



Ann Thomas

The
Marion Campbell
Library
Kilmartin house

K15765

THE KIST

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The magazine of the Natural History and Antiquarian Society
of Mid Argyll

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Editorial

The Kist – now in its 32nd year of publication – has grown into a veritable treasure chest bursting with jewels of information touching our ancient, living, magical landscape where the “veil is thin”.

Taking on the editorship at this stage is a daunting task. The previous editors - most recently Mrs. A.O.M. Clark – have done an excellent job in shaping the magazine into what it is (with the invaluable help, of course, of our contributors).

The current issue has a new look because it is now being compiled on computer (future contributions, please, on disc in Word – but no matter if computers are not your scene, any technology will suffice). I hope this will be seen as part of the magazine’s natural evolution.

People talk nowadays about Landscape Interpretation – an holistic discipline uniting history, archaeology, geography and ecology. Of course, this is what our Society has been doing all along. Reading the land as a working, cultural, sacred place with a long, rich history and ancient language – this is our continuing vision for the century ahead. It is the task of this journal to set down some of the words so that we are able to read our unique home with sensitivity, respect and awe.

Thanks to Jonathan Arnot for his invaluable computer know-how and Mrs. Clark for her patience in helping me to “learn the ropes”.

The next issue is to be on a sea/coast/water theme. Please send me any suitable articles, photographs, letters, book reviews etc. (of course, material on any subject would be welcome so I can plan even further ahead).

Note on the front cover

We are fortunate to include an article by Martin Murphy who has created a series of sculptures at Kilmatin House Library. He has shaped a special environment for readers to consult the works on offer, many of them the bequest of Marion Campbell of Kilberry, our founding President, first editor of the Kist, author and archaeologist. Mr. Murphy’s efforts have transformed the elements of a typical room (table, chairs, chandelier, bookshelves) into a work of art, a tribute to and multi-layered reminder of the “enduring heartland” outside the window about which Miss Campbell wrote so poetically.

THE CANON AND THE DEAN

A.O.M.Clark

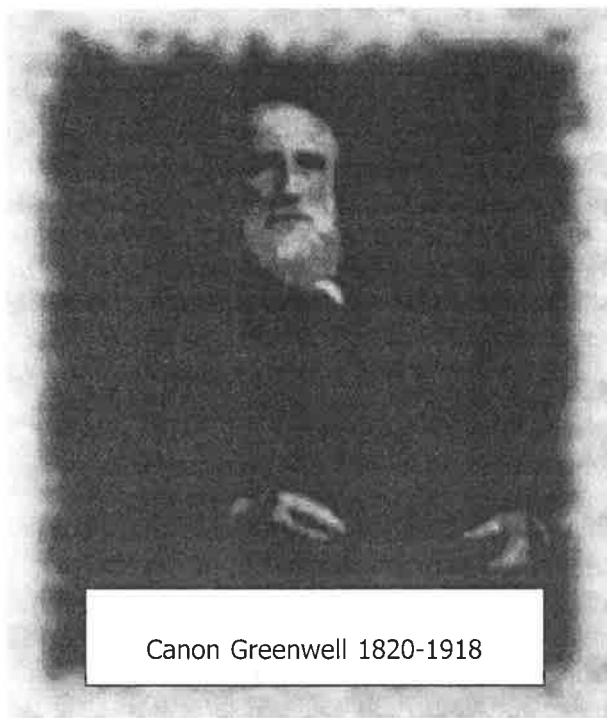
Among the myriad shades whose presence may be felt, by the imaginative, in the Kilmartin Valley, there flit in and out among the monuments the shadowy figures of two mid-Victorian ecclesiastics whose names turn up again and again in the records - the Rev. William Greenwell, Canon of Durham Cathedral, and the Rev. Reginald J. Mapleton, Dean of Argyll and the Isles. They were responsible for the first properly recorded excavations undertaken in the Kilmartin Valley.

Sophisticated equipment and the analytical services available to archaeologists today were not available to them; but their approach was strictly scientific; they noted exactly what they saw, described the artifacts, recorded and published their findings. Their work is invaluable; much information would now be lost to us had they not carried out their investigations as and when they did. Already both comment on earlier damage to sites - "cairns carried away for walls and drains", cists "rifled" - and there have been further losses since their time. Their excavation reports appeared in the "Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland" vols. 6 and 8 (1864 and 1870); copies of these are available for consultation in the Marion Campbell Library in Kilmartin House (where our Society's library can also be found). These reports appear in vol.6 of the RCAHMS Inventory of Argyll published in 1988.

There seems to be no record that they ever worked together, but they certainly knew one another and complemented one another's work. In recognition of their work both men were elected Corresponding Members of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

The **Rev. William Greenwell** (1820 - 1918) was appointed a Canon of Durham Cathedral in 1854, a position from which he retired in 1907. He was also Librarian to the Dean and Chapter and Rector of St. Mary-the-Less in Durham. His activities were not, however, exclusively ecclesiastical.

He was a keen angler, and is immortalised in angling circles by "Greenwell's Glory", a trout fly which is still used by many anglers today. His main avocation however was archaeology - the Concise Dictionary of National Biography describes him primarily as "archaeologist". His particular interest was in ancient barrows and burial cairns; he excavated no fewer than 443, in many areas of Britain; his work at Kilmartin in the 1860's was a very small part of his activities.



Canon Greenwell 1820-1918

He also became fascinated by the rock carvings, similar to those in Argyll, in which Northumberland is particularly rich, identifying and describing many sites and reading a paper on the subject at the Archaeological institute of Newcastle.

This interest also attracted him to the Kilmartin area, and he seems to have made visits on more occasions than in 1864 when he carried out his main excavations, at Nether Largie South chambered tomb, the Glebe cairn, Dunchraigaig cairn, Ballymeanoch henge and cists at Rhudil. These operations of course required preparation, and he expresses his thanks to "John Malcolm Esq. of Poltalloch by whose permission and most liberal assistance in providing labourers the excavation of this [Nether Largie South] and all other cairns was made". His report on Dunchraigaig makes it clear that before he began work "the greater part had been opened by Mr. Mapleton".

