

III.

NOTES ON ANCIENT FORTIFICATIONS IN THE BLACK ISLE, ROSS-SHIRE. BY ANGUS J. BEATON, INVERNESS.

The Black Isle.—In my “Notes on the Antiquities of the Black Isle,” communicated to the Society last Session, I observed that the Black Isle contained many interesting relics of the past, and briefly alluded to a few ancient places of defence in the district. These ancient forts are scattered over a wide area of the peninsula, but for convenient reference I will confine these notes to the few situated in the north-west part of the Black Isle. The “forts” I am to refer to are exceedingly fine examples and well preserved, although many equally as good have been sacrificed to the advances of agricultural improvements, chiefly through neglect of interest in those valuable monuments by the proprietors of lands containing them. But we are happy those days are now gone, when we find such influential men as Sir Kenneth S. Mackenzie, Bart., and others taking interest in the preservation of antiquities on their estates, which will prevent future destruction. James Fletcher, Esq. of Rosehaugh, the most extensive proprietor in the Black Isle, recently requested me to furnish a list of—with a view of partially restoring and substantially enclosing—all the antiquities on his estates. It is hoped this generous offer of Mr Fletcher’s will receive extensive imitation throughout the north of Scotland.

For continuity in reference, I will begin at the entrance west of the Black Isle, where *The Muir of Ord Fort* (fig. 1) is situated in the wood, 300 yards southward from the railway station, and about 20 yards west of the line of railway. It stands on one of the numerous gravelly ridges (evidently lateral moraines) so prevalent in this locality, between the rivers Beaully and Conan. From the position of the “fort” one would infer that it could never have been selected as a place of defence, the surrounding grounds being more or less on the same level as the “fort,” which is of the common oval form, surrounded by a ditch, still very complete, 20 feet

