

Toll's Porth St Mary's, Isles of Scilly

NGR: SV 90857 12346
CITiZAN region: South West

Report on a CITiZAN site survey



Issue No.	Date:	Prepared by:	Reason for Issue:
1	30.03.18	Thérèse Kearns	Interim Report

Summary

This report presents the results of a survey and training session carried out by CITiZAN, the Coastal and Intertidal Zone Archaeological Network, at Toll's Porth, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly in collaboration with Charlie Johns of the Cornwall Archaeological Unit (CAU). The monument at Toll's Porth is comprised of three distinct features – a Prehistoric settlement, a Romano-British cist cemetery and a Civil War battery. All three features are scheduled under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 and are listed in the Heritage at Risk register.

As part of the national CITiZAN programme to prepare surveys of key zones and features at risk, threatened by coastal erosion and tidal scour, a baseline survey was carried out on the site between 24th and 26th September 2017. This was carried out as part of a training event with volunteers, many of whom are members of the Isles of Scilly Community Archaeology Group (CAG).

The results of this survey will be used as baseline data for the future monitoring and management of the monument by Cornwall Archaeological Unit (CAU) and the CAG.

Acknowledgements

The work of CITIZAN would not be possible without the support of our volunteers, sponsors and project partners.

CITIZAN would like to thank volunteers: Lisbet Jackman, Margret Davis, Murray Grant, Joseph Payne, Linda Wornes, Angela Underwood. Thanks also to Charlie Johns, Cornwall Archaeological Unit who was instrumental in identifying the monument as one which merited more detailed survey.

CITIZAN is funded by a generous grant of £1.4 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund, with match funding from the Crown Estate and National Trust and additional support from Historic England. CITIZAN is hosted by MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology); our regional teams are based with MOLA in London and with our partners the Council for British Archaeology in York and Nautical Archaeology Society in Fort Cumberland, Portsmouth.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Site background

An archaeological survey was carried out by CITiZAN at Toll's Porth, St. Mary's Isles of Scilly ('the site') as a part of a training session between 24th and 26th September 2017. The site is located on a small coastal promontory on the north side of Toll's Porth, in the north-west of St Mary's (Fig. 1). The centre of the site lies at National Grid reference SV 90857 12346. This document is the report on the work carried out during that training event.

A Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment (RCZA) was previously prepared by English Heritage (now Historic England) which covers the area of the site (Johns et al. 2004). This document should be referred to for information on the natural geology, archaeological and historical background of the area (and the initial assessment of its archaeological potential).

The site is scheduled under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 (list entry number: 1015664) and is a designated conservation area. The monument listing for Toll's Porth describes three distinct features one of which is a prehistoric hut circle settlement, with an adjacent Romano-British cist-grave cemetery and a Civil War gun battery.

It is listed in the Heritage at Risk South West Register 2017 as 'Declining' and having 'Extensive significant problems' with the principal vulnerability being 'Bracken' (Historic England 2017, 168). In the 2016 register the principal vulnerability was listed as 'coastal erosion' (Historic England 2016).

Initial site reconnaissance was carried out on the site by Charlie Johns, Cornwall Archaeological Unit who recommended this site as one which merited attention.

1.2 Research frameworks

All work has been undertaken within the research priorities established in the Isles of Scilly Historic Environment Research Framework (Johns 2012) and within the research priorities established in the South West Archaeological Research Framework Research Strategy 2012-2017 (Grove and Croft 2012). In particular, Theme F: Widening Access and Interpretation, engaging the public, accessing resources, and Section 4: Encourage wide involvement in archaeological research and present modern accounts of the past to the public (Grove and Croft 2012: 36).

The survey was carried out within the terms of one or more of the CITiZAN themes and research priorities developed for the project.

- a) Military defences
- b) Coastal settlement and industries
- c) Prehistoric landscapes
- d) Coastal erosion

1.3 Aims and objectives

The survey had two principal objectives. The first objective was to work with the volunteers to develop their skills in recording archaeological sites and monuments on the Island which are considered to be at risk. The second objective was to make a detailed photographic record and measured survey of the current condition of the remains at Toll's Porth in order to create a baseline record on which later surveys can be compared against to monitor the rate of erosion.

