

# THE TRADITIONAL ROUTES OF BIRSE PARISH

A Report for BCT by Robin Callander

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## PREFACE

*This study of the traditional routes in Birse parish was instigated by Birse Community Trust (BCT), as part of the Trust's work to promote the conservation and greater understanding of the parish's cultural heritage. The study was commissioned by BCT with funding from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and BCT gratefully acknowledges SNH's support.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In this study, 'traditional routes' are defined as the main routes in Birse, whether roads, tracks or paths, used during previous times by the local inhabitants of the parish and others passing through the area.

These routes have never been the focus of a study before and the main aims of this study have been:

- (a) to produce an initial description of the main traditional routes in the parish; &
- (b) to provide a framework for further, more detailed research into these routes.

The report has three main parts. The first considers why these traditional routes are of interest, examines some of the main physical and historical factors influencing the nature of these routes in Birse and outlines the main types of traditional routes identified during the course of this study.

The second part of the report describes some of the main examples in the parish of each of the different types of traditional routes, while the final part of the report examines in more detail the major changes affecting these routes during the last 250 years.

Maps are provided in the report to show the main routes described. However, the text assumes that the reader has a 'working knowledge' of locations in the parish.

The main documentary sources referred to in the report, are the three local history books about Birse parish which have been re-published by BCT:-

*'An Account of the Parish of Birse'* Robert Dinnie (1865, re-published BCT 1999)

*'History in Birse'* Robin Callander (1981-85, re-published BCT 2000)

*'The Statistical Accounts of Birse Parish 1792, 1842, 1950'* (as dates, re-published BCT 2001)

# PART ONE - CONTEXT

## 1. Local Interest

The traditional routes of Birse is a very broad topic. They are the main routes, whether roads, tracks or paths, which have been used during previous times by the local inhabitants of the parish and others passing through the area. They can have originated at different periods in the history of the parish, may have been used for varying lengths of time and physical evidence of them may or may not still be traceable today.

As an overall topic, these routes are of interest to BCT for several main reasons:-

### (a) Local History

Greater knowledge of the main traditional routes in Birse and their history, has the potential to make a valuable contribution to understanding the history of the parish. These routes have, for example, both influenced and been influenced by the local settlement patterns in the parish at different periods. They also reflect past patterns of land use and changes resulting from the progression in transport from pre-wheel 'foot and hoof' to carts and carriages to motor vehicles.

### (b) Physical Heritage

Many of the main traditional routes in the parish are now in the form of tarred roads and other modern dirt tracks. However, in some places, older lengths of these routes still survive from when they have been by-passed by a change of route. Elsewhere, more substantial lengths of old tracks survive, often engraved across the lower slopes of the hills as 'sunken tracks'. While interest has understandably been focused on the archaeological and other historical local sites with which these routes are associated, there may be instances where more attention should be given to conserving the physical remains of some of the routes themselves.

### (c) Current Relevance

Traditional routes in a location such as Birse, can be seen as having formed a network across the parish; a web with its main strands formed by the principal routes through the parish and then lesser strands linking the main settlements and lesser strands still in the areas around them. The idea of such a network now has a certain resonance with the 'core path networks' required under the new public access legislation passed by the Scottish Parliament. It seems likely that knowledge of the traditional network could help identify routes to form parts of any such core path network.

For BCT, given these reasons for its interest in traditional routes, this initial report opens 'a file' on the subject in the expectation that:

- (i) additional information related to these routes will be collated to this report, as and when such information comes to light through some of BCT's other local history work;
- (ii) this initial work for BCT on the parish's traditional routes will be followed up at some stage due to local interest in the parish's local history: &
- (iii) any such follow up work is likely to lead to the sub-division of "the file" by concentrating on some specific aspects of the topic (eg. recognised Rights of Way, a particular route,...).

## **2. Physical Setting**

In starting to investigate the traditional routes of Birse, it is clear that both the location of the parish and the topography within the parish are two factors with a profound influence on the pattern of such routes.

The position of Birse parish near the eastern end of the hills along the Highland Boundary Fault and thus the lower passes through them, has made north / south routes through the parish an important feature of its traditional routes.

The form of the parish itself, with its three glens and the ridges in between them, each descending from the south west to the River Dee, has concentrated routes down the sides of the valleys and over the low points in the ridges.

## **3. Historical Context**

There is scope for some of the traditional routes in Birse, whether still in use or not, to be very ancient, as people had arrived in the Birse area around 8,000 years ago following the end of the last Ice Age, and permanent settlements in the area go back at least 6,000 years (Callander, p.82).

It can also be seen from even just the surviving archaeological remains of pre-historic settlements and cultivation, that all the main parts of the parish where people live now, were extensively settled by the end of the Bronze Age around 3,000 years ago (*op.cit*). In addition, the continuity of this settlement pattern can be demonstrated from a list of townships in the parish nearly 1000 years ago and the high degree to which the evolution of that pattern can be traced up to the present time (Callander, p.155).

While the very longstanding nature of the pattern of settlement is one factor suggesting that many traditional routes may be of ancient origin, another central factor has been the means of travel. For the vast majority of the thousands of years of local settlement, there was no wheeled transport in the parish. All travel continued to be by 'foot and hoof' until around 250 years ago, when "Fifty miles by foot was thought nothing extra for a Birse peasant to perform in one day" (Dinnie, p.14).

It was not until the 1750s that the first carts and carriages started to be used in the parish. These then required significant changes to the nature of local roads and tracks, including wider and smoother surfaces, re-alignment or re-routing in some places for less steep gradients and bridges to improve the main river crossings. These changes gathered momentum during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and were followed by more major developments in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Marked changes in local travel continued during the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the arrival of motor vehicles. One of the most conspicuous developments has been the tarring of the public roads in the parish.

## **4. Public Roads & Rights of Way**

An early stage in the investigations for this study, was to map the current public roads in the parish along with the recognised rights of way (Map 1). These two types of routes are the most conspicuous examples of surviving traditional routes in the parish, as they have their current status by virtue of their long established public or communal use.

The map shows a distinct east / west split. The network of public roads is concentrated in the lower and more settled parts, with a branch going up each of the parishes two main straths (Feugh & Cattie). The formally 'recognised' rights of way are all in the upland, western parts of the parish, extensions of the public road network from the last settlements further into the hills.

These existing public roads and rights of way are not only much older than the combustion engine, they also pre-date the start of wheeled transport in the parish from the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. They can be seen as surviving parts of a wider network of routes for foot and hoof that existed for hundreds, indeed thousands of years, before that time.

## 5. Classification of Traditional Routes

The investigations for this study identified a large number of other traditional routes in the parish, many of which connected with the parish's current public roads and rights of way. Analysis of all these different routes suggests that the traditional routes in Birse can be seen as consisting of five main types:-

(a)- Highways: Map 2 - Three ancient main routes along which most of the traffic has always passed through the parish, namely:

- one running north/south along the *east side* of the parish (formerly known as the Great North Road and now known as the Shooting Greens road)
- one running north/south along the *west side* of the parish (the Fungle road ); &
- one running *diagonally across* the parish between these two routes in a north-west/south-east direction (now known as the South Deeside Road or B976).

