

## Dunbeath Broch: Stemming the Tide of History

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### Introduction

The Dunbeath Estate is situated in southern Caithness and occupies the southern half of the parish of Latheron. The estate is rich in archaeology and has been the centre of archaeological research since 1984. Keith Blood has had an involvement in the archaeology of the estate since his days in the Ordnance Survey, when he recorded many of the sites on the estate in the course of the mapping of Caithness. Subsequently, when the late Stanton Avery, then owner of the estate, set up the Dunbeath Preservation Trust, Keith was one of the trustees. The Dunbeath Preservation Trust has encouraged a substantial body of research on the estate, largely carried out by Glasgow University (e.g. Morrison 1996; Banks and Hooper 1998). Keith has taken a great interest in much of this work, and has taken part in some aspects of it himself. One of the projects involved Dunbeath broch, a scheduled ancient monument lying a little inland from the modern village of Dunbeath and a site which Keith first visited on 5 March 1968.

By no means the only broch on the estate, the Dunbeath broch is the example most closely associated with it and is currently in the best state of repair. The other examples are generally 'green' mounds like those found all over Caithness, mounds which are presumed to be brochs but may equally conceal other types of sites. The Dunbeath broch itself survived as a mound, as the nineteenth century account of the excavation of the broch states (Anderson 1890, 145), until the 1866 excavation of the site. The site was cleaned out as part of the excavation and revealed as a broch. Over the years since the excavation, the broch has suffered from exposure to the elements, and the wall faces have degraded quite badly. The account of the excavation suggests that there was evidence of intense heat on the internal walls (Anderson *ibid.*), and the structure of the stone work may have become weakened in the past. By the 1980s, the broch had become dangerous, while it was also now one of the sites on the Heritage Trail established by the Preservation Trust. This provided a pressing need to carry out remedial work and make the broch safer. Accordingly, the Trust approached the Scottish Development Department Historic Buildings and Monuments for partnership funding and in 1990, Glasgow University was commissioned to

provide the archaeological supervision for a consolidation of the broch.

### The Broch

The Dunbeath broch (Figs. 1 and 2) is situated on a scarp above the Dunbeath Water at the confluence with the Houstry Burn at ND1553 3045. On one side, the scarp falls steeply to the river, on the other, the ground falls away more gently before dropping to the Houstry Burn in a series of terraces. The view from the broch is downstream towards the sea, the ground behind the broch rising to cut off the broch from the inland areas. The river and the burn have carved deep gouges through the landscape and have created a very enclosed area, with steep slopes up to the higher ground all around. On the other side of the Houstry Burn is the Hill of Peace, a possible Early Christian monastery site (Banks and Hooper 1998), standing on top of a steep sided mound. Both the broch and the chapel site have appeared in the stories of Neil Gunn, most directly in *Sun Circle* (Gunn 1931), but also in passing in *The Silver Darlings* (Gunn 1941) and *Highland River* (Gunn 1937).

Of the history of the broch, little is known. There is a reference to *Dun Beitt* being besieged in 680 AD, a reference which has been linked to the broch but whose connection remains unproven, but other than this, the site is unrecorded until the nineteenth century. The monument was opened and excavated by the landowner, WS Thompson Sinclair the younger, in 1866. Although brief details of the results of the excavation were passed on to Joseph Anderson, no proper record of the excavation was made. Indeed, the excavation only came to a wider audience's attention in 1890 when Anderson's paper on excavations at a series of Caithness brochs was published in *Archaeologia Scotica*. Accordingly, no record survives of the extent of the excavation or the location of any trenches, and Anderson's account relied entirely upon a letter written to him by Thompson Sinclair. The result of the excavation was to leave the site opened to the elements, with the structure of the broch visible after centuries of being a green mound. However, while the site could now be seen as a broch (Fig. 1), the evidence of its internal occupation had apparently

