



Highland Archaeology Services Ltd

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Archaeological Trial Trenching Evaluation



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Archaeological Trial Trenching Evaluation

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Client	Innes Miller
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Summary

An archaeological evaluation amounting to 15% trial trenching on the site of a proposed new-build office/workshop was carried out in advance of construction of a house on land at Westerdale, Caithness, in response to a planning condition. Much of the site had been disturbed by quarrying; nothing of archaeological significance was found.

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Acknowledgements

The archaeologist on site was Paul Humphreys. This report was edited by John Wood. Background mapping has been reproduced by permission of the Ordnance Survey under Licence 100043217.

Location

The site lies at Westerdale, near Mybster in Caithness, at about 59m above sea level. It is centred at Ordnance Survey National Grid Reference ND 1321 5184.



Figure 1 Site location

Introduction

The erection of a new office/workshop ND 1320 5185, close to the Bridge of Westerdale, Caithness, required a 15 % trial trenching survey be conducted prior to the starts of building works. The site location is depicted on the extract from the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map sheet XXII (Fig. 2) below.



Figure 2 Extract from Ordnance Survey 1st Edition 6 inch map, Caithness sheet XXII; surveyed 1871
Courtesy of National Library of Scotland. Arrow shows approximate position of site. Not reproduced to scale

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; Cultural Significance

The planning and policy framework includes the Highland Council's *Structure Plan*¹, and the Scottish Government's *Scottish Planning Policy SPP 23: Planning and the Historic Environment* (2008)². 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)³ and the *Burra Charter* (Australia ICOMOS 1999).⁴

Archaeological fieldwork was requested in this case because there is considered to be potential for finds or features of interest to be discovered during site works. Although no archaeological finds or features had been recorded within the site itself, it lies within an area known to contain a high density of archaeological sites. Four brochs lie within 500m; a mill, a medieval chapel and burial ground and the abandoned township of Tormsdale suggest that Westerdale has been an important focus for rural settlement for centuries.

Some of these are shown on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey 1:10560 map (1871) This depicts a track, still extant, bounding the west of the site. Within the site is depicted an amorphous feature, initially thought to be a pool. (*see Figs 2 and 3 below*). Just south of the site within the fenced enclosure is a large modern steel framed agricultural building that occupies the site of an experimental peat-fired power station.

Setting

The site is located on the east bank of the Thurso River close to the Bridge of Westerdale and immediately south of the Westerdale to Mybster road. The site lies in a river valley within an open landscape of largely improved agricultural land to the north of Westerdale with predominantly unimproved or abandoned landscape to the south (Plates 1 to 4). This landscape has a high concentration of known archaeological monuments.

The new building was located within the bounds of a former industrial site. Much of the area immediately to the south and east of the site has been covered with crushed hardcore similar to number 1 bottoming. This can be attributed to the locations former use as an experimental peat-fired power station; now replaced by a steel-framed agricultural building (Plate 5).

1

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

2 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/10/28135841/0>

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

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

Methods

The trial trenching was conducted using a tracked 360⁰ excavator fitted with a smooth bladed ditching bucket. Turf and topsoil were removed down to the first colour change under observation in accordance with the specification set out in the approved Written Scheme of Investigation.⁵ The site is approximately 2954 sq m. in area. A 15% trial trenching evaluation was requested in this case. Five linear and four box trenches were proposed. In the event, Trench 6 lay entirely within the disturbed area and was not excavated; while Trench 1 was split into two (see Fig 3 below.)

Findings

The site vegetation cover was predominantly rough tussock-forming grasses and soft rush (Plate 6). The extract from the 1st edition OS map of the area (figure 2) indicates what was originally thought to be a pool corresponding to the western side of the site. This feature later proved to be an old quarry that had been partially backfilled with rubble in a clay matrix (Plate 7; see also Fig 3, where its approximate extent has been plotted against the modern mapping). Several water-filled ditches had been cut draining into this area; parts of which were low lying and also water-filled (Plates 8 & 9). In consequence the pattern of trial trenching had to be adjusted slightly to avoid flooding. Only the section of the site east of trench T3 proved to be relatively free of modern disturbance.

Trench T1 had to be truncated for the reasons set out above; it was augmented by T1a. T1 was placed longitudinally over the pool/quarry feature and was cut down to the bedrock to determine the nature of the feature. This was thought necessary because, had it been a natural pool, there would be no indications of anthropogenic disturbance at the 1st colour change interface and there would have remained the remote possibility of ritual deposition. No evidence of lacustrine deposits was observed and it was clear that the feature was an old quarry (Plates 10 & 11).

The bedrock was generally encountered between 100 and 200 mm below the turf; rising towards the east (Plate 12). Trench 7 location proved to overlie the backfilled quarry. The remaining trial trenches yielded no evidence of archaeologically significant features (Plates 13 to 17).

Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

Trial trenching indicated that the bedrock was close to the surface over the entire site which explained the presence of the old quarry located in the NW of the site. Nothing of archaeological significance other than the quarry itself was encountered, and no further archaeological work is recommended.

⁵ Wood J, 2010 *Westerdale, Caithness: Written Scheme of Investigation* Report HAS100105



Plate 1 View across the site looking NW



Plate 2 View looking NW towards Ben Dorrery



Plate 3 View looking SW across the Bridge at Westerdale



Plate 4 View looking NE towards Mybster



Plate 5 Farm building on site of former power station



Plate 6 6 Site vegetation cover



Plate 7 Low lying quarry area



Plate 8 Ditch draining into quarry area



Plate 9 Pooled water; trial trench T3



Plate 10 Trial trench T1; quarry fill



Plate 11 Trial trench T1; quarry floor bedrock



Plate 12 Bedrock proximity to turf; trial trench T3



Plate 13 Trial trench T3 looking NW



Plate 14 Trial trench T4 looking SE



Plate 15 Trial trench T2 looking NE



Plate 16 Trial trench T5 looking SW



Plate 17 Trial trench T8 being stripped looking SE

Table of Photographs

Photo No.	Notes	Taken by	Date
1	View across the site looking NW	PDH	28 01 2010
2	View looking NW towards Ben Dorrery	PDH	02 02 2010
3	View looking SW across the Bridge at Westerdale	PDH	02 02 2010
4	View looking NE towards Mybster	PDH	02 02 2010
5	Farm building on site of former power station	PDH	28 01 2010
6	Site vegetation cover	PDH	28 01 2010
7	Low lying quarry area	PDH	02 02 2010
8	Ditch draining into quarry area	PDH	02 02 2010
9	Pooled water; trial trench T3	PDH	02 02 2010
10	Trial trench T1; quarry fill	PDH	02 02 2010
11	Trial trench T1; quarry floor bedrock	PDH	02 02 2010
12	Bedrock proximity to turf; trial trench T3	PDH	02 02 2010
13	Trial trench T3 looking NW	PDH	02 02 2010
14	Trial trench T4 looking SE	PDH	02 02 2010
15	Trial trench T2 looking NE	PDH	02 02 2010
16	Trial trench T5 looking SW	PDH	02 02 2010
17	Trial trench T8 being stripped looking SE	PDH	02 02 2010



Figure 3 Site layout, showing new development, trenches, and outline of former quarry