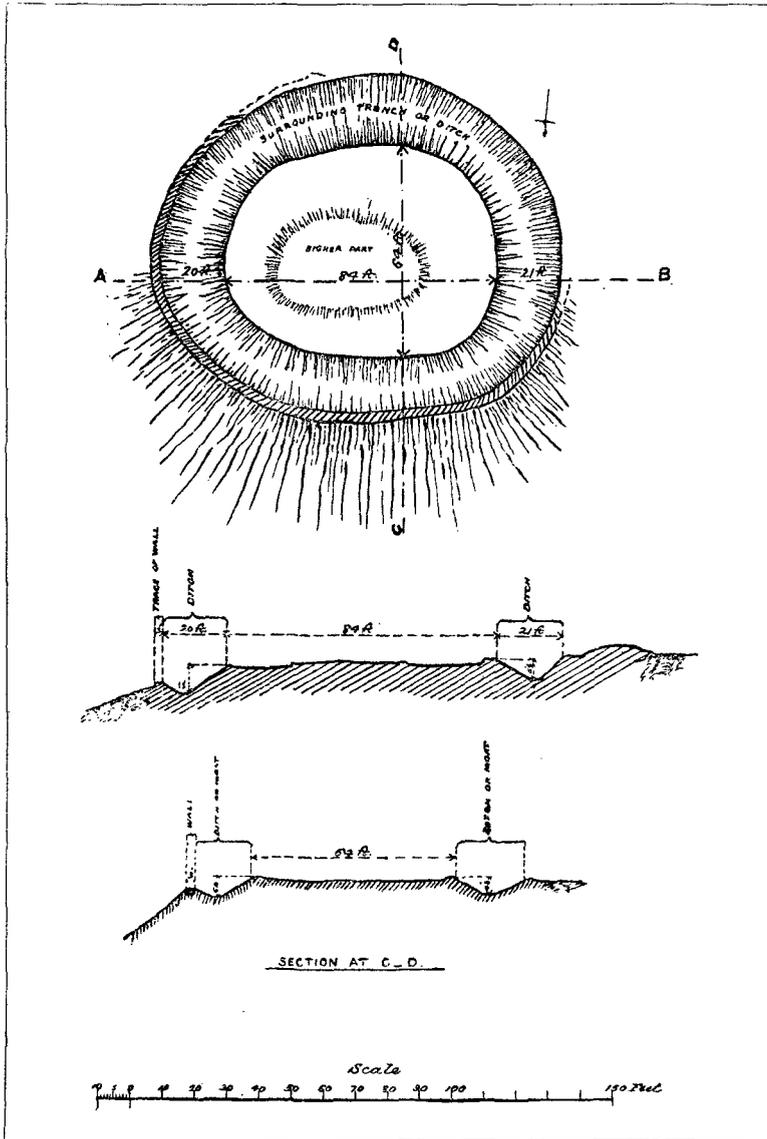


Fig. 1. Ground Plan and Sections of Ancient Fort at Muir of Ord, Ross-shire.

wide at top and 6 feet deep on average. On the outer and inner edge of ditch are traces of an earthen breastwork or wall, standing from 12 to 18 inches above the ground surface and 3 feet wide. The "fort" measures inside the ditch 84 feet from east to west and 64 feet from north to south. Near the middle is a raised oval-shaped piece of ground, raised 18 inches, as shown on plan and section. If the ditch were filled with water, it must have been conveyed a long distance, as no water in the immediate vicinity is available by gravitation.

The Standing Stones, or *Clach-an-t-Seasaidh*, are about three-quarters of a mile south-east of the "fort." They are two in number, one on either side of the road which leads from Muir of Ord to Beaully. They are supposed to be remains of stone circles, but this is rather doubtful, as they look more like monolithic monuments raised for some brilliant event, although the circumstances are in obscurity. They are associated with the superstitious belief in Coinneach Oidhar the Brahan seer's prophesy, "that the raven will drink from the top of Clach-an-t-Seasaidh its full of the blood of the Mackenzies for three successive days."

Cille Chriosd.—About one mile north of the Standing Stones is the restored chapel of Gilchrist, "the church of Christ," so famous for the tragic deed called the "Raid of Gilchrist." The story is, that the Macdonells of Glengarry, having a feud with the Mackenzies of Ross-shire, arrived one Sunday morning at Cille Chriosd, surrounded the little thatched chapel (in which the Mackenzies had assembled for morning devotion), bolted the door, and set fire to the building, their piper playing an extempore pibroch, which, along with the fiendish yells of the perpetrators of the diabolical deed, served to drown the cries of their victims. The Mackenzies, however, were speedily avenged on their enemies.¹

David's Fort.—Following the county road leading from Muir of Ord to Dingwall for about $2\frac{1}{4}$ miles, we reach "David's Fort,"² in Conan Wood, below the farm of Bishop Kinkell, or about 300 yards south of the rail-

¹ See Anderson's *Guide to the Highlands*, pp. 91-93.

² One old man knew the place by the name of "Tigh Diabdh," or "The House of David."

