

**Archaeological Assessment of the route of Power Lines
between Melvich and Armadale, and areas of refurbishment of
Power Lines between Melvich and Kinbrace, Sutherland**

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Introduction

The author was asked by Scottish and Southern Electric to carry out an archaeological desk-based assessment and rapid walk-over survey of the areas of refurbishment work on the power line between Melvich and south of Kinbrace in Sutherland, and a full survey of the route of power lines between Melvich and Armadale on the North Coast, including branch lines to Portskerra, Dallangwell and Strathy Point. The object of the assessment is to identify archaeological features or areas of potential archaeological interest which might be adversely affected by refurbishment work, and to recommend actions to be taken to mitigate the effect of the work on the archaeological record.

Refurbishment work on the Melvich to Kinbrace section consisted of pole changes, which would involve the excavation of a hole for the new pole and the extraction of the old pole. This would have the greatest effect potentially on both visible archaeological features and concealed archaeology. Other refurbishment work; stay wire changes and the plumbing of poles would have less direct effect on the archaeology as they do not involve excavation, but for all work, routes of access for vehicles would also need to be assessed, particularly in the case of pole changes where new poles are being dragged into position.

Method

Information on previously recorded archaeological features was obtained from the Sites and Monuments Record held by the Archaeology Unit within the Department of Planning and Development at Highland Council. Further information on areas of potential archaeological interest was obtained from material held by the Highland Archive in Inverness and the Scottish National Map Library in Edinburgh.

The rapid walk-over survey was affected by restrictions on access still in place after the Foot and Mouth outbreak. The concerns of crofters and farmers were respected, and where the power lines crossed croft land they were viewed from the nearest point of public access, generally the public road. Despite this limitation, it is felt that this allowed for an adequate assessment of whether visible archaeological features were present.

The Archaeological Assessment

The assessment is divided into two parts: the **Melvich to Kinbrace** section which deals with only the specific areas of refurbishment work, and the **Melvich to Armadale** section which was assessed along its entire length to provide a database which can be consulted in the future when refurbishment work is being planned.

Melvich to Kinbrace

This assessment follows the power line from north to south. The number of the pole where refurbishment work is to be carried out is given as well as a grid reference for archaeological features

It should be stressed that this assessment is limited to this phase of refurbishment and is not applicable to any future work along this section.

Pole 22, Achridigill Township at NC 8887 6292. Most of the buildings of this depopulated township are grouped on either side of the Achridigill Burn, but one building is located to the NE of the main group, beside the road. It is visible as low rubble footings, aligned NNE-SSW. It lies between Pole 22 and the road, far enough from the pole to be unaffected by stay wire changes, although any future pole change may affect associated archaeological features.

This feature was marked with canes to prevent accidental damage from any vehicles gaining access to the pole.

Pole 41, Cnoc Chorkael, Farmstead at NC 897 618, SMR no. NC86SE0045 and Golval, Enclosure at NC 8975 6200, SMR no. NC86SE0037 These two recorded archaeological features lie between Pole 41 and the road. The obvious access route from the gate on the road by the sheep fank, passes between the two features but on a recognizable track, and at the narrowest point the two are 20m apart. Both are fairly visible features, the farmstead consisting of low rubble footings and the enclosure being a substantial turf and stone dyke. It is unlikely that either feature will be affected.

Poles 189-190, Breacrie, Dykes at NC 8955 5103. There are faint traces of turf dykes running parallel to the river, west of the power line by approximately 5m.

It is recommended that wheeled vehicles do not cross over, or drag poles over these turf dykes as this is likely to cause damage to already eroded features.

Pole 267, Dail Dhonuill, Enclosure at NC 8950 4523, SMR no. NC84NE0003 Approximately 40m WSW of Pole 267 is a faint circular enclosure, approximately 20m in diameter on a level platform in what is now wet ground. This feature, probably associated with hut circles to the west, is barely visible, but does not lie on the direct route of access from the road to the power line and should be unaffected.

It is recommended that any wheeled vehicles in the vicinity of this pole adhere to a direct access route from the road or along the power line to avoid accidental damage to this feature.

Poles 274-277, Forsinard, farmstead at NC 895 445, SMR no. NC84SE0007 This farmstead is marked on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map as three unroofed buildings, including a 74m longhouse at the river's edge, but with no enclosures. However, faint traces of enclosing walls are visible on the ground, indicating that the complex is more extensive than the map indicates. There appears to have been a dyke running N-S just east of the present power line, but no associated features were observed west of this.

It is recommended that vehicles gaining access to poles along this section adhere to a route running between the road and the power lines where no archaeological features were observed.

Poles 150, 151, 155, 158 Creag nan Caorach, Hut Circles and Field Systems at NC 866 312, SMR no. NC83SE0003 Scheduled Ancient Monument. All the known and visible features of this complex lie to the east of the road on a well-drained grassy slope, while the power line passes to the west of the road on poorly drained, peaty ground. No archaeological features were observed west of the road. It is possible that features have been concealed by the build up of peat, but the poles where refurbishment is to take place are located on slight rises with less peat cover, where it is considered less likely that archaeological features are concealed. Only one of these poles, no.151, is a pole replacement where excavation is to take place, and this lies approximately 250m from the nearest recorded hut circle.

