

Lower Polish

(OS NM 750 825)

**A report of an archaeological survey
for Scotland's Rural Past (part of the
Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical
Monuments in Scotland) by members of the
Moidart History Group.**

December 2010

Lower Polish: a township in Moidart

1. Introduction

This survey is concerned with the township known as Lower Polish, which was a scattered township on the eastern isthmus of the Ardnish Peninsula, in the parish first of Ardnamurchan, and later of Arisaig. It overlooks the shores of Loch Ailort, and is opposite the modern village of Lochailort. The survey, split into two parts, covers firstly the remains of Lower Polish on the shoreline of Loch Ailort and secondly that on the hilltops west of the A830 road, which was realigned in 2000 and which now divides the existing, disused, Roman Catholic church from the township.

Drawing 1 shows the overall plan of Lower Polish.

1.1 Lower Polish: the shoreline settlement

The centre of the survey area is at Ordnance Survey Grid Reference NM 752 825.

Archaeological excavation in 1996, prior to the realignment of the road identified two post-medieval buildings and a possible corn kiln, all now beneath the new road surface (see *Canmore ID 118438*, *NMR Site Number NM78SE 2*).

This is the easternmost part of the settlement of Lower Polish and is immediately above sea level on the shores of Lochailort, below the rest of Lower Polish. It splits into five groups of features. It has an ample water supply from a central burn.

Drawing 2 shows the plan of the shoreline settlement of Lower Polish.

Features 1, 2 and 3.

1. A well-preserved building, about 11m x 5m, with walls with rounded external corners standing to eave height, the interior heavily-overgrown with mature trees. The doorway and one of the windows on the south-east wall still have substantial stone lintels. This building features in many old photographs of Polish where it is shown thatched. An overgrown stone wall, ankle-high, divides it from the buildings to the west. Not visible during survey was a gap in the north-west corner of the wall, which is an entrance clearly seen in an old photograph.
2. A large stone-walled enclosure with walls of varying height – some as high as two metres, some tumbled: a probable track ran between the eastern wall and the steep bank beyond it which would have followed the old post track to Lochailort.
3. A group of very-overgrown features, only properly visible from aerial photographs but discernible on the ground. It is likely these were animal pens of some kind.

Features 4 and 5 are situated along the bank of the burn.

4. A small building with externally-rounded corners to the shoulder-height walls, the entrance to the south. About 5m x 4 m. It has a flagged floor. Currently (2010) it is in use with a polytunnel built inside it. There is a stone-walled unroofed enclosure, about 4m x 6m, adjoining it to the north with no discernible entrance.

5. A 12m x 4m building with externally-rounded corners to eave height, with a substantial fireplace in a central wall with a massive stone lintel. There is a blocked-up entrance in the north-east wall. The main doorway lintel remains.

Feature 6.

6. This modernised house, 11m x 5m, is still inhabited. It has been altered from that seen in earlier photographs but retains the floor plan. It was known as 'Wee Ronald's house' because the last of the old inhabitants, Ronald MacEachen, lived there until about 1970.

Feature 7.

7. A building with externally-rounded corners standing to shoulder height, 11m x 4m, with an enclosed garden ground.

Feature 8.

8. A pair of small buildings with externally-rounded corners, 5m x 3m and 6m x 4m, with 1m-high standing walls with full-height cruck slots on the internal walls. There is a large adjoining stone-walled enclosure in which the remains of a building (a byre?) can be traced. There are traces of riggs between features 7 and 8.

1.2 Lower Polish: the hilltop settlement

This part of the survey is concerned with one part of the township known as Lower Polish. The survey covers the remains of Lower Polish on the hilltops overlooking Loch Ailort and west of the A830 road, which was realigned in 2000 and which now divides the existing, disused, Roman Catholic church from the township. The centre of the survey area is at Ordnance Survey Grid Reference NM 749 826.

Archaeological excavation in 1996, prior to the realignment of the road identified two post-medieval buildings and a possible corn kiln, all now beneath the new road surface (see *Canmore ID 118438*, NMR *Site Number* NM78SE 2).

An unusually large area of riggs is visible on the foothills of Ardnish to the south-east of this part of the township, and there are many more in and around the immediate township.

Drawing 3 shows the survey areas and their relationships, labelled as sections A and B. Feature numbers start at Feature 9: feature numbers 1 to 8 refer to NM78SE13, the shoreline part of the Lower Polish township.

Section A (see drawing 3)

This section comprises a group of buildings at the north-west of Lower Polish, the highest level being over 50m above sea level. The section splits into five groups of features. Although the area is marshy, there is no easily-accessible water supply nearer than Loch Dubh, 500m to the north-west. Loch Dubh was dammed by Robert MacAlpine's construction company in the late 1800s to provide water-power for a tunnelling drill for the West Highland Railway, but has substantially retained its shape. The only other supply is a spring in the gully south-east of feature 22 (see below).

Features 9 and 10.

9. A ruinous building with some standing walls, 6m x 3m, with an entrance to the south, tucked into the shelter of a low hill.

10. A very ruined building, 6m x 4m, with some walls to the north and west, tucked against the hill. South of these features is an extensive marshy area.

Feature 11.

