

**An Archaeological Survey of the Proposed Extension to the
Woodland Grant Scheme at Little Assynt, Assynt, Sutherland.**



**Cathy Dagg
2, Ruigh' Riabhach
Scoraig Peninsula
Dundonnell
Wester Ross
IV23 2RE
Tel: 01854 633 337**

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Introduction

In May 1999, the author carried out the original archaeological survey on the main area of the proposed Woodland Grant Scheme at Little Assynt at the request of Iain MacLennan Forestry. A second phase is now planned to extend the Scheme to the North West of the original planting area, and the author was invited to carry out a further archaeological survey of this extension area prior to the submission of detailed planting plans. The object of the survey was to identify features of archaeological interest and where necessary to recommend mitigating actions to minimise damage to the archaeological record.

Method

The survey was carried out on 21st February 2000 in dry and clear conditions. Prior to this, background information on the history of the area was gleaned from Dr Malcolm Bangor Jones' two books: 'The Assynt Clearances' and 'Population Lists of Assynt'. Experience gained during the original Little Assynt survey was used to predict the probable location and nature of the archaeological record, so the survey concentrated on the lower lying ground and along the water courses.

Topography

The topography is similar to that of the area of the initial Little Assynt survey, with the same roughly grid-like pattern of streams and lochans imposed by the fracturing of the underlying Lewisian gneiss. The main trend of NW-SE fracture is indicated by the course of the Allt Mor and the NW-SE axis of Loch Innis Thorcaill and Loch Bad a' Chigean, while lesser streams drain NE-SW. Between the watercourses the ground rises as irregular and broken hillocks with much exposed rock. The land is rising gradually to the NE, the shore of Loch Leitir Easaidh is just over the 200m contour, while the NE boundary of the survey area reaches 500m, and is more exposed and poorer in vegetation cover.

Historical Background

Two pre-clearance settlements are recorded for this area: Poll Tigh a' Charraigein on the shore of Loch Innis Thorcaill, and Doirean Rairidh on the shore of Loch Doirean Rairidh. Poll Tigh

a' Charraigein was a pendicle, or satellite settlement of Achmore, occupied in 1774 by Ann MacCra, widow, with two children and two servants. This was possibly the widow of Duncan MacCra listed in 1746 as tenant in Achmore, (a large tack on Loch Assynt.) The tacksman Kenneth Scobie, with the encouragement of the Sutherland Estate, cleared his tack of tenants to make way for large scale sheep farming. In 1806 Poll Tigh a' Charraigein was cleared of subtenants and a shepherd installed, one Donald Rutherford and family. Rutherford's occupancy of the site presumably lasted no longer than Scobie's experiment in sheepfarming. By 1818 Scobie had failed and Achmore was taken over by Charles Clarke, who himself gave up the sheepfarm in 1822.

Only one mention is made of the smaller settlement at Doirean Rairidh. The 1811 census return lists one family, that of Alexander MacLeod. Although this is a common local name, it is most likely that he too was a shepherd installed at the same time as Donald Rutherford

The Archaeological Survey

The following archaeological features were identified during the survey:

Site no. 1. From NC 1700 2675 to NC 1682 2690 Track. The faint traces of a made track, with occasional ditching on the upper side, can be followed a short distance above the shore of Loch Leitir Easaidh from the metal gate on the boundary fence below Leitir Mhor to a few metres before the burn running down from Loch bad a' Chigein.

Site no. 2. Centred on NC 1680 2690 Drystone Dyke well-constructed although low and square in section. Th dyke measures 1.1m. high and 1m. wide, and runs 20m. along the west bank of the burn from where the burn emerges from a gorge to the loch shore. There is a gateway 11m. from the loch shore, corresponding to the probable route of the track (site no. 1)

Site no. 3. Centred on NC 1671 2694 Area of previous cultivation indicated by the vegetation cover of grass and bracken. Spaced along the north edge of this area are at least three clearance cairns.

Site no. 4. NC 1674 2699 Turf and stone dyke, running NW from the top of a rockface located to the south of a small gully running up from the burn. The dyke curves westward before becoming untraceable. It is possible that this dyke is a continuation of a turf dyke recorded in the first survey (Site no. 9 in that report)

Site no. 5. NC 1685 2703 Drystone Dyke and dam A rough drystone dyke runs along the west bank of the burn from the gorge to the loch shore and curves NNW along the shore for 2-3m. There are the remains of a rubble dam across the outflow of the loch.

Site no. 6. Centred on NC 1682 2755 Areas of previous cultivation and enclosures. One rocky hillock appears to have been entirely enclosed by means of turf and stone dykes connecting small rockfaces, but the dyke cannot be traced to the north where the ground is more boggy. Within this enclosure is one possible structure consisting of two 2m. lengths of low rubble walling forming an L-shape. South West of this enclosure further sections of turf and stone walling running south and south west possibly represent the previous enclosure of this whole area running down to the burn flowing into Loch bad a' Chigean. There is at least one clearance cairn at the top of this area.

