

**Blarbuie, Strath Tirrie, Lairg, Sutherland
Proposed New Planting Area**

Archaeological Evaluation



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for

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Blarbuie, Strath Tirrie, Lairg, Sutherland

Proposed New Planting Area

Archaeological Evaluation

1.0 Background

This evaluation covers an area of proposed new planting at Blarbuie on the west side of Strath Tirrie in the parish of Lairg, Sutherland. The evaluation consisted of a desk-based review of all readily available archive sources and databases, followed by a rapid walk-over survey, carried out on 25.7.13

The *Forests and Archaeology Guidelines*, produced by the Forestry Authority, recommend that:

- No new planting should occur on archaeological sites. Normally an unplanted area should extend for at least 20m beyond the outermost recognised feature of the site
- Where groups of archaeological features are close together they should be incorporated into a larger area of open space
- Fence lines should not cross the archaeological sites
- Archaeological sites should not be used as a source for stone or other materials

In addition, it is generally accepted that the best management practice for archaeological features is light grazing, to prevent the features from being obscured or damaged by vegetation growth within fenced areas even if the site is left clear of tree planting. Where the site is close to the perimeter fence, the fence line should be altered to exclude the site.

This evaluation identifies all archaeological features, both recorded and not previously noted, places them within their historical and archaeological context and offers recommendations for mitigation within the planting scheme to protect the archaeological record.

2.0 Site Description

The proposed planting area is a rectangle of hill ground on the south west side of the River Tirrie, measuring approximately 1km NW-SE and 600m NE-SW. The narrow strath rises in a series of sloping terraces, gaining 40m in height, the slope broken occasionally by prominent knolls of glacial gravels. Vegetation is uniform grass, moss and heather, with no shrub or tree cover, and no natural watercourses cut through the slope, although the whole area is crossed by shallow artificial drainage ditches.

3.0 Historical Background

3.1 Documentary Evidence

The area of proposed planting lies within the former farm of Shinness, which occupied the ground between Loch Shin and the River Tirrie, extending as far north as Mudale in upper Strath Naver.

The nearest Early Modern habitation to the proposed planting area is Midpenny (recorded as Penvenichan on Roy's survey of 1750s), a small farmstead associated with an area of arable ground by the river. This was probably cleared in 1819 and a shepherd installed. The place was still inhabited in 1873 but abandoned by 1903, when one of the houses was converted to a sheep shelter.

Shinness farm was one of the first on the Sutherland estate to be converted to sheep farming. Sheep were introduced on a small scale around 1808 and notices were given to small tenants to remove, but it was not until the rental of the farm was taken by Dugald Gilchrist of Ospisdale in 1819 that the small townships and farmsteads were cleared.

Soon after 1833 four large farms were created from the lands of Shinness, one of which was Blarbuie. These farms were relatively successful until the loss of workers at the outbreak of the 1st world war. In 1916 the Duke of Sutherland donated Shinness Farm to the Board of Agriculture, which was searching for land under the Government's Land Settlement (Scotland) Act. Twenty crofts of thirty acres each were leased to ex-servicemen. Each croft had 40 acres of arable land plus a 500-acre share in the Shinness Sheepstock Club Co-operative Society, which employed shepherds to look after their livestock. This society failed in the 1920s and the crofters divided the flock.

Blarbuie continued to function as a separate farm. The boundary between the farm hill ground and the crofters common grazings was probably the top of the ridge

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3.2 Cartographic Evidence

Ordnance Survey 1st edition surveyed 1874

The 1st edition Ordnance Survey map, Sutherland LXXXV, surveyed 1873, shows no evidence for settlement or any constructed feature within the area of proposed planting. The sheep shelter is not indicated, nor are the sheep folds downstream of Midpenny. One of these, now a circular structure, is shown as an inhabited building in 1873, which suggests that all of the sheep shelters were constructed after this date. There are no land divisions

Ordnance Survey 2nd edition, revised 1903

By 1903 the three sheep shelters, are recorded, two at Midpenny and one within the proposed planting area. Two boundary lines, probably post and wire fences, are indicated, converging on the confluence of the Tirrie and the Abhainn Sgeamhaidh. The southern of these is on the same line as the fence which forms the SE boundary of the present scheme.

