

CEBAC Community Archaeology walks No 6

On our 6th walk we continued our anti-clockwise-from-the-north exploration of the Gress moor, this week exploring the Lochs to the south of Gress River; namely Loch Ullabhat a Clìth, Loch an Eilean and Loch Ullabhat a Deas. Canmore records indicated that we would encounter four archaeological sites on our route:

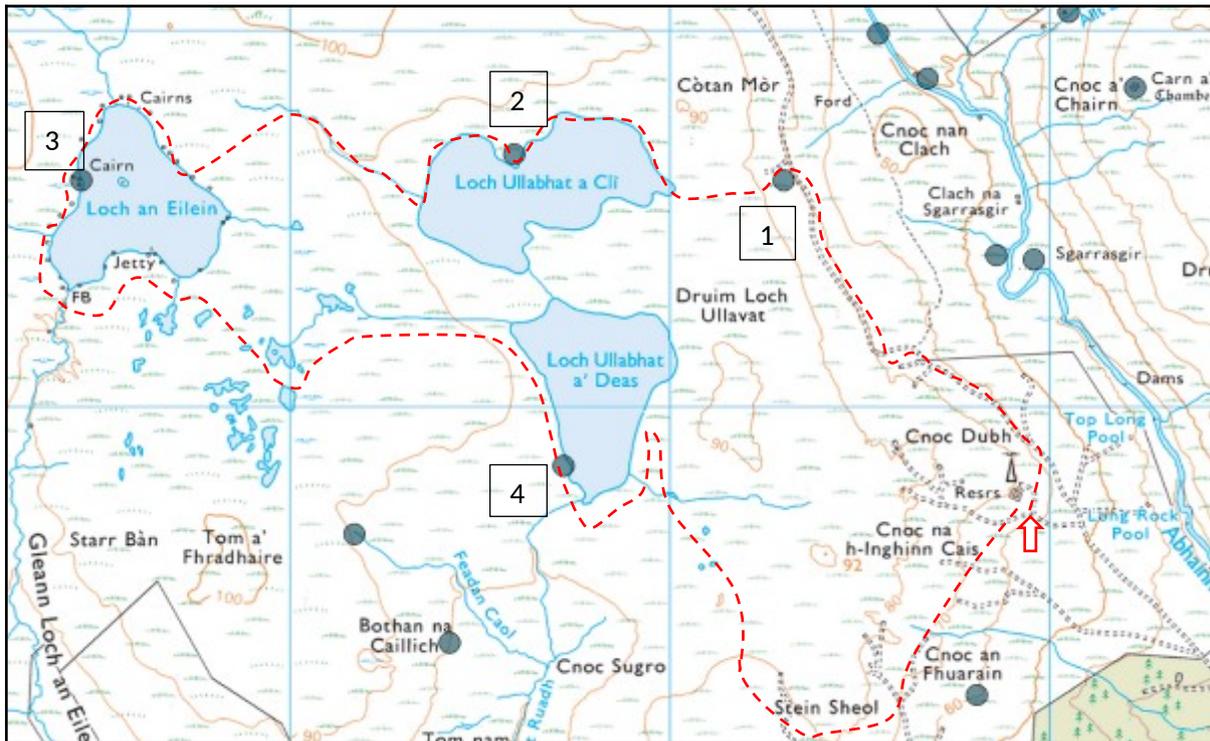


Figure 1: Walk 6, starting from red arrow at Cnoc Dubh, Gress river to right hand side of map.

1. A Head dyke at No. 1 in the figure 1 above - Canmore ID 206823, NGR NB 463 436.

“A head-dyke approximately 550m in length is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Island of Lewis, Ross-shire 1854, sheet 14), but it is not shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1991).” Information from RCAHMS (SAH) 28 January 2002

2. An Airigh at No.2 Canmore ID 136427, NGR NB 4559 4367

“What may be a single roofed shieling-hut is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Island of Lewis, Ross-shire 1852, sheet 14), but it is not shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1991).” Information from RCAHMS (AKK) 27 June 1997.

3. A series of Airigh around the Loch an Eilean, No. 3. Canmore ID 136524, NGR NB 4445 4360

“What may be twenty-eight roofed shieling-huts and one unroofed shieling-hut are depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Island of Lewis, Ross-shire 1852, sheet 14) surrounding the loch. Thirty-two unroofed buildings which may be shieling-huts are shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1973).” Information from RCAHMS (AKK) 27 June 1997.