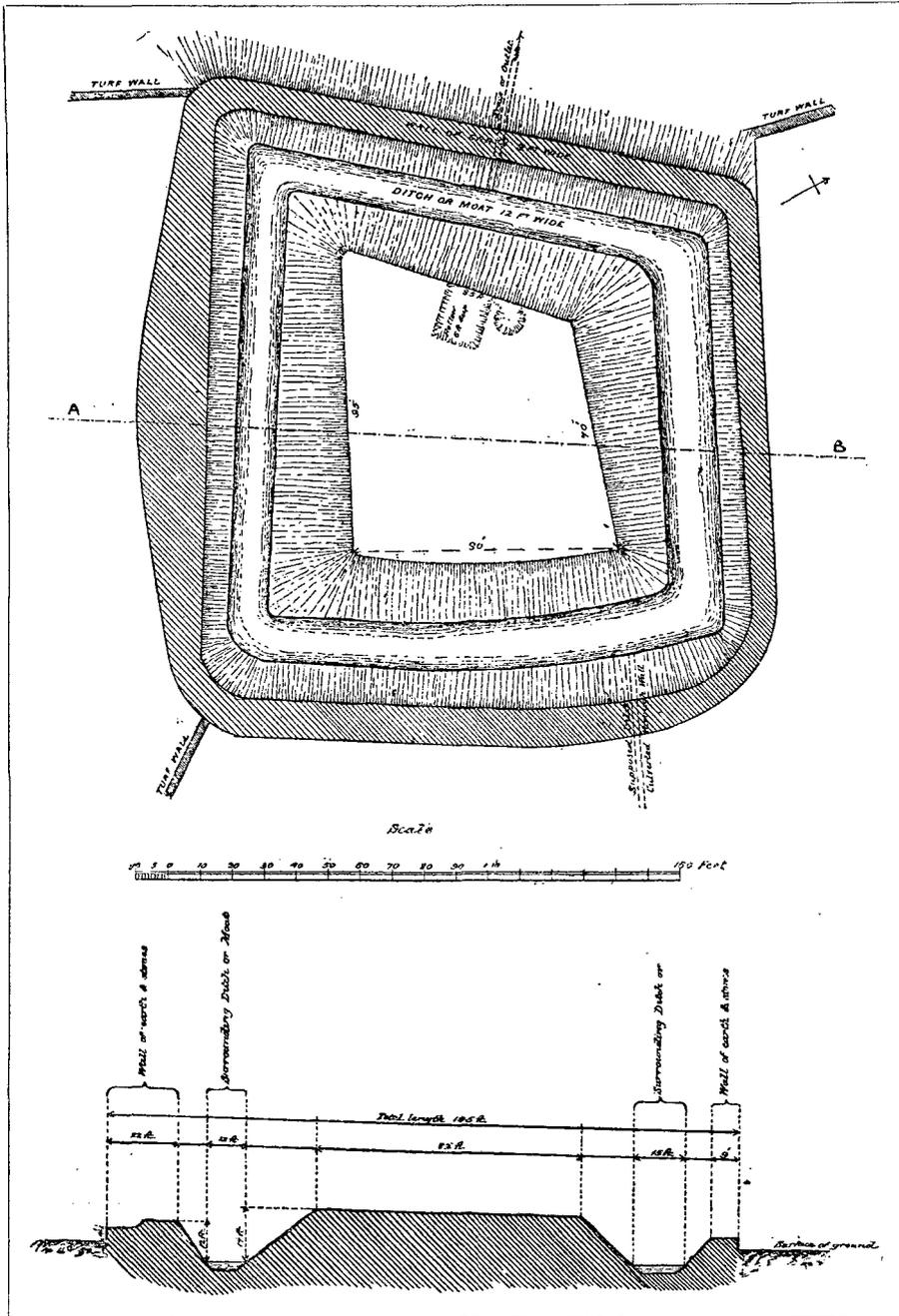


Fig. 2. Ground Plan and Section of David's Fort, in Conan Wood.

way, as shown on map; it is a splendid example of an earth fort (see fig. 2). The construction, which is a rhomboidal form, consists of an outer wall or "banquette," a ditch or moat, and an inner fort or rampart. The outer or surrounding wall is 9 feet wide on average at the east, north, and west sides, while it attains a breadth of 22 feet at the south side. The wall, which is formed of loose earth, turf, and a few stones, stands 4 feet high on the outer side above the natural surface of the ground, and from 9 feet to $12\frac{1}{2}$ feet above the level of the water in the moat. The moat is from 12 feet to 15 feet wide at the bottom, and contains from $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet to 3 feet of water; possibly the trench was 2 feet deeper originally, as it is now gradually filling with rubbish. The inner square or rampart, which stands 17 feet above the level of the water in the ditch at the west side, or about 6 feet above the top of the outer wall, has four sides of the following lengths—east side, 80 feet; west side, 75 feet; north side, 70 feet; and the south side, 95 feet. It is chiefly composed of the sand thrown out of the ditch.

