

CENTRE *for* FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY

University of Edinburgh

October 1999

Commissioned by Kenneth Stewart (Strathpeffer) Ltd

**A836 Road improvements:
Farr to Kirtomy, Sutherland
Archaeological excavation of two clearance cairns
and archaeological watching brief
Report No. 469**

This document has been prepared in accordance with CFA standard operating procedures.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

0.	Summary	3
1.	Introduction	4
2.	Methods Statement	8
3.	Archaeological Results	10
4	Conclusions	14
5.	References	15

Appendices

1.	Summary context lists and matrix diagrams.	15
2.	Finds register	18
3.	Field drawings register.	18
4.	Photographic register.	19
5.	Copy of Highland Council Specification	20

Illustrations

Fig. 1	General location map	6
Fig. 2	Detailed location map showing positions of cairns and area 7 of watching brief.	
Fig. 3	Plan and south-facing section of Trench 1 (Cairn 24)	12
Fig. 4	Plan and west-facing section of Trench 2 (Cairn 28)	13

Colour illustrations

Plate 1: general shot of Cairn 24.	25
Plate 2: general shot of Cairn 28.	25

0. SUMMARY

- 0.1 This report describes the results of an archaeological excavation of two clearance cairns and a watching brief undertaken by the Centre for Field Archaeology (CFA) in February and April respectively, at Fiscary, Sutherland, in advance of improvements to the A836 Thurso-Tongue road (Farr to Kirtomy section). The work was commissioned by Kenneth Stewart (Strathpeffer) Ltd. A Specification for the archaeological work was prepared by Highland Council Archaeology Service.
- 0.2 Two clearance cairns had been identified by a previous survey as under threat from the proposed road improvements. Given the density of prehistoric settlement within the vicinity of the road improvements it was considered possible by Highland Council Archaeology Service that further archaeological remains may be present and that an archaeological watching brief should be maintained during topsoil stripping operations of areas to the north of the existing road, between chainages -45 to 600. However, during road construction it was considered by the contractor that it was unnecessary to strip-widen the road between chainages -45 and 300. The watching brief was therefore conducted between the topsoil stripping between chainages 300-600.
- 0.3 The objective of this project was to record, to professional standards, any features and objects of archaeological importance which would be damaged or destroyed by this development.
- 0.4 Excavation has shown that Cairn 24 and Cairn 28 are clearance cairns. Cairn 24 exhibits at least two dumping episodes, while Cairn 28 appears to represent a single deposit. Cairn 24 contained three prehistoric pottery sherds, whose presence suggests that this cairn, and most likely the surrounding cairns, are of considerable antiquity and relate to activity associated with the adjacent roundhouse settlement.
- 0.5 No archaeologically significant features, finds or deposits were found during the watching brief during between chainages 300-600.
- 0.6 A summary of results will be produced for publication in *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland 1999*. No further post-excavation work or publication is recommended. The project archive, comprising all CFA record sheets, plans and reports, will be deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland. Finds are subject to the Scots law of Treasure Trove and *Bona Vacantia* and will be reported to the Crown Agent for disposal.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 General

1.1.1 This report describes the results of an archaeological excavation of two clearance cairns and a watching brief undertaken by the Centre for Field Archaeology (CFA) in February and April respectively, at Fiscary, Sutherland (Fig. 1), in advance of improvements to the A836 Thurso-Tongue road (Farr to Kirtomy section). The work was commissioned by Kenneth Stewart (Strathpeffer) Ltd. A Specification for the archaeological work prepared by Highland Council Archaeology Service.

1.1.2 References to chainage measurements within this report refer to those on plans RS6094/ARCH1, RS6094/1-3 sent to CFA on 3 December 1998.

1.2 Background

1.2.1 The general project area contains a concentration of prehistoric settlement remains, comprising roundhouses (hut-circles), clearance cairns, field banks and artefact findspots. The area comprises a component of Mercer's survey of Northern Scotland (Mercer 1981). It was subject to a rapid desk-based assessment and archaeological field survey in October 1997 by Alba Archaeology Ltd (Rideout 1997; 1999), based upon a Specification for archaeological work prepared by the Highland Council Archaeology Service. This survey provided a re-assessment of Mercer's survey, identified archaeological sites under threat from the proposed road improvements and outlined suitable mitigation measures.

1.2.2 Two sites were identified as under threat from road improvements; lying within the corridor of the strip-widening (Fig. 2). These comprised two clearance cairns (No. 24, NGR: NC 7327 6223; and No. 28, NGR: NC 7330 6223; Rideout 1997) which formed components of a larger settlement complex centred at NGR: NC 731 623 (NMRS ref: NC76SW7).

1.2.3 Given the density of settlement within the vicinity of the road improvements it was considered likely by Highland Council Archaeology Service that further archaeological remains would be present and that an archaeological watching brief would be maintained during topsoil stripping operations of areas to the north of the existing road, between chainages -45 to 600.

1.3 Aims and Objectives

The objectives of this project were to record, to professional standards, any features and objects of archaeological importance which would be damaged or destroyed by this development.

1.4 Weather and ground conditions

- 1.4.1 Weather conditions during the excavation of the clearance cairns and watching brief was generally clement. The general area was covered in dead bracken.

