

HIGHLAND CLACHAN

by
Margaret Stewart



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THE CLACHAN

The clachan was probably deserted for the last time early in the nineteenth century. The local tradition has it that when the inhabitants left they piled their goods on to carts and moved south across the loch and over the hills into Strathtay.

Unfortunately there is no documentary evidence about the clachan; no estate papers or maps to give some indication of how old it is. There are however two clues which can carry the story back for at least 250 years. Evidence found during excavation showed that the original corn drying kiln had been structurally altered in order to burn limestone from which to obtain fertiliser. The burning of limestone was introduced into this part of Perthshire at the end of the 18thC so the clachan must go back at least to the middle of that century. The second clue lies in the fact that House I has had two periods of use. In the second period it was given over to the preparation of wool. It is known that the Crown Commissioners who administered the Forfeited Estates after the failure of the 1745 Rebellion encouraged sheep rearing. Before that the Highland communities had subsisted on small black cattle keeping only a few sheep mainly for their milk which was used for a variety of purposes. After 1745 the secondary use of House I may reflect the increased importance of sheep. If so it is an argument for the existence of the house before the middle of the 18thC.

The name of the clachan is uncertain. On Stobie's map of 1783 there is a Tombuie marked on the hillside above The Queen's View but the name does not appear on the Ordnance Survey 6" Sheet published in 1867. Possibly the economy of such a small community had ceased to be viable on what must have been a very exposed situation 400' above the loch and with no shelter from the prevailing wind.

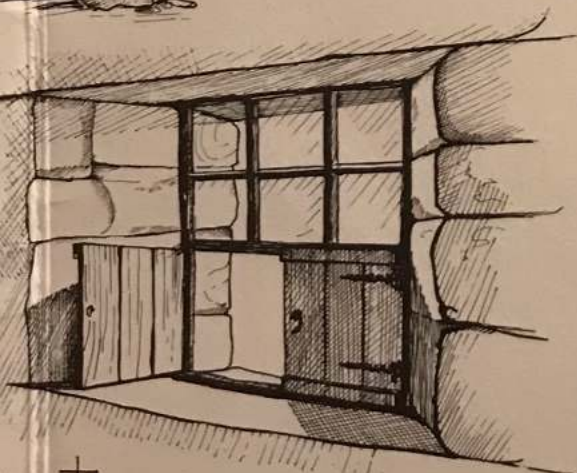
THE LAYOUT (See Plan)

The clachan consists of a nucleus of three houses surrounded by small patches of arable or garden land. Houses I and III lie approximately E/W. House II lies N/S and against the contours.

To the west of the houses is an enclosed area which was probably cultivated and lying outside it and to the north is an open ended byre. Below the houses is a walled in garden and a terrace for small crop growing both with a southern exposure. The present forestry road has cut through another field, the remaining wall of which can be seen on the right hand side of the track as it approaches the clachan.



Section through corn drying kiln.



HOUSE I

The walls of this house have been rebuilt and on the north and south incorporate four crucks (two on each side) to carry the birchwood roof. Two of the original cruck holes were found in the south wall during excavation and corresponding holes were created in the north wall when it was heightened. Notice the collar brace which joins each pair of crucks, the wooden pegs in place of nails and the pins of hazel wood which secure each roofing turf under the thatch.

The construction of the roof has been copied from one still in situ on an old cottage by the lochside below Strath Tummel post office.

As fragments of window glass were found in the debris lying on the floor of the house two windows have been included in the reconstruction. There is one in the north wall and a small one in the west gable which it is said allowed the hens to roost in the timbers of the roof.

This house has had two periods of use. In the first period there was a domestic occupation with a central hearth part of which can still be seen. In the east gable a low doorway filled in during the second period can be traced as a discontinuity of build. This doorway had originally given access to a small animal pen. In the second period the house had been used for dyeing fleece and for the preparation of wool. The sockets which held the iron stanchions of a rack on which the dyed fleece could be hung to dry; an elaborate drainage system to carry off surplus dyeing liquid and the sockets for the pegs of a warping loom can be identified by the visitor. Alongside the dyeing rack there had been a fire pit where the cauldron with the dye was heated and a peat stack was found in the adjacent N.W. corner of the house. A dark brown dye could be obtained from heather roots and a pile of these was found on the remains of the first period cobbling which had been left in situ along the eastern half of the south wall.

