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Chapter 2

Description of the Investigation

Principles

The mode of argument adopted by this research project was archaeological. The programme was to begin by selecting an area through *reconnaissance* and then subjecting it to an *evaluation* in which the survival of stratigraphic information was explored, mapped and estimated. If this *deposit model* is successfully composed, it offers an assessment of the likely riches of the site, the preservation and depth of strata, without significant disturbance or damage to the monument. The evaluation then draws up a *research agenda* – what current scholarship would wish to know – and this in turn is matched to the visibility of archaeological traces in the terrain and what additional techniques would be required to see them. The evalution phase also assesses the *social context* of the site – that is the constraints, expectations and concepts of ownership of interested parties, both local and remote. From this preliminary appreciation of the factors, a *project design* is drawn up which hopefully reconciles them all. The design will comprise a *research programme*, including excavation and survey, a *conservation programme*, in which the long-term curation of the site is planned, and a *display programme,* applied to the construction of measures to allow long-term access to the general public. The project design is then sent out for scrutiny by experts and public alike, in other words it is published, and modified in the light of this multi-vocal consultation, before being adopted as the definitive version (here Bulletin 1, OLA 5.1). The subsequent *fieldwork*, *analysis* and *publication* should follow this prescription as closely as possible – not by making a virtue of inflexibility, but because these programmes represent a contract with the rest of society, one intended to win new history in exchange for a diminished resource. In this chapter we shall demonstrate how these principles were applied at Portmahomack, highlighting both achievements and shortcomings (see Carver 2009b for an exposition of the principles in general).

Reconnaissance stage – early finds of carved stone

St Colman's Church or Tarbat Old Church is also known as the White Church, because in living memory it has been protected by white harling (frontispiece). As it stands, the building is essentially a structure of the eighteenth century, and early antiquaries will have encountered it as such. It has a long, narrow nave and northern extension – the 'north aisle'. At the west end is a shapely belfry in blonde sandstone probably created by Alexander Stronach who operated in the seventeenth century. Inside at the east end, accessed by a flight of steps, is a crypt with a barrel vault (Illus 2.2). Although little showed before 1994 that was certainly of an early date, expert visitors over the years had speculated that this crypt was medieval. A Royal Commission investigator in 1966 pronounced the church as essentially eighteenth century, but noted that it incorporated early remains. The addition of a north aisle to accommodate a heritor's loft and burial vault was noted as 'a typical adaptation of a medieval church in Reformation Scotland'. Recording St Colman's Church for the Royal Commission in 1982, Geoffrey Stell warmed to the theme of its earlier history: 'At the east end is what appears to be a genuine late medieval vaulted crypt which takes up one-third of the length of the church' (OLA 5.1/p 37). As part of the investigation undertaken in connection with the restoration and refurbishment of the building, this was shown to be so, and to be one of seven phases of development from the twelfth to the twentieth century (Chapter 7, p 289).

Illustration 2.1
St Colman's Church with belfry, undergoing restoration in 1998

The signal of early medieval activity – that is, activity earlier than the twelfth century – was provided by fragments of sculpture dating to the seventh to ninth century, that were

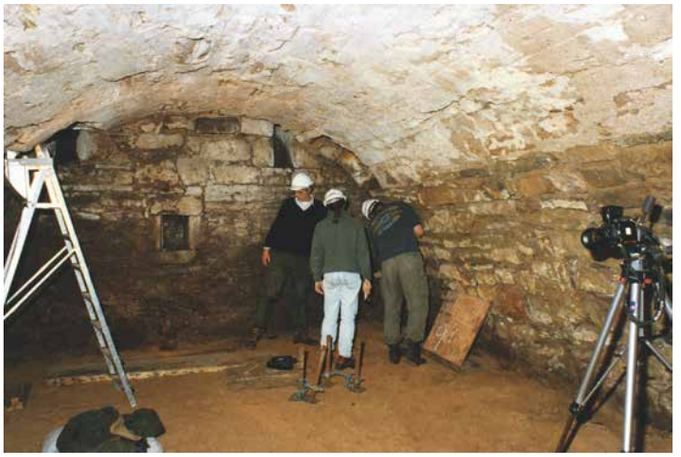

Illustration 2.2
Inside the crypt during recording

seen or found during the late eighteenth to twentieth century in the neighbourhood: in the churchyard, in the boundary walls of church property and eventually rediscovered built into the fabric of the church itself (a catalogue of all sculpture found at Portmahomack numbered TR1–263 will be found in the Digest 5, p D42). Early champions of Pictish sculpture, Charles Cordiner and Charles Petley in the late eighteenth century, John Stuart in the mid-nineteenth and J Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson at the turn of the twentieth, all came to the Tarbat peninsula and to Portmahomack, and the assets of the area were further enhanced by the observations of several church ministers, the celebrated naturalist Hugh Miller, resident at Cromarty, and his son Hugh Miller Jr. The most important of the chance discoveries proved to be the stone carrying a Latin inscription retrieved from the manse garden wall (p 124; see Illus 1.8; for the chance finds of early sculpture at Portmahomack, see Chapter 5.3, p 123; TR1–16).

A coin hoard and sight of strata in the churchyard

Hugh Miller Jr was present in 1889 to witness a discovery of another kind. On 28 March, during the digging of a grave some few yards from the east gate of the churchyard a 'line of hewn stones' appeared at a depth of five or six feet. From this feature, on the side nearest the church, and apparently from some crevice in the masonry, came 'several pieces of old silver'. A month later, the minister, the Reverend Donald Macleod, caused an opening to be made in an adjacent space among the gravestones, in order to continue the investigation so far as the crowded memorials of the churchyard would permit (Miller & Macleod 1889, 314). The location would appear to have been on the inside of the churchyard wall and north of the east end of the church, at nearly the highest point in the vicinity. The line of masonry was rediscovered at about five feet from the surface as thin flagstones. It ran E–W and was coincident with the old churchyard wall which had been moved some thirty-five years before (*c* 1854). After digging down to a depth of nearly seven feet, the excavator threw out a spadeful of earth and pieces of stone, together with three more silver coins, including a penny of the English King Edgar (AD 959–975). More silver was found when adjacent graves were dug in 1892. The eventual find consisted of thirteen coins, including ten of the Frankish king Louis le Bewgue (846–879), and four silver penannular armlets. The latter were also coinage, the Viking 'ring money' of the day, and the collection is likely to have been buried around AD 1000 (Graham-Campbell 1995, 143–4; four armlets and six coins survive in the National Museum, Acc nos IL 272–81). Two penannular armlets from Tarbat were shown to the Antiquaries in 1892 (PSAS 26 (1892), 60; Miller & Macleod 1889; Grieg S 1940). A Roman coin was found at a similar location near the churchyard gates. It was described as a fairly worn *antoninianius* of Tetricus II, AD 270–273/4 possibly minted

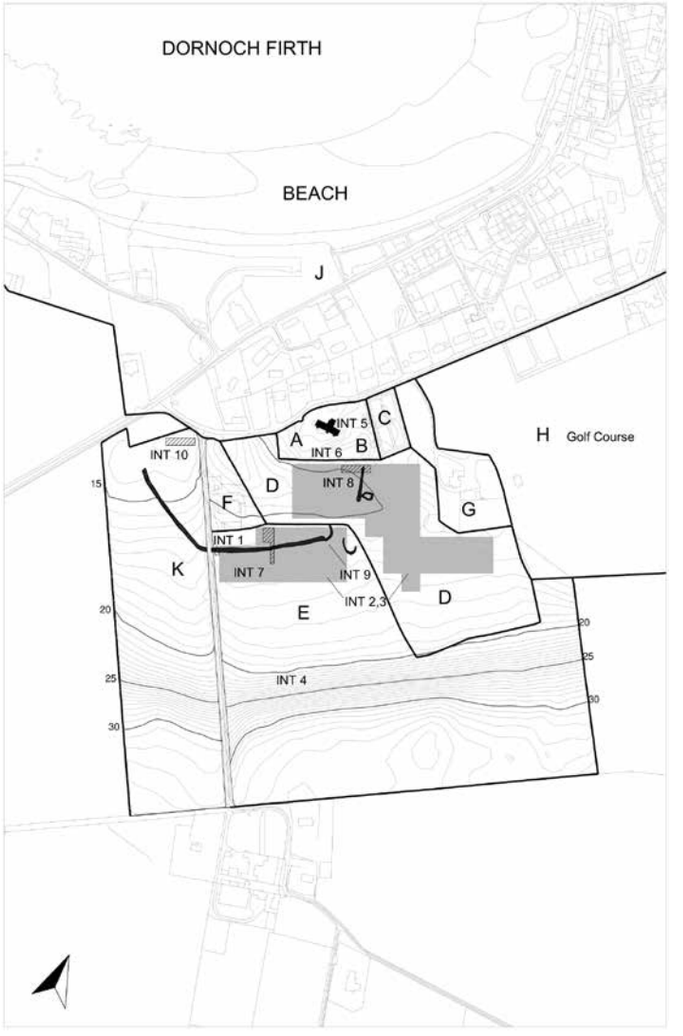

Illustration 2.3
Map showing location of zones (A–K) and interventions relating to the evaluation phase

