

NEWSLETTER July 2013

Dates for your diary

28 September - 13 October

Highland Archaeology Festival

Many events being planned, including NOSAS led walks to Urchany and Castle Leod

12 and 13 October

Highland Archaeology Festival Conference

Highland Council Chamber, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness

Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) update

Thank you for your responses on the draft constitution, which the Committee has reviewed and a final version has been agreed. We have again discussed our application to become a SCIO with the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR), and have decided that we should hold the vote of members on the decision to become a SCIO before submitting the application.

Subject to approval by the Committee on 13 August we will issue a formal resolution for consideration by members, and vote at the AGM on 12 October. Under our current constitution a 2/3 majority of members present and voting is necessary to pass the resolution. If approved, the application will then be submitted to OSCR and if successful NOSAS and NOSAS SCIO will co-exist for a period while the Committee manages the transition.

Further information will be provided after the next Committee meeting, but if you have any questions or observations in the meanwhile, please let me know.

Anne Coombs, Chair

The eighty-seven steps or All aboard for Island Roan

After consultation with Sutherland Estates, who saw no problem with our visit, NOSAS members converged on Skerry Harbour early on the morning of 25th May to cross to Eilean nan Ron or Island Roan as it is often called.

We had been expecting an icy plunge ashore at the only beach, but the good news, as Jonie had explained at a sociable briefing in the Tongue Hotel, was that there was also a proper landing place on Island Roan. So, unlike the seals from which the island's name derives, it appeared that we might arrive with dignity unimpaired. The bad news was that there were eighty-seven steps from the quay to the top of the cliff above. Jonie tactfully left out any mention of the extra steps needed to disembark at the end of the day when the tide was several metres lower. She did however feel obliged to mention the metal handrail whose reassuring presence, she emphasised, was not to be relied upon.

Thus it was that, thanks to the organisational efforts of Jonie, Richard and Beth, 22 lifejacketed NOSAS members along with Jo Hambly from SCAPE went to sea in a RIB, in successive cohorts from Skerry Harbour. With Jonie as chief engineer, helmsman and pilot, able-seamanly assisted by Richard, we took our places in "Seahorse", following instructions to stand with knees bent, holding firmly to the grab rail. It was not without some nervous anticipation that we observed that the crew members were attired in dry suits, aptly complemented by a pair of yellow fins (labelled "Richard") at hand in the bottom



Seahorse

Colin Miller

of the boat. With the sunshine highlighting the startling orange cliffs of Eilean Naoimh, "Seahorse" edged carefully out past the skerries, before developing full speed and planing out over the sparkling waters of the kyle towards low-lying Island Roan, a mile and a half away to the northwest. Making landfall in just a few exhilarating minutes, our crew had judged the tide perfectly, with the water lapping the landing platform allowing an easy step ashore, where we huddled auk-like on a tidal concrete ledge between tall cliffs and unfathomed depths.



Steps and harbour

Colin Miller

The landing platform, steps and associated "harbour" are in themselves a remarkable structure in mass concrete, linking together firstly, an exposed rock promontory, ascended somewhat alarmingly up its nose by the eighty-seven steps; secondly, the landing platform, itself constructed on handy rock ledges; and thirdly, a partially enclosed harbour comprising a deep natural channel in the wave-cut platform to which the only feasible approach by boat would be through a long tunnel under the aforementioned promontory.

New visitors take note: this is not a place to be in a high wind, even if one were to achieve a successful landing. The steps are crumbling, the promontory drops off into the sea on both sides of the path, and the surviving sections of handrail are not to be trusted. An alternative beach landing option is via the wide inlet immediately to the south, where a narrow path corkscrews up the coastal slope.

