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# TRIAL EXCAVATIONS AT STROME CASTLE, WESTER ROSS



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*Excavations at Strome Castle, Wester Ross, sponsored  
by the National Trust for Scotland, Highland Regional  
Council and the University of Glasgow, carried out by*

*Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division*

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*Cover. View of the castle from the east  
along Loch Carron towards Skye.*

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*by*

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1995

GLASGOW UNIVERSITY ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH DIVISION  
Glasgow

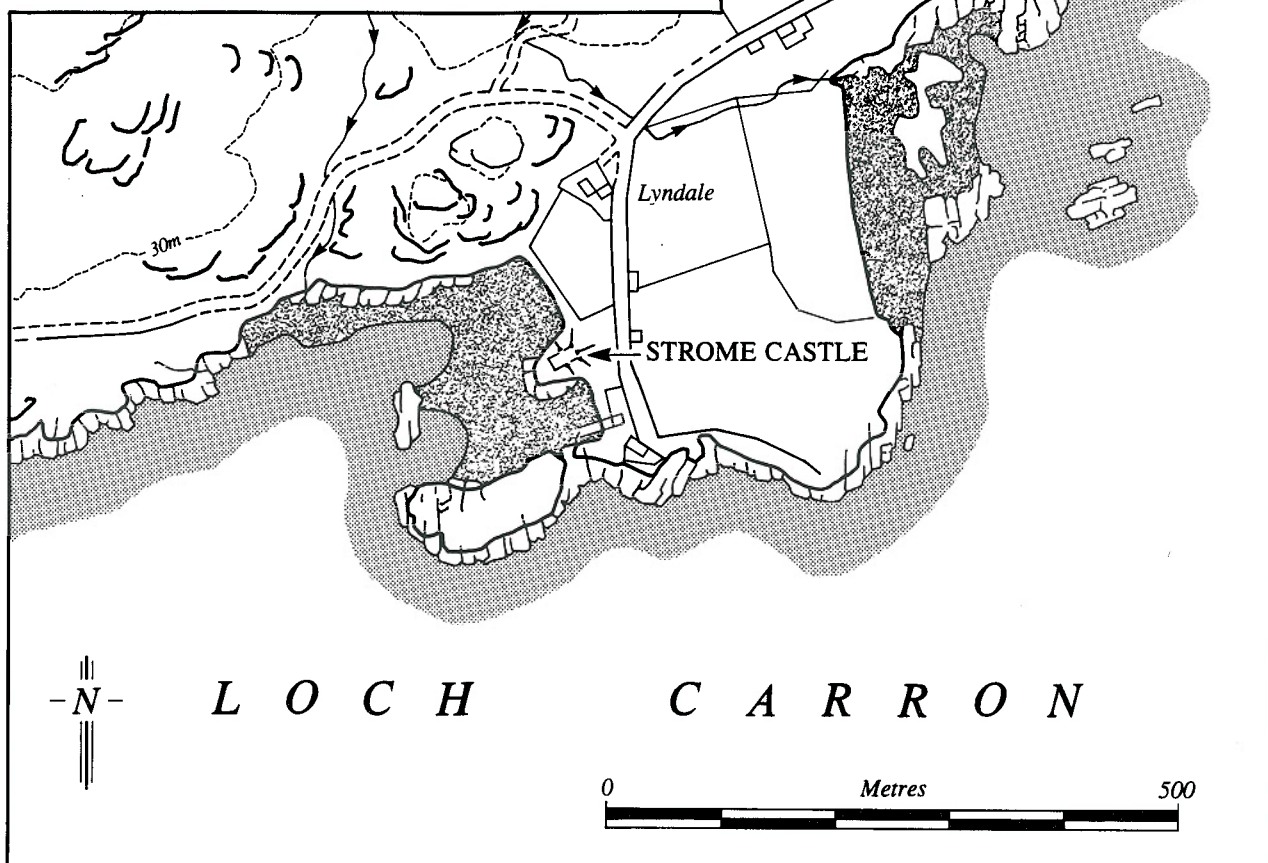
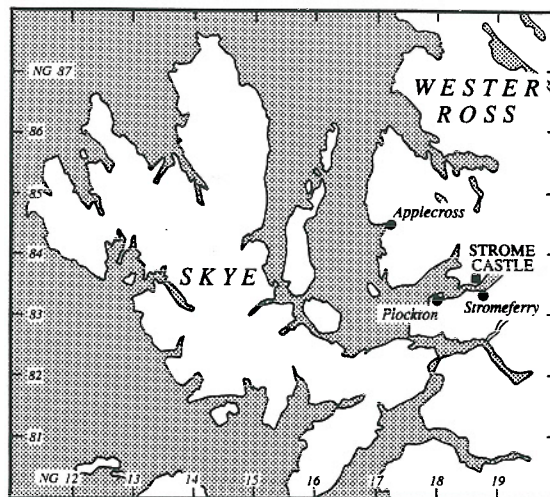
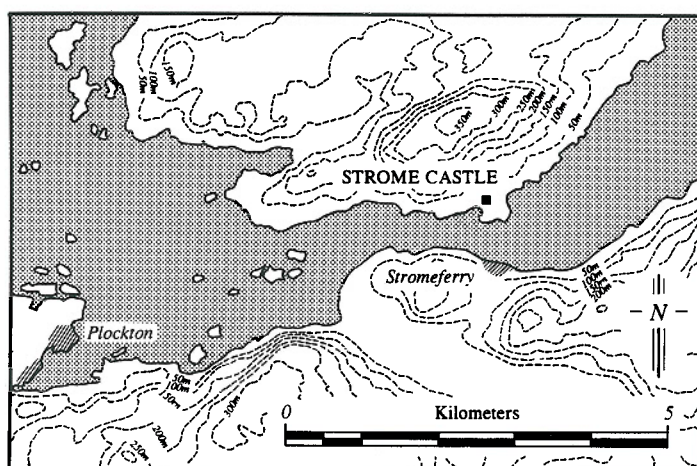
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# STROME CASTLE 1994

