

**Land 150m SE of Achingale Bridge, Watten,  
Caithness**

**Erection of new house, installation of septic tank and  
soakaway, upgrade existing vehicular access**

**Ref no. 08/00068/REMCA**

**Archaeological Watching Brief**



**Catherine Dagg**

**For**

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## **Land 150m SE of Achingale Bridge, Watten, Caithness**

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### **Archaeological Watching Brief**

<i>Site summary</i>	Rural site
<i>Site location (NGR)</i>	ND 24412 54189
<i>Total area of construction</i>	House, septic tank and soakaway, upgrade vehicular access
<i>Work required</i>	Archaeological Watching Brief
<i>Area of monitoring required</i>	All ground breaking work

### **1.0 Background**

The development consists of: erection of one new-build house with all associated works at Achingale Bridge, Watten, Caithness. The development is located within an improved field to the south of the A882 Thurso-Wick road, east of the Wick River. It is 300m from Watten village centre and 200m from Greystones Farm

A brief for archaeological work has been prepared by the Archaeology Unit of the Department of Planning and Development at Highland Council, as a condition of the granting of planning consent for the present development.

The archaeological work is considered necessary as there is a significant risk that buried archaeological or historical remains could be affected. Although the full nature and extent of these features is not known, they are expected to be of historic interest and of value to future research, and as such they should not be destroyed without being recorded:

This area is considered to be archaeologically-sensitive: it lies within an area where there are significant recorded archaeological sites. The wider area around Loch Watten is well known for its rich prehistoric landscapes of settlement, burial and ritual remains.

An archaeological watching brief enables any such discoveries to be recorded quickly and efficiently as they appear with minimum delay or disruption to the development.

## 2.0 Method

The evaluation consists of the following elements:

**Desk-based assessment:** A check of all relevant archaeological and historical databases, records, historic maps and aerial photographs will be undertaken, to build up a picture of previous settlement, land use and historical events which will allow a more accurate prediction of areas of particular archaeological or historical sensitivity before ground breaking work commences. This allows an assessment of the potential for archaeological remains to survive and minimises the risk of finds or features of interest being discovered and damaged during site works.

**Watching Brief.** All ground-breaking work is monitored by the archaeological contractor. After topsoil stripping, any archaeological features revealed are investigated and recorded. The results at this stage inform the advisability of continued monitoring during excavation of foundation trenches.

## 3.0 Archaeological Background

The following sites are recorded in the vicinity of the development on the Highland Sites and Monuments Record (SMR):

**Greystones, cist, cairn** at ND 2450 5430

SMR no. ND25SW0016

A small ‘tumulus’ in the present garden of Greystones Farmhouse, located and reported in 1873 (PSAS)

**Greystones, cairn/hut circle** at ND 2450 5430

SMR no. ND25SW0017

1. A number of small circular ‘tumuli’ on both sides of the road, levelled around 1841 of which now no trace
2. Hut circles at ND 2334 5780 and 2331 5777 (RJ Mercer)

**Church site** (placename evidence) at ND 2450 5430

SMR no. ND25SW0018

‘There was a church of St Talore or Tarloc near to the village of Watten’ (1914)

‘To the south of Greystones is Knoctarloc’ (1909)

**Greystones, standing stone** at ND 2444 5436

SMR no. ND25SW0011

One stone extant with records of 2 removed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, all within a few feet of each other

**Greystones, cist with burial** at ND 2449 5433

SMR no. ND25SW0012

Found in 1834, recorded in OS Name Book 1871. Also broch and hut circle recorded by RJ Mercer

**Achingale Bridge** Listed ‘B’ at ND 24348 54309

SMR no. ND25SW0032

Telford arched bridge constructed 1812-17

**Achingale Bridge, building** at ND 2442 5418

SMR no. ND25SW0063

Now demolished, recorded as measuring 7.6m by 5m with an annexe at W. end, aligned E-W.

This building was a standing ruin at the time of the planning application for the present development but has subsequently been demolished after a photographic record.

With the exception of this last site, all the archaeological features are located adjacent to or north of the public road.

#### **4.0 Cartographic Evidence**

The 1877 1<sup>st</sup> edition Ordnance Survey map shows a roofed building in the middle of an improved field, aligned E-W with an annexe or porch attached centrally to the north. A path leads from the building west to the field edge and a well is marked just north of this path. The 1907 2<sup>nd</sup> edition OS map shows no change. The 1978 Pathfinder map shows the building as roofless.

