



Highland Archaeology Services Ltd

Watching Brief:



Mybster, Caithness

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Watching Brief:

Mybster, Caithness

Summary

An archaeological watching brief was carried out to record the nature and extent of any archaeology revealed during construction of a house at Mybster in Caithness. Bedrock was found to lie close to the surface throughout the site and no archaeological finds or features were recorded.

Report No.	HAS070903
Site Code	HAS-MYB07
Client	Mr and Mrs S Firth
Planning Ref	
Date / updated	16 September 2007
Author	Paul Humphreys and John Wood

Contents

Introduction	3
Location.....	4
Archaeology and policy background	5
Aims and objectives.....	5
Desk Based Assessment	6
Watching Brief	9
Observations.....	9
Conclusions and Recommendations	13

List of Figures and Plates

1: Site Location.....	4
2: Sketch plan showing site layout	6
3: Extract from Blaeu's map (1654).....	7
4: Extract from 1st Edition OS 6-inch County Series map (1877)	8
5: General view of site, looking S (Photo 1).....	9
6: Bedrock appearing approx. 40 cm below surface (Photo 2).....	10
7: Bedrock encountered (Photo 3)	10
8: Site stripping in progress: hard standing and shed area (Photo 4).....	11
9: Site stripping in progress: dwelling area (Photo 5).....	11
10: Dark feature (Photo 6).....	12
11: Dark feature, half-sectioned (Photo 7).....	12
12: Stripping for septic tank and soakaway (Photo 8)	13

Acknowledgments

The fieldwork was carried out by Paul Humphreys; the desk-based assessment was done by John Wood. Mapping is reproduced by permission of the Ordnance Survey under the company's Licence 100043217.

