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SUMMARY REPORT

Excavation of a souterrain and associated features
by Cyderhall Farm, Clashmore, Sutherland

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1. Introduction

The excavation of the site on the north-east corner of a new gravel quarry took place over 9 weeks from November 1987 until February 1988. The work was carried out by the author, paid volunteers and other interested individuals mainly from the Dornoch Heritage Society. A grant from SDD (HBI) covered the first 4 weeks of the excavation. It was done with the co-operation of the contractors, Miller Construction, and of the sub-contractors, K.F.C. Miller Construction also funded the author's travelling expenses during the last 2 weeks of the excavation.

The archaeological features had been disturbed by the preliminary stripping of the topsoil before quarrying began, and by the extraction of gravel itself, which only ceased in this part of the quarry when the machine driver noticed large sandstone blocks in his bucket. However, certain postholes outside the surviving area of archaeological deposits, showing as features in the natural gravel, were successfully related to the other evidence.

2. Souterrain

SEE PLANS 1 - 3

This was separated from the rest of the site by a wide machine scoop. The souterrain was aligned NW-SE, and the wall survived to a length of 7m on the NE side and 2.5m on the SW. The maximum surviving height of the wall was 1.5m. This walling consisted of large roughly-dressed sandstone blocks - maximum size 0.25m x 0.5m x 0.84m high - which were laid long axes vertically and flatter faces outward. These sandstone blocks had been imported to the site. Smaller rounded stones were also used in the walling which had been selected from the natural gravels.

A floor surface inside the souterrain of well trampled sandy gravel was excavated. Also at this level were 4 opposite pairs of postholes, which may indicate support for the walls or for the roof. Cut through the floor was a round pit, 1.5m in diameter and 1.03m deep. The function of this feature is not clear. A greasy

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silty deposit in the bottom of the pit was sampled.

The souterrain had either collapsed or been deliberately pulled down, and the main fill of the pit feature was displaced walling. The whole interior had been filled up with dumps of sandy gravel.

3. House site and gully/proto-souterrain.

The other major features of the site have been interpreted as the surviving part of a round-house; and an associated gully. This house had been initially sunk into the ground surface to a depth of at least 0.7m. Three phases of use of the structure have been identified.

Phase 1

SEE PLANS 1 AND 4

An inner arc of 5 postholes 0.45m - 0.60m in diameter and 0.63m - 0.69m deep, and 6 smaller outer postholes along the inner edge of the cut were excavated. These are taken to indicate that a round-house c. 9m in diameter had existed, although nothing of the presumed matching postholes further south had survived the machine cuts. A large round and deep feature was also found, cut through the floor surface, which consisted of trampled and compacted gravel.

Leading off NW from the house area, and cut down to the same level was a gully 7m long and 1.75m wide. On either side of the access to the gully was a major posthole 0.5m deep, suggesting a raised roof height here. Within the gully itself three opposite pairs of postholes may indicate the positions of timbers which may have revetted the unstable sides of the cut and possibly also supported a roof. A slot between the extreme NW pair of postholes suggests a closing wall. The parallels in size, orientation and internal features between this gully and the stone built souterrain are obvious, and the one may be a more sophisticated version of the other.

The round-house had burned down and a clear destruction level of carbonised wood and oxidised gravels was noted and sampled.

Phase 2

Pieces of red sandstone, which does not occur locally, were observed on the interface of the Phase 1 destruction and the later deposits; the construction and use of the stone souterrain may be contemporary with the occupation of the Phase 2 house.

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The gully was almost completely filled with dumps of sandy gravel, as was much of the house, especially the NW area. The fills may be the excavated material from the souterrain trench. Six shallow external postholes are thought to relate to this occupation. No floor levels were identified. This timber structure also burned down. The carbonised roof timbers, including possible ring beam and rafters (see PLAN 5) were excavated and sampled. They survived intact due to a sealing layer of grey silt which may be derived from the turf roofing sods.

