

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF
at
DORNOCH

3/11/97-13/11/97

by Jill Kendrick for

Wordsworth

Archaeological

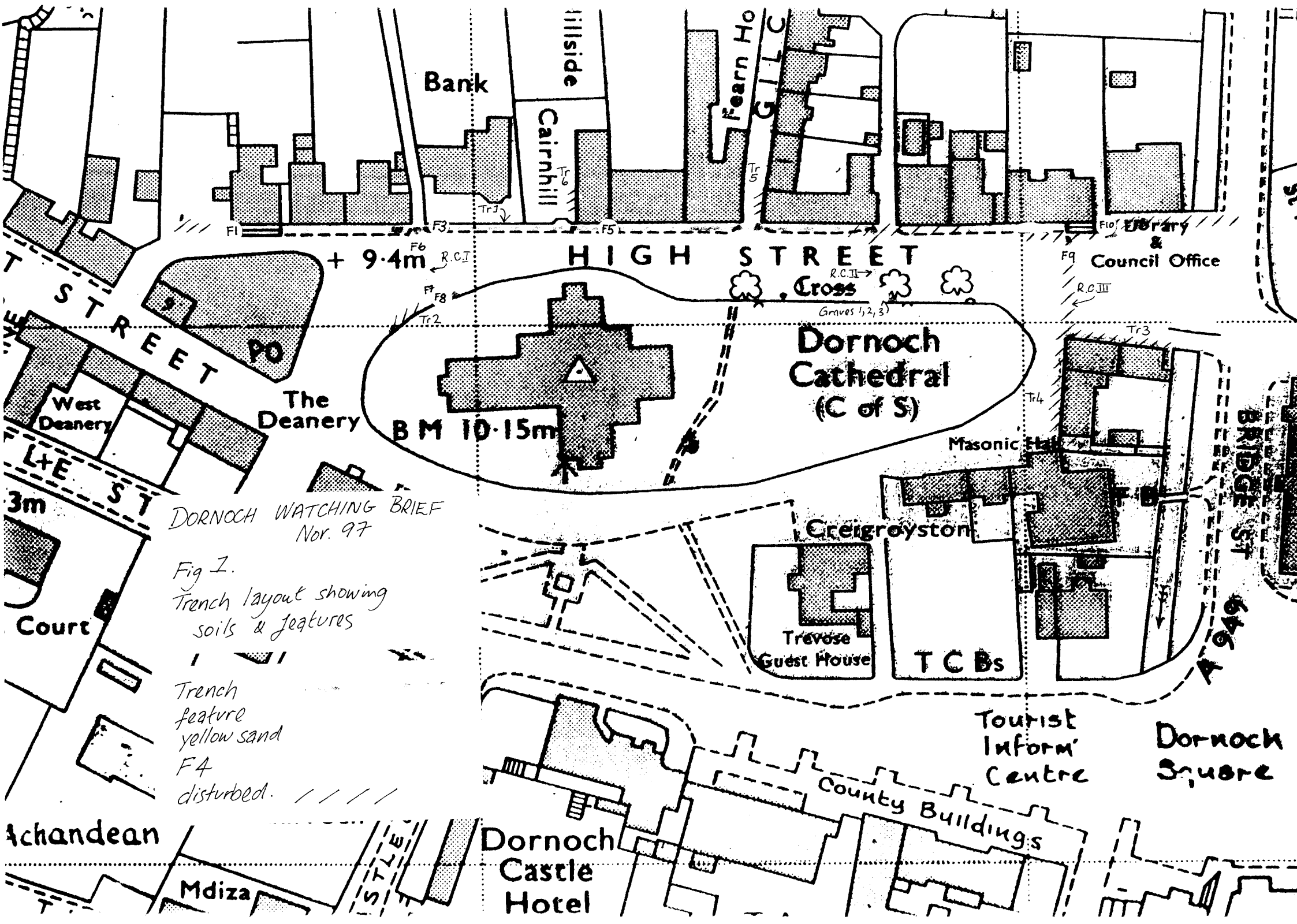
Services

INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The author was invited to carry out an archaeological watching brief along Dornoch High St, on behalf of the Archaeology Service of the Highland Council, during work to lay new street lighting cables. The purpose was to record the extent, nature, and depth of any archaeological deposits. No such assessment of the archaeological potential of this area had previously been possible.
- 1.2 Excavation was carried out with a JCB back acter toothed ditching bucket. This produced a trench measuring 0.35m wide by 0.65m deep. The work was watched but not interfered with in any way. The profile produced was inspected, photographed and recorded as necessary.

BACKGROUND TO THE HISTORY OF DORNOCH

- 2.1 According to local tradition a church was founded at Dornoch by St Finbarr, a disciple of St Ninian of Whithorn. The first documentary reference to a settlement here is in the early 12th century when David I offered his protection to '*the monks and their men dwelling in Durnach in Caithness.*'
- 2.2 This settlement gained in status, and no doubt extent, after 1222 when Gilbert of Moravia established this as the seat of his bishopric in preference to Halkirk. The building of the cathedral is believed to have been started at this time.
- 2.3 The parish church was reputedly sited at the E end of the graveyard which was known as St Barr's Churchyard until the reformation. According to Mackay (1920, p3), this church was demolished in the reign of James VI.
- 2.4 Mackay also stated (1920, p116) that the back walls of the houses on the S side of the High Street formed the northern enclosure of the churchyard. These houses were demolished as part of extensive civic improvements carried out in the period 1810-1815.



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Fig 1.
Trench layout showing
soils & features

Trench
feature
yellow sand
F4
disturbed.

THE EXCAVATIONS - SUMMARY

