

FIG. 1

Itinerary:

Start at Historylinks: 10.30
Sidera Mill: arr. 10.40; leave 11.00
Monks' canal: arr. 11.15; leave 11.30
Achvaich settlement: arr. 11.45; leave 12.45
Achosnich croft (Lunch stop): 12.50-1.30
 (plus look at remains of old mill)
Allt Snaipeag croft (Achvaich): leave Achosnich 1.30; arr. Allt Snaipeag 2.45
 leave Allt Snaipeag 3.30; arr. Achosnich 5.00
Back at Historylinks: 5.30

Introduction

The Evelix river flows through attractive scenery to the east coast of Sutherland, following one of a series of parallel glacier-modified valleys in the southeast corner of the county. The valley, approximately 25 km in length, commences a few kilometres north-west of Bonar Bridge and contains a wealth of archaeological interest, ranging from Iron-age hut circles and chambered cairns to 19th century eviction settlements and watermills.

Site 1: Sidera Farm watermill (Figure 2)

The site of this mill, now a ruin, lies 500m north of Cyderhall Farm, at NH 758 890. The ruined mill building, and the positions of the mill lade, mill pond and tail race can still be seen. The mill building is recessed into the hillside. The gable end with its square shaft opening and wheel pit are still visible. A large wooden trough set on wooden supports conveyed water to the wheel from the mill pond dam. Following a fire, this trough was removed to a location about 400m upstream to act as a water trough for animals, and was still there in 1989.

The mill is recorded by the Sutherland Estate in 1812 as having a value of "not more than £20". It is known that Mr. Whittet, one of the last Skibo factors, had the mill burned down in the 20th century to economise on Estate dues.

110m ENE of the mill building is Sidera Mill ford and stepping stones. These stepping stones are of great antiquity and are regarded as having been built by the Vikings, who had a village, or encampment in this area.

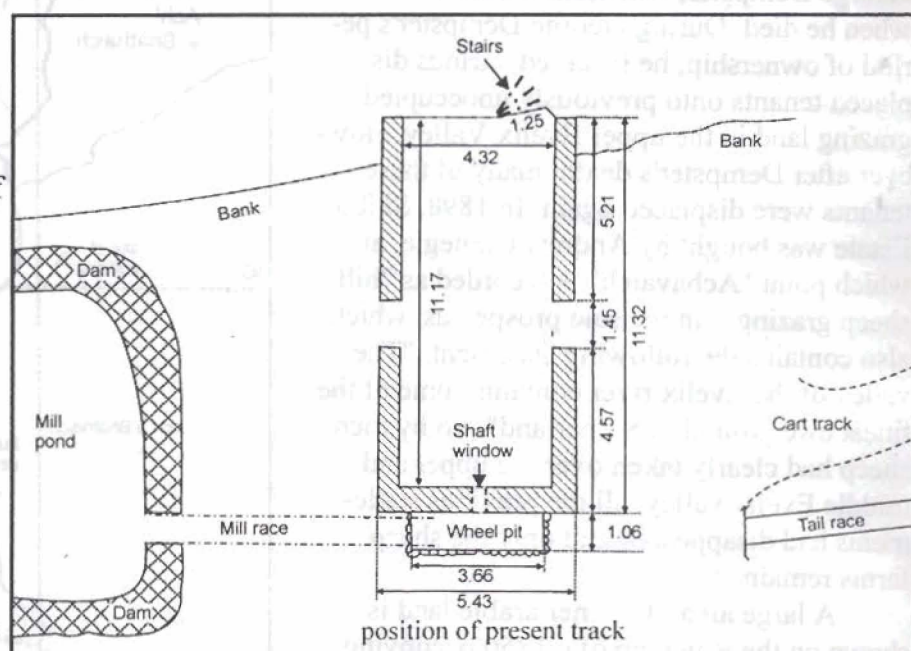


FIG. 2: Sidera watermill

Site 2: The Rearquhar Monks' canal ((Figure 3))

By local tradition, the "Monks' canal" was a mill lade bringing water to a mill in the original Dornoch Cathedral settlement in the 13th century, at the time when Dornoch Cathedral was established. Water was required for working the flour mill and servicing the developing township, and so a channel was cut by the monks from the River Evelix at Rearquhar to bring running water to Dornoch. However there is no evidence of it lower down the valley where it has probably been obliterated by agricultural operations.

