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Reviewed Article:

Experimental Archaeology in the Scottish Highlands

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Over the past year, Archaeology for Communities in the Highlands (ARCH) has been running a series of experimental archaeology workshops in the Scottish Highlands. ARCH is a non-profit educational charity, providing learning opportunities inside and out for all ages, always with an eye on the legacy of the event. Our experimental archaeology project was a good example of this approach involving a wide range of the public while investigating research questions. We wanted a series of events to build a following and interest, showing a range of craft and technology from earliest settlers to modern times, using objects or structures found in the Highlands.

> We were interested in attracting people who might not otherwise think of themselves as interested in archaeology. The extended interviews clearly showed that we were successful in this regard. Publicity was therefore key to reaching these people, and it is clear that people heard about the events in diverse ways.

With funding from Historic Environment Scotland and the Heritage Lottery Fund, we organised a series of monthly workshops between October 2017 and October 2018, choosing workshop leaders who were experts in their craft, but also had knowledge of archaeological finds. Workshop leaders were asked to replicate historic objects from the Highlands, using traditional apparatus and tools (or explaining why they didn't and what were the implications of using modern tools), provide insights into what raw materials were needed and where they would have been obtained, what equipment would have been available, and, most importantly, what insights they gained as to ancient craftsmanship. This was not done in a laboratory, but part of community engagement to get participants also to understand and appreciate these issues.

We held the workshops in a number of locations, including in local libraries in an attempt to reach audiences who might not otherwise hear about the project. Most of the workshop leaders also did schools sessions, and there was an enthusiastic take up by primary schools. No primary schools refused an offer of a workshop, and most requested as many as we could provide. This was in contrast to secondary schools, only two of which responded to offers.

The inspiration for the project came from a visit in 2013 by Neil Burridge who produces Bronze Age metalwork using traditional methods. The event showed the power of experimental archaeology, producing the magic of the moment, but also getting people to think behind just the aesthetics of the objects. The fact that he reproduced objects which were made locally several thousand years ago clearly engaged many of the participants. Many participants went on to other modules within the project, creating a corpus of all known Bronze Age metalwork from the region, and contributing to a book publicising results (Clark *et al*. 2017).

A number of workshops looked at prehistoric craft, including flint knapping (producing Mesolithic microliths and other objects), green woodworking, basket making, Neolithic carved stone balls, Bronze Age pottery, Bronze Age metalworking and Iron Age boneworking and textiles (tablet weaving). For the historical period, we had Pictish stone carving, Viking silversmithing, Medieval coinage, lead seals used on cloth imports from Russia to Cromarty in the 18th & 19th century, and an exploration of the innovations of civil engineer Thomas Telford, who revolutionised communications in the Highlands in the early 19th century.

Wherever possible, unless there were health and safety concerns, there were opportunities for hands-on participation, a very popular element of the project. Workshop leaders provided materials for people to have a go, either on an object they took home with them, or contributing to the artefact which would be donated to the loan box. All workshops were free.

Insights

All workshop leaders were asked to discuss issues of production. Where would the raw materials have come from? What tools would have been available? Who would have made the objects and what were their position in society? How long would it take to produce the object? What special skills were involved? For some of the questions we had no answers, but stressed the importance of thinking about these issues. Each session also had resources on offer to look at – books, articles, illustrations of objects, videos, replicas or real objects. For example, for the Iron Age boneworking and Viking silversmithing workshops, the publication on the extraordinary Gotlandic Mästermyr tool chest (Arwidsson and Berg, 2000) was available, providing further discussion on tools available to early historic smiths. All participants were encouraged to ask questions during the sessions, and to contribute any insights.

In almost every case the workshop leaders were able to shed interesting perspectives. James Dilley, our flint knapper, noted the time involved to create a barbed and tanged arrowhead, and speculated that they may have been more for show, since a simple struck flake would have sufficed for hunting. He was able to rough out a stone axehead in an hour, but noted that it would take another 60 or so to smooth it down to a polished surface.