*Loch Carron  
Ross and Cromarty*



## Summary

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*A short programme of trial excavations was undertaken to examine the archaeological potential of Strome Castle, Wester Ross. The work was carried out by GUARD in early September 1994. The investigations were sponsored by the National Trust for Scotland and the Planning Department/Department of Sport and Leisure of the Highland Regional Council. The castle has historical associations with the Lords of the Isles and is reported to have been destroyed and abandoned in 1602 AD. It was hoped that late medieval deposits would survive in an undisturbed state. The excavations and survey revealed a complex structural history and considerable depths of archaeological deposits including the lower storey of the tower and a well. Few artifacts were recovered.*

## Introduction

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*Figure 1 (facing).  
Location map.*

Strome Castle (NGR NG 8623 3542) sits in a commanding position on a promontory jutting into the sea loch of Loch Carron, Ross and Cromarty. The castle has been owned by the National Trust since 1939, but unusually it is a ruin rather than an historic building. Its ruinous condition is attributed to having been blown up by Kenneth MacKenzie, First Lord of Kintail, following a siege in 1602. The early history and date of construction of Strome Castle are unknown is not recorded until 1472 when it was a stronghold of the Lord of the Isles. It was hoped that late medieval structures and occupation debris would be present beneath the rubble, which would reveal some of the sites missing history.

The castle as it stands consists of two elements, a rectangular hall (24 x 11m internally), which stands up to about 5m high in places and occupies the seaward end of the peninsula. The second element is the tower which joins the hall on the eastern, landward side of the hall. The 'tower' survives as a large pile of rubble with few visible structural features. At the foot of the promontory there are masses of rubble, including several particularly large pieces of bonded masonry, one of which is at least





3m x 4m x 5m. The interior area of the hall is level and grass covered. It appears to have been cleared of rubble which may have been dumped at the eastern end with the rubble from the tower. Outside the western wall of the hall is a small, level terrace which forms the end of the promontory, which once was within the castle.

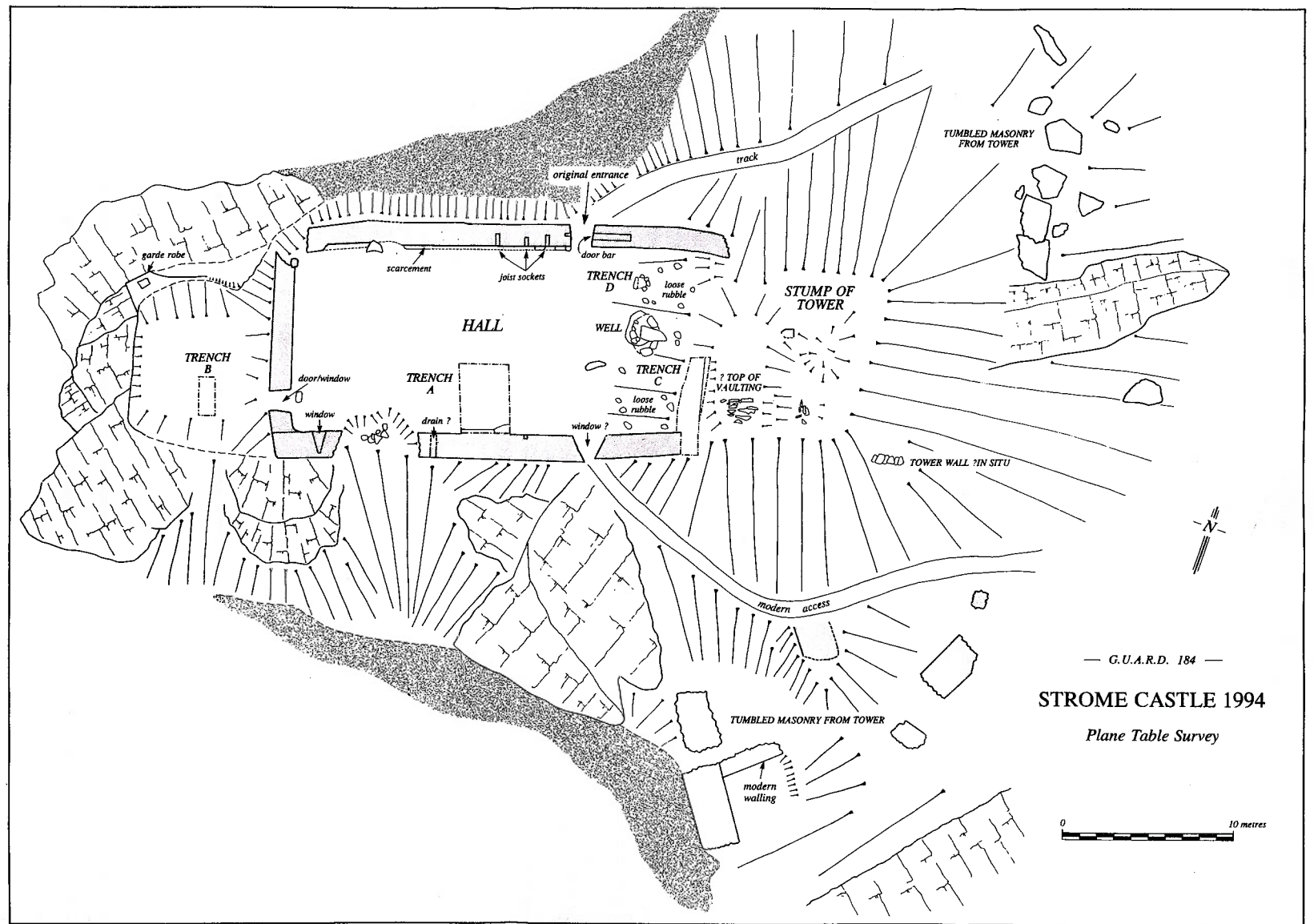
*Figure 2. View of interior of the hall from the tower looking west with Castle Bay to the right.*

*Figure 3 (facing). Planetable Survey of the Castle showing the locations of the 1994 trenches.*

## *The survey*

As part of this evaluation a detailed plane table survey at a scale of 1:100 was carried out of the castle, the rubble mound, the rocky outcrop they sit upon and the large lumps of masonry rubble and general collapse in the surrounding area. The castle site is largely grass covered with a few patches of nettles and a few scrub trees. This is grazed by sheep, so the vegetation is short and visibility is good.

