

Autumn Lecture Series

16 September 2016 – Norman Atkinson

*Curator of the Last Resort:
A look back at curating Pictish and
early medieval sculpture in Angus Museums*

When our former President last spoke to PAS back in November 2014, he gave us chapter and verse on the Dunnichen Stone: its discovery, travels and travails, its sojourn in Dundee and eventual return in glory to Angus (see *PAS Newsletter 74*). This time round, Norman Atkinson gave us a full history of his involvement with Pictish and other Early Medieval sculptured stones in Angus Museums over most of his working lifetime.

Norman first gave this paper to the *Able Minds and Practised Hands* conference in Edinburgh in 2003, held to mark the centenary of the publication of the *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*. His chosen title then, *Curators of the Last Resort: The role of a local museum service in the preservation and interpretation of Early Medieval sculptured stones*, was a rather wry reference to Historic Scotland guidance of the time which stated that ‘movement of stones to more remote locations, including museums, should be a last resort’. Of course, that original paper charted Norman’s work to 2003. This talk was updated and charted a further decade of curation.

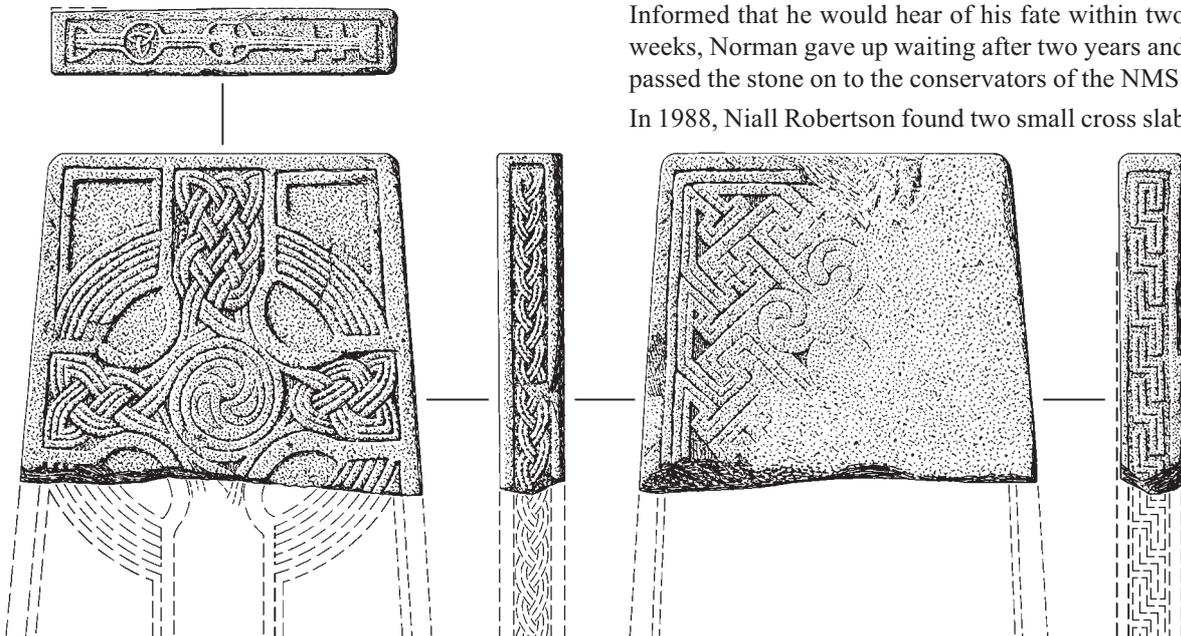
When Norman was first appointed to Angus District Council as District Museum Curator in 1977, the Council’s museum collection consisted of only three pieces of Early Medieval sculpture. He retired in

2013 as Head of Angus Council’s Cultural Services and by that time their collection had grown to 41 stones. Norman played a pivotal role in that process but as he demonstrated throughout the talk, he was never driven by a desire to merely acquire. Invariably there were sound reasons relating to care and conservation behind each and every stone brought into the museum.

In 1977 Montrose Museum held those three stones – the cross slab from Farnell and two much smaller cross slabs from Inchbrayock – all of them donated in the mid-19th century. Norman talked us through their discovery and their carvings. He described how a third cross was found at Inchbrayock graveyard in 1884 but never joined the others in Montrose due, apparently, to a falling-out between the local minister and the Museum. The stone subsequently went missing around 1908 and local tradition says that the minister took it to his grave when he died. Norman described an attempt to rejoin the two fragments of the Farnell cross in the 1980s. The work was carried out by the Sculpture Department of Gray’s School of Art, Aberdeen, who took it upon themselves not only to bridge the gap but also to re-model some of the missing ornament. When the Pictavia visitors centre on the outskirts of Brechin opened in 1998, the Farnell cross slab was one of several stones to be located there but following its closure in 2014, Farnell returned once more to Montrose.

When Norman ‘rediscovered’ the Edzell recumbent stone in 1985, it languished under decades’ worth of pigeon droppings in a derelict burial aisle. Taking it into care, he was duly informed by Historic Scotland that he had broken the Ancient Monuments Act. Informed that he would hear of his fate within two weeks, Norman gave up waiting after two years and passed the stone on to the conservators of the NMS.

In 1988, Niall Robertson found two small cross slab



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Kirriemuir 18 Pictish cross slab. Scale 1:10, John Borland

fragments in a pile of masonry in Nevay churchyard, just within the Angus border but very close to Meikle. When Norman went to retrieve them, only one was still there, a clear indication of just how vulnerable such small fragments are.

