



Highland Archaeology Services Ltd

Bringing the Past and Future Together

Achie's Harpsdale, Caithness



Archaeological Watching Brief

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Achies

Harpsdale, Caithness

Watching Brief Report

Report No.	HAS110201
Site Code	HAS - ACH10
Grid Ref	ND 13159 55241
Client	D Flett
Planning Ref	10/02974/FUL
OASIS	highland4-92728
Date/ revision	07/02/2011
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 Harpsdale, Caithness. Nothing of archaeological significance was found.

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Acknowledgements

Background mapping has been reproduced by permission of the Ordnance Survey under Licence 100043217. Site plans have been kindly supplied by SSE. The archaeologist on site was Paul Humphreys.

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.

Location and setting

The site is centred at Ordnance Survey National Grid Reference ND 13159 55241 at a height of about 77 metres above sea level. It lies in a large field of improved pasture, adjacent to a single track road running north - south from Halkirk to Westerdale, which has been divided into three plots for private development.

The site 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.

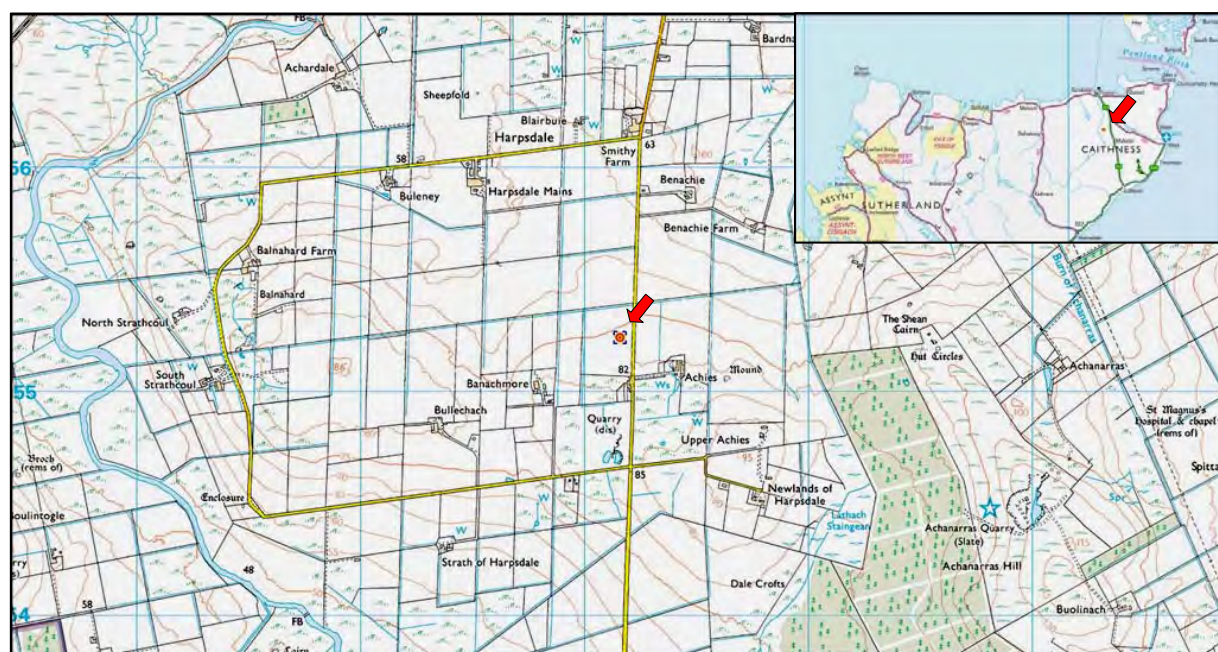


Figure 1 Site location

Reproduced from Ordnance Survey 1:25000 Mapping under licence. Not to scale

Introduction

The construction a new private house at Achies, Harpsdale, Caithness required an archaeological watching brief be conducted during site stripping. The area concerned is depicted against an aerial photograph background on Figure 2 below.



