

Chapel House Wood Landscape Project

Interim Report 2013



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The annual Dales Heritage Field School was held at Chapel House Wood again this year, and in contrast to last year's wettest summer on record we enjoyed (or endured) the hottest summer weather since 2006. 30 people took part during the three-week Field School, and this year for the first time an additional week was organised for students from Northwestern Michigan College who were on a two-week course in the UK accredited through the Nautical Archaeological Society.

The aims of the Chapel House Wood Landscape Project this year were to continue the investigation of area DG which had been opened up last year, and to complete the detailed topographical survey of the southern part of the settlement.

Topographical survey

Using a plane table and self-reducing alidade, participants were introduced to the techniques of earthwork survey and generated a plan of the southern part of the settlement area (Fig. 1). This was tied in to reference points which had been accurately located using differential GPS, and so provides a seamless addition to all previous surveys carried out during the project.

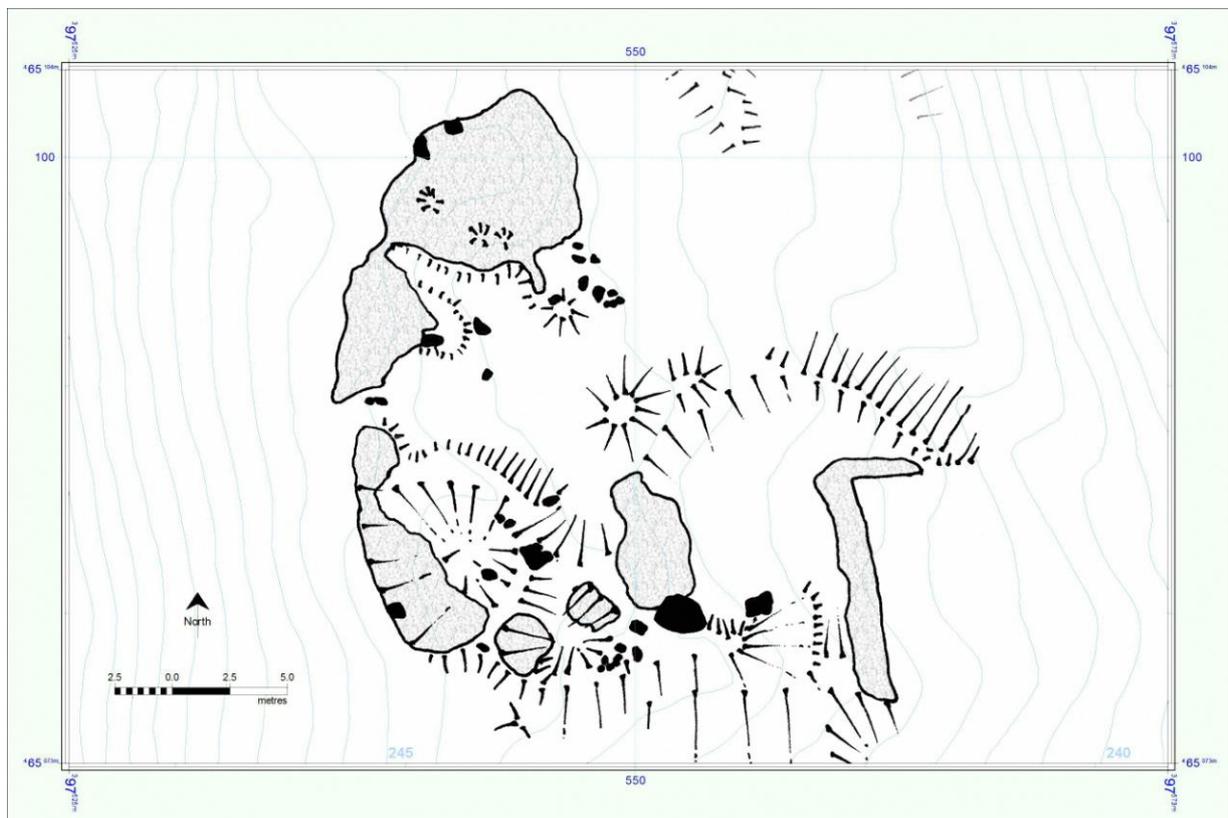
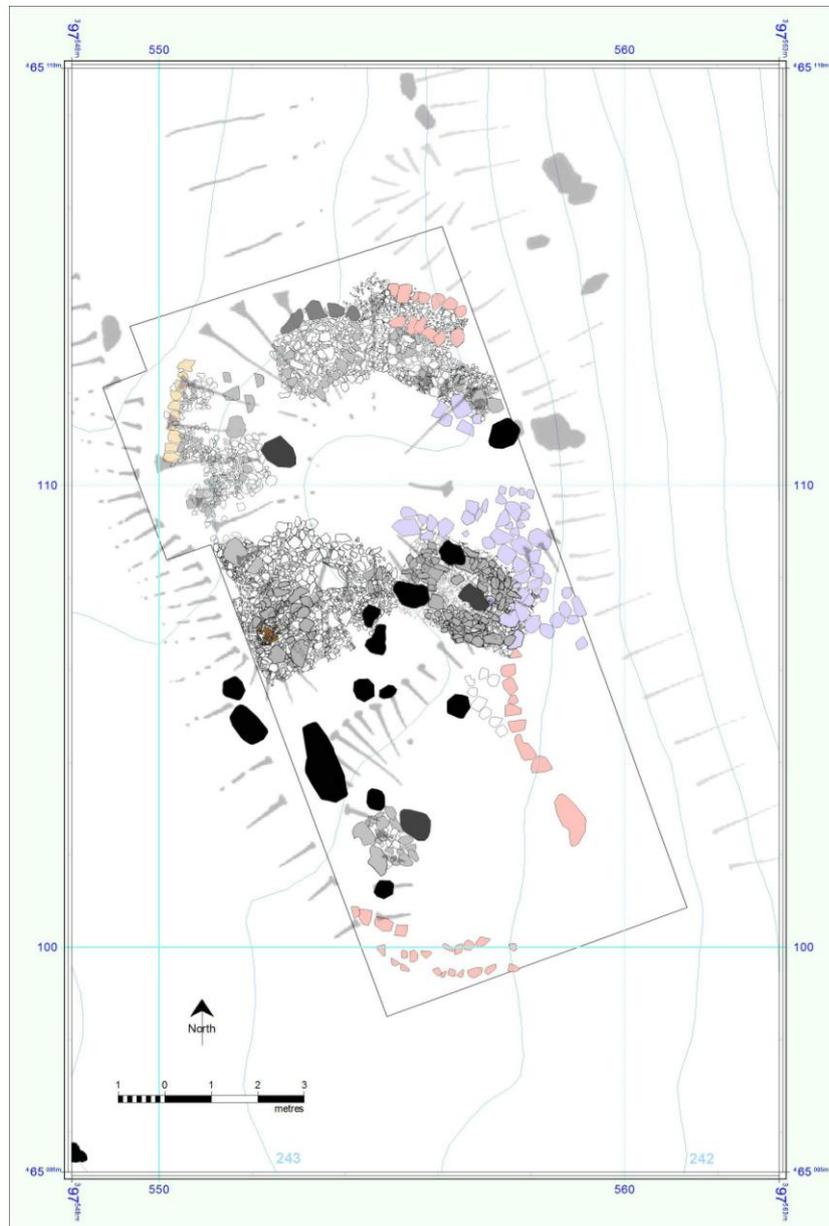


Fig. 1 Topographical survey of the southern part of the settlement. Shaded areas are piles of loose stone: on the right this lies at the base of the modern field wall which is not shown. Contours at 0.5m intervals.

