

4. Medieval or Later Rural Settlement

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Medieval or Later Rural Settlement - M.O.L.R.S. for short, varies a great deal depending on where in Scotland they are situated. Therefore I have confined this article to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and even in this area there are regional differences.

There is a problem with medieval settlement in Scotland in that the materials used - turf, wattle etc leave very little visible remains and it is very difficult to identify structures as positively medieval. The remains that are normally found are from the late 17th century onwards as their construction is usually of stone, or at least, they had stone bases. It is this period that I shall discuss here.

A.M.O.L.R.S. was a settlement similar to the artist's impression shown in Fig. 1. It consists of the following structures: houses, barns, outhouses, kailyard, stackstands, lazybeds and head dyke field systems, and (although they are not shown in Fig 1) a corn drying kiln, mill, and sheilings.

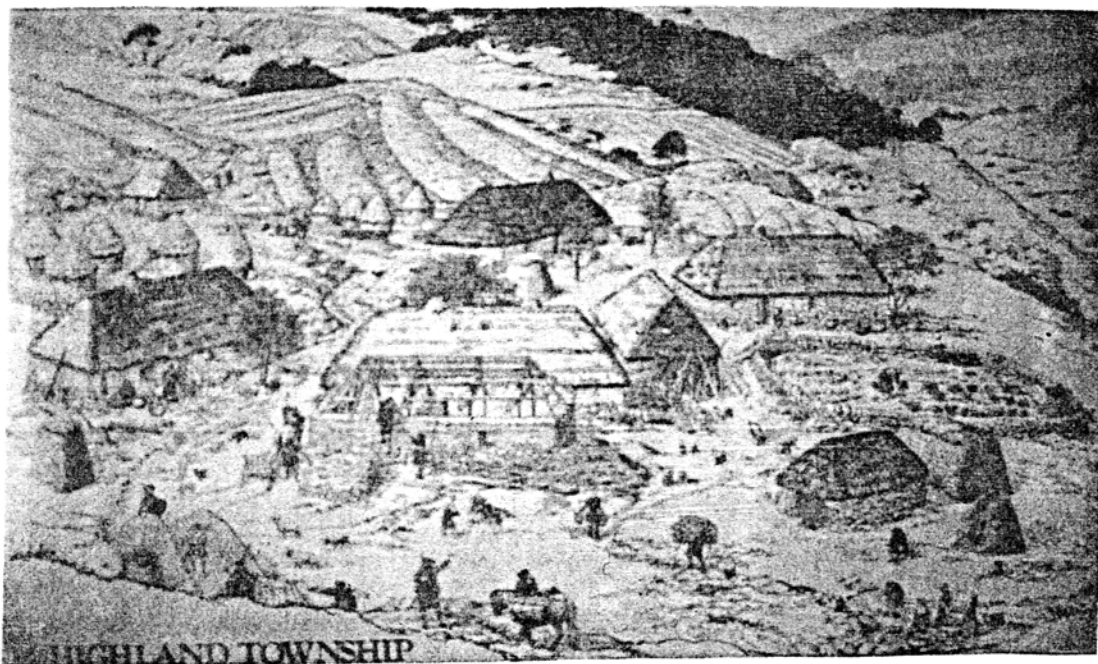


Fig1 (after J. Proudfoot)

The settlement appears to be laid out in a very haphazard manner with no overall plan. The various structures were simply built where it was deemed appropriate at the time with no thought given to any kind of a street layout.

Only two M. O L. R. S. sites have been fully excavated; Lix in Perthshire and Rosal in Sutherland. Both were excavated by H Fairhurst in the late 1960's. A typical drawing of the layout at Lix is shown in Fig 2. The absence of straight lines shows that no measured ground plan, of the various structures was laid out before building started. Drawings of the layouts at Rosal are very similar.