The canal commences about 400m northwest of Rearquhar, at NH 7345 9125, where it can be traced in a thicket about 3m above the level of the river. The discrepancy in level at its point of origin may be due partly to cutting down of the river, and partly to infill over the centuries from weathering and movement of animals. The best view is where the Rearquhar road cuts the old channel a few hundred yards east of Rearquhar School House, near Gashagich, at NH 7485 9200. It continues beyond the road, now a simple shallow ditch, to disappear near Gashagich croft, and then makes a further appearance about a kilometre to the east where a short section of about three to four hundred metres of very shallow ditching is seen at Cnoc Bhair.

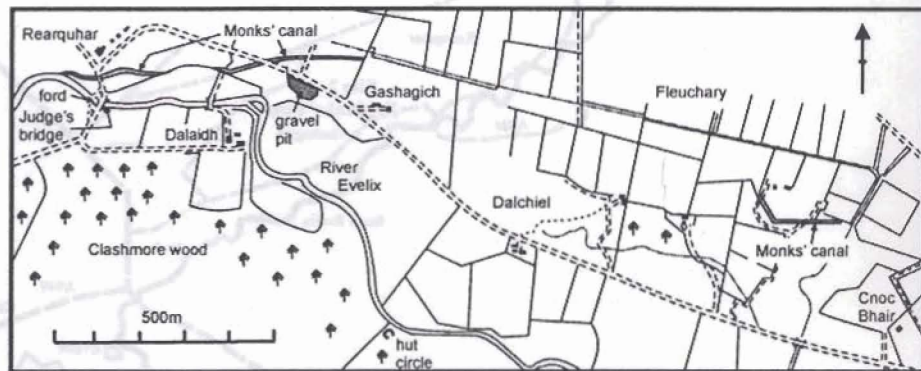


FIG. 3: the Monks' canal

The Achvaich settlements (Figure 4)

The Skibo Estate, in addition to Skibo Castle and its immediate parklands and home farm, includes a large tract of ground in the upper Evelix valley between Loch Laro and Achvaich. In 1794, the estate was acquired by George Dempster, who held it until 1819 when he died. During George Dempster's period of ownership, he installed various displaced tenants onto previously unoccupied grazing land in the upper Evelix Valley. However after Dempster's death, many of these tenants were displaced again. In 1898, Skibo Estate was bought by Andrew Carnegie, at which point "Achavaich" is recorded as "hill sheep grazings" in the sale prospectus, which also contains the following statement: "The valley of the Evelix river contains some of the finest ewe ground in Sutherland". So by then sheep had clearly taken over the upper and middle Evelix valley, all the previous settlements had disappeared and only the sheep farms remained.

A large area of former arable land is shown on the Roy map of c.1750 occupying the valley of Strath Ach a' Bhathaich (Strath Achvaich), a tributary of the river Evelix on the north side of the main valley. Figure 4 shows a number of settlements occupying the lower 2km of the strath.

