Society of Antiquaries of Scotland

Rhynie, A Powerful Place of Pictland

Edited by Gordon Noble

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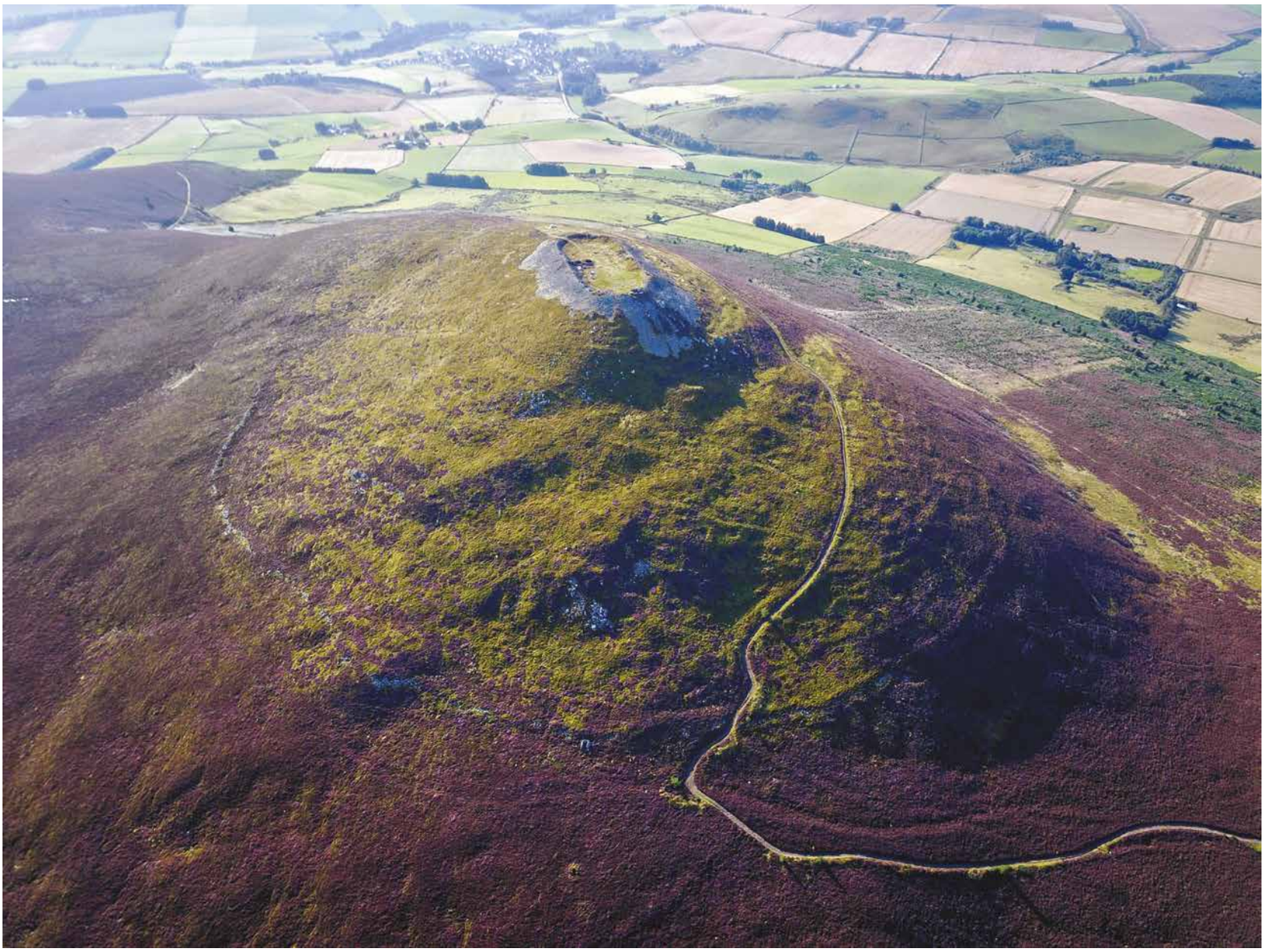


Illus 4.1
Aerial photograph of Tap o' Noth, showing the vitrified oblong fort at the summit and the remnants of the large outer fort below

Chapter 4

EXCAVATION RESULTS: TAP O' NOTH

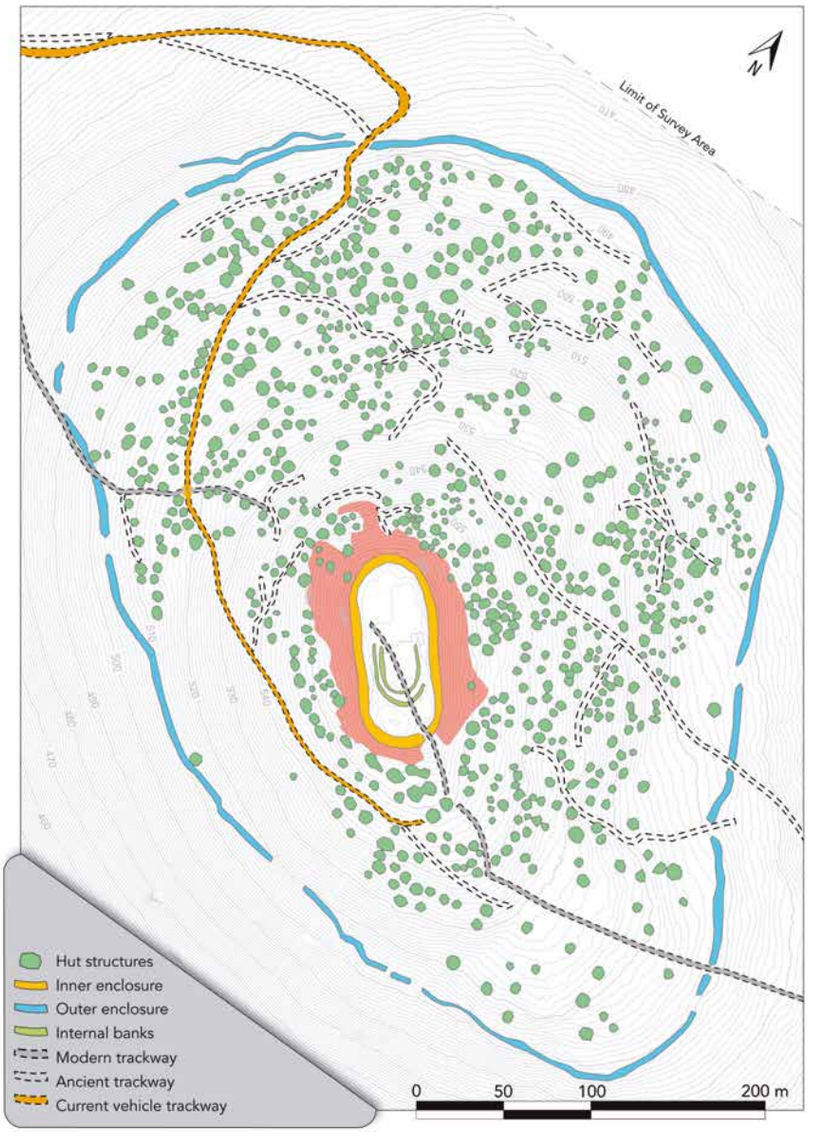
GORDON NOBLE, JAMES O'DRISCOLL AND CATHY MACIVER

4.1 Introduction

Tap o' Noth is the second largest, and one of the most spectacularly sited hillforts in Scotland, positioned on a prominent and distinctive hill at 563m OD overlooking the village of Rhynie (Illus 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3). The investigations at Tap o' Noth formed the focus of the University of Aberdeen Northern Picts: Rhynie Environs Project (2017–22) funded by Historic Environment Scotland. This project built on the work at the Craw Stane complex (Chapter 5) and aimed to characterise and date the environ sites of the Rhynie valley – the enclosures at Tap o' Noth, Cnoc Cailliche and Cairn More – to provide a context for the development of the elite centre in the valley bottom. Investigations were scheduled to run over three seasons from 2017–19, but the spectacular and unexpected results from the lower fort prompted further seasons of excavations in 2020–22, which targeted additional sections of the lower fort rampart and a number of additional house platforms.

With the Northern Picts: Rhynie Environs Project we hoped to address the following research questions:

- How did the landscape of the Rhynie valley develop from the later prehistoric to early medieval period? Did the Pictish enclosure complex at the Craw Stane evolve from an earlier Iron Age regional centre at Tap o' Noth?
- How did the Craw Stane complex relate chronologically and functionally to sites such as Tap o' Noth, Cnoc Cailliche and Cairn More forts? Did the focus at the Craw Stane complex in the 4th–6th centuries AD shift to Tap o' Noth as might be suggested from early medieval reoccupation of other Iron Age oblong forts such as Craig Phadrig, Inverness-shire (Small & Cottam 1972)? Or did the elite focus on this wider landscape end in the 6th century AD and move to other locations within northern Pictland?
- How can the important series of sites in the vicinity of Rhynie help us answer crucial questions surrounding the development of the Pictish kingdoms?
- Did the landscape of the Upper Strathbogie valley resemble royal landscapes in early medieval or late Iron Age Scandinavia, Ireland or Anglo-Saxon England, which were polyfocal in nature with contemporary sites existing within a complex settlement hierarchy (eg Brink 1996)?



Illus 4.2
Plan of the archaeological features at Tap o' Noth, including the vitrified oblong fort at the summit (orange) and its associated rampart collapse (red), the large outer fort (blue) and internal house platforms identified in the LiDAR and photogrammetry results (green)

Illus 4.3
Vertical aerial photograph of the first excavation season (2017) within the oblong fort

- How did the character of the enclosed sites and the material assemblages of Tap o' Noth, Cnoc Cailliche and Cairn More compare or contrast to the Craw Stane complex?

4.2 The forts of Tap o' Noth

Tap o' Noth consists of two forts crowning the Hill of Noth; a massive oblong-shaped vitrified fort at its peak and an irregularly shaped stone-walled enclosure downslope (Illus 4.2). The upper oblong fort was recorded from the late 18th century onwards and through time was increasingly identified as part of a group of similar vitrified oblong/oval forts found throughout eastern Scotland, with Tap o' Noth recognised as a very well-preserved example of a vitrified fort (eg Douglas 1782: 245–6; Feachem 1966). The massive enclosing wall, which stands 2–3m above the level of the interior (RCAHMS 2007: 103), has partially collapsed creating an impressive 'apron' of stone extending up to 30m downslope beyond the perimeter of the wall (Illus 4.2). Quarrying and stone robbing in the post-medieval period have impacted upon the wall's integrity. Nonetheless, the extent of the downslope material demonstrates the quantity of stone that would have originally made up the wall and the resources that went into building the fort. The location and size of the construction suggests the fort must have been a spectacular sight for those who saw the fort in its heyday. At various points, particularly on the south-western side, large masses of vitrification are apparent indicating that the wall was originally built with an internal timber framework, which, upon the fort going on fire, enabled the vitrification process to take place. The fort itself encloses an area of about 0.38ha. No entrance has been identified, as is common with this monument type, but other features include two internal and parallel U-shaped banks and an impressive well or cistern.

The outer fort (Illus 4.1, 4.2 and 4.4), first recorded on the 1st Edition OS map of 1867, consists of a single stone rampart that extends up to 12m wide and encloses an area of around 16.75ha, making it the second largest hilltop fort in Scotland after Eildon Hill North in the Scottish Borders. The lower fort rampart has been substantially affected by stone robbing, though the majority of its perimeter can still be traced on the ground, in aerial photographs

Illus 4.4
GIS Skyview analysis derived from LiDAR data of Tap o' Noth revealing the hundreds of house platforms within the lower fort

and through LiDAR and photogrammetry survey (Illus 4.2 and 4.4). This has identified approximately ten gaps or entrances but it is likely that some may not be original (RCAHMS 2007: 105). The RCAHMS (2007: 104), and later Ralston and Watt (1981, 1982, 1983), recorded hundreds of hut platforms within this lower enclosure and aerial mapping suggests the existence of many more (see below). The RCAHMS also recorded a number of short stretches of track which may have serviced the clusters of small circular house platforms contained within the lower rampart.