1.5 Discovery & Excavation in Scotland 1999

- 1.5.1 A summary of results will be produced for publication in *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland 1999*.

1.6 Analysis and Reporting

- 1.6.1 Following the completion of fieldwork, rapid analyses were undertaken on the finds recovered during the excavation and watching brief.

1.7 Archiving and finds disposal

- 1.7.1 The project archive, comprising all CFA record sheets, plans and reports, will be deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland within six months of completion of fieldwork and any relevant post-excavation analysis. Finds will be subject to the Scots law of Treasure Trove and Bona Vacantia, and will be reported to the Crown Agent for disposal.

1.8 Acknowledgements

- 1.8.1 CFA wishes to thank Roddy Mackenzie, Site Agent for Kenneth Stewart (Strathpeffer) Ltd; Kevin Silverton, Resident Engineer for Highland Council; and Dorothy Low of Highland Council Archaeology Service.

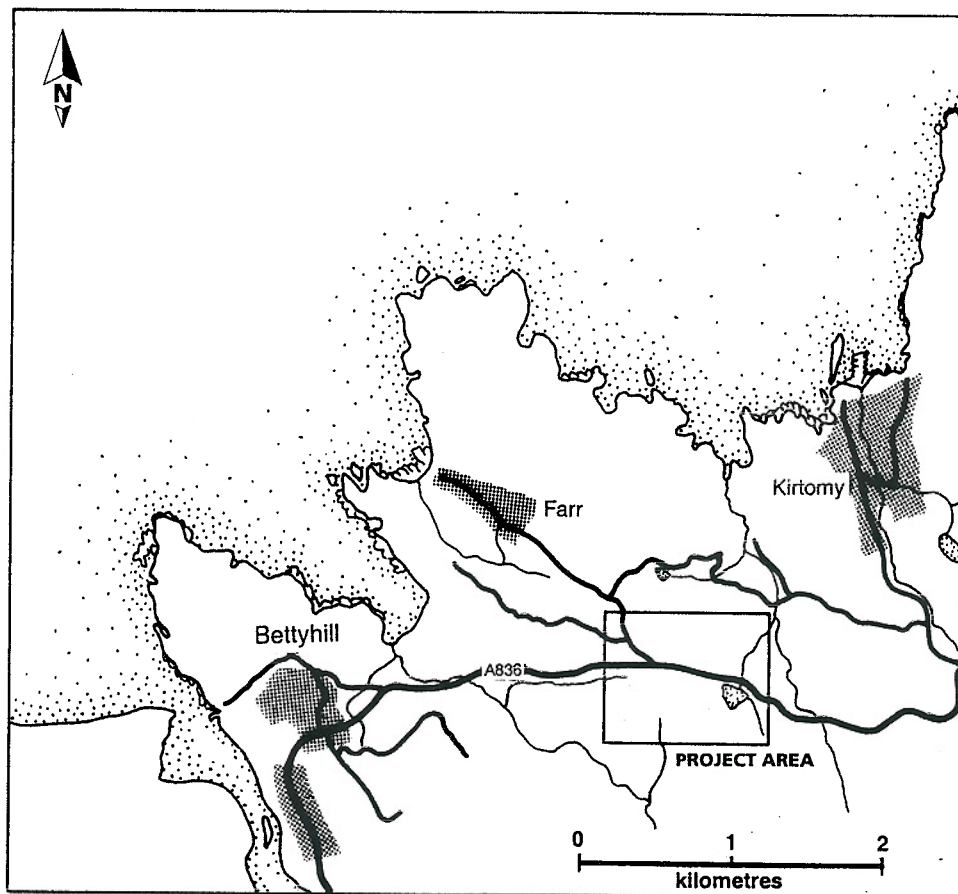
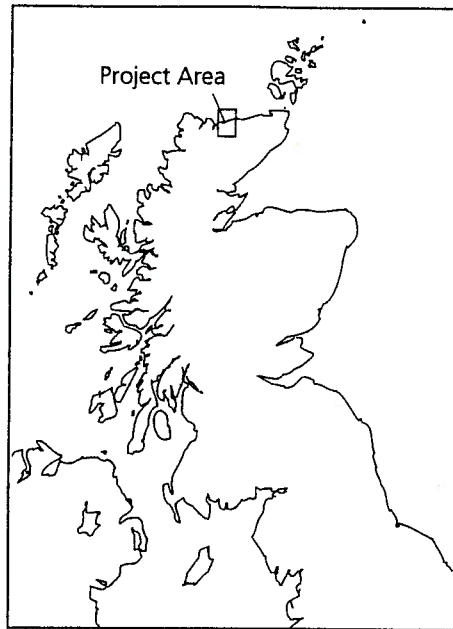


