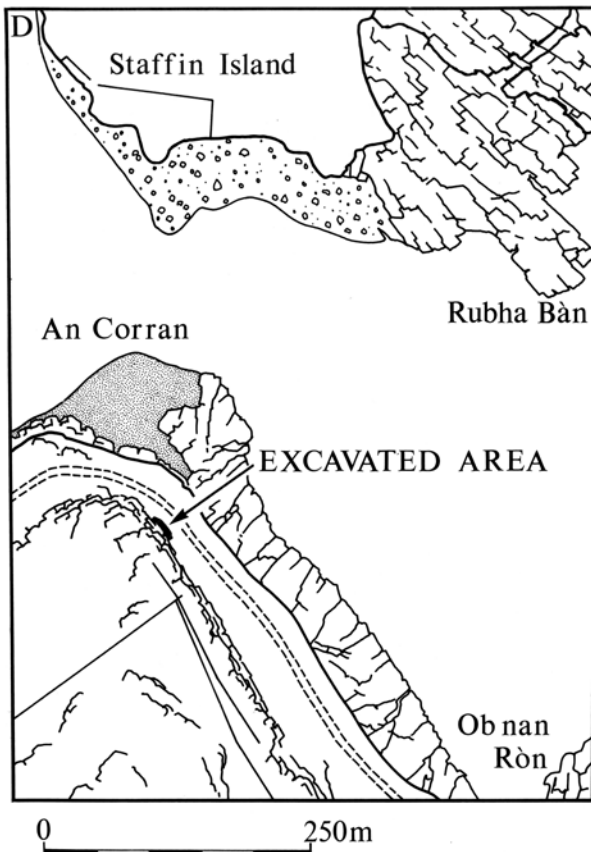

2 INTRODUCTION, by Roger Miket, Karen Hardy and Alan Saville

The archaeological site referred to here as the An Corran rockshelter is situated in north-east Skye, on the eastern side of the Trotternish peninsula, which is the largest of the three northward projecting headlands of Skye (illus 1 & 2). Trotternish, the easternmost of the three, is dominated along its length by a north-south trending escarpment, which extends like a raised spine for over 23km down the centre of the headland. It is composed of basaltic lavas extruded over softer rocks of Jurassic date, dipping steeply westwards to present a near continuous eastern cliff face, intermittently attaining heights of over 500m (Bell & Harris 1986, 119). To the north of Portree, the coastline is dominated by high cliffs of olivine basalt and dolerite, formed by the intrusion of a sill complex through the Jurassic substrate, and these sea cliffs continue largely unbroken to the southern extremity of Staffin Bay (Anderson & Dunham 1966, 126; Emeleus & Bell 2005, 60). Here, at An Corran, the cliffs give way to a broad embayment with a sandy beach, offering the first real opportunity for easy access between sea and land along this whole stretch of coastline and the first landing point north of Portree Bay.

This embayment is known locally as An Corran (in Gaelic ‘the Sickle’) after the sweeping curvature of rock partly visible at low-water level and terminating at Staffin Island.

The site (NGR NG 4915 6848) lies on what was a narrow ledge, just south of the An Corran headland, facing eastwards out to sea and towards Staffin Island (illus 3-5). At this point the cliff face and the shore are close, only some 20 metres separating ledge and sea, with the road to Staffin slipway occupying a ‘terrace’ midway up the slope (illus 6). As elsewhere on this stretch of coast, the lower parts of the cliffs are masked by well-developed scree slopes, composed largely of eroded rock and soil. On the slope immediately below the site the scree has a significant component of blown sand derived from the beach (Anderson & Dunham 1966, 196). The ledge, with its surface at c 10m above MHWS (Mean High Water Springs), and the rock undercut at its rear, probably



Illus 2 An Corran detailed location map (D)



Illus 3 Rockshelter ledge in 1988, viewed from the south (photo: Roger Miket)