4. A single Airigh at No.4. Canmore ID 136428, NGR NB 4572 4284.

“What may be a single unroofed shieling-hut is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Island of Lewis, Ross-shire 1852, sheet 14), but it is not shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1991).” Information from RCAHMS (AKK) 27 June 1997.

We found that these records were mostly correct, with the exception that there was no trace of Airigh No.4. However we found an additional three sites which were not on Canmore - No. 5, 6 and 7 on figure 2 below.

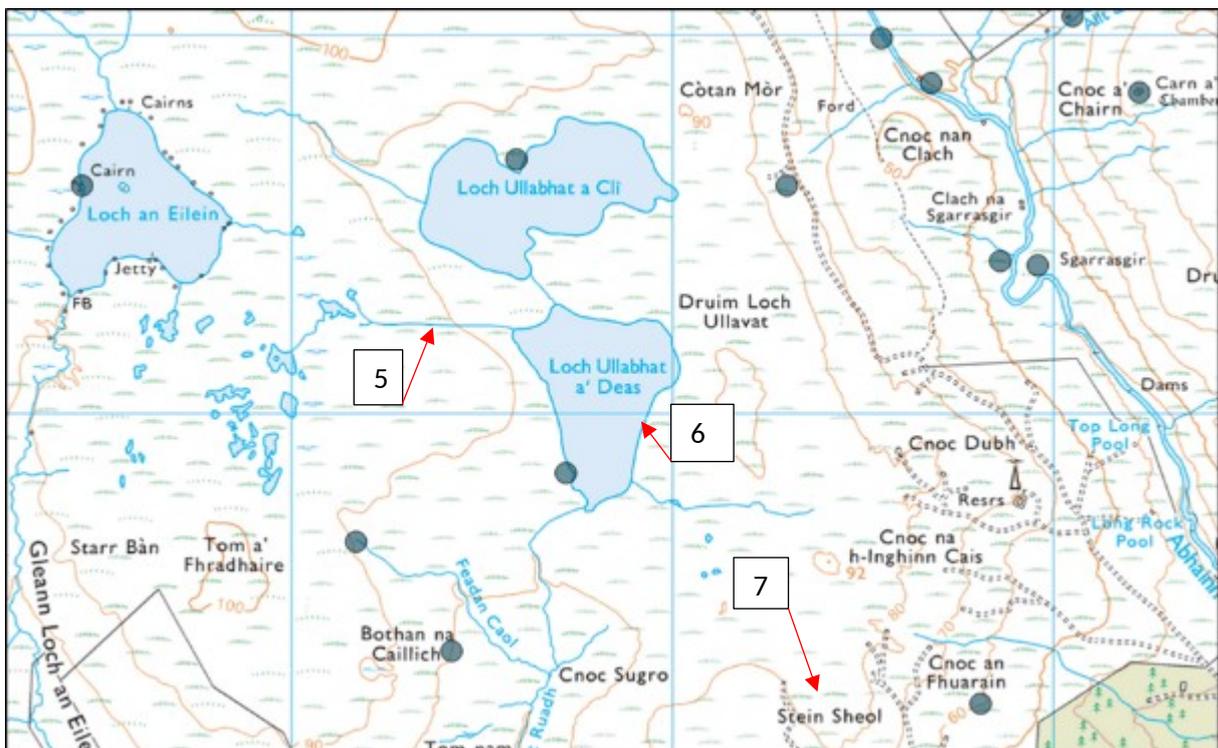


Figure 2: New sites discovered during walk No.6. See text below for descriptions.

We shall take each site and describe in turn.

Site 1: The Head dyke.

