

# Shell seat at Gyllyngdune Gardens, Falmouth, Cornwall

## Historic building record





Report No

2011R003

Report Name

Shell seat at Gyllyngdune Gardens,  
Falmouth, Cornwall, Historic building record

Report Author

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Event Type

Historic building record

Client Organisation

Environment, Cornwall  
Council

Client Contact

Jon Mitchell

Monuments (MonUID)

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Fieldwork dates (From) (To)

15/12/10

(Created By)

Jo Sturgess

(Create Date)

5/1/11

Location (postal address; or general location and parish)

Gyllyngdune Gardens, Falmouth

(Town - for urban sites)

Falmouth

(Postcode)

(Easting) X co-ord

SW 81266

(Northing) Y co-ord

31888

### List of Figures

Fig 1: Location of Gyllyngdune gardens

Fig 2: Location of shell seat

Fig 3: First Edition OS map c1880

Fig 4: Second Edition OS map c1907

Fig 5: Francis Frith postcard of shell seat, photograph taken in 1908

Fig 6: Present view of the front elevation looking north-east

Fig 7: Interior of western half

Fig 8: Interior dividing wall in western half

Fig 9: Seat in western half

Fig 10: Back wall in western half

Fig 11: West wall in western half

Fig 12: Ceiling and front arch in western half

Fig 13: Interior east wall of eastern half

Fig 14: Interior dividing wall in eastern half

Fig 15: Seat in eastern half

- Fig 16: Back wall in eastern half
- Fig 17: Ceiling in eastern half
- Fig 18: Front arch in eastern half
- Fig 19: Plan of shell seat
- Fig 20: South (front) elevation
- Fig 21: Elevations of interior dividing wall
- Fig 22: Elevations of interior back walls



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## Summary

The shell seat in Gyllyngdune Gardens (located at NGR SW 81266 31888) is first recorded in a photograph taken in 1908 (Fig 5). It is not a large enough structure to be shown on any of the historic maps, but is likely to have been constructed at some point during the early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. It comprises a semi-circular open fronted room space (now divided in two) cut into an earth bank overlooking the quarry garden and sea beyond. The fieldwork has revealed that the structure contains at least four separate construction and alteration phases.

## Project background

Historic Environment Projects, Cornwall Council was contacted by Jon Mitchell (Senior Landscape Architect) Cornwall Council and asked to provide an estimate of costs for an archaeological record of the shell seat prior to alterations and conservation (including the removal and replacement of the entire roof structure). Although the work was not required as part of a planning condition, the historic importance of the shell seat had been highlighted in an existing Conservation Plan (Nicholas Pearsons Associates, 2007) and the recording work was commissioned in response to this. The Conservation plan states:

*The surviving features such as the high quality grotto and the shell seat may merit listed status.*

The Conservation plan also states:

*Anticipated repairs include: repair and replacement of corroded steel reinforcing; careful cleaning of the shell and mineral work, and careful like-for-like replacement where the original patterns survive; raking out of loose cement mortar repairs and replacement with good quality lime mortar; replacement of timber seat with oak; re-exposure of original floor, restoration with pebbles or cobbles; and replacement of granite block wing wall if the rear path can be reinstated. It is now considered inappropriate to remove the early twentieth century internal wall, partly because of anticipated structural weaknesses, and partly because this wall forms part of the early twentieth century history of the site. Interpretation should provide some detailed information on the source and status of some of the shells and minerals within the seat (Nicholas Pearsons Associates, 2007).*

A quality and conservation report on the shell seat was completed by Dianna Reynell.

An estimate for the recording work was produced by Nigel Thomas of HE Projects which was subsequently agreed and then undertaken. This report sets out the results.

## Historic background

The following background is based on Gyllyngdune Conservation Management Plan (Nicholas Pearsons Associates, 2007):

Gyllyngdune House, originally known as 'Summerlands' was first built in about 1837 by General William Jesser Coope (diary of Barclay Fox). It is believed that the quarry in the gardens was excavated for building the house and that the quarry's axial location to the house anticipated its subsequent re-use as a quarry garden.

After the death of General William Jesser Coope, his son, the Reverend William John Coope took up residence in Gyllyngdune house and laid out the gardens. Apparently Reverend Coope was wealthy, energetic and resourceful which was expressed in the construction of the shell seat, grotto and sea-front chapel. It is thought that the Reverend's daughters worked on the shell seat and grotto.

