

Scotia Archaeology

REPORT
TO
MR & MRS M DRURY

CONSTRUCTION OF
NEW DOMESTIC RESIDENCE
AT SLIGNEACH,
ISLE OF IONA, ARGYLL

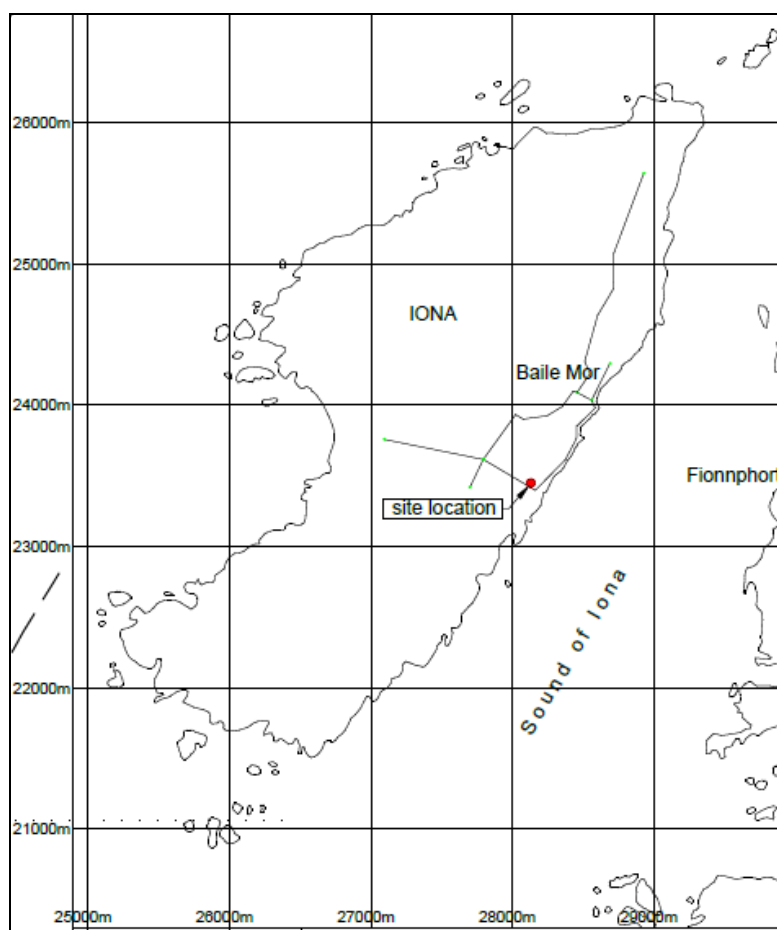
ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING
DURING TOPSOIL STRIPPING

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INTRODUCTION

This document describes the results of archaeological monitoring during topsoil-stripping in advance of the construction of a new domestic residence near Sligneach, Isle of Iona, Argyll. The archaeological work was undertaken by John Lewis of Scotia Archaeology on behalf of Mr and Mrs M Drury of Caol-Ithe, Fionnphort, Mull.

Argyll & Bute Council granted consent to the project (Planning Application number 14/00253/PP) subject to several conditions. One of those conditions, based on advice from the council's archaeological advisors, the West of Scotland Archaeology Service (WoSAS), was that the removal of topsoil and other materials that overlie the natural geology of the site should be monitored by an approved archaeological contractor. Prior to the commencement of fieldwork a method statement outlining a proposed programme of works was forwarded to WoSAS who approved its contents.



Map of Iona showing the location of the site

THE SITE

The site is located near the east shore of the island, on machair which characterises this stretch of coastline. It is situated some 1km south of Iona Abbey and a short distance from Sandbank Croft and Torran, two of several houses laid out along the road that runs roughly southwards from the abbey before turning to the north-east at Sligneach.