From three of the corners turf fences, 3 feet high by 18 inches wide, branch through the wood, as seen on the plan. What purpose these turf walls were put to is difficult to conjecture. Undoubtedly they are not of modern construction.

The water for filling the moat was evidently taken from a small loch, about 100 yards south of the fort, and the inlet and outlet culverted through the outer wall are still distinctly visible, as indicated on the plan. I should have observed that the earthwork does not occupy a very commanding situation relative to its own defensive features, for on all sides, except the north-west, the ground surrounding is comparatively flat, and on the side referred to slopes at an angle of about 45° for 20 or 30 yards only.

There is no tradition related in connection with it. The work is evidently of the mediæval age, and of a skilled engineer.

In a letter written to me by Sir Kenneth S. Mackenzie, Bart. of Gairloch, upon whose property of Conan the fort is situated, Sir Kenneth says,
"There is no tradition about it with which I am acquainted. It is evidently

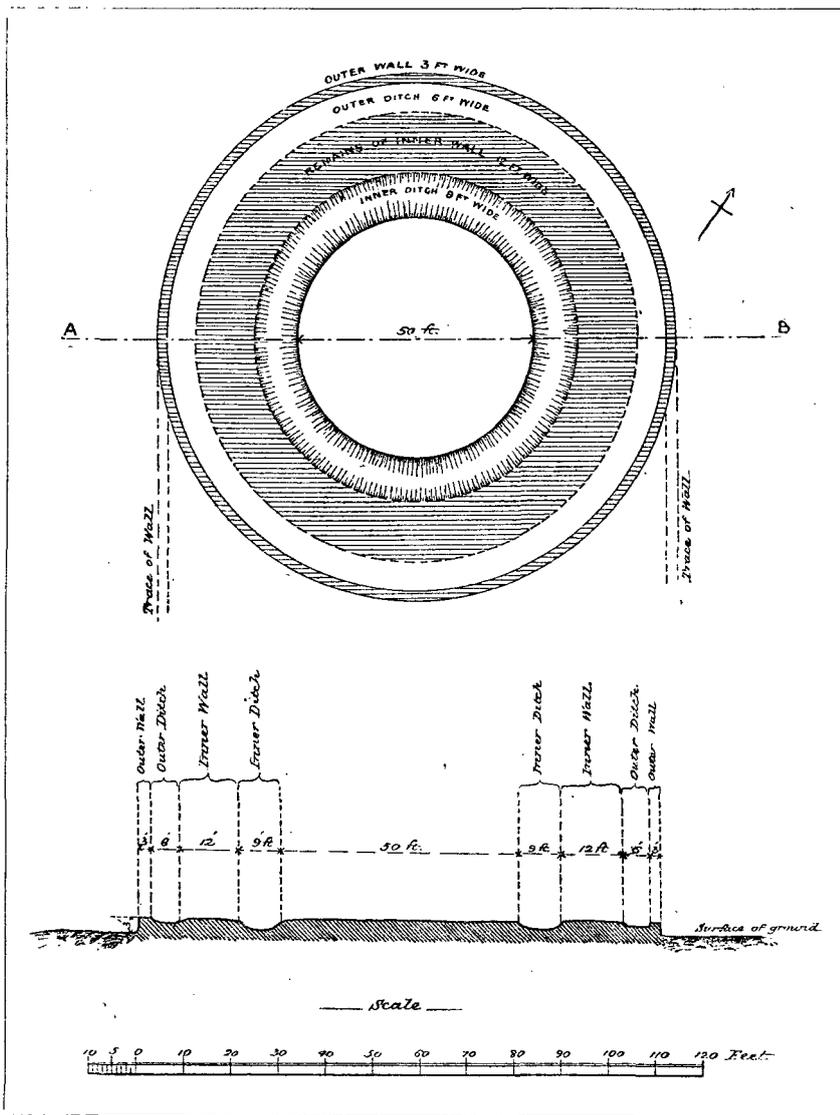


Fig. 3. Plan and Section of Circular Structure at Conan, Ross-shire.

not the work of any people belonging to prehistoric times. I have heard it ascribed to the Romans; I have also heard it suggested that it may have been the camping place of one of the independent companies of which the 42nd or Black Watch was afterwards formed; and also I have heard it said that it was a defensible cattle fold, into which the bestial were driven on the rumours of an approaching raid, but I don't think it looks like this. It seems to me the work of educated military engineers."