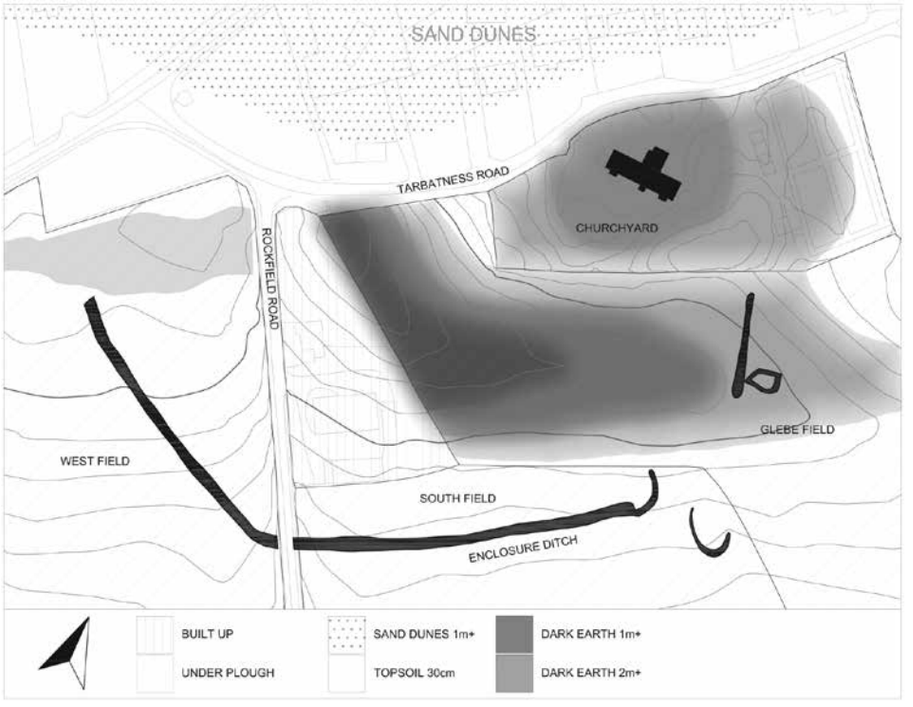

Illustration 2.4
Deposit model of the central and northern parts of the site as indicated by the evaluation

some silver coins. Near the manse (500 yards ESE from the church) a layer of charcoal was reported, four feet down (Miller & Macleod 1889, 317). The hill carrying the church of St Colman had thus accumulated up to two metres of humic soil over white sand. While much of these strata were due to burial, some settlement traces had survived of a kind that would be encountered in the present campaign further down the hill in Sector 2. They were here identified as shell middens and ironworking of a Late Medieval village (Chapter 7, pp 311–16).

Cropmark enclosure

The cropmark around the church of St Colman was seen and photographed by aerial archaeologists Barri Jones and Ian Keillar in the summer of 1984 (NMR no NH98SW0042, NGR 25 915 840; Harden 1995; see Illus 1.9). It took the shape of a three-sided curvilinear rectangle, with the open side towards the Dornoch Firth. It was one of a number of cropmarks recorded by Jones and Keillar at Trier (Robertson 1983; NMR no NH98SW0043; NGR 23 914 840).

On the occasion of the 1889 discoveries, Miller made some useful observations on the character of the strata: 'In this excavation, and in other graves of the churchyard, the earthy mould in which the interments are made is found to extend to a depth of from 7 to 8 feet below the present uneven surface, resting on white sand. The bottom of this considerable growth of mould [earth] probably represents … the original surface of the ground, the native soil of which, in so bleak a spot, was doubtless very thin … Over considerable spaces of the churchyard, some thirty paces from the east and west gables [of the church], the spade of the grave-digger passes through a layer of shells of edible species … The date of this early occupation it is impossible exactly to fix.' He also noted that 500 yards ENE from the church in 1889 was a heap of heavy slag from bog iron, together with some remains of an old forge round which older people said they remembered finding

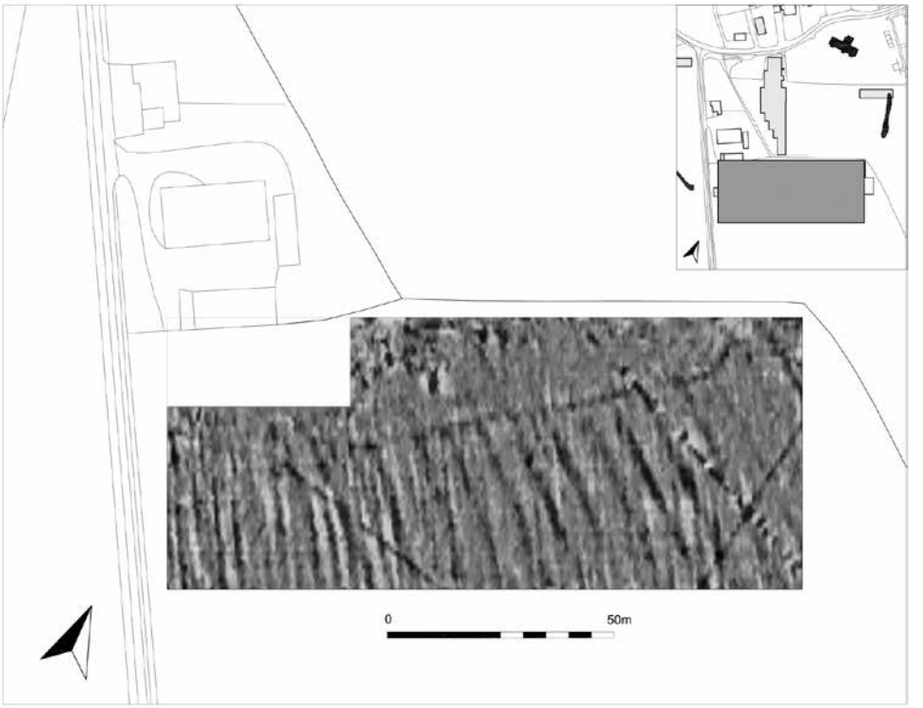

Illustration 2.5
Geophysical survey in Sector 1

Illustration 2.6
Horizon mapping in Sector 1, over the line of the second enclosure ditch S16, and the area of the possible internal bank (foreground)

as part of their survey of the Moray *laigh* (fertile plain) across the Moray firth to the south (Jones et al 1993). It lay in an unusual position for a fortification, between two ridges of high ground, and was immediately reminiscent of the enclosure surviving in a similar position at Iona. This type of earthwork had for some years been defined as 'a monastic vallum' (Thomas 1971, passim) seen as marking out a protective or a symbolic enclave, and an association between the enclosure and an early monastery was also assumed at Portmahomack. However, in very few cases had any of these structures been well dated to the early medieval period. From a practical point of view, the Tarbat 'vallum' was poorly sited for effective defence, but its location was well placed to collect water drained from the upslope and so supply the settlement it enclosed.

Test trench across the enclosure

The enclosure ditch at Portmahomack was tested by Jill Harden on commission from Tarbat Historic Trust in 1991 (Int 1; Bulletin 1; Harden 1995). The test trench was sited at the west end of the southern run of the enclosure where it met the Rockfield road (Illus 2.3); it measured 4m × 10m, stepped in to 1.50m × 8.75m (at a depth of 0.80m) for safety reasons. The enclosure ditch had been cut through sand and into hard pink clay-sand giving a profile with a maximum width of 7.2m at the top, sloping down on both sides to a flat bottom 2.6m across; the depth of the ditch at this point was recorded at *c* 2.20m below the current ground level (or 1.40m below subsoil level). The earliest deposit encountered within the ditch consisted of a laminated peat deposit (L2) that had the appearance of having accumulated slowly and intermittently and in the presence of water. Samples taken from this layer gave three radiocarbon dates between the second and sixth century AD (Harden 1995, 226). These results sufficed to show that the cropmark was a significant feature and had been in existence in the early medieval period. More than 100m of the ditch system was subsequently examined (see Chapter 5.5, p 178 and OLA 6.1).

