

CEBAC Community archaeology walks No. 8

This week we walked up the Coll river. Again, it was said to have illicit stills and there were shielings aplenty. One shieling in particular, Tigh Thaisader, (Site 3 in Figure 3 below) had a story about two giants that lived there and had stolen sheep from across Loch a Tuath. Unfortunately the route had not been grazed and was very overgrown, making walking difficult and spotting archaeology impossible in places.



Figure 1: The route

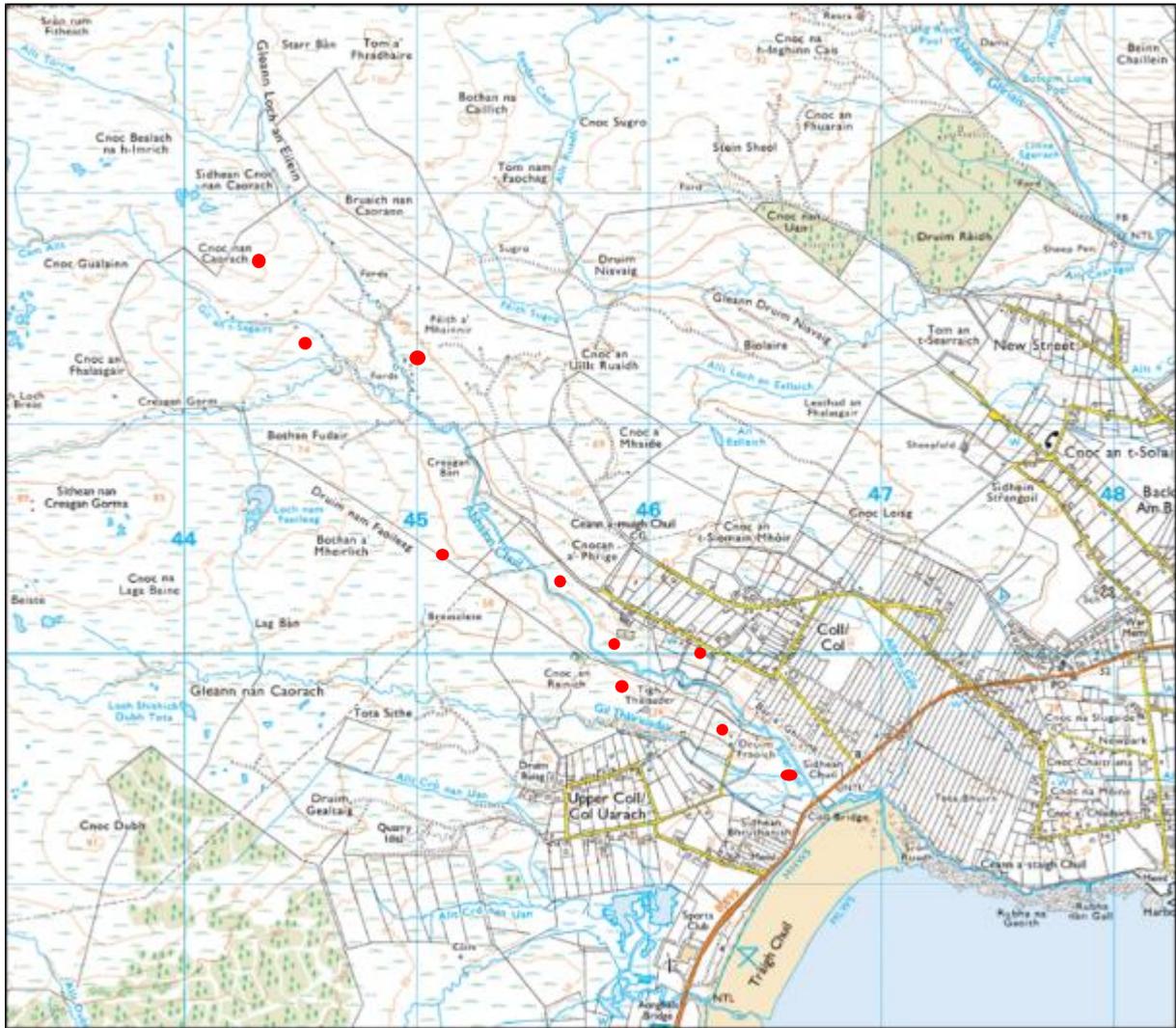


Figure 2: Sites of interest

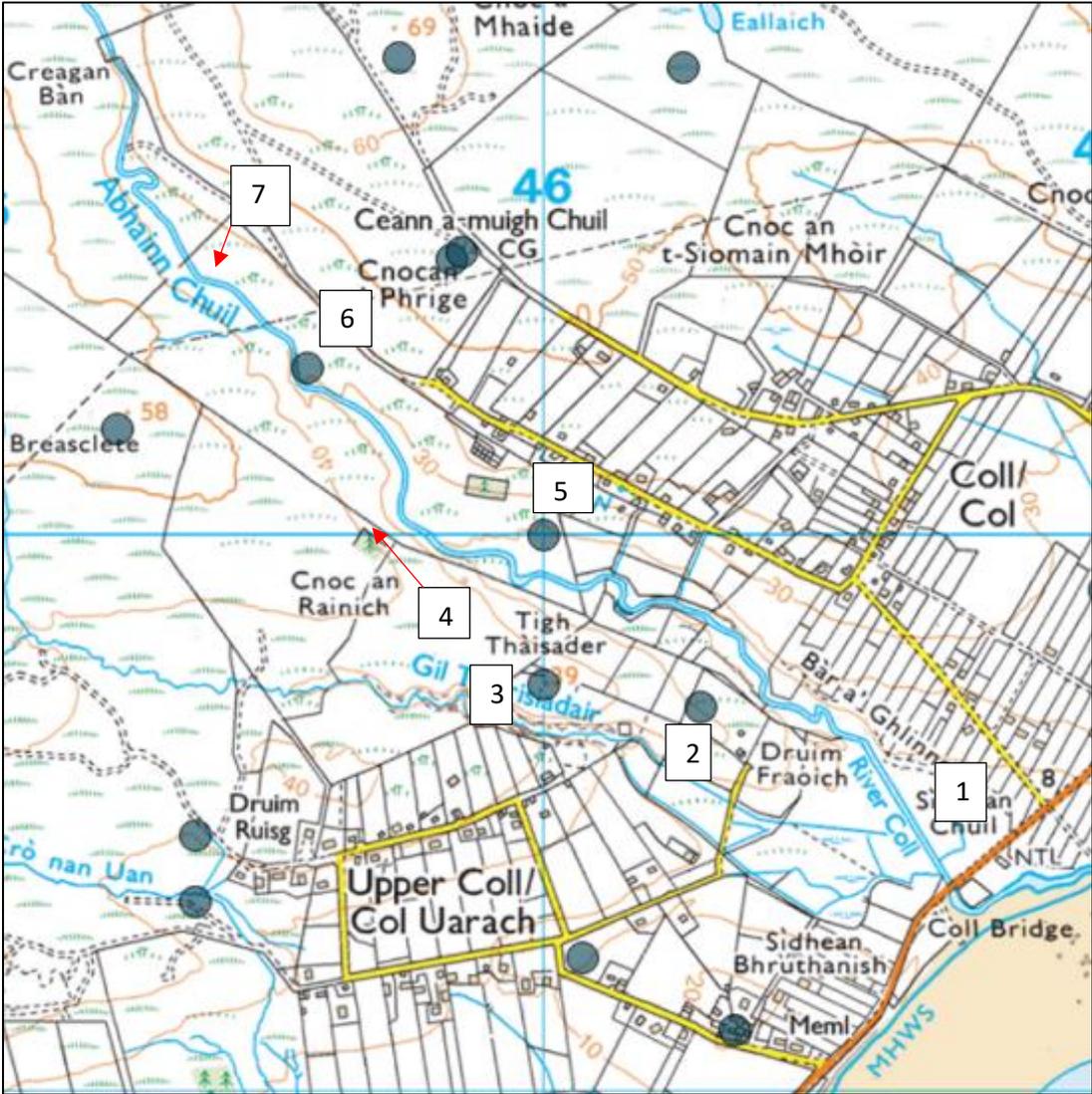


