

**Preliminary Report
Committee for Archaeology
Royal Irish Academy**

**EXCAVATION OF AN ENCLOSURE SITE AT
ROSSNAREE, (BRÚ NA BÓINNE) CO. MEATH.
10E0242**

Preliminary Report, Excavation 2011



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1. Introduction

The site under investigation was first discovered as a dense scatter of lithic (chipped stone) material on the surface of a tilled field close to the River Boyne, NGR 299200 273150, at the point where the famous ‘Bend of the Boyne’ begins (Figure 1, Brady 2007a; 2007b). This was subsequently investigated using various geophysical techniques (Brady and Barton 2008; 2009a; 2009b; 2010) at which time it became apparent that there was a substantial multivallate enclosure at the site (Figure 2). This enclosure was reported to the Archaeological Survey of Ireland and an RMP number was subsequently issued (ME019-080---).



Figure 1 Site location.

The enclosure is roughly D-shaped and is bounded on the north and east sided by the River Boyne. The enclosure cordons off an area of several hectares and measures *c.* 300m east-west by *c.* 150m north-south. The core of the enclosure and the main area of activity is located on the first fluvio-glacial terrace overlooking the floodplain proper of the River Boyne, the outermost enclosure ditch extends from the river floodplain at the north western end of the site across the terrace to the wide floodplain to the east. While the floodplain of the River Boyne in this area is subjected to regular

flooding, the area of the terrace is at an elevation that avoids inundation (Brady and Barton 2009b).

2. Summary of 2010 Season

Four Trenches were excavated during the 2010 season (Figure 2). A fifth (Trench 2) had been planned but this was not opened due to time constraints.

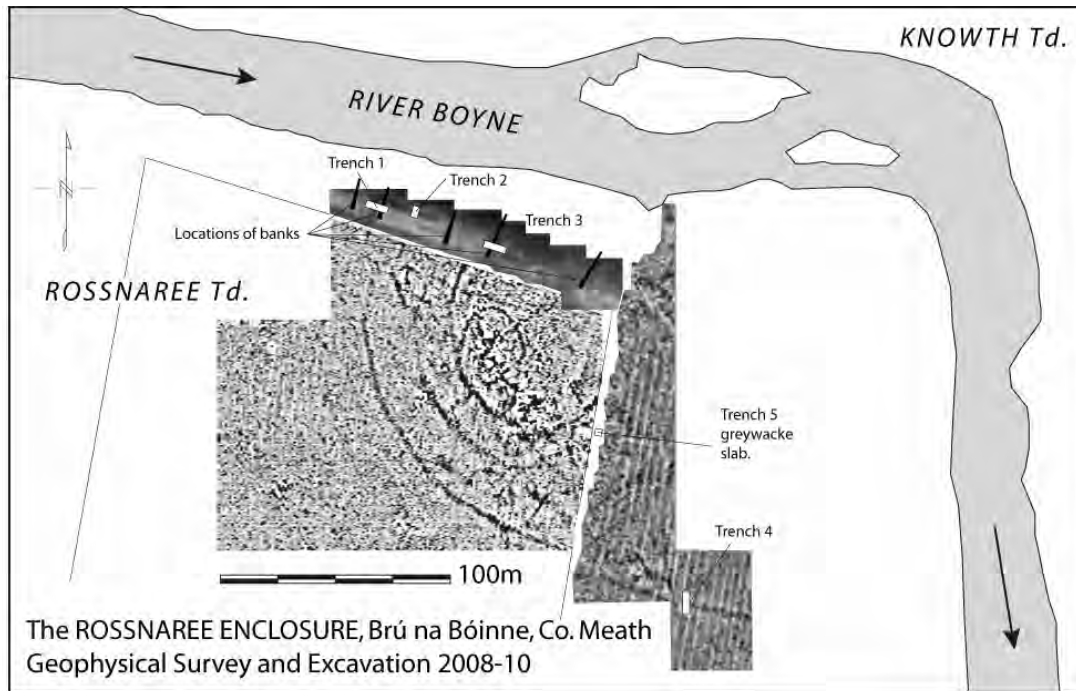


Figure 2 Site layout, 2010 season

2.1 Trench 1

This was located on the north-facing slope of the fluvio-glacial terrace, an area untouched by cultivation. The features investigated in this trench included part of the bank of the outer enclosure in the eastern end of the trench and its associated ditch immediately to the west. Three metres further to the west of this is a smaller ditch feature. The main ditch at the east end of the cutting was V-shaped in profile and reached an overall depth of 1.47m below sod. The mandible of a cow was recovered from the fill at the base of this feature and hopefully will provide a suitable sample for radiocarbon dating. A number of possible recuts were discernible in the section. Occasional finds included animal bone and pieces of flint. A smaller ditch was recorded c.3m further to the west. As this feature diverges from the line of the main ditch as it descends the slope, it may not be associated with it. This small ditch had a V-shaped profile with a depth of c. 0.8m and a width at the top of c.1.5m and had three main fills.

2.2 Trench 3

This was located on the same north-facing slope as Trench 1. As with Trench 1 this area was unaffected by cultivation and preservation was very good. The main features in this trench were the bank and ditch. The ditch, on excavation, was smaller in scale than the main ditch in Trench 1 with a width of c. 2m at the top and a depth of c. 1m. A cow rib was excavated from the very base of this ditch and hopefully will provide a

suitable sample for radiocarbon dating. There was a recut towards the base of the ditch. The bank, which was *c.* 2m wide with a height of *c.* 0.8m, was very solidly constructed with a core of large well-placed cobbles. A cow skull was found inverted within the stones of this feature and was clearly a deliberate incorporation. Abutting this feature was a rich silty humic layer with frequent pieces of animal bone and flint. Below this layer and the bank was another relatively stone-free rich humic layer. Chronologically diagnostic artefacts were recovered from this layer: a fragment of a double-sided bone or antler comb and a copper-alloy strap. These finds provide an *terminus post quem* for the bank feature above and indicate that it is likely to have a late 1st millennium AD date. Beneath this layer, a linear stone terracing or revetment feature comprising at least three courses of substantial cobbles was found. The feature ran roughly horizontally across the face of the slope for a distance of *c.* 4.5m within the trench and appeared to continue eastwards out of the area of the trench.

2.3 Trench 4

This was positioned to investigate the outer enclosure ditch at the level of the river floodplain. It was clear that this area had been cultivated in the past and on excavation, it was established that the depth to undisturbed natural was *c.* 0.45m. The ditch was *c.* 3.6m wide and was at least 1.5m deep below sod level. It was not possible to establish the exact depth of the ditch because of flooding. Five distinct fills were encountered during the excavation and material from a possible levelled internal bank was identified. Occasional flint artefacts and animal bone fragments were recovered.

2.4 Trench 5

This was positioned to investigate the area of a greywacke slab which appears to have been displaced during cultivation. The cultivation soil was excavated in spits until the base of the greywacke slab was exposed. This was found to be lying completely within the cultivation soil layer and appears to have been moved to its current position in relatively recent times. Excavation ceased at this point so as not to destabilise the stone in advance of raising it. At the north end of the trench a possible deliberate linear setting of firmly set field stones was uncovered. Fragments of barbed wire fencing were frequent and some animal bone was also recovered. Occasional lithic artefacts were also encountered as well as a portion of a lignite bracelet.

2.5 Conclusion

The major features at this site appear to be Early Medieval in date. No structural evidence of the intense prehistoric activity indicated by the lithic scatter came to light and the exact nature of this activity remains to be determined.

3. Project Objectives 2011

The 2010 excavation was successful in retrieving material suitable for the dating of two of the major internal ditches of the enclosure. Furthermore, artefactual material retrieved during the excavation from one of the ditches which indicates a probable late 1st millennium AD date for the construction of this feature and it seems likely on morphological grounds that the other outer banks and ditches also date to this period.

However, although flint artefacts were recovered during the excavation, little light was shed on the nature of prehistoric activity at the site as indicated by the extensive dense lithic scatter. Because of the nature and extent of this lithic scatter, it is believed that a number of the features identified in the various geophysical surveys of the area are highly likely to be prehistoric and to date from the Neolithic period. Given the importance of questions relating to the nature of Neolithic settlement in the Brú na Bóinne area, it is proposed to carry out further excavation at the site in 2011.

Further geophysical survey was conducted at the site subsequent to the excavation in August 2010. This included magnetic gradiometry, earth resistance, magnetic susceptibility and electrical resistance tomography. The gradiometry, earth resistance and magnetic susceptibility surveys were carried out at higher resolutions than previous surveys of the site and have identified a number of areas of potential. These are indicated as Area 1 and Area 2 in Figures 3 and 4 below.

