

Using archaeological plans to investigate Scotland's rural past

Archaeologists survey and record building remains to help gain a better understanding of daily life in the past and to gather evidence to see how society has evolved, diversified and changed through time. Accurate recording of a rural settlement, and the interpretation of these records enable archaeologists to visualise how a site looked when it was occupied. When Rosal was being excavated, the archaeologists drew these plans to show in detail the extent of what was discovered, record the level of preservation at the site and show how buildings in the township were planned and constructed. The buildings were measured accurately and drawn to scale. The Scotland's Rural Past team are training volunteers to create such plans with simple surveying tools and techniques.

What does the plan of Rosal show?

The plan shows a byre dwelling, barn, stackyard and nearby outhouse which were excavated in 1962. The byre dwelling had low stone walls which were less than one metre high. These stone walls would never have been much higher, and when the byre dwelling was occupied the walls would have been built to full height with layers of turf. Slots in the wall show where the bases of wooden crucks would have sat to support the roof. The byre dwelling had only one door, which would have been used by both people and animals. The animals would have been housed in the byre and the people would have lived next to them, separated perhaps by only a wooden partition. A more private room was located at the end of the building. A photograph of a reconstruction of a byre dwelling from the Highland Folk Museum, Newtonmore, shows a similar type of building to those at Rosal.

Near to the byre house was a stackyard, a separate outhouse and a barn with two opposed entrances. Having the doors opposite each other in the barn would create a through-draught which was important when threshing grain. After harvesting, cereal crops, such as oats or barley would be beaten with sticks or flails to separate them from the inedible straw and husks. The draught would blow away this waste material as the grains were being processed. The grains would be dried in a corn-drying kiln before being milled. Milled oats could be used to cook oatcakes or fed to animals; barley could be cooked and eaten or used in whisky making.

Examples of how to use this resource

The following questions can be used to critically analyse the site plan and make observations about the way of life in a township. Background detail has been added to help with the answers.

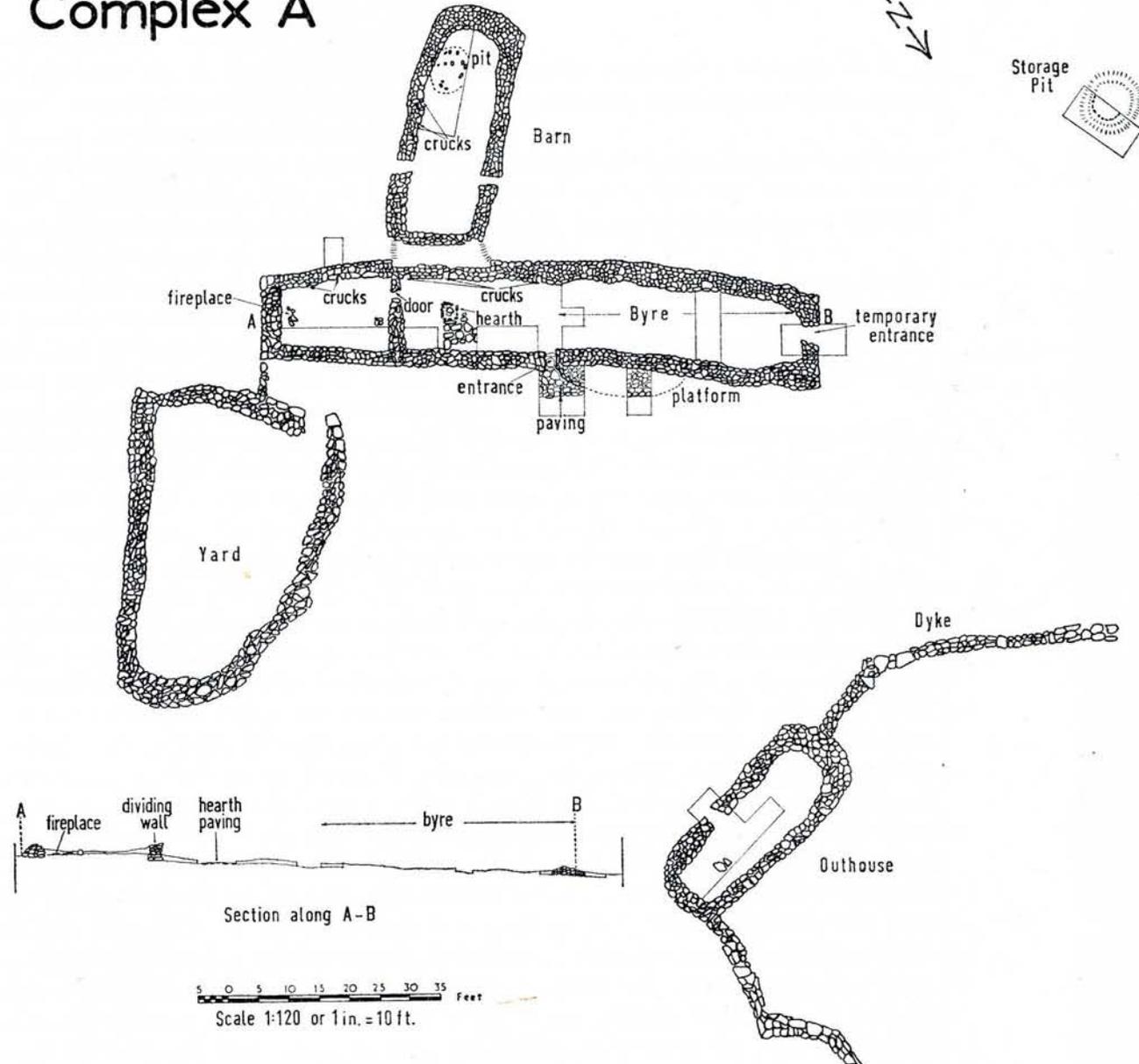
- What was the main occupation of the people who lived in and used these buildings?
 - A farming community lived at Rosal.
- What was each building used for? How can you tell?
 - The barn was used for storing and threshing crops; the opposing doors are evidence of this. The hearths and fireplace in the byre dwelling show that people would have lived in it, with animals using the byre. You can see from the section illustration that the byre dwelling is built on a slope. This makes it easier to clean the animal muck out of the byre end as gravity would make it accumulate at the bottom of the slope. The temporary entrance in the end of the byre might have been knocked through to clear out the muck. The outhouse would most likely be used for storage. It is difficult to say precisely what the yard was used for; it may have been a kail yard for growing food, or a stack yard for storing stacks of oats and barley.

