

Diary of Peter Quelch, Independent Historic Woodland Specialist. Sat 4 June 2011.

High Morlaggan, Loch Long, near Arrochar

PQ was asked by Fiona Jackson and Sue Furness to visit the abandoned settlement above Morelaggan Cottage which is an active SRP project. PQ had first heard about the project during a talk at an early SRP conference. The aim of the visit was to comment on any remarkable trees and woods connected with the township of High Morlaggan.



Natural oak and ash woodland beyond and below the spring

Unusually for me this is a site which has already had a lot of attention in terms of old map and documentary research, and so there is no point me duplicating any of that work. So instead I will restrict my comments to the various tree features that we observed during a 2 hour walk over the site. I will attach however my glossary and notes on tree form so that if I use words like pollard you know what I mean.

Murlagan Placename

I said that we had worked at a late 18th C farm at east end of Loch Katrine called Murlagan, and a Gaelic place name scholar Peter McNiven gave his view on translations for all our farm names on Loch Katrine: "Murlagan derives from Gaelic muirbhulgan, a diminutive of muirbholg, muirbhalg, lit 'sea-bag', denoting a bay in the sea shore but also applied to inland lochside sites. Also found at Loch Voil and Loch Rannoch."

This agrees well with the second translation you have on the cover of your history leaflet.

Hazel bush on a steep bank just above the cottage

This hazel stool, which may perhaps be 2 or 3 individuals, had the look of having been a utilised hazel coppice stool for a long time. Hazel is very useful mainly for thatching and hurdle making, and we could see from an early photo that hazel rods and 'staples' were holding down the straw thatch roofs of several buildings around 1900. Hazel would have been very prized by rural people of the township for many tasks on the land, but also at

sea as creels and baskets were also made from it. It would be normal to have hazel on steep, fertile, but otherwise unusable land, and to protect it from livestock by some sort of fencing.

Wooded knoll with open-sided building

Several oak trees surrounded the flat knoll which contains the relatively recent ruins of an open sided cart shed or similar. The knoll also had clearance stones around its edge and looked as if it might have had an earlier building too. The views in each direction along Loch Long reminded the author of a similarly spectacular open knoll on Glenfalloch Estate with the faint remains of an old settlement, and a natural spring, overlooking the north end of Loch Lomond at Upper Blarstainge.

The maiden or single stemmed oak trees were not large in diameter, but could be older than they looked, but probably no more than a hundred years. The adjacent Sitka spruce trees seemed to be self seeded and are probably less than 40 years old.



Maiden oaks on the knoll with the open sided building looking south along Loch Long

The pieces of wood in the base of the hut were interesting, and seemed to be the remains of round pine logs which had been employed as roof supports. During the rotting process the resinous pine knots and branch stubs had remained intact and now looked like the pointed tips of stakes. However they are probably just pine knots. One in the house was quite different however, as it was a hollow pointed piece of wood which had been bored through the side and used as a weaving shuttle or net maker's needle.

I explained that these pine knots had value as firelighters when resinous and dry, but these ones just seemed to be left over after rotting and weathering of logs. However one further idea is that they were relatively long stubs perhaps because they came from round upright knotty pine posts of the sort which were common on Edwardian buildings in Scotland usually seen supporting a porch. That would explain the longish weathered

stubs which remain, rather than the smaller knots one would expect from a log pruned flush? When the building part collapsed (and it was seen as intact as late as the 1946 aerial photo) these log pillars were thrown inside to rot, hence their current unexpectedly neat position.

Sub rectangular platform with earth banking, stone hearth and nearby spring.

This interesting structure at the top of a steep partly-wooded bank is now more or less within woodland or scrub, though as the whole site is slowly scrubbing over due to lack of farm livestock, no doubt it was much more open when last in use. It did seem to be an animal enclosure or pen and perhaps the hearth was used in connection with animals, like boiling tar or sheep wool treatment of some sort. I do know that many old sheep fanks have heated iron tubs in them for this purpose.

The fascinating thing about this feature is the way in which a good quality stone cobbled track led down to a watering place in the nearby burn which was emerging right there from deep underground as a spring. The track stopped at the spring and did not go further downhill due to the very rough terrain below. Maybe the track and the spring were much older than the sheep pen, if that is what it is, and this spring was always an important water supply for the township, or for the township livestock. An oak tree had fallen over the cave entrance some time ago and partly dislodged the spring's entrance stones.



Woodland north of the spring

The end of the township fields and the beginning of the old woodland to the north is marked by a substantial head dyke which curves around the township in a semicircle. This head dyke uphill of the spring thus also acts as a wood bank, joining up between the many large boulders. The woodland just beyond the dyke is very rough and rocky terrain, fairly wet near the spring and dominated by ash and hazel (NVC community W9), and the ground flora reflects this with Yellow Pimpernel, Wild Garlic and Sanicle all seen here. Further north the woodland soil is not so wet and oak is more frequent, with some large mature single stemmed specimens (see the first photo above).

