



# PAST

Peebles Archaeological Society Times  
December 2011

## From retting and scutching to mash and worms: a walk through time

On Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> September, a group of hardy souls met at Traquair for a guided walk organised by Peeblesshire Archaeological Society (PAS). As well as being one of the nationwide activities organised under the banner of Scottish Archaeology Month, our walk formed part of Borders Heritage Week.

This year the theme of Borders Heritage Week was 'Water'. Well, maybe it was tempting fate, but the Society felt that this would be a great opportunity to show visitors some of the sites which the group has recently been recording, surveying and in some cases, excavating along the upper Camp Shiel Burn on the edge of Minchmoor to the south of Traquair.

What lay behind our interest in this area? As some members will recall, back in 2007 a story of early 19<sup>th</sup> century 'smugglers' on Minchmoor was brought to our attention. The story, originally from an old chapbook, tells of illicit whisky being made somewhere on the southern slopes of Minchmoor. Locally too, the remains of an illicit still were said to exist near Traquair. Our Camp Shiel project was therefore originally conceived to try to connect the feature on the ground with the story in the chapbook, by fieldwork and archival research.

The project has proved to be a great success. The site of the suspected still was identified and confirmed by excavation. Moreover, despite very difficult terrain, field survey of the surrounding area led to the discovery of several previously unrecorded sites: these included a second still, two shieling huts and three flax retting ponds.

Back to the guided walk that Sunday, then! Led by Joyce Durham, who has been masterminding this field project, the party made its way up the track from the village, pausing briefly at Damhead Farm to view the remains of the mill race, which would once have led water away from the watermill which once occupied part of the steading.

Moving on up the valley, the going got steeper and decidedly damper underfoot as we climbed steadily up towards the site of the still.



**Not a scene from TV's Extreme Archaeology ...but one of the steeper slopes on the route of the guided walk being negotiated with the aid of a handy rope provided courtesy of Joyce - and very useful It was too in the treacherously slippery conditions!**

Up at the still, Joyce explained how whisky production begins when barley is malted - the process of steeping the grain in water to allow germination to occur. Once sprouted, the malted barley is mixed with hot water, creating a 'mash', which is steeped again allowing sugars, produced during malting, to dissolve. This, the 'wort', then has yeast added and is allowed to ferment. The liquid produced is called 'wash' and is ready for distillation. Illicit distillers used a pot still to heat the wash to the boiling point of alcohol which is less than that of water. The alcohol evaporates, travels to the top of the still, through a connecting pipe into a condenser, called the 'worm', where it cools and reverts to liquid. This, the whisky, may be distilled a second or third time to increase the concentration of alcohol.



**The party moves off after discussing the ins and outs of illicit distilling!**

There were many ways in which distillers of illicit whisky attempted to conceal their activities from the unwanted attentions of the excise men. The Camp Shiel still is typical in that the site was built virtually underground and with a turf roof would have been well camouflaged; the water supply taken in and out of the building ensured there would have been little cause for movement outside; the elaborately built smoke-away meant their activities would not be detected by tell-tale signs of smoke; the situation they had chosen was concealed from view behind a hillside and there was access to a variety of routes over the hills by which to distribute the product without detection.

One of the big success stories of our Camp Shiel project was the discovery of a previously unrecorded structure just downstream from the still; this was identified as a probable 'shieling' hut and excavation was undertaken to establish its date and form. Before fields were enclosed, animals were taken to shielings, summer hill or moorland pastures, whilst crops were growing on the cultivated ground lower down. Women and children stayed with the sheep and cattle for the duration of the summer, living in rough shieling huts such as the one on Camp Shiel Burn, milking the cattle (or sheep) and making butter and cheese. Three of the charcoal samples recovered during the excavation were sent for carbon-dating. The results showed that the shieling was built and occupied during the 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries - results that have been welcomed with great delight because well-dated small rural structures of this period are extremely rare!



**Camp Shiel guided walk: members of the party view the medieval shieling hut, which was partly restored following excavation.**

The flax was probably grown on White Rigg to the south of Camp Shiel Burn. After it was harvested it was fermented, or 'retted', in a pond which ideally had water slowly running through. It was then dried and 'scutched', or beaten, to separate the useful fibres from the waste. After that it was 'heckled', when the fibres were combed, resulting in flax ready for spinning into yarn and finally woven into linen.

The 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but possibly earlier, are most likely to be when the retting ponds of Camp Shiel Burn were in use; this was a time when linen production was actively being encouraged by the government. According to the Old Statistical Account of 1791-99, there were six weavers living in Traquair Parish but by the time of the First Census in 1841 there were none.

Returning to Traquair, the group ended a fascinating walk with a quick look at the lade and pond which would have supplied the water for the mill at Damhead Farm - and so neatly rounding off our exploration of the historical and industrial archaeology of the Camp Shiel Burn - and the water which had played such a part in the story.

However by this time, water was playing a little bit too much of the story inside our clothes and boots as well, so with a hearty vote of thanks to Joyce for organising the walk and for expert guidance around the sites, the party headed off for home after a rather damp but thoroughly rewarding day. Maybe it was all that talk of illicit distilling, but a few of us felt we had earned a warming glass of something a wee bit stronger than a cup of tea!

