

Site Survey

Mr. F. Bettess of Sunderland Polytechnic continued work on the new site-survey and plan, and roughly one-third of the site was plotted. The results are being computerised, and ultimately will be drawn out with the aid of a graph-plotter when the whole site is completed.

Objectives for 1976

- 1) Excavation of the area to the north-east of House N, possibly including House E and another.
- 2) Small-scale work to answer specific questions arising out of excavation in 1974 and 1975 to the west of the Cathedral, and, where incomplete, to finish this work.
- 3) Continued excavation of House F, and possibly also the other buildings on the cliff-edge to the north of the Cathedral.
- 4) Completion of the site-survey.

Brough of Deerness, Orkney (NGRHY 596087)

Excavations 1975

Excavations at this site were directed by Mr. C.D. Morris of Durham University on behalf of the Department of the Environment (Scotland) for a period of three weeks, with some post-excavation work immediately following in Durham, in September 1975. The excavation team was drawn from Durham University, with a Site Assistant from Gothenburg University. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the skilful assistance, especially in transporting huts and equipment to this remote site, of the D.O.E. staff in Orkney, and in particular that of Mr. John Drever, the Foreman. The onset of gales and wet weather, while not prematurely ending the excavation, hampered work in the second half of the excavation, and it will be continued in 1976.

The site is traditionally the site of an Early Christian monastery, and both rectangular and circular features, apparently buildings, were plotted by the Royal Commission in the 1930's and subsequently published. An intended aerial photographic survey of the site in September by Dr. D.W. Harding of Durham University could not take place because of the inclement weather, and Dr. Harding's indisposition; it is hoped to carry out this survey in 1976. Owing to the presence of the Army's shells (some certainly unexploded), neither magnetometer nor resistivity surveys have yet been initiated.

The object of the excavation was the chapel and its associated enclosure. The site is heavily overgrown, and the chapel is in a bad state of disrepair because it was used for target-practice by the Army during the War. Preliminary clearance of some of the rubble tumble in and around the chapel by the D.O.E. Orkney staff had taken place, but, owing to the nature of the site, this was halted in favour of archaeological investigation prior to consolidation of the building.

It was clear that the Army's work had severely depleted the walls, as well as pushing in the uppermost part of the south wall to overhang the interior, and that some collapse has taken place since then. Indeed this has been accompanied by rather random 're-building' of the walls — particularly the eastern wall — presumably by the (occasional) visitors to the site; a 1971 penny was found under 4 'courses' of stone in the eastern wall in a position that can only have been achieved by such 're-building'. The walls were cleared of loose and dangerous stones as well as those obviously replaced in this sort of ecclesiastical 'cairn-building'. Care was taken to remove no stone more than seemed necessary, but, even so, part of the north-east corner of the chapel collapsed during one gale.

The chapel is stone-built, approximately 4.80 metres long by 3.00 metres in width internally, with walls approximately 1.50 metres thick. The walls are now standing to a height that varies from 40 cms. to a little less than 2 metres. No window-

settings are discernible, and the only entrance is from the west through a splayed doorway less than a metre in width. It is a single-cell structure with no visible porch, tower or chancel, and no sign in the masonry that there ever was any.

Within the chapel, large loose rubble from recent collapse was removed, and then that which appeared to be an earlier collapse. All of the tumble removed by us was examined carefully, along with that removed by the D.O.E. staff, for signs of re-use of earlier architectural features, grave-slabs etc., but little readily identifiable material was found. In this process of clearance, fourteen coins were found in addition to the sixteen found previously by the D.O.E. staff, and two picked up by C.D. Morris during preliminary visits to the site. Initial inspection of them could suggest Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century dates for them, and would fit in with the tradition that this site remained a place of pilgrimage up the Eighteenth Century.

Below the loose mixed rubble and earth, a stratified layer of thick brown clay, also with large flat stones in it, was encountered. No coins were recovered from this layer, and, although it had the appearance of a 'surface', it is unlikely to have been a floor. However, usable at this time would have been a stone bench approximately 40 cms. wide, 35 cms. high, and extending nearly 3 metres along the south wall from the south-west corner. It is formed of slabs laid horizontally, and delimited by upright slabs at the east end. Also clearly present was a solid stone altar against the east wall of the chapel, c. 80 cms. deep, 1.10 metres wide, and 1 metre high. A large black stone, that may possibly have been the *mensa*, was found lying on the clay 'surface' in front of, and to one side of, the altar. Unfortunately, this stone was crossed by a myriad of breaks and, being flagstone, had also split horizontally, so that preservation of it was impossible. However, no incised features of any kind were found on either face or the edges.

A second clayey 'surface' was distinguished with gravel and stones mixed in. Notable was the presence of a group of well-

fired, wheel-turned, unglazed sherds of pottery, and a group of much coarser, more friable, pottery was also found, both in this layer and a burnt patch below.

The first obvious floor level consisted of a mortar surface which covered most, but not all, the chapel, and indeed 'lipped over' an earlier stone setting across the east end of the chapel. Removal of this mortar revealed that the stones were clearly the top of a raised step below and to either side of the altar, and of the same width as it. A further clay layer covered most of the body of the chapel, although there were some indications that the stone bench might be a later added fitting in the church. At this stage, the weather made further work impracticable and this area was covered over pending completion of excavation in 1976.

Outside the chapel, excavation was primarily to determine the limits of the enclosure. Again, much loose rubble overlay the surface, but once this was removed, four key trial sections located the stone wall surrounding the chapel. This wall is generally 1.10 m. wide, and lies between 3 and 4 metres outside the outer faces of the walls of the chapel. In the eastern section alone, a shallow ditch was found outside it and apparently associated with it. An obvious depression at one point in the western enclosure wall was examined in the hope that it might prove to be an entrance, but it proved merely to be the site of a shell off-target!

Because of a certain amount of previous clearance around the outside of the chapel walls, one could not be certain, but there did seem to be some indications that there had been a gravel path around the outside. Examination of the area within the enclosure wall began, in order to establish whether there was a cemetery, but this work had to be abandoned because of the weather. However, one cist-grave was located to the south of the chapel, and it is naturally a great moment to determine if there is any difference in orientation between graves and chapel, as an indicator of different phases. Some slight

indication of an earlier stone phase in the chapel was noted, and will be examined in the next excavation season.

February 1976.

An Excavation at Clow Chapel, Watten, Caithness

(ND/233524) August 2 – 8, 1975.

Eric Talbot

The above work was undertaken at the invitation of the University of Aberdeen's Extra-Mural Department. The project had two main aims – to come to a fuller understanding of the development of chapel sites and to provide training in excavation and survey techniques primarily for interested amateur archaeologists in the north of Scotland.

I am greatly indebted to Mr. Don Omand (tutor-organiser in Extra-Mural Studies, Caithness) for the initial invitation to excavate and for help on site and to Mr. Leslie Myatt for practical help at all stages of the project. Mr. David Miller organised the electric fencing. Permission to carry out the operation came from the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate, the Department of Agriculture and the tenant, Mr. Harrold.

Before the excavation was undertaken an extensive documentary search revealed that the site, which is to be found on the E. side of the Scouthal Burn and c. 2 miles to the S. of Watten village, did not appear in written records until the eighteenth century when it was in a ruinous state and was used for the burial of travellers and unbaptised children. The ruined chapel is situated close to the traces of a settlement, complete with a mill, which also has no known recorded history (*Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.*) Vol. 100 (1967-8) 126). Excavation was aimed at throwing light upon the structural development of the chapel and its period of use. The surviving traces indicated a