

MS/6143/7/2

Historic Scotland's  
Properties in Care -  
Minor Archaeological Works  
1998

Hilton of Cadboll Chapel

3<sup>rd</sup> August 1998



ARCHAEOLOGY

Site Hilton of Cadboll Chapel

N.G.R NH 873 768

Project Description Excavation

Report

Attached

*EXCAVATIONS AT HILTON OF CADBOLL CHAPEL, ROSS AND CROMARTY,  
JULY 1998*

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The work was carried out as part of the Historic Scotland Properties in Care Minor Archaeological Works, and the archaeologists were Jon Triscott and Paul Sharman. The hachured location plan (Fig. 1) was based on that in the Carver assessment, itself based on a Crown Copyright measured survey by the RCAHMS in 1997. Kirkdale Archaeology does not have the full reference for the Carver work, nor for the Bates and Durham survey included within it, but the use of this information in this report is freely acknowledged. The excerpt was supplied by Nick Bridgland, Inspector of Ancient Monuments, Historic Scotland.

**SUMMARY**

*An area of 6 square metres was excavated for Historic Scotland outside the west gable of the chapel at Hilton of Cadboll, Ross and Cromarty (NGR NH 873 768, Fig. 1). The purpose was to locate the base of the Pictish cross slab, now in the NMS, prior to the erection of a reproduction on the site. The base was not located, but the excavations revealed that the D-shaped 'annexe' against the W gable was probably the result of 19th-century disturbance. Some of the sculpted debitage from the re-dressing of one face of the cross slab in the late 17th century was retrieved.*

**1.0**

**INTRODUCTION**

The grassed-over chapel site at Hilton of Cadboll, Ross and Cromarty (NGR NH 873 768), consists of a subrectangular building 12 m E-W x 6.5 m N-S within a sub-rectangular enclosure along with other earthworks. A semicircular feature at the W end of the building was interpreted by RCAHMS as an annexe and the probable original site of the Pictish cross slab now in the NMS (RCAHMS 1979, 26). The origin of the cross slab is by no means certain, it having been moved at least twice in its history, the evidence for which is summarised in M O H Carver's assessment (including a dowsing survey by D L Bates and J Durham) of the Hilton area, an excerpt of which was provided by Nick Bridgland of HS Inspectorate. The 1st edition O S places the cross at the W end of the chapel, but its last position before being sent south was actually on a modern base in the grounds of Invergordon Castle, to

where it was moved in the second half of the 19th century. Only one side of the Hilton of Cadboill cross slab survives, the other having been reworked as an inscribed tombstone in the late 17th century. Stylistically, the surviving face with its panels of interlace, a hunting scene, double disc, crescent and V-rod and inhabited vine scroll (fully described in Allen & Anderson 1903, 61-3), has been assigned to the Class II group of Pictish sculpture and dated to the late 8th or early 9th century AD (Close-Brooks 1995, 122-3).

## 2.0 THE EXCAVATION

The brief, under Kirkdale Archaeology's call-off contract with Historic Scotland, was to locate the last position of the cross (before its removal to Invergordon Castle) by investigating with a 4 square metre trench the hypotheses that the cross was erected at the W gable of the chapel, and that the base was still in place with the bottom of the stone still left in the socket. These hypotheses appear to be based on the 1st edition O S, the RCAHMS interpretation of the semi-circular feature at the W end of the chapel as the site of the stone, local tradition and a dowsing and shallow probing survey.

Initially, an area of 2 x 2 m was opened immediately outside the W gable of the chapel and central to its E-W axis. This was subsequently expanded with a 2 x 1 m extension to the S. Care was taken to minimise damage to the archaeology because of the sensitive nature of the site. Therefore it was decided that only the levels above the surface on which the tumble from the W gable rested should be excavated, because this seemed to be the most likely level at which to find the cross base if the hypotheses on its position were correct. This would avoid intrusion into Pictish or medieval stratigraphy.

The trench, which was backfilled and re-turfed, was excavated by trowel and recorded using notes, *pro forma* context sheets, photography and scale drawings. All finds were retained, with the exception of lumps of mortar, samples of which were retained. The OS benchmark on the brow of the hill above the site was not visible, so a temporary bench mark (TBM) with a notional value of 100 m was used, positioned on top of the NW corner fence post of the fencing surrounding the site. The work was executed between the 8th and 10th July, 1998.

