

2. Raasay

John Macdonald

The Island of Raasay lies off the east coast of Skye between Skye and the mainland at Applecross; it is approximately 13 miles long and three and a half miles across at its broadest point. The population is around 125, most of whom live in the village of Inverarish, which is toward the south end of the island.

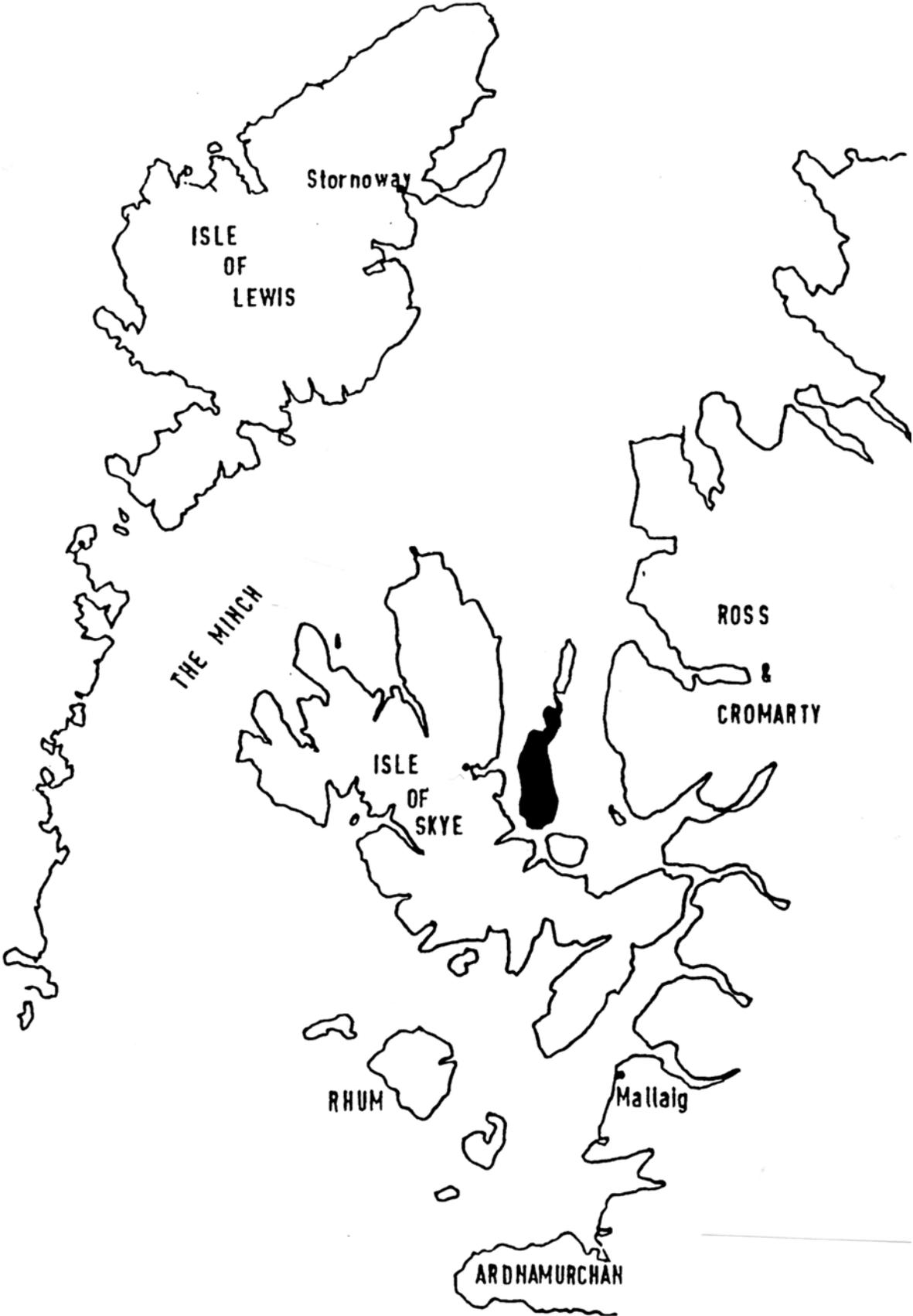
The Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists (ACFA) first became involved in surveying Raasay when in 1991 we were invited by Roger Miket, the then Skye & Lochalsh Museums Officer, to carry out a sweep survey of part of the east coast. This we duly did and the results were lodged in the museum in Portree.

