

Scotia Archaeology

REPORT
TO
SCOTTISH & SOUTHERN
ELECTRICITY NETWORKS

OVERHEAD 11KV POWER LINE
ISLE OF IONA, ARGYLL

ARCHAEOLOGICAL
WATCHING BRIEFS
JANUARY 2017

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INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of archaeological watching briefs undertaken for Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks (SSEN) during the excavation of trenches for new wooden poles on 11kv overhead power lines, together with a small number of earth cable trenches, on the Isle of Iona, Argyll.

This work was commissioned by Max Bigham of SSEN and carried out by John Lewis of Scotia Archaeology on 17-20 January 2017.

IONA

The island measures some 5.5km north/south by 1.5-2km wide and is composed mainly of grey gneisses of the Lewisian complex with some thermally metamorphosed Torridonian rocks on its east side. Areas of moorland with craggy outcrops cover much of the island while its east coast is characterised by a post-glacial beach and its south by machair. Troughs between rock outcrops, together with the machair, provide pasture for both sheep and cattle.

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.

The remains of sites and monuments both predating and post-dating the abbey are scattered throughout the island. A comprehensive description of the abbey's history and architecture and of other monuments on Iona can be found in RCHAMS 1982.

THE WATCHING BRIEFS

Most of the watching briefs consisted of monitoring the excavation of trenches for replacement poles and sometimes for associated stays. In addition, a small number of earth-cable trenches, including some for trigger arc gaps (TAGs) to minimise damage caused by lightning strikes, were also monitored.

Pole 5: Lagandorain spur

Pole 5 was located at NM 28838 25566, some 200m south of Lagandorain Farm, on a spur from the island's main power line. The old pole stood on the east side of a fence within a field given over to sheep pasture. Its position is shown on the map overleaf. There are no known archaeological sites or monuments within the vicinity of this pole.

The new pole was dug to the immediate north of the existing one, its trench measuring 1.8m north/south by 0.5m wide and 1.6m deep. It cut through 0.5m of dark brown, sandy loam which gave onto glacial till of orange sand and pebbles. No features or deposits of archaeological significance were uncovered and no artefacts of any age retrieved from the trench.



The north end of the main power line. Pole 5 is on a spur, 200m south of Lagandorain Farm; Pole 3 is a similar distance further south

Pole 3: Lagandorain spur

Located 200m south of Pole 5, at NM 28800 25424, Pole 3 stood in a pasture field 200-300m north of several post-medieval features identified during a 1996 field survey and comprising:

- the foundations of a building (NM22NE 19 at NM 28710 25280);
- a kiln and rig and furrow (NM22NE 6 at NM 2870 2526);
- a kiln (NM22NE 20 at NM 28730 25210);
- an enclosure (NM22NE 21 at NM 28562 25175); and
- a ditch, enclosure and structure (NM22NE 4 at NM 2855 2518).

The trench for Pole 3 was situated to the immediate north of the extant pole and measured 1.8m north/south by 0.5m wide and 1.6m deep. Other than backfill from the earlier pole

trench, it cut through 0.5m of dark brown, sandy topsoil with pebbles and glacial till of sand and pebbles and, at a depth of 1.3m, bedrock. Nothing of archaeological interest was found.



