



Situation

Duck Loch, traditionally known as Loch na h-Airigh Bige, is situated at an elevation of c70 mOD on the western side of the Kyle of Tongue. The underlying glacial drift deposits are capped by an extensive cover of peat. The surrounding vegetation is *nardus* dominant. Initial impressions suggest this is an area of unimproved moorland.

Current farming practice

Forming part of Hope Estate, this has traditionally been run as a sheep unit and the land was also used as part of an extensive deer forest. Recently the decision was taken to convert the land to forestry under the Woodland Grant Scheme (later replaced by the Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme and now the Rural Priorities Scheme).

Historical sources

Though extensive prehistoric remains have been recorded in the area, including a 19th century souterrain or earthhouse close to the present road, no prehistoric remains were noted during a recent archaeological survey of the area. The location of the loch and the relatively more fertile ground down on the sea shore make the higher ground an unlikely area for early settlement. There are no early records of any settlement in this area in contrast to the extensive medieval and later settlement at Tongue and to a lesser extent to the south. The placename translates as '*Loch of the small shieling*' and a study of an aerial

photograph taken by the RAF in 1946 showed remains on the north side of the loch and traces of walling to the south west.

Field Survey

A rapid walk-over archaeological survey confirmed the location of a shieling (summer grazing) settlement within a dyked enclosure. The area within the enclosure was more verdant than the surrounding moorland and partially obscured by bracken. On the sloping ground to the south leading to the Loch a single clearance cairn suggested the ground here might have been once cultivated by spade or by hand plough. Traces of both stone and turf walling were noted to the south west of the loch as shown and they defined another area of greener more species-rich grassland, also first recognised by bracken growth. Within this area further clearance cairns and rig cultivation were recorded, further evidence that an original shieling for summer grazing had become a permanent settlement. An unusual discovery was cutting 60m long by 3m deep on the east side of the Loch. The artificial nature of this cutting was determined by its V-shaped profile and regular form. As the existing water level laps over the rig system to the south, it is likely that this cutting was cut to expose fertile ground for cultivation, possibly as early as the 18th century but more probably in the 19th century. Alternative explanations are posited overleaf.

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Airigh Bige Case Study 3



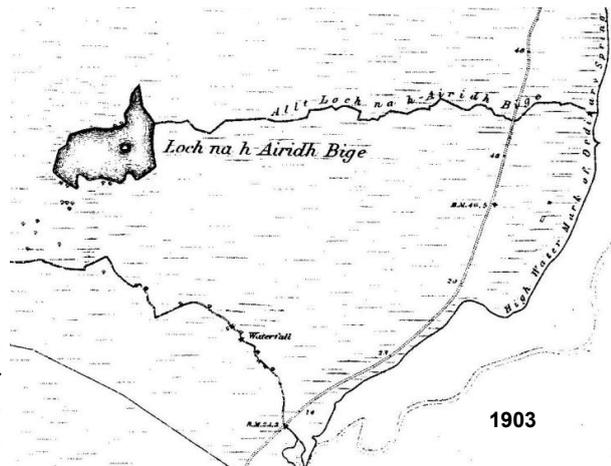
Stone clearance cairns and a more species-rich grassland within an enclosure, point to an enriched soil from cultivation. Identification of these features is made easier by preferential colonisation of the improved ground by bracken.



Longhouse wall foundations, partially hidden by bracken, are sited on the rockier ground away from the more fertile areas.



Low walls of turf and stone mark enclosures to control stock. Though difficult to spot under rank vegetation or where the original walling has collapsed, the lines of the dykes and associated ditches can be seen as shapes placed into the landscape.



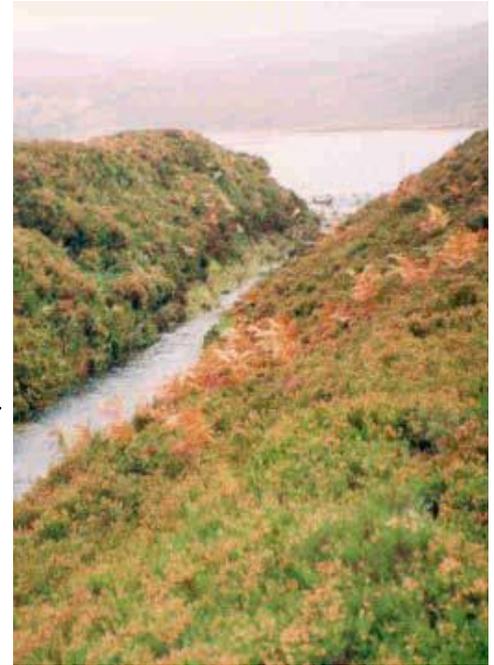
Traces of rig cultivation, dykes and clearance cairns were seen in this area of bracken-clad species-rich grassland on either side of the burn. The features are easier to spot in winter and early spring when the bracken growth is at a minimum. Spraying of the bracken to make these features more visible would only be possible for part of the area because of the danger of polluting the neighbouring watercourses.