Poles 169, 171, 172, 176, 178, 184, Kinbrace Hill, Hut Circles, Enclosures, Chambered cairns at NC 866 295, SMR no. NC82NE0001, Scheduled Ancient Monuments. This extensive complex covers both sides of the road. The area east of the road is now afforested, and although the major features are still preserved, many of the minor features will have been lost during ploughing. Therefore the features preserved to the west of the road are significant. These include hut circles, burnt mounds, cultivation plots and boundary walls. One pole, no.172, is located within what was probably a cultivation plot, with its stay wire anchored in a section of stone dyke. The other poles do not appear to lie directly on archaeological features, but features are located between the poles along the power line, and between the poles and the road. No poles are being replaced along this section during this phase of refurbishment, so no excavation is required.

It is recommended that routes of access for wheeled vehicles be carefully marked to prevent accidental damage to archaeological features which are not very visible. This would need to be done in consultation on site with an archaeologist, before any work takes place. As this is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, Historic Scotland will need to be consulted before work begins, as Scheduled Monument Consent may be required even if there is to be no excavation.

Conclusions: Melvich to Kinbrace

Although Strath Halladale is particularly rich in prehistoric settlements and pre-improvement farmsteads and townships, it is fortunate that generally the route of the power line avoids running directly through areas of known archaeological features. The reason for this is mainly that while the preserved archaeological landscapes are on the well-drained soils to the side of the strath, the power line follows the level but poorer drained ground along the floor of the strath. The build up of peat in these low lying areas may conceal further archaeological features, but it is beyond the ability of this assessment to locate these. Equally, where the level ground has been drained and improved, further archaeological evidence may survive below the plough soil.

It is recommended that a complete archaeological assessment of the entire route of the power line be carried out before the next phase of refurbishment is considered, to be available for consultation over the long term.

Melvich to Armadale

This assessment considers the entire route of the power line as the areas of refurbishment have not yet been pinpointed. Although slightly limited by restricted access, the information in this assessment should be valid for all future refurbishment work along this route, but not for new branch lines or undergrounding.

The assessment follows the power line from east to west

Poles 23-24, Portskerra, Cairn at NC8735 6526, SMR no. NC86NE0024 This cairn was not located and has possibly been damaged by recent road improvements. Its given location is approximately 30m west of the power line, so if it exists, it should not be affected.

Poles 53-54, Baligill, 19th century Carding Mill at NC 8552 6567, SMR no. NC86NE0005, Scheduled Ancient Monument The substantial ruins of this mill are located approximately 30m north of where the power line crosses the Baligill Burn. The mill lade leaves the burn via a sluice at a point where the burn is crossable, and these are not very visible features, but the steepness of the banks make it unlikely that vehicles will attempt to take a direct route from one pole to the next. It is also unlikely that any refurbishment work will require to enter into the Scheduled area.

It is recommended that no crossings of the burn be attempted by vehicles to avoid accidental damage to the sluice and lade. The two poles should only be approached from their respective sides of the Baligill Burn

Poles 58-59, Baligill limekilns at NC 8516 6567, SMR no. NC86NE0007. The most substantial ruined limekiln is built into the steep bank below and to the east of pole 59. The steepness of this bank makes it much more practical to gain access to this pole from the west. The other kilns are located to the south of the power line and the road and should not be affected. There appear to be no associated features by Pole 58 on the other side of the road.

It is recommended that care be taken during any refurbishment work on Pole 59 to prevent material or rubble from rolling down the bank onto the kiln, thus causing accidental damage, and to prevent any damage to the bank itself which might weaken the structure of the kiln.

Pole 76, Clash Smeligill, Dyke at NC 8387 6560 A low dyke formed of slabs of stone set on edge in the style of Caithness dykes runs along the south edge of the road, and between the road and Pole 76.

It is recommended that vehicles do not drive over this low dyke to gain access to Pole 76, and that no stones be removed from the dyke to provide infill.

Poles 80-81, Clash Smeligill, Structure at NC 8364 6569 In the sand dunes to the east of the River Strathy, a low, grass-covered oval structure lies approximately halfway between the two poles, and just to the south of the power line. It is aligned NW-SE, measures 3m. by 2m. and has one visible stone

It is recommended that wheeled vehicles gaining access to the poles to the west of Cnoc Geal do not run over this structure. It is possible that other archaeological features are concealed by the sand, and this should be taken into consideration if any excavation work is planned

Dallangwell Branch Pole 4-Parish Church Branch, Pole 1, Strathy Bridge Cairns at NC 8349 6537 and NC 8356 6537, SMR no. NC86NW0024. There are three cairns at the first location, which is immediately to the south of Pole 1, and one cairn at the second location, which is south of the power line between Poles 4 and 1.

It is recommended that access to this section of the power line follow the route of the line rather than cut down from the road at any point, and that vehicles stay north of the power line to avoid driving over and damaging these cairns.

Strathy East Church Branch, Pole 3, Longhouse at NC 8425 6526, SMR no. NC86NW0028 This is a visible ruin lying just north of Pole 3.