Trench for Pole 3, viewed from the east

Pole 15: TAG

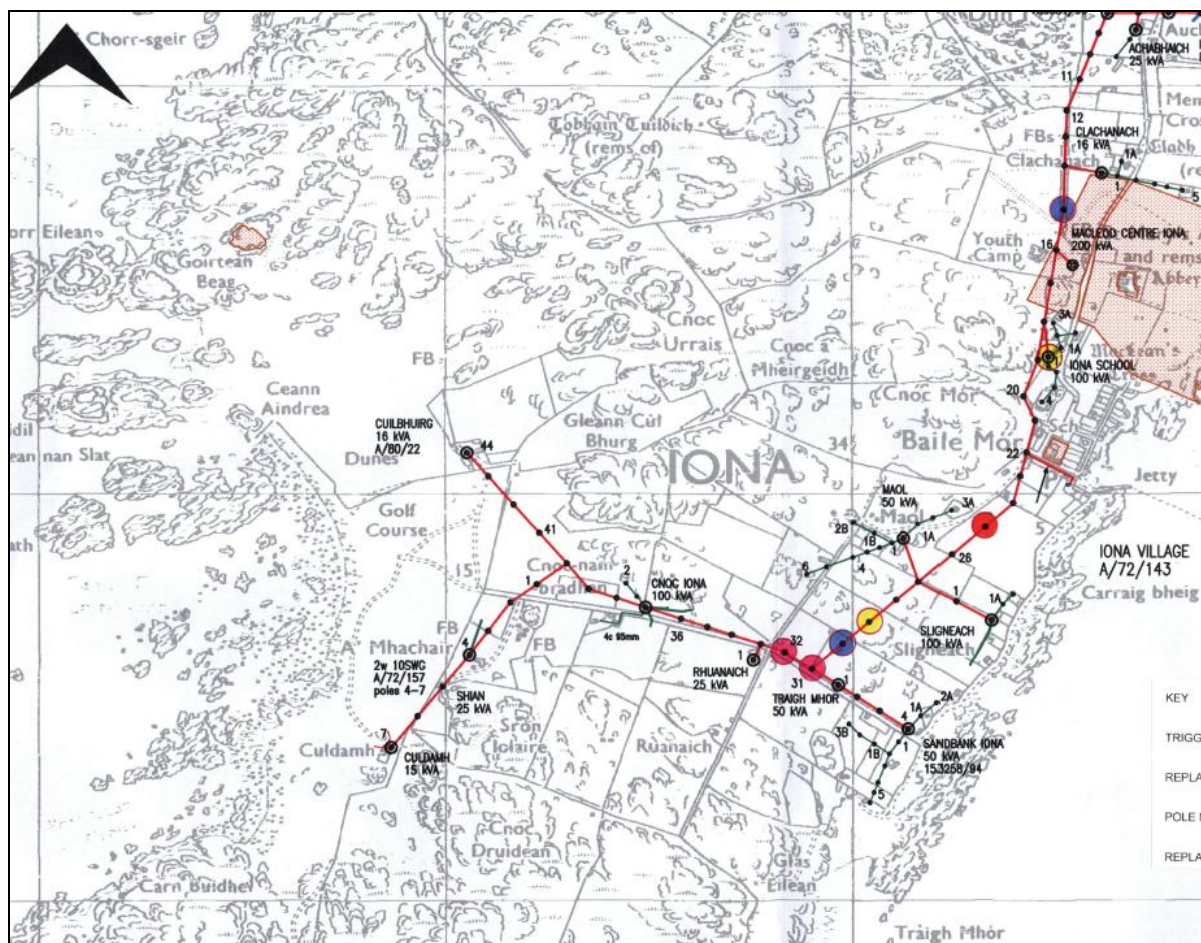
Pole 15 is located some 100m north of the Macleod Centre, at NM 28520 24682.



TAG trench for Pole 15, viewed from the south

The pole stands just beyond the remains of a dam and causeway known as 'Iomaire Tochair' (ridge of the causeway) (NM22SE 6) which may be associated with the abbey and has been included with it for scheduling purposes (SAM12968).

The pole itself was not replaced although a 50m-long trench was excavated northwards from it, as far as NM 28520 24722, to provide a trigger arc gap (TAG) to counter the effects of lightning strikes. Along most of its length, the trench cut through coarse grass, 0.2m of sandy topsoil and underlying sandy till whereas its northern part, in waterlogged ground, it was excavated through dark brown to black peaty soil. Nothing of archaeological significance was uncovered.



