

# **Archaeological Assessment of the Area of Proposed Forestry at Lower Rumster, Forse, Caithness**

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**for**

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### **Introduction**

The author was asked by Scottish Woodlands Ltd to carry out an archaeological desk-based assessment and walk-over survey of the area of proposed forestry at Lower Rumster, Forse, Caithness. The object of the assessment was to locate previously recorded archaeological features and identify unrecorded sites or areas of archaeological interest, prior to the formation of detailed planting plans, to ensure that the archaeological record would be protected from planting or accidental damage during fencing or other activities associated with planting. As a greater part of the proposed planting area is deep peat and bog, it is proposed that planting will only cover areas without too deep a cover of peat or bog, and the archaeological survey concentrated on these areas.

### **Method**

Information on previously recorded archaeological sites was obtained from the Sites and Monuments Record for Highland Region, held by the Archaeology Unit within the Department of Planning and Development at Highland Council in Inverness. Early Ordnance Survey maps, also held by the Archaeology Unit, provided information on changing land use over the past 130 years. This was followed by a rapid walk-over survey, carried out on 2.10.01 in reasonably clear weather conditions. Only the areas of high, drier ground, where archaeological features would be likely to be located, were surveyed in detail.

### **Topography**

The moss of Forse is a low lying, waterlogged expanse trapped behind the fertile fields of the coastal strip of Forse. To the immediate west of the Moss, extensive drainage activity has reclaimed fields in an area referred to as the Ditches of Forse and probably giving rise to the name Newlands of Forse, now referring to the abandoned farmstead to the south of Lower Rumster. Most of these fields are now in poor condition and becoming choked with rushes. To the west of the Ditches of Forse, the land is divided by a series of N-S running ridges, providing well-drained strips colonized by grasses and gorse but too narrow to have been of much agricultural use, while the land between the ridges is peaty and poor, utilized only for peat cutting and the trapping of water in mill ponds.

### **Archaeological Background**

As with much of Caithness, the unimproved ground around Forse is rich in prehistoric settlement, notably a large settlement of hut circles and burnt mounds to the west of Forse

House. It is unclear whether this known distribution represents a preference for the higher ground in the prehistoric period, or the poor survival of archaeological features on the improved, lower ground. Some monuments do survive in the improved fields, particularly a group of standing stones SW of Forse House, and some of the many brochs in the area, their survival perhaps due to their being located on the crests of the rocky ridges, for example Appnag Tulloch Broch, just south of the present survey area.

## **Historical Background**

The large scale improvement of fields and draining of wetlands probably commenced with the building of Forse House, formerly Nottingham House, in 1753. The Mill of Forse, constructed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was powered by water collected in the large millpond, now an unnamed lochan SW of the present survey area. Upstream of this, water was diverted eastwards to a second millpond, although it is unclear which mill this was serving. A number of abandoned farmsteads are scattered across the landscape, some probably dating to the reorganization of land use at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and some representing the gradual abandonment of small holdings through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mature forest now covers much of the high ground behind Lower Rumster.

## **The Archaeological Survey**

Two archaeological sites are already recorded on the Highland Council Sites and Monuments Record, as well as the 19<sup>th</sup> century mill dams and lades. Apart from these, only minor features were noted during the archaeological survey.

### **1. Standing Stones / Stone Circle at ND 2077 3630, SMR no. ND23NW0010.**

These have been variously described as being of no great antiquity and as the remains of a stone circle. Thom and Burl (1980) consider them to be the surviving stones of a circle 48m in diameter, of which 3 standing and the base of a fourth stone can be seen. They stand on a low, level platform, bordered by the stream to the east and a rocky ridge to the west (**Photo no. 1**) Only two definitely standing stones were located during this survey: The first is now tilted at an angle of 25° from horizontal and rests on the upper face of another stone tilted at the same angle. It now stands 0.8m high and measures approximately 0.65m wide by 0.25m and faces east, (**Photo no. 2**). The second is 6m NNW of the first, and is tilted at an angle of 60° from horizontal, facing ENE. It now stands approximately 1m. high and measures 0.8m by 0.2m. (**Photo no.3**) A third stone, which could possibly be considered to be the base of a standing stone, is visible to the north of these. It is possible that the proximity of a fast-flowing spring, rising below the rockface to the north of the circle, had some influence on the siting of the circle.

2. **Pit at ND 2088 3528** This irregularly shaped grassy pit is located on top of a ridge, and appears to be artificial although its function is unknown. It is irregularly shaped, and measures approximately 8m in length. **(Photo no.4)**
3. **Hut Circle at ND 2106 3627, SMR no. ND23NW0016** This hut circle is as described in the Highland Council SMR, situated on the summit of a well-drained ridge. It is grass-covered, measuring 5.5m in diameter, with an entrance to the south. There are no signs of associated cultivation.
4. **Mill Lade from ND 2187 3663 to ND 2147 3635, SMR no. ND23NW0030** This is marked on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition OS map as a mill lade, although in appearance and construction it is no different from a large drainage ditch. Where it passes under the roadway (site 5) is a well-constructed stone culvert **(Photo no. 5)** which suggests that the two features are fairly contemporary.
5. **Roadway from ND 2119 3596 to ND 2133 3505** This is a section of the roadway running from Nottingham Mains over Airigh Hill to Sheppardstown although it is no longer in public use. It makes use of one of the ridges to cross the Moss, and shares this route with power lines. A well is noted on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition OS map at the southern end of the roadway but this was not located.
6. **Area of peat cuttings at ND 2097 3650.** This feature is noted as a number of associated mounds, which could be confused with field clearance piles, are in fact peat dross piles adjacent to the abandoned faces of the cuttings.

