

CEBAC Community archaeology walks – No 3

For our third walk DI had set up a circular route taking in “The Midnight wall” and the Carn a Mharc chambered tomb. We started at NB 48723 42578, meeting in the car park of a small Mission house now owned by the village and the village fank.

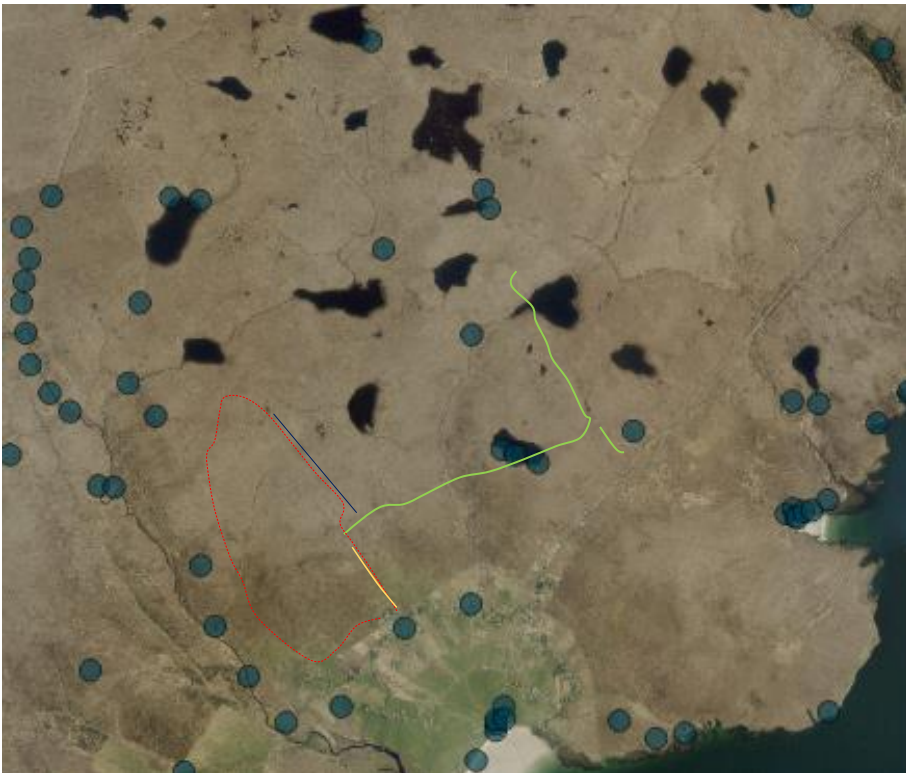


Figure 1: The Garadh Dubh as traced in Walk No 2 is in green. The “Gàrradh Druim Bràigh an Uillt” or “The wall of the rising ground above the stream” is in orange. The “Gàrradh a’ Mheadhan Oidhche” or “The Midnight Wall” in dark blue, further inland. Walking route in red dash.

Near where we started the walk is a small enclosed area is named “Garaidh Duibhig” on the 1st edition OS, 1852. This could also be Geàrraidh Duibhig, or Duthac, or Dubhaig, as the spelling seems to vary. One document speculated might relate to St Duthac but with no evidence other than place-name. There are a number of ruins marked within its enclosure, which is just inside the head dyke, much like the Buaille Ghlas enclosure we saw on walk 2. In fact in this case it seems almost as though the head dyke has been redirected to take the Geàrraidh Duibhig inside of it. It seems likely that these were both small independent settlements before they were cleared to make way for the Gress Farm. The head dyke may have made use of the stone of their houses explaining why it runs so close to them or actually through them in some cases.

Commented [DI1]: Geàrraidh Duibhig, or Duthac, or Dubhaig, spelling seems to vary. One doc speculated might relate to St Duthac but with no evidence other than place-name. Geàrraidh means “enclosure”.

