

# The Corrimony estate – a summary of its history and sites from the 1800s until today

## Highland, Urquhart & Glenmoriston parish

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### 1.0 Introduction

During an assessment of the archaeological implications of a proposed windfarm at the southern upland end of the Corrimony valley, it became apparent that the valley had a significant historical development starting as a barony awarded in 1509. This culminated as a prosperous 10,000 acre Victorian sporting estate stocked with grouse, deer and trout in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century before decline set in. This was accelerated by the destruction by fire of its centrepiece grand house in 1951 and subsequent fragmentation of the estate. Although most ingredients of this sequence are known, the sources are widely scattered and do not appear to have been assembled before, so the full history has escaped recognition. A brief summary is given here to register its place in the record. Sources include some recorded data, out-of-print local heritage publications, local oral tradition and some field survey. The primary source for much of this information was Lindsay Girvan, a current farmer and resident in the valley; some was oral tradition accumulated since the family came to the farm in 1941, with other insights coming from his collection of locally produced booklets of old photos and some field observations. The status of this report is purely to add to NMRS and the Highland Council SMR and/or HER databases. A condensed version of this text was submitted to *Discovery & Excavation in Scotland* in November 2008, with differences being the lack of included pictures and source referencing in that version to fit *DES* guidelines. The archaeological assessment of the proposed windfarm will be formally reported within the relevant planning application, and this document is not a substitute for any part of that process.

A brief historical background was compiled, but is only included to provide a backcloth and has no guarantee of accuracy or correct emphasis on its components. The primary event was the creation of the Barony of Corrimony in 1509 and its award by James IV to a branch of the Grant family after the family had been progressive landlords of the royal estates of Urquhart (Bridgeland 2005, pp86-7). The house of Old Corrimony was built in 1740 and contains a carved armorial and marriage stone with this date for Alexander Grant, 6th Earl of Corrimony, and Jean Ogilvie (his new wife), linking these two local land-owning families whose Corrimony branches both fought on the Jacobite side at Culloden. The estate was later sold to Thomas Ogilvy of the same family c.1835. Nothing is known of a big house as the baronial seat in the valley until Old Corrimony was built, but it seems highly probable that such a site existed.

### 2.0 [New] Corrimony House (also spelled Corriemony)

Database records in NMRS [NH32NE12] and HER [MHG47413] simply record its depiction on OS 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> edition maps at NH 3727/2998 (about 590m SW of Old Corrimony) and that the architect Alexander Ross was involved; there is no SMR record, and books such as Gifford contain nothing. The NMRS Demolition Register, a paper-based record listed by Gow (2008, pp188-90) as "*the only official attempt to record all Scotland's lost country houses*" does not mention New Corrimony; ironically Gow's book, a catalogue of some of the most poignant such losses devotes a specific chapter to the ruin of Guisachan, a few miles away in Strathglass, but does not mention New Corrimony. Current OS maps simply show an unidentified but apparently roofed building. The result is that the site is known and tersely recorded, but its significance and story has not been registered nor assembled into a meaningful insight of its former status. The Dictionary of Scottish Architects website ([www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/building\\_full.php?id=216235](http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/building_full.php?id=216235)) mentions architectural work by Duncan Cameron in 1891 (no details of works given) and then three episodes by the Alexander Ross firm "*after 1907*" and "*before 1923*", each comprising "*additions*". No reference was found to identify the original architect.

Lindsay Girvan's collection of booklets contained 2 captioned but undated photos with much detail evident. New Corrimony was built in or immediately after 1840, following the estate's transfer into the Ogilvy family, and looks from the photos to have evolved into the prestigious style of house and designed landscape surround which featured on many Victorian Highland

estates; one caption describes it as “*an elegant structure in the Scottish baronial style*” (GHG 1995, p26). The other photo is reproduced below and apparently shows the main entrance - so was probably taken from the NE - with a gothic-style frontage with 3 main storeys and a probable attic level; each of the 3 visible corners has a minor turret. A squared 5-storey tower rose within the masonry from ground level beside the entrance with an ornamental minaret on its top, from which (according to the caption) Temple Pier on Loch Ness was visible, a distance of c.10 miles/16km (Mackell 1982, *np*, photo no.12). A third undated picture (photo'd by Lindsay Girvan from someone else's original) shows the house without the tower; due to its sepia tones, mode of reproduction and different angle of view, details are indistinct, but comparison suggests the tower was a complete secondary insertion from the ground upwards rather than a modification of only the upper levels. If so, this would have been a major feat of architectural engineering affecting most of the structural fabric of the house, and presumably relates to one of the four listed phases of architectural work between 1891-1923.



