

## 7. SITE INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

The complete excavation of a Middle Bronze Age roundhouse at Beaully Substation, in an area which has seen intensive archaeological work, provided an excellent opportunity to investigate this type of feature, and to place it within its wider prehistoric landscape setting, as well as investigating the state of preservation of upstanding archaeological remains within an afforested landscape.

### 7.1 Neolithic

The earliest feature excavated at Beaully Substation was Pit [078], which contained pine roundwood charcoal (SUERC-122117) dated to the Late Neolithic period, between 2881 and 2636 cal BC (at 95% probability). Environmental analysis of samples taken from the fill of the pit indicated that pine and oak woodland was located nearby. The recording in the Historic Environment Record of a findspot of a polished stone axe head ([MHG49771](#); Saville 2005), located at Kilmorack, Ardachy, c 500m west of the current site, is indicative of Neolithic activity within this landscape. Two previously recorded funerary monuments at Balblair Wood, also mentioned in the Historic Environment Record ([MHG29162](#); [MHG24775](#)), are also of interest. The Balblair Wood 2 cairn ([MHG29162](#); Neighbour 1999: 16) was situated on level ground c 300m southwest of the current site. It was roughly horseshoe shaped, with an open end facing southeast. The other burial cairn in Balblair Wood ([MHG24775](#); Jacks 1989) was located c 500m south of the current site. It was described as a probable sub-circular funerary enclosure with an entrance on its northwest side. It measured 14m x 11m and comprised a bank that was up to 1m wide and 0.2m high. Regularly spaced around the interior of the enclosure were four stone mounds, all of similar proportions. Although it could be argued that recorded evidence suggests that the landscape was predominantly used for funerary activities during the Neolithic period, this pattern may be due to the better survival of large stone-built funerary monuments in comparison with more ephemeral settlement remains.

### 7.2 Early Bronze Age

Early Bronze Age radiocarbon dates were obtained from two sampled deposits at Beaully Substation:

oak charcoal (SUERC-111664) from collapsed turf Deposit (015), 1880–1644 cal BC (at 95% probability); and hazel charcoal (SUERC-122115) from the fill of Posthole [039], 2451–2148 cal BC (at 95% probability). These dates likely represent residual material, related to Early Bronze Age occupation in the area, which became incorporated into the roundhouse deposits.

The use of the landscape for funerary activities during the Late Neolithic, continued into the Early Bronze Age. In 1925, a cist ([MHG42151](#)) was uncovered, on the summit of a slight ridge, c 650m north of the current site. It contained the remains of an incompletely incinerated human skeleton, fragments of an Early Bronze Age bronze dagger, a barbed and stemmed flint arrowhead, and a flint knife (Callander 1925). In 1990, Inverness Museum staff undertook rescue excavation of a Bronze Age cist within Balblair Wood some 300m east of the present site (Hanley & Sheridan 1995). The cist contained a pair of Beaker pots, and likely contained a decayed inhumation, as indicated by phosphate and pH analyses. The cist likely dated to between 2460 and 1675 BC on typological grounds. In 2004, Headland Archaeology excavated a Bronze Age burial cairn, c 300m southwest of the present site (Dutton et al 2008). A single cist was found within the cairn, which contained three decorated stone slabs, food vessel fragments, and a flint scraper. No cremated bone was identified within the cist, suggesting that it may originally have contained an inhumation, although no skeletal remains were preserved. One of the cairns, FTR 004, excavated by Northlight Heritage (Becket 2014; 2020; Gallacher 2014) appeared to be a funerary monument. Although radiocarbon dates, obtained from a sample of birch charcoal that returned a radiocarbon range of 1686–1526 cal BC (95.4% probability; SUERC-65257) and a sample of hazel charcoal that returned a date range of 1611–1439 cal BC (95.4% probability; SUERC-65251), indicate a Middle Bronze Age date, the feature was severely disturbed and associated artefacts appeared to date to the Early Bronze Age. The cairn contained sherds possibly derived from an Early Bronze Age Cordoned Urn, and fragments of burnt bone, consisting of three fragments from a medium to large terrestrial mammal and six small fragments that could not be identified to species. The cairn also contained an Early Bronze Age tanged

copper awl that was missing its point and part of its tang (Sheridan 2020). Investigation by X-ray fluorescence spectrometry indicated that the awl had formerly been located in proximity to human remains and it was interpreted as a grave good.

