

KEIG SCHOOL COMMUNITY CULTURAL HERITAGE PROJECT
ECOLOGY AND LANDSCAPE-USE WITHIN THE
PRE-MODERN LORDSHIP OF FORBES:
AN INTERIM REPORT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

Bennachie Landscapes Fieldwork Group

SUMMARY

During the Summer of 2012 Bennachie Landscapes Fieldwork Group carried out excavations in the grounds of the Castle Forbes Estate with a view to support the research being carried out by the teachers, pupils and parents of Keig School. This short paper is an interim report on the findings from those excavations.

INTRODUCTION

Two areas were considered based upon findings of landscape study forming part of Keig School's landscape investigations. The first was the 18th century road forming the major thoroughfare linking the Forbes original power base at Druminnor in the north with their southern base at Puttachie, present Castle Forbes. Beyond this, the road continued to the 'Boat of Forbes' crossing of the Don. The second area examined was centred on the remains of a possible former lade and associated mill stance. Excavations sought to verify this suggestion.

SITE 1: THE ROAD (TRENCH 1)

A metre wide section was dug across the course of the road approximately 100m west of its crossing of the Keig Burn. Prior to excavation the road survived in this area of woodland as a level but lower course between two banks. Turf and overburden were removed down to a 'cobbled' layer and topsoil removed from above the dykes and side ditches to its final phase profile. This was drawn along with a plan view of the section. (A section will in due course be cut through the road and banks to determine their construction sequences). Figure 1 shows the profile at time of abandonment and the final phase of construction in plan view.

The term 'cobbled' is here used in a broad sense. What seems to have occurred is the removal of topsoil and subsoil down to the natural clay and into

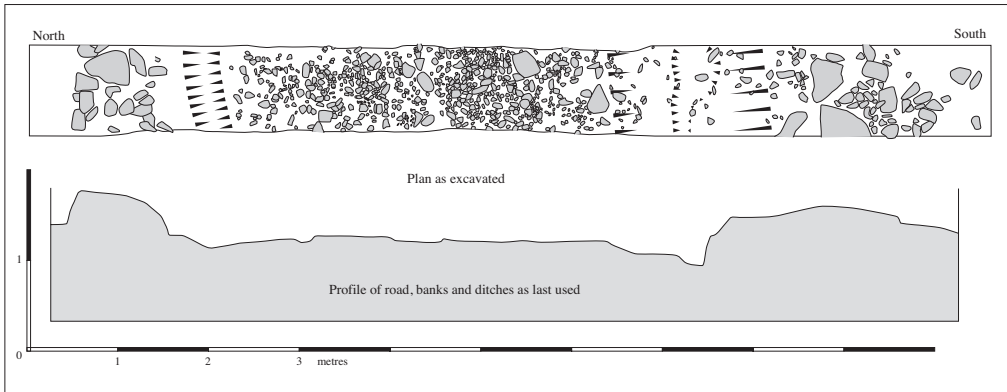


Figure 1. Road section in plan and as final phase profile.



Picture 1. Road section.



Picture 2. Section across the laide showing upcast 'berm' to the right of the picture.

which the two side ditches were dug. Cart loads of stones were then tipped onto this clay surface and, as was suggested during the course of excavation and recording, these two cart widths remain visible in the archaeological record. This central two-cart width does also appear to have been laid to a greater depth than occurred across the remainder of the road between the ditches. Whether this deeper layer represents a secondary period of make-up or simply a section laid to a greater depth requires further consideration. This matter and the confirmation of whether the clay surface on which the stones sit is genuine 'natural' or a reconstituted bedding surface made from redeposited subsoil await further work.

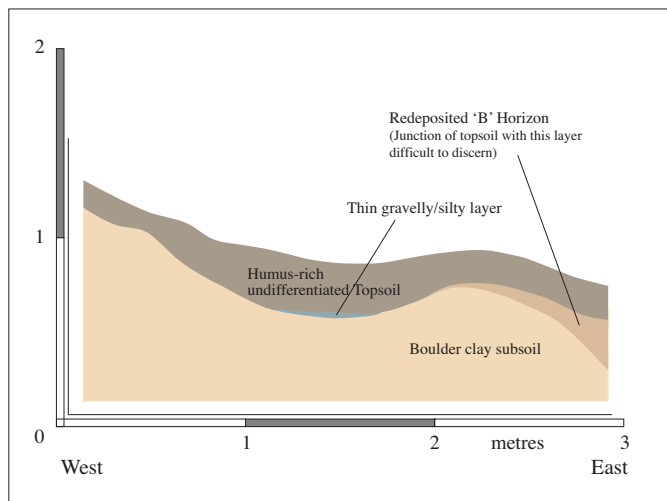


Figure 2. Section across lade.

