

CEBAC Community archaeology walks No 7

This week we followed Allt Cearagol up to the confluence with Allt Loch an Eallaich, then up to Cnoc a Mhaide, Cnocan a' Phrige and back to the start via Cnoc an Soluis. Local tradition has it that this river system had many illicit stills.

Allt Cearagol may mean something like "Wandering Stream" according to DI McDonald. Certainly, it can be observed to have changed shape slightly on the maps from 1852 – present.

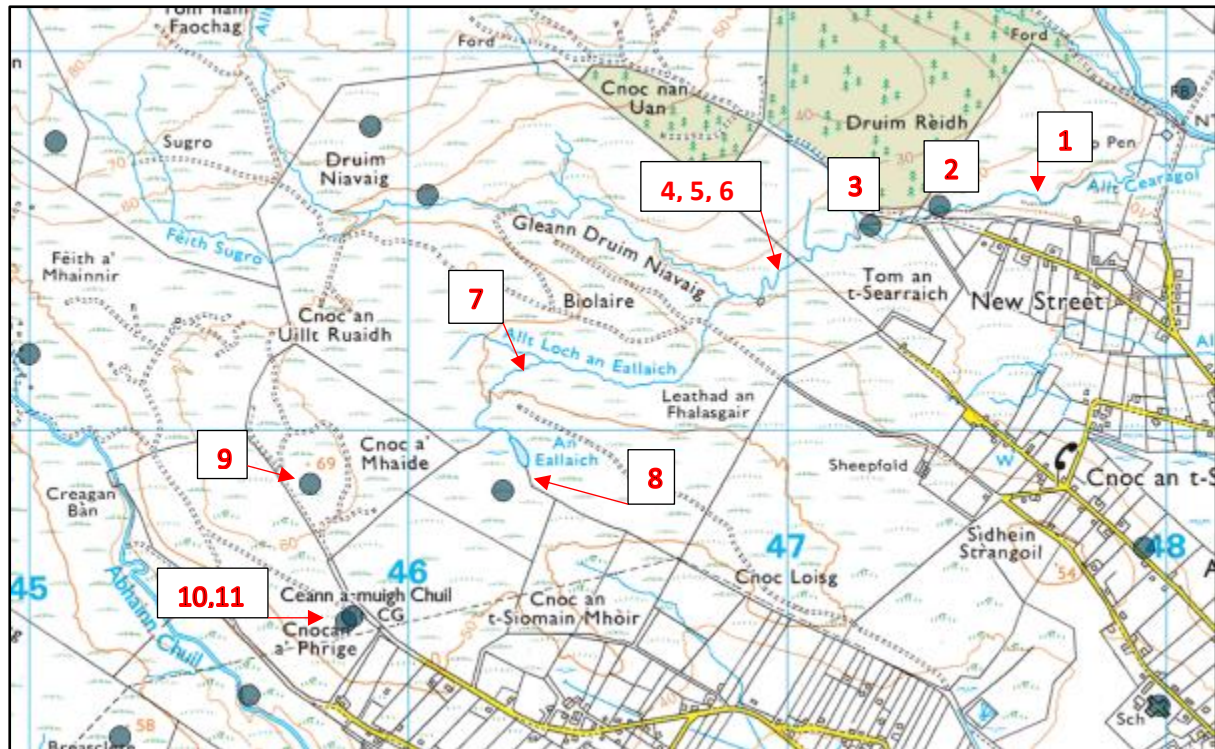


Figure 1: The numbers in red are the sites found or sites looked for and not found (but discussed) on the route. No new sites were found on this walk.

At site 1, figure 1, we have this on the 1852 OS:



Figure 2: The red arrow points to some sort of boundary – possibly Gress farm boundary?