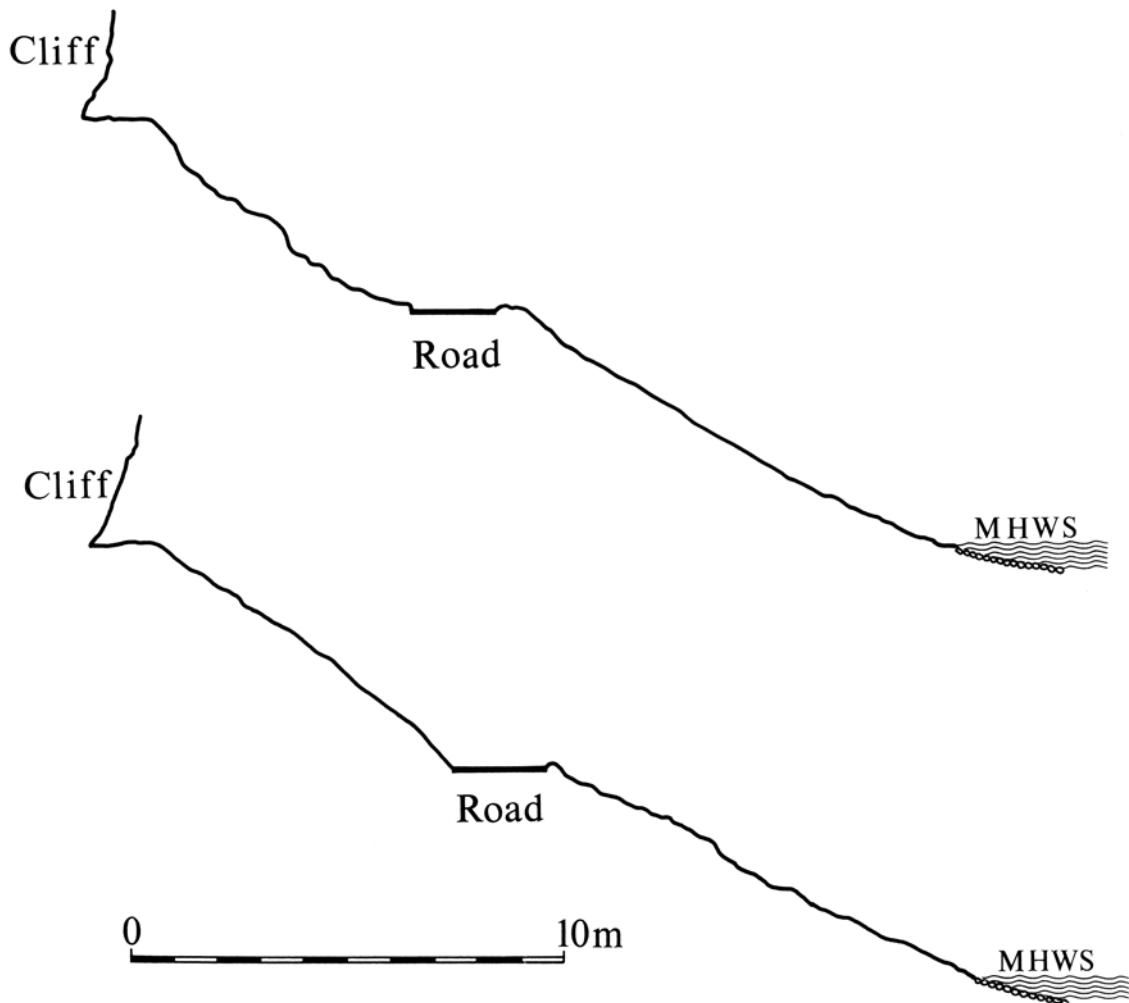
represents an erosional sea ‘cave’ feature formed at a period of raised shoreline, perhaps during the Devensian glaciation (Benn 1991; Dawson 2007; Richards 1969; Selby et al 2000). However, as Dawson (2007) has recently emphasised, relative postglacial land/sea changes in this location are complex, and the strong effect of glacial isostatic tilt may mean that the sea level was probably much as it is today during the postglacial maximum around 7000 years ago (A. Dawson pers comm). The implication of this is that, during much of the period of human occupation of An Corran, the shoreline and sea level would have been relatively as they are today, thus probably including the offshore status of Staffin Island.

The extent of the ledge, which sloped down from south to north, mirrors the extent of the slight undercutting of the cliff face (illus 3 & 4). During excavation this undercutting was shown to be more pronounced below the existing surface level, but still insufficient to warrant any description other than ‘overhang’ for the cliff profile, which creates a classic, albeit relatively shallow, rockshelter situation. Material fallen from above has, over a considerable period of time, created a talus slope, the apex of which lay some metres from the base of the cliff.

Illus 4 (left) Rockshelter ledge in 1988, viewed from the north (photo: Roger Miket)

Illus 5 (below) Panoramic view of the site and adjacent areas from the ENE prior to the excavation in 1993 (photo: Roger Miket)





Illus 6 Slope profiles from the rockshelter ledge to the sea. The upper profile is a projection of section E–D at the north edge of the excavation trench (see *illus 16*); the lower profile is on a parallel alignment c 1m to the north. The profiles were compiled using tapes and ranging rods.

Directly above the rockshelter lay a second, more extensive ledge (*illus 5 & 7*). This ledge, which was accessible from above rather than below, may have been used as a point of lithic exploitation as it lay directly below a band of baked mudstone identical to the lithic raw material found on the site. The implications of this ledge were not recognised at the time of the excavation, and the ledge no longer exists (*illus 12*).

The rockshelter ledge extended up to 6m out from the rock face, but it is thought that some of the width of the ledge may possibly have been removed when the original road was constructed, or may have eroded subsequently. The ledge extended laterally for 16m to the north and south. The beach below the site consists of vegetated shingle ridges, and it is one of the few areas of beach sand deposition on Skye.

