



Highland Archaeology Services Ltd
Bringing the Past and Future Together

Quintfall

Lyth, Caithness



Watching Brief Report

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Quintfall

Lyth, Caithness

Watching Brief Report

Report No.	HAS100908
Site Code	QFL09
Grid Ref	E330970, N961633
Client	S Fowles
Planning Ref	09/ 00123 / FULCA
OASIS	highland4-83216 (1)
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Author	Paul Humphreys

Summary

An archaeological desk-based assessment and watching brief was undertaken in response to a planning condition during excavations for a new dwelling at Quintfall, Lyth; nothing of archaeological significance was encountered.

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Location and setting

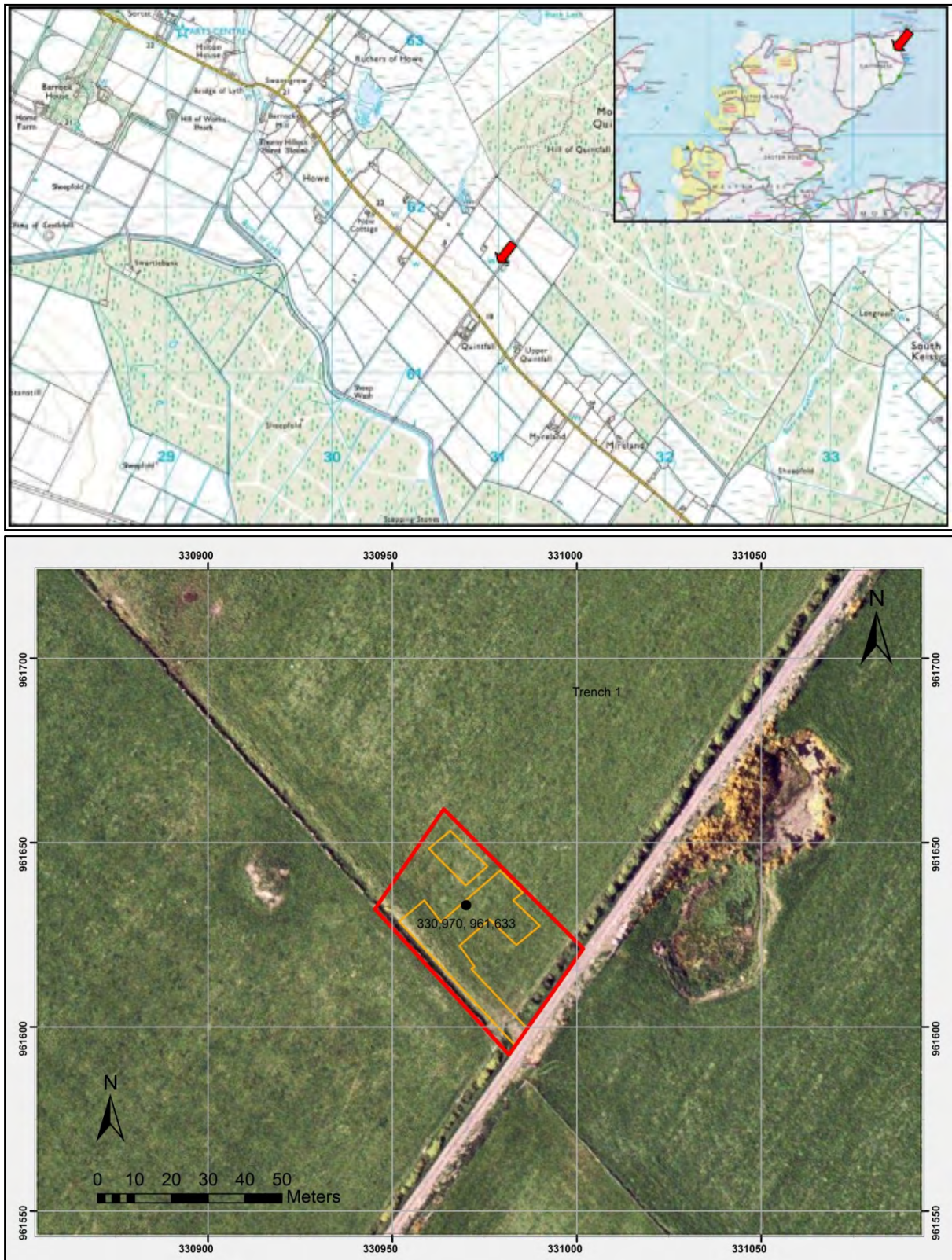


Figure 1 Site location

Mapping reproduced from the Ordnance Survey under licence. Not to scale. Aerial photograph courtesy of GetMapping.com. Red outline – application site; orange outlines: watching brief areas

