Excavating Dundonald Castle, 1986-93: some thoughts and recollections

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After being invited to contribute an article on my excavations at Dundonald Castle for the CSG Journal in lieu of a site visit, I quickly realised it would be difficult to recall the details after a gap of some 35 years. With that in mind I suggested that a ‘memory lane’ approach might be more realistic, a response to the unusual times we find ourselves in, and an attempt to give a flavour of the early excavations of 1985-6. What follows thus sets out something of the background to the project, the practicalities of the site, some notable discoveries and, not least, how much help I received. A full formal account of all the 1986-93 excavations and the extensive specialist contributions from numerous experts is available in a dedicated issue of the Scottish Archaeological Journal.¹

Once upon a time …

With a couple of friends, I first excavated in Scotland as a volunteer at Threave Castle in 1975. It was there that I first met Chris Tabraham, Inspector of Ancient Monuments and director of the Threave harbour excavation that summer,² and it was then that I was properly introduced to Scottish medieval archaeology and the ‘castles of the west’ in particular.

We must have made a good impression because Chris, on behalf of Scottish Development Department as it was known at that time, invited me on a series of Scottish excavations, intermittently from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. These were all on monuments that were designated as ‘Properties in Care’, usually in advance of repair and upgrading works on the fabric and immediate environs of these sites. It was all fairly intensive in terms of a requirement for speedy excavation and recording, and undertaken at any time of the year, including winter. They were, moreover, exclusively medieval or post medieval, and we eventually excavated at a wide range of monuments, including numerous castles and abbeys as well as the early blast furnace at Bonawe, Argyll, where I first made the acquaintance of John Hume.³

In 1985, John Lewis and I had recently finished our biggest project to date, the excavation of the claustral ranges at Jedburgh Abbey in the Borders, and with new insights into things monastic, I was asked by John Hume to excavate parts of the infilled nave at Kilwinning Abbey, Ayrshire. However, within a day of digging within the nave, the unmistakeable presence of numerous inhumations halted proceedings abruptly while a revised strategy was considered. It was suggested, since we were in the area, that we

Fig. 1. Distant views of Dundonald Castle from NE and SE, within the village.
could transfer to Dundonald Castle, a short distance away, and remove rubble that was currently infilling the area immediately adjacent to the tower. So that is what we did.

'It stands on a beautiful rising ground, which is seen at a great distance on several quarters ...' ⁴

At first impression, Dundonald Castle tower appears as a rather featureless and squat block, visible for miles around (Fig. 1); only at closer quarters is the sheer size of its tower fully appreciated. It stands at the west end of the extensive summit of an elongated rocky mound which looms dramatically over Dundonald village.

Another first impression at that time was that the site was somewhat embattled and forbidding, with a massive scaffold around the tower (Fig. 2) and the entire summit of the castle rock surrounded in turn by high security fencing. This rather bleak and industrial character was further reinforced by a narrow-gauge rail line running up the east slope of the castle rock. The steepness of the slope precluded any vehicular means of spoil removal, so supplies were hauled up the railway by a noisy winch.

The site summit is a surprisingly lofty vantage point with scenic views to the north, east and south, only to the west is the site overlooked by tree-covered rising ground. The natural elevation of the site is further complemented by the massive tower itself, the focus at the time of extensive masonry repair and consolidation. As a very reluctant climber of scaffolds, particularly in excess of 100 feet (30.5m), it was always a challenge for me to go to the upper floor, much to the hilarity of the masons and builders. Once up there, the view and its appeal to the one-time residents was obvious.

The excavations – where to put the spoil?

The rather quaint winch-and-bogey arrangement was adequate for bringing supplies to the masons, but clearly would never cope with the volume of spoil generated by a digging team, who were noted experts with pick and shovel. In these circumstances, the solution I adopted was the ‘moving spoil heap’. In fact we moved the spoil heap no less than three times — opening an area and excavating it completely before covering it in ‘terram’ and replacing the spoil, before embarking on another area and repeating the process. In this fashion we were able to open
most of the upper areas of the castle mound without the need to bring in earth-moving machinery. At the conclusion of the work, a small bulldozer shifted the many tons of spoil we had generated and a local quarry was infilled with them.

