Transcript
Wild for Scotland Podcast
Episode 64: ‘Like an open book’ - An Archaeology Tour in the Scottish Borders
Published on 26 March 2024
Written and hosted by Kathi Kamleitner
Produced by Fran Turauskis
Edited & sound design by Fran Turauskis
Transcript by Kathi Kamleitner and Michelle Payne
Part of Tremula Network

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This episode is sponsored by Harp Archaeology, a social enterprise that aims to promote and enhance public understanding and awareness of archaeology and cultural heritage. Find out more at harparchaeology.co.uk.

[main theme tune]

Hello there and welcome to Wild for Scotland,

a podcast full of immersive travel stories from Scotland.

I’m your host and storyteller-in-chief, Kathi Kamleitner.

Wild for Scotland helps you connect with Scotland
Its people, wildlife landscapes and histories.

In every episode, I either whisk you away on a beautiful adventure,
Or introduce you to inspiring locals and their stories.

In between, I share my top tips for your own Scotland trip,
And how to follow in my footsteps.

So, lean back and enjoy -
Let’s travel to Scotland!

[main theme tune end]

Today, I have an episode for you that has been a long time coming. I met Michelle Gamble a few years ago when I joined the team at Wonder Seekers for an educational trip to Oban and Fort William. Avid listeners might remember my conversation with Katie Murray about scientific tourism from season 3 and our story ‘Never the Same’ in which we go land-based whale watching and on a geology tour around Glen Nevis.

Michelle was one of the other participants on that trip and together with Ian Hill, she works for a social enterprise called HARP Archaeology. They run field schools at archaeological sites around the UK and work with community groups to expand their awareness and understanding of local archaeology. Some of their work is aimed at archaeology students looking for hands-on experience, but they also offer programmes for people with a personal interest in archaeology.

I remember back then Michelle told me about their plans to develop a tour about Scottish history and archaeology that would be led by archaeologists. And now, those plans have finally come to fruition.

Michelle and Ian invited me along to join their very first archaeology tour to the Scottish Borders - although the word tour doesn’t quite do the time we spent together justice. What they offer is an experience where you get to engage with professional archaeologists and ask all your burning questions about the past. On our trip we got to handle historic artefacts, meet experts to tell us more about different aspects of Scottish history, and try our hands at archaeological methods and skills, like reading buildings, drawing gravestones and field walking.

If you’ve ever wanted to learn more about Scottish history and more importantly, get up close with it, I can’t recommend enough joining one of their forthcoming tours.

It’s hard to fit all the experiences I’ve had over those three days into a single podcast episode, but I’m going to give it a try anyways.

This is ‘Like an Open Book’.

[jingle]

[sound of wind blowing]

I’m standing on the slope of an exposed hillside. Strong gusts of wind are rushing through my hair which is held in place by a warm knitted headband, trying to defy the elements. The ground is rough underfoot as I follow a bumpy path across the short grass. Every now and then, rocks poke through the top layer of soil, sometimes just a single pebble, but I suspect others are huge boulders, revealing only their tips above ground like icebergs.

Above me, about 30 metres in the distance, stands the impressive ruin of Hume Castle. Only that it isn't the actual Hume Castle that was built here in 12th century. No, that castle and its was destroyed by the 1600s.

The castle I see today was built much later in the 18th century, by a wealthy man who lived in a comfortable mansion a few miles away. He wanted a castle on his land, that he could see from his window, and so this version of Hume Castle was built. It features tall and oversized castellated walls that seem to serve no other purpose than to be seen from a distance. It's like the architects looked at a child's drawing of a castle, and built it like that.

Unlike most people who stop by Hume Castle though, we're not really interested in the main structure on the top of the hill. We keep our eyes firmly on the ground, looking for lumps and bumps on the ground that might tell another story about this place.

We - that's a small tour group of eager guests, and our two guides, Ian and Michelle from Harp Archaeology. They are professional archaeologists and have taken us on a tour to the Scottish Borders to learn about the history of the Romans, walk in the footsteps of armies during the Rough Wooing and have a go at being archaeologists ourselves.

Hume Castle is our first stop. Under Ian and Michelle's guidance, we're exploring the barely visible remains of the old road leading to the castle and trace the outline of what might have been its gatehouse. Only when you know what you're looking for, the remains aren't as hard to see as you might think.

