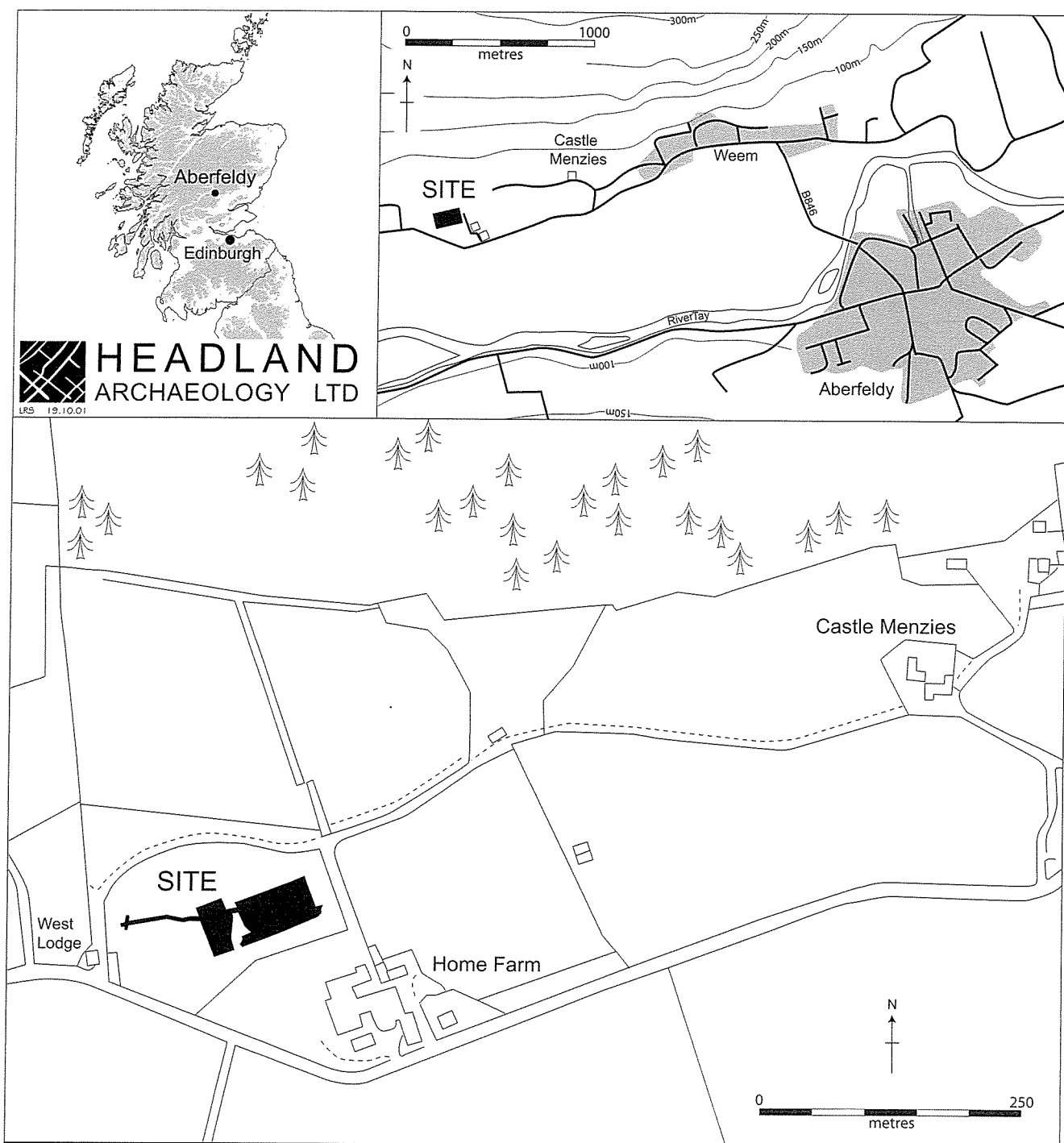




Illus 1 Location of excavation.

Excavations at a Neolithic enclosure at Castle Menzies, Aberfeldy, Perthshire

Stuart Halliday

Introduction

Aerial reconnaissance by RCAHMS has identified an extensive area of cropmarks to the west of Castle Menzies, near Aberfeldy in Perthshire (Illus 1 and 3; NGR: NN 8305 4940). These include rectilinear features that clearly relate to the yards and gardens around the castle but there are also prominent arcs of pit-type cropmarks. These were provisionally interpreted as Neolithic structures, similar to other pit-defined features originally detected as cropmarks in Eastern Scotland.