EAST LIX Cluster III

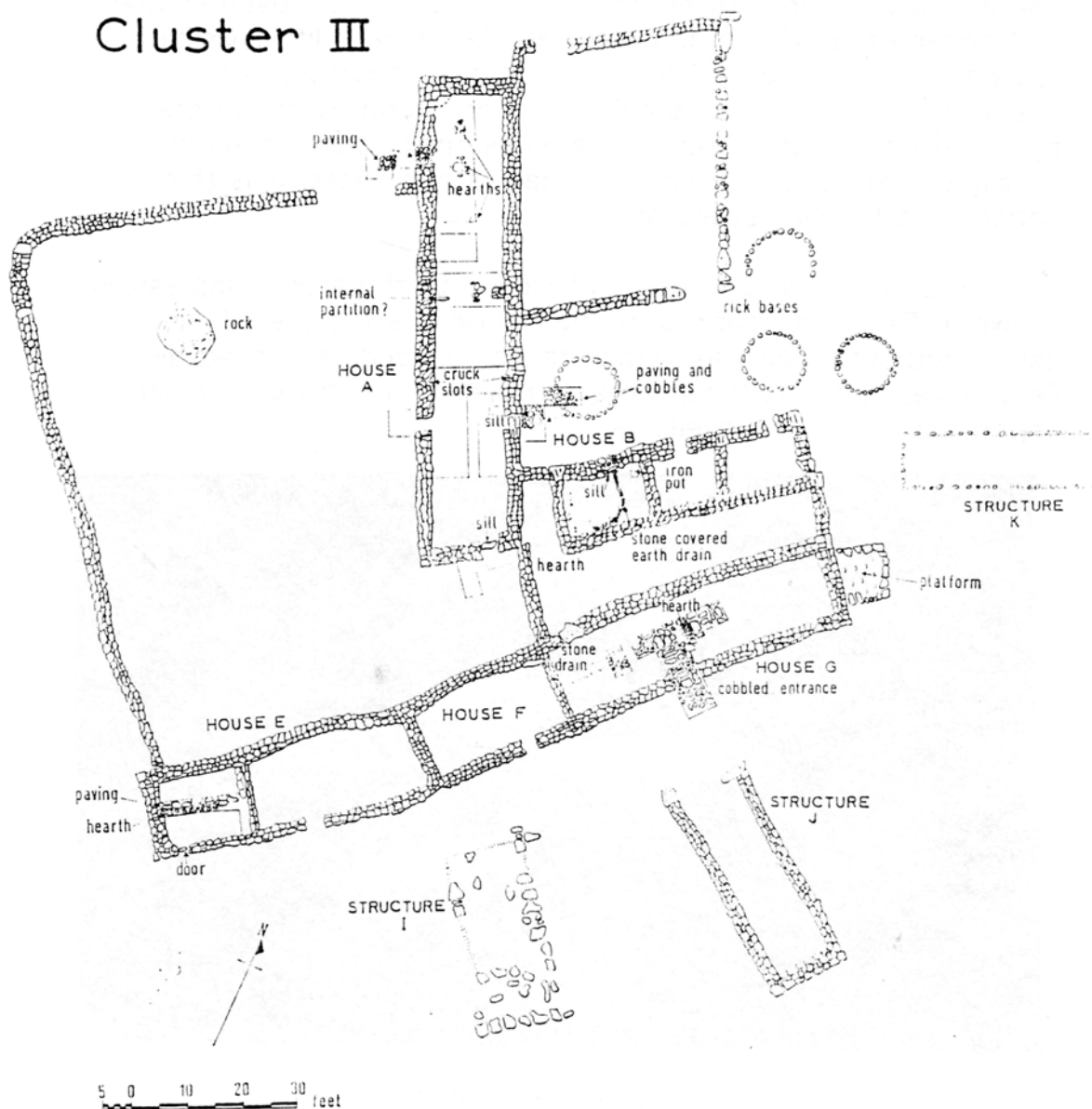


Fig 2 (after H. Fairhurst)

The House

The house, of which Fig. 3 shows a typical example, is of course the most important structure in the settlement.

It is usually roughly rectangular in plan and the size could range from 12 m by 4.5m to 24m by 4.5m. It would be a single storey with no loft. It can have hip or gable ends, the latter being from the later 18th century. Internally it was divided into two compartments, one the living quarters for the humans and the other for the cattle. The partition could be of stone or wood or wattle depending on what was available.

The walls were constructed of an outer and inner dry stone wall with a rubble, earth, or peat

infill. The thickness of the wall is usually between 0.7m & 0.9m. The height can vary but it is not usually above 1.2m. The wall did not have foundations but was simply laid on the cleared ground surface. The corners of the walls can be either rounded or square depending on the house's date. It is generally accepted that rounded corners are usually from an earlier period. The walls have a distinct inward batter. The stone work would sometimes be made water tight by the use of clay.

