
2 Introduction

The excavation of the prehistoric house at Catpund and an adjacent steatite quarry was undertaken in 1988, as part of a landscape project devised and co-ordinated by Val Turner, for Shetland Amenity Trust. The threat to the Catpund area came from a mining concern, wishing to establish a quarry for the extraction of steatite (talc). Although steatite is common in Shetland, it is rare elsewhere in the British Isles. The threat affected both the prehistoric house and the early steatite quarry, part of which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Through comparison with other Shetland monuments, the house site was considered to be Bronze Age or early Iron Age in date, and the quarry at least 1000 years old.

The prehistoric house and its surrounding enclosure were located on a gentle slope at the north edge of the quarry (Calder 1956, 377, no 47). The relationship between the quarry and the house was unclear, although the presence of the latter indicated the possibility of prehistoric exploitation of the steatite. Not only was the physical presence of the two monuments threatened by the modern development, but also their relationship to each other and the surrounding landscape.

Post-medieval crofts and *planticrubs* (cultivation plots for cabbage and kale) occur along the Catpund Burn to the south of the prehistoric house, indicating that settlement in the area was varied and of long duration. This unique landscape, presently managed by crofters, was thought to be of high research value.

In view of the threat to it, the then Scottish Development Department (Historic Buildings and Monuments) funded an archaeological project managed by the Shetland Amenity Trust.

2.1 Aims and rationale of the archaeological investigation

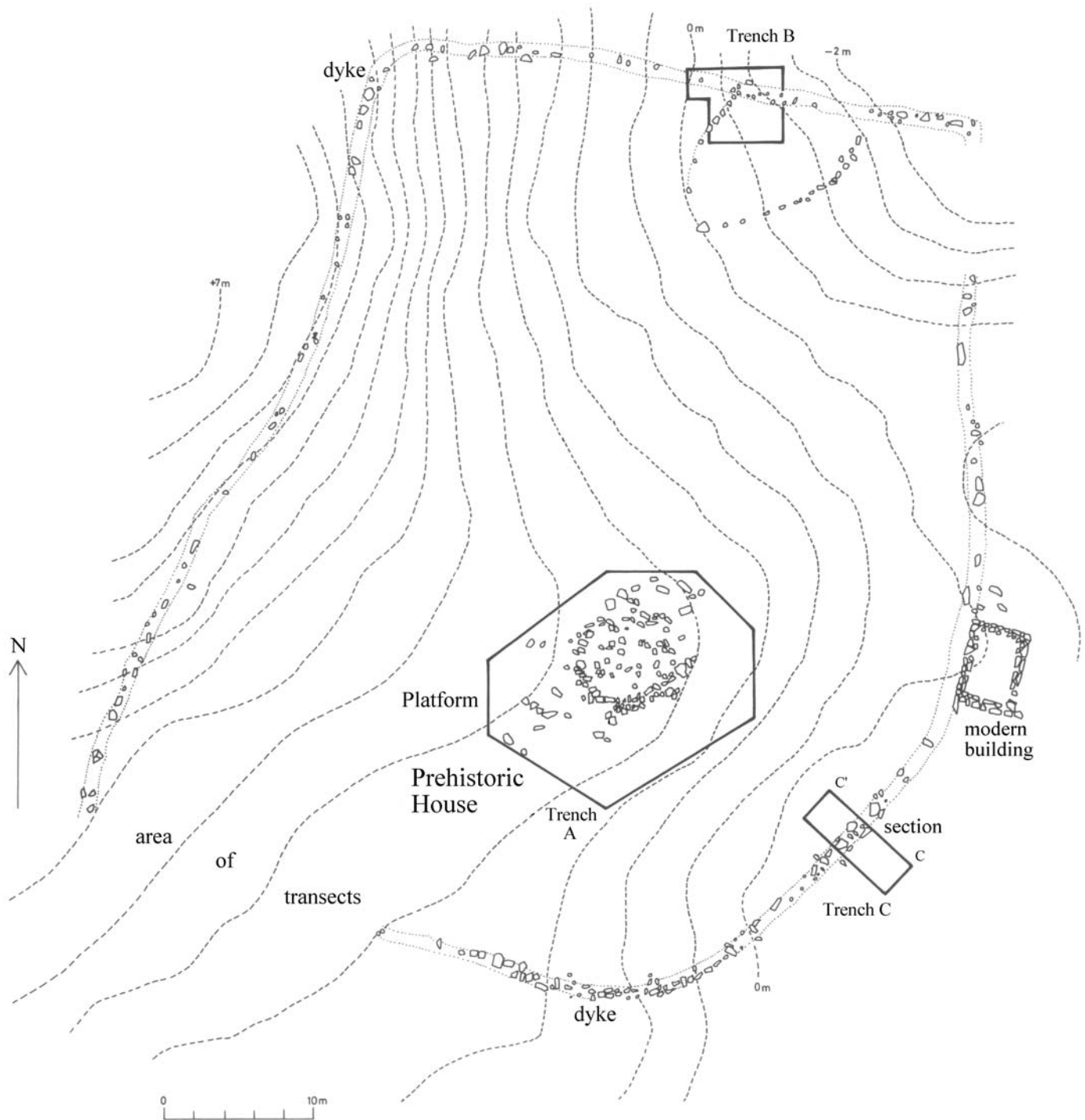
The aims of archeologically examining the prehistoric house were threefold:

