

BRITISH MINING No.84

THE SCOTTISH GOLD RUSH OF 1869

by

R.M. CALLENDER AND P.F. REESON



MONOGRAPH
OF THE
NORTHERN MINE RESEARCH SOCIETY
APRIL 2008

CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	7
Preface	8
Introduction	9
References	11
Local History	12
The Kildonan gold rush	12
The find	12
January 1869	14
February 1869	20
March 1869	22
April 1869	29
May 1869	35
June 1869	42
July 1869	48
August 1869	49
September 1869	51
October 1869	52
November 1869	53
December 1869	53
Epilogue	53
Gold discoveries prior to 1868	54
After the gold rush	55
The search for gold at Brora	61
Gold and the Duke of Portland	63
Recent events	65
References	65
People of the Gold Rush	69
The Third Duke of Sutherland	69
Descendents of the gold rush	71
Robert Nelson Gilchrist (1821-1877)	73
Records at the National Library of Scotland	76
Where did the men come from ?	81
Women of the gold rush	82
Geology	93
The setting for Kildonan gold	93
Geological timescale	96
References	96
Recovery methods used at Kildonan	99
Development of the goldfield during 1869	99
Gold washing with a pan	99
Gold washing with the rocker	101
Gold washing by sluicing	101
The returns	103
References	105

CONTENTS (continued)	Page
Gold nuggets from Kildonan	106
Three named nuggets	106
Other nuggets	107
The quantity and quality of Kildonan gold	107
Other auriferous rivers	111
References	114
Applied Photography	115
Mr Alexander Johnston of Wick	115
Recent uses of Johnston's photograph	117
Documenting archaeology	120
A catalogue raisonnée	122
Archaeology	124
Introduction - a delve into the past	124
The Surveys - Setting up on site	124
The ground survey	125
The geophysical survey	127
An experiment in metal detecting	129
The context record of each excavation	129
The archaeological excavations with contribution from Phil Cox	130
Finds from the excavations	134
The clay tobacco pipe	140
References	143
Reconstruction	144
The 19th century miners' huts	144
Constructing and furnishing a miner's hut	145
The construction and use of a rocker	150
Working Kildonan gold	152
References	155
Working Kildonan gold	155
Bibliography and reading list	155
Appendix I Papers of The Sutherland Estates	157
Appendix II Involving the local communities	158
Appendix III The British Association's lost paper	159
Appendix IV A note on Scottish newspapers	160
Index	161