In 1863 Gyllyngdune House was sold by Reverend Coope to Sampson Waters (Lake) and in 1900 it was sold again to Frederick John Horniman who was at that time the MP for Falmouth.

In 1903 Horniman sold the coastal strip of the Gyllyngdune estate to Falmouth Town Council to enable them to complete the Cliff Road. Further land was subsequently sold to

the Council for housing developments and for the creation of public winter gardens, and Gyllyngdune House became a private hotel.

A plan (of c1905) in the possession of Carrick District Council shows how the Council intended to profit from the acquisition of the estate by dividing it up into development plots; only the rump of the estate, consisting of the gardens to the west and south of Gyllyngdune House, was to be retained as a public amenity, linked by a dog-leg path; this proposal was carried out.

It is possible that it was the council around this time who inserted an internal dividing wall in the shell seat to add stability to the roof structure.

## **Aims and objectives**

The principal aim of the study was to obtain an archaeological record of the structure prior to partial demolition and to help inform reconstruction and conservation. An objective was to obtain a better understanding of the structure.

## **Working methods**

Fieldwork was undertaken to be equivalent to an English Heritage Level 3 survey (see English Heritage 2006). It comprised a photographic survey, the production of a measured plan and elevations and brief building descriptions through annotations to the plan and elevations.

A brief review of historic maps and other source material was carried out before the site visit.

## **Building description**

### **General structure (see Figs 19-21)**

The structure is located on the northern side of the upper path of the quarry garden facing the sea. It comprises an open-fronted, roughly semi-circular chamber, hollowed out of a south-facing bank and roofed over with an off-central pillar supporting both the roof and two arched openings at the front. A dividing wall containing a small pointed arch opening has been added at a later date and splits the original room space into two. The seat structure is an integral part of the curving rear retaining wall. It is constructed from slate rubble with occasional quartz and granite, and has a timber planked top. The walls, vaulted ceiling, pillar and jambs are all constructed from slate (killas) rubble originally bonded with lime mortar although some rebuilt areas are now bonded with cement mortar. The roof and top of the rear wall are reinforced with a basket framework of iron straps concealed immediately below the internal lime mortar render. The decoration comprises shells, stone chips, pebbles, coral and slag all pressed into the lime render.

The approximate internal dimensions of the structure are 1.9m deep (to the back wall) by 3m wide by 2m high.

There are at least four construction phases.

### **Phase 1:**

The original structure included the reinforced roof that exists today and double arched opening with supporting pillar to the front (although this was rebuilt in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, compare Figs 5 and 6). It also included the slate rubble-built seat. Much of the original shell decoration survives in the form of rectangular and square panels with internal decoration outlined with rows of limpets particularly on the rear wall. Some of the original panels are also visible on the ceiling although more extensive (phase 4) repair work here has hidden most of the original decoration. The materials used in the original decorative panels include the following:

Tiny pebbles set in lime mortar (panel infill, average pebble 4mm in diameter)

Small chips of quartz (panel infill, average stone dimension: 20mm x 15mm)  
Quartz pebbles (horizontal bands of infill, average stone dimension: 100mm x 50mm)  
Slate pebbles (horizontal bands, average stone dimension: 100mm x 20mm)  
Small slate fragments (panel infill, average stone dimension: 20mm x 15mm)  
Fragments of iron slag (panel infill, average dimension: 70mm x 70mm)  
Small limpet shells (used for borders)  
Great or queen scallop shells (used as panel centrepieces)  
Common razor shells (used as panel centrepieces)  
Mussel shells (used as panel centrepieces)  
One large piece of coral (used as centrepiece of rear wall)

### **Phase 2:**

At some point before 1908 (see Fig 5) an internal dividing wall was inserted, presumably to add stability to the wide single span vaulted ceiling. This is a slate rubble-built wall rendered with lime mortar and decorated with shells. It contains a small pointed arch opening in its upper half. The shell decoration on this inserted wall is very different from that on the original structure. It comprises friezes of diamond and triangular shaped panels rather than rectangular or square panels. The materials used in these decorative panels include the following:

Small chips of quartz (panel infill, average stone dimension: 20mm x 15mm)  
Oysters (used for borders)  
Purple variegated scallop shells (also used for borders)  
Great or queen scallop shells (above pointed arch only)  
Common otter shell? (border around pointed arch)

### **Phase 3:**

At some point after 1908 the jambs of the front openings along with the central support pillar were rebuilt using smaller slate rubble bonded with a cement mortar (compare Figs 5 and 6). It is unclear whether or not the two arches were also rebuilt at this date, but the shells on the inner faces of the arches have clearly been replaced after 1908. The stone structure of the seat was also either rebuilt or repointed with a cement mortar during this phase and a new timber top inserted.