We were not the first, nor the only, organisation to be involved in surveying the island. The R.C.A.H.M.S. surveyed the island just before and shortly after the First World War producing an Inventory in 1928. Martin Wildgoose has carried out a number of surveys prior to afforestation and C. Wickham-Jones and colleagues have surveyed the north-west as part of the Scotland's First Settlers Project. In many ways Raasay is a microcosm of the Highlands and Islands of the west coast of Scotland and because of its size it is ideal for a comprehensive survey.

The earliest remains found to date are of the Mesolithic, consisting of 2 rock-shelters which were found in 1999 by C. Wickham-Jones and colleagues when they surveyed the north-west of Raasay as part of the Scotland's First Settlers Project. In trial trenching at the rock shelters the archaeologists found midden material, lithics and 1 sharp-ended bone implement.

The largest collection of archaeological remains of the pre-historic are to be found in an area at the southwest tip of the Island known as Eyre Point. In several references about Raasay one of the structures is referred to as a 'dolmen', consisting as it does of 2 large side stones, a back-stone and an enormous capstone. Closer examination, however, shows that the surrounding ground is covered in cairn material and there is what could be described as a large portal stone supporting the capstone. It is clearly a chamber rather than a cist and is therefore more probably the remains of a robbed-out Neolithic chambered tomb. On the surrounding flat, almost machair-like ground, are several other features - a large cairn from the Bronze Age, two or three kerb cairns, a possible Pictish burial and, in a disturbed area close to the shore, signs of possible Viking burials. Not far from Eyre we found in 1999 a cairn of the Hebridean type not previously recorded with its capstone apparently still in place.

Richard Sharpe in his book on Raasay refers to cairns of the type normally associated with hut circles being found on the island but says that no hut circles have been found. Malloy says that 'remains of stone circles were once in evidence around Fearnas but these have now been lost to sight beneath the peat'. In our surveys, ACFA has found to date at least 10 hut circles and a possible 'complex' of hut circles at Glame. In addition we noted in 1997 several enigmatic features in an area known as Doire Domhain. These structures may be hut circles but there is no obvious sign of an entrance and the stonework round the edge is edged like a ring cairn. Close by lies a hut circle and several smaller features, and below it on a lower plateau is another unusual circular feature which we were unable to identify.



The most striking monument from the Iron Age is Dun Borodail. Although Malloy describes it as a Pictish fort, Boswell as a 'Danish fort' and the Inventory of 1926 as a 'broch-like structure', it is generally accepted that this is a broch or semi-broch of the Iron Age. Now no more than 2m in height, the entrance, internal passage and remains of the guard cell can still be seen. Boswell describes it as 'pretty high, circular wall, built double so that there was a spiral passage to the top, roughed over with flag stones. In the space in the middle were the huts for the people'. It is not clear whether Boswell had been told that that was what would have been in the middle or if he could actually see the remains of hut bases in the interior when he visited in 1775. Now the interior is completely covered with a very deep pile of stone. In the forest round about, hut circles were recorded by Martin Wildgoose and the remains of several later, probably late mediaeval, house bases are visible close to the broch. Possibly also dating from the Iron Age is a small dun like structure discovered by the Certificate in Field Archaeology students in 1998 on a rocky outcrop above Eyre.

The archaeology on Raasay in the early Christian era is not plentiful but the remains of St. Moluag's church still stand on the slopes above the harbour and Raasay House. St. Moluag is thought to have preached, if not lived for a time, in Raasay but this is not anywhere documented. The church dates to the early 13th century. In the churchyard are two other buildings, one of which may be the remains of an earlier, possibly 11th century structure and the other a shrine to a daughter of Raasay House who died while very young. Down at the harbour in front of Raasay House, a cross incised into the natural rock with the whole of the chi-rho symbol visible was noted by several travellers to Raasay in times past, including Johnson and Boswell, and can still be seen. There have been reports of other crosses and carved stones in Raasay but these are now considered to be lost.

It is thought that Raasay was on the periphery of Pictish influence and language during the early Christian era. The evidence for this is the presence of a Pictish symbol stone which could be an indicator of Pictish influence. The stone is a class 1 stone - i.e. the symbols and the cross are incised rather than being in relief – but Raasay's stone is rather unusual, in that the cross is carved on the same side of the stone as the Pictish symbols. Normally the cross would have been carved on the opposite face and the symbols consigned to the 'back'. The symbols are the crescent and V-rod and the tuning fork seen on many symbol stones, but the cross is unusual in its design. It is formed by 'petals' enclosed by a square and you have to make an effort of will over your vision to see the design as a Maltese cross and not as a flower. On the right of the top arm is the rho part of the chi-rho symbol. The cross and chi-rho are similar to the one at the harbour. Further evidence of Pictish influence may lie in square burial cairns, still to be authenticated. At least one of these is at Eyre and one lies close to the road at Brae and is recorded on the Ordnance Survey maps as 'Storab's Grave'. Legend has it that Storab was a Viking prince or chief.