The walls of the hall contain evidence of several periods of rebuilding and repair. The north wall shows





four possible builds concerned with heightening and extending the hall. No window or adornment is visible in this wall, the only original opening was the principal entrance to the castle which was reached via a narrow path leading from the sheltered Castle Bay up the north side of the promontory. This narrow doorway was probably the main entrance (the current pathway leading into the castle appears to be modern). The door frame, was probably made from dressed stone, which has been robbed, but the socket for the door bar survives on the western side of the doorway. Apart from the door and windows, the main structural features are sockets for floor joists and a scarcement on the interior face of the north wall.

The west wall appears as a later addition or modification, because it is not bonded to the south wall. Unfortunately the relationship between the west and north wall has been lost since the northwest corner has collapsed. The south wall survives less well than the north. Scant traces of the floor joist sockets remain, but a blocked splayed window is present close to where it has been abutted by the west wall. The collapsed area through which the modern path passes may mark the position of a second window. The remains of an arch over a large, robbed out window or door is present in the western wall. A ledge above the arch may mark the location of an upper window.

At one stage the terrace outwith the western wall, measuring 5.9 x 5.5m, was originally part of the hall, but most of the walls have tumbled down the cliffs which fall away sharply. A garde-robe chute at the northwest corner visible from the rocks below is the only surviving structural feature. The shortening of the hall (marked by the secondary construction of the west wall) may have been a deliberate modification. The small terrace on the nose of the promontory could have served as a gun platform.

The tower survives as a mass of rubble at the eastern end of the promontory adjacent to the hall. The rubble rises some 4m above the current level of the hall. Prior to excavation the only visible stretch of wall face was a short length on the south side, while on the west side vertical slabs which marked the position of an opening could be

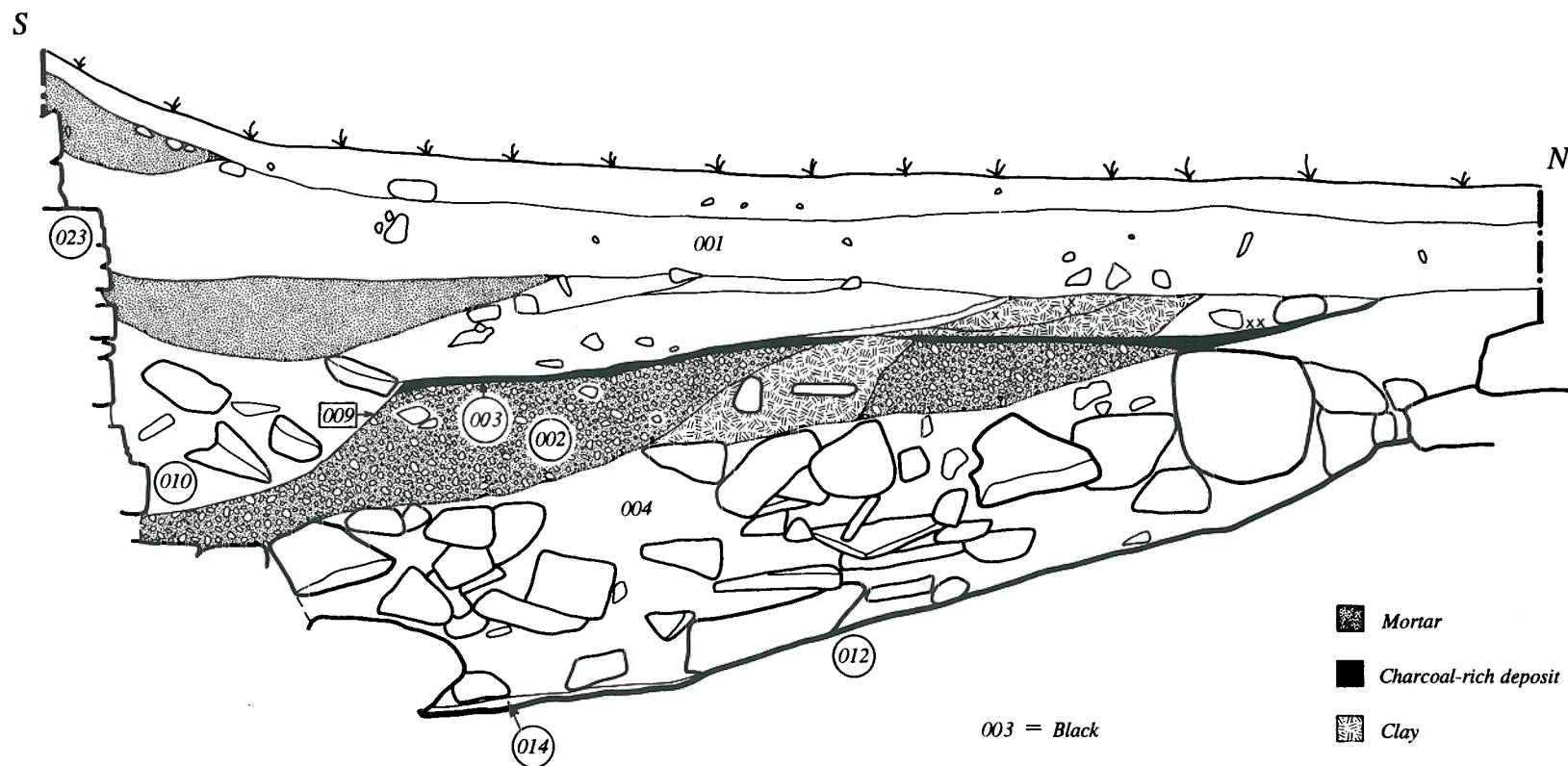


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## STROME CASTLE 1994

*Trench A East facing section*

0 1 metre





**Figure 5. Photo of east facing section in Trench A.**

**Figure 4 (facing). East facing section in Trench A.**

seen emerging from the rubble. In addition the large pieces of collapsed masonry located at the base of the castle rock, at the landward foot of the rubble mound provided an indication of the original thickness of the tower walls. These are considerably wider than the walls of the hall, suggesting the presence of a more substantial and taller structure.

