Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork
School of Archaeology and Palaeoecology

Queen's University Belfast

Data Structure Report: No. 16.

Monitoring at Nendrum, Mahee Island, Co. Down 2003

AE/03/74

On behalf of

ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE SERVICE

Data Structure Report: Nendrum, Mahee Island, County Down 2003

(Licence No. AE/03/74)

Philip Macdonald

(CAF DSR 016)

(Licence No. AE/03/74)

Contents

1 Summary

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Archaeological monitoring during the replacement of a safety grill placed over an exposed pit on the early monastic site at Nendrum, Mahee Island took place on Friday 27th June 2003. The monitoring was undertaken by Philip Macdonald for the Excavation Unit of the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork in the School of Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast (Licence No. AE/03/74). The monitoring was conducted on behalf of the Environment and Heritage Service: Built Heritage who funded the work.

1.1.2 The site at Nendrum is defined by three large concentric cashels of dry-stone walling which were largely rebuilt by H.C.Lawlor in the 1920's. The inner cashel contains the remains of a church, round tower and a graveyard, while the second cashel contains the so-called monastic school or workshop and further burials. The exposed pit is located immediately adjacent to the second cashel wall on the western side of the site. It is partially overlain by the southern wall of the 'monastic school'. Apparently predating the 'monastic school', the pit is *c.*0.95 metres by *c.*0.80 metres in dimension and *c.*1.9 metres deep and its sides are revetted by stones. Although it was excavated by both Lawlor in the 1920's and A.C.Thomas in the 1950's, the precise date and function of the pit is uncertain.

1.2 Monitoring

1.2.1 Staff of the Environment and Heritage Service: Regional Operations requested that monitoring by a licensed archaeologist take place during the fitting of a safety grill over the exposed pit. The principal objective of the monitoring was to ascertain the character and date of any deposits disturbed during the fitting of the safety grill.

1.2.2 During the fitting of the new safety grill, five small holes (Trench Nos. I – V) were dug adjacent to the pit. These holes/trenches formed sockets into which the bolts of the grill's frame were concreted. The stratigraphic sequence in each hole/trench was similar, but not identical. All five holes were covered in a thick layer of matted vegetation (Context Nos.101, 201, 301, 401 and 501) which overlay a deposit of loose, rounded to sub-angular, stones (Context Nos.102, 202, 302, 402 and 502). In three of the holes (Trench Nos. I, III and IV) this deposit was only one stone thick, whilst in Trench No. II the deposit consisted of at least three layers of stones and in Trench No. V the deposit consisted of at least two layers of stone. For the purposes of securing the bolts of the grill it was only necessary to remove one layer of stones in all five of the holes. Included in the stone layer in Trench No. V were two small concrete blocks and a sherd of modern bottle glass (Small Find No.1002) which suggest that the deposit of loose stones is relatively recent in date.

Underlying the deposit of loose stones in Trench Nos. I, III, and IV was a mid brown silty loam (Context Nos. 103, 303 and 403). In Trench Nos. I and IV it was necessary to partially excavate the silty loam deposit for a depth of *c.*0.03 metres

1.3 Discussion

1.3.1 Despite their small size, a tentative interpretation of the stratigraphic sequence exposed in the five holes/trenches is possible. The layer of stones probably represents a recent and deliberate deposit presumably intended to form either a path or area of hardstanding around the pit. That the deposit varies in depth suggests that its deposition may have been part of an attempt to level the ground surface around the exposed pit. The overlying matted vegetation is the product of grass and weeds which have grown up through the stones while the underlying mid brown silty loam may represent a buried topsoil or, more probably, the backfill of either Lawlor's or Thomas's excavations.

1.4 Recommendations

1.4.1 Despite the importance of the monastic site at Nendrum, the deposits disturbed during the replacement of the safety grill are not of any significant archaeological value or interest. Consequently, it is recommended that publication of the monitoring results, beyond a concise summary in *Excavations 2003*, is not merited. No additional post-excavation research or other resources will be necessary to produce the summary report.

2 Introduction

2.1 General

2.1.1 The following report details the results of the archaeological monitoring of the replacement of a safety grill laid over an exposed pit at the monastic site at Nendrum on Mahee Island, Co. Down (SMR No. DOW 017:005). The monitoring was undertaken on the 27th June 2003 by Philip Macdonald for the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, School of Archaeology and Palaeoecology at Queen's University of Belfast (Licence No. AE/03/74). The monitoring was conducted on behalf of the Environment and Heritage Service: Built Heritage who funded the work.

