

Recent work at Freswick Links, Caithness, Northern Scotland

By Colleen E. Batey

1. Introduction

Excavations at Freswick Links (fig. 1) have been undertaken intermittently since the beginning of this century. However, only two excavators addressed themselves to the settlement of the Viking age on the site: A. O. Curle and V. G. Childe. The first recorded excavations were at Freswick Sands broch, in the northern part of the Links in the 1890s; these were undertaken by Sir Francis Tress-Barry of nearby Keiss Castle. This excavation was only one of a series of eight to be undertaken along the East Caithness coast by him during the period of only a few summers' work. Although he characterised the broch tower (1) and distinguished some extra-mural chambers, he made little mention of the later finds he recovered. These included, for example, Late Norse antler combs more typical of a 12th Century dating and found elsewhere on the Links (2).

Further work at the northern part of the site was undertaken by A. J. H. Edwards, then of the National Museum in Edinburgh, in 1924 and 1926. He examined crude stone structures which were subsequently interpreted as earth houses (3). These may have been of the Pre-Norse period and seem to have been surrounded by Norse midden deposits. This work has been discussed more fully elsewhere (4).

Other, less formal work, was undertaken at the site, for example by A. D. Lacaille and by local people, pro-

viding a large corpus of material representing activity at the site from the Mesolithic/Neolithic periods to the 14th Century and beyond. This material has been examined in detail elsewhere (5).

2. The Identification of the Norse Site

It was the work by A. O. Curle in 1937 and 1938, followed to a lesser extent by that of V. G. Childe in 1941, which provided the most significant information about the site at Freswick Links in the Norse period. However, the recent re-appraisal indicates a rather later date for the site occupation than initially published; this re-interpretation is based largely on a detailed study of the extensive artefact assemblage from the site (6). Curle's outstanding earlier contribution to the archaeology of Caithness had been published in 1911 as the Third volume of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland (7). Through that work he had brought together the disparate sources of information available, and, in particular, he noted the presence of eroding middens at Freswick Bay (8). At this point, he gave no indication as to the period represented by this material, only mentioning the presence of crude pottery and bone pins within the midden. He returned in 1937 to excavate a series of buildings inland from the eroding coast: these he published in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* in 1939 (9). He reported on seven structures

