

A Norse Homestead near Doarlish Cashen, Kirk Patrick, Isle of Man

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IN THE COURSE of a systematic search for shieling-sites in the Isle of Man in 1961, faint traces of a group of buildings, with associated banks, were noted on the edge of the moorland just outside the top fields of Doarlish Cashen farm (FIG. 28). They lie about 150 yd. south of the 'mound' which is marked on the 1-in. Ordnance Survey map at SC 235783. Some of the walls of the buildings

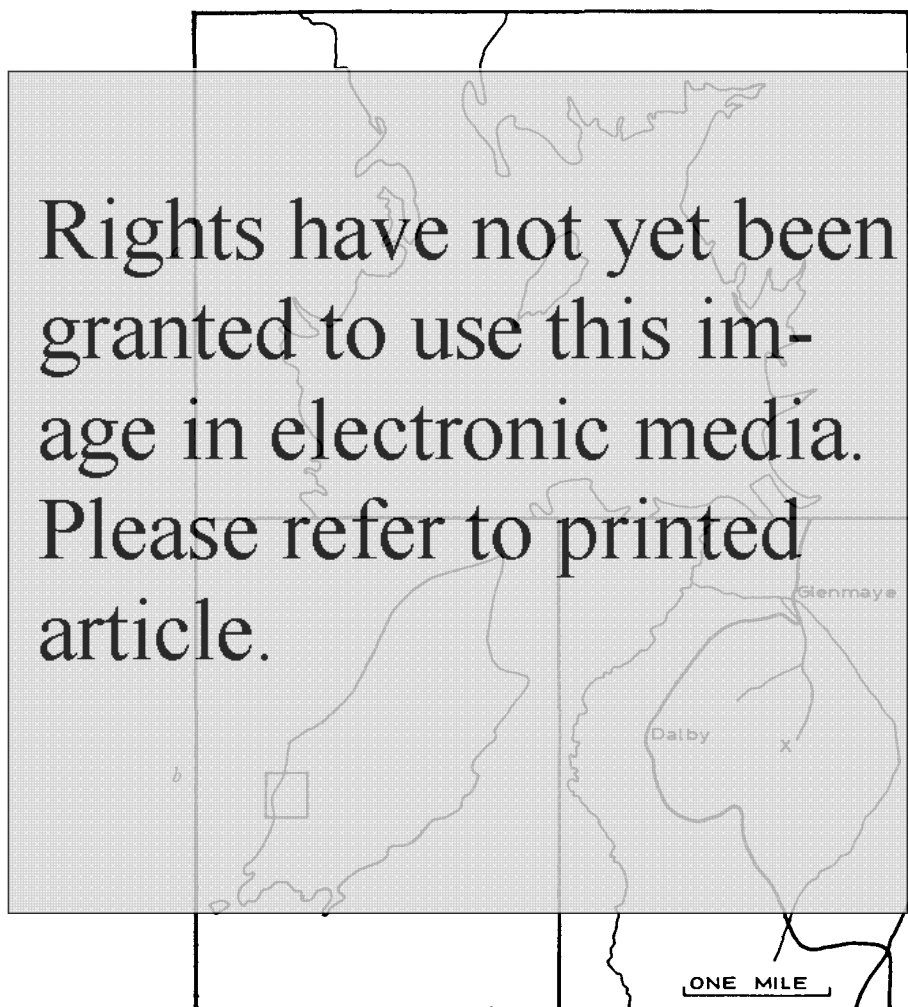


FIG. 28
DOARLISH
CASHEN,

ISLE OF MAN (p. 74)
a, sketch-map showing position of Isle of Man; *b*, sketch-map showing position of *c*; *c*, sketch-map with position of site marked by cross (*c*, based on O.S. map with sanction of Controller of H.M.S.O. Crown copyright reserved)