The following research aims and objectives were established:

- What is the nature and condition of the surviving archaeological remains?
- Were the prehistoric settlements at Toll's Porth and Halangy Porth part of the same settlement?
- Were they contemporary?
- Are the features on this site at serious risk from natural or anthropogenic threats?

1.4 [Scope of the survey](#)

A CITiZAN survey is not the same as full excavation. It is designed to locate and identify significant archaeological features currently exposed on the coast or foreshore and highlights those that are under threat from erosive forces. These surveys provide a baseline dataset so that their condition can be effectively monitored in the future.

2 Background research

A detailed description of the geology, archaeology and history of the Scillonian archipelago was provided in the earlier report: Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment for The Isles of Scilly (Johns et al. 2004), though the monument at Toll's Porth is not specifically referred to in that document.

2.1 Topography

A description of the topography and underlying geology of the Isles of Scilly is detailed in the Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment for the Isles of Scilly (Johns et al. 2004) and the Isles of Scilly Historic Environment Research Framework (Johns 2012). In summary:

- The Isles of Scilly form an archipelago some 50 km west-south-west of Land's End Cornwall.
- Originally, the islands formed one single, large oval shaped landmass which over time through erosion and partial submergence by the sea has resulted in the archipelago we see today, which is comprised of approximately 200 islands, islets and rocks.
- The islands are composed almost entirely of granite, the products of granite weathering and wind-blown sand (Ashbee 1974).
- St Mary's is the largest of the islands approximately 4km long by 2.9 km wide. It's relatively flat with a gently undulating interior with rounded plateau hills at Halangy Down, the golf course and the airport all of which are in the vicinity of Toll's Porth. The highest point rises to 48m OD at Telegraph Hill on the north-west of the island.
- Toll's Porth is situated on a raised promontory approximately 2.5 - 3m high. The monument lies under coarse coastal grassland with bracken and bramble with a large number of bushes and Pittosporum trees. There is active coastal erosion around the edges of the promontory particularly around the northern and southwestern sides.

2.2 Archaeology and documentary evidence

The archaeological potential of the islands was first documented in the 18th century (Borlase, 1756, Troutbeck, 1796), and has since been well studied (eg. Ashbee, 1974; Charman et al., 2016; Garrow & Sturt, 2017; Johns, 2012; Thomas, 1975, 1985, Robinson 2007).

The islands were one single landmass until around 6000 BC when the landmass began to break up. The several thousand years following saw a gradual submergence of land and an increase in the intertidal area resulting in the gradual formation of the archipelago. The period between the Bronze and Iron Ages saw the most dramatic changes in the landscape and this is when St Mary's was separated from land in the north and the islands began to take the form we see today (Garrow & Sturt 2017, 11).

Given the gradual inundation of the larger landmass, it is perhaps not surprising that there is scant evidence for human activity on the islands in very early periods. Evidence for Mesolithic (8500-4000 BC) activity is comprised of a small number of flint artefacts and artefact scatters. Based on this evidence, the current consensus is that the islands were visited on a seasonal basis only, most likely for hunting expeditions from the mainland (Charman et al. 2016; Garrow & Sturt 2017).

The archaeological record for the Bronze Age is extremely rich. This period saw the widespread appearance of entrance graves (or chambered cairns), cairns and standing stones. The Cornwall and Scilly Historic Environment Record lists at least 90 entrance graves, including 21 probable and 13 possible examples (Sawyer 2015, 30-31; Garrow & Sturt 2017, 18), and c. 384 cairns are recorded in Scilly (Johns 2012 70).

Much of the early archaeological research on the islands focused on this rich burial evidence much of which is still prominent in the landscape. However, the focus on burials meant that relatively little attention was paid to the prehistoric settlement evidence (Robinson 2007, 5).

2.2.1 Prehistoric Settlement

There is little clear evidence to indicate the nature of Early Bronze Age settlement on the islands and it is likely that much lies yet undiscovered (Johns 2012). The evidence for the Later Bronze and Iron Ages is more distinct and better understood.

