

WOODLAND ESTABLISHMENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

EAST DURCHA, LAIRG, SUTHERLAND

NGR NC 507 020

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Report No. 001/10



West Coast Archaeological Services

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WOODLAND ESTABLISHMENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY
East Ducha, Lairg, Sutherland **Rural Development Contract**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 A rapid walkover survey of the visible archaeological monuments surviving within the boundaries of a proposed Rural Development Contract (RDC), centred at grid reference N 507 020, was carried out at East Ducha, near Lairg, Sutherland (see Fig.1). The area surveyed consists of approximately 12.3 ha of gently rising hill ground on the lower southwest flanks of Cnoc a' Choire (401 metres) and Sron nan Larnachan (374 metres). The survey was commissioned by Steve Robertson of the North Highland Forest Trust, under reference number HIG-135351 – 4078505.
- 1.2 The ground surveyed comprised areas of rough deer grass and heather, interspersed with improved ground under grass, to the north, east and south of East Ducha Farm. The south westerly and open aspect of the land receives sunlight through much of the day and would have been ideal ground for settlement. Several small and modified stream channels dissect the area surveyed; these having been captured by a man-made channel at the base of the hill-slope to feed a threshing mill pond and lade (these features fall outside the area of archaeological survey).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Desk-Based Assessment

2.1.2 Aims and Objectives

- 2.1.2.1 The overall aim of this assessment is to identify any recorded archaeological sites or features that might be affected by the proposed tree planting and fence improvement at East Ducha; propose mitigation or recording as appropriate to ensure that archaeological evidence is not unnecessarily damaged or destroyed; and to minimize any possible delay or costs to the development by anticipating any archaeological requirements as far as possible.

2.1.3 Archaeological Background and Cultural Significance

- 2.1.3.1 East Ducha is situated in the Parish of Creich, in the former County of Sutherland now Highland Region¹, and as such sits within a landscape rich in archaeological remains. There is a broch at West Ducha² and hut circles are shown on the modern Ordnance Survey map to the north and north-east of the farmhouse at East Ducha³.

¹ Scotland's Places www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk (accessed 28/01/10)

² Dunwell, A. 1999 *An Atlantic Roundhouse at Ducha, Sutherland* Proceedings of the Antiquaries of Scotland 1999, 129, pp281-302
http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/adsdata/PSAS_2002/pdf/vol_129/129_281_302.pdf (accessed 29/01/10)

³ Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 441 Lairg, Bonar Bridge & Golspie 2007