Fig. 1 - General location map

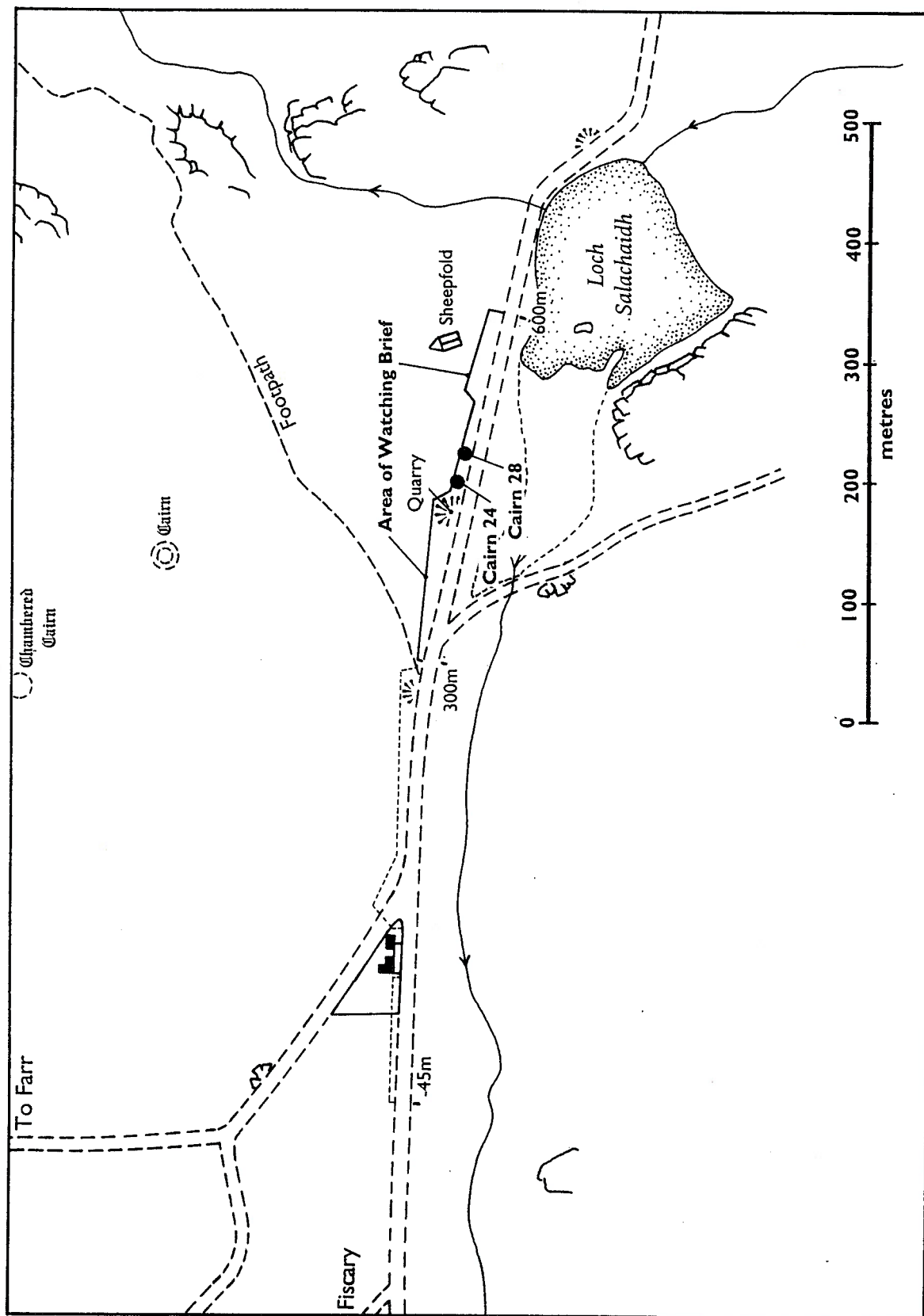


Fig. 2 - Detailed location map showing positions of cairns and area of watching brief.

2. METHODS STATEMENT

2.1 General

- 2.1.1 All work was conducted with regard to the Codes and Standards established by the Institute of Field Archaeologists.

2.2 Excavation

- 2.2.1 Both cairns were photographed prior to excavation. A trench was positioned over half of each clearance cairn, with the intention that further excavation of the cairns would be conducted if necessary. All excavation was conducted by hand.

Trench 1 (16m²)

- 2.2.2 Trench 1 measured c. 8m east-west by 2m north-south and was positioned over the southern (eroding) section of Cairn 24. Upon deturfing the exposed stone within the trench and the unexcavated side of the cairn was planned, as the cairn displayed possible structural form prior to excavation. A c. 1m wide trench was excavated through the centre of the cairn to subsoil level to provide a complete profile of the cairn.

Trench 2 (13.7m²)

- 2.2.3 Trench 2 was T-shaped and had maximal dimensions of c. 5.7m north-south by 3m east west and was positioned across the western side of Cairn 28. All stonework and deposits were removed from this trench with the exception of some massive boulders situated on the subsoil surface.

2.3 Watching brief

- 2.3.1 A watching brief was conducted during the topsoil stripping between chainages 300-600 in April 1999. During road construction it was considered unnecessary by the contractors to strip-widen the road between chainages -45 and 300, as had been previously proposed. Topsoil-stripping was conducted, where possible, by a mechanical excavator using a smooth-bladed bucket.

2.4 Recording

- 2.4.1 Excavation proceeded according to standard stratigraphic principles. Recording was conducted according to established CFA methods and included the use of CFA record forms, drawing in plan and photography. All artefacts were collected for examination. No samples were taken as no archaeologically appropriate deposits were encountered.

