

Archaeology & Rural Landuse

KINBEACHIE FARM BLACK ISLE

An Arable Farm with
buried archaeology



Situation

1 Kinbeachie Farm is a small farm of 80 hectares situated on a low sandstone ridge on the Black Isle, Easter Ross, overlooking the Cromarty Firth. The topsoil is generally shallow (less than 200 mm) and ploughing has regularly exposed fragments of the underlying bedrock and clay subsoil.

Current farming practice

This was run by a previous owner, Andrew Fraser, for a number of years, as an arable unit with 10 suckler cows. By 2003 no stock were held on the farm and it is currently used for horses.

Historical sources

In medieval and more recent times much of the Black Isle was uncultivated, forming part of an extensive common used for grazing and as a source of peat and turf for fuel. A radiocarbon (C14) date of c1200AD from a pit in one of Mr Fraser's fields and the known castle of Kinbeachie (as shown on the map overleaf) to the east suggest there was farming activity here in medieval times. How much of the present farm this included is not known

*Flint tools found
during a field
walking survey.*



Archaeological discoveries

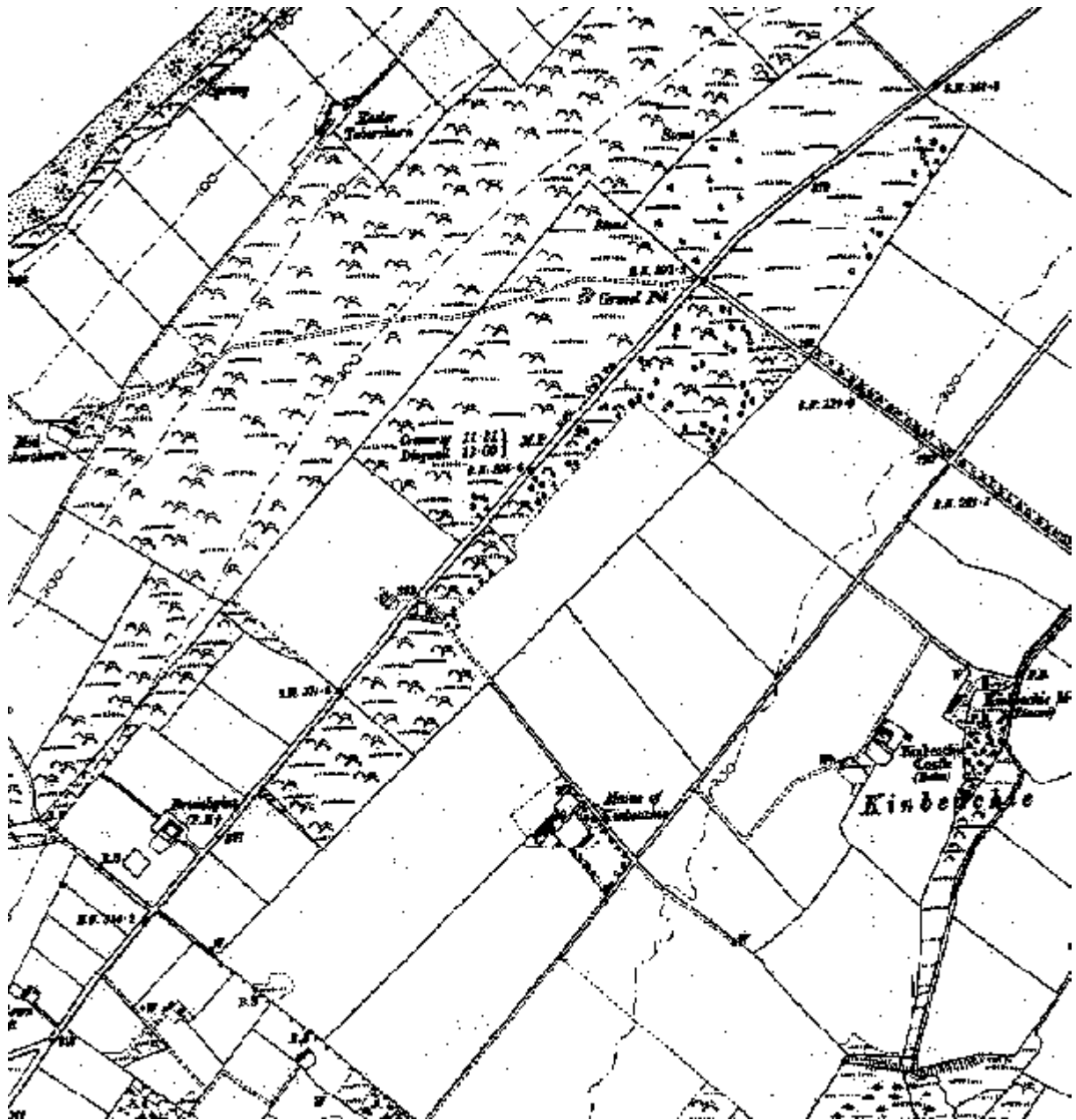
No finds were reported from this farm until the construction of a water pipeline exposed a possible cist and also a sherd of pottery, later identified as early Neolithic. Following this and the purchase of a new plough, Mr Fraser began to recognise distinct charcoal spreads on the surface of his fields after ploughing. Field walking by Mr Fraser, local volunteers and archaeologists revealed a small scatter of pottery and flint artefacts related to these charcoal patches.