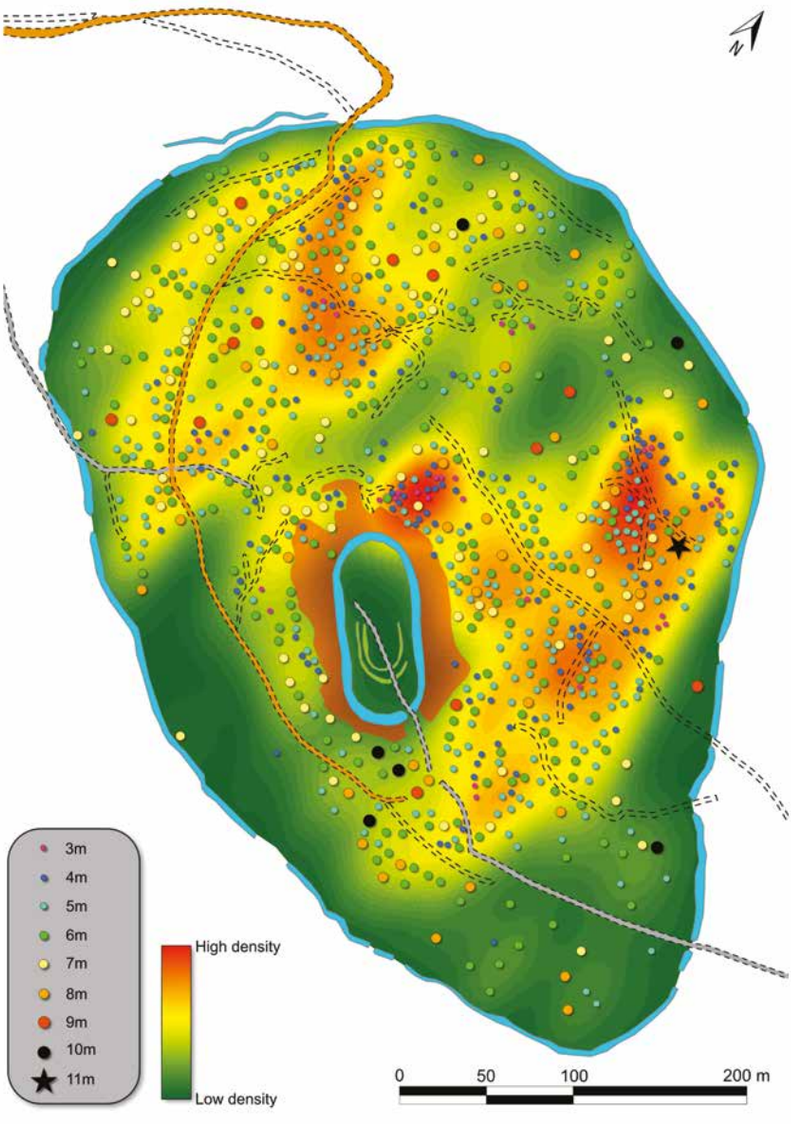
From an early date, Tap o' Noth has attracted the attention of numerous antiquarians and archaeologists. As early as the 18th century, scholars were writing about the vitrification of the oblong fort; Douglas (1782: 196–7), for example, disregarding the commonly held belief that the oblong fort was 'the mouth of a volcano', described the site as being 'constructed of stones vitrified by the force of fire, of which kind many have been lately discovered in Scotland'. By the middle of the 19th century, antiquarians such as Hibbert (1857: 295–7) and MacLagan (1875: 51) had recorded the state of the oblong fort in some detail, with Hibbert (1857: 296) possibly describing the lower fort, stating how 'some observers' had traced the extent of some 'trenches' around the 'whole compass of the mountain'. In the 1880s, James Macdonald (1891: 35–52) spent a single season investigating the massive wall of the oblong fort, testing possible internal features and preparing the first measured drawings of the site with the aid of his nephew who was an architect. Macdonald excavated two sections through the wall, noting on the eastern side that larger stones at the base were overlain by smaller loose stones, with no evidence for vitrification. Here, the original wall measured approximately 6.1m wide at the base and 3.7m in height. Macdonald's second section was located on the western side, where vitrification is more apparent. Here he noted a very similar structure and composition to the wall in the east. Macdonald (1891: 38) concluded that the vitrification process was not a practical or structural design and instead may have been an incidental consequence of frequent 'beacon fires'.

In addition to the fort's wall, Macdonald (1891: 45–7) also identified stretches of walling in the interior which he interpreted as dwellings. Here, he describes the walls as being 0.9–1.2m thick and 0.6m high on the east side (less certainly on the west side). These could well have been parts of the U-shaped banks in the interior which would not be identified again until the 1990s (Dunwell & Strachan 1997). Macdonald also explored the 'well' (more properly a cistern) shaft, where he recorded a layer of moss about 0.75m below the surface which overlay 'a considerable bed of clay'. Once the clay was removed, all the surface water which had collected disappeared. No obvious masonry or other structural features were associated with the cistern, and it appeared to comprise a simple rock-cut shaft some 2.4m in diameter which narrowed towards the base.

By the time Kilbride-Jones (1935: 448–9) had published his report on the stray finds around Tap o' Noth, some of the house platforms surrounding the lower slopes of the oblong fort had been identified. Subsequent visits, particularly by Ralston and Watt (1981, 1982, 1983) in the early 1980s, recorded a total of 234 possible examples. In the late 20th century, visits by Dunwell and Strachan (1997) recorded possible settlement features within the oblong fort and identified the two U-shaped banks, along with two possible hut-circles in the fort's interior. RCAHMS (2007: 104) completed a detailed earthwork survey in 1999 and suggested these U-shaped banks were part of the circular/oval enclosing walls of an earlier fort that enclosed a roundhouse. The 20th century witnessed a number of excavations on oblong forts in Scotland, with archaeological intervention at sites such as Finavon and Clatchard Craig (Childe 1935, 1936; MacKie 1966a, 1967; Small & Cottam 1972); however, Tap o' Noth remained uninvestigated by excavation in the modern period. There have been a number of attempts to date vitrified forts using alternatives to radiocarbon such as archaeomagnetic and thermoluminescence dating techniques during the later 20th century (Sanderson et al 1988: 315, table 3; Gentles 1993) (Chapter 9). The latter were both utilised at Tap o' Noth, producing Bronze Age and early medieval determinations for the vitrified wall (Sanderson et al 1988: 315, table 3), neither of which match the current radiocarbon chronology (Chapter 8).

4.3 LiDAR survey and conditions prior to excavation

In 2015, a LiDAR survey was commissioned by Aberdeenshire Council Archaeology Service, Forestry Commission Scotland and the University of Aberdeen which focused on Tap o' Noth and the Upper Strathbogie valley centred on Rhynie. An area approximately 5km north/south by 3.5km east/west, incorporating Tap o' Noth at the northern edge and Cairn More on the south-east, was surveyed at 0.5m resolution (Illus 4.4). A series of photogrammetry derived models were also produced as part of the Leverhulme-funded Comparative Kingship project. Both the LiDAR and photogrammetry surveys suggested that the number of house platforms previously recorded on the hill had been significantly underestimated. These surveys identified hundreds more potential examples, with up to 808 candidates recorded. The house platforms were shown to cluster in groups, with individual platforms measuring around 3–11m in diameter within the lower fort (Illus 4.2 and 4.5). The platforms comprised level terraces partially cut into the natural slope of the hill, some of which occupy long curvilinear terraces up to 250m in length that may have been altered to prepare parts of the hillslope for habitation. Other house platforms occur in curvilinear patterns which follow the contours of the hill or line the routes of a series of trackways. Some of these trackways had been identified in the earlier RCAHMS survey and were clarified in the LiDAR and photogrammetry surveys.



Illus 4.5
Analysis of LiDAR and photogrammetry data, showing the size and density of the house platforms

The house platforms display two clear concentrations. The first are located on the north-eastern side of the hill, surrounding the oblong fort and extending downslope to the outer rampart; the second is a major grouping concentrated on the western side of the lower fort (Illus 4.5). Areas where few platforms were recorded are also noted, principally on the eastern edge of the fort and on its steepest slopes. The more level terrain found at the east meant that any terracing, if present, was likely to be less extensive and with higher vegetation growth today less visible in any survey results. As such, further structures may be present in these areas but are likely more difficult to detect from surface traces alone. Conversely, the steepest parts of the fort – in the area abutting the oblong fort immediately to the north and north-west, and on the southern part of the interior – were largely devoid of structures and this is likely to represent a real absence due to the impracticalities of construction on such a gradient.

The most common-sized house platforms are between 4m and 8m in diameter, though erosion has undoubtedly reduced the size of these features. Larger examples (up to 11m in diameter) are spread throughout the interior but are much less common and are often found at the edge of groups of platforms (Table 4.1). The presence and rarity of these may indicate some form of hierarchical organisation to the settlement. With regards to chronology, from the survey results alone, the fact that a limited number of platforms are dug into the scree of the collapsed oblong fort is a good pointer that at least some of the house platforms are of a later date than the vitrified fort. Dunwell and Strachan (1997) and the RCAHMS (2007: 104) both recorded potential hut-circles within the interior of the oblong fort but the LiDAR and photogrammetry surveys failed to identify these.

With regards to the lower fort rampart, the LiDAR and photogrammetry surveys have added further detail to previous interpretations and plans. Whilst as many as 17 gaps were evident in the enclosing elements of the lower fort, only three are used by trackways which appear to be pre-modern (Illus 4.2 and 4.5). Two of these are located within 35m of one another, suggesting that consolidating and limiting the number of entrances may not have been an original design feature. This implies that a large proportion of the remaining gaps could also be original but excavation is required to clarify this point. The present vehicle track which climbs the southern side of the hill may follow the line of an original trackway, as a large number of house platforms appear to respect its route. Indeed, where the track penetrates the enclosing elements on the north-western side, an older track separates from the modern and extends downhill on a steeper incline before it is again truncated by the more recent trackway.

Diameter of Platform	Number of Platforms
3m	30
4m	147
5m	270
6m	219
7m	87
8m	36
9m	12
10m	6
11m	1

Table 4.1
Platform size and numbers

Illus 4.6
All trenches 2017–22 plan

4.4 Excavations 2017–22

The LiDAR and photogrammetry surveys provided an excellent basis for targeting features at the site and excavations from 2017–22 investigated all of the major elements of the Tap o' Noth hillforts, including the rampart of the oblong fort, the U-shaped banks and interior deposits of the summit fort, as well as the rampart of the lower fort and a range of house platforms selected to represent a sample of different topographical positions within the fort (Illus 4.6). In 2017, a single trench was excavated inside the oblong fort abutting the rampart to evaluate the complexity of the site, to test the logistics needed for future seasons and to obtain a basic chronology for interior occupation (Illus 4.7). The programme moved into a more invasive investigation of the oblong fort interior in 2018, focusing on another section of the inner wall face, possible

Illus 4.7
Excavations in progress at Trench 1 (2017), inside the oblong fort at Tap o' Noth

Illus 4.8
Post-excavation plan of Trench 1 showing the wall face (1713) and inner U-shaped bank (1704)

Illus 4.9
South-east facing section of Trench 1 split into three parts: wall face (1713) below and deposits extending into the interior – mid and upper image. The large stones to the left of 1708 are likely to be from the collapse of the wall face

settlement features in the interior and the cistern previously excavated by Macdonald. The subsequent seasons targeted the larger outer fort and a sample of house platforms (Illus 4.6).

4.5 The upper vitrified oblong fort

4.5.1 Natural peat/old ground surface(s)

The earliest material encountered during excavation within the oblong fort were thin layers of natural peat. This consisted of a dark black-brown clayey peat with frequent interlocked stone or bedrock jutting through. In places, this peat layer was found to overlie a yellow-orange-brown boulder clay. On occasion, such as near the wall face in Trench 1, a thin lens of blackish-brown peaty silt (1707) containing charcoal was found overlying the natural peat horizon. This deposit may represent an episode of ground clearance prior to the construction of the fort.

4.5.2 North-east rampart

In 2017, a single rectangular trench (Trench 1) measuring 15m x 5m was excavated against the north-east rampart of the oblong fort (Illus 4.7 and 4.8). The trench was positioned to allow exploration of the wall collapse, the inner wall face and part of the interior. The basal deposit comprised a peat layer (1714) which extended under the wall face, where it was only a few centimetres in depth. It was found intermittently into the interior, but in general thickened towards the centre of the fort (Illus 4.9). This is likely to have been the original ground surface encountered by the fort builders. A thin lens of brown soil with charcoal inclusions (1715) also extended beneath the wall, but did not extend into the interior. An area *c* 3m wide was excavated against the wall face but only a small fragment of the wall face survived intact (Illus 4.10). The surviving wall face section (1713) stood just over a metre high and was composed of heat-shattered stones. The vitrification process in this part of the site had clearly been so catastrophic that the individual stones were cracked into many pieces and the wall face was extremely fragile. While there were places where drops of vitrified material adhered to the stones, there was no sign of the mass vitrification present in other parts of the oblong fort, but excavation did not extend beyond the wall face where vitrification is likely to be concentrated. Small voids in the wall face may represent evidence for timber lacing but the destruction was so severe

Illus 4.10
The small section of brittle, heat-affected wall face surviving within Trench 1 (to the left of the upright ranging rod and above the horizontal ranging rod)

that any pattern to the putative timber slots was not identifiable. The wall face held back a core of much smaller angular stones. The basal courses of the wall face were found in situ and did not appear to be heat affected. They measured up to 0.2m in height and 0.4m across, a likely indication of the original size of many of the facing stones.

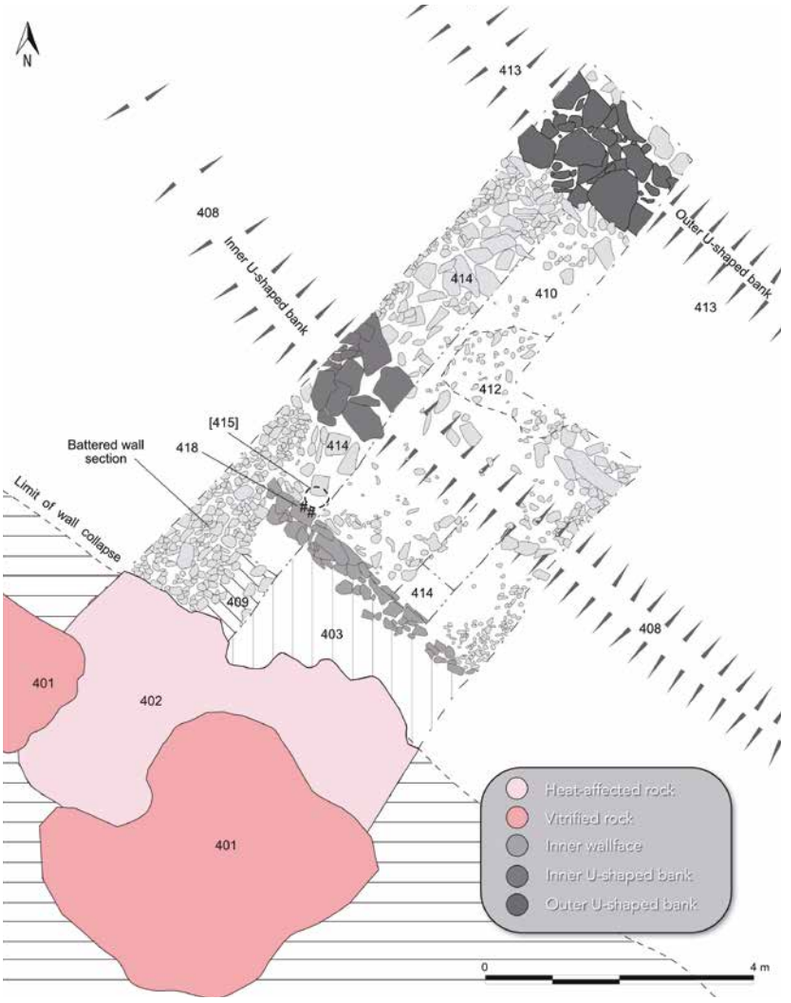
Abutting the basal stones of the inner wall face was a deposit of orange-brown, charcoal and bone-rich silty soil (1708) that extended around 4m into the interior. This layer was up to 0.2m deep and was roughly level with the interior topography, implying it had formed during the occupation of the fort and was not a product of the destruction or decay of the wall. It may therefore represent a midden deposit relating to the main occupation phase that built up during the use of the fort. Overlying this at the inner face was a layer of smaller angular stones with occasional larger stones (probably collapsed facing stones) mixed with soil (1718). This extended from the wall face for about 1m into the interior and could represent initial slump or the slow accumulation of detritus following abandonment. A more substantial layer of voided angular rubble (1702) overlay this deposit, reflecting a more catastrophic collapse event. The uppermost part of (1702) was made up of relatively small stones possibly wall core material that had slumped out after the larger facing stones had fallen away.

