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TORDARROCH ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

by

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In July 1989 an archaeological survey of the lands around Tordarroch, Davoit and Dunlichty parish, Inverness District was undertaken to identify and map archaeological monuments threatened by the proposed afforestation scheme. This work was commissioned by Historic Buildings and Monuments, Scottish Development Department at the request of the Highland Regional archaeologist, Robert Gourlay. The survey area included land on both sides of the river Nairn around the castle of Tordarroch.

1.1 SURVEY CONDITIONS

Within this area three types of land were encountered. The largest area consisted of unimproved pasture with areas of rock outcrop and pockets of peat. This was being lightly grazed and in places was under high grass: visibility was variable, at time it was poor - some known archaeological features could not be located. The second largest area consisted of riverside terraces and meadows, most of which was not being grazed at all: visibility was generally poor with the grass in places being chest high. However only the boggiest places were totally ungrazed and where the ground was firmer the grazing allow for limited visibility. The smallest area encountered was the arable, which was being used for pasture and was under short grass: visibility here was good. The prevailing conditions are indicated on the 1:2500 plan using the following code: G = good visibility, F = Fair visibility, P = Poor visibility.

1.2 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

A number of sites had already been recorded in the survey area and their description follows that in the Highland Region Sites and Monuments record, unless otherwise stated. In addition to the know sites a number of other features were recorded. Among these new sites are a barrow and two possible cairns which may be outliers of the ring-cairn (NH63SE3). In addition to the pre-historic burial mounds one definite and two probable square cairn cemeteries were located, and these are presumed to be of Pictish date. Two additional hut circles were added to the previously known group (NH63SE27) as well as a burnt mound and clearance heaps and field boundary. Considerable detail was added to previously recorded depopulated settlement (NH63SE22) and two new groups of depopulated settlement remains were located. A rectangular enclosure which is not closely associated with any of these settlements was also noted.

2.0 CATALOGUE OF SITES

The monuments are grouped approximately by period and site type. When it has been convenient the SMR/OS code for designating the sites has been used.

2.1 PREHISTORIC RITUAL MONUMENTS

Tordarroch Ring Cairn - NH63SE3, NH 6801 3350 ✓ NH63SE0003

This consists of the kerb of a heavily robbed ring-cairn surrounded by a stone circle. Many of the stones of the kerb of the cairn (21.5 m in diameter) have collapsed both inwards and outwards, but most of the kerb survives and there is only one large gap. A stone with 33 cup-marks has been incorporated into the SW portion of the kerb. The chambered tomb is surrounded by a stone circle 35.4 m in diameter, 7 of the original 9 stones still stand, one has fallen and the other is missing.

The scale of the stone circle is massive (the tallest stone is 2.5 m high) and even in its present state with a fence line and drain cutting through its circuit it remains an impressive ruin. [Much more detail is available in the Highland SMR.]

Cupmarked Stone - NH63SE16, NH 6790 3363 ✓ NH63SE0016

A block of grey gneiss 1.7 x 1.7 x 0.6 m embedded in a rocky knoll 150 m NE of the ring-cairn. It bears 58 cup marks, some with connecting or radiating grooves.

? Earthen Barrow - New, NH 6800 3360 NH63SE0066

A massive earthen mound to the N of the ring cairn (NH63SE3) and E of the cup-marked stone (NH63SE16). The mound is marked on the 1:2500 OS map, but is treated as a natural feature. It is oval in plan, c. 35.0 m N-S by c. 20.0 m E-W, and stands c. 3.5 m high. Although there are numerous glacial hillocks in the valley, the sides of this monument rise so steeply from the surrounding ground that it seems unlikely that it is a natural feature. Where the body of the mound had been exposed by animal erosion, it can be seen to be made up of earth and very little stone.

? Possible Cairn 1 - New, NH 6808 3341 NH63SE0069

One of two possible cairns SE of the ring cairn (NH63SE3). Low oval mound c. 14.0 m NE-SW by c. 8.5 m standing no more than 0.5 m high. Where the cairn material is not covered by grass or heather it can be seen to be composed of stones which look too small (fist-sized to 0.35 m in diameter) to be the result of

agricultural clearance. Its edges are very poorly defined especially to the E where the adjacent ground is actually higher. It may be that the delapidated state of this monument is due to robbing for the construction of features associated with the nearby depopulated settlement (see below).

? Possible Cairn 2 - New, NH 6804 3338

NH 63 SE 0070

This is located 40 m W of the other possible cairn in an area where there are a several glacial erratics. It too is a low oval mound c. 17.5 m N-S by c. 10.5 m, which stands up to 2.0 m higher than the surrounding ground. It does not have very well defined edges and has been extensively robbed. It is composed of material similar in character to that in the other possible cairn.