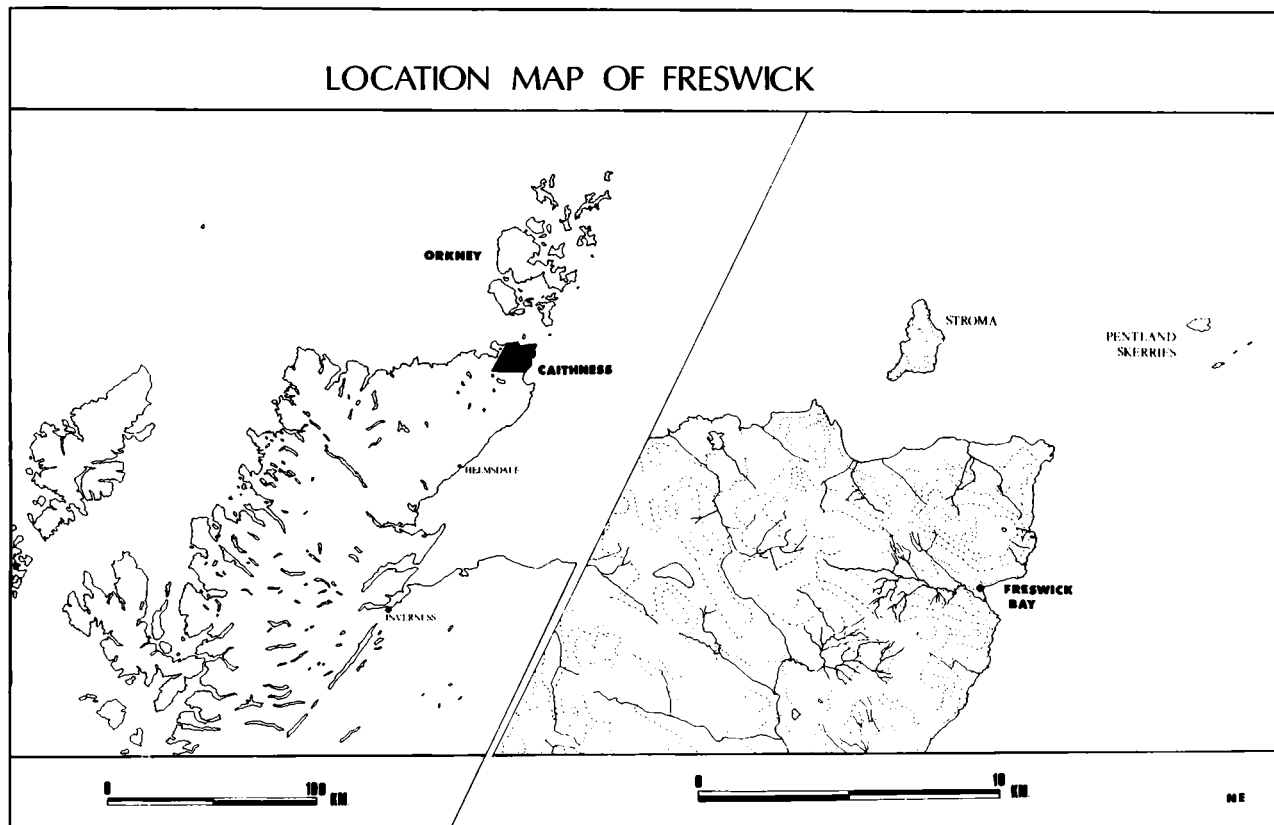


Fig. 1. Location of Freswick Links, Caithness.

and associated deposits with some consideration of the overall cultural context and artefactual assemblage. There are several problems which arise from a detailed study of this material (10), but it is to his great credit that his records do enable his excavations to be at least partially reconstructed and further elucidated. This is not the place to examine in detail his results, but the

important appendix to his paper by Dr Marjorie Platt on the faunal assemblage provides us with an indication of the range of material being produced at the site (11). The material included cattle, pig, sheep, dog, horse, seal, gannet and cod. This picture has now been greatly expanded by the recent work.

The first true "rescue" excavations at the site were

undertaken by V.G. Childe in 1941 at the cliff edge. This area had been de-stabilised by the removal of sand at three main quarrying points, severely increasing the amount of erosion. Curle had noted the erosion in 1910 at Lady's Brow at the north of the Links (12), but he did not cite erosion along the whole seaward edge virtually to the Castle some ½ mile to the south. There is no real evidence that the rapid erosion to which Childe was responding, and which has dogged the site subsequently, was happening prior to this large-scale sand removal during World War II.

Childe's excavations were minimal and limited in area, and consequently the published accounts of the fragmented remains of one or two buildings which he recovered remain today virtually unintelligible. These suffice to tell us that structures have been removed from the seaward edge of the site – because they fell away after the excavation – and that one or more of the phases he distinguished were probably Late Norse, as suggested by some of the few remaining artefacts. He made very little reference in the published report to environmental material being recovered, confining himself to the single statement that the “floor...in the eastern room... consists of a tough brownish deposit full of fish bones” (13). Childe, however, would not foresee that virtually all further work at the site, which resumed in 1979 with funding from the Scottish Development Department, would concentrate on the cliff edge where, it has been estimated, in excess of 30-40 metres has been removed by natural agencies and sand extraction within the last 20-30 years (14).

