Macleod Vault
Inchnadamph Parish Church

An Archaeological Watching Brief

by

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on behalf of

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List of Figures

1.0 Executive Summary

This report presents the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out during the unblocking of the Macleod Vault in Inchnadamph churchyard. A limited assessment of the roof structure was also undertaken in order to assess its character and stability.

Once the blocking of the door had been removed, it was clear that the floor deposits of the vault were much more complex than anticipated. They comprised a number of flat slabs, a probable armorial panel of the Macleods of Assynt, two inscribed graveslabs, along with coffin wood and furniture, human bone, material, animal bone and more obviously modern debris. An uneven layer of earth and decayed mortar overlay much of the floor area, but voids were visible underneath the two large slabs in the centre. An examination of the roof structure of the vault revealed that the slabs forming the original wallhead remained *in situ* on the east side, but that elsewhere a considerable build-up of earth and mortar obscured the original stonework of the vault.

2.0 Introduction

This report presents the results of the watching brief carried out by the author during the unblocking of the Macleod Vault in Inchnadamph churchyard by Stephen Laing, Laing Traditional Masonry on the 14th March 2002. The work was undertaken on a fine, sunny day, in the presence of members of Historic Assynt and Ian Fraser and David Maciver, LDN Architects.

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 1998). 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.).

The present entrance to the Macleod vault consists of a low door, located towards the west end of the northeast wall of the mausoleum. It is 1.12m high and 0.74m wide. On the east side, the rybats of the door are formed from three roll moulded blocks of orangey yellow sandstone, with a corresponding dressed stone at the top of the western jamb. The stone used to form these dressings does not appear to be local in origin and is likely to have been imported from the east coast of Ross-shire. In contrast, the lintel consists of a thin slab of a fine grained sedimentary stone of probably local origin. This is much darker in colour than the dressed stones and may therefore be a later replacement. The rest of the surrounds comprise roughly shaped stones, similar to those used in the walls of the vault and in other structures in the graveyard. These again indicate that the doorway has been modified in the past. However, the presence of a relieving arch, now largely obscured by heavy cement pointing (dated 1988 on the south west wall of the vault), suggests that the door itself is in its original location. A narrow concrete threshold was presumably put in at the same time as the door was blocked.

As the roof is now obscured by moss and tree growth, its original form is unclear. Although the ash trees have been cut back in the last few years, they are re-establishing themselves rapidly, suggesting the presence of a considerable depth of soil. The fact that 'heath' is described as growing on top of the arch in 1794 (Mackenzie 1794, 207) suggests that the roof may always have been of turf; the present mounded appearance of the roof must be the consequence 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. If the roof was turf, it is possible that these provided protection for the wall head. Whether or not they originally covered the whole roof is less obvious.

Once the mausoleum was accessible, it was intended to evaluate the structure of the vault itself and to record any features of archaeological significance within the interior. However, the nature of the floor deposits (see below) made it impossible to walk across the vault and therefore any assessment made - both of the structural stability of the vault and the nature of the floor deposits - is, by necessity, preliminary at this stage. Samples of mortar were removed by the architect for analysis. Limited exploration of the material overlying the roof of the vault was also undertaken. Three slots were dug into these roof deposits, in order to examine their nature, as well as the structural stability of the stones of the vault. Any evidence for the structure of the room which once stood on top of the vault, but which was removed shortly before the First Statistical Account was written in 1794, was also sought.

This report offers the results of this assessment, alongside general recommendations for future work.

3.0 Aims and Objectives

This assessment was intended to evaluate the interior of the Macleod vault and the nature of the deposits overlying the roof.

The objectives of this study were as follows:

to monitor work undertaken on the vault, including the unblocking of the door and the exploratory slots dug into the roof deposits

to make a preliminary evaluation of the archaeological significance of any deposits remaining within the vault

to suggest appropriate mitigation measures where these might be necessary

4.0 Methodology

The masonry forming the blocking of the door was carefully removed, using hammer and chisel to chip away the cement. Each stone was examined for evidence of working or other diagnostic features, before being placed on a pallet, located on the east side of the car park, well away from other loose rubble with which it could become confused. All the pinnings and chunks of cement were retained in plastic sacks.

