

The defences of Dundarg Castle, Aberdeenshire

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SUMMARY

Excavations on the inner edge of defences at Dundarg revealed no trace of pre-medieval settlement. A new defensive line was located and sectioned within the defended enclosure. The sequence given by earlier excavators is discussed in the light of these limited excavations, and a Dark Age date suggested for the new defensive element.

The modern dwelling-house of Dundarg, New Aberdour, Aberdeenshire (NGR NJ 895 648), itself of no little architectural interest, is located within the remains of a series of defences which have exploited a strong natural position. Situated at the foot of a N-facing coastal slope, the house stands on the S side of a triangle of more gently sloping ground (fig 1). This is flanked by steep slopes on all sides except along the broad S approach and at the NE extremity, whence a narrow hog-backed spine runs out to link with a flat elongated promontory. The red sandstone cliffs of this natural redoubt have led to its name, *dun dearg*: the red fort or castle. These cliffs stand 20 m high, overhanging in places, and forbid approach except from the SW ridge.

EARLY HISTORY AND EXCAVATIONS

Apart from a reference in the Book of Deer to the presence at Aberdour, in the 6th century AD, of a *cathair*, or fortified place, the documented history of Dundarg commences in 1334, with the re-fortification of 'un strong chastel'. The presence of a massive double bank and ditch to landward of the castle, coupled with the Dark Age reference and finds of early midden deposits and an enamelled button with 3rd-4th century Romano-British affinities, prompted the suggestion that Dundarg may have begun life as an Iron Age promontory fort (Simpson 1954, 94). The recent publication of a series of promontory defences along the southern shore of the Moray Firth has added substance to this suggestion while widening the range of possible dates for Dundarg and other, unexcavated, forts (Ralston 1980).

Excavations in 1911 and 1950-51, while identifying as pre-medieval the ramparts and certain bone-rich midden deposits, concentrated upon the masonry remains. Finds included the late Iron Age button mentioned above and a number of undiagnostic worked flints, but were predominantly ceramic. Medieval pottery of local NE Scottish manufacture was plentiful, mainly of forms and fabrics attributed to the later 13th and early 14th centuries. Lesser quantities of sherds dating to the 16th and 17th centuries have also been recovered (Beveridge 1912; Simpson 1954; 1960).

On the basis of these excavations, Simpson (1954) advanced a sequence which may be summarized as follows.

- 1 Prehistoric fort with earthen defences (the *cathair* of the local Pictish *mormaer*).
- 2 Monastic settlement of Drostan (Drostan landed, traditionally with Columba, at Aberdour Bay).

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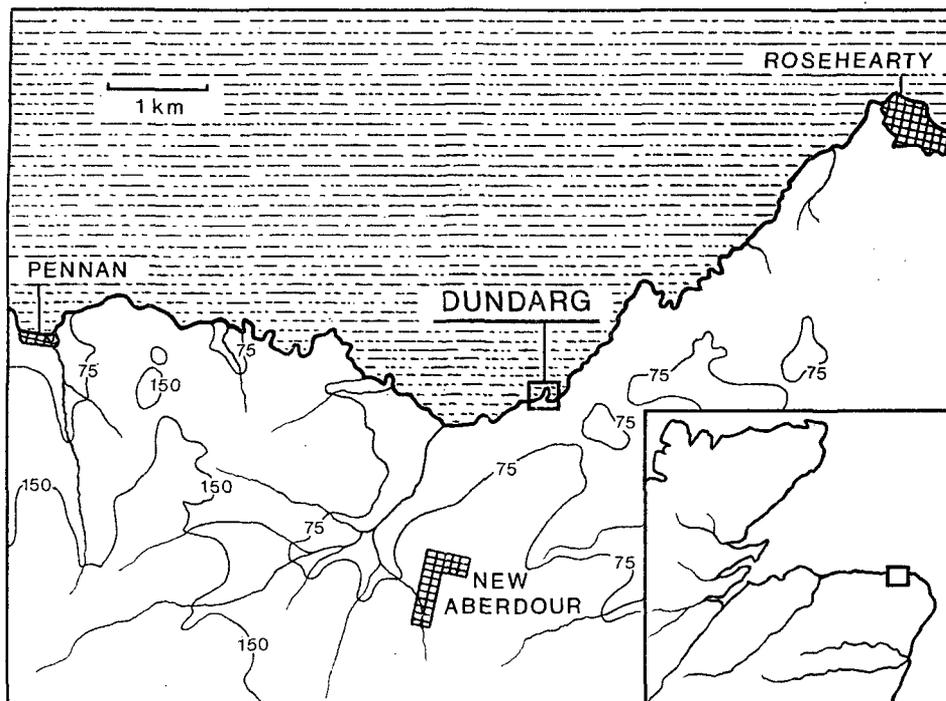