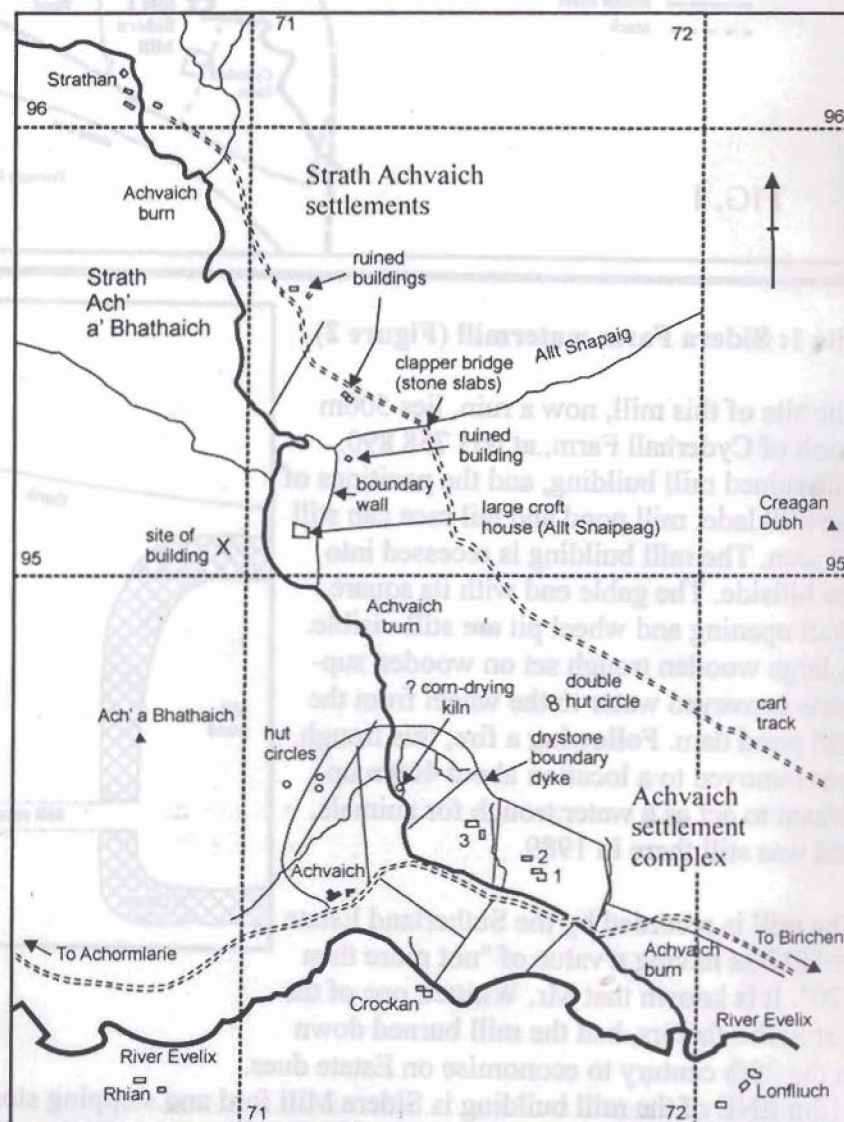


FIG. 4: Achvaich settlements

However the buildings shown on the Roy map lie in the immediate vicinity of the present-day Achvaich farm, built in the 1820s, and are no longer visible, being replaced by the various post-eviction settlements. These settlements form two distinct groups: those in the main valley, near the present Achvaich farm (the Achvaich settlement) and those further up the Achvaich Valley (Strath Achvaich settlements). In the 1851 census, 8 separate families are recorded at Achvaich but, by 1946, only two are recorded, at Achvaich Farm.

The oldest settlement, at Achvaich itself, was probably set up as a result of clearances elsewhere (perhaps on the original site across the Achvaich burn) but it in turn seems to have been cleared to make way for the farm. Of the crofts further up Strath Achvaich, two (tenants of Skibo Estate) were occupied within living memory - in the case of Strathan, until 1906.

Site 3: The Achvaich settlement, building 3 (Figure 5)

The ruins of several buildings can be seen on the lower slopes of the hillside just north of the road. This settlement consists of a group of separate buildings, two with associated enclosures, plus a possible corn-drying kiln, situated on the north bank of the river on the opposite side of the Achvaich burn from the present Achvaich Farm (Figure 4). Building group 3 is situated at NH 7151 9443, on the west side of a small burn. It consists of a rather simple dwelling house with attached byre. The house is set into the hillside and has a retaining wall at the front. Across the access track is a large enclosure with a simple rectangular plan and entrance on its west side. The eastern wall is completely demolished. There is a small building attached to the west wall which may have functioned as a store or perhaps an animal shelter.

