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# BARABHAIG WGS, ISLE OF SKYE

*A Rapid Archaeological Survey*

AF OF 26/2

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*Archaeological*

*Services*

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## **1 Introduction**

1.1 The writer was asked to carry out a rapid archaeological survey of a proposed Woodland Grant Scheme application at Barabhaig, Isle of Skye on behalf of Tilhill Economic Forestry. This was in response to a request from Highland Council Archaeology Service that such a survey should be carried out, as this area had not previously been examined by an archaeologist. The planting proposals recommended natural regeneration ear surviving woodland and mounding and planting in areas elsewhere.

1.2 This report outlines the findings of this survey and recommends mitigation work to protect the recorded remains.

## **2 Survey Method**

2.1 A limited desk-bound survey was carried out examining the Highland Council Sites & Monuments Record, earlier OS maps of the area held by Highland Council Archive Service and secondary sources held in Inverness Reference Library.

2.2 This was followed by a rapid walk-over survey carried out on the 31<sup>st</sup> October in cold dry conditions that later changed to heavy rain. The bracken had was already dead but still obscured a number of features. Photographs were taken of all visible features but dense bracken growth and variable lighting conditions made the quality of this information variable.

2.3 Subsequent to this visit a colour aerial photograph of the area taken in August 1998 was supplied courtesy of Eilean Oronsay Estate Office and a black & white print held by Highland Council Archive, taken by the RAF in August 1947, was enlarged to 1:5,000 scale. Both photos were obscured by dense bracken growth but in conjunction with the ground photographs taken during the survey did show the majority of the recorded features. These have been traced onto the accompanying figures.

2.4 A second visit was carried out in the company of Kevin Sutton, Tilhill Forestry, on the 24<sup>th</sup> November in similar showery conditions. House sites were marked with a cane and GPS readings taken. Additional photographs were taken with the same light and bracken constraints of the previous visit. Duplicate prints of both sets of photographs have been supplied to Tilhill Forestry and Highland Council Archaeology Service with this report.

### 3 Archaeological & Historical Background

3.1 2 prehistoric dun sites and one roundhouse or hut circle were previously recorded in the RCAHMS survey of Skye published in 1928. They are shown on the current 1:10,000 OS map of the area. No other sites are recorded in the Highland Council Sites & Monuments Record within the survey area, though additional features are listed to the north east in a pre-afforestation Archaeological Survey carried out by Headland Archaeology in March 1998. In particular they identified an area of c10 hectares centred at NG 693 109 on the south bank of the Allt na Beiste consisting of rig cultivation, enclosure dykes and buildings presumed to form part of the modern settlement of Camascross. The surveyors noted that further buildings, banks and cultivation extended to the south, within the present WGS application area.

3.2 Little is known of the medieval and later history of this area. The abandonment of Barabhaig is likely to have occurred after the practice of runrig was abandoned in 1811. This would have been to create the sheep farm of Knock which by 1892 (*Deer Farm Commission*) consisted of 1818 acres (including *40 acres under arable and 35 acres old cultivation now under pasture*) but which had at one time been *much larger*. John Martin, a witness to the Napier Commission meeting in Portree in 1884 reckoned that Camuscross had been laid out *upwards of 60 years ago*. More precise information will be held in Macdonald of Sleat Estate papers, but such detailed research was beyond the scope of this survey.

### 4 Survey Results

4.1 The presence of 2 duns and the hut circles/roundhouses shows that this area was extensively settled in the later prehistoric /early medieval period. The discovery of only 3 possible roundhouses and no evidence of contemporary field systems within the survey area suggests that most of the evidence for this earlier settlement has been obscured or destroyed by the later post-medieval settlement. It is possible some evidence is preserved under the peat in the area of the roundhouses but it is difficult to predict where this is likely to be found.

4.2 No trace of medieval settlement was found, though it is possible that the roundhouses north west of Loch Baravaig may have been used in this period. In addition the probable house platform at NG 6879 1085 is likely to have been robbed out long before the houses at Sites 2 & 4 were abandoned. Similarly the possible 'shieling' huts at Sites 15 point to an earlier use of the land before the larger longhouses were being used. While they may be only temporary huts for summer grazing, their location so close to the settlements of Baravaig and Camascross makes this seem unlikely, particularly as they are near areas of rig cultivation.