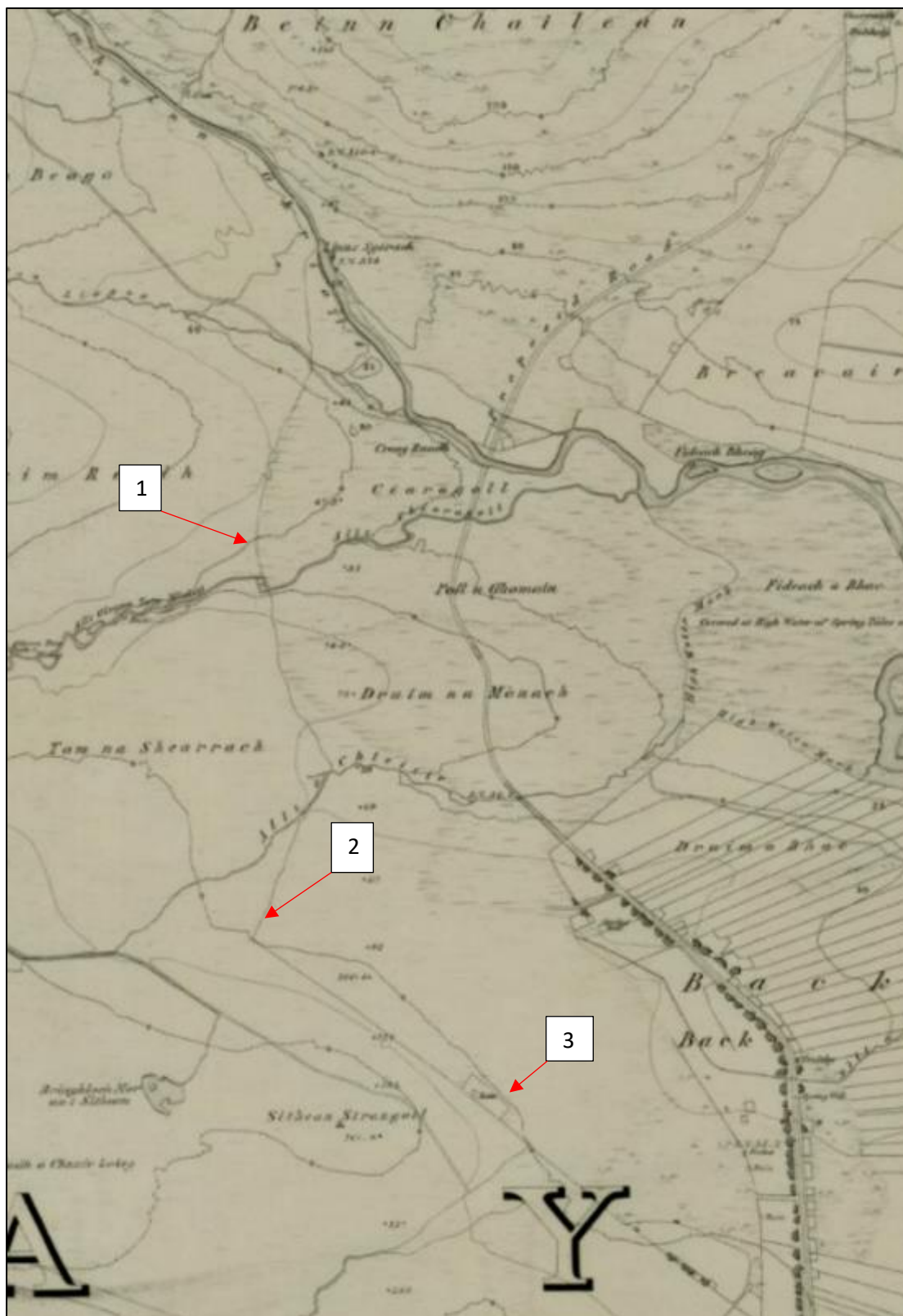


Figure 3: You can see the boundary line crossing Allt Cearogoll at right angles at (1). It then continues south, crossing contour lines and the Allt Chleitir before it shoots of southeast in a very straight line at (2), incorporating the Ruined farmhouse (3) which is now No 64 Cnoc an Soluis. To the north, it continues to the Linne Sgorach on the Gress river and seems to then turn and follow the river down on the far bank.

There was no sign of any of these features on the ground however.

The OS 1st ed shows the following anthropogenic looking features of the stream here:

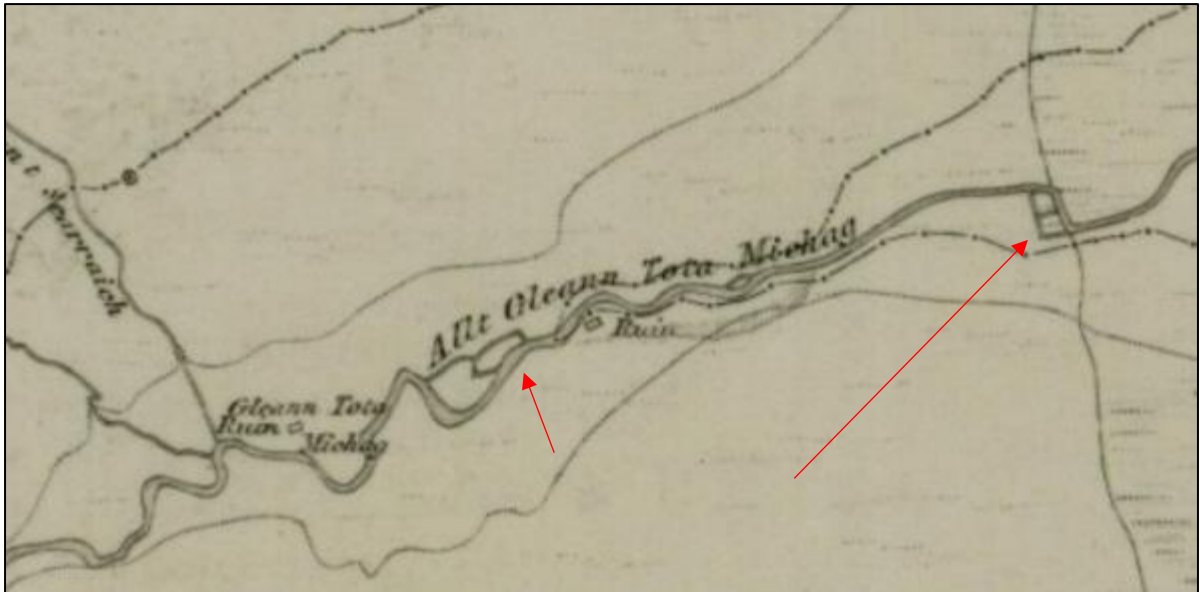


Figure 4: The red arrows point to channels made to divert water. These may be fish traps – see fig 11 below. The right hand one is also the location of a well. The Ruins marked are the two sites marked on CANMORE as Shielings, discussed below.

At the right hand arrow in Fig 4, we couldn't make out the channels as shown on the map but there was a well or spring on the south bank, now over grown:



Figure 5: Well, now overgrown

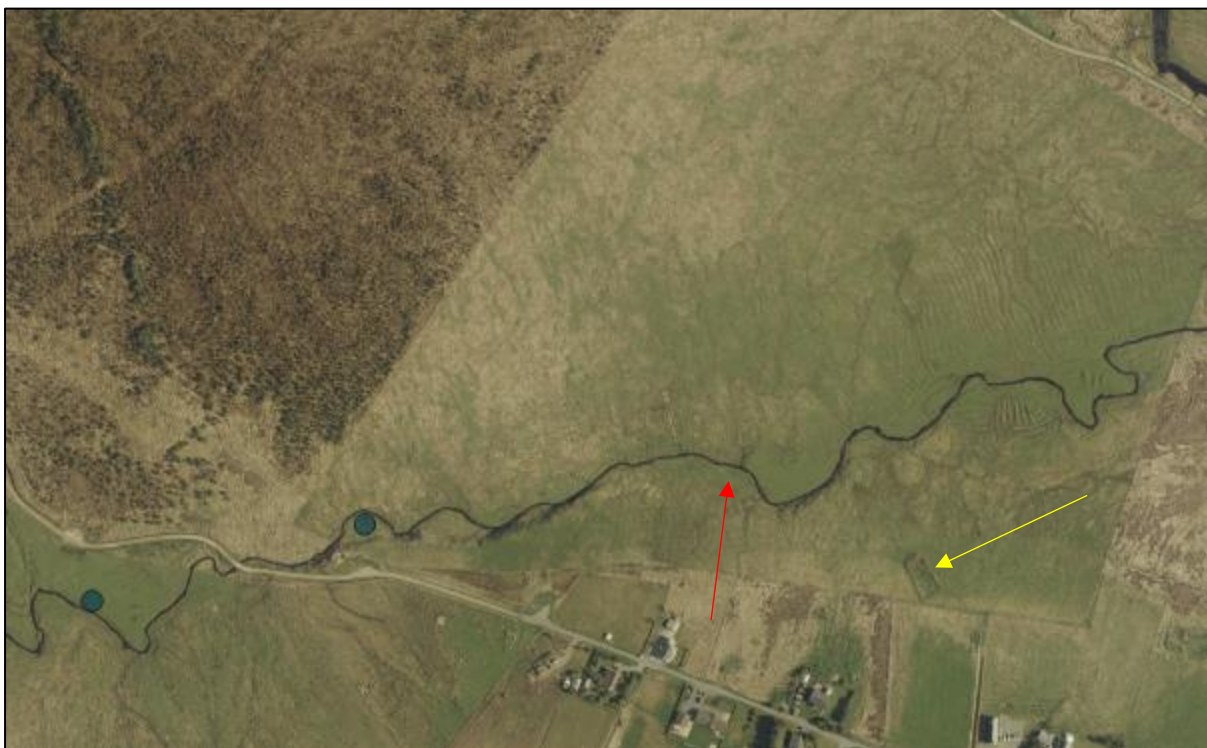


Figure 6: Red arrow where the 1st edition boundary was supposed to cross, near the Well and the strange water channels, at NB 47655 41612. No sign of the boundary and little sign of the channels could be made out. The yellow arrow points to what was a stone fank (marked on modern maps)

Continuing upstream, we come to two CANMORE records:

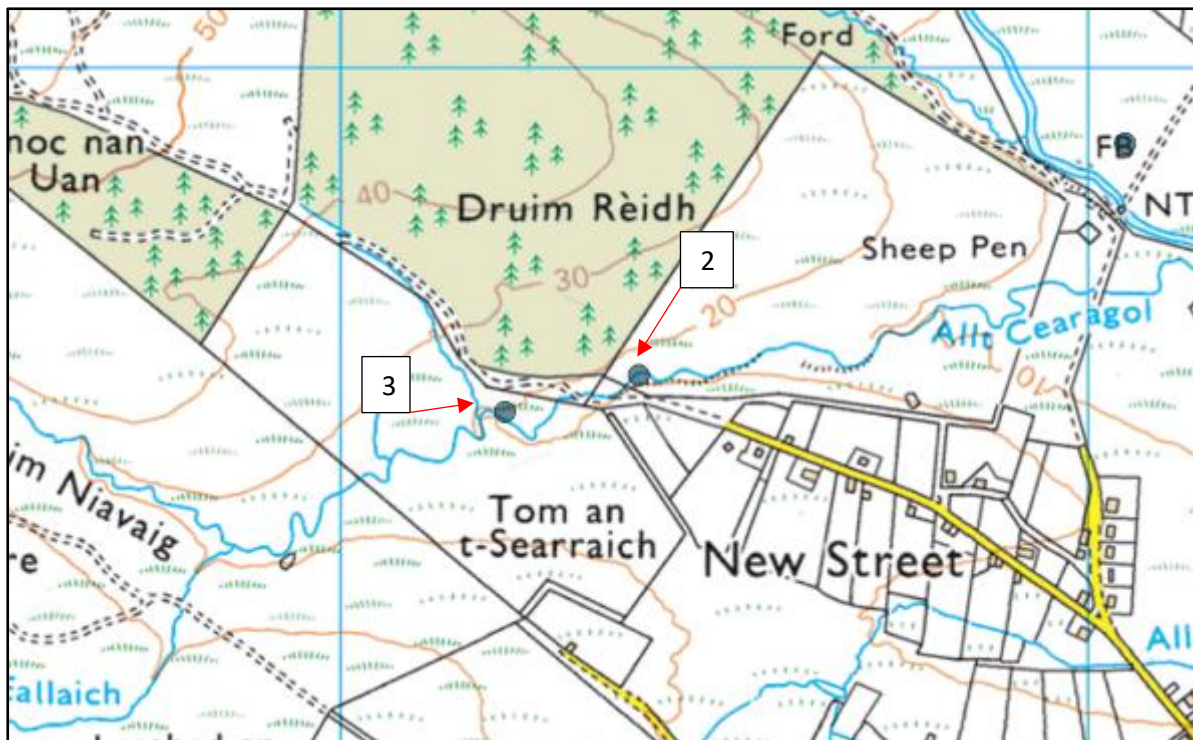


Figure 7: Sites 2 and 3 are CANMORE records. These are detailed below.

Site 2. Canmore ID 136475, Site Number NB44SE 41, NGR NB 4740 4159

What may be a single unroofed shieling-hut annotated 'ruin' is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Island of Lewis, Ross-shire 1852, sheet 15), but it is not shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1991). Information from RCAHMS (AKK) 30 June 1997.

