

A Report on Trial-pits at Balnagask Motte, Torry, Aberdeen



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SUMMARY

On March 23rd, 2016, two trial pits measuring 2 x 1m were hand-dug to the underlying sub-soil which sloped down in both trenches following the slope of the supposed motte itself. These trial-pits were located adjacent to the retaining wall which encircles much of Balnagask Motte, a scheduled ancient monument (SM10403) located in the Torry area of Aberdeen City. This action was carried out in advance of remedial works to repair the double-faced stone retaining wall which currently stands over 2m high in areas along the public footpath. The trenches indicate that the wall and adjacent path were terraced into the natural slope of the ground, which generally slopes down towards the north.

Numerous sherds of 19th and 20th century pottery were recovered, in addition to animal bone (horse), a clay pipe stem and fragments of clay roof tile and metal drainage pipe, but no earlier finds suggesting that the soil banked up behind the boundary wall has accumulated or been dumped in the 19th century and later.

1 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The site (Illus 1a/b) is located within the former Royal Burgh of Torry which was incorporated into Aberdeen in 1891. Torry is located on the south bank of the River Dee, while Balnagask Motte lies within the boundary of Balnagask House on the east side of the property. It is centred on NGR NJ 95743 05113, at 26m OD in the parish of Aberdeen.
- 1.2 The work was commissioned by Land and Property Assets: Communities, Housing and Infrastructure, Aberdeen City Council. Application H1135
- 1.3 All the archaeological work will be carried out in the context of Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) Planning Advice Note (PAN 2/2011) and Scottish Historic Environment Policy (SHEP), which state that archaeological remains should be regarded as part of the environment to be protected and managed.



Illus 1a/b Location plan (Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2016)

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

There are four Scheduled Ancient Monuments within 1km of Balnagask Motte:

- 2.1 Balnagask Motte NJ90NE 3) itself is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SM10403). The monument comprises a motte of medieval date, visible as a substantial grass-covered mound. The motte lies within the grounds of Balnagask House, opposite Mains of Balnagask, in what is now a modern housing estate, adjacent to Baxter Place, Aberdeen. Before it was subsumed within the SE outskirts of Aberdeen, the motte would have occupied a prominent position, at around 20m OD, overlooking the Dee Estuary and Nigg Bay. Mottes are artificial mounds which were once topped with timber castles. This type of monument was common in twelfth and thirteenth-century Scotland, a significant element in the feudal landscape. Mottes were sometimes accompanied by baileys (enclosed courtyards for ancillary buildings), although there are no traces of a bailey at Balnagask. A Normanised Celtic family, with the territorial designation of de Nug, held the lands here in the twelfth century. Otherwise, little is known of the historical associations of this motte, although it is thought to have been located within a hunting reserve. The motte still stands around 6m high, although its top was re-modelled in the early twentieth century obscuring any traces of medieval remains on its upper surface. It is surrounded around much of its perimeter by a high retaining wall of early modern date. The ground surface behind the wall is c.2m higher than the level of Baxter Place, indicating that the insertion of the wall and road cut through the outer edges of the motte and any associated remains. The area proposed for scheduling comprises the remains described and an area around them within which related material may be expected to survive. It is irregular in shape, with maximum dimensions of 74m NNW-SSE by 54m WSW-ENE, as marked in red on the accompanying map. It is confined within the existing high boundary wall around the NE, E and S edges of the site, and a wooden fence around the NW and W. The boundary walls and fences are excluded from the scheduling to allow for routine maintenance (SM10403: Historic Environment Scotland). At Balnagask Motte a watching brief was maintained during the excavation of trial pits in advance of remedial works to the retaining wall at Balnagask Motte, Aberdeen. No finds or features were evident (Information from OASIS ID: mas1-206996, D Harding, 2015).
- 2.2 Saint Fittick's Church lies some 540m ESE of Balnagask Motte and is also a Schedule Ancient Monument (SM10400). The monument comprises the remains of St Fittick's Church and its graveyard, visible as an upstanding monument. St Fittick's Church lies on open ground, adjacent to Balnagask golf course, overlooking Nigg Bay, at a height of about 10.5m OD. This former parish church of Nigg, founded between 1189 and 1199, was dedicated to St Fittick, which is said to be a corrupted form of St Fiacre (seventh century). The structure was reconstructed and enlarged in the eighteenth century before being abandoned in 1829, but parts of the walls date to the thirteenth century. The fabric has been considerably restored. The wall heads have a modern capping and the wall faces have been almost entirely rendered, obscuring the architectural features. On the N side, an early doorway or opening is visible, partly obscured by the raised ground level. Stone masonry is visible only around windows and doors, and on the internal face of the bell-cote (E) gable end where memorials have been attached to the wall and a chimney has been inserted. The graveyard is crowded largely with nineteenth-century graves. The area proposed for scheduling comprises the remains described and an area around them within which related material may be expected to survive. It is almost square in shape, with maximum dimensions of 36m NNW-SSE by 36.5m transversely. (SM10400: Historic Environment Scotland).
- 2.3 Some 900m to the north east lies the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Torry Battery (SM9215). The monument comprises the remains of a military battery, constructed over the period 1857-1861 in response to the perceived threat of a French invasion,

