

CILL BHREA CHAPEL AND GRAVEYARD

Damage Assessment Report

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4th April 1997

1. Introduction

Public concern about the continuing erosion of this site and the exposure of human bone on the beach below, had led to Historic Scotland being contacted by the owner of the adjoining house, John Woodham at *The Boathouse*. In response to this concern, the writer was appointed by Historic Scotland to carry out an assessment of the damage to the site.

2. Project Brief

The objectives of this study were:-

- 2.1. *To record and retrieve any loose burial remains, such as human bone or associated artefacts.*
- 2.2. *To record the open earthen face and retrieve any burial remains which are in imminent danger of falling from it.*
- 2.3. *To assess what further archaeological work is necessary to ensure the proper treatment or preservation of the burial remains.*

3. Method

An initial desk-based study examined the material held at Highland Council Sites & Monuments Record and documentation supplied by the Historic Scotland Manager of the project, Nick Bridgland. This was followed by a site visit with John Woodham and Jill Kendrick on the 26th March 1997. Measurements were taken to produce Fig and the position of eroding burials was recorded on photograph and plan. Due to driving sleet and rain, a second visit was necessary and this was carried out on 2nd April 1997

4. Historical & Archaeological Background

- 4.1 Cill Bhrea was reputedly founded in 1198 [*Dr Woodham pers comm*]. A fragment of a cross slab found here by R. Gourlay in 1983, suggests that there may have been an earlier church here. It was the parish church of Lemlair [*Place names of Ross and Cromarty, 1904, Inverness, p86*] until this parish was united with Kiltearn parish in 1618.
- 4.2 The church is one of seven in the parish of Kiltearn, including Cille a'Choan 1.5km to the south west,
- 4.3 It was the first church in Easter Ross in which the Reformed Doctrine was preached, Dr Munro of Castlecraig crossing the Cromarty Firth to do so [*Dr Woodham pers comm*]. It is therefore of some importance in the religious history of the area.

- 4.4 It would appear to have gone out of use before the amalgamation of the two parishes as the Munro's of Foulis had established a burial enclosure dated 1588 in Kiltearn [*Beaton E 1992 Ross & Cromarty An Illustrated Architectural Guide, p58*]
- 4.5 From the excavation evidence of Dr Woodham [*see below*], a mausoleum for the Foulis family was established here in the 18th century. It is not known if there is any documentary evidence for this use in the Foulis family papers.
- 4.6 According to Dr Woodham [*based on information in The Ross-shire Journal*] a series of burials were placed here in 1836 following a cholera outbreak.
- 4.7 The church was excavated in 1966 by Dr Tony Woodham. The excavation revealed a stone font [*now in Dingwall Museum*], a stone platform interpreted as a communion table, two dated grave slabs and a small stone disc [*currently in the possession of John Woodham at The Boathouse*]. No floor was found. Numerous burials were found, some of them being very close to the surface. They were all re-interred on site at the end of the excavation. The site was never published, though the two 18th century tombstones with the Munro family crest were written up in a Munro family history. A drawing in Highland Council SMR [*Fig 2*] drawn to a scale of 1:48 by Dr Woodham and showing the extent of erosion in 1988, appears to be based on a drawing from 1966.
- 4.8 At some unknown period subsequent to this excavation, a revetting wall was put on the west side of the sea frontage. However Mrs Munro's [*of Foulis?*] recollection is that it was constructed more than 50 years ago [*reference in letter dated 12/10/1994 by J. Woods, Regional Archaeologist, to K Mackie, Kiltearn Community Council*]. The style of revetting wall would also point to a date pre 1966.
- 4.9 The site gained Scheduled Monument Protection on the 6th October 1970. The Scheduled Area appears to be defined by a low stone wall now barely visible.
- 4.10 A survey of the site was carried out by the RCHAMS in 1979 [*Fig 3*]. No sign of a mausoleum is evident at the east end, though the west wall is not set at right angles to the north wall. The irregular line of the walls shown would conform more to a medieval chapel than an 18th century mausoleum.
- 4.11 Continuing erosion by the sea led to a visit by R. Gourlay, Regional Archaeologist in 1983. The extent of the erosion and the topography of the site was recorded on a sketch [*see Fig 4*]. A fragment from a cross slab incorporated into the retaining wall, human remains and possible coffin nails were retained and deposited in Inverness Museum. This was followed by a visit by Patrick Ashmore in 1984. By this time the east wall of the church had been lost to erosion.
- 4.12 Continuing local concerns were expressed about erosion at the site, including those voiced by Kiltearn Community Council. John Woodham at the neighbouring property of The Boathouse has noted particularly bad erosion in the last two years. He has collected human remains from the foreshore and was responsible for instigating the present action over the site.