Figure 3: Sites of interest, lower stretch, numbered

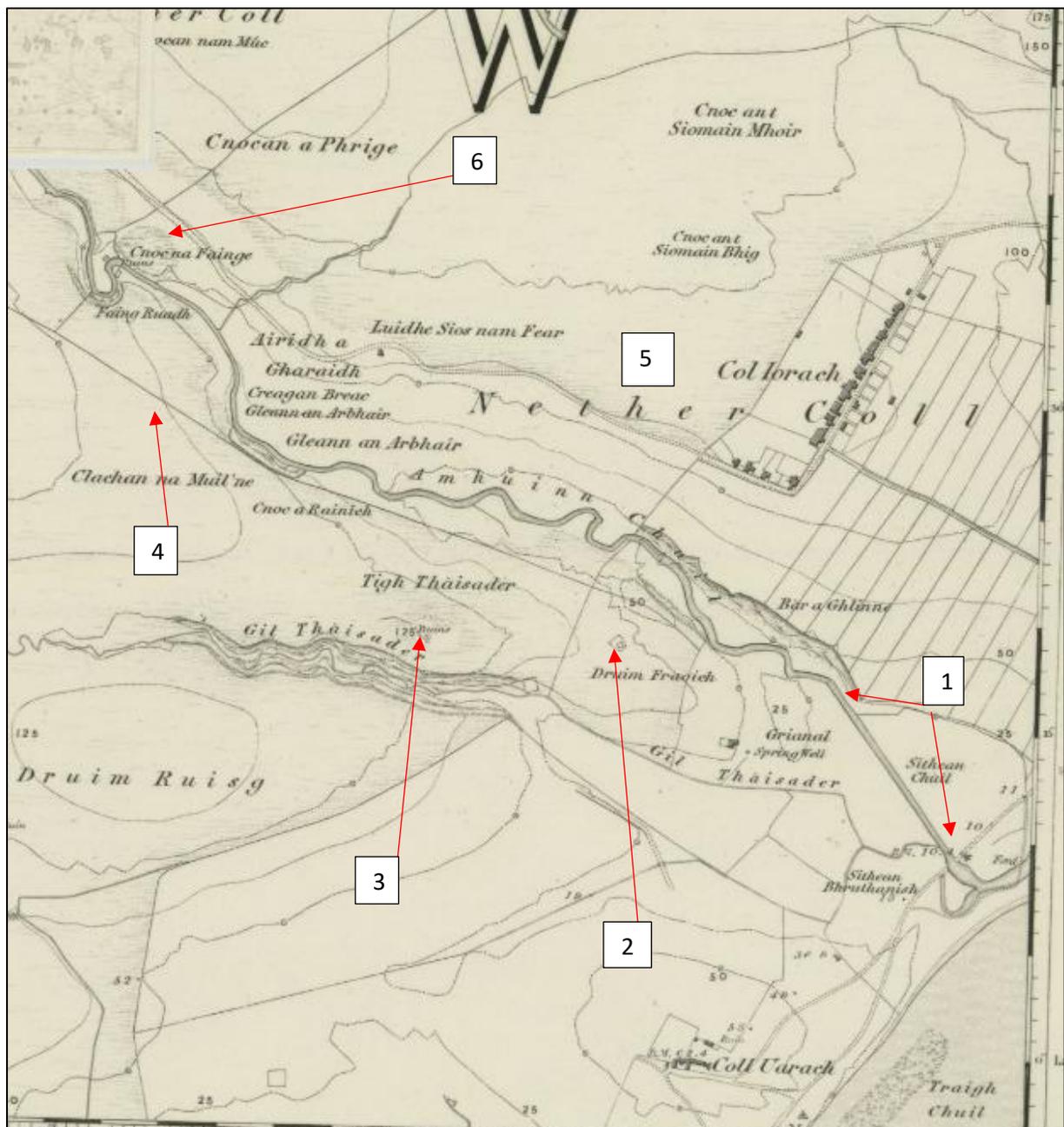


Figure 4: 1st edition OS of figure 3 showing the same sites of interest

Site 1: Am Bu' Ruadh

The Coll River has been straightened out by human hand. Margaret Martin, a local who made a place name study of the area, reports that at “Am Bu' Ruadh”/ The red Meander, at NB 4659 3952, the lower reaches of the river was

“This is a large former meander of the Coll river which resulted from a major undertaking, well over a 100 years ago, to straighten the course of the river.” Martin, Margaret “The placenames of Coll” (19??).



