

The excavation of a palisaded enclosure at Methven Wood, Almondbank, Perthshire, 1979

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SUMMARY

In November 1979 the author undertook a watching brief at a Forestry Commission gravel quarry in Methven Wood. This quarry had previously yielded a short-cist cemetery (Discovery Excav Scot 1973, 40–1; 1975, 40). Site clearance methods prior to the start of the brief partially conditioned the nature and extent of the archaeological remains recovered. None the less, a sector of palisade trench and some presumptively ancillary features were identified. No further cists were noted.

THE SITE

The quarry (illus 1) lay 1 km west of Almondbank village, on the south-eastern flank of a slight rise overlooking Methven Loch, which occupies a kettle-hole some 200 m to the south-east. The site had been occupied by a plantation of young trees; no surface archaeological traces were noted. The removal of the overburden by heavy machinery demonstrated that approximately 1 m of humus overlay a gravel subsoil; at the north end of the site this had been locally capped with clay, the removal of which – to facilitate gravel extraction – would have destroyed any contained features. The gravel was bright orange in colour, offering a marked contrast with the soil-filled archaeological features. The timber features noted lay approximately 90 m north-west of the cist cemetery in a position on a gentle slope which does not appear overtly defensive.

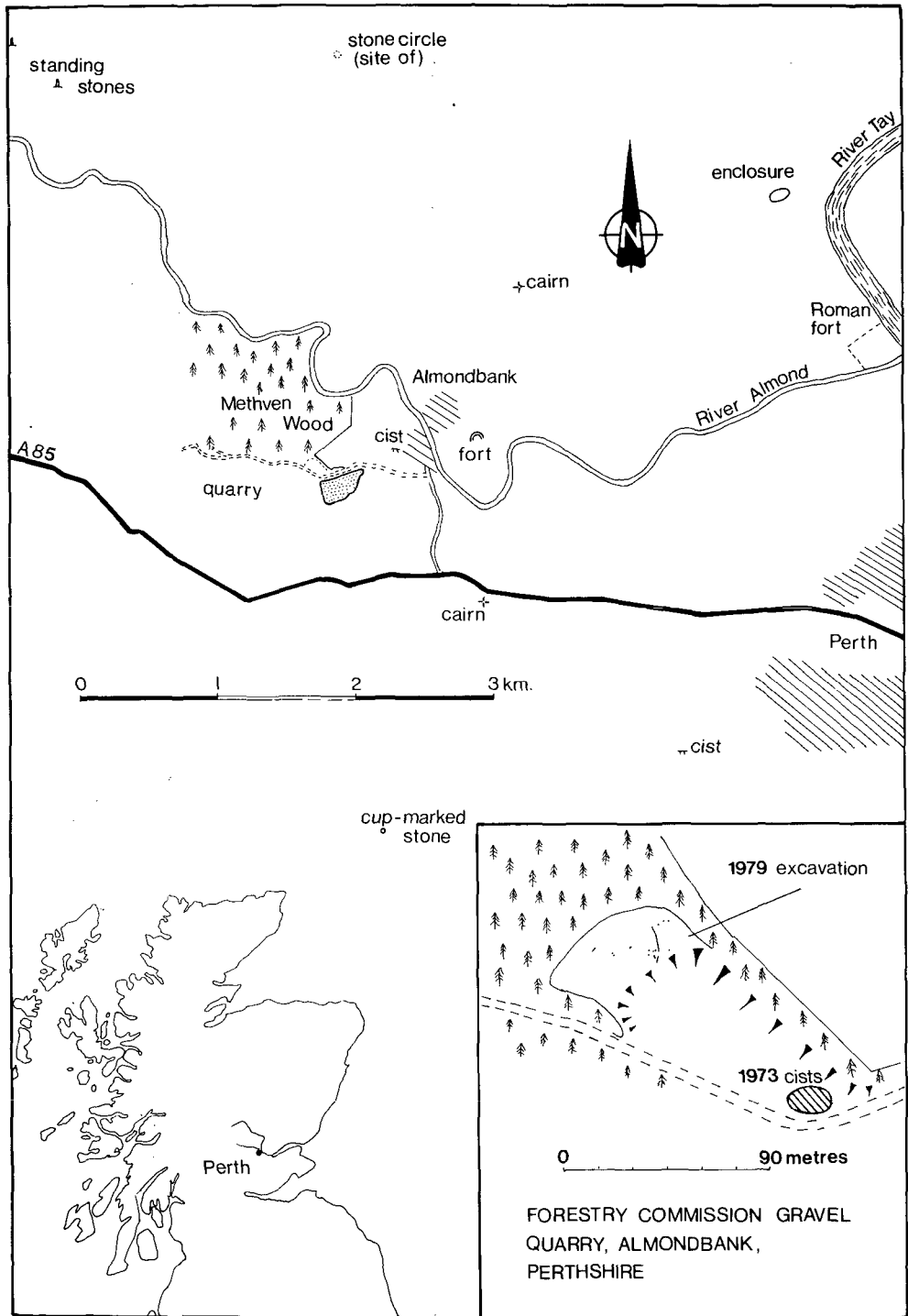
THE EXCAVATION

An initial test excavation, measuring 25 sq m, proved negative and suggested that this type of approach was inappropriate, given the scale and immediacy of the threat. Instead, the author decided to walk beside the earthmoving equipment, marking anomalies in the subsoil for subsequent archaeological examination. In places where site clearance had already occurred, the machine was used to scrape a fresh surface in the gravel to ease the identification of archaeological remains. The equipment used, a Caterpillar 951c fitted with a front-acting blade and bucket, proved ideally-suited to the task; surface deposits could be dragged off, leaving no trace of topsoil or vehicle tracks.

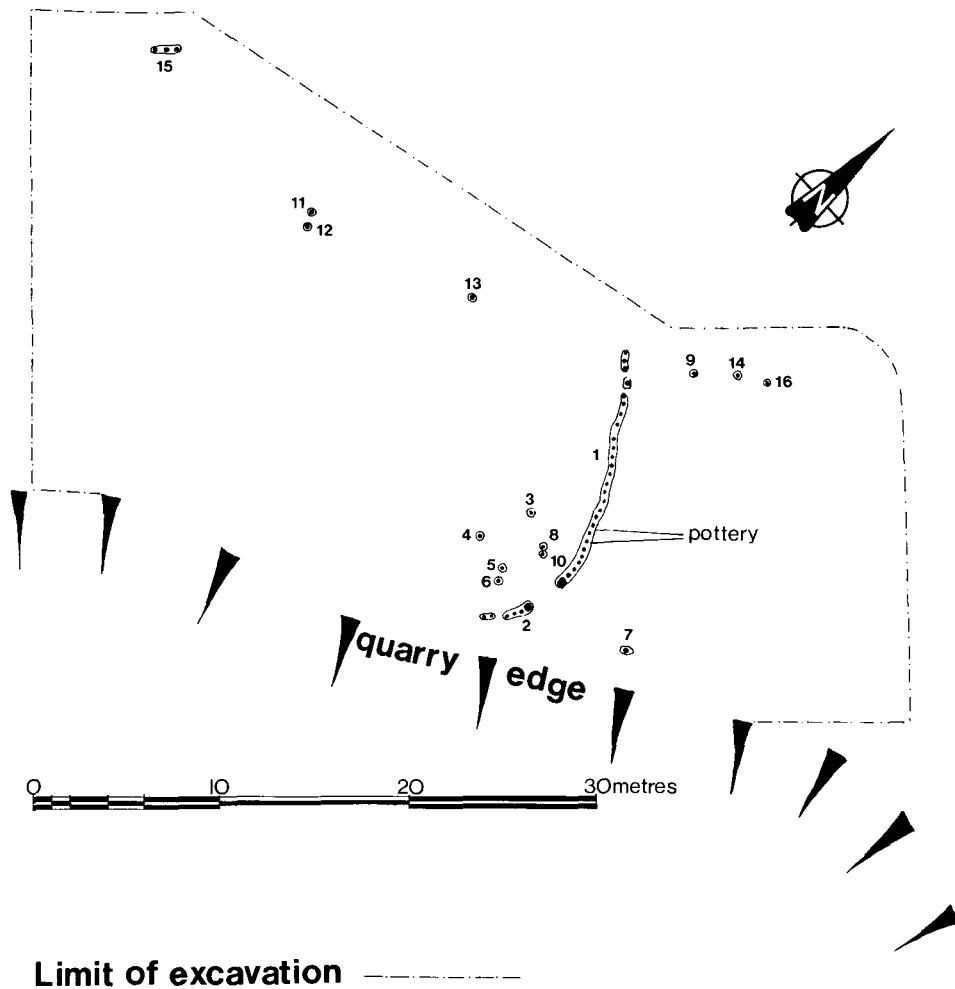
THE PALISADE TRENCH (features 1 & 2, illus 2 & 3)

