

'How we found a tumulus' a story of the Orkney Islands—The Journal of Lady Burroughs

Diana M Reynolds*

In 1898 a chambered cairn was discovered in a mound, known locally as Taversoe Tuick, in the grounds of Trumland House on Rousay, Orkney. General Frederick William Traill-Burroughs, the owner, sent a description of the cairn with sketches made by himself and his wife and 'a box containing some human bones and other objects' to Sir William Turner, FSA Scot, Principal of the University of Edinburgh, who subsequently published a paper describing the excavation in these *Proceedings* (Turner 1903).

Taversoe Tuick is situated about 200 m west of Trumland House at NGR HY 425 276 and is one of only two known examples with two chambers set one above the other. This was not recognized in the excavations made in 1898, although the north side of the upper chamber was uncovered and three stone cists containing cremated bone and broken pottery were removed. The flagstone slabs which formed the floor of the upper chamber were lifted to reveal the lower chamber which had four recesses, one containing a skeleton, and an entrance passage leading south.

It was not until 1937 that excavations undertaken by Walter Grant, the then owner of Trumland House, on behalf of the Ministry of Works, revealed the full nature and complexity of the chambers, the extent of the covering cairn and the unique miniature chamber found to the south of the mound (Grant 1939). Grant subsequently paid for a concrete cover to be erected over the monument and gave it into Guardianship for the nation. The finds from the cairn are preserved in the Royal Museum of Scotland, Queen St, Edinburgh. A full description of the site and the finds recovered from it has been made by Henshall (1963, 234–8), and a summary description may be found in Ritchie and Ritchie (1978, 25–6).

The discovery of the cairn caught the imagination of Lady Burroughs, and her journal describing the event was preserved in Trumland House until 1982 when it was kindly donated to the Orkney Archive by Mr and Mrs E Harrison.

It consists of a folio of nine pages of manuscript bound in a green cover 390 mm by 285 mm. Pasted on the inside of the cover are sketch plans and a photograph of Trumland House showing the cairn on the horizon; two loose sheets of pencil sketches also illustrate the text.

Although the journal is signed 'Veronica', there is no doubt that it was written by Lady Eliza D'Oyley Burroughs. It contains frank references to her husband's attitudes and general demeanour, and the descriptions of the locality, the activities and the workforce, are obviously those of the lady of the house. Why she should choose a pseudonym is unclear; perhaps it was a personal whim, or she may have attempted to get the story published.

Lady Burroughs was 48 years old at the time she was writing, and her husband had by then