2.2. PREHISTORIC SETTLEMENT AND AGRICULTURE

Hut Circle - NH63SE27 A, NH 6840 3305

✓

NH 63 SE 0027

The hut is located on a slight rise and measures c. 13.0 m NW-SE by c. 11.0 m transversely between the centres of a denuded wall spread to 3.0 m. Several blocks, some displaced, occur around the S arc. A gap, c. 2.2 m wide in the E arc, is the mutilated entrance.

Hut Circle - NH63SE27 B, NH 6800 3306

✓

NH 63 SE 0027

The hut is set into the base of a slope (occupied by hut D) and is circular, c. 8.5 m in diameter. The walls are low spreads of grassy rubble c. 2.0 m wide. The entrance may be located in the W arc.

Hut Circle - NH63SE27 C, NH 6813 3313

✓

NH 63 SE 0027

This large hut is situated on level ground. It is defined by stone walls c. 4.0 m broad and measures c. 18.0 m NE-SW between wall centres. It has been destroyed in the SE. No entrance is evident. At the time of the visit the N half of the circle was due to be destroyed by the construction of the church car park. This area was being excavated by the Inverness Museum archaeologist, Jill Harden. Given the large diameter of this site it may not be contemporary with the other huts.

Hut Circle - New, NH63SE27 D, NH 6801 3306

✓

NH 63 SE 0027

The hut occupies a slight rise to the NE of hut B. The low grass covered walls spread over c. 2.0 m. It measures c. 12.5 m NW-SE

by 11.0 m. The mutilated entrance may be in the NW arc.

Hut Circle - New, NH63SE27 E, NH 6776 3310 ✓ NH63SE0027

The hut is separated from the other huts in the group by an overgrown burn and is located on a level shoulder of a hill. Conditions of its preservation are variable. In places the wall survives only as large boulders, elsewhere it is a low grassy spread 2.0 m broad. It measures c. 10.0 m NW-SE by c. 8.5 m. The entrance may have been in the SE.

Burnt Mound - New, NH 6781 3325 X NH63SE0071

This crescentic low mound is 0.5 m high c. 4.5 m in diameter, with a hollow on the SW side. It is located by the side of the small burn, which is now a boggy patch, that separates hut NH63SE27E from the other huts of the group. Presumably this is contemporary with the occupation of the settlement NH63SE27.

Clearance Heaps - New, NH 6809 3305 X NH63SE0072

A group of six clearance heaps adjacent to hut D of group NH63SE27. The heaps range in size from c. 4.0 m in diameter to c. 6.0 m.

Field Bank - New, NH 6792 3311 to 6803 3311 X NH63SE0067

A short stretch of ragged walling preserved as a low stone spread covered with grass c. 2.0 m wide.

Traces of rig cultivation reported in the area S of the field bank could not be confirmed due to the high growth of vegetation.

Hillfort - NH63SE29, NH 6766 3343 7, STBLK ENC NH63SE0029

Situated on a prominent knoll S of Tordarroch house is a double ramparted hillfort. The outer rampart is a poorly preserved spread of grass-covered rubble c. 2.0 m wide by 0.5 - 1.0 m high. For much of its length it follows a line well below the break in slope enclosing an oval area c. 40 m NE-SW by 30.0 m. On the west side of the site the ground falls away very steeply, while on the east natural outcrops have been incorporated into the defences. The inner rampart is slighter and its size 12.0 x 10.0 m suggests that it may represent the foundations of a house. The entrance is marked by a gap in the outer wall and a hollow way cut into the slope on the E side.

The excavation of 1975 is still open showing the precise location of the cores of both inner and outer enclosure. A series of 4 pits strung out in a line in the SW end of the fort look like the results of less disciplined excavation. The pits are approximately 2.0 m in diameter and 1.0 m deep. A date in the historic period should not be ruled out for this site.

2.3 HISTORIC BURIAL MONUMENTS

Pictish Cemetery 1 - New, NH 6817 3360 ✓

NH 6352 0073

A group of six possibly seven low rectangular cairns is located alongside the line of a silted up burn. In general these cairns consist of flat mounds between 0.25 -0.5 m high of stones which vary between fist-sized and 0.25 m in diameter. In several cases shallow straight ditches can be seen to enclose the cairn, in other cases the cairns have clearly been constructed so as to share a common side. The cluster of four or five cairns includes ones which range from 5.5 m E-W by 5.0 m to 3.4 m E-W by 3.2 m. A short distance away are two apparently isolated cairns. The one at NH 6817 3356 measures 4.8 m N-S by 4.4 m and is enclosed in a shallow ditch; it is also enclosed within an apparently later field boundary. The other isolated cairn is located at NH 6818 3359 and measures 4.2 m NW-SE by 3.5 m. All of the cairns are at least in part obscured by grass and heather and there is a distinct possibility that others await discovery.