Although Canmore states that this is visible on the OS 1st edition, it is not immediately clear that this line represents a Head dyke – it looks just like a water course:

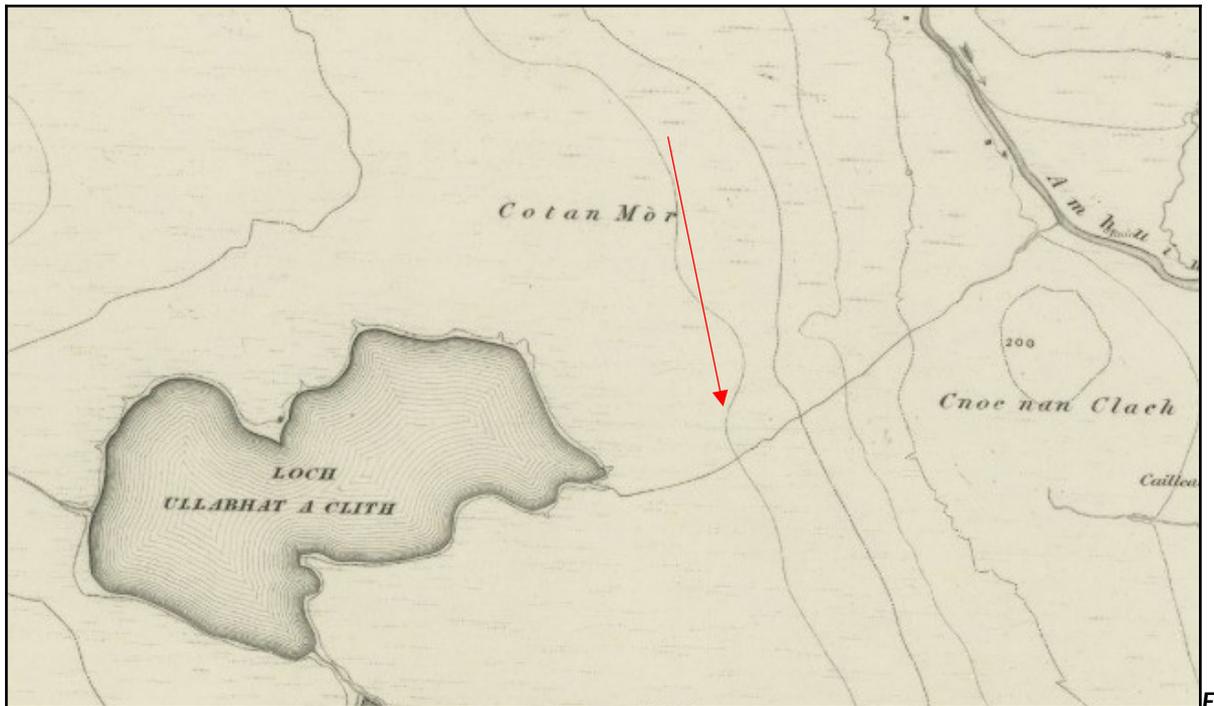


Figure 3: Head dyke on OS 1st edition.

However a closer inspection reveals that this water course goes uphill from the loch to the contour line at the red arrow in Figure 3, then downhill to feed into the “Amhuinn Ghriais” – meaning that it is not a “Feadan” or outlet from the Loch but in fact a ditch with water in it. As is becoming a common finding over the walks, many OS lines are not what they seem at first! Someone from the RCAHMS must have been particularly observant to notice this without actually having been there.

Note the placename “Cotan Mor” just north – the big calf pen. The dyke might well be one side of the pen. To the right there is “Cnoc na Clach” or hillock of the stone – discussed in Walk 4.



Figure 4: The "Head Dyke" - two parallel ditches and a bank in between, facing north. Note the stream it points to, far to the north, "Allt an Tartair", which may be its continuation.

We were definitely aided in our search for this section of head wall by our experiences in other walks: when we saw the configuration of a bank with a ditch either side we instantly saw the resemblance to the Garradh a Mheadhain Oidhche (Midnight wall) on Walk 3.

Interestingly, this Dyke (red dash in Figure 5 below) can be traced nearly all the way north back to the original Garadh Dubh which we traced on Walk 2 (green on Figure 5 below) - although unclear over some of its route up the Allt an Tartair, it is very clear on aerial imagery a bit farther north - No 2 in Figure 5 below.

