



Peeblesshire Archaeological Society

October 2023 Newsletter

Welcome to the latest Peeblesshire Archaeological Society newsletter! We hope that you enjoyed the first talk of 2023/24 and are looking forward to seeing Nick Card this month!

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Previous lecture: Jessica Lowther, *The Lammermuir Community Project*, St Joseph's Neighbourhood Centre

On **Thursday 21 September** we welcomed **Jessica Lowther (Headland Archaeology)** to the St Joseph's Neighbourhood Centre in Peebles to talk about '[The Lammermuir Community Project: Morham Castle and Bothwell Water Sheepcote](#)'.

Jessica outlined the citizen science behind the Whiteadder Heart of the Lammermuirs community project led by AOC Archaeology, whereby members of the public identified sites using LiDAR and old OS maps presented on the project website. Several of the many sites identified were selected for excavation of which Jessica directed two: Morham Castle and the 50m long narrow building in the Bothwell Water.



Jessica Lowther speaking at the St Joseph's Neighbourhood Centre in Peebles. Image courtesy Trevor Cowie

Morham Castle's exact location based on the OS map could not be confirmed with geophysics and so half a dozen test trenches were opened in the field which the OS marked as the site. One was successful, finding part of a corner tower with walls 2m in thickness and fragments of a Scottish White Gritty Ware cooking pot. Radiocarbon dating confirmed that this structure was late medieval, but Covid prevented further exploration. Documentary sources referring to a castle were absent until the 14th century but give a vivid account of the de Morham feudal landlords difficulties keeping on the right side during the Wars of Independence.

Exploration of the long narrow Bothwell Water building found that it was about 7m across over well-built, earth-bonded stone walls three courses high, with plenty of



Excavations at Bothwell Water. Image courtesy Piers Dixon

collapsed rubble suggesting they once stood much higher. The building was situated beside the Bothwell Water in an area granted to Kelso Abbey in the later 13th century that was used for grazing flocks of sheep, which led to this being interpreted as a sheep house. There were no finds and radiocarbon dating from charcoal under the wall confirmed the documentary dating. Its entrance was not located but there was an outshot on one side which might have been a bothy for a shepherd. Analogies with the sheep houses researched in England by

Chris Dyer showed that they are common in Gloucestershire amongst other places.

Piers Dixon

Next lecture: Nick Card – *Building the Ness of Brodgar, Eastgate Theatre, Peebles*

For our next talk we are delighted to be welcoming **Nick Card (UHI Orkney)** to Peebles on **Thursday 19 October** to speak about '[Building the Ness of Brodgar](#)'. This follows last year's cancellation due to Covid-19 complications.

This is a fantastic opportunity to hear the results of recent research on this internationally important prehistoric site on Orkney.

Set in the midst of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site, Ness of Brodgar is renowned for some of the most impressive buildings of the Neolithic period in NW Europe. In this talk various aspects of their architecture will be considered, from the initial choice of the site and the procurement of materials to their construction and how they were roofed. Exciting new discoveries from recent fieldwork will also be revealed!



View over the Ness of Brodgar site, with the Stones of Stenness and Barnhouse beyond the bridge
(© Scott Pike)

Since 2004, Nick has directed the campaigns of fieldwork at the Ness of Brodgar - a project that has achieved international recognition (including the distinction of being a *National Geographic* cover article!) and that has been the recipient of several national and international archaeological awards.

