Interim Report of Archaeological Excavations on the Pittodrie Estate, Aberdeenshire

Summer 2022

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Project Background and Research Aims

2022 saw the fourth season of work carried out by the Bennachie Landscapes Fieldwork Group. This work forms part of the wider Bennachie Landscapes Project run jointly by the Bailies of Bennachie, the University of Aberdeen and other community members. More information concerning this community project can be found at two websites:

www.bailiesofbennachie.org.uk/bennachie-landscapes-project
www.bennachielandscapes.scot

Like most of the North-east, Bennachie suffered from a considerable amount of storm damage that occurred last winter. The result was that this season's work was restricted to the Pittodrie 'mound' area and to the northern part of the lower enclosure site, which had fortunately escaped relatively undamaged. Certain areas were, however, considered unsafe to enter and further work on some previous trenches will have to await the removal of fallen trees. (Please see earlier interim reports for further details of these trenches.)

The Excavations

This season's excavation ran from 27th June 2022 for two days per week for a total of 15 days fieldwork. The excavation attracted 23 volunteers drawn primarily from the Bailies of Bennachie membership and students from the University of Aberdeen. In addition, a group of 11 youngsters and carers from the Aberdeen branch of the Young Archaeology Club attended for a day. Dr. Ed. Schofield of the University of Aberdeen visited the site and took pollen samples from the suggested 'mill pond'. This work forms part of the 'Voices of the Future' NERC-funded project organised in the North-east by the University of Aberdeen. Excluding the YAC attendees, this fieldwork group succeeded to work the equivalent of 114 days over our 15 day period offering the participants the opportunities to learn and further improve their archaeological fieldwork skills.

However, for the reasons stated above, only two trenches were opened this season. One small trench was located on the slope of the southwest side of the Pittodrie mound and attempted to further characterise the observed earthworks. The second trench continued the excavation of Trench 1, previously worked during the 2018 and 2019 seasons. The original Trench 1 was extended eastwards and northwards, positioned in order to attempt to characterise several earthworks that were evident in this area (see Figure 1).

Trench 1 Extension, East

The 8x1m Trench 1 eastern extension was located east of the building platform [AM] (see previous reports) and ran along the projected line of the Pittodrie lower enclosure dyke (coloured light green in Figure 1), bisecting two of several earthworks noted previously. A further 3x1m trench was excavated southwards from this trench in order to locate the inner line of the enclosure dyke. The results suggest at least two phases of site use in this restricted area. The earliest recognisable phases appear to have necessitated the stripping away of the organic topsoil leaving the natural subsoil exposed.

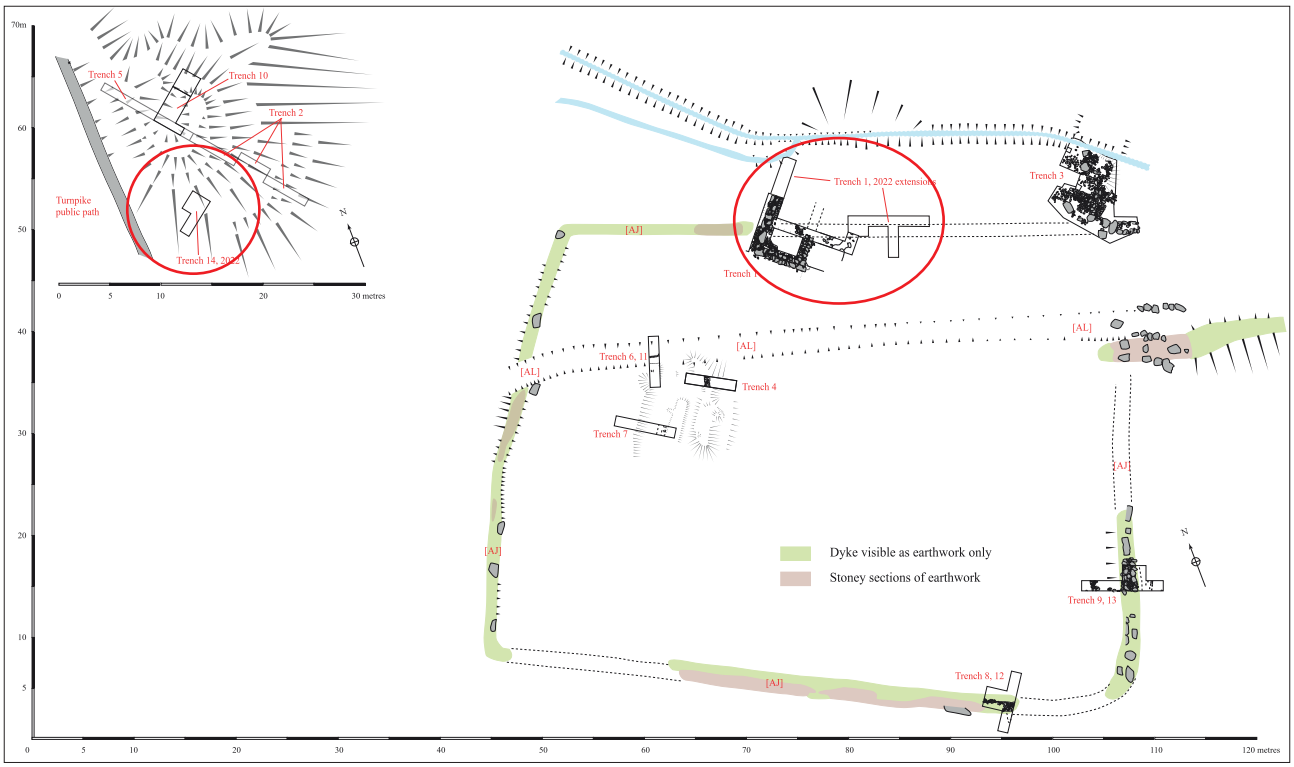

Figure 1. Site plan with 2022 interventions highlighted.

