

#### Managing Earthen and Turf Features

##### Why are archaeologists interested in earth & turf features?

Many archaeological features now survive as earthen or turf features, either because they were built of these materials or because they are what survives after other materials like wood and stone have been robbed out or decayed. Many earlier field and other boundaries were made of earth and turf and can still be tracked to map areas of former settlement. While some banks and mounds can be quite substantial, others survive as only slight features today - surviving extent is not necessarily a sign of significance. Due to changes in farming practice large areas of upstanding archaeology do still survive in Scotland. It is the survival of these features in combination that makes our historic landscapes so important.

##### Why are they under threat?

Rabbits and other burrowing animals favour these sites because they are soft to dig and generally dry. The growth of scrub can prevent control of these animals both by natural predation and human action. Trees & scrub can cause root damage as well as obscuring these sites as visible features in the landscape. Poaching by stock can also be a problem, especially on steep slopes.



Some of our most important archaeological sites now survive as turf covered banks and mounds.



In upland areas of Scotland much of the archaeology survives as turf or earthen features. Inappropriate forestry planting can destroy these sites and reduce the landscape impact of neighbouring sites.

The insertion of tracks, both by vehicles and stock, and inappropriate siting of fencing can all damage turf and earth features. In most cases this is the result of ignorance of the position and significance of these features, best corrected by carrying out an audit of all archaeological features on a farm.

##### What can be done to repair damage?

In many cases repair work is expensive and inappropriate because the original feature cannot be 'restored'. However it is desirable to prevent continuing damage like vehicle tracks over monuments or to prevent poaching by reducing grazing when mounds and banks are at greatest risk of erosion. Control of rabbits and scrub can also be beneficial allowing eroded areas to regenerate.

*Much of Scotland's archaeological heritage lies in rural areas. This sheet is one of a series giving advice on some of the ways these important remains can be protected during normal rural land management.*

### GOOD PRACTICE

- Identify where archaeological sites are on your farm and map their location. Identify the sites which are suffering from damage. Try to recognise the cause of the problem so that it can be corrected.
- Control scrub to prevent this being used as protection for rabbits & other burrowing animals.
- Control bracken, scrub and other rank vegetation to prevent root damaging archaeological deposits and to maintain these features as visible elements in the landscape.
- Do not drive vehicles over sensitive features, especially in wet weather.
- Site tracks away from known earthen and turf features.
- Keep stock off eroded and poached areas to prevent further damage.
- Avoid feeding stock where this is likely to cause erosion.
- Repair eroded surfaces where appropriate - consult your local archaeological adviser if unsure.
- When using soil, stones or turf found locally to repair damage, make sure you are not robbing from another archaeological site or parts of the same feature to obtain these materials.
- Major repairs may require terram matting, fencing and/or re-seeding at potentially large expense. Consult your local archaeological adviser to discuss what is appropriate and Historic Scotland if dealing with Scheduled Monuments.

Further information - see Historic Scotland [TAN 16 Burrowing Animals & Archaeology](#) (price £6)  
Historic England [Managing Earthwork Monuments](#)



Check regular or rounded mounds as they may well be previously unrecorded sites like this 18th or 19th century turf building. Though only slight remains now, they were once part of substantial buildings like those opposite.



At the Highland Folk Park in Newtownmore has reconstructed a whole crofting township of turf walled buildings. Turf and clay structures were common throughout Scotland until the 18th & 19th centuries.

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