I would also say that without the cheerful contributions from the many volunteers who attended the site, some local, some from far afield, the core team of seasoned campaigners would have struggled with the ambitious targets I set ... if only in terms of the size of the trenches. In my defence I would say that small trenches would never have picked up the fragmentary edges of what proved to be large structures, and the settlement sequence would have been considerably less well defined. I also admit that my style of directing was not to everyone’s taste: I let the spoil-movers in particular bring their favourite music to the site, with The Pogues, Thin Lizzy et al. setting a cracking pace!

What to plan?

In my principal role as site planner, as well as general supervisor, I soon became acutely aware of the generally rocky nature of the site. Under the turf were varying depths of what appeared to be simply random dumps of loose stones spread across the two recognisable courtyard areas lying to the east of the tower. It was also apparent that within the generally stony mass, structures of various sorts were just about discernible, and so it all required detailed planning.

In those pre-digital days, archaeological planning at 1:20 scale was dependent on a combination of 30m tapes measured from a site grid. This in turn comprised a series of wooden pegs (each with a nail) located at precise points across the site, from which tapes could be strung out. As I was a proponent of the triangulation method of measuring features in plan, the pegs, in terms of...
of accurate location and stability, were crucial - woe betide anyone accidentally tripping over them! Measurements were taken by using a plumb bob to locate features on the ground, then using a beam compass to fix the points on a board. This method allowed me to cope with the uneven ground and slopes on the site. However, the memory of hanging on to flapping tapes in a stiff gale, then leaning over a large board while trying to draw some pile of confused stonework on a slope, lingers to this day.

Establishing a series of fixed points across the entire site soon became an urgent priority as I was invited to examine the area immediately outside the castle boundary fence (Figs. 3 & 4). A series of clear terraces as well as enigmatic ‘humps and bumps’ all suggested buried structures beyond the surviving enclosure wall. It was decided that a limited foray in the area of the eastern approach route to the castle mound would be acceptable in order to help inform the apparent range of structures, including the tower, on the summit itself. This involved the arcane science of survey, transects and offsets, all realised via an elderly theodolite, which itself required great skill even just to set up over a fixed point.

The need to record the mass of rubble and stone scatters remained fixed in my mind, despite muttered comments like ‘a heap of stones is probably just a heap of stones’. However, I felt that the use of earth-fast posts for a variety of timber buildings on a rocky outcrop had definitely required some imported aggregate for support. Fortunately, this was borne out and proved a consistent feature of the sequence of the round houses and straight-sided timber buildings. However, the downside was the need to actually draw all the stone spreads and mounds, and the task fell mainly to me. Although a real challenge, this exercise did force me to look very closely at these features and deposits. This led eventually to the identification of a series of convincing post settings alongside the more obvious features like hearths, paving and thresholds. These could then be associated with wall lines and doorways, once the general dimensions and shapes of buildings were recognised (Fig. 5).

The east gatehouse and castle defences

Once the rubble was cleared around the tower itself, we moved eastwards, initially to the wide area defined by the enclosure wall to the east of the site, as well as around the present access route on to the site. In due course, two trenches were opened on the north and south sides of the railway, and dramatic evidence was revealed of a towered gatehouse sitting close to the remains of an earlier rampart, succeeded by the remnants of a final wall line (which survives today). It was also apparent that some drystone...
deposits on the eastern edge of the castle mound had been subjected to intense heat, suggesting that the later gatehouse was itself cut against remnants of a rather different form of wall line.

Only a short section of what we eventually recognised as vitrified stonework was revealed, but it was enough to offer evidence of a dramatic episode in the history of Dundonald (Fig. 6). The explanation for the strangely fused mass of small angular stones mixed with occasional large boulders was not immediately obvious, and only when the crude slots of possible timber beams were revealed did its true form and alignment become clearer. This phenomenon is still something of a mystery, but with expert advice on site from the geologist, Nigel Ruckley, and later from the petrologists at the British Geological Survey and Professor Ian Ralston and Dr David Sanderson, the Dundonald evidence was thoroughly checked. All this activity raised the profile of the excavation considerably, a long way from the limited clearance exercise that was first intended.

**Notable artefacts**

The sequence of fortification implied by a vitrified rampart, sealed by a towered gatehouse, was further illuminated by numerous well stratified and diagnostic finds. This gave a new interpretative framework for the frankly enigmatic development of the late fourteenth-century tower, as well as giving context to the assumed colonisation of an existing fortified site by the Stewarts in the twelfth century. Some traces of late prehistoric occupation and subsequent early medieval settlement was to be expected on the site, but the quality and condition of that archaeological evidence was a surprise to us all.