Following trial excavations that uncovered highly truncated prehistoric remains and a further C14 sample from an isolated pit (paid for by Mr Fraser) produced a probable date of 3795–3640 BC, a short excavation was commissioned by Historic Scotland. This revealed the remains of a small timber building dating to the same early Neolithic period. This is the only early prehistoric building excavated on the mainland north of Inverness.

No features are visible on aerial photographs and a geophysical survey did not supply useful results (probably because of the local geology and the small size of the pits revealed).

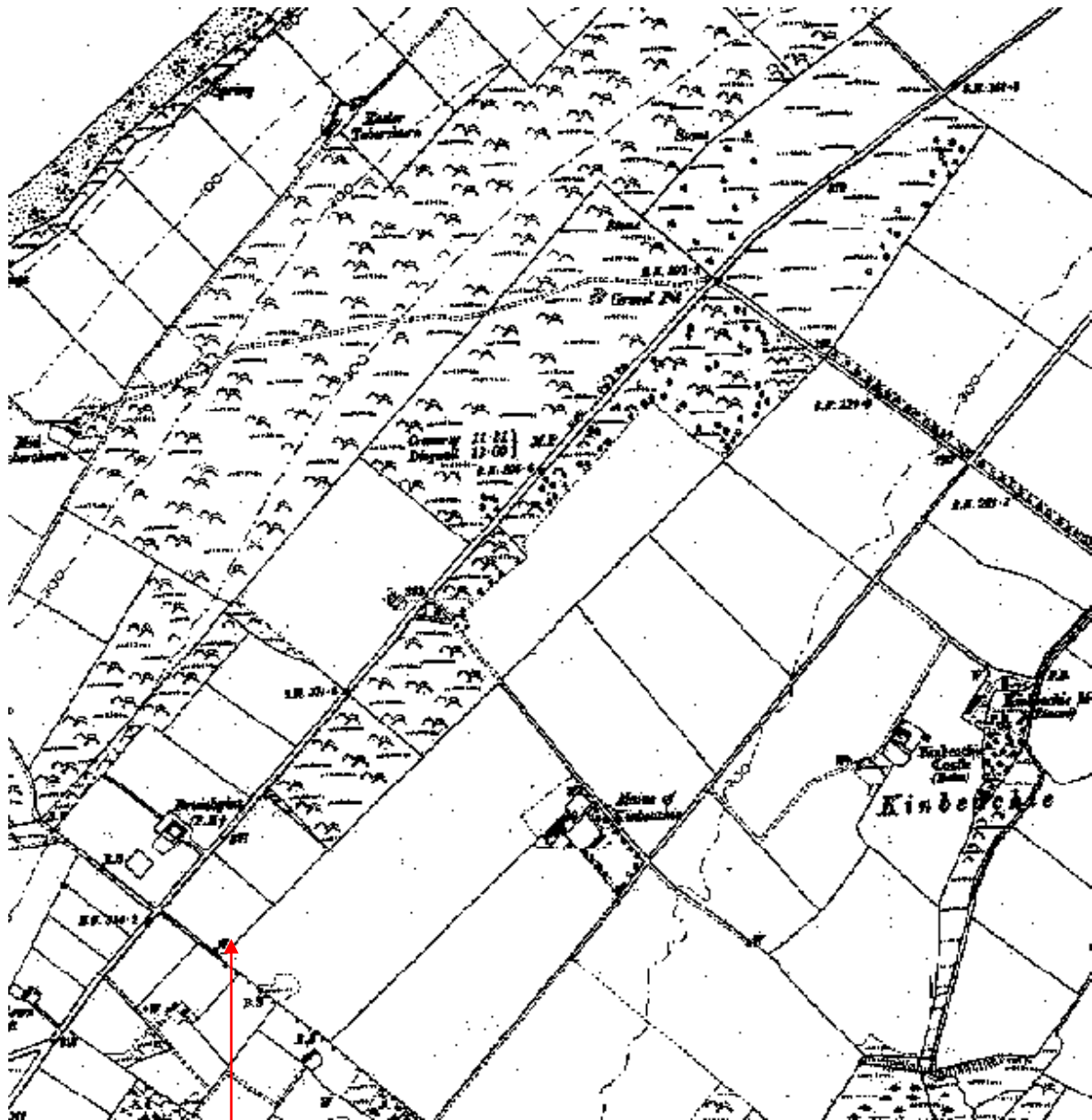
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On the rising ground to the south and east of this farm is a series of major Neolithic burial cairns such as this chamber that survives at Woodhead Farm.