Excavation of area DG

The area being investigated includes a bowl-shaped depression situated on the eastern side of the trackway through the settlement and at the edge of a natural terrace. The southern part of the area includes a significant anomaly identified during previous magnetic surveys (see the 2012 Interim Report for details). The total area under excavation was extended this year to 16 x 7 metres (Fig. 2).



*Fig. 2 Plan of area DG at the end of the 2013 Field School.
The loose stone rubble covering the whole area is only shown here in relation to specific features.
Contours at 0.5m intervals.*

The spread of mixed limestone and sandstone cobbles covering the southern part of area DG contained the highest density of finds from this year's excavation. Recent activity was represented by fragments of clay pipe and a bone gaming die (Fig. 3), but the majority of finds were of animal bone mixed in among the stones as in other parts of the settlement area. A small, rounded piece of copper alloy may be yet another indication of metalworking taking place on the site, but the precise location of this has not yet been identified.

The high magnetic anomaly identified in previous years was close to several large boulders. Excavation showed that while some of these are earthfast, the closest boulder rested on top of a few stones creating a void that had been exploited by rabbits. It was concluded that the boulder had slipped into its present position, and it was moved to a more stable location so that excavation could continue safely. In the area of the magnetic anomaly a concentration of cobbles suggests a deliberate feature which remains to be investigated. A 1m wide trench excavated across the area shows a build-up of at least 200 mm of limestone cobbles and shattered sandstone mixed with animal bone. A few fragments of thick, gritty pottery were also recovered in this area. Soil samples were taken on a 1m grid to test for hammerscale.



*Fig. 3 Selected finds in 2013: coarse pottery, glass bead, Samian fragment, gaming die and bone pin.
Scale bars = 10 mm*

Features in the northern part of area DG

Opening up the remaining parts of the northern excavation area revealed a number of features that suggest a more complex and unusual picture than was originally expected. Not all of the features have yet been fully excavated, and while some can be readily explained others are less easy to interpret at present.

The flat slab discovered last year was shown to be part of an extensive area of paving on the eastern part of the depression, leading out along the very edge of the natural terrace and partially covered by tumbled stones. In the north-eastern corner, the double-faced walling revealed last year did not continue around the top edge of the bowl as expected, but instead gave way to what appears to be a discrete setting of stones (Fig. 4), the nature and purpose of which is as yet unclear.

