

V.—REMAINS OF ILLICIT DISTILLERIES IN UPPER COQUETDALE.

BY JOHN PHILIPSON AND F. AUSTIN CHILD.

On the bank of a small burn, tributary to the Davidsons burn, at a place named Inner Hare Cleugh, is a site known as Rory's Still. From the account in *Upper Coquetdale*¹ it would appear that in his day Rory had an extensive interest in the illicit distillation of whisky in that district. Rory is referred to also by Tomlinson² in the following passage:

Between Hedgehope and the adjoining hill of Great Standrop there is a syke, near which a Highlandman, named "Black Rory", had his whiskey-still, over fifty years ago. A green spot near it is called "Rory's Gair"—*gair* being a small strip of green ground among heather or ferns.

We have traced no remains there now, but the passage suggests, though not very precisely, that Rory's active period fell at some time before 1830. Dixon refers to Rory as "one of the most notorious of these smugglers", but gives no biographical details except a list of six stills that he is said to have operated.

It is not our intention in the present paper to pursue enquiry into the history of illicit distillation in Upper Coquetdale, nor shall we cite any literary references except such as bear on the remains with which we are concerned. We propose to describe the remains of distilleries in the area and in particular to give an account of the excavation of one of them. The paper³ read in May 1957 was intended to provide

¹ David Dippie Dixon: *Upper Coquetdale*, 1903.

² W. W. Tomlinson: *Comprehensive Guide to Northumberland*, 1888.

³ A.A. Fourth Series, Vol. 36: *Distillation of Spirits in 18th c.*

the necessary background information about the methods of distillation in use during the relevant period.

The six sites listed by Dixon are the Inner Hare Cleugh, Rowhope, Carlcroft, Saugh Rig, Kitty's Walls, and Blindburn. Of these six sites we have been able to trace only three on the ground, namely, the Inner Hare Cleugh, Saugh Rig, and Blindburn. We can, however, add a possible seventh on the Midhope Burn near Batailshiels. No remains have been found on the Rowhope burn. Kitty's Walls we have been unable to identify, though there is a Kitty's Crag near the Allerhope burn. We have traced no site on the Carlcroft burn. Mr. R. H. Walton has excavated a hide-out on the White Knowe above the Carlcroft burn, but it lacks the characteristics which would enable it to be identified as a distillery and it is accordingly not discussed. The location of the identified sites is shown on fig. 1 and a brief description of the four sites follows.

Rory's Still (plate IV) on the Inner Hare Cleugh stands close to the banks of that burn near its junction with Davidsons burn. The remains consist of a kiln constructed of rough stones against the slope of the hill. Immediately adjoining the kiln and partly cut into the hill is a rectangular building in which distillation must have been carried out. The fire-hole for the kiln is in the vertical wall at one end of the rectangular building. Little of the walls remains except at the back and at the kiln end. It is reasonable to assume that a turf roof continued the steep slope of the hill over the building and effectively concealed it except for a low wall fronting the burn in which the entrance must have been set. The inside measurements of the distillery are $9\frac{1}{2}$ by $22\frac{1}{2}$ feet and the kiln as it stands to-day is about 6 feet in diameter at the top and tapers to a diameter of $4\frac{1}{4}$ feet near the base, having a depth of 5 ft. 9 in.

The distillery named by Dixon as Saugh Rig we prefer to name the *Wholehope* still because it is on the Wholehope burn and because its line of communication with the outside world appears to have been to join Clennell Street near

Wholehope. The site is well concealed in a deep cleugh on the burn, rather less than 1150 feet above sea-level. This was the site chosen for excavation and it is further described below.

The site on the *Blindburn* (plate V) is similar in size and plan to Rory's Still, consisting of a rectangular building with