2.2 Background

2.2.1 Mahee Island is the largest island in Strangford Lough. It is situated within the parish of Tullynakill, close to the western shore of the lough and is located about five kilometres to the southeast of Comber. The island consists of two ridges joined by an isthmus; the monastic site of Nendrum is located towards the southern end of the western ridge which is formed by a drumlin with a boulder clay core (Figure One). The name 'Mahee' is derived from Mochaoi who was the saint traditionally considered to have founded the monastery at Nendrum (Knox 1875, 540; McErlean and Crothers 2002, 200).

2.2.2 The monastic site at Nendrum was discovered by Reeves in 1844 whilst he was conducting research on the taxation roll of 1306 AD (Reeves 1902). Since Reeves' initial work at the site, there have been four phases of largely unpublished excavation at Nendrum. H.C.Lawlor oversaw excavation and restoration work at the site between 1922 and 1924 on behalf of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society (Lawlor 1925). In 1954 A.C.Thomas conducted a new survey of the site and excavated several small scale trenches (see Archaeological Survey of County Down 1966, 292-295, fig.191; Matthews 1995, 53-77). D.Waterman excavated two trenches at the site during the 1960s (see Matthews 1995, 55-56, 67-68, figs.31-33). N.Brannon undertook excavations at the site in 1979 and 1982 which have been usefully summarised cf. Matthews 1995, 78-82. Historical sources relating to the site have been critically reviewed by Fitzsimons (2000, 99-108).

2.2.3 The site at Nendrum is defined by three large concentric cashels, largely rebuilt by Lawlor, of dry-stone walling (Figure Two). The inner cashel contains the remains of a rectangular gabled church, a round tower and a graveyard, while the second cashel contains the so-called monastic school or workshop and further burials. The exposed pit, over which the