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
Frontispiece. Baile an Or in the Strath of Kildonan, April 1869 by Alexander Johnston.	6
Figure 1. Area map, the Strath of Kildonan, Sutherland, Scotland.	10
Figure 2. Above Baile an Or, looking downstream over the Kildonan Burn today.	18
Figure 3. The Kildonan Burn looking upstream above Baile an Or.	25
Figure 4. ‘The Sutherlandshire gold diggings’, Illustrated London News, May 1869.	27
Figure 5. Visualisation of a hut interior, by R. Wilkinson.	38
Figure 6. Kildonan Church at the confluence of the Kildonan Burn and Helmsdale River.	41
Figure 7. Mining activities on the Kildonan Burn, Illustrated London News, May 1869.	46
Figure 8. Licence issued to John Murray of Creich on 1 April 1869.	52
Figure 9. Mining exploration group organised in 1911 by Sutherland County Council.	60
Figure 10. Drawing of activities during the first months of 1869 by R. Wilkinson.	62
Figure 11. The Allt Smeòrail close to Loch Brora.	63
Figure 12. Portrait of the 3rd Duke of Sutherland from Dunrobin Castle, Golspie.	70
Figure 13. A preliminary sketch of Baile an Or in the Spring of 1869.	72
Figure 14. Mining exploration group photograph of 1911.	74
Figure 15. A portrayal of Robert Nelson Gilchrist, by R. Wilkinson.	75
Figure 16. Notice of 25 March 1869 announcing the licence system.	77
Figure 17. Certificate used for the weekly declarations by the miners.	80
Figure 18. Scene in the office of the Inspector, by R. Wilkinson.	82
Figure 19. Sketch featuring tasks shared by a husband and wife team by R. Wilkinson.	83
Figure 20. Map of ‘Southerlandia’ by Joan Blaeu of Amsterdam, 1654.	85
Figure 21. Contemporary sketch of the gold mining activities in February 1869.	87
Figure 22. Group of gold miners at Baile an Or possibly by Alexander Johnston.	88
Figure 23. Portrayal of Sunday morning service by R. Wilkinson.	89
Figure 24. Photograph of a group of miners with huts and rocker.	92
Figure 25. An aerial view of where the A897 crosses the Kildonan Burn.	94
Figure 26. Panning for gold in the Kildonan Burn and landscape view of the burn.	97
Figure 27. Recovery ‘machines’ used at Kildonan.	101
Figure 28. Panning and using cradles to extract gold at Australia’s Forest Creek workings.	102
Figure 29. Five men working a long tom and a cradle near Auckland, New Zealand.	103
Figure 30. A California lift pump.	104
Figure 31. The ‘Helmsdale Nugget’, gifted to the Duke of Sutherland in 1869.	106
Figure 32. Gold nuggets presented by the miners to the Duke of Sutherland.	108
Figure 33. A scanning electron micrograph of Kildonan gold.	112
Figure 34. Photograph of activities at the Suisgill Burn, showing sluice box.	113
Figure 35. Portrait of Alexander Johnston in his studio in Wick, Caithness.	116
Figure 36. Stereoscopic camera negatives from the Johnston Collection, Wick.	117
Figure 37. Superimposition of a transparency from 1869 on today’s landscape.	119
Figure 38. Superimposition of Johnston’s photograph of 1869 on Baile an Or as it is today.	122
Figure 39. Plan of the site at Baile an Or, showing the location of trenches.	125
Figure 40. Ground survey using a Cowley Automatic Level.	126
Figure 41. Geophysical survey of part of the site.	128
Figure 42. The large hut which might have been the store/bunkhouse.	130
Figure 43. Metal detector survey of the former hut areas.	132
Figure 44. Aerial view of archaeological explorations of the site.	133
Figure 45. Careful recording of the archaeological dig and drawing of Trench 5.	136
Figure 46. Excavation of a trench revealing the cobbled floor of a miner’s hut.	138
Figure 47. A visitor to the site is shown Trench 6.6 containing a post-hole.	139
Figure 48. Selection of finds from the site.	140
Figure 49. The bowl of a clay tobacco pipe found in Trench 2.	141
Figure 50. Pieces of a saucer found in Trench 1.	142
Figure 51. Detail from A. Johnston’s photograph of the hut selected for re-construction.	146
Figure 52. Reconstructed miner’s hut with tools and rocker.	147
Figure 53. Nine-negative composite of the interior of the reconstructed miner’s hut.	149
Figure 54. The rocker showing design and method of use.	151
Figure 55. Stages in fashioning a decorated gold disk.	153



Frontispiece. Reproduction of the 19th century albumen print made by Alexander Johnston from the 8" x 10" glass negative he exposed at Baile an Or in the Strath of Kildonan, Sutherland, April 1869. [From Dr R.M. Callender's picture library].

INTRODUCTION

There has been no substantial finds of gold in England, albeit the Lake District has seen some small-scale gold mining in the past and some gold was found at Bampfylde Mine near North Molton in Devon. Gold has been extensively mined in Merioneth, mid-Wales, for at least two centuries and there is a preserved Roman gold mine near Lampeter, some 50 miles further south. Gold can still be panned from the Mawddach River and adjacent streams near Dolgellau and indeed spasmodic underground hard rock mining still takes place in the surrounding hills.

Scotland has seen gold mined over the centuries; gold from the hills around Wanlockhead and Leadhills in the Southern Uplands was used to make some of the Scottish crown jewels. Prospecting by large international mining concerns has taken place over the years in various areas and indeed continues to this day.

