

Meeting notes

1. Introduction

A special meeting under the auspices of the Historic Rural Settlement Working Group was convened in order to take forward some of the ideas from the Group's May 2003 seminar¹, and to stimulate interest and enthusiasm in future research into Historic Rural Settlement in Scotland.

The meeting was chaired by Robin Turner (Historic Rural Settlement Trust and National Trust for Scotland), and attended by 35 participants from all sections of the community of interest: academic, contractor, curator, amateur, museum, central and local government.

Robin opened the meeting by reviewing the key research-related points from his '20-20 Vision' from the 2003 event:

- The continuing need for research. Historic rural settlement in Scotland has an international resonance, and students need to be encouraged to take an interest in the subject;
- The need to encourage public involvement in rural settlement, showing communities why this resource is important – to us and to them;
- The need for landscape-scale protection of the best rural settlement remains.

2. Introductory talks

The meeting continued with talks from three prominent practitioners, each with his own perspective:

Dr John Atkinson, GUARD – Archaeological research

- Reviewed the main points of GUARD's 1995 MoLRS report;
- 'National Themes for Research' are still the most useful part of the report, with chronological sequences remaining the most pressing need;
- there has been progress over the past decade, especially in the quantity of fieldwork, in particular RCAHMS survey, university research in the Western Isles and the multi-disciplinary project on Ben Lawers;
- development-led archaeology is not feeding into the debate as it should, principally because so little of it is properly published. There are problems here securing post-excavation funding.

Some ways forward:

- make 'grey literature' more accessible;
- target excavations more carefully, particularly on the upland fringe, where there is the best chance of medieval / early medieval settlements surviving;
- develop artefact studies;
- develop links with physical sciences.

Dr Richard Oram, Stirling University – desk-based research.

- The 1995 report understated the potential for documentary studies: a multi-disciplinary approach is needed, involving historians, archaeologists and palaeo-environmentalists;

¹ <http://www.molrs.org.uk/downloads/MoLRS%20Priority%20Seminar%20note.doc>

- Local mismatches between the quality of surviving documents and archaeology are to be expected, so research projects should involve documentary historians *before* selecting a site;
- At present desk-based research on rural settlements tends to use only secondary sources, often out-of-date;
- There is a need to understand the wider systems within which sites functioned. Research in Laggan, for example, has shown that davochs could be composed of widely dispersed fragments, each exploited within the one system. Narrowly-drawn 'keyhole' research would have missed this;
- Gogar and Eldbottle are good recent examples of collaboration between archaeologists and historians. These are lowland sites – in the uplands, where archaeological survival is usually better, there is even greater potential for collaboration.

Dr Richard Tipping, Stirling University – Scientific research

(Summary version attached –Appendix 1)

- At the 2003 seminar various ideas and various needs were discussed, but progress has been limited;
- We need a statement of present knowledge, from which a new research agenda can be developed;
- We need to think big in research, pursuing large-scale funding for projects. Two routes to securing this funding are developing an international dimension to research and demonstrating the relevance that studying the past has for the future.

Some potential ways forward include:

- Seeing rural settlement studies as rural ecology –'Living with environmental change' is a theme emerging for research;
- More rigorous hypothesis testing – research questions need to be more focussed;
- Identifying landscapes – remote sensing technology may speed up the recording of landscapes;
- Understanding landscapes – we tend to have a very static view of landscapes, though historical evidence reveals a range of contrasting exploitation strategies in different areas and at different times. We need to examine whether these strategies can be recovered on the ground, experimenting with scientific techniques.

Additional comments from the floor:

- An observation was made that the maritime perspective is missing; the seaboard is not peripheral.
- Developer-funded archaeology is going to be increasingly important in the future.

3. Breakout Sessions

The talks were followed by a breakout session of three groups. Each group had participants from a variety of backgrounds, and Chairs and Facilitators were asked to structure the discussions around the following:

- Strategic approaches
- Knowledge gaps and requirements
- Understanding

Summaries of the discussions of each of the three breakout groups can be found as Appendix 2.

4. Discussion

Following feedback from the breakout groups, there was a wide-ranging discussion that can be summarised, mainly within four main themes, as follows:

An Atlas of Historic Rural Settlement in Scotland: Do we need one? Who should do it?

