Macleod Vault
Assynt Old Parish Church
Kirkton, Inchnadamph

Archaeological Assessment of the Roof

Project Design

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on behalf of

Historic Assynt

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1.0 Introduction

This document details a project design for the recording and evaluation of the deposits overlying the roof of the Macleod Vault, the mausoleum of the Macleods of Assynt which lies in the burial ground of Assynt Old Parish Church at Kirkton, Inchnadamph.

The roof of the Macleod Vault is now obscured by moss and tree growth, making its original form unclear. Although the ash trees have been continually cut back in the last few years, they have re-established themselves rapidly, suggesting the presence of a considerable depth of soil. ‘Heath’ is described as growing on top of the arch in 1794 (Mackenzie 1794, 207), suggesting that the roof may always have been of turf; if so, its present mounded appearance must be the result of the build up of earth and humic matter over the subsequent two centuries. Slabs visible along the wallhead on the east side appear to be original and, if the roof was of turf, may have provided protection for the wall head. Whether or not they originally covered the whole roof is less obvious. Minimising water ingress into the interior is essential if the Macleod Vault is to be conserved and to ensure this the material overlying the roof will have to be removed under controlled archaeological conditions, prior to a full assessment of the roof being made.

2.0 Historical and Archaeological Background

The Macleod Vault is the family mausoleum of the Macleods of Assynt and is thought to have been added onto an earlier church in the sixteenth century. It is a small rectangular building, constructed of random rubble, with some red sandstone quoins surviving at the south west and south east corners. The vault is aligned north east - south west and lies just to the south east of the present church, which dates to the mid eighteenth century (Campbell 2002). It formerly had a second storey, reputedly used as a chapel, which was demolished prior to the end of the eighteenth century (Mackenzie 1794, 207). The remains of this upper floor are probably represented by the tumble around the vault, which is particularly prominent on its west side. The doorway in the north-east wall, which provides the only access into the mausoleum, is believed to have been blocked up sometime in the 1960’s; prior to this the interior had always been open and had never had a door, at least within living memory (George Morrison, pers. comm.). Internally, the high arched vault appears to be intact; it rises 3.43m above the present level of the floor, while the rectangular chamber measures 3.70m NE-SW by 2.70m NW-SE. A central crack, splitting into two towards the north east, is present in the spine of the vault. There are a number of other minor cracks in the walls of the vault, but none appear to be serious enough to affect the structural stability of the building.

At the time that the blocking of the door into the vault was removed, the structure of the roof was evaluated in three locations. Two small slot trenches were dug through the earth and rubble overlying the vault itself, while the character of the slabs at the wallhead on the north east side of the vault was also assessed. Given the fact that the mausoleum appears to be sound internally, it has been assumed that no additional information would have been gained by extending the roof slots down to the level of the vault, as the amount of stone and number of roots made this impossible in such a small trench.

The first slot, approximately 300mm by 600mm, was located in the centre of the west wall, behind the wallhead. Against the wall head, the presence of similar cement based mortar as that found in the blocking of the doorway suggests that repairs were undertaken in this area at the same time as the vault was walled up. The roof deposits were taken down to a depth of
approximately 300mm. This proved that unshaped rubble, similar to that encountered elsewhere in the structure of the vault, was randomly distributed through an earth matrix, covered by a layer of moss. Some of this rubble had mortar adhering to it and decayed mortar was present within the earth matrix. The mortar appeared to become more concentrated with depth. The pervasiveness of the tree roots was clearly visible within the slot and made it impracticable to continue down to the stones of the vault. The second slot was located underneath a flat slab lying on the crest of the vault. The slab proved not to be in situ, as it lay over a similar matrix of earth and decayed mortar to that encountered in the first slot. In this case, however, there was very little rubble. A slot, c. 200mm by 200mm, was dug to a depth of 370mm. The highest point in the roof build up is approximately 3.35m above external ground level, suggesting a build up of almost 1m over the top of the vault; it was decided that little additional information could be gleaned from extending the slot to this depth at that stage. Within the slot, no traces of the floor for the upper apartment of the vault, which was demolished prior to 1794, were encountered.

On the east side a number of roughly rectangular slabs, approximately 800m long by 400mm and aligned with the axis of the vault, remain in place at the wall head. The slabs are a pale grey, finely laminated schistose stone, although they have been described as Caithness flagstone in previous assessments of the roof structure. Such slabs could have been obtained relatively locally, as this rock outcrops just to the east of the Moine Thrust zone (Neil Campbell, pers. comm.). Significantly, Ardvreck Castle seems to have been roofed with a similar stone. At the north east corner of the roof, three overlapping slabs were lifted. Each of these was bedded on lime mortar and - although now loose - they appeared to be in their original positions. No further disturbance was created in this area. The slabs would have provided an effective means of sealing the wallhead. As the slab on the crest of the vault was not in situ and few others were apparent on the top of the roof, it seems possible that the slabs - rather than covering the whole roof - did just protect the wallhead.

3.0 Aims and Objectives

The aim of this project is to record the material overlying the Macleod Vault and to try and establish the nature of the original roof.

4.0 Methodology

- Photograph and compile a scale plan at 1:20 of the roof of the vault prior to excavation.

A comprehensive record of the material overlying the vault will be essential prior to work beginning. In particular, it will enable the nature of the slabs along the wallhead to be evaluated, as well as ensuring that they can be replaced in their original locations.

- Carefully excavate a trench through the material overlying the roof in order to assess its character and significance.

It is intended to lay out a trench, 1m wide, running across the entire axis of the vault. This will be excavated down to the upper side of the vault, in the hope of finding evidence of the original upper floor, as well as for how the vault was roofed, once this floor was removed. The trench will be positioned on the south east side of the vault, in the hope of determining whether this gable is a later addition. The deposits exposed will be recorded in plan through measured drawings at a scale of 1:20, scaled photographs and written description. It is intended to catalogue the finds recovered and provide a brief assessment of their character, purpose and possible date.
It is intended that all this work will be undertaken once a scaffolded platform has been erected around the vault, enabling both easier access and the establishment of a suitable mechanism for getting spoil/stone from roof to ground level safely and securely. All spoil will be bagged and removed from the immediate environs of the churchyard.

Unless clear evidence for features of archaeological significance are revealed, the removal of the rest of the overburden will be subject to a watching brief. All material will be removed by hand, under the supervision of an appropriately qualified archaeologist. This will include the removal and placement in a safe location of the wallhead slabs.

- Once the overburden has been removed, make an assessment of the nature and purpose of the original roof.

In consultation with the architect and Historic Scotland, appropriate methods for reinstating the deposits overlying the roof of the vault will be proposed on the basis of the evidence revealed.

4.0 Products

The products of the fieldwork will include an illustrated data structure report detailing the findings of the evaluation and any proposed mitigation measures necessary. A note will also be submitted to Discovery and Excavation in Scotland on the fieldwork results. These will be produced within two weeks of the completion of fieldwork.

Copies of the report will be deposited with the Historic Environment Record at Highland Council and the National Monuments Record.

6.0 Bibliography

