

1. Excavation of Barrhouse, Neilston Anne Macdonald

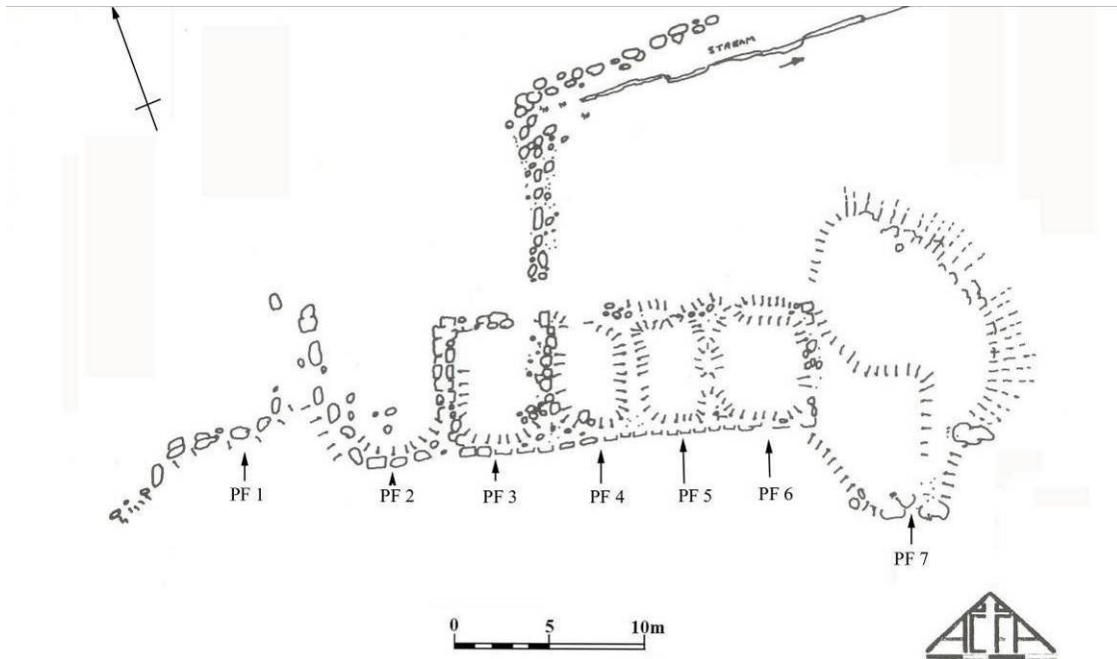


Figure 1: Barrhouse Survey Drawing, 1994

Barrhouse lies in Neilston Parish, between the north-east bluff of Neilston Pad and the west side of Snypes Dam.

The site was known locally as Pad Farm and this was what the excavation team called it for the first year of the excavation, until estate maps in the Houston House archives revealed that it was, in fact, called Barrhouse – the low hill immediately to the north of the site is called Barr Hill. The site first came to our notice in December 1994 when the Forum joined forces with the Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists (ACFA) 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 linear farmhouse which possibly gave it a date of as early as the late 17th century. Later visits and some idle kicking over of 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 the site might be as old as medieval sparked interest in investigating it more seriously. 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.

Working from west to east the building was divided into seven sectors, PF1 to PF7

(Figure 1). In June 1998, a small group of Forum members started excavating the section of the structure which had the best upstanding remains (PF3). After large quantities of stone, timbers and corrugated tin roofing were removed the excavators reached the floor. This was the first real diagnostic feature to be uncovered. Substantial well-dressed flagstones measuring up to 1m by 0.5m were quickly revealed. Clearing the rubble towards the south wall revealed a gap of about 0.5m between the edge of the flagstone area and the wall. 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. Removing the cinders revealed an earlier floor of regularly set cobbles and the edge of the flagstoned area tapered down to the level of these cobbles.

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 proved to be a drain which continued through the north wall, under which it took a dog-leg turn to become a stone-lined drain running towards the boggy area later shown to be a spring or well. The dog-leg turn seemed strange at first, but is apparently a fairly common feature designed to reduce draughts into the byre. The cobbled area had been subdivided into stalls. Two pieces of sandstone were set into the cobbles, one of which had an approx 750mm square cut out to hold a standard post. 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 rubble.

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. The north facing door had a dressed stone sill, measuring 1m by 0.33m. It had been partly covered by some reconstruction of the north wall. A rough cobbled surface of small stones appeared to have been laid outside the north wall and was probably a walkway to stop animals churning up the ground in front of the house as they went in and out of the byre.



Figure 2: Excavation in Progress (first year)

Sector PF4 - The Workshop/Byre

Once again a considerable amount of loose rubble had to be removed. This sector was smaller than Sector PF3. The south wall was a continuation of the south wall of PF3.

