

Construction of permanent access routes for removal of timber at Syre, Strathnaver, Sutherland

Planning ref. nos. 03/00304/FULSU and 03/00305/FULSU

Archaeological Watching Brief



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for

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Construction of Access Routes for removal of timber at Syre, Strathnaver, Sutherland, Planning ref. nos. 03/00304/FULSU and 03/00305/FULSU: Archaeological Watching Brief

1. Background

In January 2004 the author was commissioned by Forest Enterprise to carry out an archaeological evaluation of the routes of two proposed forest access tracks into a mature forestry plantation at Syre, Strathnaver, Sutherland. The purpose of the access tracks is to allow the extraction of timber. Harvesting does not require planning consent, but the construction of the access does, and plans were duly submitted to the Archaeology Unit within the Department of Planning and Development at Highland Council. A brief evaluation of the proposal by the Archaeology Unit ascertained that no recorded archaeology would be affected, and no archaeological conditions were placed on the planning consent. However, it was noted that there are a large number of sites in the general area, and there was a high likelihood of unrecorded sites lying within the areas of proposed construction. It was therefore decided that an archaeological evaluation, consisting of a desk-based assessment and rapid walk-over survey, should be carried out before work commenced.

A desk-based assessment was carried out, consulting all readily available data sources to provide background information on the history of settlement and land use in this area of Strathnaver, and the known distribution of archaeological sites. This was followed by a rapid walk-over survey, carried out on 22.1.04 in dry and clear weather conditions, in the company of Malcolm MacDougall of Forest Enterprise, who provided the opportunity to discuss on site the various options for protecting the features noted during the survey.

The following two sites were listed in the gazetteer of archaeological sites located during this evaluation:

1. **Hut Circle** at NC 6798 4124. This has not been previously recorded on the SMR or NMRS, but has been noted by forestry workers and is recorded on the Forestry Commission's own plan of archaeological features. It consists of substantial banks, not ploughed over, but planted on with large trees and is located in the corner between two rides.
2. **Field System** at NC 68004120. To the south of the hut circle are a number of large and probably contemporary field clearance cairns indicating a prehistoric field system. Three are within the forestry to the east of the ride, and are well-preserved and easily accessible. At least four are within the forestry west of the ride which contains a large number of windblown trees which made detailed investigation impossible. Two are located within the ride itself.

The recommendations of the evaluation report included the following statements:

The majority of archaeological features located during this survey are adjacent to, but not within, the corridor of the proposed access roads, and therefore will not be directly affected. It is however advisable to be aware of their location in case there is

the need for the widening of the road to provide turning or passing space, or for drainage ditches to diverge from the side of the road. No material should be removed from any archaeological feature to provide hardcore for the roads. Two sites, the hut circle, site 2.4 and the enclosure, site 2.8, are particularly close to the road, and should be clearly marked before construction work commences.

The field system, site 2.5, associated with the hut circle, site 2.4, is more problematic as again it is impractical to re-route the road to avoid this site. The preferred route of the road at this point actually passes through the section of forestry immediately west of the open ride where at least four field clearance cairns are located, and others may be obscured by windblown trees. It is recommended that some degree of archaeological monitoring be carried out during the removal of topsoil along this section, to allow for the investigation of sub-surface features, including ancient soil horizons possibly preserved under the field clearance cairns.

It was therefore agreed that an archaeological Watching Brief would be carried out on topsoil stripping connected with the construction of the section of access track passing the hut circle and crossing the field system.

2. The Watching Brief

This was carried out on May 18th 2004 in dry and clear weather conditions. At this stage the access track had been completed as far as an area of hardstanding east of the hut circle. Only a short section was monitored, including one field clearance cairn, as the section further south, where the route deviated from the open ride into standing trees, was awaiting felling. It was ascertained in consultation with representatives of Forest Enterprise that no other field clearance cairns would be destroyed by later work. It was also agreed that the other field clearance cairns in the vicinity would be marked before work commences on the next section of track to prevent accidental damage.

2.1. The Hut Circle

This had been clearly marked before any work was carried out in the vicinity. No ground disturbance took place any closer than 5m from the edge of the structure. Work had been completed on the area of hardstanding east of the hut circle before the Watching Brief started, but this offered a clean section along the west edge of the hardstanding, containing no archaeological features. The hut circle is still tree-covered. It was agreed that these trees would be felled using a method which would not disturb the ground, and that the site would be preserved as open ground in any future planting scheme.

2.2. Soil Profile

Below a thin vegetation cover of mostly mosses, the topsoil was covered by a thin layer of forest floor debris consisting of dropped pine needles. The topsoil in the vicinity of the hut circle was shallow, no more than 10cm in depth, and was uniformly a dry, friable dark chocolate soil, in contrast to the peatier soils on the

lower ground to the east. Below this was an undisturbed subsoil of orange-brown sandy material with a high content of stones of varying sizes.

2.3 The Field Clearance Cairn

This was entirely covered with vegetation, mostly mosses, and had been planted with trees. The removal of these by pushing them over with the digger bucket caused the lifting of the mat of vegetation and a thin layer of pine needle debris. The pulling up of the tree roots also caused the cairn to partially break apart. Of what remained, half was removed by the digger to allow an examination of a cross section. This was cleaned by trowel to investigate any soil deposits beneath the cairn.

The cairn was found to consist of generally large stones, some up to 0.5m in length. There appeared to be no upper layer of smaller stones from a second phase of field clearance. The stones were intermixed with a loose black soil. This soil and the stones directly overlay the orange-brown sandy subsoil.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

On this occasion, too small an area was investigated to allow for a meaningful interpretation of the site. If all the clearance cairns in the field system associated with this hut circle contain similar quantities of large stones and also overlie no appreciable original topsoil, then this would appear to have been an unrewarding area to open to cultivation. There must therefore have been compensating factors such as the improved drainage of a site on the ridge, or the selection of the ridge top site for its defensive rather than its cultivable qualities.