The medieval period is represented by Brochel Castle. The castle is generally accepted to be of 15th century construction although tales of the exploits of various clan chiefs suggest a castle at Brochel as early as the 13th or 14th centuries. It is not probable, however, that the castle which can be seen today is as early as this. Munro, in 1549, refers to the castle and its 'fair orchards' and it was clearly inhabited

then. Martin Martin in c.1695 remarks on 'an artificial fort, 3-stories high called Castle Vreokle'. Boswell and Johnston visited the castle in 1775 by which time it was roofless but they were able to go into the interior and walk about the rooms. At some time in the mid-17th century Ian Garbh, a famous Raasay Macleod chief, left Brochel and Brochel ceased to be the capital of the island. In 1819 a man called Daniell toured the Highlands and Islands and painted romantic places of interest, including Brochel Castle. Substantial, upstanding houses can be seen below the castle in the painting. It is not clear whether this was artistic license, whether the more upstanding houses seen at Brochel now were telescoped in to make a more satisfying picture or whether, in fact, the houses were substantial as recently as 1819. The painting does, however show an entrance in the landward wall which has never existed, there being a chute in the wall here and the entrance always having been on the seaward side of the castle. So perhaps we have to take the picture with a pinch of salt. However, during ACFA's survey of Brochel in 1997 the foundations of several houses were recorded around the foot of the castle.

The 'seat of power' of the Macleods of Raasay shifted in the 17th century to Clachan and Ian Garbh moved to the 'castle' at Clachan. Munro records two castles on Raasay in 1549, one at Brochel and one at Kilmoloroch (probably Kilmaluag) both with 'fair orchards' around them. Martin Martin refers to 'a little tower' at Clachan. This tower was replaced in 1744 or 45 with a fine new house built where Raasay House now stands and probably using the stone from the tower. When Prince Charles Edward Stuart called for men the Macleod of Raasay, in common with many of the clan chiefs at the time, hedged his bets. He gave his estates to his eldest son who remained at home 'loyal' to the government, and he (the chief) came out with his other sons and his men for the Prince. After Culloden, when vengeance was wreaked on the Highlands, the estates were not sequestered because they belonged to a 'loyal subject' but the island was harried by government troops, both as a compliance with government orders and during the search for the Prince who hid for 3 days and 2 nights in Raasay. The fine new house of the Macleod was not spared and was burned to the ground in 1746. A new house was built, using the last of the stones of the tower house, and that is the house which we see today, give or take a few minor additions and alterations over the years. Raasay suffered at the hands of the government troops in 1746 and it was reported that not a house remained roofed and not an animal remained alive after the troops had left. Sharpe reckons that this was possibly a bit of an exaggeration but it is agreed that the face of the island was probably changed forever by the destruction of 1746.

Until this time the record of what life was like for the people of Raasay is fairly scanty. In 1549 Munro describes an island 'with birkin woodis, maney deires, pairt of profitable landes, inhabit and manurit twa fair orchards, ane rough country bot all full of free-stanes and guid quarells (quarries) excellent for fishing'. Martin Martin describes 'a quarry of good stone, some woods on the quarters of it very well watered with rivulets and springs, cattle, fowl and fish are produced here, fruitful in corn and grass'. Probably the way of life of the people had changed very little since the prehistoric and they were as comfortable as the common people were in any other place up to the mid-18th century except that they may have been wetter and a bit colder than most! After the 1745 uprising the way of life of the people of the Highlands changed forever. The clan system was destroyed, the habit of 'rieving and thieving' was ended and even their language was systematically downgraded until it