Modern Mapping

Modern mapping shows virtually no change to the area, other than the addition of prehistoric sites to the north and west and the loss of the northern of the two boundary fences recorded in 1903.

4.0 Archaeological Background

No systematic archaeological survey has previously been carried out within the area of proposed planting.

Two archaeological sites adjacent to the west boundary of the planting area are recorded on the Highland Historic Environment Record:

- **Strath Tirry hut circle and field system** at NC 54790 16580
HER ref. MHG12822
An oval-shaped hut-circle is situated on a NE-Facing slope which overlooks the River Tirry. It measures 8.8m NNW-SSE internally by 6m transversely over a bank up to 2m thick by 0.3m in height. The entrance is on the SSE. A field-system comprising small cairns and short linear banks extends about 100m to the S, 80m to the W, 200m to the NW and 100m to the NE.
- **Strath Tirry, burnt mound at NC 54800 16660**
HER ref. MHG12821
This burnt mound is situated within the field-system around a hut-circle. It measures 7.5m from NW to SE by 6.5m transversely and up to 0.7m in height. There is a hollow about 2.5m across at its centre, which probably opened towards the SE.

A third site is recorded erroneously within the planting area, but is more correctly located on the east bank of the River Tirry:

- **River Tirry, enclosure** at NC 55400 16600
HER ref. MHG19535

5.0 Gazetteer of Archaeological Sites

The following sites were noted during a field survey carried out on 25.7.13 in dry and clear weather conditions. Locations were taken by GPS accurate to 3m.

