



Highland Archaeology Services Ltd

Bringing the past and future together

Watching Brief



New House: Nipster, Caithness

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Watching Brief

New House: Nipster, Caithness

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Summary

An archaeological watching brief was conducted to establish the nature and extent of any archaeology likely to be affected by the construction of a new house at Nipster, Caithness, in response to a planning condition. No archaeological finds or features were discovered and there are no proposals for any follow-up work in this case.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the client, Ian Duffy of SID Building Services Ltd for commissioning the work and for his help throughout. The fieldwork was undertaken by Paul Humphreys. John Wood edited this report.

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Introduction and Planning Background

Planning consent for the erection of a single dwelling by SID Building Services Ltd, Wick, at Nipster, Caithness (ND 2187 5908), required a watching brief to be conducted during soil stripping from the house-base and driveway areas of the proposed dwelling. The site is situated approximately 1 km to the north of Loch Watten on agricultural land adjacent to B874.

The purpose of the work was to identify and record the nature and extent of any archaeological features affected by the development. The programme consisted of a desk-based assessment and archaeological watching brief. This report summarises the results.

The watching brief took place on 10 January 2007. Bright, low-angle sun precluded photography from certain positions.

This report summarises the results.

Location

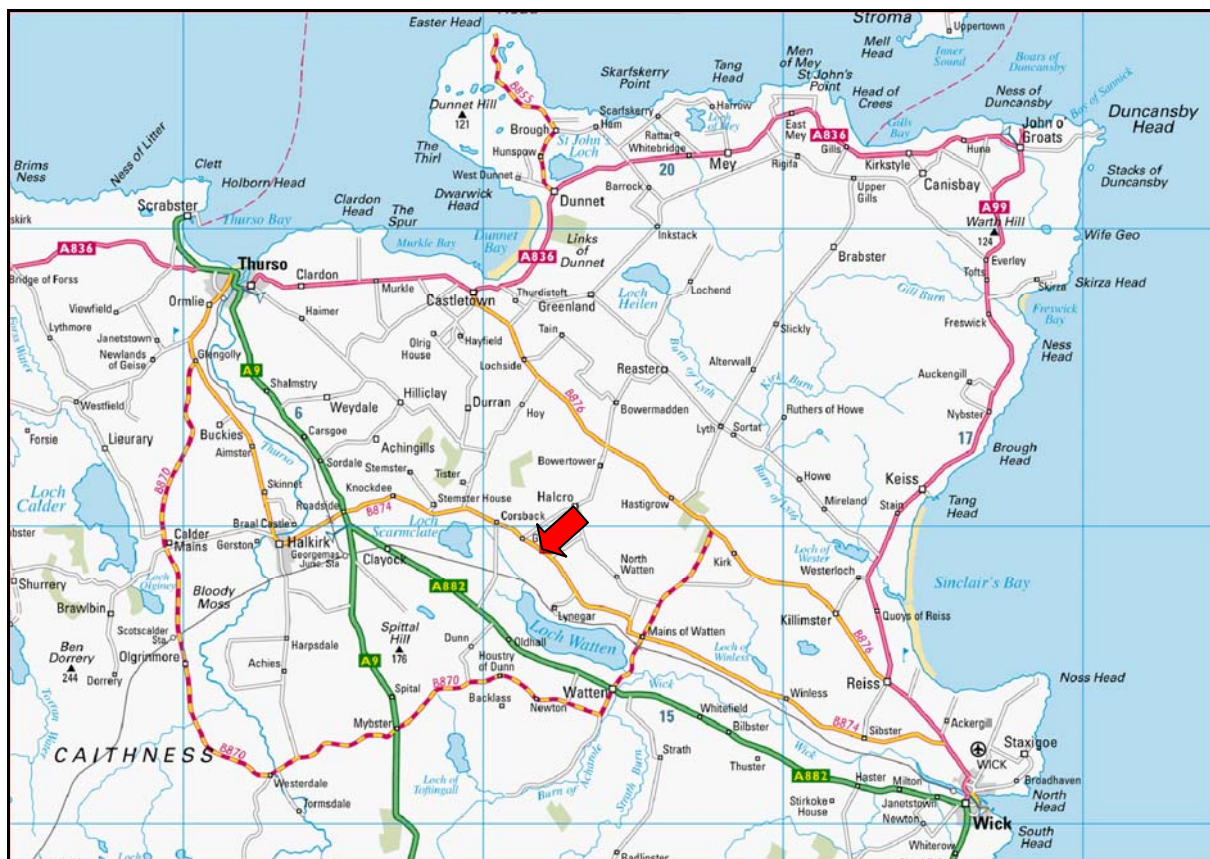


Figure 1 Site Location

Mapping reproduced by permission of the Ordnance Survey: Licence 100043217

The site is located roughly half-way between Thurso and Wick at ND 2187 5908.

