

## TIREE HORIZONS: ACFA Field Survey April/October 2016

**Elaine Black**

*The Tiree Field Survey is a collaboration between the Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists, Dr John Holliday and An Iodhlann Historical Centre, Tiree.*

This article is a summary of Interim Report Season 1: Introduction, which will be published in full later in 2017.



## Introduction

Tiree, the most westerly island in the Inner Hebrides, lies south-west of Coll. It has an area of 7,834 hectares (30.2 square miles) and is 12 miles long, and just 3 miles wide. The island is particularly low lying, the highest point being Ben Hynish in the south, which is 141m (463 ft). In general, the coastal shelf does not exceed 10m OD. In the past, Tiree was known for its fertile machair and there is a folk tradition that it supplied Columba's monastic community with grain.

An idea has emerged that Tiree is *tìr bàrr fo thuinn* 'the land below the waves' or 'the secret island' - such that a recent conference organised by islanders and academics resulted in an excellent book of the latter name. 'The Secret Island, Towards a History of Tiree' (2014) drew together several strands of historical evidence in one publication for the first time. The aim was to establish a narrative in the public consciousness on behalf of an island which, beautiful as it is, lacks the more obvious geological drama of its neighbours on the western archipelago. As Donald E Meek puts it in a foreword to 'Secret Island', this was an attempt to no longer let it 'lie low in the horizon of history.' However, as Meek also points out, Tiree is not un-observed. Far from it. Researchers new to the scene encounter a growing canon of academic research and field reports, such that there is a very real danger that future work on the island re-traces paths already well-trodden.

So what attracts? Foremost is the medieval conundrum. Dr Holliday has identified 250 names of possible Norse or medieval origin on Tiree. This suggests significant settlement during the Viking/Scandinavian period from the 8th to the 15th centuries. This place-name evidence is supported by a scatter of 18th century antiquarian Viking finds. For example, a pair of 'tortoise' brooches and a bronze pin, attributed to a now lost grave site (Canmore ID 21417). Tiree, and its close neighbour Coll, also rates a mention in saga literature. In Orkneyinga Saga, Sweyn Asleifsson the 'ultimate viking' was entertained on Tiree in the 12th century by a chieftain called Holboldi. The extent of Scandinavian influence is further supported by land assessment studies which propose that there were between 20-25 *ouncelands* in the medieval period. The *ounceland* (Scottish Gaelic *tir-unga*) is a unit of land assessment of probable Norse origin. It was based on a value of land that amounted to an ounce of silver either as yearly rent or purchase price. Tiree, therefore, was fertile, land was valuable, and in terms of assessment, highly regulated in the past.