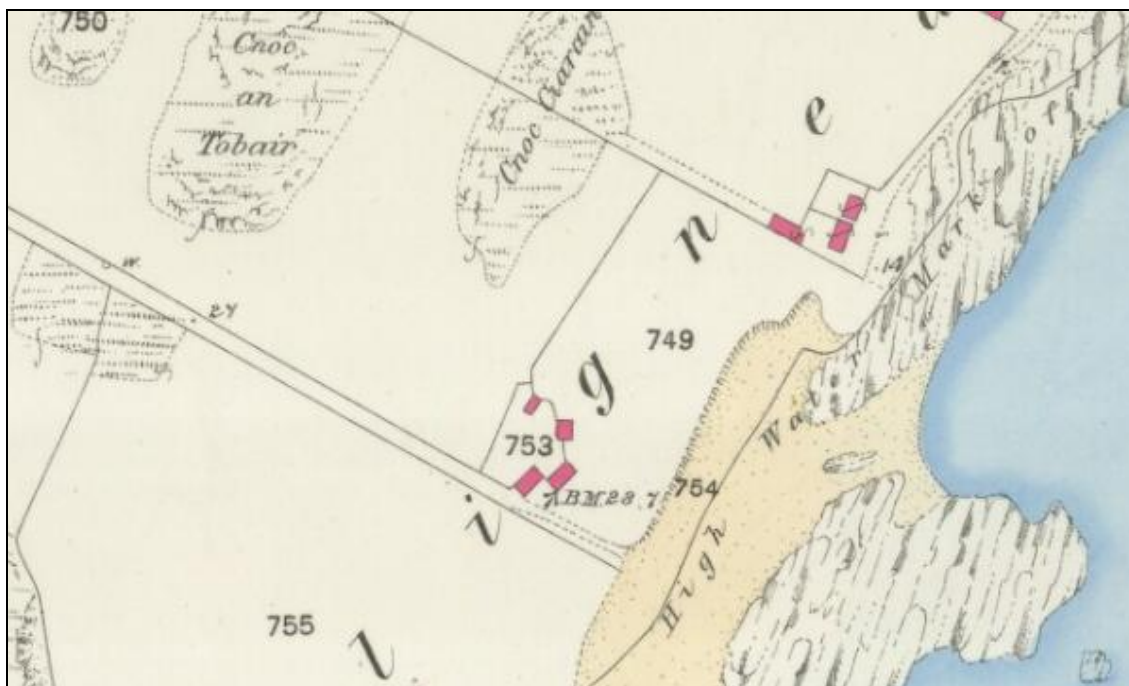
The predominant land use in this part of the island is sheep-farming, utilizing relatively good quality grazing on stretches of undulating ground punctuated by substantial rock outcrops such as the nearby Cnoc Ciarain and Cnoc an Tobair (see maps below, supplied by the client). The name 'Torran', meaning craggy hills, ascribed to a nearby house also attests to the rocky nature of this area.



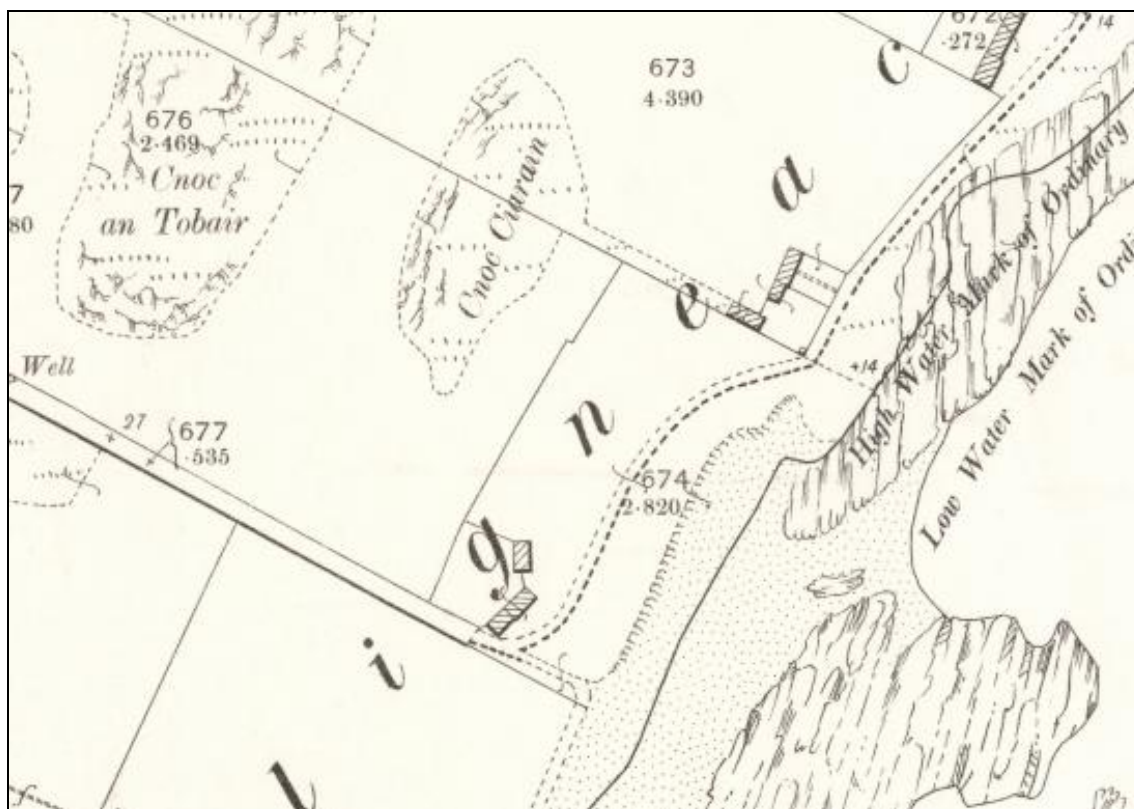
Map showing the location of the development area

