

several new circular depressions were located, mostly to the south of the Chapel and enclosure, but also two at the north end of the site. The smaller ones may prove to be the result of Army target practice in the War, but probably not all! On parts of the Brough, the nature of the turf obscured some building lines, but on others (notably the central area) there are indications that some walls may be superimposed on earlier features. In general, the plan of the buildings would seem to be on a more regular lay-out, particularly in the north western part of the site, than appeared hitherto.

**C.D. MORRIS**  
**August 1977.**

## **BROUGH OF BIRSAY, ORKNEY (NGR HY 239285)**

### **Excavations and survey 1977: Interim Report on work by Durham University.**

Excavations and survey under the direction of Christopher D. Morris of the Department of Archaeology, Durham University, took place on this site on behalf of Durham University Excavations Committee and the Department of the Environment (Scotland) for a period of four weeks in July/August 1977. Staff and volunteers were recruited through Durham University.

#### **1) Survey**

This is now complete. An interim general site plan has been prepared for the reprinting of the DOE site guidebook, and a final site plan should be completed in the next year. The more detailed surveys of the different parts of the site were checked and corrections and additions made; Mr. F. Bettess of Sunderland Polytechnic supervised the extension of the survey to the south-west of the Guardian ship area on the cliff, where eight further buildings, first noted by Mr. Peter Gelling, have been plotted.

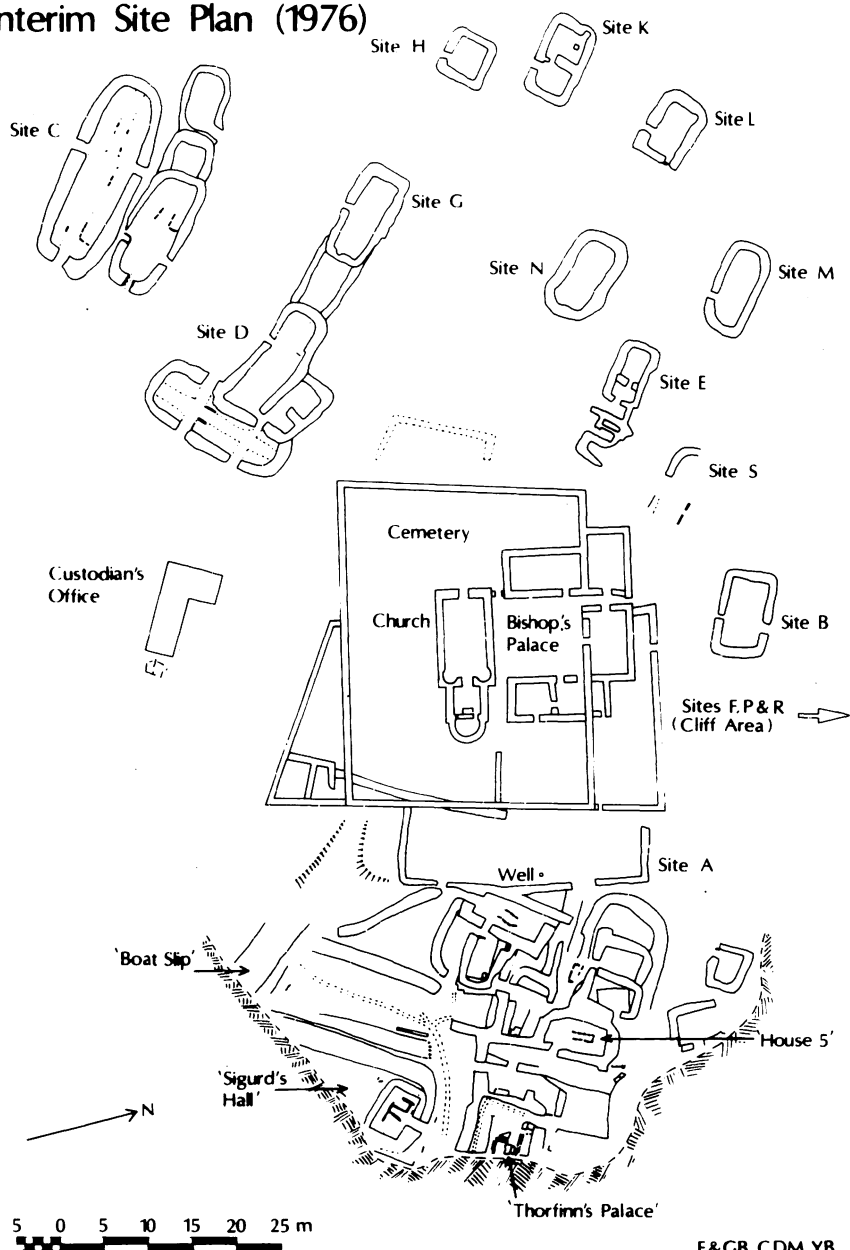
#### **2) Excavations continued in the area to the west of the church.**

