

Managing remains of earlier cultivation systems

What sort of remains of earlier farmers survive?

Clearance cairns from early farmers can be found in many upland areas. Lacking carts to shift stones they were piled in heaps in the fields. Cultivation ridges (better known as rigs) can date from all periods until the introduction of modern drainage in the 1840s. The width and shape of rigs can tell us when and how they were made, either by plough or by spade. They were used by the earliest farmers and prehistoric rigs still survive as upstanding features in some upland areas of Scotland.

Cultivation terraces formed horizontally across slopes through long periods of ploughing across slopes are mostly limited to the south of the country.

Why are they important?

They are a significant and distinctive part of our agricultural landscape, showing the changing use of the countryside. They are also markers in time as to when and how the land was last cultivated. Earlier archaeological remains may well be preserved beneath both rigs and cairns. Some clearance cairns may also have had a secondary use for burials.



Cairnfields, like this prehistoric group in Perthshire, may only show as low bumps in the ground, but once recognised are easy to distinguish from natural mounds.



Rigs can be a distinctive part of the landscape, giving it form and character, as well as explaining how the land was managed in the past.

What should I do to protect them?

By recognising that they survive and have value, there is more chance to protect them. Rigs are easily removed by ploughing but can be preserved as permanent pasture. Both rigs and cairnfields should be selected to encourage species-rich grassland, as their survival generally reflects a less intensively managed area of farmland.

Must all old cultivation areas be preserved?

No, it is not possible to protect everything, but these features should be protected where feasible. Clearance cairns may be the only record of prehistoric farmers and some may date to the time of the first farmers as much as 6,000 years ago.

Rigs may be a common feature of the countryside but are easily destroyed by ploughing and the differences in form are significant in understanding the past of our countryside.

Cultivation terraces are vulnerable to modern ploughing, though generally surviving examples are on slopes too steep to justify modern cultivation.

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 these remains are known to survive on your farm.
- Check your farm plan to see if current or future management is damaging these remains.
- Do not use areas of earlier cultivation as supplementary feeding sites for stock.
- Avoid ploughing over earlier cultivation remains. When dealing with areas of clearance cairns be aware that the area between the cairns may contain archaeological interest and should also be excluded from cultivation. If possible retain these as areas of permanent pasture.
- When cultivation is unavoidable, follow minimum cultivation techniques and avoid draining or subsoiling in these areas.
- These areas should not be selected for root crops or any crops that require deep ploughing.
- Do not encourage tree planting or tree regeneration over these areas.
- An appropriate grazing regime to prevent regeneration and the development of rank vegetation is desirable. This will also make these features a more visible element in the farming landscape.
- Control of rabbits and other burrowing animals is desirable.
- Spraying of bracken is advantageous in areas of infestation, but should follow best practice.
- Select areas of early cultivation preferentially (as with other areas of archaeological and historic interest) for conversion to species-rich grassland.

Further information - see [GUIDELINES FOR THE PRESERVATION OF AREAS OF RIG AND FURROW](#)
see also the Archaeology Scotland [Identification Guides](#) for help in recognising these features.



Cultivation terraces, such as these surviving on Arthur's Seat, required many years of ploughing to create their current form.



This pattern of different cultivation rigs in the Border hills, shows changing agricultural practice from prehistoric times to modern times.