Figure 5: The location formerly known as Am Bu Ruadh, now straightened out as can be seen. The straight section between the arrows is 221m long.

Site 2: Druim Fraoich NB 46265 39684

What may be one unroofed shieling-hut and one enclosure are depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Island of Lewis, Ross-shire 1852, sheet 14). This site lies within the head-dyke system associated with the township NB43NE 16.

No structures are shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1988). Information from RCAHMS (AKK) 27 June 1997.

No trace could be found of this site. However the entire area is no longer grazed, making it far more difficult to see archaeological remains, so some trace might remain.

Site 3: Tigh Thaisader NB 45994 39745

What may be two unroofed shieling-huts are depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Island of Lewis, Ross-shire 1852, sheet 14). This site lies within the head-dyke system associated with the township NB43NE 16.

One unroofed building which may be a shieling-hut is shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1988). Information from RCAHMS (AKK) 27 June 1997.

This place was said to be home to two giants. The story goes that they carried a boat over the Coll sands so as not to be caught, then rowed across to Point to steal sheep.

This site was found. It occupied a large rounded hill surrounded by numerous traces of feannagan and traces of a large enclosure around them. On the summit of the hill lay a rectangular building, like a blackhouse but smaller, c.9m x 4m and so possibly a Spring house or Taigh-earraich. Next to it lay the footings of a circular structure which may have originally been a Beehive Shieling.



Figure 6: The Taigh-earraich or Spring house



Figure 7: remains of a Beehive?



Figure 8: The beehive like structure was part of a dyke running west. The small hole dug may have been a careless metal detectorist.

Site 4: Boundary Dyke

Nearby a massive earthwork dyke ran straight out into the moor. This had at least two ditches and two banks.



Figure 9: Boundary dyke, running parallel with modern fence. Looking back toward the Minch



Figure 10: Boundary dyke, looking out into the moor. Note the double bank one either side of the modern fence, and notch on the horizon where the feature continues into the moor.

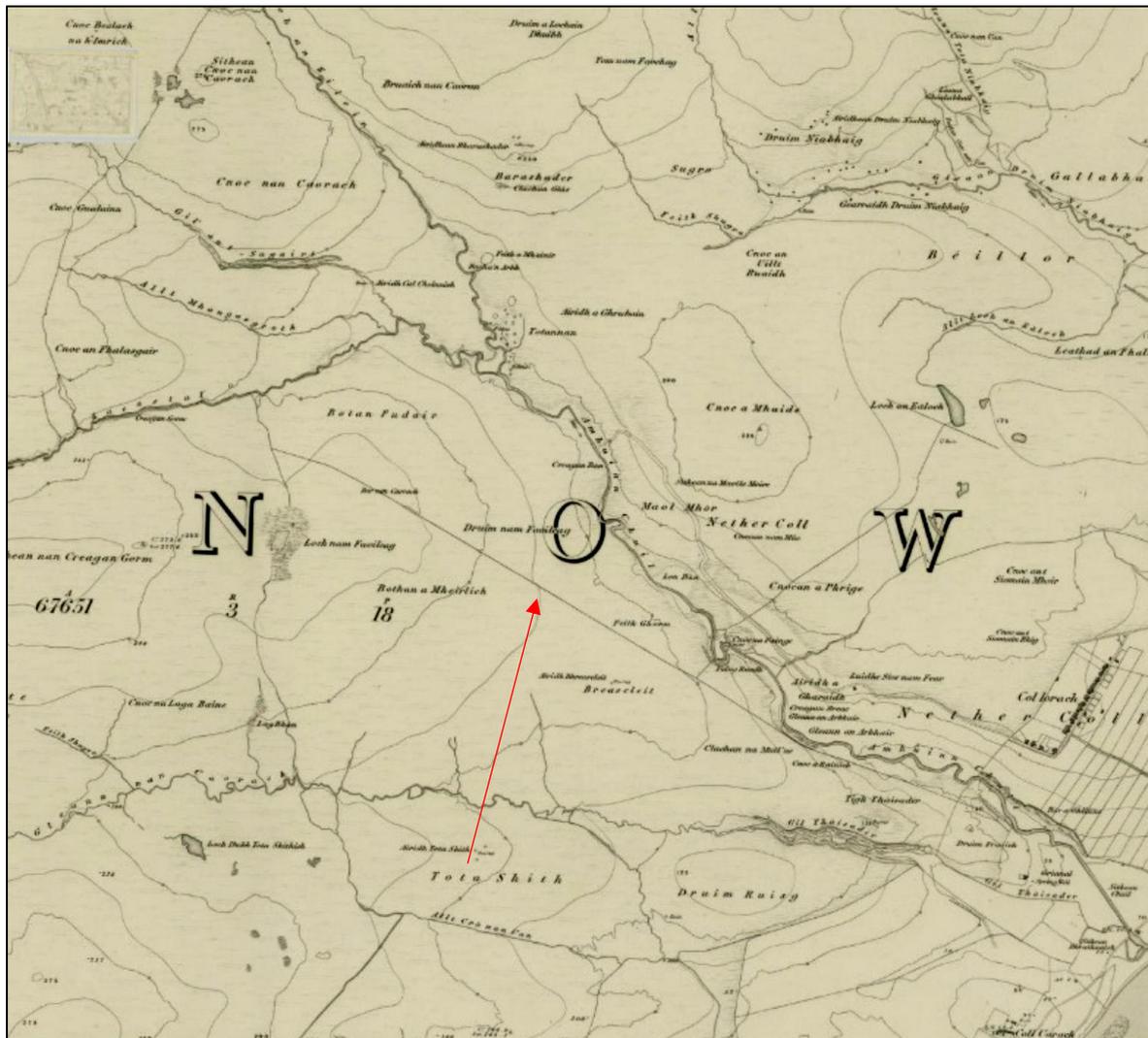


Figure 11: The dyke on the 1st edition OS, c.1851.

Site 5: Stone AXE NB 46005 39998

NB: This is an approximate location, the actual location is not known

CANMORE:

Stone axe with the head of its wooden haft (rowan, or less probably hawthorn) found at Coll, Lewis in 1920, given to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (NMAS) by the Peabody Museum, Harvard University No. AF 976 a & b. Proc Soc Antiq Scot 1961.