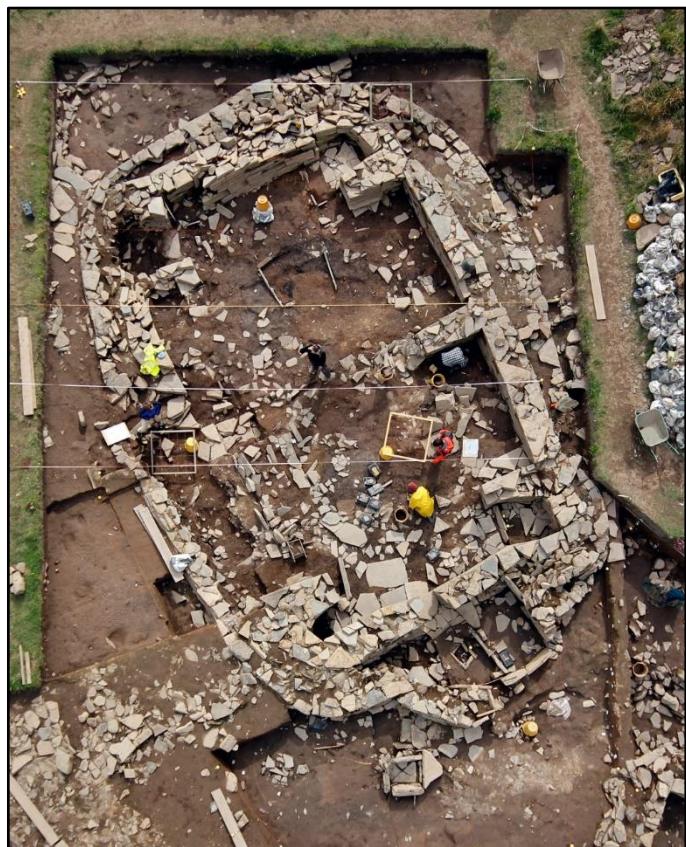
Venue: The Studio, Eastgate Theatre

Date: Thursday 19 October

Time: 7.30pm, doors 7pm

***Please note that tickets for this event have now SOLD OUT.**

Since moving to Orkney over 30 years ago, Nick Card has directed and managed a wide range of projects for the Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology within the University of Highlands and Islands Institute of Archaeology. His interests lie in all aspects of the prehistory of Britain and the Highlands and Islands with particular reference to the Neolithic.



Ness of Brodgar Structure 12 (c) Hugo Anderson Whymark

Notes from Portmore Loch, Eddleston

On **Sunday 24 September**

PAS Chairman
Trevor Cowie
led a walk at
Portmore
Loch,
Eddleston.



Trevor Cowie bringing Northshield Rings to life. Image courtesy Andrew Jepson

The day
started with a
morning coffee

at the Scots Pine Café to set the intrepid group of 15 members up for the guided walk through the wooded policies of Portmore House, stopping at selected points to hear about the development of the House and its associated designed landscape, followed by a visit to the well-preserved Iron Age hillfort at Northshield Rings and other points

of archaeological and historical interest along the way.



The end of a fascinating day. Image courtesy Richard Welander

Trevor has very kindly provided his field notes for Portmore Estate and Northshield Rings. Please see attached. Please note that whilst the material comes from publicly-available resources the notes are for information and the interest of members only. We kindly request that they are not circulated beyond the Society. Thank you.

Reminder: Renewal of Annual Subscriptions

A gentle reminder that we are now inviting members to renew annual subscriptions for the 2023/24 year. Thank you to everyone who has renewed already. For members still to do so please find attached a renewal form with instructions (in Word and PDF formats). Any membership/payment queries should be sent in the first instance to Treasurer **Brian Tait** at brikath16@hotmail.com.

Lost and found: the ‘very perfect urn’ from Hare Law Cairn

*In our previous newsletter PAS members were offered an opportunity to go behind the scenes and explore the collection of Peebles Museum, courtesy of Chris Sawers of Live Borders. To give a flavour of the fascinating strands of research that can be the result, **Trevor Cowie** recalls an excellent piece of detective work by our member and former Secretary Bob Knox while he was working as a volunteer in the museum after his retirement.*

In 2010, **Bob Knox** was working as a volunteer at the Tweeddale Museum (now the Peebles Library, Museum and Gallery), assisting the staff by looking into artefacts in the collection whose provenance was in some doubt, or which might have been wrongly described or catalogued, or perhaps had some unusual story to tell. The aim was to try to find out as much as possible about them and then make that information more widely available.

