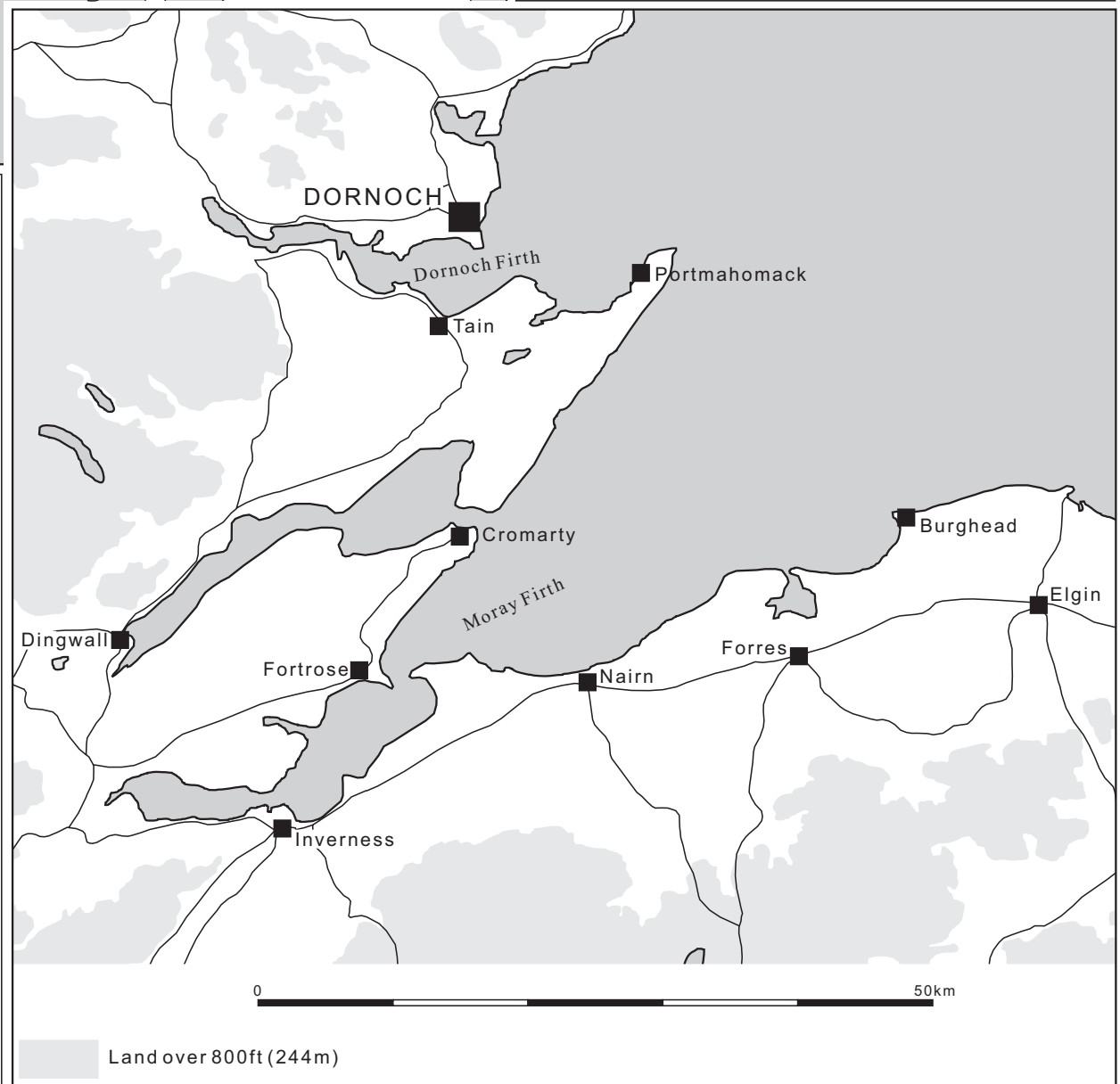


Illus 1 Site location



2 Introduction

A watching brief was carried out initially by Charlie Miller of Resurgam! and then jointly with SUAT Ltd in May 1997 on the development site of a new business park in Dornoch (*illus 1*). The site lay immediately to the south of the former Bishop's Palace (part of which is now the Dornoch Castle Hotel) on the southern edge of the burgh (*illus 2*) and just outside the area of archaeological interest as defined in *Historic Dornoch: The Archaeological Implications of Development* (Simpson & Stevenson 1982). To the south of the site, the low-lying fields and *machair* stretch uninterrupted to the Dornoch Firth. The burgh of Tain lies just across the Dornoch Firth to the south, and the important site recently excavated at Portmahomack further along the Dornoch Firth to the south-east.

