



Galloway Glens 'Can You Dig It' Community

Archaeology project – Technical notes.

#6: Castledykes – The Castle of the King

PUBLISHED TUESDAY, 2 JULY 2019

Castledykes (NX 6771 5088) is located within Kirkcudbright, lying to the west of Kirkcudbright Academy and southeast of the sewage works. The monument is accessible by Castledykes road. It appears as a series of grassy banks with scrub woodland covering some portions of the site.



It's History

The first mention of the castle at Kirkcudbright was in 1288, when John Comyn, sheriff of Wigtown, was noted as being the guardian of 'the castle and lands which belonged to the King in Kirkcudbright'. This castle was probably the structure erected at Castledykes. The office of guardian was combined with that of Dumfries and Wigtown in 1291-2.



Castledykes (centre) from an aerial image

During the first phase of the Wars of Independence, Edward I evidently intended Kirkcudbright as a supply port when his fleet lay off the Dee estuary in 1300. The castle was held by the English throughout this period, with Edward I camping at Kirkcudbright for ten days in the summer of that year. Thereafter the king turned his attention to the east of Scotland, leaving the west to his son Edward who may have come to Kirkcudbright in July 1301. Kirkcudbright appears to have been used as supply base again in 1306.

After Edward I's death in 1307, the castle is unlikely to have been significantly used by the English, and the town was reported as waste in 1335-6. The castle of Kirkcudbright was included in a grant of the lordship of Galloway to Edward Bruce, brother of the king, in the early 14th century, but virtually nothing was heard of the castle after that date. There is no record that the castle was used at all by the Douglas family up until their forfeiture in 1455 and the castle probably lay in ruins. Sir Thomas Maclellan acquired the site in 1577 and he appears to have used much of the material from the castle to build his house (Maclellan's Castle) which still stands within the town.

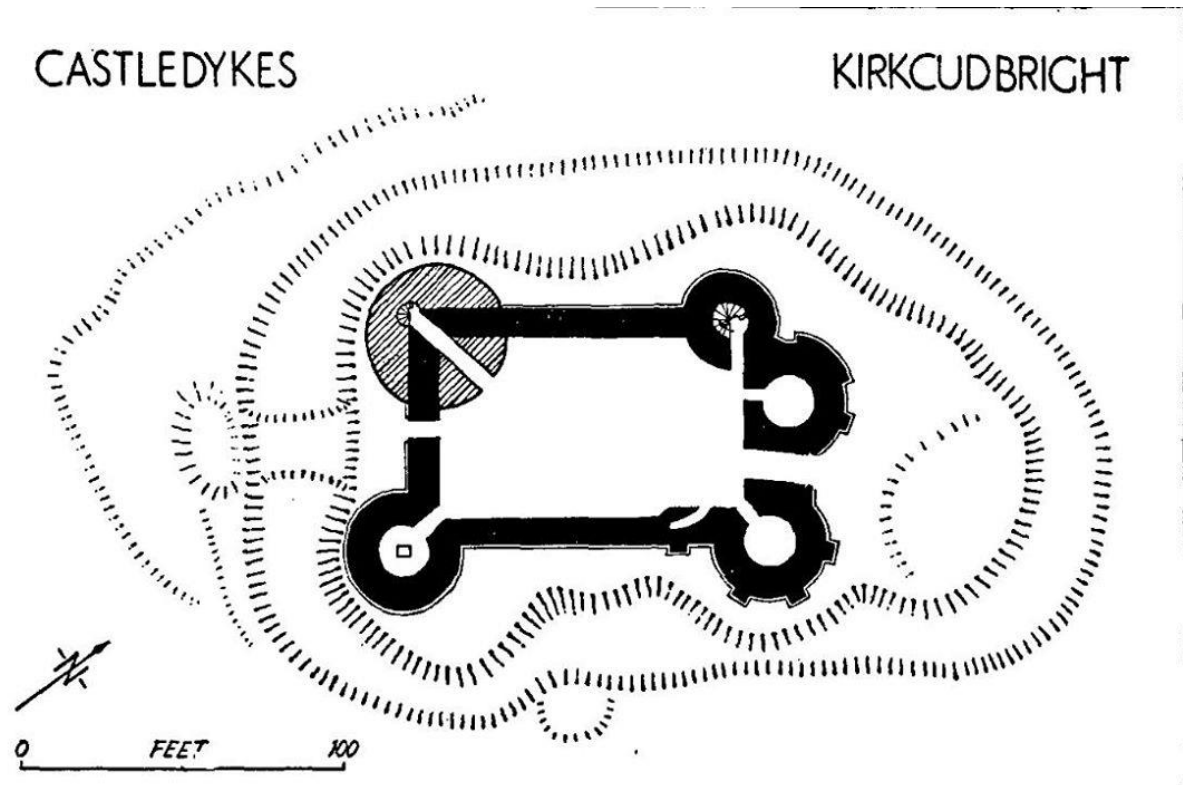
In 1964 Castledykes was recognised as a nationally important site with the motte being designated (and so protected) as a [scheduled monument](#)