### *The trial excavations*

Three major trenches (A - C) and three trial pits (D - F) were excavated by hand. Each was located to examine a particular aspect of the castle. All were intended to assess the depth of deposits, the survival of castle structure and locate occupation deposits.

#### *Trench A*

This trench (4 x 3m) was located within the hall interior adjacent to the south wall. This trench was intended to

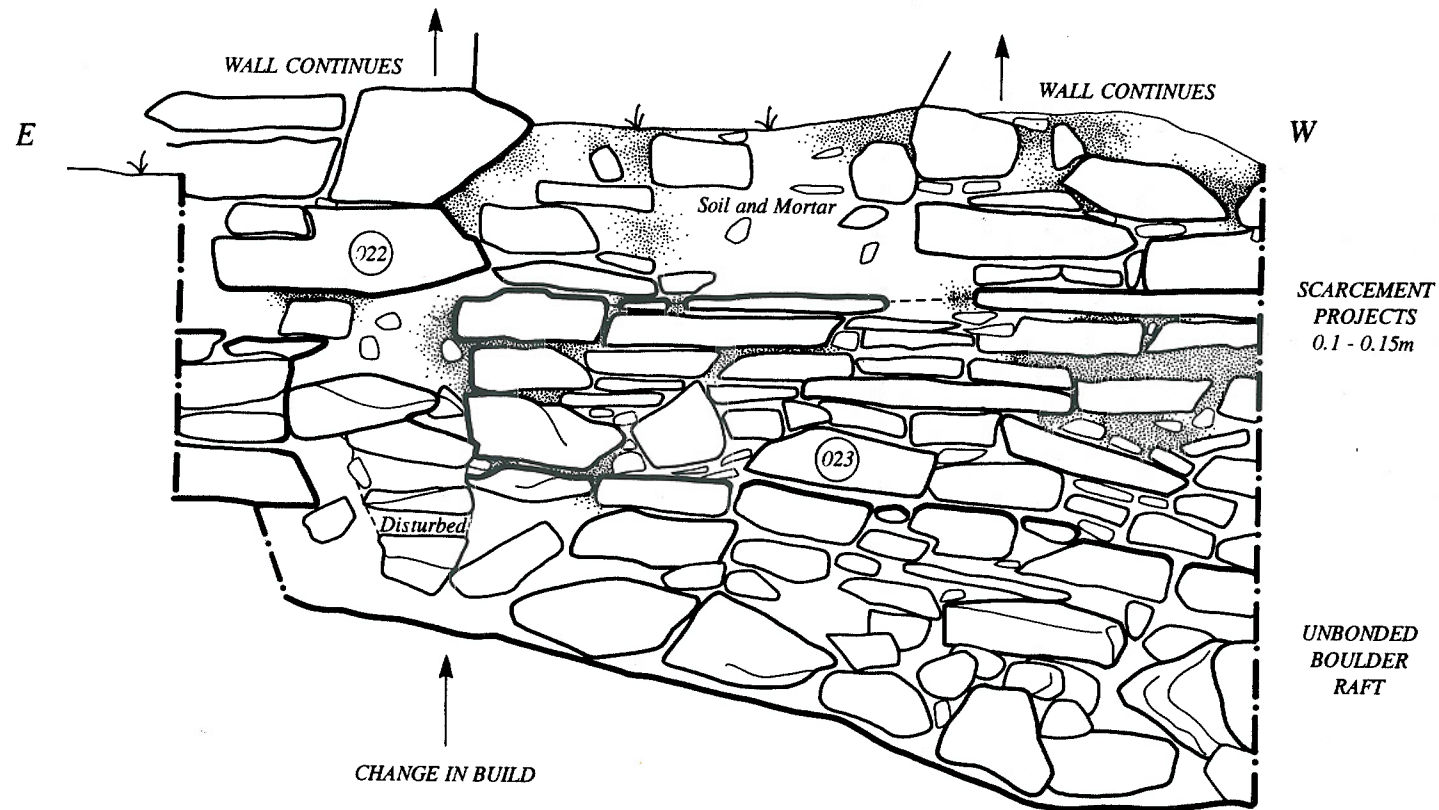


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# STROME CASTLE 1994

*Trench A Elevation of Interior  
of South Wall of the Hall.*

0 1 metre







*Figure 7. Photo of inside of south wall of hall in Trench A.*

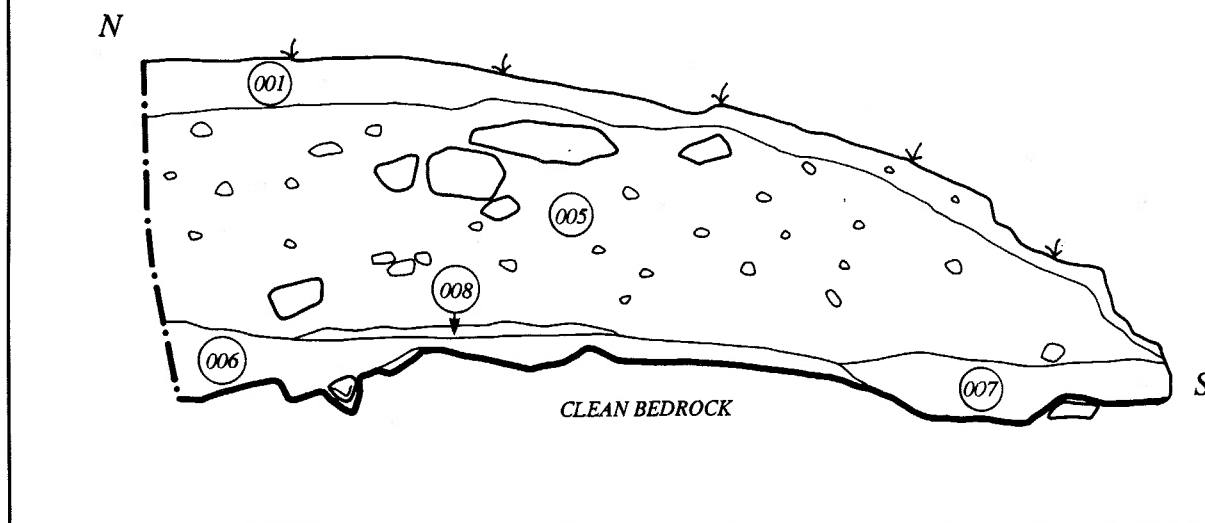
*Figure 6 (facing). Elevation of inside of south wall of hall in Trench A.*

