

A Basic Building Survey and Archaeological Evaluation of  
a Black house at 9A Grimshader,  
Isle of Lewis.



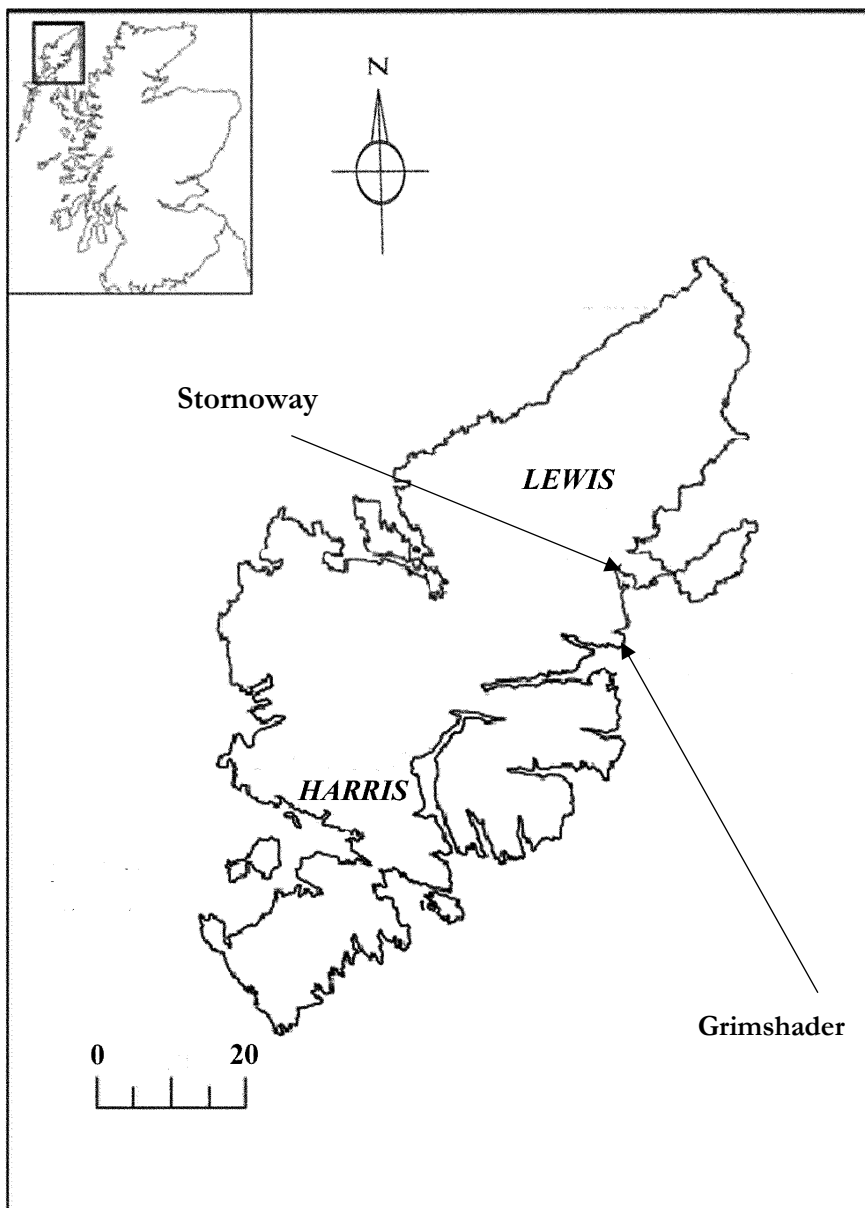
By Ian McHardy, B(Sc) Hons,  
Associate of the Chartered Institute of Field Archaeologists (ACiFA)

## Contents:

1.0 Summary.....	1
2.0 Location of house site.....	2
3.0 Archaeological potential.....	4
4.0 Methodology.....	4
5.0 Results; Basic Building Survey.....	5
5.1 Map regression.....	5
5.2 Documentary.....	7
5.3 Known sites in the area.....	7
5.4 Description of Blackhouse.....	7
5.5 Photographic record.....	8
5.6 Scale plan and levels.....	13
5.7 Evaluation Excavation.....	17
5.7.1 Trench 1.....	19
5.7.2 Trench 2.....	25
5.7.3 Trench 3.....	26
6.0 Conclusions.....	27
Appendix 1: Context register.....	28
Appendix 2: Photographic register.....	29
Bibliography.....	31

## 1.0 Introduction

A Basic Standing building survey and archaeological evaluation was requested by the Western Isles Archaeology Service (WIAS) as a condition of consent for a new build development. This development will require the destruction of the upstanding Blackhouse building at No. 9A Grimshader, Isle of Lewis, NGR NB 40378 25795 – see cover photograph. The Comhairle's Archaeology Service therefore recommended that a Basic Building Survey and Archaeological Evaluation of the derelict structure be carried out in advance of the destruction in order to preserve it by record (Comhairle Development Application Reference 17/00156). The following report documents the results of these activities.



*Figure 1: General location of Grimshader, Isle of Lewis*

## 2.0 Site Location

The Blackhouse concerned is situated at NGR NB 40378 25795, c.20m above sea level, adjacent a small stream which runs from the freshwater Loch Grimshader to the Sea loch Grimshader, and just south of the narrows between (Sea) Loch Beag Grimshader and the main (Sea) Loch Grimshader. The underlying geology is of Banded Gneiss. The land faces south, is reasonably well drained and has obviously sustained intensive agriculture in the past, being covered in Feanagan and containing a large walled Garden enclosure. This situation with easy access to cultivatable land as well as freshwater and marine resources mean that this would have always been a desirable location.



