Cemented in History

27/10/2011

The aim of the mosaic was to brighten up the school playground and provide a lasting reminder of their local heritage. The children have been a driving force behind the High Morlaggan community heritage project, an initiative that has already been incorporated into the school curriculum through archaeology, poetry, art, Gaelic singing and drama.

In May 2011, the High Morlaggan Project brought together people from all walks of life. Enthusiasts from the community were trained by professionals in the techniques needed to uncover the hidden secrets of the deserted rural settlement of High Morlaggan, near Arrochar. The four-week dig was part of a wider project to investigate the history of this ruined settlement that had been slowly disappearing under the bracken, until an initial excavation in 2009 started to unearth the remains of the buildings and their contents. Although the finds from the Dig Morlaggan excavation are in the care of Kilmartin House Museum, the Arrochar Primary School pupils were so inspired by the many colourful pottery fragments they unearthed that they set about collecting similar sherds from the burn and shore beside the school.

Alison Palmer, Headteacher at Arrochar Primary School, said: “The children have had a fabulous time working on the High Morlaggan Project. It was a real interdisciplinary topic and involved everyone in the school, from Pre-5 to Primary 7. Pupils enjoyed searching for the pottery in the burn and on the shores of Loch Lomond, and then, with the help of Ann, Fiona and Sue, created a wonderful sea mosaic on one of the dull, outside walls of the school. The mosaic is truly stunning and I would like to thank them all for their hard work and commitment to this project. The staff and pupils have really enjoyed finding out about Morlaggan and its history. This has been a very worthwhile, enjoyable educational project.”

The tantalising finds from the 2009 dig prompted this year?s longer excavation, which was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and Argyll and the Islands LEADER. The dig was run by Roddy Regan, a freelance archaeologist who regularly works for Kilmartin House Museum, along with Clare Ellis from Argyll Archaeology and Heather James from Northlight Heritage. The aim was to find evidence of earlier occupation of the site to tie in with documentary records dating back to 1500. Pupils from Arrochar Primary School and Hermitage Academy participated in the excavation with the help of Kilmartin House Museum, which was also commissioned with the unenviable task of cataloguing the vast amounts of pottery, glass, metal, shoes and clay pipes found by the volunteers.

Colin McLean, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund Scotland, said: “Our heritage offers a rich resource for education and it is wonderful to see it being used at High Morlaggan in such an innovative way. It is providing powerful and memorable experiences for the children, making learning fun and opening their eyes to the history which surrounds them. Young people are the future custodians of our heritage so their passion for it is vital if we are to keep it from being lost forever”.

The results of the excavation will add to the generally sparse knowledge of Scottish post-Medieval settlements. Leading Scottish ceramics expert George Haggarty was commissioned to analyse the massive pottery assemblage, which has unofficially become the signature of Dig Morlaggan. Early indications suggest that people were living at Morlaggan as long ago as the 1300s! Many floor layers and hearths have been uncovered during the dig, together with unexpected finds, such as a wooden bucket used to collect urine for dyeing cloth, and ceramic eggs used to encourage hens to lay. Once all the finds have been examined by specialists, it is hoped that it will be possible to paint a much fuller picture of what life used to be like at Morlaggan.

Sheila McLean from Argyll and the Islands LEADER added: “This is an excellent example of a project which encourages members of the community of all ages to take part in the discovery and recording of their local heritage. In addition, the project benefits the local economy through the interest raised in the area and the additional visitors that it brings”.

Sir Malcolm Colquhoun of Luss, who gave permission to excavate his land, will open a public exhibition at the Three Villages Hall in Arrochar on Saturday January 14, 2012, which will reveal the outcomes of the excavation. This will include day-time activities for young people, a pottery workshop, and an evening lecture presented by professional archaeologist Roddy Regan. For more information, visit the High Morlaggan website.

Note to editors

In 2010, the community-run **Morlaggan Rural Settlement Group** was awarded the Robert Kiln Trust Award for the best project, or series of works or projects, carried out in the UK by a voluntary body or individual for the High Morlaggan Project. It also achieved a Highly Commended in the Best Community Archaeology Project category of the 2010 British Archaeological Awards.

LEADER - Links Activities Developing the Rural Economy: LEADER is part of the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP), which promotes economic and community development within rural areas. LEADER is a bottom-up method of delivering support for rural development through implementing local development strategies. Support, awarded by Local Action Groups (LAGs), is aimed at local projects with a wide community benefit that show an element of originality or experimentation where possible, and complement other activities within the local development strategy.

Kilmartin House Museum: Kilmartin House Museum is an award winning world-class centre for archaeology and landscape interpretation established to protect, investigate and interpret this internationally important archaeological landscape and artefacts found in the region.

Northlight Heritage: Northlight Heritage is a commercial enterprise that believes business is about more than the accumulation of wealth. The traditional core business values of excellence, service, and diligence are important, and additional opportunities with clients, partners, associates and friends, combine to bring other social and environmental benefits that can help people understand, appreciate and engage with their pasts.

Argyll Archaeology is a small professional archaeology business based in Campbeltown in Argyll and run by Dr Clare Ellis.