3.2 Mineral soils

A mineral soil was discovered beneath undisturbed peat in every trench with an overlying growth of peat. This soil measured between 0.02m and 0.15m thick, and consisted of a dark brown, compact sandy silt, with grit inclusions, occasional charcoal flecks and some root matter throughout. This soil is interpreted as a palaeosol, representing the land surface prior to peat initiation, and its presence in every trench indicated extensive preservation of this surface. In several trenches an earlier soil was found beneath this palaeosol, lying directly on top of glacial till. This soil comprised a medium/light brown, compact, silty sand, with occasional root matter throughout and occasional charcoal flecks. This soil had characteristics of a brown earth (Curtis et al. 1976: 49) and was interpreted as an earlier palaeosol. These palaeosols were typical of thin, poorly developed soils which form on weather-resistant acid bedrock such as Lewisian Gneiss and were thus consistent with other observations on the island’s soils (Hudson 1991: 19).

To provide an indication of how far the buried land surface survived beneath the peat within the study area, a coring transect was established, running roughly NNW away from the main area of excavation (Illus 1). The transect began on a large peat bank to the north of the study area and continued for a distance of c 120m. Cores were recovered every 8m along this line using a 1m length Eijelkamp corer. Each core was described, drawn and a sample of the palaeosol was taken for soil tests. A similar sequence of peat growth was recorded along the transect and the palaeosol was present in all cases. Peat depth varied from 0.4m to 1.97m, and the palaeosol was between 0.07m and 0.29m thick and appeared to have been unaffected by peat cutting.

A range of prehistoric structures were found beneath the peat through the prospection methodology, all lying on this palaeosol. These are categorised and described below.

3.3 Sub-peat structure, field wall and cobbling (Trench 15)

The focus of the excavations was on Trench 15 (Illus 3). The final trench measured 17m by 9m overall, expanding from two previous trial trenches.
Five phases of construction have been identified within this trench. Some sequential arrangement of these phases is possible but Phases 2 and 3, as well as Phases 4 and 5, may be contemporary.

3.3.1 Phase 1

The earliest features were vestigial structural remains (Context 15008) with an internal division at the eastern side of the trench; a single-faced wall (C15004) running roughly east/west and revetted against a bank of palaeosol; and to the west of this wall, an area of cobbling (C15005, C15006) which had two phases of use (Illus 4). Two deposits of palaeosol were found; within the upper palaeosol, two sets of cultivation furrows were recorded.
Illus 6 Trench 15, boundary wall and west end of trench, from the north

Illus 7 Trench 15, detail of boundary wall from the north-west
3.3.2 Phase 2

This phase is characterised by a wall (C15004) running east/west (Illus 3, 5, 6). It was possibly used to demarcate areas of either arable or pastoral land, or to separate the domestic from agricultural activity. The accumulation of material either side of this wall, particularly to the east, indicates the longevity of this feature as a functioning entity (Illus 7). This boundary wall demarcates an area of well-developed agricultural soil (C15019, C15003, C15007), which formed a more fertile, less waterlogged area in the centre of the trench, and has prevented the soil from eroding. Associated with this feature is a bank of soil against the back of the wall (C15021) and a ditch probably inserted to improve drainage (C15036) (Illus 3, Illus 8). Possible secondary stonework was noted in section (Illus 5).

This phase may also be associated with a system of cultivation furrows (C15011, C15012, C15013) because the surface of the palaeosol (C15003) in the centre of the trench displayed traces of such features, which were particularly noticeable when the overlying peat was removed (Illus 3, 9, 10).
Illus 10 Trench 15, Furrows 15012 and 15013 in centre of trench from the north

Illus 11 Trench 15, cobbling between Structure 15008 and trench edge, from the east
Illus 12 Trench 15, Structure 15008 from the north

Illus 13 Trench 15, general view of Structure 15008 from the north
These furrows measured about 0.5m wide by 0.15m deep, were aligned roughly north-west/south-east and parallel to each other. The two in the centre of the trench (C15012 and C15013) lay about 1m apart. Similarly, the presence of cereals, confirmed through pollen analysis of the palaeosol (see below) supports the presence of arable land.

