

ALLT SAIGH, BALMACAAN

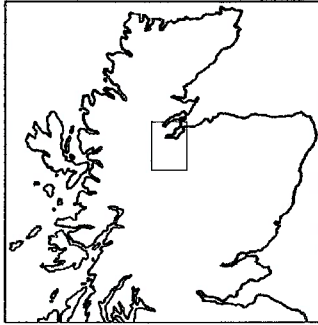
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

Client: Tilhill Economic Forestry

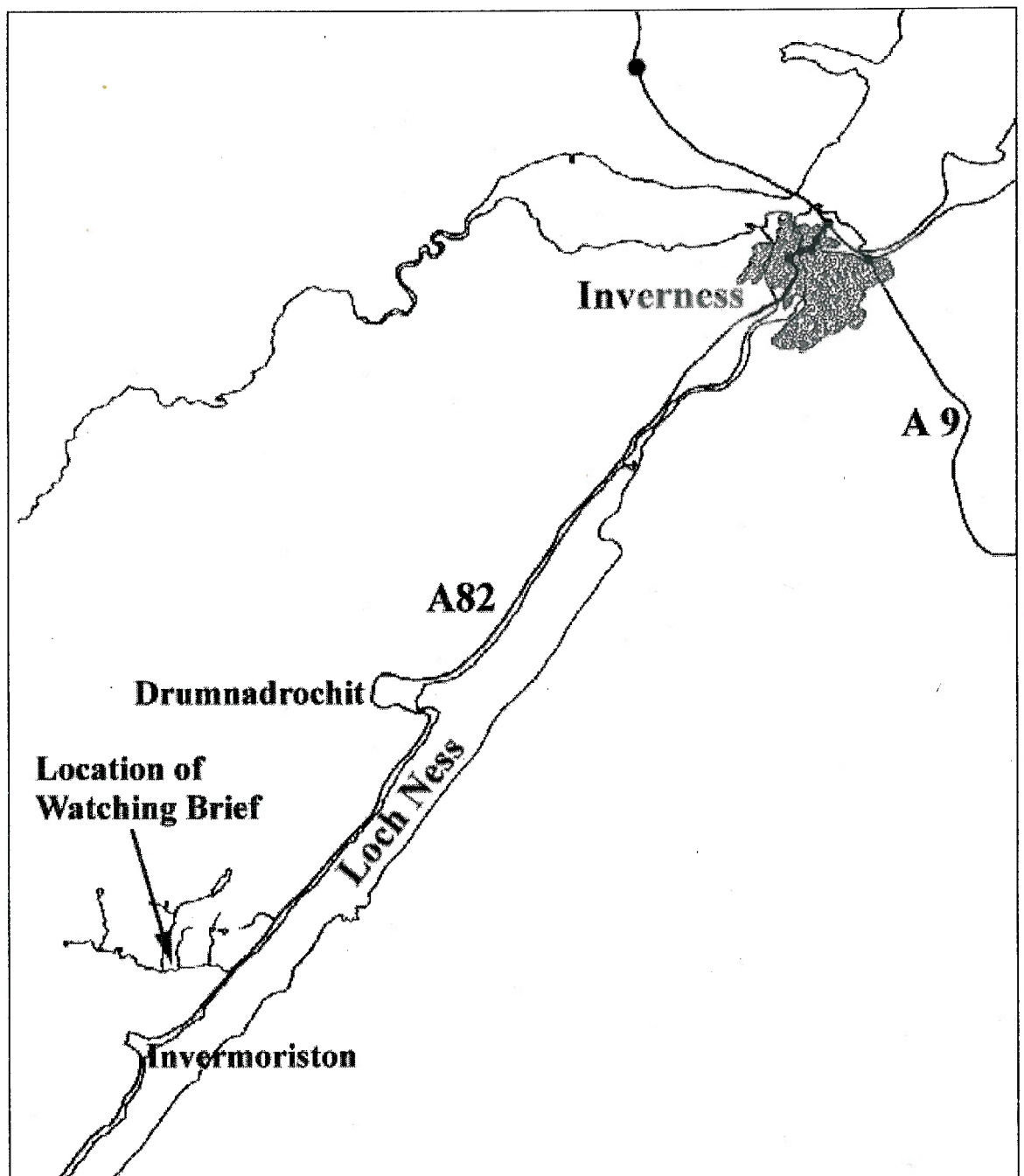
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North Highland Archaeology