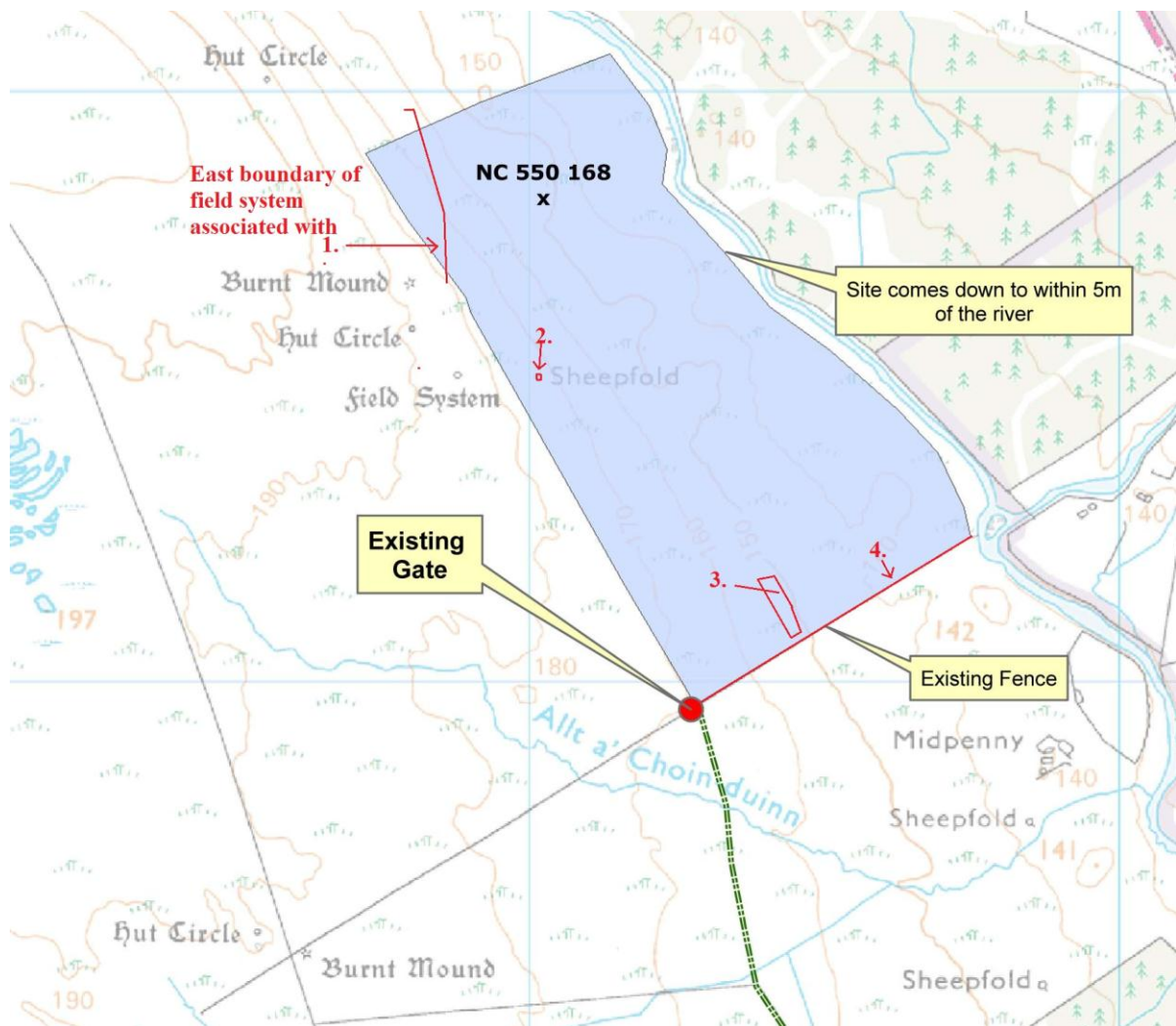


Fig 1. Archaeological sites 1-4 and proposed planting area

Significance is given to each individual feature as one of the following:

National: this category contains all sites and monuments with statutory protection, ie. Scheduled Ancient Monuments and Listed Buildings. Other monuments, although not scheduled, may be considered to be of national importance if they are particularly rare and well-preserved examples of a type

Regional: almost all prehistoric and mediaeval sites would be considered to be of regional significance. Post mediaeval sites would be placed in this category if they are particularly well-preserved or unusual, dependent on the distribution of similar sites in the vicinity, if they form an element within a complex archaeological or historical landscape. Post-mediaeval townships, shieling sites and the more substantial relict agricultural, sporting or military remains of the 19th and 20th centuries would fall into this category

Local: This category applies to minor landscape features of the post-mediaeval period, particularly those which are common or poorly preserved. Boundaries and trackways, unless forming elements of a well-preserved relict archaeological or historical landscape, or bearing historical or cultural associations, would fall into this category

1. Hut circle, field system, burnt mound at NC 54790 16580

Significance: Regional

Photographs 1-3

These recorded archaeological features to the west of the boundary of the proposed planting area are indistinct. The hut circle in particular could not be identified with any certainty. The burnt mound is unconvincing and may be no more than a spread field clearance pile, it is not adjacent to any watercourse. The field system can be traced along its eastern edge as a series of irregularly-shaped mounds within grassy patches, following the contour at the slight break of slope, extending as far north as NC 54824 16887



Site 1. Irregular mound at break of slope

Part of this field system is located within the proposed boundary of the planting area, as shown on Fig 1. The hut circle and burnt mound are west of the planting boundary

2. Sheep shelter at NC 55012 16498

Significance: local

Photographs 4-6

A small circular drystone structure, measuring internally approximately 8m, with walling standing no higher than 0.7m but mostly tumbled and spread. There is a narrow entrance to the south and a spur extending south for about 8m. This structure is presumed to date from between 1874 and 1904 as it is first recorded only on the 2nd edition OS map, although in style this type of sheep shelter is more commonly dated to the beginning of sheep farming in the early 19th century. At least six of these sheep shelter structures, all similar in style, are spread over the hill grazing of the former Shinness farm.

This structure lies entirely within the proposed planting area.