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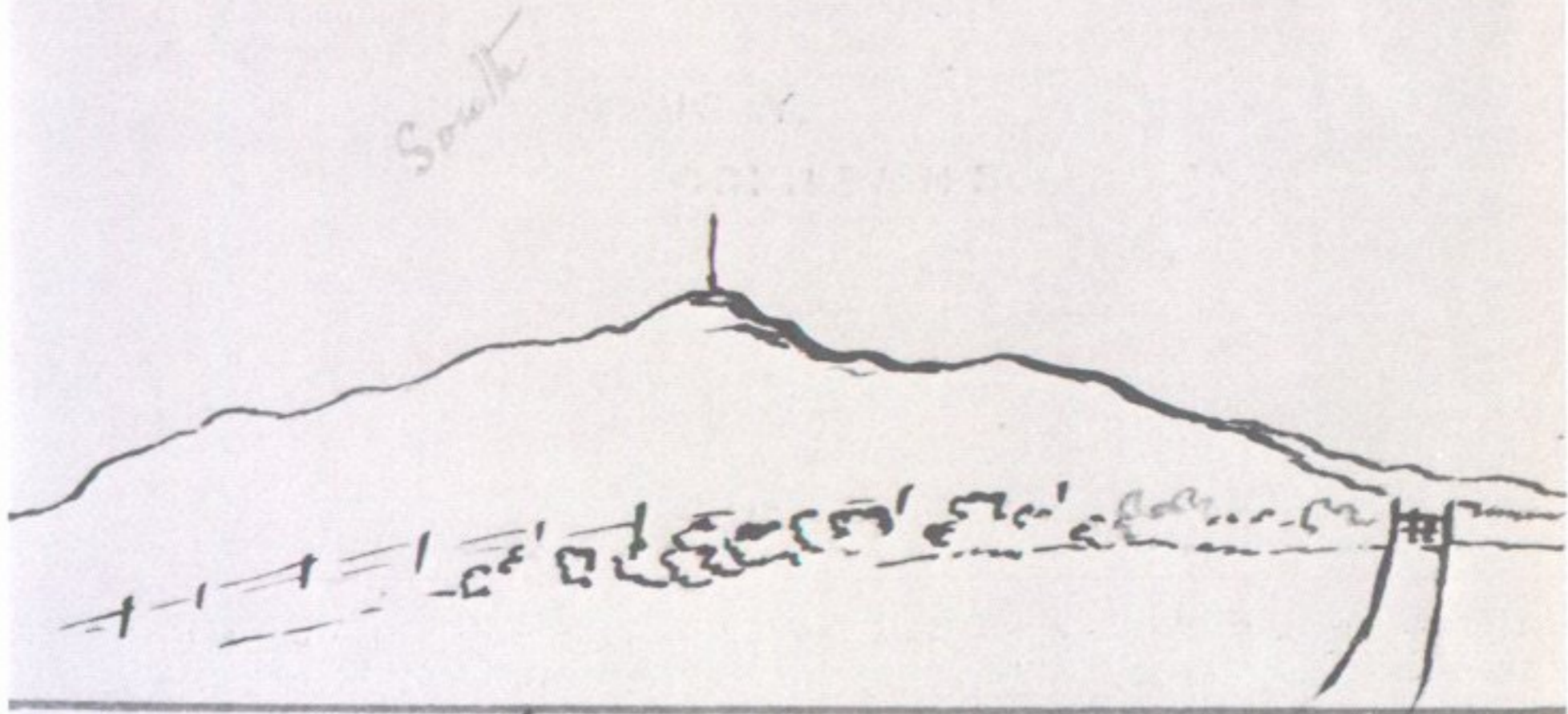


ILLUS 1 Lady Burroughs standing in the excavation of Taversoe Tuick Chambered Cairn

become well-known for his dogmatic views on land ownership, although his worst battles with the crofting community were over (Thomson 1981). Lady Burroughs herself took an active role in island life, playing the new harmonium in the Established church, starting a circulating library and encouraging the tenants on Rousay to establish flower gardens. Her journal is of interest in that, in addition to the archaeological description, it gives an insight into aspects of her life on the island. Her enchantment with the cairn and her dramatic narrative of its discovery make the reproduction of her journal worthwhile in an age when archaeological reports are normally written in dry academic prose.

Close to our house, about 200 yards "west" as they say in Orkney there is a knoll which we call Flag-staff-hill. The view from it is lovely, 13 islands dotted on an azure blue sea, the old Town of Kirkwall with its 12th century Cathedral of St. Magnus lies due South of it, 8 miles off as the Crow flies. The Lighthouse on Auskerry perhaps 11 miles distant bounds it on the East, and though one can't see the wide Atlantic on the West, yet a very gentle breeze from that direction even in calm weather brings an ocean boom and smothered roar which tells of the waves breaking into the cliffs not 5 miles off.

View of Hay-Staff Hill before 2nd - May 1898



3rd - May

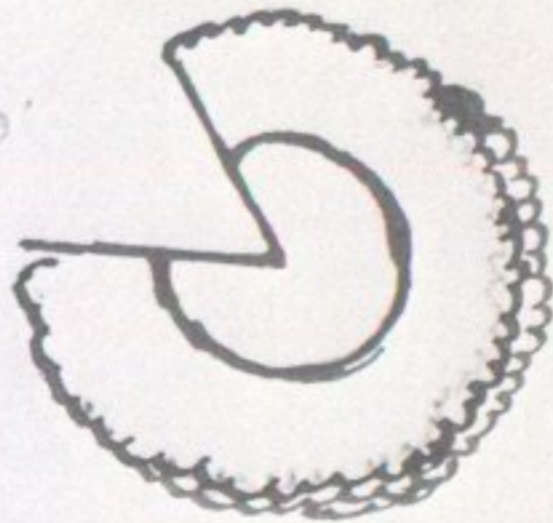
South



Plan of how we
proceeded to open
it for a Summer
Seat.

5th - May 11. a.m.

