

VARIOUS  
DOCUMENTS GIVING  
DETAILS OF THE  
HISTORY OF  
DUNDARG CASTLE

## SOME NOTES CONCERNING THE OLD CASTLE

### OR FORT OF DUNDARGUE

#### INTRODUCTION

Dundargue – the Red Fort – seems to have been used as a defensive position from prehistoric times. The reasons for this included its access to beaches, arable land, good artesian drinking water and cliff top visibility and security.

Important Pictish officials lived at Dundargue in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century and almost certainly earlier than that. After the Picts, Dundargue remained as a fortified home until the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. At that time it was owned by the heiress to the Earldom of Buchan and her husband who was an English Baron claiming the Earldom. The building was destroyed by Scottish forces under the command of the Warden of Scotland.

These notes provide a brief insight into a long history.

#### Accounts and Excavations

The first detailed written account of Dundargue was carried out by the Rev. Andrew Youngson in 1794. At that time he was Minister of Aberdour Parish Church – or St. Drostan's Kirk. His work which was included in the first Statistical Account of Scotland begins as follows:-

"About half a mile English, east of the church is the site and remains of the ancient castle of Dundargue – built upon a rock of red free stone, 64 feet high from the beach immediately below, 261 feet in length and 48 mean breadth – surrounded by the sea when the tide flows except at a narrow neck of rock which joins the castle rock to the land".

The castle and its defensive lands have been substantially derelict since the mid 15<sup>th</sup> Century and little is known of its history from that time until 1911 – 1912 when the then owner, Mr. Dinglewall Fordyce of Brucklay Castle ordered that a carefully recorded excavation was carried out.

This was mainly concerned with the inner moat or ditch, which had been connected with old tales of hidden treasure. Some old artefacts were found, but nothing of great value. An unsuccessful attempt was then made to flood the moat by damming the western outlet.

A more professional and detailed excavation and analysis of the whole site was carried out in 1950/51. The results were published by Aberdeen University Press. Iron Age remains were identified as were the prehistoric works that had been carried out to the three ditches or moats, which had been built to help protect the landward side of the fort from attack. The smallest of the three ditches is now almost entirely covered by soil and grass in adjoining fields.

The archaeological analysis confirmed the historical importance of the site, which is officially listed by Historic Scotland.

### Drostan & The Picts

St. Columba (563-597) was an Irish nobleman who sailed from Ulster and founded the community on the island of Iona, which played a significant role in the conversion of much of eastern Scotland and north-eastern England to Christianity. St. Aidan was sent from Iona to Northumberland and became the Bishop of Lindisfarne. Drostan first went to Caithness and founded a church at Wick in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. He then came to Buchan by sea, landing at Aberdour beach.

No written records are available of exactly how Drostan's ministry was carried out. In the 11<sup>th</sup> Century however, the Celtic Monks of Deer, where the first church is thought to be founded by St. Drostan wrote:-

"Columcille and Drostan, son of Cosgrach his pupil came from Iona as God had shown them unto Abbordobor, and Bede the Pict was Mormaer of Buchan before them and it was he who gave them that Cathair in freedom for ever from Mormaer and Toisich."

It is thought that Bede lived at Dundargue and that the land that he gave to Drostan to build a church on, is close to where the ruins of the old Aberdour Kirk still stand. Aberdour is thus one of Scotland's earliest Christian locations.

Dundargue continued to be a Pictish stronghold until the long line of Mormaers of Buchan ended in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century when Fergus died without a son. His daughter, Margery became heiress and she married William Comyn. Buchan thus fell under the influence of a powerful Anglo-Norman family.

### The Comyns

The Comyn dynasty in Buchan began well with William – the first Norman Earl of Buchan, founding the Abbey of Deer in 1219.

The old Celtic Dun at Dundargue was refashioned to suit its new owner and it remained a Comyn stronghold for almost a century. The family were not popular however, when their support of Edward 1<sup>st</sup> of England became clear. They were very powerful and John Comyn was High Constable of Scotland in 1297 and Comyn – Lord of Badenoch – the Red Comyn – became Guardian of Scotland under John Balliol in 1298.

Robert the Bruce killed him in 1306 and in revenge at the Comyn's treachery to Scotland, Bruce invaded Buchan in 1308, defeated the Comyns at a battle in Inverurie and laid Buchan waste, burning forests and destroying castles and buildings. This was called "the Harrying of Buchan" and Dundargue Castle was substantially destroyed with the majority of the stonework being thrown off the cliffs onto the beaches.

Limited repairs were carried out however and the building was occupied when Alice, niece of the last Comyn, Earl of Buchan and his heiress, married and English nobleman, Henry de Beaumont.



### Henry de Beaumont

Henry de Beaumont was high born and powerful, he was directly related to Eleanor of Castille, the first wife of Edward 1<sup>st</sup> of England. He was a loyal Royalist and served with distinction in the Scottish campaigns from 1302 onwards. In 1308 he was Joint Warden of Scotland south of the River Forth. He married Alice of Buchan in 1310 and claimed the Earldom of Buchan because his wife was the heiress.

The Regent rejected his claim, because it was felt that to yield it to an Englishman would open up dangerous possibilities of sea borne invasion by English troops landing on the Buchan coastline. This disagreement lasted for the remaining years that de Beaumont spent in Scotland only ending with his defeat at Dundargue and the destruction of the castle in 1334.