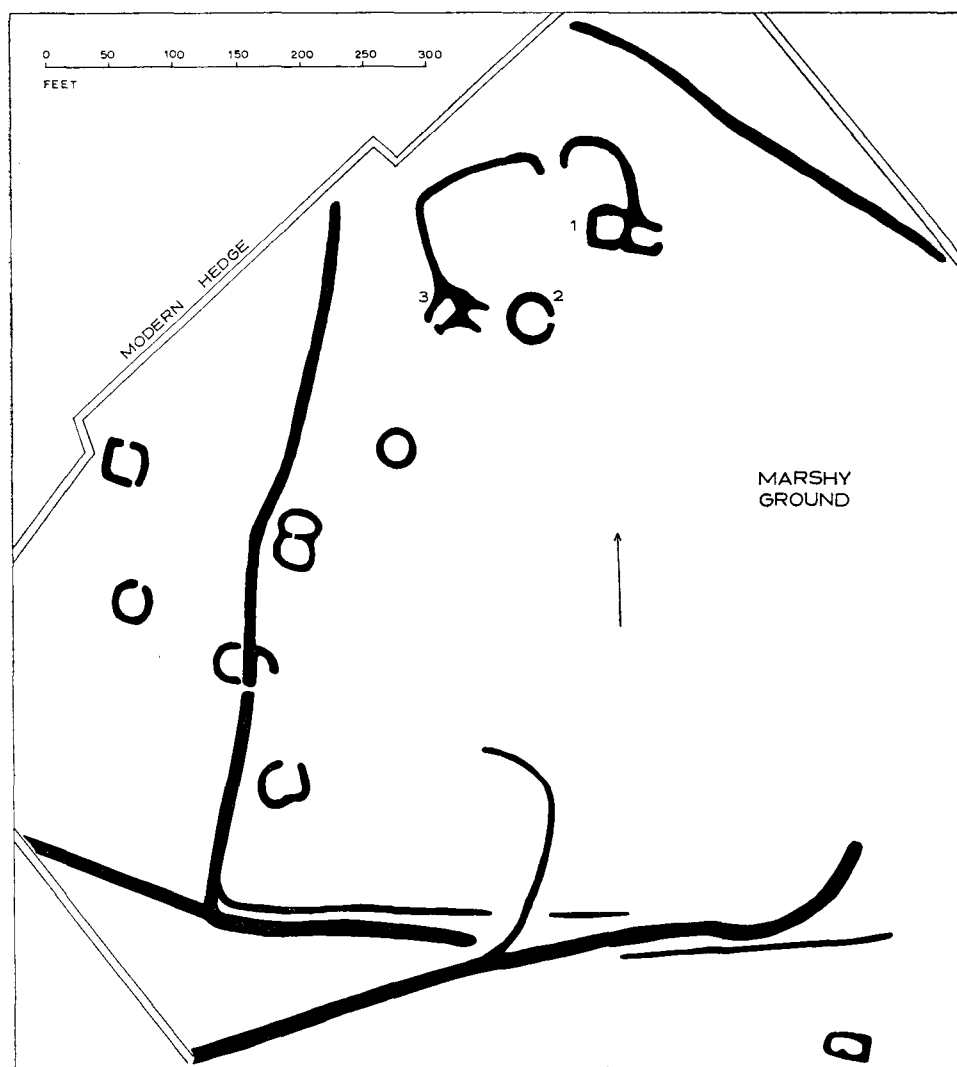


FIG. 29
DOARLISH CASHEN, ISLE OF MAN
General plan of site (pp. 75 f., 78, 81)

were very faint indeed, and some details of the plan (FIG. 29), which was made in early September, depended on the fact that bell heather was growing where walls had apparently been, and stood out against the surrounding ling. At that time buildings 1-3 were fairly clearly defined, and they were noted as the most likely to repay excavation. This did not appear to be urgent, as the site was then grazed only by sheep, and seemed to be in no danger. A visit at Easter 1969 showed that the position had changed. This part of the moorland had been fenced

off, and the treading of cattle and the tracks of vehicles were causing serious damage. Nothing could be done until Easter 1970, and by then the site had been ploughed and rotavated, and most of the features marked on FIG. 29 completely obliterated. In spite of this it proved possible to locate and excavate substantial parts of buildings 1 and 3, and to do a little work on building 2.¹

The site is situated about 700 ft. above sea-level, and lies immediately west of a marshy depression from which a stream flows in a rapidly deepening valley towards Glen Maye. To the north-west the land is fairly level for about 100 yd., and then falls away steeply past Doarlish Cashen farm towards the coast. The immediate vicinity is, in general, level, with gentle undulations. One of the higher points is occupied by building 3, while building 1 is appreciably lower, in about as sheltered a position, consistent with dry ground, as this exposed site affords. These two buildings lie at opposite sides of a small yard which has an entrance on its N. side. In 1961 the incurved sides of the entrance were clearly visible. There was no sign of any continuous barrier on the S. side of the yard, but something of the kind must surely have existed.

