

Using archaeological records to investigate Scotland's rural past

This is an extract of the entry for the rural settlement of Spittal of Glenmuick from Canmore, the public interface to the RCAHMS database (www.rcahms.gov.uk). Canmore contains details of around 270,000 archaeological sites, monuments, buildings and maritime sites in Scotland, together with an index to the drawings, manuscripts and photographs in our collections. Images of over 80,000 of the photographs or drawings in the collection are also available online. You can search for information by name, location, site type or collection or search using the Canmore mapping service.

A site description is a descriptive written account of what is known about an archaeological site. The description is created as a result of archaeological fieldwork or documentary research, and gives a picture of how the site appeared when it was visited or researched by an investigator. Each time a new piece of archaeological investigation takes place, the site description gets updated. Over time a fuller picture of the site and its history gets built and changes in the state of preservation at the site can be documented and recorded.

The site description for Spittal of Glenmuick is as follows:

Spittal Of Glenmuick

Type of Site: Rig And Furrow, Township

NMRS Number: NO38SW 1

Map reference: NO 3085 8495

Parish: Glenmuick, Tullich And Glengairn

Council: Aberdeenshire

Former District: Kincardine And Deeside

Former Region: Grampian

NO38SW 1 centred on 308 849

See also:

NO38NW 2 NO 3074 8500 Hospital

A township comprising three unroofed, four roofed buildings and five enclosures, one of which is annotated as Sheepfold, is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Aberdeenshire 1869, sheet cviii). Two unroofed, seven roofed buildings and several enclosures are shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1973).

Information from RCAHMS (SAH) 15 November 1999

The remains of this township are much more extensive than the features shown on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Aberdeenshire, sheet cviii) and the current edition of the OS 1:10,000 map (1973). The remains of at least seven additional rectangular buildings and a yard were recorded on oblique aerial photographs (RCAHMSAP 2003). In addition an extensive area of rig has been recorded to the N of the buildings

Information from RCAHMS (MMB) 2 March 2004

As you can see, this account does not give much detail on the surviving remains at the site. However, the Balmoral Estate Ranger Service commissioned an archaeological survey of the township and the following is adapted from these results.

The ruined long houses are the remains of an old farming **township** where several families of peasant farmers would have lived and farmed together. Unfortunately, at present it is not possible to date this settlement but it was almost certainly earlier than the single farm shown on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1867. It is very likely that the farm replaced the township. In a typical township there could be several tacksmen holding the land from the

laird, tenants renting the land from a tacksman and also cottars who had no land but worked for the tenants.

The ruins look insubstantial now, just a few low lines of stones, but we cannot tell if the walls were robbed for later building, **dry-stone dykes** for instance. However, many writers of the 18th and early 19th centuries observed on the wretched state of the peasant farmers' houses - tenants and cottars usually had to build and repair their own houses.

The houses tended to be of the poorest materials and flimsiest construction. It was said that some cottages could be built in a day, with all the neighbours involved, they having previously collected the materials. Some better-off farmers' houses were built of stone with clay **mortar** walls to a height of one and a half metres then turf tops and gables. Sometimes the walls were built entirely of turf, or indeed any combination of stone, turf and earth. Because the stone used was usually granite, which the peasants could not cut to square shape, round comers were easier to build, as can be seen at the Spittal of Glenmuick. The flimsy walls could not support a roof so **crucks** were used and it is reported that the timber for those frames often belonged to the laird so that, on moving house, a tenant had to give them back! Roofing would have been thatch, turf, straw, heather or bracken, whichever was to hand. There were no ceilings, being open to the thatch, and no proper fireplace, perhaps a central **hearth** with the smoke going out through gaps in thatch. Very smoky living conditions indeed but at least the thatch got very sooty and could be taken off at intervals and so become manure for the fields. Floors would have been beaten earth, perhaps covered with straw and swept regularly.

Usually the family lived at one end of the house and the cow at other, often with no dividing wall. (This type of building is called a **byre dwelling**). At least they kept each other warm in winter! **Middens** at the front of the house were common practice, rubbish disposal being just to throw it out of the door. This is said to be one reason why houses in new villages such as Ballater and Tomintoul had no front gardens - the lairds who planned them wanted to stop the folk who moved there from farming townships from carrying on their old habits.

The farmers who lived in townships farmed jointly, sharing the land and the work. Most people will be familiar with the system called runrig where fields were divided into strips with each tenant getting a strip in each field. The main field for growing crops was the infield, close to the houses; this was constantly cropped and received the only manure available, from cattle or as we have seen, from the matched roofs.

Other fields used were the outfields and common grazings. Outfields got no manure but parts were left fallow until a lapse of time restored enough fertility to grow a few successive crops of oats or barley.

Examples of how to use this resource

- Read through the simplified description and find a definition for each of the highlighted keywords. A glossary of keywords has been provided. Encourage your class to use different sources to find definitions for the words, for example, Google, dictionaries, reference books. You can find a glossary of terms on the Scotland's Rural Past website (www.scotlandsruralpast.org.uk). It is located in the following section: Home / Doing / Doing field work / [Glossary of terms](#).

Keywords

Township A farming settlement made up of a group of dwellings, farm buildings and land, held by two or more joint tenants usually working the land communally

Dry-stone A method of building walls by laying carefully selected stones one on top of another without using any cement or mortar

Dyke A wall

Crucks A pair of curved timbers, often built into the walls of a building, forming an A-frame to support the weight of the roof.

Hearth A slab, structure or place on which fires are made.

Byre dwelling A rectangular building which developed during the medieval period, comprising a dwelling for people and accommodation for animals under one roof.

Midden A refuse heap, often associated with a building or settlement.

- Go to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland's website – <http://www.rcahms.gov.uk>. Log in to Canmore and use the following terms to find records of other abandoned rural settlements in your own area:
 - **Township**
 - **Farmstead** (A farmhouse and ancillary farm buildings forming a group)
 - **Byre dwelling**
- Use the SCRAN website <http://www.scran.ac.uk> to try to find images for a farming township and for each of the keywords highlighted in the simplified site description.
- Using the archaeological records as an example, write a simple description for your school, or another notable building familiar to you. Describe the location, size, and materials used in construction.
- Contact your local museum or library service to find out about the rural past in your area.
- Research what life was like in a township. Learning and Teaching Scotland have some excellent resources:
 - http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/scottishhistory/stewartscotland/stewartsociety/Everyday_Life_in_the_Highlands_in_the_17th_Century/index.asp
 - http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/scottishhistory/industrialrevolution/dailylife/Working_on_Farms/index.asp
 - http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/scottishhistory/industrialrevolution/clearances/The_Highland_Clearances/index.asp