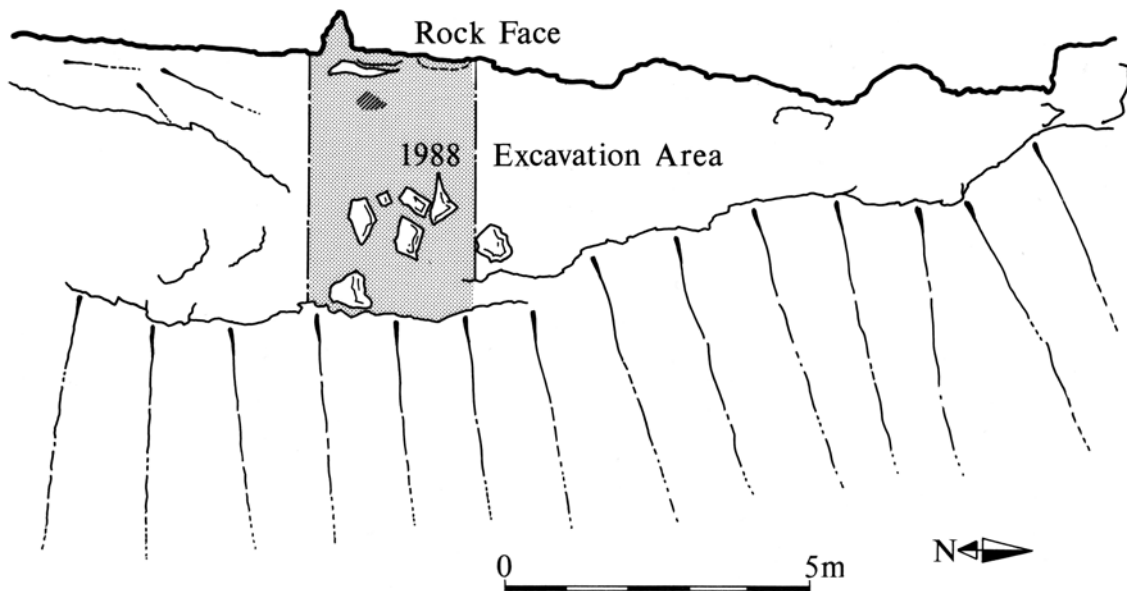
The nearest freshwater source was a spring, now obscured by rockfall, which emerged on the beach as a stream a few metres to the north of the site, on the headland. Half a kilometre west of An Corran is the mouth of the Stenscholl River (also known locally as the Kilmartin River), which flows into Staffin Bay.

2.1 Discovery and prelude to the excavation

The location was first noted as a potential archaeological site by Martin Wildgoose in 1982. A preliminary inspection in May 1988 led to it being added to the local Sites and Monuments Record (NG 46 NE 17) as a rockshelter with shell deposits (*Saville & Miket 1994a; Wildgoose 1988*). In September 1988 an assessment of the ledge on behalf of what was then Dualchas (the Skye & Lochalsh District Council Museum Service), involving a limited examination of the surface sand layers (*illus 8*), revealed a scattering of shelly material in association with two concentrated patches of burning, as well as fragments of later 19th/early 20th-century pottery. It was concluded that the ledge had been used in a casual manner in relatively recent times, certainly for building a fire, and probably for cooking meals involving shellfish. The sheltered aspect of the site was evident during the assessment and, on the basis that the qualities which attracted activity at one period might equally apply at other times, the Sites and Monuments Record entry made note of



Illus 7 View from the east after the start of the excavation in 1993 showing the configuration of the rock- ledges above (photo: Roger Miket)



Illus 8 Plan of the rockshelter ledge showing the position of the 1988 excavation (shaded)

the site's potential for the finding of residues from earlier use.

In 1993, the instability of the cliff face adjacent to the access road to Staffin slipway prompted drastic action by Highland Regional Council's Depart-

ment of Roads and Transport. The remedy proposed involved cutting back the entire cliff face, including the rockshelter ledge, and utilising the quarried rock as a broad foundation for improved access to the slipway. By the time both the Highland Regional

Archaeologist and Dualchas learned of this proposal, the contract for demolishing the cliff face, and with it the archaeological site, had been assigned, and commencement of the construction work was said to be absolutely imminent. It is important to note that this happened just before the publication in January 1994 of the *National Planning Policy Guideline on Archaeology and Planning* (NPPG 5) and the *Planning Advice Note on Archaeology* (PAN 42), when there was still no requirement for developers to engage in any dialogue with archaeologists. Notwithstanding this, the late Bob Gourlay, then the Highland Region Archaeologist, succeeded in last-minute negotiations with both the Roads and Transport Department and the contractors for a three-day window, within which Dualchas might undertake an emergency excavation at the site.

2.2 Excavation planning

After four days of working on the site with local volunteers (22–25 November 1993), a clearer picture of its potential began to emerge. An extension to the excavation was granted by the Department of Roads and Transport and a further eight days' work was undertaken (between 29 November and 8 December 1993). At the end of this time, section drawings were made of the upper levels. Contrary to what was expected, however, the demolition work did not begin immediately and a further three days of excavation were carried out in early January 1994. It was at this time that the lowest archaeological layers, C40 and C41, were first identified. The south section of the trench was subsequently cleaned and drawn. In total, some excavation was undertaken on 21 days. Had the excavators known the time which might be available from the start, the excavation could have proceeded in a more planned manner.

As it was, the excavation strategy was adjusted as the length of extensions agreed by Highland Region Roads and Transport emerged. The blasting of the cliff face finally took place in April 1994.