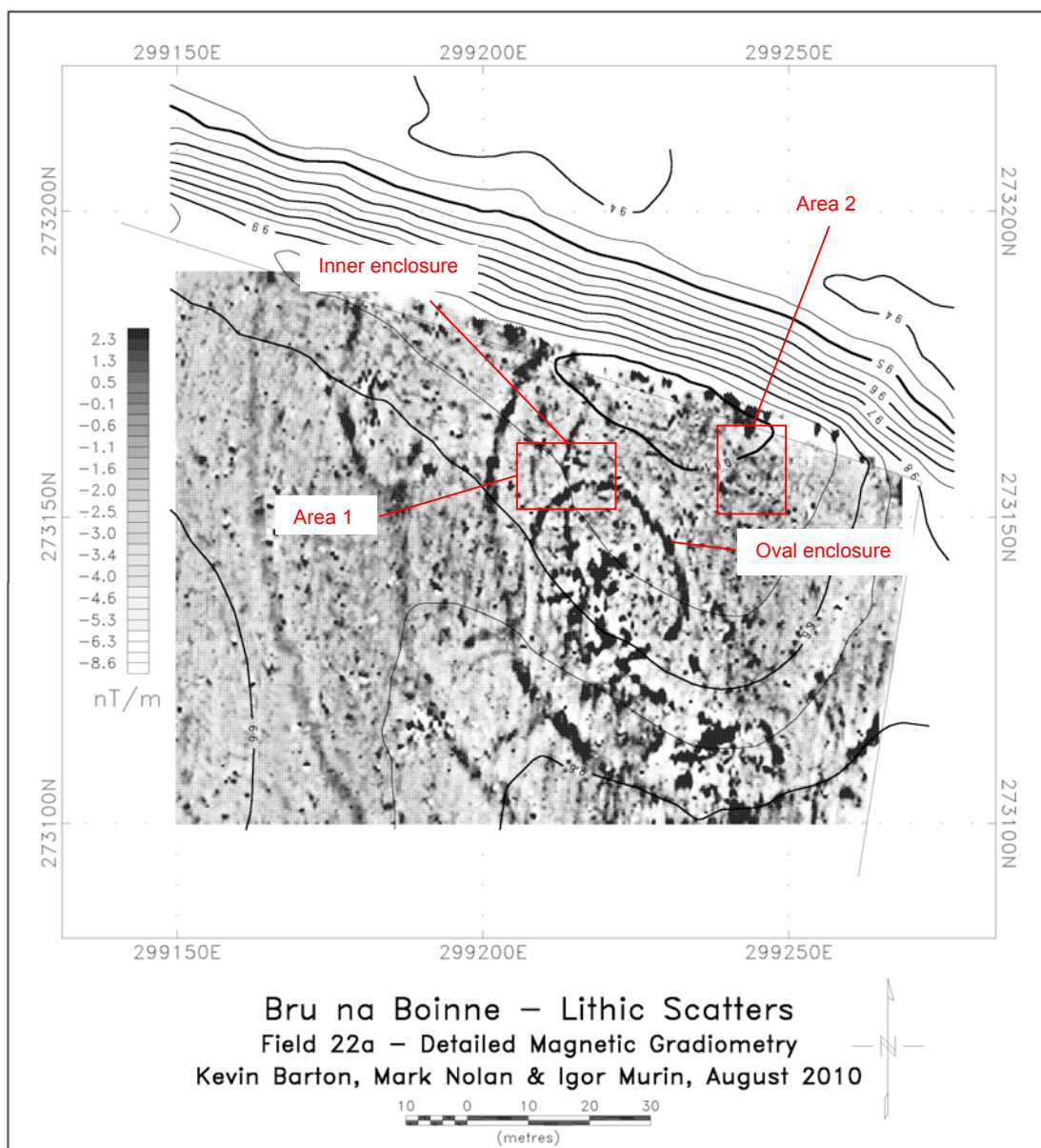


Figure 3 Rossnaree Enclosure, detailed magnetic gradiometry plot (2010) with topography and showing Areas 1 and 2.

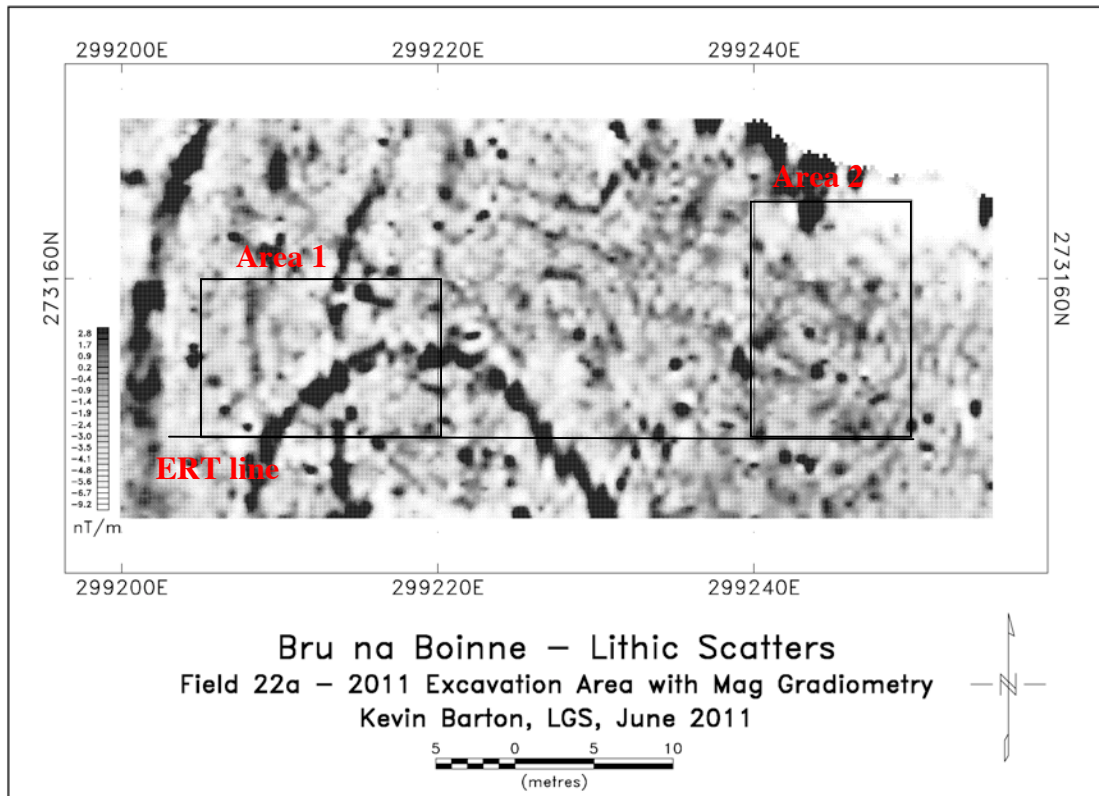


Figure 4 Detail of magnetic gradiometry plot (2010) showing Areas 1 and 2 and the line of the ERT section (see Figure 11 below).

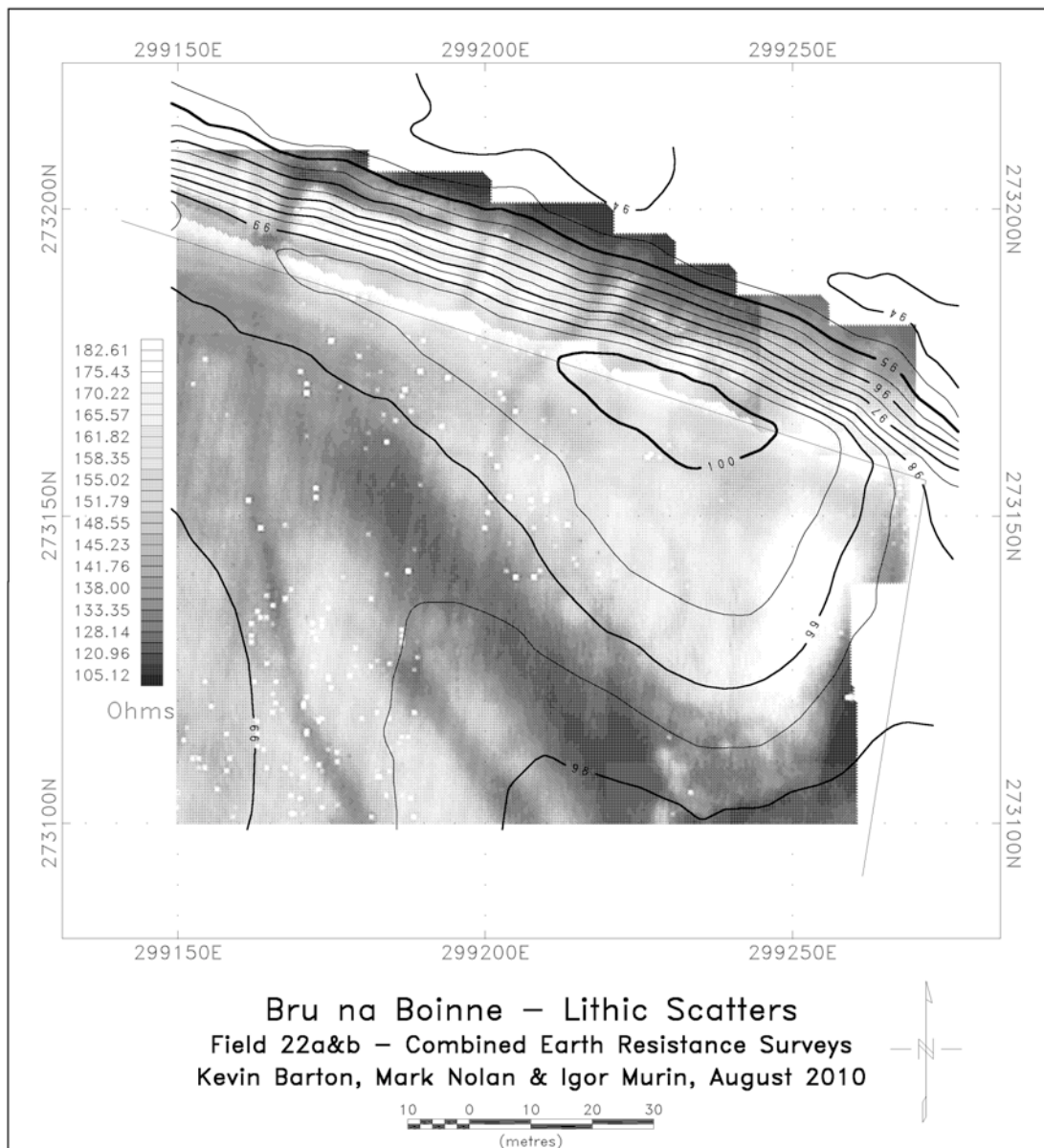


Figure 5 Rosnaree Enclosure, detailed earth resistance plot (2010) with topography.

