CHAPTER 4: EXCAVATIONS AT BALELONE

H F James & P Strong

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The site lies to the west of Balelone Farm on North Uist, at NF 719 740 (Figure 9). It was revealed by coastal erosion, in a steep, cliff face cut into machair sand. To the landward side, the undulating machair consists of a series of gentle ridges and hollows. The sand cover is thick and has been deposited against, and partly over, the till covered rocky peninsula of Varlish. To the south, there is a stream in the bed of which, approximately 300–400 m east of the site, peat-like bands outcrop. These indicate shallow lacustrine or wet marsh environments in the area, before the deposition of the machair sands. Ritchie has suggested that these layers provide evidence for the existence of a loch in a large part of the inter-ridge basin of Balelone Varlish (Ritchie 1985). This loch was subsequently infilled with windblown sand. Inter-tidal organic layers with windblown sand were also found, 70–100 m south-west of the site, at approximately mid-tidal level.

Before excavation, the site was discernible as a 2 m high, elongated, grass-covered mound, the seaward side of which was cut by marine erosion. It was 35 m long. The lower face was obscured by a loose mass of tumbled material forming a slope of 45°, which extended onto the beach. The slope was colonised by clumps of marram grass. At the south end of the site the mound sloped down into the gully of the stream. To the north the site terminated in a steep grass slope. Large, round, waterworn beach boulders and course gritty sand from the upper beach lay against the base of the site.

4.1.1 Archaeological features

A stone structure was noted near the centre of the exposed face. It consisted of four courses of rough, angular stones forming a corner or niche. Above this and slightly to one side, a number of flat rectangular stones formed an ashlar face parallel to the shore line. A tallard of midden layers, which had not collapsed, jutted out above the stone structure.

4.1.2 Site history

Beveridge states that the name Balelone means 'township of the marsh' but that this name does not appear in early documents, probably because it formed part of the township of Scolpaig. Balelone appears to have been mentioned in the Judicial Rental of 1718 and the Balranald Rental of 1764 (Crawford 1983). Reid's map (1799) showed planned improvements of the land then owned by Alexander, Lord Mac-