001, the 0.05-0.15 m thick mole-disturbed turf and grey sandy topsoil was removed, revealing 002, a layer of loose rubble with a matrix of grey, slightly silty sand. The rubble itself comprised mostly angular flaggy schistose stone with occasional sandstone and beach cobbles, 0.05 x 0.05 x 0.02 - 0.35 x 0.20 x 0.10 m in size. 002 also contained occasional small lumps of shelly lime mortar, fragments of 19th-century pottery and a fragment of a sandstone vaulting rib. Below 002 and at the base of the steep slope down from the gable was 003, a deposit of loose angular stone, 0.05 - 0.15 m in size and similar in types to 002, with a matrix of mid brown silty sand. 003 appeared to fill a slight depression and some of the smaller stones were on edge around the margins of the deposit. E of 003 and over the base of 004 was a 0.10 m thick, 0.30 - 0.60 m wide deposit of soft, mid brown-grey slightly silty sand with moderate stone and occasional mortar fragments - 005. 003 lay on top of and 005 overlapped the side of a linear feature running N-S across the trench. The feature consisted of a 0.20 m deep, 0.60 m wide cut with shallow sides and a flat base - 008 - filled with 006, a deposit of stone, similar to 002 in the mixture of type, shape and size, but with a compact matrix of orange-brown sandy clay.

To the E, forming the upper part of the slope down from the W gable of the chapel, was 004, a 0.10-0.50 m thick heap of rubble with a matrix of firm orange-brown sandy clay. The stone, like 002, comprised mostly angular flaggy schistose stone with occasional sandstone and beach cobbles, 0.01 x 0.05 x 0.08 - 0.40 x 0.35 x 0.120 m in size. Finds from 004 included fragments of shelly lime mortar, 19th-century ceramics and a fragment of a schistose roof slate. 010 lay on and 008 cut through an even surface of mid grey-brown sand (010) which sloped slightly down to the W. An animal bone and occasional fragments of flaggy schistose stone were visible on the surface, which was left unexcavated.

To the W in the extension below 002 lay 009, a 0.20 m thick deposit of comparatively large stone and soft, mid grey rooty sand which tipped down to the W. The stone was mostly angular, flaggy schistose material, sometimes pockmarked, with rare beach cobbles, 0.02 x 0.07 x 0.08 - 0.15 x 0.35 x 0.37 m in size. 009 overlay and 008 cut through 007, a N-S linear heap 0.15 m thick and 0.30-0.70 m wide, consisting of compact, angular, mainly schistose stone with occasional sandstone, 0.02 x 0.05 x 0.05 - 0.15 x 0.25 m in size, in a matrix of firm orange-brown sandy clay. 007 formed the ridge of the semi-circular annexe visible on the ground surface; it was left unexcavated. 007 lay over 011, a 0.15 m thick deposit of soft, mid grey sand containing moderate small stone. The deposit dipped down to the W. 012,

below 011, was a 0.05 m thick layer of sandstone chips roughly 0.05 x 0.10 m in size, in a slight matrix of soft grey sand. The chips were mostly fragments of Pictish carving. It was initially thought that 012 lay at the base of 009, but partial excavation showed that it lay under 011 as well as running outwith the confines of the trench, so the rest of both 011 and 012 were left *in situ*. The spoil from 012 was kept (4 large bags in total) for dry sieving in order to recover any fragments of sculpture missed during excavation. 012 lay on an even surface of mid brown-grey sand (013) which sloped slightly down to the W. Occasional fragments of flaggy schistose stone were visible on the moderately compact surface, which was left unexcavated. At the very W of the trench in the section, 013 appeared to lay against, or include, a large pockmarked stone over 0.60 x 0.30 m in size.

