

CHAPTER 8: EXCAVATIONS AT NEWTONFERRY

H F James & J S Rideout

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Newtonferry is situated on the north-east coast of North Uist. The coastline in this area is rocky except for the sand filled meandering inlet, Port nan Long, which lies between two low hills, Suenish and Beinna' Chaolais (Figure 72). Beveridge (1911, 91) wrote that 'Port nan Long', meaning 'Harbour of the ships', derives from the local tradition that ships of the Spanish Armada were wrecked here and stated that these could still be seen at very low tides in the shallow water between Port nan Long and Berneray.

The road divides just south of the inlet, continuing on to the settlement of Newtonferry and curving round the coast to the pier for the Berneray ferry. Immediately to the south of the inlet is a small loch, Loch an Sticir, and on the east side of the inlet there is a smaller loch called Loch a'Chaolais. To the south the land is low lying for *circa* 1 km until it rises gently to the hills of Beinn Mhor and Beinn Bhreac. To the south-west of Newtonferry a wide machair plain runs along the coast for 4.5 km to Vallaquie strand.

To the east of Port nan Long lies a sandy bay between the rocky outcrop, Cnoc Raineach, and the rocky shore of Rubha na Traghead. At the back of this bay the undulating grassy surface has been broken through by wind and sea erosion to form vertical sand faces up to 1.2 m high and an isolated tallard or island of sand. Cnoc Raineach and the area of stable sand at the back of the bay are grass covered, while some marram grass has become established on the hummocky sand at the base of the beach to the north of the site. Around the edges of the loch and in the depression to the south of Cnoc Raineach there are clumps of yellow flag. The higher ground to the east and south is covered with only a very thin layer of sand and as a result the grass cover is intermittent.

8.1.1 Archaeological features

Concentrations of pottery, bones and shells, created by the deflation of overlying sand deposits, have been noted at the back of the sandy bay. Dark stained deposits containing these materials were exposed in some parts of the vertical faces. On the west side of the tallard midden deposits and possible stone foundations could be seen. Further stone alignments lay 10 m to the south, lying on the surface and forming a right angle. Some 15 m to the north-east of the tallard were further amorphous stone settings.

8.1.2 Site history

In his description of the antiquities of North Uist, Beveridge (1911, 227) mentions that from the north-east anti-clockwise, the 'first noticeable sand hill is at Rudha na Traghead, a shelving slope which faces southwards on the east side of Port nan Long.' Here he discovered several cists, deposits of slag and ashes and a large amount of pottery as well as bone pins, bronze/brass brooches and rivets of Viking type (*ibid.*, 227–8). He also found a cist with an inverted urn (*ibid.*, 268).

In 1965, the OS Field Inspector noted an extensive spread of midden material and fragmentary building remains in the area of open dune centred at NF 9882 7820. The OS 2.5 inch maps mark this site as a finds spot for 'cists, pottery, bronze brooches'. The MacKenzie Collection, donated to the National Museum in 1972, contained a large collection of antiquities collected between 1880 and 1935 by H H MacKenzie, factor of the North Uist Estates, and by Mrs McNeil of Newton House, Lochmaddy. In the catalogue Caolais Newton is mentioned as a find spot for a silver ring and bone artefacts (Close-Brooks & Maxwell 1974, 287).

In 1983, members of the CEU had visited the site and collected a few sherds of Beaker pottery from the deflated areas.

8.1.3 Local sites

Several cist burials have been discovered in this area. These include one found on the west side of the road leading to Port Nan Long in 1848 (ONB 1878, 78). To the west of Newton House three short cists formed of flat slabs and holding human remains were apparently found in 1845 (ONB 1878, 72). In 1955 a further cist was uncovered by the plough at this site and excavated by personnel from Edinburgh University. It contained a crouched female skeleton and two small sherds of pottery, one of which Professor Atkinson thought to be of 'wheelhouse' type (Megaw & Simpson 1961).

The Iron Age remains include a probable earthhouse at Screvan which was partially excavated in 1887. It apparently lay on the east side of Port Nan Long, in a sandy hillock and included a possible souterrain (Beveridge 1911, 114). This site, however, was not found by the Field Inspector in 1965. The massive remains of Dun an Sticir, a galleried dun or broch, lie to the south of Cnoc Raineach, at NF 8972 7768 (RCAHMS, 1928, 51–2, no. 171). A rectangular structure built within the ruined dun walls is traditionally associated with Hugh MacDonald, who fled from Skye and lived here temporarily in 1601–2 (Beveridge 1911, 138–144).