11. Almost indiscernible now, this building consists of a scattering of stones, about 10m x 4m, with a right-angled pair of walls some 4m x 4m on the western end. The outline is best discerned from the crag high above.

Features 12 and 13.

In a windy gap between two low hills are two relatively-large buildings.

12. Stone foundations of a building, about 9m x 6m, in a tumbled state.

13. A large building with externally-rounded corners, 11m x 5m, with a probable entrance to the north. The western wall is still standing to eave height. There are cruck slots and evidence of some rebuilding, but no traces of internal walls.

Features 14 and 15.

14. A stony scatter, roughly 5m x 5m, on top of a low heather-covered hill, in a very exposed position. Possibly simply stone clearance.

15. A small stone-built cairn on top of a low hill. Possibly a recent feature.

Feature 16.

16. A substantially-built ruin with externally-rounded corners, hidden from the main settlement, about 5m x 3m and an entrance to the west.

Features 17 and 18.

These two features are on the valley floor beneath feature 16. It has been suggested that they are collapsed peat stacks, although local opinion is that such stacks would never have been abandoned and that even if they were, they would have collapsed inwards like a badly-baked cake. There is undoubtedly evidence of old peat cutting nearby. These features may benefit from further investigation.

17. This an almost perfectly-circular mound, 8m across, rising to about a metre high in the centre. The vegetation differs from the surrounding grasses and rushes. Metal probes found nothing solid below the surface.

18. North-west of feature 17 and similar in nature, this is an oval feature about 8m x 4m, 1m high in the centre.

Feature 19.

This is the remains of an enclosure wall, incomplete, which closed off the top of the gully which runs south-east from feature 16 down to the shore.

Section B (see drawing 4)

This section is a group of buildings and an enclosure to the south-west of the township, somewhat isolated from the main upper group, half-way up the hill on a flat promontory. These are amongst the best-preserved buildings in this part of Lower Polish. There is a stone-lined spring, or well, half-way down the gully to the south-east of feature 21.

Features 20, 21 and 22.

20. About 6m x 4m with the two end walls with externally-rounded corners standing and an entrance to the west.

21. About 5m x 4m with externally-rounded corners with an entrance to the north-east; this building is complete up to eave height.

22. A small enclosure, possibly an animal enclosure, about 15m x 15m, using a sheer rock wall to the west with a sheer drop to the east connecting the two other stone walls.

There is also a large enclosure, very ruinous, about 45m x 50m, in the gully below and due east of feature 22, which was not surveyed in detail.

2. Lower Polish: history and demography.

Lower Polish was a scattered township on the eastern isthmus of the Ardnish Peninsula, in the parish first of Ardnamurchan, and later of Arisaig. It overlooks the shores of Loch Ailort, and is opposite the modern village of Lochailort.

The demography of Lower Polish

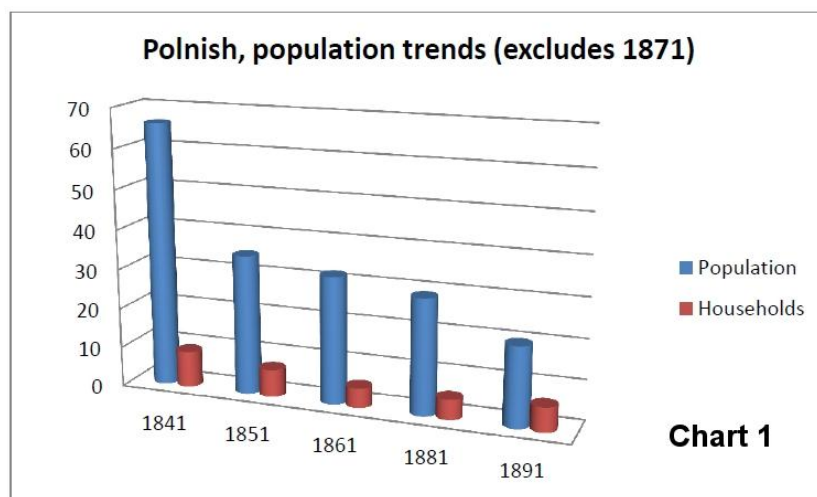
Oral history tells that about 1520 the pursued Dugald VI of Clanranald took to the hills from Loch Ailort and was murdered by his kinsmen in the corrie known as Coire a' Dhugaill, about 800m east of Polish.

Two Polishes appear on modern maps, but the Ordnance Survey's First Edition Map, published in 1876, shows 'Polnish School', well to the northwest of what we nowadays know as Lower Polish. The school, now a modernised dwelling outside the survey area, was recorded by the OS surveyors in 1873. It was created by Mrs Astley, the estate owner in the 1870s (Robertson) and funded by the SSPCK (Roberts). It would have served Polish, Kinlochnanuamh and Ardnish: the average attendance was only fifteen children.

The New Statistical Account of 1834 makes only one mention of anything at all on the Ardnish Peninsula – 'Polnish Church is a tolerable thatched house, built by subscription, which, being inadequate, a considerable share of the expense has fallen on the assistant' (Statistical Accounts of Scotland). This church was refurbished by the Kinlochailort Camerons in the later part of the century (Roberts).

The 1876 OS map shows only the buildings by the shore (Section A of the drawings) as being roofed – all the ones on top of the hill were already roofless.