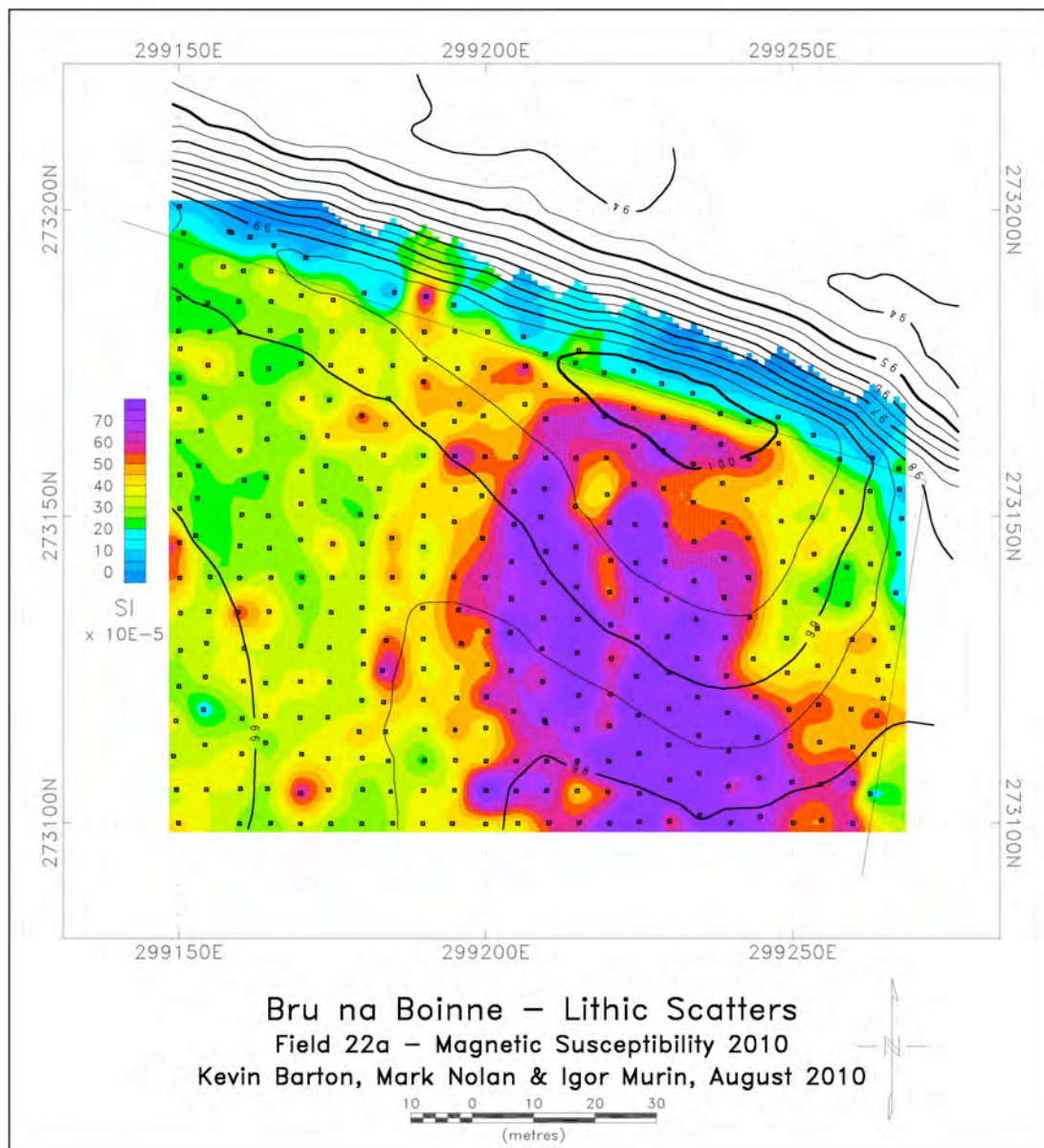


Figure 6 Rosnaree Enclosure, detailed magnetic susceptibility plot (2010) with topography.

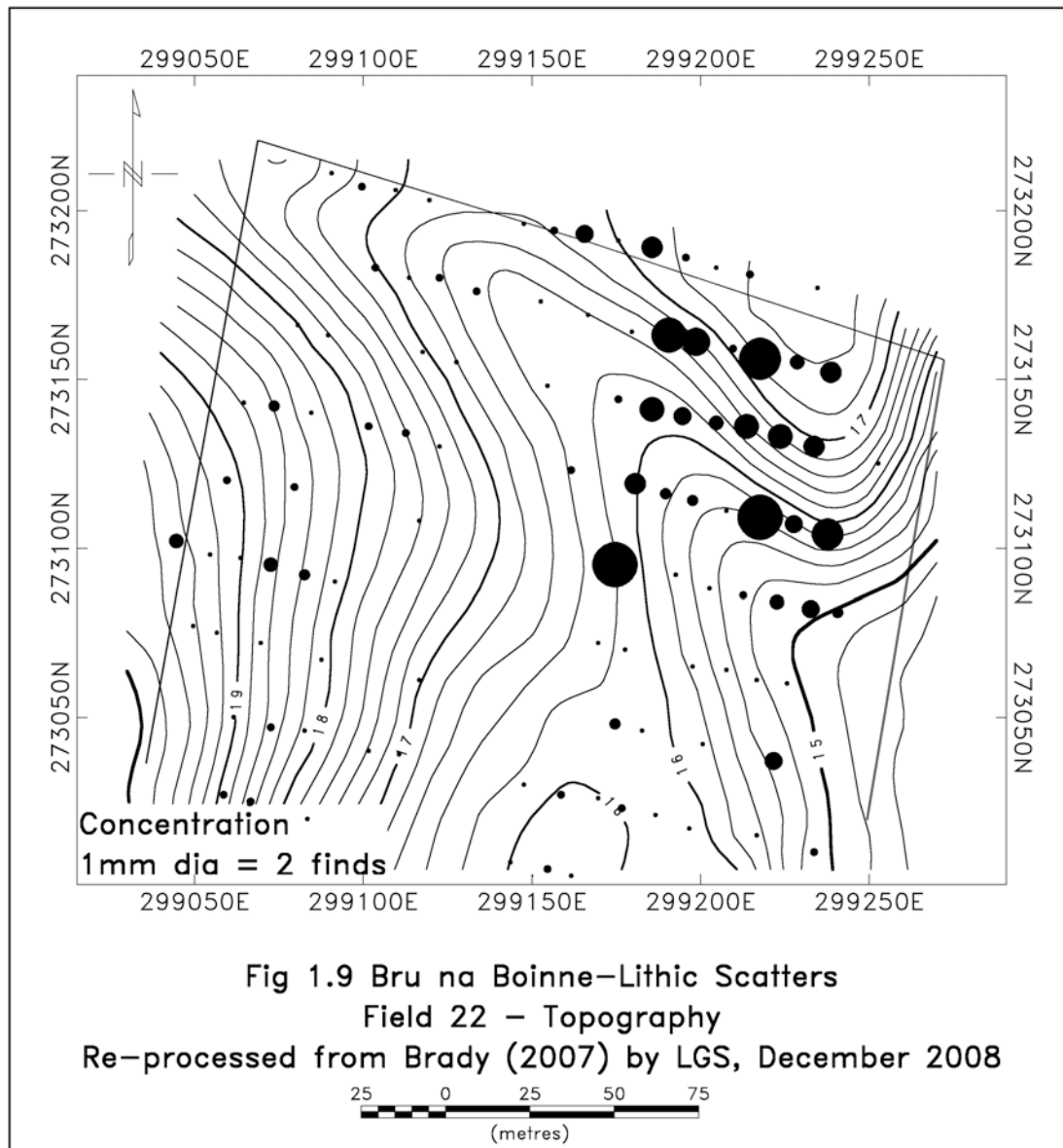


Figure 7 Field 22 surface lithics distribution with topography.

3.1 Area 1

The first potentially early feature identified lies in the core area of the complex, labelled ‘inner enclosure’ in Figure 2. This feature appears to define the top of the knoll or topographic high in this area (Area 1, Figures 3 and 4). It appears to be quite different in character to the other probable Early Medieval ditches. The character of the feature on the magnetometry plot (Figure 4) shows it to be narrower and less magnetic than the other enclosures. The magnetometry plot also shows that it is clearly cut by the oval enclosure suggesting a relative chronological relationship between the features. The earth resistance plot (Figure 5) shows that the inner enclosure defines an area of high resistance, with a sharp delineation between the high-resistance inner area and the low resistance area immediately outside, although the line of the ditch along the west side of the enclosure visible in the magnetometry plot, is almost absent. The junction between the two areas appears to be particularly sharp and suggests a possible stone facing/revetment feature. This again suggests that the method used to construct the inner enclosure is different to that of the other enclosures. The area chosen lies well within the zone of magnetic susceptibility

enhancement (Figure 6) and also is within area defined by the lithic scatter (Figure 7). Trench 6 was positioned over the junction between the two ditches on the western side of the oval enclosure and is positioned to examine the relationship between these features and to retrieve material suitable for dating from each enclosure.

