

A second earth-house at Grainbank, St Ola, Orkney

D Haigh*

with a contribution by B Smith

SUMMARY

A second earth-house and parts of several adjacent buildings were partly revealed during construction work at the Hatston Industrial Estate in Kirkwall during March 1982. A brief exploratory excavation revealed the importance of the finds and the area was grassed over to prevent further disturbance. Although the site was not fully excavated a wide range of finds was discovered, and some of the sequence of building on the site could be explained. The report concludes with a brief discussion of the site in the context of other similar sites on Orkney and elsewhere.

During the construction of a car park on the Hatston Industrial Estate in March 1982, archaeological deposits were uncovered immediately adjacent to the guardianship earth-house (NGR HY 4418 1159). Although the Orkney Islands Council had been advised that no significant archaeological remains were expected, they willingly rearranged their works' programme to enable a brief exploratory excavation to be carried out. This was directed by D Haigh, assisted by B Smith and N Fojut, for the SDD(AM) and revealed a second earth-house of at least two phases lying 6 m W of the existing monument (fig 1). The fragmentary remains of several Iron Age buildings overlay this earth-house and formed part of a larger settlement that almost certainly included the guardianship earth-house as well.

The Council had already stripped topsoil from an area of 5 by 15 m immediately to the W of the fence round the existing monument. This caused little further damage to the archaeological deposits as most of this material had already been severely disturbed during the last war. Round the entrance to the guardianship earth-house, extensive damage had been caused by excavations during the 19th century. Notes made by Petrie record that in 1857 Farrer had found:

... remains of walls running in various directions ... also a large pit, full of ashes containing great quantities of fragments of charred wood, and bones of several of the domestic animals and shells of the limpet, whelk, and other of the edible mollusca. Beneath this debris a wall was found and broken through, and an opening obtained thereby into a long curved passage about 26 feet long, 2 feet 6 inches wide, and about 3 feet high. This passage led by a gentle descent to a chamber 13 feet long, about 6 feet wide and 6 feet 6 inches in greatest height. (RCAMS 1946, 155).

The exploratory excavation was undertaken to determine the nature and extent of the surviving deposits. The earliest structure proved to be an earth-house almost identical in size and construction to the guardianship one (fig 2). The chamber was c 2 m wide and almost 5 m long and curved gently at right-angles to the guardianship earth-house that lay directly to the E.

*28 Roman Hill, Barton, Cambridge

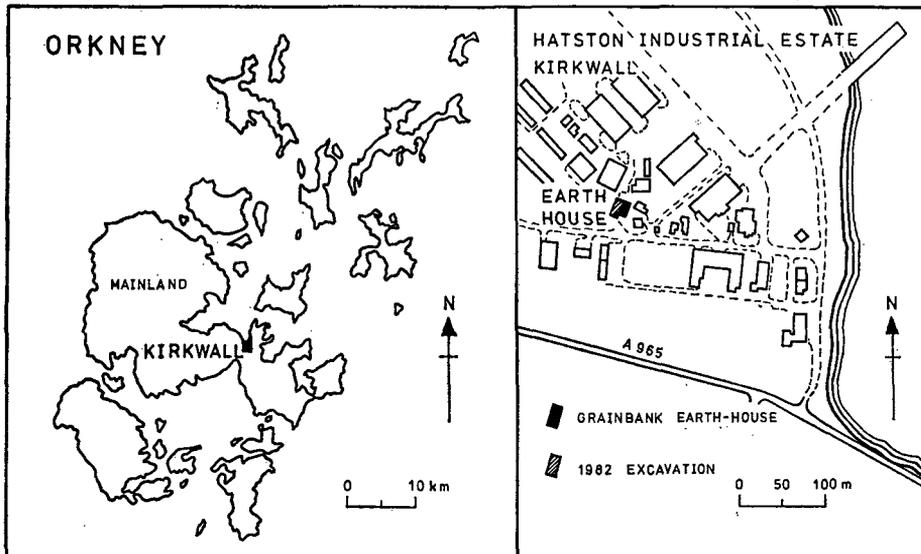


FIG 1 Location of Grainbank earth-house

This chamber was at least 0.6 m deep and had walls composed of small horizontally laid masonry. The tops of several orthostats that appeared to be *in situ* roof supports showed through the mass of peat ash and domestic rubbish that almost filled the chamber. Shattered stones from the collapsed flagstone roof lay where they had fallen on the debris, and a further shallow midden deposit covered the remains. A short length of wall running northwards from the E end of this chamber appeared to be contemporary with it and was all that remained of what had either been an additional side chamber, or more likely, was the entrance passage.

