History

The school at Loch Croispol was built in the mid 1760s as a parish school for Durness, and in some ways was a forebear of the current Durness Primary School. The first schoolmaster, Donald Munro, was appointed in 1767; he also acted as Precentor, leading the singing during church services, and as Session Clerk, keeping records for the church.

The Kirk records provide us with a great deal of information about the school. For example, this extract from the Kirk Session account book details repairs and alterations to the school in the later 18th century.

1773 Aug 8	*By paid for a skylight to the schoolhouse*	£0.1.8.
1775 Aug 27	*By John Bain for mending the schoolhouse*	£0.1.0.
	By paid Angus Roy and William Munro or thatching the schoolhouse	£0.2.0.
1782 Aug 16	*By cash pd. Angus MacKay, late Miller, his dft. In favour of James Craig for timber of bridge*	£0.2.9.
1788 Jan 15	*By pd. Murdoch Machustian for repairing the bridge at ye school*	£0. 1. 0.
	By do. to Angus MacLeod for snake and key to the school door	£0. 1. 0.

In 1791 the school was described as 'quite ruinous' and a significant amount of money was required for repairs. This may be when the eastern room was plastered and floored.

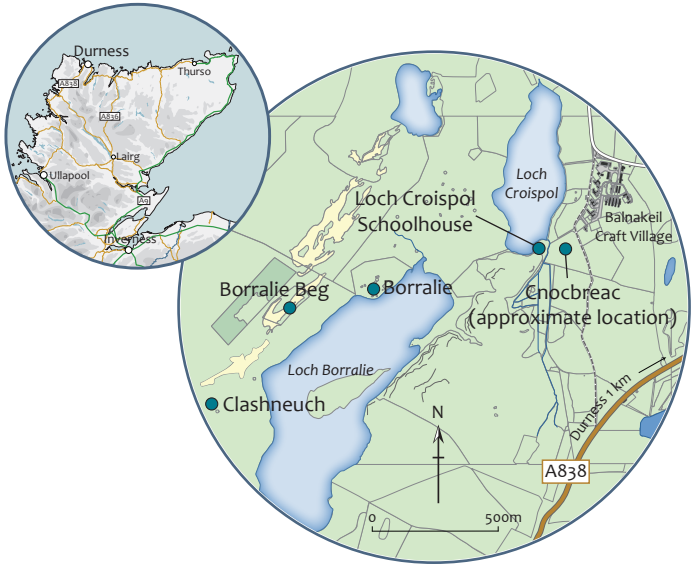
With the appointment of William Ross as schoolmaster in 1811, a controversial period in the school's history began. Aged only 16 when he took up the post, Ross was a local boy who may originally have attended the school, and combined his role of teacher with studies at the University of Aberdeen. By 1822, the relationship between Ross and the local minister, Rev William Findlater, had broken down, culminating in the discovery that Ross had falsified documents in support of his application to study Divinity at Aberdeen. He was eventually sacked but refused to leave the schoolhouse, leading to a protracted legal battle. This eventually reached the House of Lords, who ruled in favour of Ross.

The tenacious Ross stayed at the school but became embroiled in further scandal in 1840. By around 1850, the school had no pupils left, leaving Ross in the peculiar position of a teacher without a class! In 1861, Ross was removed from the post but stayed in the schoolhouse until his death, sometime after 1871.

'I mean to die in this old spot, being so conveniently situated for angling on the Loch here'.

William Ross in a letter to James Loch, Factor to the Duke of Sutherland, 1846.

The ruinous remains of Loch Croispol Schoolhouse are a distinctive feature on the southern shore of the loch (at NGR: NC 3908 6769). Built in the 1760s, this schoolhouse represents an important stage in the development of education in the Highlands, when many communities had no access to schools. A study of the school's history and archaeology, the Loch Croispol School History Project, has revealed some intriguing insights into the characters involved in the school and helped to paint a broader picture of how the school functioned within the wider community. Today the building stands on the edge of modern Durness as a symbol of times past, when it formed a central connection between the townships of Borralie, Borralie Beg, Cnocbreac and Clashneuch.



