

RCAHMS Site Description of Moredun Top, Moncrieffe Hill (NO11NW 23).

This multi-period fort, referred to in the 19th century as ‘Carnac’, crowns Moredun Top (223m OD), the name given to the grass-grown summit of the otherwise afforested Moncrieffe Hill, a 4km long ridge which lies immediately west of the confluence of the Rivers Tay and Earn, its north side dropping gently towards the former and its south side falling much more steeply towards the latter. The undulating spine of the ridge is characterised by a series of craggy rises, some more prominent than others, and Moredun Top is the highest and most conspicuous of these. Its south side is precipitous, but the other flanks drop away more gently to the west, north and east in a series of uneven terraces. By-and-large, the walls of the fort in all of its phases of construction have followed the edges of these terraces, or the top of the S-facing escarpment, making best use of the natural defences offered by the often precipitous slopes below. A second, much smaller, fort on the ridge (NO11NW 7) occupies one of the lesser summits 340m west of Moredun Top.

Moncrieffe Hill, and by association the remains of this fort, have long been identified as *Monad Croib*, the site of a battle in AD 728 between warring Pictish factions led by Angus and Alpin (Watson 1926, 400-1ⁱ). More recently, the site has been identified as a potential candidate for the capital of the Pictish Kingdom of *Fortriu* (Foster 2004). The fort is described in the 19th century as a Pictish Fort (*Memorabilia of Perth* 1806, 5; *New Stat Acct* 1845, vol X, 810) and a small-scale plan of it was published by the Ordnance Survey on the 1st edition of their 25-inch map (Perth and Clackmannan 1866, Sheet XCVIII.14). This was accompanied by a note (Name Book 24, p.13) and further detail was added by Christison in his regional study (1900, 79-81). The site was surveyed by RCAHMS in 1953 as part of the Marginal Land Survey (see Feachem 1955ⁱⁱ), closely followed by its inclusion in the Schedule of Ancient Monuments. The OS revised their 25-inch map depiction and their associated records in 1963. A short note was added by RCAHMS in 1996, and a survey of the site was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology North in 2012ⁱⁱⁱ. The following account makes use of the published accounts: other features on the hill – the 19th curling pond (NO12SW 302) NW of the fort and the socketed stone (NO11SW 23.01) that sits on the southern edge of the summit, are described elsewhere.

Before describing the remains of the fort, mention must be made of a large mound, possibly a cairn (**A**), which stands within the E side of the interior. The mound appears to comprise a grass-grown mass of loose stone measuring about 30m from E to W by 23m transversely and at least 1.5m in height. It is depicted on the OS 25-inch map and is described in the contemporary Name Book (No.24, p.13) as a mound almost entirely composed of small stones ‘as if it had once been a cairn or place of internment’. The map also depicts the causewayed track that runs onto the mound from the WNW which, if it wasn’t constructed for the purpose of extracting stone from the mound, then it would have certainly facilitated it. The character of the surviving quarry-pits suggests relatively small-scale delving, possibly over an extended period, but the almost blanket coverage of the

intrusions, none of which is very deep, could also hint at a systematic searching of the mound for antiquities.

The earliest phase of fortification on the summit that can be discerned from the visible remains is represented by an oval enclosure (**B**) measuring about 197m from ENE to WSW by 100m transversely (c1.5ha) within the remains of a stone wall. At several places along its length this ruinous wall can be seen to measure at least 7m in thickness though nowhere does it exceed about 0.3m in internal height. Six stretches of outer wall-face were recorded at the west end of this enclosure by RCAHMS in 1953 but only one of these was identified during the present survey. From a possible entrance on the SSE, the wall runs along the crest of a very steep, often precipitous, slope and then around the ENE end. From here it extends across the gentler NNW flank of the hill towards the WSW end where, once again, it follows the crest of what is probably a largely natural terrace. From here it runs round onto the very steep south flank of the hill and disappears from view. The 2012 Oxford survey depicts the wall continuing along the southern edge of the summit to provide a complete circuit. However, there is no visible evidence for this as the presumed line of the wall is either now obscured by the southern wall of the latest summit enclosure or else it simply cannot be seen on steep sloping ground. There is some evidence at both the ENE and WSW ends that at least some of the material used to construct the walls was derived from shallow internal quarries. At the WSW end especially, a low rocky scarp (set back up to 10m from the surviving remains of the wall) appears to be of a completely different character to any of the more recent quarrying on or around the summit. There are two possible entrances into the enclosure, situated on the NNW and SSE sides respectively. However, both have had later tracks driven through them and any original structural features relating to formal gateways are likely to have been heavily damaged if not destroyed.

