

Discovery and Excavation in Scotland

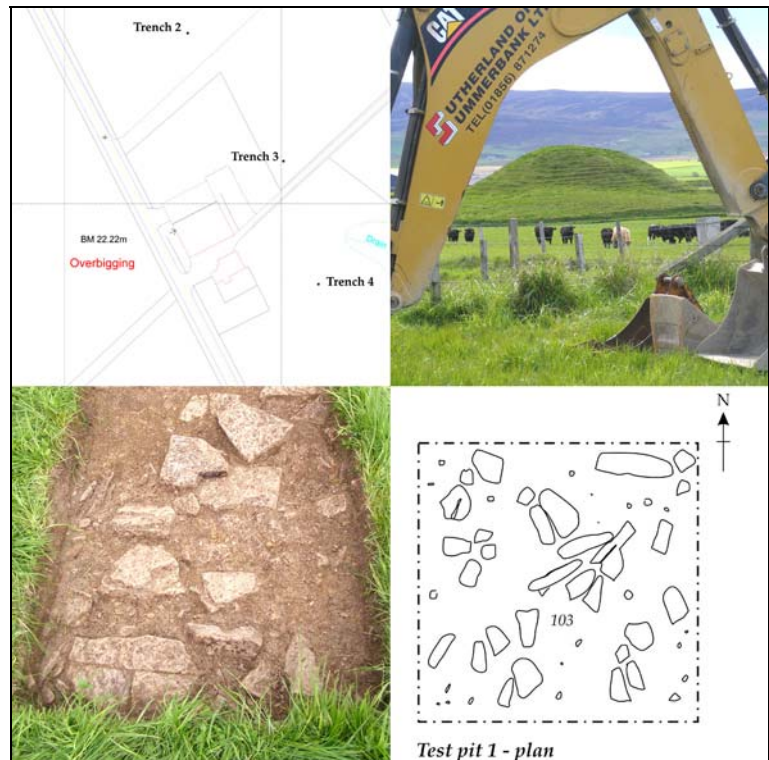
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LOCAL AUTHORITY:	Orkney Islands
PROJECT TITLE/SITE NAME:	Overbigging, near Maeshowe Chambered Cairn: Archaeological excavations, May 2009
PROJECT CODE:	HSCO-90209-2009-01
PARISH:	Stenness
NAME OF CONTRIBUTOR:	David Murray
NAME OF ORGANISATION:	Kirkdale Archaeology
TYPE(S) OF PROJECT:	Trial excavation
NMRS NO(S):	HY31SW 21 (Maeshowe)
SITE/MONUMENT TYPE(S):	Trial excavation
SIGNIFICANT FINDS:	None
NGR (2 letters, 8 or 10 figures)	Centred c HY 317 131 Pit 1 - HY 31630 13336 Pit 2 - HY 31656 13278 Pit 3 - HY 31701 13219 Pit 4 - HY 31717 13162 Pit 5 - HY 31730 13101 Pit 6 - HY 31744 13046 Pit 7 - HY 31763 12983
START DATE (this season)	19 May 2009
END DATE (this season)	22 May 2009
PREVIOUS WORK (incl. <i>DES</i> ref.)	
MAIN (NARRATIVE) DESCRIPTION: (May include information from other fields)	Kirkdale Archaeology excavated a series of seven 1.0 m ² test pits spread across two fields at Overbigging, to the north of Maeshowe Chambered Cairn, Stenness, Orkney. These were intended to allow engineers to undertake soil testing. The southernmost three pits (5, 6& 7) produced possibly archaeologically significant features. The southernmost (pit 7) produced a possible plough-truncated cut feature below deeper plough-soil. The most substantial feature seen was found in the second pit from the south (pit 6). This was a spread of flat flagstones with a clear edge on its north side running across the trench, under a shallow plough-soil, which remained unexcavated. The next trench to the north (pit 5) revealed a large flat slab, not lifted but possibly of archaeological significance. The other pits produced no features of archaeological significance, but showed evidence of ploughing and water logging of these soils.
PROPOSED FUTURE WORK:	
CAPTION(S) FOR ILLUSTRS:	
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Historic Scotland
Properties in Care
Minor Archaeological Works 2009

Overbigging, near Maeshowe Chambered Cairn: Archaeological excavations, May 2009

Project code: HSCO-90209-2009-01



11 June 2009
Kirkdale Archaeology

<u>Site</u>	Overbigging, near Maeshowe Chambered Cairn, Orkney
<u>N.G.R</u>	c HY 317 131
<u>Project Description</u>	Archaeological excavations
<u>Project codes</u>	HSCO-90209-2009-01

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SUMMARY

Kirkdale Archaeology excavated a series of seven 1.0 m² test pits spread across two fields at Overbigging, to the north of Maeshowe Chambered Cairn, Stenness, Orkney. These were intended to allow engineers to undertake soil testing. The southernmost three pits produced possibly archaeologically significant features. The southernmost trench produced a possible plough-truncated cut feature below deeper plough-soil. The most substantial feature seen was found in the second pit from the south. This was a spread of flat flagstones with a clear edge on its north side running across the trench, under a shallow plough-soil, which remained unexcavated. The next trench to the north revealed a large flat slab, not lifted but possibly of archaeological significance. The other pits produced no features of archaeological significance, but showed evidence of ploughing and water logging of these soils.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Historic Scotland asked Kirkdale Archaeology to excavate a series of test pits spread across two fields at Overbigging, to the north of Maeshowe Chambered Cairn, Stenness, Orkney (Fig. 1). These were in advance of the proposed construction of a new visitor centre for this monument, and were designed to allow engineers to test the porosity of the soil in the area, to assess its suitability for drainage. The fields in question lie adjacent to the east of Stonyhill Road some 200 m N of Maeshowe.