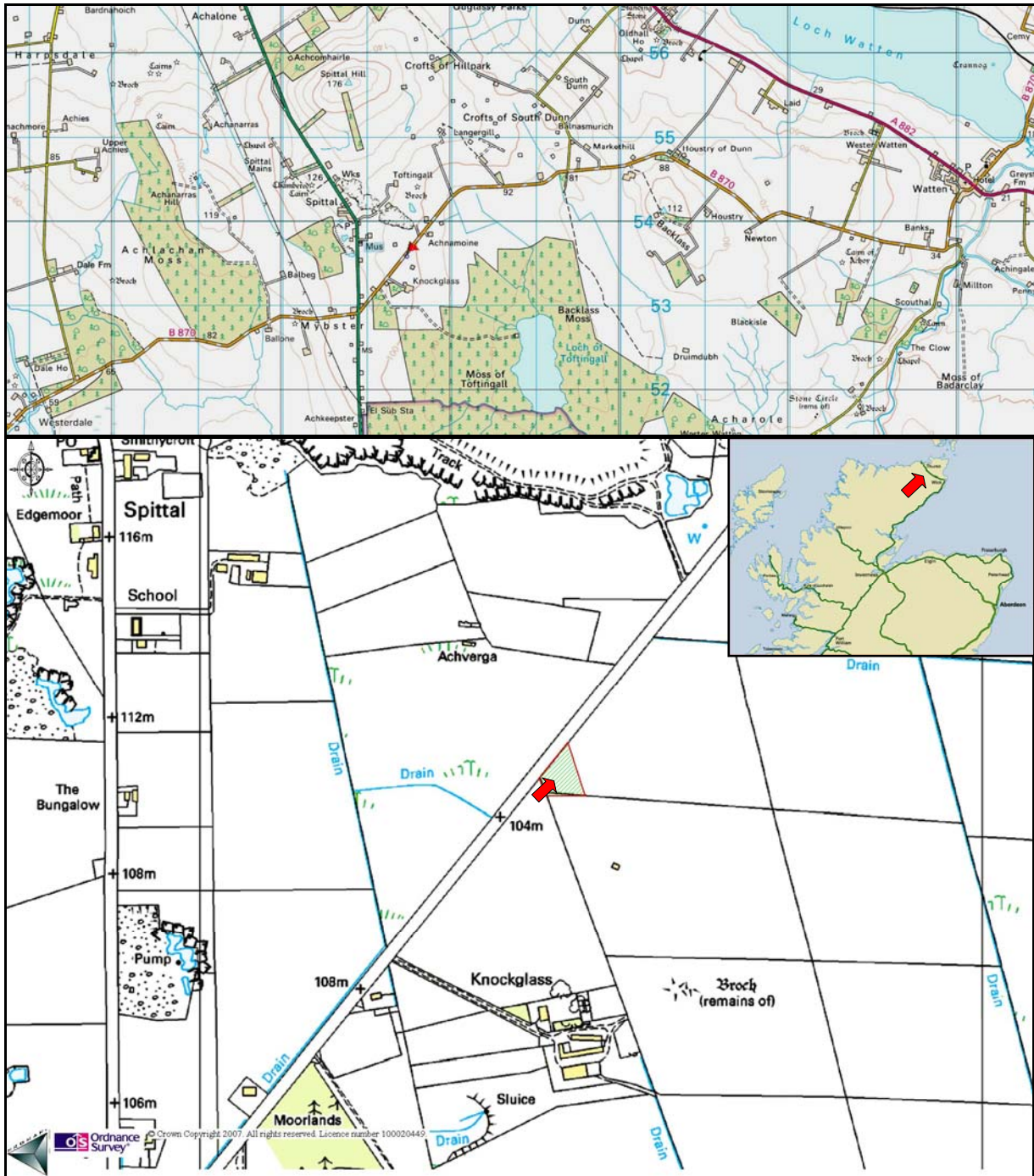
Introduction

Planning consent for the erection of a single dwelling and shed for Mr and Mrs S Firth, required a watching brief be conducted during all topsoil stripping and trenching works. The site is located at Mybster, Caithness (ND 1745 5357) in improved pasture circa 300 metres from a Broch (Fig 1).

The purpose of the work was to identify and record the nature and extent of any archaeological features revealed or affected by the intended development, as set out in the project proposal agreed previously with the Highland Council.

Location

The site is located at approximately Ordnance Survey National Grid Reference ND 1746 5356



1: Site Location

Archaeology and policy background

An archaeological watching brief was requested for this site because of a potential for finds or features of interest to be discovered during site works. Caithness generally is rich in archaeology and the present site lies within an area close to Loch Watten in a prime location for prehistoric or later settlement. Archaeological sites that have been recorded nearby include chambered cairns and brochs.

The watching brief was intended to enable any discoveries to be recorded quickly and efficiently with minimum delay or disruption to the development.

The planning and policy framework includes the Highland Council's *Structure Plan*¹, and the Scottish Executive's *National Planning Policy Guidance Notes 5 (NPPG5)*² and *18 (NPPG18)*³, and *Planning Advice Note 42 (PAN42)*⁴ (SOEND 1994). The fundamental principles underpinning the above policies are set out in *Passed to the Future: Historic Scotland's Policy for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment* (2002)⁵ and the *Burra Charter* (Australia ICOMOS 1999).⁶

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.

¹ <http://www.highland.gov.uk/yourenvironment/planning/developmentplans/structureplan/thehighlandstructureplan.htm>