The first available census of the Ardnish Peninsula is from 1841, when it was part of the parish of Ardnamurchan. This report examines available data up to and including 1891, but the 1871 data is illegible and is not considered.



The data is not easy to interpret: we have to assume that the same rules as today applied, and that overnight absence when the enumerator called meant that one did not appear on the list. Two surnames predominate: MacDonald and MacDougall. This area was a Clan Ranald stronghold and MacDonalds still predominate in Moidart today, although the MacDougalls have largely disappeared. Christian names were often passed on within the family, and this adds to the problems of genealogy.

In 1841 and 1851 Lower Polish and Upper Polish were classified as separate settlements: after this only Polish is mentioned, except in 1891, when it is known as Kinlochailort Road – but analysis of the data tells us it was Polish. Today, the whole township is known locally as Lower Polish, and chart 1 (see photographs) assumes this. This chart shows a significant population decline from 66 to 35 in the 1840s, almost certainly attributable to the 1848 potato famine. A huge area of riggs to the south of the township tells us that arable land was vital to Polish, and we know that potatoes were very important to the diet of the Highlander. In 1846 the potato famine struck the Highlands and in the hungry years afterwards many folk emigrated, mainly to Canada and Australia.

This was a very rural community. In 1841, apart from the schoolmaster and one man who described himself as a cattle drover, every other man was either a cottar, a tenant or an agricultural labourer. By 1851, only one tenant is listed, with twelve acres to farm – every other man is described as a labourer, except one – the first shepherd appears, reflecting the introduction of sheep. After 1851, 'labourers' predominate but it is not until 1891 that we see that they may not have all been agricultural labourers – two widows tell us that their husbands had been road-menders and masons, but it is quite likely that these men could turn their hands to various tasks. The 1870s saw a major depression, with a succession of bad, wet harvests, overgrazing by sheep and the development of deer estates, and by 1881 we see only five men claiming to work the land. 1891 shows a marked change – the population dips and, of the six household heads, only the schoolmaster is male – the other five are older women, four of whom are widows. Fifteen out of the twenty people recorded on the census are female.

The population of Polish declined for reasons common everywhere in the Highlands: poverty, hunger, lack of work, sheep and deer grazing destroying crops, and in Ardnish the situation was not helped by the second world war, when the entire peninsula was cleared of people to enable secret Special Forces training to be carried out. Only one black house in the old township of Lower Polish is still (2010) inhabited, following modernisation. The last of the 'old inhabitants' on the peninsula, Ronald MacEachen, left this house, known locally as 'Wee Ronald's', around 1970.

People in Polish before 1900 spoke Gaelic almost exclusively – only the landowners used English until the teaching of Gaelic was actively discouraged by the 1872 Education Act, and by the 1881 census 92.9% still did (Duwe). Today, about 14.5% of the population speaks some Gaelic.

There is little about the individual inhabitants of Polish in any kind of record, but the MacDonalds, living in Polish, came to prominence to complain about deer ravaging their potato crops when the Napier Commission sat in Arisaig on August 6th, 1883, (Napier Commission). The 20,000 acres of the Arisaig Deer Forest was at that time owned by Mrs Nicholson, née Astley.

There was considerable unrest by tenants all over the Highlands in the 1860s and 1870s, to the point where the landowners regularly called in the police – but the police were being overstretched. Because of this, Lord Gladstone set up a Royal Commission, led by Lord Napier, to look into the rents, security of tenure and evictions of cottars and crofters. The Commission eventually led to the 1886 Crofters' Holding Act.

"Napier Aug 6th 1883 Vol 3 p2070

Mr N. B. Mackenzie, factor for the proprietrix of Arisaig. —I am authorised to say, on behalf of the proprietors, that persons may speak freely and perfectly whatever grievances they may have, and that anything they may say today will not be used against them.

Napier Aug 6th 1883 Vol 3 p2123

33337. *Do you know anything of the three cottars, Donald Macdonald, Donald Macdonald, sen.[and Archibald M'Dougal], who live in Polnish?—Yes.*

33338. *They have some potato land ?—Yes.*

33339. *They have had some potato land off a farm upon which they are cottars, and they complain very much, that the deer have destroyed their potatoes. Where do these deer come from ?—I have no idea.*

33340. *Where is that deer forest—round about here ?—No; it is on the Kinloch Moidart part of the estate.*

33341. *Where do these deer come from?—They must be wild deer travelling over the country.*

33342. *It is stated that the late Mr Astley promised to fence this potato ground. Do you know why that has not been done ?—I do not know; but Mrs Nicholson was disposed to fence it, and there was an arrangement that it should be fenced when a certain thing was done. There was a small rent put on the tenants, and, as soon as they clear that, I understand they will get that altered.*

33343. *But has that been intimated to these people ?—Yes, I have done it myself, by letter. It is a small potato patch.”*

The subsequent pages of the Napier Report tell us that the MacDonalds had a single cow, and that not only the proprietor's deer (for deer would certainly not have been discouraged by the factor, wild or not) but her sheep were causing havoc with MacDonald's potatoes.

