

**DATA STRUCTURE: WATCHING BRIEF ON THE MACHINE EXCAVATION
OF SITE INVESTIGATION PITS AROUND LISMORE PARISH CHURCH, ISLE
OF LISMORE, ARGYLL**

Client: Kilmoluag Liosmor (SCIO, Registered No SC053097)

Produced by Clare Ellis of Argyll Archaeology, January 2025

Planning Ref. No.:



0. NON TECHNICAL SUMMARY

- 0.1 A watching brief on the machine excavation of five site investigation test pits was carried out on 28th January 2025 within the glebe of Lismore Parish Church, Isle of Lismore, Argyll. A cobble surface was exposed just below the topsoil in TP5 and a mixed deposit of charcoal and ash was exposed in TP4. No archaeological material was found in the first three test pits which were located in the field on the north side of the Parish Church.

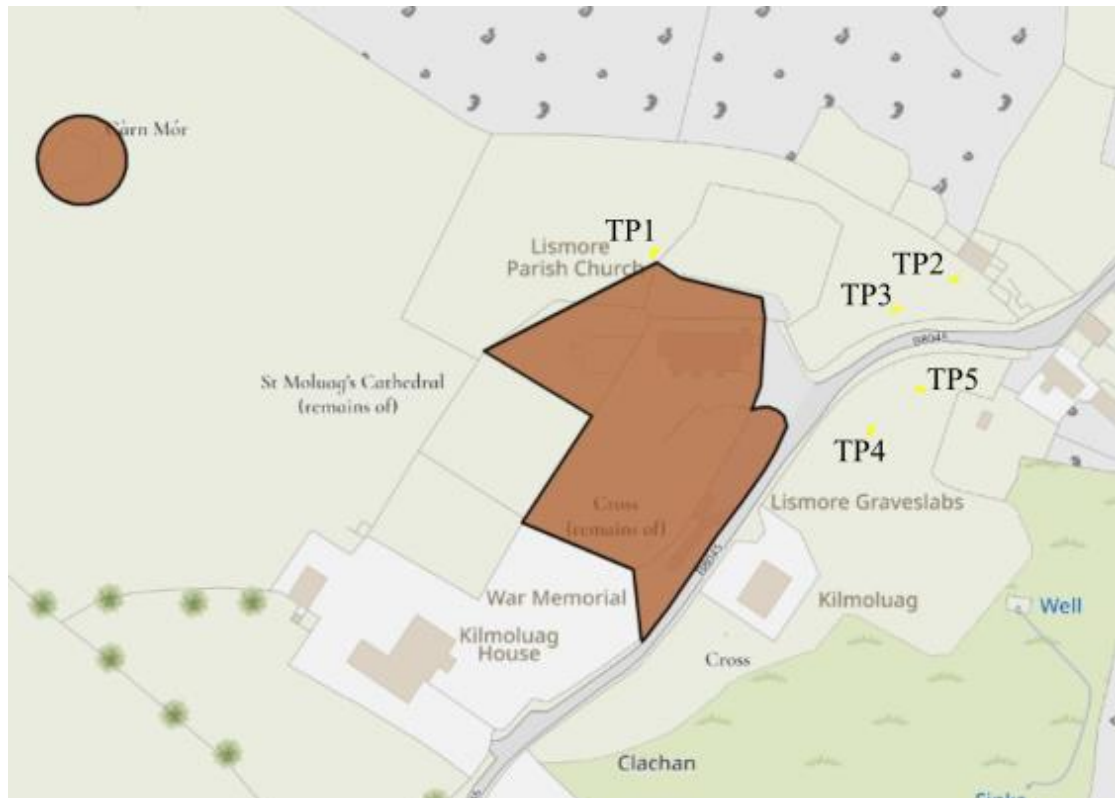


Fig. 1. The location of the test pits in relation to the scheduled area of the Parish Church and graveyard

1. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 The early medieval monastery

- 1.1.1 Lismore Parish Church is the choir of the medieval cathedral of Argyll and sits on the purported site of a monastery founded by St Moluag (c. 592 AD). A large curvilinear enclosure, visible in the line of old boundaries and which surrounds the parish church and the settlement of Clachan, encloses an area of roughly 4.5 hectares and has been interpreted as the remains of a monastic vallum (MacDonald 1974) (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Possible line of the vallum monasterii (after MacDonald) shown in red, over 1st Edition Ordnance Survey Map Sheet LXXII 1875

- 1.1.2 However, until 2018 the only evidence of early medieval activity within the glebe was the fragments of an 8th century cross which were found in the graveyard. But now because of the community led pilot excavation within the glebe lands in 2018 we can be confident in the existence of an enclosed cemetery dating from at least 7th century and earlier burials may well exist (Ellis 2019) (Fig. 3 & 4).



