

RUBH AN DUNAIN

Sheiling, Dun and other structures centred on NC04100 33900

Rubh an Dunain is a promontory at the northwest end of Culkein Bay on the north coast of the Stoer peninsula in Assynt. At its landward (southwest) end the headland slopes down from high cliffs in the northwest to a rocky beach in the south east, but at the northeast tip of the headland the situation is reversed and on either side of a natural arch the cliff is highest to the south east and slopes down to the north-west.

Home's survey map of 1774 shows the whole of the headland as a shieling with indications of cultivation strips, but no structures. However a century later the shieling appears to have fallen out of use and is not marked on the first edition OS 6 inch map, but by then the fields of Culkein township extended almost as far northeast as the former sheiling. The first edition also shows two structures within the former sheiling area, a circular Dun at the northeast tip of the headland and an unroofed building close to a wall by the shore in the southeast. The shieling dyke (A) can still be followed and within it there is a discreet area of cultivation (B). The small structure (C) and walling to the southeast survive and there are fragmentary signs of another possible wall or dyke at D. The Dun (E) has a hitherto unrecorded outer boundary to the west of the main sub-circular walls, and across the natural arch there are further structures.

A The Shieling Dyke NC03945 33970 – NC 04060 33780

From its northern end on the cliff top the dyke runs south and then southeast to a point close to a change of angle in the later field boundary after which it appears to run east-southeast parallel to that boundary. The northern end of the dyke is badly eroded and all that remains are a few stones within fragments of earth bank. However it survives much better from NC03940 33900 southwards as far as the field system boundary and about half way along that stretch it reaches a maximum height of 1m and slopes gently down on either side to give a maximum overall width of approximately 7.5m. This is very unusual and all other known field/shieling dykes in the area are much narrower (usually no more than 1m) with at least one steep side. The remaining section of the dyke running parallel to the field wall is much eroded and only partially discernible, but what survives is also low and wide.

B The Cultivated Area centred on NC04025 33850

Sloping gently southeast and down slope from the northern cliff edge the cultivated area occupies about a quarter of the headland. Utilising what was probably a natural hollow extensive use has levelled the cultivated area leaving the surrounding land to west, north and east higher and thus affording a protective bank. Working from the southwest there are 1 short and 17 long rigs which slope gently from the rig crest down into the drainage channels and are all 4m or more across. To the northeast of these there are 9 rigs which are all shorter than those to the west. The first is very short indeed and there are then 7 of equal length before a final short one. These all have clear, sharp, steep sides and are generally 3m to 3.5m wide. The narrower, more

sharply defined rigs are interpreted as older and probably created using spade and cashrom whereas the wider, smoother rigs are probably evidence of later ploughing. There are no signs of cultivation strips anywhere else on the headland in spite of their apparent appearance on Home's map.

C The Building by the Shore NC04090 33820

On the south eastern shore, at the foot of a low bank and at the top of the beach is a small, rectangular, two-celled structure (C1). The lowest few courses of masonry of the north, west, south and partition walls survive (C1.1) and what is visible appears to be well built with substantial stones embedded in clay mortar. To the north, west and south is a 1.5m wide drainage ditch. The east wall is very eroded, its line can barely be followed and no entrance can be discerned. Each cell is approx 2.8m x 3m. At some stage after its partial collapse or demolition the structure was modified and poor quality dry-stone walling (C1.2) was built inside the south wall, on top of the inner half of the west wall of the southern compartment, on top of the partition wall and inside the east and north walls of the northern compartment. In the modified southern compartment an entrance (C1.3) was created on the east side, and access to the northern compartment may have been over the lowest section of the earlier west wall. What might be a drain can be seen in the floor of the southern compartment (C1.4)

To the east and south of the structure double-faced wall lines (C2) can clearly be discerned within the boulders of the beach, creating two enclosures (C2.1 and C2.3). However these walls never rise above the level of the beach, are made entirely of beach boulders and filled by beach boulders. Within enclosure C2.1 what could be a former path runs from the southeast corner of the building across the enclosure. The main northeast/southwest line of walling seems originally to have continued along the top of the beach to the south (C2.5) for more than 20m before petering out close to the township field boundary. To the southeast of C2.3 another enclosure (C2.4) has been created. The walling is made of irregularly placed single boulders and seems to have been created on top of the beach rather than built into it, suggesting that it is later.

The well laid out plan, carefully selected stone, clay mortar and stone built partition wall of the earliest form of the building suggest that it was built in the first half of the 19th century. It is possible that the double-faced enclosure walls were created at the same time and that when built they were above the beach. This could suggest a small house and garden on the edges of the township, perhaps built after the clearances by someone hoping to make a living as a fisherman, although the beach would have been far from ideal for launching and landing a boat. Subsequently storms could have filled the enclosures with beach boulders and damaged the east wall of the house leading to its abandonment. The dry-stone modifications to the building and enclosure C2.4 could indicate later use as sheep pens or the like.

D Possible dyke/wall NC 0411 33975

In a sloping hollow on the north side of the headland are a few isolated stones in a rough curve leading to a short row of seven closely placed stones. They could

indicate the remains of a dyke, but not enough survives to be sure what, if anything, it enclosed.

E Promontory Dun NC04200 34020

The Dun has long been known and its main features described. It is assumed to be of iron-age date, lies at the very tip of the headland and consists of a massively walled sub-circular enclosure (E2) and across a narrow natural arch the remains of a small tower or blockhouse and a further enclosed area (E3). These features would have been both visible and imposing when seen from the sea, but largely hidden by higher ground to the west when approached overland. Across these western approaches there are signs of what might be a hitherto unrecorded outwork (E1).