New Corrimony: undated photo reproduced from Mackell (1982, *np*, photo no.12). Presumed to have been taken from NE c.1923-51. Copyright detail for this photo is unknown.

The house was comprehensively burnt out in an electrical fire in 1951, lying as a ruined shell which was adapted for use as a barn until the site was cleared in about 1981. Both book photos show a house and landscape which appears well established, suggesting they may have been taken in the latter half of the house's existence (ie post-1900). They each seem to show the house in the same state in terms of the sequence of architectural alterations identified by DSA; while differences in viewpoint and discernable detail make this a tentative observation, the temptation is to regard both photos as dating after the final alterations, ie between 1923 and the 1951 fire. It seems likely that the original photos, possibly with several others, are retained locally and could be assembled into an interesting portfolio for this lost house and estate. It is also intriguing that each change of estate ownership in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was soon followed by a major building or rebuilding phase for the main house. The purchase in 1835 saw New Corrimony emerge as a completely new development by 1840, while another estate sale in 1888 was followed by the first of the recorded architectural commissions in 1891. It would be a revealing societal comment if these links demonstrated how new owners consolidated their contemporary status.

The site today is reached from the NE down a still very evident and 300m long formal tree-lined avenue, possibly of imported *wellantonia*s left to grow unchecked since. The SW end of the avenue opens onto a modern forestry track, heavily consolidated with substantial rubble

which curves round to head northwards and gently uphill. Immediately outside the curve on its south edge lies a flat grassy area containing an apparent terrace platform largely surrounded by a waist high rendered stone wall. The initial impression is that the terrace platform contained the house footprint, but this is deceptive as the main house position lay under the track curve, with the demolition rubble levelled and slightly spread to create the track bed to a sufficiently solid base for heavy forestry use. The full extent of the footprint therefore includes the track in its NW corner and the surviving platform terrace was only its SE half, containing a lower - probably single storey plus attic - wing visible in the GHG photo and some yard areas.

The full outline is sub-square in plan, with paced dimensions of c50-60m across. It stands proud of the slope on its southeast boundary, with the southern half at a lower level than the rubble platform and now partially grassed and used as a cattle feed area, with various concreted and stone surfaces partly visible beneath the surface debris. Lindsay Girvan has excavated a sump to drain the cattle feed area, which has been refilled and concreted though maintaining the level, so caution is needed in confidently identifying house floor surfaces and wall footings. In the SW corner a small stretch of stone walling still runs outwards from the hillside retaining wall amid the nettles and looks like the remains of a coal store or similar. A basic breeze-block shed was built in 1950 to contain a diesel electric generator for the house shortly before the big fire, and survives as a roofed storage building within the trees just outside the SW corner, though has no architectural significance or stylistic reference.

The surviving east portion of the platform, built out onto the sloping ground contained a garden terrace, and focuses onto a flight of six steps down onto a formal path between two walled lawns or flowered gardens sloping down to a mature tree at the edge of an ornamental pond in the bottom of the valley c100m SE. The pond outline is clearly identifiable today, with the shore-side tree still standing; its dam to the NE was an earth and stone bank which is still clearly visible as a curving feature 2m high and 3m wide, now with a central breach for the stream flow and the drained pond bed behind as a flat boggy patch. The other garden features are lost with its subsequent use as cattle pasture, although it still retains the appearance of a former designed landscape park of grassland with isolated trees.



General view of house area from opposite valley side, looking across the former pond and the grass slope which contained the ornamental garden. The yellowing tree on the right stands at what was the end of the formal path at the pondside; several other visible trees were originally part of the house's

immediate surround. The house stood beyond the terrace wall and steps, extending behind the yellowing tree and under the built-up track to the partly obscured reddish tree. From SE, October 2008.



View of garden terrace steps and retaining wall. From SE. July 2008.



View of platform with possible coal store remnant built into retaining wall behind. From NE, July 2008.



Detail of terrace steps, with view onto platform; coal store remnant at foot of trees on left, behind grassed mound containing spoil from modern sump excavation. Car parked beside track within N corner of rubble platform covering former house footprint. From SE, July 2008.

### 3.0 Mony's Stone [NH33SE5]

This unscheduled monument is recorded in the various databases as a standing stone [NMRS no. NH33SE5, HER no. MHG2627, SMR no. NH33SE0005] which traditionally marks the burial place of Mony, “*a son of one of the Kings of Denmark*”; its date of erection is unknown. It is noted in the Name Book of 1871, which was a crucial source for the 1<sup>st</sup> edition OS of 1876; NMRS only cites its inclusion on the 1904 2<sup>nd</sup> edition OS 6” map, but it is also shown on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition 2½” map of 1876 in its current position.

