

## **HIGH MORLAGGAN: THE METAL AND ASSOCIATED OBJECTS**

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### **Overview**

A total of 1289 fragments of metal and associated materials (104 kg) were recovered from the 2009-2011 excavations of a deserted 16<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century settlement at High Morlaggan, Argyll. The assemblage is dominated by iron objects but also includes a small number of copper alloy and lead finds, as well as leather, brick, glass, Bakelite and other synthetic materials.

Visual analysis of the metal objects confirms that the majority of fragments derive from structural fittings (e.g. brackets, hinges and bolts), tools (e.g. axes, chisels and blades) and household fixtures (e.g. cooking pot fragments, chains and locks). Very few decorative or personal objects were identified but a small number of brass buttons and buckles and leather/synthetic boot sole fragments were present. Most finds cannot be closely dated. Those that can indicate a date range between the eighteenth and twentieth century with the majority of datable finds suggesting a late date (19th to 20th century).

Although metal finds were recovered throughout the excavated area, the vast majority of objects (76%) derive from contexts associated with structure 2. These are predominantly from abandonment/collapse deposits or deliberate dumps/accumulations of midden material. The condition of the objects concurs well with these secondary contexts: most are incomplete or damaged, suggesting deliberate disposal. The vast quantity of iron in particular is unexpected from a rural post-medieval settlement context. The fragmentary, damaged condition of most of the objects and their recovery from residual contexts suggests that most of the material had been deliberately dumped at the site after its abandonment in the twentieth century, perhaps from elsewhere such as nearby Morelaggan House.

### **Methodology**

Due to constraints on funding, it was only possible to undertake a rapid visual examination of the finds with a view to providing spot identifications. This assessment focused particularly on identifying the function, condition and potential date of individual objects and the assemblage as a whole. Due to the vast size of the assemblage and limitations on funding, only a small selection of the finds were x-rayed. As such, a large proportion of the iron is unidentifiable due to the heavy surface corrosion.

Each object was examined, identified where possible and assigned an individual catalogue number. No measurements were taken. Objects of the same form (e.g. nails) within the same context were catalogued together. As such, over 670

individual objects were identified amongst the fragments. A full catalogue list is provided in the archive.

## **Contextual analysis**

### *Stone-built spring (context 108)*

A minimum of ten iron objects were identified including fragments of a sheet metal vessel with footed base, a complete knife blade, a damaged hafted toothed agricultural tool, a damaged and highly corroded flat circular object which may be a cast iron lid, and six nails. The majority of nails had wood adhering to the shanks suggesting that they had been deposited within their wooden fixtures. None of the finds are closely datable.

### *Structure 1*

Forty-two metal objects were recovered from this structure; the majority derive from abandonment and post-abandonment deposits. Only three objects come from well-stratified contexts and appear to relate to the use of the building. These comprise two fragments of robust flat rectangular plates of cast iron (Cat. 155) which are from an early trampled floor (context 120). One face of each of the fragments has an equidistant grid of shallow circular hollows (Diam 13 mm) which do not perforate the thickness of the plate. In both cases, little of the original edges remain, making it difficult to determine how the plates may have been assembled. It is possible that they are treads from an iron step. These fragmentary objects are not closely datable but the large quantity of cast iron that they represent suggests that they are unlikely to be earlier than 18<sup>th</sup> century in date. A single nail shank was associated with the building's later use as an animal pen (context 100).

The remaining thirty-nine objects come from collapse/post-abandonment contexts (contexts 57 & 64). Structural fittings dominate the finds from these contexts (13 examples) and include three complete pivoting door hinge brackets, two still interconnected (Cat 144 A), suggesting they rotted in situ attached to their timber fixtures. Also present are nine nail fragments, two possible tool fragments, an iron key and several unidentified pieces of iron. Three small copper alloy pieces include a late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century glass and copper alloy button or cuff-link and a mass-produced, machine-made four-holed brass button of similar date (Cuddeford 1994, 15, no 29). This button has the maker's mark "WINSA.... GLASGOW" stamped on one face.

### *Structure 2 and associated contexts*

The majority of the metal finds from the excavated area, representing a minimum of 512 objects, derived from the interior and immediate exterior of Structure 2. As with structure 1, only a small proportion come from contexts associated with the occupation of the building (11 objects).

