Kinbeachie Farm, Culbo kie, Black Isle

An Assessment of current archaeological discoveries and a Project Design for future work.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to summarise the archaeological discoveries found at Kinbeachie Farm since 1993, assess their archaeological significance and evaluate whether further work on the site is justified.

2. Farm Location and Management

2.1 The farm, as outlined on Fig 1, is sited on the north facing shore of the Black Isle on a ridge of sandstone rising to 117 metres OD from Culbockie and Findon to the west. The south side of the farm is bounded by the B 9163 which leads to Cromarty and was formerly the route to the former crossings over the Cromarty Firth at Alness Ferry , Ferryton and Balblair. A further crossing point lay to the north west of the farm across to Foulis. This route may well be an ancient one.

2.2 The farm is run and owned by Mr Andrew Fraser. It has been in his family for three generations and was purchased from its previous owners, the Department of Agriculture after the Second World War. It is run primarily as an arable unit, though *c*1/4 is under set aside and used as pasture for suckler cows. This pasture, currently a field at the north of the farm, is managed under a 5 year rotation, so that all fields are under either an annual or quinquennial ploughing cycle.

3. Archaeological context

3.1 Extensive prehistoric activity is attested in the area by the presence of the major complex of neolithic cairns at Woodhead and Brae on the rising ground to the south east of the farm. The density of cairns suggests this was a major area of activity in the neolithic.

3.2 In 1937 a cist was found at Findon to the east of containing a complete beaker and the base of a second [*Galbraith, 1937, p248-249*].

3.3 To the north of the farm at *c*NH 623 627 in forestry plantation are the remains of a roundhouse and clearance cairns. The site of the plantation was shown as uncultivated ground on the OS 1st edition survey of 1871 [*Ross-shire Sheet 89*]. A similar roundhouse settlement was recorded at Alnessferry in 1871, though little trace of it now survives.

3.4 Continuing activity into the Iron Age is shown by the surviving Dun sites at Findon [*NH 610 603*] and Culbockie [*NH 6035 5860*]. This is succeeded by medieval occupation demonstrated by Castle Craig [*NH 6320 6383*], Kinbeachie Castle [*NH 6344 6219*] and the possible medieval chapel site at Tobar a'Chuirn [*NH 6196 6296*].

3.5 It is not clear how far the area of Kinbeachie Farm was being occupied in these periods. Much of the Black Isle or *Ardmeanach* as it was then known was common or moorland ground. It was not colonised on a significant scale until the beginning of the 19th century when large scale enclosure took place.

3.6 The area of Kinbeachie was occupied by crofters evicted from Strathconon c1820 and 3 separate farm complexes can be seen on the 1871 OS Ist edition map, all at the south end of the farm.

4. Summary of recent archaeological discoveries

4.1 In January 1993 the construction of a new water pipe running parallel to the road revealed a deposit of fire-blackened stones. This was visited by Tony Woodham of Dingwall Museum and Bob Gourlay of HRC Archaeology Service and not seen as of major archaeological interest. Mr Fraser was advised to fill the feature in. Later delving by Mr Fraser exposed it a rock-cut pit filled with clean sand. Sherds of pottery were reportedly found under the stones, though these cannot now be distinguished from later finds from this field.
[*see Appendix 1*]

4.2 Mr Fraser investigated another group of stones with charcoal and discovered a sherd of pottery later identified as early neolithic by Trevor Cowie of the NMS.

4.3 Mr Fraser noted various charcoal spreads in his fields and in some cases ploughed deeper at these spots to expose more material. Various flint and pottery finds have been recovered by Mr Fraser.

4.4 J. Wordsworth as part of his role as Community Archaeologist in 1995, initiated a programme of field walking across these fields. This has continued into 1996 and 1997 with local volunteers and members of the Aberdeen University Extra-Mural Course in Archaeology. Various flint and pottery finds have continued to be found.

4.5 The 'cairn' of stones from which the early neolithic sherd of pottery was excavated by J. Wordsworth in September 1996. The feature was badly disturbed, but may have been a post hole. Similar features were located nearby.
[*see Appendix 1*]

4.6 Mr Fraser submits a C14 date in February 1996 from an isolated charcoal-rich feature at cNH 6265 6255. An uncalibrated radiocarbon date of 790± 50 BC was returned.
[*Beta Analytic -92880*]

4.7 Following the discovery of a sherd of beaker pottery by Mr Fraser, three test pits 3m by 2m were dug in November 1996 by J. Wordsworth, R. Hanley and G.Robbins. Most of the profile of a beaker pot was found in a partially disturbed pit because of the disturbance it was not possible to establish whether this was a funerary or domestic context. A second test pit exposed further possible posthole pits, one of which was sampled. It contained a retouched flint blade. The third contained no significant features.

