



Case reference	SMC-ANG-007
Application details	Open area archaeological excavation
Site address	Enclosure, 400M E of Balbinny, Aberlemno near Forfar (SM 6357)
Applicant	University of Aberdeen
Determining Authority	Historic Environment Scotland (HES)
Local Authority Area	Angus Council
Reason(s) for notification	Notification Direction 2015 – works to be granted Scheduled Monument Consent by Historic Environment Scotland go beyond the minimum level of intervention that is consistent with conserving what is culturally significant in a monument
Representations	Nil
Date notified to Ministers	14 April 2020
Date of recommendation	6 May 2020
Decision / recommendation	Clear

Description of Proposal and Site:

- Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) is sought for significant archaeological excavation at a potential early Pictish high status enclosure. The proposed works include conducting an open area excavation on the south side of the monument and backfilling the excavation area. It follows trial excavation in 2018, which assessed the enclosure ditch and suggested it was constructed and abandoned during the 5th to early 7th centuries AD (see Figure 2 below).
- The monument comprises the remains of an enclosed settlement of prehistoric date represented by cropmarks visible on oblique aerial photographs. The monument lies on arable farmland on locally high ground and is a roughly oval enclosure measuring about 65m NE-SW by about 50m NW-SE within a ditch some 2m broad. Inside the enclosure there are numerous ill-defined cropmarks that appear to represent the remains of domestic structures. Immediately to the SE there appears to be a group of at least three souterrains, or semi-subterranean storage buildings, of Iron Age date.
- The monument is of national importance because of its potential to contribute to our understanding of prehistoric settlement and economy.



Figure 1 – Location map

Proposed location and extent of 2020 excavation trench

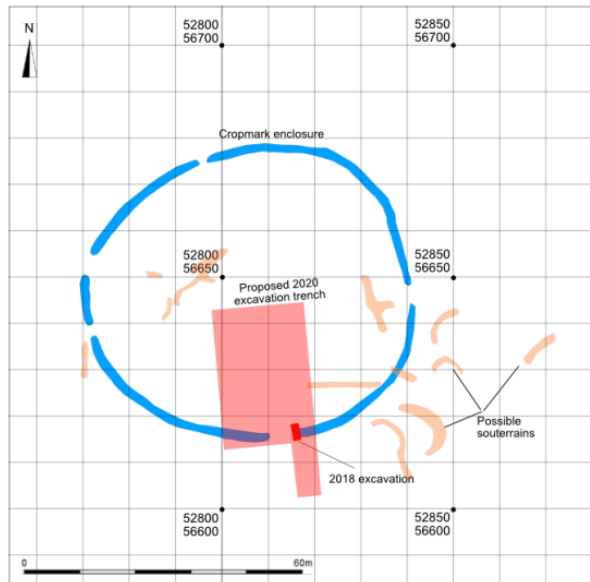


Figure 2 – Proposed trench shown in light red

Consultations and Representations:

- No representations were made during consideration of the application.
- PAD consulted Scottish Government's Culture and Historic Environment Division following notification and they consider the proposal raises no issues of national importance and offers an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the site and of other Pictish stones nearby.

Assessment:

1. Historic Environment Scotland (HES) are minded to grant scheduled monument consent (SMC) for the carrying out of open area archaeological excavation which impacts on the Scheduled Monument as the works are not considered the minimum level of intervention consistent with conserving what is culturally significant in the monument.
2. The application has been submitted by the University of Aberdeen. The proposal is a component of the University's Comparative Kingship Project. The project is investigating the nature of the Pictish kingdoms in early Scotland. The project team have identified the likelihood that the concentration of Pictish stones at Aberlemno, together with a group of nearby enclosures, may represent an important focus for Pictish settlement and kingship. HES consider the overall project is well resourced and the project team are leaders in the study of Pictish power centres, a subject of national importance, as defined in ScARF (the Scottish Archaeological Research Framework).

3. The proposals seek to excavate and record of about 20% of the interior of the enclosure, targeting one of the most threatened parts of the enclosure on the southern side, where the slope is most pronounced. This is considered an important part of the monument, encompassing the south entrance and an area immediately inside, where internal features, if present, are very likely to be experiencing ongoing plough erosion/attrition due to the slope, silty soil and ongoing arable cultivation.
4. The applicant indicates that the large trench would measure 20m east/west by 30m north south. In addition, a 3m by 10m area would be opened on the south side of the main excavation to determine if additional enclosing features exist downslope from the ditch. A staged approach to opening up the trench would be adopted, with half the main area being excavated initially.
5. HES consider the works are extensive, but respond to unavoidable circumstances and threat, in particular cultivation damage and a high risk of further damage, demonstrated through previous limited excavation. Consequently, they believe the proposed works are compliant with their Scheduled Monument Consent Policy 3 whereby the applicants would deliver "preservation by record" of a site that otherwise faces erosion without record.
6. HES believe the works would also deliver public benefits by increasing our understanding of the monument, in close proximity to the Aberlemno Pictish Stones, and that the application is carefully considered, sensitively designed and properly planned. However, due to the current pandemic situation and uncertainty when the proposed works will progress, further information on project timescales would be required in advance of the works to enable the application to be fully compliant with HES' Scheduled Monument Consent Policy 4.
7. Therefore, the proposal is concluded by HES to be consistent with relevant policy but not considered the minimum necessary consistent with conserving the cultural significance of the monument, thus the requirement to notify Scottish Ministers.
8. In summary, and for the reasons set out above, this SMC application does not raise any issues of national importance that would merit intervention by Ministers.

Decision/Recommendation:

- The application should be cleared back to Historic Environment Scotland to issue Scheduled Monument Consent with one condition.