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Survey at Castle Law fort, Forgandenny

October 2009 saw the start of a survey by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) of the timber-laced fort on Castle Law, perched on the northern edge of the Ochil Hills above Forgandenny. The first part of the two-phase project concentrated on mapping the earthworks using global positioning system (GPS) equipment and interpreting the remains. The second phase, which will take place next spring, will concentrate on recording some of the finer detail of the fort and working out the complex chronology.

The survey is being undertaken for several reasons, including the need to revise the existing record of the fort, which has not been updated for several years. The Commission last visited the site in 1995, when its complexities, including the presence of timber round-houses, first began to be appreciated, but it is only recently that resources have become available to support a short but intensive survey project.

The survey will also complement the work of the Strathearn Environs and Royal Forteviot (SERF) project, currently being undertaken by Glasgow University. That project is looking at all forms of settlement in Strathearn, from earliest times through to the medieval period, and the Castle Law fort provides ample evidence for a depth of chronology that probably lasted several hundred years in the first millennium B.C.

If the SERF project targets Castle Law for excavation, the Commission survey of the fort

will prove to be a valuable tool in determining what sort of questions may be answered by digging, and exactly where that digging might best take place.

Castle Law was investigated in 1892 by Edwin Weston Bell, a breeder of Scottish Deerhounds and antiquarian from Dundee. One of the early results from the present survey is the recognition of Bell's excavation strategy. He appears to have instructed his workmen to locate the faces of the timber-laced walls by driving a series of trenches at an angle across the lines of the ruined walls. Once the wall-faces were located, they were then revealed along their entire length by simply digging a long trench to remove the rubble. In 1892 the wall-face at the east end of the fort still survived to a height of 6 feet (1.8m).

Bell also had his workmen clear out all of the rubble from in and around the entrance gap in the outer wall at the east end. This resulted in a huge pile of spoil being dumped on the slope below -- ironically overlying a probably earlier line of enclosure that Bell did not investigate before it was buried. Trenches were also dug across other features outside the timber-laced fort, including a hut-circle on the SE, which Bell interpreted as a sheep fank. Other trenches and pits were dug in the interior of the fort, but these are not recorded on either Bell's published plan or a draught plan, now in the collection at RCAHMS. Bell's attitude appears to have been that if nothing was found in a trench then the fact that it was dug was not really relevant.



Ian Parker (RCAHMS) uses GPS to survey the rear of a timber round-house which overlies the robbed outer timber-laced wall. One of Bell's trenches, which was dug to reveal the inner face of the fort wall, can be seen on the left side of the image, cutting across the house platform.

Early results of the present survey include the recognition that although Bell found the timber-laced walls at the east end of the fort still well preserved, the west end had been very heavily robbed – to such an extent that the outer wall was found to stand only 1ft (0.3m) high. A huge amount of robbing had occurred in prehistory (before several round-houses were built over the ruins) and it will be one of the aims of the second phase of survey next spring to attempt to work out exactly why the robbing happened, when it happened and where all the robbed material went.

The recognition of over forty timber round-houses, most of them set on platforms, has been one of the most exciting aspects of the survey so far. Large settlements such as this are rare north of the River Forth and this site offers tremendous opportunities for answering questions

about the nature of open settlement in Strathearn in the mid- to late-first millennium B.C. Although there are literally hundreds of hut-circles in highland Perthshire and numerous open settlements that have been reduced to cropmarks, Castle Law is unique in affording the chance to examine house sites which not only have a clear relationship to each other, but also to the phases of fortification which they overlie.

The fact that the round-houses appear to be so well preserved also offers a rare opportunity to investigate some of their structural and architectural features. Finally, any investigation of the fort by excavation might provide clues that will help contextualise the artefacts found during Bell's investigation, which are in the Royal Museum of Scotland.

Dunnichen fieldwalk

The first fieldwalk undertaken by members of the recently formed Dunnichen Heritage Society took place on Sunday 29th November in the 'Castle Hill' field, immediately SW of Dunnichen village. Earlier this year, some of the Dunnichen group took part in a fieldwalk at Brighton with the Kinnettles folk and were keen to undertake a walk in their own parish. This took place with members of the two groups present as well as some of our metal-detecting friends from Dundee (but without their detectors on this occasion) -- about fifteen people, led by John Sherriff, turning out on a very cold day, with the weather mainly bright but including a very brief shower of sleet.