Investigating references to carved stones in Kirkbuddo burial-ground in 1989, Norman found an early Christian cross slab in a dire state of preservation. A less-than-helpful farmer was not at all happy to learn that there was something of note on his land, fearing an endless procession of visitors traipsing through his fields. Norman was quick to seize the initiative and suggested that the man donate the stone to the museum: stone preserved, visitors averted. In that same year, an irregular fragment incised with an unusual motif was discovered on the shore near Arbroath harbour. It was taken to the nearby Signal Tower Museum. Experts, including Isabel Henderson, were consulted and it was decided that the motif was indeed likely to be of Pictish origin. When the stone was recorded in detail by RCAHMS in 2003, the remnants of what appears to be a relief-carved cross shaft with two round hollow armpits was noted on the other side.

The following year a rare 'pillow-stone', a rounded boulder bearing a small cross carved in relief, was found in the garden of a house in the Clifftown area of Arbroath and was subsequently awarded to Angus Council Museums. An earlier attempt to have the cross slab and four small fragments from Menmuir Church given on loan ended in failure but when the church closed in 1991, the Kirk Session donated all five stones to Angus Council Museums.

In 1992, Norman was walking on the shore of Forfar Loch by St Margaret's Inch when he spotted a small stone clearly shaped by hand, which he donated to the Museum. It had one horizontal and two vertical intrusions of quartz forming a cross.

Kirriemuir 1–4 were discovered in 1787 during the demolition of the previous kirk. Kirriemuir 5 was first noted in the kirkyard in 1903. All five stones were moved into a purpose-built shed located in the new cemetery in 1955 but as Norman illustrated, this was still far from ideal. The shed was damp, exposing the stones to frost damage. Those that were fixed were held by iron clamps whilst those that were not fixed were being scratched and damaged due to manhandling and all were being daubed by splashes and drips of paint every time the shed was decorated. In 1989 Norman applied for Scheduled Monument Consent to move, conserve and display them in a safe environment. Astonishingly it took six years for permission to be granted and for the stones to be re-displayed. As there was no museum in Kirriemuir at the time, they were taken to the Meffan Institute in Forfar.

In 1994, ploughing at Wester Denoon farm brought to the surface a fragment of another Pictish cross slab, which was duly awarded to the Meffan. The following year, Scotia Archaeology carried out an

excavation in Kirriemuir churchyard in advance of access improvements. On day one of the dig a small fragment of cross slab, Kirriemuir 6, was found. This was followed by another, then another and then a whole slab. In all, 12 stones were found, the 12th being spotted in a spoil heap on the last day. This last fragment has a square panel at the centre of the cross. Devoid of ornament, this panel looks like an ideal location for an inscription but despite detailed examination, no traces of lettering have been found. Norman mused at the possibility of a painted inscription. All 12 stones were declared Treasure Trove and awarded to the Meffan.

Having previously discussed the Dunnichen Stone in detail, Norman dealt with it only briefly before moving on to the discovery of yet another cross slab fragment at Kirriemuir in 1999. Found during the digging of a services trench, this top half of a cross slab is decorated on all five faces. By the time this stone had been conserved, Kirriemuir had a new museum, Kirriemuir Gateway, so it was possible to display it locally.

At the *Able Minds* conference in 2003, Norman recognised a stone put up on screen by another speaker as one of the long-lost Strathmartine fragments. Of the 13 stones recorded in the mid-19th century, only three survived by the 1900s. However Norman noted that the image on screen was not an antiquarian drawing or a 19th-century photograph. Making enquiries of the speaker, he was eventually put on the trail of a house in the Borders where he found not one of the missing Strathmartine stones but two – Strathmartine 3 and 8 – in a garden rockery. Norman arranged to borrow them for an exhibition and in 2006 successfully persuaded their owner to donate them both to the Meffan.

In 2009 another fragment of cross slab was found at Easter Denoon, this one from a byre that was being demolished. However it wasn't until the following year that word reached Norman of the discovery, by which time the fabric of the demolished building had been crushed, denying the opportunity to see if it contained any other carved fragments. Even now Norman's irritation at this wilful act was plain. The fragment was taken as Treasure Trove and awarded to the Meffan. As a swansong, just weeks before his retirement in the summer of 2013, Norman was part of a small PAS delegation that helped secure the long-term loan of four small fragments in Glamis Church to the Meffan, a full account of which can be found in *PAS Newsletter 75*.

Having recorded each and every one of the stones in Angus Council's care, I felt I knew them all very well but learning about the dire plight that faced many of them and the various hoops Norman had to jump through at times to secure their future added a whole new dimension to my appreciation of this remarkable collection of sculpture. I'm sure every PAS member has visited the Meffan (and other Angus Museums) but it's never too soon to go take another look. *JB*

PAS Conference 2016

The Northern Picts

Our annual conference, held this year in Inverness from the 7–9 October, took as its theme ‘The Northern Picts’. Following a visit to Inverness Museum on the Friday evening, Saturday was given over to a series of seven talks which examined different aspects of current research in this area. A field trip on the Sunday allowed visits to a selection of local stones.

Friday 7 October: Private view of Pictish sculpture in Inverness Museum

Inverness Museum closes at 4pm on Fridays and as the conference and fieldtrip would take up the whole of Saturday and Sunday, it was decided to offer delegates a private view of the museum’s impressive collection of Pictish sculpture on the Friday evening. Access to the museum is free during the day but getting it opened up for us in the evening incurred a cost so we weren’t sure just how many conference attendees would willingly stump up.

Not surprisingly perhaps, no locals saw the need but eighteen visitors to the city, most of us PAS members, signed up and were treated to a thoroughly enjoyable hour and a half. With no need to accommodate other visitors and tourists, the PAS delegation was able to encircle the island display of Pictish sculpture and hog it for the full 90 minutes. In that time we perused, examined, scrutinised and discussed the museum’s ten Pictish sculptured stones and its fine jet pendant.