### 7.3 Middle Bronze Age

#### 7.3.1 Construction of the Roundhouse

The roundhouse at Beaully Substation was constructed during the Middle Bronze Age and has many similarities to nearby roundhouses, FTR 002 and FTR 009, excavated by Northlight Heritage. These features consisted of a circular or oval bank constructed with stone and turf. A number of pits and postholes were found within the interior of FTR 009, with four postholes forming a rough square within its centre. FTR 002 contained a pair of entrance postholes at its southeast side but lacked internal features to support a roof. A sample of hazel charcoal from FTR 002 returned a radiocarbon date range of 1682–1514 cal BC (95.4% probability; SUERC-65249). Two samples of alder charcoal from FTR 009 returned a radiocarbon date range of 1623–1460 cal BC (95.4% probability; SUERC-65263) and 1728–1530 cal BC (95.4% probability; SUERC-65267). This shows that these roundhouses were broadly contemporary with the Beaully Substation roundhouse. While no definitively identifiable hearth was recorded in any of these roundhouses, the Beaully Substation roundhouse contained a burnt deposit, Context (020), close to the centre, which could represent the scant remains of a hearth.

Walkover survey undertaken by Headland Archaeology recorded an additional four roundhouses within 500m of the Beaully Substation roundhouse (Dutton et al 2008). Although these have not been excavated, they appear similar to the Beaully Substation roundhouse in form, and are likely to be broadly contemporary with it. This suggests that there was a loosely clustered settlement during the Middle Bronze Age, perhaps representing a social group of about seven families.

These roundhouses can be classified as ‘ring-bank structures’ (Pope 2015). Previous research shows that ring-bank structures originated in the Early Bronze Age, in predominantly upland and coastal

areas, with a variety of techniques used in their construction, and varying proportions of stone and turf components. For example, the walls of House 5 at Culduthel, Inverness, were constructed entirely from turf, with a timber revetment encasing the outer edge of the wall (Hatherley & Murray 2021), whereas the walls of Hut 2 at Kilearnan Hill, Sutherland, were constructed from a core of closely-set stones and soil contained by an internal and external façade of upright, tightly-spaced stone blocks (McIntyre 1999). It is likely that the construction materials and techniques chosen were, in part, based on communal traditions, but were largely influenced by the resource availability (Pope 2015). At Kilphedir, Sutherland, three of the hut circles were similar in shape, size, and construction to the roundhouse at Beaully Substation, consisting of stone and turf walls and a central ring of posts to support the roof (Fairhurst & Taylor 1974). While these might not have been in use simultaneously, the similarity of construction could indicate that the Kilphedir structures were occupied by a single social group of up to five families in multiple buildings. Recent excavations at Dalchork have revealed four very different roundhouses (Glew & Peteranna 2020). Dalchork Site 1 had a boulder-faced stone bank and contained a single inner post-ring to support the roof, together with a central slab hearth and a simple entrance. This roundhouse contained deep occupation deposits with evidence for the multiple re-setting of posts, which represented two phases of occupation during the Middle Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. In contrast, Site 2 at Dalchork had a stone-faced earth bank, a double post-ring, and a paved entrance, but lacked interior floor deposits. This suggests that the structure may have contained a first floor, with animals stalled on the ground floor. Site 3 had a smaller stone rubble bank with inner and outer boulder facing stones, and an internal tank feature, which was tentatively identified as industrial in nature, but may have been related to domestic storage. Site 4 was much larger, comprising a rubble stone bank, which enclosed a single ring of postholes, and a timber-built entrance passage. This group of structures was originally occupied during the Middle Bronze Age, suggesting that differences in construction might indicate differences in use rather than date. Different construction methods were also seen in the

roundhouses at Lairg, Sutherland, which included turf (House 3), earth with stone-facing (House 5), and earth/turf with an outer stone face (House 4) (McCullagh & Tipping 1998).

