

High Noon at Bettyhill

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Styles of archaeological field-survey and their published results varied considerably in Scotland in the 1960s and 1970s. On the one hand the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland concentrated on individual site plans made by plane-table, with, as the years went on, increasingly sophisticated measuring technology. The written description, accompanied where appropriate by a plan, was prepared for publication in *Inventory* format. Sometimes small-scale excavation might be undertaken in order to enhance knowledge of classes of monument that might otherwise have been difficult to classify. In the 1960s and 70s Royal Commission field-survey was concentrated in the county of Argyll, the current *Inventory* area, and cartographic accuracy was made difficult by the absence of gridded mapping at Six-inch scale. The only available detailed maps dated to the early 1900s and it was not until the survey of Islay in the late 1970s that pencilled grids were traced from maps that were being revised by the Ordnance Survey themselves. Thus the knowledge that the plotting would subsequently be undertaken as the maps were revised meant at first that a visual rather than a measured approach was taken to location. The location was published by a six-figure NGR and was meant to be a guide to future workers in the finding of the site rather than a precise pinpointing. Frequently a verbal description of the topography was also given in order to aid identification of the spot.

The Ordnance Survey, on the other hand, had locational accuracy and classification as its priorities, which ensured that the map detail and nomenclature were as correct as possible. The deadlines of map production created pressures unrelated to archaeological research. The card index system that was created with the background information and the field report was initially a mapping tool, designed to maintain a record of site name, classification and authentication for inclusion on the maps. The cards follow the tradition of the Object Name Books (ONB) of the first surveyors in the 1850s, 60s and 70s. The ONB headings give something of the traditions of the times: List of Names to be corrected if necessary; Orthography as recommended to be used in the new Plans; Other modes of Spelling of the Name; Authority for these other modes of Spelling when known; Situation; Descriptive Remarks, or other General Observations which may be considered of Interest. The

names and occupation of three people are provided as the Authority for the information, and each ONB is signed off by an officer of the Survey. The considerable nuance of cartographic depiction of the maps may be illustrated by a portion of a Sutherland sheet (Fig. 1; Sheet xviii, surveyed in 1873 and published in 1878) showing Strathnaver to the south of the then Bettyhill Inn. Several antiquities are shown, but it is the crofting pattern that most catches the eye.

In 1855 the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, concerned that agricultural improvements had increased the destruction of 'the primitive monuments of our national history' had communicated with the War Department that 'it would be of great consequence to have all such ancient monuments laid down on the Ordnance Survey of Scotland in the course of preparation.' The Marquess of Breadalbane acknowledged the request 'that all remains, such as Barrows, Pillars, Circles, and Ecclesiastical and other Ruins, may be noted on the Ordnance Survey of Scotland now in progress.' He was happy to comply with the request, and 'instructions will immediately be given to the Engineer Department'. The Society was asked to assist the Surveyors 'through the co-operation of the resident gentry, ministers, schoolmasters and others.' (*Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 2 (1854-7), 129). The ONBs display a range of enthusiasm for the task of recording antiquities, but there is no doubt that they and the accompanying maps form a remarkable body of information.

Such a listing of information was an internal document designed to provide back-up material and demonstrate the systematic nature of the work. In origin, the Record Card Index formulated in 1947 by C W Phillips, at least as far as the Ordnance Survey hierarchy must have been concerned, had a mapping function in the same tradition, rather than one designed as the archaeological database that it was to become (Murray and Appleby 1992, 2). A hint of tradition too remains in the fact that each entry is initialled so that the author can be identified. Little by little the importance of this store of information became better known to archaeologists and the entries on the cards became more detailed as fieldwork for revision produced more new sites. In Scotland in the 1960s and 1970s site meetings between the Ordnance Survey and the Royal Commission did indeed sometimes take place, but the