Fieldwalking in fields around Castle Menzies by Richard Bradley, part of a project unrelated to the cropmarks (Bradley 1995), identified five worked quartz scatters accompanied by occasional pieces of flint. No chronologically diagnostic items were found, nor was there any clear focus to the low density scatters (R Bradley, pers comm), of which only one was located in the area of Headland Archaeology's subsequent investigations (NN 8305 4942).

In 1999, an area of land adjacent to Home Farm, roughly 0.6ha in extent, that contained the westernmost example of the pit-type cropmarks was threatened by gravel extraction. In response, Headland Archaeology was commissioned by Historic Scotland to excavate the site in November/December 1999 and, in particular, to investigate the cropmarks.

The excavation

Methodology

The fieldwork programme comprised topsoil sampling for artefacts followed by machine stripping, recording and sample excavation of archaeological features. Sixty samples of topsoil (each 250 litres) were collected on a 10m grid from the proposed area of excavation and passed through a 10mm sieve to recover any artefacts. All material retained in the sieve was kept for subsequent examination.

An area of approximately 0.6ha (120 x 50m) was stripped using a 360° tracked excavator with a toothless bucket. Archaeological features were detected cut into the gravel subsoil at depths of 0.4 to 0.8m below present ground surface. The gravel subsoil surface was not level: on slight rises the gravel directly underlay topsoil, in depressions there was up to 0.4m of sandy silt alluvium over the gravel. The stripped surface was cleaned by hand and all features were photographed and recorded in plan. A proportion of the features was fully excavated and sampled for the recovery of

artefacts, dateable material and environmental remains by flotation and wet-sieving.

Many problems were encountered during the excavation because it had to be undertaken in winter. Adverse weather conditions, including heavy rain, frost and snow, and a subsequent rise in the water table, hampered the stripping operation to the extent that much of the proposed northern part of the trench could not be fully stripped in the four weeks of fieldwork. It also hindered the excavation of archaeological features as parts of the southern edge of the site remained flooded for the duration of the fieldwork and needle ice growth destroyed shallow features before they could be excavated.

Results

The results of the topsoil sampling were essentially negative. One struck flint flake was retrieved at the east end of the excavation area while there was a concentration of unworked quartz in the south-east of the excavation area; all other finds were modern. These results do not contradict the findings of Bradley's fieldwalking exercise, which only yielded very low-density quartz scatters.

The results of the excavation were much more positive. Numerous features immediately became apparent after the removal of topsoil and alluvium, and these were grouped according to possible associations (Illus 2):