Towards the interior, in the south-west end of the trench, there were few indications of occupation or activity. Covering around 6m of the south-west end of the trench was a spread of stones/cobbles (1706) which were tightly packed but formed no clear structure or purpose. They appeared to abut the south-west edge of the internal U-shaped bank, which could imply they were formed later, but this relationship was unclear due to the disturbance of these deposits by a modern bowl-shaped pit [1705] which measured *c* 1.0m x 1.2m and 0.3m deep and contained a voided rubble fill of stones. A modern coin dated 1990 was found at the base. Under (1706) was a reddish-brown loamy layer (1712) that may have been a surviving fragment of an old ground surface. Both (1706) and (1712) were truncated by pit [1705].

4.5.3 South-west rampart (406)

In 2018, Trench 4 (11m by 5m) was positioned against the inner side of the oblong fort rampart on the south-west side (Illus 4.11 and 4.12). In this trench, the inner wall face survived to a height of five courses, constructed of flat slabs of metamorphosed sandstone – a stone type which makes up the vast majority of the rampart and one that can be found outcropping on the hill (Illus 4.13). Three sub-rectangular transverse beam slots for timber lacing were also identified, two of which were found on the eastern side of the trench. Beam slot (419) measured 0.15m high and 0.18m wide and was separated from the lower beam slot (421)

Illus 4.11
Overhead view of excavations in progress at Trench 4, inside the oblong fort. The wall face and vitrified masses are evident on the left of the image, with the two U-shaped banks visible to the right

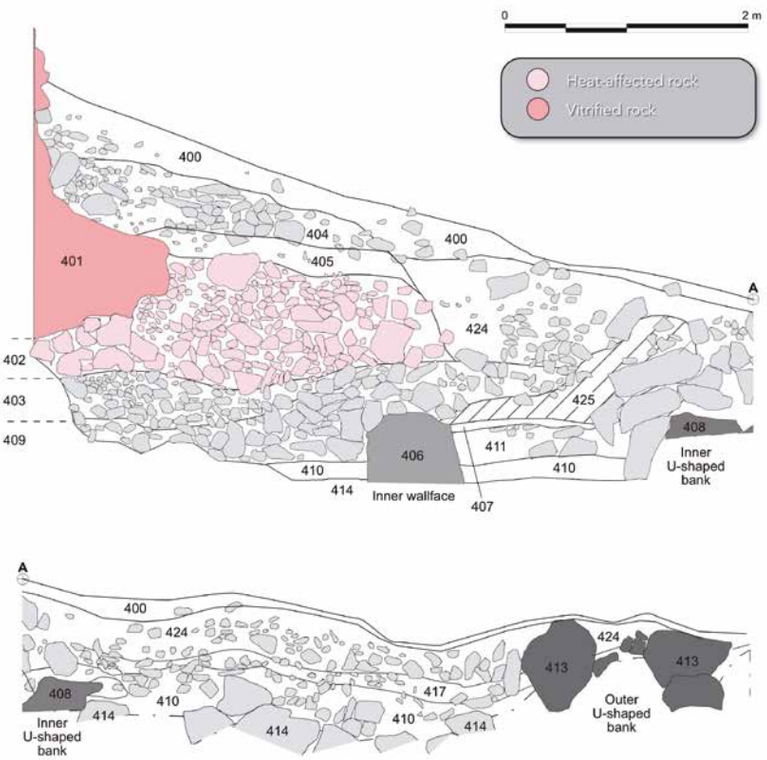


Illus 4.12
Post-excavation plan of Trench 4 showing the mass of vitrified and heat-affected rock within the core of the oblong fort rampart

Illus 4.13
The wall face of metamorphosed sandstone and one of the beam slots in Trench 4

(measuring 0.26m wide and 0.21m high) by a single course of stone. This lower beam would have sat directly on the natural peat/old ground surface. A third beam slot (423) measured 0.33m wide by 0.17m high and was located approximately 1.35m west of the other examples. The slots were filled with a loose, mid-brown sandy silt with degraded charcoal fragments and small bits of burnt bone within the fill.

The bulk of the exposed wall core comprised a series of rubble layers (Illus 4.14), many of which had been affected by the large-scale collapse and destruction of the wall. The lowest wall core layer consisted of voided medium to large stones (409) with a matrix of mid-brown sandy clay, delimited on the northern side by the wall face (406). This material was not heat affected and lay directly on the natural peat (410). Within the wall and overlying (409) was a deposit of small, angular, reddened heat-shattered stone (403) intermixed with a loose, light brown silt. This layer contained some vitrified material closer to the wall face. Deposit (403) lay underneath a thin layer of collapsed partially vitrified stone (402), over which was a mass of vitrified stone (401) within the former core of the rampart. This comprised medium to large heat-reddened stones fused together with no obvious structure, forming a vitrified mass measuring approximately 2.1m high and extending for at least 1.3m into the core of the wall. The upper sections of the vitrified stone in (401) seemed to be more fused, with less obvious indications of individual stones. Over the core of the rampart, a thin layer of mid-brown silty clay (405) may



Illus 4.14
South-east facing section of Trench 4 split into two parts: wall face above and deposits extending into the interior below

represent regeneration of a topsoil after the abandonment of the fort and partial collapse of the wall. This layer abutted (401) and sat directly on top of wall core (402). Over this probable old ground surface was a layer of relatively recent wall collapse (404). It comprised medium to large stones that were not fire-reddened. A layer of collapsed small to medium stone was evident over the majority of the trench (424) intermixed with a moderately compacted mid-brown sandy silt. Finally, overlying the trench was a thin silty topsoil (400) that contained modern glass and pottery.

4.5.4 Structure against the wall face

Between the south-western wall face and the inner U-shaped bank (408), and directly overlying the natural peat in Trench 4, was a distinct compact light blue clay layer (411) with frequent charcoal fragments (Illus 4.15). The clay deposit was approximately 0.18–0.38m in thickness and extended beyond the limits of the trench to the east and west. It was delimited on its southern side by the wall face of the oblong fort and extended for 1.5m towards the U-shaped bank (408). A similar clay (425) was found overlying bank (408), though this may relate to material disturbed during the construction of that feature (see below). Clay deposit (411) had multiple lenses of clay and charcoal and may represent a number of floor layers built up over time.

A small oval feature [415], possibly a post hole, with a steep-sided U-shaped cut was identified at the top of clay deposit (411), abutting the inner face of the fort wall (406) (Illus 4.16). This feature measured 0.35m x 0.30m and was 0.20m deep, and had a stone at its base which sat on natural peat. Its fill comprised a light bluish-brown clayey silt (416) that showed signs of having been heat affected towards the edges of the feature, suggesting that a post may have been burnt in situ. Next to this post hole was a small deposit of charred timber with the appearance of wicker-work (418) extending along the wall face to the east. A deposit of dark-brown silty clay (407), 0.05–0.15m in thickness with frequent amounts of charcoal, some fragments of animal bone and moderate amounts of stone, overlay deposit (411) (Illus 4.14). This layer extended beyond the limits of the trench to the north-west and south-east, but was defined on its south-western side by the inner face of the fort wall (406), and may have been truncated by the inner bank (408) on the north-east side. This deposit could represent a destruction layer associated with the burning of the last phase of a building with a clay floor and a wicker- and post-defined superstructure built up against the rampart wall face. Between the inner (408) and outer (413) U-shaped banks, a thin deposit of mid-brown silty sand mixed with small to medium stones and occasional flecks of charcoal (417) was recorded. This deposit may also be associated with the destruction of the fort or it may be a continuation of the occupation deposits represented by (411).

Illus 4.15
Blue clay deposit (411) in south-east facing section of Trench 4 rising up over the inner U-shaped bank

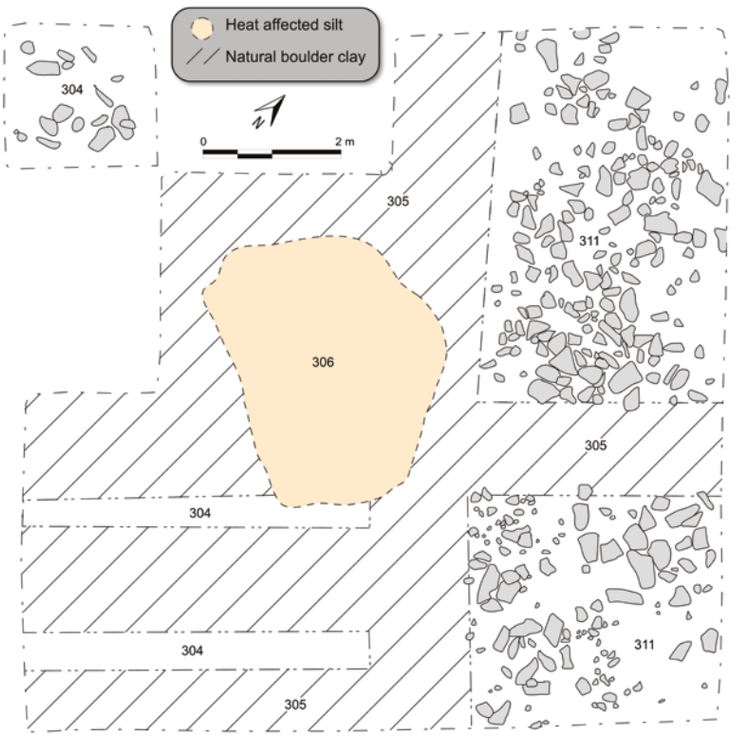
Illus 4.16
Small oval post hole [415] cut into the upper levels of the blue clay floor (411) in Trench 4

4.5.5 U-shaped banks/walls

The two U-shaped banks present in the interior of the oblong fort were investigated in Trenches 1, 2 and 4 during the 2017 and 2018 field seasons (Illus 4.8 and 4.12). As noted earlier, these banks had been interpreted by the RCAHMS as part of an earlier fort on the summit (2008: 105). However, Trench 4 provided tentative evidence that at least the outermost bank (408) had been inserted after

the oblong fort or at least the structure built up against the wall. The inner U-shaped bank (408) was located 2m to the north-east of the inner face of the oblong fort, running more or less parallel to its line. It comprised a 1.1m wide linear deposit of stone intermixed with a light brown-grey silty clay, with large angular stones forming the bank's core. Large pieces of charcoal were also recovered from the core. Overlying the bank (408) on its southern side was a deposit of blue clay (425) similar to that found in floor (411). Considering this 'capping' was inconsistent and visible only to the south (and its similar composition to (411)), it seems likely that during the construction of bank (408) the floor of the structure built up against the wall of the oblong fort had been truncated with the blue clay (411) reused as a capping. This suggests the bank was secondary to the earlier occupation of the fort (floor 411) that was built up against the wall face. Around Trench 1, the outermost bank was difficult to identify on the ground and within the trench its line was difficult to disentangle from wall collapse. However, the foundation of the bank may be represented by a small deposit of grey-brown silty clay (1717) that extended from the north-west baulk across the trench and measured up to 0.9m wide and 0.2m deep.

The inner bank was identified in Trenches 1, 2 and 4. The best-preserved section was found in Trench 4 (413), where it ran parallel to the outermost bank (408) (Illus 4.11 and 4.12). The bank (413) was located around 6.5m from the inner wall face and comprised small to medium boulders sitting directly on the natural peat. The stones had a matrix of light brown sandy silt with no obvious charcoal. The bank measured around 1.7m wide and up to by 0.45m in height. The feature was of similar character in Trench 1 (1704), again sitting directly on the natural peat, though here it was overlain by tumbled stone from the collapse of the oblong fort wall. Although there was no clear stratigraphic evidence, the occurrence of small pieces of vitrified stone within the upper layers of the bank (1704) suggests it may post-date the destruction of the oblong fort. Only the very edge of the inner U-shaped bank (215) was exposed in Trench 2, where it was revealed in plan and not excavated.