Fig. 3. Location of the evaluation trenches, 2018 excavation

- 1.1.3 The pilot excavation also demonstrated that the cemetery continued to be used until the late 10th or early 11th century AD. The discovery of an early Christian

cemetery with good bone survival, its own enclosure wall, indicating that is probably associated with an early Christian church/monastery, is extremely significant as very few have been discovered or excavated in Scotland. Furthermore, the discovery indicates that this location had some special significance to the early Christians of Lismore, and this knowledge was passed down through the generations into the medieval period when Argyll's first medieval cathedral was founded in around 1250 AD. Maldonado (2011, 255) has demonstrated that in Scotland there was a surge in use of cemeteries during the 7th to 8th centuries when there is also an emergence of saint's cults, the use of Class II Pictish symbol stones, the production of the earliest insular illuminated manuscripts and within secular society the emergence of over-kingship. Give the dates of the burials it seems likely that any focus of burial in the early Medieval period (i.e an early church building but see Maldonado (2011) who argues there may not necessarily be a focus to many early Medieval enclosed cemeteries) was probably not the location of the later cathedral, which lies some 65m to the northwest, but perhaps somewhere to the south of the cathedral.



Fig. 4. Trench 5, the cemetery excavation.

- 1.1.4 Further excavation in 2021 and 2022 confirmed the existence and survival of the early medieval lower cemetery to the south, west and to the north/northeast of the modern manse. There was much intercutting of the burials in that part of

the cemetery located on the south side of the modern manse. The burials included newborn children, infants/sub-adults, young adults and older adults, although initial assessment indicates that women were not buried here. At least one adult buried in the cemetery had been killed by a sword or axe. The southern portion of the cemetery was capped by later occupation, with *in situ* cooking hearths and a pit in which lime may have been made; post-excavation analyses will confirm whether this activity is contemporary with the 13th century occupation deposits and metalworking deposits previously identified in Trench 5. The recovery from the deposit above the cemetery soil of an Edward II coin, which was probably minted in Dublin around 1280 AD, indicates that the cemetery may have gone out of use by this period and that is certainly what was indicated by the results of our 2018 excavation. The cemetery wall, previously identified in Trench 5, was not exposed in the trench south of the manse but it was revealed to the north and survived as a substantial limestone clay boned wall. The northern portion of the cemetery was sealed by a fairly clean clay which was then capped by a cobbled surface. The recovery of a David II coin (1367-71) from the soil layer above the cobbling indicates that the cemetery had been abandoned by 14th century AD.

- 1.1.4 Interestingly, boundaries around early Medieval cemeteries are rare and Maldonado (2011, 157, 262) states that where they do occur, they are often reused from pre-existing structures, for example the *vallum* on Iona forms one boundary of the cemetery and are often associated with monasteries. Maldonado (ibid, 157) also notes that ‘the use of enclosed burial grounds is otherwise characteristic of church sites and may well be a diagnostic Christian practice’. This makes the cemetery boundary discovered in 2018 even more interesting as the burials clearly respect it (there were none outside the wall) and therefore the working assumption is that it must have been constructed prior to the interment of the inhumations. One possibility that should be considered is that this wall is one part, or a subdivision of the monastic *vallum*.
- 1.1.5 The potential *vallum monasterii* identified by MacDonald is just over half the size of that on Iona but twice the size of St Blane’s at Kingarth on the Isle of Bute and considerably larger than many of the smaller monasteries such as Ardnadam in Cowal or St Patrick’s chapel on Tiree (Fig. 2). The *vallum monasterii* served to not only identify the physical boundary of a given monastery but also it formed the spiritual and legal boundary between the monastic establishment and the outside world. Often within the *vallum monasterii* were subdivisions which served to control and allow access to different parts of the monastery as well as define different areas of activity, e.g. cemetery, church, craft workshops, dwellings, barns and byres, corn drying kilns etc. The 2018 pilot excavation revealed a cobbled surface in two places (Trenches 7 & 8 Fig. 3) along the extrapolated course of the vallum beneath a substantial deposit of peat, although no dating evidence for the cobble surface nor a turf bank uncovered on the north side of the glebe was forthcoming. Although the most common form of an early Christian *vallum monasterii* is a curvilinear ditch and bank, other types of recorded enclosure boundary include stone walls (e.g. Wimborne, Lowe 2008, 51), and a thorn hedge (Oundle, Lowe 2008, 251). At Lismore perhaps the presence of so much bedrock immediately