Commented [IM2R1]: Can you remember the document, DI? Be good to add this reference

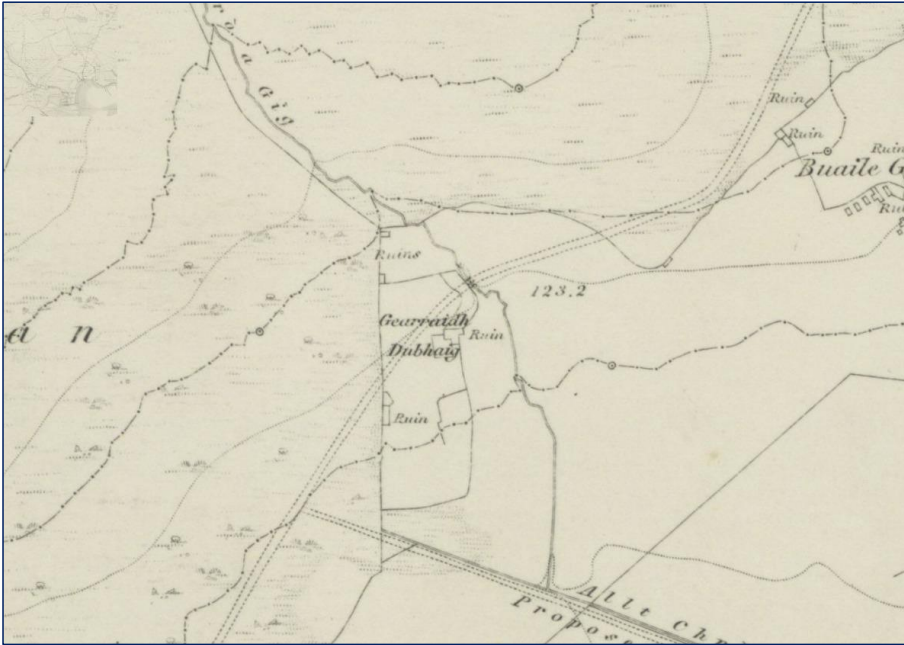


Figure 2: The Gearraidh Dubhaig, where we stated the walk, on the 1st edition, 1852. Note the head dyke which seems to have been diverted to take it in and the roofless ruins.

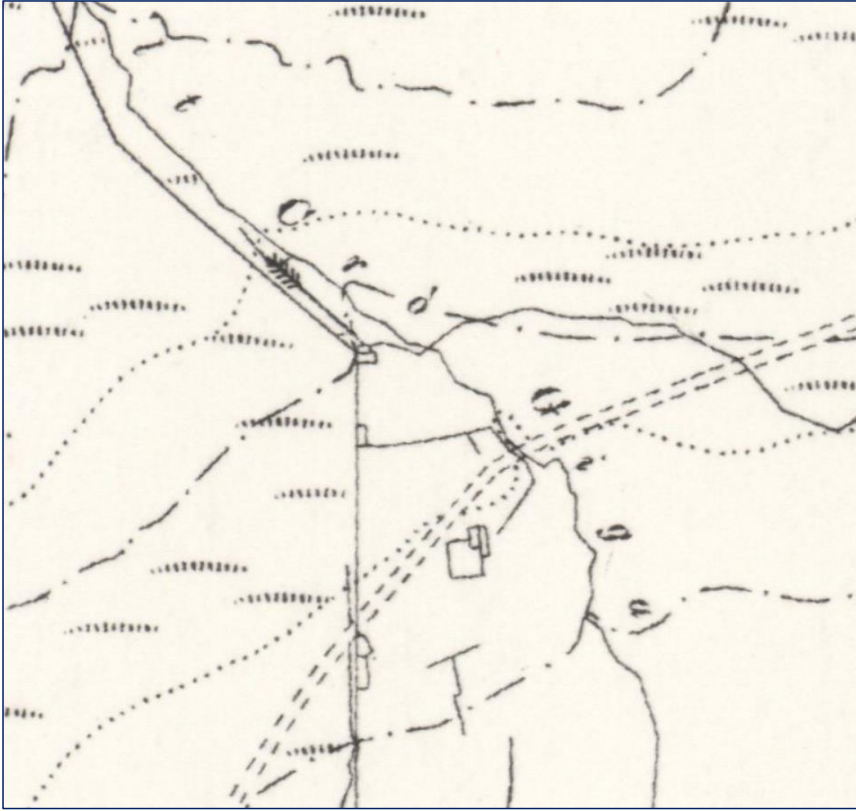


Figure 3: The Gearraidh Dubhaig on the 2nd edition, 1895.