(b) Main Link Roads: Map 3 – Ten main routes, principally running up and down the main straths in the parish in a generally east/west direction and connecting to the diagonal highway across the parish and the two north/south highways running along its east and west boundaries. These routes can be listed as:

- in the *west* of the parish: the Newmills, Church, Glencat, Forest of Birse and Muir of Tutach roads;
- in the *east* of the parish: the Tillygarmond, Tillyfruskie, Midstrath, Sliderybrae, Craigmore and Pitslugarty roads;

(c) Other Connecting Roads: Map 4 – A relatively large number of routes which were essentially only locally used and were either local links for particular parts of the parish with the more major routes under (a) & (b) above or routes to places of communal activity, such as sheilings, common grazings and peat mosses. More of this types of routes also existed than are marked on the map.

(d) Localised Routes: – Below the level of the routes under (a), (b) & (c) above and linked to them, were the very localised patterns of tracks in and around each of the settlements or 'townships' in the parish (Callander, p.155). While tracing and mapping these patterns, or what remains of them, was beyond the scope of this study, they are discussed further below (Part 2, section 9).

(e) Hill Tracks: Map 5 – The final category of traditional routes is hill tracks in the south of the parish, south and west of the Feugh. While there must have been paths up into these hills from the sheiling sites that existed there to the higher grazings, the only known routes now are these tracks. These tend to be of two types, those that were communal routes to common grazings and peat cuttings and those that date from the 20<sup>th</sup> century for field sports.

## PART TWO - THE MAIN TRADITIONAL ROUTES

### 6. Ancient Highways

All the indications from archaeological records and wider historical studies, are that the Shooting Greens road (as the continuation of the Cairn o'Mount road and previously known as the Great North Road), the Fungle road and South Deeside Road (B976) were the three main roads through Birse parish for over two thousands years and probably much longer.

This longstanding pattern of main routes has been determined by the importance of the position of the passes through the hills to the south and the fords and ferry crossings over the Dee in the North.

The detailed routes of the two north/south roads along the east and west sides of the parish, appear to have stayed very constant for hundreds, and potentially thousands of years, with only minor re-alignments. The line of the diagonal route has, however, changed significantly during the last 300 years. This has mainly been a shift downslope to lower ground.

The presence of these important routes through the parish has had many local influences in the past. At one level, for example, these routes supported a greater number of alehouses and inns through the parish than would have occurred due to just local traffic. At a much wider level, the presence of these routes has involved Birse in many nationally and regionally important historical episodes, as many different armies travelled through the parish on these routes during the 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and no doubt before then.

While Birse's location on these routes has meant that kings and queens and other prominent leaders in Scotland's history came through the parish, the location was probably somewhat hazardous as it made Birse one of the first areas that might be laid waste by an army coming over the hills from the south.

A fourth, similarly ancient and important route in Birse is the Fir Mounth road. This runs for over 5 km. / 3 miles along the south west boundary of the parish. The Fir Mounth is discussed in (c) below because of its relationship with the Fungle road, but is otherwise not considered in more detail in this report. This is because the Fir Mounth only cuts through the hills in the most remote corner of Birse parish and has not had a significant direct influence on the parish.

Now, with the Shooting Greens road an unclassified minor rural road, the South Deeside road classified as a B road and the Fungle and Fir Mounth, as hill tracks used by relatively small numbers of hill walkers, the historic importance of these traditional routes can be hard to imagine.

#### (a) The Great North Road

The idea that the Shooting Greens road was once part of the Great North Road between Edinburgh and Inverness is very surprising to most people, as the current main road between Edinburgh and Inverness is almost exactly 100 kilometres / 80 miles due west – the A9 at Dalwhinnie.

However, the A9 route up through the central highlands, while developed in part by General Wade in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, did not become the main north/south road until the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Until that time, the Cairn o'Mount / Shooting Greens road continued to be of major importance.

A number of features still reflect that former importance of the Shooting Greens road, in particular the pattern of an inn and grazing stance at the river crossings over the Feugh and Dee at either end of the road through the parish and also the former Crown Common of Slewdrum Forest occupying the high ground in between them.

At the Feugh crossing at Whitestones, the grazing stance is the area of rough ground south of the river. There also used to be another inn at Cutties Hillock a mile to the south in addition to what is now called the Feughside Inn,.

In the north, there were two traditional ford and ferry crossings over the Dee. One at Inchbare, just south of Potarch, and another north of Potarch at the Boat of Kincardine. The Inchbare ferry was replaced by the Potarch Bridge in 1814, with that substantial bridge designed by Thomas Telford and largely paid for by the government, being another reflection of the importance of the road. The other ferry crossing to Kincardine O'Neil continued as such until at least the 1920s (G.M.Fraser, Old Deeside Road, 1921).

The maintenance and improvement of the Shooting Greens road from at least the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards was also a higher standard than all the other roads in the parish, which were just done by the heritors of the parish using statute labour. The length immediately north of the Feughside Inn appears, for example, to have been re-aligned historically to a straighter route where it now no longer coincides with the parish (& former county) boundary. There were also changes on the north side of the hill to reduce the gradient for wheeled vehicles.

(b) The Fungle Road

The Fungle road between the ford and ferry crossings over the Dee at Aboyne and Tarfside in Glen Esk, was one of the ancient mounth passes through the hills. Like the other passes, it will have been used for thousands of years by medieval times as an important north and south route. During that period, as with the other passes, there was a Spital or form of hostelry on the route at the head of the Forest of Birse (eg. Bishop of Aberdeen's Rent Roll for Birse Parish, 1511).

The ancient Fir Mounth Road also connected to the Fungle just over the watershed in Glen Esk, so that they shared the same route in that Glen. The Fir Mouth crossed over the Gannoch in the south-west corner of Birse parish into Glen Tanar and over the next ridge at Belrorie to cross the Dee at Cobbleheugh, near Dinnet.

The Fungle remained an important route into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, though it did not have the status of the Shooting Greens and South Deeside Roads, which had been classified as 'King's Highways' since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It also appears that by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, improvements to the Fir Mounth and the poor condition of the Fungle meant that the Fir Mounth started to be seen as a more important route

Work had started to upgrade the Fungle into a better public road by the 1790s, because it would provide a shorter and more convenient link than crossing the Cairn o'Mount (Statistical Accounts, p.19). It would also have had the advantage of avoiding the South Deeside road across Birse, which was not well maintained at that time (op.cit.). The progress of that work is not known but, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it appears that most traffic for the districts north of Aboyne came over the Cairn o'Mount and cut across Birse along the South Deeside road

Improvements to the Fungle continued to be proposed as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the arrival of motorised transport meant that, it was the Cairn o'Mount road that became the focus of all improvements rather than the higher Fungle or Fir Mounth routes. The Fungle crosses the watershed between Deeside and Glen Esk at 600 metres above sea level, in comparison to the Cairn o'Mount's summit at 454 metres.

(c) South Deeside Road

This diagonal route across the parish is as ancient as the Cairn o'Mount and Fungle roads, but the precise route which it has followed has changed significantly over the centuries, mainly in the last 300 years. While traces of some old, former lengths of the road still survive, more research would be required to work out the former routes in any detail. However, following the road south from Aboyne, a number of points can be noted.

