

The Return Trip – An t-Slighe Air Ais

If you skirt back down towards Loch Borralie, descending the slope through the gate you saw above the loch side earlier, you can turn right around the loch side and walk back over the hill via a rough cart track to Loch Croispol. When you are over the brow and above Loch Croispol, keep to the high ground above the loch to return to the stone stile by the schoohouse.

The land to the south of Balnakeil Bay, bounded on the west by the Kyle of Durness, is a landscape of grass-covered sand dunes with heathery moorland to the north around Loch Croispol. This area was home to generations of people, from at least the 2nd century AD until the 19th century, when the area was cleared of farmsteads to make way for sheep. The limestone geology has made this a fertile area, always attractive to settlement. Walking across the ground, you can see the remains of houses, fields and burial mounds that attest to this long, rich history. The fragile, dynamic qualities of the landscape mean that much of this archaeology is exposed when the wind blows out the thick layers of sand that cover ancient remains, exposing them to erosion. At other times the wind blows sand over them, protecting them and hiding them from view.

This leaflet will guide you through the archaeology and history of the area, taking you back over 2,000 years of life on the Durness limestones. Numbered wooden posts mark each of the archaeological sites highlighted here.

Walking Guide

Grade C: Walking over rough/boggy ground and some hills - a reasonable level of fitness is required.

Scottish Outdoor Access Code

Please remember Know the Code before you go. Enjoy, Respect and Protect.
For more information: www.outdooraccess-scotland.com



To learn more about Durness, visit the area's websites:

www.durness.org & www.mackaycountry.com
& www.mackaycountry.com

BORRALIE HEADLAND

RHUBHA BHORALaidH





1. Croispol schoolhouse - Taigh-sgoile Chroispal (NC 3908 6769)

At the south-east edge of Loch Croispol stands a schoolhouse that was the parish school from about 1760 to 1861. At top of the track leading down to the schoolhouse from the north-east you'll find a display board where you can read about its unusual history, and the evidence that excavation found for its use, alteration and collapse.

2. Prehistoric houses and fields – Taighean is achaidhean aosmhor

Around the south-western edge of Loch Croispol are the remains of houses and small fields where people lived and farmed more than 2,000 years ago. The houses are visible now as low circular and oval banks (like those at NC 3878 6785 and 3881 6782) that supported timber or turf walls, with a cone-shaped roof resting on a ring of posts around the hearth inside. A system of small fields extends northward from the roundhouse at NC 3877 6791, defined by stony banks and clearance cairns, created when stones were cleared to make way for cultivation.



3. Sheepfold – Crò-chaorach (NC 3879 6787)

A circular, stone-built sheepfold (or a 'stell', to use its local name) stands among the remains of prehistoric settlement beside Loch Croispol. It was built in the 19th century when people living in the area were moved out to make way for sheep farming. It stands atop a substantial circular stony bank that may be an earlier cattlefold that was robbed to build the sheepfold. Another arcing bank beneath the sheepfold could be a prehistoric house.

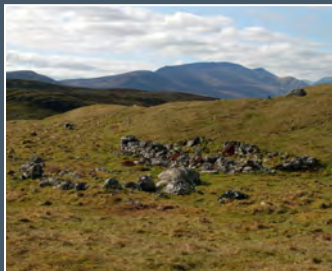


4. Farmstead – Tuathanas (NC 3871 6791)

The remains of a small farmstead are nestled in a narrow, sheltered valley to the west of Loch Croispol and the areas of prehistoric settlement. You can see the tumbled stony remains of a house, with associated dykes and clearance cairns. This was probably occupied during the 18th century, before the area was cleared for sheep.

5. Loch Croispol cairns & building – Cùirn is togalaichean Loch Chroispal (NC 3867 6781)

In a shallow bowl near the top of the ridge that separates Lochs Croispol and Borralie are the ruins of a small farmstead, with a tumbled building and a small adjacent yard. This may be the remains of a 19th-century shepherd's dwelling. Lying across the broad slope leading south-east from here (centred at NC 3872 6770) are up to 70 stone cairns. They range from 2 to 9 m across and some are defined by neat kerbs. They may relate to cultivation of the ground, but it is quite likely that at least some are prehistoric burial cairns.



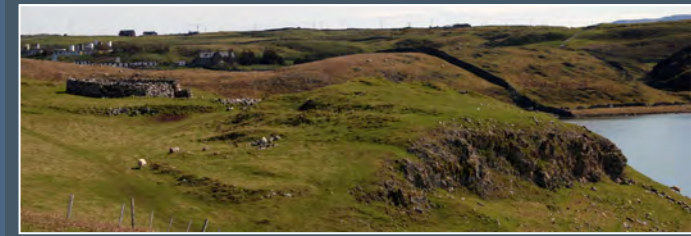
6. Hakon's Bowl prehistoric house – Taigh aosmhor Chuach Acain (NC 3850 6780)

At the northern edge of the natural amphitheatre known as Hakon's Bowl (after a Norwegian king who was said to have sheltered here) are the remains of a large prehistoric house. It is visible as a substantial circular bank, with a low curving bank outside it on the north-east that was probably an associated yard (to the right in the photo). The house once stood on the shore of a loch, evident now in the thick, soft peat covering the floor of the Bowl.



7. Hakon's Bowl mystery building – Togalach neo-aithnichte Chuach Acain (NC 3857 6767)

An enigmatic structure is tucked into the quarried face of a rocky outcrop at the mouth of Hakon's Bowl. It is defined by a stone-and-turf wall base with several upright stones. It could be a prehistoric house or a later shelter or enclosure. You can see remnants of ancient hazel woodland growing among the surrounding outcrops.



8. Loch Borralie dun and township – Baile is Dùn Loch Bhoralaidh (NC 3841 6752)

Keep to the slope above the loch shore to climb to this site on a prominent knoll overlooking Loch Borralie. You'll find an intriguing complex of buildings. The earliest is a defended homestead, visible as a pronounced circular mound ringed by a bank on the south and west, perched above the steep slope that leads down to the loch. This was probably occupied during the mid first millennium AD, and when Norse speakers arrived in the area they named it 'Borralie' after this fort (or 'borg'). A small township was built around the homestead, with several long, rectangular houses and yards. They were probably constructed using stones from the homestead, and one was dug into its south-west flank. Finally, after the inhabitants of Borralie township were evicted in the early 19th century, a sheepfold was built in its midst.



9. Loch Borralie medieval houses – Taighean meadhan-aoiseil Loch Bhoralaidh

From site 8, go through the gate at the loch side and then climb the slope diagonally towards the forestry plantation. Along the western side of Loch Borralie are two settlements dating from the 1400s. One (at NC 3807 6745) sits within a large fenced enclosure and is being investigated by archaeologists; the excavation trench outline is marked out with stones, and later (18th-century) buildings sit partly over it. The other (at NC 3780 6717) sits high above the loch in a hollow, with stone walls defining a small yard and a field beside it.



10. Loch Borralie burial cairns – Cùirn tiodhlacaidh Loch Bhoralaidh (NC 3790 6761)

Several circular and rectangular arrangements of stone, between 1 and 3 metres across, lie on this south-west facing slope in an area of limestone crags. These are burial cairns built about 2,000 years ago. The largest was partly excavated in 2000 when rabbit burrowing disturbed human remains. It covered the skeletons of two people, who had been buried at different times, one with an iron ring-headed pin. Radiocarbon dating showed that one of people died between 40 BC and AD 210.