He seems to have worked on the large group of cists at Poltalloch - it is recorded that a number of cists there were said to have been opened "many years before the excavations of Canon Greenwell and Dean Mapleton by a factor called Gow" and that the objects recovered had been removed. With regard to his interest in cup-and-ring markings, we are told that Canon Greenwell's maps and plans are "now abandoned", but he seems to have reported to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, or at least to Professor (later Sir) J. Y. Simpson, Vice-president of the Society some at least of his findings.

The **Rev. Reginald John Mapleton** (1818 - 1892) was the son of the Rev. James Henry Mapleton. He attended St. John's College Oxford, and went on to hold various appointments in Yorkshire, Warwickshire and Leicestershire in the 1840's and 1850's.

In 1859 he was selected by the Malcolms of Poltalloch as incumbent of St. Columba's, Poltalloch, where he remained until he death. From 1886 to 1892 he was Dean of Argyll and the Isles.

I will now refer to "The Kilmahonaig Diaries" (which appeared in slightly abbreviated form in "Kist" 53 and 54) - the journal kept by a Dr. Blatherwick who with his family spent three summer months of 1871 at Kilmahumaig, which he spelt as "Kilmahonaig". [It may have been the form at the time].

The Blatherwicks regularly attended church at Poltalloch, being rowed across from Crinan to Duntroon, and walking to St. Columba's. The Mapletons lived in Duntroon Castle, and the two families became friends, exchanging visits back and forth across the loch. From the Journal we learn that:

Mr. Mapleton is a great authority on all questions affecting natural history - he is domestic gamekeeper at home" and that he "owns 12 dozen snares for rabbits" and "1670 rabbits have been slain by him".

He joined shooting parties with the Blatherwick sons, and "taught the party the correct mode to snare rabbits". He also contributed a list of 119 species of bird found in the area around the Crinan Canal.

There is a casual mention that the Blatherwick boys were at Duntroon practising for "the forthcoming cricket match between Poltalloch and Ardrishaig". In all these respects the Rev. Mr. Mapleton seems to have lived the life of an old-fashioned English country parson.

His archaeological interests were not neglected for such rural pursuits. Professor Simpson, in an article in the Appendix to PSAS 6 aforementioned, dealing with cup-and-ring markings, notes the "ring markings on a large stone at Nether Largie first discovered by the Rev. Mr. Mapleton, to whose extreme courtesy I - and other antiquarian visitors to the district - feel most deeply indebted". In describing the rock carvings at Achnabreck he refers again to Mapleton, who "has most carefully examined the sculptings". It seems as if Mapleton was in the habit of conducting archaeological tours for interested visitors.

His first main excavation at Kilmartin was of the chambered tomb at Kilchoan in December 1864; the article in the RCAHMS Inventory remarks that his account of the material found in the three compartments is unusually full for its time.

It is clear that features that he observed are now altered or missing, and that the tomb itself must now be filled with about a metre of debris (he gives the height of a compartment as over 8ft (2.5m) whereas now it is only 1.5m). He remarks that the tomb "had long been a play place for children and was full of shells and broken crockery". The local name for the tomb had been "the burying place of St. John, but there was no chapel found or told of". In 1870 he carried out excavations of the cists in the cairn at Ri Cruin, but as these had been investigated some forty years previously it is possible that the grave goods had been rifled.

He noted that the side slabs had grooves to take the end slabs, one of which was still in position. This report is in PSAS 8. The cairn at Barr a' Chuirn was excavated by him in 1864 and reported in PSAS 6 in the Appendix; he found two cists with burnt bone, and a skeleton "of later date between them, but probably put there by the men who destroyed the cairn". [See Kist 62 p.10]. His most innovative operation took place in 1870 when he borrowed divers currently working on the Crinan Canal to investigate a crannog in Loch Coille Bharr.

One of our members, Mrs. Sheena Carmichael of Ford, confirms that the Mapleton family retained their connection with Kilmartin - one daughter married Mr. Edgar, the Factor of Poltalloch Estate; they lived at Ri Cruin, which was then the Estate office. The other daughter, "Miss Milly", came to stay with Mrs. Carmichael's mother during the 1914 - 1918 war, first at Slockavullin then at Kilmartin, and was nursed by her and Mrs. Carmichael's sister until she died.

Many archaeologists have worked in the Kilmartin Valley since the days of the Canon and the Dean; their reports are more accessible, their activities much more fully recorded; somehow they seem rather too solid to find a place among the Kilmartin shades.

The author wishes to thank Eleanor Harris, Michael Davis of Argyll & Bute Council Library service, Sheena Carmichael, and her daughter for help with the article.

THE MARION CAMPBELL LIBRARY, KILMARTIN HOUSE

The artist's interpretation of his work, by Martin Murphy

The main theme of this library is the landscape and the forces therein. Thousands of years have passed since a group of men and women (hunters perhaps) came to this valley and said, "This is the place. This is where we will do it". The traces of that "doing" have survived and will probably still be visible when traces of our own existence have gone. The natural world they saw is still visible.

The table is made from that natural world. The centre - piece is a Pine tree root and trunk base (yearly rings visible). This tree is a remnant of the great Caledonian forests that covered Scotland approximately 7,000 years ago, the root taken from a bog high in the hills above Loch Fyne where it has lain buried in peat all that time. Around this is Black Bog Oak from another period in Scotland's ancient past, most likely extracted from a bog near Campbeltown; its age uncertain but probably earlier than the Pine. Within and around these two woods are most of the small native trees: Rowan, Hawthorn (May), Alder, Elder, Holly, Juniper, Birch, Willow, Hazel - small trees, but with great stature and potential within man's development; each one possessing individual qualities as wood and tree, and revered accordingly.

Circling these is a ring of end-grain Heather with Bog Myrtle and Willow inclusions. Also fitted within the space are bird quills inside each other: the smallest a pipit, the largest a swan. Red and Roe deer are represented by sections through antler coronets, and cattle by segments of horn. Other inserts are Gorse, Irish Yew root, Oak burr, Juniper, Red deer antler and jet. The "whole" is set in the dust of the Pine and Oak they surround, mixed with glue. The entire central composition is circumferenced with Ash (for shaft, stave or spear there is none better). Spanning out radially from this are four main boards of Oak, Elm, Cherry and Yew. These make the main mass of the table surface; the only other visible addition is an irregular edging line made from Pine and Oak dust, mixed with

Alizarin Crimson pigment and glue. At strategic points within the table surface amber and jet have been set in to represent the ancient jewellery found locally. The table structure is designed so that it can be dismantled in fifteen minutes and relocated in the room, thus giving space for a variety of uses. The structure beneath is as follows: a central Elm boss in the form of a knot has its threads terminating in stylised heads (like the Islay Cross). From the boss there are six spokes which are supported by six Elm legs, both held tightly together by Yew locking pieces, again in the form of heads, representing the spirits of the landscape (hidden away but ever present and supportive).

