Stills, Shielings and Retting Ponds: Survey and Excavation at the Camp Shiel Burn, Peeblesshire, Scottish Borders

Joyce Durham and Piers Dixon

ABSTRACT

The Border Magazine for March 1933 recounts a story about smugglers of illicit whisky on Minchmoor near Traquair in the Scottish Borders. Moreover, according to an intriguing local tradition, the remains of an illicit whisky still were said to be located not far from Traquair at Birkie Cleugh by the Camp Shiel Burn.[1] This project was originally conceived to investigate the possible connection between the magazine story and the surviving structural remains said to be the site of the still, by means of a combination of field and archival research undertaken by members of the Peeblesshire Archaeological Society. However, as a result of the ensuing field survey, a range of previously unknown sites was discovered along the banks of the Camp Shiel Burn, including stills, flax retting ponds and shieling huts. Of these, a shieling hut and a still were excavated, revealing the poverty of the material culture of the former and the technical care applied to the construction of the latter. The shieling hut – a type of domestic building once common to the Southern Uplands – was dated by radiocarbon determinations to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The still is dated by the musket ball found in the middle of the floor to the later eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries. No secure dating evidence was found for the other sites but their presence attests to the active role played in the local post-medieval rural economy by what has become an isolated side valley now given over almost entirely to forestry.

INTRODUCTION

> 'It is very difficult of approach, as the sides of the glen are precipitous and the bottom strewn with boulders which have been washed out of the hillside by the rains of centuries. There is not much to see, just a sort of cave: and when it was pointed out to me, about thirty years ago, I did not put much faith in the story. It was, of course, an ideal spot for such traffic: difficult of access even in daylight, it was absolutely unapproachable at night.'[2]

In 2007, the attention of author Joyce Durham was drawn to a story about smugglers of illicit whisky on Minchmoor near Traquair in the Scottish Borders in the year 1816, described in

1 Throughout this article, the place name Birkie Cleugh, meaning a birch-grown ravine, is preferred to Birkie Cleuch. It can be spelt either way, but is currently spelt Birkie Cleuch on the Ordnance Survey (OS) map.

2 *The Border Magazine* March 1933 Vol. xxxvii No. 447, 'The Smugglers. A Tragedy of the Minch', pp. 42-3.

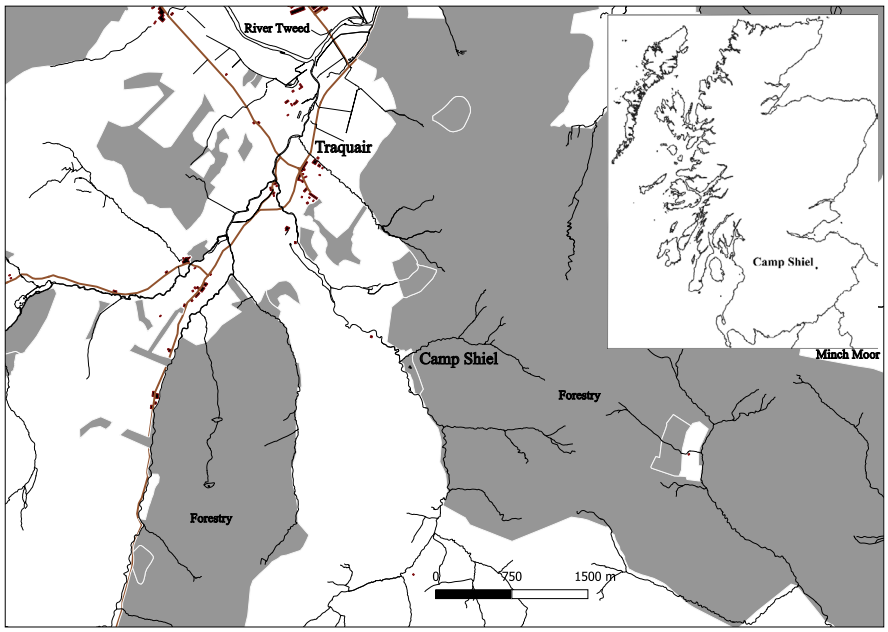

Figure 1: Location map. Copyright Piers Dixon OS OpenMap Local Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2018; HLA map data © Crown copyright Historic Environment Scotland.

The Border Magazine for March 1933. Moreover, according to an intriguing local tradition, the remains of an illicit whisky still was said to be located not far from Traquair at Birkie Cleugh by the Camp Shiel Burn. The original aim of this project was to investigate whether there might be a connection between the magazine story and the surviving structural remains supposed to be the site of the still. However, in the course of the ensuing reconnaissance survey, a greater range of previously unknown sites was discovered along the banks of the Camp Shiel Burn, including stills, flax retting ponds and shieling huts. The scope of the project was broadened with the aim of investigating these by means of detailed survey and selective excavation, and to undertake archival research in the hope of corroborating the smugglers' story. In particular it was intended that the putative still would be excavated in the hope of contributing to the currently limited knowledge of illicit stills. The work was carried out through a combination of field and archival research undertaken by members of the Peeblesshire Archaeological Society principally under the direction of Joyce Durham with the assistance of Piers Dixon during the excavation and the writing of this report.

Camp Shiel Burn is situated on the south-west facing slopes of Minch Moor about 2.5km south-east of the village of Traquair, Peeblesshire, in the Scottish Borders (Figure 1). The land has belonged to the Maxwell-Stewart family, lairds of Traquair since 1479 (OPS 1851: 221), and was part of the tenanted Traquair Knowe Farm. A late 1940s aerial photograph shows the ground cover as rough moorland (NCAP: 106G/Scot/

Figure 2: View of the landscape of Camp Shiel cottage and Camp Shiel Burn from the southwest. Copyright Joyce Durham.

UK/0018_5155). In the 1960s the land was sold to the Forestry Commission and planted with conifers. In the 1990s some of the trees by the burn were felled and the south bank was left to regenerate naturally. At the foot of the Camp Shiel Burn at its junction with Fingland Burn, a tributary of the Quair Water, lies Camp Shiel (Figure 2), a cottage built in 1831 (NRS: GD1/162/1; NT 340 328).

