T. Neighbour

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Excavation of a Presumed Round House and Associated Features at Priesthill Farm, near Delny, Ross and Cromarty District, Highland Region, 1993

Abstract

Excavation was carried out on a cropmark site at Priesthill Farm, near Delny, Ross and Cromarty in advance of the realignment of the A9 trunk road. The remains of a possible round house and a length of ditch which may be part of a contemporary field system of later second to mid-first millennium BC date were revealed. Further lengths of ditches and a putative trackway were discovered. Some of these features coincided with cropmark features. The discovery of the remains of a robbed or heavily collapsed cist of uncertain form or date is tentatively suggested. Talc-tempered pottery recovered from the site represents the southernmost presently known occurrence of this type in northern Scotland.

The implications of site recovery in the Scottish lowlands are discussed in the light of current research.

Introduction

This report describes the results of excavations carried out by the Centre for Field Archaeology (CFA) of the University of Edinburgh in February 1993 at Priesthill Farm, near Delny, Ross and Cromarty (NH 738 727). Cropmark features were identified from oblique aerial photographs (HRC 86/08/1/03-5) by Historic Scotland in an area threatened by the realignment of the A9 trunk road between Broomhill and Logie Easter. Rectification indicated that, whilst a number of linear cropmarks of varying width either crossed or lay close to the proposed route, the main complex of features lay upslope to the north (Fig. 1). Geophysical survey was carried out by Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD) both on and adjacent to the proposed route (Banks, 1992). The excavation and post-excavation work was funded by the National Roads Directorate of The Scottish Office Development Department.

The investigated area lies in arable land just over 1km north-west of the Cromarty Firth. The site lies on till above undifferentiated upper Old Red Sandstone. Raised beach deposits are present to the immediate south. Irregularly shaped patches of mineral leaching were present in the subsoil in both trenches. The depth of topsoil was remarkable, being generally in excess of 1m.

Previous Work and Historical Background

A gradiometer survey was carried out by GUARD on and in the immediate vicinity of the proposed road realignment (Banks, 1992). Three separate areas were surveyed, two of which are shown on the location map (Fig. 1C, Blocks 1 and 2). The third survey area, measuring 20m by 40m, was positioned at the extreme east of the alignment and Trench A was subsequently placed by CFA so as to investigate two linear anomalies recorded here. Block 1, in which no anomalies were recorded, measured 20m by 40m. Block 2, measuring 40m by 40m, was located over the cropmark features to the south of Trench B and confirmed their presence. The resolution provided by the gradiometer survey demonstrated that the two curvilinear cropmarks clearly crossed, but it was not clear which was the later. The presence of a rectangular anomaly was interpreted as the foundations of a small building. Resistivity survey would have tested the interpretation of this anomaly, but



Fig. 1. Location Maps.

could not be conducted, owing to poor weather conditions and the state of the crop. Banks (1992) suggests that the putative building and the longer curving cropmark to its immediate north might have been a small chapel and an associated vallum, and cites the place-name 'Priesthill' as further evidence. Such an interpretation can only be tested by excavation, although it is strengthened by an anecdote from the *Statistical Account of Scotland* in 1793, regarding the owner of the farm at Delny and recounted by the Rev. Mr. John Matheson:

The only remains of antiquity that stood in this parish, were last year removed. In the place of Delny, once a principal seat of the Earls of Ross, stood the ruins of a Romish chapel on a pleasant bank, surrounded with graves. This spot has been deserted as a burying place for many years; and the present farmer (not adverting to the impropriety of such a measure) carried away all the stones to build his farm house, and the rubbish to meliorate his land; and ploughed up the burying ground, with an intention to make it an addition to a corn field. The present incumbent, having heard of this species of sacriledge, visited the spot, and found it covered with the bones of the dead, turned up by the plough. The indelicacy of his conduct was represented to the farmer; and he was persuaded to collect the reliques, and to deposit them again in the earth; and he solemnly engaged to draw lines around the sacred spot, to erect a stone in the middle with a suitable inscription, to sow down the spot with grass seed, and never more disturb the manes of his fathers. [Matheson, 1793, pp. 194-5]

It is not known whether the farmer carried out his 'solemn engagement', although it is certain that no stone with a 'suitable inscription' is present in the area now.

