DRURIDGE BAY EXCAVATIONS OCT/NOV 1993
INITIAL STRATIGRAPHIC REPORT

Summary

The discovery of a Bronze Age cist weathering out of the coastline at the north end of Druridge Bay, Low Hauxley, Northumberland (NU 284018) led to a small scale rescue excavation carried out by the Department of Archaeology of Tyne and Wear Museums for the Northumberland County Council. During the course of this work two cists (both containing Bronze Age beakers and one a human inhumation) were discovered beneath a rubble cairn. Both cists were completely excavated and the contents removed for analysis and conservation. A layer below the cists, believed to be Mesolithic, was sampled also. The contents of the cists and the environmental samples are yet to be studied, and the report below is simply a stratigraphic account of the excavations.

Introduction and Previous History

The site was located at the north end of Druridge Bay, Low Hauxley (NU 284018) in a stretch of sand dune/marram grass coastline that has been steadily eroded by the sea over the years (SSSI). In 1983 a rescue excavation was carried out when a cist was found weathering out of the coastline just Xm to the south of the current discovery. This was followed by a more complete excavation slightly inland from the coastline (PPS 50, 1984, p398), in which two burial cairns were discovered sealing a probable Mesolithic midden deposit.

The first cist from the current excavations was initially located by a Mr Hilton Dawson on 21/10/93. After clearing it slightly to confirm his suspicions he contacted the Northumberland County Archaeologist, Caroline Hardie. The cist was noted on the same day by Mr Ian McGrath, and he too reported the find to Ms Hardie. Site inspection revealed that the cist would be unlikely to survive the next storm on the coastline, and so on the following Tuesday (26/10/93) a small team of archaeologists from Tyne and Wear Museums Department of Archaeology began excavating at the site.

Initially the work was to take approximately four days, but the discovery of a second cist increased the time spent on site to 7 days. Given that the location of the site was well known locally, and that winter was fast approaching the main priority on the site was the rapid excavation of the threatened cists. To that end, only a limited area of the cairn, that directly sealing the cists, was opened up. In addition, an assessment was made of the general state of preservation of the archaeological remains in the area.

The Excavation

The Earliest deposits

A thin seam of black coally material, believed to represent the suspected Mesolithic deposit in the area, was located beneath the bases of the cists (contexted as 6 beneath cist 1 and 15 beneath cist 2) and samples were taken for analysis. This was sealed by a deposit of compact gravel (5) set in a brown clay loam containing occasional soft coal/charcoal fragments. This layer was up to 0.4m thick in places, and was cut into by the cists.

Cist 1

This was the first, and easternmost, of the two cists to be discovered. It was cut into the compact gravel layer (5), and protruded c 0.05m above it (to the underside of its capstone). The cist was set into a sub oval construction pit (1.15m north south and 0.65m east west) 0.4m deep. Its sides consisted of four sandstone slabs that formed a rectangular box measuring 0.6 X 0.35m internally. The two longer side slabs had been made from one block of stone which had been split in two. These slabs protruded out beyond the end panels of the cist at both ends. Stone spalls had been inserted in the gaps between the side and end panels as wedges, and even when the whole construction trench had been emptied out, the sides of the cist remained firm. The stones were set into shallow grooves 0.0lm deep,

presumably formed naturally by the stones subsiding into the layer below.

The floor of the cist was made up of 3 thin sandstone slabs set within the walls of the cist. The construction trench on the outside of the wall slabs was filled with a soft loose deposit of gravel and clay loam (4), presumably material displaced from the layer below (5) during the digging out of the pit for the cist. The construction trench also contained some larger fragments of sandstone.

The cist had been filled with a layer of bone fragments (17) up to 30mm deep, spread across the whole of the floor of the cist. Further fragments (18) were found below the floor slabs, although in nothing like the same concentration (NB the two contexts were divided only arbitrarily, there being no way of telling them apart except for their location). In the north east corner of the cist was a complete beaker lying on its side on top of the bone layer. It contained nothing beyond a few small rodent bones. The cist was reasonably heavily colonised by insects, and these and small rodents will have disturbed the bones to some extent, perhaps even accounting for the presence of some bones below the floor slabs, although this seems unlikely.

The bones themselves have yet to be analysed. However, no human bones have yet been noted among them, and at least one bird skull was present. The bones do not appear to have been burnt, but their white appearance suggests that they may have been exposed for some time prior to interment. There was no sign of any articulate skeletal remains.

The cist was capped by a thick (0.15m) slab of sandstone that overlapped the edges of the box by c 0.2m on all sides; it thus also sealed the construction cut for the cist. It was in turn covered by a layer of sandstone slab fragments, none more than 0.05m thick, which, as well as covering the slab, sloped down over its edges onto the ground level (5) from which the cist was cut.

Cist 2

The second cist was located during the final clearance of the site for an overall photograph after cist 1 had been removed. It lay 0.7m to the west of the first cist, and was discovered when a sandstone fragment that turned out to be a piece of the cover slab that had broken off was removed to reveal a void beneath. Within could be seen the outline of a complete beaker and a human skull. As these had now been exposed to the air, it was decided to excavate them as quickly as possible.