E1 now consists of a curving line of embedded stones most of which barely rise through the surface of the turf. It cuts across the headland just to the landward side of the highest point west of E2, which lies approximately 25m to the east. The longer section (E1.1) runs up from the lower northern cliff towards the highest point, but a little to the west of it. Here, where anyone approaching the Dun overland would encounter the barrier, there is a gap (E1.3), which is interpreted as an entrance. There is then a further short line of stones (E1.2) running due east to the higher southern cliff top. The position of the wall line and the presumed entrance make it fairly certain that it is connected in some way to the Dun and not simply a later field boundary. In sections E1.1 and E1.2 there are some indications that there may once have been inner and outer faces to this feature, but at no point are there any signs of a ditch or bank and most of the stones appear fairly small. If this feature was ever a substantial wall or bank it has been severely robbed out, perhaps deliberately erased from the landscape. But if it was designed less for defence than to make the Dun complex visible from the west then something like a wooden or wicker palisade could have served the purpose well and left little trace in the landscape beyond a few stones originally used to pack and support the timberwork.

E2 is a massively built curving rampart between 2.3m and 3m thick with an entrance at its southern end and there are indications of possible internal structures. The rampart is constructed with inner and outer faces and a rubble core. The outer face of the northwest and southwest sections of the rampart (E2.1), parts of survive to over 1m high is constructed of large boulders, many over 1m square, whereas to the north and northeast there are no facing stones and the walling is little more than an amorphous mound (E2.2). However the ground to the north slopes steeply and immediately below the cliff edge but above the high-water line, there are piles of stones of similar size to those facing E2.1. These are presumed to be fallen facing stones from the rampart. E2.2 appears to fork towards the southeast. One arm (E2.3) turns down the steeply sloping ground to the cliff edge and could have protected the natural arch from an approach from the north. The other arm (E2.4) continues to run along the top of the sloping ground and ends close to the route down to the arch. The entrance through the rampart is 2.2m wide at its outer end but narrows to 1.8m at its inner end and the ground surface slopes steeply down through the rampart into the interior which is at a markedly lower level than the ground outside to the west. The short section of rampart to the south of the entrance has lost most of its facing stones. The interior face of the rampart to the left of the entrance shows signs of stepped revetments of small coursed stones and the topmost layer could be the remains of a

wall walk. A little to the northeast at E2.6 the internal face survives to two or three courses but show signs of possible later rebuilding. Inside the entrance and within the 'courtyard' there are several large stones interpreted as fallen wall face. Just within the northeast inner wall face is another less substantial wall (E2.8) 0.75 m wide and running almost straight for 4.5m. At its northeast end it merges with E2.2 and to the southwest it ends at the bottom of the revetted slope (E2.7). Close to the entrance and at the bottom of E2.7 three stones suggest a corner, but this is far from conclusive. However E2.8, E2.9, the inner face of E2.4 and the base of the slope at E2.7 could indicate the outline of a sub-rectangular structure approx 7m x 5m.

E3 has been built on the stack beyond the natural arch and seems to consist of a very substantial sub-rectangular structure about 5m x 7m and beyond it to the east an enclosed area of similar size. The main structure survives best on the north side at E3.1 where up to four courses of well-built masonry are visible. The majority of the surviving stones have an outer face approximately 0.5m wide and 0.3m high and some can be seen to be 0.5m deep or more. Their outer face is chamfered and so the wall has a batter. However this chamfer occurs naturally in the rock of the headland and was most probably selected rather than created. The section of wall at E3.1 is very slightly concave and at its west end turns sharply into E3.2, a much less well-preserved section of similar walling facing the arch bridge. The stones at the junction are missing and it could have been either a right angle or a curve. To the south the surface of the stack rises and at E3.3 only the lowest courses of the wall survive and consist of three large sub-circular slabs. The wall beyond E3.3 turns northeast and then east following the cliff top and here it is even less well preserved and consists of smaller stones and rubble. Internally the whole surface is mounded rubble with some projecting stones (E3.4) suggesting a possible inner face. At E3.5 there are signs of what might have been the northeast wall of this structure but no facing stones are visible and only a short steep drop along the northeast edge suggests it may have been a wall. The eastern end of the stack has far less surface material and only a low bank at E3.7, a few low mounds at E3.8 and three laid stones at E3.9 to indicate any structure at all. A large part of the surface area is badly eroded (E3.6). T.C. Welsh suggested in 1971 that the features at the eastern end of the stack were earlier foundations, but the stones at E3.9 are of similar size to those at E3.1, have a similar chamfer and appear to have been laid in the same manner, and so we conclude that the substantial structure and the enclosure are contemporary.

The carefully coursed stones of similar size and the overall rectangular form of E3 contrasts with the massive boulder wall and generally circular form of E2. This has led to speculation that E3 could be later than E2. However a similar contrast can be seen at the nearby iron-age Broch at Clachtoll where the broch tower is of carefully coursed masonry and the outwork of even more massive boulders. But the broch tower is sub-circular, the coursing much less regular and no use has been made of chamfered stones to create a batter. Conversely there are fewer chamfered blocks readily available at Clachtoll and the stack at Rubh an Dunain requires a rectilinear plan. E2 and E3 are therefore interpreted as broadly contemporary although E3 could be later.

The unusual construction of the shieling dyke, the fact that only a small area of the headland shows signs of cultivation, and the discovery of outwork (E1) raises more questions. Could the dyke and either the whole Dun complex (E1, E2 & E3) or one or

more phases of the Dun be contemporary? Does the later shieling preserve the outline of an iron age or early medieval fortified farmstead and its fields?