
2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 *The Portree project*

This report brings together the results of a programme of archaeological field investigations and post-excavation work undertaken by CFA Archaeology Ltd (CFA) at Kiltaraglen, Portree (illus 1 and 2), in advance of construction of a housing development. The project was funded by the Lochalsh and Skye Housing Association (LSHA) and was overseen by Highland Council Archaeology Unit (HCAU).

Proposals for a residential housing development within improved land on the northern edge of Portree (NGR: NG 476 444 centred) led to an evaluation (5%, 11,037m²) of the whole 20ha site in early 2005 (Suddaby 2005). Cellular and rectangular buildings, along with an area of pits discovered within the western portion of the development, were excavated later in 2005 by Headland Archaeology (Masser 2005) and are not included in this report. Archaeological remains to the east were less substantial and HCAU proposed that this area should be subject to a watching brief during topsoil removal prior to construction. In autumn 2006, the watching brief was carried out by CFA and led to the discovery of a series of sites (illus 3) which had, with one exception, escaped detection during the evaluation. The subsequent excavations lasted until spring 2007. A report was produced (Suddaby 2007) and this was followed up with proposals for post-excavation work including radiocarbon dating. The results are summarised in this report with the full site records being held in the archive.

2.2 *Site location, topography and geology*

Formerly part of Home Farm, Kiltaraglen is the Gaelic name for an area between the rivers Leasgeary and Chracaig which is now on the northern outskirts of Portree, Isle of Skye (illus 2). The place name would appear (N MacLeod pers comm) to derive from *Cille* (Church) and *Talorgan* (a man's name). Kiltarlilty, a village between two rivers 15km to the west of Inverness means 'Church of Talorcan' (ibid). Talorgan and Talorcan may well be the same name, if not the same person. The land between these rivers forms a prominent low hill which rises to 50m OD and includes a gentle ridge on its north-west side (illus 3) on which the archaeological remains described in this report were located. The south and west flanks of this hill, as well as its summit, have been developed, much of it in recent years without archaeological involvement (K Cameron pers comm).

