

INTRODUCTION

This report describes the result of watching briefs undertaken during the excavation of parts of a trench to accommodate a new 33kv underground power cable between Comrie Bridge, near Keltneyburn and Mains of Taymouth at Kenmore, Perthshire. Because of the proximity of known archaeological sites, three stretches of the trench were excavated under archaeological supervision. The watching briefs were commissioned by Scottish & Southern Energy and undertaken by John Lewis of Scotia Archaeology. Trenching was carried out by Turriff Contractors, using a tracked excavator. Terms of Reference for this project were supplied by Perth & Kinross Heritage Trust (PKHT).

THE CABLE ROUTE

The route of the new cable ran southwards from a transformer pole at NN 7865 4835, a short distance south of Comrie Bridge, to NN 7716 4574 at Mains of Taymouth, Kenmore, 9km west of Aberfeldy. Its total length was approximately 5km. Three stretches of the power line passed near previously identified archaeological sites and monuments, excavations in these areas being subject to watching briefs. The remainder of the route was excavated without monitoring.

The northernmost section (some 800m long) of the cable route (Areas 1 and 2: see below) passed through the flood plains of the Rivers Lyon and Tay which meet at the Point of Lyon, at NN 79330 47925. It followed closely the course of the Comrie Bridge to Kenmore road, skirting the base of Drummond Hill to its west.

SITES AND MONUMENTS

Sites and monuments lying close to the cable route are listed below. They are given the numbers allocated by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) (eg NN74NE 83), by PKHT (eg MPK6948) and, if Scheduled Ancient Monuments, by Historic Scotland (eg SAM 5507).

1 NN74NE 29 (MPK5261; SAM 5507): Comrie Castle

Comrie Castle, located at NN 78671 48602 near the south bank of the River Lyon, survives as the remains of a late 16th-century, L-plan tower house built to replace an earlier castle partially destroyed in 1487.

2 NN74NE 107 (MPK9946): cropmarks

Aerial photographs have identified a series of cropmarks around NN 787 485, on the flood plain of the River Lyon to the east of Comrie Castle. They include a circular enclosure, approximately 37m in diameter and centred on NN 7875 4856, with a possible entrance on its north side. Some 50m further east is what may be the remains of an old boundary of probable post-medieval date.

3 NN74NE 108 (MPK9947): cropmarks

A series of cropmarks around NN 786 483 were identified by aerial photography. The RCAHMS record describes an enclosure, approximately 55m in diameter and defined by a

narrow ditch, 180m SSE of Comrie Castle although this location is somewhat at odds with the grid reference given in the same entry. Other, less distinct cropmarks have been identified nearby.

4 NN74NE 51 (MPK402): stone circle

A stone circle of five stones with a diameter of 7m is said to have once stood at NN 789 479, some 700m south of Comrie Castle. It is described by Coles (1910, 137) as standing 1 mile and 1 furlong (2.18km) south of Comrie Castle, a considerable distance south of the grid reference given by RCAHMS. The Ordnance Survey (OS) found no trace of this monument at this location in 1978 and none was visible at the time of the watching brief.

5 NN74NE 83 (MPK6948): cist and axehead

A stone cist and an axehead are reported to have been found at NN 791 479. No other details are known.

6 NN74NE 48 (MPK398): mound

At NN 7723 4577, near Mains of Taymouth, is a grassy mound, measuring approximately 20m in diameter and 1.8m high. Water tanks were inserted into its summit in the 1970s and, on the evidence of materials removed at that time, this feature might be glacial in origin although this was not confirmed at the time.

THE WATCHING BRIEF

The watching brief was carried out in several stages between October 2008 and June 2009, the timing being dependent on a range of operational factors. The three sections that were monitored were:

from the transformer pole at the north end of the cable route at NN 78644 48353 to approximately NN 78932 48146 (Area 1);

from NN 78966 48092 to NN 78994 47751, close to the confluence of the Rivers Lyon and Tay (Area 2); and

from NN 77276 45807 to NN 77228 45765, at Mains of Taymouth (Area 3).

Areas 1 and 2 were all but contiguous, running through the flood plains of the Rivers Tay and Lyon, close to their confluence. In these areas the trench cut through arable farmland, much of it given over to the cultivation of raspberries. Here the topsoil comprised mid-brown, silty loam with occasional lenses of sand and boulders and was generally about 0.3m deep although there were a few significant exceptions (see below).

Area 3 was located towards the south-west end of the cable route, near the former Mains of Taymouth farm steading and adjacent to a modern caravan park. The depth and nature of the topsoil in this area had been influenced to a great extent by activities associated with the caravan park.

Excavation was undertaken using a 5-tonne 360° tracked excavator, the trench varying in depth from 0.7m to 1.0m and in width from 0.6m to 0.75m except where the sides collapsed, where it had to be widened. Spoil was deposited to the side of the trench and partially consolidated to prevent materials washing back in. It was usually backfilled as soon as the cable was laid.

