

ACHTERCAIRN ARCHAEOLOGY TRAIL



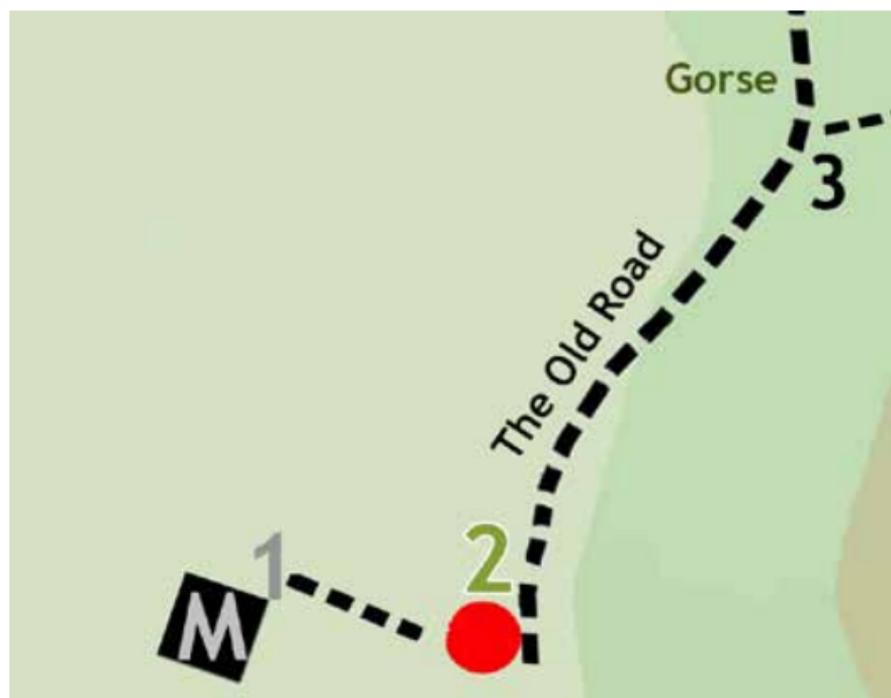
1 Start at a sign behind the Museum.

Please note the safety warnings given on this sign.

Walk up the path to reach the first site and another sign. It is hard to imagine this ruin as a roundhouse because it has been damaged in four different ways. Walk around it and use your imagination.

Key:

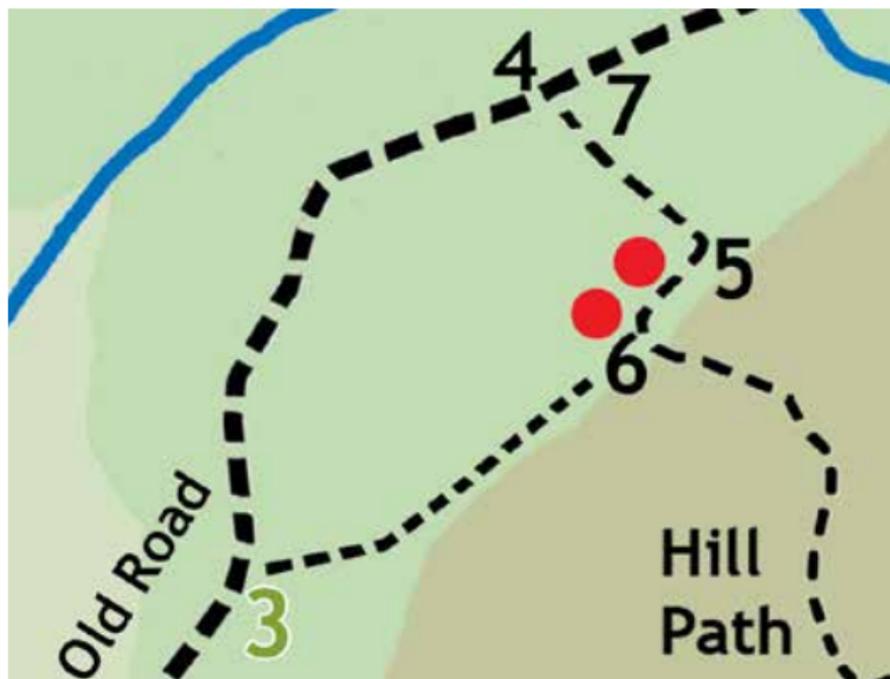
- a **green** or **black** number is a wooden post. On the full circuit you will pass 28 posts, each described on one page.
- a **red circle** is a roundhouse etc.



2 From post 2 at the top of the roundhouse follow the path to the left.

This path follows part of the Old Road from Gairloch to Poolewe, built in 1831. It was probably only used by walkers and horse-riders, and was replaced about 20 years later (when wheeled vehicles had arrived) by the present main road route.