4.3 The later post-medieval settlement is extensive and shows more than one phase of use with rigs occurring both within and without enclosures. The number of houses is limited, either being dispersed as those at Sites 2, 4, 17 and 19 or clustered as at Baravaig at Sites 9 and 18. The latter are heavily robbed but appear to be less substantial than the round ended buildings and may represent an earlier turf & stone walled building tradition abandoned possibly before the clearances of c1811.

4.4 The extent of rig cultivation may give a false idea of the population as the majority of the rigs would have lain fallow in any one year to rest the soil. There was some evidence for a sequence of use in this area with some dykes appearing to lie over rig systems that extended beyond the enclosing dykes. Also there was some variation in rig width, suggesting different periods of use. Again dating of this is difficult and more detailed survey work would be required to disentangle this sequence.

4.5 The extensive banks across this area are undated but may well date to the 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> century when there was an extensive trade in cattle from Skye. The most probable lines of these have been recorded on plan but additional lengths may be found either from further study of aerial photographs or by more fieldwork.

4.6 A date of abandonment for Baravaig and its surrounding fields in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century is consistent with the (limited) historical evidence. Only the drystone sheep fank at Site 12 is obviously connected with this later 19<sup>th</sup> century use of the area as a sheep farm. It is possible that the two houses identified as possible fisherman's houses or stores, Sites 5 & 7, may have also been in use at this time. It is possible that Sites 2 & 4 may also date to after the introduction of sheep, the houses either belonging to cottars or shepherds.

4.7 Modern drainage channels, presumed to be machine-cut and dating to the 1960s or 1970s are also visible. These seem to have been fairly ineffective as they are now silted up. In the area to the west of Ob Snaosaig they cut obliquely across the rig pattern whereas in the area north east of Buaille Mhor they cut an area not previously cultivated. Extensive remains of peat cutting can be seen, particularly around the Allt Tarsuinn. These were not recorded in detail.

## **5 Archaeological Significance**

5.1 The two duns are potentially of national importance, though their ruinous condition makes such a designation unlikely. The other recorded structures both prehistoric and later are also worthy of preservation and should be protected as *per* the Forestry Commission Guidelines. The survey clearly shows that this land has been intensively used by man since at least for 2000 years and probably for considerably longer. Though used a sheep farm for nearly 200 years there is still a substantial evidence for this surviving both as individual features and as elements of a historic landscape.

5.2 While it easy to protect the identified structures, the field banks and areas of rig cultivation are less easy to value. They have significant landscape value showing both as features in the landscape and as indicators of the former land management of this area. However for much of the year they are obscured by bracken which will also have turbated any archaeological deposits associated with them.

## 6 Management Recommendations

6.1 *It is recommended that wherever possible areas of rig should be left for natural regeneration. Clearly in areas such as to the west of Ob Snaosaig and north east of Camas Baravaig tree sources are some distance from these rig systems. The areas of open ground and areas left for natural regeneration as suggested on plan are indicative rather than definitive. Both the Highland Council Archaeology Service and Tilhill Economic Forestry/Eilean Oronsay Estate will need to negotiate to decide the WGS plan that best addresses their own objectives.*

6.2 *It should also be stressed that this was a rapid survey and a more intensive survey carried out when the bracken has more clearly died down will almost certainly identify new features. This could perhaps be done under the HS call-out contract, allowing the identified archaeology to be precisely mapped by an EDM total station.*

6.3 *The following recommendations are general principles to be followed to preserve the recorded archaeological features, based on the Forestry Commission Forests & Archaeology Guidelines.*

1. *Leave all structures unplanted with suitable buffers, as listed in the gazetteer.*
2. *Spray bracken off all structures*
3. *Protect all features from damage during fencing operations.*
4. *Leave all boundaries unplanted with a 5m buffer*
5. *Leave sample areas of rig unplanted. Such sample areas are identified on plan and have been selected to include areas of both enclosed and unenclosed rig.*
6. *Natural regeneration over the areas of rig is acceptable.*
7. *Planting should reflect the previous landscape patterns and where feasible the mounding for trees should follow the lines of the previous rig system (not the later drainage system).*
8. *Any new finds or features discovered during planting operations should be reported to the Highland Council Archaeology Service.*