The north-west shore of the rocky promontory to the north-west of Cnoc Raineach, Rubh' a' Charnain Mhoir, has produced evidence of Viking burials. A cairn, partially excavated by Beveridge, contained a skeleton accompanied by iron rivets, suggesting the presence of an unburnt burial of a 'Norseman' with his boat (*ibid.*, 267). This lay 50 yards to the north of a smaller cairn which the OS 6 inch map of 1904 marked as 'Human Remains found AD 1840' and which Beveridge also believed was Viking from the presence of a similar iron rivet.

Two standing stones, Crois Mhic Jamain, each on the summit of low mounds, are situated on the west of the road to Port Nan Long. In 1862, it is said that a very large skull was discovered here (*ibid.*, 277).

A local tradition that there was a pre-clearance settlement lying beneath the road at the back of the sandy bay, is supported by Beveridge who states that the settlement of 'Balliviconen' was one of three townships – the others being Baile Mhic Phail and Caolas (or Kyles Berneray) – which were cleared in order to make the single large farm of Newton, whence the very modern name of the latter' (*ibid.*, 47). Beveridge considered that Kyles Bernera, meaning 'the sound of Berneray' seemed to have been identical in position with

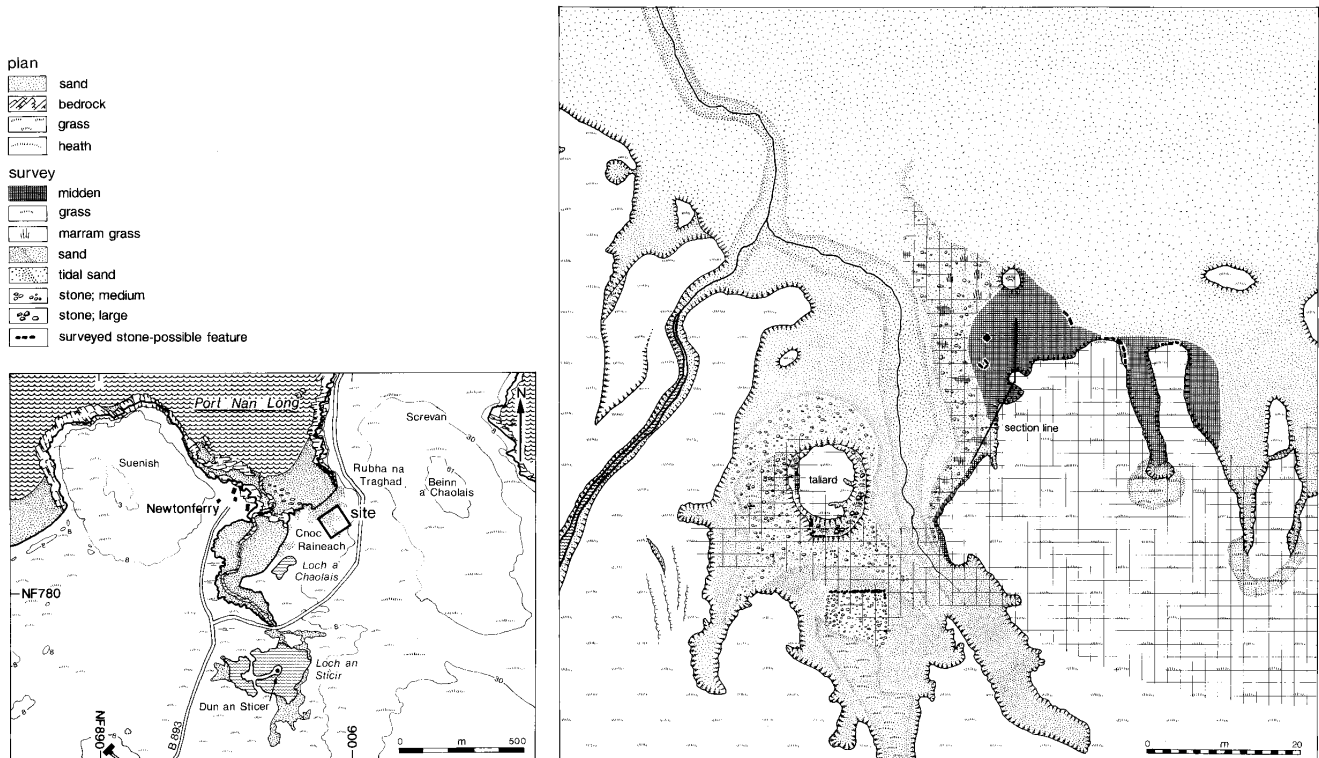


Figure 72. Newtonferry: site location and survey

Port nan Long, a little north of Newton (*ibid*, 83). This township seems to have been also known as Baile Mhic Cumhais (Crawford 1983). Bleau's map of 1654, while depicting 'Dunamich' (presumably Dun an Sticir) and two sites along the machair coast, does not refer to a site on the east side of the inlet. The first known reference to this placename is in the Judicial Rental of 1718 (MacDonald 1904, vol 3, 662), which includes the entry, 'Kyles, etc. Wm McLeod of Bernera. 200m'. About 50 years later, the Balranald Rental mentions that Donald Roy MacDonald became tacksman of Kyles-Bernera, at the north end of North Uist, shortly before 1764 (MacDonald 1904, vol 3, 537).