The Kildonan story, however, is comparatively unknown even though it produced rich pickings for a lucky few of those miners who tried their hand at the diggings. Part of the reason for its obscurity may be that Kildonan is a long way off the beaten track; few tourists venture north of Inverness, capital of the Highlands and those who do tend to head for the scenically attractive west coast rather than the less mountainous east coast.

The A9 trunk road and a single track railway line head north from Inverness to take visitors and locals on both business and pleasure to Wick and Thurso and onward by ferry to the Orkney and Shetland Isles. Both road and rail serve the small and attractive east coast towns of Beauly and Dingwall (or did until the A9 was improved and diverted away from them) and also Alness, Tain, Dornoch, Golspie, Brora and Helmsdale, passing en route the oil rig construction and repair yards of the Cromarty Firth. At Helmsdale the road follows the coast north but the railway engineers decided that an easier route would be preferable and headed inland following the Helmsdale river up the Strath of Kildonan towards the wilderness of the flow country with its lochs and bogs and its distant horizons towards the mountains of the west.

At this time, late 1868, the railway company and the local landowner, the Duke of Sutherland whose family home was (and still is) the magnificent Dunrobin Castle, situated just north of Golspie, were finalising plans to extend the line north from Golspie to its northernmost point at Helmsdale. Work was due to commence in the New Year of 1869.

At about the same time, a local man who had made good in the Australian goldfields returned home to the Strath of Kildonan. He was Robert Nelson Gilchrist and his discovery of gold, panned in the local rivers, led to a small but nevertheless remarkable gold rush to this remote part of the Scottish highlands.

This, therefore, is the background to the birth of the Baile an Or project, which now, culminates in the publication of the results of our endeavours.