6.4 *While as evidence for the cultural heritage of this area it would be desirable to preserve all areas of former rig cultivation as open unplanted ground, it is recognised that on economic grounds this is not feasible. If the boundary dykes are respected at least something of the former field system will be preserved. It is also recognised that the areas of rig are obscured for most of the year under a blanket of bracken. Additionally thryare also the most fertile areas conducive to good tree growth. The area of rigs around Buaile Mhor and Sites 9 & 18 has been selected as a core area to be preserved. It would be desirable to spray the bracken in this area preferably at the time of planting and certainly as part of the 10 year management plan for the area.*

**Jonathan Wordsworth MA, MIFA, FSA Scot**

## GAZETTEER OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES

- Site No. 1**  
**NGR** NG 6698 1100 (centred)  
**Description** A group of turf and turf & stone dykes divide a small pass at *Creag na Ba* (Crag of the Cow) both N/S and E/W. The dykes are mostly visible as a low mound, though in places they survive up to 0.7m high. Entrances are visible at the dyke junctions. Headland Archaeology found 2 small ?shieling huts to the N of this in 1998 at NG 681 112 [HNG61SE0032].  
**Recommendation** *Leave unplanted with a 5m buffer. Care must be taken to prevent damage to these dykes during fencing & planting operations.*
- Site No. 2**  
**NGR** NG 68569 10748 (GPS reading)  
**Description** A substantial stone and ?turf building measuring 15m by 5m lies here hidden by bracken. It is round ended and facing almost N/S. The walls are 0.5-0.6m high and are 0.7-0.8m thick. A single entrance lies in the centre of the E wall. To the SE is a platform 6m diameter with a drystone store 1m diam on its edge. 60m to the NE is a triangular turf walled enclosure 11m N/s by 10m E/W at the S coming to a point at the N. A dyke runs NW/SE to the E of this as shown before curving SW to the Allt Tarsuinn.  
**Recommendation** *Both features should be left unplanted with buffer of c20m and a 5m buffer left on either side of the dyke..*
- Site No. 3**  
**NGR** NG 68797 10840 (GPS reading)  
**Description** A rectangular platform 8m long aligned WNW/ESE with a slight ditch visible on the W, N & E is almost certainly the site of a robbed out ?turf building. The width of the building is uncertain as the platform spreads out c8m to the S. The area is covered in bracken and there may well be other features not spotted in this area.  
**Recommendations** *Leave unplanted with a 20m buffer. Further examination in late winter may reveal other features nearby. Spraying of the bracken in this area is desirable.*
- Site No. 4**  
**NGR** NG 6898 1096  
**Description** A round ended longhouse 15m by 5m with walls surviving up to 1.2m high and 1m thick survives in good condition just to the S of the proposed fence line. It is aligned almost N/S with a single entrance on the E side. It lies in a bracken-clad area of richer grassland. 10m to the S is a remnant E/W dyke forming an edge to the more herb-rich grassland. C70m to the SW is a dyked enclosure c50m in diameter with faint traces of rig cultivation visible, though largely obscured by bracken. The extent of this feature shows up clearly on the earlier aerial photograph. A 5 m length of dyke to the SW has clearly been robbed by later peat cuttings.  
**Recommendation** *Leave unplanted with a suitable buffer. The excluded area should include the dyked enclosure. The remnant dyke can probably be ignored. Spraying of the bracken would be desirable.*
- Site No. 5**  
**NGR** NG 7013 1068  
**Description** A longhouse aligned N/S measuring 14m by 4.5m. It is not well-preserved with walls surviving to 0.5m or less and all badly obscured by bracken.. It is best preserved on the N. The entrance was probably in the E wall towards the N end. From its location it was almost certainly used by a fisherman, probably squatting as a cottar on the 19thC sheep farm. Small fragments of drystone walling below the SW corner of Site 6 are probably connected to this site rather than the prehistoric dun.  
**Recommendation** *It is unclear if this lies within or without the proposed WGS. Care must be taken if any fencing is proposed in this area. No planting should take place on or within 20m of this feature. Spraying of the bracken would be desirable.*