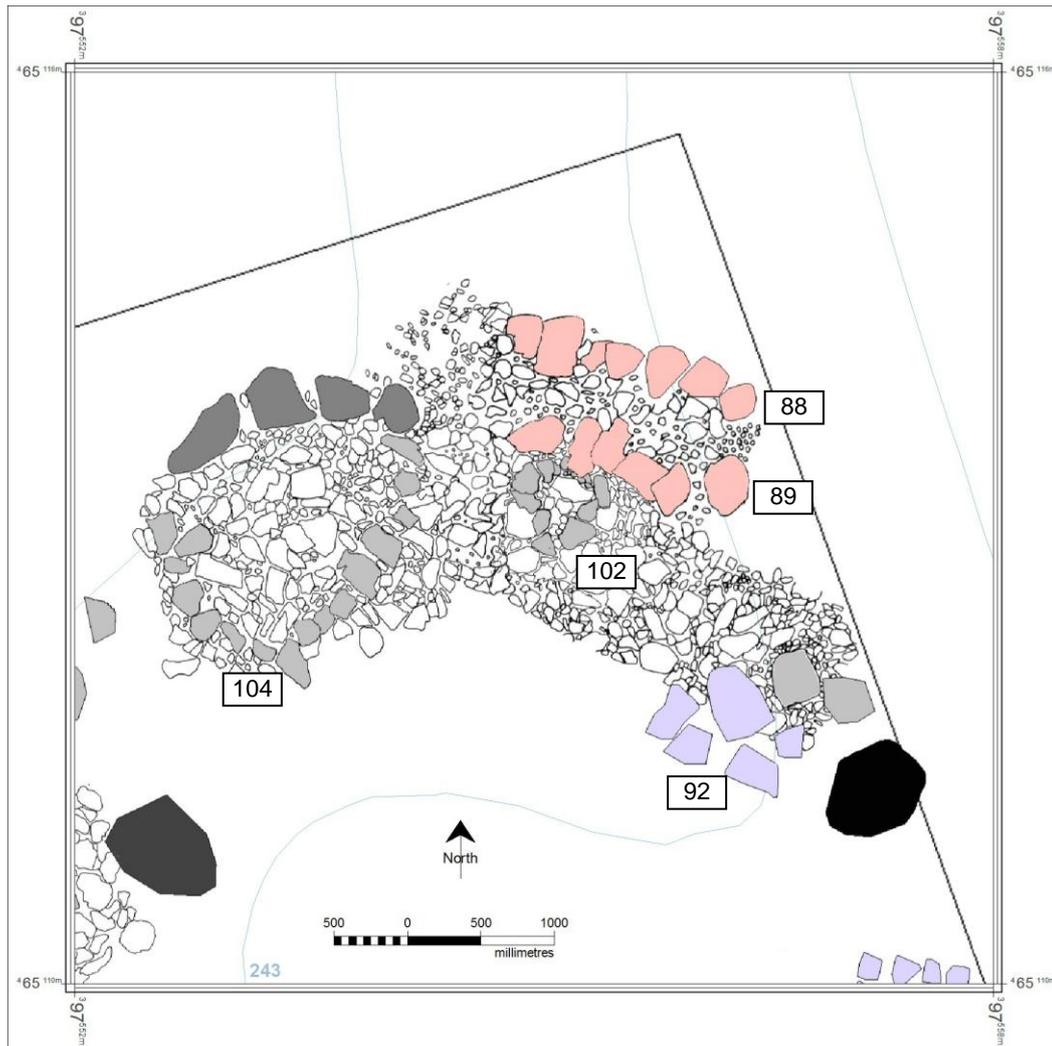


Fig. 4 Features in the north-eastern corner of area DG. Loose stone rubble is only depicted around the features. Light grey shading: prominent stones set in loose rubble; dark grey: prominent earthfast stones; black: large boulders. Purple: paving; pink: wall facing. Contours at 0.5m intervals.

A similar setting on the opposite side of the bowl contained a feature reminiscent of a stone setting excavated in 2008 on the northern platform in area DF. Concentric rings of edge-set stones surrounded small stone blocks placed one above the other, beneath which in each case was a deliberately-placed cow molar (Fig. 5). The example excavated in 2008 produced a radiocarbon date of 1798 ± 30 bp (Wk27961), which calibrates to a broad date range in the second to fourth centuries AD at 2σ (Martlew 2012).

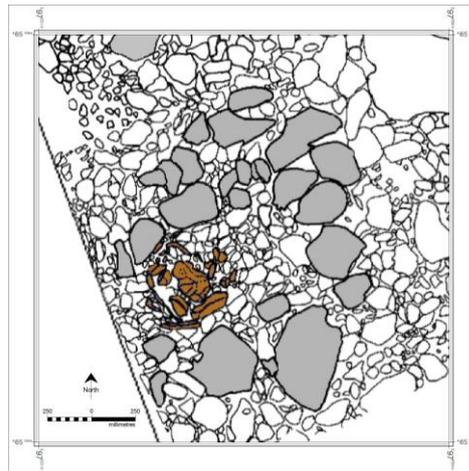
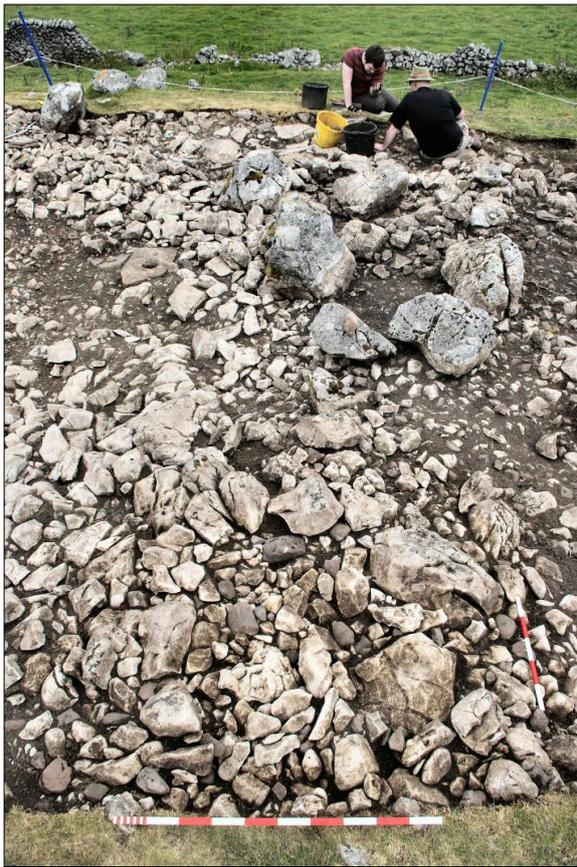