FIG 1 Location map for Dundarg

- 3 Castle built by Comyns in later 13th century, after Buchan passed into their hands.
- 4 Castle destroyed by Bruce in ? 1308.
- 5 Castle rebuilt by Henry de Beaumont, disaffected supporter of Balliol, in 1334.
- 6 Castle reduced by siege later the same year.
- 7 Castle rebuilt, with addition of inner gatehouse, c 1560.
- 8 Site abandoned, mid-17th century.
- 9 Modern dwelling-house constructed, 1938.

PROBLEMS OF CHRONOLOGY

Although attractive and broadly acceptable, the sequence proposed by Simpson has several questionable areas. There is no clear evidence for the dating of the outer ramparts, although the late prehistoric attribution gains qualified support from the recently identified ard-share. This artefact, one of the finds from the earlier excavations, came from the moat or the middle ditch, and while of a type which could be Iron Age, cannot itself be firmly dated (see Rees, this volume, for discussion).

The midden material recovered during the 1911 and 1950 examinations consisted of bone and shell, and was not dated by artefactual association. It was ascribed a prehistoric date purely on the appearance of the constituents. The earlier samples are now missing, and the 1981 excavations suggest that earlier investigators succeeded in removing the entire deposit.

The Celtic monastic phase derives no support from excavated finds, although the documentary allusions appear convincing, given the local topography and the nearby Drostan placenames. The rectilinear foundations on the spine of the site, ascribed tentatively to this phase by Simpson, have more the look of 17th- than 7th-century date, and are most probably ancillary buildings to the inner gatehouse. A similarity of form and layout may be observed at Old Wick Castle, Caithness (ND 369 488).

There is no documentation for the presence of either Comyns or Bruce. There is no doubt about the presence of de Beaumont in 1334, or the siege to dislodge his forces. However, Simpson ascribes the main fortification to the hypothetical Comyn presence and suggests only cursory refortification by de Beaumont. This does not accord well with the elaborate siege needed to end the latter's occupancy.

Again, there is no written evidence to support Simpson's proposed late-16th century phase, although the ceramic evidence does suggest at least limited use around this period. The architectural style of the inner gatehouse, which bears some resemblance to Fast Castle, Berwickshire (NY 861 710), does appear to be later in date than the last attested fortification, in 1334. It is known that defences at Findlater Castle (NJ 542 673) and possibly Banff (NJ 689 646) were examined in the period 1550–60 with a view to adapting them to the new requirements of artillery warfare, and it may be that Dundarg was modified at this time. Further support for this suggested phase comes from the inclusion of Dundarg as a place of some importance on the map of Buchan compiled by Gordon around 1640 (Blaeu 1654). This would hardly have been likely if the site had lain unused for three centuries.

THE 1981 EXCAVATIONS

In 1981, planned building work beside the modern dwelling-house afforded an opportunity to re-examine parts of the 'established' sequence, and in particular the innermost element of the outer defences. A three-week season was organized and funded by SDD(AM), and took place in typical Buchan spring weather.

Although this excavation failed in its primary aim of dating the outer defences, it did demonstrate that the system is not all of pre-medieval origin. In addition, the 1981 investigations revealed an entirely unrecorded defensive construction. However, a measure of resolution was achieved regarding the extent and date of the earlier medieval phases of the site sequence.

What follows is a brief description and discussion. The full report, together with the site documents, has been lodged with the National Monuments Record of Scotland and copies have also been placed in the Grampian Regional Council Sites and Monuments Record.

THE OUTER DEFENCES

Excavation was initially restricted to the 7 m square area of a proposed garage, to be built immediately adjoining a shed originally erected for the same purpose. The planned construction would cut the innermost bank along a 7 m length and cause severe disturbance to deposits lying to its N.