Matheson also describes the funerary archaeological sites present in the parish and documents the change in attitude leading to their destruction. Barrows and tumuli were, apparently, regarded as the burials of plague victims and

treated with great caution, prior to 1768:

... one of these tumuli, not much larger than a cart load of earth, was left an impediment on the middle of the road, at the principal entry of the village of Milntown [now Milton, 3.5km to the east of Delny]; and no argument could prevail with the inhabitants to remove it. At length, a certain person, who wished to undeceive the people...undertook to remove this little barrow; and while he was thus displaying his courage, the whole inhabitants of the village surrounded him, dissuading him from the dangerous undertaking, and looking every moment for his falling down dead before them: he lives, however, to this day, after removing this bug-bear, and reducing the ground to a level with the road. From that period little regard is paid to these tumuli: some of them have been opened, but nothing found worthy of remark [Matheson, 1793, pp. 195-6]

No barrows or tumuli are now identified on the Ordnance Survey coverage or in the National Monuments Record of Scotland in the vicinity of Delny or Milton.

According to Watson (1904, p. 65), the place-name Delny derives from the Gaelic deilgneach, meaning 'prickly' and may best be translated as 'place of thorns'. A MacDonald charter, dated 18th February 1462 and referring to 'manerium nostrum de Delny' (our manor house at Delny), is the first recorded mention of a residence here (MacDonald and MacDonald, 1896, pp. 603-604), although there are earlier references to the name: 'the mairdom of Delny, a district including various land in Kilmuir and other parishes, belonged of old to the Earls of Ross, one of whom, Earl William, died at Delny in 1323' (Originales Parochiales Scotiae, 1855, p. 461) is perhaps the earliest. Nearly all medieval traces have now disappeared, and the site is now occupied by a 19th century farmstead (Stell, 1986, p. 107). It is probable that Delny was a wet-moated site, similar to David's Fort (ibid.)

Priesthill, known as *Cnoc an t-sagairt* in Gaelic, is the site of a pre-Reformation manse and glebe (Watson, 1904, p. 65).

Consultation of early cartographic sources (e.g. Blaeu, 1654; Roy, 1747-55; Dorrett, 1750; Ainslie, 1789 and Thomson, 1826) did not add to the information on the area provided by documentary sources. None of the features noted either as cropmarks or from geophysical survey were present on the First or Second Edition Ordnance Survey coverage (1880 and 1907), indicating that any trace of these features had disappeared from the landscape before these maps were surveyed.

Excavation

Two trenches were positioned to examine the intersections of features identified from aerial photography and geophysical prospection within the proposed development corridor (Fig. 1). Trench A was placed at the north-east of the development area. Trench B was placed c.120m to the west. The total area excavated was approximately 2000 square metres.

Ploughsoil was removed from both trenches by earth moving machinery. The entire subsoil surface thus exposed was cleaned by hand and a sample of all archaeological deposits present beneath the ploughsoil was excavated. All features but one were negative and many had been so severely ploughtruncated as to have almost disappeared. Consequently, few stratigraphic relationships remained. All features have been assigned a unique identifier (F1 to F30), quoted in parentheses in the following text. Other numbers refer to entries in the pottery catalogue.

Trench A (Figs. 2 and 3)

Three phases of activity were identified within this trench on the basis of stratigraphic relationships. One isolated feature and a cluster of three features remain impossible to phase owing to their stratigraphic isolation and absence of associated artefacts.

Phase 1 – Sub-circular ditch and post-holes The earliest activity in the trench was marked by two arcs of ditch approximately 0.75m wide and 0.20m deep, with a Ushaped profile (F1). It seems probable that the ditch continued beyond the trench edge to form a rough circle approximately 12m to 13m in diameter. A single sherd of talctempered pottery (1), probably dating from the later second to mid-first millennium BC, was retrieved from the fill.

The ditch enclosed a number of negative features, some of which may be identified as post-holes (F6 and F7) or stakeholes (F10, F11 and F12). The remaining features were pits and hollows of uncertain function (F8, F9, F13 and F14). There is no stratigraphic or artefactual evidence to support the assumption that these features were contemporary with the ditch, but their density within the ditch, and the relative absence of similar features externally, makes their association likely. It is possible that two further post-holes (F6 and F7) were related to the southernmost ditch (F2) of phase 3. Similarly, a solitary pit (F15), located outside the ring-ditch, could be associated with either the two arcs of ditch (F1) or the northernmost ditch (F3) of Phase 3.

