

STRATH SGITHEACH FORESTRY SURVEY

by

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INTRODUCTION

This survey was undertaken to assess in precise terms what archaeological monuments would be damaged by the proposed afforestation scheme in Strath Sgitheach. It was funded by a grant from Historic Buildings and Monuments, Scottish Development Department.

Seven discrete blocks of forest are proposed. Each area was examined for archaeological monuments by field walking. In total approximately 125 ha were walked. In areas where archaeological monuments were dense surrounding areas were also walked. The results of this are presented on the annotated 1:10,000 map (Figure 1). In areas of proposed afforestation where the archaeological monuments were particularly complex or extensive they were surveyed at 1:2500 (Figures 2 & 3).

Each of the seven blocks of afforestation are discussed separately. Descriptions of the monuments are followed by an assessment of the potential for destruction and recommendations to ensure preservation.

1.1 AREA 1 Block centred on NH 515 625, Figure 2

Survey conditions were good. Much of the heather on the hillside had been recently burned off, although the heather was deep in the extreme west of the area walked and vegetation over the boggy ground could be quite heavy, especially by the river.

This was the most extensive area examined and the most intensively surveyed. It contained a known settlement (NH56SW11) consisting of 6 hut circles within which was a collection of 6 cup-marked stones (NH56SW5). This survey identified another hut circle and a possible hut circle, 5 new cup-marked stones, field banks and the site of a mill.

1.2 SETTLEMENT NH56SW11

All of the six hut circles (A - E) were as described in the Highland Region SMR, however the 1:2500 survey has provided more accurate grid references. They are grouped in small clusters on a SE facing slope. The ground they occupy has a marked eroded character, the soil is very shallow and boulders frequently protrude through the turf and heather. This degradation may explain why there is no sign of anything other than prehistoric settlement.

Hut A, on a knoll, survives as a platform, c. 11.5m NW-SE by

10.0m bounded by traces of a wall. Several outer facing stones are visible in the W arc. The position of the entrance is not evident. NH 5171 6256.

Hut B, is c. 13.0 m NNW-SSE by 11.0m between the centres of a wall of indeterminate thickness, with one or two outer and inner facing stones visible in the SW arc. The entrance cannot be seen. A field wall joins the hut in the SE arc. NH 5140 6263.

Hut C, is c.11.5m NNW-SSE by c.9.5m between centres of walls of indefinite thickness, with outer face visible intermittently around the S arc. The mutilated entrance is in the SSE. NH 5137 6269.

Hut D, measures c. 13.0m NNW-SSE by c. 11.0m between the centres of walls of uncertain thickness, which have been extensively robbed revealing the inner face of contiguous stones around the E arc. Occasional outer facing stones occur around the W arc. The mutilated entrance is in the SSE. NH 5132 6268.

Hut E is c. 13.0m NW-SE by 11.0m between the centres of walls of indeterminate thickness. The ill-defined entrance is in the SE. NH 5146 6281.

Hut F is c. 9.5m NW-SE by c. 7.5m between the centres of a wall of indeterminate thickness. The ill-defined entrance is in the SE. NH 5151 6282.

Hut G measures c. 13.0m NW-SE by c. 10.0m between the centres of a denuded wall. The entrance is in the SE. NH 5139 6290.

The possible hut platform noted in the SMR at a point 'about 100m S of hut B' was not convincing.

Two new discoveries of hut circles were made and have been added to the sequence of elements in settlement NH56SW11.

Hut H occupies a level terrace at the foot of the slope above the flood plain. It is c. 9.0m in diameter between the centres of walls of indeterminate thickness. Much of the circuit of outer facing stones survives. The entrance may have been in the SE. NH 5160 6230.

Hut J is represented only by the curving arc of a stony bank, which may represent the collapsed wall of a hut circle c. 9.0m in diameter. NH 5156 6291.

Hut circle J is surrounded by clearance heaps and short linear banks 3-5m long. These obvious signs of intense cultivation fill

the area between the two burns on either side of hut J, but do not form any obvious field system.