Figure 2: General area with location of Grimshader marked, OS 1960

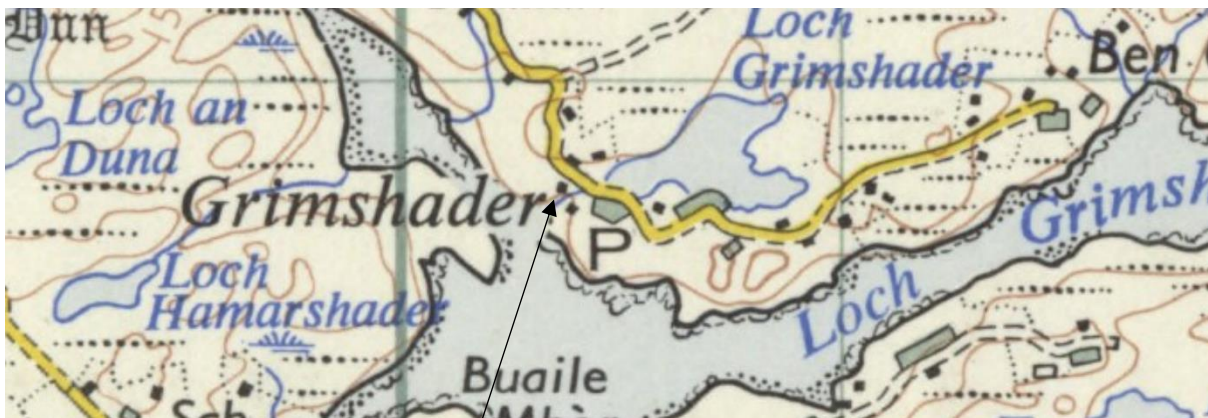


Figure 3: Detail of Croft 9A with Blackhouse position, OS 1960.

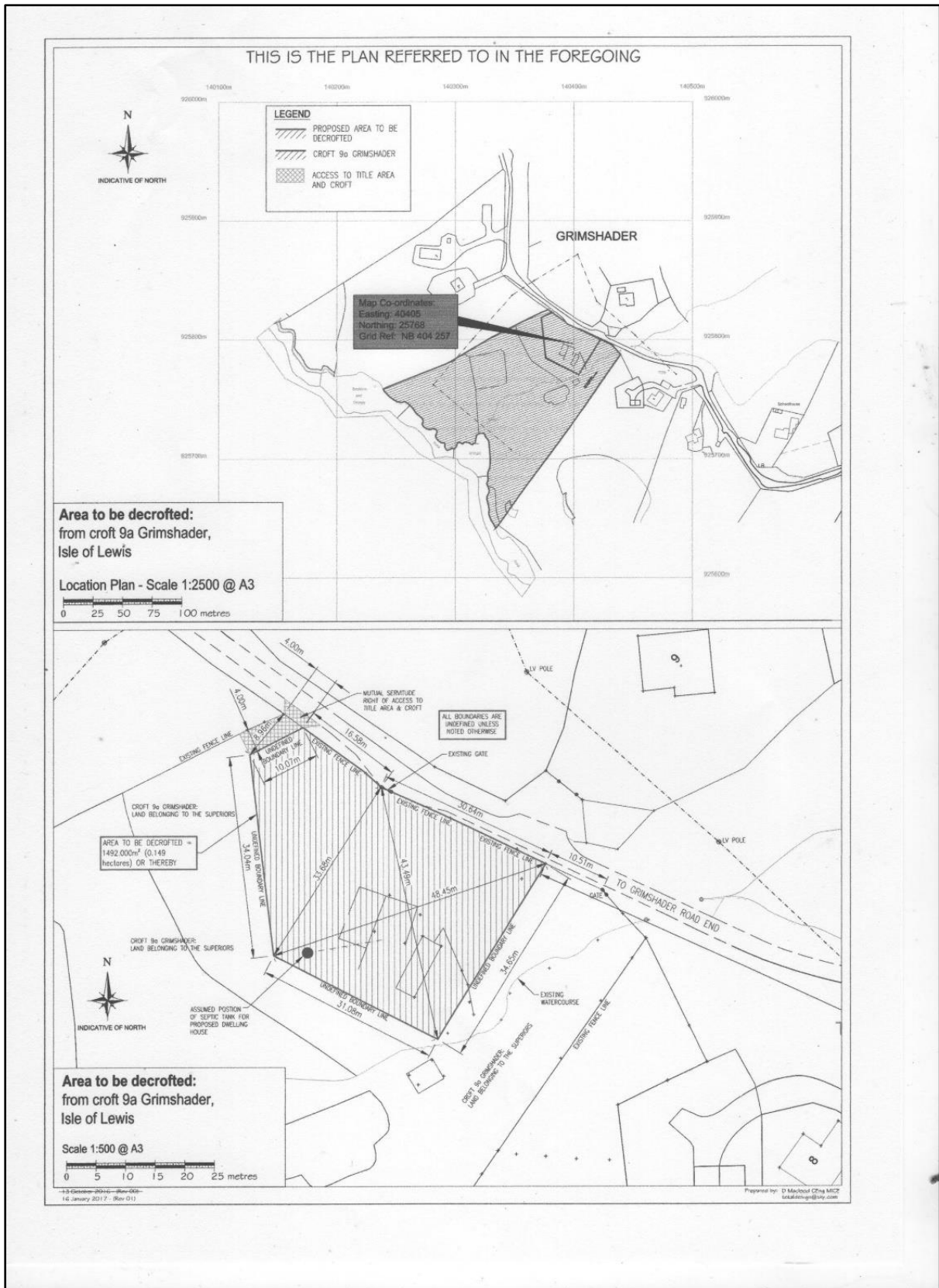


Figure 4: Architects plan of site

### **3.0 Archaeological Potential**

The access to cultivatable land, inland resources such as summer grazing and freshwater and Marine resources in the vicinity would mean that this area may have sustained many people over the years and there consequently may be archaeology from any period since Human beings first arrived in the Hebrides - sometime before around 6,000 BC (Dates from Northton - <https://canmore.org.uk/site/10502/harris-northton>).

### **4.0 Methodology**

The Building survey was carried out in accordance with ALGAO (The Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers UK)'s 2013 guidance document on standing building survey - "Historic Building Recording Guidance for Curators, Consultants and Contractors". The survey requested was a "Basic Survey", which is defined by ALGAO as a "Building Appraisal" plus a "Historic Building Recording (Basic):

For a "Building appraisal": An archive assessment, A general description of the structure(s), Photographs, An annotated ground plan.

Field records should include the following:-

Drawings: Location map of the structure/s within the landscape (1:10,000 or larger scale), A ground plan (the architectural plan/s are acceptable, if relatively accurate), A map regression depicting 1st / 2nd edition Ordnance Survey map locations (additional historic OS maps may also be relevant) and earlier historic maps of the development area with the location of the site clearly marked.

