

Blar an t-Suidhe, Broubster

An Archaeological Survey



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Archaeological

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The author was asked to carry out an archaeological survey of an area of ground proposed for planting at Blar an t-Suidhe, Broubster, Caithness, as part of an environmental assessment. The archaeological survey was requested by the Archaeology Unit of Highland Council because of the significant archaeological remains recorded in the vicinity. This report considers the findings of this survey and recommends appropriate action to protect the remains recorded.

2 Survey Method

- 2.1 A desk-bound survey was carried out examining records held in Highland Council's Sites & Monument Record, earlier OS map editions held by Highland Council Archive Service and secondary sources available in Inverness library. The field survey was carried out on the 7th April 2000, in blustery, mostly dry conditions.

3 Archaeological and Historical Background

- 3.1 The survey area lies in a locality rich in archaeological remains. This includes the nationally important chambered cairn at Shurrery Church, known as *Monadh nan Carn*. This monument, a stalled cairn some 50m by 35m, even in its present mutilated state, can be seen to have been an impressive monument. It was clearly of considerable local importance. This is not an isolated feature in the local landscape as at least 5 other cairns, including *Sithean Dubh*, *Tota Gharbhaig* and *Carn Liath* lie within 400-1400m of *Monadh nan Carn*. They demonstrate that this area has been intensively occupied since neolithic times some 5,000 years ago. Research into the distribution of these cairns suggests they were put up by farming communities often as boundary markers to define individual territories. In view of this widespread distribution it is reasonable to assume that much of the survey area was being farmed in the neolithic period.
- 3.2 Later prehistoric activity is not evidenced within the survey area, though a substantial settlement has been recorded west of the Forss Water and north of the Allt Torgill. This settlement includes 13 roundhouses, 9 burial cairns and clearance cairns suggesting a date of between 1,500BC and 500AD. A similar late prehistoric date is suggested to the south of the area at *Tota an Dranndain*, a broch site in Shurrery.
- 3.3 Medieval settlement is less easy to define, though the presence of a possible church site at *Creagan a' Bheannaich* in Shurrery suggests some continuity of settlement. This is also suggested by the extensive post-medieval settlements of Broubster and Shurrery. Broubster, in linguistic origin, also points to Norse settlement by 900AD, presumably on existing farmland.

- 3.4 The existing pattern of settlement replaced an earlier unenclosed system of run-rig township settlements based on Shurrey and Brouster with an enclosed system of fields and sheep farming. According to Donald Mackay over 100 families were cleared in 1838 from Shurrery, Broubster and Shebster to make way for sheep. (Ironically the church for Shurrery built near the Neolithic Cairn at Monadh nan Carn is recorded as having been built in 1838 and it is not thought to have remained long in use after these tenants left. Presumably the Disruption which led to the formation of the Free Church in 1843 was also a factor leading to its closure.)
- 3.5 By the time of the 1841 census there was a single tenant at Broubster, though 22 other households were listed primarily headed by Agricultural Labourers, the term for crofters and presumably based on Broubster Village and the area to the north. It is clear that Broubster Farm had been converted to sheep farming. At the time of the Royal Commission in 1892, the Farm of Broubster was described as a sheep farm of 6,000 acres holding c1,000 ewes. At the same time 9 crofters and 1 cottar were resident at Broubster and the last resident of Broubster was to leave in 1952.

4 Archaeological Survey Results

- 4.1 Two areas of archaeological interest were discovered. Descriptive details on each site are listed in the Appendix. In view of the importance archaeological survivals surrounding Blar an t-Suidhe, surprisingly few archaeological remains were recorded. The most prominent man-made features in the area were a series of silted up drains, thought to have been excavated by machine since the 1940s.
- 4.2 The most prominent site is a corn-drying kiln, lying at the north east of the area, just south of an unnamed settlement, presumed to be part of Broubster village. The kiln is separated from the house site by a low turf or earthen bank and ditch as recorded on the modern and earlier OS maps. This boundary was presumably constructed when the sheep farm was established in 1838 and is likely to have been topped with a gorse hedge, a custom adopted in other parts of Caithness.
- 4.3 At the south east of the area a stony mound was recorded. This was not a certain archaeological feature but could potentially be a disturbed burial cairn similar to *Monadh nan Carn*.

5 Archaeological Conclusions

- 5.1 3 explanations are possible for the low-level of archaeological remains recorded. Firstly there was never any significant archaeological settlement in this particular area. Secondly any archaeological remains were destroyed when this was converted into a sheep farm. Thirdly earlier archaeological remains are obscured by deep peat formation. Each option is discussed in turn below.