The collection ranges from ‘classic’ Pictish symbols (Ardross Wolf) to ‘naive’ – (Kingsmills Bull), from plain (Wester Balblair) to ornate (Torgorm), so there was no shortage of topics for discussion. The museum staff on hand were very accommodating and even supplied a spot light and extension cable for that close inspection. An hour and a half of jaw-jaw is guaranteed to induce a drooth so the subsequent trip to a local hostelry was required on purely medical grounds. JB

Saturday 8 October: PAS Conference, Morning Session

The first speaker on Saturday morning was **Dr Candy Hatherly**, who has had twenty years of experience of excavation, mainly focussing on the first millennia BC and AD, especially in northern Scotland. She talked on *Atlantic roundhouses and the later prehistoric archaeology of the Moray Firthlands*, a brief summary of work she carried out between 2012 and 2015 as part of her doctoral studies under the supervision of Gordon Noble.

Candy concentrated on a series of Atlantic roundhouses located on the Tarbat peninsula (‘Atlantic roundhouse’ being a catch-all term for thick-walled structures, including brochs and duns, of the west and north of mainland Scotland, and the

western and northern isles). The Tarbat peninsula was chosen because of the evidence for a Pictish presence here: Class I and Class II stones, Pictish place names, and the 5th to 7th century monastic settlement at Portmahomack. Elsewhere, Atlantic roundhouses dating from the early Iron Age have yielded evidence of re-use in the early medieval period. The question here was whether or not any of these sites were in use in the Pictish period.

All were examined by small excavations, leaving the potential for more intensive future investigations. The first site to be tackled, Tarrel Dun, lies on the south-east coast of the peninsula. It sits on a rocky knoll on a promontory jutting out into the Firth, with a cave below it. It became apparent that some of the external features were in fact post-medieval in origin, possibly relating to farming activity. A much earlier revetment ran higher up the knoll, and on the summit stood a roundhouse. The entrance was in the east, looking towards Burghead, and the southern half of the building was eroded away. Radiocarbon dating places the construction of the well-built wall somewhere in the period 800–400BC.

Cnoc Tigh, as its name implies, also sits on a knoll. About 300 metres from the present-day shoreline overlooking the Dornoch Firth and less than a kilometre south-west of the monastery at Portmahomack, the building was formerly described as a castle, or perhaps a broch. The proximity to Portmahomack raised the possibility that the monks may have chosen to use it. However, although the thick walls of this roundhouse showed signs of two phases of work after initial construction, making the wall much more substantial and monumental, the only dates obtained for its use place it, like Tarrel Dun, in the early Iron Age (800–400BC).

The two Rarichies lie on the south-east coast of the peninsula. Wester Rarichie is the smaller of the two. This proved to have been a monumental turf roundhouse, set on a small eminence with some signs of stone revetment. Again, the building and occupation appear to belong firmly in the early Iron Age. Easter Rarichie was a more complex site. The roundhouse on the summit here was surrounded by stone walls and a massive earth bank. The roundhouse walls are well preserved, with rubble core with no sign of intramural cells. Thick floor deposits have been preserved. The middle Iron Age date obtained here (400–200BC) places the use of this site somewhat later than the others described so far. Candy felt that this probably reflects a re-use of the site.

Scotsburn is the only ‘inland’ site of the six. The first impression is that it looks like a broch. At any rate, it is a very thick walled roundhouse which appears to have been elaborated over time. The site was obscured by trees, since cut back. Sitting on a low hill not far from the shore of the Cromarty Firth, the roundhouse is encircled by a stone enclosure wall, flanked by two sets of earth banks and ditches.

Occupation deposits presenting a complicated pattern of settlement, industrial or artisan workshops, and food preparation were found just outside the roundhouse itself. There is an intramural gallery, a feature of brochs. However, this is a very early example, dating to 730–400BC with later activity dating to 540–340BC. It would appear to be an early Iron Age broch in the Moray Firthlands. Perhaps the idea of an origin of these structures in Orkney may be off the mark.

The roundhouse at Tarlogie sits on another knoll, overlooking the southern shore of the Dornoch Firth near Tain. The walls here had been considerably widened, with in the final phase an inner and outer wall face enclosing a rubble core. The interior also showed many phases of modification, with intercutting hearths and evidence for possible smelting and smithing. An occupation layer uncovered in a test pit and assumed to be associated with a primary phase of construction gave a date of 370–160BC. A subsequent floor gave a date of 25–130AD, while the uppermost floor gave material dating between 235–385AD and yielded an early penannular brooch. Close to the entrance, a midden contained fragments of broken quern stone, animal bones, shells and the handle of a steatite cup or bowl. This was the most productive of the sites in terms of finds, and would pay further investigation.

Throughout her talk, Candy paid tribute to Gordon Noble's contribution and to the assistance of a number of members of NOSAS throughout these excavations.

Juliette Mitchell graduated with an MA in history from Glasgow University, and went on to post-graduate studies in information technology. After ten years in project management, she took an MSc in the Archaeology of the North and turned to a career in archaeology. Last October, she started working towards a PhD, and her talk, *The early medieval barrow cemeteries of Scotland: Movement, Placement, Archaeology and Chronology* introduced us to the background to her project. Largely drawing on her Master's thesis and on an extensive literature survey, Juliette summarised the current state of knowledge of Pictish period barrow cemeteries, and posed a number of questions that she hopes to answer.

The barrows in question are generally low mounds of about four or five metres across. Mostly round or square (although some oblong and ovoid examples are also known), they consist of bank and ditch surrounding a low platform of earth, stones or sand, with a central grave pit. The ditches of the square barrows are usually causewayed at the corners. A few examples, as at Ackergill on the east coast of Caithness, included white quartz pebbles on the platform. Barrow cemeteries seem to be concentrated in the north and on the islands, with notable examples at Garbeg, near Drumnadrochit, Whitebridge, Ackergill Links and on the island of Eigg. As at

Ackergill, a barrow cemetery at Lundin Links in Fife was excavated in advance of loss to coastal erosion. Further south, long cist cemeteries seem to have been more common at this period.