It seems probable that this suite of features, with the possible exception of the outlying pit (F15), were the remains of a round house, although the fact that the whole ditch circle could not be exposed and the probably incomplete arrangement of internal features, makes its reconstruction difficult.

Phase 2 – Curvilinear channels

Two shallow, curvilinear channels (F4 and F5) arcing away from one another can be assigned no clear function. Both channels were around 0.20m wide and up to 0.13m deep. The easterly example (F4) cut through the fill of the eastern arc of the Phase 1 ditch (F1), and was hence secondary to it. The similarity in morphology of the channels implies that they were broadly contemporary.

Phase 3 – Linear ditches

Two straight, near parallel, linear ditches (F2 and F3) ran approximately east to west, separated by 7m. The northern ditch (F3) cut both Phase 2 channels (F4 and F5), whilst the



Fig. 2 Trench A: Plan.



Fig. 3 Trench A: Sections.

southern ditch (F2) only cut the eastern channel (F4). The exposed length of the southern ditch was nearly 10m long, just over 1m wide and 0.16m deep at its terminus. The northern ditch (F3) was c.35m long, up to 2m wide and 0.5m deep at maximum. It continued beyond the southern trench edge and had a rounded terminus at its western end. A line of four postholes (F18, F19, F20 and F21) ran just south of and parallel to this ditch, between its west end and the edge of the trench. A linear cropmark, which runs for c.100m west along the same line as the excavated ditch (F3) just beyond the trench edge, is probably a similarly proportioned ditch (see Fig. 1). It is possible that the four post-holes could have supported a structure covering the gap between the two ditches; such as a fenced break accompanying a former earthen bank running parallel to the ditches on their southern side.

Modern

An isolated, sub-rectangular pit (F16) in the east of the trench contained a fragment of modern pottery. The dimensions and form of this pit suggested that it was probably recently spadedug.

Unphased

A cluster of three features (F17), with ill-defined edges and fills rich in mineral leaching, was stratigraphically isolated. It is possible that the three features were natural formations as irregularly shaped patches of mineral leaching were common throughout the subsoil in both trenches.

Trench B (Fig. 4)

Because of the absence of stratigraphic relationships in Trench B, the features described hereafter are not necessarily listed in chronological order.

Ditch

A slightly curving, shallow length of ditch (F23), containing a brown, sandy silt fill, was located towards the east end of the trench. It is not possible to elucidate the shape or overall dimensions of this feature as, although it clearly continued



Fig. 4. Trench B: Plans and sections.

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beyond the trench edge to the south, the ditch is not visible as a cropmark on the oblique aerial photographic coverage. The ditch, as exposed, was c.13m long, 1.2m wide and survived to a maximum depth of 0.15m. Three body sherds (6 and 7) found within the ditch fill and two sherds (5) from the topsoil near the ditch are of coarse clay with sand inclusions. Three further body sherds (2, 3 and 4), found within the topsoil very near the ditch, were of talc-tempered clay. One of these sherds (3) was of the same fabric as the sherd found in the penannular ditch (F1) in Trench A. Both the sand-tempered and talc-tempered sherds are considered to date from the later second to mid-first millennium BC (see Cowie, below). If the pottery can be used reliably to date the feature, then it suggests that the ditch was broadly contemporary with the putative round house in Trench A, and perhaps part of an associated field system.

Wide, shallow hollow

Trench B was placed so as to intersect with a linear cropmark that runs roughly south-east to north-west (Fig. 1). The irregular cross-section of the excavated feature (F26) was over 7m wide and 0.4m deep at maximum. The recorded width and irregularity of this feature suggests that it was not deliberately cut, but had been hollowed by erosion over time, probably through use as a trackway.

Modern

A small, rectangular pit (F28) was similarly proportioned to an isolated pit (F16) in Trench A and was probably also dug by spade at around the same time.

Unphased

Three pits of various shapes and sizes were located at the west end of the area. From east to west these were: a flat bottomed, circular cut (F30) containing a grey-brown silty sand and large, angular stone fill; a sub-rectangular cut (F29) containing a brown sandy silt; and a circular hollow with an irregular profile (F27) containing a grey, sandy silt.