Site no. 7. Centred on NC 1631 2840 Turf and stone dykes. The visible sections of these dykes form no complete enclosures but are presumably part of a larger pattern of dykes no longer visible. The main section of dyke runs westwards down a hillside, curves south round a knoll, loops NE up a small burn then eastward up the hillside. A second section of dyke runs from just south of this to the SW before curving NW round a knoll and becoming indistinct. There is one round storage structure immediately to the west of a prominent split boulder, just south of the loop in the main section of dyke. A further oval-shaped structure measuring 2.5m. by 1.8m. lies on the hill slope to the north of this loop.

Site no. 8. Centred on NC 1612 2842 Turf and stone dyke. This dyke runs NW from the Allt Mor, curving NE then NW to probably originally enclose the entire area of high ground to the north of the settlement (site no. 9) although it can no longer be traced beyond its northernmost point. The brae to the west of the Allt Mor has been previously cultivated, as indicated by the grass and bracken ground cover.

Site no. 9. Centred on NC 1594 2829 Pre-Clearance Settlement. (Tigh Poll a' Charraigein) Consisting of three probable dwellings, corn kiln and enclosures. The area of the settlement is very uneven ground, with dwellings placed on outcrops of higher ground. The lower ground between these is wet and rushy and may conceal other features.

1. Main dwelling, of good drystone double skin construction with rubble fill, with some worked stone. The walls stand 2m. high. This building measures 9m by 3m. is aligned NW-SE and divided into two sections. The SE section has a door in the centre of the NE wall and two windows in the SW wall, with a 'cupboard' in the SW gable. The NW section has a door in the SW wall, access to this from outside is by a built-up stone platform.
2. Enclosure, trapezoidal in shape and measuring approximately 2.5m. by 3.5m., of rough drystone construction with walls standing no higher than 0.5m. This enclosure is 3.5m WSW of the south corner of building no.1.
3. Running W of building no.1. is the faint trace of a turf dyke or retaining wall which terminates in a circular grass-covered depression, 2m. in diameter, possibly a storage structure.
4. Corn kiln, a small sub-rectangular building aligned N-S and measuring 3.8m. by 2m. The bowl of the kiln is to the north of the interior. To the SW of this is an enclosure measuring 7m. by 5m. The north wall of this is not visible.
5. Dwelling, to the SW of building no.1, also on a hillock. It is of rough drystone construction, measuring 4.8m. by 2.7m and aligned E-W with a door to the south. The corners of the building are rounded and the walls now stand no more than 0.5m. high.

6. Dwelling, to the east of no.5 and of similar drystone construction and shape, aligned WNW-ESE, measuring 4.2m. by 2.4m.
7. Low turf-stone dykes can be traced curving round the south of building no.6 and heading towards the low boggy ground where a small burn runs SW to Loch Innis Thorcaill.

Site no. 10. NC 1577 2839 Area of previous cultivation. The ground between the settlement (site no. 9) and the unnamed lochan to its West has previously been cultivated, as indicated by the ground cover of grass and bracken. There are at least three clearance cairns on the highest part of this ground.

Site no. 11. NC 1555 2828. Water management feature. Traces of a rubble dam across the outflow of the lochan, although now insufficient to make any difference to water levels.

Site no. 12. Centred on NC 1476 2811 Area of previous cultivation This area is probably outside the proposed planting area, but was noted in case the boundaries are extended. The area contains both clearance cairns and storage structures.

Site no. 13. NC 1513 2788 Turf and stone dyke. This dyke runs down the east bank of the burn.

Site no. 14. Centred on NC 1529 2784 Pre-Clearance Settlement (Doirean Rairidh) consisting of two dwellings, enclosures and dykes:

1. West dwelling, of rough rubble construction with rounded corners. It is aligned E-W and measures 4.5m. by 1.8m., with a door in the south wall. The walls now stand no more than 1m. high.
2. East Dwelling, of similar construction to the first but measuring 6.6m. by 2.4m. and aligned NW-SE. A short section of enclosure wall curves Eastward from the NE wall. To the SW is an enclosure measuring 5m. by 8.5m., D-shaped and making use of the step of rock in front of the dwelling for its back.
3. Two sections of turf and stone dyke run, approximately 50m. apart, NNE-SSW to the shore of the loch to the East of the dwellings.

