

Coastal command

Surveying Scotland's maritime superhighway

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From ground level the western Scottish seaboard can be a place of glorious isolation. Dave Cowley and Colin Martin climb to 2000 feet to reveal once bustling sea-lanes, and a Viking harbour.

In the past, Scotland's western seaboard was linked not by roads, but by the sea. This was the superhighway of its day, tying communities together and creating connections between places that, to modern eyes, can seem frustratingly hard to reach. Anyone travelling to Skye, or walking out through the isolated peninsula at Knoydart, is likely to be struck by the remoteness and sense of wilderness.

ABOVE Skye high. In the foreground lies the small body of water at Rubh' an Dùnain, where the presence of a Viking shipyard has been proposed. On the horizon are the Cullin mountains.

As a result, they totally misunderstand these landscapes. Such perspectives are urban-centric, the product only of the last 200 years or so, and based on the distance of a place from modern roads and population centres. Taking flight in a small Cessna 172 light aircraft gives a different perspective on this world – a seabird's view of an environment that would be impossible to reconnoitre on any scale by other means.

PHOTOS: David Griffiths



Based near Oban on Scotland's west coast, the climb out of North Connell airport has become a familiar one. Rising first over the yachts in the marina below, then Loch Linnhe, the view gradually shifts from one of blocking mountains to reveal natural, interconnecting corridors. First comes the Great Glen, carving through the Highland landscape towards Loch Ness. Then, at 3000 feet, Fort William is shadowed by the looming bulk of Ben Nevis, and the massive scale of the mountainous West Highlands becomes clear, as serried ranks of jagged peaks march off into the distance.

Turning westwards, following the 'Road to the Isles' – the iconic road and rail approach to Mallaig with its Western Isles ferry terminal – the seaboard stretches out as far as the eye can see. Ardnamurchan, Rum, Knoydart, Skye and Applecross: a roll call of dramatic landscapes where land and sea mesh, awe-inspiring and beautiful.

A rare privilege though this aerial perspective is, we are here to work – to explore the maritime landscapes of the west coast; undertaking reconnaissance aimed at putting otherwise unknown monuments on record, and revisiting long-standing sites in order to better appreciate them. Most importantly of all, we are trying to understand how these seascapes worked in the past, throwing off the perspective of the 'land-lubber' and looking at land and sea – their resources,

challenges and advantages – with fresh eyes.

Of all the sites to have recently been surveyed, one in particular has captured the popular imagination: Rubh' an Dùnain. This is a small body of water on the tip of a striking peninsula which juts boldly into the sea on the west coast of Skye. It is also the site of the so called 'Viking Shipyard'. But in order to understand Rubh' an Dùnain's significance, it is necessary to appreciate first its place in a wider, interconnected maritime world.

Reconnaissance and discovery

It is not surprising that the known archaeological record of the western seaboard is dominated by 'traditional' and often conspicuous sites such as brochs, forts, duns and castles. It is a very challenging environment in which to attempt to detect more subtle features using large-scale ground prospection. What from ground level may look like nothing more than a seaweed-covered rickle of stones extending from the shore, for instance, reveals itself as a fish trap with the perspective gained from 2000 or 3000 feet of altitude.

By systematically working the heavily indented coastline, looking into sheltered bays and inlets, vast areas have been covered and a rich catch of sites has been recorded both underwater and on the shore. This has proved a highly effective means of conducting such survey, aided by remarkably clear water and a keen knowledge of the features on the ground and underwater,

developed over many years by the Morvern Maritime Centre. And this aerial reconnaissance is not restricted to underwater and shoreline features – the opportunity to record sites and

landscapes more widely, including the extensive remains of post-medieval settlements and their field systems, has also been seized.

Fresh eyes on old sites

The aerial view also offers a fresh perspective on often well-known sites on western Scotland's coasts and islands. Looking at the many pre-historic fortified sites and later castles scattered along the coastline has revealed their strong links with the sea, and pinpointed some of the harbours and centres of maritime power which have shaped the area's long history. This is not always a case of recognising artificial structures, as the best harbours are often entirely natural ➔



ABOVE A bird's-eye view of a Cessna 172



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ABOVE The West Highlands.

– a convenient estuary head, a sheltered bay, or a sloping beach up which vessels can be drawn.