Above the table is a chandelier made of Oak in a form inspired by the Glebe pot design. Secured to this with silver domes is Red deer antler, cut and polished longitudinally to expose the internal "hair" structure, redolent of deerskin, bone and antler scattered within a hunters camp. Intermingled amongst these are arrowheads, scrapers and fragments of flint. The "whole" is intended to give the impression of human intrusion onto the natural landscape below. Above this is a cruciform shape in cattle horn, opened out to make shades for the lights, and to mark the evolution of farming and animal husbandry. The ceiling boss is a spiral in oak to speak of the ever-present element of water this terrain offers. The heavy copper tube that carries the chandelier is covered in deerskin. Alas the lights are from a supplier in Glasgow, local mutton-fat candles being just too messy - think of the books!

The chairs surrounding the table are of Yew and Ash (the two most important woods for linear strength). Seats and backs are of cowhide, simply oiled and waxed to keep them supple. On the upper front is embossed the design from the base of the Glebe Pot, pigmented with Alizarin Crimson; and on the back the Kilmartin Cross (now inside the church) and the year 2000 in Roman numerals.

Red deer antler buckles hold the leather to the frame, the design influenced by hides pegged out to dry. The Yew finials on each chair are all carved with a different design and surmounted with a small dome of sterling silver, in turn capped with 18carat gold. Acupuncturists from the Orient balance the human body with these two metals so we can assume anyone sitting in the chairs will benefit from their presence.

Both metals are found locally, as is copper. Around the walls are shelves made of Birch but faced with Oak, supported by twelve Oak posts. These represent the twelve months of the year and each one has a carved finial representing the actual month, - the growth and decay of the seasons easily identifiable. On the face of each post is a small relief carving depicting each month in this area:

December Badgers and other animals are in hibernation (behind the door in the north corner!)

January Salmon return to fresh water from the ocean.

February My first winter in Kilmartin was diabolical. I thought I was lost, until a song thrush spoke to us of better things, in a sycamore behind the café. There was hope after all! Alas the same bird lay dead the next morning, having flown into the conservatory. I hope you look at this post and hear that song of songs.

March Eagles are nesting in the hills and on the islands; and the hares in the valley do daft things.

April Not far away, ospreys come to nest and rear their young, but not without some assistance from dedicated people.

May Every year swallows nest in the toilets. Last year they tidied the old nest and laid eggs, but the nest fell from the wall and the eggs were lost. But these courageous birds just built another one in the same spot and reared a family. Only when one sees five nearly full-grown swallows clinging to that flimsy structure do we realise the consummate skill of these feathered artisans.

June Vipers bask in the warm sun - a lovely sight, but seldom seen. Walk softly and carefully.

July Curlews nest on the hill around Ederline; parents and young will be seen feeding on the estuary in this rich month.

August Most things are ripe and ready, the mackerel are running and there is a berry on every bush, fruit on every tree.

September Squirrels are busy storing up for winter.

October The geese return from the Arctic - fifty thousand winter on Islay alone. In spring they leave without a mention. In autumn they shout, "We' re home, we're back!"

November The hills resound to the roaring of stags: some happy, some sad. But all fancying their chances with the ladies, and prepared to fight for the pleasure.

Set amidst the Oak under the windows are couches with springs of Ash laths, and stuffing of local sheep's wool. The covering is tanned Red deer hide, hand sewn with waxed linen thread.

As the shelves become full of books relating to this landscape, so it will expand and explode in infinite directions through the hearts and minds of the readers. A story with no ending. On the underside of the table is written:

This table was made during a wonderful idyllic summer
In the year 2000
By a captive spirit longing to be free
Trapped within these boards
In an entire sunlit landscape
Untrodden
But constantly dreamed of.

Society members are welcome to visit the library, where the Society's collection is held. Please call in at the barn reception area of Kilmartin House Museum to pick up the key.

WATER-MILLS AND THE SOURCES FOR THEIR STONES

Anne Kahane

In earlier days the reduction of hard grain to a less or more fine flour for cooking was done by means of a **quern** shaped from a gritty rock. The two elements were a base, which was flat underneath and domed on top, and an upper stone which fitted over the base, having a central channel for feeding in the grain. There was also a shorter hole to receive a wooden handle, which could force the top round, over the stationary base, thus breaking up the grain between the two stones. The power used was that of the human arm.

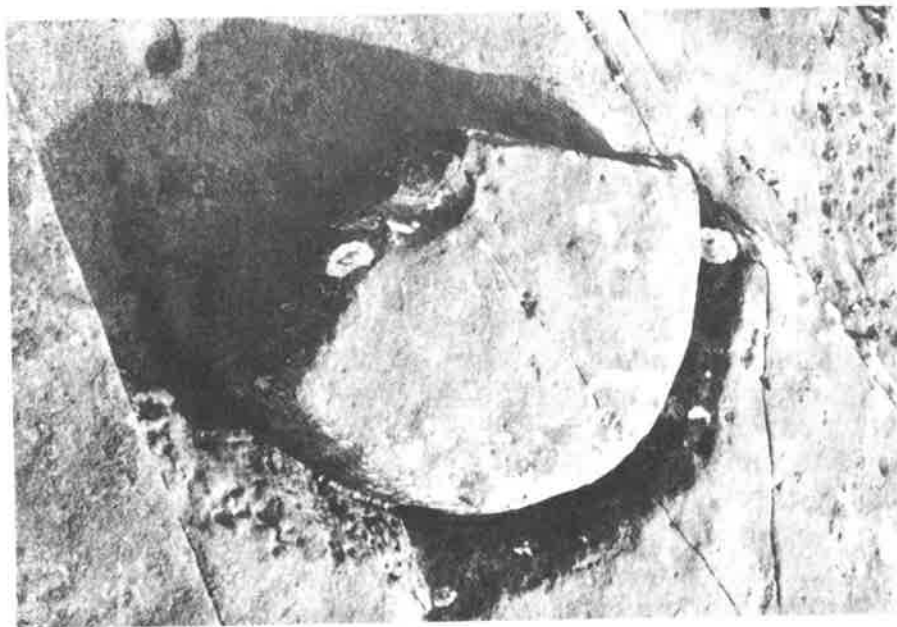
There was a working example of just such a pair of stones in the museum, which the late Miss Hope MacDougall had in her house in Oban. There was a turning handle in place and grain available for visitors to try their hand, or hands. I think nearly all who attempted this were surprised and dismayed to discover the strength needed. We must hope it became easier with youthful training and practice.