**Trevor Cowie**

**The report on the fieldwork at Camp Shiel will shortly be available on the Society website**



**Camp Shiel: the lower retting pond is the best preserved of the three found during the survey. After it was harvested, flax was fermented, or 'retted', in a pond which ideally had water slowly running through.**

**Here, Peter and Bob stand on either side of the inlet channel which led water from the burn through the bank surrounding the pond. Joyce stands in the interior; trial excavation showed that it was filled with considerable deposits of sediment. After retting, the flax was dried and 'scutched', or beaten, to separate the useful fibres from the waste. Photo: T Cowie**

# Field Work Projects

## Shootinglee Project shaping up...

Around 150 years ago when asked by the compilers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Edition Ordnance Survey Namebook, the origins of the name 'Shootinglee', two Traquair worthies responded by saying 'it was the hunting lodge of the earls of Traquair'.

One aim of the Shootinglee project will be to try to prove (or disprove!) the truth of this statement. The broader aim will be to establish the place within its landscape: how do the ruined buildings and enclosures at Shootinglee relate to other features in the surrounding area?

The details of the project have yet to be fully worked out but to start with we will be organising a site visit sometime during the winter. The next step will be to undertake a detailed survey of the site in the early spring and from the resulting plan we hope be able to gain a better understanding of how we should take the project forward.

However undertaking a field survey and researching the story of Shootinglee does mean that we will be peeking over our neighbour's fence a wee bit! The study area is not actually in the County of Peeblesshire; it is in Selkirkshire – but only just!

However we reckon that this offers an exciting opportunity and we intend to invite the members of the Selkirkshire Antiquarian Society to join us on the site visit and in due course to participate in the field survey project.

As well as encouraging existing PAS members to join in the project we shall hope to attract new members with the prospect of active fieldwork.

We will be circulating details of the initial site visit nearer the time.

**Joyce Durham**



**Looking E towards Shootinglee across the valley of the Paddock Burn (Photo: Joyce Durham)**

# Scotland's Rural Past: Pentland Hills Project

*Members of PAS who attended the excellent training days at Threipmuir will be interested in the following update on the SRP Pentlands Project, reproduced from the Newsletter of Edinburgh Archaeological Field Society, by courtesy of EAFS and Jill Strobridge the project co-ordinator.*

The SRP project formally ended on 30<sup>th</sup> September. All the Pentland sites (Dreghorn and Little Vantage will be done separately) that have been put into Canmore are listed below with links - or you can search for them directly on Canmore. Jill Strobridge, who managed this project and carried out a huge amount of work, received a very nice thank you letter from Professor John Hume, Chairman of RCAHMS.

The "old" SRP website (see URL below) will be maintained by RCAHMS and the Data Input Form remains open so additional sites can be submitted for inclusion to Canmore at any time, although no new Projects can be started.

Training videos and guides will also be found on the website. There will also be a Community Archaeology Team at RCAHMS headed up by Steve Boyle as Community Liaison Manager (e-mail address: [communities@rcahms.gov.uk](mailto:communities@rcahms.gov.uk)). So if you find any new sites don't hesitate to record them!

<http://www.scotlandsruralpast.org.uk>



Surveying at Threipmuir Farmstead © RCAHMS

**Acreheads of Bavelaw:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/50377/details/wester+bavelaw/>  
**BackSpittal:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/50164/details/back+spittal/>  
**Boghall Burn:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/181405/details/boghall+burn/>  
**Capelaw:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/263884/details/capelaw/>  
**Craigentarrie:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/307407/details/craigentarrie/>  
**Fala Knowe:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/313172/details/fala+knowe/>  
**Grain Burn:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/51900/details/grain+burn/>  
**Gutterford:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/313161/details/gutterford/>  
**Kirkton Cottage:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/300409/details/kirkton+cottage/>  
**Leips:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/313141/details/leips/>  
**Logan Burn:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/181354/details/logan+burn/>  
**Redford Farm:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/50379/details/redford+wood+farmstead/>  
**River North Esk:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/181489/details/river+north+esk/>  
**Saltersyke:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/80546/details/saltersyke/>  
**Threipmuir Farm:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/306371/details/threipmuir/>  
**Upper Friarton:** <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/313162/details/upper+friarton/>

## PAS Lecture Programme

19 January 2012  
Speaker from The Hawick Hub  
(Scottish Borders Archives)

16 February 2012  
Alistair Hackett  
**'Metal Detecting'**

13 March 2012  
Angus Miller  
**'The in-between Land: Clues to a  
Lost Ocean and the Collision of  
Continents'**  
Joint Meeting with the Tweeddale  
Society

19 April 2012  
AGM followed by **Members Night**

## Other forthcoming meetings

### Selkirkshire Antiquarian Society Wednesday 14 December

Natasha Ferguson (Scottish Treasure Trove Unit)  
**Archaeology at Philiphaugh, Lost treasures from the battlefield**

Venue: Selkirk Parish Church Hall starting 7.30pm

For an informative website see  
<http://www.battlefieldstrust.com/resource-centre/civil-war/battleview.asp?BattleFieldId=74>

## ...and a reminder from the Treasurer

If you have not already paid, the Treasurer would be pleased to receive  
your subscription for 2011-2012 as soon as possible

£15 - individual membership   £20 - joint membership

Please pay by using the form appended to this newsletter  
or at meeting

**New members always welcome**

**Subscriptions 2011-2012**

**Dear member**

**Please pay at meeting or detach the tear-off slip and send remittance as soon as possible to:**

**Peter Barclay  
Peeblesshire Archaeological Society  
18 South Parks  
Peebles  
EH45 9DS**

**Thank you.**

**PAS Committee**

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