There are no early estate maps that cover this particular area, though the Scottish Record Office do hold 18th-century plans of Findon Estate to the west, showing dispersed settlements among unenclosed lands. This is likely to have been the case here with medieval and later settlement clustered around Kinbeachie Castle, St Martin's chapel and by the coast at Tobar a'Chuirn. The establishment of four crofts on the ridge of Kinbeachie is likely to have been on ground not recently cultivated and considered relatively poor.



A marker stone was disturbed here during building operations in 1996. It marked the boundary in the 19th century between Findon and Kinbeachie Estates. Similar stones can still be seen to the north-east of the modern farm.

Kinbeachie as surveyed in 1904. The outlined area marks the extent of the modern farm. Only one of the three crofts shown in 1871–5 still survived and this was also used as a public house. Note the disappearance of the plantation to the east of the farm. Kinbeachie Loch (only just showing on this map extract) was drained by this date and the mill closed.

Large areas of ground remained unenclosed and unimproved. This included the area to the east of the modern farm which was not brought into cultivation until after World War II.

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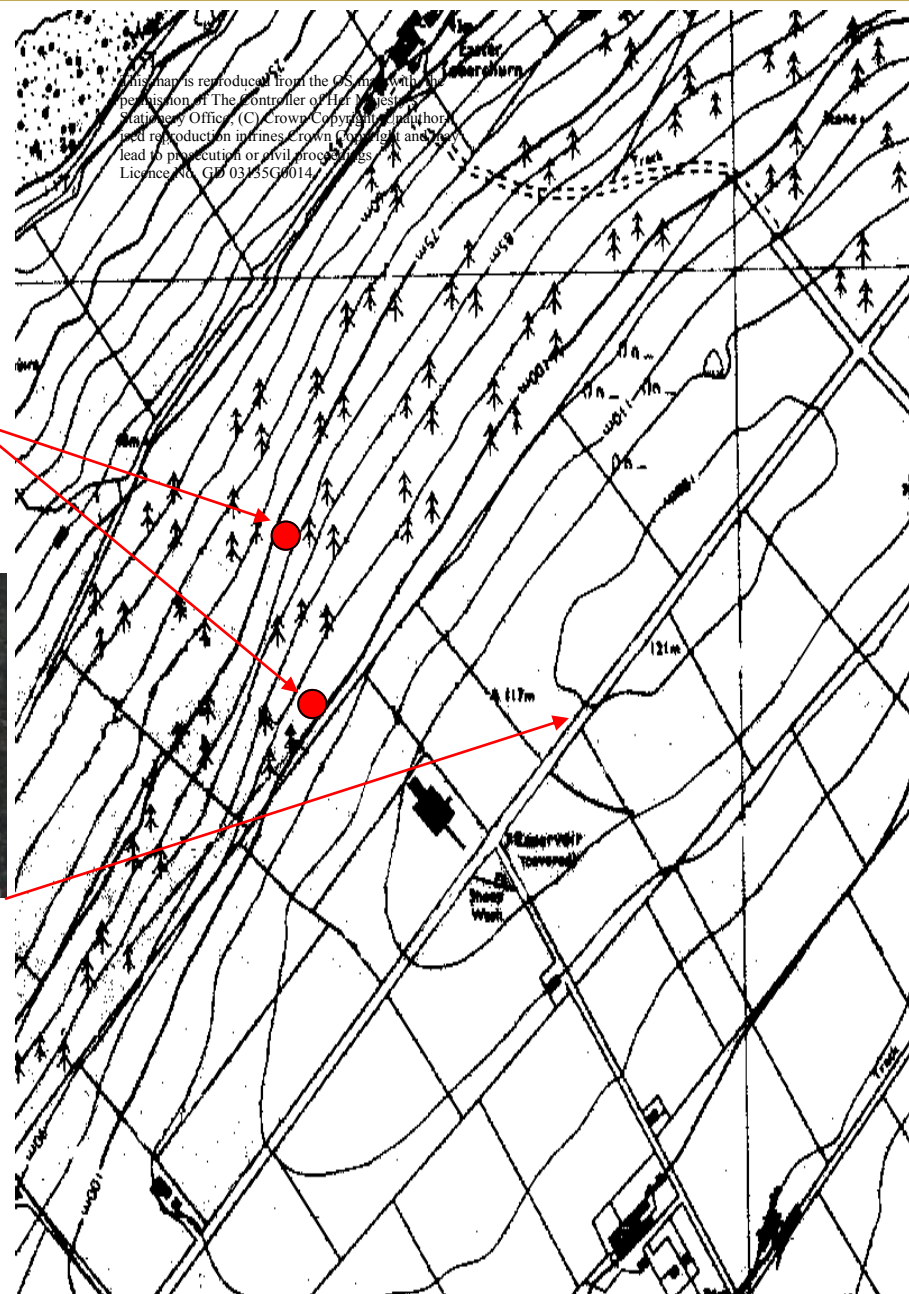
Quern stone found during ploughing many years ago. It is not known where on the farm it was found.