The footings of this building were found. All that remains are c.0.3m high turf wall footings of a c3m x 2m rectangular building, built hard up against a steep bank. CANMORE suggests that it might be a shieling hut but the observed footprint is unlike any shieling we have seen so far. It does however conform to the shape of the mainland illicit stills which we found out about in Walk No 3. We also noticed that it was impossible to see from upstream and likewise well-hidden on the approach, or from any other angle. We therefore suggest that it is rather the remains of an illicit still.



Figure 8: Site 2 – illicit still?



Figure 9: Site 2 again showing possible run out channel

Site 3: Canmore ID 136474, Site Number NB44SE 40, NGR NB 4722 4154

What may be a single unroofed shieling-hut annotated 'ruin' is depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Island of Lewis, Ross-shire 1852, sheet 15), but it is not shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1991). Information from RCAHMS (AKK) 30 June 1997.

There was absolutely no sign of a ruin in this location.

Moving upstream there were three previously undiscovered features:

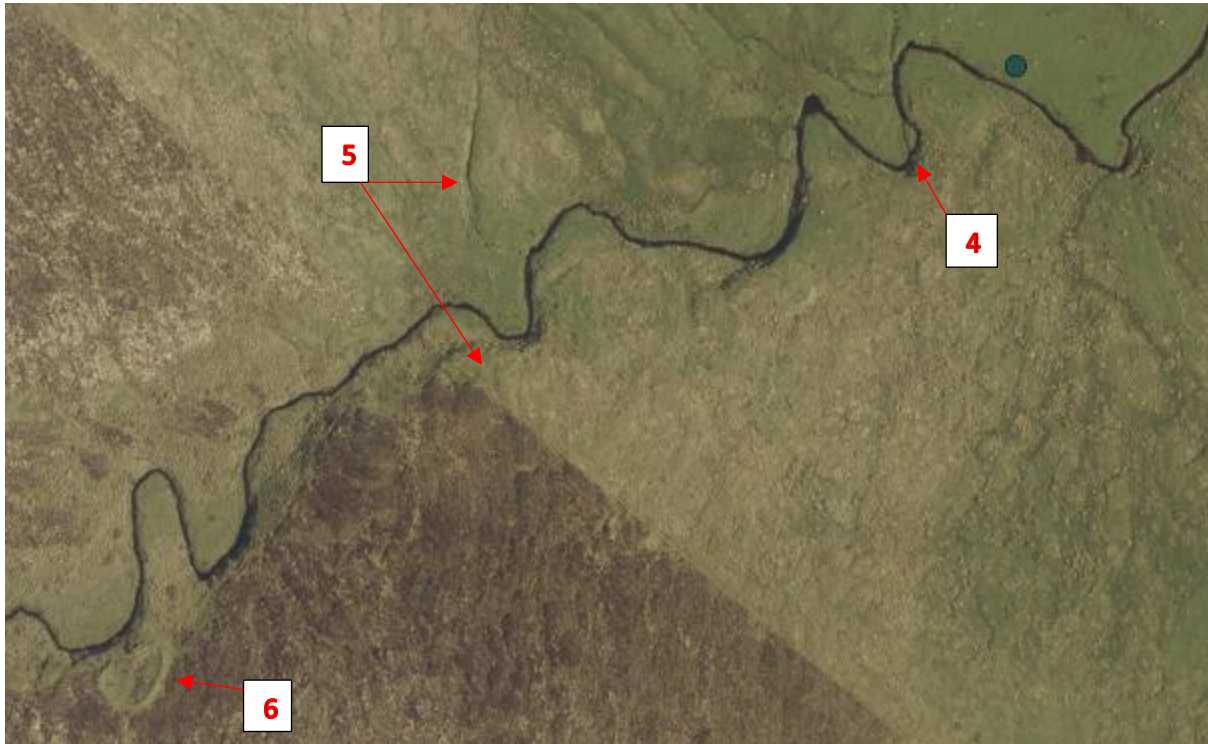


Figure 10: The blue dot top right is the supposed second shieling (site 3) of which there was no trace. Site 4: Just upstream the bend in the river is cut off by a small channel, possibly a fish trap (fig 11). Site 5: Near where the modern fenceline crosses the river there are traces of an older boundary at a different angle (fig 12, 13). Finally, site 6, an egg shaped enclosure and another possible still (fig 14, 15, 16, 17).



