

Longhouses – background information for project plan

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Introduction

It is thought that there have been two basic types of longhouse in Europe. The first of these was the Neolithic longhouse of which there are few examples in Britain, and which was constructed of timber. According to Castleden (1987), it was a long, narrow timber dwelling (approximately 20 m long and 7 m wide) built by early European farmers about 7000-8000 years ago. It probably had a pitched roof and a single doorway, and could have housed 20-30 people. One of the few known Neolithic longhouses in Britain is the Balbridie timber house in Aberdeenshire (Ralston, 1982; Fairweather and Ralston, 1993). It seems that subsequent British farmers in the Bronze and Iron Ages generally built roundhouses, so there is a long gap in time before longhouses (this time generally with stone foundations) made their reappearance. Some rectangular buildings did appear in the Roman period, but they do not generally fit the description of a medieval longhouse (see below).

The second type of longhouse first occurred in medieval times, and some modified examples have even survived with occupants almost to the present day (see below). Such houses first appeared in northern Germany in the 3rd or 4th centuries BC, and may have given rise to later similar structures in Scandinavia (known as a *langhus*), the Netherlands, and ultimately Britain. They are quite well described by Hurst (1961), and a more detailed and up-to-date general description is offered by English Heritage (2006). There are a number of references to longhouses in medieval documents, such as Court Rolls, and in some cases they are described therein by the Latin term *longa domus*.

According to Quiney (1990), *'The increasing prominence of cattle farming in the late Middle Ages was attended by the building of large numbers of longhouses outside eastern England....these insubstantial buildings do not survive, although several are recorded in documents.'* By 1700, longhouses were restricted to the north and west of England where *'all classes of farmers built longhouses in the late 17th and early 18th century'*. It seems that longhouses often had a roof supported by crucks which were so stable that it did not require post supports which would have left archaeological traces. The majority of longhouses in Britain fell out of use, or were built over, during the 14th-16th centuries, although some more or less original examples continued in use until recent times (mid-20th century).

There is some confusion in the literature over the distinction between shielings and longhouses, but the general consensus is that a shieling was a temporarily occupied dwelling in the uplands used during the summer months as part of the practice of transhumance. Stock would be driven up to the higher pastures and the shepherd or stockman would live for that time in the shieling. As it was summer, stock would not be kept in the building, and this seems to be the key distinction from longhouses which were permanent dwellings (sometimes also in the uplands), in part of which the stock were housed during the winter.

Construction of medieval longhouses

According to Hurst (1961) and Brunskill (2002), medieval longhouses varied considerably in size, measuring in the range 9-21 m long, and 4-6 m wide, but as the name implies, they were always of an elongated and roughly rectangular shape. One of their defining characteristics, as indicated above, was that they housed both humans and livestock (usually cattle, but sometimes sheep or pigs) under a single roof erected at one time. Originally, animals and people used a single entrance, but by late-medieval times, separate access was often arranged. There was generally a partition wall dividing the longhouse into two spaces, one for people and one for livestock (the latter generally at the lower end to assist drainage of dung and urine). Indeed, the livestock accommodation was often provided with a central drain and an outlet for manure. There was internal access between the two halves, and usually (but not always) a cross-passage. In some late-medieval examples of longhouses, the internal space may have been divided into three 'rooms', with at least some dividers being simple screens or curtains.

According to English Heritage (2006), longhouses were often grouped together and associated with strip farming in adjacent fields. In areas like North Yorkshire, some of these groups of longhouses probably developed into the villages of larger farmhouses still in existence. Fig. 1 shows the distribution of listed longhouses in England, and it can be seen that although they were widespread, they appear to have been more or less confined to the uplands. This may, however, be partly an artefact caused by the razing of older buildings to permit more modern constructions in lowland areas. Longhouse sites are particularly common in northern England, and on the eastern fringes of Dartmoor, and it is thought that this type of building suited the small upland farms (<20 ha) which were prevalent there. The close proximity of livestock and people was of particular benefit in the winter months (October to May) when livestock were kept permanently indoors, and their body heat provided convenient central heating for the farmer.

