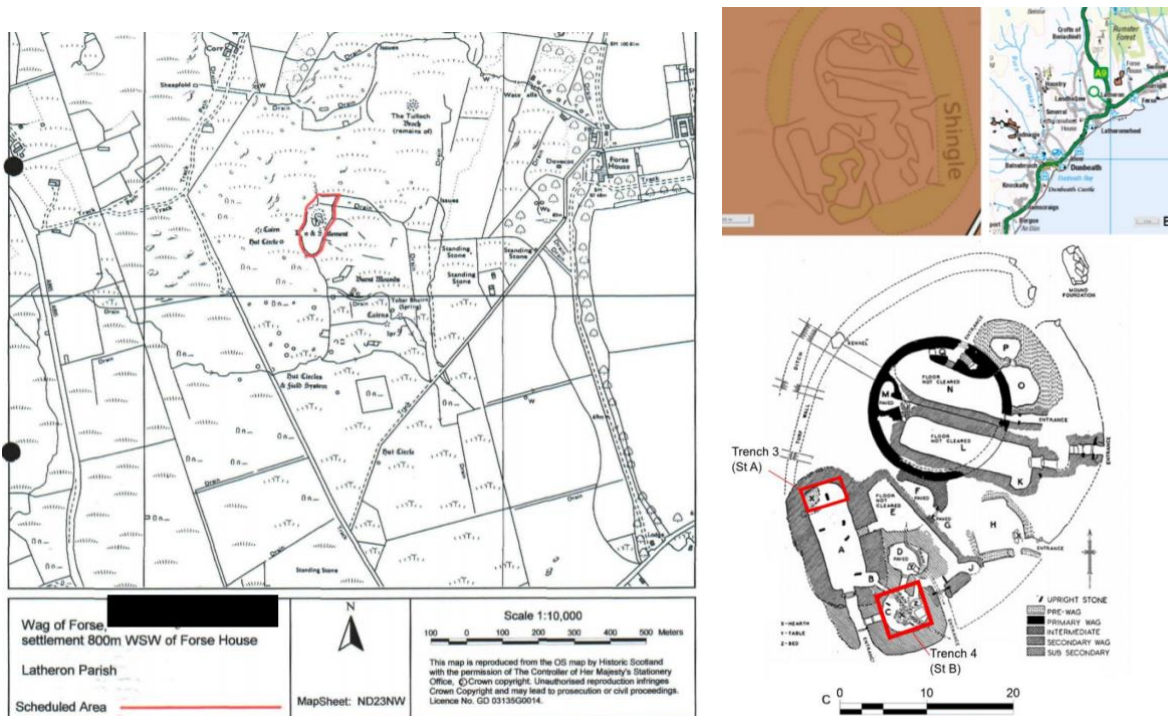




<b>Case reference</b>	SMC-HLD-006
<b>Application details</b>	Evaluation of Curle's trenching of the 1930s and 1940s - Phase II
<b>Site address</b>	Wag of Forse, settlement 800M WSW of Forse House, nr Latheron, Caithness (SM 2301)
<b>Applicant</b>	University of Aberdeen
<b>Determining Authority</b>	Historic Environment Scotland (HES)
<b>Local Authority Area</b>	The Highland Council
<b>Reason(s) for notification</b>	Notification Direction 2015 – works to be granted Scheduled Monument Consent by <b>Historic Environment Scotland</b> go beyond the minimum level of intervention that is consistent with conserving what is culturally significant in a monument
<b>Representations</b>	Nil
<b>Date notified to Ministers</b>	26 May 2020
<b>Date of recommendation</b>	16 June 2020
<b>Decision / recommendation</b>	Clear