Excavation began at the south-west end of Area 2 but was halted at an early stage for operational reasons. A long stretch to the south of Area 2, through a quarry and beyond, was completed before monitoring was resumed in Areas 1 and 2. Progress varied greatly, depending on the nature of the subsoil, some of which had to be removed. Topsoil and subsoil were almost stone-free through most of Area 1 and trenching proceeded very quickly there whereas it comprised mainly large boulders where the trench ran alongside the bank of the Tay, at the south-west end of Area 2.

Area 1

This stretch of the trench ran from NN 78644 48353, at a transformer pole which marked the north terminus of the cable route, south-eastwards to NN 78932 78146, some 70m from the north end of Area 2 (see below). Its course was roughly parallel with the Comrie Bridge to Kenmore road, running along the west side of a field which extended as far as the River Lyon, some 200m to the east. The total length of this section of the trench, including meanders, was approximately 400m.

In places, the depth of topsoil increased from its usual 0.3m to as much as 0.8m as a result of hillwash that had flowed from Drummond Hill to the west. The underlying fluvio-glacial deposits comprised gravel and sand, much of the latter stained black, not from burning but probably from peat washing off the hill.

The watching brief was maintained until excavation reached a point adjacent to an artificial pond on the east side of the road. The pond collects water draining off Drummond Hill, diverting it along a plastic pipe, probably to a sump whose location is not known. Earlier attempts to control this water with ceramic drains and a rubble-filled soakaway had limited success.

No features of archaeological significance were uncovered in this area.

Area 2

The trench through Area 2 ran from NN 78966 48092 to NN 78994 47751, its overall length being nearly 400m. Much of its route ran alongside a fence that defines the western limit of land fit for ploughing and formed a gentle curve echoing that of the nearby road. Its south-westernmost 150m ran very close to the west bank of the Tay.

The fluvio-glacial deposits varied greatly along this stretch, ranging from silt through fine and coarse sands, gravel, pebbles to large, rounded boulders. Along most of its length the topsoil comprised silty loam but there was a distinct change within a 170m-long stretch between NN 79074 47889 and NN 79013 48034 and around NN 79057 47989 where there were large quantities of rubble and other debris. These materials had been deposited either during the tenure of a nearby, but now defunct, quarry or the subsequent construction of the Enerfoil Magnum showroom on the same site (see Lewis 2008).

Some hillwash from Drummond Hill, comprising 0.25-0.7m of sand, gravel and humic loam lay beneath the topsoil between NN 79075 47989 and the north end of Area 2 at NN 78966 48092.

No other features or deposits of archaeological significance were uncovered in Area 2.

Area 3

Area 3 was the westernmost section of the cable route that was monitored and ran from NN 77276 45807 to NN 77228 45765. It was sandwiched between Kenmore golf course to its north and a caravan park to its south. Beyond the west end of the golf course are the remnants of the Mains of Taymouth farm steading (NN74NE 14.5), centred on NN 77131 45867, and its associated gas works (NN74NE 14.25) at NN 77125 45783. Neither of these monuments was threatened by the excavations. However, the trench passed to the immediate north of a small grassy knoll which, from some aspects, resembles a burial mound or even a small fortification and has been afforded monument number NN74NE 48/MPK398.

Midway along this stretch, at NN 77253 45785, the trench was widened to accommodate a new electricity sub-station and was cut 3m into the north side of the mound over a length of 4.2m. At the summit of the mound are large water tanks installed in the 1970s while its sides are covered with small trees and coarse vegetation. To its immediate west is a toilet block for the caravan park that covers a large area to the south of the cable trench. The excavation was monitored for some 30m to the east and west of the sub-station.

Topsoil in this trench consisted of dark brown loam with occasional stones which increased in number close to the mound. It varied in depth from 0.25m to 0.6m, much of it having been imported during landscaping for the caravan park and toilet block. Nothing of archaeological significance was uncovered in the trench, the only features being a redundant alkathene water pipe some 4m east of the mound and two plastic field drains to its west. The underlying glacial till comprised orange-brown silt, gravel, pebbles and boulders which extended into the mound itself.

It was clear from the excavated results that the mound was a natural feature.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

During the watching brief, the presence of a large mound was noted on a grassy slope at NN 78867 47966, approximately 100m to the west of the Comrie Bridge to Kenmore Road and roughly opposite the entrance to the Enerfoil Magnum showroom.

Although precise measurements were not taken, its diameter is estimated at approximately 30m although there is clearly slumping on its east side, suggesting its real diameter may be a little less. The mound is flat-topped and measures about 8m square at its summit. A few large boulders protrude through the surface in places, some of those at the base of the mound perhaps being remnants of a kerb. The mound is covered in grass with a few trees and tree stumps. The first and second edition OS 6-inch maps depict it as a circular area covered with trees and it is not shown on more recent editions of the map.

The location of this mound is close to that given for the stone circle (NN74NE 51) described in the early 20th century (Coles 1910, 137). It could be argued that one monument was

confused for another but a sketch by Coles clearly depicts a stone circle on what appears to be level ground, not a mound on a hill.

CONCLUSIONS

Areas 1 and 2

No features of archaeological significance were uncovered during the watching brief in Areas 1 and 2. The extents of the sites identified by aerial photography near the north end of the route are unknown and it is quite possible that, although nothing was found during the excavation, features associated with them may lie within a short distance of the trench.