The intention was to excavate seven 1.0 m² test pits across the two fields to check for any significant archaeological features, and if none were seen, they were to be mechanically excavated to bedrock. Four trenches were located in the southernmost field and three in the northernmost, spread over a distance of c 380 m. The two fields are separated by an access road to Moa farm, with a cluster of buildings at its W end, Overbigging farm.

Maeshowe is one of four major monuments that form the core of a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS), labelled “the heart of Neolithic Orkney”. This is a testament to the scale and preservation of these spectacular prehistoric monuments. The southernmost field in the study area lies within the inner buffer zone for the WHS,

while the northernmost lies entirely outside it.

Extensive geophysical surveys have been carried out in the surrounding fields, and this had partly informed the location of these test pits, although the northernmost field had not been surveyed. Numerous anomalies of probable archaeological origin were identified, with a large circular feature in the field to the west of Stonyhill Road interpreted as a probable early prehistoric monument, perhaps contemporary with Maeshowe. This is a scheduled ancient monument and is *c* 125 m from the nearest test pit.

The southern field (labelled Area 43 during the geophysical investigation) was examined using magnetometry and seemed to be relatively devoid of significant anomalies, at least along its W side. A shallow quarry (visible as a field monument) sits roughly centrally to the S field, with probable access routes leading away to its N. To the E of this were linear anomalies interpreted as evidence for ploughing. At least some of these appeared to be differently orientated from the present layout of fields. A roofless ruin in the NE corner of the field represents all that remains of Upper Bigging farm, shown on earlier OS maps.

The landscape is gently undulating, with a tendency to drop to the W, towards the Loch of Harry. The underlying geology comprises fluvo-glacial clays over Old Red Sandstone, through which are dykes of volcanic rock.

2.0 EXCAVATIONS

2.1 Test pit locations

Pit number	NGR
1	HY 31630 13336
2	HY 31656 13278
3	HY 31701 13219
4	HY 31717 13162

Pit number	NGR
5	HY 31730 13101
6	HY 31744 13046
7	HY 31763 12983

2.2 Excavation account

Excavation started with test pit 7 in the SW corner of the S field. This was orientated N-S and was located towards the NW side of the base of a low mound. Topsoil **F700** was compact mid brown silty clay 70-80 mm thick. Below this 250-300 mm of **F701** was recorded, pale brown silty clay with patches of very pale grey and orange silty clay throughout. Beneath this most of the trench was covered by **F704**, compact pale orange silty clay with frequent chunks of decaying flagstone throughout. In the SW corner of the trench however an area of compact dark brown silty clay rich in stone, **F702** was noted. On excavation this seemed to sit in a possible shallow curving cut **F703**. This had fairly steep sides and a flat base and was up to 130 mm thick. After the excavation of this feature within the trench the W section, running through **F703** was drawn. The trench was then expanded 200 mm to the W, to attempt to prove if this was a shallow feature, or merely a stone-hole. In the event little further was added, with only part of the curving NE side of the feature exposed. It measured at least 850 mm N-S by at least 600 mm E-W

Trench 7 was the only trench that ended up being dug down by machine, which took it to a depth of *c* 1.6 m. Only the top 150 mm of **F704** proved to be pale orange, below which it was pale grey in colour. Solid bedrock was not encountered, but increasing quantities of broken up brashy flagstone were noted the deeper the trench was dug.

Test pit 6 was located some 70 m N of test pit 7, separated from each other by a wide shallow depression in the field, and was orientated NE-SW. The trench was covered by 150-200 mm of **F600**, moderately compact mid brown silty clay, from which it proved impossible to separate out topsoil. The removal of this exposed an apparent feature **F601** across the SW end of the trench. This took the form of a spread of small

to medium sized angular flagstone fragments, mostly lying flat, with an apparent N edge running E-W across the trench. The trench was expanded by 1.0 m to the NE, and this action revealed more of this edge, indicating that this is a real archaeological feature. **F601** was not excavated and measured at least 1.80 m NE-SW and was at least 1.40 m E-W.



*Plate 1 : Test pit 6, after excavation, showing **F601**, taken from NE*

To the N of **F601** was **F604**, compact pale yellow silty clay, with frequent small flagstone fragments throughout. In the extreme N corner of the trench was an area of stones **F602**, with a curving S edge some 450 mm N-S and E-W. These tended to tip downwards, and were mixed in with mid brown silty clay. Although not excavated this was given a cut number, **F603**.

