

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT THE SITE OF THE
PROPOSED NEW SEWAGE TREATMENT WORKS, NORTH
BALLACHULISH**

Wordsworth Archaeological Services
4 Balbeg, Balnain, Glenurquhart
Inverness-shire IV3 6XQ
(tel 01456476 288)

Introduction

As part of the planning consent for the construction of a new sewage pipeline and treatment works for North Ballachulish, an archaeological condition was put on part of this project. This condition required archaeological supervision during the topsoil strip of the site of the proposed treatment works and part of the pipeline route. This report discusses the background to and the results of this work.

Historical Background

The watching brief was concentrated on two sides of a burial cairn, *Carn Glas*. This Scheduled Ancient Monument was badly mutilated in the 19th century when a local minister paid workmen to dig into the monument on its south west side. He reported finding a stone cist with calcined bones and ashes. The farmer also found a cist in digging into the cairn on the north east side. The present cairn is badly disturbed and was originally much larger as the same account dating to 1880 mentions that '*hundreds of loads of stone have been carted away for drain-making, dyke-building, road-making and piers.*'

Another cairn, *Carn Ria'ach*, even more badly mutilated lies at the back of the Lochleven Hotel. Part of a kerb of slate survives on the north-west face of this monument suggesting that this too is a burial cairn of neolithic/bronze age date.

Another burial cist was discovered during the construction of the new road and bridge across the narrows at Ballachulish in 1974-76. It was well-built of slate slabs both in its sides and cover. The cist was around 1.5m deep (chest height) and contained a crouched inhumation and pottery. The feature was sealed over and not disturbed further as the contractors did not wish to interrupt their work programme. The digger driver who uncovered it Hugh from Tobermory was also working on the present contract and he reckoned it was found at about the Lochleven junction *i.e* cN 0525 6040. Unfortunately the information about this cist came to light during the topsoil strip and the area between Manhole 11 and 13 which lay closest to this find was not included in the watching brief.

The cairns and the cist were placed on a gravel ridge formed as glacial outwash some 10,000 years ago. A further five stone cists were found prior to 1880 in unspecified sites, but from the context they were probably from peat cuttings within the area of the modern village. A substantial raised bog had formed behind the gravel ridge and was about 12 feet thick in the last century. Extensive peat cutting and land reclamation since then has removed most of this bog. During this peat extraction numerous finds such as '*wooden basins, platters, and bowls of antique shape, have been a comparatively common find.*' Also before 1880 '*an ancient flint weapon manufactory was discovered several years ago. This most "interesting find" consisted of several barrow-loads of flint chips, hundreds of them in every stage of completion, arrow-heads, spear points, knives, scrapers etc.....and all of them within the area of what was evidently a circular wattled building, of which stumps of the tough heart of oak framework still survived in situ.*' The most significant discovery was a carved figurine 4 feet 9 inches high nicknamed the '*Ballachulish Goddess*' that was found buried in wickerwork, possibly the remains of a surrounding shrine. These finds suggest the peat formed after prehistoric man first settled this area.

These finds are mentioned here, though outside the area of the main watching brief, to demonstrate the archaeological importance of North Ballachulish and because the pipeline penetrated parts of the bog.

Method

A JCB 900 with 360 degree was dedicated to the topsoil strip under the supervision of the archaeologist. A ditching bucket was used to remove a strip 6 metres wide along the pipe line route. Stripping started from Manhole 13 southwards. The area of the pumping station was planned to be stripped of all its topsoil cover, though modern disturbances made it unnecessary to excavate more than the extent shown on **Fig1**. A total of three days was spent on this work in generally dry conditions and a skilled operator manned the machine.

Results

Despite the considerable areas of ground uncovered no significant finds were made.

In the first field between Manholes 13 and 15 after the first 20 metres of iron panned surface a considerably disturbed subsoil was revealed. In discussion with local informants it became clear that considerable quantities of subsoil had been stripped from here to supply material for the new road. The contours of this field show a considerable hollow between the levels on either side (see **Fig 1**) and apparently this had previously been a near level terrace.

In the area to the south of Manhole 15 the only features noted were three black gully fills in the north east corner of the treatment work site, as shown on **Fig 2**. These gullies were irregular in width, discontinuous and varied depth up to 60mm. They were c3.5m apart and were interpreted as the remains of rigs or lazy beds. Similar but much smaller deposits of leached black silts suggested that this whole field may once have been covered with rigs before the agricultural improvements of the mid to late 19th century. General Roy's Military Survey of 1747-56 shows no arable land in this area and so such rigs must date to the late 18th century. In view of the heavy iron-panning to be found here, raised beds whether of rigs or lazy beds would be a sensible method for dealing with the poor drainage.