2.5 Analysis

- 2.5.1 Following the completion of fieldwork a programme of preliminary analysis was conducted. Tasks undertaken included preliminary stratigraphic analysis; specialist assessment of the artefact assemblage, cataloguing of all finds, drawings, photographs and other site records; preparation of illustrations.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

3.1 General

3.1.1 Numbers in bold parentheses refer to context numbers listed in Appendix 1.

3.2 Cairn 24, Trench 1 (Fig. 3; Plate 1)

3.2.1 The survey report (Rideout 1997, 12) described Cairn 24 as:

‘a heather and bracken-covered area of clearance heaps, 6.5m by 3.5m and 0.6m high, cut by the present road cutting (to the south). Stones show in the exposed section. A line of stones, possibly a wall, runs eastwards along the edge of the road cutting for c. 9m from the cairn’.

3.2.2 Upon arrival the cairn was found to comprise a turf, heather and bracken covered sub-rectangular mound of stones measuring 7.2m east-west by 4.4-5m north-south. Two depressions within the centre of the mound, subdivided by a line of stones gave the impression that the remains were possibly structural (Fig. 3). The southern side of the cairn was as described above.

3.2.3 Upon excavation the cairn was found to measure c. 7.5m east-west by 4-5m north-south and up to 1m in height. At least two separate dumping episodes were apparent: the western side of the cairn appears to be the earlier, which was subsequently added to on its eastern side (Fig. 3).

3.2.4 The western side measured c. 4.8m by 4.2m and comprised large angular and sub-angular boulders (**106**) contained within a topsoil derived deposit (**103**), although much of the stone heap was voided. Larger stones tended to occur at the base and edges of the cairn, and lay directly upon the subsoil (**109**). The upper component of the cairn comprised smaller angular stones (**107**).

3.2.5 The eastern side of the cairn was characterised by large angular and tabular boulders within a matrix similar to 103 (**110**). Small angular stones formed the upper component of the cairn on this side.

3.2.6 A topsoil derived loose deposit (**104**) was present within the eastern half of the cairn and overlying the earlier cairn to the west. A compact, localised deposit, possibly windblown, was present on the upper eastern side of the cairn (**105**).

3.2.7 Three prehistoric pottery sherds (SFN 1 and SFN 2) were recovered from a localised deposit (**102**) present on the upper western side of the cairn. An examination of the fabric and style show it is closely comparable to that of sherds recovered from the excavation of a roundhouse at Armadale (Strachan 1996, Strachan 1997) dated to the second half of the first millennium BC.

3.2.8 No buried soils or evidence for cultivation were found within Trench 1. Excavation revealed that no structure was present within the cairn. The

relationship between the cairn and the stone bank referred to by Rideout was not determined as the bank terminated beyond the trench.

3.3 Cairn 28, Trench 2 (Fig. 4;Plate 2)

- 3.3.1 The survey report (Rideout 1997, 12) described Cairn 28 as 'an irregular-shaped clearance cairn, 5m in diameter and 1.2m high'.
- 3.3.2 Upon arrival the cairn was found to comprise a turf and bracken covered mound, c. 5.6m in diameter, with the occasional stone visible protruding through the turf. The northern side of the cairn was notably steep, sloping more gently to the south and west (Fig. 4).
- 3.3.3 Upon excavation the cairn was found to measure 4.3m north-south by 5.6m east-west, and stood to c. 0.8m high (max). It consisted of large angular and sub-angular boulders (203), which predominated towards the base and edges of the cairn . These lay directly upon the subsoil (204). Medium and small angular and sub-angular stones were present above the larger stones. The areas between the stones occasionally filled with topsoil, peat and bracken roots (Fig. 4).
- 3.3.4 A localised deposit (202) measuring c. 0.5m deep was located banking over the northern side of the cairn. This accounted for the steepness of the cairn here and most likely represents material washed down the hill. It was not represented elsewhere within the trench.
- 3.3.5 No buried soils or evidence for cultivation were found within Trench 2. There was no evidence of internal structure to the cairn.

3.4 Watching brief

- 3.4.1 No archaeological features or significant deposits were located during the watching brief.