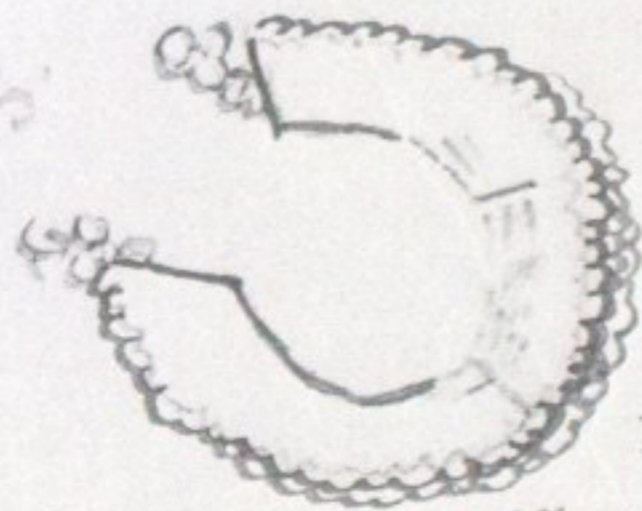
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Ditches placed round
mound to heighten
it from North
& East.

3 p.m.

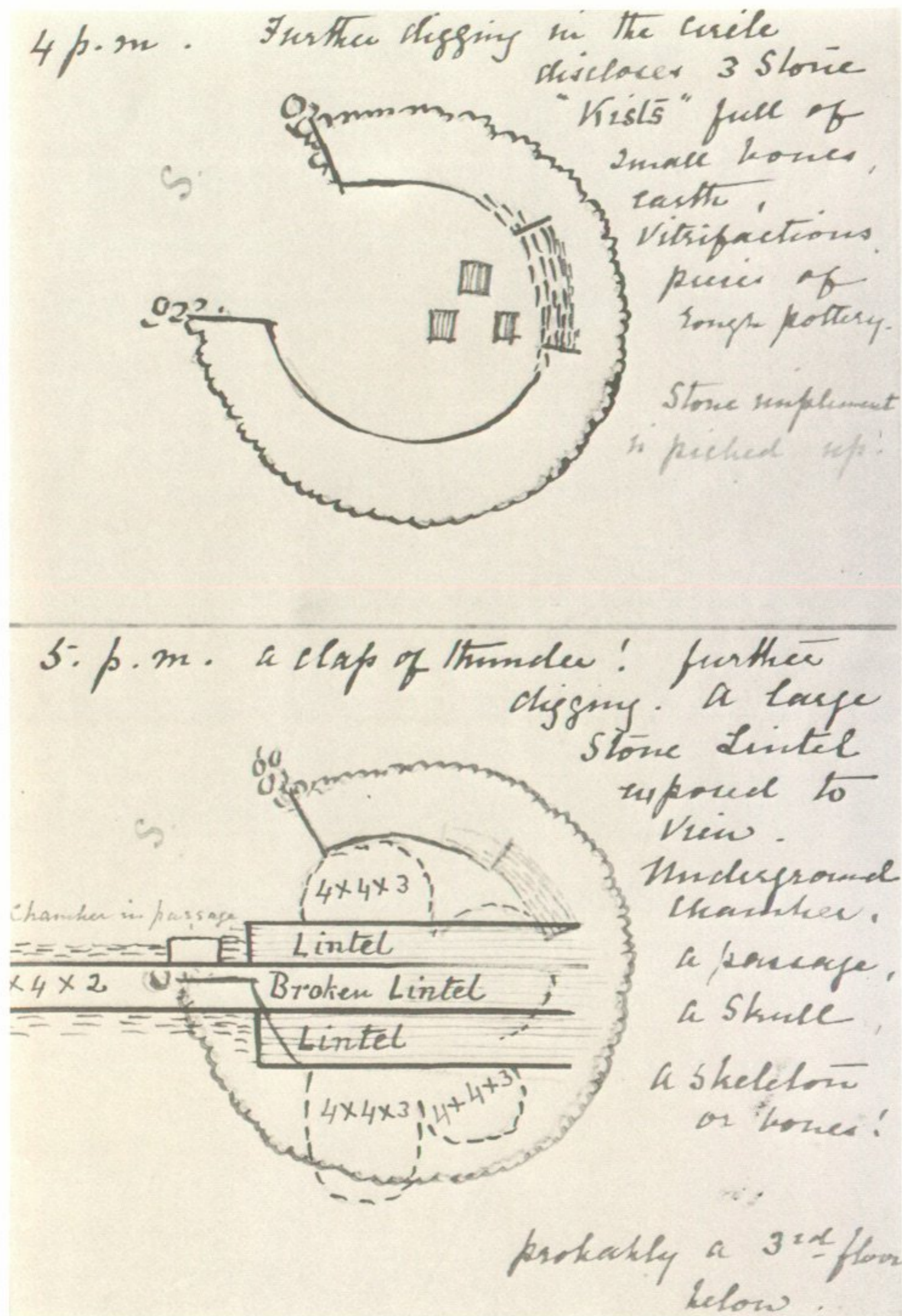
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Orders were given to further
cut into the Mound
as the triangular
shelter was not
enough.