SITE 2: POSSIBLE MILL SITE (TRENCH 2)

A linear 'platform' surviving as an earhtwork was identified in field survey and was considered as a possible lade relating to the possible existence of an early mill site. A section was dug across this feature in order to test this hypothesis.

This section appears to confirm the notion of the feature being a lade. The

feature was dug into the natural boulder clay slightly above the naturally-formed scarp of the former river flood plain. The spoil appears to have been thrown downslope and a berm left wide enough for access, presumably to keep the channel cleaned. What was noticeable, however, was the absence of a 'B' horizon above the boulder clay above the lade. This suggests that the slope had also been scoured down to the natural before the lade was dug. The abundance of mixed soil and 'B' horizon material helping to form the 'berm' appears to confirm this idea. Figure 2 shows the drawn section across the lade.

SITE 2: POSSIBLE MILL SITE (TRENCH 3)

A 6 metre x 6 metre area was opened on the site of the suspected mill site. (It must be stressed that this is only a working hypothesis, though made more likely by the recognition of the lade in Trench 2). This site was considered a likely area for a mill site for three main reasons: firstly, the lade heads directly to the steep scarp abutting this area; secondly, that the lade leads directly into a large depression that would have functioned admirably as a mill wheel pit; thirdly, this area describes a fairly level platform on an otherwise sloping hillside and is defined on its downslope side by the steep distinctive depression towards which the lade runs. Initial clearance of the site by the pupils of Keig School discovered a residual portion of a strap handle of 14th/15th century date.

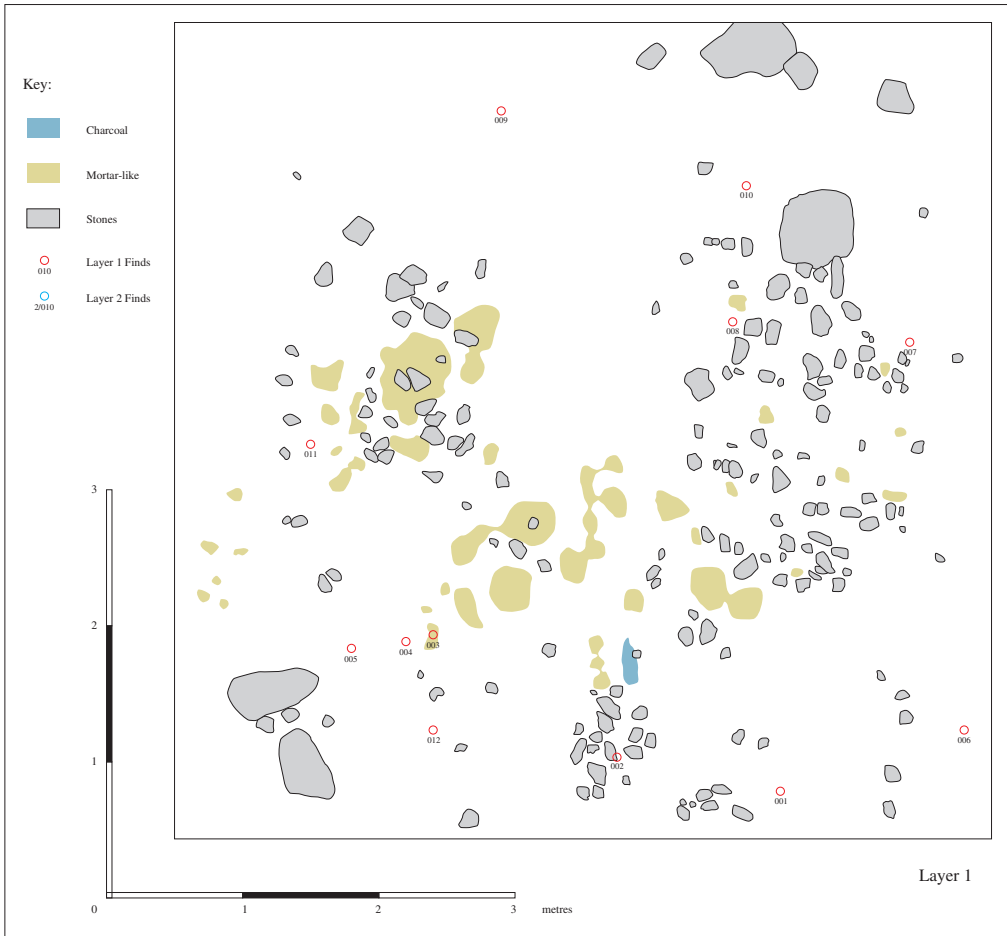


Figure 3. Possible mill site Layer 1.