These oaks are close to the cave with stonework which may have housed the whisky still, which the history leaflet says was worked by MacIntyre in 1850. There was no running water in the cave, but it was noted that many natural burns and springs were perhaps affected or diverted due to the construction of the railway during the 1890s.

This woodland is extensive and is shown on Roy's map in 1750, and has every appearance of being true ancient woodland, partly because the rough terrain would not allow any other land use. We did not see oaks older than 200 years or so, neither did we see many multi-stemmed trees derived from previous coppice, nor charcoal hearths, nor pony tracks. However we didn't walk far in the woodland and these would be features to look for in another visit.

Small field outside the head dyke

While examining a few hawthorn bushes on the edge of the wood, it became apparent that these were indeed part of an old hedgerow and were not within the woodland itself. A faint bank could be traced linking them, thus forming the boundary of a small steep field lying between the head dyke and the woodland.

The head dyke itself is visible in one stretch between large rocks as a low earth bank, just before we descended to the felled rowan pollard.

Rowan Pollard

A Rowan of large diameter, nearly a meter at the base, and growing between large rocks, has been felled by contractors recently since it is under a powerline. It is massively hollow and has a bundle of roots descending down the hollow stem to the ground. These seemed to be its own internal roots rather than the roots of epiphytic air trees. There was some evidence of past pollarding low down the stem at about a meter up (not measured) and then free re-growth not cut again until the recent felling. Most main branches are hollow but one was fairly solid and could yield a slice which would give the date of last pollarding, but not the tree age of course. I took a small wedge from the base of the tree, which had about 60 rings but did not even reach the hollow. I have sliced and planed it and posted to Coralie Mills to examine. I would estimate a minimum of 200 years for the whole tree's age on account of the extent of hollowing.

The tree was probably naturally seeded amongst natural rocks and clearance stones. It is now throwing up many new young shoots from the base and with a little protection might continue to live, though in future it would be a multi-stemmed stool (and is still under the power-line!).



L: Felled rowan pollard from above



R: top of the tree with solid branch suitable for ring counting

Village ruins

We then inspected the village ruins which are impressive and very visible after excavation of the building floors and cobbled yards. An old postcard around the turn of the century (?) shows a small hawthorn bush beside a small square cottage which was thatched at the time. The bush hardly seems to have changed, which indicates something of the longevity of hawthorn. Some rowans can also be seen in that photo and might be checked against standing ones today.

Kailyard hedge trees

A large hollow rowan still stands at the south edge of the village. It is not as large as the felled one described above, and does not have internal roots, but it looks contemporary with the village, at least during the late 19th C. It can also be seen to be on the edge of a large kailyard which would have been used for growing vegetable crops.

Around the kailyard are a number of tall hawthorns, some multi-stemmed in a line, and these are clearly the remains of an old hawthorn hedge around that yard.



Kailyard rowan, with hawthorns in the background



Close up of the group of hawthorn stems from a previous hedge, also visible in the photo above

Within the kailyard is a recently excavated well and drain. At present it is quite dry yet it seems can have no other purpose. The water supply to it may have dried up due to the

railway construction as described above. Outside the kailyard is what looks like a small corn-kiln, and a little below the village by an old track are a group of levelled stances for corn ricks forming a sort of stack-yard.

Oakwood to south of Morelaggan cottage

Finally we inspected a small oakwood adjoining the upper garden of Morelagan House, a house which is shown on the 1st Edition OS map. The oaks included several which show signs of having been singled from previous multi-stem coppice stools. An old enclosing dyke around the oakwood is still visible either side of a natural oak tree corner strainer, and this fence is visible on the 1960 aerial photo.

It is interesting that this small oakwood is actually within the township head dyke, though one wonders if this gave tenants the right to utilise the oak trees – probably not as they would have been reserved to the estate. The oak planting may well be contemporary with the building of that house, and that land removed from the township tenancy. Only documentary research can shed light on this sort of detail.

It would be interesting to date these oaks, and also the few tapered maiden oaks at the extreme corner of that stand. Many birch trees on the slopes above are of much more recent origin, and the sequence of aerial photos show that the site in general is gradually developing scrub cover, and will continue to do so in the absence of livestock grazing.

Scope for further work

It would be interesting to look further into the main woodland immediately north of the head-dyke, including taking some oak and ash ages by coring.

The oaks at the knoll and also in the small wood adjoining Morelaggan House would be interesting too, to indicate when the woods adjoining the township were last worked.

Documentary evidence for working of the woodlands would be worth researching, and evidence of named inhabitants of the village working in the adjacent estate woodlands might be found.

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