THE FIELD SURVEY

Field prospection revealed a range of archaeological sites along the banks of the Camp Shiel Burn (Figure 3). Eight possible monuments were recorded, including two stills, two shieling huts and three retting ponds. What was initially thought to be a possible mill site on the south side of the burn, visible as an arc of bank, was tested by a trial trench and found to be a natural feature

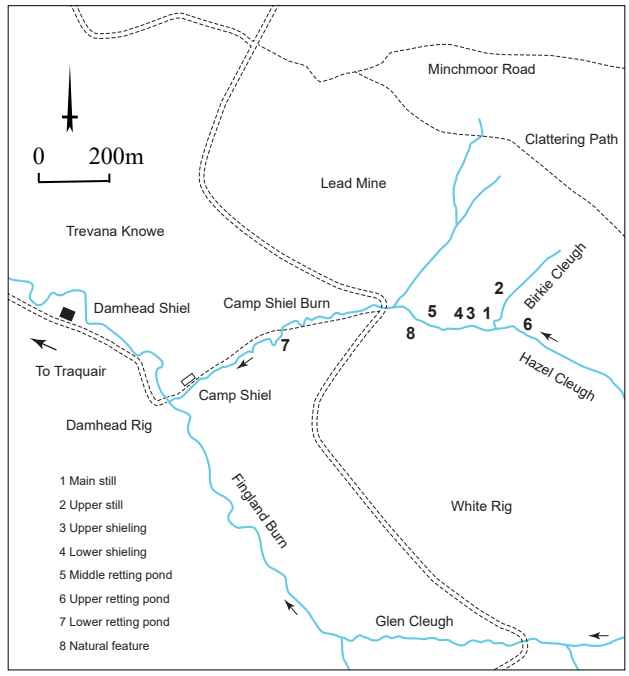

Figure 3: Map of the sites located in the field survey. Copyright Danny Dutton.

Figure 4: The Camp Shiel still from the northwest showing the stone-capped drain after removal of vegetation. Copyright Joyce Durham.

Figure 5: The flue and smoke away at the back of the still under excavation. Copyright Joyce Durham.

(NT 34668 32987; Figure 3, site 8 on plan). Test trenches were also excavated to confirm the interpretation of the other features; in two cases - the still at the junction with Birkie Cleugh Burn and the upper of the two shieling huts – the trial trenches were later extended to allow more comprehensive excavation (see below).

The Stills

What was identified as the site of the still suggested by local tradition is situated at an altitude of around 300m on the north bank of the Camp Shiel Burn, at its junction with a side burn called Birkie Cleugh (NT 34882 32951; Figure 3, site 1 on plan). Indeed, it is depicted as a sheepfold on the first edition 6-inch Ordnance Survey (OS) map of Peeblesshire (1859: sheet xviii)[3]. Prior to the investigation, the vegetation was thick moss

3 The map can be accessed online at https://maps.nls.uk/view/228779452.

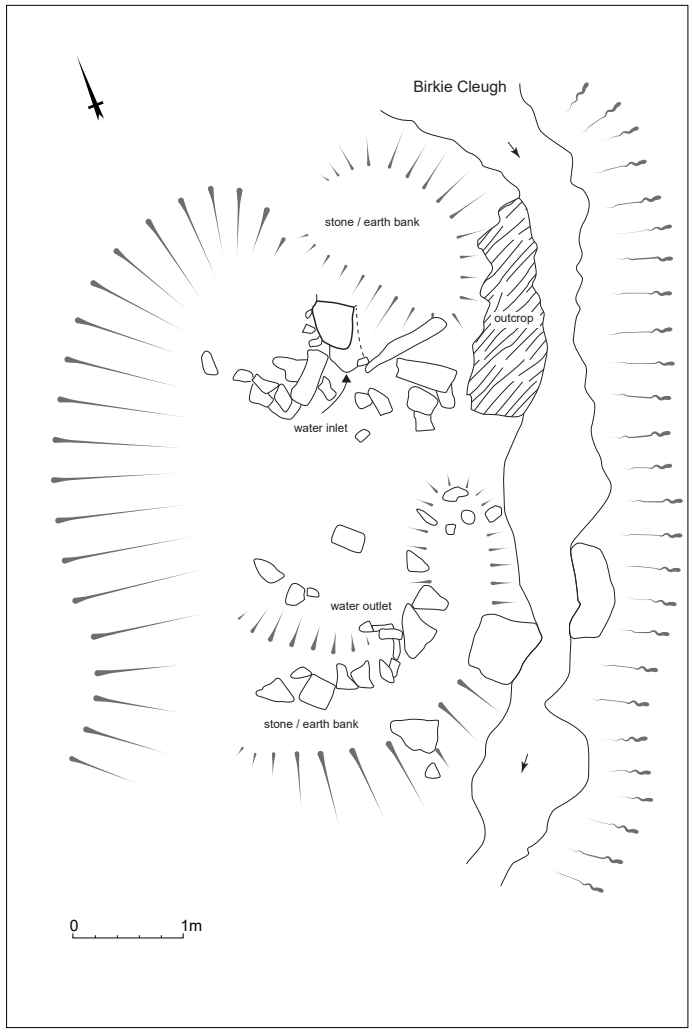

Figure 6: Site plan of the Birkie Cleugh still.
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with grass and ferns underlying mature pine trees originally planted by the Forestry Commission in the 1960s. Access to this and other sites was challenging due to the many wind-blown trees lying around in the immediate vicinity.

The structure of what we may term the Camp Shiel still is best described as a large stone-lined pit set into the hillside. Roughly D-shaped on plan, it measured 2.9m from north-east to south-west by 2.8m transversely and 1.5m in depth (Figure 4). An alcove or flue was visible in the north wall where it was set into the hillside (Figure 5). As this structure was thought to be the suspected site of the still, it was selected for excavation (see below).

About 40m up the Birkie Cleugh from its junction with Camp Shiel Burn, the remains of a second still, measuring 2.3m x 1.7m, were found (NT 34912 32976; Figure 3, site 2 on plan). This feature (the Birkie Cleugh still) was much more

