



Peeblesshire Archaeological Society

# March 2024 Newsletter

Welcome to the latest Peeblesshire Archaeological Society newsletter! Highlights this month include news of a field trip to the fabulously intriguing Burnswark Hill!

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**Previous lecture: Rob Engl – *A Home by the Sea: Excavation of a Mesolithic house at East Barns, St Joseph's Neighbourhood Centre***

On **Thursday 15 February** we welcomed **Rob Engl** to talk about life in South-East Scotland during the late 9th Millennium BC, mainly as seen through the lens of his excavations at East Barns, near Dunbar. Currently the Senior Project Manager for Fieldwork at **AOC Archaeology Group**, Rob is one of our leading specialists in the study of chipped stone tools (or lithics) and an established expert in the Scottish Mesolithic period.

Before focusing in on East Barns itself, Rob set the scene with a brief introduction to the Mesolithic period: broadly speaking, this is the period from about 8500 BC to around 4000 BC when hunter-gatherers roamed across the landscapes of what we now call Scotland, until their mobile way of life was gradually brought to an end by the spread of farming. In the past, those Mesolithic people would largely have been seen as living in lightweight, temporary structures rather

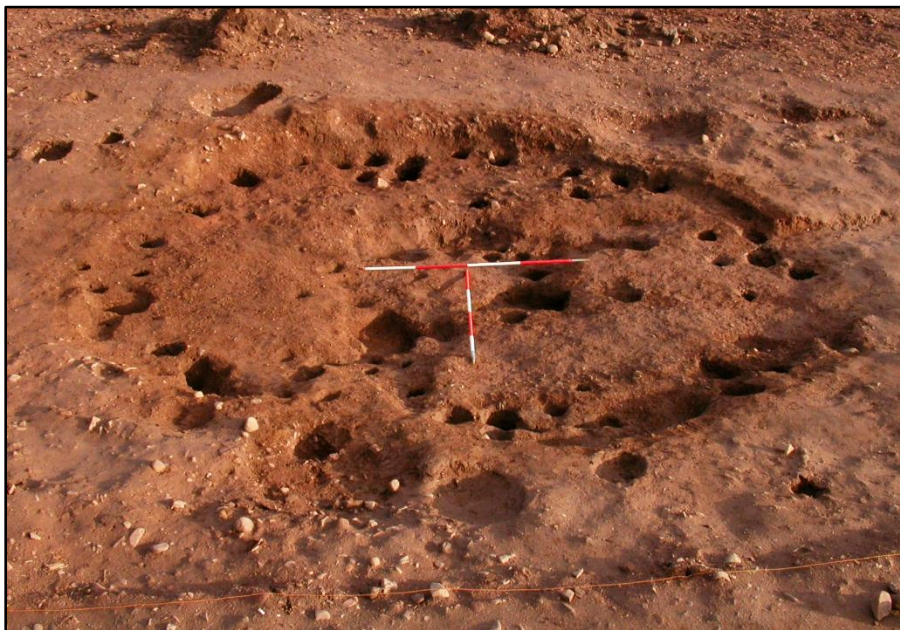


*Rob Engl (AOC Archaeology)*

like tepees or 'benders' and designed for a life on the move. However, as Rob was to show, that picture has been changed over the last two decades by the discovery of more substantial timber houses in the course of a number of excavations around the North Sea coastline.

In 2001, excavation works undertaken by AOC Archaeology in advance of limestone quarrying at East Barns, East Lothian, revealed the substantial remains of a robust Mesolithic structure, securely radiocarbon dated to the late 9th millennium BC. The site was first discovered in the course of evaluation survey work involving field-walking, geophysical survey and trenching by machine. In the event, it was geophysical survey that led to the identification of a roughly circular soil anomaly of unknown date but with characteristics suggesting human activity rather than an entirely natural origin, and the presence of a prehistoric structure and associated occupation deposits were subsequently confirmed by an exploratory excavation.

The following year, the AOC team opened a larger excavation area in order to isolate and fully expose the structure, which lay within what turned out to be an elongated natural hollow measuring 31m N-S by 9m E-W. Rob explained how it was the gradual infilling of this hollow that had resulted in the sealing of the fragile archaeological deposits. As the excavation proceeded, the various occupation horizons and features on the site were then excavated on a grid basis to permit accurate recording of the distributions of artefacts.



