

Re-discovering a landscape: the barrow and motte in north Ayrshire

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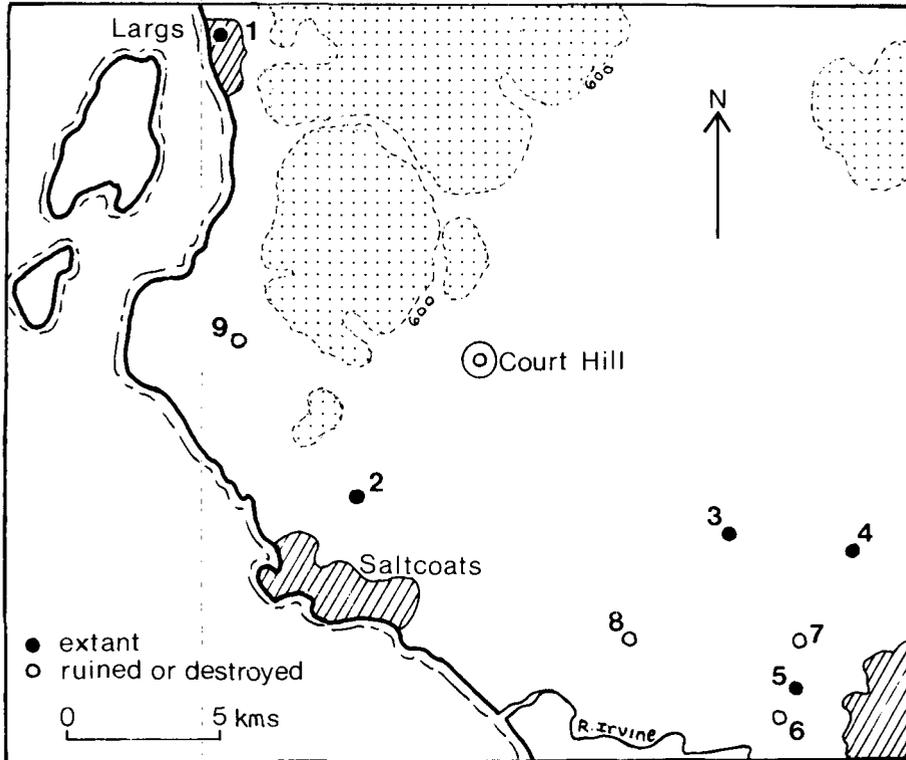
SUMMARY

In 1982/3 a Field Archaeology Section of the Ordnance Survey undertook a mapping programme in north Ayrshire. During this work it became apparent that, (1) the large 'tumuli' (barrows) known to, or suspected by, the 19th-century antiquarians and surveyors had been re-evaluated in the modern post-war record, and that (2) a vigorous post-war search for 'missing' medieval defence works in lowland Scotland had postulated many examples in north Ayrshire which were of doubtful relevance. It is suggested here that there is a direct and revealing relationship between these two points that can be explained by the subtleties and recent history of this particular lowland landscape and the nature of the field surveys it attracted. Using as a focal point the extraordinary history of Court Hill in Dalry, the results of this OS survey may indicate that the large barrow still survives in this region and that a more rational approach to medieval earthwork identification can be sought.

When Cochran-Patrick excavated Court Hill in Dalry town centre in 1872 (NGR NS 292 495) he could have little known that his act of rescue archaeology would not be fully appreciated, in name or result, for nearly a century. He obviously did know that this local landmark of antiquity, soon to be engulfed by iron-works tipplings, was a probable artificial 'pudding basin' mound some 27 m in diameter and 5 to 6 m high with a flat top c 10 m wide and that, as entities, evocatively named 'mounts', natural or otherwise, they were features of the north Ayrshire landscape. The effects of expanding industrialization and urban growth had already destroyed several such 'mounts' in this lowland coastal region, and the random finds from these were as well reported here as elsewhere. Although Cochran-Patrick confidently published Court Hill as a tumulus (Cochran-Patrick 1873), and with some justification, we can only assume that he suspected its potential beforehand; certainly, his contemporaries, Christison and Smith, both of whom worked extensively on the prehistory of Ayrshire, treated the various 'moots' and 'castle hills' and the like with due circumspection.

