

# *Scotia Archaeology*

**REPORT  
TO  
SCOTTISH & SOUTHERN ENERGY**

**TEMPORARY GENERATOR SITE  
ISLE OF IONA**

**Watching brief  
April-May 2014**

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## INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of archaeological watching briefs undertaken during excavations in advance of the installation of a temporary generator, including a surrounding stock-proof fence, and three poles for a new 11kv overhead power line from the generator.

This work was commissioned by Ian Nicoll of Scottish & Southern Energy (SSE) and carried out by John Lewis of Scotia Archaeology April and May 2014.

## THE SITE

The Isle of Iona is famous worldwide as a centre of early Christianity. Iona Abbey was founded by St Columba, an Irish monk, in circa 563 and was an influential establishment for some considerable time after that date. As was common with Irish monasteries, the abbey was surrounded by a ditch which marked its boundary rather than provided defence. A small stretch of this vallum can still be traced whereas nothing survives above ground of the early monastic buildings, all of which would have been of timber.

In circa 1200 a Benedictine abbey was founded close to the site of the early monastery, the later monument being much altered and enlarged over several centuries. Its restored remains stand as the most imposing structure on the island. Shortly after the abbey was established, an Augustinian nunnery was built some 400m to its south-west, this monument now being in ruins. A comprehensive description of the history and architecture of the abbey and nunnery can be found in RCAHMS (1982).

The temporary generator is to be sited at approximately NM 2849 2390, in the corner of a field to the immediate south-west of Iona's fire station. This stands near the sea shore on the south side of Baile Mòr and some 600m south of the abbey. A small number of archaeological sites are known from this vicinity, these sites being described below.

### **NM22SE 32 An Eala: long cists, mound**

In 1969 two burials were disturbed when a water main was laid at NM 2846 2387, a short distance south of the site. Following this disruption some 40 burials were uncovered, all of them orientated east/west with some contained within cists. It was suggested that the burial ground was in use between the 6th and 10th centuries. Nearby was a low mound, said to have been used for resting coffins after landing on the island while the funeral parties performed the 'deisiol' (walking clockwise) three times round the artificial mound.

The name 'An Eala' is a corruption of the Irish word for a coffin.

### **NM22SE 16 Sraid Nam Marbh: road**

'Sraid nam Marbh, translated as 'Street of the Dead', was a processional way dating from about 1000 and ran from the original landing place at the head of Martyr's Bay to St Oran's Chapel, some 250m south of the generator site.

A cobbled street which has been exposed running from the graveyard to the Abbey is believed to be a later extension of this road. The first edition Ordnance Survey 25-inch map

(Argyllshire 1875, sheet 104) shows what appears to be the latter running from An Eala northwards towards the abbey.

## THE WATCHING BRIEFS

Watching briefs were undertaken at this location because of the close proximity of known archaeological sites, in particular the cemetery uncovered nearby in 1969. The first part of the operation comprised stripping topsoil from the area designated for the generator on 24 April 2014 during dry, sunny weather. On May 7, a cold showery day, watching briefs covered the excavation of three corner fence posts around the perimeter of the generator site and trenching for three poles and two stays for a new overhead line connecting the generator to an existing line.

This work had to be completed by early May to avoid disturbing corncrakes, a protected species, which nest in adjacent fields during the breeding season.

The locations of the trench for the generator and for the three poles are shown on the accompanying map which is based on one provided by SSE.

## GENERATOR TRENCH

The generator trench was located in the east corner of a field which is mostly level but which slopes gently upwards on its north-west side towards a rocky ridge. The field is now given over to good quality pasture but has been under arable cultivation in the past although there are patches of waterlogged ground supporting irises and other water-loving plants towards its north-east side. It is bounded on the south-east by a tarmac road and on the north-east by the car park for the fire station. The overall area of development measured approximately 23m by 21-28m with a small drainage gully cutting across its east corner.

Excavation of the main trench was carried out using a smooth-edged ditching bucket attached to a 13-tonne mechanical excavator whereas a 5-tonne machine dug the pole trenches and the pits for the three new corner posts were dug by hand. Topsoil in the main trench was 0.5m deep, coincidentally the required depth of excavation, and comprised dark brown, sandy loam with some small pebbles and occasional larger stones. This gave onto beach sands which varied in colour from near-white to dark yellow and occasionally grey. In wetter parts of the trench both the topsoil and subsoil comprised silt and peat.

The actual area excavated in the main trench measured some 20m by 11-17.5m, spoil being deposited between the edges of the trench and the line of the new boundary fence. The corner post-pits for the fence were 0.3m square and were excavated to a depth of 1m, the north and west pits cutting through mostly silt and peat and the south pit through field clearance rubble.

The only features uncovered in this area were several field drains, containing plastic drain pipes, which cut north-west to south-east across the site (see Photos 1 and 2).

## **POLE TRENCHES**

The three new poles were erected close to the fence that borders the north-east side of the field.

### **Pole Trench 1**

Pole Trench 1 was located at NM 28485 23916 and measured 1.8m north-east/south-west by 0.7m wide. It cut through silt and peat and underlying beach sand which sat on bedrock at a depth of 1.1m. The trench was abandoned temporarily to await the arrival of a breaker to remove the rock to the required overall depth of 1.8m. This process did not require monitoring.

### **Stay trench for Pole 1**

This stay trench was dug 5m to the south-east of the pole trench and measured 2.2m north-west/south-east by 0.7m wide. The stratigraphic sequence within the trench was identical to that in Pole Trench 1, bedrock being encountered at a depth of 1.1m.

### **Pole Trench 2**

This trench was located at NM 28441 23946 and measured 1.2m north-east/south-west by 0.7m wide. Silty topsoil was 1.0m deep and gave directly onto bedrock.

### **Pole Trench 3**

Pole trench 3 measured 1.5m north-east/south-west by 0.7m wide and was located on higher ground, at NM 28389 23974. The pale brown, sandy topsoil was only 0.2m deep and sat on undisturbed yellow beach sand which gave onto rounded boulders mixed with sand at a depth of 1m.

### **Stay trench for Pole 3**

The stay trench was situated 5m north-west of Pole Trench 3 and measured 1.5m north-west/south-east by 1.0m wide. Again, 0.2m of topsoil sat directly on undisturbed yellow beach sand.

Nothing of archaeological significance was uncovered in any of the trench and no artefacts retrieved from them.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Although no archaeological features were uncovered in any of the trenches described above, it is worth noting that the burials uncovered in 1969 were located only a short distance from the principal 2014 trench and that the 'Street of the Dead' (Sraid nam Marbh) also appears to have run quite close to the excavation site. As a consequence it is felt that any future developments involving ground disturbance in this area should also be monitored archaeologically.

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## REFERENCE

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.

- 1-2 Field drain in the generator trench, viewed from the south-west
- 3 View of the site from the south-east on completion of the main trench
- 4 North corner post-pit, viewed from the south-west
- 5-6 West corner post-pit, viewed from the south-west
- 7-8 East corner post-pit, viewed from the north-west
- 9 Stay trench for Pole 1, viewed from the south-west
- 10 Pole trench 1, viewed from the south-west
- 11 Pole trench 2, viewed from the south-west
- 12 Pole trench 3, viewed from the south-west
- 13 Stay trench for Pole 3, viewed from the south-west
- 14-15 Views to the south-east along the line of the pole trenches