Two further features were located near the ditch (F23): an

irregular cut (F25) filled with a brown, gritty, sandy silt; and a small, circular pit (F24) containing a brown, stone-rich, sandy silt fill. Their differences in shape, size and the characters of their fills did not suggest that they had formed a pair.

None of the unphased features produced any artefactual material.

Stone arrangement

A sub-rectangular arrangement of stones (F22), measuring 1.6m by 1.5m and 0.4m high at maximum, was unique in being the only feature surviving above subsoil in either of the two excavation areas. Some of the stones had clearly been scored by the plough, but no stray stones, which may have been moved by the plough, were present in the topsoil in the vicinity of the feature. When initially exposed, the feature was thought to be a heavily disturbed long cist incorporating three flat, sub-rectangular stones. It was considered likely that any cut containing the stones had been destroyed by deep ploughing. That excavation of the feature revealed no skeletal remains is unsurprising: animal bones were not recovered from any features in either trench, implying that bone preservation was poor. Furthermore, it is possible that the feature was the by-product of robbing, perhaps one of the small 'barrows or tumuli' noted by Matheson (1793, pp. 195-6). The stones could also, of course, have been from field clearance, although the small size of the pile, its position directly on subsoil and the absence of similar features in either of the excavation trenches suggests that this interpretation is unlikely, in the opinion of the author. However, it should be noted that incontrovertible evidence for the date and function of this stone arrangement will never be available and neither of the offered explanations accounts entirely successfully for its presence.

The Pottery Assemblage (T. Cowie)

Nine body sherds were recovered from the site (see Table 1 for pottery catalogue). In the absence of any formal features, the types of vessels represented are unknown, but the relatively good quality of the pottery and the moderate wall thicknesses (average 7.5-8 mm) suggest medium-sized vessels rather than large coarse storage pots. Two main types of fabric can be distinguished, one characterised by the presence of talctempering (four sherds) and the other represented by sherds with a sandy texture, but this broad division masks the fact that there is considerable variation in detail (the nine sherds perhaps deriving from as many as seven separate pots).

Although little can be said about this group of pottery, the talc-tempered sherds, which form the most distinctive component, are of considerable interest. Talc-tempered pottery has been found in small quantities at several sites in Sutherland, including Kilphedir (Fairhurst and Taylor, 1971, pp. 75-77), Upper Suisgill (Barclay, 1985, pp. 179-185) and Kilearnan Hill (Haggarty, forthcoming) - all in the Strath of Kildonan - and more recently in considerably greater quantities from several of the sites in Achany Glen investigated in the course of the Lairg project (cf. McCullagh, 1992, 1993; McCullagh and Tipping, 1998). Fairhurst and Taylor (1971, p. 77, quoting the work of Wilson and Phemister, 1946) noted that while steatite (or fine-grained talc) is rather rare it has been identified in small quantities at a number of different localities in Sutherland. They drew attention to occurrences in upper Strath Naver and also on Loch Shin (the latter some 50 km from Kilphedir). In their report on the coarse pottery from Lairg, MacSween and Dixon (1998, p. 142) have suggested that the source of the talc is likely to have been the series of metamorphosed ultrabasic bosses found in a belt straddling Loch Naver - possibly as far as 30 km from Achany Glen.

The majority of the talc-tempered pottery from Lairg derives from contexts which can be dated broadly to 1800-1200 BC (MacSween and Dixon, 1998, p. 144). This is somewhat earlier than the date range suggested for the talc-tempered

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pottery recovered from Upper Suisgill: there, the relevant fabric group (A3), albeit comprising only a very small quantity of sherds, was assigned to the earlier periods of occupation of the site (Periods I-III), dated to the later second to mid-first millennium BC (Barclay, 1985, pp. 180-183).

Table 1: Pottery catalogue
Trench A: Fill of ditch F1, W end 1. Body sherd; coarse clay, mica and talc-tempered; smoothed
internal surface; abraded; 46 x 38 x 8 mm.
Trench B: Surface finds near ditch cut F23
 Body sherd; fine clay and talc-tempered; 25 x 21 x 7-8 mm. Body sherd; coarse clay and talc-tempered; 32 x 27 x 6 mm.
 Body sherd; coarse clay, mica and talc-tempered; abraded; 45 x 28 x 9 mm.
 Two sherds; coarse clay, sand and mica; one with sooted interior; 33 x 22 x 8 mm; 31 x 24 x 9 mm.
Trench B: Fill of ditch F23
6. Two body sherds; coarse clay and sand; 46 x 34 x 7.5 mm; 32 x 25 x 7.5-8 mm.
 Body sherd; coarse sandy clay with rock fragments; 30 x 35 x 7.5-8 mm.