**a) Area to the north of House N.** This area was opened to link up the previously excavated area with that of the current excavations and to investigate the nature of features there. The gully traced south of, and under, House N in 1976 was traced

# BROUGH OF BIRSAY

MAIN AREA OF SITE:

Interim Site Plan (1976)



further to the north of the building, but terminated after a few metres. "Paving" outside the building noted in 1974 was not found to extend much further north and the area was disturbed by sinkage over a roughly circular pit c. 60 cm in diameter with a channel sloping into it c. 1 cm long and 50 cm wide. Layers of burnt peat and yellowed clay were over and sinking into it. The general layer sealing the pit had four fragments of steatite, and two more were found in a layer above that. Other finds were few but included lumps of iron and slag or fuel ash. Another circular feature was encountered in the north section. A burnt feature with slag, under the north wall of the building and partially excavated in 1975, was emptied and seen to cut into a shallow gully. This gully has not been traced outside the walls of the building; it was presumably cleared for the construction of the north wall of House N.

b) **Two trial trenches** at the top of the slope sectioned notable depressions in the ground. One running roughly north-south across the site had no archaeological significance and perhaps might be explained as sinkage over a natural watercourse due to a geological feature below. The other running roughly south-west-north-east is a recent drain presumed to be inserted by the DOE.

c) **"House E."** Work continued on this area, begun in 1976. A large burnt area outside the north wall of the main building was seen to represent several burning phases; at least one pre-dates the building. Around the building to the west a gully-like feature was traced but not completed. Inside the walls differences in the construction at separate points in the south wall prompted further examination. It appears that the inner face of a wall from an earlier building was utilized for part of the outer face of this south wall of House E. Further work is needed as there are indications of a different orientation. To the north of the building a large area of rubble was encountered; it appears to be earlier than the standing walls of House E and may well represent the destruction of an earlier building perhaps further to the north. An area of paving first found in the 1930s, and delimited by upright slabs, was found to go, in part, under the north wall of House E and extend further to the east. The small "wall" of upright slabs to the east of House E appears to be later than the west wall of the "rooms" further to the east. Limited work in and around these

"rooms" indicates an area of flagging outside them, and the possibility, first noted in the '30s, that they are a sub-division of an earlier building. There has clearly been a considerable build-up under these, and a primary ditch-like feature was found in a section to the east of, and stratigraphically earlier than, the easternmost "room".

d) **Area between "House E" and "House S"**. Across the area at the west end was a mass of rubble (as mentioned above), apparently destruction of a earlier building. A trial trench to the north west located a wall running east-west and other features, which suggests that the whole area will need consideration as one in future excavations. Excavation in the eastern part of this area went through several rubble layers with large amounts of animal bone in poor condition. There are indications therefore of a midden, but no bone artifacts were found. However, three sherds of glass, including the rim of a vessel, a rectangular bronze plate with rivets and Insular decoration, a half of a sandstone spindle-whorl, and a ?gaming piece of sandstone were found.

e) **"House S"**. Further work here simply revealed further complexities of rubble. The main features identified were three drains running in different directions. The indications are that there may well be the remnants of two large buildings here, but work will have to be continued in a painstaking way to unravel the sequence by "horizontal stratigraphy". A large burnt area in the east, probably a hearth, revealed a large rim sherd of a steatite vessel decorated with incised parallel lines. Other finds in this area included steatite, whetstone fragments, a second large fishing weight and a second small conical lead weight.

The work on Houses E and S will therefore continue with the exciting possibility of a sequence of building phases that can be related stratigraphically. The sequence will not be as complicated as that to the east of the church, but there are indications that in the Norse period the Brough of Birsay may well have had, to the west of the church, a complex succession of domestic building phases.

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**October 1977.**