### 3.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although a cross base was not found, a large amount of information has been uncovered concerning the missing face of the cross slab, the likely construction of the medieval chapel and the misleading nature of the ground surface. Obviously the most important discovery of the excavation was the layer of fragments of Pictish carving (012). The chips were of micaceous sandstone with a red oxidised surface, similar in type to the Hilton of Cadboll cross slab (Dr Theo Skinner, NMS, *pers comm*). The deposit must be linked to the redressing of one face of the stone to form the grave slab of Alexander Duff and his 3 wives in 1676 (Allen & Anderson 1903, 61-2) and therefore 013 (and possibly 010) must be the late 17th-century ground surface on which this activity occurred. The cross base was not found within the area as excavated, in the location 'indicated repeatedly and unequivocally' by D L Bates' dowsing investigation, but it seems likely that if it is in the general area it will be at the same stratigraphic level as 013, or perhaps below. There is of course no direct evidence that the cross slab was erected here, only that it was redressed here, but again it is probable that it was in its original position (erect or collapsed) until moved in the late 17th century. The designs on the flakes were not studied, but certain patterns were noticed as they were excavated, especially diagonal and square key patterns and small bosses. Visits to the Pictish crosses at Shandwick, Nigg and the Groam House Museum in Rosemarkie and a subsequent cursory inspection of books containing illustrations of Pictish sculpture, especially Allen and Anderson's work (1903), indicate a close similarity of designs to those used on the Nigg stone, some of those from Rosemarkie and (not surprisingly) the key pattern infilling the crescent on the other face of the cross slab from Hilton of Cadboll itself.

The designs on other stones in the area, such as those from Tarbat, Edderton and the Shandwick cross slab were not particularly similar.

The sandy deposit, 011, may be the result of natural accumulation after the late 17th century, whilst the contexts later than this appear to be the result of the decay of the W end of the building (part of which was used as a shed in the mid 19th century) and various intrusive activities. Despite the presence of moles, worms and grassroots, the ceramics and bottle glass appeared to be fairly secure in their stratification, especially those from contexts with compact clayey matrices such as 004 and 006. Therefore at least 001 - 005 must be dated to the 19th century or later, whilst 006 and 009 contained bottle glass and a clay pipe stem, indicating that they are post-medieval in date. No dateable material was retrieved from 007, but the fact that it was later than 012 and similar to other 19th-century deposits indicates that the 'annexe' visible on the ground is certainly a post-mediaeval dump of material, quite possibly upcast from 19th-century activity. The vaulting rib recovered from 002, and possibly the schistose roof slate from 004, the shelly lime mortar fragments from most deposits and the stone types present on the site give some indication of the construction of the mediaeval chapel. The rib fragment must be mediaeval in date, whilst the other structural elements may only reflect the shed, although it is likely that the shed would have utilised the materials available on the site.

#### 4.0 REFERENCES

Allen, J Romilly & Anderson, J 1903 *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, vol 3, Edinburgh.

Close-Brooks, J 1995 *Exploring Scotland's Heritage: the Highlands*, HMSO, Edinburgh.

RCAHMS 1979 *The Archaeological Sites and Monuments of Easter Ross, Ross and Cromarty District, Highland Region*, Edinburgh.

#### 5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The rest of the debitage should be retrieved so that the missing face of the Hilton of Cadboll cross slab can be reconstructed. The retrieval would be a comparatively straightforward process and would allow the search for the base to be continued at the same time, without any need to disturb medieval or Pictish archaeology. The area to be excavated could be kept to a minimum by re-opening the W part of the

area excavated and extending the 1 metre wide trench to the E and W. The 19th-century deposits could be removed in a relatively brisk manner, thus revealing the E-W extent of 012. The area could then be opened to the N and S by 2 metres in either direction, extendable if 012 still lies outwith the area. It is estimated that an area some 7 metres square might need to be opened. Once the debitage is fully revealed, all surface fragments could be turned face up (if not already so) and recorded and tagged in position. It may be that the mason who removed the face in the late 17th century chiselled systematically from one end of the slab to the other, thus the position in which the flakes were discarded may indicate the rough position of the various designs on the face of the cross slab. The disposition of the debitage may also indicate the position of the cross base.