*Site No.*           **6**  
*NGR*                NG 7012 1065  
*Description*      *Dun Ban*           This prehistoric Dun or small fort measures c17m by 10m on a grassy stack separated from the adjoining land. Distinct wall facing is not evident, though clearly the amount of stone debris suggests there was once a wall here. It was described by the RCAHMS in 1928 as follows.  
 'The site of Dun Ban is a flat-topped rock rising some 40ft above the sea and 25 ft above the neck joining it to the mainland. The summit, an irregular oval, measuring about 60 ft in length along its main axis, ENE-WSW, and some 30ft in breadth, has been surrounded by a drystone wall on the edge of the rock. It can be traced for the greater part of the circumference except at the NE extremity. The name Dun Ban (white fort) is accounted for by the rock being partly composed of white quartz.'  
*Recommendation*      *No planting is planned for this area. Future management of this area should prevent trees establishing themselves on this site from the new woodland.*

*Site No.*           **7**  
*NGR*                NG 6932 0970  
*Description*      A ruinous drystone structure 10m by 4m aligned WNW/ESE sits close to the shore N of Camas Bravaig. The quality of stonework and its location suggests it was used as a store, probably for a fisherman.  
 A low wall extends 20m to the WNW before turning NE to a rock outcrop. 23m to the NE of this is a small ? store measuring 6m by 2.5m.  
*Recommendation*      *Leave unplanted with a buffer of at least 10m external to the wall.*

*Site No.*           **8**  
*NGR*                NG 6923 0974  
*Description*      A grassy mound by the Allt nan Geal -charn measures 7m diameter by 1.5-2m high. This is not a natural feature, either being a cairn or a collapsed structure. Though it cannot be fully interpreted it is clearly of archaeological interest and is worthy of preservation. It is partly obscured by bracken.  
*Recommendation*      *Leave unplanted with a 20m buffer.*

*Site No.*           **9**  
*NGR*                NG 6916 0967  
*Description*      Within dense bracken are the remains of a drystone structure measuring 6m by 3m and aligned NE/SW. There is a possible entrance on the E. 2m to the W are the footings of a building 5m by 2m. Bracken still stood nearly 2m high here and no photograph was taken.  
*Recommendation*      *This should be preserved with a 20m unplanted buffer. Treatment of the bracken is highly desirable. Additional structures may also be hidden here.*

*Site No.*           **10**  
*NGR*                NG 69938 68964 (*GPS reading*)  
*Description*      This is the site of a dun, recorded in 1876 as '*an old fort....or few loose stones is all that remains visible.*' A visit by the OSFI in 1961 failed to locate this recording '*No trace of a dun could be found but its site may be marked by an area of hummocky ground.*' The probable site of this dun was photographed, though no features now survive to confirm this as the site of a dun. Though the fence k  
*Recommendation*      *The proposed WGS boundary appears to cut across this feature and there must be concern that this might lead to a fence being constructed over this site. The new fence lince should be designed to go to the N or S of this feature. No planting should take place within the vicinity of this feature and a minimum buffer of 20m left unplanted around it.*

*Site No.*           **11**  
*NGR*                NG 691 099  
*Description*      Centred at this point are the remains of at least 4 structures with eroded or robbed walls of turf & stone, partially obscured by bracken and rushes. They sit on the ridge overlooking the main area of cultivation at Barabhaig centred on Buaille Mhor. They are almost certainly the remains of the township of Barabhaig cleared c1812.  
 11.1    NG 6902 09857 (*GPS reading*)    A longhouse aligned NE/SW 16m by 4m. A large boulder marks the N wall.

- 11.2 8m E of the N wall of 11.1 is a longhouse on the same alignment measuring 10m by 3.5m.  
 11.3 65m to the N of 11.2 is a building 12m by 4m with turf walls up to 0.8m high & 0.6m wide.  
 11.4 NG 69225 09904 (*GPS reading*) To the E of 11.3 (distance not measured) is another longhouse on a distinct slope measuring 10m by 3.5m (?) N/S. 2 other buildings aligned NE/SW measuring 8m by 4m lie to the N of this building with a small yard attached.

It is possible additional buildings may have been missed in this area. It is not clear if this was a dispersed settlement connected with Site 18 or was distinguished by the Allt na Geal-charn to be Wester Baravaig.

*Recommendation* Further survey work when the bracken has died down may identify additional buildings in this area and locate those identified more accurately. These should all be preserved, preferably as a single open area within the new woodland.