1.3 CUP-MARKED STONES NH56SW5

Stones A - D were not located. Stones E and F were as described in the Highland Region SMR but the grid references should be adjusted to E - 5158 6259, F - 5165 6254. The following cup-marked stones are newly discovered and have been added to the sequence of stones in group NH56SW5.

Stone G has 8 good cup-marks and 2 possible ones. NH 5167 6246.

Stone H has 3 good cup-marks and 2 possible ones. NH 5138 6266.

Stone J is a large boulder with a flat upper surface 1.6 x 1.0m, which has 30 good cup-marks and 5 possible ones. NH 5131 6248.

Stone K has 10 cup-marks, 4 of which are exceptionally large, i.e. 0.12m in diameter and 0.07m deep. NH 5145 5256.

Stone L has 8 good cup-marks and 2 possible ones. NH 5134 6266.

1.4 FIELD BOUNDARIES

The various field boundaries indicated in figure 2 all consist of collapsed turf-covered stone walls which spread between 1.0 - 2.0m. and follow wandering lines dictated by the topography.

1.5 MILL SITE NH 5168 6219

The natural knoll north of the river is named Cnoc a' Mhuilinn, 'hill of the mill' and contains evidence of milling. The hill has been shaped by the river and a meander (presently dry) on its north side. Presumably during much of the year it is a virtual island. (The 1:10560 OS survey of 1875-6 shows it as an island.) The hill consists of two parts, a rounded upper area on the west and a lower level area to the east. The mill lade approaches the hill from the south and runs along side the level east end. At its widest point the lade is 3.25m wide by 1.25m deep. It has been constructed by throwing up a bank of earth and stone which varies between 1.5 - 2.5m in width and stands up to 2.0m high. At a point near the extreme SE tip of the hill the lade bank widens to 4.5m. If this mill was a horizontal mill, and this seems very likely, then it was here that the mill itself spanned the lade.

In addition to the lade, there is a small circular structure on the upper western part of the hill. It is 7.0m in diameter with

walls 2.0m thick and 1.0m high. It has no apparent entrance and its interior is lower than the surrounding ground surface outside. It does not appear to be a hut circle and in view of its location it is tentatively interpreted as a grain drying kiln.

Horizontal mills are known to have been in common use in the early middle ages and in some remote districts of Scotland they remained in use until the 19th century. There is therefore no way of dating this site apart from excavation.

1.6

As the map shows the archaeological features in the area of proposed afforestation are very dense. This area of plantation will have to be completely redesigned if damage to the archaeology is to be avoided. Special care should be taken in the area of the mill where the lade easily might be mistaken for a drainage ditch.

2.0 AREA 2 Block centred on NH 524 635, Figure 3

This area contained both heather and deep grass, visibility was fair. All of the discovered monuments seem to be agricultural in nature and consist of enclosures and field boundaries. All survive as grass or heather covered collapsed stone walls, generally 2.0m wide. Sites will be described from south to north.

A large oval enclosure which is overlain by the field banks which are shown on the OS map. This is very ruinous and in places appears to have been robbed. It extends beyond the survey area to both east and west. NH 5255 6356.

Incorporated into the circuit of the oval enclosure is a U-shaped feature measuring c. 10.0 by 10.0m. It would appear to be an integral part of the enclosure. Its function is unknown. NH 5250 6357

A large rectangular enclosure has been added to the major N-S field boundary defining the W edge of this area. It is of a similar build (2.0m wide and 0.75m high) as the N-S wall but appears to be a later addition. NH 5237 6359.

The final field boundary is a massive stone wall which has created a lynchet 1.5m high. This wall is 2.0m wide and stands between 0.5 - 1.0m high. It apparently relates to the nearby pre-Improvement settlement (NH56SW19), possibly it was the infield. NH 5224 6373.

