



Highland Archaeology Services Ltd
Bringing the Past and Future Together

Harpsdale

Halkirk, Caithness

Plot 2



Archaeological Watching Brief

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Archaeological Watching Brief

Report No.	HAS120604
HAS Site Code	HAR12
Client	Mr & Mrs G K Bell
OS Grid Ref	ND 1315 5510 (centred)
HCAU / Planning Ref	11/04410/FUL
Date/ revision	03/07/2012
OASIS	highland4-129564
Authors	Paul Humphreys and John Wood

Summary

An archaeological desk-based assessment and watching brief was undertaken in response to a planning condition during excavations for a new dwelling at plot 2, Harpsdale, Caithness. No archaeological features or artefacts were recorded and there are no recommendations for follow-up work in this case.

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Acknowledgements

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Location and Setting

The new house is to be situated approximately at Ordnance Survey National Grid Reference ND 1315 5510, at a height of about 80 m above sea level. The site is part of a large field of improved pasture, adjacent to a single track road running north - south from Halkirk to Westerdale.



Figure 1 Site location

This field has been divided into three plots for private development: the plot immediately to north of this site has been recently developed¹. It lies to the east of the River Thurso on the north facing flank of a low ridge running roughly east - west on the crown of which lies Achies Farm. The northern aspect overlooks relatively flat improved agricultural land that continues towards Halkirk and beyond. The western aspect looks across the river towards ridge of Ben Dorrery and hill enclosure and Chambered Cairn surmounting Beinn Freiceadain. The eastern aspect is characterised by an undulating landscape of improved, unimproved and forested land towards Spittal Hill.