Nothing is known of this find by the vice-Rector of the Nicolson Institute, who has charge of the Museum Collection. Visited by OS (A L F R) assistant archaeology officer, 22 April 1964.

PSAS:

"Stone axe with the head of its wooden haft (rowan, or less probably hawthorn), found at Coll, Lewis in 1920. (PI. XXI.) (donated) by the PEABODY MUSEUM, HARVARD UNIVERSITY, U.S.A. (in exchange for an Irish bronze sword). (1958-9) 'Donations to and purchases for the Museum and Library', Proc Soc Antiq Scot, vol. 92, 1958-9. Page(s): 120

I emailed the NMS about the axe in order to try to get a better picture of it. Dr Anderson Whymark replied saying that he will get us better images and possibly even a 3D model, and there is even a possibility of getting the haft radiocarbon dated in the near future. He also furnished us with some more information:

NMS Original description:

STONE AXE-HEADS. AF 976. a) Axe of brown stone, much weathered, oval cross-section, pointed butt, blunt cutting edge, 6.2 x 2.35 x 1.2"; b) Part of wooden haft, much warped, 6.9 x 1.85 x 1.2", one end rounded, the other broken, central perforation, 1.75 x .8". Found in peat at Coll, near Stornoway, Isle of Lewis in 1920 by D. Stewart

There's also the following provenance note:

Purchased in a sale at Sothebys and Co., Ltd., London in 1938 by the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass

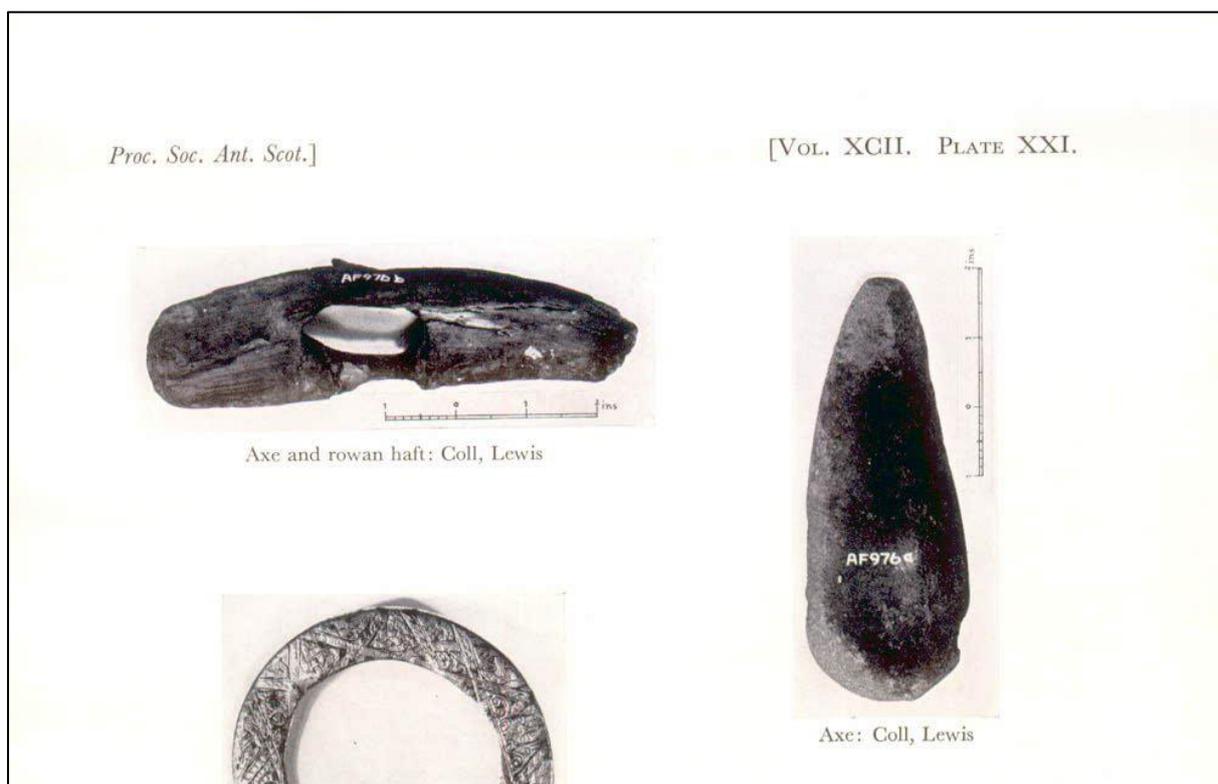


Figure 12: The Coll Axe

So the axe went first straight to Sotheby's, bypassing the local museum, then to the Peabody museum in Harvard, and then eventually back to the National Museum of Scotland. Maybe someday it might make it home to Coll, completing a trans-Atlantic odyssey!

In the meantime, Dr Hugo Anderson-Whymark of the National Museums of Scotland has made a 3D model of the axe and its haft which gives a much better idea of what it looked like. It is available at

<https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/neolithic-stone-axe-and-haft-6b9b4f8fc717462e9c69ea355b5835fb>

He is also going to get the haft radiocarbon dated, and to try to find out exactly what kind of stone it is made from. Axes such as this can be made from exotic stone from many miles away – the Sulishader axe from Point, for example, is made from Porcenallite stone from County Antrim, Northern Ireland (<https://nms.scran.ac.uk/database/record.php?usi=000-100-082-991-C>).

Site 6: Cnoc na Fainge NB 45587 40309

Two unroofed buildings are depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Island of Lewis, Ross-shire 1852, sheet 14). This site lies within the head-dyke associated with the township NB43NE 12.

No structures are shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1991).

Information from RCAHMS (AKK) 27 June 1997.