Figure 4: The black line is just outside of the line of the head dyke for Gress Farm, which is still visible if you look closely. The area within it is the Gearraidh Dubhaig. Red arrow shows the start of Walk No. 3

AS is becoming usual now, within a couple of hundred metres our collective attention was grabbed by a feature to our right – what looked like a very straight earthen dyke, already! I wasn't expecting it so soon...



Figure 5: A few hundred metres in and we notice what looks like an earthen dyke running parallel with the road, all within a fenced area.

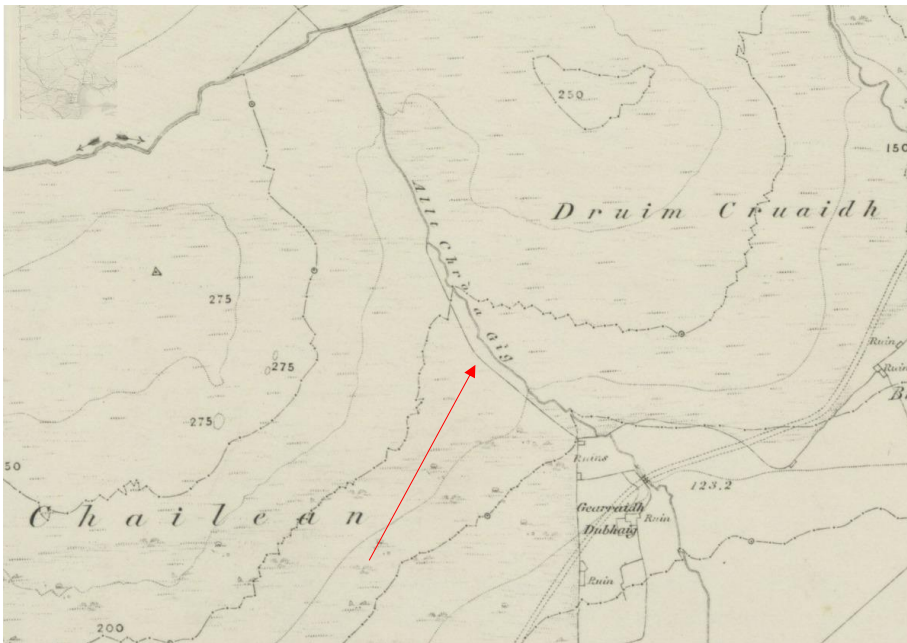


Figure 6: The first stretch of wall the "Gàrradh Druim Bràigh an Uillt" on the 1st edition – the straight line just to the left of the Allt Chro a Gig, marked by the arrow.



Figure 7: DI is standing on “Gàrradh Druim Bràigh an Uillt” - an earthen bank with ditches either side which runs back towards the village in a remarkably straight line..

But also, just to the north, what seemed to be the footings of a “turf” house – c30m long, 6m wide internally at the widest point, rectangular, possibly slightly almond shaped form, wall footings 2-3m wide, but no stone could be felt within them. There is no sign of a structure at this location on the 1st, 2nd or later OS maps – which indicates that if this is the remains of a structure then it was already old and not worth recording in 1852.

Most turf buildings found in the Hebrides would be smaller shieling type structures. However, there is a possibility that this site represents the remains of a turf long house such as those found in Iceland – see picture below.



Figure8: The footings of a large turf blackhouse?



Figure 9: Icelandic turf house of similar proportions

Getting back to the wall, we followed it up the side of the river for a few hundred metres but then it became faint and we lost all trace of it. For a while we were map reading and striking out in a direction which we were sure to intersect with it further on. Once this was achieved we could figure out the significant lines running through the already heavily lined landscape due to all the peat banks here.