5 Topography

- 5.1 The surface of the graveyard is currently obscured by the dead stalks of rosebay willow herb and a strong growth of moss over the stones of the church. The enclosure wall is faintly visible but it is not possible to distinguish individual grave slabs as has been previously recorded [*cf Figs 3 & 4*]. The south end is marked by a line of broom, currently sliding down the cliff face in response to erosion below.
- 5.2 The southern edge of the graveyard is set on a 4m high cliff that is being eroded by the sea. The cliff is formed by a deposit of fluvio-glacial sand and fine gravel set on a deposit of gray clay.
- 5.3 The revetting wall of drystone construction has eroded to the extent shown on plan. It is not clear how far it originally extended.
- 5.4 There is slight evidence of rabbit damage, though most of the burrows appear to have been abandoned.

6. Damage Assessment

- 6.1 The breaching of the revetting wall at some time in the past has led to continuing destruction of the surviving church and graveyard. The revetting wall has been breached at both its west and east ends. According to Colin Woodham this erosion is episodic, occurring only at the highest spring tides.
- 6.2 The erosion is being exacerbated by the collapse of the broom growing on the cliff edge.
- 6.3 The erosion is destroying the church. The church must be seen as the most important part of this Scheduled Monument, potentially containing remains from the early christian period. The east end of the church was already lost at the time of Patrick Ashmore's visit in 1984. The increase in destruction since that time is uncertain but the position of a tombstone and the possible communion table on the beach suggest that this erosion is increasing. As the communion table was drawn as being in the centre of the church it is possible that vandalism is also a factor here.
- 6.4 The remains of 2 human burials were recorded eroding out of the cliff as well as fragments previously collected by Colin Woodham. [*see Appendix 1*] 1 skeleton was from a redeposited context and the other was from an extended inhumation with coffin nails. The recovery of further material would require the removal of the broom and this was not considered appropriate or necessary at this time.

7. Archaeological Conclusions

- 7.1 Cill Bhrea, on the evidence of a single cross slab fragment is an early christian foundation and therefore of some importance both regionally and nationally.
- 7.2 Its continued use until its abandonment in the early 17th century would also give it at least regional importance.
- 7.3 Its conversion into a mausoleum for the Munro of Foulis family remains unproven. The presence of 18th century tombstones merely confirms a periodic use as a graveyard. The wall at the east end, as elsewhere, is clay bonded and it is likely that a mausoleum would be lime mortared by this date.
- 7.4 Its use as a graveyard for 19th century cholera victims means that it is likely that the early medieval cemetery has been disturbed by later burials. The visible section at the south end shows a maximum soil depth of 0.9m suggesting that the stratigraphy will be slight.
- 7.5 The presence of coffin nails and the excellent preservation of the surviving remains are also an indication of the modern status of most of the surviving remains. It is unlikely that coffin nails would be associated with earlier medieval burials.
- 7.6 The excavation by Dr Woodham in 1966 suggests that much of the archaeological evidence from within the church has now been lost. However it remains unclear how extensive these excavations were.

8. Historic Scotland Policy Position

- 8.1 The forthcoming Historic Scotland policy document *The Treatment of Human Remains in Archaeology* [examined in version 1: 1 August 1966] states:-

'Policy 2.1 As the Government's agency responsible for the protection of Scotland's built heritage, we have the legal authority to protect any archaeological site deemed to be of national importance. We will monitor the condition of scheduled ancient monuments, particularly those where the presence of human remains is known or reasonably suspected, and will seek to respond effectively to any threat which might arise to the site or its contents.'