I have never heard of any analogous structure in the northern counties of Scotland, and it would be interesting to have comparison with any cognate constructions, should any exist in other parts of Scotland.

Remains at Conan.—Above Conan railway station, $1\frac{1}{4}$ mile in a north-east direction from "David's Fort," is a circular structure. The remains are situated in a clump of trees in the angle where the station road joins the public road. The structure consists of four concentric rings, with two wings of outer wall branching southward, tangential to the outer wall or ring. The centre is 50 feet in diameter, surrounded by a dry ditch 9 feet wide and 2 feet deep; then a wall or mound of earth 12 feet wide, also circumscribed by a ditch or hollow 6 feet wide and about 1 foot deep. Outside this ditch is the outer wall, which is 3 feet wide, and standing 3 feet above the cultivated lands around it. The middle or inner wall seems to have been formed of the matter thrown out of the ditch, and the outer wall is formed of earth, with a considerable number of stones intermixed. The structure is called a "fort," but this it could not possibly have been, as it is on a comparatively level place, and in no respect commanding an imposing situation. It is, however, of almost identical construction with Dùn Mòr, above Beaully, where Montrose is said to have made an encampment.

The Conan remains probably represent a place of prehistoric sepulture. This is also on the property of Sir Kenneth S. Mackenzie, who also believes it to be the remains of an ancient place of burial, and has saved it from the sacrilege of the plough.

Mr R. A. Mackintosh, teacher, Conan, writing me on the subject in 1881, says, "The only tradition I ever heard regarding it was,