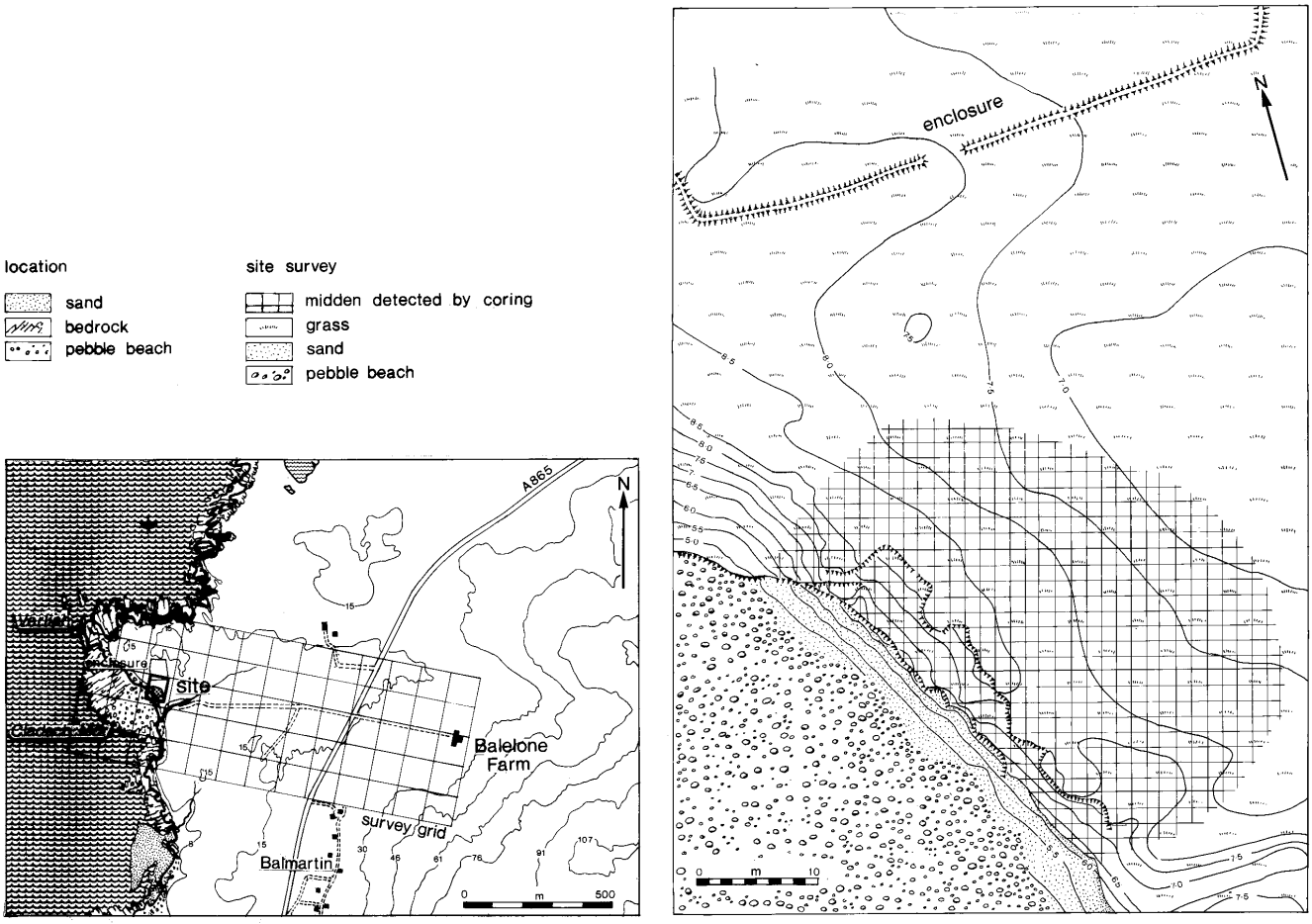

Figure 9. Balelone: site location and survey

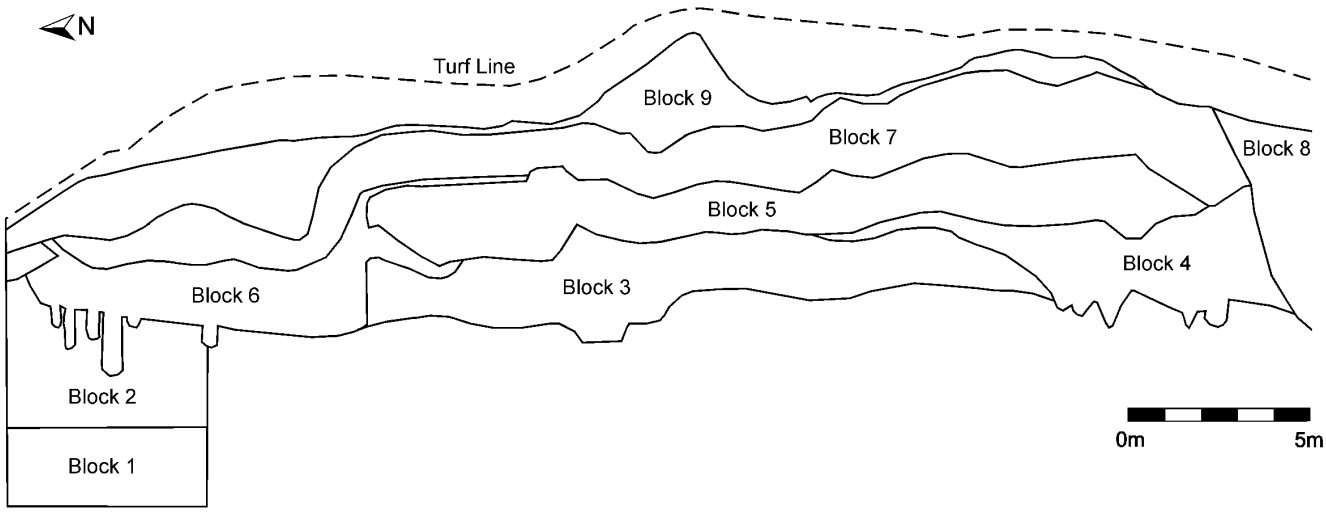

Figure 10. Balelone: main section showing Blocks

Donald. The plans for lotting of the land were superimposed over the medieval runrig system. Moisley (1961) noted that 'lots are shown on Balelone and Baleloch which were probably never lotted, being cleared for farms in 1815'.

The 6-inch OS map of 1904 marks the site of the excavation as the position of 'Erd Houses'. Beveridge records that here, thin layers of kitchen midden were exposed in the eroding face of the machair. In the upper portion of this sandy knoll there were traces of a 'slight' wall which curved in a northerly direction for several yards and seemed to represent part of the underground lining of one of the 'earth houses'. He also lists several finds from the site, including hammer-stones, pottery with both incised and applied decoration, iron slag, butchered bone, a re-used quern and a small hollowed oval stone. The Society of Antiquaries of Scotland received a 'fragment of a large hand-made Vessel with a notched fillet encircling it, and chevron ornament, from a kitchen midden at the seashore west of and opposite Balelone .... adjacent to a buried earth house', (PSAS 1916, 12). A fragment of an oval pebble with deep rounded indentation on both faces was also donated (PSAS 1922, 16). The Shepherds' report (1978) describes the site as a substantial midden deposit 35 m long and 2 m deep, enclosing the remains of a structure.

4.1.3 Local sites

Immediately behind the house at Kilphedir lay a broken monolith, one part standing to 1.5 m and the other part *circa* 1.5 m long lying close beside it (Beveridge 1911, 263). At Varlish Point, the name of which is probably of Norse derivation (*ibid,* 100) an earth house is said to have existed (*ibid,* 116). However this site was not located by the RCAHMS in 1965.

4.1.4 Method of excavation

Unlike Baleshare and Hornish Point, the site at Balelone was not conceived of as a tapestry excavation, and it was dug in separate sections. The seaward face of the site was divided into five equal areas separated by 1 m wide baulks and then cleaned of loose sand. In each area a trench was dug leaving a vertical section face at right angles to the slope to establish the limit of the undisturbed midden layers below the slip and the extent of damage by erosion. The baulk sections were drawn, to establish a relationship with the beach material. The section face was cut with a series of steps, to prevent its collapse. At the north end a small horizontal area was opened to examine the lower shell sand strata, down to the underlying bedrock (Figure 10). At the south end, a soil pit sondage was cut to ascertain the full depth of the midden deposit.

Towards the end of the excavation an attempt was made to join up the separate sections and reduce the repetition of context numbers. However, several stratigraphic problems remained unresolved. Samples were only collected systematically within the two test squares. Therefore, it is not possible to compare the material retrieved from the layers to the extent that was done on the later sites. In general the levels of interpretation and description attained at Balelone are not as detailed as those achieved at the other sites. Balelone was the first erosion face excavated in the current project and its main value to the project lies in the lesson it taught and the experience it provided. In consequence of the differences in approach to this site, the organisation of this report differs from the others. The Blocks described here are in fact groups of Blocks, as defined for the other sites. The Blocks are stratigraphically ordered from the lowest, Block 1, to the topmost, Block 9 (Figure 10).

Note on Sampling

Every layer which was sieved produced some material. Therefore, when no material is listed for a given context, below, it means that this layer was not sampled and sieved. Bone and pot are recorded as numbers of pieces, while seashell, macroplant, stone, and slag are recorded by weight in

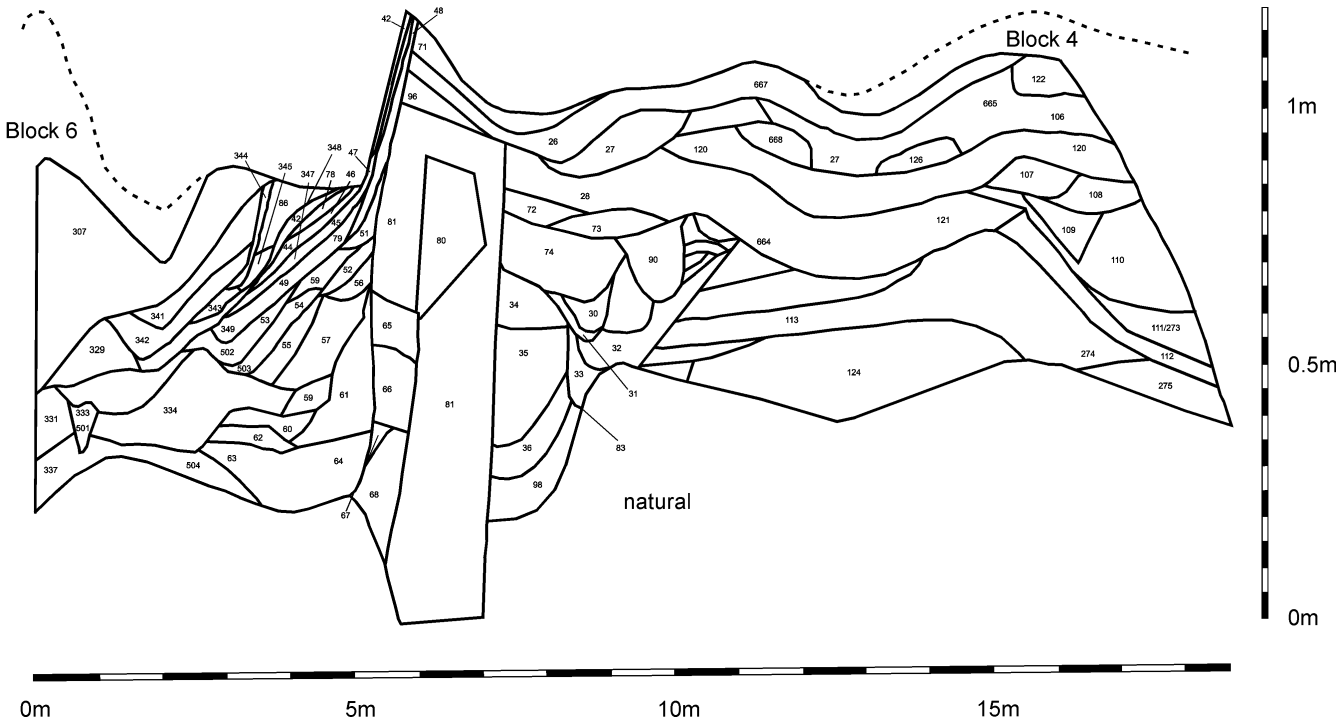

Figure 11. Block 3

grams. Due to the heavily truncated nature of site and the absence of structures to which they could be related, the animal bone and macroplant material were not studied further. Eoin Halpin identified the animal bone recovered by hand on site and his identifications are summarised at the end of each Block report. The much larger number of fragments recovered by wet-seiving and flotation are listed in the tables accompanying each Block report. None of this material was included in the faunal study undertaken by Halstead (Chapter 11.2).

