
2 INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the combined results of an archaeological excavation and historical research undertaken into the social history of a 19th-century household at Brunary Burn. The ruinous house is the material embodiment of the life of the occupiers, the McEachens, who are in turn representative of a class of people who suffered greatly during a time of economic and social crisis in Scotland's history.

The advantages of a combined research strategy are manifold. Archaeological data can produce narratives without the support of written documentation or oral history. These narratives may span generations or millennia, or detail a single physical event such as making a clay pot. It is usually more difficult to reconstruct short-term events over a day or a generation, as they may leave no archaeological signature. Historical research on the other hand, with its myriad oral and documentary evidence, can elucidate past events, and the people involved, within many different timeframes. But, with its focus on written evidence, this form of research can also be prey to bias and mis-representation within the evidential documents, and can fail to supply detail relating to the physical aspects of life for the subjects. Archaeological research, however, is well placed, and has a long and practised methodology, for understanding material evidence. The combination of both these lines of research, archaeological and historical, can be a powerful analytical research tool.

2.1 *Site history*

Brunary Burn lies in the district of Arisaig in the Western Highlands. Together with neighbouring districts of Ardnamurchan, Moidart, Morar and Knoydart, this general area is often referred to as the 'Rough Bounds'. Bounded to the north by Loch Hourn and to the South by Loch Suinart, with mountains, innumerable sea- and freshwater lochs, and a dramatic coastline, the area is almost archetypically Highland in its natural beauty. The Rough Bounds, however, also refers historically to the difficulty of the terrain, the almost impenetrable nature of much of the landscape, and the isolation of the population. This remoteness only came to an end relatively recently; the West Highland rail line was opened at the end of the 19th century with the extension to Mallaig completed in March 1901 (Thomas 1979, 11), a regular steam ship service began earlier (Durie 2003, 47–55), and, prior to this, the road from Fort William was completed in 1812 (Rixson 2002; though, at the time of writing, there are still some single-track sections near Arisaig).