- 8.2 In the light of this there is clearly an onus on Historic Scotland to undertake measures to protect this site. The following recommendations are made on the premise that there will need to be remedial work, probably a retaining wall at the base of the cliff. The exact nature of this construction will need to be established by the appropriate Historic Scotland Architect.
- 8.3 In view of the the necessary expenditure to protect this site, it would be desirable to display the site to the public. As the graveyard was in use until last century, it might be possible for the graveyard to be adopted by the local council [eg. for grass cutting].

9 Recommendations

- 9.1. A retaining wall should be constructed at the base of the cliff eroding at the south edge of the scheduled area. Any soil introduced to cover the current exposed face should either be introduced from below e.g. by raised JCB bucket or transported by wheelbarrow across the scheduled area. This is to prevent compression of the buried remains within the cemetery. Access for plant and materials for the retaining wall should be to the east of the Scheduled Area and undertakings should be given by the building contractors over protecting the buried remains.**
- 9.2. The broom along the edge of the cliff should be removed and where their roots extend into the surviving cemetery they should be cut off at ground level and treated with an appropriate weed killer.**
- 9.3. Any rabbits active on the site should be destroyed with cymag or other chemical by an approved handler. Any rabbit holes should be blocked by means of stones and earth introduced from outside the scheduled area. The position of these filled-in holes should be marked on an appropriate plan for future reference.**
- 9.4 Vegetation should be cut down within the scheduled area defined by the low enclosure wall. A maintenance should be made with the local council to adopt this site for public display and appropriate signboarding should be erected outlining the history of the site. Alternatively a leaflet could be produced in conjunction with the local community council [Leader 2 funding might be available].**
- 9.5. The broom should be removed by archaeological contractors and the opportunity should then be taken to draw the exposed section. The removal of the vegetation should also be done by archaeological contractors and should as a minimum be under archaeological supervision.**
- 9.6. An examination of the church should be made to establish the extent of the previous excavations and the nature of the surviving structure. Total excavation may not be required but the excavation should be conducted to a sufficient level to establish the presence/absence of earlier structures on the site. Excavation should be sufficient to allow the fabric of the church to be displayed for public viewing.**
- 9.7 Because of the modernity of some of the burials it is recommended that no excavations should be carried out within the graveyard. A resistivity survey might be appropriate once the vegetation has been cut down to establish whether traces of buildings other than the chapel survive.**
- 9.8. The existing burial remains should be reinterred on site. In view of the confused and possibly modern contexts from which they have been derived it is not considered appropriate to submit these remains to scientific analysis.**

Jonathan Wordsworth, MA, MIFA, FSA Scot
4th April 1997

Appendix 1

List of Skeletal material

- B1 Fragments of 2 crania with no jaw fragments, at least 1 other cranium remains in the soil. Nettle roots surround the remains.*
- B2 Femur & tibia from an extended inhumation lying in section. 1 coffin nail recovered and another remains in section.*
- B3 Cranial fragments recovered by John Woodham from the shore. They include 3 lower jaws*

Appendix 2

Dressed stone

- Stone 1 Substantial dressed sandstone block partially buried measuring 1.3m+ long by 0.64m wide by 120mm thick. Possibly the stone described as 'Communion Table' by Dr Woodham.*
- Stone 2 Stone measuring 0.26m by 0.23m by 80mm thick with an incised line running diagonally across the stone. Moved to the back of the beach with Stone 3.*
- Stone 3 Substantial but broken sandstone slab measuring 0.91m long by 0.46-0.65m wide and 90mm thick. There is a distinct chamfer on the edge of this stone. This is almost certainly a grave slab. Faint traces of a former inscription/carving can be traced*