- RCAHMS proposes doing a scoping exercise, looking into it and what it might involve. The Atlas would create a collection of what we know, where it is (regionally) and provide an audit of available resources. Research questions should emerge from this product.
- Proposed that atlas should be a web resource, although some funders might only fund a hard copy.
- Scoping exercise will throw up what we do know, what we don't know, what we think we know and what others know that we don't.
- Create an atlas of surviving historical resources – showing where the archives are.
- Provide a record of what work is being done presently.

Research framework: Do we need one, if so what should it look like?

- Essential – crucially important to have declaration of positive actions, otherwise might be no further forward in another 4 years time.
- Framework should be fluid
- Framework necessary to move forward & look back to see what has been achieved.
- Resources already exist within the group to produce a framework.
- Does the framework flow out of the Atlas scoping exercise/ audit? Can we wait or should they go forward side by side?
- What are the big questions; can they be costed, prioritised and actioned accordingly?
- Living with environmental change is a broad enough theme to join together a range of research topics.
- Present status – Research councils going for consideration presently, ready in 2 years time?
- HRSWG needs to establish itself as the official voice in order to get access to research funding directly.
- SRP proving groundswell of enthusiasm for these types of projects.

Engagement. Grants dependent on collaboration between groups, eg transferring/ aiding policy formation. What are the opportunities? (Many such schemes demand 50:50 funding, though not NERC).

- Skills shortages. IFA training – enabling basic artefact recognition, who to ask for further information and the right questions to ask – a relatively easy and inexpensive mechanism. Do the trainers need training too?
- Stirling University provide training courses for non-experts at an SRP level in documentary research.
- People producing accurate transcriptions are desperately needed.
- There is a thirst for knowledge in amateur groups.

Value: Assessment of significance of historic rural settlements is vital (though a lack of knowledge and understanding may prevent this).

- Chronology, origin, regional typologies all lacking for historic rural settlements.
- Intangible value itself is undervalued. This needs further investigation for benefit of local people and government.

- Year of homecoming 2009 – a good tie in opportunity for HRSDG and need to explore any available funding.
- ESSENCE (UHI/Orkney College) – need to liaise with them or will be in danger of reinventing the wheel.

5. The Way Forward

A number of key issues arose from the meeting, and were particularly drawn out during the discussions. These issues can be brought together to consider where we go from here.

Atlas of Historic Rural Settlement

We need more access to information about different types of site and landscape, perhaps building on the First Edition Survey Project and Historic Landuse Assessment. The atlas would perhaps be GIS-based, and might be linked to a handbook of site types or to regional variations in vernacular architecture. **Colleagues at the Royal Commission have agreed to consider how this sort of resource might be developed and built up.**

Research Framework

Having spent a few years in collecting information of various sorts, there is a need to review the state of knowledge, then to identify key questions or pose testable hypotheses. Amongst the broad issues that might be raised are:

- How did people live with and respond to significant environmental change over the past millennium?
- Can we find distinctive chemical signatures in the soil which reflect different sorts of activities that once took place there?
- Can we link the physical evidence of historic rural settlement with the historical and oral sources, to produce new landscape biographies?
- What are the values of historic rural settlement?: Social, economic, scientific, cultural.
- What forms of remote sensing can be used in what circumstances to detect recent rural activities?
- How can finds be better used to illuminate the daily lives of our predecessors?

Colleagues within the Historic Rural Settlement Working Group have begun to scope-out what such a Research Framework would look like, and how it might be developed.

Engagement

There is a realisation that historic rural settlement studies can only thrive if there is a transfer of knowledge from specialists and experts to those who have a non-professional interest. Scotland's Rural Past is beginning to empower local groups by giving them a range of skills, but these skills need to be extended beyond fieldwork and into the realms of documentary research, oral history and tradition, etc. Scotland's Rural Past is already beginning to recognise this, but a lot more can and will be done if sufficient interest is shown from local groups and communities.

Working principles

A number of issues emerged during the discussions, which relate to the principles within which historic rural settlement research takes place. Where appropriate that research should be:

- Of international relevance, undertaken in an international research context.
- Inter-disciplinary, with disciplines working closely together from the start.
- Landscape scale, looking at systems rather than just sites.
- Relevant, linking past to the present, to the future.
- Hypothesis testing, not just asking vague questions.