- 3.1 The trenches were excavated as shown on the enclosed High St plan (Fig 1). The main trench running the length of the High St, and Road Crossings I & II, were the most substantial intrusions, measuring 0.35m in width and with a depth of up to 0.85m. (Trenches 1& 2 and Road Crossings I & II) Subsidiary service trenches were dug by private contractors and measured c0.25m wide by a maximum depth of c0.35m (Trenches 3-5 and Road Crossing III)
- 3.2 The buried soils observed in Dornoch can be divided into four main types:
- 1 ***Clean yellow windblown sand.***
This revealed the occasional archaeological feature and, in some places, an overlying black organic layer. It occurred mostly at the extreme west end of the High St.
 - 2 ***Dark stony sand lensed with densely packed shells in a black organic matrix. (F4)***
This varied in thickness from 0.05m to 0.25m at an average depth of 0.35m below the present pavement. This usually rested on gleyed brownish stony sand giving way to clean yellow sand. (similar to sand layer in 3.2.1) The shell layer appeared in most of the High St Trench 1 but disappeared as the trench dog- legged S into the street, and did not recur in the remaining length to the E.
 - 3 ***Areas of rubble consisting of large rounded pebbles.***
These areas were designated separate feature numbers as they occurred.
 - 4 ***Recently disturbed ground***
This contained modern materials such as glass, tar and fragments of glazed china, and occurred mostly to the east of the High St.

These areas are represented on Fig 1 and are discussed in more detail later in the report.
- 3.3 Occasional human remains were uncovered during the watching brief, as would be expected so close to the Cathedral. These were usually the result of previous disturbance, except in the case of three burials disturbed near the graveyard (see Fig 1)
- 3.4 Finds such as pottery were absent from these excavations.

THE EVIDENCE

- 4.1 Features as noted will be discussed as they occurred from the West end of the High St to the East, as they were uncovered, and are not in any chronological order. All features are marked on Fig 1.