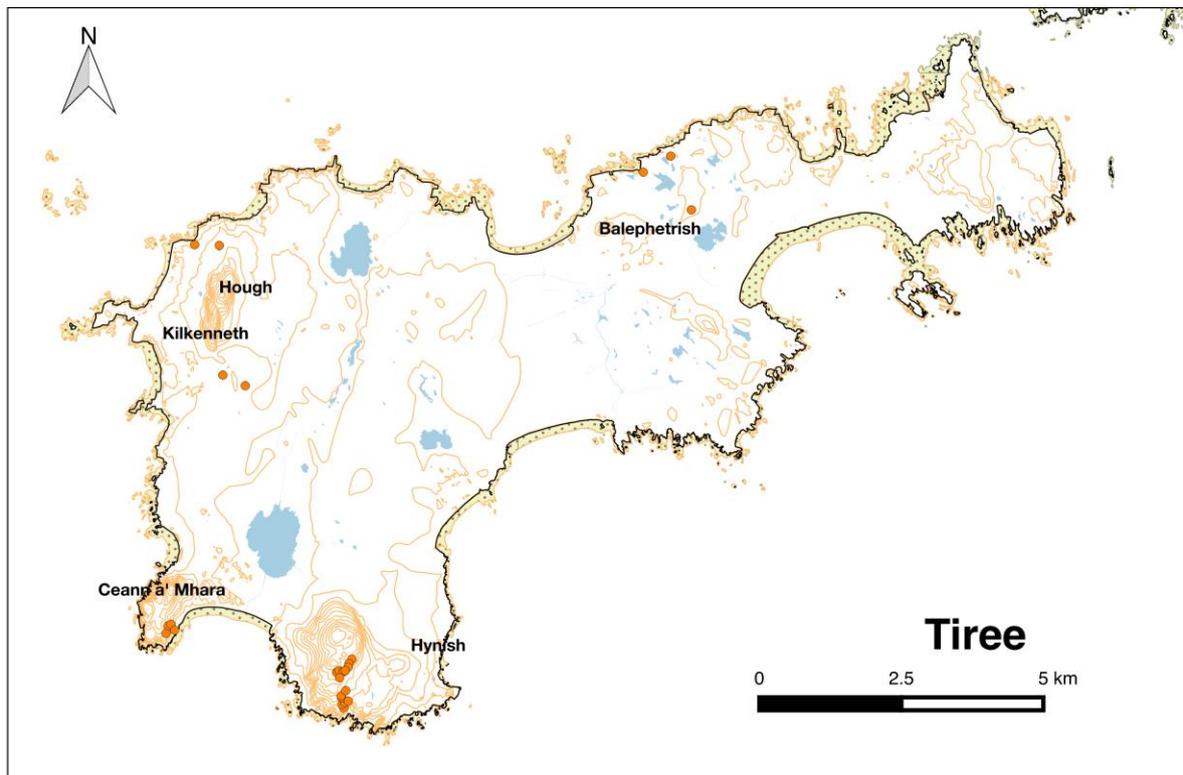
However, previous attempts to identify medieval, and in particular Norse, settlement evidence have failed, hampered by severe sand blow which affects most coastal areas. Strong conservatism of location, to be expected on a small island, leads to further problems of identification. Rebuilding on the same sites for millennia coupled with the ephemeral nature of pre-improvement Tiree houses and an increase in peripheral dwellings during the growth of the kelp industry from the mid-18th century, means that identifying earlier settlement is extremely difficult without archaeological excavation. On a visit to the island last year Dr David Caldwell, formerly National Museums of Scotland, warned that one should not discount the possibility that on many sites medieval settlement evidence is simply not there.

It is with this in mind that ACFA has entered the fray. The intention of the present survey is to introduce a visual source of surface information which might usefully contribute to several on-going conversations. A further aim of the survey is to identify areas of possible medieval interest which might encourage archaeological and geophysical investigation. In 'Norse by Northwest: pursuing Scandinavian settlement on Coll and Tiree' (2016), originally presented to the University of Glasgow and to be published in ACFA's Season 1 Interim Report, Ollie Rusk contends that 'despite extensive research emphasising the extent of Scandinavian influence in place-names and

land management, the islands of Tiree and Coll have yet to be subject to rigorous archaeological enquiry pertaining to Viking-Age settlement.’ Excavation of Norse settlement elsewhere in the Hebrides demonstrates a greater diversity of localised house forms than previously imagined, and it therefore remains a possibility that Tiree in the future will have something to add to this effect. But that longship has yet to be launched.

### Tiree - Season 1

Previous archaeological field investigations on Tiree have concentrated on raised beaches, machair and beach zones, areas most affected by sand blow. This approach has met with limited success, particularly when trying to identify earlier settlement remains. A decision was taken that the first season of this survey would target areas untouched by coastal incursions. Principal field surveys were undertaken on the slopes of Hynish and the headland of Ceann a’ Mhara, in the south and south-west. Some visible remains on the machair were investigated, notably at Hough, as well as a group of 19th century buildings at Kilkenneth, and a dwelling on a strip of improved, peripheral land at Loch Dubh A Gharaidh Fail between Balephetrish and Vault.



