



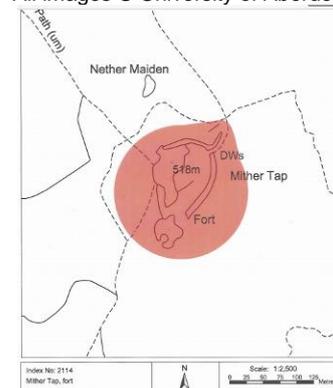
Case reference	SMC-ABS-006
Application details	Re-excavation of antiquarian trenches and further evaluative excavation
Site address	Mither Tap, fort , near Oyne, Aberdeenshire (SM 2114)
Applicant	University of Aberdeen
Determining Authority	Historic Environment Scotland (HES)
Local Authority Area	Aberdeenshire 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	1
Date re-notified to Ministers	17 June 2020
Date of recommendation	24 June 2020
Decision / recommendation	Clear

Description of Proposal and Site:

- Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) is being sought for the excavation of six additional trenches at Mither Tap, Bennachie, Aberdeenshire. This follows on from a SMC for excavations, granted in 2019, as part of the same research project.
- The scheduled area is roughly circular and includes the visible remains of the fort and surrounds, within which evidence relating to the monument’s construction and use may survive – the scheduled area is shown in red on map below.
- The monument is of national importance because it makes a significant addition to understanding later prehistoric/early-historic hilltop enclosures and the values that later communities placed on them. The quality of the surviving ramparts is very high. Mither Tap is likely to have played a central role as a Pictish centre and in the development of communities that occupied Strathdon, where it is one of the largest and most imposing landmarks.



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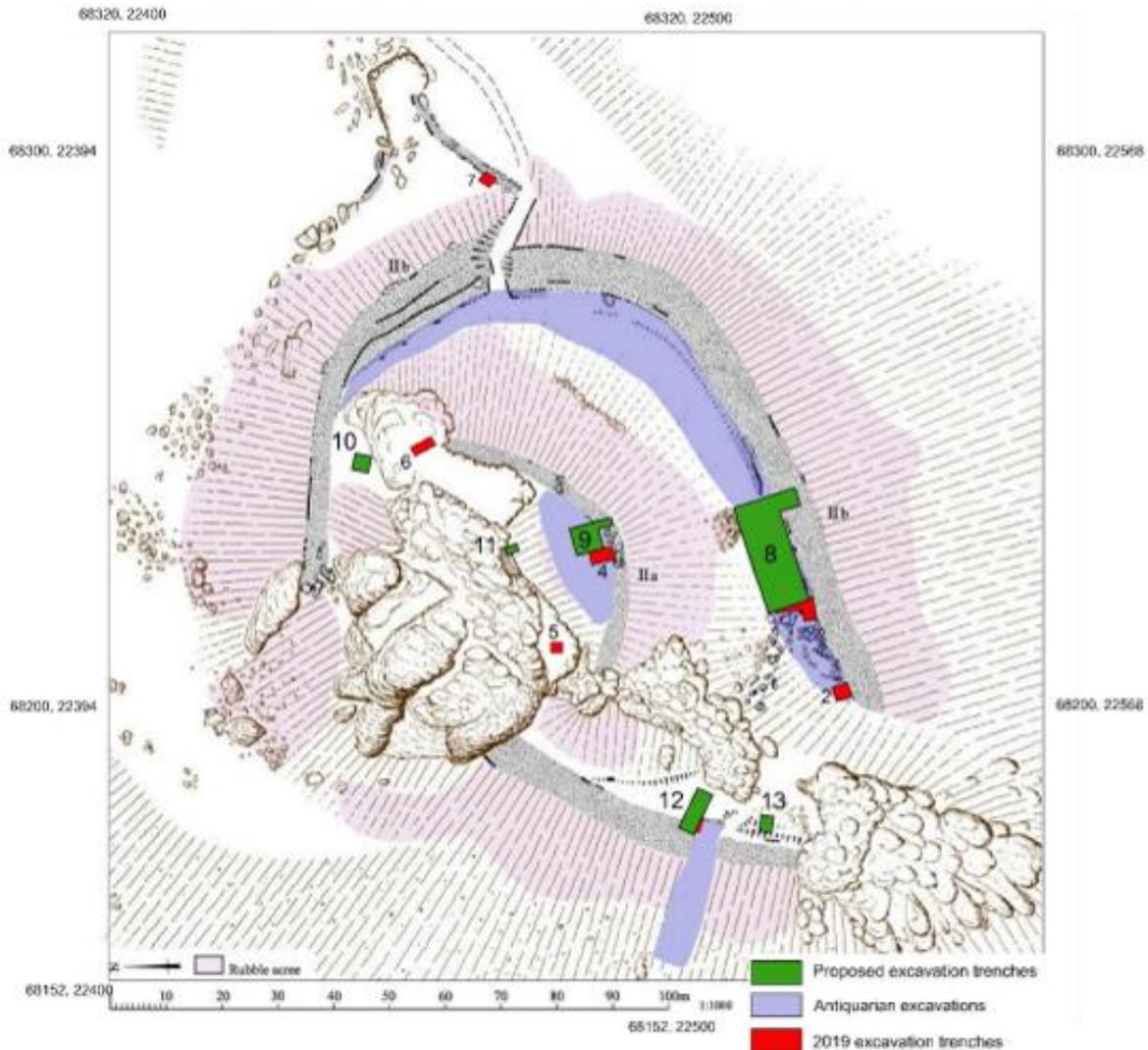


Figure 4 Proposed trenches at Mither Tap in relation to the RCHAMS 2007 survey and the areas impacted by antiquarian trenching and clearing.