Almost as soon as we started excavation on the eastern side of the castle mound, confirmation of the extended settlement sequence at Dundonald emerged in the form of a rather unprepossessing fragment of what resembled twisted fence wire, mixed within the spreads of stone, at a shallow depth below the turf and topsoil. Not long after, and nearby, were found the first of numerous fragments of extremely rough ceramic, initially assumed to be kiln lining rather than simple pottery, so crude was the fabric and large the inclusions.

Unusually, I found these objects myself, and once the twisted wire was identified as a Romano-British brooch (Fig. 7) and the fired clay lumps were actually pottery sherds, it was a genuine thrill to handle this material and to realise the potential scale and preservation of residual structures and surfaces towards the eastern end of the site in particular. Again, I should emphasise that this was...
not what we expected – ‘tower houses and barmkin walls’ were the order of the day – but the site quickly demonstrated it held much more. Soon after, I found another object which I felt spoke volumes about Dundonald. This was a fragment of slate with roughly incised decoration. I knew that any slate was worth a closer look after my experience at Cruggleton Castle in Galloway where I first found such objects.⁵

This piece was picked up close to the site of the gatehouse, in a shallow spread of rubble and debris. I could see it had scratches on both sides, and remember holding it while puzzling about what was depicted. Another member of the team, standing opposite me, pointed out that I was holding it upside down. Once I turned the slate around, the recognition of two spidery figures holding double-handed swords is still, after all this time, a truly memorable moment (Fig. 7).

Architectural analysis and standing buildings recording
As site supervisor, I was considerably more comfortable with so-called ‘buried archaeology’ than with the ‘upstanding evidence’, embedded in the massive masonry of the surviving walls and chambers. The building fabric obviously displayed evidence of a complex history, culminating in the great tower itself, but its origins were not obvious. The need to analyse that evidence was also problematic at that time for several reasons. Pre-digital survey and photo modelling, the business of recording and interpreting the sequence of building reflected by a patchwork of masonry, often difficult to access and hard to measure accurately, was generally the province of architectural historians. My role focused on ‘dirt archaeology’, leaving the standing building analysis as a separate discipline entirely. Again, in those pre-digital days, rectification of photographs was not easy: scaling images still relied on the Grants Projector and field elevations were drawn at large scale using plane tables and plumb bobs.

However, help was at hand in the form of guidance from many quarters, for which I was grateful, although it is fair to say that not everyone shared my enthusiasm for possible post settings and burnt stones. The consum-
mate skills of the RCAHMS draughtsmen rescued our attempts to survey the site, and, some years after the excavations were finished, it was Professor Denys Pringle who rigorously addressed the architectural puzzle of the tower gatehouse /tower house plans. Thanks to Denys, I was able to pull the archaeological evidence together, enough to persuade Stephen Driscoll that it might warrant publication.

The Stewarts and Dundonald

New evidence of the long association between Dundonald and the early Stewarts was suggested by the discovery of a possible medieval motte and timber hall plan, succeeded by a castle of enclosure, all predating the present great tower house. The poor press enjoyed by Robert II, and by association, Dundonald, was now mitigated by a long and colourful history, punctuated by successive episodes of destruction and rebuilding. The castle was now more recognisable as an ancient and powerful ‘caput’ rather than a backwater, contrasting with Samuel Johnson’s jocular dismissal of the site as ‘homely’ (Figs. 8 & 9).

The evidence for the links between the estates of Dundonald and the territories of Strathclyde before the arrival of the Stewarts in Ayrshire was first developed by Bill McQueen and David Caldwell. Their researches in particular led to our collaboration on excavations at other castles of the western seaboard, starting with Auldhill, Portencross, then to Castle Sween and Finlaggan on Islay.