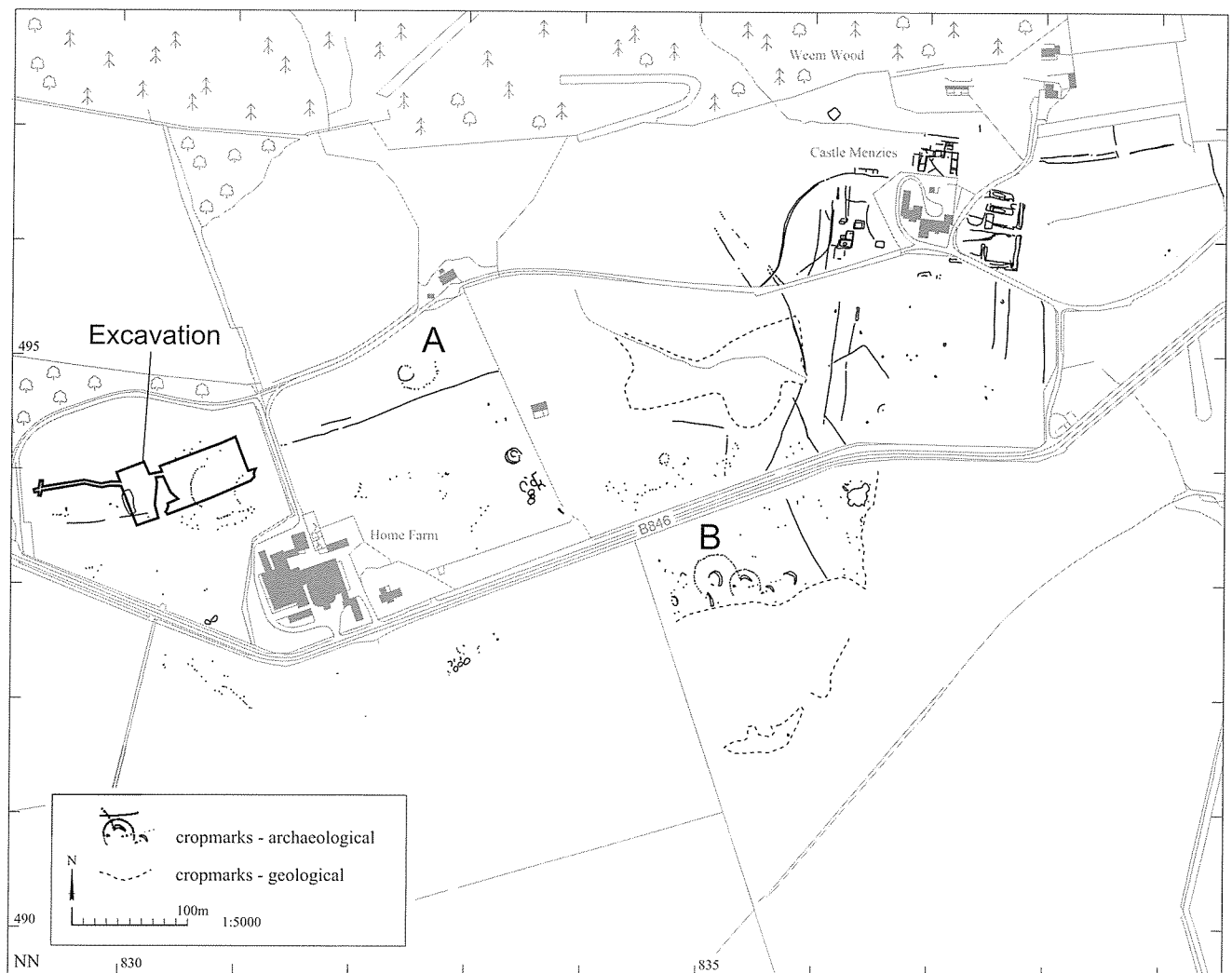
- Group 1* Arc of pits
- Group 2* Post-hole alignment
- Group 3* Post-hole alignment
- Group 4* Post-hole alignment
- Group 5* Post-hole grouping
- Group 6* All remaining features (no obvious associations)

Groups 1, 2, 3 and 4 are interpreted as elements of a large enclosure. Group 5 was dismissed as a coherent feature after excavation but is retained here as it is suggestive in plan and therefore requires explanation. Group 6 is simply a label for all other features with no obvious associations.

The Group 2 post-hole alignment was followed for a considerable distance beyond the original 120 x 50m excavation area. All other recording was limited to features within the original excavation area. The six groups are described below but one general point may be repeated here: no artefacts were recovered from the excavated features.



Illus 2 Overall plan of features in excavated area.



Illus 3 Transcription of cropmarks between Home Farm and Castle Menzies (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS). See text for discussion of points A and B.

Group 1 (arc of pits)

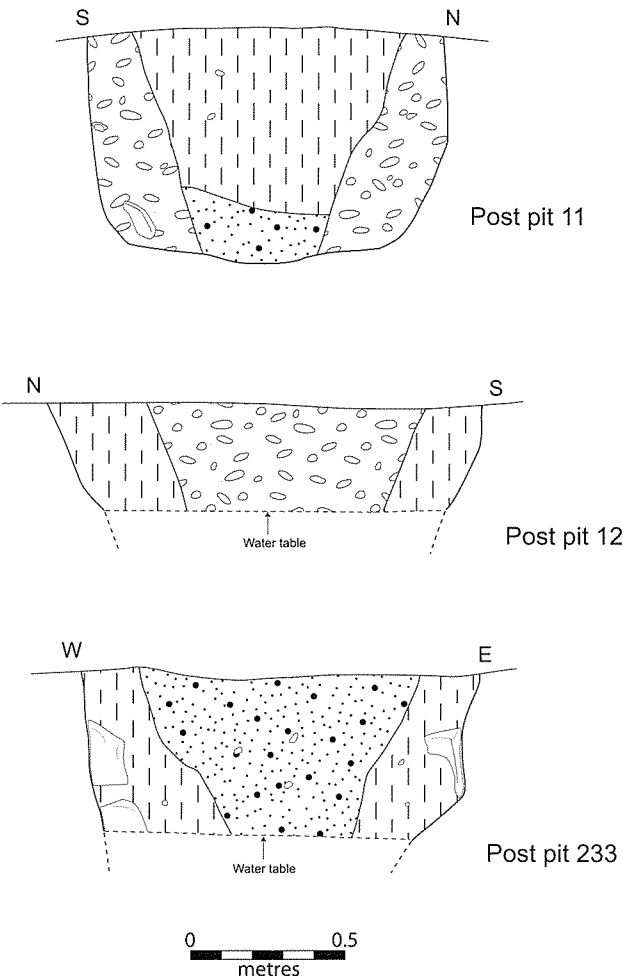
Sixteen pits were identified in the centre-south of the trench, forming an arc measuring 26m in length (Illus 6). These correlated to the arc of features identified by RCAHMS in aerial photographs and form the east end of a large enclosure. Eight of these pits were excavated and their size ranged from 1.3 to 1.8m in diameter with post-pipes being recorded in three of them (Illus 4). The pits located at the southern end of the arc were on average 0.75m deep and were found under a greater depth of topsoil and alluvium, while those to the north were on average 0.45m deep and located on a slight ridge that had probably been subject to plough truncation. In the three examples that contained post-pipes, the average diameter of the pipes was 0.35–0.4m. A possible entrance was identified in the arc between pits 014 and 230 (Point A, Illus 5). The average centre to centre distance between pits was 1.75m while the distance between these two pits was 3.05m. If the average diameter of the posts was 0.35–0.4m, the gap between these posts would have been approximately 2.65m, a gap that would have easily allowed entrance. However, the position of this gap does not lie in the centre of the arc. From the transcription of the aerial photograph (Illus 3), it appears that four more pits lie outwith the area of excavation and, if this is the case, the entrance lies with twelve post-pits to the north and eight to the south. No finds were recovered from any of these pits but sufficient charcoal was retrieved to obtain the radiocarbon determinates listed in Table 1.