3. Recent Excavation and Research

The renewed interest in this site, which still remains the only excavated Norse site in Mainland Scotland, has concentrated on the eroding deposits along the

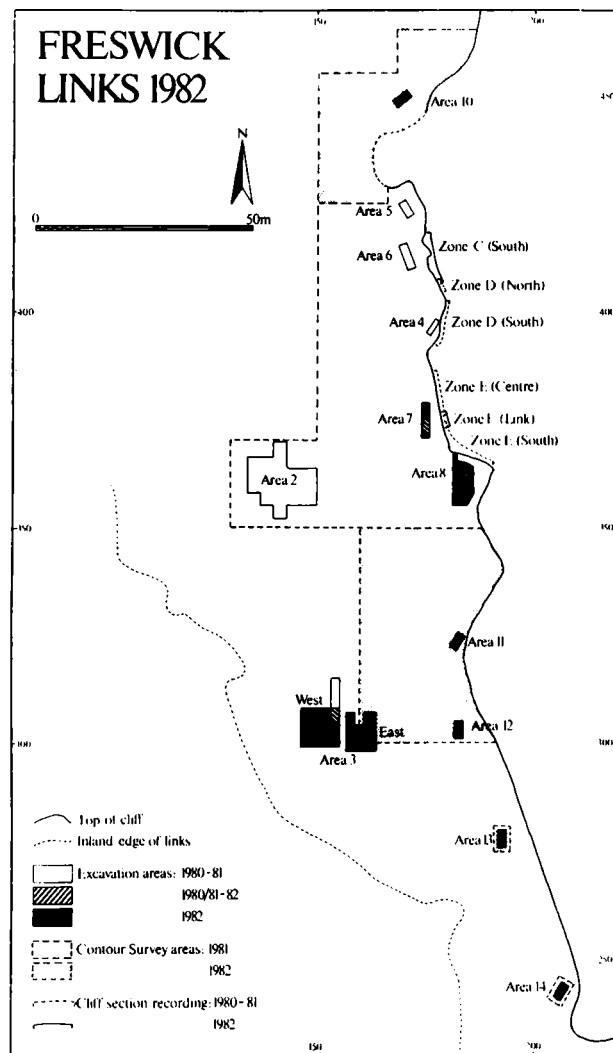


Fig. 2. The Renewed Archaeological Activity at Freswick Links.

exposed sand cliff edge, a distance of approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ mile (fig. 2). Within this zone, structural and artefactual material is being exposed amongst the collapsed material; the most important loss is in the form of deep banks of rich midden material which are being undermined. The potential of these deposits has formed the basis of the renewed excavation at the site (15).

An initial investigation of the middens, by means of two column samples through the full depth of the deposits is published elsewhere (16). The first column was taken in 1979 (from Zone E) to assess the potential of the exposed deposits in terms of the environmental and economic information available. This was followed by a further column taken to the north in Zone D to test in a more detailed way the results suggested by Column 1. The information thus gained formed the basis for the subsequent excavation strategy at the site, which was designed to examine the nature of the middens across a very wide area. Both columns indicated an encouraging variety of identifiable remains, including concentrations of large fish remains (cod, ling and saithe), and the presence of bere barley (six-rowed). The second column sample corroborated the overall picture of the first (17), but added more reliable indications of vertical variations related to detailed stratigraphy. Further columns were taken in 1982 from each excavation area or adjacent cliff-edge. These are currently being prepared for publication (18) and will provide further pointers to the material being examined from the main sampling strategy at the site.

A series of trenches, only 4×2 metres, were placed approximately 2 metres back from the cliff edge, throughout its length, to examine the deposits *in situ* (fig. 2). It is salutary to reflect that the first "environmental trench", Area 4, excavated in 1980 is now vir-

tually completely removed by erosion. Within each trench the central strip of $\frac{1}{2}$ m from the complete length (divided up into four samples), has been examined by bulk sampling and sieving down to 1 mm, all samples being extracted stratigraphically, as in the rest of the trench. This attention to minute detail is providing a significant data base for the period (19).