## Recommendations

It is recommended that the following archaeological sites be protected from planting as follows:

**Site 1. Possible Stone Circle.** Despite the uncertain interpretation of this site, it is recommended that it be assumed that it extends over 48m in diameter and that this entire area, from the stream to the ridge, extending north to include the spring as a landscape feature and south for at least 20m from the southernmost visible stone be left clear of planting.

**Site 3. Hut Circle** It is recommended that an area extending 10m in all directions from the edge of the feature be left clear of planting. As there is a potential problem of gorse covering the site, it is also recommended that a programme of gorse management be considered.

It is not considered that sites **4, Mill Lade** and **5, Roadway**, will be adversely affected by planting, nor is it felt necessary to recommend any measures to protect sites **2, Pit** and **6, Area of Peat Cuttings**

## **The Photographs**

1. **Site 1. Possible Stone Circle**, view from the south showing two visible standing stones and, behind, the site of the natural spring.
2. **Site 1. stone 1**, view from SE
3. **Site 1. stone 2**, view from E.
4. **Site 2. Pit, view from S. The pit and its edges are grass-covered.**
5. **Site 3. Hut Circle**, view from S.
6. **Sites 4 and 5**, stone culvert carrying the roadway over the mill lade, view from the E.

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**24.10.01**

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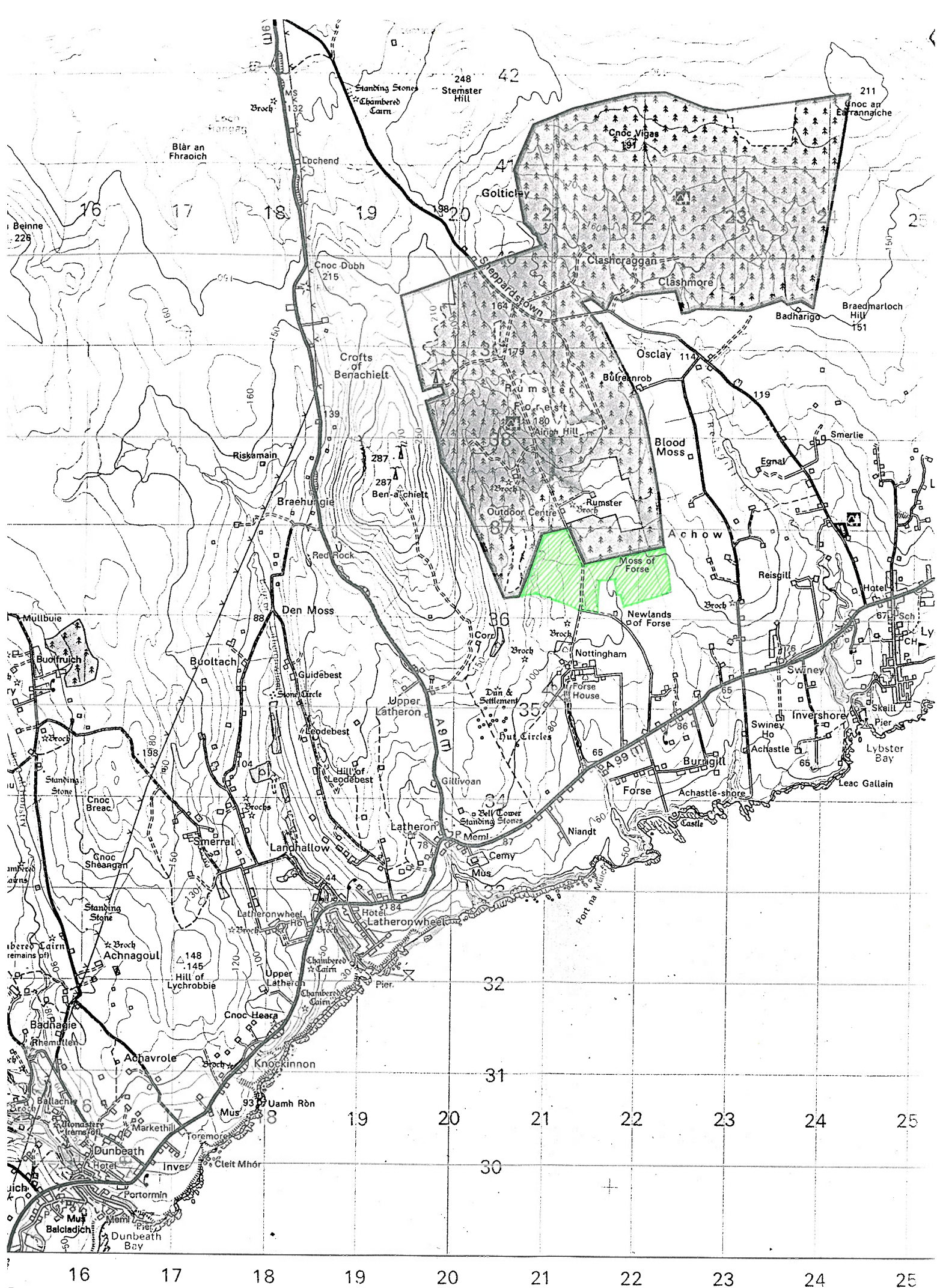


