

## II.

### NOTICE OF THE EXCAVATION OF A HUT-CIRCLE, NEAR ACKERGILL TOWER, WICK, CAITHNESS. BY JAMES E. CREE, F.S.A. Scot.

When on a visit to Caithness, last spring, I had the good fortune to receive a request from Mrs Duff-Dunbar of Ackergill Tower, near Wick, to excavate the supposed site of a hut-circle which a few days previously Mr A. O. Curle and I had located when examining the fringe of sandy dunes which skirt the coast to the north-west of Ackergill. Many sandy hollows or "bunkers," swept by the north or north-east winds, occur along the coast-line, and it was in one of these, perhaps fifty or sixty yards from the beach, and about a mile to the west of Ackergill Tower, that the site was discovered. A few stones appearing above the surface, and describing approximately a semicircle, were noticed, and, as undoubted evidences of a kitchen-midden existed in close proximity, we concluded that these stones indicated the presence of a hut-circle.

Mrs Duff-Dunbar, herself a keen antiquary and a member of this Society, offered to supply the necessary labour and tools for the excavation, and accordingly the work of clearing away the sand was

commenced a day or two later. As the work progressed, the structure of the hut-circle took definite shape, and after a couple of days it was completely exposed to view (fig. 1). The walls of the dwelling were about one foot six inches in height, and were composed of stones laid in sandy soil. Towards the east the thickness of the wall was about four feet six inches, but this tapered to about two feet on the west.



Fig. 1. View of the Hut-Circle as excavated.

The interior dimensions were about twelve feet from north to south by ten feet six inches from east to west. The greater portion of the floor was paved with large slabs of stone, and this paving extended towards the east, where there appears to have been an exit, and also towards the south, where, as usual in such structures, the door was situated. As will be seen from the ground plan (fig. 2), flagstones were laid both outside the principal entrance and also outside the exit on the east side. A curious feature was noticed in regard to the floor, the slope of which was towards the west or landward side of the house,

and not as one would have supposed, either towards the sea on the east or towards the entrance on the south. A small paved passageway, five feet six inches in length and about four feet in width, led

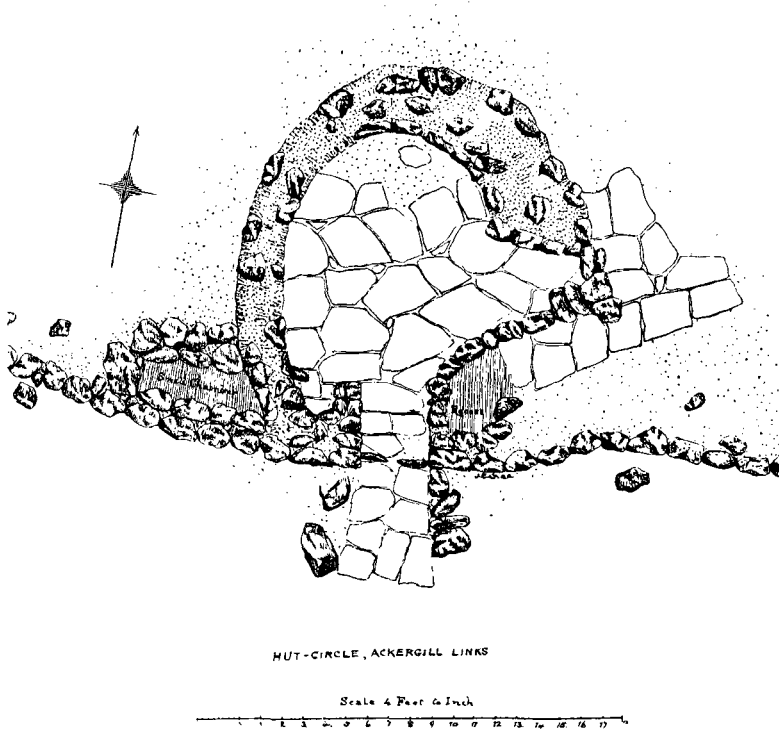


Fig. 2. Ground Plan of Hut-Circle at Ackergill Links.