## Description of Proposal and Site:

- Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) is sought for a second phase of archaeological investigation of previously excavated trenches at Wag of Forse, a complex prehistoric settlement in Caithness, the north-eastern most part of Scotland. The application is for the partial re-excavation of trenches originally dug out under the direction by Alexander Ormiston Curle in 1939. After WWII, these excavations continued from 1946-48. This application follows on from a SMC application granted by HES in 2019 for archaeological evaluation of the two areas of interest as shown in Figure 1 below.
- The monument is of national importance as an outstanding site in the history of archaeological research into the Iron Age in Northern Scotland displaying an uncommon and unusual structure, known as a Wag. Wags were drystone structures of varying form in plan, commonly circular or oblong with rounded corners and a "gallery" running along at least one internal side. The details of the defensive structure (especially its similarities to and differences from brochs and duns) and of the subsequent buildings, are unusual. Wags can occur both on broch sites in fertile areas and alone in very marginal land far up river valleys. Wags are often regarded as evidence for change to a more cattle-based agricultural system, on account of their structural details and their locations.



## Consultations and Representations:

- No representations were made during the consideration of the application.
- PAD consulted Scottish Government's Culture and Historic Environment Division (CHED) following notification, who consider the proposed works do not appear to raise any specific issues of national importance as this is the second phase of a project and the nature is to revisit this historic excavation with greater awareness of preservation and conservation techniques than previously demonstrated.

## Assessment:

1. Historic Environment Scotland (HES) are minded to grant SMC for the excavation and sampling from two trenches which would impact on the Scheduled Monument as the related ground disturbance and removal of material goes beyond the minimum level of intervention which is consistent with conserving what is culturally significant in the monument.
2. The application has been submitted by the University of Aberdeen. It is accompanied by a project design that sets out an appropriate methodology. The HES Heritage Directorate has undertaken pre-application discussions with the applicant and the application accords with the outcome of those discussions. HES consider the project team are highly experienced and have an established track record of successful delivery of archaeological projects and that the specified method of the work is appropriate to ensure it is undertaken to a professional standard, including post-excavation, reporting, and archiving.
3. The proposed works involve the excavation of two trenches by hand (trenches 3 and 4 as shown in Figure 1), the sampling of deposits within each trench and the

careful backfilling of the two trenches. Evaluation undertaken in these areas in 2019 identified deposits that the applicant intends to sample as part of the current proposals. Trench 3 is contained within the confines of Trench 1 from the 2019 season; Trench 4 would re-examine and extend the area targeted by Trench 2 in 2019. Extracting samples of in-situ deposits from the two trenches is sought with a view to establishing a clearer chronology for the monument through post-excavation analyses.

4. HES consider Curle's intervention had a significant effect on the monument, its condition, and its cultural significance. The area to be excavated was examined by the HES Heritage Directorate during the 2019 evaluation. It was clear that the building had been almost entirely cleared by Curle and had not been backfilled, with the subsequent turf layer accumulating in the intervening 80 years. Upon visually examining these deposits, the HES Heritage Directorate considered that they make a limited contribution to the significance of the monument. They are most likely to be the heavily disturbed residual remains of material removed by Curle in 1939. This, combined with the subsequent exposure to the atmosphere for a considerable period of time and the lack of any backfill, would suggest that these deposits are archaeologically insecure and therefore of limited value.
5. HES consider that despite Curle's excavations, the site has enormous potential for research by further excavation and through analysis of the exposed remains. They believe it is important as it is also adjacent to an extensive area of varied settlement remains of various dates, with which it undoubtedly had functional links.
6. HES believe that the proposed works are being done to elements of the monument in such a way as to maintain the cultural significance of the monument. Thus they do not therefore conflict with their Scheduled Monument Policy 1. As a timetable has not been supplied for the proposals, HES have added a single condition to ensure that HES Heritage Directorate receive a proposed timetable in writing so they can plan for the opportunity to inspect the excavations as they are ongoing.
7. HES believe the proposal is broadly consistent with their relevant policy. However, should the deposits encountered be more significant than anticipated the proposal would no longer be considered the minimum necessary consistent with conserving the cultural significance of the monument, hence the requirement to notify 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.