Site 2, sheep shelter, detail of tumbled walling

3. **Field system** (possible) between NC 55389 16382 and NC 55444 16087

Significance: local

Photographs: 7-11

An area of grass with many visible stones on the ground surface, which may be randomly cleared from cultivation areas further to the west, and six compact banks and mounds following the contour at a slight break of slope which may be field clearance material. Three of these are short linear banks which contain some small stones, and three are more circular mounds with no visible stones. If these do represent prehistoric cultivation, then it must be assumed that an extensive area of the upper NE-facing slope may have been used, but there is now no physical trace of this.



Site 3, linear bank of field clearance stones at break of slope

These poorly defined features all lie entirely within the proposed planting area.

4. **Ditch, bank** at NC 55330 16000

Significance: local

Low bank and associated ditch running parallel to the present post and wire fence, forming the SE boundary of the proposed planting area. This is probably contemporary with the boundary recorded on the 2nd edition OS map. There is no trace on the ground of a second boundary line, recorded on the 2nd edition OS map, to the north of this.

5. **Drainage ditches (throughout)**

Significance: local

Photograph: 12

The sloping ground is crossed by a series of drainage ditches, some running NE to the river but curving around glacial knolls, others running approximately east to join the main ditch at the south east boundary. These are undateable but presumed to be late 19th century.

6.0 Summary of Findings

Evidence for prehistoric activity contemporary with the hut circle to the west is present but slight, and identification is primarily through comparison with the previously recorded field system surrounding the hut circle. All the prehistoric activity is restricted to the higher ground where, despite being on a north-facing slope, cultivation could benefit from more sunlight and better drainage than lower down by the river. Subsequent to the Iron Age, there is no archaeological evidence for any land use on this side of the River Tirrie north of Midpenny, until the development of sheep farming in the 19th century. This period is represented by the sheep shelter and possibly by improvement through the pattern of drainage ditches. The sheep shelter is one of a series of such features scattered along the west bank of the River Tirrie, probably all constructed at the same time across the hill ground of Shinness farm

7.0 Recommendations

No recommendations are made for the protection of the slight traces of prehistoric cultivation identified during this survey (site 3) or for the drainage ditches, sites 4 and 5. The cultivation features are so poorly defined that preservation by record, in the form of submission of a measured and photographic report to the Highland Historic Environment Record, is considered to be adequate mitigation. The features themselves could be preserved within a planting exclusion zone but would very soon become obscured by increased vegetation cover. Their preservation would add little to the archaeological record.

The previously recorded field system, site 1, should be respected, if practical, by the west boundary of the planting area, preferably keeping the fence line east of the visible cultivation features. If this proves impractical, then the visible cultivation features, the irregularly-shaped mounds, should be protected from planting within a corridor of approximately 20m width.

The sheep shelter, site 2, should be protected within an unplanted area extending approximately 10m beyond the walling of the structure.

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17.8.13

Appendix 1. Photograph index

Photo no.	Site no.	Description	Viewpoint
1	1	North east edge of recorded prehistoric field system: C-shaped grassy mound taken to be a field clearance pile at the edge of the slight break of slope	From WNW
2	1	North east edge of recorded prehistoric field system: C-shaped grassy mound taken to be a field clearance pile at the edge of the slight break of slope	From NW
3	1	North east edge of recorded prehistoric field system: small circular grassy mound	From SE
4	2	Sheep shelter: Narrow entrance to south and spur running south	From S
5	2	Sheep shelter: detail of drystone walling of eastern arc	From NE
6	2	Sheep shelter: detail of tumbled drystone walling of eastern arc	From SE
7	3	Possible prehistoric field system: two low compact linear banks at the edge of slight break of slope	From SE
8	3	Possible prehistoric field system: low linear bank with visible stone fill	From SE
9	3	Possible prehistoric field system: circular grassy mound with no visible stone content	From SE
10	3	Possible prehistoric field system: general view of scatter of stones on ground surface and low mounds	From NW
11	3	Possible prehistoric field system: setting of stones on ground surface assumed to be removed from cultivation area	From E
12	5	Drainage ditch: blocked remains of upper section of drainage ditch running ENE to river	From WSW