The watching brief involved monitoring the final phase of ground works, in particular the topsoil stripping of a new access road (*illus 2*). This revealed numerous features including a building, ditched enclosures and evidence for ironworking, all sealed beneath an artefact-rich cultivation soil (*illus 7*). In consultation with Highland Council, the developer, and Highland Council Archaeology Services as curator, salvage excavation was agreed. Over the May Bank Holiday weekend the Tain Archaeology Group and students from the Aberdeen University Certificate of Field Archaeology course kindly helped out.

2.1 Historical and archaeological background

The Dornoch Firth was a crucial place in the emergence of the Scottish nation in the early Middle Ages. The Norse and Celts in northern Scotland, led by their respective political rulers the earls of Orkney and the Mormaers, struggled to control Easter Ross, which lay between the earldom of Caithness (which included Sutherland) and the mormaerdom of Moray (Crawford 1995a, 2).

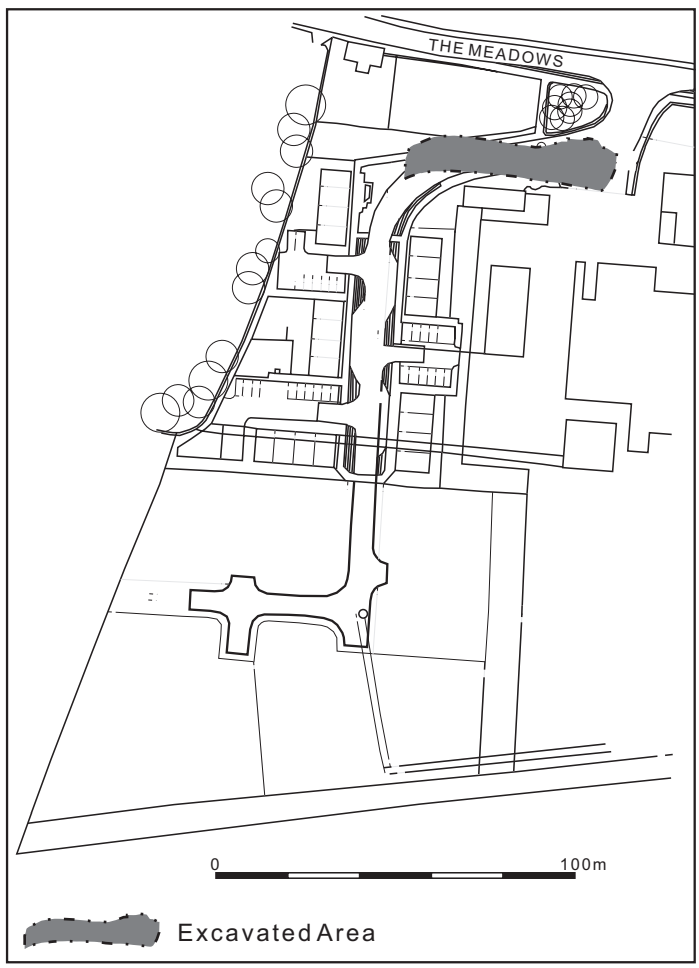
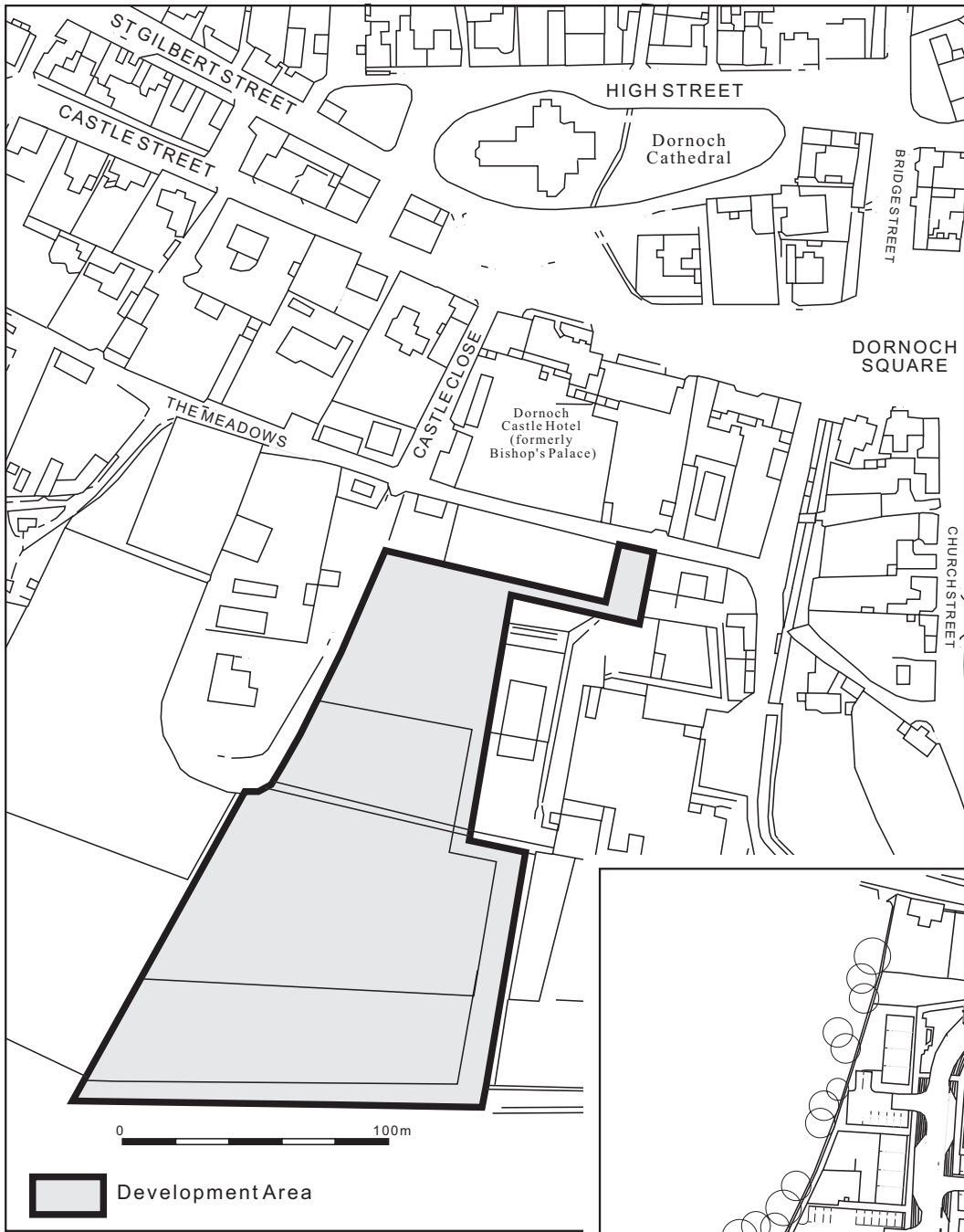
The Dornoch Firth seems to have been the boundary between the two cultural groups and has been the subject of much discussion (Crawford 1986, 1987, 1995a, 1995b). Though later (13th-century) Icelandic saga writers refer to the Ekkialsbakki (thought to be the River Oykeall, which flows into the Dornoch Firth) as the extent of the conquests of some of the early earls of Orkney (Sigurd the Mighty and Thorstein the Red), there was no geographical reason why the Norse should have contented themselves with the Dornoch Firth as