4.1.5 Summary of Blocks

Block No.	Final interpretation
1.	Cultivated deposits
2.	Windblown sand and cultivated deposits
3.	Midden-site deposits with windblown sand, intermittently cultivated
4.	Midden-site deposits
5.	Drystone structure and midden-site deposits
6.	Pits, post-holes and associated deposits
7.	Midden-site deposits, intermittently cultivated
8.	Windblown sand
9.	Windblown sand

4.2 BLOCK 1 – CULTIVATED DEPOSITS

See Table p.273

Block 1 lay at the north end of the site, at the base of the test trench (Figure 10). Its deposits were exposed over a distance of 6.5 m and were *circa* 1 m in depth, lying directly on bedrock. There were five layers within this Block which ranged from orange to dark grey black in colour and from humic sand to sand in texture. Cultivation marks were cut into the surface of layers [9] and [203]. These were filled with light coloured sand which in both cases differed from the overlying layers. The pH values recorded for [8] and [10] were 7.6 and 7.3 respectively.

Archaeological interpretation

The loamy texture of some of the layers in this Block and the presence of ard marks indicates that cultivation took place during the accumulation of its deposits. The scale of cultivation is unknown as the full horizontal extent of this Block was not revealed.

Specialist contribution

A total of fifteen unidentifiable bone fragments were recovered. Two teeth were present, one of pig (M3) and one of cow (M1/M2).

4.3 BLOCK 2 – WINDBLOWN SAND AND CULTIVATED DEPOSITS

See table p.273

Block 2 was revealed to a depth of 1.1 m only at the north end of the site (Figure 10), but sufficient was exposed to show that it covered the whole site above Block 1 and beneath Block 3. It consisted of numerous interdigitated soil layers which could only be differentiated stratigraphically with enormous effort. They ranged from very pale brown to

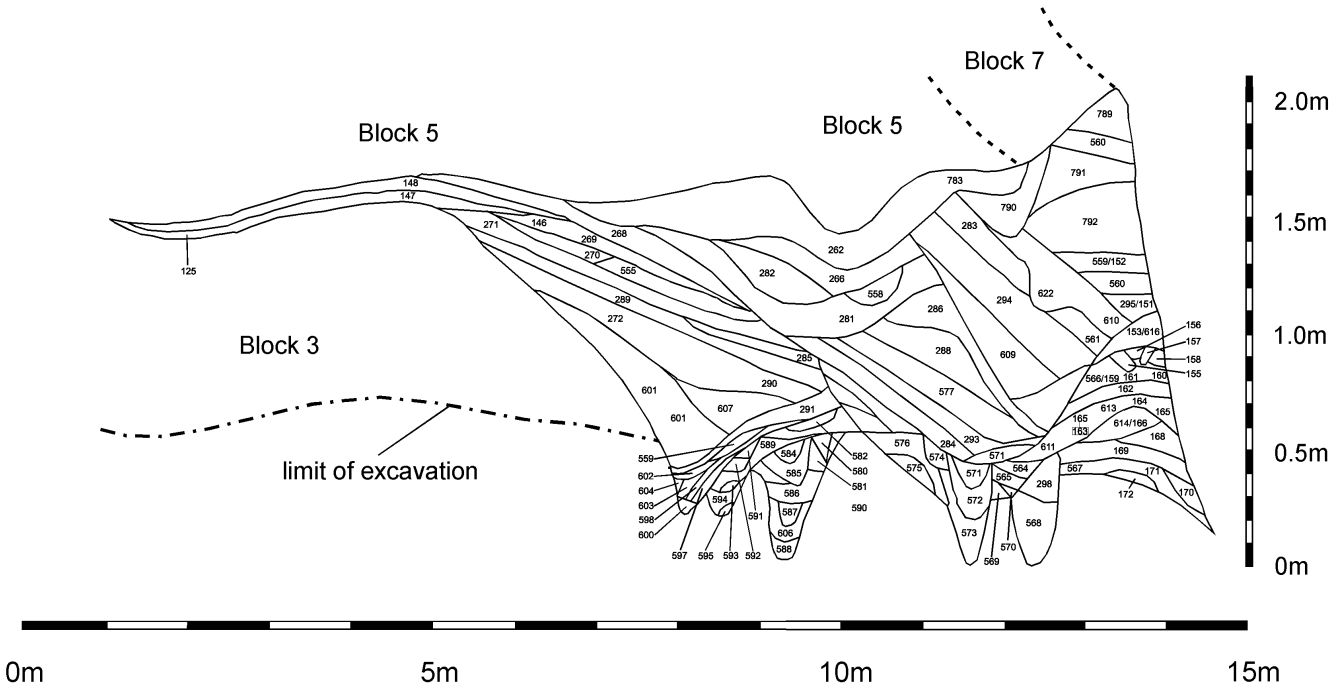

Figure 12. Block 4

brown in colour and all were sand. The boundaries were predominantly diffuse and irregular. One layer, [511], had ard marks cut into its surface, filled with a slightly greyer sand than that above and below.

Archaeological interpretation

The light colour of the sand within this Block indicates that its organic matter content was low. This implies that the bulk of the deposit is windblown sand. However, the presence of ard marks in the upper layers indicated that these layers, at least, were cultivated.

4.4 BLOCK 3 – MIDDEN-SITE DEPOSITS WITH WINDBLOWN SAND, INTERMITTENTLY CULTIVATED

See table p.274

* ^{14}C date 2330 ± 70 bp (GU-1801) from layer [113] (Seashell)

Block 3 lay in the middle of the site beneath Blocks 4 and 5 (Figure 10). At its north end it abutted the masonry of Block 6 and in the south it was cut by Block 4. It extended for 18.5 m along the section and its maximum depth was 1.2 m. It consisted of seventy-two soil layers and a single masonry context (Figure 11). The masonry, [81], was constructed of large stone blocks which in plan formed two arms. In the section the masonry measured 1.3 m wide and 1 m high. It had been cut into the layer beneath Block 3 and the deposits of Block 3 either abutted or overlay it. South of the masonry, the layers were generally extensive. To the north the lower layers were extensive while the upper ones consisted of thin layers and lenses that rose up over the masonry. The soil colours throughout the Block varied from very pale brown to dark grey-brown. However, the sloping layers were more consistently dark in colour than the rest of the Block. The soil boundaries were predominantly wavy. Cultivation marks were noted at the boundary of the basal layer, [124], and the Block beneath (Plate 11). The pH values recorded for this Block ranged between 7.1–7.6.