The south section of the main overhead line

Pole 1: Old School spur

An existing H-pole was replaced by a single pole to the rear of the Aosdana Gallery, on boggy ground at NM 28484 24332. The trench was opened 3m to the west of the old pole and measured 2m east/west by 0.8m wide and 1.6m deep. Up to 0.9m of peaty soil was removed to reveal large rounded boulders admixed with coarse sand and grey clay.

A trench for a stay was excavated 4m to the east of the new pole. It measured 1.5m north/south by 0.5m wide and 1.8m deep, materials recovered from it being identical to those in the pole trench.

Survey work in 1996 identified the remains of an enclosure (NM22SE 79) at NM 2843 2431 and a kerb cairn (NM22SE 140) at NM 28450 24360 a short distance west of Pole 1. Excavations in 2005 and 2016 (NM22SE 121) some 100m south-west of the pole, around NM 2840 2426, uncovered artefacts ranging in date from prehistoric to post-medieval.

Notwithstanding the sites and artefacts nearby, no features, deposits or finds of archaeological significance were found in the pole and stay trenches.

Pole 25

Located towards the north-west end of a gently rising pasture field at NM 28320 23919, the trench for Pole 25 measured 2m north-east/south-west by 0.5m wide and 1.6m deep. It cut through 0.3m of dark brown loam and underlying glacial till of coarse sand, gravel, pebbles and boulders.

An earth-cable trench, 50m-long, 0.5m wide and 0.5m deep, was excavated from the pole down the slope as far as NM 28349 23883. The topsoil within the trench deepened to more than 0.5m as it progressed downhill.

Nothing of archaeological significance was uncovered in either trench.



Earth-cable trench running downhill from Pole 25; viewed from the north-west

Pole 30: TAG

Pole 30 is located at NM 27959 23603, near the base of a low outcrop of bedrock to the north of Torrassa Farm. The pole was not replaced although a 50m-long TAG trench was excavated north-eastwards from it around the base of the outcrop, as far as NM 27993 23622. The trench was 0.4m wide and 0.4m deep and cut through dark brown, sandy loam which was not bottomed. Nothing of interest was revealed in this trench.

Pole 3: Sandbank spur

This pole stands in a field of rough pasture on machair, towards the south end of the island. The trench for the replacement pole was located at NM 28082 23447, 2m east of the existing one, and measured 2m east/west by 0.5m wide and 1.6m deep. Below 0.3m of mid-brown, sandy topsoil lay undisturbed beach sand which extended beyond the base of the trench.



Trench for Pole 3, Sandbank spur

Trenches for two new stays were dug 7m east of the pole trench, each of them measuring 2m north/south by 0.8m wide and 1.8m deep. The stratigraphic sequence in each trench was identical to that in the pole trench.

In 2012 a controlled topsoil strip a short distance north of Pole 3 uncovered what may have been a cut for an earlier boundary (DES 2012, 46) although nothing of archaeological interest was uncovered in any of the 2017 trenches.

REFERENCES

DES *Discovery & Excavation in Scotland*. Archaeology Scotland.

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

PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD

Only a small number of the photographs listed below are contained within this report. The complete catalogue forms part of the project archive deposited with RCAHMS.

- 1 Trench for Pole 5 on the Lagandorain spur, viewed from the south-east
- 2 Trench for Pole 3 on the Lagandorain spur, viewed from the east
- 3 TAG trench running north from Pole 15, viewed from the south
- 4-5 Trench for Pole 1 on the Old School spur, to the rear of the Aosdana Gallery, viewed from the west
- 6 Stay trench for Pole 1 on the Old School spur, viewed from the south
- 7-8 Trench for Pole 25, viewed from the north-east
- 9 TAG trench from Pole 25, viewed from the south-east
- 10 TAG trench from Pole 25, viewed from the north-west
- 11 TAG trench from Pole 30, viewed from the east
- 12 TAG trench from Pole 30, viewed from the south-west
- 13-14 Trench for Pole 3 on the Sandbank spur, viewed from the east
- 15 Southernmost stay trench for Pole 3 on the Sandbank spur, viewed from the north