

INCHNADAMPH NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE :

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

for

Scottish Natural Heritage

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The NNR

The National Nature Reserve lies to the east of the A837, mid-way between Ledmore junction and Ardvreck Castle. Its natural boundaries are formed by the Allt nan Uamh to the south, the slopes of Braebag to the east and the river Traligill to the north.

The archaeological survey

This survey of archaeological features was undertaken to help inform SNH staff of the evidence for human occupation in the area from the prehistoric and historic periods. Although most of the area has been walked, a detailed ground survey has not been undertaken this time. Instead the sites, already known and newly discovered, have been recorded and explained herein, and plotted on tracings of the 1:10,000 map sheets. Further survey work using an EDM or other technical equipment could be carried out if necessary.

Introduction

From an historical and archaeological point of view, the Inchnadamph NNR is renowned for the so-called prehistoric bone caves. These were first fully published by Peach and Horne in 1917, and then investigated by Callander, Cree and Ritchie in 1926 and 1927, when bones of various prehistoric, now extinct, animals were discovered along with human skeletal material. Since that work was undertaken the site has been one of intrigue to those with an interest in quaternary studies. The faunal remains sit awkwardly with evidence of human occupation and so further work has been carried out on the excavated material in recent years to try to clarify the evidence (Lawson & Bonsall 1986; Murray et al 1993). The results were suggest that the fauanl remains are not contemporary with the human use of the caves but the fame of the site lives on.

Between the use of the bone caves and the more recent historic periods very little is known about settlement in the area.

There are no known mesolithic (c6-8,000 year-old) camp-sites in the vicinity nor, indeed, in any other places in north-west Scotland other than that on Rhum and those deposits associated with Smoo Cave. However, the shores of Loch Assynt could have provided ideal camping grounds, with fish to be caught in the lochs and rivers and red deer to hunt in the area.

But with the coming of the first farmers there is recorded evidence a-plenty. Around the east end of Loch Assynt and between Loch Awe and Elphin there are numerous chambered cairns which generally date to the period 6-4,000 years ago. Indeed, before the widening of the A837 in the 1960s there was a neolithic chambered cairn within the NNR at Stronchrubie. These cairns were the burial places of the neolithic peoples who introduced crops and domesticated animals to the area. It was these people that felled trees to build their homes and create clearings for fields. They made fired-clay vessels and continued to use stone and flint tools for hunting and gathering the natural foodstuffs of the north. However, apart from the burial cairn that once stood at Stronchrubie, the only piece of evidence for this period actually from the NNR seems to be the finding of a stone axehead by the river beyond the caves.

The subsequent periods - the Bronze Age and Iron Age - are equally poorly represented in the recorded remains of the area. One might have expected a beaker burial cist, standing stone, some round houses or even some field systems, to have survived and be known about.

Perhaps the apparent lack of extant remains is a reflection of the intensity of use of the landscape throughout the subsequent period, from 2,000BC to the present day. An area which has quite restricted patches of fertile ground would be used time and time again. Prehistoric and historic homes and fields would be cleared to enable new houses and field boundaries to be built. Only particularly large burial mounds of stones and boulders might survive - either because of the difficulty of shifting them or the fact that superstition persisted over the burial of the dead at these sites.

Knowledge of the early christian and medieval settlement of the Inchnadamph area is equally sparse. Recently an early carved cross in stone was discovered by RCAHMS staff in the graveyard at Inchnadamph but otherwise the ruins that remain are probably of the late-medieval and post-medieval periods - Ardvreck Castle, Calda House and the abandoned settlements at Inchnadamph, Stronchrubie and Lyne (originally known as Loyne) and their summer shieling sites. Subsequently the lands were cleared and the sheep introduced. Today the lands are emptier still, with the sheep all but gone and the land left bleak and quiet for the deer stalking.