*Site No.* **12**

*NGR* NG 6950 1050

*Description* A drystone sheepfold c50m by 20m survives here as illustrated. It is likely to be of mid 19thC date.

*Recommendation* Preserve with an unplanted buffer of c20m or preferably link to a large open area of rig connected with Baravaig.

*Site No.* **13**

*NGR* NG 68218 10282 (*GPS reading*)

*Description* 13.1 At this point is a roundhouse or hut circle 6m in diameter with walls c0.2m wide by c1m wide. It is badly obscured by coarse grasses, bracken and peat growth.

13.2 NG 68244 10224 (*GPS reading*) To the S as illustrated close to a large rock outcrop is another ? roundhouse 7m E/W by 6m N/S also badly overgrown.

13.3 Between the 2 features and c35m NW of 13.2 is an oval structure largely obscured by dense bracken. It is c7m in diameter and appears to be more a turf pen than a house or hut. It has an entrance on the S and has been built against the hillslope with ?turf walls c1m high.

*Site No.* **14**

*NGR* NG 6811 1014

*Description* In 1928 the RCAHMS recorded: *Some 300 yds (97.2m) N of a dun is a circular enclosure 18' (5.6m) in diameter, internally surrounded by a stone wall 4' (1.21m) thick and 1' (0.3m) high, of which the outer and inner facings of boulders remain. The entrance is from the E. A tortuous stone wall has been erected some distance to the N and S of the circle. This is probably of a late date. An OS Field Investigator in 1961 also recorded: A hut circle as described by RCAHMS. It is situated on a sheltered shelf at NG 6811 1014. About 50m to the SW built against a low rock face, there is a small circular hut measuring 2m in internal diameter, probably a shieling.*

This feature could not be found during this survey, almost certainly because there has been confusion between Site 13 and another site to the W of the proposed WGS boundary. The original 1928 reference would agree with a site at cNG 680 100 also seen in this survey (see photograph). The description from 1961 is probably that of Site 13, though the dimensions do not agree.

There is therefore no hut circle/roundhouse at this recorded position.

*Recommendation* No action required.

*Site No.* **15**

*NGR* NG 68402 10425 – NG 68248 10466 (*GPS reading*)

*Description* A group of 4 slight turf built structures are set on a slightly sheltered ridge facing to the SE. They only survive as slight hollows and are badly infested with bracken. They are probably the remains of circular shieling huts, though there is an area of rig cultivation centred 150m to the SE.

15.1 ?oval structure 4m by 3m

15.2 16m NE of 15.1 is an oval or circular structure 4m diameter

15.3 23m NE of 15.2 is a structure 3m diameter

15.4 7m NE of 15.3 is a circular structure c4m in diameter

*Recommendation* These should be left as a single unplanted group with a 20m external buffer. Spraying of the bracken over these sites would be desirable.