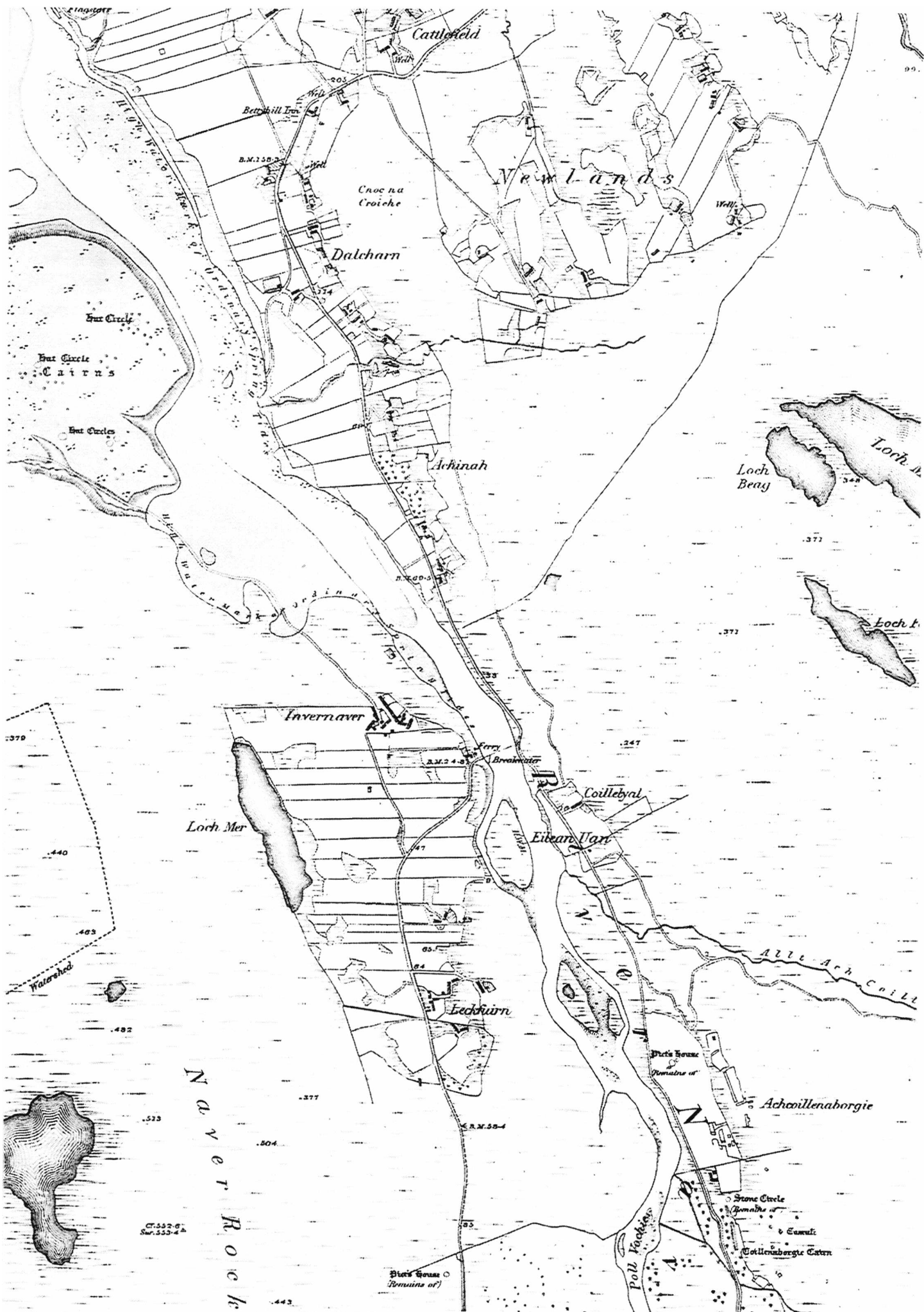


Fig. 1. Part of the Ordnance Survey First Edition Map of Strathnaver, Sutherland, 1878.