Parts of this exposed layer seem to have been levelled in places and dug into elsewhere. All of the following described features from this primary phase sit directly onto or within cuts dug into this natural subsoil.

In the extreme northwest corner of the trench, section 36 (Figure 2) shows a break in the slope that appears to be a cut into the subsoil [ABS]. If a wall or dyke had once stood above this break of slope, the stones [ABC] may represent demolition material (see Photo 1). A further cut [ABT] may be a foundation trench for a possible stone wall/dyke [ABF] running approximately in a north to south direction. To the east of [ABF], a sloping feature [ABV] may be tentatively identified as a gully. However, without further work, the linear natures of these features must remain purely speculative.

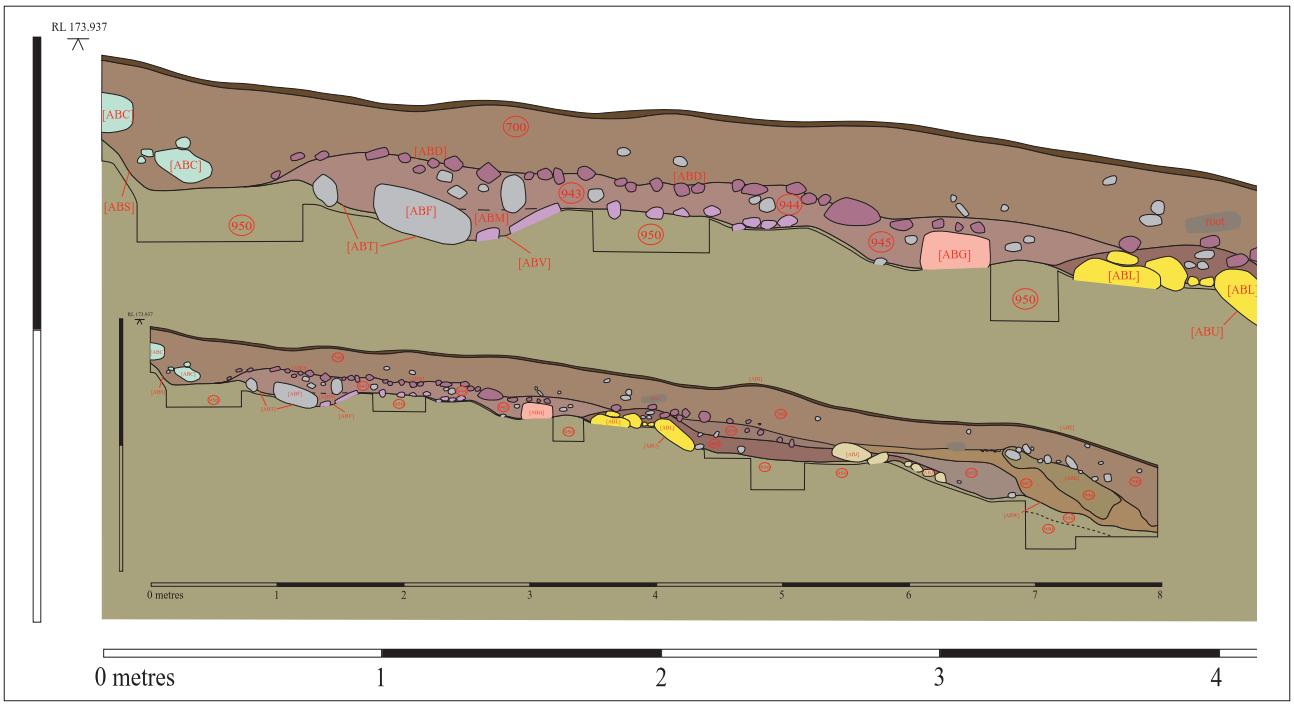

Figure 2. West end of Section 36 with inset showing full extent of trench.

A cobbled or metalled surface [ABM], comprising round-edged (worn) field stones, extended approximately 1.5m eastwards, with the surface being covered by a thick layer of charcoal and iron oxide material (contexts (943) and (944); Photo 2). It is uncertain whether the cobbled surface [ABM] ever extended further westwards, but its construction suggests it is likely to have provided a useful working platform.

Further east of the stone feature [ABF], several large stones were encountered that may be the remains of another robbed-out stone feature [ABG] (see Figure 3). To the east of [ABG] is a further feature [ABL] again, arguably, linear in nature. This may be associated with the break in slope and cut [ABU] (Figure 4).

Feature [ABL] again appears to run in an approximately north-south direction and continues southwards into the 3x1m N-S trench extension. This feature may have articulated with feature [ABN] (see Figure 5). Feature [ABN] is the most striking feature within the 3x1m N-S trench extension and is likely to represent the basal stone layer of the inner edge of the north lower enclosure dyke [AJ]. If this is indeed the enclosure dyke then the large sloping stone appears to be a 'shiner' stone, as found widely in northeast dyking tradition. Laying directly south of [ABN] may be the possible remains of another cobbled surface [ABO] (see Figure 6). Recovered from the surface of this layer were iron objects. One of these was a substantial iron 'lump' while the other took a more definite form that consisted of three finger-length elements that appeared to lie side by side with two, small stud-like

Photo 1. Feature [ABC].