# DUNBEATH BROCH

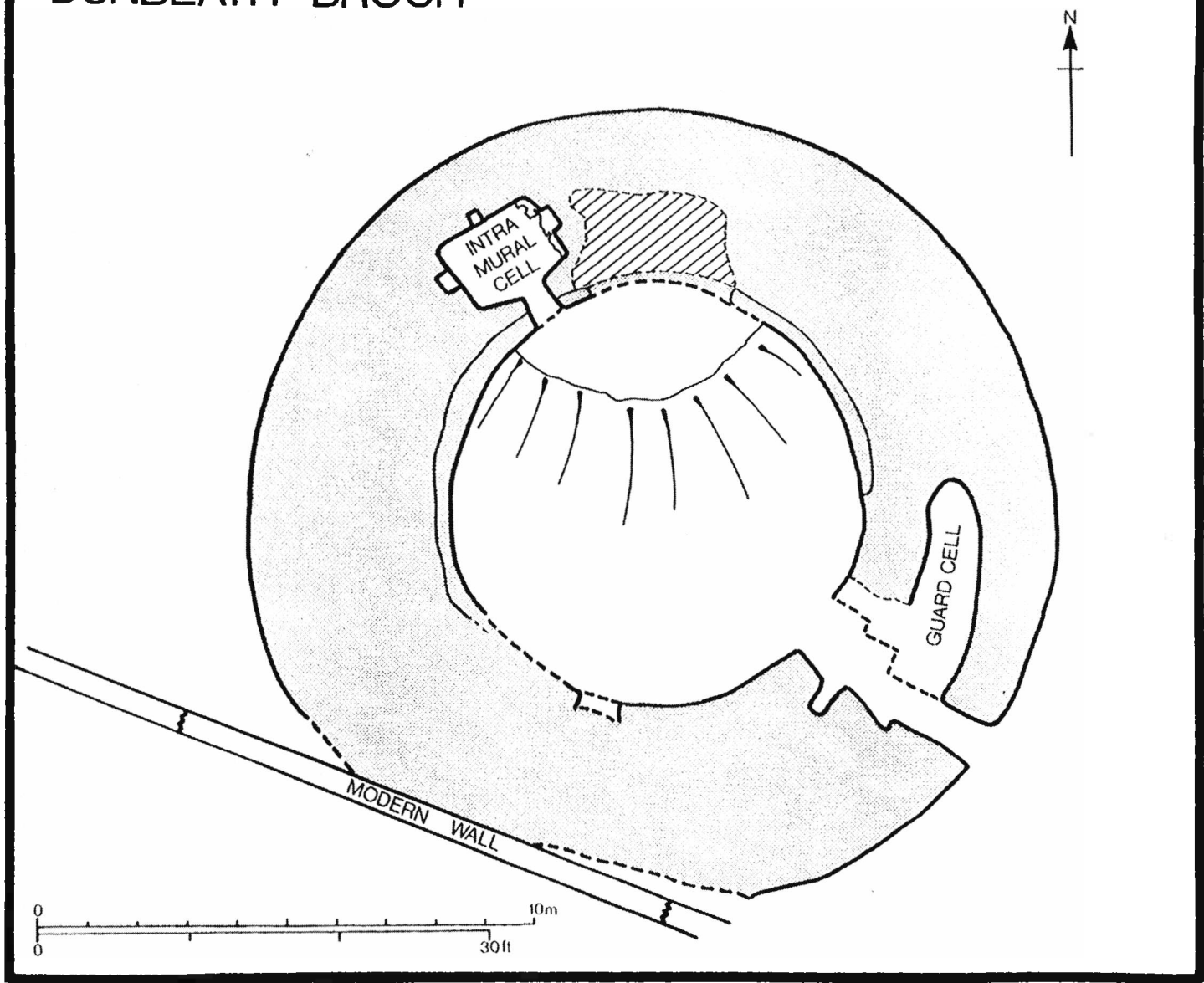


Fig. 1. Plan of Dunbeath broch.

been lost in the excavation: a more recent account of the broch concluded that the site was completely exposed inside and out, all debris having been removed from the site (Swanson 1985a).

The excavation revealed that the broch consisted of a narrow entrance passage, with a 'guard-cell' on the south-east, leading into a circular fosse sloping up to the rear of the broch. Only one internal structure was apparent, a chamber in the back wall opposite the entrance. Beyond this, there were no indications of any further intra-mural features such as a staircase. The chamber is quite unusual, having a corbelled roof rising to nearly 3m in height. The two side walls both have a well-constructed aumbry. The walls also bear the evidence of generations of visitors who have left their names and initials carved in the stone. One of the most evocative of these graffiti is the initials of 'A Poulson', a name which is also recorded in Dunbeath village on the War memorial at the Post Office (T. Pollard, pers. comm.).

It was very apparent by the 1980s that the stones of the inner face were weathering quite badly and that parts of the inner face were close to collapse. The poor state of the stonework had required some intervention already, causing alterations to the structure of the broch with a patch of wall above the entrance to the chamber having been re-built rather poorly. Trees had seeded within the broch interior and were growing through whatever deposits might have survived the 1866 excavations.

