

**Report of the  
Archaeological Survey of  
the Earthwork / possible Motte in Achnasoul Wood,  
near Marybank, Ross-shire  
11th - 12th February 2005**



**The Report of the Archaeological Survey  
of the Earthwork/possible Motte and bailey  
at Achnasoul Wood, near Marybank, Ross-shire  
by members of the North of Scotland Archaeological Society,  
11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> January 2005**

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**Acknowledgements**

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their kind permission  
and the Heritage Lottery Fund for financial assistance

This report was compiled and produced by Meryl Marshall with  
generous assistance from members of the team

Front page - The site viewed, through the trees, from the north

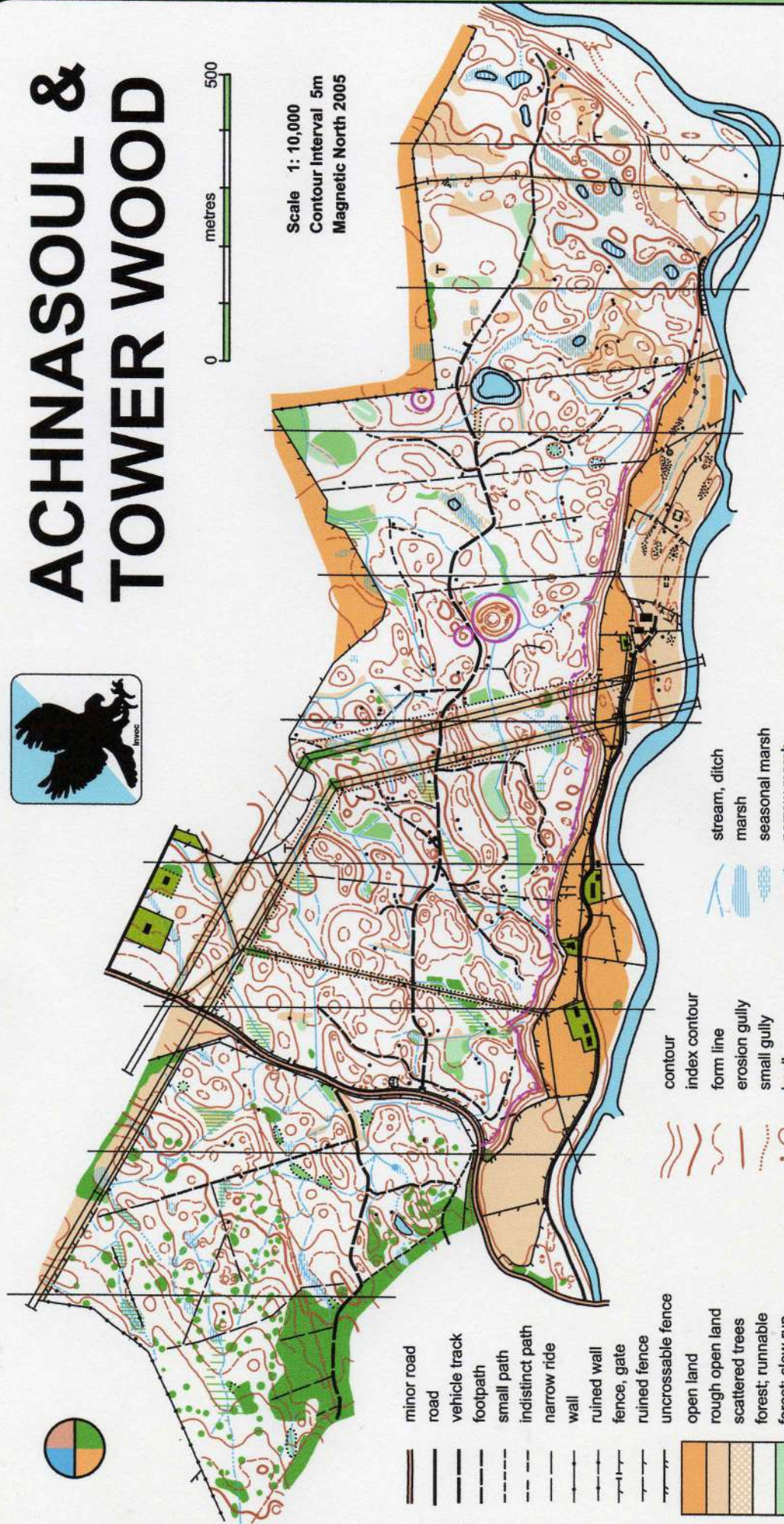


# ACHNASOUL & TOWER WOOD



metres  
0 500

Scale 1: 10,000  
Contour Interval 5m  
Magnetic North 2005



minor road

road

vehicle track

footpath

small path

indistinct path

narrow ride

wall

ruined wall

fence, gate

ruined fence

uncrossable fence

open land

rough open land

scattered trees

forest: runnable

forest: slow run

forest: walk

forest: impassable

undergrowth: slow run

undergrowth: difficult to walk

distinct vegetation boundary

contour

index contour

form line

erosion gully

small gully

knoll

depression, pit

crag

boulder, cairn

group of boulders

stony ground

stream, ditch

marsh

seasonal marsh

narrow marsh

uncrossable marsh

building, ruin

tower

power line

major power line

Based on: ...Previous O-map by Contours  
...Reviewed survey: ...M.M. 2005  
...Digital Printing: ...Selling Survey  
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...Grid reference: ...N4 490 830  
...OS 1:50,000

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## Introduction

The aim of this project was to survey and record, for the Archaeological Record, the previously unrecorded ringed earthwork, which is to be found in Achnasoul Wood, near Marybank. The site comprises a ditch and 2 concentric earthbanks with a raised central area. It is most probably a motte and bailey, although a henge has also been suggested. It is located in a mature coniferous plantation on a linear terrace of undulating morainic deposit, 4 kilometres northwest of Muir of Ord. The River Orrin lies to the south and east of the wood. The wood is managed by Fairburn Estates and is used for sporting purposes. Intending visitors please contact Fairburn Estates Office prior to visiting (01997-433273) or if no response the factor; Peter Hingston (Mobile: 07831-244409) to ensure safe conduct. There has also been selective felling in the wood and extraction of timber on a minor scale.

