

Dean Castle Country Park: Archaeology Project

Interim Report



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on behalf of East Ayrshire Leisure

RATHMELL 
ARCHAEOLOGY LTD

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Introduction

1. This Interim Report has been prepared to present the results of archaeological excavations undertaken at Dean Castle Country Park on behalf of East Ayrshire Leisure, Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society and the community in support of their investigations within Dean Castle Country Park.
2. These works formed part of a wider programme of works which involve the local community and are planned to investigate the archaeological potential of several areas in Dean Castle Country Park. This report describes work undertaken on the 5th and 6th of September 2015 which involved the investigation of a potential earthwork to the north-west of Dean Castle.
3. The work was undertaken by volunteers supported and supervised by staff from the Countryside Ranger Service at Dean Park and by staff from Rathmell Archaeology Ltd. Rathmell Archaeology Ltd has been appointed to undertake the development and implementation of archaeological works including supervision of volunteers.

Scope of Works

4. The potential archaeological resource within Dean Castle Country Park is large and varied, and a range of heritage targets have been identified by East Ayrshire Leisure. It is the aim of this overall project to subject specified areas of Dean Castle Country Park to survey and targeted excavation. The nature of the works undertaken will change as appropriate while remaining within the limits of the works described in the Method Statement (Matthews 2015).
5. The works undertaken on the 5th and 6th of September 2015 specifically targeted an area to the north-west of Dean Castle in an area which is currently woodland. The History Trail as it starts by the Dower House circuits a lobe of higher ground to the north and then east of its route following the valley of a minor burn. This higher ground is defined by an apparent east/west orientated bank and ditch earthwork, lying to the immediately southeast of the de Walden Cemetery.
6. The earthwork comprises, based on topography, an external upcast bank, a ditch and a larger internal bank. Should these be anthropic features, the date is uncertain and while a later prehistoric promontory fort is credible there are also, given the location, the credible potential for medieval origins of a defended site at this location.
7. Our objective in this area is to establish the existence and character of the feature, to seek artefacts, understand soil depth and to seek structural remains.

Archaeological Works

8. Archaeological excavation works were undertaken on the 5th and 6th of September 2015 and carried out in keeping with the Method Statement (Matthews 2015). Archaeological excavation works were carried out by volunteers under the supervision of staff from Rathmell Archaeology, with Rathmell Archaeology responsible for the organisation of the archaeological work. The archaeological work was tailored according to the conditions on the day and the range of volunteers available to carry it out.
9. During these works Rathmell Archaeology staff were assisted by between 3 and 5 experienced volunteers from Kilwinning Heritage and Ardrossan Castle Heritage. These experienced volunteers attended from 9am till 4pm on both the 5th and the 6th. The experienced volunteers assisted in the supervision of those who were less experienced.
10. The Countryside Ranger Service arranged volunteers to experience archaeology. Each working day was split into a morning session (running from 10:00 until 12:00), and an afternoon session (running from 13:00 until 15:00). The number of Dean Castle volunteers available for a single session varied, reaching up to 10 volunteers. The ages of the volunteers also varied, ranging from young children under the supervision of an adult to adults. All volunteers were given the opportunity to carry out archaeological excavation work and assist in basic recording methods.



Figure 1: Trench 1 from N, excavation within (501)

