

CEBAC community Archaeology walks – No. 2

The group met at NB 49102 42649. We set off on the agreed route to Loch Beinn Iobhor along a very well made track. Immediately there was a low earthen dyke to our right/south, and after 50m or so we came across the footings of a ruin at NB 49164 42685. It seemed to be straddling the dyke with half uphill and half down. It was a bit short and wide for a blackhouse (leading me to wonder if it could have originally been an example of an Iron Age jellybean shaped house such as found and reconstructed at Bostadh, on Bernera) but otherwise it looked the same as many ancient examples of the traditional medieval – to – post medieval dwelling house of the islands.



Figure 1: Caroline and first structure

Subsequently I have been looking at the Ordnance Survey maps of the area using the NLS website “Side by Side” viewer and it turns out that the structure is marked upon both the 1st edition (1852), the second edition (1888) and the 1944-1970 1:2,500 edition which also shows the modern croft layout, as a “Ruin”, at a corner of a boundary wall – what looks to be the main boundary for Gress farm.

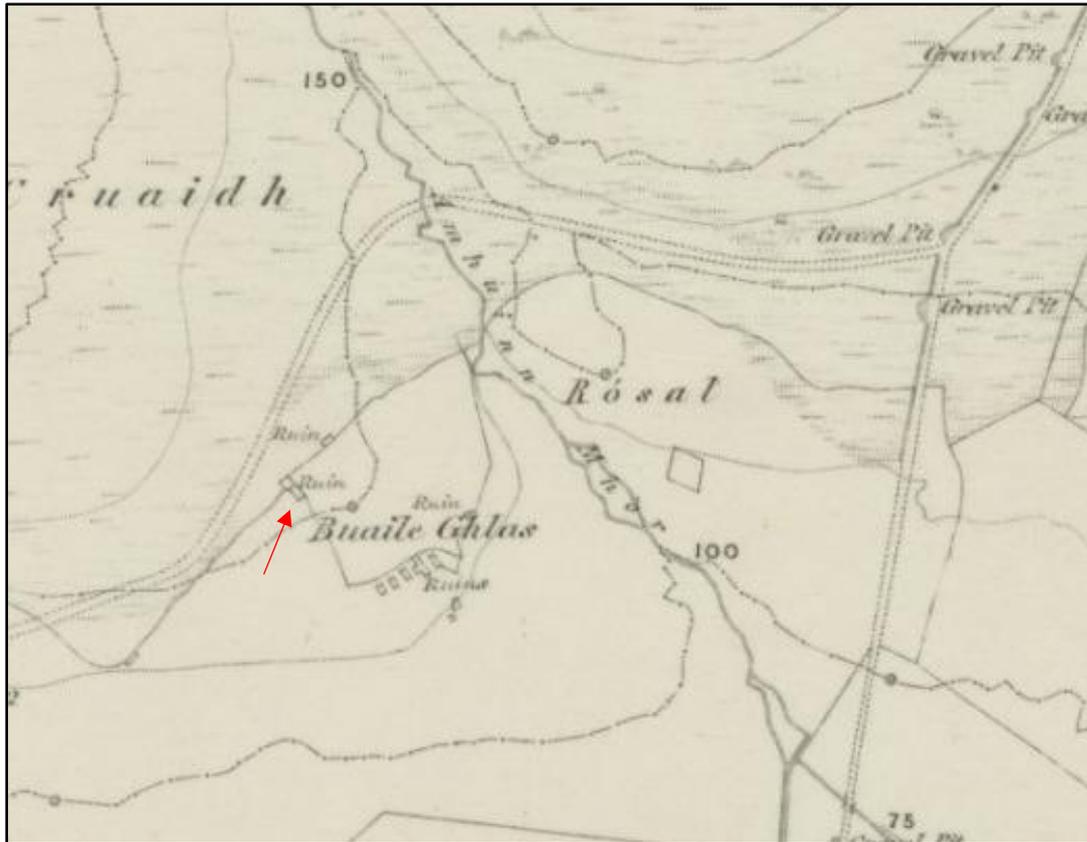


Figure 2: The 1st ruin on the OS 1st edition, 1852.

