STRATHNAVER PROVINCE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH PROJECT

2004 SEASON: BORRALIE, DURNESS

PROJECT DESIGN

DRAFT

PROJECT 1634

GUARD

Contents

GUARD

Durness

Outer
Hebrides

Inverness

Glasgow

Cape Wrath

Durness

Thurso

Province of Strathnaver

Balnakeil Bay

N

Durness
golf course

Balnakeil

Loch
Lanlish

30m

50m

Loch
Croispol

Kyle of Durness

50m

site 89

Loch
Borralie

10m

site 46

30m

forestry
plantation

30m

50m

20m

Keoldale
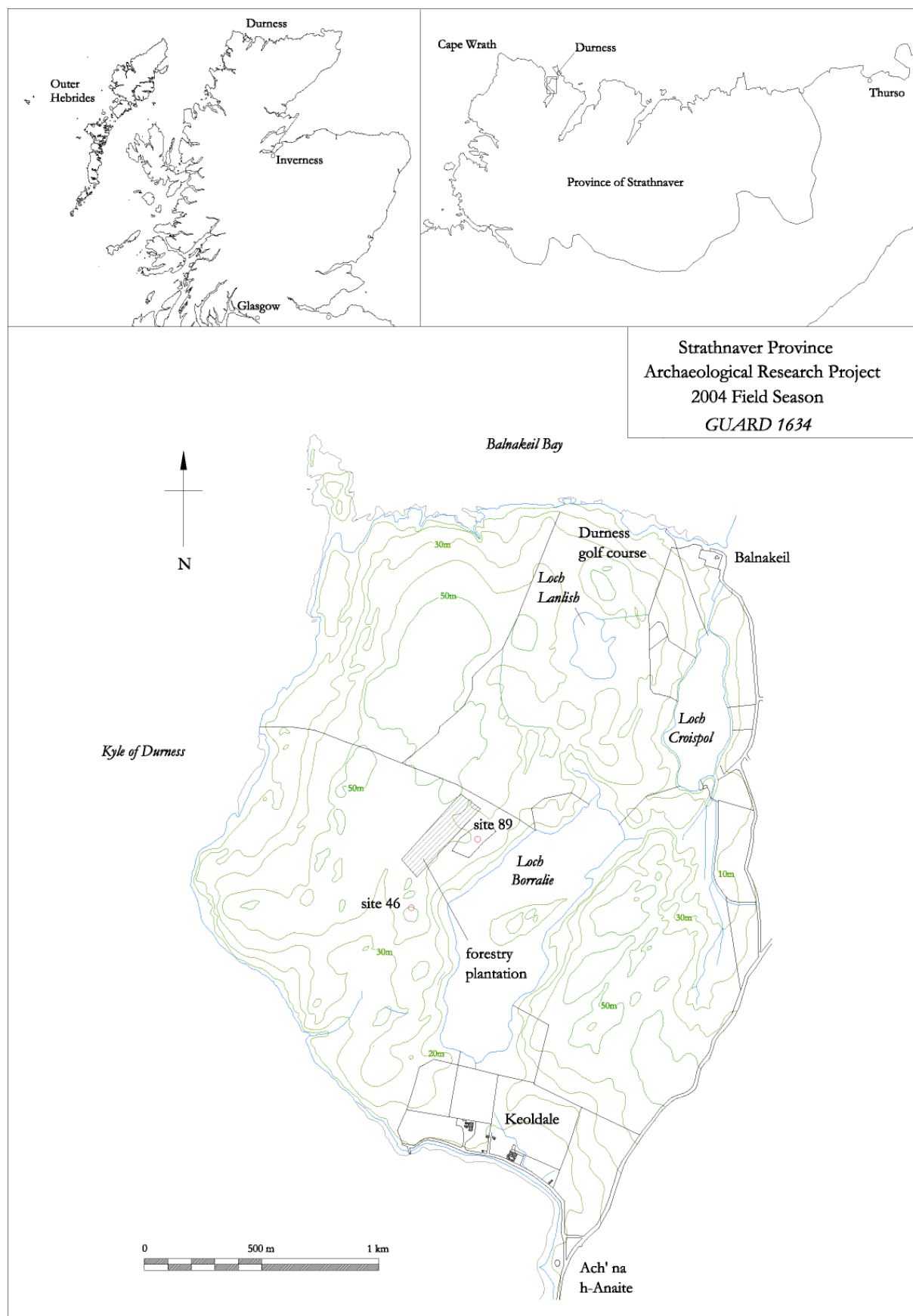
0   500 m   1 km

Ach' na
h-Anaite

Figure 1: Map showing locations of sites proposed for investigation in 2004.

1.0   Introduction

This document sets out a project design for archaeological fieldwork to be carried out in 2004 as part of the Strathnaver Province Archaeological Research Project, a five-year excavation and survey project directed by staff from the University of Glasgow and Assumption College, Massachusetts. The project has been designed to further understanding of Medieval rural settlement on a regional scale across northern Sutherland, to inform future management of this archaeological resource and to encourage heritage awareness and a local sense of historical identity in the region. It will also provide training in archaeological field techniques to university students and members of the local community.

The five-year project will consist of a programme of walkover survey, detailed topographic survey, geophysical survey, trial trenching and excavation of sites with high potential for evidence of Medieval settlement in two areas of the former Province of Strathnaver: in the parish of Durness, particularly around the village of Durness, and in the valley of Strathnaver in the parish of Farr. The 2004 season will focus on the area to the south-west of Durness and will involve limited geophysical survey, trial trenching and open-area excavation. This design sets out the broad aims, methodology and planned outcomes for the project as a whole as well as the specific ones relating to the 2004 field season.

2.0   Context of the Project

2.1   *Research Context*

One of the most pressing questions relating to the archaeology of Highland Scotland is how the nature and pattern of settlement altered through the Medieval period, the degrees of continuity or otherwise of settlement location and character from the early Medieval period to the post-Medieval, and the processes that influenced both continuity and change.

