

**ARO2: In the Shadow of Dun da Lamh:
An Archaeological Evaluation near Spey
Dam, Laggan**

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Summary

An archaeological evaluation of a site compound area in advance of development at Spey Dam near Laggan, was undertaken by GUARD Archaeology due to the proximity of archaeological remains such as the site of St Michael's Chapel and the deserted township of Crathie.

The trial trench evaluation encountered a number of archaeological features. A clearance cairn was identified towards the north-western part of the development area, while towards the south-east in Trench 7, a deposit containing a good quantity of burnt faunal bone and charcoal, possibly representing the remains of a hearth, was encountered next to the ruinous remains of a dry stone structure.

Subsequent analysis of a soil sample taken from the hearth material found only alder and birch charcoal, with some indeterminate bark. There was nothing distinctive about the assemblage that could suggest a possible date, although the material is consistent with general hearth waste. A single fragment of alder charcoal was radiocarbon dated to 790–510 cal BC, indicating that the remains of the hearth originate in the early Iron Age. While the most visible remains of Iron Age settlement in the vicinity of the site is the stone walled fort of Dun da Lamh, the hearth remains and probable associated dry stone structure encountered during the evaluation, indicates that other Iron Age settlements may also lie buried within the lower-lying grounds of the glen.

Background

The archaeological evaluation examined a 1.33 ha area selected to be a site compound, located c. 3 km to the west of Laggan (NGR: NN 5825 9371; Figure 1). The evaluation area is bounded to the north by fields, to the west by the Spey Dam, to the south by the River Spey and to the east by a woodland plantation.

While no archaeological remains had been previously identified within the evaluation area, the surrounding land has a moderate distribution of archaeological sites. To the immediate north-east lay the site of St Michael's Chapel, constructed in 1845 to replace an earlier chapel and graveyard located several hundred metres

further east. The later St Michael's Chapel is now demolished with no remains visible, but once stood on a hillock above the present road and was surrounded by yew trees. The presence of the lower shaft of a carved stone cross on the site of the earlier chapel further to the east, indicates that the original chapel was perhaps of some status during the early medieval period. No remains of this earlier chapel survive, but only a D-shaped enclosure, the carved stone cross-shaft and some gravestones mark the burial ground that surrounded it.

Between the two St Michael Chapel sites, to the east was the location of a stone axe found in 1975. Dun da Lamh hillfort overlooks the evaluation area from high ground to the south of the River Spey.

A short distance to the north lies the depopulated township of Crathie, which comprises the remains of about 61 buildings, 25 small enclosures and a corn-drying kiln. The major part of Crathie was deserted in the late nineteenth century while more buildings were abandoned in the 1920s and then in 1960. This township is depicted on the 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey 6-inch map of 1872, when it comprised thirty-nine roofed, three partially roofed, twelve unroofed buildings, enclosures, field-system and two lengths of head-dyke. On the 1971 edition of the Ordnance Survey 1:10,000 map only four roofed, twenty-nine unroofed buildings, field-system and the head-dykes were shown.

The modern Dalwhinnie to Fort Augustus section of General Wade's eighteenth century Military Road runs parallel to the southern bank of the River Spey.

The evaluation had the potential to encounter previously unknown archaeological remains related to the prehistoric, medieval and post-medieval occupation of the surrounding landscape. The Highland Council Archaeology Unit, archaeological advisors to the Cairngorms National Park Authority, considered that an archaeological evaluation was required of the area where the proposed site compound was to be constructed. GUARD Archaeology were therefore commissioned by Balfour Beatty Utility Solutions to undertake an archaeological evaluation of 5% of the area in order to establish

