

3. EXCAVATION RESULTS

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3.1 Working methods

Eighteen trenches were excavated during the course of the project; these ranged from trial trenches measuring 1m by 2m to larger excavation areas around identified features. The locations of the trenches were determined mainly as a result of systematic probing of the peat, using a 2m peat probe, by transects on a grid system, used to identify and trace sub-peat stone features. Some trenches were also randomly placed across the study area to target apparently 'blank' areas enclosed by the field walls, and other trenches targeted features which were visible on the surface.

Several trenches warranted further excavation due to the features revealed within them; Trenches 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 13 and 16 (and Trench 15, formed when Trenches 5 and 10 were combined and extended) are described in detail below. Minor features identified, which are not described below, include a scatter of stones with no discernible structure in Trench 11; a possible continuation within Trench 18 of the cobbles seen in Trench 15; and a possible wall and spread of stones relating to peat cutting activities in Trench 2. The remaining trenches contained no features and simply recorded the peat depths and palaeosol characteristics. Some artefacts were recovered from some of these trenches, in particular a piece of pitchstone from Trench 12 and a flint flake from Trench 18.

The sampling strategy involved four main elements:

- Bulk soil samples for wet-sieving and routine smaller soil samples for laboratory tests were taken from each deposit beneath the peat.
- The palaeosol associated with the sub-peat features was sampled for phosphates on a grid system.
- Monoliths for pollen analysis were taken from Trenches 14 and 15.
- Soil micromorphological samples were taken from several key positions in Trenches 15 and 17.

The trench positions are shown on Illus 1 and features are described below. The stone structures in Trench 15 were not removed and remain in situ.

3.2 Mineral soils

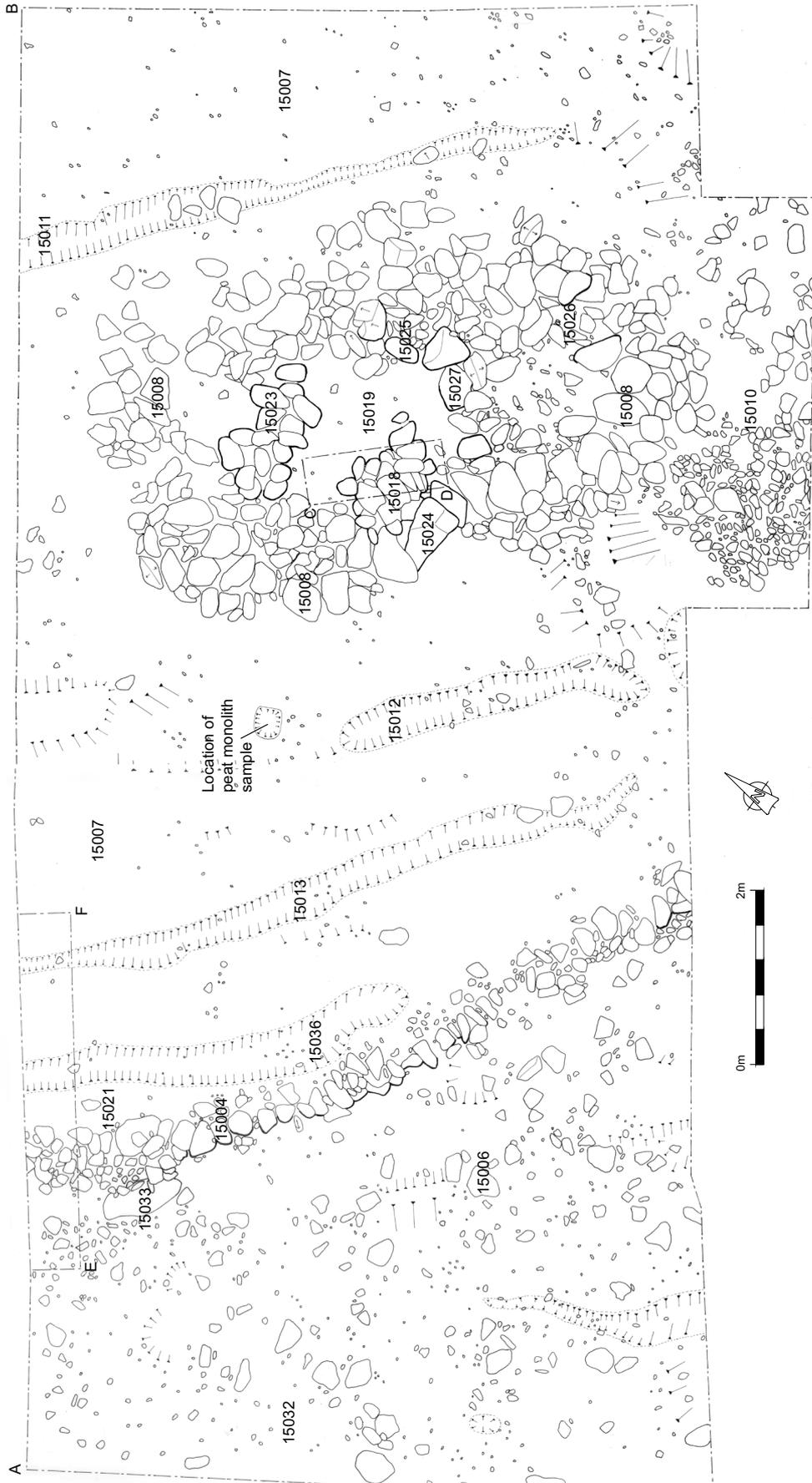
A mineral soil was discovered beneath undisturbed peat in every trench with an overlying growth of peat. This soil measured between 0.02m and 0.15m thick, and consisted of a dark brown, compact sandy silt, with grit inclusions, occasional charcoal flecks and some root matter throughout. This soil is interpreted as a palaeosol, representing the land surface prior to peat initiation, and its presence in every trench indicated extensive preservation of this surface. In several trenches an earlier soil was found beneath this palaeosol, lying directly on top of glacial till. This soil comprised a medium/light brown, compact, silty sand, with occasional root matter throughout and occasional charcoal flecks. This soil had characteristics of a brown earth (Curtis et al 1976: 49) and was interpreted as an earlier palaeosol. These palaeosols were typical of thin, poorly developed soils which form on weather-resistant acid bedrock such as Lewisian Gneiss and were thus consistent with other observations on the island's soils (Hudson 1991: 19).