- (i) Up until at least the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, when John Ross rowed supporters of Bonnie Price Charlie across the Dee (Callander, p.131), the ferry between Birse and Aboyne was at Waterside. It was then moved to beside the site of the current Aboyne bridge (hence the Boat Inn in Aboyne) and replaced by the first bridge there in 1828-31. These changes resulted in adjustments of the main routes in the Birsemore area.
- (ii) The original route south went through Birsemore and Deerhillock to Birse Kirk, then through Oldyleiper and Kinminity and over the hill to Achnafoy (Dinnie, pp74-75 et al). This route can still be traced in a number of places, as well as some old links to it (for example, the track and ford to join it from Haugh farm). It is not clear when this old route was replaced by the current line of the B976, but it appears to have occurred in a number of stages by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- (iii) The main route south from Achnafoy appears to have gone to Marywell, with another branch going down to the Cattie at the current Ballogie Home Farm. From Marywell, the route went passed Midstrath and over the hill into Finzean. Dinnie (p.90) indicates that the route did not originally cross Corsedardar as now and it may have originally crossed the ridge north west of Finzean House (before there was a Finzean House).
- (iv) In Finzean, the route to Whitstones and the Feugh crossing there, appears to have followed a higher line passed Tillyfruskie and Dubston than the current route through Finzean village. The length of the current B976 coming down hill to near Boghead seems to have been part of the original route, like a similarly formed bit of old road at Marywell. It seems that the main link to the Cairn o'Mount road was the route crossing the Feugh at the ford at Clinter (see 7(c) below). This route went passed Easter Clune, across the Muir of Tutach to the ford over the Aven and joined the Cairn o'Mount road near Greendams.

## 7. Main Link Roads

These routes were both links with the main highways through the parish and usually main routes up and down one of the parish's main straths. They thus run with the lie of the land in a generally east / west direction. They also formed a fairly regular grid of routes between the Shooting Greens road and South Deeside road. There is a similar pattern between the South Deeside Road and the Fungle, although with longer and more sinuous connecting routes.

On most of these main link roads, the traffic was mainly local. However, on some, such as Newmill and Craigmore, there is likely to have been a high proportion of travellers from outwith the parish.

(a) Newmill Road



The Birse area of the parish scarcely appears to be a strath, until following this road up to the headwaters of the Burn of Birse. This was one of the main routes for the inhabitants in the Birse area to the Forest of Birse Commonly and other common grazings and peat cuttings. The route was also important for other travellers in connection with the Fungle.

The Fungle is a relatively steep route immediately south of Aboyne and appears to have been a shorter, more direct route that was therefore quicker for those on foot. The length from the Guard to the Fungle's junction with the Newmill route west of Carnferg, remains as just a footpath and is labelled on OS maps as "Fungle Road (path)".

The Newmill road, in comparison, is a more gradual ascent / descent that will have been particularly valuable once carts started to be used after 1750 and before that, potentially provided a more direct route to/from the ford and ferry crossing at Waterside up to that time. Newmill was an alehouse for travellers until it ceased to be a meal mill in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

(b) Church Road

This route appears to have been used very largely by local traffic, as the Fungle and Newmill routes were used for travel to / from Aboyne and the south. There must have also been some use of the route by those living in the Birse area to go to the Forest of Birse and other common areas.

As the route's name suggests, its main purpose was or became for those living in the Forest of Birse to travel back and forth to Birse Kirk. This use must only have been from the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the Forest of Birse first became permanently settled. The establishment of the Forest of Birse Kirk will have reduced this use in part. However, burials were still at Birse and this presumably explains why some locally know the route as the Coffin Road rather than Church Road.

(c) Glencat Road

This route provided a main link between the Fungle and the strath now known as Ballogie, with easier gradients than any of the alternatives. It might have also provided a further link between the Fungle and Potarch for some through traffic.

(d) Forest of Birse Road

This route, while providing a link between the Fungle and Feughside, seems to have been essentially for traffic in and out of the Forest of Birse Commonly as other routes would have been better to go elsewhere (eg. over Corsedardar or Cairn o'Mount).

(e) Muir of Tutach

As noted in Section 5 above, it appears that this route across the Muir of Tutach was a major link to and from the Cairn o'Mount road. It was still used for that link by locals on occasions until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and historically, for example, before the first bridge at Whitestone in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, it may have been the main route for 'foot & hoof' traffic.

The Muir of Tutach route was substantially shorter than the route via Whitestones, when foot traffic usually followed the shortest routes as the quickest routes. The Mill of Clinter, with its ford, used to have an ale-house for travellers and, although it is somewhat obscured nowadays, the route west from Clinter to Drumhead was still an important route in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Mounthstile was a former croft on Easter Clune (Callander, p.120), while the location of the 'Bishop's Palace' at Easter Clune beside this route and overlooking the ford at Clinter, also suggests that this

route was important in medieval times and probably the main link to and from the Cairn o'Mount road.

(f) Tillygarmond - Balfiddy

This ancient upper route, with its connections west over Corsedardar and east into Strachan, continued to be the route for mail deliveries until vans started to be used.

(g) Inverchatt - Midstrath

The main route along the south of the Cattie and linking, as with (f) above, two of the townships identified in the 1170 list for the parish.

(h) Slidderybrae

This potentially longstanding route continued to be more important than the new route created to the south of it (i), principally because it was the one with settlements along it.

(i) Craigmore

A new road created in the 1750s on the south side of Craigmore hill to give direct access to the Inchbare ferry (Callander, p.22-23).

(j) Pitslugarty

This route has always been important as a way to and from the Inchbare ford / ferry and subsequently, Potarch Bridge. It served not just those in the Birse area, but other areas further west on the south of the Dee (Glen Tanar, Glenmuick).

The original route seems to have gone from Oldyleiper straight across the current B976, swung round to Pitslugarty and then continued round to Inchbare on the south of the Burn of Angels. This route, which was entirely in Birse parish, seems to have been very difficult in winter (Callander, p.22), but it is not known when it was replaced by the current public road to Potarch, much of which runs north of the parish boundary. However, it is thought to have been in the early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## **8. Other Connecting Routes**

As stated in 5.c above, these were the relatively large number of routes, which were essentially only locally used and were either local links for particular parts of the parish with the more major routes (described in 6 & 7 above) or routes to places of communal gathering or activity, such as the parish kirk, market stances, sheilings, common grazings or peat mosses.

The wide range of types of common land and other areas of shared use in the parish, is described in "The Common Lands of Birse" in A Pattern of Land Ownership in Scotland by Robin Callander (1987). The map there shows that these areas might have covered as much as half the land area of the parish around the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The extensive changes to local landscapes during the 'Era of Improvement' in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (see section 11 below), have obscured large parts of the former lines of many of these connecting routes, particularly in the main areas of cultivation and the areas ('policies') associated with Ballogie and Finzean Houses. Some notes are given below for routes marked on the map.

(a) Balfour Road

The existing public road which, like the other three most minor public roads in the parish (Slidderbrae, Glencat, Forest of Birse), follows what seems a very long established line.

(b) Achnafoy

An old route, still evident in parts, which may have been the main (South Deeside) road across the parish 300 years or more ago (see 6.c.(ii) above).

(c) Glencat

A link up to Church Road which was potentially just used by those living in the settlements of Glencat, to come and go to the north (Church, Aboyne, ...).

(d) Bogieshiel Church Road

The Church Road leading up from Birse Kirk to Balfour, forks south of Balfour House. The main route continues to the Forest of Birse. The eastern fork provided a 'church road' for residents from the Cattie, that went up the Bogiesheil Den through the metal gate in the march dyke across the saddle between the Craigs of Kinminity and Creagantoll to join the main Church Road.

(e) Torquhandallochy

One of the 1170 listed townships, Torquhandallochy was once of some significance. Dinnie reports a route to the north to Quithelhead (near Quithel Wood), the first length of which can still be followed.

(f) Achaballa / Achabrack

Historically, an important route from north of the Cattie to the Forest of Birse.