2.2

All of these features appear to be of relatively recent date, certainly they are better preserved and more substantial than the presumed prehistoric field boundaries in survey area 1. Their value is as parts of field systems which are superimposed on one another and as such their true worth cannot be evaluated without a more complete survey of the surrounding field boundaries.

3.1 AREA 3 Block centred on NH 529 633

This area occupies a relatively level plateau, which is entirely covered in deep heather. Visibility of archaeological features was poor. No archaeological monuments were seen in the area, however an interesting pre-Improvement settlement is located beyond the east end of the proposed plantation.

It is centred on a long house which is on the OS map (NH 531 636), but unmapped elements of the settlement extend up the slope of the plateau which is to be afforested.

Care should be taken that they are not disturbed.

4.1 AREA 4 Block centred on NH 537 640

This area along the river side is very low-lying and consequently very boggy. The grasses were very high in places and visibility was variable. No archaeological monuments were detected in the area of proposed plantation. However a pre-Improvement settlement was discovered to the north of the area to be planted.

The settlement is centred at NH 535 641 and survives as low stone wall spreads (1.0 - 2.0m wide), which are completely grassed over. The settlement is focused on a long house (33.0m by 5.0m) oriented NE-SW with two internal partitions. At its SW end is a second smaller house or byre (14.0 by 5.0m), which was oriented NW-SE. Nearby, to the SW, is a probable grain drying kiln and to the NE a substantial stone enclosure which measures 24.0 by 14.0m and is oriented NW-SE. A number of less prominent field walls extend from the settlement away from the river.

Care should be taken to avoid disturbing this nicely preserved site.

5.1 AREA 5 Block centred on NH 528 637, Figure 3

This area was mostly covered in knee-high bracken and unburnt heather. Visibility was poor.

The only archaeological monument was a rectangular enclosure (NH 5274 6366) which was part of a previously unknown pre-Improvement settlement, the rest of which lay outside the proposed plantation to the North. All the walls of the settlement were completely turf covered spreads of stone which varied between 1.0 - 2.0m wide. The settlement consisted of a house 18.0 by 5.0m, with an attached yard to the north. The enclosure runs down the hill to the south and is c. 20.0 by 20.0m.

With a slight adjustment in the layout of this planation this feature could be preserved.

6.1 Area 6 Block centred on NH 529 639, Figure 3

This area is rough pasture and is mostly covered in hummocky grass and unburnt heather; visibility was fair. One prehistoric monument was discovered.

A single hut circle (NH 5288 6402) is located on a slight hillock adjacent to a steep gully made by a burn. It is c. 12.0m in diameter between walls of uncertain thickness. The E wall is poorly preserved, but a few facing stones survive. The ill defined entrance is to the W. No associated features were observed.

This monument could be preserved by slightly modifying the plantation layout.

7.1 Area 7 Block centred on NH 521 639, Figure 3

This area is unimproved heather moorland. Visibility was fair. Two prehistoric monuments were discovered.

A single hut circle (NH 5223 6383) is located on a bluff above a burn, NW of pre-Improvement Settlement NH56SW19. This poorly preserved circle measures c. 9.5m in diameter between walls of indeterminate width. It has no obvious entrance.

A substantial kerbed cairn (NH 5236 6397) is located on slightly sloping ground. This large mound of stones is approximately circular c. 15.5m in diameter. Along most of the perimeter large boulders retain the smaller stones of the body of the cairn. The cairn has been heavily robbed and now stands no more than 1.5m high. Projecting from the E side is a line of several boulders 2.0m long, which may simply be the result of modern disturbances.