There is little known evidence of early occupation in this part of Iona although, given the good potential for animal husbandry, it would not be surprising if such evidence yet awaits discovery.

However, there is clear evidence of 19th-century human occupation around Sligneach, as is demonstrated on the first and second editions of the Ordnance Survey (OS) 25-inch maps surveyed in 1875 and 1897, respectively (see below).



Extract of first edition OS 25-inch map showing four structures at Torran

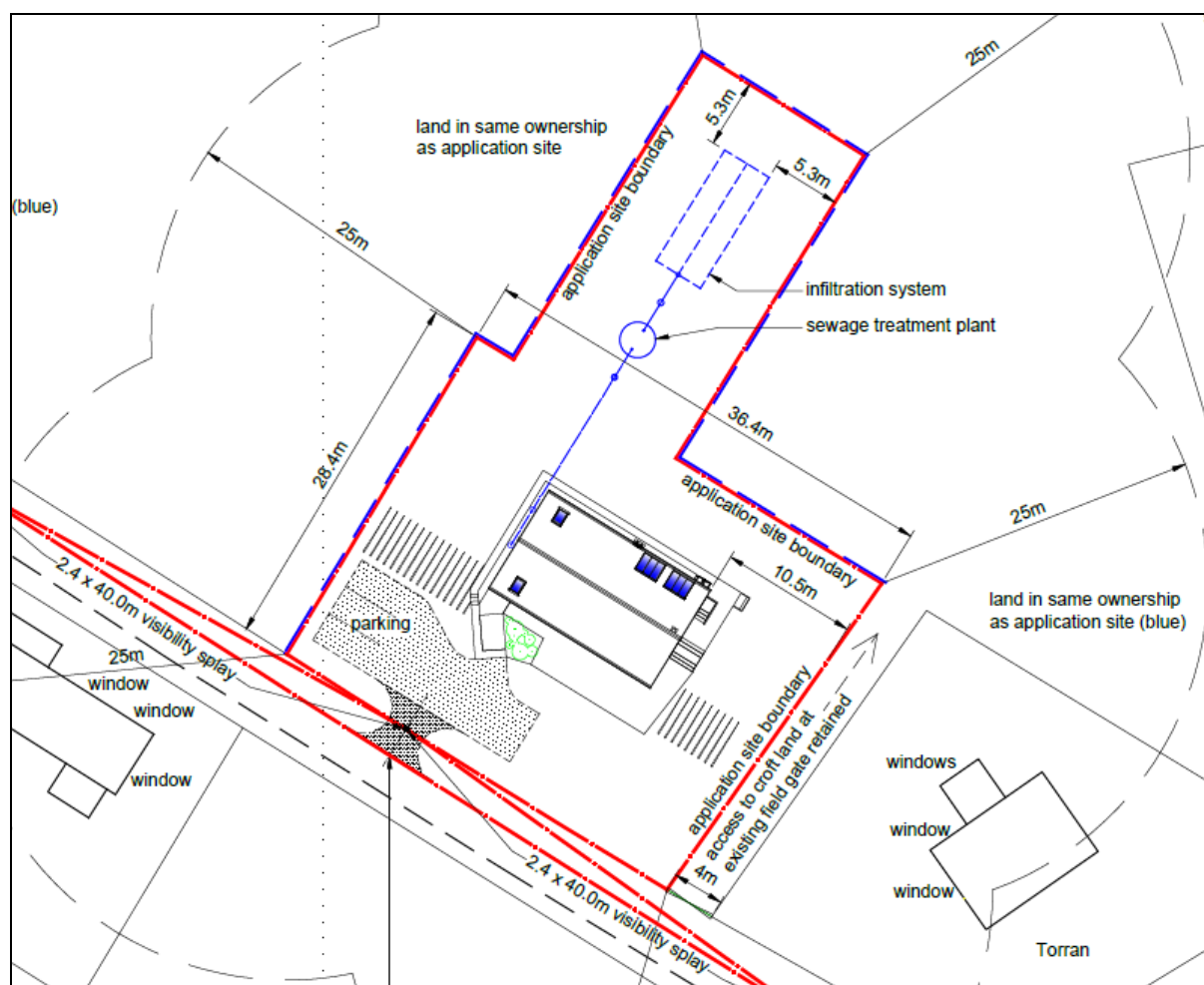


Extract of second edition OS 25-inch map showing two structures at Torran

Traces of structures were identified around Torran and Sandbank during survey work undertaken by AOC (Scotland) Ltd in 1996 (DES 1996, 19). These features were almost certainly associated with the settlement shown on the early OS maps. In addition, a controlled topsoil strip in 2012 to the south of Tigh Shee and west of the present development area, uncovered what may have been a cut for an early boundary (DES 2012, 46).

A recent watching brief carried out by the writer for Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks (SSEN) during the refurbishment of the power line that runs across the development site uncovered nothing of archaeological interest, only natural beach sand (Lewis 2017).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING



Plan of the plot (outlined in red) showing the house footprint, parking area and sewage outflow, septic tank and soakaway

Archaeological monitoring was undertaken on 7 March 2017, a predominantly cloudy and very windy but dry day.

The areas stripped of topsoil consisted of:

the house footprint, centred on approximately NM 28127 23428 and measuring 16.3m SE/NW by 11.0m wide;

the west corner of the site which is to be given over to car parking, measuring some 16m by 12m;

a trench to accommodate a new underground electricity cable, replacing the existing overhead power line; and

a trench, 14m long and 4.5m wide, running to the north-east from the house for the sewage outlet, septic tank and soakaway.

Soil-stripping was carried out using a smooth-edged ditching bucket attached to a mechanical excavator and was monitored closely by the archaeologist. There was no variation in the stratigraphic sequence throughout the excavation areas. Short grass overlay 0.3m of mid-brown, sandy topsoil which sat directly on beach sand varying in colour from near-white to pale yellow. The topsoil was almost entirely stone-free, as was the sand exposed beneath it.



***The main areas of investigation, viewed from the east.
The house footprint is in the foreground with the parking area beyond.
Note the gateway defined by two concrete pillars in the distance***