Undeterred (and with little choice) we mounted the steps with determination and due care, finding ourselves on a gently undulating clifftop with close-cropped heath and grassland. A few hundred yards away, the scattered shells of deserted and broken houses beckoned us to the settlement, while chocolate-brown and brockit sheep grazed the green lands that once bore crops of oats, potatoes, turnips and hay. A remarkable quantity of gear had somehow accompanied us on



The steps

Anne Cockroft

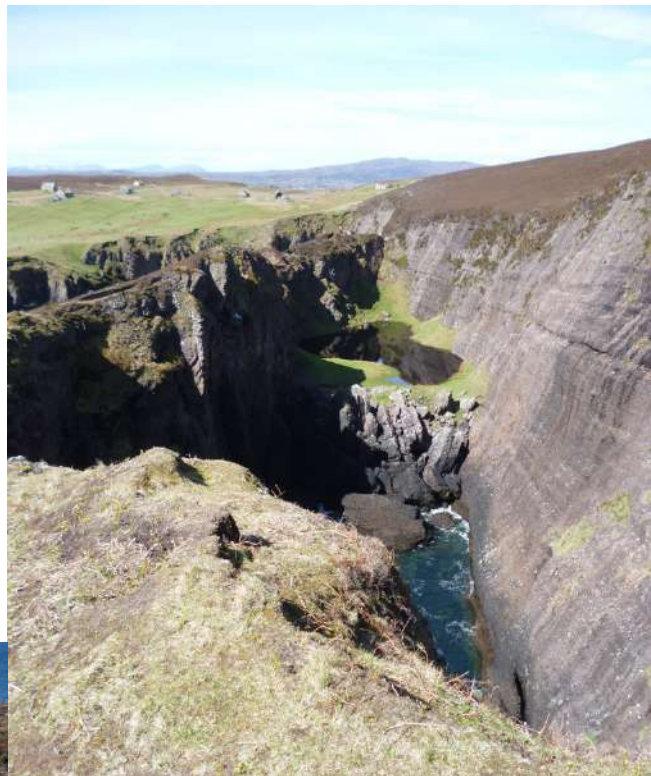
"Seahorse", and the party spent some time portering the gear from open clifftop to the nearest stone-walled ruin, thus minimising potential depredation from gulls, sheep and possible high winds. Meanwhile, the crew of "Seahorse" were otherwise occupied, with Jonie sending Richard off to sea alone to anchor the craft in a sheltered inlet. At this point, his drysuit and fins came into play, as swimming back to land was his preferred option over spending a solitary day at anchor in a small boat.

Somehow, NOSAS had succeeded in choosing a perfect day, not only for Richard's aquatic manoeuvres, but for island-going in general – bright sunshine, a light refreshing breeze, and no midges. Eilean Roan indeed looked, in the words of a child's poem on the signboard at Skerryay, as "pretty as a picture". Any bucolic illusions, however, are tempered by the pathos of the human story, and the extraordinary, jaw-dropping cliff scenery.

Settled by crofters in the early 1800s, the half-dozen or so families built substantial stone and lime homes and created spacious fields that must have been a release from the overcrowded conditions which prevailed in the congested mainland townships. With the produce of land and sea at immediate hand, supplemented by the income gained by the younger men who followed the herring fishing around the Scottish and English coastline in season, there must have been good times as well as difficulties. By 1888, the population had risen to 76, but declined over the subsequent decades. In 1938 the last 12 residents decided to abandon the island, probably a fortunate choice in the light of subsequent world events. Vandalism to the houses in the 1970s reduced the dwellings to a sad state. Indeed, the most substantial dwelling, with two storeys and a slated roof, has now been taken over by the sheep, whose dung has risen to windowsill level and halfway up the fireplace on the ground floor (an accumulation rate of c.2cm per year assuming that the house was secure until the 1970s).

The same sheep that seek refuge in the vacant houses are not averse to galloping with complete abandon across the daunting slopes that fringe the island's coastline and the scary geos that cut deeply into the otherwise gently-sloping land surface. A stone's throw from the green pastures is a bizarre 100-foot deep ravine-like feature on two levels, one filled with freshwater and one with seawater entering by a subterranean passage. The impression is more that of a coastal quarry than a natural feature.