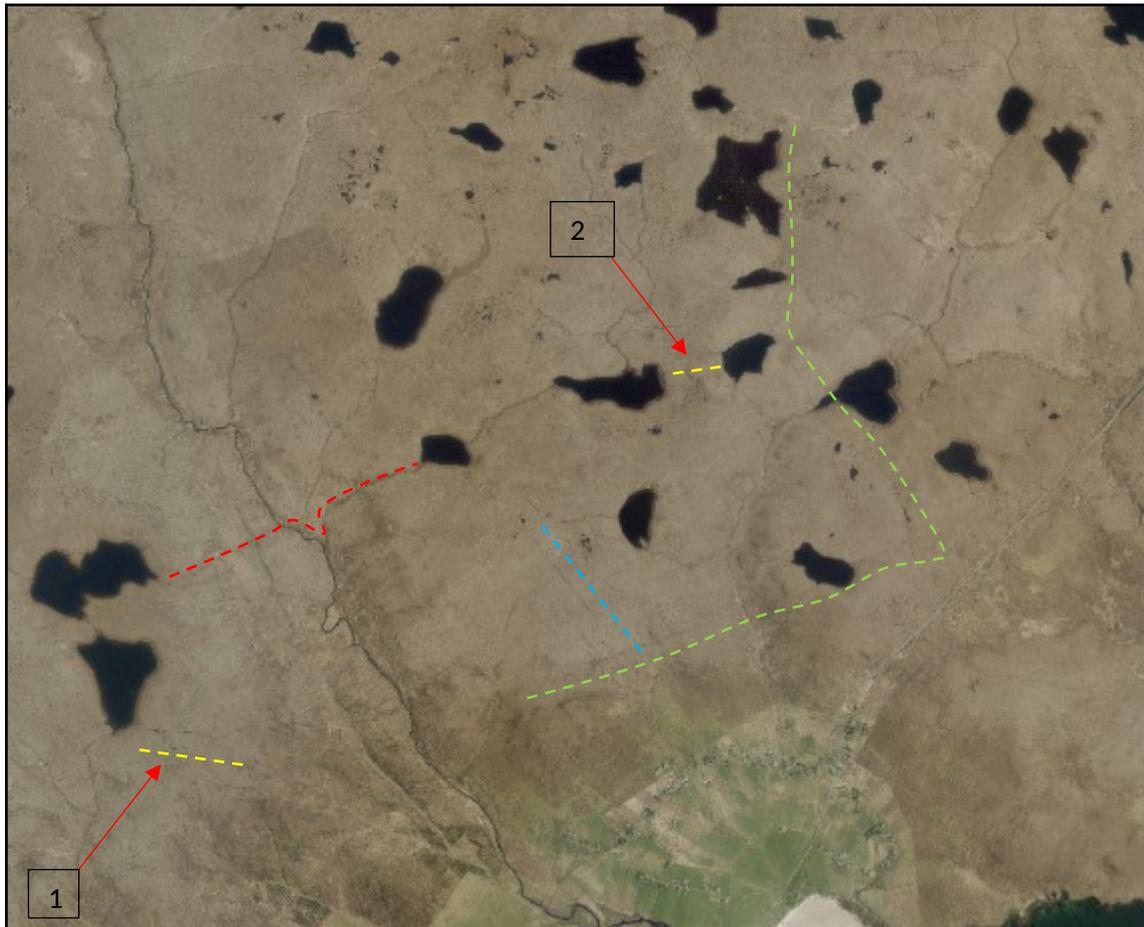


Figure 5: Head dyke/ An Garadh Dubh as traced on this walk in red dash. An Garradh Dubh as traced on Walk 2 in green dash, Garradh a Mheadhain Oidhche/ Midnight wall walk 3 in blue dash. Two more sections spotted from aerial imagery in yellow dash and numbered 1 & 2, illustrated in more detail below.



Figure 6: Possible section of Garadh Dubh spotted from aerial imagery labelled No 1 in Figure 5



Figure 7: Possible section of Head dyke spotted from aerial imagery, labelled No 2 in Figure 5.

Site 2 - Airigh nan Aonn Oidche (Shieling of the one night) Canmore ID 136427, NGR NB 4559 4367.

Site 2 was a lone Airigh of Anne Campbells "Rectilinear" type, i.e. mostly oval but with two internal right angled corners at the opposite end to the fire.



Figure 9: Site No 2

DI had a story about it, in which two sisters were sleeping there and heard something come out of the loch and walk around the Airigh. They were so scared that they never returned, hence the name "Shieling of the one night".

Interestingly, there are many shielings with this name. There are also many stories linking moorland shielings with the Each Uisge, or water horse..

In discussion later we thought it interesting why this Loch had only one shieling and Loch an Eilean many - any ideas why this should be would be very welcome. Is it better for fishing?