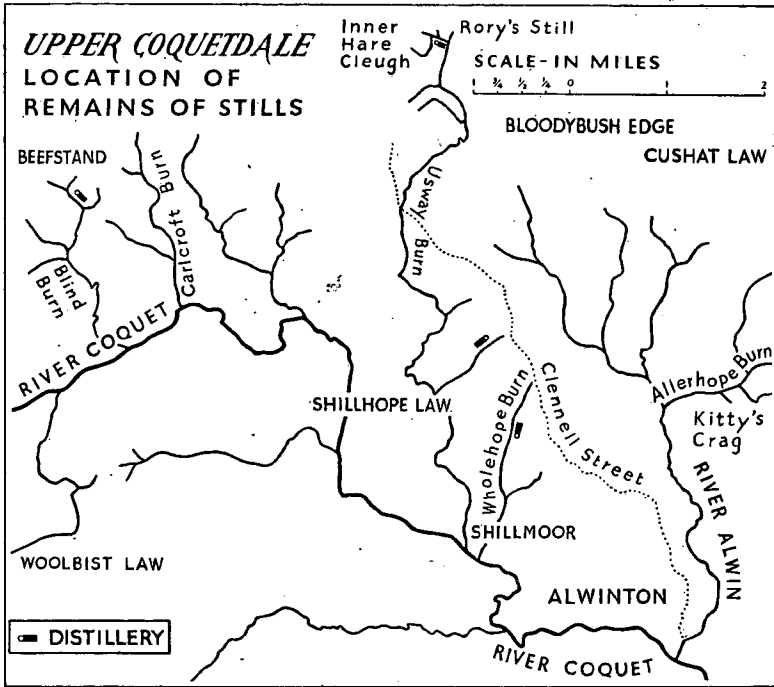


FIG. 1.

a kiln at one end. It is, however, in a more open valley and makes less use of the adjoining hillside. The building has been loosely built of rough local stone and less of it has survived than in the two sites described above. The site is approximately on the 1450-foot contour and, while in a remote situation, is not so well concealed as the others.

In addition to the sites named by Dixon we were told (in 1950) by Mr. Rutherford of Batailshiels that there had been a still on the *Midhope burn*, the remains (plate V) of which had been destroyed in a great flood about fifty years ago. The flood may well be that caused by a waterspout on 2nd July, 1893, an eloquent account of which is quoted⁴ by Dixon. The site can be located and is shown in fig. 1. Virtually nothing of the structure remains. A corner of the rough stone walls was revealed by a trial excavation, but that was all. None-the-less as the attribution came from a well-informed source we are inclined to accept the site as that of a former still. This might possibly be the unidentified Kitty's Walls referred to by Dixon.

These sites have a number of characteristics in common. All are in remote situations and are more or less well concealed. All stand beside burns which would provide water for cooling the worm and all have springs of good water nearby. Near to all are deposits of peat. All are loosely built of local stone and all, of which the buildings survive, have kilns.

How, it may be asked, are we able to assert that these were whisky distilleries? First, there is local oral tradition which named the four sites we have examined. This is borne out by the doubtless fuller oral tradition of fifty or more years ago recorded by Dixon. Then there are the characteristics of the sites listed above, all of which are consistent with use for distillation. Most conclusive are the evidences of excavation of the Wholehope still and more especially the significance of the kiln which we shall discuss later. Finally there is the evidence of the plan which forms part of the Enclosure Award of Alwinton Common made on 27th June, 1862. There the Wholehope still is marked and named *Old Distillery*.

The Wholehope still was selected for excavation because its remains were visibly the most complex. The War Department land agent kindly gave permission and work began in

⁴ *Upper Coquetdale*, p. 78.

1951, continuing at irregular week-end visits until 1954. The excavators were the authors, together with Colonel C. Chipper and Captain R. H. Walton.

A rough outline of the plan of the buildings was visible above ground before excavation started. A line of buildings runs north and south consisting of three apartments with a kiln-house set into the hill roughly at right-angles to the main north-south axis of the site. The buildings are on a very small haugh in a crook of the burn. To the south the site is overhung by a small crag, while west of the stream rises a steep encircling declivity. North-east up the side of the valley is a spring. On the burn above the site is a small linn from the head of which water might be conducted at a suitable level for cooling the worm. A track formed by ponies or donkeys runs diagonally up the slope in the direction of Wholehope. The depth of this track is such as to warrant the conclusion that traffic continued over a number of years.

Excavation was begun in the spaces between the buildings. This preliminary clearance suggested that we were dealing with a series of buildings each capable of standing independently but given a definite unity by being built against or into the same bank. The kiln-house (fig. 2—D) and the kiln behind it were then thoroughly excavated (plate VI). The kiln, circular in plan, is built into the steep bank behind and projects with a bow front into the kiln-house. The inside of the kiln tapers downwards in a smooth slope, and is joined at its foot by a fire-hole from a corner of the kiln-house. The floor of the latter is very rough. The entrance is at the south-west corner. We found no evidence of the nature of the roof of the kiln-house, nor of the cowl over the kiln. The bow-front of the kiln subsequently collapsed.