Surrounding the broch is a large stone wall which may well have been constructed at the time of the excavation (Fig. 2). Its main purpose seems to have been to prevent cattle from straying over the precipice on which the broch stands (Swanson 1985a). It presumably utilised much of the rubble from within the broch, although there was still a great deal of rubble inside, particularly against the internal face on the north-north-west beside the chamber entrance. The later wall was also considered to be a possible explanation for the lack of external features which are reasonably common in Caithness and Orkney (Swanson 1985b). The dating of the wall to the excavation is suggested by a nineteenth century photograph of the Ballachly croft in which broch is visible in the background as a mound; the wall had not yet been built and there were no trees present. A couple of now-vanished small mounds also lay near the broch (G. Bethune, pers. comm.). Certainly, from this photograph, the folk etymology of the name *Dunbeath* as the 'fort of the beech trees' (Morrison 1996) would be less easy to accept than it is today with the vigorous tree growth inside the wall.

## A Cause for Concern

The condition of the broch was of some concern by the 1980s. The trees growing within the broch were causing damage to the structure of the broch, while the cattle which sought the shade of the trees were causing further damage as they wandered amongst the stones. The stones of the internal face of the broch were fragmenting and it was obvious that sections of the wall-face would eventually

collapse into the interior. Furthermore, the re-built section of the chamber was of particular concern and appeared liable to collapse, having been carried out so poorly as to represent a threat to the safety of visitors. Finally, it was also apparent that the entrance to the broch had been damaged; on the western side, it was turf-covered and slumped. On the eastern side, it was still standing, but the external face showed signs of modern rebuilding and the inner face had been removed down to ground level.

These concerns about the broch led the Dunbeath Preservation Trust to suggest consolidation of the broch. The project was submitted to the Historic Buildings and Monuments section of the Scottish Development Department (HBM, the forerunner of Historic Scotland) for partnership funding and for scheduled monument consent. The costs of the project were agreed and divided between Historic Buildings and Monuments and the Dunbeath Preservation Trust and Glasgow University was contracted through its field archaeology unit, Archaeology Projects Glasgow (APG, later GUARD), to provide archaeological support to the project. The project brief as defined by HBM was to consolidate the stonework under archaeological supervision, with rebuilding carried out where necessary. Disturbance to the floor was to be minimised since there was no certainty as to the extent of the 1866 excavation. The Dunbeath Preservation Trust approached a local stonemason, Charlie Juhlenki of Mid Clyth, to undertake the actual re-building and the work was carried out in May and June of 1990.

## The Consolidation

The consolidation process involved replacing decayed stones with stone from the estate and re-building in a more sympathetic fashion areas which had clearly been altered in the recent past. The stones used were all local but were appreciably different to the original stones in order to make the interventions plain. Moving clockwise from the entrance (Fig. 1), the work carried out was as follows:

The west side of the entrance was exposed and cleared. Original stonework was reduced almost to ground level, but was complete enough to reconstruct this side of the entrance to a level of about five courses of stonework, preserving the original line. A small niche was discovered towards the back of the entrance, roughly 0.5 by 0.3 m, seemingly a slot or check for the doorway.

The area of collapse in the west side of the wall was partially rebuilt. This was not completed because an opening was discovered. It was at first thought to have been the entrance to a further intra-mural chamber or possibly a staircase, but neither explanation is entirely satisfactory. The main chamber, in the north, is nearly three metres high, which would make a staircase reaching a level above this chamber unfeasibly steep. Furthermore, none of the stonework behind this opening gave any indication of structure. Investigation was curtailed by the discovery of archaeological deposits, shown by the presence of shells, burnt bone and flecks of charcoal in the soil fill of the opening. To avoid damage to potentially undisturbed