below the topsoil prevented the construction of a ditched and banked enclosure boundary, rather in places it may have been defined by a bank and elsewhere by a stout hedge with a paved path along its inner edge; further excavation and a programme of dating is required in order to determine the presence or absence of a *vallum*.

- 1.1.6 Two stone structures, initially identified by the geophysical survey, were confirmed in the low-lying area of the glebe to the southeast of the modern manse. The westernmost comprised a massive limestone built oval structure with a narrow, splayed entrance which was in use during the 9th and 10th centuries. The interior of the structure was paved, with two stone boxes and a possible internal oval stone structure. In contrast the easternmost structure appeared to comprise a sub-rectangular arrangement of walls, one of which was cut by a later stone wall. The structure had been constructed over a series of dumps that were rich in whole and fragmentary crucibles and numerous fragmentary clay moulds. An in situ wooden stake was recovered from adjacent to one of these spreads. The peat on the west side of this structure yielded further crucible and mould fragments as well as the remains of worked pieces of wood. The archaeological evidence is consistent with the presence of craft specialisation within an early Christian monastery, with the workshop activity dating to 8th/9th century AD, and is directly comparable to the contemporary monasteries at Iona and Portmahomack.

1.2 The cathedral

- 1.2.1 Excavation took place between 1950 and 1953 on the north and western sides of the existing parish church structure and revealed the plan of a large building comprising a choir and nave some 137 feet long, a later western tower and north chapel (Brown & Duncan 1957, 42, 44) (Fig. 5). More recent work by Sullivan (1994) suggests that the north chapel may have been smaller than estimated by Brown and Duncan. Brown and Duncan (1957, 45) reported that the walls of the nave had been mostly robbed of the larger stone, while the discarded smaller stone, rubble and mixed sand and shell mortar had been spread over the ruin. Two feet, 0.61m, of wall survived above the foundations at the west end of the nave, though this appeared to reduce in height towards the eastern end of the nave (ibid, 46). The north and south walls were roughly 1.03 m thick and the west wall 1.17m thick at its base. The walls were built upon a slate foundation set within a shallow trench with white dressed sandstone forming the basal layer and which Brown and Duncan thought must have been imported onto the island perhaps from Inninmore Bay in Movern (ibid, 46). The walls were roughly mortared with a rubble and mortar core. An entrance was identified in the southern wall of the nave. Buttresses extended the western wall beyond the southern and northern walls. Two walls 1.2m wide were built into this western wall and a third perpendicular to them enclosing a small area that was interpreted as the base of a tower. A further short wall internal to the nave was interpreted as a possible later wall associated with the burials (ibid 47).

