



#### Situation

Rahoy Oak Woods are part of an extensive group of native woodlands that survive in the sheltered sea lochs of Morvern and Ardnamurchan. They are in turn matched by the oakwoods of Lorn further to the south, all forming part of a nationally significant resource protected by SSSI and NATURA legislation. They are currently managed as conservation woodlands under the Woodland Grant Scheme and no felling in the woods now takes place.

#### Historical sources

Two significant archaeological sites are recorded at Rahoy, both protected as scheduled monuments of national importance. They show that this area has been settled for at least 4,000 years. Little is known of the early history of Rahoy or whether the dun was occupied in the iron age or during the later Norse period when the vikings were raiding and settling in this area. The placename is thought to be of Norse origin. As part of Morvern it will have belonged to the medieval Lordship of the Isles. It was acquired by the Duke of Argyll in the 17th century and Campbell tacksmen were introduced to manage the lands for the Duke. The woodlands were enclosed with stone and turf dykes in 1785 to protect them from damage by stock. This was because the woods had commercial value as charcoal for the iron industry based at Furnace and for the oak bark used in the tanning industry.

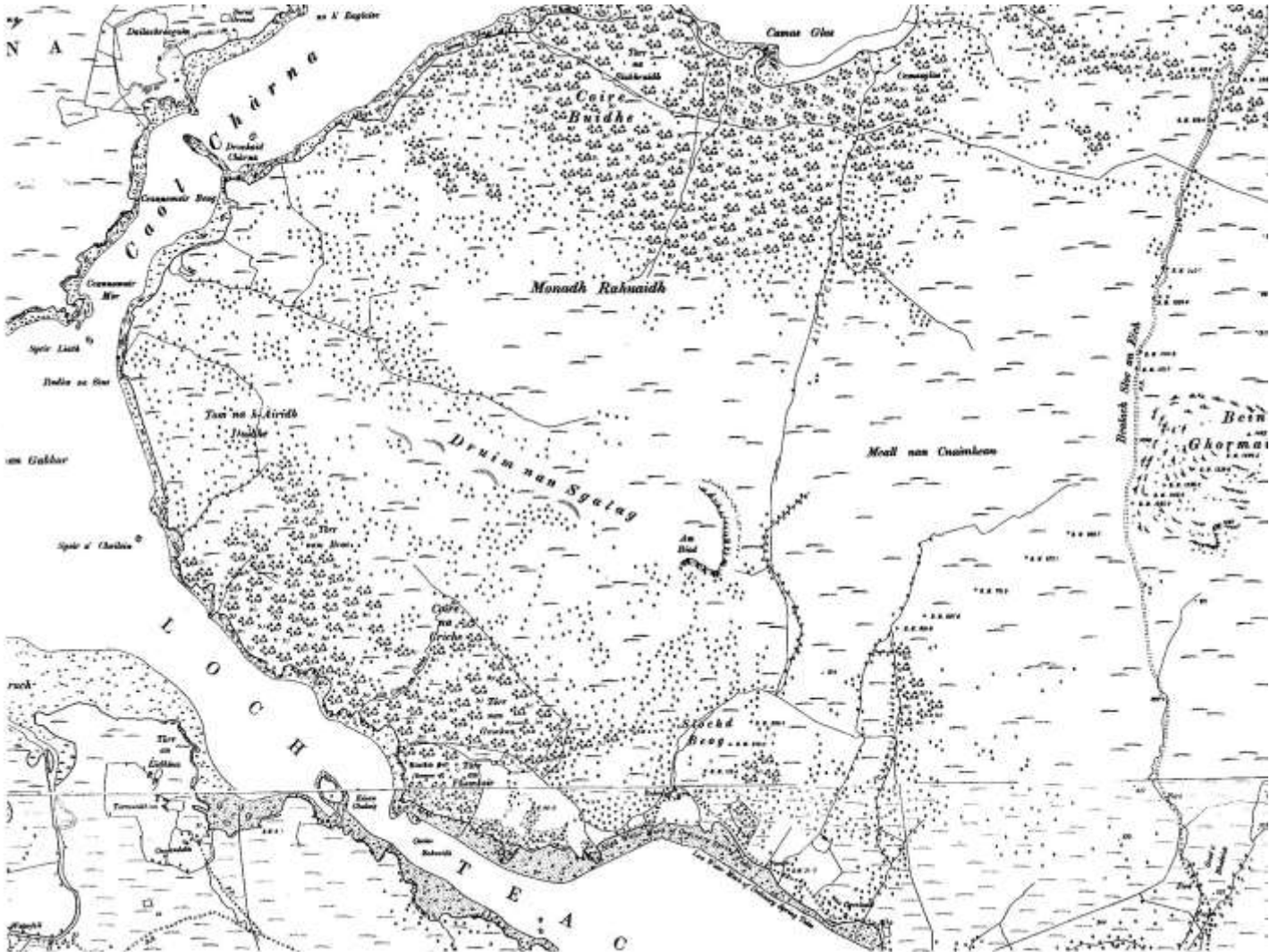


*Rahoy c1750 on Roy's Military Survey. Note that no settlement is shown other than at Rahoy and that the woodland is restricted to approximately the same extent as shown on pp 4-5.*

These boundaries can still be traced today eg An oak hill in the wintertown (ie winter pasture) The inclosure of this oak hill in the wintertown of Rahoy begins at the west end and goes round the whole hill. In this hill there is some old oaks and a most thriving stool (ie a former coppice) which requires brushing. (Cregeen)

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Rahoy 1897



Because the wood was valued and managed as a crop it still survives today, whereas other woods such as that shown on Roy's survey on the island of Carna were cut and prevented from regenerating by grazing animals.



The Bronze Age Cairn lying in woods to the west of Rahoy House has been extensively robbed, though a central burial chamber can still be seen.



The Dun at Rahoy is sited on a defensive knoll overlooking Loch Teacuis. It points to a significant prehistoric or early medieval settlement nearby, perhaps based on the site of the modern and earlier settlement at Rahoy. The site was excavated in the 1930s and is unusual in being perhaps the only site in Scotland known to be partly excavated by dynamite!

It was cleared of trees in 1998 but as can be seen young birch is beginning to colonise the site. Bracken is also a problem here.