Written: A descriptive summary of the structure, such as: type of building; its place in the wider topographical landscape; materials used in construction; any visible changes in build/additions; etc., A structure description (a general appraisal of the external elevations/features and any other relevant constructional details), A short narrative section describing the significance of the findings of the historic building appraisal.

Photographs of the building in its setting, Photographs that relate to and complement the descriptions within the text.

A Historic Building Recording (Basic) builds upon an Appraisal survey (whether carried out or not) and should also be:

- an adequate record of a structure in its own right and the report should reflect that rather than be seen as evaluation of a structure.
- A narrative placing the structure in its geographical, architectural and historical context.

The following results will be in delivered in the above order.

## 5.0 Results - The Basic Building Survey

The archive assessment of the building here comprises a map regression of the site, any local records available, and consideration of any other nearby sites on the national record. It is not meant to be exhaustive and further information might be uncovered in the future.

After that the scale plan and photographic survey are presented, PUT THEM OTHER WAY ROUND?? and lastly the narrative placing the structure in its geographical, architectural and historical context.

### 5.1 Map Regression

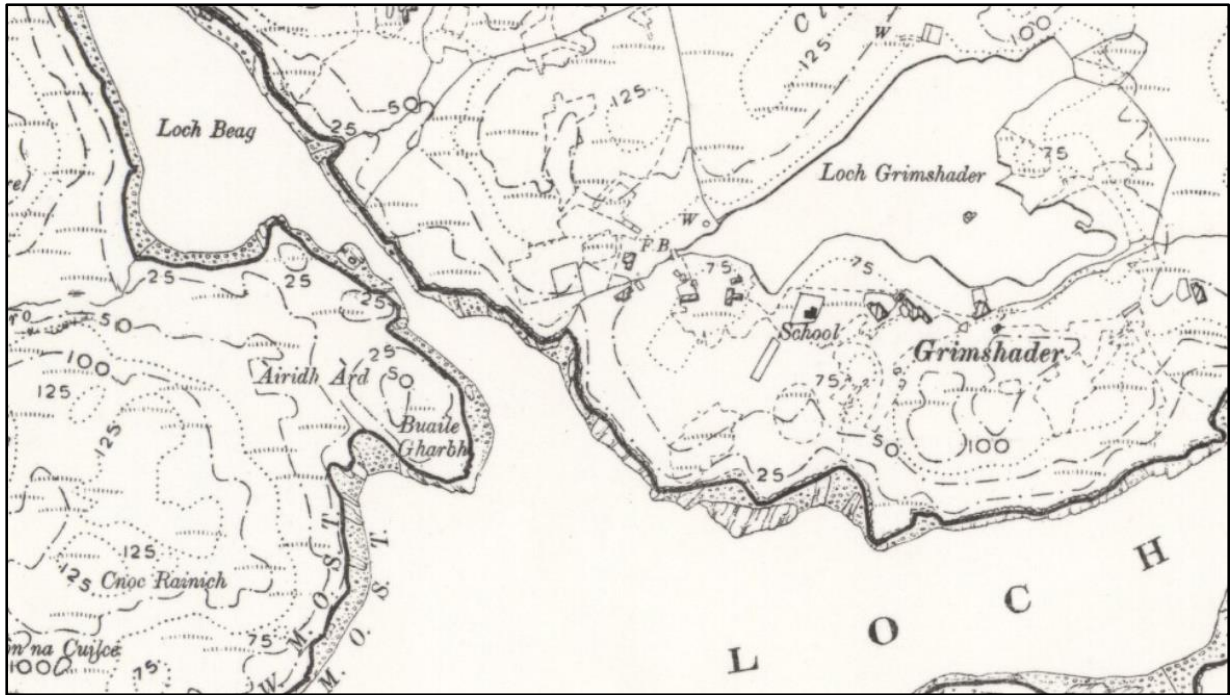
Two blackhouses in the vicinity of 9A Grimshader are shown on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Ordnance survey maps of the area:



*Figure 5: 1<sup>st</sup> edition OS map of the area, c.1854*

There are four buildings in the vicinity. We can note that the house on the southeast bank of the stream has a small garden enclosure (often known as a Kaleyard) attached to its north east.

It is the house north of the stream which is now scheduled for demolition. The remains of the house immediately south of the river can still be seen above ground but are not going to be effected by the development.



*Figure 6: 2<sup>nd</sup> edition OS of vicinity, c.1899*

We can see in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition that the original Blackhouses are still there, as indeed are the other four houses in the vicinity. A small rectangular structure is shown just to the north of the southernmost Blackhouse – this might be the small ‘shed’ seen today. A large square enclosure has been created immediately west of the Blackhouses we are interested in. A School has been built to the East.



*Figure 7: Close up of 2<sup>nd</sup> edition OS map.*



## 5.2 Documentary evidence

The Hebridean connections website is a valuable resource when researching anywhere the Hebrides. Unusually however it doesn't have many entries for Grimshader, but it does have this to say:

“Grimshader was part of Arnish Farm, and was settled as a crofting township in 1835 making it only slightly newer than Crossbost. Evidence of ancient dwellings can be found on the moor at Loch Mor Soval and possibly at Alt na Phedair. There are the remains of a 'Norse' mill at Ceann Hurnaway which is most easily accessed from Grimshader. This mill was used both by Ranish and Grimshader.”

<https://www.hebrideanconnections.com/subjects/8648>

## 5.3 Known Sites in the area

The national database of sites (Canmore) has only one entry for Grimshader:

“A township and a farmstead are depicted on the 1st edition of the OS 6-inch map (Ross-shire, Island of Lewis 1854, sheet 33). The township comprises nine roofed buildings, two partially roofed buildings, one of which is annotated as a Ruin, eight unroofed buildings, one of which is also annotated as a Ruin, nine enclosures and a head-dyke, part of which is shared with the township NB32NE 4.01 to the W. The farmstead (NB 4156 2600) comprises one roofed building, one enclosure and a head-dyke.

Thirty-three roofed, one partially roofed, four unroofed buildings and several enclosures are shown on the current edition of the OS 1:10000 map (1973).

Information from RCAHMS (SAH) 25 July 1997.”

