



Fire and Water Project Evaluation Report

Overall, the project has been a great success, achieving what we set out to do and exceeding our expectations, not least in terms of weather - who could have guessed we could spend 15 days excavating and do five public heritage walks and stay dry? In October and February! In Assynt! We are delighted by our overall figure of more than 500 for participation in the project - this figure is the total count for attendance at all the project events, and although some people are counted several times because they came to several events, it is still a huge result for a community of only around 1000 people.

The aims of the project have all been achieved:

- ▲ To engage the local community and visitors in the further exploration of the on-going story of the relationship between people, communities and landscape in this unique area of Scotland.
- ▲ To conduct a community excavation and associated work at the Burnt Mound in order to better understand its form and date, its various uses and its relationship to both hidden and known remains within its immediate environment.
- ▲ To increase its accessibility to the public so that it may take its place in the developing network of accessible and interpreted sites of all periods across the whole of Assynt.
- ▲ To offer appropriate archaeological training to all who wish to engage in the excavations.
- ▲ To arrange a series of complementary events alongside the excavations in order to attract people who would not take part in an excavation.
- ▲ To disseminate all findings via the internet and in printed form at national, regional and local level.
- ▲ To develop and inaugurate five Heritage Trails across Assynt.
- ▲ To train local people to act as Heritage Trail Guides.
- ▲ To provide accessible interpretation.

We have carried out two digs, one at the burnt mound at Stronechrubie in October and one at the likely mediaeval moated site at Inchnadamph in February. These are giving us insights into two historical periods that weren't covered in the Life and Death in Assynt's past project. Altogether the five excavations we have done over the past two years provide an impressive and fascinating demonstration of the importance of Assynt's archaeological heritage in every period from the neolithic to the Clearances.

Archaeological Excavations

The Fire and Water project has shed light on one of Assynt's bronze age mysteries, the burnt mounds, of which we have quite an abundance. The excavation of the burnt mound at Stronechrubie went on throughout the inaugural Assynt Festival and it defied the archaeologists predictions that we would find nothing more exciting than some heat-shattered stones and charcoal. On the first day of the dig Charlie Russell delivered a load of firewood, and we proceeded to have a great deal of fun ensuring that the project lived up to its title by experimenting with fire and water. We found out what is actually involved in heating a tank of water with stones and we cooked on the open fire everything remotely bronze age we could get our hands on including fish, nuts, barley bread and scones.

The actual dig revealed a tank so big that its only conceivable use could be for bathing, and together with a total lack of bones, pottery or other signs of food, this pretty conclusively eliminated various other theories of the function of the burnt mound. The charcoal analysis has provided an interesting picture of a wooded landscape, rich in alder, birch, hazel and other trees. The charcoal analysis shows the burnt mound was used in two distinct periods - around three thousand years ago in the bronze age, and then again in the mediaeval, about a thousand years ago. It is intriguing to speculate how and why people, after a two thousand year break, resumed the same use of the mound. Were these incomers from another part of the world who still continued a tradition long abandoned here?

In addition to the burnt mound dig the archaeological team also did several other exploratory test pits and coring, and while the results were not significant they did suggest that more thorough exploration of the moated site at Inchnadamph would be worthwhile. This site was suspected to be early medieval and might thus be able to shed some light on the later use of the burnt mound.

A second excavation therefore got underway in February. Water was plentiful in the moat, but thankfully not from the sky. Fire was clearly also a big part of life to the people who lived there, from the evidence of slag from iron smelting, pottery and charcoal. We had visits from all three local schools, with lots of questions from the children about how to become an archaeologist, so hopefully there may be a future generation with an interest in Assynt's past.

Community Events

As well as the archaeological excavations we have organised a lot of other events to engage the wider community in the project.

- ♣ At Stronechrubie we had a memorable day of music through time, and thanks to Bob Pegg, Henry Fosbrooke and his marquee, and several local musicians, we were able to imagine how people entertained themselves through the ages. This brought 70 odd people to the burnt mound dig, most of whom may well not have visited it otherwise.
- ♣ We ran three 'finds workshops', at which members of the public could bring things they had dug up in their gardens or found in their attics to be identified by archaeologists.
- ♣ The post-excavation work for Stronechrubie was partially carried out in Stoer Community Hall, enabling lots of local people to come and see what is involved in the part of archaeology that does not involve getting muddy.
- ♣ We took part in a hazel day, celebrating this versatile local tree species, including a talk by an archaeologist and practical exploration of what is involved in making hurdles.

Heritage Trails

A big strand of the project was the development of heritage trails, which have been enjoyed by both visitors and locals and are an important legacy of the project.