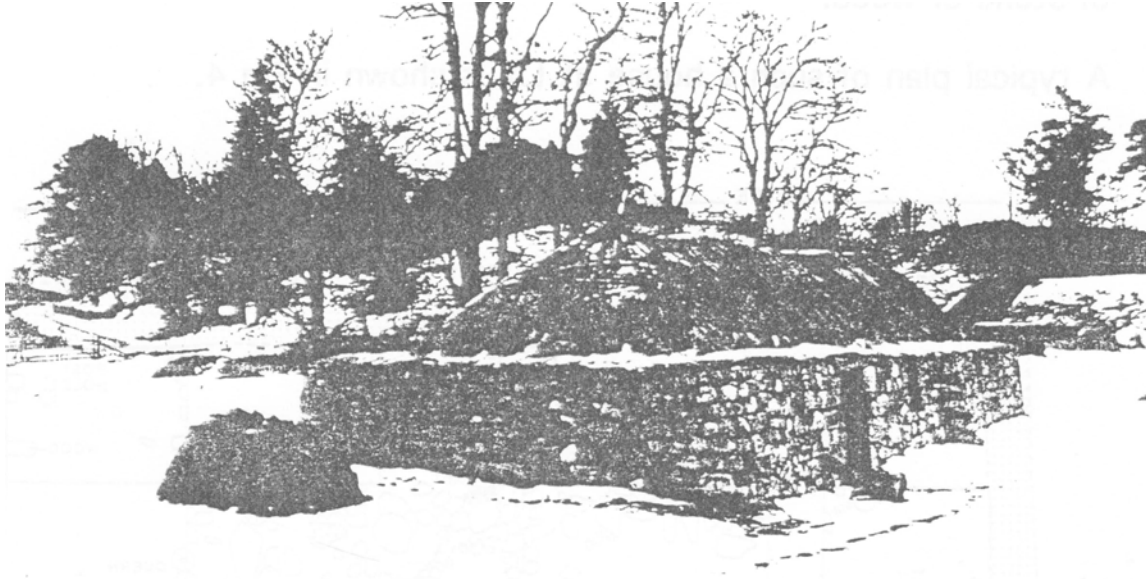


Fig. 3.

The inside of the walls might be limewashed and in the last part of the 19th century even lined with wood panelling. There could be one or two doorways, but usually only one. Both the humans and the cattle would use it. It must be remembered that the cattle were only brought inside at the onset of winter and once in would be there until spring. The door lintels could be of stone or wood, again depending on what was available. There would be at least one small window usually in the living quarters. If glass were available it would be glazed; if not it would be covered by a piece of sacking and a wooden shutter. Once again the lintels could be of stone or wood.

A typical plan of such a house at Lix is shown in Fig 4.

The roof was supported either by transverse timbers or by 'crucks' which were timbers which had been shaped into a curve or suitably shaped tree branches, and these were placed in cruck slots in the wall. There are many different types of crucks and their use and construction is a study in itself. Cruck slots were recesses in the wall which could either be a few inches long or as in some cases extend down to the floor level thus transferring the weight of the roof to the ground.

Beams would be placed longitudinally and fixed to the crucks by means of wooden pegs, iron nails, or simply by tying them with twine or heather rope. Smaller branches would then be intertwined through the beams. The timber used for the roof would be what was readily available; even driftwood would be used if nothing else was available. The roof would then be thatched. This thatch could be of heather, straw, clay, or even turves. Quite often ropes with large stones attached would be placed over the thatch to secure it against the gales of winter. In some areas, such as Skye, the thatch would be of barley straw, which would become impregnated with soot, as there were no chimneys. This would be removed in the

spring and spread on the growing crops as top dressing. The house would then be re-thatched after the crop had been harvested.