The lack of shading of the structure indicates it wasn't roofed at the time of surveying. Note the main dyke running bottom left to top right, joining the ruin in the middle of its west wall, splitting at the building and running two directions. The southerly wall skirts around inside of some other ruins, before re-joining the main northerly wall near the Abhainn Mhor. Presumably this wall defines the "Buaille Ghlas" or grey/pale or possibly dawn (?) enclosure. Given its location the first light of dawn probably does light this area up before the lower ground. The main wall is a "Head Dyke" and runs all the way around Gress.

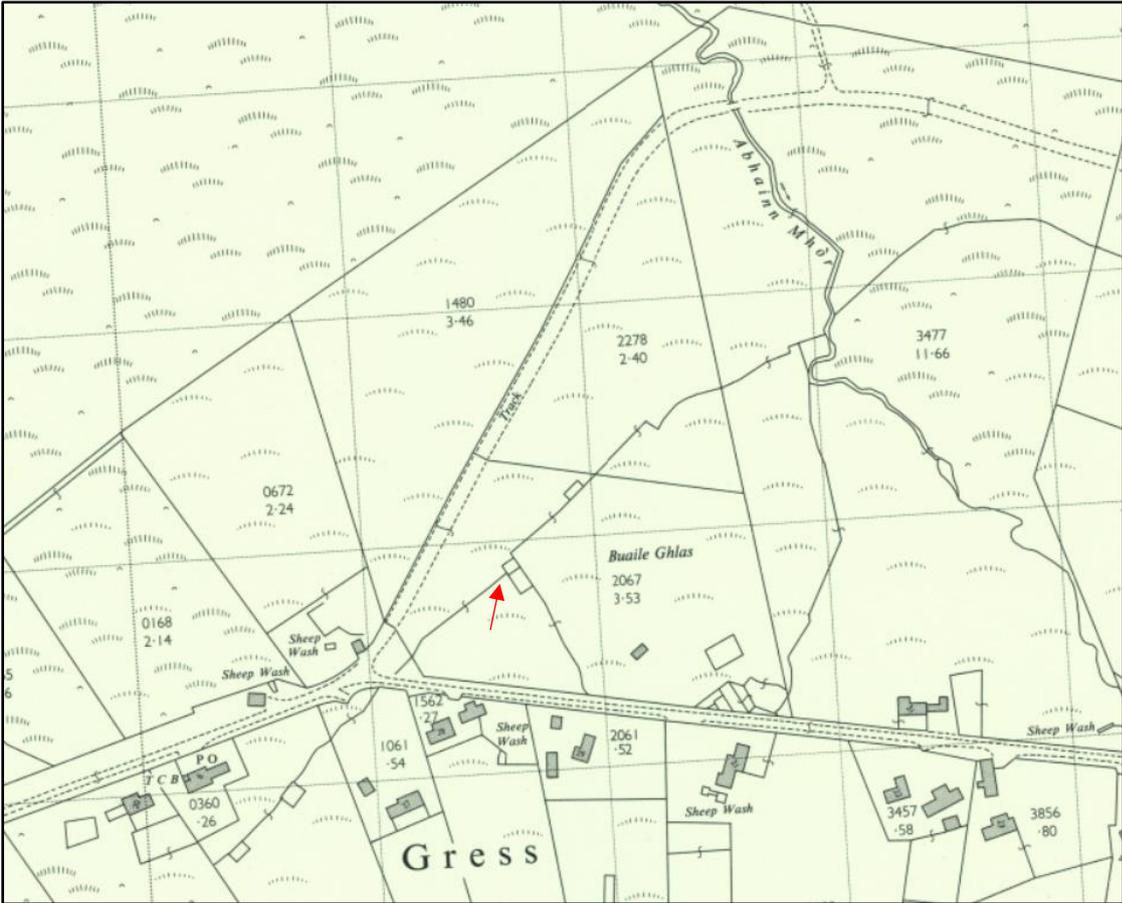