**Fig. 1** Sites surveyed by ACFA, April 2016. Ollie Rusk, University of Glasgow.

## Hynish

The Hynish landscape is characterised by mixtures of heather, rough grasses, bosses of outcropping gneiss and there is peaty bog at the foot of south-east facing slopes. There is some improved land to the east and north but to the south are dramatic cliffs and gullies. Several ACFA teams led by Dugie MacInnes surveyed to the east and south of two 19th-century improvement dykes. An early picture has emerged of intense activity from prehistoric to modern times. A total of 111 features were described during Season 1. Features putatively identified as prehistoric include four possible cairns and three hut circles or round houses. Initial conclusions are that the cairns, formed from recumbent stones, are typical of chambered examples found elsewhere in the Hebrides. These are, however, smaller in diameter than those found on North Uist, for example. It remains to be seen if the Three cairns 'form a local or are part of a regional type' (Armit 1996: 69). Further examination in future seasons will provide a better understanding of the distribution of the much-disturbed cairns and their relationship with the landscape.



**Fig. 2** Hynish. Possible kerbed cairn into which a later house has been constructed. Drawing: Margaret Gardiner and Libby King (October 2016).

A putative stone circle was also noted, although the disturbed nature of all features on Hynish does not preclude the possibility that this is a remnant of a later enclosure.



**Fig. 3** Hynish. Putative stone circle or robbed out enclosure. View from north. Photograph: Dugald MacInnes (April 2016).

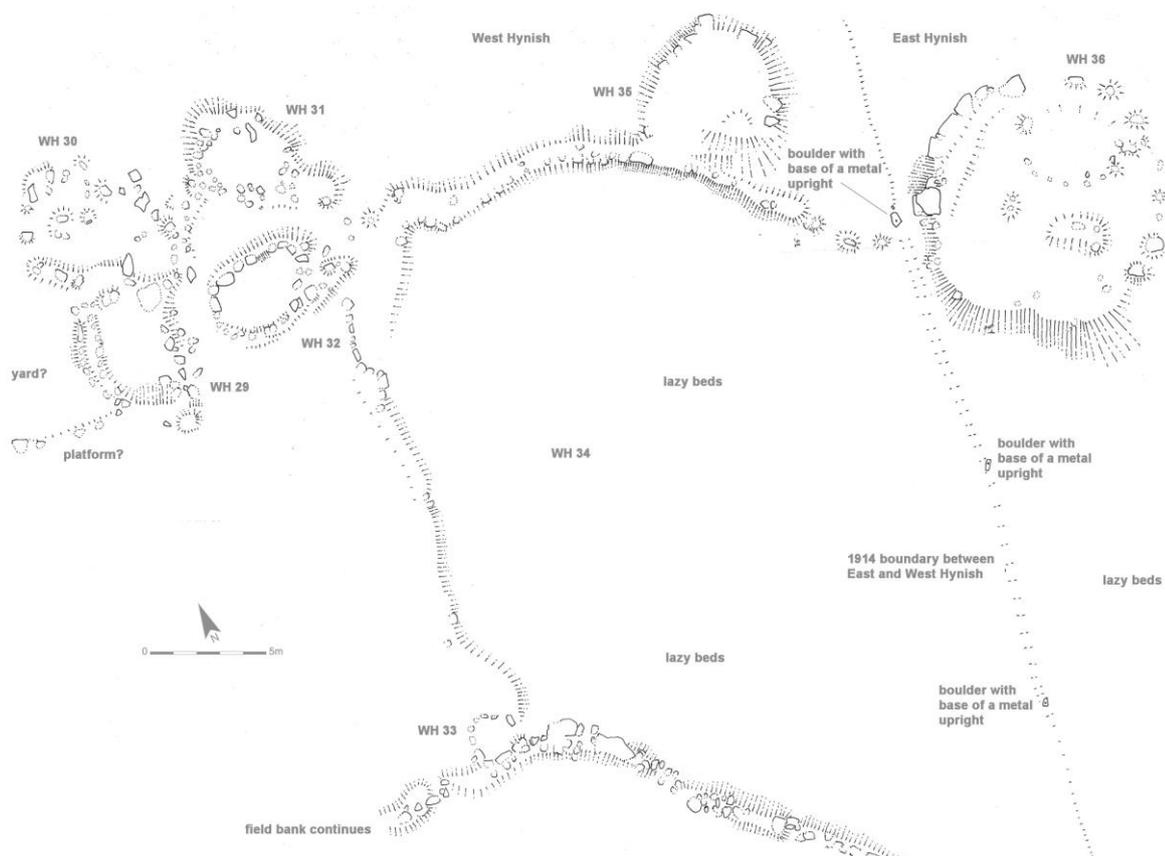
There is also evidence of narrow rig, which may indicate early field systems, on an area of improved slopes above the Iron Age site of Dùn Shiader. Several long and narrow features, some open at one end and formed from large boulders, were also noted. The original function of these features is uncertain, although animal enclosures, peat stores or even ritual purposes have been posited. Broader rig, of probable medieval or later date, is present in many parts of the survey area. Only one possible corn-drying kiln and no winnowing barns have been identified.

