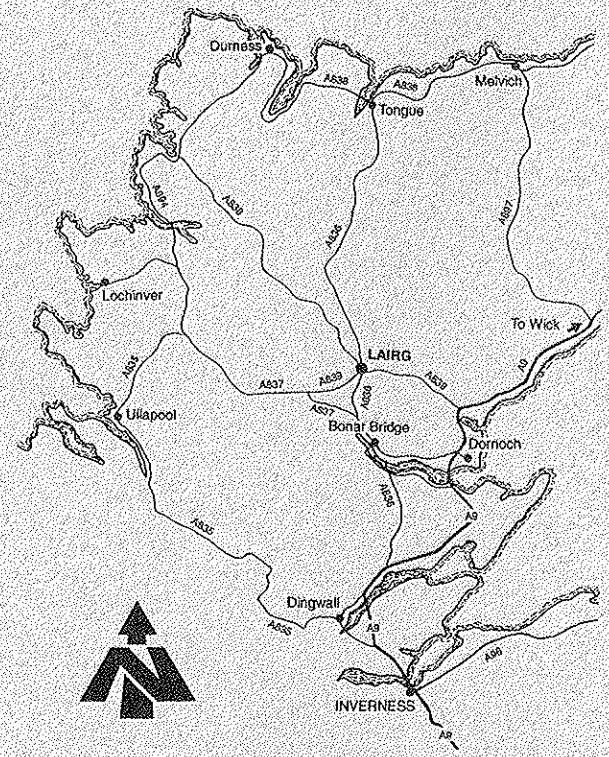
## HOW TO GET THERE




To enjoy this trail, please

- respect the weather, which can change quickly! Take suitable clothing.
- take suitable footwear – parts of the trail can be rough or wet.
- respect the countryside – take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints. Do not light fires – heather and peat easily burn out of control. Follow the Country Code.
- respect the monuments and help to ensure they survive for future generations to enjoy. Please don't add to them or take anything away.

We hope you enjoy walking the Ord Trail.

