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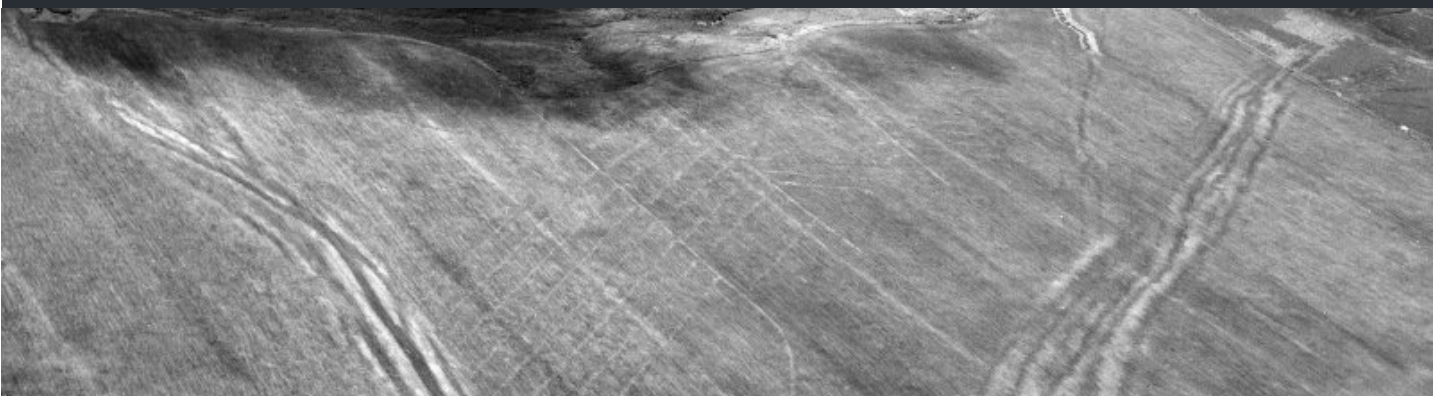
Eldritch hill tracks - Dunning, Perth
and Kinross

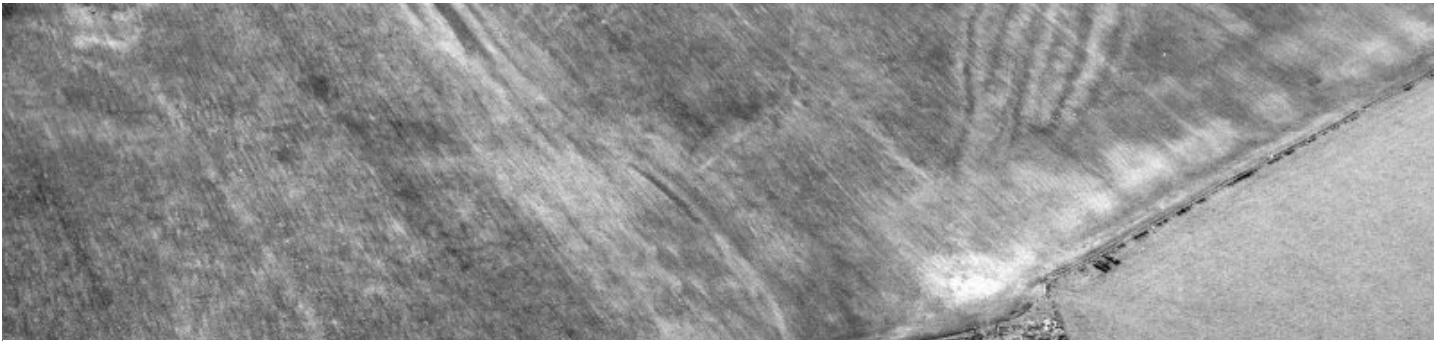


Of hoofs and feet

Created by movement up and down Eldritch Hill by a mobile assemblage of cattle, horses and humans, the tracks were probably associated with the local movement of farmers' stock to the fertile grazing lands across the Ochil Hills. Carried out during the summer months, the movement of animals, especially cattle in this area but also sheep, was a regular occurrence back and forth from the farm. Situated on the lower slopes of the Ochil Hills, they are a kind of extensive 'site' which can cover a large area, and are formed of multiple 'ways', each up to 2m wide. Examples of other routes which are 'braided' in this way are often found on the lower slopes of hills, perhaps because this was where greatest effort was required to move animals, at the interface between up and down slope; hoofs and feet bedding down into the ground under wet conditions scoring the earth, and probably done so under repeated action over many years.