Archaeological interpretation

The Block contained the remains of a drystone structure set into the deposits of Block 2. Against this to the north and south, deposits of windblown sand and midden-site deposits had built up. These latter deposits were identified as such because of their dark colour and loamy texture. The presence of ard marks in the base of this Block indicated that the basal deposit to the south of the masonry had been cultivated and the wavy soil boundaries further up the section in this area suggest that further, intermittent, cultivation may have taken place. To the north of the walling deposits rich in soil organic matter appeared to have accumulated.

Specialist contribution

A total of 211 bone fragments were recovered. Identifiable fragments comprised a possible sheep horncore and dog mandible fragments from [331] & [28]. Unidentified bird bones were retrieved from [331]. Sheep bones and a cattle tooth (P4) were recovered from [667] and sheep teeth (M1 and M2) from [113]). Fish bone fragments were also recovered from the latter. Sheep and cattle fragments were recovered from [106], including unidentified fragments with cut marks from [665]. A deer phalanx was found in [120].

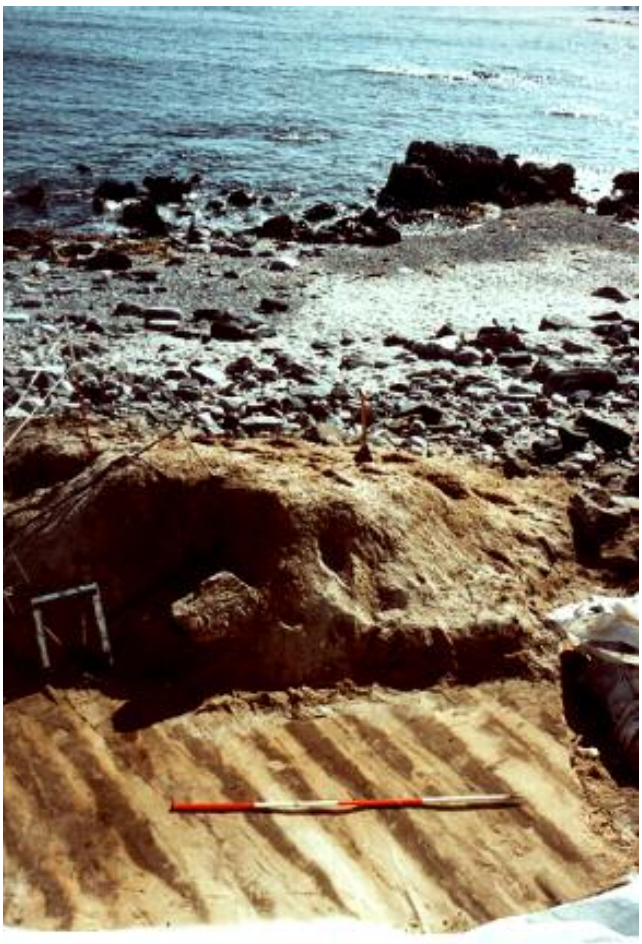

Plate 11. Cultivation marks at the base of the Balelone midden

4.5 BLOCK 4 – MIDDEN-SITE DEPOSITS

See table p.275

* ^{14}C date 2440 ± 80 bp (GU-1803) from [166] (Seashell).

Block 4 lay at the south end of the site (Figure 10). It overlay Block 3 and its southern margin had been cut by Block 8. It extended for 11.6 m in the section with a maximum depth of 1.3 m. There were ninety-six contexts within this Block, including eight pits. The complex stratigraphy within the Block (Figure 12) is the result of the repeated cutting and refilling of these sediments. Generally, the sand layers sloped down from the north. They consisted of layers which range in depth from less than 0.01 m–0.2 m and in extent from 6 m down to small lenses. These layers range in colour from very pale brown to dark grey-brown and in texture from sand to sandy loam. A pocket of winkle shells was noted in the section, [266], and many other layers contained large numbers of seashells. The soil boundaries were generally wavy and abrupt. Eight round bottomed pits which ranged in depth from 0.2 m–0.4 m were seen at the base of the Block. The fills of the pits, where recorded, were described as brown sands. The pH values for this Block ranged from 7.2–7.6.

Archaeological interpretation

The layers were interpreted as midden site deposits because of the variability of soil colour and texture. These deposits have been periodically dug away, probably for use as manure. The pits could not be interpreted from the information available.

Specialist contribution

A total of 157 bone fragments were recoverd from this Block. Identified bones include a left sheep mandible [780] and various sheep and cattle fragments from [288] and [284]. A sheep illium from [289] had cut marks.

4.6 BLOCK 5 – DRYSTONE STRUCTURE AND MIDDEN-SITE DEPOSITS

See table p.276

Block 5 lay near the centre of the site, above Blocks 3 and 4 (Figure 10). It extended for 22.8 m and its maximum depth was 0.7 m. It consisted of three segments of masonry, three post-holes and twenty-six layers and lenses (Figure 13). Masonry [37] measured 1.5 m long and 0.6 m high, and was seen towards the north end of the section (Plate 12). It was built of large rectangular boulders, roughly faced to the south and it was up to three courses high. This masonry had been constructed directly on top of a layer of dark reddish brown sand, [21], and was abutted by the layers above. Towards the south end of the Block, some walling, [654], curved out from section face for a distance of 4 m (Plate 13). It consisted of two faces; the north face was constructed of a single course of large rectangular stones while the south face was formed of more than one course of smaller rounded boulders. Smaller stones and flat slabs were set into the space between the faces. Further masonry, [779], was seen in the section consisting of four stones extending for 0.6 m along the section. The layers within this Block were generally extensive and gently undulating. They were up to 0.3 m in depth and were described as ranging in colour from very pale brown to black and in texture from peat through sandy loam to sand. The lowest layers in this Block were the most extensive, stretching from the stones [779] for a distance of *circa* 20 m to the north. Their depths ranged between a few centimetres to 0.3 m and they were well compacted layers of red-brown clay sands or sandy clays (fig 00, Block 10). The three post-holes, [803], [804] and [805], had been dug from the top of layer [340], to the north of the masonry, [37]. They were all circular and measured 0.23 m–0.30 m in diameter and between 0.12 m and 0.21 m in depth. They were sealed by a layer of black sandy peat, [39]. The pH values recorded from this Block ranged from 7.2–7.5.

