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MORVICH FARM, ROGART SUTHERLAND

Regenerating woodland in a historic landscape



Situation

Morvich Farm is situated on land rising steeply from the valley floor on the north bank of the River Fleet. The lower ground is mostly improved pasture with some scattered mature woodland used for grazing cattle and sheep. While cattle and sheep stock are run by Morvich, adjoining crofting rights allow for additional sheep stock to be run on the common grazing. This has caused tensions in the past with plans to extend the woodland area on this farm. Some woodland has been established as coverts for pheasants and currently the farm is run primarily as a sporting estate with a corresponding reduction in stock.

Historical sources

Previous archaeological survey work has recorded a substantial extent of prehistoric settlement in this area represented by cairns, hut circles and field systems of clearance cairns and lynchets. These are likely to have been built from c1500BC onwards on the evidence of the excavations at Lairg (McCullagh & Tipping 1998) and



there was almost certainly earlier settlement of this area from the Neolithic some 5,000 years ago that is no longer visible. Settlement continued into Pictish and medieval times (Abercross is a placename of probable Pictish origin whereas the name Morvich may be of Norse derivation.)

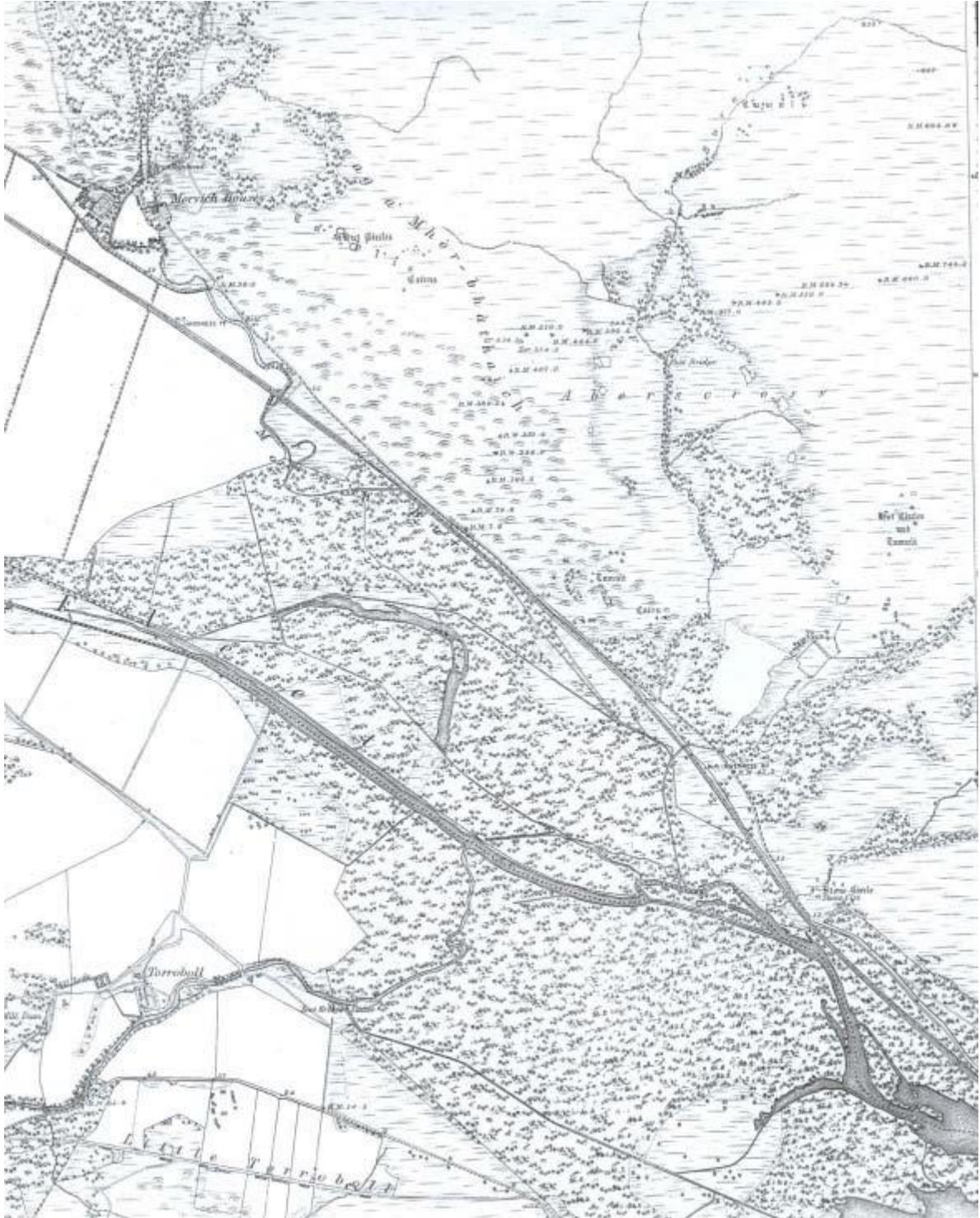
Morvich Farm was created out of the traditional runrig joint stock farming townships of Easter and Wester Abercross c1819 by the notorious land agent Patrick Sellars for his own use. This will have involved the clearance of the small tenants and their stock, re-ordering of the earlier fields and the construction of 19th century farmhouse and buildings. It is probable that much of the oak woodland, outside any gorge refugia, was deliberately planted at this time to provide shelter for stock.

