

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 The Ness Gap project

A number of Neolithic–Chalcolithic pits, Early Bronze Age short-cists, and a Bronze Age cremation cemetery were excavated by Headland Archaeology at Ness Gap, Fortrose, Black Isle. The work was commissioned and funded by Tulloch Homes Ltd in response to a planning condition (ref: 09/00471/OUTRC) placed by Highland Council on the proposed Chanonry Park housing development. Prior to the excavation, a programme of archaeological work was carried out at the site which comprised a desk-based assessment (Haston 2006), trial trenching, and a watching brief (Marshall 2011a & b). The final excavation of an irregular 3.6-hectare plot, reduced to *c.* 2.5 hectares due to existing spoil bunds and haul roads, revealed 150 recorded cut features. The site was damaged by modern ploughing, with numerous features being severely truncated.

2.2 Geology and topography

Ness Gap is located on the eastern margins of Fortrose and covers a total area of 10.4 hectares on Chanonry Ness, a distinctive peninsula extending south-eastwards into the Moray Firth on the Black Isle (Illus 1). This site is located to the south of Ness Road (NGR: NH73290 56510), bounded by housing developments to the north and east, with Fortrose Academy to the west.

The geology of the area comprises Forres Sandstone overlain by raised marine beach deposits of post-glacial age and is characterised by gravel, sand, silt and clay, commonly charged with organic debris of plant and shells (NERC 2019). The site slopes gently from north-west (16m AOD) to south-east (8.5m AOD) towards the Moray Firth shore. The raised marine beach deposits indicate that the prehistoric sea level was higher than today.

2.3 Archaeological and historical background

The Black Isle peninsula, situated at the northern end of the Great Glen, has a small but significant archaeological record. The fertile soils and moderate climate support arable and permanent pasture with

decades of agricultural practice and afforestation impacting many sites (Woodham 1953–5: 66; Fraser 2014: 5). Nevertheless, the surviving monuments and sites highlight the importance of the Black Isle in prehistory.

One of the most significant sites on the Black Isle at Kinbeachie, to the north-west of Ness Gap, provides rare evidence of a Neolithic structure. A rectangular arrangement of post holes was interpreted as a timber building dating from the second half of the 4th millennium BC (Barclay et al 2001: 62). High concentrations of carbonised cereal grains, identified as naked barley and emmer wheat, were recovered from within the structure (Barclay et al 2001: 60, 67). The site does not exist in isolation, the distribution of Neolithic flaked stone suggests a landscape with widespread settlement and cultivation on the lower ground (Phillips et al 1999). The higher ground is dominated by two types of Chambered Cairns: Clava and Orkney-Cromarty (Henshall & Ritchie 2001). The Black Isle is the meeting place of these two regionally distinct burial monuments (Fraser 2014: 6).

The site at Ness Gap is in the town of Fortrose, which early maps refer to by the onomastic term of Chanirie or Chanonry, with its name coming from the Gaelic *A'Channanaich*, 'The Place of the Canons' or 'the Chanonry' (Fraser 1984). Gordon's maps of 1615–86 and 1636–52 depict the town with its cathedral and precinct as being larger than that of neighbouring Rosemarkie. Fortrose Cathedral, a Scheduled Ancient Monument (HES SM No. 90147), was the seat of the bishops of Ross, which was transferred from Rosemarkie in around 1235. The cathedral was an important seat of worship during the early to late medieval period and the surrounding lands were undoubtedly utilised by those in the growing town.

Little evidence exists or survives of prehistoric activity in the immediate vicinity of the site at Ness Gap. Historic Environment Scotland (HES) records a flint scatter (Canmore ID 14329) and a midden (Canmore ID 14330) found in 1923 around 800m to the west of the site. A stone cist containing a Food Vessel and a flat copper axe head was also found at the manse of Rosemarkie in 1903 (Canmore ID 14380). The most significant recent



Illus 1 Site location (OS OpenData © Crown copyright and database right 2020)

archaeological work in the area was an excavation at Fortrose and Rosemarkie Waste Water Works. Excavations there uncovered Neolithic and Bronze Age pits, a Bronze Age corn-drying kiln and a number of cremation pits, including two urned

cremations (one upright and one inverted). The evidence from Ness Gap, along with that from Fortrose and Rosemarkie Waste Water Works, reveals significant insights into prehistoric activity on Chanonry Ness.