It is recommended that no material be removed from the ruin to provide infill

Dallangwell Branch Pole 23, Cnoc na Leanaig Gile, Cairn at NC 8371 6430, SMR no. NC86SW0007 This pole has been inserted into the edge of the cairn and it appears that material from the cairn has been removed to pack the pole upright. The cairn itself is low, a mixture of stones and peat standing on a low rise above the River Strathy. Although described as a possible Neolithic cairn, it is also possibly a large clearance cairn, as the area immediately to the north of the cairn is level and well drained and may have been a small prehistoric cultivation plot.

It is recommended that when the time comes to replace this pole, a new location is selected to the south of its present position. The existing pole should then be cut off at ground level to avoid any further damage to the cairn. No material should be removed from the cairn or from around the existing pole. It may be considered necessary for an archaeologist to be present if any excavation work is carried out in this area, in order to ascertain whether any further archaeological features are present in the vicinity.

Dallangwell Branch Poles 35-37, Dail Teine Depopulated Settlement at NC 834 631, SMR no. NC86SW0024 Although two unroofed buildings and enclosing dykes are noted on both the 1st edition OS map and the present Pathfinder map, these are not visible on the ground. Down on the lower ground by the river are extensive traces of rig cultivation and a possible original trackway. The only trace of the settlement along the ridge is a heather covered structure about 10m west of Pole 37, far enough away to be unaffected by refurbishment work. It is possible that other features, namely enclosing dykes, have been removed in recent years to provide hardcore for the road.

Given the state of preservation of this site, it is not felt that any mitigating measures need be implemented,

Strathy Point Branch Pole 3, Strathy, Settlement and field system at NC 833 658, SMR no. NC86NW0016 This settlement was not visited due to restrictions of access, but the poles along this section were examined and determined to be not on or adjacent to visible archaeological features. The settlement is recorded as east of the group of buildings north of the school, while the power line runs west of this group of buildings.

Strathy Point Branch, Poles 1-36, Strathy Crofting Township at NC 831 664, SMR no. NC86NW0039 Although this section of power line was only surveyed from the road due to restrictions of access, it was noted that it passes through areas of ruined crofting buildings, and at least two poles are adjacent to ruins, notably Pole 14.

A more detailed survey may be attempted at a later date when restrictions to access are lifted. Meanwhile, a general recommendation is that any standing ruins should not be damaged for the purposes of access or material for infill.

Poles 45-51, Lednagullin, Crofting Township at NC 800 646, SMR no. NC86SW0032 The ruins of this township, as marked on the 1st edition OS map, and as visible standing ruins, all lie to the north of the route of the power line and should not be affected by future refurbishment work.

Pole 49, Lednagullin, Cairn at NC 7996 6465, SMR no. NC76SE0020 This cairn is located south of the present farm steading, while the power line passes north of the steading. Access to this section would be by the farm track, so there should be no need for this cairn to be affected.

Poles 52-58, Armadale Burn, Hut Circles, field systems and associated features at NC 7964 6409, SMR no. NC76SE0001

Armadale, Longhouse at NC 7954 6420, SMR no. NC76SE0021

The settlement of four hut circles and associated features is located south of the power line, occupying the sheltered grassy hollows between rocky ridges. The route of the power line here is up a steep bank of rocky ridges and eroding sand, and no visible archaeological features were located. It was felt that it was unlikely that there would be any concealed prehistoric features in this steep terrain. It is possible that a direct access route from the road to the south to the power line might be considered, but this would pass through the prehistoric features. At the base of the bank, the power line crosses the Armadale Burn. There is no vehicular crossing point apart from the present road bridge, and possibly the beach to the north at low tide. If the approach were to be from the beach, it should be noted that a longhouse is located on the east bank of the burn just south of the footbridge, visible as low grass-covered footings.

It is recommended that the access route to this section be carefully considered to avoid the archaeological features to north and south. The best route from this point of view is probably following the power line down from Lednagullin. If this proves impractical because of the steepness of the slope, the route from the road or the beach would have to be investigated in more detail, and archaeological features marked to avoid damage from vehicles.

Poles 75-76, Armadale, Cairn at NC 7877 6405, SMR no. NC76SE0023 This cairn lies approximately 30m east of the power line, in the middle of the field where the two poles are on the field boundaries. Access would be from the road to the west, so this feature should not be affected.

Poles 79-80, Armadale, Cairn and enclosure at NC 7879 6428, SMR no. NC76SE0024 These features lie approximately 25m west of power line, between poles 79 and 80, and between them and the road.

Access to these two poles should be planned to avoid these archaeological features. It is recommended that the access route follow the route of the power line rather than cutting across from the road.

Poles 81-82, Armadale, Hut Circle at NC 7879 6441, SMR no. NC76SE0027 This feature is located approximately 30m from the power line, on improved croft land where it is unlikely that associated features will have survived. The nearest pole, no.82, is located in the field to the north. It is unlikely that this feature will be affected.

It is recommended that the access route to poles 81-82 be along the route of the power line or from the northern field, avoiding crossing the area of the field in which the hut circle is located.