4.8 Mr Fraser continues to observe and excavate charcoal spreads on his farm. Robin Hanley and J. Wordsworth have attempted to dissuade him from this without success. R. Hanley has plotted the location of some of the charcoal spreads as observed by Mr Fraser.
[*see Fig 2*].

4.9 Mr Fraser submitted a second date in October 1996 from another feature containing charcoal and pottery at NH 6269 6252. A calibrated date of 3230BC is returned.
[*Beta Analytic -date reported to R.Hanley by Mr Fraser, though paper confirmation is still with Mr Fraser.*]

5. Archaeological importance of the site

5.1 The farm clearly has a wide range of activity from the neolithic onwards. The farm is significant because of the range of finds, both ceramic and lithic, that can be identified as early prehistoric in date.

5.2 Dateable sites of this period are rare both nationally [*cf Ashmore1996 & Barclay 1997*] and locally. Apart from pits found at Raigmore no neolithic/ early bronze age settlement sites have been examined in this area.

5.3 The remains are significant in apparently representing domestic settlement in contrast to a ritual site of the early prehistoric period. The data, however, is not sufficient yet to confirm the nature of the settlement and it may be that the early bronze age material is from ritual contexts.

5.4 The truncated nature of these deposits should not reduce their value. It is only in the unusual preservation conditions of the dune sites of the Western Isles that stratified deposits of this period are found. It is unlikely that better preserved sites of this period will be discovered in this area.

5.5 Though truncated by ploughing, useful information may still be recovered. This has been demonstrated in the lowland zone by recent work at Wardend of Durris and Balfarg [*Barclay & Russell-White 1993 and Russell-White 1995*]. Even in the highland zone early prehistoric settlement material has generally been truncated [*cf Lairg*].

5.6 A single medieval C14 date suggests there may be traces of later deposits of interest.

6. Threat to the Archaeology

6.1 The most serious threat is the continuing excavation of the deposits by Mr Fraser, despite remonstrances by various archaeologists to stop his diggings.

6.2 The discoveries have occurred since Mr Fraser invested in a new plough some 6 years ago and this has resulted in greater destruction of the deposits. The extent of plough damage makes it unlikely that the deposits will survive much longer.

6.3 Current set-aside legislation which has allowed Mr Fraser to leave the field to the east out of cultivation for the last 5 years, means that it is not possible to isolate areas of the farm from future ploughing.

7. Mitigation

7.1 The remains as so far revealed do not justify Scheduled Monument protection, though Mr Fraser may be amenable to some form of protection scheme. This might involve putting down areas to permanent pasture as ploughing remains a major threat. As Mr Fraser is predominantly a cereal grower this would involve a major loss of income which would require compensation..

7.2 Alternatively the remains may justify excavation, though the extent and nature of the remains needs to be established.

8. PROJECT DESIGN FOR FUTURE WORK

8.1 Purpose

To examine the surviving remains to establish whether further excavation is justified or if the remains merit special protection.
In particular to see if significant, interpretable deposits survive despite the effects of modern ploughing.

8.2 Method

8.2.1 Geophysics

The nature of the ground with irregular quantities of angular sandstone fragments over a variable thin subsoil is not thought to be a suitable medium for soil resitivity. A magnetometer survey might identify areas of burning, though these may already have been seen in the charcoal spreads spotted by Mr Fraser during ploughing. However it may be worth sampling one field to compare the results with the surface observations

8.2.2 Hand dug test pits

It is not considered cost-effective to hand dig large areas. It might be fruitful to dry sieve selected sites such as areas where pottery finds have already been made to establish the extent to which finds are currently distributed through the topsoil.

8.2.3 Machine excavation

Machine stripping of ploughsoil in selected areas is thought to be the most cost effective method of examining the site. Areas 6m by 10m are suggested. This width would allow a machine with a 3 metre ditching bucket to cast spoil on either side of the stripped areas and also allow a reasonable area to be examined.

The subsoil surface would then be hand cleaned and a limited number of features would be half sectioned to reveal their extent and the nature of their deposits. Particular emphasis would be put on the spatial distribution of structural features and the extent that diagnostic finds material could be recovered from secure contexts.

8.2.4 Sampling strategy

The aim of the excavation would be to examine areas on top of the hill and down slope in different fields to assess the extent of the archaeological remains. The points of known charcoal spreads would be targetted but the trenches would also extend into areas where charcoal has not been noted. This would establish whether remains are masked by deeper soils or just do not survive outwith these areas.