and manned by a volunteer rifle battalion. It later served as a training ground for the Territorial Army and was staffed on a permanent basis throughout World War I and World War II. The battery was briefly re-occupied during the Suez Crisis of 1956 before being partially demolished in 1959. The extant remains comprise the perimeter wall, the gateway and the guardhouse, gun mounts and the footings of some of the interior buildings (SM9215: Historic Environment Scotland).

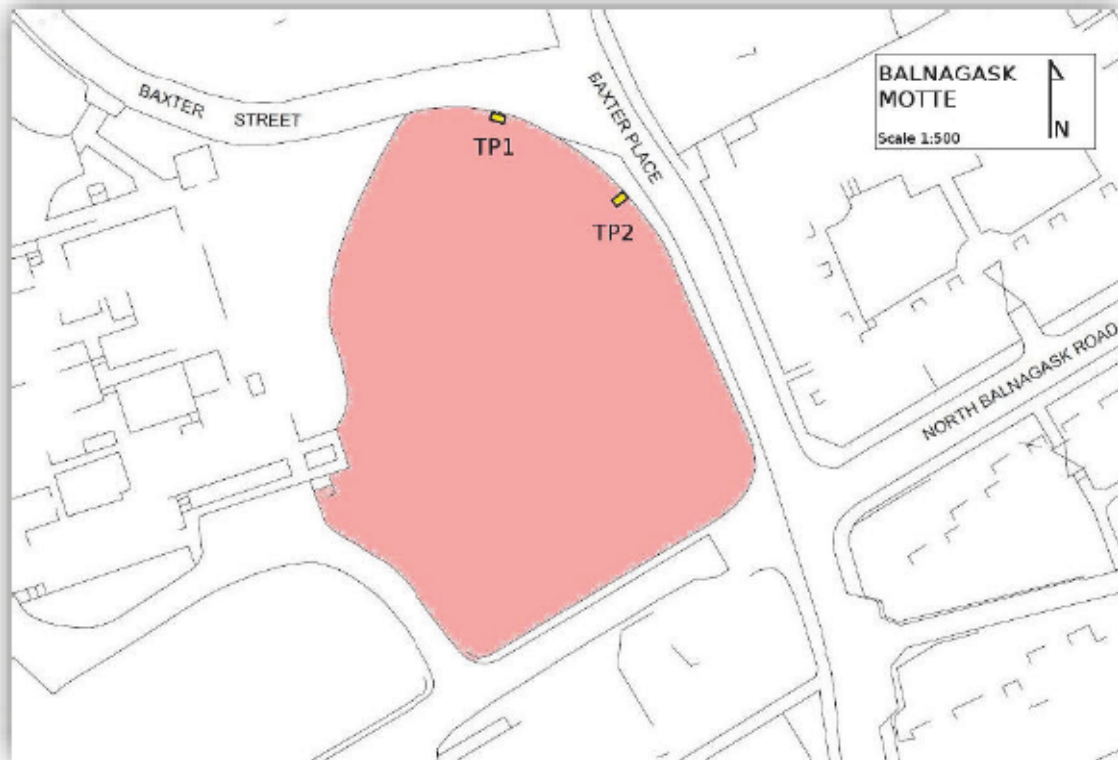
- 2.4 Tullos Cairn lies approximately 1,000m due south of Balnagask Motte. The monument comprises the remains of a massive burial cairn of bare stones. The monument was first scheduled in 1977 but the boundary of the scheduled area was unclear: the present re-scheduling rectifies this. This massive stone-built burial cairn is situated on the N facing slope of Tullos Hill, overlooking Nigg Bay, at c. 50m OD. Although greatly mutilated, it still measures approximately 20m in diameter and stands some 2m high. Another three cairns are located within the close vicinity, indicating that this monument may form part of a relict prehistoric funerary landscape (SM4055 Historic Environment Scotland).
- 2.5 Balnagask House is depicted on the OS 1st Edition map (Kincardineshire, sheet IV, 1883). It has since been demolished (Canmore ID 183502). Balnagask Motte now lies within the eastern portion of the former Balnagask House gardens.
- 2.6 Balnagask House – Lying immediately east of the house (approximately at the junction of the modern Balnagask Place and North Balnagask Road) a farmstead is depicted on both the 1st and 2nd editions of the OS 6-inch map (Kincardineshire 1869, sheet iv; 1902, sheet iii.SE), has been demolished and its site is now occupied by modern housing. (Canmore ID 204767).