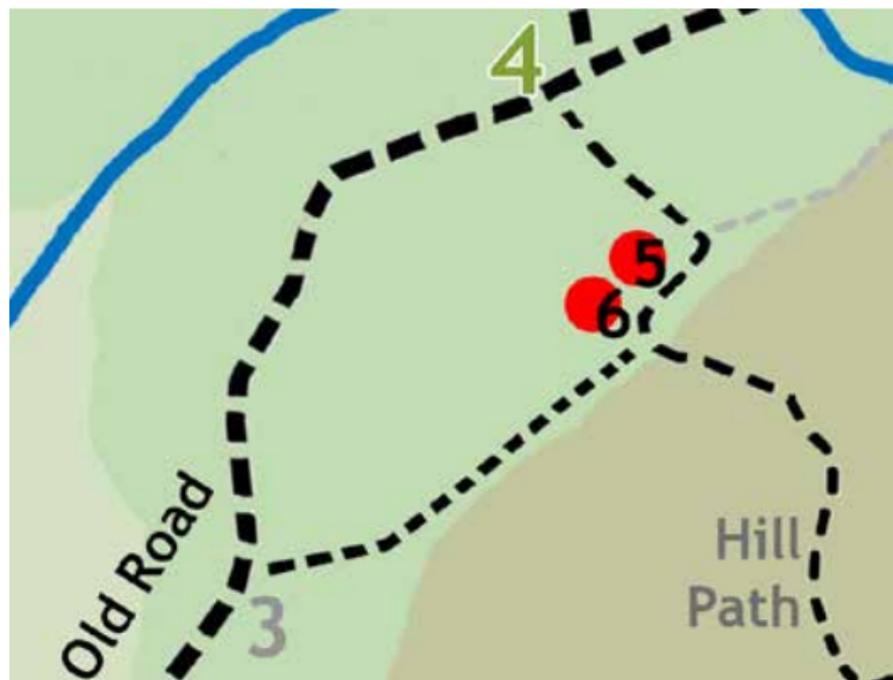
Reach post 3.



3 At post 3 you have a choice of paths.

(1) The easier **main path** follows the Old Road through gorse, reaching open and partly wooded ground above. After a stony start it is easy but it needs care. **Reach post 4.**

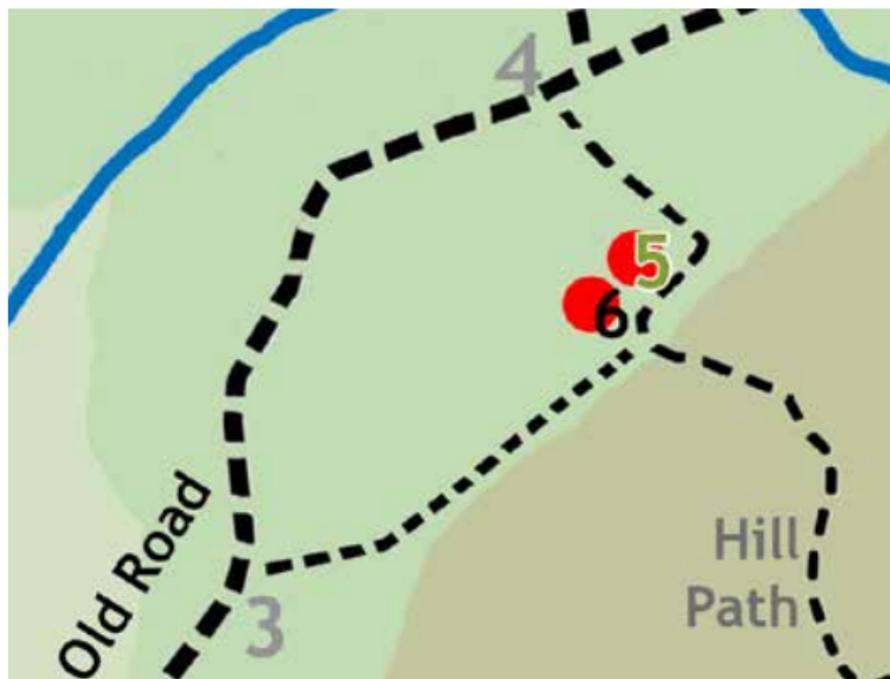
(2) *To the right a more difficult path heads uphill: only take this if you are fit and sure-footed. If you do, you will visit the next four posts in a different order: 6 - 5 - 4 - 7 (and right may become left!).*



4 At post 4 turn right, uphill.

The trees on the Trail were planted in 2002-7 as part of a huge tree-planting scheme: 2½ million trees between here and Loch Maree.