Elsewhere, geos cut into the conglomerate and sandstone cliffs from all directions.



The ravine-like feature Anne Cockroft



Sinkhole near Cnoc an Loisgein Colin Miller

Near the highest point on the island, and almost two hundred metres inland, it is recorded that in the late 18th-century the land surface simply gave way into what is thought to be a collapsed sea cavern beneath. Reported in the Old Statistical Account, and shown on large-scale OS mapping, one can only marvel at the likely seismic effects locally and the visual

impact on anyone present on the island at the time. Today sheep graze the uncertain floor of this sinkhole, where a sinister jumble of unvegetated boulders and voids at the lowest point might inspire an adventure epic from a latter-day Jules Verne. One cannot help but speculate on the possibility of further collapses!

Apart from the hazards underfoot, we were also mindful of the bonxies which watched from every rise in the ground and, more worryingly, from overhead reconnaissance flights. Fulmars, gulls and geese were also present but there was an absence of ledge-nesting seabirds, perhaps because the conglomerate does not weather into suitable ledges.

Unusually for a group of randomly distributed NOSAS enthusiasts, no ancient sites were reported during our wide-ranging walkover. The archaeology seemed to be associated only with the 19th-20th century settlement. Away from the fields themselves, there was widespread evidence of peat and/or turf-cutting.

The photo shows a curious feature, a perfectly straight shallow ditch some 50m long on an isolated clifftop, terminating a few feet from the cliff edge. Similar ditches and rectangular patches were reported from elsewhere, and we could only conclude that these were exploratory diggings to test the depths of peat, which in most parts of the island was very shallow and may have been sufficiently limited to cause concern. The photo also shows a wide sloping rock platform below a cliff, approached by a terraced path which on closer inspection had clearly been intentionally cut from the hill slope.



Ditch and sloping rock platform Colin Miller

Despite exploring the platform beneath some alarmingly undercut cliffs, exhibiting a clear contact between the sandstone and conglomerate layers, we failed to locate the cave in which, according to Mackay (see below) and the New Statistical Account, the islanders completed the process of curing fish in the salt-laden air. Nor did we knowingly discover the quarry of "brown granite" from which Mackay states that the islanders took the stone to build the houses. One gained the impression that the houses were built (and even in some cases roofed) with metamorphic stone rather than igneous. The British Geological Survey map online at <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html> shows the entire island to be of the Old Red Sandstone group.



The eastern settlement Colin Miller

The main area of cultivation was on the marginally more sheltered eastward-sloping aspect of the island.



The western field system Colin Miller

Another field system occupied the uninhabited and more exposed western aspect extending to the actively eroding edge of the coastal slope, and within easy walking distance of the settlement. The structures in and around the settlement, despite their relatively modern origins in the early 19th century, gave cause for debate. Between the two field systems is a low saddle of wet moorland, with no natural shelter and no doubt very windy most of the time. Here there are the low walls of several stone buildings of two compartments spaced some distance apart from each other. One might initially conclude that these were byrehouses;

until, that is, it becomes apparent that in some cases the "byre" is at a higher level than the "house". Moreover, the "house" end, has a rounded gable facing west while the "byre" end has square corners. The "houses" have no fireplace at the gable end, while in some cases the "byre" has a doorway or window-opening in its gable. One recalls also that all these structures were oriented along the same axis. A possible conclusion is that they may have been a combination of storage building and winter shelter for livestock. They are shown as roofed structures on the first and second edition OS 6-inch maps.