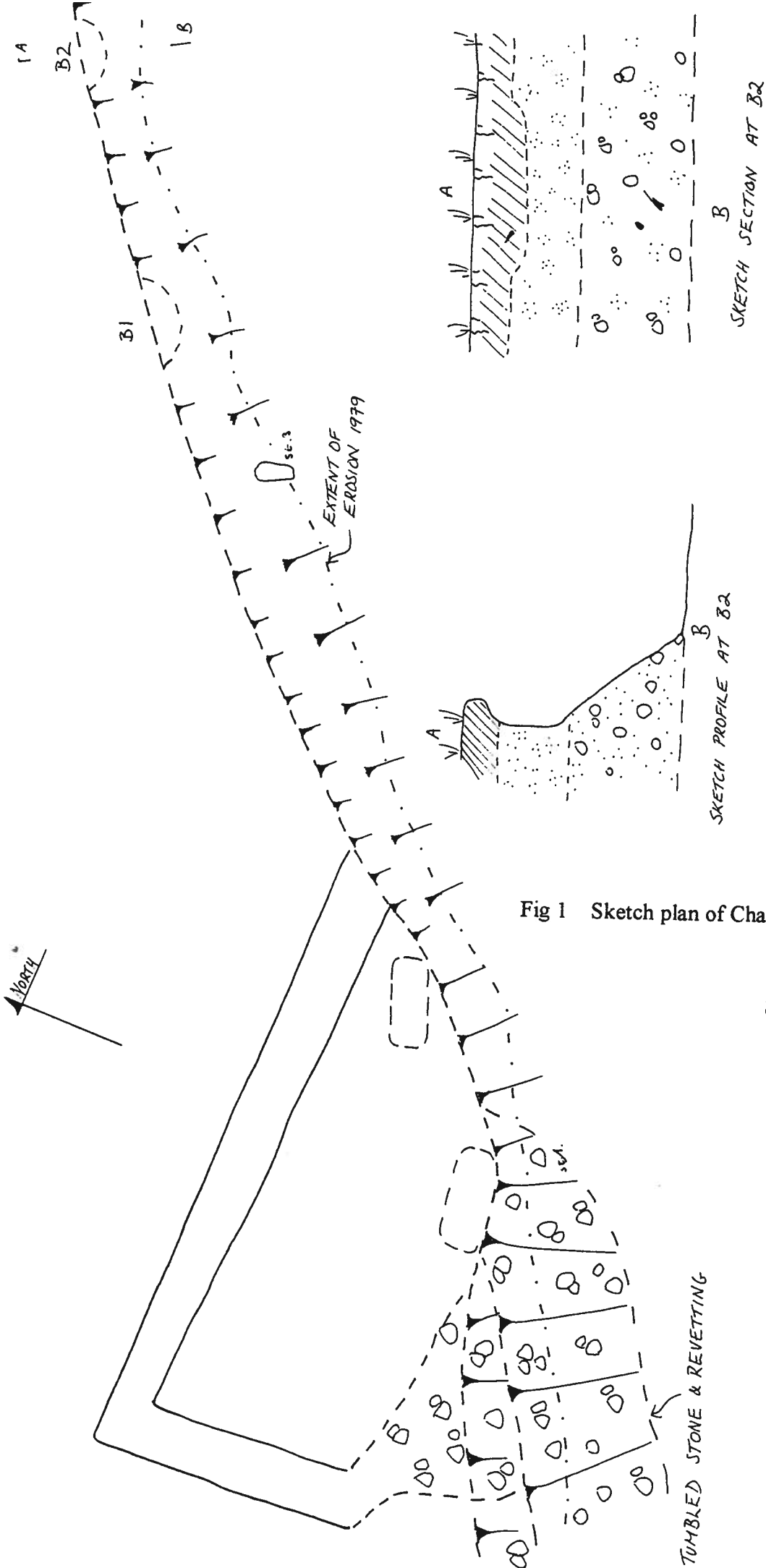


Fig 1 Sketch plan of Chapel as surviving in April 1997

Scale c1:100.

Fig 2 Drawing by Dr Woodham based on unpublished excavation records & showing extent of erosion in 1988.

