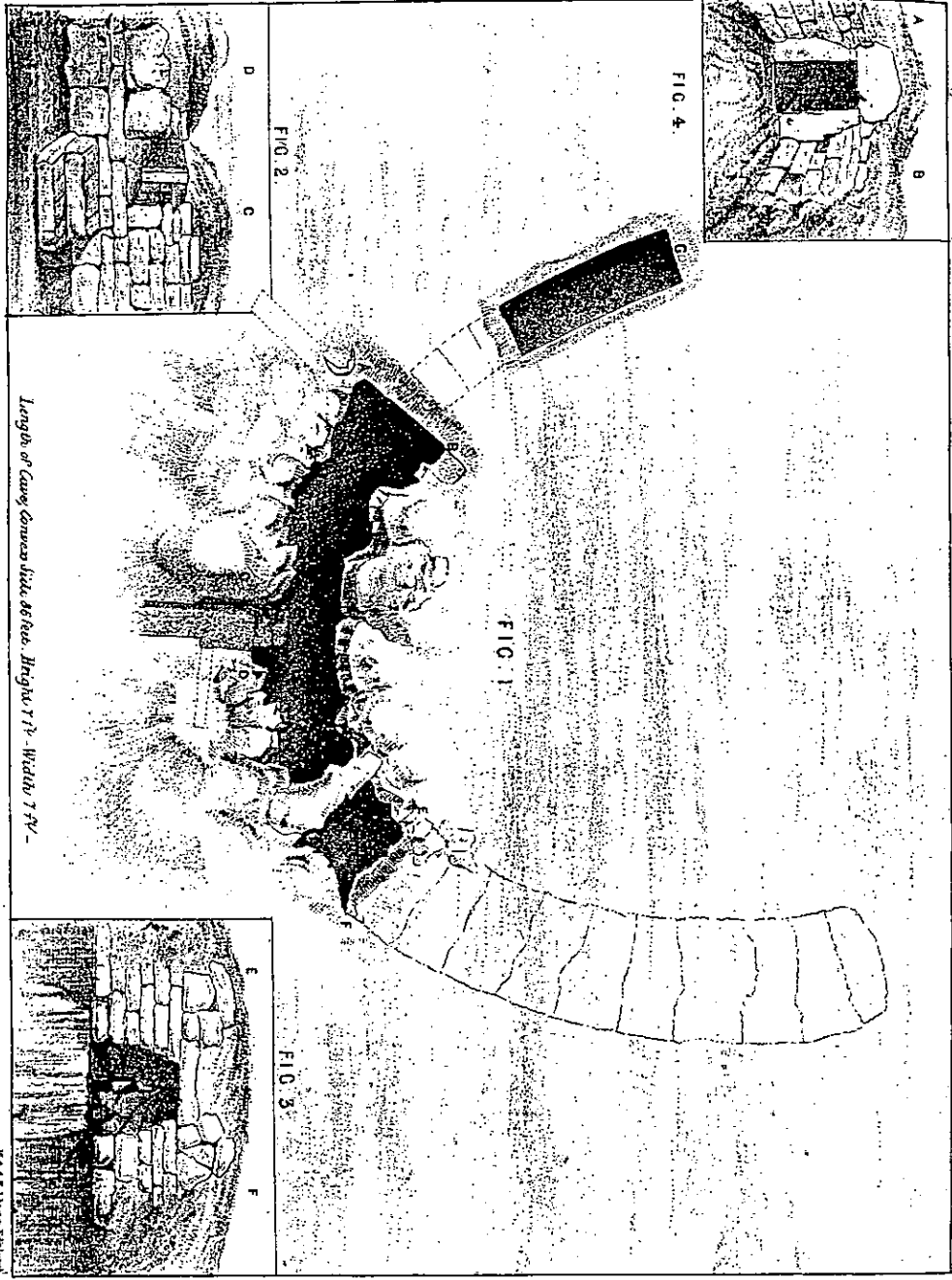


SOUTERRAIN, RAITS CAVE, LYNCHAT

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UNDERGROUND BUILDING DISCOVERED AT BELLEVILLE  
PARISH OF ALVEY, INVERNESS-SHIRE



*Length of Gang Corries like at Raes. Heights 7 1/2 - Within 7 1/2 -*

Source: Proc Soc Ant Scot 5  
(1862-64) Plate III.