The Excavations

The motte at Castledykes was investigated through substantial excavation works by [Robison](#) in the 1911, 1912 and 1913. These works were successful in recording the foundation courses for the curtain wall and corner towers of what appeared to be the late 13th to early 14th century castle.

The layout was revealed to be a rubble-built rectangular enclosure with a round tower at each corner. The eastern tower formed one side of two externally buttressed gatehouse towers, with the other sitting along the northeastern wall, placing the entrance for the castle as coming from the northeast. The buttresses on the gatehouse towers and the adjacent curtain wall are unusual for this period but it is possible that they were designed to carry machicolations near the wall-top, perhaps even arched, as seen at Haughton Castle, Northumberland.

The footings at the western corner revealed this tower to be larger in size and it probably represented the keep. The plan reproduced by the excavators represents this tower as a later addition buttressing that corner of the enclosure inside and out, but this may perhaps represent the sequence of construction.



Plan showing Castledykes in relation to earthwork

The latter tower and the one to the north both contained the remains of spiral staircases, which presumably gave access to the upper floors. Robison wrote that the defences of the outer bailey had disappeared but that he presumed they would have been on a stockade principle and, if so, that no trace of them would remain.

These excavations followed the approach of 'wall chasing' - excavating a series of narrow linear trenches that followed obvious structures. While this was a common approach in the early 20th century, it is now considered a poor strategy as it fails to examine, in plan, the sequential development of sites.



Wall chasing trench from 1911

Since Robison's work, there has only been two further instances of archaeological interventions at Castledykes, both of which were small-scale. In 2002, Brann monitored civil engineering test pits and boreholes in advance of a proposed expansion of the Waste Water Treatment Works. Another watching brief by Rathmell Archaeology in 2005 supported the construction of a pipeline running to the works close to the access road. No significant archaeological features or deposits were recorded by either.

The Finds

Artefacts recovered from the 1911-13 excavations included pottery sherds, fragments of ironwork and a small-toothed comb made from bone. The finds were discussed in more detail by [Dunning, Hodges and Joep](#) in 1957-58.