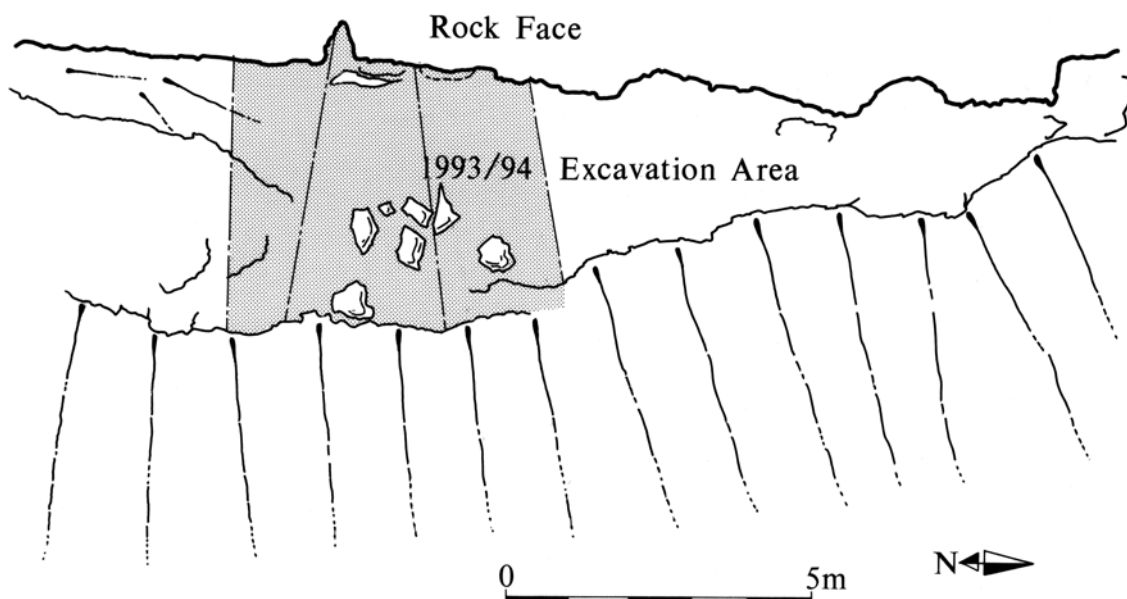
2.3 Excavation strategy

The term 'excavation strategy' is perhaps over-elaborate for what was intended as little more than an exploration to recover parts of the site's pedigree before its destruction. Yet, before work commenced, five priorities were identified:

- Establishing the site's vertical stratigraphy within the excavated area
- Recovery of material which might indicate the nature of these deposits
- Recovery of material for dating
- Recovery of any environmental data
- Obtaining plans and sections in an attempt to establish a three-dimensional record of the site

The short time-scale and the difficult winter weather conditions allowed only the application of relatively crude approaches. Throughout the 21 days, work proceeded under the expectation that, within a day or two, blasting might begin to remove the entire cliff face, including the rock platform and the archaeological site. Given the small size of the volunteer team assembled and uncertainty about the depths of the deposits, an area of around five square metres, representing approximately one-fifth of the extent of the platform, was laid out for investigation over and beyond that of the limited 1988 excavation (*illus 9*). In the event, the depth of deposits encountered required progressive reductions of the area under excavation.

With a choice between making a detailed record of



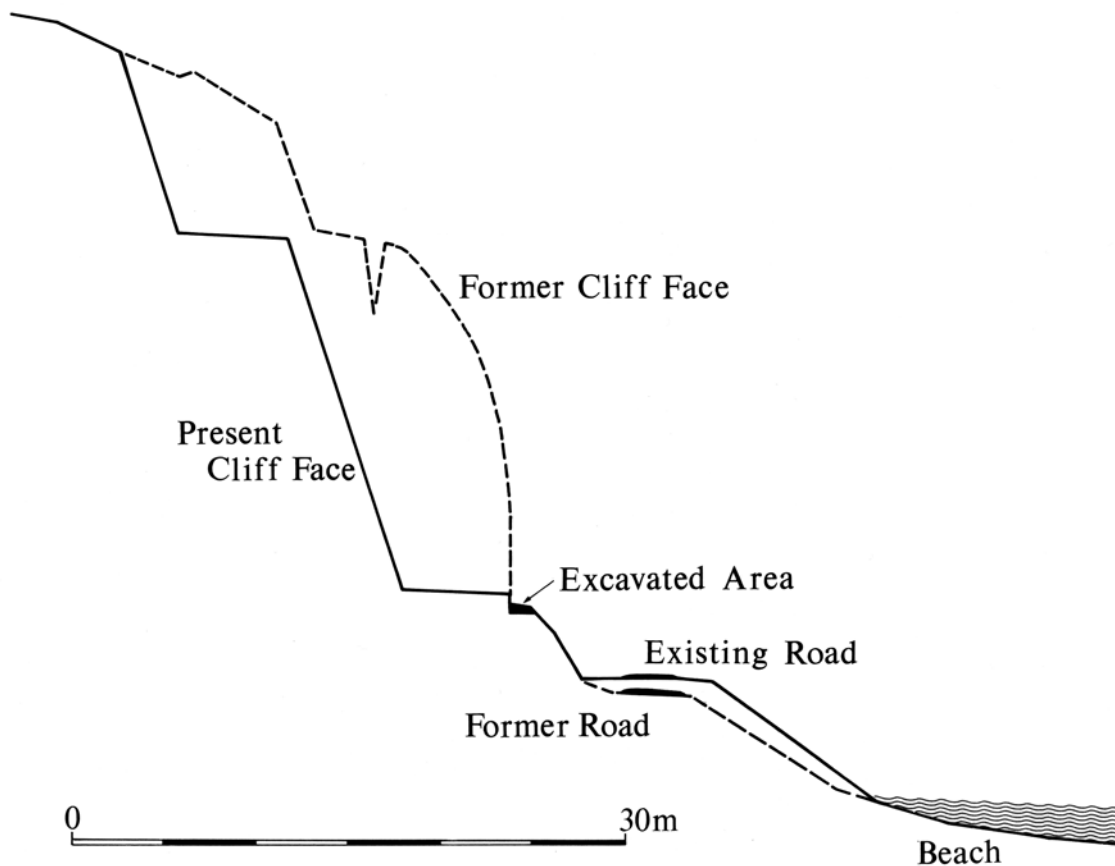
Illus 9 Plan of the rockshelter ledge showing the position of the 1993–94 excavation area (shaded)