In the process of a systematic archaeological mapping programme by the Ordnance Survey in north Ayrshire, in 1982/3, it became evident that not only had the rural landscape known to Cochran-Patrick essentially changed little, but that the large, artificial earthen mound with a characteristic flattened top was a striking, if not common, feature of these lowland pastures. Illustration 1 shows the location of five extant mounds, all of which have long been known to the archaeological record and which bear comparison with the morphology of Court Hill as illustrated by Cochran-Patrick (illus 2) and previous OS first edition maps. Also shown are four mounds, now destroyed or ruined, which the record suggests were once of this same morphology. The five preserved examples are arresting in their circular or oval artificiality in contrast to the natural or partly adapted eminences common to the

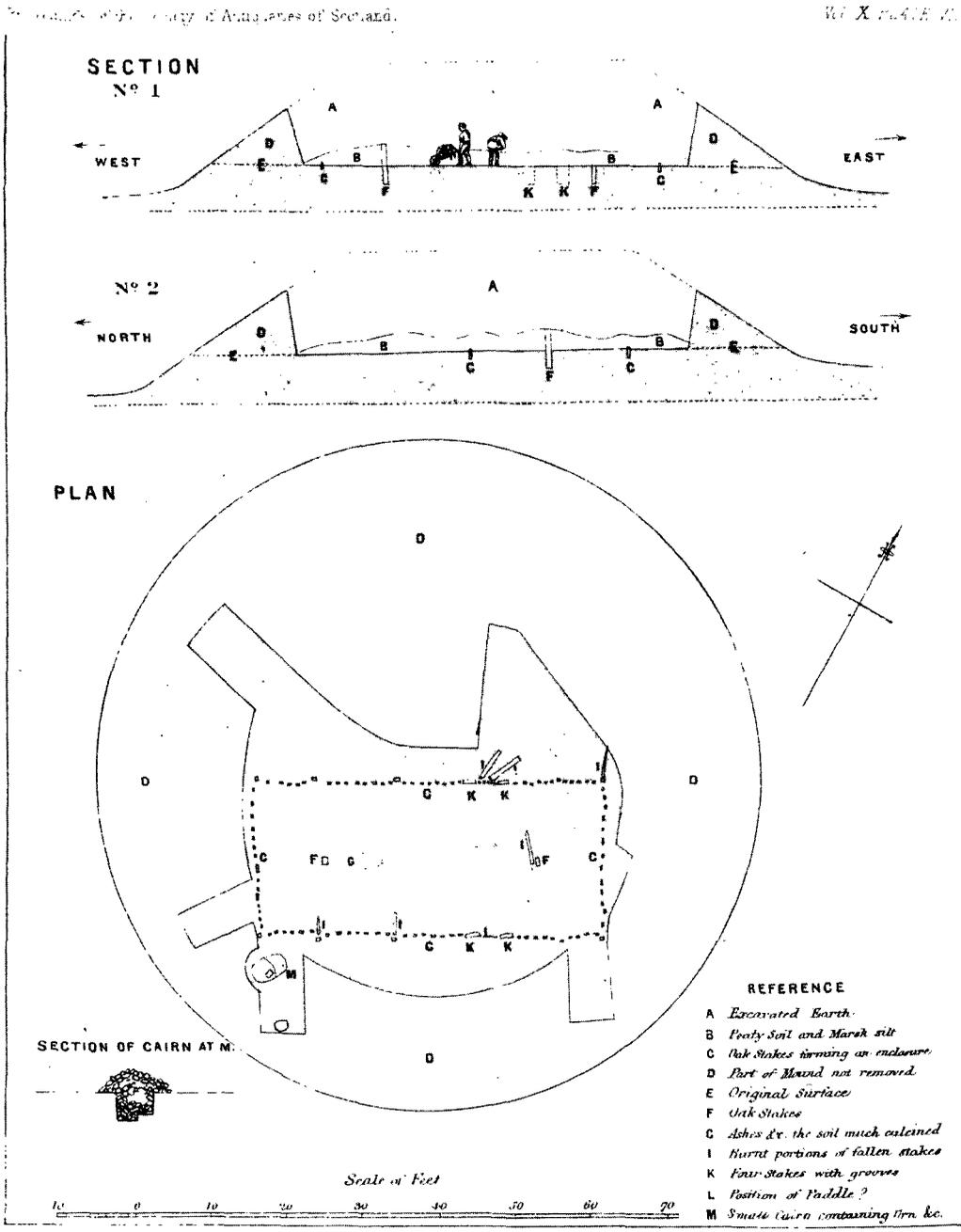
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ILLUS 1 Distribution of mounds in north Ayrshire