had virtually disappeared except in the islands by the end of the 19th century. Even in 1775 Boswell describes a fairly settled and prosperous island with the people quite comfortable and well fed. The chief in his elegant new house was living very well and Boswell and Johnston thought him sophisticated and cultured and lavish in his life style - in common with many of the clan chiefs by this time a little too lavish and living well beyond his means! Both Johnston and the First Statistical Account remark on the fact that no one from Raasay had gone abroad in the 'fever for emigration' which was rife in other parts. However, throughout the Highlands and the Lowlands the population was rising and the pressure on the land was such that many people began for the first time to go hungry. This was due in great part to the improvements in medical knowledge which enabled the infant mortality rate to be drastically reduced and also allowed people to live longer. This rise in population was accompanied by changes in agricultural practices and landowners and many clan chiefs began to expect to receive more profit from their estates than they had previously looked for. Sheep became the money maker of the day and many smallholdings were merged together to make larger 'sheep ranches' which could be rented at more than the sum of the smaller parts. Raasay did not escape from this pattern and many of the small tenants in areas of good ground like Hallaig, Screapadal and Brochel were moved to make way for the larger sheep farms, their houses being demolished to make larger enclosures in some cases. Raasay did not, however, initially suffer from the large-scale 'voluntary' emigration which was prevalent in other areas. The people were moved to areas which were less viable like Doire Domhain, Holoman, Balachuirn and Balmeanoch. These areas had been settled for a very long time - the records of settlement for the 16th and 17th centuries show the names (apart from slight variations in spelling) to have remained more or less the same to the present day. It is possible that many of the farmsteads in these areas had been abandoned when they were destroyed in 1746 (they are all on the west coast and easily accessible to Government troops from Skye) and when the people came to them in the 1820's and 30's they rebuilt on the original sites. Nowadays, when we survey these farmsteads which remain we can usually see several periods represented on the ground, one on top of the other. When, in the 1820's and 30's, the ground had been cleared and, to an extent 'improved', by the new settlers these areas were also taken in for sheep farming and the people moved further north to Fladda, Kyle Rona and Rona. The soil in these areas is very thin and not cultivable and produces not even enough grass for cattle to survive all year round. Finally by the beginning of the 1840's the people were 'allowed' to emigrate to Canada and Australia. By this time, conditions were very bad for the people of the Islands and many people would be only too pleased to go elsewhere. There are not the records from Raasay of instant shipping of whole communities such as are found in Skye for instance. The last Macleod of Raasay to own the island, one John Macleod, sold the island in 1843 and himself emigrated to Tasmania. It was sold for 35,000 guineas and the beginning of the sorry tale of absentee landlords and uncaring owners who were running a business began. Emigration continued until the last quarter of the 18th century when it was gradually realised that the population was too low to maintain the land and eventually the emigration stopped. In 1841 a Dr. Wilson recorded in Raasay that 'there is considerable poverty, the habitations are wretched and the people ill-attired'. He states that the people are starving and that 'many natives have recently emigrated to Prince Edward Island'. The Napier Commission which sat to consider the rights of the people of the Highlands and Islands heard evidence from many sources during the 1880's. Mr. Galbraith who was

the Raasay minister quotes a visiting doctor - 'the prevailing disease is poverty and the chief remedy is food'.

Mostly what we see upstanding in our surveys are the last phases of the occupation and they frequently stand on the remains of much older structures. The houses are rectangular, of dry-stone construction without chimneys or often windows. Often the houses have been adapted and re-used during the shifting pattern of clearances and often a fireplace has been inserted during a later occupancy. Houses were frequently built in almost impossible places surrounded by bog and peat - truly awful places where it must have been back-breakingly difficult to scrape a living from the ground. By the last quarter of the 19th century the emigration of the people was stopped and a row of houses was built at Oskaig to house the 'indigent and the widows'. Many of the prospective tenants did not want to live in them but would have preferred to have gone to Canada. 'Why' they were asked 'would you want to go to Canada when you can have these lovely houses with a bit of garden etc.?' but they said 'Our families and friends have all gone, we would rather be in Manitoba'. That is the story behind the naming of this place Manitoba - and that is as near to Manitoba as any of them ever got.

There were reports of ancient iron workings in Raasay, and we are told that an enormous bloomery with red stones and slag existed above Fearn's until it was quarried away for the road during the First World War.

The island was sold in 1912 and this time it was bought for the mining and mineral rights by Wm. Baird (Iron masters) of Coatbridge. The First World War was coming and business was booming. The rows of houses were built for the workers in Inverarish and a new jetty was built at Suisnish. During the war the mines were worked by German prisoners of war and some of the houses now in Inverarish began life as a prisoner of war camp! The mines were closed in 1919 as being uneconomical although work was still given to Raasay men until 1940 to maintain the plant and machinery. In 1940 the mine was closed down and the machinery and metal melted down for the war effort.

