

The Isle of Skye is littered with prehistoric monuments, some dating from around 4200 BC. Harlosh has examples of this ancient occupation that you can explore. The oldest of these are the chambered cairns, while the most evocative are the brochs or duns.

What is a chambered cairn?

Chambered cairns were tombs built by Neolithic peoples [c.4500-2100 BC]. Archaeology has found that the bones inside the cairns were not together as whole skeletons, but separated and placed in set areas of the cairn: e.g. all the skulls in one area. This means that Neolithic people did not bury their dead, but practiced excarnation, leaving the body in a special place to rot before carefully placing the bones in the cairn. Some cairns do have articulated burials in them, but these are from a later peoples who reused the tombs. They are known as Beaker people due to the pottery beakers found with the skeletons.

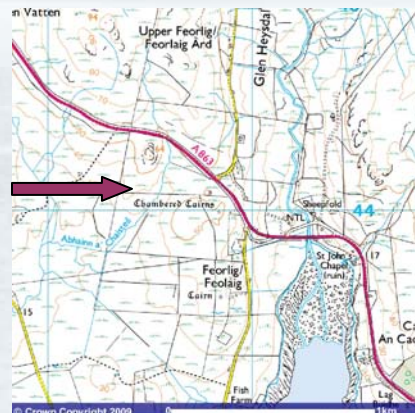
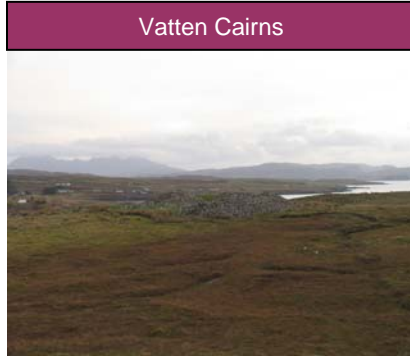
What do they look like?

They vary in size, but imagine a massive walker's cairn with a low room inside. The stone-built room or "chamber" had stones piled on top. The stones were bounded by a circular kerb edged with boulders. There was one, low entrance. On Skye they are the "Hebridean" type of chambered cairns, and tend to have an oval or polygonal chamber at the end of a short passage. Today, most chambered cairns are identified by a mass of tumbled stones that once formed the cairn.

Vatten chambered cairns (NG 298441 & NG 299440)

At the Feorlig end of the Harlosh loop road are two chambered cairns. Park on the left at the junction with the A863. One can be accessed from a gate behind you on this side of the road: the other can be accessed from a gate

Vatten Cairns



about ¼ mile along the A863, opposite the right turn to Upper Feorlig.

The northernmost cairn is smaller, but still stands some 6m high and measures almost 28m in diameter. It appears to have been built of quite small stones, and is in good condition despite some robbing (the later removal of stones for reuse in other construction, such as black houses). There is no sign of the entrance and the depressions you can see in the cairn are where stones have been robbed. The southern cairn of this pair is in a very ruinous state. It is clear that the structure has been opened up, as there is a deep depression in the centre. It still stands almost 3.5m high and the stone spread is some 36m in diameter. Here there are some indications of an entrance in the south-east face of the cairn.

Otta Swire's mother ventured inside one of the cairns "...some time between 1880 and 1890. There were, she said, several little rooms or cells off a passage, the centre one being the largest but none high enough for her (5 ft. 4 in.) to stand erect." At this time, both cairns could apparently be entered. It appears that one of the two cairns was investigated in the 19th century. Swire mentions finds of "...Bronze Age implements and jewellery...", and MacCulloch, writing in 1905, tells of a MacLeod chief who, "some years ago...began to excavate one of the heaps, but the work proved too laborious, the feeling of the countryside was against all such meddling with the dead, and the work was abandoned." The deep hole in the centre of the southern cairn was probably caused by this amateur excavation, and it is possible that the finds also came from there. The finds (now lost) may have been from a Beaker burial, of the early Bronze Age [c.2100 to c.1700 BC].

Several legends surround the cairns. One tells of a chief who was killed on a raiding party, so his men dug a great grave for him, burying many of their adversaries too, and covered it with stones. His ghost returned as an evil "barrow dweller". Another tells of the last battle between the Macleods and Macdonalds and that the dead were too many to bury, so women gathered the Macleods in one place and the Macdonalds in another and piled stones on them: their ghosts were also said to walk. There was a battle at Feorlig, in the early 15th century, but this date is later than the construction of the cairns and both are simply good legends.

There is a third cairn to the south [NG 298436], although this is much harder to access. The Royal Commission survey (1928) also identified a fourth cairn about half a mile to the west of the northern one, and this is identified as boulders on modern maps.

What is a broch?

The Iron Age in Scotland is most commonly associated with brochs and duns, more recently termed "Atlantic roundhouses". They are massive, drystone-built, circular or almost circular structures that are found only in northern and western Scotland. They vary considerably in date, architectural design and complexity, diameter and height, and quality of preservation.