Clyde coast; even the highest situated, Knockrioch (illus 1, no 2), is an imposition on the natural contours at only 120 m OD. Their overall sizes vary from the largest, Greenhill (illus 1, no 5), 33 m in diameter by 4.5 m high, to the smallest and most problematic, Hutt Knowe (illus 1, no 3), at 17 m diameter by 2.7 m high. Like Court Hill, which falls in the mid-range size, they offer a distinct earthen profile with somewhat exaggerated flat tops relative to their diameter. The absence of a recorded ditch at Court Hill is consistent with Cochran-Patrick's stratigraphic sequences which suggest an initial scrape-zone of surface vegetation and topsoil to form the core of the mound. The resulting platform/berm effect is a noticeable feature around Knockrioch (illus 1, no 2), Law Mount (illus 1, no 4) and one of the ruined sites, Glen Mount (illus 1, no 9).

The problems of reliance on morphological comparisons alone are well known, especially when considering such a common form as the mound. Even so, the question is more complicated than the comparison of one known barrow form with several other candidates. Not only is Court Hill long since destroyed and its form portrayed to us in a stylized manner, but Cochran-Patrick's findings remain contentious despite the fact that his excavations and reportings were exemplary for their day. His discoveries on the original land surface beneath the mound could not be sensibly interpreted until modern comparative data had been produced; the juxtaposition of a small, cairned beaker burial and a staked rectangular enclosure or 'house' was not reconciled until the 1960s when Coles and Simpson (1965) compared this staked enclosure to a stone-built Neolithic structure beneath the barrow at Pitnacree in the Tay Valley. However, this perhaps tenuous comparison was soon queried by the then growing body of excavated evidence which apparently suggested that in Britain such rectangular wooden buildings were purely a feature of the Dark Age/Early Medieval period. In 1969 Court Hill



PLAN & SECTIONS OF EXCAVATIONS OF COURTHILL, DALRY.

ILLUS 2 Cochran-Patrick's illustration of his excavations at Courthill, Dalry

was firmly recorded as a Dark-Age hall site (Laing 1969) and the covering mound postulated as a later motte. The plan of this enclosure did not, however, sit easily amongst other timber hall examples and in 1970, Ritchie, in an article primarily concerned with the beaker assemblages of the region, tentatively restored the balance (Ritchie 1970). In recent years the virtual explosion of excavated knowledge has again placed the rectangular wooden structure in a secure early prehistoric context (Ralston 1982; Barclay 1985). A close re-examination of Cochran-Patrick's results is outwith the scope of this article (Cochran-Patrick 1873; Dobie 1876), but a general contemporaneity of enclosure – burial – mounds must now be thought highly probable.

In terms of field survey the main importance of Court Hill's recent history is the working acceptance of its later phase as a barrow/funerary-ritual mound and of its form prior to its destruction. In this we are aided both by Cochran-Patrick's detailed measurements and by his scrupulous attention to previous exploratory borings and late 18th-/early 19th-century earth carting from its base. He concluded that the mound remained 'in an excellent state of preservation'. As his description concurs with that of the first edition OS 25" map (c 1856) there is no reason to doubt that the original form was sub-circular/oval and that the 11.5 m diameter flat top was also an early feature and not a medieval adaption or a late ornamental device. Concentrating on Court Hill as a field monument, it would seem from the above extractive history that the local antiquity known to Cochran-Patrick and his contemporaries has been misplaced both geographically and chronologically. Firstly it was removed, albeit by association, some 80 miles (124 km) distant to a comprehensible grouping of early prehistoric monuments in the Tay Valley, and then again removed from its own geographical location to be compared with other Dark-Age sites; Ritchie's reference to the said juxtaposition of burial and enclosure avoids any direct implication for the mound. This lack of attention to the mound as a monument of its own region is hardly surprising; as opposed to the ubiquitous cairn, the barrow and its variants are not documented in the modern record of the area. No extant examples are recorded for north Ayrshire; not only is this site listed as a probable motte but all the five preserved examples of this same form given here (illus 1) are recorded as of medieval or later import. Before detailing the sites listed in illus 1 it would be relevant to elucidate the basis of the modern record in Ayrshire and indicate the changed nature of field survey over the last century.