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The Highland Council

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The Highland Council
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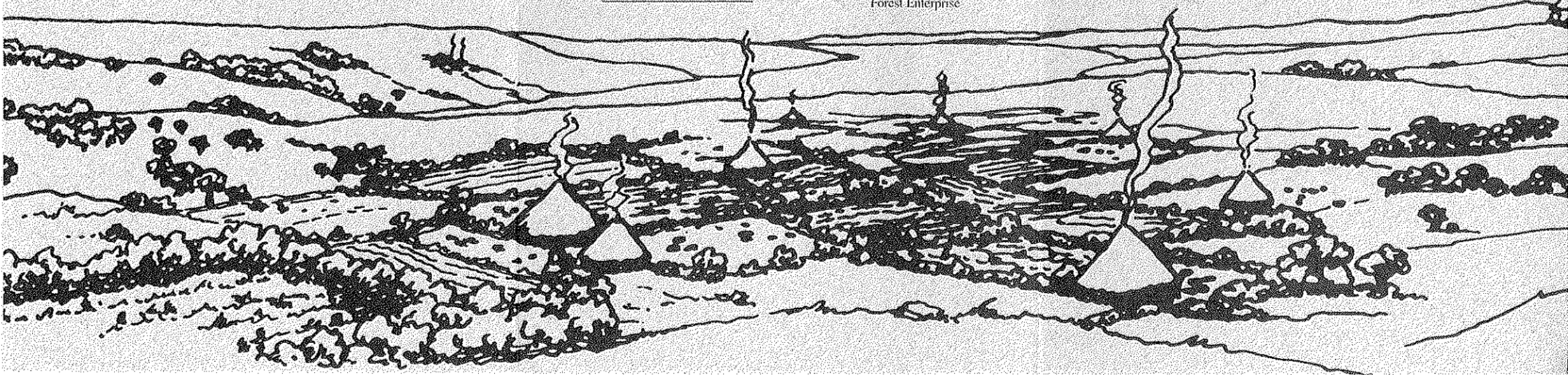
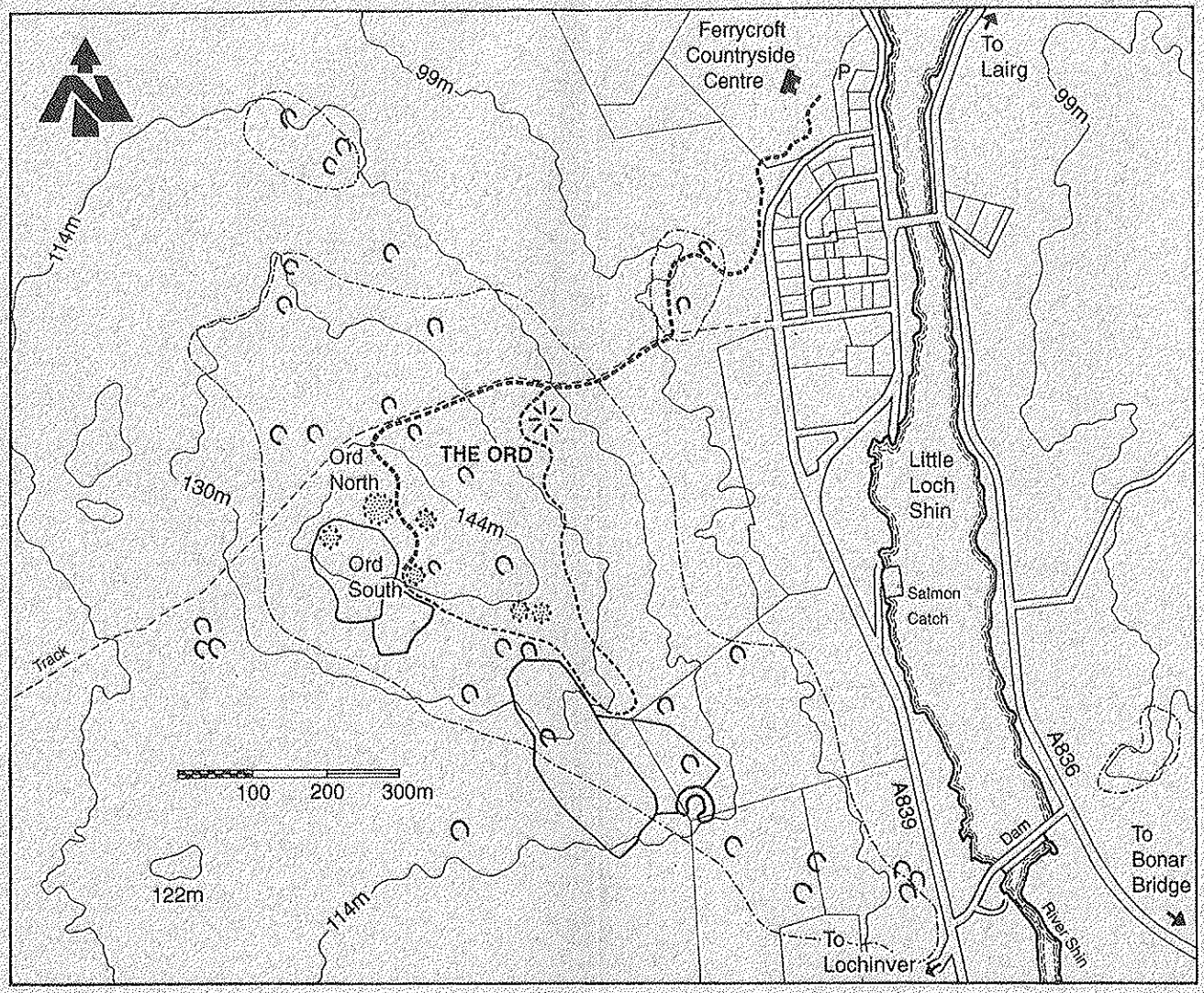
Forest Enterprise