One of the better known settlement sites from this period is Halangy Down, approximately 10 m to the east of Toll's Porth. Substantial remains can be seen at this site, characterised by stone built circular huts, many of which still have internal features such as hearths.

A short distance down the hill to the west of Halangy Down is the earlier site of Halangy Porth, sections of which are visible as they continue to erode out of the cliff face and on to the beach. This site is thought to be the precursor to Halangy Down, which was possibly occupied when sea level rise and encroaching wind-blown sand resulted in the abandonment of Halangy Porth.

In the scheduling documentation for Toll's Porth, the prehistoric settlement is described as containing 'at least two stone hut circles, 1.5m apart, surviving in and behind the cliff face which extends along what western outer curve of the northern hut circle's wall'. This feature does not appear to have been studied in any great detail and therefore many questions remain unanswered such as, when it was in use and was it contemporary with the settlements at either Halangy Porth or Halangy Down.

2.2.2 Romano-British cist cemetery

The presence of cist burials at Toll's Porth has long been noted and one example which lies beneath the battery at Toll's Porth was first described in 1949 (Ashbee 1974). The scheduling information for Toll's Porth refers to at least two cists, with coursed slab walls capped by flat slabs. These are known as Porthcressa type cists and are thought to date to the 1st to 4th centuries AD. Their name is derived from the type site on St Mary's where their characteristic form was first noted by Paul Ashbee during his investigations in 1949-50 (Ashbee 1954; Ashbee 1979). To date a total of 33 examples have been recorded throughout the Islands.

In their original form they comprise an oval or sub rectangular burial chamber constructed within pits in the subsoil which are lined with upright stones and course walling and then sealed with capstones (Robinson, 2007, 107) (Fig. 3). Their dimensions typically range from 0.9m to 1.6m in length, 0.5 m to 1.0m in width, and 0.2m to 0.8m in depth. The majority are aligned north – south (Johns, 2012, 101).

Where skeletal remains have survived in these types of burials, they have taken the form of crouched inhumation burials (the body lying on its side with knees bent). A number of examples which have been excavated in the past also contained grave goods such as brooches, pottery and non-local stones. One exceptionally rich example on the island of Bryher contained a sword, shield and mirror (Johns 2006) (Fig. 3).

2.2.3 Civil War battery

During the English Civil War (1642 to 1651) the Isles of Scilly were strategically important as the most westerly anchorage and the first landfall for naval ships and merchantmen. Because of this a series of fortifications were built around the islands. These included gun batteries which were built at locations to cover the main maritime routes into the archipelago. One such battery, situated at Toll's Porth, covered the approach from Crow Sound to the main military and administrative Garrison approximately 2 km to the south-west. It would have worked in conjunction with batteries at Carn Morval Point (450 m to the south-west and Bar Point (1km to the north-west).

The official listing (from January 1999) for this site describes the remains of the battery as 'surviving well and is of unusual form (though it does not explain what is unusual). The description continues as follows:

'...visible as a sub-circular raised platform, 12m in diameter. The platform is built largely of sand with traces of revetment slabs on its slope. A slight bank, to 1.5m wide and 0.3m high, extends from the rear of the platform to form a short breastwork running north-south across the base of the spur, leaving a gap before reaching the northern coastal edge. The bank is accompanied on its east side by a ditch, up to 2m wide and 0.3m deep'.

The battery was included in a comprehensive survey of the Isles of Scilly military defences by English Heritage (now Historic England) in 2011. During that survey it was noted that there was an 'amorphous' earthwork platform which was overgrown by scrub and therefore the identification of a battery could not be confirmed (Bowden 2011, 27).

3 Survey methodology

3.1 Training methodology

The survey was conducted as part of a 2-day CITiZAN training session.

Two-day training sessions comprise one day off-site briefing on site background, health and safety and methodologies and one day of on-site practical work as in section 3.2. All volunteers must adhere to Health and Safety assessments (CITiZAN 2015c) and the CITiZAN code of conduct (CITiZAN 2015a). Learnt skills were recorded in the CITiZAN Archaeology Skills Passport.