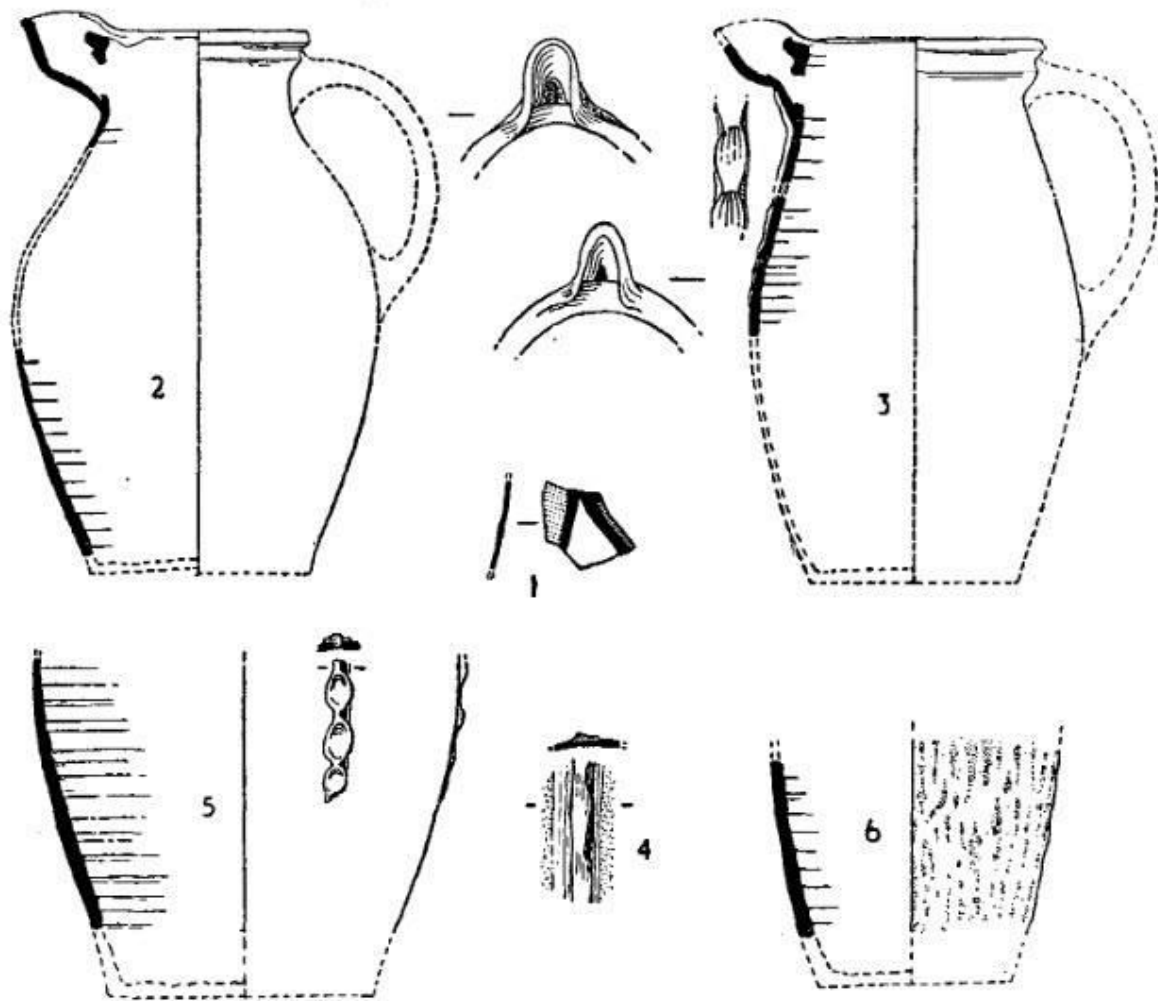


Fig. 3. Fine glazed pottery imported from France. Scale $\times \frac{1}{2}$.

Depiction of imported jugs from Dunning, Hodges & Jope

The pottery represented at least 50 jugs and four cooking pots. There were no dishes, bowls or more specialised shapes. At least six (and probably eight) of the jugs were imports from southwest France. Of the remaining, a variety of styles and fabrics suggested several different sources, some probably being brought from England. A number showed an underlying uniformity of fabric which could have been made at or near Kirkcudbright. The French pottery was identified as being late 13th to early 14th century in date, with one fragment coming from a medieval polychrome pitcher - the only example of this type from Scotland at the time of the article. The transport of this pottery has been associated with the extensive Gascon wine trade to Britain.

These artefacts are held by Dumfries and Galloway Council within the collections of the Stewartry Museum.

Conclusion

No upstanding structures remain of the castle and the site survives as a massive earthwork comprising a roughly oblong mound surrounded by a ditch. Excavations undertaken in the 1910s revealed the layout of the castle as a rectangular enclosure with a round tower at each corner and a substantial gatehouse to the northeast.

Pottery sherds recovered from the excavations were dated to the late 13th to early 14th century, which matches with the short-lived period of use suggested by the historic references.



Modern interpretation of the Motte placed in the Outer Bailey

Further Reading

Robison, J 1914 'Account of the excavation of the Edwardian Castle at Castledykes, Kirkcudbright', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* Vol. 48 pp 381-394

Dunning, G C, Hodges, H W M and Jope, E M 1957-58 'Kirkcudbright Castle, its Pottery and Ironwork', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* Vol. 91 pp 117-138

Created by Rathmell Archaeology for the Galloway Glens, July 2019.

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