Boundary ditches and the centrally-placed grave cuts of the barrows tend to show up well on aerial photographs wherever conditions are suitable. Many of the cemeteries identified in this way have not been studied in detail. Juliette has begun to examine these in relation to the landscape in which they are located. Of the twenty seven she has so far studied, seventeen were in the neighbourhood of known hillforts. By contrast, only two (Garbeg and Dunrobin) had any association with symbol stones.

At Pitgavenny, north of Elgin, three Bronze Age round barrows share higher ground with a barrow cemetery, south of what was possibly marshy ground and Spynie Loch in the Pictish period. The site is close to a possible ford across the Lossie. Juliette suggested that there may have been an association between barrow cemeteries and watery places. Several others also sit in proximity to Bronze Age or Neolithic funerary sites, and she proposed that these may have been deliberately incorporated in a landscape of power. Some of the barrow cemeteries, on the Moray coast and Fife for example, include more monumental mounds, up to fifteen to twenty-five metres across.

At Mains of Garten, the barrows seem to follow a linear arrangement along a slightly higher strip of land in a bend of the Spey. When the barrows were constructed, it may have been a seasonal island, cut off by marsh and floodwater. A number of the cemetery sites seem to be associated with liminal spaces or rivers, and this will be further investigated. In terms of chronology, the earliest dates for barrow cemeteries so far determined show their origins before the 5th century AD, with a span of up to three centuries. One of Juliette's aims is to examine the question of which barrow cemeteries are broadly contemporary, which will require some re-dating of material from early excavations. There is also more work to be done on the study of individual cemeteries within the landscape. Comparisons with contemporary cemeteries from Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England will also be made, placing the Pictish barrow cemeteries in a wider contemporary context.

Our third speaker, **Daniel McLean**, graduated with a Masters in Celtic and Viking Age Archaeology from Glasgow University. He went on to gain experience excavating medieval sites in Britain and Ireland. His talk was entitled *Fragments of significance: Identifying high status settlement in Northern Pictland*.

One of the problems when it comes to discussing high status settlements in Northern Pictland is the shortage of archaeological studies on such sites in the area. For example, although Easter Ross has a wealth of impressive sculpture in the form of the

cross slabs at Hilton of Cadboll, Shandwick and Nigg as well as the monastic settlement at Portmahomack, very little evidence of high status presence in the Pictish period has as yet been uncovered.

Daniel set out to look for possible sites of high status Pictish settlement in the North, drawing on a wide range of information. He combed available historical sources for any sites referred to as being of significance. There is some evidence to suggest that in the early medieval period, high status settlements were often located in the vicinity of much older monuments such as chambered cairns or standing stones, many of which have been located, documented and studied. Aerial photographs were useful and some indications from earlier excavations were also valuable. Visiting possible sites and examining them in their landscape context allowed Daniel to understand their potential.

One such site is at Tarradale. Here Jones and Gregory excavated an enigmatic enclosure with ditch and box rampart, reminiscent of Rhynie. Pottery found during this investigation was dated to the middle of the first millennium, well within the Pictish period. A barrow cemetery has been identified close by, as at Rhynie and Forteviot. The Balblair stone, with its incised human figure was found in this area and there are a number of Pictish place names. Two possible early church sites are in the vicinity, and there are a number of prehistoric features close by. A number of possible round houses or barrows also show up on aerial photographs.

Close to Inverness, the hillfort of Craig Phadrig was first suggested as a Pictish capital in the nineteenth century. Excavation in the early 70s produced dating evidence which suggested a 4th century BC date for the vitrified ramparts, with a later early medieval occupation. Finds from that period included a mould for a hanging bowl escutcheon, a rare item. More recently, work carried out by AOC and the Forestry Commission have confirmed the early medieval dating for a re-occupation of the site, and have yielded evidence for a palisade trench over the earlier ramparts.

Daniel briefly pointed out other places which might be worth further investigation. At Tomnahurich, for example, aerial photography has suggested the remains of an enclosure with double ditch and palisade, near to a cemetery. It resembles one which appears on aerial photographs by Golspie. Again, there is a similarity with the enclosure at Rhynie. The approach of combining available sources of information does indeed look promising when it comes to identifying other possible sites of high status settlement in Northern Pictland.

Our final speaker of the morning was **Matt Ritchie**, whose experience has included spells working with the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Historic Scotland and Cadw, the Welsh Government's historic environment

service. Matt is currently employed as Archaeologist at Forest Enterprise Scotland, which manages on behalf of Forestry Commission Scotland. Matt and his colleagues work to protect, preserve and present archaeological sites located within the FCS estate, which covers 6650 hectares, or around 9% of the land area of Scotland. This is no small task, as at least 12,000 archaeological records are held for sites within the estate.

In addition, they have responsibility for outreach work that covers a wide range of activities. Among these has been the development of resource packages that allow teachers to use archaeology as a tool towards introducing and developing a number of the skills featured in the aims of the Curriculum for Excellence. Of immediate interest, this has resulted in the production of 'The Picts: a learning resource', which not only gave Matt the title for his talk: *The Picts: a learning resource. Place based learning and Scotland's Archaeology*, but was short listed (and Highly Commended) for the Best Public Presentation of Archaeology category in the British Archaeological Awards of 2016. For those of you who have not yet had a chance to read through this excellent production, go online to the Forestry Commission Scotland's website where the pdf is available to download:

<<http://scotland.forestry.gov.uk/managing/work-on-scotlands-national-forest-estate/conservation/archaeology/learning/the-picts>>

The aim of this work was to introduce the Picts as a focus of indoor and outdoor learning. In practice, this involves teaching and learning in the classroom, in visits to museums and to Pictish sites within the Forestry Estate, as well as the use of web-based sources. Matt and his team aim to support and educate the teachers to encourage them to make the Picts a familiar part of classroom learning.

