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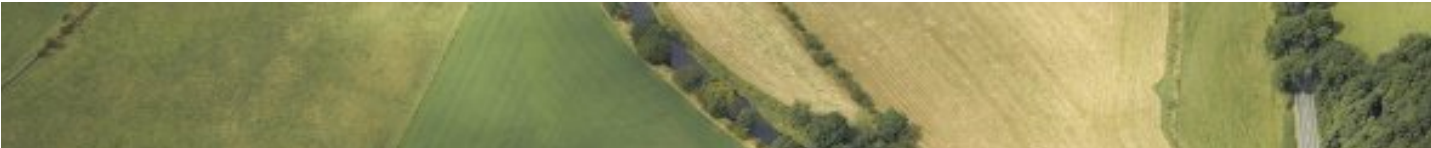
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The Mote of Urr, Motte-and-Bailey Castle – Dumfries and Galloway





A Symbol of Lordship

The Mote of Urr is the earthwork remains of a 12th century timber castle known as a motte-and-bailey. It lies 4km north of Dalbeattie in the valley of the Urr Water, and standing on the edge of an old river cliff dominating the haughland of the river it is a very visible feature in the landscape. The river now flows along the east side of the castle, but when it was built it almost certainly flowed along its west side. We know this because the parish boundary follows the course of the Urr Water, preserving its line when the boundary was settled, possibly around the time the castle was built.

The castle comprises a steep-sided, conical, flat-topped mound (the motte) upon which a timber tower may well have stood within a timber palisade, and a lower enclosure (the bailey). The bailey would also have been defended by a timber palisade and housed the service buildings of the castle - stables, workshops, stores and so on. Dumfries and Galloway possesses the greatest concentration of timber castles in Scotland and the Mote of Urr stands out as the most impressive. With the exception of the first castle of Lochmaben at the centre of the Bruce lordship of Annandale, most were built on a more modest scale, often utilising natural features in their construction and not necessarily following the classic motte-and-bailey plan.

There is a long tradition in Scotland of forts and settlements with timber defences, but timber castles as private lordly residences only appeared here in the 12th century. They came with Anglo-Norman lords invited to settle by the 12th and 13th century Kings of Scots seeking to feudalise the kingdom. These lords were usually of Norman, French, Breton or Flemish origin, whose fathers, grandfathers or great grandfathers had settled in England following the Norman Conquest, or who sometimes came directly to Scotland from their homelands.

The probable builder of the Mote of Urr was Walter de Berkley, royal chamberlain to William I 'the Lion.' His importance was reflected in the large estate of Urr granted to him by Uhtred, the lord of eastern Galloway, and in the scale of his castle. Although a defensible site and probably built to impress, the Mote of Urr was also the centre from which the accompanying estate was administered, where rents in kind were collected and stored and from which law was dispensed.

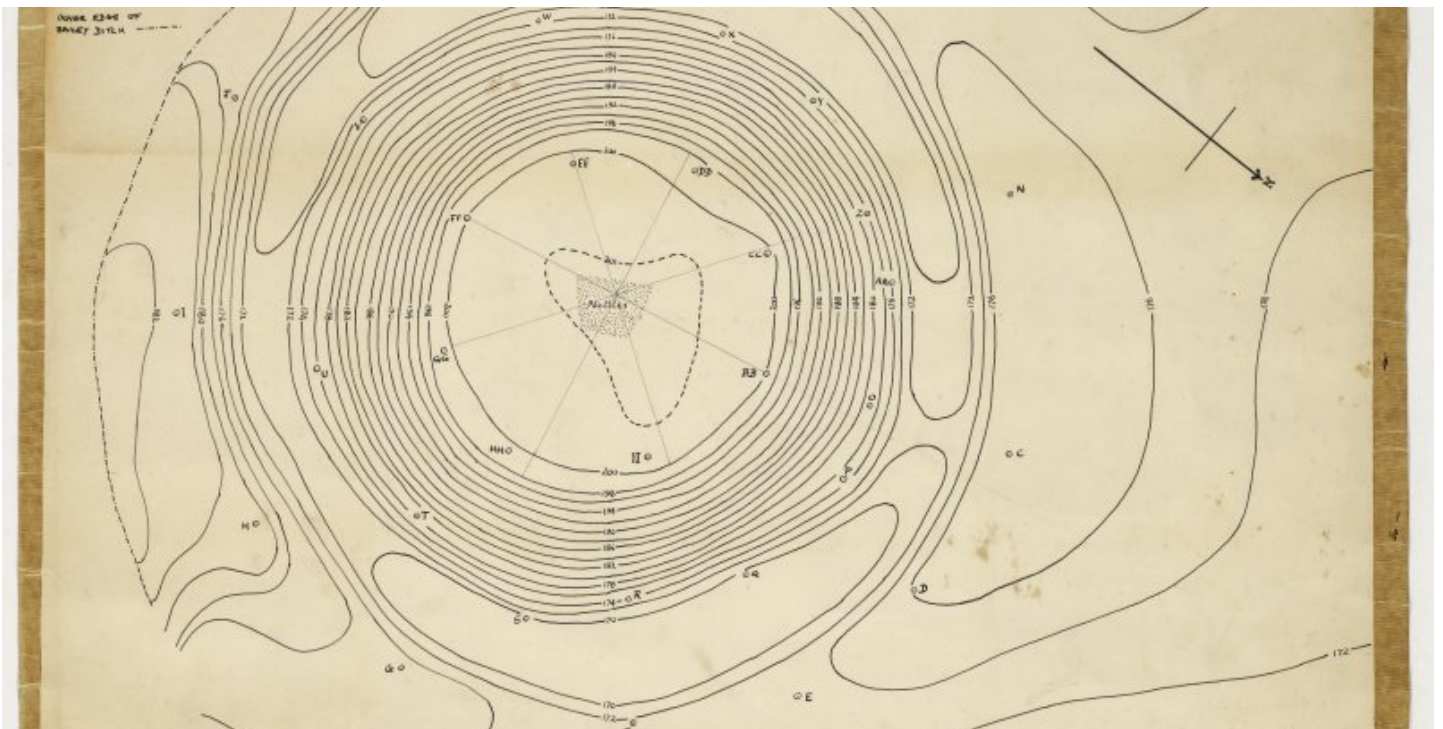




Assault, Destruction, Rebuilding?

Excavations led by the late Brian Hope-Taylor were carried out on the summit of the motte in 1951 and 1953. He had previously undertaken pioneering work on the motte at Abinger in Surrey, stripping the entire summit and revealing the post-holes of both palisade and central tower. Urr was to be a continuation of this work, but it was discovered that the summit of the motte had been severely disturbed by later medieval activity and no further excavation took place after 1953. However, evidence was recovered suggesting that the structures on the motte had been burned and that rebuilding had subsequently taken place. This has given rise to some speculation that it had been a victim of violent assault, perhaps in the notorious rebellion of 1174 when the chronicler Roger of Howden records that Gilbert and Uhtred 'the leaders of the men of Galloway... expelled the king's thanes from their territories, and slew without mercy those of English or French origin whom they found therein. The fortresses and castles which the king of Scots had fortified in their territories they laid siege to, and capturing them, levelled them with the ground.' An exciting interpretation which may be true, though equally it may be no more than an over enthusiastic conflation of archaeological and documentary evidence.

Peter Corser - Field Officer, Heritage Directorate





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