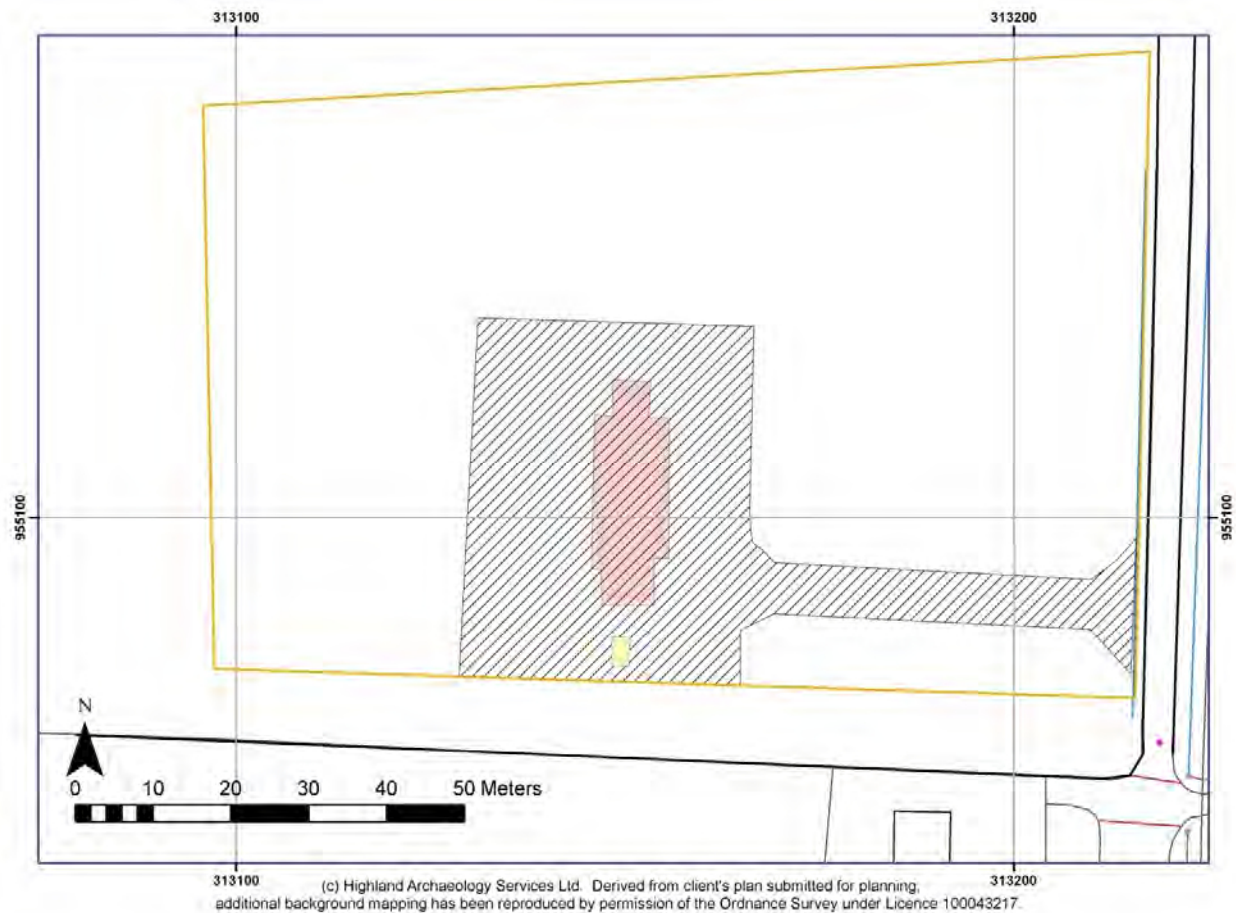


Figure 2 Site showing area stripped (shaded)

Introduction

The construction a new private house on plot 2 at Harpsdale, Caithness required an archaeological watching brief be conducted during site stripping (Figures 1-3).

¹ Dagg, C. 11/2008. Erection of new-build house at Achies, Halkirk, Caithness: Archaeological Watching Brief Phase 1. HHER EH2856

Aims and objectives

- To minimise any possible delay or cost to the development by anticipating archaeological requirements as far as possible, timetabling and integrating archaeological recording work with the project, and dealing with any issues arising quickly and efficiently.
- To determine as far as possible the character, extent, condition, date and significance of any archaeologically significant remains; and to preserve these where possible and record where necessary in line with national and local policies and standards.
- To ensure that any artefacts or human remains are dealt with in accordance with legal requirements and current Historic Scotland policy guidance.

Archaeology and policy background

An archaeological evaluation was requested in this case because there was potential for finds or features of interest to be discovered during site works. The Thurso River valley is well populated with a variety of sites and monuments, including the small henge at Pullyhour; cist burials a clan battle site and pre-improvement agricultural features. In particular there are two recorded brochs within about 500m of the site.

The policy framework includes the Highland Council's *Structure Plan*², and Scottish Government's *Scottish Planning Policy* (SPP), issued in February 2010, which consolidates and supersedes the previous SPP and NPPG series. The fundamental principles underpinning all the above legislation and policies are set out in *Passed to the Future: Historic Scotland's Policy for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment* (2002)³ and the *Burra Charter* (Australia ICOMOS 1999)⁴. The Codes of Conduct and Approved Practice and Standards of the Institute for Archaeologists⁵ were also applicable to this work.

The Highland Council's archaeologist noted in response to the planning application,

“The development lies adjacent to the site of a putative broch. Accordingly, there is believed to be potential for associated buried archaeological features or finds to be impacted. While the risk is not such as to warrant a full archaeological excavation, it is important that the full nature and extent of any archaeological features should be identified and recorded before destruction.”

This refers to a site located at ND 1305 5522 by the Ordnance Survey in 1872 and 1911, and recorded in both the Highland Council's Historic Environment Record and the National Monuments Record for Scotland⁶. However when the Ordnance Survey visited in 1965 and again in 1981, they found ‘except for a very slight rise in the ground, no trace of a broch or any other structure could be seen at this site’. It

² <http://www.highland.gov.uk/yourenvironment/planning/developmentplans/structureplan/thehighlandstructureplan.htm>

³ www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/pasttofuture.pdf

⁴ <http://www.icomos.org/australia/burra.html>

⁵ <http://www.archaeologists.net/>

⁶ HHER MHG1329; NMRS ND15NW16

is understood that the field has been used for growing potatoes over many years. However stones were noted here during fieldwork (see below).

Another broch lies just east of Achies at grid reference ND 1364 5506, about 560m E of the present development. This is a Scheduled as of national importance under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979⁷.

Both these sites are shown on the 1st edition OS map as ‘Pict’s Houses’ (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Extract from Ordnance Survey 1st Edition 6 inch to 1 mile (1:10560) map, surveyed 1872 Caithness, Sheet XVII, published 1877. Courtesy of National Library of Scotland. Arrow shows approximate position of site.

A watching brief conducted by Cathy Dagg in 2008 on topsoil stripping for the new house immediately to the north of this one (Doric House) found 19th c. stone-built land drains, but no earlier features. However it was not possible to examine some of the access road as this had already been filled with base material before she visited⁸.