The building (fig. 2—C) adjoining the kiln-house was the next excavated. This proved to have a uniform cobbled floor, sloping evenly downwards from north to south. Over the whole floor was a thin layer of red ash. It is suggested that the roof was turfed and that it was fired when the

building was abandoned, depositing the uniform layer of ash. The floor was penetrated in the southern half of the building and excavation continued through a mixed filling of rubble and clay to the natural sub-soil. The only entrance to this building is in the centre of the north wall. This was no doubt the most convenient position for the door as well as the most sheltered, with the object of keeping the temperature within as uniform as possible. It is also consistent with the supposition that the building was roofed with a central ridge. If the roof were low, there would be more headroom for entrance through a doorway centrally placed. The only object found in this building was an iron dog, discovered on the ground in the doorway.

The most northerly building (fig. 2—A.B) is divided by an internal wall. The northern half is shown complete in the plan on the Enclosure Award of 1862, but at some subsequent date a violent flood swept away a substantial part of the northernmost apartment. Possibly the destruction may be attributed to the waterspout that has been referred to above, or it may have been due to a succession of smaller floods. Only one object was found in this apartment. No trace of the entrance remains, but it may have been in the north wall.

Apartment B was evidently the principal living and working quarters. In it were found all but a few of the objects uncovered. Projecting from the inner wall are remains of a stone fireplace, and in the centre of the floor some fire bars were found. As peat ash was found on the floor it may be assumed that the roof was covered with turf. The establishment may, therefore, be visualized as consisting of two low stone buildings with ridged roofs turf-covered with probably just a hole in the roof for a chimney; the whole lying low in its cleugh with the kiln-house snug under the crag (plate VII).

The objects found were:

- (a) a triangular iron plate,
- (b) fragments of glass,

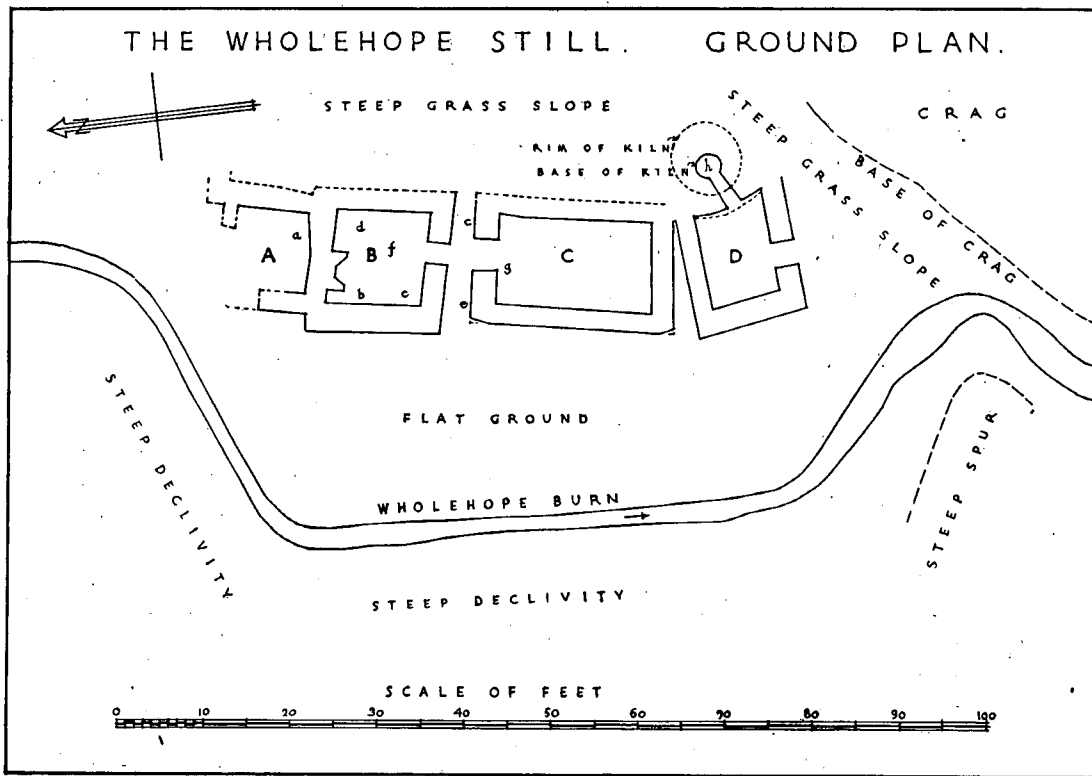


FIG. 2. THE POSITIONS IN WHICH OBJECTS WERE FOUND ARE MARKED WITH LOWER-CASE LETTERS.

- (c) fragments of pottery,
- (d) four fragments of a knife-blade and a staple,
- (e) an apothecary's phial found on a ledge of stone in the entrance,
- (f) a firegrate, a file and a piece of leather,
- (g) an iron dog found in the entrance to the southern building,
- (h) some short pieces of wood found in the kiln,
- (i) some fragments of coal found in apartment B.

The lower-case letters under which they are grouped in this list refer to their positions on the site as shown in fig. 2.

No apparatus specifically adapted for distillation was found. Presumably the worm and other equipment were removed when the plant was dismantled.

The *phial* is the most interesting single find. It was clearly used for sampling. Our member Mr. Ian Glendenning has explained to us that a piece of string would be tied about its neck; then, weighted with some lead shot, it could be lowered through the bung-hole of the keg and withdrawn when partly filled with spirit. The spirit in the phial was examined for proof by the method known as the *bead* and described by Malachy Postlethwayt in the passage quoted on page 52 of A.A.4 XXXVI. Its position at the entrance suggests that the smuggler had come out to the daylight to examine the spirit, and, the test concluded, had laid the phial down on a ledge as he returned. The phial has been examined by Mr. Charleston of the Victoria and Albert Museum and is of a type common in the second half of the seventeenth century and in the eighteenth century. It could have been made as late as 1830. As it is of a clear white metal, Mr. Charleston suggests that a late date within these limits is more probable.

The *pottery* consists of domestic ware. There are at least four mixing bowls and other coarse kitchen ware. There are some fragments of blue decorated ware of the willow pattern type. There are two cups of a surprising elegance. A smaller bowl is different in type from the others. Had it been made to-day we should say it was the work of an artist potter.

The pottery has been fully discussed with Mr. Wm. Bulmer and Mr. Thomas Wake. - Here it will suffice to say that none is specifically associated with distillation. It might be of interest to speculate on how some of it reached this site, but that is not our present concern.

The fragments of *glass* have been reconstructed as the greater part of a bottle which Mr. Wm. Bulmer describes as follows:

Glass bottle: free blown, with sagging base and pronounced 'kick', in good dark olive-green metal; double moulding at mouth; late 18th century, probably round about 1780.

The pieces of *timber* found in the kiln have been examined by Mr. H. T. Eyres, who found that they had been considerably affected by fungus. Most of the pieces were of Scots pine, of quickly grown wood probably from a young stem or a branch quartered lengthwise. One of the pieces was of ash. A portion of a cut iron nail of square section was extracted from one of the pieces but could not be dated.

The *iron* finds were cleaned for us by Mr. Thomas Wake, who attributes them to the early nineteenth century. They consist of parts of a cast-iron grate, part of a half-round file $3\frac{5}{8}$ inches long, with bands of circular rings incised, two fragments of copper, and an iron dog.

A fragment of *leather* found is described by Dr. L. Goldman of the Elswick Leather Works as being sheepskin of the type known in the trade as shammy, probably oil-tanned, possibly forming part of a garment.

The dates given to the finds by Mr. Bulmer and Mr. Wake are all either late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. They show that the still was in active use in the early nineteenth century. That is, of course, the heroic age of illicit distillation and this dating is consistent with the description of the still in the Enclosure Award of 1862 as "Old Distillery".

We were not at first clear about the function of the kiln.

