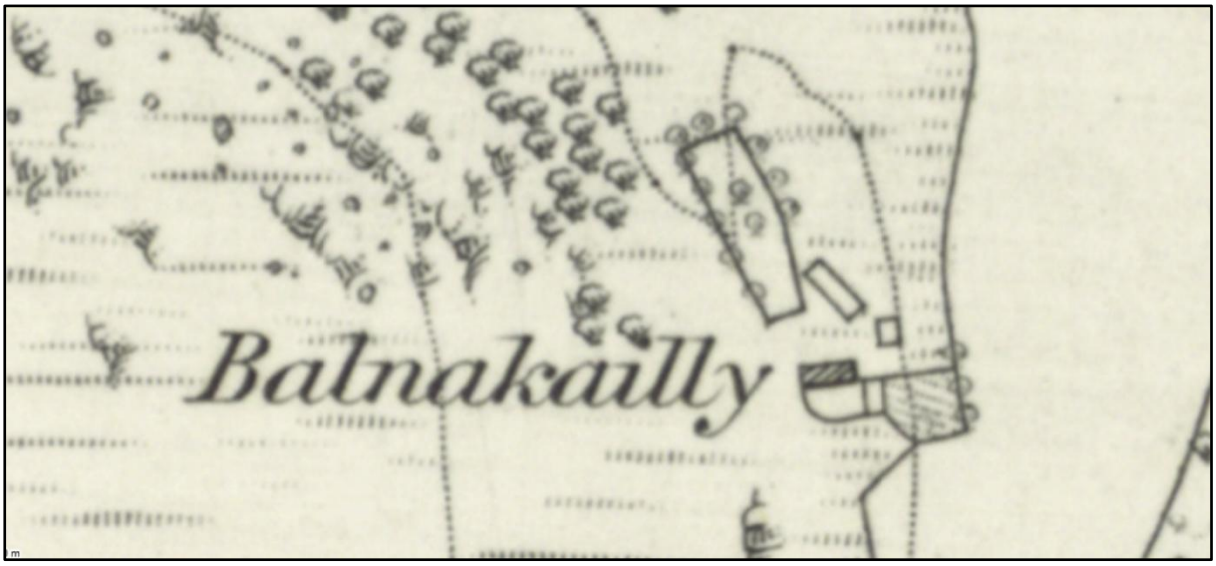


Balnakailly – Settlement in the Woods

On the northern tip of Bute in the Firth of Clyde lies the island's last remaining Atlantic rainforest at Balnakailly. Now owned by the community, the forest is home to a variety of plants, animals, insects, fungi and protected bird species. The stories of how people settled and interacted with this environment are just waiting to be told. A Second World War decoy bunker commands a stunning view of the surrounding area but it is the settlement at Balnakailly, nestling in the trees, that has become the focus of an exciting new partnership between Archaeology Scotland's Adopt-a-Monument programme, Bute Forest and the local community.

Long since abandoned, Balnakailly today retains a charm of rural lives once lived. Whilst nature is slowly and inevitably reclaiming the land the deserted farm-steading has five ruined buildings and an enclosure that captures the imagination.



OS Six-inch 1st edition Argyllshire sheet CLXXXII, surveyed 1864-5, published 1869. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

Sitting within the former Forest of Bute, a royal forest in the 15th century, the structures in the settlement are good examples of traditional building practice, including slots for a cruck frame still visible in the largest structure. The name Balnakailly is first mentioned in legal documents in 1615 although a farm may have been established circa 1500. Previous survey work was undertaken at the site by the Natural History Society as part of the Scotland's Rural Past project in the early 2000s.



The largest building at Balnakailly features cruck frame slots.

With its origins a distant memory, 19th century census records suggest that most residents left Balnakailly in the 1840s and that the settlement was finally abandoned in the 1860s. Over 160 years later and Balnakailly is once again the focus of attention. The Adopt-a-Monument team first met the lovely Amie Dow, Bute Community Forest's Heritage Project Co-ordinator, in November 2025 to explore the site and to offer a taster session for potential volunteers. So began a partnership to investigate Balnakailly's history and to discover the story of the people who once lived and worked there.



During Scottish Archaeology Month in September 2026 the team returned for 4 days to run an assessment dig at Balnakailly. Getting off the short Rhubodach-Colintraive ferry the journey to Balnakailly begins with a 30 to 40-minute walk across boggy ground followed by a gradual ascent through the woods. It makes the intrepid archaeologist realise how remote the site is. Thankfully the community group have marked out paths through the dense trees.

Blessed with participants from Bute Forest, Live Argyll Community Learning and Development volunteers and pupils from Rothesay Academy the team took to exploring the footprint of a structure close to the largest building. It is possible that it represents one of the earliest phases. Initially starting with small test pits placed along a visible stone feature the trenches were expanded to reveal the remains of a significant wall running north to south with a possible entrance halfway along its extent.



Looking along the excavated wall.

During the excavation the team found sherds of pottery and two pieces of broken clay pipe stem. Whilst one stem had no identifying marks the second included part of the *bowl* and the *heel*. The fluted decoration on the bowl is suggestive of clay pipes dating from between 1790 and 1820. If so, this 200-year-old evidence may have belonged to the last generations who lived at Balnakailly.

A more un-expected find was discovered by local volunteer Ben within the core of the wall. Announcing that he had found a pocked-sized leather case he

carefully lifted the muddy artefact to discover that on the front the words SANGAMO WESTON were staring back at him. Inside was a rusty electrical instrument, a photographic light meter. Sangamo had acquired Weston in 1936. During the Second World War they dedicated their efforts to producing electrical instruments for aircraft so Ben's find probably dates to the post-war period. A surprising find, nonetheless, and one that generated much debate!



The clay pipe stem, bowl and heel.



The Sangamo Weston light meter (r) and case (l).

With the success of the assessment dig there was much excitement for exploring the site further and to research archive material on Balnakailly held at Bute Museum in Rothesay.

We are therefore delighted that an extended dig is due to take place week commencing February 22nd, 2027, where we will return to Balnakailly for two weeks of fieldwork.

Those interested in taking part should contact Amie Dow at amie.dow@buteforest.org. No previous experience is necessary. Archaeology Scotland will provide all the necessary tools and expert guidance.

With thanks to all the participants and to Historic Environment Scotland and The National Lottery Heritage Fund for making it all possible.

Adopt-a-Monument is a nation-wide community-led Archaeology scheme that provides the practical advice and training needed to care and conserve local heritage whilst encouraging hands-on activities to improve the condition, accessibility and interpretation of community sites. Adopt-a-Monument is an Archaeology Scotland initiative supported by Historic Environment Scotland. The team can be contacted at adopt@archaeologyscotland.org.uk.



Drone view of excavated wall. September 2026.

Andrew Jepson, Adopt-a-Monument Project Officer – 30 October 2026