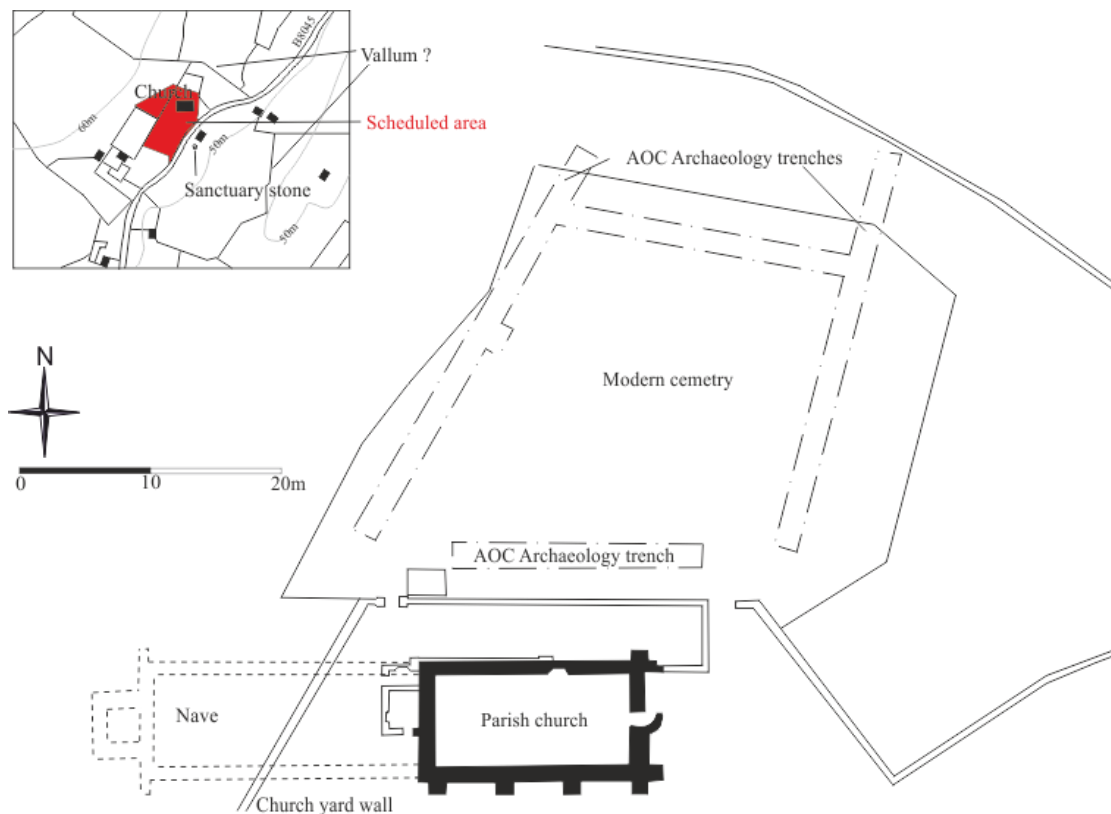


Fig. 5. Location of the church and plan of the church, nave and modern burial ground.

- 1.2.2 In 2016 three excavation trenches were opened over what were thought to be the previous locations of Brown and Duncan's trenches; one over the northwest corner of the nave, one over the northern tower wall and one over a later wall which appeared to be located within the nave (Fig. 6 & Ellis 2016). The nave wall was roughly 1.10m high, with a limestone flag foundation and a sandstone drip course; the wall was 0.92m wide. The northwest buttress had been constructed after the nave wall. There were small pockets of mortar surviving within the wall but in the main the lime element of the mortar had been dissolved leaving a loose gritty soil. No floor within the nave was discernible. The tower wall was up to 1.24m wide and built from limestone facing blocks with a stone and mortar core; however, the west end of the north tower wall appeared to largely comprise a core of loose gritty soil which was formerly lined with limestone orthostats. A possible re-deposited mortar-like grey clay floor was identified within the interior of the tower and a possible square posthole packet with grey limestone rocks was identified abutting the interior elevation of the north tower wall; this was not excavated. The tower wall had been keyed into the nave wall. Within the interior of the nave a 1.56m deep sondage dug by Brown and Duncan was re-excavated, revealing a large quantity of re-deposited human and animal bone and within the upper undisturbed deposit (this would have been located just beneath the former nave floor) parts of two in situ inhumation burials; a radiocarbon date from one of these dates the burial to 1482-1650 cal AD (95% confidence level SUERC-70207). Finally, a much later, but quite substantial drystone limestone wall was exposed within the interior of the nave running parallel to the southern nave wall; the function of

this wall is not known but it may have been built to replace a collapsed southern nave wall.