A total of seven iron objects were recovered from Phase 1. None of the finds, which include nails, the pegged heel of a leather work-boot, a possible barrel stave

fragment and various fittings, are closely datable but they are consistent with the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century date suggested from the historical record.

Phase 2 deposits contain a single metal find: a fragment of a 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century brass thimble (Cat 163) with out-turned round rim and well-machined dimples (Cuddeford 1994, 48, no.9). This came from a possible occupation deposit (context 056). In phase 3, a small number (3) of finds came from a heavily burnt deposit (context 051) thought to be the residues from small-scale metalworking. These consisted of a complete but heavily damaged shovel head (Cat 142), a nail shank and an unidentified, heavily corroded fragmentary object. No blacksmithing waste in the form of vitrified slag or hammerscale was identified to substantiate use as a smithy. Overlying this deposit was a build-up of organic material (context 038) suggesting the presence of animals or use as a store-room. This context was rich in fragmentary iron objects (75). The presence of so much fragmentary iron makes it unlikely to have functioned as an animal pen due to the danger the sharp fractured objects would have posed to the animals. Looking more closely at the range of objects represented within this deposit proves fruitful: the majority of finds appear to be nails (approximately 40 examples) and structural fixtures (8) such as robust bolts, a possible joist bracket and perforated and imperforate strap fragments, representing possible collapsed roofing material. Also present are a piece of scrap lead sheet (Cat 137 N), a tool shaft fragment (Cat 137 R), a fragment of the rim from a metal pail or bucket (Cat 137 H), multiple fragments of copper alloy strip adhering to wood (Cat 137 E, L, S) and a fragment of a 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century cast four-holed brass button (Cat 137 X).

The bulk of the metal finds from this structure come from post-abandonment deposits, representing accumulations of collapsed rubble and deliberate midden dumps and do not relate directly to the occupation of the building. From Structure 2 alone, over 500 fragmentary metal objects were recovered from post-abandonment deposits within concentrations of midden material accumulating at the west side of the building, particularly from contexts 005 (over 90 objects), 037 (over 180 objects) and 050 (over 65 objects). These are dominated by nail shank fragments (minimum of 140 examples), various fittings, damaged tools, cooking vessel fragments and leather/synthetic soles from men and women's shoes.

The tools tend to be substantially complete but appear damaged beyond the point of use at the time of deposition. These include a pitchfork (Cat 129 B), a sledgehammer head (Cat 136 CQ), axe-heads (Cat 125 V & 129 F), a hoe blade (Cat 125 Y), a complete tanged file (Cat 125 AU) and various fine files, chisels and punches. Less common within these deposits are structural fittings although screw-tipped carriage-type bolts, L-shaped brackets, pivoting hinges and robust strap fragments are present.

Fragments of cooking pot, including 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century cast, ribbed, camp-kettle styles (Schiffer *et al* 1979, 219) and larger, rounded cauldron-type sheet vessels are present, as well as various pails of rolled, tinned iron (*ibid*, 215) and cylindrical tins. Possible pot lids and wooden barrel stave fragments are also prevalent.

Domestic fittings have been identified in the form of fragmentary door handles (Cat 125 BA, 141 R), composite locks (Cat 125, 133 K, 141 W) and a possible letter-box plate (Cat 133 G). Internal fixtures are also present such as non-joining fragments of a cast iron decorative fire-grate (Cat 127 C). Here, portions of the relief cast decoration are visible. The lower portion features alternate bands of cross hatching and parallel vertical lines. The upper panel shows some form of foliage decorative scheme (thistles?).

Amongst the more prosaic elements of the assemblage are a few more unusual objects including a substantially complete but damaged late 19<sup>th</sup> century cap gun (Cat 125 H), the brass nozzle gauge for a late 19<sup>th</sup> century gunpowder flask (Cat 125 I) and the brass telescopic sight from a shotgun (Cat 125 BJ). Decorative objects such as an 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century stamped tinned or silvered copper alloy button (Cat 162 B), a pre-1850 gilt domed brass button (Cat 160 E) and a four-holed machine-made cast brass button of 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century date are also present.

Due to the severe corrosion of much of the iron, it has not been possible to identify joining fragments of objects from distinct midden dumps. In only one case was this possible, where two joining fragments of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century green Bakelite plinth or box (Cat 133 C & 136 CL) were found in different contexts (022 & 037).