Photo 2. Charcoal and iron oxide amongst metalled surface [ABM].

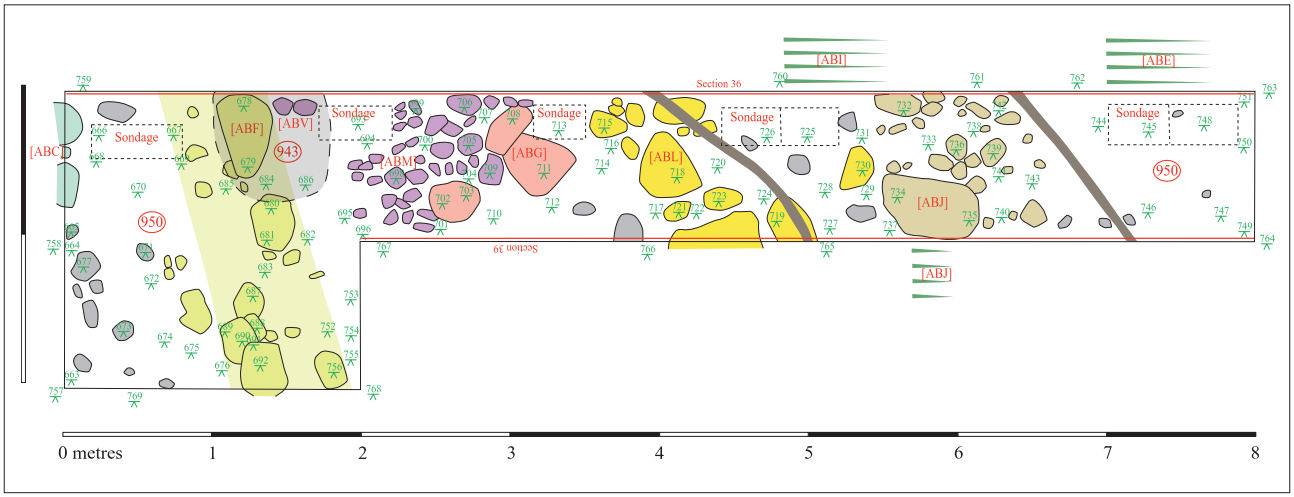

Figure 3. Plan 30 showing Phase 1 features.

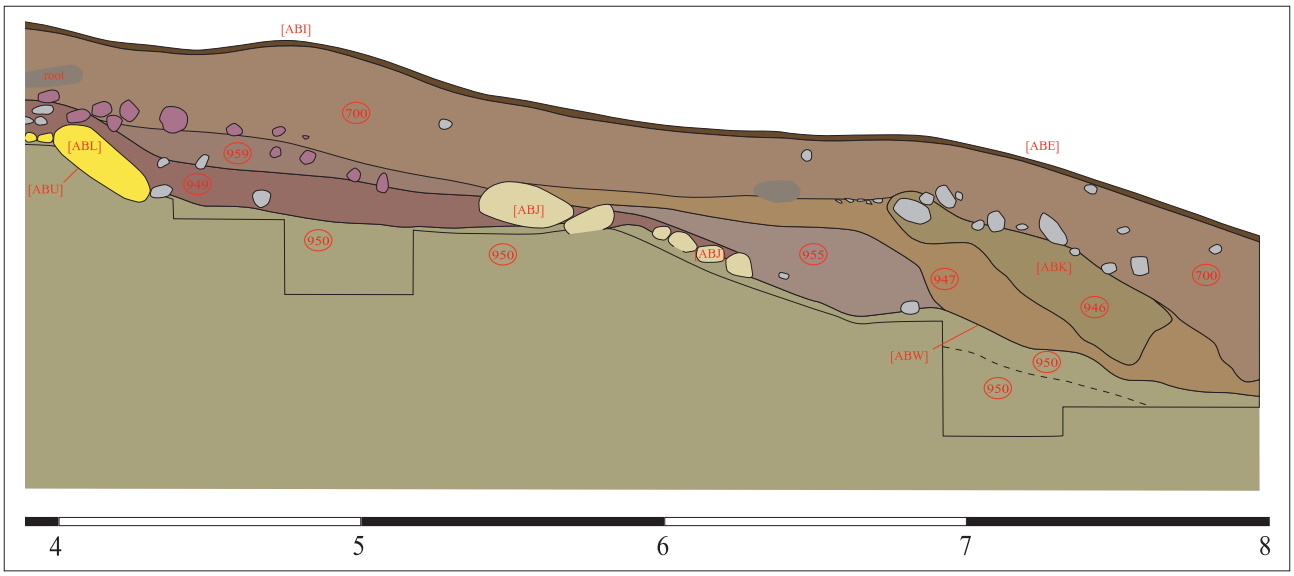

Figure 4. East end of Section 36.

protrusions on one side. This may have once held the other elements together (see Photo 3).

