

Figure 2: The lower reaches. Each blue dot is a record on the national database CANMORE.

The first dot is a record of a “Field System”. The area has lots of suspicious lumps and bumps, some of which were feannagan like. The second dot up the right bank was marked as a shieling. This is also marked as a small rectangle upon the 1st edition at “Linne Sgorach”:



Figure 3: note the small rectangle, denoting an unroofed Shieling, just under the letter “i”

There was no sign of a rectangular footing now, although there was a suspicious looking mound which may have been its last remains.

Moving on up the river, the path was beautifully clear in places, a metre wide terrace which had obviously been shored up and augmented in places and was redolent of the movement of thousands of feet

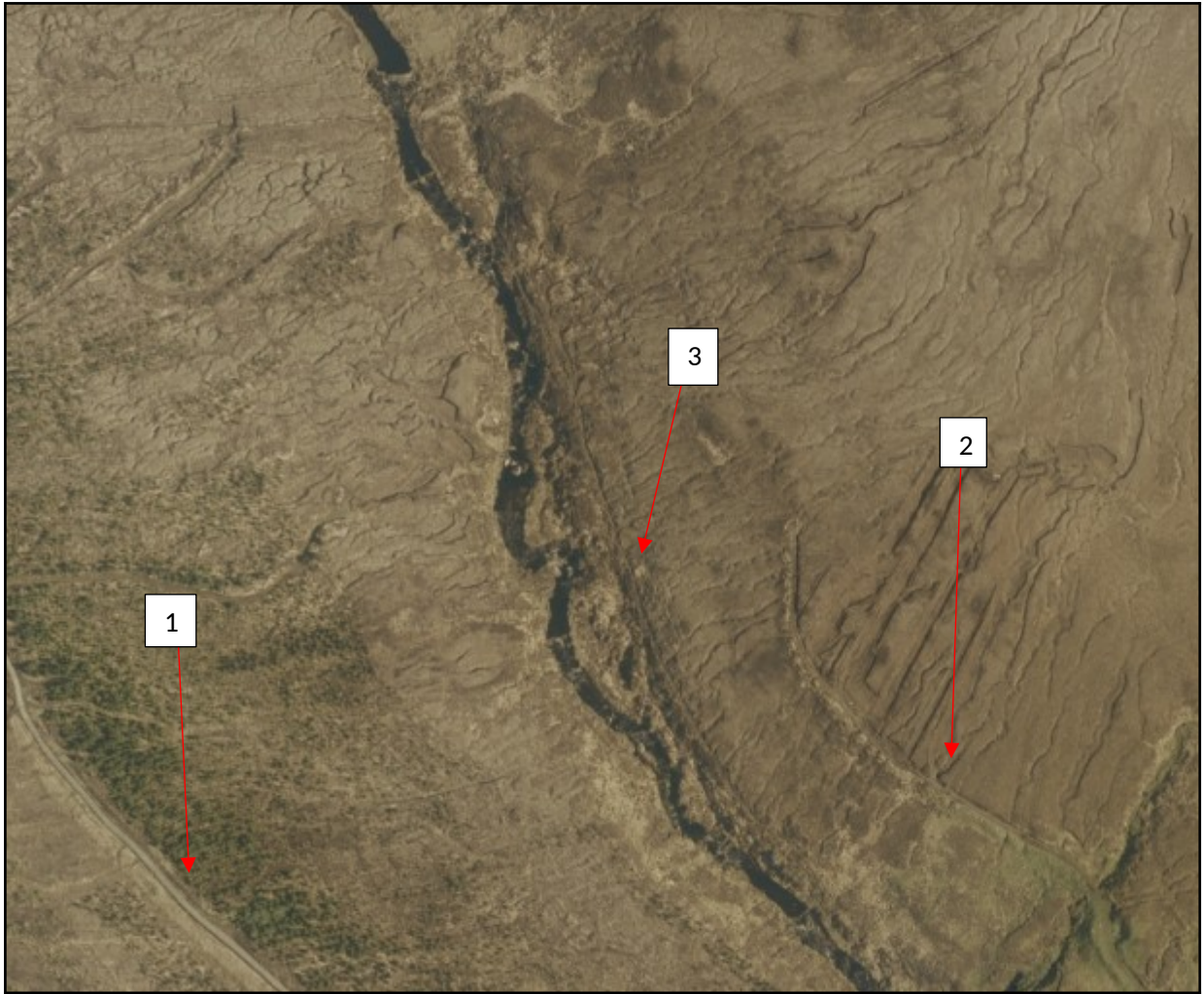


Figure 4: The modern peat track (1) is just visible to the bottom left hand corner, an old peat track (2) runs up from the bottom right corner and terminates abruptly. The Womans road (3) is clearly visible running close to the river just above the flood plain, up the right bank.