⁷ HHER MHG 1328; Scheduled Ancient Monument No. 509

⁸ Op.cit., note 1 (HHER EHG2856)

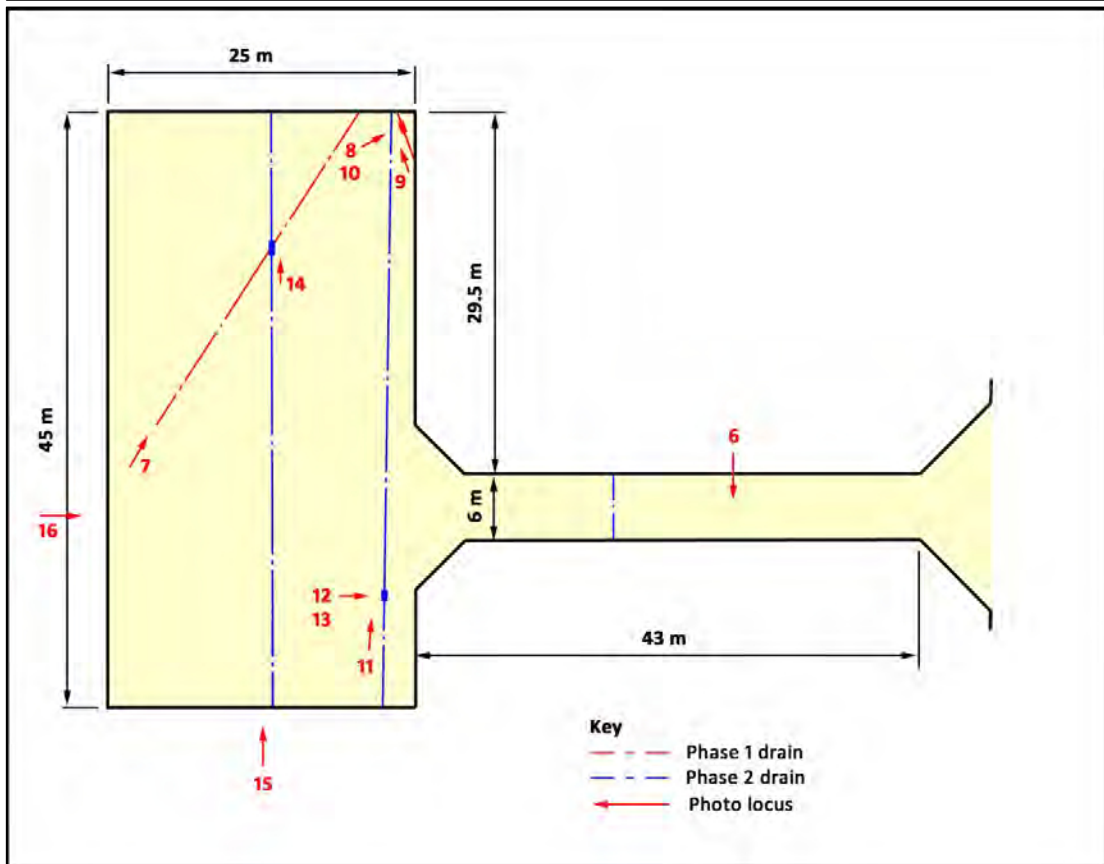


Figure 4 Area covered by the topsoil strip, with photo locations (sketches)

Method

A desk-based assessment was followed by a watching brief (controlled topsoil strip) during stripping for the construction of the access drive and house, which was carried out on 1 May 2012, in accordance with a project Design and Method Statement previously approved by the client and the planning authority⁹.

The area observed is shown on Figure 4. A back-acting excavator fitted with a straight edged (ditching) bucket was used to remove topsoil and other overburden down to the first soil change. The resulting surface was carefully checked for any indications of archaeology. No archaeological excavation was undertaken as part of this work beyond the minimum necessary to achieve the objectives above.