The second phase of fortification is represented by a sub-oval enclosure (**C**) measuring about 170m from E to W by 103m transversely (1.15ha) within the remains of a stone wall. On the west and north this wall is roughly concentric with the earlier wall but on the east it overlies it and follows its line all the way along the SSE side. The remains of the collapsed wall of this later phase of construction are both thicker (up to 10m) and higher than the first phase wall, which may have been robbed to aid its construction. At several locations the outer wall-face is visible, including a significant stretch on the SSE, although the small size of the stones here must surely reflect their position comparatively high in the face. Fragments of the inner face also appear to be visible on the SSE, indicating an original wall thickness here of at least 4m. On the NW, a short section of the outer face has been exposed in a cutting the neatness of which strongly hints at it being dug as part of an otherwise unrecorded antiquarian excavation. Again, there are two probable entrances to this enclosure, that on the SSE simply being re-used from the earlier phase and that on the NNW being aligned with the break in the outer, first phase, wall. As with the other gaps, any evidence for an original gateway here is likely to have been compromised.

Possibly in use contemporarily with the second phase enclosure is the large enclosure which appears to have been attached to its N side (**D**). This enclosure, which is roughly D-shaped on plan - the chord of the D formed by the wall of the second phase enclosure, measures 110m from E to W by 76m transversely within the remains of a low wall averaging 8.5m in thickness. First noted by RCAHMS in 1953, the wall of this enclosure clearly rides over the wall of the first phase enclosure on both the east and west. However, its relationship to the later enclosure wall is not clear as at both locations where there would have been a junction there has been quarrying/excavation. That said, there is no evidence that the wall, on either the west or east, extended over and beyond that of the earlier enclosure. It must therefore be a fair assumption that **C** and **D** are broadly contemporary in date, at least in their latest period of use. If this was the case, then the annexe would have required an entrance. There is a gap in its west side, which is the direction from which the easiest approach can be made, but as before, later use of the gap has at least severely disturbed any visible remains of the original gateway.

The third phase of enclosure is a comparatively small but thick-walled fort (**E**) that crowns the summit of the hill. Oval on plan, it measures about 53m from NW to SE by 38m transversely within a wall reduced to a thick stony bank up to 13m in thickness but no more than 1m in internal height. There is no obvious entrance into this enclosure which has suffered considerably from quarrying, both of the wall itself but also areas of the interior. That the fort has also been subjected to some form of antiquarian investigation is indicated by the way the trenches have been taken along the outer wall-face on the NNE and W. Two stretches of outer wall-face are visible; one on the W and another along the S face, perhaps also exposed by excavation.

A phase of unenclosed settlement on the summit is represented by four hut-circles (**F**) – three lying within the north part of the small summit fort and one immediately to the north. First noted by Christison, though confused with evidence of quarrying, they measure up to 6m in diameter within walls reduced to low spreads of rubble up to 2m in thickness. At least two of those situated within the interior of the small fort have been constructed on a stony platform created by the spreading of material from the fort wall. Two putative hut-circles identified by RCAHMS in 1953 in the southern part of the interior are less-convincing, and have been interpreted here as further evidence of quarrying.

Other features that appear on earlier surveys and have been reassessed include the walls that are shown springing north from the annexe on the 1953 plan. They simply do not bear scrutiny. Nor does the outer annexe depicted on the NE on the 2012 Oxford plan, which is simply a natural break-of-slope. In contrast, the substantial bank (**G**) shown running N from the W end of the fort in 1953 certainly exists and it can be traced for a distance of at least 80m, running obliquely up a steep slope from the SE edge of the curling pond to a point just short of the wall of the second phase enclosure.