Figure 3: Our structure, part of the old head dyke. From OS 1944-1970 1:2,500

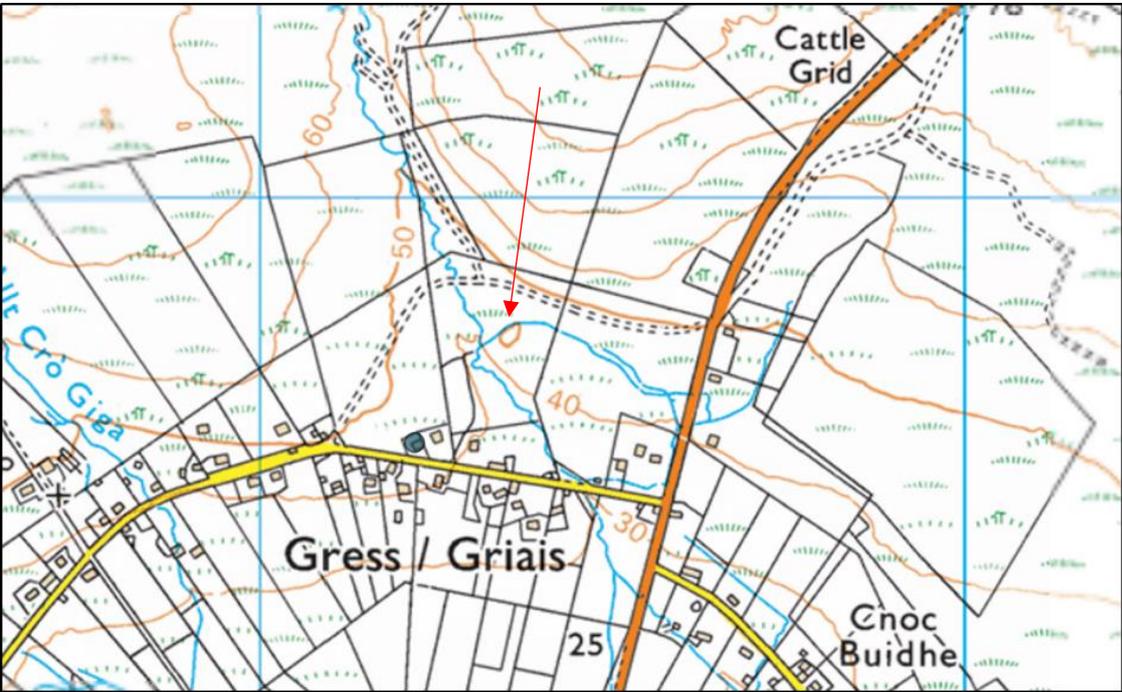


Figure 4: Modern OS/Canmore base map of Buaille Ghlas area.

On the last figure 3, note the track as seen on the other maps, but the dyke/wall not fully marked. The blue dot denotes the Canmore record for “Head Dyke/Township” and refers the reader to the general

location of the ruins seen on the 1st edition (Fig. 1). Part of the actual head dyke is marked near the river but continues east coloured blue as a water course. This is a mistake, the blue line (marked with a red arrow) is in fact the remains of the head dyke, not a water course.