Great well preserved
rough Building found
with fragments of thin Stones

ILLUS 2 Sketches of the excavation pasted into the cover of the journal



ILLUS 3 Sketch plan of upper chamber pasted into the cover of the journal

Though we call it Flag-staff hill it has never really boasted a flag-staff, but there is an old ship's mast which to tell the truth has once acted as the pole for the vermin-trap set by the gamekeeper. At the base of this pole and round it is a tiny cairn of stones, and on these many a day I have sat and to amuse and chaff my Southern friends I have asked them "to come and listen to the Picts whispering". It is true that round this old pole in certain "airts" of wind there is a curious siffling sound quite compatible with the idea that a buried Pict is whispering up it through the Cairn – for there is a small mound which this Cairn surmounts.

I have spoken only of the gentle breezes we encounter on Flag-staff hill, but it is not always so! for a sharp north-easter is apt to catch one in the ears as one looks at the view in front. One lovely Sunday afternoon with warm sunshine in front of us, and this same nor'easter annoying at one's back we decided to put an end to the trouble and have a "Summer-seat" manufactured there. My plan was to treat the knoll like a plum cake, and cut a good thick wedge out of it due south, keeping the debris round the north and East. Of course my Husband has another plan, he generally has, & we quarrel complacently over most things, which gives a zest to life – but on this occasion he was specially amiable, and magnanimously consented to waive his plan without the usual pitched battle.

