

An Atlantic roundhouse at Durcha, Sutherland

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ABSTRACT

Recent excavations have confirmed the presence of an Atlantic roundhouse within a large mound at Durcha. The presence of a stone fortress at Durcha had been recorded in the 18th century, but following stone robbing in the 19th century no clear traces of the structure survived to allow confirmation of its identity. The difficulties of the identification and classification of such structures in Sutherland, where little excavation has been carried out, are highlighted. The project was funded by Historic Scotland.

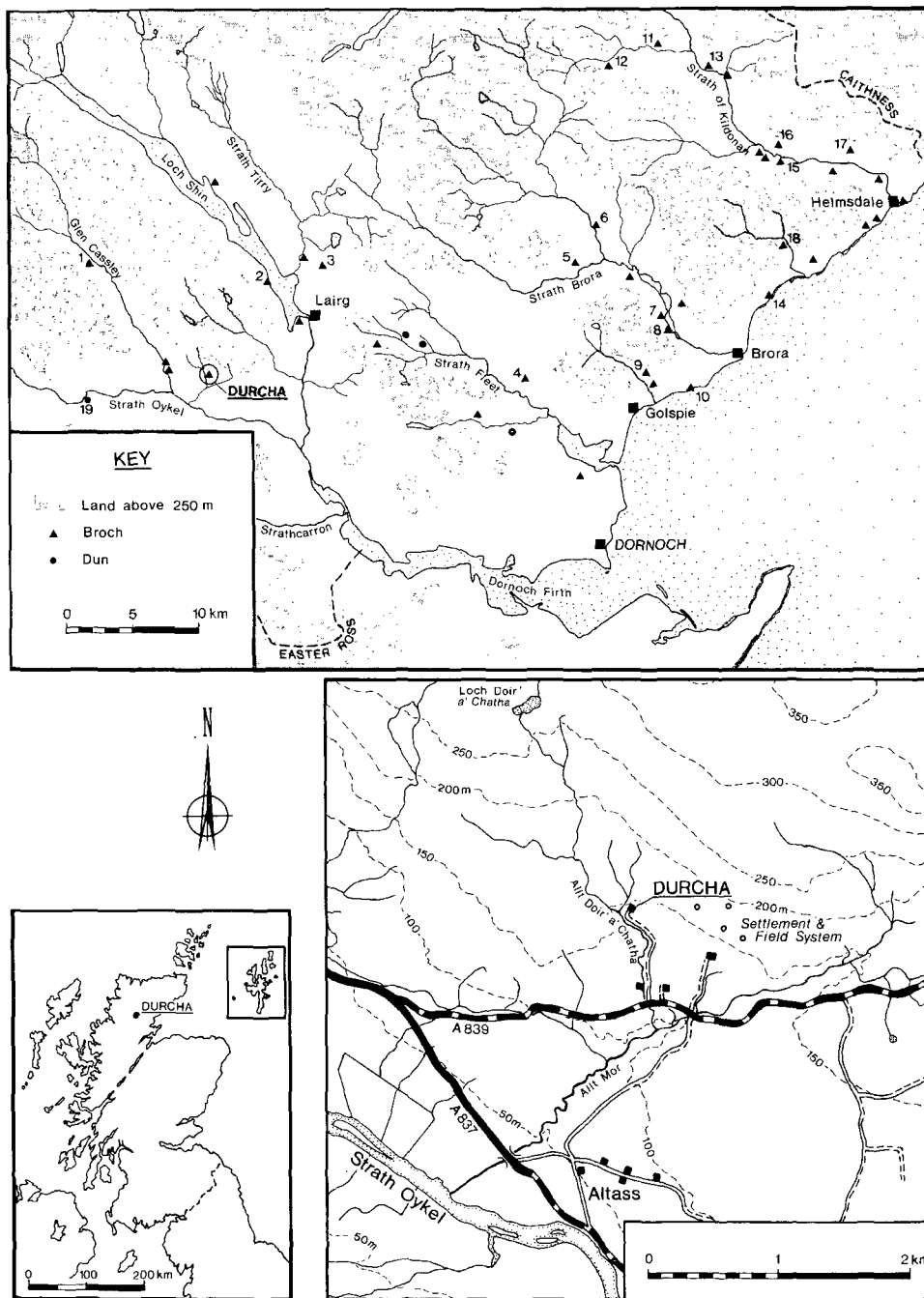
INTRODUCTION

This report details the results of survey and excavations conducted in 1992 and 1996 at the reputed site of a broch at Durcha, near Rosehall (NGR: NC 5017 0239; NMRS NC 50 SW no 2; illus 1). The site lies at 145 m OD beside Allt Doir' a' Chatha, a tributary of Allt Mor in Strath Oykel (illus 1). Hut circles and field systems are present to the east and south (NGR: NC 507 023, illus 1; also NGR: NC 504 004). Prior to investigation the alleged broch site was represented by a large, grassed mound, roughly oval and irregularly pitted, with maximum dimensions of 33.5 m by 20 m; the modern dwelling house and outbuildings of Durcha immediately surrounded the site (illus 2). No previous archaeological excavation is known to have been carried out, and the mound itself had not been surveyed in detail.

Documentary sources provide a modest amount of information about the site. The earliest known source is a reference to 'Dun Cor' in Pococke's account of his tour of Sutherland in 1760 (Kemp 1887, 115): 'at a rivulet, came to Dun Cor, another such stone fortress, it was thirty feet [c 9.15 m] in diameter within, and the walls six feet [c 1.8 m] thick'. The condition of this structure appears to have deteriorated significantly during the 19th century. The Sutherland itinerary of Pococke's tour was republished separately in 1888 by Kemp with added background material. Kemp's (1888, 48) explanatory note on Pococke's visit to Durcha (quoted here in full) states that:

the broch, Doir-a-Chatha, or Durcha, north of Rosehall, below Cnoc-a-Choire, now only a mound of stones, but the older inhabitants of the district remember when many feet of it was standing, and whence hundreds of loads of stone were taken to build the dyke which now encloses the Invernauld Wood.

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ILLUS 1 Location maps, showing Durlcha, and the broch and dun sites (as classified in NMRS) of south-east Sutherland. Numbered broch sites are those considered in statistical analyses (see illus 13 & 14): 1, Dail Langwell; 2, Sallachadh; 3, Alltbreac; 4, East Kinnauld; 5, Coich Burn; 6, Caisteal na Coille; 7, Carrol; 8, Leadoch; 9, Backies; 10, Carn Liath, Golspie; 11, Feranach; 12, Altanduin; 13, Suisgill; 14, Kintradwell; 15, Gailiable; 16, Balvalaich; 17, Kilphedir; 18, Carn Bran. Other site: 19, Tor a' Chorcain, Langwell. (Based on Ordnance Survey maps © Crown copyright)



ILLUS 2 View of the site from north-east, showing the house during redevelopment partly obscured behind the grassed mound

The first edition of the Ordnance Survey, surveyed in 1874 (Sutherland CII), indicates the site as a dashed circular feature annotated as 'Pictish Tower (Remains of)', suggesting that the form of the structure was no longer clearly visible. In 1909 the site was visited by the Royal Commission and recorded as 'a structureless heap of ruins, from which most of the large stones have been removed. It has apparently been of great size, and the ruin measures 106' [32.3 m] across, but, as no wall-faces are visible, the actual dimensions of the structure are not obtainable' (RCAHMS 1911, 20; no 52). The mound appears to have become grassed over since the 1909 visit, with little of its stone content now exposed.

SUTHERLAND BROCHS/ATLANTIC ROUNDHOUSES

The origin and development of the 'brochs' in the old county of Sutherland forms one of the less well understood aspects of the Iron Age societies of northern Scotland. Relevant to this issue has been the lack of consensus in recent debate about what a broch actually is: some have adopted new terminologies based upon architectural characteristics to allow a unitary, nested classification of the range of massive roundhouses distributed across Atlantic Scotland (eg Armit 1990a), whereas others (eg Swanson 1984) regard the term 'broch' as potentially including a range of structures of possibly different dates and functions. This report hereafter adopts Armit's (1990a, 59–60) classification of these structures as Atlantic roundhouses. His terminology proposes that drystone roundhouses with evidence for intramural galleries or cells are classed as complex Atlantic roundhouses. Only complex Atlantic roundhouses with upper galleries are classified as broch towers.

