

Background to the Homesteads of Perthshire

The homesteads of Perthshire survive as substantial stone-built circular enclosures, with an internal diameter of around 16-20m, constructed with dry-stone walls 3-4m thick. There are around seventy examples in the area, found along Glen Lyon, Upper Strath Tay, Strath Braan, Loch Tummel, Loch Tummel and around Pitlochry. They are particularly important to this area as while they are occasionally found as far apart as Angus and Dumfries and Galloway, their distribution is very much concentrated in Highland Perthshire.

They were first noted by Thomas Pennant in his *Tour in Scotland* (1776) in which he quotes a Gaelic poem referring to a group of ancient "castles" in Glen Lyon: "Twelve Castles had Fionn in the dark, bent glen of the stones". The sites often have the Gaelic place-name "caisteal" or "ball" meaning castle, and several are known as "Caisteal Dubh" or Black Castle.

Only five of the sites have been excavated in the past: Borenich, on the north side of Loch Tummel (1913); Litigan (1969), Glen Lyon; the Queen's View (1974), above Loch Tummel; and two sites at Aldclune, Blair Atholl in advance of the construction of the A9 in 1980.

At Borenich, only the walls were uncovered along with a few finds including pieces of querns, scraps of iron, a stone spinning whorl and a number of small circular stone discs. Watson, the excavator, referred to the sites as Ring-forts and suggested that they were built as castles to control passage through the Highlands.

Dr. Margaret Stewart excavations at Litigan and the Queen's View saw the first detailed excavation and recording of the homesteads. At Litigan a central hearth was recorded and a circular arrangement of postholes inside the enclosure wall suggested a large internal timber roundhouse. At Queen's View remains of iron-working were found, along with more stone discs, rotary querns, a stone cup, a yellow translucent bead and a stone lamp.

On the basis of these finds, Stewart proposed that these sites dated from around 700-1000 AD, and suggested that they related to the movement of the early Scots eastward from Dalriada (modern Argyll and Bute). The term "homestead" also began to replace "ring-fort", as while the sites do have substantial walls, they do not appear in defensive locations, such as hilltops, but on the sides of straths and lochs, often overlooked by higher ground.

A pair of homesteads were subsequently fully excavated at Aldclune, Blair Atholl, where the large round houses were found to occupy natural hillocks which had been further defended by banks and ditches. One site was constructed between the first and second centuries BC and the second between the second and third centuries AD, and two major phases of occupation were found at each site.

The various excavations to date have shown that the homesteads vary considerably in their nature, although they do still form a recognisable group. The excavations at the Black Spout form part of a larger project to study the sites, in particular their shape and location in the landscape.

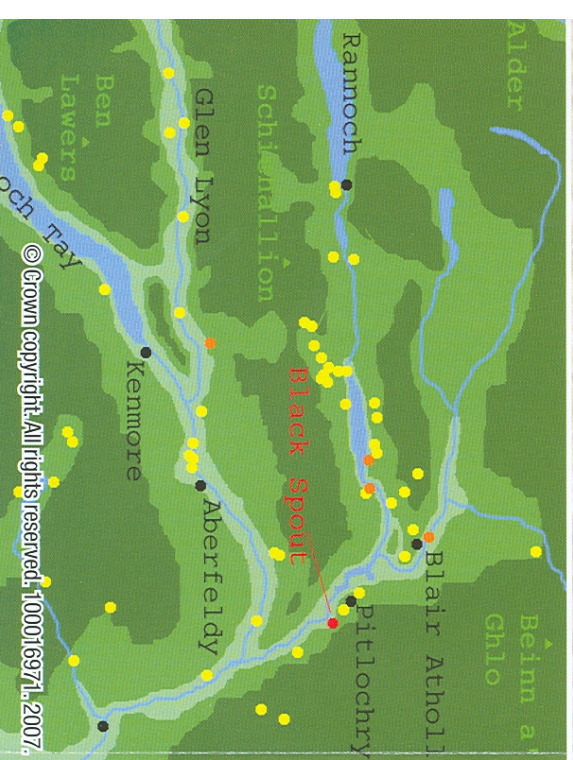
Left: The Homesteads (yellow) indicating the Black Spout (red) and other excavated examples (orange).