The methodology of the archaeological survey

The area surveyed divides conveniently into 5 distinct areas:

- a) the Allt nan Uamh glen, with its sheep fank and associated enclosure, possible mill site, shielings and the "Bone Caves";
- b) the southern part of the west facing slopes overlooking the A837, with the 19th century farm buildings and historic farm boundaries;
- c) the high ground that stretches from Beinn nan Cnaimhseag to Loch Mhaolach-coire and beyond;
- d) Gleann Dubh, with its numerous 19th century buildings, both in use and deserted, the historic field systems, shielings and high-ground fields;
- e) the possible prehistoric sites below the cliffs of Blar nam Fiadhag.

Before the fieldwork took place, a search of Highland Regional Council's Archaeological Sites & Monuments Record [SMR] was undertaken for information on known sites and finds from the area (this record is available for public scrutiny at Clachnaharry Old School by appointment, tel: 0463.711176). Reference was also made to the last 10 years of editions of "Discovery & Excavation in Scotland" (available from the Council for Scottish Archaeology tel:031.225.7534 ext 311), as well as to the National Monuments Record of the RCAHMS in Edinburgh for aerial photographic coverage of the area (tel:031.662.1456). First edition Ordnance Survey maps, held on microfilm in Inverness Library (tel:0463.236463), also proved useful for the mid-late 19th century abandoned farm buildings and field patterns.

Having gathered this information together the out-of-doors work began. The survey was undertaken by two people in the spring of 1994, well in advance of the bracken growth. The northern side of the Allt nan Uamh was covered in detail, followed by a general sweep of the moorland to the north towards Loch Mhaolach-coire. The south side of Gleann Dubh and the Traligill glen were then covered in detail as far as the Allt nan Glaic Moire. This was followed by a detailed survey of the low ground in front of the cliffs below Blar nam Fiadhag and then southwards across the slopes above Stronchrubie.

Both the existing and the new sites were identified, described and located on maps and in a site notebook. Some 35mm transparencies were also taken. The information was then transferred into this report for the use of SNH staff in preparing information for visitors to Inchnadamph NNR.

The results of the archaeological survey

The newly recorded features are marked with an * in the following pages.

a) Allt nan Uamh glen

The bone caves

At the eastern end of the survey area are the bone caves, so named late last century when excavations recovered bones from a varied Arctic fauna, now extinct in Scotland. Since then there has been another excavation at the caves and further research on the material discovered there and deposited at the National Museum of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh. Interpretations of the evidence have changed during this time.

The eastern cave [Bone Cave] was first excavated in 1889, by the famous geologists Peach and Horne. They recognised a mixed layer of animal bones and antler, some of which appeared to have been split and/or burnt. The remains of fires were also noted. Nevertheless, Peach and Horne were careful in their assessment of these finds, emphasising that there was no conclusive proof that the faunal remains and evidence of human use of them and/or the cave were contemporary. Indeed, they suggested that the animal bones and antler had been washed into the cave during the Late Glacial period. Thus they proposed that the accumulated faunal deposits were the result of natural rather than human agencies, but that some were later used by people during their sojourns in the cave.

However, almost 40 years later, the potential for a different interpretation of the use of the caves was recognised by Callander, Cree and Ritchie. In 1926 and 1927 they worked at all three caves, re-examining the Bone Cave, excavating the deposits in what came to be known as Reindeer Cave and the western cave. The variety of the faunal remains was confirmed - lynx, brown bear, arctic fox and wolf, as well as huge number of reindeer antlers. In Reindeer Cave a human skeleton and a "ceremonially buried" human skull were also discovered.

The excavators argued that such large quantities of reindeer antler could not have entered the caves naturally. They proposed that here was evidence for Upper Palaeolithic human use of the area; that the reindeer antlers were brought into the caves by hunter gatherers during one of the slightly warmer periods during the last glacial period of the Ice Age (before 13,000 years before present). They also proposed that there was later use of the cave (before the mesolithic period of c6,000-8,000 years ago), based on the human skeletal material and possible broken bone pin, broken bone awl and broken antler spear-point.

However, their interpretation of the evidence was not met with whole-hearted support from academia. Gordon Childe and others questioned the excavators belief that some of the faunal material and human remains were contemporary. They reiterated the caution expressed by Peach and Horne, that the material was from a mixed deposit and could not be assigned to specific periods in time. Was this sour grapes - the earliest evidence for human use of the environment in Scotland being found by geologists rather than archaeologists or palaeontologists? Or was this circumspection the result of sound, academic deductions from deposits which included no definitive cultural remains?