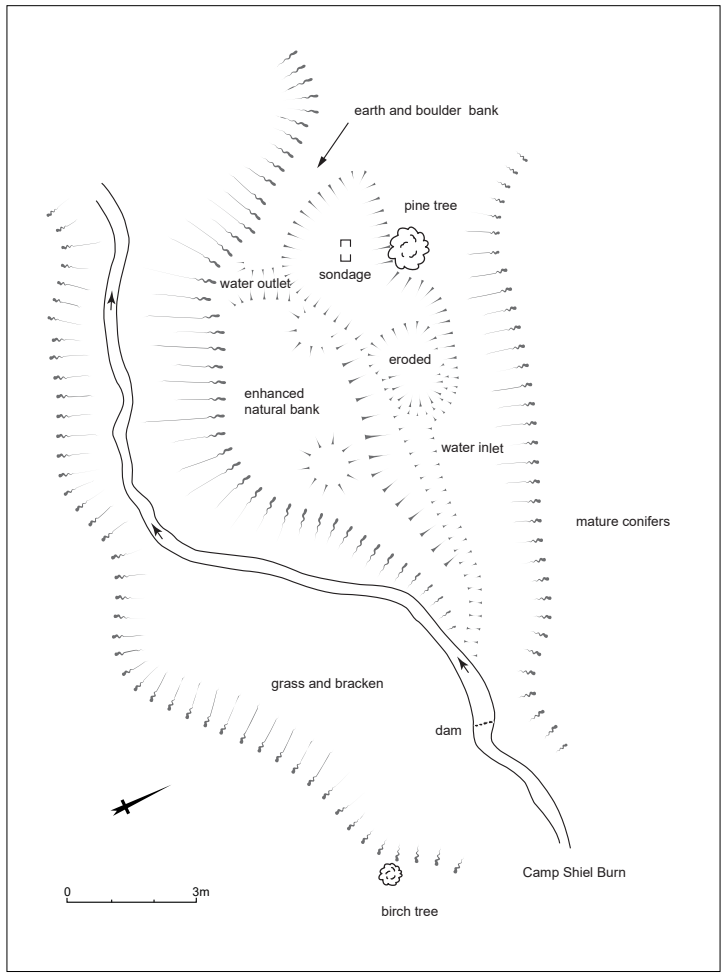

Figure 7: Site plan of the upper retting pond.
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basic and less well-preserved than the first, but similar in that it was dug into the hillside on one side, had a retaining wall on the other and a small lade for water running through it (Figure 6).

The Shieling Huts

The remains of two huts were located during the course of the survey. The first was found on a gently sloping terrace parallel to the stream on the north side of the burn and about 20m south-west of the still at the confluence with the Birkie Cleugh Burn (NT 34860 32941; Figure 3, site 3 on plan). The very slight remains of a second hut were found 7m downstream from the upper one (NT 34850 32942; Figure 3, site 4 on plan), showing as an L-shaped length of stony bank.

The first hut was not immediately recognisable as a building, let alone a shieling hut; it consisted of a grass-covered dome-shaped mound set within a rectangular depression which had sharply-defined edges on the north and east sides. There were several stones protruding around the rim

Figure 8: View of the lower retting pond from the southeast.
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of the depression but the picture was confused further by pine trees, some of them wind-blown. Seemingly at least partly artificial, this rather amorphous feature occupied a terrace about 2m above and parallel to the course of the burn and at a distance of about 5m from it. The ground immediately surrounding the possible structure was more or less level, forming a platform, with a stony slope on the downward side facing the stream.

In the hope that it would assist in interpreting the site, a 0.5m wide evaluation trench was dug along the top of the mound and then another at right angles to it. These showed that the mound fill was dark grey loose silt with a few stones of varying sizes and small fragments of charcoal. The mound was 0.5m deep at its highest point and there was a compacted surface at its base. As the initial trenches did not clarify the nature of the site, it was decided to extend the excavation (see below).

The Retting Ponds

Three possible retting ponds were located by the survey. One, which is situated 50m downstream from the shielings (NT34808 32938; Figure 3, site 5 on plan), is fed by what may have been a former water course of the Camp Shiel Burn that ends abruptly in a drop of about 1m over a dry-stone wall, badly disturbed by a large fallen tree.

There was a second pond approximately 80m upstream from the Birkie Cleugh on the north

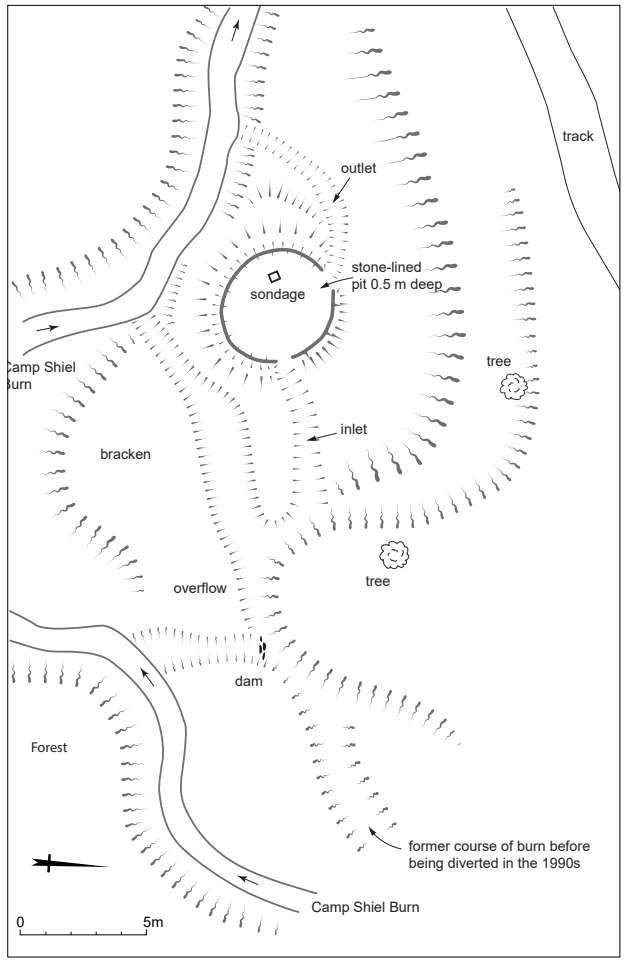

Figure 9: Site plan of the lower retting pond.
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bank of the Hazel Cleugh (NT 34956 32926; Figure 3, site 6 on plan). It comprised an oval pit roughly 5m by 2m in extent and 1m in depth, separated from the burn by an earthen bank. An exit channel in the middle of the earthen bank was noted which reinforced the interpretation of this structure as a retting pond (Figure 7). The upper part of the pit was deeper than the lower possibly caused by water cascading from a channel leading from the stream above. A small sondage dug into the base of the lower half of the pit revealed a stony silt deposit about 1.2m in depth over a compacted clay surface running with ground water.