assess the survival of any floor or occupation deposits within the hall and to look for earlier structures. Removal of the turf and topsoil (001) revealed a layer of rounded cobbles, 5–20cm in diameter (002), which covered the eastern side of the trench. To the west was a setting of large flat stones (003) with slight concentrations of ash and charcoal in their immediate area. This seems to represent a late, short-lived hearth built over the rounded stones and post-dating the main occupation of the castle. After removal of the hearth the cobbles were found to extend over the whole trench. The stones were very loose and irregular, in a coarse gritty matrix and seemed to form no clear surface, rather they had a dumped appearance. They overlay a loose, voided jumble of larger, angular stones (004). No mortar was present amongst these stones and they appear to have been dumped after

# STROME CASTLE 1994

## Trench B West facing section

0 1 metre



construction of the south wall foundations to level off the interior.

Both stony layers (002, 004) were cut by a construction trench (009) for a western extension to the south wall (023) of the hall. The fill (010) of the construction trench for the western extension was composed of loose rubble in a medium brown silt matrix, capped with a dump of shelly mortar. No finds were recovered from the fill. The end of the trench corresponds to a change of build in the south wall. By comparison with the eastern section (022), the later western stretch (023) was built of thinner, flatter stones and the western foundations were more substantial. The later section of wall (023) had been built upon a wide foundation raft of large, angular voided rubble stepping out as much as 1m, on the interior side.

Figure 8. Trench B, west facing section.



# STROME CASTLE 1994

## Trench C Plan of collapsed Arch of Tower Doorway.

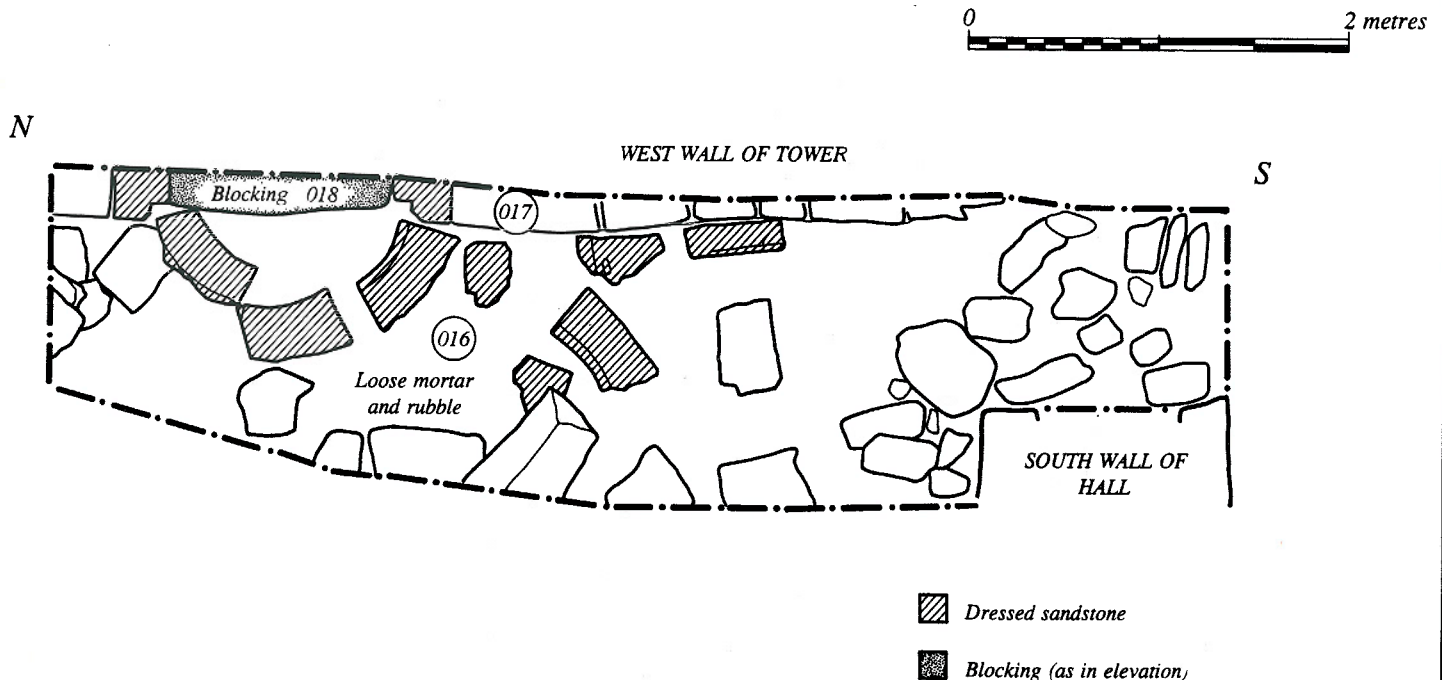


Figure 9. Plan showing collapsed arch of tower doorway in Trench C.

This had been sealed by the dumped rubble (002,004), prior to the building of the later wall (023). The original foundations had been built upon a sloping surface of compact gritty gravel (012) which appeared to represent the natural slope of the hill. A dump of shelly mortar (011) lay against the slope, probably dating to the initial masonry building. A deposit of dark grey, charcoal rich silt (014) lay in the southwest corner of the trench, at the base of the natural slope (013) and slightly overlying the foundations. Fragments of birch bark and a hazelnut shell were found within this layer.

The two sections of the south wall are not well bonded, but the western section appears to be built upon the earlier eastern foundations. This relationship confirms





the evidence of the western foundation trench, which cut into the levelling material, and indicates that western stretch of wall was a later construction. This change is apparently matched by slight signs of a change of build in the north wall of the hall (visible on the exterior). This western extension to the castle must represent a major modification of the original design.