To provide an indication of how far the buried land surface survived beneath the peat within the study area, a coring transect was established, running roughly NNW away from the main area of excavation (Illus 1). The transect began on a large peat bank to the north of the study area and continued for a distance of *c* 120m. Cores were recovered every 8m along this line using a 1m length Eijelkamp corer. Each core was described, drawn and a sample of the palaeosol was taken for soil tests. A similar sequence of peat growth was recorded along the transect and the palaeosol was present in all cases. Peat depth varied from 0.4m to 1.97m, and the palaeosol was between 0.07m and 0.29m thick and appeared to have been unaffected by peat cutting.

A range of prehistoric structures were found beneath the peat through the prospection methodology, all lying on this palaeosol. These are categorised and described below.

3.3 Sub-peat structure, field wall and cobbling (Trench 15)

The focus of the excavations was on Trench 15 (Illus 3). The final trench measured 17m by 9m overall, expanding from two previous trial trenches



Illus 3 Plan of Trench 15

(Trenches 5 and 10), with peat reaching a maximum depth of 1.8m.

A suite of prehistoric stone features were uncovered in this trench. These features were: a sub-rectangular structure (Context 15008) with an internal division at the eastern side of the trench; a single-faced wall (C15004) running roughly east/west and revetted against a bank of palaeosol; and to the west of this wall, an area of cobbling (C15005, C15006) which had two phases of use (Illus 4). Two deposits of palaeosol were found; within the upper palaeosol, two sets of cultivation furrows were recorded.

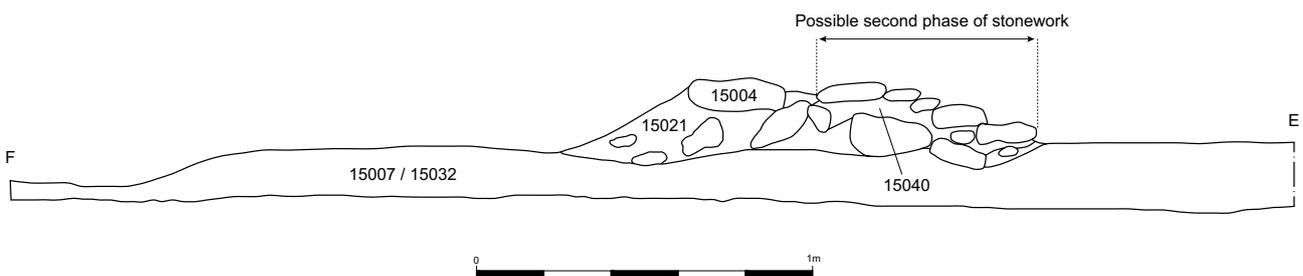
Five phases of construction have been identified within this trench. Some sequential arrangement of these phases is possible but Phases 2 and 3, as well as Phases 4 and 5, may be contemporary.

3.3.1 Phase 1

The earliest features were vestigial structural remains (C15033) found to the west of the wall (C15004) and sealed beneath the cobbling of Phase 3 (C15006). These appeared to sit within a thin (0.05m) layer of palaeosol (C15034), believed to represent the earliest agricultural soil uncovered in Trench 15.