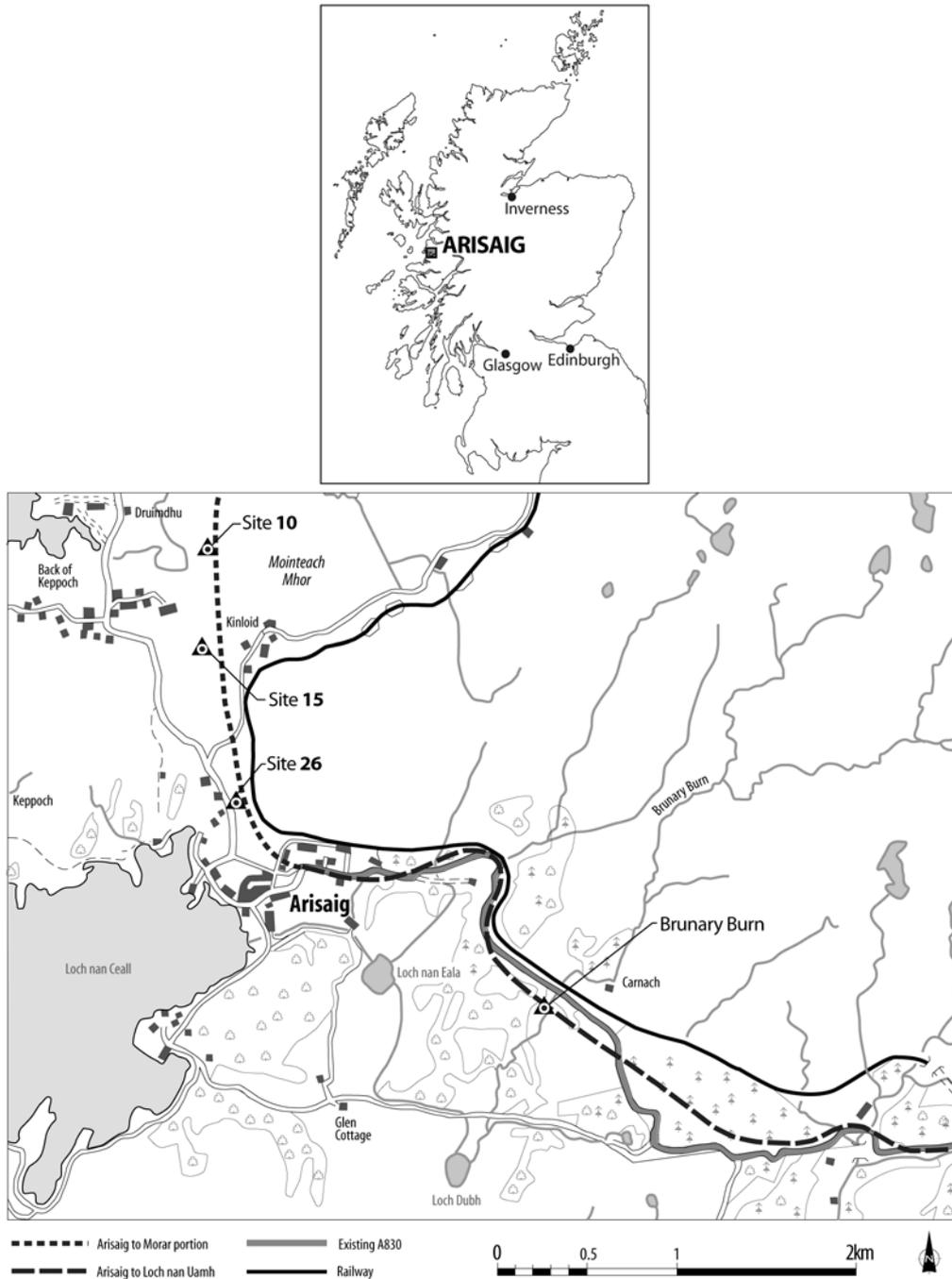
The site was located 120m to the south of the present A830 (NGR: NM 6770 8578; *illus 1*). It lay at *c* 50m above OD, in a clearing of trees on rough pasture and boggy ground on the west side of the Brunary Burn. The buildings were previously recorded as part of a survey carried out in 1994 (Alexander 1994). The excavation area was heavily overgrown with bracken and other vegetation. To the south of the main excavation area lay boggy ground and to the west lay a large glacial drumlin or knoll.

CFA Archaeology Ltd carried out an evaluation of the two partially upstanding buildings at Brunary Burn (NMRS No NM68NE 42) in June and July 2005 (Suddaby 2005). During this work, the building interiors were investigated by trial trenching and a series of test pits investigated the area between the houses. A programme of excavation subsequently took place focusing on the buildings and area between the houses, as well as the recording of ancillary features, in September and October 2005. The excavations were required as the site would be covered by the construction of an embankment on the approach to the new bridge over the Brunary Burn as part of the A830 upgrading. A watching brief was later conducted during topsoil stripping associated with the road construction in the summer of 2007, to monitor the removal of the buildings and the stripping to natural subsoil by mechanical excavator; no further archaeological remains were discovered. The archaeological work was commissioned by Historic Scotland on behalf of Transport Scotland, an agency of the Scottish Executive.

Several other archaeological sites, recorded in the National Monuments Register for Scotland (NMRS), in the vicinity of Brunary Burn, were of particular relevance to this study (*illus 2*). They were a drystone building with associated rig and furrow (NM68NE 41); field banks and quarries at Druim an Darich (NM68SE 19); field banks at Torr an t-Sagairt (NM68NE 40); a drystone rectangular building (NM68NE 35); a township comprising eight buildings (NM68NE 35); and a rectangular turf structure (NGR: NM 6583 8835)