There was also a dispute about whether the rent had been paid or not. Next day, Donald MacDonald goes on to say *“We were promised a fence by the late Mr Astley and by Mr M'Kenzie, factor, and on the strength of these promises we planted potatoes; but they were destroyed, and our husbandry entirely stopped. The result is that from being poor we have become poorer, and our case is truly pitiable. We are a sad example of the ruinous effects of the growth of deer forests - especially where they are not fenced.”* He points out that they rented only the shells of the black houses and had to thatch them themselves. Life for the cottars was not easy.

References

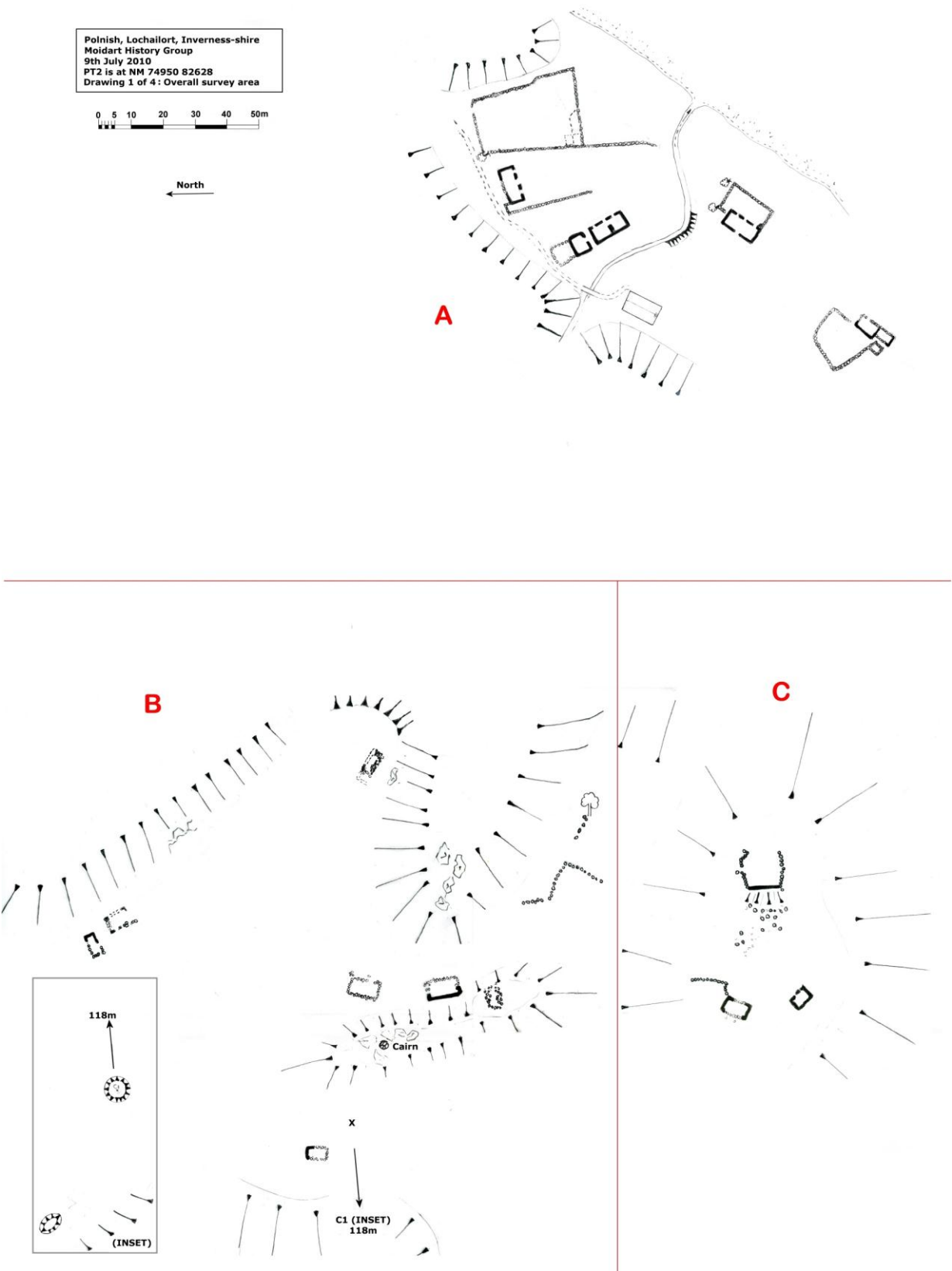
1. Robertson, T., 2005, Moidart History Group, <http://www.moidart.org.uk/datasets/1873ordsurvextract.htm> , (accessed July 2010).
2. Roberts, A., 2010, by email to the author, March 2010.
3. Statistical Accounts of Scotland, 1834, <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1834-45/Argyle/Ardnamurchan/7/158/> , (accessed July 2010).
4. Napier Commission Aug 6th 1883, Vol 3 p2070 and p2123, transcribed by Lochaber College, Mallaig, at <http://www.highland-elibrary.com/> (accessed July 2010).
5. Duwe, K., 2010, http://www.linguae-celticae.org/GLS_english.htm ,(accessed July 2010).

