

# *Scotia Archaeology*

**REPORT  
TO  
SCOTTISH & SOUTHERN ENERGY**

**OVERHEAD POWER LINE  
AT MACLEOD CENTRE,  
ISLE OF IONA**

**Watching brief  
March 2013**

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## INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief undertaken during the replacement of a pole for an overhead power line near the McLeod Centre, Isle of Iona, Argyll. Prior to the commencement of fieldwork a Written Scheme of Investigation, outlining proposals for this work, was presented to Historic Scotland because the pole stood within the scheduled area which includes the nearby abbey.

This work was commissioned by Ian Nicoll of Scottish & Southern Energy (SSE) and carried out by John Lewis of Scotia Archaeology, the field work being completed on 20 March 2013.

## THE SITE

Iona Abbey was founded by St Columba in 563 or soon after and was an influential establishment for some considerable time after that date. The vallum which surrounded early Irish monasteries marked their boundaries rather than provided defence. At Iona, the vallum enclosed an area of about four hectares. Its east side is now difficult to distinguish while the north side can still be traced as a very slight bank with a ditch outside it. It has been identified to a depth of nearly 2m on the south side of the abbey but it is best preserved on its west side where it survives as a large, crudely constructed, earthen rampart with an external ditch and counterscarp bank.

A comprehensive description of the abbey's history and architecture can be found in RCAHMS 1982. There have been several small-scale investigations within and around the vallum: for example Barber (1981); Lowe & Mate (1988); and McCormick (1989). They all produced some evidence for the presence and state of this feature.

From the abbey the land rises to the west onto knolls and ridges covered with coarse grass through which bedrock protrudes in many places. The pole that was replaced stood at NM 28545 24560, approximately 150m west of Iona Abbey and a short distance east of the McLeod Centre, a residential youth camp. It was the only pole on a short line branching south-eastwards from Pole 16 on the island's main overhead power line and consisted of a four-pole structure carrying a transformer from where power was transferred to an underground cable. The pole was eventually replaced with a two-pole structure (an H-pole) to which a new transformer was attached.

The location of the original transformer pole (and hence that of its replacement) is shown on the accompanying map which is based on one provided by SSE.

## THE WATCHING BRIEF

Prior to the demolition of the transformer pole the underground cable that led northwards from it had to be exposed. The cable was then cut and a new stretch of cable attached via a joint within a trench some 5m north of the pole. This trench measured 1.5m north/south by 0.6m wide and 0.4m deep. It cut through materials already disturbed when the cable was inserted and bottomed onto undisturbed glacial till comprising hard-packed sand, gravel, pebbles and boulders.

Once the new cable had been attached, the four-poster transformer pole was dismantled and a trench excavated for the new H-pole. This trench measured 2.5m north/south by 1.6m wide

and 1.8m deep. Most of the materials removed consisted of backfilled soils and rubble from the earlier trench although the west edge of the trench cut through undisturbed deposits. These comprised 0.3m of topsoil, 0.4-0.5m of glacial till and bedrock.

No features of archaeological significance were uncovered in either trench and no artefacts retrieved from them.

## CONCLUSIONS

The transformer pole stood within a shallow gully that tapers out a short distance to the west of the pole. The excavations of the pole trench and the jointing trench confirmed that the gully is very shallow and indicated that it is almost certainly a natural feature, the abbey's vallum being further west of this feature.

## REFERENCES

Barber, J 1981 'Excavations on Iona, 1979', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 111, 282-380.

Lowe, CE & Maté, I D 1988 'Iona Abbey, unauthorized excavation', *Discovery & Excavation in Scotland*, 20.

McCormick, F 1989 'Iona, early Christian medieval monastic settlement', *Discovery & Excavation in Scotland*, 54-5.

RCAHMS 1982 The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland *Inventory of Monuments, Argyll*, 4.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE

The photographs listed below form part of the project archive and are not included in hard copies of this report.

- 1 The old four-pole structure prior to excavation, viewed from the west
- 2 The old four-pole structure prior to excavation, viewed from the north-east
- 3 The jointing trench viewed from the east
- 4 The transformer being dismantled from the old pole
- 5 The pole trench, viewed from the east
- 6 The pole trench with the McLeod Centre in the background, viewed from the east
- 7 The pole trench, cut through redeposited materials and bedrock, viewed from the west