Fig. 5 Stone setting, contexts 97 and 117; (l) general view looking East (top r) plan showing edge-set stones within boulder kerb (bottom r) during excavation showing location of cow molar

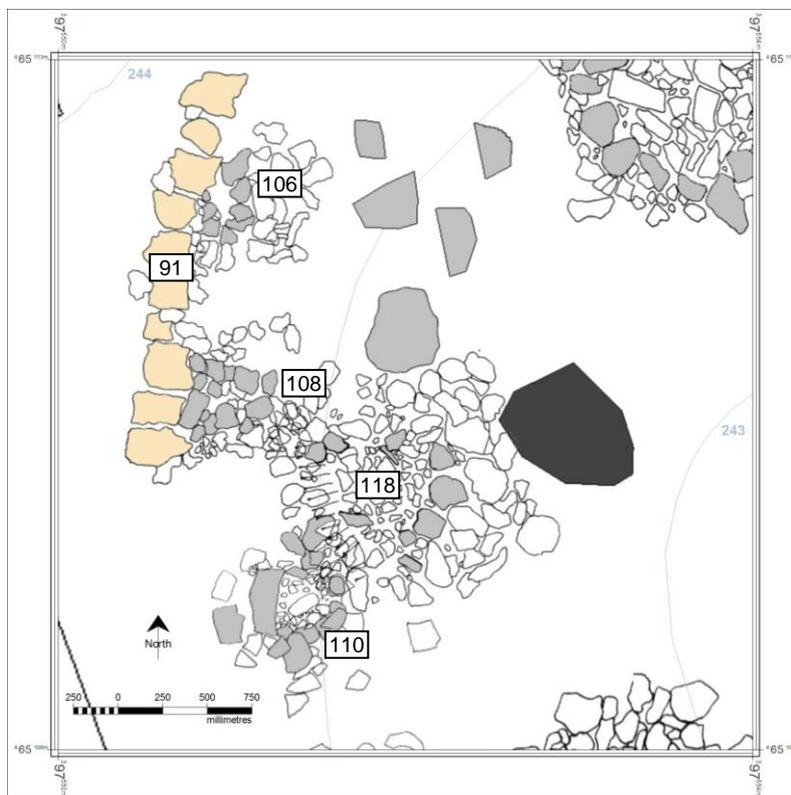


Fig. 6 Revetment kerb 91 and post-settings 106-110; feature 118.

A kerb of small boulders in the north-western part of the area (Fig. 6, context 91) may represent a secondary re-use of the scooped hollow, with post-settings 106-110 providing anchor points for a lean-to roof. Rather than roofing the whole of the hollow, this would provide cover for the area of stone setting 118 which may have been the original position of the large boulder that now lies adjacent to it.