Phase 3

This level had been disturbed by the bulldozer, and the main evidence recovered consisted of dark gravelly silt spreads within the limits of the house area. A possible indication that there had been a major reconstruction was a large round feature 1.1m in diameter and fully 1.6m deep, with near vertical sides, taken to be the hole for a massive post. No nearly comparable features were noted from this phase, however.

4. Other features.

A. The bottom 0.05m of a clay-lined grain pit was located just by the machine cut section through the roundhouse. The grain had become carbonised, and was sampled. No stratigraphical relationship between this and the rest of the site survived, but its location between 2 of the postholes of the inner arc of the Phase 1 structure is suggestive.

B. A steep-sided pit-like feature located c. 20m west of the stone souterrain was exposed in section. It had been at least 0.98m deep. The fills consisted of dark greasy silt.

C. A midden pit 0.75m deep exposed in section on the far side of the quarry, 158m south of the main excavation area. Fills including much mussel, cockle and whelk shells.

5. The finds

Due to the nature of the soil organic survival was poor and bone was only recovered in small quantities from the stone souterrain backfill gravels. Small pieces of burnt bone were recovered from roundhouse phases 1 and 2.

One sherd of pottery was recovered from the gully fills, and a few soft pieces which had lost their external surfaces from the stone souterrain floor level.

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A large unretouched flint flake was found in a phase 2 deposit, and part of a broken leaf-shaped arrowhead of Buchan flint, also in a phase 2 context.

6. Conclusion

Hopefully this very simplified account of the excavation results has shown that useful information was recovered from an unpromising site. The working hypothesis has been that the main features are of late Iron Age date. Given the large quantities of carbonised wood taken from unstratified contexts, this can be tested. The discovery of the 'proto-souterrain' in this area, associated with a house the original form of which can be deduced, may be as significant as the addition of another stone-built souterrain to the list.

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PLAN 1

GENERAL

GULLEY

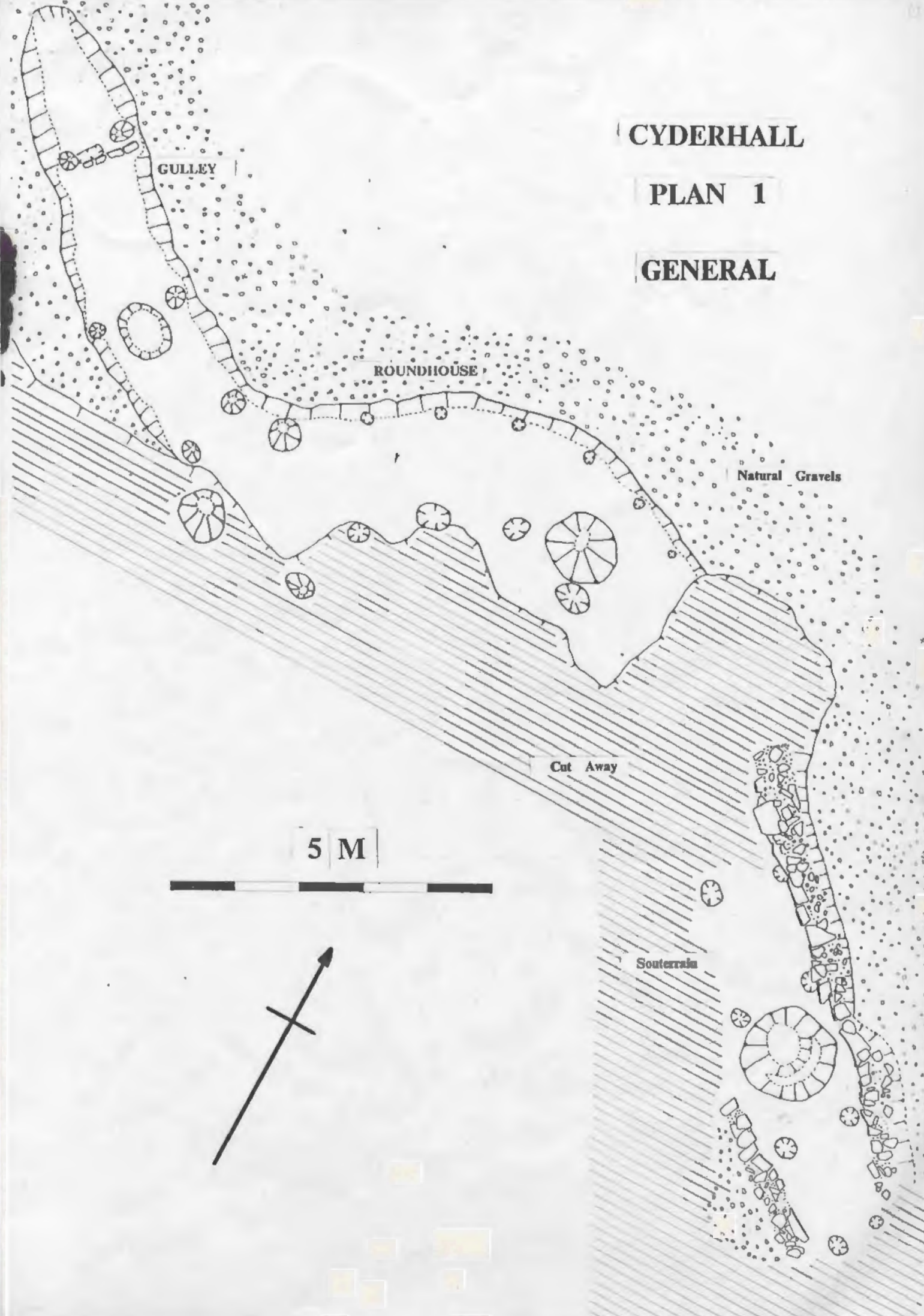
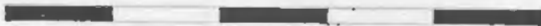
ROUNDHOUSE