The wood is linear and about 65 hectares in size with an additional 25 hectares of natural birch at the east end. There is a steep escarpment(?a river terrace) running the length of the wood. The wood seems to have been firmly established as a plantation - it appears on the 1<sup>st</sup> edition OS map of 1870 as such, and there is ample evidence of previously felled trees.

The earthwork is in a low lying damp area and is surrounded by higher knolls. The site has been respected in recent years - the central raised area has been left unplanted and has a cover of natural birch and rowan. There is however evidence of the recent felling of coniferous trees on the external earthbank. Over the whole site there are the stumps of previously felled trees, both coniferous and deciduous, in various states of decay. Bracken is very vigorous.

In addition several other archaeological features in the wood were recorded, these may or may not be associated with the earthwork.

Copies of this report will be deposited with the local Sites and Monuments Record (Highland Council), the National Monuments Record for Scotland (Royal Commission Ancient and Historic Monuments Scotland), Historic Scotland and the NOSAS library

## Historical background

There are references to Achnasoul in the Exchequer Rolls. These most probably refer to the site and would lend weight to the interpretation of it as a motte and bailey. They indicate that it would have been under royal control (They have yet to be consulted):

*Vol 8 (1470 - 1479) - Achansawle mentioned in 1479*

*Vol 9 (1480 - 1489) - Achanesowll mentioned in 1486*

*Vol 12 (1502 - 1507) - Auchinsoule mentioned in 1504*

*Vol 14 (1513 - 1522) - Auchinfale mentioned 1515*

*Vol 15 (1523 - 1529) - Auchnsoule mentioned 1523*

Several royal forests were established in the Inverness area and around the Moray Coast in Mediaeval times. It may be that this location was one of them and that the earthwork was a hunting lodge, possibly in the guardianship or gifted to (?at a later date) a local nobleman. The Scottish king, James IV (1473-1513), had a great affection for the northern parts of his realm and made regular pilgrimages to Tain. He was known to be very fond of hunting. A graphic account of his stay at Dingwall Castle in 1503 exists. (*Dingwalls Thousand Years*)