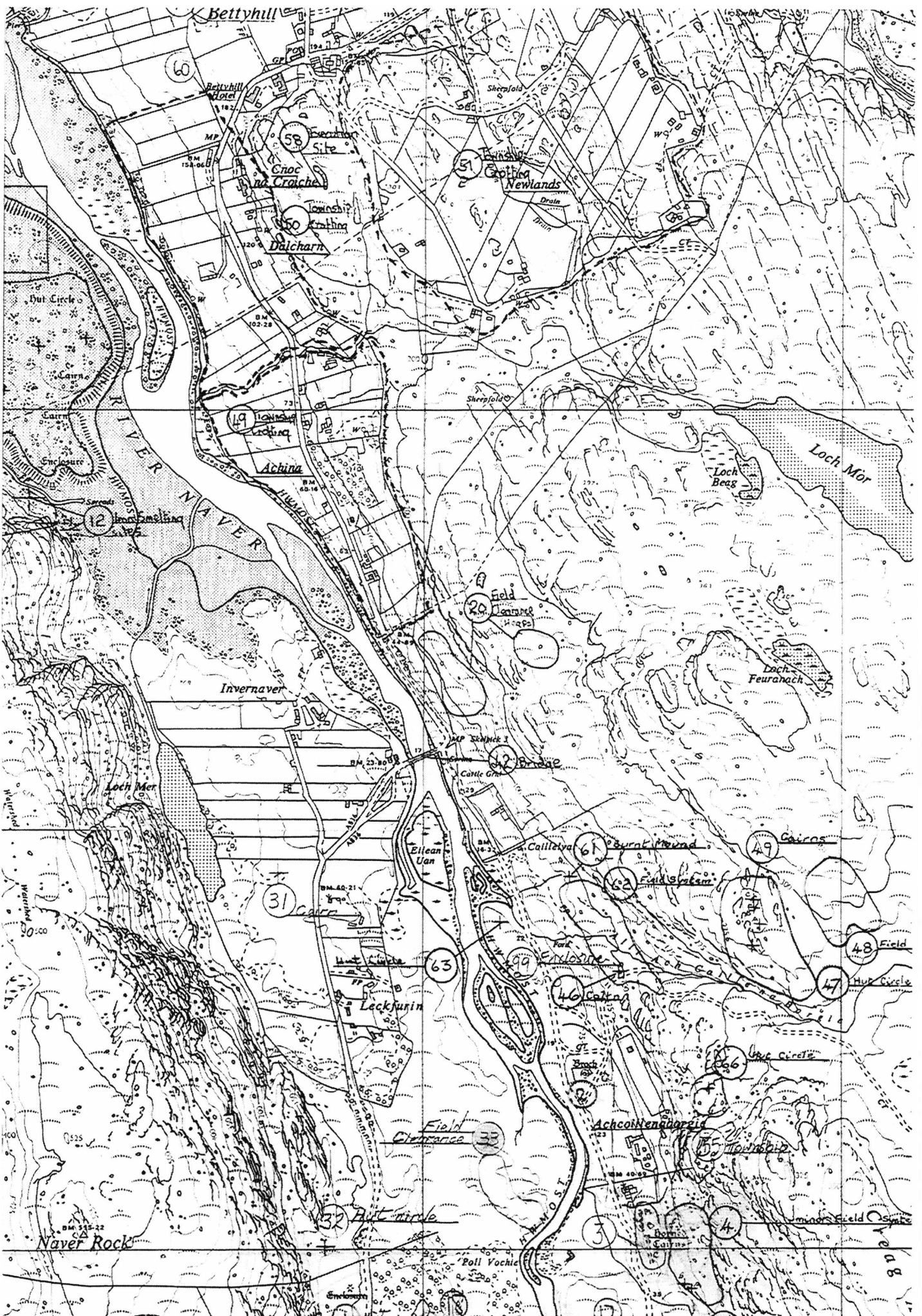


Fig. 2. Part of the Ordnance Survey Record Sheet for Strathnaver.

surveys were undertaken quite independently. There were also discussions about classification of field monuments. These included the question of the classification of 'duns' or 'ring-forts' or 'enclosures' on the fringes of Argyll and Perthshire, and the use of the terms 'unenclosed platform settlement' or 'enclosed cremation cemetery', the very lengths of which caused cartographic frissons all the way to Southampton. But meetings about survey methodology did not take place until that at Bettyhill, Sutherland, in September 1977.