Figure 5: The blue dot on the “Alltan Baigasgro” near the “Bottom Long Pool” is marked upon the OS 1st edition as an L shaped “Ruin” in 1852.



Figure 6: The L shaped structure, a ruin in 1852



Figure 7: The L-shaped ruin - now a collapsed sub circular shieling structure built within the larger wall footings of the original structure.

It was hard to interpret this structure as it had obviously been reused by being rebuilt into a circular structure after the Lshaped structure had become ruinous. However, Chrissie Bell Urpeth informed me that she and her husband Peter had once found a millstone in this vicinity some years back. These stones don't usually move far, and it would make sense of the L shape - but it means that the little tributary stream running into the Gress river here must have had substantially more water flowing through it at the time. Perhaps there has been some change to the way the water courses work here.

A note on Shielings

Shielings have a very long history. The earliest shielings are thought to be the "Both" (pronounced Boh) or Beehive type; circular, corbelled stone igloos with one door which date back roughly 1,500-2000 years, and were used by early Christian monks coming from Ireland. Although some of those structures continued in use until recently, over the years new shieling designs were being built and there is thought to be a "progression" or gradual shift to a more oval plan, with stout vertical walls supporting a removable wooden roof structure, and two opposing doors, one of which would be

blocked with turf depending upon which way the wind was blowing. At first these were quite irregular curvilinear shapes but gradually became more regular oval shapes.

Here I wish to introduce the work of Anne Campbell, of No 1 North Bragar. Anne undertook a Masters dissertation with Edinburgh University, studying the Moor in Bragar, in which she visited and recorded every place name, shieling and archaeological site in a vast area. This makes her one of the foremost authorities on the Lewis Shieling, and her typology of Shieling plans is very instructive to our understanding what was going on in Gress.