Illus 4.17
Post-excavation plan of Trench 3, within the oblong fort at the north-west

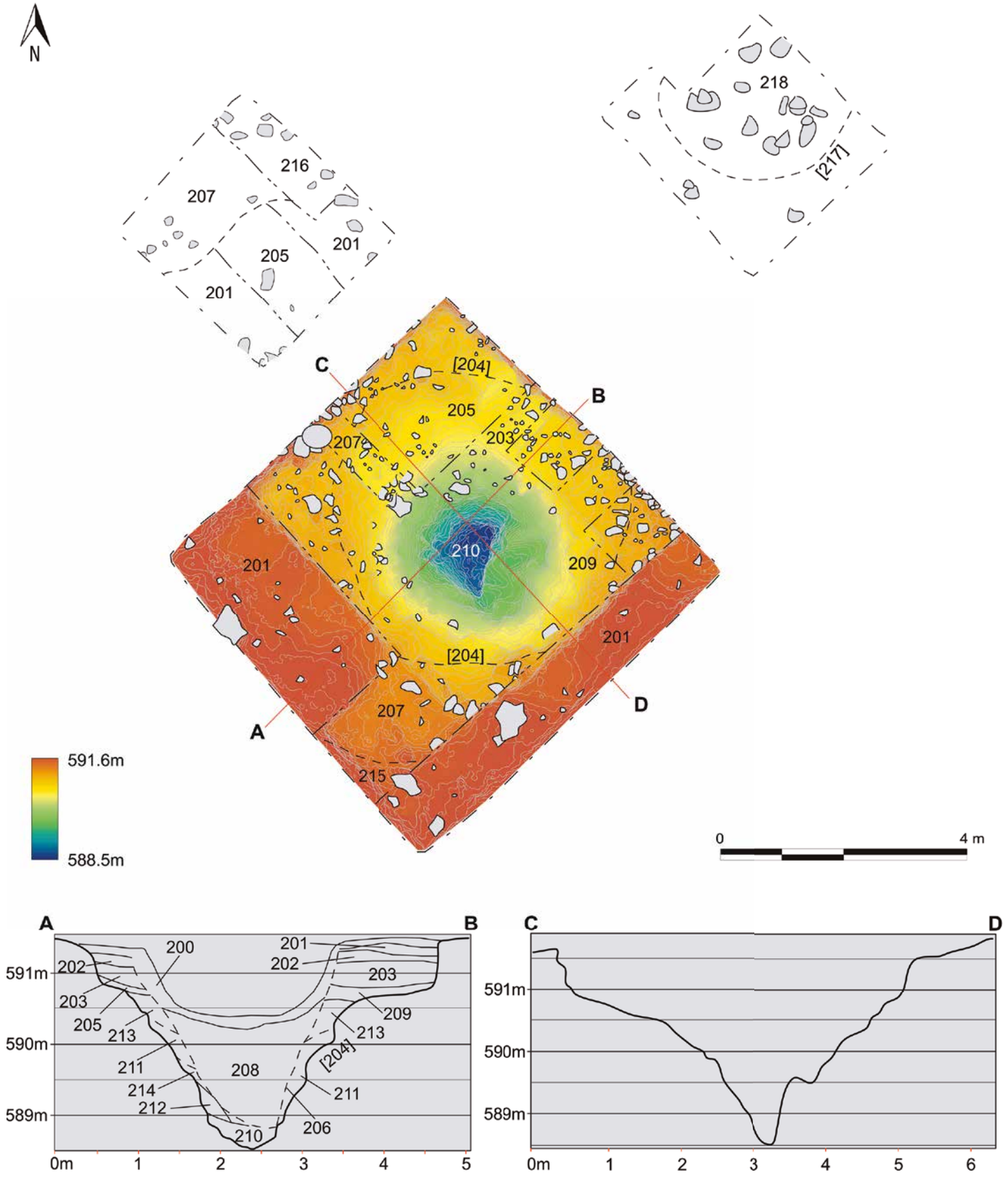
4.5.6 The central areas of the oblong fort

Two trenches were excavated in 2018 to investigate the central areas of the interior of the oblong fort. Trench 3 measured 10m x 10m and was placed in the north-western part of the interior on a raised area of ground (Illus 4.17). Trench 2 measured 6m x 5m, with two small extensions to the north-west (3m x 2m) and to the north-east (2m x 2m) and was opened to investigate a hollow identified as the well (Illus 4.18 and 4.19).

Trench 3 showed little in the way of obvious activity. One of the few areas of interest was a thin 0.05m spread of reddish-brown heat-affected silt (306) with some charcoal inclusions and fragments of animal bone. This lay directly over the natural peat and was spread over an area around 2m by 2m. Overlying this was a layer of tumbled stone (311) evident across the entire trench. This stone deposit did not form any obvious structural feature but could perhaps be related to material from the construction phase of the wall, later collapse of the wall or even material moved around in more recent times.

Trench 2 had more in the way of obviously in situ deposits, with the main feature being the cistern shaft [204] investigated by Macdonald (Illus 4.18). The upper cut was sub-circular in plan, measuring approximately 4.0m x 3.1m, with gradual sloping sides at the top that steepened close to vertical towards the base (see profiles on Illus 4.18). It measured 1.7m deep from the present ground surface and cut through the natural peat (216), subsoil (207) and bedrock. Although extensively disturbed by the antiquarian investigations,

Illus 4.19
Oblique aerial photograph of the cistern, looking west. The intact upper fills can be seen adhering to the edge of the shaft



Illus 4.18

Above: post-excavation plan of Trench 2, the cistern within the oblong fort. Below: profiles of the cistern shaft with context numbers of the various fills indicated

some deposits were found in situ. Macdonald's team had excavated a trench measuring approximately 3m x 3m at the top of the cistern that tapered towards a narrow bottom at the base. The antiquarian trench had left parts of the basal deposits and material overlying natural on the sides of the shaft in situ. It was backfilled with a largely homogenous grey-brown silt with 19th-century ceramics and glass throughout. The backfill also contained several large angular stones that required ropes to remove.

Around 0.1m of the basal fill (210) of the cistern remained intact (Illus 4.18). This was waterlogged and included well-preserved twigs of birch and abundant amounts of charcoal covering an area around 1m across. Elements of the fill on the side of the cistern also survived, along with deposits around the lip of the cut. These latter deposits appear to represent successive layers of clay lining that had built up during the original construction, use and perhaps repair of the cistern, or may simply reflect remnants of more extensive fills left in place by Macdonald's labourers. They consisted of a lower dark grey, loose clayey silt (212) measuring 0.04m thick surviving on the southern side of the cut that was overlain by a hard yellow clay (214) forming a 0.03m thick lining. On the upper edges of the cistern (Illus 4.18) there were remnants of a dark-brown clay (211), and a more compact yellow clay (213) 0.03m thick, that represented the uppermost surviving cistern deposits (Illus 4.19). Some elements of original in situ deposits (205/209) were also evident as charcoal-rich accumulations on the upper lip of the north and west side of the cut. Overlying these charcoal-rich deposits was a substantial overburden that included a layer of yellow clay which may have been redeposited from the 19th century excavation.

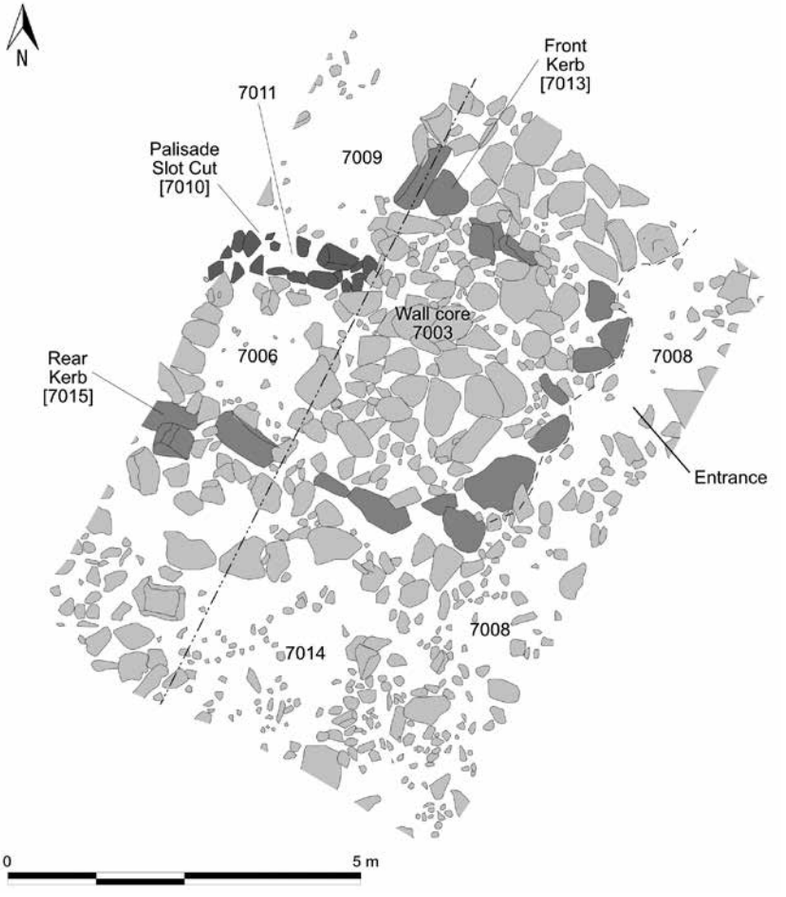
In the two extensions to Trench 2, additional features and deposits were identified (Illus 4.18). In the north-east extension, a sub-circular feature [217] cut into the natural boulder clay (207) that measured *c* 2m in diameter and extended beyond the limits of the trench to the north-east. A small 0.4m x 0.5m sondage at the western edge of this feature revealed a silty, blackish-brown peaty fill (218). It appeared to represent a significant feature that was at least 0.4m in depth and it could have been the edge of another cistern or a very large pit. In the north-west extension, natural peat (207) was encountered at a depth of 0.35m underlying a layer of yellow-brown clayey silt (201/205). Deposit (201/205) extended towards the cistern shaft and may represent material from the original digging out of the cistern.

4.6 The lower fort enclosures and platforms

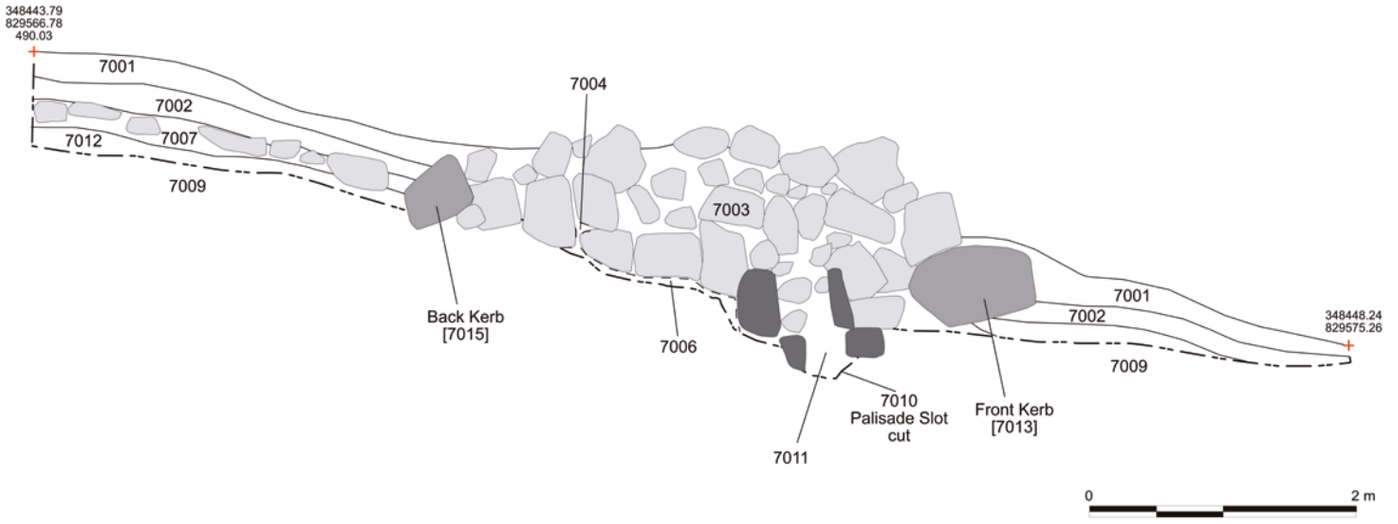
4.6.1 Lower rampart

In 2019, Trench 7 was excavated across the rampart of the lower fort, targeting one of the possible entranceways on the north side of the hill (Illus 4.20 and 4.21). The trench covered the western rampart terminal and confirmed it as a probable original feature. This entrance based on surface traces measures around 4m wide. Within the trench small angular stones appeared to form a rough surface (7008), though no associated structural features such as post holes relating to a gate were identified. The underlying natural subsoil (7009) in this area consisted of a layer of frequent, loose, small angular stones within a bright orange-brown sandy clay with small patches of dark peaty material.

Illus 4.20
Excavations in progress in Trench 7, at one of the entrances to the large outer fort. The scale lies downslope with the entrance to the right



Illus 4.21
Post-excavation plan of Trench 7 of the outer fort



Illus 4.22
North-west facing section of Trench 7 across the rampart of the lower fort

The rampart of the lower fort (7003) consisted of a deposit of mixed angular and sub-rounded stones some of massive proportions (Illus 4.21). At the back of the rampart was a line of large boulders approximately 1.0m by 0.6m that formed a basal course of a wall face or an irregular 'kerb' (7015) into which the irregular boulder core had been piled. Edging the terminal in the entrance passage and along the front of the rampart, a line of medium-sized upright stones (7013) *c* 0.6m x 0.4m, some of which had slumped forwards, formed a similar footing of a wall face or 'kerb' on this side of the rampart. Set upslope from the outer wall edge, and first identified under the core of the rampart, the line of a palisade slot [7010] ran roughly east/west (Illus 4.21, 4.22 and 4.23). The upper cut of this slot was 0.8m wide, narrowing to 0.3m at the base, with a sub-rectangular profile cut into the underlying subsoil. At the centre of the palisade slot was a deposit of collapsed stone and a grey-brown silty material with charcoal flecks (7011) that extended in a band 0.4m wide and 0.3m deep. A 0.1m thick basal deposit of dark orange-brown clayey silt (7006) with frequent charcoal and occasional small flecks of burnt bone overlay the natural subsoil and was localised between the rampart inner wall line and the palisade slot (not evident in section). Overlying the palisade slot and forming the core of the rampart was a mixed deposit of angular and sub-rounded stones (7003). The stones ranged up to 0.5m in length, but there was no consistency in the size of the stones or their arrangement. In the upper levels of the deposit, the stones were notably more voided, giving the impression they had simply been dumped between the kerbs as an informal stone mound rather than forming collapse from a well-constructed wall. The lower levels of the rampart core had small patches of silty material (7004) intermixed with the stones. In section, the stones of the rampart core were notably smaller above the projected line of the palisade, implying that the palisade (or at least one phase of it) was contemporary with the rampart, though there could have been two phases to this given the radiocarbon results (Chapter 8), and the slight disjuncture between the lowest course of stone lining and stones lining the upper part of the palisade slot (Illus 4.22).