Natural Gravels

Cut Away

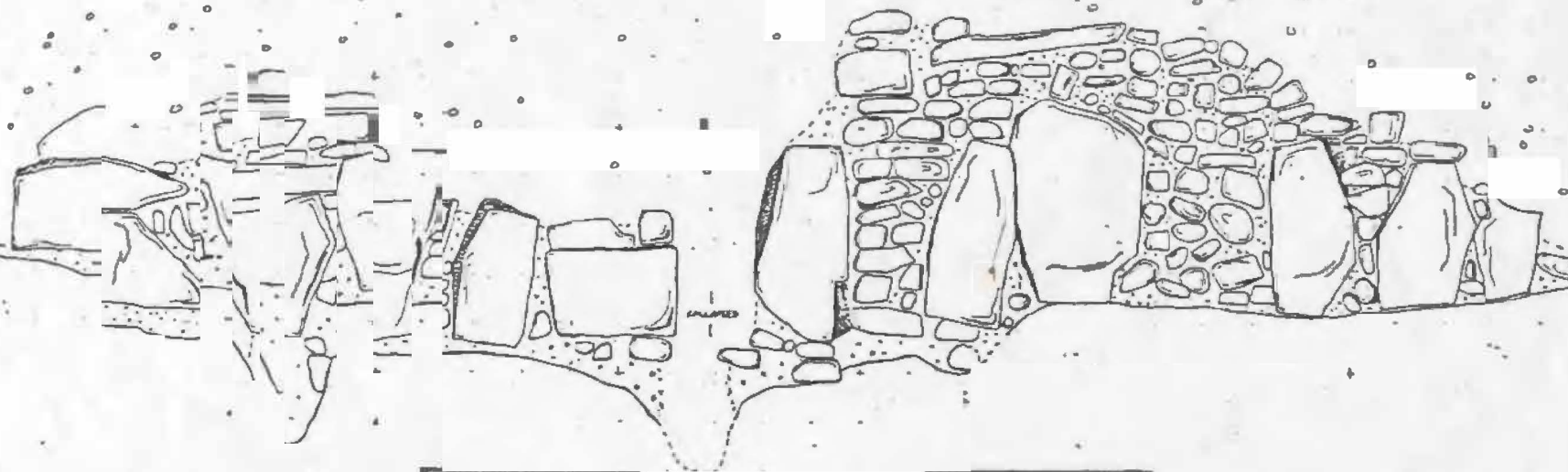
Souterrain

5 M



A

B



3 M