Plate 12. Balelone. Masonry [37] in Block 5

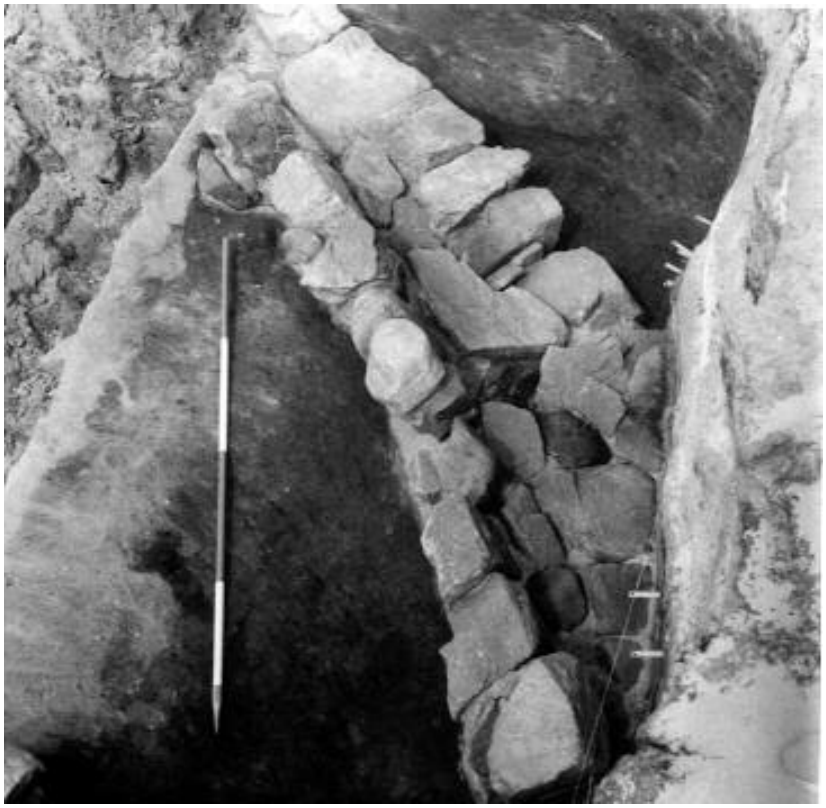

Plate 13. Balelone. Masonry [654] in Block 5

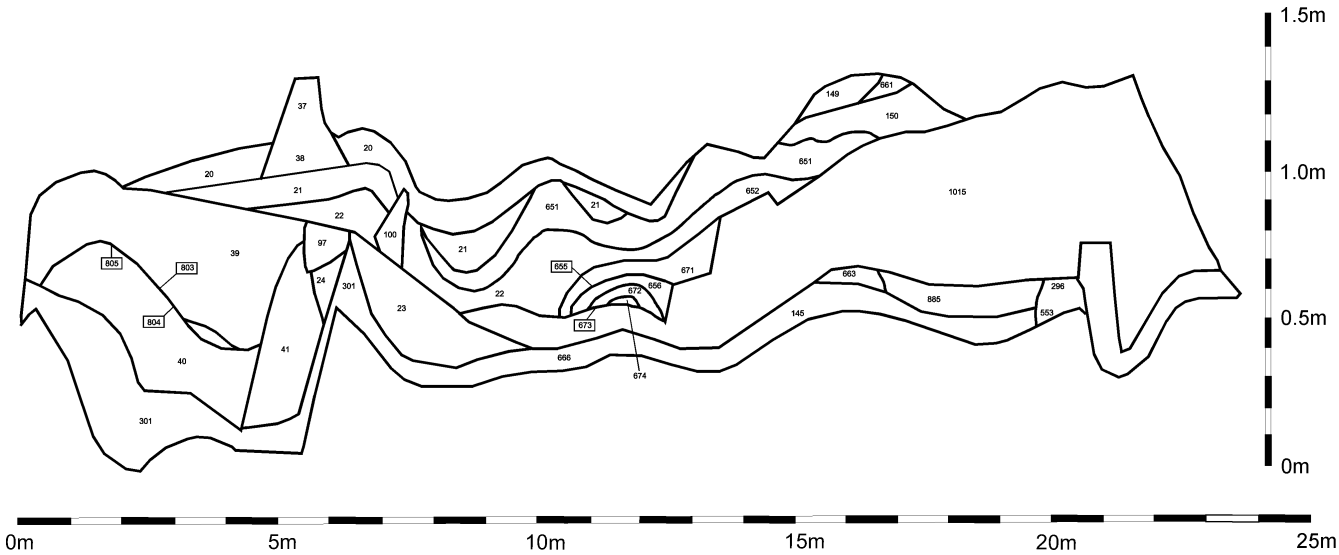

Figure 13. Block 5

Archaeological interpretation

The layers within this Block were interpreted as midden-site deposits because of their variability in texture, colour and their extent. The lower layers appeared to contain substantial amounts of burnt peat. Subsumed within this deposit were remains of drystone walling. The walling [654] was thick and slightly curving, suggestive of the enclosing wall of a wheel-house, but no other architectural features, eg radial walls, were found. It is stratigraphically later than the masonry, [37], which like the stones [779], could not be interpreted from the visible remains. The post-holes could not be interpreted further from the information available; however, it was clear that they were sealed by sand layers before the masonry was constructed.

Specialist contribution

A total of 1807 bone fragments were recovered. Butchery marks were present on a cattle scapula from [301] and a sheep vertebra from [20] and [1023]. Sheep fragments with cut marks were also identified in [22] and [1023]. Radii of sheep and cattle were retrieved from [662] and [88] respectively, while sheep teeth (M2, M3 and P4) were found in [39] and [1017]). A pig jaw and red deer antler antler were found in [20] and a possible otter humerus was found in [1023].

4.7 BLOCK 6 – PITS, POST-HOLES AND ASSOCIATED DEPOSITS

See table p.277

Block 6 lay at the north end of the site above Blocks 2 and 5 and beneath Block 7 (Figure 10). It extended for 13 m along the section and had a maximum depth of *circa* 1 m. The earliest features in this Block were ten, circular, round-bottomed post-holes (Plate 14). Six of these, [711], [713], [715], [717], [719], and [721], were cut by the section line; these cut into the layers of Block 2 (Figure 14). They ranged in diameter from 0.23 m–0.5 m and in depth from 0.1–0.7 m. Their fills were described as dark grey, yellow and white sand, all with a significant charcoal content. Post-pipes were visible within all of the post-hole fills. The 2 m square box, cut back into the section at this point, revealed four more pits, [521], [530], [532] and [535]. These were also circular and had similar fills to those noted above. They were also cut into the layers of Block 2. These pits had been truncated before the layers of the overlying Block 6 were deposited. At the south end of Block 6 was a drystone wall, [317], constructed of stones of varying sizes, all irregular in shape. In the section this masonry stood 1.1 m high, with five courses still *in situ*, and was *circa* 0.3 m wide. The walling was constructed against a vertical face cut into the layers of Block 3. A further pit, [336], was noted at the foot of the wall. The layers and lenses which had built up against wall [317] stretched to the edge of the excavated area. The lower layers were generally pale brown sand except for layer [710] which consisted of laminated layers of pale sand and black peat. Above this was a thick deposit of layers and lenses which ranged from black to orange brown in colour and from peaty sand to loamy sand, in texture. Several layers produced large amounts of seashells. The uppermost layer, [309], was of peat ash and this sealed the walling [317] and the layers of Block 5. The pH values recorded for the pit fills ranged from 7.2–7.5, the modal value was 7.3. The pH values for the layers ranged from 7.3–7.5, the modal value being 7.4.