Ayrshire, like many other areas of Scotland not yet covered by a Royal Commission inventory, offers a distinct comparison between localized antiquarian concepts of the 19th century and modern, far reaching, practice. After J Smith published *Prehistoric Man in Ayrshire* in 1895 there was a clear break in the fieldwork record of some 45 years until 1942–3 when, as part of a wartime Emergency Survey, Graham and Childe (1943) examined a number of sites deemed vulnerable. There followed from 1951 to 1958 a Marginal Lands Survey by the Royal Commission which again, though obviously selective in subjects, set the framework for the Ordnance Survey's first archaeological mapping and recording programme in Ayrshire. However, even this latter 1956 survey was not comprehensive in its coverage, being subject, as was the recent 1982/3 survey, to the general mapping needs of the OS.

This then, in brief, is the basis of the modern record in Ayrshire, much of which remains unpublished. These combined surveys confronted the later 1982/3 preparatory programme with the probability that four of the sites described below were mottes, and the fifth a large kiln. There was, and remains, no reason to treat these classifications lightly and no glaring inconsistencies show in their accounts; in the southern lowlands the form in question is more readily associated with a classic (English?) motte shape than with a barrow, and the various recorded diggings and exposures revealed at best only circumstantial and subjective evidence.

The unnamed 'mount' in the historic centre of Largs (NS 202 585) (illus 1, no 1) is sub-oval in shape and formerly measured c 31 m by 24 m with a flat top, some 10 m by 8 m and a height of over 3.5 m. Positioned adjacent to the medieval parish churchyard and long since hemmed in by develop-

ment, a motte theory is tenable despite an OS first edition 25" publication (c 1856) as a 'tumulus' and persistent folklore that this is a tomb for the Norse dead of the Battle of Largs in 1263 (Dillon 1818). Moreover, the prolific early prehistoric sites around Largs mainly relate to stone-built cairns; the chambered tomb at Haily, less than a mile away (NS 209 585), had a 'large' cairn removed in 1772. Looked at in a slightly wider setting, the Largs 'mount' most closely resembles Knockrivoch Mount (NS 253 451) (illus 1, no 2) some nine miles (14 km) to the south, which is also oval in shape with near identical dimensions: 30 m by 24 m, and 3.3 m high with a top 9.5 m by 6.0 m. Following the Marginal Lands Survey and OS fieldwork of the 1950s this mound was map published as a motte although its isolated position in open land, devoid of any obvious strategic logic, is in stark contrast to that of the Largs 'mount' (illus 3). Any such earthwork with no trace of a circuit ditch cannot be precluded as a medieval defence work or caput, but should perhaps be suspect if it appears totally alien to the surviving post-medieval landscape – particularly so in the case of Knockrivoch, where the nearby old farmstead of Meiklelaught was pointed out by J Smith in 1895 as signifying 'Big Grave'.

Greenhill at Knockentiber (NS 401 391) (illus 1, no 5), could be said to have a 'classic' motte form, but is set well back from a steep river escarpment on level ground. At 33 m in diameter, 4.2 m high, and with a spacious flat top 21 m in diameter, the mound is so imposing that the farm of this name has taken the line of least resistance and built itself around the base. An early 19th century attempt to investigate it was abandoned when, at a depth of well below 5 ft (1.52 m), at its top centre, a human skeleton and stones of increasing size were found (Smith 1895; M'Naught 1912). Of the skeleton, its antecedents and subsequent history we can venture nothing, but the discovery of stone beneath such an earth capping could be interpreted as either a bonding layer in a motte construction,



ILLUS 3 The Knockrivoch mound

or as the exposure of a barrow or cairn core; before 1846 a newspaper report of six cists being found in the locality refers to '... a cairn seen to be of stones when its surface was removed' (M'Naught 1912, 35). On Greenhill farm there was known to be a 'Mound Field' unrelated to the mound in question. The first edition OS 25" (c 1856) shows a 'tumulus', where four cists had been found some 400 m north of Greenhill, and although it is partly truncated by a mainline railway its portrayal suggests a flat top and even larger dimensions than those of Greenhill. By 1896 (OS second edition) this northern mound had been destroyed by a spur line and, most significantly, Greenhill was now landscaped around its top and demoted on the map from 'tumulus' to 'mound' in antiquity type.

