

CEBAC community archaeology walks - No 1.

The group met at the Slipway at NB 49678 41871 on 15/05/21. The 6" 1st edition OS (1852) shows an enclosed area here called "Gearraidh na Muilne" or Mill enclosure. This would likely refer to an old horizontal or "Norse" mill in use before the land was cleared to make way for Gress Farm – in the so called "improvements", when the big mill took over all milling in the area. The stream is called "Allt Ath Leoid" which may refer to a ford or alternatively to a kiln in association with the Mill.

Three roofed buildings are shown on this map at the eastern extent of the enclosure (see fig 1). They are marked as roofed buildings on the 1852 6" 1st edition OS map. These were the first stop for the group as we recognised the footings of buildings although their exact shape and dimensions were hard to discern.

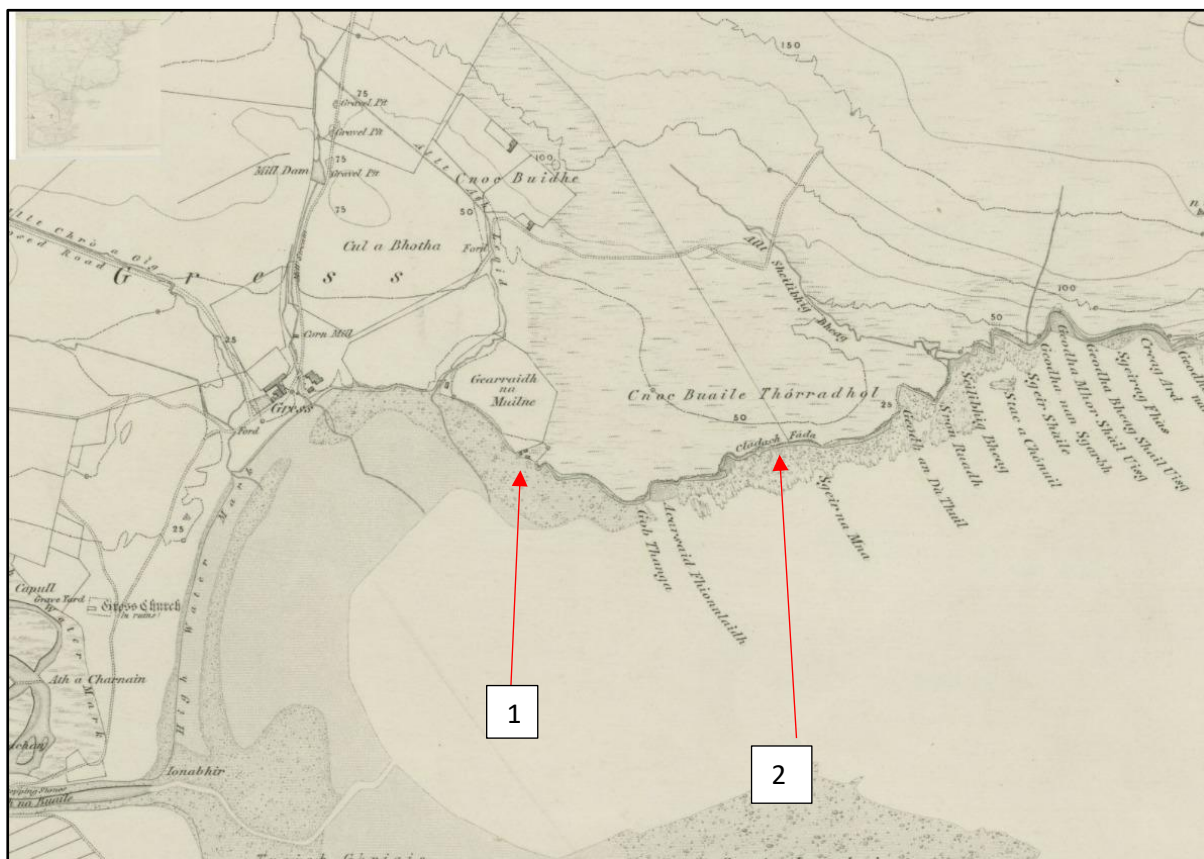


Figure 1: OS 1st edition 6" map 1852 showing three roofed buildings (1) and the boundary dyke of feannagan (2). Image courtesy of OS and NLS.

The next stretch of coast is called Cnoc Buaille Thorradhól on the 1st edition. Buaille refers to an enclosure and Thorradhól may be a name. Certainly the area is covered in Feannagan which stretch inland a good distance inland. They are clearly overlain by modern fencelines which are presumably those referred to in the CANMORE entry:

Classification Field System (Modern): **Canmore ID** 335457: **Site Number** NB54SW 17:
NGR NB 50162 41912: **Permalink** <http://canmore.org.uk/site/335457>

There were hints of older, circular buildings seen within this area at NB 50165 41740 which may relate to these feannagan or even predate them – see Figure 2.