6. Conclusions

While the event did not result in a long list of individual research tasks and topics, many useful ideas were aired, and some firm commitments to take things forward resulted. It was clear that the priorities for the time being are to consolidate the data that we have been collecting over the past few years, and to put them into the melting pot to produce an agreed Research Framework. Such a Framework will be invaluable in helping us all to prioritise research into historic rural settlement in Scotland, and has the potential to enable us to work together to look at the bigger questions of how our rural ancestors lived and developed. In the process we have the potential to inspire and empower communities throughout the country, and help them re-engage with the cultural landscapes they inhabit.

*Robin Turner
June 2007*

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Appendix 1 - Historic Rural Landscapes – The Way Forward Once More *Richard Tipping*

Introduction

This is our second workshop in four years, and we are thinking of the future “once more”. My feeling is that, with regard to our ambitions to be a research grouping, not much has happened since we last met in 2003. There is a feeling abroad that we need to do something. At that meeting in 2003, Chris Dalglish and I discussed “enhancing the knowledge base”, our sole subject today. I argued then that we needed to:

- Ask good questions
- Think ‘big’
- Use our principal advantage over other regions and countries, the landscape
- Think in an interdisciplinary way.

Some of these ideas emerged in group discussions:

- Consideration of international questions
- Need for a bigger vision but interlinking with local initiatives
- Need for a communication network and improved networks – from the local to the international
- A forum for discussing research frameworks
- The need for a statement of knowledge – the need for a new research agenda

I would in particular make a plea for the last point, an updated research agenda, if only because we can use this to justify research funding and even if it is only our own research agenda.

My brief for this afternoon is to look specifically at ‘landscape’, and I have three themes:

- Rural settlement as human ecology
- The need for hypothesis testing
- Identifying and understanding landscapes

Rural Settlement Studies as Human Ecology

My suggestion for a unifying theme to our work in historic rural settlement, and of unifying relevance for the future, would be to understand how people lived with environmental change. In the 21st century, faced with accelerating environmental change, some thinkers are belatedly explore those economic options that involve downsizing the economy, local production rather than globalisation, and environmental sustainability. Perhaps without fully realising it, these aspects are what we study. Increasingly there is a need to emphasise the link between history and future socio-economic policy-making, and demonstrate the relevance of what we do.

There are many questions. A selection which might fit this wider social agenda are:

How adaptive or responsive to environmental change were people? Were the 18th-19th Century ‘Improvements’ necessary? Was the rural economy really failing before the ‘Improvements’ or are we influenced too much by the post-colonial writings of the Improvers? What went wrong except unbridled population growth? Was the economy ecologically unsustainable or only economically intolerable to some people? What knowledge of how to do things did we lose in the Agricultural Improvements? What can we put back in a 21st century context?

Hypothesis Testing

But how to couch the questions? Having worked with archaeologists and historians for 25 years, I am continually bemused and frustrated by an apparent aversion to the generation of testable

hypotheses. Scientists instinctively generate formal hypotheses which define what the problem is, what will constitute a proof and how to establish that proof. We should note that UK Research Councils will not fund projects in which the applicants simply want to find things out. Our research has to be more focussed.

Identifying and Understanding Landscapes

Finding and recording historic landscapes was the principal academic justification for our group's major success, the *Scotland's Rural Past Project*. We argued to our funding partners that so abundant and extensive were these historic landscapes – and so few were the professional archaeologists – that we needed the manpower of amateur groups in finding and recording these. This remains true, but linked to this is the needs to use more sophisticated techniques. These will include new techniques for rapid aerial and satellite survey, although the nuances of horizontal 'stratigraphy' and architecture will need to be recovered by hand.

A more important concern is with what do we do with the landscapes that we then find? We can expect to find fields and cultivation traces as well as buildings and built structures. But our bases for classification of cultivation remains are 30 years old (Parry 1976), and were not tested even then. Recent comparable classifications which infer a chronology for different forms (RCAHMS 2001) were not tested against other mechanisms for controlling rig-width such as soil type and hydrology. Halliday (2004) suggested that, indeed, we have few grounds for thinking that what we see is older than 18th century anyway, but we have not explored this possibility. We might have the scientific techniques to do this, either indirectly (Carter *et al* 1997), or more adventurously directly by ¹⁴C dating basal peat formed in abandoned furrows, OSL dating of mineral grains exposed when they were last turned over by the plough, or exposure dating by cosmogenic isotopes like ¹⁰Be of minerals exposed by the last ploughing. Our current views of fields see them as rather static because of the way we record them and the questions we currently ask about them, when we know that they must have been dynamic, always evolving and responsive, and potentially our most sensitive indicators of change.