Originally, medieval longhouses had no chimney, but the smoke from a usually central hearth simply filtered out through the thatch (a feature which can still be seen today in some Himalayan buildings). In areas where stone was easily obtained (such as the Cumbrian uplands), the low walls were constructed of drystone (~1 m high), either single- or double-skinned, upon which the rafters of the pitched roof were located. If walls were double, the space between was sometimes filled with insulating materials such as turf. In 1698, the traveller Celia Fiennes commented that Lake District villages consisted of '*sad little hutts made up of drye walls, only stones piled together and the roofs of the same slatt; there seemed to be little or no tunnels for their chimneys and have no mortar or plaister within or without...*'.

However, in regions where stone was scarce, longhouse walls were built entirely of turf or mud. Examples of the latter are the so-called clay dabbins of the Solway plain (Jennings, 2002) which originated in late-medieval times (~15th century) and featured cruck-framed roof timbers. The thatch would have been composed of whatever material was readily available, including reeds, bracken or turf. According to Brunskill (1985), until the mid-19th century, most 'inferior' farm buildings in the Lake District were probably covered with turf, and '*the predecessors to vernacular buildings probably consisted of a thatch or turf roof carried on a cruck framework between low walls of clay, turf or*

crudely piled fieldstones'. There was no upper storey, although some sleeping accommodation may have been located under the roof. A reconstruction of a Norse longhouse is shown in Fig. 2.

Excavations

A number of medieval longhouses in the UK have been excavated, the most familiar one for DVLHG members being the longhouse at Stephenson Ground Scale, which was an egg-shaped (or boat-shaped), stone-walled structure (Newman, 2006; Ball, 1994). The remaining walls consist of a double row of boulders topped by a single row, and the building is 12 m long, aligned east-west (R2R, 2009). During the excavation, post-holes were discovered marking the positions of roof supports and internal dividing walls. There is also post-hole evidence for an earlier wooden building underneath the stone one. Phosphate analysis of the soil suggested that the upslope area was occupied by people and the downslope area by livestock, so this building conformed to the medieval longhouse pattern. Pottery and radiocarbon dating indicated occupation during the 12th to 14th centuries (Newman, 2006), although the approximate boat-shape and a find of a sharpening stone could be taken as a hint that the builders were influenced by Norse designs which had reached Cumbria when people of Scandinavian descent settled there in the 10th century (see below). Unfortunately, this excavation has not yet been published, and attempts to obtain details from the archaeologist (Dr Nick Thorpe, Dept. of Archaeology, Winchester University) have so far been unsuccessful.

However, there have been a number of other longhouse excavations in the UK. One of the first was by Curle (1934) at Sumburgh on Shetland. The 'Jarlshof' building was nearly 30 m long and 4-5 m wide, and was the first longhouse to be associated with Norse people on account of various finds which could loosely be described as of Viking age. Several other Norse longhouses have been excavated in the northern isles, including at Underhoull on Unst, Shetland (Small, 1964-1966) which was 16 m long and 4.5 m wide, and several on Orkney (Radford, 1959; Ritchie, 1970 both cited in Maclaren, 1974), Caithness (Curle, 1938-39) and North Uist (Crawford, cited in Maclaren, 1974). A particularly striking example was excavated from blown sand on the machair of Drimore on South Uist (Maclaren, 1974). Its internal dimensions were 14 m long and 5 m wide, with double walls and a central hearth (Fig. 3). Various finds confirmed that it was of Norse origin, dating from the second half of the 9th century or the early part of the 10th. The gently rounded end of the building is similar to some other Norse longhouses, although it appears that this cannot be taken as a diagnostic feature of Norse origins as some are square-ended (e.g. Curle, 1934). Other examples of Norse longhouses can be found further afield, including at the Vinland site at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland (Wallace, 2008) and in Greenland (Vebæk, 1961).

However, in many other cases, a Norse connection is tenuous, not investigated or non-existent. For example, the peasant longhouses excavated in the deserted medieval village of Wharram Percy do not apparently have known Norse associations (Beresford and Hurst, 1990), and the same applies at present to longhouse sites in Cumbria.