The Reid Survey of 1799 is unfortunately damaged in its north-east corner, but locates a group of 'house steads' at the back of the bay on the east side of the inlet. The name survives only as 'Kyli' (Reid Survey 1799). This is enough, however, to confirm the existence of a pre-clearance township which is first recorded in the eighteenth century but may well have its foundations well back in the medieval period.

8.1.4 Method of excavation

Two areas were examined in 1984 (Figure 72), one at the base of the tallard where the stonework and midden material was seen (Plate 28), and the other in the shaded area of exposed midden.

The midden deposits on the west side of the tallard were shallow and contained burnt peat and little else. These layers tapered away immediately to the west of a line of walling that protruded from the tallard. Sufficient walling was exposed to show that it formed a straight line and that it sur-

vived within the tallard immediately beneath the grass cover. The stability of the tallard, the proximity of the stonework to its surface and the paucity of the midden remains discouraged further examination.

Attention was then concentrated on the area to the east where midden deposits and stone settings were seen on the surface. Loose sand, containing bones, shells and pottery, was cleared from the surface of the exposed midden and from around the extruding stonework. The vertical sand cliff, which also contained midden deposits, was straightened and a trench dug at its base to reveal the depth of the deposits. The section line was in two parts, the first, aligned north/south, measured *circa* 13 m along the edge of the sand cliff and the second, aligned north-west/south-east, measured *circa* 7 m from the sand face across the surface of the exposed midden. Towards the south end the trench was deepened to *circa* 1 m below the lowest stained sand deposit.

As with the other sites of Baleshare and Hornish Point the deposits were grouped into Blocks of contexts (Figure 73). Block 1 was situated to the west of the section line. The main section has been divided into four Blocks, the clean sand that lies beneath the midden (Block 2), the main midden deposit (Block 3), a small midden to the south (Block 4), and the wind blown sand that covers the site (Block 5).



Plate 28. The tallard at Newtonferry after deflation material has been removed from the surrounding surface. Masonry of Block 1 is visible at the base of the tallard

8.2 BLOCK 1 – MEDIEVAL OR POST-MEDIEVAL STONE SETTING

See table p.324

The features within Block 1 do not appear on the section drawing. They lay to the west of the section line at the edge of the eroding midden (Plate 28). Set within a 0.10 m deep layer of stained sand, [1], were upright slabs, [2], and flat settings of stones and two cetacean vertebrae, [3]. Beneath [1] lay clean sand [4] which was probably the same layer as [50] (Block 2).

Field and archaeological interpretation and conclusion

This Block was interpreted as a stone setting probably of post-medieval date.

8.3 BLOCK 2 – WINDBLOWN SAND

See table p.324

Block 2 lay beneath the midden deposits and stone settings of Blocks 1, 3 and 4 (Figure 73). It consisted of a layer of pale brown sand, [4] and [50], which contained within it lenses of slightly darker sand. These became more definite towards the southern end. The trench dug towards the south end of the section revealed this deposit to be of at least 1 m in depth.

Field and archaeological interpretation and conclusion

This Block was interpreted as wind blown sand because of its light colour and sandy texture. The increase in organic input towards the south end may be the remains of stable soil horizons within the windblown sand.

8.4 BLOCK 3 – MIDDEN DEPOSIT

See table p.324

* ¹⁴C date 700 ± 50 bp (GU-2163) from layer [19] (Periwinkle).

* ¹⁴C date 710 ± 50 bp (GU-2164) from layer [33] (Periwinkle).

* ¹⁴C date 1150 ± 70 bp (GU-2162) from layer [8] (Periwinkle, limpet & razor).

Block 3 extended for 14 m in the section. It had a maximum depth of 1.5 m and consisted of numerous, generally thin layers which ranged in colour from light to very dark brown and in texture from sand to sandy loam (Figure 73 & Plate 29).

There were four shallow features with round or flat bottoms, unevenly spaced along the section, [14], [25], [34] and [36]. The fill of [34] was a bright orange burnt peat, while the other sand fills were of brown sand and some burnt peat.

At the north end of the section there was a small irregularly shaped stone setting, [9]. Two of these stones, [10], were set on edge and delimited the layer of peat, [11].