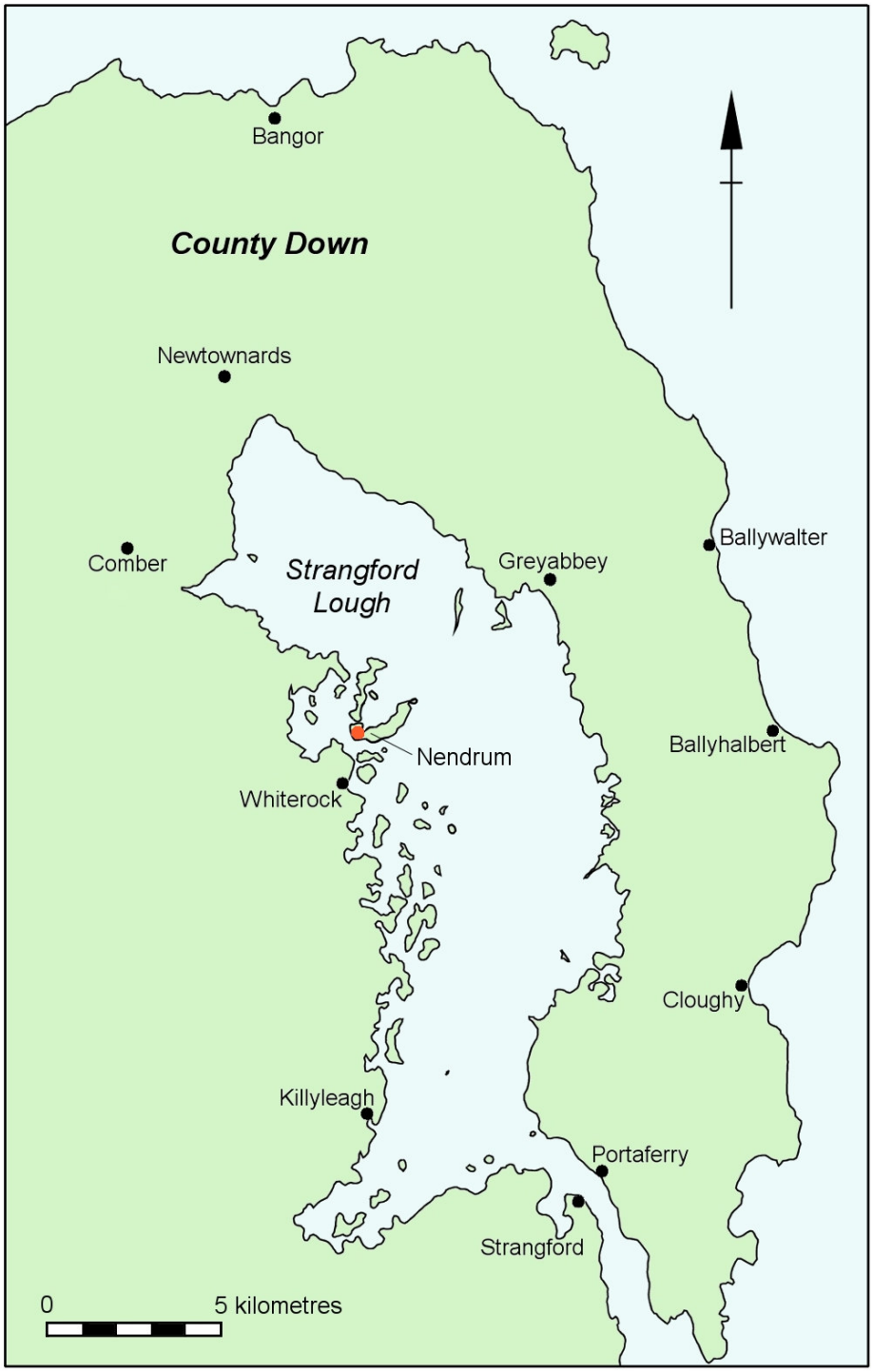

Figure One: Location Map

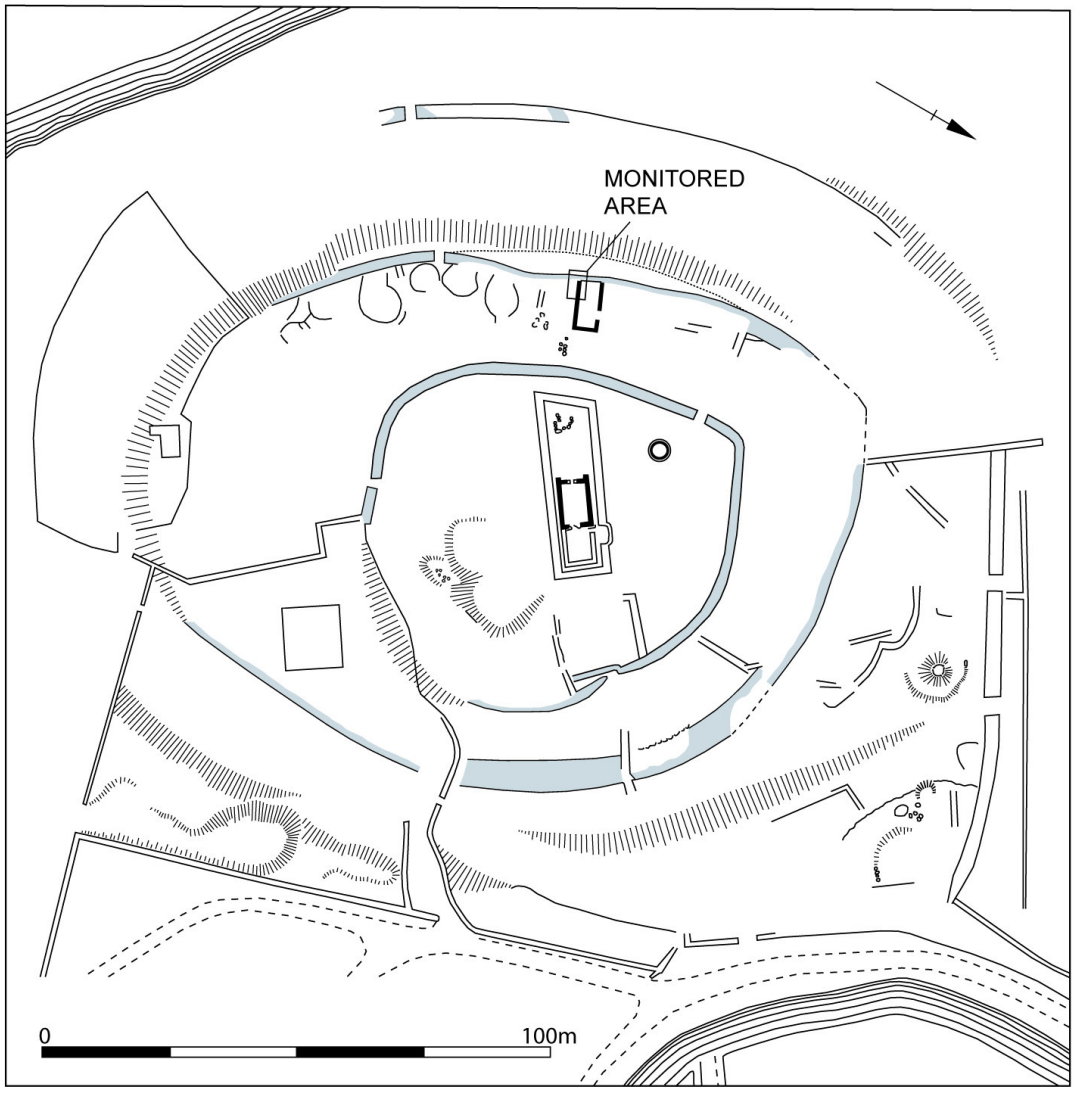

Figure Two: Plan of the Early Christian monastic site of Nendrum showing the monitored area (after Archaeological Survey of County Down 1966, fig.191).

replacement safety grill was fitted, is located immediately adjacent to the second cashel wall on the western side of the site. It is partially overlain by the southern wall of the 'monastic school' building. Apparently predating the 'monastic school', the pit is *c.*0.95 metres by *c.*0.80 metres in dimension and *c.*1.9 metres deep. The pit's sides are revetted by stones and Lawlor suggested that it may have been partially arched over the top (Lawlor 1925, 104). Although it was excavated by both Lawlor (who recorded that its base contained 'a deep layer of fire remains, and a few fragments of animal bones' cf. Lawlor 1925, 104), and Thomas (see Matthews 1995, 66, fig.28.4) the precise date and function of the pit remains uncertain.

2.2.4 In her important evaluation of the archaeology of the site, Matthews suggests that Lawlor considered the pit to date to an Early Medieval, pre-terrace phase in the site's sequence (1995, 24). This is, however, not the only possible reading of Lawlor's text. Lawlor does not explicitly state that the pit pre-dates the construction of the terrace. Furthermore, as Lawlor observed, the pit is only faced on the inside (Lawlor 1924, 104) suggesting that it was never a freestanding structure but rather a negative feature cut from the same terrace level that the 'monastic school' was built into. Matthews' re-evaluation of the pottery recovered during Lawlor's excavations suggests that the terrace dates from the eighth to the twelfth centuries AD providing an imprecise *terminus post quem* for the pit's construction (see Matthews 1995, 35). The motif pieces recovered by Lawlor from the 'monastic school' have been convincingly dated