Figure 10: The intersection of the Gardh Dubh (in orange) – as traced on walk 2 over by Loch Beinn Iobheir – running through horizontally, with the “Gàrradh Druim Bràigh an Uillt” running up to it in light blue and the “Gàrradh a’ Mheadhan Oidhche” / Midnight wall in dark blue. This pattern would suggest that the Garadh Dubh was in place before the midnight wall was made as it branches off from it. The lower Gàrradh Druim Bràigh an Uillt seems to terminate at the Garadh Dubh, again indicating that the Garadh dubh was present first. All are pre-1852.

Our navigation worked and it became fairly obvious we had found what we were looking for!



Figure 11: The “Gàrradh a’ Mheadhan Oidhche” or The Midnight Wall

It is called the midnight wall for very specific reasons, although the story varies slightly in detail. Here are two versions and a note on possible eclipse dates:

Murdo Stals:

“Beinn Chailein, Beinn lomhair (two hills in Gress. Once upon a time Gress belonged to an old woman. She was going to make a will... she had two sons and this is why one is called Beinn lomhair and the other Beinn Chailein. She was going to divide the village. The wall is there; many people were working on it when the sun was eclipsed – everything went black. The old woman was told a judgement had come upon her.” Therefore no more work was done on the wall. It may be seen today, starting at the top part of the stream and stopping in the middle of the moor. There was a total eclipse on the 14th of July 1748.

Translation of place name 200, Gàrradh Druim Bràigh an Uillt in Ainmean-Àite Sgir’ a’ Bhac Eilean Leodhais by Murchadh M. MacDhòmhnaill, Aberdeen University, 1997

[The bit in quotation marks seems to be direct speech recorded by Murdo. He doesn’t state how or why he fixed on the eclipse being the one of July 1748.]

George Stewarts:

This wall is one of many to have been seen on the fringes of villages in the Back district and no doubt many of them have an interesting history. The purpose of most of them is self-evident as boundary walls to keep stock off the village, away from the growing crops. This one, however, is different in that it runs at right angles to the village boundary walls such as the "Gàrradh Dubh" and the "Gàrradh Glas".

It starts at "Gearradh Duthac" in Gress and goes straight out to the moor for approximately one mile and comes to an abrupt end. Why was it built and why does it come to an abrupt end? We would like to suggest a theory as to why it was built and support it with some slender evidence.

When the Macivers came to Gress at the end of the 17th Century, the Morrisons were the tacksmen there and they stayed on for some time after the arrival of the Macivers. On one side of the wall we have "Beinn Chailein" and on the other side "Beinn Iomhair". It is easy to associate "Beinn Iomhair" with the Macivers and what would be more appropriate than to associate "Beinn Chailein" with the Morrisons with whom Colin was such a popular family name? So, did the Morrisons and MacIvers build this as a boundary wall between them some three hundred years ago?

Tradition tells us why the building of the wall came to such an abrupt end. On one occasion, when the work was in progress, about mid-day, darkness fell and the superstitious workers panicked, believing that it was a judgement on them for maybe disturbing remains of a person or persons buried in the area and they refused to do any more work and so the wall progressed no further. No such panic would concern us today because, in our "enlightened" times, we would know that the darkness was simply a total eclipse of the sun. This is why it is popularly known as "Gàrradh Meadhan Oidhche"

Contributed by George Stewart (Seòras Shoidhean, 2 Back), sometime in 1980s.

DI Macdonald: I researched eclipses visible from Gress using eclipsewise.com and found that an almost-total eclipse (magnitude 0.983) occurred on the 23rd of September 1699. So if you think the date of the wall's construction coincided with the MacIver/Morrison period that's the best bet. If the wall is later than that, then perhaps the eclipse Murdo Macdonald mentions in 1748 might be a better bet.