In view of the very restricted number of sherds and in the complete absence of diagnostic formal or decorative features, it would perhaps be rash to attempt to date the group of sherds from Priesthill Farm closely; however, the writer feels, and this is admittedly no more than a subjective impression, that the general character of the pottery, both talc- and sand-tempered, would be more in keeping with a later second to mid-first millennium BC date, rather than 1800-1200 BC as in the case of Lairg.

As far as the writer is aware, this group of sherds represents the most southerly occurrence of talc-tempered pottery in northern Scotland, extending the distribution south of the Dornoch Firth for the first time. In discussing the Lairg assemblage, MacSween and Dixon noted the possibility that the widespread use of talc as temper could represent the collection of temper from a distance, or the importation of pottery made in the Loch Naver area. The matter is potentially of considerable interest, as modern ethnographic evidence suggests that traditional potters tend to travel only limited distances to obtain their supplies of ceramic raw materials (Arnold, 1981, p. 36). Whatever the explanation for the emerging pattern of distribution of talc-tempered pottery, this distinctive feature of pottery fabrics in Northern Scotland appears to offer considerable scope for the study of prehistoric ceramic production and exchange in the region.

Following MacSween and Dixon (1998), the term talc has been adopted in preference to steatite (as used in previous reports: e.g. Fairhurst and Taylor, 1971; Barclay, 1985).

Palaeoenvironmental Assessment (S. Boardman and C. Rushe)

A total of 11 samples representing 9 soil contexts were subjected to palaeo-environmental assessment. The results are listed in Table 2 and discussed by trench and feature number below.

Trench A

Phase 1 – Gritty sandy silt fill of penannular ditch F1 A total of c.12 g of charcoal was noted. There were 500 plus cereal grains, largely from hulled barley (Hordeum sp.). Cereal chaff (floral) fragments were not encountered in the flots, suggesting that the grain was winnowed elsewhere. The wild species included fat hen/orache (Chenopodium/ Atriplex), hemp-nettle (Galeopsis sp.), corn spurrey (Spergula arvensis L.) and persicaria (Polygonum lapathifolium/ persicaria). All are common weeds of cultivation. Corn spurrey tends to grow on light sandy soils.

Phase 2 – Sandy fill of curvilinear channel F5

Only c.1 g of charcoal was noted. There was a single charred seed of cleavers (*Galium aparine* L.), plus a range of uncharred seeds and fragments, all probably of recent origin.

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Phase 3 – Grey silty sand fill of ditch cut F2 Less than 1 g of charcoal was noted. No other material was present.

Table 2: Plant Material Present in Soil Samples								
Feature Material present								
	Charcoal	Cereal grains	Cereal chaff	Straw nodes	Possible flax	Wild species	Comments on plant material	
F1	>10g	400-600)			25-30	Cereals all <i>Hordeum</i> (barley)?	
F5	c.1g					1	Charred seed - Galium aparine	
F30	>20g	>150	5?	6?	4	25-30	Naked and hulled barley? Many detached embrico ends	
F29	>10g						entoryoenus	
F23	<1g	1				Modern only	Cereal – <i>Avena</i> sp. (oat)	

Trench B

Grey-brown pebbly sandy silt fill of shallow curving ditch cut F23

Less than 1 g of charcoal was noted. A single charred cereal grain was identified as oat (*Avena* sp.). Many uncharred seeds were also present, suggesting that this deposit was disturbed by recent activity (plant rootlets, worm actions, etc.)

Grey-brown stony sandy silt fill of cut F26

Much less than 1 g of charcoal was noted, plus a few uncharred seeds.

Brown sandy silt with charcoal fragments, fill of cut F29 More than 10 g of charcoal was noted. All the identified material was predominantly oak with a high proportion of quick growing (young) wood. No other remains were encountered.

Charcoal rich brown gritty sand silt fill of cut F25 More than 20 g of charcoal was noted, largely of pine. No other remains were encountered.

