
SCOTTISH URBAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST LTD

***A WATCHING BRIEF
at
CNOC RAVOCH
WOODLANDS FARM
by DINGWALL***

RJC/NMR/CAM

6th August 1998

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abstract

The Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust was commissioned by Main McCook Chartered Architects, on behalf of their client, Orange PCS Ltd, to carry out a watching brief (SUAT Site Code DW01) on the installation of a telecommunications mast at Cnoc Ravoch, Woodlands Farm, near Dingwall (NH 5575 6140). An archaeological condition was placed on the planning application by Highland Council Archaeology Service, prompted by the proximity of a Neolithic chambered cairn and other archaeological sites to the proposed mast site and the potential for undiscovered sites and features to be uncovered during the construction works. A specification for the archaeological watching brief, was prepared by Highland Council Archaeology Service (Highland Council Planning and Development Service (Archaeology Service), June 1998).

The watching brief was carried on Monday 6th and Tuesday 7th July 1998. All ground disturbance was monitored and no features or finds were recorded. No further work has been recommended.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The digging of foundation trenches for a telecommunications mast on the shoulder of Cnoc Ravoch, above Dingwall, near several recorded prehistoric monuments, prompted a watching brief to monitor any remains of archaeological significance that might be uncovered during the excavation. The watching brief was carried out from 6th to 7th July 1998 by a single archaeologist from the Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust Ltd.
- 1.2 The proximity of a Neolithic chambered cairn, in particular, led to a condition being placed on the planning application on the advice of Highland Council Archaeology Services. A specification for the archaeological work was also prepared by Highland Council Archaeology Service.
- 1.3 The Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust was commissioned to carry out a watching brief by Main McCook Chartered Architects, on behalf of their client Orange PCS Ltd.

2. The Site

- 2.1 The site of the excavation (Fig 1), in a field south-west of Woodlands Farm, was some 180 m above sea-level on the south-east facing slope of Cnoc Ravoch, a minor

hill which rises to a height of 214 m above the Cromarty Firth, approximately 2.5 km north-east of the centre of Dingwall (NH 5582 6125). The slope of the hill at this point is approximately 2.5/10. The site was 2 m to the north-west of a fence running roughly along the contour, in a large field currently under grass and used as sheep pasture. In recent years the area had been densely planted with trees, now cut, and weathered stumps are scattered across the slope. The hillside is infested with rabbit burrows, especially the slope above the probable chambered cairn (see below).

3. Archaeological Background

3.1 The requirement of a watching brief was prompted by the presence on Cnoc Ravoch of the remains of a probable chambered cairn of the Neolithic period. This monument is 70 m to the south-west of the excavation site in the same field at NH 5575 6120, on a flattish shoulder of the hill with a superb view of the whole of the Cromarty Firth from the Sutors to Dingwall, and past Strathpeffer to the mountains of central Ross-shire. This is a typical situation for these communal tombs of the earliest farming peoples, and the long vanished houses and fields of the community it served may have been spread out below it on the lower slopes of the hill, down towards the Firth. The monument's status as a chambered tomb is not quite certain, due to extensive stone robbing over the centuries to build dykes etc (it is not listed in Henshall's definitive list of Scottish chambered cairns (Henshall 1963)), and it has in the past been taken to be a stone circle, but its interpretation as a severely denuded chambered cairn is the most likely given the nature of the fragmentary surviving remains.

3.2 The National Monuments Record of Scotland provides an accurate description of the probable cairn:

. . overlooking the Cromarty Firth at a height of 670 ft OD, there are three large slabs, possibly the remains of a burial chamber. One is earthfast, placed on edge, and measures 1.9 m long, 0.8 m high and 0.4 m thick; the other two are recumbent, one measuring 2.5 m long by 1.7 m wide and 0.5 m thick. They lie approx. central to a stony platform c 20 m in diameter and 0.5 m high, around which five ?kerb stones can be seen.

3.3 A spread of small stones down the slope immediately to the south-east of the large boulders may be scattered remains of the cairn material which would once have covered the burial chamber. The monument has been disturbed to some extent by rabbit burrows.

3.4 Two further possible cairns have been noted on a terrace slightly further down the hill at NH 557 610 (ASMS 1979, no 45, 11). Their remains are even more fragmentary than those of the first monument.