Returning to the settlement itself, the roofed houses, each with their carefully demarcated kailyard, are dispersed towards the upper edges of the main area of cultivated land. Although widely separated, most of the houses face towards each other, which would have given a sense of cohesion to the community. The school is some distance off on the fringe of the settlement. It is noteworthy that the main houses had extensive stone outbuildings. Were these thrown up for immediate occupation while the more sophisticated cottages were under construction? Were they also byres, barns and storage? Could they even have been additional accommodation built to a more basic standard as population pressures increased? After all, a population of 76 is a lot to cram into the half dozen main houses.

So many questions! If there is an academic study of Eilean nan Ron available, it would be great to know about it. Meanwhile, John George Mackay's anecdotal history "The Story of Island Roan" now online at www.skerray.com/island-roan/story is of considerable interest.

NOSAS members, duly pondering the above, and with appetite kindled by the sea air and morning's exertions, converged (under instruction from Jonie) back at the settlement to find a fully-plenished barbeque underway.



Fine dining in the sun

Jo Hambly

This explained the several loads of gas cylinders, stoves, kettles, and provisions which had been dutifully conveyed from clifftop to cottage on our arrival. Not content with their nautical responsibilities, Richard and Jonie had taken on the mantle of providing and running a complete outdoor catering establishment on an uninhabited island. Three cheers were never more duly earned for this additional bonus to a truly exceptional visit.

Duly returned to the mainland, 23 sunburned seafarers trooped into the Borgie Lodge Hotel for a substantial dinner, kindly arranged by Beth and impeccably prepared and served by the hotel staff.

Hmm... Stroma, Eilean nan Ron, where next, one wonders?

Colin Miller

Visit to Neave Island

Eight of us left Eilean nan Ron after the delicious BBQ lunch organised by Jonie and Richard. We had a boat trip round Neave Island, coming into a sandy cove on the landward side. Richard ran the boat up onto the sandy beach, but the retreating waves dragged us back out again. Jonie went overboard to try and drag the boat in, but again without success. So we decided that when the next big wave came, we would all jump off and wade ashore. We made it safely ashore, though rather wet.

We went in search of the chapel and gravestones marked on our map; we found some large stones, but nothing to make us think they were part of the chapel. I climbed to a high point and saw a circle of stones up on a higher platform. A rough circle of large boulders and some enclosures were found, and also evidence of two sheilings.

Otter paths criss-crossed the island and otter scats were found in abundance. The island has not been grazed, and so it is covered with wild flowers: bugle, violets, primroses, celandine and scilla.

To get back on the boat at the end of the day we climbed along the rocks at the side of the beach to avoid getting wet again. When we arrived back at Skerray pier, we found a signboard which said that the stones from the chapel were all taken over to the mainland!

Hazel Keiro

Eilean nan Ron circumnavigation

Once the Neave Island party had been safely delivered, another group of us happily accepted Jonie and Richard's offer of a boat tour right around Eilean nan Ron. What a unique and delightful experience.

As we set off in sparkling sunshine, a playful seal followed briefly in our wake. Other huge grey Atlantic seals watched from the rocks. No wonder the island is named "island of the seals".

As we looked up at the rugged coast we understood the difficulties the population must have had at landing boats, getting people, goods and animals ashore. They must have faced days of being cut off from the mainland. There appeared to be no easy sheltered landings anywhere.

We sailed past the narrow gap that dries out at low tide between Eilean Iosal and Eilean nan Ron. We could see no easy way to get across. How did the feral sheep get there: had they learnt to fly?



Cliffs on Eilean nan Ron

Beth Blackburn

Then round to the north side with splendid views of natural arches and weird pillar-like rock formations. Here there's no shelter from the full force of the North Atlantic storms. To our surprise a small flock of sheep appeared to be grazing on seaweed at the foot of steep cliffs.

We rounded the north east corner and headed past Neave Island where some of the party had a wet and precarious landing earlier. Richard gave us a fast thrilling boat ride skimming across the water, all holding on tight! Reluctantly we headed back to Skerry harbour - what a wonderful day. We even had dry feet.