3.2 Area 2

The second area of potential is also in the core area close to the highest point on the knoll. It shows up in the magnetic data as a circular cut feature of slightly positive magnetic gradient, *c.* 6m in diameter and possible with a centrally placed posthole and there are other possible pits or postholes immediately outside it (Area 2, Figures 3 and 4). There is an area of lower resistance in the same location on the earth resistance plot (Figure 5) and the magnetic susceptibility plot also indicates an almost discrete linear area of enhanced magnetic susceptibility to the north of the main area of enhancement (Figure 6). The feature lies at the north-eastern corner of the area defined by the lithic scatter (Figure 7). Given that this feature appears to be relatively well preserved and that it is potentially prehistoric in date based on its position and morphology, Cutting 7 was positioned over this feature to establish its date and Cutting 8 was located to the south of this to investigate some of the other point features.

4. Preliminary Work 2011

Clearance of the oil seed rape crop from the areas of investigation took place using a strimmer in the week prior to the commencement of the excavation. Following clearance of the crop, the site grid was laid out using a Sokkia total station and a baseline was established. The southern edge of each area was contiguous with this baseline. The proposed cuttings were laid out within each of the two areas. At this time, the opportunity was taken to carry out high detail geophysical survey to inform the excavation strategy. Highly detailed magnetic gradiometry survey was carried out over each area at a resolution of 0.25m x 0.125m in order to try to define as well as possible the locations and plans of potential features in advance of the excavation (Figures 8 and 10). High detail earth resistance survey was also carried out at a resolution of 0.5m x 0.5m over the same area (not illustrated here) and a magnetic susceptibility survey was carried out using a Bartington field loop on a 1m x 1m grid (Figure 9 and 11). Additionally, an electrical resistivity tomography survey was carried out along the baseline connecting the two areas with electrodes spaced at 0.5m intervals (Figure 12).

Soil samples were also collected from the field surface on a 1m x 1m grid in order to carry out laboratory-based magnetic susceptibility testing to use in a comparison of the performance of the two techniques.

The higher resolution survey data were most useful in facilitating the accurate location of the excavation cuttings, providing better clarity and resolution than the data gathered in August 2010 (Figures 3 to 6). The magnetic susceptibility plots in particular (Figures 9 and 11) gave a much more detailed plot of the enhancement in each area and rather than resulting in a plot of general enhancement, the more detailed plots appear to be relatable to archaeological activity in the area and possible subsurface features as indicated by the magnetic gradiometry plots.

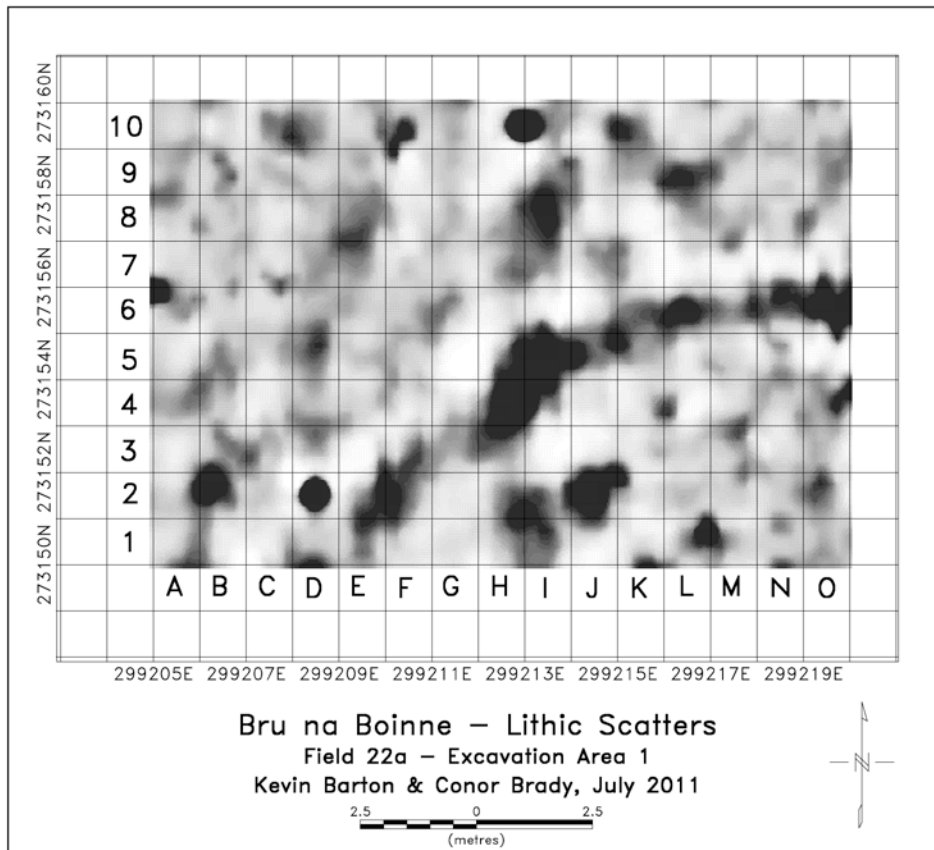


Figure 8 Area 1 high detail magnetic gradiometry plot.

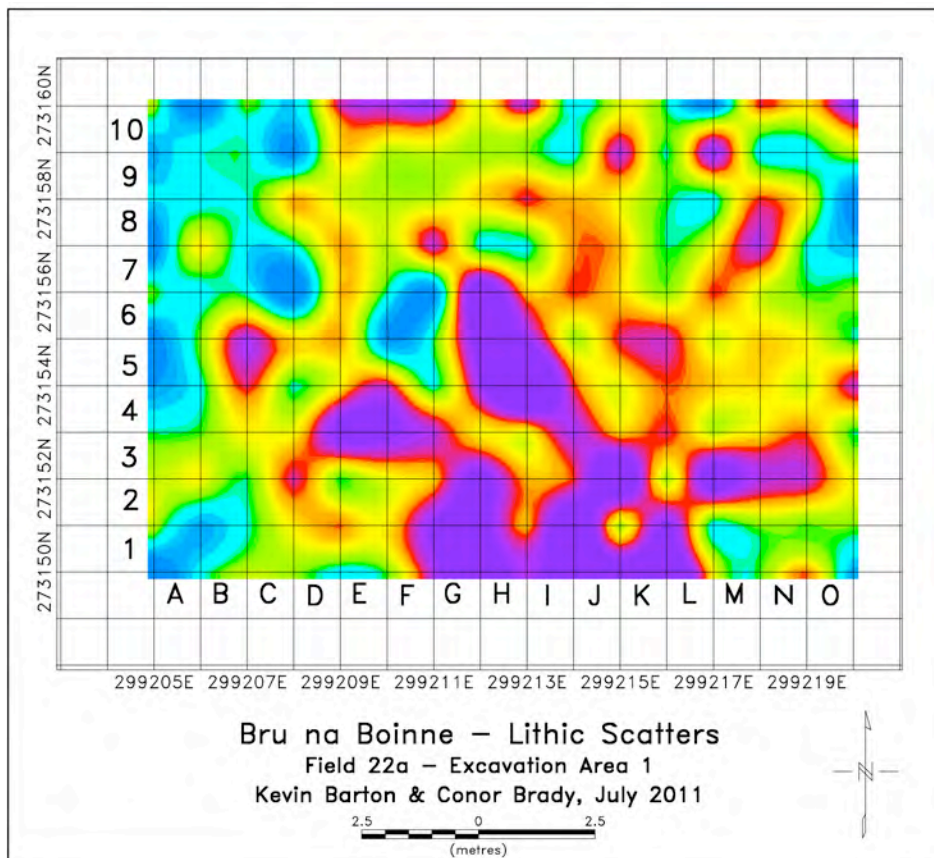


Figure 9 Area 1 high detail magnetic susceptibility plot.