A line of dressed sandstone blocks was soon revealed running east - west across the middle. This was a double line of stone, 0.75m apart with a cobbled area between. Clearance of the rubble in NE corner revealed an arc of set stones which was surrounded by a considerable quantity of cinders, clinker and charcoal. This indicated that perhaps a boiler, stove or even a small furnace had been located here, but no artifactual evidence was recovered. Built into the east wall was a large stone which later proved to be backing for the fireplace in the next sector. Clearance of collapsed material at the east wall revealed this to be of poorer construction with smaller rubble infill and red brick used in places, which was surprising considering its importance relative to the structure and use of Sector PF5. The build of the wall deteriorated to the north of the large stone noted above, at the position of the semi-circular platform. Contained in the material used to block the doorway was a fine knocking stone. Just to the south of this doorway was further evidence of burning. Close by a small quantity of square hand-made iron nails were found in the rubble.

At the west end of Sector PF4 it appeared that the cobbling might run under and therefore pre-date the west wall. It was subsequently concluded that sectors PF3 & 4 had originally been one feature and the dividing wall had been built at a later date as clearance of the rubble along the west wall revealed this was a later alteration to the building. It was butted on at either end to the north and south walls and it also was built on a clay base rather than having a foundation course. Clearance of the north wall revealed that, like the south wall, this was of good

construction. Close to the wall a short piece of clay pipe stem was recovered and a small quantity of putty and thin, cloudy window glass. However no evidence of a window was visible in the surviving courses of the wall in this sector.



Figure 3: The Knocking Stone

Excavation to floor level revealed a pebbled clay floor which was crudely cobbled away from the doorway into Sector PF5. Under the rubble, on the floor, a few sherds of china and pottery were uncovered, including light brown glazed, cream decorated ware on a red body. Once the rubble was removed from the southern half, a clay mound was revealed. The clay mound appeared to be a deliberate deposit laid down while the building was still in use. The clay bed extended down to the natural hard gritty impacted clay level. It was later suggested that the mound could have been raised flooring for a stall for young calves or lambs. As the last of the rubble was cleared from the SW corner a burnt layer became evident against the west wall. It is speculated that this resulted from the destruction of Sector PF3 as it overlay some of the rubble.

It appeared that Sector PF4 had had several uses. Sectors 3 & 4 were probably originally one unit serving as a byre attached to the west end of the house. Later, 4 was possibly partitioned off from 3 and used as a dairy with only an entrance from the house (Sector PF5). Finally the doorway was blocked and the sector abandoned probably when the house itself was abandoned, leaving only the end sector (3) in use as a storage place and an area for working with animals.

On excavation, Sector 5 proved to be a kitchen/living room. Midway in the west wall a fireplace was uncovered with good side and back stones and a large flat hearthstone. Unfortunately, the back and side stones of the fireplace were knocked

over and smashed by vandals – the only occasion when vandalism was a problem. The west wall was covered with a lime plaster. As was revealed on the other side of the wall, the structure was very poorly built with small stones, bricks and even pieces of tile field-drain and a total lack of facing stone. Where the plaster had peeled away the wall was rapidly disintegrating. For safety reasons it was necessary to reduce the remaining height of this section of wall by removing the looser rubble on top.



Figure 4: The Fireplace

Beyond the fireplace to the south, the wall was of better construction, at least having facing stone behind the plaster. Abutting the south wall a recess was formed, 0.85m wide and 0.3m deep. It also was well constructed with the same type of facing stone and plaster as the adjacent wall. A considerable amount of china and pottery sherds were found in the rubble here, resulting in this being named the “china cabinet”. Some of the broken sherds were later found to be partially burnt and it was concluded that at the end of the use of the house there had been a fire. There was a window in the north wall in Sector 5 and, as well as the door into Sector 4, there was a door leading into a narrow ‘lobby’ which ran through the length of the house and had an external door at each end.

There were also two enclosed features in the kitchen which were interpreted as the bases of box beds. The material used in the construction of the bed bases was very poor and virtually crumbled away as soon as it was exposed. It was thought that the beds would have had wooden frames and, although there was evidence, in the broken pottery and china sherds, of a fire, there was no evidence for burning of the bed cupboards or roof beams. It was thought that, when the house was abandoned, the bed cupboards would be removed for re-use. A mystery remains as to why the glass and china, some of it quite good quality (one clearly marked Spode) had not

been cleared up before the house was abandoned.

The final sector at the east end of the building, Sector PF6, was also entered from the N end of the corridor. Room 6 featured both N and S - facing windows, a well-preserved fireplace and a recessed cupboard. The floors of this room and the kitchen were lime-mortared and a lime mortar wash was used to plaster the walls. It was noticeable that there were virtually no finds in this rooms beyond a few shards of window glass. The conclusion was that this room was the 'good room' and the parents' bedroom, and everything of value had been packed up and removed when the house was abandoned. Even the large hearthstone was gone, leaving only its shape in the floor. The possibility was raised that this fireplace hearthstone and mantel had been carved as a marriage stone when the house was new and therefore taken away when it was left.