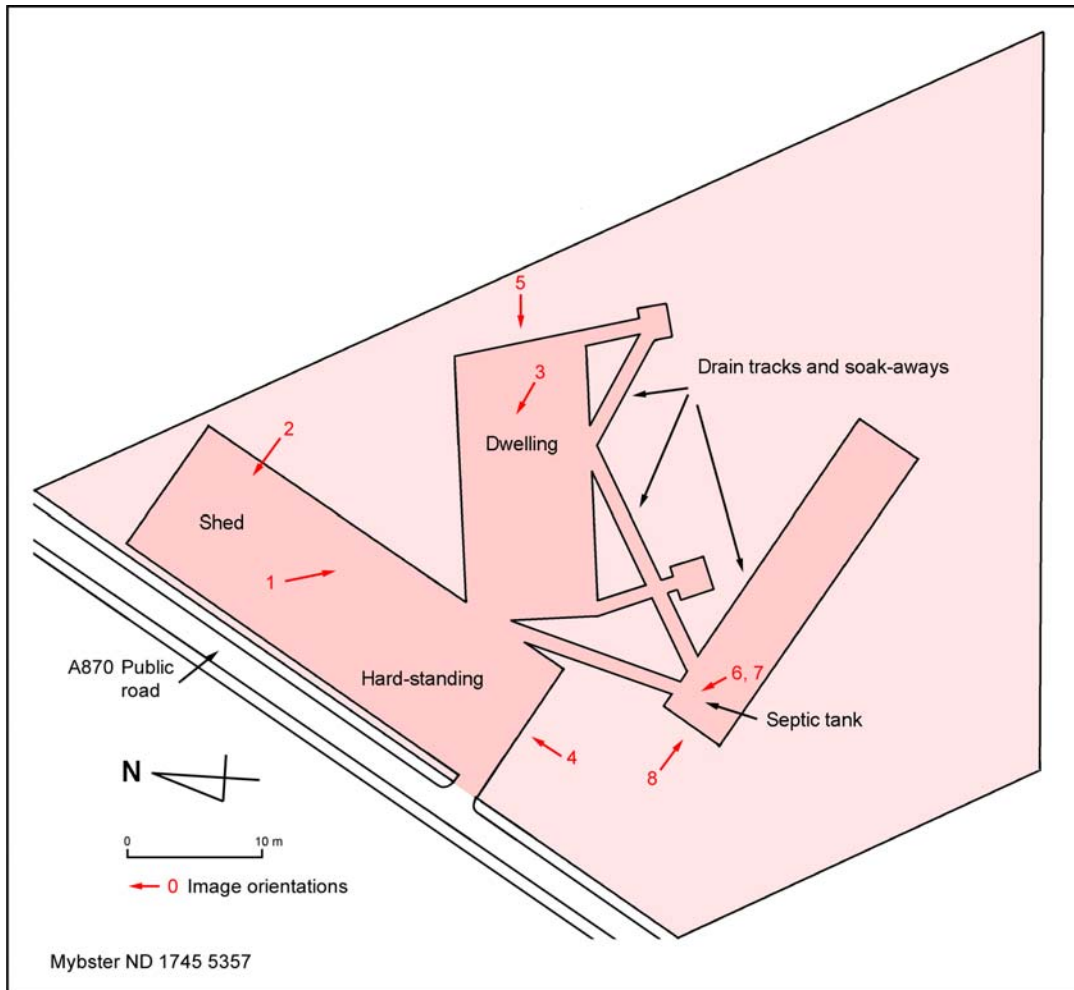
² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/1998/10/nppg5>

³ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/1999/04/nppg18>

⁴ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/1994/01/17081/21711>

⁵ www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/pasttofuture.pdf

⁶ <http://www.icomos.org/australia/burra.html>



2: Sketch plan showing site layout

Desk Based Assessment

A check of all relevant archaeological / historical records, maps and aerial photographs was undertaken as specified.

The first edition Ordnance Survey 1:10560 map of 1877 shows the site as improved farmland. The landscape has been enclosed with a pattern of field with straight boundaries as is the case today. Agricultural Improvement had hardly begun before the first Statistical Account of 1791 – 99, when the area was largely occupied by small farmers without security of tenure or incentive to change long established practice. Roads were also very poor⁷. Considerable changes had taken place by the time of the second account (1834-45).⁸ However no indication could be found of activity at the present site.

