

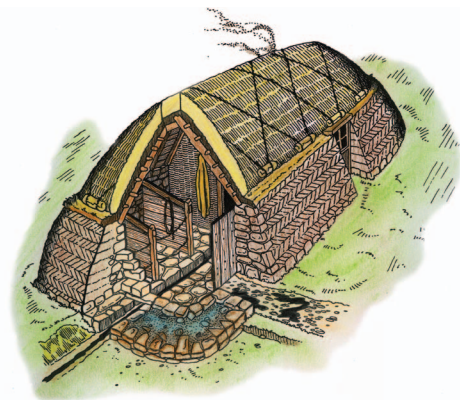


# FARMING SINCE MEDIEVAL TIMES

Scotland's rural landscape is the result of six thousand years of farming, and many physical traces survive of past land-use, particularly since medieval times, beginning around AD 1100. The climate has been somewhat warmer at certain periods in the past, allowing arable farming at higher altitudes than today. In upland areas untouched by the intensive ploughing of the last two centuries, it is often possible to see superimposed patterns of land-use reflecting past changes, as well as the ruins of farm buildings, dykes and enclosures.



Seen from the air; the three main buildings of this pre-improvement farmstead lie alongside irregularly-shaped enclosures. © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk)



Turf made a very satisfactory building material. The turf wall was built on a stone foundation and sometimes given an inner face of stone, on which the roof timbers rested.

In medieval times, most farming was at a subsistence level, with each small community aiming to produce enough food for its own survival. Barley and oats were cultivated on rigs (raised ridges), with furrows (drainage channels) between them, and cattle and sheep were kept for milk, meat, wool and hides. However, hardly any farm sites have been found that date to before AD 1600, and there is still much we need to learn

about how people lived and worked at this time.

A typical farmstead from the 1700s might have several buildings and small enclosures, surrounded by arable and pasture. Combined byre-dwellings (known as blackhouses in the Western Isles) were common, in which family and cattle lived at either end of a single building. In many areas of Scotland, building materials included turf, peat, wattle (interwoven rods) and clay, as well as timber and stone, and many such houses had a short and ephemeral lifespan. Roofs could be of turf, wooden shingles, stone slabs or thatch on a wooden framework, and the precious roof timbers were often taken down and re-used for new houses. In the fertile lowlands, people tended to live in villages.

Corn-drying kilns were essential in the Scottish climate, to dry grain in preparation for grinding. Prior to the big estate mills of the 18th and later



On the plan, the parallel lines (green) of rig cultivation can be seen downslope from the farmstead. The houses are marked in red and the enclosures in black. © Crown copyright: RCAHMS

Raised green mounds with traces of foundations are often all that survives today of the once widespread shieling system. This involved taking the cattle and sheep up to summer pastures on higher ground, where the women and children would stay all summer in shieling-huts, while they made butter and cheese and spun wool. The practice continued into the 20th century in Lewis and was remembered with nostalgia as the highlight of the year. The earliest shieling-huts were round or oval and built of stone and turf, but by the late 18th century they were normally oblong or rectangular. A good site on a dry terrace with a source of fresh water nearby would be used over and over again.

centuries with their huge vertical water-wheels, corn-mills were small and had horizontal water-wheels to power the mill-stones. Small round or square enclosures known as kailyards or plantiecrubs were used for garden cultivation of vegetables, fertilised by midden material or sooty thatch. Beyond the infield and outfield areas of unenclosed cultivation was the hill pasture for common grazing, separated from the arable by a head-dyke. The reality was often more complicated, of course, especially over time, and there might be pasture within the head-dyke or cultivation without, and enclosures in which animals might manure the soil ready for cultivation. On hill-slopes, the track ways between these areas might, with frequent use, become sunken or hollow droveways.

*An artists reconstruction of the same farmstead in use in the 18th century. The houses are built of stone, and the nearer building has a byre at the far end. The turf-built enclosures were used for garden cultivation and to keep animals in.*





*Although the rubble walls have collapsed, the shape of this kiln-barn is still clearly visible. In the foreground is the barn, with an entrance on the left, and at the far end is the circular corn-drying kiln. © Crown copyright: RCAHMS*

By the late 18th century, Scotland was at the forefront of agricultural ‘Improvement’. This movement sought to replace the old semi-communal pattern of land-holding and cultivation with a science-based and commercially productive system under single-ownership separating arable and pasture, improved land-use alternated the two with crop rotation in enclosed blocks of land.

Enclosure could take the form of turf banks, hedges or stone dykes, and the latter were a useful way of absorbing the stones cleared from arable land. Increased use of lime fertiliser helped to improve the soil, and new machinery increased crop yields. The modern plough with a curved mould board to turn the furrow was invented in Scotland in the 1760s, followed by the threshing machine

in the 1780s. Initially, threshing machines were driven by horse-power, and the remains of covered horse-engines, or horse-gangs, often survive today. Model estates run by innovative landowners included large steadings, planned villages, and rural industrial buildings such as lime-kilns, saw-mills and smithies.

