

## BURGHEAD

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Pandora's Box, in which Hope alone remained when by its rash opening all objects of desire were dispersed to play havoc among mankind.

There can be little doubt that the Burghead fort is a true archaeological Pandora's Box. Over the past 200 years this magnificent site has been ruthlessly destroyed and from the destruction numerous objects have survived without context to tantalise modern scholars. However, as I hope I shall be able to show, at least some of the major excavation undertaken by Young in the nineteenth century is an extremely useful piece of work.<sup>1,2</sup> We need not waste time here on the enormous previous literature of Burghead.<sup>3</sup> It has been variously described, among other things, as a Danish camp, a Roman camp, a vitrified fort, a broch and a galle fort. I suggest that it is a Pictish fort. One may note briefly, however, some of the important finds from the fort. A Roman coin; the bull symbol stones - (probably somewhere in the region of 25-30 of them are noted in the literature); fragments of a Dark Age slab shrine; Viking metalwork; and numerous bronze spears 'given away to any English tourist who happened to be passing'!

The recent excavation at Burghead was prompted by the offer to the University of Aberdeen of funds to conduct a further excavation on the site. The selection of which area to examine was governed by the limited undisturbed area remaining and the need to examine the western ramparts before they are removed by fairly active marine erosion. Part of the village of Burghead now covers the outer ramparts of the fort which sealed off the end of the promontory, and only fragments of the inner rampart remain, apparently intact. The lower fort was rejected as the ramparts were thoroughly examined by Young in the early eighteen-nineties, and the fort interior much disturbed by cultivation and the intrusion of sewage pipes. Of the upper fort, much of the northern rampart has been pushed down-slope towards the lower installations by an early proprietor, and partly excavated in the nineteenth century: the only apparently intact section being under the coastguard hut. The southern rampart was vandalised in the early nineteenth century to provide material for the construction of the harbour, which is one of the most sheltered on the southern shore of the Moray Firth. The western short rampart, now in acute danger from coastal erosion, appeared to give the best prospect of detailed study and