Recorded longhouse sites in Cumbria

A number of Cumbrian longhouse sites have been recorded. A good example is the 15th century longhouse at Bank End in Eskdale, for which documentary records exist (EDLHS, 2008). Apart from the excavated longhouse at Stephenson Ground (SD 240945), the Lake District National Park Historic

Environment Record (HER) currently lists 5 other longhouse sites, one of which (at Long House Close, SD 246974) lies in the Duddon Valley. The others are at: Whelter Beck, Bampton (NY 469132); below High Hartsop Dodd, Patterdale (SY 398511); Gillerthwaite, Ennerdale (NY 146140); and Smithy Beck, Ennerdale (NY 130149). A further possible longhouse originally thought to be from the Norse period, aligned NW-SE, is located at Bryant's Gill, Kentmere. This 10x5 m, sub-rectangular building has been excavated (Dickinson, 1985). It had a strip of paving along its spine, and numerous artefacts were found, including spindle whorls, whetstones, and worked iron and flint. However, carbon-14 analysis has since shown that it was built in the 7th-8th century (John Hodgson, pers. comm., 2010) *i.e.* before the Norse arrived in Britain. Finally, a possible medieval longhouse with a rounded end is situated at Tonguesdale Moss on the Eskdale side of Birker Fell (SD 167992). It is currently being excavated by Birmingham University, and an interim report is expected at the end of 2010 (contact: Dr Mark Kinsey).

'Contemporary' longhouses

There are two areas in the UK where it is still possible to see extant longhouses, or at least derivatives of them which are quite similar to their medieval forebears. The first of these is eastern Dartmoor where there are many stone-built longhouses in various states of preservation. An unmodernised example can be seen at Higher Uppacott (details on the Dartmoor National Park website - <http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/index/lookingafter/laf-culturalheritage/laf-historicbuiltenvironment/laf-dartmoorshistoricbuildings/laf-dartmoorlonghouse.htm>).

The other area is the Western Isles of Scotland, where there are many longhouses, locally now called blackhouses, or *taighean dubha* in Gaelic, to distinguish them from the more modern white houses (*taighean geala*) which replaced them in the 19th and 20th centuries. All have now been abandoned, but some have been restored and can be visited. One of the best, which was vacated in 1966 and has since been maintained as a museum, is at Arnol on northwest Lewis. It shows all the classic longhouse features including 1-storey drystone double walls insulated with turf, accommodation for people and stock connected by a central passage, and a thatched roof (Fig. 4).

Conclusions

1. The known longhouses in Cumbria appear to be similar to the many medieval examples found elsewhere, both in the UK and abroad.
2. In the Cumbrian uplands, they were single-storey, sub-rectangular structures, 10-15 m long and 4-6 m wide, with low, single- or double-skin drystone walls, and generally 2 rooms, one for people and one for livestock. It is presumed they had wooden pitched roofs, sometimes supported by posts but sometimes by crucks, and covered with thatch or turf.
3. They generally had a cross-passage, and internal access between the living accommodation and the byre. The latter was usually located downslope, and often had a central floor drain and an aperture for removing dung.
4. Longhouses (permanent dwellings) can be distinguished from shielings which were temporary dwellings in the uplands used during transhumance, and which were not used for

housing livestock. However, some rectilinear shielings may be difficult to distinguish from classic longhouses on appearance alone.

5. There is a possibility that the Cumbrian longhouse design was first brought to the region by Norse settlers in the 9th and 10th centuries, but as yet there is no evidence for this.
6. A conservative evaluation of the R2R database suggests that the number of longhouse sites listed in the Lake District National Park HER will eventually be at least doubled when the new finds in the Duddon/Lickle valleys have been confirmed.
7. It is possible that detailed Level 2 investigation of the newly-discovered sites will help to resolve the uncertainty about longhouse origins in Cumbria, but definitive evidence in this regard is only likely to be obtained through excavation.
8. To assist surveyors, a set of criteria for identifying possible longhouses in the field has been distilled from this review and is set out in Annex 1.

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Annex 1. Identifying possible longhouses from their visible remains.

These are guidelines which may be of some use to field teams, but it must be recognised that firm identification of building remains as longhouses can only be achieved by excavation, and sometimes not even then.