- What animals did the people keep?
 - Cattle were the most important animal to the farming economy.
- Why would people and their animals have used the same building?
 - Cattle would be kept in the byre over the winter months when there was little grazing on the hills. The cattle's body heat would have helped warm the byre dwelling.
- Who do you think used the separate room?
 - We cannot tell for sure from the archaeological evidence. Perhaps it was a 'master bedroom' used by the head of the household, or it may have been a 'best' room for special occasions. What do you think it was used for?
- Where would the occupants have cooked their food?
 - Food would have been cooked over an open fire on the hearth in the central living area.
- What food did they cook?
 - The diet was made up of what the farmers would grow; oats, barley, potatoes, kale, and dairy products like milk, cheese and butter. Meat would have been an occasional luxury rather than an everyday food.
- What fuel were they burning on the fire?
 - The fire would burn peat, which would be dug up and cut on the hillsides around Rosal.
- Where do you think they slept?
 - Unlike a house today there are not numerous separate bedrooms. The people living here would have had to share rooms, and most likely beds in either the main living area or separate room at the end. People slept in wooden box beds.
- What were the floors of the building made of?
 - There were rough earthen floors in the byre dwelling; no carpets or floorboards.
- Where is the toilet?
 - There isn't one! People would use the byre or go out to the midden (dung heap).
- Can you see any evidence of windows?
 - There is no evidence of any windows in the site plan; however, the remains of what has been drawn would stand less than one metre high – too low down to put a window. The building walls were made of turf, which may or may not have had windows in them. The picture of the reconstructed byre dwelling shows a window built into a turf wall.
- What do you think it would have been like to live inside a byre dwelling? What would be the everyday sights, sounds and smells you would encounter?
- Using the site plan of Rosal for guidance can you draw what you think what a building would have looked like when it was in use? Photos on SCRAN could give you some clues.

Further ideas

- The Rosal byre dwelling measured 30 metres long by 3.6 metres wide internally. Approximately half of this space was the byre, and the other half was subdivided into two living spaces. Use a tape measure to measure the size of the byre dwelling accurately, or pace this distance out in the school playground. Draw the outline of the byre dwelling in chalk, you could draw a simple rectangle, or draw copy the plan accurately. Compare the outline you make with the size of pupils own homes and the size of the school classroom. See how much space there would be for cattle and for people. See how many of your class can fit into the living space comfortably.
- Measure and make a plan of your classroom, school on graph paper. Mark in significant features such as doors and windows.
- Pupils can make a plan of their homes on graph paper and write down the names of each room and the activities that take place in each of them. Compare these to the Rosal site plan and note any similarities and differences between byre dwellings and modern homes.

ROSAL Northern Cluster Complex A



Archaeological plan of buildings at Rosal



Reconstructed Byre Dwelling at the Highland Folk Museum