Conclusions: Melvich to Armadale

Very few previously unrecorded archaeological features were noted during this survey. This is possibly due to the pressure on land along the north coast for cultivation, particularly in the immediate post-Clearance period, meaning that all cultivable land, where evidence for prehistoric settlement might be expected to be located, has been laboriously cleared of stones, drained and ploughed for the past 200 years, thus removing all but the most substantial of prehistoric remains. The lack of visible archaeological features on the higher ground between the townships, meanwhile, may only reflect the burying of archaeological layers under the build up of peat over the past two millennia.

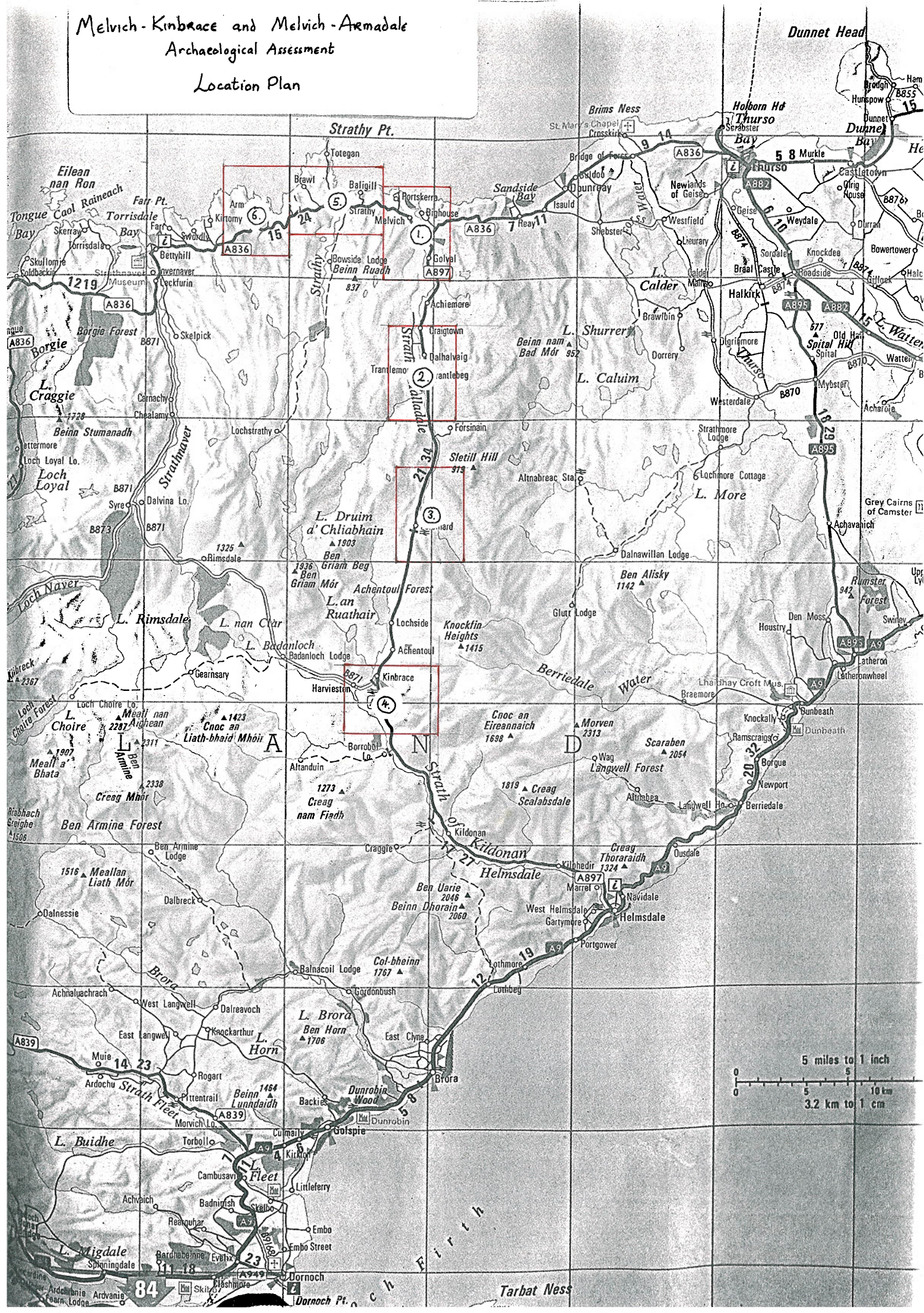
The picture is different along the River Strathy where the pre-Clearance townships are preserved intact, and it would be presumed that the full pattern of prehistoric settlement has not yet been investigated. It does however appear that the route of the present powerline, following the higher but poorly drained ground along the strath, has not passed through any areas of visible prehistoric settlement apart from at Cnoc na Leanaig Gile, just outside the cultivated lands of Strathy township.