Illus 4 Trench 15 from the west



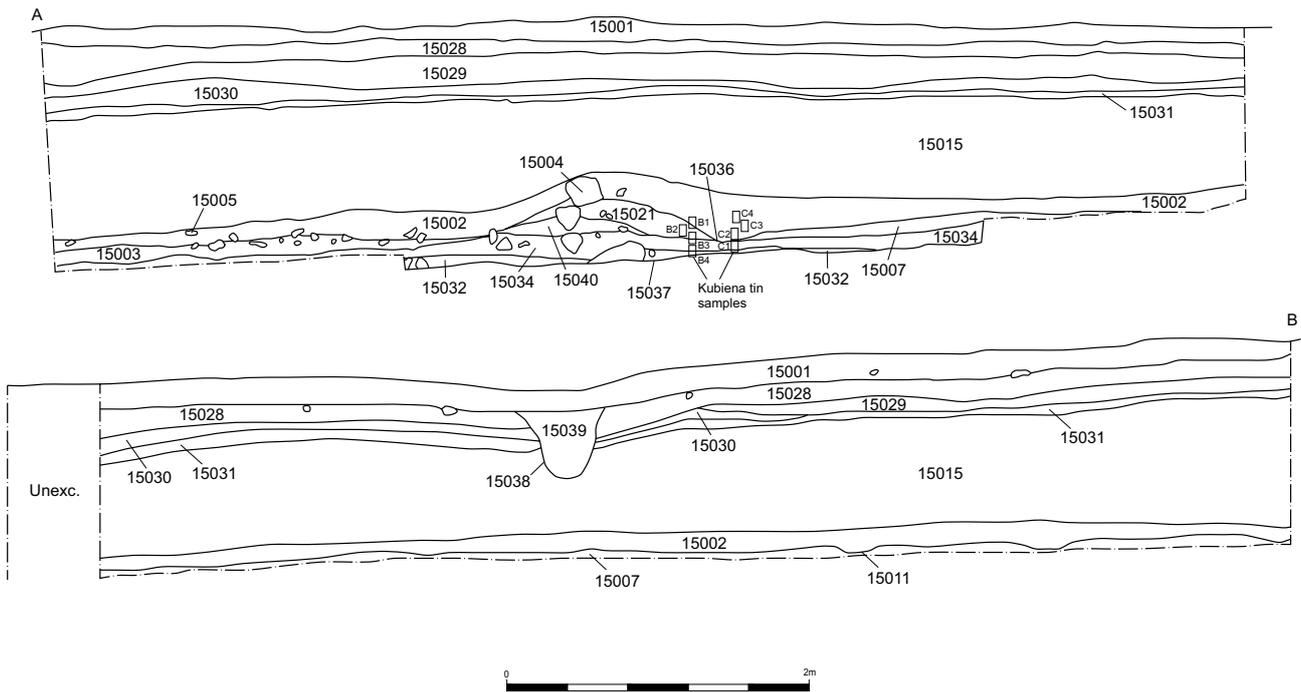
Illus 5 Trench 15, north-facing section



Illus 6 Trench 15, boundary wall and west end of trench, from the north



Illus 7 Trench 15, detail of boundary wall from the north-west



Illus 8 Trench 15, south-facing section

3.3.2 Phase 2

This phase is characterised by a wall (C15004) running east/west (Illus 3, 5, 6). It was possibly used to demarcate areas of either arable or pastoral land, or to separate the domestic from agricultural activity. The accumulation of material either side of this wall, particularly to the east, indicates the longevity of this feature as a functioning entity (Illus 7). This boundary wall demarcates an area of well-developed agricultural soil (C15019, C15003, C15007), which formed a more fertile, less waterlogged area in the centre of the trench, and has prevented the soil from eroding. Associated with this feature is a bank of soil against the back of the wall (C15021) and a ditch probably inserted to improve drainage (C15036) (Illus 3, Illus 8). Possible secondary stonework was noted in section (Illus 5).

This phase may also be associated with a system of cultivation furrows (C15011, C15012, C15013) because the surface of the palaeosol (C15003) in the centre of the trench displayed traces of such features, which were particularly noticeable when the overlying peat was removed (Illus 3, 9, 10).



Illus 9 Trench 15, Furrow 15011 from the north



Illus 10 Trench 15, Furrows 15012 and 15013 in centre of trench from the north



Illus 11 Trench 15, cobbling between Structure 15008 and trench edge, from the east



Illus 12 Trench 15, Structure 15008 from the north



Illus 13 Trench 15, general view of Structure 15008 from the north

These furrows measured about 0.5m wide by 0.15m deep, were aligned roughly north-west/south-east and parallel to each other. The two in the centre of the trench (C15012 and C15013) lay about 1m apart. Similarly, the presence of cereals, confirmed through pollen analysis of the palaeosol (see below) supports the presence of arable land.