This bank is stone-faced, and, although not sectioned by Simpson's excavation, follows the obvious line for a curtain wall linking the great tower on the NW edge of the site to the outer gatehouse, which stood on the site of the modern house. A cursory examination during the 1950–51 operations concluded that this bank was of two phases, with an earlier stone wall overlain by an apparently hasty earthen rebuild. The phases were ascribed, respectively, to the hypothetical Comyn castle and the 1334 de Beaumont defence.

In 1981 two parallel trenches (Areas I and II) were laid down, cutting the bank at right angles and extending to the N (see fig 2). These provided four sections through the deposits and, since they were excavated in area fashion, also gave an opportunity of examining the rear of the bank for structural evidence. Later in the excavation the two trenches were united to give a broad view of the subsoil topography. Although considerable recent activity was noted, it proved possible to record a number of significant stratigraphical observations.

In the S portions of Areas I and II the principal deposit immediately overlying the till subsoil, a clean, cultivated loamy earth, was found to have been compacted, presumably by trampling. Small sherds of medieval pottery, of types attributed to the late 13th or early 14th centuries, were found pressed into the upper surface of this soil. At the S extremity of both areas, the subsoil was directly overlain by the remains of a mortared wall, its red sandstone slabs largely decayed to pockets of friable grit within a matrix of shell-lime mortar. Although principally founded upon till, the N edge of the wall base extended over the southernmost extension of the trampled level.

Once the wall had been reduced to a stump it was sealed beneath a bank of earth, apparently derived from the N side of the wall, where the compacted levels, and a further depth of 10 cm of soil which