On south-east slopes and lower ground there are areas of improved ground enclosed by field banks. Remains of structures include a house, stores and animal pens. Some of these small agricultural units may have medieval origins. Two groupings of remains are worthy of note. The first (Fig. 4 below), includes one or two hut circles or roundhouses with associated smaller structures which may range from Prehistoric to Medieval in date.



**Fig. 4** Hynish. Possible round-houses (21, 26), Possible house (28), and other small features that may be stores or pens, etc. Drawing: Jim Anderson, Dugald MacInnes and Janie Munro (April 2016).

Additionally, a cluster of four roughly circular structures are associated with improved ground and close to two, possibly four, kerbed cairns (Fig. 5 below). It is not clear if these are chambered. However, chambered cairns close to settlements have been noted elsewhere in the Hebrides.



**Fig. 5** W Hynish. Possible House (29), byre (30), store (31), House (32); Possible kerbed round cairn (35, 36). Drawing: Jim Anderson, Dugald MacInnes, and Janie Munro (April 2016).

A complex and large number of field banks either completely of stone or a mixture of stone and turf criss-cross the Hynish slopes. These appear to be reminiscent of field-systems present around hut circle groups in north-east Perthshire, the Céide Fields in Ireland, parts of SW England and West Wales. The possibility exists that some of these boundaries on Hynish date from Prehistoric times and could explain the almost total absence of small clearance cairns; cleared stone having been used in the construction of the boundaries as a form of consumption dyke. While there is much work still to be done on the age and function of the Hynish dykes, a major contribution towards understanding them further has been made by John Holliday, who has painstakingly recorded them and his field sketch will be published in the Season 1 report.

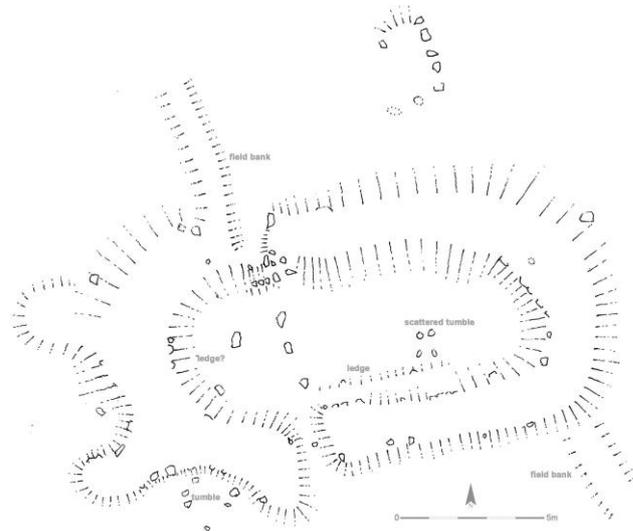
## House, Loch Dubh A Gharaidh Fail

To date, no medieval farmsteads have been positively identified on Tiree. A team led by Wendy Raine surveyed a structure which was listed on Canmore (ID 239562) as either a church - it has an approximate east-west alignment - or a possible Norse dwelling. Similarities to a Norse homestead at Doarlish Cashen, Isle of Man, excavated by P.J. Gelling in the 1960s, had been noted. These similarities included its size and the appearance of opposing doors. Excavation on the Isle of Man has shown shieling or peripheral farming in low uplands in the Norse period. While low-lying and coastal, the feature at Loch Dubh A Gharaidh Fail sits on a spectacular site, on a strip of improved peripheral ground between loch and sea. It is c.150m from the marine shore and close to an erratic boulder known as the Ringing Stone [Canmore ID 21529].