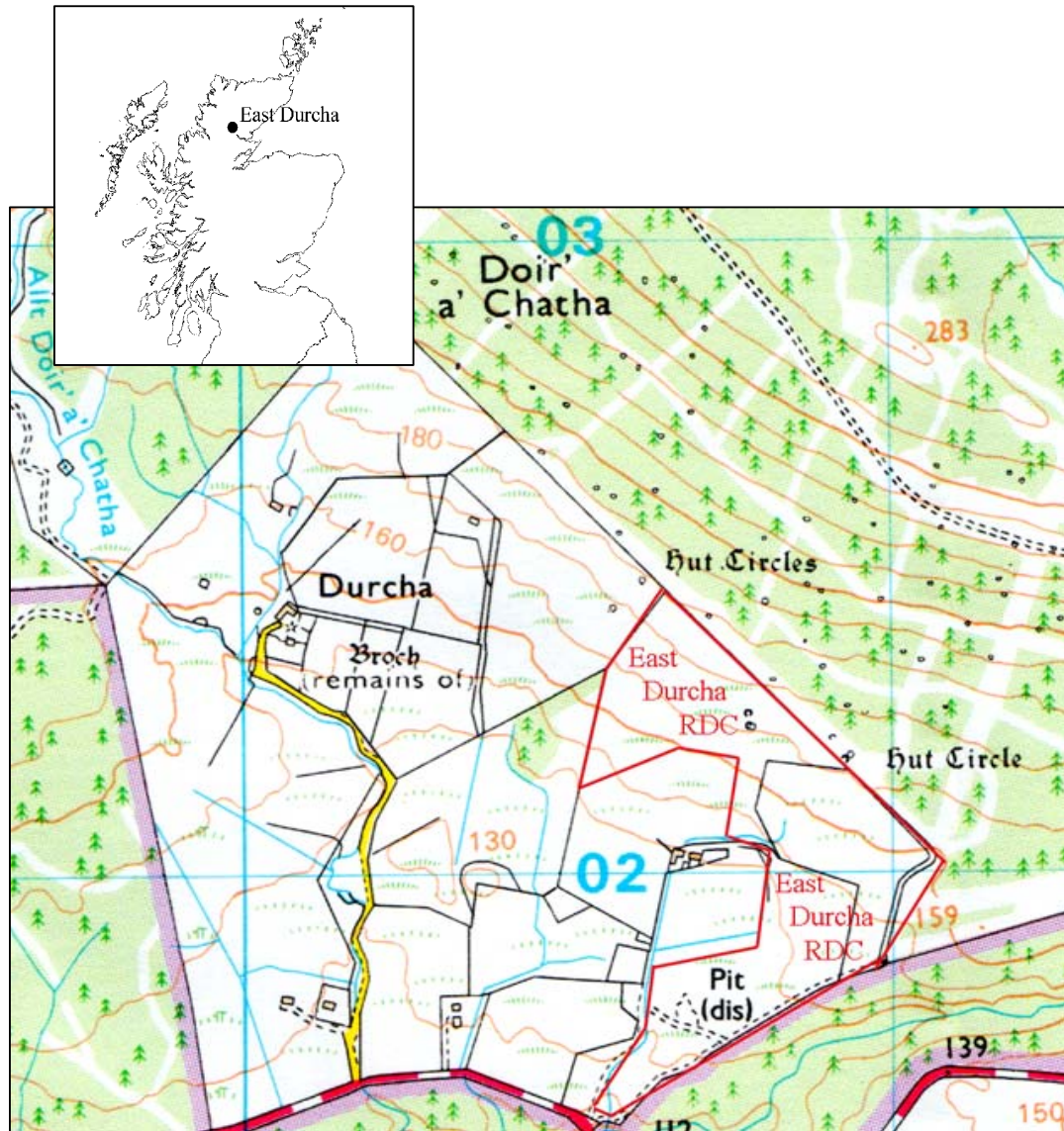


Fig. 1 – Location Map for the proposed Rural Development Contract at East Ducha Farm, Lairg, Sutherland (RDC area denoted by red boundary lines). For detailed boundaries of the extent of the scheme, see Fig.3.

2.1.4 Methods

2.1.4.1 The drawings of the proposed work, as supplied by the client, were checked in detail against the Ordnance Survey 1:25000 Map, the National Monuments Record of Scotland and the Highland Council's Historic Environment Record, as well as historical maps and aerial photographs available at the Highland Council's offices in Inverness or online.

2.1.4.2 The offices of the Highland Council Historic Environment Record were visited on 29th January 2010, when relevant archaeological reports and the RAF vertical aerial photographs taken in 1946 were examined. The National Monuments Record for Scotland, the 6 inch Ordnance Survey map series, the map collections of the National Library of Scotland were studied on-line⁴. Imagery on Google Earth was also studied online.

2.2 The Walkover Survey

2.2.1 The area of the proposed RDC scheme was walked and surveyed on the 25th January 2010, during a period of dry but cold weather with a slight frost cover to the ground. Conditions on the ground for the rapid walkover survey were good with excellent visibility and light levels, although stands of deep heather and tussock-covered ground with long deer grass resulted in some difficulty in identifying archaeological features in some areas of the site.