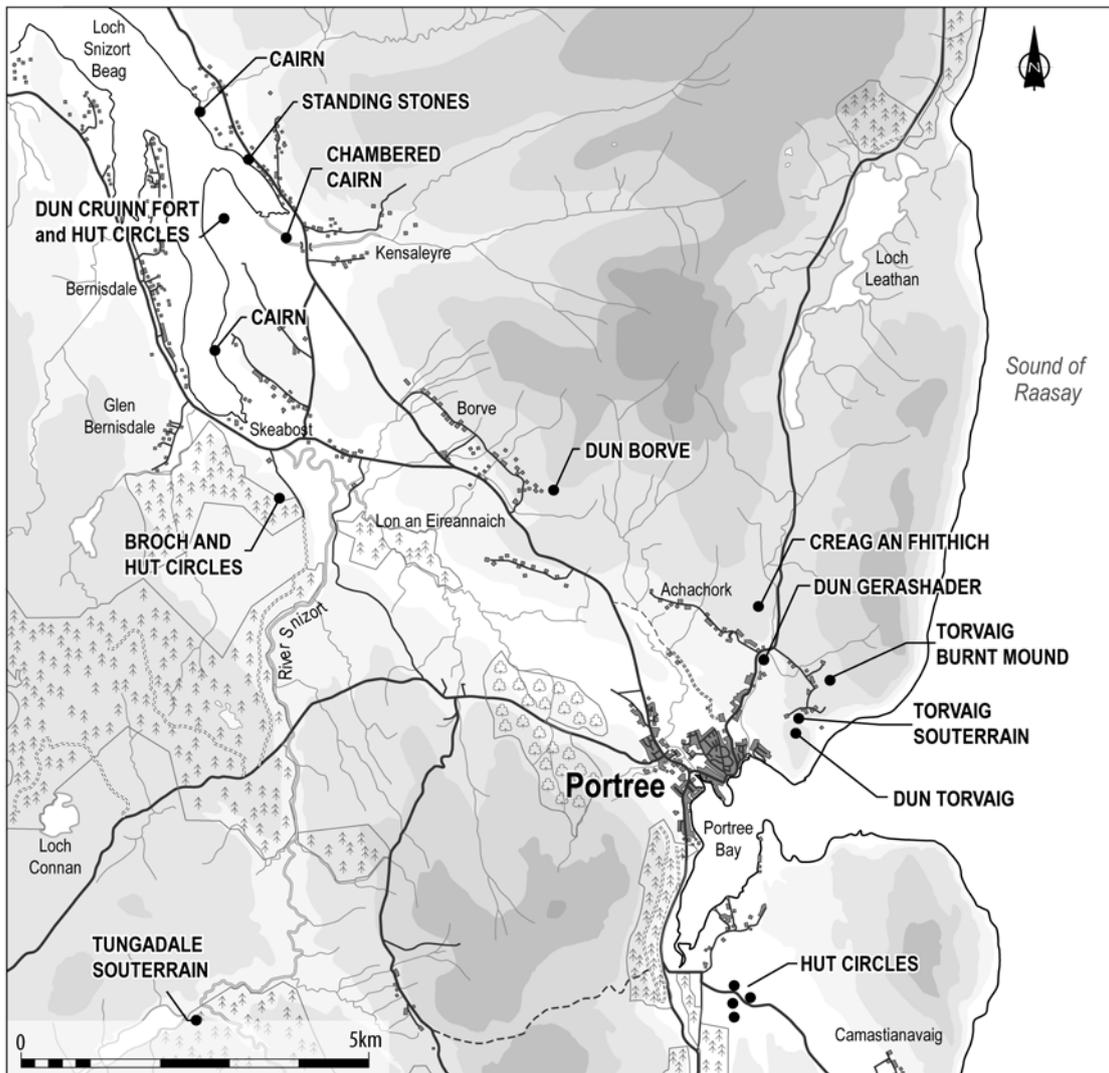
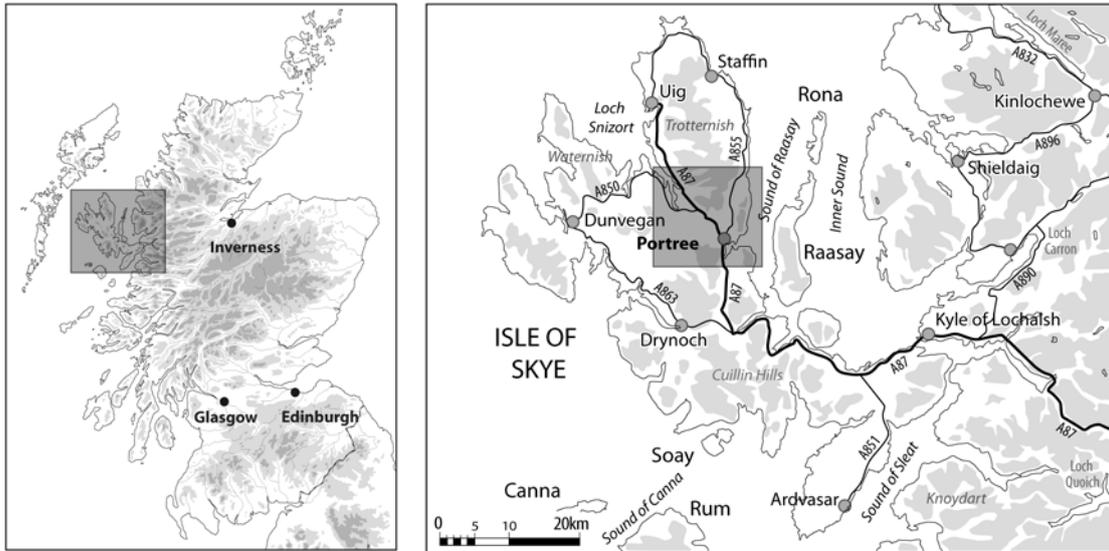
Portree House was constructed for the chamber-

lain of the MacDonald estates around 1807, with subsequent land improvements in the 19th century leading to the creation of Home Farm, and this designation was used in previous archaeological reports. LSHA have now revived the Gaelic name for their development, which is therefore used in this report.