Previous investigations of Sutherland Atlantic roundhouse sites have been limited in comparison to those of the Western Isles (eg Armit 1990b), the Northern Isles (eg Hedges 1987; Ballin Smith 1994) and even neighbouring Caithness (eg Fairhurst 1984). Much of what is known of Sutherland examples has been derived from surface survey. The Royal Commission's *Inventary* (RCAHMS 1911, xviii–xxiii) of monuments in Sutherland presented both site descriptions and a synthesis of the visible structural characteristics of the 67 sites recorded at that time as brochs. Although additional discoveries were cited in lists produced by Graham (1949, 94–6) and Hamilton (1968, 175–9), and a more stringent classification based on visible architectural characteristics was proposed by MacKie (1965), the Royal Commission *Inventary* remains the primary published source of information. The National Monuments Record of Scotland, by 1996, had recorded 84 sites in Sutherland as 'brochs', with a further 14 roundhouses described as duns.

Fairhurst (1984, 183) regarded the Sutherland 'brochs' as representing a secondary spread from an Orkney/Caithness core area, and drew a distinction between the distribution of sites along the coastal edge, often attended by extra-mural settlements, and the mostly isolated structures occupying the more rugged inland areas. These latter sites, he suggested, were the homes of 'intruding broch lords' set within a landscape of hut circles. Young (1964, 173–5, 184–9) had previously considered the inland 'brochs' of Sutherland to be a development secondary to the coastal sites on the basis that those inland were of smaller size, more strategically located for defence and, although skilfully engineered, built with less carefully chosen materials. These hypotheses, while of interest, had no dated excavated material to support them.

Recorded excavations of Sutherland Atlantic roundhouses are extremely scarce. Four of the better-preserved examples were either excavated in a rudimentary fashion or cleared out in the later 19th century, at Carrol and Carn Liath (Joass 1873; illus 1, nos 7 & 10), Kintradwell (Joass 1865, 1873; *PSAS* 1873, 53–6; Smith 1871, 188–9; illus 1, no 14), and Backies (Stuart 1870, 291, 305; illus 1, no 9). Carn Liath is the only site to have been subject to modern excavation, but this at a site already examined in the 19th century (Love 1991 and references therein). A vitrified dun at Langwell (equally a complex Atlantic roundhouse in Armit's usage) was examined extensively in the 1970s (Nisbet 1996). A number of sites have been cleared of rubble to expose walling (eg The Borg, Dunrobin Wood, and Sallachadh), although in most cases no records exist of any structures or artefacts recovered during these operations, or indeed of the circumstances and date of the clearance work.

On surface evidence the recorded Atlantic roundhouse sites of Sutherland can be divided into three broad groups in terms of the certainty of their identification:

- 1 Approximately 40 sites, some surviving to several metres high, with diagnostic architectural features; this group includes the excavated or otherwise cleared sites.
- 2 Approximately 35 grassed or rubble mounds, often structureless, with little or no *in situ* masonry visible, their form resulting principally from stone robbing and structural collapse. The identification of these sites as Atlantic roundhouses commonly stands upon factors such as fragments of exposed masonry, their general size and morphology, and antiquarian accounts. Durcha falls into this category.
- 3 Approximately 25 further sites have been claimed. Either they have been destroyed, or that claim is based solely on place-name evidence or fictitious.

The distribution of Atlantic roundhouse sites in south-east Sutherland (illus 1) indicates that relatively low-lying locations adjacent to major watercourses were preferred. The location of

Durcha beside the higher reaches of a minor inland tributary of the River Oykel appears somewhat atypical in this regard.

FIELDWORK IN 1992 AND 1996

In 1992 a major refurbishment of the dwelling house at Durcha was proposed following a change of ownership. This included the demolition of a lean-to structure on the northern side of the building, and its replacement by a larger extension which would project into the southern side of the mound. The Centre for Field Archaeology (CFA) was commissioned by Historic Scotland to undertake an excavation in May 1992 within the footprint of the proposed extension, immediately in advance of its construction (illus 3, Trench 5). A detailed topographic survey of the mound was conducted at this time (illus 3).

Following the completion of this fieldwork a programme of post-excavation analyses and reporting was commissioned by Historic Scotland. The report resulting from this work was not considered to be publishable as the fieldwork required by the curatorial authorities had recovered insufficient information about the character of the site. In order to supplement this data, a programme of further exploratory excavations was proposed by CFA in consultation with Historic Scotland, with the objective of characterizing the principal structures within the mound. This work comprised the excavation of four further trenches (illus 3, Trenches 1–4), and was conducted in October 1996, sponsored by Historic Scotland.

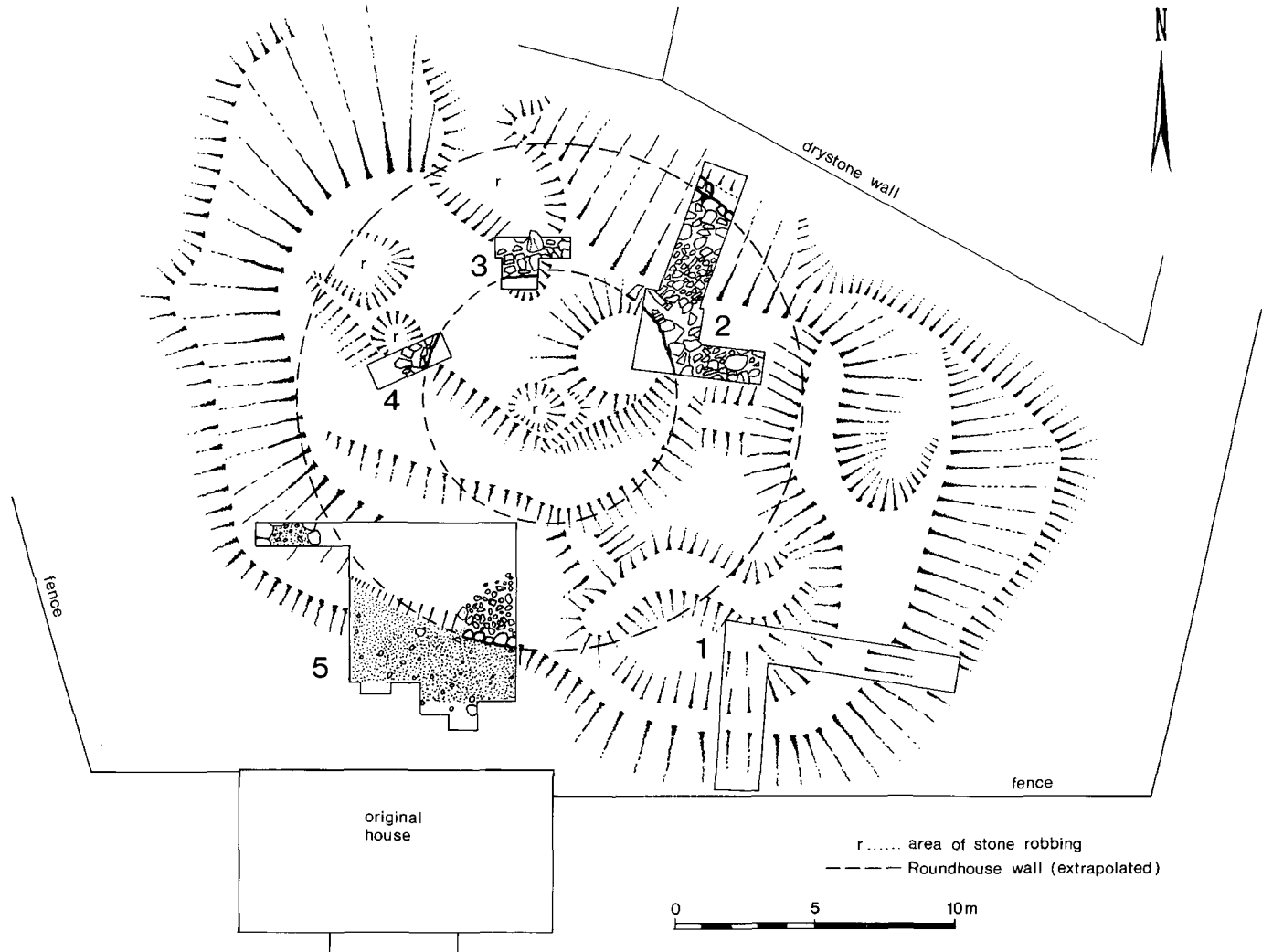
FIELDWORK RESULTS

The scope of the 1992 and 1996 excavations was fundamentally different. The 1992 investigation was designed to record the full stratified sequence of remains within the area to be developed. By contrast, the 1996 excavations were not conducted in response to a threat, and were limited to revealing the nature of the principal structures present within the mound through the removal of rubble and demonstrably modern deposits, without disturbing *in situ* pre-modern archaeological remains. This information from the 1996 work is important as it will help to determine how best to protect and manage the structure.