A third retting pond on the north bank of the main burn about 300m above Camp Shiel Cottage (NT 34302 32924; Figure 3, site 7 on plan), comprised a roughly circular stone-lined pit 3m in diameter and 0.5m in depth (Figure 8). In its upper, east side, there was a gap to allow ingress of water from a channel, which led from an old stream bed (Figure 9). A few metres along this

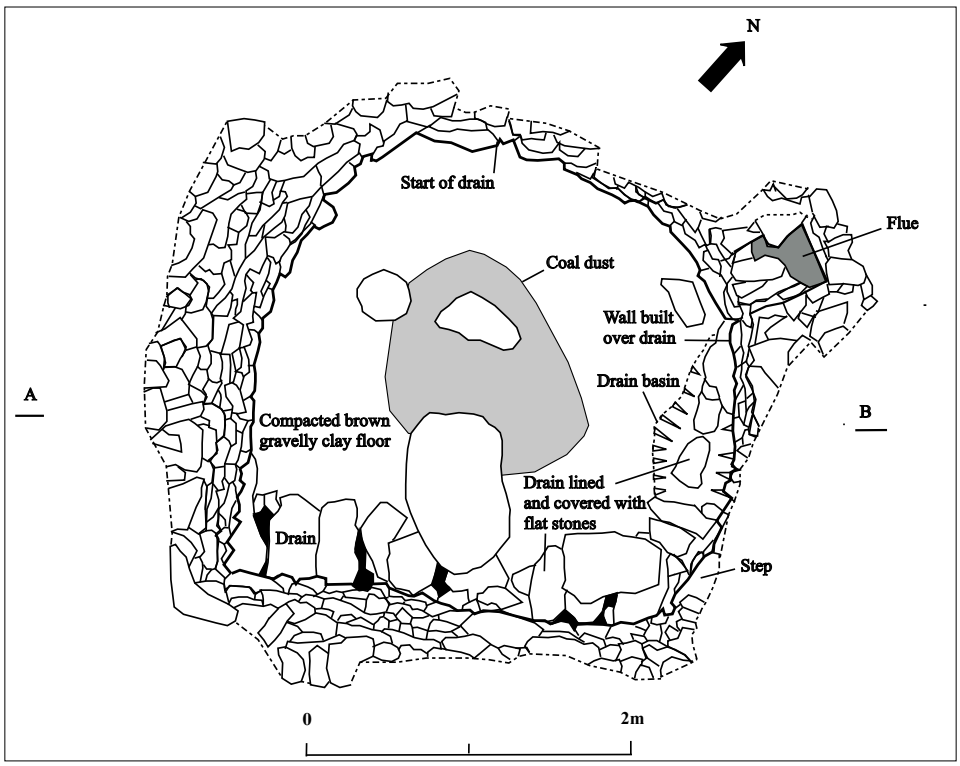

Figure 10: Plan of Camp Shiel still. Copyright Piers Dixon.

channel there was a gap for the overflow to run off, allowing the regulation of the water flow. On the north side of the pit there was a second gap and channel which allowed water to drain back into the stream. A small 0.6m deep sondage dug in the centre of the pit, revealed an orange silty deposit, with darker layers immediately above the compacted base, indicating episodes of silting and soil development.

Two of the three ponds appear therefore to have had stone lined pits and it is tempting to suggest that there was a sequence of development in the use and design of the ponds: the middle one having silted up, operations may have moved to a more efficient pond higher up the burn, which also in due course silted up, to be replaced by a more sophisticated one lower down.

THE EXCAVATIONS

The still

A decision was taken at the outset of the project that our investigation would be directed towards finding out all we could about how the Camp Shiel still was built and worked, whilst preserving its structural integrity.

Having removed the moss, grass and ferns from the walls and floor within the building, it was evident that the internal area had been previously cleared and the walls substantially rebuilt. The evidence for this was the lack of debris from natural decay and the fact that the walls showed signs of having been built in two phases – the

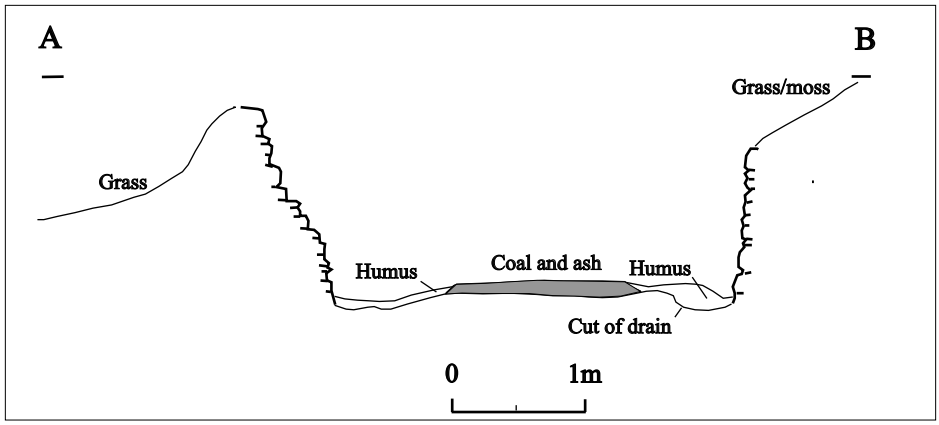

Figure 11: Profile and section of the Camp Shiel still. Copyright Piers Dixon.

upper courses being more roughly built than the lower (Figure 4). Access was from a step at the east corner, a drop of about 0.75m. One large flattish boulder and several other smaller ones lay on the floor of the structure. There was a fan-shaped mound of sandy clay material at the foot of the flue, which had fallen from above, possibly when one of two lintel stones had collapsed. This had built up since the building had been cleared. On the floor surface beneath this debris there was a quantity of ash but very little charcoal and no sign of heat-affected stone. Neither was there any evidence of burnt stone within the flue itself, suggesting that it had seen little use as a hearth, if that had been its original intended purpose. A flat boulder propped at the back of the flue was most probably a collapsed lintel stone. The back of a lintel stone still *in situ* could be seen to be packed with fist-sized stones when viewed from below.

Excavation of the floor area revealed a large central deposit of coal dust and ash, measuring 1.4m by 1.1m across and 0.1m in thickness under which a pinecone was found. Surrounding this deposit and overlying it was a humic layer about 60mm thick. Immediately under them both was an extremely compacted, possibly baked, floor layer of clayey material flecked with coal (Figures 10 and 11). Apart from a small sondage, this floor layer was left unexcavated. A 0.3m x 0.3m sondage was dug into the floor to try to establish the relationship of the building to the underlying deposits (Figure 12). There was an initial layer of extremely compacted yellow grey clay about 50mm thick which became progressively less compacted and stony lower down. At a depth of 0.3m the matrix became water-logged and gravelly with larger stones, indicating that the structure had possibly been built over the original stream bed in order to provide a constant, easily accessible supply of water.

