

Archaeological record of a Circular Feature within the gardens of the former Brahan Castle, Ross-shire

Site Name - Brahan **Parish** - Urray (Ross and Cromarty) **Region** - Highland

NGR - NH 51370 54404 **SMR or NMRS No.** -

Site type/Class - Ringed earthwork **Recorded by** - M. Marshall - 14.01.05

This circular enclosure is situated on the east bank of a small stream, within the ornamental woodland associated with Brahan Castle known as the Dell (NMRS No. NH55SW 5.07). The gardens and woodland are thought to have been laid out in about 1800 (a plan dated 1798 by George Brown has proposals for the paths)

The woodland is on a gentle south facing slope and has mature exotic trees, azaleas and rhododendrons. Pathways run through the circular feature and around it, and beech trees have been planted on the encircling banks. Most of the site has also become overgrown with rhododendrons (recent attempts have been made to cut them back on the banks) and the central area, which is mostly covered with rhododendrons, has 2 clearings.

The feature is clearly marked on the 1st edition OS survey of 1877 as a circular area of woodland. It is also depicted on a plan of Brahan Estate by David Aitken, dated 1787 (ie prior to the laying out of the ornamental woodland), where it appears as a wooded circular feature and is annotated "Beech Mount".

Description

The Surrounding Banks

The site has an overall diameter of 80m with a drop of perhaps 5m from NE to SW. It is defined by a surrounding bank which is substantial and which has been planted with beech trees, these are now mature and dominate the site. The north and northeast arc (a length comprising one third of the total circumference of the feature) of the earthbank is generally of a height between 0.8m and 1.5m externally and 0.2m internally. The width of the earthbank at its base is between 3m and 4m. It appears to be mostly composed of earth, there being no evidence of stones or boulders. A break in the earthbank, at a point just east of north of the feature, has a width of 2.5m and could be an entrance. The remaining two thirds of the encircling bank, on the SE, south and west side of the enclosure appear as an abrupt slope of height 1.5m to 2m, with a "lip" at its inside edge. There is very little evidence of any ditches associated with the earthbank, either internally or externally.

The Central Area

The central area is even and sloping to the SW, it is quite grossly overgrown with rhododendrons but there are 2 clearings and a small path providing access to them. No other features were noted in the central area largely because it is so overgrown.

The NE clearing has a burial enclosure with a surrounding ornate iron fence and a memorial stone with the inscription "*James Alexander Francis Humberston, Colonel Lord Seaforth, whose body rests in the place he loved so well, born 9th Oct 1847, passed away 3^d March 1923*" and "*also of Mary Margaret, Lady Seaforth, whose body rests here, born 9th March 1862 died 1933*". A large stone also within the burial enclosure is of unknown significance.

The SW clearing is larger and has the headstones of 21 dog graves in 2 groups. The east group has 8 headstones dating from the late 19th century with the earliest being 1872. The west group is L shaped and has 12 headstones mostly dating from the early 20th century. Of particular interest is the west most one which has the inscription "*Cruiser, for 15 years faithful friend and companion of Col Stewart Mackenzie of Seaforth. He accompanied the 9th Lancers throughout the Afghan Campaign, 1878 - 79 - 80 including the march from Kabul to Kandahar. b 1878 d. 1895*".

Comment – It seems difficult to believe that this substantial feature was constructed specifically as part of the ornamental woodland. It may have originally been a fortified enclosure, which has been altered and reused. It is ideally situated for a fortified enclosure being at a point where the slope drops away more steeply and having a 10m drop to the stream on its west side. In addition it is only 500m from one of the former crossing points of the River Conon.