Once the entrance was opened, the decision was swiftly taken not to walk on any of the floor deposits, in light of their obviously delicate nature. Nonetheless, given the small size of the interior, a fairly comprehensive visual examination of the interior was possible with the aid of a

flashlight. A sketch was made of the floor deposits and a photographic record made. The door was then re-sealed, using a piece of plywood screwed onto a wooden frame; this hopefully ensures that the vault is as airtight as possible, while remaining easily accessible when necessary.

The structure of the roof was evaluated in three locations. Two of these comprised small slot trenches 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.

5.0 Results

5.1 Entrance

The stones blocking the doorway, in spite of the hardness of the cement based mortar, were removed relatively easily, with no damage to the moulded sandstone blocks forming the surrounds of the door. The shallow concrete threshold was left in place. The mortar around the small stones at the base of the jamb on the north east side proved to be loose, while the dressed masonry seems to be falling away from the wall behind. The latter may explain why a couple of stones, low down in the fabric of the wall, behind the door jambs on the west side, also appear to be slightly loose.

The majority of the stones used to block the doorway consist of local quartzite and limestone, which appear to be unshaped. They are comparable to those used in the construction of the vault itself. Piles of rubble both within and without the graveyard probably provided the sources for this stone; it is unlikely that it was taken from the mounds of rubble surrounding the vault, since these have always been grassed over within living memory (Maggie Campbell, pers. comm.). Amongst these stones was a single block of concrete and, more significantly, two shaped blocks of pink quartzite. These are roughly squared with pyramidal shaped tops; both are slightly different in size, while one has a stepped base and a groove around the base of the pyramid. These appear to be enclosure markers, probably of nineteenth century date - there are two further stones, of the same pink quartzite, resting against either side of the gate into the churchyard. The dimensions of the latter two were not obtainable as their bases were firmly set into the ground. While it is possible that the variable size of the four enclosure markers indicate that they represent more than one lair, these differences might not have been visible once the stones were erected in their intended positions. Against the inside of the south west wall of the graveyard are piles of rubble and railings which must represent further burial enclosures. All these features are suggestive of the fact that the graveyard has undergone substantial reorganisation at various times in the past.

The doorway gives access to what appears to be a short entrance passage, 1.30m long, formed through the thickness of the walls of the vault. Although local knowledge suggested that there had been a step up into the vault externally (perhaps preserved by the present concrete threshold) and then several steps down to floor level, these no longer appear to survive. However, just inside the jamb, three rounded stones may have formed the core of a step, although they do not appear to be mortared into place. From the base of these, the ground slopes away to a number of larger stones at the opening into the chamber. These are largely obscured by the layer of earth and decayed mortar which forms the slope down into the vault, but appear to be uneven in size and shape. They seem to be substantial enough to form part of the foundation course of the mausoleum rather than a bottom step. It is perhaps possible, given the nature of the remaining stones visible in the entrance passage, that the original steps provided readily accessible material for use in the blocking of the doorway. The present floor level is approximately 0.8m below external ground level.

Internally, the high arched vault appears to be intact; it rises 3.12m 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. No tree roots have penetrated through the roof, but both walls and floor are saturated with moisture. After heavy rain prior to the day on which the vault was opened, water was visible seeping from the external wall just above ground level; following several dry days, this seepage was no longer present. The scars of wooden shuttering are visible on the roof of the vault, while the walls are rendered; although difficult to tell without full examination, this render is probably similar to that present on the external walls. If this is the case, then it also appears to match that on the walls of the potentially eighteenth century enclosure attached to the east end of the church. It also implies that all the structures within the churchyard may once have been harled.