The modern farm with its improved fields and farm buildings largely reflects this revised layout, though several of the improved features such as stone dykes have been replaced by later innovations such as wire fencing. The shift from a mixed farming economy to a purely pastoral system probably took place in the mid 20th century.

A plan of c1800 showing Morvich and Loch Fleet before the Causeway was built and the draining of the land behind.

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The complex archaeological and historical record is only imperfectly recorded on the 19th century map of this area. It does show the visible (though incomplete) picture of settlement at Wester and Easter Abercross.

Close to the road and in the more sheltered area of the gorge are extensive patches of oak woodland. Some of these are natural survivals but others would appear to be deliberately planted to form shelter for stock and they are still used today as wood pasture. Continuation of this woodland pattern may require reduction of stock and/or planting of saplings in protective enclosures to prevent the new growth being browsed out.



.It is likely that the prehistoric settlement extended originally into the area of the modern fields. Later agricultural improvements have removed all trace of such occupation except for the scheduled cairn and another possible cairn surviving behind these wind damaged oak trees.



The land to the south of the modern road was formerly part of the tidal Loch reclaimed by extensive draining operations in the 19th century. It is no longer economic to retain this and it has reverted to alder carr woodland with a high nature conservation interest with low archaeological value, though there is a small potential for crannogs or hunting platforms to be preserved in these wetland areas.

Straight cuts for the smaller burns suggest deliberate canalisation of these water sources for draining the adjoining land. These channels were probably cut as part of the agricultural improvements of the early 19th century, though they could also have been made in more recent times.



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Morvich Farm Case Study 1

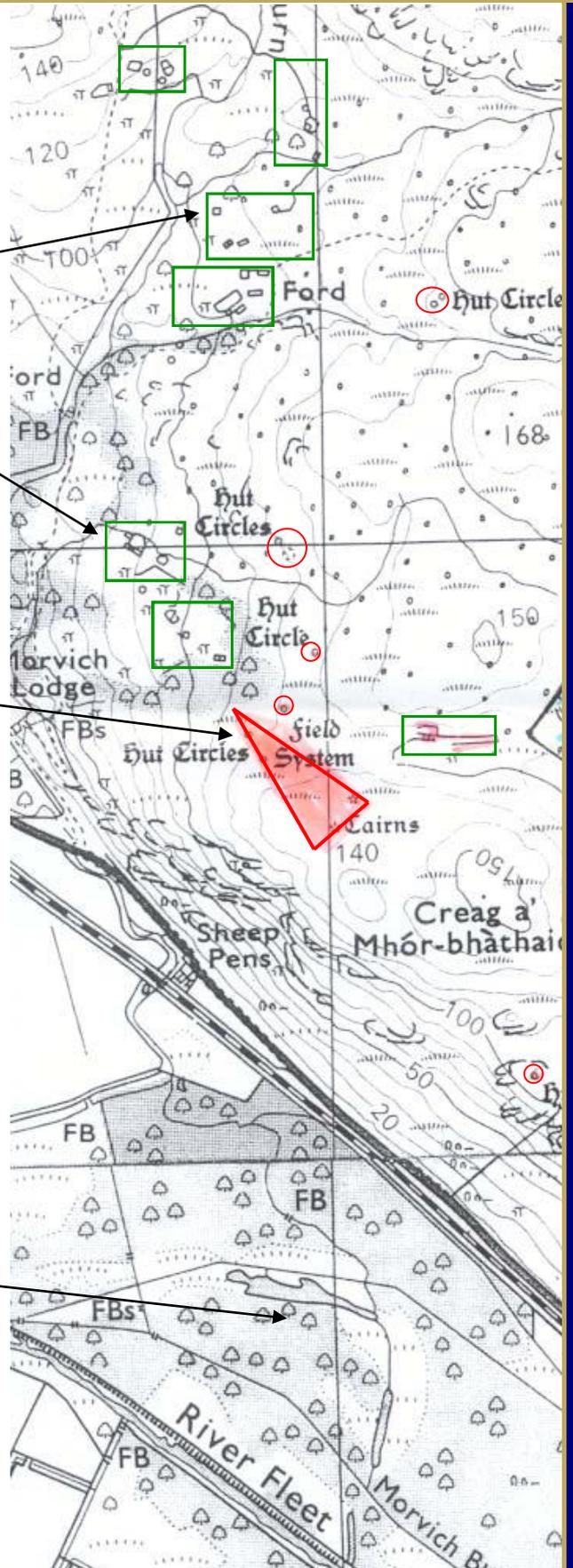
The extent of prehistoric and later settlement already recorded shows that this is a significant historic landscape.