More than 300 soldiers and non-combatants were staying at Dundargue Castle which De Beaumont had spent time re-fortifying in preparations for the attack, which he knew, was bound to come.

It came in October 1334 under the command of the then Warden of Scotland, Sir Andrew de Moray. Dundargue came to occupy a brief but central position on the Scottish scene. De Beaumont's troops kept the official forces at bay. A siege was mounted and this lasted for two months. The water supply was broken and a stone throwing machine was brought in, which smashed the main beam of the tower. On 23<sup>rd</sup> December, 1334, surrender terms were agreed. These gave safe passage to de Beaumont and all his people, provided that he never again returned to Scotland.

Dundargue was left derelict and ruined. It has never been restored.

Alisdair Donaldson  
Dundarg Castle,  
Aberdeenshire,  
May 1998.

Copy.

The University,  
Aberdeen.

8th November, 1950.

A.L. Young, Esq.,  
Director of Education,  
Aberdeenshire Education Offices,  
Union Terrace,  
Aberdeen.

Dear Sir,

I have pleasure in enclosing herewith a copy of a preliminary report upon the excavations at Dundarg Castle which I conducted in August of this year. You will note a reference to the courtesy of the Aberdeenshire Education Committee in placing equipment at our disposal. I am writing on behalf of the three bodies which sponsored this undertaking to ask you to convey to your Committee the expression of our warmest thanks. We desire also gratefully to acknowledge the donation of £10: -: -d. made to us through the Scottish Field School of Archaeology.

I should like further to let you know how greatly we appreciate the extraordinary amount of courtesy and help given to us throughout the undertaking by Mr. Garrioch, the schoolmaster at New Aberdour. The success of the excavation owes a great deal to himself and his wife.

Yours faithfully,

(Sgd.) W. DOUGLAS SIMPSON.

Encl.



PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE EXCAVATION OF DUNDARG CASTLE, 1950.

Under the auspices of the Buchan Club, the Scottish Field School of Archaeology, and the University of Aberdeen, excavations were conducted at Dundarg Castle, Aberdour, Aberdeenshire, during the month of August, 1950. The student diggers, obtained through the Field School, came from the Universities of St. Andrews, Glasgow, and Aberdeen.

The excavation kit was kindly lent, free of charge, by Messrs. Tawse and Allan, Contractors, Aberdeen. Camp beds and some cooking equipment were similarly lent by the Aberdeen Battalion of the Boys' Brigade, and the remainder of the kitchen requisites were placed at our disposal by the Aberdeenshire Education Committee. Sanitary equipment at the Castle was installed, also without charge, by the Aberdeen Corporation Cleansing Department. Through the kindness of the Parish Committee, the students were quartered in the well-appointed New Aberdour Hall. The photographic record was taken by Mr. J. Wilson Smith, Peterhead, and the air survey by Air Vice-Marshal D. V. Carnegie, C.B., C.B.E., A.F.C., the owner of the castle. Every facility on the site was cordially provided by the Air Vice-Marshal and by his tenant in the castle, Mr. F. G. Somerset.

Mr. Hector Thomson, M.A., Department of Greek, Aberdeen University, acted as Camp Chief, my wife undertook the arduous duties of Quartermaster and Cook, and Dr. F. T. Wainwright, University College, Dundee, was Deputy Director of Excavations. Guidance in engineering problems was given us by Squadron leader W. Norrie and Mr. Hector Lees, Aberdeen. The soil analyses are being made by Dr. W. T. Williamson, Department of Soil Science, University of Aberdeen.

The excavations were favoured with very good weather, and excellent results were obtained. In the remains of the medieval castle, clear evidence of its double reconstruction, as attested by record, in 1308 and 1334, was revealed. An interesting feature was the way in which earthwork had been employed by Henry de Beaumont, in his hurried reconditioning of the castle before the siege of 1334, to close the breaches in the frontal curtain and the great tower made by Bruce in 1308. In front of the inner gatehouse, the bed of a sleeper joist, cut in the rock, was exposed. It appears to have belonged to a pre-existing timber construction on this portion of the site.

Evidence was obtained of a partial restoration of the castle in the 16th century, probably during the War of the Rough Wooing. In this reconstruction the inner gatehouse was pierced for cannon.

Outside the castle a triple system of ditches and banks, straddling the promontory, was investigated. The outermost ditch, being under corn, could not be dug: it is, however, evident in the air survey. The innermost ditch proved to have been widened to serve as the castle moat. The middle ditch, which (like the inner one) is rock-cut, appears to be prehistoric, and the whole system may be accepted as a promontory fort of the Iron Age.

In the outer court of the castle a prehistoric kitchen midden was exposed, and a portion of it sifted. It yielded large quantities of limpets, periwinkles, and other shell-fish, together with fish and animal bones, and artefacts. A report on the contents of this midden is awaited from the Natural History Department, University of Aberdeen.

Unfortunately the excavations yielded no prehistoric pottery. But the bone tools possess affinities with those of the brochs, and the approximate dating thereby suggested seems to be confirmed by an enamelled stud, apparently a stray from the Roman Province. Large quantities of medieval pottery and other relics of this period have been turned up. The pottery dates mainly from the 13th-14th centuries. The coin record from the site extends from Edward I to the 18th century.

It is proposed to complete the clearance of the midden in the Easter Vacation: and, if circumstances permit, to conduct another full-scale excavation on the site next summer.

W. DOUGLAS SIMPSON,

Director of Excavations.

King's College,  
Aberdeen.  
November, 1950.  
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