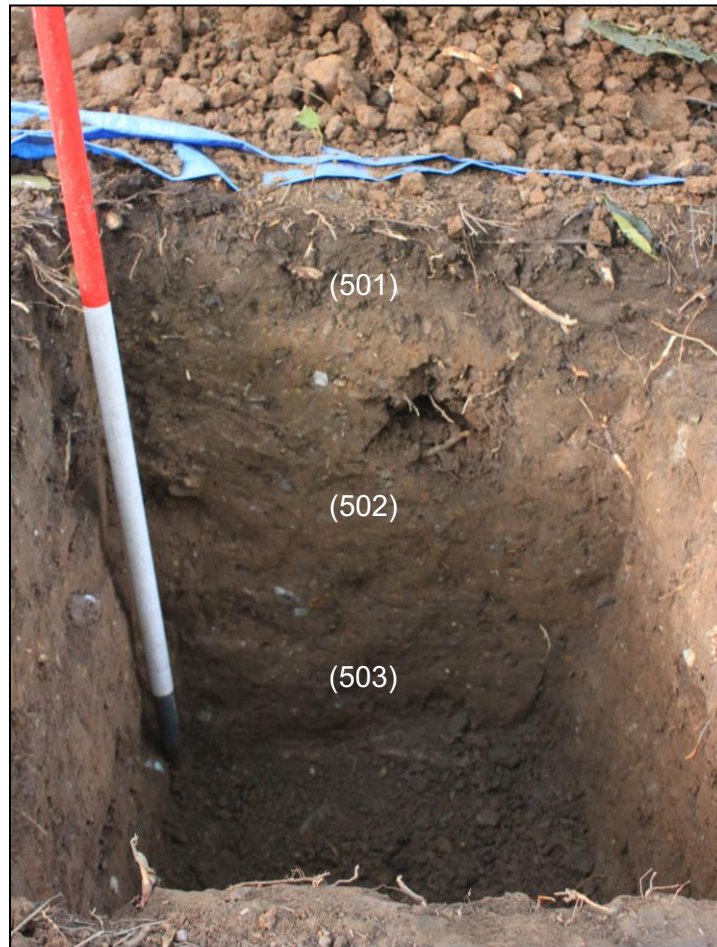


Figure 2: E-facing section through Test Pit 2

The Earthwork

12. A natural spur of raised ground exists to the north-west of Dean Castle. The shallowest, northern approach to the summit shows some evidence of bank and ditch defences which modify the natural topography. In sequence, from north to south, an up-cast bank with a linear hollow to the rear suggesting a ditch feature and then a second bank or rampart immediately to the south.
13. This earthwork complex (NGR NS 4359 3950) extends for roughly 40m east/west arcing slightly to the north, cutting off an area of roughly 0.15ha. The summit of the southernmost main bank is some 3.5m above the base of the ditch, the northern bank some 2m above. The investigations amounted to one linear trench and four small test pits excavated in order to investigate, and if possible validate, these features.

Excavations

14. Trench 1 (Figure 1) was approximately 1.5m wide and 6.3m long running from the crest of the southernmost bank down into the ditch. The initial excavation was through topsoil with lots of roots (501). Some ceramics were recovered all of 19th century origin or later. In addition glass and burnt flint was also recovered. In the southern (upper) half of Trench 1 the excavation came down onto stiff clay (502). Small inclusions of coal observed in this layer suggested that this material had been redeposited and there were medium sized sub-angular stones embedded within the clay.
15. Topsoil (501) upon excavation was demonstrated to be between 100mm and 170mm deep, with greater depth typically being towards the lower end of the trench. As the northern, lower, half of Trench 1 was excavated the deeper topsoil led to only the western half being excavated to depth in order to assess the layers beneath. Beneath (501) was uncovered mid-brown loose, damp clay (503). This clay was interpreted as most likely being the natural subsoil. The upper layers of the subsoil (503) may have been truncated by the excavation of the ditch. The relationship between (502) and (503) was uncertain. The most likely interpretation is that a wedge of (502) at the southern end of Trench 1 overlay (503).
16. Test Pit 2 (Figure 2) was excavated at the southwestern corner of Trench 1 to confirm this relationship. The test pit at the summit of the main bank showed that under the 120mm topsoil (501) was the thick compact clay with coal fragments (502) that was some 310mm thick. This did indeed overlie a less compact, coal-free and stone-free clay (provisionally (503)) which was excavated for a thickness of 120mm before excavation ceased.
17. Test Pit 3 lay 4m southwest of the southern end of Trench 1 and was started to test another portion of the summit of the main bank, this was not excavated deeper than (501) and was shallow (roughly 100mm). In contrast, Test Pit 1 was excavated within the enclosed area, some 33m to the SSE of Trench 1 within a clearing. These test pit was excavated to a depth of approximately 500mm and through (501), exposing at this depth an ENE / WSW orientated segmented clay tile drain.
18. Test Pit 4 was excavated within the linear ditch feature in order to investigate the ditch fills. This pit was excavated to a depth of approximately 1050mm and exposed contexts, under 200mm of topsoil (501), a mid-brown granular clay (504) some 650mm deep that overlay at least 200mm of a grey clay with angular stones (505). The character of these sediments was that of wet, uncompacted fills. Further excavation was halted at this depth due to the limited size of the test pit.
19. No additional archaeological features were uncovered during the excavation works. The trenches were located and recorded before backfilling was carried out on the Sunday afternoon by staff from Rathmell Archaeology Ltd, the Countryside Ranger Service and the experienced volunteers. All significant finds were retained.