Group 2 (post-hole alignment)

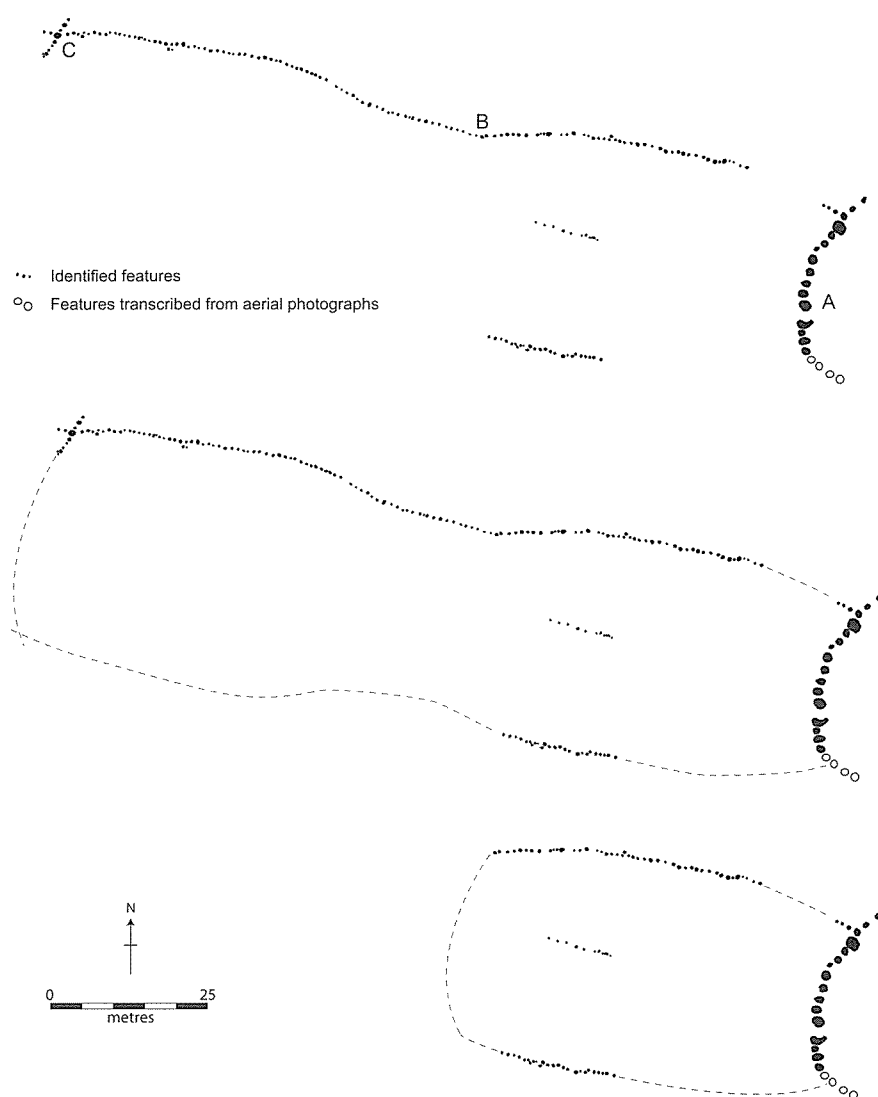
An alignment of 137 post-holes, orientated E–W, was identified at the north end of the Group 1 pits. Three post-holes were located directly to the west of the arc of pits forming a junction with that arc at the third northernmost pit (Illus 5). A gap of 12m separated the three post-holes from the remaining 134 post-holes. This gap is likely to be a result of plough-truncation on the higher ridge rather than an intentional gap.