The far north of mainland Scotland is particularly understudied in this respect. Here, the introduction of Christianity from the seventh century AD on no doubt brought cultural changes and may have influenced the landscape's structure to some extent. The arrival of the Norse, first as viking raiders and later as settlers from the ninth century, is likely to have significantly affected the language and culture of the native Pictish population. In the Medieval period, the feudal system penetrated the northern Highlands as they came under the control of the Crown, although the process was slower in the northern and western Highlands than further south. This may have re-configured the settlement pattern and the social and physical landscape most fundamentally.

Archaeological evidence for Medieval rural settlement in the Highlands of Scotland is notoriously elusive. Where MoLRS (Medieval or Later Rural Settlement) remains have been excavated, they have generally been found to date to the century or two preceding the early nineteenth-century Clearances (for example, Fairhurst 1968; Fairhurst & Petrie 1964; Lelong & Wood 2000; Atkinson et al forthcoming), although documentary evidence does suggest that many of these settlements originated in the Medieval period.

The evidence identified so far for Medieval settlement in the Province of Strathnaver does seem to indicate continuity of occupation on particular sites from the Early Medieval or Norse periods onward (see section 2.2 below). A programme of investigation of the most promising sites could yield important information on these periods, filling a significant gap in current understanding of Medieval settlement along the northern seaboard. The precise location and nature of these settlements may, of course, have altered over time, but at present little is known about whether they did, if so to what extent and what processes affected or determined these changes. More focused research is needed to test models and methodologies and answer questions about long-term Highland settlement in the Medieval period, and for this area in particular (Lelong 2003).

The Strathnaver Province Archaeological Research Project has been designed to employ a variety of methodologies, including walk-over survey to identify potentially early structures within settlements known to have long histories of occupation; detailed survey to record the visible remains making up these settlements; geophysical survey to prospect for buried features; evaluation and excavation of structures identified as likely to be early in date, and trial trenching of enigmatic features and apparently blank areas at complex township sites.

2.2   *Archaeological and Historical Context of the Study Area*

The study area comprises the Medieval Province of Strathnaver. It corresponds approximately to present-day northern Sutherland and extends from Cape Wrath eastward to the boundary with Caithness and southward as far as Eddrachillis, mirroring the Province's extent at certain times in the past (Mackay 1906). The chronological scope of the project is c AD 600-1600, encompassing the early Medieval period, the phase of Norse colonisation (c 900-1100) and the late Norse and Medieval periods. While the evidence varies for these periods in quality and quantity across the Province, it does indicate settlement and/or ecclesiastical activity with particular focus in certain areas. That evidence is outlined here, with some reference to the evidence for later Iron Age/Pictish activity where it is relevant to the earlier part of the study period.

The name 'Naver,' which first appears on Ptolemy's map of c AD 140 as 'Nabarus', is of pre-Celtic origins (from an Indo-European root meaning 'moist, cloud, water, mist'; Nicolaisen 1976, 188-9; Watson 1926, 47; Waugh 2000) but it endured through the Norse period, in spite of the settlement by Norse speakers of the valley through which the River Naver flows (see below). That the valley's name came to apply to the whole of the later Province suggests its importance in the region in the late Norse/Medieval period. It clearly was also a focus of high-status settlement in the later Iron Age, as the number of brochs lining the strath attests, while the distribution of early Medieval chapel sites points to a thriving Pictish population in the centuries before Norse settlement.

Place name and archaeological evidence indicates the locations of early Medieval chapel sites and possible monastic sites in several concentrations in the Province. Near Durness, for example, the place name Ach' na h'Anaite, associated with a field to the south-east of Keoldale on the Kyle of Durness (see Figure 1), indicates the presence of an early ecclesiastical foundation in the vicinity. The *annaid* element of the place name attests to an association with a church, perhaps a mother church that provided or oversaw pastoral care by subordinate churches. The place name as a whole means 'Field of the Church' and may denote agricultural land that brought the church revenues or was designated for its use (Clancy 1995, 95, 102). It need not mean the site of the church itself, but it does point to the presence of a nearby church that was already considered old by the ninth or tenth century AD (MacDonald 1973).

The place name Balnakeil to the north (see Figure 1) also indicates a township or farm associated with an early church or chapel (*cille*). A church or monastery may have been founded there as early as the late seventh century. Balnakeil is traditionally associated with St. Maelrubha, who founded the church and monastery at Applecross and is thought to have carried out missionary work along the northern seaboard (*OPS* 1855, 702; Scott 1909, 272). A number of Maelrubha dedications are known in northern Sutherland, including in the valley of Strathnaver (where some antiquarian sources say he met his death in AD 722; eg., Knight 1933, 215) and at Lairg. The present church was built in 1619 (Findlater 1845, 102), but there was certainly an earlier church on the site, first appearing in the documentary record in the early thirteenth century (see below). St. Maelrubha is also associated with a putative chapel at Bealach Mhor, between Durness and Eriboll, said to have been used occasionally by the inhabitants of Eriboll (*OPS* 1855, 702-3). Its position is now very remote, but it may have been on an early inland routeway between the Kyle of Durness and Loch Eriboll.

In the valley of Strathnaver a number of pre-Reformation church or chapel sites are known, for example at Langdale, Skaill, Rivigil, Grumbeg, Farr and Klibreck. Several of these have indications of early Medieval origins (Lelong 2002, 210-19). In the churchyard at Farr on the coast stands a late eighth- or ninth-century cross slab. The chapel site at Skaill, dedicated to St. Maelrubha, is represented by a low mound with an upright stone incised with an equal-armed, round-headed cross thought to date to the seventh or eighth century AD (Henderson 1987; Allen & Anderson 1903, 55). At the site of the chapel at Grumbeg, two simple, cross-incised stones formed part of the burial enclosure until recently (Macdonald & Laing 1970, 134), and the site of a holy well dedicated to St. Martin is recorded nearby (Mackay 1914, 34). At Klibreck, the site of a probable chapel is marked by two upright stones, one of them incised with a cross (Henderson 1987). The chapel site at Rivigill is a steep-sided mound known as Cnoc an t-Sagairt, or 'Hillock of the Priest' (Horsburgh 1867, 274), its upper periphery enclosed by an oval bank that suggests early origins. Several of these chapel sites correspond approximately to the locations of post-

Medieval townships, which documentary evidence (see below) shows were peopled from at least the thirteenth century.