The bank is overlain by the broad track that ascends the NW flank of the hill and it is cut by at least one quarry. Another feature (**H**) depicted in 1953 to the W of the fort is simply another quarry. A feature that is not included in any of the earlier surveys is a roughly circular platform or stance measuring about 1.8m in diameter which is situated on the highest part of the summit. Now largely obscured by a later marker cairn, the boulder-edged platform stands no more than 0.15m in height. Given its position, it is likely to be the remains of an old survey station.

Quarrying

Disused quarries are conspicuous and significant features on Moncreiffe Hill – conspicuous simply because there are so many of them and significant for the effect their excavation has had on the archaeology. Quite when the first quarrying took place is not known but the hill has formed part of the Moncreiffe Estate since the Middle Ages and it is likely that the family papers, which date back to the 12th century (Historic Scotland scheduling document, ref 4535), will provide clues to the approximate date. Whatever that date is, the first quarrying is unlikely to have been anything other than of modest scale, and large-scale extraction probably did not take place until after the middle of the 18th century when the demand for stone to build field walls, buildings, roads and drains rose dramatically as a result of the Improvements. It is also possible that this quarrying had ceased by the end of the 18th century because the writer of the New Statistical Account for Dunbarney parish mentions only two quarries on the Moncreiffe Estate neither of which were on the top of the ridge (1885, 798).

The quarrying on the summit of the hill takes two forms – excavation into solid bedrock and the removal of what is effectively loose rubble from archaeological features. Bedrock quarries have had a limited effect on the archaeology of the hill – mainly nibbling into the wall of the annexe, and it is the shallower pits that have been dug to remove loose stone that have caused the most damage. This is particularly evident on the summit, where the wall of the small fort has been robbed to such an extent that in places it barely survives more than 0.5m in height. And, whilst some despoliation of the wall of the fort must have happened in antiquity – as is evidenced by the position of at least two of the hut-circles, the quarry pits on the south and south-east are probably of comparatively recent date. There also appears to be a direct relationship between the two main engineered tracks that ascent the hill from the NW and SE respectively. Leaving aside the question of whether these tracks run through original gaps in the defences of the fort, it is unclear what their purpose was. They and others are depicted on the OS 25-inch map (see ref above) but they could have been constructed many years beforehand to allow carriages to be driven to the summit. What is clear, however, is that the westerly of the two tracks has been used by the stone quarriers to access both the summit and the north flank of the hill. The SE track has also been used by the quarries, here to transport away stone robbed from a 40m long stretch of the fort wall immediately E of the entrance, in the process completely removing the core and any trace of the rear face.

Undocumented excavation

There is sufficient evidence in the form of trenching to demonstrate antiquarian interest in and investigation of the fort. The description above of the small summit fort makes reference to the exposure of the outer wall face through the digging of a long trench. This a well-known technique that was used elsewhere locally, including by Mackie and Marr, then Christison and Anderson at Castle Law, Abernethy (NO11NE 2) and Bell at Castle Law, Forgandenny (NO01NE 5), both excavations in the 1890s. Further, in addition to a number of variously shaped pits that are clearly quarries within the interior of the small summit fort, there is a subrectangular pit on the east which appears to have square corners and a split-level interior. Further, the presence of a spoil-tip at its eastern end also suggests that the original contents of the pit were simply discarded rather than taken away as would have been the case had the excavation been for the purpose of quarrying. The possibility that excavation has been undertaken at the two junctions of the annexe and the inner of the two oval forts has also been mentioned above, but the wall of this inner enclosure also appears to have been examined elsewhere. On the south side there is a rectangular trench measuring about 5m from N to S by 4m transversely, which has been dug across the thickness of the wall, in the process exposing what appears to be an outer wall-face. Another excavation trench, which cuts across the thickness of the southern side of the small summit fort, is visible immediately to the north-west. It is possible that several small excavations into the wall of the inner of the two large oval enclosures on the west and north-west are also the result of antiquarian interest.

Visited by RCAHMS (GF Geddes, JR Sherriff, I Parker) 12-15 May 2014.

ⁱ A full reference list is provided as part of the Canmore record.

ⁱⁱ The 1953, 2012 and 2014 surveys are available to view in the RCAHMS Search Room and online.