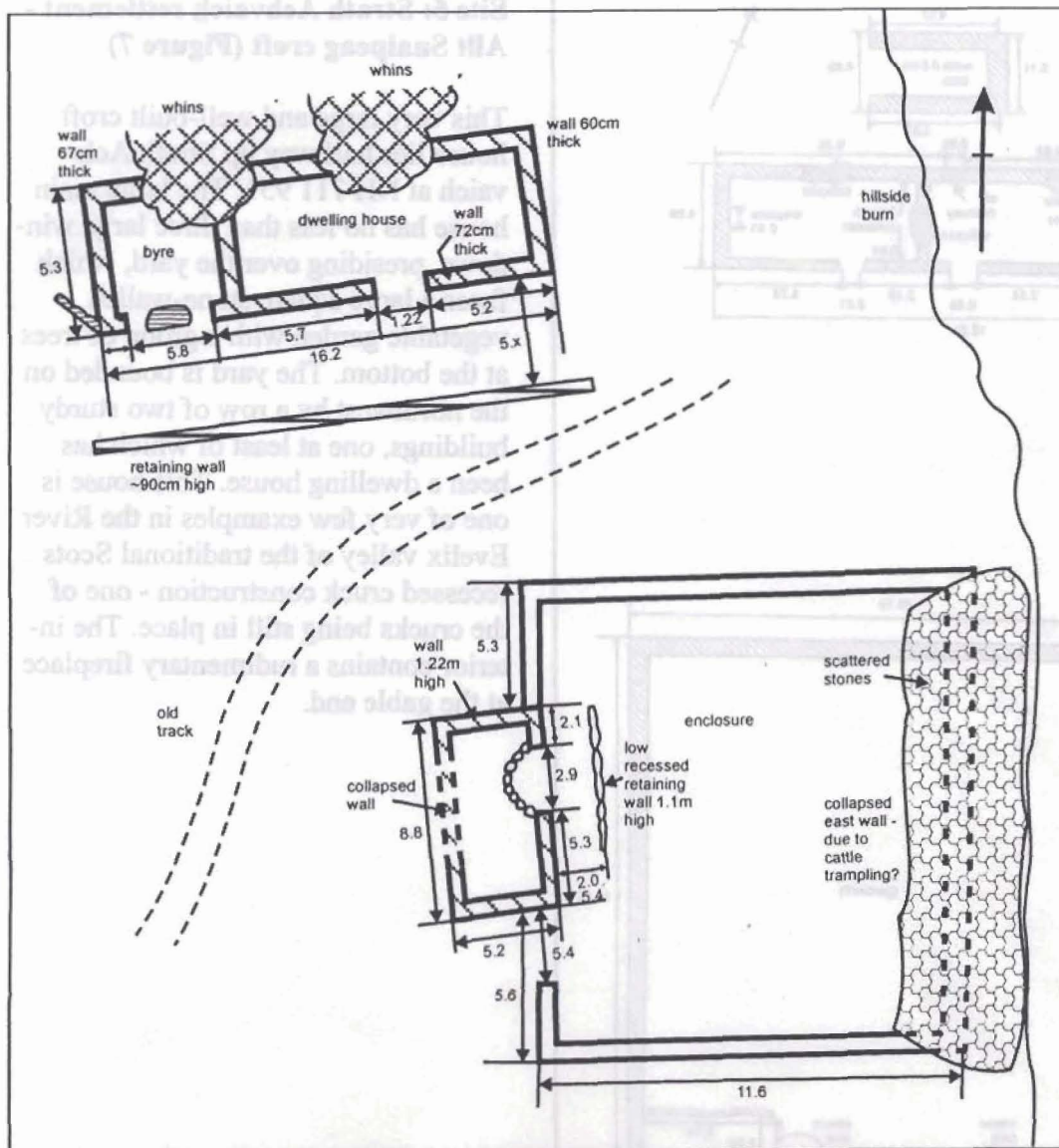


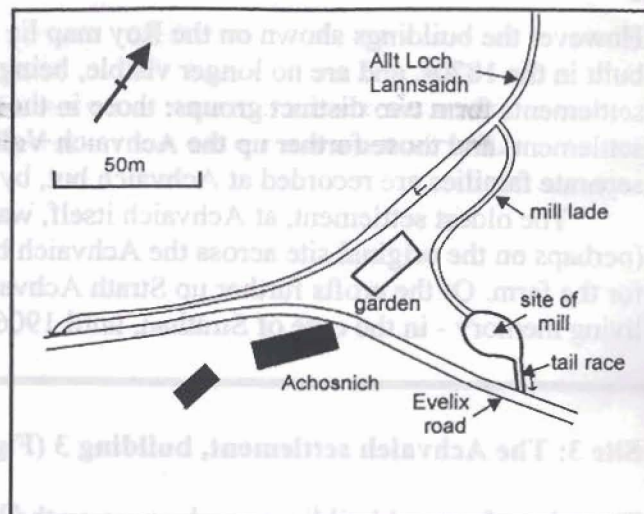
FIG. 5: Achvaich settlement: building 3

Site 4: Achosnich watermill (Figure 6)

The remains of this little mill are situated at Achosnich croft, NH 726 940, beside the present house. The mill must be well-nigh two hundred years old, as not only do very few people locally know of its existence, but every stone of which it was built has been removed for other purposes. Nevertheless, the mill-lade and tail-race remain in the form of clear-cut incisions into the hillside. The entrance to the mill lade is now nearly one metre higher than the present river level. The presence of a line of stones across the river here suggests the presence of a former cauld or weir; this structure must have been originally substantial in order to divert the river water into the lade. The mill must almost certainly have had a horizontal wheel (i.e. a "click mill").

A typical example of the rent paid by Achosnich mill in the early 19th century is: 1 pig, 6 bolls, 3 firlats of meal as "moulder" (owed by law to the laird as a proportion of the meal ground at the mill), 100 eggs, 4 cocks, 8 hens, 1 wedder, 1 beast of the laird's wintered, making a cash rent of £10 9/2. This should be compared to the rent from an average-sized croft such as Gashagich, which paid 1 firlat of meal, 80 eggs, 2 cocks, 4 hens, 1 wedder and 1 beast wintered, or a cash rent of £2 12/-.

