

4. Excavation of Barrhouse, Neilston First Interim Report

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Background

The site at Neilston, known locally as the Pad Farm, first came to our notice in December 1994 when the Forum joined forces with the Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists (Glasgow University) to survey the area around Neilston Pad in advance of the planting of the Community Woodland. At that time the surveyors could only see a line of rectangular outlines covered with turf. Along the south edge however some stonework was evident allowing them to draw the conclusion that this was a pre-improvement longhouse which possibly gave it a date of as early as the 17th century. Later visits and some idle kicking over the molehills revealed not only the usual Victorian pottery sherds and pieces of clay pipes but also a sherd of green glazed, grey pottery. The possibility that this might be as old as medieval sparked interest in investigating the site more seriously.

The Dig

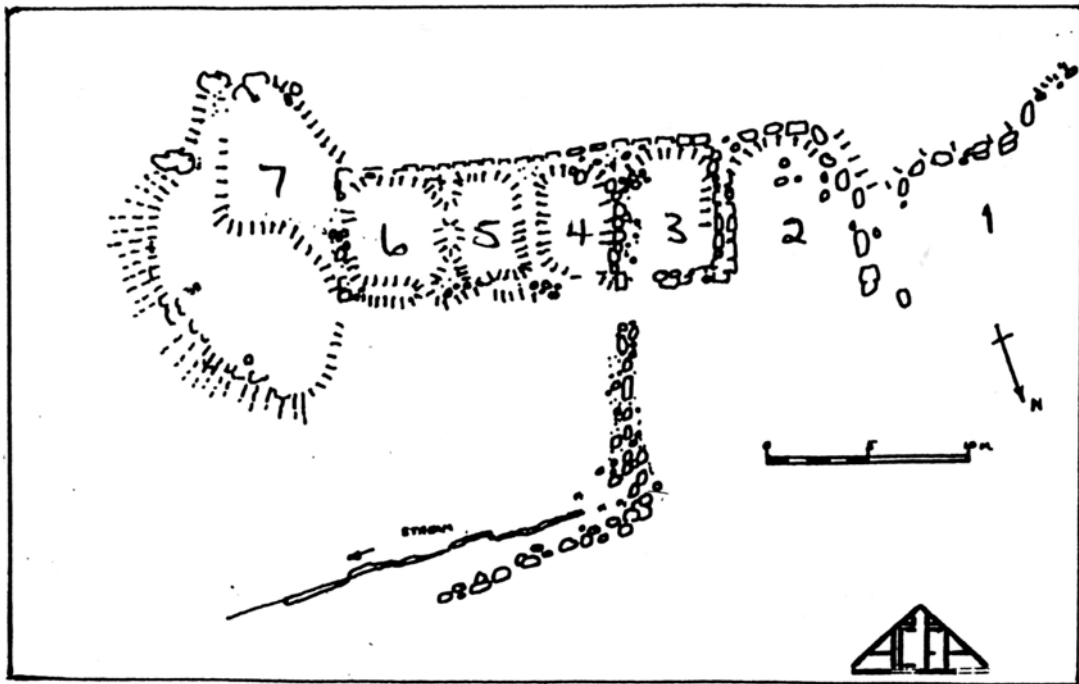
Approaches to Elderslie Estates, in particular Mark Crichton-Maitland the landowner, were met with enthusiasm. Apart from his personal interest, Mr Crichton-Maitland saw this as an eminently suitable feature to be developed for the interest of visitors to the woodland.

In June 1998, a small group of Forum members started excavating the section of the structure which had the best upstanding remains (no. 3 on the plan). This was designed to give quicker development of a point of interest for any visitors to the site. Deturfing the internal area and about half a metre on the outside of the north and south walls soon revealed that more of the wall was still standing than originally thought.

A considerable amount of loose stone tumble required to be removed. Within a metre of the wall there was also a quantity of lime mortar which had clearly been used to bond the stones in the wall. Farther out the stones were mixed with poor quality earth. The depth of spoil in the centre of the area under excavation was only a few centimetres compared with over half a metre against the wall. It was small wonder therefore that we first hit the floor in the more central area.

The Floor

This was the first real diagnostic feature to be uncovered. Substantial well-dressed flagstones measuring up to 1m x 0.50m were quickly revealed. These however did not completely cover the floor. Clearing the tumble towards the south wall revealed a gap of about 0.50m between the edge of the flagstone area and the wall. This strip appeared to be filled with earthy clay and was left unexcavated at this stage. To the east side the flagstones deteriorated into flat but rough stones largely covered with cinders.



The fine flagstone floor only covered about half of the compartment. The remaining northern half of the floor consisted of a 50mm deep layer of beaten cinders and gravel. With the removal of fallen stones, which had become embedded in this layer, the surface soon crumbled. It was decided therefore to remove the cinders under reasonably controlled conditions.