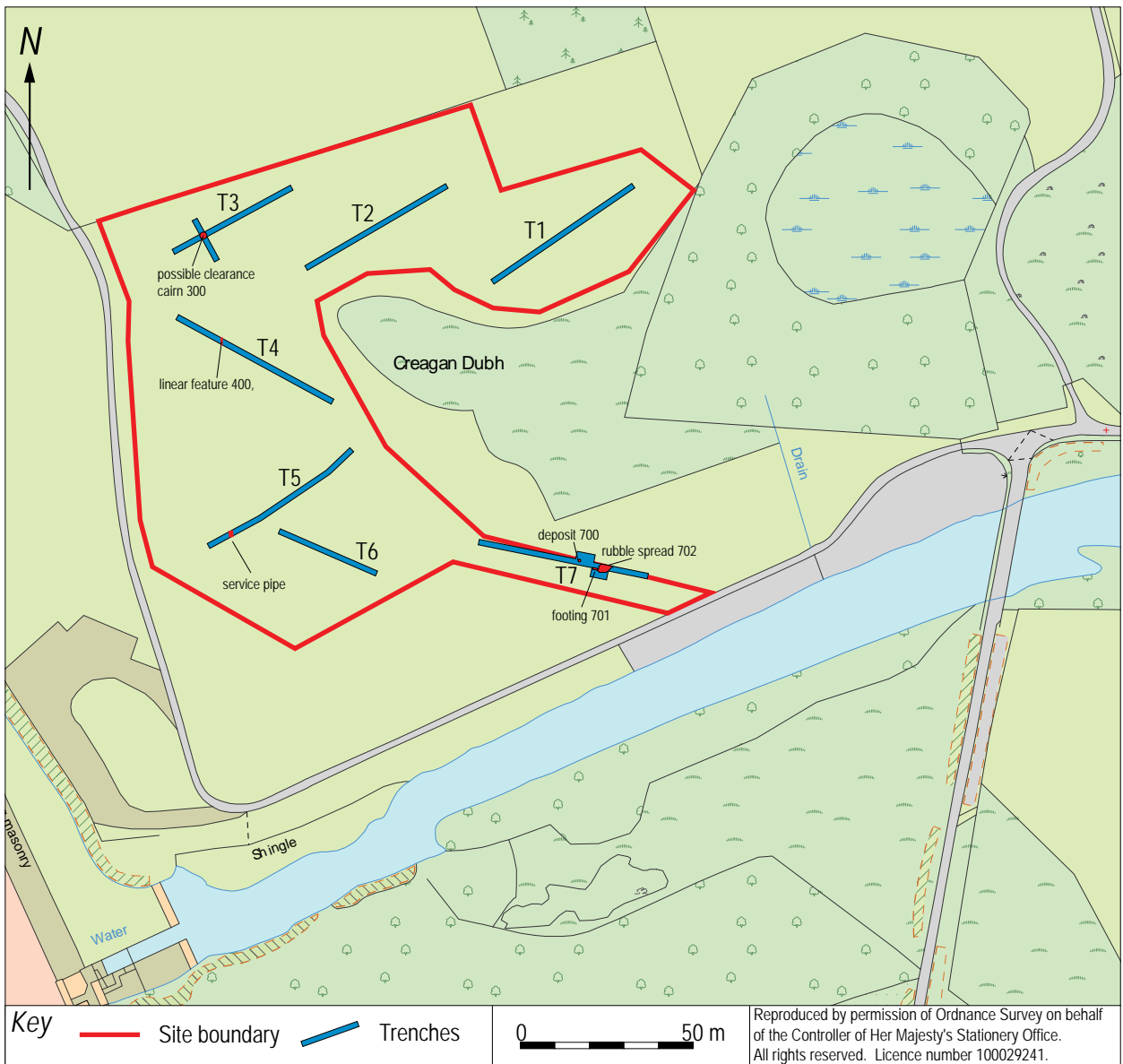
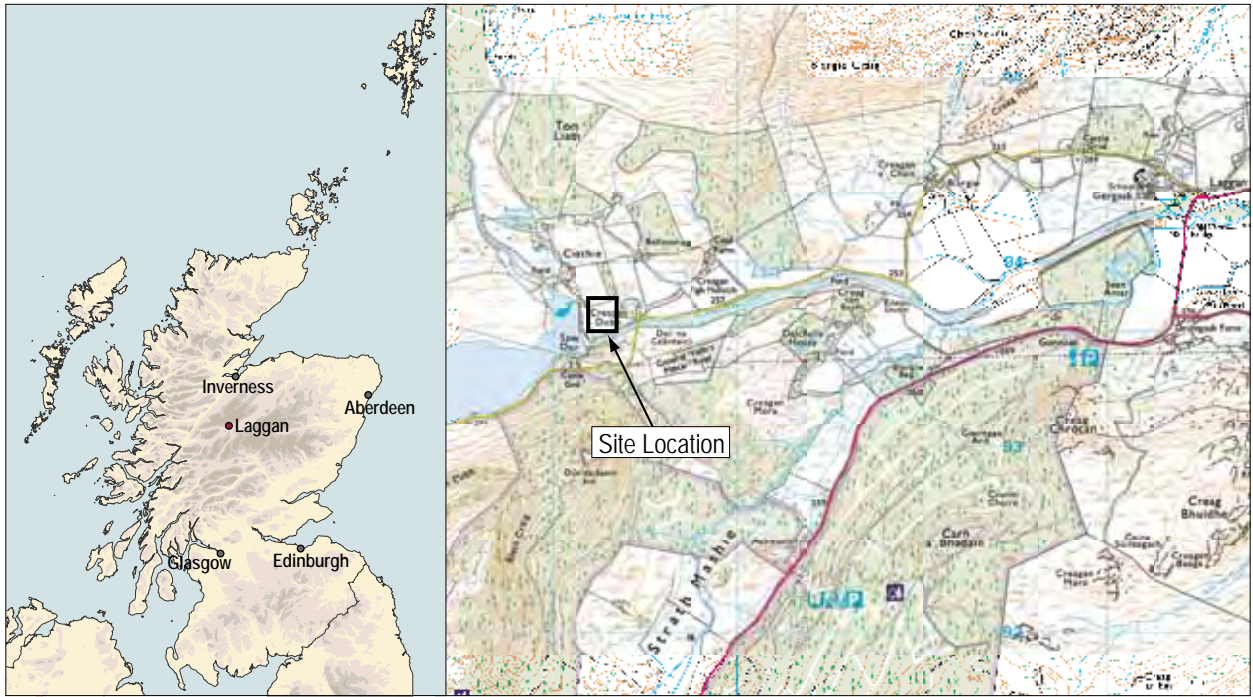


