EMBARGOED UNTIL 12 NOON ON
THURSDAY NOVEMBER 12TH

THE WORLD'S OLDEST BREW

From the bonnie banks of heather
They brewed a drink longsyne
Was sweeter far than honey
Was stronger far than wine

Robert Louis Stevenson
"Heather Ale" from "A Galloway Legend"

Tradition has it that the recipe for the ancient Celtic heather ale, the potent home brew of the Bronze and early Iron Ages, was lost forever in the Dark Ages when the recipe holders chose death rather than reveal their secrets.

However, modern science can solve many mysteries and thank to some complex archaeological detective work, under the sponsorship of Glenfiddich malt whisky distillers, William Grant & Sons, the long-lost brew has been re-discovered and may soon be available to modern day palates.

The story began on the picturesque Inner Hebridean island of Rhum in 1985, when freelance archaeologists, Caroline Wickham-Jones and Dave Pollock, on a Historic Buildings and Monuments dig, found traces of Neolithic communities dating back 4000 years to circa 2000 B.C. They unearthed several insignificant pot sherds measuring not more than 2 ins, 4 of which contained a black crust on the inside.

Edinburgh based archaeo-botanist, Brian Moffat, analysed the crust finding, much to his excitement, that it consisted of a set of pollen and spores which could not occur together naturally. These included cereals, apparently a mixture of oats and barley; heather indicating honey; meadowsweet; and royal fern amongst other herbs. Probably collected in late summer or early autumn, all these suggested that the pot was used in the production of a fermented brew.
Eager to investigate the detailed nature of this brew, the archaeologists, now based at the Artifact Research Unit run by the National Museums of Scotland, sought the help of experts. William Grant & Sons, distillers of Glenfiddich Malt whisky, who are currently celebrating their centenary year, were delighted to assist. A series of experimental brews were made up in their distillery, under the supervision of the Chief Chemist, George Wilkin.

"There were many problems to overcome in finding the right quantities of ingredients, but it has been a fascinating project," Mr Wilkin said.

"There are many parallels between this drink the Ancients brewed and African honey beers which are still produced today."

"At nine percent proof, which is about as strong as wine, there's no doubt that the Neolithic people to brew something sophisticated enough to keep out the hard winters!" he concluded.

The archaeologists, led by site director, Carolin Wickham-Jones are hoping the brew is not too savage for modern tastes. Should it ever be possible to brew it for the commercial market, they would like to see any royalties going towards benefitting Scottish archaeological research in some way.

"It is great to work on a project as exciting as this, to show people that archaeology can have direct relevance today. To get the chance to taste this brew really brings the past alive and hopefully will catch the modern public's imagination," Caroline said.

End

Further information from: Ailsa MacMillan
Tait & McLay
9 Royal Crescent
Glasgow G3 7SP
NEOLITHIC BREW IN NEOLITHIC POTS

The reconstructed Neolithic Brew has been made as exact as possible, using the probable techniques and ingredients employed 4000 years ago.

This versimilitude has even extended to serving the drink from replica Neolithic pots, specifically commissioned by William Grant and Sons from Orkney potter, Sandy Matthews.

Sandy is an acknowledged expert in the field of ancient pottery and she was delighted with the challenge.

She collected buckets of clay from the island cliffs, which then had to be sorted and prepared.

"I had to pick over the clay to clear out the veins of sandstone, then soak it down into very thick slip", she explained.

The pots were then made by a mixture of coil and thumb techniques before being fired outdoors.

"I had to wait until the weather was suitable before I could make the kiln. I used a natural hollow, lining it with peat turfs, leaving a gap underneath for the fire. I then embedded the pots, leaving them to burn as slowly as possible," Sandy concluded.

Sandy Matthews works from Fursbreck Pottery, Harray, Orkney, telephone, 0856 77419.

Further information from: Ailsa MacMillan
Tait & Melay
9 Royal Crescent
Glasgow G3 7SP
Tel: 041 332 0193

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