
5 DISCUSSION

This paper presents the results of archaeological and historical research that aids in elucidating the plight of a family during a period of social and economic depression in Scotland's history. It demonstrates how national economic strategies had a very real impact on the lives of families of a low socio-economic status, with their fortunes being largely dictated by economic downturns, the decisions of a few wealthy landowners, potato blight leading to crop failure and forced evictions or 'clearances' all resulting in famine and the necessity to emigrate, leading to a decrease in the local population.

The McEachen family make a brief appearance in the historical record. They are first noted in the 1841 census, as a family of ten, living in a house of drystone construction on the west bank of Brunary Burn. The family are not recorded as residing at the house in the next census of 1851, but some of the family members are recorded as living in a farm at Kinloid, with John McEachen listed as the head of the household, his occupation a stone mason and the tenant of a farm with three acres of land. Listed as living with him are his father Angus, now a widower, Christina his daughter and his two sons Angus and Ewen (a new addition to the family since the 1841 census). His daughter Janet is no longer listed, and his son Donald is recorded in the 1851 census as working as a farm servant on a 14-acre farm at Acharale. There is no mention of his sister Kate. The family appear once again to have been evicted from their home at Kinloid as they are recorded by the 1861 census as now living at Back of Keppoch.

Like other crofting families their life was one of subsistence. The discovery of rig-and-furrow or 'lazy beds' to the south-west of the house attests to the fact that they would have grown their own vegetables; probably potatoes, on a small agricultural scale. If they had grazing rights they may have kept a small number of sheep and maybe a cow for milk. To supplement what they could grow and rear, the crofters earned money through labouring. The kind of labour the crofters could be employed to do was varied, and largely dependent on the will of the landowner. For instance, when the estate was owned by Clanranald, the kelp industry was in boom times, and the crofters were employed on a seasonal basis in kelp production. When the kelp industry collapsed and the fortune of Clanranald declined, crofters found themselves without this income, with the subsequent landowners, particularly Lord Cranstoun, becoming less willing to provide necessary employment on the estate.

The house at Brunary Burn, like its residents, also has a short recorded history. There is no hint of a structure at this location on Roy's map of 1747

and, by the time of the first Ordnance Survey map of the area in 1876, the buildings are shown to be unroofed. This suggests that when the McEachens left their former home some time in the 1840s and moved to Kinloid Farm near Arisaig, as recorded in the 1851 census, the house was left abandoned and soon fell into ruin. There is no documentary evidence to show whether the McEachen family were the original occupants or whether other families had lived there previously, but there is circumstantial evidence. All datable artefacts recovered during the excavations were 19th-century or later, and it can be shown that much of the pottery at least was contemporary with the life of the buildings, even though some was redeposited following abandonment. No major structural repairs or realignments were evident in the houses, no earlier structures or features were identified below or around the houses, and no artefacts were recovered pre-dating the 19th century. This archaeological evidence, coupled with the historical and cartographic evidence, is suggestive of a single, short phase of occupation, possibly only within the two decades between the 1831 and 1851 censuses.

The houses as they stood at the time of excavation were in a ruinous state. The larger building, Structure A, was stone-built, with the possibility of a slate roof. The smaller adjacent building, the function of which could not be determined through excavation, was more lightly built. A cobbled yard was built in front of the house and would have been subject to repeated flooding from the adjacent burn, so much so that a revetting wall was built on its western bank.

The internal floor space of Structure A was small at 28m², or 2.8m² per family member. There was only one internal division in the house, creating a small room 1m², the function of which was probably a storeroom, as it was too small for a habitable room, and toilet facilities were probably outwith the house. This stone partition may have been added later as the walls were not keyed in to the main outer walls. One end, probably the south, would have formed the living and sleeping area (the 'ben-end' or best end) and the other the working area and kitchen (the 'but-end'), with a central hearth heating both. Box beds and/or wooden benches were probably arranged against the walls around the surviving paving. It is uncertain whether the northern end was also paved, but a compacted earth floor would not be out of place in the working end of a farm worker's cottage. A rammed earth floor was present in the longhouse at Balquhidder, for example, with stone flags only being present around the hearth area and entrance (Stewart & Stewart 1988, 309).

Effectively this meant that family life within the house was without privacy. The finds assemblage attests to their necessary thriftiness, with pieces of crockery being repaired with wire, but also demonstrates a little household pride in that some of the pieces, like the teapot, could not have been used and were probably for display only.