Grey-brown silty sand top fill of cut F30

Total of c.20 g of charcoal was noted, representing a range of species: *Alnus* (alder), *Betula* (birch), *Corylus* (hazel), *Pinus* (pine), *Quercus* (oak, includes mature timber) and *Salix* (willow). There was a total of c.150 badly preserved cereal grains, predominantly barley. Both naked and hulled grain varieties appear to be present. Some barley chaff was noted. Straw nodes may also indicate that the crop(s) were locally grown. Detached, germinated embryos hint that spoilt grains were deliberately destroyed. Possible cultivated flax (cf. *Linum usitatissimum* L.) and a range of wild plant species were also encountered.

Discussion

The scarcity of both artefacts and stratigraphic association makes interpretation and dating difficult. However, there was enough evidence to indicate that the site was multiperiod. A sub-rectangular pile of stones (F22) has been tentatively interpreted as either a dilapidated or robbed cist, its dimensions suggesting that it was a long cist. Perhaps this was one of the 'barrows or tumuli' mentioned by Matheson (1793, pp. 195-6). The earliest definable phase was represented by the plough-truncated remains of a single round house (F1), datable probably to the later second to mid-first millennium BC by the presence of talc-tempered pottery. Such pottery has previously only been found to the north of the Dornoch Firth, generally in upland hut-circles. Typically

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these survive as penannular banks of stones and earth, varying in diameter between 5m and 14m. Excavation has identified post-holes and ditches. Examples with talc-tempered pottery include Hut-circle I at Kilphedir (Fairhurst and Taylor, 1971), Lairg (McCullagh, 1992 and 1993) and Kilearnan Hill (Haggarty, in prep.) Talc-tempered pottery was also discovered in Phases I to III at Upper Suisgill (Barclay, 1985), a valley bottom site. The pottery from Priesthill is felt to be of a broadly similar date to that from Upper Suisgill (see Cowie, above).

The round house at Priesthill must be viewed as a component of a lowland farm. Associated environmental evidence suggests that barley was being cultivated in the vicinity at the time and evidence for a possibly contemporary field system was recorded in Trench B (Fig. 4, F23). However, due to the dearth of prehistoric domestic sites recorded in the vicinity, it is impossible to fit the Priesthill round house into a local tradition of lowland settlement. The few prehistoric sites in the immediate vicinity are known from recent excavations in advance of a British Gas pipeline (Wordsworth, 1993). These include the remains of settlement and industrial activity from the Bronze and Iron Ages. A probable Iron Age settlement at Dalmore Farm (NH 666 690) consisted of two possible post-built round houses, a grain storage pit and evidence for iron working. An irregular distribution of pits and post-holes, containing decorated Bronze Age pottery, at Rosskeen (NH 668 694) were thought to be the remains of small buildings secondary to a main house outwith the stripped area. A 7m diameter post-pit ring at Rosskeen House (NH 688 694) lay to the east of a group of pits, thought originally to have been timber-lined, and probably used for an industrial process, such as tanning. In the absence of finds, dating and interpretation were difficult. Other finds included a small cremation (NH 69738 69428), a shell midden on the bank of Rosskeen burn (NH 6911 6945) and sherds of combed beaker pot in silts sealing a gulley that may have been structural (NH 6962 6952).

Later features

One or two phases of later field systems or boundaries were discernible from the excavated remains and cropmarks. No evidence survives which can be used to date these later features and neither of the trenches could be placed so as to investigate the intersections of any of the cropmarks. However, some limited interpretation is possible. It is clear that the two, generally parallel, cropmarks to the north of Trench B respect the putative trackway (F26) running NW to SE through that trench. Of the two parallel ditches (F2 and F3) recorded in Trench A, one ran on the same line as a cropmark to the west, which in turn runs in a similar direction to the two cropmarks to the north of Trench B. It seems likely that all these features are aspects of a contemporary field system of a broadly medieval or post-medieval date. This is no more than a subjective impression, which could be tested by excavation of the intersection of the putative trackway (F26) and possible vallum (Banks, 1992) to the south of Trench B.

The date and function of the rectangular enclosure, visible as a cropmark to the north of the proposed road realignment, are unknown. It is worthy of note that the juxtaposition of near parallel cropmarks and a rectangular, or sub-rectangular enclosure, is not uncommon in the area. In particular, a similar arrangement, associated with rig and furrow cultivation, can be seem on oblique aerial photographs at Balintraid (NMRS Ref: NH 77 SW 9, NH 732 708).