The area walked was the southern part of the 'Castle Hill' field (NGR NO 5065 4851), which had been under potatoes this year. The northern, unploughed, part of the field contains the putative site of what has been described as a dun, but, if truth be told, the exact nature of whatever is or was there remains unknown. That said, however, at least two worked stones have been identified in the dyke that forms the eastern boundary of the field. The face of one of these stones (above right) bears deep grooving within a plain margin, the other is a slab (centre right) 1.4m in length by 0.12m in thickness, which has a ladder-like motif all the way along its visible edge, and two circular holes close to its curving N end. If any reader has any suggestions regarding the date, function, etc., of these stones, please contact the editor.

The area walked was a south-facing slope that probably once stood on the north edge of a broad boggy area. Indeed, the south end of the field was waterlogged and could not be examined. Conditions in the drier part of the field were not ideal for fieldwalking, but people soon got their eye in and although the number of significant finds was not great, a total of ten flints were found. Of these three appear to bear crude secondary working to form small scrapers.



The smaller of the two worked stones in the dyke, which has probably been in place for about 200 years.



The north end of the long slab with ladder-like decoration along its edge.

Other finds include about sixteen very abraded sherds of medieval pottery. Unusually, none of these sherds, which include three rim fragments and a piece of handle, are of white gritty ware, such as that found on all the walks over the past six years in Kinnettles parish. All the Castle Hill sherds have red fabrics, some bearing the remains of green glaze, probably hinting at a local Angus source rather than one further afield.

Among the several hundred other finds, most of which comprised china and glass, there was an 1890 halfpenny, a slate pencil and a fragment of inscribed clay pipe bowl.

Successful Perth Conference

The 2009 TAFAC annual conference was held in Perth on Saturday, 7th November and was attended by over 130 people, making it the best-attended annual conference for some time. A surprising number (47) people turned up and paid on the door, necessitating some *ad hoc* rearranging of the furniture after the first session had started.

The morning session got off to a great start with Dave Easton (RCAHMS) talking about recent survey of military works (some dating back to the 1500s) on and around the River Forth. Then followed a triumvirate of speakers from the Perth & Kinross Heritage Trust. Lindsay Farquharson told us about her three-year project on preserving and promoting 18th century bridges; Dave Strachan brought us up to date on the excavations at Black Spout homestead, Pitlochry, and Oliver O'Grady informed everyone of what has recently been happening on the survey and excavation front at Scone Palace. Three very different projects, but all the same in their deep commitment to involving volunteers, including members of the local community.

After lunch, two speakers, Tessa Poller, from Glasgow University, and John Sherriff (RCAHMS) gave two short talks each. These were punctuated by Mark Hall (Perth Museum), who updated us about the later than expected radiocarbon date for the medieval spearhead from Kinclaven. Tessa's first talk was a brief introduction to the SERF (Strathearn Environs and Royal Forteviot) project's work on hillforts in their survey area. She illustrated the team's survey and excavations at Jacks chairs Wood and Dun Knock, Dunning, and explained the project strategy.

John Sherriff's first talk was on the recent RCAHMS survey of the timber-



The conference saw the launch of volume 15 of the TAFAC Journal and gave the first chance to many to examine Monograph 7. The Committee is extremely grateful to Catherine Smith (pictured) who ran the TAFAC bookstall at the conference, which sold about £1000 worth of publications on the day.

laced fort on Castle Law, Forgandenny. He set the survey in context and illustrated the results to date. Tessa's second talk was a summary of this year's excavations at Forteviot, where a massive boulder, discovered last year, was removed to reveal an early bronze age cist. The cist contained very little surviving evidence of a body but it did contain a very corroded bronze knife that is currently undergoing conservation. John's second talk was on the subject of milestones in Angus, Fife and Perthshire, a form of monument often neglected (except in Fife) and very underrepresented in local and national Sites and Monuments Records.

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