(g) Murley

Historically, an important route from south of the Cattie to the Forest of Birse. The stone bridge over the Cattie near Ythanside and its straight link road between the Achaballa and Murley routes south and north of the Cattie, were potentially a 19<sup>th</sup> century development to detour traffic away from Ballogie House.

(h) Finlets / Arntillyhard / Berrysloch / Birkenhill

This was a very long established route that used the saddle between Arntilly Craig and Craig Lash, but which has become fragmented in that middle length. This appears to have been a result of the defining of property boundaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The route itself still forms the march between Finzean and Ballogie Estates to the east and west of Berrysloch.

(i) Arntilly / Milton

Much of the traditional route between Arntilly and Arntillyhard still survives. In the south, it connects to (h) above and (j) below. In the north, it appears Arntilly may have connected to a crossing of the Cattie. These connections would have made it a significant local link route. It is of note that, in 1730, it was a tenant in Arntilly (William Robbie) who funded the building of a bridge across the Cattie at Milton (- this was the first ever stone built bridge in the parish).

(j) “Finzean Gates”

The route from Finzean House to North Gate Cottage appears a natural route between the Feugh and Cattie straths. It is also one that is no higher and less exposed than Corsedardar (to where Dinnie appears to suggest the main route was moved at some stage). One route south of the watershed leads to the Turfgate (ie. gate to the Forest of Birse common). The other route south of Finzean House out passed South Gate Lodge, is also a fairly natural link to traffic that crossed the Feugh at either the Dalsack or Clinter fords.

(k) Wester / Easter Clune

Historically, the route between these two major townships was an important connection. Until the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the route between Easter and Wester Clune was through the middle of the haugh between them. That route was removed by agricultural improvement and, while a link was maintained round through Tillyorn, this was diminished in importance due to the construction of the bridge over the Feugh at Finzean Sawmill by c.1820.

(l) Balnahard

A valuable cut across to and from the Inchbare ford / ferry, & subsequently Potarch bridge, for those living in the western end of Finzean.

(m) Muir of Tutach

The paths from the fords at Ennochie and Little Ennochie still run across the Muir.

## 9. Localised Routes

(i) “Lowest Level”

The final type of traditional routes in this classification is, from the perspective of this study’s strategic overview, the ‘lowest’ level. This is not lowest in the sense of either their condition or level of use, but because they were the most localised in the links they made (ie. where they came from and went to) and also the most localised in terms of the people who used them.

These were the routes in and around the settlements in the parish, the traditional townships of Birse. There was also equivalent communal routes from these to areas of common use in the hills (see 10 below).

(ii) Pattern of Townships

The 17 townships listed in Birse in 1170 (Callander, p.155) were the focus of settlement in the parish then. They had been that for hundreds, possibly thousands, of years before then and continued as such until the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

While the evolution of these traditional fermtouns can be traced in some details for over 800 years to the current pattern of farms, they were quite different in character as multiple tenancies each with scattered buildings and cultivation (Callander, p.155 et seq.). They were more like little ‘hamlets’ with many residents and often a wide range of trades and crafts over and above those living by subsistence agriculture. Their former pattern can still be seen on some of the old local estate maps (eg. detail reproduced in Callander, p.119). Each had a network of communal routes over the area

covered by the township between the different holdings on it, providing access to the various common resources usually shared by each township and linking to other local routes.

The changes during the Era of Improvement in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (see 11 below) swept this ancient pattern of townships away and with it, most of the localised traditional routes associated with each.

While it was beyond the scope of this study to research the remains of these routes, they do survive around the edges of the current pattern of farms and cultivated land. These remains are also relatively extensive given the amount of 'edge' in Birse around the limited areas of cultivation in the each of the three main parts of the parish.

### (iii) *Shift of Focus*

Fourteen of the seventeen townships recorded in Birse in 1170, trace a line across the parish that is similar to the current South Deeside Road or B976. (The exceptions are Inverchatt on the southside route up/down the Cattie, Tillygarmond on the upper route east on Feughside and Percie at the start of the route up the Forest of Birse).

These fourteen townships were all on the ancient precursor of the B976. These settlements were the natural focus for the route across the parish and for centuries, possibly thousands of years, the route and settlements had evolved and developed together.

The fourteen townships are still all recognisable in the names of current farms, but most of these farms are not directly on the B976. This is because in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the route was re-aligned away from its traditional route through the townships. This happened for two main reasons:- *Firstly*, the development of new stretches of road in the north of the parish (Birsemore to Haugh) and south of the parish (Whitstones to Boghead) to meet the requirements of improved transport; *Secondly*, in between those stretches, the deflection of local routes away from the vicinities of the new mansion houses for Finzean and Ballogie Estates and their relatively extensive policy grounds.

## **10. Communal Hill Tracks**

As indicated previously, the final category of traditional routes is hill tracks in the south of the parish, south of the Feugh. While there must have been paths up into these hills from the sheiling sites that existed there to the higher grazings, the only known routes now are tracks. These tend to be of two types, those that were communal routes to common grazings and peat cuttings and those that date from the 20<sup>th</sup> century for shooting.

The traditional hill track routes shown on Map 5 are some of the main examples. Some of the other hill tracks not marked because they appear to be modern land rover tracks, may previously have served as routes to peat cuttings. There are also potentially other former communal peat cutting and grazing routes on the hills which were never upgraded for landrover or even wheeled access, but which have yet to be located and recorded in any systematic way.

The examples of this type of traditional route which have been mapped served the following purposes and continued to be used for these purposes into 20<sup>th</sup> century in each case; listing the routes from west to east:-

- *Rough Burn* – peat cutting at top

- Glaspits Burn – peat cutting at top
- The Slough – common grazings in Aven
- Peter Hill – peat cutting in Luther Moss
- Burn of Mannie – peat cutting in Luther Moss
- Aven – common grazings in Aven
- Burn of Clashmad – common grazings on Airy Muir and beyond on Glen Dye Estate.

## **PART THREE - THE LAST 250 YEARS**

### **11. ‘The Era of Improvement’**

Dinnie recorded that the first cart in the parish was in 1753 (p.13), while the Reverend Joseph Smith reported in the First Statistical Account that there were already 150 by 1792. Over the same 40 year period, at the beginning of which the roads in Birse were seen as notoriously bad (eg. Callander, p.23), the momentum for improvements to them (surfaces, gradients, river crossings) also increased dramatically. This ‘mood of the times’ is well reflected in the First Statistical Account, where the Reverend Smith wrote at some length on the topic.

The local drive for change and the increasing number of changes themselves were all part of the wider movement for improvements to transport in Aberdeenshire and elsewhere at the time. The construction of the bridge at Potarch, for example, was carried out at the same time as a new one was built across the Don at Alford and major improvements planned to the Great North Road running between them (G.M.Fraser, Old Deeside Road, p.142 et al). There was also the development of the turnpike roads coming up Deeside, which were then followed by the railway.

All these changes resulted in an increasing re-orientation of travel in the parish from north/south to more east/west as noted by Dinnie (p.21) – a re-orientation that has continued ever since. Dinnie also comments more generally on the “great changes in the modes of travelling” in the parish in the 100 years before his 1865 book, the loss of alehouses and inns in the parish with their cattle drovers and others, and the loss of the old tracks used for centuries before (Dinnie, p.21)

These changes related to transport were themselves just part of the wider and sweeping changes to the landscape between the mid 18<sup>th</sup> and late 19<sup>th</sup> century during what became known as the ‘Era of Improvement’. As part of this, in Birse as elsewhere, old settlement and land use patterns were replaced with new farms buildings, cottages, field layouts and dykes to a degree which is now hard to imagine.