Returning once more to the main trench (Figure 4), east of stone feature [ABL], also above a break in slope in the natural subsoil, is another stone feature [ABJ], probably linear and, again, with an approximate north-south orientation. This feature is a little downhill from the first surface earthwork [ABI]. One possible explanation for this is that the ground level on the west side of feature [ABJ] may have been higher than that on the east side where it abutted [ABJ]. Once this stone feature [ABJ] was removed, the held-back soil crept forward, leaving a raised portion surviving to the west of the 'slump'. Alternatively, [ABI] may have been related to soil disturbance caused by the removal of [ABJ] at a much later period. Between stone features [ABL] and [ABJ] context (949) may represent re-deposited subsoil material but, if so, its purpose is presently unknown.

The area laying directly to the east of [ABJ] is more complicated as the interfaces between the various contexts and features are less well defined. Directly to the east of [ABJ] is a dark organic soil layer (955) laying downhill from [ABJ]. This appears to have been cut by [ABW], which extended down into the natural subsoil. This extreme disturbance may indicate a former

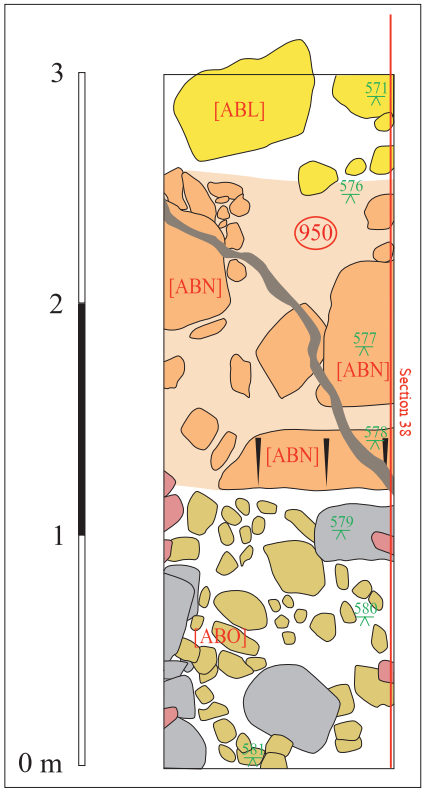

Figure 5. Plan 30 showing primary features [ABL] and [ABN].

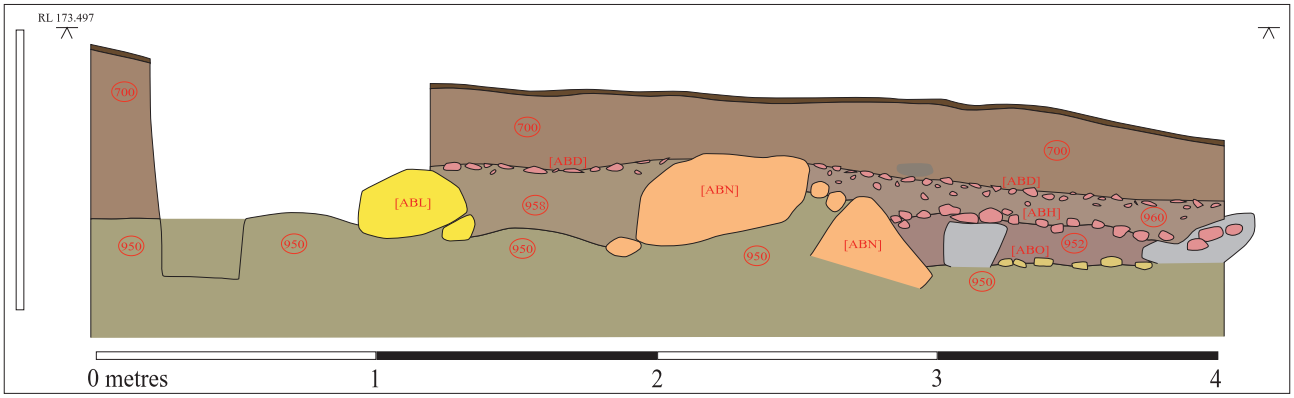

Figure 6. Section 38 showing various structural features.

archaeological feature or, as suggested by the excavator, reflects a 'tree throw': the ground disturbance caused by a large tree falling over. Further work would be required to better characterise these anomalies. Based upon historical knowledge of the site and the 19th-century date of a fragment of green wine bottle found at the base of (947), the latter may be more likely. Certainly, from the earlier part of the 19th century this area formed part of the woodland policies of Pittodrie, with any agricultural usage of the area pre-dating this period. As such, these contexts might more properly be associated with a later archaeological phase of the site.

Photo 3. Iron objects found above Feature [ABO].

This later archaeological phases, like the earlier ones, cannot yet be ascribed a firm chronological date. The known history of the site suggests that the building - represented by the remains on the building platform [AM] - must have fallen out of use by the early years of the 19th century. Consequently, the later phases of occupation shown by this year's excavations, may relate to a period prior to that. How much earlier is still under review. But, the dumped stones overlying the remains of building [AM] (noted in 2021) suggest a further phase post-dating that building (see below).

Overlying the earliest features at the western end of the Trench was the cobbled surface [ABD], consisting of sharp-edged, broken stones with a well-defined edge running north to south along its western edge (see Figure 7). This feature has the appearance of being a path but, equally, may once have been the western end of a yard. It clearly extended eastwards, possibly overlaying the earlier feature [ABF] and sealing the charcoal and iron oxide rich layers contexts (943)-(945). Unfortunately, the cobbling becomes increasingly ruinous eastwards but may have once extended at least as far as [ABG]. Its extension beyond that point is, however, open to interpretation and requires further investigation.