After the chamber was abandoned, it was filled with rubbish before being blocked-off by a row of upright flagstones. The passage to the N was also filled with rubble and clay and a new chamber was built where the old passage and chamber joined. Later this new chamber was extended northwards destroying much of the old blocked passages in the process. It is possible that this new chamber was entered from the guardianship earth-house to the E, and that the connecting passage was later blocked up. If however this was the case, the blocked passage was not recognized during the consolidation of the guardianship earth-house when it was totally rebuilt. At the same time a trench was dug round the entire monument which destroyed any stratigraphic links with the rest of the site.

A layer of silty clay loam and rubble covered the collapsed earth-house and a rather poor paved surface was laid on top. This paving extended southwards to a free-standing wall of which little more than the foundations remained. A large, possibly double hearth was set into this paving adjacent to this wall and was surrounded by ash presumably cleared from it. Beyond this wall was a layer of fine sandy clay loam streaked with ash. Although this area was heavily disturbed, the remains of a partition survived running from the wall southwards to form the E wall of a small building. The partition seemed to consist of a single row of orthostats packed around with smaller stones. The building had been partially destroyed but enough survived to show that it had been fairly well-built with both orthostats and horizontally laid masonry and that it had a well-paved stone floor.

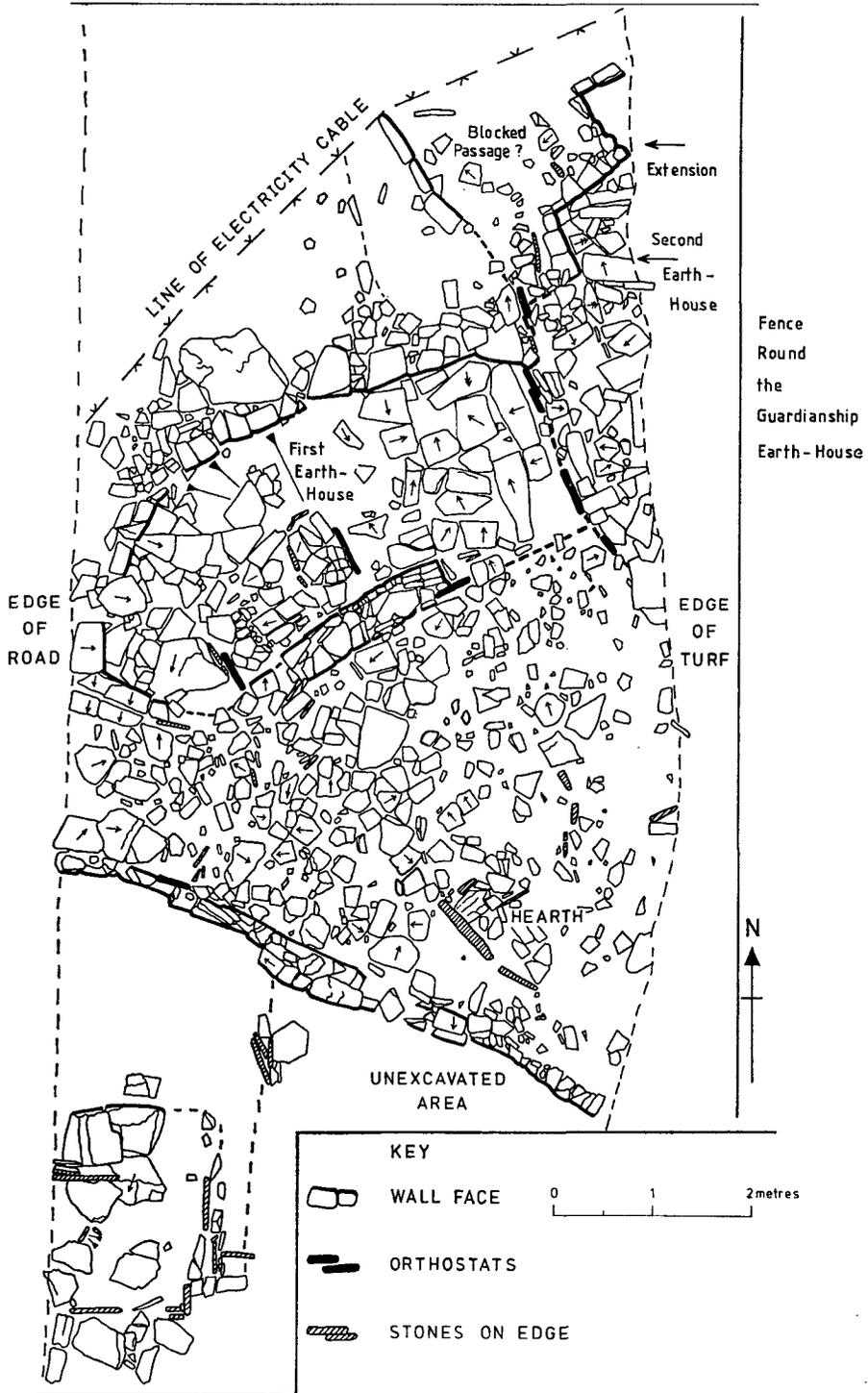


FIG 2 Grainbank earth-house: site plan

As the guardianship earth-house was largely intact when it was first exposed it seems probable that this was the latest of the sequence of earth-houses at this site. The dumping of rubbish as the earlier phases were abandoned implies that the settlement continued to be at least partly occupied until the entrance to the final phase of the earth-house collapsed.

Although a number of earth-houses of similar size and construction have been excavated on Orkney, little is known about their immediate surroundings. Only at Howe, Stromness, has an adjacent settlement been excavated. Here the earth-house lay directly below the principal building on the site and was entered by a shaft in its floor. At both sites considerable trouble had been taken to construct the earth-house, suggesting that it was regarded as an important part of the settlement. At Grainbank it was rebuilt on three occasions, and as each phase was partly rock-cut, this was no light undertaking. In view of the recent evidence for associated buildings, perhaps the idyllic picture drawn by Burl (1981, 217) should be viewed differently. At Rennibister he noted:

the passage was blocked with earth, whelks, cockles and cowrie shells suggesting that people had lived in the gloomy cell much as the animal bones on top of the Grain earth-house nearby intimated that a family squatted on the roof of their house in warm summer days.

A careful examination of the evidence from similar earth-houses further south has led Barclay (1980), amongst others, to conclude that they were probably used either as foodstores or had a religious function. There is no conclusive evidence for either use from the Orkney examples. However, the earth-houses at the Knowe of Rowiegar, Rousay, (RCAMS 1946, 219) and at Howe, Stromness (Haigh & Smith 1982), were both cut into the centre of chambered-tomb mounds. At Rowiegar part of the roof over the stalled cairn was removed and an earth-house inserted which was partly cut into the floor of the tomb and was entered via the tomb entrance passage. At Howe, a Maes Howe-type tomb was almost completely destroyed when an earth-house was built into the clay below the floor of the main chamber. The destruction caused to both these sites would seem to imply that the tombs themselves were no longer revered and hallowed monuments. As at Newmill (Watkins 1980, 196), the roundhouse associated with the earth-house at Howe appeared to be the most substantial contemporary building on the site. There was, however, nothing from it that could be associated with any religious activity. The skulls at Rennibister (RCAMS 1946, 93) could indicate judicious reuse of an already abandoned earth-house rather than imply that its normal function was as a shrine or burial place; whilst the anthropomorphic stone from the earth-house at Dale, Harray (Kirkness 1928, 159), that was held to have some religious significance, seems remarkably unconvincing.

It is noticeable that both the earth-house at Howe and the admittedly consolidated ones at Grainbank and Rennibister remain dry during the winter months; and although the air within them seems damp, it stays cool all the year round. It would seem to be perfectly possible to store dairy products in these earth-houses provided that they were adequately ventilated, but it would not be possible to store grain under these conditions unless it was parched first. If, however, the earth-houses were completely filled with grain and then sealed to render them airtight, they could have functioned like the contemporary underground storage pits found further south (Reynolds 1974, 126). Reynolds also points out that pits dug into clay tended to flood, and this may explain the situation of the earth-houses at Howe and Rowiegar, rather than any religious significance of the two sites. The reuse of these chambered tombs enabled the earth-houses to be built underground, whilst still remaining above the level of the surrounding watertable. Perhaps a practical experiment in one of the surviving earth-houses may give a clue to the range of items that could be successfully stored underground.