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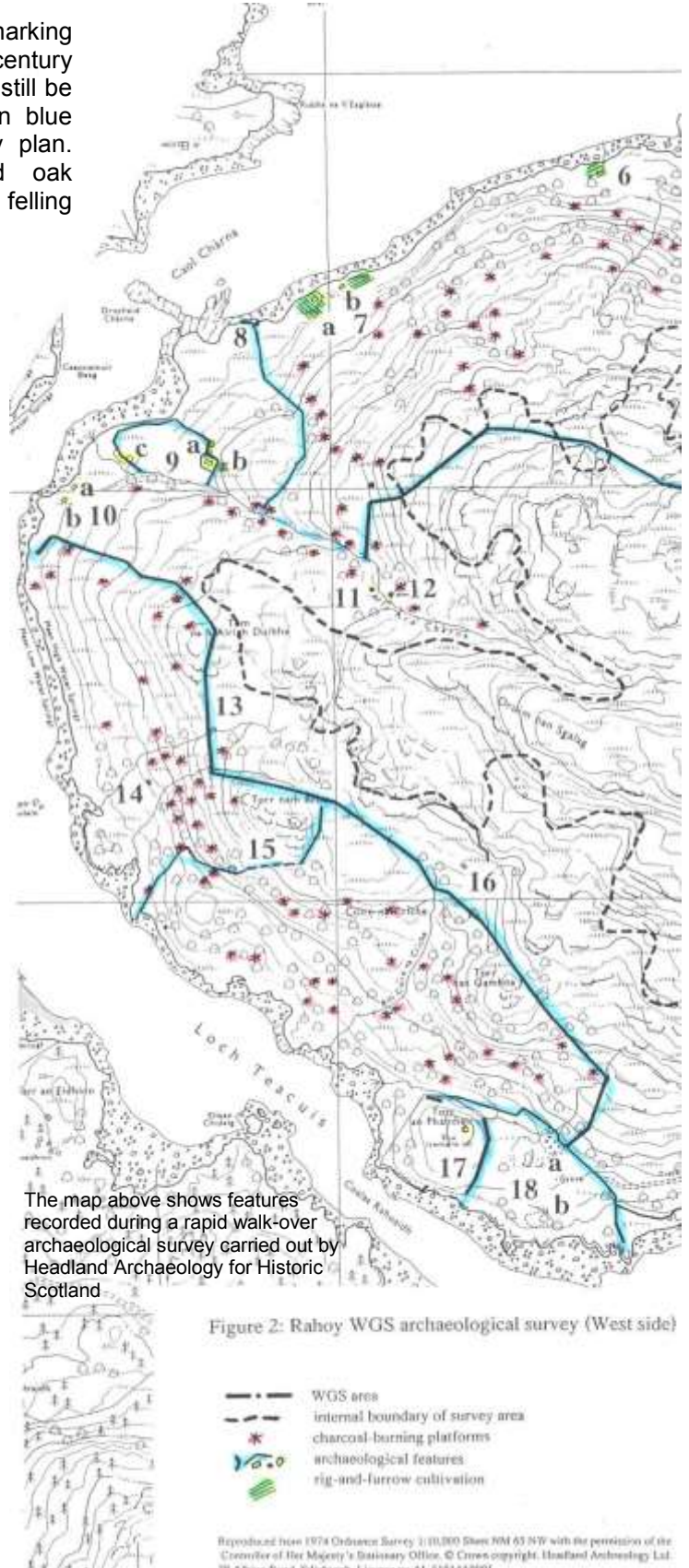
Remnant dykes marking separate 18th century woodland coups can still be seen, as recorded in blue on the 1996 survey plan. Note the coppiced oak growing after the last felling of the woodland.



Coppiced oaks mark the last episode of felling, perhaps c1850 when oak bark was replaced by synthetically produced tannins for leatherworking.