### **12. Fords, Ferries & Bridges**

An influential strand in the history of traditional routes in Birse, has been the challenge of crossing water – principally the Dee along the north of the parish and the Waters of Feugh & Cattie and Burn of Birse flowing across it.

#### *(a) Main Fords & Early Bridges*

Historically, the location of fords was a major factor influencing routes in the parish. The fords across the Dee became supplemented by ferries at an early date and then these fords and ferries were replaced by bridges:-

- the Waterside ferry was re-located upstream to Aboyne in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century;
- the Inchbare ford and ferry was replaced by the Potarch Bridge in 1814
- the Aboyne ferry was replaced by a bridge at Aboyne in 1828
- the Kincardine ferry appears to have continued until the 1920s, but had been essentially by-passed by the Potarch bridge for most traffic.

The other important ford for the highways through the parish, over the Feugh at Whitestones, was replaced by the five arch stone bridge funded there by Dr Ramsay's bequest in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The history of these early bridges, all of which were swept away or damaged by spates, illustrates the dynamic nature of the water courses in the area:-

- The Whitestones bridge was swept away in the great spate of 1799; (Dinnie reported in 1865 that it had still not been replaced, while the Statistical Account records a bridge built there in the 1835, indicating a timber bridge; the current bridge dates from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century)
- The Potarch bridge had to be partially re-built at the time of its construction following damage from float logs and again as a result of the Muckle Spate of 1829; (that bridge still stands today)
- The suspension bridge at Aboyne was swept away by the Muckle Spate in 1829 before it had been completed and had to be replaced; (it was then replaced with a new suspension bridge in 1871 & the current bridge in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century).

Stone bridges also started to be built elsewhere in the parish from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. While no fords were left on the public roads in the parish by the 20<sup>th</sup> century (except possibly across the two burns just before Balloch), it can be noted that the last two fords on the Cairn o'Mount road (a couple of miles south of Birse) were only replaced by culverts under the road in the last twenty years; the last one less than 10 years ago.

#### (b) Milton Bridge

The first of these other stone bridges in the parish was built over the Cattie at Milton in 1730. This was built with funds donated by William Robbie, who like Dr Ramsay, had spent time in Barbados. It might be noted that Robbie also funded the Milton bridge at the time of the Ramsay bequest, which was used for the bridge at Whitestones.

The 1730 Milton of Cattie bridge still stands today, bearing out the positive comments of 140 years ago by Robert Dinnie (stone mason and bridge builder) about the quality of its construction (Dinnie, p.86). Dinnie also noted that the stone plaque recording the origin of the bridge has come away from the bridge and was lying downstream of it. However, the plaque has been re-instated at some time between then and now.

The Milton bridge was built over 20 years before the first wheeled vehicles in the parish and is so narrow that few carts will have ever been able to use it.

#### (c) Other Stone Bridges

The spate in 1799 swept away the Stock Bridge at Birse Kirk. This was replaced by a temporary wooden bridge until the replacement stone bridge was built in 1801. The timber was then used for a bridge across the Cattie at Marywell, there being no bridge there at that date or where the Great North Road crossed the Cattie lower down (Callander, p.13).

Other stone bridges built in the parish from that time included the Holly Burn and Burnfoot bridges, when Archibald Farquharson was laird of Finzean. These and others still survive (eg. Newmill, Ythanside). Amongst these, the ‘humpbacked’ ones appear to be the older bridges.

More might be researched about these historic stone built bridges in the parish as part of the cultural heritage project BCT is due to start in 2004.

(d) Wooden Bridges

While the first stone bridge in the parish is well recorded at 1730, little is known about the history of wooden bridges locally. It would seem reasonable to suppose that they might have been important from an early date, given the clear skill with large timber structures at an early date (eg. Balbridie near Banchory, castles...) and the relative abundance of timber in Birse historically.

While it appears that there was a timber bridge over the Dee to Kincardine O’Neil as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Fraser, Old Deeside Road p.140), there are apparently no records of local wooden bridges until the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (when there are the references quoted in (a) and (c) above).

The new bridge built at Finzean Sawmill c.1820 was a timber bridge on stone abutments and this pattern was followed when fords were gradually replaced at other locations down the Feugh (Clinter, Powlair, Little Ennochie). However, it is likely that timber footbridges have been important in the parish over a much longer period, particularly at fords as again illustrated by the history of the Feugh:-

- (a) At Balloch an at the head of the Forest of Birse, there is a steel girder and concrete footbridge beside the current ford of the Fungle over the Burn of Corn and this might have been a timber bridge previously.
- (b) Just downstream from Balloch an, there was a timber footbridge over the Feugh at the ford beside the Forest of Birse Kirk (as shown in an old postcard in BCT’s Archive).
- (c) There was, until the late 1980s, a timber footbridge just downstream from the ford across the Feugh at the Laird’s Burn.
- (d) There is still a timber footbridge at Woodend just downstream from the ford there, but the current replacement bridge built by the Aberdeen University Officer Training Corps in the last couple of years, does not follow the traditional design of such timber footbridges in Finzean.
- (e) There was a timber footbridge at the Dalsack ford across the Feugh.
- (f) There was also one at Whitestones linking the grazing stance and Feughside Inn (picture on p.146 in History in Birse).

An example of a timber bridge at a much smaller scale was found in the Forest of Birse when BCT first became involved with the pinewood management there. There was an apparently very old “swing bridge” near the bottom of the Laird’s Burn – a thick plank tethered by a chain to one bank (the east bank). This plank would lie across the burn and when swept away each spate, would just swing into the bankside so that it could be replaced across the burn next time someone needed it.

### **13. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

(i) Another Transformation

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the patterns of traditional routes in Birse and their uses underwent profound changes with the arrival of the wheel and subsequent impacts of the Era of Improvement.



During these centuries, the ancient patterns of ‘foot & hoof’ were transformed to those of horse powered wheeled transport.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was another major transformation with the replacement of that horse powered transport by the present reliance on the combustion engine for nearly every journey in the parish. At the same time, there has been a dramatic reduction over the last 100 years in the number of people in the parish working on the land and with any cause to use traditional routes other than public roads, except for recreation.

During the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the watershed of the First World War, the horse economy of the previous centuries continued and there was still widespread travel by foot. The experience of that very different era then stayed in the community for much of the rest of the century. Some of those who were adults before the First World War (eg. 20 in 1910) could still recall the profoundly different culture of the previous era into the 1960s and 70s (eg. Callander, p.33), including a widespread readiness to walk what would now be considered fairly long distances (eg. over 20 miles).

#### (ii) Main Changes

The main impacts of the changes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the traditional routes in the parish have been, firstly, a major reduction in the extent of these routes still in use and secondly, the loss of the of routes no longer in use.

This loss can simply be that the routes have become overgrown as their use has diminished. This process is illustrated by two routes that were still much used in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the Balnahard / Tillentech and Balfiddy / Tillygarmond routes. Much of the former route is now obscured by dense swathes of bracken, while the middle section of the latter route is now covered by fairly impenetrable gorse. In some other instances, old routes have been planted over with trees. In other cases, the loss has involved the destruction of the physical evidence of the traditional routes. This has usually been due to the conversion of parts of them into modern agricultural or forestry tracks.

#### (iii) Public Roads

One particular strand in the history of the parish’s traditional routes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been the evolution of the public road network.

It has been during the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the extent of the network has been finalised. At the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in addition to the two King’s Highways, there was an extensive range of other routes used as public and communal roads and only part of which now form part of the public highways as defined and managed by the local authority.