#### **5.0 Site Description**

The house site is located on high, level ground, the south boundary of a field rising gently from the A882 Wick-Thurso road. To the west the ground falls away steeply to the Wick River, to the east it rises slightly and to the south two more fields continue at this level before the ground drops to the Strath Burn. The site therefore offers a clear vista to north, west and south (Photos 3, 5). The remaining standing stone of a possible former stone circle is visible from the site, in the field north of the road, and Greystones farm, the site of now removed cists and cairns, is also visible (Photo no. 4)

The field is recently ploughed and sown and appears featureless. A field access track runs along its east boundary. From the south end of this, a new access road has been constructed to the site. The material laid as the surface for this road is the crushed stone from the former building on the site.

The building was demolished some time before this watching brief was carried out. A large quantity of stone fragments covers the site (Photo no. 1) together with farm debris such as iron and aluminium pen sections. To the west of the house site, a large pile of earth is the topsoil removed from the new access road.

The material overlying the development area was therefore not undisturbed topsoil

The demolished building is described as having been dilapidated, partially roofed and adapted to contain pens and a sheep dip inserted into the floor in an internal doorway.

The stone debris indicates that it had been constructed of typical small pieces of Caithness sandstone slab.

## **6.0 The Watching Brief**

This was carried out on 4.6.08 in dry and sunny weather conditions. Removal of the overlying rubble and soil exposed the footprint of the former building, clearly visible initially as an orange sandy and stony rectangle surrounded by darker, brown and more organic soil (Photos 6-8) The lowest courses of the outer walls were still evident as thin, broad slabs (Photos 9-12) forming a wall base 0.6m in width.



**Footings of south wall of former building**

The building measured 11.65m in length, divided by an internal partition to form one larger room, 7m in length, to the east and a smaller, 4m in length, to the west (Photo no. 13). The internal partition had a doorway at its north end and a fireplace attached to its east face. The east 'room' appeared to be floored with large, regular slabs, while the west 'room' appeared to either have no paved floor or flooring had been removed either during its use as sheep pens or during demolition. The west room also had a fireplace centrally in the west gable wall, which measured 0.9m in thickness. The hearth of this fireplace consisted of bricks laid on their sides (Photo no. 14)

Some upright wooden posts were still in place, presumably having formerly supported a wood lining. Also noted were small fragments of stone set upright (Photo no. 9) The function of these is uncertain but it is possible that they were packing stones to support larger wood uprights now removed, or 'fillers' where the horizontal slabs did not meet neatly.

The outline of the extension on the north face, shown on the 1877 OS map, was not evident on the ground. It is possible that this was a relatively insubstantial, possibly wooden, porch or outhouse. This area appeared to be possibly roughly cobbled (Photo no. 15)

Excavation of the foundation trenches exposed a large concrete trough, measuring 3m long by 0.75m wide inserted into the floor within the internal doorway (Photos 16-18) This is presumably the sheep dip noted before the building was demolished. As this lay between trenches, it was not lifted.



**Edge of concrete sheep dip trough exposed during excavation of foundation trench**

Removal of the floor slabs revealed that they were laid on a gritty red-orange subsoil material, possibly re-deposited. However, where the foundation trench crossed the south outer wall of the former building a more complex stratigraphy was noted: (Photo no. 19)

1. Floor slabs
2. Yellow-brown gritty-sandy re-deposited subsoil to a thickness of 100mm
3. Dark, black-brown material to a thickness of 100mm. This material had a clay content and appeared to be fibrous
4. Natural subsoil and one large stone measuring 500mm in width, 300mm deep



**Stratigraphy under floor slabs in east part of building, including stone in layer 4**

This suggests a previous use of the site or building. The dark layer, no. 3, may be the residual deposit of a byre or the remains of a collapsed roof. This may have been later covered with a layer of sterile subsoil to seal the floor and level it in order to lay paving. It is unlikely that the present building had a byre on its east side as the site drains to the west and livestock would have been housed west of the living space. This offers the possibility that the most recent building replaced an earlier, although the foundations of that have not survived. Alternatively, the dark material represents an earlier activity on the site unrelated to farm cottages.

The single large stone found in the lowest layer is also curious as it is, although sandstone, not the more typical Caithness slab. Its presence may be natural or it may be the single relict stone of a previous structure

## **5.0 Small Finds**

A large quantity of mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century ceramics were recovered from the site, together with bottle and window glass, iron objects including a hook probably a pot hanger from the chimney, a section of strap and guttering. Two bones were identified as sheep. More recent finds included a gun cartridge, plastic sheep drench bottles and sheep ear tags. No objects pre-dating the known date range for use of the building were recovered.