4. The Excavation

- 4.1 The digging of the foundation trenches for the mast base was carried out by machine by workmen from Hunter Construction. The area to be excavated was examined before digging commenced for surface remains, but none were visible, and a search of the earth thrown out of their burrows by rabbits revealed no man-made artefacts. The area appeared to be simply a part of the hill-slope.
- 4.2 Two foundation trenches were dug side by side, both using earth-moving equipment (Fig 2): the first 8 m x 8 m, the second, slightly shallower, 8 m x 4 m. In both, the deposits encountered were the same: below 12-15 cm of turf and topsoil, was a layer of undifferentiated sandy, heavily oxidised soil, full of small to medium stones, and undisturbed except by tree roots and animal burrows. There was no sign of human activity in either of the trenches, and no artefacts were recovered from the surface of the spoil heaps. At a depth of 40-60 cm below the present ground surface, bedrock was encountered, sloping downhill at a similar angle to the surface. Digging this out to the required depth (creating a horizontal platform on which to mould the concrete mast bases) took much of two working days. The bedrock consisted of grey-blue micaceous schist, so fragmented by weathering on its surface as to resemble a close-packed moraine. The subsoil was full of fragments of this stone.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 Archaeological results from the watching brief were negative. The known prehistoric monuments in the vicinity are on the more level parts of the hill, and any structure that might have been built on the sloping site of the present excavation would appear to require the same terracing as was employed in creating a stable surface for the modern telecommunication mast. In any case, nothing appears to have been built on the site prior to the present construction, and no casual finds were recovered.

6. Acknowledgements

- 6.1 The Trust would like to thank Mr Colin Lawson, Main McCook Chartered Architects for his assistance in the work and Orange PCS Ltd for funding the watching brief and the report. The Trust would also like to thank Highland Council Archaeology Services, in particular Allison Fox, for their curatorial role in the project.

7. Bibliography

ASMS - Archaeological Sites and Monuments of Scotland (1979) *Easter Ross* (Edinburgh).

Henshall, A S (1963) *The Chambered Tombs of Scotland* Vol 1 (Edinburgh).

Highland Council Sites and Monuments Record SMR No. NH56SE0008

8. Site Archive

- 8.1 The site archive comprises five pages of a field note-book which also includes two sketch drawings with measurements.