The 6 x 6 area was stripped down to where potential structural features started to emerge, The site was drawn at this level and finds associated with this layer plotted. (See Figure 3). (This was done as it was felt that these features might be very ephemeral and could disappear at the next 'scrape!'). A further spit was removed with finds plotted and the resulting features planned. (See Figure 4). As it happens the features did not disappear but became rather more substantial.

Most noticeable was the the dense layer of binding material with which the scatter of stones appeared to be associated. This is being referred to as a 'mortar' layer, though this terminology may be slightly suspect. Its structure contains elements of clay material combined with a yellowy 'mortar-like' substance which appears to

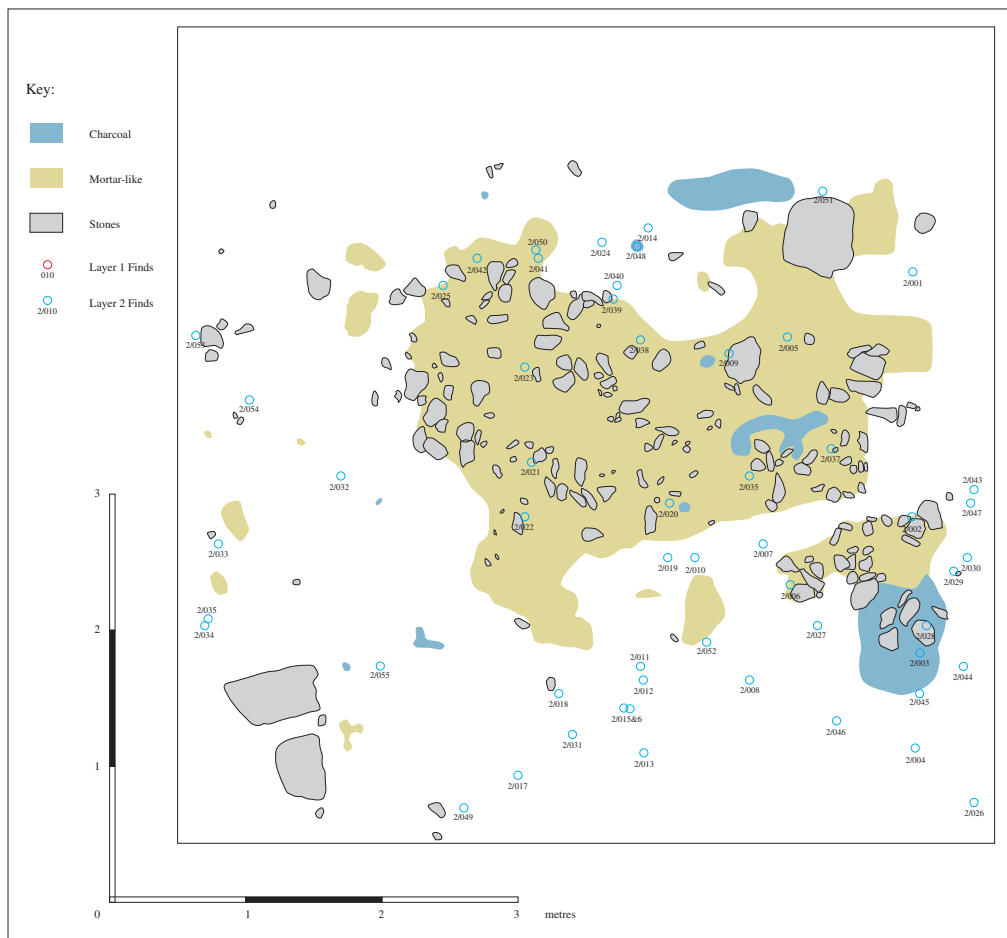


Figure 4. Possible mill site Layer 2.

have been used as a bonding element for some structural purpose. Few finds have so far been found embedded within this material though a piece of melted glass may turn out to be instructive. Further scatters of charcoal and other evidence of burning suggest some destructive process in the vicinity. However, surviving charcoal fragments to date seem to be composed of small diameter roundwood rather than anything more substantial in appearance. The overall appearance is of a layer of destruction associated with the removal of something structural on the site. The scatter of stones may be suggestive of the remains of a site that has been robbed for use elsewhere. The finds to date are also inconclusive and appear to range from Mediaeval through late/post-mediaeval to early modern.