Problems with lowland recovery

The excavations at Priesthill and those conducted by Wordsworth (1993) demonstrate the problem with recovery in the Scottish lowlands. As has been stressed elsewhere, although 'the low level of archaeological visibility in the lowland plough zone is to some extent offset by the application of aerial photography' (Hanson and Macinnes, 1991, p. 155), this technique, together with geophysical survey, is biased towards the detection of certain types of sites, mainly those characterised by negative features, such as slots, ditches, and post-holes.

It is apparent that neither aerial photography nor

geophysical survey located what is arguably the most important suite of features identified by excavation, the remains of the probable round house. Geophysical survey is not good for detecting pits and post-holes, particularly when seemingly randomly arranged, for it is impossible to differentiate such features from background noise, unless patterning can be detected. Furthermore, gradiometry relies on detecting differences in magnetism. The two arcs of ditch and the pits, which comprised the probable round house, were very shallow, and it is doubtful whether the contrast in magnetic susceptibility between the fills of the features and the adjacent subsoil was of sufficient magnitude to be detectable, certainly through the depth of topsoil at Priesthill, which excavation demonstrated to be generally in excess of 1m. As mentioned earlier, resistivity survey could not be carried out at Priesthill. In any case, the standard 0.5m wide twin-probe array, the most common resistivity technique used in archaeology, receives its main signal from a depth of around 0.5m, which would clearly have been insufficient here. Penetration can only be increased by widening the array, which leads to a loss of resolution. It is questionable whether the resolution achievable with a wider twin-probe array would have been sufficient for feature detection. Consequently, the excavation trenches were targeted by the results of aerial photographic analyses, known to be selective, and the discovery of the round house was entirely due to its proximity to cropmarks and has to be regarded as fortuitous. The intention of the above is not to criticise the Priesthill survey (Banks, 1992), but to question the worth of applying geophysical survey when site clearance is to be undertaken in any case.

Comparison with a similar road realignment programme in southern England, where most archaeology is undertaken in 'the lowland plough-zone' (Hanson and Macinnes, 1991), is perhaps revealing. For the by-pass to the A41 in Hertfordshire, a stance was taken against the 'current orthodoxy, which says that the initial site detection should be done by field walking, geophysics and the cutting of small test pits' (McDonald, 1993, p. 137). Instead, extensive trenching was used, which was found to transcend the inherent bias from fieldwalking and geophysical survey and be considerably cheaper. The results were impressive, producing more prehistoric material than had previously been known from the whole of Hertfordshire. Such extensive trenching is standard practice on motorway construction programmes in France (Ralston, pers. comm.)

It is perhaps an obvious point that the lowland zone is more fertile than the uplands. It is the continuing use of this land for agriculture that prevents us from appreciating the density of prehistoric agricultural sites within this zone. Such unenclosed sites as that at Priesthill and those discovered by Wordsworth (1993) are generally undiscoverable by any means other than excavation. Thus, random trenching, in addition to the targeting of cropmarks as at Priesthill, has to be considered a primary evaluative technique and should be applied even in the absence of evidence from remote sensing.

Conclusions

Results from the excavation of relatively narrow transects through large scale cropmark features in advance of linear developments can be hard to interpret. In this case, useful contributions to archaeological research have been made, partly by further defining the cropmark features, but more importantly by locating a previously unknown suite of features.

The most important aspect of the site is the remains of a suspected round house from the later second to mid-first millennium BC. Although poorly preserved and with little definable structure, the round house nevertheless represents the most southerly occurrence of talc-tempered pottery in northern Scotland to date, and is a further example of the potential for recovery of the lowland component of the settlement pattern in the region, which is dominated by ubiquitous upland hut-circles.

The excavation emphasises the dangers of depending on remote sensing in archaeological prospection. The types of site

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which can be located by geophysical survey are limited, and it is questionable whether such techniques are worthwhile or cost effective when site clearance is inevitable.

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Location of the Archive

The complete project archive has been deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS). An archive report (Neighbour and Finlayson, 1994), with full stratigraphic analysis, is also lodged with NMRS. This includes a complete catalogue of the finds assemblage and soil samples from the site. The finds have been deposited with Historic Scotland, in advance of deposition in an appropriate museum.

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