

REPORT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT LYBSTER AND BRUAN CHURCH, BRUAN, CAITHNESS

An archaeological watching brief was carried out on a site at ND 3129 3951, on waste ground immediately north-east of Lybster and Bruan Church of Scotland at Bruan, Caithness. The site lies on the west side of the A99, approximately 300 metres east of a broch, and about 300 metres south of a dismantled railway line (Figs. 1 and 2). The work which was to be observed was the excavation of a trench and pits for the installation of a septic tank. The trench was to run north-eastwards from the wall surrounding the church to a large pit which would contain the septic tank, and a further trench would lead south-east from this to a soakaway area (Fig. 3). In the event, while work was in progress the contractors decided to change this plan and make the trench to the soakaway run north-east from the septic tank pit, continuing the line of the trench into it (Fig. 4).

The work was carried out on 25th. September 2001; the weather was initially cloudy, with heavy rain clearing, and becoming sunny in the afternoon. At some time a few days or weeks previously the site had been visited by engineers from SEPA, who had dug several holes to test for soil filtration, including one on the site of the actual septic tank pit. While no archaeological features of any great significance were found during the watching brief, it is nevertheless impossible to be certain that nothing of interest was destroyed by the digging of these holes, or that no finds which might have been in the soil were overlooked, and it is strongly recommended that archaeological watching briefs should be conducted whenever digging first begins on a site, including cases like the present where test pits are dug before the actual excavation for construction takes place.

The site consisted of an area of rough ground lying between the Church of Scotland and the former Free Church, now used by a farmer as an implement store (Plates 1 and 2). In the northwest corner of the site were the very ruinous remains of a cottage (Plate 3), and the whole area appeared to be much disturbed with many bumps and mounds in the ground, which was overgrown with grass, weeds and nettles. A local neighbour, Mr. John MacLean of Tulloch Lea, Bruan, confirmed that the area had been extensively used as a rubbish dump.

Work began with the excavation of the pipe trench north-eastwards from the wall surrounding the Church of Scotland. Vegetation and dark brown topsoil were removed to a depth of about 45 cm, at which the topsoil gave way to what is known locally as raffie stone (information from the digger driver, Mr. Willie Sutherland), a natural rotten shale consisting of disintegrating flat stones, intermixed with orange sand. Work continued into the actual septic tank pit; a hole had already been dug here by the SEPA engineers, and it was now expanded by the digger and the sides straightened.

During the removal of the topsoil much domestic refuse was noted, namely bottles, pottery (of 19th. and 20th. century date) and an enamelled iron cooking-pot, also some flat stone fragments which may have been broken paving stones. An iron sleeper bolt was also found, which must have come from the old Lybster railway (see Figs. 1 and 2).

The only possible archaeological feature was seen in the north-east side of the pit for the septic tank, revealed in section as the digger straightened the sides of the irregular pit which