2.2.2 Recovered archaeological sites were recorded on prepared sheets and locations established using a hand-held GPS (Global Positioning System). Extant land divisions including dykes, walls and boulder alignments, were plotted directly onto a map of the proposal. Where possible, a photographic record of archaeological sites and features were taken; although the vegetation cover hindered this aspect of the recording process.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Desk-Based Assessment

3.1.1 The searches of the Highland Council Historic Environment Record (HER), the National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS), the historical cartography and Google Earth identified 8 features. The results are given below with each feature's position depicted on Figure 2.

Feature A Hut Circle, East of Ducha

A hut circle noted as Bronze Age (2400BC to 551BC) recorded at NGR NC 5079 0223⁵.

Feature B Doir A' Chatha

This feature is noted as occurring at NGR NC 5070 0230. It was recorded by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments in 1909, surveyed by Ordnance Survey in 1963 and then re-surveyed by them in 1976. At that time five stone walled huts within a small field system and a crescentic mound of cleared stones were noted. The huts were said to be oval and circular in shape with diameters varying between 7.5m and 9.5m. One hut had an interior wall height of 0.4m with

⁴ www.rcahms.gov.uk ; www.nls.uk/maps (accessed 28/01/10)

⁵ Historic Environment Record, Highland Council <http://her.highland.gov.uk> (accessed 28/01/10)

occasional inner facing stones visible. The southern arc of another hut had been destroyed by an old track. The field system comprised of scattered clearance heaps with no discernible plots and the occasional lynchet.

It is suggested that monument dates from the Neolithic to the Late Iron Age (4000BC to 560AD) ⁶.



Fig. 2 – Location of identified features in the desk-based assessment

Feature C Hut Circle, East of Durcha

This feature is noted as occurring at NGR NC 5095 0215 and is a hut circle dating to the Bronze Age (2400 BC to 551 BC) ⁷.

Feature D Cairn Field

This feature has been identified from examination of the imagery on Google Earth. There is no written record of it.

Feature E House and associated boundary walling

The 1st Edition 6 inch to the mile Ordnance Survey map, Sutherland Sheet CII, surveyed in 1874 shows a roofed building with a curving wall to the north east and a straight wall to the south west. These walls do not form any kind of enclosure ⁸.

⁶ Historic Environment Record, Highland Council <http://her.highland.gov.uk> (accessed 28/01/10)

⁷ Historic Environment Record, Highland Council <http://her.highland.gov.uk> (accessed 28/01/10)

By the time of the survey of 1894 leading to the 2nd Edition Ordnance Survey 1 inch to the mile map (Sheet 102 Lairg) this building has disappeared ⁹.

Feature F East Dürcha Steading

A farmstead (undated) is recorded at NGR NC 5068 0202. It is described as a small 'L' shaped range which once included a two storey dwelling, stable, a yard, a byre and a water-powered threshing machine. The threshing machine has been removed but the water wheel is still in position. There is a surviving extensive dam wall, but the dam is now dry ¹⁰.

Although undated the farmstead is first seen on the 2nd edition Ordnance Survey 1 inch to the mile map (Sheet 102 Lairg) surveyed in 1894 ¹¹.

Feature G Hut Circle

A hut circle recorded at NGR NC 5057 0241. It is marked on the modern Ordnance Survey map and is in the general area described as 'hut circle' and 'tumuli' on the 1st edition 6 inch to the mile Ordnance Survey map ¹².

Feature H Tumuli

Tumuli are shown in the general area of Feature G on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey 6 inch to the mile map ¹³. See OS 1" 3rd Edition map (1903-1912) – Appendix 2.

3.2 The Walkover Survey

- 3.2.1 A total of 8 archaeological sites were located and recorded during the survey (see Fig. 3), some of which contain a palimpsest of archaeological features. The individual sites are listed below and a general description of current condition, ground cover vegetation and descriptive elements are included. The sites, including individual elements such as clearance cairns, were flagged with marker canes and red and white marker tape.

Site No.	Grid Reference	Type	Condition
1a	NC 50794 02228	Hut Circle/Cairns	Ruinous

Situated on a southwest-facing slope and approximately 35 metres southwest from the upper boundary fence demarcating the planting scheme, is a large ruinous hut circle.