Figure 2: Possible group of circular structures at Buaille Thorrachol NB 50165 41740

Almost parallel with the modern fenceline was a turf dyke which is much older (see fig 1 & 3). It is the boundary edge of this section of feannagan. It was made pre-1852 as it is marked upon the OS 1st edition and is still clear on aerial imagery. It connects with the shore at NB 50278 41745, near the “Sgeir na Mna” – a name which must have a story? Beyond this dyke to the east and north the ground is very boggy and there were no further traces of feannagan until we reached the Sron Ruadh.

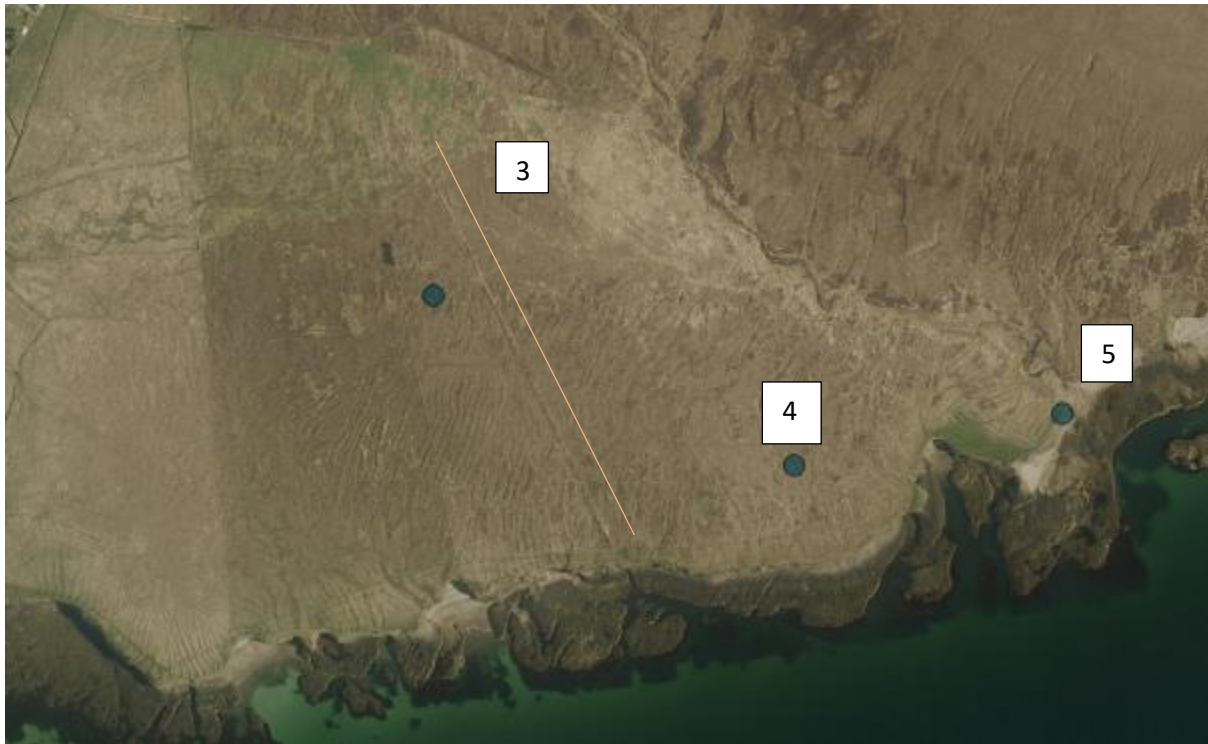


Figure 3: Pre-1852 Earthen Dyke (3) marking boundary of feannagan at Buaille Thorradhól (immediately left of line). No 4 is the midden and 5 Sron Ruadh. Image courtesy of Canmore.

Roughly 100m east of this dyke, before the Sron Ruadh is reached, Canmore records the findspot (No. 4 in fig 3 above) of some iron-age pottery from a midden. The record states:

Classification Midden (Period Unassigned), Unidentified Pottery: **Canmore ID 4413: Site Number NB54SW 3: NGR NB 504 418: Permalink <http://canmore.org.uk/site/4413>**

The record references the journal called the “Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland” (PSAS) for the years 1978 and 1979. These entries are:

1978 - 13 Iron-age sherds from a midden at Gress, Lewis (NB 504418), and from Carry Bay (NB 534499). By I CAMPBELL, Coll, Back, Lewis.