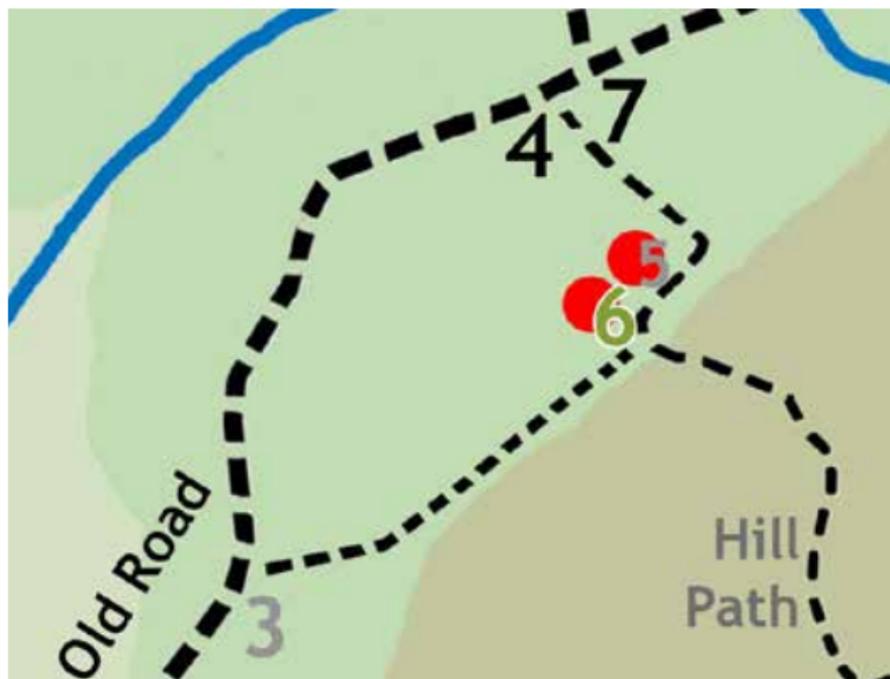
Follow the path. It turns right to **reach post 5**. (*Ignore a route to the left which is a rough short-cut to post 10.*)



5 On your right is a stone circle.

Walk around it and look at the layout of the stones: too irregular to be a roundhouse wall? There was an archaeological dig here. In the middle was found a cobbled area with charcoal, and 80 pieces of quartz. One of these had been shaped to make a tool. The charcoal was carbon dated to 2769 BC. This was a Neolithic work area, not a roundhouse. But charcoal under a wall stone was dated 1391 BC: the stone circle was a Bronze Age addition.

Continue to post 6.



6 On your right is a roundhouse.

Explore this. A dig took place here too (crossing the wall on each side), and charcoal gave a date of 726 BC (2000 years after its neighbour!). But unusually there was an older roundhouse under it with an earth wall, which could not be dated. Roundhouse entrances normally faced south east, and were often extended to give shelter: hence the number of stones.

(The rough path uphill leads to the hill Meall na h-Iolair.)

Now return to post 4 and turn right: just beyond the gorse bush is post 7.



7 Path Junction.

You will now make a long circuit and finally return to post 7 by the rocky path to the left. To start the circuit, continue along the Old Road **to post 8**.

(If you want a much shorter circuit, turn left at post 7, descending with care to the burn. Cross it and continue, now uphill, until you reach post 24. Then follow the posts from 24 to 28, finally returning to post 7 and then back to the Museum.)



8 Old Sheep Enclosure.

On your left is the impressively large and well-built 'Fank' (a Scottish word for a sheep enclosure). The whole of Achtercairn and this area above it was turned into a single farm in 1800. Sheep arrived in about 1850, and this fank was built for the tenant farmer by Gairloch Estate.

Note the rounded corners and the turf wall topping. The fank was last used in 1944.

Continue to post 9.



9 Path Junction.

To your right a small path leads uphill.
Follow it **to post 10**.

(After visiting posts 10 and 11 you will
return to this point.)



10 Roundhouse.

In this open space there are the meagre remains of a roundhouse with a fine view. But it has been ruined in two ways. (1) Most of its stones were used in building the fank. (2) The tree-planters have dug many holes in it. Roundhouse walls had inner and outer facings with stones and rubble between. How much of the outer facing can you see here?

Continue on a small steep path uphill to post 11, ignoring a left path (the Hill Climb) and a right path (shortcut to post 5).



11 Ritual site.

You will reach a large standing stone. This is probably natural, but it may have been significant for the people who lived in the roundhouse.

Just beyond it there is a small stone circle. Its purpose is unknown.