- 5.2 The density of Neolithic burial monuments and in particular the proximity of *Monadh nan Carn* make it likely that there was settlement here at least in earlier prehistoric period and possibly much later as well. It is extremely unlikely that there was no early prehistoric settlement here. When the extent of settlement declined is not known, though it could be associated with the onset of wetter conditions c1000 BC which would encourage the growth of blanket peat.
- 5.3 It is probable that the conversion of Broubster into a sheepfarm did lead to the ploughing out of former arable rigs connected with the earlier run-rig system. How far these extended into the survey area is of course, not known. The lack of extensive stone clearance heaps and the building of earthen dykes suggest that the peat levels were well-established by the 1840s.
- 5.4 Auguring of the peat by Mr Sutherland has established that the peat depth varies considerably from 200mm to 4 metres across the survey area. While the deep peat may have started forming soon after the end of glaciation, it is likely that some of the shallower peats are in fact obscuring earlier archaeological sites.

6 *Recommendations*

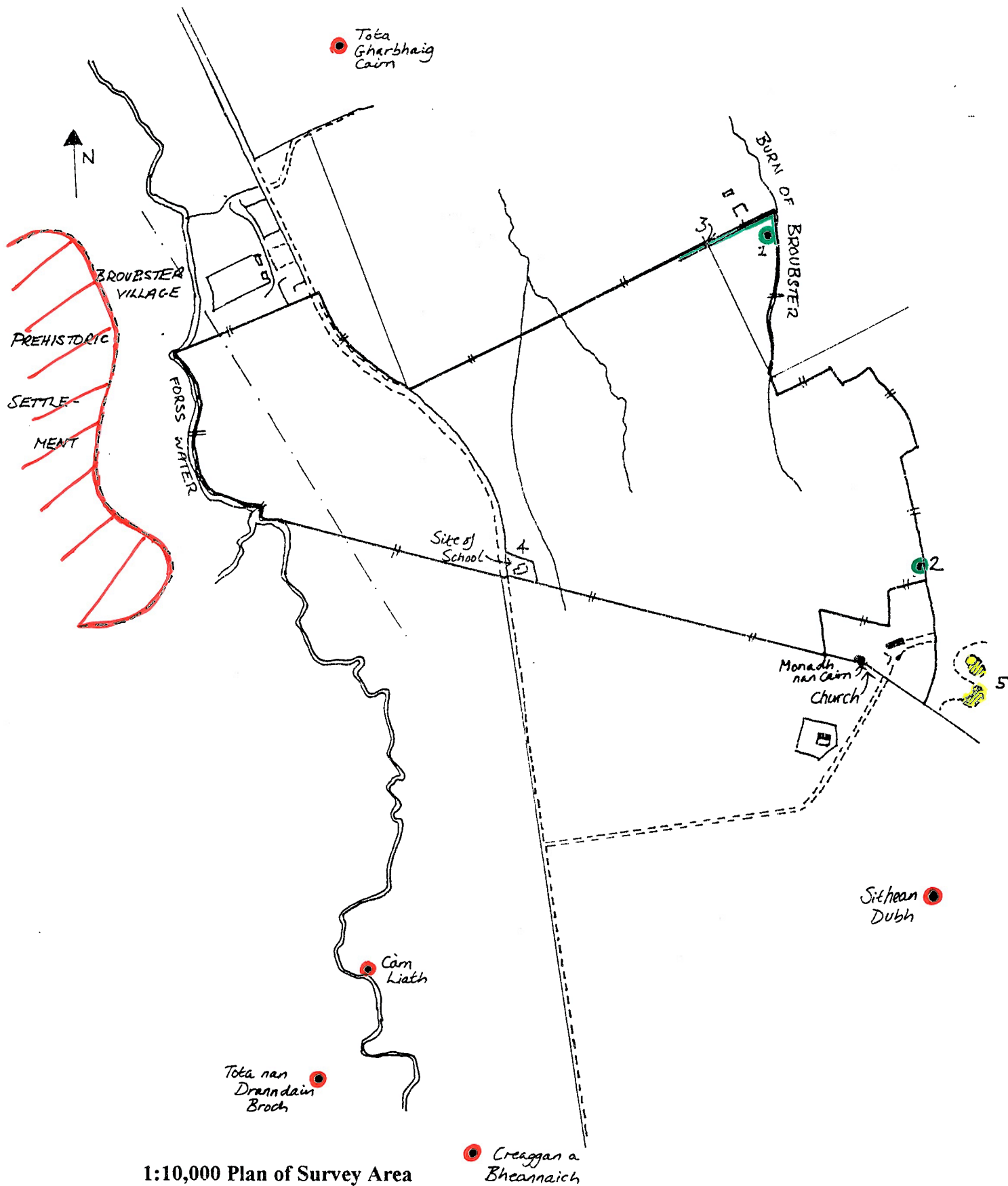
- 6.1 *The two areas as identified on plan should be excluded from the area of planting. The Forest Authority Guidelines recommend an exclusion zone of 20 metres but it would more appropriate for this to be extended to the fence line for the site at the ND 0474 5863.*
- 6.2 *The old bank at the north of the site should be protected as an historical boundary and not destroyed by forestry ploughing or planting.*
- 6.3 *A walk-over survey should be carried out after ploughing/mounding has been carried out to establish the presence or absence of archaeological features below the peat. Because ploughing/mounding will destroy any archaeological features encountered this will not require any commitment to excavate features encountered, though appropriate sampling may be desirable.*