Upslope from the rampart, above/abutting the rear wall face, a series of deposits was identified (Illus 4.21 and 4.22). Although hard to define in the small area exposed within the trench, these were interpreted as successive occupation deposits. The lowest sat directly on subsoil and consisted of an orange-brown silt (7012) with frequent charcoal inclusions and occasional flat stones *c* 0.3m x 0.2m within this material, which could have formed a rough surface. This was delimited to the west by a line of larger stones, *c* 0.45–0.35m in size (not evident in section), which may have formed the base of a turf wall structure. Overlying (7012) was a charcoal-rich silt (7007) containing more obvious flat stones that again could have formed a paved surface. Deposits (7012) and (7007) covered the same area within the trench and may represent successive layers of

Illus 4.23
Pre-excavation photograph of the palisade slot in Trench 7. Palisade slot defined by upright stones to right of scale

occupation within a larger structure that extended beyond the limits of the trench to the west (Illus 4.22). To the east of the stones at the edge of this possible structure, another charcoal rich but distinctly different deposit of silt (7014) with frequent small angular stones extended 3–4m to the south (Illus 4.21). It covered the space between the structure and the entranceway and could represent a less well-preserved activity layer immediately within one of the entrances to the lower fort. Over all these layers in the southern portion of the trench was a claggy waterlogged silty clay deposit (7002) and a 0.15m thick topsoil (7001) comprising a silty peat. No topsoil was present over the majority of the bank material which was visible above ground as a spread of stone.

4.6.2 T5 Platform

Trench 5 was excavated in two stages (Illus 4.24 and 4.25). In 2019, a trench measuring 5m x 4m (Illus 4.25) was positioned to investigate one of the possible house platforms/quarry scoops within the lower fort, at the base of the scree slope just below the upper fort on the southern side of the hill. It successfully identified the westernmost remnants of a platform that had been created by redepositing subsoil and other angular stony material (5005) to create a level terrace measuring *c* 7m x 12m. The 2019 investigations were limited to revealing the floor (5002), which contained deposits of animal bone and a pottery sherd.

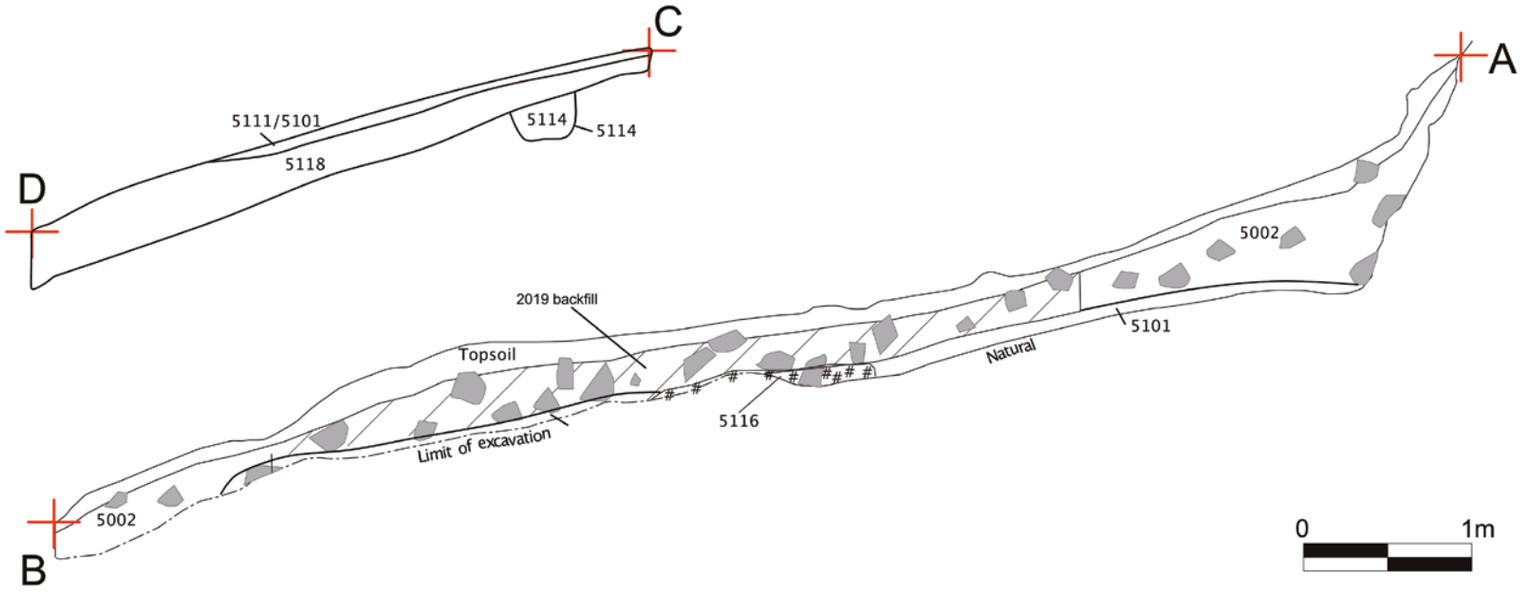
Illus 4.24
Drone image of platform T5 extension mid-excavation with south at the top of the picture. The baulk mid image is that shown on Illus 4.25

In May 2021, Trench 5 was re-established with a 5m x 8m extension located on the east of the 2019 trench (Illus 4.25). A hearth (5116) was revealed set centrally within the full extent of the floor layer (5101) of the T5 platform. The 2021 trench revealed that the structure was oval/sub-circular in plan measuring around 6.8m north/south by at least 8.5m east/west. The foundations for this had been created by digging into the hillslope (up to 1m depth at the upslope end of the trench) and spreading the quarried material downslope to create a near level platform. The northern extent of the floor was laid upon natural boulder clay subsoil, while the southern part was erected over a foundation comprising a mixed deposit (5118) of large quarried metamorphised sandstone interspersed with a yellow-brown to dark-brown silty clay soil. The foundation of the T5 platform was up to 0.4m deep at the southern end of the trench and was recorded through a 1m wide sondage dug to natural in the southern half of the trench (Illus 4.26). Around the north-eastern and southern sides of the platform were notable deposits of bright yellow-brown (5110) and grey-brown (5111) silty-loam that appear to have been the degraded remains of a turf outer wall. No such deposit was obvious on the northern side and it seems likely that the quarried hillslope to the north was utilised as the back wall of the structure. At the north-eastern limits of the trench, the edge of another platform (5117), consisting of a grey-brown silt very similar to the floor/turf layers of the main structure already described, was identified. This is likely to represent the floor of another house on the slope above.

The central hearth (5116) revealed in the Trench 5 extension consisted of an area of concentrated stone and charcoal with only one in situ kerb stone on its south side. The hearth deposits consisted of dark blackish-brown silt with heavy concentrations of charcoal and areas of orange-red clayey silt around its margins that provided evidence of in situ burning. The hearth formed part of the occupation deposit(s) on the platform which consisted of a thin floor layer (5101) of mid-brown clayey silt with frequent charcoal. The floor was up to 0.08m thick near the hearth but otherwise formed a thin deposit only a few centimetres deep across the platform. Pottery and metal finds were concentrated within the southern, downslope, side of the structure and included numerous sherds of hand-coiled pottery, including rim, body and base sherds, and two sherds of Late Roman amphorae (Chapter 7). The metal finds comprised a nail or fitting, a larger lump of iron and a fragment of a small copper-alloy projecting ring-headed pin.

Several cut features were identified around the hearth and on the north side of the structure, where they were easily recognisable due to being cut into the natural subsoil. The most obvious were three post holes – [5103], [5105] and [5107] – which were very similar in form and survived *c* 0.2m in diameter and 0.2–0.3m deep, containing a fine silt fill with abundant charcoal. These are considered likely to represent the remains of roof supports for the T5 platform structure. The much more mixed deposits occupying the foundation of the structure on its downslope side made it significantly harder to identify features here. However, a sondage in this area revealed a cut [5114] into natural representing a possible pit or post hole around 0.6m in diameter and 0.47m deep with a largely sterile, dark, loamy silt fill.

Illus 4.25
Plan of platform T5



Illus 4.26
East-facing section of western trench edge (A–B) of T5 and sondage (C–D) (as marked on Illus 4.25)

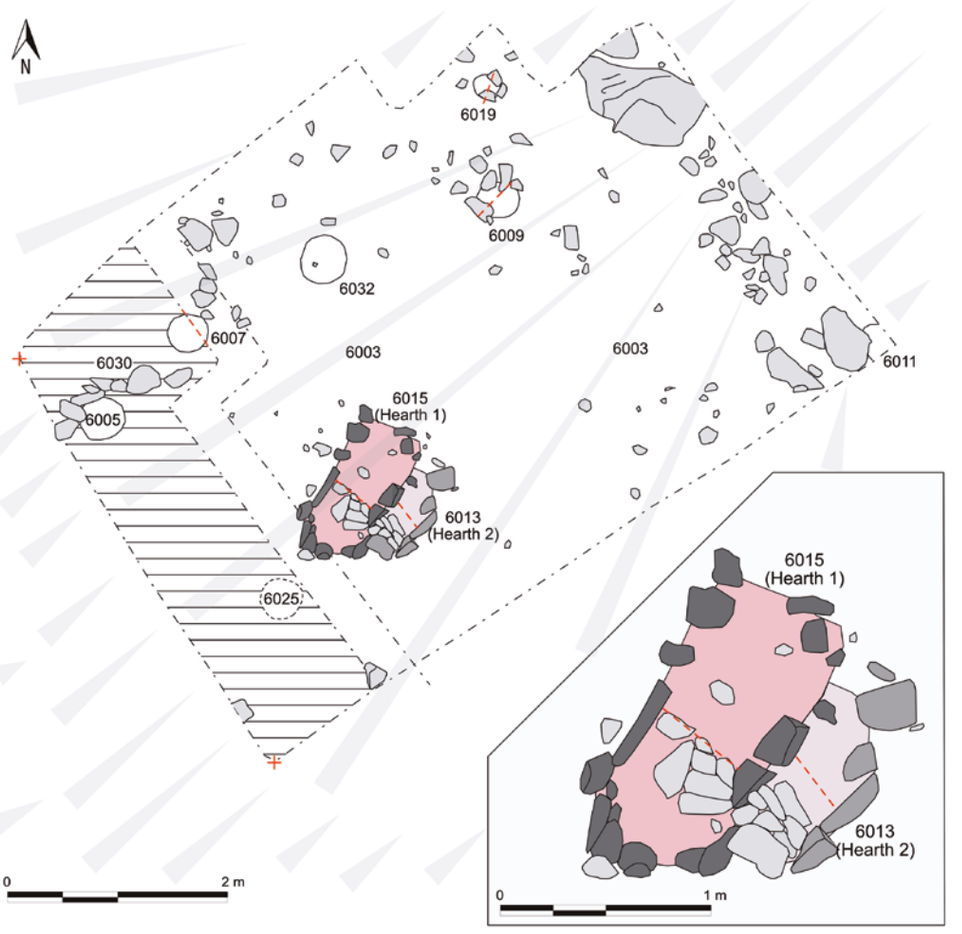
Illus 4.27
Post-excavation aerial photograph of T6 house platform – north-west is at the top of the image – Hearths 1 and 2 are evident in the image with sondage through the platform floors and foundation to the left (see illustration 4.29)

4.6.3 T6 Platform

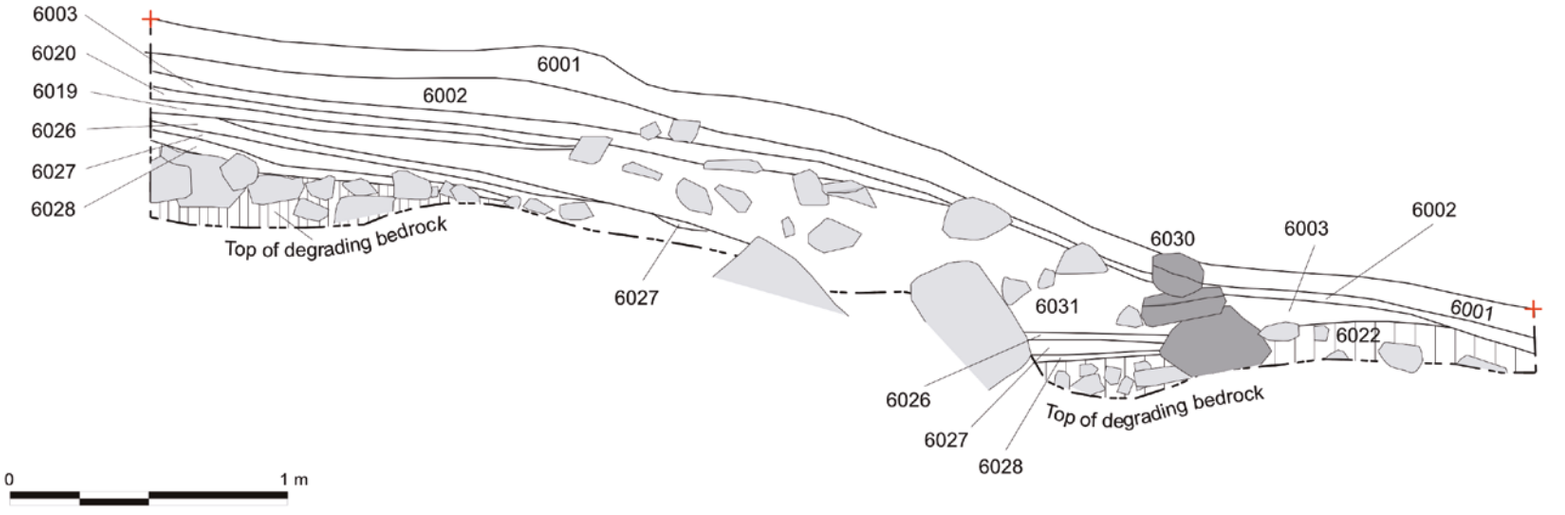
Trench 6 was established in 2019 to investigate a platform on the west-facing slope within the lower fort (Illus 4.27 and 4.28). As in T5, the T6 platform was constructed by cutting into the hillside and depositing the extracted material on the lower slopes to create a level surface. On the upslope, and downslope, bedrock was overlain by a series of occupation deposits – (6026), (6027) and (6028) (Illus 4.29). Above these layers was a substantial, stone-rich, deposit (6031) consisting of a greyish-brown gravelly silt with moderate amounts of small- to medium-sized angular stones and charcoal (Illus 4.29). This deposit had a maximum thickness of 0.38m and may represent later refurbishment of the platform or the collapse of some form of superstructure over the earlier floors. The termination of deposit (6031) downslope coincided with the position of a number of possible post holes – [6005], [6007], [6009], [6011] and [6019] – which may have demarcated the edge of this platform (Illus 4.28). The cuts for these post holes were difficult to define (see below) as their fills were similar to the deposit (6031). A number of sherds of Roman pottery was recovered around post hole [6005].