Archaeologists tend to call such places 'ritual sites'! Imagine it without the trees, and with a good view of the distant horizon.

Return downhill to post 9 on the main path. Then turn right to post 12.



12 Short-cut path.

To the left a short-cut path goes down and then steeply up to post 19.

Continue along the main path (still the Old Road) to post 13.



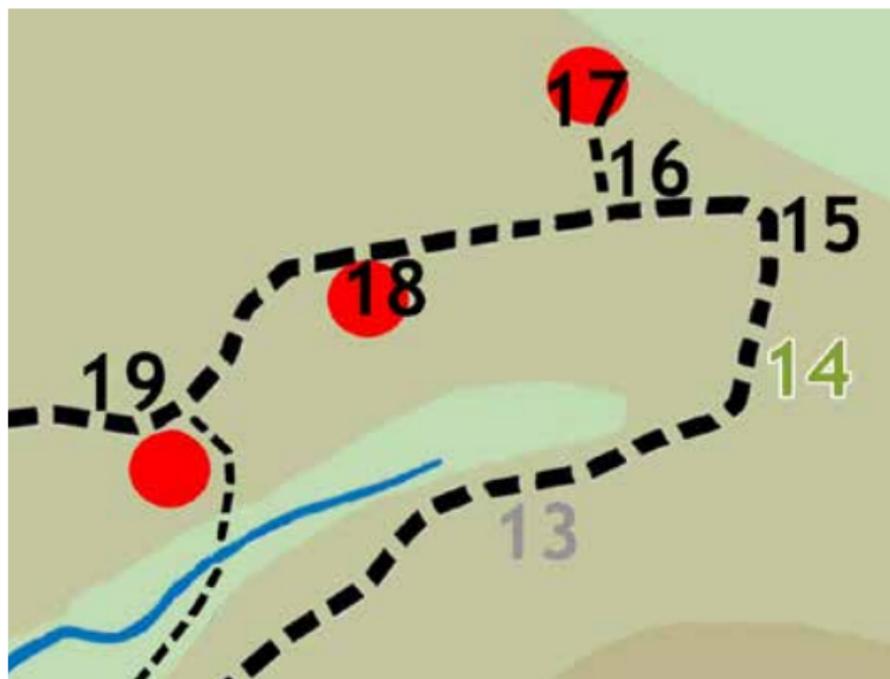
13 Farm wall.

At this point an old wall crosses the path. It was built in 1800 as the 4-foot boundary wall of the new Achtercairn Farm, from the sea near the Museum to Achtercairn River near the A832.

Like many walls around here, it follows an irregular route, making use of cliffs wherever possible.

The open area to your left was once a lochan, and is now covered by peat 4 metres deep.

Continue to post 14.

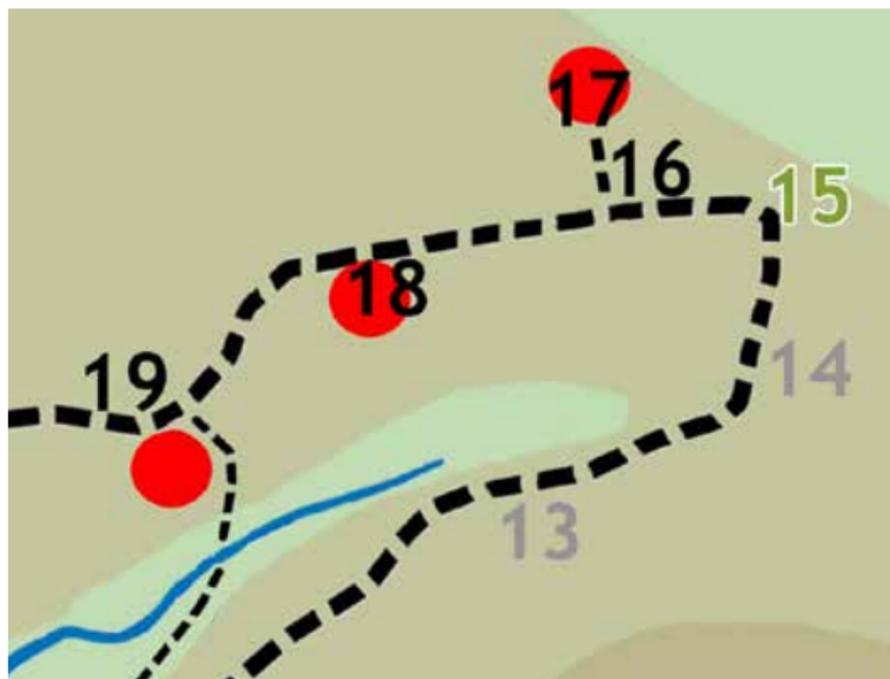


14 Old wood.

The wood whose remains you can see was first planted in the 1800s. Most of it was blown down in the hurricane of 2005. Beyond it is Gairloch Quarry.