- Feature 1** Pit cut into clean yellow sand 0.25m wide x 0.45m deep and sectioned by trench..
- F2** Black organic layer c0.10m thick
Immediately beneath bedding material for pavement
Overlying clean yellow sand
- F3** Post hole sectioned by HC trench, cut into clean yellow sand. (fig 2)
Excavation beyond depth of HC trench revealed it to be 0.7m deep x c0.25m in width, consisting of black organic sandy fill with frequent charcoal fragments. Overlaid by F2. See sketch Fig 3
- F4** Stony, black/brown organic layer with densely packed shells
Occurred at an average depth of 0.35m below pavement level, although in some places it was directly below the pavement slabs.
This layer appeared to overlay F2. (see Fig3)
It appeared along most of Trench 1 but disappeared as the trench dog-legged S into the street, and did not recur on the remaining length to the E. (See Fig 1)
- F5** Lens of red burnt clay
Underlay F4 and measured 0.40m in length by 0.10m thick
- F6, 7, 8** Road Crossing I, (as marked on Fig 1), running from north to south, revealed pure yellow sand immediately under road construction material. Three areas of loose boulders occurred along its length as marked on Fig 1 :

F6 was an area of boulders in a grey/brown sandy matrix.

Fs 7 & 8 were apparent at 3.70m north of cathedral wall and at the junction with Trench 2 respectively. These two features were very similar being blackened rounded pebbles up to 0.25m diameter in a black greasy loam matrix. They are almost certainly two exposures of the same feature although this could not be proved. As the road crossing was re-instated immediately it was only possible to photograph these areas. (see fig 4)
- F9** A surface layer of small tightly packed pebbles immediately under the modern tarmac, to a depth of 0.3m.
In Road Crossing III as shown on Fig 1. This trench was not dug by Highland Council and was only 0.2m wide, and was re-instated immediately after excavation. F9 overlay clean sandy gravel.
- F10** As marked at the E end of the High St on the corner of the library, a wall footing of dressed and mortared stone. This was not visible at street level, but can be seen on the town plan as an extension of the library building. It marked an access ramp for vehicles at this point and was probably built for this purpose.

Other trenches as marked on Fig 1 (Trs 3, 4, 5, and 6) appeared to be dug through recently disturbed ground which had been frequently excavated for service trenches, and did not reveal any significant archaeological finds.