Figure 1: Site location.



the presence or absence of any archaeological remains and to determine the character, extent and significance of any archaeological deposits encountered.

The Archaeological Evaluation

Seven trenches were excavated, totalling 665 m² and therefore amounting to 5% of the evaluation area (Figure 2).

In general, topsoil across the development area was c. 0.28-0.35 m deep and was found overlying a thin interface layer forming a discrete horizon between the topsoil and the underlying natural sand and gravels. Towards the northern part of the development area, in Trench 3, a subsoil horizon was encountered that was 0.46 m deep and may represent an accumulation of colluvium.

The trial trench evaluation encountered a number of archaeological features. A clearance cairn was identified towards the north western part of the development area in Trench 3. This comprised a low mound of stone measuring c. 6 m in diameter and up to 0.4 m in height. The fabric of the mound comprised large, medium and small stones which appeared to have been partially subsumed by colluvium. A slot was excavated through the mound of stone which was found to overlie a layer of grey sand with thin discontinuous lenses of peat towards its base. This archaeological feature was not considered to be archaeologically significant.

Towards the south eastern part of the evaluation area, in Trench 7, a deposit containing a quantity of burnt faunal bone and charcoal, possibly representing the remains of a hearth, was encountered next to the ruinous remains of a dry stone structure. The hearth-like deposit of grey ashy silty sand with charcoal and frequent burnt bone measured 1.3 m long by 1.2 m wide by 0.06 m deep (Plate 1). The stone structure, possibly representing the remains of a wall footing, was situated 2m east of this and measured 1.3 m long by up to 0.68 m wide and stood no taller than 0.22 m in height (Plate 2). Immediately to the east of this lay an undefined spread of rubble contained within mid greyish brown sand, from the top of which was recovered a small fragment of pottery, identified as a factory-produced refined red earthenware with a black manganese glaze that would date to the nineteenth century

or later. The trench around this group of features was expanded (Plate 3) but given the constraints of this part of the development area, comprising a narrow strip of land designated as the proposed site access, it was not possible to establish the extent of these remains.



Plate 1: Hearth-like deposit in Trench 7 (0.3 m scale indicates area of concentrated burnt bone)



Plate 2: Possible wall footing remnant in Trench 7.



Plate 3: General view of archaeological features in Trench 7 (the ranging rod top right denotes the position of the possible hearth, while the plastic bag to the right of the near ranging rod marks the position of nineteenth century or later pottery find)

Post-excavation Analysis

Subsequent analysis of a flotation processed soil sample taken from the hearth material found the botanical assemblage contained only alder and birch charcoal, with some indeterminate