You now leave the Old Road. It bears right and crosses the present road beyond the woodland.

Continue to post 15.



15 Field.

You are about to enter an old field. It is named 'Field of the Shieling of the Bird', and contains evidence of 'rig and furrow' ploughing, possibly from the 18th or 19th century. Bracken likes to grow in former fields.

It was originally a prehistoric field, attached to a roundhouse. You can see part of the ancient boundary wall, made with large single rocks. In the area of the Trail there are about 2 kilometres of such prehistoric walls.

Continue to post 16.



16 Path Junction.

A small path to the right here leads to a roundhouse.



17 Roundhouse.

The wall of this roundhouse is mostly covered by heather and grass, and has been ruined by later farmers. Some of its stones have been uncovered.

Cross it to see a few of the stones of the wall, some of which have been formed into a small structure. This is probably a lambing pen, into which an orphan lamb was put with a ewe to help them bond.

Return to post 16 and turn right to reach post 18.



18 Roundhouse.

This roundhouse was mostly covered by soil and grass, but it has recently been uncovered. Study the wall, with parts of the inner and outer facings made from upright slabs. Notice how the wall at the entrance is greatly widened. Most of the missing stones have gone into making the field wall just to the south.

This roundhouse and the next one are sheltered behind small hills: for shelter or protection?

Continue to post 19 and the next roundhouse.

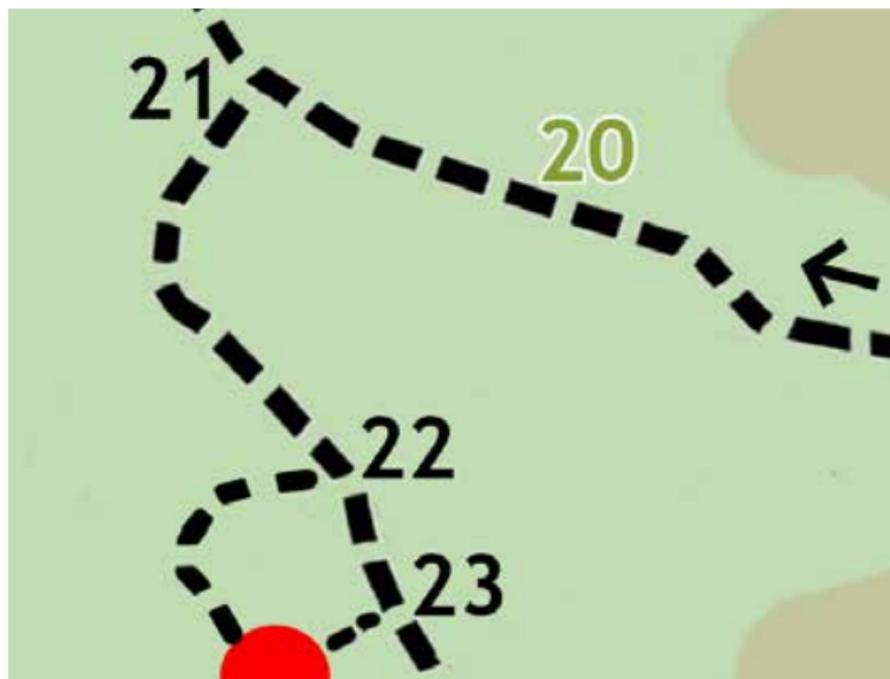


19 Roundhouse.

Turn left at the post to visit the smallest but also the best preserved of the roundhouses. Notice the neatly built wall with much of the inner facing intact, and the clear entrance on the opposite side with cobbles and a doorstep.

An oddity is the pile of stones against the inside of the wall. One theory is that this is a burial site.

Continue down the path some way to post 20.