Along the southern and eastern edges of the interior the line of a drain was revealed (Figures 10 and 11). Excavation showed that it was well built with flat stones lining the base and as capping. A short distance from the point at which the drain came out from under the flue, it widened, forming a basin filled with sandy silt. When the stream

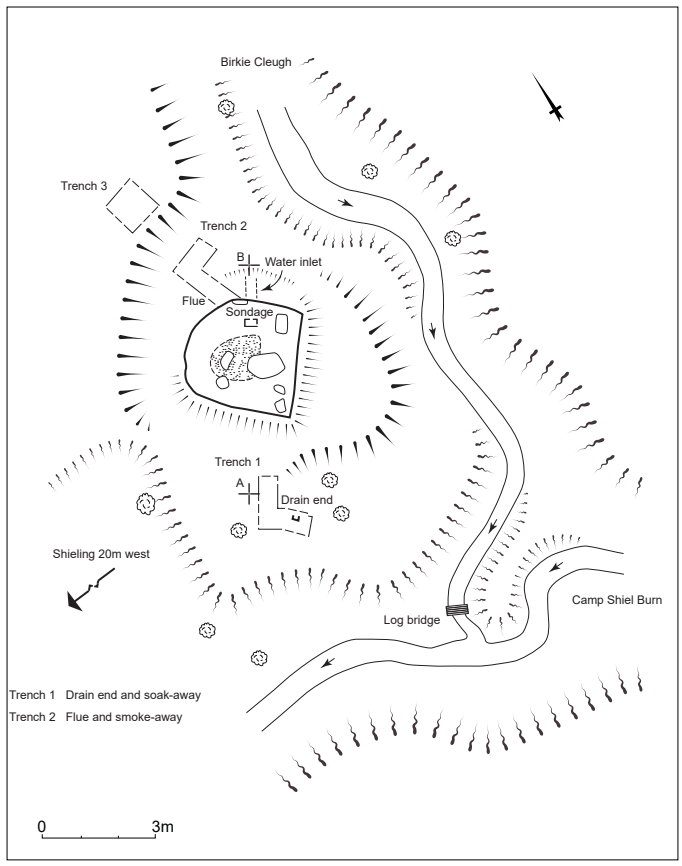

Figure 12: Site plan of Camp Shiel still.
Copyright Danny Dutton.

was either dammed or in spate, water flowed out from under the wall into the basin and thence down the drain. The drain exited the structure to the south at the lowest corner opposite the flue.

The only finds were two pieces of green glass from the humic layer and one of rusted metal from the central coal deposit. Subsequently, a musket ball, 16.6mm in diameter or 0.65inches and 19.99g in weight, was found by metal detecting in the centre of the clay floor about 30mm below the excavated surface, either placed intentionally by the distillers as a ritual or lost accidentally.[4]

In order to clarify the construction of the exterior of the structure and to trace the end of the drain, a 0.5m wide by 1.5m long trench (Figure 12, Trench 1 on plan) was opened on the built-up bank at the lower, south end of the building. On the surface of the bank was a spread of shaley coal. Below it a loose mix of stone and clay soil, 0.3m in thickness, was uncovered that became more consolidated as excavation progressed. At the lower end of the trench boulders had been placed

4 A photograph of the musket ball, deposited at Peebles Museum (Accession number PEEBM 15810.1), is available online at Peeblesshire Archaeological Society Reports, p. 34.

to make a firm base for the bank, preventing slippage. An eastward extension of the trench was made, and the end of the drain capped with stones was located. The trench was extended and a well-made soakaway uncovered, the stones at the end of the drain having been placed to allow the free flow of water. The matrix between the stones of the soak-away was gritty sand.

Excavation of the area above the flue revealed a rough retaining wall built on top of the lintel stone that was still in situ (Figures 5 and 12, Trench 2 on plan). Packed behind were fist-sized stones covered with soot and overlying these were flat stones placed to prevent soil filtering down between the stones, all of which combined to suggest a deliberately constructed smoke-away. The trench was extended up the slope revealing the same arrangement of stones about 0.3m below the ground surface. About 0.5m from the flue there was no longer any evidence of soot on the stones perhaps indicating that the smoke-away had not seen much use or had not functioned very well. A 1m square trench (Figure 12, Trench 3 on plan) was dug at the top of the slope above the smoke-away to demonstrate where it exited, but this could not be verified from this small sondage.

Discussion

As the excavation developed any doubts at the outset that the structure described above was an illicit still were dispelled. The measures the builders had taken to hide the intended activities from detection were many and thorough. The site was set into the slope of the ground, and with a turf roof would have been well camouflaged. The water supply that was led in and out of the building ensured there was little cause for outside movement, while the elaborately built smoke-away would have hidden the tell-tale signs of smoke. The situation they had chosen was not only concealed from view behind a hillside but offered access to a variety of routes over the hills by which to distribute the product without detection.

Excavation of the smoke-away and drain revealed just how well and with how much ingenuity they had been built. While the lower courses of the inside walls were built to the same high standard the upper ones were poorly constructed, showing that there had been two building phases. At some time in the history of the still it had either fallen down naturally or it had been pulled down; if it is indeed the setting for the 'smugglers' story, the structure would presumably have been demolished when the distillers were caught.

There is no certainty as to when or by whom the structure was cleared out and rebuilt, but there is a strong possibility that it was the forestry workers using it as a bothy in the 1960s. Alternatively, it might have been reused as a bothy by the estate during the shooting season. The pinecone found under the coal deposit indicates it is unlikely to be of great antiquity. A final but less likely occasion in recent time would have been when mature trees were felled in the 1990s.

However, the best evidence of a date for the structure is the musket ball. Its weight at 19.99g is in the range of shot suitable for a carbine, according to the British Museum's Portable

Figure 13: The north wall of the shieling hut showing the interleaved layers of earth and stone suggesting a turf and stone construction. Copyright Joyce Durham.

Antiquities Scheme, but it cannot be dated more closely than the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries when carbines were in use.[5]

The shieling hut

The whole of the mound that was found in the evaluation trench was deturfed and the earth removed revealing a wall on the north and tumbled stones on the south and west. The excavation was then extended through the east edge of the original depression to a tree, which the Forestry Commission very kindly cut down, and beyond. The material removed at this end was a light brown, humus-rich soil with many stones, interpreted as tumble from a wall. At this point, enough had been uncovered to show that the structure was a stone-walled building and it was decided to excavate the whole structure to confirm its date and function, since it was thought at first to be related to the use of the still.

At the west end of the north wall there were four courses of stone interleaved with soil, interpreted as the remains of turf (Figure 13). Two flat stones were set on end against the base of the inner face of the south wall (Figure 14, hached on plan). The west wall formed an obtuse angle with the south wall and the east wall had largely been eroded by the action of the burn.