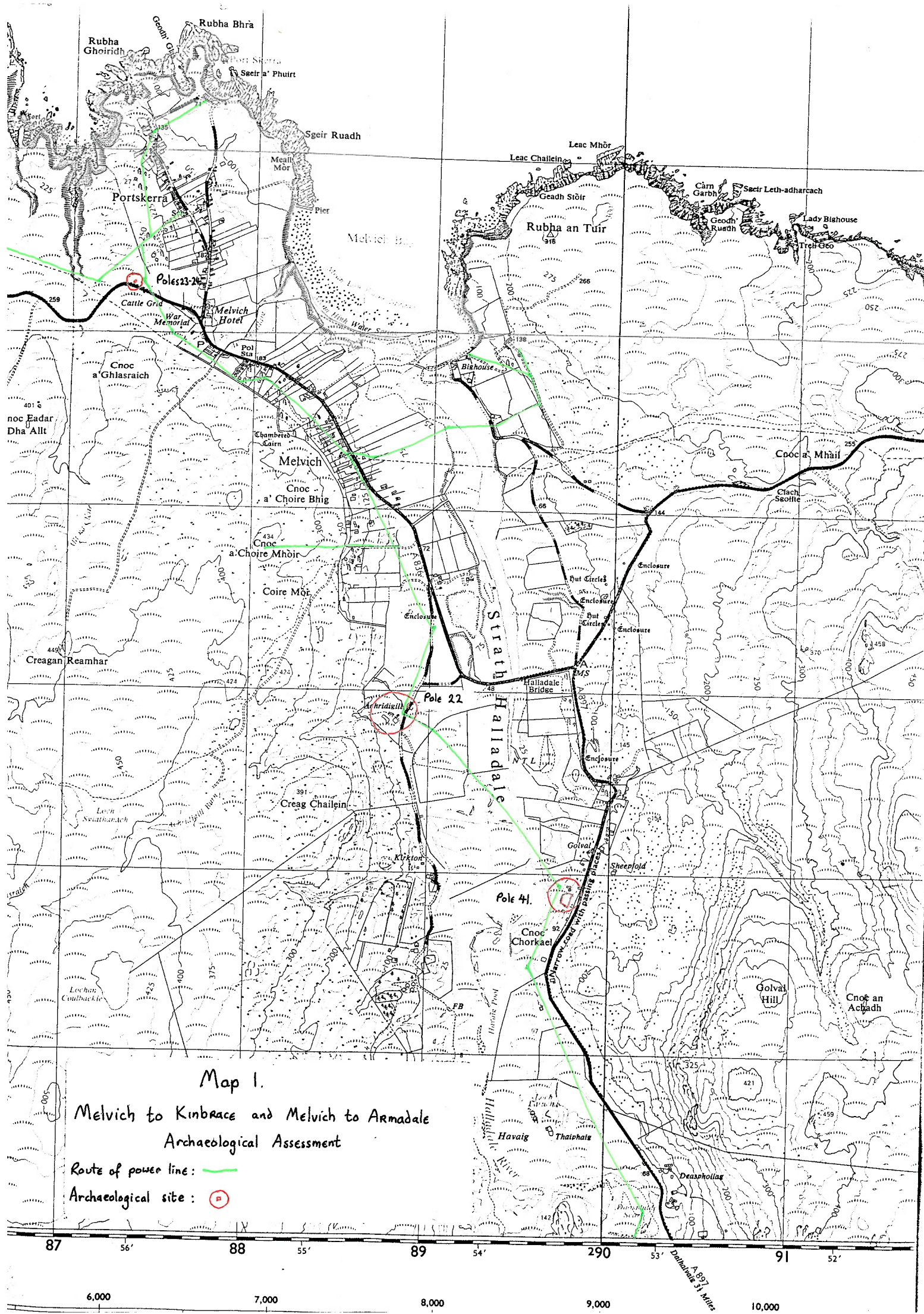
Finally, it should be noted that while this assessment has covered the existing power line, any new branch lines, or undergrounding of sections anywhere near the archaeological features identified in this report, would require further archaeological input to fulfill the requirement that the archaeological record be adequately protected.