Test pit 5 was excavated some 60 m N of test pit 6, and was situated on the N end of a fairly level terrace, which test pit 6 was towards the S end of. The trench was orientated NE-SW and its upper deposit **F500** proved to be mid brown silty clay 200-250 mm thick from which a fragment of what appeared to be Welsh slate was noted (but not retained). Below this a single large flat slab **F501** occupied the NE end of the trench. This was a distinctive soft dark bluish flagstone, measuring at least 1.0 m E-W by 600 mm N-S. Although not lifted it was at least 40 mm thick. To the SW of **F501** the trench was filled by **F502**, very compact pale yellow silty clay rich in degraded pale grey flagstones, especially towards the E of the trench.

Test pit 4 was the northernmost in the S field, some 60 m N of test pit 5. It was close to Overbigging farm, and sat towards the S edge of a flat terrace occupying the N end of this field. This produced a simple sequence of 200-250 mm of **F400**, moderately compact mid brown silty clay with occasional small flagstone fragments throughout. At the base of the trench, **F401**, compact pale yellow silty clay rich in flagstone fragments was encountered.

Test pit 3 was the southernmost in the N field, situated immediately E of the enclosure around Overbigging farm. It was orientated NE-SW and sits in a slight hollow which runs from here NW across this field. Topsoil **F300** was 60 mm of dark brown silty clay, below which was **F301**, 150 mm thickness of similar soil but richer in stones. **F301** also produced a large collection of slate fragments and pieces of iron, nails etc of fairly recent date. These were photographed but not retained. Below this **F302** proved to be compact pale grey silty clay up to 120 mm thick from which no finds were recovered. At the base of the trench **F303** was a mix of compact pale yellow/ pale grey silty clay and flagstone fragments, often decayed.

Test pit 2 was 70 m N of test pit 3, and was towards the E side of the hollow running NW-SE across this field. Below 80 mm of mid grey silty clay **F200** was 150 mm of a

similar soil **F201** rich in iron pan flecks. This in turn sealed **F202**, compact pale grey silty clay with discrete patches of yellow slightly silty clay. This tended to merge into **F201** above and **F203** below, but was typically 100-150 mm thick. At the base of the trench **F203** was compact pale yellow/ pale grey slightly silty clay, with occasional small angular stones throughout.

The final trench, test pit 1, was 60 m N of test pit 2 to the E of the hollow running through the field. Its topsoil **F100** was 60 mm of mid grey silty clay, below which was 250 mm thickness of **F101**, mid brown silty clay with occasional small charcoal flecks, and small flagstone fragments throughout. This in turn sealed **F102**, 150 mm of compact pale brown silty clay. At the base of this trench **F103** mostly comprised flagstone fragments, but mixed in with very compact, very pale yellow slightly silty clay.

3.0 INTERPRETATION

This sequence of seven small test pits excavated where little evidence for significant archaeological features had been seen produced some surprising results. The southernmost three test pits all produced evidence for possible archaeological features.

Test pit 7 produced a good depth of probable plough-soil, with traces of the subsoil ploughed up and re-deposited throughout it. Below this a possible shallow cut feature was noted in its SW corner, only part exposed in spite of extending the trench. This was only 130 mm deep, but had reasonable sides and a flat base, and its fill seemed different from the overlying plough-soil. This seems to indicate that this was a real, albeit truncated feature, but only further excavation could demonstrate this.

Test pit 6 showed evidence for a shallower plough-soil, with a spread of flat flagstones below it. This had a good N edge, and was so out of character from the occasional flagstone fragments seen elsewhere that it is almost certainly a man-made feature. It was not excavated, so its date is unknown and its function is far from clear, however it should be noted that the first edition OS map shows a road or track

leading to Upper Bigging farm running diagonally across this field on a similar alignment, and this may relate to that. To the N of this was a further possible cut feature, perhaps a pit or post-hole, but only further work could demonstrate what this represents.

Test pit 5 had a fairly shallow plough-soil overlying a large flat slab, only part exposed. This was not lifted, but its size and distinctive colour indicates that it may well be archaeologically significant. It seemed to be orientated roughly E-W. Test pit 4 produced a similar depth of plough- soil, but with no trace of archaeological features in the excavated area.

The three test pits in the N field all produced similar but subtly different sequences. Test pit 3 produced a large assemblage of modern finds, doubtless reflecting its proximity to Overbigging farm. It is unclear if these are part of a dump in the corner of the field or is dispersed, having been disturbed by the plough. This sealed a pale grey, probably gleyed soil over the subsoil. Test pit 2 had an upper iron panned soil, overlying gleyed deposits. Both test pits 2 and 3 lay near the base of a broad hollow running up this field, which may well explain the evidence for water logging noted in these soils.

Test pit 1 was located to the E of this hollow, and produced little evidence for water action, but may have two separate plough soils surviving within its sequence.