1979 - 23 Finds from Lewis: iron-age sherds and other material from middens at Gress (NB 504418); Carry Bay (NB 534499); Barvas (NB 348520); and Dalbeg (NB 224458); also an iron animal trap from Glen Tolsta. By I CAMPBELL, Coll, Isle of Lewis.

(The grid reference NB 504 418 is the one relevant here. The grid reference for “Carry Bay” refers to Gearraidh Beach in North Tolsta).

This midden could not be located.

The next feature of interest is at Sron Ruadh (No 5 in fig.3). Here, a little headland bounded by the stream Allt Sheilabhig Bheag to the north is totally covered by massive 2-3m wide feannagan with similarly wide flat ditches.



Figure 4: Feannagan at the Sron Ruadh

The headland area is enclosed by a turf dyke which runs north to the Allt, which seems to form the northern side of the enclosure.



Figure 5: Enclosing dyke at Sron Ruadh

Given that the enclosing dyke is clear today and that other similar dykes (such as the one just mentioned) are marked, the fact that this is not marked upon the 1st edition (1852) or the 2nd edition (1895), and the fact that the feannagan themselves are so clear and defined, may imply that these features are post 1895. It is recorded on Canmore as

Classification Field System (Post Medieval): **Canmore ID** 335456: **Site Number** NB54SW 16: **NGR** NB 50577 41834: **Permalink** <http://canmore.org.uk/site/335456>

However the CEBAW walk proved that there was activity here a long time before that, as when we checked the actively eroding ends of the feannagan at small cliff at the shore, Mr Ben Inglis-Grant spotted a flint flake in the soil of the ditch between two feannagan. It is a grey-blue flint which looks to the author to be the beach flint which washes up on Lewis shores as pebbles, the only native source of flint on the island. It is not a tool in itself but is the waste or debitage from the creation of a tool. It is very difficult to know how old this flake is, although we can say it is Iron Age (c.700BC – 800 AD) or older.



Figure 6: Flake of beach flint found at Sron Ruadh by Mr Ben Inglis-Grant

This little area has evidently been a good place to live for a very long time. This would make sense as it seems to be fertile, sheltered, and well drained and has a nearby source of fresh water and marine resources. It seems likely that there will be the remains of ancient dwellings somewhere nearby.

East of this, the cliffs steadily gain height again. At a place called Gheoda Mhor Shail Uisg at NB 50771 41928, DI Macdonald was first to notice a substantial earthen dyke running along the cliff top.



Figure 7: The cliff top dyke



Figure 8: Cliff top dyke showing deep drain on inland side

It was around 2-3m wide, with a deep ditch running along on the inland side. At first we could not believe that such effort had been expended as to fence off the cliff to prevent stock

animals from endangering themselves – as someone pointed out, it would need to run nearly the entire length of Lewis to be of any use. However, as we followed it for mile upon mile that was indeed the unavoidable conclusion, especially as a bit further on a modern fence ran alongside it with a presumably similar function. It is quite clear on aerial imagery and can be traced all the way to Alla Tholan, at NB 51737 42890, a distance of 2km. The dyke disappeared after the Alla Tholan and around Traigh Sheilabhig but then reappeared on the other side of this beach as the cliffs gained height again and ran all the way to Glen Tolsta, a further 1.67 km. We discussed trying to work out how many work hours that would require, something yet to be done although it could clearly be described as a monumental task. It should also be remembered that such a dyke would require continuous annual maintenance to work properly.

The dyke has been recorded on Canmore, from a few hundred metres past where we first picked it up at a place called Clachan a Gobha. It is shown on the canmore map (<https://canmore.org.uk/>) running to Sron na Creige Fraoich just before Alla Tholan, although as we have said, it is far more extensive.

Site Name Druim Mor: **Classification** Dyke (Period Unassigned): **Canmore ID** 335455: **Site Number** NB54SW 15: **NGR** NB 51487 41968: **Permalink** <http://canmore.org.uk/site/335455>

It is hard to date such a feature – was it to do with Gress farm or was it earlier? Perhaps oral tradition or historical records might throw some light upon it if we do some further research. Perhaps records of Gress farm might show expenditure for such a project? Perhaps it was part of the same job creation scheme as the drainage ditched at Sheilibhig Mhor (see Figure 15, below).

Some way after Gheoda Mhor Shail Uisg where we first noticed the cliff edge dyke, we came to Gheoda nan Muic NB 51362 41946. Here we came across the day's biggest mystery. This Geo is remarkably straight sided and vertical as a result of a geological feature known as an intrusive dike ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dike_\(geology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dike_(geology))), formed when molten lava is forced up through a crack in pre-existing rocks. The lava cools in such a way as to create Basaltic rocks or similar which are of a completely different nature to the surrounding rock, which in this case is "Stornoway Conglomerate", defined on the British Geological Society website as:

1:50 000 scale bedrock geology description: Stornoway Formation - Conglomerate. Sedimentary Bedrock formed approximately 247 to 272 million years ago in the Triassic and Permian Periods. Local environment previously dominated by rivers.