The surviving portions of this trench measured 13·2 m and 2·7 m in length respectively to the north and south of an entrance gap. The maximum dimensions of this trench in the gravel subsoil were

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ILLUS 1 Location map

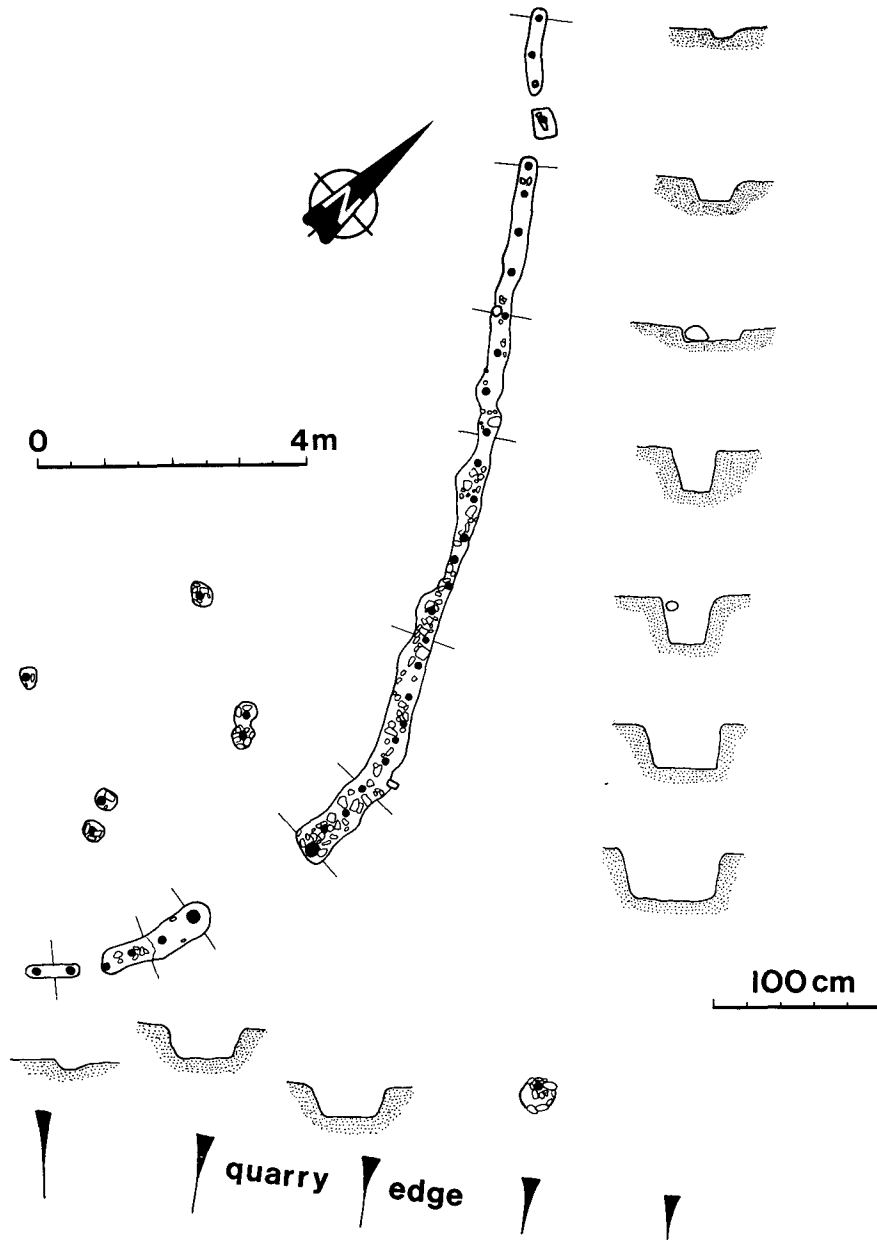


ILLUS 2 Excavated features (position of posts within the trench is based on the position of surviving packing stones)