Scarcity of good fertile land in the Highlands and Islands led to a different form of ‘Improvement’, better known as the Clearances. Small communal farms were replaced by huge single-tenant sheep farms, and surplus people either emigrated or were resettled on small crofts in planned townships.










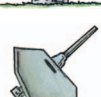

Both documentary evidence and archaeological field-survey have important roles in unravelling the history of complex farming landscapes. The sites themselves are known to research workers today as MoLRS, Medieval or Later Rural Settlements, and they are vital to our understanding of the way in which land-use in Scotland has developed over the last millennium. They are also vital to the sense of place today of Highland communities in particular and to the heritage of many thousands of Scots who chose, or were forced, to emigrate overseas.



*Left: This is a typical upland location for a summer shieling. On a level grassy terrace are the stone footings for an oblong hut. © Crown copyright: RCAHMS*

*Right: From the air, clear traces of rig-and-furrow cultivation lie beneath a later turf-built sheep fold. The square fold has wings at its corners to provide extra shelter for the sheep. © Crown copyright: RCAHMS*

# TIME-LINE

End of the last Ice Age Wildlife colonises land Mesolithic hunting settlers		12,500	
		8500	Flint scatters Shell mounds, rock shelters
Neolithic farming settlers		4000	Chambered tombs and houses Cupmarked rocks
		3000	Stone circles, henges, and standing stones
Metal technology (gold, copper)		2000	Burial mounds and short cists Hut-circles
Climate deteriorating Fortifications begin		1000	Burnt mounds Hillforts
Iron-working technology		500	Crannogs
		200	Duns, brochs, wheelhouses, and earth-houses
		BC ▲	
		▼ AD	
Roman army in Scotland		79	
Waning of Roman influence		200	Roman camps, forts and roads, Antonine Wall
		400	
Introduction of Christianity Picts, Gaels, Britons and Anglians		600	Long cist graves
Start of the Viking Age		800	Early Christian and Pictish carved stones, chapels
Emergence of Scottish nation		1000	Pagan Viking graves and settlements
		1100	
First burghs		1200	Stone-built churches
		1500	Mottes, abbeys, stone-built castles
Reformation of the Church		1600	Tower-houses
Agricultural improvements & Industrial Revolution		1800	Deserted villages and farms
		1900	Coal mines and heavy industries
Two World Wars		2000	Gun batteries and airfields

**FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPH:**

A complex agricultural landscape from the 18th century seen from the air today. A stone march-dyke of the 1760s runs bottom left to top right across earlier enclosures, and the remains of a large turf building can be seen in the centre of this photograph. This upland landscape has escaped the destructive effects of intensive ploughing.

For advice and further information, please contact  
Historic Scotland  
Longmore House, Salisbury Place  
Edinburgh EH9 1SH  
Tel: 0131 668 8766  
Email: [hs.schedulingteam@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:hs.schedulingteam@scotland.gsi.gov.uk)  
[www.historic-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk)

Historic Scotland is an agency within the Scottish Government and is responsible for administering the legislation that protects ancient monuments (buildings, ruins, archaeological sites and landscapes). It provides general advice on the conservation and protection of Scotland's heritage.

Historic Scotland's Education Service encourages the use of the built heritage as a learning and teaching resource.

Over 300 historic properties are looked after by Historic Scotland and are open to the public for enjoyment and education. For further information, including free leaflets telephone 0131 668 8600.

Our data service website contains details of scheduled Monuments and has GIS datasets available to download:  
<http://data.historic-scotland.gov.uk>

### **The following leaflets are available from Historic Scotland:**

*Scheduled ancient monuments: a guide for owners, occupiers and land managers*

*Managing Scotland's archaeological heritage*

*Grants for Ancient Monuments: a guide to grants available for the preservation, maintenance and management of ancient monuments*

*Archaeology on farm and croft (produced jointly with Archaeology Scotland)*

*Scotland's listed buildings: a guide for owners and occupiers*

*The carved stones of Scotland: a guide to helping in their protection*

*Metal detecting - yes or no? Metal detecting, scheduled ancient monuments and the law*

A leaflet on *Treasure Trove in Scotland* is available from the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh

A number of *Historic Scotland Technical Advice Notes*, on topics such as the use of lime mortars, the conservation of thatching and stonecleaning, are available; catalogue from and orders to:

Historic Scotland Conservation Group  
Tel: 0131 668 8638

e-mail:  
[hs.cgpublishations@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:hs.cgpublishations@scotland.gsi.gov.uk)

*This information leaflet is one of a series produced by Historic Scotland.*

*Text written by Anna Ritchie  
Illustrations drawn by Alan Braby  
© Crown Copyright: Historic Scotland  
(2011).*