(https://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html?&_ga=2.115993474.58275594.1621262399-2094680308.1617704805).

DI Macdonald mentioned that his father had told him that if you go directly across Broad Bay you can see the Dike coming back out of the sea and continuing across Point. There were 8 human made boreholes in the surface of this dike, first spotted by Jayne MacArthur of Loch a Tuath news.



Figure 9: Boreholes in intrusive Dike at Geodh nan Muic

They were around 1- 2cm diameter and, where it could be seen, only around 3-5cm deep. Five were in the vertical face whilst three more were drilled into a horizontal face above. These remain an intriguing mystery.

Our first thought was that they may have been for iron spike to anchor something – we had indeed spotted an iron spike stuck in the rock near the slip at the start of the day, which was for tying up boats. However the shallow depth of these holes would not seem to be conducive with attaching anything, and the way that there were five close together in a rough line and two on a completely different angle would not seem to fit with such an interpretation. Such a configuration of small holes would be more like that required to quarry blocks; leading us to wonder if perhaps this rock was good for making mill stones. It has a fine, even grain as would be required for millstones, unlike the surrounding conglomerate rock which would be completely unsuited. Such information would have been important in ancient times when mill stones were essential for survival.

When researching the question a friend from Tong informed me that some (as yet unknown) Geologists had investigated a similar dyke on the shore there, at NB 46245 36330, and taken samples by drilling into the rock.



Figure 10: Boreholes in the Dike at Tong - general



Figure 11: Borehole in the Dike at Tong.

However, as you can see from the photographs in figure 10 & 11, the holes look very different from those at Geoda na Muic. Also, the BGS website does not show our intrusive dike at Gheoda na Muic and further enquiries will be made to see if Geologists do actually know about it.

Happily, though, the mystery was then solved by a local, Chrissie Bell, who had also joined us on a walk. Her email to DI went as follows:

Hi Don. Kenny says he knows exactly what the holes are all about. They were made at a time when households needed lintels for a building, above a door or window, and the intention would be to break the rock along the line of the holes. Clearly on this occasion the rock proved stubborn and unsuitable. I'm sure he'll describe it better himself. He's coming over in two weeks.

Enjoyed my walk with the group, may do another one, if it's not too challenging.

I wonder if there has ever been any thoughts about a memory plaque for those two girls who lost their lives at the chair pool. Perhaps not enough time has passed, I think it will be 70 years soon since it happened.

Regards

Chrissie Bell

The next place of interest was Alla Tholan and the cave at Geodh alla Tholan. While the name is interesting and the location spectacular and the subject of further inquiry we did not find any archaeological features to be described here.

The next feature of interest became clear as we approached the Seilibhig Mhor beach. The fertile land around this little bay has clearly been inhabited and intensively used, with a large area completely covered in feannagan and several footings of dwelling places on the central plain behind the beach. However about 400m out from the plain, at NB 51526 42962 we came across an almost right angled ditch dug into the peat, draining to the sea to our right and stretching out in a perfectly straight line ahead of us.



Figure 12: Extensive ditch in moor above Traigh Sheilibhig



Figure 13: Aerial image of ditches in moor above Traigh Sheilibhig. Arrow denotes where picture in figure 10 was taken from. Image from Canmore.

In fact from the air you can see there is another straight line drain uphill of where we were standing. What were these for? At first I thought they may have been some form of head dyke, stopping animals from accessing the more fertile area close to the settlement used for growing crops during the summer months. Sheep might not be stopped by such a ditch but possibly Cows would? On reflection and study of the aerial imagery it seems more likely that they are simply drainage ditches, designed to drain water away from the potential crop growing area. Not only could animals probably cross it, but it seems to stop abruptly at a marshy area to the west.



Figure 14: Series of drains? In moor above Traigh Sheilibhig. Image from Canmore

Once this line is seen on the aerial imagery it is impossible not to see the other three, two almost on the same (bent) alignment but farther out from the bay, and one inside it with a sharper angle. Presumably these are all the same sort of feature, although the farthest out strings together a series of green dots and occupies the top of the ridge and so might be different. This requires more investigation but will have to wait for a return visit! Again, these features represent massive amounts of work hours.