In the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century Mackenzie power and control was on the increase in Ross-shire. In 1503 King James IV granted a charter of "the Brahan slopes" (3kms to the NE of this



site) to John Mackenzie of Kintail. "*Mackenzie influence is now firmly established in Easter Ross, being in possession of Garbat, Castle Leod, Kinellan, Strathconon, Brahan, Fairburn, the 2 Scatwells, Davochmaluach, Ord, Redcastle*" (*Dingwalls Thousand Years*). The control of Achnasoul may well have been closely linked with that of Fairburn, which lies a few kilometres to the NW. In 1542, Murdoch Mackenzie, 1<sup>st</sup> of Fairburn, a son of Rory Mor Mackenzie of Achilty (who in turn was a son of John Mackenzie of Kintail), obtained a charter of the lands of (Mid) Fairburn, Kirk Fairburn, Achnasoul and Balvraid from James V, this was confirmed by Queen Mary in 1548. Fairburn Castle/Tower, the remains of which are to be seen 2kms to the NW of the Achnasoul site, is thought to have been built soon after this.

## Methods

A small team of members from the North of Scotland Archaeological Society (NOSAS) undertook the project over a two day period - 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2005. The first day was fine and dry but the second day was made difficult by heavy rain and hail showers. Despite this we were able to complete most of the work and only a couple of short visits were needed afterwards.