More recently the unpublished written records and faunal remains have been re-assessed by two separate research teams. During the early 1980's Lawson and Bonsall re-examined the accounts of Callander, Cree and Ritchie. Two bulk samples of reindeer antler and three single fragments were submitted for C14 assay, a technique unavailable to the earlier excavators. The results were intriguing; ranging from >c26,000 to >c18,000 years old for the antler, and >c8,000 years old for a bone, from the inner Reindeer Cave, to >c10,000 years old for the antler from the outer Reindeer Cave. Lawson and Bonsall suggested that this latter date provided the proof that the deposits were associated with the Loch Lomond Stadial of the late glacial period, as suggested by Callander, Cree and Ritchie, and that the reindeer antler had indeed been brought to the cave by people rather than natural agencies.

Since then the reindeer antler have been re-examined for cut and scratch marks, and single pieces have been submitted for C14 assays. The results of this work refutes the interpretations of Lawson & Bonsall and Callander, Cree & Ritchie and supports the suggestions made by Peach & Horne over a century ago. No specific evidence for human use of the antler was noted and the marks were interpreted as damage during movement of the antler by natural agencies. The dates from the single pieces of antler from the shaft and outer part of Reindeer Cave all fall between >c22,000 and >c44,000 years ago, with three distinct periods being identified. Murray et al therefore argue that the precise mechanism for the introduction of the antler fragments to the caves remains uncertain, but that human agencies did not play a part. They propose that the antler came from a nearby reindeer calving ground - the antler all being from females or young males - that was used during three specific periods of the Ice Age

The human use of caves is known throughout Scotland, from the mesolithic period, (the rock shelters by Oban, Argyll) to the Iron Age (the caves at Covesea, Moray), and more recently by tinkers (the cave by Rosemarkie, Easter Ross). The lack of cultural remains from the Creag nan Uamh caves - worked flints, potsherds or bronze items - means that it is impossible to accurately date their human use unless the

skeletal material is sent for C14 assay. Nevertheless, the research carried out most recently provides the knowledge that, whilst people certainly used the caves in the past, there is no evidence that that use was prior to the mesolithic period of c6-8,000 years ago.

The shielings

Down by the river, on its northern side, below the caves and spreading west almost to the point where the footpath crosses the river to get up to the caves, is an extended area of shielings. These are the remains of very small, sub-rectangular structures, built of turf, that were re-made and used by the women, young men and children each spring and summer before the people were cleared from the land in the 19th century.

The tradition of transhumance was well-established amongst the clans of northern Scotland in post-medieval and medieval times, and may have had its origins in the prehistoric period. The cattle and goats or sheep were taken away from their winter grazings and byres from May to August, to take advantage of the fresh grazings on the hillsides. Such a movement of livestock also meant that there was less likelihood of crops being damaged, thus ensuring feed for the winter months [see Grant 1961 and Fenton 1987].

The flat area of ground by the banks of the Allt nan Uamh would have been ideal for such summer grazings - a plentiful supply of new grass and unusual herbs for the stock, water for everyone and easily renewable shelters. Each structure was only c1.5m across and at most 3m long and c1m high - but sufficient for sleeping in and keeping dry. However, all that can be seen today is the very slight outline of the plan of the turf building c0.05m - 0.1m above the general surface of the ground. Presumably the people who lived here every summer came from Stronchrubie, but this has not been verified. Home's survey of Assynt details the pattern of shieling use in the district and it would prove a useful source for information on the Inchnadamph area and its post-medieval settlement pattern.

An isolated field *

Down-stream from the shielings, on quite a steep part of the N hillside, is an area c115m square that was once enclosed on three sides by a stone dyke, whilst the other side was marked by the river. This dyke is now largely turf covered and only c0.4m high and c0.75-1m wide. Within this enclosure, down by the river are certain piles of stones that could possibly be the remains of structures associated with the use of this isolated field. However, the structures are so unclear that this can only be a tentative identification. Indeed, the piles of stones may reflect an attempt to control flooding of the river rather than anything else.