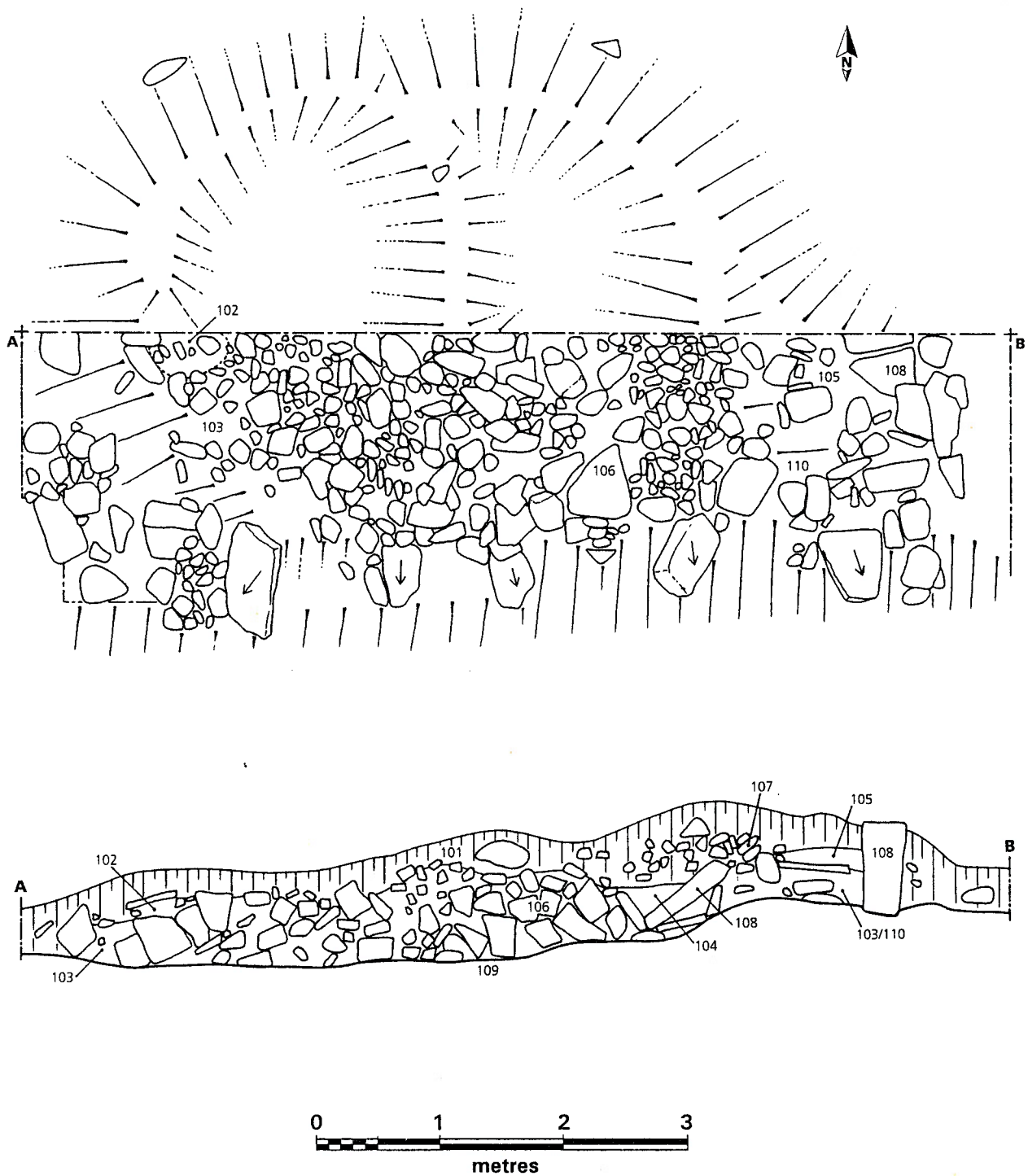


Fig. 3 - Plan and south-facing section of Trench 1 (Cairn 24).

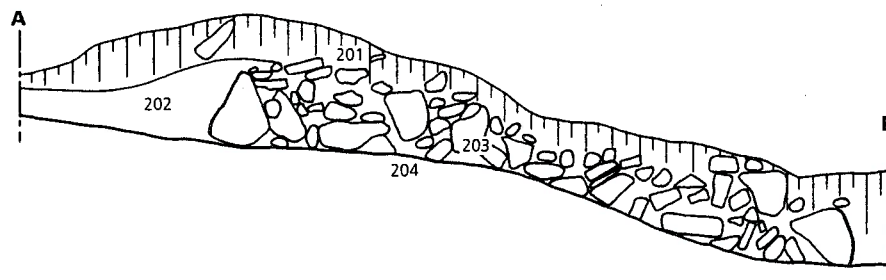
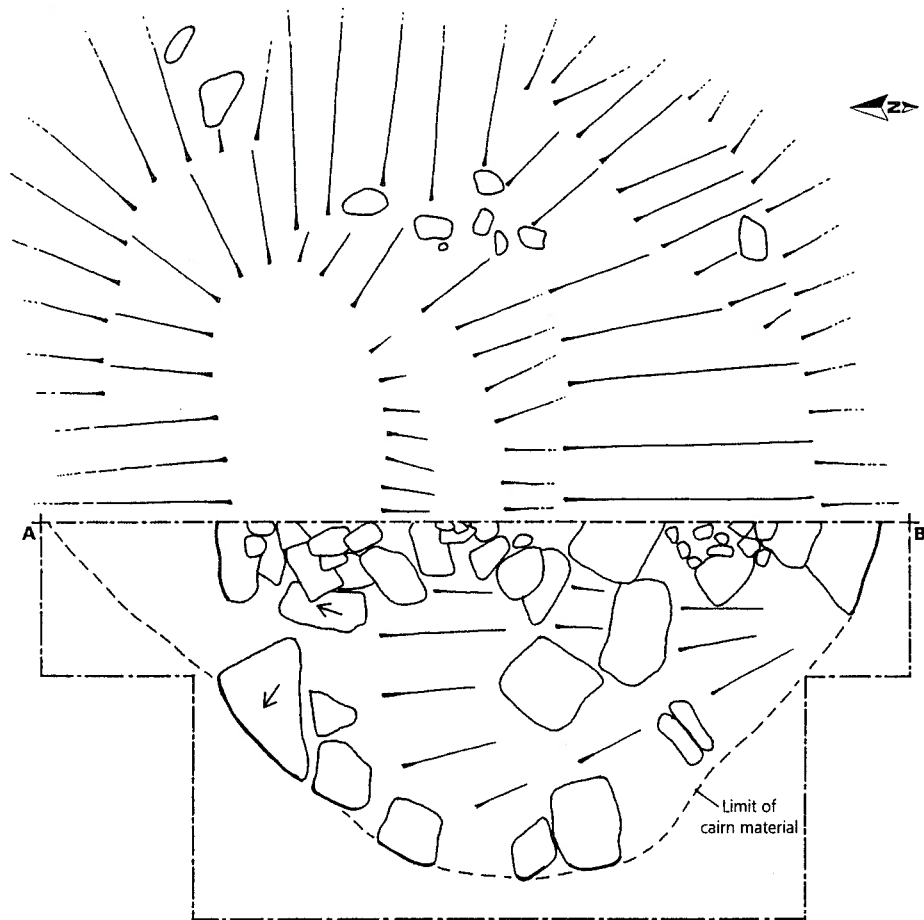