2.2 *Placename evidence*

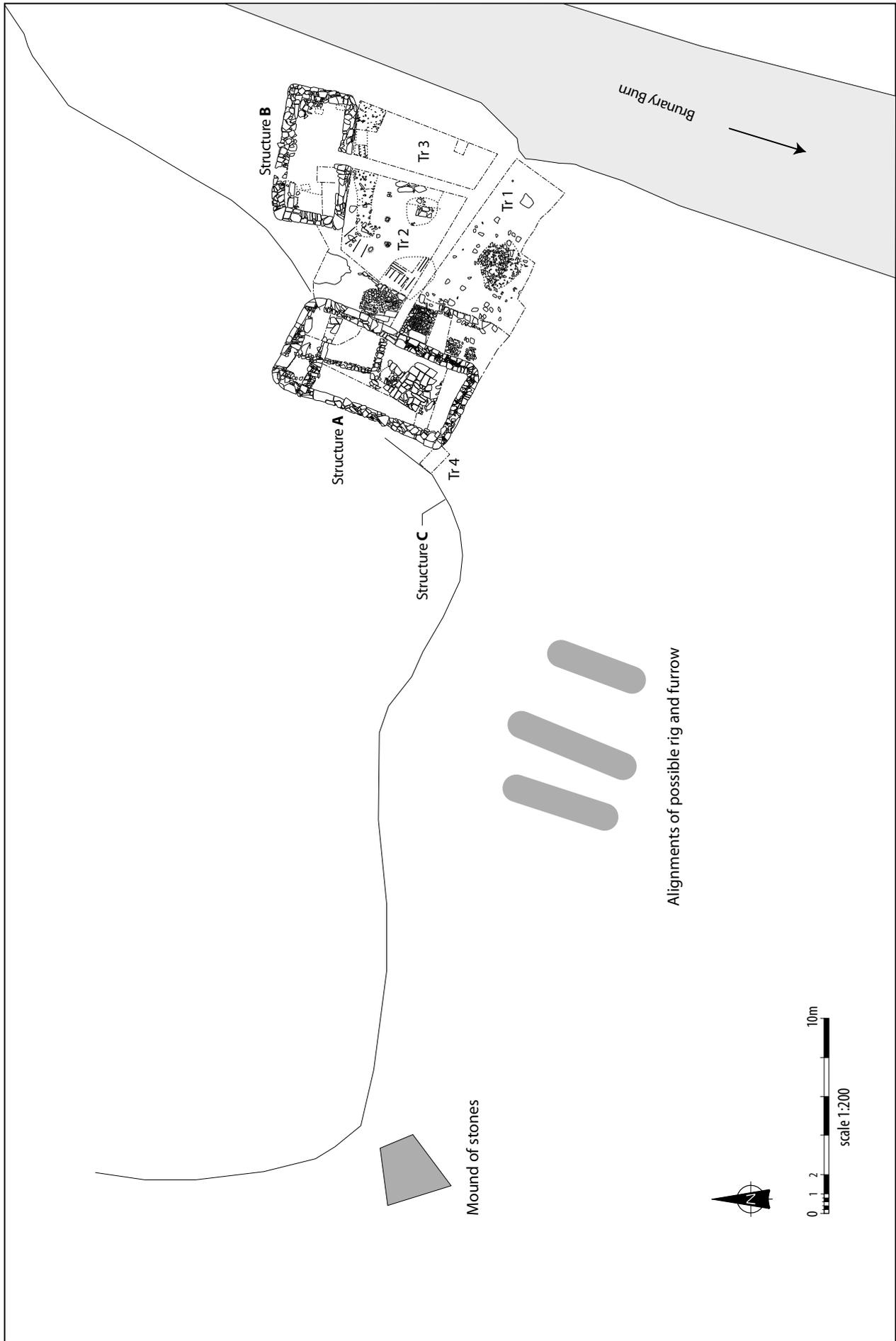
It has been suggested that some of the placenames in the immediate area of Brunary Burn contain evidence for a religious settlement of early date: Torr an t-Sagairt (mound of the priest), Lochan Torr na Nighinn (little loch of the mound of the sisters (or nuns)) and Lochan a Chléirich (little loch of the cleric) (R McCullagh, pers comm). Torr an t-Sagairt



Illus 1 Site location map

could be explained by the fact that the Statistical Accounts mention preachers travelling to the Kinlochmoidart area to preach to their flocks; if this were to be done in the open air, then the preacher may have used the drumlin as a natural dais and vantage

point. The excavations at Brunary Burn recovered no supporting evidence for an early religious site, however, it is doubtful that the activities of peripatetic preachers would leave much physical evidence of their presence.



Illus 2 Brunary Burn site plan showing trenches, structures and other features