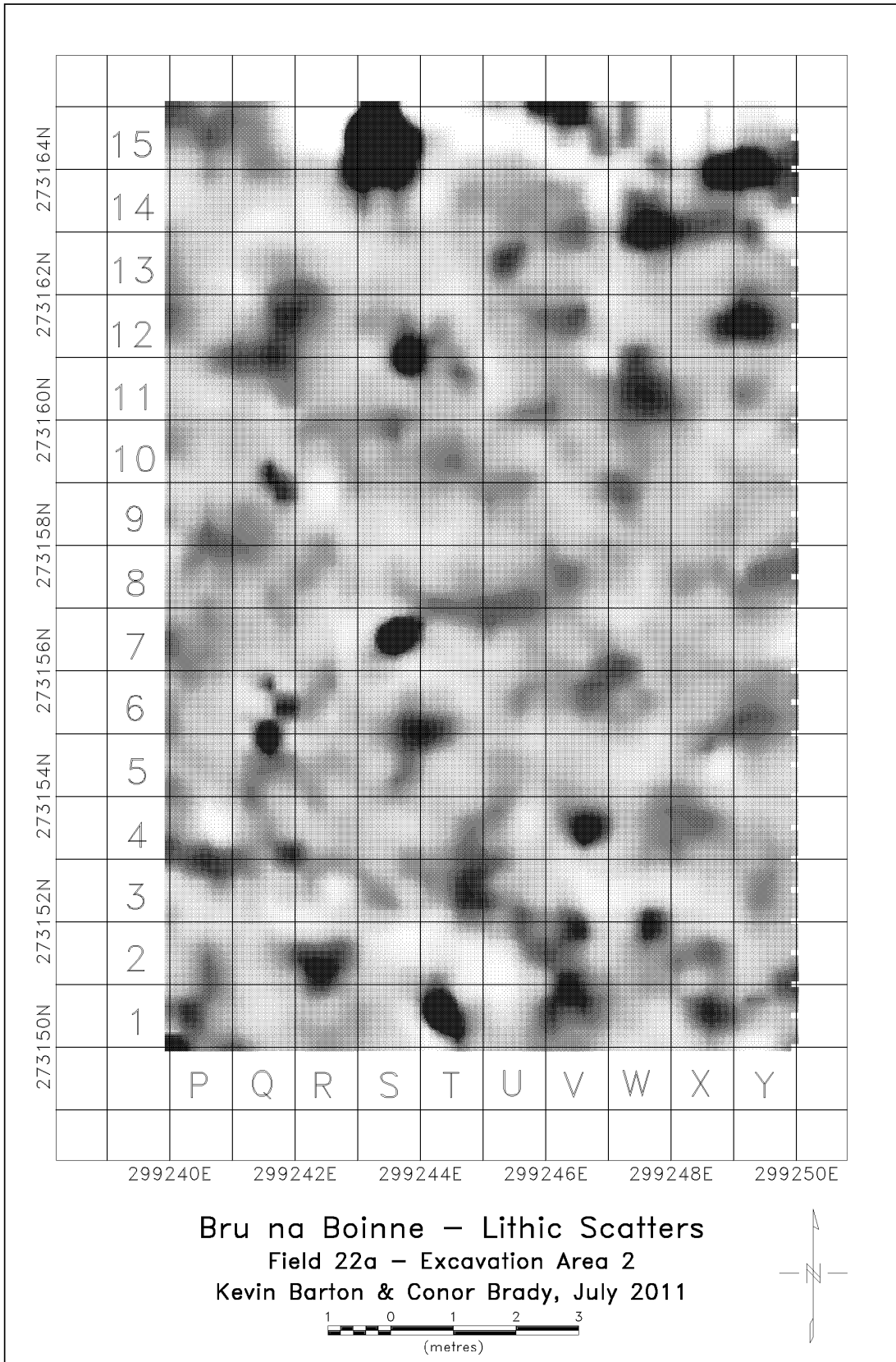


Figure 10 Area 2 high detail magnetic gradiometry plot

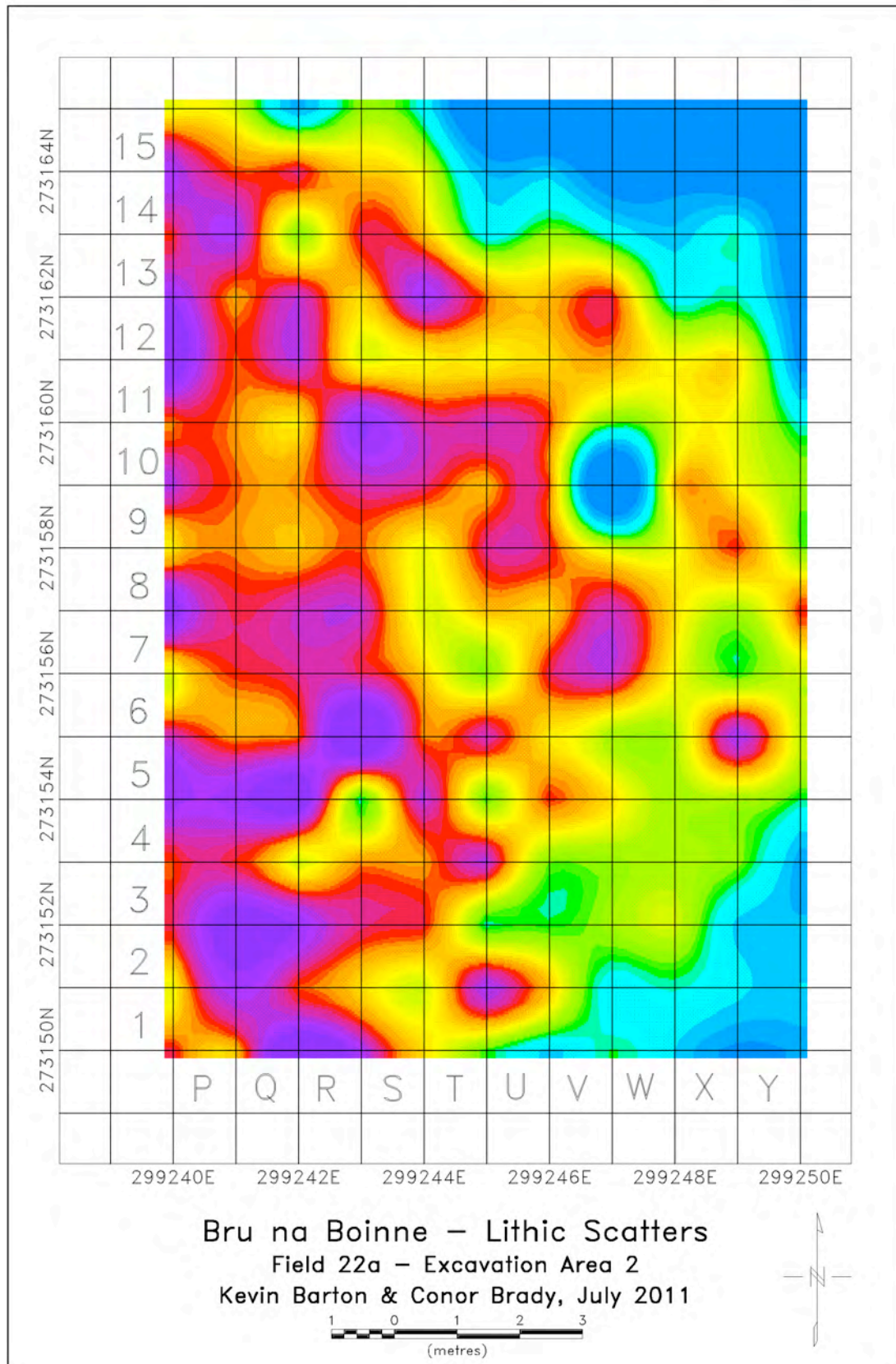


Figure 11 Area 2 high detail magnetic susceptibility plot

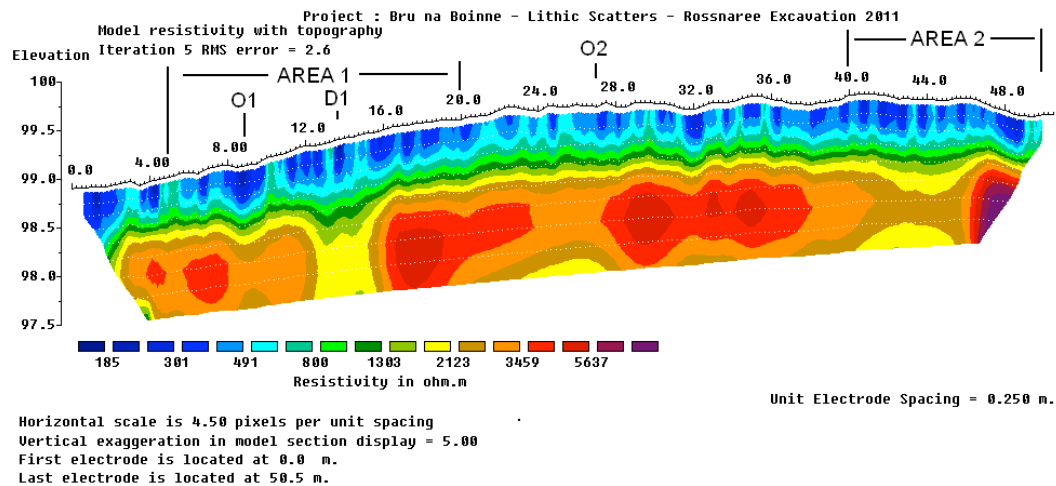


Figure 12 Areas 1 and 2 electrical resistivity tomography pseudosection.
 (See Figure 3 for location).

