

MINUTES OF THE MEDIEVAL OR LATER RURAL SETTLEMENT WORKING GROUP
THURSDAY 19TH JUNE 2003, UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Present: John Atkinson (GUARD) (Chair), Chris Dalgligh (GUARD), Sarah Govan (HS), Lesley Macinnes (HS), Rod McCullagh (HS), Alex Morrison (Glasgow University), Ross Noble, Jack Stevenson (RCAHMS), Richard Tipping (Stirling University), Robin Turner (NTS) and Steve Boyle (RCAHMS).

Apologies: Derek Alexander (NTS), Malcolm Bangor-Jones, Donald Davidson (Stirling University), Piers Dixon (RCAHMS), Aonghus Mackechnie (HS), Ian Shepherd (Aberdeenshire Council), John Wood (Highland Council) and Tim Yarnell (FC).

Training Day

SB confirmed that Tombreck would provide the base for the training day, which will take place on 6th September and that a recce had already taken place. It was agreed that the event should be publicised through the circulation of fliers, and also through the new website.

Website

CD reported that he had now taken over the general management of the website, which was formally launched at the ARP conference on 24th May. It was agreed that the site was progressing well, and the group was very impressed. The bibliography, supplied by Alex Morrison came in for particular praise. CD confirmed that while we do not have details of the number of 'hits', he would approach CBA for this information. He also reported that he intends to approach a variety of people and organisations to raise awareness about the site and to encourage them to post details of their projects.

Further development of the site was discussed. CD confirmed that the sub-group is currently investigating the possibility of a message board and a section on how to access resources. There will also be further expansion of the existing sections. CD noted that there was no limit to the space available on the CBA server. SG asked that all members pass on their details for the contacts page, as some were incomplete and others missing. SB asked about updating the bibliography and CD confirmed that the intention at the moment was to update annually as quite a lot of work is involved. They will also be investigating its conversion to a database. The possibility of increasing the use of illustrations was discussed.

Seminar, 1st May 2003

JA referred to the note circulated by SG in advance of the meeting, and suggested that this be used as a basis for discussion. RTu emphasised the need to establish a vision to work towards, and although the seminar had not produced a final view, SB noted that it had provided plenty to go on. SG felt that a central framework was needed to facilitate a communication and support network. LM noted that while communication was good, the key need that brought the working group together was that of understanding for conservation. She was struck by the value of national surveys as a basis for further work. JS noted that the training day would be a good opportunity to get some feedback from active volunteers in what they need and how we can help them further. RN reminded the group of the issue of confidence raising among groups and individuals.

JA asked how we can best move forward, and RTu identified two key issues – whether we continue as we are with very limited resources or whether we should look to the SCAPE approach of a lottery bid for resources to support dedicated staff. He suggested that a strong contender for funding might be a 5-year project with 3-4 staff aimed at raising the profile of local historic landscapes across Scotland. However, one problem in the SCAPE comparison might be the lack of a dedicated individual to partner and host the project, if it is successful.

Discussion surrounded this idea, and considered the difficulties that might be involved and the potential partners that could be approached. LM stressed the importance of having a clear goal and end-product, and possible options were discussed. SG noted that HS might consider funding support on the same basis as SCAPE, and while there will be opportunities to investigate this further, RM stressed that HS was unlikely to be a major funding partner.

RM mentioned a meeting of local history groups that had recently taken place in Skye as a demonstration of a growing interest. He expressed concern that the area of interest may be too large and suggested that confining any bid to a geographical area might be considered. Further discussion centred around the possible options, and RTI suggested that there was a need to look within the vision and examine which elements of the aspirations could be taken forward.

The meeting agreed that a small sub-group should be established to examine the possible mechanisms for action working towards a clear vision. The following members will serve on the group: John Atkinson, Robin Turner, Richard Tipping, Steven Boyle, Rod McCullagh and Lesley Macinnes/Sarah Govan.

The discussion then moved onto specific issues, such as the possibility of tying training and recording together with programmes such as FESP; whether objectives should include hard copy printed products perhaps combined with electronic dissemination; who might act as a lead body for any bid and a number of suggestions were made. RTu stressed the importance of working out the principal objectives from which products could emerge. CD suggested a useful end-point could be a synthesis of what has been learned through the project, and RN pointed out that any plan could consider the incorporation of appropriate skills at a set stage, rather than assuming that a project officer would carry everything through from beginning to end. It was agreed that there were many other projects from which we could learn lessons. LM noted the importance of conservation issues lying at the heart of any objectives. There was some discussion on how best to engage with local groups.

The first meeting of the sub-group was arranged for Tuesday 8th July at 2pm in RCAHMS, Edinburgh.

Secretariat

SG reported that she was struggling to absorb all of the secretarial duties of the group within her broader workload and was finding it difficult to support, for example, the Discussion Group. LM suggested that it would be easier if the work could be shared around the group. The organisation of the Discussion Group was seen as a key issue, and it was agreed that the proposed Auchindrain meeting should be postponed until the spring, when lower ground vegetation will make it easier to view the site anyway. SB agreed to take on the organisation of this meeting, with support from Alex Morrison, who will act as a local liaison.

It was agreed that the 'mechanisms' sub-group would take on the organisation of an indoor meeting to be held on 15th November, which would be aimed at presenting the initial project thoughts to the Discussion Group. It was agreed that this meeting would be held in Stirling or Perth and RTI agreed to look into possible venues.

Work in Progress

Time was limited, so only brief contributions were given under this item.

RTu reported that Jill Harden has been involved in MoLRS projects on Pabay and is also preparing an exhibition on the settlements on St Kilda. Derek Alexander has developed a project to survey the caves at Culzean where some medieval occupation layers have been identified. The NTS have been successful in securing grant from SNH for broader historic landscape work including some palaeoenvironmental survey.

RM reported that Douglas Spiers is involved in a Time Team project involving the (possibly) earliest distillery site at Lindores, Fife. MoLRS remains have been identified at a site in Burntisland which is threatened by a proposed holiday park. Survey work on Loch Glashen will look at two rectangular MoLRS structures now under the water. Forestry clearance will also be taking place soon which may reveal further remains.

RN reported that he has now officially retired from the Highland Folk Museum, and that his successor is Bob Powell. It was agreed that the Chairman should invite him to join the Working Group. He also reported that two shieling hut experiments were taking place this summer, and that a railway building has now been moved onto the site.

JS reported that the survey of Mingulay is almost complete, and that a lot of interesting material has been recorded. The RCAHMS is also planning to work in Sutherland. They have been approached by the RSPB to consider survey on an area of Islay.

RTI reported that he has been involved in survey work related to the Ardrossan by-pass and that they are also developing a project relating to coastal landforms which may be of some interest to the group.

CD reported that he will be giving a paper on a MoLRS topic at the EAA conference in St Petersburg and will report back to the group.

AM reported that he currently has two students working on MoLRS topics – an MLitt focussing on Islay and an MPhil looking at the economic archaeology of Irvine. He is also working on a synthesis of his own work over the years.

SB circulated a copy of the new RCAHMS broadsheet resulting from the survey of Eigg. They are also continuing the survey of Ben Lawers.

JA reported that the 2003 Ben Lawers survey season in April had concentrated on Kiltyrie and Tomnavora as well as high shieling groups. The geophysical survey work has also been very successful. The Scottish Crannog Centre has begun the underwater survey element of the project.

Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Working Group was arranged for Wednesday 27th August to be held in the main conference room, Historic Scotland, Longmore House, Edinburgh at 1.30pm.