Around 20m away on the East side of the stream the remains of a further Blackhouse can be seen. Interestingly, this Blackhouse may have had Turf walls as few stones can be felt in what remains of the walls. Also, a very small stone shed stands between the two Blackhouses, on the East bank of the stream but closer to the threatened Blackhouse. This is not marked on any map and is likely to have been built more recently. It may well have utilised stone from the threatened Blackhouse in its construction. Both of these ruins are not threatened by the development.

## 5.4 Description of the Blackhouse at 9A Grimshader

The Blackhouse at Grimshader is a fairly typical Blackhouse and Barn Structure. These two rectangular structures sit parallel to each other, side by side so that they share one middle wall. The Barn is 10.40m long by 4.5m wide and the Blackhouse 17.30m long by 5.8m wide. The Blackhouse had rounded corners but the Barns are square. They have been placed so that they are perpendicular to the aspect of the slope they sit upon, a common feature probably designed to aid drainage. They are actually aligned almost N-S, being just 20' East of North. The main house door faces east, away from the prevailing SW winds. The barn door faced west. There may have been a window or Hen hole between the two structures as their shared wall is very low at the southern end of the Barn, although clearly not a proper entranceway as some other Blackhouses have.

The southern, lower end of the Blackhouse had been robbed of a lot of stone so that all that was left of the southernmost wall was a low rise. The southeasterly section of wall (south of the main entrance) had also been completely robbed of stone at some point, before a very rough bit of wall was hastily re-erected in its place – see Figure 10. The north side of this entranceway remained standing to 6 courses. The rest of the walls were typical massive blackhouse walls, up to 1.5m width at base but with a batter leading to more slender upper sections of around 1.1m. They survived to almost 2m high in places. It was clear that internally the walls had been built with more care; the stones were coursed and fitted together better – see Figure 13, below. Outside the stones had no coursing and would be described as random rubble stone work – see Figure 12. One small section of the internal wall had been mortared together with concrete – see Figure 15. Interestingly, blue clay was also found in between stones of the internal walls and may have originally been used as plaster to cover the walls – Figure 16.

Internally thick grass and turf made identification of internal features impossible at this stage.

### 5.5 Photographic record

There follows a selection of photographs from the photographic record for the purposes of illustrating the text. The full photographic record can be found on the CD attached at the end of this report or at [DROPBOX LINK HERE](#)



*Figure 8: Looking North at Blackhouse and Barn. New access road to the right.*



*Figure 9: Looking South at Blackhouse and Barn. New access road to the left hand side.*



*Figure 10: East external wall showing North side of entranceway remaining with re-erected stock? wall to the left, under scale rod.*



*Figure 11: Entrance to Barn on West side of Building.*



*Figure 12: Northeast external wall showing random coursing*



*Figure 13: Northeast internal wall showing coursing*



*Figure 14: Tar on North Eastern external wall (003), presumably from a time after thatching when the roof was “modernised”.*



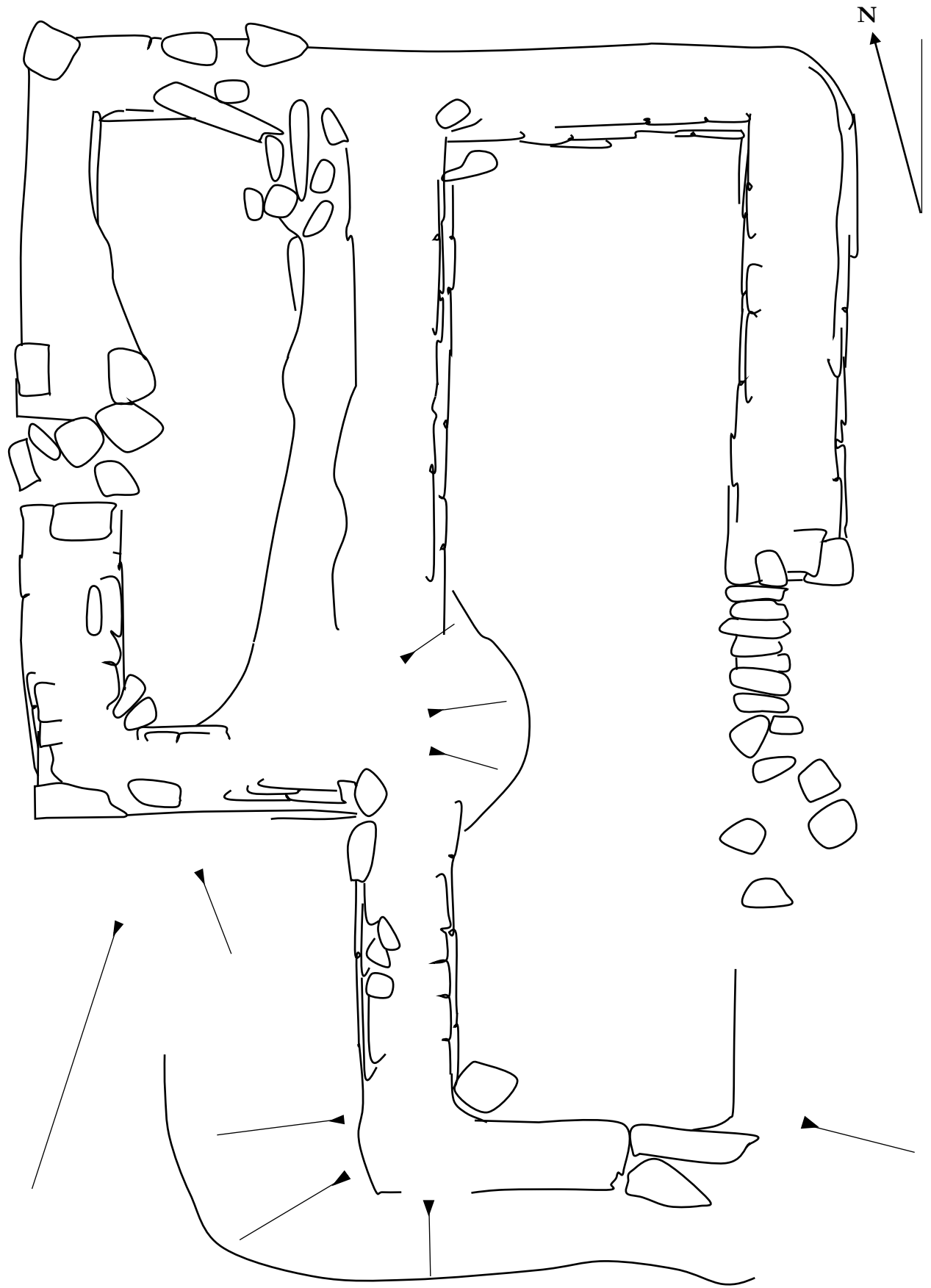
*Figure 15: Concrete pointing of section of internal wall*



