



Case reference	SMC-ABS-005
Application details	Re-excavation of antiquarian trenches and new evaluative trenches
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	Nil
Date notified to Ministers	25 January 2019
Date of recommendation	5 February 2019
Decision / recommendation	Clear

Description of Proposal and Site:

- Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) is being sought for the re-excavation of four antiquarian trenches and three new trenches at Mither Tap, Bennachie, Aberdeenshire. Bennachie is one of the best-known landmarks in the Northeast. Mither Tap (see Figure 1) is a large hilltop enclosure or fort which was most likely built during the later prehistoric or early historic period. The monument's two stone ramparts enclose a natural granite outcrop making the summit of Mither Tap and the high point of the Bennachie hill range. The monument is a well-preserved example of its class and it retains a significant proportion of its estimated original shape and structure, notably substantial walls with surviving wall faces and a unique example of parapet walk.
- The scheduled area is roughly circular on plan (see Figure 3 in Annex 1), to include the visible remains of the fort and an area around, within which evidence relating to the monument's construction and use may survive.
- The monument is of national importance because it makes a significant addition to understanding the past, in particular, 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.



Figure 1 - Mither Tap hilltop fort (Iain Cameron, Flickr 2018)

Consultations and Representations:

- No representations were made during the consideration of the application.
- PAD consulted Scottish Government's Culture and Historic Environment Division following notification and they are content and have no further comment to make.

Assessment:

1. Historic Environment Scotland (HES) are minded to grant SMC for physical works which will impact on the scheduled monument, as the related ground disturbance goes beyond the minimum level of intervention which is consistent with conserving what is culturally significant in the monument. This is a significant departure from policy as set out in section 3.16 of the HES Policy Statement 2016.
2. The application has been submitted by the University of Aberdeen and forms part of the Northern Picts and Comparative Kingship Project that is being carried out by the university. The project team have been working to improve knowledge and understanding of the Picts for 10 years and have been responsible for significant advances in knowledge in the Aberdeenshire area.
3. The proposed works would involve evaluation trenches to examine the ramparts of the fort, as well as a platform and an external wall. Within the seven trenches, walls would be retained in situ, while occupation deposits would be sample excavated to allow recovery of dating and environmental samples. The extent of the impact from 19th century excavations will also be assessed. In addition, any deposits where a small area of footpath repairs are proposed would also be excavated and recorded. The proposals aim to characterise and date some of the main features of the fort and clarify the extent to which Mither Tap was used in the later prehistoric and early historic periods.
4. HES state that the seven proposed trenches (see Figure 2 in Annex 1) would contribute to improved understanding of the character and significance of the

fort, and dating it would be of wide public and academic interest. The investigation works would also respond to key research areas suggested by the Scottish Archaeological Research Framework (ScARF), whose Iron Age panel recommends targeted excavation to remedy a lack of dating evidence for enclosed sites. HES also state that the project would also offer educational opportunities for volunteers and students and has a high potential to inform future interpretation of the site for visitors and local people.

5. HES do acknowledge that the sample excavation would be destructive, as it would remove archaeological deposits and artefacts in small areas of the site. However, HES consider that given the small size of the trenches, relative to the size of the monument and because of the proposed excavation methodology – the investigations will not have a material effect on the monuments overall archaeological value. Therefore, HES consider that the proposals are not inconsistent with the principles of minimal intervention and would have a very limited impact on the cultural significance on the monument.
6. HES also consider that although the proposals are not extensive, there is high potential that the investigations would generate public benefits of national importance which outweigh the limited impact on the national cultural significance of the monument.
7. HES also conclude that the benefits of the proposed work are considered to be greater than the negative effects of the removal of a number archaeological deposits. Therefore consider that the works are justified in accordance with paragraph 3.17 of their Policy Statement. Lastly, HES consider the proposed works meets paragraph 3.20 of the Policy Statement as they have demonstrated that they have been carefully considered, based on good authority, sensitively designed and properly planned which have led to HES considering that no conditions are necessary.
8. Overall, HES are of the view that the works would affect a relatively small area and would not visually alter the monument after reinstatement and the vegetation regrows. Therefore, HES conclude the works would have no material effect on the overall significance of the monument.
9. However, the proposed works are not considered the minimum necessary consistent with conserving what is culturally significant in the monument, hence the requirement to notify 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.