⁸ www.nls.uk/maps (accessed 28/01/10)

⁹ www.nls.uk/maps (accessed 28/01/10)

¹⁰ Historic Environment Record, Highland Council <http://her.highland.gov.uk> (accessed 28/01/10); RCAHMS <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/83634/details/east+durcha+steading/> (accessed 28/01/10)

¹¹ www.nls.uk/maps (accessed 28/01/10)

¹² Historic Environment Record, Highland Council <http://her.highland.gov.uk> (accessed 28/01/10); www.nls.uk/maps (accessed 28/01/10)

¹³ www.nls.uk/maps (accessed 28/01/10)

The site, which lies at an elevation of 162 metres OD, appears as a large grass and heather-covered mound and has some stone showing within the southeast sector. The structure measures 13.5 metres over walls on the N-S axis by 13m over walls on the E-W axis, with an approximate wall thickness of between 1.5 and 2.5 metres. The walls stand to a maximum height of 0.8 metres. There are the remains of a possible entrance of indeterminate dimensions in the southeast quadrant of the structure (see Fig. 4).

Site No.	Grid Reference	Type	Condition
1b	NC 50795 02223	Possible Hut Circle/Cairns	Degraded

Located approximately 7 metres to the SSE of Site 1a are the remains of a possible degraded and partially robbed hut circle, measuring approximately 11 metres over walls 1.8 metres thick. Only the northwest arc of the structure survives and stands to a maximum of 0.6 metres in height. The site is located at approximately 160 metres OD and is covered with deer grass and stands of heather. No other diagnostic features are visible. The site has an open aspect facing southwest.

Sites 1a and 1b are surrounded by clearance cairns, which are most likely contemporary with the roundhouses. Most of these features are masked by deer grass and heather, although stone is showing on some of the better preserved examples that are located in the more improved areas of grazing. A total of at least 15 clearance cairns were identified surrounding the two hut circles, in particular to the west and east, running along the break of slope. Average measurements for the cairns are between 1.5 metres and 2 metres in diameter at the base, and up to 0.8 metres in height.

2	NC 50736 02237 (centred)	Clearance Cairns	Ruinous
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Situated to the west of Site 1a, at an elevation of approximately 158 metres OD, are a group of at least 6 clearance cairns. The cairns generally run on a SE-NW axis, running diagonally down-slope, and are located in a small area of improved grazing. Most of the cairns have angular stones and cobbles showing, although they are generally covered in short grass, moss and small stands of heather. The cairns measure between 1.5 metres and 2.5 metres in diameter at their base, and up to 0.8 metres in height (see Fig. 5). The cairns are most likely contemporary with the hut circles (Sites 1a and 1b).

3	NC 50777 02158	Linear Clearance	Ruinous
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Located approximately 65 metres to the south of Site 1a, at around 153 metres OD and to the west of a small stream course, is a linear clearance mound. Measuring at least 12 metres in length on an N-S axis, the mound varies in width between 1.2 metres and 2.5 metres and survives to a maximum height of 0.6 metres. Large individual boulder clasts were also noted in close proximity to the feature, suggesting that other areas of stone may be hidden by the deep vegetation in this area, which

comprises deer grass, moss, rushes and stands of heather. The site is located out-with the proposed planting area, but is recorded here for completeness.