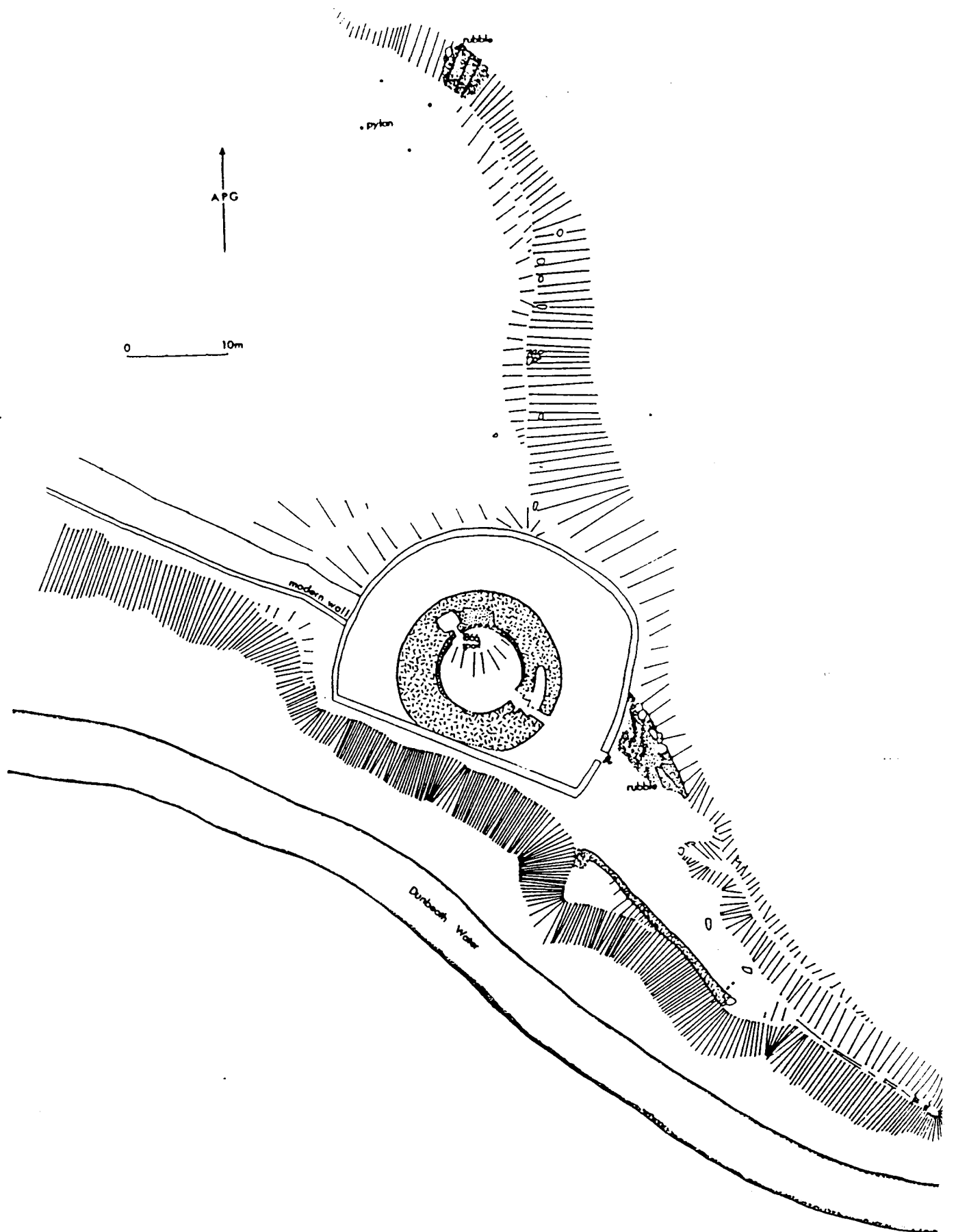


Fig. 2. Plan of Dunbeath broch and locality.

archaeological deposits, this area was covered with turf and left to posterity.

The lower wall was patched and partially re-faced up to the scarcement level because of the degraded stonework. During this work, some large stones from the upper wall fell out, graphically demonstrating the pressing need for the consolidation. The vegetation covering the scarcement all the way round the broch was cleared, removing damaging root systems and also making the line of the scarcement obvious.

The upper wall on the west of the chamber had to be consolidated because it was unstable, as the collapse mentioned above demonstrated, and little of the original facing remains. The original builders of the broch had used a lot of shale in this area, which had not survived the weathering particularly well. The whole of this area was in a very serious state of decay and posed an active danger to visitors. Furthermore, the safety of the chamber's roof could not be guaranteed without rebuilding this section of wall.

The modern rebuild of the chamber's corbelled roof was pulled down and replaced. The potential danger of collapse was revealed during this process, for the entire rebuild was held in place by a small wedge of stone. Working with aquaprops, the stonework was removed back to the original corbelling and then rebuilt so that all the corbelling was securely anchored. It also proved necessary to rebuild the entrance to the chamber because the western side was beginning to collapse.

It had originally been intended that the area of supposed collapse in the north face by the chamber should be left as an archaeological deposit. However, when work on the chamber began, it became obvious that this area of collapse posed an unacceptable degree of danger to the work of reconstruction and that health and safety considerations required some intervention. As the upper layers were removed, the deposit proved to be rubble overlying a mixture of soil, sharp fragments of rock, rubble, bones, shell and bottle glass. This suggested that it was a modern deposit. The sheer quantity of stones in the slump demonstrated that it was not simply the collapse of that section of wall, while the majority of the stones were from the exterior since they were convex-faced (C. Juhlenki, pers. comm.). The bones and shell appeared in greater quantities than might have been expected from the amounts elsewhere in the wall but would fit with references to the discovery of midden material during the excavation of the interior of the broch. The most reasonable explanation for the deposit is that it represents the spoil from the 1866 excavation. Consequently, the loose rubble was cleared down until original stonework appeared and the wall was rebuilt on the original line. In order to display the scarcement, two courses of upper wall were added. This also provided a safe area from which to work on the chamber.