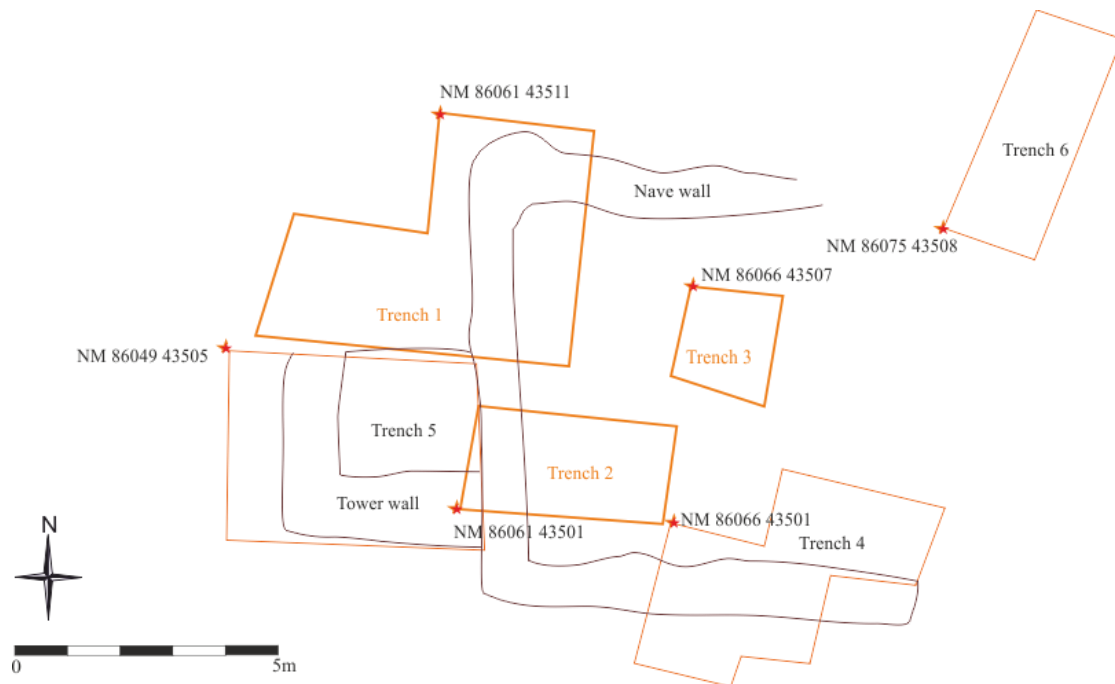


Fig. 6. Location of Trenches 4 to 6 overlying survey plan of the visible earthworks and trenches 1 to 3 from 2016.

1.2.3 In 2017 excavation revealed that the western tower wall was lined with limestone orthostats while the inner core material comprised soil rich grit (the result of chemically weathered mortar) with very few small stones (hearting) (Ellis 2017). In comparison the core of the southern tower wall, especially towards where it abutted the nave wall, contained a few larger stones; a similar pattern was revealed in 2016 within the northern tower wall. Although not a particularly structurally strong wall the large width of the tower wall, roughly 1.20m, indicates that it most probably was part of a tower, although it may not have been particularly high. The entrance in the southern nave wall was re-exposed and recorded. The internal later wall identified in 2016 was not found to continue into Trench 4.

2. OBJECTIVES

a.1 The archaeological objectives are:

- a. to determine the presence or absence of archaeological features within the confines of the site investigation test pits
- b. to record archaeological features and deposits as exposed
- c. ensure the preservation in situ of the archaeological resource

3. METHOD

- 3.1 A JCB equipped with a narrow tooth bucket was used to excavated TP1-T3 and TP5. A small, tracked excavator equipped with a ditching bucket was used to excavated T4. The spoil was placed on the sides of the stripped areas and backed filled after recording. All machine excavation was carried out in the presence of an archaeologist.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- 4.1 TP1 was located on the west side of the modern graveyard and its western fence and just beyond the scheduled area and to the east of the banked enclosure (Fig. 1 & 7). The test pit measured 1.70m NE/SW and was 0.90m wide SE/NW. The topsoil comprised a dark grey clay loam around 0.23m deep. Below the topsoil was shattered limestone bedrock which was soft and easy to excavate. The trench was excavated down to a depth of 1.4m. No archaeological deposits or artefacts were found.



Fig. 7. TP1

- 4.2 TP2 was located on the east side of the modern graveyard in a natural hollow which is located on the south side of the stone enclosure wall (Fig. 1 & 8). The test pit was the same size as TP1 and roughly oriented NE/SW. The topsoil comprised a black clay loam with occasional rounded pebbles within it. Hard limestone bedrock was exposed at 0.40-0.45m depth. No archaeological deposits or artefacts were found.



Fig. 8. TP2

- 4.3 TP3, 1.70m x 0.90m, was located to the south of TP2 (Fig. 1 & Fig. 9). The topsoil was again around 0.40m deep with hard limestone bedrock recorded just below the topsoil. No archaeological deposits or artefacts were found.