Acknowledgements

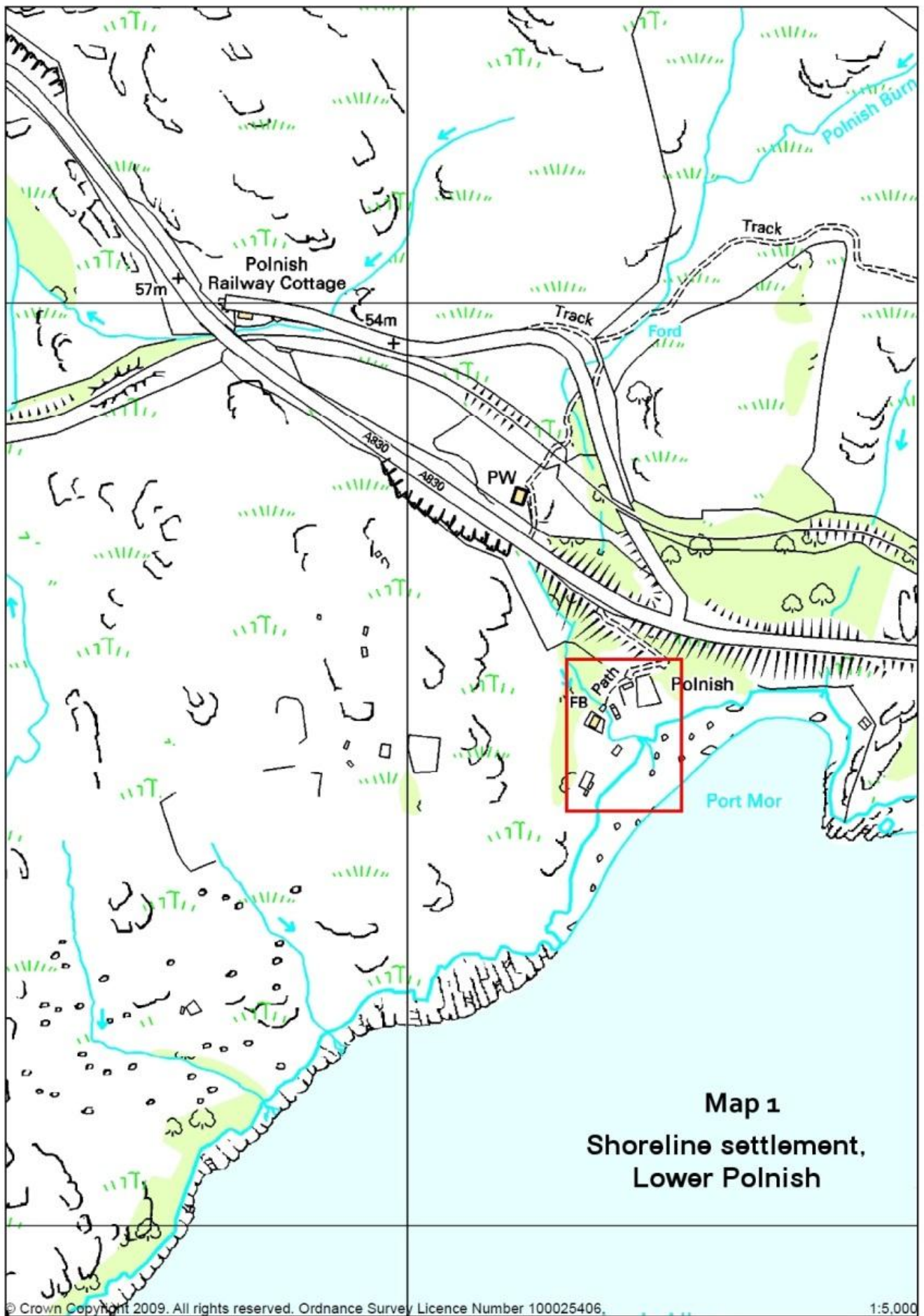
We are grateful to Mr. & Mrs. C. Sandeman for permission to survey the townships of the Ardnish Peninsula, and to the Scottish Mountaineering Club (SMC) to use images from the A. E. Robertson photographic archive.

Ken & Jean Bowker, Allan & Elizabeth MacDonald
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December 2010