the southern limit of their expansion (Crawford 1986, 33–5). The attraction of good land led the Norse to attempt to control land further south both politically and territorially. The earls of Orkney and Caithness also attempted to rule in the Hebrides, and control of the firthlands ensured free access to the Great Glen and a through route to the south-west, thus avoiding a long and difficult sea voyage. South of the Dornoch Firth also offered access to rich resources of timber in Easter Ross, which they must surely have exploited for the maintenance of their existing fleet and the building of new vessels (Crawford 1995a, 11–17).

Very little is known about the origins and development of early medieval Dornoch, and precisely what prompted the establishment of the cathedral in the 13th century, but there must have been some pre-13th-century importance attached to the site to encourage such a development (Simpson & Stevenson 1982, 10). The first direct reference to settlement in Dornoch is, however, not until the early 12th century. Contained in a writ by David I (1127 x 1153), recorded in the Dunfermline Abbey register, it orders Rognvald, Earl of Orkney, to respect the monks at Dornoch and has led to the suggestion that monks from Dunfermline had established a cell in Dornoch (Cowan & Easson 1976, 203–204). Dornoch is traditionally associated with St Barr or St Finbarr (died AD 610), a disciple of St Ninian of Whithorn, and it is possible that a community of Celi De monks had established a cell there (Cowan & Easson 1976, 52, 61). It has been claimed that the remains of this early monastery were found during excavations for the public school in the mid 19th century (Scott 1915, 24).

The see was probably founded by David I c 1147 x 1151 as part of a deliberate policy of detaching this remote and partly Norse-speaking province, which had been under the political influence of the earls of Orkney, and may have been ecclesiastically under the Bishops of Orkney, from Norse loyalties (Barrow 1981, 68). It was not until the 13th century, in fact, that the see was moved from Norse-dominated Halkirk to the more southerly church of Dornoch in the Gaelic-speaking part of the diocese. Other than the cathedral and Bishop's Palace (*illus 2*), little is known of medieval settlement here. Despite its early history, the town itself was not officially recognised as a burgh until it received its charter from Charles I in 1628.

The development area lies on the southern edge of the burgh and has been under pasture since at least the First Edition OS map of the town, when it was known as The Glebe.



Illus 2 The development and excavated areas