8.2.5 Team

It is anticipated that a team of four excavators would be sufficient. The excavation would be organised for three weeks with local volunteers, particularly students of the Aberdeen Extra-mural course, being encouraged to participate [*as recommended in Barclay, 1997, p15*].

8.2.6 Soil sampling

Bulk Soil samples would be taken of all features examined. Processing procedures would be established on completion of the excavation but it is anticipated processing would be restricted to producing C14 samples and an analysis of the environmental material surviving within the deposits..

8.3 Post-excavation

As this work is intended as an evaluation, post-excavation analysis would be restricted to processing key samples, initial finds analysis and the production of an analytic report assessing the archaeological value of the survey areas. Apart from a Data Structure Report, publication is not anticipated at this stage. C14 dating would be the major cost at this stage, as a range of dates would be required.

8.4 Costs

Costings at this stage are provisional as the nature of the sampling strategy would have to be confirmed.

8.4.1 Geophysics, for a sample survey, is estimated at £600.

8.4.2 Excavation costs based on a team of 4 excavators for 15 working days, with 2 days machine hire are estimated at £6,000

8.4.3 Post-excavation costs may include 10 C14 dates @ £410 per sample, finds analysis, soil processing and report writing. A figure of £6,000 is indicated

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10th March 1997

Acknowledgements

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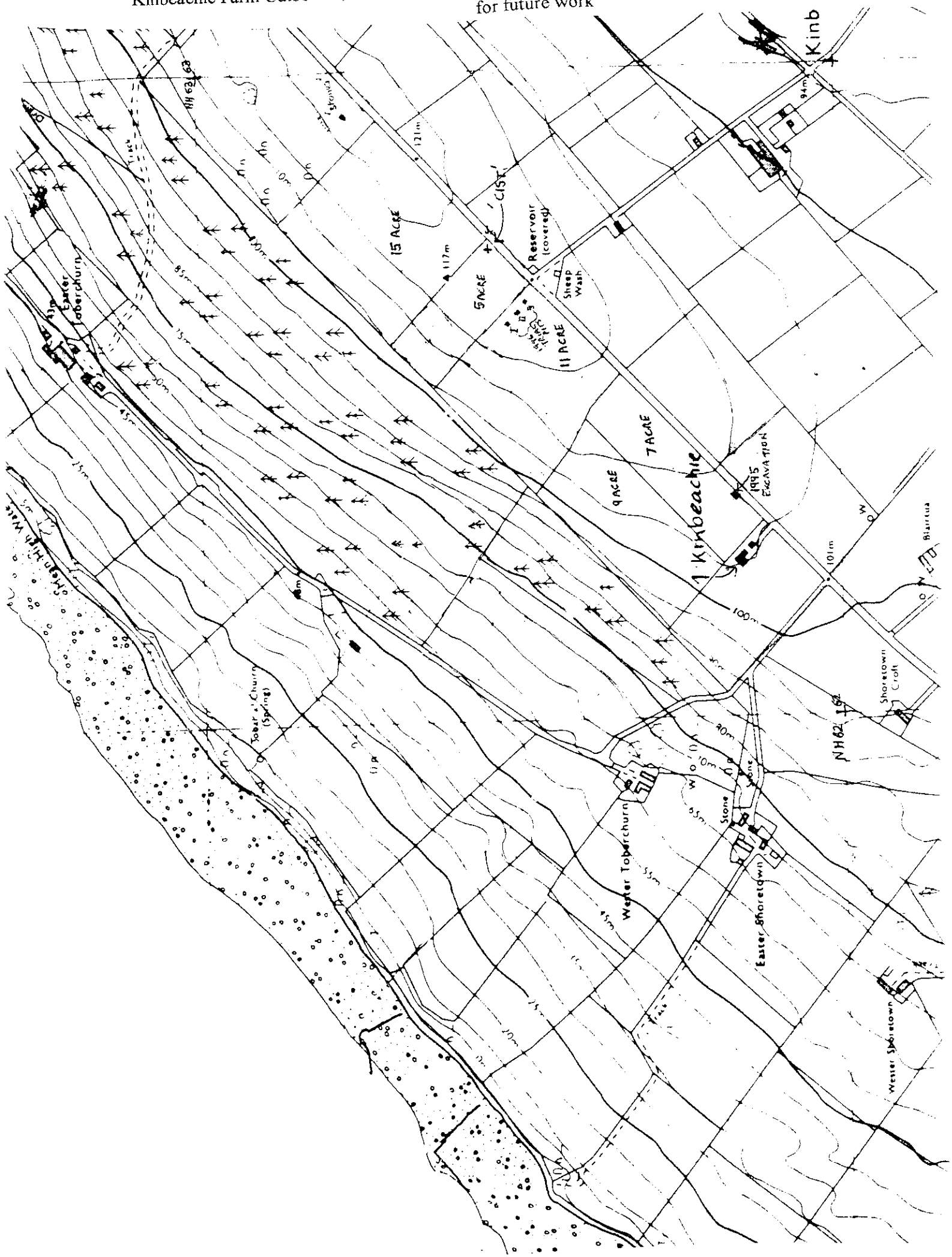