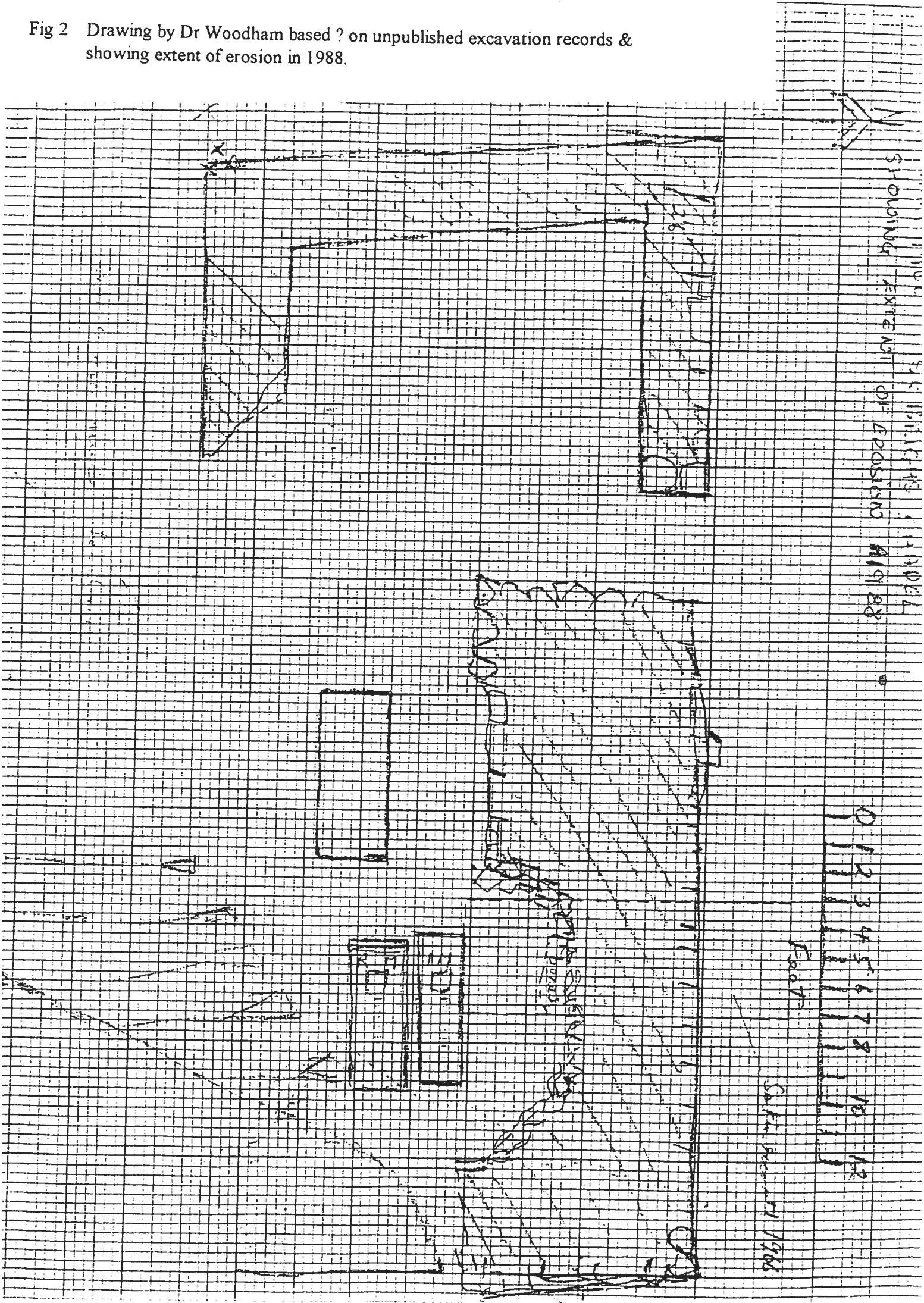


Fig 3 RCHAMS Survey Plan of 1979

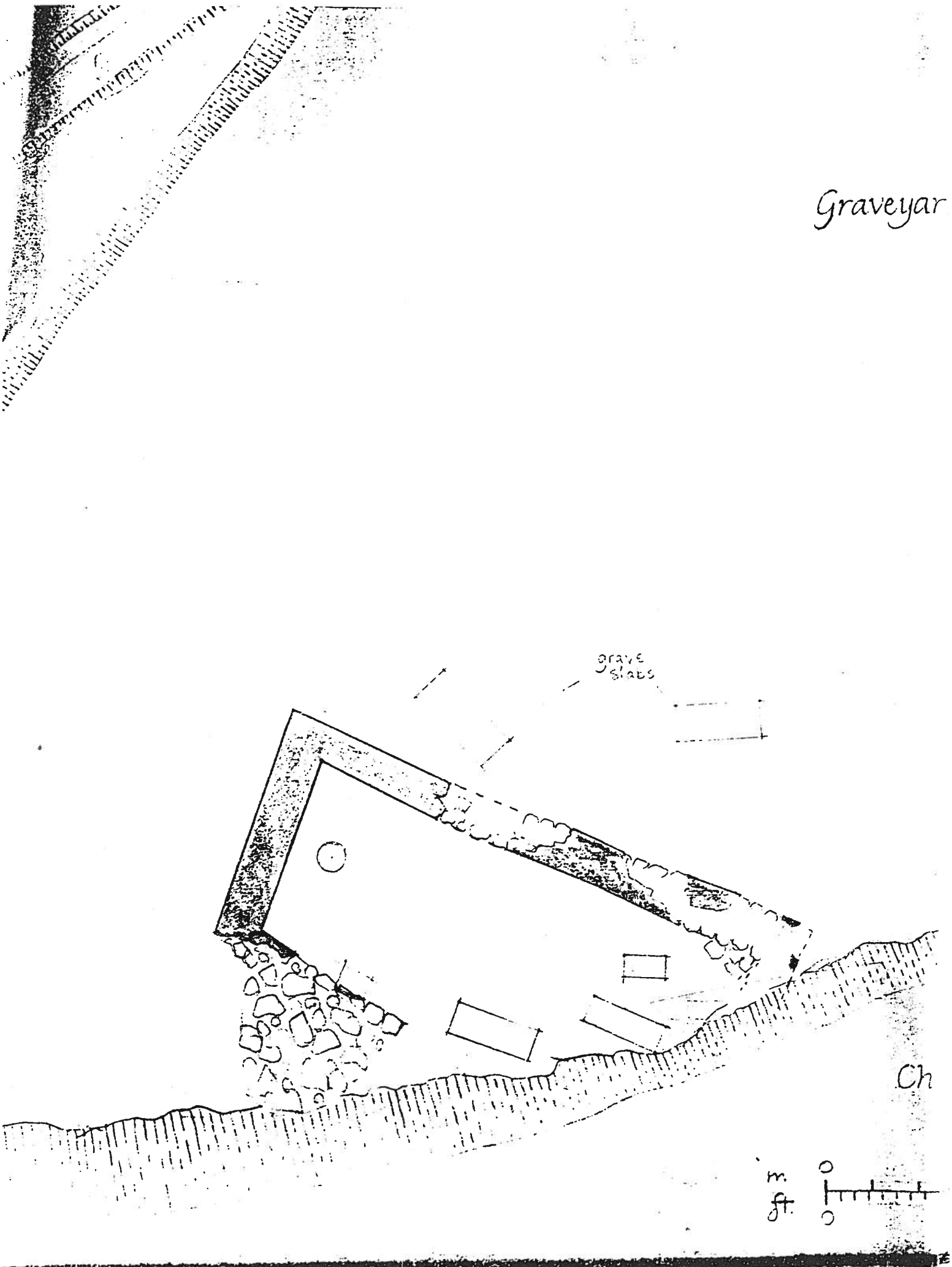