3.2 Field methodology

The survey began with a walkover of the site in an attempt to identify the three features described in the Historic England list entry. The site was heavily eroded seaward which made the accurate identification of the features described in the list entry somewhat difficult, however, elements of all three features were thought to have been identified.

A primary baseline was established running along the extent of the slope of the promontory (SV 90861/12361 to SV 90851/12357). A secondary baseline (SV 90865/12355 to SV 90861/12354) was then triangulated from the first via an intermediate baseline and therefore a margin of error of +/- 3m should be taken into account. GPS coordinates were recorded using a handheld Garmin eTrex 10.

3.3 Recording methodology

A written and drawn record of features was carried out using CITiZAN proformas and the CITiZAN app and 3D photogrammetry by stitching together photos in Agisoft PhotoScan. Plans of features were drawn at 1:20 scale.

4 Results

For area and feature locations see Fig. 1.

For feature plans and sections see Fig. 2 & Fig. 3.

4.1 Feature 1 – Prehistoric Settlement

The two hut circles at Toll's Porth are no longer discernible to the extent that they were described when scheduled in 1999. At that time, the southern-most circle was described as being encroached by cliff face erosion. It now appears to have disappeared completely due to continuing erosion. The plan of the feature in Fig. 4 illustrates what may be the remains of the northern hut, though again, extensive erosion makes the feature difficult to identify with any certainty. An indication of the extent of erosion in the area can be seen in Fig. 5. The remains are roughly semi-circular but rather ambiguous. The feature was also recorded as a 3D model which is accessible here:

<https://sketchfab.com/models/da4145228f5041c9a34649d6ad6ef613?ref=related>

No cultural remains such as pottery were found and therefore there is currently no evidence which would help to date the feature and allow for comparisons with the settlement site at Halangy Porth, slightly further north.

4.2 Feature 2 – Romano-British cist cemetery

The remains of a Romano-British cist burial were located in the northern cliff face, approximately 2m up from the beach level. It was situated in a deep section and difficult to access, it was therefore decided that a measured sketch plan (Fig. 6) and a 3D model were the most appropriate means of recording the remains.

The 3D model can be accessed here:

<https://sketchfab.com/models/2ef7a9d6f31940d7bba92830e3a14a36>

Unfortunately, much of the feature has been lost to erosion and only one end survives.

4.3 Feature 3 – Civil War battery

The site of the Civil War Battery has continued to erode since it was last surveyed in 2011 (Bowden, 2011). It was at that time described as an 'amorphous' earthwork and that description still applies. It is particularly vulnerable on the western seaward side where the outer slope continues to erode. At the very top of the feature a platform area is vaguely discernible but heavily obscured by coarse vegetation. As the form of the feature could not be determined with any certainty, it was not recorded, but the site will continue to be monitored by local volunteers as new information may emerge as the erosion continues.

4.4 The finds

CITiZAN is focused on recording and monitoring structures, landscapes and archaeological features, and will not systematically collect artefacts. Any artefacts encountered were dealt with in accordance with the CITiZAN finds policy (CITiZAN 2015b). No finds were encountered during the training session.

4.5 Training results

A total of six people attended the training event over the course of the two days and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive in the future. Several participants commented that it had increased their confidence and were keen to start putting their new-found skills to use recording other sites around the islands. All expressed an interest in attending similar sessions in the future.

All participation evaluation of CITiZAN events is being undertaken by an external evaluator as a condition of our HLF funding.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 General discussion of the survey

Due to the high levels of erosion and inundation by vegetation, all three features in the Toll's Porth monument are seriously at risk. The high levels of loss which have occurred so far, mean that only a small section of the cist burial remains, any indication of form of the Civil War Battery is almost totally indiscernible and the identification of a prehistoric hut settlement is tentative at best.

This site highlights the importance of continued monitoring as new information is revealed over time. That information will add to our understanding of this complex monument.

Fortunately, the islands are home to a dedicated community archaeology group (CAG) who with continued support from members of the Cornwall Archaeological Unit are well placed to continue monitoring the site. Any information revealed in the course of the monitoring will be vital to further our understanding of the diverse three features within the site.