EXCAVATION

Building 1 had always appeared to be the most substantial on the site, and it proved on excavation to be a small dwelling-house of recognizable type. Some details of the plan are uncertain, because cultivation had played havoc with the turf walls and dragged a number of stones out of position, but here and there the stone curb at the inner foot of the wall had survived, and in places there was even a very thin layer of undisturbed turf to indicate where the wall had been (FIG. 30). It is an oblong house, with the two principal doorways set opposite each other towards the E. end. The only floor-space appeared to be the passage between the doors, and the central portion of the W. part of the house. Most of this area was covered by a deposit of hearth-material (marked by stippling on FIG. 30) which petered out gradually in the doorways, but elsewhere stopped abruptly against settings of stones which appeared to mark the edge of turf benches. The larger edging-stones, up to 35 cm. high, were towards the west of the house; otherwise they were small, seldom exceeding 20 cm. Near the middle of the S. bench the upright edging-stones were replaced by a rough suggestion of coursed stonework, and immediately east of this there were four small stones which had acted as packing round a larger one which had disappeared. Elsewhere the small edging-stones seem to have stood on their own. They can never have provided any real support for the edge of the turf, but they would have helped to lessen the attrition from passing feet.

It is not certain whether there was a bench at the W. end of the house. There were no edging-stones at this point, but the spread of hearth-material stopped abruptly, and a bench in this position might in any case be expected. The only reason for doubting its existence was that at this end the inner edge of the turf

¹ The excavation was sponsored by the Manx Museum, and carried out by kind permission of Mr. D. Waterson of Creglea farm, Dalby.