Table 1 Radiocarbon determinations (Group 1).

description	material dated	raw date	C13 adj	cal date (2 sigma)	lab no
Charcoal rich black sandy silt, concentrated in the base of the post-pipe within pit 011. Remains of possible tempering of post within pit 011	Quercus sp. (1g)	5093±39BP	- 24.9%	3970– 3790BC	OxA-9987
Dark grey brown sandy silt. Fill of post-pipe within pit 233. Probable remains of wooden post	Quercus sp. (1g)	5010±40BP	-24.5%	3950– 3700BC	OxA-9814
Mid brown sandy silt with charcoal in base and around edges of pit 239. Possible tempering of post prior to setting	Quercus sp. (1g)	5035±70BP	-25.6%	3970–3660BC	OxA-9816



Illus 4 Sections of Group 1 post-pits.



Illus 5 Excavated evidence of Neolithic enclosure and interpretative plans. See text for discussion of points A, B and C.

Of the identified post-holes, 53 were excavated and the average diameter of these was 0.4m, much smaller than the features in Group 1, while the depth was variable, ranging between 0.1 and 0.35m. Only one post-hole yielded sufficient charcoal for radiocarbon dating. This date places the feature in the same period as those dated in Group 1.

The Group 2 alignment was followed westwards for a distance of 130m where a probable end was identified. This was defined by post-hole 422 (at Point C, Illus 5) which measured 0.96m in diameter compared to the average diameter of 0.4m. Three post-holes were seen to extend to the north of feature 422, while two further post-holes extended to the west of the junction.

Five post-holes were noted to the south of this point and, within the confines of the excavated area, appeared to be continuing, probably forming the western limits of the enclosure. It was also noted that the alignment of these post-holes was not perpendicular to the E-W alignment. Instead, the orientation of these features appears to mirror the arc of the pits at the east end.

Group 3 (post-hole alignment)

A group of nine post-holes was identified 14.5m to the south of Group 2 and running parallel with it. The immediate topography suggested that this may have been

Table 2 Radiocarbon determinations (Group 2).

description	material dated	raw date	C13 adj	cal date (2 sigma)	lab no
Dark grey brown silty sand with charcoal concentration in the centre, fill of cut 095. Probable remains of a wooden post	Quercus sp. (1g)	5130±40BP	- 24.5%	4040–3790BC	OxA-9813

the limit of these features, as it is unlikely that any extension of the alignment would have been completely removed by ploughing. None of these features was excavated, as a result of adverse weather conditions, but their form suggested that they were likely to be the remains of post-holes. They were slightly smaller in size than the post-holes of Group 2, having an average diameter of 0.3m.

Group 4 (post-hole alignment)

This group of post-holes was located 19m to the south of Group 3 and ran parallel with both Groups 2 and 3. It consisted of 23 post-holes located in the south-west corner of the excavated area: 14 of these were excavated. None of the excavated features yielded sufficient material to obtain a radiocarbon date and no finds were retrieved. The orientation of these features, however, immediately suggests a relationship with Groups 2 and 3 and projection of the alignment indicates that it is likely to represent the southern limits of the enclosure, continuing beyond the excavated area in both an east-erly and westerly direction.