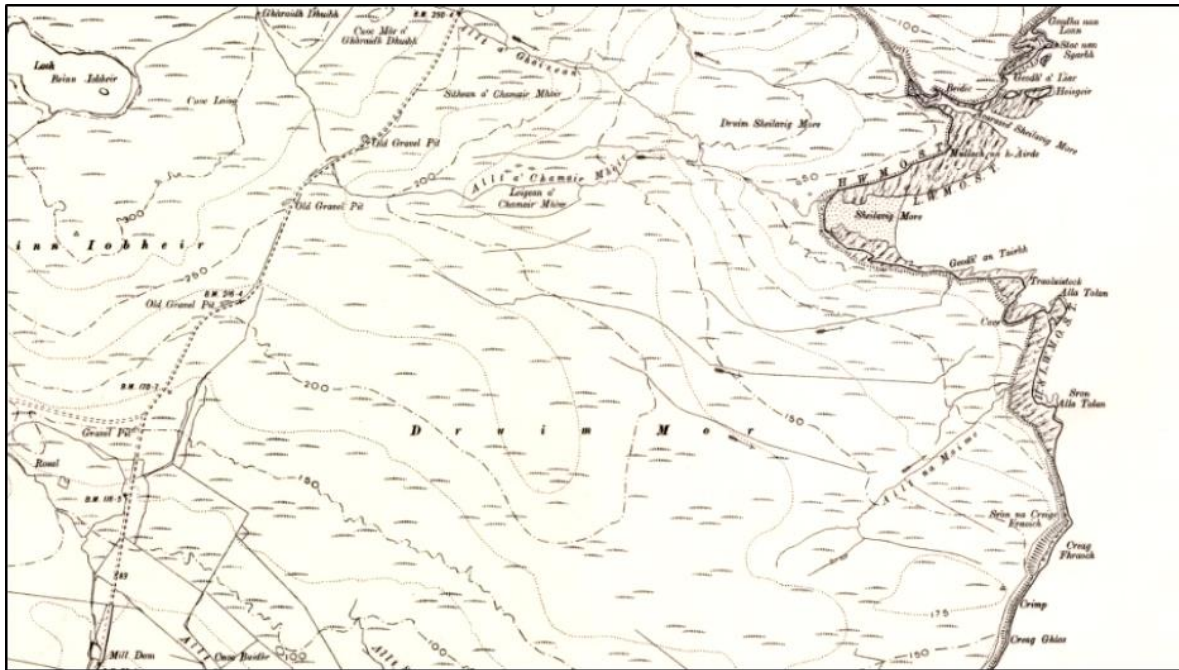


Figure 15: OS 2nd edition 1895 showing the drains visible in Figure 14. These are not marked upon the 1st edition.

DI Macdonald did some research of Commun Eachdraidh sgìre a Bhac records and soon came back with the following snippet:

SOME HISTORY ABOUT GRESS PASTURE

If you walk along the cliff tops towards the headland (Kneap) you will notice a fairly large area that has been ploughed. This was one of Lord Lever's experimental schemes. What were his intentions? Was he thinking of planting it with something? Nobody seems to know.

Further along you can see a drain and this is one of a number in that area. There is another one starting from the main road near "*Beinn Ionhair*" and leading towards the cliffs at "*Shuilivig Mhor*". Another one can be seen out on the moor on the west side of the main road leading towards "*Loch Corsavat*". These drains were made by the local people during a kind of Job Creation scheme. In the 1880s money was allocated by the Government to the depressed areas and the work to be supervised by the Landlords. They used the money more or less for their own benefit to drain their own pastures. It was said that the wages were 6d a day.

Figure 16: From the records of the Commun Eachdraidh, the solution to the "Shuilivig Mhor" drains. The area of ploughed land initially referred to can be seen in Figure 16 below.



Figure 17: Area of ploughed land at NB 50922 41988 thought to be Lord Levers experimental schemes, referred to in Figure 15. The blue dot to the left is the Sron Ruadh.

Next we came to Traigh Sheilibhig. As noted there is a lot of archaeological activity here and it was decided that this was not to be investigated or recorded in depth at the present time as this would hold up the walk too much. We discussed returning at a later date for more in depth recording.



Figure 16: Canmore image of the settlement area at Traigh Sheilibhig, with numbered blue dots representing Canmore records.

However what we can note presently is the inaccuracy of the Canmore records. The first thing would be that most of these are under a “Site name” of Tolsta, which it clearly isn’t. Secondly, most of these entries are referenced as having come from an archaeological study entitled “From Barra to Berneray” by Branigan and Foster (2000). Clearly there has been some kind of error, for this study did not cover Harris or Lewis.