The assemblage of finds from these post-abandonment deposits includes a wide date range of objects, from 18/19<sup>th</sup> century cooking vessels and brass buttons, to objects of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century date such as a folding umbrella frame (Cat 136 H, BG, BO) and a petrol cap from a tractor or generator (Cat 136 E). These later items confirm that the majority of finds from midden deposits and deliberate dumps accumulated during the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### *Structure 3 and associated contexts*

Despite the quantity of finds from this building (minimum 44), very few can be related to its use. Two nail fragments came from phase 1 and 2 floor levels (context 095 and 091). A later surface, possibly a floor (context 045), was associated with a small quantity of iron objects consisting of a riveted horn-plated tool handle and blade fragment, three nails and an L-shaped bracket. A further eight objects, including a possible knife blade, three fittings (e.g. loop-headed fitting & strap fragments) and three nail fragments were associated with a drain (context 061).

The remaining twenty-eight objects from this structure came from post-abandonment collapse and topsoil (contexts 002, 016, 023, 047, 052, 068). Broken and damaged tools are numerous here and include an auger for boring holes in timber (Cat 135 B), a chisel (Cat 122 D), three substantial sickle blades (Cat 123 B & C, 146) and a galvanized steel hacksaw frame (Cat 122 B). The latter tool is suggestive of a late 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century date which corresponds well with the historical record that suggests that the building was still in use at c.1890-1900. Fittings, including substantial structural fixtures carriage-bolt-type bolts, and a fragmentary

door-hinge bracket, are also frequent within these contexts. Only one domestic fitting was identified: a small broken copper alloy coat hook (Cat 159).

#### *Early structure between buildings 3 & 4*

Only two metal objects were associated with these ephemeral structural remains (context 020): a thin flat rectangular copper alloy strip and a small brass tack. Both are damaged and distorted from removal from their timber fixtures, likely to be from an item of household furniture.

#### *Structure 4 and associated deposits*

A total of twenty objects came from the interior of structure 4, fifteen of which were recovered from context 101. This context has been interpreted as a layer of possible occupation or midden build-up, making it unclear whether the finds relate directly to the use of the structure or were deposited there after abandonment. With the exception of a hoe or mattock blade (Cat 153 A) which is damaged but largely complete, the other iron items from this layer are heavily fractured. These include curving iron staves from a wooden bucket (Cat 153 C), a possible fragment of bucket handle (Cat 153 D) and nails.

Overlying this layer is a mixed deposit of rubble and midden material (context 035). Only five objects were recovered, most being severely fractured and corroded preventing identification. One complete 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century cast machine-made brass button was found with the makers mark 'TURNER & Co PATENT' (Cuddeford 1994, 15, no 29).

To the east of structure 4 was a deliberate dump of midden material (context 021) which included a minimum of thirty-four metal objects. These comprise fragments of structural fittings including fragments of complex hinges (Cat 132 G) and brackets (Cat 132 C). Also present were further possible bucket or barrel staves, multiple nails (13), a fragment from a triangular-sectioned tanged file or rasp (Cat 132 M) and pieces of pegged leather boot soles (Cat 132 A). Such boots have a long chronology of use, being manufactured up until the mid-twentieth century (Stuart Campbell, *pers comm.*). In addition to the iron were three copper alloy objects: two cast utility buckles of 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century date (Cat 166 B) and a damaged and distorted domed circular mount, probably for furniture (Cat 165). The domed face, decorated with a repeating motif of raised dots, bars and crescents.

#### *Structure 6*

A total of eight iron objects were recovered from this structure, which was located below the main settlement area. These consisted of five nail fragments and two pieces of galvanised steel fence wire suggestive of a 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century date. A further fragmentary iron object could not be identified due to the level of surface corrosion.

#### *Enclosure 3*

A single small sheet fragment of copper alloy was the only metal find from this area. No original edges were preserved and identification of function and date are unknown.

'Cave'. Only one find came from this feature: a rim fragment from a cauldron-type iron vessel. Such vessels were in use throughout post-medieval times and continued in use until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Conclusions**

Very few metal objects within the assemblage can be confidently associated with the use of the individual buildings. Those that are associated assist little with confirming either the date of occupation or the possible function of the structures during their use. The vast majority of the iron finds derive from post-abandonment deposits, namely deliberate dumps of midden material introduced into and around the structural remains probably during the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

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## **References**

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