### 7.3.2 Alterations and refurbishment

There is evidence from the excavation at Beaully Substation that replacement posts were inserted to repair parts of the roundhouse. Ongoing repair of roundhouse structures has been identified at other Highland sites, such as Dalchork Site 2, where most postholes contained two or three post slots interpreted as enabling re-insertion or re-setting. Excavation of a roundhouse at Navidale, Helmsdale, revealed that extensive refurbishment, such as post replacement and reroofing, might have left minimal archaeological evidence (Dunbar 2008). The postholes, cut into bedrock, could allow for posts to be replaced without the holes collapsing. Two shallow pits near the postholes suggested repair and consolidation rather than complete replacement. At Lower Slackbuie, Inverness, Roundhouse 6 contained clusters of postholes and the postholes within Roundhouse 3 were often found in pairs. In both cases, this was interpreted as indicating the replacement or repair of posts throughout the life of the structure (Christie & Dalland 2022).

Certain elements of a roundhouse structure could have required more frequent repairs. For example, many of the structures at Culduthel, Inverness, contained postholes that had been recut for replacement posts, and House 10/1 contained six postholes that had been recut, all of which were located on the southwest side of the structure (Hatherley & Murray 2021). At Macallan Distillery, Craigellachie, evidence for post replacement was identified close to the entrance to the roundhouse, and it was hypothesised that the junction between the structure and porch was amongst the most vulnerable to damage and decay (Dunbar 2017). Similarly, at Beaully Substation, the postholes at the southeast side, near the entrance, appear to have been repaired/replaced.

### 7.3.3 The associated field system

The Beaully Substation roundhouse, and those excavated by Northlight Heritage, are associated

with an extensive field system. This field system was recorded during walkover survey in 2002 and comprised features labelled as ‘enclosures’, ‘clearance cairns’, and ‘banks’ (NOSAS 2002). Excavation of some of the surveyed sites was carried out by Headland Archaeology in 2004 (Dutton et al 2008) and by Northlight Heritage between 2012 and 2013 (Becket 2014; 2020; Gallacher 2014). The excavations by Headland uncovered 18 small cairns and ten sections of stone banks, likely constructed during land clearance. There was no clear dating evidence, but the similar alignment of the banks indicates that they were likely contemporary. The Northlight Heritage excavations uncovered similar evidence for small cairns and banks constructed during stone clearance activities and positioned to divide plots of land. Radiocarbon dating of the Northlight Heritage features indicated that the field system and the roundhouses appeared to be broadly contemporary. A sample of birch charcoal from Northlight cairn (FTR 006b) and a sample of hazel charcoal from cairn (FTR 008) returned radiocarbon date ranges of 1745–1565 cal BC (95.4% probability; SUERC-65261) and 1616–1453 cal BC (95.4% probability; SUERC-65262). A sample of alder charcoal from a recorded bank (FTR 006a) returned a radiocarbon date range of 1625–1461 cal BC (95.4% probability; SUERC-65260).

The field system is complex, with many clearance cairns and banks, and does not appear to have an immediately obvious planned layout. This is typical of Bronze Age field systems in Scotland, which tend to be more organic in nature; often one element of the field system subsumes structures of different dates (Barber 1997). This has hindered attempts to categorise the field systems into regionally or chronologically significant groups. At Lairg, radiocarbon dating of field banks indicated that they were constructed and maintained over long periods of time (McCullagh & Tipping 1998). For example, the earliest radiocarbon date from Dyke 1 indicated construction during the Late Neolithic 2850–2325 cal BC (95% probability; GU-3319) while a sample representing the latest surviving tilled land-surface in the vicinity of the dyke returned a date of 1420–1115 cal BC (95% probability; GU-2859). While the banks at Lairg may have been used as sediment traps, their primary purpose appears to have been as boundaries that performed social rather

than agricultural functions in terms of dividing the landscape into discrete plots. It is possible that the field banks associated with the roundhouse at Beaully Substation were similarly maintained over long time periods with important social implications. One of the Northlight-recorded field banks (FTR 0009b) was situated between the Beaully Substation roundhouse and another nearby roundhouse (FTR 009), creating a separation between them, and it also appears that two banks, FTR 001 and FTR 006, bounded roundhouse FTR 002. It has been suggested that this type of small-scale organisation of land, in contrast to larger field systems, which cover many hectares, created fields that were an extension of a household's domestic space, marking out the edges of gardens, stock enclosures, and cultivated plots (Johnston 2013: 320). One of the field banks at Beaully Substation appeared to be aligned with the earlier Bronze Age cairn excavated by Headland Archaeology (Dutton et al 2008: 124). While this may have been coincidental, it is also possible that incorporating an earlier monument within the field bank was a symbolic act; as small-scale field systems can often reflect the strong social and emotional attachments between communities and the land (Johnston 2013: 319).