Evaluation stage 1994–1996 – deposit modelling

The full evaluation programme began in March 1994 with the support of Highland Council, its objective to prepare a *deposit model*, assess the *research agenda* and establish the *social context* (see above). The procedure for deposit modelling was to provide, at first hand, but if possible non-destructively, a clear view of the archaeological strata that had survived and to assess its ability to address the main questions on the research agenda. The resulting models take the form of maps showing the depth of strata and how far they are likely to have been truncated, distorted or disturbed (see Carver 2009b for examples).

Preparatory to deposit modelling, the area of interest was divided into zones, since the choice of techniques depended on current usage of the land (lettered A–G on Illus 2.3). Zone A was the church of St Colman, then redundant. Zones B and C comprised the churchyard and its modern extension at that time protected from excavation – other than grave digging. The Glebe

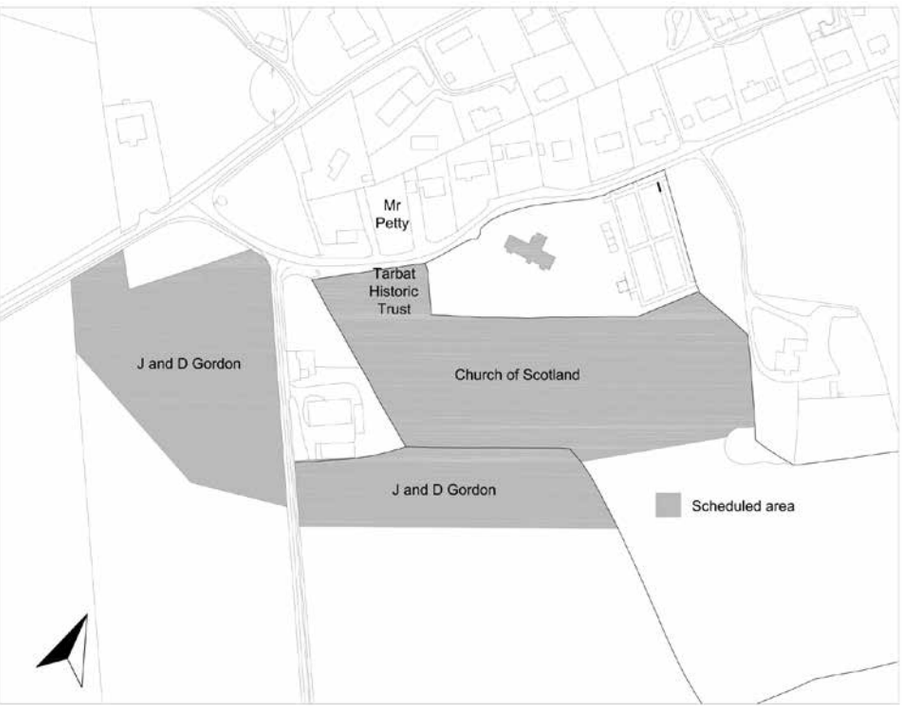

Illustration 2.7
Landowners and Scheduled area

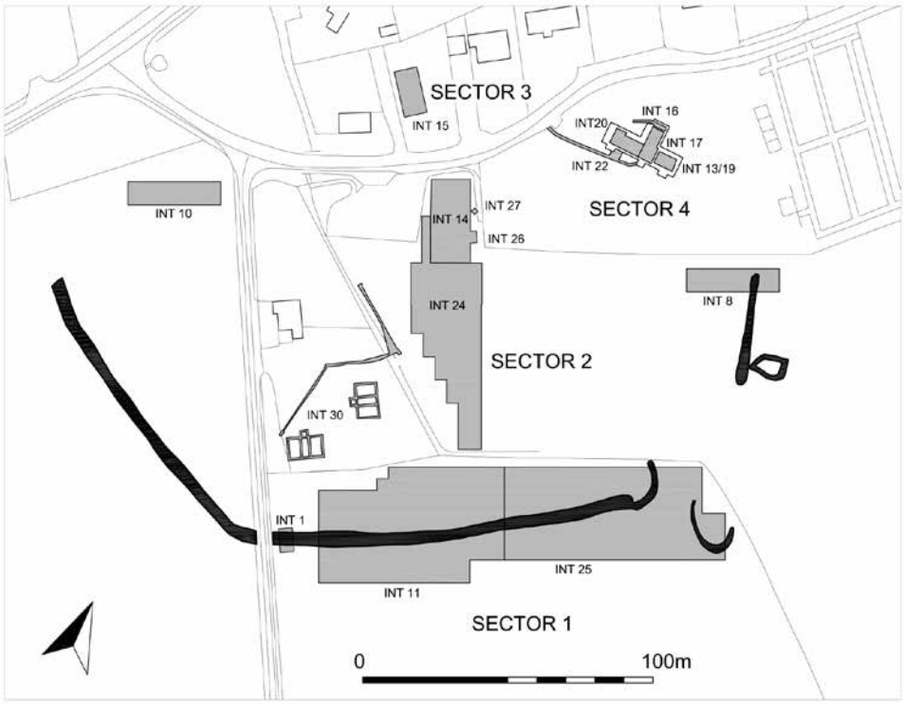

Illustration 2.8
Project Design, showing the four sectors and interventions involving excavation. The area excavated was 0.741ha, about 20% of the enclosed area

Field (Zone D), and the south (Zone E) and west fields (Zone K) were routinely under the plough, although sometimes used to graze cattle. Zone G was a private property, formerly the manse. Zone H was a golf course and Zone J the built up area on the dunes leading down to the sea.

Four bundles of techniques were applied – topographic, geophysical, test trenching and surface mapping – using fourteen interventions (=Int; for a full list of interventions, see Digest 1). The local topography was captured in an intensive contour survey (Int 4 and 6), showing that the enclosure ditch lay across a valley between two ridges, the more northerly carrying the church and churchyard (Illus 2.4). There was no visible stream running in the valley, but the lie of the land suggested it would flow west and then north across a low point in the ridge towards the firth. The tenant farmer complained about a perennial wet patch at the point where the slope and the waterway changed direction. This would be explained in due course as the site of an underground dam built to make the monastic pool. Geophysical surveys, which included magnetometry and resistivity (Int 2 and 3), were mainly effective in mapping the rig and furrow in the south field (Illus 2.5). Ground-penetrating radar (Int 9) was applied to the churchyard without successfully profiling the subsoil horizon. The memorials in the churchyard were also mapped (Int 5; Illus 2.21, p 27).

A second stage of deposit modelling used three test trenches (Int 7, 8 and 10) to examine strata in the south, Glebe and west fields (Zones D, E and K). Int 8 and 10 showed black soil lying deep over features cut into white sand, but little sense could be made of them at that point. Int 7 was located to investigate a cluster of anomalies located by magnetometer survey; retired farmer Duncan Johnson, living locally, had noted the same area as one where stone was often pulled up by the plough. This test trench would contact the structure to be known as *S1* (also S1; Carver 2008a, 27–8). As is often the case outside towns, the trenches generally gave a poor return, offering little more than relative depth to subsoil and the presence of undated features. The third and the most effective stage employed a technique of examining the surface of the buried archaeology under ploughsoil pioneered at Yeavering ('primary horizontal sections'; Hope-Taylor 1977, 32–4) and developed at Sutton Hoo ('Horizon mapping'; Carver 2005a, 43–7). The ploughsoil is first surveyed for surface finds (very few in this case) and then stripped off by machine to 'Horizon 1'. The strata between the ploughed soil and the surface of the undisturbed archaeology ('Horizon 2') is removed by a trowelling line, enhanced by spraying with water and then viewed and photographed from a tower prior to mapping, a process known as 'strip and map' (Illus 2.6). Large areas of the south field (Int 11) and the Glebe Field (Int 14) were explored in this way during the evaluation phase. The work could be spread

Illustration 2.9
The eastern end of the enclosure ditch S16 seen as a parch mark in Sector 1

Illustration 2.10
Field school tuition (left) trowelling (right) recording

over more than one season by covering the cleaned surfaces with polythene and backfilling, a procedure dubbed 'strip, map and wrap'. Some surfaces were uncovered and re-covered several times, a crop being taken off in between seasons without impedance to the farmers or damage to the archaeological deposits. In the south field, the operation revealed the remains of the bag-shaped building S1; in the north of the Glebe Field, the pebble surface adjacent to the vellum-washing tank, S4. The significance of these features was sufficiently clear to provide a basis for the project.

It should be emphasised that this method is more reliable and no more damaging than fieldwalking and geophysics as a way of testing plough-damaged sites, where features are dispersed over wide areas. It requires a tower, a water supply and a volunteer workforce, and, in the case of research projects at least, this aligns with the relatively modest funding packages generally available at the evaluation stage. There is no compulsion to excavate the area that has been mapped, since the process is benign and intact strata are not disturbed. The information retrieved is invaluable in addressing the principal task of project design, namely that of deciding where and how to excavate.