The site lies at Quintfall, centred approximately at OS grid reference ND 3097 6166 at about 27 m above sea level (Fig. 1) (Photo 1). It is located in improved farm land on rising ground on the southwest facing flank of the Hill of Quintfall. To the northwest the improved farmland gives way to Quintfall forest plantation (Photo 2). The south-western aspect overlooks a low-lying area towards the hills that mark the southern boundary of the county (Photo 3).

Introduction

The construction a new private house at Quintfall, Lyth, required as a condition of planning consent that an archaeological watching brief be conducted during site stripping. The area concerned is depicted on Figures 1 and 2.

Archaeology and policy background

The new house site is located 22 m from the site of a 'Pict's House', shown on the first edition Ordnance Survey 6-inch map (Figure 2) (Photo 4). It survives as a grass-grown mound, 15.0 m in diameter and 2.2 m high, trenched through by Sir Francis Tress Barry, who found nothing. The monument is almost certainly not a broch; it is recorded on the Highland Historic Environment Record (HHER) and the National Monuments Record (NMRS) as a 'possible cairn'¹, where it is described as

A turf-covered mound, prominently situated on rising ground as described in previous report. It is roughly bowl-shaped, though the margins have been disturbed by ploughing, and there is some disturbance on summit, probably caused by Tress Barry's trenching. Substantial erosion of turf cover reveals a content of earth and small fragments of stone; only a very few rubble stones are exposed. Despite the absence of finds by Tress Barry, it is possible that this is a barrow or cairn.

Despite the uncertainty over the nature of this feature, the possibility of associated buried archaeology within the present application site led to the request for a watching brief here.

There are no other archaeological features recorded within 500m of the present site.

The current planning and policy framework includes the Highland Council's *Structure Plan*², and the Scottish Government's *Scottish Planning Policy* (SPP), issued in February 2010, which consolidates and supersedes the previous SPP and NPPG series³. The fundamental principles underpinning UK and Scottish policies are set out in *Passed to the Future: Historic Scotland's Policy for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment* (2002)⁴ and the *Burra Charter* (Australia ICOMOS 1999).⁵

¹ HHER MHG410; NMRS ND36SW4

² <http://www.highland.gov.uk/yourenvironment/planning/developmentplans/structureplan/thehighlandstructureplan.htm>

³ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/02/03132605/8>

⁴ www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/pasttofuture.pdf

⁵ <http://www.icomos.org/australia/burra.html>



Figure 2 Extract from Ordnance Survey 1st Edition 25'' map, surveyed 1872.
Caithness sheet XIII Courtesy of National Library of Scotland. Not reproduced to scale

Programme

A desk-based assessment was followed by the phase 1 watching brief for the construction of the access drive and caravan stance, which was carried out on October 14th 2009 in accordance with a Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) approved by the Highland Council.⁶

Phase 2, the stripping of the proposed house and garage area, was conducted in August 30th and 31st 2010 in accordance with the said WSI. During the interim period, the Council's archaeologist also requested that all field drains encountered should be investigated and recorded.

Results

Phase 1

Stripping in preparation for a hard standing to accommodate the client's caravan (Trench 1), was carried out in weather conditions of mist below a heavy overcast sky with occasional rain showers. The stripping was conducted using a 5 ton tracked 360⁰ excavator fitted with a smooth-bladed ditching bucket. Turf and topsoil were removed down to the first colour change which proved to be the plough-soil / clay till interface. The depth of the topsoil was variable, being generally 200 to 400 mm (Photo 5). The top soil proved to be undifferentiated, bio-turbation being active with no evidence of podsolisation.

⁶ Wood 2009

A possible feature (Feature 1) was noted close to the southern edge of the stripped area which looked at first sight to be a cut (Photo 6). Hand cleaning suggested that it might be a product of ditch clearance, with re-deposited orange clay from the base of the ditch being interleaved between layers of dark topsoil (Photo 7). It soon became clear that it was indeed flattened up-cast from ditch cleaning, with no clear edge – just a spread of rubble covered by flattened up-cast whose boundaries were arbitrary, dependent on how much material was trowelled off, so no plan was drawn. Although photos 6 and 7 appear to show a terminus this is in fact the product of the mix of clay and top soil from the ditch cleaning as described above.

