

The Story of Achlochan



The Broch and ruins, looking east © AOC Archaeology Group

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May 2021.

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Introduction

Looking down on Achlochan peninsula from Polglass, narrow strips of croft land stretch out to a mire of rippling reeds, flanked by stone ruins, tightly-nibbled grass and a mesmerizingly meandering shore. A solitary white house looks back inland from a hill of heather, peat, bog and rock. It may look like a standard patch of Highland ground, but this intriguing triangle is packed with all sorts of treasures: there is geology, biology, archaeology, and the stories of people's lives.

One billion years ago this piece of rock was near the equator; 9000 years ago it was under the sea; 2000 years ago it was the site of a magnificent Broch, and just 50 years ago families were still growing oats and harvesting hay. In this small space we collect the fascinating strands of our natural and cultural heritage, to help us all enjoy it and appreciate it.

A Note on Names

We have tried to keep Gaelic translations as accurate as possible, using the most reliable sources.

Achlochan – the field of the loch – is the settlement at the west side of the reedbed, which is called *Loch Poll an Dùnain* - sea pool of the little fort.¹ However, the whole peninsula – including *Loch Poll an Dùnain* out to the headland *Rubha Dùnan* – is locally referred to as Achlochan.

Rubha - headland – is seen on old maps as *Rudha*; this is the ancient Gaelic spelling. Throughout this text we use the more modern *Rubha*, for consistency. We refer to *Loch Poll an Dùnain* simply as the Loch.

The north-facing *Camas na Maraichean* means Bay of the Sailors – and may have been used as a harbour. The hill on the peninsula has the sinister name of *Cnoc na Croiche*: Hangman's Hill – and one hanging is said to have happened there.

¹ This translation is taken from the Donnie Fraser's amazing Gaelic map on display in Coigach Community Hall.

Geology

Until relatively recently - 6000-9000 years ago - the peninsula was separated from the mainland. The hill of Cnoc na Croiche and the Rubha it sits on was an island, whilst what is now Loch Poll an Dùnain sat beneath the waves. The shingle bar to the south of the peninsula was formed as a storm beach, and as the last ice-age ended and the ice cap melted, the huge release of pressure allowed the land to rise out of the sea - a process known as 'isostatic rebound', which is still occurring today.



The Shingle Bar, and looking east ©Neil MacGregor

However, the most interesting geology of the peninsula (according to NatureScot, who designated it a 'Site of Special Scientific Interest, or SSSI'²) was formed long before this relatively recent rebounding.

In this small area there are three different types of rock: at the tip of the Rubha and the northern part of the peninsula we find dark Lewisian Gneiss (formed deep in the earth's crust approximately three billion years ago); the south west of the peninsula is formed of Stoer Group sandstones (formed around 1.2 billion years ago) and the north west section is Diabaig Formation – a subdivision of the Torridonian Group; a mere 1 billion years old.

As well as these varied rock types, 'unconformities' between the groups show there are gaps in the laying down of sediment, and studies of the rocks tell us about continental drift: Coigach was located just above the equator when the Stoer Group was formed, but just 200 million years later it was far south of the equator. Ripples on the rocks show the rocks were laid down in lakes, whilst large boulders and ice-scoured rocks show the effects of passing glaciers³.

The sandstone is of such fine quality that it has been used the buildings we see ruined today - and some is believed to have been taken to build a church in Stornoway⁴. The quarry is still visible along the southern shore, as are drill holes from the old-style geological sampling process.

² Read more about SSSIs here: <https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/protected-areas-and-species/protected-areas/national-designations/sites-special-scientific-interest-ssis>

and about the Rubha Dunan SSSI here: <https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/1392>

³ You can learn much more about this, and the geology of Coigach, on the annotated 'Coigach Geotrail' map: <https://visitcoigach.com/see-and-do/the-coigach-geotrail/> (Also available to buy in local shops.)

⁴ Mairi Thornton, Oral History. Available in the Coigach Heritage Archive.

Wildlife

Loch Poll an Dùnain is not the sort of wide-open loch we are used to seeing in the Highlands: it is a marsh full of tall, rustling reeds – the largest area of its kind in Wester Ross. This unusual habitat – officially a ‘hydromorphological mire range’ - is another reason for Rubha Dùnan’s classification as a SSSI.