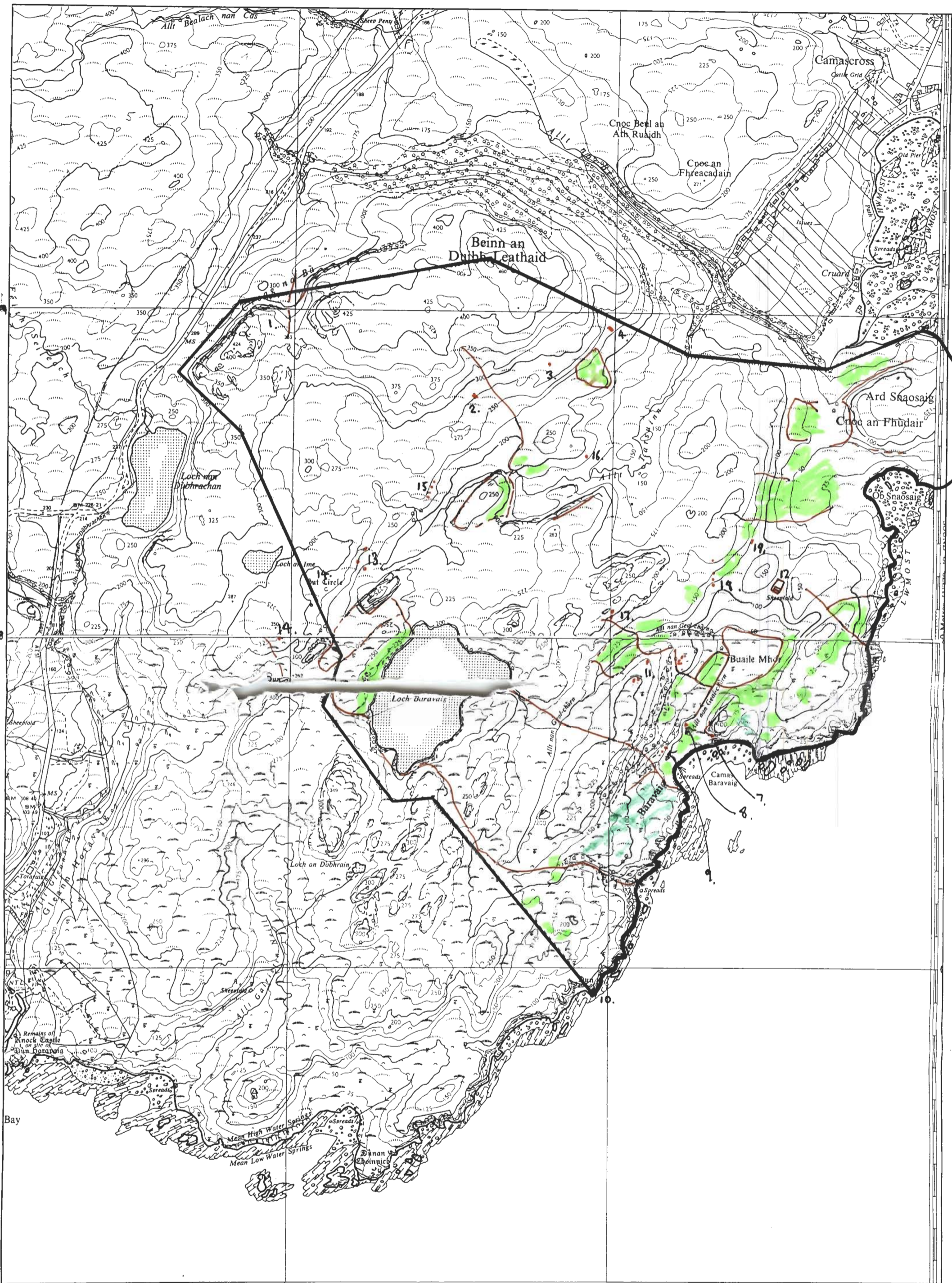
*Site No.*           **16**  
*NGR*                NG 68938 10557 (*GPS reading*)  
*Description*       A rectangular structure 5m by 3m and aligned SSW/NNE is set at the base of a small on its SE corner. There has been some rig cultivation to the NW, though this may have no connection with this structure. It is partially obscured by bracken.  
*Recommendation*       *Leave unplanted with a suitable buffer. Treatment of the bracken would be desirable.*

*Site No.*           **17**  
*NGR*                NG 69017 10091 (*GPS reading*)  
*Description*       A round ended structure 11m by 5m aligned NE/SW is sited here. 8m to the SW is a rectangular building 6m by 3m on the same alignment. This lies just N of a boundary dyke as illustrated. They are partially obscured by bracken.  
*Recommendation*       *Leave unplanted with a 20m buffer external to both features. Treatment of the bracken would be desirable.*

*Site No.*           **18**  
*NGR*                NG 69294 10178 (*GPS reading at 18.1*)  
*Description*       A group of 4 buildings aligned predominantly NNE/SSW sit on a slight ridge to the N of a boundary dyke as drawn. The features are slight and are partly obscured by bracken. They would appear to have formed a separate part of Baravaig Township to Site 11.  
18.1     10m by 4m NE/SW  
18.2     8m NNE to a building 7m by 3.5m aligned NNE/SSW  
18.3     5m NNE to building 10m by 3.5m aligned NNE/SSW  
18.4     4m NNE to later wire fence (not shown on OS map) then 24m to building 7m by 3.5m aligned NNE/SSW.  
*Recommendation*       *Leave the all the buildings unplanted in a linked open area with a buffer of c20m. Treatment of the bracken would be desirable.*