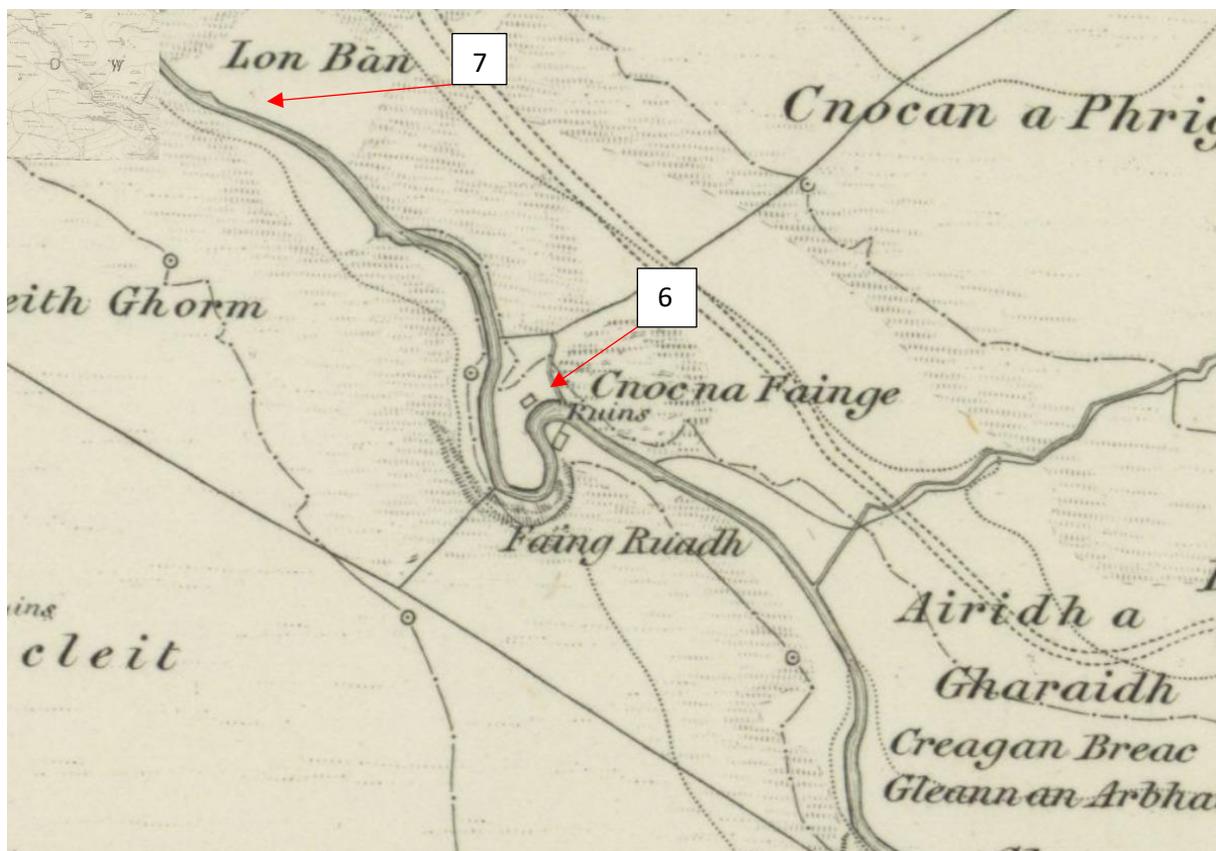


Figure 13: Cnoc na Fainge on the 1st edition.

The bend in the river here has been straightened out, probably naturally (OS 1965 edition shows the meander half way to the present position) but possibly aided by human hand. This may have had the affect of removing the remains of the two ruins marked here, which could not be found.



Figure 14: Cnoc na Fainge today. Note the oxbow lake on the left bank and the two cnocan on the right bank which presumably give the name

The other interesting thing about this location is that it seems to have been a landmark for a long time; an important boundary crosses the Coll River at this point. This is the boundary that runs up to Loch an Ealaich, which we looked for last week and could not locate due to overgrowth.