FIG 1

Site Location
Mountgerald, Woodlands Farm, Dingwall

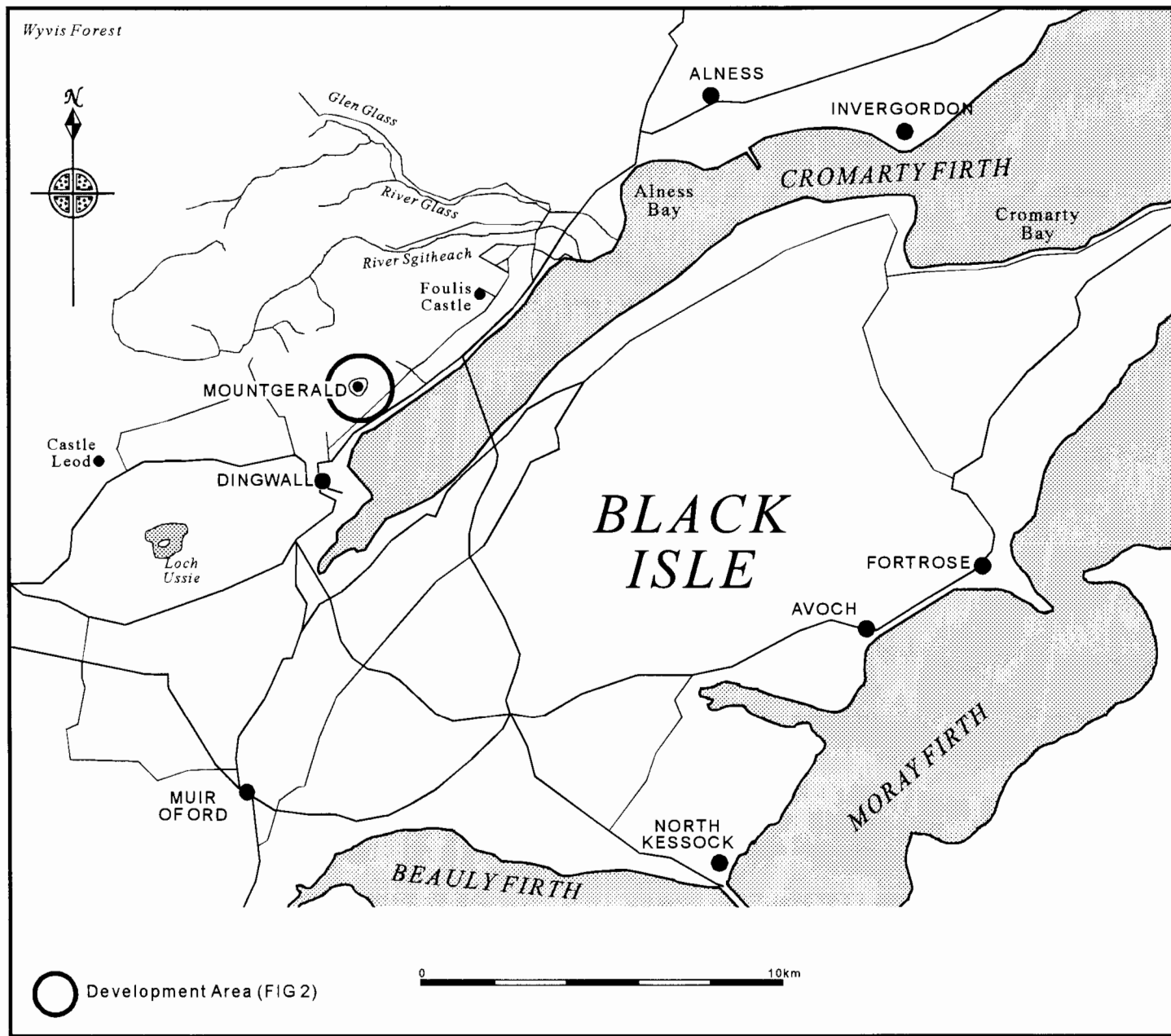