# THE ORD, LAIRG

## Archaeological Trail






- Short Trail
- Long Trail
- Round Houses
- Burnt Mound
- P - Parking
- Burial Cairns
- Fields
- Former Cultivated Areas

# THE ORD, LAIRG

## Archaeological Trail

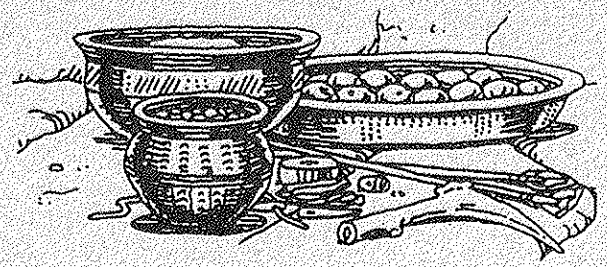
**BACKGROUND**

People have lived around Lairg for many thousands of years, and some of the best remains of the past settlers are preserved on Ord Hill. This trail will take you round the archaeological sites left by the previous inhabitants of the hill. The remains have survived because farming practices have changed and become less intensive. This land is now used as grazings for sheep and cattle, but the sites are still fragile. Please follow the Countryside Code and respect the archaeology as you go by.

**INTRODUCTION**

The trail starts at the Ferrycroft Countryside Centre, Lairg, where there is lots of information about Sutherland and the Lairg area in particular. Having watched the audio-visual or read about the archaeology on Ord Hill you could spend a while walking to the top of the hill to find out more or just enjoy the view.

The short trail takes about 30 minutes, the longer one takes an hour or more. Stout footwear and warm clothing are advised.

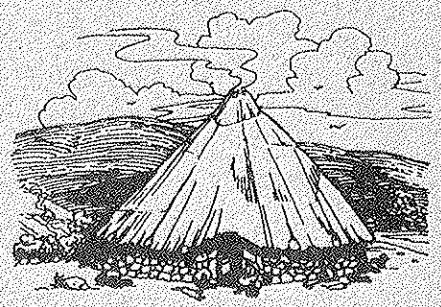


## THE TRAIL

The trail leaves from the back of the Ferrycroft Countryside Centre. Today, it takes you across grass and heather moorland, but 3,000 years ago and more this was an area of pasture, with clumps of birch and Scots pine trees. Higher up on the hill there were small fields where crops of wheat and oats were grown. Dotted all around were small, round farmhouses and other buildings. It is difficult to imagine a thriving community living here, but cast your mind back and walk out into the past.

## BRONZE AGE HOUSES

Before you start to climb the hill there are the first archaeological sites. To the right of a bend in the trail are the remains of a round house some 2-3,000 years old. Today all you can see is a slight, circular bank about 10m in diameter, with boulders sticking out between the heather and grass. But when it was in use it would have been quite substantial as it was a farmer's home, with space for a single family of several generations to cook, eat and sleep. The wall would have been of stone and turf and the roof of turf and heather on timber supports. The doorway into the house would have faced SE, away from the worst winds. Inside there would have been little natural light, for there were no windows. But there would have been a central fire-place ensuring that the home was warm and dry.



There is a larger round house about 100m further on, this time on the left of the path in a patch of grass. You may find this one easier to see and understand.

of the community in much the same way as a church, for it continued to be used for 1,000 years. Today you can walk round the impressive stones that still mark the importance of the area.