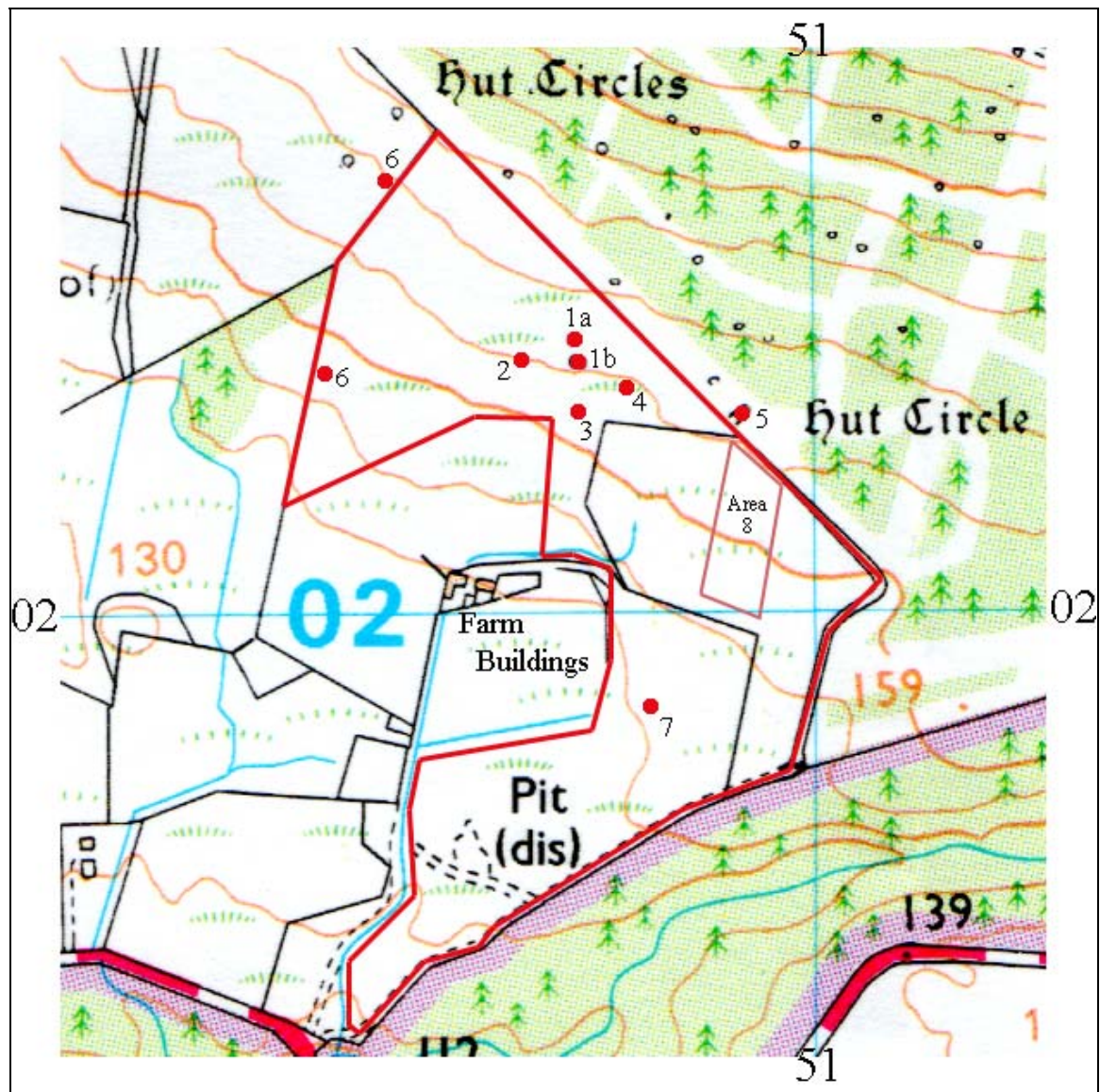


Fig. 3 – Map showing the RDC boundaries and archaeological features recovered during the rapid walkover survey. For details regarding Area 8, see the individual site entries below.

Site No.	Grid Reference	Type	Condition
4	NC 50833 02202	Stone Revetment	Ruinous

This stone-built feature is located approximately 25 metres to the east of Site 1a, at an elevation of 158 metres OD. The alignment of medium-sized boulders runs parallel with the contours of the slope and is only visible in a shallow NE-SW trending gully.

The gully now forms a natural drainage line, while the site in general is covered in mixed vegetation including deer grass, moss and heather. Running approximately E-W, around a 12 metres length of boulder revetment is visible with additional loose stone (tumble) running down the slope. The feature may be some form of revetted platform, or the remains of a partially visible boulder dyke.