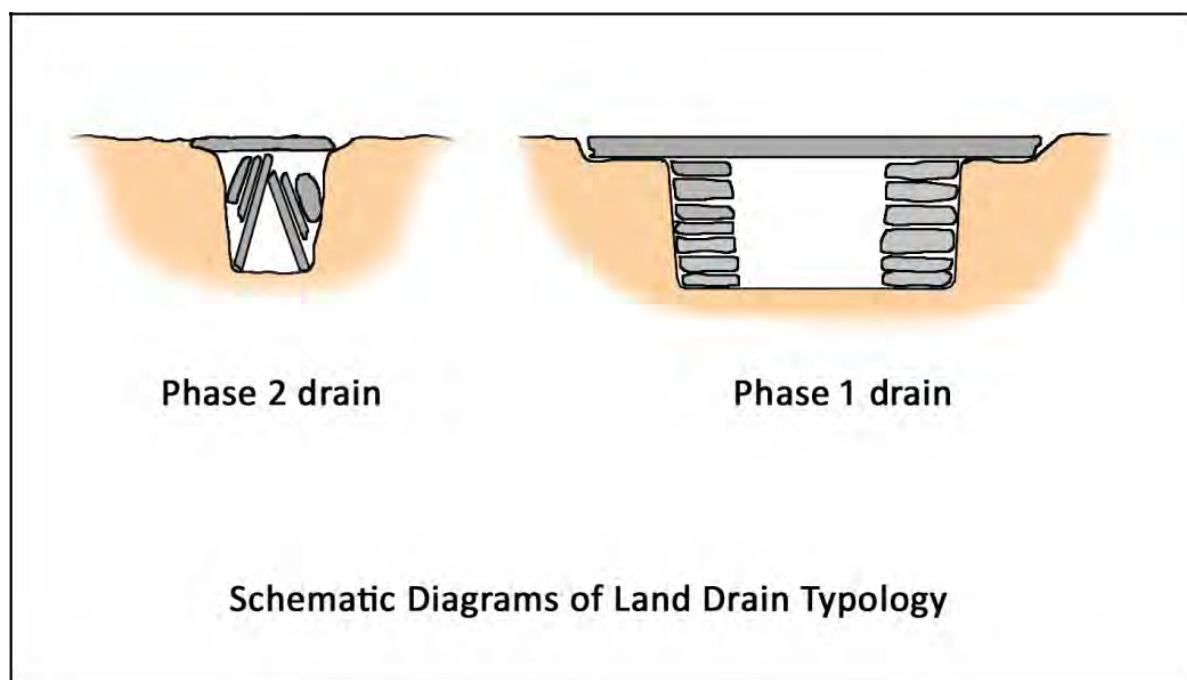


Figure 5 Field drains

Results

The prevailing weather conditions for the stripping were initially misty but this cleared as the day progressed. The ground conditions were dry following a period of warm weather. The underlying geology comprised glacial till with areas of horizontally bedded flagstone. The exposed rock had been subject to a considerable degree of chemical weathering, producing a friable material common in Caithness and known locally as *raffi rock*.

⁹ Wood, J 2012 *Harpsdale, Halkirk, Caithness: Project Design, Risk Assessment and Method Statement*, Highland Archaeology Services, Cromarty (Report No. HAS120405)

⁸ Peach and Horn, *Proc. Roy. Phys. Soc. Edin.* vol. vi., 1881 p321

No features or finds of archaeological significance were noted, apart from two types of land drains (Figure 5). These were exposed by partial excavation to determine the drain type. Two distinct types were noted, both probably dating from the late 18th to mid 19th centuries.

Phase 1 drains were carefully constructed stone lined channels with capping stones, laid in a herringbone pattern, with the water flow being directed to the NE to the road side ditch.

Phase 2 drains were narrower and less sophisticated, with slate pitched in to form a clear channel and a rough capstone across the top. These cut the Phase 1 drains and followed a parallel layout, the water flow being directed to the south into a ditch orthogonal to the roadside ditch.

As these land drains were operational they were reinstated after investigation.

It was noted, while looking at the wider area, that rubble was visible within the broch foot-print area just NW of the present site¹⁰, and it is possible that undisturbed archaeological deposits may have survived in this area (Photo 5).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this fieldwork are similar to those of Cathy Dagg at Doric House nearby in 2008. No further archaeological work is proposed within the Plot 2 area. However a number of important archaeological sites are close by, including the broch referred to above, which though damaged by ploughing may still contain important buried evidence. A similar watching brief is therefore recommended if further developments are planned nearby that could affect this or other nearby features.