4.0 SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary the S field produced the only evidence for probable archaeological features. All except the southernmost test pit (number 7) produced evidence for a shallow plough-soil. This is something the farmer confirmed in conversation, suggesting that he didn't want to disturb drains running away from the quarry in this field. The failure of the geophysical survey to locate features (especially the spread of stones buried at no great depth in test pit 6) in this field demands explanation. It should be noted that only a magnetometer survey was undertaken, and this simply demonstrates a lack of burning and/ or magnetically enhanced soils in this field. This perhaps indicates a lack of settlement sites within this area. A

resistivity survey would surely pick up stone features like those found in pits 5 and 6 and such a survey should be recommended to be carried out before further work is carried out.

The N field produced some evidence for water logging, at least for pits 2 and 3. This was not noted in the soils of test pit 1, and this may be confined to the broad, shallow hollow running SE-NW across this field. If a geophysical survey is to be carried out across this field the large quantity of iron objects recovered from pit 3 should be borne in mind, as this is likely to interfere with the results obtained.

The results of this work have confirmed the survival of archaeological deposits where geophysical surveys had suggested the absence of significant features or structures. Since there is the possibility of the existence of further structures in this field lying unidentified by geophysical survey, the proposed insertion of a drain across the S field would have to involve the stripping of a sufficiently wide corridor to allow archaeologically significant features to be identified, and avoided if at all possible. The quarry in the S field, which has presumably already destroyed any features in its path, might present the least damaging course through which a drainage pipe might be installed.

A1.0

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF CONTEXTS

Context	Description
100	Tr. 1 topsoil
101	Tr. 1 dark brown silty clay plough soil
102	Tr. 1 pale brown silty clay
103	Tr. 1 subsoil
200	Tr. 2 topsoil
201	Tr. 2 iron pan rich plough soil
202	Tr. 2 pale grey clay
203	Tr. 2 yellow clay subsoil
300	Tr. 3 topsoil
301	Tr. 3 dark brown silty clay
302	Tr. 3 pale grey silty clay
303	Tr. 3 subsoil
400	Tr. 4 topsoil
401	Tr. 4 yellow clay subsoil
500	Tr. 5 topsoil
501	Tr. 5 slab at N end of trench
502	Tr. 5 yellow clay subsoil
600	Tr. 6 topsoil
601	Tr. 6 stone spread at SW end of trench
602	Tr. 6 fill of F603
603	Tr. 6 possible cut in NW corner of trench
604	Tr. 6 pale yellow clay subsoil
700	Tr. 7 topsoil
701	Tr. 7 plough soil
702	Tr. 7 fill of F703
703	Tr. 7 cut in SW corner of trench
704	Tr. 7 subsoil

A2.0

APPENDIX 2: LIST OF DRAWINGS

No	Type	Description	Scale
001	Plan	Plan of trench 7 as finished	1: 20
002	Section	N facing section of trench 7, before its enlargement	1: 10
003	Plan	Plan of trench 6 as finished	1: 20

No	Type	Description	Scale
004	Section	SE facing section of trench 6	1: 10
005	Plan	Plan of trench 5 as finished	1: 20
006	Section	E facing section of trench 6	1: 10
007	Plan	Plan of trench 4 as finished	1: 20
008	Section	E facing section of trench 4	1: 10
009	Plan	Plan of trench 3 as finished	1: 20
010	Section	SE facing section of trench 3	1: 10
011	Plan	Plan of trench 2 as finished	1: 20
012	Section	E facing section of trench 2	1: 10
013	Plan	Plan of trench 1 as finished	1: 20
014	Section	S facing section of trench 1	1: 10

A3.0

APPENDIX 3: LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

#	Description	From	Date
001-2	General shots	-	19/05/09
003	Ruined farm of Upper Bigging	W	19/05/09
004	General shot of Over Bigging farm	SE	19/05/09
005	Tr. 7 top of F702 cleaned up	E	19/05/09
006	Tr. 7 W section of trench, F702 unexcavated	E	19/05/09
007	Tr. 7 cut F703 emptied	E	19/05/09
008-9	Tr. 7 cut F703 emptied	N	19/05/09
010	Tr. 7 drawn section across cut F703	E	19/05/09
011	Tr. 7 F702 in expanded trench cleaned up	E	20/05/09
012	Tr. 7 F702 in expanded trench cleaned up	N	20/05/09
013-15	Tr. 7 cut F703 in expanded trench emptied	E	20/05/09
016-17	Machining near trench 7	N	20/05/09
018	Tr. 6 stone feature F601	SW	20/05/09
019	Tr. 6 stone feature F601 , detail of NE end	SW	20/05/09
020	Tr. 6 stone feature F601 , detail of SW end	SW	20/05/09