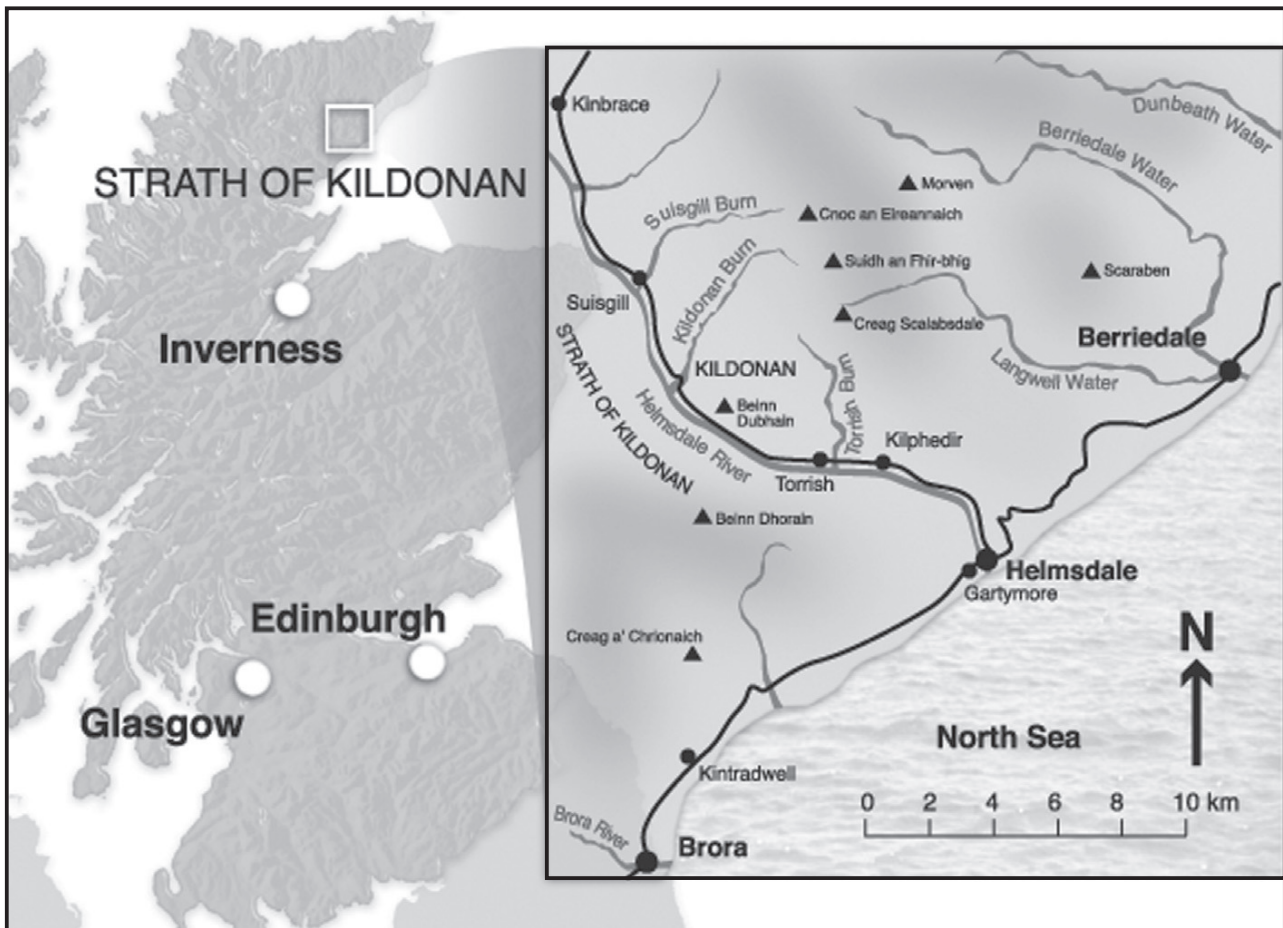


Figure 1. Area map. The Strath of Kildonan, Sutherland, Scotland, including Brora, Helmsdale and Berriedale.

We had to consider and discuss the name by which the location is now known. ‘Baile an Or’ is the popular version of the Gaelic words meaning ‘Town of Gold’ but the term also exists in other forms, such as Baile-An-Or, Baile n’ Oir, Baile an Òr, Bailinore, Ballinore, Bailem Oir and Baile-’n-oir. Contrary to a wish expressed by the Gaelic Development Officer for the Western Isles, who advocated ‘Baile an Òir’, we decided to use the now familiar wording, Baile an Or.

It was inevitable that the single word ‘Kildonan’ appears frequently in the texts and in different circumstances. It may imply Kildonan Burn, Kildonan Farm, Kildonan Kirk, the Strath of Kildonan or Kildonan railway station, which displays the single word, ‘Kildonan’ on its platform signs. Strictly speaking, Kildonan evolves from the Parish of Kildonan, however, we believe that the context will convey the meaning and have taken comfort from the opening line of a piece of contemporary verse: *‘I’m off to Kildonan in the morning ...’*.

Many 19th century texts used the Gaelic version ‘Strath Ullie’ to identify the Strath of Kildonan and the current Ordnance Survey map (Sheet 17: Strath of Kildonan) includes both versions to identify this feature. As a rule, a preference for the Strath of Kildonan has denied the use of Strath Ullie, except where the latter appears in quoted texts.

The church at Kildonan belongs to the Church of Scotland and is generally referred to as Kildonan Church and sometimes Kildonan Kirk.

Monetary and other values of the 19th century presented us with a dilemma. In 1869, the gold miner's monthly licence cost £1 a month but inflation has taken its toll and this now converts to something like £80 a month. As an initial outlay, such a fee may appear to be high but it is worth remembering that a diligent miner could recover more than an ounce of gold in the month and sell it for three pounds fifteen shillings per ounce.