from the seventh to ninth centuries (O'Meadhra 1979, 72; Matthews 1995, 37) which, combined with the pottery evidence, suggests an eighth or ninth century AD date for the 'monastic school' and by extension the pit. However, in the light of Thomas's excavations, Lawlor's association of the motif pieces with the floor of the 'monastic school' has been questioned and it is possible that the motif pieces may have been recovered from deposits underlying and predating the 'monastic school' (Matthews 1995, 65). If this is the case then no stratigraphic relationship between the deposits containing the motif pieces and the pit can be established and their date cannot be applied to the pit.

2.2.5 The function of the exposed pit is also uncertain. Lawlor suggested that it may have been an oven or a sweathouse (1925, 104) whilst Thomas presumed that the pit had probably been used for storage (Matthews 1995, 66). B.K.Davison noted several Early Medieval and Medieval parallels for the pit and suggests that their function reflects some form of specialised activity (Davison 1962, 81).

2.3 Archaeological survey of the site's environs

2.3.1 Mahee Island contains several archaeological sites ranging in date from the Mesolithic to the Post-Medieval period. Appreciation of the archaeology of Mahee Island has been

greatly advanced by the 1995 to 2000 survey of the coastal archaeology of Strangford Lough commissioned by the Environment and Heritage Service: Built Heritage (McErlean, McConkey and Forsythe 2002). Details of sites and monuments either on the island or associated with its shoreline have been tabulated (Table One). In addition to the early monastic site of Nendrum, the most significant sites are the Early Medieval tidal mills associated with the monastery (McErlean and Crothers 2002) and the ruined tower house known as Mahee Castle (Archaeological Survey of County Down 1966, 244-245; Ó Baoill and McQuaid 2002; Macdonald 2003).