#	Description	From	Date
021	Tr. 6 stone feature F601	NW	20/05/09
022	Tr. 6 stone feature F601	NE	20/05/09
023	Tr. 5 slab F501 exposed	S	20/05/09
024	Tr. 5 slab F501 exposed	N	20/05/09
025	Tr. 5 W section of trench	E	20/05/09
026	General shot	-	21/05/09
027	Tr. 4 as finished	SW	21/05/09
028	Tr. 4 as finished, NE section	SW	21/05/09
029	Tr. 2 as finished	N	21/05/09
030	Tr. 2 as finished, S section	N	21/05/09
031	Tr. 2 as finished	S	21/05/09
032-34	General shots of N field	-	21/05/09
035	Tr. 3 as finished	SW	22/05/09
036	Tr. 3 as finished	NE	22/05/09
037	Tr. 3 as finished, SE section	NW	22/05/09
038	Finds from trench 3	-	22/05/09
039	Tr. 1 as finished	NW	22/05/09
040	Tr. 1 as finished, NW section	SE	22/05/09
041	View of quarry in S field	N	22/05/09
042	General shot	-	22/05/09
043	Upper Bigging farm	W	22/05/09
044	Over Bigging farm	E	22/05/09
045	Quarry in S field	NE	22/05/09

A4.0**APPENDIX 4 : LIST OF SAMPLES**

Sample No.	Context No.	Description	No. Of Bags
001	F702	Fill of Possible cut F703 , trench 7	2
002	F701	Plough soil, trench 7	1

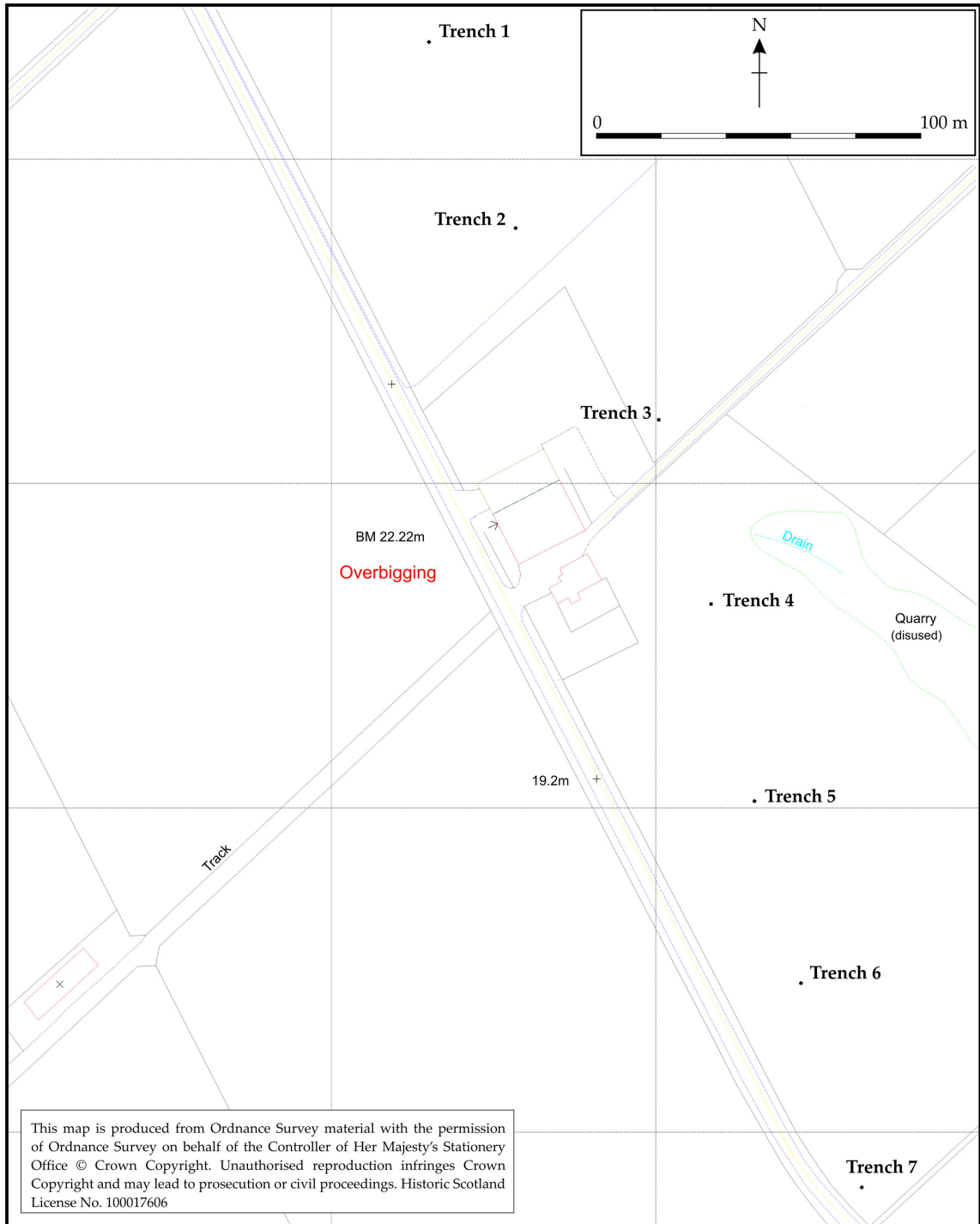
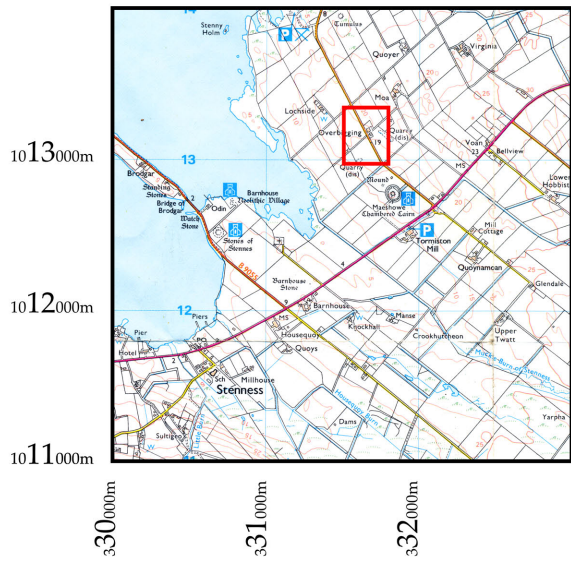
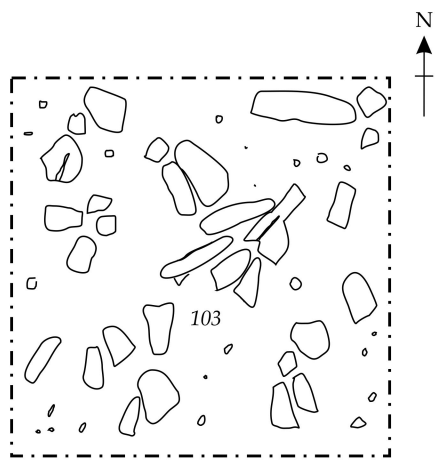
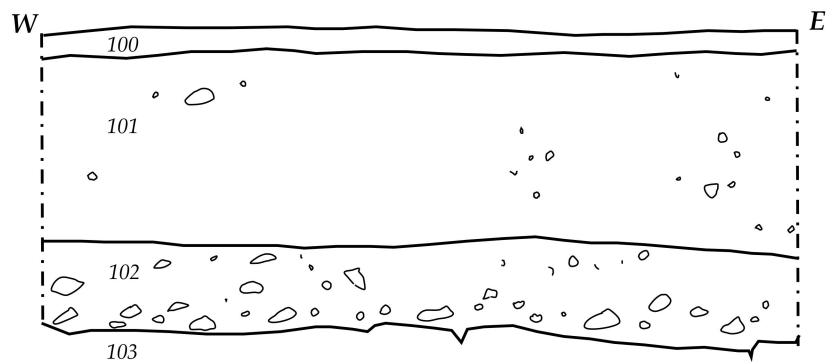