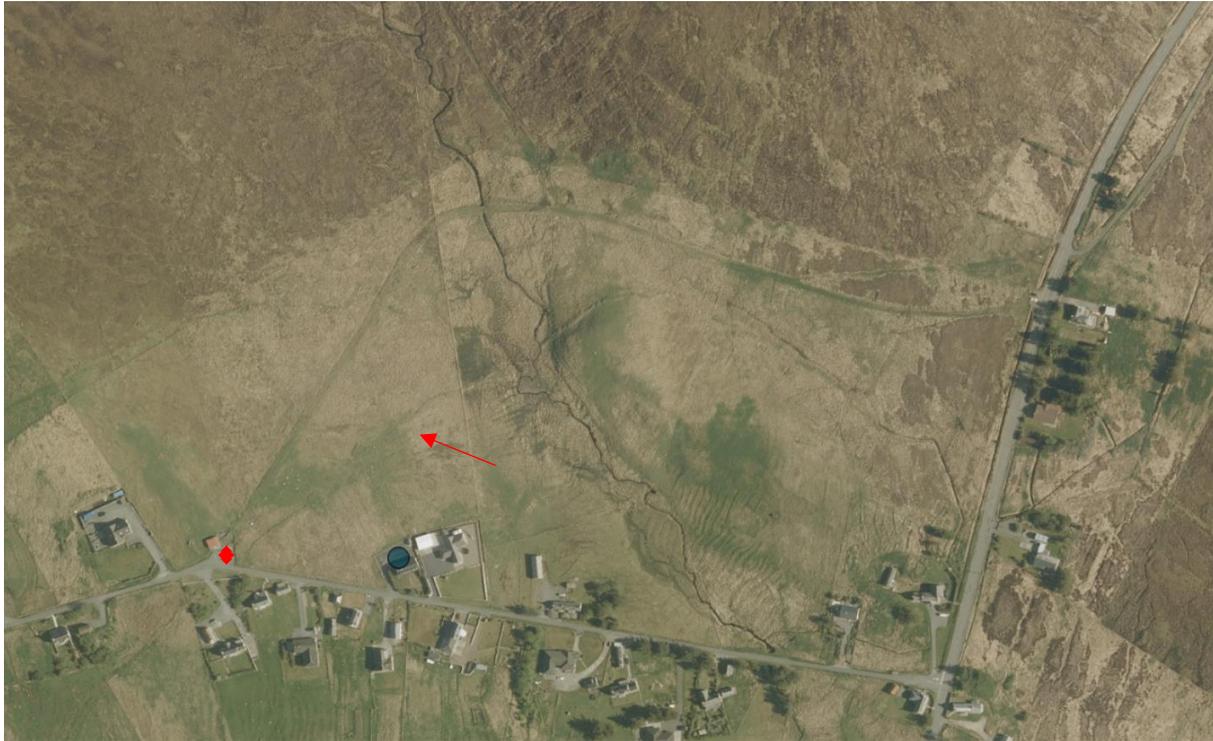


Figure 5: Aerial image courtesy of Canmore. Red diamond is the start of the walk, the arrow is the first structure. Note the old track and the remains of the head dyke visible as it crosses the river, shown as a blue line on the modern OS. Modern fencelines are overlaid on different alignments.

It would be interesting to hear if anyone knew about the Buaille. The unroofed ruins would seem to indicate pre-clearance occupation, before the Gress farm was made. So it seems that the dyke we first noticed was the head dyke of the post clearance Gress Farm, incorporating older buildings and perhaps even using them for stone.

We then took the track up beside the Abhainn Mhor as far as what we suspected was the remains of the Garadh Dubh. On a previous excursion DI and myself had noticed that the blue line of a stream flowing into Loch Beinn Iobhair on the map was in reality a straight earthen dyke with a ditch and wasn't flowing into the Loch at all. Furthermore it could be traced heading out into the moor from the other side of the Loch, and had the nearby name Sidhean a Gharaidh Dubh as well as a Cnoc Mor a Garaidh Duibh and Cnoc Beag a Gharaidh Duibh on earlier editions.