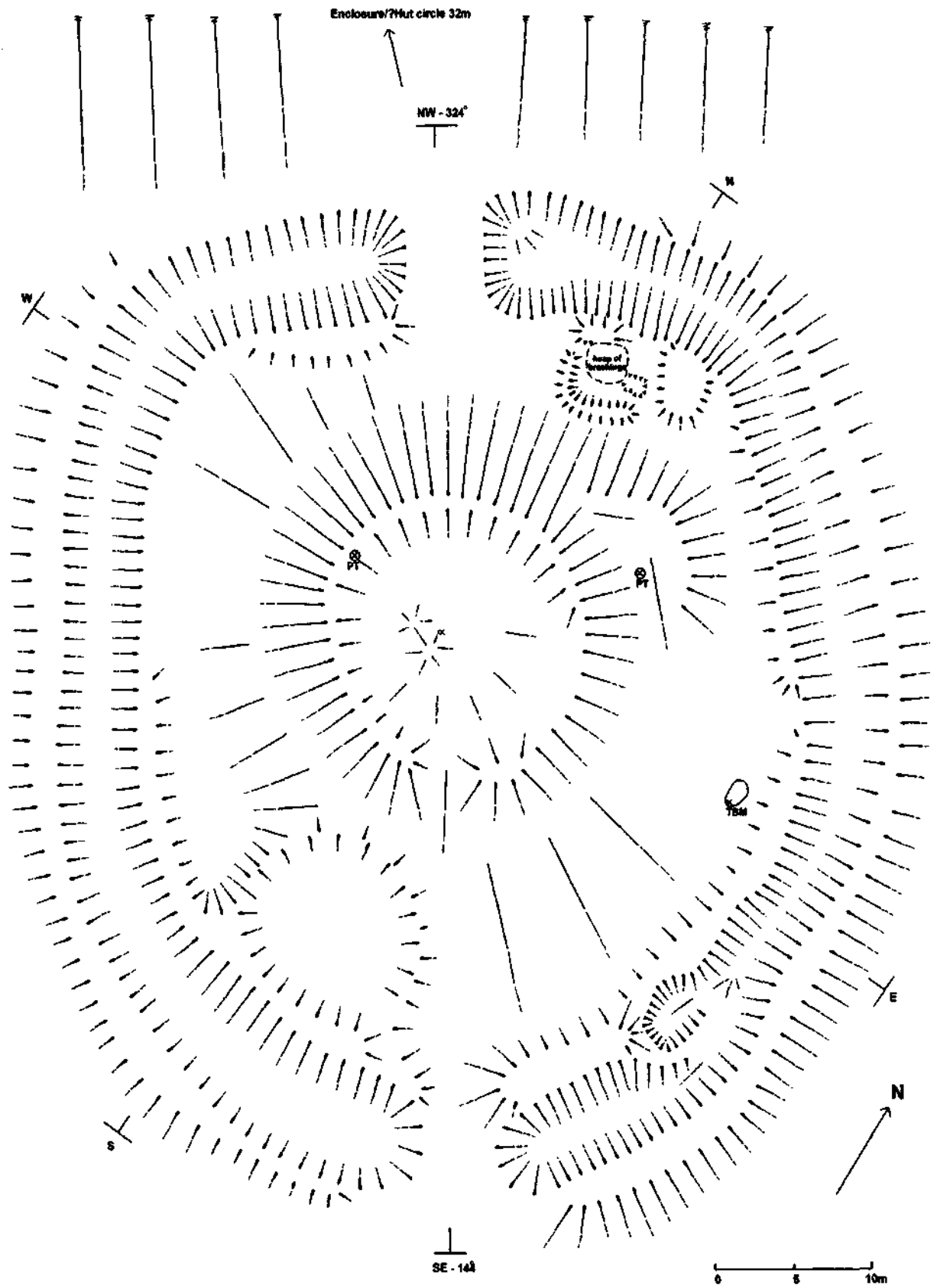
- Brushings and bracken were cleared from the site, several features which had previously been obscured were identified.
- Two plane tables were set up, linked together and a survey of the whole site at a scale of 1:200 was made.
- Profiles were taken on the N-S, E-W and (approx) NW-SE lines using a dumpy level. A temporary bench mark was used for the levels. It was located on the south corner of a large boulder in the east of the site. The N-S profile ran through the middle of a pile of brushings which lay in the structure on the north side of the central mound, so a parallel line, 2m to the east, was taken at this point. The NW-SE profile was chosen as it took a line through the 2 causeways at either end of the site. A profile was also taken of the deep cut feature/pit on the east side of the inner bank.
- More detailed plans, at a scale of 1:50, using taped offsets, were made of one of the internal structures (3.2) and also the sub-circular enclosure/?hut circle to the north of the main site.
- Photographs were taken, although the weather and the proximity of the trees made this quite difficult and a further visit was made 6 weeks later when the conditions were more suitable.
- Details were also taken of a hut circle 400m to the east and the boundary wall/earth bank which runs along the top of the escarpment to the south of the site

## Results

**The Earthwork** is sub-circular and has an overall diameter of between 58 and 61m. The encircling ditch and earth banks are broken in the NW and SE by causeways which give access to the central area.

