

Forestry Survey: Coulmony, Cawdor Estate, Highland Region

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December 1995

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INTRODUCTION

Circumstances

Archaeological survey at Coulmony was commissioned by Historic Scotland in advance of proposed forestry management measures by Cawdor Estate.

Survey area

The survey area occupies the gentle eastern slopes of Carn na Caillich (*circa* NH 915 425), where it extends from the valley of the River Findhorn to the hill summit at 375 m OD. The western boundary of the survey area is formed a forestry plantation fence which traverses the hill summit. In the east, the boundary is formed by a modern road from Dulsie Bridge, which partly perpetuates the route of an eighteenth-century military road.

The area identified by Cawdor Estate's management proposals extends over *circa* 6 square kilometres. At the time of survey, much of this area was found to be under established commercial woodland, consisting of a variety of densely planted conifer species. These had been planted on mounded, machine-made beds (1.5 m to 2 m wide) between square drains or gutters (0.4 m wide by 0.4 m deep). Elsewhere, there are tracts of mature birchwood, though these are areas of natural woodland regeneration in which no ground-breaking work has occurred. The remaining areas of open ground support rush meadows or heather and have been used in the past for moorland shooting. These open areas occur, in general, in the western and northern parts of the survey area.

The respective extents of birchwood, coniferous planting and open ground are illustrated on Figure 1 (1:10,000 plan). The limits of coniferous planting relative to the recorded archaeological features - which occur in the western part of the survey area - are also shown on Figure 2 (1:2500 plan).

SURVEY METHODS

Field survey

After a preliminary inspection of the survey area, an appropriate survey strategy was decided in consultation with Dr Richard Hingley (Historic Scotland). All open, or unplanted areas were surveyed according to normal procedures: these areas were traversed at regular intervals and all archaeological features were described in the field. Unrecorded features were mapped using an EDM on an arbitrary local grid. (No survey stations were marked in the field.) In these areas, conditions for surveying were generally favourable, with clear, dry weather and low vegetation (heather to 0.4 m). Elsewhere, however, tree-cover prohibited effective survey work and neither the areas of dense coniferous planting nor of natural birch woodland were surveyed. However, where specific sites were previously known to have existed within these areas, these were inspected to assess their present condition and to record any surviving remains.

Desk-based research

Limited desk-based research was undertaken prior to the field survey. The following sources were consulted.

National Monuments Record (RCAHMS)

Within the survey area, five previously known archaeological sites are recorded by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS):

NMRS NH 94 SW 4 - Hut circle & cairnfields

NMRS NH 94 SW 6 - cairnfield

NMRS NH 94 SW 8 - cairnfield

NMRS NH 94 SW 11 - farmstead; kilnbarn

NMRS NH 94 SW 14 - farmstead

Maps

The survey area is represented on two sheets of the first edition of the Ordnance Survey at 1:10,560:

OS 1871 *Nairn*, Sheet XI (1869), 1:10,560.

OS 1874 *Nairn*, Sheet VIII (1869-71), 1:10,560.

Other early maps which were consulted included National Library facsimiles of the following:

Ainslie, J 1789 *Atlas of Scotland* (Nairn extract).

Arrowsmith, A 1807 extract from the *Map of Scotland* (Nairn extract).

Blaeu, J 1654 'Moravia', from *Atlas of Scotland*.

Roy, Gen. Sir Wm. *circa* 1750. *Military Survey of Scotland* (NLS facsimile sheet 27/3).

Thomson, J 1830 *Nairn & Elgin*.

All of these early maps identify a settlement at Dulsie Bridge, the nearest crossing-point of the Findhorn River. Only Blaeu (1654) and Roy (*circa* 1750) show settlements north or west of this point, which may lie within the survey area, as described (see 'Discussion').

Vertical air photographs

The survey area is represented by several series of vertical air photographs in the collection of the RCAHMS:

Royal Air Force B163 CPE/SCOT/UK 255 August 1947.

Royal Air Force B311 541/A/480 June 1949.

Royal Air Force B356 116/F22 May 1953.

No features of archaeological interest could be identified in these photographs which were not subsequently recorded by field survey.

SURVEY RESULTS

Six archaeological sites or groups of features were recorded by the survey. These include cairnfields, abandoned farmsteads, a hut circle and two small embanked structures which may have been shielings (these were previously unrecorded). All features are described in detail by the gazetteer which completes the report and are illustrated in plan at scales of 1:10,000 and 1:2500 (Figures 1 & 2).

Of the sites which were previously recorded by the RCAHMS, one has now been entirely destroyed by afforestation and is not described by the present report. This was a cairnfield at NH 906 423 (NMRS NH 94 SW 6).

DISCUSSION

Much of the survey area has been heavily modified by commercial forestry development or by natural regeneration and the survey recorded only six sites of archaeological interest.