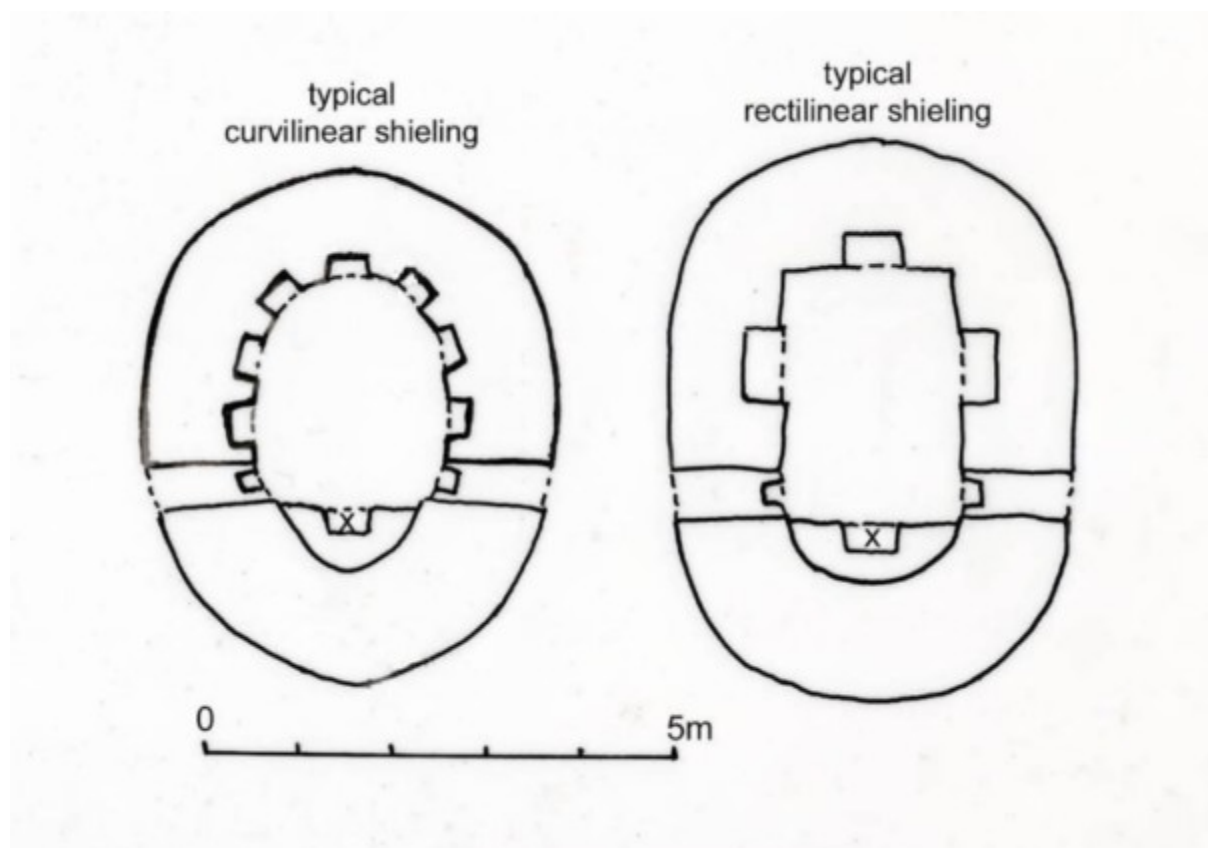


Figure 8: Typical shapes and dimensions of curvilinear and rectilinear shielings, showing recesses. X = fireplace.

“Shielings have been divided into two different categories: Those with two or more *rectilinear internal corners* are classified as *rectilinear*. The most common internal shape for shielings which are known to have been still in use in the mid-20th century is *rectilinear* at the sleeping end and *curvilinear* at the fire end”.

Anne has seen examples of Shieling that started as Curvilinear and were rebuilt into the Rectilinear, so we can be confident that one developed into the other. After these there are the truly rectangular Shielings, which are the last form in the tradition, and soon to be replicated in corrugated iron instead of stone. There is no known date for commencement of this design in academic circles, but

I'm sure that if the right people from the community were to get together to talk about it a good idea of the date might well be found.

One preliminary idea is that it may have been when commercial timber which was straight and regular became available and the wall and door plan changed accordingly.

The shieling rebuilt from the ruins of the L shaped structure above (Fig 7) were too collapsed to be able to attribute to any of these categories however.