Description	**SMR No. or MR No.**	**Grid Reference**	**References**
Mesolithic flint blade find spot	DOW 017:032	J52386352	
Mesolithic flint scatters	DOW 017:036	J52446363	McErlean, McConkey and Forsythe 2002, 435
Late Mesolithic flint scatter	-	J537624	McErlean 2002c, fig.7.8
Oyster midden	-	J538624	McErlean 2002c, fig.7.8
Oyster midden	MRD 168:96	J35393645	McErlean 2002c, fig.7.8; McErlean, McConkey and Forsythe 2002, 486-487
Neolithic polished stone axes	DOW 017:039	J524636	McErlean, McConkey and Forsythe 2002, 446
Monastic site: Nendrum	DOW 017:005	J524636	Lawlor 1925; McErlean 2002a, 75
Tower House: Mahee Castle	DOW 017:004	J52396394	Archaeological Survey of County Down 1966, 244-245; Ó Baoill and McQuaid 2002; Macdonald 2003
Early Medieval tidal mills	-	J525637	McErlean and Crothers 2002
Possible quay	MRD 168:180	J524639	McConkey 2002, 310-311, fig.10.2; McErlean, McConkey and Forsythe 2002, 529
Late nineteenth century causeway to Reagh Island	-		McErlean 2002c, 196
Quay and slipway	MRD 168:21	J522638	McErlean, McConkey and Forsythe 2002, 527
Slipway	MRD 168:29	J523636	McConkey 2002, 311; McErlean, McConkey and Forsythe 2002, 528
Quay and slipways	MRD168:149	J528634	McErlean, McConkey and Forsythe 2002, 528

Table One: Recorded archaeological sites either on, or associated with the shoreline of, Mahee Island

2.4 Reason for excavation and objectives

2.4.1 Given the archaeological importance of the monastic site at Nendrum, staff of the Environment and Heritage Service: Regional Operations requested that monitoring by a licensed archaeologist take place during the fitting of a safety grill over the exposed pit. The principal objective of the monitoring was to ascertain the character and date of any deposits disturbed during the fitting of the safety grill.

2.5 Archiving

2.5.1 A copy of this report has been deposited with the Environment and Heritage Service: Built Heritage. All site records and finds are temporarily archived with the School of Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University Belfast.

2.6 Credits and acknowledgements

2.6.1 The monitoring was undertaken by Philip Macdonald. For their assistance during the course of the monitoring and the preparation of this report, the author is grateful to: Joe Casement, John Davison (Queen's University Belfast), Colm Donnelly (Queen's University Belfast), Gavin Duffy (Environment and Heritage Service: Regional Operations), Declan Hurl (Environment and Heritage Service: Built Heritage) and Norman Patten (Environment and Heritage Service: Regional Operations). The illustrations were prepared by Bronagh Murray of the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork, Queen's University Belfast.

3 Excavation

3.1 Methodology

3.1.1 Installing the new safety grill over the exposed pit involved the excavation of five small, irregular-shaped holes in the area immediately adjacent to the pit (labelled Trenches I to V) (Figure Three). These holes/trenches formed sockets into which the bolts of the safety grill's frame were concreted (see Table Two for the dimensions of the holes).

3.1.2 The excavation of the five holes/trenches was jointly undertaken by Mr Joe Casement, who was the contractor employed to replace the safety grill, and Philip Macdonald. Regrettably, the wind-on mechanism of the camera failed following the completion of the pre-excavation photographs and so no photographic images of the excavation were taken. A single plan (Scale 1:10) was prepared of the site following the excavation of the five holes/trenches (for details of site photography see Appendix Three and for field illustrations see Appendix Four). In addition to the photography and illustration, the principal site records consisted of a director's notebook which contained a register of small finds (Appendix Five). No bulk finds or samples were recovered during the course of the excavation. Given the small scale of the excavations, no context sheets were used to record the stratigraphic sequence in each hole/trench, instead full descriptions of each deposit were made in the director's notebook. The unique site code used to identify the records generated during the excavation is NEN 03.