*Figure 16: Clay pointing of internal walls*

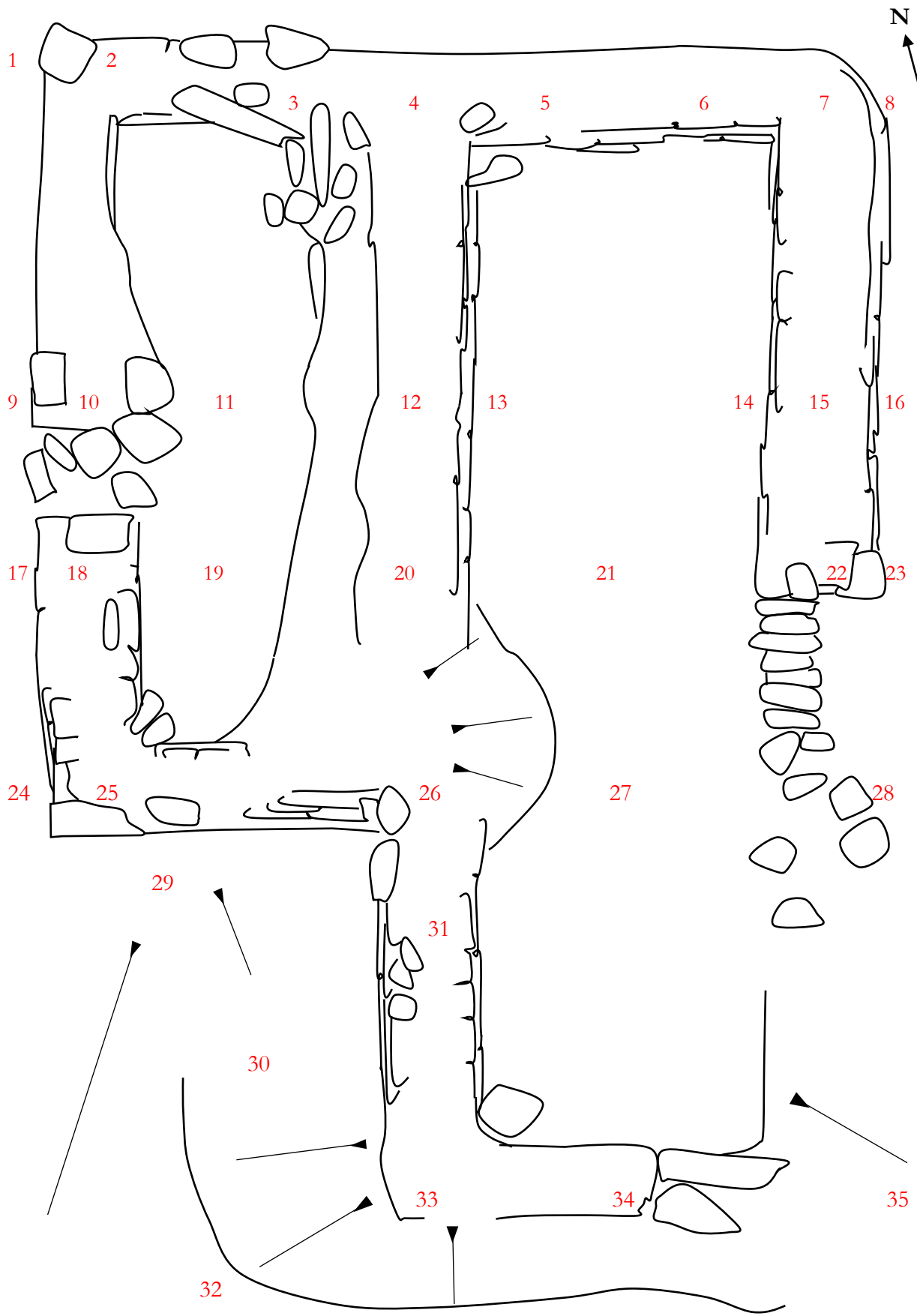
## **5.6 The Scale Plan**

A scale plan of the building is reproduced overleaf, followed by another plan showing relative levels.



0m 4m  
**Figure 17: Plan of Blackhouse at 9A Grimshader**





0m 4m  
**Figure 18: Position of Levels at 9A Grimshader, see table below for values**

The TBM was taken at the side of the tarmac road, roughly in the centre of where the future drive will be. This road slopes downwards to the east and no permanent mark could be made upon it so consequently we cannot return and relate these figures to an absolute Bench Mark. They do however show the relative heights and record what remains of the Blackhouse in that dimension. The position of each level is marked upon Figure 18 above in a red number.

Level No.	Foresight	Back sight-TBM	Level relative to TBM
1	4.32	0.98	-3.34
2	2.88	0.98	-1.90
3	3.25	0.98	-2.27
4	2.55	0.98	-1.27
5	2.93	0.98	-1.95
6	3.10	0.98	-2.12
7	2.77	0.98	-1.79
8	3.98	0.98	-3.00
9	4.65	0.98	-3.67
10	3.82	0.98	-2.84
11	4.20	0.98	-3.22
12	2.88	0.98	-1.90
13	3.92	0.98	-2.94
14	3.99	0.98	-3.01
15	3.30	0.98	-2.32
16	4.51	0.98	-3.53
17	4.68	0.98	-3.70
18	3.39	0.98	-2.41
19	4.29	0.98	-3.31
20	3.00	0.98	-2.02
21	4.18	0.98	-3.20
22	3.15	0.98	-2.17
23	4.44	0.98	-3.46
24	4.85	0.98	-3.87
25	3.45	0.98	-2.47
26	3.35	0.98	-2.37
27	4.66	0.98	-3.68
28	4.67	0.98	-3.69
29	4.45	0.98	-3.47
30	4.84	0.98	-3.86
31	5.13	0.98	-4.15
32	4.52	0.98	-3.54
33	4.70	0.98	-3.72
34	5.13	0.98	-4.15
35	5.13	0.98	-4.15