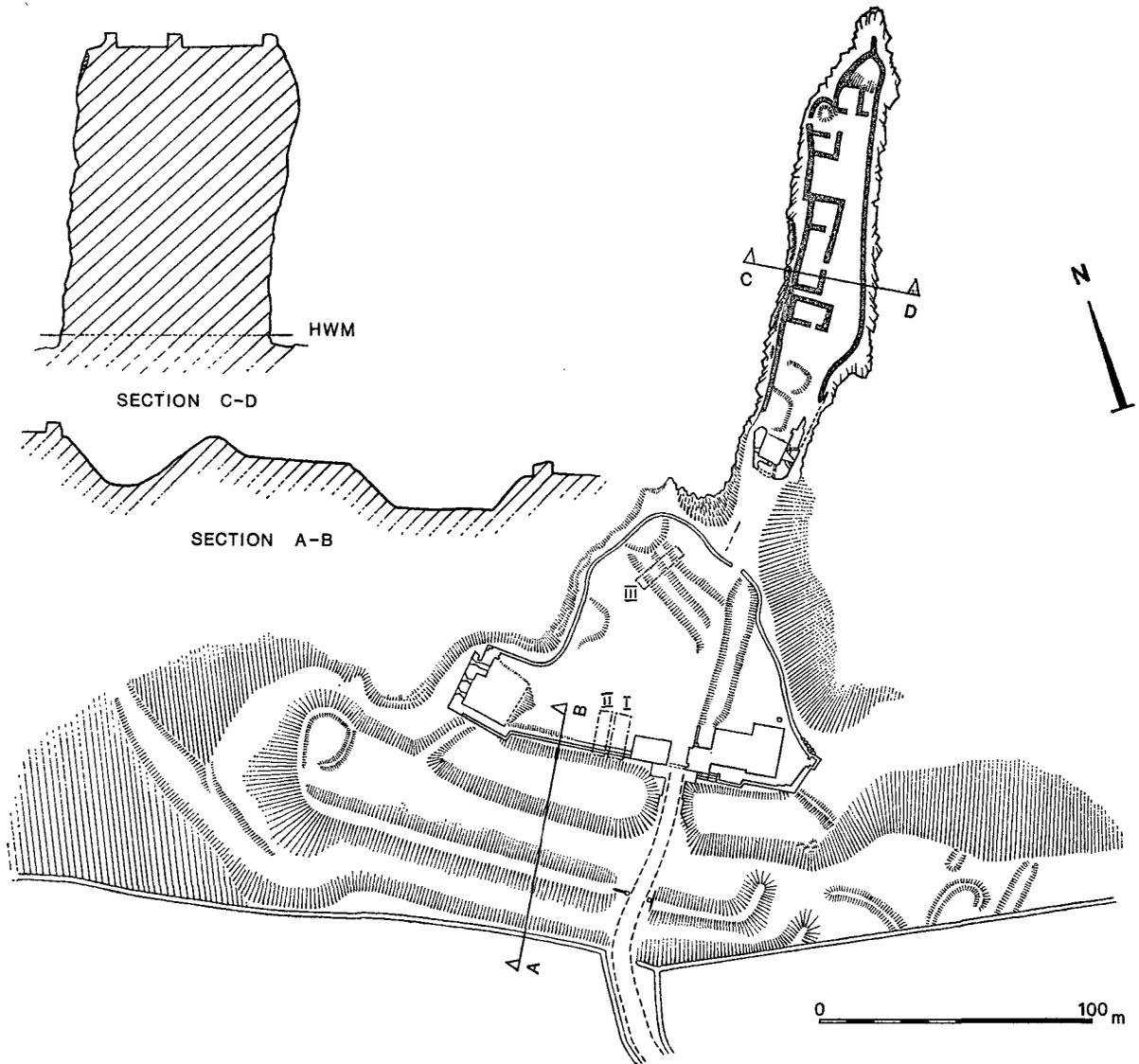


FIG 2 Plan of Dundarg peninsula, based on plan ABD/521/1 prepared by Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland

had accumulated after trampling, had been cut away. The S limit of removal, marked by a line of spade impressions, coincided with the N foot of the upcast mound, which had a width of about 2.5 m. After this activity, soil continued to accumulate to the N, sealing the disturbed areas and the foot of the bank. The latter feature appears to have been left undisturbed until, in or shortly after 1938, the outer face was cut into and a stone facing inserted along the whole distance from the newly built house to the ruined tower at the NW end of the defences. At a slightly later date the rear of the bank was partly levelled to provide an approach to the shed built beside the house. These last phases may be dated by modern materials sealed with the deposits, the stonework clearly being surplus from that imported to the site for the construction of the house.

In the areas examined there were no traces of any structures behind the wall/bank. While the exten-

sive disturbance associated with the throwing-up of the earthen defence would have cut away any structural evidence which did not reach almost into the subsoil, the subsequent slight agricultural activity does not seem to have been severe enough to have destroyed any substantial foundations contemporary with, or later than, the bank, if such ever existed.

The sequence may be interpreted in relatively simple fashion. Cultivation took place on the site, resulting in a shallow soil. This soil was cleared from most, but not all, of the strip required for the footings of a mortared wall. It is suggested that trampling of the soil occurred during this constructional activity, which would date this activity to around 1275–1350 on ceramic evidence. The wall was subsequently either demolished or allowed to decay, probably the former, as fragments of mortar were found some distance from the wall in the soil which had accumulated over the trampled horizon. After a considerable passage of time, in which 10 cm of soil accumulated and the wall was reduced to a mere stump, the earthen mound was thrown up, using the soil from the interior of the site. This produced a bank of unknown height. After the creation of this feature, which cannot be closely dated, natural processes, with some slight traces of agricultural efforts, seem to have prevailed into the early 20th century.

The important features of this sequence are the evidence for the date of the masonry work, which accords best with the 1334 use of the site, and the suggestion that a considerable period of time elapsed before the creation of the bank over the decayed or demolished wall. It is difficult to see any firm evidence here for the wholly hypothetical pre-1334 Comyn castle, but the bank may provide qualified support for the idea of a later medieval remodelling.

It seems unlikely that the builders of the wall removed all evidence of an earlier rampart before starting work, as they built part of the wall-footing upon a compacted soil which would have been a poorer foundation than upcast from an old defence. Thus Simpson's intuitive suggestion, that the inner bank and moat did not form part of a refurbished prehistoric defensive system, is supported by the evidence from the recent excavations.

A NEW DEFENSIVE LINE

Both earlier excavators examined a small masonry platform which lay towards the N end of the outer enclosure, and both recovered supposedly prehistoric midden material from beneath it. This structure, which may have been the foundation for some item of medieval weaponry, was observed to stand in a slight linear depression, no more than 0.8 m in depth, running from the N edge of the site towards the centre. The midden seemed to have accumulated by dumping from the S side of this depression. Although careful examination of the E edge of the outer enclosure suggests that this feature once ran across the site, neither excavator seems to have considered it as other than natural. Had there at any time been a unitary defence intended to enclose only the small, cliffed, promontory which forms the seaward part of Dundarg, this might well have followed the line of the depression described above. To determine whether or not this feature was man-made, and the slight rise on its N side the remains of a rampart, a trench was laid out at right angles to the axis of the hollow.