Prehistoric roundhouses dating to 1500–500 BC, obscured and part destroyed in a modern conifer plantation. These were discovered by Mr Fraser and are too obscured by trees to show by photographs.



A sherd of early Neolithic pottery was found here adjacent to a waterpipe trench dug in 1993. A small excavation in 1995 adjacent to the field edge revealed the extent of damage by modern ploughing.

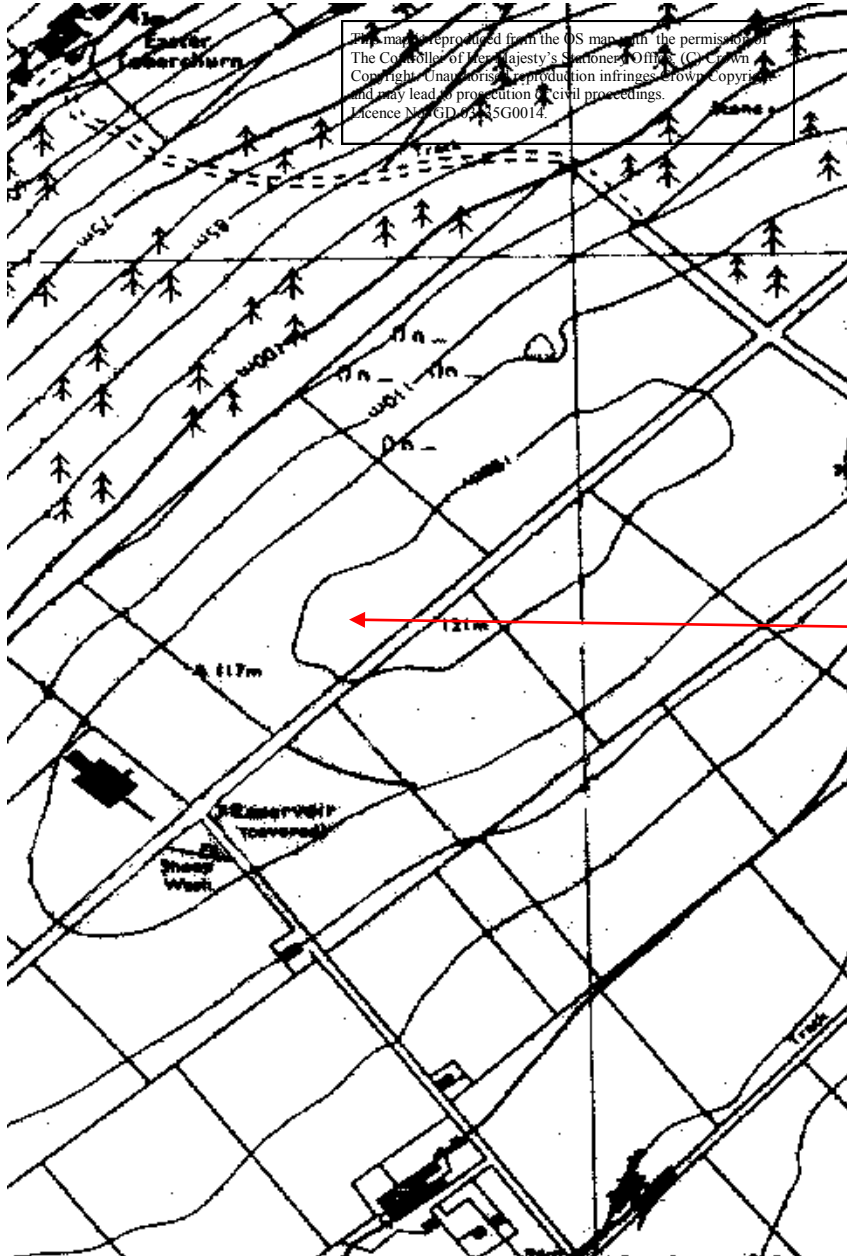
Excavation after removal of ploughsoil (the fence is on the east, beside the road) showing how the plough has cut into the subsoil. The grey area in the centre left was caused by digging at the time of the 1993 work.