The results from the excavations are not presented in chronological order of investigation. Trenches 2–4 are detailed first, as these indicate the nature of the principal structure encountered. Trench 5 is then described, as the interpretation of the less well preserved remains of the structure recorded here has been enhanced by the subsequent excavations in Trenches 2–4. Trench 1 is described last as the remains identified here do not relate to the principal structure. More detailed archive reports (Dunwell 1993; 1996) and the primary site records have been deposited in the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

Mound (illus 2 & 3)

The mound appears from surface traces to have two main components. A higher, north-western sector, with a relatively level summit and several indentations and scars caused by stone robbing, forms approximately two-thirds of the mound. The south-eastern area is lower and more irregularly mounded and hollowed, although the edge around the south-east corner of the mound forms a smooth arc. With hindsight from the 1996 excavations the basic topography of the mound can be related to the form of the principal structure present. The somewhat ambiguous surface traces previously had led the excavator to speculate on the presence of a galleried



ILLUS 3 Topographic plan of the mound, showing trench positions, principal excavated features and proposed extent of the roundhouse

roundhouse in the south-eastern area and a post-medieval building occupying the summit of the north-west area (see Dunwell 1993).

Trench 2 (illus 3–6)

This trench was investigated to assess the character and date of the structure occupying the summit of the north-western part of the mound. A small trench was opened at a point where a cluster of large boulders had been exposed as a result of stone robbing. As part of a massive drystone wall on a curvilinear alignment was revealed, this trench was extended to reveal its full width and character.

Structure of the wall The wall, as exposed in plan and elevation, proved to be of complex character. It had a total width of 4.5 m, and the level of the upper surface of its inner face stood 2.1 m above that of the exposed base of the outer face. Its remains were sealed beneath a spread of small angular stones containing modern artefacts, which probably represent the debris left by stone robbing and the recent use of the mound as a repository for domestic and agricultural midden. The curvilinear alignment of the walling intimated that it formed part of a substantial roundhouse.

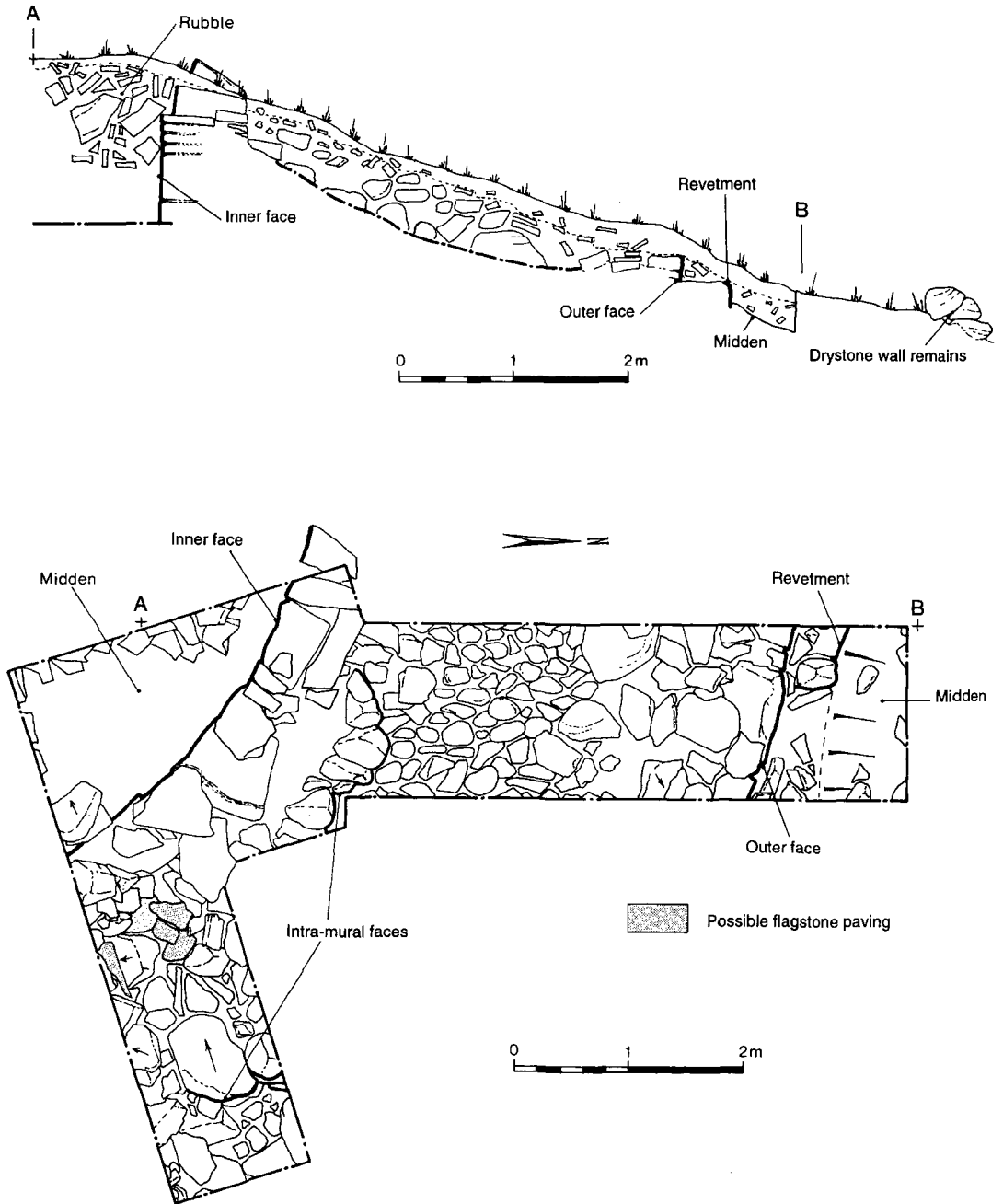
The inner face of the wall was relatively even, and composed of well-fitted sub-angular stones of varying sizes, including both blocky and tabular examples, with small stones packing any gaps between the larger components (illus 5). Some of the boulders forming the face measured up to 0.75 m from face to rear. It was the irregular rear sides of these larger facing stones which had been exposed in the robbing scar. The inner face was exposed over a sector spanning 3 m, with a depth of up to 1.2 m revealed: its base was not exposed. The variable size of material used in the wall-face parallels the evidence from Crosskirk (Fairhurst 1984, 40).

The outer wall-face was formed of less regular, sub-rounded boulders, with the gaps between them packed with stacked piles of small angular stones (illus 6). This face was exposed to a height of only 0.4 m, over a sector 1.5 m in length, in the northern arm of the trench. The base of the wall-face was not exposed.

The wall core material comprised a series of largely unconsolidated, but distinct dumps of rounded boulders and cobbles (illus 6). The nature of this material varied between the two arms of the trench, indicating that the core was not formed of a series of concentric deposits. Two roughly coursed lengths of boulder alignment were present within the core, in both cases facing outwards and running roughly concentrically with the line of the wall as a whole. The bases of both were identified, and found to rest on earlier wall core material. These alignments were flimsy and irregular by comparison with the internal and external wall-faces, and represent neither early outer faces subsequently buried within an expanded or buttressed wall nor the lining of intramural chambers. They are interpreted as constructional devices perhaps intended to ensure the stability of the wall and analogous to *murus duplex* style defences. At one point within the core immediately to the rear of the inner face a cluster of slabs forming an even surface had the appearance of paving, but no other evidence was identified to suggest that they formed the floor of an intramural chamber or passage. Alternatively, they may be explained as a temporary working platform used during the construction of the wall, possibly associated with the erection of the inner wall-face.