Fig 1. Extent of I Kinbeachie Farm and location of significant features

Recent Archaeological Discoveries at 1 Kinbeachie Farm, Culbokie

Summary

A number of Neolithic and possibly Bronze Age pottery and flint finds have led to the discovery of an early farming settlement on the south side of the Cromarty Firth. This report is a record of the discoveries to date.

Background

The farm at I Kinbeachie, also known as Shoretown crofts, is formed from a group of three crofts that were established here in the mid 19th century. Earlier maps suggest that this area was not under cultivation before the crofts were created though the former castle of *Kinbeachie* at NH634 622 metres to the south and the well site *Tobar a'Chuirn* at NH 6190 6295 show there was medieval settlement in this area. It is probable that the land had been utilised both for grazing and as a source of turf before the 19th century crofts were constructed.

The farm is situated on a ridge of sandstone rising to 120 mOD and lies on the north side of the road from Conon to Cromarty. This is likely to be a route of some antiquity.

Prehistoric remains in the neighbourhood include chambered cairns and the remains of hut circles at Woodhead and Brae 2 kilometres to the south and at Alness Ferry 4 kilometres to the east. To the west are the later duns of Culbokie and Findon as well as the find site of a beaker cist and a possible henge monument.

The farm is presently owned by Mr Andrew Fraser whose family have farmed here since the end of the last war when the land was purchased from the Department of Agriculture. Previous finds from the farm have included a trough quern uncovered during the laying of a water pipe in the '50s and a hoard possibly 10 large fish-shaped flint points discovered in the late 40s at cNH 6225 6225, only one of these now survives [currently stored in Inverness Museum - *addendum Alan Saville believes this cannot have been found here as it is not paralleled elsewhere in this country.*)

The 'cist'

During the the mechanical excavation of a pipe trench for a new public water supply in January 1993 a heap of fire-blackened stones was uncovered at NH 6273 6253. Mr Fraser informed Dr Tony Woodham of Dingwall Museum of this discovery and Dr Woodham visited the site and interpreted it as the remains of a burnt mound or cooking pit. (Fig. 2 was taken by Dr Woodham at the time and Fig 3 on a subsequent visit to the site.)

Mr Fraser re-examined the site revealing a basin cut into the rock which he interpreted as a cist. The photographs shown in Figs. 4-6 are of reconstructions made by Mr Fraser after the whole feature had been excavated. He is positive that the stones lay in a discrete pile restricted to the area of the basin. He also found sherds of a red fabric pottery sealed by the stones. The basin which measured 50"[*1.27m*] by 37"[*0.94m*] and was 1.5'[*0.43m*] deep (Dr Woodham's measurements) was filled with a clean sand with no obvious variations in its fill.

As Dr Woodham's photographs show it had already worked as a sump for the modern waterpipe trench and it may have acted similarly under the ploughsoil, thus disturbing any deposits originally in this basin. The reconstruction by Mr Fraser must be partly conjectural as Fig 3 shows the feature partially destroyed before MR Fraser opened up the site.

The basin has been described as neolithic on the evidence of a sherd of pottery which is now known to have been found elsewhere on the farm (see below). It is therefore easier to accept it now as the remains of a bronze age cist. It is unlikely to be the remains of a burnt mound because the stones lying over the stone basin appear to have been discretely placed and they do not show obvious signs of fire-cracking. The charcoal-rich coating around the stones could be a deposit collected in connection with the burial rite, though the lack of cremated bone does make this less conclusive. The lip on the edge of the basin suggests it may once have had a lid. If this is correct then the stone deposit must be seen as secondary.