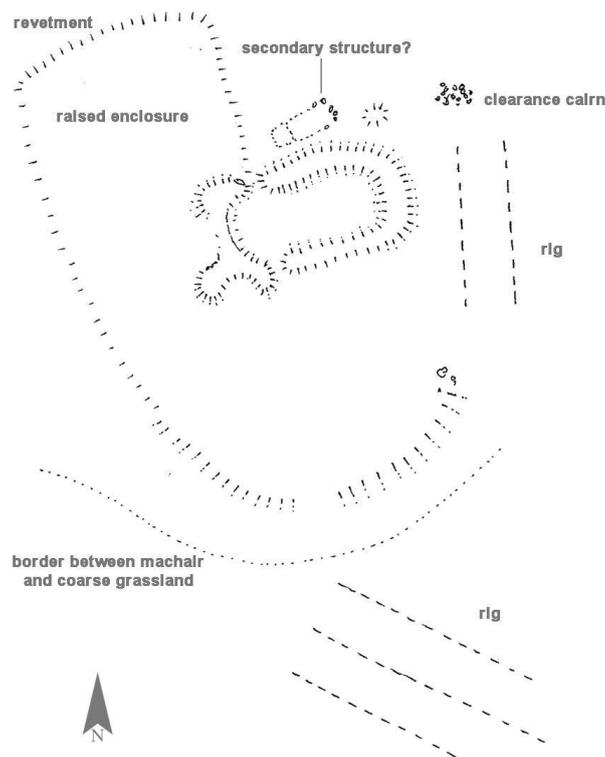
**Fig 6** Alison Blackwood, Wendy Raine ACFA and Ollie Rusk, University of Glasgow. Ringing Stone, Balephetrish (April 2016). Photograph: Peter Raine.

A rectilinear building was recorded with curved internal and external corners and possible opposing entrances to the W end of the long walls, constructed of dry stone footings. A potential secondary, amorphous structure is built up against the W wall consisting of an extended SW corner which may be the remains of a room or an extension. Apart from tumble, the interior suggests a possible raised floor platform 1.0m wide, which follows the S and W walls.



**Fig.7** Loch Dubh A Gharaidh Fail. House. Drawing: Wendy Raine ACFA (April, 2016).

A field sketch by Ollie Rusk shows the dwelling in the context of several associated features. There is a small cairn 7.0m to the ENE of the house which may represent clearance and a less defined ancillary feature on the N side where stones are arranged to suggest a rectilinear outline 2.9m x up to 4.8m long. The building and associated features are surrounded by a raised enclosure platform and are 50m from a fresh-water loch. A boundary shown on Turnbull's 1768 Argyll Estate map lies c. 125m to the S of the main building. However, the map does not record a dwelling at this site.



**Fig. 8** Loch Dubh A Gharaidh Fail. Field sketch: Ollie Rusk, University of Glasgow (April 2016)

Associated features suggest a domestic rather than ecclesiastical function. Winnowing has been posited with regards to opposing doors, however this is precluded by the ambiguity of one door which may display traces of a step or wall and the slightly sunken nature of the structure. There is also anecdotal evidence of islanders in the past constructing two doors, the use of a particular entrance depending on wind direction. Drs David Caldwell and Colleen Batey visited the site in April 2016. Dr Batey was open to the possibility that the dwelling might be late medieval or occupy a medieval site, while Dr Caldwell suggested a later date. Both agreed that a Norse date in its present incarnation is unlikely. This site would merit further investigation, perhaps through test pitting, which would allow a greater understanding of the date and typology of pre-improvement homesteads on Tiree.

### **'Beacon House' Balephuill**

An 'ancient dwelling' has been previously noted on aerial photographs at Ceann a' Mhara, Balephuill (Canmore ID 2148), on the headland above the chapel Temple Patrick (Canmore ID 21477). Ian Marshall and Fred Hay surveyed the site and dubbed it the 'Beacon House' because of its spectacular views of the bay, the inland Loch a' Phuill and Hynish to the south.