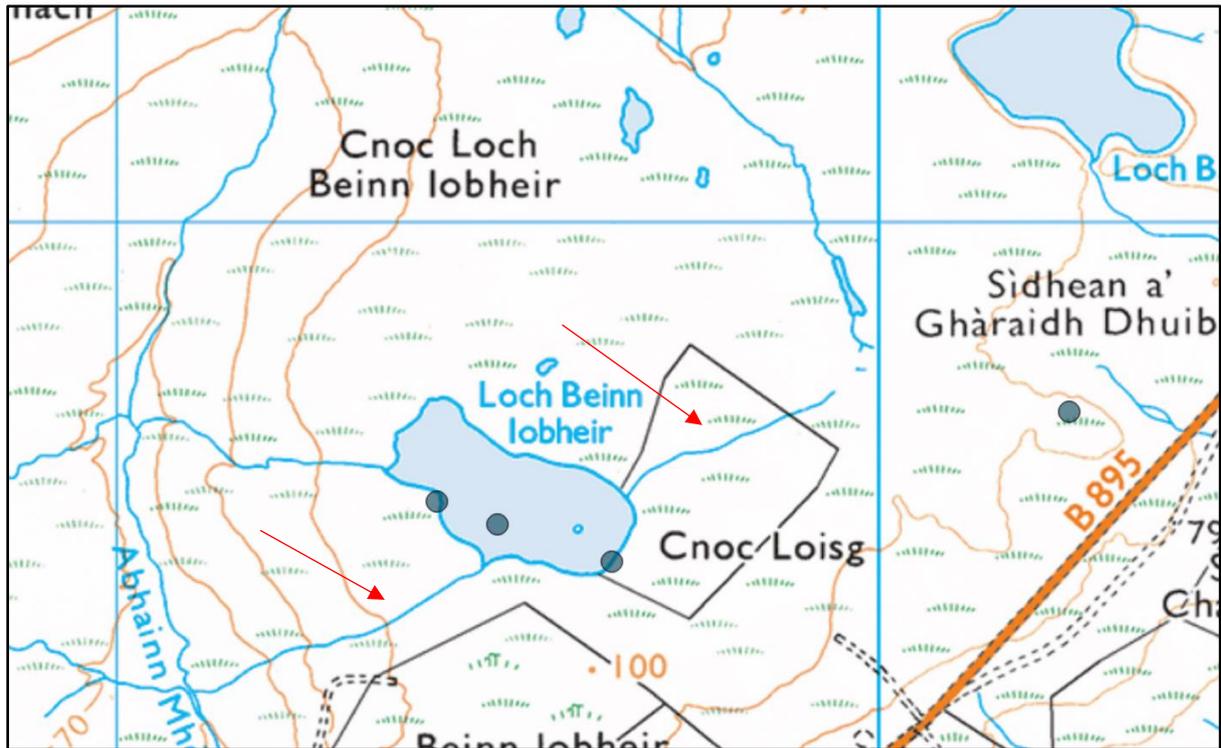


Figure 6: The remarkably straight water courses entering and exiting Loch Beinn Iobhair, which are in fact dykes with bank and ditch works.

For each walk DI had enlisted characters who knew the territory well, and on this walk we were joined by Seumus and Mac the dog. Seumus was a font of interesting information about the moor and Gress in general, making for an enjoyable and educational day out.

We followed the dyke into a marshy area where it grew faint. Another obvious dyke could be seen running up to meet it from the direction of the modern main road (see Figure 5, & 7 below), but the one we were following became impossible to make out on the ground for a section. However, we were armed with aerial photography and maps and, after following a natural lochan for a while it re-emerged as obvious as ever.



Figure 8: The Garadh Dubh as traced on the walk, with CANMORE aerial imagery. Note the separate length running south east to the main road.

SOME HISTORY ABOUT GRESS PASTURE

If you walk along the cliff tops towards the headland (Kneap) you will notice a fairly large area that has been ploughed. This was one of Lord Lever's experimental schemes. What were his intentions? Was he thinking of planting it with something? Nobody seems to know.

Further along you can see a drain and this is one of a number in that area. There is another one starting from the main road near "*Beinn Iomhair*" and leading towards the cliffs at "*Shuilivig Mhor*". Another one can be seen out on the moor on the west side of the main road leading towards "*Loch Corsavat*". These drains were made by the local people during a kind of Job Creation scheme. In the 1880s money was allocated by the Government to the depressed areas and the work to be supervised by the Landlords. They used the money more or less for their own benefit to drain their own pastures. It was said that the wages were 6d a day.

Figure 9: This "Job creation scheme" in the 1880's is in the exact same area and must have followed the pre-existing Garadh Dubh as all of the features detailed here are present on the 1st edition map from 1852.

As we followed the ditch and bank out into the moor, it became more and more obvious:



Figure 10: The Garadh Dubh when it re-appeared after the marshy area past Loch Beinn Iobheir.



Figure 11: Garadh Dubh heading toward Loch Corsabhat.



Figure 12: Garadh Dubh crossing the Feadan area of the Loch Corrasabhat, Muirneag on the horizon.

At the outlet of Loch Corrasabhat we found an earthen and stone damn stretching across the Feadan. The Feadan was running but had clearly been Damned up in the past. The higher beach line could also be seen all the way around the Loch. It was difficult to photograph but clear as a bell on the 1st edition,

where it marked "Sluice". Presumably this mechanism ensured plenty of head of water for the Mill downstream when they had a lot of milling to be done.

