

I.

NOTICE OF THE EXCAVATION OF A CHAMBERED MOUND NEAR
BRECKNESS, STROMNESS, ORKNEY. BY M. M. CHARLESON, F.S.A.
Scor.

In the summer of 1900, by the kind permission of W. G. T. Watt, Esq. of Skail, I commenced the excavation of a large mound on the farm of Westerleafea, near Breckness in Outertown, Stromness.

There was no room for doubt as to the artificiality of the mound, which, apart from its symmetry and surroundings, had previously supplied a neighbouring farmer with a quantity of material for building purposes, these operations, more properly depredations, leaving a gap on the south side of the mound in which several upright slabs of some size were noticeable. At this point we began the excavation, and before long struck a low wall between two upright slabs which projected from it and which were 6 feet apart. In the middle of this wall, that is, between the two upright slabs, an opening was found, and this led to a passage running inwardly for a few feet, and roofed over with large transverse slabs. At the inner end of this passage, the interior wall branched sharply to right and left, and in following it up on the right we found that it extended first in an easterly and then in a northerly and westerly direction, ending in a large recess which subsequently proved to be of equal height with the wall exposed. The outline of the structure being thus far laid bare, the excavation was carried on in a downward direction, beginning at the entrance. At a depth of 5 feet from the surface of the mound a floor was discovered, together with a lateral recess off the east side of the building. This floor, however, proved to be secondary, for, at a depth of a foot, another and evidently primary one was found, the debris between the two consisting of black unctuous earth intermixed with animal remains. Almost in line with, and 4 feet from, the entrance we noticed a large slab on the floor, which, on being raised, revealed a square-built cavity full of black earth, having a single

slab for its base. The recess on the east side was next cleared of its contents, consisting of black earth reduced to the consistency of mud, and animal remains, few of which survived handling. Contrary to expectation, this recess extended downwards beneath the level of the floor and diverged in a north-easterly direction from the axis of the chamber, while the back wall was acutely constricted in the middle of its length. The walls of the recess converged towards the top, which was formed of slabs laid across, and near which its width was reduced to about one half by the breadth of the lintel and the thickness of the superincum-

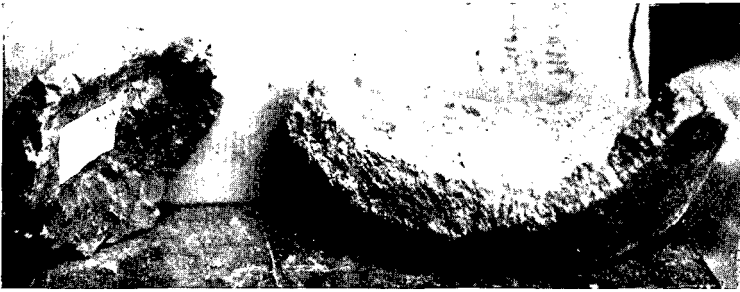


Fig. 1. Pottery found in the chamber of the mound at Breckness.

bent masonry. In the recess off the north side of the chamber were found a fragment of rude pottery, evidently part of the base of a vessel (fig. 1) and the tine of a deer-horn. The walls of the chamber and recess last mentioned were beehive in form and dry built, the lower portions of the former being here and there formed of slabs set on edge and resting on the floor. The walls of the recess, it may be added, showed traces of the action of fire.

At this point the excavation had to be abandoned, and was not resumed until the summer of 1902, when we exhumed the wall on the west side, beginning, as before, at the entrance, from which it diverged to the west for a few feet, with an inward tendency, and then trended to the north and east until it joined the recess off the north side of the chamber at

the point where the excavation had been stopped in 1900. The remaining debris was then removed, together with the secondary floor, the primary one being also raised, but without revealing relics of any kind. The wall on this side showed no traces of convergence.

The chamber being now cleared of its contents, which consisted throughout of compacted earth intermixed with stones, we found that it took the form of an irregular square with a passage and recesses off the south, east and north sides respectively. The extreme length from north to south was 9 feet, and from east to west 9 feet 10 inches, the greatest height being 5 feet. The entrance passage, the floor of which was paved and which faced the south, measured 4 feet in length, $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet in height and $1\frac{1}{2}$ in breadth. The recess on the east side was about $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet from top to bottom, about 3 feet in greatest length and breadth respectively, and 2 feet square at the opening, while that off the north side measured $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet in length and $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet in breadth. The cavity in the centre of the chamber was about $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet each way and 1 foot in depth.