At Portmahomack, the site surveys and strip-and-map operations, combined with observations made before 1994, gave a reasonably coherent account of what lay in store. The enclosure ditch was a major feature that could be used to define the nucleus of early medieval settlement; features belonging to structures of likely Pictish date had survived directly under medieval and later ploughsoil in the south field and at the north end of the Glebe Field; there were deep deposits in the centre of the Glebe Field, well out of reach of modern ploughing, where waterlogging was a possibility. A mantle of dark soil, up to two metres deep and cut by successive graves, lay over white sand in the churchyard. These graves had disturbed a large number of carved stones that could be stylistically dated to the eighth century. It could be said

Illustration 2.11
Bag-shaped building S1 under excavation. The post-pits have been recorded and the perimeter wall (F40) is being dissected

that a Pictish settlement, with monastic associations, was present underneath St Colman's Church and in the land in the valley to the south of it. It remained to see how much of it would need to be, could be, or should be, brought to light.

The research agenda

The research agenda was deliberately left broad in the design phase (see Chapter 1, p 21). In the research environment of the early 1990s, the unearthing of almost any settlement in the Pictish mainland would be welcome, if dug to a large enough scale and in enough scientific detail. Although they remain traditional starting points in early medieval Scottish research, neither historical nor art-historical knowledge was given a determinant or even a guiding role in the strategy. The principal goal was to map an early medieval settlement and anchor it in history by chronicling the story of the site both before and after the Pictish period. Buildings, burials, monuments, industries, the environment and the agricultural economy were given equal billing, since these things were equally unknown. The visibility of features was predicted to be good, and accessible near the surface. However, the evaluation did not fully anticipate the depth of strata at the west end of the Glebe Field, where there was a large pond buried under a metre of ploughsoil and the strata on its north side proved to assume levels of urban complexity.

In addition to the demands of the research community to see a Pictish settlement on a large scale, and to demonstrate the existence of a Pictish monastery, there was an urgent desire in Scotland to chronicle the sequence of an early medieval church. The present church could have occupied the site of any Pictish predecessor, of which there were then no excavated or standing examples (Hughes 1970; Fernie 1986; Morris C 1989; Foster, forthcoming). Furthermore, since the surviving church was part medieval, its comprehensive restoration presented an opportunity to examine its fabric, layout and burial ground from the twelfth century to the twentieth.

The research agenda therefore demanded as full a picture as possible of the settlement in time and space, the detailed dissection of any monastic phase, and the comprehensive story of the church on its present site. Excavation survey and analytical programmes would be designed with these goals in mind.

The social context

The ethical considerations to be taken into account in the design of an archaeological investigation are no longer merely desirable, but contingent. A site is always in someone's purview, regarded as someone's legacy, subject to concerns of assumed as well as legal local ownership. At a superficial level, these concerns are those of the landowners, since the character of their property is about to change. At another level, the archaeology is the concern of the state, whether the land is protected or not, since the state represents the long-term well-being of the unborn and has a duty to protect their interests. But there is a third level too: the stake that a great many people believe that they hold in the territory and its past, whether they were born there, have a house in the area or take their dog for a walk on its footpaths. An archaeologist cannot simply get

Illustration 2.12
The area of Sector 2 under excavation, looking north

Illustration 2.13
Excavation at the north end of Sector 2, looking north, showing the pebble surface of road S13 in Period 3 (F18)

Illustration 2.14
The central part of Sector 2 under excavation, looking north, showing road S13 (centre), boundary wall F149 (foreground, right), overflow culvert (foreground, centre) and the bridge (foreground, left)

permission from the landowners and the local authorities and then drive a trench through a site, even if commissioned to do so by the state agency. Contrary to the traditional viewpoint (still regrettably widespread), archaeological excavation requires a lengthy and continuous process of consultation and consensus with all interested parties.

At Portmahomack the landowners were the Gordon family, who farmed the south and west fields, the Church of Scotland who leased the Glebe Field to tenant farmer Billy Vass, Highland Council, responsible for the churchyard and Tarbat Historic Trust who had purchased 0.15ha of the Glebe to build their car park, as well as being owners of the church building itself (Illus 2.7). The Gordons put the relevant piece of the south field into 'set aside', thus providing the archaeological team with land to excavate and a campsite; the friendship and support of a family so widely respected in the area proved invaluable. The Church of Scotland was a more distant but eventually compliant landowner, and in spite of the inconvenience of having a large part of his land turned over and put back every year (for which he was compensated), their tenant farmer Billy Vass remained a stalwart supporter throughout the campaign.

Highland Council was both a partner and a major sponsor (see p xi), priming the evaluation and grant-aiding both the excavation and the museum display. The council's long-term aim was to promote the development of a centre that would raise the profile of Scottish history, both as an educational asset and as a magnet for tourism, with consequent improvement in the prosperity of the area. The long-term prosperity of Easter Ross depended largely on farming; the other principal trading industries, salmon farming and North Sea oil were in trouble in the early 90s: Norwegian salmon farmers were creating a very competitive market, and the manufacture of drilling rigs had been increasingly outsourced to the detriment of Nigg Yard. Carrying out archaeological research in an area of endemic unemployment requires diplomacy of a sophisticated kind, in which the support of Highland Council was crucial.

The Trust assumed the responsibility for representing public interests in the project, but in reality neither they, nor Highland Council, had that power. In the churchyard for example, permission to excavate a trench to lay service cables to the museum was given by both the Council and by the Church of Scotland, acting through the Trust. When the work of digging the trench started it was soon evident that these permissions, though necessary, were by no means sufficient. A Scottish cemetery is owned by the descendants of those buried there, burial places being allocated as *lairs*, zones intended to receive the bodies of family members when their time came. In theory the geography of these lairs was known but in practice their borders were vague. Permission to insert the Trust's service trench (which was not

Illustration 2.15
Definition of Period 1 features beneath the Period 2 vellum workshop

part of the archaeological programme) had to be re-sought through a process of soliciting support from local elders and opinion formers, and advertising in shops and on local radio, otherwise objection was likely from visiting lair owners resident outside the region, as indeed happened. The service trench (Int 16) was aborted and restarted on a new route (Int 22), which had had a more carefully negotiated consensus (Carver 2008a, 31).

The Tarbat Historic Trust was an independent-minded organisation with its goals set firmly on the business of restoring St Colman's Church. The priorities and values of Highland Council (tourism and amenity) and the University of York (research) were different again. But the three partners learnt from each other and eventually formed an effective and professional alliance. The viability of the project required a continual round of visits, meetings, public presentations and hobnobbing in public houses, almost akin to electioneering, to win the goodwill of the people of the village and the peninsula. There was also a wider constituency to woo – other archaeologists with an interest in the period and in seeing it well served. These legitimate concerns were addressed in the first place by publishing and widely circulating the project design in advance (Bulletin 1; OLA 5.1), secondly by giving a series of seminars and public lectures (around a dozen a year) and thirdly, towards the end of the campaign, by convening four advisory site meetings from Ireland, England and Scandinavia to help understand what had been found and help design the programme of post-excavation analysis (below, p 30).

Illustration 2.16
Proving the sterile subsoil, beneath the vellum yard

Project design

The research agenda, deposit model and the study of the social context, products of the evaluation, were fed into the project design to create programmes of research, conservation and display. These programmes were published in 1995 (Bulletin 1; OLA 5.1) and updated in 1999 (for the display, OLA 4.4), in 2002 (for completion of the excavation, OLA 4.3.1) and 2007 (for post-excavation, OLA 4.3.2, 4.3.3). The first of these was the most important because it announced the project and sought consensus for it within the ethos of multi-vocality (Carver 2011, 143).