THE FINDS (fig 3)

B Smith

1. A long-handled weaving comb of antler. The shaft was shaped and supported six teeth. Maximum length 134 mm. Length of teeth c 20 cm.
2. Heavily eroded everted rimsherd. Originally slipped.
3. Everted rimsherd as no 2, but fabric extremely coarse.
4. Base sherd from flat-bottomed vessel. Maximum thickness of base 13 mm.
5. Body sherd with basal angle.

The four pottery sherds are all heavily gritted, no 2 being of a slightly finer fabric. The fabric varies in colour from a dark grey to orange and buff, and is coarse. All the pottery is sandy in texture and was grass-tempered.

6. Hammerstone, utilized at both ends.
7. Stone scraper. Chipped neatly along three edges. The butt has been shaped by chipping. This tool was found on the ashy surface S of the earth-house.
8. Boulder pivot-stone. With slightly worn central hollow. Depth of hollow 14 mm, diameter of hollow 98-110 mm.

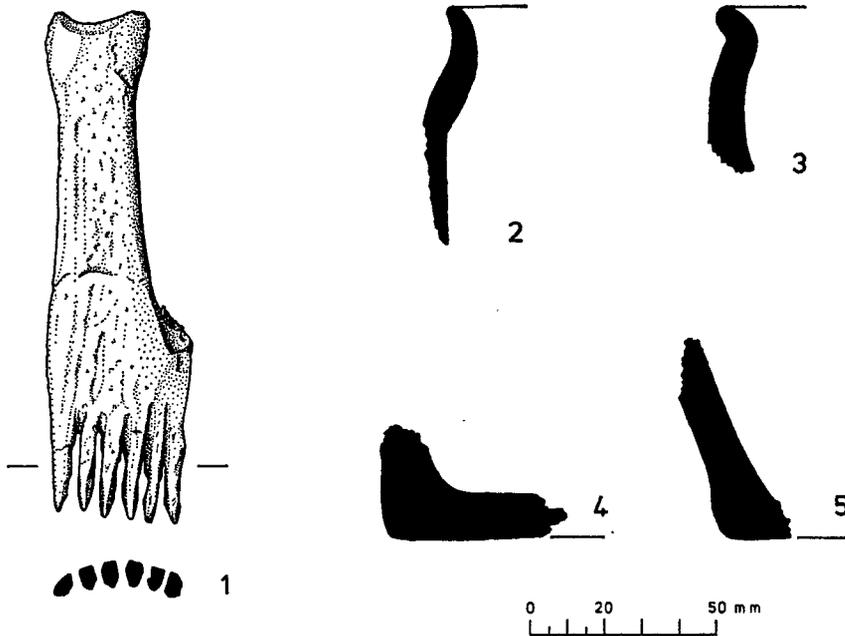


FIG 3 Grainbank earth-house: antler weaving-comb and pottery

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Miss B Smith for her note on the finds and for her helpful advice throughout. I am most grateful to the Orkney Islands Council, particularly Messrs R Wood and T Egging, and also to the site contractor A Sinclair and his colleagues who rendered every assistance during our investigation. Dr N Fojut of the SDD(AM) gave valuable help throughout and Mr F W Moran drew the finds and plans. Volunteers included I Laughton, A Leith, P Morrison and T Muir amongst others. The excavation was funded by the SDD(AM) and the finds have been deposited in Tankerness House Museum by the Orkney Islands Council.

REFERENCES

- Barclay, G 1980 'Newmill and the "souterrains of southern Pictland"', in Watkins 1980, 200-7.
- Burl, A 1981 *Rites of the Gods*. London.
- Haigh, D & Smith, B 1982 *Excavations at Howe, an interim report*. Stromness.
- Kirkness, W 1928 'An underground building at Dale, Harray, Orkney', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 62 (1928), 155-61.
- Reynolds, P J 1974 'Experimental Iron Age storage pits: an interim report', *Proc Prehist Soc*, 40 (1974), 118-31.
- RCAMS 1946 *Twelfth Report and Inventory of the Monuments of Orkney and Shetland*, Vol II. Edinburgh.
- Watkins, T 1980 'Excavation of a settlement and souterrain at Newmill, near Bankfoot, Perthshire' *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 110 (1978-80), 165-208.

*This paper is published with the aid of a grant from the Scottish Development Department
(Ancient Monuments)*