Site No.	Grid Reference	Type	Condition
5	NC 50935 02185	Hut Circle	Degraded

Located some 4 metres to the northeast of a post and wire fence (upper boundary fence) and outside of the planting scheme, are the degraded remains of a large hut circle. With a southwest aspect, the structure measures 14 metres over walls varying between 1.8 metres and 2.4 metres in width. The walls survive to a maximum height of 0.8 metres and there are the remains of a possible entrance in the southeast quadrant of the hut. Covered by dense stands of tall heather and deer grass, the hut circle has been slightly truncated by the construction of a track of unknown date, which runs along the outside of the northeast boundary fence. The site has been included in the archaeological survey due to the close proximity of the boundary fence, which is scheduled for renewal in the RDC scheme. The site is located at approximately 164 metres OD.

6	NC 50560 02250	Boundary Dyke	Degraded
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The remains of a stone-built boundary dyke run parallel to the proposed fence line that runs down the northwest side of the RDC scheme. The upper section of the dyke runs on the northwest side of the fence, crosses below the line of the fence at grid reference NC 50550 02330, and continues down-slope and eventually runs out of the RDC. Comprising rough stone clasts, with a stone core, the wall has suffered from stone removal in the past. The base of the wall measures up to 1.2 metres wide and survives to a maximum height of 0.7 metres.

7	NC 50840 01330 (Centred)	Peat Cutting	Degraded
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Located in rough and wet ground towards the valley bottom, to the southeast of East Durcha Farm and at an elevation of 132 metres OD, there is evidence for peat cutting. Most of the peat cuts are aligned NE-SE and are covered in deer grass and deep heather. There is no regular pattern to the cuttings.

8	NC 50930 02060 (Centred)	Clearance Cairns	Degraded
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Shown as Area 8 on the site location map (see Fig. 3), this comprises a gently-descending strip of ground located between two improved field systems. Working from the top of the area, adjacent to the boundary fence and hut circle Site 5, a small group of round clearance cairns was identified. These measure approximately 1.5

metres to 2.5 metres in diameter at their base, and up to 0.8 metres in height. These clearance cairns are most likely contemporary with hut circle Site 5.

Working down the slope from these cairns, more random clearance was encountered including amorphous-shaped cairns and linear clearance mounds. Many of these cairns have been modified and spread during later periods of field clearance and the potential robbing of the stone for other building requirements. These features continue to the southwest edge of the strip of ground, adjacent to a track-way running to the east from the farm at East Durcha.



Fig. 4 – Hut Circle (Site 1a) looking southwest

4. DISCUSSION

- 4.1 The area comprising the Rural Development Contract is generally poor hill ground today, although areas of improved grazing still exist on these relatively well-drained southwest-facing slopes. However, the hut circles and associated clearance cairns of prehistoric date (Bronze Age to Iron Age) indicate that these hill slopes provided ground of sufficient quality to sustain a farming community in the past. Evidence for more recent agricultural practices and the presence of a threshing barn within the steadings at East Durcha Farm also testify to the overall quality of the adjacent hill ground.
- 4.2 Evidence recovered from the desk-based assessment and the walkover survey has revealed the presence of at least five prehistoric hut circles within, and adjacent to the RDC scheme, along with associated field clearance cairns. Site 4, the length of boulder revetment, may also be contemporary with these features and may be a surviving fragment of a field boundary or revetted platform associated with the hut circles. This mode of settlement is typical of the use of these upland areas of central and eastern Scotland during prehistory

when the climate was generally thought to be more suitable for the growing of cereal crops and the raising of livestock.