Lachlan McKeggie who ran the green woodworking session noted that some wooden objects in museums listed as bowls were probably large spoons but the stems had broken off. Monique Bervoets not only showed a range of historic baskets, but also how plant fibres could be made into rope. Orkney archaeologist Chris Gee speculated on how ancient craftsmen would have laid out their designs for the carved stone balls, and wondered whether they would have been painted. In Pat Gulliver's workshop we wondered at how some of the regular decoration on Bronze Age beaker pottery was produced, and also the need for detailed analysis to tell if they were coiled or pinched. Neil Burridge still marvels at the skills of Bronze smiths and their control of alloys and temperatures, as he undertook to reproduce a sunflower pin, he believes for the first time. Lynne McKeggie noted the archaeological finds of tablets for tablet weaving, which come in different shapes and with different numbers of holes, suggesting opportunities for complex patterns. From Jim Glazzard's bone working workshop we gained a real appreciation for the length of time needed to produce simple objects even when using metal tools. It must have been far more difficult for bone and antler working in the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods.

Barry Grove, a sculptor who has created a reproduction of a large local Pictish cross slab, noted the difficulties just to source large enough stone for carving. His work has given him

insights into how such large carvings were tackled. Jim Glazzard, who makes replica Viking jewellery, is still grappling with how Viking craftsmen annealed silver in their work. Stuart Strong's workshop on medieval coinage made us think about mint organisation and supply networks, at this time when the Highlands were to some extent a frontier zone for the Scottish kings. Ian Hammond, a third generation local engraver and die sinker, not only gave us insights into how lead seals were made, but also the process of creating punches to use when making the dies.

While all the other workshops were able to focus on portable objects, our session on the works of Thomas Telford required a different approach. We had a model made of a bridge surveyed by ARCH several years ago, and created cutaway models of Telford's road construction techniques. Alison Ward from the Institution of Civil Engineers provided insight into structural aspects, emphasising just how innovative Telford was for his time. Having this workshop in a local library allowed us to bring out 19th century books and drawings.

Legacy

For the legacy, we ensured that each workshop was filmed and edited highlights are available on the ARCH website or YouTube. We also invited blogs after each event, and these are also on the ARCH website. They provide descriptions of the event, insights into each craft, and also links to other resources.

The workshops all produced objects, usually modelled on Highland finds. In the second year of our project, we will take these objects and create loan boxes which will be freely available to schools, community groups, libraries, community centres, care homes, and more. However, we know from experience that many loan boxes remain underused, because they come with little or no background material. Teachers in particular need to know how they fit into the curriculum. As a result, a teacher and an archaeologist are working together to produce learning materials to go with the boxes, suitable for schools and adult learning. These materials will also be put up on the website.

Reflections

The first year of the project has been exciting. Having monthly workshops built up a following, with many people wanting opportunities to continue on their own or in further workshops. A total of 547 adults and 707 children attended the workshops or schools' sessions. The majority of the adults were retired age, but the focus on family-friendly events meant that we also attracted a younger adult age group, one of the aims of the project. Several older attendees particularly enjoyed the intergenerational mix at the events.

Clearly the workshops were successful: of those completing the feedback form, 99% said they were satisfied with the workshop, 100% said they gained new knowledge, and 94% said they

learned new skills. The last figure is lower because some people felt that only when there was a hands-on element did they learn the skills. We also asked what people expected from the workshop, and it became clear that there were diverse reasons for attending, from wanting detailed technical knowledge to simply wanting to find out more about the historical background. Teachers, home schoolers, tour guides, artists, archaeologists and museum staff were amongst those who attended. Virtually everyone agreed that it was a much better way to learn about ancient craft and technology in this fashion, rather than a lecture with slides (though some participants wanted both).

In addition to the feedback forms, at least three extended interviews were undertaken at each session. Comments were generally favourable and often thoughtful. Some people noted that they only intended to stay an hour, and ended up staying far longer. Many were inspired to have a go at home. We also asked what could improve the sessions. Most people responded 'Nothing', but in one case several people reported difficulties hearing the workshop leader over the background noise. As a result, we bought a sound system which was much appreciated by the participants in subsequent workshops.