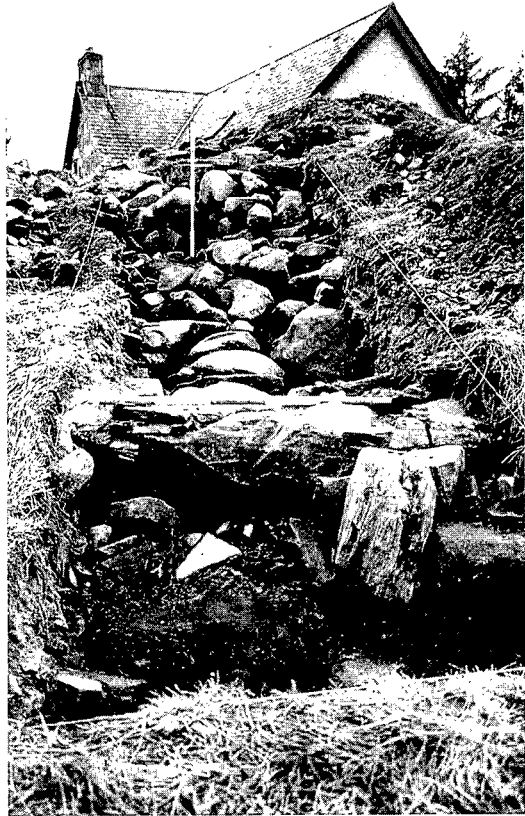
Internal features Within the structure a layer of brown sandy soil was revealed at a depth of 1.2 m beneath the surviving wall-head. This deposit was not excavated, and it may represent either the uppermost *in situ* occupation deposit within the structure or later material dumped in. It was sealed beneath a substantial body of large sub-angular stones, probably representing collapsed or dumped rubble from the inner wall-face.

External features A secondary face c0.5 m wide abutted and partly obscured the outer wall-face (illus 4 & 6). This feature was partly comprised of a rough boulder alignment, and partly of a linear



ILLUS 4 Trench 2: plan and section of roundhouse wall

arrangement of earth and stones. It appeared to represent either the buttressing of the roundhouse wall or part of a structure abutting the roundhouse. A bank of midden including discrete lumps of ash abutted this revetment. None of these external features was excavated, and no datable artefacts were recovered.



ILLUS 5 (top left) View of the elevation of the inner wall-face from south-east

ILLUS 6 (top right) View of the roundhouse wall from north-east, showing house extension as built



ILLUS 7 (left) View of Trench 3 from west

Trenches 3 & 4 (illus 3 & 7)

In order to confirm that the wall identified in Trench 2 was that of a substantial roundhouse, and consequently to determine the internal diameter of this structure, two small trenches were opened on other parts of the north-western summit of the mound across the anticipated alignment of the

inner wall-face; this element of the wall was considered likely to be the most readily identifiable from limited investigation.

Trench 3 This was located on the northern side of the mound, at a point where an irregular linear arrangement of boulders was visible running approximately east/west in the face of a robbing scar. This boulder alignment was found to represent the rear of the inner wall-face of the structure (illus 7). The wall-face was identical in construction to that identified in Trench 2, and survived to a level 0.5 m higher than the rubble wall core material backing it, of which only a fragment was exposed. Overlying the wall core and abutting the rear of the inner face was a sub-rounded boulder which formed one end of a further alignment of four boulders visible from surface traces running downslope to the north within a robbing scar. This boulder alignment thus post-dated the robbing of the roundhouse, and is of modern origin. Within the wall circuit the same sequence of deposits as in Trench 2 was identified, comprising a sandy soil overlain by a deposit of angular stones, c 0.5 m deep, tipping away from the wall-face. Finds from this trench were restricted to a range of modern artefacts including glazed pottery, glass and a horseshoe, from the rubble within the wall.

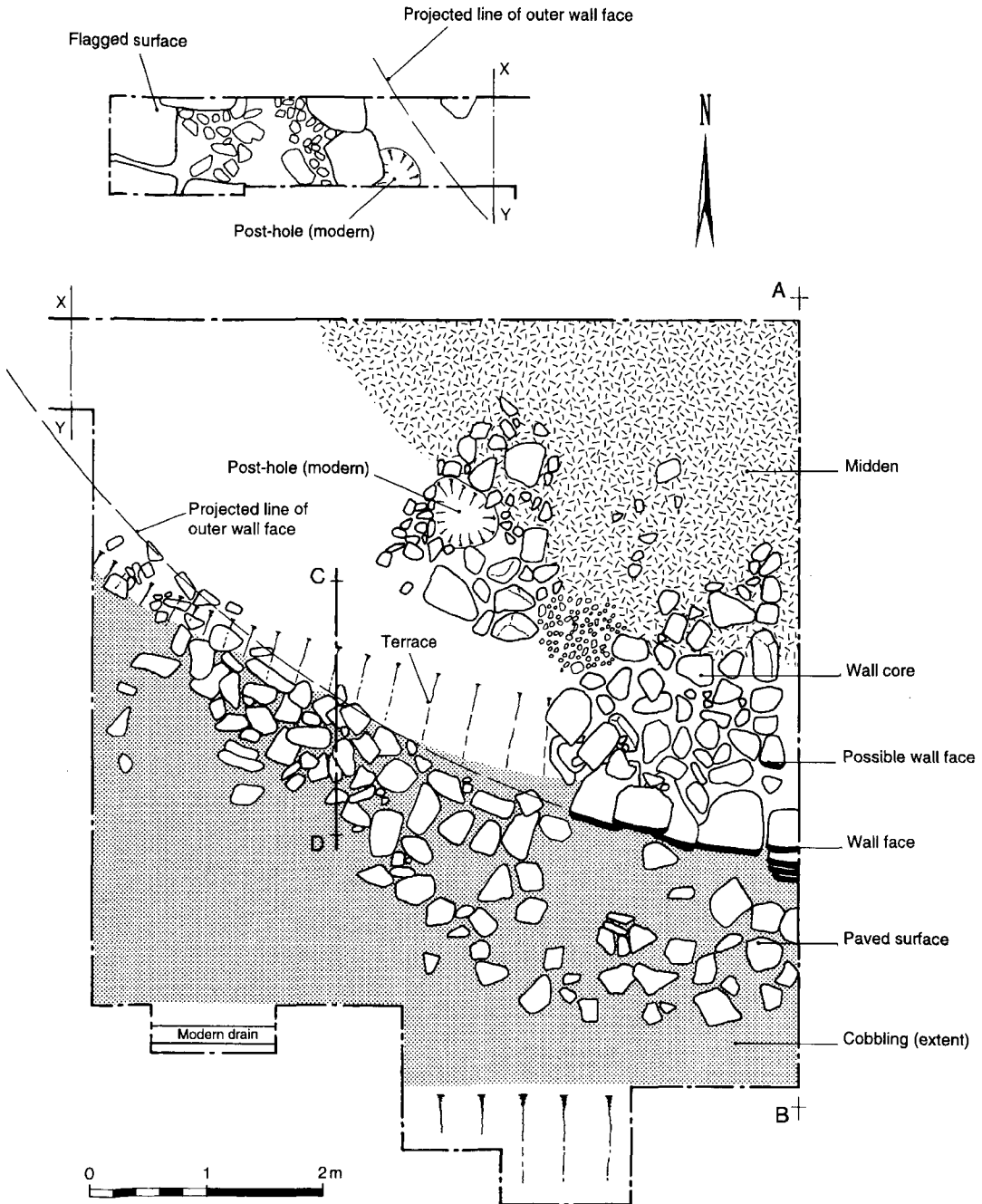
Trench 4 This was opened to identify the western circuit of the wall. The inner face was revealed to be of similar character to that exposed in Trenches 2 and 3; a length of 1 m was exposed to a depth of 0.5 m. Loose, angular rubble was present within the wall circuit; a depth of 0.6 m was removed, but its base was not reached. No artefacts were found in this trench.