After the First World War, the men returning from the front went back to their crofts, many of them in the poorer areas of the north and, despite promises of 'a land fit for heroes', were refused land in the more fertile south of Raasay. In the 1920's there was a series of land raids in Raasay and families moved down from the north and settled in Fearn's, Eyre etc. and from this time the population of the north of the island was in serious decline.

THE SURVEY OF THE ISLAND

All of the volunteers who had taken part in the 1991 survey had somewhat fallen in love with the island, perhaps because the weather during the survey of '91 had been so good but also because of what we had found and we therefore decided to return 'one of these years'. So it was that in 1995 nine volunteers returned to begin the survey.

We decided that we would record all the evidence of man's activity on the island from prehistoric times to the present day. To achieve this we planned to record the townships, of which there are a total of about 20, in great detail producing a map of the townships at 1:1000 with drawings of the individual structures at a scale of 1:200. The map and drawings would be accompanied by full descriptions of the structures and their surroundings. In addition we would carry out a field survey of the land surrounding the townships, recording and drawing anything we found. All our findings would be published as an ACFA Occasional Paper and our findings sent to the various official bodies, such as the R.C.A.H.M.S.

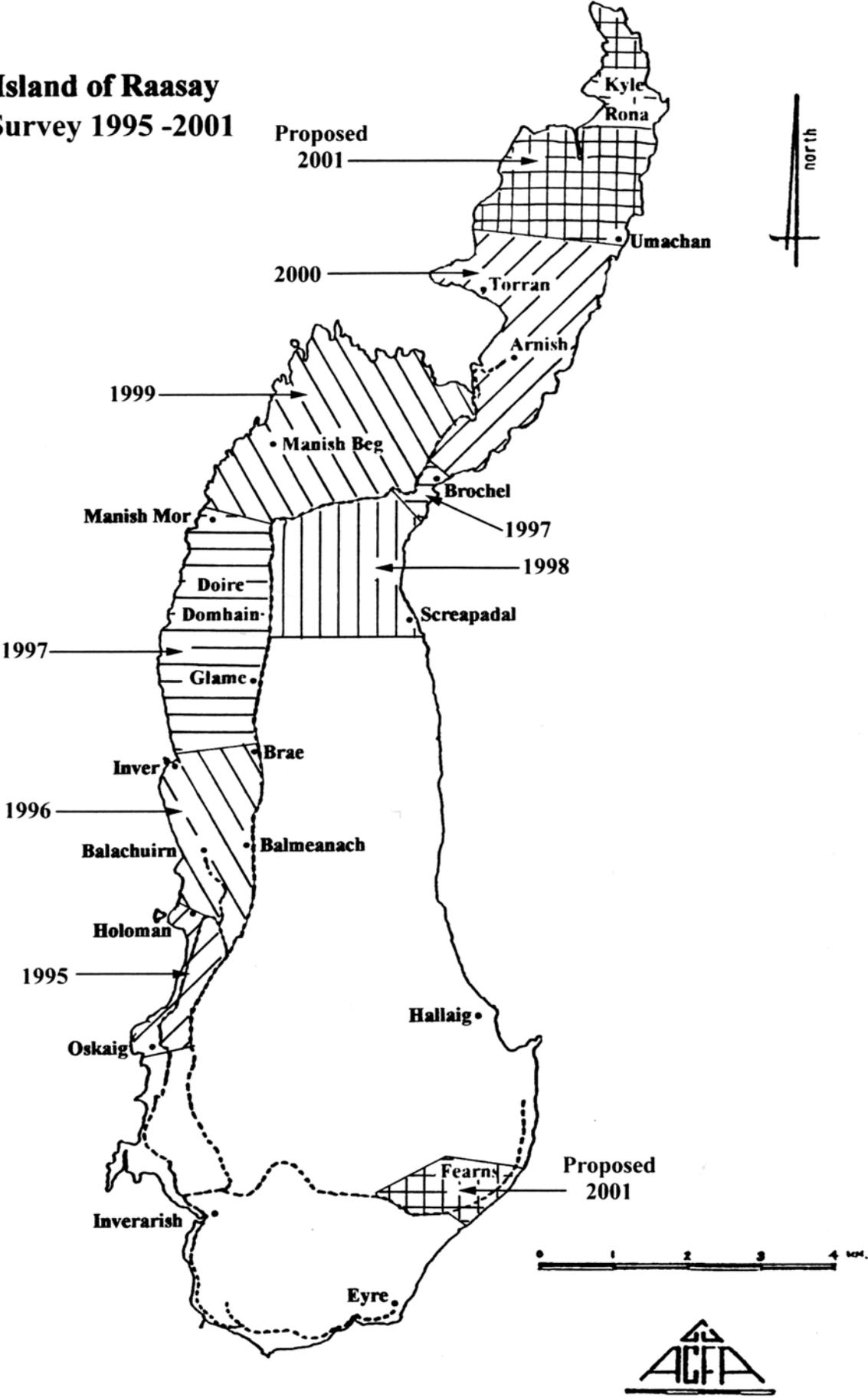
We had agreed to begin the survey on the west coast at the small township of Oskaig. As expected there were a number of remains from the 19th century but we discovered the chamber of a chambered tomb, probably Neolithic, and what may be the remnants of a pre-historic field system. In addition to Oskaig we were able to survey the remains of Holoman just to the north and the areas surrounding them. The weather was cold and wet and we were staying in the Youth Hostel so we agreed that in 1996 we would stay in the hotel.