The mill is recorded by Sutherland Estates in 1812 separately from the croft. In 1884, only the croft figures in the valuation roll so that by then it must have been demolished.



Site 5: Strath Achvaich settlement - Allt Snaipeag croft (Figure 7)

This very large and well-built croft house lies half way up Strath Achvaich at NH 711 951. The large main house has no less than three large windows, presiding over the yard, which faces a large square stone-walled vegetable garden with a group of trees at the bottom. The yard is bounded on the northwest by a row of two sturdy buildings, one at least of which has been a dwelling house. This house is one of very few examples in the River Evelix valley of the traditional Scots recessed cruck construction - one of the crucks being still in place. The interior contains a rudimentary fireplace at the gable end.

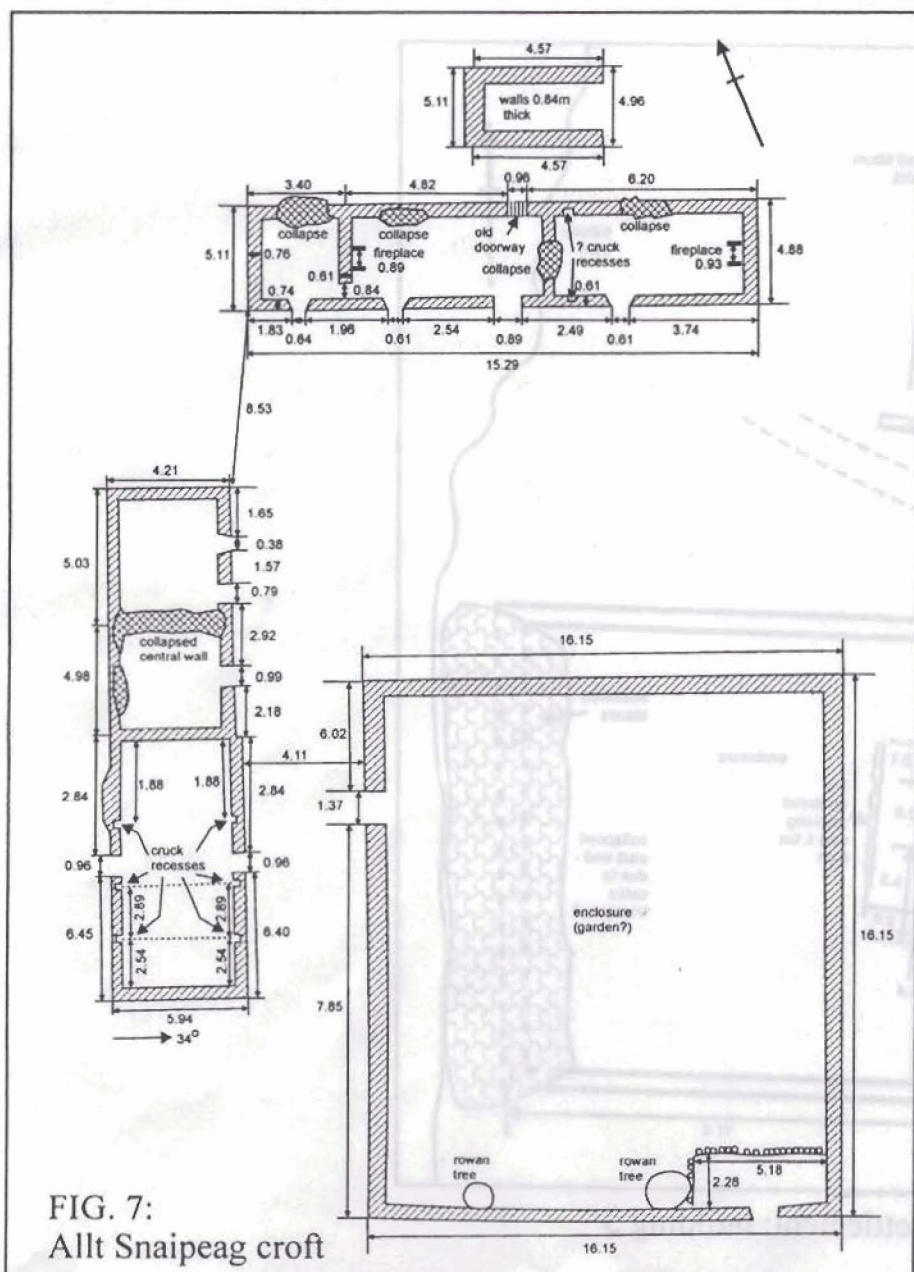


FIG. 7:
Allt Snaipeag croft