Participants were also encouraged to provide their own feedback via the blogs. Few took up the offer, though the ones who did provided additional perspective. One was even in Scottish Gaelic and English. The Inverness Young Archaeologists Club (YAC) attended a number of the sessions, and they took pictures and created blog entries as well. Feedback at the YAC end of year meeting noted that these events were some of the highlights of the year for members.

We were interested in attracting people who might not otherwise think of themselves as interested in archaeology. The extended interviews clearly showed that we were successful in this regard. Publicity was therefore key to reaching these people, and it is clear that people heard about the events in diverse ways. We printed up a large number of postcards and distributed these to libraries, heritage groups and to schools near where workshops would take place. We used Facebook and our posts were shared to other groups, for example one for spinners, weavers and dyers in the Highlands. Press releases in the local paper and listings in a free events newsletter also attracted some people. The schools' sessions also resulted in some children bringing their parents to the Saturday workshop day.

Our workshop leaders were chosen for their abilities to communicate with others as well as their skills. Several remarked how they enjoyed the interaction with the public, and the chance to recreate a Highland object. All were extremely generous donating their results: what we thought was going to fill one loans box is now filling three.

The outdoor events were held in a large hangar at the Black Isle Agricultural Show ground, allowing a large well-ventilated space regardless of weather. For indoor events, we used community centres and also libraries. which allowed us to bring out reference source

materials we otherwise would not have been able to show, including for our Telford workshop, 19th century Parliamentary papers relating to Telford's work in the Highlands. It also allowed us to hook up a computer to show pictures and videos.

Primary schools were very interested in the workshops. We spread these around a number of schools, and all expressed interest in hosting as many as we could offer. We were not successful in attracting interest from secondary schools, and would have liked to have more participation from university students. However, the blogs and films may help reach these audiences.

While an important aim of the project was to enhance understanding and appreciation for the crafts in general, we also addressed a number of issues of craft production which should be of interest to archaeologists. By publicising the project, signposting people to the ARCH website and blogs, YouTube videos and providing talks at conferences, the hope is that this information will become more available and used by professionals.

There is certainly scope to build on this year, exploring other crafts and also to interest other organisations, for example community woodlands. Future ARCH projects will incorporate an experimental element where possible. Already we have ideas of other crafts we would like to explore.

Link(s)
http://www.archhighland.org.uk/
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC59fhnUb17O7gRx5Uch3TkQ

Keywords workshop
crafts
public
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public archaeology

Country United Kingdom

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ARCH – Archaeology for Communities in the Highlands [online] Available at < www.archhighland.org.uk >.

Archaeology for Communities in the Highlands ARCH [youtube channel] Available at < https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC59fhnUb17O7gRx5Uch3TkQ >.

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Gallery Image

FIG 1. IRON AGE BONEWORKING WORKSHOP HELD IN DINGWALL COMMUNITY LIBRARY. COPYRIGHT: ARCH

FIG 2. AT THE BRONZE CASTING WORKSHOP, THERE WAS ALSO OPPORTUNITY TO TRY CUTTING WITH AN EARLY BRONZE AGE AXEHEAD. COPYRIGHT: ARCH

FIG 3. PECKING THE SPHERE TO CREATE THE KNOBS IN A CARVED STONE BALL. COPYRIGHT: ARCH

FIG 4. AT THE GREEN WOODWORKING SESSION, METAL AND STONE TOOLS WERE USED TO CREATE SIMPLE PEGS AND THEN SPOONS. COPYRIGHT: ARCH

FIG 5. AT THE MEDIEVAL COINAGE WORKSHOP, THERE WAS A CHANCE TO CREATE DIES WITH PUNCHES, AS WELL AS TO STRIKE COINS. COPYRIGHT: ARCH

