

5. Nook - A Reluctant Gazebo

Sue Hothersall

Fifteen years ago in the second volume of this Journal, Gordon McCrae asked some searching questions about the identification of historical features. This was reiterated in a presentation at the Forum Members' Night in 2005, on which this article is based. It demonstrates the problems which can arise once an incorrect identification has been made and has then been absorbed into the public domain. It raises questions about wider interpretation of structures whose purpose initially seems to be obvious. Any effort to preserve and interpret old buildings is to be commended, but can we believe interpretative boards which claim to identify a historic structure and its use, or should we always keep an open mind?

An archaeological' find'

A press report in 2003 announced plans to build a new B&Q store in the Nerston area of East Kilbride, adding that the developers had 'agreed...to incorporate an archaeological find into their plans' ¹. The 'find' was a lime kiln, claimed by the planning authority to be 'locally important'.

On 1st December 2004 the same newspaper carried a substantial article about the lime kiln and the importance of the lime industry in eighteenth and nineteenth century East Kilbride. It explained that the restored B&Q kiln had been owned by the farmer of the nearby Neuk (or Nook) Farm, 'who fired limestone and local East Kilbride coal to produce burnt lime' for use on his farm fields. A large sign was erected on the site early in 2005, identifying it as a lime kiln and describing its use.

Being interested to see this 'find' on our doorstep, a visit was made to the site, but we were immediately sceptical about the structure ². Unlike other lime kilns in the area, it is strange that the building was circular, and that it had no sign of a firebrick lining or any reddened or heat-damaged stonework. Even more significantly, there is no lime extraction site in the immediate area; in fact the site is beyond the local lime bearing strata and into igneous rocks ³.

There is no question that East Kilbride and Thorntonhall once had an extensive lime industry ⁴. This is largely forgotten today, although the Limekilns placename near East Kilbride village is a reminder of that past. Forrest's 1816 map of Kilbryde Parish shows fifteen lime kilns or quarries south and east of the village ⁵. The watermill in the village was also used for crushing limestone, and the eastern end of the present town centre is undermined by limestone mines. However was it too obvious to assume that the structure at Nook was a kiln?

Identification

The building was first identified as a lime kiln in a report to *Discovery and Excavation* in 1997, and the identification was accepted when archaeological consultant AOC was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the proposed B&Q site ⁶. A report was produced in April 2002 which suggested that it was 'a *very early* example of a limekiln', although quite how it had been dated is uncertain ⁷. On their recommendation an excavation was carried out in 2003 with the aim of investigating, tidying and consolidating the structure. Before deciding whether or not the lime kiln assumption is correct, it is instructive to look at what we know of the area from historical and map evidence.

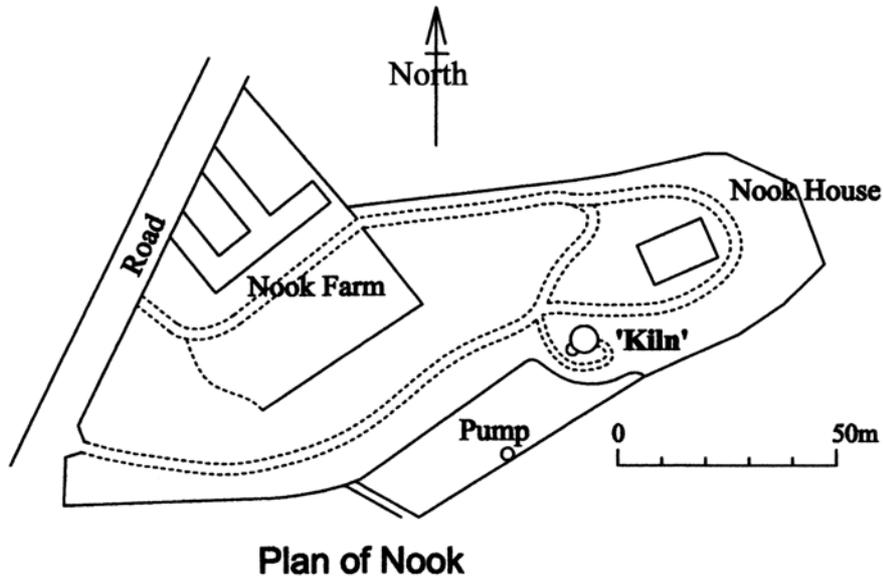
A modern history of the area mentions two Lairds of Neuk, and John Fleming, who died in 1789, is the better-known figure ⁸. Fleming was a notable amateur astronomer who published an influential textbook in 1786 ⁹. Ure's 1793 history lists 'Nook' as one of the places where 'neat and commodious dwelling-houses have lately been built' and it seems likely that this was Fleming's house ¹⁰. The garden at Nook had a famous sundial, dated 1754. Roy's map of the 1750's shows Neuk as a medium sized farming settlement and subsequent maps identify the house as a small rectangular structure, approached by a long drive, which continues around the house. The buildings of Nook Farm are nearby to the west, but the kiln is not shown.