The other, smaller, building, Structure B, was of inferior construction, with thinner walls, and no evidence of windows as with the house, Structure A. The function of Structure B could not be determined through excavation. It may have been a byre for overwintering animals, if the McEachens had grazing rights, but probably not cattle as the doorway was too narrow. Allan MacEachan from South Morar, a witness at the sitting of the Deer Forest Commission in Arisaig in 1894 (see above), explained that his croft had one acre of land only, plus the right to graze one cow on a neighbouring farm. In general the crofters had no rights to grazing land, and few were able to keep sheep. It is more probable that Structure B was a storeroom for the few agricultural implements the family would have possessed, but it cannot entirely be ruled out that the structure was used as living quarters, perhaps on an ad hoc basis when conditions became too cramped in the main house.

Although the house was built on marginal land with a wet and boggy nature, and may have been prone to flooding, in other respects some care was taken when choosing the position of the house. The house was roughly aligned north to south, with the entrance and possible windows facing the rising sun in the east. The house was also nestled on the leeward side of a knoll which offered some protection against prevailing westerly and south-westerly winds, and sat in a hollow, which was interpreted as the result of quarrying stone for the construction of the house and the other associated buildings and walls.

The presence of roofing slates would suggest that at least one structure had a slate roof. Only a few slates were recovered from the topsoil, but it is possible that the others were collected when the house went out of use and taken elsewhere for reuse. Although no evidence of a chimney was found during excavation, the smoke from the house would have had to be vented if the roof was tiled. Alternatively, both buildings could have been thatched and no provision made for the venting of smoke. No timber framing or evidence of any other structures for supporting the roofs of the buildings was identified. It is likely that, if thatched, the roof would have been hipped, with the rafters sitting directly on wall plates.

There are other examples of what appear to be 19th-century houses with a short occupation span in the vicinity of Brunary Burn. A drystone structure (Arisaig An Sidean, Site 26, [illus 1](#)), aligned north-east to south-west was recorded on

the south-west side of a knoll. It had an internal measurement of 3m × 7.7m, with a smaller lean-to building built up against the east gable. Although the building was unroofed at the time of recording, fragments of roof slate were recovered ([Carter et al 2005](#), 18). This structure's position, orientation, size and construction material are very similar to those aspects of the house at Brunary Burn. The house does not appear on any maps, and must have been demolished by the time of the First Edition OS map of 1876, and has been interpreted as an isolated and early 19th-century house ([ibid](#)). An evaluation was carried out on a nearby small township of eight buildings with associated banks and cultivation remains, named Achraig on the First Edition OS map (Site 15, [illus 1](#); [ibid](#), 18). Only three of the structures were depicted as being roofed on the First Edition OS map; the other five were not mapped. Of the five structures that did not appear on the First edition OS map, four were evaluated. Two of these were found to be turf and stone built and two were entirely of drystone construction. The finds assemblage was early to mid 19th-century, and there was no evidence of an earlier phase of occupation. A third site north of Achraig (Site 10, [illus 1](#)) was interpreted as a late 19th-century turf building ([ibid](#), 17–18). What these sites have in common with Brunary Burn, as well as some similarities in aspect and construction, is the fact that all the houses appear to have had a relatively short lifespan. They appear on no maps prior to the First Edition OS map, six of the structures do not appear on it at all, and Brunary Burn is depicted as ruinous. They all have a probable 19th-century origin and there was no evidence of earlier occupation on the sites.

A building which exemplifies the suggested appearance of the Brunary Burn structures – drystone walling with a hipped thatched roof – is preserved as the ‘Cottar’s House’ at Auchindrain Museum near Inverary ([Brunskill 1987](#), fig 132).

One possible interpretation of these sites is that they were a response to the growing kelp industry in the area and the increasing population, mirroring the rise of the industry in the early 19th century, with eventual economic slowdown and population decrease witnessed in the 1840s. As a direct result of the clearances, famine and emigrations, these houses were abandoned and left to fall to ruin.

Like many other families of low socio-economic status, the life of the McEachen family was blighted by economic downturns, famine and social upheaval. The downturn in the kelp industry had a local and national effect. Crofters who had seasonally found employment in kelping could no longer rely on this as a source of cash, as landowners turned from kelp production to giving over land for sheep grazing. The downturn in the economic fortune of the Highlands and Islands was also compounded by the potato famine of the 1840s.