*East Barns: view of the excavated house showing the concentric ring of post holes around the perimeter of the sunken floor. Image courtesy Rob Engl, AOC.*

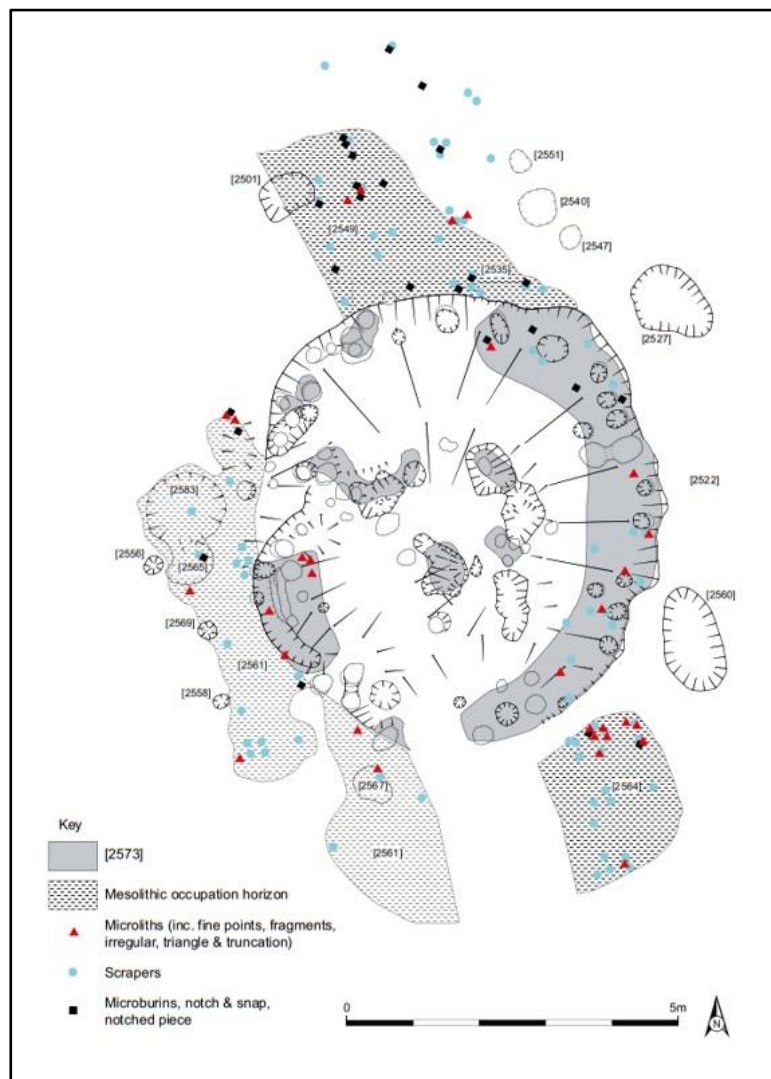
Moving on to the various structural features, Rob explained how the house consisted of a sub-circular sunken floor with two concentric rings of post holes which would have held timber posts angled inwards. The distribution of the post holes suggests episodes of replacement, if

not actual rebuilding. The remains of interior furniture were also recorded in the

form of post holes, a platform (for sleeping?), and three probable hearth features. In contrast to the steepness of the edges of the hollow in some parts of its circuit, a shallow sloping surface with signs of wear on the west side probably indicated the position of the entrance. Wondering if there was a particular reason for the west-facing entrance was just one of the questions that cropped up in the busy Q&A session that followed Rob's presentation - with the prevailing wind direction perhaps offering the most likely explanation.

A charred deposit of occupation debris rich in lithics sealed many of the structural features around the internal perimeter of the house. The formation of this deposit appears to have been due to refuse disposal during the lifetime of the structure, with the distribution of finds hinting at some form of internal organisation of the internal living space, which amounted to just over 26 square metres.