Nevertheless, a small sondage (Photo 8) was cut to test this interpretation. This confirmed the interpretation and revealed a layer of rubble comprising a mix of glacially rounded cobbles and sharp edged quarry stone. This was interpreted as hardcore dumped to form or repair an old track that probably gave access to farm buildings and a well (now abandoned) shown on the 1872 map (Figure 2 and Photo 9).

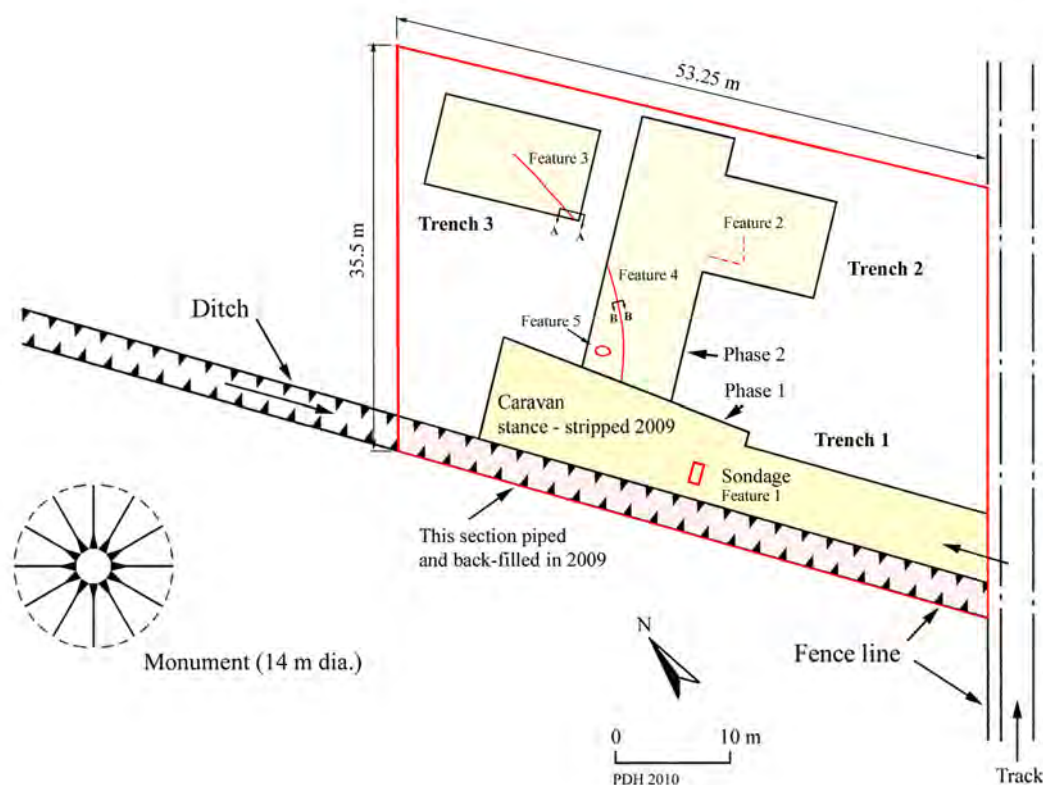


Figure 3 (Drawing 1) – Site plan

Phase 2

The stripping of the house (Trench 2) and garage bases (Trench 3), was carried out in bright sunshine. The stripping was conducted using a 5 ton tracked 360° excavator fitted with a smooth-bladed ditching bucket, working in conjunction with a dumper. Turf and topsoil were removed down to the first colour change which, as with phase 1, proved to be the plough-soil / clay till interface. The consistency of the till varied across the site, being clay to the west with increasing levels of sand and gravel to the east. The depth of the topsoil varied from 250 to 400 mm, the variation resulting from a

series of undulations in the till surface, which had an orientation consistent with the generalised pattern of ice flow across Caithness during the Devensian glaciation⁷.