Because we were anxious to indicate today's values, without losing sight of the original amounts, the following table converts typical pre-decimal values to those used today:

Pre-decimal	Today's currency
1d (one penny)	approximately ½p
2d ('tuppence')	approximately 1p
6d (sixpence)	2½p
1s or 1/- (one shilling)	5p
2/6 ('half a crown')	12½p
10s or 10/- (ten shillings)	50p

The gold miner of 1869 worked in grains, pennyweights and troy ounces and the following equation is recommended when converting 19th century weights to metric equivalents:

$$480 \text{ grains} = 20 \text{ pennyweights} = 1 \text{ ounce} = 28.35 \text{ grams.}$$

REFERENCES

1. O'Donoghue G., 2004, '*Consumer price inflation since 1750*', www.safalra.com/other/ukinflation.
2. Dalladay A.J., 1956, '*The British Journal of Photography Almanac*', Henry Greenwood & Co Ltd, London.

LOCAL HISTORY

THE KILDONAN GOLD RUSH

The story of the Kildonan gold rush was reported in some detail at the time in local newspapers but this valuable source of information has never been explored in detail and the results used as the basis for a narrative of this little known episode in the history of the Scottish Highlands. Some sources other than the newspaper records have also been used to compile the full story and the outcome is a record of the events of 1869 as seen at the time by those who were there, either taking part in the adventure or visiting and reporting on the happenings in the Strath of Kildonan.

Most of the story of the Kildonan gold rush has been taken from the columns of The Inverness Courier that was published weekly on a Thursday. Other local newspapers followed the story as it unfolded; local reporters watched the events as they happened and filed their reports for publication. It is also likely that one or more of the correspondents 'syndicated' their reports to a number of outlets. As a result some of the reports published in one newspaper are very similar to those in the others.

Not only were the events reported locally but it is of considerable interest that they were the subject of sketches later published in The Illustrated London News. Even more remarkably, local photographers including Alexander Johnston from Wick, visited the area and took a number of pictures which show in some detail the settlement of miners' huts and tents which grew up in the Strath of Kildonan adjacent to the diggings. Fortunately some of Johnston's photographs have survived and his story can be found elsewhere in this publication.

The site of the gold rush is little changed today from what it was in 1869, the only difference is that the settlement is long gone, car parking and camping are now permitted on the site and there is a small shelter erected by the roadside. Prospectors are still able to search for gold and with a little hard work, their labours can be rewarded. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that in 1869, although some of the miners struck lucky, many returned home with little or nothing to show for their time spent at the diggings.

THE FIND

Robert Nelson Gilchrist was born at Gartymore near Helmsdale and having learned the trade of cooper - his father assisted with the curing of herrings for export - he decided to emigrate to Australia to make his fortune. He left in 1849 and was attracted by the tales of the fortunes that had been made in the gold fields.¹ The Australian gold rushes of the 1850's and 60's were past their heyday but gold had been discovered in various parts of New Zealand during the 1860's. It is likely that as a local lad he would have known of gold having been found in the burns of the strath of his childhood and indeed in the Helmsdale River over the years, albeit in very small amounts. The one noteworthy find had occurred in the early part of the century when a small nugget was found at the edge of the river. This was given to the then Duke of Sutherland who had it made into a ring.²

Gilchrist had clearly gained considerable experience prospecting and panning for gold in the antipodes and it was reported that he had ‘made money’ at the gold diggings abroad. When working in Australia he had been struck by the similarity of the gold-producing district to his native strath and determined on his return to try whether any worthwhile gold could be found in Kildonan. On the very first day of his search he made some small finds but did not initially make the discovery public as he did not know if permission would be given to work the area.²

Reports of Gilchrist’s finds began to circulate in the area towards the end of 1868. One of the first reports appeared in the Northern Ensign dated 10 December, which suggested that no small sensation had been created by reports that gold had been found in Kildonan Strath and although this had not yet led to a ‘rush to the diggings’, it had raised sufficient interest to justify some prospecting in the area. The report confirmed that it had been established beyond doubt that gold was to be found in the strath, the only question was to the quantity and indeed whether other precious minerals were present in the same locality.³ A report in the same newspaper one week later suggested that the discovery was the work of two miners from Sutherland who had recently returned from New Zealand and were struck by the similarity of the rocks of the strath to those they had worked there.⁴