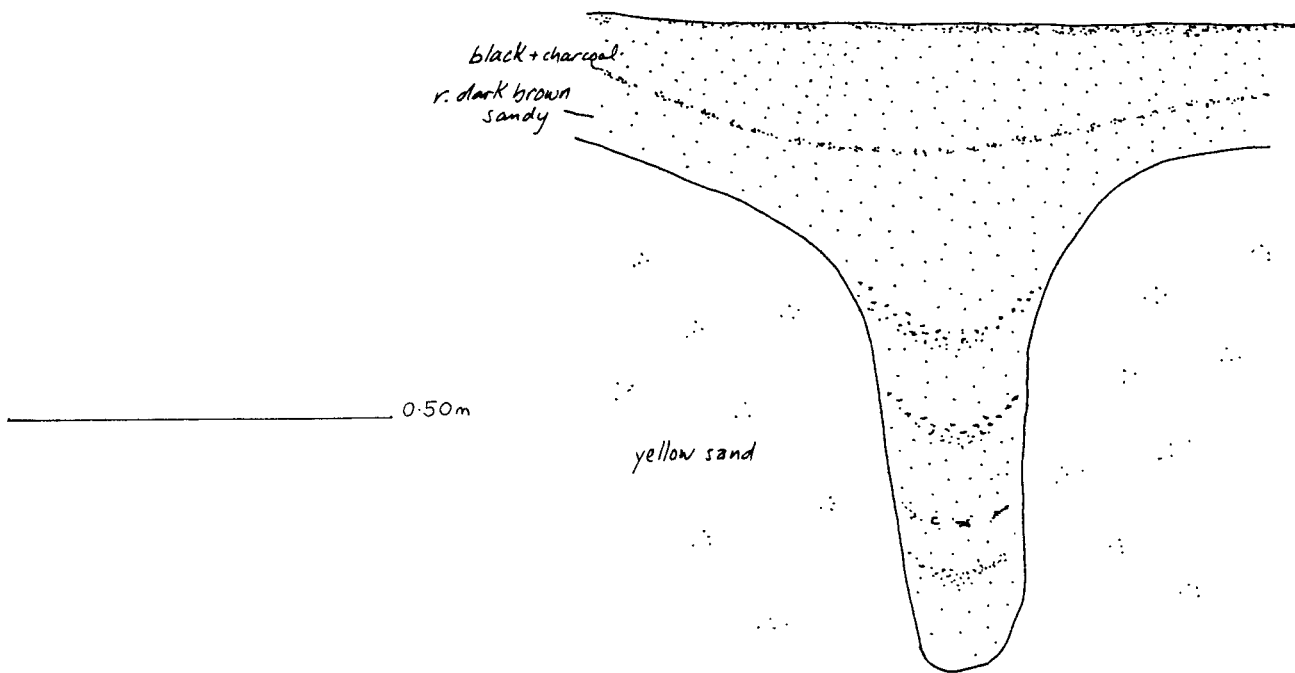


Fig 2 Post hole section. Feature 3. South facing.