### **Phase 4:**

In recent years rough repairs have been made to the interior decoration by applying a cement render and random covering of white clam shells (or possibly warty venus shells) over the original shell decoration. The original ceiling decoration has been almost entirely covered with these modern shells and only one or two very small areas of limpets, slag or quartz chips are visible. The small areas of the original decoration still visible suggest that the ceiling originally followed the design on the rear wall being made up of square or rectangular panels of decoration.

## **References**

### **Primary sources**

Ordnance Survey, c1880. *25 Inch Map* First Edition (licensed digital copy at HE)  
Ordnance Survey, c1907. *25 Inch Map* Second Edition (licensed digital copy at HE)  
Ordnance Survey, 2007. *Mastermap Digital Mapping*  
Francis Frith postcard of shell seat, photograph taken in 1908

### **Publications**

Nicholas Pearsons Associates, 2007. *Gyllyngdune Conservation Management Plan*

## Websites

[http://www.pznw.co.uk/marine/sea\\_life.html](http://www.pznw.co.uk/marine/sea_life.html)

## Project archive

The HE project number is **2010121**

The project's documentary, photographic and drawn archive is housed at the offices of Historic Environment, Cornwall Council, Kennall Building, Old County Hall, Station Road, Truro, TR1 3AY. The contents of this archive are as listed below:

1. A project file containing site records and notes, project correspondence and administration.
2. Field plans and copies of historic maps stored in an A2-size plastic envelope (GRE 735).
3. Digital photographs stored in the directory ..\Images\Sites E-H\Gyllyngdune gardens shell seat 2010121
4. English Heritage/ADS OASIS online reference: cornwall2-91734

This report text is held in digital form as: G:\CAU\HE Projects\Sites G\Gyllyngdune gardens shell seat 2010121\report 2010121





