

Inferring the placement of a bardic school in 13th to 15th century Lennox, Scotland, through harp wood types.

Taking as its basis the recent work done on two of the oldest extant medieval harps (the Queen Mary and Lamont harps) by Karen Loomis, Ticca Ogilvie, and Lore Troalen in *Early Music*¹, this paper attempts to use the wood type information given by Loomis et al to strengthen Keith Sanger and Alison Kinnaird's postulation of a bardic school in the area around Loch Lomond in Scotland², known as the Lennox. Whilst Sanger and Kinnaird concern themselves with evidence of bardic existence, I wish to ascertain the potential evidence of bardic instrument making in the area.

Loomis, Ogilvie, and Troalen's work disproved earlier (controversial) claims that the Queen Mary and Lamont harps were made from European Hornbeam, a wood not normally associated with the making of this style of Irish harp. Their recent work at the National Museum of Scotland showed that the soundboxes of both harps are in fact made of willow³, whilst the forepillars and necks are still yet to be conclusively matched, though likely matches are whitebeam or apple. It is the willow classification that concerns this paper. Willow is known to prefer damper conditions, usually being found on the side of bodies of water – and one of the foremost places one can find waterside in Scotland is the area surrounding Loch Lomond, with its large number of lochs and rivers.

The Lennox

During the medieval period, the land around Loch Lomond and further to the east was known as the Lennox. The Lennox was a wide area, said to embrace the entirety of Dumbartonshire and much of West Stirlingshire⁴. The parishes of Rosneath, Arrochar, Row, Luss, Cardross, Bonhill, Dumbarton, Kilmarnock, New Kilpatrick, Old Kilpatrick, Baldernock, Buchanan, Drymen, Killearn, Balfron, Fintry, Strathblane, Campsie, and Kilsyth were all ruled over by the Earls of Lennox⁵, with the boundary including Loch Lomond as well⁶ (see Figures 1 and 2. Figure 2 labels several of the listed parishes in an attempt to show the rough area contained within the Lennox boundaries).

Sanger and Kinnaird posit a bardic school existing in the Lennox area from the 13th century onwards. They start their argument with the existence of 'Adam, a native of Lennox' at Melrose Abbey in 1260, who spent his winter nights 'playing upon the harp and singing songs which are called "Motets"'⁷. The implication here is that Adam filled out the other parts of the polyphonic motets upon the harp, but what Sanger and Kinnaird find most interesting is that he is from Lennox, and go on to point out several factors that make this area appear to be a hub of bardic tradition and training.

Firstly, the bard Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh and his descendants are found in Lennox from the early 13th century onwards⁸, Muireadhach having originally been a member of the Ó Dálaigh Irish bardic dynasty that had begun in the 12th century. After this, a 'Donnachadh Mor' from Lennox appears, probably from the late 13th to early 14th centuries⁹, noted in the Book of the Dean of Lismore as the only Scottish poet worthy of having his place of origin remembered¹⁰. The Lennox was also the territorial home of the Mac a' Bhreatnaich (or Bretnach) clan, who we find in the 15th and 16th centuries providing a number of harpers to the court of James IV of Scotland.

There is written evidence, then, of a tradition in Lennox of bardic training. Whilst training appears to be mainly passed on through families, its location as a meeting point and cultural ‘hotspot’ between Scots, Picts and Bretons suggests the potential of more than just familial passing-on of knowledge. What we have lacked, however, is any physical evidence to tie these people to this place – until now. The conclusion by Loomis et al that the 15th century Queen Mary and Lamont harps have soundboxes of willow gives us another method of reinforcing Sanger and Kinnaird’s theory. If there was bardic schooling happening in the area, then those being trained would need instruments, and it would be far easier for instruments to be made nearby. I posit that the Lennox was not only a centre of bardic schooling, but also a hub for the creation of instruments necessary for the bardic arts – harps.