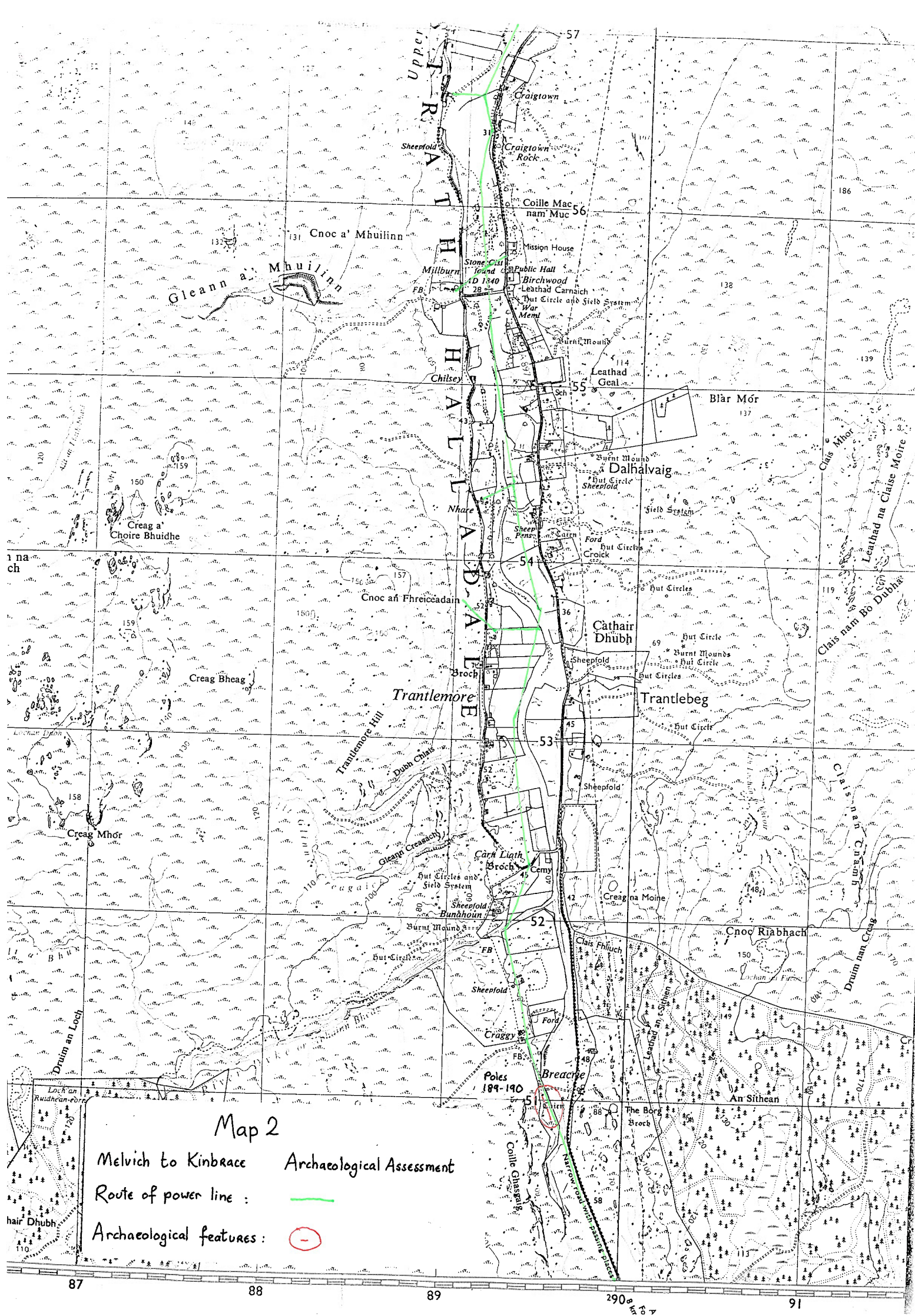
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Location Plan