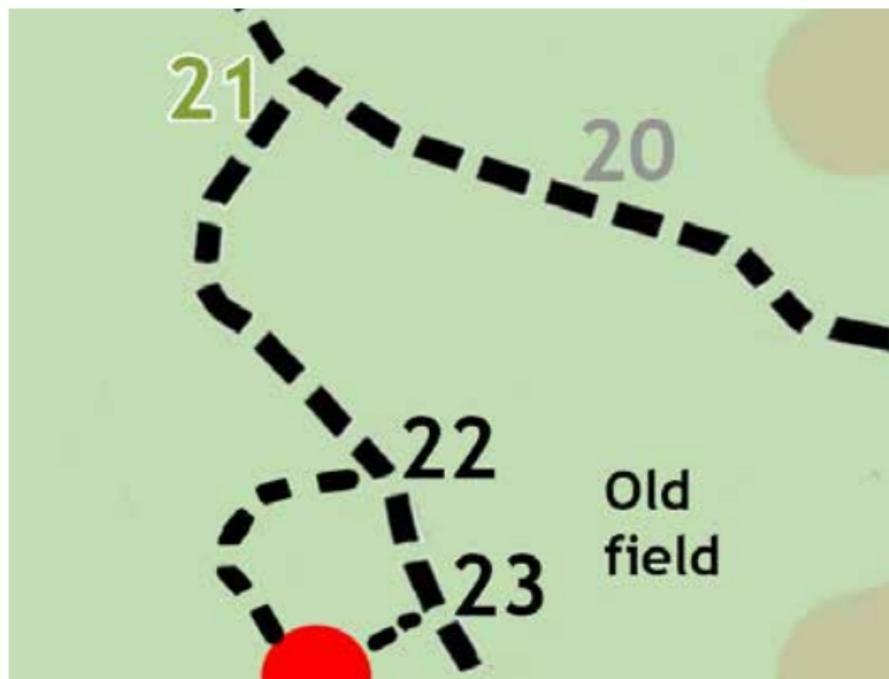


20 Cattlefold.

On your right is an area called the 'Cattlefold of the Tenants'. This is where the crofters' cattle were gathered before being taken to Poolewe where they were sold to cattle drovers. They would then be taken across to Easter Ross.

You may be able to make out former 'lazybeds': raised beds on which potatoes were planted.

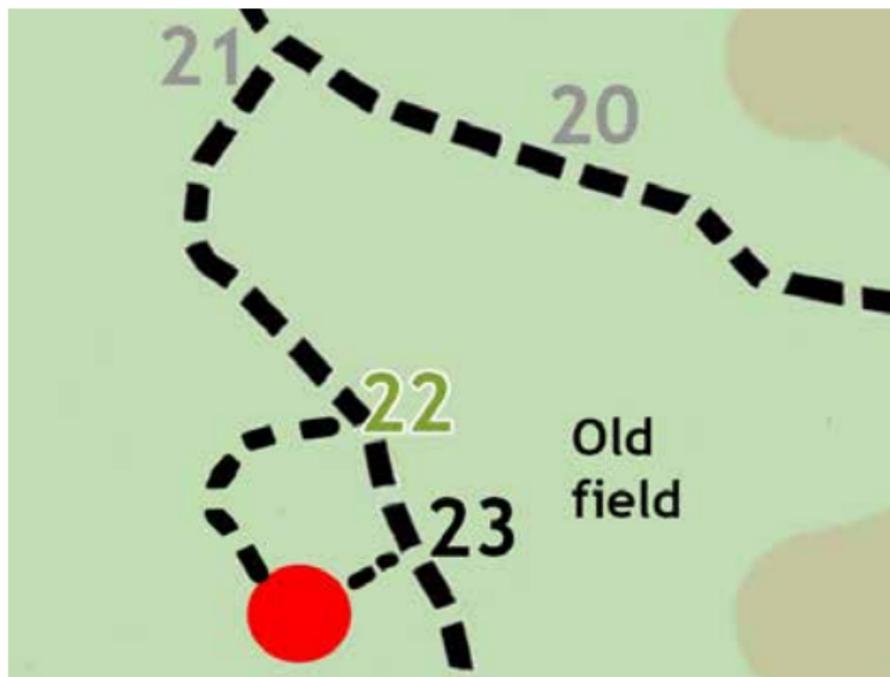
Continue to post 21.



21 Path junction.

Keep left. The path to the right goes to the cattlegrid on the main road.

Continue to post 22.



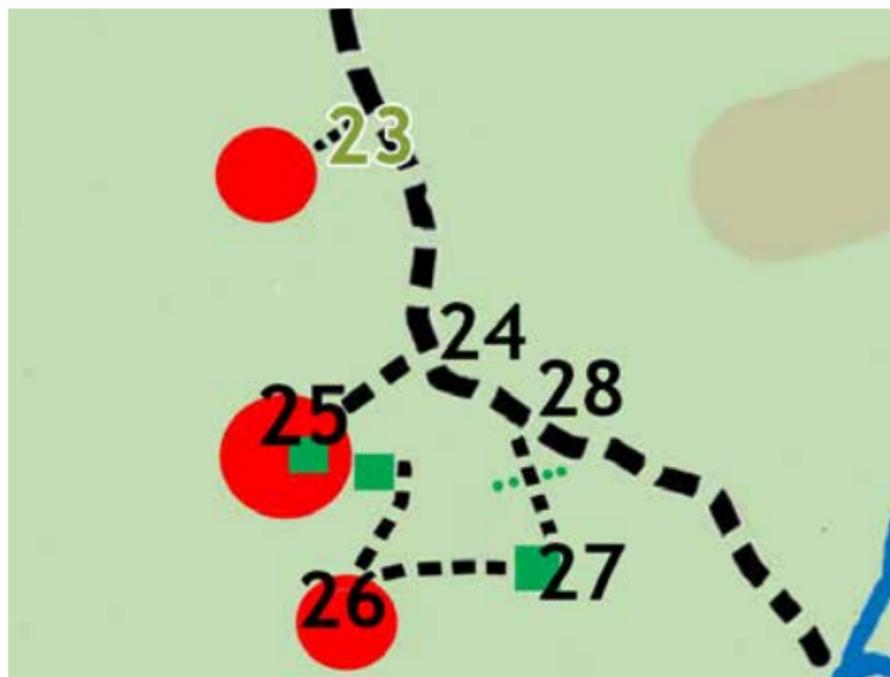
22 Old field.