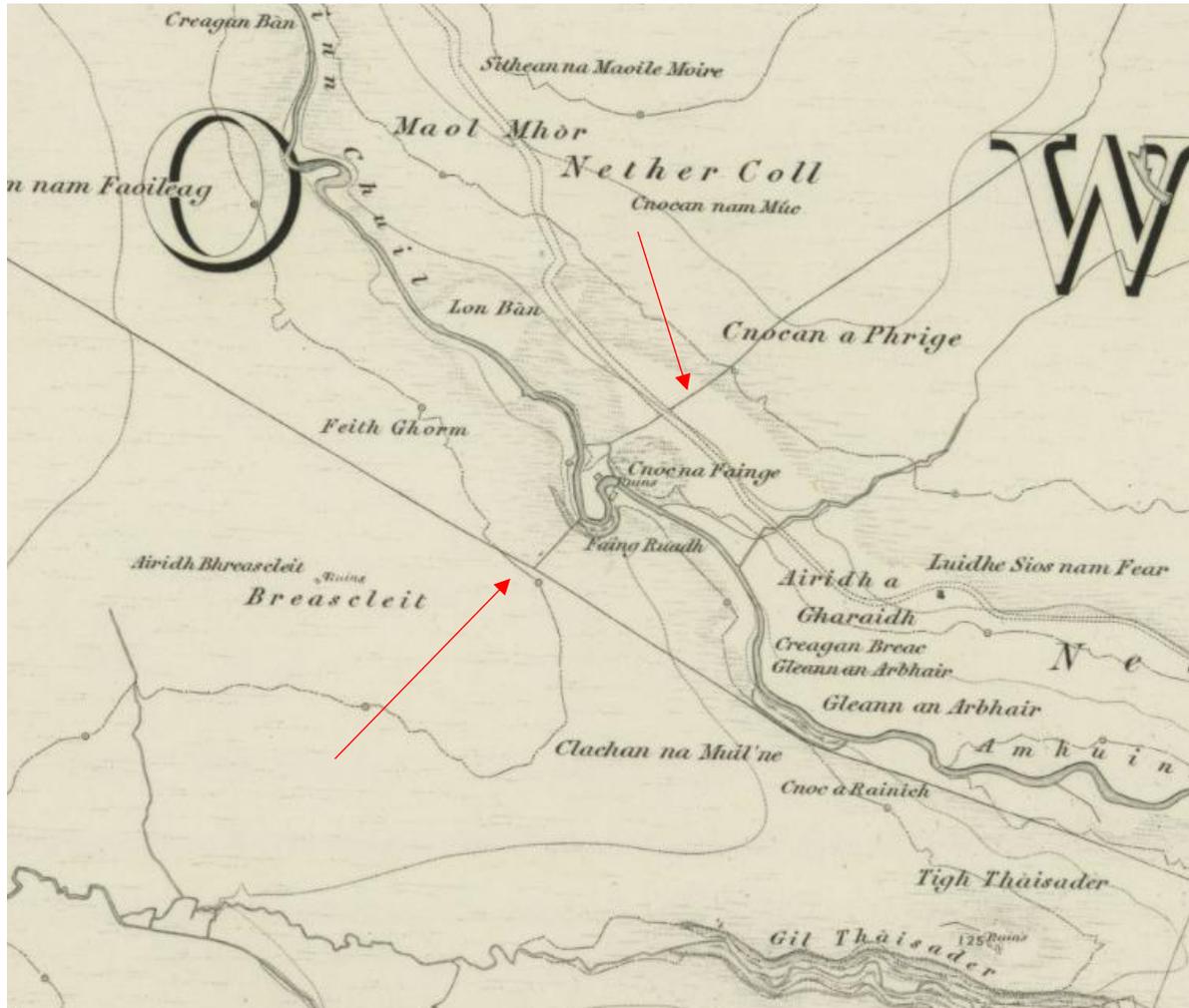


Figure 15: Boundary's cross at Cnoc na Fainge. If the boundary were followed to the NE the Loch an Ealaich, visited on Walk 7, would be reached.



Figure 16: Shieling at Lon Ban

Site 7: Lon Ban

There are remains of a shieling at NB 45395 40459 in an area called “Lon Ban”. The footings of the shieling did not seem to be stone and the structure may have been made of turf.

Upper stretch of the river

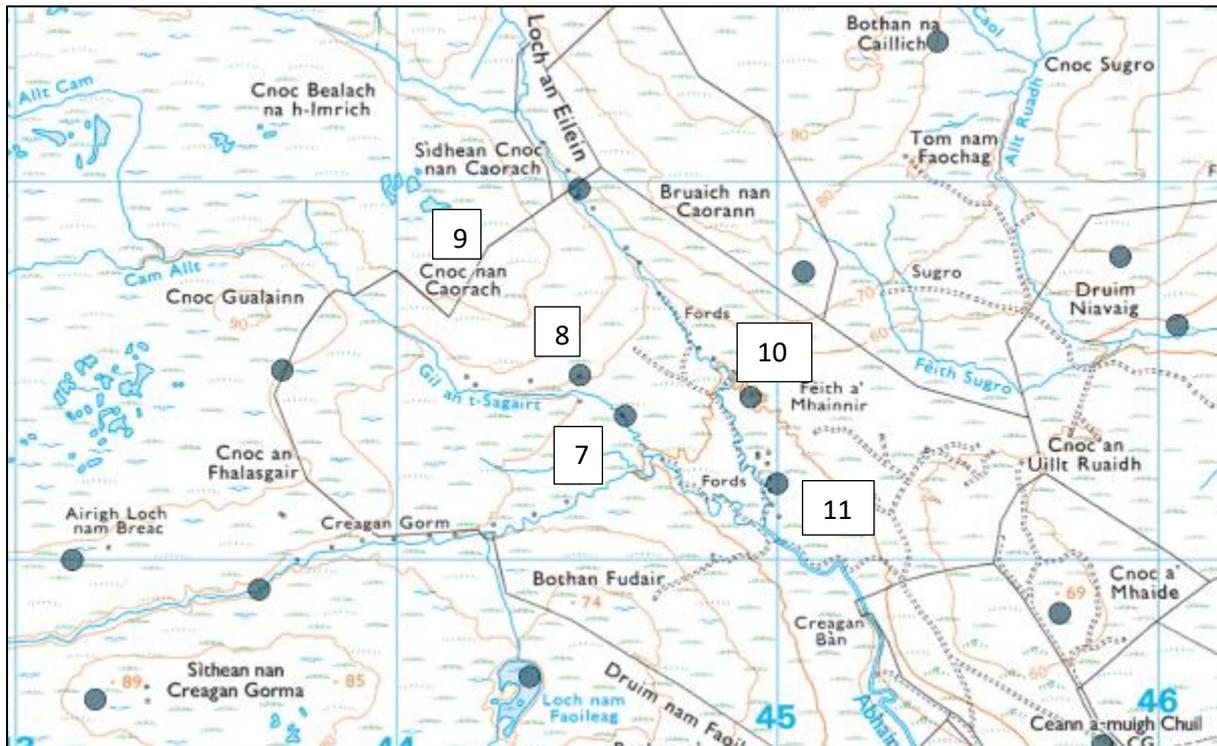


Figure 17: Sites in the upper reaches

Site 7: Airigh Cul Choinnich NB 44603 41382

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) and on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1973). Information from RCAHMS (AKK) 27 June 1997.

This was not located.

Site 8: Gil An T-sagairt NB 44482 41488

Remains of oval stone structure 1.5m x 2.5m interior, 2.5m x c. 3.5m exterior. N-S aligned, doorway in east side. Sits on a sheltered platform slightly uphill on the north bank of Gil^l an t-Sagairt (stream of the priest).

This is one of a group of shielings in the vicinity of Gil^l an t-Sagairt and other tributaries of the River Coll, which are shown on the current OS maps but not the 1st edn map, and so presumably post-date 1851. Carol Knott, 17.1.2002



Figure 18: Probable remains of Airigh Gil an T-Sagairt

Site 9: Cnoc na Caorach NB 44316 41682

A head dyke is marked upon all editions of the OS maps (see figure10) crossing near the summit of Cnoc na Caorach. This could not be seen. Some 'modern archaeology' stood on the summit of the Cnoc, however, the interpretation of which stumped one and all.



Figure 19: Strange monument upon the summit of Cnoc na Caorach. Ideas on a post card please...

We walked straight back on the way down, not detouring for any of the other sites – maybe these can be investigated on another occasion.

Site 10: Feith A Mhainir, Bogha'n Arbh NB 44927 41437

An enclosure 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 (1973).

Information from RCAHMS (AKK) 27 June 1997.

There were many suspicious looking mounds in the area, none of which could unmistakably be made out as the remains of buildings or the enclosure. This led us to speculate that the shielings in this area may have been made of turf.

Site 11: Totannan NB 44997 41197

What may be thirteen unroofed shieling-huts and four enclosures are depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Island of Lewis, Ross-shire 1852, sheet 14).

Six unroofed buildings which may be shieling-huts are shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1991).

Information from RCAHMS (AKK), 27 June 1997.