An interesting observation we made was that the water in this loch - Loch Ullabhat a Cli - and the water in the slightly lower one it flowed into - Loch Ullabhat a Dheas - was clearly a lot higher at some point - see Figure 10 below. Although there is a chance that this was natural, it could also have been due to them being damned up in order to store water for milling grain, as was Loch Corsabhat (NB 49457 44480) which we explored on our second walk. The previous levels of water look to have been at a greater height above the present in the lower loch (Loch Ullabhat a Dheas) indicating the levels of both lochs were equal at this time.

These lochs flow out into Allt Ruadh which turns into the Allt Cearagol which we will explore in the next walk. These do not have any mills recorded upon them.



Figure 10: Loch Ullabhat a Cli (top) and Loch Ullabhat a Dheas (bottom) showing the once higher water line, suggested to be due to their being dammed up in the past. No trace of a damn was noted on the walk however, and no mills are recorded on the stream which flows from them.

Site 3: The Shieling group at Loch an Eilean

This Loch had numerous shielings all the way around its shores – 28 in 1852 and 32 in 1973 according to Canmore. We spotted 20. However we weren't searching exhaustively, folk wanted to walk and not have to stop so often, and I was trying to keep up! Also, as noted before, they are very difficult to usefully photograph. Again, the solution would seem to be using a Drone to fly slowly over and get a good aerial shot of each one – which might be done in the future. We saw all varieties of Shieling type here. Most of the shielings were of Anne Campbells "Rectilinear" type, except for one which was clearly of the "Curvilinear" type, and one which may have been the footings of a beehive, "both" or circular corbelled type. There were also four rectangular corrugated iron Shielings from the 70/80/90s a few of which are still in use.



Figure 11: an example of a “Rectilinear” shaped Airigh, with squared corners to the opposite end from the fire. NB 44672 43685.



Figure 12: The footings of a Beehive, 'Both' or circular corbelled shieling with one entrance, c. NB 44383 43360.



Figure 13: A modern Shieling, next to an older shieling, both now abandoned. NB 44561 43812.



Figure 14: One of the memorial cairns.

Two cairns were erected upon the shore to the northern side around NB 44600 43796, said to have been built because a boy drowned; one cairn where he went in and one for where he came back after a rescue attempt.

The island in the middle of Loch an Eilean is known to have the remains of buildings upon it, as relayed to the Commun Eachdraidh by Alastair "Tuxy". Alastair had also kindly offered the use of a boat which had been stored in a Shieling, but we did not have time to explore on this first occasion. In a letter to the Commun Eachdraidh, Tuxy had said:

The Exchange
Stafford Terrace
Brora
Sutherland
KW9 6QW

tel:01408621464

Dear Anna

I am writing to you to give you information about a historical site on Vatisker moor. The site I refer to consists of a ruin of a four roomed stone built building [probably a house] on the little island in the middle of Loch an Eilean.

My parents had a hut [sheiling] out there by the side of the loch in the 1950,s. We used that hut until about the year 2000.

there were a few other huts around the loch which belonged to other Vatisker crofters. One of the hut owners had a small boat which my brothers and I as children used to go across to the island.

Today the Island is very overgrown. a number of years back my Late uncle planted a number of trees on the island. There is a stone path underwater which leads out to the island. This path does not run straight, it has a sharp turn in it. Over the years one or two good swimmers have followed the path across to the island. This ruin looks to have been a place of refuge from a bygone age. The size suggests a long term occupation.

I still have a hut out by the loch and a small serviceable boat so access is not to difficult. Very few people go out to Loch an Eilean these days as very few work sheep or peats.

Covid permitting I hope to visit there later this year. I would love to have a professional archeologists opinion of the site as it has intrigued me for most of my life. I will be 74 this year which is why I gfeel I must pass on this information before it is too late.

I am known locally in the Back area as Alistair Tuxy. Although I have been away from the island and the village for many years I have been back two or three times a year up until Covid put a stop to that. I have always been interested in my local history and heritage.

Pease feel free to contact me if I can be of any help.

Regards

Alistair

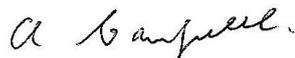


Figure 15: Letter from Alastair Tuxy.