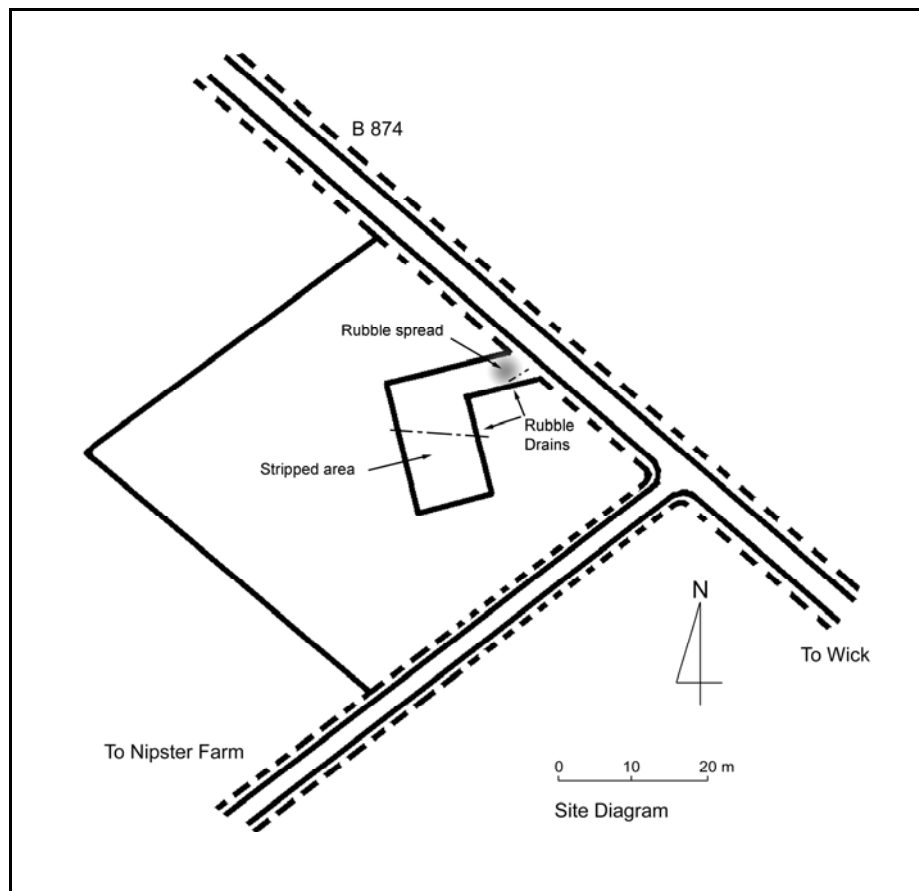
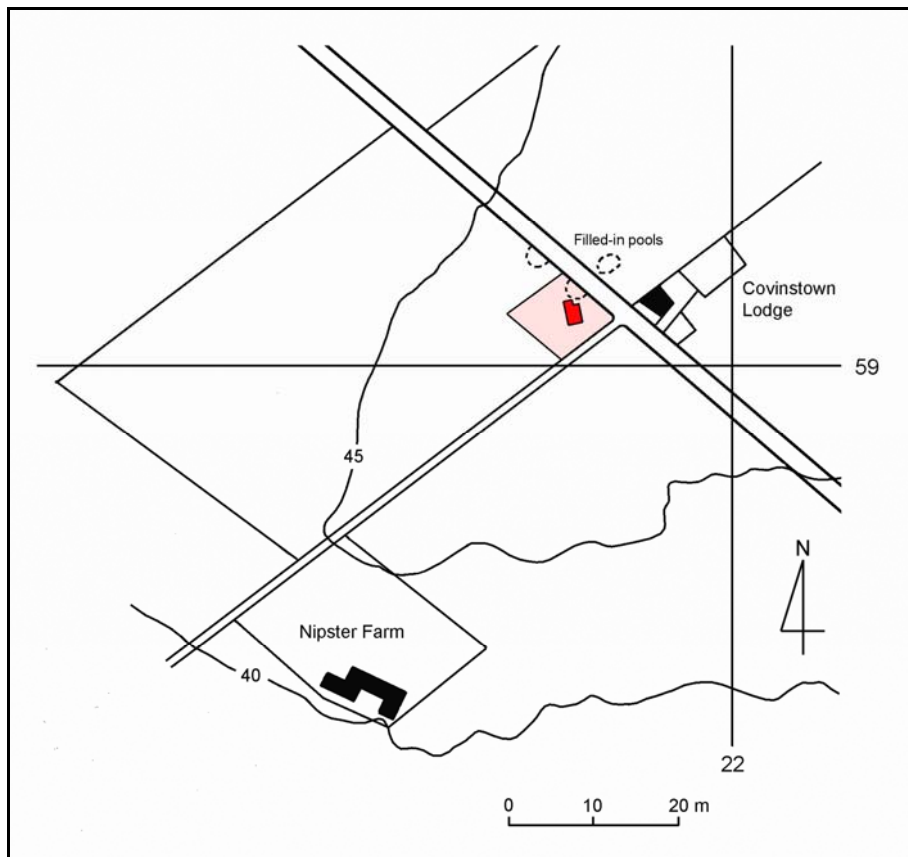