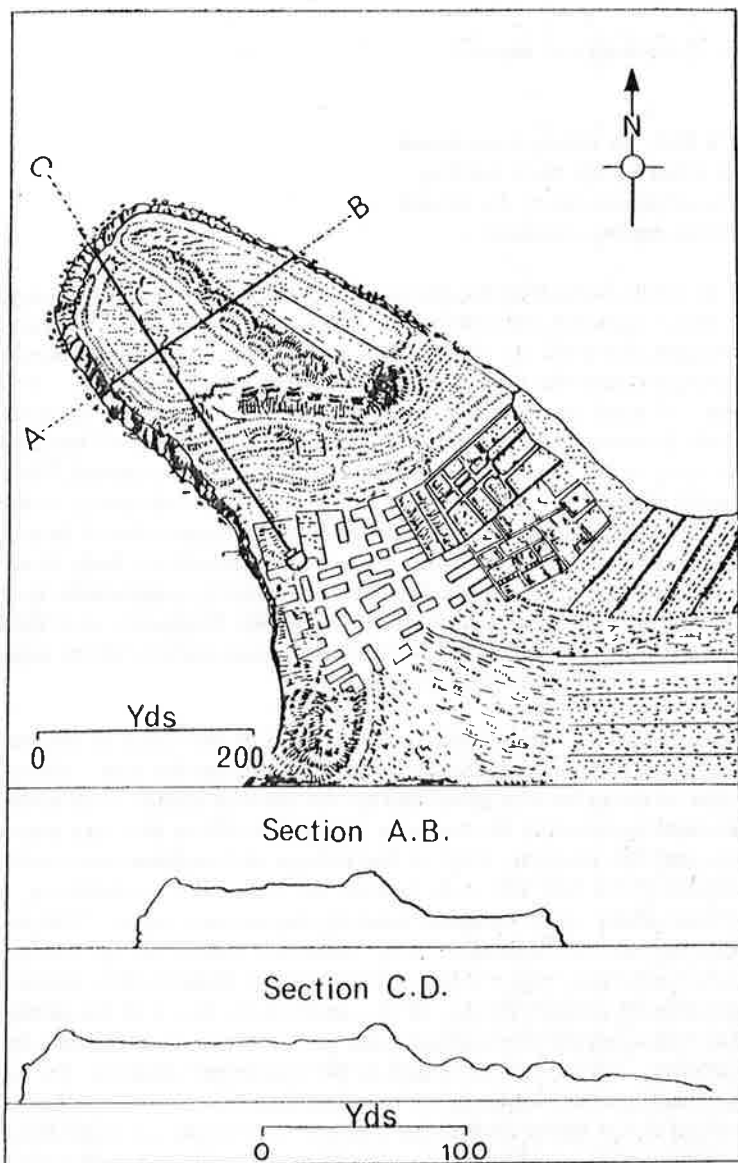


Figure 1. Burghead redrawn from Roy's Military Antiquities. Pl. XXXIII.

three sections were cut, and this brief commentary rests on a study of one of these sections.

The Section. The red sandstone headland forming a concave bay at the eastern end of the extension of the Culbin Sands forms a natural wind-break for westerly gales, and the sand blown up from the coastal beaches appears to have been deposited to a considerable depth on the promontory, and it was on this loose unconsolidated surface that the primary fort was built at Burghead. Above the basal sands lie two thick black carbonaceous layers separated by layers of dark and light sand. The wall of the fort is significantly sited on the upper of the two black layers. Analysis of the material from these carbonaceous layers shows that they contain largely twigs, probably of oak, birch, and willow, particularly very young shoots only one to two years old, and much of the rotted organic matter is probably leaves. No small finds were recorded from any of these horizons. Note the steep seaward drop of these black layers, suggesting that the interior of the fort was probably quite high above the wall foundations. This gully formed on the inside of the wall became a natural point for blowing sand to accumulate after the burning of the fort. Some sand blowing took place during construction, as the building layer overlies a sand-blow in the east. Slight indications of turf layers show stability at various post-fort periods, but there is no indication whatsoever of an occupation layer until just below the pebble horizon near the top of the section. In the lowest of these sand layers there was considerable evidence of burnt timbers close to the wall.

Immediately below the pebble layer a large plank of wood lay on a dry stone foundation close to the rampart. It is tempting to relate this feature to a carbon rich layer to the east of the section. The eastern part of the section ceases to be of interest at this point, as the stratification is clearly truncated by the levelling of the site in 1809, and has a later stony layer associated with the building of the coastguard houses and later rubbish pits. Unfortunately, a significant find of a section of a round soapstone bowl of typical Viking type came from this area. In the west a pebble layer slopes up to the rampart, consisting of a thick scatter of smallish beach stones. In the upper inch of the sand below and the base of the pebbles there was a distinct dark-coloured occupation level containing large quantities of carbon, wood charcoal, shells, animal bone and a very few fragments of rough crude undecorated pottery. No rims or bases were recorded.

On top of the pebble layer a scatter of occupation debris yielded shells, animal bones and fragments of medieval green glazed ware. Two post-holes were recorded in this cobbling. Near the rampart this horizon was overlain by a

mass of fallen rubble from the rampart, and in turn capped by a layer of dark sand stained by percolation from a turf layer which had capped the whole area. The upper few feet are modern accumulations of sand, builders' rubble, rubbish, etc.

The Rampart. The rampart at Burghead varies between 27 and 28 feet thick at the base, and in the section excavated the interior face still stands 10 feet high. There is no evidence of a timber raft foundation or particularly large selected boulders having been used at the base of the wall. Using students suspended over the cliff on ropes, the lower few courses of the exterior face of this wall were exposed and shown to be of massive undressed boulder. There was no evidence of timber in or near the outside face of the wall. The interior revetting face, on the other hand, was extremely carefully constructed of finely dressed and carefully coursed sandstone flags. Every two to three feet upwards the face was set back a few inches giving a step-like appearance. Long well-hewn oak planks were intercoured with the flags at intervals lying parallel to the wall face. Occasionally, and irregularly, transverse planks and logs were set at right angles to the wall, though these seldom penetrated more than a few feet into the wall core. The deepest penetration was 5 feet 2 inches, but none of the others exceeded three feet. At no point where the longitudinal and transverse timbers met was there any evidence of nailing. Indeed, in the sections examined there can be no doubt that nails were not used. There was considerable evidence, however, that some of the transverse beams had projected from the wall into the interior of the fort. The charring of these timbers gave the inner face a rather dilapidated appearance. The core of the wall consisted largely of well-rounded large beach pebbles with surprisingly little debris packing. Occasional fragments of dressed sandstone occurred, presumably rejects from the construction of the revetting face. Both the state of the timbers and the appearance of the inner face of the fort confirmed that it had been destroyed by fire.