Since there was no evidence of an entrance in the other relatively more intact walls, it was

5 Portable Antiquities Scheme, Finds Recording Guides, Shot

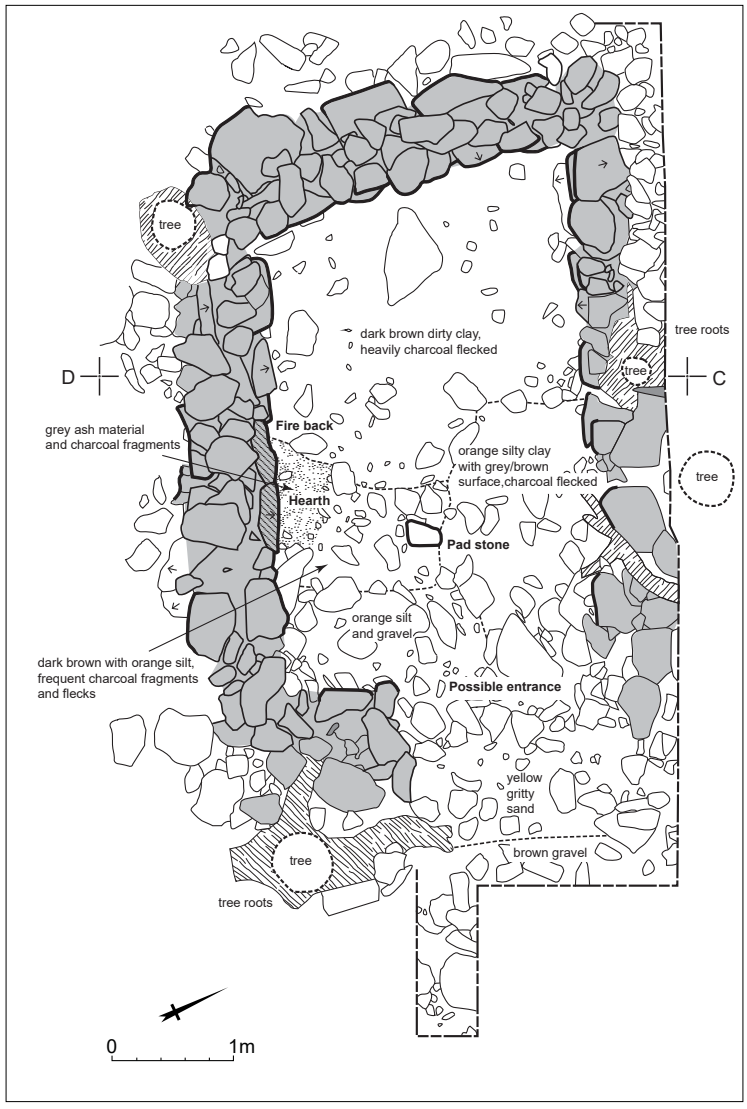

Figure 14: Excavation plan of Camp Shiel shieling hut.
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assumed it had been in the eroded east wall. This wall was on the upstream side of the building, and comprised plenty of tumbled stones but little evidence of placed stones which could be interpreted as part of the wall, except one or two possible facing stones on the inside of the wall at its south end (Figure 14). Nor, indeed, was there any paving or threshold that might have covered the floor of the entrance. However, a difference in the colour and texture of the soil indicated the division between eroded remains of the wall and hill-wash beyond, the wall material having a matrix of yellowish gritty sandy-silt and the hill-wash deposit a darker, brown gravelly

Figure 15: The shieling hut from the east during excavation. The upright flat-topped pad stone is visible in the middle of the floor and the possible entrance in the foreground. Copyright Joyce Durham.

silt. The only finds from the structure were two small pieces of corroded metal found within the remains of wall at the east end.

Inside the building a prominent feature near the centre of the floor space was a flat-topped squarish stone, embedded upright in the natural ground surface and secured in place by packing-stones (Figures 14 and 15). It was thought that this square stone provided the base of a partition, the upright stone being a pad to support the base and upright timbers. However, no other stone was located that might have supported the other end.

Between the pad stone and the two flat slabs set on end against the south wall there was a 100-150mm thick layer of charcoal-rich grey ashy material on top of a bed of packed medium-sized stones in a matrix of dark brown-orange silt (Figure 14). The charcoal-rich feature was interpreted as a hearth, the upright flat stones perhaps providing a fire-back, although there were no visibly heat-affected stones.

The area to the east of the hearth and possible partition was very stony with a matrix of orange sandy gravel, with no evidence of any occupation in this area. To the west, however, there was charcoal-rich, grey-brown clay-silt, between 150-250mm thick, which was thought to be either cabers and turf that had collapsed from the roof, or a floor layer (Figure 16). This deposit was compacted in the centre, perhaps caused by the

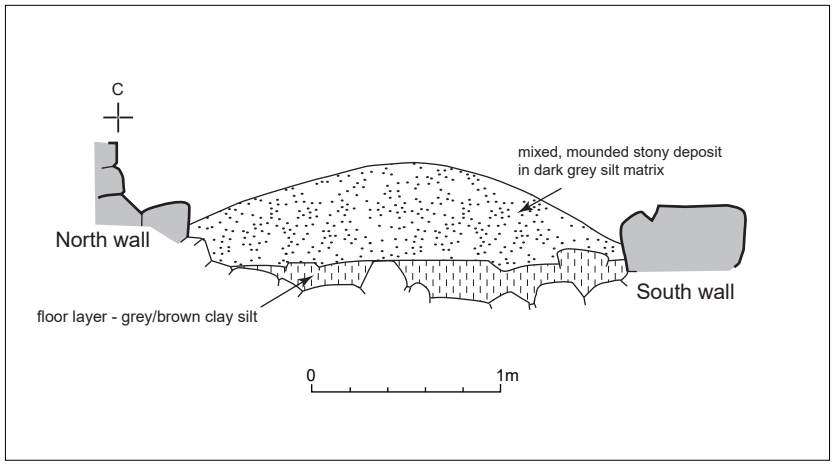

Figure 16: Section through the Camp Shiel shieling hut. Copyright Danny Dutton.

weight of the mound above it or by the effects of occupation, but less so round the edges. Here there were also substantial amounts of charcoal. Beneath this deposit there was compacted pale grey clay and stones with occasional charcoal fragments, probably redeposited natural.

A narrow section was excavated through the east end of the south wall and another at the north end of the west wall, which established that at these points the walls were built on the old ground surface. Another break was made through the south end of the west wall. The material below the wall here was the same as the lowest layer within the building, namely packed stones in a matrix of pale grey clay and flecks of charcoal. This charcoal-flecked deposit ran under the wall and indicates that it was present when the building was constructed and constitutes the subsoil at the time.

Discussion

The size of this building at approximately 4m x 2m internally indicates that it was a small building interpreted as a shieling hut for seasonal use, as it is too small for a permanent habitation. Its dimensions compare with the norm for shieling huts recorded by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (Dixon 2018: 63) while its location high in the hills beside a burn with the associated place name Camp Shiel are strongly indicative of it being a shieling. There is also at least one other possible small stone building (Figure 2, No. 4 on plan) that may be another shieling hut nearby.