In 1975-76 concern about the patchy nature of archaeological information in Scotland caused the Committee for Rescue Archaeology of the Ancient Monuments Board of Scotland to recommend that arrangements be made for rapid, non-intensive, field survey work in those areas of Scotland where it was suspected that large numbers of unrecorded monuments existed (AMB 1977, 8). Accordingly three archaeological surveyors were appointed. The team was funded by the Department of the Environment (from 1978 by Scottish Development Department) and sponsored and administered by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland through a Management Committee, with day-to-day management by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. An overall assessment of the results of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Field Survey and an informed discussion of the broader background is given by Proudfoot (1982). I was given the role within the Commission of looking after the survey, and a format for the presentation of results was agreed with the Committee. The surveyors, Peter Corser, Strat Halliday and Robert Mowat, had been appointed to ensure a broad range of archaeological interest. For the remit was to be a comprehensive one embracing all field-monuments, not merely those deemed 'Prehistoric' or 'Dark Age', the periods with which the 'archaeological' side of *Inventory* work was concerned (a cross-over into architectural matters seemed to operate around AD 800). The Committee felt that the surveyors should become acquainted with the greater precision of the survey skills of the Ordnance Survey. While the results of such survey and the use of the Record Cards and maps were becoming better known to Royal Commission investigators through the assistance of the Ordnance Survey in-house team in Rose Street (and subsequent offices) under the supervision of Jim Davidson, the Ordnance Survey field-surveyors themselves were unknown. The lore about their tenacity in the field, undertaking long treks in order to pinpoint sites, extended periods away from home to complete work to deadlines, and even the rumour that they existed on tins of peas, all added to the mythic nature of our opposite numbers. A meeting was arranged in an area of current Ordnance Survey map revision, and it seemed all the more symptomatic of the reclusive nature of the OS teams that the meeting was to be in Bettyhill, Sutherland, almost as far away from Edinburgh as possible. The Commission group drove up with some trepidation. High Noon was to be in the bar of the Bettyhill Hotel. Would we recognise the Ordnance Survey team? Would our inadequate survey skills mean that we were in for a tricky day or two? In the bar the tallest of a discrete group, as yet the Man with No Name, spotted us

at once, introduced himself as Keith Blood and his colleagues, John Macrae and John Barneveld.

The next couple of days were among the most productive ever remembered by the small team from the Commission. Keith, John and John taught us what was possible in terms of accuracy with portable technology. It was not just the simple equipment, it was the sense of duty in pinpointing any feature to an acceptable degree of mapping accuracy. I was later to discover something of the methods of checking on detail by the Ordnance Survey when an Ordnance Survey supervisor was staying at the same hotel in Jura; he took a mapsheet and checked one square, then if that showed up a proportion of inaccuracies, the whole mapsheet was checked, with consequent opprobrium on the original surveyor. It was an eye-opener on the nature of the long-arm, still almost military control, from Southampton that had created a consistency of detail on the maps and in the background information on the Record Cards, with corroborating data and accurate locational information. The results of this systematic approach, with a degree of independent style, are particularly remarkable for the north of Scotland with the work of Keith and the two Johns between 1975 and 1983 (Davidson *et al.* this volume). I and my three colleagues were fortunate to see at first hand some of the most constructive field-work of an archaeological nature in Scotland, for we were introduced to burnt mounds when these were only beginning to be recognised by Keith and colleagues in Sutherland, and to the far greater frequency of hut-circles and field-systems than had formerly been thought. For us all, it was a revelation not only in terms of mapping techniques, but also in 'looking', and 'getting the eye into' a new terrain, but then the realisation that burnt mounds had been 'seen' by the highland Ordnance Survey surveyors for some months before they had been 'recognised' as burnt mounds meant that every new area of survey had to be treated with respect, and time to begin to understand the nuances of survival had to be built into survey plans, which was not necessarily a fashionable notion at the time. An impression of the archaeological activity involved in the recording can be gauged by the working map of the same portion of Sutherland (Fig. 2), with new discoveries and wide range of antiquities to be examined. The exciting discoveries that were being made had no ready mechanism to bring them to public attention, for the addition of a batch of cards to the Ordnance Survey Record Card index, or indeed a bald list of new discoveries in *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, were not designed to fly an archaeological flag. In subsequent fieldwork I have stumbled across two separate mapsheets 'hotching' with exciting archaeological remains, all carefully docketed by Keith and his team, the information embedded in the intractable archive. High Noon at Bettyhill was a lesson not only in survey methodology but also in the importance of ensuring the publication of information in useable formats.