The hut circle and cairns recorded at Site No.5 are remnants of a larger site, originally recorded by the Ordnance Survey and the RCAHMS. The number and extent of the cairns has now been reduced by planting. The cairns more probably represent ground clearance for cultivation than a cairn cemetery, and the hut circle appears to have been an isolated, unenclosed, prehistoric settlement, occupying an associated area of improved or tilled ground. At over 290 m OD, it is near the upper limit at which such settlements generally occur in the Highlands.

The cairnfields recorded at Site No.3 and No.6 may also date to an early period, but as no associated hut circle was recorded, they might equally represent temporary 'outfield' cultivation of a much later period, associated with one of the abandoned farmsteads at Sites No.1 and 2. Again, in this case, the cairnfield at Site No.6 was originally recorded as a much larger site by the Ordnance Survey and the RCAHMS, but has been considerably reduced by commercial planting.

The farmsteads consist of groups of dwellings, outhouses and, at Site No.2, a kiln barn. These buildings are generally represented by well-defined, upstanding, drystone walls and are probably of relatively recent date. They appear as ruined or abandoned structures on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey (1871; 1884) and may represent the latest generation of pre-clearance settlement in the survey area. Earlier maps are not particularly helpful in this regard. Only the maps by Blaeu (1654) and Roy (*circa* 1750) show settlements which may lie within the survey area or on its margins. Blaeu shows settlements at both 'Dulciemor', on the river-crossing, and at 'Dulciebeg', some distance

upriver. These may correspond to present-day Dulsie and Wester Dulsie, both of which lie outwith the southern boundary of the survey area. Roy's map (*circa* 1750) shows several settlements west of present-day Dulsie, identifying these as 'Pouldow', 'Ardbanchor', 'Little Banchor' and 'Banchor'. All of these lie on or adjacent to the river bank, and it is unlikely that any of them corresponds to the abandoned farmsteads at Sites No.1 and No.2.

The small, curvilinear, embanked features recorded at Site No.4 have been recorded as possible shielings, but are not well defined, and may simply be the remains of shooting butts.

GAZETTEER OF SITES RECORDED

Site No.1

NGR: NH 9070 4195

NMRS: NH 94 SW 14

Class: Abandoned farmstead

Location: Refuil; Carn na Caillich

Landuse: Rush meadow; shooting.

Description: A group of drystone buildings and associated enclosures extends over a broad area of low-lying rush-meadow. The buildings occupy two adjacent knolls of dry ground in an area which is otherwise poorly-drained.

The southern knoll is occupied by a building group which consists of three rectangular structures in a L-shaped arrangement, with doorways that open into the 'courtyard' area formed by the angle of the building group. The individual buildings are variously 16 m, 13 m, and 13 m long and are all 5 m wide. The drystone rubble walls are *circa* 0.6 m thick and are generally upstanding to between 0.5 m and 1 m. Immediately to the east of this group is a rubble cairn with some household debris (fragments of bottle glass and part of a cast-iron cooking pot). Beyond the cairn is a group of tiny (< 2 m by 1 m), oblong, turf-clad wall butts which may be the remains of poultry houses. On the north side, the edge of the knoll is retained by a low, drystone revetment wall.

The northern knoll is occupied by a single, long rectangular building (26 m long by 4 m wide) with drystone rubble walls *circa* 0.5 m thick and upstanding to *circa* 0.6 m. It is internally divided into three chambers, with a doorway opening to south-east in the longest or southern chamber and a small cell or annexe (3 m wide by 2 m deep) to the south of the doorway. Remains of enclosures or abutting structures are appended on the gables of the building at either end.

Between the two building groups, a third knoll does not feature any upstanding remains but may have been built upon during some earlier phase in the occupation of the site.

Outlying the buildings to the south, west and north, the associated dykes are of two kinds. The dykes to the south are low, earthen banks, up to 3 m wide and 0.5 m high. Those to the north and west are drystone rubble dykes, 0.8 m wide and not more than 0.5 m high.

The main structures, but not the dykes, appear on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey at 1:10,000 (1871).

Quality of preservation: The main structures in the building groups are well-defined, clearly-visible and free of heather or woody vegetation. The dykes, in contrast, are low, poorly-defined features and are strongly clad in heather or coarse grasses.

Site No.2

NGR: NH 9122 4265

NMRS: NH 94 SW 11

Class: Abandoned farmstead; kiln barn

Location: Carn na Caillich

Landuse: Coniferous forestry plantation

Description: An abandoned farmstead is represented by a building group of four structures with the remains of an enclosure adjacent.

The enclosure measured 25 m by 30 m. It underlies commercial planting on machine-made beds, as well a new forestry track by which it is traversed. Consequently, it is now identifiable only as intermittent grassy tussocks.

Adjacent to the enclosure is a rectangular structure, of two chambers, with an overall length of 13 m and a width of 4.5 m. Drystone rubble walls, 0.7 m thick, survive to 0.5 m in height.