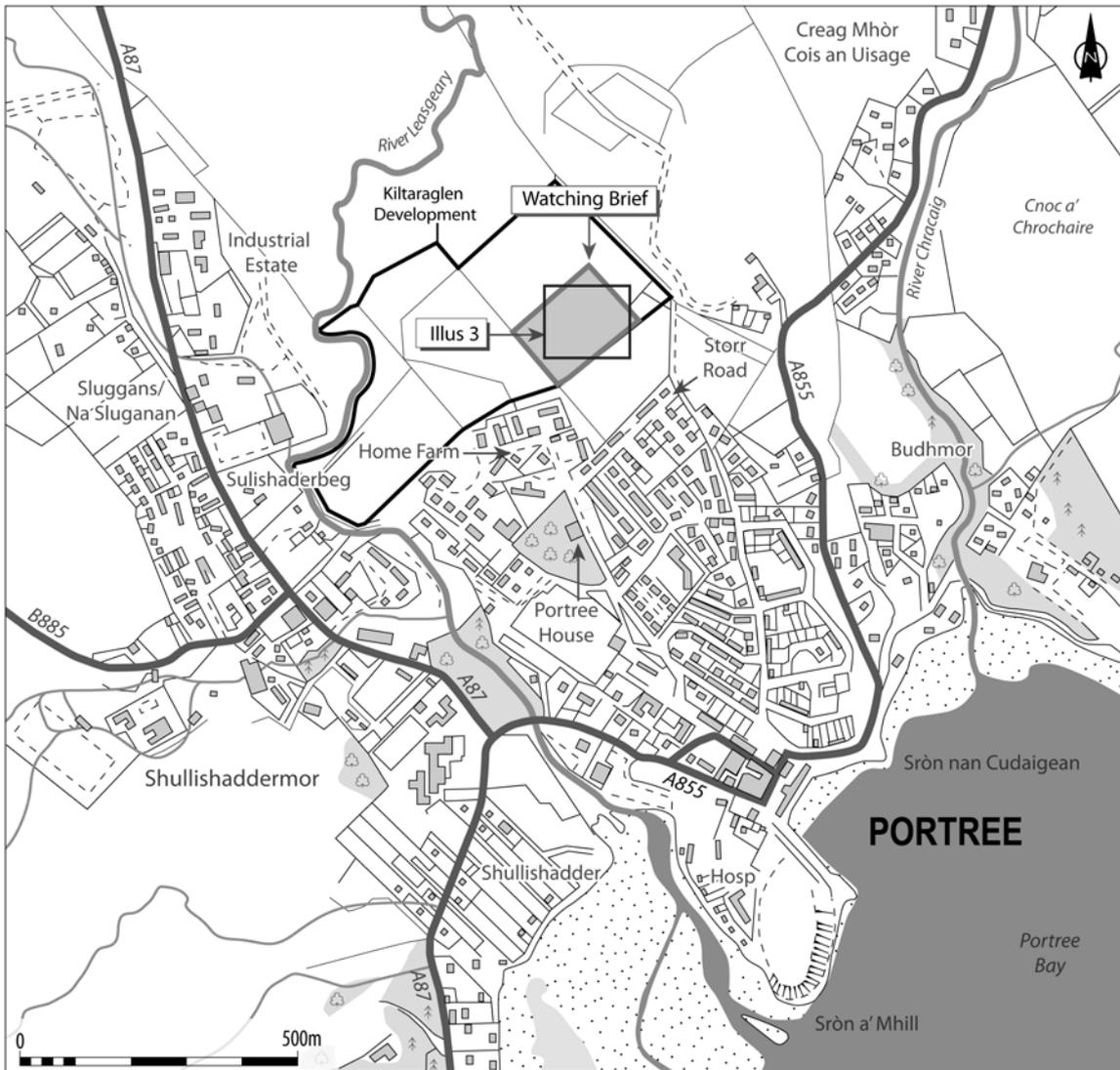
Kiltaraglen lies at the southern end of the low-lying isthmus that connects the eastern side of the island at Portree Bay to the western side at Loch Snizort Beag where the modern villages of Skeabost and Kensaleyre lie (illus 1). This is the easiest crossing from east to west in the whole of Skye and Portree Bay (King's Port) is a safe and sheltered anchorage. With a length of 8.5km, the isthmus is nowhere over 50m in height. Much of it could be traversed by a small boat following (from the north-west) the meandering River Snizort and its tributary, the Lòan an Eireannaich (Fierce Irishman). The River Leasgeary at the south-eastern end is steeper and not navigable. Today, the isthmus from Portree to Loch Snizort Beag is rapidly crossed using the modern A87 leading to the port of Uig and early maps indicate that a crossing from the east to the west of the island has always utilised this natural routeway.

The bedrock in the Portree area comprises extrusive basalt and spilite, with more localised exposures of limestone (Lias) between them and the intrusive basalt, dolorite and camptonite which outcrop around the north side of Portree Bay (British Geological Survey 2001). A seam of coal was mined by Lord MacDonald from about 1800 at Camas Bàn, on the south side of the bay. To the north, fossil-bearing limestone is widespread along the coast as far as Staffin. The interface between this limestone and the basalt has in places been altered to form the metasedimentary mudstone from which lithics can be crafted, and a notable outcrop occurs at An Corran, Staffin (Saville & Miket 1994). The Institute of Geological Sciences (1977) Quaternary drift geology map is unhelpful, as it shows only peat in the Portree area. However, the improved fields around Home Farm contain no peat, and topsoil overlies a variable depth of boulder clay, which overlies basalt bedrock.