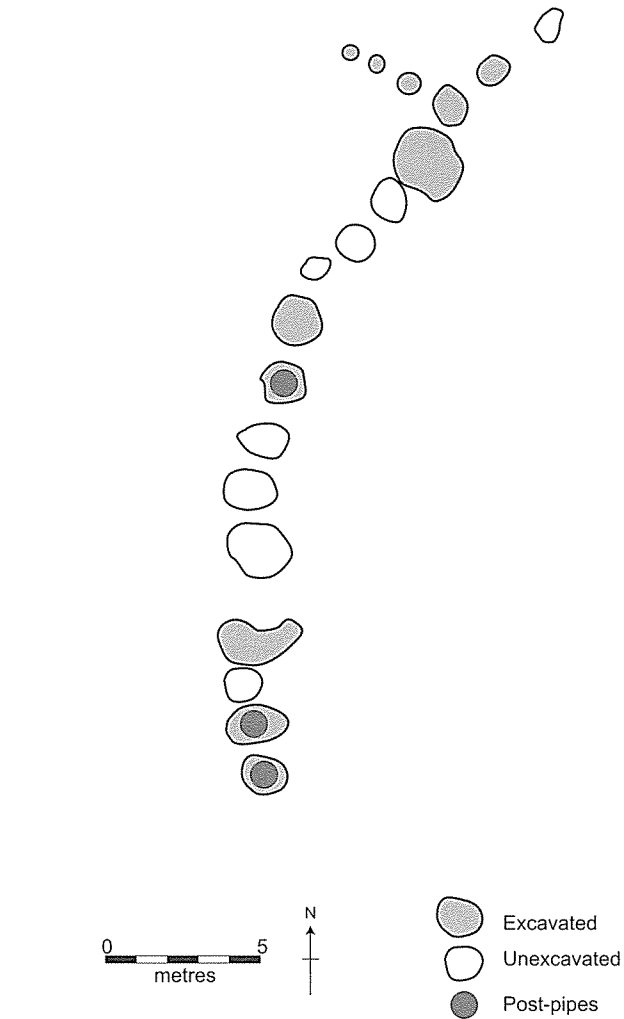
Group 5

During stripping of topsoil and alluvium, six features located in the south-east corner were thought to be a possible six-post structure measuring 5 by 4m. However, this was discounted after excavation due to each feature differing greatly in form.

Group 6

A further 120 features were identified across the excavated area but none of them appeared to form any distinct structural associations, especially with the enclosure. Eighty of these features were excavated; all contained single sediment fills and no artefacts were recovered. Four yielded sufficient material for radiocarbon dating and the date ranges listed in Table 3 were obtained.

These dates show that the site was subject to human activity from the late Mesolithic period into the early historic period. However, it is unclear, from what may be the remains of isolated events, exactly what these features represent. The presence of post-holes, of which



Illus 6 Detailed plan of Group 1 features.

there were many, is evidence of structures yet they do not form any coherent pattern. In the light of this it is impossible to suggest what their original function was. The general scarcity of cultural material (no artefacts, little charcoal and only two features yielding carbon-ized grain) strongly suggests that there has never been a focus of human settlement within the excavated area. Post-hole 004, located in the south-east corner of the excavated area, is worthy of further comment as the date obtained had a calibrated range of 3640–3360BC. This date appears to be around three centuries later than those obtained for the enclosure. However, the

Table 3 Radiocarbon determinations (Group 6).

description	material dated	raw date	C13 adj	cal date (2 sigma)	lab no
Charcoal-rich black silty loam. Basal fill of post-hole 004	Corylus sp. (1g)	4701±38 BP	-24.7%	3640–3360 BC	OxA-9811
Black silty sand filling post-hole 059	barley indet (1g)	2705±50 BP	-24.4%	980–790 BC	OxA-9854
Dark grey brown sandy silt and gravel fill of pit 054	barley indet. (1g)	1571±36 BP	-24.4%	410–600 AD	OxA-9812
Dark grey brown silty sand with charcoal filling pit 282	Quercus sp. (1g)	7030±45 BP	-24.0%	6000–5790 BC	OxA-9815

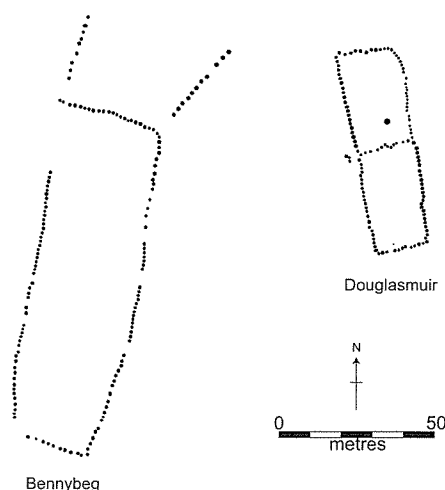
date range for post-hole 004 was obtained from a sample of hazel, while the dates for the enclosure were obtained from oak. Since oak trees have a significantly longer life than hazel trees, there is a possibility that the posts used for the enclosure came from trees several centuries old and the construction of the enclosure could, therefore, be contemporary with post-hole 004.