Figure 2 Site aerial view, with photograph locations.

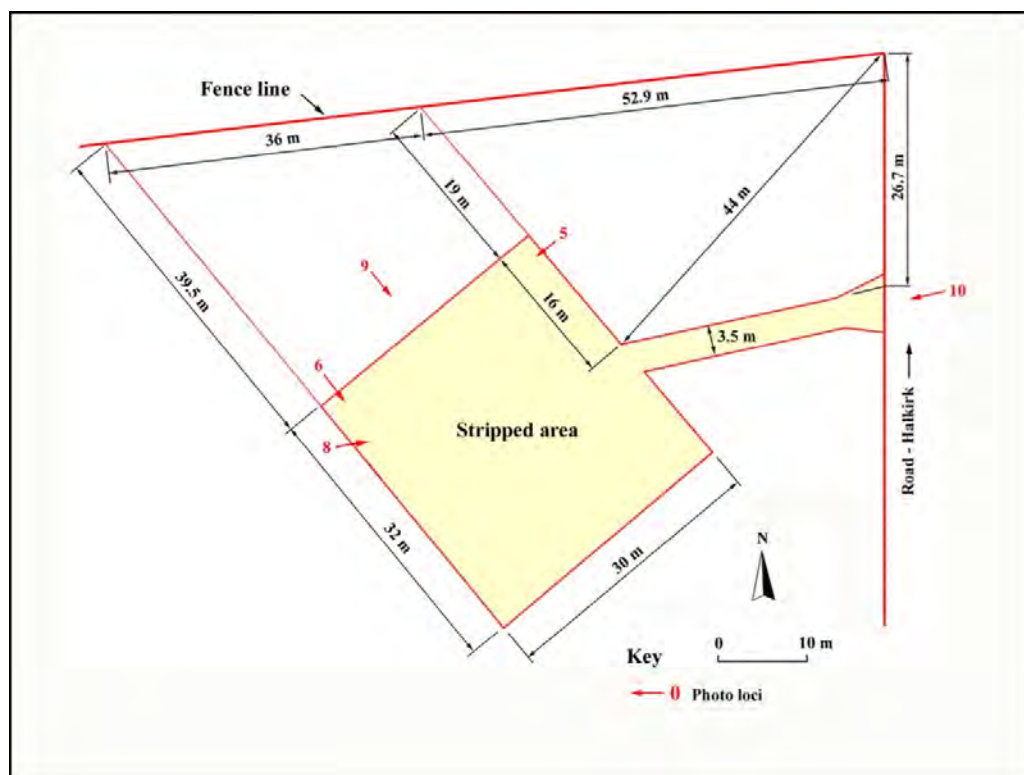


Figure 3 Stripped area (Drawing 1), with photograph locations

Background

The current planning and policy framework includes the Highland Council's *Structure Plan*¹, and the 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 the above policies are set out in *Passed to the Future: Historic Scotland's Policy for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment* (2002)² and the *Burra Charter* (Australia ICOMOS 1999).³

Archaeological fieldwork was requested in this case because there was considered to be potential for finds or features of interest to be discovered during site works. The Thurso River valley is well populated by brochs, the site of a possible example being about 100 m from the area to be stripped (at ND 1305 5522)⁴. This is recorded as the 'site of' a broch by the Ordnance Survey Name Book in 1872 but the OS surveyors visited in 1965 and found only a slight rise in the ground.

Another broch, Scheduled Monument No 509, lies circa 500 m from the site (ND 1364 5506)⁵. This survives as a grassy mound. The wider landscape includes monuments and sites including the small henge at Pullyhour; cist burials, clan battle sites and pre-improvement agricultural features.

A watching brief was carried out by Cathy Dagg in 2008 on topsoil stripping within the plot immediately north of the present site⁶. This found 'No definite archaeological features other than 19th century land drains'⁷. She notes in her report that a pre-forestry archaeological evaluation by J Wordsworth at Dale Farm to the NW of Achies recorded several pre-improvement cultivation features outwith the present improved fields. However it is likely that within this field, all pre-improvement features have been removed by cultivation apart from features cut into the subsoil layer such as pits, trenches and foundations.