Two hearths [6015] (Hearth 1) and [6013] (Hearth 2) were identified at the centre of the circular platform (Illus 4.27 and 4.28). Hearth 1 [6015] was the larger of the two, measuring 1.44m long by 0.58m wide. It was defined by kerbstones and contained two distinct fills: the lower was charcoal-rich and ashy (6017) with occasional burnt bone and a series of heat-affected stones towards the base. The upper fill (6012) appears to have represented a refurbishment of the hearth with another layer of heat-affected stones covered by a charcoal-rich dark-brown silt with moderate amounts of small angular heat-affected stones and occasional burnt bone. A number of mould and crucible fragments were recovered from this upper fill (Chapter 7). The soils underneath this hearth were heat affected and oxidised. Hearth 2 measured 0.74m x 0.57m. Its fill (6014) comprised a charcoal-rich dark-brown silt with some burnt bone. This hearth was stone lined at its base, comprising thin slabs about 0.2m x 0.8m in size. A smaller assemblage of mould and/or crucible fragments was identified in the fill of Hearth 2. A small pit [6025] measuring 0.40m x 0.36m and 0.06m in depth was identified near the hearths; this was filled by a basal charcoal-rich lens (6024) and an upper orange-brown heavily oxidised fill (6023) (Illus 4.28).

A series of additional occupation layers were identified above (6031) which capped the early floor layers (Illus 4.29). These included (6019), which was only partially revealed on the upslope side of the trench as a thin 0.04m deposit of medium-brown sandy silt



Illus 4.28
Post-excavation plan of T6 house platform – sondage on left side (hatched), hearths 1 and 2 and post holes indicated



Illus 4.29
North-east facing section of T6 house platform

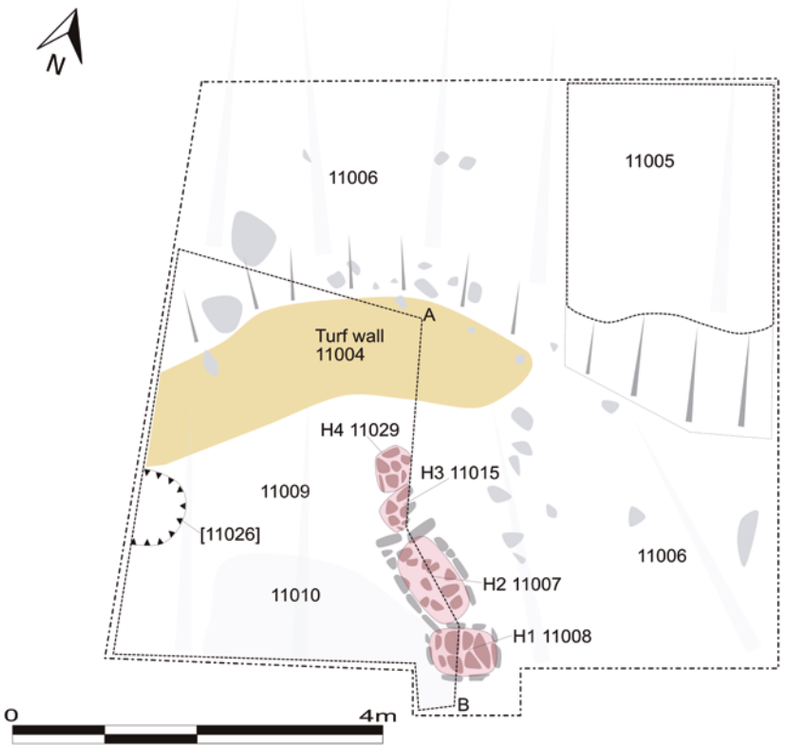
with charcoal. This lay beneath a medium-brown, 0.05m thick, sloping clay deposit (6020) which was again only identifiable in the upslope side of the trench. These were in turn positioned under later medium-brown deposits (6002) and (6003), that were up to 0.08m thick. These uppermost layers extended almost to the edge of the revetment (6031). The purpose of these layers is uncertain – they could represent midden layers from later activity from adjacent platforms rather than in situ late occupation of the T6 platform.

4.6.4 T11 platforms

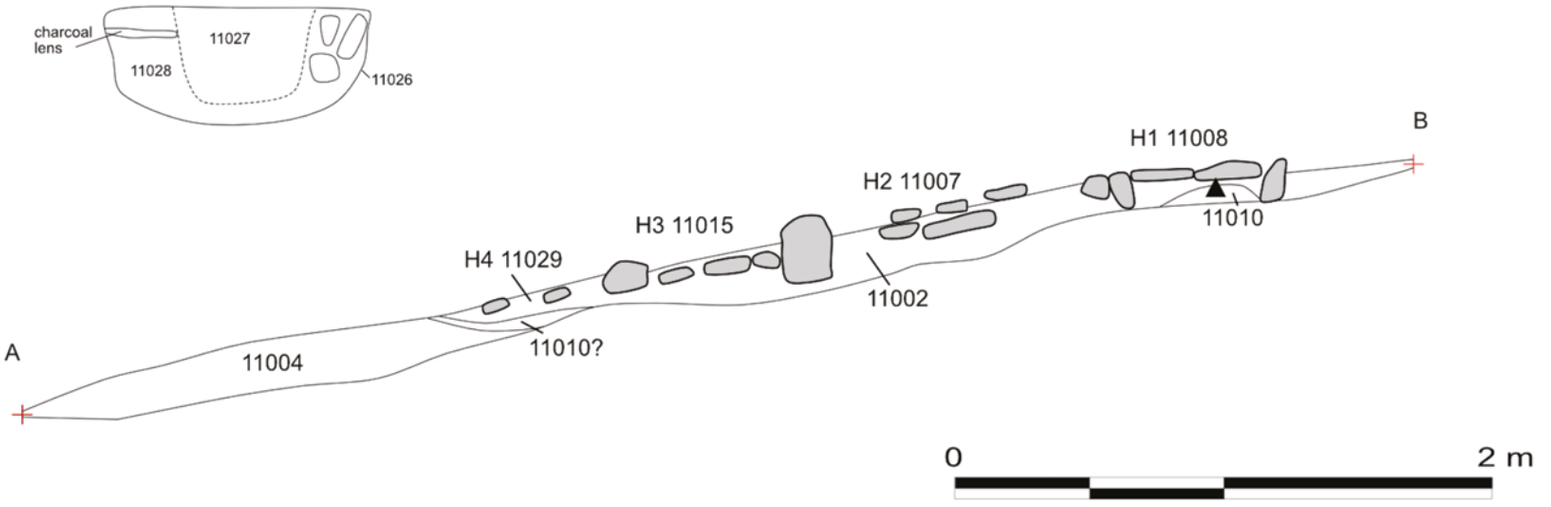
In July 2021, Trench 11 was established on the north-west shoulder of the hill, on the western side of the modern path that ascends the slope (Illus 4.30 and 4.31). The trench measured 8m x 8m and encompassed at least two platforms, an upper and a lower. Deturfing the upper platform immediately revealed the outlines of two hearths (H1 and H2) apparently in the centre of the platform (Illus 4.30 and 4.32). The western quadrant of the platform was selected for excavation and a floor layer (11002) was exposed following removal of the overburden. This deposit comprised a mid-brown clayey silt that contained a number of artefacts, including hand-coiled pottery, imported colour-coated Roman pottery, two polished stone discs, slag and a mould fragment (Chapter 7). Removing the upper floor layer revealed two further hearths (H3 and H4: Illus 4.32). The stratigraphic position of the hearths showed that hearth 4 was the earliest, overlain and thus replaced by hearth 3. Hearth 2 overlay hearth 3 and hearth 1 was probably the latest in the sequence, as its construction appears to have involved removing and perhaps reusing the northern kerbstones of Hearth 2. The hearths were made of locally sourced red and white granite and metamorphosed sandstone slabs. A number of stake-holes was found to the west of the hearths but the only substantial cut feature was a large post hole at the western trench edge: this was around 1m in diameter and 0.5m deep, containing a post-pipe and packing. This could potentially be the remains of an entrance, but further trenching would be required to test this idea fully.

Under floor horizon (11002) in the upslope part of the trench was a heavily oxidised and burnt layer of pinkish-orange clayey silt (11010), only vestigially present in the section drawing (Illus 4.31 and 4.33). This layer was associated with a dense concentration of charcoal that was concentrated to the west of hearth 1, though hearth 1 also sat on top of an extension of this deposit. Layer (11010) may have also underlain hearths 2 and 4, although this relationship was less certain. It may be that the hearths were constructed after this deposit had been cut through or largely removed, with the exception of hearth 1 which was more shallowly set and undoubtedly overlay 11010 (Fig. 4.32). Either way, (11010) is an early deposit in the sequence. Its character – a heavily oxidised clayey silt underlain by a distinct layer of charcoal – has the appearance of a destruction deposit and may represent a collapsed turf and timber roof or wall from an early phase of habitation on the platform that was destroyed by fire. Both (11002) and (11010) overlay (11004), a mixed deposit of yellow-brown and mid-brown clayey silt that appears to have been redeposited natural/an old ground surface laid to help level the platform.

The lower part of Trench 11 consisted of a linear terrace that extended east/west for at least 15m. The deposits on this lower platform comprised clayey silts containing a small number of artefacts, with the only clear differentiation in these deposits being an area of pinkish-orange clayey silt (11005) on the eastern side. This was heavily oxidised and similar in appearance to (11010) on the upper platform. This area, targeted for excavation, revealed that (11005) was concentrated in the downslope portion of the platform and sat directly on top of a natural blackish-brown peat and rocky subsoil. Layer (11005) was up to 0.08m deep but was inconsistent in profile, being only 0.03m thick in places. A few sherds of pottery and iron fragments were found on and within this layer. No hearth was located on the lower platform, though it may be this was positioned in the unexcavated area east of the trench where the platform extended for at least another 5m. The deposits in the western part of the lower platform could conceivably relate to another platform dwelling or activity area or, alternatively, the lower terrace may relate to ancillary activities associated with the upper platform. Only further excavation would be able to establish the validity of these hypotheses.



Illus 4.30
Trench plan of T11 with upper platform to the south and lower to the north



Illus 4.31
West-facing section of upper platform quadrant (Section A–B) T11 (as marked on Illus 4.30). Also show is the east-facing section of post hole [11026]

Illus 4.32
Hearths 1–4 on the upper platform T11

Illus 4.33
Layer 11010 by Hearth 1 and 2 on the upper platform T11

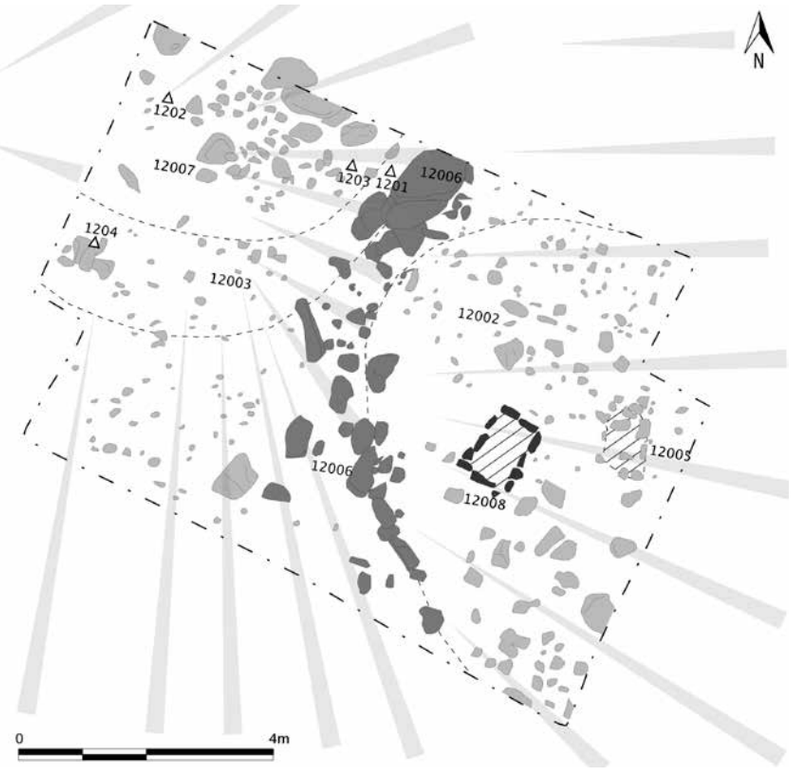
Illus 4.34
Platform T12 under excavation

Illus 4.35
Drone shot of the T12 platforms deturfed and cleaned up with the upper platform on the left