However, the outreach programme is not restricted to school based education. The remit is far wider: to encourage as many people as possible to enjoy visits to sites within the forests, and to ensure that they are supplied with the information they need. This covers details of accessibility as well as what is known about the history of the site. Those wishing to visit any of the Pictish sites in the forests will find a wealth of information on how to get to their chosen location, by public or private transport and eventually on foot. This includes details of accessibility. For each site, there are clear notes on the history as well. Information provision may take other forms: clear notice boards giving brief outlines of what is known about the site, or special events such as guided tours of a site, or community archaeology projects, for example.

Matt gave some examples of the kind of archaeological and outreach work carried out at Pictish sites. Craig Phadrig is a substantial hillfort with evidence of vitrification in its ramparts that has been identified

with the Picts since the nineteenth century. Excavations in the 1970s focussed on the ramparts, but did yield evidence for activity here in the Pictish period, in the form of a rare mould for a hanging bowl escutcheon and several fragments of imported E-ware. A detailed topographical survey was carried out for the Forestry Commission in 2014 to enable the construction of a 3D model of the site which can be used to develop a management plan. (Five other hillfort sites were also surveyed at this time). As the site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, further excavation has been restricted. However, nature being no respecter of scheduling, storms in January 2015 brought down two large trees and exposed a section of the inner rampart. Before consolidating and restoring the damaged area, the exposed sections were cleaned and evaluated, and material for radiocarbon dating was sampled.

Alder and birch charcoal samples were obtained from within the main rampart which gave dates of 409–235BC and 461–196BC for its construction. Much later, a palisade ditch was cut into the top of the collapsed inner rampart. Birch charcoal from the lower fill of the ditch gave a date of 416–566AD. Charred hazelnut shell from a stone setting overlying the palisade slot gave a date of 1036–1206 AD. So even this limited investigation yielded evidence for three clearly separate phases of activity at Craig Phadrig. The Pictish period was represented by the construction of a palisade over a collapsed rampart that had been built perhaps eight hundred years earlier. Public fascination with this site was clearly revealed when over 500 people turned up to an open day hosted by Matt and his team.

Another vitrified hillfort that may have been re-used in the Pictish period is Dun Deardail, close to the West Highland Way in Glen Nevis. Excavations there over the past two years have involved volunteers working alongside professional archaeologists on a programme of survey and excavations. The work has already revealed several interesting details about the ramparts. Vitrified stone is apparent all around the circuit; excavations revealed the structure to have had a framework of timber beams built into the wall. Medial wall faces were observed: they clearly added stability. Perhaps most interesting is the revelation that the upper part of the rampart had undergone the most vitrification, suggesting that—it had perhaps supported a wooden superstructure. The collapsed ramparts were later refaced, the rubble in the interior levelled, and the fort re-occupied. Work here will continue.

A final example was the unexcavated site at Torr Dhuin, near Fort Augustus, where a visit by Inverness Young Archaeologists Club this summer was a great success. After exploring the ramparts, the young archaeologists were inspired to produce their own reconstruction drawings by the new information board, recently installed on the site. *Sheila Hainey*

A review of the afternoon session of the 2016 PAS conference
and of the fieldtrip will appear in the next edition.

The mirror-case mystery

On my way to the PAS conference in Inverness this year I visited some northern Pictish stones. The fact that I saw Inveravon 1 in the porch at Inveravon church on Speyside followed by the Dandaleith stone in Elgin museum reawakened my interest in the mystery of the ‘mirror-case’ symbol. In *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, I, 61, the symbol is described as a ‘circular disc and rectangle’ or ‘circular disc and rectangle with square indentation’ to cover variations in the base. JNG Ritchie used this terminology in 1969, but at some point the terms ‘mirror-case’ and ‘notched mirror-case’ were coined. Perhaps it was only meant as a term of convenience, but it has been taken seriously.

Joanna Close-Brooks accepted the interpretation as unproven but, with reference to the similar style of handles on Inveravon 1’s mirror-case and mirror, she considered a possible ‘connection between the two symbols in the sculptor’s mind’. Alastair Mack had to stretch a point or two to see it as a flexible cover of leather or fabric which could be pulled over a mirror to protect it, with the mouth of the cover (the rectangle) able to be gathered in round the mirror handle.

If you look at the mirror and mirror-case which are placed side-by-side and are of equal size on the Tillytarmont Goose Stone (in Marischal Museum, Aberdeen), you can understand the logic. Similarly at Nether Corskie, west of Aberdeen, and Sandside, Caithness.

I was never happy with ‘mirror-case’. Only six of the twenty or so examples are accompanied by a mirror. At Inveravon 1 the mirror is so very much smaller than its case. While the mirror-case is a large dominating symbol at the top of the stone above an eagle, a little mirror and comb are in their customary position at the bottom. The mirror-case on Drumbuie 2 from Inverness-shire (in NMS) is again out of proportion to the mirror.

As a rule, the circular section has another circle just within its rim. On the Orkney stones of Broch of Gurness, South Ronaldsay, and Greens (in NMS), also at Sandside in Caithness and Strathmiglo in Fife, it is well in



Arndilly Symbol Stone

from the rim and on some of them off-centre. The circular section of the mirror-case on Westfield 1 in Fife is especially similar to the double disc and Z-rod symbol on that stone.