5.2 Answering original research aims

- What is the nature and condition of the surviving archaeological remains?

All three elements of the monument are highly degraded, prone to erosion and inundation from vegetation and a combination of these factors greatly limit the possibilities of clearly identifying the features.

- Were the prehistoric settlements at Toll's Porth and Halangy Porth contemporary?

It was not possible to address this question due to the ambiguity of the 'hut circle' and the lack of any dating evidence from Toll's Porth. Future monitoring may result in information which will enhance our understanding.

- Are the features on this site at serious risk from natural or anthropogenic threats?

At risk from natural threats, as above. The Romano-British cist appears to be most immediately at risk as it lies in a precarious position in the cliff face.

5.3 New research aims

The principal research aim still involves understanding the 'hut circle', to firstly determine if it is indeed a hut circle and if it is, then was it contemporary with the settlements at either Halangy Porth or Halangy Down.

The plan of that feature completed during the training session will be used by local volunteers and CAG as baseline for future monitoring. It is hoped that any new information revealed will help to address our research question.

6 Dissemination

The results of the survey will be made publicly available on the CITIZAN website:

<http://www.citizen.org.uk/>. The feature data will be uploaded to the CITIZAN interactive database, to allow ease of future long-term monitoring of the site via the CITIZAN online interactive map and smart phone app and to permit inclusion of the data in any future academic researches into coastal and intertidal archaeology. This can be found at <http://www.citizen.org.uk/interactive-coastal-map/>.

Records created by this survey will be deposited with the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) where it will make up a part of the archive of all data and materials created by CITIZAN. It will be deposited with appropriate local repositories via the ADS.

A short note on the results of the survey will be submitted to the appropriate journals to be included in annual county and period fieldwork round-ups.