Amongst the ragged reed heads, sedge warblers chatter frantically and reed buntings trill. There are some open areas of ‘quaking mire’ where ‘swamp communities’ of bog bean, horsetail and the lesser bladderwort - which is scarce in this region - can thrive. The edges are fringed with sphagnum moss, bottle sedge and marsh cinquefoil. In summer the eastern fringe is lit with pink ragged robin, bold yellow flag iris, and the gentler shades of early marsh orchid and lesser butterfly orchid.



Sedge warbler © Steve Gardner



Ragged Robin © Mark Foxwell

These reeds grow enthusiastically and can easily swamp these less vigorous plants. Historically the reeds were less dense: they were harvested for thatching roofs and actively managed to allow boats in, which encouraged more diverse habitats – and therefore a wider variety of plants, insects, birds and animals – to flourish. Local volunteers, facilitated by the landowner Scottish Wildlife Trust and the Coigach & Assynt Living Landscapes Partnership⁵ - now cut the reeds to help wildlife. Water shrews and endangered

water voles have been seen: a sign of a healthy home.

Away from the Loch there is also precious wildlife. The rough grassland is hunting ground for barn owls and buzzards. Along the path around the Rubha, flush-green mounds topped with crumbly shell and oily dung are signs of otters marking their territory.⁶ Wading birds rummage on the shore: dunlin, sandpiper, redshank and oyster catcher all have specifically shaped beaks for catching their preferred prey. The strand line – as everywhere – is strewn with omnipresent marine plastic: an ongoing challenge for local people to clean up, and for wildlife to contend with.



Aerial image of loch © Neil MacGregor

Annotation overlay © Claire Proctor, Hill99 Design Studio

⁵ [Coigach & Assynt Living Landscapes Partnership](#) (CALLP) is a unique community partnership project which ran from 2016-2021, aiming to bring environmental and economic benefits to Coigach and Assynt. The CALLP Scheme is a National Lottery Heritage Funded project comprising 14 Partner organisations, of which the [Scottish Wildlife Trust](#) – who own the land of Achlochan - is the lead partner.

⁶ There are some more descriptions of the local flora in the ‘Springwatch’ of Coigach’s Lockdown Newsletter 2020, available at: www.wilderwords.ink

Human History

Against this backdrop of geology and biology, the human story has evolved, and there are plenty of signs in the rocks and stones.

Pre-history

A flint found in the area was dated by the National Museum of Scotland to be around 4000 years old. This is the oldest artefact but there are remnants of many other prehistoric structures.

It is difficult to discern amongst the unassuming peat hags, sphagnum moss and heather ... but in good light and with good faith it is possible to discern a ring of raised ground: 11.5m in diameter; 25cm high and 2m wide, near the end of the Rubha: thought to be a Bronze Age hut circle⁷.

There are clusters of smaller huts elsewhere on the peninsula: circular turf-walled huts which were probably ephemeral and used as summer shielings⁸. It is amazing to think that tiny, temporary dwellings made of nothing more than the earth they sit on can survive across millennia.

The Broch

The large mound on the southern shore of the peninsula harbours more secrets. Within this turfed cone lie the remains of a Broch, or *Dùn* as it was known locally: a drystone tower made of Torridonian sandstone which would have been 'one of the most significant Iron Age settlement on the North West coast of mainland Scotland'⁹. Although '*Dùnain*' means 'fortified place', Brochs are thought to be a type of Atlantic roundhouse, rather than fort, and would have been home to an extended family or a small community.

All that is visible now under the turf, lichen, and stonecrop are fragments of the inner and outer walls, and signs that subsequent Achlochan occupants recycled the stone for their own buildings.



Artist's impression of how the Broch may have looked in its intact form. © AOC Archaeology

Archaeologists surveyed the area in 2016; every feature was meticulously recorded and a small excavation was undertaken. By direct measurement and extrapolation, they calculated that the Broch

⁷ Similar structures found elsewhere in Coigach have been radiocarbon-dated to the 1500 - 1600 century BC (approximately 3500-3600 years old), and we can assume this structure also dates from the same era.

⁸ Read more about shielings at <https://www.theshielingproject.org/the-tradition-of-the-shieling/>

⁹ Achlochan Coastal Heritage Project: Archaeological Survey. AOC Archaeology Group, 2016.

had an outer diameter of 18m, with walls around 4m thick and an inner diameter of almost 9m. It has similar features to the Broch at Clachtoll, just 13 miles up the coast, which has been extensively researched and excavated. Radiocarbon dating of charcoal from Clachtoll Broch shows it was built between 111BC and AD56¹⁰: approximately 2000 years ago, and archaeologists believe that the two Brochs were built at a similar time for a similar purpose.