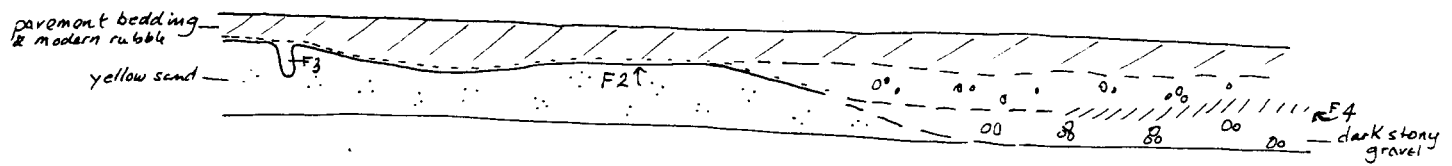


Fig 3 Sketch showing soil relationships at West end of High St. Not to scale

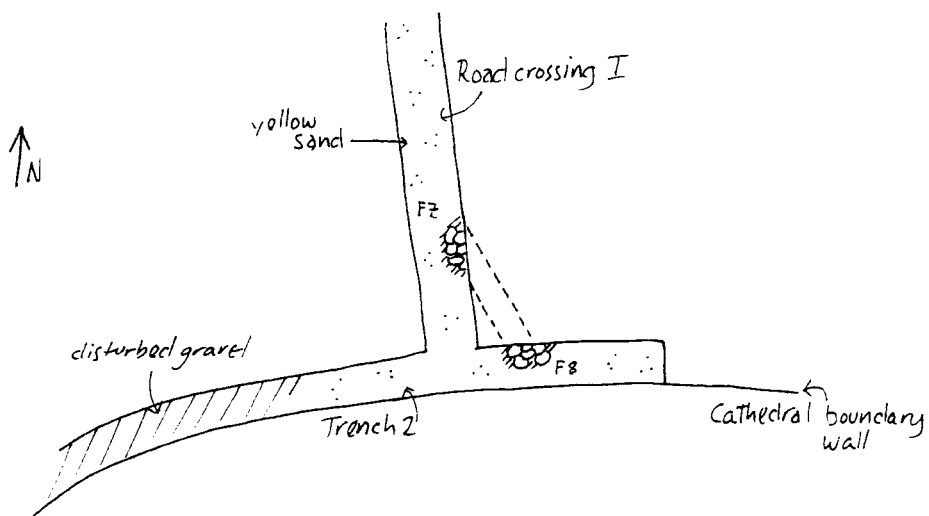


Fig 4 Detail of positions of features 7 & 8. Sketch not to scale

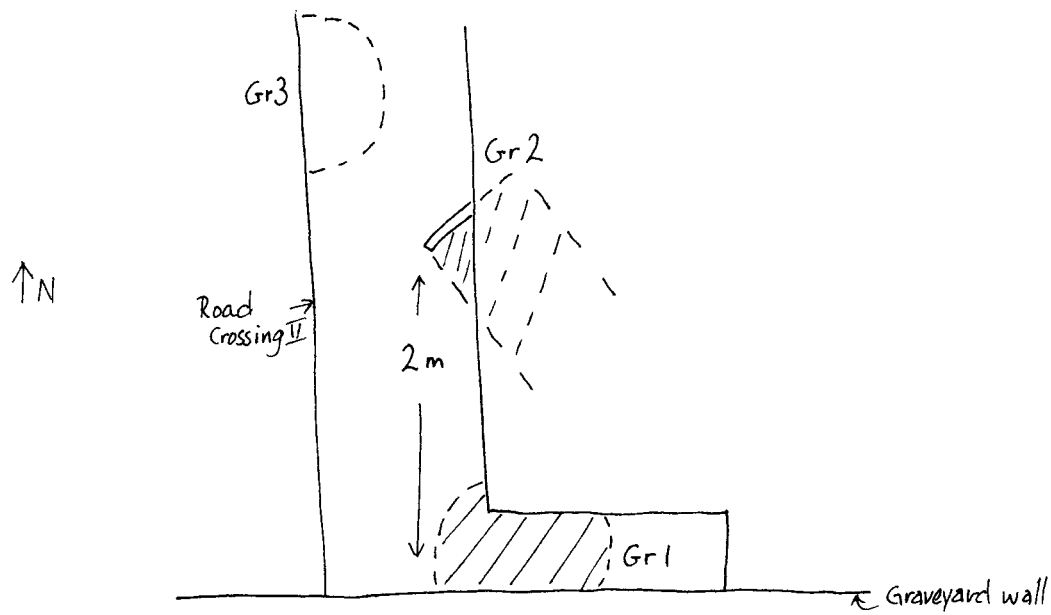


Fig 5 Sketch showing position of burials in Road Crossing 2. Not to scale

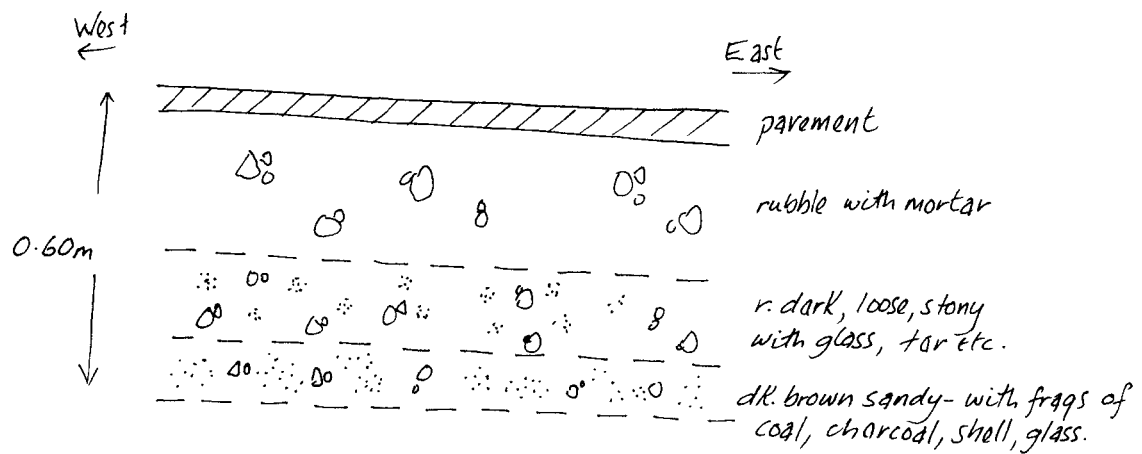


Fig 6 Sketch showing disturbed nature of soils at the East end of the High St.