Points to consider if this work is undertaken should include

- Size of team and duration of works
- reinstatement by archaeologists or Historic Scotland staff?
- on-site dry sieving requirement
- on-site conservation and specialist input
- if no cross base is found, a reproduction base could be set in the 19th century levels so more sensitive archaeology is not disturbed
- how the topography is to be reinstated - with or without the 19th-century features, especially the semi-circular 'annexe'
- an element of PR will be necessary because of intense local interest.

## 6.0

### CONTEXT LIST

Context No.	Description
001	turf & sandy topsoil
002	loose rubble with sandy matrix
003	patch of loose stone filling depression
004	rubble heap with sandy clay matrix, against gable
005	linear deposit of sand and moderate stone



Context No.	Description
006	compact fill of stone with sandy clay matrix in cut 008
007	compact deposit of stone with sandy clay matrix (forms 'D' shape of 'annexe')
008	shallow linear cut
009	loose large stone and sand sloping down W edge of trench
010	even sandy surface with occasional stone
011	deposit of soft grey sand with small stone
012	dense spread of stone chips from redressing Pictish cross slab
013	even sandy surface on which 012 deposited

## 7.0

### FINDS LIST

Find No.	Description
002	1 sample frag of shelly lime mortar
002	1 sandstone vaulting rib frag
002	2 frags mussel shells
002	4 winkles
002	3 bone frags
002	1 clay pipe bowl frag
002	2 green glass bottle frags
002	2 iron nails, square section
002	9 pottery sherds - 2 blue transfer print, 2 blue sponge & 3 white glaze body frags; 2 blue sponge & 1 feathered edge blue tinted rim
003	1 sample frag of shelly lime mortar
003	5 winkles

Find No.	Description
003	1 bone frag
003	1 iron nail, square section
004	1 sample frag of shelly lime mortar
004	1 micaceous schistose roof slate frag with hole
004	8 winkles
004	3 iron nails, square section
004	7 pottery sherds - 1 blue transfer print, 2 blue sponge & 3 white glaze body frags; 1 rim white glaze with blue line int & ext
005	1 sample frag of shelly lime mortar
005	1 limpet
005	8 winkles
005	1 iron nail, square section
005	2 degraded body frags of green bottle glass
005	3 pottery sherds - 1 white/cream & 1 blue & white body frags; 1 moulded rim white glaze with hand painting
006	1 sample frag of shelly lime mortar
006	1 winkle
006	1 bone frag
006	1 degraded body frag of bottle glass, possibly green
009	2 bone frags
009	1 clay pipe stem frag
012	at least 40 flakes of Pictish sculpture, to be counted and catalogued in conservation

## 8.0

## DRAWING LIST

No.	Description
1	1:20 plan of 2 x 2 m area after removal of 002. JT. 9/7/98.
2	1:20 plan of full area, showing 004, 006, 007, 009. JT & PS. 9/7/98.
3	1:20 plan of full area, as left prior to backfilling. PS. 10/7/98.
4	1:20 section and profile E-W across trench and over W gable. JT. 10/7/98.

## 9.0

## PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORDING

11 shots of monochrome print and 11 of colour slide film were taken.