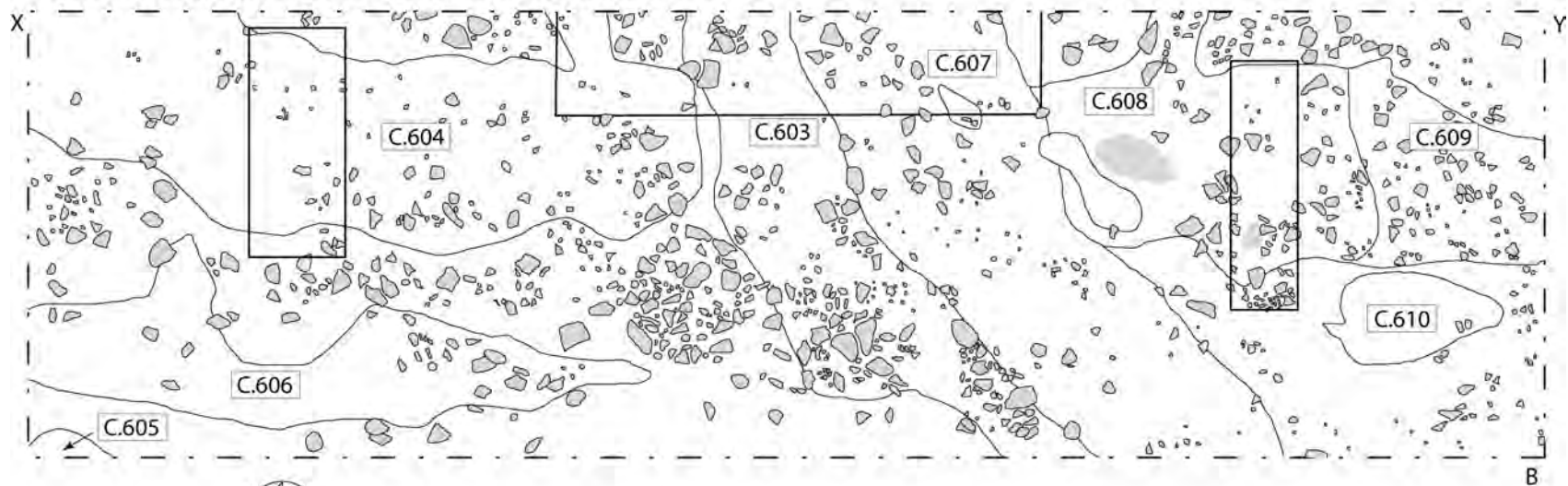
In addition to the magnetic gradiometry, earth resistance and magnetic susceptibility surveys in Areas 1 and 2, an electrical resistivity tomography survey was carried out along a line linking the southern edges of each area with an electrode spacing of 0.5m giving a modelled depth of *c.*1.5m (Figure 12). This shows the nature of the topography between the two areas rising between Area 1 and 2. In Area 1 the pseudosection indicates the locations of both the north-south ditch (indicated as D1 in Figure 12 above) and the ditch of the oval enclosure (indicated by the two O1 labels in Figure 12 above) while in Area 2 a levelling off of the intact subsoil levels is indicated along with an apparent thickening of the lower resistance upper layers probably relating to ploughing.

5. Fieldwork

The excavation commenced on Monday 4th July and continued until Friday 29th July in accordance with the wishes of the landowner and the terms of the excavation license. As the field was under crop it was not necessary to desod. However, the first spits taken down in each cutting were full of stalks and rooty material which were discarded. All cuttings were excavated by hand using mattocks, spades and shovels. All material was passed through a 5mm suspended mesh riddle in order to maximise the recovery of smaller artefacts, particularly lithics.

5.1 Cutting 6

This measured 10m N-S and 3m E-W and was positioned over an intersection between the innermost D-shaped enclosure cordoning off the area of high ground and the discrete oval enclosure. From the geophysical surveys, particularly the MG (Figures 3, 4 and 8), it was clear that the oval enclosure cuts the line of the D-shaped enclosure. Thus, there is a relative relationship between the two features with the D-shaped enclosure being the earlier of the two features. The cutting was located on the western slope of the low knoll.



Cutting 6. S Baulk, N-facing section.

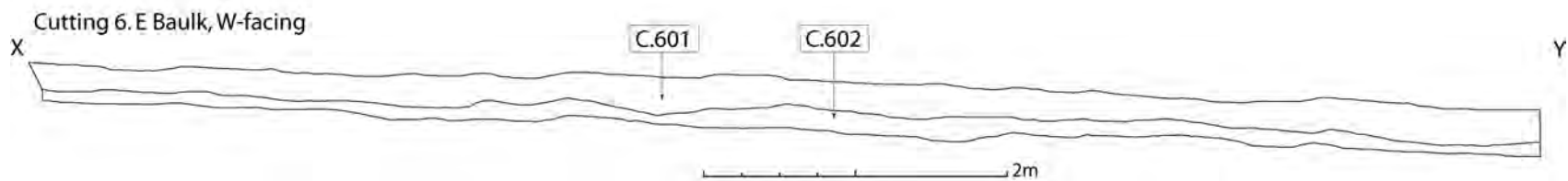
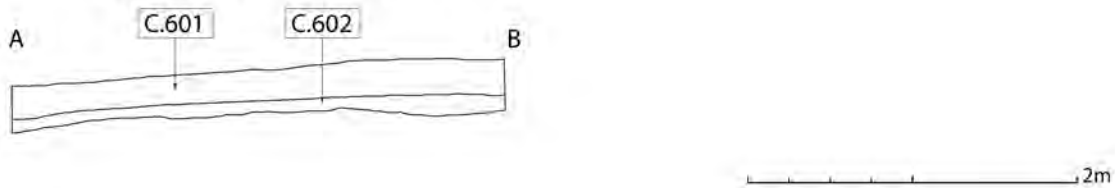


Figure 13 Cutting 6 plan on removal of ploughsoil, south baulk, north-facing section and east baulk, west-facing section

The ploughsoil was found to have a depth of c. 0.25-0.40m and within this, there were two layers of disturbance. C.601 was the uppermost layer of ploughsoil, disturbed at every ploughing event. This layer gave way gradually to C.602 which started at a depth of c.0.15-0.20m. On removal of the ploughsoil, a truncated surface was revealed in which several distinct contexts were visible including the lines of and material filling each of the ditches previously identified in the geophysics (Figure 13).

The main feature running N-S through the entire length of the cutting was the line and fills of the D-shaped enclosure. Contexts identified on the surface of this feature were C.604, which was located to the north of the intersection with the oval enclosure, C.608 and C.609 to the south of this intersection. These contexts were characterised by charcoal flecking, a more dark or grey colour than the surrounding natural, and the presence of animal bone fragments. As this is a portion of the western side of the enclosure, it runs in a N-S direction here. The other main feature visible was the curvilinear line of the oval enclosure. Contexts identified on the surface of this feature were C.603 and C.607 which were broadly similar to the fills already described.

Due to time constraints, it was not possible to completely excavate all of the features in this cutting. Instead, three sondage trenches were excavated – two across the line of the N-S ditch, one at the northern end of the cutting (Figure 14) and the other at the southern end of the cutting (Figure 15) and a third sondage was excavated across the line of the oval enclosure at the eastern side of the cutting (Figure 16). Each of these sondage trenches allowed the recording of the stratigraphy and morphology of the ditches at each location.

Sondage 1

This was located at the N end of Cutting 6 and was orientated E-W. The sondage measured 0.60m N-S by 1.65m E-W and its location is indicated on Figure 13. The fills of the feature were C.604, C.619, C. 616, C.617 and C.618. The feature was c.1.20m wide at the top and had a shallow U-shaped profile with a step c.0.30m wide on the E side (Figure 14). A number of fills were encountered – C.604, C.616, C.617 (which, although it contained a very ashy lens, this was not given a separate number because of the very ashy nature of the fill), C.618 and C.619. The cut of the feature was given the number C.621. Some of the fills seem to represent episodes of recutting, e.g., C.604 and C.619 in particular.

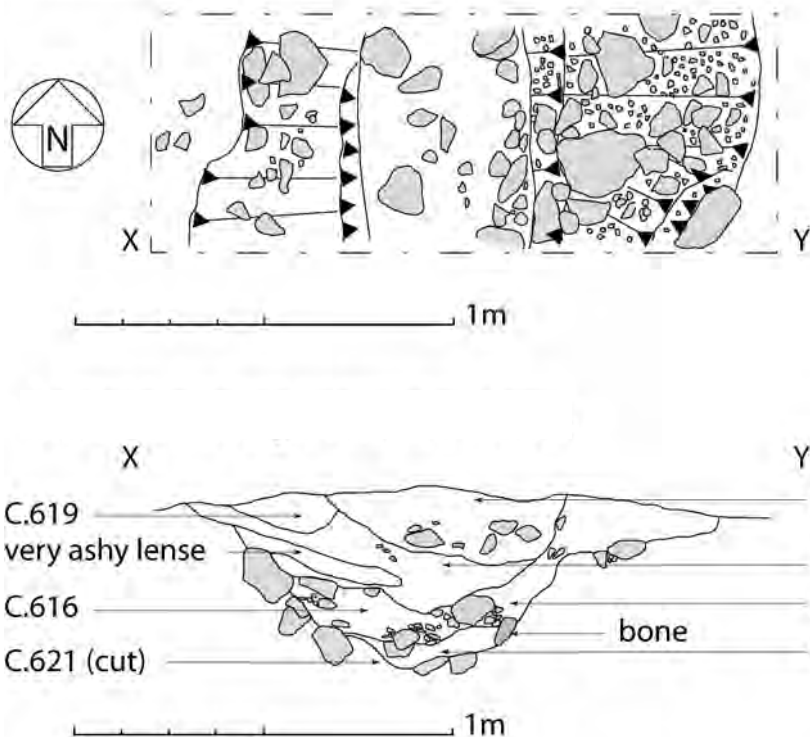


Figure 14 Plan and section of Sondage 1, Cutting 6.

Sondage 2

This was located at the S end of Cutting 6 and was oriented E-W across the line of the N-S ditch. The sondage measured 1.65m x 0.50m and its location is indicated on Figure 13. The ditch had a shallow U-shaped profile, shallower than that encountered in Sondage 1, and had a slight step feature *c.* 0.20m wide on the E side (Figure 15). There were a number of fills recorded: C.608, C.612, C.613 and C.615. The cut of the feature was given the number C.621.

