

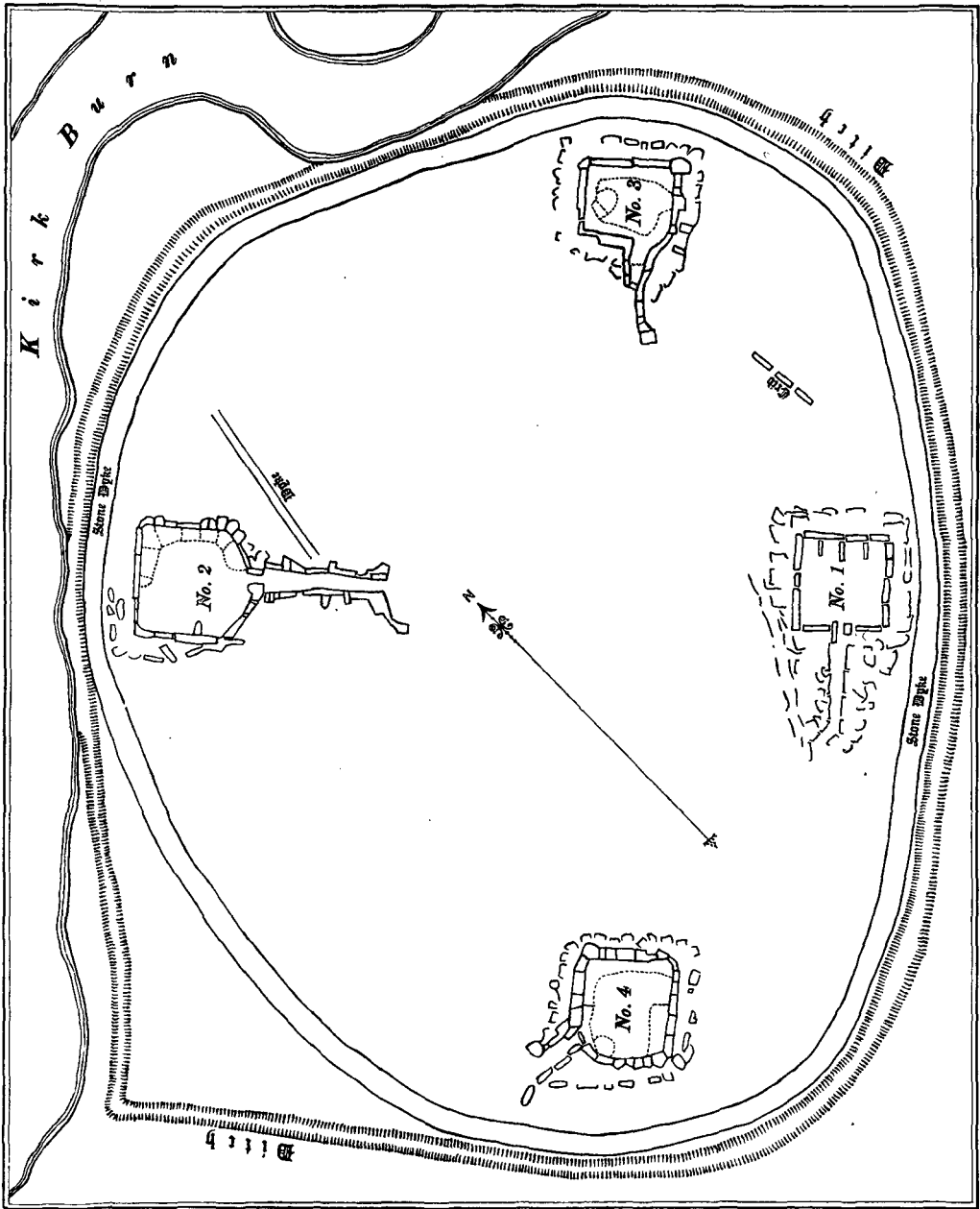
IV.

THE EXPLORATION OF THE SITE KNOWN AS THE KIRK STONES OF STROUPSTER, IN THE PARISH OF WICK, COUNTY OF CAITHNESS. BY JOHN NICOLSON, CORRESPONDING MEMBER.