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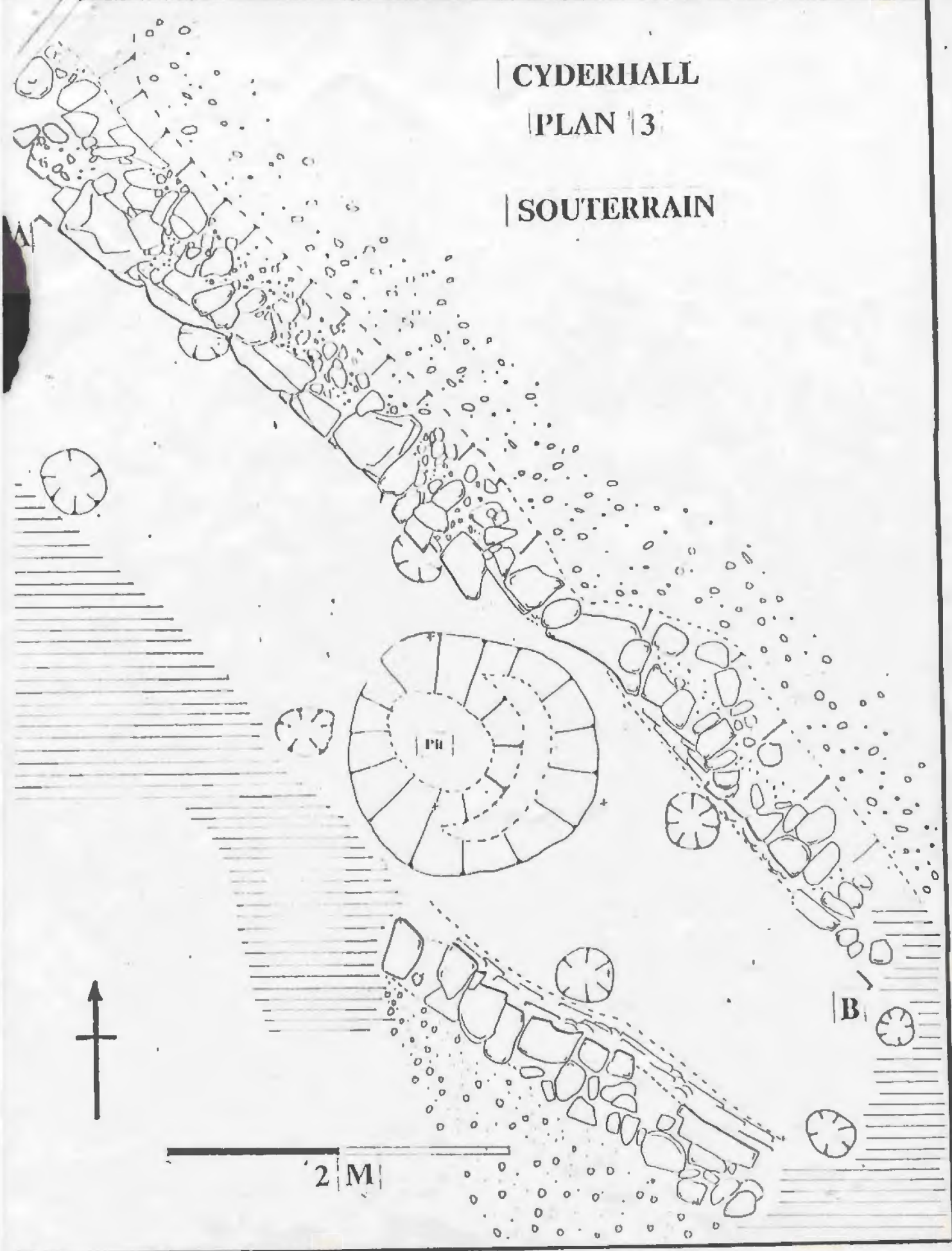
PLAN 2