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Fig. 1: Site location

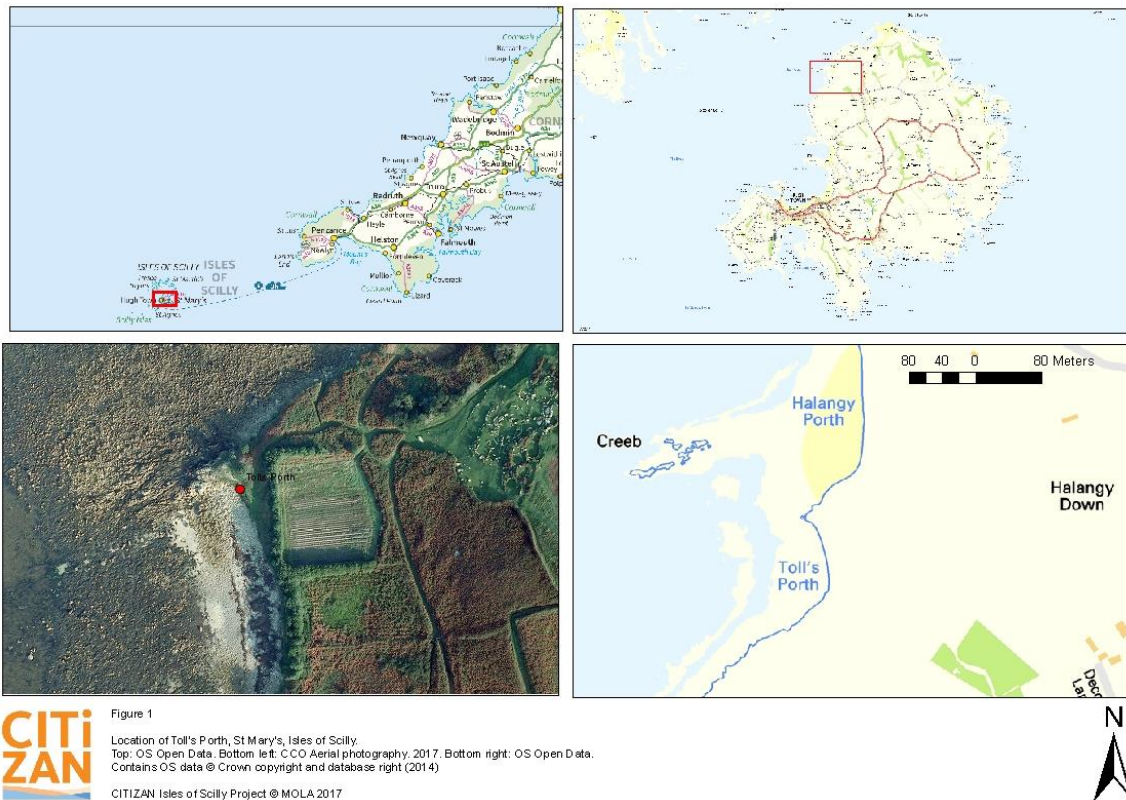


Fig. 2: Extent of scheduled area at Toll's Porth and vicinity

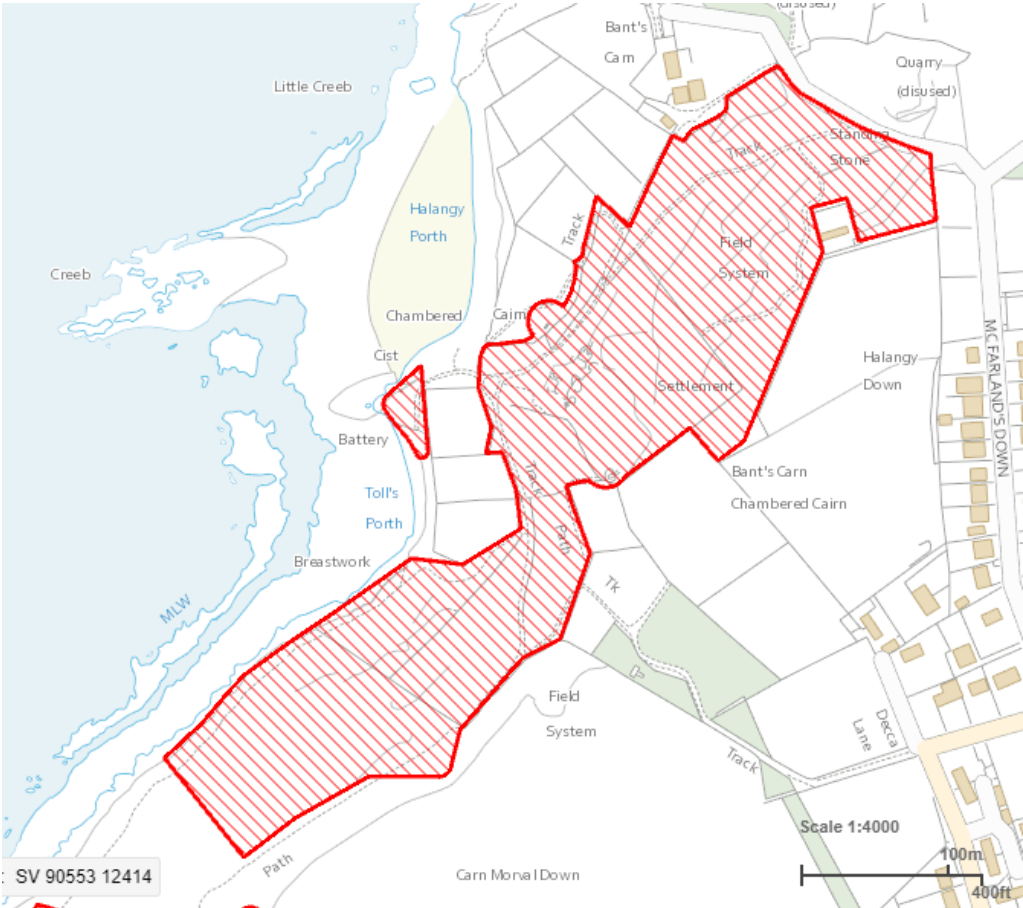


Fig. 3 - Iron Age sword and mirror cist burial, Hillside Farm, Bryher (photo: Cornwall Council)



