

Discovery and Excavation in Scotland

Updated on 15/06/2007

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PROJECT TITLE/SITE NAME:	Urquhart Castle
PROJECT CODE:	HSCO-90309-2012-01
PARISH:	URQUHART AND GLENMORISTON
NAME OF CONTRIBUTOR:	David Murray
NAME OF ORGANISATION:	Kirkdale Archaeology
TYPE(S) OF PROJECT:	Archaeological Monitoring
NMRS NO(S):	NH52NW 3
SITE/MONUMENT TYPE(S):	CASTLE, FORT, MOTTE AND BAILEY
SIGNIFICANT FINDS:	None
NGR (2 letters, 8 or 10 figures)	Centred c. NH 5306 2858
START DATE (this season)	14 November 2011
END DATE (this season)	14 November 2011
PREVIOUS WORK (incl. <i>DES</i> ref.)	
MAIN (NARRATIVE) DESCRIPTION: (May include information from other fields)	A watching brief was maintained during small excavations designed to hold a series of permanent survey markers. Sixteen small trenches were dug. Some of the locations involved drilling pins into bedrock or masonry, and these were not monitored. All the trenches measured approximately 300 x 300 mm in plan and were 150 mm deep. Some of the small holes revealed structural remains, but most disturbed only soil.
PROPOSED FUTURE WORK:	
CAPTION(S) FOR ILLUSTRS:	
SPONSOR OR FUNDING BODY:	Historic Scotland
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ARCHIVE LOCATION (intended/deposited)	Archive to be deposited in NMRS

**HISTORIC SCOTLAND PROPERTIES IN CARE
MINOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORKS 2012**

Urquhart Castle: Watching Brief, November 2011

HS PIC Index Number: 90309

SITE: Urquhart Castle

N.G.R.: Centred c. NH 5306 2858

DESCRIPTION: Watching brief during the installation of a series of permanent survey markers around Urquhart Castle

PROJECT CODE: HSCO-90309-2012-01

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MARCH 2012

INTRODUCTION

Under the terms of the PIC call-off contract, Historic Scotland requested archaeological monitoring to be provided by Kirkdale Archaeology for a series of small excavations at Urquhart Castle (Fig.1). These were designed to hold a series of permanent survey markers, with their locations intended to have a high degree of intervisibility. A total of sixteen small trenches were dug, with some further survey points abandoned, and some new ones added while on site. Some of the locations involved drilling pins into bedrock or masonry, and these were not archaeologically monitored. The initial numbering system for these survey points supplied by Historic Scotland has been retained to avoid confusion, but because of the alterations listed above this means that the trench numbers are not necessarily consecutive. Additional trenches are marked by the suffix 'a' - *e.g.* 10a. All the trenches measured approximately 300 mm x 300 mm in plan and were 150 mm deep.

The work took place over a single day, 14th November 2011.

DESCRIPTION

Marker 1 was to be drilled into the concrete of a tank at the S end of the Castle's ditch and was not monitored.

Marker 2 was near the S end of this same ditch, on its W edge. This was an area of rough grass and excavation exposed mid-brown silt rich in small sub angular stones throughout its depth.

Marker 3 lay in the base of the ditch, to the SW of the drawbridge. This revealed pale brown silt with a few small sub angular stones throughout, seemingly increasing in density towards the base of the exposed sequence.

Marker 4 was located to the N of this drawbridge, on the outer (NW) side of the ditch. The first attempt at excavation exposed a cable buried just below the turf, so the marker's location was shifted slightly to the S. The new location's sequence comprised 70 - 80 mm of pale brown silty clay with few stones present; below this it became very rich in stones.



Figure 1: Plan showing the location of Urquhart Castle and the permanent survey markers.
Inset No. 2 © Crown copyright. All rights reserved 2012. Licence number 100036933.

Marker 5 was to be located on the inner lip of the ditch; just to the NE of the entrance path which is here flanked by a ruinous wall. The excavated soil comprised dark brown silty clay, which filled the trench to the SW, but to the NE extended to a depth of only 70 - 80 mm. Below this was a line of four stones, which in the small exposed area seemed to have a face running parallel to the ruinous wall 1.9 m to the SW.

Marker 6 was located at the E end of the base of the ditch. This area consisted of pale brown silty clay with many stones and roots throughout.

Marker 7 was to be sited on the steep slope rising above Loch Ness to the W of the Castle tower, an area thick with vegetation. Here the soil comprised a loose dark brown silt full of roots.

Marker 8 was on the spur of a promontory above the Loch, just to the E of the tower. Again dark brown silt rich in root matter was exposed. The presence of an old (severed) electric cable at the base of the hole indicated prior disturbance.

Marker 9 comprised a pin to be drilled into the door sill on the E side of the tower; this was not monitored.

Marker 10 was to the S of the site of 10a, at the base of a stepped buttress to the Castle wall, where it changes angle. Here 70 - 80 mm of dark brown silt sealed a large, undressed sub rectangular stone, filling the area of the trench.

The site of a new marker, 10a, was the next to be excavated. This lay outside the Castle walls, just to the S of the tower. Here the upper 100 mm of fill comprised a dark brown silt rich in roots, below which was a similar soil rich in mortar and sandstone chunks.