Pictish Cemetery 2 - New, NH 6794 3327 ✓

NH 6352 0065

This is a loose group consisting of a single square barrow and three small round cairns, which do not appear to be clearance heaps. The square cairn measures 4.5 m E-W by 4.0 m and is enclosed in a faint rectangular ditch. The round cairns stand about 0.5 m high and are all approximately 4 m in diameter.

Pictish Cemetery 3 - New, NH 6736 3303 ✓

NH 6352 0074

This site consists of a single square cairn and other small spreads of stones which may be either clearance or disturbed cairns. They are located on the gravel terrace above the River Nairn, in a setting similar to the cemetery at White Bridge. The square cairn measures 3.0 m SW-NE by 2.75 m and stands 0.2 m high. The accompanying possible cairns were irregular heaps some of which might have originally formed a second square barrow while others are distinct piles of stones about 4 m in diameter. In total there may be up to five other monuments in addition to the square cairn here.

2.4 HISTORIC SETTLEMENT AND AGRICULTURE

Depopulated Settlement 1 - New, NH 6803 3335 X NH 635E0120

This settlement consists of a linear spread of rectangular buildings and field boundaries. All of the walls are very collapsed and have been robbed to build later field dykes; they generally are no more than a grassed over spread of stone c. 2.0 -3.0 m wide and no more than 1.0 m high.

1a) is a two-celled long house 10 m N-S by 6 m. Internal partition faintly visible, most of the W wall has been robbed.

1b) is roughly circular structure c. 5.0 m in diameter with a deep central hollow 2.0 m in diameter. It has no visible entrance and is probably a grain kiln.

1c) is a low stretch of walling running S from building 1d and around the S end of building 1a where it peters out, probably because it was robbed to build the adjacent field dyke.

1d) is a rectangular structure 14 m N-S by 7 m with no sign of internal partition. Its entrance faces E and may perhaps have been a barn.

1e) is a building represented only by three sides of walling. It probably represents an outbuilding of some sort which was at least 7 m E-W by 4 m.

1f) is astride the line of field wall 1h. Its walls survive higher than any of the other buildings to a height of c. 1.5 m. It is c. 8 m E-W by 6 m and its entrance is not obvious.

1g) is isolated from the rest of the buildings in this group and lies outside the long field boundary 1h and across a boggy area. It has apparently been robbed of all but its boulder foundations. It measures c. 10.5 m SW-NE by 5.2 m. The location of its entrance is unclear. Given its situation this building may in fact be part of another separate settlement.

1h) is a long meandering stretch of walling which seems to separate the settlement from the boggy area created by a silted-up burn and small pond, which are to the E of the settlement. It cannot be traced in the improved fields to the W of the settlement. It is interrupted at NH 6817 3352 by a gravel pit.

Depopulated Settlement 2 - NH 6773 3340

NH63SE0090

These represent earlier dwellings and outbuildings of the Tordarroch estate. The state of decay varies from building to building. The best preserved are 2a and 2b which are recorded on the 1:2500 map so were presumably occupied within the last 150 years.

2a) is set in a hollow formed by two hills. Most of the masonry is still visible and where it has been built into the hill on the W side its walls stand over 2.0 m high. Its walls are very regularly built with crisp right angles. It appears to have been built in two phases. First the house portion (the S end) which is 11.0 N-S by 6.0 m, to which was added a two celled byre, which is 7.0m N-S by 6.0 m. The original entrance to the byre portion occupied approximately half of the E wall; the entrance to the house portion was not located. The walls are 0.6 m throughout.

2b) was described by a local informant as the former 'Estate Office' where rents had been paid. Only the larger foundation stones of this building remain. Overall it is 12.0 m by 5.3 m and has a projecting rectangular porch in the middle on its SE side, which measures 2.2 m by 3.1 m. The foundations of the porch are made from massive orthostats.

2c) occupied (with 2d) a flat hill nearly as high as the fort opposite. It survives only as the grassed-over footings of a long house. It measures 18.0 N-S m by 5.75. No entrance was seen.