Beth Blackburn

Visit to Sculptor's Cave June 2nd

Given all the interest in things Pictish engendered by the recent announcement of the University of Aberdeen's Fortriu Project, this visit to see Sculptor's Cave on Moray coast seemed particularly timely. Thus there was a good crowd of a dozen or so NOSAS members gathered at Hopeman on this Sunday morning ready to embark for the day. Our remit was to examine the Pictish carvings for which the cave is famous, with the hope of perhaps recording a few new discoveries of our own as well.

John Wombell, our leader on the expedition, had arranged the trip to coincide with the low tide around midday. Consequently we were reassured that many hours were available for exploration before any swimming would be necessary. John had also come equipped with the feted NOSAS ladder and several copies of detailed RCAHMS drawings of the cave for identification purposes. Some members were a little alarmed to see what looked suspiciously like climbing ropes as well; fortunately however no abseiling was required in the event!

Following a short shared car journey from Hopeman, a pleasant walk then followed the coastal path east from Clashach Cove. We proceeded past the quarry and great expanses of yellow gorse in full flower until, just west of Covesea, a point of comparatively easy access to the beach was reached. A short clamber down the cliff later, the party was soon scrambling across large smooth round boulders towards the cave entrance.

Along the way Jonie quickly discovered the first artefact of the day; a mill stone apparently fashioned from one of the stones on the beach. There was, it's fair to say, some doubt initially as to this identification since the central hollow could perhaps have been made by natural erosion. However, this stone proved to be one of several that were spotted nearby in various states of dress. This intriguingly suggested the possibility that the beach may have been a kind of mill stone production site utilising the natural materials that lay around in abundance.



A mill stone on the beach James McComas

The cave itself meanwhile was soon identified; it was indeed easy to spot since the entrance is partially boarded, presumably to protect the interior from worst of the weather. John had encouraged us all to bring LED torches since the gloom penetrating qualities of these have been responsible for many recent cave discoveries. Armed with a variety of these, we were soon researching the darkest recesses. It soon became apparent that a torch held an oblique angle to the wall tended to yield much better results than a full-on beam.



A fish on the left with a crescent and v rod to the right. More modern graffiti far right.
James McComas

A few of the carvings were in fact remarkably clear and conformed to the traditional enigmatic Pictish symbols, such as fish, crescent and v-rods, discs, mirrors and even beasts.



Three oval shapes with what appears to be the head of a Pictish beast on the right.
James McComas

Others were more problematic, ranging from pure graffiti (some going back to the 17th century) to other probably non-Pictish and less ancient art. In some places the soft sandstone of which the cave is constructed had eroded badly, leaving behind only a confused jumble of shapes which were often difficult to positively identify. RCAHMS however seemed to conclude this was a flower design. Answers on a postcard please.

Once everyone had had an initial look John set about pressing the surveyor's ladder into service. This has a tripod-like structure which allows it to be used free standing and makes it able to achieve stability on uneven ground – ideal for archaeologists in the field looking in high places! Two rather eroded Pictish carvings unrecorded by RCAHMS were observed in detail and drawn by John at a height of around 3 metres.



A double rectangular symbol with a "mushroom" like shape on its left. Top right: a simple cross and a crescent and v-rod. James McComas



A previously unrecorded carving in Sculptor's Cave, photographed from atop the NOSAS ladder. James McComas

The OS map shows several more caves along the coastline between Hopeman and Covesea, so it is anybody's guess what further treasures may wait to be discovered in these.

In the event one further cave was visited on the day; a vast cathedral-like space accessible some metres above the beach. Unfortunately a quick examination of this revealed only one questionable shape on the wall amid the lichen. A subsidiary cave however, leading 50 metres or so into the subterranean darkness, did reveal some astonishingly fresh looking Victorian graffiti celebrating, of all things, Shakespeare's birthday.