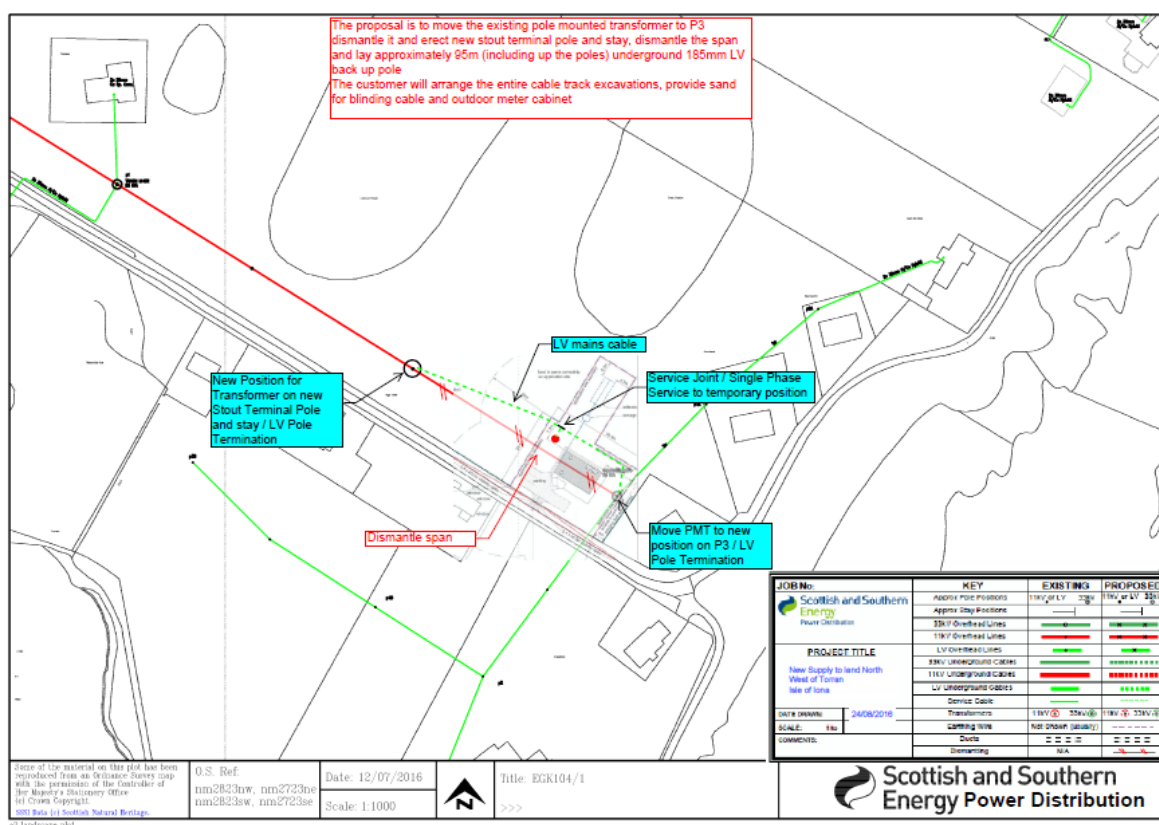
No structures, features or deposits of archaeological significance were uncovered in any of the trenches and the few artefacts retrieved during the excavations all dated to the late 19th century or later.



Trench for the septic tank and soakaway, viewed from the south-west



Cable trench being excavated; viewed from the west



Map supplied by SSEN showing the route of the new power cable, shown as a broken green line

CONCLUSIONS

Although nothing of archaeological interest was uncovered during soil-stripping, map evidence shows that the area around Torran and Sandbank was settled during the second half of the 19th century. However, there is no known cartographic or other evidence to indicate how far back that occupation dates.

The 1996 survey mentions an enclosure and two associated concrete gate posts to the south-west of Sandbank. Those posts were clearly visible at the time of the excavation (see below) although there was no other discernible evidence of an enclosure. The pillars, each 1.2m high and 0.6m square, were built of very crude, shuttered concrete incorporating rounded pebbles, only one of which was rendered smooth with a cement finish. They formed what is assumed to have been a gateway, 2.6m wide. A short stretch of wall, built of similar material to the pillars, connected the gateway to the field wall that runs alongside the adjacent road.

The excavation revealed the scant remains of a timber post a short distance to the north-east of the gateway although no other evidence of a boundary wall or fence was found. Nevertheless, the alignment of those features does correspond with that of a boundary depicted on the early OS maps (see above) and clearly the position of the gateway points to it been associated with a field wall at some time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Wind-blown sand was encountered in all areas that were stripped. It is possible that this material, although naturally deposited, may cover archaeological features of any period. As a consequence, it is recommended that further ground works on the development site should be the subject of an archaeological watching brief.



Concrete posts in the west corner of the plot; viewed from the south-east

REPORTS

Copies of this report will be deposited with Mr and Mrs Drury, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), WoSAS, the National Trust for Scotland and the online digital resource OASIS.

REFERENCES

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

Lewis, J 2017 *Overhead 11kv power lines, Isle of Iona, Argyll: archaeological watching briefs, January 2017*. Unpublished report to Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks.