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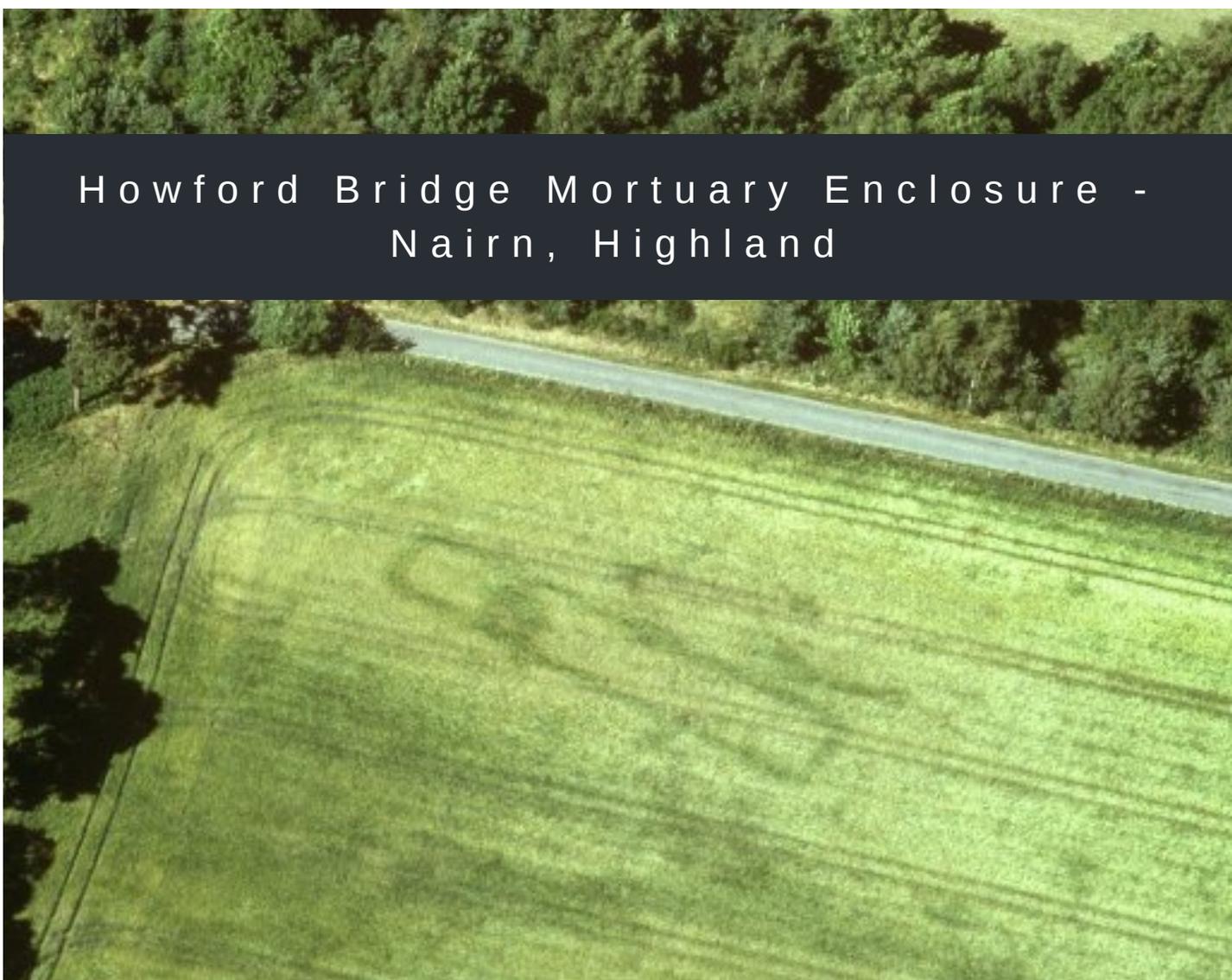
NATIONAL RECORD OF THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT



## Archaeology InSites



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### Howford Bridge Mortuary Enclosure - Nairn, Highland



## What are mortuary enclosures?

*Like cursus monuments, mortuary enclosures are only visible as cropmarks on aerial photographs. Cropmarks are caused by the presence of archaeological features below ground which influence how plants grow above ground. There is a wide range of structures of this type identified across the whole of Britain. They tend to be rectangular or oblong in shape, like the example at Howford Bridge in Nairn, and are often only recognisable by the surviving imprints of the ditches or pits that defined them. Archaeologists tend to believe that these would have been enclosures made from large timbers, due to the frequency of postholes appearing at these sites. However, it is difficult to identify their original function without carrying out investigative excavations.*

*Of the mortuary enclosure sites that have been excavated in Britain, many reveal scatterings of human bones. The main interpretation, which most archaeologists accept, is that the timber posts were used to hold up raised platforms on which the deceased were laid out before burial; here the bodies would have been kept safe from larger predatory animals, but not from scavenging birds or rodents. Archaeologists think that the scattering of human bones occurred either as the bodies decayed and fell through gaps in the platform or when the bones were collected. At some English sites, such as at Callis Wold in Humberside, the bones of both adults and children have been recovered from the bottom of the post holes. This means that during the construction phase of the monument the large timber posts were erected directly on top of the bones of the dead. While we don't know the reason behind this it probably carried ritual significance.*



## Closure and re-use

*At most mortuary enclosure sites it appears that the timbers were left and remained there until they rotted away. However, there are a handful of sites where there is evidence of burning, both of the posts and of human remains. Again, why this happened is unknown, but it may have been an act of closure at the site. At some of these sites, such as Lochhill and Slewcairn both long cairns in Dumfries and Galloway, it appears that a second Neolithic structure was built on top. At Fussell's Lodge in Wiltshire, England, we see a long barrow constructed on top of a mortuary enclosure. These sites show a clear transition from the use of timber to the use of stone amongst Neolithic communities.*

*The site at Howford Bridge has not been excavated, and has only been identified as cropmarks on aerial photographs. It is roughly 65m in length, 8m in width and defined by a ditch 2m in width. A number of oblong pits have been identified in proximity to and within the enclosure. As the site has never been excavated, it leaves you wondering what may be lying just beneath the surface...*

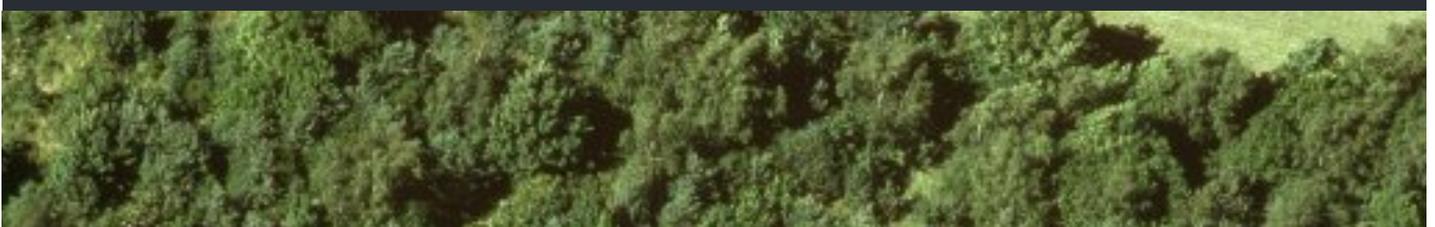
*Join us next Tuesday as we investigate Balfarg henge in Glenrothes, Fife, and look at archaeological sites within modern contexts.*

Maya Hoole - Archaeology InSites project manager



<https://canmore.org.uk/site/72179/howford-bridge>

<https://canmore.org.uk/site/65428/lochhill>





## #ArchInSites

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