THE ARTIFACT RESEARCH UNIT OF THE
NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF SCOTLAND

The Artifact Research Unit was set up in 1978 as a centre for studying archaeological objects from the Museum's collection and from excavations.

Its main aim is to improve our understanding of the way artifacts were made and used in Scotland's distant past. A special feature of the Unit is its emphasis on practical and experimental work, involving members in activities such as manufacturing stone tools and living for a week as stone age hunter-gatherers in Sweden.

The Unit is staffed by freelance professional archaeologists and hosts visiting scholars from Scotland and abroad.

The Rhum excavation project, supported by the Archaeology Department of the National Museums of Scotland, has been based in the Unit since its launch in 1984.

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NEOLITHIC ALE DISCOVERED
ON ISLAND OF RHUM

The earliest evidence yet of alcohol being consumed in Scotland was discovered by Caroline Wickham-Jones and her team of archaeologists during a three-year excavation on the island of Rhum, funded by Historic Buildings and Monuments for £133,000.

The site at Kinloch, dated to 8,500 years ago, was first used by mesolithic hunter-gatherers and was discovered in 1983 when ploughing brought thousands of small bloodstone flakes to the surface, waste from the making and using of stone tools.

Excavation began in 1984 which confirmed Kinloch’s status as the oldest recorded site of human habitation in Scotland. Work continued in 1985 and 1986 to learn more about the nature of the site.

In 1985 the remains of a 4,000-year old neolithic farming community were also unearthed. Domestic rubbish was found in an old, in-filled burn and some sherds of pottery contained traces of a fermented drink, the earliest alcohol yet discovered in Scotland. Now after sponsorship from William Grant & Sons, distillers of Glenfiddich malt whisky, the recipe for the long-lost neolithic ale has been recreated from those traces and the beverage is ready to be sampled.
NOTES TO NEWS EDITORS

The excavations on Rhum were carried out in advance of further cultivation of the site by the Nature Conservancy Council, who manage the island, and is part of Historic Buildings and Monuments' programme of rescue archaeology.

Caroline Wickham-Jones is a freelance archaeologist based at the Artifact Research Unit of the Royal Museum of Scotland.

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