A late adjustment in the public / private road boundaries nearly occurred at Balloch in 2000, with the proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to de-list the length of public road from the Forest of Birse Kirk to the ford passed Balloch. However, in the end, this proposal was not taken forward. That length of road remains the only length of public road in the parish that is not tarred.

The tarring of the public roads from the 1930s/40s has been one of the major developments affecting them, along with the replacement of the bridges at Aboyne and Whitestones. There have also been

continuing small scale re-alignments (for example, the B976 at Corsedardar in the 1950s (see BCT Update 6), lower down the north slope at Hopes Croft in the 1990s,...).

One relict of the pre-tarred public roads, are the recesses in the dykes beside in the B976 between Whitestones and Finzean village where those working as stone breakers used to manufacture re-surfacing material.

The roads that have been tarred by the Council do not define public roads in the parish, as the Council also tarred a number of farm access roads and related estate roads in the 1960s as ‘adopted roads’ (for example, in Finzean, to Wester Clune, Turfgate, Powlair...). This was done on the basis that there would be no further commitment or obligation on the Council to maintain any of these roads. In some instances, however, maintenance has been occasionally carried out when the Council has had funds.

## CONCLUSIONS

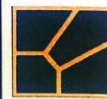
Three overall points stand out from this study of the traditional routes in Birse parish:-

- (a) the continued dependence of all travel in the parish on “foot & hoof”, lasting thousands of years, until the relatively recent date of the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century or around 250 years ago;
- (b) the relatively rapid and sweeping changes during the Era of Improvement in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, to local travel and many other aspects of local life;
- (c) the degree to which, despite those historic changes, a coherent pattern of pre-Improvement traditional routes can still be identified at the current time.

Within the constraints of this initial study, which started with a more or less ‘blank map’, it has only been possible to explore the traditional routes in the parish to a limited degree. As a result, the details of some of the routes identified and the interpretation of their significance, should be treated as somewhat speculative pending further research.

The report and associated maps do, however, provide a structured platform for such research. This could involve, for example:

- Use of BCT’s GIS to map in detail (1:10,000) on a single baseline map, routes identified in the report that are not shown on current OS maps, but which appear on earlier OS editions;
- Systematic examination of local estate maps that survive from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century (Balfour, Finzean and Ballogie);
- Examination of local estate papers and other local sources (eg. 19<sup>th</sup> century parochial board records) for additional information about traditional routes and the development of the current road network;
- Research in other historical sources for additional information about the use and development of the Fungle and Great North Road;
- Further field work to locate, trace, record and map lengths of the parish’s other main surviving traditional routes.