Recommendations have already been made in the original site evaluation for the identification and protection of archaeological sites during the clear felling and re-planting of the Syre forest area. This Watching Brief has witnessed how easily archaeological features can be damaged by modern felling techniques, which emphasises the need to identify sites before felling commences and to implement a methodology to prevent this damage. This will certainly require the cutting of trees rather than pulling or pushing them from the ground, to ensure that the roots are left in situ.

4. Bibliography and Data Sources

Highland Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) held by the Archaeology Unit at Highland Council in Inverness

National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS) held by the RCAHMS in Edinburgh

Early maps held by the Map Library within the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh

Dagg, C. 2004: Archaeological evaluation of areas to be affected by the construction of permanent access routes at Syre, Strathnaver, Sutherland

Mackenzie, A. 1883: The Highland Clearances

Prebble J. 1963: The Highland Clearances

Appendix 1. Photographic Record

1. Field Clearance cairn before commencement of Watching Brief, view from NE
2. Field Clearance Cairn, eastern half removed, view from NE.
3. Field Clearance cairn, east half removed down to subsoil, view from SE
4. Field Clearance Cairn, section cleaned to show stones and dark soil fill lying directly on the subsoil.
5. Hut circle, view from SE showing entrance. This photograph taken after the completion of work on the area of hardstanding.
6. Section at edge of area of hardstanding. The hut circle is within the standing trees in the background.

Appendix 2. Plans

1. Location Plan
2. Area of watching Brief, sketch plan.

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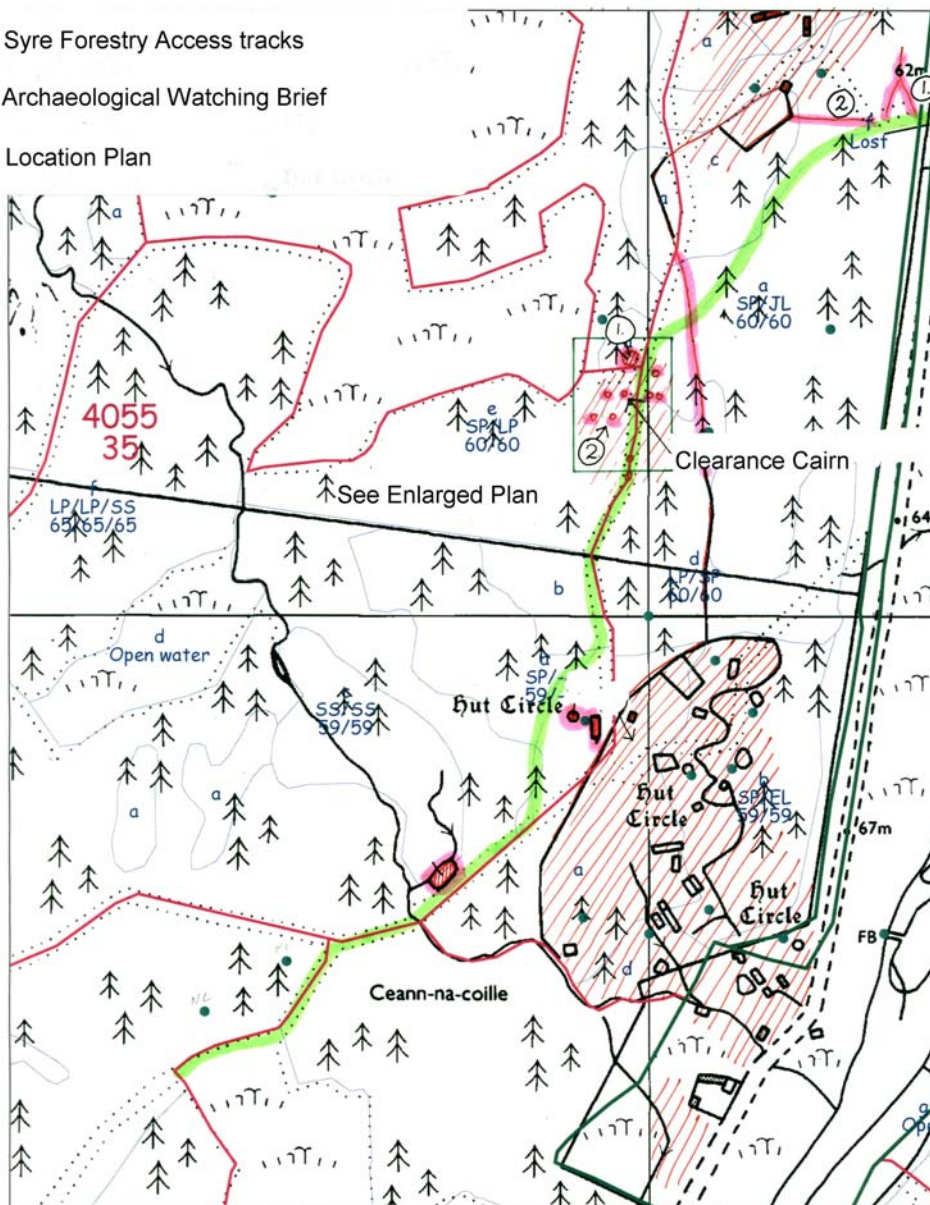
6.



Syre Forestry Access tracks

Archaeological Watching Brief

Location Plan



Forest District - DORNOCH

Title Syre

Type of Map Stock

Scale 1:5000

Date 21 January 2004



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Syre Forestry Tracks

Archaeological Watching Brief

Sketch Plan