But the excavation was not finished. We concluded that the chamber brought to light did not exhaust so large a mound, although no trace of any passage which might lead to other chambers could be found. Accordingly, we cut trenches at different points, and were rewarded for our trouble by unearthing a wall which ran almost parallel with that on the west side of the chamber already discovered, and which, on being followed up to the north, led to a recess similar to that which distinguished the north side of the other building, with this difference, that there was a depression in the angle leading to it, together with another in its east side, the former extending the full height of the wall and the latter having a lintel 6 inches from the floor; thereafter the wall trended to the west, south and east, being broken on the south side by the entrance passage, which, together with the chamber itself and the lateral recess on the north side, were afterwards cleared, but without revealing any animal remains, relics, or

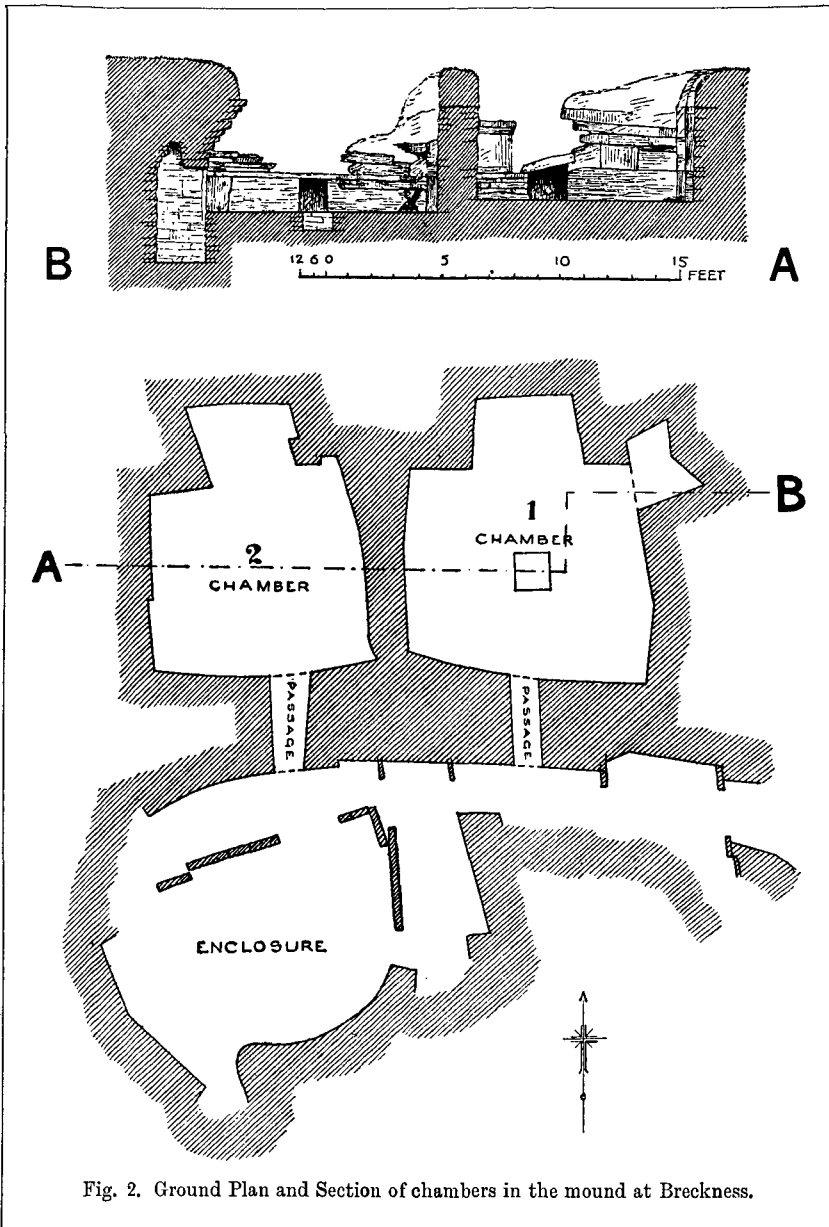


Fig. 2. Ground Plan and Section of chambers in the mound at Breckness.

traces of a secondary floor; even the raising of what floor there was produced the same negative results.

We had now a chamber closely resembling the one already brought to light, so closely indeed as to make the resemblance striking, and it wanted only the addition in the second instance of a lateral recess and floor cavity to bring the two into the category of twins. The wall on the east side, it may be said, showed traces of convergence as well as the walls of the northerly recess, which bore evidence of the action of fire. The wall, however, on the west side, like the corresponding one in the other chamber, did not assume the beehive form, the converging portion, no doubt, having given way, while the wall on the south side fell away considerably from the perpendicular, to the extent, I should say, of 45° at the top. As in the other case also, the lower sections of the walls at several points were constructed of slabs set on edge, a practice adopted evidently to economise labour, if not material. In length the chamber measured 8 feet, in breadth 9 feet, and in greatest height about 4 feet, while the entrance passage was 4 feet in length, from $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 feet in breadth, which increased inwardly, and fully 1 foot in height. The recess off the north side measured $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet in greatest length, about 4 feet in width, not including that of the depression, which was 6 inches. The height of this recess, as has been said, corresponded with that of the adjacent wall.