Trench 5 (illus 3 & 8–11)

This trench was opened in 1992. With hindsight from the roundhouse wall alignments identified in Trenches 2–4, it is clear that the pre-modern remains excavated here belonged to the southern side of the same large roundhouse. An area of 9 m by 6 m was examined immediately to the north of the modern house, with a slit trench, measuring 3.5 m by 0.8 m, extending westwards from its north-west angle (illus 8). A section of the concrete floor of the lean-to extension was not removed prior to archaeological excavation in the south-east corner of the trench, prohibiting any work beneath it. Excavation of adjacent deposits suggested that no significant archaeological deposits were sealed beneath the concrete. Safety considerations severely constrained excavation in the southernmost 2.5 m of the trench. Limited earth-moving which occurred immediately beside the trench after the completion of excavation was monitored by an archaeological representative of (former) Highland Regional Council.

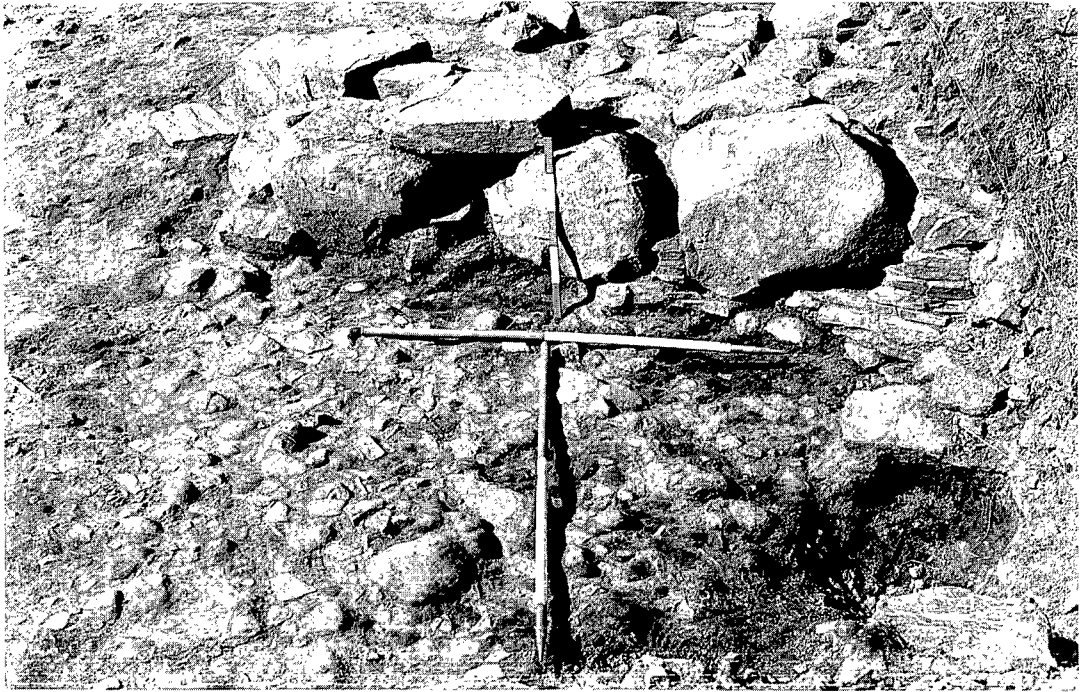
Roundhouse wall The primary archaeological features in the trench were the heavily truncated remains of the massive drystone wall of the roundhouse, and two associated laid surfaces or possible pavements (illus 8). The roundhouse wall had been reduced to foundation level, and survived only in the eastern part of the trench. Its remains consisted of the outer face backed by large cobbles. A span of about 2.1 m was exposed (illus 9) and consisted of carefully chocked large, rounded boulders. The gaps between them were tightly packed with coursed angular and laminar pieces of stone, an arrangement very similar to the external wall-face recorded in Trench 2. A large tabular stone set over two boulders (illus 9) appeared to represent the vestiges of a second course. The core material did not have regular limits to north and west, and no internal wall-face was identified.

Midden A deposit of midden overlapped the residual cobble core in the north-east part of the trench (illus 8 & 10). The surface of this midden was distinctly mounded and irregular, suggesting that it had been

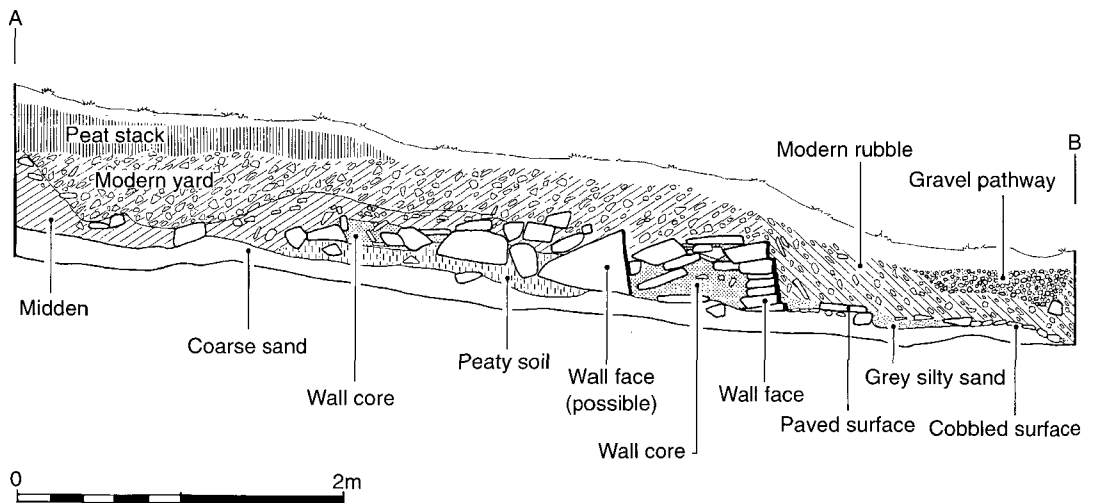


ILLUS 8 Trench 5: composite plan showing principal excavated features

disturbed. A sherd of coarse, undecorated pottery came from amongst the stones of the cobble core, and a fragment of stone bracelet or armband, eight lumps of iron slag and pieces of cattle bone were present within the midden (see Finds, below).

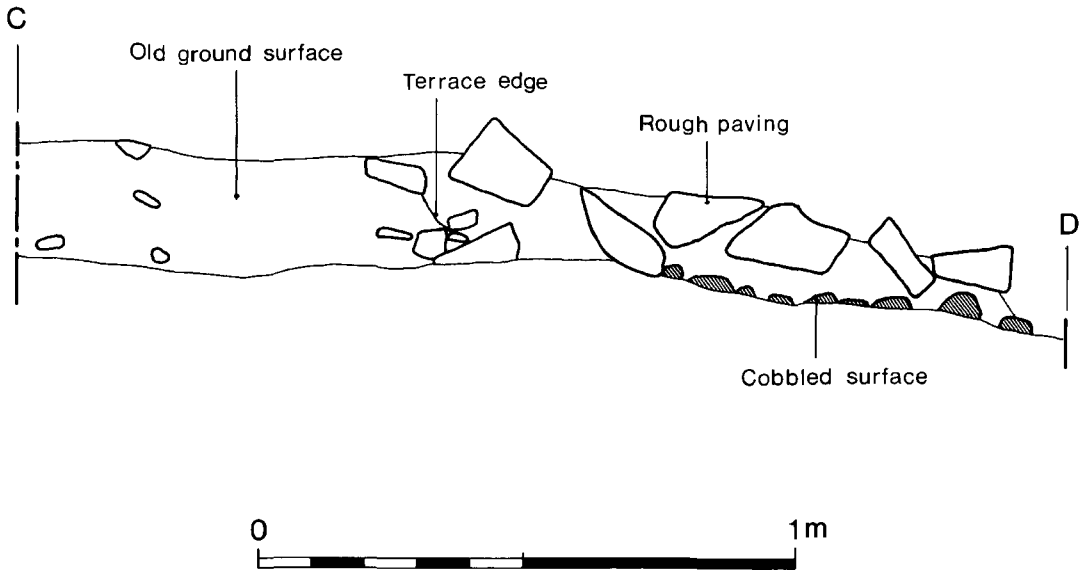


ILLUS 9 Trench 5: view of cobbling and elevation of wall-face



ILLUS 10 Trench 5: section A-B

Sandy layer Sealed beneath the wall core was a layer of coarse, humic sand (illus 10). It was structureless, and had an abrupt boundary to the underlying subsoil, a glacial till. Stratigraphic evidence, and an on-site palaeoenvironmental assessment conducted by Richard Tipping (pers comm), suggest two possible modes of formation: as a buried ground surface or as an accumulation of amorphous organic matter washed down from above. The origin of a layer of peaty soil sealed between this layer and the cobble wall core is unclear.