Rectangular areas mark areas of post-medieval settlement, mostly dating to the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Oval areas defined in red and areas shaded in red without an outline mark the site of prehistoric features, 2,000—

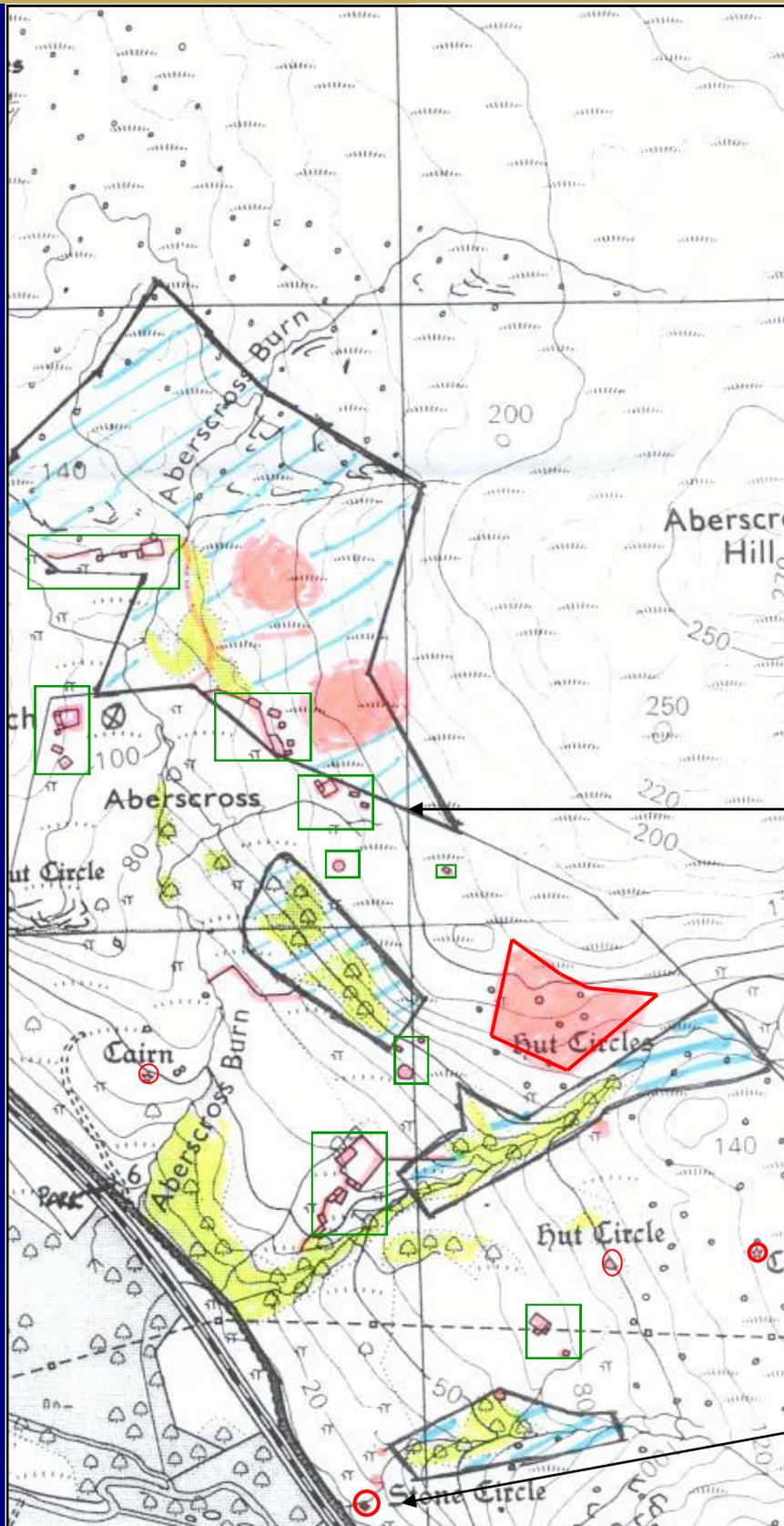
Certain areas, outlined and shaded in red on this plan, have statutory designation and legal protection as scheduled monuments of national importance.