Instead DI and myself returned at a later date, after the main walks had been completed. I swam out with a snorkel and mask so we could check for any artefacts in the surrounding waters; DI took Tuxy up on his offer of the boat.



Figure 16: A very small boat!

Once on the island it was clear that there had been substantial buildings here, and most probably a succession of them. It was very difficult to get a decent picture of any of it though! The latest seemed to have been a shieling type structure with a gable:



Figure 17: Gable?

There seemed to be at least two shielings; however it was clear that there were earlier structures underneath which the shielings had been made out of. Most obvious was a substantial curving wall – which seemed to have originally been a complete circle - over 1 metre tall on its inside and probably around 7m in diameter. It was only extant for around 6 or 7 metres of its length.

It is the authors' opinion that this is highly likely to have been part of an iron-age structure such as a wheel house or jelly bean house like the reconstruction at Bosta. Unfortunately however no definitive proof, such as Iron Age pottery, could be found in the surrounding water or eroding from the island.



Figure 18: Curving section of wall over 1 metre tall on its inside where the ferns are growing.

A pamphlet on the village of Vatisker produced by the old Comann Eachdraidh Sgìre a Bhac in the 1980s had the following to say about Loch an Eilein:

This is a pleasant loch and most of the Vatisker cattle were here in the summer. There was well over twenty shielings here, and people continued to go to them until about 10 years before World War Two.

There are two cairns on the North side of the loch that are a memorial to a young boy who drowned whilst swimming in the loch. He was called Donald Macrae. One cairn was made where he went out from the shore and the other shows where his body was taken ashore.

People at the time habitually added a stone or two from the loch bank as they walked past and added them to the cairns.

There is an island in the loch with interesting features. Traces of a stone building with four rooms and a surrounding wall may still be seen on it.

A path runs out to the island but it is underwater and only somebody very familiar with its route could use it. It has every appearance of being a place people used to shelter from their enemies.

“Four rooms” with a “surrounding wall” could conceivably have been the cells of a wheelhouse within its outer wall – or indeed four shielings built into the remains of a larger circular structure. One way to gain more evidence would be to return in winter when the foliage is low and draw an accurate plan of the remains.

Site 4

There was no sign of a single Airigh as shown at Figure 1, No.4, Loch Ullabhat a Dheas.

Site 5:

Site 5 was a remarkably straight line spotted on the map in preparation for the walk, which aerial imagery further suggested was a human made feature. As it turned out it was indeed a massive ditch, but with no bank, quite unlike any Garadh Dubh or Head dyke feature we have seen so far. The spoil from the ditch must have gone somewhere – but where? Perhaps it was deposited on both sides and sank down so as to be not visible any more. It had obviously filled up a lot since being made and was treacherous to cross. It ran for 490m. It is marked upon the 1852 1st edition.