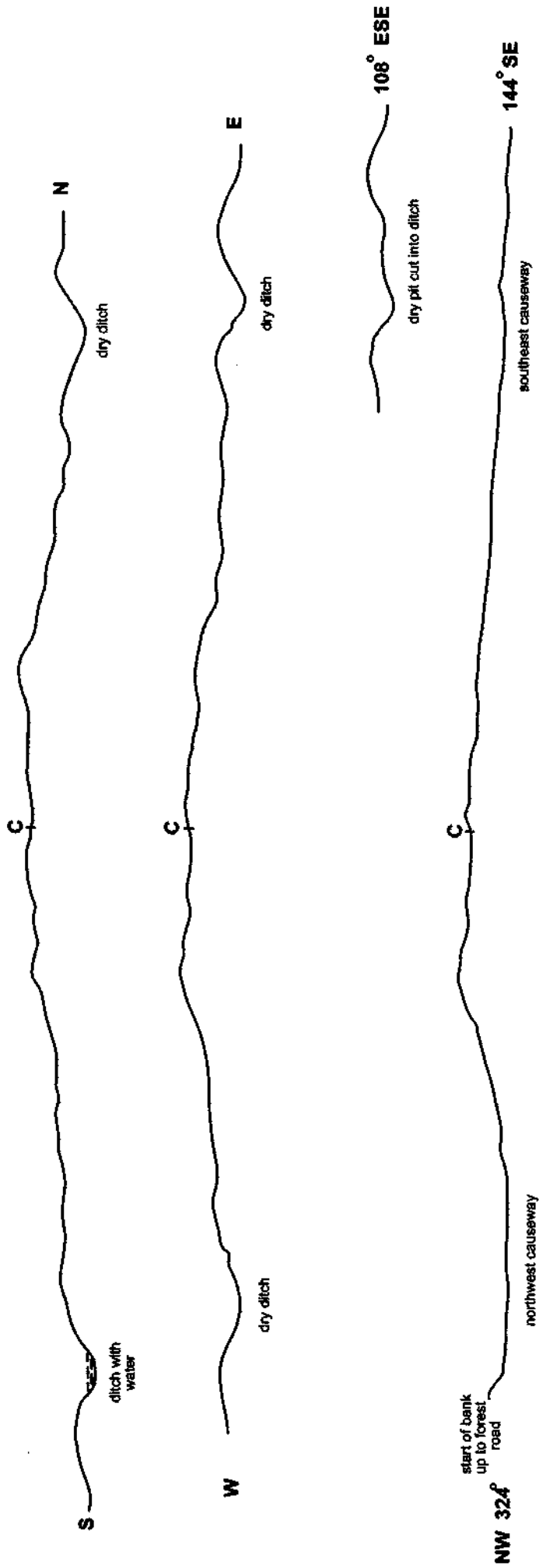
The site can be conveniently divided into three parts:

- The raised area or motte at the centre of the site
- The surrounding ditch and earthbanks, including the two causeways
- An area between the foot of the central mound and the inner earthbank, which may be a bailey and which includes two secondary structures



**ACHNASOUL** NH 48803 51813

surveyed by NOBAS - February 2006



36 34 32 30 28 26 24 22 20 18 16 14 12 10 8 6 4 2 0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 18 20 22 24 26 28 30 32 34 36

