofters' rents. The drove route was to Poolewe, across



The Fank, a 19th-century sheep enclosure

the River Ewe, and to Kinlochewe by a route north of Loch Maree. It is known, for example, that the Achtercairn farmer Murdo Macdonald took 209 cattle to market in 1841. The area east of the Cattle Grid is named on an old map **Buaile na Tuatha**, Cattle-fold of the Tenantry: presumably this was where the cattle were gathered before setting out to Poolewe.

Sheep. Around 1850 sheep were introduced (later than elsewhere), and the grazing area was greatly enlarged; there is a shepherd in the census of 1851, and two in 1861. The very fine **Fank** (a Scots word for a sheep enclosure) must have been built at this time, probably by the Estate for the farmer, Peter Robertson; it appears on the 1875 OS map (the first) as a “sheepfold”. Sheep were taken to Dingwall Market on foot until 1938 when a lorry was first used. The Fank was last used in 1944, and a concrete replacement was made beyond R10. You can see the remains of several sheep fences. Now that the area is part of the **tree-planting scheme** (p28), it is no longer used for any kind of farming. The end of grazing has allowed vegetation to flourish (excessively?).

TRACKS

Above Stile to Old Wood

This path follows the old road to Poolewe. There must have been an earlier route for cattle-drovers, postmen and others, but according to Dixon in his “Gairloch” guide of 1886 (now reprinted, and essential reading!) the first road was built by Sir Hector Mackenzie in 1825. In the Old Wood the road is lost, but it emerges on the A832 main road beyond the Quarry; then it takes the pass to the north of the A832 before descending to join it near Loch Tollaidh.

One section in this area seems to have been moved. The route originally appears to have gone to the north of the Fank, then as a well-made section of the Shortcut path, across the Alltan na h-Achlaise burn and along its north side, before entering field **F5** through a gate which is now blocked with stones and leaving the field where the path enters it. It is not clear why and when it was moved.

The road was replaced about 1850 by the route of the present A832 up Achtercairn Brae. The reason was probably to cater for the wheeled vehicles which had at last reached Gairloch in 1849 with the building of the “Destitution Road” along Loch Maree, one of four key roads built here to create employment during the potato famine.

Old Wood to Cattle Grid

This path follows the line of a well-built track for much of the way, but is not marked on any maps. Perhaps it was built when the main Poolewe road was moved from its old route to the present route, to maintain access to fields.

(The path south from the Cattle Grid was probably made by the tree-planters’ vehicles.)

Hill Path

Above R1 this looks like another old track, probably to a peat cutting area further inland (a “peat track”); but it was enlarged for the tree-planting scheme (p28). Evidence of the enlargement is seen in boulders which have been dug out and moved aside, showing a “tide-line” where they were below ground and no lichen grew. The digging has caused water erosion in the middle section.