

Medieval Settlement at Upper Cormonachan, Loch Goil by Carrick Castle, Argyll

Notes on occupation

Agricultural traditions in Scotland changed little during the Medieval and Post Medieval periods until the later 19th century Improvement movement, which also saw the introduction of sheep on a large scale. The change from a cattle-based economy to a sheep-based economy and improvements in agricultural methods and crops led to a decline and eventual petering out of the old ways.

Upper Cormonachan is a small farming settlement or clachan that dates back to at least the late 16th century and is shown on Pont's map. The archaeological evidence suggests there were three, possibly four houses and several enclosures for the livestock. The settlement was remodelled in the later 19th century with one building being completely rebuilt and sheep fanks constructed, reflecting the passing of a way of life that had existed for centuries.

In its later phases there were two main houses, but the archaeological and map evidence suggests the re-modelled and completely rebuilt shepherd's bothy was originally a longhouse like the two surviving examples and a possible fourth house is located to the south. One of the prominent houses, (4) is reduced in size from its original extent, perhaps also reflecting the change in agricultural practices from raising cattle to sheep farming. The reduction in house size and relatively well-preserved eastern part of the building suggests a dwindling away of the thriving farmstead to reduced usage and perhaps just seasonal occupation reflecting the abandonment of cultivation and change to sheep husbandry.

In the later 17th century, we know that Upper Cormonachan was a joint tenancy farmship, essentially meaning that two men, Jon McNuier and Duncan McKellar, shared the land. As tenant farmers or husbandmen they would have had labourers or cottars helping them to farm the land. The cottars would have had a small patch of land, perhaps just two hectares or so for their own subsistence crops and one or two cows. However, life was often only a little above subsistence levels for the tenant farmers themselves who had to pay their rents to the tacksman representing the clan landlord, Campbell, Captain of Carrick Castle. The land was rented from the clan chief and the rent was paid in grain, butter, cheese and sometimes cattle. The feudal system essentially meant tenant farmers were bound to their clan chief and were under his protection but in exchange they were expected to take up arms for the clan when called upon.

In the 1730s the Argyll Estates introduced bidding for leases, an early sign of the dramatic changes of the 18th century and the beginning of the end of the traditional agricultural and feudal social system. The heritable jurisdictions of the clan chiefs were abolished in 1747. The Enlightenment, agricultural Improvement movement and an increase in commercial ventures that saw a great deal of land change hands as some prospered and others failed brought changing fortunes for all. The introduction of blackface sheep in the later 18th century brought the most dramatic change to the traditional Highland agricultural practices and the way of life practised at small steadings such as Upper Cormonachan began to slip away. This was a period of great change with peaks and troughs, there was huge demand for meat and all produce at the end of the 17th century during the Napoleonic Wars and general colonial expansion. Highlanders sold their cattle and sheep for high prices and the population increased. However, the end of the war saw a drastic decline in demand, which brought

poverty to many. The Potato Famine of 1846 brought destitution and had a greater impact in clearing the population from the old clachans and steadings than the introduction of blackface sheep, agricultural Improvement and industrialisation. The settlement is shown as abandoned, the buildings unroofed by the 1850s and by the 1890s the ruins had been adapted to support a sheep-based economy.

The land of Upper Cormonachan is defined by two substantial dykes. One dyke, the head dyke, which separates the infield land for cultivation from the upland outfield grazing land, extends to the North from the settlement. Another dyke further down the hill to the East below the terrace separates the cultivation ground on the terrace from the oak woodlands, which would also have been grazed by cattle. The woodlands also provided valuable resources for building as well as firewood and charcoal.

The forestry plantation has damaged the remains of the rig and furrow agriculture that would have utilised the generally level and sheltered terrace. The rigs of piled-up earth, manure and vegetation compost were used to grow the crops and the furrows acted as drainage features. The main crops were oats and barley (bere) providing cereals for human and animal consumption as well as surplus for sale. Up to a third of the cereal crop would have been paid in rent and there is an old saying – a third for eating, a third for planting and a third for the laird. However, the most valuable commodity for a Highland farmer was cattle and these were the small and hardy black kyloes. Cattle provided milk, butter and cheese, meat, were beasts of burden for the plough and hides and also provided a cash income. The West Highlands are covered with drove roads for moving the cattle to the great markets or trysts at Perth, Dumbarton and Glasgow. Horses were also raised and a record of 11 pairs of horses, along with cows and stirks (young cattle) being taken from Upper Cormonachan during Argyll's Rebellion of 1685 suggests horse breeding may have been a particular specialism.

At the settlement itself there were stock pens for livestock husbandry, chickens, the milk cow and some sheep and goats, which provided milk as well as wool. Other small enclosed areas would have been used for the kailyard or kitchen garden. Of course, in the medieval period when wolves still roamed Scotland the cattle would have been brought into the infield or stock pens at night.

There is a knocking stane at Upper Cormonachan which would have been used for grinding the cereals to make flour. It is of note that there is no corn drying kiln at the settlement and as a small farmstead it seems likely the rain was taken to a central kiln, perhaps at Cormonachan at the bottom of the hill or perhaps at Carrick. The installation in the corner of the house (4) might be a small kiln but it is impossible to be certain of the function of the feature without excavation.

In the summer, the cattle would be taken to the shielings of the upland pastures by the women and children for two to three months. This summer excursion for the cattle to graze on the good grass and the women to make cheese and butter for the year and collect herbs for dying and medicines is often portrayed as a joyous time and almost a summer holiday. Several shielings are located a mile or two up the hill from Upper Cormonachan. The men stayed at the settlement tending and harvesting the crops and carrying out repairs to the buildings and dykes.

The houses themselves have stone foundations and the walls would have stood to varying heights with upper courses of turf if stone were scarce. The two main houses, and the later bothy, were probably almost entirely stone walled but the enclosures would have had an upper wall of turf or fencing to contain the livestock. The roofs would have been thatched with bracken and rashes laid on cabers and a timber cruck frame.

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