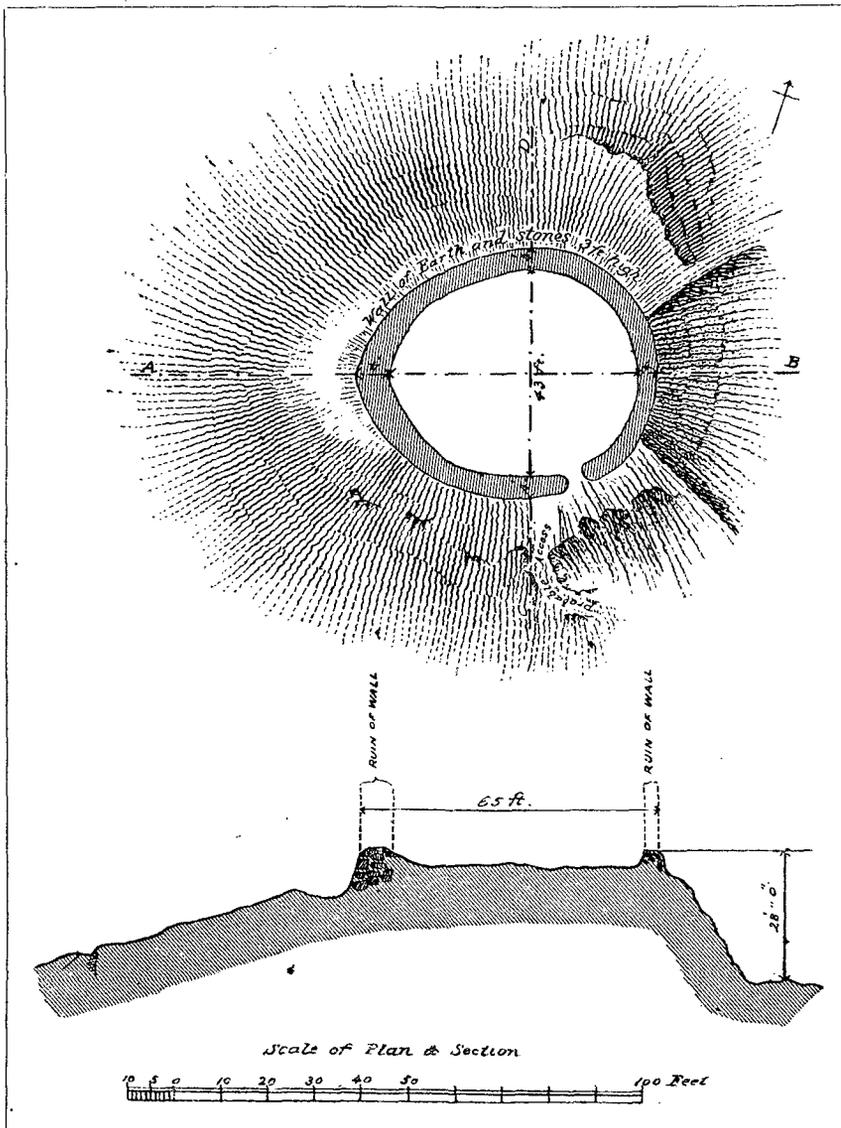


Fig. 4. Ground Plan and Section on the line A B of Craig-a-Caistail.
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while talking some years ago with an old man at the place, his mentioning that St Bridget or St Bride was buried there. I would not, however, place much reliance on this."

East from Conan, in the Ferintosh district, are many interesting stone circles, forts, and mounds, which may be referred to at some future date.

I annex a plan and sections of a small earth fort at Loch Lundie, near the Ord Hill of Kessoek (figs. 4 and 5).

"*Craig-a-Caistail*," or *Loch Lundie Fort*.—It is situated on a rocky knoll, the highest point of a rugged anticlinal ridge of conglomerate called "*Craig-a-Caistail*," or the "*rock of the castle*." Geologically this ridge is most interesting, with its steep, rugged sides, having a deep marsh on the north side, occupying a long narrow gully, and terminating at the east end with masses of boulder clay.

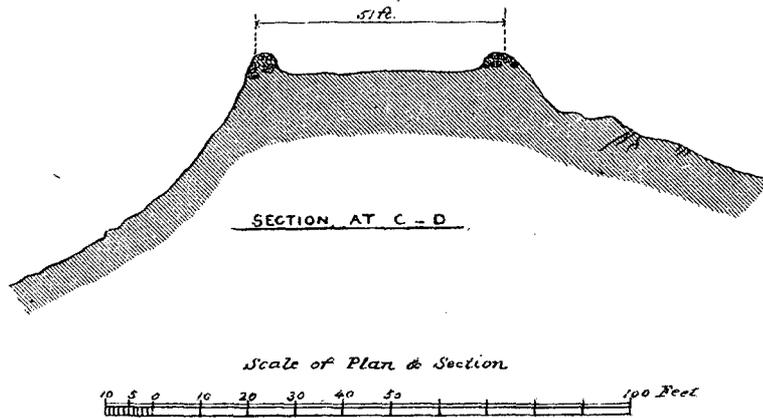


Fig. 5. *Craig-a-Caistail*. Section.

The fort, which is an earth and stone structure of oval form, is comparatively small, measuring inside the walls from east to west 54 feet, and 43 feet north to south at the widest part. The wall is 4 feet thick

all round, except that at the west side, where the natural defence is less protective, it is 7 feet thick, and higher, as shown on section. The total length to outside of wall, measuring east and west, is 65 feet.

The surrounding wall is formed of earth and stones, and stands 2 feet above the level of inside. On the east side the rock seems to have been artificially formed into a glacis for 28 feet below the level of the top of the wall, as shown on section A B.

The extensive vitrified fort of the Ord Hill of Kessock is not more than 1 mile in a south-west direction.