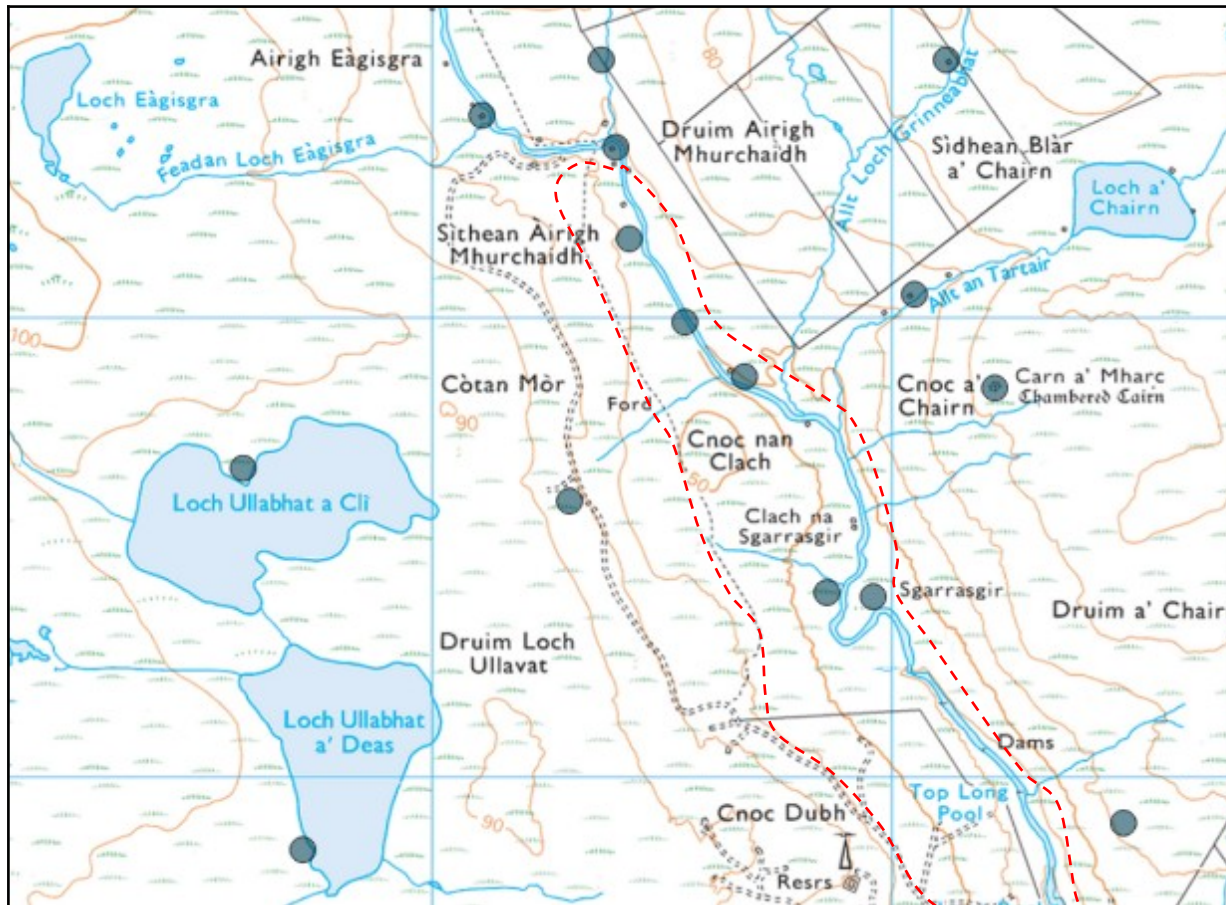


Figure 9: The upper part of the route. Note the blue dots denoting canmore records at "Sgarrasgir".

Returning to the walk, we now were entering Shieling territory proper. At a large bend in the river we came across a fertile plain called "Sgarrasgir".

It was very difficult to get a photo of these structures – they were surrounded by reeds and long grass such that only an aerial viewpoint would adequately capture their state of preservation, something which we eventually plan to achieve using a drone. In the meantime aerial imagery from the CANMORE database has been used.