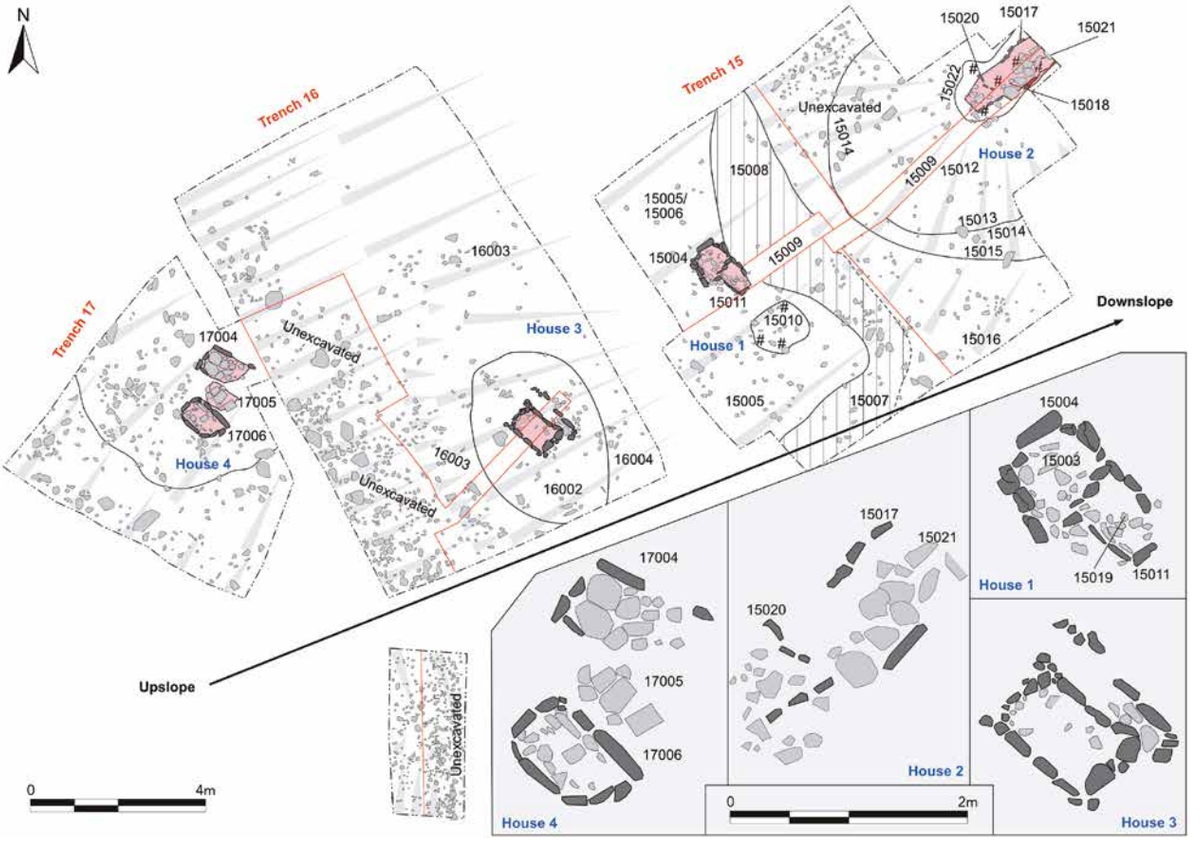
4.6.5 T12 platforms

Trench 12 targeted two platforms on the western side of the hill, one above the other (Illus 4.34–4.36). This trench measured around 8m x 8m with small extensions on the east and west sides. The removal of a 0.25m thick peaty topsoil (12001) revealed the upper floor layers (12002/12003) of the two house platforms (Illus 4.36). The upper, eastern platform extended to the edge of a terrace which had been augmented by the addition of a revetment (12006) outlining its western side and supporting the material that had been piled downslope to create a level surface for the floor. Immediately to the west of this and downslope lay the remains of the second, sub-circular, platform.

The upper platform had been recorded by LiDAR and photogrammetry as a *c* 6m diameter terrace but on the ground measured at least 8m across. A thick, dark-brown clayey silt intermixed with infrequent charcoal and medium-sized angular stones (12002) comprised the floor of this house. It survived up to 0.3m in depth and sat directly on the underlying natural or on the platform revetment to the west. While no small finds were recovered from (12002), two possible hearths (12008) and (12005) were identified near the centre of the platform (Illus 4.36). The first hearth (12008) consisted of a 1.0m x 0.6m setting of kerb stones set into (12002) and found directly on the natural. It had a single shallow fill comprising a 0.06m deep, dark greyish-brown sandy silt with moderate charcoal, infrequent burnt-bone fragments and frequent small heat-affected stones (12004). Its base, consisting of



Illus 4.36
Plan of T12 excavations, with the upper platform on the east and the lower downslope to the west



Illus 4.37
Plan of T15–T17 Platforms

small flat slabs of heat-affected sandstone, was also identified. A second possible hearth was located *c* 1m to the east of (12005) was left unexcavated.

The lower western platform was also recorded by LiDAR and photogrammetry, where it was defined as a *c* 7m diameter terrace. Two floor layers were identified on this platform (Illus 4.36), the upper of which consisted of a 0.1m thick mid brown clayey silt with infrequent charcoal (12003). A number of pottery sherds and leather-working cobble came from this context (Chapter 7). Underneath (12003), in the northern-western half of the trench only, lay a second possible floor layer, comprising a 0.04m thick, greyish-brown clayey silt with infrequent charcoal flecks (12007).

4.6.6 T15 Platforms

In June 2012, three trenches (T15–T17) were opened to investigate what can be identified as four platforms (identified as Houses 1–4) lying one above another within the north-west side of the lower fort (Illus 4.37 and 4.38). Trench 15 (T15) measured 8m x 8m, with an extension at the north-eastern side, and was opened to target two of the platforms (Houses 1 and 2) that lay below the platforms in T16 and T17 (Illus 4.37). Neither of the structures excavated within this trench was set on fully level ground, with a notable east/west slope marking each platform. The slope may have been incorporated to help with drainage, but it is also possible that the sloping topography may have been exacerbated by the later erosion of the platform edge. The underlying natural deposit (15009) comprised an irregular mixture of yellow and dark-brown gravel intermixed with medium to large stones. On the lower part of House 1, a foundation deposit (15016) was recorded for the house floors. This measured up to 0.48m in depth, and it had partly collapsed downslope where it met the floor layers of House 2. Fragments of pottery and an iron object were recovered from the interface between deposit (15016) and the overburden (15002) present between Houses 1 and 2.

House 1 on the upper platform of T15 was defined by two floor layers (15005/15006) that lay on top of the foundation (15016). The remains of a probable turf wall (15007/15008) was found slumped around the platform edge. The turf wall comprised a soft, 0.15m thick, light brownish-grey clayey silt with occasional charcoal, burnt bone and medium stones that extended in a broad arc around the eastern and south-eastern edges of the platform, following the contours of the hill. The deposit measured up to 1m wide and directly abutted the structure's hearth on its eastern side (see below), though its thickness here may represent evidence for collapse and slumping.

The turf wall demarcated the edge of the two floor surfaces (15005) and (15006) of House 1 on the upper platform of T15. The lower floor (15006) consisted of a 0.08m thick, compact, dark brownish-grey clayey silt with moderate amounts of charcoal. This abutted the central hearth and was recorded in patches on the eastern side of the hearth continuing underneath the western

Illus 4.38
Platforms T15–T17 under excavation. T17 is the upper platform, T16 & T15 are downslope

limits of the collapsed turf wall (15008). Directly on top of (15006), a 0.06m thick, compact, dark greyish-black clayey silt with moderate charcoal and occasional burnt bone (15005) represented the later floor layer associated with House 1. This was contained within the area defined by the turf wall (15007/15008). Floor (15005) abutted hearth 15004. The floors, platform dimensions and turf wall indicated that House 1 was elongated and sub-rectangular in form rather than circular and measured around 4m wide by 8m long.

House 1 was found to have at least two phases of use, indicated by the two floor layers and also by two superimposed hearths. The earlier hearth (15004) was defined by a series of locally derived flagstones set on edge and measured 0.98m wide and at least 1.09m long, though its southern side has been truncated by the later hearth (15011). The earlier hearth contained a 0.16m dark greyish-brown clayey silt (15003) with occasional burnt bone and frequent charcoal. Intermixed with this fill were several heat-affected stone slabs that may have been used as an unstructured base to the hearth. Overlying and partially truncating the lower hearth (15004) on the south-eastern side was a smaller hearth (15011) measuring 0.83m x 0.54m. It consisted of a series of flagstones set on edge; it contained a 0.15m deep fill (15019) of dark greyish-brown clayey silt with occasional burnt bone and frequent charcoal. Fragments of pottery were also recovered from the fill of this hearth. Immediately to the south-east of these two hearths, a thin (0.02m thick) amorphous spread of charcoal and burnt bone was found sitting on top of the upper floor surface (15005), which could represent a cleaning episode associated with late hearth.

Immediately downslope, House 2 was revealed to be more circular in shape, at least within the excavated area. It measured at least 6m in diameter. At least three floor deposits were associated with this building, as well as the partial remains of a possible turf wall (15014) which survived on its western, upslope side. The lowermost floor (15015) sat directly on natural (15009). It comprised a 0.09m thick, firm, light blackish-brown clayey silt with frequent charcoal (15015). This floor (15015) remained evident on the western upslope side of the trench partially underneath the collapsed foundation deposit (15016) of House 1 and the possible remains of a turf wall (15014). The turf wall survived as a 0.04m thick by 0.32m wide band of soft, light yellowish-brown clayey silt with occasional charcoal that curved around the western edge of House 2. Sitting above and truncating floor (15015) and turf wall (15014) was a 0.19m thick, dark-brown clayey silt with moderate charcoal (15013). Two fragments of pottery were recovered from this secondary floor surface. Above this, the final floor layer (15012) comprised a 0.07m thick, firm, dark reddish-brown clayey silt with moderate amounts of charcoal and occasional burnt bone.

This complex, multiphase occupation for House 2 may explain the poorly preserved hearth(s) recorded on the north-eastern edge of the lower platform in T15. At least two heavily disturbed elongated hearths were identified, which measured respectively approximately 1.32m x 0.78m (15017) and 0.87m x 0.61m (15020). Hearth (15017) was defined on its north-western and south-eastern sides by a series of flagstones; hearth (15020) was delimited on its north-eastern and south-eastern margins by smaller flagstones. The disturbance of both features resulted in a single mixed fill (15018) contained within both hearths which consisted of a loose, dark blackish-brown clayey silt with frequent burnt bone and charcoal intermixed with frequent heat-affected stones. An amorphous deposit of compact, dark blackish-brown clayey silt with frequent charcoal and burnt bone (15022) was spread around the poorly defined limits of both hearths. On top of (15022) and over hearth (15017) lay a series of well placed, partially heat-affected stone slabs (15021) that may represent the latest hearth associated with House 2 – though there was no obvious deposit (such as material associated with the final use of this possible hearth) found associated with this feature. Overlying the undisturbed features was a 0.1–0.3m deep, dark brownish-grey clay silt overburden (15002) intermixed with frequent small to medium stones, which was capped by a 0.1–0.2m thick, peaty turf line (15001).

4.6.7 T16 Platform

Trench 16 measured 10m x 6m and was opened over what appeared to be two possible platforms, although only one apparently structure, labelled House 3 (Illus 4.37), could be identified during excavation. It may be that a larger terrace had been prepared for a series of structures here, with other buildings located to the north-east just beyond the limits of the trench. Only part of House 3 lay within the trench, where it measured at least 7m long by 4.5m wide, with the long, downslope side of this building coinciding with the terrace edge overlooking House 2. Its plan strongly suggested that House 3, like House 2, was sub-rectangular in form and established on a north-west/south-east oriented terrace. The terrace had been created by cutting into the natural hillslope and spreading the resulting material to create a foundation downslope. The levelling material (16004/16011) was not fully excavated due to time constraints but where (16011) was partly removed to the north-east of the hearth it indicated that this deposit was at least 0.25m thick and the soil matrix contained several animal teeth, perhaps from redeposited midden deposits.

Multiple floor layers and two hearths were identified within the part of House 3 that was excavated in T16. The upper floor deposits consisted of a compact layer of mid-greyish-brown silty clay (16002) concentrated around the hearth and what appeared to be a broadly contemporary deposit (16005) on the north-west side of the building that extended up to 3m from the hearth. At the edge of (16005) was (16012), an orangey-brown loamy silt that may have been the remains of an outer turf wall of the structure. A possible earlier floor (16009) (not on the plan) survived only in patches and lay under (16005/16002) around the western upslope side of building. These lower floor remnants may have conceivably related to the fragmentary lower hearth (16008).

Towards the centre of floor (16002) lay a well-built rectangular hearth (16006) that measured around 1.2m long by 0.7m wide and was well defined by kerbstones of a mix of local geologies. The kerbs retained a number of heat-affected flat slabs and abundant charcoal (16007). Downslope, to the north-east side of hearth (16006), were the remnants of an earlier hearth (16008), partially covered by floor (16002). This hearth lay directly on the T16 platform foundation (16004) and consisted of one incomplete side and corner of a largely dismantled hearth. The kerb stones delimited the edge of three flat slabs, remnants of the hearth base, and these contained a charcoal-rich, mid-brownish-black clayey silt soil matrix (16012). Over the platform, and its associated floor

layers and hearths, lay a rubble overburden (16010) that extended to 0.7m deep on the upslope side and only 0.1m thick on the downslope platform edge.

4.6.8 T17 Platform

Trench 17 measured around 6m x 5m in maximum dimensions and was established in an irregular wedge-shape to conform to the shape of the platform initially identified here (Illus 4.37). The trench covered approximately 60% of the platform floor area of House 4, which is likely to have been around 5m in diameter. The structure on the T17 platform appears to have been sub-circular in plan, though remodelling through time and erosion may have obscured its full shape and character. At least three hearths were identified. A charcoal-rich layer (17011), possibly a robbed-out hearth, lay under the lowest hearth (17004) and another hearth located immediately upslope (17005). The stratigraphically lowest hearth (17004) measured around 0.8m long and 0.67m wide and contained a mid-brown, charcoal-rich, clayey silt soil fill (17007). Only five kerbstones survived, with the hearth placed right at the break of slope down to the platform below – the floors here may have been partly removed by the construction of the platform below or the edge of the platform may have been lost to later erosion.