The research programme was planned to operate at three levels: excavation at Portmahomack, survey on the Tarbat peninsula and at its principal sites, and study of the Moray Firth area. The previous experience of early medieval excavations in Scotland, particularly that applied to monasteries, had been more damaging than productive because these had been undertaken at too small a scale to address the research questions (p 6). A scale appropriate to match the questions would require a large area, since the main element missing in the understanding of monasteries was the layout of the activities within them, and the consequent geographies of power, ritual and economy. On the other hand an excavation that was too large could be unethical (because prodigal), costly and risked remaining unfinished. The location of

Illustration 2.17
Recording a N–S profile through the west side of Sector 2 (Int 14), from the sand subsoil at the base to the present day

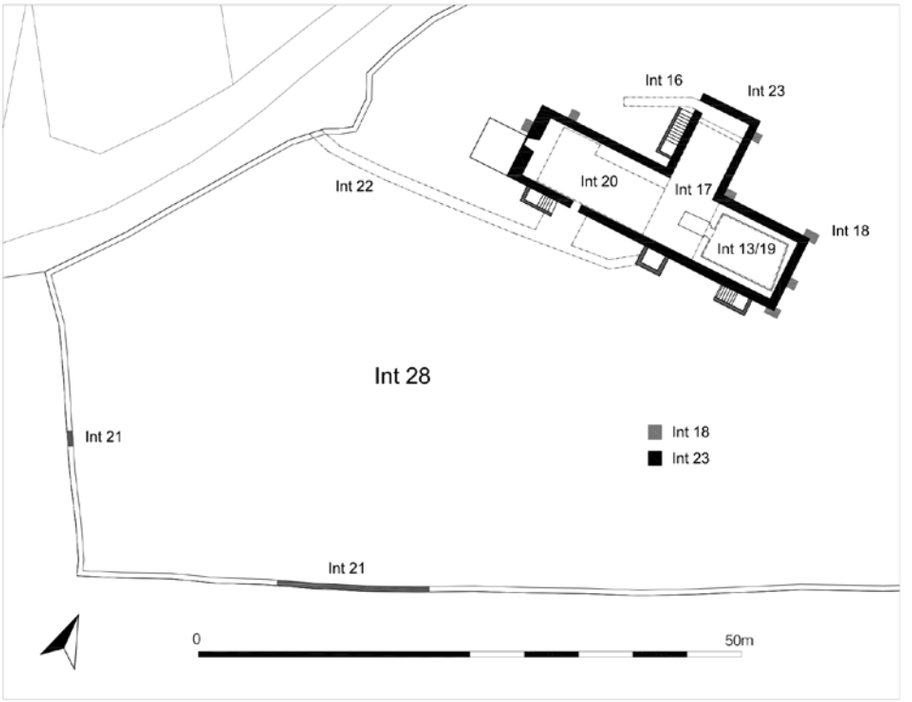

Illustration 2.18
Interventions in the church and churchyard

the present church of St Colman, and the area marked out by the enclosure ditch, gave prime indications of the probable focus. The church was to be completely restored and refitted as a museum; it would therefore be the subject of a detailed investigation in advance of redevelopment. The churchyard itself was a no-go area (see above), but in any case was much disturbed by graves and liable to produce a sequence that was largely unreadable. The area within the enclosure at the greatest distance from the church was likely to have been used for industrial purposes as demonstrated at Hoddom (Lowe 2006). The area in the centre of the Glebe was wet, and should be included for that reason. The inclusion of an area outside the enclosure ditch was desirable since it should allow the identification of any prehistoric settlement superseded by the monastery. To ensure an understanding of sequence in what was predicted to be a shallow stratification, it was essential that these areas be joined up.

These factors led to the design for a planned excavation as laid out in Illus 2.8. The area inside and outside the enclosure ditch would be totally excavated to record the occupation before and after it was constructed (Sector 1). A broad transect across the valley would be totally excavated to connect the events in the south field with those on the crest at Tarbatness Road (Sector 2). It would be taken as near as was legitimate to the church on its hill. To tell the story of a north-east Scottish parish church, the interior would be completely excavated subject to the safety of the building (Sector 4). With only minor adjustments and exceptions, these were the areas subsequently opened and largely excavated to subsoil. Sector 3 on the north side of Tarbatness Road did not form part of the original design; it was a response to a chance opportunity to excavate in advance of the building of a bungalow.

Included in the programme were investigations on the Tarbat peninsula, focused on the known Pictish and prehistoric sites, and on defining the portage. The design also outlined its ambitions to explore the wider Firthlands. These are described below (pp 28–9).

Implementation of the programme

Each operation within or without the four sectors was recorded as a numbered *intervention* (Illus 2.8) (Int) (see Digest 1). The basic unit of record in each intervention was the *context* (C), a set of materials defined as a belonging to a single deposit. Subsets of contexts were retrieved as samples or artefacts (collectively *finds*) for assessment and further analysis. Where appropriate, sets of contexts were further defined as *features* (F), usually, but not invariably, indicative of deliberate human activities. Exceptionally, sets of features were further defined as *structures* (S), normally restricted to pieces of major planned engineering. A list of structures is given in Digest 2. Thus in Sector 1, Intervention 11 (Int 11), the bag-shaped building numbered as structure S1 had a central hearth, feature F65, with a deposit of burnt material context C1141, which included a bronze fragment, 11/3391 (for the principles, see Carver 2009b, 138–42).

The ground was examined at a level of intensity appropriate to the opacity of the strata and its rewards, with a series of procedures known as Recovery Levels (Carver 2009b, 124–9). As a broad generalisation, the topsoil was removed by machine (Level A), cleared by shovel (Level B), defined by trowel (Level C), and prepared for recording with trowel and brush (Level D). Exceptionally complex features (such as graves and hearths) were studied using micro tools (Level E) and features requiring laboratory study were lifted and taken off site (Level F). The level applied was noted on the context and feature records, which were proformae filled in by hand. These stated the location, geometry, stratigraphy and content of each unit, and had space for sketches and comments. All survey was photographic and digital; that is, the appearance of contexts, features and structures was photographed and their extent recorded as sets of coordinates measured with a TST (Total Station Theodolite), the lines connecting the points joined and smoothed by eye on site. Directors, supervisors and recorders responsible for each area were required to keep journals. The daily tasks and the participants themselves were also recorded over the years by photography and video (OLA 3). In this way the changing

opinions of the more vocal participants were potentially captured, although they usually had less eventual relevance than the professional record.

Sector 1

Sector 1 was laid out along the enclosure ditch seen in the air photograph (Illus 1.9) and located on the ground through a parchmark (Illus 2.9). The subsoil was a sharp, silty sand about 50cm deep overlying pink stony clay-sand. All archaeological features were cut into the sand subsoil and overlaid with ploughsoil 30cm deep. The ploughsoil was surveyed by surface collection and metal detecting, which produced some medieval and modern pottery and a scatter of metal finds. It was further tested in a control area of 80m² in the north-west corner of Sector 1 where underlying features were expected, with a programme in which the ploughsoil was removed by trowel in 5cm spits to see how far the results from field-walking matched the whole content of the ploughsoil. The results of this test area demonstrated that few finds were present in the ploughsoil with the exception of the bottom 5–10cm overlying features cut into the subsoil. The ploughsoil was then largely removed to this depth using a back-acting mechanical excavator fitted with a wide toothless ditching bucket (ie at Level A). The remaining 5–10cm of ploughsoil was removed by shovel (Level B) and trowel (Level C) with all finds being three-dimensionally located. The surface of the subsoil was then carefully cleaned by trowel (Level D; Illus 2.6).

For recording purposes, the exposed surface was divided into *modules*, measuring 4 × 8m, this being the area that could be cleaned to its optimum contrast within a weather window, which in this part of the world could be maintained for about two hours before rain on the one hand, or sun on the other, again obscured the surface. Once cleaned, each module was photographed from a tower using a medium-format camera, and all contexts were then numbered, and mapped using a Total Station Theodolite. Contexts and features were investigated, in most cases, at Level D. All Level D contexts were bulk sampled and proportions of the deposits sieved, but further sampling strategies were developed in pursuit of particular questions, such as the vegetation in the primary filling of the enclosure ditch (p 280). Level E recording was applied to the post-pits of S1, its hearth and storage pit, and to the secondary infilling of the first enclosure ditch which had captured part of a seventh/eighth-century metalworking area (p 215). All finds, including animal bone, were plotted in three dimensions (see for example Illus 5.8.1, p 223).

Sector 1 measured 140 × 40m and was mapped by the field team with the aid of students from Britain and abroad attending a series of field schools (1994–2000) (Illus 2.10). The whole area was mapped at Horizon 2, and all feature groups that were defined were sample-excavated including the enclosure ditches, which were sampled in 5m lengths. Int 25, the eastern part of Sector 1, including buildings S5 and S12, was both mapped and largely excavated by field-school students (1997/8). The more complete and complex structures, such as the eighth-century S1, the bag-shaped building, were dissected mainly by the professional field team (Illus 2.11).

Illustration 2.19
Recording and excavating in St Colman's Church during its restoration

Sector 2

Horizon mapping was applied to Sector 2 (1996/7) which revealed features at or close to the surface (Illus 2.12). At its north end (Int 14), these were a stone-lined trough S4 and a road S13 (both belonging to the eighth-century Period 2), while further down the slope, later levels survived, such as the resurfaced road of Period 3 (Illus 2.13). Considerable help in managing the excavation strategy at the north end was given by a trench against the east baulk, excavated to house a heating oil tank for the church (Int 26). Dug in 1998 this latter showed the rich stratification that lay in store and provided invaluable guidance over the next eight seasons. Recognising that the trough (S4) was a surface survival of an early period, the director (JGL) kept the north end in abeyance while the later infilling of ploughsoils in the centre (Int 24 N) was removed by a large workforce of professional fieldworkers, students and volunteers (1997; 2000). This process, colloquially called 'debrowning', eventually revealed the outlines of the boundary walls, pool and the dam, the components of the monastic water-management system S7 (Illus 2.14). This area in the centre of Sector 2 became the scene

of a relentless search for elements belonging to a mill. Its lower parts were laced with drains from various periods, indicating the effort of generations of farmers to remove the water which was being impounded by the deeply buried and long-hidden dam (see Chapter 5.5, p 193).