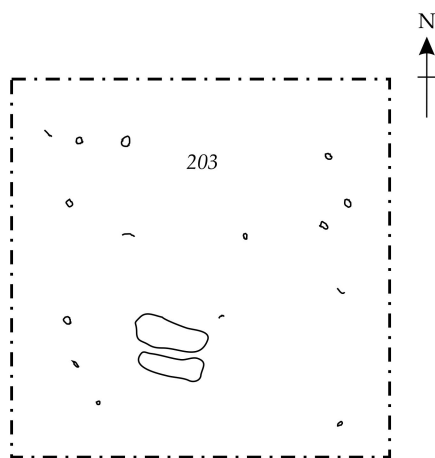
Fig. 1 : Location maps



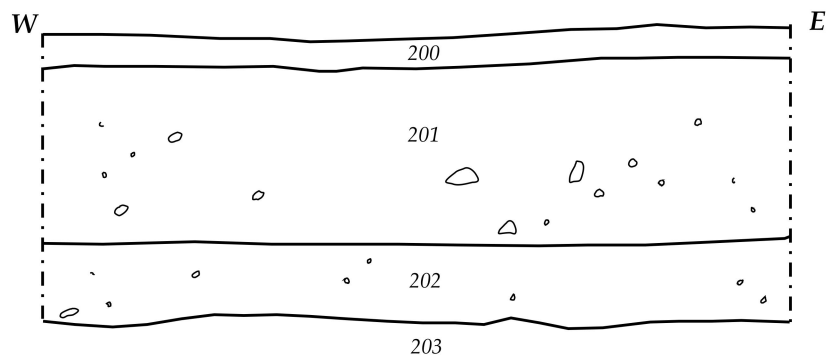
Test pit 1 - plan



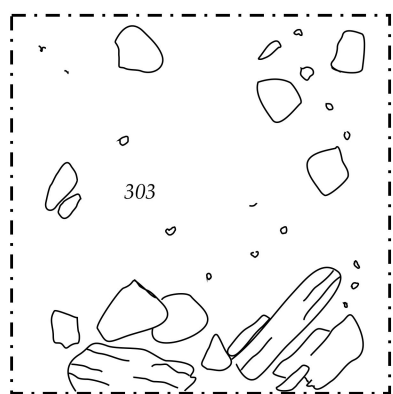
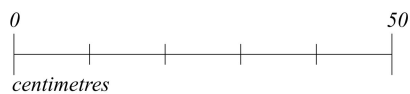
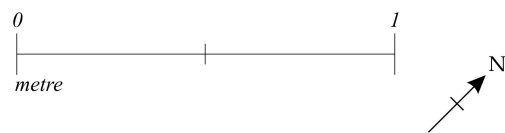
Test pit 1 - S facing section