Meanwhile Allan MacKenzie and Brian Duff entered another smaller cave immediately to the west of Sculptor's, where several more unrecorded carvings were found. These included a trident and a double disc which appeared to be typically Pictish in design.



A double disc design; one of several previously unrecorded carvings found in a close neighbour to Sculptor's Cave. James McComas

By now it was mid afternoon and everyone was more than happy to begin the journey back after a successful day out. On the way I mused that the Dali-esque forms produced by the eroding sandstone were enough by themselves to make the area worthy of a visit. Having got all personnel, equipment and the odd boulder safely back to Hopeman, a few of us then took the opportunity to top off the day with an informal visit to the Pictish fort and well at nearby Burghead.



A very impressive cavern to the west of Sculptor's cave
James McComas

Many thanks are due to John for arranging this fascinating excursion. I am also indebted to Karen Clarke for providing background info on previous excavations at Sculptor's Cave which found Bronze Age and Roman artefacts in the occupation layers, as well as human remains.

More photos of the day can be found at
<http://sdrv.ms/11mQfu2>

Also, check out the Canmore entry at

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/16278/details/sculptor+s+cave+covesea/>

Here I learnt that severed human heads may once have adorned the cave entrance.

Fortunately this practice appears to have been discontinued in the modern era!

James McComas

Archaeology Scotland Summer School, May 17-20

The annual summer school was based in Nairn this year, which allowed some NOSAS members to commute, and the rest of us lived in comfort at the Golf View Hotel or in local B & Bs; most dined in the hotel. Unfortunately the persistent haar prevented any views to the Black Isle and beyond, so our visitors had to believe us when we extolled the beauty of the location.

There was a strong Pictish flavour to the visits over the weekend, which is particularly appropriate in this year when there is renewed interest in the Northern Picts and the possibility that Fortriu might be in this area.

The weekend got off to a great start with a lecture on Friday evening by Dr. Fraser Hunter of the National Museums of Scotland, already known to many of us from his local digs at Birnie, Clarkly Hill, and (last year) Belladrum. His subject, "The Iron Age in Morayshire and the impact of Rome", nicely set the scene for the two days of site visits which followed.

With a dire weather forecast, we set off in two coaches on Saturday morning for the Aviemore area, where we visited a rare Pictish Barrow Cemetery at Pityoulish. There are two groups of barrows in light woodland and they were thought to have been destroyed by later cultivation and tree planting; at one time they must have had a commanding position above the river valley, but now they are much diminished. However,

we could make out one group of three circular barrows and one square one with a narrow causeway at each corner, and another group of three circular barrows and a kerbed cairn.

We then climbed the remains of a motte at Gartenrothe, near the farm of Mains of Garten, which is on the edge of a terrace above the flood plain of the River Spey. Traces of remains of buildings on the summit, including the bowl of a corn kiln, make this a rare survival of perhaps the thirteenth century.

After a picnic lunch in Grantown-on-Spey, we went on to Gaich Wood near Grantown, and again in afforestation, we saw an unusual chambered cairn, much damaged, and possibly Bronze Age rather than Neolithic, which has a large cist or chamber at its centre. Several other small cists and cairns have been found nearby.

By this time the light rain had become heavy, but we climbed a hill and walked round two sides of a very muddy ploughed field to visit Lagmore West chambered cairn, a Clava passage grave on the steep south side of the valley of the Avon. The cairn has been robbed and field-clearance stones dumped in it, but there are still impressive large standing stones.

Two bus loads of muddy and soggy enthusiasts were then taken to Auldearn, just outside Nairn, to visit the site of the battle of Auldearn in 1645 between the Scottish Royalists and the Covenanters. There is an impressive motte, being all that remains of the 12th century timber castle, and on it the doocot which was probably built around 1720 as part of the Boath Estate. The doocot has been modernised and re-roofed, and looks in good condition.

Once we had cleaned up and eaten a good dinner we were treated to a lecture by Iain Anderson of RCAHMS on "The castles and mottes of Medieval Morayshire and Srathspey"; nodding off was not allowed!