South-east of this, two rectangular structures stand in close proximity. The larger is divided into three chambers, with a small cell or annexe appended on the east side of the southernmost compartment and an east-facing entrance. It is 22 m long by 5 m wide. The neighbouring, smaller building is a simple rectangular structure 7 m long and 4.5 m wide. Both buildings have walls in drystone rubble, up to 0.8 m thick and up to 0.6 m high.

Finally, a fourth building stands further to the south, on the bank of a small burn. This is a rectangular structure, 8 m long by 5 m wide, with drystone rubble walls up to 0.8 m wide and 1 m high. A circular structure is appended on the west gable, with an internal diameter of 2 m. The walls are of fair-faced rubble construction internally and, externally, are clad in mounded turf and heather. There is a narrow opening (*circa* 0.5 m) on the south side. Doubtless, this is the building described as a 'kiln barn' by the RCAHMS.

Quality of preservation: The large enclosure has been substantially modified by commercial planting and is traversed by a new forestry track. In contrast, the individual structures in the building group are clearly visible, with well-defined, upstanding wall remnants. Some heather and coarse grasses have colonised the walls. Although commercial conifer planting closely borders the site, no trees have encroached on the buildings themselves. The walls are clad, however, in heather and coarse grasses.

Site No.3

NGR: NH 904 427

NMRS: NH 94 SW 8

Class: Cairnfield

Location: Carn na Caillich

Landuse: Heather moorland; shooting.

Description: A dispersed group of twenty-eight cairns was recorded on the eastern brow of Carn na Caillich. Individual cairns are up to 4 m or 5 m wide, but seldom more than 0.5 m high. Some visibly consist of substantial quantities of rounded rubble (0.2 m to 0.5 m). Others are densely clad in heather.

Quality of preservation: The condition of the cairns is variable as some are well-defined stony features, but others are heather-clad and difficult to identify in the field. A few cairns have been robbed or disturbed, possibly for temporary use as shooting butts.

Site No.4

NGR: NH 9067 4330

Class: Possible shielings/shooting butts

NMRS: N/A

Location: Carn na Caillich

Landuse: Heather moorland; shooting.

Description: Two, small, curvilinear structures were recorded on a steep, north-facing flank of Carn na Caillich. The uppermost structure is defined by broad, rounded banks (3 m wide by 0.5 m high) which enclose an oval-shaped scooped or scraped interior 4 m wide. The second, or lower structure is similar in form though less-well defined. It opens to the north-east or downslope side and is 6 m wide internally. These structures occur in an area where the hillslope is corrugated by natural erosion features. They may be the remains of shielings, or possibly shooting butts, which have been created by simply enhancing natural surface irregularities.

Quality of preservation: The features are individually well-defined, but occur in an area with numerous topographical irregularities and may be difficult to identify in the field. Both structures support strong heather. The lower structure supports an immature pine tree (*circa* 4 m).

Site No.5

NGR: NH 9097 4355

NMRS: NH 94 SW 4a

Class: Hut circle and cairns

Location: Carn na Caillich

Landuse: Coniferous forestry plantation

Description: The hut circle and cairns occur on a northern spur of Carn na Caillich, within a clearing in the forestry plantation.

The hut circle is defined by low, embanked walls, 0.6 m wide and less than 0.3 m high, with an overall diameter of 11 m. The structure is described as incomplete on its east side by the RCAHMS, but was found to be D-shaped by the present survey, with the east side formed by a chord of the projected circumference.

Ten cairns are dispersed across the adjacent open ground of the clearing. These are low features, up to 4 m wide, but seldom more than 0.5 m high. In the south-eastern angle of the clearing, an embanked linear feature may be a remnant field bank, or simply a linear clearance cairn.

Quality of preservation: The clearing occupied by these features is an expanded area within the forestry ride or fire-break which traverses the site. The site area has been reduced by planting outwith the clearing and trees encroach on the surviving hut circle and cairns at several points. The hut circle banks are low and very poorly defined, being densely clad in strong heather. The cairns are equally ill-defined, except in those few examples where quantities of rubble protrude, and their number has probably been reduced by planting.

Site No.6

NGR: NH 9133 4324

NMRS: NH 94 SW 4b

Class: Cairnfield

Location: Carn na Caillich

Landuse: Coniferous forestry plantation

Description: Two cairns were recorded within a forestry ride or fire-break. The cairns are broad and low (5 m by 0.5 m), with quantities of stony rubble visible through strong heather.

Quality of preservation: The cairns are well-defined but are clad in strong heather. They are the vestiges of a larger cairnfield which has been largely destroyed by forestry planting.

Figure 1. Pre-afforestation survey at Coulmony, Cawdor Estate.
AOC (Scotland) Ltd. for Historic Scotland. December 1995.