Conclusions about the suitability of a possible harbour drawn from the air are sometimes supported by place-name evidence, allowing otherwise ‘natural’ sites to be recognised. Examples include Port a Churaich on Iona – literally ‘Harbour of the Skin-Boat’ – where tradition asserts that St Columba landed, or Port na Birlinn – ‘Galley Harbour’ – beside Duart Castle on Mull.

Historical sources can also fill in gaps. They tell us, for example, that Little Horseshoe Bay near Oban is where Alexander II of Scotland fatefully mustered his fleet against the Norse King of the Hebrides in 1249. Alexander II was not destined to return, and instead succumbed to fever on the island of Kerrera.

Further back in time we lack such supporting written evidence, but while natural harbours seldom leave discernible archaeological traces, their proximity to other structures often provides clues to their identification. The presence of an Iron Age fort on a bluff overlooking a bay provides a strong hint that this is a place where ships have gathered since remote antiquity. Likewise, there are no built harbour-works at Lagavulin on Islay (now a famous malt whisky distillery), but on the bay’s eastern headland stand the remains of a medieval castle associated with the Lords of the Isles, once the powerful rulers of the Hebrides, and on the west a prehistoric fort. Taken together this strongly suggests their placing is no coincidence, and that boats could and did safely shelter here for centuries.

Island eyrie

Paradoxically perhaps, some of the remotest island castles appear to have had no facilities for landing, safe anchoring, or harbourage. They include Cairn na Burgh off Mull, and Dùn Chonnuill (above) in the Garvellach Islands, both of which are only visited by yachtsmen today in the calmest conditions. The choice of such inhospitable locations suggests that they were places of refuge rather than strength, since an attacking force would be forced either to make a difficult opposed landing on terrain that favoured the defenders or, if it chose to play a waiting game, risk being caught by bad weather in a potentially catastrophic environment.





Lagavulin Bay has another characteristic common on early harbour sites in the west of Scotland. There are many hidden rocks around its entrance. For those who know where they are, these hazards are easily and safely negotiated. But anyone ignorant of them would find the harbour entrance a death-trap. Knowledge of this kind was power, because it gave locals who understood the complex seascapes of the area, and the shifting vagaries of tides and currents, an inestimable advantage over strangers who did not.

Such considerations seem to have conditioned the mind-set of whoever decided, in late prehistoric or early historic times, to build a fortified stone round-house on the tiny islet of Dùn Ghallain in Loch Sunart. The building crowns the highest point of the island, from which it commanded an excellent view over the entrance to the loch. Behind the island is a tiny bay, further protected by a chain of rocks, where quite substantial vessels could lie completely hidden from seaward observation. The bay is entered through a narrow passage directly overlooked by the fort, negotiable only by those who know of it. Just below the fort, inside the bay, a strip of beach was cleared so that boats could be drawn into a narrow gully.

Coastal castles are often located next to creeks or other sheltered places which give access to the sea. Sween in Knapdale, the oldest stone-built castle in Scotland, stands on the edge of a sloping gully into the loch, across which a rough stone jetty has been built. Similar features have been recognised at Castle Coeffin on Lismore and at Aros and Dun Ara castles on Mull. Unfortunately such features rarely yield independent dating evidence, or can be associated with the structural

ABOVE Lagavulin Bay on Islay. An Iron Age fort stood on headland to the left, while on the right are the remains of Dunyvaig Castle, a one-time naval base of the Lords of the Isles.

BELOW A prehistoric or early historic fort at Dùn Ghallain in Loch Sunart. The building stands on the island at top centre, dominating the natural harbour below.

phases of the adjacent castle, so there is no way of knowing if they are contemporaneous, however likely it may seem.

These consistent juxtapositions create an overwhelming impression of seats of power – brochs, forts and castles – throughout prehistory and the medieval period with an intimate and abiding association with the sea. Seeing and exploring this relationship is the clue to understanding the networks of communication, trade and power throughout the western seaboard, allowing us to envisage a sophisticated infrastructure of ancient naval bases, harbours and shipyards.

A Viking harbour?

There is nothing like an image of longboats bristling with axe-waving Vikings to excite the popular imagination, and one of the most significant early harbours in western Scotland investigated in recent times has acquired this association. Rubh' an Dùnain is a small body of water on the tip of a peninsula which juts dramatically into the sea from the foothills of the Cuillin Mountains, on the west coast of Skye. Though remote and uninhabited today this has been a place of intensive human activity since the distant past.