The positioning of large boulders around the hollow is not at present easy to interpret in structural or other functional terms. Some have clearly fallen from their original positions, and now lie loosely on top of the general scatter of limestone and shattered sandstone cobbles covering the area. Others are earthfast, or just too large and well-set to suggest anything other than that they remain in their original positions (whether indeed those are natural or artificial). The arrangement of contexts 94 and 95 demonstrates the current difficulties in interpretation (Fig. 7). A large boulder is surrounded by a loosely built wall of limestone cobbles, no more than 0.5m high, which partly incorporates two large earthfast boulders and partly overlies the paving leading towards the entrance to the hollow. Parallels of this arrangement have yet to be identified, and its purpose remains a mystery.

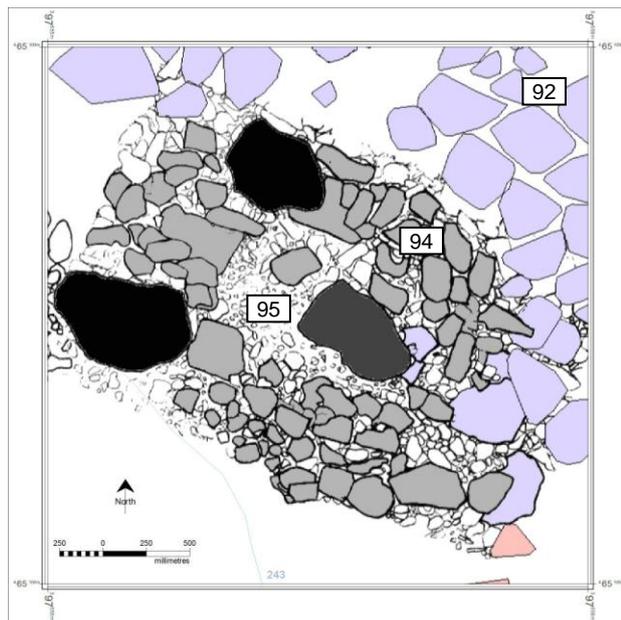


Fig. 7 Stone walling around a large boulder (l) looking West; (r) plan, shading as in Fig. 4

Finds from the northern part of area DG were significantly fewer than from the area outside the scooped hollow. A small fragment of decorated Samian pottery was found next to the walled boulder described above (context 95), and a bone pin was found outside the hollow in the northern end of the excavation (Fig. 3). There was no indication of a definable floor level beyond the area of paving, but this aspect remains to be investigated further in the coming years.

Conclusions

The 2013 season of the Dales Heritage Field School has taken the interpretation of area DG a long way from the surface perception of a simple scooped hollow forming a semi-subterranean structure. Paving indicates the main access route and suggests a floor level which cannot otherwise be identified. Features defined by boulders of various sizes suggest retaining walls and kerbs around the hollow, without forming a complete or coherent pattern. Other settings of large stones are at present difficult to interpret in structural terms, and include an element of symbolic or ritual activity that has been revealed elsewhere in the settlement.

It appears that the area of the hollow was kept relatively clean, while the area to the south received an accumulation of waste material including animal bone, nails and other metal fragments, and broken pieces of at least one large pottery vessel. The large quantities of shattered sandstone cobbles reflect similar accumulations on other upland sites of the period, where they are interpreted as pot-boilers. The thickness of the coarse pottery fragments certainly suggests a container suitable for heating water by dropping in hot sandstone cobbles. A tiny fragment of decorated Samian ware indicates activity during the Roman period, while pieces of clay pipe and a gaming die show more recent presence on the site.

The various stone settings around the scooped hollow remain difficult to interpret. It was noted during the excavation that the low stone wall context 94 was at a convenient height to sit on next to the boulder that it surrounds, but there was no indication that the flattish top of the boulder had ever been used as a working surface. Some of the stone settings are interpreted as post settings, but as yet these do not form a clear structural pattern across the whole site. The hollow and the features identified within and around it may represent several different phases of activity and remodelling, which is a crucial aspect that remains to be investigated as work on this site continues.

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Bibliography

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