

## 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 Margdow was surveyed by RCAHMS, 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 Margdow show?

The plan shows the extent of the township at Margdow. The township consists of a grouping of seven buildings and enclosures, divided into three individual farmsteads. The northernmost farmstead has two buildings, as has the central farmstead. The southernmost farmstead consists of three buildings. Each farmstead is made up of at least two buildings, a byre dwelling, a barn, and one or two stone-walled enclosures. The southernmost farmstead also has an outbuilding.

The buildings are all built of stone and are in various stages of decay. The plan depicts this through the way the walls of the buildings have been drawn. Just as a map uses symbols to depict an area of land and show whether the ground is boggy or forested, so archaeological plans use various drawing symbols to show how a site looked when it was surveyed and drawn.

On the Margdow plan, where walls are still standing above sill height, that is, above the level of the windowsills, they have been drawn as a solid dark grey block. Where walls have collapsed and are now standing to levels below sill height the convention is to draw them as stone walls. Several buildings have blocked doorways and windows, and these are drawn as lighter grey blocks within the building walls. Three of the buildings have dashed lines drawn inside them, perpendicular to their long sides, joining notches or slots in opposite walls. This represents where the bases of wooden crucks would have sat to support the roof.

By looking closely at the details which have been drawn an archaeologist can interpret what the buildings were used for. The long buildings which are built in an east-west direction are byre dwellings. These would have been lived in both by people and their 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. The southernmost byre dwelling has a wall built between the two compartments. In the compartment to the west you can see the remains of a drain, shown as a pair of parallel lines across the centre of the room. This proves that this room was the byre, as a drain would be necessary to drain away the muck produced by the animals housed there. The drain would empty into a midden, evidence of which can be seen to the south of this byre dwelling, between it and the enclosure, and to the west of the outbuilding. The midden is depicted as a patch of boggy ground.

A photograph of a byre dwelling from Auchindrain Township Open Air Museum, near Inveraray, shows a similar type of building to those at Margdow.

The other type of building shown on the Margdow plan is built in a north-south direction and has a pair of doorways constructed opposite one another. These are barns, and it is the doorways which provide the clue to this. Having the doors opposite each other creates a through-draught which was important when threshing grain by hand. After harvesting, cereal crops such as oats or barley would be beaten with sticks or flails to separate the grains 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.

Once milled, oats could be used to cook oatcakes, porridge or fed to animals; barley could be cooked and eaten or used in whisky making.

### Examples of how to use this resource

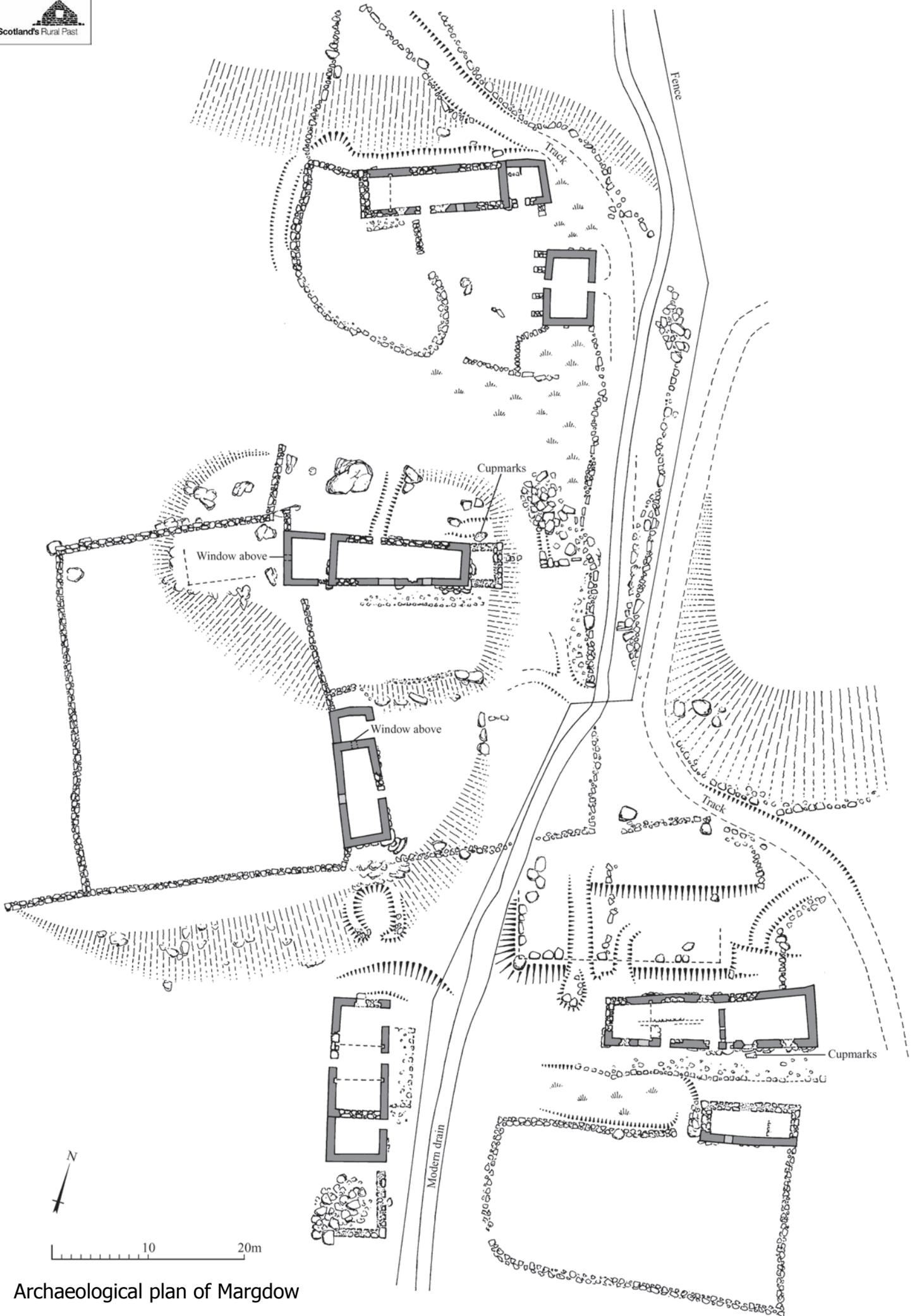
The following questions can be used to critically analyse the site plan and make observations about the way of life in a township. Background detail has been added to help with the answers.

- What was the main occupation of the people who lived in and used these buildings?
  - A farming community lived at Margdow.
- 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 windows in the byre dwellings show that people would have lived in them, alongside their animals in the byres. The byre drain in the southernmost byre dwelling is evidence of its function. It is difficult to say precisely what each of the enclosures were used for; they may have been for stockading animals, they could have been kail yards for growing food, or stack yards for storing stacks of oats and barley.
- What animals did the people keep?
  - At the time these buildings were occupied, 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 to be found on the hills. The cattle's body heat would have helped warm the byre dwelling also.
- Where would the occupants have cooked their food?
  - Food would have been cooked over an open fire within the byre dwellings.
- 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 Margdow.
- Where did they sleep?
  - 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 within the byre dwellings; 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).

- 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 Margdow 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 southernmost byre dwelling at Margdow measures internally 20.2 metres long by 4.6 metres in breadth at the east end, narrowing to 3.5 metres at the west end. Approximately half of this space was the byre, and the other half was living space. 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 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 or 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 Margdow site plan and note any similarities and differences between byre dwellings and modern homes.



Archaeological plan of Margdow



Byre dwelling at Auchindrain Township Open Air Museum, near Inveraray