This trench (Area III) ran from the S lip of the possible ditch to the crest of the low bank on its N side. It revealed traces of work in all three excavations, 1911, 1950 and 1951. The last season's work had been infilled with ashes from the modern house, containing glass and china fragments. The stones of the dismantled masonry platform were found, as described by Simpson (1954, 46), heaped into a neat circular cairn over the clean, sieved, soil of the 1950 trench infill. The 1911 trench was less regular in outline, but had penetrated deeper than the later excavation. The W section of Area III (fig 3) shows the 1911 and 1951 disturbance. The 1950 digging did not reach so far W. From the final 1981 section, it can be seen that neither of the earlier excavators succeeded in bottoming the depression.

Below the infill of the earlier investigations lay a clean red-brown clayey soil. This was clearly of a secondary nature, and filled a depression in the underlying yellow-brown pebbly till. On removal, this soil revealed an asymmetrical V-bottomed ditch, obviously man-made. When fully emptied, the ditch was just under 2 m deep below its S edge and 1.6 m deep below a step on its N, steeper, slope. The latter feature marked the junction between natural till and upcast from the ditch, heaped to form an amorphous bank, now heavily eroded.

The ditch infill consisted of a series of thin layers of reddish-brown clay-rich soil, and was consistent in deposition and composition with natural accumulation at a slow rate. Just over half-way down, a buried turf-line indicated a longer stable episode. Towards the bottom of the ditch, the thin soil layers were intercalated with tongues of yellow clay, presumably the result of slipping from the sides during more rapid initial infilling of the newly cut feature.

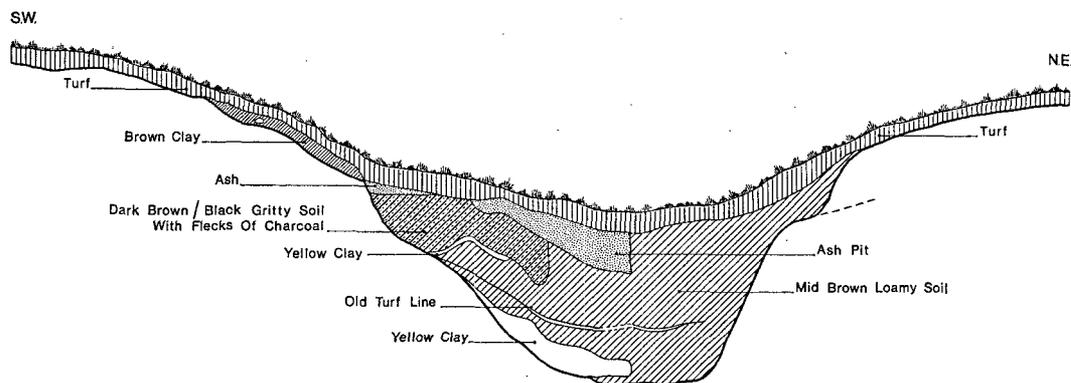


FIG 3 Area III, W section. Scale 1:50

No datable material was recovered except for two medieval sherds, one of late 13th or early 14th-century date. These were found near to the surface, in the disturbance caused by Simpson's excavations. As sherds of similar date were recorded during removal of the overlying masonry platform in the 1950 season, the ditch must be earlier than this, probably considerably so. The newly discovered ditch and bank are therefore much earlier than the inner gatehouse, which they might otherwise appear to protect. There is no sign of deliberate infilling of the ditch, and since the earlier, shallow, examinations removed all of the midden material, the latter must have been deposited on the southern slope of the ditch after this had already reached a profile close to its modern appearance.

DISCUSSION: THE PRE-MEDIEVAL DEFENCES OF DUNDARG

The newly recognized ditch and upcast rampart ran across the landward approach to the narrow, flat-topped promontory which forms the inner enclosure of the medieval defences. Its line can be observed, prior to excavation, on the aerial photograph (pl 28). The simple construction and general line of this defensive work recall the outer ramparts of some northern forts, such as Burland and Burreland in Shetland (HU 455 360, HU 447 223) and South Haven, Fair Isle (HZ 223 723). However, these sites are multivallate while Dundarg, at least in this phase, appears to have been univallate (Fojut forthcoming; Lamb 1980). No particularly close parallels can be found in the forts of the southern Moray Firth coast (Ralston pers comm).