3.3.2 Phase 3

The laying of a cobbled surface (C15006) to the west of the boundary wall marks a change (Illus 3). This is the first phase of cobbling to the west of the field wall, and the stones may have been laid to consolidate the ground surface. This feature lay within the palaeosol (C15003), which was covered with preliminary peat growth (C15002). A patch of cobbling (C15010) within the palaeosol to the south of the building may also belong to this phase (Illus 11).

3.3.3 Phase 4

Phase 4 is characterised by the construction of a structure (C15008) (Illus 12), which itself has at

least two phases of activity. Located in the east of the trench, the walls of this structure were constructed of substantial boulders, which may have supported an organic superstructure, perhaps turf (Illus 3, Illus 13).

Phase 4a sees the building in its original form, sub-rectangular with an internal division resulting in two compartments linked by an internal doorway (C15027). The structure measured 7m by 4m overall; the northern compartment measured approximately 2m by 1.8m internally while the southern compartment measured about 1.5m by 1.5m internally (Illus 14). Two possible entrances into the larger, northern compartment were located to the east (C15025) and west (15024) respectively (Illus 15), and one possible entrance was identified in the southern cell facing south-east (C15026) (Illus 16).

A phase of reconstruction, Phase 4b, saw the northern compartment shortened by a secondary cross-wall (C15023) (Illus 17) and the western entrance blocked (C15018). A section measuring 1.6m by 0.6m was excavated within the northern cell in front of what was the west-facing entrance (Illus 18). The palaeosol here (C15019) overlay a brown



Illus 14 Trench 15 from the east



Illus 15 Trench 15, blocking of the western entrance of Structure 15008, from the west



Illus 16 Trench 15, southern cell of structure from the south-east

earth (15020), itself set over glacial till (C15037). A series of soil monoliths were taken here for soil micromorphological analysis (see below; Illus 19).

The function of this building is unclear and very few artefacts were found associated with it, comprising only two flint chips and a small number of quartz flakes (see below); there were no internal stratified deposits or features such as a hearth. There was also no evidence to indicate whether this structure was roofed or not. Its small size may indicate it functioned as a bothy or shelter.

3.3.4 Phase 5

A second phase of cobbling (C15005) was laid down to the west of the Phase 2 field wall (C15004), perhaps as a consequence of increased wetness and paludification¹ of the ground surface (Illus 20). This appeared to be sitting within a

¹ Paludification is the process by which blanket bog encroaches onto formerly dry land through the accumulation of organic matter, increased soil moisture and sphagnum moss colonisation. This can be caused by climatic change, geomorphological change, and by the natural advancement of peatland.

thin layer of compact peat (C15015) above a gritty interface layer (C15002) (Illus 8). The stratification indicates that farming activity or stock control may have continued after the peat had begun to grow and an attempt to continue use of the area in a wet and infertile environment was made, if only for a brief period. A possible continuation of this cobbled surface was excavated in Trench 18.

3.4 Sub-peat field wall (Trench 4)

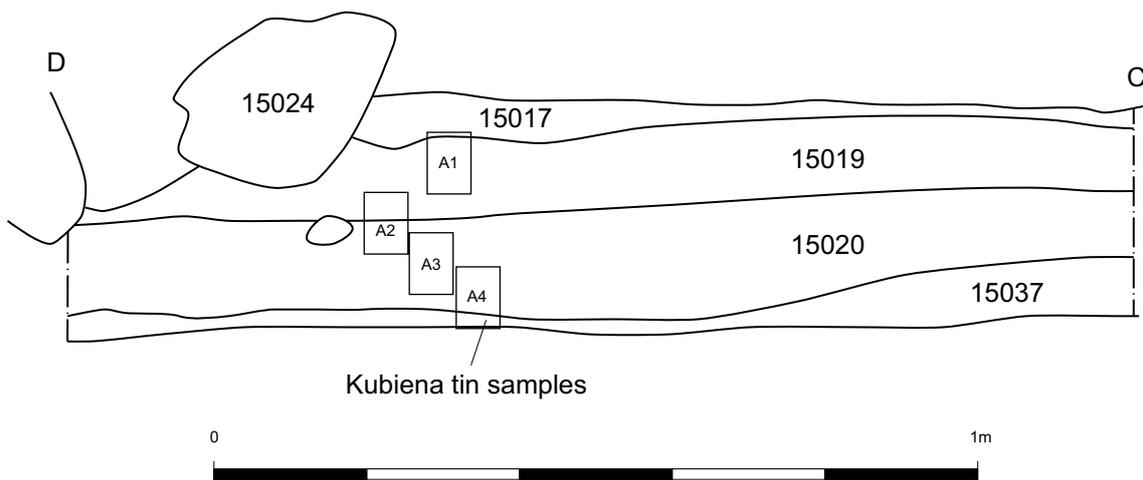
A stone wall was excavated, lying on the same alignment as a wall found during the watching brief (Inglis 1999). This wall (C4003) measured 1.5m wide by 3m long and was constructed on top of the palaeosol (Illus 21). It was built of large sub-angular gneiss boulders measuring up to 0.65m across, with a little tumbled stone lying to the east (Illus 22). Its presence is particularly significant in light of the features present in Trench 15, just 5m to the north. It is possible that this represents a linear field wall aligned NNW/SSE, whose northern end