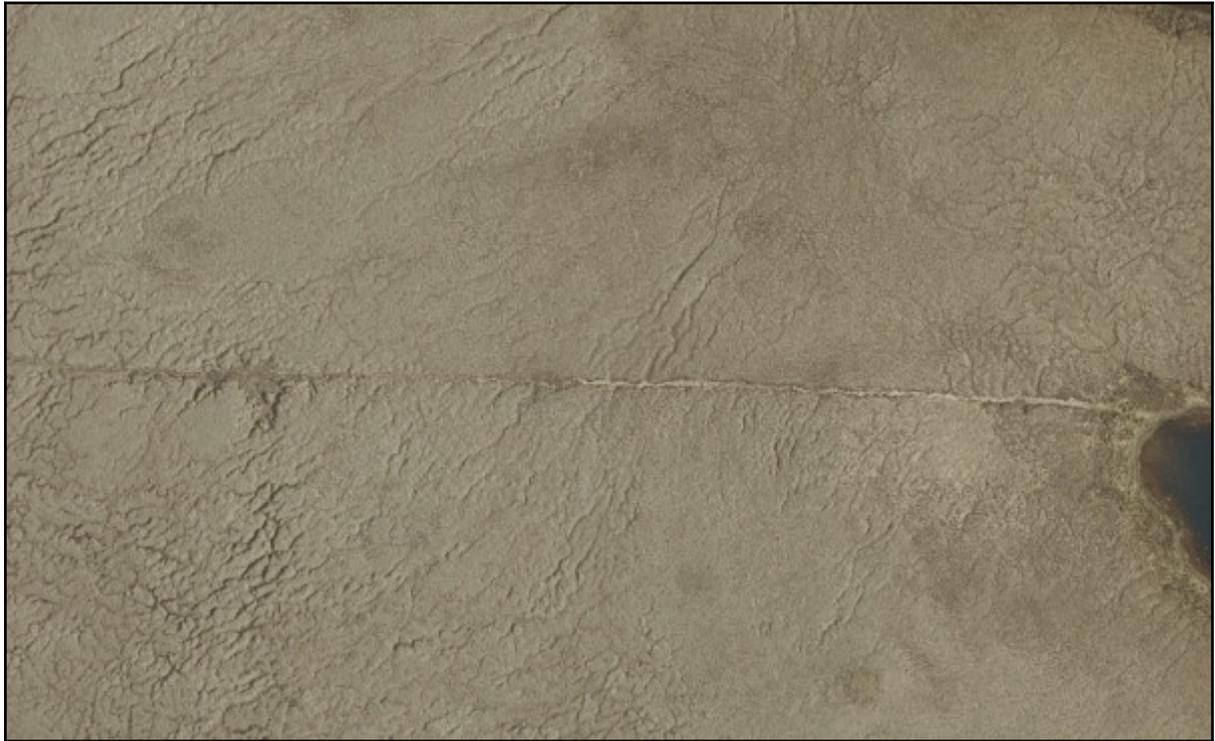


Figure 19: Site 5 in aerial imagery



Figure 20: Site 5 - massive man-made ditch draining into Loch Ullabhat a Dheas.

Site 6

Site 6 was a tiny island in Loch Ullabhat a Dheas, with a hint of a causeway leading out to it on the aerial imagery.



Figure 21: Site 6, tiny island with a causeway

Luckily it was a roasting hot day and we weren't that far from the vans, so I decided to see if there was a causeway all the way out. This involved wading in up to my waist, balancing precariously on underwater boulders. Very luckily, one of the group, Alison Fox, had a waterproof camera! I used two sticks to steady myself, and could tell that the water was much deeper either side of the causeway I was on, well over 1m deeper each side near the island. The water in the loch was probably pretty much as low as it gets so we wondered why the causeway was so deep under the surface - had the loch been much shallower in the past? Or could it have been as the Commun pamphlet about Loch an Eilean states above, that the path was only traversable by those who knew it well?

Although it may not look like much there was definitely archaeology upon the island in the form of a low cairn, around 2.5-3m diameter. There is a slight possibility that it may have been a Beehive type corbelled Shieling which had collapsed in on itself. It reminded us of the cairn on the small island where we had lunch on Walk 2, at Loch Sgeirach Mor, NB 49113 45537.



Figure 22: A low cairn was discovered upon the tiny island in Loch Ullabhat a Dheas



Figure 23: The small cairn on the tiny island on Loch Sgeirach Mor, Walk 2

The island was re-visited at a later date and the water around it checked for artefacts with the aid of a wetsuit, goggles and snorkel. No artefacts were discovered.

Site 7

The final find of the day occurred when we took a small detour on our way back to vans in order to see the small hill called “Stein Sheol” on the maps (see No 7 Figure 2 above), and depicted in gothic script on the early OS editions – usually a sign of archaeology, yet strangely there is no record marked on CANMORE for the site.

We found three main areas which might be called “settlement mounds” – green knolls covered in building stones which poked through the grass, but which were lying randomly in no discernible pattern or shape. The site had remarkably good views over Gress, Back and all of Loch a Tuath/ Broadbay down to Stornoway, but no fresh water source close by, being located on high ground between the Gress and Back Rivers.

The locally renowned expert in the place names of Gress and Back, Murdo Stal, was consulted about the name. In his opinion “Stein Sheol” means “Stony Hill”, in Old Norse. It seems relevant to point out that all the other names in the area are Gaelic or Gaelicised Norse, whilst this place is a purely

Norse name. This would seem to indicate that either a) this site was already a landmark when the Norse first arrived, or b) it is an early Norse site.

We speculated that it could have been a Neolithic chambered tomb like the Carn a Mharc. It seemed to be in a similar landscape location, on the edge of the high ground overlooking the fertile plain below, with extensive views in all directions.



Figure 24: Stein Sheol, D.I. and Bess the dog.

Another fine adventure!