Fig 1: Location of Gyllyngdune gardens

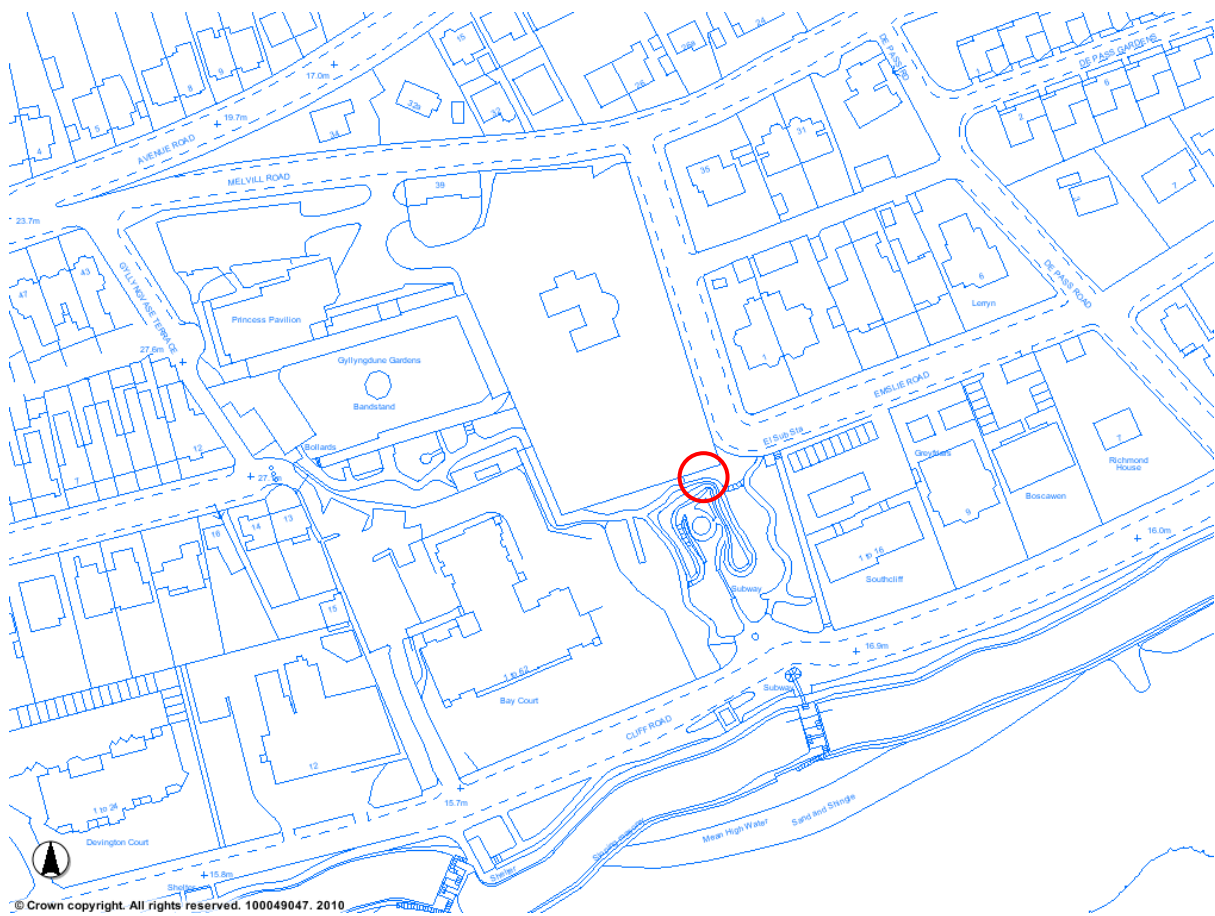


Fig 2: Location of shell seat

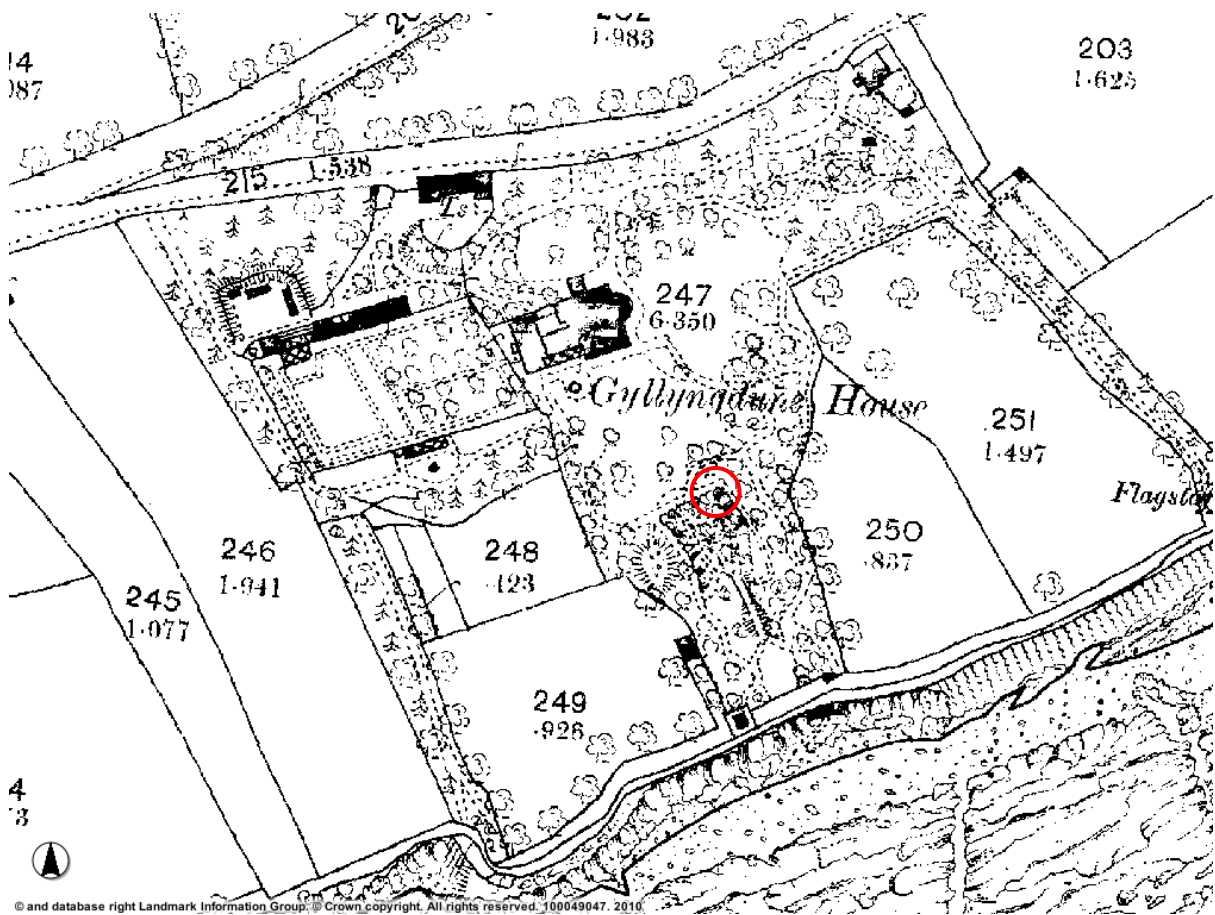


Fig 3: First Edition OS map c1880

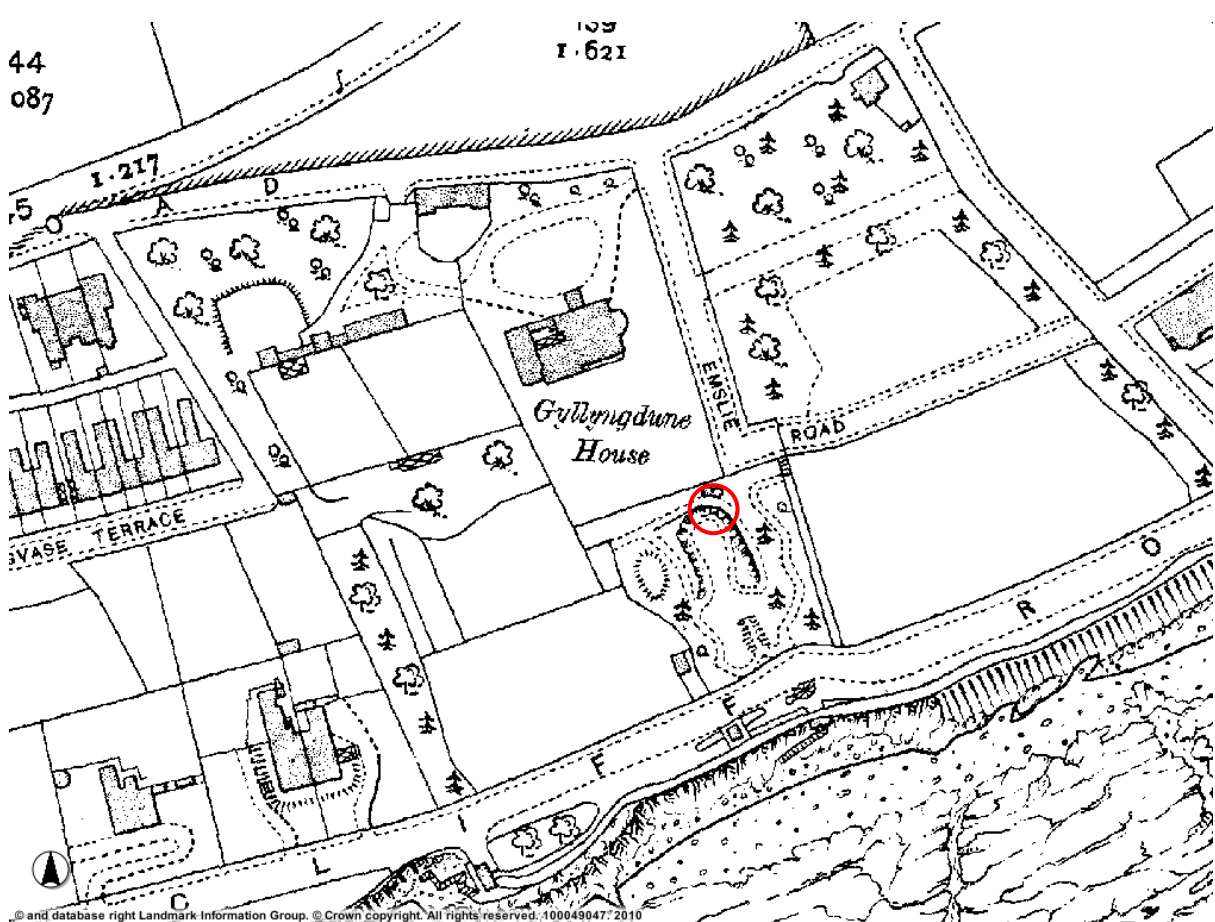


Fig 4: Second Edition OS map c1907



Fig 5: Francis Frith postcard of shell seat, photograph taken in 1908