There are few traces of the internal arrangements of the hall. No fireplace or hearth was encountered. The only

*Figure 10. Photo looking south along the wall face of the tower with collapsed architectural fragments exposed in Trench C.*

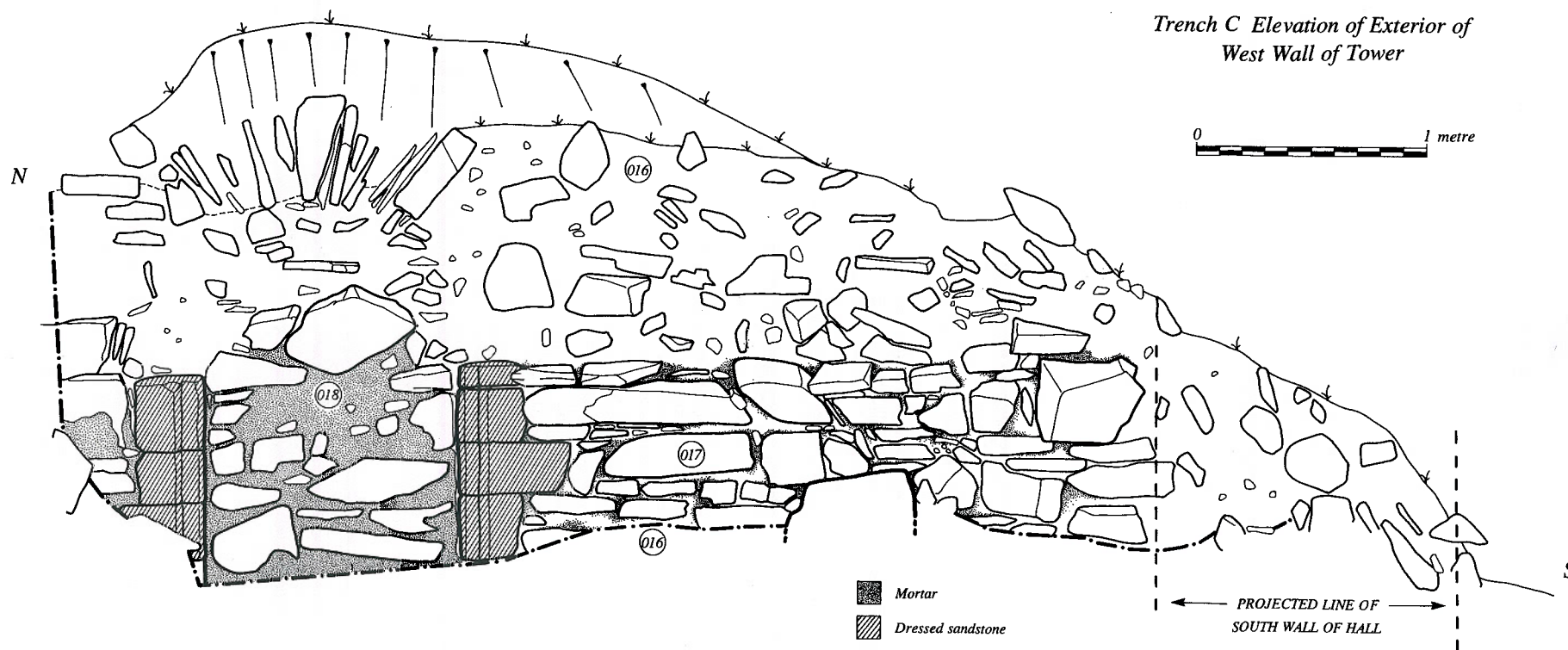
*Figure 11 (facing). Elevation of west wall of tower in Trench C.*

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# STROME CASTLE 1994

*Trench C Elevation of Exterior of  
West Wall of Tower*

0 1 metre







*Figure 12. Photo of blocked doorway to tower in Trench C.*

features relate to the floor level and construction. Floor scarcements were visible on both stretches of southern wall and indicate that the original floor was of timber.

No datable finds were recovered from sealed contexts. The few sherds of medieval pottery which were found came from the topsoil. A flint flake was found within layer 002 and fragments of what may be vitrified rock were recovered from layers, 002 and 004, but no evidence was found of a prehistoric structure. If any early structure





survives, it is likely to be located further towards the north end of the hall (or the site of the tower) where the natural summit of the promontory seems to have existed.

### *Trench B*

Trench B (2 x 1m) was located outwith the west wall on the nose of the promontory. It was intended to determine the use of this area and to examine any remaining traces of the original structure. The turf and topsoil gave onto a deep (0.60m) layer of mid to dark brown loam (005) containing occasional fragments of rubble and pieces of charcoal. This overlay a lens of cream coloured clay (008) which in turn overlay a layer of fine black silt with charcoal (006) which lay directly on the bedrock. A pocket of yellow sand and mortar (007) to the south of the trench, also lying directly over the natural bedrock may represent all that remains of the foundations of the remainder of the south wall. The original wall appears to have slid off the bedrock. No finds were recovered from this trench.

*Figure 13. Photo of back side of the tower doorway arch elements (the back finish was too irregular to allow the stones to be laid out so that the dressed face was visible).*

Nor was there any evidence relating to later use of the terrace. All that can be said with certainty is that prior to construction this area consisted of naked rock.

### *Trench C*

The irregular setting of vertical schist slabs protruding from the top of the rubble at the west side of the tower mound was taken to indicate the possibility that a window or door through a wall face survived or that the top of a vaulted floor remained intact. Trench C was situated on the western (exterior) side of the tower and extended from the vertical stones to the expected junction with the south wall. It was intended to examine the fabric of the tower and the depth of the archaeological deposits.

A thin layer of turf (015) was removed from the rubble (016) which consisted of a loose deposit of large, angular tumbled schist blocks in a matrix of loose decayed shell mortar. The rubble contained many voids and was excavated to a depth of 1.5m. At a depth of around 1m pieces of a yellow sandstone arch were encountered. Exposure of the tower wall showed that this arch had collapsed from its position over a blocked doorway. The irregular, vertical schist setting proved to be the relieving arch, above and behind the dressed sandstone arch. The entire opening of the doorway consisted of yellow sandstone with a simple, wide chamfer and square rebate. The arch was round headed and was dressed identically to the jambs. The closest source for this sandstone (according to a local resident) is at Applecross, a short sail of about 30 km up the coast to the north.