A change came about at the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries, with the development of water power as the driving force to replace the human arm for grinding. The collecting, channelling and depositing of a steady supply of water onto a vertically set wheel geared to iron grinding machinery allowed much larger stones to be turned. There is an excellent account of the construction and functioning of one of these mills, that at Taynish, in Kist 64.

The water-mill grinding stones measured a much larger 1.2-1.4m. diameter by 20-30cm. thick. Some have been found close to the ruins of the mill complexes, but also there are quite a number of incompletely quarried stones left unextracted or broken off at their places of origin. The identification of suitable rock, its extraction and transport must have been quite a special skill. The material is described in vol. 7 of the RCAHMS Inventory of Argyll as Epidiorite or Schist. The following is a list of those "failed" millstones we have noted so far.

1. Barnacarry Bay, near Kilninver (near Oban).

An extensive shelf of suitable hard grey rock exposed between the sand and the coarse vegetation at the back of the bay has been intensively quarried for millstones with many imprints surviving, as well as broken stones. This was an excellent location as the successful products could have been removed and distributed by sea.



Barnacarry Bay (photo by Phil Holt)

2. Road to Old Poltalloch.

North side of the road, just before the start of the descent westwards there is a huge stone, chipped out all round but not detached. It used to be much more clear, but has got overgrown with moss and weeds in recent years.

3. Temple Wood, Kilmartin.

One of the stones has been partly shaped to form a millstone, but the top has been broken off and the base abandoned. It makes one wonder about the fate of the neighbouring missing circle stones.

4. Carsaig Bay.

An apparently perfect round millstone has been chipped out but not detached from its parent rock in a gully near the west shore, now completely overgrown.

5. West of Knap Studio.

Sheena Carmichael and I were shown a partially excavated millstone on the west side of a track in the forest by the late Betty Hunter many years ago, but are now unable to identify the place. Presumably intended for Kilmory Oib Mill, near Loch Coille Bharr.

6. Ballimore, near point of Knap.

Almost completely quarried millstone reported in the RCAHMS Inventory of Argyll, vol. 7, no. 232, presumably intended for the mill at Airon, known as Stronefield.

7. Creag Bhreac.

Alan Begg and the late Donnie MacVean saw two partially quarried millstones in the quarry at Creag Bhreac, just above and east of the turning towards Ford from the A 816. Presumably for the mill at Carnasserie. Information from Mr. Begg's sister, Mrs. Jenny Campbell.

8. Kilmartin Hotel.

The lintel over the fireplace in the bar of the Kilmartin Hotel consists of half a millstone with the round side upwards. Probably also recovered from the mill at Carnasserie.

THE LOST MILLS OF TARBERT

Jonathan Arnot

From a damaged copy of a Victorian tourist publication, "Tarbert in Picture and Story" (author unknown) is a reference to the statement of accounts by the Constable of the Castle in the year 1326:

In addition to more or less expenditure upon the main building referred to above, (Tarbert Castle) the surrounding walls, and the outlying towers, we find that expense was incurred in the construction of a hall built on piers, houses within the inner court, with a middle wall enclosing it, and a chapel, together with such accessory structures, as a new kitchen, a wine-house, bake-house, goldsmith's house, malt-house, brew-house, with new vat, **a mill with mill pond and lade**, a moat, and a lime-kiln.

We understand from other literature that at times of tension in the history of Tarbert, a great number of fighting men were stationed in the Castle. Some accounts refer to as many as eighteen hundred men at different occasions during King Robert De Bruce's reign.

Making a simple calculation to estimate the amount of flour used, I've assumed that each man would consume at least one small loaf of bread each day, thus giving an approximate measure of 1.5lbs of flour per man per day. Based on this figure I think that it is reasonable to suppose that the daily requirement for the Castle compliment alone would be more than two tons of flour for bread each day. Added to this figure the unknown quantity of Oatmeal and Bruised Oats for livestock and we can guess that the mill or mills would have to process between one and three tons of grain each day simply to meet the needs of the Castle. In order to keep control of such an important process I think we can also assume that the mill(s) were built close by the Castle. Given the lack of a reliable water supply and the requirement for continuous flour

production, there should be substantial evidence of the former mill lades (leats) and millponds.

I believe I have found, to the south of the castle, the remains of a reservoir and millpond complete with a complex system of sluices or lades. The evidence is in the form of narrow stone sided and paved lades (mostly overgrown) that run from small burns towards what are now only visible as low lying marshy areas. Following these sluices leads me to believe that a complex water system was constructed using the meagre water supply to maintain not only the needs of the mill(s) but also to top up the Castle Mote.

The low marshy areas I speak of are distinct from other marshy areas in that they are enclosed by dry-stone walls (in places nearly six feet high) almost completely overgrown with moss, heather and bracken.

In contrast to the later boundary walls that run in straight lines, these walls are unusual as they generally follow contours curving round the marshy ground and run from natural rock outcrop to outcrop. In more recent times I'm told that these areas were drained and have been used as a wartime shooting range, grazing paddock and as part of a golf course.

In places iron fence posts have been drilled into the old stones. I assume that these posts are a much later addition.

'Old Tarbert Lore' tells us that Robert De Bruce constructed a water supply to provide for the Castle's requirements. These stories speak of a subterranean pipeline bringing fresh water from as far away as Barfad.

Please contact the Kist if you have any information about mill sites in Tarbert. The only map I've seen that shows a millpond and lade anywhere in the immediate area was on the opposite side of the harbour and probably supplied the cotton mill that stood behind the Co-Op.

Map1

With suggested positions of mill, millpond, reservoir and mote.