After the initial period of Iron Age occupation, it is likely that the Broch – whether in its original state, or its ruinous remains - would have been re-used by other settlers. There is no direct evidence of Norse



Life in the Broch ©Historic Environment Scotland

settlement at Achlochan itself, but archaeologists are confident they were in the area¹¹ and given its shore-side location, it is likely that the Broch would have been inhabited by Vikings. Local children have long been told the legends that the waters of Loch Poll an Dùnain conceal a Viking Longship, and that a Giant is buried by the shore.

¹⁰ AOC report, as above.

¹¹A steatite vessel was found on Tanera Mòr in the Summer Isles by local resident Steve Husband in 1989; it is kept by the Ullapool Museum. <https://her.highland.gov.uk/Monument/MHG7326> Steatite is a type of soapstone associated with Vikings. Remains of a medieval building at Achnahaird are thought to be Viking.

There are no plans for a full excavation of the Broch¹² so the mysteries of who built it, and who lived in it through the millennia, will remain secret for now.

18th - 19th Century

It's possible to walk by the shore every day and see only grass and rubble, but once you know what to look for it is suddenly obvious that the ground by the Broch is littered with history: fascinating insights into life in the 18th and 19th centuries.



Nausts on the shingle shore © Richard Williams

A map from 1758 shows cultivation all around the Loch: the largest 'cornland farm' in Coigach¹³. Meanwhile, the southern shore was a working boat yard; on a 1775 map it is annotated as the '*beach where they haul up their boats*'. There are visible '*nausts*' – boat-shaped indentations – on the seaward side of the shingle bar. There are also *nausts* on the shore of the loch where boats may have been berthed in winter; access to these was through the man-made canal, which would have been controlled with a sluice gate.

The notorious Highland clearances¹⁴ started in the early 1800s, and an

1875 map shows the linear croft boundaries that are still in place today. Life was inconceivably difficult for Crofters, scratching a living from poor strips of land; fishing and harvesting kelp seaweed for essential protein, fertilizer and cash.

The kelp industry reached its peak in the region in the 1800s. Families were allocated an area of foreshore to harvest kelp, which was dried on stones, then burned in a simple kiln to produce potash. Landlords bought the potash for a scraping of cash, and sold it onto the linen and glass industries. There are signs of drying stacks and burning pits along the shore.¹⁵

¹² *Full excavation would cost many hundreds of thousands of pounds and – although likely to be utterly fascinating – is difficult to justify when the very similar Clachtoll has been investigated. Read about Clachtoll at <http://clachtoll.aocarchaeology.com/> (Pages currently being updated.)*

¹³ *Duncan May (2016) Achlochan Interpretation Notes.*

¹⁴ *John Baldwin (Ed.) (1994) Peoples & Settlement in North-West Ross (1994) Available online: <https://www.ssn.org.uk/monograph/peoples-and-settlement-in-northwest-ross-1994/>*

¹⁵ *Information about the Kelp harvest <https://www.facebook.com/groups/272269480455580>*

Meanwhile the herring industry was booming in the area and would have been crucial additional income for the families on Achlochan, and the remains of tiny ruined huts – possibly for storing fishing equipment – lie along the shore.



These may be kelp kilns or more nausts
© Richard Williams

The collapse of both the kelp industry (due to shifting market forces at the end of the Napoleonic Wars) and the herring industry (due to the vagaries of the herring shoals ... or perhaps overfishing) coincided with catastrophic famines, which had a huge impact on the residents of Achlochan and the North West Highlands generally. Compounding these catastrophes, landlords implemented a second wave of Clearances, which in Coigach were met with fierce resistance - led by the women¹⁶.

Coigach (which in those days stretched from Morefield to Reiff) had a population of 2000 in 1840; by 1885, 1000¹⁷ people had left to seek a better life in more flourishing areas of Scotland, or boarding boats for North America, Australia and New Zealand¹⁸. There are stories of emigrants thriving in their new home: Roderick and John Macleod were two brothers from Achlochan who left in 1904 for Montana to support their families, and made their fortune in freezing beef. Roderick bought a ranch and pioneered soil conservation techniques; there is a lovely circularity in Achlochan now being a site of conservation value.¹⁹

Despite the hardship, the 1881 census shows 31 people still living on Achlochan, and good quality buildings and outbuildings were built around the Broch in the mid-late 1800s. The buildings to the west of the Broch were constructed first; the ruin to the east had a canvas and pitch roof and so was known as the Black House; black stains are still visible on the chimney stack.