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I would like to thank the Highland Council Archive Service for permission to illustrate the earlier OS maps. I would also like to thank Neil Redgate for accompanying me on the field survey and for discussing the implications of the sites found as an aid to interpreting the past settlement patterns in this area.

The location plan was drawn by Jill Kendrick.



Archaeological Sites as numbered

Extent of proposed buffer zones in green highlight

Approximate extent of 'pits' at Site 5 shown in yellow highlight

APPENDIX Gazetteer of Sites

Five sites are described. Four lie within the survey and suggestions are put forward for their protection as per the Forestry Commission Guidelines Forests and Archaeology. The fifth, which the writer was asked to examine by Mr Sutherland, lies just to the SE of the survey area.

Site No. 1
NGR ND 0473 5958
Description In the NE corner of the survey area 16m W of the burn and 40m S of the N boundary are the remains of a corn-drying kiln. It measures c8m by 3m with the central bowl measuring c3m wide by 1.2m deep. The kiln was fed by a flue facing S. External to the kiln structure at the N is a line of stones suggesting the kiln may have been contained within a kiln barn. This would have protected the kiln from extreme weather.
 The kiln lies c120m S of an unnamed longhouse at ND 0464 5967 outside the survey area. It is likely that the two features formed part of the same settlement with the kiln being abandoned c1838. The house was still roofed in 1872 but derelict by 1905.
Recommendation *The kiln and its surrounding wall should be protected with a minimum 20m exclusion zone. It would be most appropriate to extend the exclusion N to the boundary of the proposed plantation.*

Site No. 2
NGR ND 0458 5893
Description At the SE end of the survey area a very stony mound, c12m in diameter, is visible growing under long heather. There appears to have been some disturbance to the top of this mound, perhaps small-scale quarrying of stones. The mound stands up to 2m above the surrounding ground.
 It is not clear whether this is a natural deposit or a man-made stone cairn. If the latter it is a significant monument, possibly used as a burial cairn.
Recommendation *This feature is recommended for protection on the grounds that it may be a significant archaeological monument. As it is composed of stones it would not be suitable for planting trees.*
A 20m unplanted buffer should be established around this feature as per the Forest Commission Guidelines.

Site No. 3
NGR ND 0474 5863 - ?ND 0457 5856
Description A turf and stone bank is visible forming an earlier boundary for Broubster Farm and was shown in 1877 as extending W to the road at ND 0401 5833. As surviving it is only c 0.7m high tapering to a broad top c0.5m wide. A silted up ditch can be traced running on the S side of this feature.
 The low height of this feature suggests it was originally topped by a hedge, almost certainly of gorse. It was probably constructed immediately after the sheep farm was established in 1838.
Recommendation *Lying on the boundary of the plantation, it is not anticipated any special protection will be necessary to protect this feature. Care, however, should be taken to prevent damage if a new fence is required on this line.*

Site No. 4
NGR ND 0423 5796
Description The school built here after 1877 was presumably built in response to the Education Act of 1872. It has now been demolished.
Recommendation *No action is required here.*

Site No. 5
NGR ND 0510 5772

Description The sheepfold here was built after 1877 on map evidence. In 1905 only a rectangular building corresponding to the modern sheep dip was shown. The enclosing fold must be a more recent feature.

To the SE of this fold are a series small pits up to 2m long by 1m wide and set below ground to a depth of 1m. They are restricted to the S & SE of the sheepfold to a maximum distance of 40m.. The features are all without evident walling with irregular stones visible on the sides of the pits.

25m to the S of this is a further concentration of small irregular pits covering an area c30m in diameter. This group is concentrated at the SE end of a natural ravine. Some of them have been partially infilled with rubbish.

Interpretation Superficially the first group of pits form an arc of chambers reminiscent of the cellular buildings sometimes attached to brochs. However, the lack of walling and the fact that all the pits are below ground and cut through stony deposits, suggests they were dug as quarry pits to extract stones. It is tempting, in view of the site's proximity to Monadh nan Carn and indeed several other cairns in the vicinity, to suggest that the stone was part of an earlier burial monument. This seems unlikely as it does not form a distinct mound.



Looking North at the Corn-drying Kiln at Site 1.



Looking South at the stony mound, possibly a cairn, Site 2.
Note the farmhouse roof in the distance.