Public involvement, volunteers and media interest

From the first excavations on the hill, local interest was high. I was again lucky enough to have the redoubtable Sandy Alexander, leader of the team of masons, on hand to keep me right in how to handle the various offers of assistance. The fact that we were open with visitor access was much appreciated by people in the village, and was in marked contrast to a perceived problem of vandalism and theft. In the first
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place, this had led to the installation of security fencing all over the hill, tower and site compound, causing some understandable resentment. Thanks to Sandy and a few local residents, I was able to build bridges and we were largely left to our own devices. Although it was understated, it was obvious that the castle meant a great deal to the village. So it was a relatively easy process for the project to evolve into a genuine community effort without any particular fanfare or drama. Whatever wealth Dundonald had archaeologically, any televisual potential was not apparent in that pre-Time Team era; the sight of a few figures on a wind-swept hill was not headline news. However, despite the absence of peak time coverage, the more informal and low-key approach that evolved probably benefited the site more over time, and developed good links with the village, which appear to have gone from strength to strength ever since.⁸

What next?

There are many riddles to solve and secrets to discover at Dundonald. What the site manifestly demonstrated to me all those years ago was, on the one hand, the remarkable preservation of its archaeology, and, on the other, its deep history. All in all, it is a rare survival. As a team, we were lucky enough to set the scene for others to develop, and, by the way, had a lot of fun (Fig.10).

Notes and references

3. Over the next few years, I was able to work on a succession of miscellaneous excavations, mainly on behalf of what became Historic Scotland. In response to the increasing scope and number of projects, I set up Kirkdale Archaeology in 1992. Since that time the team has worked on a wide variety of projects for various clients, including excavation and survey at Stirling Castle, Edinburgh Castle, the Palace of Holyroodhouse, Cadzow Castle, Rowallan Castle and Tantallon Castle. Most recently, I have been working on the Kings Old Building at Stirling Castle for Historic Environment Scotland (HES) and Abbey Strand, Holyrood Palace, on behalf of the Royal Collections Trust. For a selection of Kirkdale Archaeology’s portfolio of publications, see the appendix below, and for unpublished reports, currently being absorbed into the HES archive, see https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/library/browse/series.xhtml?recordId=10453&recordType=GreyLit
6. John Borland and Douglas Boyd, directed by Geoffrey Stell; see the ‘prints and drawings’ tab under https://canmore.org.uk/site/41970
8. The Friends of Dundonald Castle, a SCIO (Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation), work in partnership with Historic Environment Scotland, looking after the castle and its visitor centre on a daily basis: https://www.dundonaldcastle.org.uk/
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Appendix: a selection, in chronological order, of other publications by Kirkdale Archaeology

(with Fiona Baker) ‘Carrick Castle: symbol and source of Campbell power in south Argyll from the 14th to the 17th century, PSAS, volume 128 (1998), pages 937-1016


(with Denys Pringle & Nigel Ruckley) ‘...“an old pentagonal fort built of stone”: excavation of the battery wall at Fort Charlotte, Lerwick, Shetland,’ Post-Medieval Archaeology, volume 34 (2000), pages 105-43


(with E Patricia Dennison, Dennis Gallagher & Laura Stewart) Historic Kilsyth: archaeology and development (Historic Scotland, Edinburgh, 2006)

(with E Patricia Dennison and Dennis Gallagher) Historic Maybole: archaeology and development (Historic Scotland, Edinburgh, 2006)


(with Dennis Gallagher) A palace fit for a laird: Rowallan Castle, archaeology and research 1998-2008 (Historic Scotland Archaeology Report No.1, Edinburgh, 2009)

The castle in the woods: excavations at Cadzow Castle 2000-03(Historic Scotland Archaeology Report No.2, Edinburgh, 2009)


(with Martin Rorke, Dennis Gallagher, Charles McKean & E Patricia Dennison) Historic Galashiels: archaeology and development (Historic Scotland, Edinburgh, 2011)

(with Dennis Gallagher) Monastery and Palace: archaeological investigations at Holyroodhouse 1996 -2009 (Historic Scotland Archaeology Report No.6, Edinburgh, 2013)

(with Dennis Gallagher) Fortress of the Kingdom: archaeology and research at Edinburgh Castle (Historic Scotland Archaeology Report No.7, Edinburgh, 2014)

(with Dennis Gallagher) ‘With Thy Towers High’: the archaeology of Stirling Castle and Palace (Historic Scotland Archaeology Report No.9, Edinburgh, 2015)

(with E Patricia Dennison and Dennis Gallagher) Historic Mauchline: archaeology and development (Historic Scotland, Edinburgh, 2016)