Archaeological interpretation

All above-ground remains of this structure had been scooped away before the layers forming the rest of the Block were deposited. The pits were interpreted as post-holes because of the presence in them of post-pipes. They had been cut from a level now lost and, while their contemporaneity is probable, it is not certain. Pit [722] was cut by [720] so at least two phases of posts are indicated. There is no clear chronological relationship between the destruction of the post structure and the construction of the walling, [317]. Wall [317] was interpreted as a boundary, possibly constructed to check the

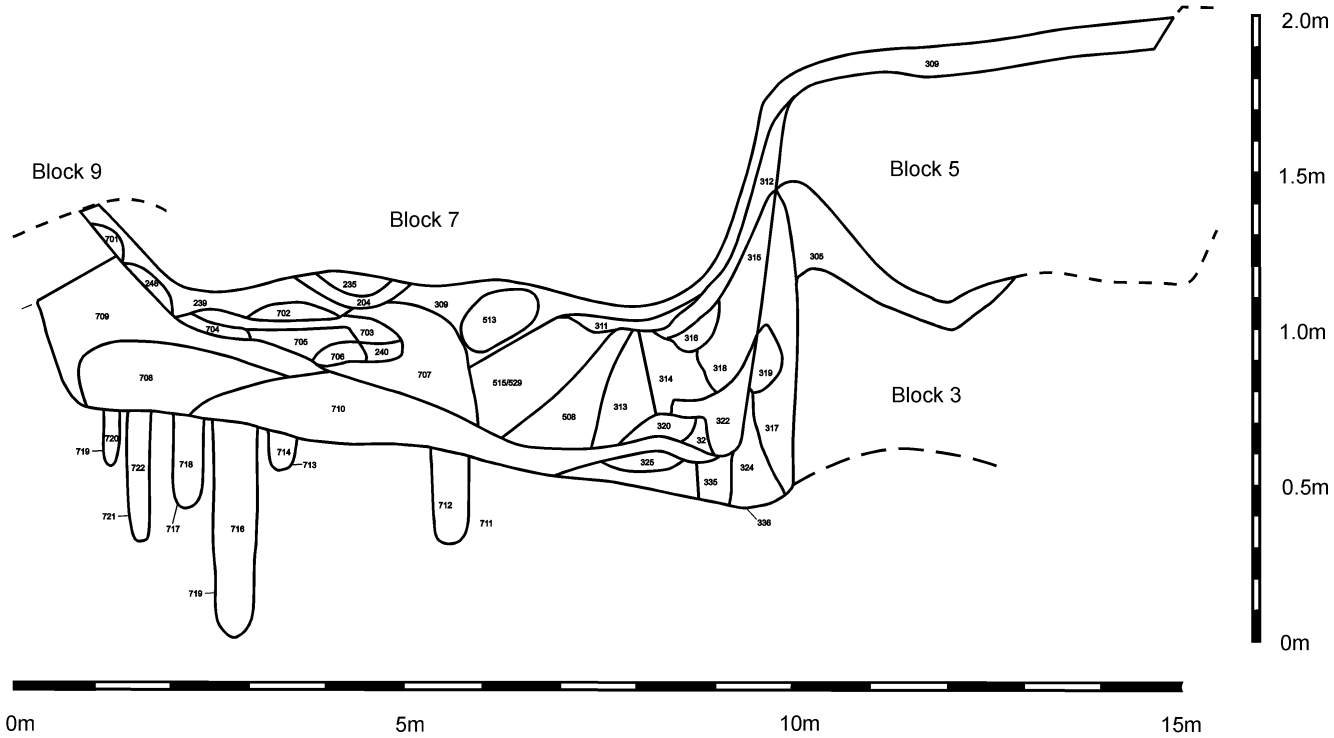

Figure 14. Block 6

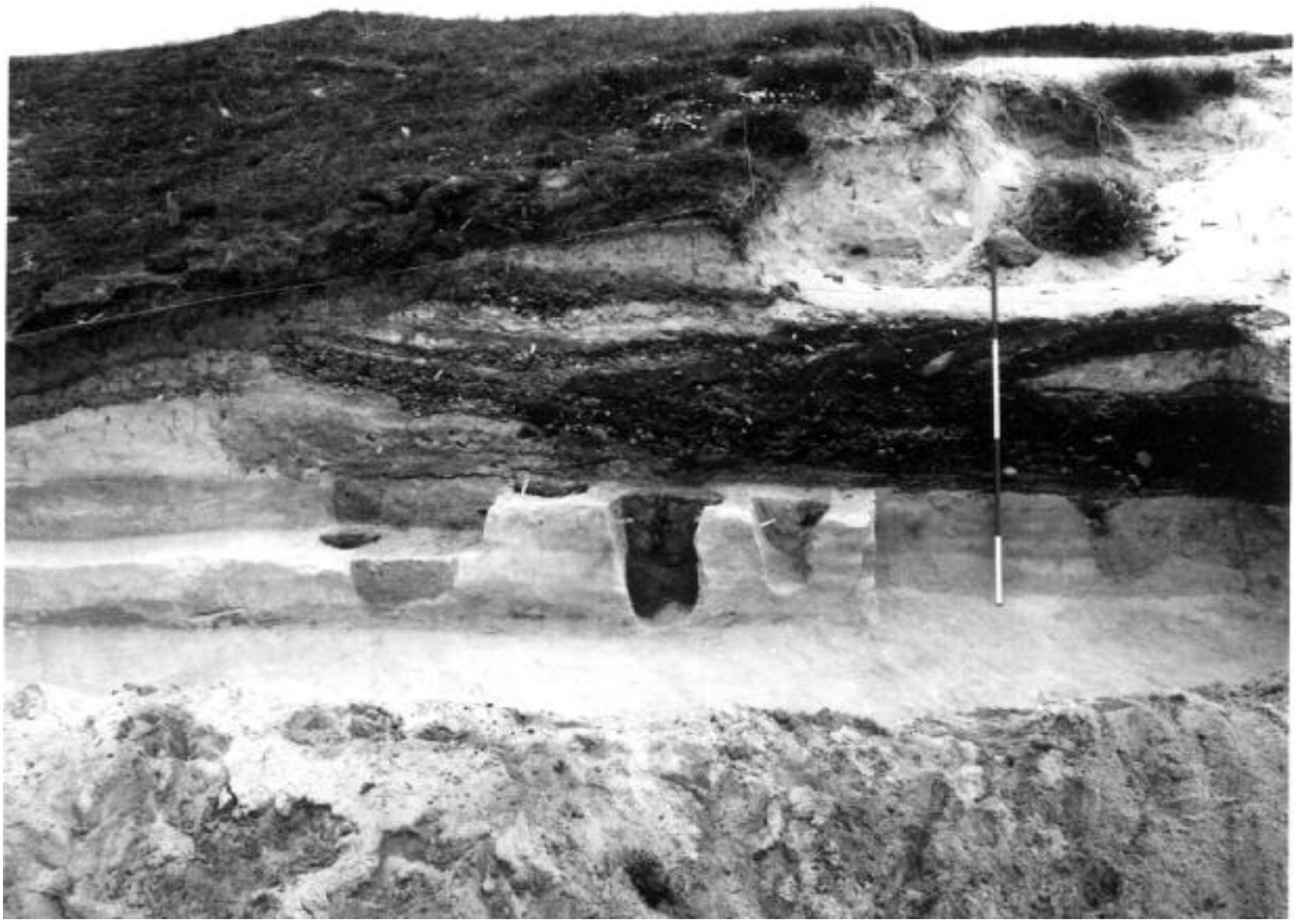

Plate 14. Balelone. Pits and postholes in Block 6

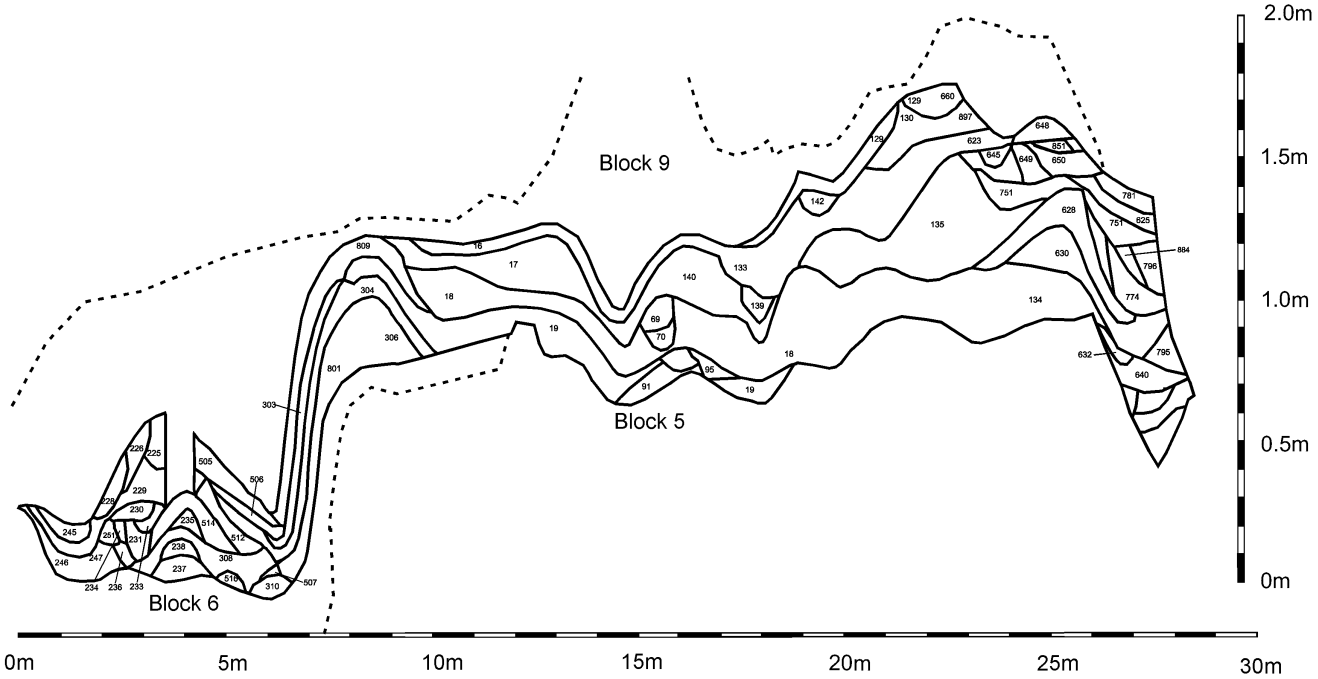

Figure 15. Block 7

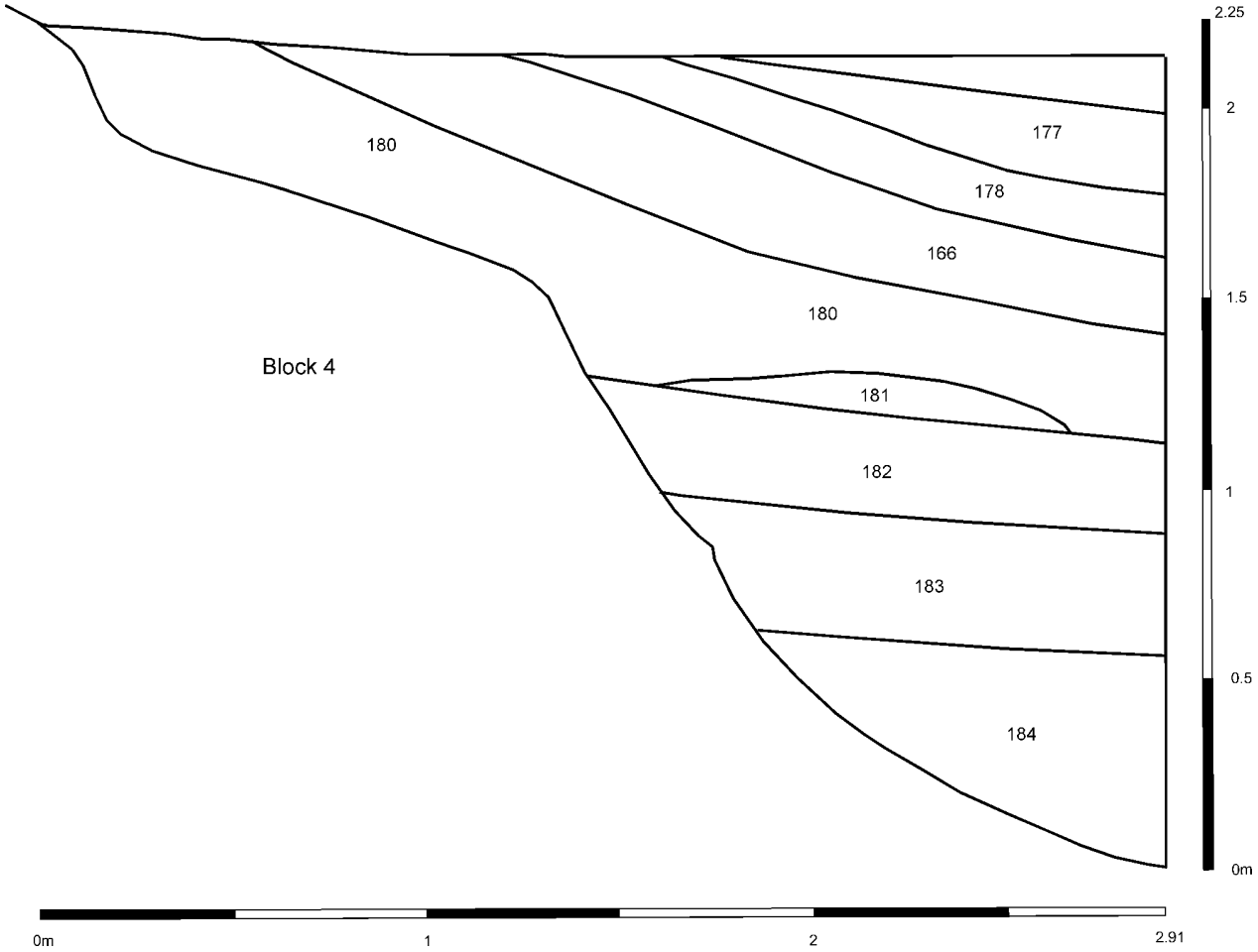

Figure 16. Block 8

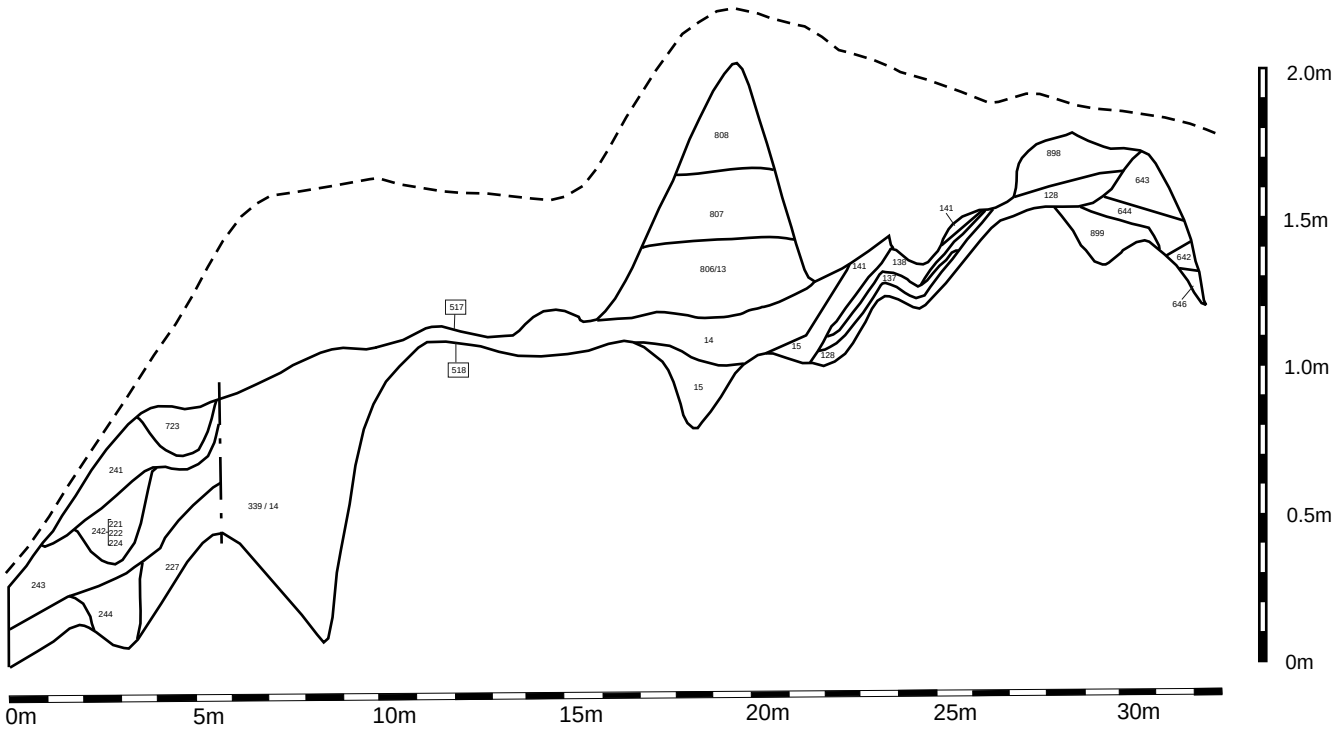

Figure 17. Block 9

spread of the midden-site deposits of Blocks 3 and 5. To the north of the wall, firstly windblown sand and then material with an extremely high organic and anthropogenic content had accumulated. These latter deposits, have been interpreted as dumped deposits.

Specialist contribution

A total of 1827 bone fragments were recovered. These comprised the 3rd phalanx of a sheep, sheep mandible fragments, teeth and worked pieces of horncore, together with cattle teeth, all from [524] and [1022]. Crab claws were also present.