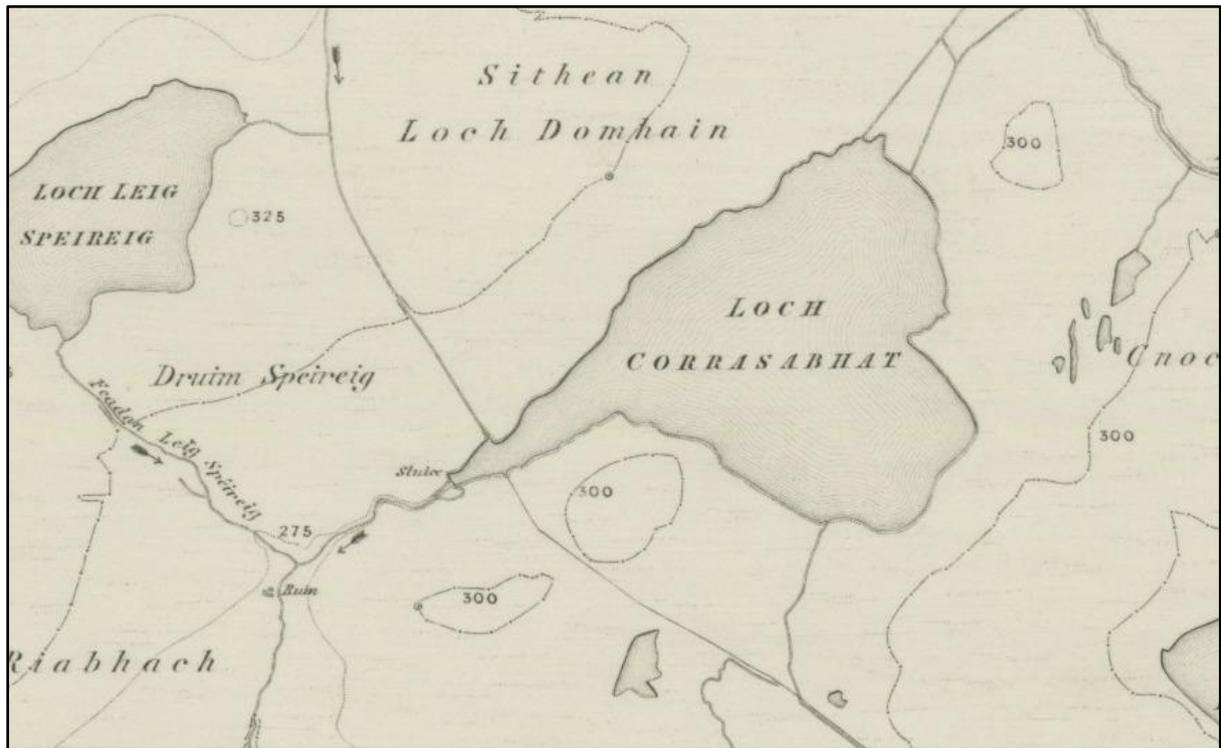


Figure 13: "Sluice" on Loch Corrasabhat just to the east of the Garadh Dubh crossing.



Figure 14: Garadh Dubh with Seumus for scale – the ditch was easily 2m deep at this point.

You would never imagine that something so big was out there! You don't even know it yourself until you are within 10m of it, yet at places like Figure 12 above the ditches were over 2m deep. It would also be hard to tell from aerial photographs alone, as indeed the Ordnance survey proved when they marked some of these features (noticed twice so far in this walk write up) in blue lines as they do for water courses.

We followed the dyke up to Loch Sgeirach Mor, where we were going to have lunch. The dyke follows the western side of the Loch, which had been the plan, but when we got to the Feadan (outlet) at the south corner we saw a small island just off a headland with what looked like piles of loose blocks of stone off to our east and decided to go that way instead.



Figure 15: The blue line shows the continuation of the Garadh Dubh, the green line the route of our walk as it diverged, the small island at the tip of the inverted V where we had lunch. We did not notice the shielings represented by the blue dots close to our route, although we were probably needing our lunch by then and might have missed them!

We were in luck, as the small island off the headland was indeed the site of archaeology of some sort. At NB 49121 45547, a small cairn was the only undeniable feature although this sat upon an ovoid mound of c4m x 10m which contained many separate but jumbled blocks of stone covered in earth and grass, as if they were the remains of a long collapsed building.



Figure 16: The cairn on the headland at Loch Sgeirach Mor.