Beneath [ABD], on the south side of [ABN], was the cobbling [ABH], sealed by a loose, stony layer (960) (Figures 6 and 7). This lower surface comprised more rounded stones and may, therefore, have provided a separate surface distinct from [ABD]. [ABH] was clearly later than [ABO] - the earliest cobbled surface - though both may have respected the enclosure dyke [ABN], suggesting a functional association between these features. It is possible that [ABD] postdates the removal of the enclosure dyke hereabouts. Its possible continuation south of [ABN], coincident with the surviving surface features of that dyke, may suggest this relative chronology. If [ABH] may be seen as an intermediate phase of cobbling, this part of the site would then demonstrate three phases of use.

Discussion of Archaeological Contexts

The excavation has shown that the ground was made up of several layers. Context (700), consisting of a black organic soil, developed above the underlying archaeological features. However, the remarkably thin accumulation of topsoil across the mound, known to have been accumulating leaf litter for around two hundred years, might lead us to suspect that context (700) may have been formed by other means, possibly to create an agricultural or horticultural soil. It also sealed the underlying cobbled surfaces. Within the lower levels of context (700) were found accumulations of late 18th/early19th-century pottery. If this were midden-derived, it would add to the possibility that (700) represents an agricultural/horticultural accumulation with domestic debris finding its way in through the manuring process. Again, the historical evidence suggests that such a use for the site must have ceased during the

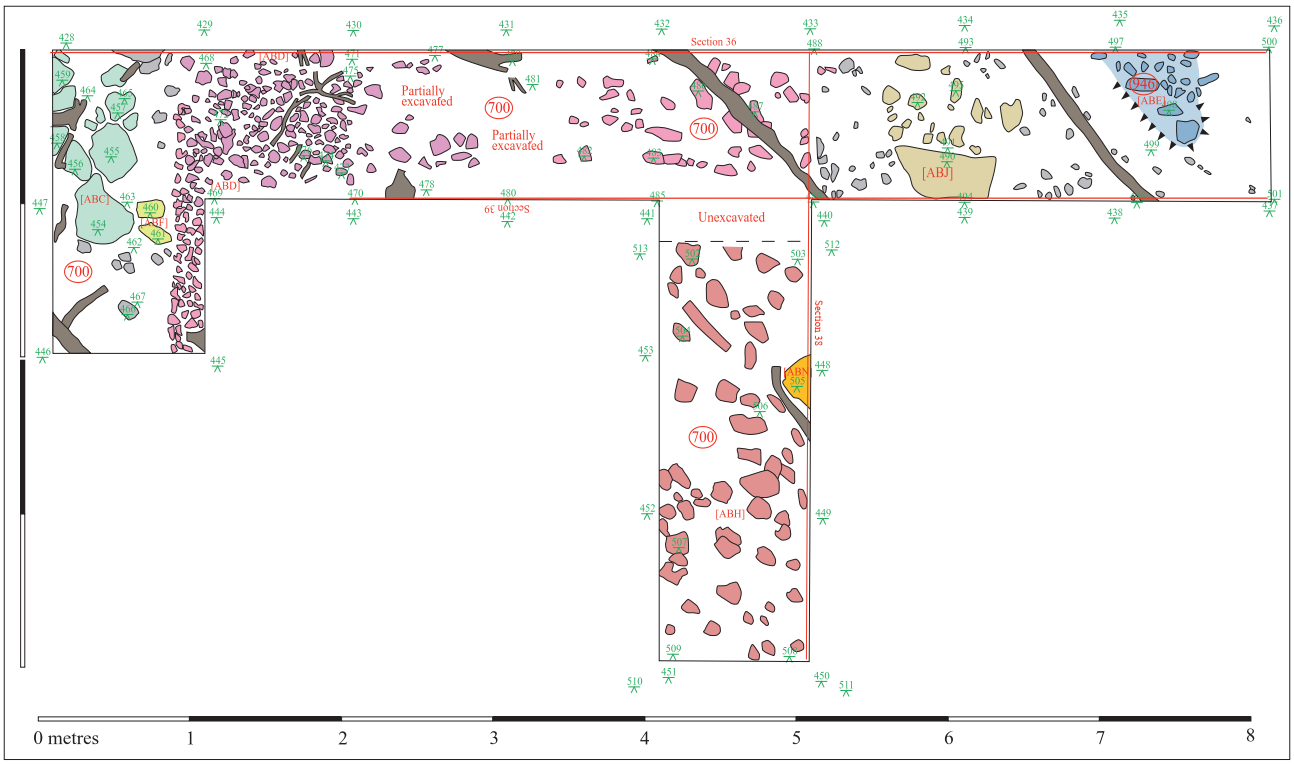

Figure 7. Plan 22 showing Phase 2 features.

first half of the 19th century. The pottery assemblage supports the notion that the building [AM] was in use up until the start of the 19th century, providing the material derived from that building. But, it would also mean that the cobbled surfaces could not have been in use during the final phase of use of that building. An alternative proposition might be to see the building [AM] as being related to the cobbled surfaces at some point prior to the 19th century. The midden material may then have derived, by means of agricultural engrossment, from a neighbouring farm, such as Craigwell. This farmstead is known to have continued in use into the 19th century.