The fact must be faced that kilns are not at all uncommon on upland farms in northern latitudes. We know of two in deserted villages in Glen Feshie⁵ and of another in a deserted settlement by the river Dulnan in Kinveachie forest. There was one apparently in the fourteenth century at Jarlshof,⁶ and there are several on the line of the Roman Wall. Of most of these kilns it is certain that the purpose was to enable grain harvested unripe to be dried. This use of kilns is discussed by J. G. D. Clark on page 112 of his *Prehistoric Europe—The Economic Basis*. "In marginal territories," he writes, "where the sun is insufficient to ripen grain, artificial drying is still practised: kilns were normally used for this purpose in Donegal up to a century ago and are still in the Hebrides, Faroes, Orkneys and Shetlands, and also in parts of Scandinavia."

Against this it may be argued that none of the farms in Upper Coquetdale have such kilns, nor are there kilns in the remains of any abandoned settlements in that area that we have examined. There are, however, substantial kilns of eighteenth- and possibly nineteenth-century date at two nearby corn-mills, the Barrow and the Grasslees mills. Any corn drying could thus have been done at the mill. Further there is no trace of former tillage near any of our sites. There would be no good reason for conveying corn to these remote sites when it could be openly dried at the mill. We regard it as highly improbable, therefore, that the kilns were erected for drying corn.

In a countryside the inhabitants of which shared with their Scots neighbours a preference for malt-spirit, the open purchase of malt for carriage into the hills might have aroused the suspicion of excise officers. Moreover, malt itself, as well as whisky, was subject to duty. The smugglers had, therefore, good reason to undertake their own malting, and there is evidence that this in fact was the purpose of the kiln.

⁵ See Richard Perry: *In the High Grampians*, p. 16.

⁶ Bruce Mitford (Ed.): *Recent Archæological Excavations in Britain*, p. 221 (1956).

Through the good offices of Dr. P. L. Robinson and of Dr. Aynsley, samples of deposits in the bottom of the Wholehope kiln and in the fire-hole were examined for us in the Chemistry Department of King's College in the University of Durham. The first was a red substance which was described as "a peaty ferruginous clay" and established that peat was the fuel used in the kiln. The second deposit was black and was found in the fire-hole. The blackness was found to be due to the presence of carbon. It was a tarry material with caramel present. The latter is attributed to the burning and partial decomposition of sugar.

The last point in this report is extremely significant. When grain is malted the starch is turned into sugar. The penultimate step in the process of malting is to dry the malt in a kiln, preferably with peat-reek. The malt has to be dried crisp, but not scorched. Scorched sugar would turn to caramel or, if charred completely, to carbon.

Should there linger any doubt that the kiln was erected for malting, there remains its association with the adjoining building (fig. 2—C). This consisted of a single long apartment with a cobbled floor, completely clear of finds, except for the iron dog in the doorway. It was the only floor in the establishment cobbled to a smooth finish. When it was excavated the spade ran smoothly over the regular surface of the cobbles.

Malting is thus described by Neil Gunn.⁷ "The barley is placed in large low tanks called 'steeps'. Water is poured on it, and the barley is allowed to remain . . . from forty to sixty hours. Then it is taken out and spread evenly over the floor of the long low-roofed malt-barn. Here it begins to germinate; while men with large wooden shovels turn it over in order to maintain an even growth."

It will be seen that this building has every characteristic of a malting-floor and we have no doubt that this was its purpose, and that the kiln was used for kilning the malt.

⁷ Neil Gunn: *Whisky and Scotland* (1935).

This conclusion leaves us, as so often, with another question: why is there no separate malt-barn at Rory's still, at the Blindburn still, or at the Batailshiels site where the visible remains suggest there can have been no separate malt-barn? The excavation of one or other of these sites might afford an answer to this question.

We found no trace of pot, helm, beck or worm, and cannot, therefore, say with certainty in which building distillation was carried out. It is most probable, however, that it was done in apartment B where the remains of so many broken vessels were found. It was only in this room that coal was found, and coal gives the steadiest heat for distillation.⁸ The most northerly room was, we suppose, simply a store. Distillation required constant supervision, malting only periodical visits for turning over the grain or stoking the kiln. Most probably the smugglers lived, distilled, and slept in the one room.

The materials used were water, barley, peat and, to a lesser degree, coal. Water and peat were available near at hand. Transport must have been by pack-pony or donkey. Barley and coal would be brought from the main valley by Clennell Street. The product in kegs or grey hens doubtless left by the same route.