Archaeological Conclusions

All the archaeological features recorded in this survey are consistent with the expected pattern of human settlement, with no surviving evidence for settlement prior to the period immediately preceding and following the Clearances, from the end of the 18th century to the first decades of the 19th Century. Pre-Clearance cultivation made use of any suitable land, with stock being controlled by means of turf/stone dykes. There are generally fewer features of cultivation such as clearance cairns and storage structures than in the area of the first survey, possibly as the land here is higher and more exposed. The settlement at Poll Tigh a' Charraigein is on the 400m

contour and the areas of cultivation are between 400 and 500m, compared with 300m for Loch Beannach and 250m for Loinn Mhor on Loch na Loinne. The presence of the corn kiln at Poll Tigh a' Charraigein does however indicate that crops were successfully grown.

The superior construction of the main dwelling house at Poll Tigh a' Charraigein is probably an improvement made at the time of the installation of the shepherd, an allowance having generally been given from the first year's rent of the incoming tacksman to pay for building shepherds' houses and fanks. The other dwellings at both Poll Tigh a' Charraigein and Doirean Rairidh are all similar in construction and would appear to predate the Clearances. Therefore although the only record of settlement at Doirean Rairidh is probably a shepherd, the house style does suggest an older settlement.

As concluded in the initial survey, the human impact on the landscape since about 1820 has been minimal.

Recommendations

The following sites will be adequately protected from planting by an exclusion zone of 5m. to either side of the feature. In the case of dykes, it is considered a pointless exercise to attempt to trace their route beyond where they are reasonably visible.

Site no. 1. Track from NC 1700 2675 to NC 1682 1690

Site no. 2. Drystone Dyke at NC 1680 2690

Site no. 4. Turf and Stone Dyke at NC 1674 2699

Site no. 5. Drystone Dyke at NC 1685 2703

Site no. 8. Turf and stone dyke at NC 1612 2842

Site no. 13 Turf and Stone Dyke at NC 1513 2788

The following features are areas of previous cultivation where it is considered unnecessary to protect the whole area from planting. It is recommended that all features within these areas, such as dykes, clearance cairns and storage structures be protected from planting by exclusion zones of 5m around or on either side of each feature.

Site no. 3. At NC 1671 2694, containing three clearance cairns

Site no. 6. At NC 1682 2755 containing enclosing dykes, clearance cairns and one structure

Site no. 7. At NC 1631 2840, containing enclosing dykes, one storage structure and one oval structure.

Site no. 10. At NC 1577 2839, containing three clearance cairns.

The following features are both settlements and should be protected from planting by an exclusion zone of 20m. from a line drawn around the outermost recorded features of each settlement.