Fig. 4 - Plan and west-facing section of Trench 2 (Cairn 28).

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Excavation

- 4.1.1 Excavation has shown that Cairn 24 and Cairn 28 are clearance cairns. Cairn 24 exhibits at least two dumping episodes, while Cairn 28 appears to represent a single dump.
- 4.1.2 Cairn 24 contained three prehistoric pottery sherds whose presence suggests that this cairn, and most likely the surrounding cairns, are of considerable antiquity and relate to activity associated with the adjacent roundhouse settlement. Similar roundhouses excavated at Armadale (Strachan 1996, Strachan 1997) have been dated to the second half of the first millennium BC.
- 4.1.3 Both cairns contained comparable deposits; the hill wash deposit (202) from Cairn 28 is similar to layers (102) and (105) from Cairn 24. It is considered likely that these represent either dump deposits and/or a combination of windblown and hillwash deposits.
- 4.1.4 No buried soils or evidence for cultivation were located in either trench.

4.2 Watching brief

- 4.2.1 The continuous presence of an archaeological watching brief during topsoil stripping operations between chainage 300-600 has ensured that no archaeologically significant features, finds or deposits were disturbed or destroyed during the road construction.

4.3 Further work and general comments

- 4.3.1 A summary of results will be produced for publication in *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland 1999*. No further post-excavation work or publication is recommended.
- 4.3.2 It should be noted that much of geology and topography of this region does not necessarily allow for the use of smooth-bladed bucket and under some conditions a toothed bucket is required.

5. REFERENCES

Mercer, R J 1981 *Archaeological Field Survey in Northern Scotland*, Vol II, University of Edinburgh Department of Archaeology Occasional Paper No. 7.

Rideout, J S 1997 *A836 Farr to Kirtomy: Archaeological Field Survey*, Alba Archaeology Ltd unpublished report.

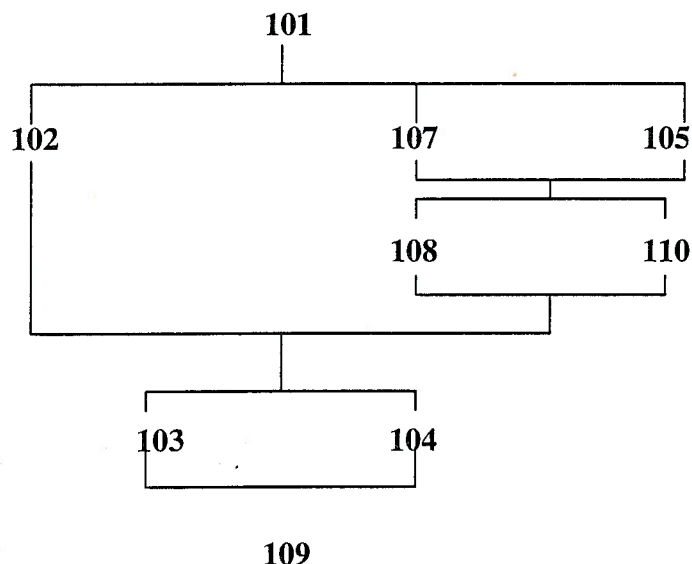
Rideout J S 1999 'A836 Farr to Kirtomy improvement (Farr parish) survey', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland 1998* (1999), 50-51. Council for Scottish Archaeology, Edinburgh.

Strachan, R. 1996 *A836 Lednagullin to Ben Ainnie , Sutherland District , Highland Region*, commissioned by Highland Regional Council Roads and Transport Department , July 1996

Strachan, R 1997 'Armada (Farr parish) Archaeological excavations', *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland 1996* (1997), 63-4. Council for Scottish Archaeology, Edinburgh.