3.3.2 Phase 3

The laying of a cobbled surface (C15006) to the west of the boundary wall marks a change (Illus 3). This is the first phase of cobbling to the west of the field wall, and the stones may have been laid to consolidate the ground surface. This feature lay within the palaeosol (C15003), which was covered with preliminary peat growth (C15002). A patch of cobbling (C15010) within the palaeosol to the south of the building may also belong to this phase (Illus 11).

3.3.3 Phase 4

Phase 4 is characterised by the construction of a structure (C15008) (Illus 12), which itself has at least two phases of activity. Located in the east of the trench, the walls of this structure were constructed of substantial boulders, which may have supported an organic superstructure, perhaps turf (Illus 3, Illus 13).

Phase 4a sees the building in its original form, sub-rectangular with an internal division resulting in two compartments linked by an internal doorway (C15027). The structure measured 7m by 4m overall; the northern compartment measured approximately 2m by 1.8m internally while the southern compartment measured about 1.5m by 1.5m internally (Illus 14). Two possible entrances into the larger, northern compartment were located to the east (C15025) and west (15024) respectively (Illus 15), and one possible entrance was identified in the southern cell facing south-east (C15026) (Illus 16).

A phase of reconstruction, Phase 4b, saw the northern compartment shortened by a secondary cross-wall (C15023) (Illus 17) and the western entrance blocked (C15018). A section measuring 1.6m by 0.6m was excavated within the northern cell in front of what was the west-facing entrance (Illus 18). The palaeosol here (C15019) overlay a brown
Illus 15 Trench 15, blocking of the western entrance of Structure 15008, from the west

Illus 16 Trench 15, southern cell of structure from the south-east
A thin layer of compact peat (C15015) above a gritty interface layer (C15002) (Illus 8). The stratification indicates that farming activity or stock control may have continued after the peat had begun to grow and an attempt to continue use of the area in a wet and infertile environment was made, if only for a brief period. A possible continuation of this cobbled surface was excavated in Trench 18.

### 3.4 Sub-peat field wall (Trench 4)

A stone wall was excavated, lying on the same alignment as a wall found during the watching brief (Inglis 1999). This wall (C4003) measured 1.5m wide by 3m long and was constructed on top of the palaeosol (Illus 21). It was built of large sub-angular gneiss boulders measuring up to 0.65m across, with a little tumbled stone lying to the east (Illus 22). Its presence is particularly significant in light of the features present in Trench 15, just 5m to the north. It is possible that this represents a linear field wall aligned NNW/SSE, whose northern end...
Illus 18 Trench 15, slot within structure

Illus 19 Trench 15, east-facing section of slot within structure
could be seen in the section edge of Trench 15; the line could be followed by probing between the trenches.

3.5 Sub-peat clearance cairns and heaps (Trenches 2, 9 and 16)

A circular spread of small stones (C9010), measuring about 1m in diameter, was discovered beneath 1.15m of peat in Trench 9 (Illus 23). These stones were heaped up towards the centre and became more scattered towards the edges (Illus 24). This feature is interpreted as a clearance cairn.

A linear heap of stones (C16009) was excavated in Trench 16, aligned roughly north/south, and piled to a height of about 0.4m at the north of the trench, tailing off towards the south (Illus 25, 26). It had a clear boundary on its north-western side and a much more diffuse one towards the south. It was initially assumed that an earlier field wall had been obscured by later clearance stones piled up against it. However, upon excavation, no wall faces could be discerned and the stone heap was irregular in construction. This feature is interpreted as a linear clearance heap, demarcated on its northern side, perhaps suggesting that clearance activity occurred from the south. It is unlikely that peat cutting has removed portions of this feature and created a false edge because the feature runs obliquely across the peat cutting. This feature possibly continued further to the east in Trench 2, where a stone spread running north-east/south-west was identified, with edge-set stones marking the south face (Illus 27).