**Fig 9** 'Beacon House', Ceann 'a Mhara (Hynish in the background). Photograph: Fred Hay ACFA (April 2016)

The extent of the site is 14.0m x 10.0m and there is a single entrance to the SW end with a possible curved bank c. 3.5m long which may have sheltered it. Internal and external corners are rounded and there is a possible small recess or cruck slot on the SE corner. The walls are made of substantial field boulders but there are no other internal features or evidence of auxiliary units. The terminus of a significant boundary bank lies 34.0m to the west of the house, then sweeps east. On a visit to the site in April 2016, Dr Caldwell said that he was happy to suggest a medieval date.

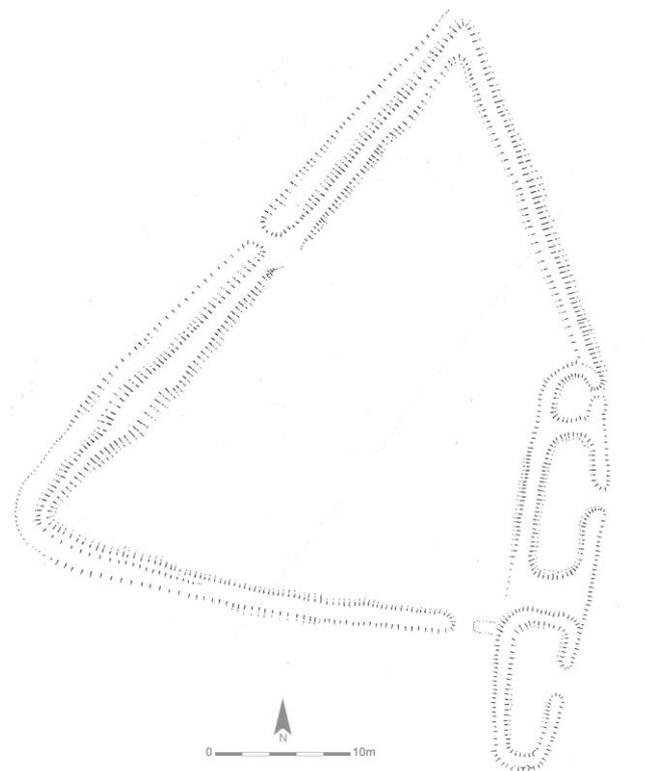


**Fig. 10** Ceann a' Mhara. 'Beacon House'. Drawing: Ian Marshall ACFA (April 2016).

A second possible late medieval dwelling and a hut or shieling feature also lie within the area of the same boundary bank. These features lie in rough grazing on a terrace and have a wide outlook to the south-west over Balephuill Bay and Loch a' Phuill. The extent of this site is 10.0m x 7.0m. There is a single entrance at the W end with possible evidence of re-alignment and blocking. At both E and W ends an outer short bank of stones may represent features associated with a roof or eaves. There are no obvious internal features, but the E end may contain a secondary feature where a spread of boulders enclose a circular feature.

## Hough

Ian Marshall and Fred Hay also surveyed a house, sub-rectangular detached structure and triangular enclosure on open ground of grass and blown sand, north of the seasonal Loch Carrastain. The site was not recorded on the 1768 Argyll Estate map or later First Edition OS map. This suggests these features were either of an earlier date, short-lived, or not deemed significant. Marshall and Hay noted a possible domestic unit incorporating a further compartment, perhaps a tool or cart unit. The putative house has an entrance on its E length and rounded corners internally and externally. The turf walls are not substantial at c. 0.5m high and 1.5m thick. There are no visible internal features within any of the features here, or the enclosure wall.