On your left is a flat area. This was once a roundhouse's field but is now a bog. The field became overgrown and peat developed. There are signs of later peat-cutting, and of lazybeds.

The path beside the bog can be very wet. A better alternative is to turn right and visit a knoll which makes a good viewpoint. There is a stone seat.

Then descend to a heather-covered Roundhouse. A small section of the wall has been exposed.

Return to the main path at post 23.

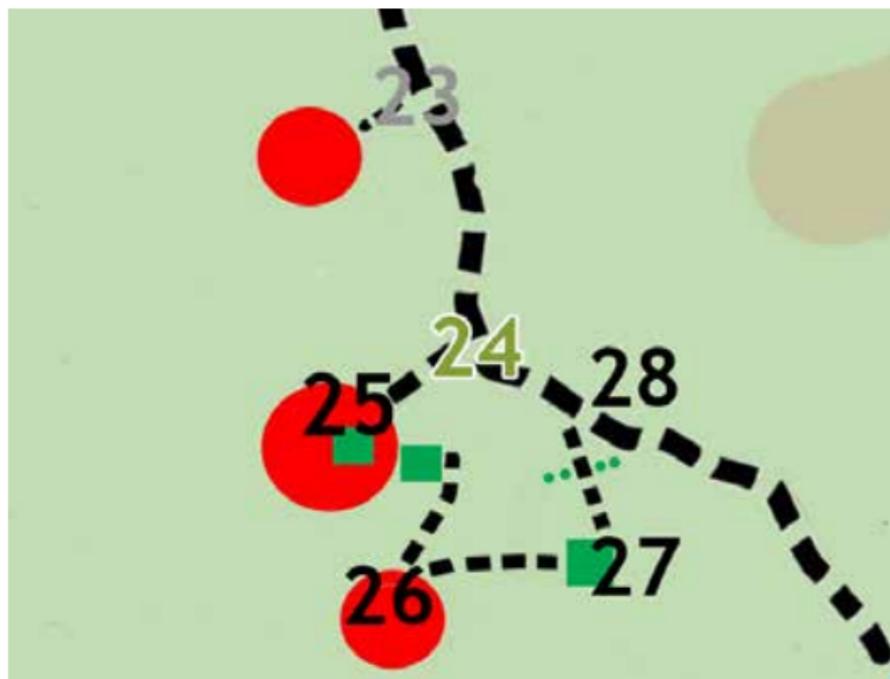


23 Roundhouse.

If you came over the knoll you have already seen this heather-covered roundhouse.

Continue along the main path, which may be wet because of the bog next to it. Notice the prehistoric wall to the left, typically made of large single stones.

Reach post 24.