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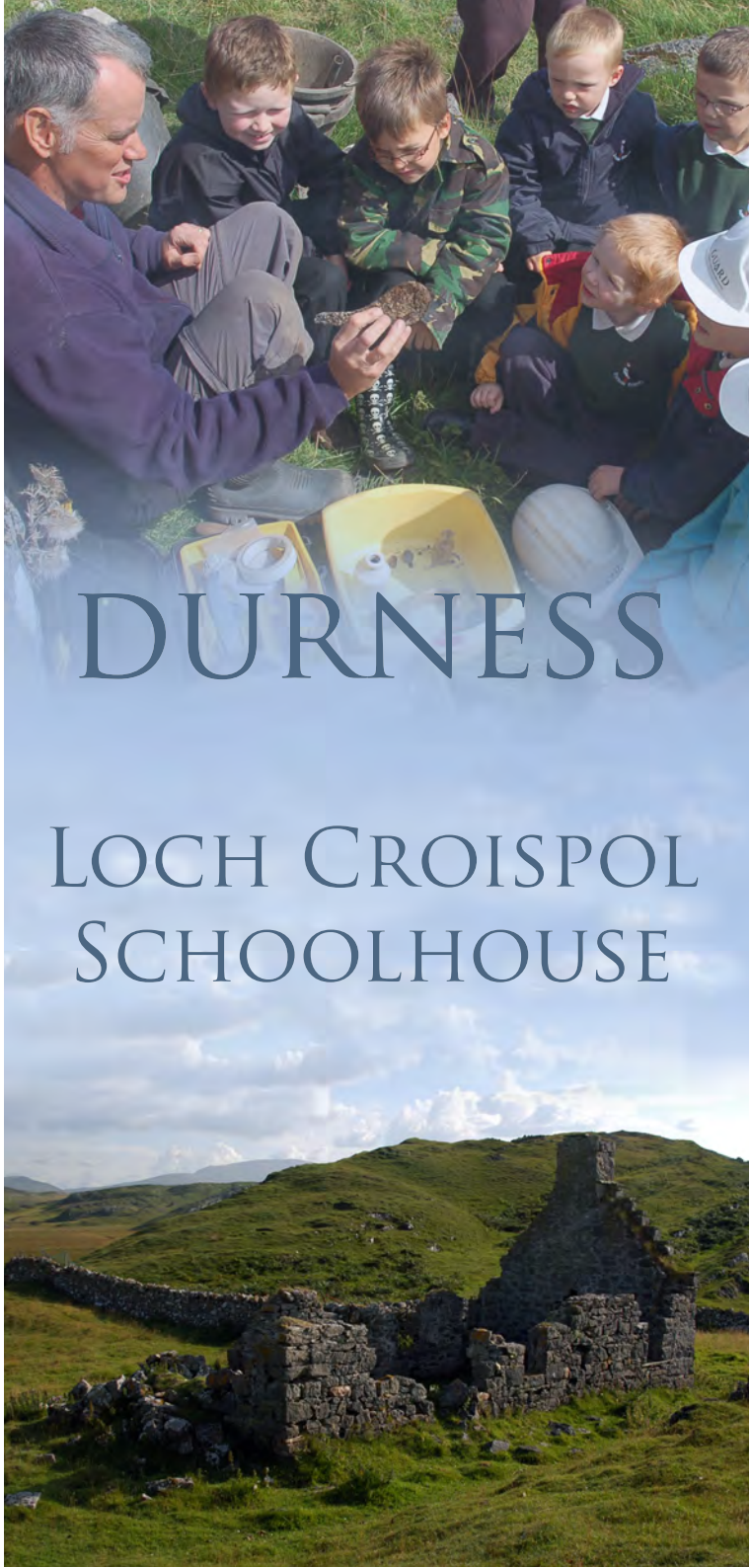


DURNESS

LOCH CROISPOL SCHOOLHOUSE

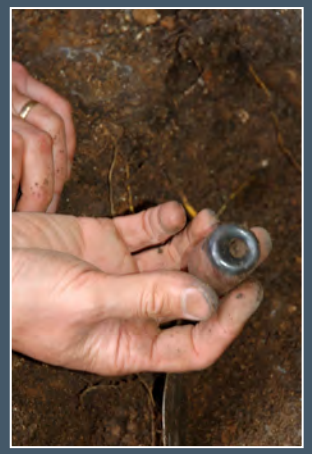
Excavation

Part of the Loch Croispol School History Project involved archaeological excavations, conducted by a team of volunteers and professional archaeologists, in and around the school itself. Much rubble and demolition debris were removed from the building, especially against the east gable. Floor layers provided insights into how the school might have looked and functioned.