Then we come to the actual records and their location. The farthest dot to the right, or east, in Figure 16, with a number 1 next to it, is supposed to be a Neolithic/ Bronze Age stone alignment:

Site Name Tolsta: Classification Stone Row (Neolithic)-(Bronze Age): Canmore ID 335454:

Site Number NB54SW 14: NGR NB 51331 43240:

Permalink <http://canmore.org.uk/site/335454>

This would be very interesting but no evidence of this was found.

The second dot moving to the left or west, on the beach, No.2, is supposed to be a rectilinear enclosure:

Site Name Tolsta: Classification Rectilinear Enclosure (Period Unassigned): Canmore

ID 335453: Site Number NB54SW 13: NGR NB 51294 43198:

Permalink <http://canmore.org.uk/site/335453>

Again, there was no trace of this and it is presumably located in the wrong place. The next dot to the west, still on the beach, No.3, is supposed to be a curvilinear enclosure:

Site Name Tolsta: Classification Curvilinear Enclosure (Period Unassigned): Canmore
ID 335452: Site Number NB54SW 12: **NGR** NB 51276 43206:
Permalink <http://canmore.org.uk/site/335452>

The dot farthest to the top, or north, of fig 16, No.4, is supposed to be another curvilinear enclosure:

Site Name Tolsta: Classification Curvilinear Enclosure (Period Unassigned): Canmore
ID 335451: Site Number NB54SW 11: **NGR** NB 51264 43255:
Permalink <http://canmore.org.uk/site/335451>

None of these records would appear to be located in the correct place.

The only record which would appear to be correct would be the dot next on the far left or west of Fig 16, No.5. This is recorded as a farmstead and would indeed conform to the general size and shape of a blackhouse.

Site Name Lewis, Sheilavaig Mor: **Classification** Farmstead (Period Unassigned): NB54SW
5 5122 4322: Alternative Name(s) Tigh Sheilabhia Mhoir: **Canmore ID** 128087: **Site**
Number NB54SW 5: **NGR** NB 5122 4322: **Permalink** <http://canmore.org.uk/site/128087>

There are notes with this record from the Ordnance Survey and the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical monuments (RCAHMS)

'The ruins of huts and a small portion of arable land...'

Name Book 1852. No. 38, 63

A farmstead, comprising three unroofed buildings is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Island of Lewis, Ross-shire 1852, sheet 15). Two enclosures are shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1973).

Information from RCAHMS (AKK) 30 June 1997

The buildings they refer to are shown in figure 17 below, called Tigh Sheilibhig Mhoir, already "in ruins" in 1852.