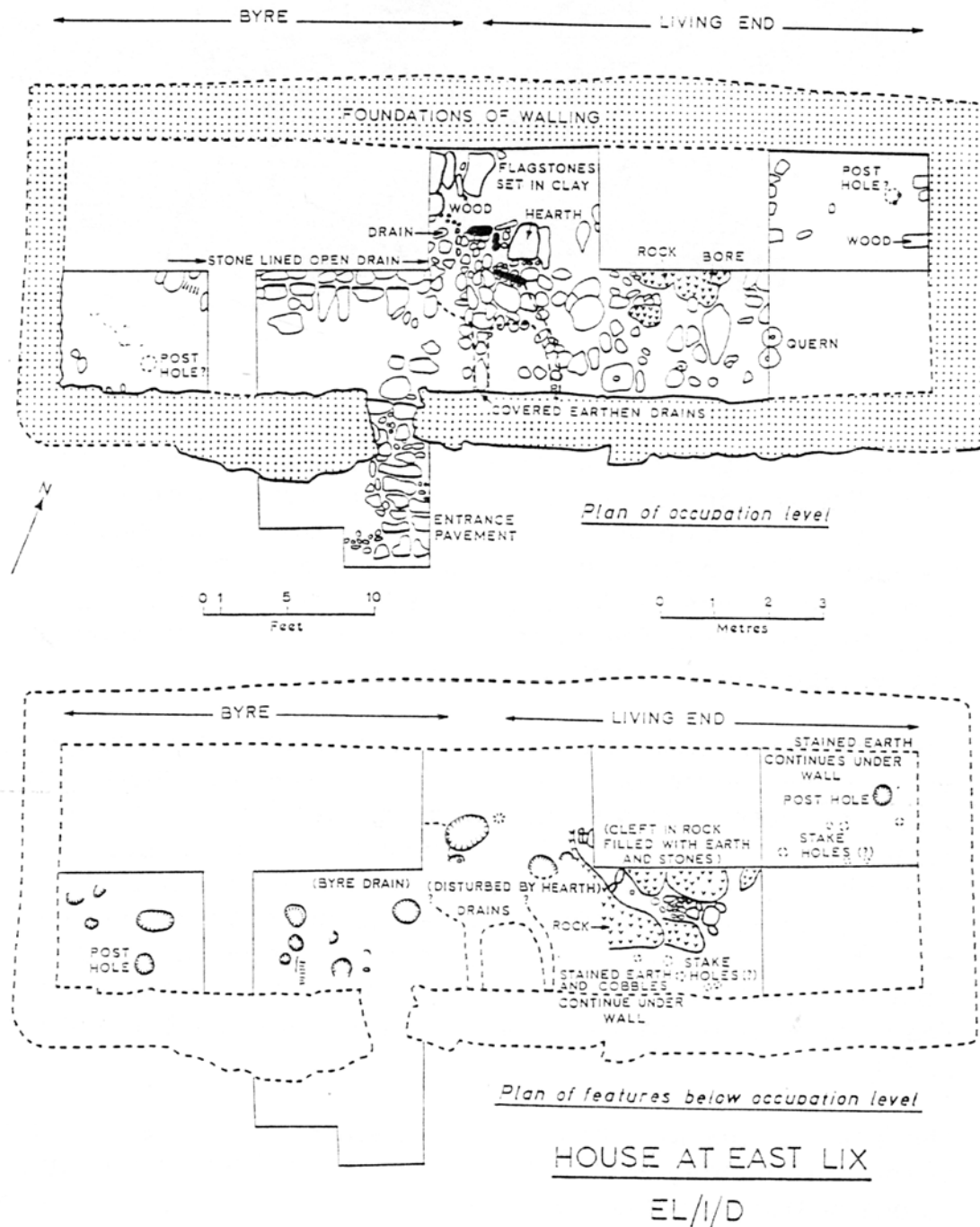


Fig. 4. (after H. Fairhurst)

The floor would normally be of beaten earth in the living quarters but sometimes there would be cobbling in the byre. Running through the byre would be a large drain which was usually open and this would lead to the outside of the house.

The byre compartment was usually situated down slope from the living quarters although in some cases the reverse has been found. I wonder why.

The hearth was situated in the middle of the living area and the smoke was allowed to find its own way out through the thatch. The fire would remain on for most of the time, or at least through the winter months. Towards the end of the 19th century houses were adapted by building proper chimneys into the end wall of the living quarters. Later still houses were constructed with gables incorporating fireplaces.

The interiors of these houses were dark, smokey, smelly, and dirty; but probably quite warm. The internal furnishings would be sparse - perhaps a rough table, a few chairs, and a built in bed for the parents. The children probably slept on straw, heather, or bracken on the floor.

This gives a picture of a typical house but of course there could be endless variations on the theme. This type of house was still being inhabited up to the middle of the 20th century. Even now there are plans in Lewis to modernise a number of the old 'black houses' internally while retaining their outward appearance.

