

## Excavations at Craigievar Castle, Aberdeenshire

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### ABSTRACT

*In the summer of 1990 the National Trust for Scotland funded an excavation to increase their knowledge of Craigievar Castle. This excavation revealed the remains of the east wall and part of the south wall of the original barmkin, along with two contemporary stone drains and a few post-holes. The excavation also recovered coins, pottery and glass.*

### INTRODUCTION

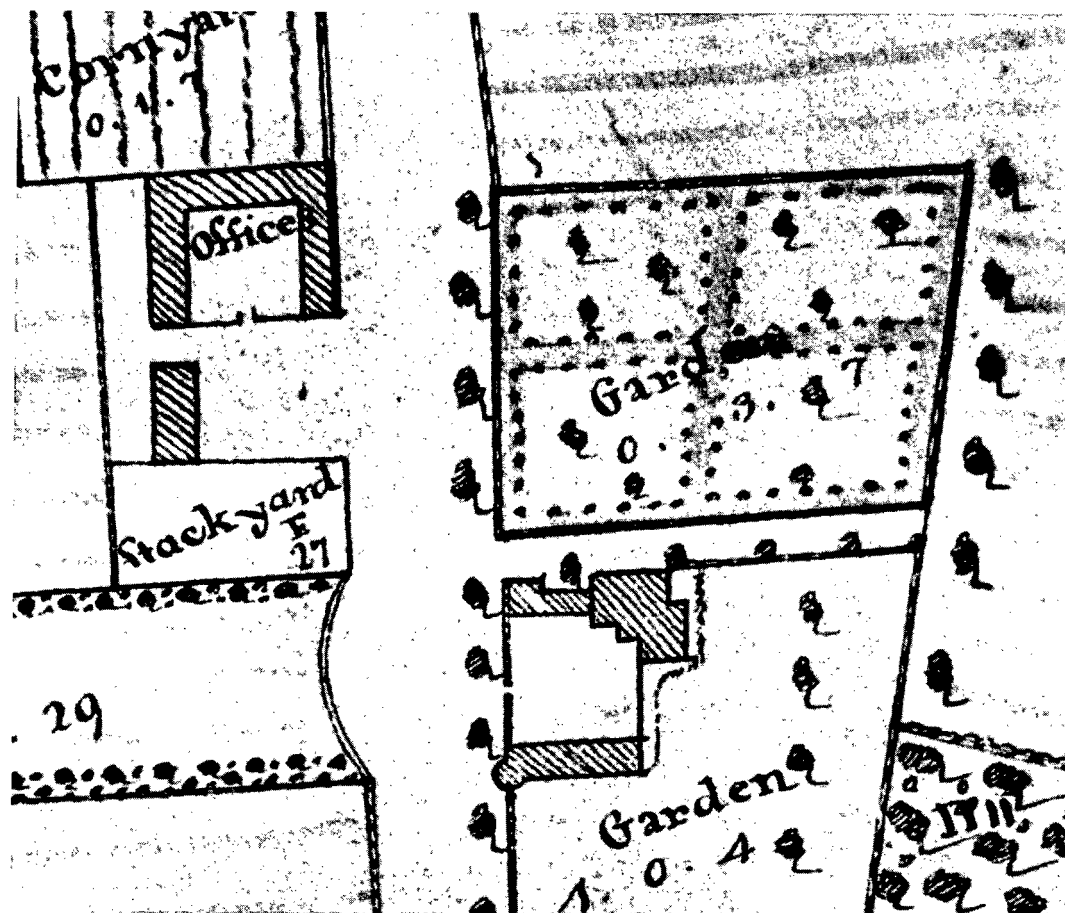
Aberdeenshire, now part of Grampian Region, is well known for its great castles. Of the later castles, built in the 17th century, many carried on the tradition of building a contiguous courtyard, or barmkin, although the defensive need for its surrounding wall was rarely required by that time. Today most of these castles have lost their barmkins or have only fragmentary remains, and little is known about their design (for the Lowlands, see Good & Tabraham 1988). However, at Craigievar Castle, in the parish of Leochel-Cushnie (NJ 56670748), there exists an almost complete stretch of barmkin wall.

No contemporary records are known to exist that describe the interior of the courtyard at Craigievar, although one can assume that there were stables and byres, a brewery, a smithy, and other necessary buildings.

There are, however, within the castle, two 18th-century plans which, though differing in some of the structural details that they depict, do show definitive evidence of a barmkin wall enclosing a courtyard with internal buildings. One, a plan by George Brown, dated 1776 (illus 1), shows the layout of the policies with walls and buildings intact; there is a round tower at the south-west corner of the barmkin and a square tower at the north-west corner. In a later plan, drawn in 1791 (illus 2), the south wall and its range of buildings have gone, but the east and west walls and the north range (without a square tower) survive.