The doorway had been blocked with schist rubble set into mortar (018), which remained solid and hard, indeed the blocking was much firmer than the body of the wall. The wall (017) into which the door was built consisted of schist rubble bonded with a shell based mortar that has become very soft and crumbly. As a consequence the wall face has slumped considerably and leans outwards at an angle of approximately 10 degrees. Unfortunately it was impossible to establish the nature of the relationship with the south wall of the hall, because the tower wall became more collapsed to the south and no trace of the south





wall remained to the depth excavated. Excavation was halted once the wall face had been exposed to a height of 2.0m. The door cill was not reached and there was no sign that the rubble was thinning out, indeed further pieces of dressed masonry were visible deeper within the collapse.

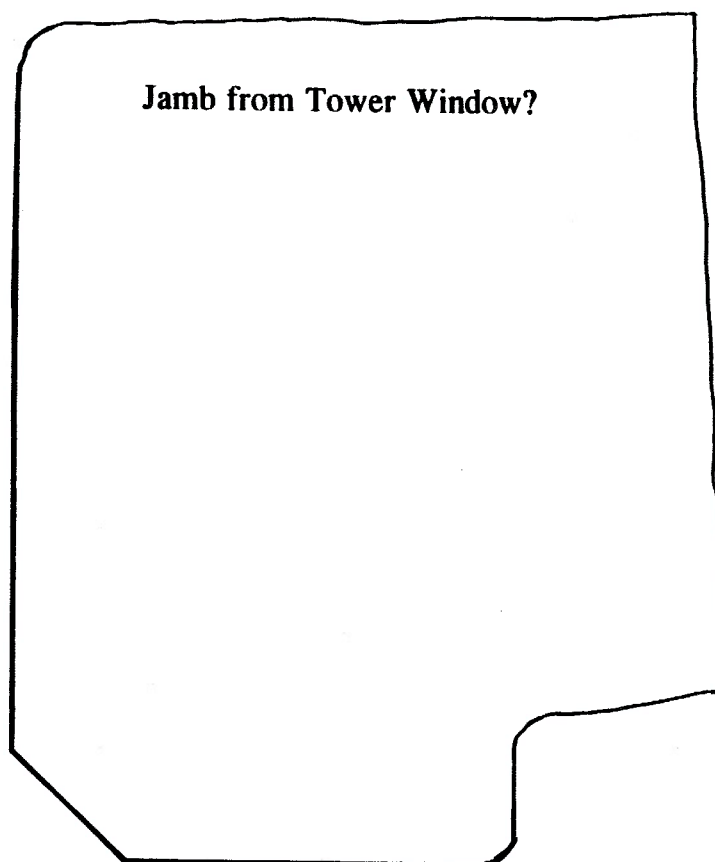
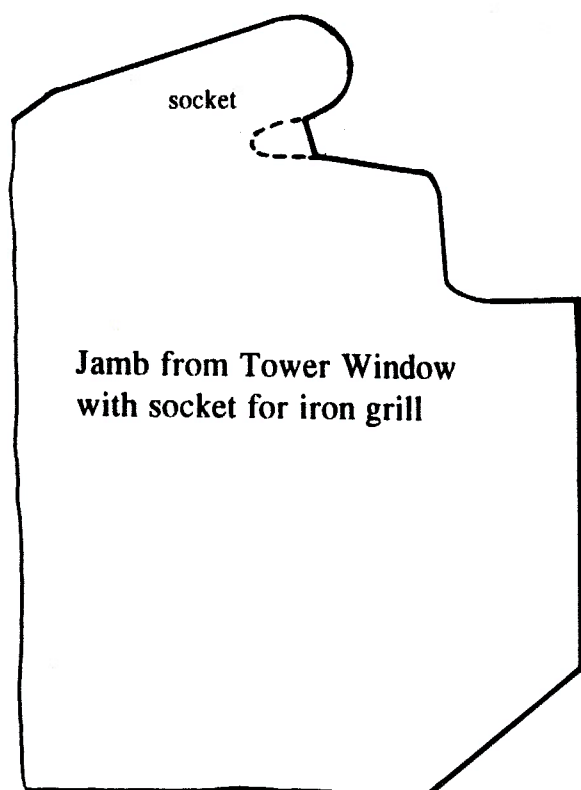
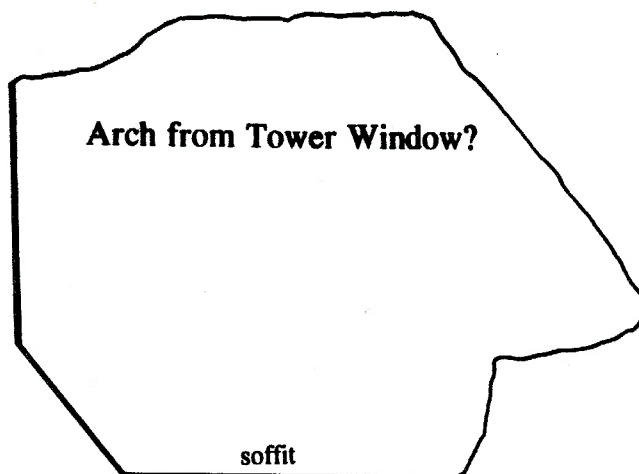
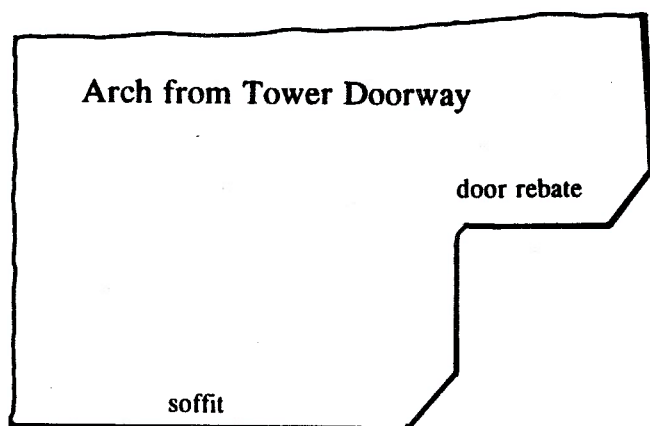
Two fragments of a second sandstone arch were found in the rubble, which had a tighter curve than the arch over the door and lacked the rebate for a door. They must come from a window. In addition two straight fragments of sandstone were found with sockets carved into the moulding, presumably to hold an iron grill. They may be part of the same window.