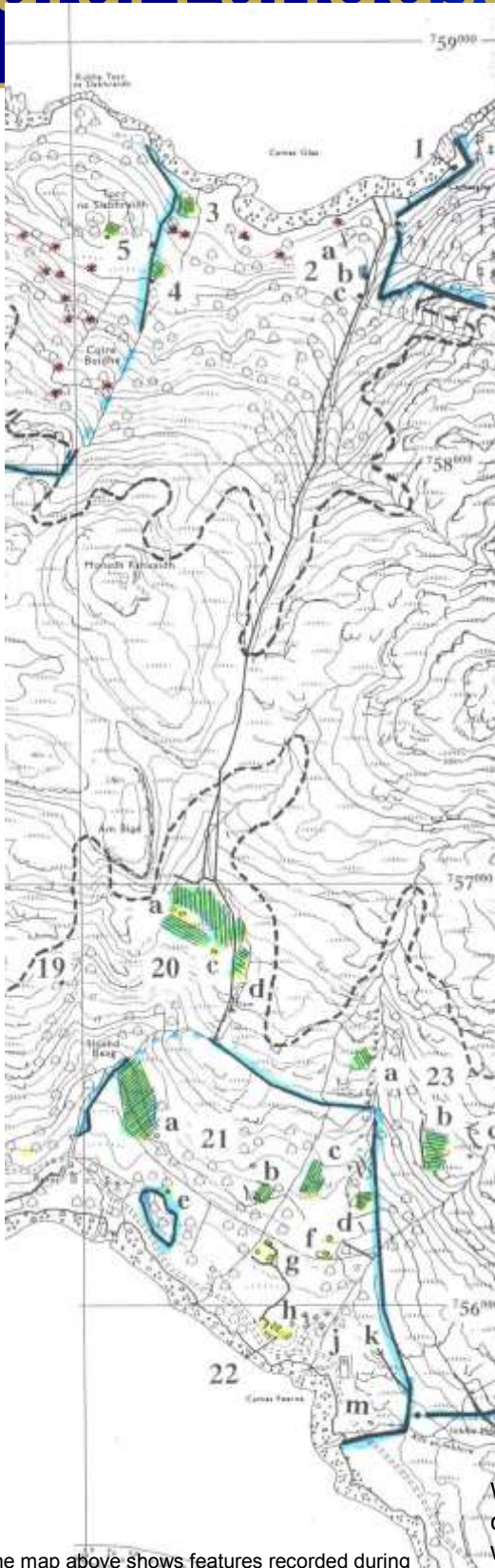


While oak was the favoured tree for the woodland and may have been deliberately planted in some places, other trees such as this old holly were also coppiced.



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Ash was another tree selected for coppicing and pollarding.



Stone dyke, a remnant of one of the boundaries between the woodland coups (these are also sometimes called hags).

The map above shows features recorded during a rapid walk-over archaeological survey carried out by Headland Archaeology for Historic Scotland

While smaller oaks were coppiced, larger stems were sometimes pollarded (ie cut above browsing height) to prevent killing the tree and possibly to produce structural timbers.



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Level platforms were made for hearths to burn the charcoal. Where the slope was steep these were revetted with stone.

There is still controversy as to how these platforms were used. Some archaeologists, notably Rennie 1992, believe some of them in the West Highlands have an earlier use as house platforms going back to the middle ages. Certainly there are anomalous C14 dates and structural evidence that are not easily explained otherwise. However this writer believes the location and distribution of these platforms, as here at Rahoy, is more consistent and convincing for an industrial process of charcoal production. It is an issue that requires further survey, excavation and study.



A ring of heather marks the front of this hearth carved out of a steep slope.

Only one possible saw pit was found, a hollow 3 metres by 2 metres surviving as a bracken-clad basin in the left foreground of this picture, and it may equally have been used as a container. It is possible the wood was all cut and split to size where the trees were felled. Note the low circular edge to another platform in the centre of this picture.



Alder trees were often favoured for coppicing and charcoal production because they produced high quality charcoal. This was particularly desired by the gunpowder industry, though there is no documentary evidence for it being produced for this purpose here.



Mature trees pollarded like this one have high conservation value for the mosses, lichens and fungi that grow on them.

### Archaeological importance

The two Scheduled Monuments have already been recognised as sites of national importance, but the dykes, charcoal-burning platforms and human-altered trees has only recently been recognised as part of a historic landscape of significance. This importance is not limited to archaeologists, for conservationists trying to understand how the woodland has developed need to know how it has been managed in the past.

### Why preserve these remains?

The remains here are a significant record of the history of land use in the western highlands, particularly over the last two hundred years. The value of the woodland would be poorer without understanding and seeing how it has developed over time.

### Protection work required

Several of the charcoal platforms are being heavily overgrown by bracken and tree regeneration removing them as visible features in the landscape and potentially causing root damage to the surviving archaeological deposits. Clearly any such treatment has to be balanced with its implications for biodiversity interests, but maintaining the platforms areas as open glades for wood pasture will also enhance the woodland diversity.

### Opportunities for enhancement

A selection of the platforms and the coppiced trees could form part of a trail enhancing the interest of visitors to the area. A detailed woodland survey, allied with dendrochronology on individual trees would increase knowledge of the woodland development and show precisely when the woodland was last cut. It would also show more clearly how the wood was managed as a timber crop.

### Acknowledgements

*I would like to thank Paul Smith and Rahoy Estates for permission to use this wood for this Case Study. The estate welcomes responsible access to these sites but would appreciate if you contacted them (01967 421287) before visiting. Accommodation is available locally.*

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### References

*Armstrong, L 1978 Woodcolliers and Charcoal Burning, Horsley & Singleton (still in print)*

*Cregeen E (ed) 1965 Argyll Estate Instructions 1, Edinburgh.*

*Rennie, E 1992 'An Investigation into the history and function of the so-called charcoal burners' platforms in the west of Scotland' The Scottish Naturalist 104,51-111*

*JWordsworth 2005 revised 2015*



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