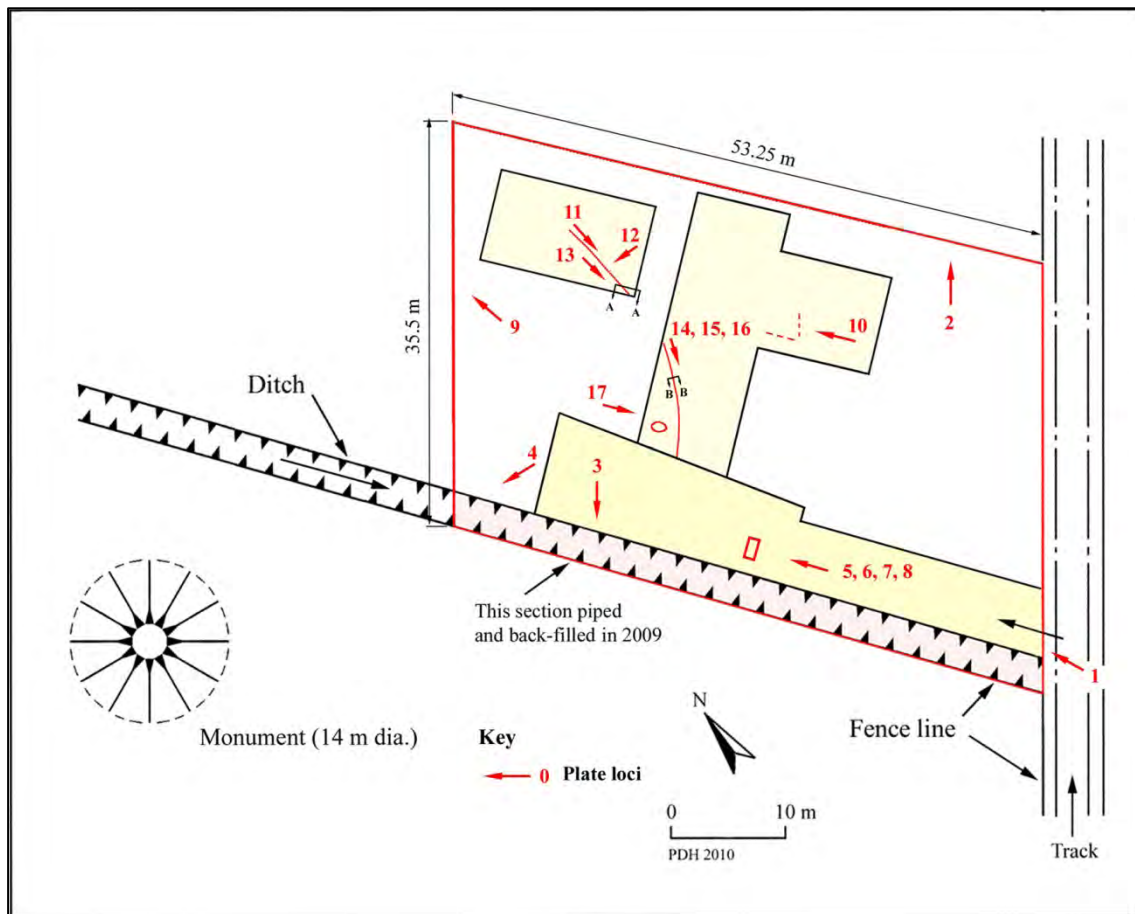


Figure 4 (Drawing 2) – Photograph locations

⁷ Peach and Horn 1881 p321

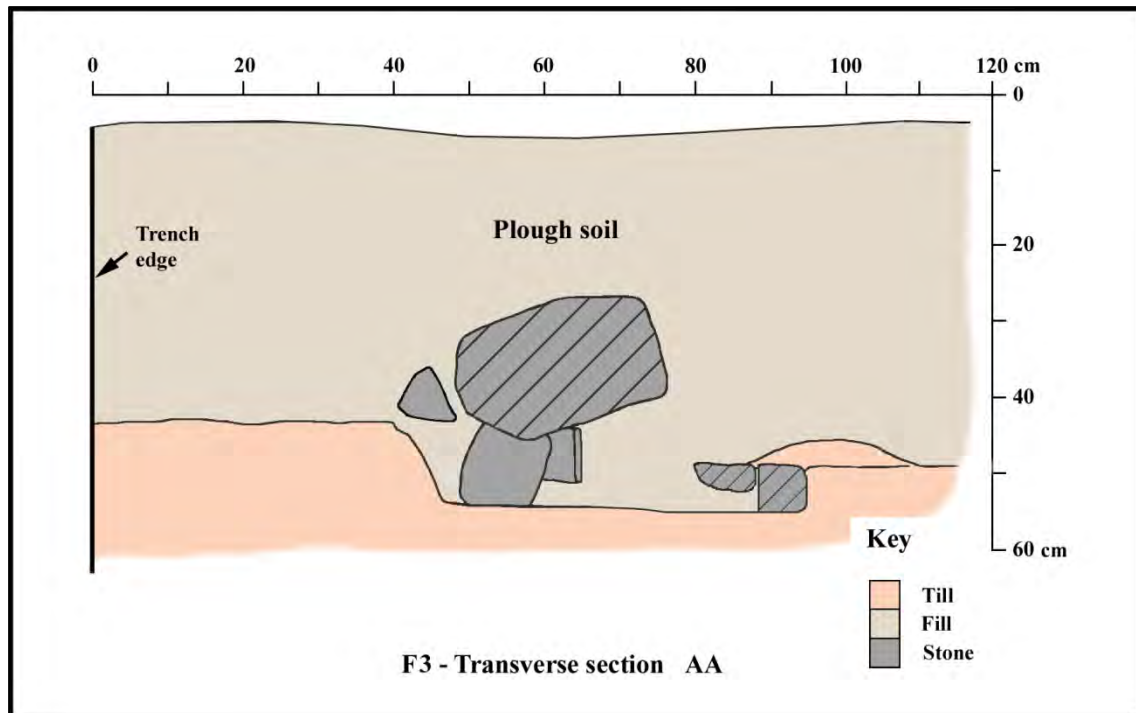


Figure 5 (Drawing 3) – Feature 3

The crest of one of the undulations in the till showed evidence for ploughing in the form of two roughly orthogonal ploughshare grooves (Feature 2 - Trench 2) (Photo 10). The orientation of the grooves respected the fence-lines of the improvement landscape and the feature was taken to be relatively modern.

Two further features (Feature 3 - Trench 3) and (Feature 4 - Trench 2) were also noted: these were interpreted as field drains (Fig 3 / Drawing 1). The section in Trench 3 was shallow, being constructed largely in the plough soil with only the base preserved in till surface (Drawing 3) (Photos 11 and 12). This being the case, it is presumed that, at the time the drain was constructed, the field was used for pasture. The section suggested that the drain had largely been destroyed by later ploughing, as it was not evident during stripping of the upper plough soil (Photo 13) (Fig 5 / Drawing 3 / Section AA).

The field drain in Trench 2 appears to be a continuation of Feature 3 in Trench 3 but cut deeper into the till (Drawing 4 - section BB) (Photos 14, 15 and 16). However, comparison of sections 'AA' and 'BB' suggests differences in constructional detail; notably the small stones in the base of feature 3. This could be explained if the drain had been partially re-constructed after being damaged by ploughing.

Both Features 3 and 4 were recorded in section (Drawings 3 and 4); Feature 4 being reconstructed after excavation to preserve its function (Photo 16).

A further feature (Feature 5) appeared as a sub-circular cut. The fill was rich in partially decomposed vegetable matter of recent origin and was interpreted as a truncated animal brood chamber (Photo 17). There were no features or finds of archaeological interest identified in this area.

Conclusions and recommendations

No features of archaeological significance were recorded apart from indications of plough-marks and field drains. No further fieldwork is recommended.

References

Highland Historic Environment Record (HHER) <http://her.highland.gov.uk>

National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS) <http://www.rcahms.gov.uk>

Peach B N, and Horn J, 1881 'The Glaciation of Caithness', *Proceedings of the Royal Physical Society of Edinburgh* Vol. VI 1881 p321

Wood J, 2009 *Proposed Watching Brief: Quintfall, Lyth, Caithness; Written Scheme of Investigation*, Highland Archaeology Services, Cromarty (Report no. HAS090603)