- ♣ In October we trained eight local guides to lead the trails.
- ♣ The guides were paid to lead five walks during the Assynt festival, which were very well attended by locals and visitors.
- ♣ There is now an enthusiastic group of people following up with more in-depth exploration of some of the features along the trails. In early March we uncovered a bronze age cist.
- ♣ Trail instructions have been written, and are available on our project website, in the form of webpages, maps, and printable leaflets.
- ♣ A spin-off of the project is a residential heritage week at Glencanisp Lodge, to happen later in 2013, a sign that all this investment can bring tangible economic benefits to Assynt.

Project management

A single Project leader and a single Project Officer in Assynt and a single project manager with AOC made communication easier than our previous project, when we had three local officers. It cut down on the need for organised meetings because so much more could be sorted out with phone, email and when we met at events and fieldwork.

The timetable we had deliberately chosen put a great deal of the work into early October but the linkage with the Assynt Festival was worth it. The intense activity created a real sense of something happening. It then left plenty of time to allow for the development of creative and useful follow up activity, including improvements to the heritage trails and in particular the targeted excavation at the moat.

What difference the project made to our heritage:

The archaeologists have been careful to ensure that there is no visible impact of the digs, by backfilling and not leaving any of the uncovered structures exposed, so the main difference made by the project is on our *understanding* of our local heritage. These gains are considerable, because we now understand the nature and dates of the excavated sites and their place in overall picture of Assynt's story. We had never deeply explored

anything from the bronze age period, and the burnt mounds had been deeply mysterious. Now we have a much clearer idea of how they were used, though of course we are still left with many questions about what went on there. The fascinating discoveries of so much material in the moat leaves us with a strong incentive to explore this site more fully in future.

What difference the project made for people:

The creation of the heritage trails leaves an important and lasting legacy of material - maps, route instructions and interpretation, which will be available from now on. This significantly increases the potential for visitor awareness and interest, and for future economic spin-offs.

We now have a strong group of trained trail guides, who have skills they can apply in future and to other projects. We had 50 people involved as volunteers in the first dig and 12 volunteers in the second dig, all of whom have been involved in some level of training and have learned new practical skills including the use of excavation tools, techniques such as plane-table drawing and post-excavation work including finds processing and identification. Some of the most enthusiastic volunteers have been declared by the archaeologists to be now competent to carry out simple archaeological explorations, so the potential for community archaeology projects in Assynt has been much enhanced by this project.

Our total figure for participation in events is 509 (this is attendance in an event, and some people are counted several times because they came to several events). By involving so many people in events we have increased interest in Assynt's heritage. The experimental archaeology heating stones and using them to heat water vividly demonstrated to people what was involved in the use of the burnt mound. Together with the sounds of ancient instruments and the smells of woodsmoke and food at the 'music through time' day, this really made the past come alive.

What worked well

The archaeological work has been carried out by the highly professional team at AOC Archaeology and their expertise has meant that genuinely new understand of burnt mounds has resulted from the work. Good relations and the strong track record of collaboration with the company has made everything run smoothly for Historic Assynt, allowing us to focus our main efforts on adding local value to the dig.

The fieldwork at the burnt mound was enhanced by organising associated events close to it, and we had more visitors to the dig as a result. The link to the Assynt Festival was a useful way of getting publicity for the events.

The trails have worked well because of previous project fieldwork which supplied background information and because of the enthusiastic local response of guides. Again the good attendance on the pilot public walks was probably linked to the timing within the Festival period. It was also helped by the presence of visitors in Assynt, and the coincidence with Highland Archaeology fortnight.

Having the post-excavation analysis laboratory in Stoer community hall was a great success, because of the trainer's enthusiasm and a strong joint local interest in archaeology and woodlands, which made the charcoal finds of genuine local fascination. This in turn led to our involvement in the Hazel Day, adding value to both our project and the Coigach and Assynt Living Landscape project, which was the primary organiser of the day.

The Inchnadamph moat excavation worked well because of exceptionally good weather, for February, and a good level of local interest built up over previous Inchnadamph project work and survey. The timing was excellent for the local schools and thus saw strong participation by them, which had not been possible in the October week as it coincided with the school holiday.

Communications have worked well, with good use of the website, particularly the 'dig diary' blog, twitter and facebook news feeds, press releases, items in the local newsletter and emails to the Historic Assynt email list. Nobody can complain that we're not keeping them informed, and the use of lots of different channels of communication seems to be effective.

Lessons learned

We have learned that it is more difficult than we anticipated to create trails that work both with knowledgeable local guides, and also as self-guided walks with information sheets for visitors to download and use by themselves, due to the range of skills and familiarity with the landscape of potential users. We are aware that we will have to find ways to allow the self-guiding information to evolve and develop as feedback comes in over coming tourism seasons.

Our main conclusion is that this project confirms that connecting well researched and carefully designed, targeted fieldwork with a range of associated activities, which involve a wider spectrum of people than would be interested in fieldwork alone, works superbly and attracts locals and visitors alike.