0.58 m wide by 0.30 m deep; to the north, where the clay which had masked the gravel had been removed prior to the excavation, this feature was more feebly marked. Twenty-eight post positions were identified north of the entrance gap; posts some 100–120 mm in diameter had been inserted approximately 0.35–0.55 m apart; most of the post-pipes survived, surrounded by packing which consisted of locally-derived stones up to 0.24 m long. An expansion of the trench immediately north of the entrance gap had accommodated a more substantial timber, 180–200 mm in diameter; evidence for these dimensions was provided by a soil stain as well as by the rubble packing. The equivalent, southern, expansion lacked packing stones but may be assumed to have held a post of similar size. The intervening gap was some 1.80 m wide.

THE ENTRANCE STRUCTURE (illus 3 & 4)

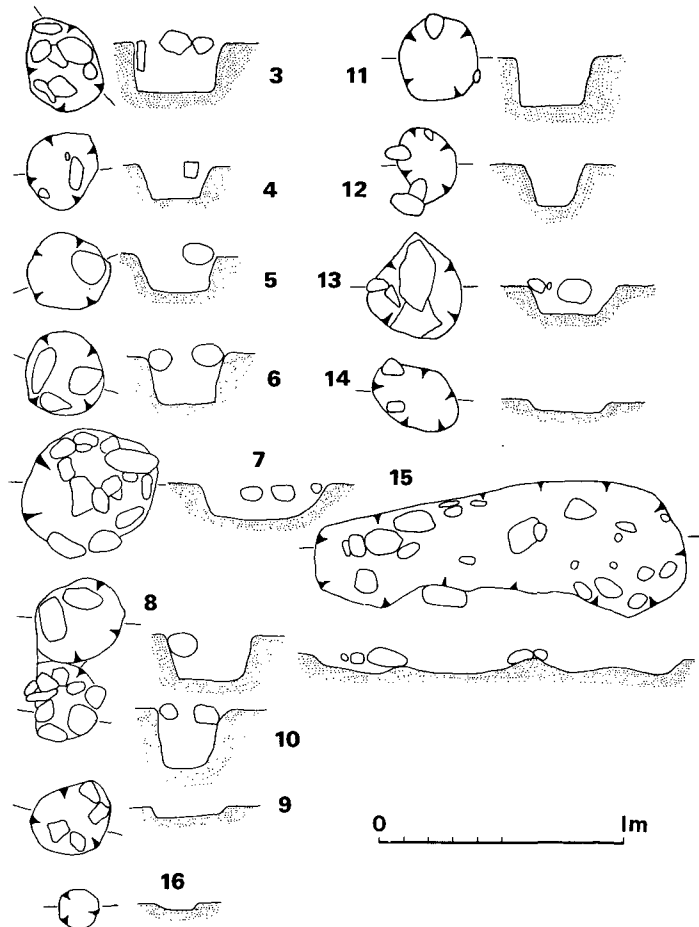
The overlap between two of the postholes (features 8 and 10) in the entrance area allows this complex of features to be resolved into two successive timber structures. Phase 1 included feature 10, which formed a pair with feature 6, set back 2 m from the major posts in the palisade terminals, and 2-60 m apart; these four defined a rectilinear setting. Phase 2 is envisaged as having included a setting



ILLUS 3 Plans and sections of palisade trench and entrance structure

of six posts; the two terminal posts, two replacements for features 6 and 10, positioned slightly north of their predecessors, and 2.50 m apart; and two further postholes, 2.00 m from the replacement pair, and 2.80 m apart. These last-mentioned features, 3 and 4, thus defined the inner end of an entrance passage that widened from 1.80 m at the palisade line to 2.80 m, over a length of 4.20 m. The stone-packed postholes were up to 0.40 m in diameter and had held posts that had varied between 100 and 150 mm in diameter. They survived to depths of between 140 and 260 mm. One further posthole (feature 7) may have been associated with this entrance; it lay 5 m east of the north gate-post. The post, set to one side of this feature, 0.50 m by 0.60 m in diameter, appears to have been about 130 mm in diameter.