There were many small suspicious looking shieling sized mounds in this area, but none of which had unmistakable remains upon them – see figure 20.

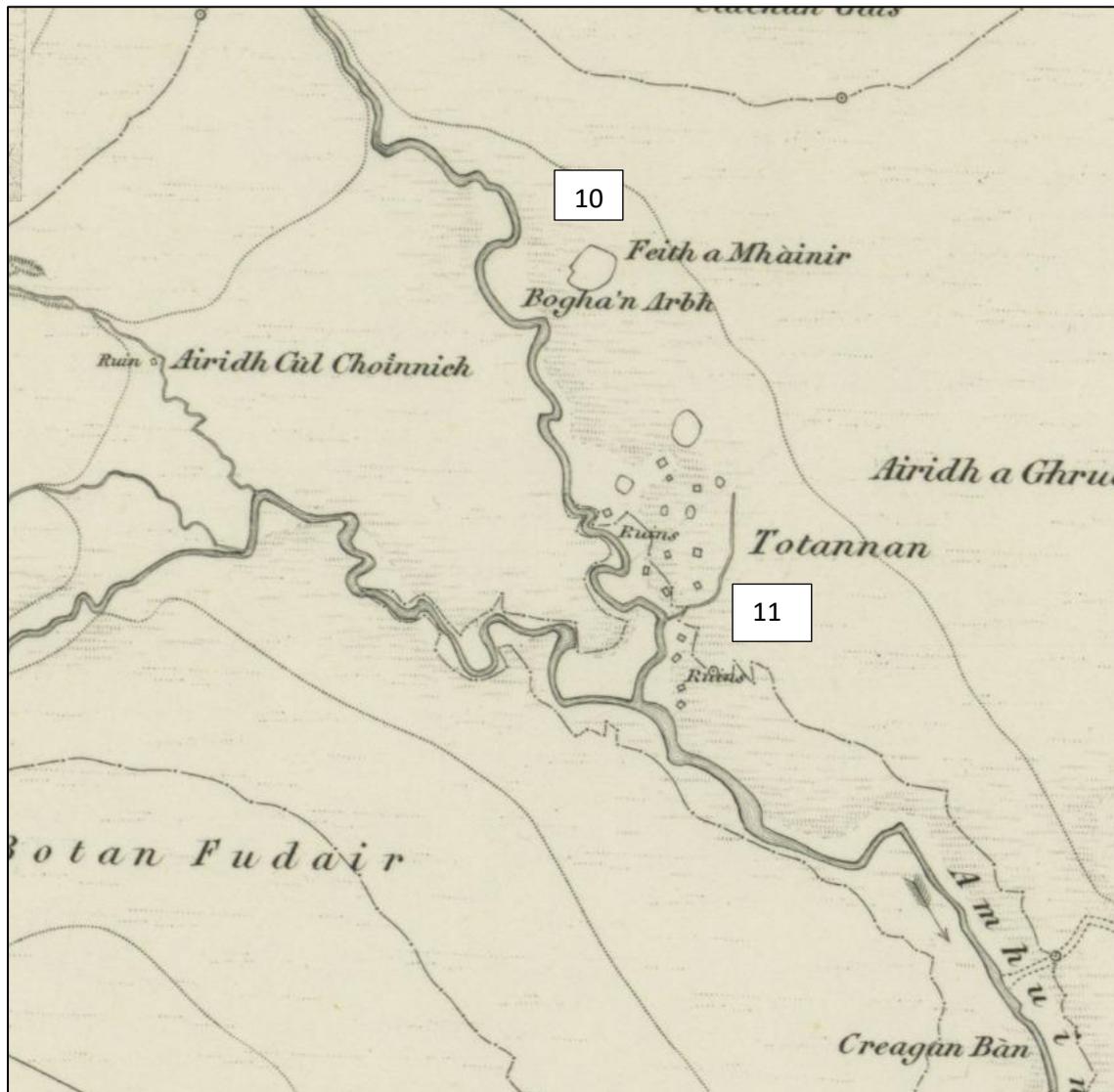


Figure 20: Sites 10 & 11 on the 1st edition OS.



Figure 21: DI inspecting one of the suspicious green mounds which may have been turf shielings at site 11.

Just north of these features was a site we did not have time to visit on this occasion – however DI did subsequently and it is worth mentioning here. It is called “Barashader” and was the site of four unroofed shielings on the 1st edition. Interestingly however there is another name close by – “Clachan Glas” – the Grey stones. This was a roughly circular mound of stone – see Figure 22 &23 below.