Figure 1: Main work area from NE, showing ditch and main bank

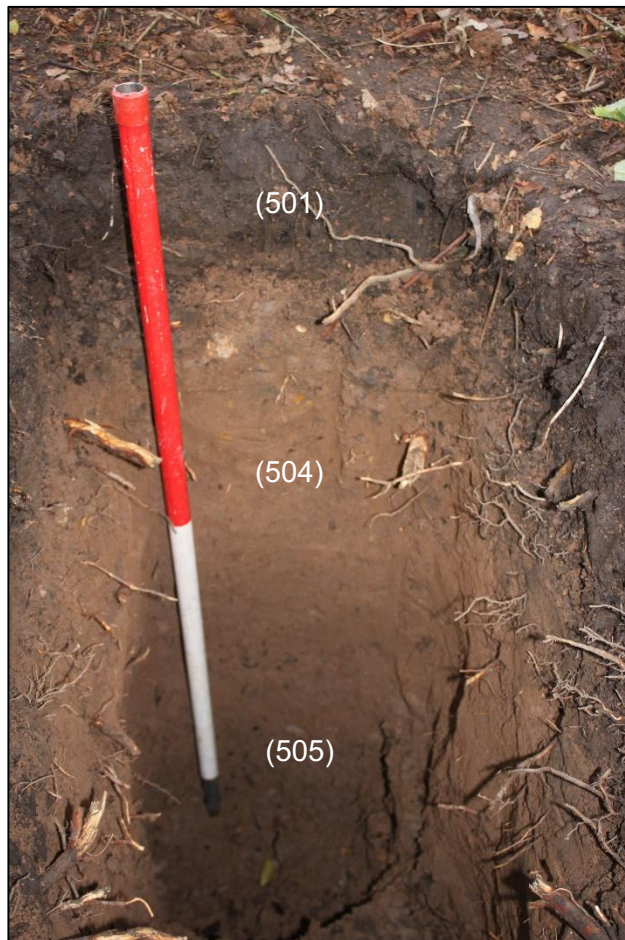


Figure 2: S-facing section through Test Pit 4

Discussion

20. The main southern bank, tested by Trench 1, has been shown to be formed by a compact, redeposited clay subsoil though this is only 310mm thick. As such, the earthwork is predominantly formed by the ditch that, based on Test Pit 4, has at least 1m depth of granular clay fill. This material has presumably derived from material eroded from the adjacent banks, suggesting that the earthwork was more notable as originally constructed.
21. No material culture (finds) were recovered that would with confidence identify the origin of the earthwork. A lump of iron concretion adhering to a stone was initially interpreted as potential iron-working slag, but later identified as an adhering and much decayed iron object, potentially a nail judging from the circular section. Industrial activities were also hinted at by the presence of coal, fuel ash slag, a single small fragment of burnt flint and several chunks of limestone recovered from topsoil (501) and the upper levels of (502).
22. Such activities can comfortably be interpreted as modern, perhaps reflecting liming of agricultural/horticultural land, with the adhering iron object representing an item subject to casual loss in the vicinity. However, alternative scenarios should be considered. The small size and isolated nature of the burnt flint fragment may, for example, be considered consistent with a prehistoric date, and the corroded iron object may also be a residual item originating in a much earlier period. The fuel ash slag, too, may derive from earlier activity taking place in the vicinity, while the fragments of coal may represent naturally occurring material in a wider landscape which was well-known for its surface deposits of coal, with the latter being actively exploited throughout the modern period and perhaps earlier.
23. The recovery of 19th or 20th century ceramic and pottery in low volumes is not remarkable given the proximity of the ground to Dean Castle, with the wares represented more consistent with domestic wares used by those workers employed to maintain the grounds or residing at the workers' cottages located close to the coal mines. The presence of these sherds on this ground may result from middening undertaken in association with use of the land for agricultural purposes, as may the exposure of a segmented tile drain at Test Pit 1. Alternatively, such finds of modern ceramic may derive from land management activities associated with the de Walden reinvigoration of the designed landscape around Dean Castle.
24. There remains the potential for further investigation of these features in order to determine origin and use. Further investigation of these features should be focused on the recovery of further anthropic material from which a date for the creation of the banks and ditch might be obtained. The test pits which investigated the summit of the spur did not uncover any additional archaeological features as might indicate the use of the site, however, these pits covered such a small area that further investigation in this area may have a different result.

Conclusion

25. Archaeological excavations were carried out over the weekend 5th and 6th of September 2015 on behalf of East Ayrshire Leisure and the community in support of their investigation of Dean Castle Country Park.
26. The archaeological work focused on the possible remains of prehistoric or medieval earthwork defences in the wooded area to the north-west of Dean Castle. A single trench and four test pits were excavated in order to assess the banks and ditch along with the summit of the spur.
27. All excavation was carried out by volunteers under supervision from Rathmell Archaeology Ltd and the Countryside Ranger Service. Some anthropic material was recovered although none could be confidently dated to earlier than the 19th century in date. From the work carried out it is likely that bank and ditch features exist in this area but their extent or date could not be confirmed by these initial works.

Acknowledgements

28. I am grateful to the staff of the Countryside Ranger Service at Dean Park for their assistance with the organisation and excavation work. Also to experienced volunteers from Kilwinning Heritage and Ardrossan Castle Heritage who supervised the some of the archaeological recording on site and to the Dean Park volunteers who carried out the archaeological excavation.

References

Matthews. A, 2015, *Dean Castle Country Park: Community Archaeology Investigation, Method Statement*, Rathmell Archaeology Ltd,

Contact Details

29. Rathmell Archaeology can be contacted at our Registered Office or through the web:

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