Illus 10 Rock clearance in progress in 1994 viewed from the east following the rockface blasting (photo: Roger Miket)



Illus 11 Situation in June 1994 subsequent to the rockface blasting, viewed from the north (photo: Alan Saville)



Illus 12 Sketch diagram showing the former and present cliff profile at the site location

the upper strata only and obtaining an impression of the full potential of the site, the decision was taken to opt for the latter. Accordingly, part of a site which might otherwise have justified several seasons of rigorous investigation was hurriedly cut away, with only limited considerations of stratification, recording and sampling procedures. Nevertheless, it was precisely this decision to opt for a *sondage* which provided the information to justify calling for conservation of the remaining ledge.

Once the nature of the deposits became apparent, discussions opened with Highland Council's Roads and Transport Department as to how the remainder of the platform might be preserved. Demolition of the cliff face above the ledge was inevitable, but agreement was reached over preservation of part of the platform. This was achieved by laying Terram sheeting across the surface of the surviving platform, backfilling the excavated area with sand, and then covering the ledge with a layer of rock to shield it from the impact of falling material. Once the cliff face had been cut back, a skin of smaller stone was added to the slope between the platform and the new road to protect against erosion. Despite the best efforts of all involved, some of the north end of the ledge was lost during the demolition of the cliff face (*illus 10–11*), and it is important to emphasise that the 'shelter' aspect of the site, that is the original overhanging rock face, has been lost entirely (*illus 12*).

However, the surviving ledge, now largely covered by rock fall, represents perhaps between two- and three-fifths of the original archaeological zone of the ledge prior to excavation and rock-blasting. This surviving section of the ledge, which undoubtedly contains important archaeological remains and could in the future yield a coherent stratigraphic sequence, was scheduled by Historic Scotland in 1999 as an Ancient Monument (No. 7848: 'shell midden 1050m NNE of Staffin House').

2.4 The excavation

In attempting to meet the above objectives, a cutting was excavated approximately at the centre of the ledge upon which the site was located (*illus 13–14*).

Initially the cutting measured c 6 × 6m, abutting the cliff face to the west and expanding slightly eastwards to reach the outer edge of the ledge (*illus 15*). This contained the area assessed in 1988 (*illus 8–9*), and the results of the archaeological investigation are included here as if they formed part of a single event. The position of the trench was determined by the following factors:

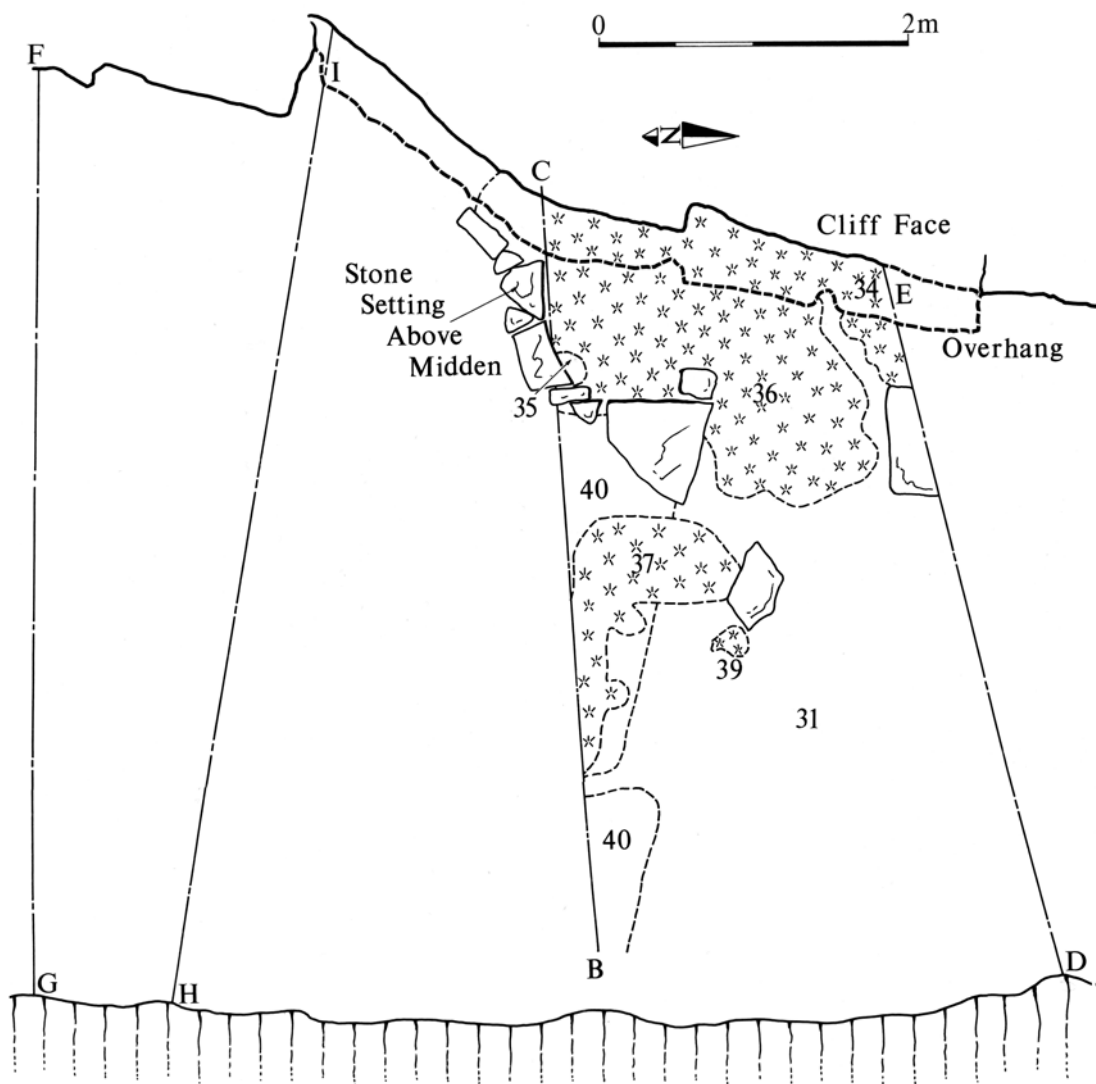
- The need for the excavation of an area sufficiently large to allow coherent features to be recognisable in plan, either in whole or in part.