The 'cairn'

Also in January 1993 Mr Fraser disturbed a group of stones during ploughing of a headland. The edge of this field had previously contained a low bank which had recently been removed by the road department to prevent snow lying on road. It is likely that the area of this headland was partly masked by the bank. On digging into this mound of stones Mr Fraser discoverd a sherd of pottery which has been identified by Dr Trevor Cowie, NMS as being early neolithic in date.

Because this feature had been partly destroyed and because of a continuing controversy over the date of the stone basin, the writer resolved to excavate this feature to interpret its structure and hopefully to locate C14 material to help date it more accurately.

Accordingly 2 days were spent excavating this feature and its surrounding area.

Excavation showed that it was a stone-packed pit 0.3m deep. Only half or less of the pit survived making its original dimensions uncertain, though it appeared to be more rectangular than rounded and possibly 0.6m by 0.4m. The fill was primarily of rounded stones though it included some charcoal flecking, particularly of carbonised hazlenut shells at the base. The pit was badly disturbed by the previous diggings, so that its interpretation is uncertain. The finding of three other pits, one of them (Feature 3) also being stone-packed with charcoal-rich soil suggests these may be structural features.

The recent ploughing showed up as distinct banding of subsoil and loam, partly evident on the east section. This ploughing had removed some 0.2m of subsoil/deposit and would have largely removed the original feature if ploughing had been extended further south.

General discoveries

Fieldwalking by the author, Mr Fraser and the Rosemarkie Field group has recovered a numbr of flint pieces as well as several sherds of prehistoric pottery. The finds include pottery, a leaf-shaped arrowhead and a variety of flint types and colour [*see Appendix 2*]. These finds

are especially concentrated at cNH 6265 6247 to the south east of a concentration of distinct charcoal spreads c1m in diameter. These spreads are probably the remains of other buried features that have been disturbed by ploughing.

Further fieldwalking was carried out in December 1995 and Mr Fraser has continued to excavate a number of the charcoal spreads despite attempts by the author and Dr Hanley of Inverness Museum to persuade him otherwise! This is now proving to be a severe threat to the remaining archaeology in the field.

Recommendations

The surviving deposits suggest that this area was occupied in early prehistoric times, probably for both settlement and burial. The dating of this is presently one sherd of pottery from an insecure context and surface finds of flint and pottery. A C14 date from the feature within which the decorated sherd was found should provide a more secure date.

The continued ploughing and depradations of Mr Fraser mean that the surviving remains may soon disappear. It is suggested that a resitivity survey be carried out on these fields, especially the 5 and 11 acre fields as soon as possible. This should be followed by a limited assessment excavation to establish the extent of archaeological survival in selected areas.