SOUTERRAIN WALL

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PLAN 3

SOUTERRAIN

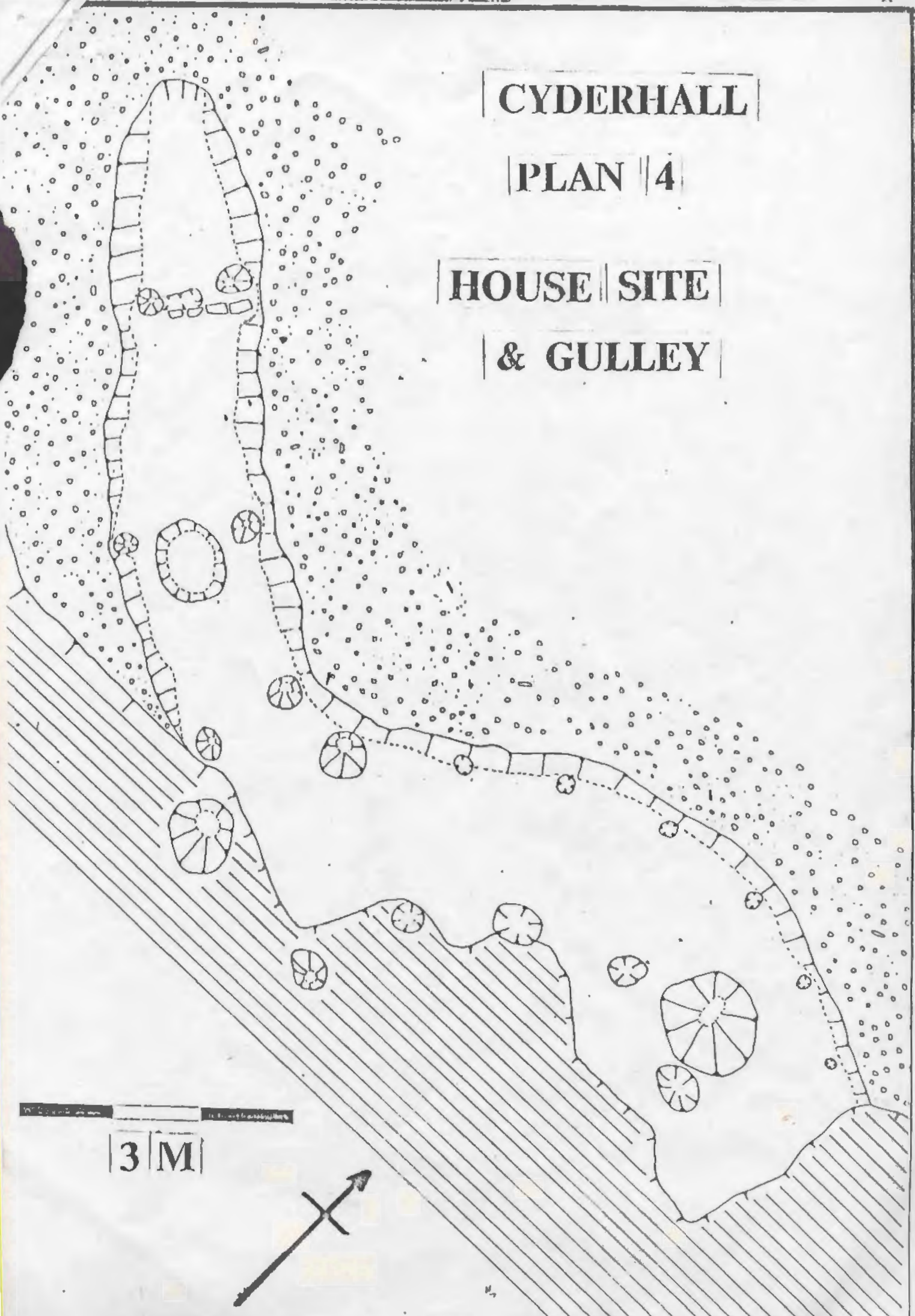