## **6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations**

While the watching brief offered an interesting exercise in investigating the archaeology of a 19<sup>th</sup> century farm cottage, the very presence of this building demonstrates that any previous archaeological features on this site will have been almost entirely removed during its construction. The deposits preserved under the floor slabs do suggest the possibility of a more complex site but this is most likely to be phasing of the building.

The photographic record of the building taken before demolition is still in the possession of MM Miller.

No further archaeological work is recommended for this site.

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**20.11.08**



### Photographic record (digital)

Photo no.	Description	Angle of view
1	View across site towards Wick river. Earth mound is topsoil from access track. Stone surface in foreground is debris from demolition	From E
2	View across site to new access road in background. Earth in foreground is topsoil removed from access road	From W
3	View from site to Achingale Bridge and Watten village	From SE
4	View north from site to Greystones farm (right) and standing stone, adjacent to telegraph pole left of centre. Loch Watten in background	From S
5	View south, over site to valley of Wick River and West Watten Holdings beyond	From N
6	Site cleaned to reveal footprint of former building, right foreground, in contrast to dark soil outside building, left	From NE
7	Cleared site with rectangle of former building visible as orange-brown rectangle running top left to bottom right, overlaid by grid for new build	From ESE
8	Interior building with part of slab floor, left, gritty subsoil underlying slabs, right and south outer wall crossing L-R	From ENE
9	Detail of slab floor and small slab fragment uprights, lower right	
10	Detail of slab floor and small slab fragment uprights, below left end of pole	
11	Detail of slab floor and small slab fragment uprights, right of pole	
12	Internal partition wall	From S
13	West 'room' of building defined by pale soil with hearth, right	From N
14	Hearth beside west gable wall, with brick set on sides	From S
15	Possible cobble surface north of main rectangle of building	From SW
16	Concrete trough, sheep dip, exposed west end	From N
17	Concrete trough, sheep dip, exposed west end	From E
18	Side of concrete trough exposed in foundation trench	From S
19	Stratigraphy under floor slabs in east 'room' showing fragmented slabs, re-deposited subsoil, black possible byre layer, natural subsoil	From N
20	Site after completion of foundation trenches	From SE





Fig 1. Location Plan

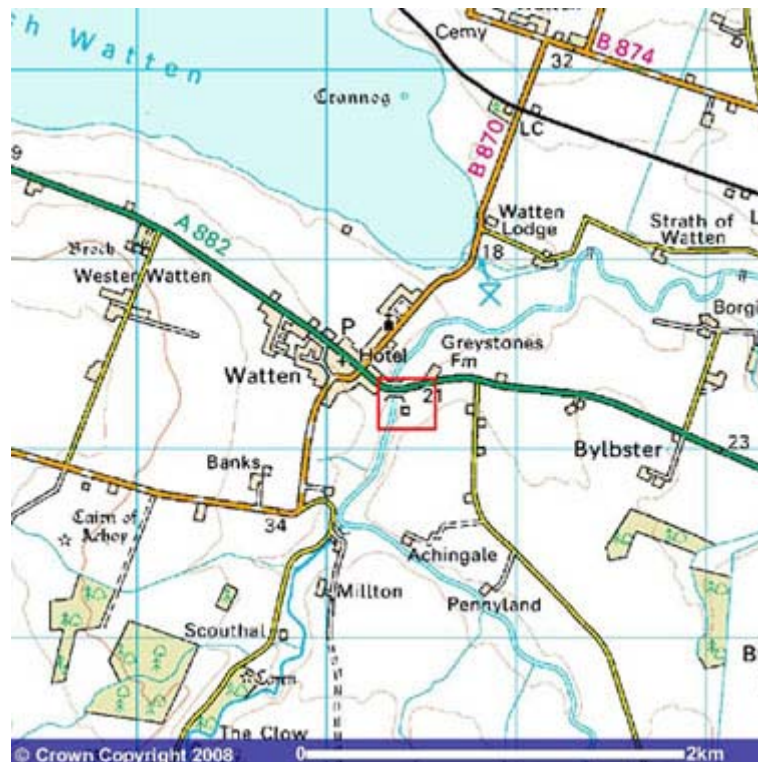


Fig 2. Location Plan

**Fig 3. Site Plan**



**Key**

Red = footprint of former building  
Green = footprint of new building