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Location Plan of Allt Saigh Watching Brief



Client: Tilhill Economic Forestry, 43 Clachnaharry Road, Inverness, IV3 6RA

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Summary

An archaeological watching brief was required by the Highland Council's Archaeology Service at the upland site of Allt Saigh (NH 437 193), occasioned by a WGS application from Tilhill Economic Forestry. A new access track would cut through a dyke, associated with the remains of a small cluster of buildings and enclosures. No clear structure to the dyke was visible within the area removed by the machine, nor in the upstanding section.

Background

An archaeological survey of this area was conducted by Wordsworth Archaeological Services, identifying a number of features, including a settlement and what is described as "a substantial turf dyke". Hence, groundworks for a new access track, which would cut through the latter, were required to include an archaeological watching brief. Fieldwork was conducted on 26th May, 1998, and the report submitted on 3rd June, 1998.

Fieldwork

The location of the new access track was along a narrow terrace located above a steepening slope cut by the Allt Saigh burn (tending approximately west/east). The topography is rugged, with outcropping rock and few level areas. In this vicinity the ground cover consisted of close-cropped turf and the beginnings of bracken shoots, a green patch in the otherwise brown, heather covered hills, indicating some degree of improvement in the past. A dyke, evidenced by a low, linear spread of stone tending north/south down a slope, crosses the terrace at ninety degrees. Where the slope flattens out evidence for the dyke is lost. Beyond the terrace, continuing down the slope to the burn, there is no evidence for the dyke continuing.

The machine stripping was carried out by a tracked digger using a 1 metre wide, toothed bucket. The turf was removed with the teeth held horizontal to minimise damage to any underlying deposits. A line for the cut of the track, approximately 6 metres wide, was chosen to minimise damage to the upstanding remains of the dyke. However, the last two metres of tumbled stone was removed.

The construction of the dyke in the observed section appeared to be wholly of stone, and did not appear to include any turf element. There were no visible traces of the dyke continuing to the south beyond the spread of stones visible on the surface. The section through the dyke was examined and showed a minimal build up of peaty soil at the base of the dyke, suggesting that it was built directly onto the existing ground surface. The collapsed stones were carefully removed in an attempt to identify any structural arrangement underlying the rubble, but none was visible. The section through the dyke appeared to be an unstructured dump of material.

Another section of walling, which lay immediately to the north of the settlement and would be crossed by the line of the new track, was removed under archaeological supervision. This wall was of drystone construction and survived up to three courses in height, (0.4 metres maximum). It too was constructed directly onto the ground surface, which in the case of the observed section was outcropping bedrock.

Excavation of the track where it curved to the north of the settlement was observed. The soil was thin (on average 70-80mm) and the sub-soil was exceptionally rocky (in excess of 50% rock). The effort represented by the improvement of such an area must have been considerable.

Conclusion

The dilapidated state of the dyke suggests that it might predate elements of the settlement site located nearby. The obvious use of the level terrace for access to this site by people and livestock (if in fact the nature of the terrace is not in some degree anthropomorphic) could account for the fact that the dyke does not continue across the terrace, or that if it once did then all evidence for it has been removed. The same processes could account for the fact that where the dyke does cross the terrace it survives only as rubble, any structure that once existed being broken down.

I would like to acknowledge the co-operation and assistance of representatives of Tilhill Economic Forestry and the on-site contractor during this project.