The only find from this trench was an iron nail from amongst the rubble.

*Figure 14. Photo of window jambs from tower with sockets for iron grills.*

*Figure 15 (facing). Profiles of architectural elements from Trench C.*





# STROME CASTLE 1994

*Sections of Architectural Elements*

0 cm 5 10 cm



### *Trench D*

A slight hollow within and close to the base of the rubble on the hall side suggested the presence of deep deposits, possibly a well or vaulted cellar. A small trench was placed here to investigate. No digging was undertaken, loose rubble was simply cleared away. After removal of the rubble overburden, an irregular, rock-cut pit appeared (019), which had been shaped following natural rock fissures. The pit was roughly half sectioned to a depth of 1.4m, removing large pieces of voided rubble (020) loosely packed or tumbled into the pit. Very little soil matrix was present. The pit had no retaining wall or lining but had been shaped into a roughly square vertically-sided shaft with a width of about 1.6m. Although approximately square its precise shape was largely determined by the natural rock fissures. The pit is likely to be a well and probing revealed that the voided rubble continued below the depth excavated. All finds recovered from the upper level of fill excavated were modern.

*Figure 16. Photograph of partially excavated well from the east in Trench D.*



A small patch of orange gravel containing a small number of cobbles (021) was located on the northwest side of the well. This may represent the original ground surface but was composed of natural gravel and may be a completely natural deposit.

### *Trenches E and F*

Two small test pits which involved little more than the removal of turf, were opened on the rubble mound. Trench E was located where a short stretch of wall face showed through the south side of the rubble mound. It was hoped to locate the southeast corner of the tower, but the depth of rubble soon became too great and the trench was abandoned after about 0.2m of digging.

Trench F (1 x 0.5m) was located against the vertically set stones on the east (interior) side of the west wall of the tower opposite the doorway in Trench C. This was an attempt to establish the inner wall face. No wall face was visible and this area was also abandoned after about 0.2m had been excavated.

### *Summary of structural interpretations —*

We have little idea of the original form of Strome Castle, but at its most elaborate it appears to have consisted of a hall and tower which occupied the whole of the promontory. However it is clear that it only reached that size gradually, because all the walls show evidence of repairs and rebuilding. The hall has been three different lengths. At one stage (perhaps its original structure) the hall portion was originally much shorter, before being lengthened perhaps to the western end of the promontory. Later the hall was slightly shortened to its present length by the building of the new west wall. The interior of the hall was certainly floored in timber and in the absence of evidence for a fire place, it is likely that there was a centrally located hearth.

What remains unresolved is the extent of the hall to the east. No evidence for an eastern wall, apart from the tower itself, was found or seen in the upstanding

masonry. Two possibilities exist. Either the hall extended upto and ajointed the tower, or it was an independant structure with its own east wall in which case there would have been an open courtyard between it and the tower. The presence of the well is not particularly helpful, in that wells in medieval castles are known to be within (e.g. Spynie Palace) and without (e.g. Dunottar Castle) buildings.

The tower itself is only imperfectly understood. It was clearly massive enough to support several stories and the architectural fragments imply at least another storey. The round headed sandstone arches suggest a relatively late date (possibly 16th century) for the final form of the tower. The later blocking of the doorway suggests some continued use of the castle, perhaps as a storehouse.

### *Prospects for further work* —————

The 1994 season answered the main questions which motivated the fieldwork. There are substantial undisturbed archaeological deposits within the Castle. The excavations also raised a number of issues which can only be resolved by further excavation. In terms of both visitor interest and archaeological potential Strome Castle must be regarded as having a high value. Three areas for further investigation can be identified. The tower, the interior of the hall and the fabric of the hall.

In archaeological terms the tower has the potential to be the most significant area. The deep accumulation of rubble shows no sign of having been disturbed in modern times and have been shown to be well-stratified deposits. They surely seal deposits from the abandonment of the castle. Whether this includes material contemporary with the traditional date of the final occupation was not established, but it seems likely. Reaching the depths where deposits of c. 1602 would be expected does pose a significant logistical challenge. The poor state of the standing masonry will require that any further archaeological investigation be tower be part of a larger programme of consolidation and stabilisation.



The interior of the hall opens the possibility of examining three aspects of the castle. Firstly, its internal layout and eastern extent are not known, nor is the relationship with the tower established. The discovery of the well within the hall suggests that there is a complex building history to explore. Secondly, the well itself represents one of the more exciting archaeological opportunities, because it likely to contain discarded and lost artefacts. The waterlogged conditions are likely to have preserved rare organic objects. Finally, the vitrified rock and the masses of rubble levelling material within the hall suggest that some remains of an Iron Age or early medieval dun survive upon the promontory.

The fabric of the castle walls was not the subject of detailed study. Despite clear visual evidence of a complex history of construction, rebuilding and extension before its destruction, this remains difficult to interpret. Not simply because of decay and modern consolidation, but also because it is built of random rubble, which is intrinsically difficult to interpret. To make any substantial progress on interpreting the fabric measured drawings of the of the surviving elevations would be required. Such drawings would be essential if further excavation were to take place and should be considered as a priority if further consolidation work is to be undertaken.

### *Acknowledgements* \_\_\_\_\_

The success of the 1994 season are due in no small measure to the expertise and good humour brought to the project by Bob Will. The team was particularly fortunate to have the benefit of Alex Gordon's culinary and organisational skills. The field drawings were effectively translated into illustrations by Lorraine MacEwan. Our thanks is extended to Robin Turner for first suggesting the project and for advice during its progress.