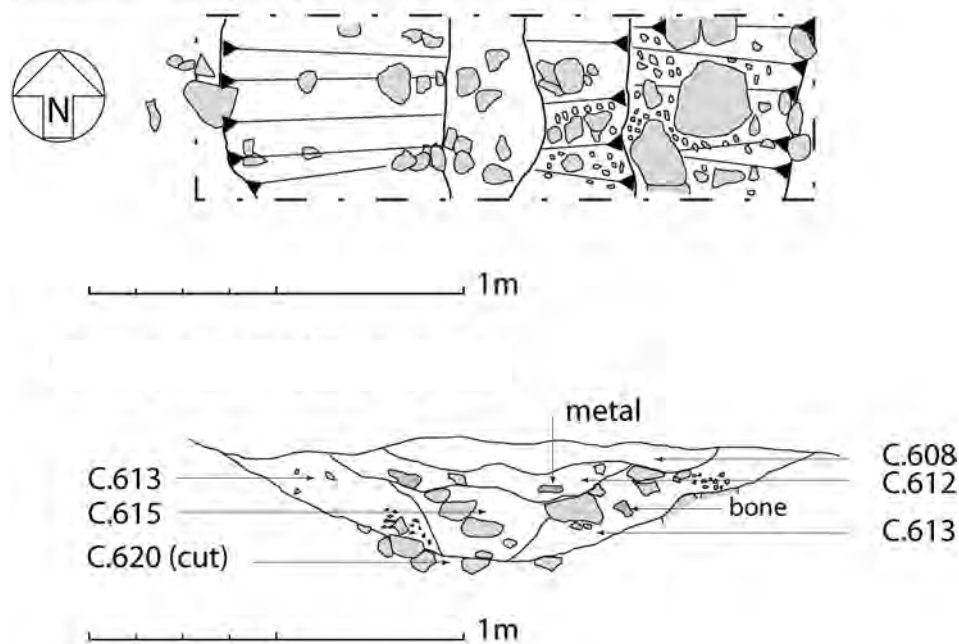


Figure 15 Plan and section of Sondage 2, Cutting 6.

Sondage 3

This was laid out over the line of the oval enclosure at the eastern baulk. The sondage measured 3.15m N-S by 0.60m E-W and its location is indicated on Figure 13. The ditch was U-shaped in profile with a flat bottom and steep sides. It measured *c.*1.5m in width and had a depth of *c.*0.45m from the base of ploughsoil. Fills of the ditch were C.607, C.622, C.623 and the cut of the feature was numbered C.624.

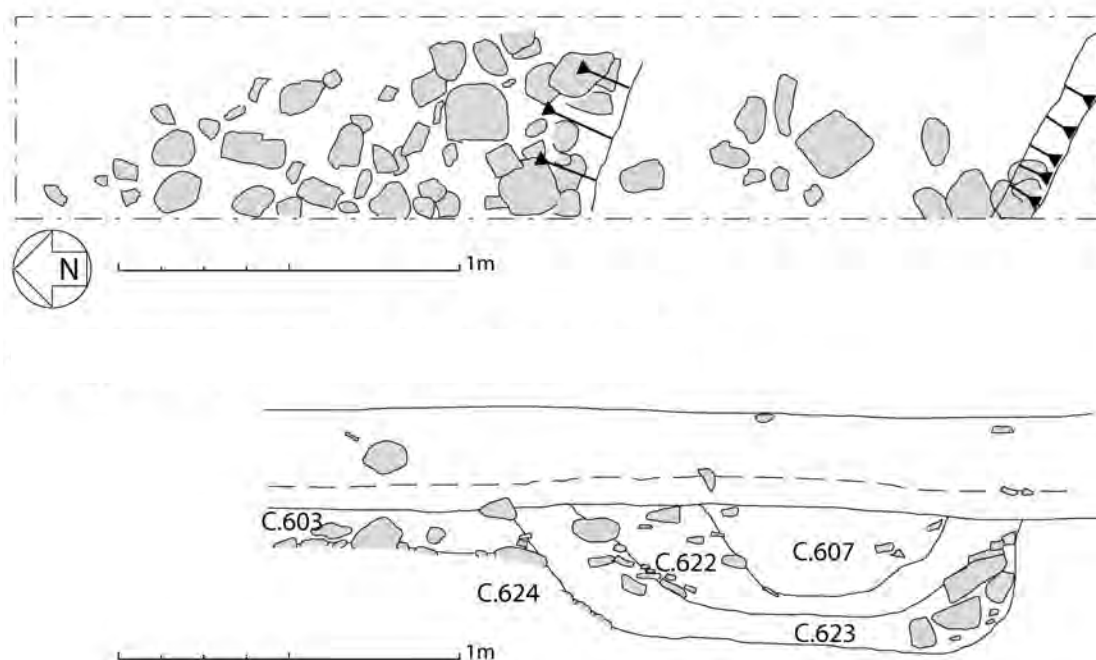


Figure 16 Plan and section of Sondage 3, Cutting 6.

5.2 Cutting 7

Cutting 7 measured 5m by 4m and was located on the summit of the low knoll in order to investigate the interior of the innermost D-shaped enclosure and a series of geophysical anomalies.

The ploughsoil was removed by mattock and shovel and passed through a 5mm suspended mesh sieve. Flint finds were common and fragments of human bone were also recovered. Two separate horizons were discernible in the ploughsoil. C.701 was frequently disturbed ploughsoil, turned over at every ploughing event and has a depth of *c.* 0.20-0.25m. Below this was C.702, a slightly more compact layer of ploughsoil representing a deeper level of ploughing, disturbed only intermittently with a thickness of *c.* 0.10m. The interface between C.701 and C.702 was indistinct but is indicated with a dashed line in the section drawing below (Figure 17). The equivalent horizon to C.702 was not discerned in Cutting 6. The presence of C.702 may be due to the proximity of Cutting 7 to the headland at the field edge a matter of a metre or two to the north of the cutting. Ploughing in the field is always in a N-S direction and this horizon of deeper ploughing may be related to the turning of the tractor and plough at the headland.

At a depth of *c.* 0.30m, the ploughsoil horizon (C.701 and C.702) gave way to C.703, a hard compact layer with frequent large cobbles which, because of the very dry weather conditions prevailing for much of the period of the excavation, was initially

taken to be undisturbed natural. Some features were identified at the northern end of the cutting: C.706, C.708, C.712, C.713, C.715 and C.723 which appears to be the base of a small hearth or furnace.

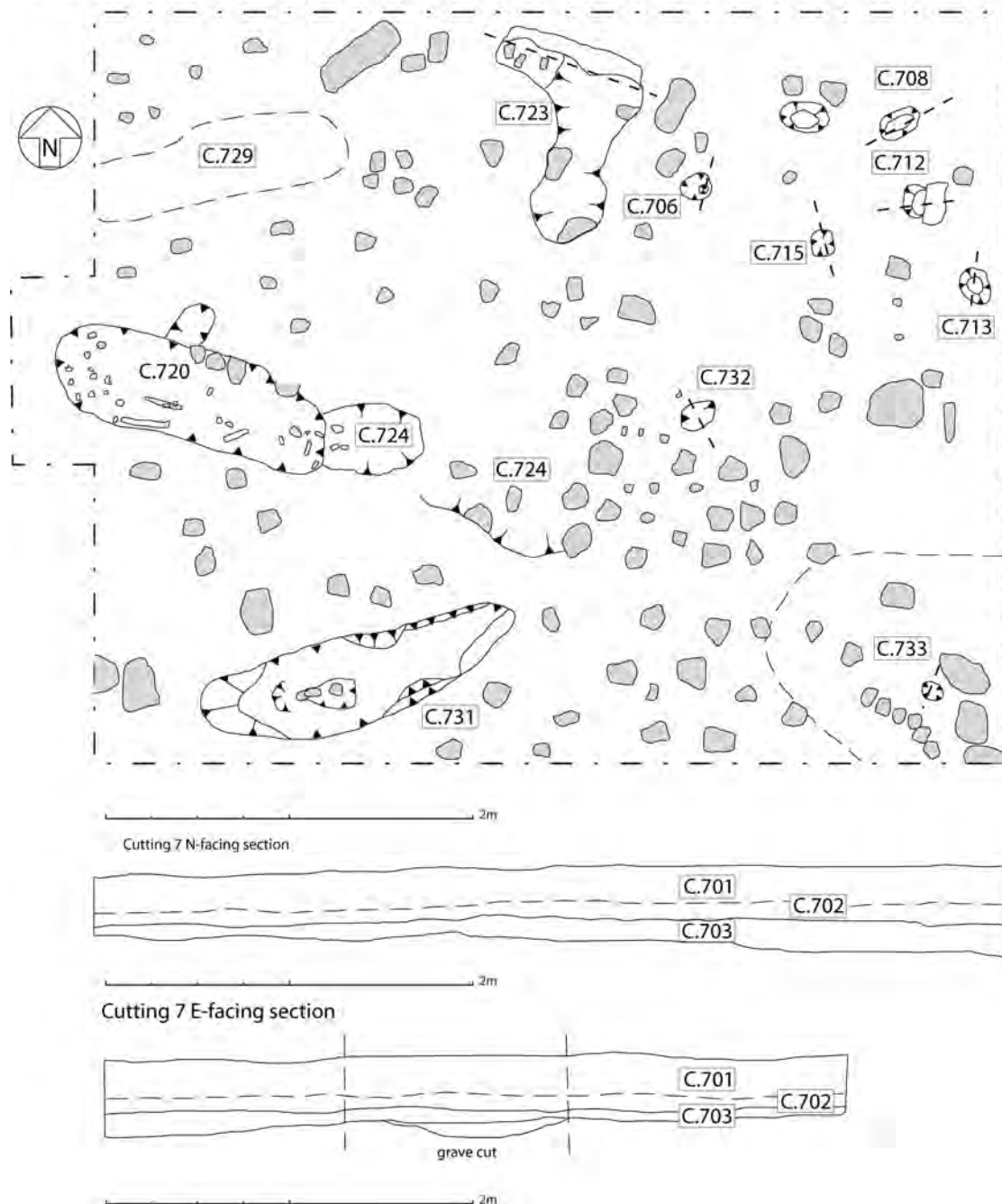


Figure 17 Plan and sections, Cutting 7.