3 THE TRIAL PITS

On March 23rd, 2016, two 2.00 x 1.00m trial pits (Illus 2) were hand-dug to either subsoil or one metre depth by Alison Cameron and Robert Lenfert of Cameron Archaeology. Trial-pit 1 (TP1) was placed with the long section adjacent to the retaining wall, while Trial-pit 2 (TP2) was placed at a right-angle to the wall in order to give a better idea of underlying site stratigraphy in this area. Both trial pits encountered natural sub-soils before reaching the one-metre maximum depth. Both trial pits were backfilled once analysis and recording was completed.

TP1

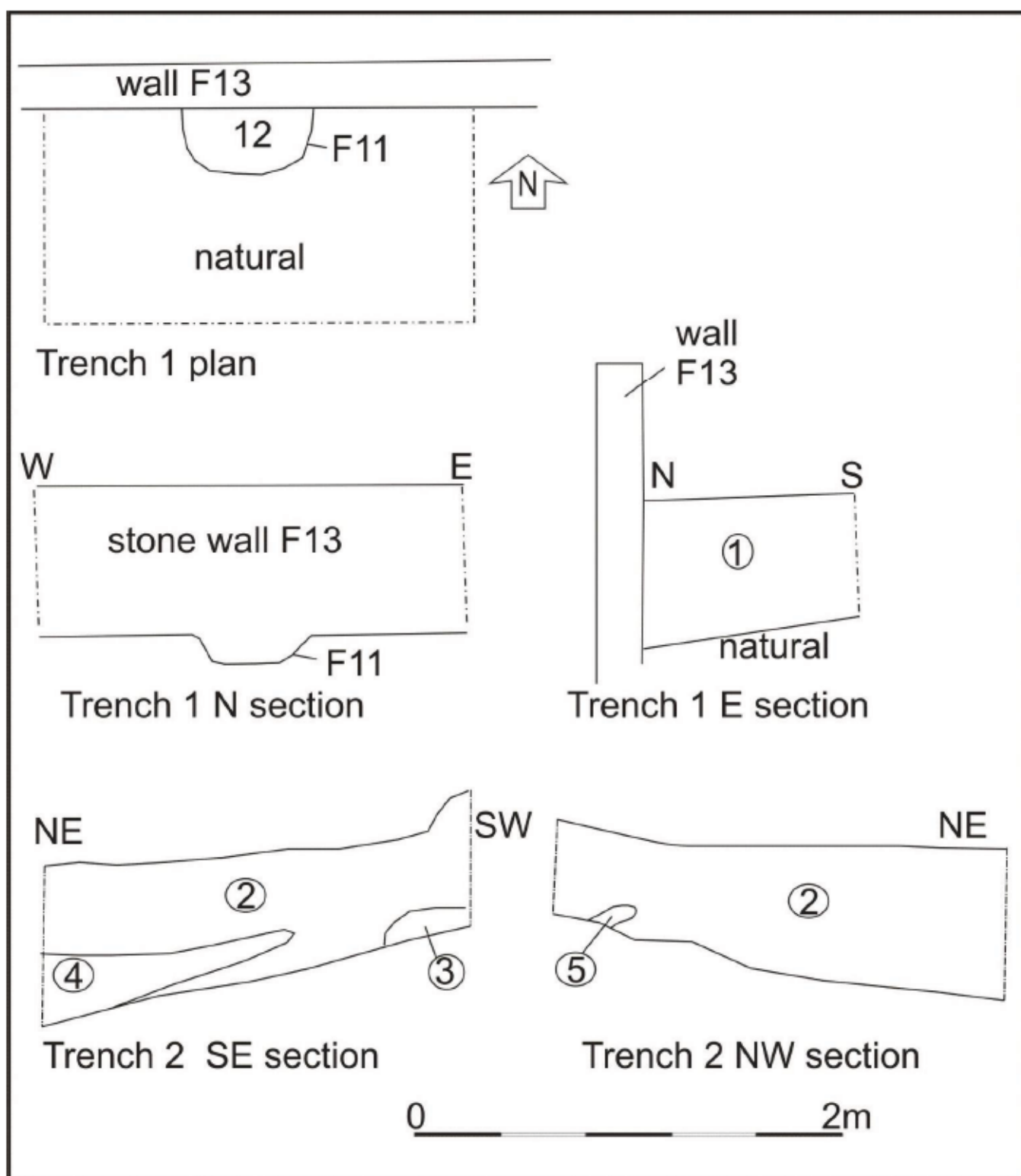
Trial-pit 1 reached a maximum depth of 0.7m at the N adjacent to boundary wall F13, and 0.6m at the S end. It was sloping down from S to N following the slope of the mound. Only one layer was recorded (1; Illus 3) a layer of compact grey clayey loam with numerous small and large roots. The subsoil was compact grey sandy gravel. A tree bole (F11) was recorded at the base of the trench cut into the natural subsoil; it was half sectioned but contained only topsoil with wood and root fragments. This tree may have been planted along the line of the boundary wall and been removed or fell; it may have caused some of the pressure on the collapsing wall. Finds in this trench included 19th and 20th-century ceramics and glass.