When a line on the ground looks too straight to be natural, there's a great chance that it isn't.

One of the first things we learn quickly on this trip is that archaeology is so much more than digging up the ground in search of precious artefacts. It's also more than an action-packed adventure abroad - no matter how many times you watch Indiana Jones.

Archaeology is at its core the study of humans that seeks to understand our past through the traces we leave behind in the landscape. To an archaeologist the landscape is, in many ways, like an open book, waiting to be read.

These traces may be grand structures like castles or walls, but they might also have been reduced to the ground, buried beneath layers of rubble and soil. Both can tell us much about the people who've left them behind, and both are equally fascinating.

[sound of footsteps]

[On-location recording of Michelle talking]

> *I think it makes it a little bit clearer as to what we're talking about when we say a rectangular structure. You might, like, literally stand where I was and then…*

[sound fades out]

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As we walk from Hume Castle to a nearby kirkyard, Michelle points out more traces in the landscape. The parallel lines in the fields are rig and furrow, a historic farming technique of ploughed ridges on the ground. The path we're walking on was once a road, but the stones have since long been repurposed to build the walls that line the path on both sides today. Just beyond, we see a crescent-shaped group of boulders - a quarry where these stones were taken hundreds of years ago.

If you don't pay attention, these traces in the landscape might escape you - and that's what this experience is all about.

While the rest of the group explores the gravestones in the kirkyard, I ask Michelle and Ian how their tours came about and what they're hoping people take away from them…

[On-location recording of Michelle, Ian and Kathi]

> *MICHELLE: Yeah, so we started, I think it's been around for a while for us. We just love sharing archaeology and history with as many people as we can, but we started out with a project that we were doing in the Highlands in Persia, and we were bringing people along to explore Wade, General Wade's roads, and we had a lot of people coming from outside of an archaeological background and there was a lot of interest in what we were doing, and they came from everything from CEOs of pharmaceutical companies to, you know, people working in shops who wanted to have a go. And it sort of made us realise that there's a real desire out there for people to see the world through sort of a different lens. And the lens we're hoping to provide for people by coming to the borders and exploring with us is that they would get the chance to see the landscape and see monuments and see different things than they would normally see, but through the eyes of an archaeologist. So having the chance to have a go at doing something a bit different and getting the chance to see the borders actually, which is sort of a bit undiscovered right now.*
>
> *IAN: And I think in terms of why we're doing it, where we're doing it, the borders has got so much to offer from a historical viewpoint, archaeological viewpoint, natural heritage as well. There's so much that goes on here, but one of the brilliant things is the evidence is still visible. A lot of the landscape is, whilst there's a lot of farming and agriculture, there's large areas of land that are underdeveloped. It's one of the largest regions in the country, but a really, really sparsely populated area, so it's not had as much impact from development. And so as well as having a huge amount of sites ranging from prehistory, there's literally hundreds of prehistoric hill forts in the region, and then the number of castles and peel towers or defended settlements from the mediaeval period because of the wars with England, the evidence is pretty much everywhere you look, you'll see something from a period of history or prehistory. So it's really, really, really rich place.*
>
> *KATHI: That is so fascinating. And of course, over the three days we're spending together, we will dive into so many different of those time periods, which I think is so cool. But something you said, Michelle, there kind of resonated so much with me because we only spent a few hours so far on this trip together and we visited Hume Castle and now we're in the nearby courtyard and already in both of those places, I*

think if you just visit on a regular basis, you would be in and out within maybe half an hour just walking about a little bit, looking at some of the stones or the remains of the castle. But you wouldn't actually spend as much time as we did really looking at the evidence of different structures that are maybe only on ground level and things like that. So already I feel like we've dug so much deeper to use that phrase than you would on a regular basis.

MICHELLE: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I think that it gives you a chance to definitely see the thing in front of you from a very different perspective. And so one of the things that's to us is to realise that what we're seeing is only one layer of the history of an area or a site or a location and what's under it or what's even just visible, but not necessarily noticeable, shall we say, is right there to be explored. But it just takes someone who has a little bit of experience in that area to sort of open your eyes to it and then you can hopefully, the hope for us is that the takeaway for people from this tour will be that when they go on their walks or they look around their own landscapes, that they can see things a bit differently and maybe see things from a conservation point of view where things that we want to preserve and how important natural heritage is and how important some of our historic heritages as well, some of the buildings and the landscapes that we need to sort of preserve as well and just see them a bit differently.