Fig. 4: Plan of possible prehistoric hut circle

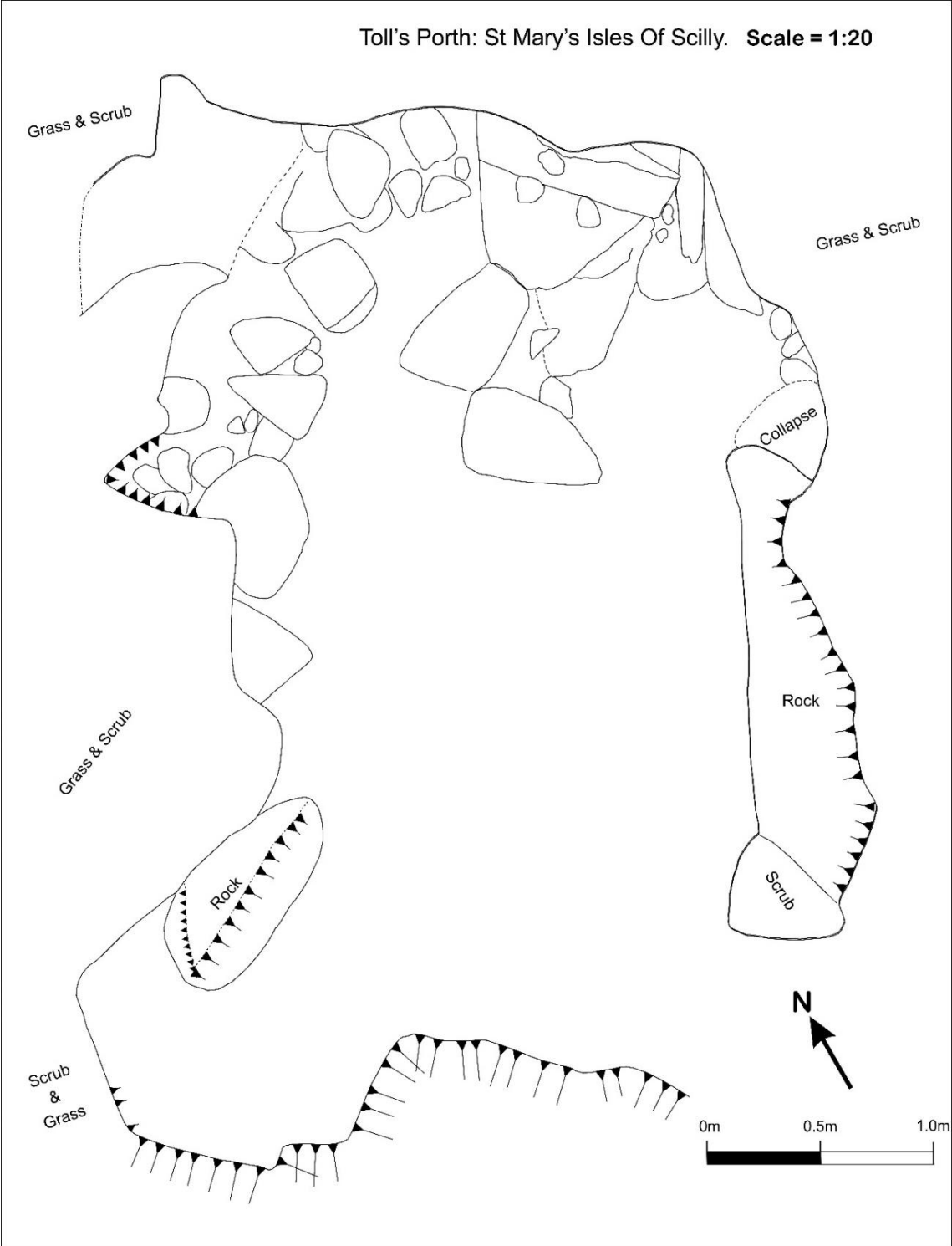


Fig. 5: Aerial view of location of 'prehistoric settlement'

To the right the impressive prehistoric remains at Halangy Down are visible (Image from the Coastal Channel Observatory).



Fig. 6: Measured sketch drawing of the remains of the Romano-British Cist burial