2d) survives as grassed-over foundations except in the NE corner where the orthostatic foundation boulders still stand over 1.0 m high. It measures 18.0 m E-W by 4.75 m and the original wall thickness appears to have been 0.9 m. No clear entrances.

2e) is located in the gully between the hills occupied by the fort and by 2c and 2d. It is set into the hillside and has a flat facade. The rear interior wall stands 1.5 m. Its interior is round, c. 3.3 m diameter, its exterior c. 6.0 m E-W by 7.0 m. The only opening is a narrow gap in the W side; the facing stones still survive showing that its original width was 0.6 m. This is a well-built structure with signs of a corbelled roof. Its state of preservation is comparable to that of house 2a. It is probably best interpreted as a grain or malting kiln.

Depopulated Settlement 3 - New, NH 6790 3300

X NH63SE 0089

This settlement consists of two badly decayed buildings in an

area of rough grazing just S of the prehistoric settlement. Strictly in terms of degree of decay this looks the oldest of the three historic settlements. Only two buildings were located but under better conditions more might be located.

3a) is an unusual structure. It consists of two possibly three cells linked together in a line. Overall the building measures c. 14.5 m E-W by c. 5.0 m. The largest cell to the SE has an internal area of approximately 4.0 m square, the middle chamber is closer to 3.0 m square and the possible third chamber is incomplete, but it too may have been about 3.0 m square. The entrance seems to have been in the SE side of the middle chamber. This is not a typical pre-Improvement long house. It may be a medieval long house or, more tentatively, a cellular house of the Pictish period.

3b) is a very ruinous long house which survives only as grassed over rubble spreads except at the gable ends where the foundation boulders are visible. It measures 12.5 m N-S by 4.2 m and apparently has two opposed entrances on the long sides c. 4.0 from the S end. Its proximity to 3a suggests they may be related.

Rectangular Enclosure - New, NH 6765 3315

NH 63SE0087

This enclosure is the closest monument to the location given for antiquity NH63SE22, which is described only as 'traces of depopulation and rock outcrop'.

It is a simple enclosure with no sign of settlement nearby or within it. It is set in a natural hollow formed by three hills. The rubble and boulder walls of the enclosure follow the contours of the hills, but do not approach their crests. Although basically rectangular in design the walls deviate to incorporate rock outcrops into the circuit. The effect on the ground is much more rectangular than it looks in plan. Overall its size is c. 40 m by 35 m, with an entrance which is at least 15, if not 20 m, wide. The entrance is on the SW side, the side on which there is no hill. Its form suggests that it is a stock enclosure, but its location away from the known areas of settlement is peculiar.

The most striking thing about the enclosure is that it is invisible unless one is standing directly above it. This invisibility is caused by the selection of the setting and by the siting of the walls. Although primitive the condition of the walls does not suggest any great antiquity. The enclosure may be medieval or later, but without question it was built to hide a small herd of cattle or flock of sheep.

3.0 COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the previously known sites there are several areas of particular interest at Tordarroch. The Pictish burials, especially the large group PC1 are of outstanding importance. Not only should they be preserved but they should be surveyed in more detail, preferably after clearing the vegetation. Similarly the possible cairns SE of the Ring Cairn would benefit from a closer examination under better conditions. Without doubt the possible earthen barrow is the most visually striking of the newly recorded burial monuments. It should be preserved. The other two 'Pictish Cemeteries' (PC 2 and 3) are not as impressive as PC 1, but each includes one unequivocal square cairn - they should be left undisturbed or excavated.

The fort S of Tordarroch itself is of interest mostly because of its proximity to the house/castle site. At the moment it is somewhat neglected. The excavation and the pits could be backfilled. The unenclosed prehistoric settlement is not particularly unusual but it does include a good range of monuments which need not be disturbed. Unfortunately most of the agricultural features (reported by Robert Gourlay and Jill Harden) eluded detection in this survey, but ideally some of them should be preserved along side the dwellings.

The Depopulated Settlement S of Tordarroch house are mostly of interest because of their historical potential, but purely in terms of antiquity Depopulated Settlements 1 and 3 are probably more interesting. Both could be medieval. The unusual structure 3a in particular requires a more detailed survey and is worthy of preservation. The rectangular enclosure, if above interpretation is correct, seems to make an important statement about cattle raiding in the not too distant past and is therefore of interest.

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TORDARROCH
Archaeological Survey
APG 89
1:2500

- KNOWN SITES
■ NEW SITES
--- LIMITS OF AREA SURVEYED
--- SURVEY VISIBILITY
⊕ = GOOD ⊖ = FAIR
⊙ = POOR