ACHINASOUL : SECTIONS THROUGH APPROX. CENTRE POINT Scale 0 5 10m





The site viewed from the northwest

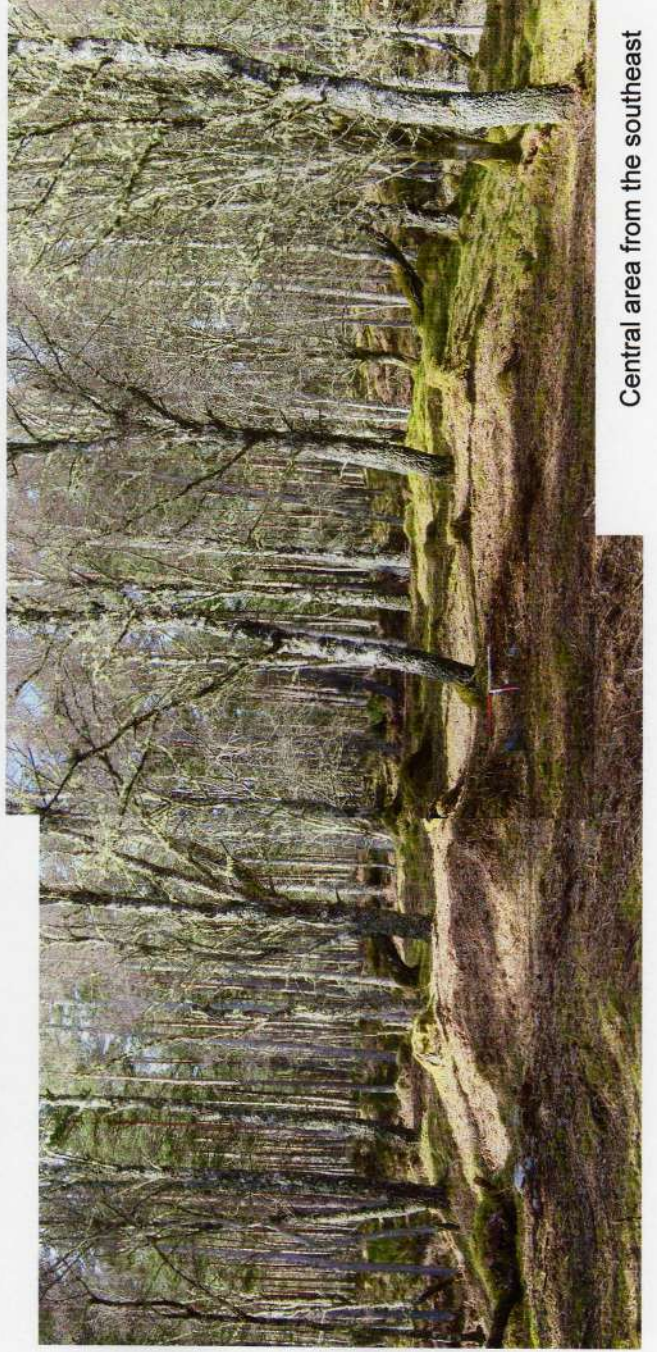


The site from the southeast





The site from the west



Central area from the southeast



**1. The raised area/motte** is situated in the northern part of the enclosed area. It is most probably an enhanced natural knoll. The diameter of the knoll at its base is roughly 25m and it has a "tilt" to the southeast, making the northern and western "skirt" much steeper than the southern. At its highest the knoll is 2m above the surrounding bailey. The summit of the knoll is encircled by an incomplete earthbank



The central raised area from the northwest with the NW causeway in the foreground

enclosing an area of 11m diameter. A possible entrance of 1m width is to be seen in the SE arc, this is in alignment with the SE causeway of the outer earth banks. The internal area of the summit has several humps and bumps, which may or may not be significant, no form to them could be detected (they may be the more recent investigations of treasure hunters!). There is a "ramp"-like feature on the NE shoulder of the knoll - it is 4m in width, 8m in length and sloping towards the SE- this does not appear to give access to the summit as the earth bank is continuous at this point.



The "ramp" from the southeast



**2. The surrounding ditch with external and internal earthbanks** are broken only in the NW and SE where there are "causeways" giving access to the internal area. The **ditch** may have been excavated in more recent times in an attempt to give better drainage to the area. Certainly the ditch in the southern arc is waterlogged for the majority of the year. The ditch is generally between 4 and 5m in width (overall) and 1.5m deep. The causeways are roughly 5m in width - the northern one may have been extended in length by the broadening of the ends of the ditch. The **outer earthbank** is complete and variable in height with a maximum of 2m. At the north end of the site it merges with the natural upslope. The **inner earthbank** is incomplete. It is better preserved in the southern half of the site, although there is a well defined stretch in the NW and a less well defined stretch to the NE. It is most substantial in the SE sector where it is 0.8m in height and 4m in thickness. A part of the bank adjacent to the ditch has been excavated (?more recently) to form:

**2.1 A depression/structure**, rectangular and measuring internally 6m x 2.5m. The south and west side have steep banks of 1.2m height, recessed into the side of the inner earth bank. The upcast from the excavation seems to have been deposited in the ditch, where it forms the east wall of the structure. The internal area slopes gently up to the north, where its limit is difficult to define.



The northwest causeway from the west



The north and east sections of the ditch and earthbanks



The depression 2.1 from the northwest



**3. The enclosed area** between the inner earthbank and the foot of the central raised area is fairly restricted in size. It is flattish and comprises the southern part (?bailey), where it has a linear curving shape of length approximately 40m and width between 10 and 12m, and a narrower curving strip of 3 to 4m width to the north and east of the motte.