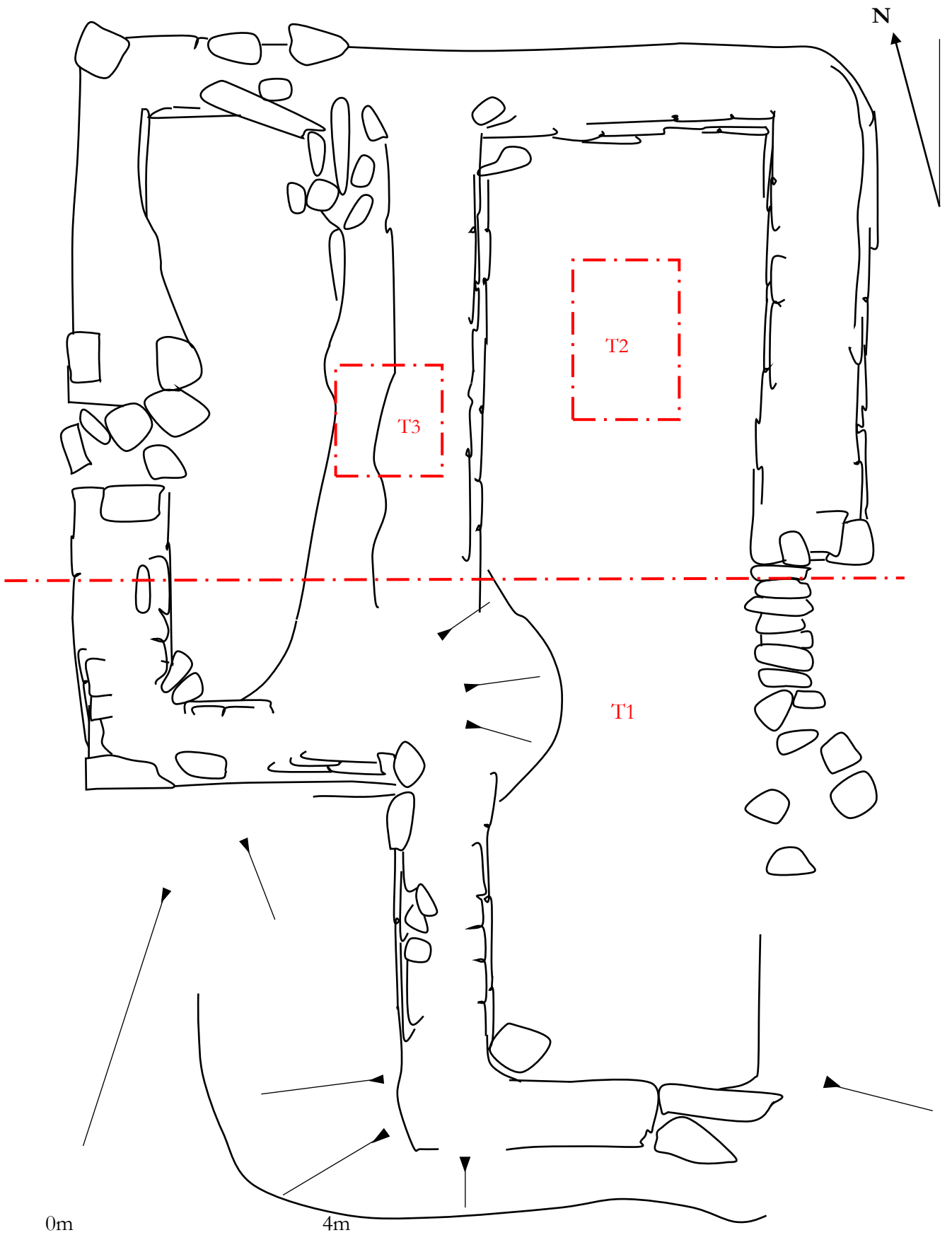
## 5.7 Evaluation Excavation

The Blackhouse appeared pretty typical at first but some interesting features emerged through excavation.

An access road to the new house site was being constructed near the Blackhouse whilst the initial Basic Building Survey took place, and the contractor agreed to help with the Evaluation trenches. This enabled the excavation of a large trench (T1) straight across all of the (damaged/robbed) south end of the Blackhouse, aimed at revealing the full cross section and thereby the construction sequence.

In addition to this, a small 1x2m trench was excavated in the centre of the floor of the Blackhouse (T2) to investigate the flooring, and another 1x1m cut into the highest remaining section of wall (T3) to look for the wall capping.

The positions of the trenches are shown overleaf.



0m 4m

**Figure 19: Location of trenches**

### 5.7.1 Trench 1

Trench 1, or rather the south facing section of trench 1, revealed an interesting sequence of events which tell us a lot about the construction. The reader should consult the full section drawing on the next page in conjunction with the following description, which is a reconstruction of events from the start of construction.