Viking/Norse activity in the Province is attested by abundant place names, both habitative and topographical (Waugh 2000; Fraser 1979). These include the place names of Langdale, Skaill, Syre, Rosal, Torrisdale and Klibreck in the valley of Strathnaver; Talmine, Tongue, Kirkiboll, Skinnet, Melness and Boarscaig around the Kyle of Tongue; Durness, Sangomore, Sangobeg, Eriboll, Keoldale, Croispol and Borralie around the Kyle of Durness and, further west, Cape Wrath itself. Many more are scattered along the coast, suggesting extensive Norse colonisation and/or linguistic influence in the area. However, relatively few archaeological remains of certain Norse date have so far been discovered.

Almost all of the known archaeological evidence for Viking/Norse activity in the Province has been found in the vicinity of Durness. A single, ninth- or tenth-century burial of a young male was found in the dunes at Balnakeil Bay (Low, Batey & Gourlay 2000), and another possible burial is known from Keoldale, less than a kilometre to the south of Loch Borralie (Batey 1993). A ninth-century midden excavated in a small cave off Smoo Inlet is thought to have been left by Norse sailors using the inlet for shelter (Pollard forthcoming). At Sangobeg, the remains of a Late Norse settlement were excavated and found to overlie a pre-Christian burial (Brady & Lelong forthcoming).

The term 'Strathnaver' first appears in documentary sources in the thirteenth century, during the period of the earldom of Caithness, the Scottish earldom held by the Norse earls of Orkney. The Scottish bishopric of Caithness, founded in the twelfth century, mirrored the extent of the Caithness earldom. Although by the time Strathnaver appears in documentary sources it no longer formed part of this earldom, it is likely that it once did because the Province continued to form part of the bishopric. At this time the northern mainland of Scotland (the former Pictish province of Cat) was sub-divided into three: Ness, the north-east corner (present Caithness); Sutherland or *Sudrland*, the lands to the south of Ness as far as the River Oykell; and the area stretching west from Ness as far as Durness, which became known as the Province of Strathnaver (Crawford 2000, 1-2). The *Orkneyinga Saga* relates that Earl Thorfinn (d. *c* 1065) was given Caithness and Sutherland by his grandfather, Malcolm II, and this would have included the later Province of Strathnaver.

Although Strathnaver is not mentioned by name in the Norse sagas, Crawford (2000, 2) suggests that it equates to the district referred to in the sagas as the 'Dales' of Caithness, an argument previously put forward by Skene (1837, 361). The character of the Province, with its long river valleys and kyles opening onto the Pentland Firth, would be in keeping with this descriptive name. Crawford also argues that the valley of Strathnaver was part of an important inland routeway in the late Norse to Medieval period, from Ross to the Pentland Firth via Lairg, with place names in the strath possibly referring to the transport requirements of earldom retinues traversing the route.

The name 'Strathnaver' first appears in a surviving charter of 1269, which grants lands in Strathnaver to Mary de Moravia and Reginald de Cheyne. The document refers to an earlier charter, in which Mary's mother, *nobilis mulier domina Johanna* ('the noblewoman lady Johanna' (Moray Reg no 126)), had given the lands to the Church of Moray. The documents make clear that *tenemento de Strathnavyr* was a holding in its own right, presumably defined in a charter that has not survived; it is not described as being in the lordship of either Caithness or Sutherland at that time. Crawford (2000, 3) suggests that when the earldom of Caithness and the newly-created earldom of Sutherland were granted out with feudal charters in the 1230s, Alexander II granted the *tenemento* of Strathnaver to Lady Johanna (also see Crawford 1985, 32-3). At this time it appears that Strathnaver consisted only of the parish of Farr, as the lands to the west were held by the Church, but by the sixteenth century the Province stretched at least as far as the Kyle of Durness.

This period in the Province's history was a pivotal one that saw control pass from the old Norse earls to the Scottish Crown, as a significant break in the earldom's line of inheritance coincided with the Crown's asserting its authority in the north via feudal grants of land to its vassals. Crawford (2000) provides an extremely useful account of the mechanisms for and nature of this transition. As part of it, Johanna was not only granted the *tenemento* of Strathnaver but also half of the earldom of Caithness; she was married to a member of the de Moravia family, to whom Alexander II had recently granted the newly-created earldom of Sutherland. The grants and the marriage ensured that the main royalist family in the north of Scotland controlled most of its lands. The identity and pedigree of Lady Johanna have exercised

historians; some argue that she was a descendant of the earls of Orkney and Caithness (Skene 1880), while others suggest she was a daughter of the prominent Celto-Norse Moddan family (Gray 1922, 111-12). In any case, her inheritance of Strathnaver and marriage to Freskyn de Moravia brought it firmly within the Crown's feudal control.

Lady Johanna and her husband's acquisition of Strathnaver as feudal overlords must have had implications for the tenants farming their estates, in terms of new tenurial arrangements and tenant-landlord relationships, with the landlords now based in Moray across difficult terrain, rather than in Orkney within easy reach by sea (Crawford 2000, 8). Johanna's gift to the Church in the lost pre-1269 charter consisted of a bloc of lands in the upper strath and around Loch Naver for the perpetual service of two chaplains, presumably in the Cathedral at Elgin. When the Church returned the gift to her daughter in 1269, it was on the condition that a yearly payment continue to be made for the chaplains' maintenance (Moray Reg no. 263). This extant charter mentions a number of farms by name, clearly indicating that these were settlements with tenants whose surplus produce would have been due to their overlords. As discussed in more detail below, the evidence of other charters and of maps throughout the Medieval and post-Medieval periods shows that these settlements continued to exist over more than 500 years, while other evidence suggests that they originated well before the thirteenth century.