From 2003–7, the emphasis was on the sixth- to eighth-century sequence in the northern part of Sector 2 (Int 14). Here the stratigraphy was complex, being composed of myriad layers, interrupted by the landmark horizon of a fire ('the primary burning') that had involved most of the area (Chapter 5.11, p 256). The excavation of features and contexts was undertaken at Levels D and E with intensive sieving and frequent bulk sampling with the resulting residues being magnetically scanned for metalworking debris. The strata in the southern half of Int 14 was found to be particularly challenging and so was investigated using a system of quadrants, in which contiguous modules were stratigraphically excavated in plan against narrow standing baulks between each module. This proved helpful in maintaining a coherent record of the sequence composed of innumerable microstrata, by providing a control over deposit definition in plan, and allowing for micromorphology sampling across deposit interfaces (Digest 7.5). The Period 2 levels at the south end of Int 14 were also subject to chemical sampling over a 20cm grid. The purpose was to map the zones dedicated to different kinds of metalworking, but these later became evident from the hearths and the samples were not used. In 2006 and 2007 the sequence was lengthened by the discovery of three cist burials at the north end of Int 14 and the definition of elements of settlement preceding the monastic developments of the eighth century (S10, 11) (Illus 2.15). The area of the dam and putative mill (S7 in Int 24 N) was revisited in 2007, and both here and over most of Int 14 the excavation reached the undisturbed subsoil and tested it thoroughly (Illus 2.16).

As well as investigative sections cut during the study of features (such as the enclosure ditches), a section was cut through the pond fill and into the marsh below, and the primary standing sections of the east and west edges of the excavations provided a profile through the whole deposit running approximately N–S (Illus 2.17; Chapter 3, p 43). However, the overall sequence in Sector 2 was determined by stratigraphic analysis (see Illus 3.13) and anchored in time with thirty-five radiocarbon dates (Digest 3).

Illustration 2.20
Investigations in St Colman's Church:
(a) excavating medieval burials;
(b) recording a wall elevation;
(c) recording strata

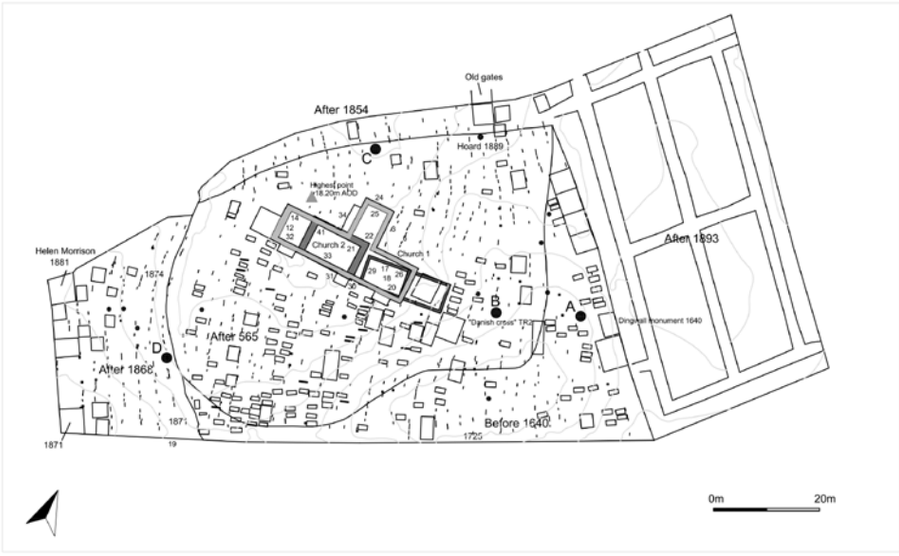

Illustration 2.21
Recording memorials in the churchyard

Sector 3

The land on the north side of the ridge, between Tarbatness Road and the beach was designated as Sector 3. In practice the only viable access to strata in this area was a building plot owned by Mr and Mrs Petty, and only one intervention was undertaken (Int 15 in 1996). This was an enlarged test trench, running north-west and measuring 16×8m (Illus 2.8). The deposit proved to consist of dunes, renewed up to historical times by windblown sand. However two fragments of ditch circles were defined within the dunes (S14, p 46), and the area had been used to quarry sand in the Middle Ages (OLA 6.2/3.5.2).

Sector 4

The investigation of St Colman's Church (Sector 4) took place between 1996 and 1997 in nine interventions as opportunity allowed (Illus 2.18). The redundant church, including its crypt (Int 13, 1992–5) was first cleared of a large amount of debris, including pews and coffin bearers. Archaeologist Jill Harden, assisted by local volunteers, recovered fragments of Pictish sculpture, lithics, coins, a bone stylus, a range of personal items of relatively recent date and the bones of mammals, birds and fish amongst the debris in the crypt (Int 13; OLA 6.3.1/3.6.8). A trench cut to take services to the church (Int 16, 1996) was aborted after encountering recent burials (see above), but early burials were contacted too, together with two simple scratched cross grave markers (TR24, 25). The replacement service trench, following the line of the path (Int 22, 1997) encountered a curving boundary wall that formed the early boundary of the churchyard (OLA 6.4/2.1.2). Inside the church the investigation began in 1996 with a transect across the nave into the north aisle (Int 17). This showed that the north aisle was largely occupied by a central burial vault and the tomb of the seventeenth-century minister William Mackenzie.

Encouraged by Trustee Anna Ritchie, this was felt sufficiently promising to request that full excavation of the nave be funded in advance of the refurbishment of the church as a museum (Illus 2.19). This could potentially deliver a long sequence from Pictish times to the Reformation, something that had yet to be fully achieved for any Scottish church. Accordingly in 1997, this main excavation was carried out (Int 20), together with the complete excavation of the crypt (Int 19). At the same time, after the harling had been removed, a number of test pits were dug by the architect Fred Geddes (Int 18) and a detailed record of the building was made by Fred Geddes and the buildings archaeologist Martin Jones (Int 23; OLA 6.4).

Within the nave was a sequence of 187 burials, beginning in the sixth century with thirteen full or partial long-cist graves and continuing in the seventh to ninth century with fifty-eight male burials, twenty of them employing head-support stones. The remaining, later burials had a normal demographic profile of men, women and children, and were mainly clustered in the fifteenth century (Illus 2.20). The excavations also exposed eleven sculptural fragments that had been incorporated into the church walls and foundations, and five of which were extracted: the so-called Dragon Stone or Apostle Stone was removed from the vault in the crypt (TR20), a rectangular grave marker (TR21) and a sarcophagus lid, the 'Boar Stone' (TR22) from the foundation of the north wall of the medieval church, a rectangular grave marker from the foundations of the south wall of the nave (TR33) and a fragment from the foundations of the external stairs of the north aisle (TR34) (see Chapter 5.3; Illus 5.3.1). Integrating the below-ground and above-ground evidence resulted in the definition of seven phases of church building dated from the twelfth to the nineteenth century (Chapter 7). The existence of fabric belonging to a church of the Pictish period remains probable, but unproved (Chapter 5.4, p 168). The churches, burials and other features were woven into

an integrated sequence supported by radiocarbon dates and Bayesian analysis (Chapter 3, p 33; Digest 3; OLA 6.3.2).

Recording of the churchyard memorials

The memorials in the Portmahomack churchyard were mapped, numbered and provided with written and photographic records as part of a long-term community project initiated in 1998 (Int 28; Illus 2.21; following Willsher 1985). This was designed to provide researchers with a history of the burial ground (see Chapter 7, p 323) and visitors with a database of those commemorated at Portmahomack. Inscribed memorials outside the church relate particularly to the eighteenth to twentieth century. Inside the church, there is a seventeenth-century memorial to William Mackenzie (see above, p 27), two seventeenth-century cartouches of 1623 and a nineteenth-century memorial to the minister William Forbes. Fragments of a seventeenth-century tombstone were noted in the blocking of the south door of the nave (TR16). Two medieval grave covers were also located: one incised with AMRM and long-sword and dated to the fourteenth to fifteenth century was incorporated in a flagstone floor at the west end; the other with a floriate cross and dating to the mid-fourteenth century remains in situ outside the east wall of the crypt (Chapter 7, p 294; Digest 5.2). The varied investment in the type and quantity of carved stone memorials over the thirteen centuries threw an intermittent light on the varying social and intellectual context in which they were made (Carver 2005b).