The most significant element in the faunal assemblage is the fish bone material, and the sieved material has produced large quantities of small bones which are often lacking from the conventional, hand-picked, archaeological record – otoliths, fin bones and head bones, for example. The fish represented are primarily cod, ling and saithe, often 1 metre in length but sometimes up to 2 metres. By examination of the distribution of these bones, it is hoped to distinguish areas of differing activity on the site, as it now remains, and through information from the otoliths, evidence of seasonality will be forthcoming (20). The final results of the analysis of this material is eagerly awaited, but it does already seem apparent that we have here evidence of fishing on a large-scale, possibly even commercially. This is of crucial significance because of the rarity of this type of site on the Western side of the North Sea and because of the implications for trading networks in Northern Scotland. These networks are at present completely undocumented, although two other sites have been recently recorded on the North Coast of Caithness, at Robertshaven and Huna (21), which are considered to be broadly contemporary, on the preliminary study of a series of Thermoluminescence dates from these sites. Preliminary examination of midden material from Robertshaven certainly indicates the presence at the site of large fish (22) but further work is required before greater comparisons can be made.

The mammal bone assemblage is considerably smaller, but still has provided interesting indications of the economic and environmental situation at the site in the Late Norse Period. The faunal assemblage provides indications of the presence on site of cattle, sheep/goat, pig and horse (23). Due to the sampling strategy, a large percentage of the assemblage collected is in a highly fragmented condition – mostly apparently fragmented prior to deposition in the ground. The highly fragmented nature of the mammal bone assemblage is also reflected in the bird bone assemblage. In this group of material, 59% has not been identifiable, but in the part of the assemblage which can be identified, gulls and auks predominate, with some rock dove and goose bones present. Although there are some traces of butchery on the bones, this is not widespread and birds could never have been a major contributor to the site's economy (24).

The fragmentary nature of the bones is conceivably to be interpreted as the direct result of the ploughing and cultivation of the middens themselves. This is not entirely unexpected, since modern Caithness farmers often need to enrich the soil for cultivation. In addition, Areas 5 and 6 at the northern end of the Links, and Area 11-14 to the south have all produced traces, albeit of variable quality, of cultivation marks clearly to be seen at the interface of the lower middens and the sands.

The pollen record for the immediate vicinity, taken from the Hill of Harley approximately 1.5 miles to the south west, does indeed suggest cereal production in the area, but at present this cannot be directly related to the archaeological evidence at Freswick Links (25). The presence of cultivation on the site, supporting the view of a mixed economic base at Freswick, raises additional questions. The carbonised seed remains and

the impressions visible on the vegetal tempered pottery, indicate the presence of oats and barley on the site, in association with only a few weed seeds which one would anticipate with arable cultivation in the vicinity. In addition, there are few chaff fragments in the assemblage, thus suggesting that the cereal was not being processed on the site, but actually brought to the site.

The significance of a sampling strategy dictated by environmental considerations cannot be underestimated as far as ecofactual evidence is concerned. But, naturally, it is not possible to examine satisfactorily structural remains in the same 4 × 2 metre trenches. Examination of the structural remains at Freswick has to date been limited; despite some obvious structural erosion and depletion, the midden dumps had to be of primary consideration because of their vulnerability. Where clear building remains were isolated at the cliff edge, ie in Areas 7 and 8, the suggested heart of the settlement, larger areas were excavated: Area 7 was extended to 8 m (with a corresponding increase in samples), and Area 8 became a substantial area excavation. In these two areas two further Late Norse structures or parts thereof have been identified – that in Area 7 is a building which lies gable – on to the sea – cliff edge and appears to have traces of organic material lying to either side of a stone feature resembling a drain. This may suggest the presence here of a true longhouse, possibly only paralleled at the site in Building VI, although the evidence at both areas is at present inconclusive. At present, the comparisons and differences between the midden assemblages associated with these structures, and indeed with the excavations of the structure in Area 2 (Curle's Building VI) (26), are still being considered and cannot be further commented upon (27).

