

## CLACHTOLL BROCH PROJECT



After many years of investigation, discussion, planning, emergency work to the entrance and south wall, and hours of form filling for permissions and funding the major phase of the Clachtoll Broch Project got off the ground in July. The main aim for 2017 was to conserve and stabilise the surviving structure and in the process to excavate the interior and the area out with the entrance. Post excavation analysis together with the provision of improved access and interpretation are to follow in 2018 and 2019. The entrance works in 2011 had suggested that a catastrophic collapse and fire at some point in the last

few decades BC brought occupation to an end, so we expected that after a couple of weeks or so removing the fallen rubble we would come down on to the destructive layer and below that the occupation layers going back to the earliest phase of the broch.

Rubble removal proved even more time consuming than expected leading to a 6 week long refrain that 'by the end of next week we should be down to the destruction layer'.

However, 3 months and 300 metric tonnes later the broch's interior had been excavated down to the bedrock and the internal walls and chambers stabilised for the future. The work threw up many surprises and puzzles, some superb finds and hundreds of samples for processing over the next 12 months.

Here are a few key points

- The catastrophic collapse and fire theory was vindicated.
- The burning upper floors and roof collapsed and were then covered by falling stonework which sealed the burning layer and left it smouldering, leading to the remarkable preservation of charred timbers, grain, matting, bags or baskets and other materials which should reveal a great deal of detailed information following post-ex.
- As expected the bedrock inside the broch was far from even, stepping down some 2m from west to east. The internal west wall was built on the crest of the bedrock.
- The east wall in particular showed evidence of several partial collapses and alterations during the occupation periods of the broch - earlier walling topped by irregular coursing of different workmanship, an enlarged east chamber, narrowing of the stacked voids over the east and south chambers etc.
- All the internal walls were both fire damaged and had clearly suffered further damage from falling stonework which in most areas had collapsed against the wall opposite with such force that walls were shunted out of true.
- A mounded area of the destruction layers a little to the west of centre overlay the uppermost of three hearths suggesting that there had been a hearth on the bedrock from a very early stage in the broch's occupation. The topmost hearth would have been very close to the first floor if that extended across the full width of the interior.



- Beside the hearth were the remains of a probable water tank and at lower levels the suggestion of some kind of channel running between the tank and the entrance.



- The lowest bedrock step on the east side had been converted into a souterrain which showed signs of changes of plan and the entrance to the east chamber was above the level of the top of the souterrain. Had a timber structure roofed the souterrain and provided a bridge to the chamber?

- Beside the souterrain, close to the entrance a large knocking stone (for de-husking grain prior transfer to querns for milling) had been set within a discreet and edged clay platform overlying paving.

Finds included:

- 9 quern stones, 9 lamps or bowls, 36 spindle whorls, a strike a light, pot boilers and other stone tools

- Whale bone some worked



- Worked and un-worked Red Deer Antler including a particularly nice comb
- Worked and un-worked animal bone including pins
- Decorated pottery fragments of various kinds
- 2 Iron dress pins, 1 socketed axe, 3 sickles (2 with partially surviving wooden handles) a large knife or saw and other items yet to be identified
- Copper alloy pin
- Waterlogged timber from lowest level hollows in bedrock



Some work was not completed this year because of the extra time taken up removing the rubble overburden! The excavation of one of the chambers off the entrance passage and the area outside the entrance will hopefully be done as part of next year's programme.

Historic Assynt is a partner in the Coigach and Assynt Living Landscape Partnership. The contractors for the project are AOC Archaeology. Funding has come from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic Environment Scotland, SSE's Sustainable Development Fund, Highland Council through the Landfill Communities Fund, the Pilgrim Trust and private donations. We are very grateful for their help and support.

We are also very grateful to the team of 52 volunteers (including a good many NOSAS members) who together put in 1,750 hours of work on site this year.