A river-side structure

Further downstream the river flows through an area apparently devoid of structures of any sort, until the broader slopes of the west facing main glen are reached. Here there is a range of enclosures and ruined buildings. Down by the river, on its southern bank opposite the fishfarm tanks, are the ruins of a rectangular building set against the steep slope of the rejuvenated river course. It is noted in the SMR that this structure could have been a watermill, but it is not at all clear how water would have been channelled beside or through the structure. A lade should have survived but a thorough search of the area was not productive. Perhaps the building merely took advantage of a sheltered spot by the river. The structure should certainly not be equated with the small roofless building that was noted on Home's Assynt survey of 1774-5. The remains are too upstanding to be from this period.

The sheep fank and associated field

On the opposite bank, and enclosing a sloping area of ground, is a ruinous enclosure dyke, presumably already in existence and more substantial when the sheep fank was built at its NW corner in the 19th century. The dyke defines three sides of a subrectangular area, the other side being defined, once again, by the river.

The fank itself is still easily recognisable, dating from the period when the lands had presumably been cleared for the extensive sheep farms so fashionable in the early-mid 19th centuries. There are 3 rectangular areas adjoining a square one and the sheep creeps into two of the rectangular pens have survived. A slight track can be traced leading northwards away from the entrance-way into the fank.

Terracing and an earlier enclosure on the higher ground *
Higher up on the hillside above the fank are the possible remains of small "terraces", some c6m wide and up to 20m long. Here there appear to be narrow shelves of stone-free ground on the slope, surrounded by rickles and areas of stones, perhaps artificially created but not certainly so. If the areas were cleared by those using the land, they may have been cleared of stone to improve the grasses that grew on the slope rather than for growing crops, for the hill slope seems too steep and exposed to support sown crops of any kind.

Above these terraces, as the hillside flattens out on to the higher tops, is an enclosure that is certainly older than the fank and possibly older than any of the other archaeological/ historic features so far mentioned downstream of the caves. Today the enclosure is defined by an irregular, winding line of boulders within the heather and grass. The area enclosed measures some 70m by 60m.

b) East of the A837

The old track and associated fields *

Northwards, towards Stronchrubie, this distinction between modern constructs associated with sheep farming - in the form of well-maintained enclosure walls, the farmhouse and lodge - and the older, presumably pre-1880's, farming divisions, can still be identified. The track already noted running northwards from the fank takes a route alongside a couple of old enclosure dykes, now grass-covered and only standing c0.3m high at most. But the track is hard to find once the "newer" 2m high drystone dykes are encountered - hence the belief that the former is older than the latter.

Structures and fields on the higher ground *

Equally, the distinction between the ruined dykes on the lower slopes and those higher up also continues. High above the 19th/20th century N-S field wall, and some 200m to the E of it, is another on a roughly similar alignment. This dyke is now grass and heather covered but can be traced as a line of boulders or a slight bank c1m wide and 0.2m high running for c270m along the slope, as far as one of the main burns SE of Stronchrubie. At this N end of the dyke an enclosure had been created - two sides being marked by a dyke of similar proportions to that already described, which forms the third, E, side of the enclosure. The other side is defined by the burn. Within this enclosure are two structures. One, by the burn, is the remains of a house-and-byre/shelter measuring some 10m by 4m. The other is a subrectangular structure, today defined by boulders, which measures c3m by 6m. Whether the two structures were contemporary or not is unclear, but the rounded corners of the latter imply that it could be older than the former, although the proximity to water would have been a primary consideration in siting a dwelling. Equally, the differences could be more to do with function rather than date.

Further structures and fields *

Moving northwards, down the hillslope towards the 19th/20th century head dyke, another structure with rounded corners was recorded, more oval than the last and this time set on a natural terrace in the slope rather than within an enclosure. The structure measures c3m by 9m within walls defined by boulders that protrude through the grassy sward. About 10m to the south of the structure are 2 depressions, each c1.2m in diameter and 0.5m deep. In other contexts these have been variously described as tatty-stores or charcoal-burning pits.