⁷ <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1791-99/Caithness/Watten/>

⁸ <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1834-45/Caithness/Watten/>

Several archaeological features have been recorded nearby on the Highland and National Sites and Monuments Records:

Knockglass

Highland SMR: ND15SE0028

NMRS: ND15SE 28

OS Grid ref ND 175 534

The Royal Commission (RCAHMS) noted in 1995 that 'A partially roofed building is depicted on the 1st edition of the 6-inch map (Caithness 1877, sheet xviii), but it is not shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1976).'

This appears to refer to the small bothy in the field south of the present house site, which seems to be shown on both the 1877 and the current maps (see site location plan above).

Knockglass Broch

Highland SMR: ND15SE0005

NMRS: ND15SE 5

OS Grid ref ND 176 532

The remains of a broch, visible as a grass-covered mound in the field to the south of this site, visited by the RCAHMS in 1910. This is a scheduled monument (No 561). Some wall facing is visible on the SE side.



3: Extract from Blaeu's map (1654)

(National Library of Scotland) This was surveyed by T Pont before 1615.

Knockglass Farm

Highland SMR: ND15SE0051

NMRS: ND15SE 51

OS Grid ref ND 175 532

This is shown on the first edition OS map. A mill dam and lade were noted in 1995.

Achverga

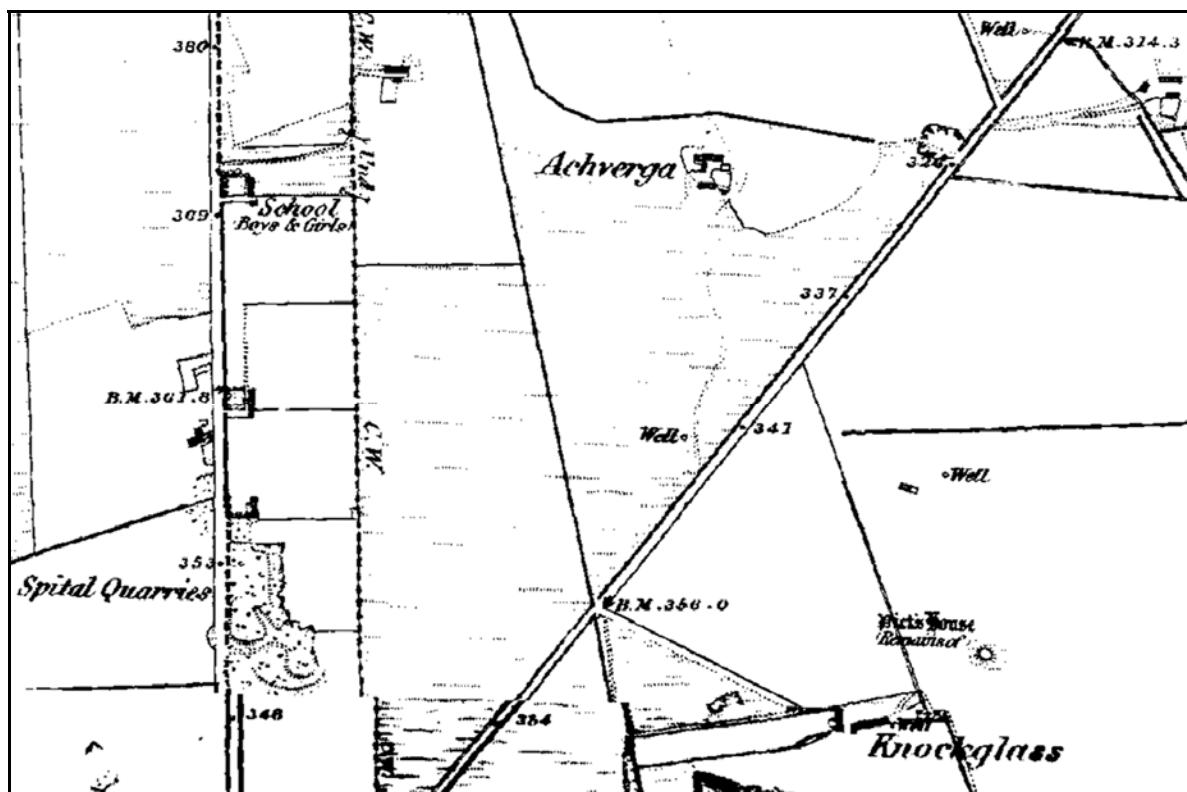
Highland SMR: ND15SE0022

NMRS: ND15SE 22

OS Grid ref ND 173 537

The Royal Commission (RCAHMS) noted in 1995 that 'A farmstead comprising three roofed buildings, one of which is a long building, and one unroofed building attached to an enclosure is depicted on the 1st edition of the 6-inch map (Caithness 1877, sheet xviii). One roofed and two unroofed buildings are shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1976)'.

None of these sites were affected by the development.



4: Extract from 1st Edition OS 6-inch County Series map (1877)

(Not to scale)

Watching Brief

Working with the contractor, a watching brief was carried out on all ground-works. The site was cleared and excavated under close archaeological supervision by mechanical back-acting digger fitted with a straight-edged bucket. Trenches were cleaned by hand where necessary to elucidate the archaeology, using draw-hoes and / or trowels as appropriate

Fig 2 (above) shows the extent of the excavations undertaken.

Observations

Site stripping