The place name evidence in the valley of Strathnaver points to the continual occupation of certain settlements in the strath from the period of Norse linguistic influence, in the late tenth and eleventh centuries, to the early nineteenth century, when many of the townships were cleared for sheep walks. The valley contains 36 names that are Norse in origin and are attached to settlements. Thirteen of these appear in surviving charters from the late thirteenth century, including the 1269 charter, and throughout the Medieval period, and 23 of them are shown as settlements on the late sixteenth- to early nineteenth-century maps. In all, a suite of about 15 Norse settlement names appears consistently in Medieval charters and on late Medieval to post-Medieval maps. Six of these townships may have even earlier Pictish origins, pre-dating Norse settlement, as indicated by the likely early Medieval chapel sites (Lelong 2002, 240-51; Lelong 2003). Strathnaver appears to have been important to the military requirements of the Norse earls and subsequently as a strategical centre for later territorial lordships that were based on inland rather than maritime routes (Crawford 2000, 10).

Elsewhere in the Province, the Medieval evidence is less densely clustered, although it should be pointed out that little detailed research has so far been conducted (see Lelong 2002 for a full review). While Strathnaver – by the late thirteenth century corresponding to the parish of Farr – was held by Lady Johanna and her descendants until the early fifteenth century, the parishes of Tongue and Durness to the west consisted mainly of Church lands, owned by the Bishop of Caithness from the bishopric's establishment in the twelfth century (Crawford 2000, 1-2). Balnakeil's first appearance in the documentary record is between 1223 and 1245, when Gilbert, Bishop of Caithness, assigned it the task of supplying light and incense for the cathedral church at Dornoch (Carter 1886, 25).

The Bishop of Caithness had his summer residence at Balnakeil through the Medieval period and also is thought to have owned Castle Varrich on the Kyle of Tongue (Bangor-Jones 2000, 37), said to have been used as a stopover while he was in transit to Balnakeil. He used the limestone-based grasslands surrounding Durness as summer grazing for his flocks. A description of the Reay estate by a valuator, dated 1797, stated that

> Durness is a dry pretty spot; the soil sandy, well peopled for its extent. It lies upon a bed of limestone which is here found in the greatest abundance. It is considered the best grass and pasture ground in the north of Scotland, and it was of old the bishop of Caithness' shieling or pasture farm (quoted in MackKay 1906, 36).

The bishop's house is presumably the 'Castle of Durinas' referred to by Sir Robert Gordon in 1630 as having stood on the site. It was allegedly demolished in 1725 for the construction of Balnakeil House, although the existing structure may have Medieval elements. At that time, the presence of a massive wall, demolished for the new building, was noted; it was thought to be the remains of an old monastery (Macfarlane 1906). The church appears to have retained ownership of a significant proportion of Durness parish until the Reformation.

By the fifteenth century, the Mackay family held extensive lands in feu across the Province, although the

mechanisms for the consolidation of their power remain obscure (Crawford 2000, 9). After the Reformation, church lands in Durness passed to the earls of Sutherland, and the Mackays were confirmed as their feudal vassals (Bangor-Jones 2000, 37). In 1628, Donald Mackay became the first Lord Reay over the Province of Strathnaver, which at the time stretched from Strath Hallidale to Kylesku on the west coast. After he fell into financial difficulties, large parts of the estate were sold, passing directly or eventually to the Dukes of Sutherland (Bangor-Jones 1987, 23).

By the late eighteenth century, repeated harvest failures coupled with rising populations in the townships were putting financial pressure on Highland landowners such as the Sutherland estate, who increasingly sought to make their lands profitable. Like other landowners, the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland evicted the occupants of the townships on their lands to create sheepwalks, particularly in the valley of Strathnaver – an estimated 15,000 people between 1807 and 1821. They were moved to newly created crofting settlements on the coast, where they were expected to take up fishing or work in the then-burgeoning kelp industry. Neither industry succeeded on a large scale in the long term, and the remains of depopulated townships in the straths and ruined crofts and disused, estate-built fishing harbours along the coast attest to this more recent phase in the Province's history.

3.0   Site Description and Archaeological Background

Over the five years of the project, the various fieldwork seasons will focus on particular parts of the Province. The 2004 fieldwork season will target the area around Loch Borralie, immediately south-west of the village of Durness. Baseline and some detailed survey work have already been carried out across the headland that centres on the loch, identifying and recording extensive archaeological landscapes of prehistoric and Medieval to post-Medieval date (Lelong & MacGregor 2000; Lelong & MacGregor forthcoming). The following sections describe the area on which the 2004 fieldwork will focus, the archaeological context of the area and the sites themselves. These sites have been selected for investigation because the forms of their structures, the stratigraphic relationship of earlier with later structures, their positions and their artefactual associations all suggest that they are potentially Medieval in date. The results of their investigation will help to guide survey and targeted excavation in other parts of the study area in succeeding seasons, providing important insight into the character and date of similar structures should they be identified on other sites.

3.1   *Site Location, Topography and Geology*

The two sites proposed for the 2004 fieldwork season lie immediately west of Loch Borralie, at the centre of a large headland on the eastern side of the Kyle of Durness (see Figure 1). The landscape is open and undulating, consisting of grassland overlying fixed dunes with a solid geology of limestone that trends NNE/SSW and outcrops in long dykes over parts of the headland. The calcareous and freely draining nature of the soils has produced a green and fertile pocket of land, unusual in the typically acidic and peaty northern Highlands.

The headland has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest and has also been recommended as a candidate Special Area of Conservation for its fixed dunes, limestone pavements, alpine and subalpine calcareous grasslands and hard mesotephic waters, for all of which it is considered one of the best areas in the UK. The headland also supports a significant presence of otter, alkaline fens, European dry heaths, humid dune slacks, hydrophious tall herb fringe communities, Northern Atlantic wet heaths and, along the shoreline, shifting dunes.