Again the cist was cut in from the top of the gravel layer (5). It stood, in places, up to 0.15m proud of this surface to the underside of its cover slab. Internally the cist was 0.5m deep and 1.2m long by 0.5m wide. It was aligned broadly east-west. The side slabs were again sandstone, but had weathered badly and were gradually splitting apart. The eastern end panel was set between the two side panels, as had been the case with cist 1; although on this occasion the side slabs did not project beyond the end panel. At the western end of the cist the end panel was overlapped by the southern side slab, but formed a right-angled joint with the northern side slab. As was the case with cist 1 stone spalls were used in the joints between the slabs. The construction trench fill (14) was again made up of gravel and clay loam, but contained a higher proportion of sandstone fragments than cist 1. The capstone of the cist had crushed down onto the tops of the side slabs giving the appearance of the top having fused together. The cover slab was also in very poor condition with stone flaking from it, and several major cracks running through it. As a result of this, it was decided to remove the eastern end panel of the cist to extract the contents safely, thus avoiding the possibility of the capstone fracturing and damaging the finds within the cist during its removal.

The floor (11) of the cist was, as with cist 1, made up of pieces of sandstone slab laid within the cist to form a rough surface. This was overlain by a layer of brown silty clayey loam (10) which contained thin sandstone fragments that had weathered from the sides

and roof of the cist. This deposit appeared to have built up around the articulate remains of a young (wisdom teeth in the skull were only just starting to come through) adult skeleton. This was set in a crouched position with its feet tucked underneath it and the arms to the north side of the cist. The skull lay at the east end of the box facing west. A complete beaker was recovered, again lying on its side, on the north side of the cist, just below the approximate position of the shoulders of the skeleton.

Unfortunately, as the remains had to be removed that day, and as it not been possible to remove the cover slab, it was not possible to record the position of the remains in detail. Instead the pot and the larger bones were lifted out separately before an attempt was made to remove the capstone in order to avoid any breakages occurring should it collapse. Once the capstone had been lifted the layer (10) covering the floor of the cist was removed as a total sample, as it contained some of the smaller bones from the skeleton. A similar deposit (12) below the floor was also removed as a total sample as it contained bones that had worked down between the gaps in the flooring; however, unlike the first cist, no remains were sealed beneath the flooring. This deposit (12) is likely to be contaminated by the probable Mesolithic layer (15) below the cist.

The capstone of the cist again overlapped the sides of the box by up to 0.3m, and was 0.12m thick. Unlike cist 1 there was no layer of smaller slabs covering it.

The Cremation

During the initial removal of the cairn to expose cist 1, the remains of a pot containing cremated bone fragments in a black soil were discovered in the body of the cairn immediately overlying the east end of cist 2. Fragments from this were found throughout the lower levels of the cairn over cist 1, and it is likely that it was disturbed at the time the cairn was built. Only one third of the pot was recovered, and all the breaks on it were clearly ancient. It had also become the

site of an ants nest which may in part account for the spread of the bone fragments.

The Cairn

Both cists were sealed by a layer of reddy brown clay loam which contained sandstone fragments. It was 0.3-0.4m thick, and appeared to have been laid as a base for the cairn (over cist 1 the layer was contexted as 2 and over cist 2 as 8).

This deposit was in turn sealed by a dump of sandstone boulders, most rounded or sub angular, but with a few angular stones present also. These were set in a matrix of orange sand. This deposit was 0.7m in height, and had presumably been higher. It was not clear as to whether the cairn had originally been a freestanding rubble mound, with the sand blowing in subsequently, or whether the sand had been used for bonding during the initial construction.

The remains of a stone lined feature (16) were found set into the cairn on the north edge of the excavation. Only the base and west side had survived coastal erosion but this was enough to show the feature to be lined with thin sandstone slabs and approximately 0.7m long on its north south axis. It was filled with a black silty loam (9), that was removed as a total sample. There was no sign of any bone, cremated or otherwise within this.

Both the cairn and the feature were sealed by a light brown sand that was overlain by a thin black deposit (7). This was overlain by another deposit of light brown sand which formed the dunes proper.

Once excavation was complete the trench base was covered with plastic sheeting and the trench filled in by hand for the first metre with layers of rubble and sand. It was then filled by a JCB tractor with a mix of sand and stone. Care was taken to add modern brick to the lowest levels of the infilling so that the position of the trench would remain clear to future excavators. The site was then replanted with marram grass in an attempt to prevent the winter storms doing too much damage.

Acknowledgements

The excavations were directed by Steve Speak and Bill Griffiths, and the work carried out by Fred Beavers, Bob Guthrie, Paul Harris and Richard Lavery from Tyne and Wear Museums.

The speed and comparative ease with which the excavation was carried out was due in no small part to the number of people who were so willing to help in all aspects of the work. These included Rory McGrath who worked as a volunteer on the excavations; Paul Morrison (Coastal Officer for Northumberland County Council) and Gordon Redford (warden of the Druridge Bay Country Park) for allowing the use of the country park for storage of finds and tools during the excavations; and to David Clark of the National Rivers Authority for providing calibration for the site TBM. Thanks are also due to the various people who helped with the Herculean task of removing the cist stones from the beach to the Country Park, these included Fiona Gilbertson of Northumberland Wildlife Trust and her team of volunteers, Richard Scott and Kevin Stone (volunteers at the Country Park), and Ken Douglas and Kevin Moore from Hadston Farm who brought down a JCB onto the beach on the last day to remove the last of the slabs and backfill the site.

Thanks are also due to Keith Gerrard and Jim Thompson for supplying copies of videos they took at the excavations.

Last, but by no means least, particular thanks are owed to Malcolm Scott, currently a volunteer warden at Druridge Bay Country Park, who helped at every stage of the excavation, with tools, expertise and advice, and who secured the services of the JCB at the end of the dig.

Steve Speak and Bill Griffiths
Tyne and Wear Museums

[This is a draft report, details of which have been incorporated into later reports – NCC 2003].