Figure 2 Site detail
Plans prepared by Paul Humphreys

Aims and Objectives

The proposed development required the digging of house foundations, driveway and drainage services.

The overall aims of the archaeology programme were to:

1. Minimize any possible delay or costs to the development by anticipating any archaeological requirements as far as possible, timetabling and integrating archaeological recording work with the project, and dealing with any issues arising quickly and efficiently.
2. 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 NPPG 5 (SOEND 1994) and PAN 42 (SOEND 1994).
3. Meet the requirements of the planning condition.

Archaeological background and cultural significance

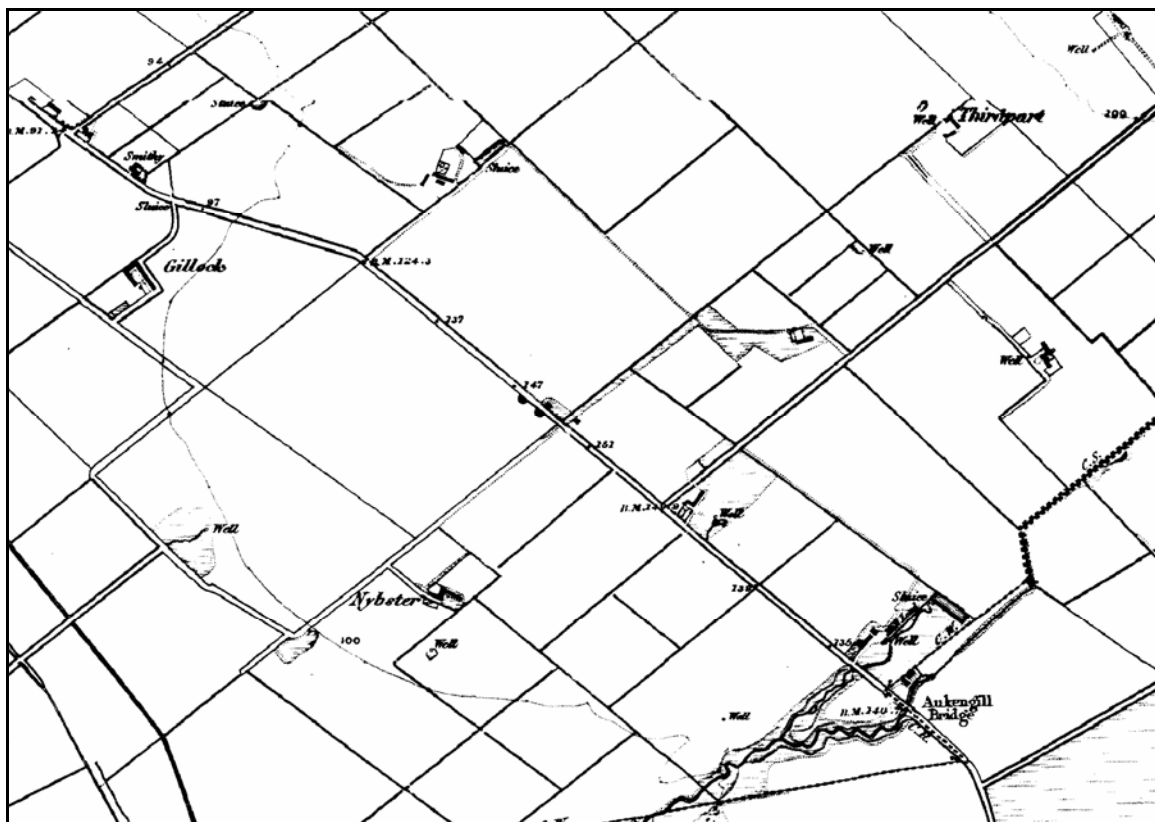


Figure 3 First Edition OS 1:10560 Map 1877

Derived from digital mapping. Not to scale

The new house site lies among a concentration of archaeological sites, of which the most important is the Scheduled Neolithic henge monument (Highland SMR and NMRS ND25NW0016) which lies just to the west of this site. This was initially identified on RCAHMS aerial photographs flown in 1977. A watching brief carried out in October 2005 on the construction of two houses did not reveal any archaeological evidence, but there was nevertheless believed to be some potential for discoveries here.

Covistown (or Covinstown) Lodge, opposite the site, is recorded as a building on both the local authority and national records (NMRS ND25NW 54; HSMR ND25NW 64). A systematic examination of the first edition Ordnance Survey 6 inch (1:10560) maps by the RCAHMS in 1995 supposedly revealed an extensive farmstead on the site in 1877 (HSMR ND25NW0024: NMRS ND25NW 23); however this seems to have been misplaced (see Fig 3).

Method

Desk Based Assessment

A desk-based assessment was conducted and included a check of relevant and accessible archaeological / historical records, maps and aerial photographs was undertaken. The National Monuments Record for Scotland, the Highland Sites and Monuments Record, the first edition 6 inch Ordnance Survey map, and the map collections of the National Library of Scotland were checked online. No recorded archaeological sites and monuments were directly affected.