Law Mount (NS 411 447) (illus 1, no 4), which sits centrally on a prominent east-west ridge above the Annick Water, was considered in the recent record to be part of a motte and bailey complex. The reason for there being no convincing previous plan of the arrangement became apparent during the 1982/3 survey when an alternative interpretation offered itself: perhaps the shape and level surface area of the ridge which comprised the supposed bailey were largely fortuitous. If so, then what remains is Law Mount itself, a perfectly formed 'pudding basin', 19 m in diameter by 3.5 m high, with a flat top some 12 m in diameter. Certainly this could be a motte, but it is worth debating whether the form of the mound unduly influenced the perception of a bailey area, or whether the shape of the ridge helped to confirm the motte.

The open questions posed by Law Mount are equally valid when applied to the illustrative history of Hutt Knowe (NS 375 441) (illus 1, no 3). Occupying a natural swelling in an otherwise low-lying area of rig and furrow pasture, this mound is a well preserved 17 m in diameter and 2.7 m high, with a level top some 9 m by 7 m. Evidence of large integral basal stones around the east side does not detract from an overall earthen appearance which the recent record interprets as a support mound for a kiln. The reasoning is persuasive and consistent until the anomalies raised are considered in full. J Smith in the 1890s (Smith 1895) described visible 'penns' or culverts that no subsequent visitor has noted in a mound showing no obvious trace of disturbance. It is of interest that Smith qualified this kiln phenomenon as unique to an Ayrshire mound, a point later elaborated by R W Feachem, who, in a review of mounded corn-kilns, suggested Hutte Knowe as a solitary southern Scottish example (Feachem 1957). The Marginal Lands Survey, of similar date, argued this mound as a lime kiln on account of its size only, but again, offered no comparisons. The 1982/3 investigations confirm its morphology and situation to be unlike any known corn or lime kiln in the region; at the least a fresh assessment would seem to be in order.

Including the barrow/mound to the north of Greenhill (NS 400 396) (illus 1, no 7) already mentioned, there are four destroyed or heavily denuded mounds that can confidently be said to have resembled Court Hill and the preserved examples described above. In addition, it is known that at Knockinlaw, Kilmarnock (NS 425 396) and at Green Knowe, Dalry (NS 288 487) earthen 'barrows' and associated finds were removed in the 18th and 19th centuries, though we are given little idea of their size and form (OS *Object Name Books*, 20 & 33). It would seem also that a sizeable earthen monument was removed at Law Hill (NS 340 487) on the Dusk Water (Smith 1895). The above monuments may be too vague in detail for primary inclusion here, but the same cannot be said of a 'tumulus' site (OS first edition c 1856) at Knockentiber (NS 397 387) (illus 1, no 6) that was levelled in the early 1800s and said to be 'similar in appearance to Greenhill' (OS *Object Name Book*, 36). At Glen Mount near West Kilbride (NS 210 501) (illus 1, no 9) are the remains of an earthen mound that has partly collapsed or eroded, in antiquity, into a steep-sided glen. In the mid 19th century it was already being ploughed over, but survived to an estimated diameter of 25 m and a height of 2 m with a flat top some 18 m wide on which D Christison remarked (1893). Today, though further ploughed to a low domed profile, it retains an individual significance of which Christison may have been aware. One possibly intriguing exception to the visible dominance of earth in this form is that of Lawthorne

Mount to the east of Irvine (NS 346 407) (illus 1, no 8). Seen to be flat-topped and over 20 m in diameter by nearly 2 m high in the 1850s (OS *Object Name Book*), much stone was noted in its composition. It is now an incoherent swelling of earth and large slabbed stone of possible megalithic character which, oddly enough, comprises one of the few *ruined* sites in Ayrshire, or elsewhere in Scotland, to be listed in the modern record as a motte (Talbot 1974). None of the other ruined sites considered here has ever been so regarded.