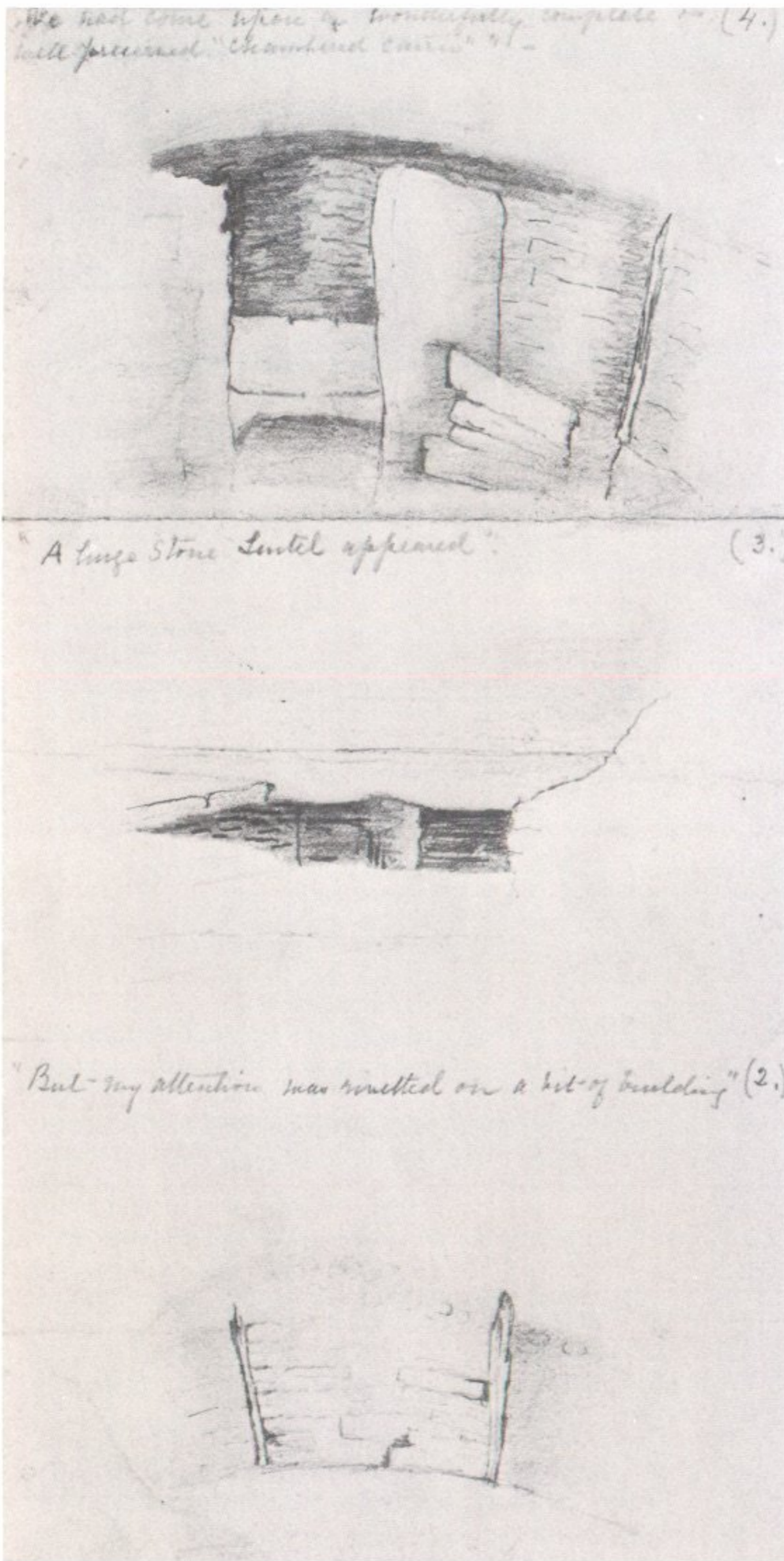
So the Workmen were summoned, a plan was given them, and on Monday afternoon they were at work. "If we find a Picts House", said my husband, "of course we can't turn it into a Summer-seat". So the workmen being on my side, hoped fervently nothing would turn up – and when on the morning of the third day we were told "the seat was ready" there had been no word of anything but the ordinary earth and loose stones being turned up, and they had been wheeled according to arrangement to the north and East. We two then ascended the knoll by the winding path from our house, to see the work completed. There was a slight "North-easter" at it as usual, indeed for the Month of May the day was rather gloomy. So we were disappointed with the amount of shelter our wedge-like cut into the knoll had given us. "You must make it larger", said my husband – "Make it into a circle and we can then have a circular seat all round instead of the triangle". "We have found absolutely nothing Ma'm, though we have looked very carefully so your seat is quite safe" said the elder workman with a pleased smile.

So we went down to the house to lunch arranging to be up by 3 pm to see the circle completed.

I did not think my friend Munro looking quite so beaming on our return. The afternoon had become still more gloomy, but there was no wind now. "We found just a wee bit holey, but we covered it over with a stone again, here it is". But my attention was rivetted on a bit of building, rough circular building, in a section of the now completed circle. "What's that Munro" said I? "I dinna know Ma'm we come upon it just this minute, I doubt there's something here after all! Look at this holey". He lifted a flat stone and under it there was a hollow formed by rough enclosing stones; earth, and a few white objects lay in it. "That is a "Cist" we both exclaimed! Of course we now proceeded to investigate in earnest and within half an hour two more remains of ancient "Cists" were found. They contained earth, Vitrifications (?) and small white bones, all apparently remnants of cremation. The Cists, though ruinous, were about 1½ ft square and by 1 ft deep; quite small in fact, but we thought it now time to have a thorough search and see if we came on any more. It was now about 5 pm. Munro's face was dark, the Inhabitants don't much like finding these burials. A Stone rather larger than the rest was raised; there was a fall of earth; and to our wondering eyes a huge stone Lintel appeared, a broken one beside it, underneath which we got a glimpse of a dark gloomy underground chamber, these Lintels forming the roof. We were all breathless! a sharp clap of thunder at the moment completed the weird scene. Down in the darkness of the chamber shone something white and erect. I was not the least afraid of the underground chamber! but I do dislike thunder and lightning! So I can recollect that I said "Oh let's go down to the house till this over". The two workmen looked hopefully at me, I am certain they would have gladly fallen in with my plan, but my Husband who is placidity itself wouldn't hear of it.