IAN: And I think we're labelling it as a tour, but I think we're probably offering more than what someone might view as a tour. It's more we want to provide that experience, as Michelle says, for people to take something more away. And as you said, Kathy, you might go in and have a look around and see the stuff, or you might have somebody that can tell you the history whilst you're there, but you're only in there for half an hour or so. But yeah, it's a different way to look at it. It's a more interactive experience with the site that you're visiting, I think, which is what we really hope that people can get a positive experience of. Really,

MICHELLE: We don't expect everyone to go around with monument recording forms in their back pockets, [Ian laughs] taking a look at every stone and whatever else, and sort of recording them in the great detail that you've had the chance now to record a monument. So

KATHI: Yeah, so it really is what you just said, it's not just a tour, it's a learning experience with a lot of expertise on the ground, which is really, really amazing. I guess with all of that then behind me in a few days, time, if we look into the future, how will that then impact how I experience Scotland or historic sites in other places in the future?

MICHELLE: Yeah, it's an excellent question and what we hope it gives you is a greater appreciation of what you're seeing. So perhaps being able to unpick some of those layers, which gives you a greater depth of understanding and taking away from it that you can't just accept on face value what you see. If you accept Hume on face value as a castle, you're in for a big surprise because as you've learned, it's not just a castle. So I think that going away from here, we hope that you'll be able to sort of apply some of the things that you learn and hopefully you're having a good time

doing it with us and seeing some different things, but apply them then to other sites where you can say, oh, yeah, right, that lump and bump over there isn't just a lump and a bump. It actually looks like, oh, it's kind of linear. Maybe it's a house, maybe it's this, how can I think about this site differently? And then perhaps it inspires you to read about it or find out more. And even if it doesn't, you've sort of created in your head, perhaps your own imagination can tell a story. And that in itself, going to other sites in Scotland, I mean Scotland's full of imagination and I think you really need it to explore and to be able to see everything that's here.

IAN: One other thing that I hope that people are able to take away from this, I mean, there's a chance that the people who will be interested to take part in these things already spend a lot of time outdoors, but if not, the health benefits both physical and mental of getting out and about and spending time outside. It is incredible. And I think cultural heritage can play a huge part in that. And it could be that you may be somebody that does the same walk over and over and over and over again, but the next time you go on it, you'll be looking at it in a very different way. And yeah, it could inspire you. It might be that you thought about going for a walk somewhere, but then you thought against it. But if you know that there could be something else or you might be looking at things a little bit differently. Yeah, hopefully it'll inspire people to get out more and appreciate the heritage. You know, this is, we love it. we are in the industry, we are passionate about it, but it only matters if more people are passionate about it and understand and care for it. And so if we can sort of spread that passion and care and knowledge about all these things and make more people interested, then I mean, that's our really our M.O. So yeah,

MICHELLE: That's like what we do.

Whether you're an archaeologist or simply interested in Scottish history, there are few places as fascinating as the Scottish Borders.

The region has the greatest density of hill forts in Europe and thanks to its geographic location, it has seen countless battles between the Scottish and English forces, changing hands like a baton at a relay.

It's also home to one of the most northerly settlements in the Roman Empire, and not to mention the dramatic Border Abbeys that brought power and wealth to the region during the Middle Ages.

Wherever you turn, you'll uncover another layer of history, and no matter which period you're interested in, you'll find signs of it somewhere in the Borders.

And while Ian and Michelle know a lot about the area, and have even led local excavations, they've made it a point to invite experts to join their tour for a while and tell their guests more.

One of them is Rob Longworth, an ancient weapons expert and heritage and landscape officer at the Trimontium Museum in Melrose. We tour the exhibition to learn about the

Roman Fort that was first excavated here in the early 20th century. Many of the artefacts on display were found in one of the 117 pits left behind by the Romans.

Up to 4,000 people lived in the settlement and it was in use for hundreds of years.

Sitting around a large table in the museum's learning centre, Rob hands around several objects. Some are replicas of pieces they found here and elsewhere in similar Roman forts. Decorative hairpins, an ivory doll and a toilet brush. Others are originals. A clay tile with footprints of a kitten. Glass beads used to decorate horses. Bangles and brooches, pottery and coins. It's incredible to hold them in my hand, just as the people who owned them did, 2,000 years ago.