Unfortunately owing to the hostile soil conditions, the preservation of faunal remains was very poor. A small quantity of burnt bone was recovered, but the only identifiable fragments were those of a medium-sized bird and a seal, the latter providing at least a hint of the significant part that marine resources are likely to have played in the subsistence of the inhabitants of the site. By contrast however, a very large lithic assemblage was recovered, amounting to over 30,000 pieces. Their range hints at the wide variety of activities that would have been undertaken in and around the house – tasks ranging from tool-making and maintenance to butchery and hide- and skin-working.



*Plan showing distribution of lithic tools. Image courtesy Rob Engl, AOC.*

Drawing his presentation to an end, Rob briefly showed some examples of comparable Mesolithic structures known from Britain, Ireland and the Low Countries. In particular, the East Barns house invites comparison with similarly robust, sunken-floored houses discovered at Echline Fields near South Queensferry during works in advance of the construction of the Queensferry Crossing, and a well preserved and more deeply stratified site at Howick on the Northumberland coast between Boulmer and Craster. A significant common factor does appear to be their location in favourable locations on or near the coast, where it would have been possible to take advantage of a variety of marine, estuarine, riverine and terrestrial resources.

Taken together the current evidence tends to suggest that the centuries around 8000 BC saw the emergence of a distinct architectural tradition (or 'house horizon'), suggesting a degree of permanence not previously associated with the Mesolithic period. Even if the reasons for this remain to be fully understood, such "homes by the sea" are changing our understanding of the scale and nature of the social and economic changes that were taking place during the Early Mesolithic.

It has only been possible to touch on some aspects of Rob's amiable and informative presentation and members wishing to read about the site in more detail are referred to the full report:

Engl, R & Gooder, J 2021 "'A home by the sea": the excavation of a robust Mesolithic house of the late 9th millennium BC at East Barns, East Lothian', *Scottish Archaeological Internet Reports* 96, accessed via this link: <https://doi.org/10.9750/issn.2056-7421.2021.96>.

**Trevor Cowie**

**Next lecture: Derek Alexander (National Trust for Scotland) – *Pioneering Spirit: Illicit Stills, St Joseph's Neighbourhood Centre***

We've got something this month to raise your spirits! For our next talk we are delighted to be welcoming **Derek Alexander (NTS Archaeology)** back to Peebles on **Thursday 21 March** to speak about '**Pioneering Spirit: Illicit Stills**' – the archaeology and history of whisky making in Scotland.

Born in Inverness, brought up in Glasgow, Derek studied prehistoric archaeology at the University of Edinburgh, specializing in the later prehistory of temperate Europe. He graduated in 1990 and worked for the University's commercial archaeology unit – the Centre for Field Archaeology (CFA) for 10 years and undertook archaeological survey and excavation work across Scotland. He joined the National Trust for



*Derek Alexander (National Trust for Scotland)*

Scotland (NTS) in 2000 as the West Region Archaeologist, with responsibility for providing advice on the archaeological aspects of all properties in the region, for conducting small-scale research projects, and for commissioning and managing larger projects. Derek was appointed as Head of Archaeological Services for the Trust in 2011 and is responsible for the archaeology on many of the Trust's western properties and islands.

In his talk, Derek will contrast the evidence for small scale illicit whisky bothies with the early establishment of a larger scale, legal distillery at The Glenlivet. Working in partnership with the Glenlivet (owned by Pernod Ricard) the Trust's intrepid archaeology team have been undertaking survey and excavation work on illicit whisky bothies on NTS land at Mar Lodge, Torridon, Ben Lomond and Ben Lawers. Derek has also been investigating the site of the old distillery at The Glenlivet which ran between 1824 and 1859 before moving downslope to a new larger site. The founder was George Smith who was originally an illegal distiller before turning professional. 2024 marks the 200th anniversary of the establishment of his distillery.



*Excavation in progress at Glenlivet's old distillery (with PAS Secretary in the background!). Image courtesy Derek Alexander*

Tempted? Why not show some 'pioneering spirit' and 'nip' along to St Joseph's this month on the 21<sup>st</sup> and enjoy Derek's talk and a 'tipple' (well, actually tea and coffee) with us! Slange var!