Illus 17 Trench 15, main cell of structure from the north



Illus 18 Trench 15, slot within structure



Illus 19 Trench 15, east-facing section of slot within structure



Illus 20 Trench 15, boundary wall and cobbled surface from the north-west

could be seen in the section edge of Trench 15; the line could be followed by probing between the trenches.

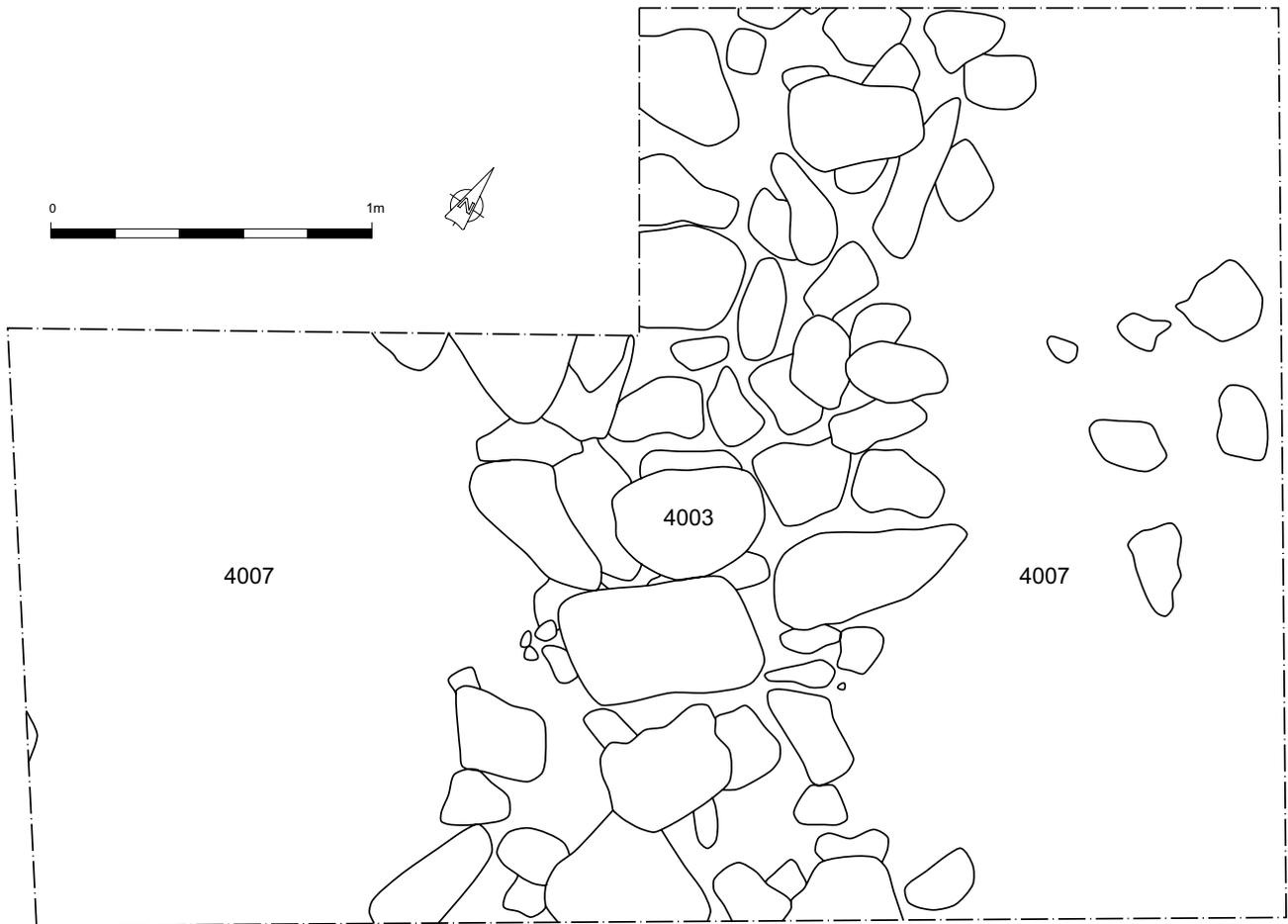
3.5 Sub-peat clearance cairns and heaps (Trenches 2, 9 and 16)

A circular spread of small stones (C9010), measuring about 1m in diameter, was discovered beneath 1.15m of peat in Trench 9 (Illus 23). These stones were heaped up towards the centre and became more scattered towards the edges (Illus 24). This feature is interpreted as a clearance cairn.

A linear heap of stones (C16009) was excavated in Trench 16, aligned roughly north/south, and piled to a height of about 0.4m at the north of the trench, tailing off towards the south (Illus 25, 26). It had a clear boundary on its north-western side and a much more diffuse one towards the south. It was initially assumed that an earlier field wall had been obscured by later clearance stones piled up against it. However, upon excavation,

no wall faces could be discerned and the stone heap was irregular in construction. This feature is interpreted as a linear clearance heap, demarcated on its northern side, perhaps suggesting that clearance activity occurred from the south. It is unlikely that peat cutting has removed portions of this feature and created a false edge because the feature runs obliquely across the peat cutting. This feature possibly continued further to the east in Trench 2, where a stone spread running north-east/south-west was identified, with edge-set stones marking the south face (Illus 27).

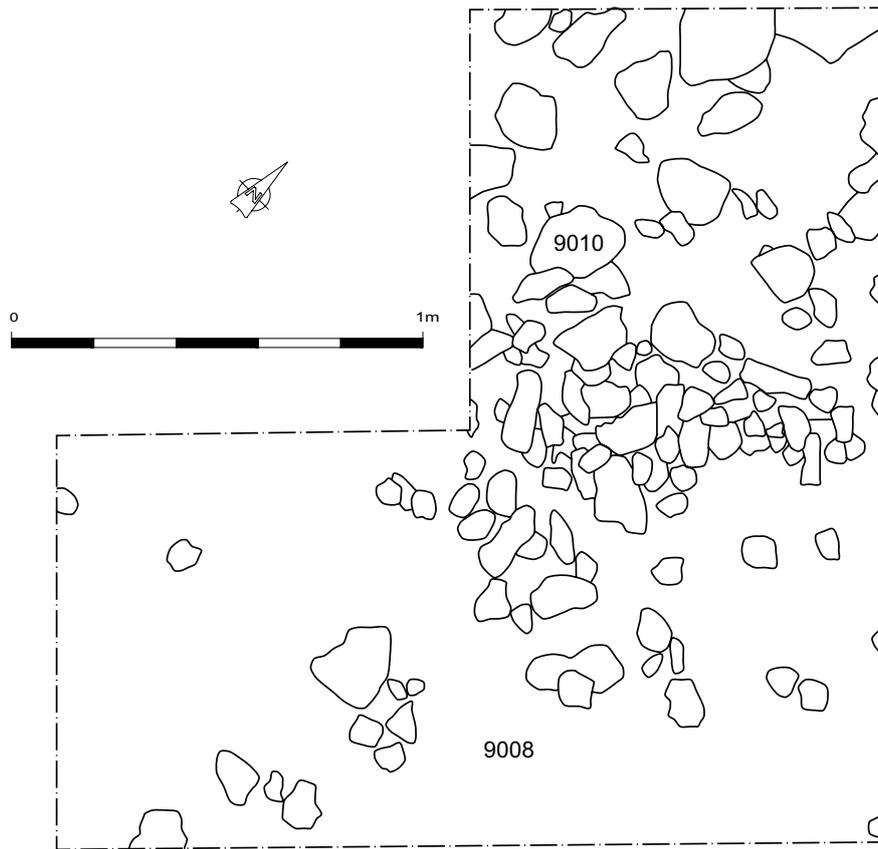
Below this stone feature was a thin layer of well-humified peat, beneath which was a spread of small sub-angular/sub-rounded stones (C16010) lying on top of the palaeosol (Illus 28). These stones perhaps indicate that a clearance heap had already begun to accumulate and was augmented by further clearance over a period of time. A small sub-oval pit (C16011) was found cutting into the palaeosol beneath these stones. It measured 0.24m across by 0.2m deep and contained a homogeneous dark brown silt.



Illus 21 Trench 4 plan



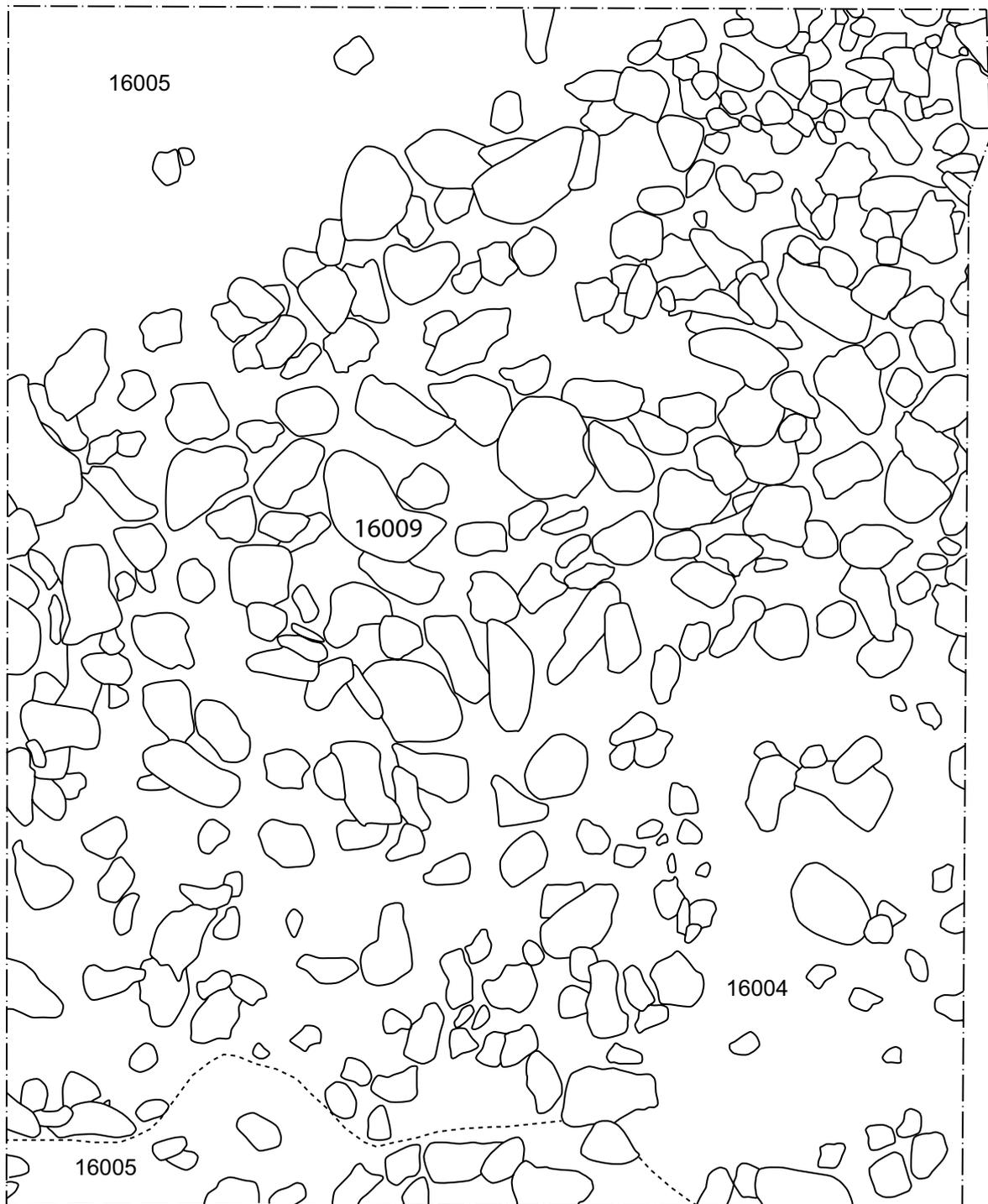
Illus 22 Trench 4 from the south



Illus 23 Trench 9 plan



Illus 24 Trench 9 from the north-east



Illus 25 Trench 16 plan



Illus 26 Trench 16 from the west



Illus 27 Trench 2 from the west



Illus 28 Trench 16 from the south following removal of upper stones

3.6 Oval structure of unknown date (Trench 13)

The footings of an oval building were found on the coastal edge sealed beneath a layer of gritty colluvium (Illus 29). It measured 2.5m by 4.5m internally and was aligned north-east/south-west (Illus 30). The walls of this structure were poorly built with no distinct coursing and had a gritty matrix, possibly forming a soil wall core, so is likely to have supported a peat/turf superstructure (Illus 31); indeed, on the south side the wall was constructed of peat blocks, their shape still readily discernible, placed on top of a stone foundation. There was no evidence of an entrance and there were no internal features within this building.

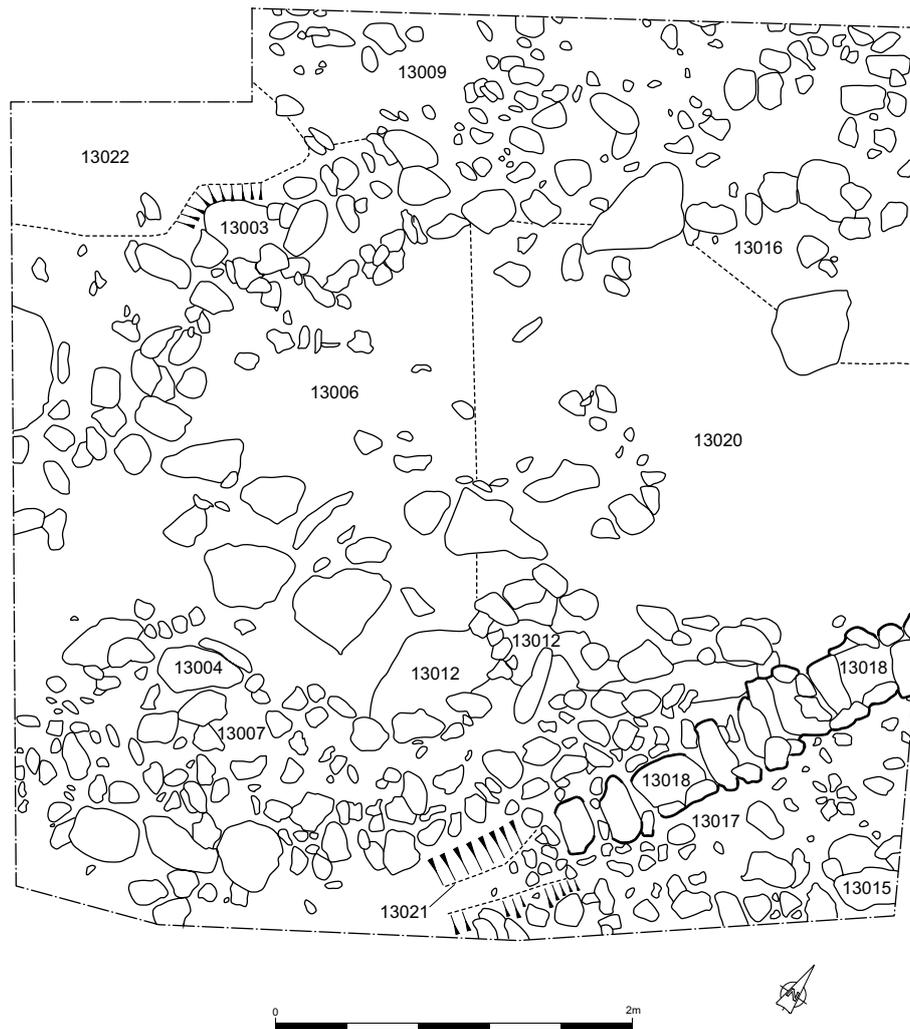
A thin organic soil covered the interior of the building and has been interpreted as an earlier floor layer. A possible secondary turf floor or platform (C13011), constructed after the original floor went out of use and the building began to fill with colluvium, was found in the eastern side of the building. It measured 0.8m wide by 3m long by 0.3m thick. This deposit lay on top of

a compact peaty layer which perhaps resulted from a foundation layer made of peat blocks. It could also indicate that the platform itself was turf-built, and what is seen is the peaty topsoil adhering to the underside of turfs cut from peat.

To the east of the structure, a length of stone wall appeared to continue beneath a peat bank. This wall could be traced by probing for a short distance heading east, but here the peat rapidly increased in depth to 3m. Between the oval structure and this ancillary wall was a thick dump of mixed material (C13014) containing patches of clay, peat and peat ash. Upon its removal, a slab-capped drain was revealed (C13018) (Illus 32). This measured 2.3m in length, aligned north-east/south-west, and continued into the section to the north. This feature could not be excavated in full because of time constraints, and so its underlying structure and contents remain unknown. This drain appears to lie outside the excavated building and may therefore be draining water away from the structure or be evidence for a second building as yet not revealed.



Illus 29 Trench 13, general view of structure from the east



Illus 30 Trench 13 plan



Illus 31 Trench 13, structure from the south



Illus 32 Trench 13, drain seen from the west

3.7 Post-medieval structure and redeposited early prehistoric finds (Trench 3)

A trench was excavated adjacent to a large bedrock knoll in the west of the study area. The latest phase of activity in this area was represented by a small semi-circular building. It had a double-faced stone wall with a soil core and was assigned a medieval or later date on the basis of its morphology and the recovery of Craggan Ware sherds from within it; it was interpreted as a bothy or hut. The building measured 4m by 3.2m overall, and a large orthostat had been used to form the north side of the entrance on the east. A spread of peat ash was interpreted as a hearth, and two possible

postholes were cut into the floor deposits.

Beneath this building, and across an area of outcropping bedrock around the area the building had occupied, was a series of deposits filling the hollows within the bedrock (Illus 33), some of which contained flint, pottery and plant macrofossils. These deposits were difficult to interpret, but it is possible that some accumulated naturally, while others may have been deliberately laid to level the uneven bedrock surface prior to constructing the building. A few of the artefacts found have been dated to the Late Neolithic or Bronze Age, suggesting that the hollows within the bedrock acted as catchments for material during prehistoric activity in this area.



Illus 33 Trench 3 from the north, bedrock exposed