Trench No.	Length (north-south)	Width (east-west)	Depth
I	0.42 metres	0.36 metres	0.14 metres
II	0.36 metres	0.38 metres	0.15 metres
III	0.24 metres	0.23 metres	0.14 metres
IV	0.36 metres	0.36 metres	0.16 metres
V	0.35 metres	0.38 metres	0.14 metres

Table Two: Dimensions of irregular holes/trenches excavated around the pit.

3.2 Account of the excavations

3.2.1 The stratigraphic sequence in each hole/trench was similar, although not identical. As a consequence the following account of the excavations is inevitably repetitious. All five holes were covered in a thick layer of matted vegetation (Context Nos.101, 201, 301, 401 and 501) which overlay a deposit of loose rounded to sub-angular stones (Context Nos.102, 202, 302, 402 and 502). Underlying the deposit of loose stones in Trench Nos. I, III, and IV was a mid brown silty loam (Context Nos. 103, 303 and 403). It is intended that the Harris Matrix for the site (see Appendix Two) is referred to whilst reading the account of the stratigraphic sequence of the excavation.

3.2.2 Trench I was a sub-rectangular shaped hole located on the western edge of the exposed pit. It measured 0.42 metres (north-south) by 0.36 metres (east-west) in dimension and was excavated to a depth of 0.14 metres. The matted vegetation (Context No.101) which formed the upper layer in this hole/trench consisted largely of grass and general weeds and was *c.*0.03 metres thick. It overlay a deposit of loose stones (Context No.102) which formed a layer one stone, or *c.*0.08 metres, thick which physically butted against the stone edging around the exposed pit. Underlying the layer of stones was a mid brown silty loam (Context No.103) of which only the upper *c.*0.03 metres was excavated.

3.2.3 Trench II was a sub-circular shaped hole located adjacent to the southwestern edge of the exposed pit. It measured 0.36 metres (north-south) by 0.38 metres (east-west) in dimension and was excavated to a depth of 0.15 metres. The matted vegetation (Context No.201), which formed the upper layer in this hole/trench consisted of mainly grass and general weeds and was *c.*0.03 metres thick. It overlay a deposit of loose stones (Context No.202) which was at least three layers of stone thick, although only the uppermost layer of stone was removed.

3.2.4 Trench III was a sub-rectangular shaped hole located adjacent to the southeastern edge of the exposed pit. It measured 0.24 metres (north-south) by 0.23 metres (east-west) in dimension and was excavated to a depth of 0.14 metres. The matted vegetation (Context No.301), which formed the upper layer in this hole/trench consisted of mainly grass and common weeds and was *c.*0.03 metres thick. It overlay a deposit of loose stones (Context No.302) which formed a layer one stone, or *c.*0.11 metres, thick. Underlying the deposit of loose stones was a mid brown silty loam (Context No.303) which was not excavated.

3.2.5 Trench IV was a sub-circular shaped hole located adjacent to the eastern edge of the exposed pit. It measured 0.36 metres (north-south) by 0.36 metres (east-west) in dimension and was excavated to a depth of 0.16 metres. The matted vegetation (Context No.401) which formed the upper layer in this hole/trench consisted largely of grass and general weeds and was *c.*0.03 metres thick. It overlay a deposit of loose stones (Context No.402) which formed a layer one stone, or *c.*0.10 metres, thick. A fragment of bone was recovered from the deposit of loose stones (Small Find No.1001). It was not possible to ascertain whether this deposit butted against the stone edging around the exposed pit. Underlying the layer of stones was a mid brown silty loam (Context No.403) of which only the upper *c.*0.03 metres was excavated.