Between the outer ring and a small central ring there is room for curvy decoration at Inveravon and Drumbuie and rotating spirals at Brough of Birsay (in NMS). Arndilly on Speyside produces a four-part design.

The rectangle too runs through variations: widening or narrowing towards the top circle, straight-sided or concave or both. What about those rectangles that are not notched but divided? The version at Strathmiglo in Fife has extremely long legs, as does the simple version at Broch of Gurness. They are reminiscent of the ‘tuning fork’ symbols, such as the one at Ardlair. Those in Sculptor’s Cave at Covesea have particularly long rectangles but solid, not divided. In contrast, Advie on Speyside has a particularly stubby rectangle.

These variations suggest that if the mirror-case ever was an actual object, it became a convention with little resemblance to its original model.

The most intriguing for me are Inveravon 1 and Dandaleith, two of the four on Speyside, each with internal lines connecting the circle with a flat-bottomed base as if the hypothetical object stood upright on a firm surface. Others too have a flat base.

I have searched for clues. Seven mirror-cases are next to a crescent and V-rod – but that is the most common symbol anyway. The rest are over or under any other symbol. The divided or notched rectangle is a feature of the very north, but Strathmiglo in Fife is a southern ‘outlier’. The mirror-case with or without mirror is most prevalent north of the Grampians, but there are

a couple of examples in Perthshire and Fife. (Collace and Inchyra have lost their tops and might perhaps have had mirror-cases over their long legs.)

The symbol had a long life. It is to be found on c.18 Class 1 stones – but also on two Class IIs, Dyce 2 and Meigle 5, both without mirrors. It is found in a cave and also on a little incised bone found at Broch of Burrian on Orkney.

The field is open for us all to speculate. Aberdeenshire Council came out boldly in their brochure ‘The Pictish Stone Trail’ on aberdeenshire.gov.uk. Their glossary of symbols calls it ‘Disc and rectangle (sun disc)’.

Flora Davidson

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Kintradwell 1 Symbol Stone

The biggest beastie?



© B Stephens

The biggest beastie? Pictish beast based on the symbol on Dyce 1



© B Stephens

Pictish bull, based on one of the Burghead stones

After this year's Inverness conference I headed off to paddle the lochs of Glen Affric with the trees in their autumn colours, something that's been on the 'to do' list for a long time. Passing Fasnakyle Power Station on the way back (in my car, not the canoe!) I noticed high up, just below the eaves, some large carved stone panels that are described on Canmore and in the Listed Building description as Pictish symbols or beasts.

There are seven panels but to my eyes only a few of these are recognisably Pictish. On the east elevation the right panel is the ubiquitous swimming elephant or dolphin, probably based on the Dyce symbol, with the central panel a stag lying down, similar to that on display at St Vigean's (my thanks to our President for identifying these). On the west elevation is a representation of a Burghead Bull and the Gask Boar with exaggerated saw tooth bristles. The other panels seem to show a horned bear with jagged saw tooth spine, a horned creature swallowing a large fish, a wolf intertwined with a serpent and a winged dragon with the tail of a fish.

The building itself dates to 1950 and is designed in the 'vernacular modernist' style using local stone and Pictish motifs in an attempt to integrate it into the landscape, unsuccessfully, I'd have to say. This approach was adopted in the design of other hydro-electric power stations of the era, including those at Lairg and Grudie Bridge. The sculptor of the Pictish or 'mythical Celtic' panels, as they also have been described, was Hew Lorimer, better known for the seven figures representing the liberal arts on the front of the National Library of Scotland and Our Lady of the Sea facing the Atlantic on South Uist.

I've not been able to locate any scale drawings of the panels and it's not possible to measure these in-situ but they must be a couple of metres high and slightly more in width. Is this the largest representation of the Pictish 'beastie' in stone?

Bill Stephens



SC903076 © Historic Environment Scotland

Fasnakyle power station from the south east.

Pictish event at Aberlemo



© Hugh Coleman

Norman Atkinson leading a tour around the stones at Aberlemno

On Saturday 24 September the third annual Pictish event was held in and around Aberlemno village hall. The day started with a tour of the four stones in the area led by Norman Atkinson whose insight into the

details of the stones and their relevance to the surrounding area enthralled all in attendance. Norman outlined the development of stone carving by the Picts and those who influenced that development, such as the Angles from the Kingdom of Northumbria. He also explained the features of the stones and the different types of crosses they represented. He finished with a detailed review of the battle depicted on the back of the cross slab in Aberlemno churchyard and the message it was meant to convey to the Picts and their contemporaries.

After the tour all returned to the hall where there was a stone working display by David McGovern, and various stalls of Pictish related arts and crafts. The Pictish Arts Society was also represented, with an excellent display of photographs of Pictish Stones by Tom Gray. This attracted considerable attention with visitors from as far away as Australia finding out about the Society.

The local community group rescued most of the material from the now defunct Pictavia and have it on display in a room at the back of the hall. Once again Norman came to the fore, giving a commentary on the replica stones there. The stone replica of the battle scene, which also came from Pictavia, now stands in the village hall car park.

The day offered plenty of inspiration for the soul and a BBQ with excellent burgers and other treats kept the body nourished too. This was an excellent day out and the organisers, who have put so much work into it and the ongoing exhibition, are to be congratulated. It is planned for the hall to be opened in the summer months but it is suggested that visitors check on <http://aberlemno.org/> for details.