Figure 11: Site 4.

It is thought that site 4 might represent a fish trap – stony damns are made in the river and the narrow channel provides an easier way up for the Salmon. A wicker basket is wedged in the channel and catches the fish.



Figure 12: Site 5.

Site 5 is not natural, but is not shown on the early OS maps. This means it could have been either a lot earlier than 1852 and forgotten about by then, or after the 2nd edition in 1892. There is a possibility that it may have just been a substantial land drain, but it appears to continue on the other side of the stream, suggesting that it was some form of boundary



Figure 13: Site 5 again - possible boundary continuing into rough heather on the south bank

Moving upstream we came to **Site 6**: an “egg” shaped enclosure. This is not recorded on CANMORE but it is marked upon the modern map. It was c 20 x 10m, egg shaped in plan with the smaller end and the entrance to the downstream side. The walls were around 2m thick with large orthostatic stones lining the inside face visible in places. The whole thing was constructed on a gentle slope on the bank to the south side of the river, above the flood plain. The size, shape, solid construction and location near the shieling would suggest that this was a pen for cattle, but alternatively it may be an early “Fank” for Sheep.

Strangely, a square section of the bank c2m x 2m, where it ran between the enclosure and the floodplain, seemed to be missing – see figure 17. If roofed, it would have been very well hidden. This was again reminiscent of the illicit still sites.



Figure 14: Site 6. Substantial enclosure.



Figure 15: Looking downstream along the wall of the enclosure site 6. Note the large orthostatic stone wall facing on inside of the substantial wall, still visible in a few places around it's circuit..



Figure 16: Site 6. What looked to be the entrance (between the scale and DI. Scale is 1.25m long)



Figure 17: Site 6 was missing a square section of bank... might this have been another illicit still??

Moving upstream, we had to locate a strange feature in the Allt Loch an Ealoch marked upon the OS 1st ed.



Figure 18: Site 7. A strange alteration to the Allt Loch an Ealach as it feeds into the Allt Cearagoll marked upon the 1st edition OS, which looked anthropogenic:

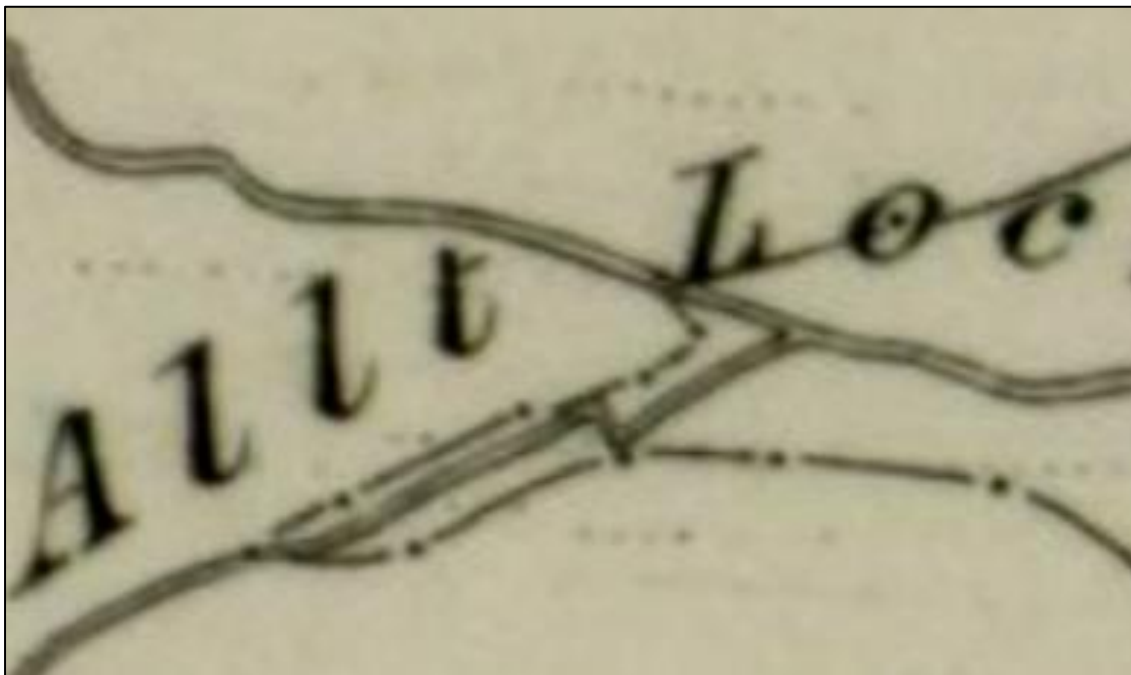


Figure 19: The river looks as if it has been substantially altered to turn two sharp right angle bends...

