

Swartigill Township Evaluation Exercise - Interim Notes

Introduction

Yarrows Heritage Trust recently carried out a small community based archaeological evaluation with the objective of prospecting for the remains of the township of Swartigill, known from Thrumster Estate records as being in existence in 1674 and referred to as *The Toun and Lands of Swartigill*. Two settlement sites had been known to the author for some years prior to his first plane table survey in 2004; one to the north of the burn (HER record MHG 48275) and one to the south of the burn. A third site comprising walling and rubble eroding out of the bank of the Swartigill Burn had been recorded by photography during the 2004 survey. This site was and continues to be being, undercut by the burn and suffering erosion by sheltering sheep and consequently at risk. Large stones in the burn=bed suggest that much has already been lost.

The Swartigill Burn site was re-visited in February 2007 for ground penetrating radar (GPR) survey of a small section of walling was drawn in section (HER record EHG 2647). It was thought, at that time, that the burn site might be an old mill site; possibly a click mill.

Site location

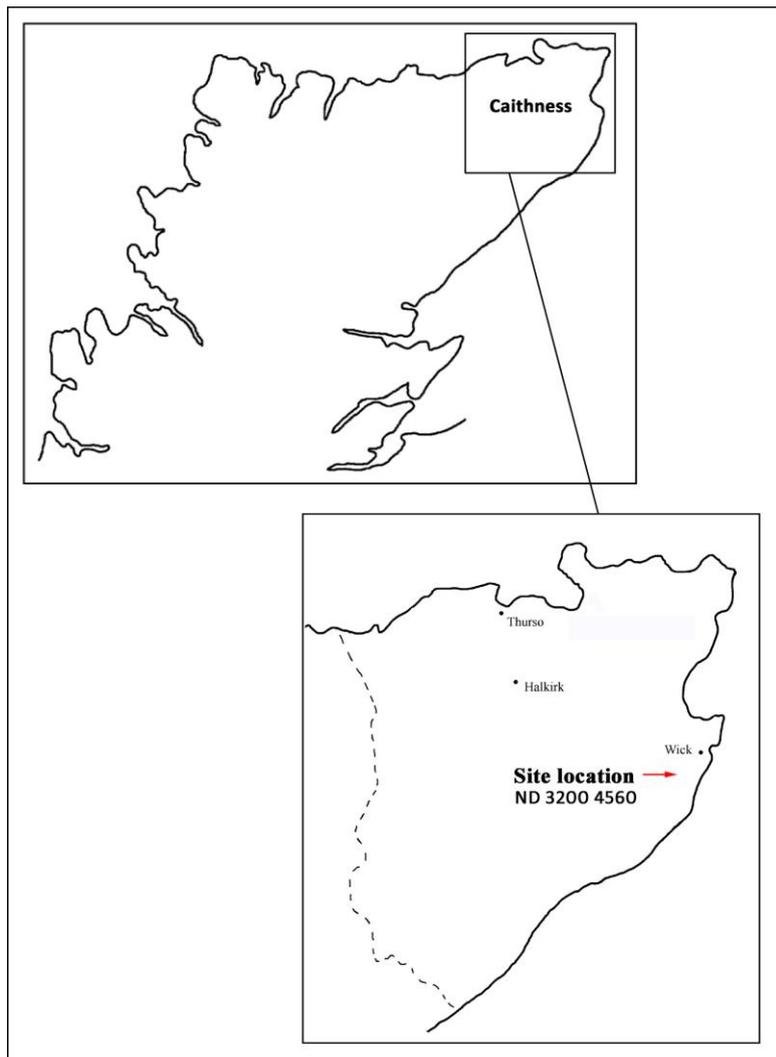


Figure 1 – Site location



Figure 2 – Aerial view of the area

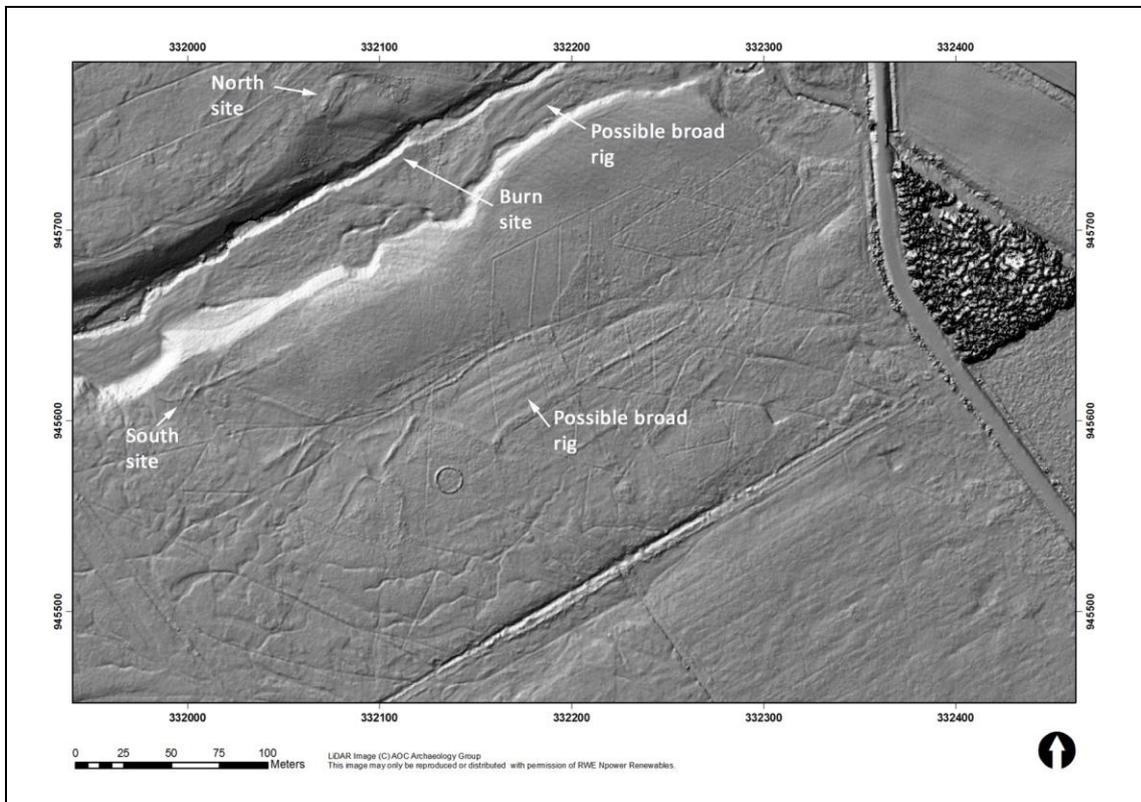


Figure 3 – LiDAR survey (AOC archaeology Ltd.)

Objectives

The objective of the excavation was to evaluate the potential of the three sites for a proposed community excavation project. The evaluation was limited to;

- de-turf, clean-back and record part of the northern settlement.
- clean-back and record the exposed walling and rubble at the Swartigill Burn site.

Swartigill Burn site

2004

This eroding site was first recorded by photography in 2004 (photos 1 to 5) walling was noted at both the eastern and western extremities of the eroding section which extended for circa 10 m along the southern bank of the Swartigill burn.

2007

In 2007 CFA archaeology and Dr Susan Ovenden (Rose Geophysical Consultants) were conducting tests on ground penetrating radar (GPR) on wetland sites in the Yarrows area. The opportunity was taken to run the GPR over the burn site; Dr Mike Cressey of CFA also cleaned back and recorded a small section of the structure depicted in photo 5.

2012

The objective of the evaluation of this site was to clean-back and record the full eroding section. It was initially thought that the remains represented a dam and / or mill. The box section feature is cold be Iron Age but it is high in the section and could be a 19th century French drain (see Figure 3).

It was also noted that the rubble spread extended considerably further west along the southern bank, this exposure is currently stable and is quite distinct from the natural geology (photo 6). The potentially large area of rubble spread suggested that this might be the site of the original township of Swartigill.