Below (700) lie the many stone structural elements, discussed above and that are all badly ruinous. It may be significant that these features mainly lay directly onto the natural subsoil, suggesting a primary clearance phase in which the site was well prepared. It is unclear if all the features were subsequently removed at the same time or sporadically. Further mention might be made here of the copious amounts of charred and iron oxide deposits that covered cobbled surface [ABM]. In the 2019 excavation a further lump of slag was recovered from another part of Trench 1. Other iron objects were also found on top of the cobbled surface [ABO]. Whilst a local informant related that he had heard of a smiddie (blacksmith) in this area, it should be noted that these finds derive from some of the earliest stratigraphic contexts. If the informant had accurately recalled some local lore, not otherwise attested, its transmission had either a long chronological depth or the complicated archaeological phases of the site must have had short durations. However, badly corroded iron objects have survived for five hundred years locally, as recorded by excavations at Druminnor Castle. Consequently, a range of possibilities are tenable.

It seems likely that the stone feature [ABN] represents the remains of the robbed-out north wall of the enclosure dyke [AJ] (Figure 1). Much of this part of the dyke had clearly been removed and possibly re-used in the foundations to the nearby building [AM]. This is also likely to prove to be the case for some of the foundation stones seen in trench 3 noted in 2019 (see previous reports). Still more stones of the type used in the surviving enclosure dyke are lined up along the hollow-way where it breaks through the east wall of the enclosure dyke (Figure 1). Those may represent an episode of site clearance, the simple provision of a gap for the later hollow-way or the need to acquire stone for other purposes, with those placed there ready for a subsequent removal that never came to pass. Alternatively those particular large stones may be related to a feature that once formed part of the original enclosure design. However, this part of the site has not yet been archaeologically examined in detail.

In sum, the evidence so far provided by the three seasons of work on this site may suggest at least five phases of use. The first saw the erection of the lowest dyke-like features sitting on or cut into the natural, including the dyke associated with the lower large enclosure. Surface [ABO] may be associated with that phase. The surface above [ABH] would provide a second phase also, seemingly, associated with the main enclosure dyke [AJ]/[ABN]. Phase 3a is reflected in the accumulation of the stony deposit (960). As this overlay the lowest stones of [ABN], this may represent the period in which this part of the enclosure dyke was removed and, perhaps converted into a yard. The stony layer (960) was capped by a further cobbled surface that may or may not be a continuation of [ABD]. This layer seals the surviving stones of [ABN] and must signal its final disappearance from the scene. Whether or not the covering by [ABD] of (960) is seen as a separate phase or just part of Phase 3 remains uncertain, so it may be appropriately termed Phase 3b. If we wish to see the building [AM] associated with [ABD], it might then also be considered to belong to Phase 3. It obviously cannot pre-date the dismantling of the dyke [AJ]/ABN]. The deep agricultural/horticultural soil (700), therefore, represents Phase 4. Phase 5 is represented by the final removal of the site from agricultural/horticultural use when it became part of the planned woodland policies of Pittodrie in the early part of the 19th century.

A final comment might be made regarding the Craigwell Burn. At present this remains a slightly mysterious feature. It was clearly canalised at some point, maybe in either the late 18th or early 19th century, being the type of undertaking usually assumed to accompany the 'improvements' of that time. However, the archaeological evidence may support an earlier period. Either way, the whereabouts of its former course is a bit of a mystery. What may be worth noting, however, is the fact that all of the geologically 'natural' soils encountered in this season's work took the form of a solid, ochre-coloured compacted material. The material found in the extreme south-east corner of Trench 1 in 2019, in contrast, contained an area of grey, sticky clay (741), very unlike anything encountered this year. This begs the question: what was the relationship between the lower enclosure and the former course of the Craigwell Burn?

Work on another part of the enclosure dyke in 2021 suggested the enclosure's primary use may have been to hold stock. This might indicate a need for a water supply, potentially supplied by the Craigwell Burn. The burn's present course clearly has nothing to do with the enclosure as they appear, stratigraphically, to belong to two completely different periods. The Craigwell Burn could not have lain further north for topographic reasons. It might, however, have entered the enclosure. If the enclosure were for stock, this would be expected. The hypothesis being advanced