One such item in the museum store was a complete Bronze Age pot of the type customarily known as Food Vessels (Accession no PEEBM 5398) and dating to the centuries around 2100-1800 BC. In very fine condition and ornately decorated with a variety of jabbed and impressed patterns, the vessel had a label in the interior stating:

‘Found in cist at Harelaw Cairn on 23 August 1890.

GWC.’ The corresponding entry in the museum’s register was dated 1st August 1931 and described the accession as ‘*Burial Urn, found in Harelaw Cairn, Fifeshire by the late Mr. Constable, Traquair*’ and that it had been handed in by ‘*Mr. Hedley Constable, Malay States, formerly of Traquair*’. Bob’s interest was piqued. How did such a fine prehistoric pot from Fife come to be in a museum in Peebles? Who were the Constables and what was their connection to Traquair? With some assistance from Douglas Speirs (the Fife Regional Archaeologist) and from Trevor Cowie (then of the Department of Archaeology at the National Museum), Bob was soon able to shed further light on the original circumstances of discovery.



Photo showing the label in the interior of the pot in Peebles Museum. Image courtesy Trevor Cowie

The story begins in the summer of 1890 when landowner and farmer George Constable of Glenraig, near Lochore in central Fife, led a work party to investigate a probable burial cairn on nearby Harelaw (now Hare Law) hill. Scientific excavation was then in its infancy, so in the fashion of the time two trenches were simply driven deep into the mound with the aim of reaching the centre of the cairn. This resulted in



View of Hare Law Cairn. Although heavily mutilated by robbing and 19th century investigations, it is still an impressively large cairn, measuring some 25m in diameter and standing to a height of 2m. Today, it is a rare survival of a prehistoric monument in a landscape that has been heavily industrialised since the 19th century. Image courtesy J Connolly, Fife Ranger Service

the discovery of two stone cists (slab-lined graves). The first contained the remains of an inhumation and 'a very perfect urn' recognisably of the class conventionally known as Food Vessels. The second and seemingly central cist was noticeably well-constructed but contained nothing apart from a few fragments of bone and teeth and a thin line of brownish dust which was thought to be the oxidised remains of a metal artefact (most likely a bronze dagger). Almost exactly a year later, the party returned to carry out further investigations. A third trench was opened with the aim of tracing the base of the cairn and

this resulted in the discovery of another cist. The smallest of the three cists found, it was said to be packed with bones and in one corner was another fine pot of Food Vessel type with distinctive lugs set around its shoulder.

We are told all this and more in Constable's own accounts of the work published in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* in 1891 and 1892 but despite being illustrated there, there was no record of what became of the two fine pottery vessels. By the later twentieth century, it seemed they were to all intents and purposes lost.

At this point, we fast forward a full century to 1982, when out of the blue a handsome Food Vessel was presented to the National Museum



Food Vessel from Hare Law Cairn presented to the National Museum in 1982 - the first of the two lost pots to re-appear. Image courtesy National Museums Scotland

by a Mrs Constable of Ashkirk in Selkirkshire following the death of her husband. Following some research by Trevor Cowie, this pot turned out to be one of the missing Food Vessels from Hare Law cairn - that from the third of the cists found back in the 1890s. And sure enough, it subsequently transpired that Mrs Constable's late husband was in fact a descendant of the Constable family of Glencraig.

However, at that stage, that still left the other vessel unaccounted for. It was only



Case solved! Bob Knox in 2010 holding George Constable's 'very perfect urn'. Image courtesy Trevor Cowie

with Bob's detective work over quarter of a century later that the final pieces of the jigsaw were all slotted into place, following his identification of the vessel in the Peebles Museum collection as the other long missing pot from Hare Law Cairn. It was indeed the 'very perfect urn' from that first cist discovered in August 1890!

