

# Excavation of a cairn at Wind Hamars, Outnabreck Hill, Scalloway, Shetland

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## ABSTRACT

*The excavation of a ruinous cairn, possibly a heel-shaped cairn, at Outnabreck Hill, Scalloway, Shetland, is described.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1990 a very ruinous cairn with a central cist and apparent passage, located above Scord Quarry, Scalloway (illus 1), was excavated in advance of a proposed extension of the quarry (SMR 892; NGR HU 4124 4003). The excavation was arranged and sponsored by Historic Scotland.

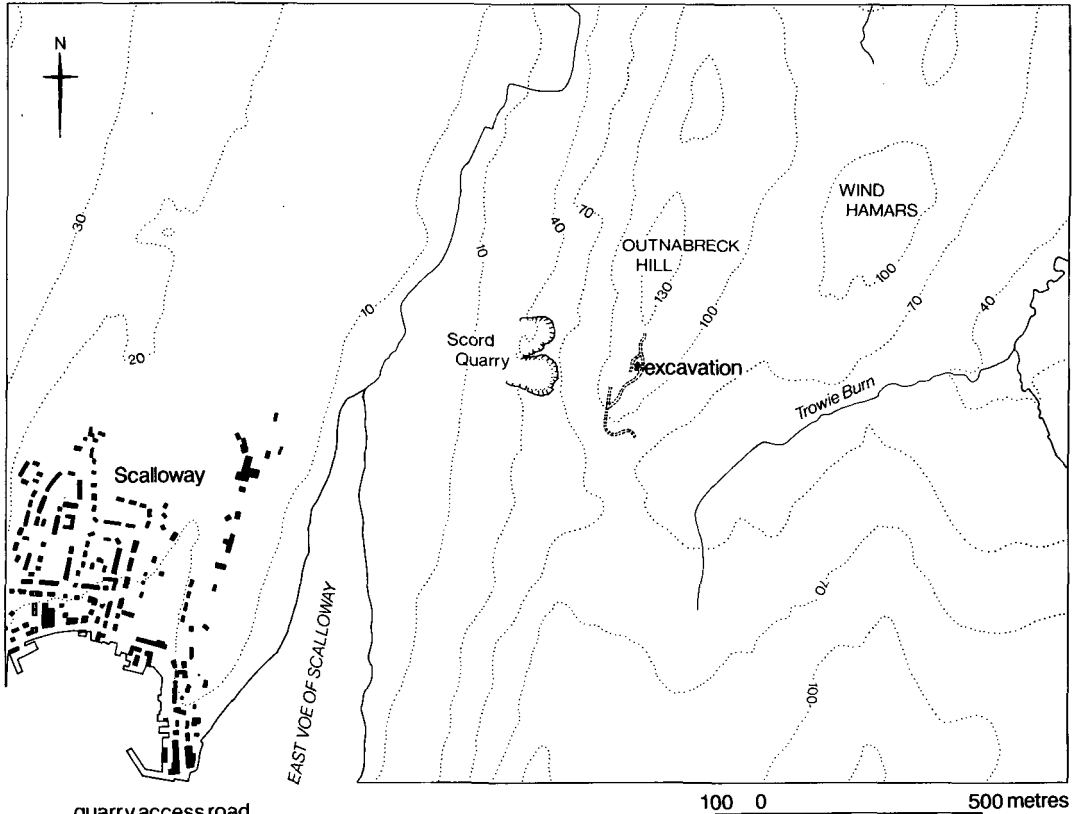
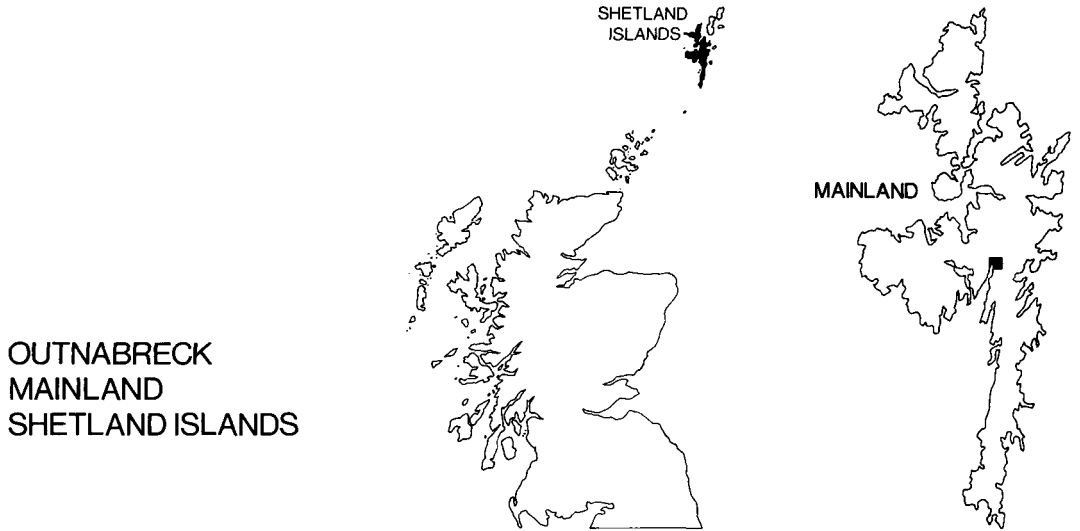
Outnabreck Hill rises steeply to a height of approximately 130 m and the cairn lies at the south end of a flat ridge called Wind Hamars, at a height of about 120 m. The ridge has been deeply incised on its east and west sides by two quarry access roads and the cairn lies on the remaining island of land between the two roads. The bedrock is a phyllitic schist with frequent quartz veins. There is no soil formation on the hillside owing to the high exposure of the site to prevailing south-westerly winds and all that remains is a well-formed blanket of peat lying directly on bedrock.