Removal of all the plough-disturbed horizon shows how 250mm of post pits surviving in headland were removed within the ploughed area. (The stone heap shown in the photograph adjacent is a reconstruction and not an original feature.)

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During the digging of a water pipeline in 1993 this small rock-cut pit was discovered. No finds were made inside it, probably because of water percolation that would have dissolved any bone or pottery that might have otherwise survived. It was perhaps used for a Bronze Age burial some 4000 years ago.

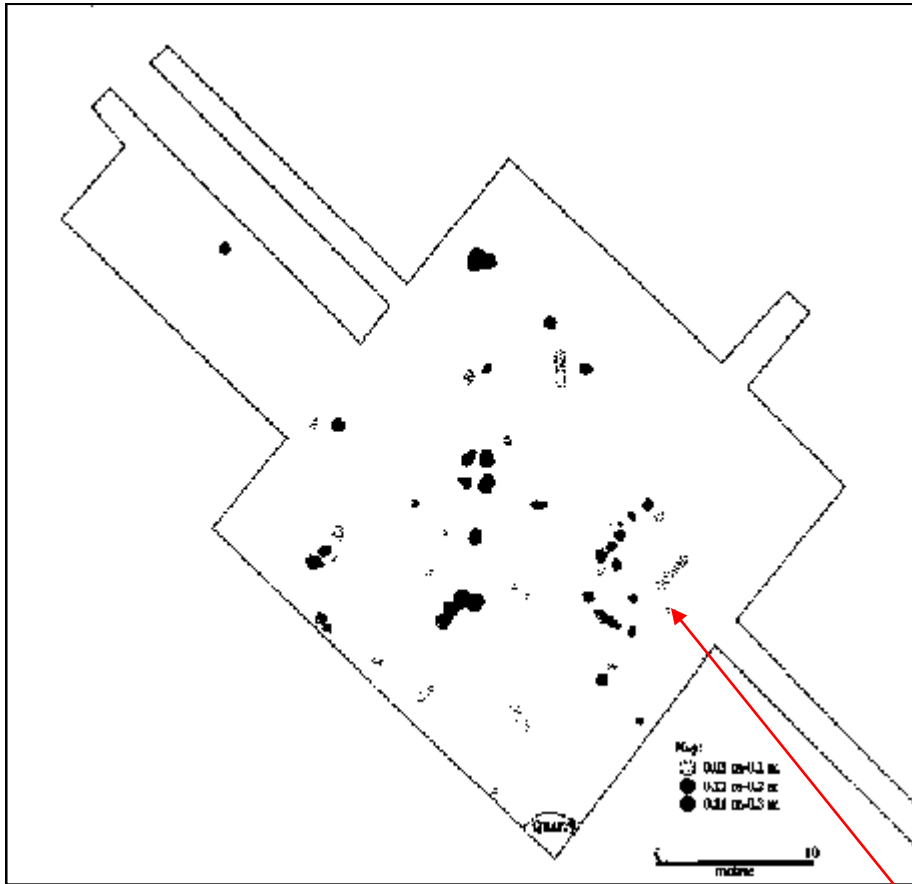
Area of trial pits in 1996 and main excavation in 1997. Remains were exposed of a timber building and associated pits dated to between 3500 and 2920 BC.