The Macaulay Institute for Soil Research (1982a, Sheet 4) categorise the soils at Kiltaraglen as being of the Darleith/Kirktonmoor Association (No. 158), which are drifts derived from basaltic rocks. They form brown forest soils with some brown rankers. The same institute classes the (modern) Land Capability (1982b, Sheet 4) within the site as 'suited only to improved grassland and rough grazing' but within this category it attains the highest rating (51), which indicates that potential yields are high



Illus 1 Location maps and a topographical plan of the area around Portree showing the monuments mentioned in the text



Illus 2 Simplified plan of Portree showing the watching brief area within the Kiltaraglen site

with ample growth throughout the season and that high stocking rates are possible. It may be noted in passing that on Skye, only very small parts of western Waternish (Trumpan, Lusta and Bay), and areas around Lyndale, Claigan, Harlosh, Drynoch, Bernisdale, Tote and Skeabost attain a superior rating, indicating a capacity for limited arable production in modern circumstances.

2.3 Archaeological background

Most of the recorded archaeological sites in and around Portree consist of post-medieval farmsteads, shielings/bothies, townships, settlements and Listed Buildings, with a lesser number of enclosures, head-dykes, bridges and a dam.

Prehistoric sites (illus 1) are dominated by Iron Age monumental architecture and include Dun Gerashader (RCAHMS Site No. NG44NE 3), a fort which lies on a volcanic knoll in farmland 1.5km north-east of Kiltaraglen. Dun Torvaig (NG44SE

2) is a ruinous dun-type structure situated on an exposed hilltop 1.5km east of Kiltaraglen. Both it and a probable broch (Dun Borve, NG44NE 2) would now be categorised as Complex Atlantic Roundhouses (Armit 1996). Much less visible, but increasingly recognised during observant field-walking in what are today marginal areas, are hut circles which often date to the Bronze Age. Several examples (eg NG44SE 7) have been recorded in association with fragmentary field systems in Glen Varragill near the south end of Portree Bay. Two souterrains, at Beal (NG44SE 10, not illustrated) and Torvaig (NG44SE 9) have been recorded, and these are further described by Miket (2002). Other sites which may be prehistoric include a stone setting (NG44NE 8) on Creag An Fhithich above Achachork and a burnt mound (NG44NE 23) at Torvaig. To the north-west, on the shores of Loch Snizort Beag there is an irregular fort (Dun Cruinn, NG45SW 3), a Complex Atlantic Roundhouse (NG44NW 8) at Skeabost, and further hut circles. Earlier prehistory is represented by several standing stones, stone



Illus 3 Site plan

settings and three cairns, including the particularly well-preserved chambered cairn of Càrn Liath or Grey Cairn (NG45SW 1) at Kensaleyre. Evidence from place names suggests a widespread Viking presence in the north and west of Skye which is not reflected in numbers of sites.

The Portree area has not been favoured with high-profile research excavations in the past although a notable exception to this took place at Tungadale souterrain (NG44SW 1, [Miket 2002](#)) and a coastal survey was undertaken as part of the 'Scotland's First Settlers' project in 1999 ([Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2002; 2009](#)). There has been little commercial development and the work described here is by far the largest developer-funded project to have taken place on Skye.

Prior to 2005, no archaeological work had taken place within the development site. An early 19th-century estate map shows a settlement by the River Leasgeary but by late in that century it had been abandoned. This site, containing interconnecting cellular/shieling-type structures is described by [Masser \(2005\)](#). The Ordnance Survey First Edition map ([Isle of Skye Sheet XXIII, 1881](#)) shows that the west of the Kiltaraglen development was in use as a rifle range at that time. Now a forgotten part of Portree's history, the trenches or butts from

which the firing took place lay within the site, with the target and other range-furniture being located off-site to the north-west. The rifle ranges are still shown on the Third Edition (1909) but by the time of the Popular Edition (1930), they are not depicted.

Bullets collected from the eroding target mound tell an interesting story (S Campbell pers comm). They were fired by a Snider-Enfield Rifle which was introduced in 1867 and was the British Army's first breech-loading cartridge rifle. The Snider-Enfield was phased out of front-line service by 1871 but was used by the Volunteer Units for the remainder of the 1870s. This development in military technology coincided with the formation of the Rifle Volunteer movement, set up in 1859 to defend the country against a potential French invasion. The first official unit in Portree was the 8th Inverness-shire Rifle Volunteer Corps, formed (perhaps from an existing unit) in July 1867.

The eastern part of the development site, including the area containing all of the archaeological remains described in this report, is shown on the First Edition map as featureless fields although it is crossed by a track leading from Home Farm north-east to a gravel pit before bifurcating north-west towards Achachork and south-east back to Portree.