The area is subject to severe gales during the autumn and winter, particularly from the south-west. Rabbit burrowing and sheep grazing disturb the turf and expose the sand beneath, which is then vulnerable to wind erosion. The wind denudes large areas of turf, and further burrowing and sheep disturbance undermine the sides of deflated areas and loosen the sand so that it is more easily removed by wind. Sand that is blown out of one area accumulates over another. Thus, the local weather patterns and the abundant rabbit and sheep populations create a cycle of disturbance, erosion and accretion, each exacerbating the effects of the other.

This longstanding pattern of deflation and accretion is evident in the sides of deflated areas, where old turf lines are visible interleaved with thick deposits of windblown sand. Many of the archaeological

monuments recorded in the baseline survey have been exposed in these deflated areas, where they are vulnerable to erosion and eventual destruction.

3.2 *Archaeological Context of Borralie*

Archaeologists have carried out some previous research in the area. A limited survey of the headland took place in 1966 (Reid et al 1968) and highlighted the significant quantities of prehistoric monuments here and an apparent relationship between the concentrations of hut circles and limestones. The Sutherland Coastal Survey, led by Kevin Brady and Christopher Morris on behalf of Historic Scotland in 1997, examined the headland's coastal fringe (Brady & Morris 1998). In 2000, on behalf of Historic Scotland, GUARD undertook the rescue excavation of two burials in a multi-phased, sub-rectangular cairn to the west of Loch Borralie. One of the skeletons was radiocarbon dated to 40 cal BC – cal AD 210 (OxA-10253) (MacGregor 2003).

The baseline survey carried out on the headland in 2001 (Lelong & MacGregor 2003) recorded approximately 200 archaeological monuments, ranging from extensive prehistoric hut-circle settlements and cairnfields to isolated shieling huts, burial cairns and field walls. Many of these were discovered eroding out of deflated areas in the fixed dunes.

The place name 'Borralie' may derive from the Old Norse *borg-* for houses clustered around a fort or monastic site and *-ley*, probably the plural of meadow (Johnston 1934, 12; Darwood 1995). The name most likely refers to a dun (site 123 in Lelong & MacGregor 2003) which is perched on a small headland overlooking the loch, around which cluster later, eighteenth-century township buildings.

Some promising sites of potential Norse to Medieval were discovered during the 2001 survey on the high ground to the west of Loch Borralie, most notably site 46 and site 89. Site 46 sits in a cleft in the ridge to the west of the loch, close to an eroding prehistoric structure and associated cultivation rigs (site 47). Another building (site 89), very similar in form to site 46, was found about 350 m to the NNE in a large, linear deflation. Both of these sites are described and discussed in further detail below (section 3.3).

Farther west, in a broad valley running down to the Kyle of Durness, a small sandblow revealed a short length of walling with an associated old ground surface eroding out beside it (site 21). This may have been a metal-working site. During the baseline survey, pieces of slag, sherds of Norse pottery and a small charm or pendant, made of a quartzite pebble in a copper-alloy setting, were collected from the eroding surface. When the site was visited in July 2003 it proved to have been destroyed by the collapse of the deflating section above it.

A striking number of small, isolated, circular or oval structures were recorded on the high rim of ground along the western part of the survey area. These could be shieling structures, perhaps dating from a period when the flocks of the Bishop of Caithness were grazed here in summer. They do suggest that the headland's grassy expanses were occupied on some temporary, seasonal basis in the past.

Over the past few decades, numerous artefacts have been collected from the surface of deflated areas by local people. During the baseline survey, these were catalogued and their locations were recorded wherever possible. They include sherds of later prehistoric pottery; worked bone; several copper alloy pins of Medieval date; pieces of late Medieval metalwork; spindle whorls; sixteenth- and seventeenth-century coins; slag and furnace lining, and post-Medieval buttons and pottery. The distribution of the artefact concentrations helps to clarify the settlement chronology somewhat, with particular concentrations of late Medieval finds discovered around site 89 (see below).

There appears to have been a shift in the local settlement pattern between the later prehistoric and Medieval periods. The distribution of sites suggests that the more permanent Norse/Medieval settlement was not as extensive or diffuse across the headland as the prehistoric settlement. The later settlement appears to have focused on the terraces and ridge to the north and west of Loch Borralie, perhaps with seasonal occupation on the headland's fringes. The areas to the north that formed the focus of prehistoric settlement may have been exclusively used for agricultural purposes. Whereas in the early centuries A.D. people were buried in the centre of the headland, by the Norse to Medieval periods the church at Balnakeil on the coast was the focus of worship and burial.

3.3   *Site Description*

The two monuments proposed for investigation in 2004 (sites 89 and 46 in Lelong & MacGregor 2003) both sit on the high ground overlooking Loch Borralie (see Figure 1).

Site 89 lies at about 35 m above OD, at the base of a large, linear deflated area (NC 3807 6745) (see Figure 2 and Plate 1). It is visible as a sub-rectangular structure defined by double-skinned drystone footings, one course high and in most cases set flush with the ground. As exposed, it measures 12.8 m east/west by 3.5 m wide internally. The long walls are distinctly bowed. An entrance leading through the south wall is defined by a length of wall projecting for 2.4 m at an angle from the structure, curving SSE/NNW to form a sheltered approach 0.6 m wide. Intensive animal burrowing inside and around the exterior of site 89, particularly within the entrance, has revealed a lower course of stonework. A thin covering of grass has developed on the surface of the sand in and around the structure.

The deflated area contains a complex of tumbled, but much more upstanding, rectangular drystone structures, including a multi-compartmental longhouse and a small outbuilding (see Figure 2). The eastern end of site 89 runs beneath the outbuilding and its western end runs beneath the corner of another drystone structure just exposed in the side of the deflation. The more upstanding buildings are of likely eighteenth-century date, related to the post-Medieval township of Borralie or Clashnyach. Both are on slightly different alignments from structure 89, although they could represent the rebuilding of parts of it if it were originally larger than it currently appears.