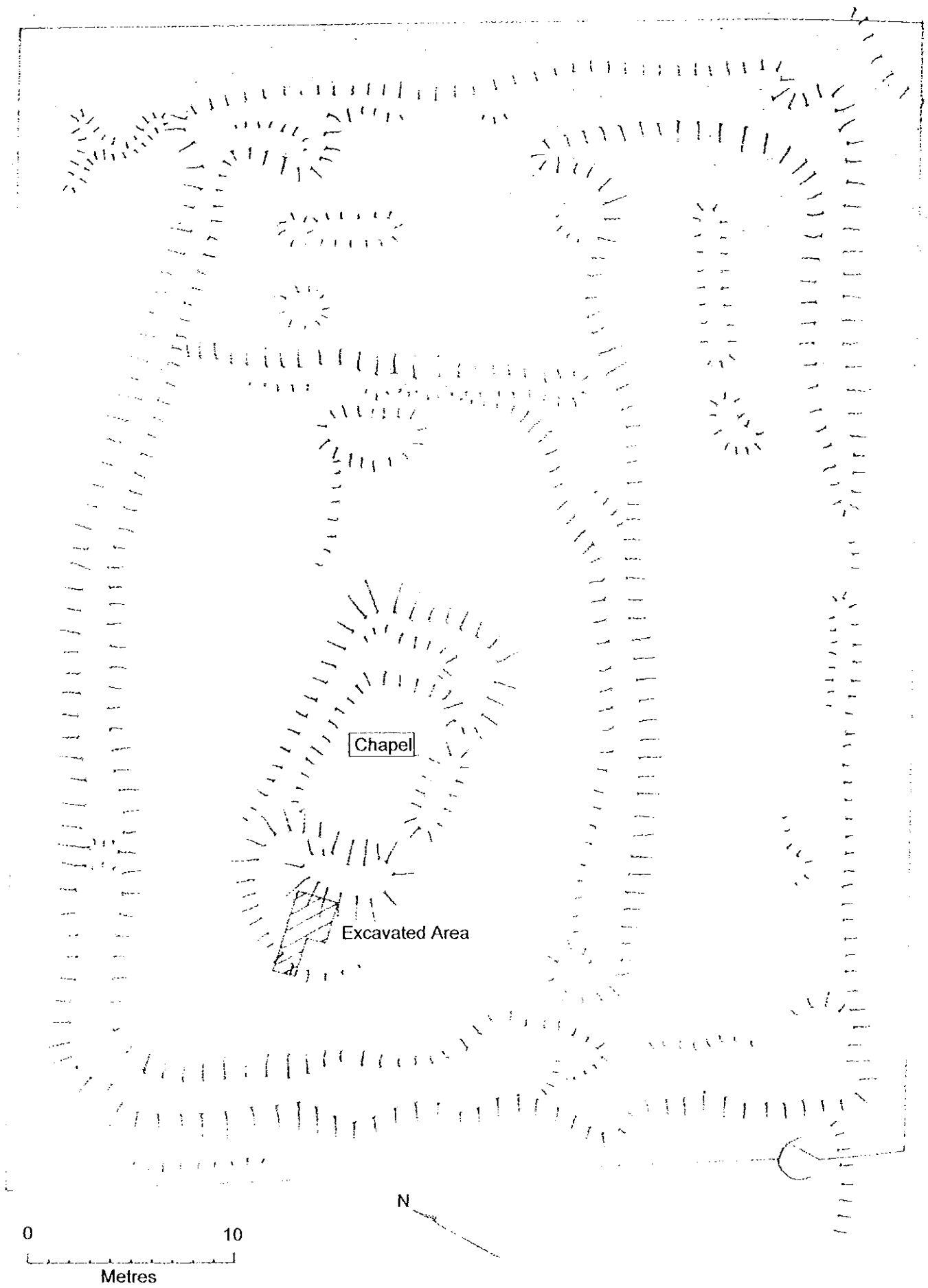


Fig. 1 : Location of Excavated Areas

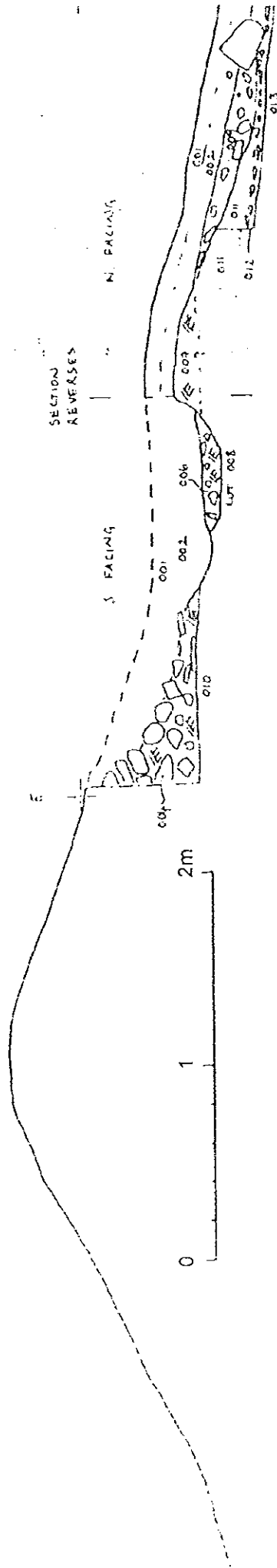


