

INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief undertaken during the excavation of a trench to accommodate an underground cable to replace a 33kv overhead power line from Kingshouse to Altnafeadh, Glencoe. The refurbishment was carried out by Scottish & Southern Energy plc (SSE). The watching brief was commissioned by Martin Sangster of SSE and undertaken by John Lewis of Scotia Archaeology on 12th March 2009.

The existing cable line runs close to, and in places crosses, the Tyndrum to Fort William military road, one of the roads that linked a chain of artillery forts and barracks built during the early 18th century. This system was designed to impose military control over the Highlands and deter any thoughts of insurrection among disaffected Jacobites. The construction of the barracks began shortly after their locations were established in 1717 although work on the roads connecting them did not start until 1724, following General George Wade's appointment as chief engineer for the project. In 1740 Wade was succeeded by Major William Caulfeild who continued this programme until 1767. Although the road network is usually associated with Wade, Caulfeild was responsible for the majority of the work, including the stretch from Tyndrum to Fort William.

The Kingshouse to Altanfeadh section of the road runs from NN 2505 5500 to NN 2500 5505. It has been assigned the monument number NN25NE 1 by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (monument number SAM 2826). Because of the military road's status, any works that might affect it require Scheduled Monument Consent as well as the production of a Written Scheme of Investigation describing a programme intended to mitigate any action that might damage the surviving archaeological record. Both documents were approved by Historic Scotland before on-site work commenced.

THE SITE

From Kingshouse the new cable route ran along roughly level ground as far as Altnafeadh, at the head of Glencoe, a distance of some 4km. It follows closely the line of the military road and its successor, the A82 trunk road. This has been upgraded in recent years leaving stretches of isolated tarmac. The area is covered with rough grass and heather and is very boggy and pock-marked with numerous small pools, particularly during wet weather. Erosion of the vegetation in places shows that the topsoil is quite thin and gives onto peat and underlying glacial till comprising granitic boulders and gravel, materials that were ideal for constructing the military road.

The road is clearly visible around Kingshouse and now forms part of the West Highland Way, a well-used visitor facility. Wade had intended his roads to be a standard 16ft (5m) wide but he realised it was sometimes necessary to reduce their widths to 10ft (3m) when the terrain was particularly difficult (Tabraham & Grove 1995, 74). Wade intended that the roads be constructed with bases of large boulders over which would be laid smaller stones and surfaced with gravel thereafter. At Kingshouse the military road appears to be a mere 1m wide because vegetation and peat have encroached onto its edges. Furthermore, its present use as a track for walkers has not required its full width to be exposed. Erosion of the road surface is very noticeable in places, particularly on sloping ground where more gravel has been introduced in order to maintain the integrity of the path.

THE WATCHING BRIEF

Most of the length of the new cable was laid using a mole plough which simultaneously disturbs the soil, inserts the cable and compresses the soil thereafter. While this technique was ideal over most of the cable route, it would cause inevitable damage to the military road and give no opportunity to examine the findings within the trench. As a consequence, it was decided that where the cable was to cross the military road its course would be excavated by open trenching, thus allowing the process to be monitored and the road and any associated archaeological features to be fully investigated and recorded.

The military road was crossed at only one point by the cable trench, at NN 24820 55190, where the area had been marked off with tape. The trench, which was excavated using a toothless bucket on a mechanical excavator, measured 8m north/south by 0.7m wide, extending well beyond the edges of the road. A pump had to be used to control the water leaching into the trench during its excavation. Metal plates had been laid either side of the trench to protect the road and the ground adjacent to it from the machine. Spoil was deposited on these plates and separated into its constituent materials to allow the road to be reinstated as near as possible to its previous state once the cable had been installed.

The trench was excavated to a depth of 1m, at which depth the cable would be laid within a protective duct. This was well below the bottom of the military road which survived as only 300mm of gravel lying directly on peat, there being no trace of the large boulders and smaller stones that Wade specified would form the base. However, the road did achieve its theoretical width of 5m, peat and vegetation having encroached over much of its surface, particularly on its south side.

Some peat had been removed by the road-builders before they laid the gravel, leaving some 100-200mm of it lying over glacially-deposited sand, gravel and boulders. However, it begs the question why they did not take off the rest of the peat to allow the road to sit directly on the underlying hard-packed materials.

Along the north side of the military road was a gully designed to prevent water running across and through it. Although still visible, this gully had become choked in many places although stretches of it appear to have been cleared out in recent times, presumably to protect the road in its role as the West Highland Way. Where the trench cut across the road, the channel had filled with peat and was not evident in the trench section.

CONCLUSIONS

It was somewhat surprising to discover how insubstantial the military road was at Kingshouse. Investigations of military roads elsewhere in Scotland have demonstrated that Wade's basic plan was not always carried out to the letter, perhaps because of a local paucity of raw materials or possibly because of lapses in standards (Curtis 1980). Construction techniques at Kingshouse were clearly inferior to those used on the Kiliwhimen to Bernera military road near Fort Augustus where a base of boulders and pebbles underlay the gravel surface (Lewis 2007). However, unlike the Fort Augustus example, the Kingshouse road did at least achieve its optimum width of 5m.

REFERENCES

Curtis, G R 1980 'Roads and bridges in the Scottish Highlands: the route between Dunkeld and Inverness, 1725-1925', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 110 (1978-80), 475-96.

Lewis 2007 *Military Road, Fort Augustus: Archaeological watching brief, September 2007*, unpublished report to Scottish & Southern Energy.

Tabraham, C & Grove, D 1995 *Fortress Scotland and the Jacobites*. London.

PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE

- 1 The west side of the trench, viewed from east
- 2-3 The west side of the trench and the military road beyond it, viewed from the east
- 4 The east side of the trench and the military road beyond it, viewed from the west