4.8 BLOCK 7 – MIDDEN-SITE DEPOSITS, INTERMITTENTLY CULTIVATED

See table p.278

Block 7 extended over the greater part of the revealed site, for a distance of 35 m and to a maximum depth of 1.6 m (Figure 10). It consisted of extensive layers, 0.02m–0.05 m deep, and numerous lenses (Figure 15). The soil colours range from very pale brown to very dark brown and the soil textures, from sand to sandy loam. The uppermost layers were predominantly pale brown sands, while the lower layers consisted of bands of extremely variable colour and texture. There were two small pits [94] within this Block and another with two fills, [70] and [69].

Archaeological interpretation

This Block was interpreted as midden-site deposits that had been intermittently cultivated. The reasons for this interpretation were the predominance of extensive layers mixed with small lenses of presumably dumped material and the presence of wavy soil boundaries, although sufficient time must have elapsed to allow the posts to rot *in situ* as there is no evidence for their removal. The pH values recorded for this Block ranged from 6.9–7.7.

Specialist contribution

A total of 1982 bone fragments were recovered. Cattle were represented by a tooth from [244] and fragments with cut marks in [19] and [1019]. Fragments of sheep bone with cutmarks and a sheep humerus were found in [522]. A pig tooth was recovered in each of [17] and [306] and a dog jaw fragment was found in [631]. Unidentified bird and fish bones were also recovered from [640] and [522] respectively, together with six crab claws.