The rather static archaeological picture of these landscapes contrasts with the dynamism and ranges of strategies in the rural economy emerging from the documentary record (e.g. Dodgshon 1998), which shows beautifully the adaptive responses to different environmental stresses, the human ecological interpretation I stressed earlier. But we do not know how to recognise these archaeologically or ecologically. Soil scientists are increasingly adept at identifying manuring practices and the making of agricultural soils – the focus of work at Stirling by Donald Davidson and Ian Simpson - but there are nutrient losses in soils which also need to be measured, and we have not moved beyond the initial scientific analyses made over a decade ago (Entwistle *et al* 1995). There is the need, of course, to define the long-term health of the soil, which determines how sustainable farming was, and we can do this with the almost untapped potential of peat and sediment stratigraphies for revealing agricultural changes at very high temporal resolutions, as we are exploring as part of the Ben Lawers Historic Landscape Project.

Conclusion

I have tried to emphasise ecological principles and approaches here, an emphasis on linkages and a belief in viewing the environment as a system, in providing a reason for studying historic rural settlement in Scotland. Human beings are part of the landscape – in Scotland we have never been separate from it. My emphasis on landscape and environment does not make me hostile to concerns to understand perceptions, decisions and choice by people, because in Scotland these decisions have always been closely embedded in landscape.

We have seen the value of thinking 'big' – no little thanks to Robin Turner - in the financial success of the *Scotland's Rural Past Project*. We need now to think equally 'big' in the research

effort, and thinking big means securing serious investment from research councils. We cannot afford to appear parochial, as we sometimes do in Scotland. We must make sure that the questions we ask are of international significance, because research funding will not come if the questions we ask are not of international relevance. We need to advance together – all disciplines – and we need an overarching philosophy which shows the relevance of the past for the future.

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**Appendix 2A – Breakout Session Notes
Breakout Group A**

What?

- Vernacular buildings (Styles; local traditions)
 - We need a strategy in how best to approach 'Invisible' material culture
 - 2D micromorphology as a tool: Targeted searches
 - Evidence for occupation
 - Mustn't forget the Maritime dimension
 - Strong support for an Atlas: Identification of existing knowledge/typologies
 - Highlighting 'unknowns'
 - How do we approach excavation of turf structures? How have techniques moved on?
 - Importance of placenames
 - Think about how people/goods moved across/through landscapes
 - Syntheses of work that has been done => follow up/revision of 1995 document
 - Uniform approach, e.g. criteria for site selection
 - Parochialism: Focused on 'Scottish' issues (potential for international links)
 - What is the wider context?
 - Arrochar: Husbandlands - - research on placenames and 'types'
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How?

- Concentrated dialogue on interdisciplinary projects: importance of planning phase
 - Appropriate scale for questions – focused research
 - Human ecology as a possible approach
 - 2D multiplicity of elements: potential linkages
 - Town/country and links between them (tracking the rural/urban interface)
 - Using 1995 local authority regions – perhaps assessing documentary record in this context
 - Landscape-based studies of historical record
 - Systematic fieldwork on geographical base
 - Importance of planning and project management
 - Research strategies – usefulness of boundaries, e.g. the 1995 GUARD document
 - Research designs; documentary research in advance of fieldwork
 - Ready access to relevant data, e.g. climate change
 - Irish Atlas as a model?: dissemination of information
 - source for further questions
 - how is it generating further research?
 - How do we resource this?
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Who?

- Targeting of ex-pats, e.g. Year of Homecoming; Family History Societies; Clan Societies
 - Local/oral histories
 - HLF (small and large)
 - HS
 - Local Authorities/National Parks
 - Research Councils – AHRC/NERC/ESRC
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Actions?

- Vernacular buildings => SVBWG
- Placenames => ALGAO/SMRs; Scottish Placenames Society
- Maritime/coastal => SCAPE – HRSWG as catalyst
- Universities – Research Strategies/Frameworks

**Appendix 2B – Breakout Session Notes
Breakout Group B**

1. STRATEGY

What is needed?