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31st January 1996

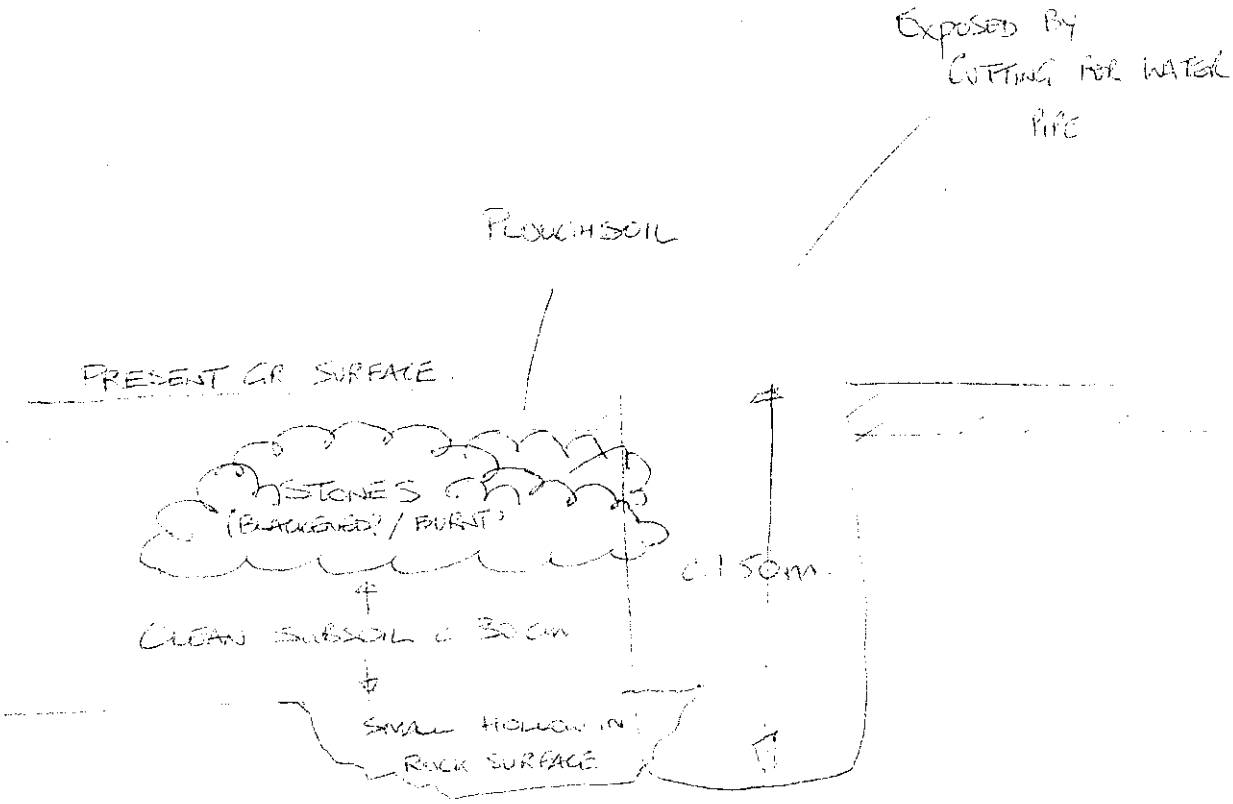

Fig 2. **Sketch of 'cist' drawn by R. Gourlay**

Fig 3. **Photo of 'Cist' as later exposed by Mr Fraser**

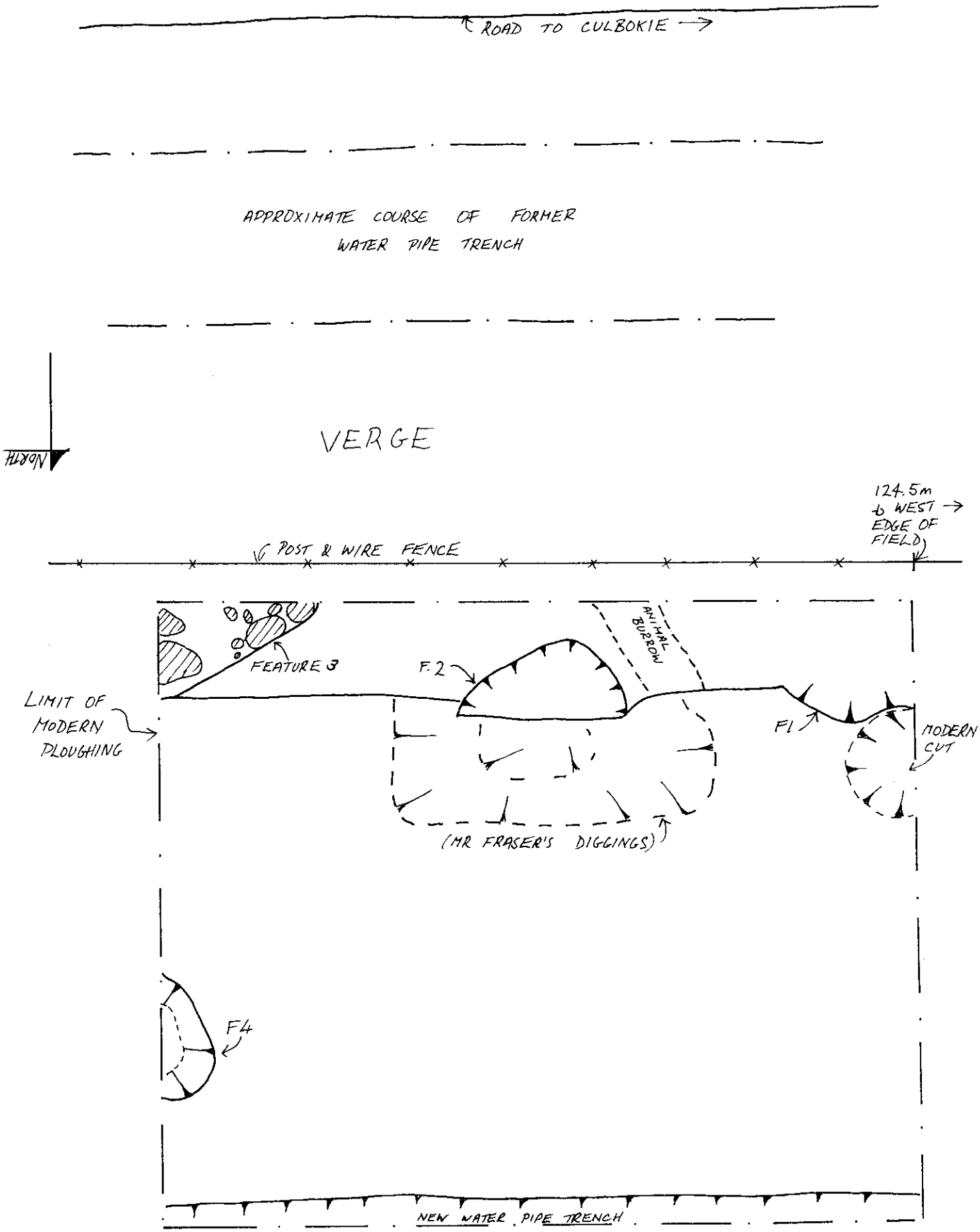

Fig 6 Plan of Excavation at 1 Kinbeachie Farm in 1996 Scale 1:20

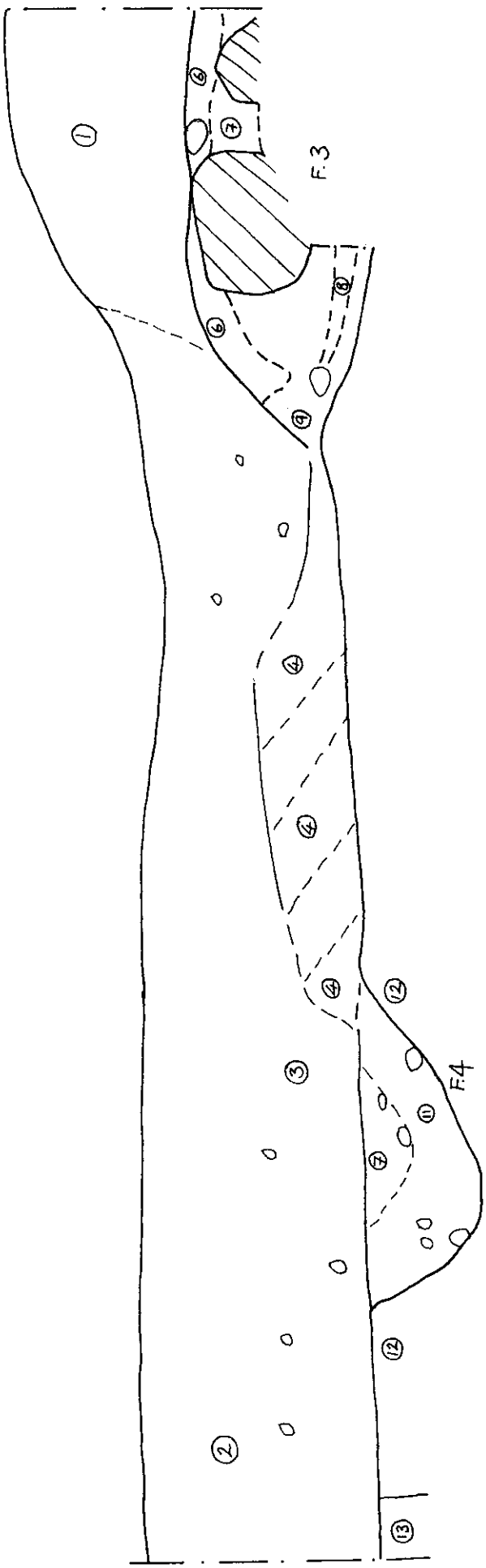

Fig 7 West facing section of excavation at 1 Kinbeachie Farm in 1995

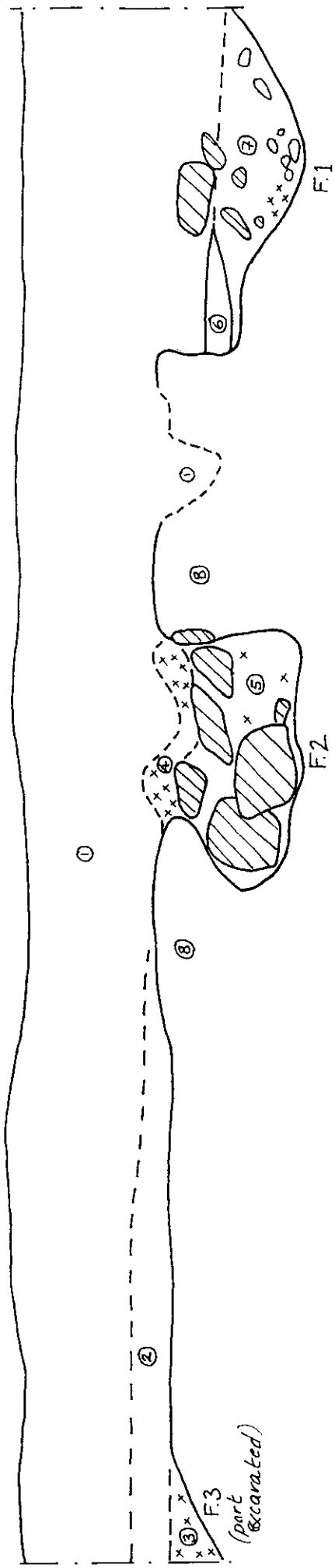

Fig 8. North facing section of excavation at I Kinbeachie Farm in 1995

I Kinbeachie Farm Excavation 12th - 13th September 1995

Context Descriptions

Feature l

Measures 0.6m deep and only 100mm exposed

Fills (6) & (7)

Feature 2

0.3m deep below 0.27m of topsoil

0.4m wide by 0.35m+ long -partly destroyed before excavation

Stones of fill capped by charcoal-rich deposit

Feature 3

0.6m exposed by 300mm + deep

Filled with large stones in a charcoal-rich loamy silt

Feature 4

0.5m exposed by 200mm deep

Some charcoal flecking in predominantly sandy fill

North Facing Section

(1) *Dark brown loam - topsoil*
(2) *Orange brown slightly loamy clay silt - interface between topsoil & B horizon*
(3) *Dark grey silt with some charcoal flecking*
(4) *Charcoal-rich silt lying directly above the stones of (5)*
(5) *Light grey slightly loamy silt with occ. charcoal flecks associated with large stones as drawn*