School Life

The Rev John Thomson, writing in 1791, sheds some light on how the school worked. He tells us that there were 45 pupils and that the pupils would pay according to which classes they attended. The quarterly fees were: 2s. 6d. for Latin; 2s. for arithmetic; 1s. 6d for reading and writing; and 1s. for teaching to read.

Life for the children would have been driven by seasonal activities, such as the annual peat-gathering. They played an important part in this and would not have attended school during it. The parish school wasn't for everybody, all of the time, and so 45 pupils may not seem too large a number of scholars for the small classroom.



Most of the classroom activities would have involved repetitive memorisation. Religious texts, such as the Shorter Catechism and the Psalms, would have played an important part in daily learning. The pupils would have written on slates and sometimes with ink on paper.

The Garden

A walled garden was built for the school, enclosing an area where the master could grow his own food. During the archaeological excavations, children from several local primary and secondary schools helped to excavate trenches in the garden. Lot of artefacts were recovered, including pieces of 19th-century pottery and glass, but a particularly special find was a prehistoric barbed and tanged arrowhead. It may have been lost by people hunting beside the loch about 5,000 years ago! But another possibility is that a schoolmaster or pupil owned the arrowhead and lost it in the garden.

Finds

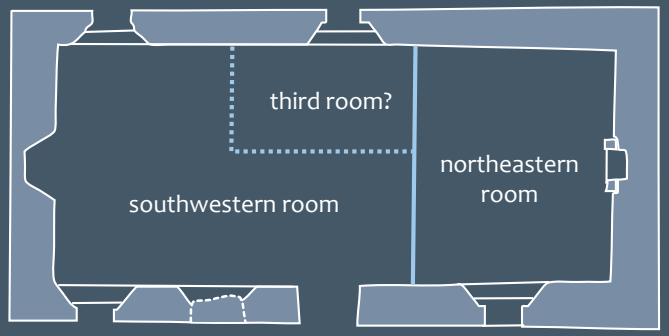
The excavation recovered many artefacts, some of them directly related to the use of the school. These included a small ceramic inkwell (shown to the left), which was probably used by a pupil, fragments of writing slate and a pencil or stylus for writing on the slate. Other finds related to the building itself. Pieces of red pantile showed that the building, at least in later years, had a tiled roof. Fragments of plaster and wood suggest that the eastern room had a timber floor and plastered walls.

Construction

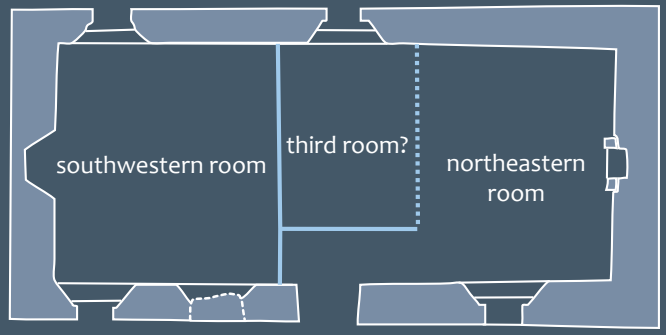
Looking at the schoolhouse today, it is the western gable with its distinctive crow-steps that is most striking. The eastern gable, now collapsed, would have mirrored this. We know that the building was originally thatched, though in later years the thatch was replaced with pantiles. ,It has one door on its southern side and at least five windows, and there may have been a sixth on the northern wall.

The archaeology demonstrated that there were at least two rooms inside the schoolhouse: a schoolroom and a room for the master, and distinctive floor levels showed that the structure had been altered and improved over time. The original floor was of clay, bedded on stones, the walls were bare stone, and each room had a fireplace in the gable wall.

Later the schoolhouse was improved, especially the eastern room: a timber floor was laid, the walls were plastered and an iron stove was inserted in the fireplace. Why this room was improved and the other was not is unclear – but it is interesting to wonder whether these improvements were for the master or for the pupils!



Phase 1 Reconstruction



Phase 2 Reconstruction

Key

suggested wall line

wall line implied by archaeological features