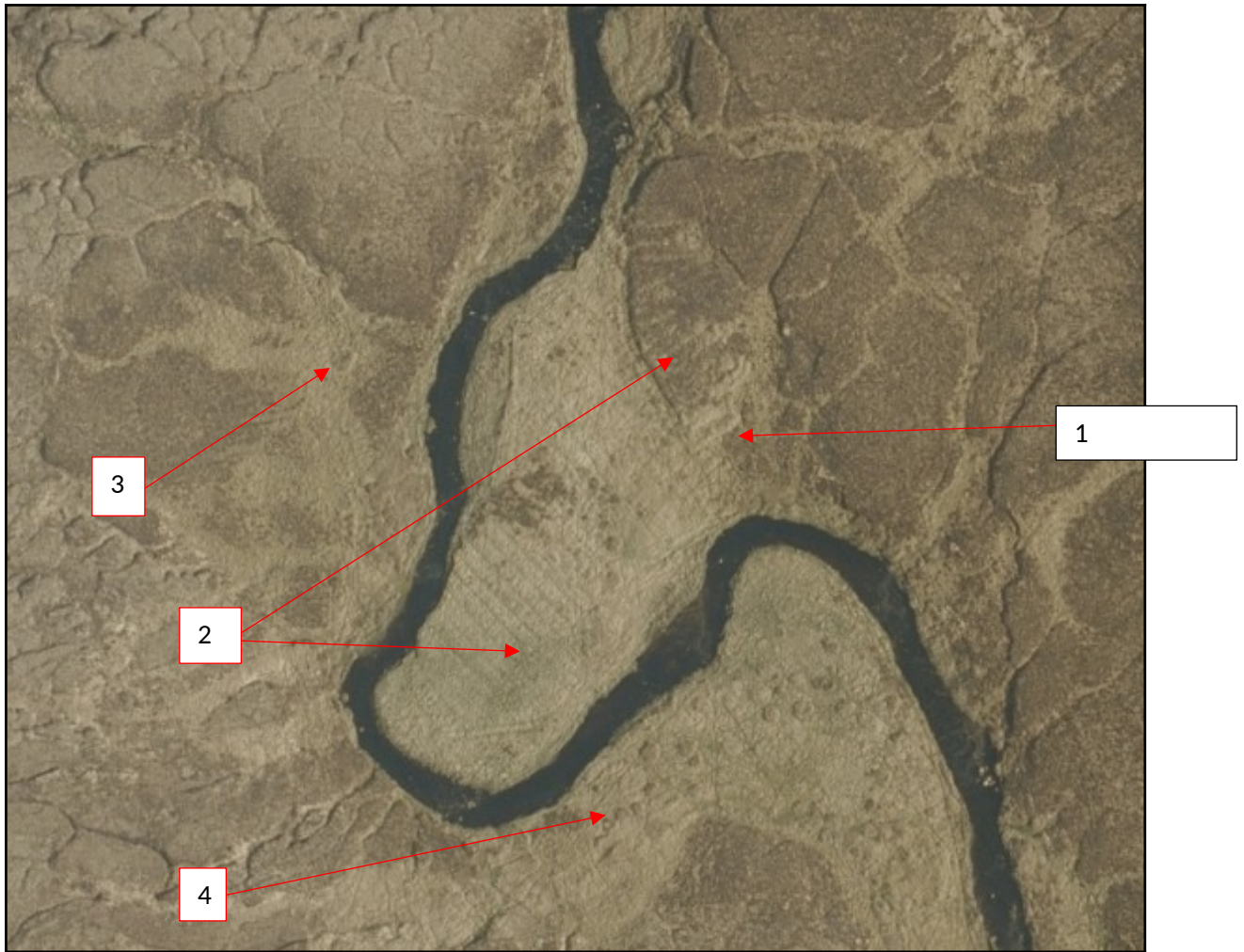


Figure 10: Sgarrisgar. 1 - Rectangular stone building; 2 - Feannagan; 3- Shieling (not visited); 4 - strange circles I must return to check!