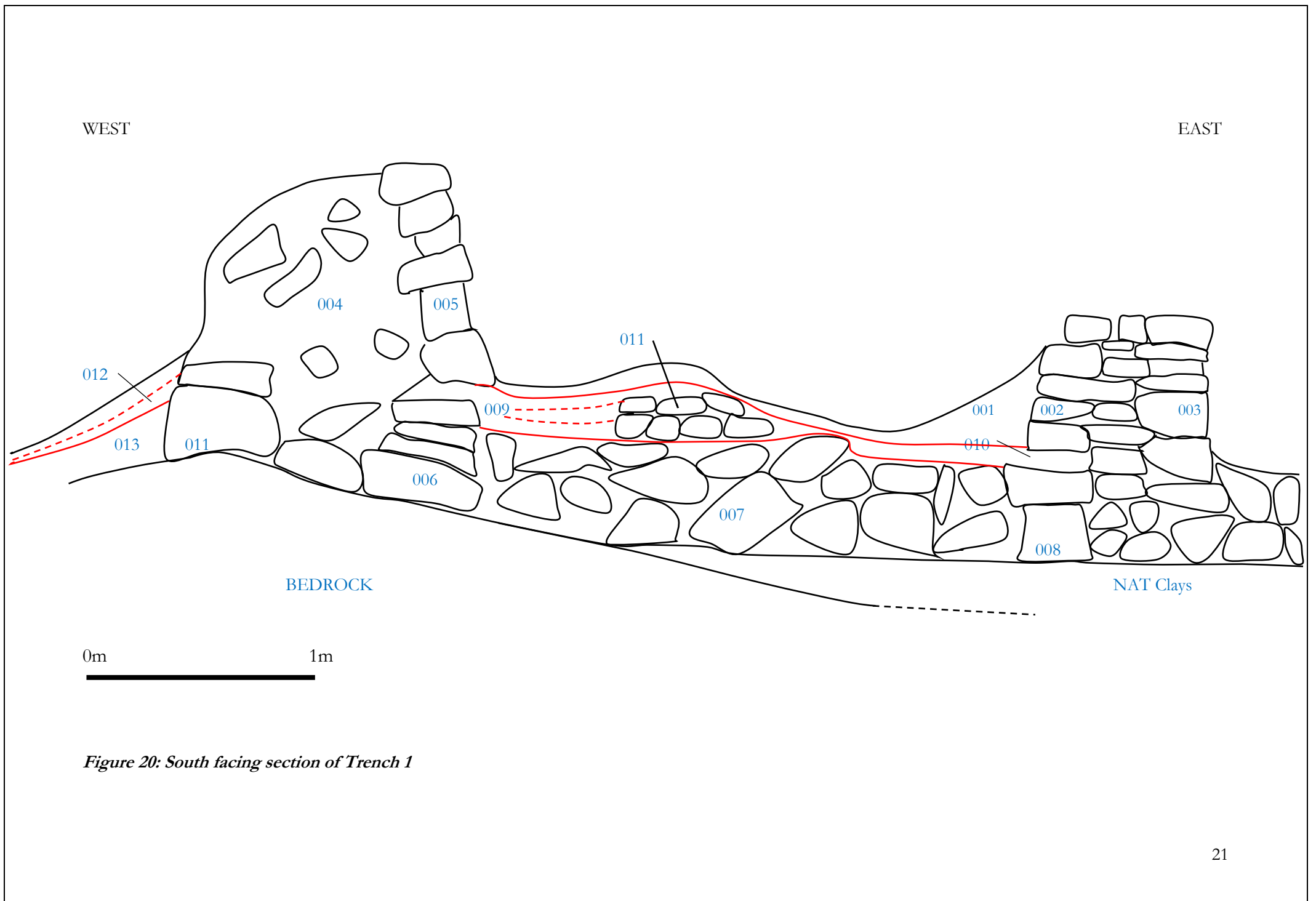
Firstly, a very large cut (hole) was made and all top soil cleared down to the natural clay or bedrock. This cut was not actually seen in the section as its limits were outside of the actual Blackhouse walls to the east and on bedrock to the west. Nevertheless it must have happened. Second, it seems that substantial foundation walls (006) and (008) were laid under where the upper blackhouse walls would eventually run. Then thirdly, the whole area was filled in with large Gneiss blocks (007) to a depth of a metre – both within these foundation walls and without. This was definitely not naturally occurring as artefacts such as parts of leather shoes and broken glass bottles were found within it. If this same depth of stone underlay the whole house, it would be an incredible amount of stone. The amount required to fill the whole area of the Blackhouse, plus a little extra around the outside, would be something like 18m length by 7m width by 1m depth (as the Barn is built on bedrock) which would be 126m<sup>3</sup>. The website [https://www.simetric.co.uk/si\\_materials.htm](https://www.simetric.co.uk/si_materials.htm) gives masses for various substances and gives the figure 1858 Kg per m<sup>3</sup> for “Broken Gneiss”. Therefore we can estimate that this massive foundation layer required a whopping 234,108 KG or 234 Tonnes of stone to be quarried and transported to the site – and that’s before any walls were built. Of course we don’t know that the whole house had the same depth of foundation – the bedrock may have risen toward the upslope and lessened this figure. Also we do not know whether the stone was reused from another structure or actually quarried, and we do not know from how far away this was. However, such massive amounts of stone make it unlikely that one family alone built this structure, with the strong implication that the wider community gathered together in order to help them.

Next, a layer of clay (009)/(010) was laid over what will be the floor of the Blackhouse. This was probably much the same as the “blue clay” mentioned in McGregor and Walker’s (1996) TAN 5 - Technical Advice Note on Historic Environment Scotlands’ Blackhouse at No 42, Arnol – see Bibliography. This layer covered an area which was slightly greater than what will become the interior – as the interior Blackhouse wall-faces sit on top of it. This is in effect a “Damp Proof Course” as it would be termed in modern building – the clay is waterproof and keeps the inhabitants dry whilst the underlying massive course of stone lets water run down the hill underneath the floor. This clay layer is wide enough to underlay the internal wall face but doesn’t run all the way out to the external part of the wall – possibly to let water driven into the wall by wind run down through the middle of the wall and drain away beneath without entering the internal space.

After this the main Blackhouse walls (004)/(005) on the west and (002)/(003) on the east were created. This was probably a process of building up the internal and external stone facings and filling the gap in between as they went along. The material filling of these particular walls (004) seems to have been exclusively peat, and not a mixture of peat, soil and other materials as seen in other Blackhouses. The internal walls (005) and (002) were much better made than the external ones, with better shaped stones arranged in courses. These walls once supported the roof.

The section cannot tell us whether the Blackhouse stood on its own for any length of time, but it does tell us that the Barn was added rather like a lean-to extension after the main Blackhouse walls were finished. After the effort of building the main house they probably needed a break! The Barn walls were tacked on to the outside of the pre-existing Blackhouse west wall, were a bit thinner than the main ones and contained much less peat filling within them. They also had squared off corners, unlike the Blackhouse. The clay floor of the Barn (012) was patchy and difficult to make out but definitely did not run under the main middle wall, just up against it. This was the same where the clay met the Barn wall. The Barn wall (not shown on drawing) did not have the massive foundation course but instead sat upon a thin layer of peaty soil (013) which overlay the bedrock which rises up at this point.

Next, occupation within the Blackhouse is clearly represented by a build-up of successive layers of clay and peat (009) and (011) to the west of the interior see Figures 20, 21 & 22. A layer of topsoil and turf (001) then formed over all.