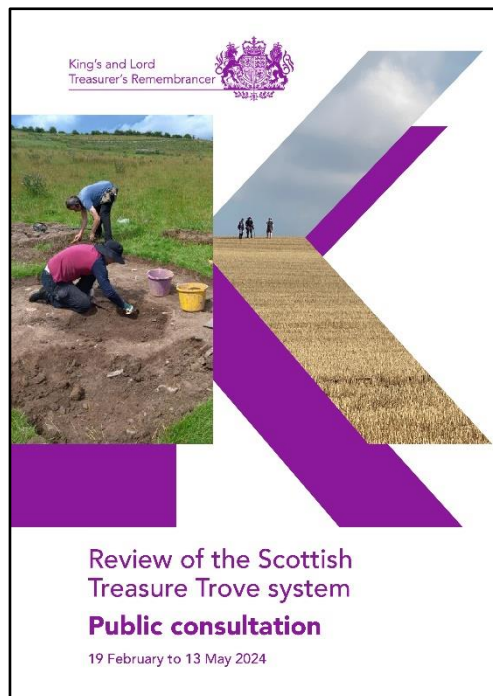
**Venue:** St Joseph's Neighbourhood Centre, Rosetta Road, Peebles

**Date:** Thursday 21 March

**Time:** 7.30pm

## Treasure Trove Scotland – Public Consultation

Members who attended January's talk on Treasure Trove by Dr George Prew may recall that he mentioned that the Treasure Trove system in Scotland was currently undergoing review, and that a public consultation was due to form part of the review process (see *PAS Newsletter, February 2024, p3*).



The public consultation phase was launched on 19 February and will run until 13 May. The results of the consultation will inform the final report and recommendations on the future of the Treasure Trove system which, as we heard from George, is the process for assessing and preserving archaeological finds discovered in Scotland.



The wide-ranging consultation aims to gather views from all those who use and benefit from the system, from

museums and public heritage organisations to metal detecting clubs and individuals with an interest in archaeology and Scotland's cultural heritage.

For further details open the following link:

<https://www.kltr.gov.uk/about/treasure-trove-review/treasure-trove-review-public-consultation/>.

As this is an opportunity for organisations and individuals to contribute their views on sustaining and improving the Treasure Trove system for present and future generations, the Committee will be submitting a response on behalf of PAS. If you are interested in contributing to the Society's response to the consultation, you are welcome to make your views known to the Committee by emailing **Richard Welander** ([richard.welander@gmail.com](mailto:richard.welander@gmail.com)) by Friday 29 March.

Alternatively, you are equally welcome to submit your own personal views directly to the Crown Office any time until the closing date of 13 May.

## A Tale of Two Villas: Penicuik and Mavisbank – Colin McLean

We were delighted to hear from PAS member **Colin McLean** recently. Colin is a freelance photographer and has conducted commercial work in architectural photography, specialising in historic buildings and places.

In recent years Colin has been rediscovering the pleasures of walking and from December 2020 he began writing a blog about his adventures, thinking that this would cease after a dozen entries. Fast forward to March 2024 and Colin is nearing his hundredth!



*Colin McLean*



*Penicuik (top) and Mavisbank (bottom). Images courtesy Colin McLean.*

Colin's 95<sup>th</sup> blog takes a different format from previous issues. It covers two walks, or rather two visits, on two consecutive days, to two historic ruins. As Colin comments, it is "less about walking and more about historic buildings". In Penicuik and Mavisbank Colin discovers two stunning Palladian villas, barely eight miles apart, built by the same family, and both destroyed by fire. One which has found a future as a stabilised romantic ruin, and one whose future hangs precariously in the balance, as it has for fifty years.

To read Colin's fascinating blog head to:

<https://colinmclean100blog.wordpress.com/2024/01/31/95-a-tale-of-two-villas-penicuik-and-mavisbank-january-27th-and-28th-2024/>.

## Society field trip to Burnswark Hill with Dr John Reid



*View of Burnswark Hill with the earthworks of the northern Roman camp visible in the foreground. Image courtesy of Trimontium Trust*

We are delighted to announce that the destination for our spring field trip is **Burnswark Hill**, near Lockerbie, Dumfries & Galloway.

Visible from a distance of up to 50km, the great table-topped hill of Burnswark dominates lower Annandale. On the hill and its immediate surroundings is a fascinating complex of monuments of many periods. They include a Bronze Age cairn; a large c 7ha Iron Age hillfort; Iron Age settlements; two Roman camps of unusual form which straddle the hill immediately to the north and south; a so-called Roman fortlet set in the NE corner of the South Camp; various prehistoric or medieval enclosures and a Civil War redoubt.