However, tracks like these may have also been created by seasonal, year-on-year, long-distance movements, or droving. The droving of cattle occurred along distinct paths or drove roads. For instance, the black cattle of Skye after fattening during the summer months on the sweet grasses, were swam across the waters at Kyle Rhea. They were then moved across the lower slopes and valleys of the highlands of Scotland to the lowland market towns, such as Crieff and Falkirk, where they were sold and then taken on across the Borders to the markets of England. The droving of cattle was a particularly important activity for the economy of Scotland from the 17th century until the late 19th century. Although other means of transporting animals were gradually introduced during the 19th century, the droving of cattle continued to be carried out until the early 20th century. The physical evidence and remnants of these and other movements are found in a variety of forms, as tracks, braided tracks or parallel tracks across the landscape, as dictated by animals and people alike. Some tracks remain visible as crop or soil marks, ploughed away but still surviving. Track ways were also fossilized in place-names such as the derivatives of -way or -road, or by reference to grazing areas or to the goods carried from one place to another, such as Butter Road (near Paths of Condie) along which dairy produce was carried from one part of the Perthshire to another. Indirectly, large folds close to a ford, or forming linear patterns across the landscape, may reveal droving routes under closer inspection.





Along the 'way'

Sites relating to movement are common in most parts of the world because moving was and is a universal practice; it leaves its mark in the landscape. There are more 'braided' tracks across the Ochil Hills, on the Common of Dunning, on Casken Hill and at Scores Burn, as well as across the whole of Scotland. These were probably produced under similar conditions —the localised movement of stock or the long-distance trade of cattle, and the heavy footwork of humans. But given the abundance of mobility as an activity from the Bronze Age and earlier, through to the early-20th century and today, tracks are a largely under-represented type of site in the archaeological record. Searching for 'track' in Canmore returns a total of 1,032 site records [accessed on 4/8/17], which is approximately 0.7% of the total number. Yet a search under the term 'Roman Road' returns 495 records, probably representing the near totality of all known Roman Roads in Scotland - at least those that were formally constructed. The disparity in the relative record between tracks such as those on Eldritch Hill and Roman Roads is partly due to status, the difficulties in dating and the spatial organisation of data (Dere Street has 46 records as it crosses the landscape from the Border to Edinburgh). Roman Roads are considered much more significant for understanding the infrastructure of conquest.

Yet, if we are to think a little harder about the tracks such as those on Eldritch Hill, at Camp Moor, Preston Mains, Moss Road, Machrie, to name just a few, are they any less important for our understanding of the past? The problem is not identification — they are often in plain sight or on historic maps, and are particularly noticeable from the air. They are also easy to classify, and to spatially define – with the proviso that very long tracks present particular issues for a system organised by map sheet, parish etc. The real challenges are assigning a date, and recognising what the site offers to our understanding about the past. It is more difficult to assess and interpret the date under which tracks like Eldritch Hill were created since the materialised form of movement is universal in character – a braided track could be created in the Bronze Age or in the 19th century.

However, there are ways to work out the relative date of a particular track — using landscape stratigraphy to assess the relationship the track has with other datable features. For example, working out whether a track cuts across a fence line, or goes under it, or crosses a Roman Road, or lies over it, tells us about the relative date of the track. However, while many tracks can only be assigned general dates, such as a Medieval or Post-medieval, it is likely that many have a long history since they reflect underlying topography – a greater number of braids may reflect longer use, or simply heavier traffic. Changes in use can also complicate our reading of the route, with modern train lines and roads obliterating older features.

By beginning to add more of these 'extensive' sites into the archaeological record, what we are starting to record is the way that people and animals inhabited and dwelled in the landscape through the ages. In all likelihood tracks are part of a complicated set of relationships with the landscape, but one in which the movements of people with their animals in the past can be realised. We begin to understand the landscape alongside the varying entanglements that occurred between, say, topography, water, vegetation, animals and people. This is a different, slower and more trodden mobility perhaps than those today, but there is a similarity between the repeated movements, daily, seasonal and year-on-year. So, while the tracks on Eldritch Hill are not much to look at, they hint at a living and dynamic landscape and can tell us something about past economies, land access, property, local-politics and land-use, and ways of living sustainably, topics that are important still today.

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<https://canmore.org.uk/site/350095/eldritch-hill>
<https://canmore.org.uk/site/84471/camp-moor>



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