3D Pointcloud data for the Broch and ruins © AOC Archaeology Group

¹⁶ Learn more about the fascinating stories through the *Sense of Place* pages (hosted on the [Geopark website](#); see in particular poems by Lisa Macdonald), the *Coigach-Assynt Heritage Trail*, and the *Memorial* being developed by Coigach Heritage. (Links not available at time of writing.)

¹⁷ Duncan May (2016) *Interpretation Research for Achlochan Interpretation Panels*. Available in the Archive.

¹⁸ More information is available on the *Coigach Heritage* website, currently hosted at: <https://visitcoigach.com/early-history/people-community-and-culture/>

¹⁹ See display in Ullapool Museum

20th Century

As the 1st World War approached, Territorial Forces were established across the country and men were trained up for action – often lured by the prospect of payment, and good boots and winter coats – and the Drill Hall and Rifle Range were built in 1914 for training exercises. Local men fought with the Seaforth Highlanders and the Lovat Scouts; many were excellent shots with good stalking skills, due to their lifestyle, and became feared by their enemies.



Firing Range © Richard Williams

Nevertheless, the war took a huge toll on the area: 48% of the Highland soldiers did not return, and Coigach lost many men. Politicians promised crofting communities they would be granted better land to assuage the huge sense of loss and sacrifice, but little changed and the recession made life even harder. Another crop failure in 1929 exacerbated the situation, leading to further emigration. Sometimes whole families left, or men went to earn money leaving women and children to tend the croft. The 2nd World War was a further blow and the remaining four Achlochan families departed by 1953; the solitary white house at Achlochan is still a

second home for the family who bought it in the 1950s.

Life on Achlochan was physically hard, with no road and no electricity. Children walked barefoot to school across the bogs. Tragic drownings were not uncommon – largely because so much time was spent at sea: it, rather than the road, was the highway. Nevertheless, it was hard to leave; some families who emigrated only as far as Ullapool struggled to settle, and always yearned for Achlochan.



Stook to stack: last corn (oats) harvest at Culnacraig, 1972 © John Baldwin

Although the houses were abandoned, the ground was still productive: hay, corn (oats) and turnips were cultivated, whilst cattle grazed the Rubha. The ruin behind the broch was adapted for a sheep 'fank'. Corncrakes and lapwings thrived under this gentle agricultural regime, whilst swans and water lilies made use of open water in the Loch.

21st Century

Rushes and bracken now grow instead of crops, and sheep roam where cattle once did. But the CALLP Coastal Heritage Project²⁰, led by local crofters has helped stop the decline, and enabled local people to fulfil their long-held ambitions to look after the land and ensure that the heritage – in all its forms – is respected.

Residents and visitors can now understand and value this place: the well-marked walk around the peninsula is popular, and interpretation boards remind us of the precious history. Decades' worth of

²⁰ <https://www.coigach-assynt.org/project/achlochan-coastal-heritage/>

blown-in marine rubbish were removed from the Loch, and the reeds will be cut periodically to maintain areas of open water and diverse habitats.

Inconspicuous benches commemorate loved-ones recently lost, and offer tranquil spots for contemplation. The peace is shattered during the annual Coigach Gathering Hill Race as runners splosh and pant in a frantic two-mile loop from the Playing Field.

Conclusion

Sitting amongst the ruined buildings, enveloped in birdsong and the reedbed's susurrations, it is easy to imagine the voices who have chatted here over the past four millennia. This peninsula, with its story of undulating fortunes, is a microcosm of Highland Life. And, just like elsewhere in the Highlands, people – stewards of the land - are striving to secure its future.

From down here we get an unusual perspective of 21st Century Coigach: the crofts in various states of use; the ruined houses and new homes; the Community wind turbine and the hulking ancient mountains behind. One wonders what the next four millennia will bring.



The ruins, Polglass and turbine, and the hills © Lizzie Wilder Williams

With many thanks to Mairi Thornton, Una Macgregor, Abigail Anne Campbell, Claire Proctor, Michelle Henley, Bill Wilder and Richard Williams for helpful input and resources, and to all those who continue to look after this special place.

This project has been funded by the Coigach Assynt Living Landscapes Partnership.

Lizzie Wilder Williams, Coigach, May 2021.