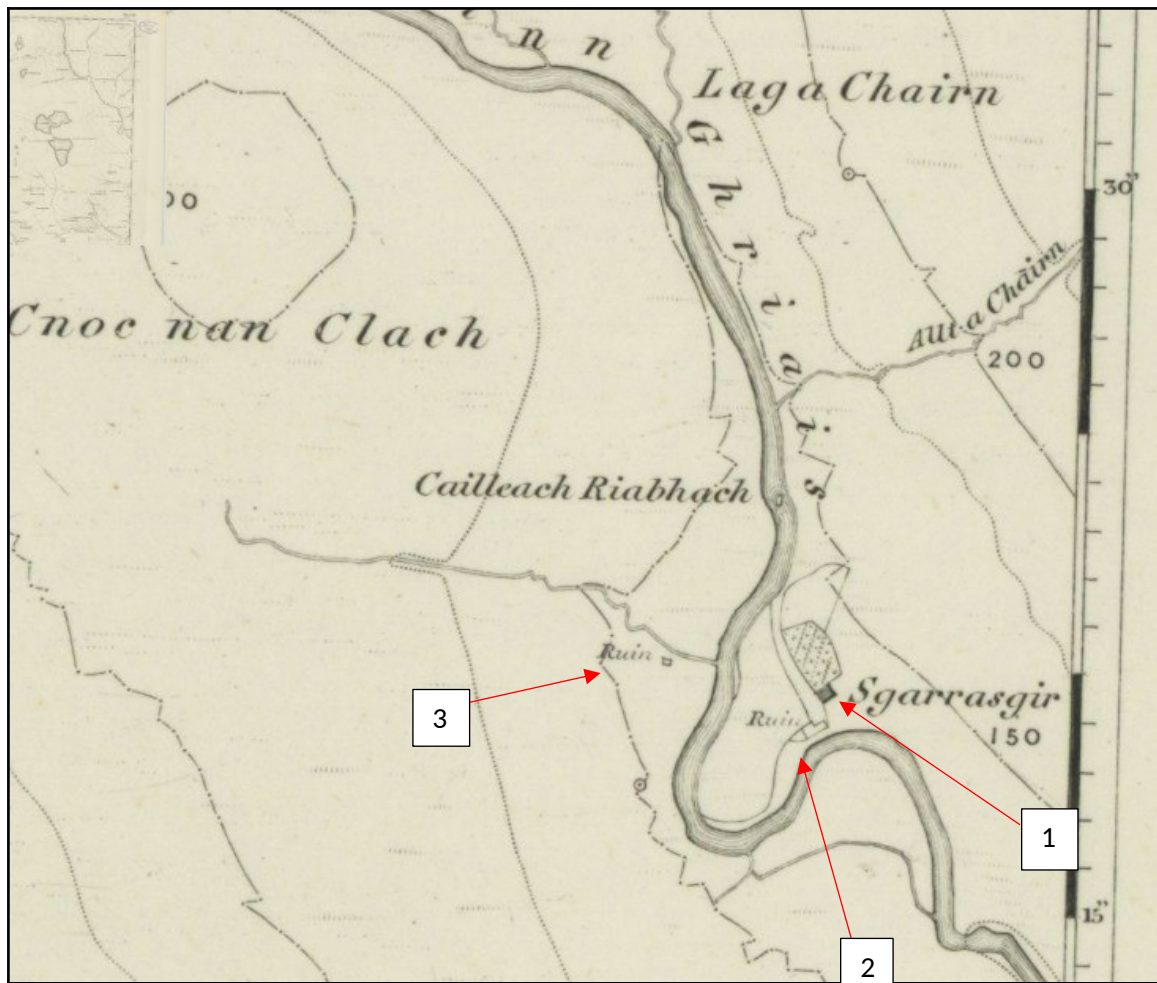


Figure 11: 1852 map of Sgarrasgir. Note one almost square roofed building (1), a nearby ruin (2) AND another ruin on the right bank (3). Only the square building can now be seen (Number 1 in fig 10 above) although there was a mound where the ruin (2) is marked.

Just upstream from Sgarrasgir there was a large rock in the middle of the River called “Cailleach Riabhach” on the 1st edition (Fig 11 above). The consensus seemed to be that that may translate to something like “The old speckled woman”.

The placename “Cailleach” is interesting as in some cases this does not just refer to an old woman – there is a mythical Cailleach who appears in the naming of many parts of landscapes across the Gaeltacht and is thought to be a pre-Christian Goddess of the Land (see - Newton, M. “Warriors of the Word, the world of the Scottish Highlanders” 2009, pages 227-230 for example). On the 2nd edition, the same rock seems to be called “Clach nan Sgarrasgir”. The nearby hill is called “Cnoc nan Clach”, and there is a possibility that this Cailleach Riabhach is the Clach referred to. It is certainly a recognisable or describable landmark. These are both very near the Charn a Mharc, and also very close to a concentric head dyke running around Gress. The close conjunction of these things is very interesting and definitely deserves further research.



Figure 12: "Cailleach Riabhach".

