

438/SKL

An Archaeological Watching Brief at Torvaig, Skye



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Introduction

The author was appointed to carry out an archaeological watching brief on the section of a new water pipe being laid to Torvaig, Skye, as highlighted on **Fig 1**. This watching brief had been requested by the **Highland Council Archaeology Section** as part of the planning consent for the construction of this new pipeline. The conditions of this brief are listed in the accompanying appendix.

The highlighted area was chosen for this watching brief because it lay close to the nationally important prehistoric fort known as *Dun Gershaider* and also because it ran past a now abandoned crofting settlement.

Method

After an initial deskbound study, the author spent a total of 4 days on site in Skye observing the trench cut. The first of these days was abortive as the author had not been informed that the contractors had been delayed by a more rocky terrain than had been anticipated. This terrain meant that a cut which had been anticipated as taking 2-3 days, in fact took nearly 6 days to complete. However it soon became clear that the high levels of groundwater, exacerbated by the predominantly wet weather, and the disturbance required to crack the rock outcrops, meant that little could be usefully observed during the pipetrench cut. The author therefore, concentrated his efforts on examining the visible archaeological remains in advance of the machine workings. To this end a series of 3 trenches were cut across enclosure walls. The most westerly enclosure wall was not examined for health reasons because it lay next to an outflow from a septic tank!

Historical background

The pipeline route ran immediately to the north of a well-preserved longhouse and associated enclosure. A local informant (*R Miket pers comm*) has identified this as the farm of *Malegan*, recorded on an estate map of 1810 drawn by John Blackadder. However *Maligan* is currently identified as a settlement centred at NG 482 457 and Blackadder's map shows *Malegan* lying to the west of the *Abhain Chreag* (River Craiga). It is more likely that this formed part of Scurrybreck Farm, cleared in 1811 for sheep and it may possibly have been called *Martaig*, as this is the name of the neighbouring burn.

An earlier map of the Macdonald estate, drawn by Mathew Stobie in 1766, was also examined and initially it was thought that the farm was not recorded on this plan. However a re-examination of this plan suggests that the farm may be shown on the north edge of an extensive area of arable ground.

Field examination

On the opposite side of the road to the pipe cut, on a sharp bend of the Martaig Burn at NG 4939 4521 are the remains of a burnt mound [*see Fig 3(i)*]. It measures 0.2m high by 1.2m wide and is capped by a more recent structure/terrace. It was not examined in detail but probably dates to 2-3,000 years ago. It was perhaps contemporary with *Dun Gershaider* and

was the only evidence for prehistoric occupation in this immediate area.

In the neighbourhood are a complex of earth and stone banks that form a whole series of enclosures, much more extensive than has been recorded on the 1877, 1905 or current OS maps. They extend well to the north east of the present road. The majority of these enclosures do not show signs of rig cultivation, though there are areas of arable, such as the field shown at the east end on Fig 1.

The walls of the most prominent enclosure survived to a height of over 1 metre and appeared to be a mixed turf and stone construction. The stones were particularly evident at the base of the walls and large stones were also concentrated at the entrance to this enclosure at the north east corner. 3 unroofed buildings were shown here in 1905 and on the current OS edition, though not in 1877. They are not shown on the map accompanying this report as they were largely destroyed when the current building was constructed two years ago.

The nature of the walling and its construction would be consistent with an 18th century stock enclosure. It is known that in the 18th century, Skye became an important centre for rearing and exporting cattle.

The surviving building, as seen on Fig 3, is a substantial ruin 4m by 11m and has a well-preserved enclosure 6m by 5m on the north west side. The building shown to the south west on Fig 1, has now been demolished and appears to have been of a more modern construction. Though not shown on the earlier OS maps, it is likely to have been built and occupied in the 18th century.

Archaeological Results

As can be seen from the frontispiece, the necessity to break rock to create a sufficient bedding trench for the pipe caused a very messy edge to the trench. As described above it was decided that the visible features should be examined by hand.

Trench I

A small trench was cut across the entrance to the large enclosure, as it was considered that the substantial wall here might mark a building. The size of the trench and the poor weather conditions handicapped results. From the OS maps it is possible that remains of a building were seen, but no convincing floor level was seen. The stones seen in layer (4) were interpreted as the surface of the **B** horizon, being similar to exposures at the road side.

Trenches II & III

These were cut as shown on the edge of a shallow terrace. This was revealed to be a stone revetted wall defining an area of presumed arable ground. Faint linear furrows observed here between 3 and 5 metres apart are thought to be the remains of cultivation ridges. No finds were recovered and the torrential rain prevented a detailed examination of the soils. Sections were drawn of the excavated features as shown overleaf. From what was observed the stone-free nature of the soil would be consistent with arable cultivation and there clearly had been a build-up of soil against this wall. The quality of the soil was poor and heavily panned, though

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as the site may have been abandoned for nearly 200 years this may be the result of later leaching of the minerals from the soil.