The first edition Ordnance Survey map shows Nook House and its wooded grounds, with the kiln beside the drive to the south-west of the house ¹¹. The farm buildings are also shown. The accompanying OS name book describes Nook as a mansion house occupied by John Berrie Fleming and farm house by Wm Strang ¹². The 1896 OS map shows a smaller circle attached to the main circle of the kiln, and also indicates the position of the sundial. On the 1910 OS map there are extensions to Nook House and additional buildings in the garden. By 1958 industrial estates have appeared to the west and south, but Nook House and the kiln are still shown as having roofs. The kiln is shown unroofed on the 1968 OS map, and Nook House and Farm have disappeared. Local authority records show that the Nook Farm outbuildings were demolished by 1971. Figure 7a shows a sketch map of Nook in the early 20th century.

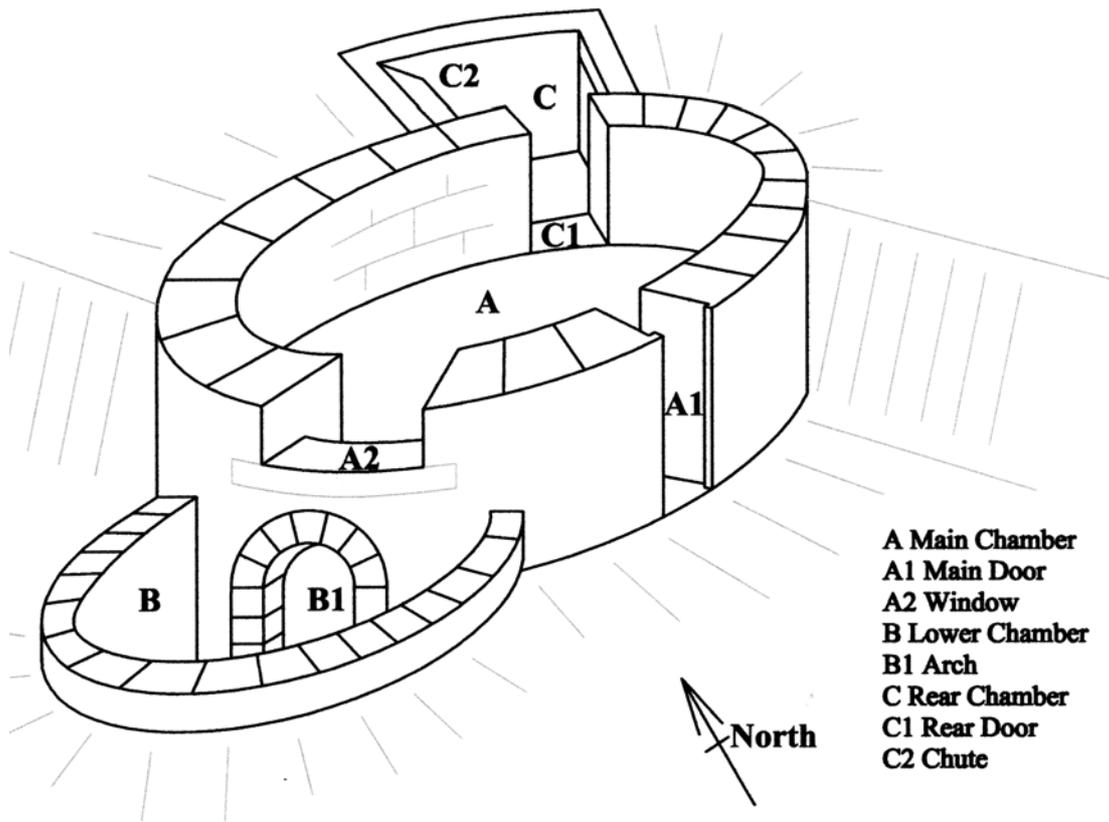
The map evidence indicates then that Nook House and Farm date from at least the 18th century, and that the kiln belonged to Nook House rather than the farm.

