

# Explosive find spurs research project at lonely Lochindorb...

SEEN through a snorkel mask, it looked innocent enough - perhaps an old beer can or a discarded aerosol lodged in the loch bed and partially obscured by the murky waters.

But when Ken McComiskie reached the surface after diving to retrieve the mysterious metal cylinder, it assumed a more sinister shape.

"For a start it had tail fins," he remembers. "I realised fairly quickly that I was holding an unexploded mortar bomb, and made my way into shallow water, laid it down carefully, and went for help."

The bomb had lain on the floor of Lochindorb since World War II, when troops used its famous island castle for target practice. The device was made safe, but Mr McComiskie, an amateur diver on his first visit, had already realised the loch and its ruined island fortress was a place where the unexpected could almost be relied on.

Last August, four years after the potentially explosive find, Mr McComiskie made another loch-bed discovery - a pot dating from the 14th century. By then he was already hooked, however - fascinated by the loch and

what lay beneath its surface.

Last week, years of preparatory work came to fruition when Mr McComiskie joined a team of underwater archaeologists as the first phase of an ambitious amphibious research programme was launched.

His determination - shared with fellow diver Matt Kaye - to uncover the loch's secrets has stoked the momentum behind the project, and their enthusiasm was instrumental in persuading a team from the Scottish Trust for Underwater Archaeology to act as advisers.

Led by Dr Nicholas Dixon, the five-strong diving team spent last week surveying the lochside and beneath its surface, preparing computer-generated models which will determine future research.

Although the island, home to the famous ruins of Lochindorb Castle, is the main focus of the underwater work, the loch, almost two miles long and a mile across, is being studied as a whole.

The necessity of an all-inclusive approach was demonstrated last week, when the divers discovered underwater tree stumps near the north bank, suggesting that the water level had risen

By Jim Wilson

by as much as two metres over the centuries. That discovery will shape the team's study of the island itself.

"It's like a huge jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing and the box top lost, so you don't have a picture to work from," said Dr Dixon.

"At this stage we simply don't know what will prove important, so everything we find must be planned in until we have a detailed scheme for the loch. Only then can we begin thinking about the next phase."

The STUA has links with the archaeology department at Edinburgh University, where Dr Dixon, a research fellow, is at the forefront of underwater archaeology.

The peaty nature of the water in many Scottish lochs means that bacteria is reduced to low levels, with items - even usually perishable material such as wood and leather - able to remain remarkably undamaged underwater for centuries.

"The underwater heritage of Scotland is as rich as you will find anywhere in the world," said Dr Dixon. "The country's lochs and coastline offer an almost unique oppor-

tunity to gain insight into its history."

Underwater archaeology has developed rapidly over recent decades, but with funding limited, the Scottish team must choose its projects carefully.

"The Lochindorb island and the history surrounding its castle made it an attractive proposition, but what sealed our involvement was the enthusiasm of Ken and Matt, who are determined to increase the knowledge of and public interest in what is already a fairly well-known loch," said Dr Dixon.

"To have a dedicated team working to support current and future research makes our job both easier and more rewarding. It is certainly an exciting project to be involved in."

The STUA has been in on a number of prestigious projects, including the discovery that an island in Loch Tay is in fact a crannog, a man-made island, dating from the Bronze Age. One of the priorities of the Lochindorb project is to establish if the castle's island is artificial.

"Crannogs were usually built to protect settlements

and their cattle from predators, whether human or animal," said Dr Dixon. "Early impressions certainly suggest that the Lochindorb island has characteristics consistent with it being artificial, and our work will aim to establish whether the island is man-made and, if it is, whether it was inhabited before the castle was built."

The team searched in vain for signs that a causeway linked the island to the lochside, and if further work confirms that the castle could only be reached by boat, another piece of the historical jigsaw will have been fitted into place.

A one-time lair of the infamous Wolf of Badenoch, Alexander Stewart, Lochindorb Castle has changed hands many times since it was wrenched from its first recorded owners, the Comyns, in 1303.

The isolated loch, formerly cushioned in a blanket of Scots pine, has long lain exposed to the elements. Its castle is now literally falling victim to nature, and after being besieged, burned and, most recently, bombed, the process of its dereliction is slowly being completed by bushes and trees breaking