Illus 13 Excavation in progress in 1993 viewed from the south-east (photo: Roger Miket)



Illus 14 Excavation in progress in 1994 viewed from the south (photo: Roger Miket)



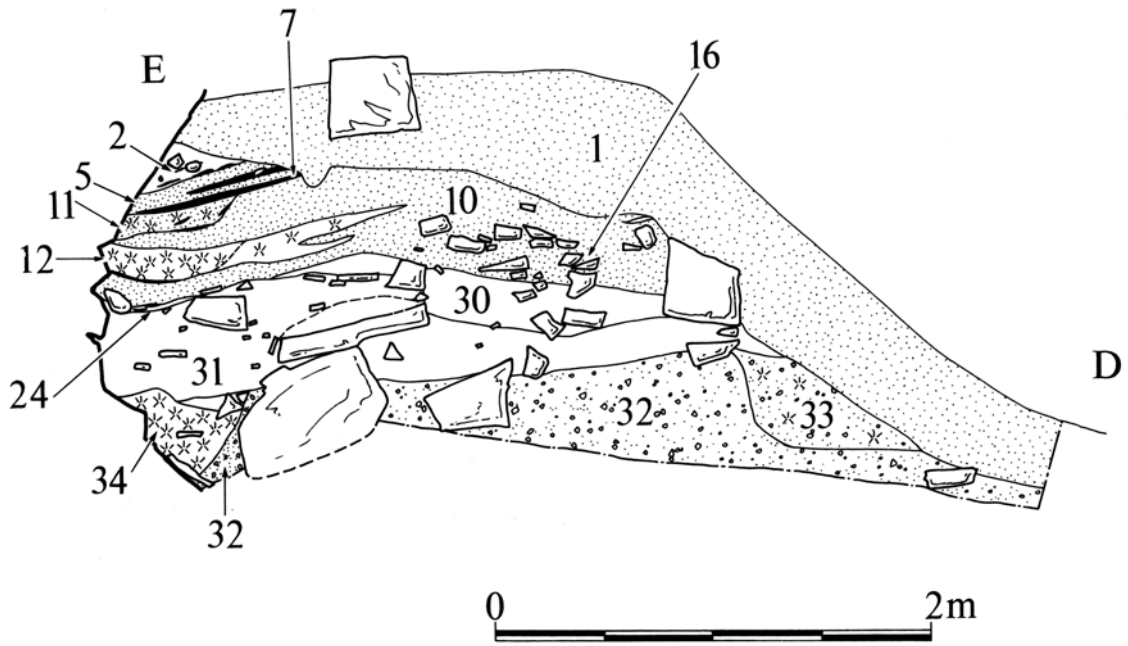
Illus 15 1993–94 excavation plan showing the location of the recorded sections and selected contexts

- The nature and character of the underlying deposits were unknown, but surface indications suggested that these might primarily consist of unconsolidated sands and angular boulders. Were this to be the case, the *sondage* would need to be of a sufficient width to allow the excavation of the site in stratigraphic ‘steps’ for reasons of safety and accessibility.
- A need to match the estimated manpower available to the time-constraint imposed by stratigraphic sequences of unknown extent, horizontally as well as vertically.