Illus 2 Detail of site plan showing location of trial pits within the Scheduled Ancient Monument - Balnagask Motte (copyright Aberdeen City Council)

TP2

Trial-pit 2 was excavated down to a maximum depth of c.0.80m before consistently encountering the natural sub-soil (Illus 3, 5). It sloped down from SW to NE following the slope of the mound. One layer (2) was recorded which contained 19th-20th-century glass, ceramics and mammal bones. This upper layer 2 was similar in composition to that of Trench 1, with a compact grey clayey loam also containing roots, albeit to a lesser size and extent than Trench 1. Trench 2 ran into the hillside perpendicular to Trench 1, revealing a dark orange-brown friable sandy-loam natural with c.50% consisting of moderately-sorted rounded gritty-gravel inclusions. This layer appeared in three areas: 3, 4 and 5. No artefacts were located within these layers. Layer 2 was located at the SW end of the SE section (i.e. upslope) while a redeposited layer 3 was encountered in the downslope area running from c.0.40m below the present surface to the base of Trench 2. It was not a continuous layer across the trench, and appears to have been redeposited after the construction phase of the adjacent wall. In the NW section of Trench 2 (opposite), layer 5 was the same consistency as 3 and 4, though appearing less substantial in section.



Illus 3 Plan of Trench 1 and sections of Trenches 1 and 2



Illus 4 General view of trial-pit locations along the retaining wall for Balnagask Motte with TP1 (left) and TP2 (right); facing N



Illus 5 View of completed Trial-pit 2 prior to backfilling. Note gradual change from reddish-brown natural at top to darker more organic natural along wall.

4 RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Balnagask Motte currently exists as a relatively steep mound encircled by a stone retaining wall over 2m tall in areas. The trial pits were located at the base of this mound alongside the retaining wall which is collapsing and has been supported by concrete blocks. Initial clearing of the topsoil revealed a fairly substantial amount of modern rubbish, including a bicycle wheel, beyond the regular assortment of bottles and cans, etc. This is perhaps due to two factors – one, the settling of any discarded or windswept packaging along the base of the mound, and two, casual rubbish disposal over the top of the retaining wall by passers-by from the pavement below.

