

Exciting find bridges that 2000-year North gap

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By BILL McALLISTER

AN EXCITING archaeological find has been uncovered during work on the approach roads for the new Dornoch Firth bridge.

Experts feel the discovery, near the Sutherland village of Clashmore, could be the first Pictish settlement to be found on the Highland mainland.

Now a special plea is being made to the Government to provide funds to enable a precise date to be pinpointed by a high-technology radiocarbon dating process — and the approach-road contractors, Miller Construction, are set to help fund further excavation of the site.

The find has been made in a quarry dug to provide materials for the £2,600,000 northern approach road to the crossing of the firth, which will run from just outside Clashmore.

UNCOVERED

The underground settlement is estimated at being between 300 BC and 200 AD by Highland Region archaeologist Mr Bob Gourlay, who says the 'dig' is "potentially extremely exciting" and who is urgently seeking help from the Government's special "Rescue Fund" for historic finds.

A digger driver for sub-contractors KPC uncovered the site during extraction of 150,000 cubic metres of sand and gravel at Cyderhall Quarry, and Dornoch Heritage Society, who had been asked by Mr Gourlay to keep an eye on the situation for possible finds, alerted the regional chief.

"AMAZING the walls they could build 2000 years ago" . . . Miller Construction site agent Mr Rory Taylor inspects part of the walls of the underground tunnel. They are made of sandstone slabs, which are not found on the site.

Picture by DAVID MURRAY. See also Page 3.

"What's been found is what we call a souterrain structure," said a delighted Mr Gourlay. "That's a tunnel into the ground, lined with stone walls and leading to what looks like two buildings.

"One is most probably a storehouse, because the temperature would be constant and dry underground, and there are post holes and timber fragments which suggest they held up a timber and turf roof.

"Sites found in the Highlands have been entirely of stone, but the Picts used timber and if

this is confirmed by radiocarbon dating as Pictish period, then it would be the first such site on the Highland mainland and really exciting."

A large amount of burned grain has also been found, and shells — which Mr Gourlay feels may indicate that the sea was further inland at that time — along with a single piece of pottery.

DAMAGED

There looks like a ridge pole and rafters in another sunken room attached to the storehouse, although some crucial pieces were damaged in excavation.



Professional excavator Mr Robert Pollock, from the Black Isle, has been called in to continue the "dig", but although the Government Rescue Budget has provided initial cash, it is running short at the end of the financial year and sponsorship may be needed fully to develop the discovery. Miller Construction have indicated they are willing to make a donation.

Miller's site agent, Mr Rory Taylor, from Drumnadrochit, said: "We never expected to find a prehistoric settlement 10ft. down on a green-field site we were developing for a quarry.

"It's amazing to think it has lain there for 2000 years and might never have been found had the Dornoch Bridge not gone ahead. We've decided to do everything possible to enable the archaeology experts to carry on working at the site, and have been extracting in the other direction."

HELPFUL

Mr Gourlay hopes to publish a booklet on the find once the carbon dating — which takes three months — confirms the age of the settlement.

He stressed: "The contractors have been extremely helpful and we've been very lucky. The find shows that modern industry and the needs of archaeology can work together, despite what many people fear."

● There had evidently been major fire and destruction at the site at some stage, the first analysis has concluded. The sandstone slabs propping up the tunnel had obviously been carried to the site from somewhere else.