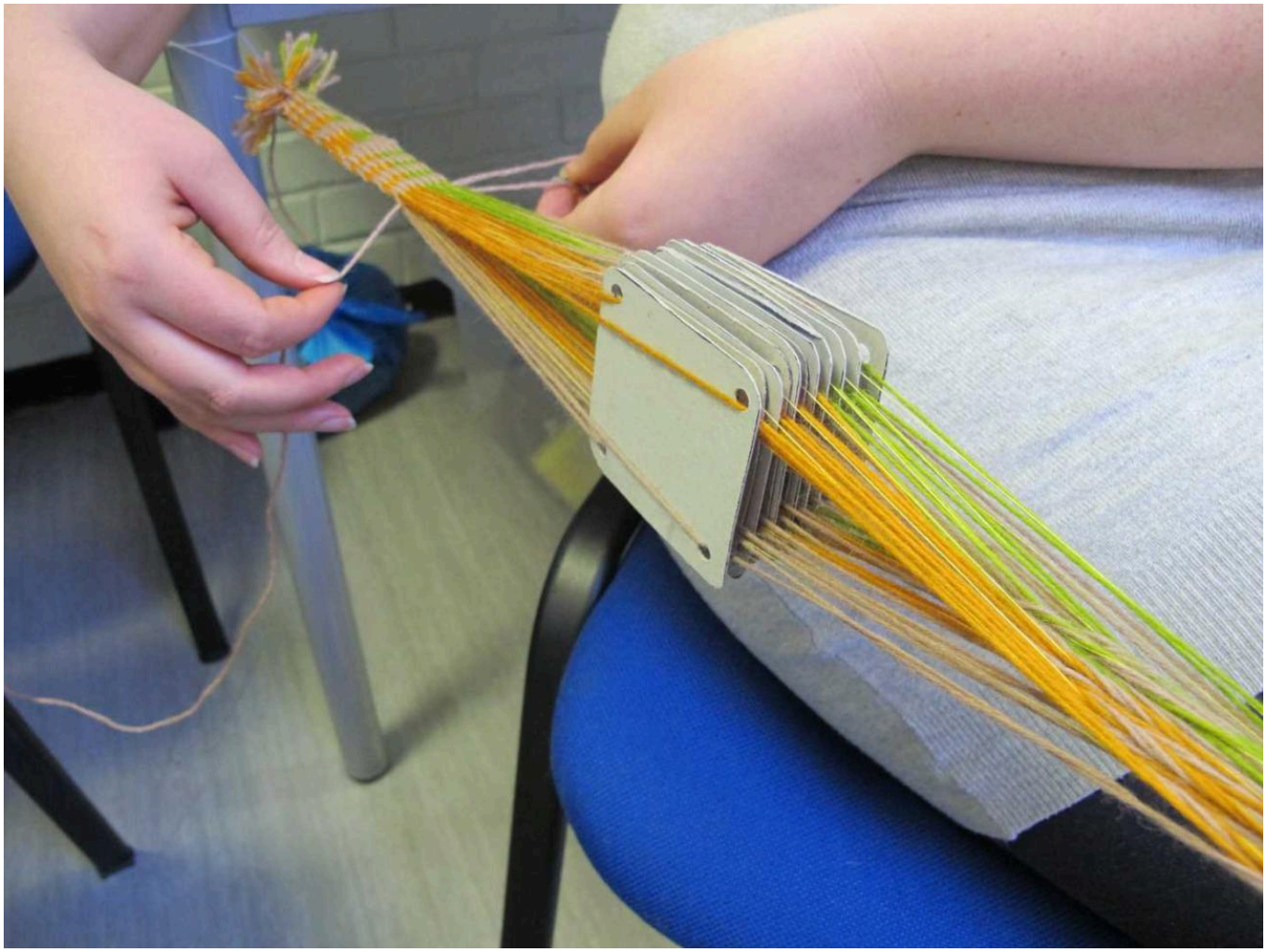

FIG 6. VARIOUS SHAPES OF TABLETS (HERE IN CARDBOARD) WERE USED IN THE TABLET WEAVING WORKSHOP. COPYRIGHT: ARCH

FIG 7. WORKING TO CREATE A REPLICA OF ‘RING MONEY’, A TYPE OF VIKING ARMRING MADE IN SCOTLAND. COPYRIGHT: ARCH

FIG 8. AS WELL AS EXPERIMENTING WITH STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF BRIDGE BUILDING, PARTICIPANTS AT THE TELFORD WORKSHOP LOOKED AT SOME OF THE ARCHIVE MATERIAL AT INVERNESS LIBRARY. COPYRIGHT: ARCH