We found the point in the stream where it undertook a similar contortion just after the confluence, **Site 7**. The water was flowing in a deep channel cut through the peat which was surrounded by reeds and as such it was impossible to photograph.

However, although it would still seem to have been human made, we were none the wiser as to what it could have been! Some sort of fishtrap perhaps? Another question for the “Loch a Tuath” newspaper?

Next we arrived at the Loch an Eallaich, **Site 8**. DI had been told that there were stills here too, and that 5 people were charged with illegal distilling at this site in 1820. We didn’t find the sites for stills, although there were a series of sections of peat bank missing – the reedy sections on the far bank in Figure 20 below. These were on the far side of the loch, requiring the crossing of ditches or streams and as our route took us the other way, we didn’t explore them in detail – although perhaps we should have! Instead we headed for the “Ruin” marked nearby on the 1st edition (Canmore ID 136435, Site Number NB44SE 34, NGR NB 4625 4084), which we looked for and likewise did not find. The heather and moss is so deep here that walking is very tough and finding archaeology under it even tougher. As “Ealaich was thought to mean something like “burden”, we wondered if this was why. Presumably if it was always like this then that is why it would have been a good place for an illicit still!



Figure 20: The west bank of the Loch an Eallaich.

The maps show that the loch was part of a boundary wall in 1852 (OS 1st ed), and that sometime after 1898 (OS 2nd ed) it was drained from the south east, lowering its level and creating the green sward we are walking upon in the photographs.