ILLUS 11 Trench 5: section C-D

Outer paving The western continuation of the roundhouse wall within Trench 5 had been entirely removed by stone robbing. Its former alignment was suggested by the course of a roughly paved surface which ran immediately outside the surviving wall-face and continued across the trench in a gentle arc, narrowing from 1.5 m to 0.8 m (illus 8). This paving was not necessarily a primary external feature of the roundhouse wall or even directly associated with its occupation, but appears to have respected its alignment, and thus to have been laid before the wall was robbed. This pathway was exposed, and was possibly in use, when a modern rubble deposit was dumped over it (illus 10). The wall alignment suggested by the paving agrees closely with that extrapolated on the basis of the positions of the roundhouse wall identified in Trenches 2–5 (illus 3).

Pre-wall cobbling The roundhouse wall was not the primary construction identified within the trench. A second and evidently earlier area of paving, or compact cobbled surface up to 3 m wide, ran across the trench and beneath the outer face of the roundhouse wall. This cobbled surface was defined to the north by a shallow terrace cut up to 0.2 m deep into the gentle slope to create a level surface beneath the paving; to the south its original extent was not defined owing to truncation by modern activity associated with the standing building. This terrace ran on a slightly different alignment to that proposed for the roundhouse wall and adjacent paved path, both of which sealed it at different points (illus 8 & 11). At the eastern edge of the trench, the northern limit of the cobbled layer was respected by a large sub-angular boulder embedded within the smaller cobble core of the roundhouse wall, 0.9 m north of its outer face (illus 10). This may represent the residual remains of a wall-face associated with the terrace and cobbling, which was subsequently incorporated within the roundhouse wall; alternatively, it could simply be part of the roundhouse wall core.

Post-medieval features All other excavated remains in Trench 5 proved to be of post-medieval, and largely modern, origin. All appear likely to be associated with the occupation of the current house. The principal remains were a compact yard with a relatively level surface, comprising angular, freshly quarried stone dumped directly over the denuded remains of the roundhouse wall and associated features (illus 10). The decayed remains of a peat stack lay on the yard surface, and a substantial post-hole, possibly for a washing line post, had been cut into it (illus 8). Modern rubble abutted the roundhouse wall-face and extended

beneath the floor of the former lean-to extension. All these features can be dated by associated artefacts to the 19th or 20th centuries.

Part of a flagged surface, incorporating a reused and upturned socket stone, was revealed beneath the modern yard surface in the slit trench (ie the supplementary cutting extending from the north-west angle of Trench 5). The unweathered nature of the flagstones, in contrast to the stones forming the paved surface within the main part of the trench, suggests that they are not parts of the same feature, and that the flagstones in the slit trench are of more recent origin, although no direct dating evidence was recovered.

Trench 1 (illus 3)

Trench 1 was excavated at the south-east corner of the mound, at the point where its edge formed a regular arc with a moderately steep slope up to 2 m high. It had been speculated on the basis of the 1992 fieldwork that this edge may have defined the south-east side of a substantial roundhouse. An arc of voided rubble 1 m wide (not illus), lying on top of the mound and roughly concentric with its edge, was interpreted in 1992 as a possible gallery within the roundhouse wall. An L-shaped trench was opened in 1996 in order to intersect the notional south and east walls and gallery of the roundhouse.

Modern disturbance The surface topography of the mound at this point was found to be largely the result of modern activity. Immediately beneath the turf a substantial dump of large angular stones with a surface of smaller angular stones, up to 0.7 m deep, represented a continuation of the yard surface exposed in Trench 5 to the west. The putative gallery was found to be the fill of a cut into this surface; modern finds, including pottery, glass and tin foil, were testaments to its recent origin.

Early deposits? Beneath the modern yard material further deposits and features were exposed but not fully excavated. In the north-south arm of the trench a sandy soil layer containing charcoal, probably midden material, was revealed. In the east/west arm two sandy layers were identified overlying a bed of large sub-rounded boulders and more angular material. There was no evident structure to this material, although the area exposed was limited, and no datable finds were recovered from deposits sealed beneath the yard. Comparison between the level reached by excavation within the trench and that external to the mound suggests that up to a further 1m of stratified deposits are preserved below those exposed.

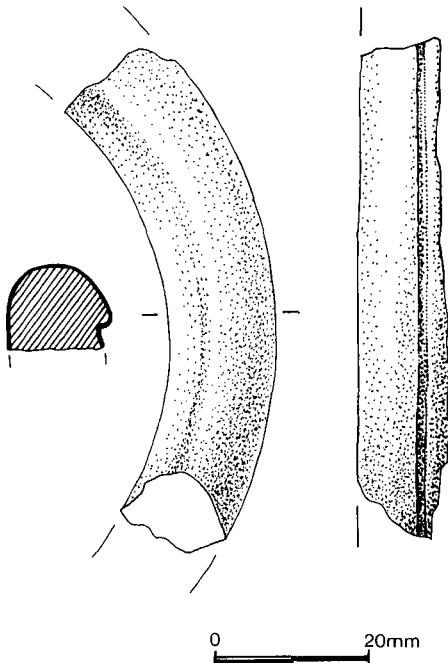
FINDS

The majority of the finds recovered during the excavations are of modern origin. The few pre-modern finds recovered, all from Trench 5, comprise a coarse potsherd, a stone bracelet or armband fragment, eight lumps of iron slag and a small assemblage of animal bone. Summary reports for material which was subject to specialist analyses are presented here; fuller accounts of all classes of material appear in unpublished archive reports (Dunwell 1993; 1996).

Pottery (not illus)

Derek Alexander

A single plain body sherd, 5–6 mm thick, was recovered from between the stones of the wall core in Trench 5. Slight thickening at one extremity suggests the proximity of the base or possibly the



ILLUS 12 Shale bracelet fragment

rim. A precise date cannot be attributed to the sherd, although the character of the fabric and the context suggest that a date somewhere in the first millennia BC or AD would be appropriate.

Shale or cannel coal bracelet (illus 12)

Fraser Hunter

A fragment of an armlet or bracelet, most probably of finely laminated shale or cannel coal, was found in the midden overlying the wall core in Trench 5. The fragment is 60 mm long. It has been snapped off at both ends, and one face has sheared off. Its preserved surface is smoothed and rounded, and it has cross-sectional maximal dimensions of 14 mm by 12 mm. The fragment has a decorative groove (4 mm by 2 mm) running along the outer face. The extrapolated diameters of the original item are 110 mm (external) and 95 mm (internal). Such artefacts are not diagnostic to period, and are found in Bronze Age to Norse contexts. The majority of these finds, however, occur in later prehistoric contexts. Few decorated examples of such artefacts are known.

Animal bone

Nicola Murray

Thirteen fragments of animal bone were recovered from the midden deposit over the wall core in Trench 5. Only two are identifiable to element and species, an upper right and an upper left cattle molar.

INTERPRETATION

The excavations have demonstrated that the north-western area of the mound is occupied by a substantial roundhouse with an approximate internal diameter of 9.1 m (illus 3). On its north-east circuit (Trench 2) the roundhouse wall was revealed to be c 4.5 m wide. No entrances were identified during the excavation. Nothing of the internal arrangement of the structure was exposed, although undated midden deposits appear to extend across the interior beneath collapsed and disturbed wall stones.