Fig 6: Present view of the front elevation looking north-east



Fig 7: Interior of western half



Fig 8: Interior dividing wall in western half



Fig 9: Seat in western half



Fig 10: Back wall in western half



Fig 11: West wall in western half



Fig 12: Ceiling and front arch in western half



Fig 13: Interior of eastern half



Fig 14: Interior dividing wall in eastern half



Fig 15: Seat in eastern half



Fig 16: Back wall in eastern half





Fig 17: Ceiling in eastern half



Fig 18: Front arch in eastern half

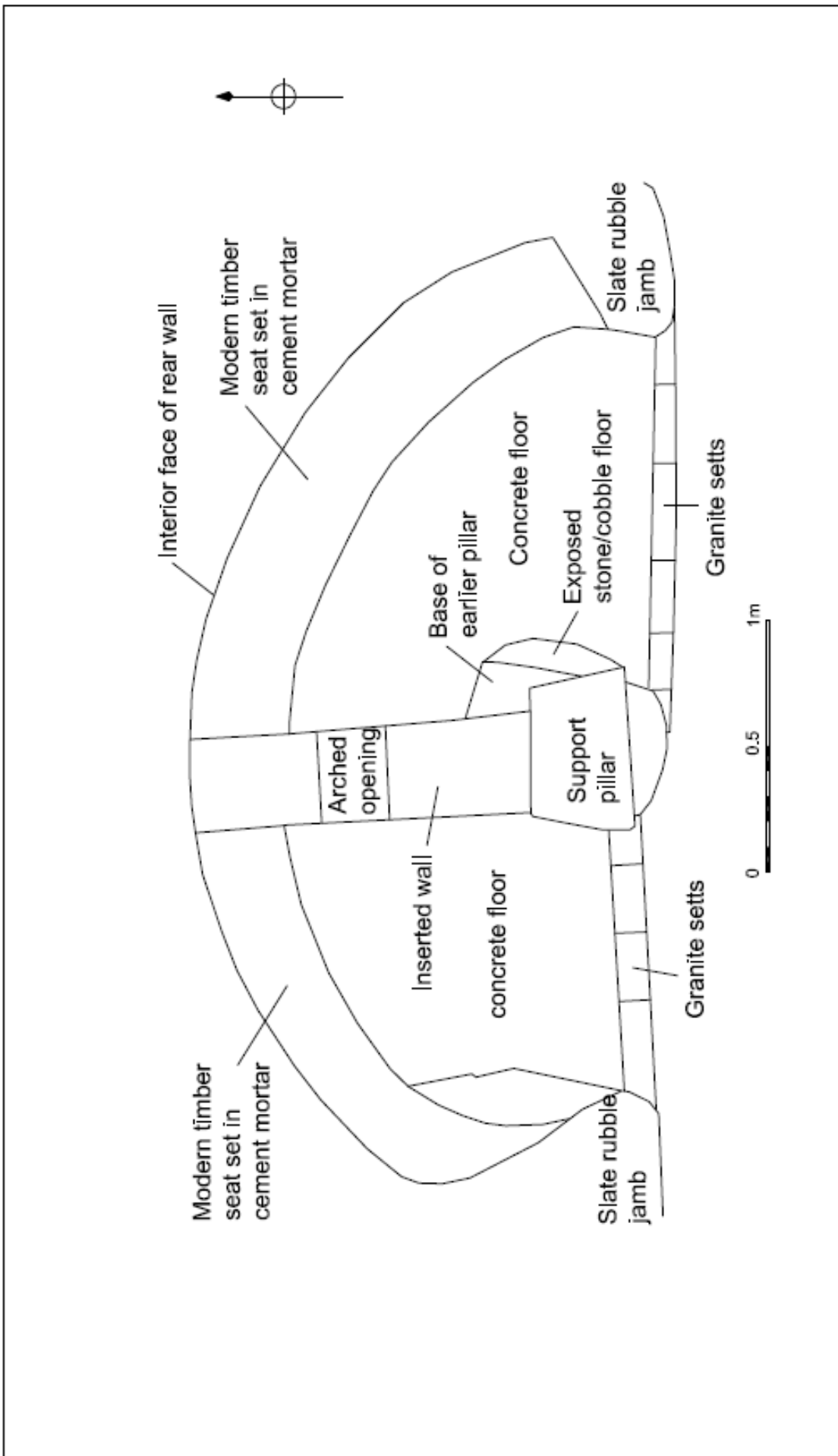


Fig 19: Plan of shell seat  
(scale 1:20 at A4)