Discussion

The Neolithic enclosure

The key result of the excavation has been the identification of a large rectilinear enclosure of Neolithic date (4040–3660BC). Although the full extent of this enclosure was not exposed, it is believed that the northern alignment of post-holes (Group 2) represents the full length of the enclosure. It is therefore approximately 130m in length and 34m in width with a concave arc of large posts at its east end (Group 1) and smaller posts on the other three sides (Illus 5). This leaves Group 3, a line of nine post-holes that appears to have no direct structural connections. If the orientation of Group 3 is projected eastwards it appears to intersect the east end of the enclosure at post-pit 230, the northern delimiter of the possible entrance, and may suggest that an earlier narrower enclosure existed. However, the archaeological and topographical evidence does not fully support this supposition as no further post-holes were identified in an area where preservation was relatively good. Instead, it may be more reasonable to suggest that this was an internal feature that delimited movement or actions. The northern line of post-holes is not strictly linear, an aspect not unusual in both pit- and ditch-defined structures of this period. Rideout (1997) has suggested that groups of consecutive pits forming short arcs may be evidence for the enclosure at Bannockburn being constructed in individual sectors, possibly over a long period of time and Brophy (2000) has highlighted the fact that patterns of segmented construction can be seen at the majority of pit defined sites. The evidence from Home Farm may be another example of this. One section of the northern line of post-holes (indicated at point B on Illus 5) is noteworthy. At this point, the alignment takes a distinct turn towards the interior of the enclosure before turning outwards again. This could mark the west end of an earlier enclosure that was shorter in length (see Illus 5) as was seen at Douglasmuir (Kendrick 1995).

If a shorter, and earlier, enclosure was present, we can still assume that the concave east end is most likely to have been part of the original structure. This line of post-pits is the most striking feature of the enclosure, with the pits being significantly larger in diameter than the post-holes defining the northern, southern and even western limits of the enclosure. Furthermore, it can be clearly seen that the arc of pits extends to the north of the junction with the northern line of post-holes, forming what could be described as a horn. Similarly, if the



Illus 7 Transcriptions of cropmark enclosures at Bennybeg and Douglasmuir (from Kendrick 1995).

line of the southern post-holes continues on its projected course, it is likely that they would form a junction with the arc of pits above the southernmost pit of the arc, thus mirroring the evidence at the north end. This feature may be related to pit extensions at the Bennybeg enclosure south of Crieff, also in Perthshire (Illus 7), although Bennybeg does differ in having linear extensions rather than continuations of an arc.

Barclay has suggested (pers comm) that the concave arc of posts at the east end may be linked to the long burial mound tradition where differences in orientation and form were intentional. Auchenlaich provides such a comparison where the western terminus has a similar flared shape. Other examples from this period include the concave eastern facade to the earthen long barrow at Dalladies, Angus and the concave timber facade to the mortuary structure at Lochhill, Kirkcudbrightshire. While the evidence at Home Farm does not suggest that this monument was anything other than a post-defined enclosure, the similarities with the treatment of the east end are worthy of note.

Given the overall form of the Home Farm enclosure, the use of the term 'cursus' may not be out of place, although the connotations of such a term must be taken into consideration. Barclay and Maxwell (1998) state that these monuments share common traits being long, rectilinear enclosures usually defined by a bank and ditch, or in many cases by pits (13 according to Brophy 2000). Brophy argues that, despite the obvious difference in size and form, structures such as Douglasmuir, Angus (Kendrick, 1995) and Cleaven Dyke, Perth and Kinross (Barclay and Maxwell 1998) have sufficient similarities to allow their being considered together. This argument has validity in the sense that they are both linear enclosures of early Neolithic date; Home Farm also falls within this category.

It is felt that despite the obvious similarities with other contemporary enclosures such as Douglasmuir

and Bannockburn, and the reasonable suppositions regarding the tradition of monument building from which it derived, the form of the Home Farm enclosure is also significant in its own right. Use of the term 'enclosure' by its very nature implies activity within a delimited area. The size of the post-pits, in comparison to the rest of the monument, suggests that the massive east end would have been an impressive barrier, possibly restricting views of activities within the enclosure. However, it could also be postulated that rather than concentrating activity on the west side of the palisade, the post-hole alignments, including Group 3, acted as avenues leading people towards the eastern arc, where activity may have been concentrated within the smaller restricted eastern space of the arc itself. The gap in the palisade, therefore, rather than being an entrance to a large enclosure, could have been an exit from one or two avenues.