We have established in our view that this reputed distillery was in fact a distillery; that malt-spirits were made from malt prepared on the site; that its active period was in the early nineteenth century. We have explained the functions of the various buildings Rory built. We have done everything, it seems, but draw a clear picture of Rory himself. There is work yet for the historian to make good the gaps in the archæological evidence.

Besides our debt to our collaborators, we owe acknowledgment to many local people for local lore, to Mr. Ian Glendenning for his interest and valued advice, to the War Department and to the late Mr. Kelly for access to sites, to

⁸ A.A.4, XXXVI, p. 54.

the Northumberland County Council for facilities to photograph the Alwinton Enclosure Award, to Messrs. Charleston, Bulmer, Wake and Eyres; to the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Coal Board; and to Doctors P. L. Robinson, Aynsley, and Goldman, for expert assistance.

POTTERY FROM THE WHOLEHOPE STILL.

REPORT BY THOMAS WAKE, F.S.A.

Two cream-ware plates, 9" dia. 1" high and 1" rim (plain).

Four cream-ware bowls:

1—7½" dia. × 3½" high

1—7¼" dia. × 3½" "

1—7" dia. × 3⅜" "

1—6½" dia. × 3¼" "

Fine quality earthenware of a light cream colour.

Newcastle pottery (possibly St. Anthony's) late eighteenth century.

Bowl—Tortoiseshell ware 6¼" dia. × 2¼" high. Brown ware with speckled black sides outside and cream interior with brown "sponged" splashes.

Newcastle—late eighteenth century. Tortoiseshell and black were mentioned as early as 1760.

Cup—? handleless, 3⅜" dia. × 2⅛" high. Decorated in blue transfer printing, with roses, tulips, etc., outside and inside rim. Quatrefoils and spots arranged chequer-wise in blue on base. Newcastle, c. 1820-1830.

Fragment of cup similar.

Fragment of saucer with similar design on centre of base but acanthus type foliage. Newcastle, c. 1820-1830.

Saucer about 6" dia. × 1¼" high. Decorated with version of willow pattern in blue transfer printing—c. 1830. Mark on base "semi-china" in blue. This mark was used by E. Wood & Sons pottery (Staffs.) in 1826 but there may have been others.

Handle of mug (Newcastle type) with blue leaf pattern in transfer.

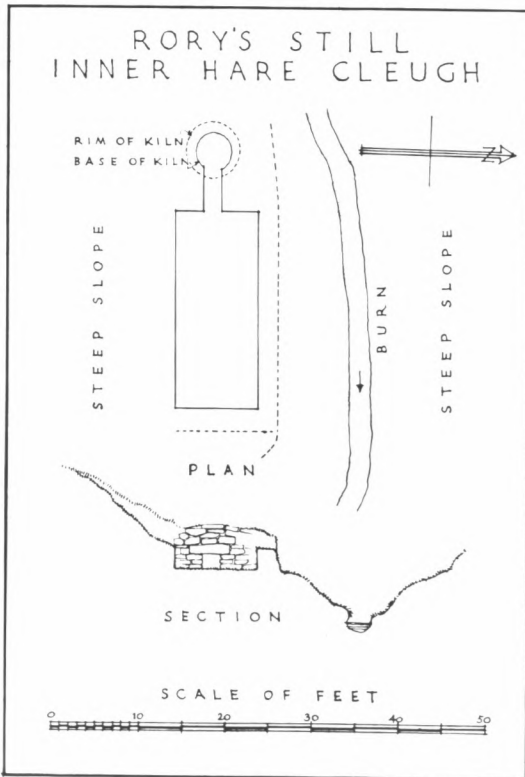
Cup—4" dia. × 2¼" high. Cream-ware decorated with painted flowers and foliage in brown, green, blue and black. Thin black at rim and at bottom of straight side. Carinated section between base

and side. Thin black line inside rim. Stuck-on handle—Newcastle, c. 1800-1820.

Cream-jug (frag.) Cream-ware—much crackled with carinated shoulder. Decoration on outside with brown line below rim and shoulder. Painted decoration in green and blue. Newcastle, c. 1800-1820.



RORY'S STILL.