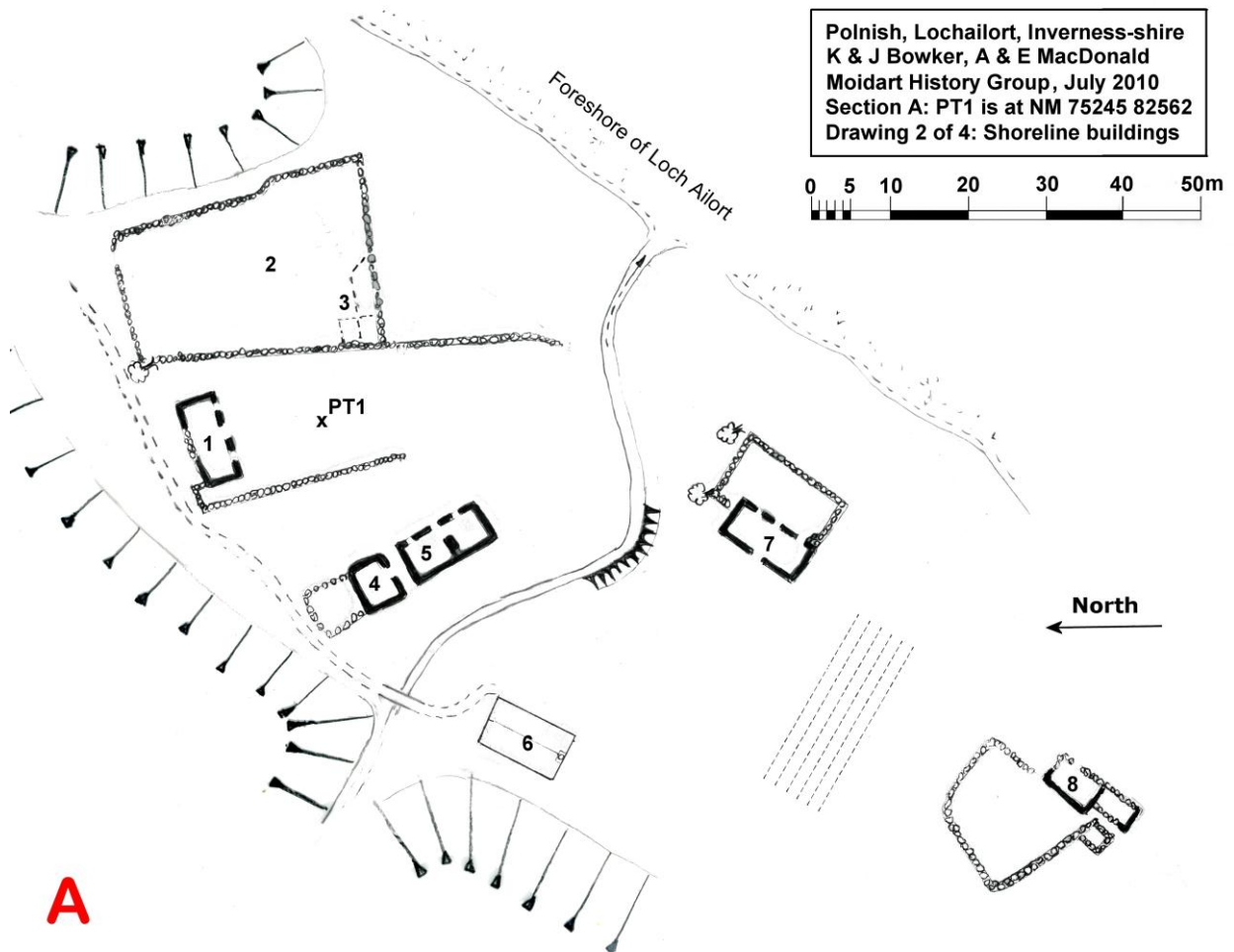
3. Drawings and Photographs



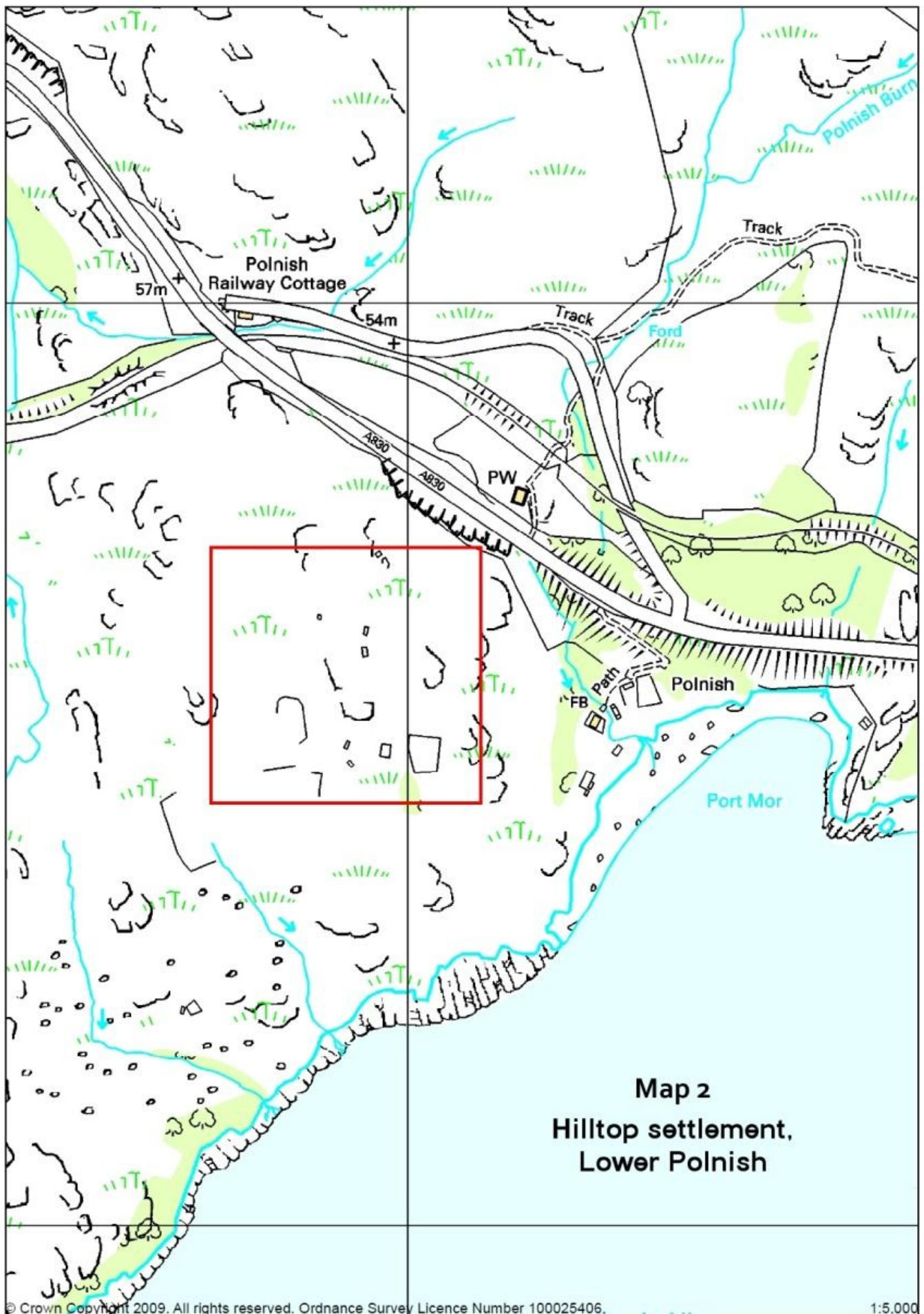
Drawing 1: Overall plan of the whole of Lower Polnish.