The site is located in an area of improved pasture (plate 1). Its closeness to the Spittal Quarry workings suggested that the bed rock might be close to the surface, and the start of site stripping confirmed this. It revealed a soil profile of improved plough soil (c 30cm) overlying thin clay till (c 10 cm), smeared over chemically weathered bed rock that dipped slightly to the south east (plate 2, plate 3). This observed soil profile extended over the full stripped area (plate 4, plate 5).

Generally the exposed surface was featureless, however one small area of colour change was investigated but proved, as expected, to be natural (plates 6 and 7). The tracks for the drains and associated septic tank area and soakaways were also stripped at this stage (plate 8).



5: General view of site, looking S (Photo 1)

Location and direction shown as No. 1 on site plan above



6: Bedrock appearing approx. 40 cm below surface (Photo 2)
Location and direction shown as No. 2 on site plan above



7: Bedrock encountered (Photo 3)
Location and direction shown as No. 3 on site plan above



8: Site stripping in progress: hard standing and shed area (Photo 4)
Location and direction shown as No. 4 on site plan above



9: Site stripping in progress: dwelling area (Photo 5)
Location and direction shown as No. 5 on site plan above



10: Dark feature (Photo 6)

Location and direction shown as No. 6 on site plan above



11: Dark feature, half-sectioned (Photo 7)

Location and direction shown as No. 7 on site plan above



12: Stripping for septic tank and soakaway (Photo 8)
Location and direction shown as No. 8 on site plan above

Foundation Trenches and other deeper excavations

Once the topsoil and overburden had been stripped, the proximity of the bed rock to the surface negated the need for a watching during the cutting of the foundation trenches and septic tank.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The areas of the site covering the dwelling, shed and hard-standing drain tracks and soak-aways were stripped down to bedrock. Nothing of archaeological significance was observed during this process.

The trenching for the foundations and other building work will involve excavation of bedrock only. In consequence it is deemed that no further watching is necessary. We recommend that clearance should be given for the site. There are no proposals for follow-up work.

	A	B	C	D
1	Photo No.	Notes	Taken by	Date
2	1	Pre-stripping site view looking south	PDH	30/07/2007
3	2	Soil profile over bed rock	PDH	30/07/2007
4	3	Bed rock detail	PDH	30/07/2007
5	4	Hard-standing and shed area	PDH	30/07/2007
6	5	Dwelling area	PDH	30/07/2007
7	6	Colour change feature	PDH	30/07/2007
8	7	Feature section	PDH	30/07/2007
9	8	Septic tank and soak-away area	PDH	30/07/2007
10				
11				

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