DISCUSSION

The road can be securely dated to being in use around 1770 (RHP859) and out of use within sixty years (Thomson, 1832). A subsequent road within this woodland area had also been created and gone out of use by 1852 by which time the present road was already in use (RHP 24390). Thomson's atlas further suggests that there was a quite dynamic period of road alteration and realignment here in the century between 1770 and 1868. It even seems to indicate that the short-lived section was constructed and made redundant between 1832 and 1852. This dramatic series of redesigns requires further consideration as the project continues.

The cobbled surface of the Keig road would hardly have stood up to much wear and tear and would have been extremely uncomfortable for carriage passengers. Speculation amongst the group has suggested that it may have formed a hardened surface over which a thin covering of soil and turf might have been readily maintained. Such a surface would have provided comfort and resilience. This well-founded speculation underlines the notion that a more thorough-going analysis of the North-east's pre-modern roads needs to be carried out before the words of such 'Improvers' as Grant of Monymusk are taken at face value. It is worth quoting from a paper recording the still generally-understood nature of Scottish rural roads at this time.

"At the beginning of the improving period, such roads as existed were often impassable in winter. Most goods were carried on horseback, on horse-drawn slips or wheelless carts, or on human backs." "By the early nineteenth century, the post roads were a width of 12 to 15m; the turnpike roads from 9 to 12m wide and metalled from 3.5 to 6m in the middle and there were feeder roads linking up the rural communities, eventually up to 7m in width." (Caird, 1980, 217-218).

It is difficult to see quite where the Keig road fits into this scheme. It is clearly far better than the presumed state of roads prior to the early nineteenth century. But, the Keig road was clearly pre-'Improvement', being replaced in the early 19th century. Neither does its width correspond with the expected norms, though it does have the metalled central section, supposedly symptomatic of the later roads. Further work on these important archaeological features is clearly called for.

Regarding the putative 'mill' site, it is hard to conceive of the reason for the undoubted lade were it not for the powering of a mill. Time will tell whether the site

of Trench 3 is indeed the site of such a mill. The cartographic evidence is clear that there were two mills either side of this site c.1770 (RHP859) - one approximately 100m upstream, the other approximately 100m downstream. Both are noted in rentals of the 1770s/80s (GD52/192;CS313/1045). A mill is recorded at Keig in the rental pertaining to the mid 16th century (GD44/31/1/2; MS588).

There is a possibility that three mills were surviving here contemporaneously. This is suggested by Thomson's atlas of 1832 which clearly depicts them strung out along the burn. If this were the case, there is a possibility that the third mill, under discussion here, was used for purposes other than grain processing. A saw-mill might be one such possibility. The 1st Edition OS shows a saw mill located a couple of hundred yards south of this site and fed by the Don. The earlier one positioned on the smaller Keig Burn may have been found to have been unequal to the task and quickly replaced. However, such considerations await further support from future excavation.

Colin Shepherd for Bennachie Landscapes Fieldwork Group

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Once again, many thanks to the Master of Forbes for support and access to his land. Also to those intrepid members of the Fieldwork Group. They were: Alison Kennedy, Andy Wood, Angela Groat, Barry Foster, Brian Cornock, Carys Thorn, Colin Miller, David Irving, Diane Collison, Ewen Rennie, Harry Liel, Iain Ralston, Marcia Hendry, Paul Bygrave, Peter Thorn, Tim Grundey.

SOURCES

- GD44/31/1/2 Keig rental recorded in 1724 from an original of 1543
 GD52/192 Rental of Keig and Glentown, 1776
 CS313/1045 Kincairgie rental, 1781
 MS588 Manuscript copy rental of the Lordship of Forbes, mid 16th century
 RHP859 Plan of the Lordship of Forbes, c.1770
 RHP 24390 Volume of 30 plans of farms etc. on the estate of Castle Forbes, 1852

SECONDARY SOURCES

John Thomson's Atlas of Scotland, 1832, National Library of Scotland
1st Edition Ordnance Survey 6" map, 1868

REFERENCE

Cair, J.B. 1980 "*The Reshaped Agricultural Landscape*," in Parry and Slater (Eds), The Making of the Scottish Countryside, London, 203-222.