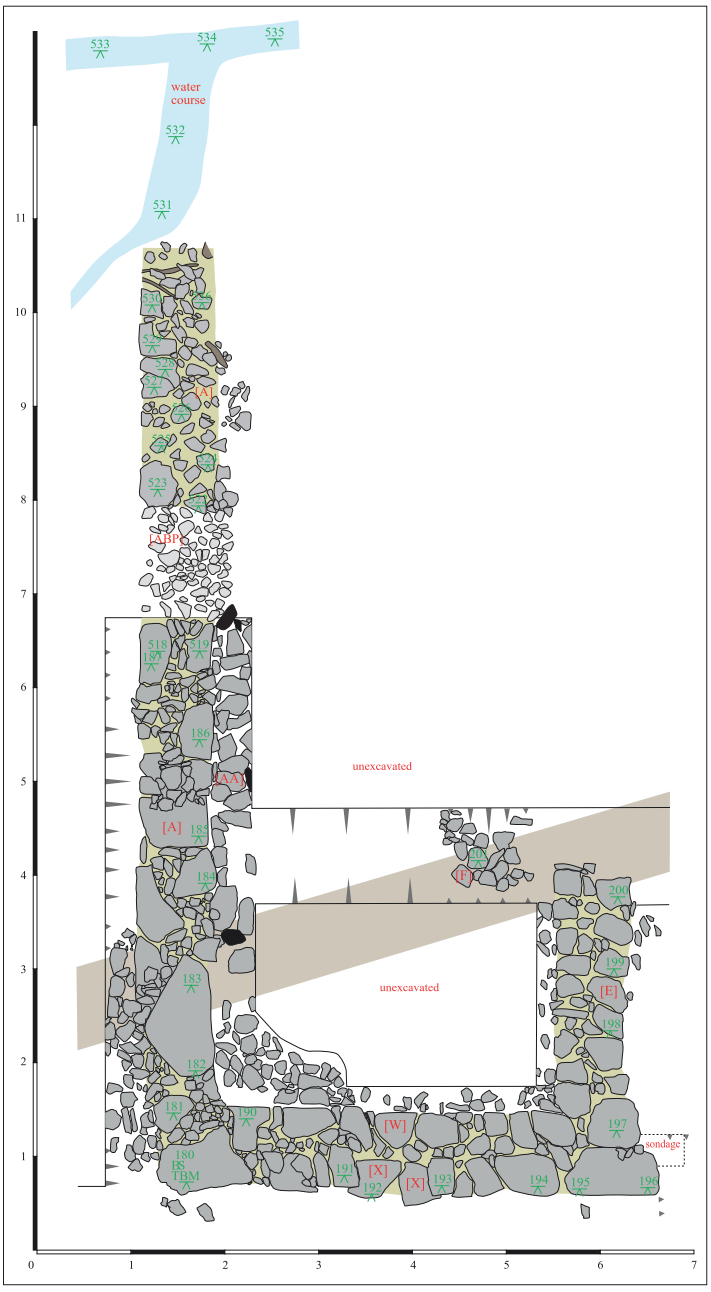

Figure 8. Plan 13 with 2022 extension northwards.

here is that the burn may have, originally, entered the enclosure close to where a small side-channel joins the main channel north of building [AM] (see Figure 8). When the dyke - that must have had some type of culvert for the water - was removed, the platform was built for the building. This should have raised it above the level of the adjacent water. Building [AM] may have extended across the new course of the burn. Though probably going far beyond what the evidence presently shows, a possible association might be considered linking this new building [AM] with the proposed mill pond, fed by the Craig Well. What does seem clear is that, over time, the building suffered damp problems, perhaps as a result of a lack of maintenance to the canalised channel, coupled with the natural inclination of water to return to its original course. This may account for the eventual need for the internal drainage channel inside the west wall of building [AM].

Trench 1 Extension, North

The opportunity was also taken to extend Trench 1 northwards in order to follow the west wall [A] of the building [AM] and to try to understand more about its ground plan. Wall [A] was found to continue northwards and may have been cut through by the canalisation of the Craigwell Burn - no corner, as yet, having been found (see Figure 8). The building [AM] must, therefore, extend for a minimum of 10 metres. An area of small stones [ABP] was found and coincided with a break in the line of large foundation stones that make up the rest of the wall line. Owing to the now-known minimum length of the building, this gap may have lain halfway along its width and may represent a former doorway.

An assessment of the earthwork remains on the north bank of the canalised Craigwell Burn may suggest that the building did extend across it. However, further excavation would be required to confirm that hypothesis. At the moment, the former course of the burn is unclear and is likely to have been, in some fashion, governed by the possible mill pond situated between here and the Craig Well itself. This entire section of the site - from the Craig Well to Building [AM] - needs to be considered with respect to the former water management of the area.

Trench 14

Trench 14 (see Figure 1) was opened in an attempt to intersect with a stone feature [ABA], discovered during the 2021 season, and to see whether it continued this far around the mound. Beneath the leaf litter (956) that covered Trench 14 was found a grey layer (940) extending the full area of the trench. Geologist Andrew Wainwright, working this trench, suggested that this colouration was owing to a leeching process derived from decaying leaf matter. Below the grey layer (940), towards the east end of trench, was uncovered a scatter of stones (941), ranging in size from approximately 7cm up to c.20cm and derived from some disturbed feature lying nearby. Unfortunately, except for this stone scatter, there were no clear structural remains found. It remains unclear, therefore, whether the stones had once been related to [ABA] or to something else entirely - perhaps arriving down the

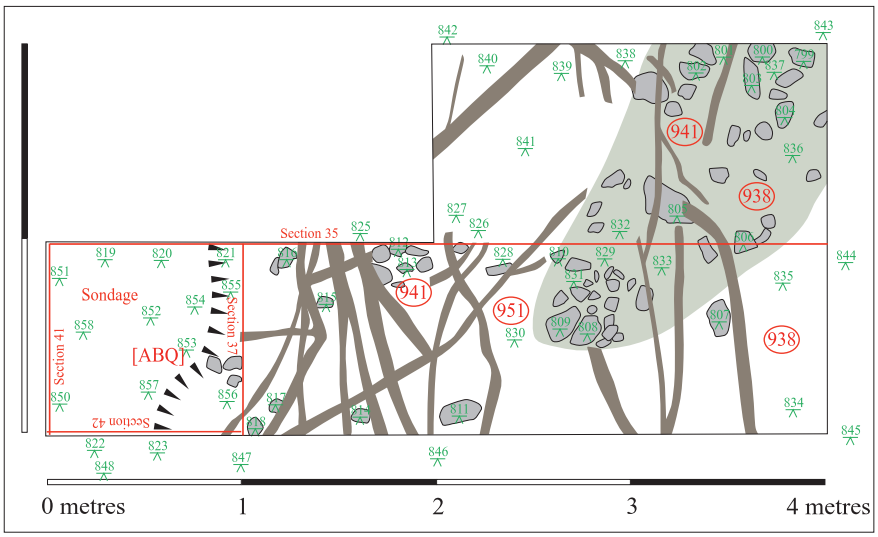

Figure 9. Plan 27 showing Trench 14 on the mound.

slope from the remains of the farmstead situated on top of the mound, recorded in a previous report.