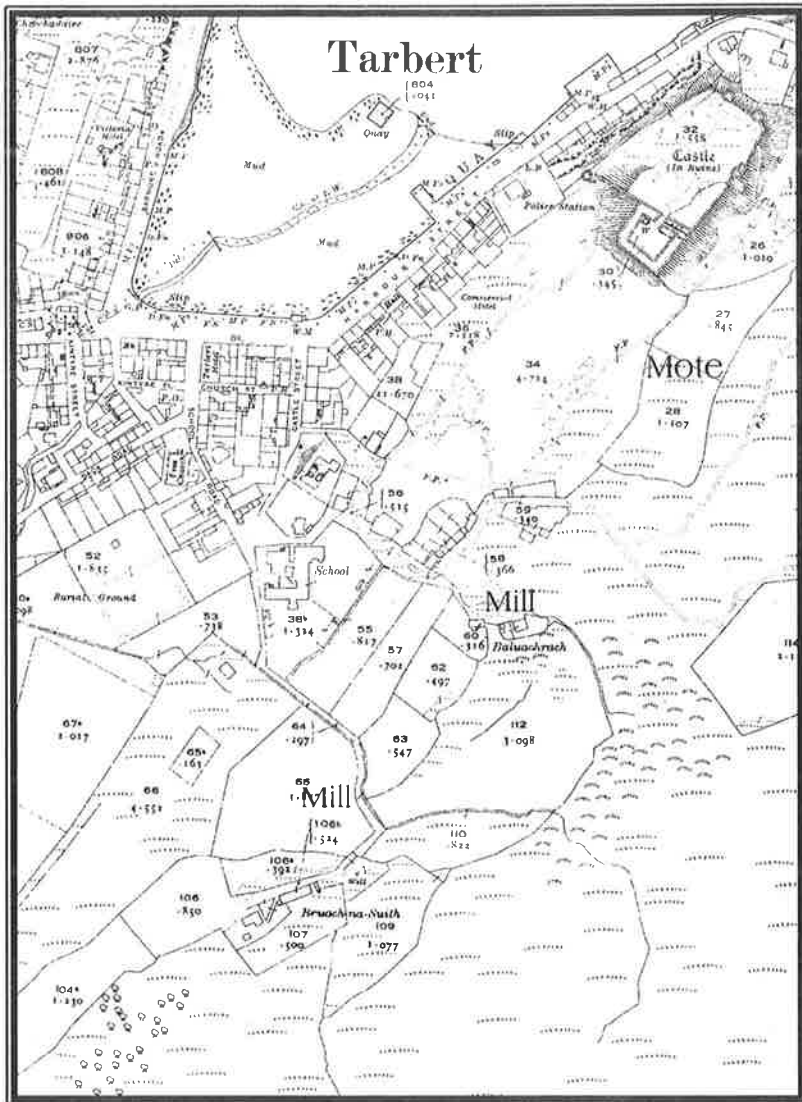


Miller's mite

Payment in kind; as much as a one-sixteenth part would be taken by the Miller - not forgetting the 'Miller's mite' (sweepings from around the stones).

Map 2

Showing other suggested sites for Mill(s)



EARTH-WALLED HOUSES

Michael Davis

Even those reasonably familiar with the past tradition of stone cottages in Mid-Argyll – so well displayed at Auchindrain – may not be aware that there was also a tradition of earth or “turff” walled cottages.

The 1798 survey of houses on newly acquired farms, undertaken for Neil Malcolm of Poltalloch, reveals that even at that date, “turff” walled houses were by no means rare. But what exactly was meant by “turff” and how effective was it as a building material? The 1798 survey provides some clues.

At “Daile” (presumably Dail near Cairnbaan) the two tenants, Neil McFaile and John MacDonald, had a house of “six couples”. This meant that it had six timber structural roof supports in addition to its two gables or “gavels”. This made it quite a long house, and longer than most. Although the couples were of ash, as were the “pantrys” (or purloins) linking the couples, the walls were of turf and it was noted that they “cannot last long in that situation”. The roof, however, was supported not merely by the couples resting on the wallhead, but by these (and the thatched roof they carried) being supported on timber “knees” or uprights, which were about six feet high and each rested on a “sole” or stones. Presumably these were hidden within the walls. Such an arrangement may not have been usual, since the Report spells out that the main roof supports would not be at risk, even if the wall began to disintegrate.

At “Dailmnaighaisig” (Dalnahaig), earth walling was posing problems, due to the disintegration of the local earth when used in walls. Lachlan McFaile had rebuilt his house as recently as the summer of 1796 (at a cost of “seven pounds Sterling money”), but it was already “not sufficient” and was “hinging and standing”. This reveals that a turff house was not necessarily something you built yourself and, even when contracted out, might not last.

At the house of the other Dalnahaiga tenant, Malcolm Leitch, there were similar problems, leading to some interesting comments:

The walls is worth nothing, the turff is rotten and falling down in Clods. All the other Barns and Bothies is not good (with) bad walls and timbers not good. The nature of the turff for build here is not good for that purpose as it's a kind of mossy substance and when it will dry in the wall of a house, it fails and becomes bulged and hinging and standing and it will last but shortly...But the turff build houses of Dailvore is a better soil and hath a mixture of pure earth among it and by that it will last longer in the walls of houses...But if stones would be carried in a boat from Athvindaellon or Crinan point with the tide what would (i.e. as much as if required to) build the walls with stones three feet and a half high so as the stones would uphold the couples rightly in an end, turff might be put on top of the walls again and would last as Cattle will be rubbing themselves to the corners of these (i.e. the walls) and will do them (i.e. the turff) much hurt.

What all this makes clear is that, by the end of the 18th century, earth walling was favoured in areas where stone was not readily available for building. Unfortunately this might be in a location where suitable turff was not easily available. But what exactly was the "turff"? The simplest idea was that it was clods dug off the surface with a layer of vegetation on top. A "mossy substance" was clearly bad, while a "soile" with a "mixture of pure earth" was considered good. However, soil in the sense of topsoil would have quickly turned to mud, so what is meant by "pure earth" clearly has a local contextual significance.

Chambers Concise Scots Dictionary links "turf" to "turr" – a turf, surface peat or turf cut for fuel. The Scottish National Dictionary corroborates this. Thus the building material was probably the surface layer(s) above the level used for fuel.

The author thanks Heather Macfarlane, White Horse, Yukon, and Murdo Macdonald, Argyll and Bute Archives, for their assistance.