Within the vault, the floor level slopes away unevenly towards the north west, following the external fall of the ground. It is impossible to determine the actual floor level, because of the amount of debris within the vault. This comprises a jumble of coffin wood, other coffin furniture (handles and plaques), rabbit bones and snail shells, mixed in with earth and decayed mortar. Amongst this are pieces of human bone and material, possibly from shrouds, alongside clearly modern artefacts such as broken glass bottles and a large hinge, presumably from a door. Lying in the centre of the northern part of the floor is a large roughly square slab, approximately 2m square, which is dark grey in colour. The slab stands proud of the ground surface and is approximately 400mm thick. Although largely obscured by the overlying deposits, another similar slab lies within the northern part of the chamber. This is visible in two places and in both cases voids can be seen underneath the slab, where water dripping from the roof has dissolved away the stone. In the south west corner of the vault, voids are also apparent underneath an uneven layer of what may be render washed down from the walls. The armorial panel of the Macleods of Assynt, broken into at least four pieces, appears to lie in the south east corner. To the north of these, against the north east wall, are two small irregularly shaped gravestones with clearly recognisable inscriptions. These would seem to be of eighteenth or nineteenth century date. In the north east corner of the vault, three unshaped stones protrude from the face of the long east wall, just above present floor level; it is possible that these represent an earlier building phase.

5.2. Roof

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 this stage. Within this slot, there was no evidence for any remaining traces of the floor for the upper apartment of the vault, which was demolished prior to 1794.

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 Ledmore Junction and also to the north of Inchnadamph (Neil Campbell, pers. comm.). Significantly, a roofing slate, recovered from Loch Assynt close to Ardvreck Castle by Maggie Campbell, is also of the same material. 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 is possible that the slabs - rather than covering the whole roof - did just protect the wallhead.

6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

It is probable that water dripping from the roof has washed away parts of the earth floor which is noted by those people who remember entering the vault prior to its blocking in the 1960's, thus revealing the slabs underneath. Rabbits and other small animals, whose bones were found in the vault, have probably also caused disturbance to the floor deposits. The size of the slabs suggests that they form part of the original floor, although there are voids clearly visible underneath them. They appear to be of a different stone to the slabs forming the roof covering. The presence of what are clearly the remains of coffins and other modern debris within the interior of the Macleod Vault confirm local reports that gravediggers have thrown whatever was retrieved from graves dug into a crowded graveyard into the vault.

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. It would seem easier and less damaging to the roof structure at this stage to establish the overall depth of the roof deposits by means of detailed measurements taken inside and outside the vault. On the east side enough slabs remain to establish the nature of the original structure of the roof at the wallhead. Many of the remaining slabs, although loose, could be fairly easily secured in place.

On the basis of the preliminary evaluation, a number of general recommendations can be made for future work within the interior of the mausoleum:

- While clearly removed from their original context, given their nature and in particular the presence of human bone, the floor deposits should be subjected to proper archaeological evaluation.

- The obviously fragile nature of the slab in the northern half of the chamber and the inability to determine its dimensions precluded any attempt to walk across the vault. This would have to be taken into consideration when any further work is to be undertaken in the chamber.

- Given the organic component within the deposits forming the floor of the vault, any work will have to be undertaken in the near future. The atmospheric conditions in the interior will have now been irrevocably altered through the removal of the blocking and though likely to remain damp, the wooden and metal objects, in particular, are likely to become degraded fairly rapidly.

7.0 Acknowledgements

Thanks are extended to Maggie Campbell, Neil Campbell and Willie, Helen and George Morrison for providing freely of their knowledge concerning the history of the vault and of the local geology of the area.

8.0 Appendices

8.1 Bibliography

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Mackenzie, W., 1794. Assynt. *Old Statistical Account*. Vol. XVI, 163-211.

8.2 Photographic Record

2	Working shot
3	Working shot
4	Working shot
5	Enclosure marker? retrieved from blocking
6	Interior - looking into SE corner
7	Interior - structure of roof
8	Interior - ?armorial panel and two incised slabs in SE corner
9	Slot 1 (roof) - pre-excavation
10	Slot 1 (roof) - working shot
11	Slot 1 (roof) - post-excavation, from NE
12	Slot 1 (roof) - post-excavation, from NE
13	Slot 2 (roof) - covering slab
14	Slot 2 (roof) - pre-excavation
15	Slot 2 (roof) - working shot
16	Slot 2 (roof) - amount of decayed mortar within earth matrix
17	Wasted
18	Slot 3 (roof) - roof slabs at wallhead
19	Slot 3 (roof) - after lifting of first slab
20	Slot 3 (roof) - after lifting of first slab
21	Slot 3 (roof) - mortar bedding of slab
22	Enclosure markers
23	Enclosure marker at gate (north side)
24	Enclosure marker at gate (south side)

Macleod Vault
Sketch plan of interior
14/3/2002