APPENDIX 1 - Summary context lists and matrix diagrams

Trench 1, Cairn 24: context list and matrix diagram



- 101 - Peat, turf and bracken roots.
- 102 - Isolated deposit of compact light brown silty sand, fine in texture containing three pot sherds (SFN1 and SFN 2).
- 103 - Matrix supporting cairn material 106, comprising a black/grey sandy-clay, topsoil derived deposit, with charcoal flecks and bracken roots throughout. Compact at western end of cairn but elsewhere loose.
- 104 - Isolated deposit of dark brown silty and gritty sand, medium-coarse in texture, very loose and with bracken roots throughout.
- 105 - Mid-brown fine sandy-clay containing small fragments of degraded stone - probable hillwash and/or windblown deposit.
- 106 - Large-medium sized angular and sub-angular boulders forming western cairn material.
- 107 - Small-medium sized angular stones forming upper western component of cairn, contained within 101.
- 108 - Large and medium-sized angular stones forming eastern component of cairn.
- 109 - Subsoil of compact mid/light brown/yellow sand with occasional iron-panning.
- 110 - Matrix supporting eastern cairn material 108, comprising a black/grey sandy-clay, topsoil derived deposit, with charcoal flecks and bracken roots throughout. Identical to 103.

Trench 2, Cairn 28: context list and matrix diagram

201

|

202

|

203

|

204

- 201 - Peat/turf and bracken.
- 202 - Deposit of light brown silty sandy clay, fine in texture with small degraded sandstone pieces banking over northern side of cairn. The origin for this deposit is unclear but is most likely a hillwash and/or windblown deposit.
- 203 - Cairn material comprising large and very large angular and sub-angular boulders. Larger stones tend to occur towards to base and edges of cairn. Medium-smaller stones form upper component. Stones are tightly packed with infill of topsoil, peat and bracken roots.
- 204 - Subsoil of light brown/yellow sand.

APPENDIX 2

Finds register

SFN	Trench	Context	Description
1	1	102	two adjoining pot sherds
2	1	102	pot sherd (rim)

APPENDIX 3

Field drawings register

Dwg No.	Sheet No.	Trench	Plan/sect	Contexts	Scale
1	1 + 2	1	Plan	101-3, 105-110,	1:20
2	3+4	2	Plan	201-204	1:20
3	5	1	Section	101-110	1:20
4	5	2	Section	201-204	1:20

APPENDIX 4

Photographic Register

Colour slide Film No. 1 and Black & White film No. 2

Shots	Site	Description	Taken From
1-2	Cairn 28	pre-excavation/working shot	W
3-4	Cairn 24	pre-excavation shot	N
5-6	Cairn 24	half-excavated	W
7-8	Cairn 24	half-excavated	W
9-10	Cairn 24	half-excavated	E
11-12	Cairn 24	half-excavated	E (detail)
13-14	Cairn 24	half-excavated	E
15-16	Cairn 24	general, half-excavated with wall	SE
17-18	Cairn 24	general, half-excavated	W
19-20	Cairn 24	general, half-excavated	S
21-23	Cairn 24	general, half-excavated	SE
24-27	Cairn 28	general, half-excavated	W
28-29	Cairn 28	post-excavation shot	S
30-31	Cairn 28	post-excavation shot	NW
32-33	Cairn 28	post-excavation shot	N
34-35	Cairn 28	post-excavation shot	NW
36-37	Cairn 28	post-excavation shot	SW

Colour slide Film No. 3 and Black & White film No. 4

Shots	Site	Description	Taken From
1-4	Cairn 24	post-excavation	SW
5-6	Cairn 24	post-excavation	SE
7-22	Cairn 24	sequential shots of south-facing section	S
23-24	Cairns 24/28	general location shots	NW
25-26	Cairns 24/28	general location shots	W

APPENDIKX 5 - Copy of Highland Council Specification

HIGHLAND COUNCIL PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICE Archaeology Service

Specification for archaeological work

FARR - KIRTOMY ROAD IMPROVEMENTS

Archaeological Excavation and Watching Brief For Section 1 (Chainage -45 to Ch. 1750)

Background

This specification has been produced in response to the need for an archaeological excavation to be carried out prior to this development taking place. It is for a *minimum* standard of work; a higher standard may be offered and accepted.

Terms of Reference

This specification is for archaeological recording work on the A836 Farr Kirtomy Roadline. It is based on Drawing numbers RS6094, 1 to 3, along with the "A836 Farr to Kirtomy Archaeological Field Survey" by Alba Archaeology(copy enclosed).

Rates should be obtained from archaeological contractors on the basis of this specification.

Any reference to 'archaeologist' in this specification is to be taken to mean a qualified and experienced practitioner acceptable to the Engineer in consultation with the Highland Council Archaeologist. This is to ensure that work is carried out to professional standards. The project should be carried out by, or under the immediate direction of, a Member of the Institute of Field Archaeologists or an archaeologist of equivalent standing.

Objectives

1. To record, to professional standards, any features and objects of archaeological importance which will be damaged or destroyed by this development.

Method

An archaeological excavation will be carried out in line with the following principles. Contractors can suggest variations to these in their tender documents if desired. Costings for any such variations should be included separately.

EXCAVATION

The projected roadline suggests that a small number of clearance cairns will be affected by the works. These are numbered in the Alba report as 24 and 28. Both of these cairns should be excavated prior to the start of site works, to ensure their preservation by record. This excavation should be undertaken as a half section to begin with. Only if the cairns appear to of archaeological interest, ie more than a pile of stones, should full excavation be carried out.