Prehistoric pits exposed by Mr Fraser contained early neolithic pottery and a C14 sample was dated to between 3300 and 2890 BC. Not excavated, as it was under grass at the time of the main excavation. Charcoal-rich pit fill revealed during trial excavation in 1996.



This soil profile is of the left-hand side of the trench shown opposite and clearly reveals how recent ploughing has been cutting below the ploughsoil. Only 120 mm survived from a pit in the centre of this profile whereas a similar pit to the right under the headland shown opposite contained over 300mm of archaeological deposits. These differences are important for interpreting and valuing archaeological sites.

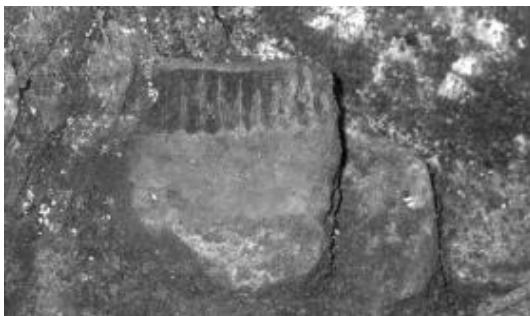


Main area of excavation in 1997. Shaded areas mark pits identified cut into the subsoil. The group on the right of the plan were interpreted as the truncated remains of post holes to hold the roof of a rectangular building.

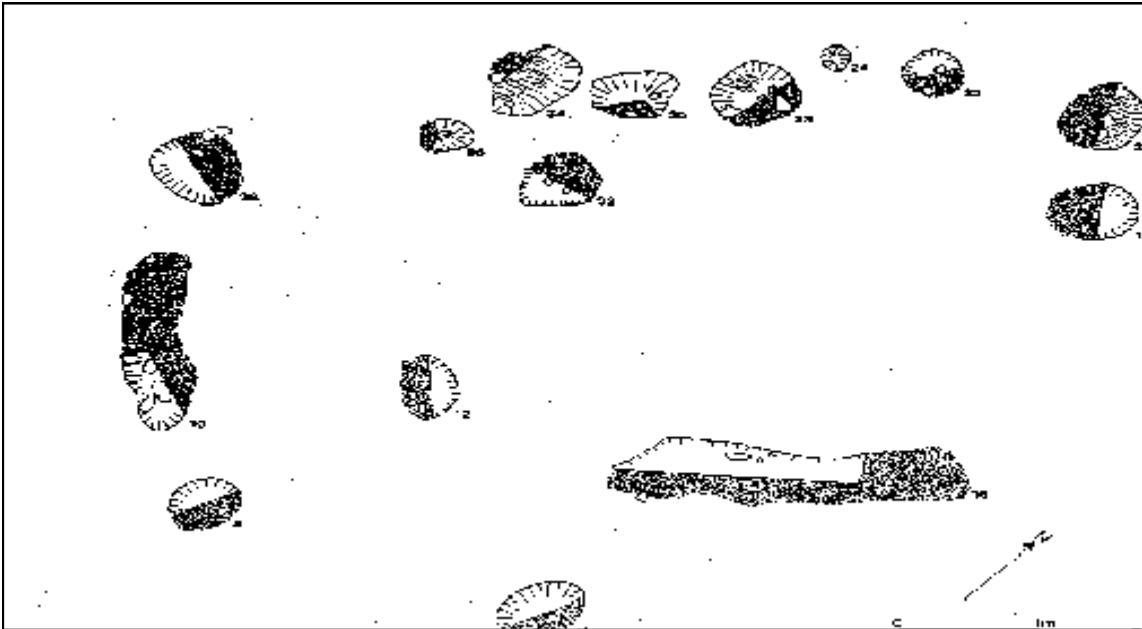
The pits were shallow and do not form a complete line suggesting severe plough damage.

Carbonised remains from these pits included grains of naked barley but also some emmer wheat.

Dark grey areas mark post pits of early Neolithic house as surviving when Excavated.



Early Neolithic pottery found in a pit close to this building.



Detailed plan of the probable post pits for the building, as part excavated, with the fills shaded in black.