(6) *Pale yellow sandy silt lens*
(7) *Grey clayish sand with c20% small gravel. 1 small sherd of pottery & occ. flecks of charcoal*
(8) *Pale orange clayish sand fading to white as it reaches C horizon*

West Facing Section

(1) *Dark brown loam*
(2) *Dark brown loam with mottled patches of yellow clayish & small gravel*
(3) *Yellow sand & fine gravel*
(4) *Pale yellow/whitish sand see (12)*
(5) *Very mixed stones & loam with yellow clay*
(6) *Orange brown slightly loamy sand*
(7) *Dark grey loamy sand with charcoal flecks*
(8) *Pale white sand with fine gravel*
(9) *Orange slightly loamy sand similar to (6) but less loamy*
(10) *Pale grey sand with c20% small pebbles*
(11) *Orange sand with occ. small pebbles*
(12) *White to v. pale orange sand with occ. gravel and small stones - B to C glacial till*
(13) *Water pipe trench fill - modern*

SUMMARY OF FINDS TO DATE FROM KINBEACHIE, BLACK ISLE

Inverness Museum & Art Gallery Entry numbers:
0799; 0794; 0849; 1051; 1130; 1091; 1124; 1131; 1133; 1134

7 Acre Field
Finds include a ?later Neolithic rim sherd of T-profile with impressed ?bone decoration and a horizontal row of perforations (from "cairn")

11 Acre Field
Finds include:
a. x71 sherds of coarse pottery of probable early prehistoric date including base; body; rim sherd decorated with ?bone impressions and perforations (?later Neolithic type similar to 7 Acre example)
b. x53 sherds from ?single beaker (prob. N3) associated with disturbed deposit [excavated during Kinbeachie '96]
c. worked lithic material including flint scraper, retouched piece & debitage; chert & pitchstone debitage

15 Acre Field
Finds include flint scraper; leaf-shaped arrowhead; flint debitage

5 Acre Field
Finds include:
a. x21 sherds of coarse pottery of probable early prehistoric date including 19 sherds associated with stone spread/burnt deposit (C14 date- 3300-3235 cal BC)
b. retouched flint pieces & debitage

COMMENTS
The occurrence of Neolithic and other probable early prehistoric pottery concentrated across 11 & 5 Acre Fields is of particular significance within an area which has produced very little well-provenanced material of such date. Further, the association of the probable Neolithic impressed forms with ?N3 beaker indicates the possibility of site continuity from the Neolithic-EBA. The occurrence of what appears to be a single (fragmentary) beaker pot with finds of finer lithic pieces suggests the presence of at least one EBA burial, possibly on a site of Neolithic activity. A number of the probable earlier prehistoric sherds exhibit burnt surfaces, possibly suggesting the presence of cremated deposits. A fabric comparison programme is currently underway on the pottery finds.

R.G. Hanley
Inverness Museum & Art Gallery 10.3.97