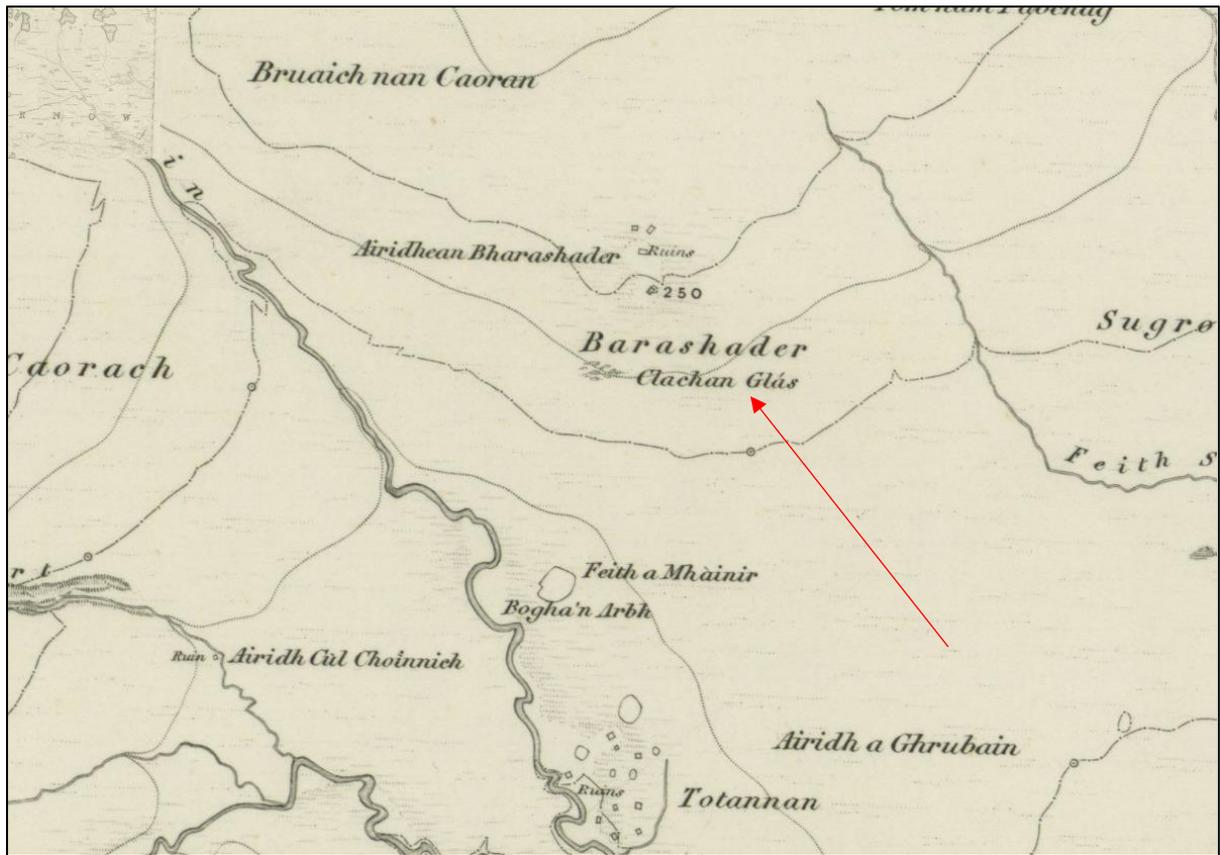


Figure 22: Barashader and Clachan Glas, just north of our route.



Figure 23: Clachan Glas at Barashader.

Although probably impossible to tell without excavation, there is a possibility that this is another Neolithic Chambered tomb, like Carn a Mharc. It occupies a position with a fine view over the fertile land below in much the same way as the other chambered tombs visited so far. An observation which might be important is that the way the depth of peat surrounding the Clachan Glas seems to have grown up around it and not covered it. This was the same at the Carn a Mharc.

Finally, the head dyke in this area might meet up with some of the features which we encountered in Walk 7, as shown below in Figure 24.

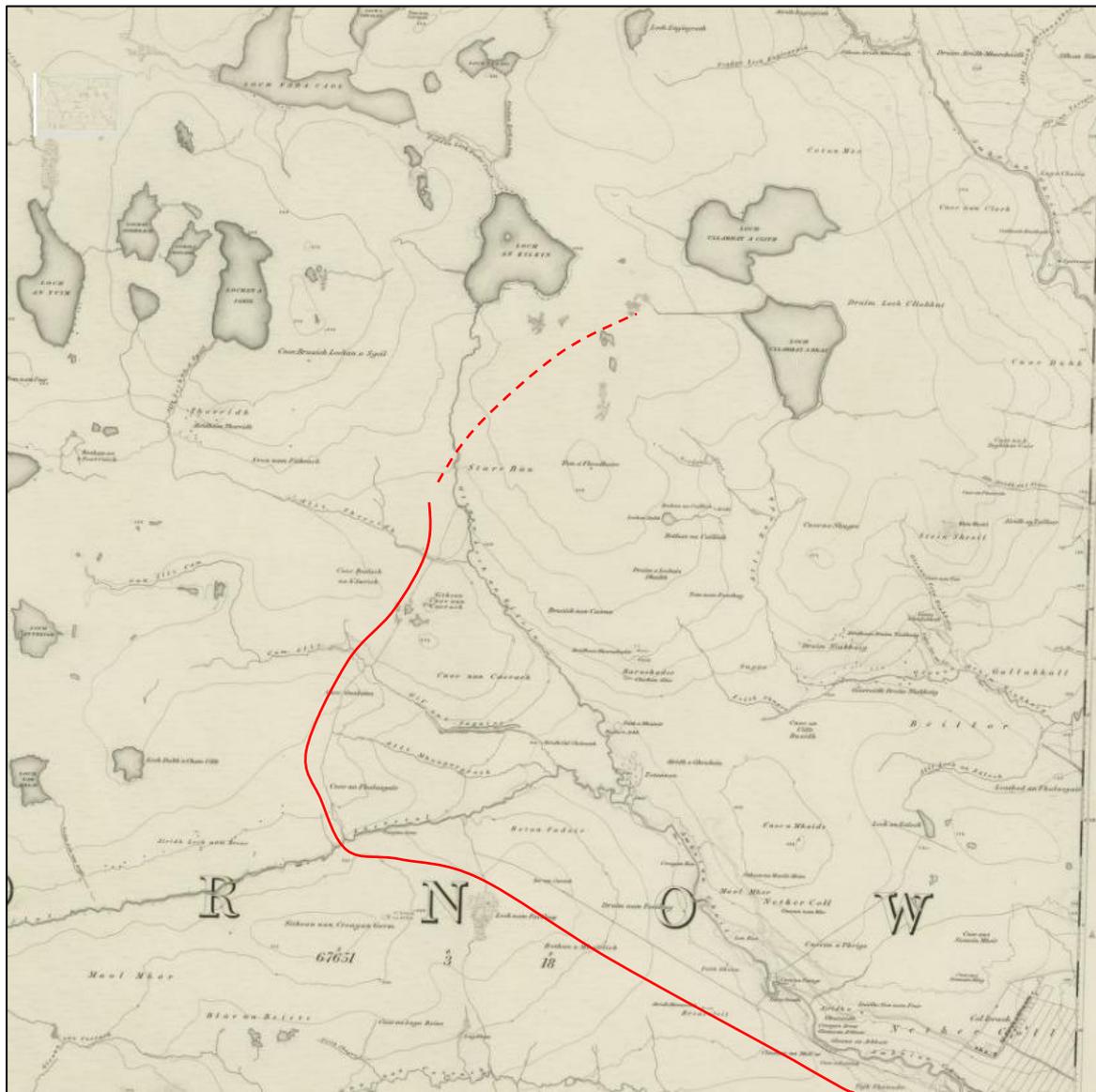


Figure 24: Line of the head dyke - possibly connects with the large ditch feature at Loch Ullabhat, explored on Walk 6.

Another productive walk, despite early worries that the long undergrowth would obscure all archaeology.