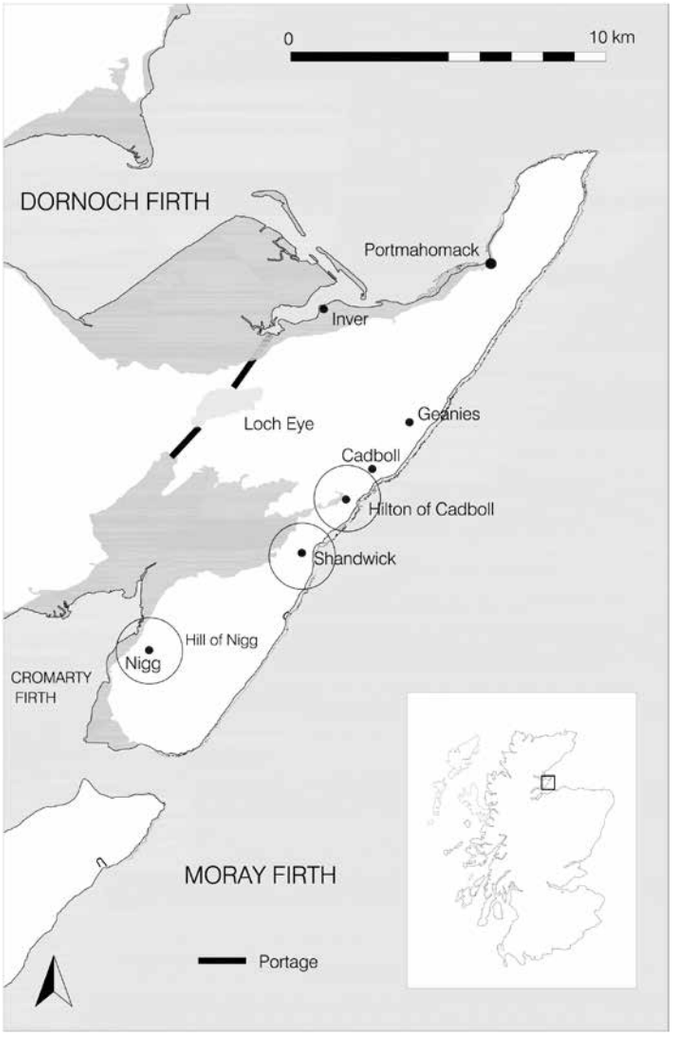

Illustration 2.22
Peninsula survey area and target sites

Investigations on the peninsula

The Tarbat peninsula was the hinterland for the Portmahomack settlement and provided its immediate geographic and chronological context. Accordingly, a programme of investigation was prepared that attempted to synthesise the prehistoric, early medieval and medieval periods in the area embraced by the three Firths (Dornoch, Moray and Cromarty) (Illus 2.22). The principal sources were the National Monuments Record and a number of local studies containing primary information, particularly *Origines Parochiales Scotiae* (cited as OPS, 1851–5), Miller Jr 1889, Watson 1904, Macfarlane 1906–8, ONB1907 (with the OS *Object Name Books*), Baldwin 1986, Gordon & Macdonald *c* 1988 and the three *statistical accounts* (cited as FSA 1791–9, NSA 1845 and TSA 1951). These were culled for early sites and the candidates mapped. There were no certain Neolithic or Bronze Age monuments, but a number of burials had been encountered of which some may have featured a short cist. Most were long cist and thought to belong to the Iron Age or Pictish period. There were fortified enclosures at Tarrel and Easter Rarichie, and a possible broch at Lower Seafield (Chapter 3, p 61; Digest 8).

The principal sites of the Pictish period were Portmahomack, Hilton of Cadboll, Shandwick and Nigg, where monuments of the eighth century had been recorded, or were still in situ (Chapter 5.10). The medieval period saw castles erected at Cadboll, Loch Eye, North Sutor and Ballone, and as many as sixteen churches, with numerous wells and possible hermitages. The main ecclesiatical establishment was the Abbey of Fearn, active in the area from 1227 and credited with major landscaping and drainage operations (Chapter 7, p 318).

The research programme on the peninsula developed by addressing five themes. The *portage* suggested by the place-name *Tairbeart* (p 247) was investigated by assessing likely routes between the estuary at Inver (now a bombing range) and the Bay of Nigg, via Loch Eye. Experiments designed to gain insights into the earlier landscape included the virtual raising of the sea level to the 10m (30ft) contour and comparing the land so inundated to the early maps and travellers' tales (Carver 2008a, 173–88; Chapter 5.10, p 246). *Burial sites* on the peninsula were researched using earlier sightings and assessed by Graham Robins (in Carver 1998b) and again by Nicky Toop in 2011. Among these were several cist graves sighted during a watching brief at Balnabruach on the coast south of Portmahomack

in 1992–3. The human bone collected then was located and analysed, giving radiocarbon dates in the third century BC to sixth century AD (Chapter 4, p 75).

It was noted that the burial sites and the medieval chapels appeared to cluster at Portmahomack, Hilton of Cadboll, Shandwick and Nigg, already known as the most likely Pictish centres and implying a longer pre- and post-Pictish importance. These were also places that had beaches suitable to land on. It was therefore planned that Hilton, Shandwick and Nigg should be incorporated into the Tarbat Discovery Programme. At Hilton of Cadboll, a full evaluation of the site of St Mary's Chapel north of modern Hilton was undertaken by the Tarbat team at the invitation of Jane Durham (a Royal Commissioner with local roots), an invitation endorsed at a community meeting at Balintore in April 1997. The work was commissioned by Tain and Easter Ross Civic Trust, and included surveys and a study of the St Mary's Chapel site (where the Hilton stone had stood in the eighteenth century). The report identified the chapel site as lying in the deserted medieval village of Cadboll Fisher, although with a possible Pictish predecessor; it gave recommendations for the research and conservation of the site and the creation and erection of a replica by Barry Grove (at an estimated cost of £6000) (see Carver 1998b reproduced at OLA 8.2; see also summary in James et al 2008, 391–8; and here Chapter 5.10).

Apart from the creation of a replica, these recommendations were not taken up, and later in 1998 there was an exploratory excavation by Historic Scotland at the west end of the chapel site, the purpose of which was to find the lower part of the Hilton stone, which it succesfully did (James et al 2008, 8). In 2000, the replica carved by Barry Grove was erected, at which point discussions came to a head on what should be carved on its defaced (front) side (p 255). This prompted a further excavation in 2001 which defined the context of the lower part along with *c* 7,500 fragments belonging to the defaced cross-slab (James et al 2008, 75; here Chapter 5.10, p 252). The discovery of the lower part led to a confrontation over ownership of the two main surviving parts of the Hilton stone, leaving the larger part in the National Museum and the base in a community centre in Balintore. At the time of writing the two parts have yet to be reunited (an academic study of the social context was included in James et al 2008, 232–69).

The Tarbat team went on to explore the site at Shandwick by geophysical survey, but without useful result. At Nigg, the area north-west of the church was mapped by contour survey. The tree cover concealed a promontory with re-entrants either side leading to the firth (p 248). In 2010, an application to construct a windfarm on the Hill of Nigg prompted an archaeological evaluation by CFA Archaeology, but this was carried out at too low an intensity to test for the presence of early occupation.

In general, archaeological investigation on the peninsula, other than at Portmahomack, has been piecemeal or low-tech up to 2013. However, the preliminary survey undertaken within the Tarbat Discovery Programme did demonstrate the high potential of the peninsula, not only in providing a context for the discoveries at Portmahomack, but of the medieval and pre-medieval period in the firthland region. This potential is currently being addressed by the University of Aberdeen (see p xii).

