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National Trust for Scotland's Top 10 archaeological discoveries

The National Trust for Scotland is celebrating the 30th anniversary of its in-house archaeology team, an asset that has allowed the conservation charity to delve more deeply into its natural and built places, allowing not only the places, but the stories of those who lived in and around them, to be shared with visitors from across the world.

As Scotland's largest conservation charity, the Trust cares for over 76,000 hectares of ground including around 12,000 archaeological features, of which about 100 are scheduled monuments – those which are nationally important and legally protected.

Derek Alexander (Head of Archaeology) and Dr Daniel Rhodes (Trust Archaeologist), along with a dedicated team of volunteers have cemented the Trust's commitment to be at the forefront of understanding Scotland's landscape history over the past 30 years. From travelling to remote places such as the Bishop's Isles; to partnering with organisations like The Glenlivet to uncover secrets of the country's whisky distilling past, through the Pioneering Spirit project; large-scale landscape research projects; surveys of buildings and battlefields; and a wide range of activity focused on responding to and understanding the impact of the climate and biodiversity crises.

Over the last three decades, the Trust has undertaken over 650 pieces of fieldwork across 80 different properties. This work has been undertaken at a range of scales from small test pits through to large research excavations, and with a range of partners from academic institutions, archaeology societies, commercial units or in-house, often with the help of the charity's dedicated team of volunteers and Trust staff.

Ten of the top projects or discoveries during this time are:

1. The **Ben Lawers Historic Landscape Project**, which was set up to investigate the rich array of post-medieval settlement remains on the northern side of Loch Tay, but actually uncovered how the land was used, stretching back thousands of years.
2. The **Pioneering Spirit Project**, in partnership with The Glenlivet, which aims to discover secrets of the country's whisky distilling past. Just last year, excavations on the original The Glenlivet Distillery site uncovered not only part of the footprint of the building, but a whole range of artefacts and features connected to whisky production.
3. **Islands research** – from undertaking survey and excavation work on the uninhabited island of Staffa and identifying Bronze Age settlement remains,

through to community excavation of prehistoric sites on Unst where the team found an Iron Age settlement and metal working site, including a rare Shetland pin mould.

4. **Newhailes historic design landscape.** Many of the Trust's large castles and country mansions sit within formal grounds and are often subject to change. Newhailes House on the outskirts of Edinburgh is surrounded by an 18th-century designed landscape which encapsulates the philosophical and aesthetic concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment. Over the years the gardens around Newhailes House have been investigated through drawn and photographic surveys, geophysics and excavation. This has helped us understand how their design was part of a bigger artistic and scientific explosion across Europe. Other Trust properties that have also seen detailed investigations are the landscapes around the castles of Culzean, Brodie and Crathes.
5. Human remains – often people think of archaeologists as digging up human skeletons but in the National Trust for Scotland this is something the team only does very occasionally. At the **House of the Binns the Trust discovered an Iron Age burial** eroding out from a quarry, with excavation revealing it contained two individuals from around 2,000 years ago. One wearing a rare, but well-preserved iron-age brooch. Other Iron Age discoveries include the Loch Thurnaig roundhouse at Inverewe.
6. Archaeology has played a crucial role in **understanding and conserving the battlefield at Culloden.** Early work from the Trust saw detailed map research undertaken to locate the position of the Culwhiniac and Leanach enclosures which formed the anchor point for the Jacobite right wing. This led to the reconstruction of a section of stone dyke and the turf wall which helps visitors orientate themselves when visiting the site. Subsequent metal detecting work by Tony Pollard and the team from the University of Glasgow Centre for Battlefield Archaeology located a concentration of artefacts that pinpointed the position of the heaviest fighting. More recently, LiDAR survey of the topography, coupled with detailed interpretation of the troop positions by the late Christopher Duffy, has led to a detailed understanding of events on the field.
7. The Trust has been undertaking small-scale investigations outside the immediate confines of the Abbey on **Iona** for many years. A large area archaeological geophysical survey of the fields to the north and south of the abbey revealed the lines of multiple ditches. These would have formed the *vallum* (a ditch and bank), with the findings allowing the team to plot the position and extent of the vallum ditches that **defined limits of the early Christian settlement.**
8. A prime example of how investigative work by the archaeology team at the Trust has allowed a deeper understanding of the charity's places, which can then be shared with the public, is the **Glencoe Turf House.** The complex build of the traditional Turf House is based around historical research and archaeological excavations which took place over a five-year period. Trust archaeologists and volunteers took part in a number of digs investigating long-lost historical townships at Achtriachtan and Achnacon, in the heart of Glencoe. These provided an insight into the lives of those who once lived in the world-renowned natural landscape, prior to the Glencoe Massacre in 1962. The Turf House allows