The internal diameter of the roundhouse agrees very well with Pococke's description in 1760 (Kemp 1887, 115), though his substantial underestimate of the wall thickness suggests it had at least partly collapsed by the time of his visit. The inner wall-face survives better, reflecting a pattern of greater robbing and collapse of the outer wall material. In Trench 2 its inner face should stand at least 2.1 m high, and the exposure of its surviving surface at similar levels in Trenches 3 and 4 indicates comparable preservation around the north and west sides. The quality of its preservation around the southern circuit is less clear, but is probably less good than elsewhere.

Excavations in Trench 2 indicated the wall core to be composed of dumps of cobbles and boulders. There was no evidence for any intramural features such as galleries, stairs or chambers, although such features may lie undetected beneath the exposed surface. Discontinuous lengths of rough coursing within the core may be explained as constructional features designed to maintain the stability of the wall both during its erection and possibly also subsequently.

In Trench 5 the surviving wall core material was also found to consist of cobbles. Here, however, a deposit of midden containing artefacts of later prehistoric character was identified overlying the cobbles. Three explanations for this are possible: firstly, that it represents a constituent of the wall core (paralleled at Crosskirk, Caithness: Fairhurst 1984, 41); secondly, that it represents material redeposited from the interior of the roundhouse during the robbing of its wall; and, thirdly, that it represents later midden, incorporating residual artefacts, dumped after the robbing of the roundhouse wall. On present evidence there is no secure means of differentiating between these possibilities.

The outer wall-face was comparatively poorly preserved. Only part of its foundation course survived in Trench 5; its exposed surface in Trench 2 was 1.7 m lower than that of the inner face, and probably represented foundation level or a little above it. The distinctive appearance of the outer face is closely paralleled at the partly excavated vitrified dun of Tor a' Chorcairn, Langwell (NGR: NC 4104 0084, illus 1, no 19; Nisbet 1996, pl 6), which a range of dating techniques (Gentles 1993, 19) suggest was occupied at the end of the first millennium BC.

Limited evidence was identified for features immediately external to the roundhouse wall. A roughly paved walkway of uncertain date ran immediately outside the southern side of the building (Trench 5). To the north-east a secondary, poorly built stone alignment abutted the outer face of the roundhouse (Trench 2), and was itself abutted by a midden deposit. Although undated, this feature could represent either the wall of an extra-mural building or part of a buttress or casing wall similar to Fairhurst's (1984, 52) Type I examples recorded at Crosskirk. Whatever its function, its construction was secondary to that of the roundhouse wall.

Features preceding the roundhouse

In Trench 5, where all surviving deposits were excavated, features preceding the construction of the roundhouse wall were identified. These comprised a cobbled yard surface which had been

made near-level by the cutting of a shallow terrace into the gently sloping sub-surface. The similarity in the alignments of the roundhouse wall (as extrapolated) and the earlier terrace might indicate that the erection of the roundhouse site represented the development of an extant settlement; there was certainly no stratigraphic evidence to suggest a time gap between the two constructions. The indication of an earlier phase of activity allows the possibility that midden material overlying the cobbles was incorporated as a core constituent of the roundhouse wall during construction work on an existing settlement site.

South-east area of the mound

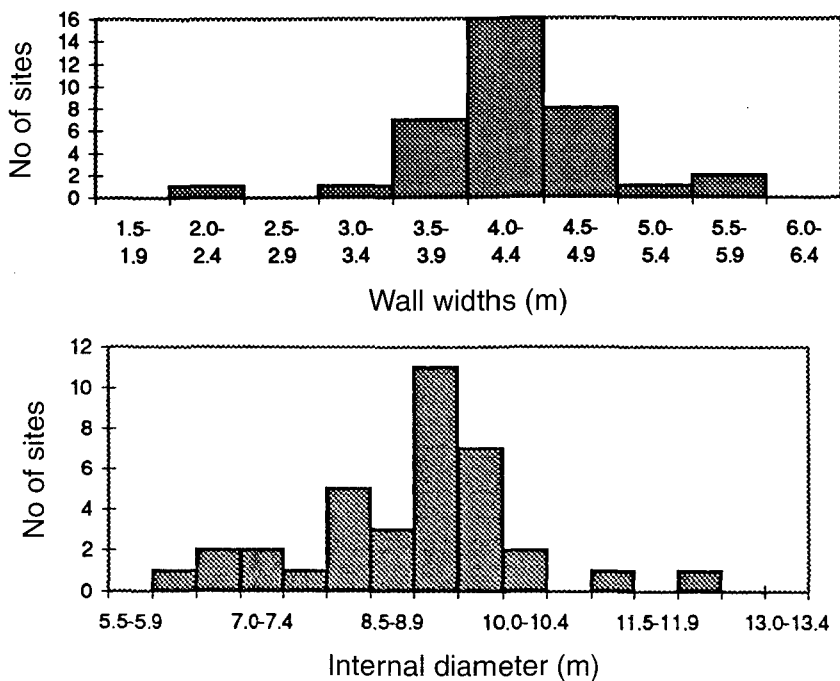
The nature of the pre-modern remains present within the south-east part of the mound was not resolved by the excavation of Trench 1. Layers of boulders and deposits of midden were exposed, although not dated; no pattern was identified to indicate the presence of structures. It is likely that a further sequence of deposits up to 1 m deep lies beneath the exposed level. Unfortunately, their chronological and structural relationship to the roundhouse and earlier excavated remains are entirely unknown, and the remains cannot be cited as evidence for a settlement or structure associated with the roundhouse. At least, the excavation of Trench 1 has demonstrated that this part of the mound does not simply comprise material disturbed during the robbing of the roundhouse.

Post-medieval activity

The roundhouse wall has suffered heavily from the effects of stone robbing; a documentary source (Kemp 1888, 48) indicates that substantial degradation occurred during the 19th century. A mass of angular rubble up to 1 m deep within the roundhouse appears to represent the collapsed or demolished upper part of its inner wall-face, probably deposited at the same time as the robbing of the walls for building stone. Subsequent to the robbing, angular rubble was dumped over the denuded remains of the roundhouse wall on its southern side, to create a yard surface probably associated with the extant dwelling-house. There is no mention of part of the mound being used as a domestic yard in the Royal Commission's *Inventory* (RCAHMS 1911, 20), and it may be that the yard was created only after this date. Despite this post-medieval disturbance, the excavation has demonstrated that considerable evidence for the roundhouse and associated structures survives at the site.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The scale of the excavated wall remnants at Durcha indicates the structure within the mound is an Atlantic roundhouse. Its construction is substantially more massive than the walls of even the more elaborate and substantial hut circles of the northern mainland, such as Fairhurst's (1971) Type II identified at Kilphedir, and the circular houses, probably of the early first millennium BC, identified at Cnoc Stanger (Mercer 1985; 1996). The wall width (4.5 m) and the diameter of its internal court (9.1 m) both demonstrate its affinities with the Atlantic roundhouse tradition. These measurement criteria have been used previously for investigating the regional characteristics of 'brochs' (eg Fojut 1982; MacKie 1965; 1971; Martlew 1983). Both measurements for the Durcha structure fall within the most common range recorded at the other 35 Atlantic roundhouse sites in Sutherland for which comparable data can be obtained (ie sites recorded in NMRS as brochs; listed in Appendix). In fact, Durcha lies very close to the mean dimensions for



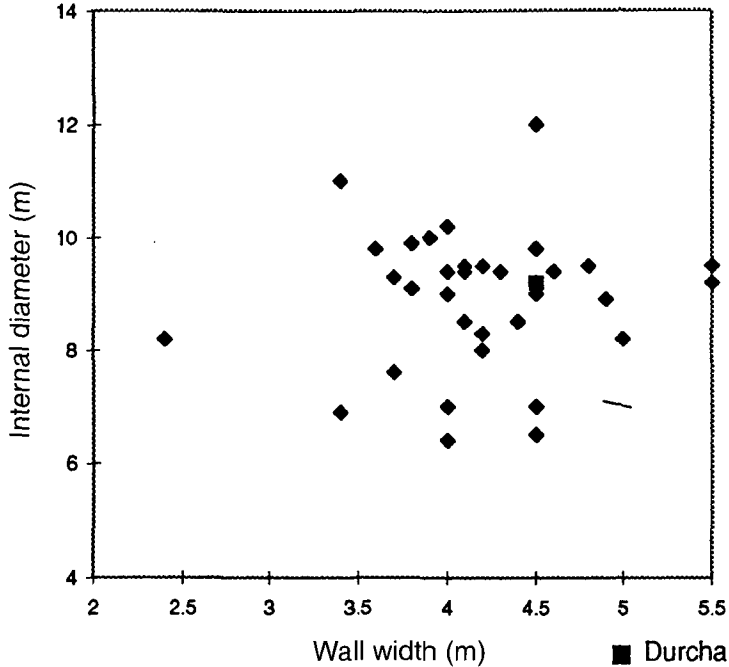
ILLUS 13 Wall widths (above) and internal diameters (below) of selected Atlantic roundhouse sites in Sutherland

the 13 eastern Sutherland structures (9.18 m internal diameter; 4.48 m wall width) considered by Martlew (1983, 257; table 3), using the data from MacKie's (1965; 1971) previous studies of a sample of 120 sites. The analysis presented here is coarse: the quoted dimensions for several sites are based upon only partly visible wall-faces, and the possibility that buttress walls have been measured, thus overestimating original wall width, must be borne in mind.