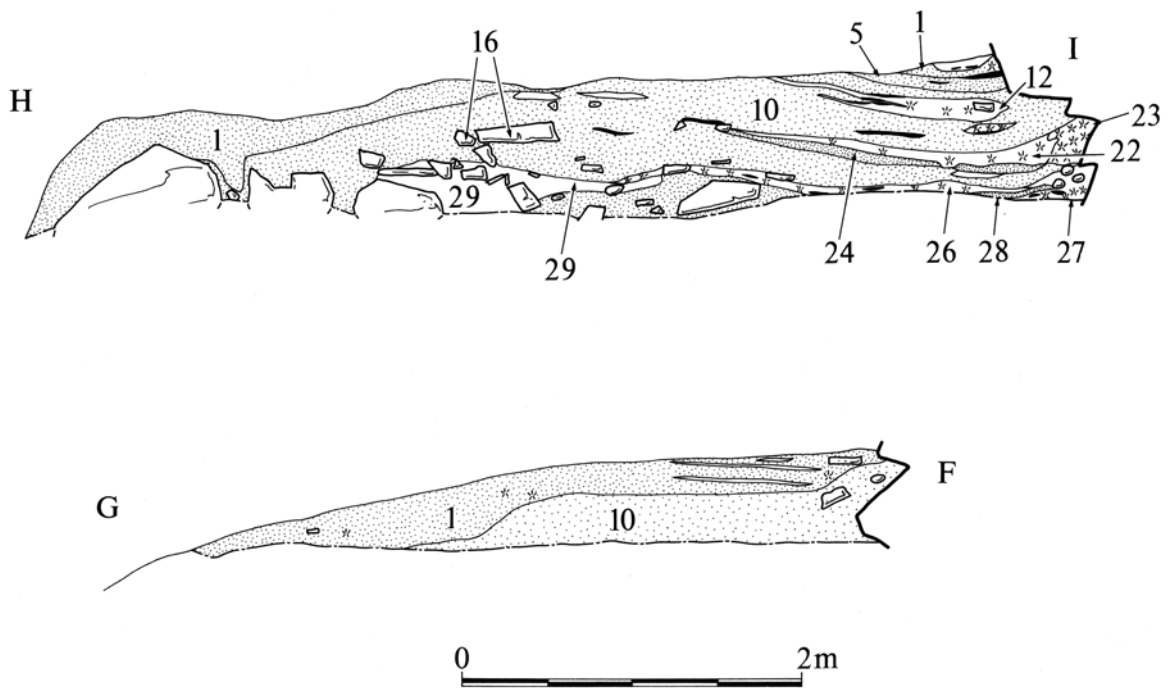
Subsequently the extent of the cutting was reduced to a *sondage* c 2.5m wide between section lines B–C and D–E in order to permit some examination of the lower stratigraphy in the time available. As part of this process, substantial volumes of the midden horizons excavated in the *sondage* were retained as bulk samples.

2.5 The contexts (see [Appendix One](#))

In total, 41 different contexts were identified during the excavation and are summarised in [Table 1](#), which also indicates the illustration, if any, on which the context is depicted. They were numbered C1–41, with C1 being uppermost, or most recent, and C41 being immediately on top of the bedrock surface. The sections through the upper layers were D–E ([illus 16](#)), F–G and H–I ([illus 17](#)), and the only completed deep *sondage* section was B–C ([illus 18](#)). The circumstances and nature of the investigation at this site, as recounted above, preclude a normal full stratigraphic description or the presentation of a meaningful matrix of all the contexts, and in this section it is not possible to maintain an ideal distinction between description and interpretation. The phasing or grouping of the contexts is of necessity ‘broad brush’, and has been presented slightly differently in some of the specialist reports,



Illus 16 Section D-E at the north edge of the excavation



Illus 17 Sections H-I and F-G at the southern limits of the excavation

other than that there is a major division between the uppermost and lowermost context groups.

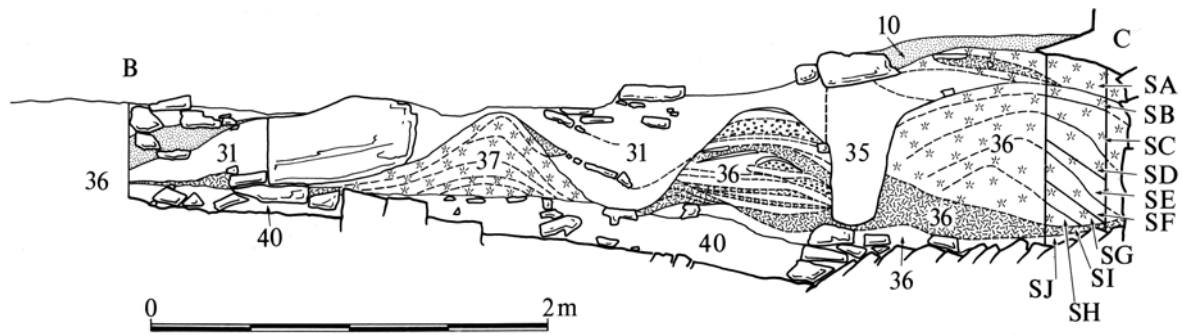
The uppermost group of contexts (C1-30), appeared as largely comprised of wind-blown sand deposits, interleaved with residues of human activity. This latter took the form of hearths and burnt deposits associated with them (illus 19), as well as lenses of shell deposition. The contexts were

characterised by clearly visible lenses that, for the most part, extended across most of the excavated area. As detailed a description as possible for the individual contexts is given at the end of this report (Appendix One).