An earlier floor of regularly set cobbles was soon exposed. The edge of the flagstoned area was tapered down to the level of these cobbles, raising the possibility that both sets of stones were contemporary, or was the sequence: cobbles – cobbles and flags – flags and cinders? At a later date we intend to raise a flagstone to attempt to answer this question. The cobbles in the eastern third of the floor were laid at right angles to the main area. Where the two patterns met a slight dip in the level suggested a drainage channel.

The Walls

Once down to the flagstone floor we could see that the walls remained standing to about 0.75m high. Several courses of rough boulder construction were secured by lime mortar, a considerable quantity of which was found in the tumble. The south wall was the most stable but considerable care had to be taken when excavating towards the other walls. That to the east, in particular, had lost several key stones through either tumble or erosion. The north wall, which included the doorway, appeared to have been crudely reconstructed to alter the width of the door.

The Doorway and External Structures

Built into the east wall, at the doorway, was a substantial roughly-dressed stone with man-made holes and an iron bar inserted possibly as a hinge. This stone will be further investigated this year when excavation takes place in the next chamber, to establish whether it is part of the original wall. The north facing

door has a dressed stone sill, measuring 1m by 0.33m. It had been partly covered by the reconstructed north wall. Excavation of the area along the outside of the north wall, principally at this stage to investigate the doorway, revealed a drain built of stone slabs laid in a V-shape at the west end of the sill. This was nearly in line with the channel noted in the cobbled floor inside. There was no immediate evidence of the drain passing through the wall but perhaps this was another reason for the reconstruction of the wall at this point.

A cobbled surface of small stones appeared to have been laid outside and, as we found difficulty in erecting ranging poles further out, this may prove to be the edge of a yard or path.

The Finds

The finds recorded in any excavation are crucial to the final conclusions to be drawn. During the clearing of the tumble a considerable quantity of bottle glass and sherds of ceramics were found.

Firstly though, we should look at some of the more 'structural' finds. Some pieces of corrugated iron and burnt timbers give us an indication of the earliest date for the final use of this compartment and the method of its final demise. Also indicative of use was the finding of at least two stone troughs of the type used for feeding or watering animals. One, considerably smashed, was found near the southeast corner in an area where the flagstone floor degenerated into rough stones and beaten earth. However in the southwest corner, still cemented in situ, was a complete, if cracked and repaired, double chambered trough with a maker's mark visible. This trough has been left undisturbed as it will inevitably split apart if any attempt is made to move it.

Many of the pieces of bottle glass appear to be milk and lemonade bottles with at least one for containing stronger drink. The remains of a Thermos flask was also found along with some other thinnish glass perhaps from a hexagonal shaped small bottle. Most of the glass has still to be sorted but the lemonade bottles include at least two or three of G & P Barrie, Glasgow & Dundee; one Mair & McDougall, Glasgow; one C Moore, 140 McNeil Street, Glasgow, and more than one J Orr, Comrie, Glasgow. These have been at least partially reassembled.

The ceramic finds have been sorted and some have been quickly reconstructed. Two stoneware "marmalade" jars, were almost complete when pieced together again. At least three china cups have been substantially rebuilt and two of these were clearly of good quality, 19th century china - perhaps the "wedding" china? Other pieces of cups and almost a complete plate have been found.

Conclusions So Far

Initial thoughts are that this compartment was a byre or barn which may have been used well into this century as an animal shelter or bothy. It was clearly destroyed by fire as the charred remains of the timbers which supported the corrugated iron roof were found. The artifactual evidence so far, does not seem to take us back to the period when the farm was occupied. The thermos flask and most of the lemonade bottles are 20th Century and perhaps as late as the

1950s. However research needs to continue to date these items more precisely and we await with interest the date of the green glazed sherd provisionally identified as early 17th Century.

Documentary Evidence

Thanks to the assistance of Mr Mark Crichton-Maitland, Elderslie Estates we had a brief opportunity to examine the archives at the Estates HQ, Houston House. There is a considerable wealth of material here - about 400 maps and plans - Elderslie Estates owned about a third of the County at its peak. There are also volumes of rent-books and other documents going back at least to the 18th Century. These helped us establish that the "Pad Farm" is correctly called Barrhouse, being to the south of Barr Hill.

In the two hours we had available, we were able to establish from the Rental Book for 1797 to 1801 that Allen Carswell had Craig of Neilston and Barrhouse - first Tacks 1786, expiry 1805. Even earlier, in a bundle of documents was a scrap of paper noting that in 1769, John Carswell of Barrhouse paid £9:8:4 for rental of Neilstonside.

There is much more research to be done here if anyone has a bent for searching through dusty documents - rather than muddy holes in the ground!

What's next – the 1999 Dig?

Weather permitting we intend spending more time on the dig this year. Starting Saturday 15 May, every weekend and hopefully some of the longer summer evenings will be spent at the site, working on what we expect to be the living quarters of the farm - and also possibly the midden, the archaeologist's favourite place.