FIG 2

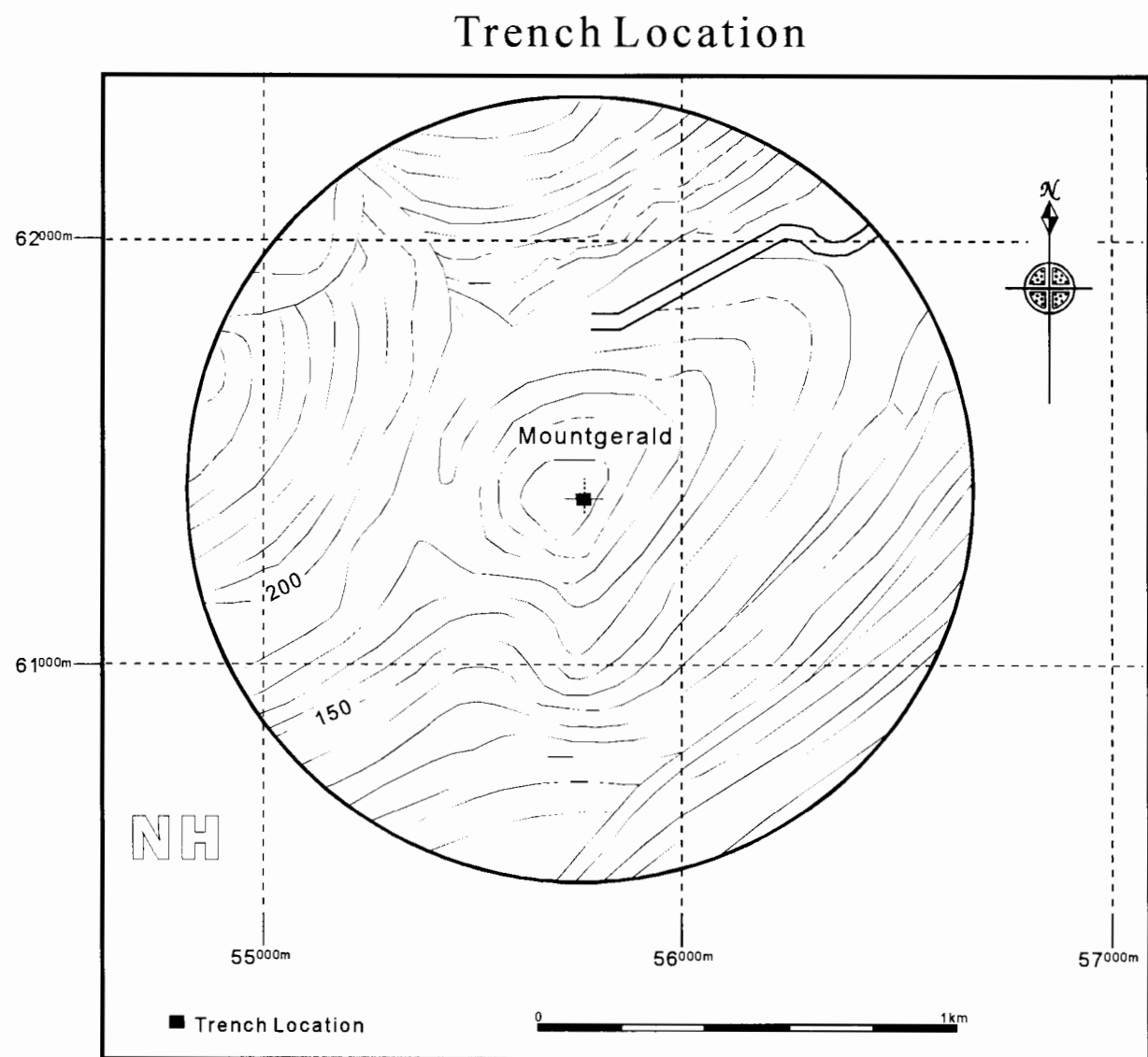


FIG 3

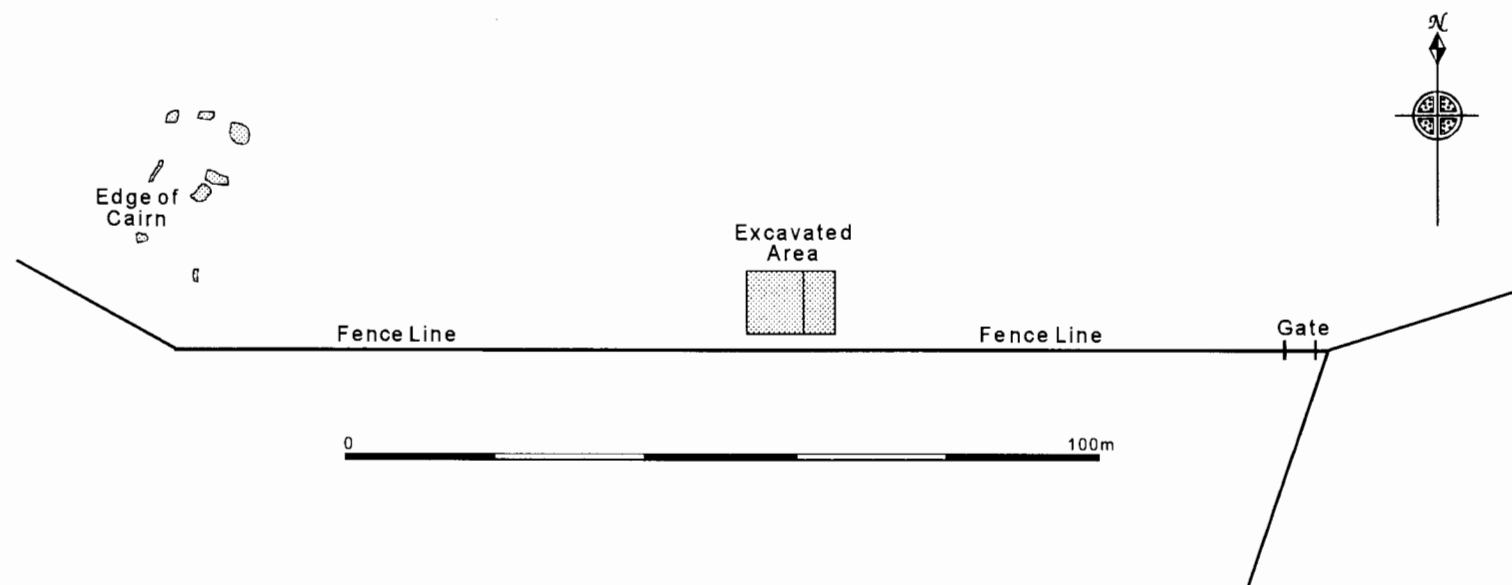


FIG 4