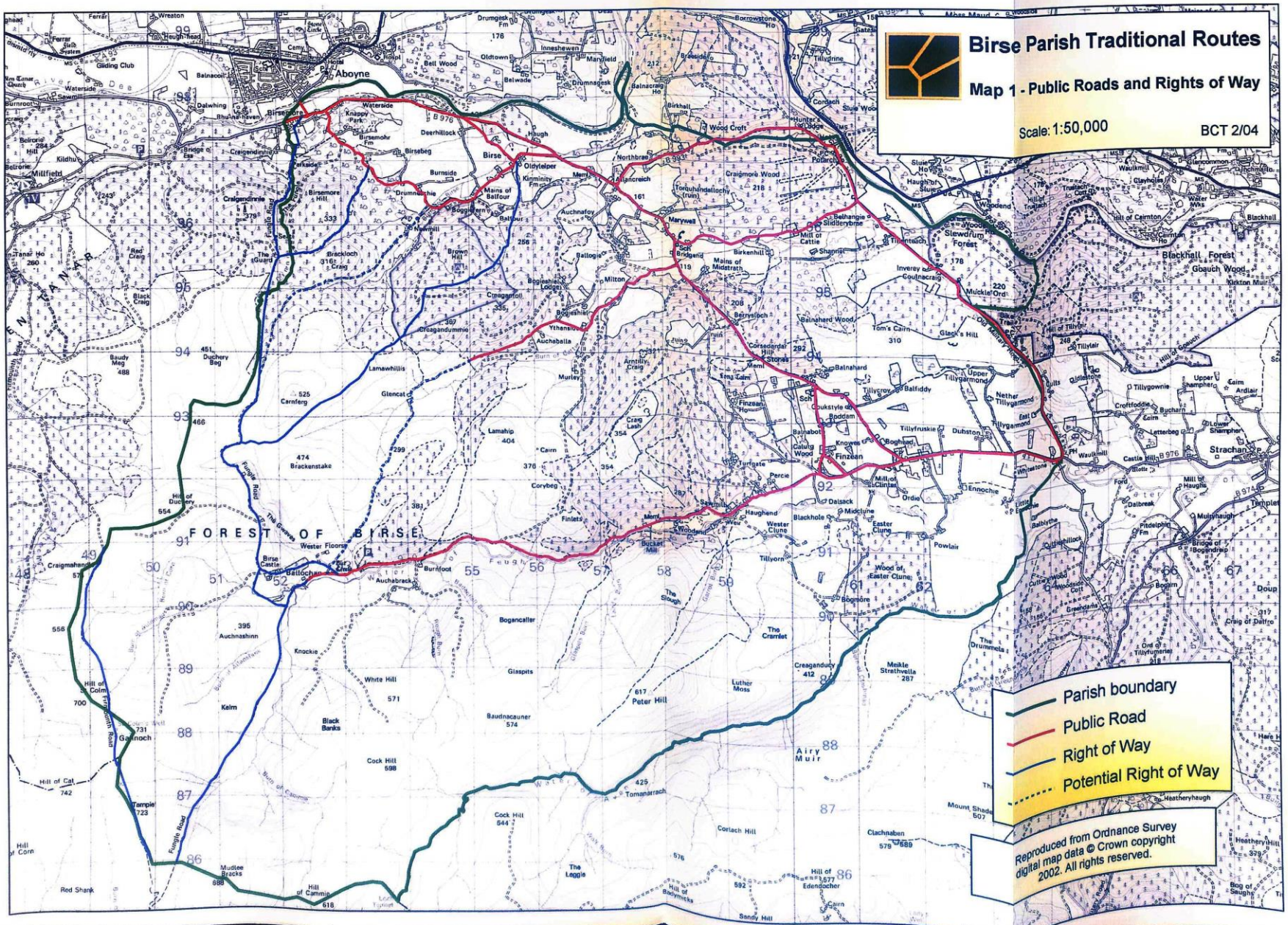


# Birse Parish Traditional Routes

## Map 1 - Public Roads and Rights of Way

Scale: 1:50,000

BCT 2/04



- Parish boundary
- Public Road
- Right of Way
- Potential Right of Way

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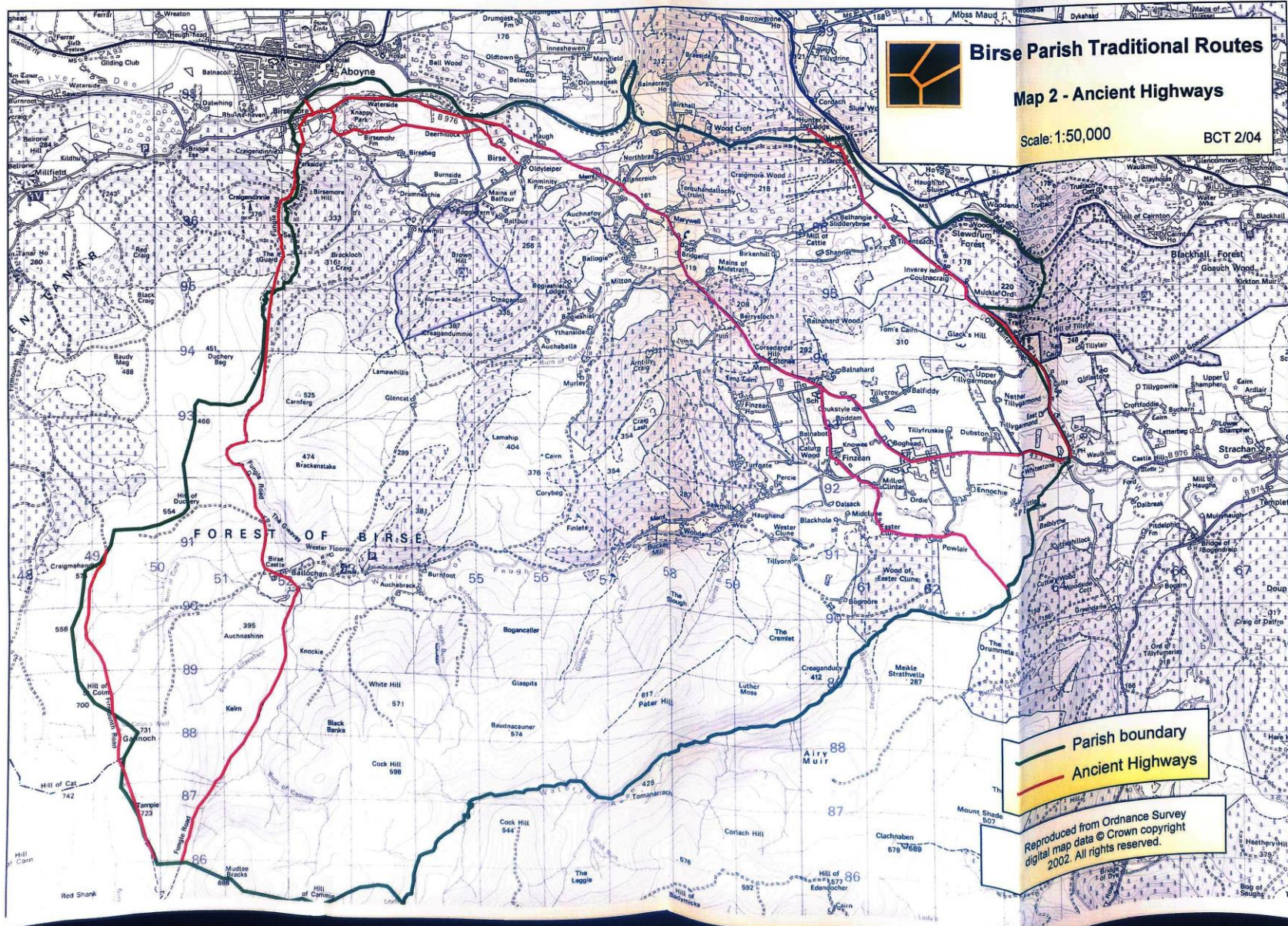