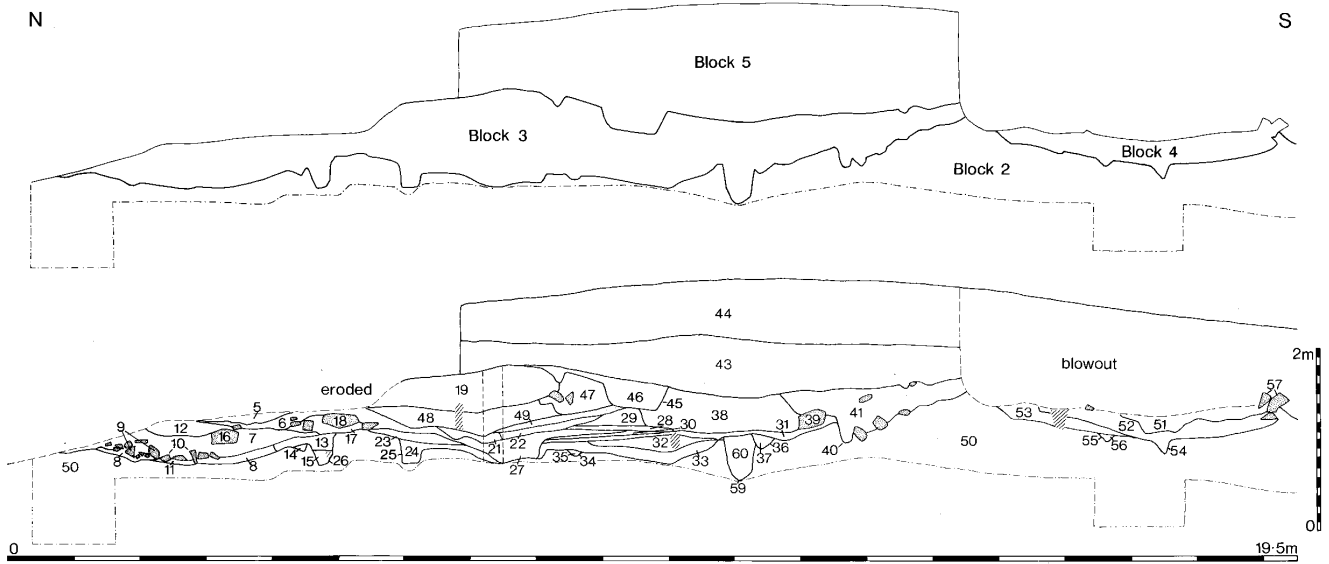


Figure 73. Newtonferry: main section



Plate 29. Newtonferry. The midden deposits of Block 3

Post dating [34] was a large round-bottomed pit, [59]. This measured 0.45 m deep by 0.45 m wide. Its fill consisted mainly of white sand though there were thin layers of dark sand, [60], in the centre and around its base. Cut into the south edge of this feature was a small, shallow, round-bottomed feature, [36]. Both [59] and [36] were sealed by a thin, very dark brown, silty sandy loam, [31].

At the south end of the site, there was a round-bottomed feature, [40]. A large stone, [39], lay just to the north of this feature and two smaller stones were set into its base.

Field and archaeological interpretation and conclusion

This Block was interpreted as midden-site deposit because of the variable colours and textures of the layers. Within this deposit were several features interpreted as probable post-holes, and there was evidence for a stone-built hearth. This Block was largely of Medieval date but a Dark Age date was returned from context [8].

8.5 BLOCK 4 – MIDDEN

See table p.325

Block 4 lay at the south end of the section above Block 2 (Figure 73). The deposits above Block 4 had been removed and so separated it stratigraphically from Block 3. It extended for a distance of 4.4 m and had a maximum depth of 0.25 m. Two small V-shaped features, [54] and [55], were cut from within this Block. Above these lay a dark brown loamy

sand, [53], and a lighter brown loamy sand, [52]. At the extreme south end were three irregularly shaped stones, [57], that appeared to be retaining the midden to its north.

Field and archaeological interpretation

This Block was interpreted as a midden-site deposit, probably of medieval to post-medieval date. It was probably in part contemporaneous with the midden of Block 3.

8.6 BLOCK 5 – WINDBLOWN SAND

See table p.325

All the layers and features above the midden of Block 3 were included in this Block. It survived in section for a distance of 7.7 m (Figure 73). Its maximum depth was 1.2 m. A flat bottomed feature, [45], filled with light brown grey sand and numerous shells, [46], had been cut from within this Block into the surface of Block 3. Above this were two light coloured sand layers with lenses of humic material, [43] and [44].

Field and archaeological interpretation and conclusion

This Block was interpreted as wind blown sand with humic lenses marking periods of stability and vegetation growth. These deposits represent the reversion of the area to abandoned landscape after the Medieval period.