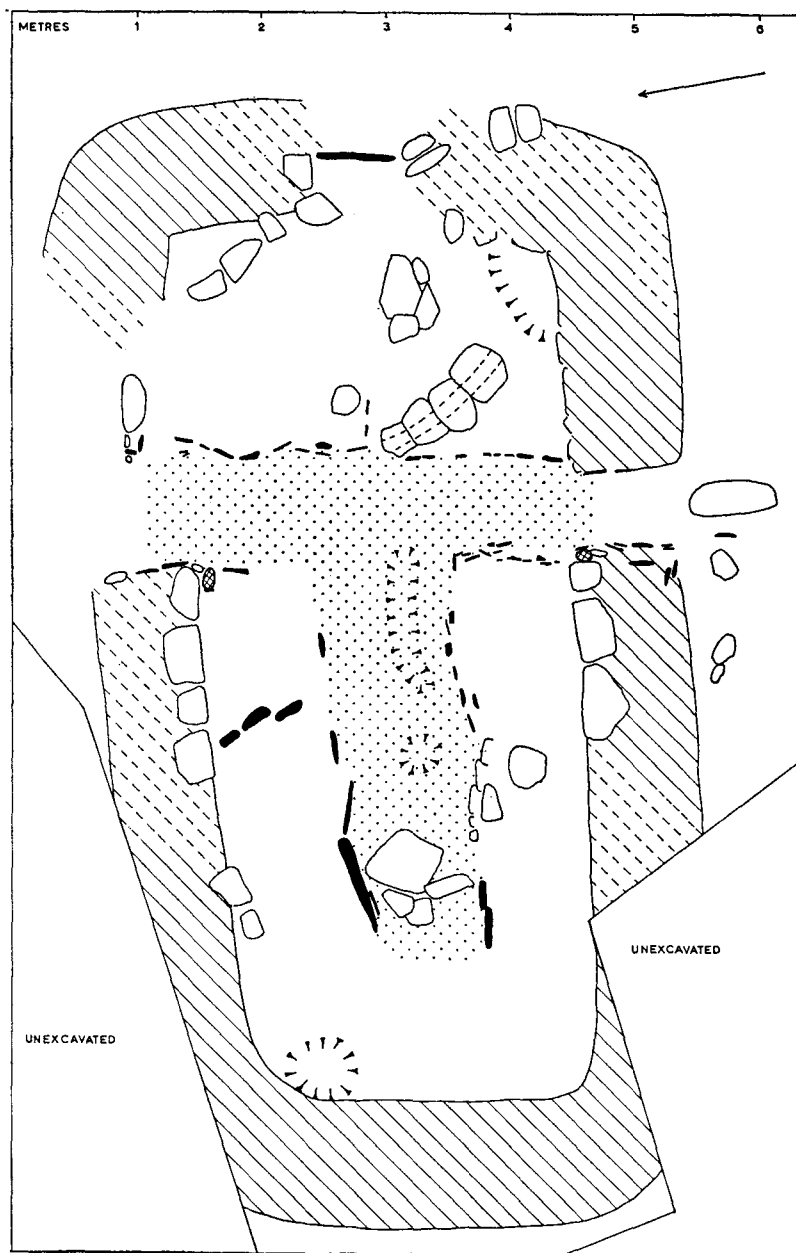


FIG. 30
DOARLISH CASHEN, ISLE OF MAN
Plan of dwelling-house (pp. 76, 78)

wall was very clearly demarcated, which is a little surprising if there had been a turf feature immediately against it. Near the NW. corner of the house a roughly circular depression had been cut 22 cm. into the subsoil; and if there was a bench at this point, its effective depth would have been approximately twice as great. It is probably a setting for a barrel. Three comparable settings were found in a room identified as a dairy at Stöng, Thjórsárdalur (Iceland).²

The E. end of the house had suffered from cultivation even more than the rest, and no trace remained of the wall east of the N. doorway. Enough was found to suggest very strongly that it was not on precisely the same alignment as the rest of the N. wall, but curved slightly outwards. The whole E. end of the house had apparently been occupied by a raised bench. The builders seem to have anticipated that water would accumulate between the two doorways, for they constructed a drain in the body of the turf of the bench which led towards a sump dug c. 10 cm. into the subsoil at the SE. corner of the house. There may even have been a small recess in the front of the bench near the mouth of the drain, to judge by two small edging-stones which are at right angles to the rest. There was no reason to think that the drain had suffered any damage, so it seems never to have quite reached the sump. The small patch of paving east of the drain lay on top of the bench, and indicated a height of c. 25 cm. A paving-stone near the middle of the S. bench indicated a marginally lesser height.

There was apparently a doorway at the E. end of the house. The wall here was badly damaged, but the distribution of stones (more or less disturbed by cultivation, admittedly) appeared to indicate a doorway, and there was a large slab set on edge in just the position where it would have been needed to protect the edge of the turf of the bench where the doorway exposed it. On this interpretation there would have been a step down to the outside.

It will be seen from FIG. 29 that the original survey indicated at least an enclosure of some kind at the E. end of the building. The whole area outside the E. wall was a mass of churned-up turf, suggesting strongly that turf walls had indeed existed there, but their precise line could not be determined. There were no signs of footing-stones, as there were within the house, and perhaps the most likely suggestion is that this was a small back yard enclosed by turf walls, but unroofed. There were extensive spreads of hearth-material outside the E. wall, and within the area of the presumed yard. It may simply have been thrown out of the house through the end door, but the spreads were not quite so diffuse as to suggest this, but rather indicated that fires had been lit in the yard, and this perhaps is where the cooking was done on suitable days. A comparable external hearth was found at a shieling-hut near Injebreck in the parish of Kirk Braddan.³ Inside the house the spread of hearth-material was more or less uniform, but there were two shallow depressions between the N. and S. benches, one elongated and the other roughly circular, which may, at least at an early stage, have been connected with hearths.

Building 3 was the only other one to be substantially excavated. Its plan is

² Stenberger (1943), p. 88.

³ Gelling (1962-3), p. 163.