Since the National Trust for Scotland bought the property from the Forbes-Sempill family in 1963, they have tried to increase their knowledge of the castle, and in so doing to update the information for visitors. The Trust decided that an archaeological excavation might clarify the discrepancies between the two 18th-century plans. If any evidence of structures survived these might be displayed to the public, thus aiding the interpretation of the castle and its domestic life.

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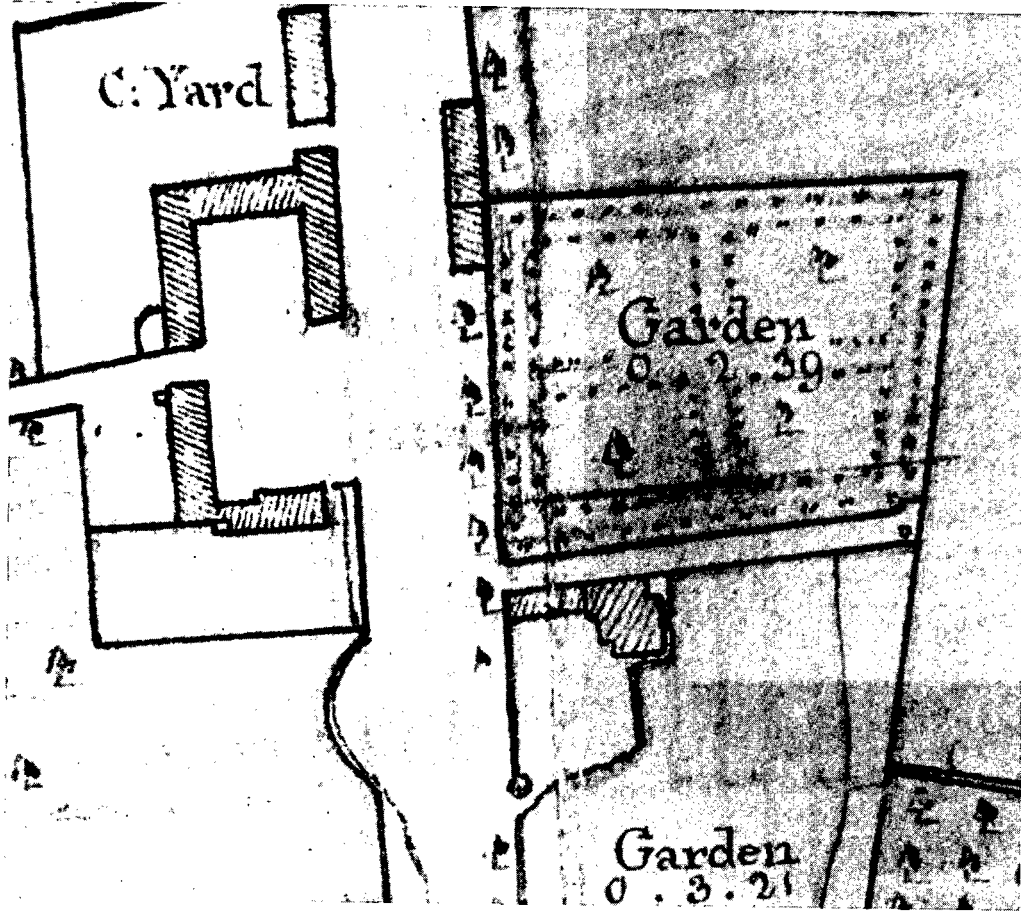


ILLUS 1 Plan by George Brown, dated 1776

## BACKGROUND HISTORY

The estate of Craigievar belonged to the Mortimer family from the mid 15th century to the early 17th century. They began to build the present castle towards the end of their ownership. However, in 1610 lack of funds forced them to sell the estate. It was bought by William Forbes of Menie, who had gone in for commerce, mostly by dealings in the Low Countries and in Danzig, and who thus became known as 'Danzig Willie', or Willie the Merchant. He continued with the building of the castle which is recorded as having been completed in 1626. The name of the architect and mason is uncertain, but he is generally thought to have been I Bell or David Bell (Cruden 1960, 170, 172), one of the great master-masons responsible for some of Aberdeenshire's fine 17th-century castles.