An increasingly detailed picture of the local archaeology has been built up as a result of surveys on the ground and from the air, complemented by the results of a number of excavations carried out since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The main focus for our visit will be the hillfort and the Roman earthworks. Ever since Burnswark was first recorded by antiquarians in the eighteenth century, the intriguing nature of the relationship between these sites has generated a great deal of discussion: in essence, the arguments turn on whether the Roman camps on either side of the hill-fort were erected as part of a siege or as a training ground for the Roman army.

We are therefore delighted to say that our field visit will be led by **Dr John Reid (Chairman of the Trimontium Trust)** who masterminded a very imaginative recent project which combined metal detecting, excavation, finds analysis and experimental archaeology to investigate the hypothesis that Burnswark Hill was indeed the scene of an actual Roman assault.

**Our provisional itinerary is as follows:**

**10.30 Rendezvous at Kirkconnel Hall Hotel (Ecclefechan)** for morning tea/coffee & comfort stop. Over coffee, John will give an introduction to the archaeology of Burnswark Hill.



*Clusters of Roman lead sling bullets revealed in the course of the recent excavations. Image courtesy of Trimontium Trust.*

**(approx 11.30)** Short drive to car parking area at foot of the hill. Set off for tour of Roman camps, siegeworks and hillfort with stop for packed lunch on the hillfort (weather permitting).

**(by 15.00)** Back at cars and disperse.

We will travel by car, with car-sharing arrangements to be fixed up nearer the date. As travel times will vary, currently the only fixed point is the rendezvous time at Kirkconnel Hall Hotel (but as a rough guide the journey time from Peebles to Ecclefechan is approximately an hour and a half).

John's site tour will take around 2 hours - which does not include the stop for packed lunch. We would aim to be back at the cars by 3pm.

Access will be via tracks and pasture. The sites are exposed and suitable footwear & weatherproof clothing will be required. Bring own packed lunches and enough drinks for the whole time out on site. No dogs allowed.

**Maximum number:** 20 (first come, first served!)

**Cost:** morning coffee, teas etc at Kirkconnel Hall Hotel (price to be confirmed) & voluntary contributions to car drivers for fuel expenses.

Final details will be circulated in the April newsletter but if you would like to reserve a place please email **Trevor Cowie** ([trevor.cowie@btopenworld.com](mailto:trevor.cowie@btopenworld.com)) and copy to **Andrew Jepson** ([theandyjepson@hotmail.com](mailto:theandyjepson@hotmail.com)).



*Roman ballista balls and a lead sling bullet found during the recent excavations. Image courtesy of Trimontium Trust.*

## Vacant position of newsletter editor

### Do you have desktop publishing skills?

Under the editorship of our Secretary Andrew Jepson, our Newsletter has been transformed into a regular, informative, and topical publication for our membership.

Unfortunately, pressure of his own work commitments means that Andrew will have to stand down as Secretary after our AGM in May. Committee member Gillian Brown has kindly agreed to take over his other main role of Minutes Secretary, but this does mean that we are looking for a volunteer with basic desktop publishing skills to take over as our Newsletter editor.

This is a less daunting prospect than it sounds. As readers of the newsletter will be aware, Andrew was himself a regular contributor of articles, but we realise that might be too big an ask for a new editor! Although some editorial oversight will be needed, the new editor's role would therefore mainly involve design and layout, working with content provided by other members of the committee and the wider PAS membership.



To help with the handover, Andrew has kindly offered to provide a template with which to begin, but should he/she wish, the new editor would be very welcome to place their own stamp on the newsletter in terms of design and content!

If any members think they, or someone they know, might be able to help the work of the Society in this way and would like to discuss what would be involved, please contact either

**Trevor Cowie** ([trevor.cowie@btinternet.com](mailto:trevor.cowie@btinternet.com)) or **Piers Dixon** ([piers.j.dixon@gmail.com](mailto:piers.j.dixon@gmail.com)).

Thank you for your continued support. We look forward to seeing you soon.

**Andrew Jepson**  
**Secretary, Peeblesshire Archaeological Society**  
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