*Site No.*           **19**  
*NGR*                NG 69419 10259  
*Description*       A round –ended longhouse survives in relatively good condition here though badly obscured by bracken. It measures 12m by 4m and is aligned NNE/SSW. To the E of the E wall in the centre of the building is a rectangular hollow defined by a low wall 7m NNE/SSW by 5m. This was almost certainly a midden scoop rather than a porch. It lies within an area of rig cultivation.  
*Recommendation*       *Leave the building and the ?midden store unplanted with a buffer of c20m. Treatment of the bracken over this site would be desirable.*





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68

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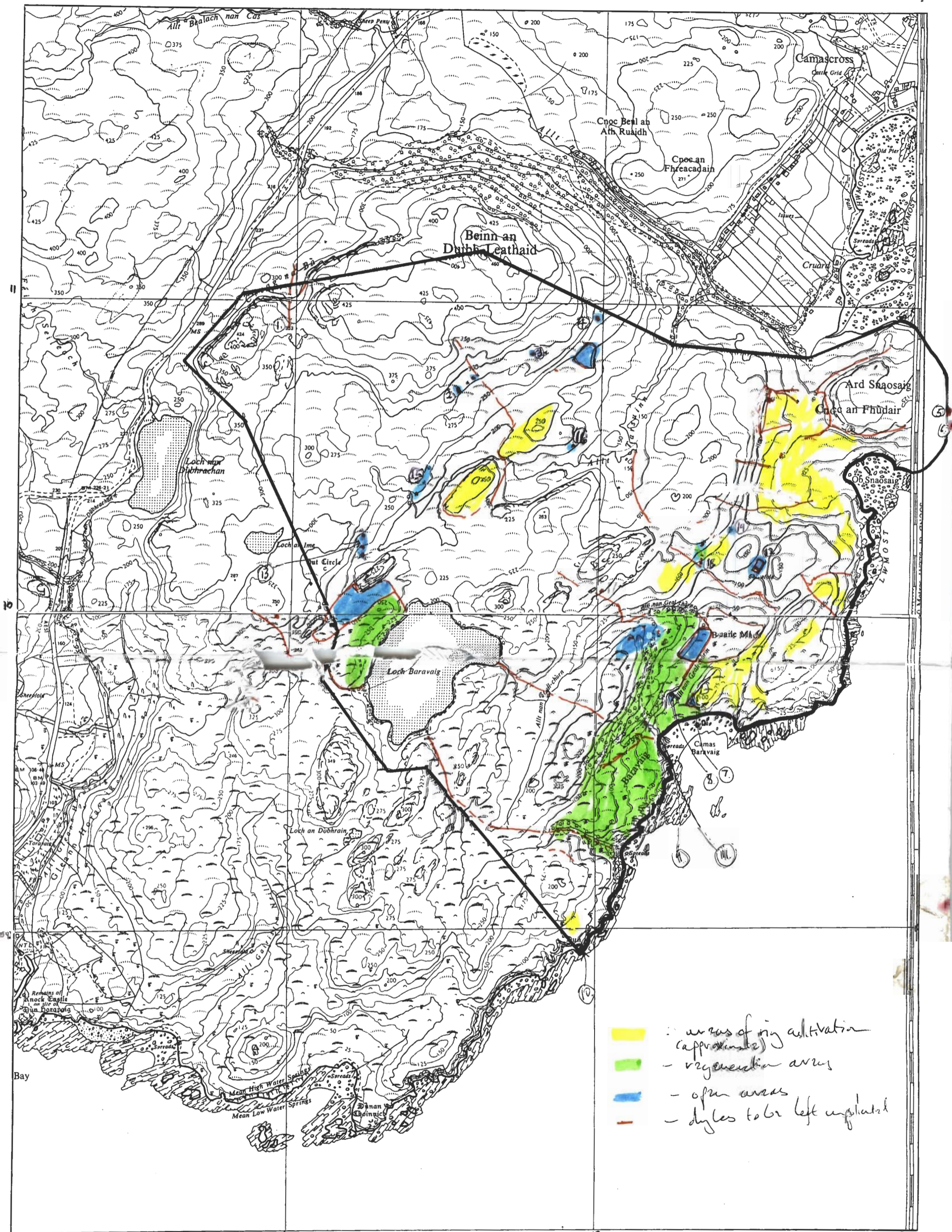
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BARAVAIG - ARCHAEOLOGY