The stratigraphy evident in the structural relationships suggests the long, perhaps continuous occupation of this site, and the range of artefacts collected from the vicinity of these buildings supports this. They include an amber bead, several copper-alloy frustum-headed pins of Medieval date (see Batey 1992 for a description of one of them) and a copper-alloy brooch of late Medieval date. Other finds of post-Medieval pottery and metalwork date from the later township.

Site 46 is perched on a ridge at 50 m above OD to the west of the loch, at the base of a now stable deflated area between marram-covered dunes (NC 3780 6717). It consists of a sub-rectangular structure, measuring (as exposed) 10.3 m long internally by 3.2 m wide and defined by substantial, double-skinned drystone wall footings 1 m wide and one course high (see Plate 2 and Figure 3). The structure is only partially exposed; its south-east side disappears beneath a fixed dune. It is aligned east/west, with a distinct bow apparent on its long sides and a large orthostatic boulder forming part of its western gable end.

An entrance leads through the north side into a small yard about 10 m wide, defined by two parallel walls that run beneath a fixed dune to the north. The ground level outside the structure is comparatively low, with weathered bedrock visible in several places, suggesting that occupation deposits may have built up inside the structure. The interior is covered in short grass, and a number of animal burrows are visible in it. A third, right-angled wall running along the edge of the contour defines a small field or enclosure about 30 m wide to the east.

These two structures (46 and 89) are strikingly similar in their dimensions and form, and dissimilar to the typical post-Medieval longhouses known in the area. Their bowed sides and generous proportions are reminiscent of Norse structures excavated in the Northern Isles, and the isolated position of site 46, set high on the ridge with its own associated enclosure and field, suggests it represents a very different, more diffuse pattern of settlement than the township clusters.

The structures seem good candidates for having Medieval origins, based on their form, position and associated artefacts. Both have been exposed through deflation and are clearly being damaged by rabbit burrowing. Excavation will establish the nature and extent of the damage and rescue information from archaeological deposits and features that would otherwise be destroyed. The excavation results will serve as a guide to identifying similar structures of comparable date through fieldwork elsewhere in the Province, both in subsequent stages of the project and in the context of future research and management of the area's archaeological resource.
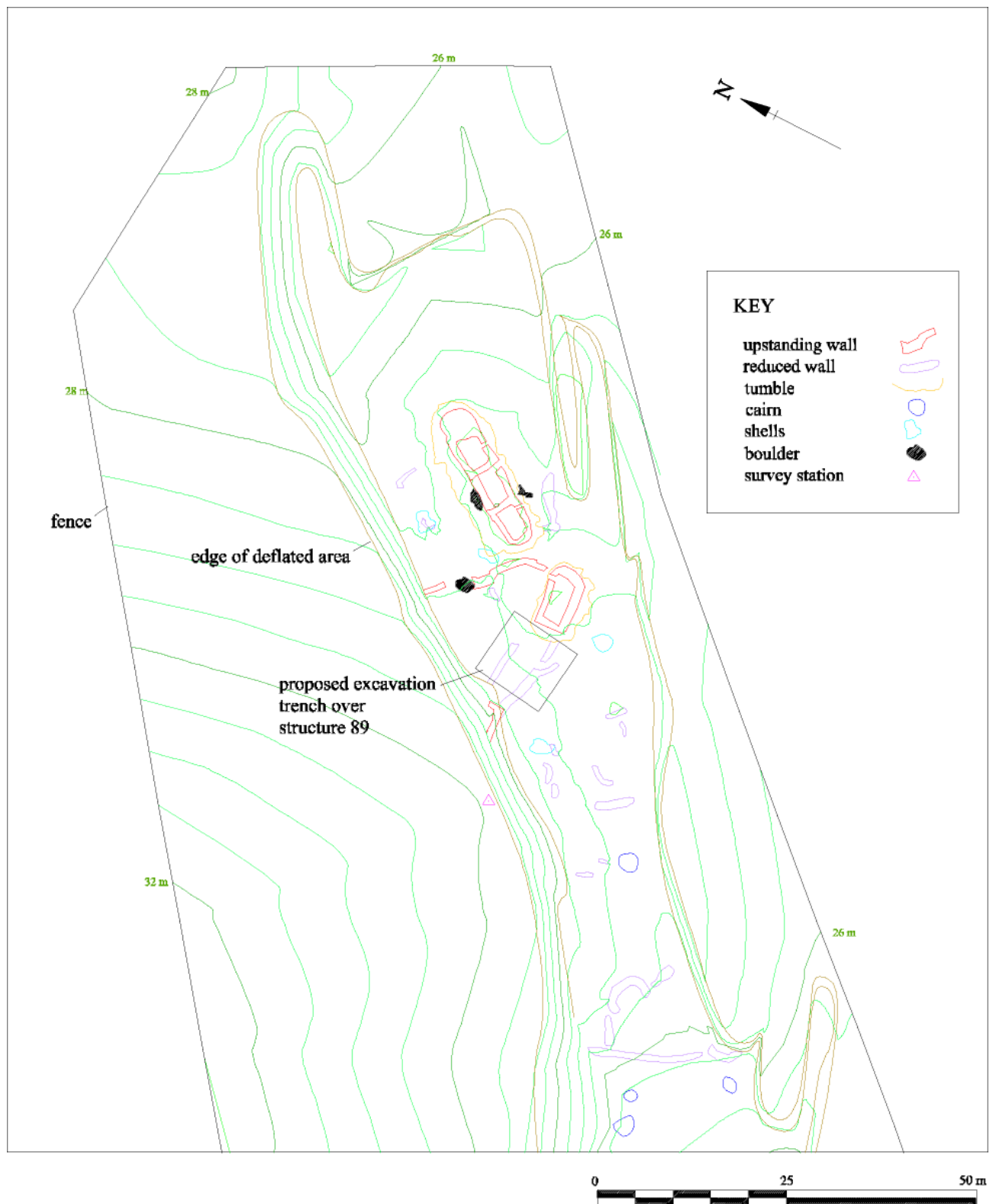
KEY

upstanding wall
reduced wall
tumble
cairn
shells
boulder
survey station

26 m

28 m

26 m

28 m

fence

edge of deflated area

proposed excavation
trench over
structure 89

32 m

26 m

N

0   25   50 m

Figure 2: Survey plan of structure 89 and associated buildings, showing position and size of proposed excavation trench.