There were Artic Terns flying around as we ate our sandwiches, and that evening DI emailed to say he had noticed that the moor immediately next to the loch was called “Blar nan Stearnag” or the “Plain of the Terns” on the 1st edition 1852 map – Figure 16 below. This evidence of continuity of wildlife is heartening, and this is obviously a safe place for the Terns.

It has to be added however that Seumus was concerned that there were very few birds on the moor in general this year.



Figure 17: Seumus and DI survey the surroundings of the small headland with cairn and ovoid mound.

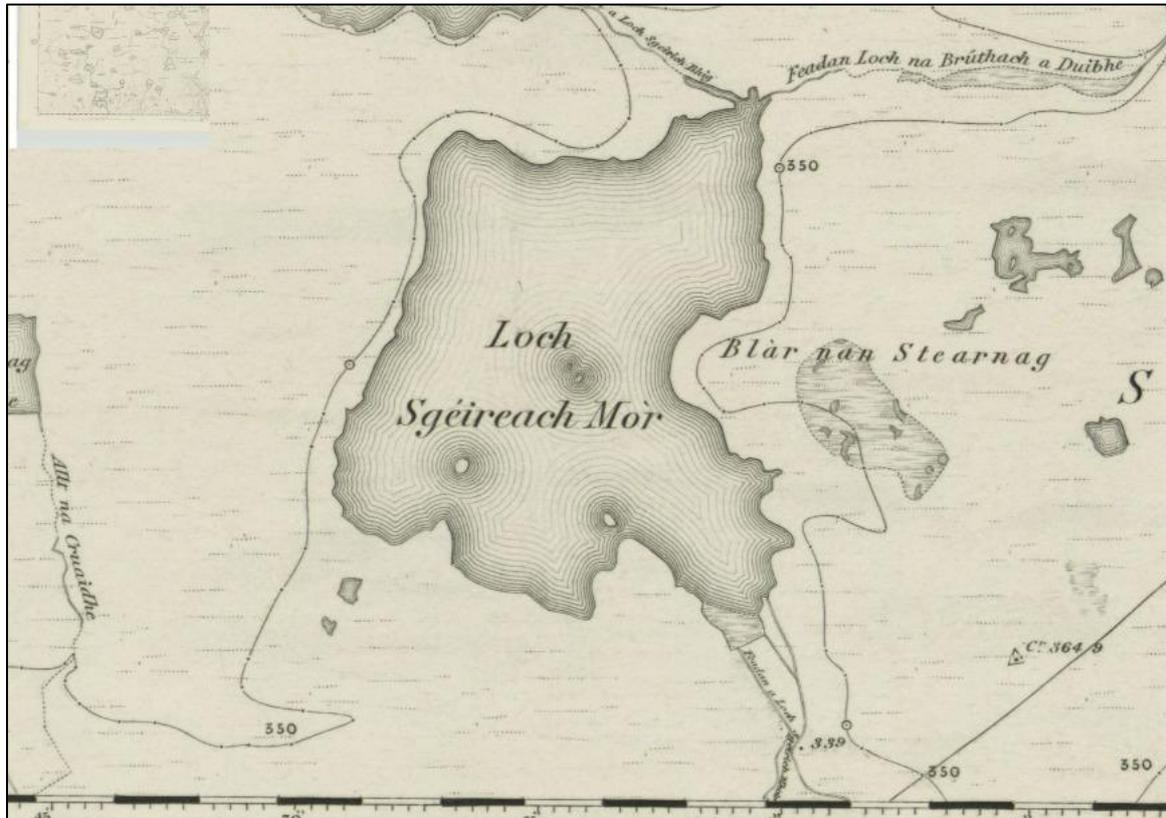


Figure 18: Loch Sgeirach Mòr on the 1st edition. Note the little island we had lunch on and the “Blàr na Stearnag” to the east. Also it is clear that the Feadan (outlet) has had considerable human remodelling – it was possibly another sluice as at Loch Corsabhat.

From there we cut out over the moor in search of a ‘monument’ or cairn on a cnoc which Seumus knew about, away out toward Muirneag, at NB 47894 46159. It was an impressively symmetrical and uniform circular knoll with a similarly perfect circular bank about 3-4m diameter sitting atop, with another small cairn in the middle. It is probably a very old Airigh.