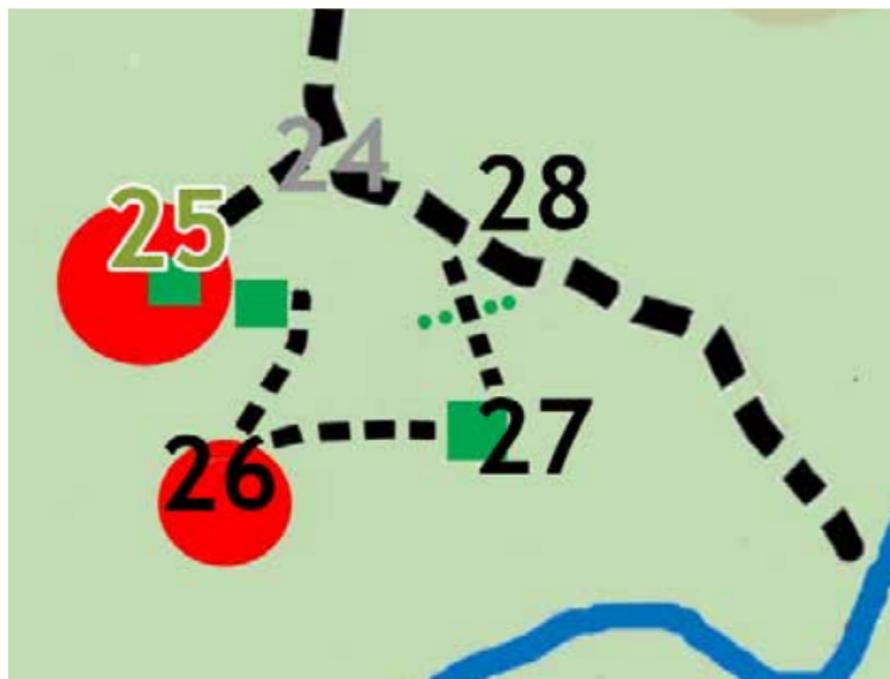


24 Path junction.

Turn right.

You will now visit the last four sites:
posts 25 to 28.

Reach post 25.



25 Not a roundhouse!

The impressively large stone circle is thought not to be a house but some kind of ceremonial or community centre. Charcoal from a very hot fire in the centre is dated 254 BC. The entrance faces south west, directly towards the winter solstice sunset.

The wall was well made with large stones, and probably 1.5 metres high. Some of the stones have been used to make two pre-1800 shieling huts.

Take the path to the left of the smaller hut to reach post 26.



26 Roundhouse and hearth.

This open platform was a roundhouse. A few stones can be seen, but most were removed to build the big circle. The wall across the top of the house is a medieval addition (AD 800-1000).

Every roundhouse had a hearth fire at its centre. You can see the hearth of this one by lifting the wooden cover (heavy: take care). The sandstone slab has been crazed by the heat. Carbon-dating of charcoal gives a date of 477 BC.

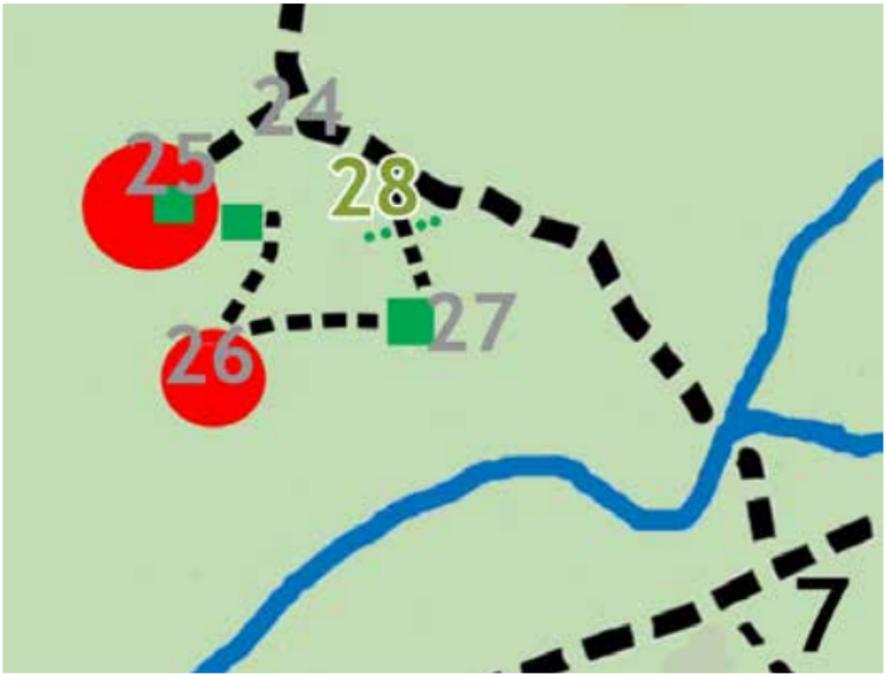
Take the small path from the post through heather to post 27.



27 Burial cairn.

A low stone platform was built here. The square hole shows where a grave robber has dug, in the hope of finding treasure. About 24 small smooth beach pebbles have been found here, left as offerings to the dead. The date is not known.

Take the path from the post downhill to a wall with post 28 beyond it.



28 Prehistoric wall.

The wall you have just crossed is a typical ancient 'dog's-tooth' wall. It may have been simply a boundary marker, or it may have been turned into a field wall with bushes such as gorse. Speculate on how they moved the stones.

You are now back on the main path. Turn right and follow it to reach a burn crossing. Uphill beyond this you will reach the Old Road at post 7. Take care: stones may be slippery. At post 7 turn right to return to the Museum.