Watching Brief

A watching brief was conducted to monitor digging of all areas of the site to be disturbed during development. Topsoil was cleared from the house site itself as well as the drive and the areas for drainage services. All excavation was carried out using a back-acting mechanical excavator fitted with a ditching bucket and monitored by an archaeologist at all times. All surfaces were inspected for possible archaeological features and hand-cleaned by trowel or draw-hoe where necessary.

A digital photographic record was made, and all photographs and an index are included with this report.

No archaeological excavation was undertaken as part of this work beyond the minimum necessary to achieve the objectives above. Palaeo-environmental sampling was not undertaken.

Results

Desk Based Assessment

There were no recorded sites on the house site, although there were several important sites of archaeological interest nearby, as mentioned above. The historical maps did not provide any further archaeological information, showing the site to have been in agricultural use.

Watching Brief

House-Base Area

The level site stands 45 m above OD in an area of agricultural land. The observed site preparation amounted to the removal of the top soil over the area of the house base and driveway. The revealed soil profile over the house-base area comprised 20 to 30 cm of undifferentiated plough soil overlying oxidised glacial till. Recent cultivation of the full depth of top soil explained the lack of differentiation. The depth of ploughing was such that the sub-soil (oxidised till, image 1) had not been incorporated into the plough soil which proved to be very clean with little or no stone. Archaeological finds within the top soil amounted to two sherds of C19 pottery. No flint or quartz was evident.

The surface of the till appeared to be undisturbed save for a rubble field drain (Fig. 2) running circa SW to NE across the site (Images 1, 2 and 3).