There is no lack of published data for the motte and allied works in Ayrshire; of the c 280 more certain and possible mottes listed in Scotland (Simpson & Webster 1972; Talbot 1974), 48 (17%) are sited in Ayrshire and of these 22 occur north of the valley of the River Irvine. In the course of the 1982/3 survey all 22 of these northern sites were examined, individually and collectively, with the result that none could be readily accepted for OS classification or publication as a motte. This is not to deny that any, or all, of these sites may be mottes, yet, they are primarily and demonstrably natural eminences showing few, if any, diagnostic features of adaptation; they could be relevant (or not) to any period. If, in the admitted absence of charter or chronicle evidence, the only criteria for a motte is a fairly level eminence with or without a suggestive name, then the Clyde coast alone affords more examples than are suggested for the whole of Scotland. Only five of these 22 sites are of wholly artificial construction and they are given no special mention despite their extraordinary disparity; they are of course, among the prime subjects of this text: Court Hill, Knockrivoch, Greenhill, Law Mount and the ruined Lathorne Mount.

A significant point to the Simpson and Webster listings in *Chateau Gaillard* is that they were published as late as 1972 but are largely derived from the Marginal Lands and OS surveys of the early 1950s. Perceptions pertaining 30–40 years ago can properly be reviewed without debasing the overall value of this work or displaying a negative attitude towards possible medieval monuments in Ayrshire. In the past more interest appears to have been generated by the potential of barren knolls at some distance from castle ruins than by the extant earthworks adjacent to or around them. Perhaps rightly, these earthworks were seen as broadly contemporary and therefore of later medieval interest, but the recent OS work in Ayrshire would tend to question this view. Many previously unlisted motte sites such as Greenan Castle (NS 311 193), Old Loudoun Castle (NS 517 377) and Glengarnock Castle (NS 310 573) have earthworks of tenable motte and motte and bailey proportions and could indicate that naturally strong positions, to which even the most substantial stone-built castles tended to gravitate, were good for all seasons. If this view holds, and is coupled with accepted orthodox motte forms such as Tarbolton (NS 432 274) and Dalmellington (NS 482 058) and the postulated scarp-edge forms such as Alloway (NS 339 180), Barnweill (NS 407 301) and perhaps Montfode (NS 227 438), then a revised and arguably more rational picture of medieval Ayrshire will begin to emerge without the overt help of myriad prominent but featureless knolls. Certainly, the artificial mounds which are the subject of this text are not being promoted as part of this revised picture, although paradoxically, they fit the stereotyped image of a motte more readily. Where any preference of location is suggested these mounds are mostly set well back from river escarpments on open ground.

One of the rare examples of a modern excavation of a proven artificial motte in Scotland, Robertson in Clydesdale, emphasizes this anomaly. Superficially comparable as a monument, its construction utilized a steep escarpment on the east and a gully around the north side (Haggarty & Tabraham 1982). In this instance there is historical evidence, diagnostic data and, equally valid, a siting which suggested itself.

Apart from the compelling shape of these mounds, one of the implicit reasons why we have been asked to accept them as medieval or later works is their confinement to a populated lowland area where only relatively late works could be expected to survive in something like complete condition. It can be argued that this natural but logically flawed assumption was inherited not from antiquarian

traditions but from post-war fieldwork practices; it has been seen that Cochran-Patrick had no qualms in thinking of an extant mound in the centre of a medieval township as wholly a tumulus. Nor is it just a question of antiquarian *naïveté* or lack of scientific technique; R N Millman in his *Making of the Scottish Landscape* (1975, 116) succinctly demonstrates to the modern mind what may once have been self-evident to Cochran-Patrick and his contemporaries. He is quoted here *in extenso*:

'In N Ayrshire and Renfrewshire a mosaic of small estates and farms existed before the eighteenth century Improvements which hindered sweeping Improvements of the type which took place on baronies which remained intact further south in Ayrshire, and of the type laid out on the large estates of the eastern lowlands. Hence change on this scatter of small properties was less radical in the Improving period than on the larger estates further south, and the present day landscapes of this area have evolved during the last two hundred years to include many more surviving features from the Pre-Improvement occupancy elsewhere. To greater or lesser degrees this theme is echoed in other lowland areas in Scotland.'

