Archaeology lab comes to Assynt

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The fires on which the stones were heated involved a range of wood - including birch, alder, hazel and hawthorn (or apple) - suggesting the site had more diverse woodland in the past than it does these days. The wood species were identified at Stoer Village Hall, thanks to AOC Archaeology bringing their post-excavation lab to Assynt and training local people in the techniques needed to analyse samples from digs. Altogether 26 people, almost all local to Assynt, took part in the post-excavation work, organised as part of the Fire and Water project, run by Historic Assynt. They learned to sort samples from the October dig at Stronchrubie burnt mound, to separate out charcoal and other datable material from the soil and stones and to identify the tree species in charcoal and any cereal grains.

Gordon Sleight, projects leader for Historic Assynt, said: "Normally archaeologists take the samples from the dig away down south, and do post-excavation analysis in their lab. But this time the lab has come to us and this has enabled lots of local people to take part in analysing what we found at Stronchrubie. It has been amazing to realise just how much charcoal we dug up, when what we thought we had was mostly sooty stone, and it has been really interesting to use microscopes to see the internal structure of the charcoal and identify the tree species".

Jack Robertson, the AOC archaeologist who led the training, said: "It has definitely been worth bringing the lab work to Assynt. We have had 26 people come and take part, which is great. We have identified alder, hazel, birch and one of the hawthorn/apple/pear/quince group of species, and we have also found some interesting heat-affected stones and some possible worked stone".

In October, the Stronchrubie dig confounded common assumptions that the burnt mound was used for feasting, as the structures unearthed beneath the mound suggest that bathing was more likely. The post-excavation confirms this, with no food or cooking remains found at all. Some of the charcoal finds will now be carbon-dated to give a better idea of when the mound was created. Historic Assynt's Fire and Water project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) Scotland and Robert Kiln Trust. As well as the Stronchrubie excavation, the Fire and Water project has also run several other associated events including a 'Finds Roadshow', a 'Music Through Time' day and the inauguration of five heritage trails.

Colin McLean, Head of HLF Scotland said: "This is a very interesting project so we are delighted to give it our support. Particularly in Assynt, there are hidden clues to the way our ancestors lived and how our lives developed into what they are today. By delving into this history, volunteers, families and school children will not only expand their knowledge and learn lots of new skills, but this and the other activities will help create a unique record of the area for others to learn, enjoy and be inspired by."

Further information

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