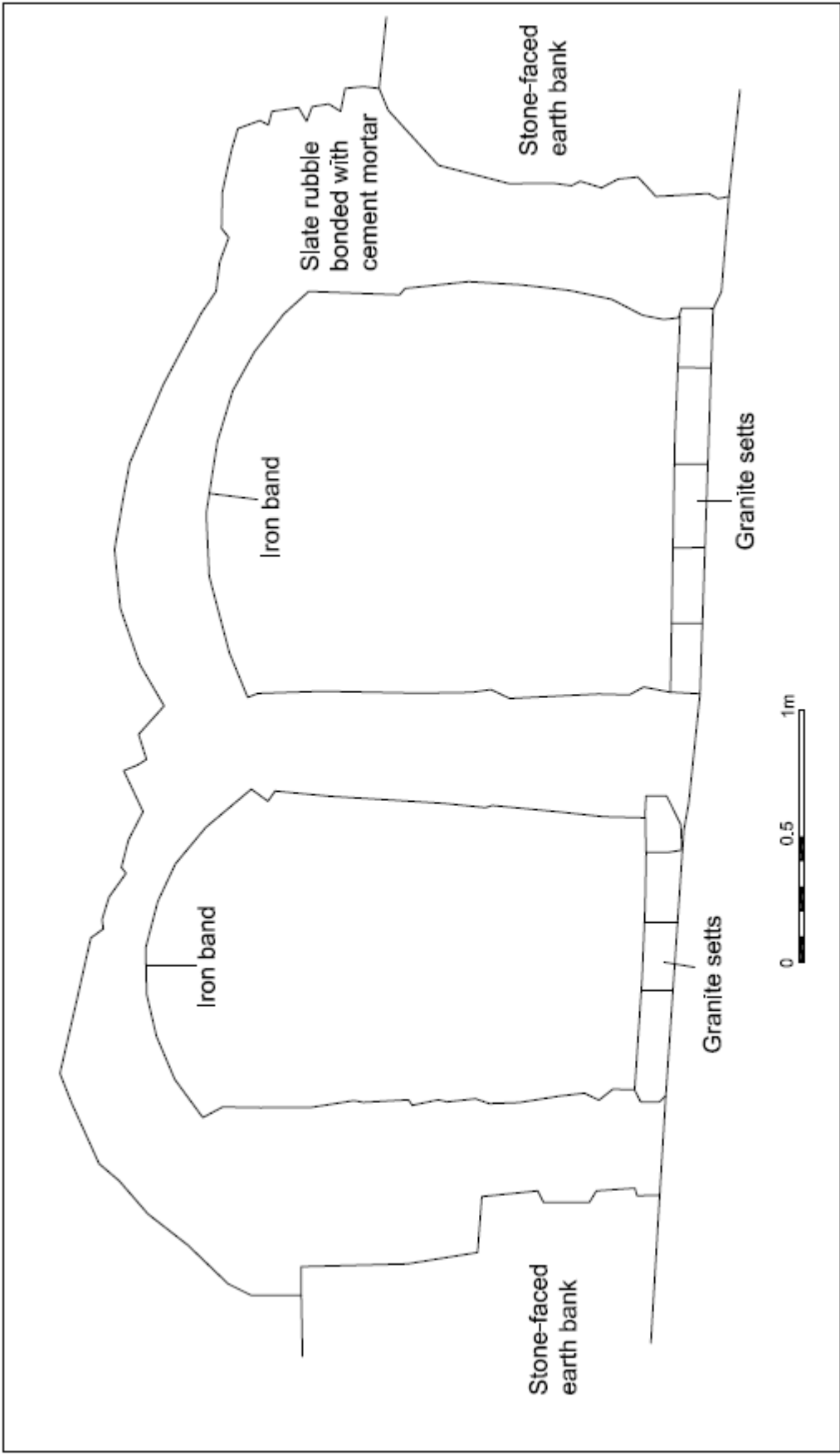


Fig 20 South (front) elevation  
(scale 1:20 at A4)