Consultations and Representations:

- A representation was received by HES from Forestry and Land Scotland in their capacity as owner of part of the monument. The main issues raised relate to ensuring there was an effective commitment from the applicant to site reinstatement and whether conditions might be appropriate with regard to the extent of sample excavation within trenches and the provision for post-excavation analysis.
- PAD consulted Scottish Government's Culture and Historic Environment Division (CHED) following notification who consider the proposal would offer a depth of knowledge into a good example of a Pictish fort which supports the Scottish Archaeological Research Framework. Due to the minimal long term impact of the proposals, they do not raise any significant issues of national importance.

Assessment:

1. Historic Environment Scotland (HES) are minded to grant scheduled monument consent (SMC) for the excavation of six archaeological evaluation trenches 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 as part of their Northern Picts and Comparative Kingship Projects. They are conducting a major, long term research programme on the Picts where forts are a key, but poorly understood, monument type within the Pictish heartland. The excavations at Mither Tap would continue to address national priorities as identified in the Scottish Archaeological Research Framework (ScARF). HES has undertaken pre-application discussions with the applicant regarding the scope and timing of works, and this application accords with the outcome of those discussions. The works would take place in summer 2020, provided travel and social distancing restrictions allow this.
3. The proposed works follow on from the seven trenches excavated in 2019 therefore the six trenches covered in this SMC are numbered 8 to 13 on the above diagram.
 - **Trench 8** (measures 20m x 8m with 4m x 3m extension over the gallery) would reveal one stretch of the occupation platforms that lie within the east and south sides of the outer rampart.
 - **Trench 9** (measures 6m x 6m with 3m x 2m extension) would allow an area of the upper citadel to be revealed. Clear 19th century backfill would be removed, with excavation continuing to determine if floor layers and structural features exist.
 - **Trench 10** (measures 3m x 3m) would investigate one of a number of level platforms within the fort, to establish whether they are archaeological features such as building stances.
 - **Trench 11** (measures 4m x 2m) would investigate the area around the granite tor - the line of defence identified by antiquarian investigations.
 - **Trench 12** (measures 8m x 3m) would re-open Trench 3 and extend east. The aim would be to verify the position of the rampart wall-face, and investigate a wall found in 2019 to determine if it is part of an internal structure or an entrance way.
 - **Trench 13** (measures 3m x 2m) would investigate another level platform, in the south part of the lower citadel.
4. With regards to reinstatement, where the existing turf is in good condition, trenches would be backfilled, re-turfed and monitored until fully re-established. Alternative options would include re-seeding or laying biodegradable stabilisation matting put in place below topsoil and/or turf cover.

5. The applicants consider that the proposals aim to offer new interpretation opportunities for visitors and the local community at what is a site of intense public interest in Northeast Scotland. An enhanced understanding of the site's cultural significance and dating will be of wide public and academic interest. The project is in co-operation with the Bailies of Bennachie, a community organisation who work to preserve and promote the amenity of the hill, encourage visitors to the landscape and promote understanding of the hill's cultural heritage.
6. HES consider the works adopt an approach that removes deposits, aims for a low level of intervention for maximum information retrieval while conducting limited excavation – all of the larger trenches would involve re-assessing areas targeted in antiquarian interventions. While the excavations would be destructive and remove archaeological deposits and artefacts over about 3% of the fort area, the trench dimensions are relatively small in relation to the whole size of the monument.
7. Following the representation from Forestry and Land Scotland, a revised project design was submitted that commits to an appropriate programme of backfilling and reinstatement and sets out how reinstatement would be conducted in trenches with no or limited turf cover. Any structural features dismantled would be reinstated to protect undisturbed deposits. As these revisions cover the issues raised, HES were content that no conditions of consent were required.
8. Overall, HES believe the investigations would not have a significant effect on the monument's overall archaeological value, given the size of the trenches relative to the monument and the proposed excavation methodology. They are content with a targeted excavation which would assess the character of the structures/occupation deposits, aiming to assess the longevity of occupation and depth of deposits while minimising the impact on floors and structural remains. They consider the revised research design submitted has been carefully considered to minimise impacts on the archaeological resource, while still leaving potential for significant advances in knowledge. HES consider, in view of the small percentage of the fort to be excavated and the limited effect on archaeological value, the works are not extensive. There is a commitment by the applicants to monitor the trenches after backfilling and to address any issues at the project's expense. Should further mitigation be needed after initial backfilling, this methodology would be submitted to HES for written agreement.
9. HES concludes the proposal is broadly consistent with relevant policy and meets their SMC Policies 1-4. However, while the proposals will not have a significant impact on buried remains, they are not considered the minimum necessary consistent with conserving the cultural significance of the monument, hence the requirement to notify Scottish Ministers.
10. In summary, 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 no conditions.