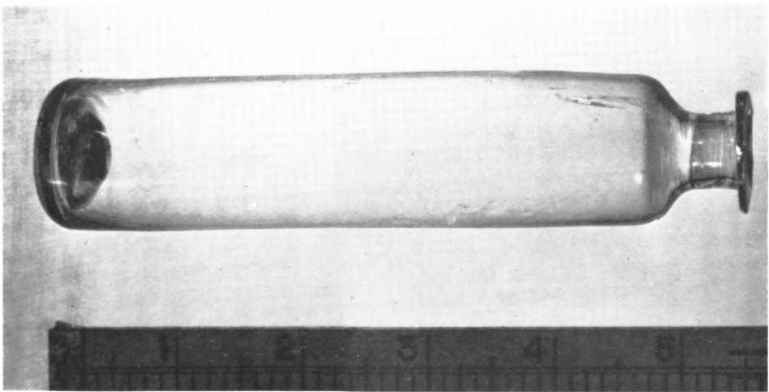
STILL ON THE BLINDBURN.



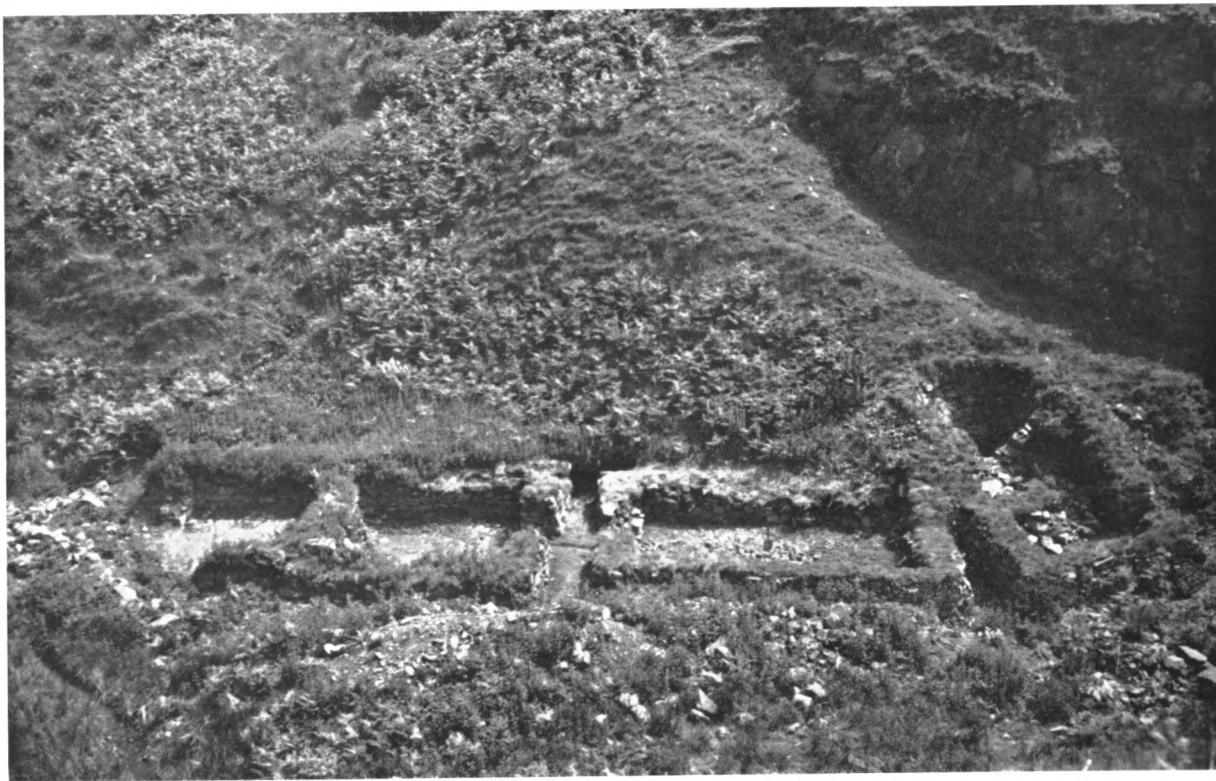
REMAINS ON THE MIDHOPE BURN.



WORK IN PROGRESS ON THE WHOLEHOPE STILL, 1953.



THE PHIAL.



THE STILL ON THE WHOLEHOPE BURN.