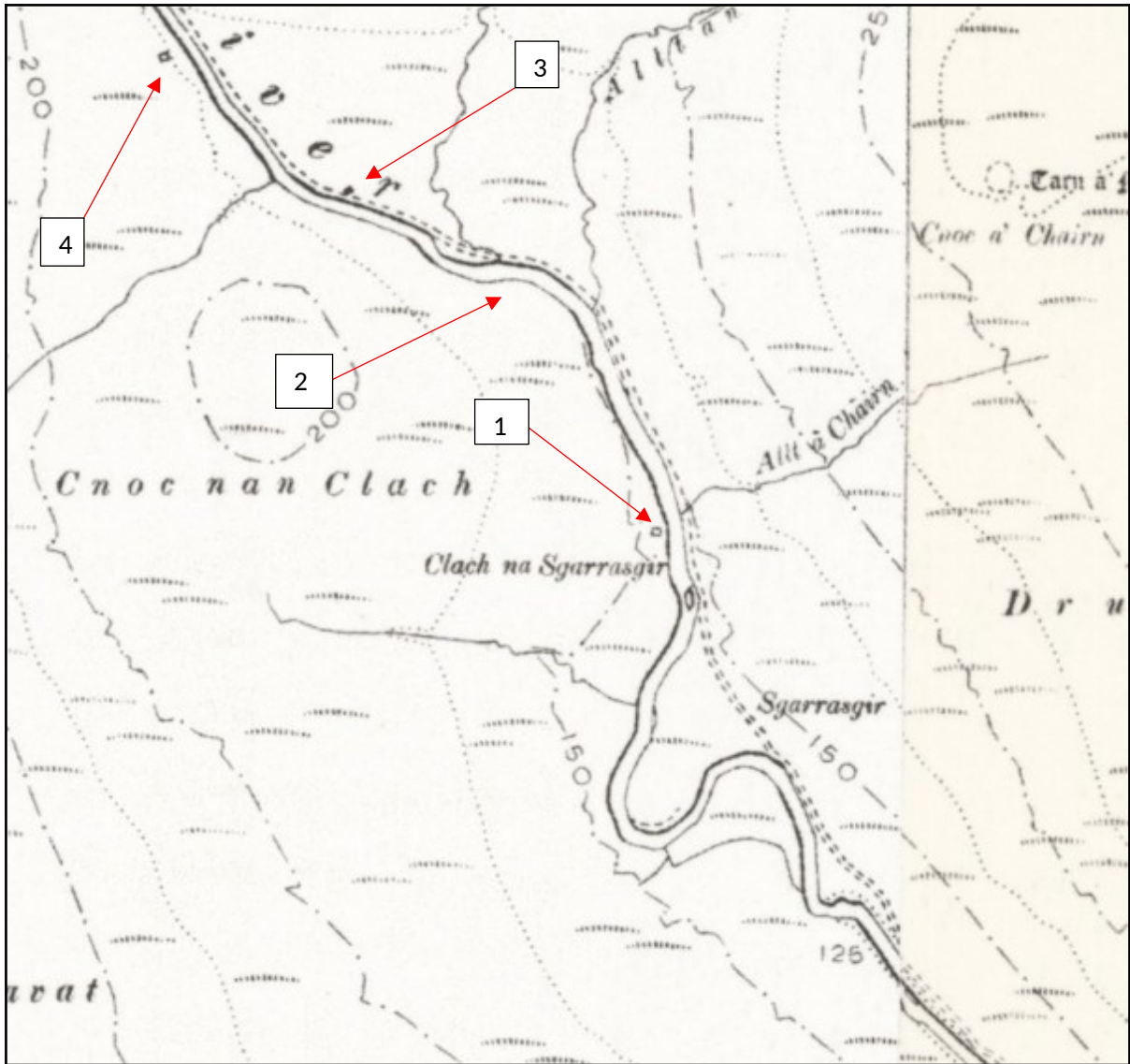


Figure 13: 2nd edition OS c.1888. "Clach na Sgarrasgir" would seem to be the stone in the middle of the river called "Cailleach Riabhach" on the 1st edition (See fig 11), or could it be something else? Note the nearby hill "Cnoc nan Clach", which we originally hoped might harbour a standing stone but none was to be found. Note also the unroofed shielings - 1, 2 & 4 on the left bank, and one roofed shieling on the right bank- 3, in between the "e" and the "r" or "Gress river"



Figure 14: DI inspecting Shieling 1

Moving on upstream from here we encountered two shielings on the left bank, at NB 46922 43539, Shieling 1 on figure 10 above. It is not marked upon the 1st edition, 1852, but is on the 2nd edition 6th 1888, meaning it was made at some time between these dates. The modern OS map has two Shielings marked here, CANMORE doesn't mention them at all as it only records what is on the 1st edition. It wasn't clear which of Anne Campbells Shieling types they were.

On the left bank after a left turn of the River we found a very well built rectangular Structure – square corners inside and out, as in the latest design form to be made – at NB 46824 43776, also not mentioned on Canmore. DI had an account of a local man who recalled all the names as you travelled the Womans road. One story involved an extra-large shieling big enough for a cow..

A feadan comes to the river from the North, called Feadan Chuinavat. This comes from Loch Chuinavat. It appears to be a Norse name.