From what was uncovered during excavation of the shieling only a few events can be interpreted with any certainty. What we can say is the walls of the hut were built of stone, possibly interleaved with turf. It had an entrance in one end, but there is no trace of any support for the roof. The interior was divided into three parts, a lobby, a central living area by the hearth and an interior private space for sleeping. The pad stone suggests a partition, but in the absence of any other evidence it was most likely to be anchored at its other end to the walls and its top to the roof timbers, dividing the

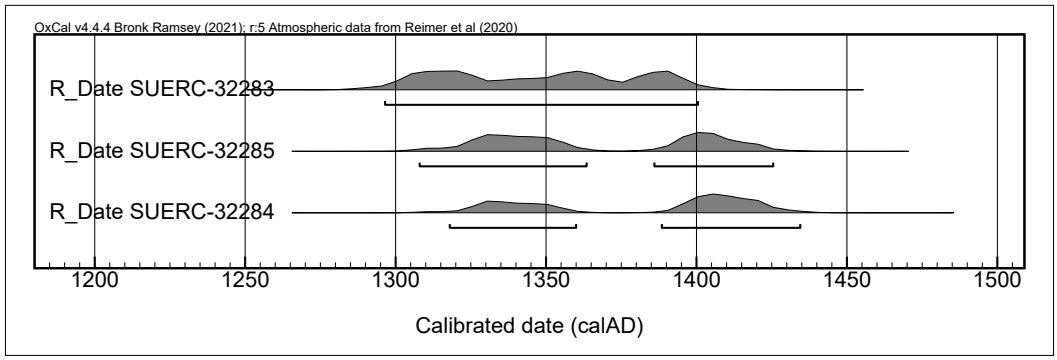

Figure 17: Calibrated dates from the shieling hut. Dates calibrated using OxCal v.4.4 [2021] (Bronk Ramsey 2009) and IntCal20 atmospheric curve (Reimer et al 2020).

hearth from the lobby while reducing drafts from the entrance.

A quantity of dark grey silty material was dumped into the rectangular depression left by the abandoned shieling hut, which may have occurred when the still, some 20m away, was cleared out, probably by forestry workers in the 1960s. The alternative, that floodwater wrought the damage to the east wall of the structure and deposited the mound of silt, does not explain the sharpness of the edges of the mound within the hut, which are better explained by the robbing of the upper courses of the walls by the builders of the nearby still.

It was fortunate, however, to find plenty good quality charcoal during the excavation, and analysis of three samples added a great deal to our understanding of the site. Charcoal from the hearth has been identified as birch (betula), while samples from below the west wall and the floor deposit at the west end of the shieling have been identified as alder (alnus) (Dr Jennifer Miller, University of Glasgow, unpublished report). The birch sample from the hearth was dated to between 1290 and 1400 cal AD (95.4% probability; SUERC-32283; 620±30 BP); the alder sample from under the west wall to between 1310 and 1440 cal AD (95.4% probability; SUERC-32284; 550 ±30 BP) and that from the floor to between 1300 and 1430 cal AD (95.4% probability; SUERC-32285; 565±30 BP)[6]. The group of dates are consistent with activity at the site during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (Figure 17).

DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH

The Stills

Exhaustive archival research failed to find any evidence to substantiate the story described in the March 1933 issue of *The Border Magazine*, which referred to the death of a smuggler called Armstrong having been recorded in an old chapbook of the early nineteenth century, but this could not be confirmed (NRS: CE2/29-32). Although there were many similar incidents in these volumes, the events recorded in this story were not among them. Traquair Parish Records

6 The samples were submitted to the Radiocarbon Laboratory at the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC).

revealed that the tenant farmer of Traquair Knowe at the time was a William Laidlaw (NRS: CH2/470/13/33). Under the law he could have been prosecuted for allowing illegal distillation of whisky to be carried out on his land, as happened in other cases (NRS: E503/105), but no evidence was found to say he was. He was however being sued for non-payment of rent and other debts (NRS: SC42/31/1; SC42/1/16 and 17). The Parochial Registers of the early nineteenth century for Traquair are patchy, and between 1815 and 1817 there was no record of the death of anyone named Armstrong, or anything relevant in the Militia Records (NRS: GD293/3/2 and 4). It was as if the event never happened.

A general prohibition on the distilling of whisky was imposed by the Scottish Government in March 1757, after which the extent of illicit distilling depended in a great measure on the amount of duty payable and the nature of the excise regulations. It was in the remote Highlands and Islands where illicit distillers were most active but it did occur elsewhere in urban situations and in the Lowlands (Maclean, MacCannell and Ellington 2017). In the Scottish Borders, apart from the two Camp Shiel stills, there is one recorded still at Staneygill Burn, Roxburgh (Canmore: NY48NE 141) and another one on the Newholm Hope Burn up the Manor Valley near Peebles at NT 17723 29219 (Cowie 2000: 45). To date only a handful of illicit stills have been excavated: Garenin on the Isle of Lewis (Canmore: NB14SE 9), Carnasserie, Argyle and Bute (Canmore: NM80SW 124), Carn Bhithir (Canmore: NO08NE 19) and Bynack (Canmore: NN98NE 4) on the Mar Lodge Estate, Allt An Tuill Bhain (Canmore: NG95NW 39) and Lagaidh Dhubh (Canmore: NG85NW 139) in Torridon: the latter four all excavated as part of the National Trust for Scotland's Pioneering Spirit project that has focused on illicit distilling. The best-documented illicit still, Wholehope Burn, is south of the Border in Upper Coquetdale, Northumberland (Philipson 1991).

Recent field observation has led to the conclusion that the design of illicit distilling sites around Scotland was highly variable both between and sometimes within regions, with still locations prioritising hiddenness and the expedient use of natural features and topography, just as they do at Camp Shiel (Bratt 2022: 172-176). Furthermore the semi-subterranean character of Camp Shiel is also a common feature of illicit distilling sites elsewhere: two impressive partly subterranean stills have been recorded in the Cabrach in Moray and Inverlael in Wester Ross, for instance (Bratt 2022: 190; McKeggie 2021: 23).

The Retting Ponds

Where the flax was grown is not known; there are enclosed fields on Damhead Rig on the hillside opposite, while the slopes of White Rig offer another possibility, but if so no field evidence is now evident. A far more likely place is on Trevana Knowe (Figure 3), which would have been close to a former road between Minch Moor and Campshiel, and shows signs of a large rectilinear enclosure centred at NT 33834 33262 which is visible on aerial photographs (Bing Aerial), possibly of eighteenth-century date since

it is not depicted on the first edition OS map of Peeblesshire (1859: sheet xviii; see also HLAmap). Traces of an old track connecting Camp Shiel to the Minchmoor Road south-east of Traquair can be seen both on the ground and on vertical aerial photographs dating to 15 April 1946 (NCAP: 106G/Scot/UK/0018_5155).