[Sound of footsteps and a metal gate opening]

After handling the objects, we follow Rob towards the site of the fort. As luck would have it, a group of volunteers is out there today, using metal detectors to scan the ground.

[On-location recording of Rob, metal detectorists and members of the group, interspersed with Kathi's narration]

> *Rob: Hi guys. [Group replies: Hello, Hi guys] We good? [Group member replies: We're good] This is a group from HARP Archaeology who have been at the museum this morning, so we're just having a wander around to see what you guys are up to. How has your day been?*
>
> *Male detectorist 1: We've got a couple of good finds.*
>
> *Rob: Yeah? What you got?*

[Voices fade out, remain audible quietly in the background, talking and laughing]

[Beeping sounds of metal detectors]

Here in Trimontium, professional archaeologists and hobby detectorists work hand-in-hand to uncover more about the history of the fort. Without their volunteer effort, much less would be known. The landowner has given them permission to search the fields and has adjusted how they are farmed to support this research. We can barely walk without stumbling upon smooth red rocks that look suspiciously like the red clay tiles we handled just moments ago.

We walk over to another group of detectorists, just as they pull out another treasure.

> *Female voice 1: Uh, wow [other voices and laughter in the background]*

A small silver coin.

> *Michelle: It looks like it's just from yesterday.*
>
> *Female voice 2: Oh, amazing.*

A shiny Roman Denarius, barely bigger than the nail of my thumb.

Male detectorist 2: Yeah, you can see the head in it there.

There's a portrait of an emperor on one side, although it's hard to tell exactly, which one it is.

Male detectorist 2: It just shows you,

It looks extraordinary.

Male detectorist 2: Always check

Hard to believe that it's 2,000 years old.

Male detectorist 2: Once it's -

Kathi: It's so shiny,

Male detectorist 2: Once it's cleaned up it'll be good

But that's archaeology for you. Even as a lay person, I know that this is a special find. And it took years of research and training to get here.

[voices in the background fade out]

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Later that day, we meet another expert. Geoff Parkhouse is a passionate local historian and takes us on a walk along Dere Street, a Roman road which ran from York past Melrose to the Antonine Wall. Chronologically though, we've moved on from the Romans and into the 16th century, the time of the Rough Wooing.

Geoff explains more…

[On-location recording of Geoff Parkhouse]

GEOFF: Big Hitters, big headline figures. You've got Henry VIII in England, everybody knows about him and his six wives. He was coming towards the end of his reign. He was even more grouchy than normal. And Mary Queen of Scots was just an infant, just eight years old, no less than that, sorry. She was looked after with advisors and so forth who basically running the realm for it with the head of her mother Mary. It's just at this time as well that Henry VIII, of course, had gone to, from Catholic church to the Protestant church for the sake of his marriage. So basically what had happened is that the cleft between the Protestant-Catholic church in England and also in Scotland, and what meant that was that there were factions all over the place and some were going towards were actually being paid by Henry and bribed to try and go into Henry's camp, if you like, and the others were trying to keep Scotland away from Henry. So what we have is that Mary as a young child and Henry sees a really great chance what you're doing is, what Henry wanted to do was to get Mary betrothed to his son Edward, who is quite a bit older, but still a youngster. And if he could get Mary in Henry's court, then he has control and he has control of Mary

the Queen, his advisors are sidelined and basically Scotland falls into his grasp. And that does away with a problem of every time Henry has a go at France, Scotland is at their back door. So there's this balance right between the two. And the old alliance kicks in every time that either France or Scotland are attacked by England. It's one way of trying to keep England in place. So Henry first asked Scotland if Mary would become betrothed to Edward, they refuse. They realise what's going on, they realise how it's going to play out. So Henry then decides to rough it up a bit, and he takes various or sends various armies north. And basically what they do is they occupy this very southern part of Scotland, and what they do is they take the castles of Berwick and Roxburgh and Jedburgh, and they form almost like a new English province north of the border. It's a buffer zone as well. And what's going to happen then is that from there, they can then go north and raid lands and basically pummel at Scotland until you give up and hand over the queen. And basically it's not subtle, [Group laughs] and the Scotts of course are being ground down, ground down all the time by this. But now what we'll do is we'll walk and we're go on to Dere Street and I'll give you an overview of what happens here. Okay.

