

BLAIRGOWRIE, RATTRAY AND DISTRICT BEFORE RECORDS BEGAN

Exploring past lives has become easier since information became more readily available, in libraries, museums and on the internet. A small group of local people decided to see what could be discovered about how people lived in this area before the arrival of the Romans, and before records began. Here is some of what we learned.

EARLY STONE AGES

Since the first humans arrived in Southern Britain over half a million years ago, the earth's polar ice caps have expanded and contracted at least three times. In the warmer, interglacial periods it is possible that early stone age hunters made their way this far north, but evidence of this would have been swept away by the next glacial advance. Certainly, no evidence has yet been found.

AFTER THE ICE

Once the last glaciers in Scotland had melted, about 10,000 years ago, pools of water were left behind. We know some of them now as the string of lochs that flow into the Lunan Burn: Clunie, Marlee, etc. As the land warmed and tundra like plants began to grow, herd animals like elk and reindeer moved into the area. Low trees followed, creating habitats for smaller animals like deer and boar. In the National Museum of Scotland we found fragments of an ancient beaver skull that had been buried deep in gravel by the Loch of Marlee. Perth Museum has a whole beaver skull that may have come from the same location.

THE MIDDLE STONE AGE

Mesolithic - between 10,000 & 6,000 years ago

As the climate became warmer, woods and forests became established. The first men arrived from the south and possibly also from the east over the land mass that still connected us to the continental mainland. They moved around, following the animals they hunted for their meat, gathering edible plants, and living in temporary shelters. Few traces of their lives survive. Sometimes there is evidence of a midden (rubbish dump) or traces of where poles supporting shelters have been thrust into the ground. Occasionally, scatters of small flint tools have been found during ploughing, some from this era, some from later, in the Neolithic. Several were found in Carsie.

THE NEW STONE AGE

Early Neolithic - between 6,000 and 3,000 years ago

Eventually families began to settle into more permanent dwellings. They began to herd animals and to clear land for farming. They still used stone and bone tools, even for chopping down trees and for shaping the wood that they used for building and shaping their utensils. Wood and bone deteriorates over time, but several polished stone axes and flint arrowheads have been found in the area.

Now they were settled in one place, people began to build communal tombs to bury their dead and erected monuments, perhaps for worship or other ritual practices. We have no idea how they used the Cleaven Dyke 1 kilometre long earthwork near Meikleour or all the standing stones we can still see around the district, but erecting them must have taken a lot of time and effort, so they must have considered them important.

Around 5,000 years ago people began to build circular ditched enclosures called henges. Many traces have been found in this area but they are often 'ploughed out' and difficult to see now. From about 4,500 years ago settings of large stones were added to some of the henges and some of these stone circles can still be seen in the hills around Blairgowrie. Dwellings were still being made of degradable natural materials so very few traces from this period remain, apart from crop marks that are sometimes visible from the air.

BRONZE AGE AND EARLY IRON AGE

From about 4,500 years ago

With settled homes, people could develop new skills, like pottery and metal working, first in bronze and later in iron, though they continued to work stone for special items. They made curious carved stone balls, like the ones found at Ford of Pitcur farm and Netherton farm near Bridge of Cally, and they decorated rocks with strange cup and ring markings. A fine cup marked rock can still be seen at Kincairney. Elaborate cup and ring markings were recorded on a large stone at Newbigging, near Cargill. Sadly, they are no longer visible to the naked eye.

Instead of communal graves, Bronze Age people began to bury their dead individually in stone lined cists like the one excavated at Lochlands farm near Rattray some years ago. Sometimes bodies were cremated, their ashes were placed in pottery urns which were then buried, occasionally near to ancient stone settings which perhaps were still considered sacred. Several such burials have been excavated locally.

Some of the artefacts recovered from this period were originally deposited as grave goods, like the two decorated pots found in a cist at Coupar Angus and the jet necklace at Easter Essendy. Sometimes, a mound of stones and soil was piled over the cists, making it difficult without excavation to determine whether a burial mound like the one at Bendochy was constructed in the Stone Age or the Bronze Age.

By the Bronze Age, the area around Blairgowrie was quite densely populated, with people taking advantage of good agricultural land in the vale of Strathmore and good pasture in the upland areas. The land was not drained in those days, so some of the low lying ground would be marshy. The traces of many dwellings in the hills to the north of the area show that the warmer climate and ground conditions allowed farming at a higher level than is possible today.

Aerial photographs clearly show the remains of round house settlements in the hills behind Alyth and Blairgowrie where their stone foundations can still be seen. Traces of settlements and field systems can even be seen in satellite photographs on Google Earth. In the low lying areas nothing of these dwellings can be seen now because of farming and other developments, but they can occasionally be detected from crop marks visible from the air.

Towards the end of this period, metal previously used for tools was also used to make weapons, some of which have been uncovered nearby, so perhaps population growth also led to disputes about land.