When these features were being investigated, it became apparent that there was still a layer of redeposited/disturbed natural covering much of the base of the cutting. Many of these features seem to be where cobbles were displaced by ploughing. The resulting cavities then filled with redeposited/disturbed natural. This was removed gradually as conditions allowed and during this process the grave cut of Burial 1 (C.720) was identified at the W end of the cutting. This burial was very fragmentary and was heavily truncated by E-W ploughing. Only portions of the right side of the

body were present in situ in the grave cut. The cutting was extended 0.5m to the west in order to fully expose the burial. Subsequently, the cut of a second grave, Burial 2 (C.731) was identified. The grave was cut to a deeper level than for Burial 1 and the skeleton was largely intact having suffered only relatively minor damage from E-W ploughing. In the final week of the excavation, rainfall levels improved the relative colours of the soils and other areas were identified: C.729, which is likely to be the fill of another grave cut and C.733. Because of time constraints, C.729 was not excavated but its extent was planned (Figure 17 above).

5.3 Cutting 8

This was located immediately to the south of Cutting 7 and was positioned to investigate further geophysical anomalies within the area of the innermost enclosure.

The ploughsoil was removed by mattock and shovel and passed through a 5mm suspended mesh sieve. Flint finds were common and some small fragments of human bone were also recovered. Three separate horizons were discernible in the ploughsoil. C.801 had a depth of *c.* 0.20m and was frequently disturbed ploughsoil which is turned over at every ploughing event. C.802 is a continuous layer immediately below C.801 which seems to be a layer of less frequently disturbed ploughsoil with a depth of *c.* 0.10m. The junction between C.801 and C.802 was relatively clear and was easily discernible, unlike in Cuttings 6 and 7. Below a depth of *c.* 0.30m, a separate interface layer, C.803, with a thickness of up to *c.* 0.10m, was identified. This was very similar in character to the underlying subsoils but still contained cultural material like flint and occasional charcoal flecks and seems to represent very infrequent episodes of the deepest ploughing.

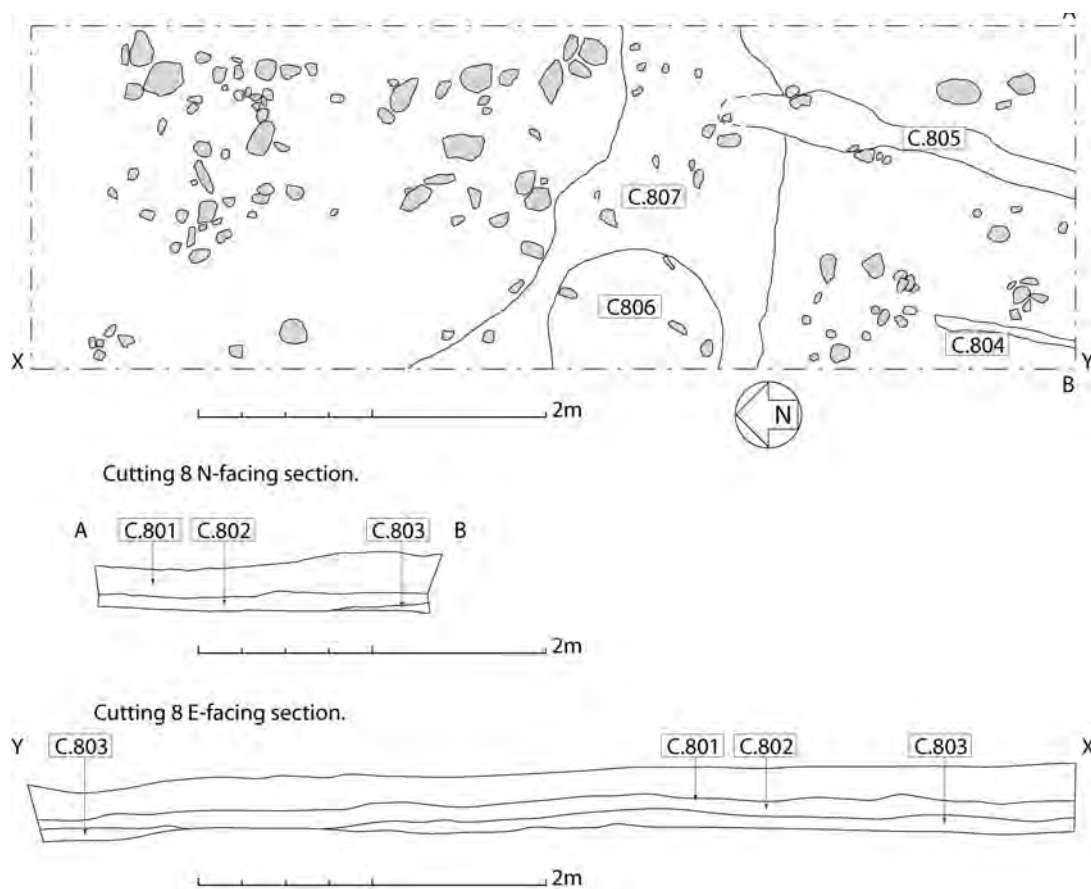


Figure 18 Plan and sections, Cutting 8.

Below these contexts, a number of features and fills were identified. C.804 was located in the southwest corner of the cutting. It is a small gully, a few centimetres wide and deep and seems to represent an episode of particularly deep ploughing, orientated almost north-south. No finds were recovered from its fill. C.805, about a metre to the east of this was similar, although slightly wider and deeper. It shares the same orientation as C.804 and appears also to be the result of a deep ploughing episode.

Other features were also identified and are indicated on the plan as C.806 and C.807. These are areas where cultural deposits were identified which included two pieces of human bone. Due to the time taken to deal with the two burials in Cutting 7 and because of the human bone retrieved from the sieving of the ploughsoil, it was thought that there was a high likelihood that these areas represent further burials. There were neither the time nor the resources available to deal fully with any burials uncovered so a decision was taken to leave these features unexcavated.

5.4 Completion of Cutting 5

Cutting 5 was excavated in the 2010 season to facilitate the full exposure and lifting of a greywacke slab similar to the stone used in the construction of the passage tombs at various locations on the northern side of the River Boyne. However, it was not possible to lift the stone during the 2010 season so the cutting was secured and lifting went ahead this summer. The stone was transported by tractor to the garden of Rossnaree House for safe keeping by the landowner.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The 2011 season excavation was successful. Although the area excavated was small in relation to the overall size of the site, important and useful information was retrieved relating to the medieval occupation and use of the site. It was a disappointment not to have uncovered any features that could be related to the prehistoric phase of activity of the site and the lack of such features is perhaps indicative of the general nature of occupation and activity on sites in the area during the Neolithic.

The excavation has been successful in retrieving additional dating material in the form of animal bone and several pieces have been recovered key features, particularly in Trenches 6 and 7, which will hopefully allow accurate radiocarbon dating for the main period of use of the site. Radiocarbon dating of the two major ditch features excavated in Cutting 6 will be particularly informative in understanding the phasing of the development of the site.

The two burials uncovered in Cutting 7 were not anticipated despite the intense pre excavation geophysical surveying. Proper resolution of these burials took much of the time and resources of the more experienced members of the team and unfortunately limited the possibility of entirely resolving other features in Cuttings 6 and 8. However, the presence of these burials adds an important new dimension to the site and it is expected that post-excavation analysis of these remains will add significantly to our understanding of the chronology and function of the site.

A significant number of environmental samples were also recovered. Large quantities of animal bone were collected which provide information on the economy of the site and some of which may be used to obtain radiocarbon dates. Useful comparanda exist for the assemblage from the work carried out at Knowth in particular. All major contexts from the features excavated were bulk sampled for macrofossil remains and separate soil samples were taken for mollusc identification.

Significant data have also been gathered in the form of feature plans and section drawings against which the various geophysical survey techniques may be directly compared.

The results of the geophysical surveys pointed to the difficulties involved in interpretation of results on the alluvial terraces close to the river. Interpretation was most difficult in Area 2 where Cuttings 7 and 8 were located. Many of the point-type anomalies initially identified appear to be related to the mixed geology of the soil as many of the cobbles seem to be of igneous origin which caused difficulties in the magnetic surveys in particular. While the location of Burials 1 and 2 in Cutting 7 can be discerned with hindsight, they were not identified in advance of the excavation because of the specific soil conditions in this area. This experience offers a lesson in the possible difficulties that might be encountered in carrying out magnetic geophysical survey on these alluvial terraces of the River Boyne.

In terms of an interpretation of the site, again the artefactual evidence points towards a later 1st millennium date for the activity. Available evidence from the excavation currently suggests that the site may be a form of settlement cemetery, and thus bears similarities to other settlement sites with associated burial activity like Raystown, Co. Meath, Augherskea, Co. Meath and Balriggeran, Co. Louth. However, attention has been drawn recently to annalistic references to a Viking longphort at Linn Rois on the River Boyne, established in 842 AD and it has been suggested that the Rosnaree enclosure may represent the site of this longphort. It is expected that further post-excavation analysis will throw further light on this possibility.

6. References

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Photo 1 Burial 1 Cutting 7, looking E.



Photo 2 Burial 2 Cutting 7, looking N.