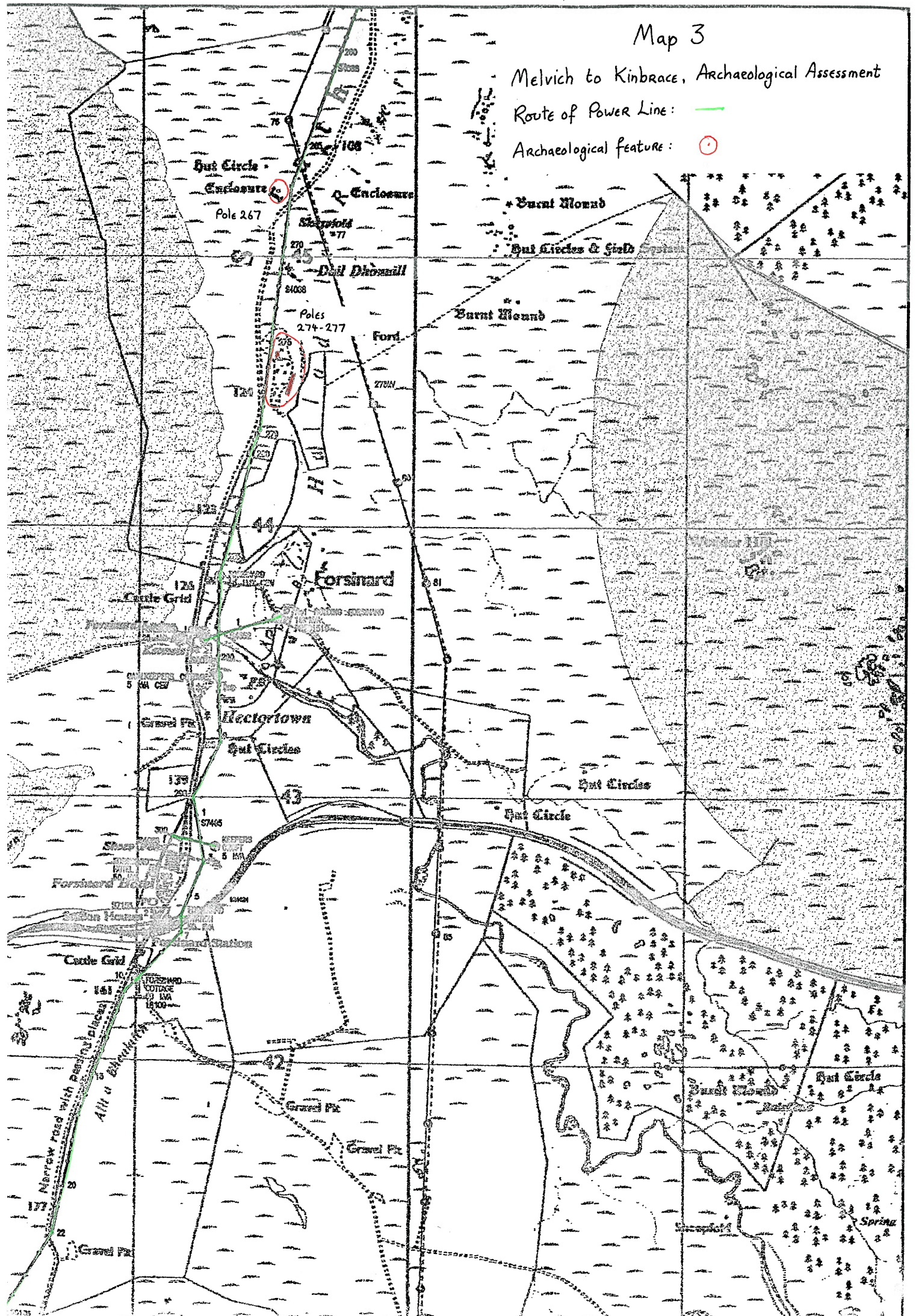


Map 3

Melvich to Kinbrace, Archaeological Assessment

Route of Power Line:


Archaeological feature:

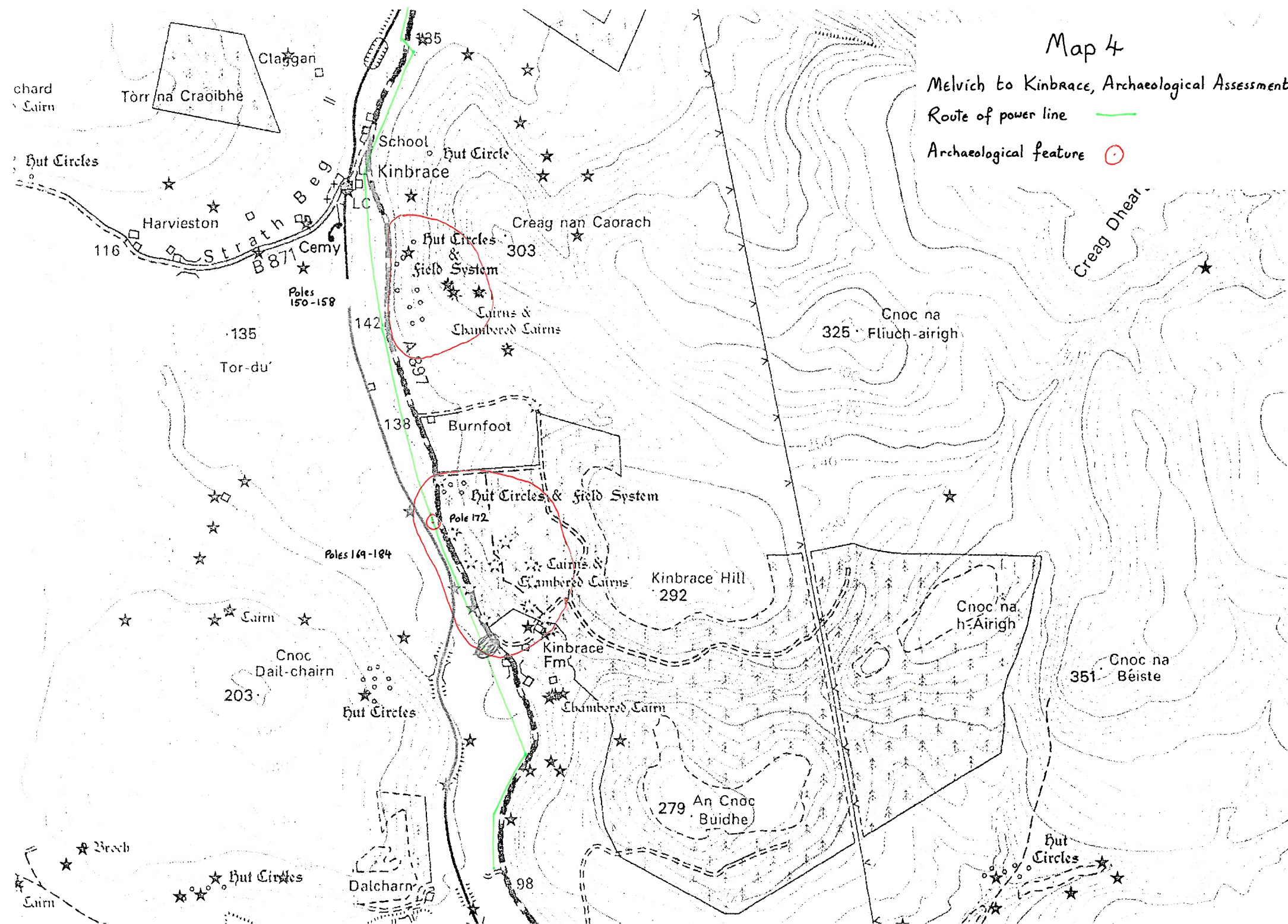


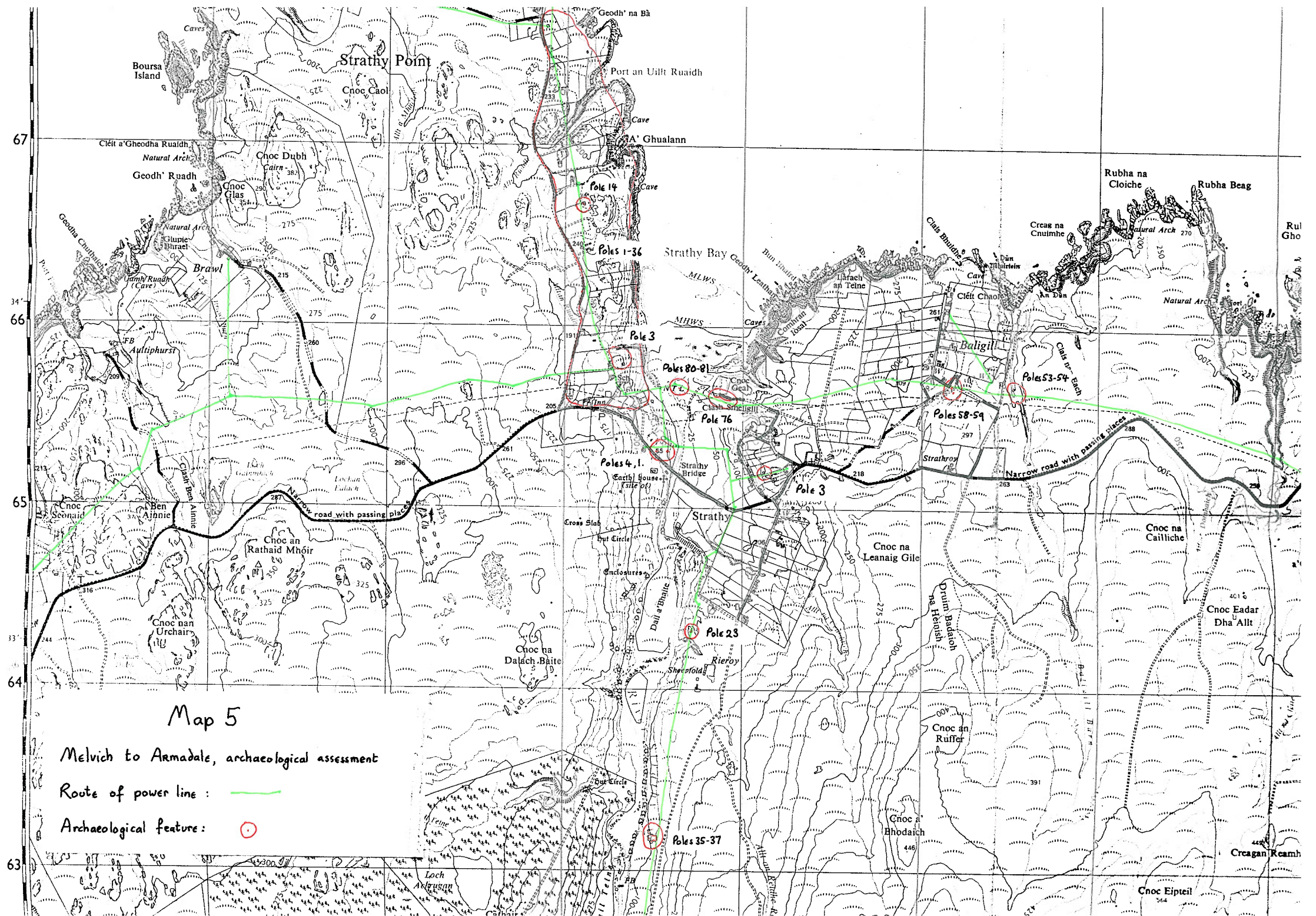
Map 4

Melvich to Kinbrace, Archaeological Assessment

Route of power line 

Archaeological feature 





The Photographs:

Melvich - Kinbrace

1. Pole 22: Achridigill. Footings of building between Pole 22 and the road
2. Pole 41: Cnoc Chorkael, farmstead and enclosure: Turf dyke of enclosure is visible in the foreground directly in front of Pole 41

Melvich – Armadale

3. Pole 54: Baligill Mill
4. Poles 53-54: Baligill Mill, sluice and lade to the right of the stream.
5. Pole 59: Baligill, Limekiln
6. Dallangwell Pole 23: Cnoc na Leanaig Cairn.
7. Dallangwell Pole 23: Cnoc na Leanaig Cairn.
8. Dallangwell Pole 37: Dail Teine Settlement, structure is on the mound behind and to the right of the pole.
9. Poles 52-58: Armadale Burn Settlement, hut circle and cairn on one possible access route to these poles.

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