- 4.3 During the more recent past, evidence was recovered from the survey for the continued development and improvement of the hill ground at East Durcha. This included the construction of land divisions, represented by the stone-built boundary dyke (Site 6), which provided a land division between East and West Durcha Farms. Additional clearance cairns and linear clearance heaps were also most likely constructed at this time, improving the ground for crop growing and for the provision of upland grazing. The presence of the threshing barn at East Durcha, with additional facilities at nearby farms (Robertson *pers comm.*), suggests that up until the early 20th century at least, cereal crops were successfully grown on the adjacent hill slopes.



Fig. 5 – Hut Circle (Site 1a at top right) with clearance cairns in the foreground

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 The hut circles and associated clearance cairns/features (Sites 1a, 1b, 2, 3 and 4) should be provided with a buffer zone of at least 20 metres. This will allow the preservation of these features as a collective group of related sites in the landscape.
- 5.2 The NNE sector of Area 8, which includes clearance cairns of potential contemporary age with hut circle Site 5, should also be provided with a 20

metre buffer zone. However, within the SSW sector of Area 8, hand-planting of trees should be allowed between the clearance cairns and linear clearance heaps of potential later date, providing a 5 metres buffer zone around any notable features. Any new fence lines associated with this area should also respect the boundaries of the dense area of archaeological features.

- 5.3 During the erection of the new stock fence that runs adjacent and close to Site 5 (hut circle), due care attention should be taken not to further disturb this site. If possible, the new fence line should be routed as close to the existing fence line as possible.
- 5.4 A 5-metre buffer zone should be left to each side of the recorded boundary dyke that runs down the northwest perimeter of the RDC scheme (Site 6). During the construction of any fence lines adjacent to this feature damage should be kept to a minimum, while the make-up of a boundary dyke should not be used as a convenient sub-base for access roads, or as fill beneath the fence-line.

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Steven Birch
Lynn Fraser

28th January 2010



Our new archaeological assistant arrives on site.....

LOCATION OF RECORDS

All records and field notes relating to this survey are held in the archive of:

West Coast Archaeological Services
Sealladh Alainn, 4 Upper Breakish, Isle of Skye IV42 8PY Tel: 01471 822124

Appendix 1: Digital Images Register

Image:	Description:	Conditions:
ED001	Hut circle Site 1a, looking south	Hazy sun *
ED002	Site 1a and clearance cairns looking north	Hazy sun *
ED003	Hut circle Site 5 looking northeast	Hazy sun *
ED004	East Dürcha Farm and northwest extent of site from the south	Hazy sun *
ED005	East Dürcha Farm and northeast extent of site from the south	Hazy sun *
ED006	East Dürcha Farm and northeast extent of site from the south	Hazy sun *
ED007	East Dürcha Farm and northern slopes of site from the south	Hazy sun *
ED008	East Dürcha Farm and extent of site from the south (photo mosaic)	Hazy sun *
P1030708	Access track leading into East Dürcha Farm looking southwest	Hazy sun **
P1030710	Tunnel through dam wall feeding lade and waterwheel of the threshing mill from the NW; East Dürcha Farm	Hazy sun **
P1030712	Closer view of tunnel entrance – as above	Hazy sun **
P1030713	Northwest wall of threshing mill and in-situ waterwheel, East Dürcha Farm	Hazy sun **
P1030714	Oblique view of northwest wall of threshing mill and waterwheel, East Dürcha Farm	Hazy sun **
P1030716	Southwest gable of threshing mill at East Dürcha Farm	Hazy sun **
P1030718	Southeast elevation of threshing mill and steadings, East Dürcha Farm	Hazy sun **
P1030720	Steadings at East Dürcha Farm, looking northwest	Hazy sun **
P1030721	Threshing mill and steading block, East Dürcha Farm – looking west	Hazy sun **
P1030722	Southwest-facing gable of threshing mill at East Dürcha Farm, showing details and features within wall	Hazy sun **
P1030724	Northwest-facing wall of threshing mill at East Dürcha Farm, showing waterwheel and details and features within stonework	Hazy sun **

* Images by Steven Birch

** Images by Lynn Fraser

Appendix 2: Ordnance Survey 1 inch to 1 mile 3rd Edition Map (1903-1912)