The remains in the area, Sector PF7, to the east end of the house, were enigmatic. Early speculation ranged from a pre-historic roundhouse to a kiln. Excavation did not answer any questions. The whole sector lay on the top of a rocky terrace at the edge of the low 'drumlin' on which Barrhouse stood. A roughly built, dry stone wall ran to the east a few metres from the east wall of the house and to the south of this wall was a trench cut against a mass of outcrop. In the centre of the space was a setting of burnt stones. This had been a hearth of some kind but it was generally felt that it was for agricultural purposes and that the feature was not prehistoric.



Figure 5: The Outside Hearth

Area PF2 is attached to the west end of the main building and consists of two walls. One wall adjoins the southern wall of the building but is much thicker. The second wall, also very thick, is at right angles to the first thus forming an open ended

compartment facing north. As the walls are much thicker this gave rise to the speculation that it was possibly the remains of an earlier structure. The interior had a floor consisting of some rough cobbling and bare earth. Running off from the west wall were the remains of a field bank. In the SW corner of this sector were several more sherds of green-glazed pottery. Time did not allow excavation to the north of this sector. The thickness of the walls, and the fact that they were constructed of very large stones, gave rise to the speculation that this end of the present building had been an older, possibly medieval, house lying north-south on its long axis of which only the south end had been kept to serve as a cart shed or stand for a horse when the later house was built.

Artefactual evidence from the dig includes 18th/19th-century ceramics, iron agricultural tools, horseshoes and a considerable quantity of square hand-made iron nails, 11lbs of which were found in the northern window recess in the living room (Sector 5). As well as the sandstone knocking stone found between Sectors 4 & 5, the remains of a cast-iron cooking pot were found outside the building. A significant quantity of sherds of late medieval and early post-medieval pottery supports the theory of an earlier building at the site, as evidenced by the 1m thick foundation course uncovered adjacent to the W of the farmhouse. No evidence remained of the earlier roof structure, which was probably thatched but latterly, when the west end section was all that was in use, it had clearly been roofed with corrugated iron.

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 makers mark visible. This trough was 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 small hexagonal shaped bottle. The lemonade bottles, including at least two or three of G. & P. Barrie, Glasgow & Dundee; one Mair & McDougall, Glasgow; one C. Moore, 140 McNeil Street Glasgow, and one J. Orr, Comrie, Glasgow, have been partially reassembled. 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. Other pieces of cups and almost a complete plate have been found. Many of these finds were from the end sector (PF3) which had obviously been the last use of the house. The impression got from this motley collection was that of shelves of 'bits and pieces', used by farm workers and destroyed by fire. A postcard, thought to have been from c.1890, shows the building in ruins but the remains of the roof timbers are just visible at the west end where the walling was much higher.

The suggested scenario? There has been a farmhouse on the site since possibly late medieval times. The present building was built about 1735 as a traditional linear

farmhouse with a 2-roomed house connected to a long byre. The byre was later divided into a byre accessed from outside and a dairy accessed from the house. Later still, the house itself was abandoned, possibly following a fire, and the byre at the end of the building was used until late in the 19th century as a place for storage and working with the animals which were using the grasslands of Barrhouse although the farmer lived at Craig of Neilston.

Records have not been easy to find but, thanks to a contact from Mr. John Carswell, Australia, a family tree was gathered beginning with a marriage in Barrhouse in 1738 between Allan and Margaret Carswell (John Carswell's direct ancestors). Several more marriages and many children are recorded in Barrhouse until 1784 and then there is a long gap in the record. In 1787 the estate rent books show the tack being held by a Carswell at Craig of Neilston and Barrhouse, as if they are all one farm. Later, a marriage is recorded in Barrhouse in 1816 followed by the births of 2 children. In 1820 a Carswell daughter married Hugh Stevenson at Barrhouse and the last birth is recorded in 1823 - after that there is nothing. There is no mention in the 1841 census of anyone living in Barrhouse.



Figure 6: Barrhouse (ruin in foreground and loch in centre) circa 1890

Addendum

The text for the presentation and for this article was taken largely from the excavation notes given to the writer by the late Bruce Henry who was not well enough to deliver the talk himself and, sadly, died very shortly afterwards. The excavations, under Bruce's direction, took place most Sundays in the summer months of the years from 1998 to 2006. Members of the Forum did sterling work, ably assisted by some ACFA members and other interested people from other areas. For the final two years of the dig Bruce agreed to supervise students from the University of Glasgow who came to get some practical experience of the wonders of

spending Sundays on your knees in a muddy Renfrewshire field surrounded by inquisitive bullocks.

It was a source of regret to Bruce that his ill health over the last 2 years of his life meant that he had little energy for completing the excavation report. The excavation drawings and site plans have been prepared and, along with Bruce's notes and photographs, will be gathered together and the archive will be lodged with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.

This paper was presented at the Barrhead & Neilston conference in Autumn 2010. It complements an earlier article by Bruce Henry in Vol. 10 of the Journal.