Annex 1

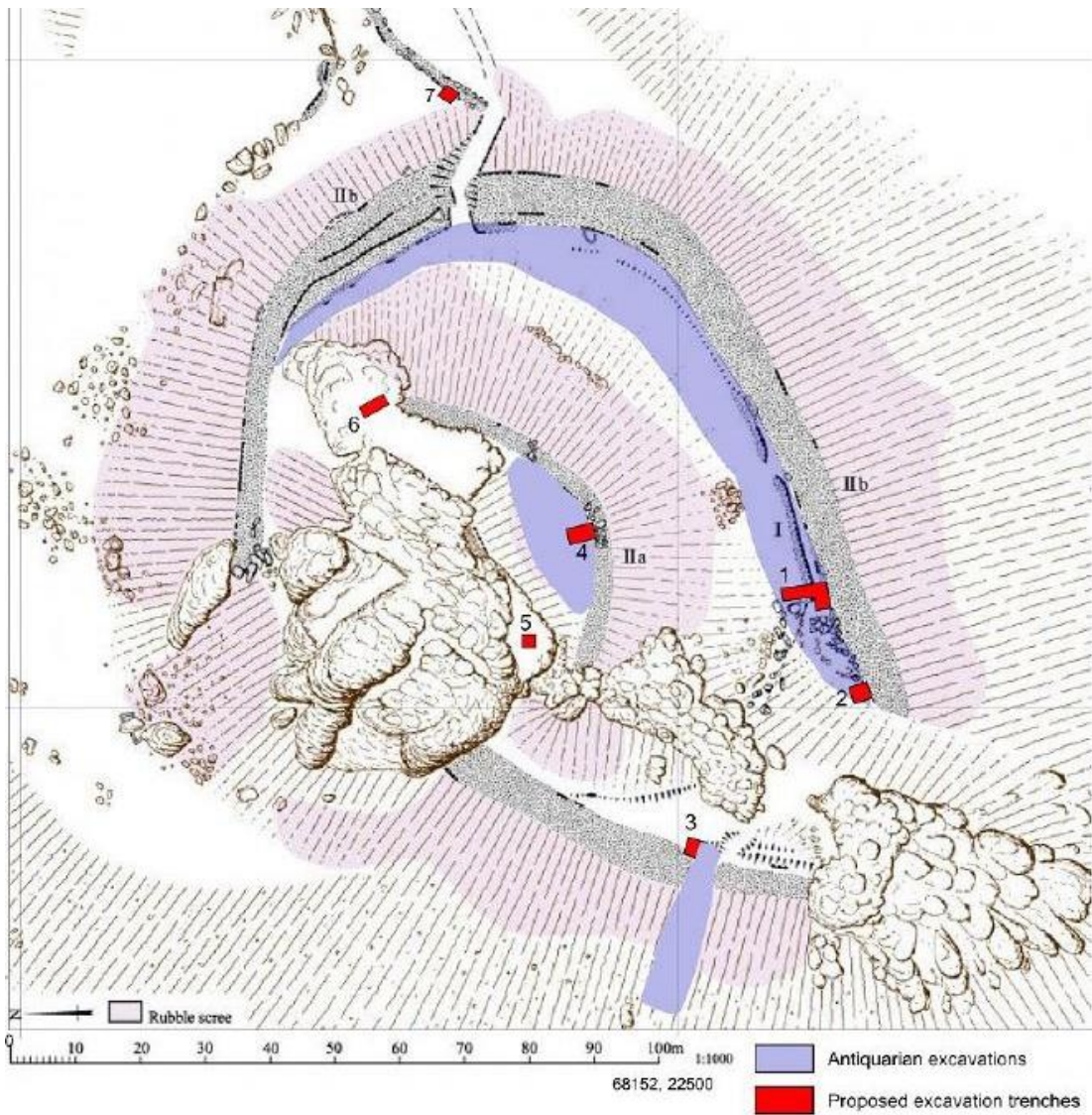


Figure 2 – Proposed trench locations (from submitted project design)

Figure 3 – Scheduled area in red below.