Walking up the slope again, around the open bowl of land immediately east of Stronchrubie, there are a variety of structures beneath the steepest part of the hillside. At one spot there is a small circular feature, c2m in diameter,

defined by a ring of boulders with a gap in the W arc.
Could this be a hide, similar to a grouse butt?

Further N, at the mid-height of the hillside, there is a small number of enclosures defined by low, grass-covered banks or boulders. None have any evidence of structures within them and so it is presumed that these fields were laid out for the farming settlement that existed lower down the hill before the 1860's. This community of at least 4, if not 8, buildings and associated arable fields was recorded in both Roy's military survey of the area and Home's work. But according to the SMR it had been deserted before 1878 although, if so, it seems to have been soon redeveloped, for 3 roofed buildings were recorded on the 1st edition OS map. Presumably the construction of the present farmhouse and its associated barns and fields led to the robbing and destruction of the earlier farm buildings.

Finally, if one climbs high above these enclosures, immediately below the cliff-face overlooking Stronchrubie, there are another two small, circular features similar to that recorded on the other side of the "bowl" and thought to be possible shooting/hunting hides.

c) Beinn nan Cnaimhseag to Loch Mhaolach-coire

The march dyke (?)

The high ground between the two limestone glens is an open, windswept and heather covered area, with no obvious physical remains of past land-use. Having crossed the higher ground immediately above the Allt nan Uamh the land falls into the catchment of the loch and there are occasional green flushes in an otherwise somewhat monotonous environment. The loch sides bore no evidence of associated structures, although within the NE arc the remains of a turf dyke, presumably a march boundary, was recorded running ENE, as shown on the 1:10,000 map for the area.

A quick review of the lie of the land, its height, aspect and the lack of obvious variety in plant species persuaded the team that a detailed search would not be of particular benefit.

d) Gleann Dubh

Small circular structures on the higher ground *

Beginning at the highest part of the glen to be surveyed, the first features to be encountered were just above the caves, beside the track that leads from Loch Mhaolach-coire to Inchnadamph. Here there are another two small circular drystone structures, c2m in diameter, that may well prove to be shooting butts or shelters, similar to those seen above Stronchrubie.

The shielings

Further on, between the rivers on a wide, flat area of heather and grass covered ground below the caves, is an even larger group of shielings than that already recorded in the Allt nan Uamh glen. Indeed, there are many more structures than suggested by the SMR. Most are also quite obvious, consisting of small structures defined by boulders and stones in subcircular and subrectangular plans. The impressive number of structures and their co-existence with a couple of putative grouse butts make this quite an interesting area to study.

The flat area of ground between the two tributaries of the Traligill would have been ideal for such summer grazings - as described previously (p4). Today the outline of the plan of the turf buildings survive c0.1-0.2m above the general surface of the ground as the "foundations" were of stone. Presumably the people who lived here every summer came from what is now known as Inchnadamph, but this has not been verified. As mentioned above, Home's survey of Assynt details the pattern of shieling use in the district and it would prove a useful source for information on the Inchnadamph area and its post-medieval settlement pattern.

A "divorced" shieling site *

West of this extensive area of shielings, and on the south side of the river just before the SNH enclosure, are two small structures showing as boulders in the heather, c2m by 3m forming subcircular plans. It is presumed that these, too, are shielings although it seems strange that they should be divorced from the main area of summer settlement.

An extensive field system *

Walking NW from this point along the southern side of the river Traligill, a number of drystone or turf dykes are crossed. They split the hillside into areas by running from the cliffs above to the river below. It may be that the turf dykes belong to a different period to the stone walls. This is certainly the case on the northern side of the river - where even today the stone dykes on the lower slopes are well maintained and cut across the earlier turf banks. But as they traverse the higher ground the turf banks change to lines of boulders, hence the problem over sequencing. This is particularly unclear on the southern hillside as there is no obvious place where the turf banks are crossed by the stone dykes, nor have the latter been maintained and straightened and they therefore "look" much older and more similar in alignment to the turf ones.