Longhouses are always

Longer than they are wide

One room deep

Built in 2 sections, one for animals and one for humans (Note 1)

Longhouses should have

Evidence of agriculture nearby (*e.g.* enclosures or rig and furrow)(Note 2)

Longhouses are usually

Rectangular (Note 3)

Built with opposed entrances (Note 4)

Better constructed and larger than shielings (suggested minimum size 8m x 4m) (Note5)

Notes

1. Ideally this would be indicated by the presence of a drain or a sump in the section used for animals but this may only show if the site is excavated. Soil tests for phosphate could indicate animal occupation. As time went by, the animal section of the house was taken over for human use so this might create identification problems. Partitions between the two sections would be flimsy and unlikely to show up in an initial survey.

2. Ramm et al. (1970) describe shielings and bastles and also some farmhouses in Northumberland and Cumberland near to the Scottish Borders. They conclude that the land use around the structure is a significant way to distinguish a farmhouse from a shieling. Farmhouses will have one or more of enclosures, rig and furrow, lazy beds, clearance cairns, corn drying kilns or stack stands nearby. Ramm et al. also conclude that shielings tend to be in groups and farmhouses stand alone but it is unclear if this applies in much of Cumbria.

3. Usually but not necessarily rectangular. The early medieval long house at Stephenson Ground is oval, as were a number of Norse longhouses in the Scottish islands.

4. Some do not have opposed entrances *e.g.* Millhouse in Lune.

5. Ramm et. al (1970) state that '*although in general the houses known from the records to have been in permanent occupation in the 18th century were larger than shielings, many differed little from them in size and form*'. Also methods of building differed through time rather than from function. The earlier ones had thick walls, rounded corners and used boulders. Later ones were well coursed with thinner than average drystone walls.

Fig. 1. Distribution of listed longhouses in England. From: English Heritage, 2006.

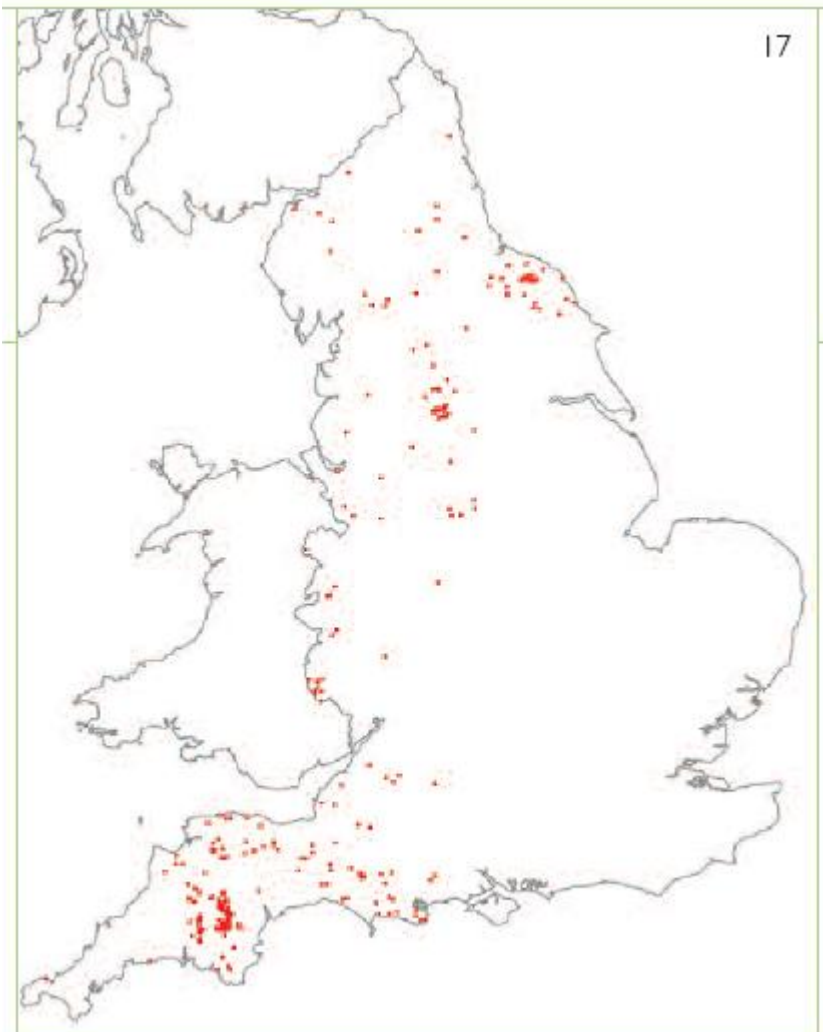


Fig. 2. A reconstructed Viking Age longhouse. From: Wikipedia



Fig. 3. The excavated Norse longhouse at Drimore, South Uist (from Maclaren, 1974). a = hearth; b = paved causeway; c & d = areas of intense burning; e = dark stains.