Detail of small stone axehead found during the 1997 excavation



Another piece of the same pot as shown on page 6.

Archaeological Importance

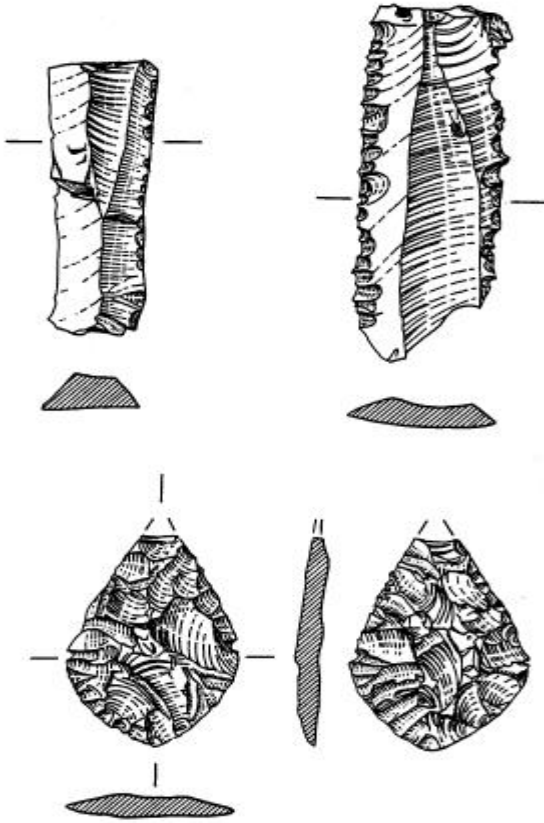
The introduction of farming into Britain had a profound effect on the landscape of Scotland with its felling of trees and the creation of fields.

Most evidence for this period comes from burial cairns or the spectacular stone villages of Skara Brae and Barnhouse in Orkney. Pollen evidence from places as remote as Loch Coulin in Wester Ross suggests that early Neolithic farmers rapidly spread across Scotland, but there is still very little evidence as to how and where these people were living.

We do not, for example, know whether they were living in villages as Barnhouse in Orkney or were widely dispersed in small crofts. More evidence is needed as to how they managed the land and the trading connections they had for obtaining materials such as flint and stone axes.

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Detailed drawings of three of the flint tools found

Lessons learned

One of the main lessons from this example is that the experience and observation of farmers and farm workers may be a major factor in the discovery of new sites. It was Mr Fraser's noting of a series of discrete charcoal spreads c1 metre in diameter that led, ultimately, to the identification and excavation of this early house site. Without his persistence this site and the associated finds would have been lost. It is therefore worth talking to farmers about what they might have seen on their land as this may lead to new sites being discovered. As the management of any archaeological site depends on the goodwill of the farmers, they should be encouraged to appreciate what they have on their land. There was considerable local interest in this site and finds from the work here have been displayed in local museums.

Opportunities for enhancement

The various excavations have shown that most of the archaeological evidence has either been destroyed or is so fragmentary that it cannot be easily understood. The current owner could be encouraged to put the land under permanent set-aside and thus prevent further cultivation, but there are not proper payment mechanisms for this option. Minimum tillage or direct drilling would be another option but this would only work as long as there was no need to deep plough or subsoil should the soil become compacted. Alternatively, he could be encouraged to enter an agri-environment scheme, but the small size of the unit and the lack of significant natural habitats makes it unlikely that an application would be successful. Management payments from Historic Scotland are limited and earmarked generally for more visible monuments in the landscape. There are therefore no adequate support mechanisms for this type of archaeology buried on arable land. Given the shallowness of the topsoil, 200 mm or less, and the stony nature of the subsoil, any surviving features are certain to get damaged over time.

This situation of fragile buried remains can be replicated across many areas of lowland Scotland. They remain our most threatened archaeological deposits.

J Wordsworth 2003 (revised 2015)

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Headland Archaeology and Historic Scotland for permission to use the line illustrations, reproduced on pp6–8, from a draft publication report on the 1997 excavation. The OS survey maps of 1869 and 1904 are reproduced courtesy of Highland Council Archive Service. Particular thanks must also go to Andrew Fraser at Kinbeachie Farm, for his persistence in recognising that there were significant archaeological remains on his land and for supplying the photographs bottom left p4 and top right p5. The remaining photographs were taken by the author.

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