Excavations at the Black Spout Homestead

Excavation of a sixth homestead began as part of Perthshire Archaeology Week 2005, using a team of volunteers and has continued annually since. The site is situated on sloping ground on the edge of the gorge below the Black Spout waterfall on the Edradour Burn. To date, the excavations have shown the enclosure wall to be around 2.5m wide and to considerably differ in construction internally and externally. The outside of the wall was made up of large boulders around 0.5m in length with small packing stones in between. The internal face of the wall is made up of much smaller blocks of coursed stone and interestingly has a noticeable shelf, or scarcement ledge: a feature usually associated with brochs. The wall is expertly made and uses large rounded boulders as through-stones to tie the wall together.

The enclosure was not found to have a large surrounding ditch as at Aldclune, although a small drainage ditch has been identified. Unfortunately, the interior of the site has been greatly disturbed by tree-roots over the years, although it seems likely that flat-slabs were used as paving inside the building.

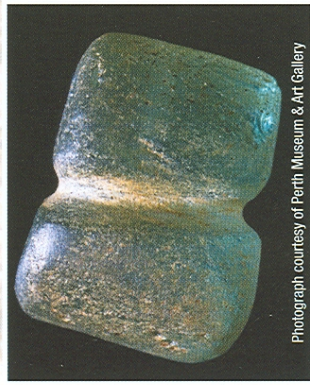


Small Finds

A number of small finds have been recovered from the disturbed floor deposits, including fragments of rotary querns, loom weights and a glass toggle.



The fragments of querns included half of the upper stone (rider) of a disc-shaped rotary quern, about 35cm in diameter. It would have been used for grinding flour with a wooden handle attached to turn the upper stone over the lower one. The querns are similar to those found in the Lowland brochs and souterrains and would suggest a later Iron Age date, probably in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD.



Photograph courtesy of Perth Museum & Art Gallery

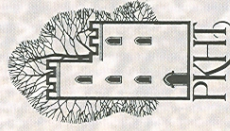
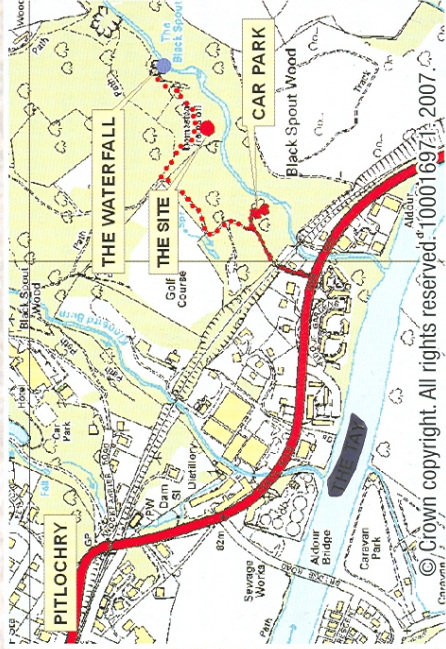
The small dumb-bell shaped glass toggle, or pendant, was made of reworked blue/green Roman vessel glass, probably from a late 1st or 2nd century AD bottle. It is only 13mm in height and around 10mm wide.

The excavations at the Black Spout Homestead will continue over the next few years, and in the longer term it is hoped to reconstruct part of the monumental wall on site.

About the Black Spout Wood

Black Spout Wood is managed by the Countryside Section of Perth and Kinross Council, with the aim of maintaining public access, encouraging responsible recreational use and improving the character and quality of the woodland. In addition to being the setting of the important Iron Age homestead, the woods saw extensive quarrying in the 19th century, a major tree felling programme during the First World War, and was partly used as the site of the refuse tip for Pitlochry until 1987. The quarrying was partly in response to the construction of the nearby Atholl Palace Hotel, designed by Andrew Heiton Jr., as a hydropathic establishment between 1874-8.

A section of the Edradour Walk, part of the Pitlochry promoted path network, runs through the wood. A short detour takes you to a viewing platform where you can see the impressive 60m Black Spout waterfall from which the wood takes its name. There is also an informal circular route through the wood where you may see Red Squirrels, Roe Deer or perhaps hear a woodpecker hammering on a dead tree.



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THE BLACKSPOUT PITLOCHRY

Excavation of an Iron Age Homestead