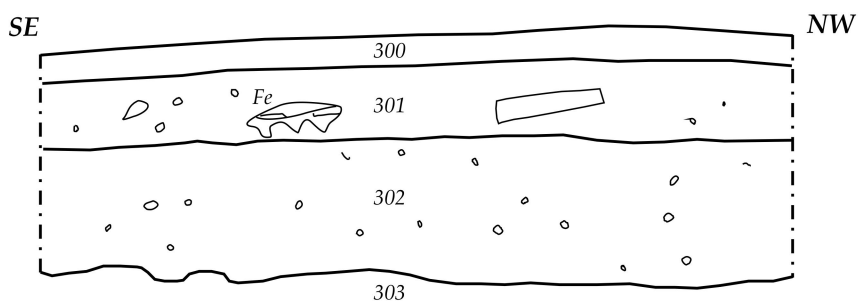
Test pit 2 - plan



Test pit 2 - E facing section

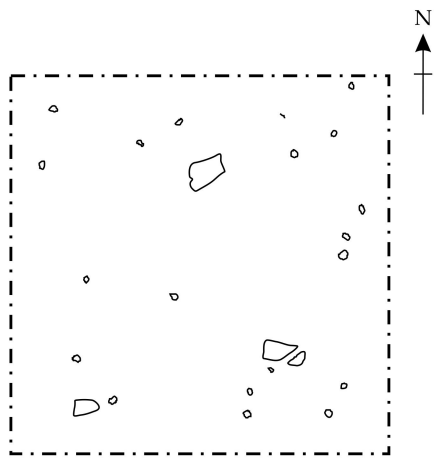


Test pit 3 - plan

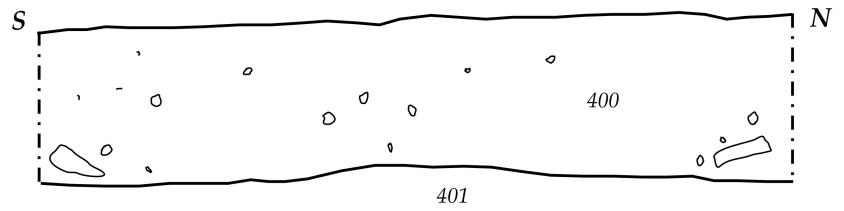


Test pit 3 - NE facing section

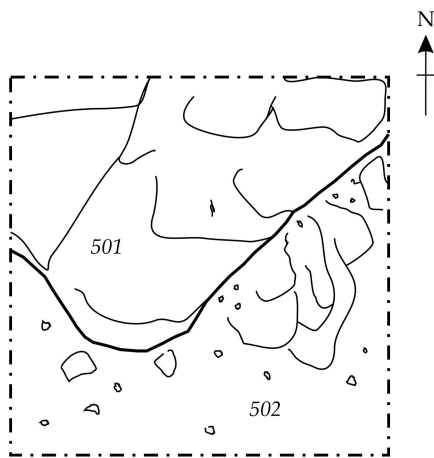
Fig. 2 : Plans and sections of test pits 1, 2& 3



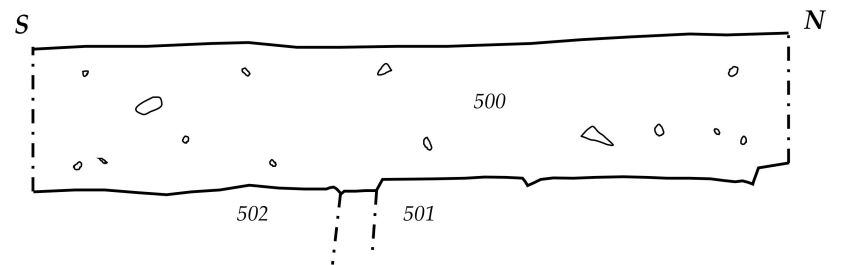
Test pit 4 - plan



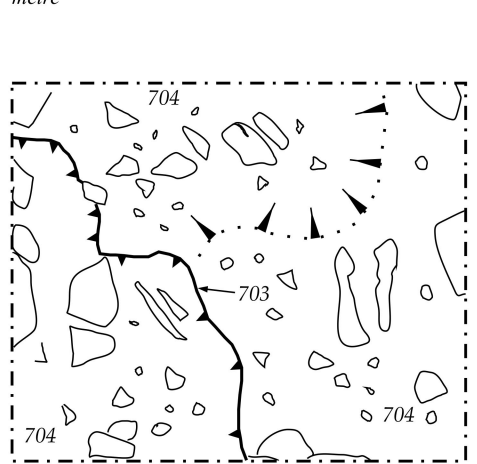
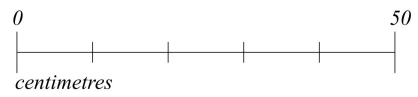
Test pit 4 - E facing section