The lower deposits were mainly formed by a series of human activities taking place on the rock platform, which included aspects of marine and faunal

Table 1 Contexts

Context	Illus	Description
1	16, 17	Light grey/silver fine sand
2	16	Burnt orange/red ash layer with charcoal, crushed shell and stones
3		Hearth within C2
4		Hearth within C2
5	16, 17	Reddish/brown sand deposit, with some limpet shells
6		Thin lens of charcoal and ash within C5
7	16	Brown ash deposit with charcoal and crushed shell
8		Hearth within C7
9		Hearth within C7
10	16, 17, 18	Reddish/brown sand with some crushed shell
11	16	Fine sand with uncompacted limpet shell and charcoal
12	16, 17	Black/brown ash layer with lenses of charcoal and crushed shell, predominantly limpet
13		Hearth with beach cobble pebble base
14		Hearth with beach cobble pebble base
15		Flagstone hearth
16	16, 17	Rock fall
17		Beach cobble surface
18		Charcoal lens
19		Charcoal lens
20		Lens of shells
21		Lens of shells
22	17	Dark brown layer with dense shell and burning
23	17	Unconsolidated shell deposit
24	16	Lens of red-brown sand
25		Lens of shells within C10
26	17	Black layer with crushed and whole shells and charcoal patches
27	17	Black layer with crushed and whole shells
28	17	Thin sand with some whole shells
29	17	Brown/orange layer with angular blocks
30	16	Dark brown layer incorporating many large angular blocks
31	15, 16, 18, 20	Black 'claggy' deposit with bone, shell, as well as bone and lithic artefacts
32	16	Red-orange sand
33	16	Brown sand with shell
34	15, 16	Unconsolidated shell deposit, partly crushed, with animal bone and lithic artefacts
35	15, 18, 20	Intrusive feature, sterile, black, silty fill
36	15, 20	Thick deposit with unconsolidated shell, crushed shell, bone, as well as bone and lithic artefacts
37	15, 18	Unconsolidated shell
38		Small lens of shell within C31
39	15	Small lens of shell within C31
40	15, 18	Dark brown silty deposit with angular stones, bone, fragmented shell, charcoal and lithic artefacts
41		Red clayey deposit present in the cracks in the bedrock, with lithic artefacts, and some burnt bone



Illus 18 Section B–C through the basal deposits in the centre of the excavated area



Illus 19 Burnt deposits (context C8) in upper levels at the rear of the rockshelter (photo: Roger Miket)

processing, the deposition of human remains, and the production and use of lithic artefacts. However, it is unlikely that the deposits represent one continuous sequence of events. The 11 lower deposits (C31–41) extending across the area of the trench reached a depth of over 1m in places and, with the probable exception of C40 and C41 (the original soil and sub-soil?), these deposits were largely anthropogenic in origin. There was an overall tendency for the contexts of this group to appear thicker, more localised in extent, and to contain a higher proportion of angular stone than the higher layers. In particular, there was an absence of the hearths discovered in the earlier group of contexts, although the

presence of dispersed burnt residues was pervasive throughout most of these lower deposits.

Although there were no apparent major discontinuities in the sequence, such as the clean wind-blown lenses noted within the first group (possibly indicating periodic human absence from the site), there were indications of different economic strategies or activity regimes through the sequence. The lowest layers (C41, C40 and the lower part of C36), for instance, contained very little shell, and it is likely that the relatively non-calcareous nature of these horizons has prevented the survival of bone, except where burnt or charred. The rest of the lower contexts was dominated by abundant shells, reflect-



Illus 20 Detail of the west end of section B–C showing contexts C35 and C36 (photo: Roger Miket)



Illus 21 Approximate context C17 horizon viewed from the south. The copper-alloy pin was found to the right of the end of the scale (photo: Roger Miket)



Illus 22 Stone setting in context C30, viewed from the south (photo: Roger Miket)

ing the subsequent importance of shellfish processing activities on or near the ledge. The shells provided the micro-environment which was conducive to the

preservation of bone and antler remains, which were extremely common in contexts C31 and C36.

At present, it is impossible to determine with any precision the chronological relationships between many of these layers. C41 and C40 were lower and earlier than the other deposits and preceded midden formation. They extended along most of the trench, and they were not cut by any of the later deposits. The two basal layers of C36, the black silt layer and the layer of crushed shells, were probably also unrelated to the remainder of the deposits.

The significance and configuration of contexts C31 and C35, which appear intrusive, are uncertain. Perhaps the most obvious explanation for C35 would be that it was a post-hole or post-pit, but without any record of it in plan or section to the south of section B–C, it could equally well have been a trench-like feature (illus 18 & 20). Similarly, the western zone of C31 in section (illus 18) looks like the infill of a pit-like feature which has truncated the C36 deposits to the west, although the C37 deposit has a non-truncated character which might imply that in reality it is coeval with C31. These kinds of problems are impossible to resolve on the present evidence.

An important chronological pointer is provided by the copper-alloy pin of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date, found on the surface of C17 (illus 21). However, the C17 horizon of beach cobbles, recorded as likely to represent an occupation surface, is unfortunately not represented on any of the sections. From archive photographs, however, it would appear to relate stratigraphically to the C10 horizon.

The unnumbered, semi- or sub-circular stone setting shown on the plan (illus 15; see also illus 22) and section (illus 18), which overlay C35, appears to predate C10, as must also be the case with C35. No further dating evidence for the contexts is available apart from the modern material (19th–20th centuries) from C2.