There are 2 structures within this area:

**3.1. A sub-circular enclosure** in the south sector. It is of 10m internal diameter and

defined by a low earth and stone bank of 0.2m height and 2.5m thickness. The south arc of the bank is shared with the inner earthbank of the main site, into which the feature encroaches. There may be an entrance to the enclosure in the SE arc but it is not very convincing. To the west of the structure there is a short downslope with a stone setting



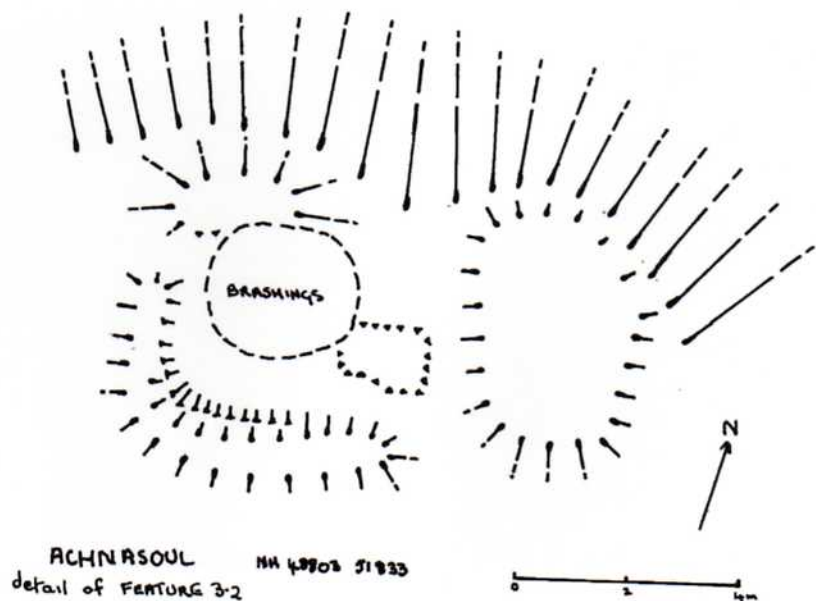
The sub-circular enclosure from the NW

forming a kerb at its base. It is difficult to discern whether or

not this is an integral part of the enclosure, possibly a base to form a more level platform. The enclosure may or may not be contemporary with the rest of the site.

**3.2. A sub-rectangular building** lying to the north of the central mound and adjacent to the inside lip of the ditch. The remains of this structure have a depressed rectangular form of internal dimensions 5m x 3m and depth 0.3m to 0.5m. A pile of brushings

obscures part of the internal area. The structure is defined by earthbanks (with some stone composition) on the N, W and S sides. These are 1 - 1.5m in width. There is an entrance of 0.8m width in the NW corner. The SE corner of the structure has been damaged by vehicle tracks. Also in the SE part there is a sub-rectangular depression of 1m x





1.5m, which has very clear cut turf edges and is 0.2 - 0.4m deep. A raised platform abutting to the east has a pentagonal shape and measures 4m x 2.5m. It appears to be composed mostly of organic material (?sawdust). This feature may be the remains of a sawmill and almost certainly is not contemporary with the rest of the site.



Structure 3.2 from the south

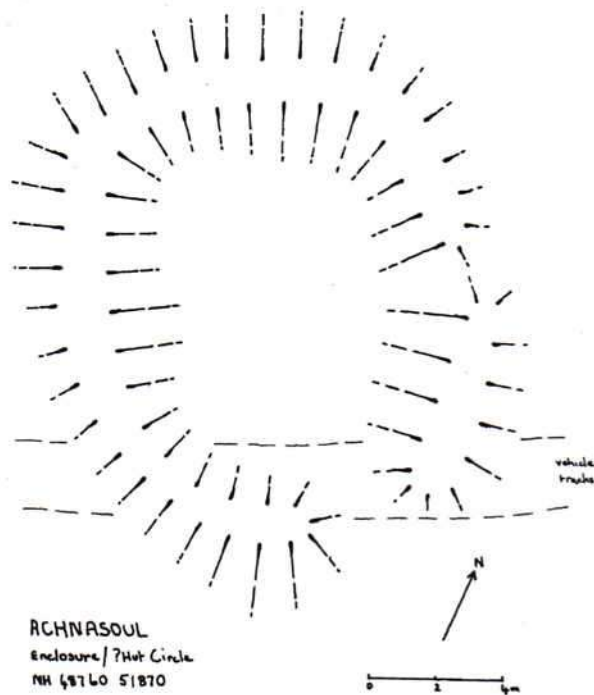
**The sub-circular Enclosure/?Hut circle to the north of the main site**

NH 48760 51870, is located to the northeast of the main site, on a higher terrace. It is 32m from the N causeway, on the opposite side of the modern track. It is roughly circular and has an internal diameter of 11m, although the NW-SE axis is slightly longer - 13m.