Wherever the concentration of activity was, the actual function of the monument must be considered. This question has been examined many times for other Neolithic enclosures and conclusions tend to concentrate on ritual based activities. Brophy (2000, 15) states that 'these were special places (for an unknown period of time) marked by physical boundaries, actions and social meanings,' while Barclay and Maxwell (1998) put forward six explanations for linear cursiform monuments:

- i* structures for formal processions or for orchestrated journeys of experience;
- ii* structures linking pre-existing monuments or significant places;
- iii* structures demarcating an alignment on a place, object or astronomical event, rather than linking any thing;
- iv* symbolic or physical barriers between areas of different significance, possibly involving control of access;
- v* physical expression of a social or ideological need;
- vi* an area of land marked off and devoted to the gods.

Clearly the effort required to construct such a monument must have been substantial and must indicate that this was indeed 'a special place.' It is thought, here, that the enclosure at Home Farm may be related to one of two functions: an area demarcated for special functions, possibly related to funerary actions; or a series of alignments focusing attention on a place of special significance to its builders. While the monument appears to have been of special significance, it may not have been upstanding for very long. Evidence from Holm, Dumfriesshire (Thomas 1998) and Bannockburn (Rideout 1997), revealed recuts within some post-pits and Thomas suggested on the basis of that evidence, that the monument underwent a series of rebuildings, as not all posts were upstanding at the same time. At Holm Farm in contrast, there is no evidence for replacement of posts within the post-holes, nor is there any evidence of recuts within the features. Instead, the evidence seems to suggest that this monument was built, possibly as a

shorter enclosure, later expanded, and then left without significant repairs. It is unusual amongst excavated early Neolithic timber enclosures in not having been burnt down.

Castle Menzies cropmark complex

The results of the excavation lend weight to the suggestion that there is a group of similar Neolithic structures between Home Farm and Castle Menzies. Is Castle Menzies to be identified as another focus of Neolithic ritual activity? There are at least three other arcs of pits that could represent sites similar to the excavated enclosure. An arc of pits is visible 200m to the north-east of the excavated enclosure, (Point A in Illus 3). Two features distinguish this arc from the excavated example. Firstly, it has a different orientation (W-E rather than N-S). Secondly, there is a circular cropmark adjacent to the arc of pits at Point A. This could be unconnected with the arc and may not even be a man-made feature. However, it may be compared with similar cropmarks associated with the other two examples of cropmark pit arcs at Point B on Illus 3.

Two further arcs of pits (Point B, Illus 3) are visible 450m to the east of the excavated enclosure. These form near-complete circles of pits, rather than shallow arcs, and both have internal circular cropmarks. It seems highly unlikely that either represents the shallow concave facade of an enclosure and there is therefore no reason to assume that they are even Neolithic in date. Their form may be compared with palisaded enclosures of later prehistoric date and it could be argued that the internal circular features represent roundhouses. The radiocarbon dates obtained from the excavation at Home Farm certainly illustrate that there was activity of this date in this area. It appears therefore that the apparent cropmark evidence for a cluster of monumental Neolithic enclosures at Castle Menzies is not strong and alternative interpretations are equally plausible. This largely reflects an absence of evidence, as is frequently the case with cropmark sites.

Conclusions

It is clear that this enclosure is another example of a diverse group of sites from Eastern Scotland dateable to the early Neolithic period. The excavation was able to determine the form and date of the enclosure but positive evidence for function was lacking. The absence of artefacts appears to be typical of these large enclosures. A significant portion of the enclosure at Home Farm remains unexcavated; there is the potential for the recovery of additional information regarding function and also the form of the west end of the enclosure.

Reconsideration of the cropmark evidence suggests that the enclosure may not form part of a complex of monumental Neolithic sites. However, there is clearly scope here for well-targeted fieldwork to establish the age of the principal cropmark sites. This would

immediately allow a more substantial assessment of the local context of the Neolithic enclosure.

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Abstract

Archaeological excavations undertaken in 1999 at Castle Menzies, Aberfeldy, Perthshire, revealed part of a large enclosure of Neolithic date. Four radiocarbon dates from samples of oak charcoal give a calibrated age range of 4040 to 3660 BC for posts from the enclosure. Numerous other pits or post-holes were recorded within the excavated area but no coherent structures could be identified. Radiocarbon dates indicate that these other features range in date from the late Mesolithic to early Medieval periods. The Neolithic enclosure forms part of a group of superficially similar cropmarks at Castle Menzies and it is discussed in the context of other pits/post-holes defined enclosures and the increasingly diverse range of cursus-type monuments in Scotland.

Keywords

Bennybeg
Douglasmuir
Mesolithic
Neolithic
ritual activity

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