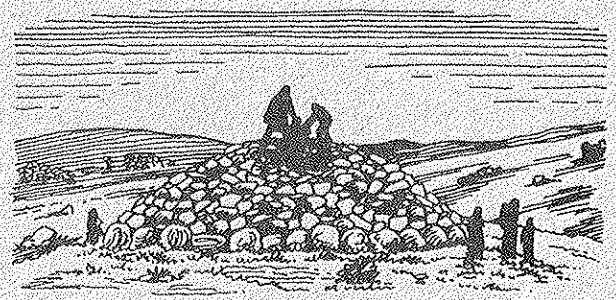
## ORD SOUTH CAIRN

If you walk on, to the very top of the hill, you will find the oldest site on the trail. All that remains of the first burial cairn that was built here over 5,000 years ago are the standing stones that formed the outline of the central chamber. The stones and boulders that once covered this ancient tomb have been removed, either to create Ord North or, much later, to build the Bronze Age farmhouses and field walls.

But where did the people who build Ord South and North live? We know that the landscape of the Neolithic or New Stone Age was very different from that of today. The country was dominated by forest but it was quite unlike the dense modern plantations. Even on this hill top there would have been an open woodland of Scots pine mixed with other species. Wild boar, wolves and deer roamed through the forests and a variety of fish and waterfowl inhabited the lochs and rivers. This was a fertile place with plenty of timber for house-building and tool-making. These wooden buildings and artefacts must have disappeared long ago but we know that they were here because of the burial cairns, the houses for the dead.

## BRONZE AGE BURIAL CAIRNS

Continuing along the trail, just down from the standing stones of Ord South, and to the left of a bend in the path, there is a small mound about 3m in diameter. This is one of several burial sites of the people who farmed the hillside in the Bronze Age. The turf-covered mound, marked by a circular kerb of small boulders, probably covers a single burial of someone of high status within the community.



Further on, there are another two mounds above the trail, but there is no sign of the burial places of the ordinary people from the farming settlements in the area. Nevertheless, there are many other prehistoric fields and Bronze Age round houses to find as you follow the walk around the ridge of the hill.

## THE BURNT MOUND

Not all humps and bumps are burial mounds or clearance cairns. As you approach the main track during your return to the Centre there is a large heather covered mound. This is the remains of a type of communal cooking place known as a burnt mound ... or is it a prehistoric sauna?

## THE HILL CLIMB

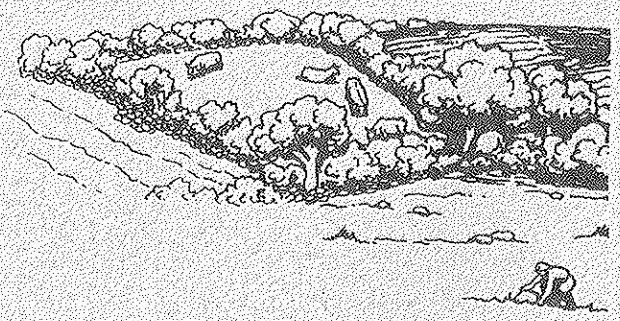
The path then joins the main track up the hill. Look to left and right. Perhaps you can see small humps and bumps – old heaps of stones created when small fields were cleared – or a few traces of ancient field banks? It was here, thousands of years ago, that patches of ground were ploughed by hand or by oxen, to grow crops. There are many more round houses towards the top of the hill too, just as you turn left towards the radio mast. Explore the area at your leisure and see if you can find the sites marked on the map with their associated fields and clearance cairns, all over 2,000 years old.

## ORD NORTH CAIRN

Beyond the prehistoric settlements, near the top of the hill, you will come to a huge mound of stones. This is much older than the Bronze Age farms that you have passed by. It is a burial cairn built by the Neolithic farmers in the area, some 5,000 years ago.

The burial cairn was built on a flat, artificially created platform of ground. The cairn itself is made up of cobbles which were originally contained within a carefully built low, dry-stone wall. You cannot see this wall now because it is buried under the fallen stones from the cairn. But if you look carefully you can see a few very large, long flat stones in the east side of the cairn (the side that looks toward the top of Ord Hill). These are some of the roof slabs of the entrance passage to the central chamber within the cairn. This chamber was very substantial and was split into two distinct areas. It was in here that certain members of the tribe or clan of the area were laid to rest. Archaeologists who excavated the chamber found objects, including a clay bowl, that had been left with the dead 5,000 years ago.