During this time, the Borders saw numerous battles. Many castles were besieged and destroyed, and the lands changed hands back and forth between the English and the Scots.

In February 1545, a small Scottish army defeated an English garrison stationed at nearby Jedburgh right here on the grounds of Dere Street. They were outnumbered 2:1 and much less trained than the soldiers and mercenaries fighting for Henry the 8th. How they did that was somewhat of a mystery for a long time. If only the bronze age standing stone in the field ahead could tell the stories of what it has seen, but it remains a silent witness of the past.

Until local historians like Geoff came along and showed an interest in the history of their area. Aided by modern archaeological survey techniques and a PhD student researching conflict archaeology, they were finally able to piece together a theory of what might have happened on that fateful day almost 500 years ago.

With the help of aerial photography and radar scans, the group was able to identify a squeeze point, where the English garrison had no room to maneuver. All the Scottish army had to do was to hide behind a ridge and wait for the English troops to arrive. A second group of Scots came from behind and so the fate of the English was sealed.

Without the work of local historians and professional archaeologists coming together, little would be known about this battle today, and people like me might forever look at the landscape oblivious to the things that took place here.

After learning so much from the people who make archaeology happen, it’s time to give it a go ourselves.

Back at Hume Castle, Ian and Michelle showed us how to record a monument in the landscape. We measured the outlines of the structures we made out on the ground, and filled in a form to describe what they looked like, where they were located in relation to the castle and what they might have been.

This time, we're walking towards Roxburgh Castle on the outskirts of Kelso. There was once a densely populated settlement here, wedged between the Rivers Tweed and Teviot.

It was the place of the first Royal mint, pressing coins for Scottish kings and together with the dramatic abbey in Kelso, it was a stronghold of power. The burgh was surrounded by water and the only access by land was guarded by a majestic castle.

Today, the remains of the settlement are long gone - buried under layers of soil used for sheepgrazing and by the local angling club. But from the path along the river we can see what's left of the castle.

[sound of a river in the distance]

At the top of a steep slope stands a weathered stone wall. At the far side, there is a hole in it, too large for a window, too erratic for a door way. Most likely, it was caused by erosion and time.

[footsteps on dry grass]

We climb a narrow footpath through dried and bent-over grass and enter the structure. There are remains of walls all around us, giving an indication of the area this castle once took up. And it's enormous.

We follow Ian over rough ground to the far side of the castle and climb a hill, only that we know it's not a natural hill. It's rubble from the ruined castle that was claimed back by nature over the centuries. From the top, get an idea of how difficult it would have been to attack the castle, with its steep embankments and tall walls.

After a wee break in the sunshine, we head over to another corner of the castle. And here, sheltered from the wind, we begin recording another monument.

[On-location recording of Ian and the tour group]

> *IAN: Yeah, so I dunno how you want to divide yourselves up and I'll hand that sheet. Here you go.*
>
> *[Sound of sheets of paper being handed out]*
>
> *Group members are laughing and talking in the background*
>
> *KATHI: We clearly have a hole in here again that looks like there might have been beam or something like that, which is at a weird height.*

[voices of group members discussing the monument quietly in the background]

The feature we're looking at is a stone wall. It's significantly taller than me and made up of dressed stones, that means stones that were cut and shaped intentionally to make a smooth wall. They're held together with lime mortar, although more recent restoration efforts added

cement to the mix as well. My teammate Kelly and I inspect every inch of the wall. We make sketches of individual stones, discuss signs of erosion and speculate over what this building might have been. What shape it was in its heyday and what purpose it might have served.

We use the lingo we picked up from the archaeologists and historians we'd met on this trip so far, and felt accomplished when we presented our annotated sketches and interpretations to Ian and the others. This is archaeology in action.

[On-location recording of Kathi]

> *KATHI (ONSITE): A much more smooth, straight stonewall, and again, you've got this, the line water, unfortunately, quite a bit of concrete as well.*

[location recording fades from outdoor scene at the castle to an interior space with multiple people speaking]

> *Male voice An activity…*
> *Female voice: We all work differently, which is very interesting with the team. Each researcher works in a different way.*

[voices fade into the background]

From Roxburgh we made our way to Galashiels, for a workshop with the Borders Family History Society.