Hugh Coleman

Pictish penannular brooch found in Fife

Metal detectorist David Liddle made a dramatic discovery earlier in the year when he unearthed two parts of a broken Pictish brooch at Boarhills, east of St Andrews. Uncertain of what he had found, he thought it might be a piece of broken Victorian jewellery. However when he took it to the Treasure Trove Unit based in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, he was astonished to learn of its true significance. The TT Unit awarded the brooch to Fife Cultural Trust, the new body set up to operate cultural services, such as museums and libraries, on behalf of Fife Council. The brooch is now on display in St Andrews Museum, which opens:

October to March: Wed–Sat 10:30am till 4.00pm
April to September: Mon–Sat 10:30am till 4.00pm



CELTS – An exhibition at the National Museum of Scotland

10 March to 25 September 2016



Wikipedia Creative Commons

Panel from the Gundestrup cauldron

It's been a while (46 years to be exact) since the Celts featured in a major exhibition in our National Museum. Both then and now, similar exhibitions were staged consecutively in both Edinburgh and London. In 1970, the joint organisers were the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Edinburgh Festival Society, the two chosen venues being the Royal Scottish Museum (as it was then called) and the Hayward Gallery. This time the English partner of the NMS was the British Museum, those two institutions providing the two venues, as well as supplying many of the exhibits; others were drawn from the collections of more than two dozen museums spread across Europe.

Last time, there was a most evocative entrance display, featuring the reconstruction of a shrine-like structure (portico?) illustrative of the 'cult of the severed head', skulls and all, the original coming from Roquepertuse in the south of France. Such an impact did this have that it featured in the title sequence of the BBC Television series 'Who are the Scots?' which followed soon after (with the addition of billowing 'smoke' from dry ice for extra atmosphere!). Producer Gordon Menzies was clearly taken by it, despite the absence of any Scottish parallel. No such drama this time, but encountering the first exhibit still made quite an impact. It was the life-size sculpture of a warrior king/god from Glauberg in Germany, bearing a sword and shield, and wearing complex armour, ornate jewellery, a leaf-crown headdress, and a far-away stare which has led to speculation that he might be in communication with the Otherworld. He was displayed without any context to whip up the level of excitement, even though he was found as if guarding the remains of the real man whom he represents.

Beyond this awesome guard, there lay a vast treasure trove of wondrous objects. It is well-nigh impossible to select 'my favourite object' when there was such an amazing range from which to choose. Even constructing a short list would be a very difficult task, but in there somewhere must be: the silver panels which surround the Gundestrup cauldron from Jutland, the bronze shield from Battersea in London, the wine flagons from Basse-Yutz in France, the engraved mirror from Desborough in Northamptonshire, the silver-clad iron torque from Trichtingen in Germany, the bucket-band from Aylesford in Kent, the painted pots from Clermont-Ferrand in France and above all, perhaps, the staggering crop harvested from the 'golden field' at Snettisham in Norfolk, which yielded twelve spectacular hoards of objects of solid gold. (No mention of Scottish treasures here, because the best of them are normally on show in the National Museum and thus fairly familiar to most of us.)



© British Museum

The Desborough mirror

On that last point, one exceptionally fine Scottish piece had a caption which kept the controversy as to the manner of its use on the bubble. That was the bronze pony head-gear found at Torrs in Kirkcudbrightshire, which displays the most delightful curvilinear decoration of the La Tene style. This object used to be called a chamfrein, which is an item of horse armour designed to protect the animal's face in battle. Perhaps it has fallen out of favour because the name predetermines which part of the head it was designed to shield, and that does not accord with the currently preferred theory of the way it was used. Interestingly, the interpretative drawings all emanated from London. Two images published by the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1955, showing differing ways in which the armour might have been worn, were displayed adjacent to the object itself, with the caption coming down heavily in favour of it being a cap rather than a mask. This opinion may have been swayed by a more recent computer-generated image by the British Museum, though the argument was not presented with overwhelming conviction. The proposed usage as a mask promoted by the Antiquaries seemed quite reasonable to me, and did not appear to have been at all 'uncomfortable' (to quote the caption) for the pony, whereas their suggestion that it was a cap is somewhat worrying, in view of the substitution of the horns with a plume in their drawing; on what evidence, one wonders? The BM's cap version abandoned the notion of a plume and restored the horns, but it then became apparent why these had been removed by the London Antiquaries; had they been left on, they would have been pointing the 'wrong' way (a subjective judgement, I know, but it didn't look quite right to my eye). The mask theory gets my vote.

Of particular interest was the inclusion of a corpus of Pictish material. This of course raises the hoary old question 'Were the Picts Celts?'. In attempting to answer this some time ago, while reviewing the Pictish elements included at a conference of the peripatetic International Congress of Celtic Studies, I came to the firm conclusion that the answer must be 'Yes & No' (see *PAS Journal* No.9, 1996, pp.17–20). Pictish symbol stones were one of the categories included in a large wall-mounted distribution map marked with coloured discs, which indicated the locations of various types of lithic inscriptions throughout the British Isles, though it seemed that there were not enough to account for the 200 or so Pictish examples which are known to have existed. Certainly there were some blanks, the more remote being the easiest to spot. With regard to the Hebridean examples, all four symbol stones on Skye and Raasay were accounted for, though only one other appeared in the Western Isles, that on Benbecula. What about the Pabbay stone? There was also a practical problem with the colour coding, for both Pictish symbol stones and those carrying Roman-letter inscriptions were

assigned shades of purple which were very similar. Just as well that they were not intermingled to any extent, though on occasion it was necessary to exercise keen attention to ensure which was which.

The important point was made that the Picts were unique in employing the curvilinear ornament found so frequently on Celtic metalwork on their sculptured stones. It is always intriguing to see actual objects upon which certain Pictish symbols were or may have been based; the pity is that there are so few of them. The triple-disc symbol, generally reckoned to be an aerial view of a ring-handled cauldron, could almost be regarded as represented here by a fine example of a cauldron from Kincardine Moss near Stirling, but for the sad fact that it has no handles, and never had. It was quite evocative to see the slender highly-decorated cross from the mighty symbol-stone at Crosston of Aberlemno translated into reality, albeit Irish, in the form of the portable cross from Tully Lough in Co. Roscommon. The object, made of oak and clad in tinned and gilded bronze panels with amber insets, may well have looked very similar to the one upon which the Aberlemno sculpted version was modelled. With a large decorated boss on each arm carrying heavy Celtic engraving and a cluster of lesser bosses leading from each to the central highly-decorated focal point set with a semi-precious stone in the very centre, it is tempting to wonder if such an object was ever carried in procession at Aberlemno.