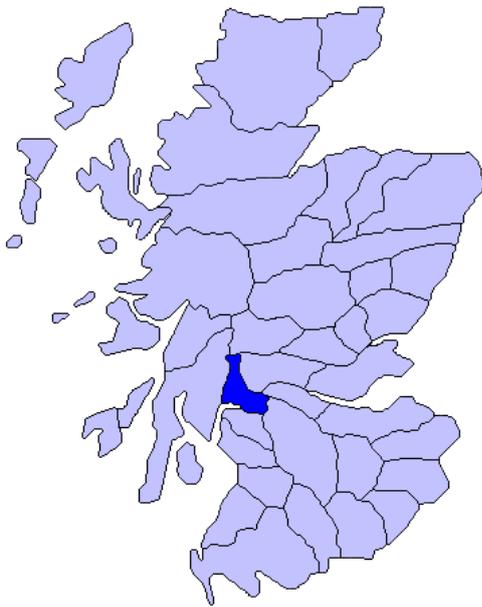


Figure 1: The Lennox area in relation to Scotland.¹¹

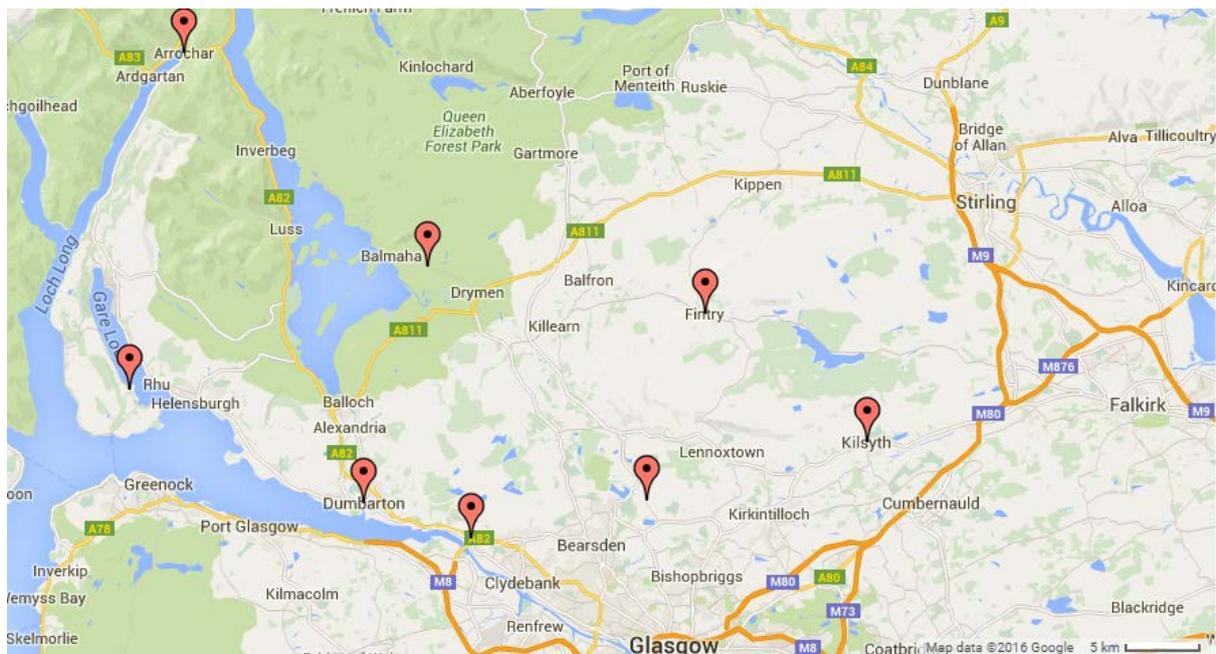


Figure 2: Rough outline of the area encompassed by the Lennox, courtesy of Google Maps.

Willow in the Lennox

A look at the flora of the Lennox area, paying particular interest to instances of willow, strengthens this claim. Unfortunately, no one was writing down detailed forestry information during the medieval ages – or if they were, it is stored in manuscripts unknown to this author. However, there is information of logging at this time. It is only in the 12th and 13th centuries that the primeval forests dating from at least 3500 B.C. were truly exploited¹². Before this time, willow appears to have been quite common throughout the forests of Scotland¹³. After this period, the next local reference to willow that I have been able to source comes from the diary of the naturalist James Robertson, in 1771¹⁴. This willow is spotted along the banks of the River Lyon, in between Meggernie and Cashlie, an area north of the Trossachs and Loch Lomond. Whilst there is an admittedly large date gap here, the willow has clearly survived in this area, and was most likely flourishing in the well-suited environment.

