

North of Scotland Archaeological Society: Road through Ross Project

This project has been ongoing since 2008 and is being undertaken with the aim of characterising and recording a series of double embanked features, believed to indicate a possible network of relict route ways in Easter Ross. The main objectives are to identify a new monument class of early roadways in this part of the Highlands and to gain understanding of their creation, use, re-use and abandonment.

Following informal walkover surveys of the linear earthworks, it has become apparent that, for the most part, they possess features distinguishing them from simple tracks. At other places along the continuous route from the Beauly to the Dornoch Firths the route-way is preserved in currently used wide paths and field boundaries. The project's coordinators believe that the configuration of these fragmentary features reflects Davies' observation that even disconnected lengths of route-ways found at some distance from each other can be considered to form elements of a continuous route (2002, p.32),

Initial walkovers followed the trajectories suggested by the positioning of these features. Additionally, surfaces were probed for sub-surface cobbling and bottoming stones, using a stainless steel survey arrow. The results have been variable and, until a benchmark roadway sub-surface can be identified in the area, further investigation is being concentrated on desk based assessment of the historical cartography, aerial photographs and the District Roads Trustees' Minute Books and the Roads Commissioners' Reports, in order to clarify whether these features represent pre-parliamentary and 18th century military roads. In addition, measured surveys are being conducted of a representative sample of the double embanked roadway fragments and likely associated features along the route.

The defining characteristic is the relative straightness of the main thoroughfare at the centre of the network. Changes in direction occur fairly frequently but in between these changes the road generally takes a direct route from point to point. Most of the road, where it is identifiable, is delineated by parallel turf embankments, of no more than one metre in height, on either side of a levelled surface of between five and eleven metres in width. There is no discernible camber.

These double embanked linear features have been identified at the locations given below.

To the north of the Beauly Firth, parallel embankments, conforming to the description given above, have been identified at NH 56887 50573, continuing 1.86 kilometres NNW to NH 55067 51063. Similar double embanked features have been identified at Balavil Wood, in the vicinity of David's Fort beginning at NH 53782 52308 and continuing NNW for 1.29 kilometres to NH 53692 53608 and again at Tallysow Wood beginning at NH 52987 55338 and extending 613 metres to NH 2682 55888.

Continuing northwards, parallel embankments, defining a levelled route-way have been again identified, this time in the vicinity of Meikle Ussie at NH 51802 57918, extending for 70m to NH 51792 57968 and again at Coill an Righe, beginning at NH 51727 58398 and extending, northwards again for 423 metres to NH 51452 58688. Here the route reaches a fording place on a tributary burn of the River Peffery, which runs in a WNW direction down the slopes of Knockfarrel. Here, the project's coordinators' have identified what may be the stone remains of a simple bridge abutment. This feature requires further survey. At St John the Baptist's Well, just below the shoulder of Knockfarrel, the route appears to coincide with the Fodderty 'Corpse Road'. Here the parallel embankments and levelled surface begin at NH 51397 58883 and continue down the N facing slope for 150m to NH 51452 58993.

At the part of the suggested route-way that continues along the high ground above the N shore of the Cromarty Firth, a double embanked line has been identified beginning at NH 55216 60511, in the vicinity of Tulloch Mains, continuing eastwards for 356 metres to NH 55566 60631. Within the policies of Foulis Castle, double embankments have been identified at NH 58347 63056, traversing a line NNE for 40 metres, terminating at NH 58368 63090. At Skiach, further embankments are visible at NH 63617 68360 and can be traced, for 220 metres to NH 63808 68432.

The characteristic features are picked up again in the vicinity of Kincaig House, starting at NH 68430 70842, continuing for 662 metres and terminating at NH 68825 70932, and also at Brenachie at NH 75745 76049, where it extends NNE for 244 metres until NH 75935 76194.

At NH 7664 7795, the projected route coincides with The King's Causeway, the fragmentary remains of a cobbled roadway evidencing, in part, two ditches running either side of a 7m (approx.) wide, occasionally cambered, surface. This is described on the Historic Environment Record of the Highland Council as a Post-Medieval Road, dated to between 1560 and 1900. A slightly earlier terminus post quem of 1527 is given in both the Old and New Statistical Accounts, where the cobbling of the route is described as being necessary in preparation for a pilgrimage of King James IV to the Sanctuary of Saint Duthus, Tain (OSA, Vol.3, p.394; NSA, Vol. 14, pp.288-89).

The creation of this surface infers an attempt to sustain the route across what was, presumably, marshy ground, as is later depicted on Alexander Sangster's Map of Tain, c.1750 (Tain and District Museum, 2005). It may also be taken to imply the maintenance of a precedent road-way.

It is proposed that the suggested route-way does indeed continue to coincide with the pilgrimage route, terminating at Tain a significant locus of sanctuary in the 15th century but also possibly as far back as the 11th century (Slade, H. G. 2000, p.7).

Although archival research is ongoing, examination of the topography of some sections of the proposed route-way indicates pre-modern construction and use. For example, heading southwards, it appears to follow a line from Tulloch Castle to Fodderty Lodge and thence across the valley of the Peffery, thereafter climbing a steep hillside and thus avoiding the area around Dingwall which is believed to have been tidal marshland until the later Medieval period (Bain 1899, 10ff; MacRae 1923, 336-8).

Early interpretation suggests that the route, although surviving physically only in part, is a roadway linking the whole length of the former Earldom of Ross, extending approximately 50 kilometres from south to north. A number of medieval castles and apparently later 'grand' houses sit either directly on this route or very close to it. It would appear to be the main communication route through the former Province of Ross.

The project's coordinators are aware that a substantial, possible early roadway, variously known as 'The Wine Road'; 'The Comyn's Road' and '*Rad na Pheny*', believed by some commentators to be capable of supporting wheeled transportation, has been identified in the southern Highlands (Hoffman, B. 2005). However, we have not recovered any evidence for the similar identification of an extensive early linear communication feature in Ross-shire.

In this last year we have worked together to develop 'Pathways into the Past' with colleagues from Archaeology for Communities in the Highlands (ARCH). The programme comprises a series of community learning sessions and fieldwork workshops. Through these ARCH offers participants from seven of the communities situated along the Easter Ross thoroughfare of the route-way network, opportunities to learn how to research and record the feature as it occurs in their area. Participants are also being helped to display and publish their findings. The research and fieldwork findings are being publicised in a series of roaming exhibitions the first of which has taken place in Muir of Ord. We wish to thank Janet Hooper and Cathy MacIver, for their collaboration and for their hard work in supporting communities in Easter Ross to research into what we believe may be a new monument class for the Highlands.

A programme of further research, walkover and measured surveys is scheduled for winter 2010 through to summer 2011.

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