The story afterwards in the Isle is worth recording – An Angel whispered to our Lady that she was to open the Mound; there was a clap of thunder; one workman was picked up 50 yards from the spot, the other fainted, the Laird and the Lady turned pale.

Within an hour the news had spread round the Island like lightning, and before dark we saw little groups wending their way up to look at the exciting "find".



ILLUS 4 Pencil sketches of the excavation

side Stone life seems certain.
 neat, even precise, there
 elements other than Stone
 the Ground Plan of Tumulus.

huge
 right-hand
 the sleeping
 black greasy
 slabs of paving

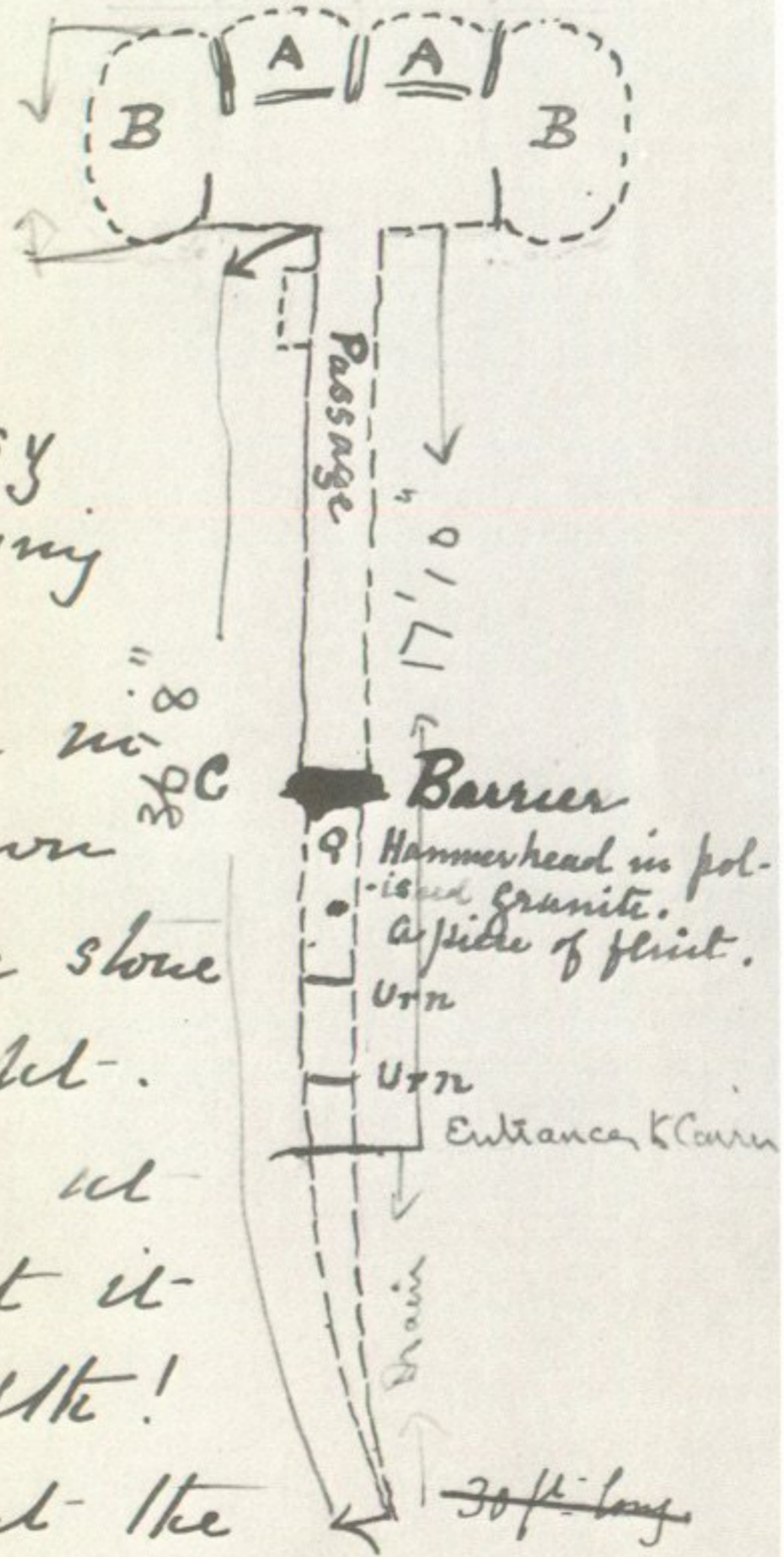
towers were in
 1/2 feet down

moveable stone
 in height.