The format decided on for the Society of Antiquaries Surveyors was that of a simple List of Monuments, without plans which, it was thought, would delay the process, but with a map with generalised location spots (which would not allow the map to be used in too specific a way as a

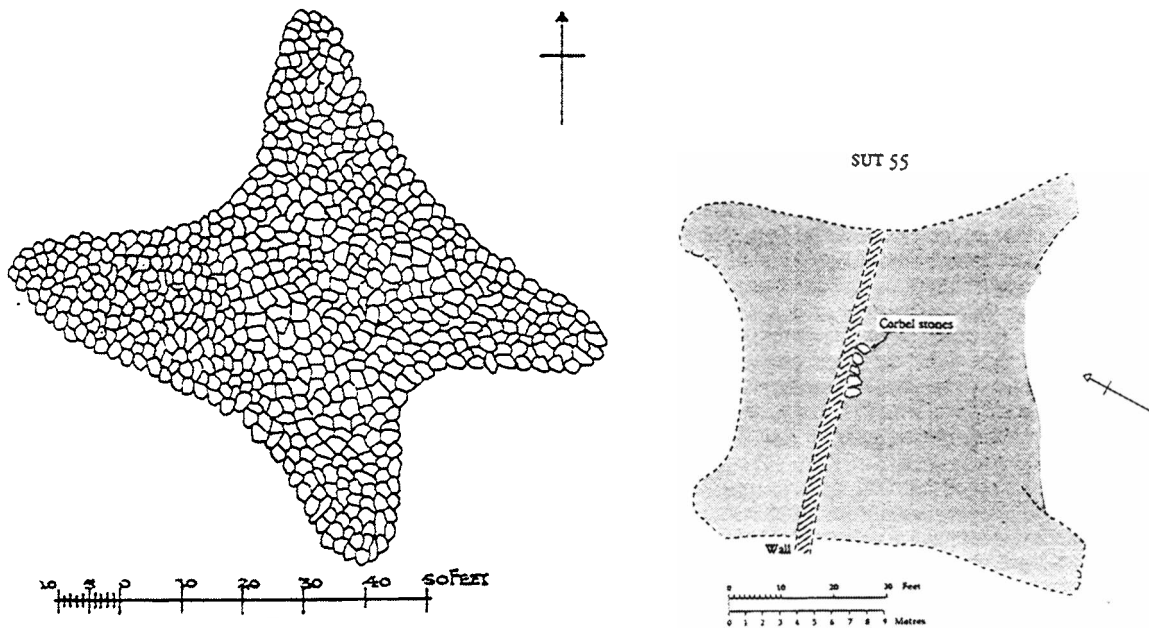


Fig. 3. Skelpick South chambered cairn (SUT 55), illustrated by Curle (1911) and Henshall and Ritchie (1995).

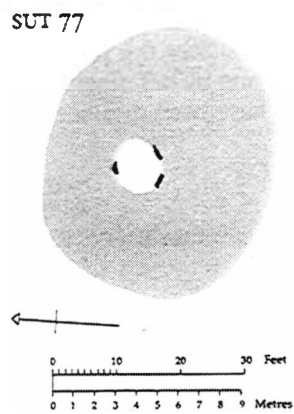


Fig. 4. Coilleyal (SUT 77), a little chambered cairn, identified in the course of the Ordnance Survey work near Bettyhill and planned by Henshall and Ritchie in 1992.

planning tool). The resultant publications are reviewed by Proudfoot (1982, 7-11), and the importance of the end-product is readily recognised. The format of the *Argyll Inventory* was to remain fixed until the end of the series (archaeologically in 1988). Thus it was not until the next initiative, in north-east Perthshire (RCAHMS 1990), that the Commission was able to experiment with new ways of publishing landscape survey, and a great deal had been learned in the intervening period. In 1983, the transfer to the Royal Commissions of responsibility for the provision of information about all antiquities to the Ordnance Survey had ensured that all survey and recording would meet mapping criteria. Indeed a sense of the tradition of the high standard required for the mapping of antiquities would imbue the Commissions' approach to this task as the digitising of information available to users progressed.