The results of the cleaning- back were totally unexpected. Pottery recover from the erosion surface comprised fabrics consistent with the early Iron Age (c 0.72 Kgs). Finer quality pottery was also found that was consistent with a late Iron Age date; possibly Pictish (c 50 gms). Current knowledge holds that these pottery types have been exclusively associated with broch sites (pers. com Dr Andy Heald). None of the sherds were decorated; the author holds the view that the finger impressions under the rim of the Early Iron Age material results from the process of everting the rim and is not decoration.

The early Iron Age pottery was found close to the eastern extremity wall. This wall appears to be a substantial double skinned wall possibly having a rubble filled cavity, similar to the core of Thrumster Mains Broch excavated in 2012. The building stone also appeared to be similar to Thrumster broch and may have been sourced from the same quarry. The finer quality pottery was found close the western extremity structure; the two pottery types were not found to be intermixed (Figure 3).

It would appear that, to date, the ceramic assemblage from this site is known only from broch sites (pers. com. Dr Andy Heald).

Initial thoughts – the site in context

There would seem to be some similarities between the apparent double wall at the eastern extremity of the erosion face (photo 1) and the core of Thrumster Mains broch wall, and similarities of building stone at both sites. It seems likely that both buildings were built from stone quarried from the low ridge that runs under Thrumster Mains broch.

The positioning of the two sites are markedly different; the broch being located on a low ridge with commanding view-sheds while burn sit is inconspicuously located on the fertile first terrace of the Swartigill burn a relict melt-water channel.

The author is of the opinion that the origin of the feudal system recognised in the early medieval period may have its roots in the late Bronze Age / early Iron Age. If this proves to be the case then it is conceivable that the two buildings may represent a Caput and its associated Demesne; the core of a wider social and economic unit.

Alternatively the apparent double wall may be a misinterpretation of the visible structure and may not be related to the ceramic assemblage.

Proposed next step

This site has the advantages that it lies relatively close to the surface and has not been disturbed by 19th century antiquarian excavation. It has almost certainly been robbed out to some extent by the builders of the township of Swartigill; however it would appear that much of the Iron Age structure and deposits could remain undisturbed.

It is proposed that:

- A geophysical survey of the area is conducted to attempt to establish the extent and nature of the site.
- Test pitting be conducted verify the geophysical results.
- Evaluation of the results and assessment of the importance of the site to current research agendas, with a view to further work.
- Funding be sought to finance the current proposals and any future work.