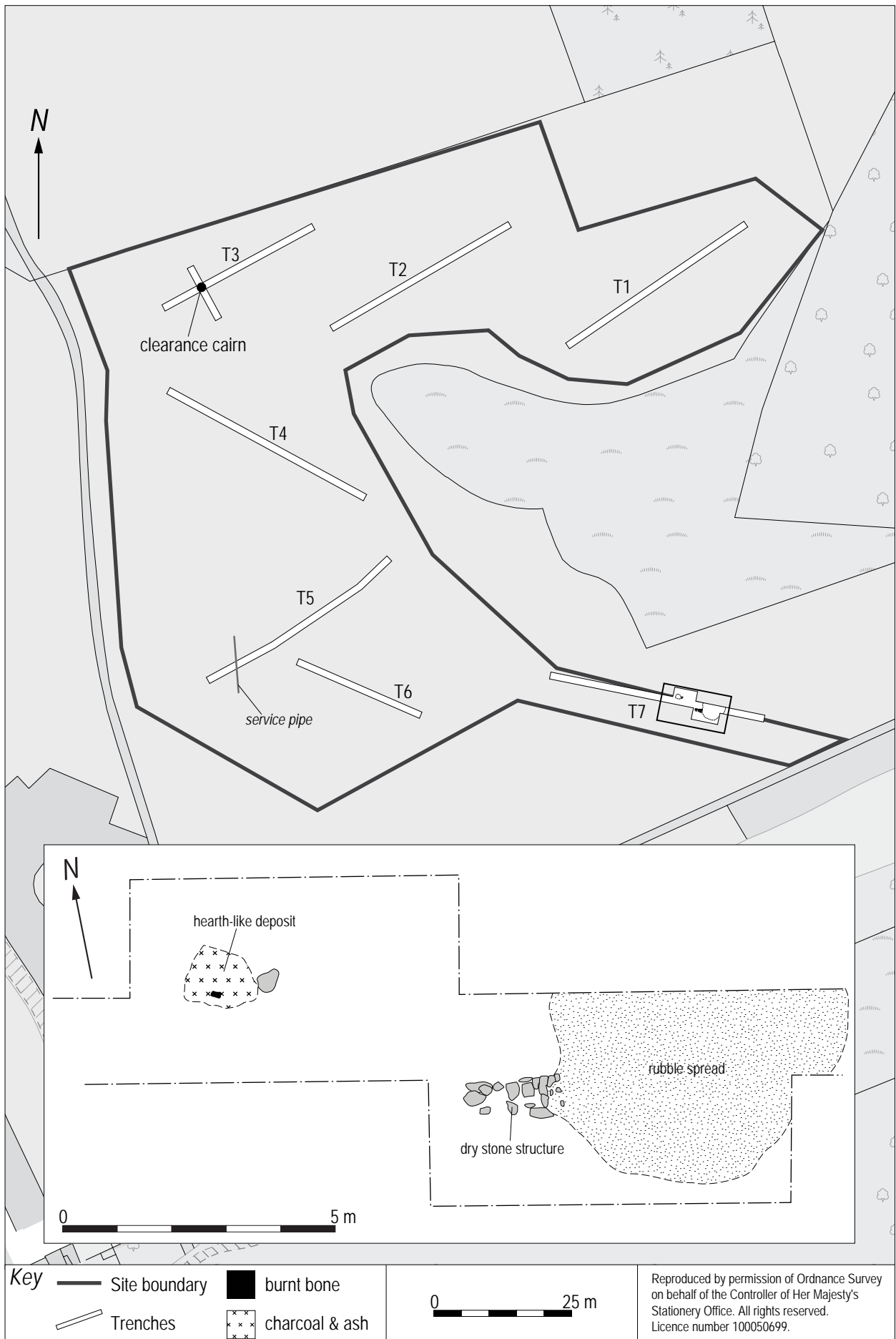


Figure 2: Archaeological evaluation of the site compound area at Spey Dam near Laggan, showing the archaeological features encountered in Trench 7.



bark. There was nothing distinctive about the assemblage that could suggest a possible date, although it is consistent with general hearth waste. Alder and birch trees grew in the native woodlands of this area throughout the prehistoric and historic periods, probably concentrated along the nearby riverbanks of the River Spey. A single fragment of alder charcoal weighing 0.22 g was selected for AMS radiocarbon dating at the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre. This returned a radiocarbon date of 790–510 cal BC (SUERC-35389) indicating that the remains of the hearth originate in the early Iron Age.

Conclusions

Following the discovery of the hearth remains and dry stone structure in Trench 7, it was agreed that all ground-breaking works be excluded from a 10 m buffer zone around this specific location. Instead the access road foundations were raised above the present ground surface allowing these archaeological remains to be preserved in situ, and negating the need for further archaeological excavation. Nevertheless, the discovery that these remains date to the early Iron Age is significant for future development of greenfield land in Badenoch and Strathspey, where relatively few Iron Age settlements are recorded. For while the most visible remains of Iron Age settlement within the vicinity of the site was the stone walled fort of Dun da Lamh, some 670 m to the south on the summit of Black Craig hill, the hearth remains and probable associated dry stone structure encountered during the evaluation indicates that other Iron Age settlements may lie buried within the lower-lying regions of the glen.

Location of Archive

The finds have been reported to the Treasure Trove Unit, and the documentary archives will be lodged with the National Monuments Record for Scotland at the RCAHMS, Edinburgh.

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References

- 1872 1st edition Ordnance Survey 6-inch map.
- 1971 edition of the Ordnance Survey 1:10,000 map.