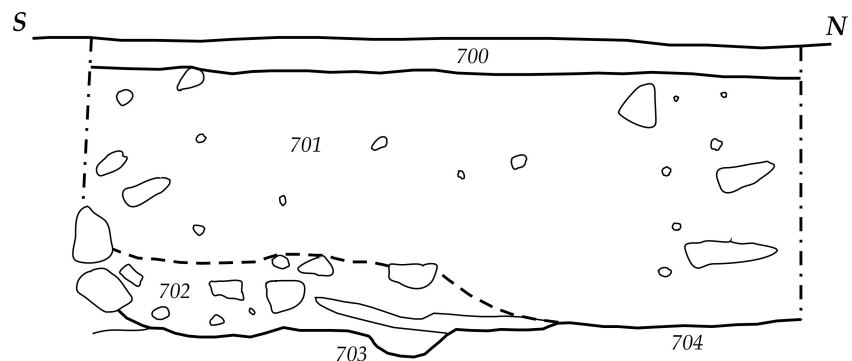
Test pit 5 - plan



Test pit 5 - E facing section



Test pit 7 - plan



Test pit 7 - E facing section

Fig. 3 : Plans and sections of test pits 4, 5& 7

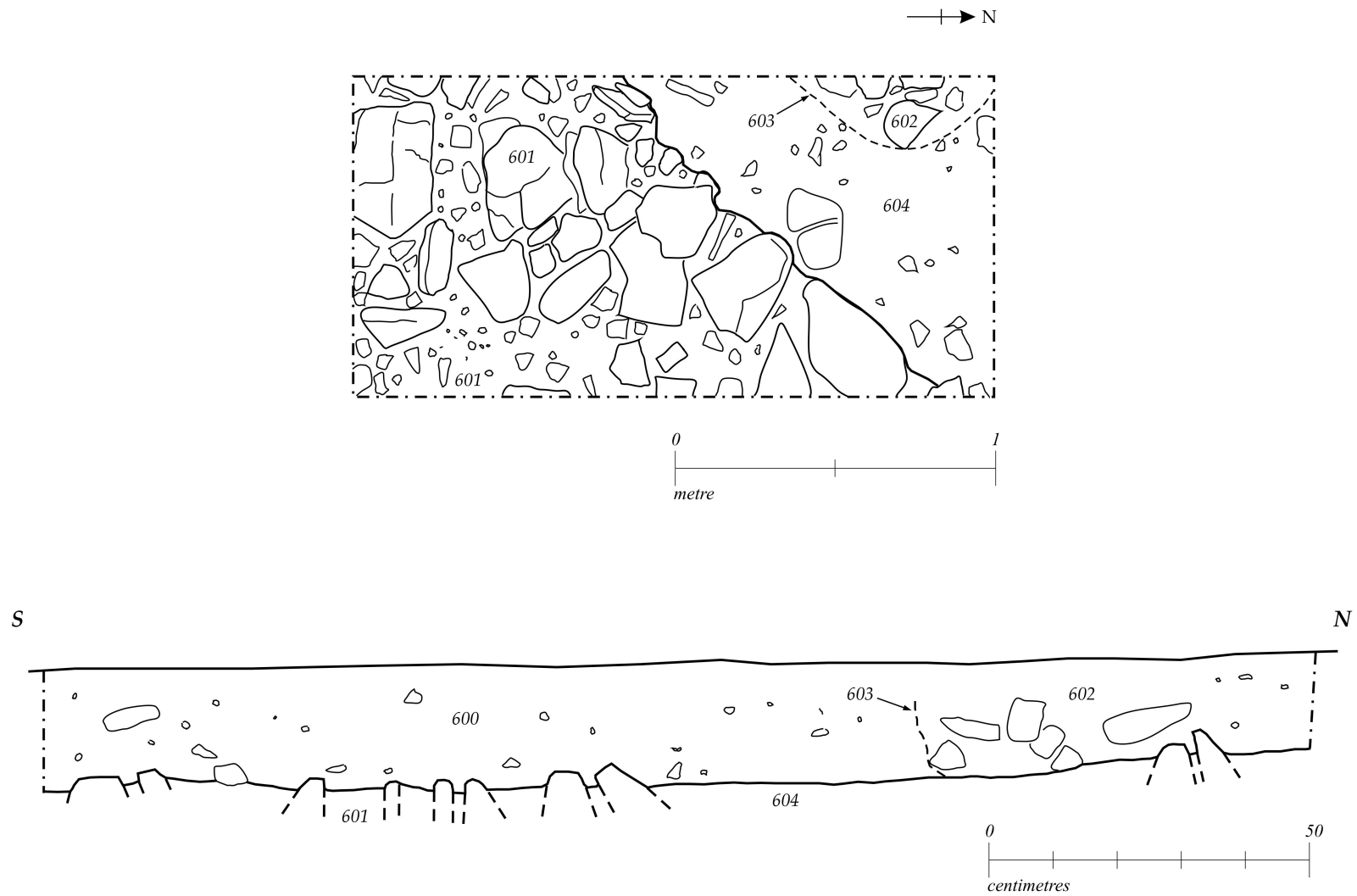


Fig. 4 : Plan and section of test pit 6