After this, one is reliant upon modern information, which at least provides us with more evidence of the Lennox being good for willow growth. A recent survey of the area mentions the River Leven, upstream of Dumbarton, as having crack willow¹⁵; the Campsie and Fintry hills as having dark-leaved willow¹⁶ and notes the general existence of grey willow within the Loch Lomondside woodlands¹⁷. This appearance within forests will have been shaped by the willow's preference for damper conditions¹⁸, i.e. lochside and riverside regions, but this hardly limits the potential for willow growth. The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park contains 22 lochs and approximately 50 rivers and burns¹⁹, whilst the more easterly side of the Lennox area has several large rivers along with a large number of tributaries and burns.

There is also evidence of willow plantations around the Endrick Water²⁰ – though cultivated for far more recent basketwork, the receptiveness of the Lennox area to create such a plantation cannot be ignored. The inflowing river mouths around Loch Lomond itself are also found to be good willow-growing areas²¹, as are the banks of the River Teith²², though this is past the likely northern limit of the Lennox.

Clearly, the willow's preference for damp conditions to grow in seems a perfect fit for the Lennox area. The usage of willow in 15th century harps, coupled with the existence of a number of bardic families in Lennox (and the potential of larger bardic schools occurring at such a cultural meeting point), points a high likelihood that harps were being created in the Lennox area, as it had both the physical resources and the knowledge from the bards. Within the 13th to 15th centuries then, one can propose that not only was the Lennox area a likely site of bardic training, but also of instrument creation.

This article is very much a work-in-progress project, so any queries, comments, or sources of information would be gratefully received, and can be sent to: a.bull.2@research.gla.ac.uk

Endnotes

¹ Loomis, Karen; Ogilvie, Ticca; and Troalen, Lore. (2015) 'Reidentifying the wood of the Queen Mary and Lamont harps'. *Early Music*. XLIII, No. 4 (2015), pp. 623-634.

² Sanger, Keith & Kinnaird, Alison. (1992) *Tree of Strings / Crann nan teud: A History of the Harp in Scotland*. Midlothian: Kinmor Music, pp. 43-44.

³ Loomis et al, p. 629.

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- ⁴ Laing, R. M. (1974) 'Local History' in: Tippet, Roger; Idle, Edward T.; Laing, Randal M.; MacDonald, James G.; Mitchell, John; Morrison, Alexander; Nicholls, Derek C.; Richmond, W. Kenneth. *A Natural History of Loch Lomond*. Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, pp. 86-95, 88.
- ⁵ Anderson, John (1908) 'The Celtic Earls of Lennox' in: Paul, James Balfour (ed.) *The Scots Peerage*. Volume V (Edinburgh, 1908) pp. 324-343, 324. [Online] Available at: <http://archive.org/stream/scotsppeeragefoun05paul#page/324/mode/1up> Accessed 30/04/2016.
- ⁶ Laing, p. 88.
- ⁷ Sanger & Kinnaird, p. 42.
- ⁸ Ibid., pp. 43-44.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 229, note 8.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 44.
- ¹¹ Reproduced from Wikipedia under the GNU Free Documentation License. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lennox_\(district\).PNG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lennox_(district).PNG) Accessed 01/05/2016
- ¹² Proctor, J. (1993) 'Vegetation and Flora' in: (eds) Corbett, L., Dix, N. J., Bryant, D. M., McLusky, D. S., Elliot, B. J., Tranter, N. L. *Central Scotland: Land - Wildlife - People*. Forth Naturalist and Historian. Stirling: Stirling University, pp. 43-56, 44.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Henderson, D. M. and Dickson, J. H. (1994) *A Naturalist in the Highlands: James Robertson - His Life and Travels in Scotland 1767-1771*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, p. 186, August 26th 1771.
- ¹⁵ Mitchell, John. (2001) *Loch Lomondside: Gateway to the Western Highlands of Scotland*. The New Naturalist Library. London: Harper Collins Publishers, p. 128.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 179-180.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 152.
- ¹⁸ Knowlton, Derrick. (1974) *The Naturalist in Scotland*. The Regional Naturalist. Newton Abbot: David & Charles, pp. 132, 146.
- ¹⁹ Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park (unknown date) *Freshwater Lochs and Rivers*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.lochlomond-trossachs.org/learning/freshwater-lochs-and-rivers/menu-id-304.html> Accessed 30/04/2016.
- ²⁰ Mitchell, p. 75.
- ²¹ Idle, E. T. (1974) 'Botany' in: Tippet et al, pp. 24-35, 32.
- ²² McLusky, D. S. and Lassiere, O. L. (1993) 'Aquatic Life' in: Corbett et al, pp. 90-106, 97.