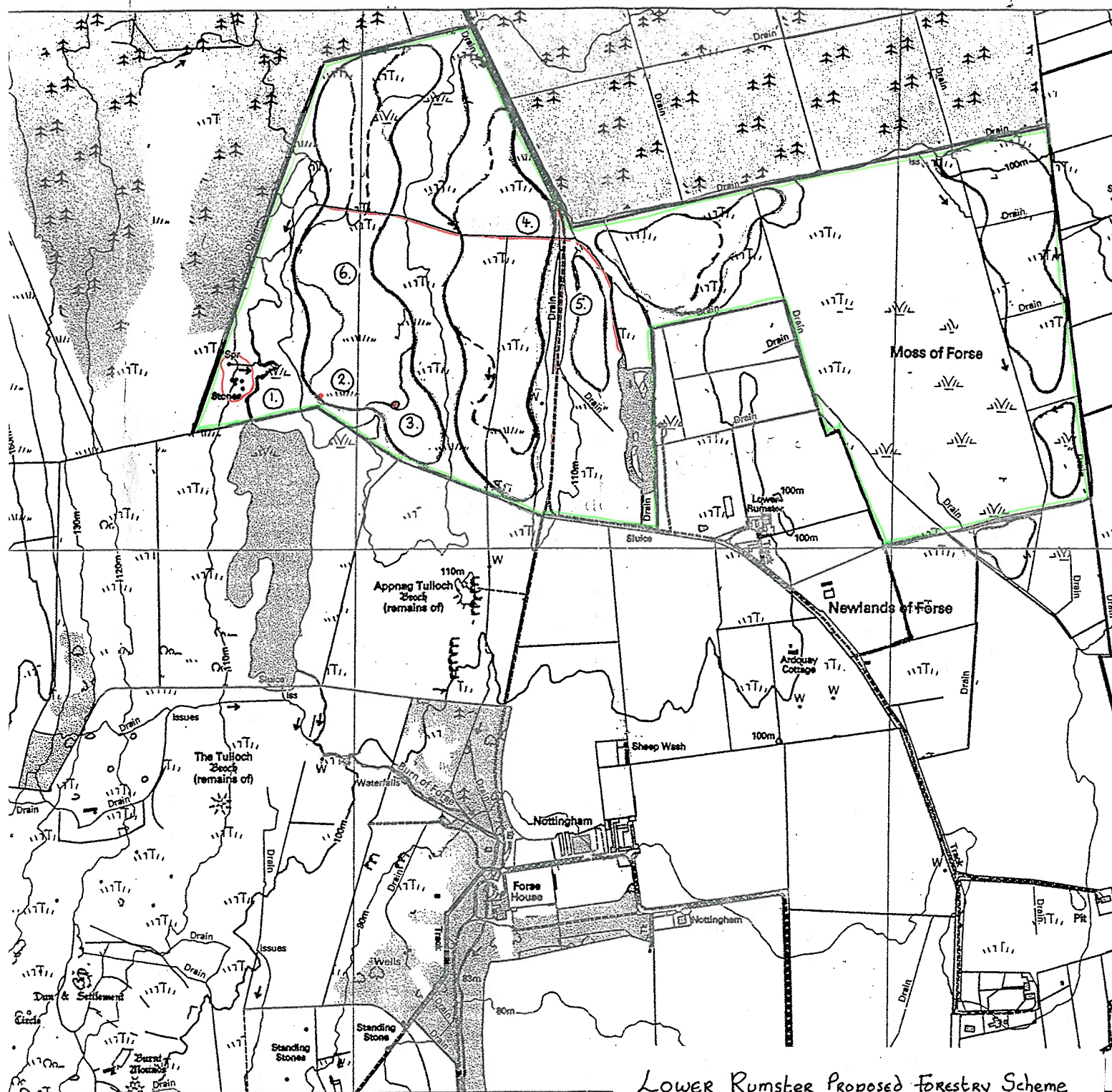
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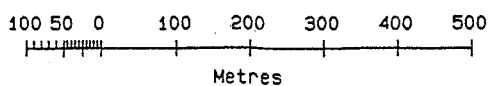
Lower Rumster Proposed Forestry Scheme

Archaeological Assessment

Area of Survey:

Archaeological Feature: •

Survey



Scale 1: 10000

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digital dat  
v 2000.

is prohibite  
Ordnance Surv  
1 to Aug 2000