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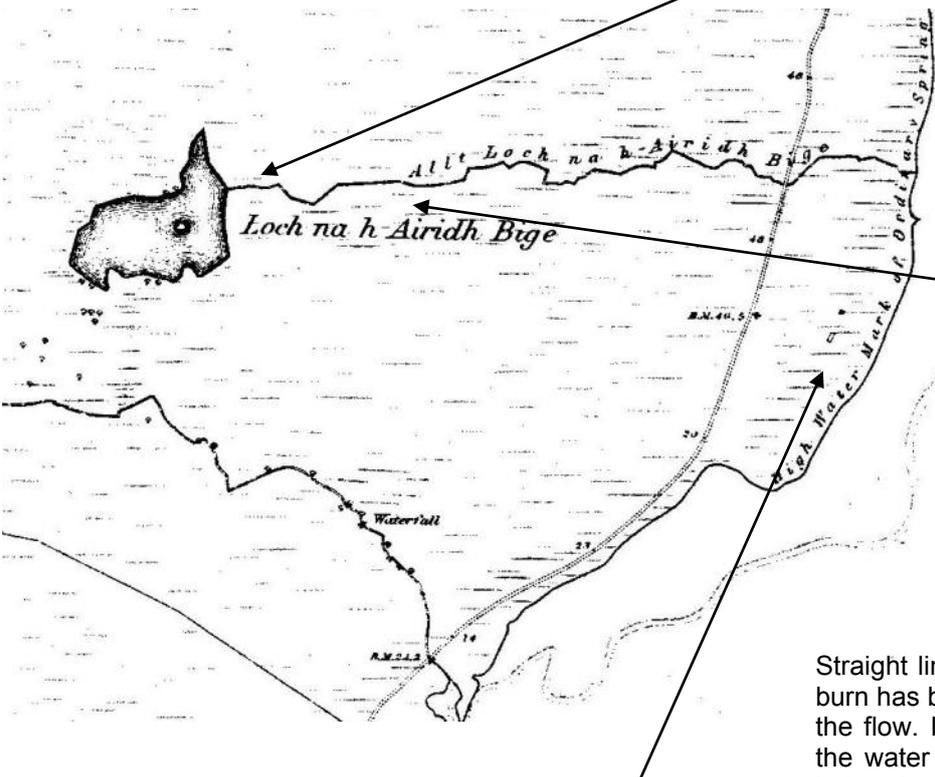
Airigh Bige Case Study 3



Stones piled on the bank show where rock was excavated to allow water to flow over a natural rock outcrop.



The distinctive V-shape of this cutting and its straight regular form show that this is not a natural channel.



Straight lines and a bank suggest the line of this burn has been deliberately channelled to increase the flow. It may be that one reason for diverting the water was to supply water to the settlement below by the shore, perhaps even to power a small mill. Alternatively it was done to encourage sea trout & salmon to migrate up the burn to the loch for sporting interests.



On the shore substantial remains show where settlement remained once the rest of the land was converted to sheep farming. The abandonment of this building in turn is a reflection of the changing pattern of settlement and land use in this area.

Archaeological importance

The surviving remains are not of sufficient value and preservation to be protected as Scheduled Monuments. They do however give evidence as to how the land was managed in the late 18th century and possibly earlier.

Why preserve these remains?

The preservation of the cutting and the canalised burn is important for understanding the local drainage pattern. It also has implications for understanding the formation and condition of the peat bog in the flatter ground below the cliff. The shieling remains are compact and discrete and show from the rig cultivation, the desperate population pressures and land hunger in the late 18th/ early 19th C. Though this was solved by clearing people off the land for sheep, the remains still form a discrete snap shot on this settlement. While it is a stiff walk from the public road to the loch, the short distance involved would make this an interesting route for both visitors and locals. The archaeological remains are important assets in giving interest and value to this landscape.

Protection work required

As the land has been entered under the WGS there was some pressure to plant over the archaeological remains. However Forestry Commission policy is to preserve sites of archaeological importance, the definition of importance being agreed between the local authority archaeologist and the local FC Conservator. In this case Highland Council Archaeology Service requested that trees be kept off all the areas of archaeological interest.

The Forestry grant scheme (WGS) allowed 20% of the land to be left unplanted, this did not significantly affect the amount of land available for planting. The forest applicant was, however, concerned that the area of archaeological interest was the area of highest fertility (due to the enrichment of the soil by stock and cultivation) and one of the few areas with existing natural regeneration.

A compromise was reached where bracken over the archaeological features was sprayed with Asulam. It was agreed that no planting should take place within the archaeological areas and a buffer of 20m left outside these features. No attempts will be made to restrict the natural scrub regenerating over the former area of cultivation south of the loch, though this situation will be monitored. It may be desirable to weed the trees seeding on the wall lines, particularly if it is decided to encourage public access at a later date.

Opportunities for enhancement

Once the woodland has been established it will be possible for the public to enter this area without damaging the seedlings and public access may be encouraged onto this site. When the protective fences are removed from this site and deer allowed to return the more fertile archaeological areas will remain favoured grazing areas.

OS map Sutherland Sheet 25, 1903 edition, reproduced courtesy of Highland Council Archive Service. Aerial photograph (RAF 1946) courtesy of RCAHMS and Highland Council. Note that public access to this area is not currently encouraged due to the size of the trees planted.