Map 1. Location of the shoreline settlement



Drawing 2: Shoreline settlement

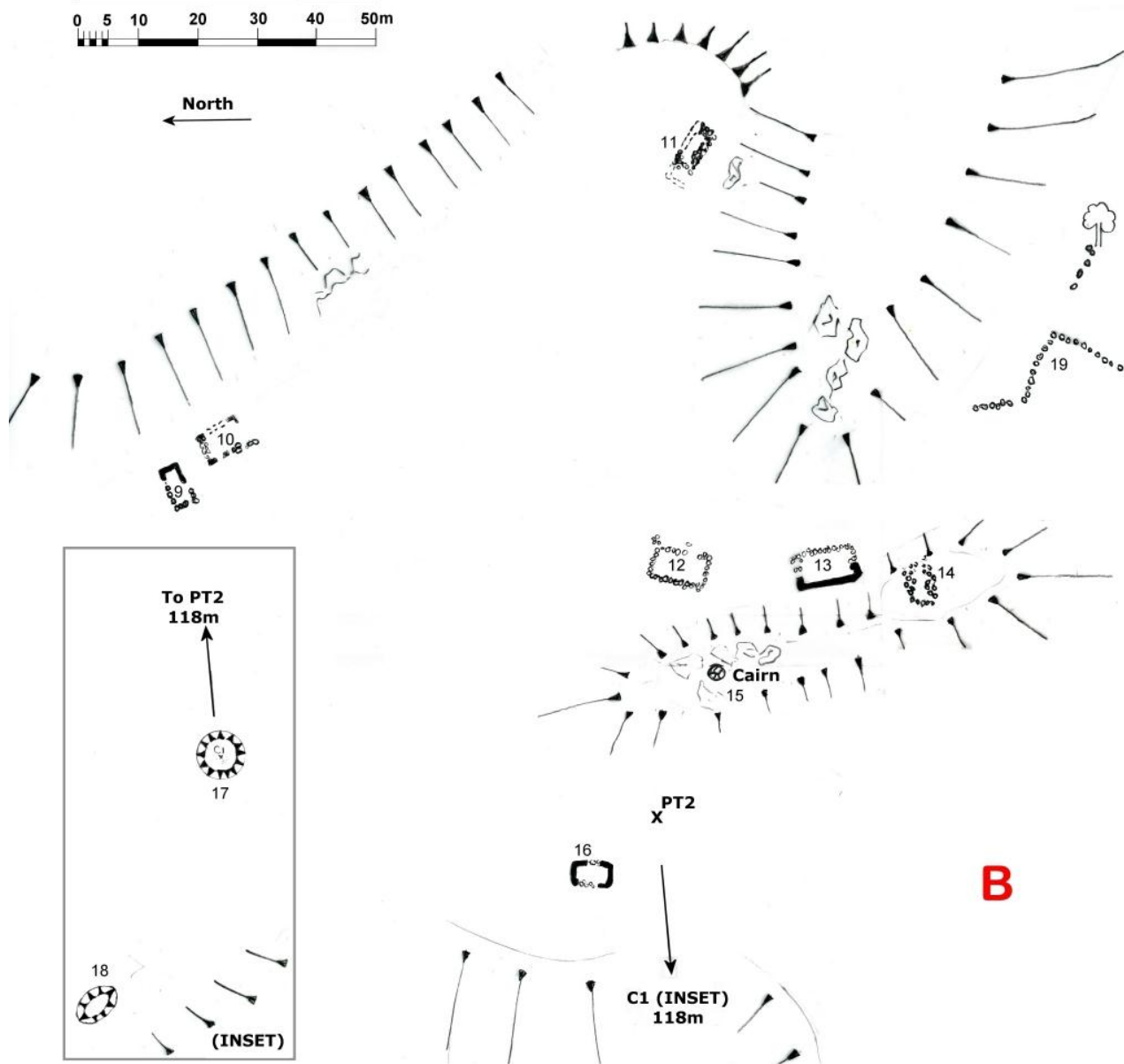


Map 2. Location of the hilltop settlement

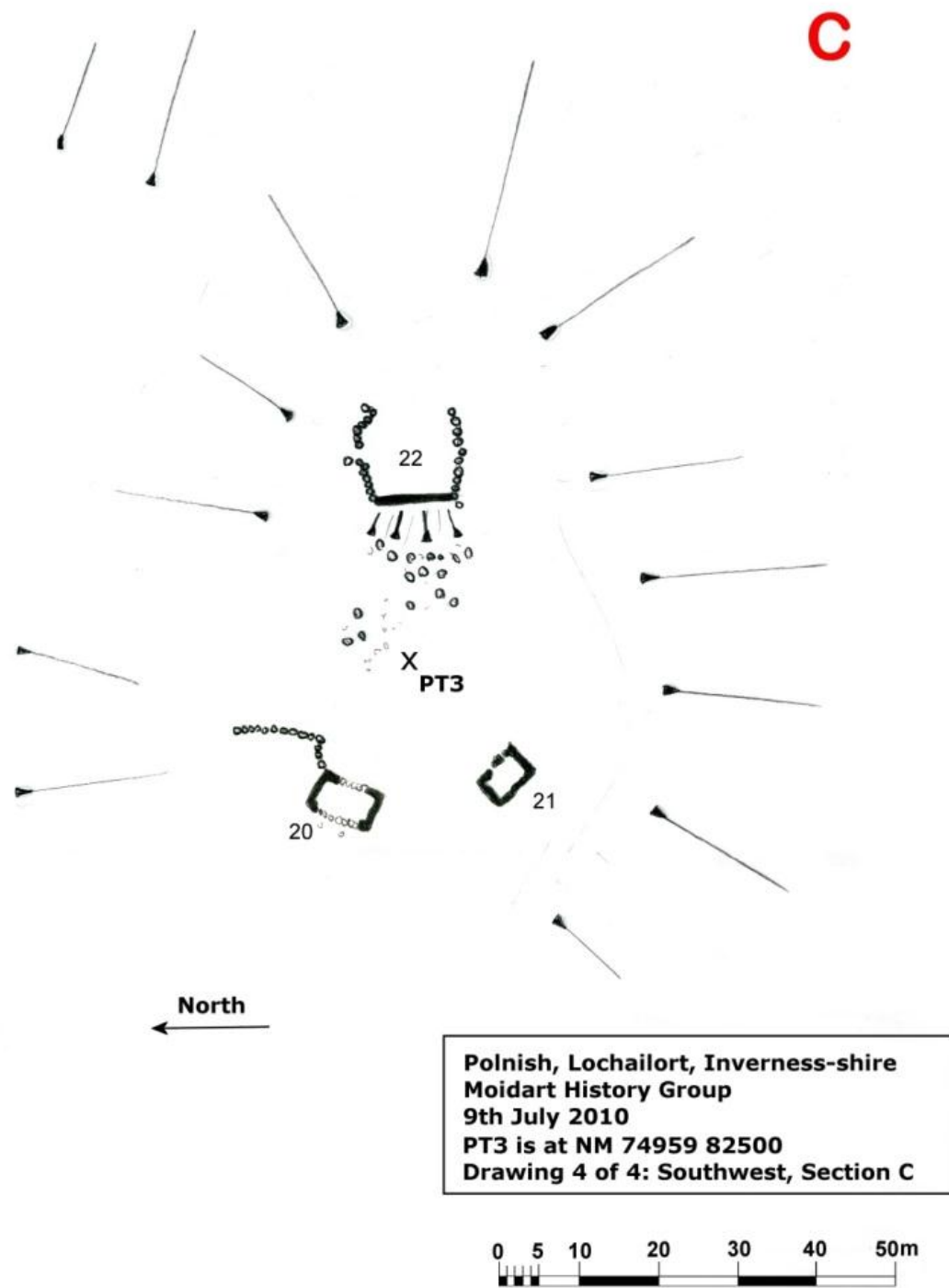
Polnish, Lochailort, Inverness-shire
 K & J Bowker, A & E MacDonald
 Moidart History Group, July 2010
 PT2 is at NM 74950 82628
 Drawing 3 of 4: Northwest, section B

0 5 10 20 30 40 50m

North
 ←



Drawing 3: Hilltop settlement, Section B



Drawing 4: Hilltop settlement, Section C

Notes on the photographs.

Lower Polish sits on the shores of Loch Ailort. First the track, then later the road, to Arisaig passes closely above the ruins of the township and the view down the loch from a modern lay-by on the A830 is one of the most photographed in Scotland.

This is not a new phenomenon: Isabel Grant, founder of the Highland Folk Museum, and A. E. Robertson, the 'First Munroist', both photographed this same view on several occasions: examples of A. E. Robertson's images, courtesy of the Scottish Mountaineering Club Archive, are shown here, in addition to the survey photographs.

The A.E.Robertson images, taken at different times in the early twentieth century, show first the complete village, then a measure of decay: the colour image taken during the survey shows the ruins we have today.

All other photographs were taken by the authors during the survey in 2009 / 2010.





Building one



Building sixteen with Loch Dubh in the distance



Fireplace in building five



Cruck slots in building eight.



Paved floor in building four



Features seventeen (left centre) and eighteen (centre top)