rows till at
 entrance it
 is of width!

throughout the
 rough flat stones.

barrier it would have



ILLUS 5 Sketch plan of lower chamber

A few minutes after we had all recovered our astonishment. I ran down to the house for a candle. By its light one of the party descended by the broken lintel and explored the underground chamber; *very* superficially of course on this first occasion, but sufficiently to show that we had come upon a wonderfully preserved and complete “Chambered Cairn”, of four Chambers and a Passage, almost intact. In the short survey remains of a skeleton in a doubled up sitting position was observed, also various distinct heaps of bones; some of these heaps reaching along the Passage at intervals. When I went to bed that night I could think of nothing else! There had we sat, during many happy summers, stretched on the purple heather, basking in the sunshine; laughing and talking with the carelessness of youth, little dreaming that barely 8 feet below us sat these grim and ghastly skeletons of, maybe 2000 years ago? “In the midst of life we are in death” I went to the Mound that afternoon carrying a basket of spring flowers to plant at the Summer seat. On the homeward journey my basket contained a Skull.

For the next 3 weeks we were busy with the careful excavation of this mysterious Tumulus. I cannot describe the intense interest and excitement this caused. We read every book at hand on the subject. None of them seemed to know much more than we did! They approached the subject elaborately, and then ran away from it!

Who built this chamber?

Was it primarily for burial, or for something else?

How old is it?

There is no answer from The Unrecorded Past. That it belongs to the rude Stone Age seems certain.

Though the building is neat, even precise, there are no marks of implements other than stone on anything. Two of the Compartments look like huge Stone Armchairs A, 2 might be sleeping places B. In the sleeping places are layers of black greasy mud, separated by slabs of paving stone! [See *illus 5*.]

The remains of the Skeletons were in the Armchairs. 13½ feet down the Passage is an unmoveable stone Barrier C of over 1 foot in height. The Passage then narrows till at 30 feet from its commencement it ends in only 6 inches of width! It is paved and roofed throughout the 30 ft with neat but rough flat stones. In fact but for the barrier it might have been intended for a well built-drain, but the Barrier disposes of the possibility of this. What then is its purpose? Echoe answers “What”? In this underground Chamber and Passage nothing has been found but bones and greasy mud; but from the broken Lintel, which first revealed the Chamber of which it formed part of the roof, has been collected beautiful specimens (sadly broken) of Clay Urns; and from *outside* the Barrier the strangest “find” of all is a polished granite axe head in company with a small bit of flint. Cremation burials, under inverted Urns were also found where the Passage begins to narrow, all of which probably point to their being of much later date than the Underground Chamber. We have since found this Chamber to be roofed with 5 large stone lintels, 2 of them of 12 inches in thickness. A thinner Lintel having broken, and fallen in ages ago was the cause of our ever discovering the gloomy Chamber which first met our wondering eyes on that night of thunder!

A few rough illustrations may serve to make clear this attempt to describe “How we found a Tumulus” – one of the most interesting events of my life: a pursuit I can cordially recommend to anyone in search of excitement! I will only add that we do not by any means think we have come to the end of the mystery, but when time permits are promising ourselves further research into this world of Centuries ago.

The patterns on the Urns are identical with those found in Switzerland, Mexico, Ireland, India; The Chambers and Passage have also a general resemblance to others all over the world. Who is this universal race of people? and for what purpose was this Tumulus originally constructed? Is it a purely a burial Chamber? I cannot think it is *only* that. Has it been the Law-giver’s seat, to administer Justice to the District? Or has it some connection with Sun-worship, or Astronomical observation?

What a pity the Stones cannot speak, and reveal to us the intentions of their builders. As I sit there now and think over the thousand and one ideas it suggests, I find it far more interesting, – though perhaps less cheerful – than the merry parties we had promised ourselves, in the “Summer-seat” which has revealed so much mystery.

“Veronica”



ILLUS 6 Lady Eliza D'Oyley Burroughs

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