4.9 BLOCK 8 – WINDBLOWN SAND

See table p.279

Block 8 lay at the extreme south end of the site (Figure 10). It extended from where Blocks 7 and 4 had been cut away to the limit of the excavation, a distance of 4.3 m, and had a maximum depth of 0.55 m. It consisted of layers which

sloped down towards the south (Figure 16). They were predominantly pale brown sands except for the basal layer, [184], which was a dark brown loamy sand. The boundaries were either clear or broken.

Archaeological interpretation

This Block was interpreted as windblown sand because of its light colour, sandy texture and the small amounts of anthropogenic material which it contained. The organic matter in the basal layer and the bone and pot in layers [166] and [181] probably derive from the eroding deposits of Blocks 4 and 7.

Specialist contribution

Two sheep mandible fragments were recovered from this Block.

4.10 BLOCK 9 – WINDBLOWN SAND

* ^{14}C date 2290 ± 60 bp (GU-1802) from [339] (Shellfish)

Block 9 extended over the whole length of the site (Figure 10). It consisted mainly of modern layers of windblown sand and cultivated deposits, which varied in depth from 0.2 m–1.2 m (Figure 17). However, the lower contexts in the block, while disturbed, contained archaeological materials. Thus, one pot sherd was recovered from context [252] and the radiocarbon date was returned from context [399].