WATCHING BRIEF

Due to the likliehood of further, as yet unrecorded archaeological remains being present, a Watching Brief must be carried out between chainages -45 to chainage 600 to all topsoil strip operations of areas to the north of the existing road.

A watching brief will be conducted by an archaeologist on site groundworks so that any finds or features of importance can be recorded to professional standards. Where there will be machinery operating in more than one area at one time, there will be a need to have more than one archaeologist on site, to ensure continual monitoring of the works. For example, if there are 3 areas being worked upon concurrently, then 3 archaeologists will be required.

Those carrying out site works will need to work closely with the archaeologist and provide all necessary access and other arrangements. **Where machinery is to be used for top soil stripping, a straight-edged bucket must be used on a back acting machine.** Care will need to be taken to avoid over excavation, and the advice of the archaeologist on-site should be adhered to regarding this.

The archaeologist must be given every aid by the Contractor to enable the archaeological work to be carried out. The Contractor may need to use differing work practices on site than usual to enable the archaeologist to complete the work. This must be allowed for in his rates.

Where archaeological remains are discovered, the archaeologist has the right to stop machinery working in that area for a maximum of one day, to allow for the professional recording of archaeological remains.

POST EXCAVATION

An **indicative** budget for post-excavation work should be agreed with the archaeological contractor prior to the start of the excavation work. At the end of the fieldwork stage, proposals for post-excavation analysis and reporting should be presented to, and a programme for this work agreed by the Engineer, the archaeological contractor and the Highland Council Archaeologist.

Monitoring

1. The Highland Council Archaeologist will normally monitor projects to ensure that specifications are met.
2. Monitoring will normally be by unannounced site visit. Alternative or additional monitoring arrangements may be made in individual cases.
3. Prior notice of fieldwork starting dates, with contact names and local addresses, telephone numbers and directions and other arrangements for access must be given to the Highland Council Archaeologist.
4. Any unexpectedly significant or complex discoveries, or any other unexpected occurrences or conditions which might affect the agreed project work or its timetable or cost must be notified immediately to the Engineer, so that revised arrangements can be made. Reasons given later for non-completion to specification or timetable will not normally be accepted if immediate notification has not taken place.

Reporting

1. Project report

At least FOUR copies of the project report must be produced.

- One paper copy for the Engineer.
- One paper copy for the Highland Sites and Monuments Record, Planning and Development Service, Council Offices, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness IV3 5NX where it will be available for immediate consultation by the public.
- One paper copy to be deposited in the local public library
- One copy for the Highland SMR as above, on a computer disk in a format compatible with Microsoft Office 95 for Windows.

The report must be submitted to the Highland Council Archaeologist within 8 weeks of the completion of the work.

The report must include, as a minimum:

- a) Location plan showing the project area and archaeological sites and features affected
- b) Circumstances and objectives of this work, including a copy of this specification
- c) Weather and other conditions affecting fieldwork
- d) Plans, drawings and photographs of archaeological features noted
- e) A full index to any records or other material generated by the project including its location
- f) Details of any measures proposed to mitigate the impact of the application on the archaeological resource
- g) A brief analysis of the project results drawing in comparative data as appropriate.
- h) General comments and proposals for future archaeological projects arising from the carrying out of this project
- i) A set of colour slides illustrating the progress of the project

The completed report will be available for immediate public consultation for research purposes at the Highland Sites and Monuments Record. In addition, the Archaeology Service reserves the right to make the report available for research purposes, either on paper, or electronically. Subject to this, copyright will remain with the author unless specifically transferred in writing, and the Archaeology Service will assume author's copyright unless advised otherwise. Copyright will be acknowledged in all cases by the Archaeology Service.

This specification includes arranging a presentation of the project results to the local community within a year of the completion of the fieldwork. Arrangements must be agreed with the Highland Council Archaeologist.

2. Treasure Trove

The Contractor must liaise with the Assistant Curator (Archaeology) at Inverness Museum and Art Gallery prior to the start of fieldwork, regarding possible emergency conservation needs and future storage arrangements. Provision must also be made for

a cataloguing system for artefactual material which will be compatible with the needs of the institution receiving these finds. Any report to the Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer must be copied to the Highland Council Archaeologist.

Any finds, where appropriate, should also be reported to the Receiver of Wreck.

3. Discovery and Excavation in Scotland

A brief summary of the results must be sent to the Council For Scottish Archaeology for inclusion in Discovery and Excavation in Scotland.

General

- The archaeologist appointed must be of a professional standing acceptable to the Engineer in consultation with the Highland Council Archaeologist and must carry out the work according to the Code of Conduct, standards and guidelines of the Institute of Field Archaeologists.
- The Contractor has responsibility for the Health and Safety of any archaeological staff on site.
- The archaeologist is responsible for taking all necessary measures to conform with the Health and Safety at Work Acts and be covered by all necessary insurances.
- Any Health and Safety incidents on site involving the archaeologist must be immediately notified to the Health and Safety Executive.
- The archaeologist must agree a timetable for the work with the Engineer in consultation with the Highland Council Archaeologist
- The archaeologist appointed will not comment to the press or other media without prior approval from the Engineer
- Proper provision must be made for prevailing weather conditions in northern Scotland



Plate 1: general shot of Cairn 24.



Plate 2: general shot of Cairn 28