No significant remains have been recorded from the lands drained from Strath Fleet at the beginning of the 19th century. These have now reverted to woodland, forming a significant environmental reserve.



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Proposed expansion of woodland in this area would destroy remains of a prehistoric and later field system.



A modern boundary fence bisects the former settlement of Easter Aberscross. The modern plan seriously underrepresented the extent of the surviving remains of this former township. See overleaf for a fuller extent of this area. Areas shaded red on this plan mark areas of prehistoric settlement recorded from survey.



A stone circle overgrown with bracken and heavily robbed survives close to the road. It still retains enough of its form to be protected as a Scheduled Monument.



A full archaeological survey of this farm has not been carried out, making it difficult for the land managers to know the extent and position of all the historic landscape features on this land. The low mounds in this photo marking stone clearance cairns almost certainly of prehistoric date, were discovered during survey work for a proposed woodland grant scheme.

Some former sites, such as this possible house, are now heavily obscured by bracken making them largely invisible features in the landscape.



This turf walled house site, part of the settlement of Easter Aberscross, was not recorded on earlier surveys. It stands out as a patch of verdant grassland amongst the less colourful heather moorland. It has previously suffered from rabbits who have damaged the structure of this house's turf wall stubs. Note the remains of houses and walls belonging to Wester Aberscross visible in the distance.

Restoration of the gorge woodlands does not cause a significant problem to the historic landscape and is easily achieved by preventing stock entering this area.



Remnant rigs marking the form of earlier cultivation have now been largely ploughed out.

Restoration of this overgrazed birch woodland is more of a problem as it skirts the edge of an area of former settlement. The buildings would benefit from spraying of the bracken to make them more visible features in the landscape. As they do not form part of a proposed woodland expansion area, they were not eligible for Stewardship payments under the Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme. They would be eligible for such payments under the Rural Priorities Scheme.



Maintenance of traditional muir burning and grazing allows the open moorland and its associated historic landscape to be preserved.

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Archaeological importance

The scheduled monuments at Morvich show that parts of this farm are considered as being of national importance. This is only a sample of a much wider historic landscape and the legally protected remains are best understood and should be managed in association with these.

Why preserve these remains?

The remains are nationally significant, even though not all are designated as such, and they help to explain the use and development of the modern landscape and environment over the last 4,000 years. They also give character and shape to farming landscape and a sense of continuity to the modern landowner.

Protection work required

As can be seen proposals to extend the modern woodland cover are at conflict with the retention of these historic features. A substantial expansion of the woodland cover is at the expense of the current landscape pattern. However a careful siting of individual trees might be acceptable in some areas. Most of the surviving archaeological features have survived for hundreds if not thousands of years and require no more than compliance with good farming practice. The main issue is making sure that the farm managers and staff know where the archaeological features are, so that they will not be damaged in the course of their work.

Opportunities for enhancement

The spread of bracken over some of the features could be beneficially treated by a programme of bracken spraying, allowing the buildings to become more visible features in the landscape. This would have to be done manually to prevent damage to standing walls. Poaching

by stock could be a potential problem and would need to be controlled by siting feeding rings away from known sites. Rabbits are a major problem on this farm and need control, especially where pressure of numbers leads to burrows being dug into house walls. Appropriate muirburn on the heather moorland would make the features in this area more visible features in the landscape. In the longer term replacement of the hill fence with one that better respects the traditional farm boundaries would be appropriate, paying greater attention to the historic landscape.

The benefits of any action will, of course, have to be balanced between natural and cultural heritage conservation interests. Equally, the commercial and aesthetic interests of the estate owner and farm managers are central to any decisions made. However, unless positive protection is offered, the appearance and value of this historic landscape will deteriorate and conscious decisions need to be taken if it is to be preserved. Modern mapping and satellite imagery show what decisions have subsequently been taken by the land owners. These are not ideal in terms of the historic landscape but reflect that landscapes do change.

Acknowledgements

The original surveys were carried out on behalf of Morvich Estate and Scottish Woodlands as part of the WGS process. Copies of the archaeological survey report can be seen at Highland Council Archive and the NMRS. No right of access to this estate is implied other than what is legally permissible.

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