Marker 11 was abandoned and replaced by 11a to the E of the original location. This was again at a change in angle of the Castle wall, and was in an area of thick vegetation, mostly

ivy. Here 100 mm of dark brown root infested silt covered two stones. That to the N was loose, while the other may have been bedrock.

Marker 12 was again outside the Castle walls, just to the E of the NE end of the 'smithy'. The site was at the top of a small cliff over the Loch and was covered in brambles and ivy. The sequence consisted entirely of root filled dark brown silt.

Marker 13 was replaced by a pin screwed into the path.

Marker 14 was located 1.1 m to the W of the chapel site. The trench exposed up to 150 mm of dark brown silt over irregular bedrock, which caused the location to be moved 100 mm to the SE. Here the same soil was mortar flecked, with no sign of bedrock.

Marker 15 was to be excavated in the SW corner of the 'Great Chamber', in a raised area with bedrock poking through, which rises 3 - 4 m above the rest of the floor of this building. Here 100 mm of dark brown silt sealed a similar deposit rich in mortar. In the event it was decided to drill this marker into the bedrock.

Marker 16 was to the SW of 15, just to the W of the 'Hall'. In this hole 15 mm of dark brown silt overlay irregular bedrock.

Marker 17 was to be drilled into masonry, and markers 18 and 19 were abandoned.

Marker 20 was located just to the S of the ruined dovecot, on the SE corner of a terrace. Here, 150 mm of dark brown silt covered a deposit of small stones, without evidence for mortar, and silt.

Marker 21 was excavated on the summit of the motte. Here 150 mm of a dark grey clayey silt covered a similar deposit rich in stones.

Marker 22 was a pin drilled into bedrock, and Marker 23 was abandoned.

CONCLUSIONS

The most interesting archaeological result from this exercise is undoubtedly the possible wall in the trench for Marker 5. Unfortunately the small size of the excavation means that little can be said about this - even whether it actually was a wall at all, or a fortuitous arrangement of stones. No evidence for mortar was noted, although the limited area visible was quite convincing of a deliberate structural arrangement. The drum shaped towers of the entrance gate suggest that this has been a point of access since the early medieval period, so a wall line funnelling access through this area is a possibility, and could be of considerable age.

Possible structural evidence was also uncovered from the site of Marker 10, located below a stepped buttress at a change in angle of the castle's outer wall. Here stones observed at the base of the trench may represent a further step down to this buttress - although they could also be rubble, or even bedrock. Surprisingly few other trenches produced evidence for rubble or mortar in their profiles. Marker 10a, to the N of 10, is the best example of this, bottoming onto a mix of sandstone fragments and mortar. In this case there is a collapse of the castle wall just to the S of the excavated area, which provides a likely source for this material.

The variations in soil types observed tend to reflect the topography and vegetation in the vicinity of the excavated area. Markers 3 and 6, both at the base of the outer ditch, produced paler soils richer in clay than elsewhere. This doubtless reflects the damp conditions at the base of this feature. Elsewhere, excavations within heavily vegetated areas produced dark brown organic rich silts.

This work has revealed how even key-hole scale excavation can reveal interesting glimpses of the Castle's history, and it is therefore recommended that an archaeological watching brief be attached to any future ground-breaking works.

LIST OF DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHS

No.	Description	From	Date
1	Trench 2, general shot	NW	14/11/2011
2	Trench 2, detail	NW	14/11/2011
3	Trench 3 being dug	SW	14/11/2011
4	Trench 3, detail	SW	14/11/2011
5	Trench 4, general shot	NW	14/11/2011
6	Trench 4, detail	NW	14/11/2011
7	Trench 6, general shot	NE	14/11/2011
8	Trench 6, detail	NE	14/11/2011
9	Trench 7, general shot	W	14/11/2011
10	Trench 7, detail	SW	14/11/2011
11	Trench 8, general shot	SW	14/11/2011
12	Trench 8, general shot	S	14/11/2011
13	Trench 8, detail	SW	14/11/2011
14	Trench 8, general shot	E	14/11/2011
15	Trench 10a, general shot	N	14/11/2011
16	Trench 10a, general shot	S	14/11/2011
17	Trench 10a, detail	N	14/11/2011
18	General shot of Castle	NW	14/11/2011
19	General shot of E end of Urquhart Castle	W	14/11/2011
20	Trench 10, general shot	N	14/11/2011
21	Trench 10, general shot	N	14/11/2011
22	Trench 10, detail	N	14/11/2011
23	Trench 11a, general shot	W	14/11/2011
24	Trench 11a, detail	W	14/11/2011
25	Trench 11a, detail	W	14/11/2011
26	Trench 12, general shot	SW	14/11/2011
27	Trench 12, detail	SW	14/11/2011
28	Trench 20, general shot	W	14/11/2011
29	Trench 20, detail	W	14/11/2011
30	Trench 21, general shot	SW	14/11/2011
31	Trench 21, detail	W	14/11/2011
32	Trench 14, general shot	SW	14/11/2011
33	Trench 14, detail	SW	14/11/2011
34	Trench 15, proposed location	NW	14/11/2011
35	Trench 16, general shot	W	14/11/2011
36	Trench 16, detail	S	14/11/2011
37	Trench 5, general shot	W	14/11/2011
38	Trench 5, detail	SW	14/11/2011
39	Trench 5, detail	SW	14/11/2011
40	Trench 5, detail	NW	14/11/2011