Site 46

Key

- Burrow
- Marram grass
- Old Ground Surface
- Orthostat
- Shells

Dune edge

0   5 m

N

Figure 3: Plan of site 46, showing the approximate size and location of proposed trial trenches.

Plate 1: View of denuded walls of structure 89 from the north-west, overlain by later outbuilding to left.

Plate 2: View of structure 46 from the south-west.

4.0   Aims and Objectives

The general aims of the project are:

- To provide regional and chronological characterisation of MoLRS remains, in order to identify those likely to be Medieval and inform management of MoLRS sites in the region.
- To further understanding of the Medieval settlement pattern in the region, the role of Norse colonisation and cultural influence, and the development of townships.
- To involve local communities in the project, encouraging a sense of shared historical identity and ownership of the archaeological heritage across the region.

The general aims of the 2004 fieldwork season will be:

- To establish the character and date of structure 89.
- To evaluate the potential for retrieving information on the character and date of structure 46
- To assess the extent and nature of damage through deflation and burrowing to the archaeological remains associated with both structures.
- To provide training in excavation and survey techniques to interested members of the local community and to university students.
- To increase awareness and appreciation of the archaeological heritage among members of the local community.

These aims will be met through several specific objectives:

- To carry out limited geophysical survey over structures 89 and 46 using a fluxgate gradiometer in order to identify hearths and other possible internal features.
- To excavate a trench over structure 89, including an area outside the structure, to recover evidence of its occupation, construction and date.
- To open small trial trenches over structure 46 in order to establish the depth and character of deposits, the nature of its entrance and the relationship of the building to the adjacent yard.
- To record all archaeological features and evidence of damage through burrowing or deflation.
- To train volunteer excavators in techniques of excavation and recording.
- To arrange for site open days and the pre-arranged involvement, if possible, of local school children in the excavations (subject to Scottish Natural Heritage approval).

5.0   Methodology

In order to meet the above objectives, the following methodology will be employed.

Both sites have already been recorded through survey that produced detailed plans of the structures – site 89 through plane table and EDM survey (Figure 2) and site 46 through stone-by-stone measured drawing (Figure 3) – and their locations have been recorded by EDM and GPS (Lelong & MacGregor 2003).

Geophysical survey will be carried out over the interiors and immediate vicinities of both structures. The survey will employ a fluxgate gradiometer, a non-invasive instrument that records changes in the magnetic properties of the soil due to burning events and disturbance. The results of the geophysical survey will be used to guide the positioning of trenches.

A trench measuring c 10 m square will be opened over structure 89, encompassing its walls and entrance and a strip of 2 m outside both long walls. The trench will stop short of the upstanding/tumbled drystone buildings that overlie the structure at either end to avoid undermining them, but small slot trenches may be excavated to the junction with these buildings to establish the stratigraphic relationships of associated deposits if it can be done without threatening the structures or endangering excavators. The trench will also avoid cutting into the sloping sand at the side of the deflated area, to the west of structure 89. Up to three sections, no more than 0.5 m wide each, may be placed through the structure's walls in order to retrieve dating material and/or establish the presence or absence of evidence for earlier activity beneath it.

Three small trial trenches will be opened over the walls and interior of structure 46: one against the orthostat in its western gable, another over the centre of the interior and a third over the entranceway and north wall at its junction with one of the exterior yard walls. The total area of the trial trenches will not exceed 27 square metres. Deposits will be excavated and sampled in order to establish the depth of stratigraphy within and around the structure, but structural elements such as walls and hearths will not be removed at this stage, in order to permit stratigraphic relationships to be easily established in a future phase of open-area excavation should one be undertaken. Sections will be fully recorded according to the methodology set out below.

Turf will removed by hand, using spades, and will be stored in coursed stacks according to good practice and watered regularly if necessary to ensure it is able to regenerate after its replacement over the trenches. All deposits and features will be excavated by hand in plan, with discrete features excavated first by section and with baulks left in place at appropriate points for stratigraphic control. All contexts identified will be recorded by measured drawing in plan at a scale of 1:20 and in section where appropriate at a scale of 1:10. Contexts will also be recorded by digital, colour slide and monochrome print photography and by written descriptions on pro forma sheets. Bulk samples will be taken of selected deposits for flotation, in order to provide material for dating and information on the contemporary environment and site formation processes. Samples for micromorphological analysis may also be taken should suitable stratigraphic sequences be identified. All artefacts will be bagged and their locations recorded in three dimensions. The trench outlines and locations will be recorded using a total station EDM. A site daybook will be maintained to record sketches and developing interpretations throughout the course of the excavations.

During the trial trenching of site 46, the trenches will be covered with boards overnight to protect their contents from sheep. Site 89 lies inside a fenced enclosure and should suffer no encroachment from livestock.

GUARD will seek detailed advice from Scottish Natural Heritage about the re-instatement of both sites after the completion of excavation. At this stage, we envisage that if further excavation of site 46 is likely in a subsequent season, a breathable, permeable geotextile should be placed over the archaeological deposits before backfilling to protect them in the intervening period. Trenches will be backfilled by hand, with the sand returned to its original angle of repose, and the turf will be carefully replaced to ensure the underlying sand is protected from wind erosion. Subject to the stipulations of SNH, suitable materials such as brushwood or fencing may be laid horizontally over the backfilled trenches to prevent wind deflation over the winter and give grasses opportunity to regenerate. Means and routes of access onto the headland for personnel and equipment will also be agreed in advance following consultation with SNH and the Keoldale Estate.