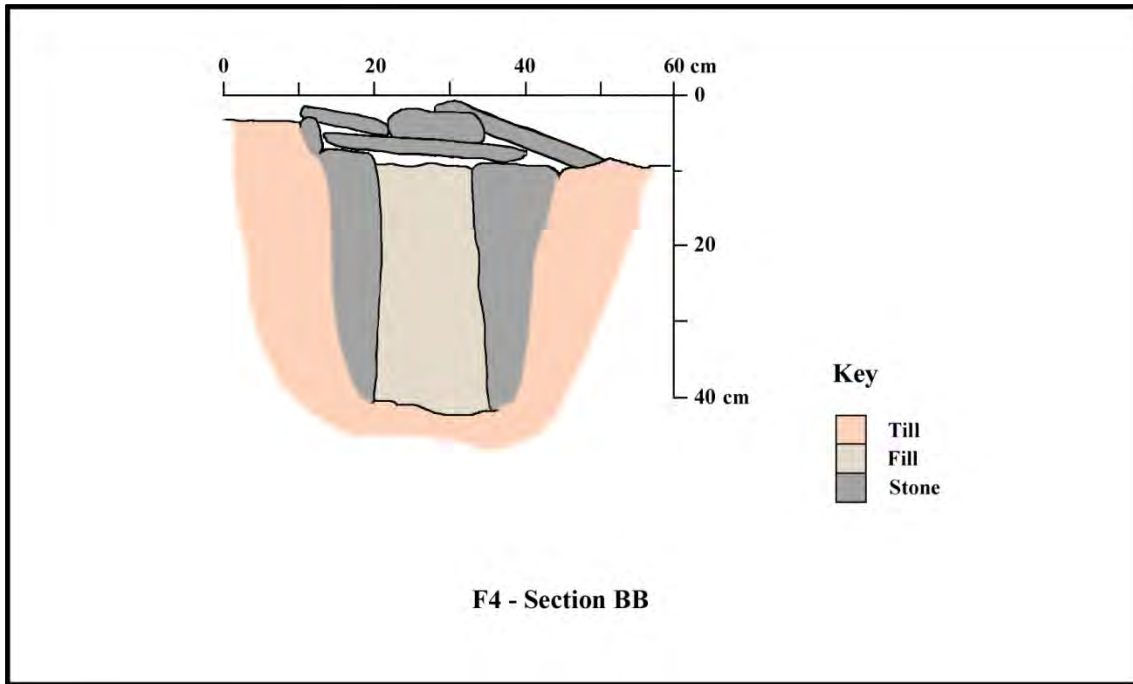


Figure 6 (Drawing 4) – Feature 4

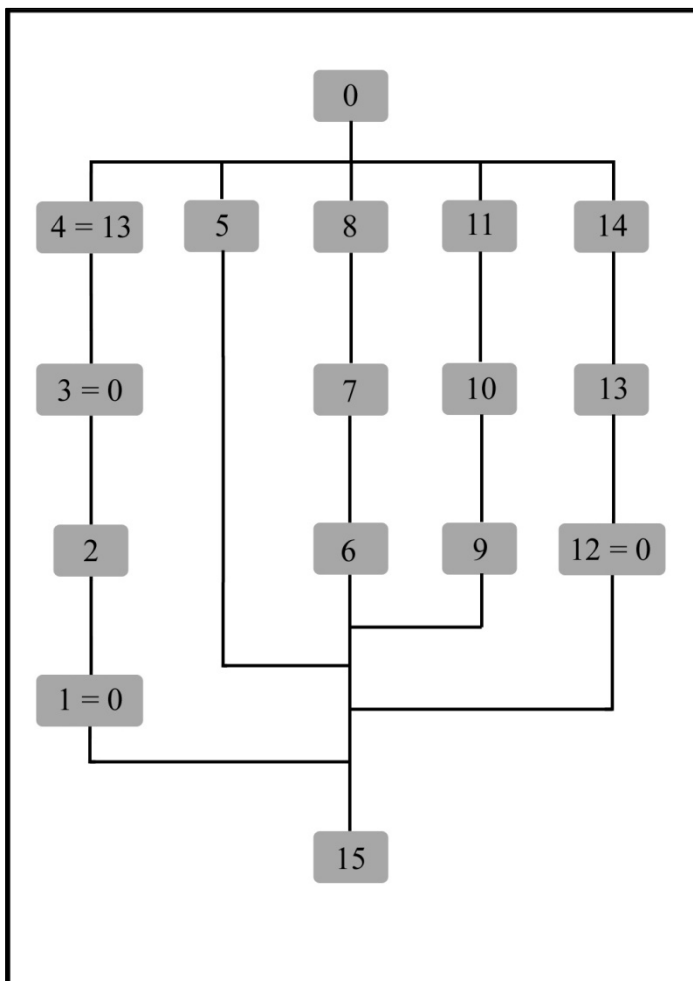


Figure 7 Stratigraphy - Harris matrix

Tables

Table 1 Drawings

Drawing No.	Title	Subject	Location (Centre E,N)	Drawn by	Date
1	Site plan	Overall site plan	330940 961622	PDH	01 09 2010
2	Plate loci	Photo locations	330940 961622	PDH	15 09 2010
3	Feature 3	Field drain section	330957 961637	PDH	10 09 2010
4	Feature 4	Field drain section	330931 961664	PDH	10 09 2010