Ancient Wood Pastures in Argyll
The case history of Altagalvash wood, near Skipness
Peter Quelch

On Saturday 25 May 2002 an enthusiastic group of a dozen or so of the fitter members of the Native Woodland Discussion Group walked the whole wooded coastline from Skipness to Tarbert. Not on the long but easy-going footpath and road system higher up, but through the actual woods and crossing the numerous ravines and steep burns. The walk was made arduous by being repeatedly forced at one moment down to the rocky shore and the next to climb right above the deep ravines to find a crossing place. The excursion was a successful one, an enjoyable and long walk in high quality woodland and coastal scenery, which gave the young woodland enthusiasts a rare perspective on this part of Kintyre.

However, one of the highlights of the walk was something I discovered while on a reconnaissance visit and which I was able to demonstrate to the visiting group. I refer to the most unusual woodland structure in the woodland just south of the ruined settlement at Altagalvash (woodland centre is at NR918605). The wood is just below the hill named Cnoc Ceann Tamhuis on the OS map, and contains a well called Tobar a' Ghail in its south-east corner. On the old NCCS Ancient woodland inventory the wood is shown as Ancient – i.e. present and shown as seminatural on the 1750 Roy maps in all of its 19ha (site 31 on sheet NR96). I know nothing of the history of the place and what I relate to you is based only on field evidence from two short visits.

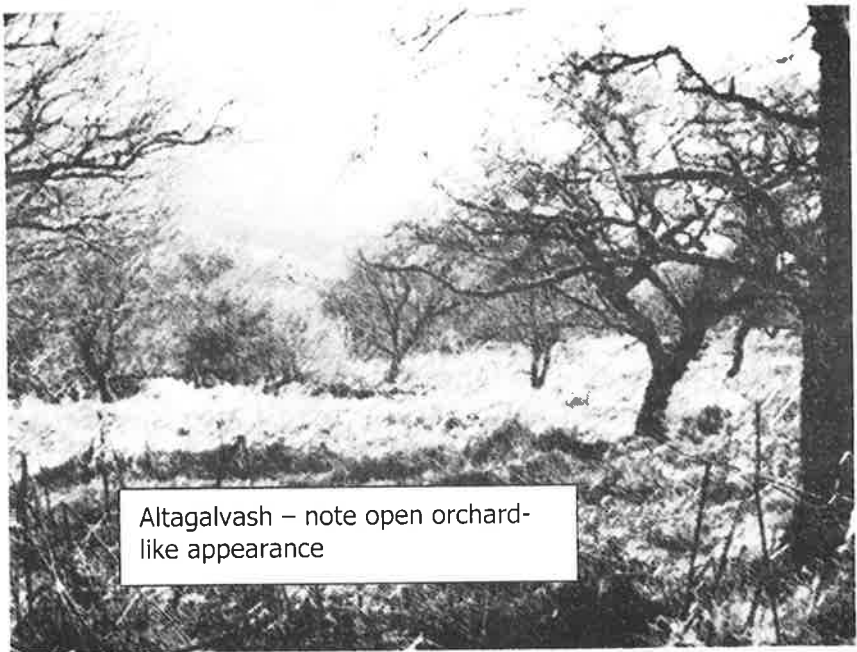
Most of the woodland along this coastline is relatively open, and little of it shows the characteristic signs of having gone through intense coppice management within walled enclosures, which is common elsewhere: for example around west Loch Tarbert.



That system of management provided tanbark for leather tanning and also oak charcoal for the iron furnaces on Loch Etive and Loch Fyne. However that does not mean these woods were not exploited for that market, which ran from about 1750 to the 1870s. The furnace at Furnace is after all an easy sail north along Loch Fyne from this coast. There are old oak stools in the Mealdarroch woods but scattered and within mixed woods with birch, hazel, ash, alder and other native trees and shrubs. We discovered the slag from an old bloomery nearer to Tarbert, and Gordon Gray Stephens, who is involved in the management of the wood at Altaalvash, says that there are some charcoal hearths within it.

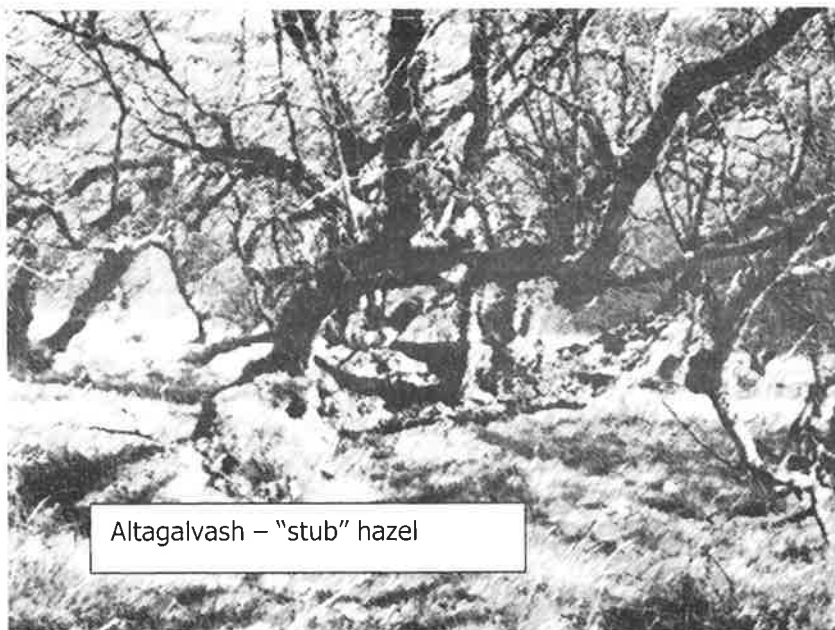
After the two lucrative markets for oak bark and charcoal closed to landowners, many of the old coppice woods went into decline and usually were then grazed by livestock, and latterly by large numbers of deer as well. So it is not unusual now to find extensive native woods in Argyll showing some evidence of past iron working, but which are now open and grazed, with large patches of bracken.