One question that still required an answer was how a pot from Fife had ended up in the museum in Peebles, so Bob looked into the Constable family connections. It turned out that in 1894, George Constable sold Glencraig and moved the family home to Traquair Bank to become a factor, probably of Traquair Estate itself. It seems he kept up his archaeological interests on moving to the Borders, for a news clipping unearthed by Bob tells how Constable showed the vessels from Hare Law Cairn to members of the local field club (the rather ambitiously

named Innerleithen Alpine Club). Specifically, the cutting refers to an outing of the club in 1898 during which they visited his home at Traquair:

"Mr Constable drew from his antiquarian collection two very finely shaped and very highly ornamented urns which had been dug out a cairn on Harelaw hill, Balgray, Fifeshire some time before 1891"

George Constable apparently remained at Traquair till his death in 1927. Bob's surmise is that on George's death, the family went through his effects, and on finding the two pots, decided that Hedley (the eldest son) should have one, another brother the other. In the case of the pot handed in by 'Mr. Hedley Constable, Malay States, formerly of Traquair', we may guess that he was due to return to the Far East, but before doing so he must have decided to hand his pot in to the nearest museum – Peebles.

Whatever the precise circumstances, it is remarkable that these two fine Bronze Age pots from Fife should both have resurfaced in the Borders and that both are still intact after being lost for over a century!

Trevor Cowie

Merlin Excavation Update – report from Robin Crichton, Arthur Trail Association and PAS member

Last summer, a team of volunteers led by **GUARD Archaeology** and the **Arthur Trail Association** excavated the site of Tinnis Castle at Drumelzier and two nearby burial sites in Upper Tweeddale. The interest of GUARD Archaeology was to find archaeological evidence which would throw light on the tangible history of the site. The Arthur Trail Association's interest was to see if this information could also throw light on an intangible heritage of local lore, claiming a connection between Tinnis and the death of Merlin.



Robin Crichton at Tinnis. Image courtesy of the Dark Age Digs website at <https://dark-age-digs.com/day-10-tinnis-hill-fort-dig-last-day-digging/>. Accessed 08/10/2023

The written evidence for the Merlin connection goes back to Herbert, a 12th century bishop of Glasgow who drew on earlier hagiographies, (subsequently lost). It was recorded that Merlin visited Tinnis around 584 AD on his way, with a guaranteed safe passage, to a negotiation with St Mungo at nearby Stobo. In the event, Merlin refused to compromise his beliefs, the negotiation failed and on his way back to Tinnis, Merlin was assassinated.

Now the archaeological excavations have revealed radiocarbon dates which demonstrate that the hillfort that underlies Tinnis Castle was indeed occupied at the

time attributed to Merlin's visit, and that it continued to be occupied until the early 11th century when Strathclyde was conquered by the Scots. The excavation has shown that the fort had a nucleated layout – a strongly fortified summit surrounded by lesser enclosures on lower-lying terraces of the hill - a type used by clan chiefs at this time. What is more, within a square burial barrow which they excavated nearby, the team may have found the graves of two high status inhabitants who were clearly of Tinnis, and date to the same period.

Altogether this archaeological evidence is consistent with an important local stronghold of a prominent chief at the same time and place as the local lore concerning Merlin – and strongly suggests that Merlin's reported connection with Tinnis probably does have a historical basis.

On top of all that, we have discovered that an iron age fort beneath the Dark Age Fort was probably burned at the time of The Great Conspiracy. It is recorded that while Hengist and Horsa (Friisi=Friesians) settled Thanet and Kent, their brother and nephew sailed North, first establishing themselves on islands in the Firth of Forth and then occupying the East and Fife coast land as far north, perhaps, as Stonehaven. They then took the Orkneys and from there raided and pillaged down the West coast, eventually moving into the Solway and it is believed, creating a Frisian colony with its stronghold up the Nith at Dun Phris (Dumfries). Was it these Frisians who took the opportunity to raid and destroy the Iron Age fort at Tinnis? Pure speculation of course!

The earliest finds showed occupation of the site was during the Mesolithic and Early Neolithic period.

We have a lot more results to come and we won't have the full picture until the end of the year but I thought you would like to know the story so far.

Robin Crichton

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

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