Barn

Often there would be a barn close to the house. This was for storing grain, farm implements etc, its' construction would be similar to that of the house but it would not have a hearth. It would quite often have two doors opposite each other and the theory is that when both were open this would cause a through draught and the space between them would be used for winnowing the grain.

Byre

In some settlements if they were comparatively wealthy there would be a byre which was separate from the house but this was unusual. Its construction would be similar to that portion of the house used for quartering cattle.

Kiln

Although there is not a corn drying kiln shown in Fig.1 most settlements had one it was normally situated some distance from the settlement. It was usually built into the side of a small hill or knoll. It was constructed by digging a hole into the top of the knoll and then lining it with stones. This was to be the bowl of the kiln. A grating of some kind would be placed over the bowl and the grain to be dried would be spread over it. A tunnel was dug through from the downslope side of the knoll and into the bowl. This was also lined with stones and acted as a flue; this was usually facing into the prevailing wind. At the entrance to the flue would be the fire. The draught would carry the hot air into the bowl and up through the grating and this was intended to dry the grain without scorching it. Quite often there would be a flat area or platform at the top of the bowl where the grain to be dried could be stored, loaded and offloaded onto the grating. In some cases there would be a track leading up to this platform. If the kiln was large there would be a barn built over the kiln. This would be, for obvious reasons, called a kiln-barn. This type of kiln should not be confused with a lime kiln which was of a different construction.

Mill

The grinding of the grain would originally be carried out by hand using either a saddle or rotary quern. Some settlements would have a water driven mill. In earlier times this would be of the horizontal type known as a 'clack' mill from the sound it made when in operation. Near Valtos in Lewis we counted 5 such mills on one burn in the space of a few hundred metres.

In later times the milling for the area would be carried out at a large vertical mill which was normally under the control of the local landowner.

Outhouses

There would be a number of smaller outhouses used for all kinds of purposes, such as butter making, the keeping of hens, and - of course - a whisky still etc.

Kailyard

Quite often there would be an area of cleared ground adjacent to the house used for growing vegetables. It was surrounded by a drystone dyke or turf wall, approximately 1 m high. Its purpose was two fold - firstly to keep the cattle out and secondly to give some protection to the crop from the wind.

Stackstand

Situated close to the settlement buildings would be a number of stackstands. These consisted of a base of stones approximately 1 m in diameter on which hay or peat could be stacked.

Field systems

Infield was the area closest to the settlement and was cultivated continuously without a fallow period. It would receive all the cattle and human manure and anything else, such as the thatch that was available. Outfield was farther away and was an area that used the fallow system. This allowed the cattle to graze on the fields that were fallow thus fertilizing them. Rig and furrow was the type of cultivation used and this was normally dug by hand. The area belonging to the settlement would have a head dyke around it which was constructed of stone, turf or a mixture of both.

Sheilings

The inhabitants of the settlement practised transhumance, and each summer they drove their cattle up to their high pastures. This was usually done by the women and small children, the men remaining behind to look after the crops and to carry out necessary repairs to the settlement. The women lived in structures called sheilings. These sheilings were constructed of either turf or stone or a mixture of both. Some were just big enough to accommodate one person and others were much larger and could have a number of chambers. Not all structures called sheilings were for living in and some would be used for other purposes such as milking or cheese making.

Living Conditions

Living conditions in these settlements would have been very hard, each day a struggle against the climate with always the fear of a bad harvest or disease or, in earlier times, the possibility of a raid from a rival clan. But I am sure that there must have been compensations as some of their locations are in the most beautiful parts of Scotland. If you have ever camped amidst the sheilings above Lorgill in Skye and seen the sunrise over the mountains on a fine summer morning I am sure you will agree.

References

H Fairhurst Rosal Township, P.S.A.S. 1967-68.

H Fairhurst The Deserted Township at Lix, P.S.A.S. 1968-69.

- J B Caird The Making of the Scottish Rural Landscape, Scottish Geographical Magazine.
- J G Dunbar The Peasant House: The Study of Deserted Medieval Settlements in Scotland. (to 1968.)

Museums of Interest

Kingussie, Invernesshire.

Osmigarry, near Uig Isle of Skye.

Colbost near Dunvegan, Isle of Skye.

Auchindrain, Argyllshire.