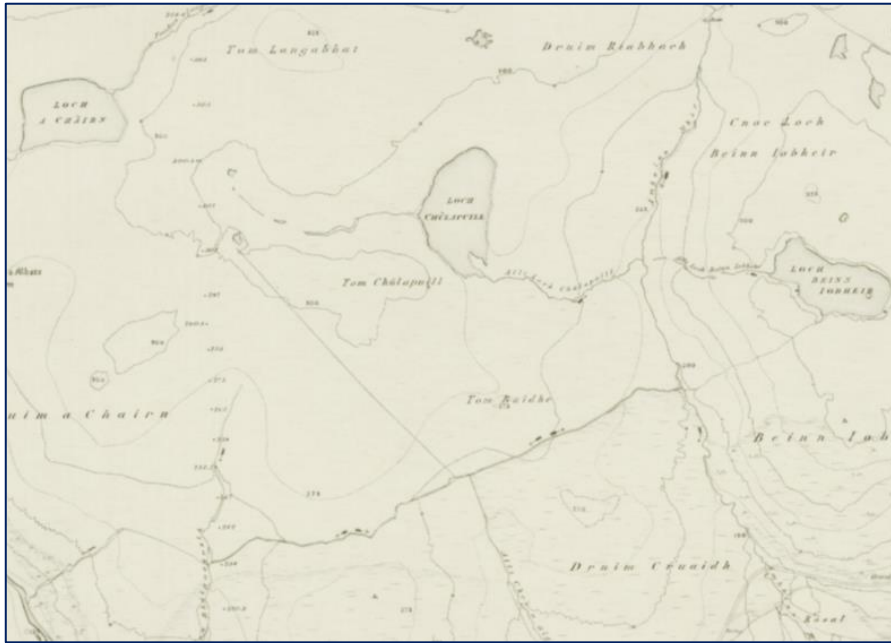


Figure 12: The Midnight wall might be the straightest wall of them all! OS 1st edition 1852



Figure 13: The Midnight wall comes to an abrupt end.



Figure 14: The Midnight wall starts again! And quickly stops!

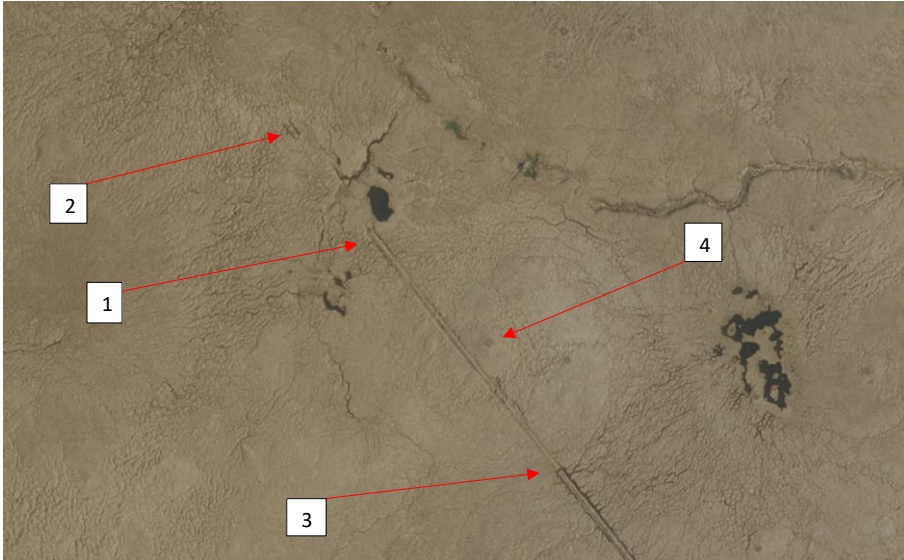


Figure 15: The Midnight wall stops, then starts again

Figure 15 shows four interesting things – firstly, the wall ends near the Lochan (1), then it starts again for a small section visible above and left of the Lochan (2). Walking the area confirmed that there was no trace of earthwork in between. Why was this? Next, down to the bottom right, a section of wall seems to end (3), as in it is crossed by the deep ditch which usually runs down both sides, and the next section seems fainter. Could the wall have been built in sections by different teams, as I think DI suggested at the time?