Mony is more of a character from legend and local tradition than a recognised historical figure; the most complete account found (Bridgeland 2005, p44) describes him as an early Viking raider, who became separated from his ship at Crinan and fled up the Great Glen with his sister and his men. They made a stand on Craig Mony in Glen Urquhart, but were defeated. Mony and his sister escaped to Corrimony where he was killed; his sister was spared and stayed locally for several years. Mony is commemorated today by this stone and a site known as Mony's Cave, on the north bank of the River Enrick just by Corrimony Falls (approx NH 3735/2915); this is apparently a well-hidden cave where some Jacobites took refuge after Culloden. However it seems unlikely that Mony is commemorated in the place names of Craig Mony and Corrimony, which more probably depend on the Gaelic word *monaidh* for a hill or hill pasture. For Corrimony this is prefixed by a derivation of St Curitan, who may have been the first missionary to venture into Glenurquhart sometime between 700-750AD in the later Pictish era, founding a chapel, the alleged site of which is now marked by the Corrimony graveyard, and a now lost holy well.

The stone itself is a substantial irregularly-shaped angular pillar (1.95m high above ground, 0.8m wide and 0.35m thick) and looks to be entirely geologically formed in its idiosyncratic shape without any sign of human dressing. Lindsay Girvan mentioned some small “pictish” inscriptions hidden near its base, but these were not found during these visits; a 1997 travelogue at <http://www.darkisle.com/c/corrimony/mony.html> mentions 3 Pictish symbols on the stone.



Mony's Stone in Victorian avenue setting. From NE with 2m ranging rod, August 2008.

Today the stone is incorporated into the eastern side of the formal avenue to New Corrimony and is totally dwarfed within the trees. The setting looks very incongruous, with a stream directly behind and the avenue track in front. Local tradition reported by Lindsay Girvan is that its original location was somewhere near Mony's Cave and the waterfall, with removal presumably before 1876 (or 1871?) to create a trophy feature in the formal avenue. This relocation is more plausible than its current situation, which even allowing for Victorian landscape alterations, is unconvincing.

#### **4.0 Other estate features**

Several other estate features should be noted within this overview. The current settlement complex at the northern outlet of the valley contains many further buildings and features of the estate infrastructure. These include the LB-A of Corrimony cruck-framed barn and the LB-C(S) of Corrimony chapel and graveyard, with graves of the Grant family and reputedly the site of St Curitan's chapel. Undesignated buildings include Corrimony farm steading, now used as tourist accommodation; the former manse, now a family residence; and a complement of other lesser estate buildings and cottages nearby.

NMRS NH32NE10 records a farmstead site at NH 3585/2690 on the west bank of the River Enrick, and shown by OS 1<sup>st</sup> edition of 1876 as three unroofed buildings. One of these was rebuilt at NH 35826/26835, and survives today as a tin-roofed bothy sheltered by a copse of fir trees on an overlooking glacial bank and clearly marked by OS, though is alongside and not within the copse as OS depicts. The date 1878 is reportedly carved into some internal wooden fittings, and its location is the upper limit of any evidence for settlement in the valley and matches the point where a former track from the Guisachan sporting estate reached the River Enrick.



The bothy from N with 2m ranging rod, August 2008.

A previously unrecorded series of pre-clearance crofting house sites and field walls exists around NH 373/297, roughly 200m south of New Corrimony, and there are several more croft sites on the eastern side of the river. These were listed by Dagg in 2000, and include a complex of 3 crofts and a 4<sup>th</sup> building on a terrace at NH 3623/2715 (Feature 8 in her list) and a small building at NH 3625/2699 (Feature 6), as well as various walled or banked boundaries and animal enclosures. These are all regarded as early clearances due to the lack of accompanying place names reported from archival records.

Further evidence of the Victorian estate development as a shooting/fishing facility is provided by the major track through from the Corrimony settlement to the upper reaches of the valley, running alongside the bothy and terminating at *Loch ma Stac*, where an unrecorded 3-storey lodge survives at NH3476/2233 alt 490m, on an islet reached over a causeway. This was not visited, but is shown by current OS as a roofed building; another building shown by OS at NH 3517/2435 alt 430m alongside the track was apparently an intermediate bothy, but the ruin was demolished for stone in the 1980s and no longer exists as a structure.