Below this stone feature was a thin layer of well-humified peat, beneath which was a spread of small sub-angular/sub-rounded stones (C16010) lying on top of the palaeosol (Illus 28). These stones perhaps indicate that a clearance heap had already begun to accumulate and was augmented by further clearance over a period of time. A small sub-oval pit (C16011) was found cutting into the palaeosol beneath these stones. It measured 0.24m across by 0.2m deep and contained a homogeneous dark brown silt.
Illus 21 Trench 4 plan

Illus 22 Trench 4 from the south
Illus 23 Trench 9 plan

Illus 24 Trench 9 from the north-east
Illus 25 Trench 16 plan
Illus 26 Trench 16 from the west

Illus 27 Trench 2 from the west
3.6 Oval structure of unknown date (Trench 13)

The footings of an oval building were found on the coastal edge sealed beneath a layer of gritty colluvium (Illus 29). It measured 2.5m by 4.5m internally and was aligned north-east/south-west (Illus 30). The walls of this structure were poorly built with no distinct coursing and had a gritty matrix, possibly forming a soil wall core, so is likely to have supported a peat/turf superstructure (Illus 31); indeed, on the south side the wall was constructed of peat blocks, their shape still readily discernible, placed on top of a stone foundation. There was no evidence of an entrance and there were no internal features within this building.

A thin organic soil covered the interior of the building and has been interpreted as an earlier floor layer. A possible secondary turf floor or platform (C13011), constructed after the original floor went out of use and the building began to fill with colluvium, was found in the eastern side of the building. It measured 0.8m wide by 3m long by 0.3m thick. This deposit lay on top of a compact peaty layer which perhaps resulted from a foundation layer made of peat blocks. It could also indicate that the platform itself was turf-built, and what is seen is the peaty topsoil adhering to the underside of turfs cut from peat.

To the east of the structure, a length of stone wall appeared to continue beneath a peat bank. This wall could be traced by probing for a short distance heading east, but here the peat rapidly increased in depth to 3m. Between the oval structure and this ancillary wall was a thick dump of mixed material (C13014) containing patches of clay, peat and peat ash. Upon its removal, a slab-capped drain was revealed (C13018) (Illus 32). This measured 2.3m in length, aligned north-east/south-west, and continued into the section to the north. This feature could not be excavated in full because of time constraints, and so its underlying structure and contents remain unknown. This drain appears to lie outside the excavated building and may therefore be draining water away from the structure or be evidence for a second building as yet not revealed.
Illus 29 Trench 13, general view of structure from the east

Illus 30 Trench 13 plan
Illus 31 Trench 13, structure from the south

Illus 32 Trench 13, drain seen from the west
3.7 Post-medieval structure and redeposited early prehistoric finds (Trench 3)

A trench was excavated adjacent to a large bedrock knoll in the west of the study area. The latest phase of activity in this area was represented by a small semi-circular building. It had a double-faced stone wall with a soil core and was assigned a medieval or later date on the basis of its morphology and the recovery of Craggan Ware sherds from within it; it was interpreted as a bothy or hut. The building measured 4m by 3.2m overall, and a large orthostat had been used to form the north side of the entrance on the east. A spread of peat ash was interpreted as a hearth, and two possible postholes were cut into the floor deposits.

Beneath this building, and across an area of outcropping bedrock around the area the building had occupied, was a series of deposits filling the hollows within the bedrock (Illus 33), some of which contained flint, pottery and plant macrofossils. These deposits were difficult to interpret, but it is possible that some accumulated naturally, while others may have been deliberately laid to level the uneven bedrock surface prior to constructing the building. A few of the artefacts found have been dated to the Late Neolithic or Bronze Age, suggesting that the hollows within the bedrock acted as catchments for material during prehistoric activity in this area.