It is interesting that the wall (or earthen dyke) was so well made, with ditches on both sides this time – so far in our walks there has only been a ditch on one side of such dykes. We wondered whether a radial division of land like this, rather than a concentric division like the Garadh Dubh, might require ditches on both sides to ensure stock doesn't get mixed up between competing or unfriendly neighbours – such as the Morrisons and McIvers in the story above?

Just before the end(s) of the wall we couldn't help but ascend a perfectly circular Cnoc with a shallow depression at the centre – No 4 in the aerial image above, at NB 48028 43760. Stones could be felt around the edge of the doughnut shape, and it commanded a majestic view of the surrounding land. It seems likely to be some sort of archaeology, although unprovable at present. Possibilities include the remains of a circular "Beehive" type shieling from the later Iron Age.



Figure 16: The circular cnoc near the end of the “Gàrradh Druim Bràigh an Uillt” / “Gàrradh a’ Mheadhan Oidhche” / The Midnight Wall, No 4 in Figure 15 above

We ate lunch at the Loch a’ Chàirn next to the remains of a more recent Shieling, of the oval form with two opposing doors. There is no trace of it on the 1852 1st edition, but it is marked upon the 2nd edition surveyed in 1895, as a ruin without a roof (although this may not necessarily be a ruin as the roofs were seasonal) so that gives us a date for its construction between 1852-1895.



Figure 17: The Airigh by Loch a' Chàirn, of oval plan with two opposing doors, whose construction can be dated by maps to between 1852-1895.