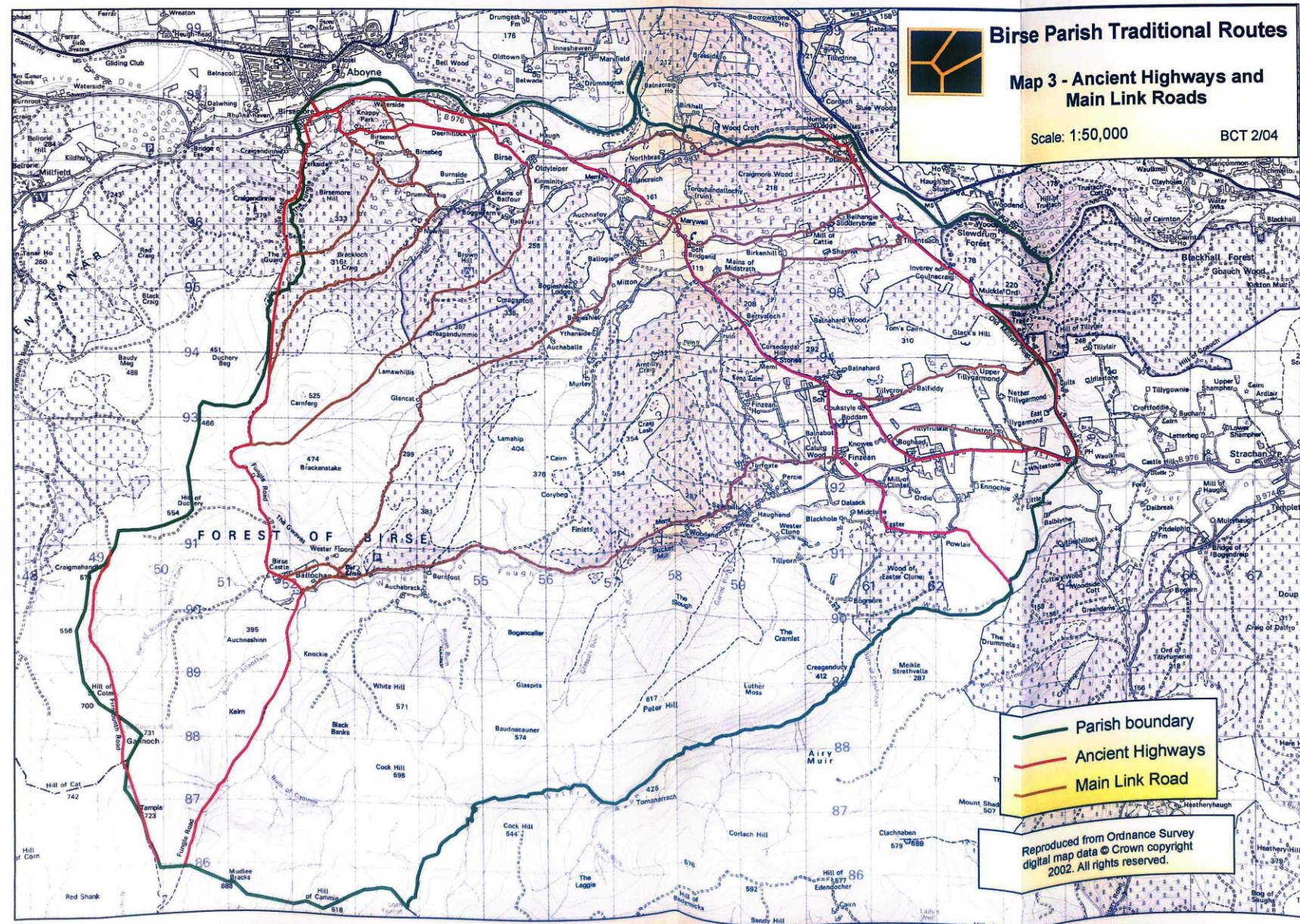
# Birse Parish Traditional Routes

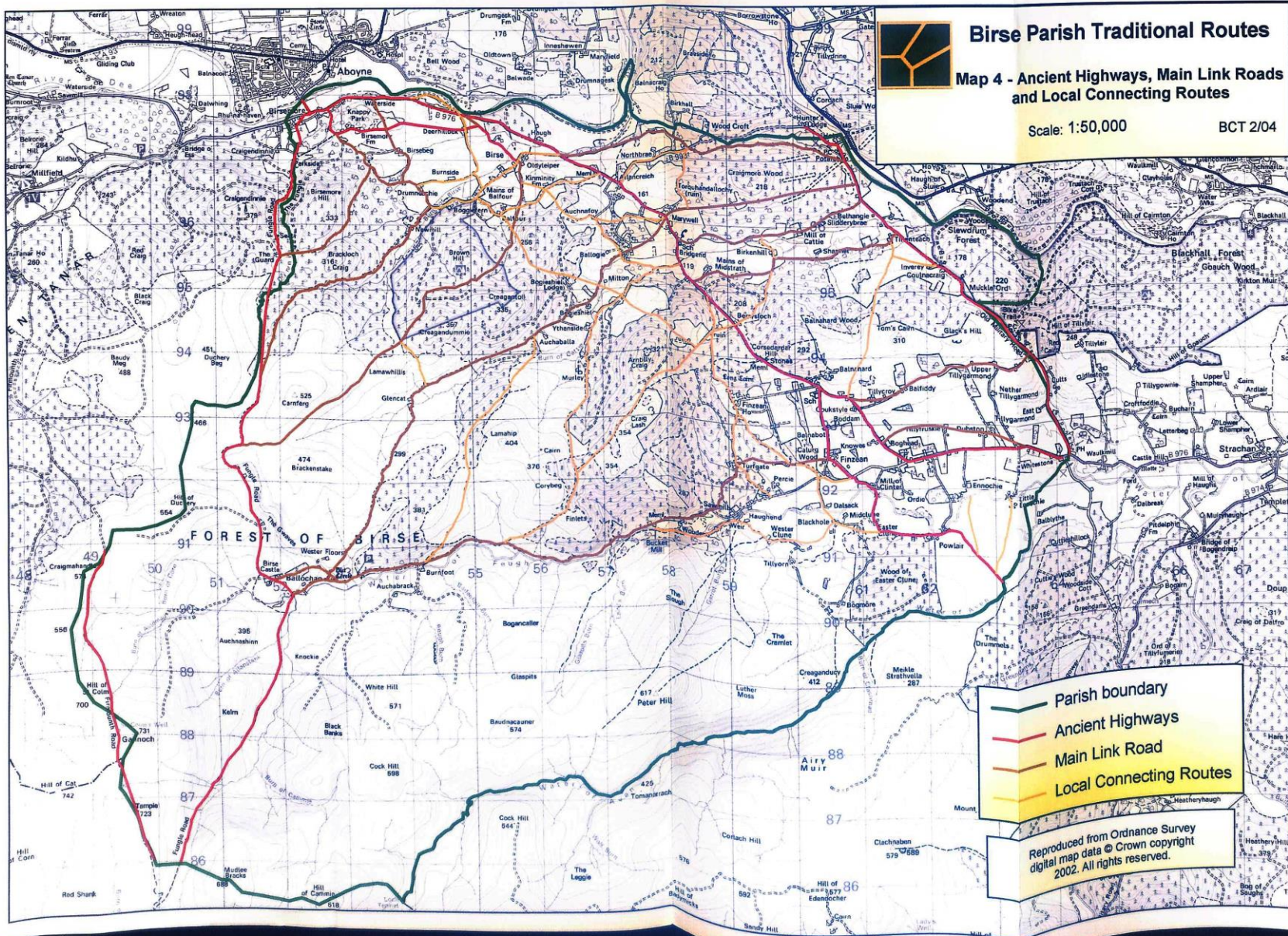
## Map 2 - Ancient Highways

Scale: 1:50,000

BCT 2/04







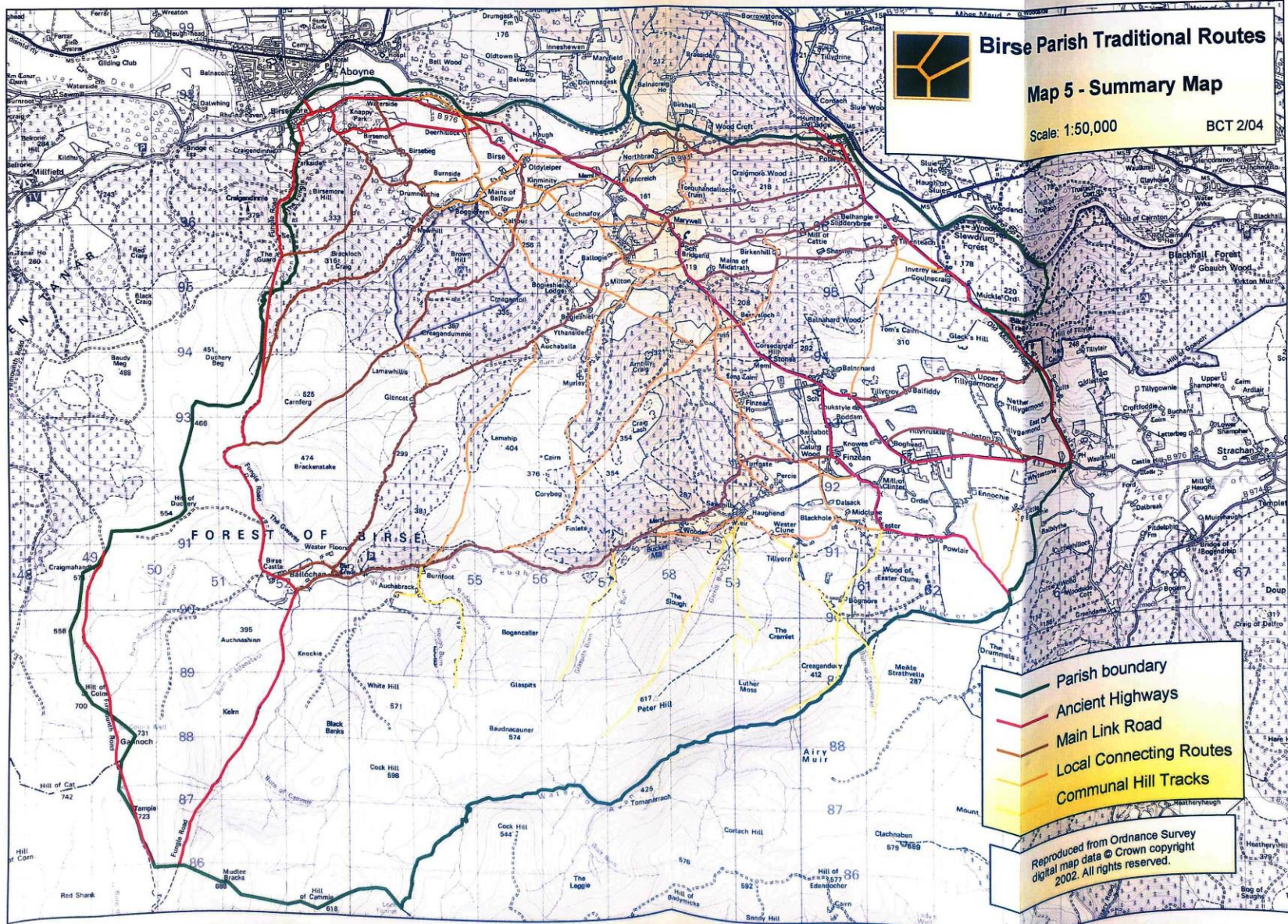


# Birse Parish Traditional Routes

## Map 5 - Summary Map

Scale: 1:50,000

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- Parish boundary
- Ancient Highways
- Main Link Road
- Local Connecting Routes
- Communal Hill Tracks

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