In one of the three audio-visual stations scattered around the exhibition, the narration for 'Out of a Roman World' described Pictish symbols as being 'a local form of communication'. A more appropriate word to use might have been 'regional', considering that the territory of the Picts is sometimes referred to as 'the Pictish region'. With Pictland (for a time at least) divided into seven provinces, it could be argued that each one should be regarded as a region in its own right. It is a feature of Pictish symbols that although their internal decoration may vary from stone to stone, the basic outlines of the entire series remained standardised to a remarkable degree. This would suggest that the message conveyed by any particular arrangement of symbols may have been delivered in the form of a 'national' language rather than a 'regional' one. When dealing with ogham, some slightly contentious statements are made. 'Ogham inscriptions have not yet helped in deciphering the symbols'. Why should it be expected that they might be able to? Is there any evidence, or even indication, that the messages carried by ogham and by Pictish symbols on the same stone were in any way linked? Is there anything to suggest that the two may have been contemporary? On this last point, the plain statement is made that 'Occasionally symbols appear alongside ogham inscriptions', though it would have been preferable had the relationship been seen as occurring the other way round.

Only a light smattering of Pictish stones appeared in the exhibition, the great majority of the Museum's holdings remaining a couple of floors below. It may not be a symbol stone, but can there be much doubt that the intriguing slab from Pupil is Pictish? If so, it may be considered as slightly odd that its caption avoids using the word 'Pictish', seeming thereby to suggest that it was not a Pictish product. The three main elements (reading downwards from the top) are all overtly Christian, but certain features indicate that this is a comparatively early stone, perhaps even earlier than the 7th-century date which has been ascribed to it – a concept awkward to accommodate chronologically, though perhaps illustrative of the sporadic nature of the Christianising of Pictland. Could the 'strange bird-men' at the bottom possibly be pagan? The ceremony in which they are engaged hints at this being the case. It is the other narrative scene, however, which is described in some detail in the caption: 'You can see four travelling monks who carry book satchels'. When I look, I see four cloaked figures, hoods up, each holding a crozier, with just two of them carrying satchels. In passing, it may be thought that 'strange' is a word somewhat overused in the captioning, especially in the 'Changing World' showcases, with talk of 'strange beasts', 'strange creatures', even 'strange people'; maybe they were not regarded as being all that strange when viewed from a Celtic standpoint. Much is made of 'paired symbols', the emphasis suggesting that this was not just the norm, but the absolute rule. There are, of course, abundant examples of triple groupings, and even a rare quadruple; nor do two symbols necessarily constitute a pair. In an adjacent showcase was the little Monifieth cross-slab, its secular side crammed with exciting imagery, and also two symbols, separated by a cordon, thereby implying that they were not paired.

The layout of the exhibition was well up to the high standards we have come to expect from our national institutions. There was a little cutting down and also augmenting between the two venues, but basically it was the same for both audiences. One Pictish absentee was what I believe to be the only Pictish carved stone (being a piece of stone as opposed to rocky outcrops) to be now found furth of Pictland, and that is one of the Burghhead bulls, which lodges in the British Museum. The reason for its omission from both venues was the same; it was felt inadvisable to disrupt the layout of its new situation in the Early Medieval gallery there. Pity in a way, as it would have been nice to have had it back on home soil once more, albeit temporarily, for it is a superb example of the genre.

The lead curators for this collaborative venture were Fraser Hunter of the NMS and Julia Farley of the BM. The co-operation went further, in that they were also joint editors of the superb book *Celts: art and identity*, which accompanied the exhibition. (At the

previous 1970 event, both roles, curator and catalogue editor, were bravely undertaken by my old professor, Stuart Piggot, and as I happened to be in the RSM at the time, on attachment from my Museum Studies course at Leicester University, I was able to work on the mounting of that exhibition. The 2016 publication is much more than a catalogue, being a series of essays, lavishly illustrated, the final product running to 304 pages and costing £25. In the Directors' Forewards, David Rintoul for the NMS emphasised the broad remit of the exhibition, taking the visitor through the entire Celtic period and beyond, and also giving consideration to the rediscovery (in some instances, reinvention) of Celtic culture right up to the present day. 'This broad perspective challenges any easy assumptions about a simple Celtic past. The objects in the exhibition and the stories they tell, reveal how decoration with curvilinear and complex Celtic artistic forms gave objects a real power and significance'. Such a sentiment is echoed by the lead curators at the conclusion of the text: 'The term "Celt" may provide a label, but behind this lie degrees of complexity that make a single word inadequate. There never was a "pure" Celtic form; everything was a mixture'. The fact that this exhibition has so effectively and enjoyably allowed that heady mixture to be appreciated by the wider public is to the credit of all concerned.

Graeme Cruickshank

Forthcoming events Spring 2017

at Brechin Town House Museum

Friday 17 March

Dr Neil McGuigan

Alba and the End of Northumbria

Friday 21 April

Martin Cook

Excavations at Dun Deardail Hill Fort

Friday 19 May

Sophie Nicol

Excavations at Moredun Top Hill Fort

Doors open at Brechin Museum at 7.00 pm for a 7.30 pm start. Tea, coffee and biscuits will be available after the talks which are free to members and £3.00 to non-members.

All are welcome.

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Please email contributions to the editor:

john.borland@rcahms.gov.uk