Dating of the Rampart. As there were no small finds or any other datable material from the levels of the rampart construction period, three separate Carbon dates have been obtained (1967), all using timber from the rampart sections. They are:

RS1 1610  $\pm$  115 B.P.

RS2 1340  $\pm$  105 B.P.

RS3 1610  $\pm$  120 B.P.

These are based on a half-life of 5730 years which gives dates of 350 A.D.  $\pm$  120 years or 650 A.D.  $\pm$  105 years, taking the fort into the early part of the Pictish period.

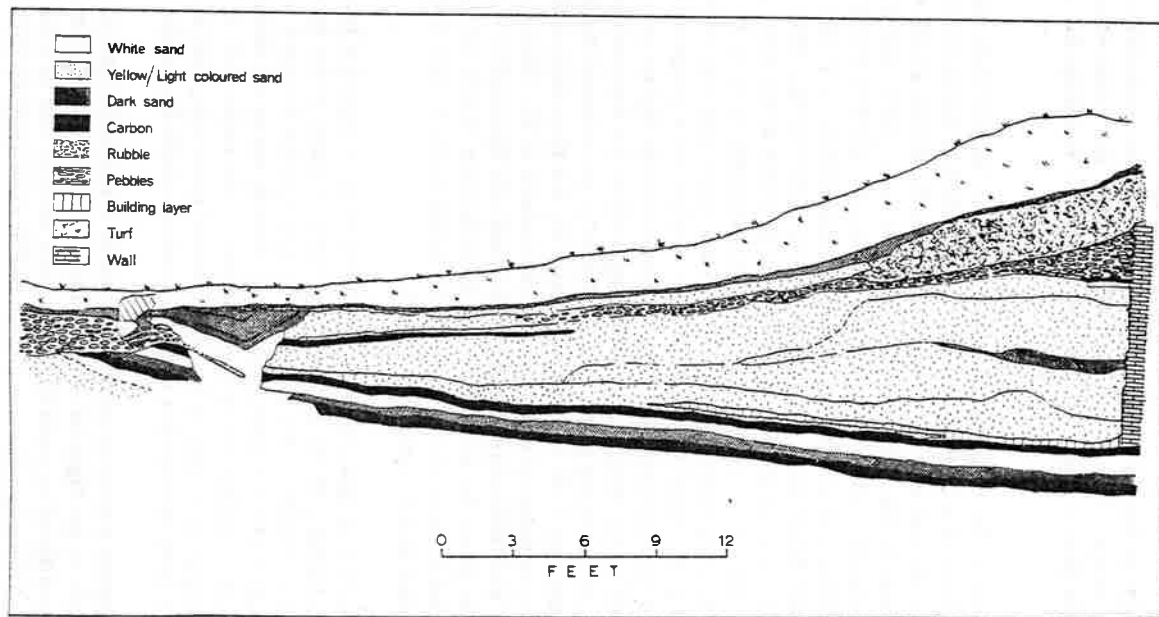


Figure 2. Section across the Western rampart of the upper fort, Burghead.

Discussion. The presence and nature of the black layers in the section below the foundations of the rampart suggests that brushwood had been scattered over the sandy site to facilitate the movement of building materials during construction. As twigs, leaves and oak content exist, the brushwood may have included the waste from the forest clearance required to obtain the timber for the wall.

One must now turn to the enigmatic occupation layer immediately below the cobbling. There was no evidence of a sand accumulation between this layer and the cobbling. On this site this must mean that the dating of the sub-cobbling layer must be close to the early medieval period, i.e. within two or three centuries, and probably almost contemporaneous. Below this horizon there is absolutely no evidence of an occupation layer, suggesting, at first sight, that the fort was either never used or only used very temporarily. This does not accord with the numerous unstratified finds discovered in the fort, particularly the bulls and the slab shrine. An alternative explanation is to be found in close examination of the area between the wall and the slope upwards from the wall to the fort. This gully could easily have been bridged by a timber platform on which a wall walk was established. The platform and its higher structures would have rested on the steps in the revetting wall at the rampart end, and simply been set on the slope at the other. There is no evidence to show how high this structure was built against the rampart, but the conclusion is supported by the presence of the burnt fallen timbers in the lower layers of the sand. If this wall walk was floored with planks as opposed to logs (and planks did project from the wall) the lack of occupation debris on the fort horizon is accounted for in the section close to the wall. It also obviates the need for post-holes which were also absent.