The presence of a stationary quern (SF01) within and associated with the abandonment of the roundhouse at Beaully Substation, and also of a broken quern (SF02), associated with the construction of the roundhouse highlights a connection between the house and the associated agricultural field system, and crop/food processing activities. It also adds to the body of evidence for the redeposition of querns within roundhouse construction and occupation surfaces of Bronze Age and Iron Age date. There is increasing evidence for querns being rebuilt into walls and floors, perhaps indicating a belief system connected with the ritual of construction and the importance of the land, food production, and the domestic sphere (Watts 2012: 140). At Navidale, Helmsdale, Sutherland, for example, querns were re-used within the structure of the house, and querns were also left inside it after its abandonment (Dunbar 2008: 165). The abandonment of still functional querns at Navidale suggests an abrupt end to the occupation of the structure, perhaps due to the decline of the surrounding agricultural land. At Dalchork Site 2, querns were rebuilt into the

entrance floor slabbing (Glew & Peteranna 2020). This was interpreted as the product of an active agrarian society, incorporating old worn querns into their new house, perhaps as a symbolic act. Similar narratives could explain the distribution of querns (SF01 and SF02) at Beaully Substation, deposited as symbolic acts during the construction of the roundhouse and during the structured abandonment of the roundhouse.

#### 7.3.4 The economy

Analysis of ecofactual material recovered from the Beaully Substation roundhouse and the Northlight Heritage excavations helps define the wider environment and economy during the Middle Bronze Age.

The charcoal assemblages from both projects are similar, consisting of tree species that would have grown within the local area and remains that represent fuel rather than structural or artefactual remains (Ramsay 2020). A variety of wood species were exploited, including oak, pine, birch, hazel, alder, willow, ivy, and cherry. From the later prehistoric period onwards, the presence of oak is often an indication of structural remains, since oak had become a less common component of Scottish woodlands and was saved for construction purposes (Gale & Cutler 2000). However, the woodlands in this landscape appear to have provided a plentiful supply of oak that could perhaps be used as firewood.

The presence of assemblages of carbonised cereal grain and of artefacts for food processing varied between the projects. No cereal grains were retrieved during the excavation of the roundhouse at Beaully Substation, despite the presence of saddle querns within the structure. In contrast, a small assemblage of carbonised cereal grains was recovered during the Northlight Heritage excavations, but no querns were found.

#### 7.4 Later landscape and state of preservation

Human activity in this landscape appears to have shifted towards the banks of the River Beaully following the abandonment of the Beaully Substation roundhouse. The nearest significant potential Iron Age site is located 130m WSW of Corff Cottage (Scheduled Monument Index

Number [3195](#); [MHG3401](#)), and approximately 1km east of the present roundhouse; this may have been an Iron Age fort or a medieval motte. Additionally, a medieval defensive earthwork ([MHG3402](#)) can be found at Castle Hill, located around 1km southeast of the Beaulieu Substation roundhouse. The place-name 'Annat' suggests the presence of a possible 9th or 10th-century chapel or cemetery, along with several enclosures ([MHG3404](#); [MHG63329](#); [MHG62997](#)) located 0.8km south of the roundhouse.

Post-medieval activity within this landscape comprised the construction of enclosures ([MHG62996](#); [MHG63328](#)), as well as earthworks ([MHG29176](#); [MHG56317](#)) associated with an 18th century forestry plantation.

One of the key research aims of the project was to assess the extent to which forestry activities had impacted the remains of the roundhouse. Birch and pine saplings, and the stumps of mature Scots

pine were present across the site at the time of fieldwork. These had clearly displaced stones within the roundhouse bank predominantly towards the south and east. The most severely affected area was believed to have been the roundhouse entrance, in the southeast of the roundhouse; this area had been completely disturbed by a large tree stump. The interior of the roundhouse was generally less impacted by mature tree stumps with only one large stump located at the northwest side. However, this stump caused disturbance to the features within Q4, with particularly severe disturbance identified in features [009], [021], [024], [033], and [078]. Micromorphological analysis supports the view that the remains had been disturbed by modern bioturbation, resulting in the mixing of deposits and the blurring of their interfaces. Despite this disturbance, the state of preservation allowed for a good understanding of the construction and use of the roundhouse.