- to identify its type;
- to establish its age; and
- to understand its chronology by exploring its phases of occupation.

It was also proposed to examine the enclosure surrounding the house and any other structures or features contained within it. These included the *planticrub*, which was located within the footprint of the house, and a D-shaped structure at the north end of the enclosure. The form and function of these ancillary structures were also to be investigated, as were any other areas outside the house enclosure threatened by the proposed quarry. Other implicit aims of the project were to explore the relationship of the house with the quarry, and to place it in the chronological sequence of Shetland's other prehistoric houses.



Illus 2 The house in its setting, viewed from the south-east. Scale 1m



Illus 3 Location plan of the principal features of the site and the excavation trenches

Prehistoric houses in Shetland are difficult to date with any certainty (see [Cracknell & Smith 1983](#); [Turner 1998a](#); [Downes & Lamb 2000](#), 119–23). Their various forms of construction, their longevity of use, the lack of dating evidence and the range of largely non-diagnostic artefacts associated with them make it difficult to define the chronological period to which they belong. Some, such as the Catpund house, are found in isolation, which prevents a detailed under-

standing of the exploitation of the landscape and the role of agriculture in the immediate area. This isolation is in direct contrast to other areas within Shetland, where there are vestiges of prehistoric communities with field systems, such as the Scord of Brouster ([Whittle *et al* 1986](#)). Prehistoric houses on Shetland generally span the Neolithic and Bronze Ages (Scord of Brouster) or the Bronze and Iron Ages (Mavis Grind) although conventional radiocarbon

dates for their establishment and use are often lacking. In investigating the Catpund house with its enclosure wall and ancillary structure, it was hoped to explore these issues through excavation and modern scientific techniques. Pollen, soil and botanical analyses were also undertaken at the house site, with a view to examining landscape and land use changes in the area.

2.2 Geology, landscape and location

The Catpund house was located on a roughly level natural platform 80m above sea level, at NGR: HU 4242 2725 (Illus 2). The geology of the Cunningsburgh area, which includes Catpund, is complex, as it lies within the Dunrossness Spilitic Group of the south mainland of Shetland. This group forms part of the metamorphosed basic igneous rocks of the East Mainland Succession that outcrops at Cunningsburgh. The outcrops form 'a considerable mass of serpentine extensively altered to talc-magnesite-schist and intimately associated with the lavas and pyroclastics' (Mykura 1976, 27–8). The talc-magnesite rocks of the Catpund Burn area cover an area of about 550,000m² and are of good quality and very homogeneous (Mykura 1976, 120).

From the platform on which the house is constructed the land rises steeply towards the west to over 240m at the summit of Hoo Field (Illus 2). To the east, the hillside falls away to the sea, to form a cliff edge with rocky outcrops. The platform was restricted to the north by a small eastward-flowing stream and to the south by another small stream, which divided the site from the existing steatite quarry. Sitting in isolation on its platform, except for a chambered tomb 150–200m to its north-east, the house commanded an exceptional

view to the east and north-east. At the time of excavation the land was used for rough grazing.

The site consisted of an irregular-shaped enclosure, measuring 64m north/south by 58m east/west. A hill or enclosure dyke constructed of tall boulders, which formed the western limit of the site, followed roughly the 100m contour, before curving southwards to join an abandoned farmstead at Catpund Burn. To the east of the site, on the lower slopes of the hill, were the remains of another hill dyke, and the fragmentary remains of a third. These walls effectively enclosed the platform on which the house stood, and separated cultivable infield land from hill pasture. Although the dyke is no longer continuous, because of the build up of soil and turf, there seemed to have been an entrance through a 20m-wide gap in the south-west corner of the enclosure.