The best known example of this broad range of Atlantic roundhouses is the "broch tower". Broch towers are the most complex and spectacular of the roundhouse tradition. Their key features include: a tall, tapering stone tower comprising an outer and an inner wall; walkways or "galleries" between the two walls, with stone staircases connecting each level; a single, small entrance; "scarcement ledges" which were courses of stones sticking out from the inner wall-face at various

heights to help support upper floors and roofs; ventilation gaps and ground level rooms or “cells” built into the walls.

There are many remains of roundhouses in northern and western Scotland and they can be identified by the Gaelic word “Dun”: e.g. Dun Beag, Dun Neill.

When were Brochs built?

Recent archaeological work suggests that in the Northern Isles simple Atlantic roundhouses were built from around 700BC. They gradually developed into complex roundhouses, which seem to date from around the 4th century BC, and then to the imposing and very complex, broch towers, with galleries and stairs, built from the later centuries BC to the end of the millennium / beginning of the 1st century AD. This development does not mean that simple versions were not being built at the same time as more complex structures.

To date, research suggests that these buildings began to be constructed rather later in the west than in the north. At present, there is no evidence for the simple structures on Skye, suggesting that the practice began only after the more complex style had developed.

Also of interest is that, in the Northern Isles, the development of broch towers appears to have been accompanied by the development of planned settlements around the base of the broch. Evidence for the emergence of such villages has yet to be found on Skye or the Western Isles however, where the broch towers continued to be isolated, individual structures. This suggests that, while they were using the same or similar techniques to build the towers, the people who built them in the west had a very different reason or use for the structures than those in the north.

Why were Brochs built?

Brochs were traditionally seen as defensive in function, however research has shown that it was not the only reason for their construction. On Skye, most are not in the best defensive positions nor do they enclose large enough areas to defend animals and possessions, suggesting that defence was not of key importance. The Skye brochs occur mainly in the north of the island. This may be due to a lack of intensive survey in the south, but may also be due to the greater availability of agricultural land in the north. Excavations in the Hebrides have shown that brochs were basically farmhouses. Studies of the broch towers at Glenelg suggest that the ground floor may have been used for storage or sheltering animals, while the first floor was the living area. Very little excavation of these sites has been undertaken on Skye, so there is still some debate as to their function and dates.

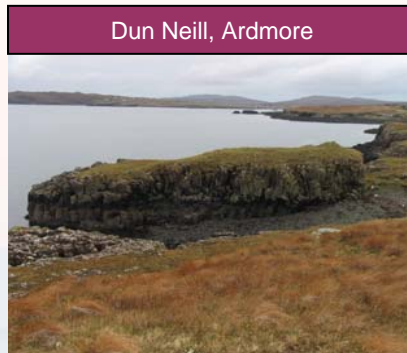
There is also a suggestion that power and prestige influenced their construction. Firstly, while the tapering walls provide solidity, they also give the illusion of greater height, suggesting that brochs were built to impress. Secondly, their development in complexity and height suggests a desire to compete to demonstrate status.

The Harloch Brochs

Dun Feorlig, Feorlig (NG 299424)

Dun Feorlig is situated on an elevated rock overlooking Loch Caroy, to the north-north-east of Feorlig House on the Harloch loop road. Just one course of stones on the north and south sides remains: the other walls are now a stony mound. Survey has shown that its walls were once around 3.5m (10ft) thick and around 16.5m (53 ft) in diameter. It also appears to have a defensive ditch cutting across the neck

Dun Neill, Ardmore



of the promontory. Defensive ditches are rare on Skye, possibly due to the rocky ground and the abundance of stone for building.

Dun Neill, Ardmore (NG 281407)

Dun Neill is on the west side of the Harloch peninsula, about half a mile from the point. It sits on the summit of a flat, oval-shaped rock, and is accessed by a sloped gap in the rock on its northern side. Here a single stone step survives. At high tide it is almost cut off from the land, while at low water it sits some 5m above the landward side and 6-12m above the beach. Little remains of the walls, however the Royal Commission survey noted that it had an odd shape and an unusual perimeter wall around the rock summit. This shape and construction suggests that Dun Neill was more likely to have been a “complex roundhouse” rather than a “broch tower”.

Other sites to visit:

Rudh an Dunain, Glenbrittle (NG 393163): chambered cairn
Dun Beag, Struan (NG 339386)
Dun Ardtreck, Portnalong (NG 335358)
Glenelg brochs (mainland)

Further reading:

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The Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions of Scotland. 1928. *Ninth report with inventory of monuments and constructions in the Outer Hebrides, Skye and the Small Isles*.
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Yoxon, Paul and Yoxon, Grace M. 2006. *Prehistoric Skye*. Skye Environmental Centre Guide No.4