A possible second entrance was identified from a short detached sector of palisading (feature 15) on the north part of the circuit. Only 0.10 m in depth, this appears to have held three posts, akin to those identified elsewhere, over a length of c 1.55 m. A bulge at the eastern termination of this feature resembles those discussed above in relation to the entrance; this may conceivably indicate the former presence of a second entrance.



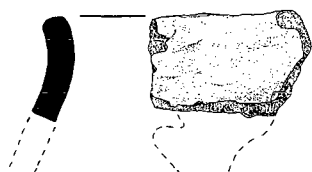
ILLUS 4 Plans and sections of features 3-16

OTHER FEATURES (9, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 16, illus 3 and 4)

Six further postholes were located, three to the west (features 11, 12 and 13) and three to the east (features 9, 14 and 16) of the arc palisade trench. Two were filled with a black, greasy soil (11 and 12); one (12) of these had a clearly-defined post-pipe c 150 mm in diameter. The remaining features, like those of the entrance arrangement, were filled with a light brown loam, with an admixture of grit or clay related to the nature of the former overburden. Features 9 and 13 were definitely postholes; the former had held a post some 130 mm in diameter; the post in the latter could not have been larger than 200 mm in diameter, judging from the surviving, although displaced, packing. Feature 14 contained only two small packing stones; none survived in feature 16. It is not possible to resolve these few features into structures.

THE FINDS

These were restricted to abraded sherds of coarse pottery, which were recovered from a two-metre length of the palisade north of the entrance. Their scattered distribution in the trench-fill suggests derivation from an earlier context. The inclusion of sandstone grits, which had degraded, in the temper contributed to the poor condition of some items, but allows the suggestion that several body sherds, 9–14 mm thick, were probably part of the same vessel.



ILLUS 5 Pottery from palisade
(scale 1:3)

The only notable sherd (illus 5) is a rim fragment, orange/brown in colour, 11 mm thick. The mouth diameter of the vessel is estimated at 310 mm. The core of the fabric is well-fired and black in colour, the temper including angular grits up to 7 mm across some of which break through the surfaces of the sherd, lending it a coarse, uneven finish. The rim is upright and rounded; it descends on to the outward sweep of the shoulder.

This pottery matches Ritchie's (1970, 54) description of coarse wares recovered from palisaded sites. As remarked then, this material does not appear 'susceptible either to typology or chronology'.

WOOD SAMPLES

(identified by R P J McCullagh)

Three samples were analysed; none was suitable for radiocarbon dating. All consisted of small diameter roundwoods; material likely to have been incorporated by chance in the backfilling of the features. All the species of shrubs and trees identified are native to Britain.

Sample 3 palisade trench: *Betula* sp, 60%; *Salix* sp, 20%; *Corylus avellana*, 10%; *Prunus avium*, 10%.

Sample 7 palisade trench: *Alnus Glutinosa*, 70%; *Corylus avellana*, 20%; *Betula* sp, 10%.

Sample 5 feature 7: *Corylus avellana* and *Salix* sp.

DISCUSSION

Methven Wood is the fifth palisaded enclosure to have been examined in Tayside; the others are listed by Ritchie (1970). To date, examples of this class which have been excavated have been

identified as the by-product of the examination of earthworks. Others have been identified from the air during the RCAMS's flying programme. As it is impossible to confirm the presence of domestic structures enclosed by the Methven Wood palisade, it should be classed as an enclosure. Its situation suggests that the site was not selected for defensive reasons. No precise date can be offered for its use, although the replacement of the entrance arrangements is indicative of two phases of construction.

ARCHIVE

Further details of this site are archived at the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCE

Ritchie, Anna 1970 'Palisaded sites in North Britain: their context and affinities', *Scot Archaeol Forum*, 2 (1970), 47–67.