¹⁰ HHER MHG1329

Tables

Table 1 Drawings

Drawing No.	Title	Subject	Drawn by	Date
1	Stripped area	Overall site plan	PDH	01 05 2012
2	Land drain characterisation	Land drain typology	PDH	01 05 2012

Table 2 Photographs (located in Figure 4)

Photo No.	Notes	Taken by	Date
1	Site looking NW	PDH	01 05 2012
2	View from site looking N	PDH	01 05 2012
3	View from site looking W	PDH	01 05 2012
4	View of low broch mound (mid-ground) looking NNW	PDH	01 05 2012
5	Surviving broch building stone	PDH	01 05 2012
6	Exposed bedrock (<i>raffi rock</i>)	PDH	01 05 2012
7	Phase 1 land drain	PDH	01 05 2012
8	Phase 1 land drain detail	PDH	01 05 2012
9	Phase 1 land drain partially excavated	PDH	01 05 2012
10	Phase 1 land drain re-instated	PDH	01 05 2012
11	Phase 2 land drain	PDH	01 05 2012
12	Phase 2 land drain characterisation	PDH	01 05 2012
13	Phase 2 land drain re-instatement	PDH	01 05 2012
14	Phase 2 land drain cutting phase 1 drain	PDH	01 05 2012
15	Stripped area looking NNW	PDH	01 05 2012
16	Stripped area looking E	PDH	01 05 2012

Photographs



Photo 1 – Site as pre-existing, looking NW



Photo 2 – View from site looking N



Photo 3 – View from site looking W



Photo 4 – View of low broch mound (mid-ground) looking NNW



Photo 5 – Building stone visible at broch site



Photo 6 – Exposed bedrock (*raffi rock*)

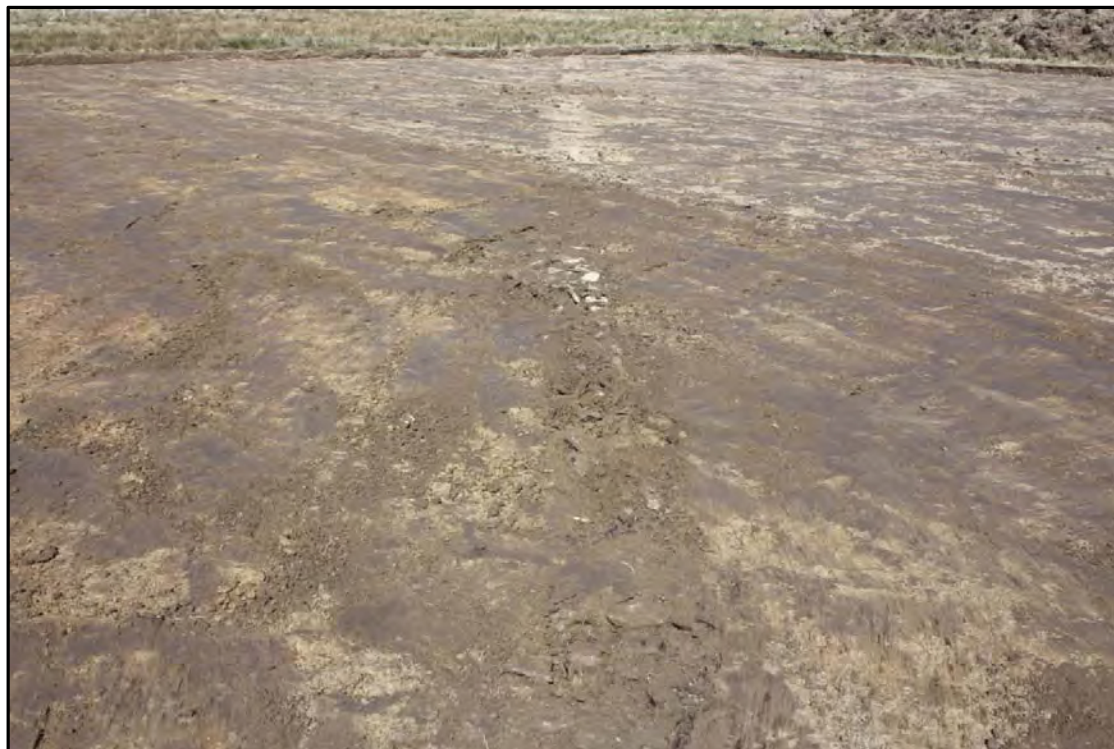


Photo 7 – Phase 1 land drain, pre-excavation



Photo 8 – Phase 1 land drain – detail of capping stones



Photo 9 – Phase 1 land drain partially excavated to show construction



Photo 10 – Phase 1 land drain re-instated



Photo 11 – Phase 2 land drain, pre-excitation



Photo 12 – Phase 2 land drain characterisation



Photo 13 – Phase 2 land drain re-instated



Photo 14 – Phase 2 land drain cutting phase 1 drain



Photo 15 – Stripped area looking NNW



Photo 16 – Stripped area looking E