N Enclosure/?Hut circle from NE





The earthbanks have a spread of between 3 and 4m and are 0.3m to 0.5m in height. There could be an entrance in the SE sector, but this area has been damaged by a heavy vehicle, the tracks of which run across the structure. The enclosure has been planted with trees.

**Hut Circle to the East-** NH 49177 51969. This hut circle is situated 400m to the east of the main site at the edge of the wood. It has been planted with trees. It has an overall diameter of 17m. The enclosing earth banks are substantial and have a spread of between 3 and 4m. Their height is generally 0.4m, but in the south section they reach a maximum of 0.7m. There may be an entrance in the SE but its not very convincing



East Hut circle from west



**The Linear Earthbank to the south** - Stretches from NH 49265 51518 (east end) to NH 47910 51778 (west end), at its nearest point it is about 120m from the main site. The wasted turf and stone bank is aligned east-west and meanders along the top of the escarpment for a distance of 1.5kms. It is more complete in its west part. At NH 47978 51728 it cuts a former track which descends the escarpment. At the east end it forms a corner with a substantial wall. This wall forms the eastern boundary of the commercial woodland - to the east of it there is an area of natural birch wood. This linear earthbank is probably not contemporary with the main site.



Earth bank at the west end

Earthbank cutting the track which is shown descending the escarpment



## Products

### Plans

- Plan of the main site at a scale of 1:200
- Plan of the north internal structure (3.2) at a scale of 1:100
- Plan of north enclosure/?hut circle at 1:100
- Section of the main site at a scale of 1:200
- Section of central area of main site at 1:100

### Photographs

- 1, 2 and 3 (panorama). - Main site from NW
- 4 and 5 (panorama). - Main site from west
- 6, 7 and 8 (panorama). - Main site from WSW
9. - Main site from WSW
- 10, 11 and 12 (panorama). - Main site from SSW
- 13, 14 and 15 (panorama). - Main site from SE
- 16 and 17 (panorama). - Main site from east
18. - "Ramp" (on NE shoulder of central mound) from SE, boulder in foreground
19. - Structure 3.2 from SE
20. - Structure 3.2 from south
21. - Structure 3.2 from NE
22. - Structure 3.2 from west
23. - Southwest corner of 3.2 from west
24. - East platform of 3.2 from east
25. - "Ramp" from east
26. - "Ramp" from SE
27. - Boulder/TBM
28. - East ditch and feature 2.1 from south
29. - Feature 2.1 from NW
- 30 and 32. - Circular enclosure 3.1 from east
32. - Circular enclosure 3.1 from north
- 33 and 34. - Circular enclosure 3.1 from NW
35. - Circular enclosure 3.1 from west with stone "kerb"
36. - Circular enclosure 3.1 from west
37. - Central raised area from SE
- 38 and 39 (panorama). - Central raised area from SE
40. - SW part of summit earth bank from SE
41. - NW part of summit earth bank from west
42. - NE part of summit area from NW
- 43 and 44. - Central raised area from NW
45. - Central raised area and NW causeway from NW
- 46 and 47. - Enclosure/?Hut circle to north from NE
48. - Enclosure/?Hut circle to north from east with vehicle track
49. - Enclosure/?Hut circle to north from SW
- 50 and 51 (panorama). - Main site from north
- 52, 53 and 54. - Main site from north
55. - Hut circle to east from south
56. - Hut circle to east from west
57. - Hut circle to east from north
- 58 and 59. - Part of earthbank in its west section
60. - Earth bank "cutting" the track