East of *Carn Glas* a circular stone drain was seen, its position as shown on **Fig 1**. The cobbles from which it was made were almost certainly collected from the cairn and probably in the 19th century.

The majority of the treatment works site had been disturbed and this disturbance which included stone chips, rubber pipes, concrete had penetrated well down to the subsoil. The extent of this disturbance is shown on **Fig 1**. It was interpreted as a debris from the Ballachulish bridge and road construction camp operating from 1974-6. Because of this disturbance it was not considered worthwhile to strip the whole of the area of the proposed treatment works and work was limited to the area shown. The ground in this area sloped down from the terrace level with *Carn Glas* and there was a distinct gleying of the subsoil, making this area less suitable for settlement. Most of the gleyed material was removed but no

Archaeological watching brief at proposed Sewage Treatment Works, North Ballachulish

features were revealed beneath it. It was noticeable that there was very little background trace of occupation in form of charcoal lying in the gleyed deposits or generally on the surface of the subsoil. It is likely that this is less the result of 19th and 20th century farming having removed the deposits than that this area has never been used for more than farming. Even farming must have been difficult as the depth of iron-panning visible in the cuttings shows a heavily acidic soil.

Few other areas of the pipeline were still open to view, but a short stretch just south of Manhole 30A was open. A small deposit of peat 0.7m thick was exposed in section and from the upcast nearby 2 flint and 1 possible quartz flakes were found. They were in grey brown humic clay that lay below the peat and were probably stray finds. Examination of other pieces of upcast did not reveal any other finds and there was no obviously worked wood relating to this level, though a number of tree roots did survive. No samples were taken other than the flints because the contexts were unreliable.

Conclusions

Though no archaeologically significant features were found near *Carn Glas*, the potential was high and fully justified this watching brief.

Jonathan Wordsworth
12th March 1996

Archaeological watching brief at proposed Sewage Treatment Works, North Ballachulish

