

PORTMAHOMACK DRAINAGE

ARCHAEOLOGY

Pumping Station

1. As part of the Portmahomack Drainage Scheme, a new pumping station was proposed in 1992. Because of a local tradition that an ancient chapel had stood on the site chosen, an archaeological investigation was undertaken to establish the extent and nature of any remains. Whilst no above ground features were then visible, it was recognised that there was a high possibility of sub-surface archaeological deposits being preserved, such as foundation walls, or an associated cemetery, for example.
2. A trial trenching programme was agreed upon as the best course of action. This involved the site being top soil stripped, in order to locate and identify any archaeological remains. The best course of action could then be decided upon: preservation, or excavation with full recording.
3. GUARD were contracted by the Department of Water and Sewerage to carry out this work, and one of their staff supervised the two day project in November 1992.
4. The area involved was top soil stripped by machine, in order to speed what is otherwise a lengthy, labour intensive process. This stripping was archaeologically supervised, and any features which were revealed in the sub soil were investigated. Stripping of the area revealed little of interest however. Some field drains were identified, but it was proved that no evidence for the chapel, or any other remains of archaeological interest, survived within the area proposed for the pumping station. This freed the land for further development, with no further archaeological work being deemed necessary in this area.

Pipeline Trenches

1. It was agreed by the Archaeology Service and the Department of Water and Sewerage, that a watching brief would be carried out by the Archaeology Service as the pipeline trenches were being excavated. This was carried out on a regular, though not daily basis.
2. A total of three features of archaeological importance were uncovered during these works, and were dealt with rapidly so that construction work was held up as little as possible.
3. The first of these features recorded was the remains of a shell midden. The feature was recognised due to the dark nature of the soil, and the high concentration of various types of shell. Some bone was also present within the soil matrix. There were however, no finds such that the deposit could be dated. Any dating will need to be the result of scientific dating for which no funds are available. The coastal location of this site, on a raised beach, is typical, as it allows full exploitation of the marine resource. This type of use of a natural resource can be found throughout history and pre-history, the earliest Scottish examples dating to around 8,000 BC.
4. The second archaeological find was discovered during trenching works, and immediately reported to the Archaeology Service for attention. Some skeletal (Burial A) remains were found, associated with large stones. Unfortunately, the trench sides were slipping due to the steep slope, and the fact that the surrounding soil was composed of loose sand. Very little of the skeleton therefore remained in situ. It was felt however that the remains might well be dated to the Bronze Age, (c.3500-1500BC) when inhumation of bodies in stone built "cists" was typical. These cists were generally square in shape, and built of large flat stone slabs. Often there was no stone base, the four sides being built on the ground surface. The body would be placed in the coffin in a crouched, or foetal position, and the coffin closed with a large "cap" stone. This information was given to the local police, and Procurator Fiscals office, as is required by law.
5. The third archaeological find was by far the most exciting. Trenching work between two houses on the northern side of the road- revealed further skeletal (Burial B) remains. Once again, construction work in the area was halted, and the Region's archaeology service called in. This skeleton seemed to be lying extended, oriented N-S with the head to the south, but full excavation was complicated by a very large stone over the leg area. It was attempted to excavate as far underneath this stone as possible, but this was further hampered by the discovery of more skeletal remains lying underneath the stone, from what seemed to be a different body (Burial C). Excavation was halted at this point for safety reasons, and a digger was brought in to carefully lift the stone, with as little further disturbance to the ground as possible. This was accomplished, and excavation continued. The second skeleton was found to be lying in an extended manner again, although this time oriented E-W, with the head to the western side. The very loose nature of the soil made excavation tricky, and it was judged better to continue excavating the skeleton in profile. This provided a useful viewpoint, as it could clearly be seen that this skeleton had been carefully laid on top of a layer of coarse gravel, within a stone built "coffin". It could also be seen that this had all been placed slightly above the level of the first skeleton. This indicated that the first skeleton excavated is somewhat older than the second, and it is possible that the location of this first skeleton was not known to the people who buried the second. While the lower legs and feet of the second skeleton were being excavated, further bones were found which did not seem to belong (Burial D). Whether these are the partial or whole remains of a third skeleton, or belong to an animal of some kind has yet to be ascertained, and this can only be done by specialised study. The nature of the first burial tells us little about it. No grave goods of any kind were found, and therefore no dating evidence is available. The second skeleton does however, represent a classic early medieval Christian burial - the body fully extended, with the head to the west, so that the tradition of all being raised from their graves, looking to the east on Judgement day can be fulfilled. Again in this period, the practice of placing bodies in stone built coffins is common. Again, this practice can be found all over Scotland.

6. This brought the main fieldwork to a close. The surrounding area was stripped of soil to ascertain that no further burials were located close by, and construction work resumed. Currently all of the skeletal remains are being held at the archaeology service office. Further work is necessary to examine the remains and gain all possible information from them. The presence of these burials, close together in an area with possible Christian associations does tend to suggest that an early chapel site exists within the general area. Whether or not the remains of the chapel await discovery is uncertain. Early house building in the immediate area could well have destroyed any such remains, with no record being kept. It is possible that these burials represent part of an associated early cemetery, and indeed, it is not impossible that the first single burial found could be dated to this period. As already stated, the remains were too fragmentary and disturbed to be sure. Radio-carbon dating might help to decide upon this.

7. This brought to a close the archaeological work necessary for this Scheme. This was one of the first Water and Sewerage schemes to work so closely with the Councils Archaeologists, and clearly was of a fruitful nature.

8. The Archaeology Service would like to thank the Department of Water and Sewerage, in particular Neil Aimers, for their help and co-operation. The watchful eyes and enthusiasm of the contractors were also much appreciated.