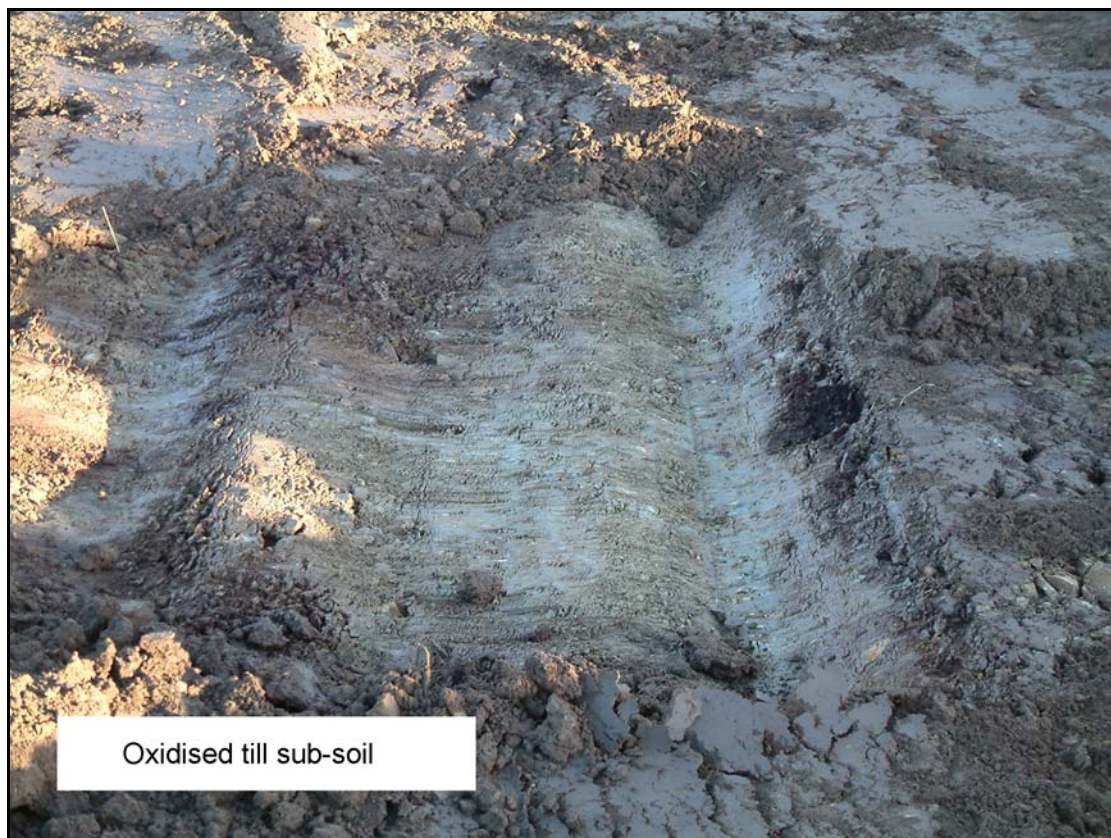


Figure 4: Oxidised till sub-soil (Image 1)



Figure 5 General view looking E (Image 2)