Immediately east of the Allt na Glaic Moire the hillside broadens and there are two distinct "flatter" areas that have been enclosed by stone/turf dykes. These use the natural features as extensions - stretches of cliff and the burn itself - and mark out two large grassy areas covered in

clearance cairns. The only trace of a structure is that in the SW corner of the lower enclosure just below the upper enclosure. Here there are the ruins of a small rectangular building c2.5m by 5m, but only surviving to c0.4m high.

The sheep fank

Above these enclosures, set almost invisibly against the rockface, is a "square" fank, its walls still standing to over 1.5m high. It is marked on the OS map, but is worthy of note for its intriguing situation and the quality of its construction.

The north bank of the river Traligill

Very few notes were made of the structures remaining on this side of the river, as it is outwith the NNR and the indicated area for rapid survey did not include it. However, the track down the Gleann Dubh passes a range of historic and archaeological features that should probably be looked at in more detail.

Glenbain apparently has an associated fank within the old plantation, as well as the extensive field dykes of 19th/20th century origin and the older ones of turf and stone.

Carrachan dubh is a small circular stoney mound - the remains of a neolithic chambered burial cairn.

Ruigh an t'Sagairl is the depopulated settlement at the confluence of the Traligill and the Allt Poll an Droighinn. According to the SMR this community was recorded by Home in the 1770's but was abandoned in the 19th century. The ruins of two of the buildings still stand quite high, suggesting that these may not in fact be those actually recorded by Home and, indeed may have been abandoned more recently than suggested.

Inchnadamph has a range of intriguing buildings, including the old manse and the lodge - now the hotel - as well as the old graveyard, mentioned in the introduction. All could be researched to provide further information on the association between the eastern-most settlement on Loch Assynt and the associated farm sites and shieling grounds up the Traligill.

e) Between the A837 and Blar nam Fiadhag

Travelling northwards from Stronchrubie, there is little flat ground between the road and the cliffs for there to be any archaeological or historical remains. However, the amphitheatre of ground created by the arc of cliffs below Blar nam Fiadhag, has a significant range of features, even if they are now quite ruinous.

The trackway and a kiln *

At the southern end of the area a turf bank running cW-E crosses the boggy flat ground, turning into a stone dyke as the land rises towards the base of the cliffs, where the dyke ceases. Some 70m in from the road a grass covered track passes through a gateway in the dyke - presumably a continuation of the track that was recorded S of Stronchrubie and "lost" amongst the more recent field boundaries. This track was traced to the outskirts of Inchnadamph, running through the area that is about to be described.

Further E of the gateway, on the N side of the dyke are the remains of a kiln. This stone structure is oval in plan - c6m by 5m - with a flue leading to a central chamber c1m in diameter, and still stands c2m high. It has been set into the slope so that the rear of the structure required little complex construction. No associated rectangular structures were found in the area.

A prehistoric burial cairn (?) *

Following the track round the amphitheatre of ground, it crosses a burn, alongside which is another stone and turf dyke, aligned cW-E. Some 30m further on another dyke is crossed. And it is beyond this that there is a possible Bronze Age burial cairn. It is situated on a slight mound in the generally rising ground towards the back of the amphitheatre. This stone cairn - the only such feature in the area - is c8m in diameter, defined by a kerb of boulders but only c1m high.

Possible prehistoric round houses and associated field clearance cairns *

To the NE of this feature are two other possible prehistoric features. An almost circular platform appears to have been created on one of the slight humps towards the rear of the amphitheatre area, measuring some 10m in diameter. Although there are no traces of a stone wall around the edge of the platform it does seem possible that this is a platform for a Bronze Age/Iron Age round-house, surrounded by an area where there are field dykes, numerous clearance cairns and the burial cairn mentioned above. The other possible round house site, in a similar situation is to the NNE, where there are in fact some boulders and stones associated with the platform.

A kiln and other more recent structures *

Walking back towards the road from this area, after crossing the old track, there is another ruined kiln, slightly more oval in shape than that recorded above, but still using the lie of the ground so that its back is set against the slight rising slope of the ground.

North of the amphitheatre, the area between the road and the cliff decreases once more. But there is a turf covered dyke that can be easily followed from the low ground to the high. In doing so, a further stone feature was recorded. A rectangular stone structure, c8m by 3m is set against the N side of the turf dyke, above the old track.

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