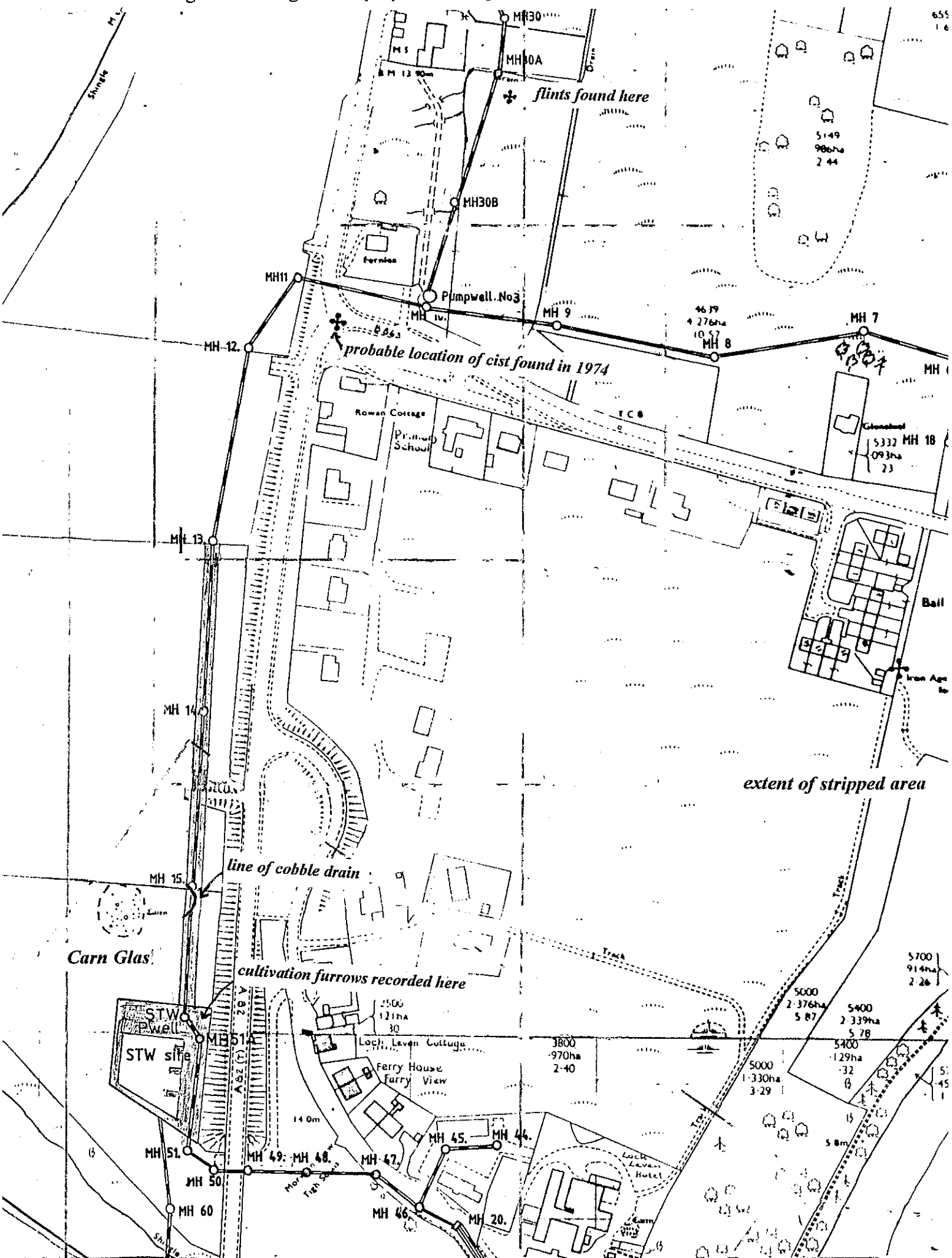


Fig 1 Location of Watching Brief and position of Archaeological Features

Scale 1:2,500



Fig 2 (i) **Stripping in Field 1 showing hollow excavated for road construction**
Looking South to *Carn Glas*



Fig 2 (ii) ***Carn Glas* as presently surviving**
Looking West



**Fig 3 (i) Extent of stripping on site of proposed Treatment Works
Looking West**



**Fig 3 (ii) Buried features, probably 19th century cultivation furrows, at site of
Treatment Works
Looking West**



Fig 4 (i) **Location of peat section near Manhole 30A**
Looking North

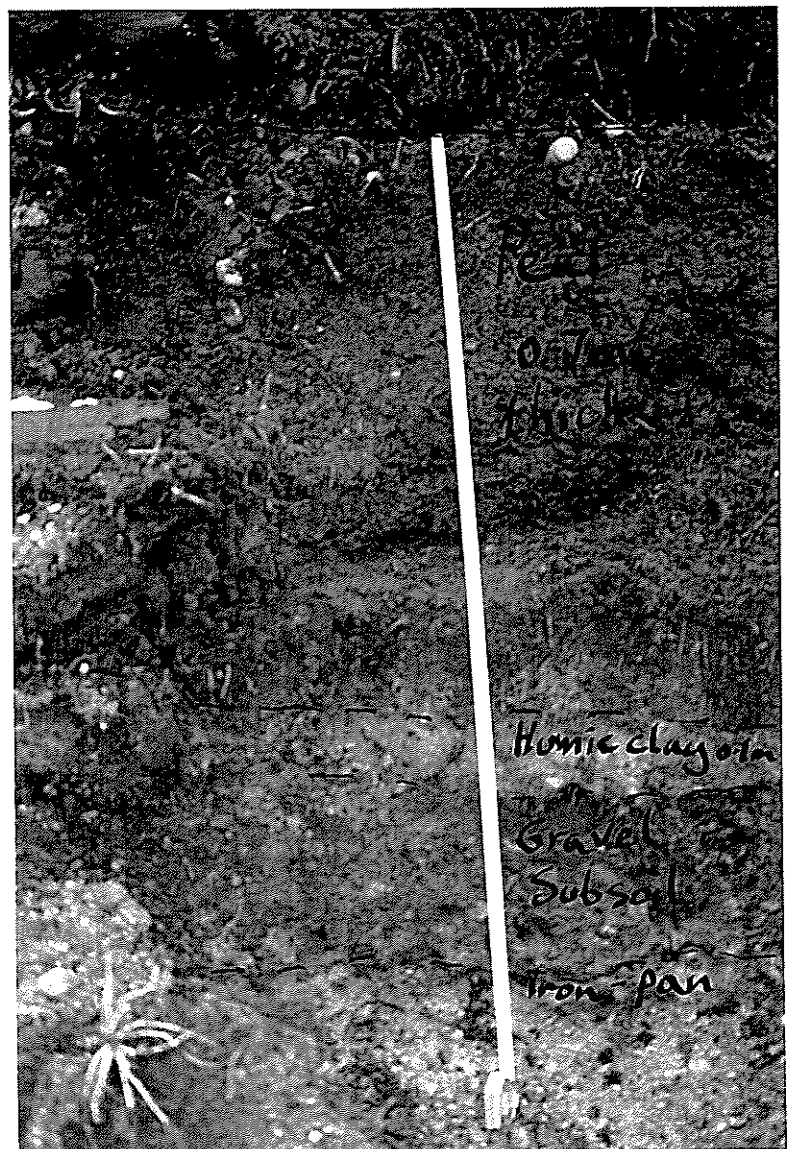


Fig 4 (ii) **Extent of peat profile**
Looking West