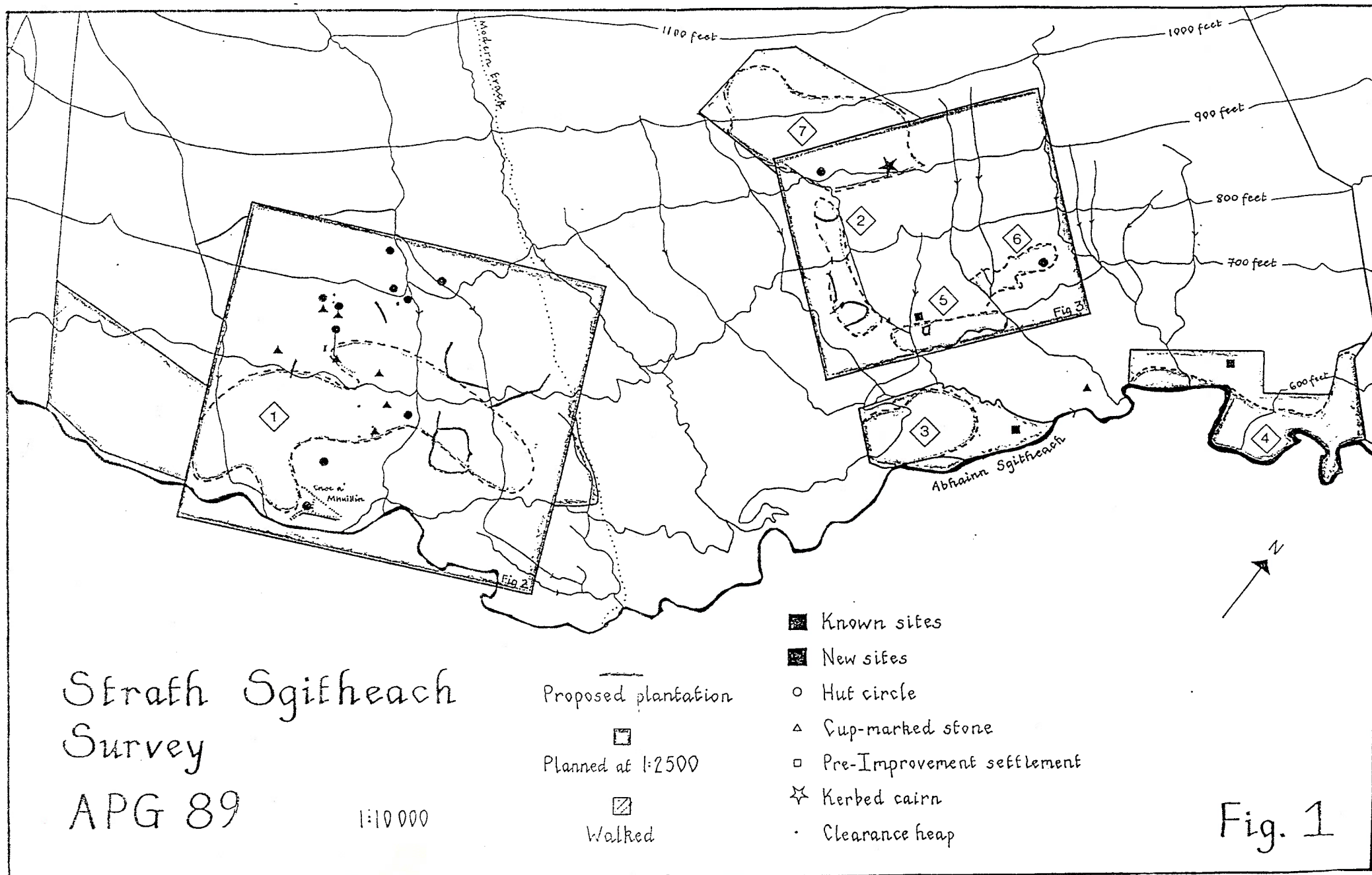
It is apparently unexcavated and has no immediate neighbours.

Both of the monuments can be saved by modifying the planting scheme and certainly the cairn should not be disturbed.

8.1 Finds outwith the Survey Areas

In addition to the pre-Improvement settlements previously noted at (NH 5269 6360, NH 531 636, NH 535 641) a cup-marked stone was found. The rock outcrop (NH 5320 6381) has 7 good cups and presumably others are obscured by the large modern clearance heap which covers much of the outcrop.