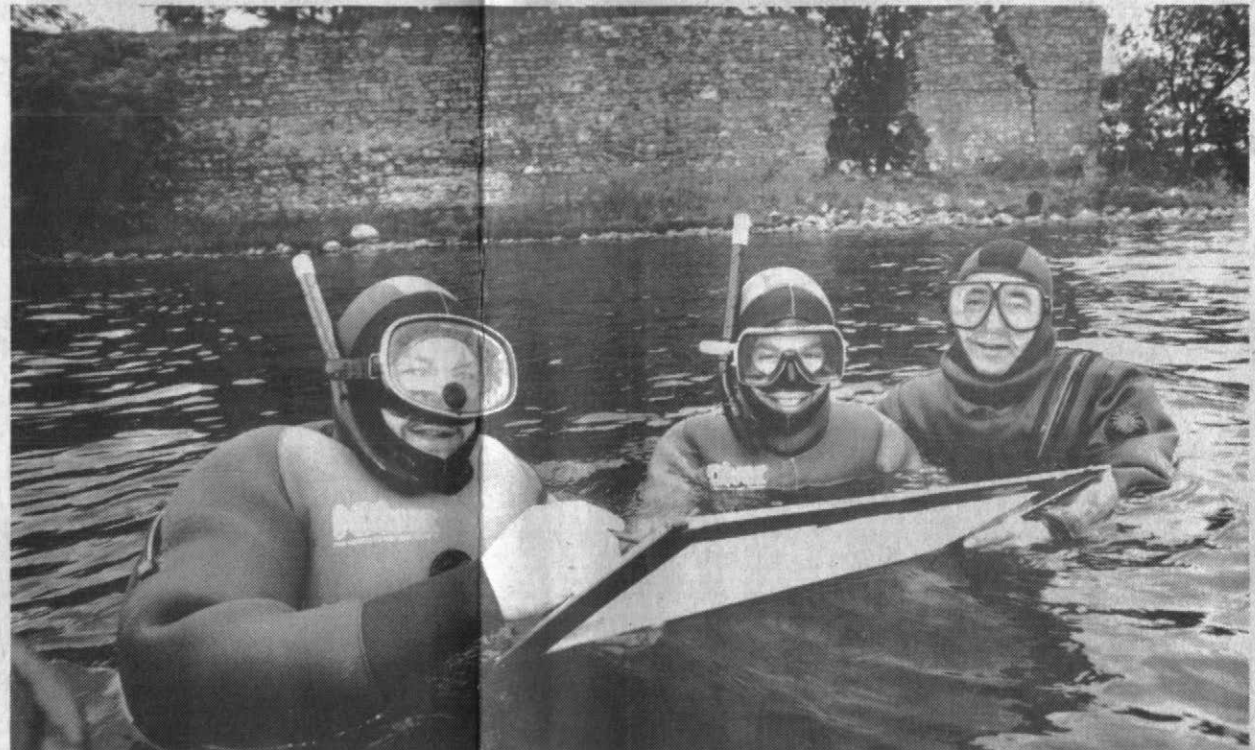
through walls and undermining foundations.

Its worsening state of repair is a disappointment to Mr McComiskie, who has noticed further deterioration since his first visit five years ago, and fears that the castle's structure could be lost completely.

"Restoration work on the island was planned in the 1980s, along with proposals to establish facilities for visitors, but I understand the plans were abandoned when funding collapsed," he said. "But to see a team of underwater archaeologists working at the loch is a tremendous boost after trying for years to get things moving."

Plans steered by Mr McComiskie, an aviation fuel engineer, and Mr Kaye, a geologist, to set up a Lochindorb Heritage Trust are at an advanced stage, and this week Mr McComiskie invited anyone with any interest in or information about the loch to get in touch.

"We hope to have the trust up and running in the near future, and would welcome enquiries or local knowledge about Lochindorb," he said. "The trust will help steer research into all aspects of



Three divers taking part in the exploration of Lochindorb study an underwater map before taking a closer look at the castle wall. Pictured are, from left, Dr Nicholas Dixon, Ms Barrie Andrian, Scottish Trust for Underwater Archaeology projects director and diver Mr Ken McComiskie.

the loch, and hopefully raise funds to support the research that has now started."

The team behind the Heritage Trust, including Gwen Melvin and Julie Downie, have provisionally drafted a five-year research schedule, and hope in the long term to establish a Lochindorb visitor centre.

The trust has already been instrumental in gaining spon-

sorship for the project, with several Aberdeen-based firms, including James Aiken Sheet Metal and Shanks and MacEwan supporting last week's diving, and other specialist companies promising future help. Mr Alisdair Laing, who owns the land surrounding the loch and Lochindorb Lodge, where the diving team were based last week, is also supporting the

project. It was from Lochindorb that the castle's most famous tenant, the Wolf of Badenoch, led his men to Elgin and Forres and put the towns to the torch as his conflict with the Bishop of Moray escalated. However, Mr McComiskie believes the Wolf's reputation as a medieval terrorist is undeserved. "I might not have wanted

him as a next-door neighbour, but I think there is a case in his defence," he said. "The Bishop had basically ordered him to throw out his mistress, who was the mother of his five sons, and have his wife back or else."

"He does get a bit of a bad press, so hopefully through the work at the loch we can find something to clean up his reputation a bit."