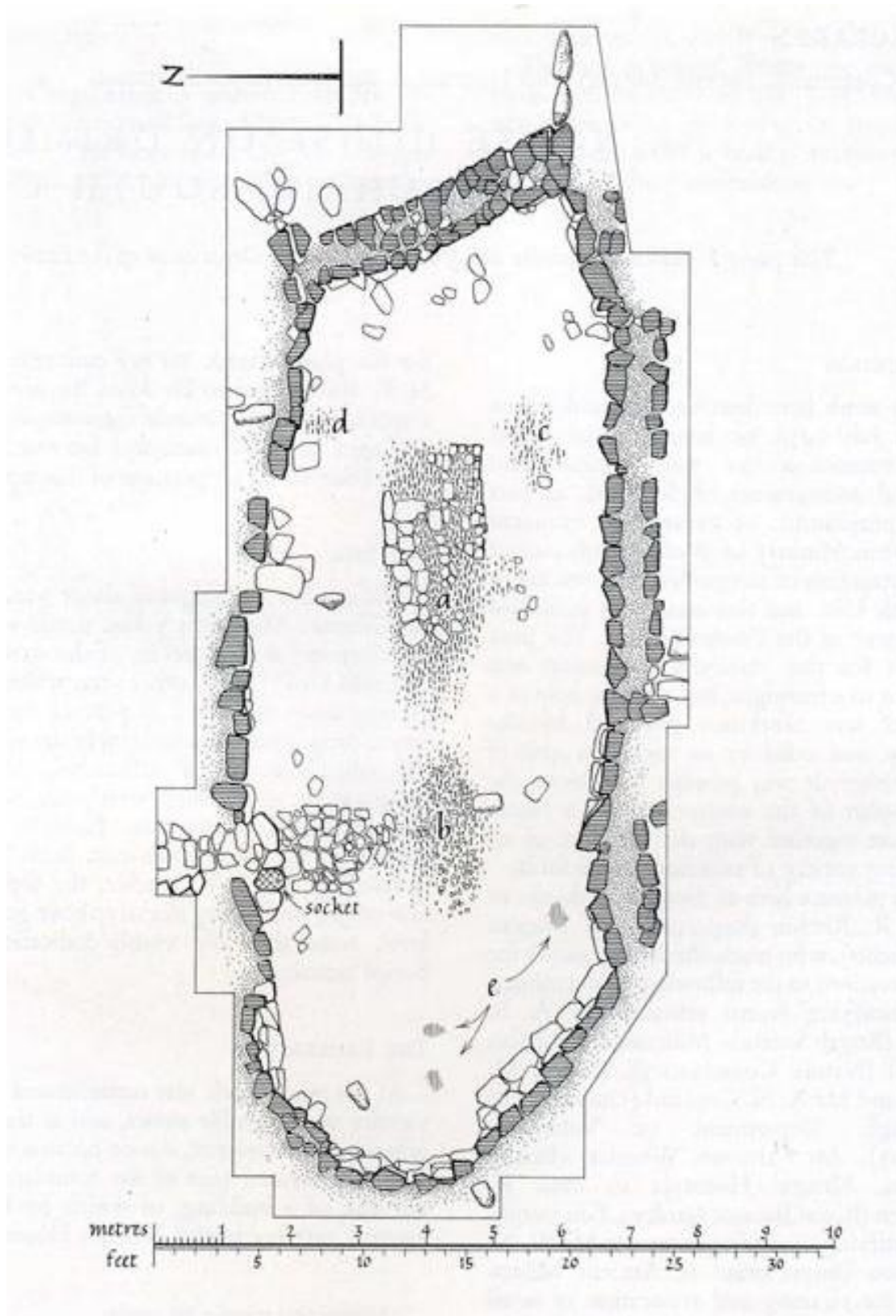


Figure 4. A blackhouse at Arnol, Isle of Lewis (©Peter Matthiessen)