However it was not this structure which made the Altagalvash wood special for me, it was the signs of previous management of the ordinary birch trees by man. You enter the wood from the south, following an ancient cart track alongside an old earth and stone dyke. Stretched out below are widely spaced very old gnarled birch trees, which are squat and almost too fat for their height. Some of the trees have swollen bases, indicating many years of grazing around their base, and some show distinct signs of previous pruning or pollarding. There is no widely accepted term to describe such trees, but Oliver Rackham in his books refers to them as 'stub trees' or perhaps short pollards. The whole phenomenon of man-influenced nature within woodlands is now known in Europe as 'biocultural heritage', and Altagalvash wood certainly shows that – it is an excellent example indeed. However it is also a puzzling example as we shall see.



Altagalvash – note open orchard-like appearance

A main part of the character of the site is the widely spaced nature of the old birches, looking more like an orchard than any other normal woodland structure. Another feature is that the ground in between the trees is cultivated and de-stoned, as in orchards, and not as in most woodland. So we seem in this woodland to be looking at the ancient remains of an old orchard-like pastoral type of woodland, of a form which as far as I can see does not exist in today's farming landscape. It is obviously a farming feature rather than a woodland management one, in the normal sense of the latter.



Altagalvash – "stub" hazel

Is the woodland at Altagalvash unique? I have seen similar features, for example on Loch Ness side, and in Assynt with Robin Noble. There is also a more local example in a fascinating ancient wood in the wooded coastal burnside called Balnabraid Glen between Campbeltown and Southend. That place has some remarkably well - preserved classic short pollards of ash and alder.

I have seen similar features in a few other very old crofting-type woodlands, mainly in coastal situations, and usually in very remote places, which have escaped improvement and changes through farm modernisation.

That remoteness (by modern standards) would also be very true of Altagalvash, which is certainly a most unusual and remarkable survivor. More detailed survey and observation would help in a search to find out more about its history. Also documentary research into the history of the place, and the social history of that coast in general, would be needed to make more sense of the field evidence. That is where I hope the readers of the Kist may be able to help. Does anyone remember this sort of land-use or remember hearing about it from older generations? Does anyone have any old photographs which might show what was going on?

Of course ordinary people did not write down the normal farming practice of the day. And how to manage remote crofts for subsistence level farming is not what you find in old farming textbooks either – far from it. The ones I have searched usually look down on those old traditional practices. Instead they wax lyrical about the latest improved farming techniques of the early or mid 1800s (which is when I think we are thinking about in relation to the farming techniques that gave rise to these orchard-like woodlands).

There are analogous situations in woodlands elsewhere in Europe, and it is tempting to speculate that whatever was happening at Altagalvash can be explained by knowing what happened in parts of Scandinavia for example. In the absence of local historical record to interpret what I am seeing I offer my first hypothesis based on the field evidence and using explanations from other countries. I postulate that the old style crofters had a system of truly integrated agriculture and woodland management. They grew hay and possibly other crops between widely spaced trees, which were pollarded to prevent shading of the field vegetation. The trees gave not only woody products like hazel rods, also fuelwood in various forms, but also dried leaf fodder for feeding livestock in winter.

After hay cutting and drying, the same site could be used for sheltered grazing in late summer or autumn, possibly in winter too. That's where comparison to Scandinavian systems can be misleading as due to the intense cold and deep snow it was normal for their livestock to be taken indoors all winter.

The second hypothesis is that the cultivated area was in fact just that – an old field, which later colonised with birch trees after a change in land use and abandonment of cropping. Then 19th Century farmers continued to graze the area with livestock which kept the land open and created this characteristic wood pasture structure (for that is what we are now calling this). Possibly branches with leaves were cut and given to stock, as a ghost of a former practice, and this caused the pollard effect on the birch and hazel. This is similar to the last hypothesis, but without the deliberate and elegant integrated farming and woodmanship (a land-use that is documented in parts of Scandinavia and described as 'wooded meadows'). However if the land was previously cultivated and the woodland mainly secondary, how does this square with the woodland being shown on the 1750 Roy maps – unless the open phase was much earlier than that?

As you can probably tell by now I am a woodland person rather than a farmer! However I am intrigued by these hints of a long forgotten way of life. So I hope you find this conundrum of interest, and I welcome comment and a better explanation for what we can see in this historic site today.

Further reading

People and Woods in Scotland, A History TC Smout (see review)

The History of the Countryside Oliver Rackham, Dent, London, 1986

Upland Pastures in Scotland Peter Quelch, Pt 1, Scottish Forestry 54(4); Pt 2, Scot For 55(2), 2001

Tree Pollarding in Western Norway Austad I, in "The Cultural Landscape, Past, Present and Future", Ed H Birks et al, CUP

Pollard Meadows, Multiple Use of Human Made Nature Haeggstrom CA, 1998, in "The Ecological History of European Forests", eds KJ Kirby and C Watkins, CAB International

Biocultural Heritage in European Forests 2003, Reforesting Scotland vol 29, Edinburgh

Thanks to Skipness Estate for supporting our visits.

Book reviews

People and Woods in Scotland – A History ed. T.C.Smout,
Edinburgh University Press, 2003.

A detailed, well - illustrated account of our woods – from 11,500 years ago until the present day – a book such as this is both welcome and overdue.

It is both an historical account and a celebration of our silvicultural heritage, bringing together the multifarious woodland types under one roof: ancient semi-natural, plantation, policy, wood pasture etc. Argyll is particularly rich in woodland (31% wooded compared to 17% across Scotland as a whole) and it is important to bear this in mind even though only a fraction of it consists of "Jewels in the Crown" i.e. (in mid-Argyll at least) the Atlantic oakwoods with their long and rich cultural histories waiting to be discovered (see Peter Quelch's account in this Kist).

I found the early chapters particularly fascinating. The 1st, for instance, by a pollen analyst, looks at the post-glacial landscape as encountered by early man (refer to Kists 15 and 17 where Dr. Leslie Rhymer did the same for North Knapdale). It gives tantalizing glimpses of the densely wooded environment which was home to our hunter-gatherer ancestors.

The later chapters prepare the scene for the present day, with our current interest in woods and what they have to offer. Reading this book, you are aware of how many "new" attitudes and uses are old ones given a contemporary twist e.g. amenity, recreation, craft, building. Even the current state of the timber trade (with cheap imports driving prices down) is part of a cycle going back centuries.

But some things are new: for instance, the decision to deliberately restore native woods (as opposed to regeneration happening by default), the burgeoning number of community woodlands and commercial attempts to set up small scale, local initiatives. These may have significant implications for the future e.g. forest habitat networks resulting from isolated native woodland blocks being joined up once more.