For the AOC evaluation report, trenches were opened to the north and east of the kiln and these revealed traces of Nook House and its red brick extensions. The report concluded that the kiln and the house were not related and that the kiln would have gone out of use by the mid-19th century because the fumes would have inconvenienced the occupants of the house. This curious reasoning seems to be based on the assumption that the house was built in the Victorian period, despite the map evidence to the contrary. Elsewhere doubts had begun to creep in after the original excitement about a kiln, and the report seems somewhat unsure about its purpose: 'While it has been assumed...that this circular structure is a limekiln...the circular form of the kiln is unusual and there is as yet no evidence from the site for the production of lime'.

The entry in *Discovery and Excavation* had described features of the structure which seemed to confirm it as a kiln: with a 'stoking bay' at the front, a 'stoke hole' with a possible loading door above it, and an external 'flue' in the rear wall. These are shown as B, B1, A2 and C respectively in the sketch (Figure 7b) ¹³. This drawing also shows a doorway (A1).



Plan of Nook



- A Main Chamber
- A1 Main Door
- A2 Window
- B Lower Chamber
- B1 Arch
- C Rear Chamber
- C1 Rear Door
- C2 Chute

Sketch of 'Kiln'

Figure 7

Quite where these identifications came from is puzzling, as lime kilns do not have loading doors, entry doors, flues, or any type of opening in the side of the kiln chamber. The small semi-circular wall (B) which surrounds the lower opening B1 appears to make it difficult, if not impossible, to draw any material out through the opening. The doorway (A1) is well built and finished with dressed masonry blocks and ingoes, and the threshold is level with a damaged concrete floor; but neither the door nor the floor appear to have anything to do with lime-burning.

The excavation evidence

The AOC excavation ¹⁴ began by clearing over two metres' depth of mixed rubble which had been dumped in and around the structure; the material included 'considerable numbers of roof slates ... directly overlying the floor surface'. Below the concrete floor was an earlier layer of asphalt and sand with a sunken trough embedded in it. Below this again, a lead pipe trench was found, leading from the small rectangular chamber C, through the main chamber and into the semi-circular area enclosed by the wall B1, which the excavators called a 'sunken pond'. From there the trench ran downslope in the direction of a 'well or sump'. A limited further excavation of the floor found yet another flagstone floor below this layer, with a large trough cut into bedrock on the north side of the building; the trough in the uppermost floor occupied one corner of this earlier feature.

The main structure itself was built of squared sandstone blocks on foundations of massive sandstone boulders. Among the loose rubble were parts of a doorway and a window sill. The inner face of the structure was whitewashed, again making it unlikely that limeburning had been carried out within it. The rear wall behind the arched opening B1 was topped by a concrete mass in which were embedded two pipes, one lead and one ceramic; below this was a stone-lined drain, and further down still was a deposit of 'charcoal flecked ash' lying on a floor surface level with the foundations of the archway.

The rectangular chamber at the rear of the building was partly excavated. A ceramic pipe was found leading into the 'chute' C2, and the floor of the chamber sloped down towards the lead pipe leading into the main structure. It proved difficult to determine the structural relationship between the main building and this small chamber.

Not a kiln

Unfortunately it seems that visitors to the new B&Q megastore may not be able to get 'exactly what is says on the tin', as the conclusion drawn by the excavators was that the building, now isolated in the B&Q car park, 'may not have been a limekiln at all'.

They suggested that in a later phase of use it *may* have been used as a garden feature, with the semi-circular area B made into a pond. This could have been fed by water collected in the rectangular chamber at the rear, with a window seat (A2) overlooking the pond. However, the excavators' discussion continued by claiming that this would be 'a later alteration of a building originally used for a different purpose'. The question remains: what was that purpose?

In the excavators' opinion, the large trough found at the lowest level of the main building, and the chamber behind it, both suggest that the collection and use of water was part of the building's original function. The ash deposit found outside the archway indicates some kind of burning and may be the only trace of the primary activity carried on in the building, all other evidence having been removed if the

structure was modified for recreational purposes. The ash layer was sampled for testing, but until the results are known we can draw no conclusions.

If not a kiln, then what?

Now that the lime kiln theory has been discounted, we are back to square one as to the original purpose of the building. A number of suggestions have been put forward, but it must be borne in mind that we know little about its earlier height or appearance. At what stage the doorway and window opening were built (if these were not original), what the floor level was, and how the building was roofed – all these are open to speculation.

If the building always stood in the grounds of Nook House, it might have been an ice-house. These were a common feature of eighteenth-century 'gentlemen's residences'; a nearby example is at Castlemilk which at first glance has a strikingly similar circular plan. Perhaps if this local connection had been made first, it would now be signposted as an ice house? In this interpretation, the archway B2 could be seen as a 'drain', and C2 as a 'loading chute'.