visitors to see, hear, feel and breathe a way of life which is difficult to imagine today.

9. The **largest archaeological investigation to take place on St Kilda revealed traces of inhabitation on the island over 2,000 years ago**, during the Iron Age. A UNESCO designated dual World Heritage Site, situated c40 miles west of the Outer Hebrides, investigations found large quantities of pottery from the Iron Age alongside a sherd of a possible early Bronze Age Beaker and two sherds of medieval pottery. This follows the discovery of the remains of a souterrain, or underground store, that was discovered in the 19th century, all helping the Trust identify the stories and history of the island. This work was undertaken by GUARD Archaeology during the building of the new base, with the help and support of the National Trust for Scotland team including the property archaeologist.
10. The archaeology team uncovered the remains of a **medieval doorway leading into the caves underneath Culzean Castle**, alongside indications that the caves were occupied in the Iron Age. One of the Trust's most popular places, few visitors realise that the famous castle is built over a warren of caves – one below the stables, which is open to the public, and one below the castle, which has a stone frontage and is not. Findings from the excavation allow for a deeper insight into Culzean and the human activity in the caves.

With a focus on getting visitors, members and the local community involved in archaeology across Trust places, sharing memorable moments with them, a further notable find came from an excavation at House of Dun in Angus, carried out alongside 16 and 17 year olds gaining archaeological and conservation experience. The dig uncovered the remains of what is thought to be a medieval, 14th century, castle and chapel, further revealing more about the House of Dun Estate.

Commenting on his aspirations for the next 30 years of archaeology at the National Trust for Scotland, Derek Alexander, head of archaeology at the Trust, said: “Archaeology has made an enormous contribution to our understanding of Trust properties and the stories of the people who have lived there. Through archaeology we can share stories which otherwise would be lost forever. As we look to the future we will continue to build, incrementally, on this knowledge through a range of archaeological techniques from small scale interventions to large research excavations.

“The past 30 years have given us a solid understanding of how these important places have changed over time. As we move towards the Trust's 100th anniversary in 2031 our focus will be on understanding the history and prehistory of Scottish landscapes – how have they come to look like they do – and what changes will the future bring.

“With the climate and biodiversity crises, archaeology will play a significant role in understanding how people in the past impacted on the landscape and will help us understand the changes that are coming. We'll be focusing on many large-scale projects

such as peat restoration, woodland planting, coastal erosion and the conservation of our standing buildings.

“As Scotland’s largest conservation charity, it is our job to look after the places in our care forever. Sharing the learning we’ve discovered through archaeology is a big part of that. We’re committed to working with communities, schools, and wider groups, to run archaeological digs at Trust places throughout the country – sharing findings, educating on the work of archaeologists, and spreading the love and enthusiasm we have for the work we do to generations young and old.

“The work we do as archaeologists not only educates on the places in the Trust’s care, it helps us to understand how the people of the past have shaped Scotland, as we know it today. It allows us to engage the public in our heritage in a different, dynamic, way, sharing our nature, beauty and heritage with everyone.”

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Note to Editors:

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.

Over the last 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.

The National Trust for Scotland is a charity registered in Scotland, Charity Number SC 007410.