Upslope, and probably later than (17004), was a second hearth (17005). This was placed between it and a further hearth (17006) to the south-west. Hearth (17005) was around 0.8m long and 0.55m wide and had a dark-brown, charcoal-rich, silty clay fill (17008). Only its basal stones survived, with all kerbstones seemingly robbed out. Hearth (17006) was likely the latest in the series and was very well-built, its sub-oval shape defined by well-constructed kerbstones. Its base largely comprised one flat slab. The fill of this hearth was a charcoal-rich, dark-brown silty clay (17009). Under the basal stones of the hearth was another charcoal-rich deposit (17010) which may represent the remnants of a robbed-out earlier hearth.

Two floor layers were also evident with House 4 on the T17 platform. A mid-greyish-brown clayey silt denoted a lower deposit (17003) which surrounded the upper hearth (17006); it survived up to 0.19m deep on the west side by the trench edge but was much thinner elsewhere. The upper floor consisted of a mid-brown clayey silt (17002) with frequent charcoal that survived around 0.11m deep and partly obscured the uppermost hearth (17006), suggesting this surface was related to a later occupation with no obvious surviving associated hearth. Two glass beads were found within this upper floor layer (17002).

4.7 Discussion: the excavated evidence

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4.7.1 Vitrified wall and the upper fort

Considering the evidence for wooden beams discovered in Trenches 1 and 4, the masses of vitrified material that provide indirect evidence for timber lacing, as well as the massive amount of tumbled stone, it is clear that the wall of the oblong fort would have been a colossal structure that required substantial resources, time and workforce to construct and maintain. The condition of the small fragments of remaining wall face, composed of collapsed, heat-shattered and buckled stones in Trench 1, and the near total collapse of the wall face in Trench 4, demonstrates the extent to which the oblong fort was destroyed by the fire that led to its partial vitrification. The large lumps of fused and vitrified wall core in Trench 4 highlight the heat of this fire, with the volumes of vitrified material far exceeding that achieved in experimental examples (Chapter 7). Huge quantities of stone from the rampart collapsed into the interior and even more slumped downslope outside of the fort. In the interior, the lack of soil horizons in the voided tumble indicates that parts of the wall fell rapidly with no time for soil and vegetation to form amongst the stone slump, though whether this happened immediately upon destruction or later is difficult to discern.

4.7.2 The U-shaped banks

The U-shaped banks on the interior of the fort had previously been identified by Dunwell and Strachan and in the RCAHMS survey (Dunwell & Strachan 1997; RCAHMS 2008: 103–5), with the latter suggesting these belonged to an earlier sub-circular enclosure that pre-dated the oblong fort. However, the excavations showed that the U-shaped banks largely followed the line of the oblong fort wall face and that they may have been added at a later phase than the oblong fort. Indeed, small pieces of vitrified stone present in the inner bank matrix, and that the outer bank may have been cut through the clay floor (411) in Trench 4, suggests that the U-shaped banks are most likely to be secondary features constructed after the burning event that led to vitrification. However, the substantial tumbled stone deposit (1702) in Trench 1, that appears to represent collapse of the oblong fort rampart, extended over the outer bank and seemingly respected the edge of the inner bank. This could therefore imply that the banks were present when the main wall collapse occurred, but how soon after the fire this slump occurred is presently impossible to tell. The radiocarbon evidence may suggest that there was not a long interval in time between the construction of the fort and the U-shaped banks for the dates are broadly similar (Chapter 8); nonetheless, there is a high possibility of residual burnt material within the core of each bank if the U-shaped banks did indeed incorporate vitrified stone and other material from the oblong fort. That aside, the dates for the banks and the stratigraphy certainly do not support the banks pre-dating the vitrified fort and the most likely scenario is that they were later features post-dating its destruction. They may have been built to revet the damaged walls of the oblong fort, allowing some use of the interior following the catastrophic destruction. It is possible that the outer bank was constructed first, with the inner a secondary addition when the weight of the unstable rampart collapse became too much. However, how much later these banks are than the oblong fort is a moot point and one that could only be resolved with further work and perhaps alternative ways of dating the construction of the U-shaped banks, given the probabilities of the incorporation of residual material within their matrix.

4.7.3 The interior

Given the size of the oblong fort, only a relatively small area within its interior was explored. However, the trenches and combined excavated area are still significant in comparison to other

investigations at forts of this type. No obvious structural features were found in Trench 1 and the occupation evidence, in the form of midden material, was relatively slight aside from the animal bone deposits found directly next to the wall face in Trench 1. Thin and fragmentary patches of turf-like material found further into the interior in Trench 1 hinted at possible remains of turf-rich layers, but it is unclear whether these deposits related to the redeposition of turf from old ground surfaces during the construction of the fort or whether they could have defined buildings or activity within the interior. No other occupation evidence was found in the support of the latter.

Results from Trench 4 indicated that some form of multiphase structure was built against the inner wall face and was presumably broadly contemporary with the construction of the fort. Its northern and southern limits extended beyond the edge of the trench and the structure appears to have been truncated on the interior side by the outer U-shaped bank, but it abutted the oblong fort wall on the south-west. It survived as a series of blue clay deposits separated by lenses of charcoal but no finds were recovered from these deposits. Further into the interior there was even less evidence for structures or activity. In Trench 3, spreads of tightly packed stone demonstrated no particular form or function and could simply represent the gradual spreading of wall collapse from the rampart and subsequent redeposition. In the same trench, a small area of in situ burning was identified but this consisted of heat-affected material with small charcoal inclusions rather than any obvious hearth feature and radiocarbon dating may suggest that the deposits within Trench 3 pre-dated the oblong fort.

It therefore remains unclear if and how the interior of the fort was used, and the lack of any artefacts from two seasons of excavation within the fort is notable. Childe (1935: 61) did find a significant artefact assemblage at the oblong fort of Finavon but almost all the finds, as well as the only structural features, came from near the wall face, again suggesting that any activity was concentrated near the ramparts (Chapter 9). At Tap o' Noth, the relative lack of any structural evidence in the form of stone walls or cut features such as post holes implies that much of the central part of the interior was 'empty' or at least deliberately left free of structures, perhaps being used as a gathering or meeting place or for some other function. The more convincing structural evidence near the wall face could imply that the fort had a series of shelters and structures that utilised the space along the inside of the wall, allowing the central area of the fort to be left open. However, these structures were not continuous along the wall face as suggested by the lack of such structural evidence in Trench 1.

4.7.4 The cistern

The cistern was reputed to have been completely emptied in the 1880s during Macdonald's excavations (1891), so the fact that the antiquarian cutting did not fully mirror the original well profile was extremely fortuitous. It allowed samples to be retrieved to date the lowest fills at the base of the cistern, and enabled the identification of deposits around the sides and around the top of the cut. This revealed that the cistern was broadly contemporary with the construction and destruction phases of the oblong fort, with the well perhaps abandoned at the time of the destruction of the rampart. The identification of in situ basal fills and multiple clay linings gave a level of insight into the construction and use of the cistern, suggesting it remained in use for a significant period of time, which perhaps contrasts with the absence of other evidence of use of the fort interior. At 1.7m in depth, it was not particularly deep and little in the way of water was found at its base. It would have perhaps functioned as a catchment for rainwater and runoff from the surrounding bedrock and subsoil. Certainly, Macdonald's description highlights the use of clay as a sealant and lining:

> On digging down about 5 feet [1.5m], water oozed out from the sides of the cutting, and at a foot lower it bubbled up vigorously for a minute or two like a genuine spring, but on piercing the clay and reaching the rock the water collected in the cutting suddenly disappeared (Macdonald 1891: 46–7).

The clay linings clearly had a role to play in making the cistern watertight, and the multiple linings identified through excavation suggest it was repaired and maintained through time.

There was a notable lack of structural evidence around the cistern, so it is unlikely that it was surrounded by a structure or covered in any way. The absence of features around the cistern again suggests relatively light use of the central area of the fort for structures or buildings. The cistern shaft excavated at Finavon was much larger, measuring around 5m across and 6.5m deep, though, like Tap o' Noth, Childe (1935: 67) did not note any significant features or deposits around. Environmental evidence from the internal deposits suggests an open environment around Tap o' Noth at the time the cistern was in use in the Iron Age, with grass and scrub woodland in the vicinity of the fort. More surprisingly, indicators of farming in the form of probable cereal-type pollen and grazing indicators were found in the pollen evidence from the lower cistern fill, though it is possible that this was introduced along with the clay from areas further down in the valley (Chapter 8).

4.7.5 The lower fort rampart/wall/bank

The large lower fort is of a type that had been associated with a Bronze Age dating horizon (eg Halliday 1985: 238; Mercer & Tipping 1994: 5; Armit 1997: 57 – see also Ralston 1983: 158) or a late pre-Roman Iron Age date (eg Feachem 1966: 77–82). However, it has now been securely dated to the Late Roman Iron Age/early medieval period (Chapter 8). The extent of the enclosure is notable, with its *c* 1.5km perimeter reflecting an impressive control of resources and labour. A large population is also suggested by the 800+ platforms recorded within the interior; however, this is probably a conservative reflection of the total settlement considering that the excavations also identified occupation surfaces that were not apparent prior to excavation (eg immediately upslope from the rampart) and on the more level areas of the interior platforms would not need to have been dug into the hillslope, so other habitations may remain as yet undetected.

The rampart of this large lower fort originally consisted of a 4.5m+ wide bank of unstructured stones defined by a series of larger kerbs or revetment. It is unlikely that this would have stood to any great height and, as such, its function as a defensive boundary is questionable. However, the remnants of a palisade slot

associated with the rampart may suggest that the rampart acted as a footing for a large wooden palisade, which would have been a much more impressive, monumental barrier. The dating evidence suggests that both the rampart and palisade slot are broadly contemporary, though it is also possible, but less likely, that these features represent a close sequence of activity with the palisade quickly being replaced by the rampart. An early date from the palisade slot (Chapter 8), and a slight misalignment in the revetment of the lower parts of the palisade slot (Illus 4.22), may also indicate an earlier phase to the palisade, though given the relative shallow nature of the slot any earlier phase may have also been embanked in some way.

4.7.6 The character of the platforms

A series of occupation deposits abutting the interior of the outer rampart appear to represent the edge of a house floor or occupation of some kind near one of the entranceways to the lower fort. Excavation of other platforms within the interior of the outer fort also produced clear evidence of the use of the platforms for occupation often of multiple phases. The platforms were created by cutting into the hillslope and moving the excavated material downslope to create a level or slightly sloping foundation. In some cases, for example House 3, the foundation material included midden deposits that contained animal teeth, which may be the vestiges of more substantial animal bone deposits given the poor bone preservation encountered on the site, and may indicate the reworking of earlier occupation traces during the building of some of the platforms.

The material revetting the downslope limits of the platform foundations must have been extensive given the steep gradients in many parts of the hill, suggesting that, including the quarrying of the upslope portions, significant amounts of labour went into creating the platforms even before structures were erected on them. The buildings set on the platforms appear to have been packed very close together, with the evidence from Trenches 15–17 suggesting that structures directly overlooked others with little intervening space. These platforms appear to have been occupied by circular (up to *c* 8m in diameter) and sub-rectangular structures (House 3, T16 was at least 7m x 4.5m), though the plans of individual buildings were difficult to trace due to uncertainties as to their outer wall positions and a lack of earthfast structural features with the exception of a few post holes (eg those upon the T6 platform). The platforms appear to have witnessed repeated episodes of building over extended periods, with the series of hearths identified on T11 and T17 being particularly impressive – four stacked hearths on the upper platform at T11 and at least three on the platform in T17. Where multiple hearths were identified, they tended to shift upslope through time, perhaps as the edges of platforms became less stable and modifications had to be made to stabilise individual platforms. Floor deposits spread on the platforms were also evident but their preservation was mixed; certain platforms had multiple, clearly differentiated floor deposits, whilst others had deeper more homogenous deposits (see Reid et al 2023) for the difficulties in identifying floor deposits in Scottish soils). Artefacts and other finds associated with each platform were notably concentrated around the hearths, as were the more distinctive and obvious floor deposits, suggesting that activity within the structures focused on the hearth area. The floors and hearths exhibited similarities to the structures found at Cairn More (Chapter 6), and the overall architectural setting of the platforms – with substantial labour and resource investment implied by adjacent features such as paths and the rampart itself – imply that occupation was not ephemeral or short-lived. Finds such as metalworking moulds also indicate that settlement activity related to more than fleeting visits. The significance of the platforms and the lower fort will be explored further in Chapter 10.

4.8 Conclusions

Investigations at Tap o' Noth were the most logistically and physically challenging excavations undertaken during the project, yet produced some of the most surprising and rewarding results. The dating of the lower fort and a series of platforms within its enclosure was a particularly exciting and important outcome that has significant implications for our understanding of the Late Roman Iron Age and early medieval environs of Rhynie, wider Strathbogie and beyond. In returning to the research questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, we can now place the development of the landscape through time on a much firmer footing. It seems clear that the key to unlocking the long-term evolution of the early medieval/Late Antique centre at the Craw Stane is the development of Tap o' Noth and its evolution through time. Tap o' Noth was transformed from an Iron Age hilltop complex after a period of apparent abandonment to a large-scale settlement involving the construction and use of hundreds of dwellings on the hill. The settlement endured from the earlier first millennium AD until the late 6th or early 7th century AD and appears to have been a huge conglomeration of settlement contained by a very substantial rampart and palisade by the 5th century AD at the latest. The landscape focus of the project has undoubtedly helped illuminate crucial questions surrounding the development of this landscape through time and the interpretation of the overall evidence will be returned to in the final chapters of the monograph.