Table 2 Photographs

Photo No.	Notes	Taken by	Date
1	Site looking northwest (pre-start)	PDH	14 10 2009
2	View looking northwest (pre-start)	PDH	14 10 2009
3	View looking southwest (pre-start)	PDH	14 10 2009
4	View of monument - looking southwest (pre-start)	PDH	14 10 2009
5	Phase 1 stripped area - looking northwest	PDH	14 10 2009
6	Apparent cut (Feature 1) - looking northwest	PDH	14 10 2009
7	Clay till interleaved with top-soil - looking northwest	PDH	14 10 2009
8	Feature 1 sondage - looking northwest	PDH	14 10 2009
9	Farm buildings - looking northwest	PDH	14 10 2009
10	Ploughshare marks - looking northwest	PDH	30 09 2010
11	Feature 3 - looking south	PDH	31 09 2010
12	Feature 3; detail - looking west	PDH	31 09 2010
13	Feature 3; detail - looking south	PDH	31 09 2010
14	Feature 4; stage 1 looking - south	PDH	30 09 2010
15	Feature 4; stage 2 - looking south	PDH	30 09 2010
16	Feature 4; reinstated – looking south	PDH	30 09 2010
17	Feature 5; truncated animal brood chamber – looking southeast	PDH	31 09 2010

Table 3 Features

Feature No.	Drawing Nos.	Contexts	Interpretation	Location 1 (E,N)	Location 2 (E,N)
1	1,2	0,1,2,3,13	Track hardcore deposit	30973 61601	30942 61645
2	1,2	0,4,13	Ploughshare cut	30971 61634	30972 61636
3	1,2,3	0,5,6,7,13	Field drain	30962 61654	30962 61646
4	1,2,4	0,8,9,10,13	Field drain	30962 61641	30957 61633
5	1,2	0,11,12	Animal brood chamber	30957 61636	centre

Table 4 Contexts

Context No.	Type	Photo	Drawing No.	Stratigraphy			Feature No.	Interpretation
				above	below	equal		
0	Deposit	5,6,7,8		1 to 15			1	Ploughsoil
1	Deposit	5,6,7,8		15	2	0	1	Ploughsoil
2	Deposit	5,6,7,8		1	3		1	Rubble
3	Deposit	5,6,7,8		2	4	0	1	Ploughsoil
4	Deposit	5,6,7,8		3	0	15	1	Re-deposited till
5	Cut	10		15	0		2	Ploughshare cut
6	Cut	11,12,13	3	15	7		3	Field drain cut
7	Structure	11,12,13	3	6	8		3	Stone field drain lining
8	Deposit	11,12,13	3	7	0		3	Drain fill
9	Cut	14,15,16	4	15	10		4	Field drain cut
10	Structure	14,15,16	4	9	11		4	Stone field drain lining
11	Deposit	14,15,16	4	10	0		4	Drain fill
12	Deposit	17		15		0	5	Ploughsoil
13	Cut	17		12	14		5	Animal brood chamber
14	Deposit	17		13			5	Chamber fill
15	Deposit				0 to 14			Natural till

Photographs



Photo 1 Site looking northwest (pre-start)



Photo 2 View looking northwest (pre-start)



Photo 3 View looking southwest (pre-start)



Photo 4 View of monument - looking southwest (pre-start)



Photo 5 Phase 1 stripped area - looking northwest



Photo 6 Apparent cut (Feature 1) - looking northwest



Photo 7 Clay till interleaved with top-soil - looking northwest



Photo 8 Feature 1 sondage - looking northwest



Photo 9 Former farm buildings - looking northwest



Photo 10 Plough marks - looking northwest



Photo 11 Feature 3 - looking south



Photo 12 Feature 3; detail - looking west



Photo 13 Feature 3 - detail, looking south



Photo 14 Feature 4; stage 1, looking - south



Photo 15 Feature 4; stage 2 - looking south



Photo 16 Feature 4 reinstated, looking south



Photo 17 Feature 5; truncated animal brood chamber – looking southeast