The harvested flax was rotted, or retted (the second part of the linen-production process) in a nearby pond, which required access to running water from a convenient stream, such as the Camp Shiel Burn. After retting the flax was dried, 'scutched', 'heckled' with a comb and spun before being woven into linen. In the absence of any datable finds the date range of these features remains uncertain; however, the preparation of flax for the making of linen has been practised widely in rural communities since the medieval period, if not before, and was an important component of the rural economy until the nineteenth century when cheaper cotton took its place (Shaw 1983: 198).

The most likely time when the retting ponds of Camp Shiel Burn were in use is in the eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, but possibly earlier. This was a time when linen production was actively being encouraged (Shaw 1983: 171) and, according to the Statistical Account (Sinclair 1794: 374), there were six weavers living in Traquair Parish, but by the time of the first Census records in 1841 there were none (Scotlands People). Nothing remains of a row of weavers' cottages which reputedly used to be at Deanfoot behind Traquair village.

Evidence for flax has been found in prehistoric contexts at Balbridie, Kincardine and Deeside, dating to the Neolithic (Fairweather and Ralston 1993), and in Fife in the Bronze Age (Jessen and Helbaek 1944: 55). There is also medieval material recorded from Queen Street, Aberdeen (Murray 1982: 241-2), and Orkney (Bond and Hunter 1987), and it is documented as a crop, for example, at Coldingham Priory in the fourteenth century (Dixon 2011: 235).

More recently, linen production formed part of the rural subsistence economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries all over Scotland (Devine 1999: 105-10), but particularly in the Lowlands, where 29 retting ponds are recorded in Canmore, the National Record of the Historic Environment. As part of the Ben Lawers Historical Landscape Project carried out by Glasgow University Archaeological Department between 1996 and 2001 two retting ponds were trial trenched at Cragganester (Canmore: NN63NE 111). The trench was located across two rectilinear sunken structures. Evidence from the interior of the structures comprised water-derived silts and occupation layering (Canmore: MS725/272). On a larger scale at Carmichael Mill, South Lanarkshire, evidence for a retting pond was found beneath a jumble of stones which may represent destruction of a building associated with the retting pond by a flood at the end of the eighteenth century. Finds included a sickle, flax seeds and a wooden wedge (Canmore: NS94SW 56.00).

The Shielings

The shieling huts on the Campshiel burn appear

to be comparable in size, construction, location and date with those found elsewhere in southern Scotland and northern England. In the Lowlands south of the Forth-Clyde isthmus, 318 shieling hut sites have been recorded in Canmore, invariably in upland areas of permanent pasture, such as the Southern Uplands. These are small, turf-, or stone-walled huts, or a mixture of the two, usually found on the banks of a river or stream-course. In northern England, Ramm has firmly established the medieval antiquity of shieling and shieling huts in Cumbria and Northumberland, and has shown that they too could have the entrance in one end, although having it on one side was more common, and they were usually located beside a burn as at Camp Shiel (Ramm et al. 1970: 9-11).

In a recent article, Winchester listed 405 *shiel* and *skali* place-names, which he found on the one-inch OS map in the same area of southern Scotland and the northern counties of England. He argued that while some are evidence of transhumance, or former shieling sites that had been converted to permanent settlement, others are indicative of activities such as fishing, mining or grazing, or just plain huts or shelters (Winchester 2012). A possible example of a shieling converted to a permanent settlement is Greenshiels in Liddesdale, Roxburghshire, which appears in a rental of the Honour of Morton, dated 1376, as a forest stead (Registrum Morton 1853: App. 17), where three turf huts, possibly for shieling, were recorded outside the head-dyke of the nearby permanent settlement (Canmore: NY49SE 17).

Gilbert in his review of hunting reserves found that shieling huts were not permitted in royal hunting forests such as Ettrick until the late medieval period with the relaxation of hunting regulations (Gilbert 1979: 178), and Camp Shiel, which lies in the forest of Traquair, a part of Ettrick forest, dates to this period of relaxation. An earlier instance of a shieling in Liddesdale, Eadulf's shielings at Kershope, are referred to in a confirmation charter of Malcolm IV dating them to the second half of the twelfth century (Bain 1884: 423). Liddesdale emerges in the fourteenth century as a baronial forest, and it is possible this shieling predates the establishment of the hunting forest and its restrictions on grazing, or else they were less proscriptive under the de Soulis lords of Liddesdale.

Very few have been excavated in southern Scotland. However, a group of twelve huts at Slackshaw Burn, near Muirkirk in Ayrshire, was excavated by Fairbairn in 1927. Ten produced late-medieval pottery and eight had walls of stone and clay '2-3 ft wide' (0.6-0.9m) similar to that at Camp Shiel (Canmore: NS62SE 6). In size, the excavated Camp Shiel hut at 4m by 2m internally is at the smaller end of the range of hut sizes recorded at Slackshaw Burn, which measured '15-23ft by 8-10ft internally' (4.6-7m by 2.4-3m), but this is more normal in Scotland-wide terms where the mean is 3.98m by 2m based on RCAHMS survey data (Dixon 2018: 63).

All this provides a comparable date and context for the construction and occupation of shieling huts at Camp Shiel. It suggests that the summer grazing of upland pastures had become a feature of rural life in Traquair forest in the late-

medieval period despite the limitations to grazing in the forest. The mother settlement from whence the inhabitants came remains a mystery, but they could easily have been from Traquair village.

CONCLUSIONS

The Camp Shiel Burn project was conceived to investigate the possible connection between the 'smugglers' story from a chapbook of 1816 and a structure thought to have been an illicit still on the slopes of Minch Moor near Traquair. While this remains unproven, evidence of other activity along the burn has been located, which extends long before the whisky distilling activity of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although none of the distilling apparatus survived, the excavation of the whisky still revealed the structural intricacies of an illegal still, with its flue designed to hide the escaping smoke and neatly constructed lade designed to deliver and remove water from the interior. The carbine shot found in the floor of the still has a longer date range than the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but this does not contradict it as the likely date of the still. The dating of the shieling hut to the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries was particularly rewarding since few shieling sites in southern Scotland have been excavated or securely dated. The concentration of evidence for transhumance, flax processing and whisky distilling along one small minor tributary of the Quair water is quite extraordinary when compared to the monolithic land use of the present forestry plantation. It is also a reminder of the variety of activities that were once carried out in upland areas, often of a seasonal nature, leaving relatively little trace in the landscape (Dixon 2021).

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