



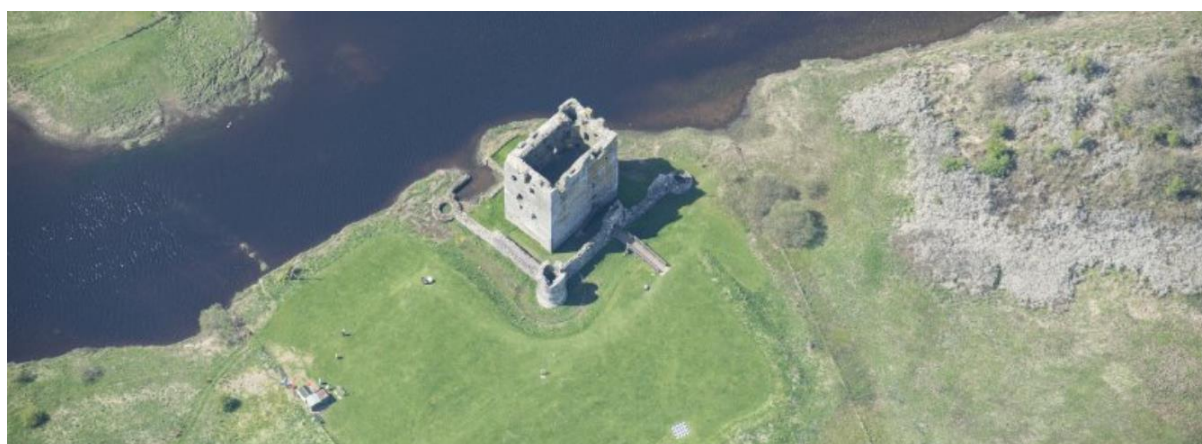
Galloway Glens 'Can You Dig It' Community

Archaeology project – Technical notes.

#4: Excavation at Threave Castle – The Stronghold of the Black Douglasses

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Threave Castle (NX 73920 62282) is located on a 10ha low-lying island within the River Dee, approximately 1.5m West of Castle Douglas. The Castle is in the care of Historic Environment Scotland and there are car parking facilities off the A75 at Kelton Mains.



It's History

Threave Castle is not mentioned in the written records until 1400 when Archibald 'The Grim', the third Earl of Douglas died on the site. It is thought that Archibald The Grim commissioned the construction of the tower house in 1369 on the island after his elevation to the Lord of Galloway. Threave Castle remained the stronghold of the 'Black Douglas' family throughout the 15th century.



The growing influence and power of the 'Black Douglas' family became a perceived threat to the Scottish Crown, which prompted extreme action by King James II, starting with the annexation of the Earldom of Wigtown in 1450. Then in 1452, James II murdered William, the 8th Earl of Douglas while he dined at Stirling Castle. In the summer of 1455 James laid siege to Threave Castle but failed to inflict substantial damage upon the Douglas's stronghold. Only after a long siege and by bribing the garrison was James able to take the castle. Threave Castle and the lordship was taken into crown ownership and the 'Black Douglas' family destroyed.

Through the subsequent centuries, Threave Castle waned in significance and was reported to have fallen to disrepair. In 1638 the Threave Castle was in the hands of Robert Maxwell, Earl of Nithsdale and keeper of Threave. Maxwell garrisoned a small number of men with a large amount of arms, ammunition and provisions within it to withstand a lengthy siege. This was in response to

concerns about the Covenanters, who would ultimately lay siege to the Castle in 1640. Despite the improved heavy ordnance of the day at the disposal of the Covenanter force, they found that the defences at Threave Castle held fast, and the siege was broken only after the garrison were given royal permission to surrender.

The War Committee of the Covenanters decided to systematically dismantle Threave Castle. Its stone was used in other construction projects and thereafter it was allowed to decay, apart from work being completed in the 19th century to enable the Tower House to house French prisoners of war.

The Excavations

The excavations at Threave Castle took place between 1974 and 1978, extensive trenching was conducted across the whole site, which covered both the landward and river defences, various structures and enclosure both external and internal. The excavations were too extensive to go into detail in this piece.

The first phase of Douglas occupation saw the construction of a tower house in the 14th century, the excavation produced evidence that suggested that during the 'Black Douglas' Families occupation that Threave Castle was largely self-sufficient if evidence for activities such as wood-turning, smithing, lead smelting being carried out on the island. It was also suggested from the data gathered during the excavation that there was little in the way of new construction after the Threave Castle was removed from the Douglas family, the excavation showed that during the 16th century the turf bank of the N side of the tower-house was rebuilt and the main ditch was re-instated. During the 17th the main was recut again with an outer bank to the N and E, 2 new buildings were constructed and down pipe added to the tower house serving as a latrine.

The Finds

There was a large assemblage of finds recovered from Threave Castle, the assemblage was made up of a broad array of artefacts which were placed into 4 distinct phases to help create a material chronology for the site:

Phase 1: Pre – Douglas (- 1370)

Phase 2: Douglas era (1370 - 1455)

Phase 3: Post – Douglas era (1455 - 1640)

Phase 4: 1640 onwards



Silver locket and seal of Douglas family crest from Threave Castle

Numerous worked metal objects were recovered during the excavation many of these items were utilitarian in design knives, handles from cooking pots, keys giving insight into a functioning community at the castle. There were also a small number of precious silver and gold artefacts recovered, including a silver Maltese cross and locket along with a gold earring and strap-end. Wooden objects were prominent in the assemblage with many wooden vessels being discovered along with carpentry timbers, a wooden rudder was recovered from the harbour area, along with many leather finds such as shoes and off cuts. For a more detailed assessment of the artefacts please see the further reading.

Conclusion

Threave Castle was the power base of the Black Douglases during the 15th century, the family rose to such prominence that their influence became of concern to James II which ultimately led to the family's demise, the castle's sphere of influence also waned shortly after, also with standing multiple sieges the changing political and military climate ultimately led to the castle being put out of commission on purpose. The archaeological data from Threave Castle provides an insight to the workings of a medieval castle with evidence suggesting that the level of self-sufficiency on the island helped make it the stronghold it was.

Further Reading

Good and Tabraham, G L and C J.(1981) '*Excavations at Threave Castle, Galloway, 1974-78*', *Medieval Archaeology*, vol. 25, 1981. Page(s): 90-140

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