Looking at the south bank here we can see the site of an old taigh-earraich [spring-house]. This sort of house was bigger than an àirigh - it had a space for cows in it. The people who owned spring houses would go out with the cows early in the spring. This particular house belonged to Murdo Alasdair Iain of the Grahams.

On the south side of the river you can see Cnoc na Cloich. This hill is named for the large stone in the river downstream of the hill which is

called Clach Mòr Erisgair. Upstream of this hill an old wall comes down to the river. It is called the gàrradh dubh (black wall). This is the outermost wall found in the moor by this part of the river.

translated from Old History of Gress.

We think this fits the description, and is in the right place in the sequence of the account.



Figure 15: Shieling 2 - An almost square very large shieling hut.. possibly the Bothy in the account?

Shortly after this, back on the right bank, we found a circular pit dug into the bank, with a restricted opening towards the river. It was remarkably regular, and overhung by 0.5 m all the way round its circuit so it was bigger inside than it looked. In it we found the remains of a wooden peg with a square cross section.



Figure 16: The circular pit - hard to make out but it's got a blue walking stick standing in it and reeds at the front



Figure 17: The remains of a wooden peg..

We discussed this and a popular idea was that this was most likely a poachers stash. Wooden pegs being used to secure a net perhaps? And the perfect place to hide a net.

Moving upstream, Shieling no 3 in fig 13 above (NB 46651 43885, Canmore Id : 136422) . In 1852 it is marked as a ruin, in 1888 the shading denotes it has a roof. When we visited there were two buildings in the location - one was clearly a shieling, but with squared corners inside and out - ie the latest type of shieling, but the other was like nothing that I, at least, had ever seen before.



Figure 18: Rectangular Shieling no.3 to the left, and mystery structure to the right...

The rectangular shieling was even cement mortared, and contained artefacts of past lives: a pail for milk, with the bottom rusted out, the remains a spring bed and, quite amazingly considering the considerable distance from a road, the remains of a very heavy cast iron stove. Maybe this particular Shieling did quite well...

Downstream of this, a structure of almost Curvilinear form had been built into or over the river bank, such that one wall was high up on the bank and the side walls dropped down with the bank.



Figure 19: *The strange structure built into the bank - slightly shaded below to help pick out the shape.*

Compare the structure with these known illicit still sites from the mainland:



Figure 20: Two examples of illicit still sites on the mainland, built into river banks to avoid detection.

According to Darroch Bratt, who is currently undertaking a PHD in illicit stills in the Highlands at the UHI, they were built into the bank of the river so that once roofed in turf and heather they were very hard to spot. I think we have a really good match of building form here, and with the rarity of this kind of structure and lack of any other reason why someone would build this way, enough to be fairly confident that we have found an illicit still site!

One more shieling (number 4 on figure 13 above, Canmore Id : 136459) was visited on the left bank, at NB 46451 44144. Again, a drone would be great for recording these as they are very difficult to photograph. It was again of the latest form with square corners inside and out and one door, facing downstream.



Figure 21: another more recent Shieling, no.14, with squared corners throughout.

We missed a Shieling marked on canmore on the left bank here (Canmore Id : 136450), possibly because we were all looking forward to having lunch at our destination, the Sithean Àirigh Mhurchaidh (Canmore Id : 136460) – which turned out to be a most pleasant bend in the river. There was so much archaeology here, with humps and bumps all over the place. This was not the occasion to embark upon the task of trying to understand it but it was quite obvious that people had been here for a very long time.



Figure 22: The most recent and best preserved Shieling at Àirigh Mhurchaidh, belonging to 32 Back, according to the sign on the gable.

On our return journey we decided to follow an obvious line on aerial imagery between the river and the peat road.



Figure 23: The route back is the straight dark line in the centre with the snaking peat road to the left and the river to the right.

I don't think anyone was entirely sure what this feature was, it might have just been a quad track. As we walked it though it became clear that it was the result of a lot of work, and in the middle of the moor we came across a lone concrete standing stone, informing us that the whole thing was the water main coming down from a dam upstream, a post war project.



Figure 24: Modern Archaeology.

We should have crossed a Garadh Dubh style dyke somewhere along the route, marked on Canmore and visible on the 1st edition, but all that was visible where it should have been was a small stream.

Another fine day.