About a mile SSW. of Stroupster there rises out of the moorland a green mound some 50 yards in length by 30 yards in breadth, bearing on its surface the remains of four structures. None of these bear any resemblance to an ecclesiastical building, but the name, the Kirk Stones, has possibly been acquired by reason of the many large stones scattered about and set on edge on the knoll. On the north a small burn flows by, and on either side of it, over an approximate extent of 6 acres, there may be observed on the heather the marks of cultivation of former times. The foundation of a turf-built homestead over 50 feet in length, adjacent, probably marks the site of a shieling. Two chains east of the burn is what appears to be a grave marked with a headstone about 8 inches above ground and a footstone just level with the surface. The top of the knoll is surrounded by a wall containing the four structures above mentioned (fig., Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 4). The most conspicuous of these (No. 1), situated towards the south side of the mound, was partially excavated many years ago by Mr Samuel Laing,¹ who referred to the site as the Moorland Mound. This excavation was subsequently completed by Sir Francis Tress Barry, and the site was further visited and described by Mr A. O. Curle in 1910 on behalf of the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments (Scotland).² Mr Curle's description may here be quoted: "In all there are the remains of four structures, in which large flat slabs have been freely used to face the inner sides of the walls. The most conspicuous building near the centre of the mound has been rectangular, with a wall some 4 feet 6 inches in thickness enclosing an area nearly 11 feet square. This has been entered by a passage from the WSW. near the centre of one wall, 13 feet in length, 2 feet wide at the inner end, and slightly wider at the exterior. . . . Against the back or ENE. wall, in the interior, are set three slabs edge-on to the wall, the end slabs 2 feet and 3 feet distant from either side, and 1 foot 5 inches and 3 feet 4 inches apart from the centre stone. Two of them are about 2 feet in height, and one 1 foot 6 inches, and they project outwards from 2 feet 3 inches to 3 feet." On excavation Mr Laing reported the finding of a row of boulders forming a bench, or bed, along the wall on each side, and he obtained, *inter alia*, some fragments of

¹ *Prehistoric Remains in Caithness*, p. 36.

² *Report, County of Caithness*, No. 581.



Plan of the Kirk Stones of Stroupster.

wheel-made pottery, one of the pieces having a coarse blue glaze on it. From time to time during the last year I have visited the spot, and bit by bit cleared out the remains of the three other structures (fig., Nos. 2-4); but though I was very anxious to find relics, I got only some small fragments of limpet shells, but not even the smallest trace of pottery. The site No. 2 measures about 10 feet across, and is entered by a long passage with a double turn at the outer end. Two door jambs contract the width of the passage at its inner end. Along one side of the chamber is a narrow ledge or scarcement on the top of which a fire has been kindled. On the opposite side a single slab set on edge projects from the wall. From the outer end of the passage a small dyke runs off in a north-westerly direction. No. 3 has been a small structure measuring in the interior only some 8 feet by 6 feet. Around the sides there are the remains of a scarcement from 8 inches to a foot in breadth, and against this on the west side, and separated by a large stone set on edge, is the site of the fire. Two floor levels were observed, the lower in the centre sunk about 8 inches. There has been an entrance passage, which has been paved, some 10 feet in length, now incomplete on one side. No. 4, also a small structure, has measured some 8 feet square in the interior. Along two sides runs a scarcement 7 to 9 inches in height and a foot in width, and extending for a distance of some 3 feet along the east side is a broader bench with a height of 1 foot 4 inches and a width of 1 foot 7 inches. At the one end of the front of the latter is a large stone set on edge, deeply fixed in the clay and projecting above the upper surface of the bench. There was evidence of three floors on an average of 10 inches apart. The latest of them was close to the surface, and had a large quantity of ashes spread over it. The next occurred at the level of the bench; in the centre of it was a large flagstone, and from it a pestle-like stone abraded at the ends was recovered. The position of the fireplace was immediately to the right of the door on entering. A great mass of shells lay along the side and at the end of the bench. The entrance passage opens out from the south-west corner of the building: it is paved, and lies at a level of about 1 foot higher than the floor, which is reached by a step.

The greatest height of the walls of these structures as remaining is about 3 feet. The batter on the outer face of the wall and the number of small stones found in the interior cause me to think that the roofing may have been of the beehive form.

I am much indebted to Mr John Mathieson of the Ordnance Survey for drawing from my sketches the plan here reproduced.