Calder (1963, 57, no 22) visited and described the monument as a ruined chambered cairn, as did Henshall (1972, MS); Henshall, however, decided that the cairn was too ruinous to be included in her catalogue of chambered tombs of Scotland.

## EXCAVATION

A cutting c 50 m<sup>2</sup> was opened (illus 2). Excavation revealed that the cairn, oriented north/south, covered an area of c 4.5 × 13 m and was truncated on both its east and west flanks by the two quarry access roads. A central cist, measuring 1.5 × 1.0 m and composed of four large, orthostatic slabs, lay directly on bedrock. Two roughly parallel rows of boulders c 1.5 m apart, extended northwards for 4.5 m from the cist. The cist and passage were enclosed in a rubble matrix composed of smaller voided rubble overlying larger rubble which lay directly on bedrock. The cairn, for the most part, was covered in peat. The rubble suggested some structural form to the cairn with a wide arc of stones to the north providing a rather blunt convex northern edge, while a somewhat narrower arc to the south of the cairn indicated a

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ILLUS 1 Location plan

more pointed convex southern edge. The peat was speckled throughout with quartz fragments. The assemblage of finds comprised in total two pieces of pumice from the smaller rubble and a pottery sherd and an undecorated stone bead from the bottom of the larger rubble matrix. The contents of the cist formed two layers of dark brown, humic rich, peaty soils, differentiated by colour. The two layers, which were speckled throughout with quartz fragments, contained no artefacts or human remains.

## ARTEFACTS

Ann MacSween

### CATALOGUE

- 1 Pear-shaped lump of pumice, flattened on one side, perhaps through use.  
L 62 mm, W 47 mm, T 35 mm
- 2 Lump of pumice with a depression on one side, possibly resulting from use.  
L 60 mm, W 49 mm, T 30 mm
- 3 Pottery sherd, representing the complete profile of a shallow vessel with a flat base, slightly angled walls and a plain rim, possibly a lamp fragment. The fabric is a sandy clay with around 20% of mixed rock temper. The sherd is grey in colour and well fired. There are traces of sooting on both the exterior and interior.  
H 20 mm, T 10 mm, Dia (base) 100 mm
- 4 Stone bead (probably mudstone) with a flat bottom, a rounded top and an hourglass perforation.  
Dia 23 mm, H 14 mm, Dia (perforation) 5–10 mm

### COMMENTS

Artefacts have seldom been found in Shetland chambered cairns, and rarely in primary contexts. Henshall (1963, 149) listed only the following: an adze-shaped steatite implement from the cairn material at Hill of Dale; a struck flake, two tiny stone discs and two characterless sherds from March Cairn, from 2 ft above the chamber floor; several unidentifiable sherds from Pettigarth's Field; a possible Beaker sherd (lost) from Giant's Grave; and six steatite vessels from Muckle Heog East cairn.

In addition, steatite-tempered pottery, various coarse stone implements (including three sandstone bars) and three pieces of pumice were recovered during excavations at the chambered cairn of Punds Water (Calder 1963).

The artefacts from Outnabreck were all recovered from the cairn material, from either the upper or lower rubble and are therefore unlikely to be in their primary contexts. None of the finds is chronologically sensitive and, apart from the pumice, has no parallels with material from other Shetland cairns.

## DISCUSSION

Outnabreck is anomalous due to the 'passage' feature which sets it apart from the recognized tradition of cairn and cist monument. Calder (1963, 57, no 22) suggested that the feature was an extra chamber: 'A few feet to the north of it [the cist] there are two rows of three boulders each, set in parallel alignment; the rows are spaced about 5' apart and are closed to the north by a boulder set transversely in a formation suggesting an extra large cist or probably a small chamber.'

Excavation, however, does not support the presence of the blocking stone indicated by Calder. Indeed, the similarity in size between the stones of the 'passage' and the lower rubble



ILLUS 2 Plan of Outnabreck during excavation

fill makes it possible, if not probable, that the feature is due to differential robbing of the cairn and that its apparent passage-like, or chamber-like, appearance is purely fortuitous. The monument seems to have been disturbed and robbed in antiquity so the fill of the 'passage' feature contributes nothing to the solution of the problem.

Of the many cairns in the Shetland Islands only Gillaburn, Hill of Dale and Muckle Heog West contain cists (Henshall 1972, 298). All of these sites are heel-shaped cairns, but the disturbance caused by the quarry roads at Outnabreck makes the original shape of the cairn uncertain. The only find from these cairns is a steatite adze-shaped object found in the cairn fill of Hill of Dale. On balance, it seems most likely that Outnabreck belongs to Henshall's heel-shaped type of Shetland cairn.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Historic Scotland arranged and funded the excavation, post-excavation analysis and publication of this report. The illustrations were drawn by Christina Unwin, AOC (Scotland) Ltd.

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*This paper is published with the aid of a grant from Historic Scotland*