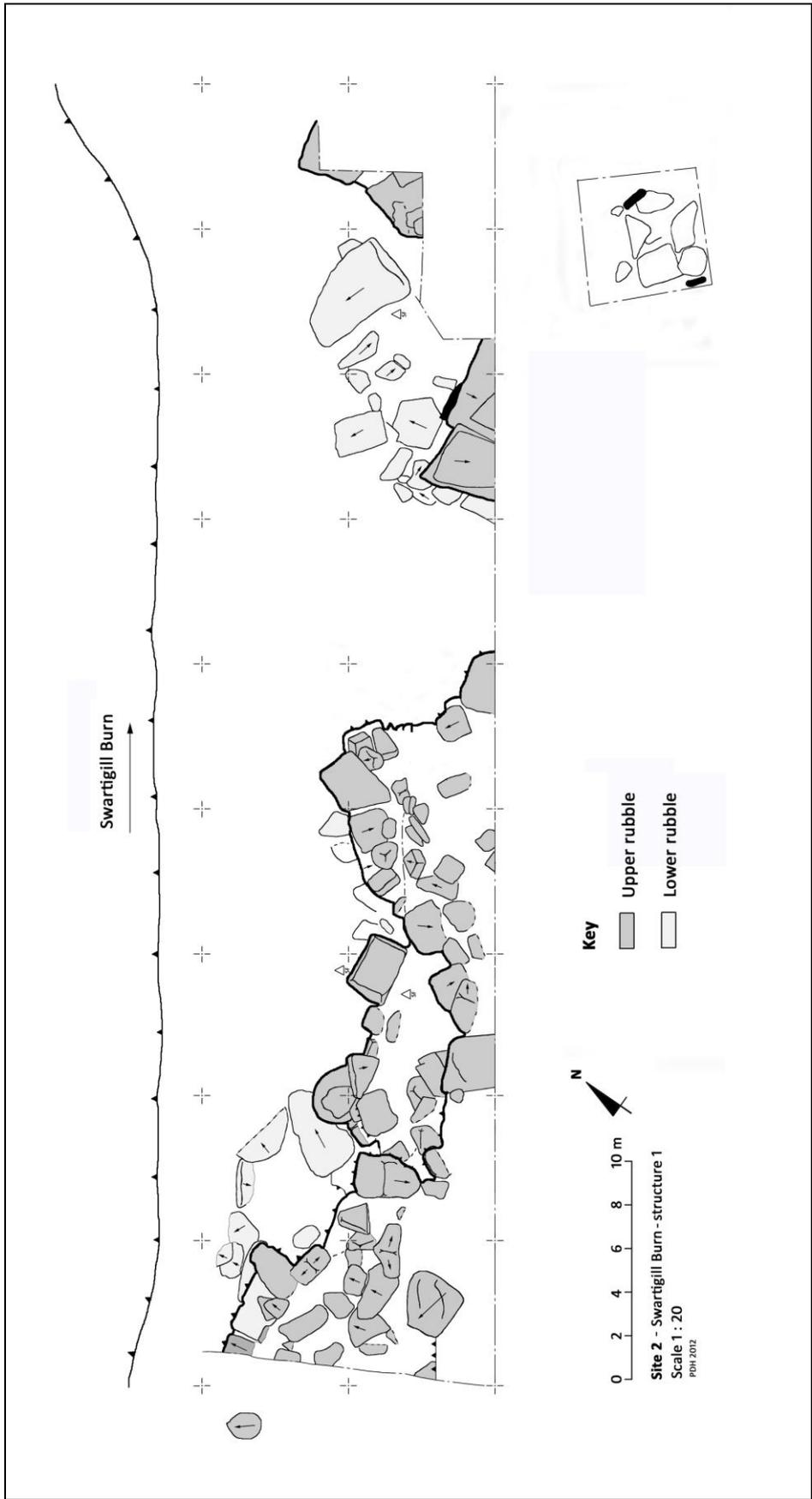


Figure 4 – Plan of the burn site eroding face



Photo 1 – Eroding Wall eastern extremity (2004)



Photo 2 – Eastern extremity wall close-up (2004)



Photo 3 – Eroding Wall eastern extremity (2012)



Photo 4 – Eastern wall and box structure (2004)



Photo 5 – Box structure close-up (2004)



Photo 6 – Eastern wall and box structure (2012)



Photo 7 – Western erosion extremity structure (2004)



Photo 8 – Western erosion extremity structure (2012)



Photo 9 – Stone in burn bed from the erosion face



Photo 10 – Cleaned back section (2012)



Photo 11 – Early Iron Age ceramic assemblage find spot



Photo 12 - Late Iron Age ceramic assemblage find spot



Photo 13 – Test pit (figure 4) looking NW



Photo 14 – Reinstated section



Photo 15 – Further structural evidence circa 30 m up-stream of the eroded section



Photo 16 – Possible archaeology circa 260 m up-stream of the eroded section



Photo 17 – Natural geological profile circa (2012)



Photo 18 – Early Iron Age rim sherd



Photo 19 – Early Iron Age rim sherd



Photo 20 – Early Iron Age rim sherd



Photo 21 – Early Iron Age rim sherd



Photo 22 – Early Iron Age rim sherd



Photo 23 – Early Iron Age base sherd



Photo 24 – Early Iron Age base sherd



Photo 25 – Early Iron Age base sherd



Photo 26 – Early Iron Age rim detail



Photo 27 – Early Iron Age body sherds



Photo 28 – Early Iron Age body sherds



Photo 29 – Late Iron Age rim sherd



Photo 30 – Late Iron Age rim sherd



Photo 31 – Late Iron Age rim and body sherds



Photo 32 – Late Iron Age rim and body sherds



Photo 33 – Late Iron Age body sherds