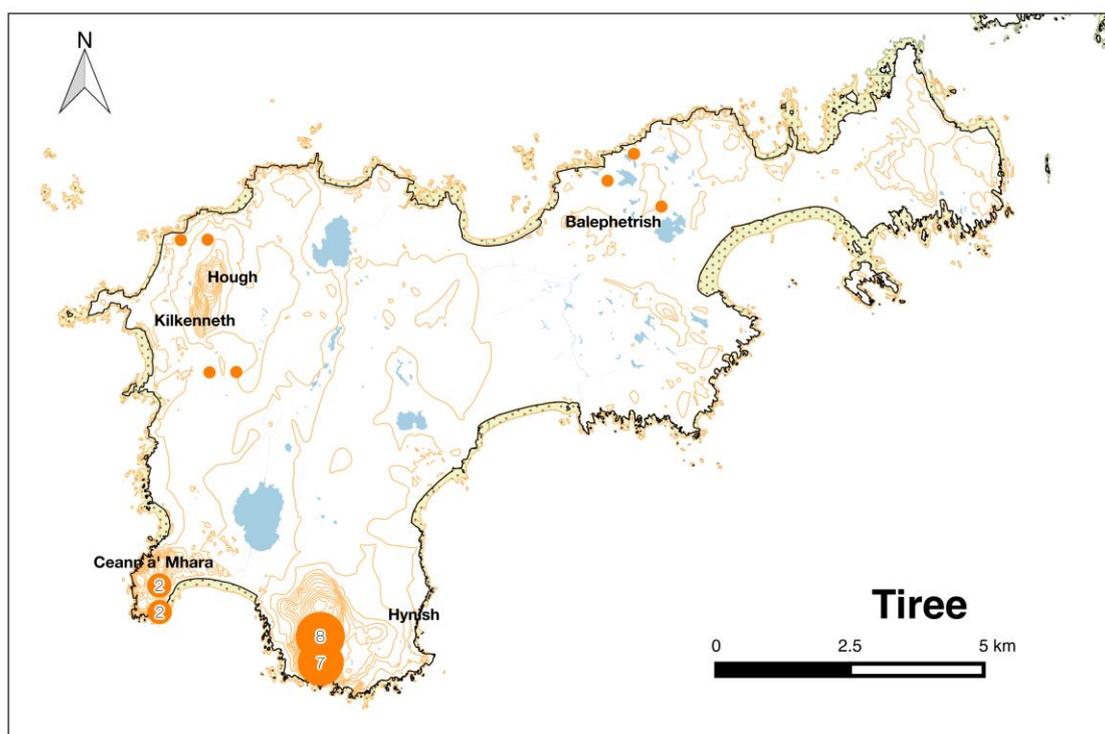


**Fig. 11** Hough. House and enclosure, Loch Carrastain. Drawing Ian Marshall (April 2016)

The extent of the site is c. 40m by 40m. To the west are several boundary-like straight ridges together forming a zig-zag pattern. This is possibly a natural feature although it should be noted that several field boundaries associated with a series of small 18th-century townships south of Hough, which are marked on the 1768 estate map, also appear to exhibit similar zig-zag patterns. Work at Hough, and a further survey undertaken of an 18/19th century farmstead at Kilkenneth, will contribute towards the beginnings of a typology of extant settlement remains on Tiree.

## Conclusion

So there we have it. A smorgasbord of ACFA's first season on Tiree. As ever, more questions have been raised than answered. We are at the beginning of understanding the typology of extant settlement remains in low-lying areas. On the headland of Ceann a' Mhara, however, we may have two structures of tentative medieval date. The association of these features with the surrounding landscape on the headland, a string of coastal Iron Age duns, St Patrick's Temple and the inland Loch a' Phuill requires further investigation. While function and dates attributed to features surveyed on Hynish are, as MacInnes points out, 'tentative at best' it is possible to say that those already recorded are 'remarkable in their number as much as their variety'. It seems likely that there is evidence of a late Bronze Age landscape on Hynish but we are a long way from a complete picture of the archaeology here. There is certainly evidence of intensive activity from prehistoric through to present-day use for sheep and cattle grazing. The nature of shieling activity on Hynish also awaits further investigation and it is worth noting that the name of nearby Dun Shiader has its roots in Old Norse 'fort of the shieling.'



**Fig. 12** GIS Cluster Map, Tiree (April 2016). Sites surveyed reflect concentrations of ACFA activity but also survival of evidence on Hynish. Ollie Rusk, University of Glasgow.

As expected, therefore, we are seeing reflected in the archaeology of Tiree the 'thriftiness' of a small island community. Re-use of sites mitigates against the survival of evidence of earlier settlements, particularly in low-lying areas. However, in the case of Hynish where there is plentiful access to stone, the impact on earlier structures has been notable but not disastrous. Here at least - and on Ceann a' Mhara - Tiree lifts its head above sea-level and interesting horizons await.