*Figure 21: Photograph of South facing section of Trench 1*





*Figure 22: West side of main Blackhouse showing Peat core (003) in wall, internal stone facing (004) and occupation layers (009)/(011)*



*Figure 23: Peat core of wall (003)*



*Figure 24: East wall (002)/(003) and foundations (007)/(008).*



*Figure 25: Barn wall sitting on (014) and Bedrock*

### 5.7.2 Trench 2

Trench 2 was situated right at the centre of the Blackhouse floor to investigate flooring material and possible hearth. The turf and topsoil were around 2-300mm thick, and peeled off like a carpet onto a concrete surface. To the east of the trench, a small patch of clay of the same nature as that seen in Trench 1 could be seen to run under the concrete. In the SE corner of T2 Lino cloth could be seen covering the concrete (see photographic record for more detail).

It seems that the clay floor was covered over by concrete and then Lino in an effort to modernise the Blackhouse. This implies that the building had a long life and was lived in until quite recently – although I do not yet know when exactly Lino (invented 1860) or indeed concrete first became widely used on the island.



*Figure 26: Trench 2 in the centre of the floor*

### 4.2.3 Trench 3

Trench 3 was situated in order to find out whether or not the walls were capped with clay as is a common feature at other Blackhouses (see McGregor and Walker 1996). The results were inconclusive. A thick layer of topsoil sat atop the wall with very few stones in it, as can be seen in Figure 27, below. Towards the bottom of this material there was indeed small lumps of similar looking clay distributed through the soil, but no proper layer such as would be required for a cap. However there was something else missing – the outside, west face of the wall (being the inside east wall of the Barn) was completely missing and the trench came down onto the internal wall fill of peat and random stone.

It would seem sensible to suggest that the stone from this face of the wall has been robbed and used somewhere else. This would also necessitate the removal of the clay cap, which would then only remain as random small lumps in the general area, as was observed.



Figure 27: Trench 3

## 5.0 Conclusions

This Blackhouse was built before the 1<sup>st</sup> edition OS in 1854, and is likely to date from around 1835 when Grimshader was established as a crofting township, part of Arnish farm (<https://www.hebrideanconnections.com/subjects/8648>). This was a period when the traditional way of life, characterised by nucleated “Clachan” settlements which had shared land equally between residents, was being replaced by larger “Farms” aimed at greater profitability for landlords and often leading to greater hardship for the people. The 1840’s and 50’s were particularly hard in Lewis with potato crops failing and many people starving or emigrating.

We can see that a lot of work was put into building this house – implying a large communal effort in its creation. We do not know if that was aided by the proprietor of Arnish Farm. It is quite possible that the people who were brought in to establish the crofting township at Grimshader had been cleared from somewhere else, and helped each other establish themselves.

We can also tell from the concrete and Lino flooring, as well as the Tar drip, that the Blackhouse went through numerous repairs and modernisations. Although I do not have an exact date, modern rubbish such as screw top bottles and a Whisky water jug found in the top soil above the floor indicate that the Blackhouse was probably inhabited from c1835 through to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, or around 100 years.

## Appendix 1: Context Register

Context No.	Description
001	Turf and topsoil
002	East wall internal stone facing
003	East wall external stone facing
004	Peat wall core in west wall
005	West wall internal stone facing
006	Foundation of west wall
007	Foundation deposit under whole Blackhouse
008	Foundation of East wall
009	Clay floor, west
010	Clay floor, east
011	Occupation deposit
012	Clay floor, Barn
013	Peaty soil under barn floor
014	Barn wall

## Appendix 2: Photographic log

<b>ID</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Facing</b>
001	Pre-excavation	N
002	-	N
003	North side of Blackhouse entrance way with later wall	W
004	-	W
005	-	NW
006	-	NW
007	-	N
008	-	N
009	-	N
010	Internal wall facing, SW corner	W
011	-	N
012	-	N
013	-	N
014	External wall facing SW corner	E
015	Barn wall, S	N
016	-	N
017	-	N
018	Barn Entrance	E
019	-	S
020	-	SE
021	-	E
022	Barn internal walls, S	SW
023	Barn internal walls W	W
024	Barn internal walls, N	N
025	Barn internal walls,	N
026	General, whole building	S
027	-	S
028	-	S
029	-	S
030	-	S
031	External wall, NE blackhouse	W
032	-	SW
033	-	SW
034	-	W
035	Tar drip	W
036	Tar drip	W
037	External east wall of Blackhouse	NW
038	-	NW
039	Inc. Entranceway	W
040	Internal west wall of blackhouse, south end	W
041	Internal west wall of blackhouse	NW
042	Internal west wall of blackhouse, North end	W
043	-	W

044	-	W
045	-	W
046	-	W
047	Internal face of North wall of blackhouse	N
048	Internal face of East wall of blackhouse	E
049	-	E
050	-	E
051	-	E
052	South end of Internal face of East wall	SE
053	Detail of remaining part of the entrance with rough wall	E
054	-	E
055	Sickle	E
056	Concrete pointing in small section of West wall, Internal, north end	W
057	-	W
058	-	W
059	Detail of NE corner internal	E
060	-	E
061	Clay pointing between stones	E
062	Small shed	SE
063	-	SE
064	-	SE
065	-	SE
066	-	SE
067	-	SE
068	General view of all buildings	NW
069		NW
070	-	NW
071	Selection of pottery sherds	N
072	Machine creating Trench 1	NW
073	-	W
074	-	
075	West wall of blackhouse and interior	N
076	-	
077	-	
078	Internal occupation layers (009)	
079	Barn wall	N
080	Barn wall	N
081	Barn wall	NE
082	Wall core peat	N
083	Whole section	NW
084	-	NW
085	-	NW
086	Trench 2	N
087	-	N
088	Blue clay patch under concrete	N
089	Lino over concrete	S
090	Trench 3	E
091		SE
092		NE



093	Occupation layer (011)	N
094	-	N
095	-	N
096	Whole section	N
097	Internal deposits west	N
098	Internal deposits centre	N
099	Internal deposit East	N
100	Detail of occupation deposits (011), clay floor (009) and underlying stone (007)	N
101	-	N

### **Bibliography:**

**McGregor, C. and Walker, B. (1996)** *“The Hebridean Blackhouse – A guide to materials, construction and maintenance”* Historic Scotland Technical Advice Note 5, Historic Scotland, Edinburgh