The fate of the stone circle NN74NE 51 (MPK402) remains a mystery. Its precise location is unclear but it is quite possible that the stones were removed at some stage in order to release additional land for ploughing although there is not even anecdotal evidence for this.

Area 3

Excavation demonstrated beyond any doubt that mound NN74NE 48/MPK398 near Mains of Taymouth is of glacial origin and was not a burial feature. Its possible use as a fortification was also disproved when trenching showed there to be no defensive features, such as a ditch, surrounding it.

Putative burial mound

Almost certainly the artificial knoll at NN 78867 47966 is a burial mound. It is very similar in size and dimensions to Scheduled Ancient Monument NN95SW 6/SAM 6147) at NN 9287 5337 near Pitnacree, 15km to its east. The Pitnacree mound, excavated in 1964, had been built of turf and stone over a penannular ring-cairn and was bounded by a drystone kerb. Inside the cairn an entrance (since blocked) led into a rectangular enclosure, built over four cremations which were carbon-dated to c2860 BC (Coles & Simpson 1965).

The Comrie Bridge mound may be aligned with one, or even two, series of prehistoric monuments. One of these lines includes a standing stone (NN84NW 4) at NN 8022 4873 and Barrows B and C (NN74NE 4) at NN 7963 4839 and NN 7982 4847, respectively. Another possible line includes a stone circle (NN84NE 2) at NN 8028 4846, Barrow A (NN74NE 4) at NN 7949 4818 and perhaps two barrows (collectively NN84NW 53) at NN 8130 4889. It is also worth noting that the location of the mound is a prestigious one, commanding far-reaching views eastwards down the Tay valley and northwards towards Schiehallion.

REFERENCES

Coles, F R 1910 'Report on stone circles surveyed in Perthshire (Aberfeldy district)', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 44 (1909-10), 136-8.

Coles, J M & Simpson, D D A 1965 'The excavation of a Neolithic round barrow at Pitnacree, Perthshire, Scotland', *Proc Prehist Soc*, New, 31, 34-57.

Lewis, J 2008 'Land to east of Rustic Lodge, Keltneyburn, Aberfeldy: archaeological evaluation, November 2008', unpublished report to Mr D and Mrs S Shearer.

PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE

- 1 South-west terminus of trench in Area 2, viewed from the south-west
- 2 View to the south-west from NN 79034 47800
- 3 View to the north-east from NN 79034 47800
- 4 View to the south-west terminus of Area 2
- 5 Rubble in trench at NN 79055 47989 in Area 2, viewed from the south
- 6-7 Rubble in trench at NN 79055 47989 in Area 2, viewed from the north
- 8-9 Rubble in trench at NN 79055 47989 in Area 2, viewed from the east
- 10 View to the west from NN 79090 47862, along backfilled trench in Field 1
- 11-12 View to the north from NN 79090 47862
- 13 West side of the trench at NN 79090 47862
- 14 View to the south-east from NN 79070 47962
- 15 View to the north-west from NN 79070 47962
- 16 View to the south-east from NN 79013 48034
- 17 View to the north-west from NN 79013 48034
- 18-19 View to the south-east from NN 78966 48092, the north terminus of Area 2
- 20 View towards the Point of Lyon from the north-west
- 21 View to the north-west, towards Schiehallion, from NN 78966 48092
- 22 View to the east from putative burial mound at NN 78867 47966
- 23 Putative burial mound at NN 78867 47966, viewed from the north
- 24 Putative burial mound at NN 78867 47966, viewed from the west
- 25 Putative burial mound at NN 78867 47966, viewed from the east
- 26 View to the north-west from NN 78932 48146 in Area 1. The cable had been laid and the trench backfilled between this point and NN 78966 48092, in an area not requiring a watching brief
- 27 View to the south-east from NN 78828 48229
- 28 View to the north-west from NN 78828 48229
- 29 View to the south-east from NN 78727 48291
- 30 View to the north-west from NN 78727 48291
- 31 View to the south-east from NN 78654 48358 after the cable had been laid and the trench blinded
- 32 Transformer pole marking the north terminus of Area 1, at NN 78644 48353
- 33 Drummond Hill showing natural water course defined by reeds, viewed from the north
- 34-35 Area 1, viewed from the south
- 36-37 Trench for sub-station at NN 77253 45785 in Area 3, showing the make up of the mound, viewed from the north
- 38 Trench for sub-station at NN 77253 45785 in Area 3, viewed from the east
- 39 Mound NN74NE 48/MPK398) viewed from the east
- 40 Mound NN74NE 48/MPK398) viewed from the north-west
- 41 Trench to the east of sub-station, viewed from the west
- 42 Trench between NN 77276 45807 and sub-station, viewed from the east
- 43 Trench to the east of NN 77276 45807 where its excavation was not covered by the watching brief, viewed from the west
- 44 Westernmost section of trench, as far as NN 77228 45765, viewed from the west
- 45 Westernmost section of trench, as far as NN 77228 45765, viewed from the east
- 46 Toilet block to immediate west of mound, viewed from the north-east