The valley track is not shown on OS 1<sup>st</sup> edition maps beyond the start of the midvalley, so is presumed to be late 19<sup>th</sup>C onwards; its present state is substantially consolidated as a forestry track up to the bothy area and then diverts in its forestry-consolidated form to a short spur running SW for 1.0km to a terminal clearing in scrub woodland. The original valley track continues south from the bothy as a less substantial route to the loch. *Loch ma Stac* drains south, eventually into Glen Moriston from which another track shown by current OS maps reaches the southern tip of the loch, suggesting a possible overland route cresting the watershed from Corrimony to eventually reach Loch Ness. However this southern track is a recent insertion by the Hydro Board for building a dam at the south end of the loch, and there was no indication of any previous through route on the ground or on earlier maps.

An unrecorded set of watermill features can be added from local information, though was not visited. Two high level lochans on the east side of the valley are named *Loch a' Mhuillin* (= Mill Loch), respectively at NH 381/249 alt 510m and NH 364/230 alt 530m. The first has a nearby minor summit named *Carn Loch a' Mhuillin*, suggesting it had a local significance at one stage, but lies over the watershed to drain into the next valley system to the northeast. However the second drains into the Corrimony valley, and a lade from close to the loch is apparently still clearly visible down to a former mill site near *Lochan Marbh* (NH 381/285, alt 310m); it follows the contour line for a steady descent of up to 7km. Although not precisely located, the mill site is also apparently still evident as a ground feature. The lade is not shown by OS, although parts of the depicted water courses may relate to it and it is unclear if it has any relationship to a drainage cut identified by Dagg (2000, Feature 9, spot located at NH 3645/2610). No further information can be given for this system, and its provenance only broadly assigned within a post-medieval origin. However its existence and landscape extent show a degree of co-ordinated land management within the valley.

## 5.0 Chronological summary of the Corrimony valley

Today, only one site - ironically probably the most ancient surviving feature of the valley - gives Corrimony any archaeological profile as a Highland valley. However the assembly of many minor indications suggests a more complex character, as summarised below; this may well be highly selective in its components and is therefore presented as a précis to set a baseline rather than an authoritative account.

**Prehistory from Neolithic into Pictish periods (3000BC-700 AD)** Corrimony chambered cairn built in Neolithic era, with other possible contemporary mounds nearby noted in NMRS. Many recorded hut circles and field systems around valley mouth and lower valley. Lower valley seems well settled and exploited for over 4,000 years for agriculture and settlement, extending some way into the midvalley and the probable limits of viable cultivation for reasons of ground conditions and increasing altitude.

**Late Pictish period (700AD onwards)** Arrival of St Curitan as a missionary and Mory as a fleeing Viking raider. Both events, though very much legends about individuals, suggest that Corrimony was a settled area with resident communities.

**1509** Creation of the Corrimony barony as one of 3 in the area as royal gifts to the local Grant dynasty. Suggests that Corrimony was prosperous enough to have value as a barony

**1509-1835** Continued development by the Grant family of the estate. Old Corrimony built in 1740 and cruck-framed barn at unknown date suggest growth in agricultural prosperity. Estate sold in 1835 into related Ogilvy family. Nothing is known of any big house before Old Corrimony, but as a baronial seat, there would almost certainly have been one in the valley. Probable feudal crofting estate economy, with evidence of clearances, probably for sheep farming in the 1700s, relatively early in the overall clearance period.

**1835-1891** Major change in role of estate to a sporting function. Construction of New Corrimony c1840 within newly created prestigious landscape and parkland, and opening up of valley with access track. Relocation of ancient features as trophies for new estate. 1888 estate sold to LA Macpherson and then passed to Wallace family. New ownership regimes radically moved the valley from its traditional economy into the fashionable Victorian leisure pursuits of hunting and fishing. Self-generating agricultural revenue diminishing in significance and replaced by external revenue as a sporting estate. Early OS shows much forestry in lower valley by the end of this period.

**1891-1923** Four phases of architectural commissions to New Corrimony. No detail known of these alterations, but each phase involves named architectural practices so implies prosperity. At least one involved the tower insertion as a major reworking.

**1923-1951** Land sales in 1941; New Corrimony burnt out in 1951 and not rebuilt, designed landscape abandoned. End of the apparent golden age as a sporting estate, and single ownership broken up by sale of farming units.

**1951-present** Renewed emphasis on agriculture in lower valley, mid and upper valley largely abandoned to intensive forestry plantation patches and conservation. Agriculture used as base for economic diversification into other forms of land use and stewardship, including Forestry Commission and RSPB.

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