Archaeologically, this trend appears to have been somewhat of an ongoing process, with dispersed sherds of 19th and 20th century ceramics recovered from both pits. TP1 contained one layer with 19th and 20th-century finds dispersed throughout and a tree bole at the base of the trench cut into the natural subsoil adjacent to the wall F13. In addition, a clay pipe stem and horse bones were recovered from TP2, alongside discarded hearth material including burnt coal. Also, fragments of clay roofing tile and metal pipe which appears to be 19th or early 20th century in date with mixed within the topsoil layer. It should be noted that the interior of the retaining wall was most likely backfilled after construction, later silting up to reach the present ground level. This would result in a natural topsoil layer accumulating upon the earlier redeposited backfill, but no distinct stratigraphy was visible in the excavated layer. The distribution of ceramic sherds from the same vessel at different levels within the topsoil in TP2 reinforces this observation. A reddish-brown gritty gravel subsoil lens (3, 4, 5) was first encountered in TP2 at a depth of some 0.40m below the present ground surface within the upslope portion of the trial pit (Illus 3, 4). This changed into a darker, more organic sub-soil with coarse stony inclusion towards the retaining wall (F13). The change was not visible as a cut, but rather as a subtle but continual shift along the trial pit.

Balnagask Motte or 'motehill' is currently somewhat of an enigma in that no convincing evidence exists for the Medieval use of this mound as a 'motte' (Canmore 2016: Balnagask Motte). As with a number of similar sites, the possibility of prehistoric rather than Medieval use is always a possibility, such as Tillydrone 'Motte' also located within Aberdeen city, which excavation revealed to contain remains of an Iron Age (or Romano-British Iron Age) fortlet rather than a Medieval motte (Cameron 2002). Conversely, later and relatively modern modifications or additions to Balnagask Motte as a garden feature may have substantially added to or altered the original topography of the site. While the trial pits are indeed useful in ascertaining the presence of archaeological deposits along the retaining wall area, additional trenching would be needed to accurately characterise the archaeological nature of the mound itself.

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APPENDIX 1 CONTEXTS

Context	Trench	Description
1	1	Dark grey clayey loam with 20 th century finds (top 10cm) and 19 th century finds to natural subsoil. Large number of small and medium roots throughout.
2	2	Compact grey clayey loam also containing roots
3	2	Lens of dark orange-brown friable sandy-loam natural with c.50% consisting of moderately-sorted rounded gritty-gravel inclusions
4	2	Lens of dark orange-brown friable sandy-loam natural with c.50% consisting of moderately-sorted rounded gritty-gravel inclusions
5	2	Lens of dark orange-brown friable sandy-loam natural with c.50% consisting of moderately-sorted rounded gritty-gravel inclusions
F11	1	Tree bole with roots and wood
12	1	Fill of F11 layer 1, wood and roots
F13	1	Stone wall with brick coping surrounding the mound; collapsing adjacent to TPs 1 and 2.

APPENDIX 2 HISTORICAL MAPS



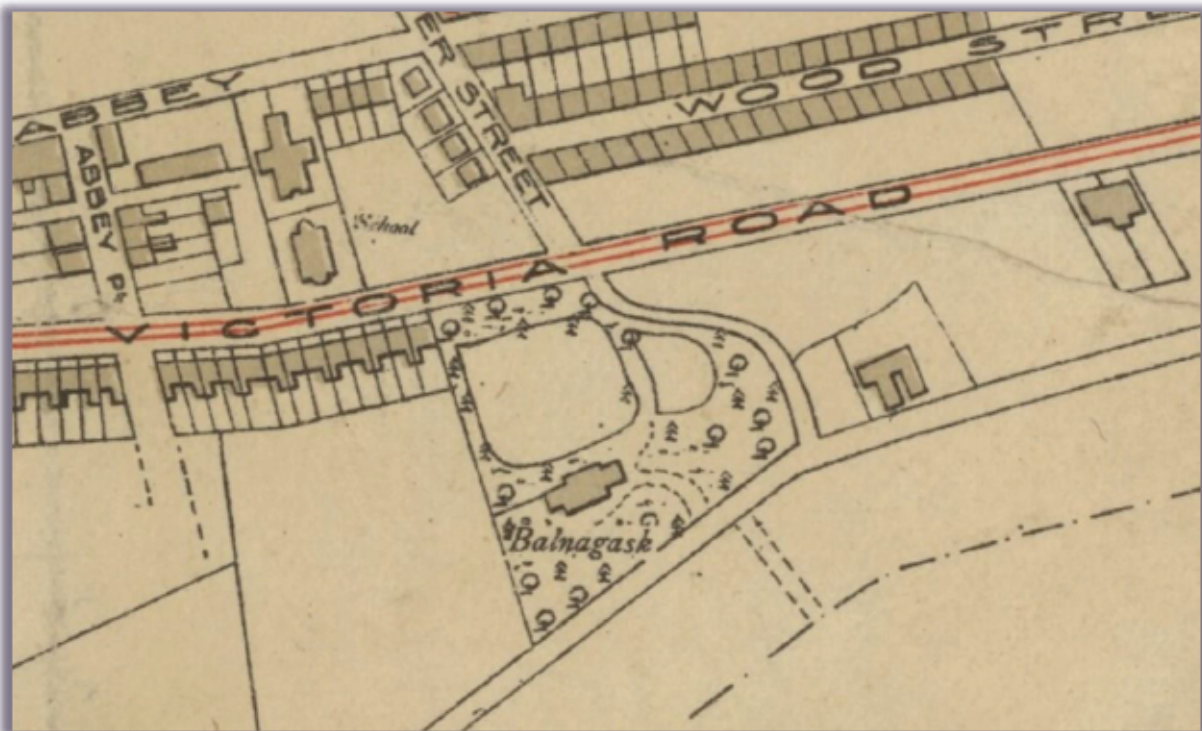
Illus 6 Detail of 'Neither Torry' along the south bank of the River Dee from the early Gordon map of 1661 (copyright National Library of Scotland)