Fieldwork in north Ayrshire provides the simple verification of Millman's statement; for landscape features in general, read archaeology in particular. Naturally, land improvements have been continuous, and consistent enough to deceive us, but by and large major reshaping has been localized and dependent on the whims and consequences of industry, not agriculture. But for late industrial threats, Court Hill would probably still be with us unexcavated, and the extremely large mound north of Greenhill, which also produced telling finds, would probably survive. We should ask ourselves why the O S first editions, often eccentric but seldom dogmatic in their descriptions, named Greenhill and the Largs mounts 'tumuli' in the absence of specific titles, why Christison in 1892 explained the subtleties of this landscape prior to the inclusion of Glen Mount, Knockrivoch and Law Mount in a list of comparative 'mounts', and why Dobie in 1876 (122-3) felt able to dispel the then credited Norse connection for the Largs mount and in a comparative study with Court Hill state that they '... appear to be of the same nature, both as regards consistence, and their date and purpose'. This date was deduced as being 'long antecedent to the Battle of Largs'. Speculative, indeed, but Dobie, no doubt intimately aware of his own Cunninghame landscape, had first-hand knowledge of Cochran-Patrick's recent excavations at Court Hill and probably had similar experience of the cruder and less well reported diggings by a certain Dr Phene into the Largs 'mount' a year later (1873, *Times* letter). It is reasonable to assume that the extraordinary findings at Court Hill spurred the investigation of the latter, and in that case the similarity of the two had probably been a matter of curiosity for some time. It is then, with somewhat more caution but no less interest, that the author would resurrect Dobie's views after some 110 years.

It is entirely possible that in north Ayrshire some substantial monuments of an early prehistoric landscape have survived in so unexpected a condition and that over the last century our understanding of their significance has become progressively confused. Our Victorian counterparts may not have technically understood the barrows they were digging and surveying, but some of them appear to have inherited a respect for the barrow's imposing survival that has been denied to us. The restrictive mandates of the post-war surveys, invaluable as they were for the collection and rationalization of data, were not designed to ponder the deeper implications of antiquarian observations or the reasoning of the early surveyors.

If we do accept these monuments of north Ayrshire as barrows, what can be deduced from these particular examples? In the first place we are neither dealing with a new or unique type of field monument, nor directly extending the distribution of a familiar form. The mound, in general, is the most ubiquitous and deceptive form in the field and the terms barrow and cairn are often working titles, based on appearance, that only excavation can qualify as multi-phased, hybrid, funerary or ritual monuments. Furthermore, the serious and warranted attention paid here to medieval and later

dates suggested for these mounds is testimony to the limitations of field observations supported only by circumstantial finds' evidence. These proposed barrows can, as yet, only focus attention on what may be hidden or disguised in the modern record, and on the burial mound as a design artefact in its final phase (Watkins 1982). The real significance of the distribution pattern indicated here is also restricted and must be balanced by at least two related considerations: the imposed geographical limits of this study and the implications for Millman's landscape history. South of the natural boundary of the Irvine Valley previous OS work has not encountered possible barrows, as opposed to hilltop cairns, to any degree, and the historical references do not indicate their common existence. It is tempting to imagine a distinct geographical area of north Ayrshire, roughly triangular and bounded by uplands on the west and east, that is in some way connected with the prolific coastal finds of early prehistoric material along the Irvine sands and the Largs gravels. In terms of fieldwork resources and comparative data, however, we are a long way short of being able to add substance to such speculation.

Finally, it is relevant to add that three sizeable flat-topped mounds elsewhere in Scotland, formerly regarded as mottes, have recently been re-classified as burial mounds. The three examples, in relatively low-lying areas of Angus and Perthshire, have been re-classified as a result of RCAMS and OS fieldwork* (RCAMS 1983, 39, 47; OS NO 06 SE 9) and the implication that many more examples must exist amongst our lists of suspect mottes and miscellaneous 'mounts' is hard to resist.

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* The Royal Commissions on Ancient and Historical Monuments took over all former archaeological functions of the Ordnance Survey in April 1983

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