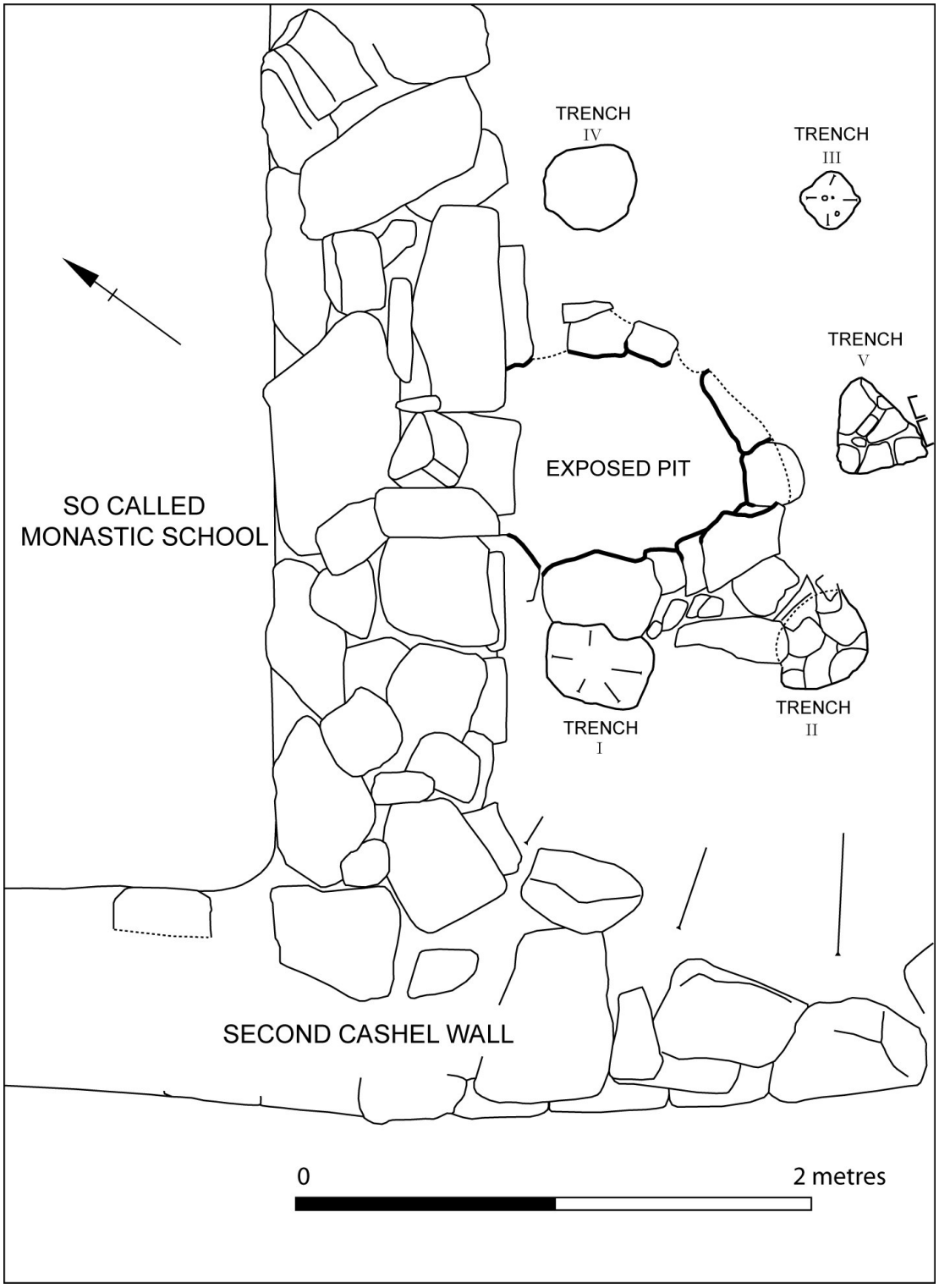

Figure Three: Plan of monitored area illustrating location of Trecnhes I – V (Scale 1:20)

3.2.6 Trench V was a sub-triangular shaped hole located adjacent to the southern edge of the exposed pit. It measured 0.35 metres (north-south) by 0.38 metres (east-west) and was excavated to a depth of 0.14 metres. The matted vegetation (Context No.501), which formed the upper layer in this hole/trench consisted of mainly grass and general weeds and was *c.*0.04 metres thick. It overlay a deposit of loose stones (Context No.502) which was at least two layers of stone thick, although only the uppermost layer of stone was removed. Two brick-shaped blocks of concrete were incorporated into the southern edge of the deposit of loose stones. A sherd of modern bottle glass was recovered from the deposit of loose stones (Small Find No.1002).

3.2.7 Given the close proximity of the holes/trenches and the similarity in the character of the deposits disturbed in each hole/trench, it is not unreasonable to assume that the deposits of loose stones identified in each hole/trench (Context Nos.102, 202, 302, 402 and 502), and the underlying mid brown silty loams uncovered in Trenches I, III and IV (Context Nos.103, 303 and 403), were all parts of the same two deposits. In addition to these two layers, and the overlying matted vegetation, no other features or deposits were identified during the course of the excavation.