Another watching brief on a house site at Achies Park, about 500m SE of the present site, was undertaken by Cathy Dagg in November 2009⁸. This too found no archaeological features apart from 19th-century field drains.

The First Statistical Account of Halkirk parish is a long and entertaining entry, and it notes the large number of antiquities in the parish; but it fails to interpret them beyond stating that 'they shew, in general, that this country was once a theatre of iniquity, bloodshed and violence; natives oppressing and plundering natives, and foreign rapacious adventurers making a prey of them all. There is not one of

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

² www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/pasttofuture.pdf

³ <http://www.icomos.org/australia/burra.html>

⁴ HHER MHG1329

⁵ HHER MHG 1328

⁶ Dagg, C., 2008 *Erection of new-build house at Achies, Halkirk, Caithness: Archaeological Watching Brief: Phase 1* (HHER: EHG2856)

⁷ Ibidem, p4

⁸ Dagg, C. 2009. *Achies Park, Harpsdale, Halkirk, Caithness: Erection of new-build house - Archaeological Watching Brief*. (EHG3132)

these antiquities that has the least appearance of being the habitation of peace and security... after all, it is still a mystery, and so I leave it'⁹

The present planned village of Halkirk was planned by Sir John Sinclair in 1803 and laid out soon afterwards. From the second Statistical Account it is clear that many other major improvements were also under way here in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, including the church, manse, two bridges, roads, schools, and 'more cultivation carried on, -more of the waste grounds improved, -a better system of husbandry introduced, -and the quantity of grain raised is much greater than at the former period' (i.e. at time of the 1st Statistical Account). The field pattern at the present site is likely to date from this period of Improvement¹⁰.

The 1st edition OS 1:10560 scale map (Figure 4 below) shows the same field boundaries as at present, with the first broch mentioned above (HHER1329) shown immediately west of the present site as 'Site of Pict's House'.