While there is no general reason to suppose that such a simple defensive construction is necessarily pre-medieval, as witness the apparently medieval bank and rock-cut ditch at Old Wick Castle, Caithness (ND 369 488), it does seem that at Dundarg this element of the defensive sequence pre-dates the earliest attested medieval phase. A date in the Dark Age, or even earlier, does not seem impossible, but this has not been demonstrated.

The multiple outer defences are also undated. As they stand, these are trivallate:

- 1 Shallow outer ditch (ploughed out) and dumped bank.
- 2 Middle ditch and dumped bank fronting a 'platform' some 5 m wide.
- 3 Broad, flat-bottomed inner ditch with low inner bank.

It has been suggested that Dundarg's outer defences are of prehistoric origin, although perhaps affected by subsequent modification (Simpson 1954; Ralston 1980). The obvious parallel, although the ramparts there were on a much larger scale, is the destroyed outer portion of the fort at Burghead (NJ 109 692) (MacDonald 1862). It was noted by Wainwright (*in* Simpson 1954,

93–4) that the inner ditch (the ‘moat’) and its bank were probably not part of the same conception as the outer pair of banks and ditches. The 1981 observations tend to support this, revealing that the composition of the inner bank is entirely different from that of the outer two.

Coupled with the earlier results, the 1981 work helps towards a partial clarification of these outer defences. The inner ditch is most probably medieval, having been cut to protect the relatively light curtain wall of the castle. It has been suggested that the masonry wall along the inner edge of this ditch dates to de Beaumont’s fortification in 1334, while the absence of clay in the later bank implies that the latter is not coeval with the ditch. The simplest interpretation is that the ditch was cut while the masonry defences were under construction. The excavated clay, being surplus to requirements, was presumably cast over the cliff at the end of the ditch. By the digging of this broad hollow, a platform was left freestanding to the S, protected by a pre-existing rampart on its S edge. This, without any corresponding upcast rampart, would be a feature without parallel in a Scottish prehistoric context, but would not be out of place in an early artillery context.

Beyond the inner bank and ditch, a bivallate defence remains. This may well be of true prehistoric date, perhaps associated with the insecurely stratified ard-share. However, these outer works remain without any firm date, despite the great section cut during the 1950–51 excavations. For reasons of topography, it seems unlikely that the outer ramparts were intended to function as part of the same defensive system as the newly discovered inner line to the N, so there would appear to be at least two pre-medieval defensive phases at Dundarg. A similar multiple phase situation was found to have obtained at Cullykhan, Troup (NJ 838 662; Greig 1971), Green Castle, Portknockie (NJ 487 687; Ralston 1980) and also, possibly, Burghead (NJ 109 692; MacDonald 1862; Small 1969).

CONCLUSIONS

Dundarg remains an enigmatic site, with evidence for two pre-medieval and at least two medieval defences, but with none of the phases securely tied into an incompletely documented history. Excavations have demonstrated the difficulty of dating simple ditch and dump-rampart constructions. It may be hoped that uncertainties of chronology can be resolved by future examination, although it appears that the digging of the broad ditch in medieval times may have destroyed the most promising zone for prehistoric dwellings, the zone immediately behind the inner rampart of the original outer defences. Likewise, further documentary evidence may yet emerge to substantiate either a pre-1334 castle or the 16th-century remodelling, the former desired by Simpson’s sequence, the latter supported by architectural evidence. But, for the present, Dundarg remains potentially, rather than actually, a key site in the study of the Moray Firth promontory defences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Excavation was funded by SDD(AM) and kindly permitted by Mr and Mrs D B Rennie of Dundarg, who gave welcome personal assistance. The work was undertaken by a small team of outstandingly hardy volunteers in sporadically severe weather conditions. Artefactual study was assisted by Messrs CHunt, J Inglis and J C Murray, and by Dr S E Rees. Aberdeen Archaeological Surveys supplied the aerial photograph and Mr G Stell, through RCAHMS Drawing Office, the base plan for fig 2. The illustrations were drawn by Mr T Borthwick. Excavation benefited from on-site discussion with Messrs I Ralston and I Shepherd, and the preparation of this paper

from the comments of Mr P Ashmore, Dr D Breeze and Mr Ralston. To all, and especially our volunteers, the authors' thanks are tendered.

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*This paper published with the aid of a grant from the Scottish Development Department
(Ancient Monuments)*



Aerial view of Dundarg from NE (Aberdeen Archaeological Surveys. Crown copyright reserved)