Next morning, in mostly dry but cool weather, the Pictish theme was continued with a visit to the most impressive sculptured Pictish cross-stele, Sueno's Stone, which stands about 6.5 metres high on the outskirts of Forres in a specially designed glass "pavilion". It is thought to date to the late 9th or early 10th century, and is rich in figures and interlace. Fraser gave us a comprehensive description of the images on it. Then on to Burghead, where we saw the remains of the Pictish fort, of which the ramparts were much damaged by new building in the early 19th century when the town and harbour were "remodelled". The position of the ramparts could be seen when they were pointed out to us by our several knowledgeable guides, including Fraser again, who also described the probable function of the Well, an enigmatic rock-cut cistern accessed by steps. We also explored the burial ground and wee museum and saw replicas of the famous Burghead bulls, Pictish carvings made as plaques for wall mounting, found here. We didn't have time to explore the harbour, which is a delight but better in warmer weather!

Duffus Castle and motte were our next destination; this is the best-preserved such site in state care; constructed in about 1150, the motte is still most impressive and the castle must have been, too, as is the remaining stone-work. The castle fell into disrepair in the late 17th century. The Episcopal Palace of Spynie, by contrast, is still a magnificent stone building, the residence of the medieval bishops of Moray for 500 years, and the best-preserved Bishop's Palace in Scotland.

At one time Spynie Loch was a sea loch which provided access to the sea and anchorages for merchant vessels and fishing boats. We spent some time examining an old plan which showed where the loch was before it was largely drained.

By this time we were well behind schedule, so plans were altered and we ate our picnics in fleeting sunshine at the Tesco store in Forres before being driven to Dufftown to the Kirkton of Mortlach church and a kind welcome by the incumbent priest. The church was a 13th century aisleless rectangle which had aisles added and has magnificent stained glass windows. In the porch is a Pictish symbol stone with an elephant and a rare curvilinear symbol known as the "Mortlach Symbol". In the lower graveyard is a Pictish cross-slab, leaning alarmingly, known as the "Battle Stone" but not depicting a battle scene, having fish and animals depicted.

On to Birnie, Fraser's happy hunting ground for more than ten seasons, where in (fleeting) sunshine Fraser described the hoards of Roman coins found there and the prehistoric activity and settlement revealed by his excavation, as well as the probable significance of the Roman hoards. To do justice to this site you should read the several relevant papers by Fraser. Tanja Romankiewicz, who is an architectural historian, described the Birnie Kirk, which is one of the oldest places of worship in Moray and dates from the early 12th century; it has high standard stone-work throughout. The graveyard has a stone with an interesting inscription entirely in phonetics. The Kirk has an Early Christian handbell of a type dated to the 8th and 9th centuries AD and probably originating in Early Christian Ireland; it has been much used. There is a Pictish stone outside by the northern entrance to the graveyard; it depicts an eagle, notched rectangle, and z-rod.

By this time we were well behind schedule, but still received a warm welcome from the staff and volunteers at the Elgin Museum, where, after a short introduction, we dispersed to explore our own special interests – there's plenty to see in the excellent displays there.

On Monday morning about half of the participants went independently to Elgin Cathedral, where Alison gave us an excellent short history and description of the site, after which we enjoyed looking round before dispersing. Several participants went to Pluscarden for a few days and found that a most rewarding experience.

[You never know, but the suggestion which Laurie and I made that the unfinished hill fort of Cnoc an Duin, near Scotsburn, in Strath Rory, could be the site of Mons Graupius might yet turn out to be right!]

The weekend was most enjoyable and instructive, as ever; Geoff Waters and Alison Reid are to be thanked and congratulated on their usual efficiency and thoroughness, and all our guides for their patience and enthusiasm.

Next year's Summer School will probably be at Brora starting on Friday 16 May.

Pam Draper