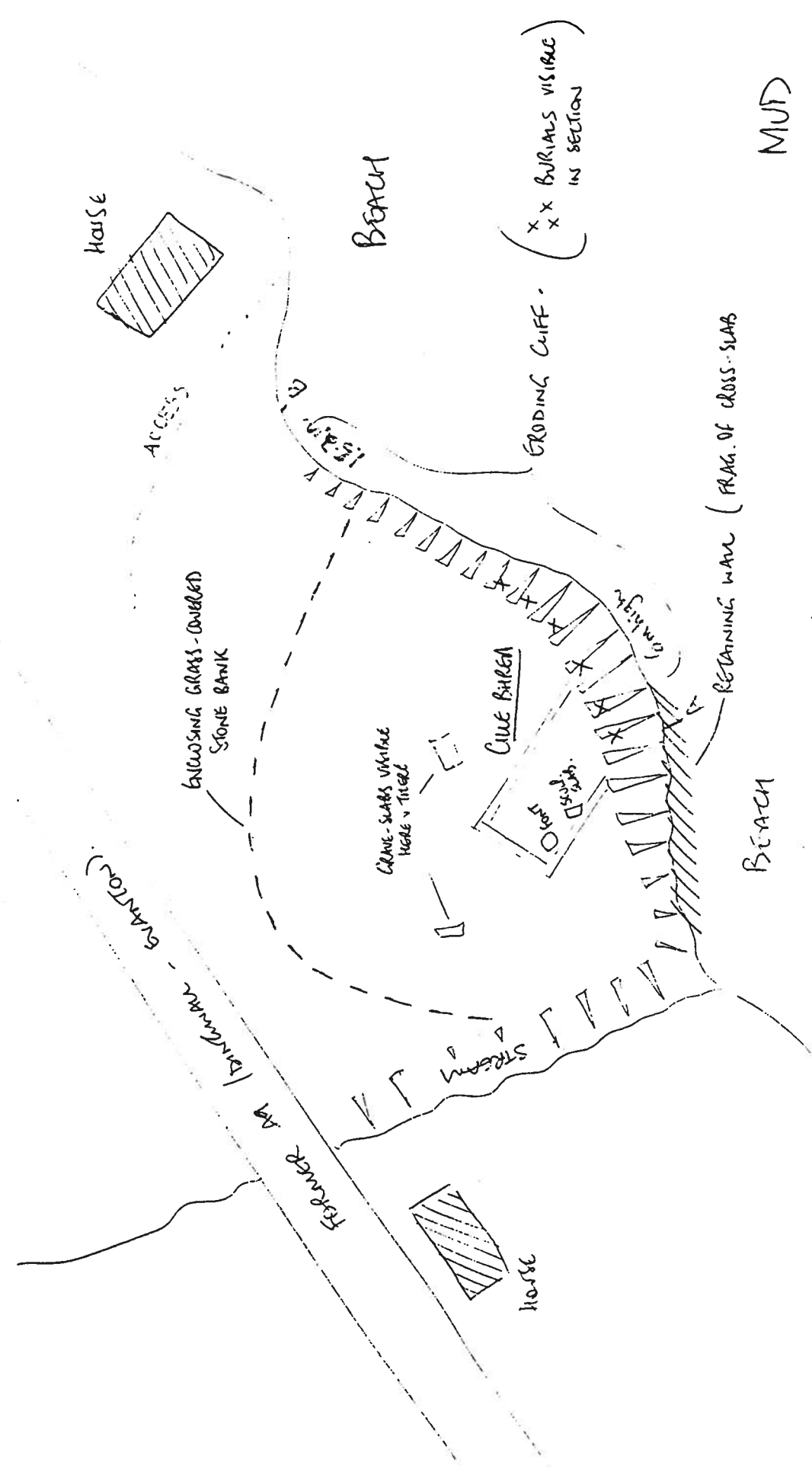
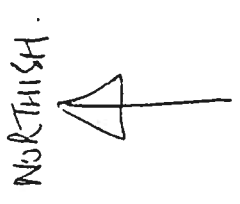


Fig 4 Sketch plan of Chapel drawn by R. Gourlay in 1983

Sketch 'A'

ULLE BIRGA, SKETCH PLAN



MUD

Also see plan.
 Also note the stream, the cliff, the beach.
 R. Gourlay 1983