It is clear that the width of the wall at such sites varies less than the diameter of the internal court. Of the 36 sites studied, 31 have a wall width within the range 3.5–4.9 m and 26 have an internal diameter between 8.0 m and 9.9 m (illus 13). In plotting these two characteristics against each other (illus 14) the clustering of the sites is apparent, and again Durcha falls comfortably within the main cluster. However, there is no apparent trend in this graph to substantiate the claim by the Royal Commission (1911, xx) that 'as might be expected, the thickness of the wall increases with the diameter of the interior'. Assuming the wall width of the Durcha structure to be consistent around its circuit, the walls would form approximately 49.5% of its overall diameter, a figure which also accords well with the mean of 49.38% for other eastern Sutherland Atlantic roundhouses (Martlew 1983, 257, Table 3), and also for Atlantic Scotland more generally.

At present, the Durcha structure can be classified only as an Atlantic roundhouse. However, this can be taken as a minimal statement of its potential complexity. No certain evidence was identified for an intramural gallery or cells, although the exposure of the roundhouse wall was insufficient to demonstrate that intramural features are not present at some point around its circuit. It may be that the remains of a complex Atlantic roundhouse, such as Crosskirk, or even a broch tower, are present within the mound at Durcha.

In this regard, an 18th-century description of the parish of Creich (in which Durcha lies) in Macfarlane's *Geographical Collections Relating to Scotland* is of interest:



ILLUS 14 Scatter graph of wall widths plotted against internal diameters for selected Atlantic roundhouse sites in Sutherland

There are in several places of said paroch [*sic*] circular edifices built of dry stone without any mortar and of a very large bulk and open at the top, with the walls so thick that there are severall [*sic*] passages through them and apartments within the walls which are supposed to be idolatrous temples built by the Druids (1748, 202–3).

At only one of the sites in Creich parish currently identified by the NMRS as brochs — Dail Langwell (illus 1, no 1) — are intramural features known to exist. Macfarlane's account suggests that other structures, such as *Durcha*, may have featured degrees of architectural complexity which have either been destroyed through stone robbing or obscured beneath debris of robbing or collapsed wall material.

The excavations at *Durcha* provided no material evidence from which the Atlantic roundhouse and associated remains could be accurately dated. It can be placed only within a broad chronological framework of Atlantic roundhouses emerging during the later first millennium BC and continuing to be occupied into the first millennium AD. The evolution of massive roundhouse construction has been extended back into the mid and even earlier first millennium BC in Orkney through important excavations at sites such as Quanterness (Renfrew 1979), Bu (Hedges 1987) and Howe (Ballin Smith 1994). By contrast, understanding of the Sutherland structures has been hampered by the lack of both detailed investigation and surface definition of architectural characteristics. The 'vitrified dun' at Tòr a' Chorcain, Langwell (Nisbet 1996), has provided the only reliable dating evidence from Sutherland, suggesting construction in the fourth century BC or thereabouts and destruction in the first century BC or AD. The similarity of walling techniques between this site and *Durcha* is perhaps indicative of a local building

tradition, but cannot be used as evidence with which to date *Durcha*. Moreover, the Langwell structure, with an internal diameter of about 15 m, timber-laced walls and a timber gateway, is clearly a variant of the drystone structures under consideration here (cf *illus 13*). As a consequence, it is unclear whether the Sutherland structures represent a range of forms emerging over time, as opposed to a structurally and chronologically more unitary development. This restricts the extent to which they can be understood either as the result of a movement of people (cf Fairhurst 1984) or as a development, in response to migrating ideas, of local structural forms including the strongly built Type II hut circles of the later centuries BC, in which Fairhurst (Fairhurst 1971; Fairhurst & Taylor 1974, 93) detected features reminiscent of broch architecture. It may be that remains preserved beneath the surviving roundhouses, such as those fragments identified at *Durcha*, hold the key.

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APPENDIX

SITES CONSIDERED IN ILLUS 13 & 14

Notes

- 1 Sites where recorded wall widths varied substantially are not considered here; but slightly varying wall widths have been averaged.
- 2 Where wall width was calculated above scarcement level (*), basal wall width will exceed this.
- 3 Sites in italics were considered by MacKie (1965).

Name	Nat Grid Ref	RCAHMS (1911) ref	Wall width	Internal diameter	Wall: diam ratio (%)
Inshlampie	NC 7159 4657	178	4.5	6.5	69
<i>Armadaile Burn</i>	NC 7994 6266	190	4.5	7.0	64
<i>Caisteal na Coille</i>	NC 7957 1337	25	4.0	6.4	63
Backies, Golspie	NC 8345 0261	272	5.0	8.2	61
<i>Carn Liath, Golspie</i>	NC 8704 0137	270	5.5	9.2	60
<i>Kintradwell</i>	NC 9293 0807	467	5.5	9.5	58
Dun Chealmy	NC 7199 5140	179	4.0	7.0	57
<i>Dun Mhaigh</i>	NC 5523 5303	527	4.9	8.9	55
Clachtoll	NC 0366 2784	7	4.2	8.0	53
<i>Coich Burn</i>	NC 7880 1087	23	4.2	8.0	53

Gailiable	NC 9487 1823	311	4.4	8.5	52
<i>Dun Viden</i>	NC 7265 5188	181	4.8	9.5	51
Skail	NC 7201 4732	N/A	4.2	8.3	51
Balvalaich	NC 9452 1898	N/A	4.5	9.0	50
Ach' an Duin	NC 4601 6053	156	3.7	7.6	49
An Dun, Loch Ardbhair	NC 1688 3323	4	3.4	6.9	49
Dun Carnachaidh	NC 7213 5269	180	4.5	9.2	49
Durcha	NC 107 0239	52	4.5	9.2	49
<i>Sallachadh</i>	NC 5491 0922	392	4.6	9.4	49
<i>Baile Mhargaite</i>	NC 6973 6097	184	4.1	8.5	47
Carn Liath, Farr	NC 8940 5233	187	4.5	9.8	46
<i>Carrol</i>	NC 8462 0646	27	4.3	9.4	46
<i>Altanduin</i>	NC 8097 2605	313	4.0	9.0	44
Dail Langwell	NC 4116 1121	49	4.2	9.5	44
Dun Creagach	NC 6046 3558	175	4.1	9.4	44
<i>East Kinnauld</i>	NC 7438 0159	477	4.1	9.5	43
<i>The Borg</i>	NC 8993 5095	186	4.0	9.4	43
<i>Grummore</i>	NC 6107 3669	174	3.8	9.1	42
<i>Alltbreac</i>	NC 5911 1035	395	3.9	10.0	39
<i>Coill' Ach a' Chuil</i>	NC 6585 3815	176	3.7	9.3	39
Leadoch	NC 8550 0520	28	4.0	10.2	39
<i>Kilphedir</i>	NC 9943 1891	307	3.8	9.9	38
<i>Suisgill</i>	NC 8875 2530	308	4.5	12.0	38
Carn Bran	NC 9420 1220	468	3.6	9.8	37
<i>Feranach</i>	NC 8441 2730	314	3.4	11.0	31
<i>Dun Dornadilla*</i>	NC 4572 4501	155	2.4*	8.2	29

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