Figure 19: Colin and Mac with the Cairn in the middle of the moor



Figure 20: The cairn in the middle of a circular ring in the middle of the moor. A very old Airigh perhaps?

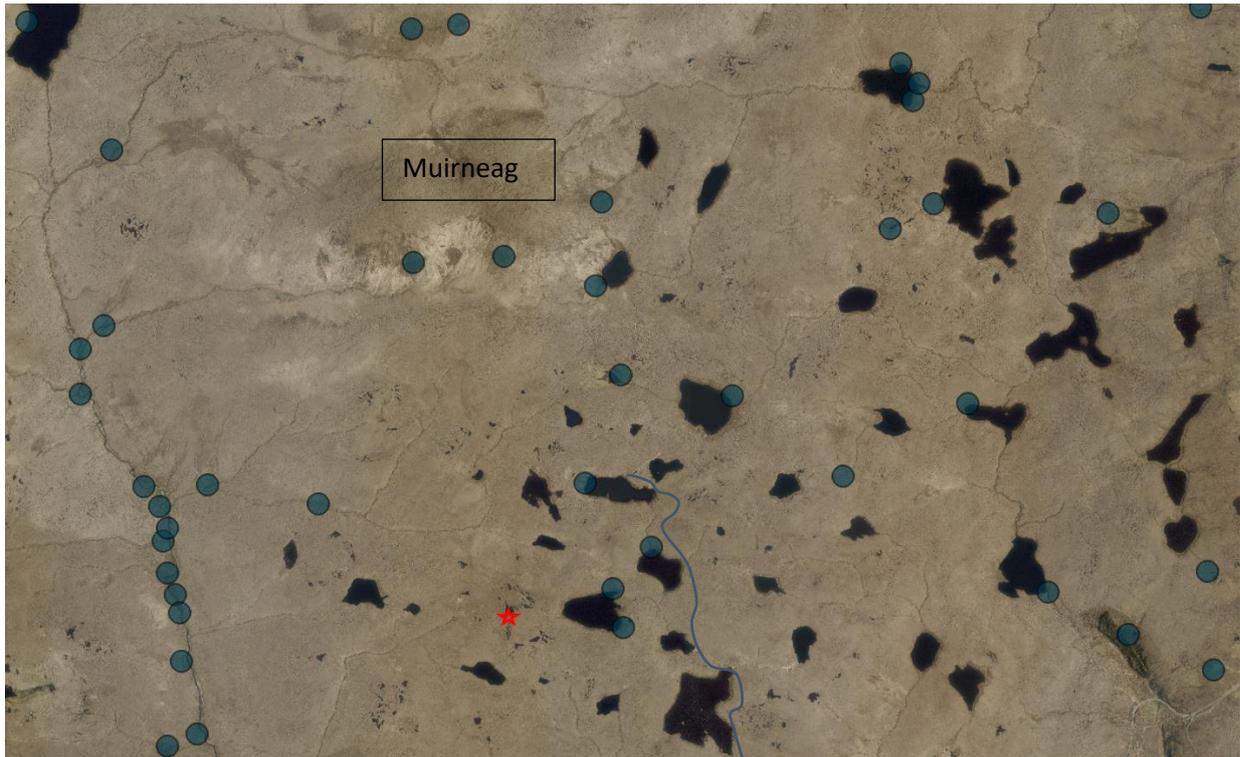


Figure 21: The red star is the location of the cairn and circular footing shown in Fig 15 &16 above. Blue line marks the possible continuation of the dyke we were following as far as can be traced on aerial imagery.

As if that weren't enough excitement for one walk, on the way home we visited the site of an illicit still, as relayed by oral tradition through Seumus. Understandably, there wasn't much to look at! The story went that they almost got caught by the excise men and had to hurriedly bury the copper still. It might even still be there! It was an honour to be shown such a site and it is perhaps best we don't tell everyone where it is in case someone goes digging it up looking for the still.



Figure 22: The Still site. Note the small stream flowing through and a roughly square area cut out of the peat. Perhaps a turf roof covered the area?

It was another fascinating walk. Many thanks to everyone involved.



Figure 23: Seumus and Mac heading for home.