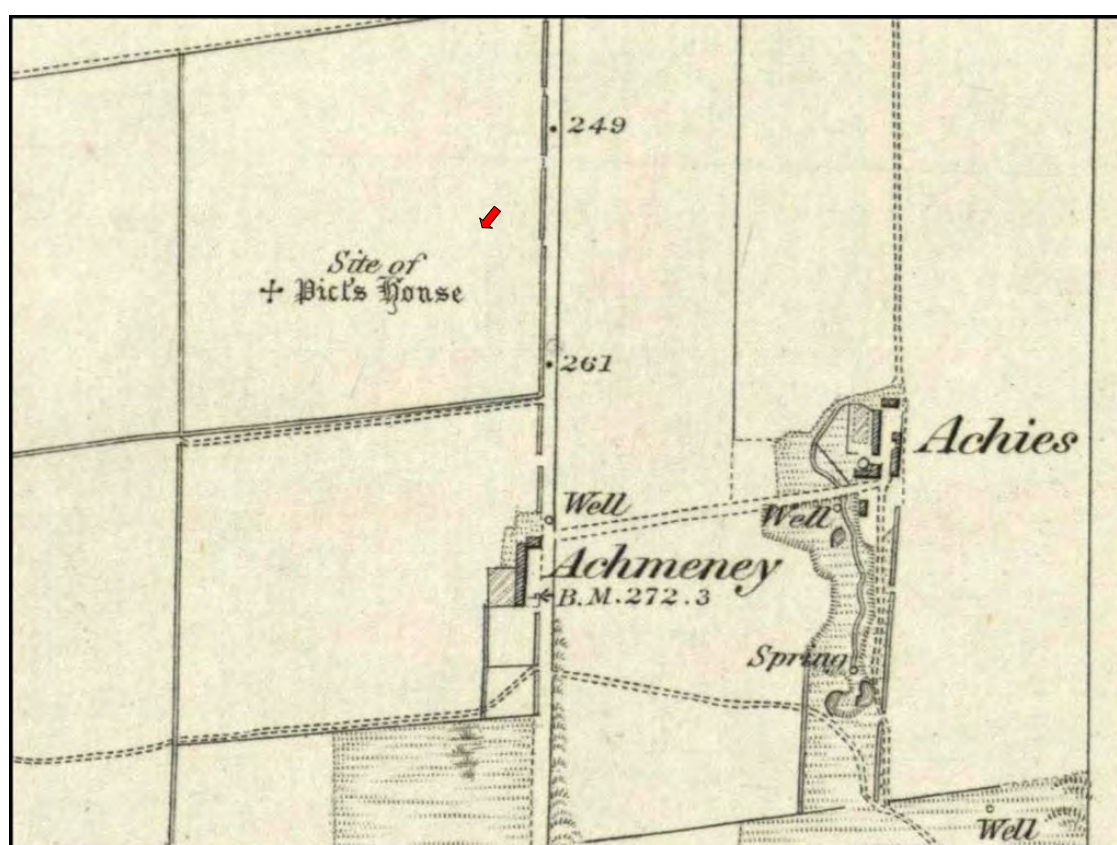


Figure 4 Extract from Ordnance Survey 1st Edition 25'' map, surveyed 1875.
Inverness Mainland Sheet XII.13 (Combined). Not reproduced to scale. Courtesy of National Library of Scotland.

⁹ Statistical Account 1791-99 vol.19: Halkirk, County of Caithness, p57

¹⁰ Statistical Account of 1834-45 vol.15: Halkirk, County of Caithness, p.82

Programme

A desk-based assessment was followed by a watching brief on the topsoil stripping of the proposed house and garage site, undertaken on 6 December 2010. All work was conducted in accordance with the Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) previously approved by the Highland Council.¹¹

Results

The weather conditions for the fieldwork were clear and cold with overnight temperature of minus 11 degrees and 250 mm of snow cover. Unfortunately the contractor had started stripping the previous day before he remembered the watching brief requirement; approximately 10% of the area had been stripped before watching commenced. The said area was re-scraped to provide a clean surface and inspected, but nothing of note was visible. The stripping was completed over the following two days. The spoil heaps were examined but were partially obscured by snow.

No features or finds of archaeological significance were noted. A possible buried feature was noted on the aerial view of the site (Figure 3) in the area intended for the drainage soak-away. This may be a product of the digital photography or file format rather than archaeology.

Conclusions and recommendations

Excavations for the drains and soakaway should be observed for possible archaeology. It is recommended that the drainage soak-away be re-positioned to avoid the possible buried feature.

Tables

Table 1 Drawings

Drawing No.	Title	Subject	Drawn by	Date
1	Stripped area	Overall site plan	PDH	06/12/2010

¹¹ Wood, J 2010 *Achies, Halkirk, Caithness: Written Scheme of Investigation*, Highland Archaeology Services, Cromarty (Report No. HAS100905)

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

Table 2 Photographs

Photo No.	Notes	Taken by	Date
1	View from site looking WNW	PDH	06/12/2010
2	View from site looking NE	PDH	06/12/2010
3	View from site looking SE	PDH	06/12/2010
4	View from site looking W	PDH	06/12/2010
5	Re-scraped area looking SW	PDH	06/12/2010
6	Re-scraped area looking SE	PDH	06/12/2010
7	Typical clay till surface	PDH	06/12/2010
8	Stripped area looking ENE	PDH	06/12/2010
9	Stripped area looking SE	PDH	06/12/2010
10	Driveway looking ENE	PDH	06/12/2010

Photographs

**Photo 1 View from site looking WNW**



Photo 2 View from site looking NE



Photo 3 View from site looking SE



Photo 4 View from site looking W



Photo 5 Re-scraped area looking SW



Photo 6 Re-scraped area looking SE



Photo 7 Typical clay till surface



Photo 8 Stripped area looking ENE



Photo 9 Stripped area looking SE



Photo 10 Driveway looking ENE