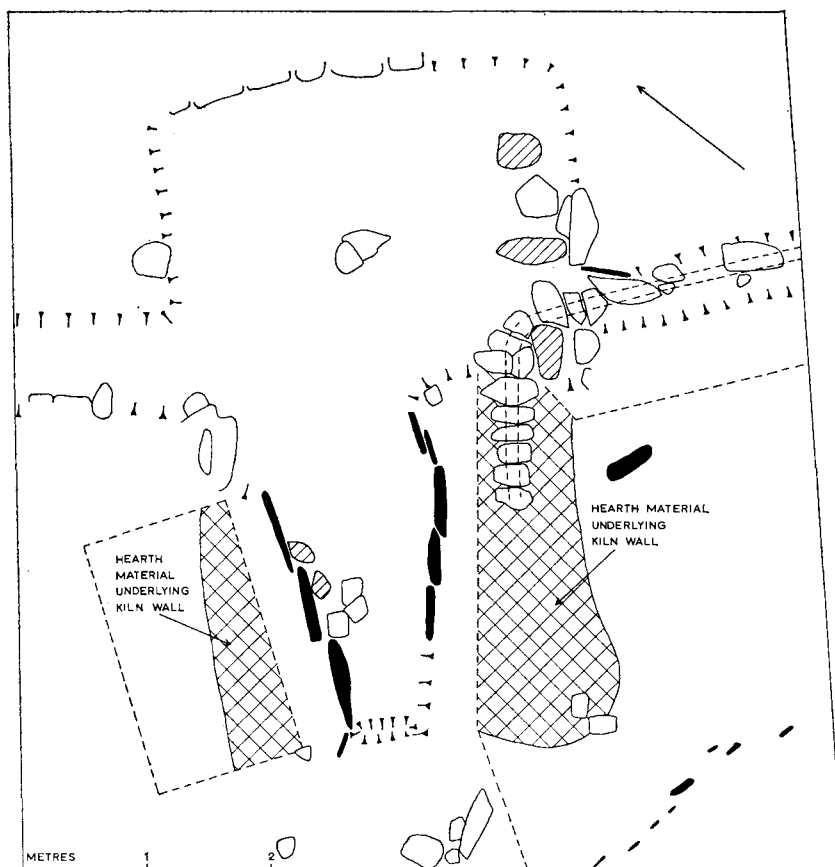


FIG. 31
DOARLISH CASHEN, ISLE OF MAN
Plan of corn-drying kiln (pp. 78 ff.)

shown on FIG. 31, and it is hard to interpret it otherwise than as a corn kiln. It stands on a slight rise, and as a result its turf walls had suffered even more severely than those of building 1. A little turf remained undisturbed on either side of the main flue, but the precise dimensions of the walls could not be ascertained, and they are not marked on the plan. The central part of the kiln was a rough oblong, *c.* 3·40 m. by 2·10 m. In places its edge was marked by a stone footing, while in others its outline was reasonably certain because it had been dug slightly into the subsoil. The main flue faced the south-west, and several of the substantial slabs which had protected its sides were still in place. Two of them, on the W. side of the flue, had supporting blocks against their inner faces (shaded on FIG. 31). Near the mouth of the flue there was a slot *c.* 13 cm. deep which may have been a socket into which a board was set for closing this flue when necessary. The unexpected feature about this kiln was that it had subsidiary flues on both the

NW. and SE. sides. The layer of ash (wood ash and peat ash in about equal quantities) which covered the bottom of the main flue and of the central part of the kiln extended out through the side flues as well, though there was less in the SE. flue than in the one opposite. There was a drain under the turf wall on the SE. side of the main flue (slightly the lower side) which ran out under the adjacent side flue. The part of it which ran roughly parallel to the main flue was not dug into the subsoil, but constructed in the lowest course of turf. On either side of the inner opening of the SE. flue there was a large block of quartzite, and a third, towards the E. corner of the kiln, seemed to be associated with them, as though all three had acted as a support for something (shaded on FIG. 31). Near the centre of the kiln there were two stones, apparently undisturbed, with a little associated turf. From their position they could be taken to be the remains of some sort of central support, but they were set in such a way that it was not clear how anything could have been built on them.

Two areas outside the kiln (marked by dotted lines on FIG. 31) were dug down to natural subsoil, and this showed that the main flue had been dug through *c.* 15 cm. of collapsed turf and hearth-material (shown by cross-hatching). A stone spindle-whorl was found in this deposit, and it is possible that it marks the site of a dwelling-house. There were also a number of stones, mainly small ones, set on edge in the natural subsoil south-east of the main flue, and as neither their position nor their alignment appears to bear any relationship to the hearth-deposit which preceded the kiln, it is possible that three phases of occupation should be envisaged on this particular spot.