Illus 7 First Edition OS map showing site location in red (copyright National Library of Scotland)
 Sheet 77: Aberdeen, Survey date: 1864-1868 Publication date: 1886



Illus 8 Third Edition OS map showing site location in red (copyright National Library of Scotland)
 Sheet 77: Aberdeen, Revised 1905-1906, Publication date: 1909



Illus 9 Aberdeen Town Plan of 1915 with Balnagask Motte shaded in red by author (top) and detail of map below (*copyright National Library of Scotland*)

APPENDIX 3 PHOTOGRAPHS

PHOTO ID	FACING	COMMENTS
DSC_5694	WNW	Tr 1 prior to excavation
DSC_5695-7	WNW	Tr 1 prior to excavation
DSC_5698-9	W	Tr 1 under first later of surface roots
DSC_5700-3	SE	Tr2 location
DSC_5704-09	ESE	Tr2 first spit removed
DSC_5710-1	W	Tr1 below second layer of roots
DSC_5712-4	W	Tr1 large root removal
DSC_5715-20	SE/E	TR2 progressing
DSC_5721-26	W	Tr1 down to natural with tree bole F11
DSC_5727-9	N	Tr1 down to natural with tree bole F11
DSC_5730-36	E	Tr1 down to natural with tree bole F11
DSC_7768	W	Commencing digging, TP1
DSC_7769	E	Location of TP2 prior to groundbreaking
DSC_7770	E	Location of TP2 prior to groundbreaking
DSC_7775	E	TP2 during initial topsoil removal
DSC_7776	E	TP2 during initial topsoil removal
DSC_7777	E	TP2 during initial topsoil removal
DSC_7778	S	TP2 revealing subsoil in south section
DSC_7779	S	TP2 viewed from atop retaining wall, approximately halfway into excavation
DSC_7780	S	TP2 revealing subsoil in south section (bracketed exposure)
DSC_7781	N	General site view of TP1 and TP2 in progress
DSC_7782	NW	General site view of TP1 in progress
DSC_7783	N	General site view of TP2 in progress
DSC_7784	N	General site view of TP2 in progress
DSC_7785	N	General site view of TP2 in progress
DSC_7793	NNW	General site view of TP1 in progress
DSC_7797	NNW	General site view of TP1 in progress
DSC_7803	NNW	TP1 in progress
DSC_7805	N	General site view of TP2 in progress
DSC_7806	N	TP2 completed
DSC_7807	N	TP2 completed
DSC_7812	E	Detail of W facing section of TP2
DSC_7817	S	Southern (upslope) view of TP2
DSC_7818	W	Detail of E facing section of TP2
DSC_7819	W	E facing section of TP2
DSC_7820	E	W facing section of TP2



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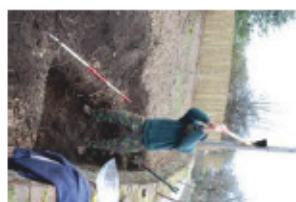
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