However, one very significant point which can be

made in relation to all the sampling, concerns the size of samples taken (28). To complement the archaeological evidence and prior to the publication of the major sampling material, a series of 25 cm × 25 cm columns were taken from each excavation area. These were intended to provide a guide to the material from the rest of the trench. There is apparently limited correlation between the results from the two types of samples taken – the 4 m × 50 cm and 25 × 25 cm. This may seem an obvious conclusion, as inevitably the smaller sample would produce a smaller range of material. However, the smaller sample is nearer in size to ones often taken in isolation on some sites, and from which conclusions are drawn. This has clear implications for future strategy. The corollary of this may also be that a sample size of more than 4 m × 50 cm would be different again.

Additional structural remains of the Late Norse period and associated with midden deposits, comprising large amounts of vegetal tempered pottery, have been found at the south side of Freswick Burn, beneath the Castle (29). This southern extension of the occupation area was revealed during excavations undertaken because of remodelling work in the cellar area of the Castle in 1979. Whilst the volume of material was small it was none the less directly comparable with that from the Links to the North, and indicates an extension of the overall site to the south in the form of middens and related walling. Despite some contamination of the middens by rat burrowing and considerable erosion of the ecofactual assemblage, oats and barley were recovered in small quantities and some very poorly preserved shell material. The fish assemblage was as to the North, cod, ling and saithe, and the mammal bone assemblage included sheep, cattle and pig – as did the northern deposits.

4. Conclusions

The major consideration behind the recent work at Freswick Links has been the examination of the eroding midden deposits, and consequently, to a certain extent, the structural remains have been by-passed. However, excavation of the structural remains which were being eroded and are intimately associated with the middens has taken place. This will be reported on elsewhere (30). The majority of the information to be derived from the eroding material naturally is to be gained from the deep midden deposits. Only through understanding the build up of these and the nature of the material, can the associated structural material be fully understood, and the legacy of Curle and to a lesser extent Childe at the site, be built upon. The necessarily time-consuming, and correspondingly costly, exercise of examining these *in situ* middens, can be readily justified. They remain unique in Northern Scotland at the period, both for quantity of information and quality of preservation. It has not been possible here to give a detailed analysis of the material recovered from these middens, as work is still in progress, and much remains to be done. However, already, as indicated above, the detail should provide a data set from this rural site which can only be rivalled at present by the material from urban centres such as York. Without this examination, the only attested Norse site in Mainland Scotland would by now have fallen victim to the action of the sea, and any attempt at reconstructing the economy of the Norse settlement on the mainland of Scotland doomed to failure.

Notes

1. Anderson 1901, 143-4.
2. Batey 1984a, 152; Batey 1987, 225.
3. Edwards 1925, 89-94; 1927, 200-2.
4. Batey 1982.
5. Batey 1987, chapter 7 to 10.
6. Batey 1987. op cit.
7. RCAHMS 1911.
8. RCAHMS 1911, no 48, 18-19.
9. Curle 1939.
10. Batey 1987, chapter 6.
11. Platt 1939, 109.
12. RCAHMS 1911, no 48, 18-19.
13. Childe 1943.
14. Batey et al 1981, page 6a.
15. Batey et al 1981; 1983.
16. Rackham et al 1984.
17. Rackham et al 1984.
18. Morris et al forthcoming.
19. Jones et al 1983.
20. A. K. G. Jones, York University Environmental Archaeology Unit, pers comm.
21. Batey 1984b, CAN 035 and CAN 042.
22. A. K. G. Jones, York University Environmental Archaeology Unit, pers comm.
23. L. Gidney Department of Archaeology, Durham University, pers comm.
24. E. Allison York University Environmental Archaeology Unit, pers comm.
25. J. Huntley, Department of Archaeology, Durham University, pers comm.
26. Curle 1939; Batey et al 1981; Batey 1984a, 171-5.
27. Morris et al forthcoming.
28. Batey et al 1983, 166-8.
29. Batey et al 1984.
30. Morris et al forthcoming.

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