



THE ASSYNT CAIRNS DESIGNATION PROJECT: SUMMARY



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In April this year a team of six designations officers visited over 40 of Assynt's most notable prehistoric burial monuments. This was a collaborative designations project with Historic Assynt, prompted by the community heritage group's previous work, investigating the archaeological character of the Assynt area (and published in partnership with the archaeological contractor AOC Ltd).



Figure 1. Members of Historic Assynt join HES colleagues at Clachtoll Iron Age broch. Figure 2. Map showing the general location of Assynt and the sites visited during the project

The Historic Environment Scotland designations team looked at a list of designation requests for 57 Neolithic and Bronze Age burial cairns, as well as other monuments in the area, that the group felt it relevant to include. In addition, the designations team took the opportunity to review documentation for existing scheduled monuments in the immediate area, where, there could be a positive impact from updating existing legal descriptions, maps and supporting information.

Designation projects such as the Assynt Cairns Project require careful consideration, not least because they compete with other team priorities, they require significant resource allocation and can often take up to a year to plan, implement and complete.



Figures 3-6. Examples of neolithic burial cairns showing the overlying cairn and underlying passage and burial chambers.

The focus for our fieldwork were the locally dense distribution of chambered burial monuments dating back to 4000BC. These cairns will normally have one or more chambers within which the dead were placed, a connecting passage and possibly, a crescent-shaped facade or forecourt at the entrance. The structure would have been sealed over with a cairn of drystone and over time, the monument will have become less visible as vegetation and soil covered its surface.

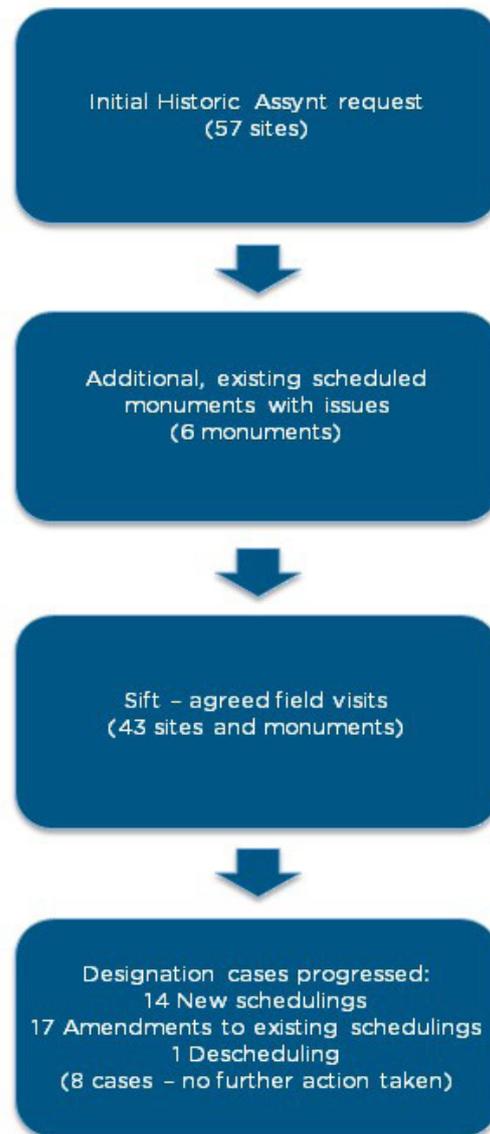
We know of over 600 of these types of monument in Scotland and in the region of the northwest and Orkney, the monuments are known as Orkney-Cromarty cairns. Later burial monuments such as cairns were built during the Bronze Age in Scotland and among the wider group in Assynt, surviving examples survive today as low earthwork mounds, often with parts of their underlying drystone structure visible and individual monoliths protruding.

You can read more about these fascinating monuments in the archaeological excavation report of one of them located at Loch Borralan, to the southeast of the Ledmore Junction on the A837 (<https://canmore.org.uk/site/4626/loch-borralan-east>).

The first stage in these types of projects is to engage directly with whomever has approached HES in order to fully understand the details of the request. The team then sifts through the list of sites to determine which of those sites can (and conversely, cannot) be dealt with, for whatever reason. On this occasion we were careful to balance what was achievable in a short field-working week with what was being asked.

In summary the 'sift' produced a master list of 43 monuments to visit and records for these sites were then compiled (combining The Highland Council Historic Environment Record, Historic Assynt's own records and information from the National Record for the Historic Environment, held by HES).

The flow chart below indicates the results of the initial sift of date, monuments visited and decisions taken about designation casework thereafter.



The project is now coming to a close as the final proposals are being completed and are sent for consultation with land owners and interested parties. Once signed, the project and its partners at HES and Historic Assynt will have secured a far better representation for neolithic and bronze age burials in the nationwide schedule of monuments of national importance.

The project team are grateful to the Historic Assynt community heritage group for highlighting these sites in the first place, their welcoming and hospitable nature and the assistance they have afforded the team throughout the planning and fieldwork stages. Grateful thanks are also due to Survey and Recording colleagues at Historic Environment Scotland, Heritage Directorate for advice, comment and technical assistance during the project.

We are the lead public body established to investigate, care for and promote Scotland's historic environment.

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