Corn kilns seem to have been formerly a common feature of the Manx countryside, but in so far as their plans are known they have a single flue and a circular drying 'pot'.⁴ This also seems to have been the characteristic Hebridean type.⁵ A related Hebridean type, which is substantially like the Manx examples, has a curving flue, which so far has not been found in the Isle of Man.⁶ In Orkney the normal type is a circular structure built at the gable of a barn, with a single flue opening on to the interior of the barn. Scott illustrates an oblong example with a single flue from the Faeroe Islands, but it is not a very satisfactory parallel, as it may owe its shape simply to the fact that it is built inside one end of an oblong building. The evidence from Doarlish Cashen would suggest that the circular type is a post-Norse development in the Isle of Man, but there seems to be no evidence to indicate when the change took place. One would expect a kiln to have a roof, but both Cubbon and Whitaker quote references to *unroofed* kilns, so perhaps it should remain an open question whether the Doarlish Cashen kiln was roofed or not.

There was only time for a very cursory excavation of *building 2*. It had appeared as circular when the the original plan was made, with an internal diameter of *c.* 7.50 m. About a quarter of its interior was dug down to the natural subsoil. There was no sign of any occupation-deposit, nor were there any coherent

⁴ Cubbon and Megaw (1969).

⁵ Scott (1951).

⁶ Whitaker (1956-7).

structural remains. It is quite possible that it was unroofed, and was a pen rather than a building; and the same must be said of all the unexcavated 'buildings' on FIG. 29.

DISCUSSION

The dating of this site presents a difficult problem, as there were only two small finds securely associated with the occupation. One was a rather roughly made spindle-whorl from the hearth-material under the kiln; the other was a tiny sherd of very dark grey unglazed pottery from the floor of building 1. Neither gives much indication of date. A very corroded fragment of an iron buckle was found just south of building 1 in a furrow which the plough had cut in the subsoil, and the collapsed turf over the centre of building 1 produced a single sherd of glazed 19th-century pottery. The plan of this building, with its raised benches and opposed doorways, provides the best indication of date, but it can only be a rough guide. The type of house is Norse, and presumably began to be built in the Isle of Man on the arrival of the first Scandinavian settlers, probably in the 2nd half of the 9th century. It is difficult to say how long houses of this kind went on being built. Similar, though slightly larger, houses have been found on two promontory forts. The one at Cronk ny merriu, Kirk Santan, produced no dating evidence whatsoever.⁷ The other, at Cass ny hawin in Kirk Malew, at least remained in use long enough to produce some sherds of 13th-century pottery.⁸ This would suggest, as is in any case not unlikely, that the traditional house-plan was adhered to at least until the extinction of the Norse kingdom in 1265. If it is assumed (and it can only be an assumption) that such a house is not likely to have been built after the middle of the 13th century it can still belong to any time in a period of almost 400 years.

It is interesting to find such very marginal land being farmed by people who built in the Norse tradition. It is natural to guess that the farming was primarily concerned with livestock, and the funnel-shaped entrance at the bottom of the plan on FIG. 29, with a bank curving round on the inside to direct cattle away from the marshy ground, would appear to bear this out. Yet the size of the kiln, and the relative care with which it is constructed, show that the intention, at least, was mixed farming, and presumably less marginal land would have been chosen had any been available. This implies that the Isle of Man was fairly densely populated at the time, and that all the good, and even medium-quality, farmland was occupied. It is hard to say whether it would be occupied primarily by people of Norse or of Celtic stock, but a recent study of place-names recorded in the 13th and 14th centuries shows that at least Norse speech was very much in the ascendant in this part of the kingdom of Man and the Isles, and this is borne out by the evidence of runic inscriptions.⁹ There is no reason to doubt that the builder of the Doarlish Cashen house, who had been squeezed out to the very edge of the cultivable land, was of Norse stock.

⁷ Gelling (1952).

⁸ Gelling (1959).

⁹ Gelling (1970).

The impression which the site conveys is one of extreme poverty, not least because of the very modest dimensions of the house (*c.* 7.0 m. by 3.0 m.). It is true that the comparable Norse houses which have been found in the coastal promontory forts are not so very much larger—the one at Cass ny hawin, for instance, is *c.* 10.0 m. by 4.50 m.—but there is a striking contrast with the Norse house at the Braaid in Kirk Marown, which was the home of a prosperous land-owner.¹⁰ This was an imposing residence, 21.0 m. long and over 9.0 m. wide in the centre. It had massive side walls, faced with large slabs, and, apparently, vertical timber gables reinforced by banks of turf. By comparison, the house at Doarlish Cashen was no more than the equivalent of a very modest crofter's cottage; but part of its interest lies in the very fact that it shows us the home of a Norse settler of very humble status.

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¹⁰ Gelling (1964).