The various holes in the inner face of the eastern side of the wall were patched. This was complicated by the poor state of much of the stone of this part of the wall. There was a 'seam' of slate running through it requiring replacement, while many of the other stones were cracked and broken.

The 'guard cell' on the south-eastern side of the entrance was cleared of rubble and the walls defined as far as possible. This proved straightforward on the exterior side, but more intractable on the interior, where the general collapse of the inner face of the eastern side of the entrance had removed this part of the 'guard cell'. It proved impossible to give a secure line to this side of the chamber without excavation, which was out with the remit of the project. However, there was no sign of a narrowing of the chamber towards the entrance. The remains of the original wall of the chamber were exposed as far as possible and then surrounded with turf as protection.

The line of the eastern side of the entrance passage was then investigated. A tentative line was established, but it was too uncertain without excavation for any rebuild. It was obvious that there had been a degree of modern rebuilding of the exterior of the entrance, as some of the stones were upside down and there were large gaps between some of them. The eastern side of the entrance was removed down to original stonework and then reconstructed to the same height.

The exterior of the broch was generally in much better condition. The only necessary work here was the removal of vegetation from the walls, the removal of overhanging loose stones that might collapse and the filling of various small holes in the stonework.

Turf was used as a protecting agent on various parts of the broch. Both sides of the entrance were covered, as were the archaeological deposits exposed at the newly-discovered opening. Turf was also used to cover the inner face of the entrance on the eastern side; the stones which might represent the original line of the entrance were at floor-level and thus at risk from visitor erosion.

In addition, the project allowed a brief investigation of the environs of the broch. As noted earlier, it was unusual for the broch to have no external features and examination of the surrounding area indicated that the absence of external features might well be more apparent than real. As the plan indicates (Fig. 2), there are a series of possible earthen enclosures surrounding the broch.

Throughout the structure of the walls of the broch, the soil matrix contained soil and faunal remains. This is most likely to have been used as a settling agent to bed in the stones of the wall securely (C. Juhlenki, pers. comm.), but it is interesting that what was obviously a midden deposit had been used for this purpose. This can be seen as the re-use of waste material, in which case the material is of interest because it is evidence of settlement prior to the broch, although whether this was from an earlier site unrelated to the broch or is directly representative of the settlement of the builders cannot be known in the absence of radiocarbon dates. Another possibility for the inclusion of midden material in the walls which must be considered is that the selection of midden soils was purposeful, that the intention was to incorporate elements of earlier settlement within the new structure. In this sense, the midden material might be seen as similar to a votive deposit. Certainly, this is speculative and the explanation may be entirely prosaic. However, there was no particular need to use the midden soil with its content of bones and shell rather than any other

soil and the possibility that there was some non-functional meaning to the selection of the soil must be considered.

## The Consolidated Broch

The broch has now been rendered safe and its process of decay has been slowed to a more acceptable rate, and this has been achieved with minimum intrusion into the integrity of the monument. The broch is a striking monument and one of the most impressive structures on the Dunbeath Heritage Trail; in its consolidated form, the monument is an asset to the Trust and to the estate. However, the drawback about intervening in the decay of a site is that it produces a long-term obligation. It is not sufficient to make a single intervention in the form of consolidation work and then to ignore the site. Having consolidated the broch, the challenge for the Dunbeath Preservation Trust and Historic Scotland is to maintain the condition of the broch by preventing the regeneration of trees in the interior of the site and to keep the vegetation on the wall heads down. This is particularly critical in view of the evidence which suggests that relatively undisturbed deposits may survive within the broch. With such maintenance in hand, the broch will have a long-term future as an attraction for those interested in the archaeology of Caithness and for those interested in the works of Neil M Gunn.

## Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Tony Pollard and Alex Morrison for their comments over the years; Charlie Juhlenki for the excellent work he carried out and the insights into the stonework he provided; George Crawford for sharing mashed fingers and burst blood vessels labouring; Historic Buildings and Monuments (now Historic Scotland) and the Dunbeath Preservation Trust for funding the work; and Isobel Miller for access to the site. I should also like to thank George and Nan Bethune for showing the nineteenth century photographs of the site to me.

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