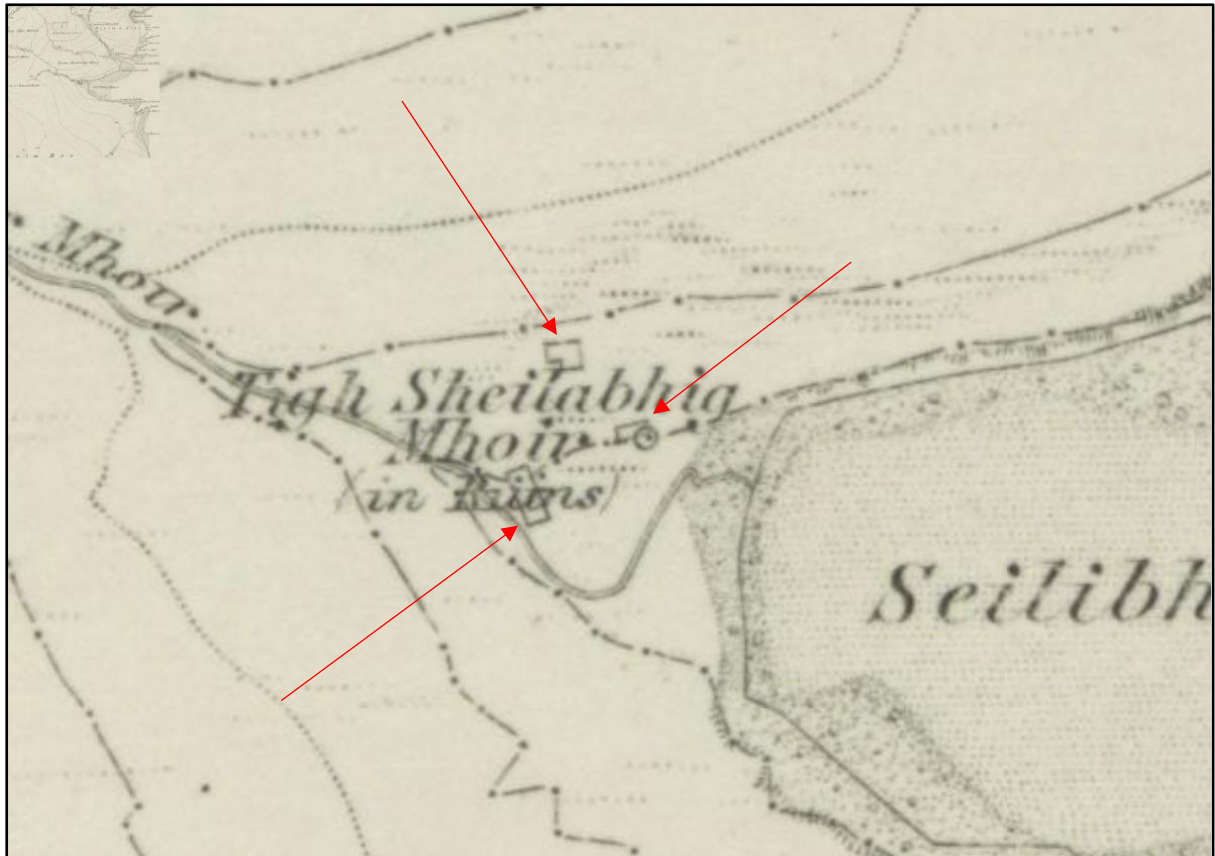


Figure 17: 1852 OS map of the settlement area. Note three empty boxes, denoting unroofed buildings.

The bottom left is clearly the blackhouse ruin still visible today. The northern enclosure might be what appears today as a circular enclosure, termed "B" on the aerial photograph in Figure 18, below, and the right hand one the smaller enclosure termed "A".



Figure 17: Settlement area with the remains of two structures, A and B.

We discussed returning to this site, possibly with a drone to capture good quality aerial images of each of the extant features. We can then write to Canmore and correct the records.

The next leg of the walk took us inland to try to ford the deep ravine of Allt Raonadail. Unbeknown to us at the time, we ended up crossing at the point marked upon the 1852 1st edition as “Ath Sgeireach Raonadail” showing a great consistency of landscape use! At a point NB 51455 43744 we came across what could have been the remains of a shieling but they were very faint. In discussion with DI, we now realise that just uphill of this is the Airigh na Banachaig, recorded on Canmore and already in ruins on the 1852 map. What we found, if anything, may have been a satellite structure related to this Airigh.

Site Name Lewis, Allt Gillevat: **Classification** Shieling Hut (Post Medieval)(Possible):

Alternative Name(s) Airidh Na Banachaig: **Canmore ID** 128090: **Site Number** NB54SW 8:

NGR NB 5143 4392: **Permalink** <http://canmore.org.uk/site/128090>

Although we didn't visit it, there is another Airigh north of where we were at NB 51083 43752 that would be worth future investigation, due to the intriguingly well preserved agricultural system which surrounds it. There is no record of this on Canmore and we wouldn't have noticed it if it weren't for Fergie pointing it out.



Figure 18: Airigh Steinatotair just north of our walk, pointed out by Fergie. Note the central circular building, the surrounding feannagan and enclosing dyke. The upturned V shape through the moor above it may be part of a head dyke for the whole Sheilibhig as it can be traced running around the whole area. Image: Canmore.

It would be interesting to research the placename “Steinatotair” and anything known locally about it. Stein is the old Norse for stone. It is marked upon the 1852 OS map, but just as a name, implying that the feannagan and ruin were already so old and ruinous that they weren’t drawn.