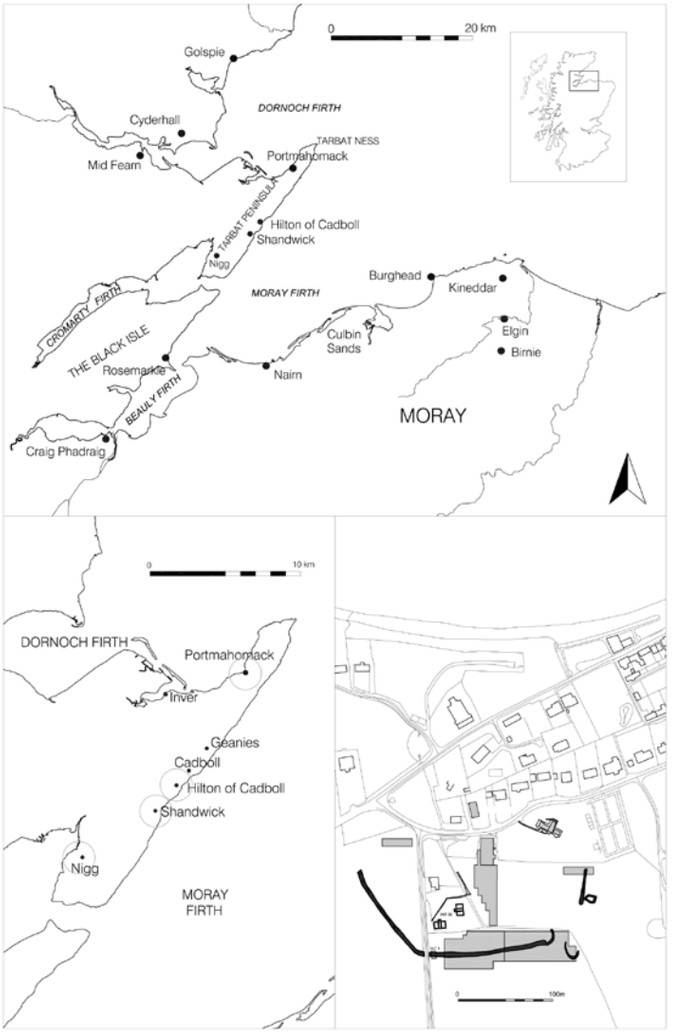

Illustration 2.23
The Moray Firth area – the geographical and cultural context for the Tarbat peninsula

Exploration of the Firthlands

The original project design included not only investigations on the peninsula, but an exploration, or at least an appreciation, of the maritime region of which it was the central place (OLA 5.1; Bulletin 1 (1995) Fig 2; Illus 2.22). In this way it was intended that the site, the peninsula and the Firthlands should act as nested perspectives that would reinforce each other (Illus 2.23). In the event it was judged improvident, if tempting, to divert resources even to the most enticing sites in the neighbourhood (for example Golspie, Mid Fearn, Craig Phadrig, Culbin Sands). A study of the Firthland area in the ninth to eleventh century was undertaken for the Groam House Lecture of 2007 (Carver 2008b), and the discussion of each period has striven for a sense of the wider context in the chapters that follow. Nevertheless the Moray Firth

region still awaits its full appreciation as a theatre of confrontation with Scandinavia comparable to that in Wessex, and a geographical key to early European history of equal importance to the Oslo fjord, Mälaren, the Danish archipelago or Kiel Bay.

Design for analysis and publication

In the summer of 2007, during the last season, four invitation seminars were held on site, attended by a total of thirty-three senior academics from Ireland, England and Scandinavia (Illus 2.24; and see credits). Fieldwork was completed in late August and the design for post-excavation analysis and publication was presented a month later. In 2008 a preliminary account of the history of the project and its results was published (Carver 2008a). This short book functioned both as an interim report, a basis for justifying analysis and publication, and a platform to raise support for them. In 2008 and 2009, assessments were sought from specialists in the analysis of artefacts and environmental material, and a revised project design for the full programme issued in 2009 (OLA 4.3.3). In 2010 to 2012 Data Structure Reports (DSRs) were prepared for all sectors, these being fully illustrated texts that describe the history of excavation and argue for the resulting sequence (OLA 6.1, 6.2, 6.3). These documents, mandatory under Historic Scotland's funding system, provided the stratigraphic platform for subsequent interpretation.

Illustration 2.24
Academic visitors in 2007: (a) Hampus Brink, Chris Morris, Stephan Brink, Neil Price, Sally Foster, Nancy Edwards, Rod McCullagh, Linda Richards, Chris Lowe, Mark Hall, Raymond Lamb, Julian Richards, MOHC; (b) Julia Smith, Lesley Abrams, Thomas Clancy, Alex Woolf; (c) (foreground) Heather King, Betty O'Brien, Niall Brady; (d) Rosemary Cramp

Illustration 2.25
Tarbat Discovery Centre, interior, prior to opening

By March 2012, specialist studies had been delivered which covered the coins, glass, stone objects, pottery, metalworking (OLA 7.1), human remains, animal remains, plant remains, geology and thirty-five radiocarbon dates (OLA 7.2–7.6). The sequences in all sectors were revisited and revised, leading to the final version to be presented in the next chapter. Detailed studies were made of the early Pictish period (Chapter 4), the cemetery (Chapter 5.2), the sculpture (Chapter 5.3), the evidence for a church (Chapter 5.4), the crafts and industries (Chapter 5.6, 5.7), the agricultural economy (Chapter 5.8), the buildings (Chapter 5.9), the peninsula in Pictish times (Chapter 5.10), the raid (Chapter 5.11), the early Norse period (Chapter 6) and the medieval church and village (Chapter 7). These accounts are supported by a Digest of Evidence to be found on pp D1–D158. All factual statements made in this book are underpinned by primary data summarised for all sectors in an online archive (OLA: http://ads.ahds. Access as http://dx.doi.org/10.5284/1031216).

Conservation programme

During the fieldwork, excavation areas were protected by fencing, and wrapped and backfilled off season. The south field was set aside by the farmers, and allowed to re-vegetate naturally. The Glebe Field was actively farmed throughout the fieldwork campaign and crops taken off the buried site without palpable damage. Following the end of fieldwork, all areas were backfilled, and levelled off by machine. The north end of Int 14, which lies within the property of Tarbat Historic Trust, is now grassed over.

In 2002, as the character of the site became more certain, negotiations began to have it put under the protection of the Scottish state. In 2010 the site was scheduled and management agreements put in place that allowed the farmers of both properties to continue farming without harming the remaining archaeological deposit.

Presentation to the public

Since the construction of a museum formed part of the integrated project, very preliminary arrangements for the eventual display of the results of the excavations were included as part of the original management plan in 1995 (OLA 5.1). The tripartite agreement that had secured Heritage Lottery funding (see p 7, above) required the Trust to open the site to the public and generate revenue as soon as possible. The church restoration, the museum design and the archaeological excavation, including mitigating excavations within the church (Sector 4, above), all began together in 1996.

The museum design, undertaken by Higgins Gardner (London), proposed the division of the church into six parts: on the ground floor a reception and shop at the west end, general orientation in the nave, a strong room for the display of irreplaceable ancient artefacts in the north aisle and an exhibition space dedicated to local history on the raised dais at the east end (Illus 2.25). The Laird's Loft and the western gallery were connected with a mezzanine

Illustration 2.26
HRH Prince Charles, Duke of Rothesay, opening the centre, 1999

corridor and used for meetings, films and children's activities. This layered display successfully set out to address international interest in the research project, casual visitors on holiday and the local residents and their schools with equal friendliness and flair. Furthermore, the restoration respected the memory of the original use of the building, by using display panels showing the development of the church building, with early wall lines marked on the floor with brass strips, by restoring the wall memorials and cartouches of the seventeenth to nineteenth century and especially by dedicating the crypt as a discrete space redolent of its ancient use as a reliquary and pilgrim destination (p 321). The restored church, with its new museum, was formally opened in the spring of 1999 by HRH The Prince Charles, Duke of Rothesay (Illus 2.26).

The problem with this otherwise excellent design was that it had to be contrived before the excavation was concluded (in fact the latter had another eight years to run). At this stage, the interpretation of the site as a monastery was by no means firm, and, although the excavation of the church itself had yielded a crop of fine sculpture (p 123), the best finds connected with the monastic crafts were yet to come. The Heritage Lottery funding regime required that money be dispensed in lump sums, and the exhibition was erected as a result of a one-off cost heading. Nevertheless, thanks to the energies of the Trust, especially under its new chairman Tony Watson, money was later found to refresh the display and update it in sympathy with the discoveries made on site.

Meanwhile, visitors to the excavations were welcomed, come rain, come shine, from 1994 to the completion of the field campaign in 2007 (Illus 2.27). Many of these visitors naturally asked whether the remains of the Pictish monastery could be conserved and displayed in situ. This proved impractical. The original structures were made in dry-stone walling, or rubble and turf with timber uprights, most of which had been destroyed by fire, damaged by later occupation or decayed almost beyond detection. Accordingly the stone footings of the monastic infrastructure, including the road, dam and boundary walls, remain buried in situ. Their display was not an option, although reconstruction of selected buildings remains an interesting, instructive and potentially entertaining possibility. The Trust was, and is, relentless in its maintenance and enhancement of an increasingly famous exhibition. At the time of writing, the entryways to the car park, churchyard and church have been furnished with graphic panels and talking posts. For visitors lingering today before a peaceful panorama comprised of cottage gardens, open fields marked by hedgerows and seagulls following a distant tractor, these devices help to offer a hint of the massive and widely renowned establishment that had once adorned the site in the eighth century and in greater part still lies beneath it.

Illustration 2.27
Public visitors viewing the excavation in 2007