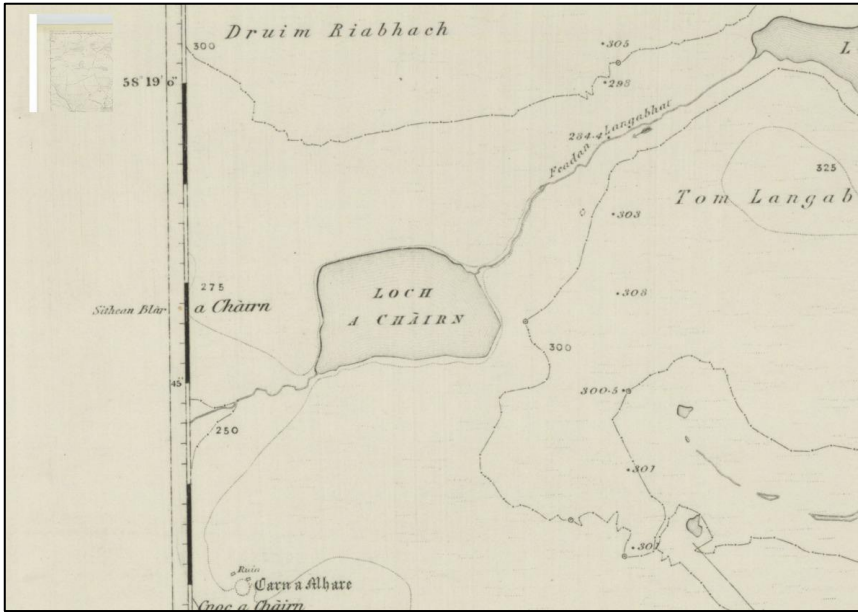


Figure 18: The OS 1st edition with no trace of an Airigh

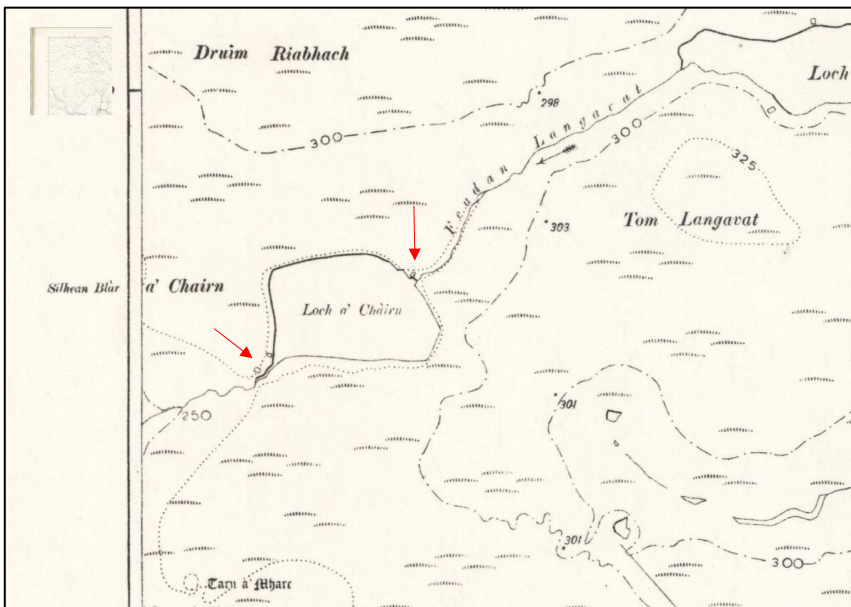


Figure 19: OS 2nd edition with 3 little rectangles denoting Airigh without roofs

Then we found the Carn, the oldest structure of the walks so far...



Figure 20: The Carn a Mharc

Much has been written about the Carn, and no need to repeat that here. In our short visit we had little time to make sense of the jumble of stones which now presents itself. It seemed clear that many little cellular structures had been made into the top of the carn, looking like expediently made shelters dotted all over it. There were no properly standing stones anymore as had been noted on records. We thought that we could make out a passage like structure which ran due south from the centre of the Cairn – shown above.

On the return leg, following the Gress river down, we looked for a wall which had been spotted running underneath the peat by Point archaeologist Carol Knott. The aerial imagery of the area looks like it might indicate an area enclosed by earthen dyke.

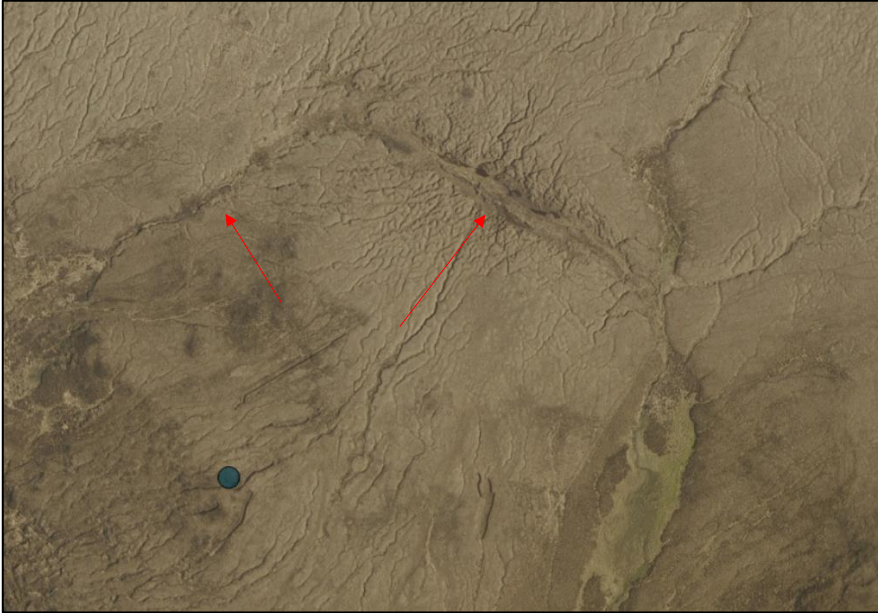


Figure 21: An area which seemed to be defined by an encircling dyke/ditch, with a findspot of pre-peat wall marked by the blue dot. The wall could not be located but the dike/ditch was clear.

We did not locate the pre-peat wall but the dyke and ditch were clear. Studying the maps when I got home it became obvious that this dyke was actually the continuation of the Garadh Dubh, as described in walks 1 & 2 rather than a dyke enclosing an area:

