

---

## 6 DISCUSSION (TRENCH 2)

---

Very few rural medieval settlements in Lowland Scotland have been excavated in recent years. Springwood near Kelso (Dixon 1998) and Eldbotle, Dirleton (Morrison et al 2008) had substantially better preserved structures than Hallhill, whilst Gogar had no structural features (Morrison et al 2009). Although later agricultural activity had removed much of the structural evidence from Hallhill, the excavation revealed some similarities with the buildings identified at the other sites, but also some major differences.

### 6.1 *The 'sunken-floored' structures: a possible workshop?*

The two irregular 'sunken-floored buildings', F13 and F14, have no close parallels in medieval Scotland so far. There is a possibility that the sunken nature of the floor was simply a result of erosion of a bare earth surface over a number of years, rather than being a deliberate attempt to create a sunken floor as seen in the sunken-featured buildings of Early Saxon England or the cellared buildings of the Late Saxon period.

F14 is the most convincing structure of the two, having three partial or complete straight 'walls'. The central part of this feature had a relatively level floor, but the varying angles of slope at its edges indicate that the sunken area was never revetted with timber or stone, at least not in the surviving part. There is, however, a slight step in the profile of the cut along the straight sides which could originally have held footings for a timber structure or wall-lining. The step appears insufficiently wide to form a base for a turf-walled structure, although this does not preclude the existence of such a structure *outside* the edges of the pit at a higher ground level which is now lost. Two small stakeholes in the south-west corner and a central post-hole in the northern side were the only structural evidence remaining, and these could perhaps have been used to support horizontal plank walling at a higher level. Although a few stones were located around its edges, there is no real evidence of any stone footings for the super-structure, nor is it apparent that any were padstones for a cruck roof.

The nature of F14, with only three straight sides, may suggest that it was simply cut into the terrace to provide a level floor. Perhaps the northern side was even open to the elements, if not just lost through truncation. The north-eastern corner had certainly been removed by modern disturbance. At the west side of the north-west corner, a shallow hollow, pit 1413, may represent the location of a side entrance

and could have been produced simply by erosion. The two stones placed across it would then have formed a threshold, although their height would appear to have made them a hindrance to entry rather than a help. The stakeholes lining the north side of this hollow might then be interpreted as supports for a handrail. Alternatively, they could represent the line of the north wall, if it existed.

An irregular oval pit cut the floor at the west end (1424) but produced no finds or evidence of function. The fill of pit 1424 was the same as the overlying abandonment fill of the structure, suggesting that it was open during the life of the structure. It may be a product of erosion from human activity within the structure. A burnt patch in the centre of the floor suggested that the building was heated, but the evidence does not suggest a hearth and perhaps the patch was caused by hot ashes from a brazier. These features suggest that it had an earthen floor, which has been postulated for other types of sunken-floored structure in Scotland, such as the earlier oval or circular examples at Easter Kinnear, Fife (Driscoll 1997) and Ratho (Smith 1998).

Like Saxon sunken-featured buildings in England, the structure appears to have been used as a rubbish pit after demolition, containing a large quantity of pottery and other artefacts within its fill. These, therefore, do not necessarily belong to its use phase and may be related to another structure or structures on the site. However, a few sherds of pottery were also collected from pits in the base of the structure and these were broadly contemporary with the pottery from elsewhere on the site. Even if F14 was abandoned whilst other structures were still in use, it is unlikely to have been constructed earlier than the rest of the settlement.

F13 was considerably shallower than F14 and contained several features. It had no definite structural edges, but stones present in the topsoil and overlying the abandonment layer could represent plough-dragged, heavily truncated footings. The lack of structural edges suggests any stone or turf wall must have been built away from the edges of the scoop. Again, this shallow hollow may have been caused by erosion if the features it contained were in constant use. Patches of gravel may represent attempts to metal the surface. It might then be interpreted as a work area with an adjacent workshop (F14). A possible (?earlier) parallel for this would be two sub-rectangular hollow defined features discovered at Birnie, Moray, which appeared to be associated with a smithy (Hunter 2003). Whether it was ever walled and/or roofed is uncertain from the available evidence.

The two features together appear to represent an

industrial or craft area, but exactly what function they had is uncertain. If the oval pit 1426, containing a large quantity of shells, was incorporated into structure F14, it is tempting to suggest that the structure was used for food processing and cooking. Also, pit 1315 produced a significant quantity of coal. This was readily available from seams on the east coast, but was not the fuel of choice for domestic use in the medieval period, being preferred for smithing and other industrial processes. No slag was recovered at Hallhill however, so smithing seems an unlikely use here. Other crafts which could have been carried out in a workshop may be represented in a few of the finds from F13. A spindle whorl might suggest that spinning took place. Two possible mortars were deposited in one pit, and a hammerstone or pounder was found in the fill of F14, so grinding of grain was probably being carried out. However, all of these objects may have been brought from elsewhere rather than used in the features. The mortars were deposited with other stones, including a pivot stone, in the top of a large pit in F13 and may have been used simply to level an inconvenient hollow caused by subsidence of an earlier pit. The hammerstone might have been dumped during rubbish disposal after the life of F14, as discussed above.