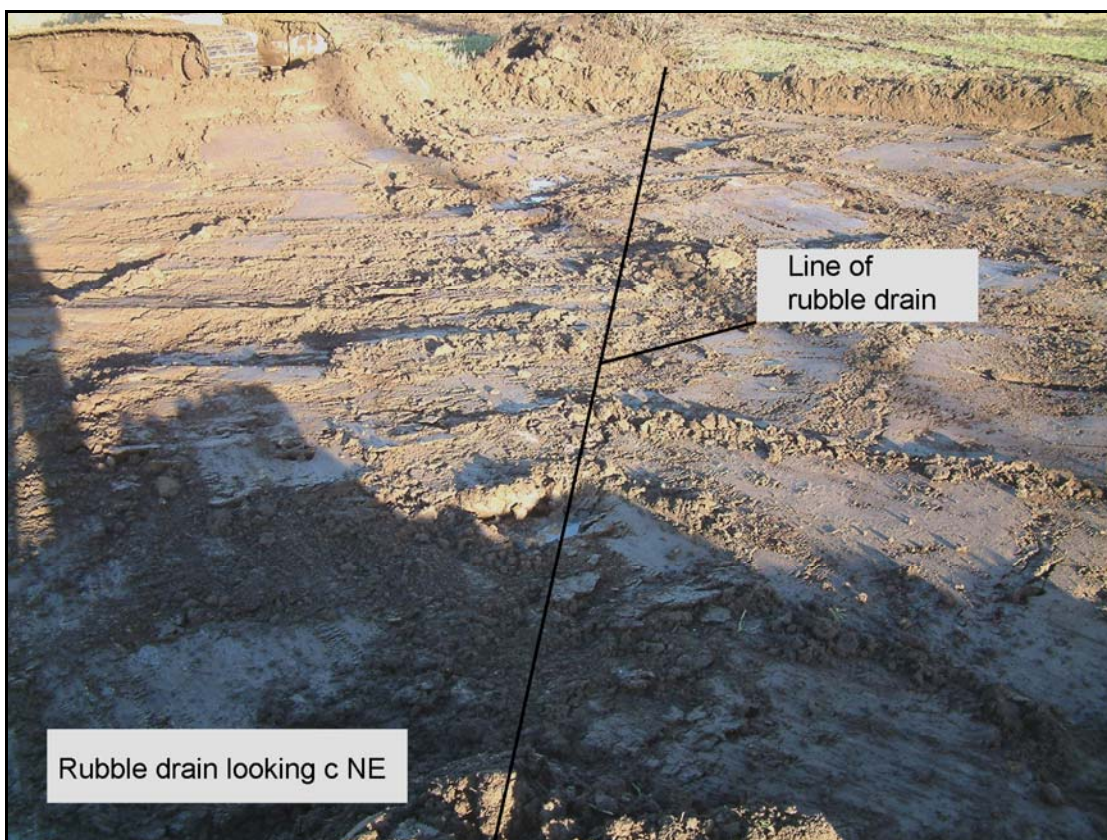


Figure 6 Rubble drain looking NE (Image 3)

Driveway Area

The removal of the top soil for the driveway differed from that for the house base. An amorphous area adjacent to the site boundary and abutting the B 874 indicated an area of colour change (image 4). The colour change was attributable to a dark humic soil containing what appeared to be a rubble spread of uniformly-sized stone circa 15 cm and the occasional modern brick (image 5)(image 6). A short linear rubble feature within the area was thought to be a rubble drain (Fig.1) (image 7). Two interpretations are suggested for the rubble spread.

- Material arising from roadside ditch clearing activity.
- In-fill material arising from a former pool indicated on OS Sheet ND 25/35 1978 that has been drained and filled.



Figure 7 Driveway area looking c NE (Image 4)



Figure 8 Rubble spread (Image 5)



Figure 9 Rubble spread showing modern brick content (Image 6)



Figure 10 Rubble drain looking NE (Image 7)



Figure 11 General view looking E (Image 8)



Figure 12 General view looking c NE (Image 9)



Figure 13 General view looking c NE (Image 10)

Discussion and conclusions

The stripped area for the house-base indicated no evidence for archaeological remains, either in the stripped top soil or in the sub-soil which comprised undisturbed glacial till. A 19th or early 20th c. rubble field drain was noted running circa SW / NE across the site.

The area stripped for the driveway did reveal an anthropogenic deposit in the area of the intended site entrance which was interpreted as a rubble spread intermixed with a humus-rich soil. The presence of modern brick, an adjacent ditch and map evidence for a former pool, now filled-in, supported an interpretation of a modern origin for this material.

No evidence of archaeological activity was observed other than 19th.c. or later agricultural improvement in the form of rubble field drains.

Recommendations

We recommend full archaeological clearance be given to the site. There are no recommendations for follow-up work in this case.

Appendix 1: Index of Photographs

Photo No.	Notes	Taken by	Date
1	Oxidised till subsoil	PH	10/01/2007
2	View E across site	PH	10/01/2007
3	Rubble drain - view NE	PH	10/01/2007
4	Driveway area. View NE	PH	10/01/2007
5	Rubble spread	PH	10/01/2007
6	Rubble spread - brick	PH	10/01/2007
7	Rubble drain - view NE	PH	10/01/2007
8	General view across site looking E	PH	10/01/2007
9	General view across site looking NE	PH	10/01/2007
10	General view across site looking NE	PH	10/01/2007