Fig. 9. TP3

- 4.4 TP4, 1.70m x 0.90m was located in the field on the east side of the main road and to the north of the presumed boundary of the early medieval graveyard (Fig. 1 & Fig. 10). The topsoil comprised a grey clay loam and was around 0.30m in depth. Below this was a compact grey clay. At a depth of c. 0.45m flecks of charcoal and red ash were observed adjacent to a clast of limestone which was partially located in the baulk. The ash deposit appears to have been dumped onto the clay 'surface'. Excavation was halted at this level.



Fig. 10. TP4

- 4.5 TP5, 1.30m x 0.90m was located to the east of the gate into the field. The topsoil was 0.21m deep and comprised a grey to black clay loam and was around 0.21m deep. Below the topsoil was a layer of limestone cobbles that had clearly been laid (Fig. 11). The limestone cobbles average 0.18m in length and there was some overlap and some stacking of the cobbles; 1 large cobble was removed by the machine and this stone was 0.45m long. A single small fragment of animal was observed within the sediment between the cobbles. Two rounded cobbles of quartzite had also been utilised in the surface. Excavation was halted at this level and the surface quickly clean and photographed.



Fig. 11. Cobble surface in TP5

- 4.6 The cobble surface in TP5 resembles that recorded against the eastern boundary of the glebe, Trench 7 and is clearly a deliberately laid surface; its extent was not ascertained. It is possible that this surface is part of the road as shown on the old estate map (See Ellis 2022, Fig 21) or it may be the remains of a surface entirely unrelated to the road. The ash in TP4 is roughly at the same level as the surface that capped the burials in Trench 12 which lay just a few metres to the south of the test pit (See Ellis 2022) and therefore may relate to medieval activity rather than the early medieval activity.
- 4.7 It is the recommendation of this report that if the development of Lismore Parish Church and/or the Church House proceeds then all associated groundbreaking work within the glebe should be subject to prior archaeological excavation and/or a watching brief.

Appendices

No.	TP	Description	Taken from
1	1	TP1	W
2	1	TP1	SE
3	2	TP2	E
4	3	TP3	N
5	3	TP3	NW
6	5	TP5 Cobble surface	N
7	5	TP5 Cobble surface	N
8	5	TP5 Cobble surface	N
9	4	TP4 ash within the clay	S
10	4	TP4 ash within the clay	E

883– Watching Brief on SI pits around Lismore Parish Church, Isle of Lismore, Argyll

Appendix 1: photographic register



1 883



2 883



3 883



4 883



5 883



6 883



7 883



8 883



9 883



10 883

883– Watching Brief on SI pits around Lismore Parish Church, Isle of Lismore, Argyll

Appendix 2: DES Entry

LOCAL AUTHORITY:	Argyll and Bute Council
PROJECT TITLE/SITE NAME:	Lismore Church
PROJECT CODE:	883
PARISH:	Lismore and Appin
NAME OF CONTRIBUTOR:	Clare Ellis
NAME OF ORGANISATION:	Argyll Archaeology
TYPE(S) OF PROJECT:	Watching brief
NMRS NO(S):	NM84SE5
SITE/MONUMENT TYPE(S):	Surface, ash deposit
SIGNIFICANT FINDS:	None
NGR (2 letters, 8 or 10 figures)	NM 86147 43490
START DATE (this season)	28th January 2024
END DATE (this season)	28 th January 2024
PREVIOUS WORK (incl. DES ref.)	
MAIN (NARRATIVE) DESCRIPTION: (May include information from other fields)	A watching brief on the machine excavation of five site investigation test pits was carried out within the glebe of Lismore Parish Church, Isle of Lismore, Argyll. A cobble surface was exposed just below the topsoil in TP5 and a mixed deposit of charcoal and ash was exposed in TP4. No archaeological material was found in the first three test pits which were located in the field on the north side of the Parish Church.
PROPOSED FUTURE WORK:	Watching brief on all groundbreaking works should development proceed.
CAPTION(S) FOR ILLUSTRS:	None
SPONSOR OR FUNDING BODY:	
ADDRESS OF MAIN CONTRIBUTOR:	Davaar Cottage, Campbeltown, Argyll. PA28 6RE
EMAIL ADDRESS:	ellisclare@argyll-archaeology.co.uk
ARCHIVE LOCATION (intended/deposited)	NRHE