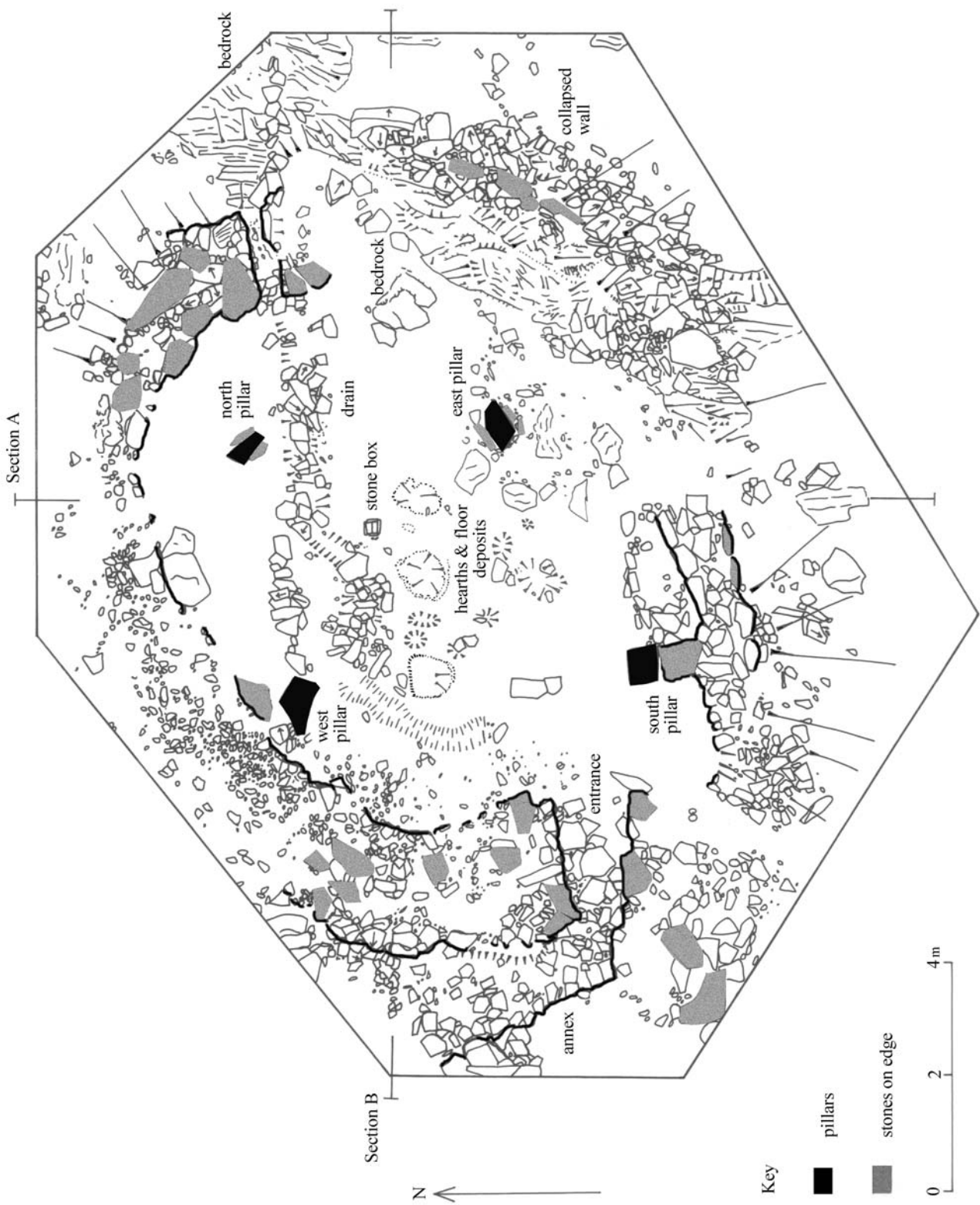
Lying immediately east of the enclosure were the rectangular stone foundations of a building. This structure, which measured approximately 6m by 4m, had an entrance close to its south-east corner. Its foundations comprised a double row of close-set boulders, probably for a turf wall.

2.3 Recording and excavation techniques

Prior to the removal of turf and topsoil, topographic and contour surveys were undertaken on the site. The resulting drawing shows the relationship between the house and enclosure dyke, and the location of the three excavation trenches (Illus 3). Trench A contained the remains of the house. Trench B was placed over the junction of the D-shaped structure with the enclosure dyke to test their relationship. A test pit was dug through the peat in the south-east corner of this trench.



Illus 4 The house prior to excavation, viewed from the north. Scale 2m



Illus 5 Plan of the prehistoric house, including locations of sections

Trench C was placed over one of the best-preserved stretches of the enclosure dyke, to the south-east of the house, in order to investigate its construction and date. Apart from planning and photographing the foundations of a possible rectangular shieling abutting the dyke on the east side of the platform, no further work was undertaken on this structure.

All finds were recorded three-dimensionally, and samples taken of the floor and other features. The full archive of the site, whose code is CP 88, is deposited with the National Monuments Record for Scotland. A copy of the archive has accompanied the artefacts to the Shetland Museum in Lerwick.