Fig. 2 : Section & Profile

W. GABLE

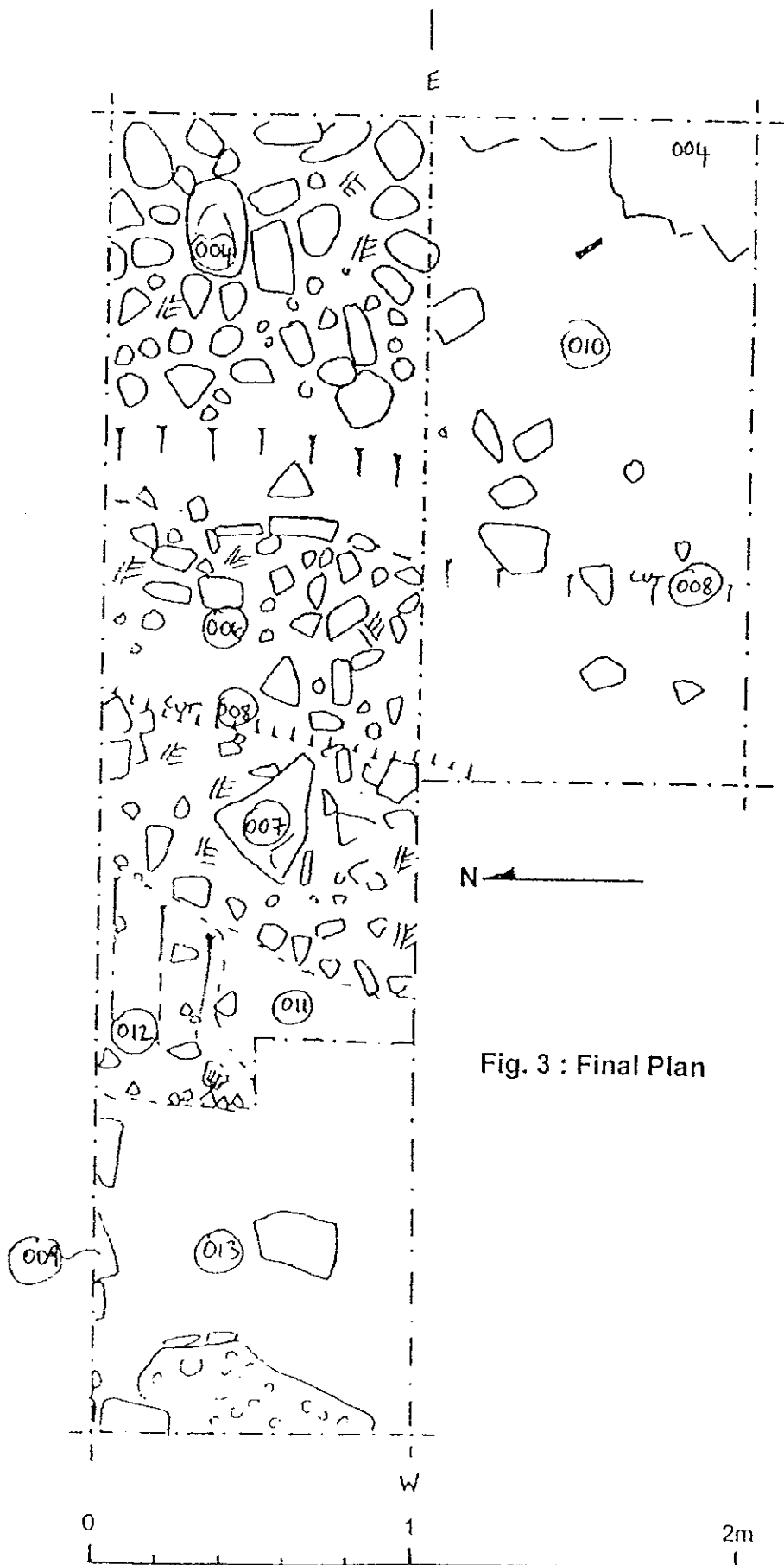


Fig. 3 : Final Plan