4.2 HUMAN REMAINS

Three burials were disturbed during the excavation of Road Crossing II as marked on Figs 1 & 5. These appeared to be intact burials although they were greatly disturbed by machine activity. They occurred at a depth of c0.3m close to the boundary wall of the graveyard. The graveyard level at this point was c0.75m above the road level. Their antiquity is unknown. It was not possible to re-bury the fragments on due to the sensitivities of the workmen, and they were removed. These were the only *in situ* burials disturbed during the trenching.

OBSERVATIONS

- 5.1 The archaeological deposits remaining along Dornoch High St appeared substantial, consisting of discrete features such as the post hole F3 and more general spreads such as the shell layer F4.
- 5.2 Although the date of the post hole F3 is not known, it pre-dates the present structure of the High St and could be an indicator of early Dornoch. Its considerable depth suggests good preservation of this phase. It is likely that Dornoch High St was previously narrower than it is today, and perhaps the presence of the post hole suggests an earlier configuration. Charcoal collected from F3 could provide a C14 date. The pit F1 to the W is not necessarily contemporary with F3 but is also of substantial depth.
- 5.3 The High St originally had buildings on both sides. Stony areas F7 & F8 may together have formed a linear feature, possibly a building foundation.(see Fig 4). This was the only suggestion of building on the S side of the High St.
- 5.4 The dense layer of shells, F4, appeared to be confined to the N of the High St, as during the road crossings it was observed that the layer did not extend more than 0.5m S into the street. Unfortunately service trenches cut to the north were not revealing as the narrow alleys had been frequently disturbed for the laying of pipes. In Tr 5 F4 appeared to extend by at least 1m N but may have been redeposited. This layer can be interpreted as an occupation or midden layer. Dornoch's proximity to the sea suggests that shellfish were an important part of the diet until quite recently, and they would also have been used as bait for fishing.
- 5.5 The three burials disturbed in Road Crossing II show that the original graveyard extended further to the N. This suggests that the present line of the High St. is an alteration to an earlier layout
- 5.6 Apart from these three burials, only fragmentary human remains were found, and these came from disturbed contexts.

- 5.7 The graveyard is some 0.7m higher to the E than the present High St , indicating a leveling of the street in its history. The deposits at this end were less clearly defined and were more disturbed than at the W end. (Fig 6) Indeed outside the library the trench revealed only mixed and modern disturbed deposits. The street may have been leveled and redeposited to accommodate modern traffic and the bridge in use today.

CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 This watching brief demonstrated that Dornoch High St contains soils and depositions of interest to the archaeologist.
- 6.2 The West end appears better preserved than the East; soils towards the East showed disturbance at a greater depth than the West end.
- 6.3 Layers F2 & F4 may be the remains of occupation layers. These are of unknown date and not related.
- 6.3 The narrow alleys running N from the High St have been greatly disturbed by modern service trenches.
- 6.4 There are several indications of an earlier street layout, notably Fs 3, 7, 8, and the *in situ* burials.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 This work does not provide conclusive evidence of archaeology in Dornoch, but could be used as guidance should the opportunity for excavation arise. Such an excavation, particularly towards the west of the High St, could provide valuable information about the archaeology of the town.
- 7.2 The human remains should be re-interred in Dornoch as soon as possible.

Thanks are due to the Highland Council for supporting this watching brief. Thanks also to the people of Dornoch who were very interested and helpful, and to the workmen who were patient and kind.

Jill Kendrick Nov 1997

APPENDIX
SLIDE LIST

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | F1 Southfacing section cut by machine trench |
| 2 | Post hole F3 and layer F2 |
| 3 | F3 after full excavation (section only) |
| 4 | General view looking West |
| 5 | General view looking East |
| 6 | F5 |
| 7 | Road Crossing III |
| 8 | Road Crossing I |
| 9 | F7 in Road Crossing I |
| 10 | F7 in Road Crossing I |
| 11 | F8 in Trench 2 |
| 12 | Grave 2 in Road Crossing II |
| 13 | Grave 3 in Road Crossing II |
| 14 | Typical profile of mid-High St showing F4 |
| 15 | Typical profile East end of High St (outside Library) |
| 16 | Stone footing F10 |