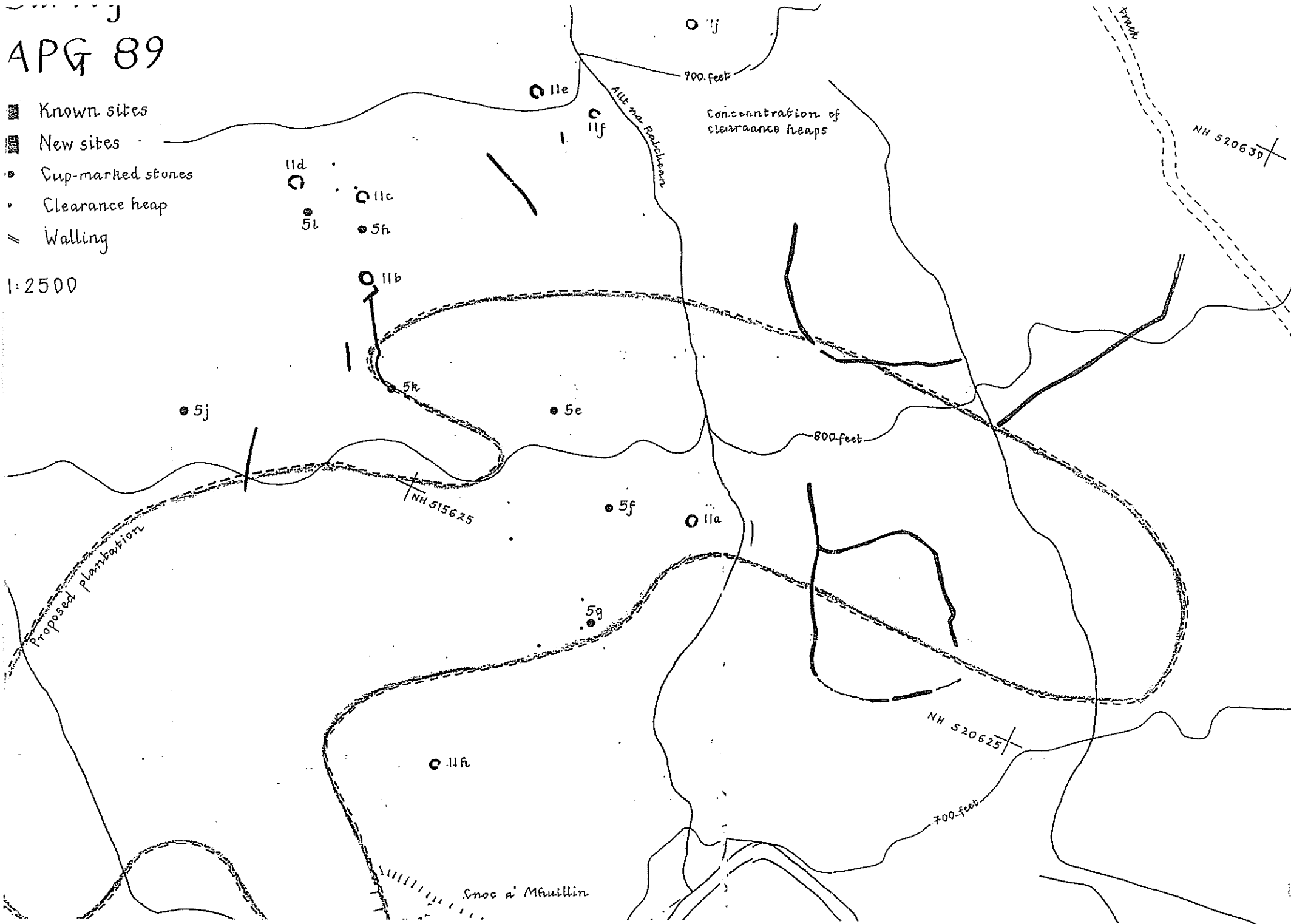
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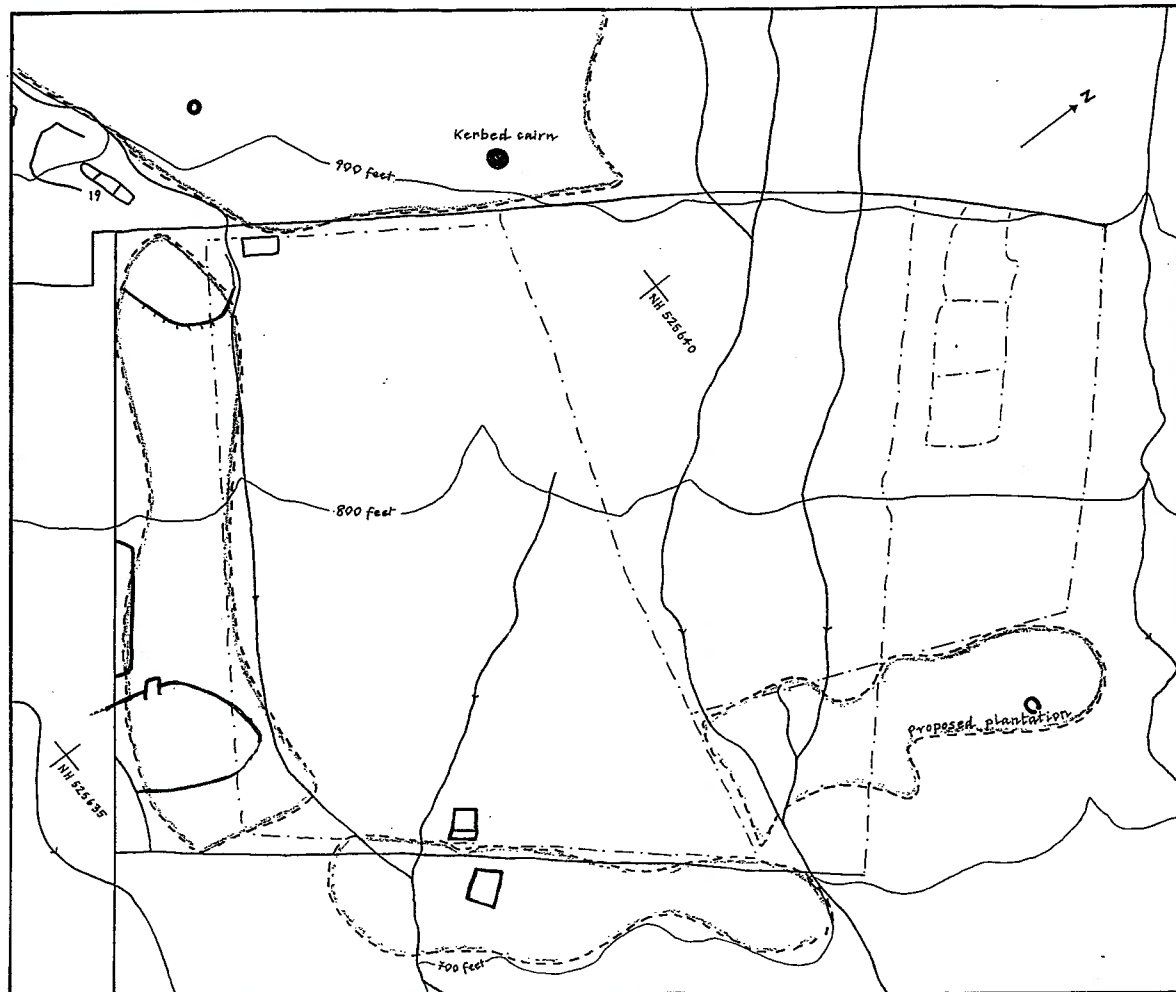


APG 89

- Known sites
- New sites
- Cup-marked stones
- Clearance heap
- // Walling

1:2500





Strath Sgitheach Survey APG 89

- Known sites
 - New sites
 - Walling
 - ⊙ Hut circle
- 1:2500

Fig. 3