- The current research focus needs to be extended geographically and also in time
- The right questions need to be identified in order to shape our hypotheses
- A common understanding needs to be identified and developed
- A common language is needed
- All scales of evidence and context need to be researched and examined
- An improved understanding of regionalities is needed

How will this be achieved and by whom?

- More strategic and dynamic networking will close the gap between different interest groups
- Mechanisms for sharing ideas and material should be used more effectively (eg SRP or HRSG website)
- Interdisciplinary study should be promoted and encouraged by all

2. KNOWLEDGE

What is needed?

- Skills base of students, professionals and local people need to be developed and improved
- Current gaps in knowledge need to be addressed

How will this be achieved and by whom?

- Training and awareness will promote shared skills and knowledge
- Development of international collaboration will encourage cross-cultural exchange of knowledge and expertise, will improve funding opportunities
- Combined publications detailing new material in common areas of interest will improve awareness between different interest groups – eg LASH AND BASH?

3. UNDERSTANDING

What is needed and how will this be achieved?

- A greater understanding of what people value in the landscape and why
- A greater understanding of what aspect of the past people value and why
- Improved relevance of research relating to the past and Scottish history to modern living and perceptions
- Engagement with the past needs to be encouraged
- Landowners, local people and other stakeholders need to be involved with research and its outcomes

Appendix 2C – Breakout Session Notes Breakout Group C

During the discussion, the group agreed that it was necessary to formulate a research agenda by defining a set of ‘big questions’ that the subject should address. This was considered necessary for a number of reasons:

- to provide a framework within which to locate new data being acquired (e.g. through the SRP project or through developer-funded archaeology);
- to provide a defined rationale and justification for work already being undertaken by various organisations – ensuring the continued inclusion and prominence of historic rural settlement studies in a variety of contexts;
- to aid the success of the search for funding by providing a focus for the subject and by identifying key areas of significant research;
- to aid in the development of true inter-disciplinary partnerships by defining areas of research where the potential for disciplinary cross-over could be greatest (i.e. by defining questions relevant to all or a number of disciplines – potential common interests).

The group discussed some of the potential themes that might be included in any research agenda. These included:

- regional variation in Scotland’s rural landscapes;
- the nature of systems of landscape exploitation/organisation and the connections between different aspects of the rural landscape;
- the market economy (the nature and pattern of its introduction, its relationship to subsistence practices, variation in people’s engagement with this economy, etc.);
- the relationship between town and country.

However, much of the discussion focussed not on the specific themes we might want to address but on how we might put ourselves in a position to identify the most relevant and profitable themes. The group considered that there were several aspects to this:

- an audit of the existing resources – a review of existing knowledge in terms of what we know about Scotland’s rural landscapes, what the pattern of past work has been and what the resources are for future research. Discussion turned to the creation of an atlas of the historic rural landscape, showing: 1) known patterns in the material remains (e.g. the extent of different settlement or landscape types); 2) the pattern of past work (where have different types of work, such as excavation, environmental sampling, historical research and so on, taken place); and 3) the nature of the available resources other than those identified under item 1 above (e.g. what areas are covered by available estate plans or good historical archives?). During the discussion, RCAHMS offered to conduct a scoping exercise to establish what the production of such an atlas would entail;
- an understanding of biases in past work: the atlas could, in part, form the basis for this – e.g. what have been the geographical biases of different types of work? – but there is also a need to understand other aspects, such as past concentration on certain historical sources for a given area over others. So, there is a need for a quantitative/geographical review and a qualitative review;
- an understanding of the wider research context – what themes are studied in relation to the rural landscape elsewhere in the UK, in Ireland, Europe and beyond? What aspects of Scotland’s historic rural past will be most relevant to the wider research community?;
- an awareness of the relevant policy context – what themes are particularly ‘policy relevant’? What themes would have most meaning to funders and to those outside of the immediate research community?

In short, we felt that there was a need to produce an audit of the historic development of the subject, the present state of knowledge and an assessment of the context for future research.

In addition, the group also considered that there was a need and an opportunity to develop greater contact between the relevant disciplines and initiatives in knowledge transfer which would help to increase understanding of the relevance and potential contribution of the subject amongst those outwith the immediate research community (including those in government involved in the development of rural policy).