Mesolithic hunter-gatherers left scatters of flint implements, there is a fine Neolithic chambered cairn, hut circles survive of later prehistoric date, and there is extensive evidence of settlement and farming extending right up until the peninsula's final abandonment in the 1850s. Today the most impressive monument is an Iron Age fort, its massive stone wall cutting across a cliff-girt promontory not far from the peninsula's head. It is a long, hard walk from the road junction ➔



PHOTOS: Colin Martin © Modern Maritime Centre

RIGHT Castle Sween in Knapdale, Scotland's oldest stone-built castle. The remains of a ruined quay can be seen in the creek beside it.



PHOTO: Colin Martin © Mervyn Maritime Centre

at Glen Brittle, and jutting far out into the sea it is one of those locations that the modern visitor will almost invariably find remote. But it was in no sense peripheral to the folk who lived there, since the sea provided them passage to wherever they willed.

Behind the fort lies a shallow inland loch, linked to the sea by a now ruinous canal. This has long been known locally as the 'Viking' canal but archaeologists gave little credence to this identification until in 2000 a local man, Dr David MacFadyen, found a piece of wood in the loch's



ABOVE & RIGHT The remarkable complex at Rubh' an Dùnain, on Skye, from above, with the canal linking it to the sea leading off to the left. Seen in more detail (XXXXXXXX), the tip of the promontory at lower left is cut off by the wall of a prehistoric headland fort, with the canal visible below it. A pair of stone-lined nousts or boat-docks beside the canal are clearly visible from ground level. These features may be of Norse or early historic date.



ABOVE A submerged fish-trap in Airds Bay is picked out against the sand by seaweed growing on its stones.

shallow margins which he recognised as a fragment of a clinker-built boat. It was subsequently radiocarbon dated to around 1100 AD and identified as part of a small faering, a four-oared boat common in the Norse period. Since the loch is extremely shallow and doesn't go anywhere, the most likely explanation for a boat's presence is that the loch was used as some kind of harbour, perhaps a place where boats were built, maintained, and secured during the harsh winter months. It follows that the canal feature is as old as the boat, or earlier.

Careful survey of the remains has shown that the canal was built in two sections. The first runs from the sea to a point just below the promontory fort, where there are two nausts, or boat-docks, of indeterminate but probably early date. The second section continues into the loch, where the remains of a stone-built quay have been identified under water. It seems likely that these features are the remnants of a system that had its origins in late prehistory or the early historic period, continuing through the Norse era into more recent times. When it became part of Clan Macleod territory, some time before the beginning of the 14th century, Rubh' an Dùnain was entrusted to the MacAskills, a clan of Norse origin, who became comes litores (coast-watchers) for their overlords, maintaining galleys and keeping guard over the southern approaches to Skye. The loch and its canal can thus be seen as a kind of medieval naval base, a function it may already have served in previous centuries.

The hunt is now on for similar sites on Scotland's convoluted western seaboard, and aerial photography is proving a powerful tool in the quest. A strong candidate is emerging on the island of Eigg, only 25 km south of Rubh' an Dùnain. There, in the 19th century, drainage work on the

BELOW The site of the drained loch at Laig on the island of Eigg, where Viking-period boat remains were found in the 19th century. Traces of a now-dry channel thought to have linked the loch to the sea are visible at the top.



PHOTOS: Colin Martin © Morvern Maritime Centre

farm of Laig turned up two unfinished wooden end-posts for Norse-type ships, dating to about 1000 AD, perhaps buried for seasoning. Prior to draining, the area had been a shallow loch, and local tradition asserted that it had been linked to the sea by a canal. Photographs taken in the low slanting light of the setting sun have shown what appears to be the faint traces of just such a feature snaking across the relict landscape.

The days spent navigating the skies above the west coast with pilot Ronnie Cowan at the controls, working the landscape and teasing out different perspectives, are just the beginning of a process of record creation and research. The detective work in the air, underwater and on the shore continues in the office, as photographs are catalogued and a site record is created – a worthy counterpoint to the pleasure of the aerial reconnaissance, but vital in building a nuanced understanding of these maritime landscapes. @

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