Site no. 9. At NC 1594 2829 Poll Tigh a; Charraigein

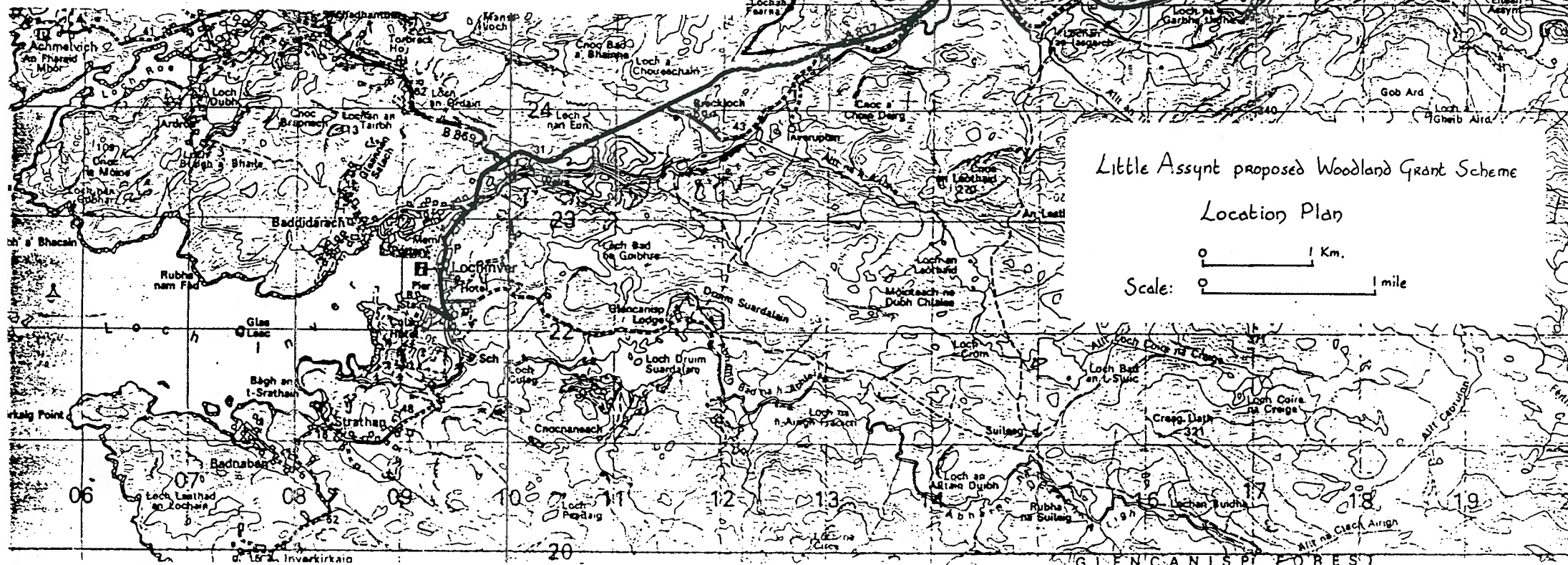
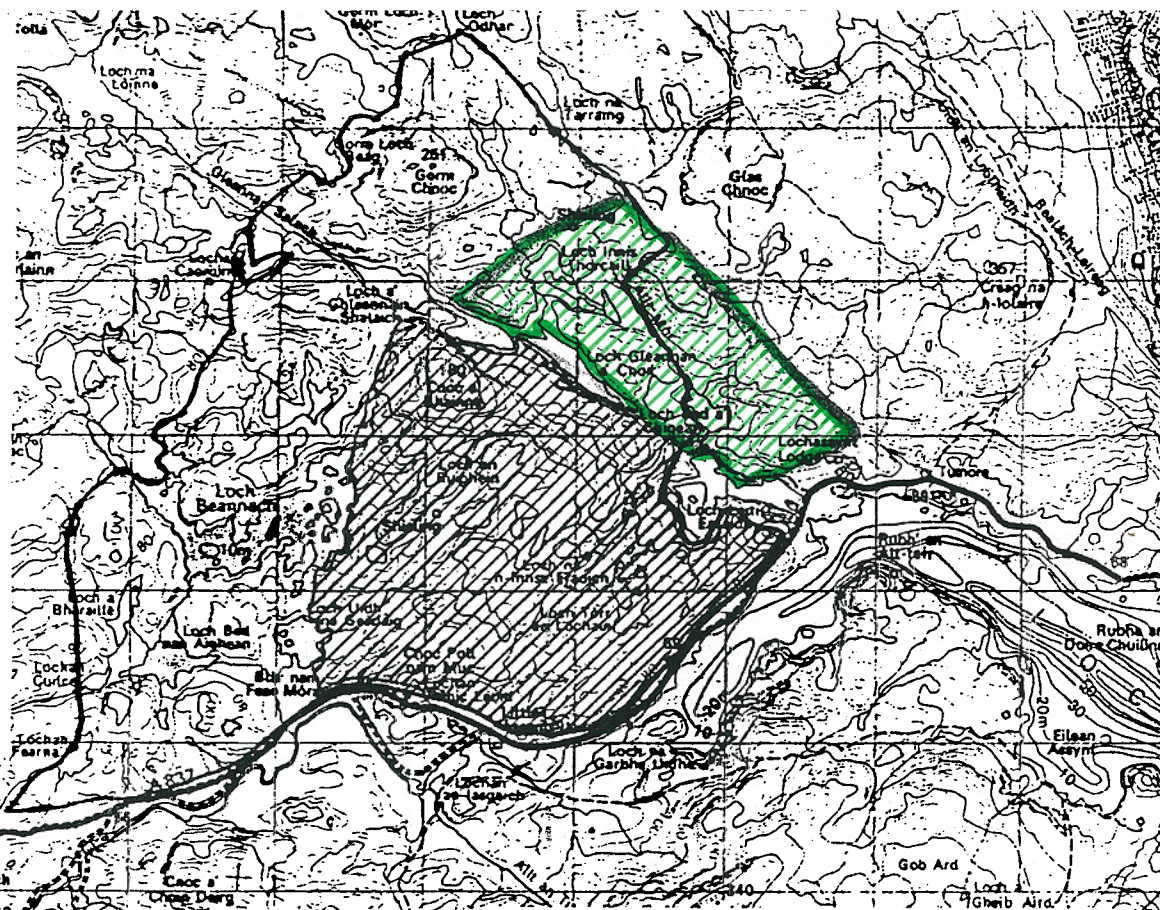
Site no. 14. At NC 1529 2784 Doirean Rairaidh

The following sites should not be affected by planting

Site no. 11. At NC 1555 2828 Water management feature

Site no. 12. At NC 1476 2811 Area of previous cultivation outside present proposed planting area.

Catherine Dagg, 13.00.





Site no. 1.



Site no. 4.



Site no. 6



Site no 6



Site no. 6



Site no. 7



Site no 7



Site no 9
building no. 1.



Site no 9
Building no. 5



Site no. 9.
Building no. 6



Site no. 9
Building no. 7



Site no. 12