This book, with its ambitious sweep, makes one contemplate the future as well as the past.

E.Tyler

Argyll and Bute Local Biodiversity Action Plan, 2001.

One of the long-awaited fruits of the Rio de Janeiro "Earth Summit" of 1992, Biodiversity Action Plans (or Baps for short) take a good hard region-by-region look at the world's biodiversity, and how best to conserve it. The one from Argyll and Bute comes in a ringbinder, and is illustrated with hundreds of excellent colour photographs. Members who attended Marina Curran-Coltard's talk to the Society (due as we go to print) will already be familiar.

According to the plan, Argyll and Bute has "the richest biodiversity in Scotland." I don't know if other regions beg to differ, but certainly the amazing variety we do have makes me want to show off the plan to all our visitors.

I was particularly impressed at our wealth of marine habitats. The plan redressed my non-specialist's ignorance. Examples such as knotted wrack – *ecad mackii* beds (in the inner harbour of Tarbert), tidal rapids and serpulid reefs (coral reefs, no less) – deserve to become common knowledge. The fact that the last - mentioned reefs have apparently now disappeared from one of their only two known sites in the U.K. highlights just how important this knowledge is.

Copies can be obtained by contacting Argyll and Bute Council, or consulting the reference section of your local library. E. Tyler

Stron Ailne
Colintraive
Argyll

Dear Mr. Tyler,

I recently received my copy of "Kist" 64 which, as always, was required reading. I have, however, a minor criticism. In the article on the Society's visit to Colonsay the writer perpetuates two myths. Firstly there never was a Kiloran Abbey. I think in the distant past a writer confused the priory on Oronsay with Kiloran, perhaps because of the name, but it just did not exist. Secondly there is, as far as I know, no evidence for a nunnery on Colonsay. I am not quite sure how this error happened but it may be that, because there was a nunnery on Iona, it was assumed that there must have been one on Colonsay as well. Apart from these points an excellent article and I wish that I had been on the visit.

Yours sincerely
Hubert Andrew

Summer Expeditions 2002

April 24. Ormaig cup and ring carved rocks

3.5 miles up a forestry road the number and variety of the patterns at Ormaig is amazing – cups, cups with single rings, cups with multiple rings, several cups surrounded by circles of small cups within the enclosing cups (rosette shape), gutters, channels, “banana” shapes, sets of parallel grooves, all thickly decorating the sloping rock outcrops. Deborah Long’s explanatory talk was completely fascinating.

May 11th. Taynish New Walk

From the National Nature Reserve Car Park the path runs to the Mill, crossing the outlet from the loch on a bridge formed from seven stone slabs laid side by side, a local method of building which was quite common; the view opens out. We paused at the Mill to admire the progress made in clearing its corn-drying kiln (see Kist 64) then turned right along the new walk. This section has been cleverly designed to intrude as little as possible on the natural lie of the ground and its vegetation; on the way we stepped over at least two otter tracks which cross the peninsular between Loch Sween and the Linne Mhuirich. We heard and saw many birds, and marvelled at the bush and tree expansion over lochside ground, which had been meadow or cultivated land 40 or 50 years ago. John Halliday pointed out several of the hut platform sites, once considered to be merely charcoal-burning stances; it has been demonstrated by Betty Rennie that though some were later used for this purpose, they were originally dug out uphill and built on the lower slope to from level places for Iron Age (and earlier) dwellings. Some of the first she excavated (with the help of NHASMA members) were on the Taynish ridge above the Linne Mhuirich. (see Kist 13). The woodland gives way to fields, the view opens out to a wide east to west sweep, then the path returns, through mixed woodland and interesting areas of raised bog, to the car park.

June 22nd. Danna

By the time we met at the Danna causeway at 10.30 am the early morning rain had stopped and the day turned pleasant. Dave Batty guided us carefully over an area of saltmarsh grading to freshwater marsh, pointing out an interesting variety of plants native to each environment, and some that were surviving in the mingled environment between the two. We then walked on to the Ferry House and jetty, limekiln and store where Catherine Pollock gave us a most interesting historical account of the buildings.

We then climbed up to the limestone quarry, inspected the workings and the botany, and traced the road leading from quarry to kiln. By Miss Pollock's kind invitation we ate our picnic lunches in her sunroom, where she supplied coffee, tea and delicious fruitcake. The trip finished with searching for and finding a variety of orchids in a field by the turn to Danna.

July 13th. Eilean Mor

Twelve of us set off from Crinan harbour in the catamaran "Gemini" skippered by Mike Murray and were landed on Eilean Mor, while Gemini brought two more boatloads from Keills Point. We visited the chapel enclosure with its elaborately carved 10th C. Cross (the original is in the National Museum of Edinburgh) which stands in the original socket on the high point of the island. Several members dropped down into the small cave once used as a retreat or study, with the 7th C. crosses incised on its wall (the "elderly" are not advised to attempt this, as getting down is all right, but getting up again is not!). John Halliday had brought his telescope, which provided a marvellous opportunity for observing the large numbers of seabirds and other wildlife.

August 21st. Kilmartin

A pleasant evening walk up the back glen, led by Anne Kahane. The old slab bridge has now been almost obliterated by strengthening work to enable the track it serves to carry heavier farm or forestry vehicles. The great stone barn, as strong and solid as the day it was built, and still in use, provided an extra excitement as a barn owl flew out of it directly in our path. The road climbed up to the well-preserved limekiln – its domed roof still complete. The evening was clear and bright, and the view from the top above the Sound of Jura magnificent.

September 21st. Furnace Millenium Path

Unfortunately only five members braved the 5 mile round trip, and those who had hoped to join at Auchindrain, the mid-point, missed the connection; the first part of the walk (involving the ironworks at Furnace, the old gunpowder, the mill and old bridges) having proved so fascinating that it took an hour more than expected! Note that there is a very good leaflet available from tourist offices. To be recommended. We are very grateful to Lynne Farrell for introducing us to it, and coming to guide us round it.

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Copies of the Kist can be obtained from the Membership and Publications Secretary, price £1, postage and packing extra.

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Although the Kist does not specialise in family history, it has been pointed out to the Editor that there may be cases where we have information that would be useful to readers in search of their forbears. Requests should be sent to the Editor, should give as much detail as possible, and should be accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope for reply.