HOUSE II

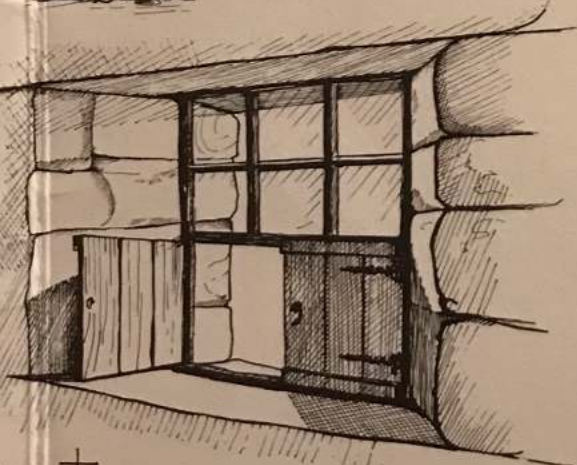
The absence of a hearth makes it unlikely that this house had ever had a domestic occupation. There is a marked difference in the type of building used in the two halves of the house and the possibility of two periods of construction is underlined by the change in alignment north of the doorways. On the west there is a divergence of 15° and on the east 20° . In the northern half the very massive stones contrast with the small boulder building elsewhere.

As one of the two doorways opens directly on to the cultivated area the inference is that at some stage the building had to do with the processing of the cereal crop. The existence of two opposed doorways, provided they are contemporary, suggests that the building may have been used for winnowing grain more especially as the doorways are in line with the prevailing wind.

In the S.W. corner three flat stones were found on top of each other covering an unlined pit averaging .70m in diameter and .45m in depth. If the building had at some period been used for animals the pit may have held a container for collecting animal urine. This was used as a mordant in dyeing.

From the nature of the debris found in the building it appears to have been used mainly as a rubbish tip during the later period of occupation of the clachan.

1.900 m.



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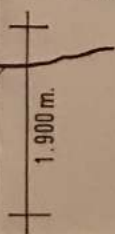
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HOUSE III

Only the two gable ends of this house remain. At the east end a well preserved area of two types of cobbling has been exposed. There is the threshold of a doorway on the south side. This end of the house has provided accommodation for animals, probably goats, and on the northern outside wall at the east end there is the outfall of a drain.

The west end of the house has a fine example of a drystone built fireplace. A close look at the outside wall of this west end shows that the fireplace has been inserted after the house was built. The fireplace could be associated with the second and last phase of occupation of the clachan perhaps reflecting a higher standard of living following on the improvements in rural economy at the end of the 18thC.

THE KILN

The corn drying kiln has been built into a natural slope in the northeastern part of the clachan. The chamber has been in part cut out of the living rock, with a thick collar of dry stone building at ground level.

The original lintelled flue is short and narrow but it has been lengthened at a later period by two wings built forward at either side. When used for corn drying the corn in the sheaf would be laid on a grid supported by a scarcement built halfway up the inverted cone of the chamber. A fire was then lit at the outer end of the flue and the heat, inducted inwards, dried the cereal without any risk of fire. Most deserted rural settlements in Perthshire have a corn drying kiln an essential adjunct when barley was sown as late as June and often not harvested until November. But with the agricultural improvements brought in at the end of the 18thC; with better seed, earlier sowing and summer harvesting the corn drying kiln became obsolete. Several examples in Central Perthshire like this one at the clachan were converted to burning limestone. Increasing the draught by lengthening and narrowing the flue was the usual method of conversion. At the clachan partly burnt limestone was found at the bottom of the chamber but the amount which could have been burnt at one time must have been minimal. However the small area of ground cultivated combined with the probable rate of distribution of approximately 2oz to the square yard must have reconciled the inhabitants to the inconvenience of production.

EXCAVATION

The clachan was excavated in 1972 and 1974 by members of the Breadalbane, Strathearn Society and Abertay Archaeological Societies and by members of the Stirling Field and Archaeological Societies under the auspices of the Forestry Commission (East Conservancy).

A selection of relics found during the excavation is on exhibition at The Queen's View Information Centre.

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