SOUTERRAIN, "RAIT'S CAVE", LYNCHAT

Rait's Cave is a fairly well-preserved souterrain or earth-house, set into a hillside above the new A9 at Lynchat. It is unusual in this area, in that it unlike most of the Highland souterrains, being closely related to those of Angus and Aberdeenshire. It comprises a wide, curving, 'horse-shoe' shaped chamber, of which some 30% still has the roof lintels intact. The only find known to have come from the site (in 1835) was 'a lock of unusual form, almost destroyed by rust'.

Souterrains are obscure sites. Their functions have been variously postulated as winter stalls for domestic animals; as underground storerooms; as refuges; and as some kind of places of worship. Despite several excavations on sites of this kind, little evidence has been forthcoming either to support these theories, or to suggest any other use. It seems most likely that they were used as places of storage, as the temperature and humidity would have been relatively stable.

Most of the Highland examples are much narrower, often straight or cruciform, while many end in small, corbelled cells. While structurally very different, they may very well have served the same function.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Rait's Cave is the multitude of stories and legends which attach to it, despite the assertion by Sir David Brewster in 1865 (the son-in-law of the translator of Ossian's poems and the then Principal of Edinburgh University) that 'there is no tradition among the people respecting the history of this cave'.

One such story emanates from the diaries of one Reverend William Blair, minister of Kingussie from 1724 to 1786. On a journey from Edinburgh to Inverness he mentions the site in the following terms:-

"We visited the cave of Clan Ichilnew, which is not far from the side of the highroad. We descended into it, and found the greater part of it fallen in, and could only perceive a dark hole through which we could not see the farther end. The stones that support the roof are of an enormous size - in length about 12 feet. The accounts

given of this subterranean mansion are various. The people there (Raitts) give this account: That in primitive ages, when anarchy prevailed throughout the island, the country was infested with men of a gigantic stature who had often made fruitless attempts to conquer the island. Being repulsed at a time when they made their last and most formidable attack, such as were not killed in the flight or escaped by sea fled into the mountains, and being closely pursued by the enemy until night stopt the pursuit, they advanced so far as the Spey, and in a night's time finished the said cave, and lived there for some time, till, by the continual searches of the conquerors, they were at last discovered and every man killed.'

Another description, where it is called 'MacNiven's Cave', refers to a conflict between the MacNivens and the MacPhersons of Cluny. According to 'Old Baillid' (Captain Alexander Macpherson), the conflict culminated in the slaying of all the MacNivens 'except eighteen that contrived to conceal themselves in the woods of Raitts'. He goes on:

'These men managed to elude the vengeance of Allaster Gaint (Cluny's man) until they constructed a cave under the floor of their dwelling house, and which they did with such skill and secrecy that they were enabled to keep possession of the place for several years ... until the cave was discovered by the following stratagem ... He (Allaster Gaint) ... disguised himself in the habit of a beggar, and came in that character to the house of the MacNivens late of an evening, when he was kindly treated by the women, but refused lodgings for the night. He begged hard to be allowed to remain, and when they attempted to remove him by force, he pretended to be afflicted by the gravel ... they had pity on him ... where he pretended to fall asleep and by this artifice discovered the cave; for they men, believing him to be really asleep, the door was opened for their supper....'

All the unfortunate MacNivens were beheaded upon the stump of a tree in front of the door a few days later. These accounts, in more detail, will be available on the bus.

RBG: 1986.