The exterior wall facing the south was then exposed, giving a frontage of fully 26 feet. It curved outwardly at the west end, and at a distance of 7 feet from the eastern extremity it formed into a recess which, with the assistance of projecting slabs, had at the ends a width of 2 feet, the length being $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet and the height 2 feet. The section of the wall forming this recess converged and was indented in this length. Two other slabs 2 feet in height, 1 foot broad, and 4 feet apart, projected from the wall between the entrance to the chambers. There were four slabs projecting from the exterior wall, the two in the middle being noted at the commencement of the excavation in 1900.

The whole area comprising the south side of the mound was next examined with interesting results, a low irregular wall somewhat circular in outline and with an opening in the middle being found to extend from a point about 6 feet from the west end of the front wall to within 9 feet of its centre, while within the enclosure thus formed, about 3 feet from the front wall and almost parallel with it, were four large slabs set on edge and about 2 feet in height, there being a break of 3 feet between them opposite the entrance to the chamber last excavated. From the easterly end of this line of slabs also two others of equal height extended outwardly towards the end of the circular wall already referred to, leaving a space 2 feet wide between the two. A little to

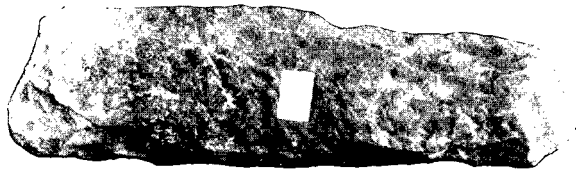


Fig. 3. Rude Implement of Claystone from the enclosure in front of the chamber in the mound at Breckness.

the east of the enclosure referred to we unearthed a segment of a wall lying about north and south and 2 feet from the front wall of the structures, while to the east of that again were two upright slabs in line with and 2 feet from the projecting slab forming the east end of the recess in the front wall. We found that the whole area was paved. In excavating the enclosure a fragment of rude pottery (shown on the left of fig. 1, p. 353), evidently part of a straight-lipped vessel, was found, together with a rude implement of claystone (fig. 3), measuring $12\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length, about 3 inches broad, and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick; one end was truncated and the other bevelled from both sides and slightly rounded. The stones forming the floor of the enclosed area were lifted, but no additional relics were found.

On the west side of the mound was a depression, $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet by $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet, with slabs forming the sides and ends; but as it was opened some time before I began the excavation I can give no account of it beyond recording its existence, and the statement made to me that it had been a cist.

It will, I think, be seen from the foregoing description that although the chambers excavated bear some resemblance to those structures occasionally met with in Orkney, which have been regarded as sepulchral, and are distinguished by a dry built chamber on the beehive principle, a passage leading to it, and one or more lateral cells, the present group must, I think, be regarded as dwellings. There is an entire absence of human remains, the bones found being those of animals, including the skull of a dog. The relics, although meagre, are interesting, and point clearly to human occupation, but apart from this the features of the chambers themselves are such as to lead one to the same conclusion. In the case of the chamber first excavated, the recess off the east side might have been a well; and in this connection I may say, that on the occasion of a recent visit I observed it to be full of water, while that on the north side of this chamber, to judge by the condition of the walls, had evidently been used as a fireplace. The cavity in the floor also seems significant, but the use to which it might have been put is not apparent. The other chamber also, to judge by the traces of fire in its northerly recess, had a fireplace. The entrance passages are low and narrow, and one would think unsuitable for giving free access to the chambers. No doubt they are so, if we consider them in relation to the requirements of the present day.

One is at a loss what to make of the enclosure fronting the chambers. Had the outworks been complete, a theory might have been suggested, but unfortunately they suffered considerably from the operations referred to in the beginning of the paper. As to the age of the structures we cannot even hazard a guess; although from the presence of the stone implement they must be assigned to a remote period, not, it should be

remembered, because the implement is made of *stone*, but because the *type* is an ancient one. The implement, however, cannot be taken as giving an adequate idea of the culture of these mound dwellers, nor can the pottery aid us in this matter. We must rather take the chambers themselves as the criterion, and in doing so we come to the conclusion that, although built on a definite plan, with great uniformity and some ingenuity, the civilisation of the builders was not of a high order; but however this may be, they were keenly alive to their personal safety, the dwellings being constructed in such a way as to be easily defended from the inside, while, in selecting a site, they took care that they had a good view of the surrounding country and of the not far distant sea.

I am much indebted to Mr Watt for having allowed me to make the excavation; to Mr George Ellison, Liverpool, for the plan and section of the chambers; and to Mr David MacRitchie, F.S.A. Scot., for the assistance which he rendered me during the progress of the work.