Immediately in front of the entrance to this magnificent tomb was a forecourt. This is where most of the ceremonies associated with the burial rites would have taken place. Here they also celebrated their possession of the land. The cairn must have been the focus for the religious activities

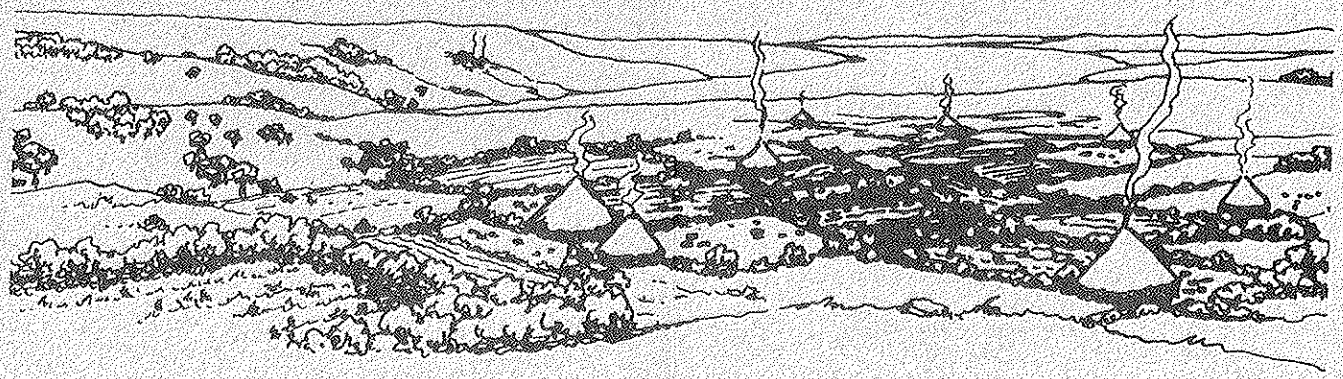


## THE VIEW

From the top of Ord Hill you can see the remains from various periods of history and prehistory. There is Lairg, with the 1950's Hydro-Electric scheme on Loch Shin and the 1880's railway and associated sheep mart. Turning clockwise, through 180°, there are the surrounding crofts which have their origins in earlier times. Some of the post-medieval or medieval fields can be seen immediately below you – the grass surviving even today. Turn again, clockwise through 90°, and you can see the Neolithic burial cairn surrounded by the Bronze Age farmed landscape, now mainly buried in the heather.

Ord Hill and its surroundings are a remarkable jigsaw of remains through time. Today the hill is apparently barren but this belies its long history. You may now choose to go on and find more out about the past. Or turn back and return to the Interpretive Centre, your appetite whetted for details of other archaeological sites.

Traditionally built close to running water, these burnt mounds consisted of a large stone-lined pit sealed with clay, together with a hearth. Stones were heated in the fire and then transferred to the water in the pit. The heated water could then be used to cook meat or fish. The broken, cold stones would then have been scooped out of the pit and dumped around it for later re-use. But some excavated sites have failed to reveal evidence of cooking. So another explanation is needed – perhaps the steam and hot water provided a sauna for the local population?

## ORD TODAY

The trail now takes you back the way you came. As you pass by the Bronze Age houses and the fields perhaps you can imagine a very different hillside. Some 2-3,000 years ago it would have been dotted with houses; smoke curled up above the thatch; and people bustled around to tend animals and crops. Around the fields there would have been woodland; whilst a slightly smaller loch glinted through the trees. Above all of this stood the great burial mounds on the hill top, a silent reminder, even in the past, of those who had gone before.