When, in 1996, news spread that we had decided to move to the hotel with its central heating and bar we were able to recruit twenty volunteers. We therefore planned to survey four townships, Balachuirn, Bahneanach, Inver and Brae plus as usual their surrounding areas. Once again there were the remains of houses and barns from the 19th century but we also discovered and recorded hut circles and a possible stone circle. For the first time we had a volunteer from the USA who was writing her dissertation on the Folklore of the Scottish Islands and had joined us for some practical experience.

We returned in 1997 with once again twenty volunteers to record the township at Manish More and that of Brochel with the remains of its medieval castle. We also surveyed the area called Doire Domhain, which lies along the west side between Glame and Manish More. This last area we knew contained a number of deserted farmsteads but we found more hut circles and a number of enigmatic circular stone features. Their purpose was unclear; they may have been hut circles, ring cairns or even the remains of wheelhouses.

In 1998 we surveyed the twin cleared townships of North and South Screapadal and the forest between them and Brochel. Screapadal is the subject of one of Sorley MacLean's best known poems and was a large township of around 40 structures on a grassy slope looking over to Applecross on the mainland. The townships were cleared in one movement in the middle of the 19th century. Once again we also recorded more hut circles. The townships at Screapadal were visited by Boswell in 1775 and there is a description of one of the houses in his Journal.

Island of Raasay Survey 1995 -2001



In 1999 it was the turn of the township of Manish Beg and the surrounding area to be surveyed. It was during this season we had our first injury when one of the volunteers slipped on the track down to the township and broke her arm. Manish has also been quite a large township with substantial remains from the 19th century still upstanding as well as signs of earlier occupation. Our American volunteer returned this year, flying in to Glasgow on Sunday morning, travelling up to Raasay on Monday, surveying for 5 days and flying back to America on the following Sunday. She likes it here you see!

In 2000, we surveyed the townships of Arnish and Torran which lie at the end of the public road. This last stretch of the road is known as "Calum's Road" after Calum McLeod who single-handedly constructed it over a number of years in a desperate attempt to make the settlement at Arnish and Torran more viable. In the face of disinterest from the local Council, Calum set out to build the road himself and was only finally helped with the surfacing of it when he had almost completed it. Unfortunately, by the time Calum had built his road he and his family were the only people living at Arnish.

There is still a lot of Raasay to be surveyed and some of it, such as Kyle Rona and Umachan, will be the most difficult as they lie beyond the end of the road and will entail either a long walk over difficult terrain or a boat trip to reach them.

Our ultimate goal is to survey the whole island and, with studies we have carried out into the soils of the island and historical evidence, we hope to produce a comprehensive record of the remains of man's activity on the Island of Raasay from prehistoric times to the present day.

Bibliography

- Boswell, J. *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnston*, Collins, 1785
First Statistical Account - Portree Parish. 1793
 Johnston, S. *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, London, 1775
 MacGregor, Alasdair Alpin *Over the Sea to Skye*, Chambers, 1930
 Malloy, Robert B. *The Isle of Raasay*, Massachusetts, 1975
 Martin, Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, c. 1695 Birlinn, 1994
 Monro, Sir Donald, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland in 1549*, Birlinn, 1994
 National Monuments Record of Scotland. - Raasay, 1999
New Statistical Account - Portree Parish
 R.C.A.H.M.S. - *Inventory - Outer Hebrides, Skye and the Small Isles*. HMSO, 1925
 Sharpe, Richard. *A Study in Island History* - 2 vols. Grant & Cutler, 1977