6.0   Products and Outcomes of the Fieldwork

6.1   *Dissemination Products*

An illustrated data structure report, prepared according to standards set out by Historic Scotland and the Institute of Field Archaeologists, will be produced within three months of the completion of fieldwork. The data structure report will describe and discuss the results of the fieldwork, identify interpretive issues arising from it and make recommendations for future work.

Copies of the final report wil be distributed to all excavation participants, and extra copies will be made available for interested members of the local community and for the Durness tourist office. Copies will also be distributed to the National Monuments Record of Scotland and the Highland Sites and Monuments Record and to other interested bodies and/or funders, including Historic Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage, Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise, the Society of Antiquaries for Scotland Library, the British Archaeological Bibliography and the Glasgow University Library.

A summary account of the fieldwork will be submitted to *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland* in December 2004.

During the winter of 2004/2005, an illustrated lecture presenting the results of the 2004 fieldwork season and proposals for future work will be held at a suitable local venue.

If sufficient resources are available, a website will be constructed to present the aims and context of the wider project and the results of the 2004 fieldwork season. Should the necessary resources not be available in 2004, a summary of the project and the results will be presented on the GUARD and Assumption College websites.

6.2   *Community Benefits*

We envisage that one of the main outcomes of the 2004 fieldwork season and the project as a whole will be a heightened awareness among members of the local community of their archaeological heritage and an understanding of its importance and value. Members of the North West Field Club will act as liaisons with the community and advise on the most effective means of achieving this outcome. By involving local schoolchildren in the excavations, holding site open days (subject to SNH approval) and ensuring the broad dissemination of the project results, we hope to significantly enhance awareness and understanding of the area's rich heritage and foster a sense of historical identity and shared ownership of it.

Another outcome of the project will be a contribution to the area's tourist appeal. This will be enhanced by the preparation of a leaflet after the completion of fieldwork in the area, summarising the project results and the area's archaeological heritage in general, with copies made available for local distribution. The Durness Development Group are already working on plans for the presentation and interpretation of local archaeological sites to visitors. We are in consultation with the DDG and will continue to liaise with them in order to ensure the Strathnaver Province Archaeological Research Project complements and supports local ambitions throughout the life of the project. The project website will be linked to the Durness community website, and ultimately the results of the project will made available in web-based format to serve as a community educational resource.

We also hope in the longer term, through the wider aims and later phases of the project, to encourage a sense of shared heritage across the Province of Strathnaver and the northern mainland in general by bringing together local groups with an interest in archaeology through a programme of training and monitoring in collaboration with Andrew Heald, Caithness Archaeologist. This aspect of the project is presently under discussion and detailed proposals will be developed in due course.

6.3   *Management Outcomes*

One of the main goals of the project in general and of the 2004 fieldwork in particular is to provide information that can be used to guide management of the MoLRS resource in the region. At present, the chronology of township remains across the Province (as elsewhere in the Highlands) is poorly understood; while different forms of building in different states of preservation can be observed on the surface, there is very little information available from excavation to indicate what those differences mean in terms of time-depth or building use.

The results of the investigation of structures 89 and 46 will, it is hoped, lead to an understanding of their antiquity and chronologies of use. The results will form an important basis for further fieldwork in the region, both as part of this ongoing project and within other research projects, and help build up a more informed understanding of the MoLRS resource, including finer chronological resolution. This will in turn aid in the management of this resource, giving those involved in its management more detailed information on what the surface remains represent in terms of settlement chronology and development.

The investigation of structures 89 and 46 will, in particular, also guide management of the rich archaeological resource that lies within the sensitive natural environment of the headland centred on Loch Borralie. The results will shed light on the dynamics of deflation, accretion and burrowing, the interplay between these processes in the distant and recent past and the ways in which they have affected archaeological deposits and features. Such information will be useful not only to those concerned with management of the archaeological heritage, but also to those concerned with management of the natural environment, including Scottish Natural Heritage and the Keoldale Estate.

7.0   Input of Resources

Funding and in-kind contributions have already been secured from Historic Scotland, Assumption College, Glasgow University Archaeology Department and GUARD. The European Community Economic Development Fund is being approached for funds to match Historic Scotland's contribution, and the Russell Trust is also being approached for support.

8.0   Timetable

The geophysical survey will be carried out over one day in May 2004, and the results will be processed at the University of Glasgow using Geoplot to identify significant anomalies. The excavations will be carried out from 14th June to 2nd July, working a six-day week from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily. The data structure report will be completed as an illustrated draft within three months of the completion of fieldwork, with the final draft prepared within five months of completion.

9.0   Staffing

The fieldwork will be co-directed by Dr. Olivia Lelong of GUARD and Dr. Amy Gazin-Schwarz of Assumption College, Massachusetts, both of whom have extensive experience both of fieldwork in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and of training and working with volunteers and students. Two additional highly experienced professional archaeologists, both from GUARD, will be employed as supervisors on the excavations. The geophysical survey will be carried out by an experienced geophysicist from the Department of Archaeology, University of Glasgow.

10.0 Health and Safety

GUARD, operating through the University of Glasgow, adheres to all standards of health and safety laid down in the Health and Safety at Work Act. A full risk assessment and safety plan will be drawn up before the commencement of fieldwork and copies will be available on request. All members of the field teams will be fully cognisant of the safety plan and will undergo a safety induction before fieldwork commences. GUARD is in addition fully covered for all public liability insurances. Proofs may be supplied upon request.

11.0 Monitoring

The project will be monitored internally by Dr John Atkinson, Senior Project Manager at GUARD, who has extensive experience of researching MoLRS archaeology. Interested bodies such as Historic Scotland, CASE and SNH will be kept informed of the progress of the project throughout.

12.0 Archive and Finds

The data structure report will contain a full finds list to allow the Finds Disposal Panel to reach a decision on their final place of deposition following post-excavation analysis.

A fully catalogued archive for the project will be prepared and deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland within one year of the completion of the overall project.

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