Conclusions

The discoveries were consistent with the remains of a late 18th century farming complex, predominantly arable in nature. Though the site may have been used in earlier periods, no evidence for such an occupation was found on the line of the pipe trench.

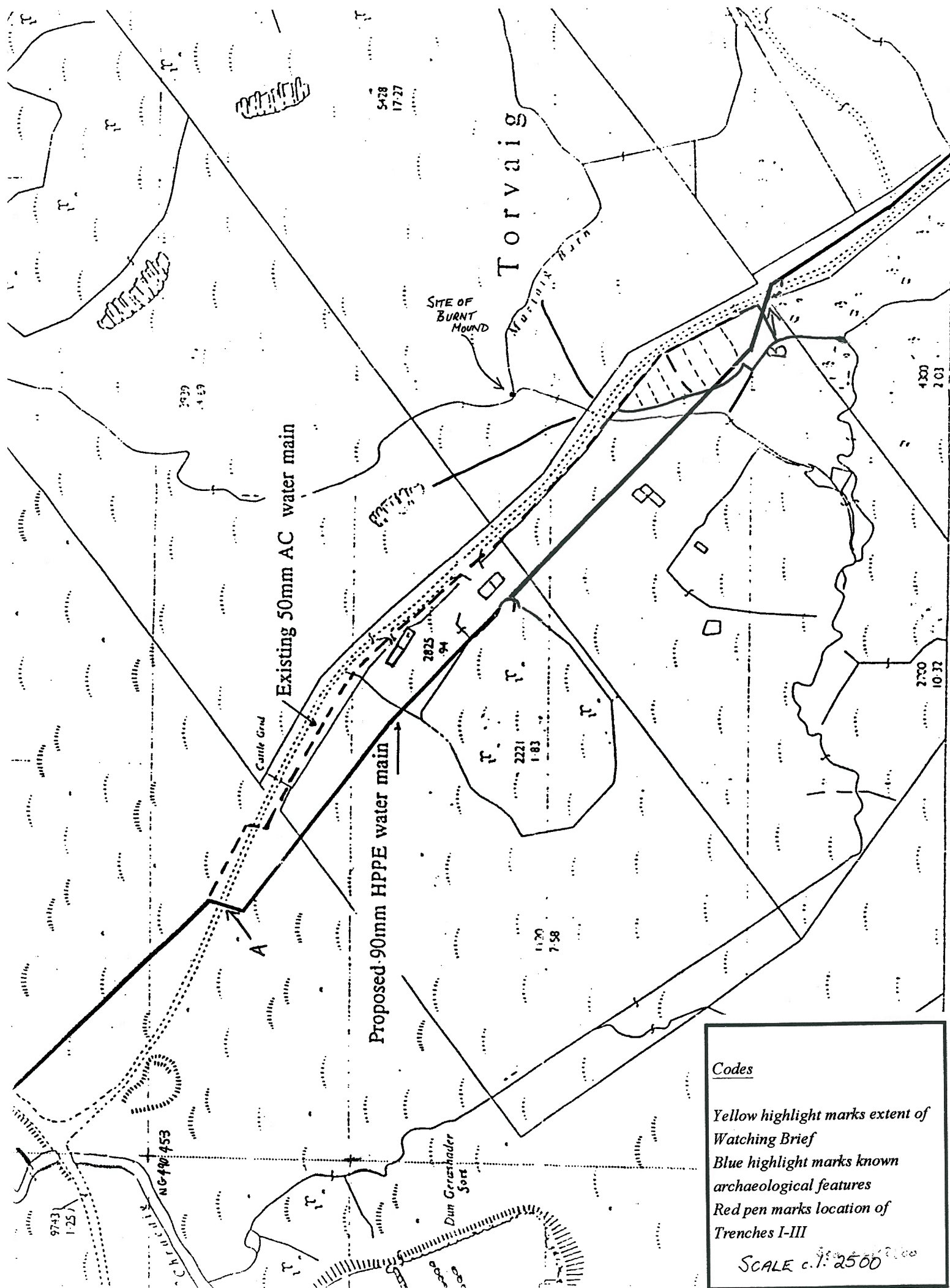
It should also be noted that construction of these pipe trenches has a much wider impact than the line of the pipe trench. In general a minimum of 10 metres width was disturbed and where the east wall of the large enclosure was concerned c14 metres of the wall was destroyed.