In 1989 additional resources were made available to the Royal Commission to undertake field-survey in land likely to be at risk from afforestation. This exercise was seen as designed primarily to improve the database of the National Monuments Record of Scotland, a database at the core of which lies the Ordnance Survey card system. Locational accuracy and accurate description again were the basic tenets of the programme, and the preparation of site plans was only to be undertaken when time permitted. Two different types of publication have emerged from the programme: short reports that highlight notable discoveries in a discrete area, and broadsheets that offer the potential to illustrate larger scale mapping exercises in a visual format. Different styles of report in the Highlands have been prepared for Watnish on Skye (RCAHMS 1993a), and for the Strath of Kildonan in Sutherland (RCAHMS 1993b). With fieldwork in Kildonan we were very aware that we were building on the work of Keith and his colleagues. The broadsheets on Achiltibuie and Canna illustrate the potential of this method of presenting information visually and cartographically as well as showing that an appreciation of landscape benefits from colour.

Gathering archaeological information is very much an incremental exercise. The Ordnance Survey Record Card often illustrates this by its very layout, and its computerised sibling in the National Monuments Record Canmore is best understood if the chronological nature of its parentage is understood. The first survey of the Bettyhill area by officers of the Ordnance Survey in the 1873 is a remarkably full one. Chambered cairns and groups of small cairns are clearly marked as are brochs. The archaeological survey undertaken by A O Curle, the Secretary of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, published more detailed descriptions with some plans and photographs in the *Inventory of Monuments and Constructions in the County of Sutherland* in 1911. The depth of ground examination by the Ordnance Survey can best be illustrated by a fragment of the Record map, on which many new sites were accurately located. Two unprepossessing cairns are illustrated here to show that even simple plane-table survey can take our knowledge a little further and, even without excavation, can help to place monuments into more understandable frameworks. Of course this is but a first stage to creating more broad-brush social or landscape

studies. The first is the horned cairn of Skelpick South (SUT 55), which was identified as such by Stuart in 1886 and pinpointed on the first edition map of 1878. Curle's description made in 1909 is accompanied by a sketch that formed the basis of Henshall's description in 1963 (330-1). When it was replanned by Audrey Henshall and myself in 1992, a more accurate shape was achieved and the corbel stones of the chamber, now exposed, could be depicted (Fig. 3; Henshall and Ritchie 1995, 131-2). Excavation may show that the proposed plan is misleading, but the examination of the site has been as thorough as possible within a specific set of resources (i.e. not contour survey). The little cairn at Coillelyal, flagged for the first time by the Ordnance Survey in December 1978 (NC 75 NW 49, with a tiny plan by John Barneveld), was also planned (fig. 4). It is situated to the north of the Allt Coille na Borgie, an area of blank moor-land in the 1870s, but with cairns hut-circles and field systems found in the later 1970s. With our larger scale plan and description set in the context of all the Sutherland monuments of its class, its place within the canon of monuments in the county is more readily understood than from the card index alone (Henshall and Ritchie 1995, 148).

How to publish the results of field survey and excavations has been a central question for many years in Scotland as elsewhere. Sometimes the need for information is related to local planning, and the answer may be a map, digitised or otherwise, with concise, but up-to-date, assessments. Sometimes, when broader questions of interpretations and chronology may be involved, greater distillation of the information available may be important. The excavator or surveyor to-day, particularly if 'street-cred' or peer-review depends on it, will stress the importance of full publication to the limit. Such a possibility was not an option to the Ordnance Surveyor in the 1980s. The degree of balance between published information and information locked in a card index, archive, or computer system has never been more important. Respect for the skills of the fieldworker (identified as an issue by Proudfoot 1982, 14) has never been more important. No one doubts that the publication of extended descriptions of all sites, as with 'complete' excavation reports, will be unwieldy and expensive, particularly as the chronological range of landscape recording is now very wide. But publication can be an index or a trigger to further research in archives, on the internet, or merely by postal correspondence, and confidence in the origin of the information has to be assured. The success of any publication is the balance between the economy by which it is achieved and the breadth of the audience reached with the greatest number of chords struck with researchers who want more data. The on-going nature of archaeological research, a matter of looking again and assessing again the evidence or site interpretation is nowhere more important than in the world of field survey. Archaeological writing and planning has advanced greatly since the 1970s and 80s, but it is important for future workers using the information gathered at this time to appreciate the constraints and frameworks within which so much new material was gathered, information that now appears on their computer screens, sometimes with such inscrutable initials of the originator of the description

as NKB, assuring those in the know that it is an archaeological kite-mark of accuracy.

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