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PLAN 4

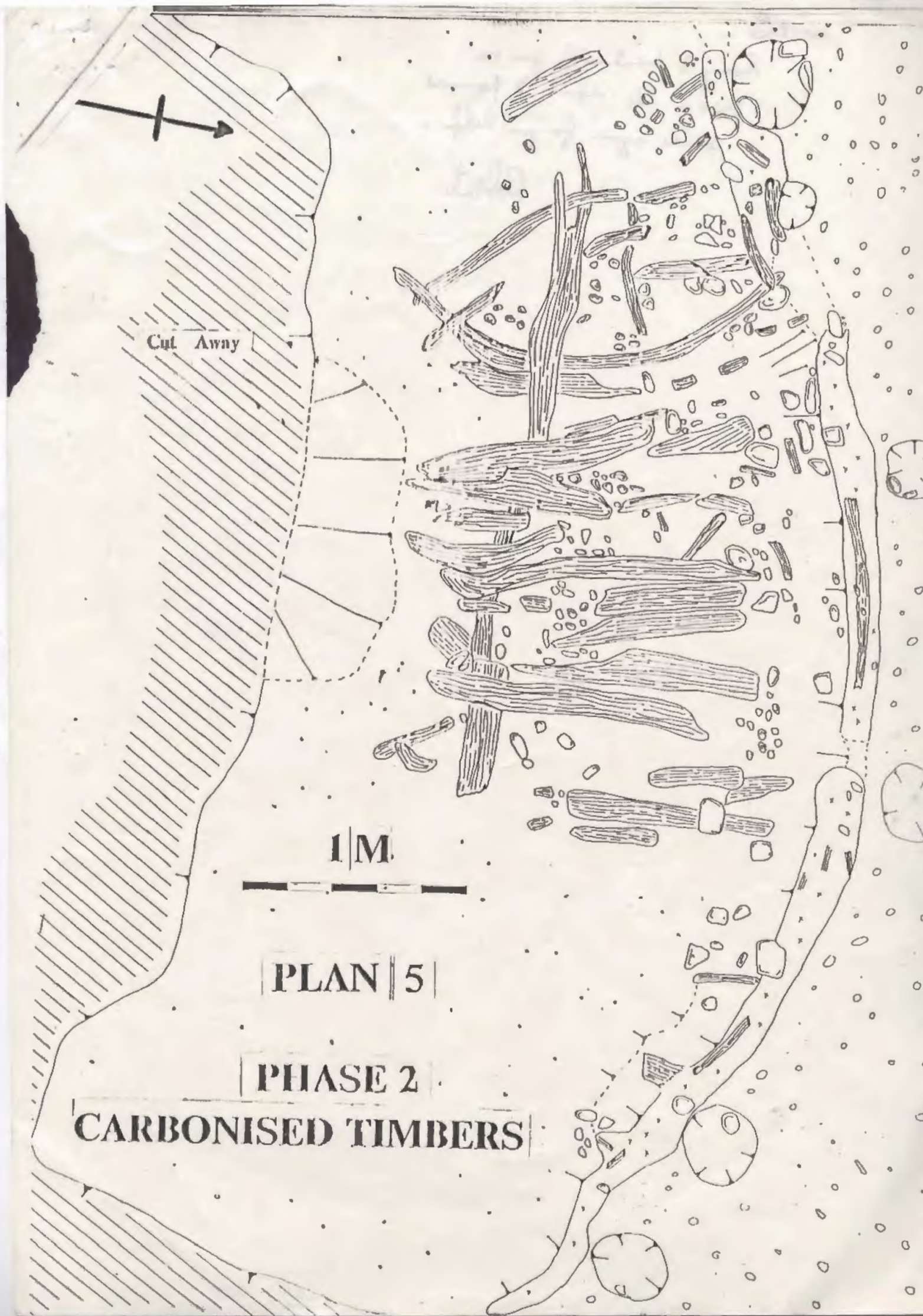
HOUSE SITE

& GULLEY



3 M





Cut Away

1 M

PLAN 5

PHASE 2

CARBONISED TIMBERS