In an attempt to clarify this matter Trench 14 was extended (see Figure 9). More stones from layer (941) were uncovered uphill from the first ones, increasing the likelihood of an association between these stones and the farmstead on the mound. Below context (941) was an inorganic yellow, sandy material (938) in which was discovered a piece of green bottle glass, Context (941) may also have continued westwards into the mid trench section were many loose stones were noted under the profusion of tree roots. Unfortunately, owing to those roots, excavating was made extremely difficult and it was hard to disentangle the various contexts.

A small sondage was then excavated in the southeast corner of the trench (not marked on figure), piercing through (941). It had been shown in last season's excavation that structure [ABA] was found with loose stone overlaying a lower basal layer still in place with a clearly defined edge and it was hoped that the same would be found under stone scatter (941). Sadly, this was not the case here.

Photo 4. The micro-strata seen in Trench 14.

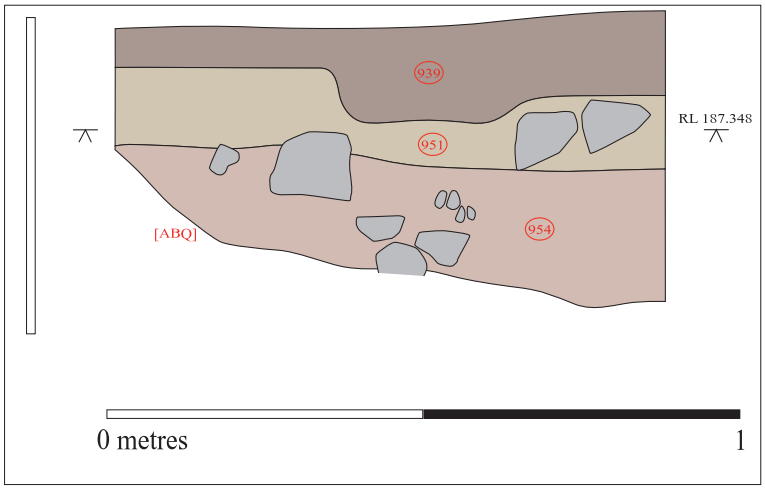

Figure 10. Section 37 showing the cut [ABQ] and fill.

Below the grey layer (940) on the west side of the trench (marked 'sondage' on figure 9), the soil (942) comprised a large number of micro strata with layers of fine tree roots favouring some strata over others (see Photo 4). It has not yet been determined whether this context (942) represents geological or anthropological layering. Below context (942) lay an inorganic yellowy brown material (953) that is equally difficult to characterise. Below (953) lay the natural 'iron pan' layer (which we are more certain about giving a geological context!). On the east side of the sondage was a cut [ABQ] that could be seen clearly cutting the natural 'iron pan' layer. The fill of this cut contained none of the micro-strata and was clearly a later insertion. The fill comprised a sandy material (951) plus a fine red sandy material with stones below (954) (see Figure 10). It is interesting to note that the mature beech trees over-shadowing Trench 14 chose to send their roots along the fill of cut [ABQ], suggesting a richer humic content than the surrounding soils.

The Small Finds

The small finds are shown in catalogue form as Appendix 3. The following is merely a brief list of the artefacts and their contexts.

Trench 1:

Unstratified:	early modern pottery shards, clear glass (from possible square bottle?);
(700):	2 flint scrapers, early modern pottery shards, ceramic pipe stem, glass wine goblet stem, window glass, green bottle glass, slate, modern shotgun cartridge, iron nails;
(946):	green bottle glass, wine bottle base, early modern pottery shard;
(952):	iron objects.

Trench 14:

(938):	green bottle glass;
(940):	green bottle glass.

Finally, an unexpected but pleasing artefact was found built into a dyke adjoining the site. This appears to be half of a stone used for the grinding of grain (Photo 5). Rotary quern stones such as this have a long history, dating from at least the Iron Age.

Appendices

A high resolution pdf copy of this report, along with a complete inventory in XL format, of Contexts, Features and Small Finds can be found on either of the websites at:

www.bailiesofbennachie.org.uk/
bennachie-landscapes-project

or:

www.bennachielandscapes.scot

Photo 5: Rotary quern stone discovered built into adjoining dyke.

Acknowledgements

A heartfelt thanks go out to all the volunteers who helped so much on this excavation - without them this project could not have taken place. Grateful thanks also go to the Pittodrie House Hotel management, namely James Hamilton and Andrew Tighe, for their continued support and trust in allowing us a free rein to carry out this work. Thanks also to members of the Bennachie Landscapes Project who helped in the production of this report and to the Bailies of Bennachie who provided funds for the excavations.

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