Arguments against this include that ice houses had double doors for insulation and the present doorway and floor level of the main building are wrong as the ice would fall out of the door. They are also usually identified as such on large scale maps of the period, which is not the case for Nook. The irony of jumping by a thousand degrees centigrade from a lime kiln to an ice house is an indication of the scale of doubt and growing controversy with this building. A more middling and luke-warm theory may be a summer house (see below), but the thick stone walls and small window would put it nearer the Baltic end of the thermometer than the tropical.

Another suggestion is that the building was an observatory for the astronomer John Fleming, the original occupant of Nook House. Unfortunately Fleming makes no mention in his book 'A New System of Astronomy' of how he made his observations, and we know little about what a small private observatory of the late eighteenth century would look like - whether they were normally circular, or whether the telescope would be mounted on the roof. We know that the building was surrounded by trees, described as an 'arboretum', but these might have been planted later. It is possible also that the building could have been meant simply as a secluded study, but the features B and C are difficult to explain in either of these interpretations and the lack of domestic fireplace and chimney rule against this.

A doocot could be considered, as they were frequently circular, with examples surviving in the west, such as at Milliken in Renfrewshire. The nesting boxes are usually relatively high, and could have been in the missing upper walls. However the window opening at A2 and main/ lower chambers are not compatible, unless they were later additions.

A more 'industrial' possibility, and perhaps no more fanciful than the range of uses previously suggested, is that the building was a windmill and there is another example nearby in East Kilbride. This would explain the heavy construction, of which little has been made to date. The wall thickens appreciably towards the front from 0.6m to 0.9m, suggesting that the front was higher or loadbearing and seems inappropriate in a building intended simply for leisure use. Against this suggestion must be set the fact that windmills are usually sited on the top of a hill, whereas the Nook structure is built into a slope.

Another 'industrial' use could have been as a small gas-producing plant for Nook House. This might account for the external features at B and C. Some form of water supply to the house is another possibility as the structure sits in a direct line between the house and a supposed well (although marked only on the 1896 OS map and named as a 'pump'). This was hinted at by AOC, but with the water falling down towards the well, not going up to the house. In this backward logic, similar to the jump from a kiln to an ice house, the purpose of the well is reversed to become a sump, to fit the direction of flow of the water through the structure.

Summary

We now know a lot more about this structure, but even less about its original purpose. The attempt to define it in a local context as a kiln was admirable, but led to a serious gaff. Perhaps if Nook had been on the coast it would now be signposted as a lighthouse? Once such a spurious identification has been made, everything about it is then fancifully linked to this function, causing further confusion. This includes naming its component parts as 'stoke holes' or 'ice chutes', even if these are not in their correct positions.

Thanks to the newspaper reports, the *Discovery and Excavation* entry, and particularly the signboard, it may now be very difficult to change the public perception that it is a lime kiln. Of course, the original Mr Fleming could have built any type of folly he wished in his garden (perhaps with an unconscious desire to confuse future archaeologists). However it is perhaps too easy to conclude that it is simply a garden folly, leaving us with a very reluctant Gazebo.

¹ *East Kilbride News*, 24th September 2003.

² The visits and background research were carried out along with Stuart Nisbet who has studied the lime industry in this area and beyond for many years.

³ In this area lime burning sites are always located beside the source of extraction.

⁴ Due to its proximity to Renfrewshire, and general lack of coal, it relied partly on coal supplied from Cathcart parish directly to the west.

⁵ Some of the best survivors are in the Thorntonhall area, one of which can be seen at Birkwood, and others survive in private gardens.

⁶ DES, Miller, C.A. 1997: The report erroneously describes the structure as being 6.25m diameter externally but only 2.1m diameter internally adding confusion (and making the walls far too thick).

⁷ AOC Archaeology Group: *Mavor Avenue, East Kilbride: archaeological evaluation: Data structure report* (2002)

⁸ Niven, T.E., *East Kilbride: History of the Village* (1965).

⁹ *Fleming, John, of Nook, East Kilbride: A new system of astronomy, upon an improved plan* (1786), viewed in National Library of Scotland.

¹⁰ Ure, D. *History of Rutherglen and East-Kilbride* (1793).

¹¹ 1859, scale 25 inches:1 mile

¹² OS Name Book, East Kilbride Parish, National Archives of Scotland, RH 4/13 Reel 113.

¹³ Sketch by Stuart Nisbet. This is not to scale but intended to give the reader a general 3-D view of the rather complex structure. For more accurate plans and elevations see AOC report (ref. 14).

¹⁴ AOC Archaeology Group. *Mavor Avenue, East Kilbride: Excavation, consolidation and fencing. Data structure report* (2004).