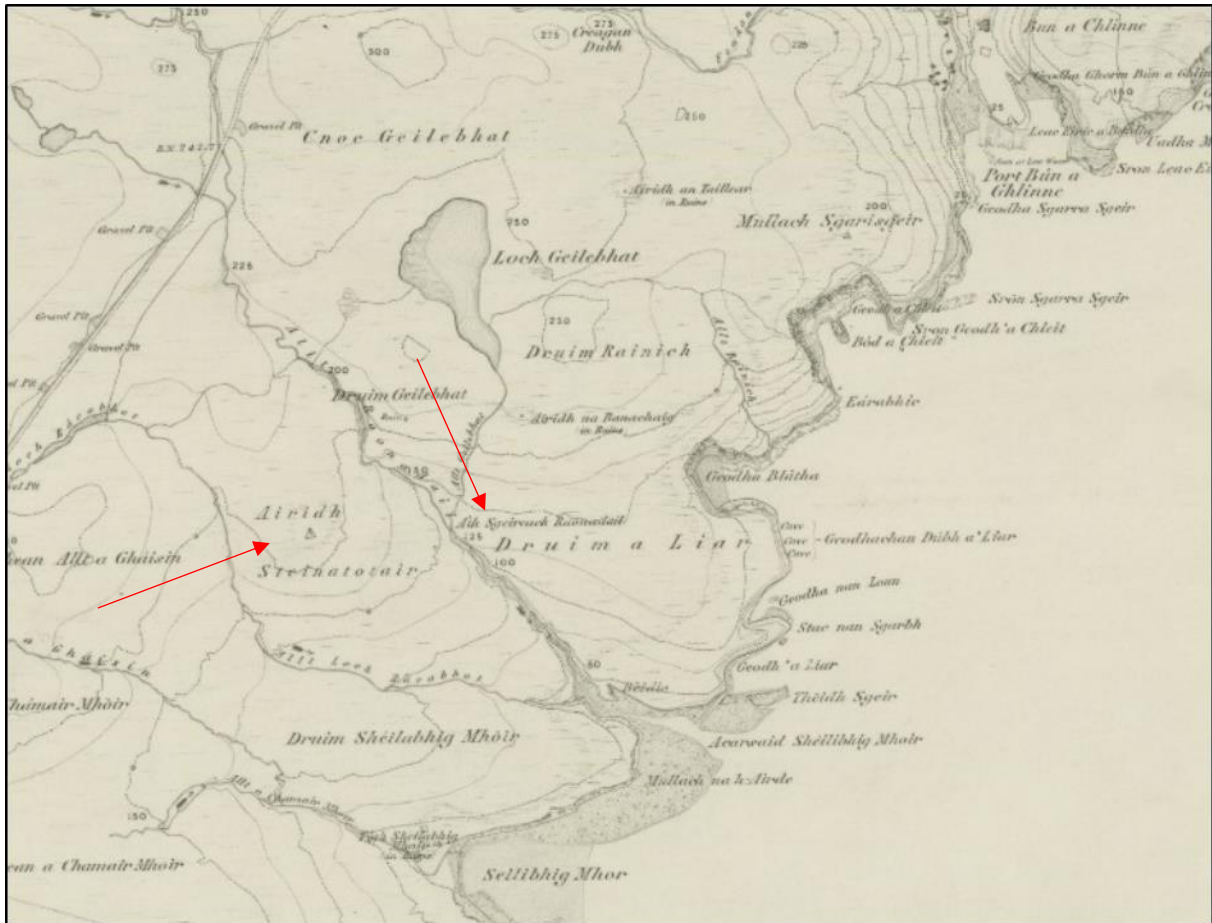


Figure 19: Airidh Steintotar and Ath Sgeirach Raonadail on the route between Sheilbhig Mhor and Glen Tolsta. From the OS 1st edition 1852.

The next site we should have seen was the Dun Beinn Earba, on the coast. We didn't actually walk right to this as it was getting hard going underfoot and time was becoming an issue, but I did look through binoculars from a distance and could not make out any archaeology. The note on the Canmore record also states that there was no sign of archaeology:

Site Name Lewis, Earabhic, Dun Beinn Earba: **Classification** Dun (Period Unassigned)(Possible): **Canmore ID** 4411: **Site Number** NB54SW 1: **NGR** NB 518 438

There is an alleged dun (Mr M Macphail), Dun Beinn Earba, probably near Earabhic (Eyrarvig).

F W L Thomas 1890.

There is an inaccessible stack at Earavick but there is no sign of a dun in the area.

Visited by OS (A A) 14 June 1969.

A bit farther north Canmore has a record for a "Trap", located *in* the sea at the base of high cliffs and a Sea Stack.

Site Name Lewis, Glen Tolsta: **Classification** Trap: **Canmore ID** 4412: **Site Number** NB54SW 2: **NGR** NB 52 44: **Permalink** <http://canmore.org.uk/site/4412>

The PSAS (Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland) entry which is also referenced on the record states:

23 Finds from Lewis: iron-age sherds and other material from middens at Gress (NB 504418); Carry Bay (NB 534499); Barvas (NB 348520); and Dalbeg (NB 224458); also an iron animal trap from Glen Tolsta. By I CAMPBELL, Coll, Isle of Lewis.

It would seem therefore that this record is also in the wrong place and should be located in Glen Tolsta. The sea stack was very dramatic and impressive but exhibited no sign of archaeology. It has a name recorded in the 1852 OS namebook which is "Bod a' Chleit". Strangely this name never made it onto the later OS maps... any ideas as to the correct translation are welcome!

The walk ended at Glen Tolsta. Again, much like Traigh Sheilibhig, this is an intensively used landscape with a lot going on – too much to start recording what we see and checking the Canmore records on this occasion, although hopefully we will get to this in the future.

Thankyou very much to everyone involved.

Ian Mchardy (AIFA) 18/05/21