from the outside up to the door. Two stones were here set up on edge, and as the paving inside the doorway was raised a few inches, drainage was thus prevented entering the house from this direction. Inside the chamber, and immediately to the left of the door, a small

recess, about one foot eight inches in width by one foot four inches in length, was formed; a single stone, three or four inches in height, set on edge and projecting from the wall, partially shut this off from the main chamber. It is worth noting that similar features have been observed in other hut-circles. Outside the wall of the hut-circle, and to the left of the entrance, a small chamber completely walled in was found. It measured five feet ten inches in length by one foot eight inches in width. The excavation of this chamber to a depth of about two feet merely revealed dark-coloured sandy soil mixed with a small quantity of charcoal, but for what purpose the chamber had been used it was impossible to determine. On the outside, and to the right of the entrance, was a small recess which was approached by a narrow paved way extending from what has been called the exit on the east side of the hut-circle. This recess measured about three feet six inches in length by two feet two inches in width, and from the stratified bands of charcoal and discoloured soil found in excavating this space it may have been used as a cooking-hole or fire-place.

On either side of the principal entrance a low wall-face running easterly and westerly was uncovered. Its east extension was laid bare for a distance of about twenty-seven feet, and the west extension for a distance of nearly twenty-four feet; but as both ends ran apparently into high banks of sand, the further excavation of them was discontinued. The interior of the hut-circle was almost entirely paved with large, flat, undressed, irregularly-shaped flags, laid as close together as possible, and the spaces between were filled up with smaller stones.<sup>1</sup> Opposite the entrance, and at the back of the apartment,

<sup>1</sup> Mr Robert Burnard, F.S.A., in an interesting paper published in *The Reliquary* (April, 1902), New Series, vol. viii. p. 87 *et seq.*, describes some hut-circles on Dartmoor, which he ascribes to the Early Bronze Age. These were excavated by the Dartmoor Exploration Committee of the Devon Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature, and Art. One—No. XX.—he mentions was “not quite ten feet in diameter. The floor of this hut was paved; it contained a small cooking-hole and much charcoal.”

there was a space about seven feet in length by three feet six inches in breadth, unpaved. This space is noteworthy in view of Mr Burnard's suggestion given below.<sup>1</sup>

A few bones of domestic animals and some shells of edible molluscs were found in clearing out the sand filling the dwelling, but few relics were brought to light. A core of flint found close to the surface near the entrance may have been fortuitous. Two implements of iron, each about eight inches in length, which may have been punches; and one or two small pieces of the same metal, much corroded, were found worked in between the flags of the floor. Should these not in course of time have worked their way down from the surface, then one may not be assuming too much in attributing the hut-circle described to the Early Iron period.



Fig. 3. Bone Pin found at the site of the Hut-Circle. (¾.)

A kitchen-midden of considerable size lay immediately behind the dwelling to the north, and while it seems probable that this was the refuse heap of the hut-circle, positive proof was lacking, and the kitchen-midden may have had reference to an earlier or later period.

A bone pin (fig. 3), about three and a half inches long, and having a "T"-shaped head, was found here by Mrs Duff-Dunbar, who kindly presented it to me; but although a considerable portion of the kitchen-midden was put through the riddle, and examination was carefully

<sup>1</sup> In the same paper Mr Burnard describes a hut-circle, No. III., as follows: "It is nearly eleven feet in diameter, with a doorway two feet nine inches wide, protected by a low curved wall, which was probably roofed. Entering the hut there is on the right hand side a raised dais or platform standing eight inches above the floor of hard trodden-in sub-soil. This is supposed to have formed a couch, and with rushes and heather made a comfortable prehistoric bed."

made, nothing further was brought to light, except quantities of animal bones and the shells of edible molluscs.

There are numerous indications of other sites of archæological interest—perhaps hut-circles, perhaps burials—as well as other kitchen-middens in the immediate vicinity. Several of these have, I understand, been excavated by a local antiquary of some note.