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## Centuries-old whisky smuggler's secret bothy uncovered by archaeologists

A piece of a copper still has been recovered as part of a targeted archaeological excavation, providing strong evidence that a stone structure discovered in Ben Lawers National Nature Reserve (NNR) was used as a site for illicit whisky distillation.

Found by members of the National Trust for Scotland's Archaeology team and volunteers, the tapered copper alloy collar is thought to be, in Gaelic, *An Gearradan*, 'the connecting piece' between the lyne arm and the head of the still. This is supported by an illustration found in a Gaelic dictionary from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which depicts a *Phoit-dhubh*, or 'black pot', with the parts of a small whisky still labelled.

Further well-preserved features of the site provided clear evidence that the stone structure was a bothy purpose-built for clandestine whisky distilling. This includes a well-constructed hearth and evidence of burning, a substantial stone-capped drain that ran beneath the internal floor, and a timber roof-support post, which appears to have been buried when the walls collapsed on top of it. There are five known illicit whisky bothies on the Ben Lawers NNR, which is cared for by the National Trust for Scotland, but the discovery of the piece of copper still is unique to this site.

In the 1780s, unlicensed private distillation, which had existed in Scotland for centuries and on which many Highland tenants relied, was declared illegal. Rather than pay the tax, distillers and smugglers went to great lengths to evade the excise officers, moving their illicit stills and hidden bothies into upland areas to avoid detection.

Derek Alexander, the National Trust for Scotland's Head of Archaeology, said: "This is a wonderful example of how archaeology can tell a gripping story of spirit smuggling that would otherwise have been lost to time.

"In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, illicit whisky distilling in these hills became a real battle of wits between excise officers and distillers. To find the remains of stills in these upland areas, you need to think like an excise officer. Those who distilled spirit in this bothy will have picked the location carefully to make sure they were well hidden.

"This bothy is well concealed along one arm of the Lawers Burn, nestled in a burn gully where there's a slight bend in the burn to shield the site from both upstream and downstream. The people who distilled here knew what they were doing and it's possible the still was never seized by the authorities.

"If the still had been found by the excise officers, the still would've been taken away and destroyed. So, the fact that we've found this connecting piece here suggests the still was

dismantled in a hurry and its components whisked away by the smugglers as they dispersed. The connecting piece may have been forgotten in the rush and left behind.

“Distillers of illicit whisky would’ve travelled light and left little trace of their activity, and so a find like this is especially rare and exciting. It gives us a glimpse into an activity that was once rife in the hills of Ben Lawers and which was seen by many as an act of community resistance.”

The discovery was made as part of archaeological excavations undertaken at previously unexplored sites on the headwaters of the Lawers Burn, near Lochan nan Cat at Ben Lawers NNR. Previous survey work by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) had identified these as sites of suspected illicit whisky-distilling.

The dig was the latest in a series undertaken as part of The Pioneering Spirit project supported by The Glenlivet, for which the Trust’s Archaeology team were awarded Current Archaeology’s ‘Archaeological Research Project of the Year’ in 2025. The project seeks to unearth stories and sites of illicit whisky production across landscapes in the care of the National Trust for Scotland, and has already identified 30 sites of illicit distilling, including at Mar Lodge Estate NNR, Torridon, Ben Lomond and Ben Lawers NNR.

A complete copper still from Cortachy, from the Angus Folk Museum Collection, is on display at the National Trust for Scotland’s House of Dun, Garden & Estate in Montrose. The Cortachy still was made to sit in a brick-built stove and so may have been used inside a building, rather than in a bothy in the hills. A [3D model of the Cortachy still](#) has been produced.

Archaeology forms a major part of the Trust’s portfolio, helping it to understand how people in the past shaped Scotland’s landscapes as they are seen today, and provides an important tool for investigating the past and for encouraging public engagement with history and heritage.

This work is therefore a critical part of the National Trust for Scotland’s vision to protect Scotland’s nature, beauty and heritage and provide access for all to enjoy it, as outlined in its 10-year strategy, launched in 2022.

## **ENDS**

Images: <https://www.flickr.com/gp/133918740@N04/873o7M6Dt7>

## **About the National Trust for Scotland**

Established in 1931, the National Trust for Scotland is Scotland’s largest conservation charity and cares for, shares and speaks up for Scotland’s magnificent heritage.

For more than 90 years, the Trust has pioneered public access to and shared ownership of some of the most magnificent buildings, collections and landscapes in Scotland. It

cares for more than 100 sites, from ancient houses to battlefields, castles, mills, gardens, coastlines, islands, mountain ranges and the plants and animals which depend upon them.

In March 2022 the National Trust for Scotland launched *Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone*, its ten-year strategy which sets out the ambitions of the charity over the coming decade. From speaking up for Scotland's heritage which doesn't have a voice, to improving the lives and wellbeing of people across the country, and responding to the climate and biodiversity crisis, the Trust will build on its work in recent years to grow its impact and conserve and restore more of Scotland's heritage, as it moves towards its centenary in 2031.

Scotland's largest membership organisation, the National Trust for Scotland relies on the support of its members and donors to carry out its important work.

For more information on the National Trust for Scotland visit [www.nts.org.uk](http://www.nts.org.uk).

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