3.3 Artefactual assemblage

3.3.1 Apart from the fragment of bone (Small Find No.1001), which was recovered from the deposit of stones in Trench No. IV (Context No.402), and the sherd of modern bottle glass (Small Find No.1002), which was recovered from the stone layer in Trench No. V (Context No.502), no other artefacts were recovered during the course of the monitoring. The sherd of modern bottle glass (Small Find No.1002), combined with the two brick shaped concrete blocks also observed in the loose stone deposit in Trench V (Context No.502) suggests that the loose deposit of stones (Context Nos.102, 202, 302, 402 and 502) is of relatively recent date.

4 Discussion

4.1 Despite their small size, a tentative interpretation of the stratigraphic sequence exposed in the five holes/trenches is possible. The layer of stones (Context Nos.102, 202, 302, 402 and 502) represents a recent and deliberate deposit presumably intended to form either a path or area of hardstanding around the pit. That the deposit varies in depth suggests that its deposition may have been part of an attempt to level the ground surface around the exposed pit, presumably following either Lawlor's excavations in the 1920's or Thomas's excavations in the 1950's. The overlying matted vegetation is the product of grass and weeds which have grown up through the stones while the underlying mid brown silty loam may represent a buried topsoil or, more probably, the backfill of either Lawlor's or Thomas's excavations.

4.2 Despite the archaeological importance of the monastic site of Nendrum no significant archaeological deposits or features were disturbed during the replacement of the safety grill over the exposed pit.

5 Recommendations for further work

5.1 Despite the importance of the monastic site at Nendrum, the sequence of deposits disturbed during the replacement of the safety grill is not of any significant archaeological value or interest. Consequently, it is recommended that publication of the results of the monitoring, beyond a concise summary in *Excavations 2003*, is not merited. No additional post-excavation research or other resources will be necessary to produce the summary report.

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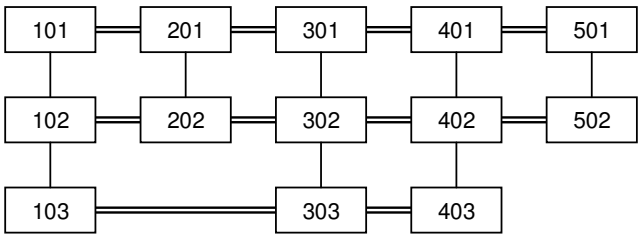
Appendix One: Context List

Context No.	***Description***
Trench I	
101	Matted vegetation
102	Deposit of loose rounded to sub-angular stones
103	Mid brown silty loam
Trench II	
201	Matted vegetation
202	Deposit of loose rounded to sub-angular stones
Trench III	
301	Matted vegetation
302	Deposit of loose rounded to sub-angular stones
303	Mid brown silty loam
Trench IV	
401	Matted vegetation
402	Deposit of loose rounded to sub-angular stones
403	Mid brown silty loam
Trench V	
501	Matted vegetation
502	Deposit of loose rounded to sub-angular stones

Appendix Two: Harris Matrix



Matted vegetation

Loose rounded to sub-angular stones

Mid brown silty loam

Appendix Three: Photographic Record

Film One: Sensia Fujichrome 400

27th June 2003

1 The exposed pit prior to the removal of the old safety grill looking northwest.
2 The exposed pit prior to the removal of the old safety grill looking northwest.
3 The exposed pit prior to the removal of the old safety grill looking west.
4 The exposed pit prior to the removal of the old safety grill looking west.

NB: Regrettably, the wind-on mechanism of the camera failed following the completion of the pre-excavation photographs and so no photographs of the five holes/trenches were taken.

Appendix Four: Field Drawing Register

Drawing No.	***Scale***	***Type***	***Description***
1	1:10	Plan	Plan of exposed pit and trenches I - V following excavation

Appendix Five: Small Finds Register

Small Find No.	***Description***	***Context No.***	***Easting***	***Northing***	***Height (uncorrected)***
1001	Bone	402	-	-	-
1002	Glass fragment (modern)	502	-	-	-

Plate One: The exposed pit prior to the removal of the old safety grill looking west.

Plate Two: The exposed pit prior to the removal of the old safety grill looking northwest.