The pits to the east side of F14 may have been used for rubbish deposition during the life of the structure. Double pit F15 in particular produced a large quantity (115 sherds) of pottery and some animal bone (91 fragments). The peaty nature of the lower fills of one pit might indicate the deposition of cess.

## 6.2 *The enclosure F19*

The interpretation of F19 as an enclosure around a structure rests on limited evidence which consists of the presence of a T-shaped fragment of stone footing in its south-east corner, and a large possible firepit or hearth at the east end of the gully-defined enclosure. Given that the footing appears to extend to the east, there is a possibility that its presence within the enclosure was fortuitous and that either it was later and extended beyond the limits of the shallow ditch to the east, or that it was earlier and the footing was removed by the ditch. The severe truncation of the site means that either of these interpretations is feasible.

However, as noted above, there is some suggestion that the shallow gullies which make up the enclosure were dug to provide earth with which to form a level platform of which nothing survives as a result of truncation, as well as for drainage. If so, it is not the gullies themselves which are important, but the area they enclosed. They were clearly too shallow to form any useful feature in their own right. A possible parallel for this method of construction can be seen at Greod, Sanday (Wickham-Jones 2001, pl 7), where stone footings appear to sit on rectilinear house platforms with possible shallow

gullies at either side. The buildings there had gaps between them, but these were not delineated by gullies and the divisions between them would not be visible if the shallow footings had been lost. Stone-footed structures on platforms were also excavated at the upland farmstead of Dowglen in Annandale (Cannell 1985; Dixon 2002, 29), although these appear to have been built at right-angles to the terrace.

Based on evidence from Springwood (Dixon 1998), the stone-footed structures might have been approximately 10m in length and two or perhaps three could have been fitted lengthways along the putative platform. There is possible evidence for further wall footings in the wide gully forming the central southern part of F19, although the stones here appeared to be resting on top of the fill of a short length of ditch which cut the base of the gully. It is an unlikely candidate for a foundation trench, so the function of this ditch is uncertain, as is the position of the wall. A possible suggestion is that the stones were moved here through ploughing or subsidence, but even if this were the case, the ditch is difficult to explain. If there was only one house on the platform, perhaps the other end functioned as an enclosed garden or yard.

F19 produced the largest groups of pottery and animal bone from any feature on the site, a total of 310 sherds and 547 fragments respectively. This is suggestive of a build-up of midden deposits in the open gullies, the fill of which also showed layering of marine shells at the widest point. This section of gully was closest to F14 and it may have been open during the life of that structure, perhaps allowing for shell waste to be deposited from there. The fragment of painted medieval window glass found in this feature would be an unusual object on most medieval rural sites and must have come from a high status or ecclesiastical building. Its condition is not suggestive of significant movement following deposition, so it is unlikely to be intrusive from the ploughsoil, however there is no other suggestion of a high-status building here. Perhaps it was deliberately brought to site as a curiosity or a talisman.

## 6.3 *Structure F24*

The collapsed stone footings of a possible rectangular building were identified following the topsoil strip. These were only one course deep and excavation revealed that they sat within the fill of an apparent hollow in the subsoil. A ditch on the south side of the hollow curved around to enter a deep pit, possibly a soakaway, which may indicate that the ditch was a drain for the structure. Unlike those at Springwood and Eldbotle, the feature was not stone-lined or capped. If the ditch curved around to avoid the wall of the structure, it is possible that the latter extended to the west and was up to 9m in length. Perhaps the footings survived in this area simply because they were built on an infilled hollow which

later slumped, leaving them at a slightly greater depth below the ploughsoil and less susceptible to damage. It is possible that some of the stones in this area were the remains of paving rather than a footing, in which case they might perhaps represent another industrial or craft area.

This area produced 219 fragments of animal bone and 113 sherds of pottery, as well as fragments of a copper alloy buckle, a vessel rim, a possible iron blade and a grinder stone. A plain perforated disc spindle whorl and a whetstone came from the possible soakaway pit. This may simply be an assemblage of domestic waste deposited after the structure went out of use.

#### 6.4 *Feature F7/F5*

The shallow gullies forming F5 and F7 were similar in appearance and character to each other. Their

purpose is enigmatic; while their common alignment with F19 and F24 invites comparison, F5 and F7 appear to comprise fairly simple gullies and do not obviously form part of a ditch-defined linear feature. The short right-angled gully at the end of F5 and the longer gully F11 could suggest the termini of an enclosure like F19. Equally, the large pits within F7 could represent the footings of a timber building, but if so this would have been a fairly substantial structure and the opposing wall should have been visible despite the greater degree of truncation seen to the north side of these structures. Several post-medieval finds were recovered from the fills of this feature, but given the degree of disturbance it is possible that they were intrusive from the ploughsoil. The shared alignment of three ditches, F8, F20 and F23 hints at these long linear features forming the edge of a wider agricultural or plot boundary system close to the more permanent centres of human activity (F13, F14, F19, F24).