Such was the infection of the reports, that the Northern Ensign published a number of letters in its Christmas Eve edition relating to the find. Charles Griffin, a Coventry solicitor, who had spent recent holidays panning for gold in the Scottish borders and Peebleshire offered to investigate and value the find but not at his expense! The newspaper also reproduced a letter from Mr Hector Mackay regarding an earlier note from a Mr Lawson Tait commenting on the discovery and suggesting that gold was to be found also at Eddrachillis near Durness in the far northwest of Scotland. The Northern Ensign’s editorial was keen that the mineral wealth of the area should be surveyed and assessed by the Geological Society with a view to developing the resources of Caithness and Sutherland, especially as the railway was to be extended into the area.⁵

A report in the Christmas Eve edition of The Inverness Courier noted that Gilchrist had found about an ounce of gold and that he wanted to sink a shaft below the river at Kildonan.⁵

The John O’Groat Journal in its Christmas Eve edition⁶ took a somewhat sceptical approach to the find, and headlined its report ‘*The alleged discovery of gold in Sutherlandshire*’. It suggested that the discovery was not new; gold in the area had been known three centuries before. Whether the gold would be found in paying quantities was in some doubt; hitherto all attempts at gold working in Scotland had paid poorly. Reference was made to the time when the Scottish gold coinage was made mostly of native metal from the Pass of Enterkin, the Lowther Hills and Durness and that at that time it had not taken a large quantity of bullion to coin all the gold in circulation. The newspaper also referred to an exploration of the district some years previously, when gold had been prospected on the Suisgill Burn. The prospectors had come to the conclusion that the quantity and quality would not be worthwhile and there the matter ended.⁶

Not to be outdone, a week later on New Year's Eve, the Northern Ensign reported that: '*despite foolish attempts to pooh-pooh this important discovery*', it continued to attract a large amount of public attention. The paper believed that practical miners were satisfied that gold was to be found in the Kildonan Strath in considerable quantities. There were also good grounds for believing that there was also a strath in Caithness, just to the north of Kildonan, which could prove to be no less tempting for miners. The newspaper also reproduced two letters, one published in The Scotsman two days previously, reviewing gold finds at home and abroad and one published in the Daily Review of the same date suggesting a providential intervention to repopulate the area following the clearances, clearly still strong in peoples' minds. The writer was of the view that big business might '*pooh-pooh*' the discovery so that the landowners could continue to clear their lands for sheep but he hoped that the area would be thoroughly searched by practical miners.⁷

JANUARY 1869

Despite the wide press coverage of the discovery, little attention was at first paid to these early reports, although they were soon confirmed beyond doubt and it became clear that the banks of the river were auriferous to a considerable extent. By early January prospecting had already covered most of the area around the original find and indeed extended beyond Kildonan. There were positive reports that it was likely that more streams than one in the counties of Sutherland and Caithness flowed over sand and gravel in which at least some gold had been deposited.⁸

As early as the first week in the month, many individuals from Helmsdale and the surrounding areas came to Kildonan to dig for gold and went home with finds varying from a pennyweight to an ounce. Two prospectors found nearly an ounce in a couple of days by simply washing the sand on the banks of the burn. Although many people were inclined to be doubtful about the existence of gold in significant quantities, the fact that so many were finding it convinced even the most sceptical. Finding gold worth anything from 5 to 20 shillings a day was certainly a convincing argument.⁹

During the month, as more people heard of the finds at Kildonan, they began to descend on the glen where the gold was originally found. Some prospectors were moderately fortunate even when their search was conducted in a very unskilful fashion. The local paper was of the view that most prospectors found less than would pay the costs involved in leaving their homes and paying for food and lodgings and the implements necessary for prospecting but nearly everyone had succeeded in finding a few grains and some had made very good wages.⁸

Although the Duke of Sutherland owned the land and both he and his factor were clearly aware of what was going on at Kildonan, as yet no proper arrangements had been made for prospecting in the area. Diggers who had experience abroad had examined the ground and spoke hopefully of the prospects. However, until proper permission was given and appropriate arrangements were in place, a more thorough survey was not going to be possible.⁸