From the section it was also clear that there was no occupation layer between the period of the burning of the fort and the horizon close to the medieval cobbling. Yet for a considerable part of this interval the rampart must have been standing high above the ground surface. Surely some evidence of the use of so fine a structure either for shelter, defence, the outer wall of domestic structures or simply as a quarry for stone would have appeared in the section had the fort been used during this interval between these horizons.

While the few Roman artefacts seem acceptable if the early date of fort is used, particularly in the light of the growing evidence for late Roman forays northward, it is difficult to push the bulls back so far, and impossible for the slab shrine. This suggests occupation of the area right up through the Pictish period. Yet in the sections examined there were no horizons which would in any way indicate these later periods. Nor was there any evidence

of the gradual decay of the wall during this period, e.g. odd stones falling off the top and accumulating in the different levels in the sand. Indeed the upper parts of the rampart seem to have survived until the medieval period. This would suggest that the rampart and its timber works were well maintained until its destruction by fire which came before the major accumulation of sand. With no occupational break in the stratigraphy until the immediate pre-medieval period, it seems one must tentatively suggest the maintenance of the fort and its timber works through to the Dark Age phase. How unfortunate it is that the find spot of the Viking silver horn mount is unknown, and the fragment of a soapstone vessel was unstratified. It would be dishonest to link the destruction with the battle and conflagration at Torfnæs on a Monday in 1029, but the Viking finds cannot be ignored, and I feel that a Celtic Church on these shores would certainly have attracted the Norse at an earlier date, probably in the ninth century.

The relationship between the lower and upper forts is still debatable. In general terms there is a distinct similarity in the construction techniques between the two forts, but close examination of Young's report and his photographs shows significant differences in detail. In the lower fort the timbers appear to have been regularly placed, and nailed, whereas in the upper fort there is absolutely no evidence of nailing, and the use of timber appears to be random and of limited use as a constructional element. Indeed, it may have been in a much greater part related to the requirements of the structure inside the fort. With the elements that are left, there is no way at present of examining the relationship between the two structures. It seems obvious that the upper one would be constructed first, and it may be suggested that the lower was better built at a time when the pressure to build quickly was not so great, though the time interval between the two periods could have been very short.

One must therefore interpret the section as:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Rampart</u>	<u>Interior &amp; Environs</u>
4th century	Building of upper fort Fort and defences well maintained	Roman coins, etc. Bulls Slab shrine
9th century	Firing of fort Unoccupied - sand accumulation	
12th-13th century	Medieval occupation	

One baulks at the uniqueness of the site, but then we know little of Pictish defensive centres, and when we know more, Burghead may not seem so odd.

Timber-laced structures are well-known both in Europe and Scotland centuries before this, and indeed the technique is still used at the present day. There is no reason why it should not be used in the Pictish period.

Conclusion. This Pandora's Box has once again been opened, I hope not rashly, and as ever, this time by its C-14 dates, it has produced something to tantalise mankind. If it is indeed a Pictish fort, 'Hope' at least has not yet vanished. The numerous unexamined fortifications of Scotland may yet produce structures of similar type and date, and so remove the uniqueness of Burghead. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the outer eastern ramparts of Burghead were thrown down into the intervening ditches and built over. Thus, in the ditches, the early horizons may be preserved intact for further investigation.

#### Notes

1. Young, Hugh W., 'Notes on the ramparts of Burghead as revealed by recent excavations', P.S.A.S. XXV, 435-47 (1890-91).
2. Young, Hugh W., 'Notes on further excavations at Burghead', P.S.A.S. XXVII, 86-91 (1892-93).
3. Macdonald, James, 'Historical Notices of "The Broch", or Burghead, in Moray, with an account of its antiquities', P.S.A.S. IV, 2-51 (1860-62).