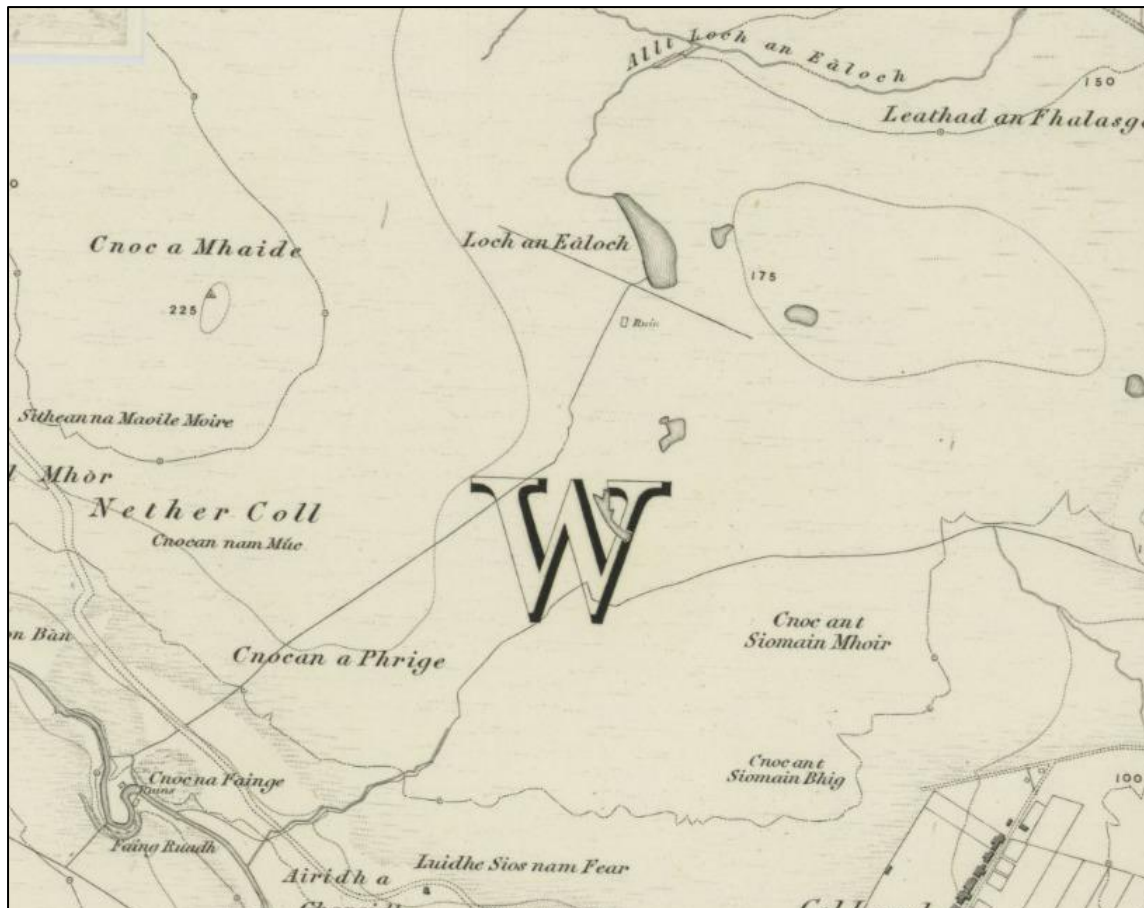


Figure 21: Site 8, Loch an Eallaich/Ealoch in 1849/50 when the 1st ed was surveyed (published 1852). Note the line exiting the loch to the SW, with a very straight line crossing it, then a Ruin to its east (very small lettering). This line continues up and then down to the Coll river, indicating that this was a boundary dyke and ditch, not a water course. Unfortunately however none of these features were detectable on the ground.



Figure 22: Site 8, Loch an Eallaich today. Note the modern drain running SE and the ghostly impression of the old loch water level in brighter green. The blue dot is the “Ruin” marked upon the OS 1st ed. (Canmore ID 136435, Site Number NB44SE 34, NGR NB 4625 4084), and you can just make out the line of the old boundary ditch which ran to the SW to its left.

None of these structures were located on the ground.



Fig 23 – Site 9. Cnoc a Mhaide / something like Hillock of the Sticks according to Margaret Martin (CEBAC publication).

Site 9 – Cnoc a Mhaide: Field System (Period Unassigned), Mound (Period Unassigned)(Possible) Canmore ID 335768, Site Number NB44SE 66, NGR NB 45742 40857

Cnoc a Mhaide. On the top of this low hummocky hill a number of green mounds are suggestive of house sites but could be glacial. Short stretches of wall are exposed between peat cuttings, two courses in places, which extend out as heather-covered dykes passing through NB 45718 40909, and NB 45785 40905 ±7. Nothing is shown on the 1st edn OS map here, but a fragmentary dyke system shown on the 1851 map suggests that it may be relict from earlier land use

Carol Knott, 17.1.2002

We could not find any trace of a field system, and only one main mound at the Cnoc summit. This Cnoc has outstanding views of the area, and is quite some distance from any water source. This location lead us to wonder whether it could have actually been the remains of a chambered cairn, like Carn a Mharc, rather than a settlement mound.



Figure 24: Location of recorded structures on Cnoc an Phrige. Red arrow shows where the blackhouse actually is.

Site 10. Cnocan a¹ Phrige.

Nearby, CANMORE records two sites, which were visited and the first found to be in a slightly different location to the CANMORE record.

Canmore ID 335766, Site Number NB44SE 64, NGR NB 45854 40508

NB 45826 40538 ±6m. Remains of isolated blackhouse, rectangular, with grass-covered walls built of stone with earth packing, 1.6m wide, surviving up to 0.75m high. House is north-south aligned, 6.8m wide by 13m long externally, with possible doorway at S end of E wall. Not shown on 1st edn OS map. Carol Knott, 17.1.2002

This blackhouse can be seen on aerial imagery and is in fact at NB 45821 40548, in the space between where two tracks meet, not on the south of the tracks as marked upon CANMORE.

Cnocan Phrige. Canmore ID 335767, Site Number NB44SE 65, NGR NB 45836 40494

NB 45831 40500 ±6m. Faint oval stone structure c. 5m wide by 7.5m long, approximately north-south aligned. Walls of structure are moss-covered enclosing soft lower interior. Not shown on 1st edn OS map. Carol Knott, 17.1.2002

This structure is thought to be marked in the correct place on CANMORE, to the south of the track.

From here we walked back to the start via Cnoc an Soluis/ Hillock of the light. The name may have been due to the many weavers who used to inhabit the location, who would work into the night aided by oil lamps and were thus visible as a landmark even to boats at sea.

Another fine day out.