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Acknowledgements

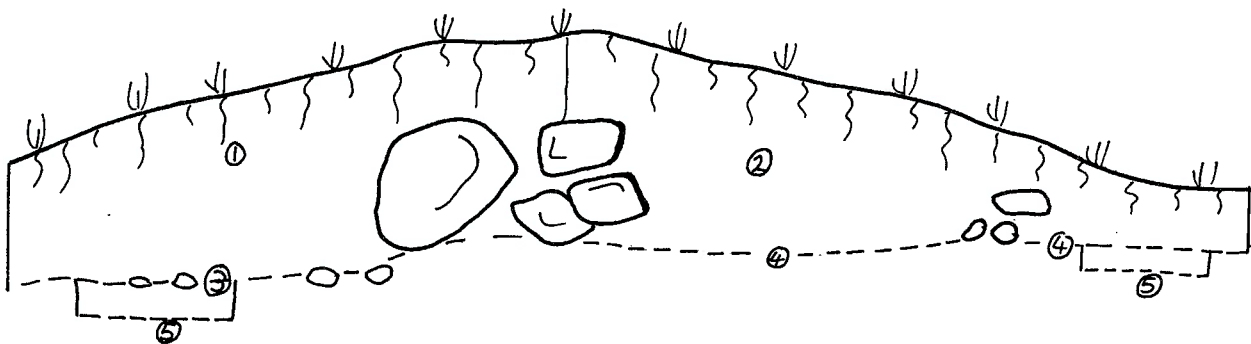
I would like to express my thanks to Roger Miket of Skye & Lochalsh Area, Highland Council, for directing me to the historical record on this site.

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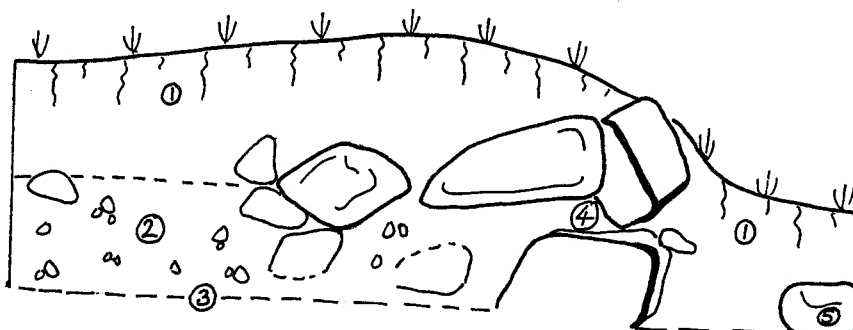
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Trench 1 Southwest facing Section through East wall of large Enclosure Scale 1:20



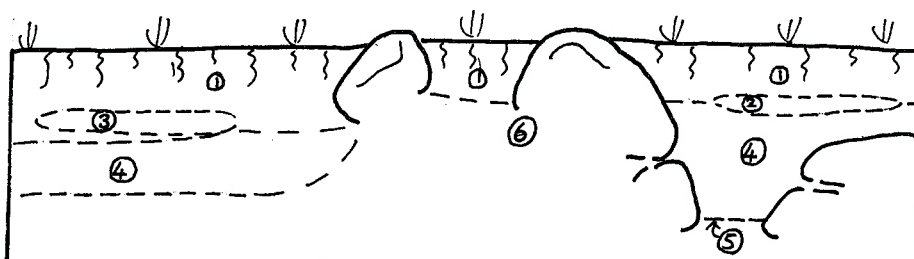
- (1) *Brown clayish loam with bracken roots, virtually stone-free and possibly derived from collapsed turf.*
- (2) *Similar to (1) but more bracken roots & darker brown in colour*
- (3) *Pale brown clayish loam with a few small rounded 80mm av. diam - c30% smaller stones when excavated. Probably B horizon*
- (4) *Similar to (3) except no stones as drawn*
- (5) *Small cuts through (3) & (4) revealed an iron-panned subsoil*
- (6) *Stones of wall. No sign of bonding material different to surrounding soil.*

Trench 2 East facing section through south wall of Enclosure on east side Scale 1:20



- (1) *Brown clayish loam, largely stone-free*
- (2) *Under water at time of recording - similar brown clayish loam but much stonier*
- (3) *Iron-pan not penetrated*
- (4) *Faced stone dyke to south but only irregular stones up slope.*
- (5) *Rounded stone - possibly collapse from (4)*

Trench 3 West facing section through east wall of Enclosure on east side



- (1) *Brown fibrous clayish loam*
- (2) *Orange-brown slightly panned layer*
- (3) *As (2) but slightly lower and not sandy*
- (4) *Brown v. clayish loam. Almost granular structure*
- (5) *Iron-pan not penetrated*
- (6) *Stones of wall. Obscured by surface water*



Fig 2 **Looking west at house site with Dun Gershader and modern house in background.**



Fig 3(i) Looking southeast at revetting wall in Trench II



Fig 3(ii) Looking south past burnt mound on Martaig Burn to site of house.