They showed us the ropes of tracing our ancestry and how to use snippets of information to work backwards through the records. Lacking my own Scottish ancestry, I asked one of the volunteers to help me look up my partner's ancestors. And to my amusement, we found birth records and marriage certificates for people I had never met, and yet felt connected to.

Family history research can be a great tool for archaeologists to learn more about the people who inhabited the monuments they observe.

[background voices fade away]

And at the same time, you may want to pick up some archaeological skills to learn more about the places your ancestors inhabited.

There are so many things I learnt on my trip to the Borders with HARP Archaeology. How to read historic buildings, how to draw out the stories of a kirkyard, before ever reading the inscriptions on the gravestones. We heard about the Romans in Melrose, the Reivers raiding the lands during the Border wars and the conflicts that shaped this landscape during the Middle Ages.

I learnt that archaeology is inextricably linked to other subjects, be it history, geography, reading maps or tracing family lines.

But most importantly, I've learnt that the landscapes I see on my travels around Scotland are always full of traces left behind by the people who came before me. You just need to open your senses and read the lumps and bumps in the landscape like an open book.

[jingle]

I hope you enjoyed this story about my experiences with HARP Archaeology in the Scottish Borders.

Ian and Michelle have just launched their tour dates for the forthcoming season, so you can now book one of these experiences yourself. They offer 3- and 5-day tours through the Borders, including accommodation, meals and of course expert guidance on the road and at the historic sites they visit.

In addition to the places I told you about in the story, the tours also include stops at places like Kelso and Melrose Abbey, Abbotsford House the Home of Sir Walter Scott, Smailholm Tower or Scott's View.

Ian and Michelle have handpicked the locations you visit on these trips, and spent many years forming relationships with local community groups, many of which rely heavily on volunteer contributions. I loved learning that part of the money they make from the tours will go towards these groups to support their work.

Our shared meals were a great opportunity to learn more about their work as archaeologists, and I particularly enjoyed the opportunity to meet so many passionate experts in their field.

Even though I had never aspired to be an archaeologist myself, I now have a much deeper appreciation of their work, and I can't wait to apply some of the skills I learnt on future trips to historic sites around Scotland.

I will link to HARP Archaeology and their tours in the show notes. After spending three days with them on the road, I have no doubt that you'd have an amazing time too, learning about archaeology and Scottish history.

Members of our Patreon community, the Wild for Scotland Social Club, will get to hear even more from Ian and Michelle this month. We took some time during our trip to record a longer conversation in which we talk about all things archaeology, including difficult subjects like how Western archaeology can clash with indigenous cultures and how that can play out in digs on Gaelic land. I also share a bit more about my own fascination with archaeology, which - maybe to your surprise - has nothing to do with Indiana Jones.

If you've not joined our Patreon community yet, you're really missing out. Head on over to patreon.com/wildforscotland to join the Wild for Scotland Social Club for as little as £3 a month. You can find the link in the show notes.

[main theme tune]

And with this, I send you off to dream about your own archaeology-inspired trip to the Scottish Borders.

I'm going to be travelling a lot in the next few months, so any new stories I'm working on will have to wait for a wee while.

If you're new to the show and enjoyed today's episode scroll back in our feed and check out some of our other history-related stories, like 'Peat and Sands' about the Isle of Lewis from season 2, or '6,000 times around the sun' about the historic sites around Kilmartin Glen which was part of season 4.

Thank you so much for listening to Wild for Scotland! We love telling stories that are truly inspiring, so if any of our episodes have ever inspired you to visit a certain location, book an activity or change something about the way you look at the world, we'd love to hear from you. Leave a review or post about it on social media and tag us. Thank you so much!

Wild for Scotland is part of the Tremula Network - adventure and outdoor podcasts off the beaten path. The show is written and hosted by me, Kathi Kamleitner. Thanks to Fran Turauskis who is the co-producer and editor, and does the sound design. Podcast art is by Lizzie Vaughan-Knight and all original music is composed by Bruce Wallace. Thanks again to HARP Archaeology for commissioning this episode.

Until next time, when we travel to a different place in Scotland.

[main theme tune end]

[post roll ads]