Tilhill Economic  
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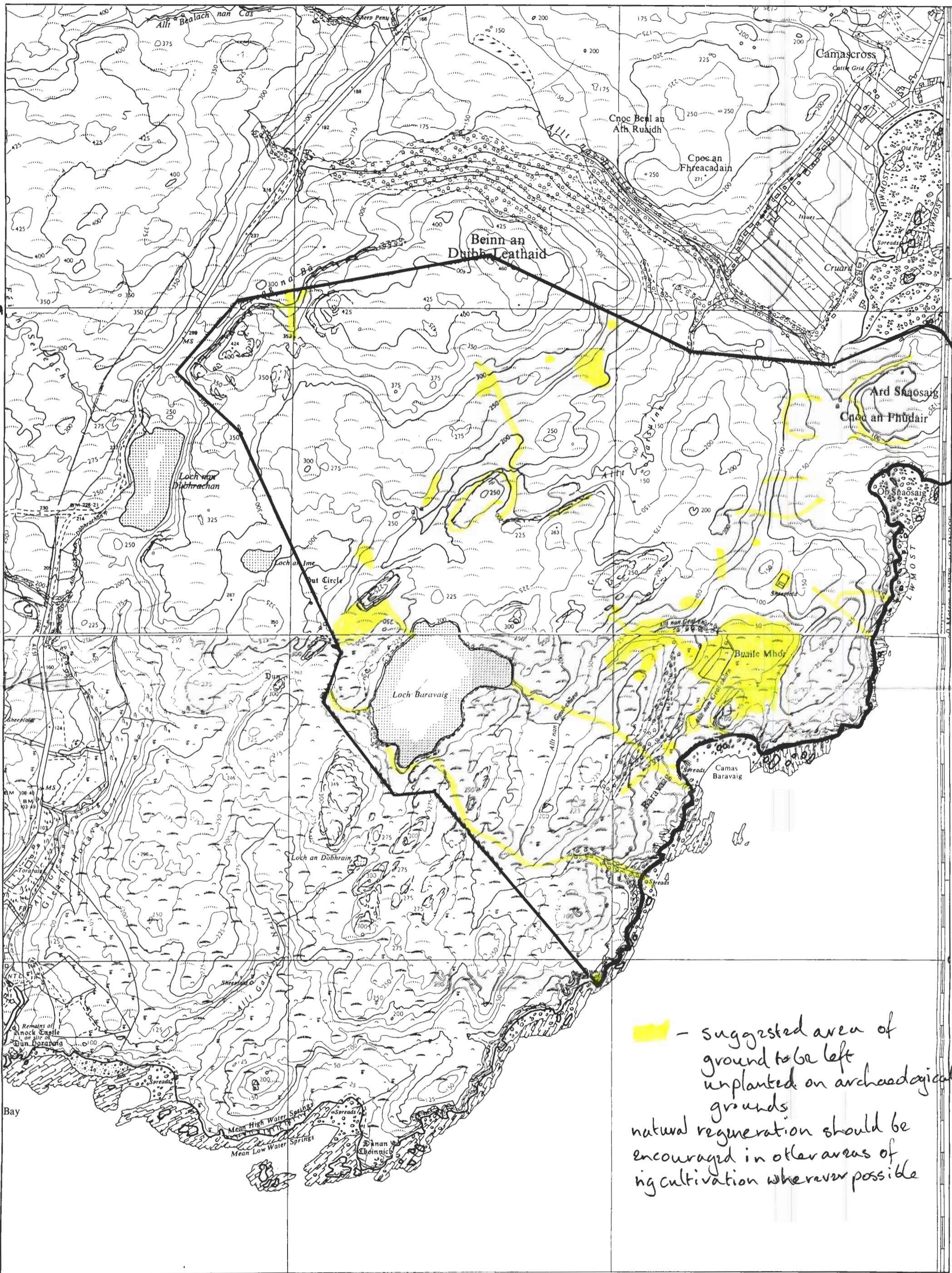
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 - suggested area of ground to be left unplanted on archaeological grounds  
 natural regeneration should be encouraged in other areas of big cultivation wherever possible

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