Fig 21. Elevations of interior dividing wall (scale 1:20 at A3)

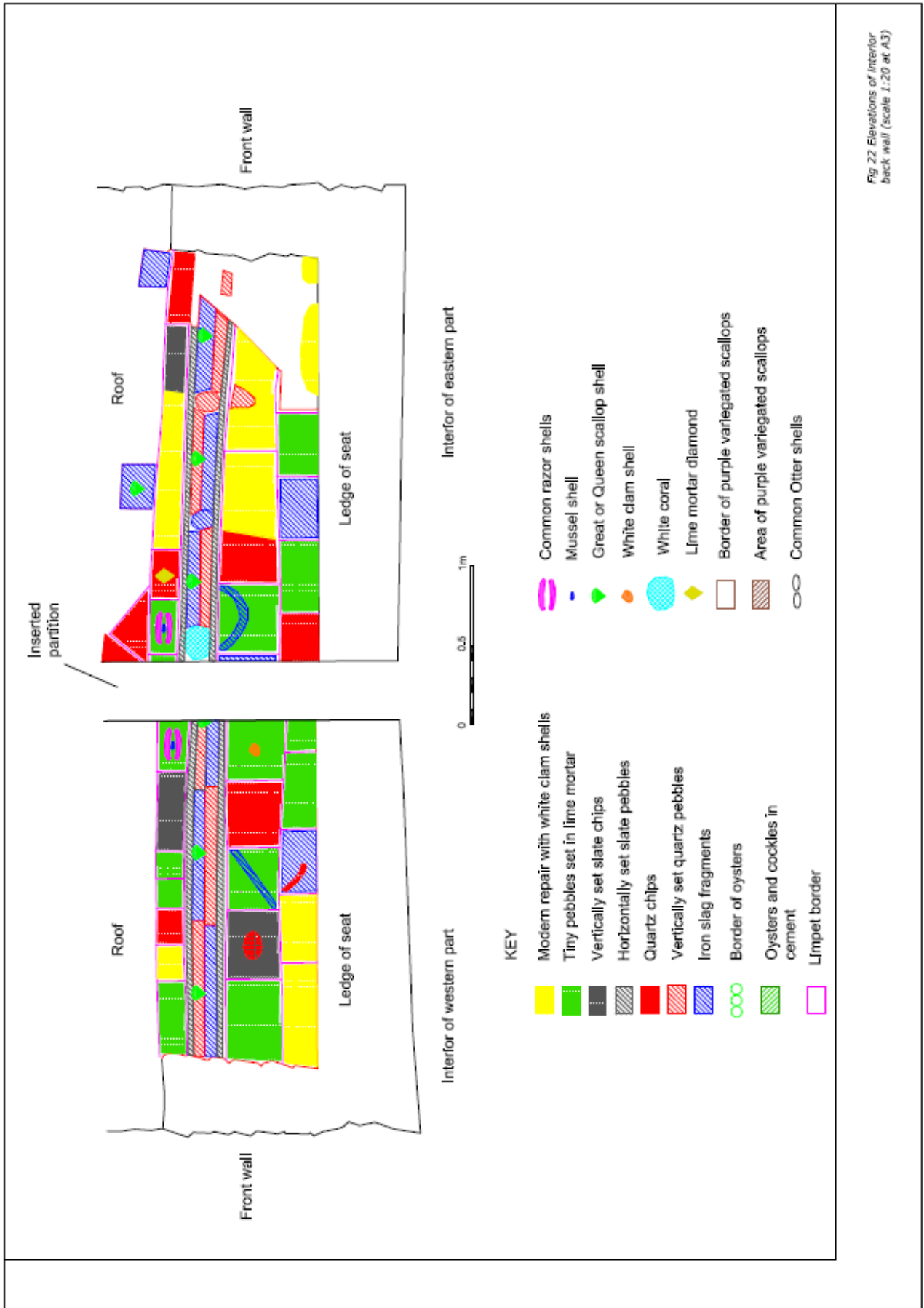


Fig 22 Elevations of interior back wall (scale 1:20 at A3)