Unfortunately Willie the Merchant did not have long to enjoy his new residence, as he died a year later in 1627. He was succeeded by his son (another William) who was created a Baronet of Nova Scotia by Charles I. As Laird of Craigievar during the Civil War he is

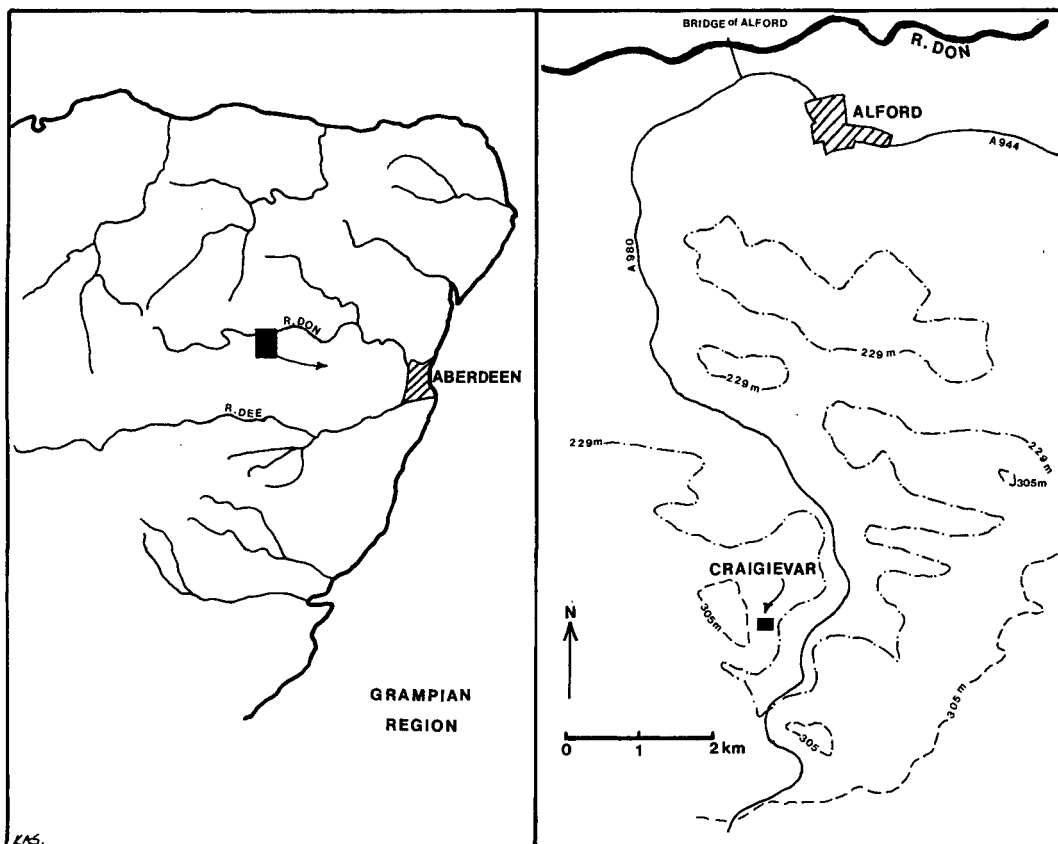


ILLUS 2 Plan, dated 1791

recorded as having transported 'his hails victuals of Fintray' to Craigievar in order that they be 'kept from plundering'. This would seem to imply that Craigievar had a defensive strength which was seen as a great asset.

## SETTING

Dominating the valley of the Leochel Burn, the castle sits on a shelf of the east-facing slope of Craigievar Hill, a hill of schist covered by Quaternary fluvio-glacial drift deposits of till. At an altitude of 264 m OD, the castle possesses a fine view to the north-east, east and south-east over Corrennie Moor and the Leochel Burn valley (illus 3). The valley also contains a route from Banchory, on the River Dee, to Alford, on the River Don. Built on an L-plan, the castle seems to grow directly out of the hillside and rises to a height of seven storeys, terminating in a profusion of pinnacles and ornamental mouldings (illus 4).



ILLUS 3 Location map

To the west the ground slopes down to the remaining west wall of the barmkin. Here, a flight of steps leads from the original entrance through the wall, to the east of which there is now a large level lawn. A sweeping gravel driveway leads up to the castle from the south while the ground to the east of the castle falls steeply away to the valley below.

### EXISTING STRUCTURAL EVIDENCE

The west wall, with its surviving walkway, contains the original entrance to the courtyard. This round-arched gateway has an alcove on either side, each with a gun-loop facing west, to protect the approach. At the south end, the wall terminates in a picturesque small round tower. On the east side of the wall, facing the castle, are two 19th-century ramped buttresses.

Projecting eastwards from the round tower are the scant remains of a wall, c 0.50 m wide. The west end of this wall is recessed and is bonded into the tower and forms the south side of the doorway. It is thus an integral part of the present tower.

At the north end of the remaining barmkin wall there are scant remains of a short length



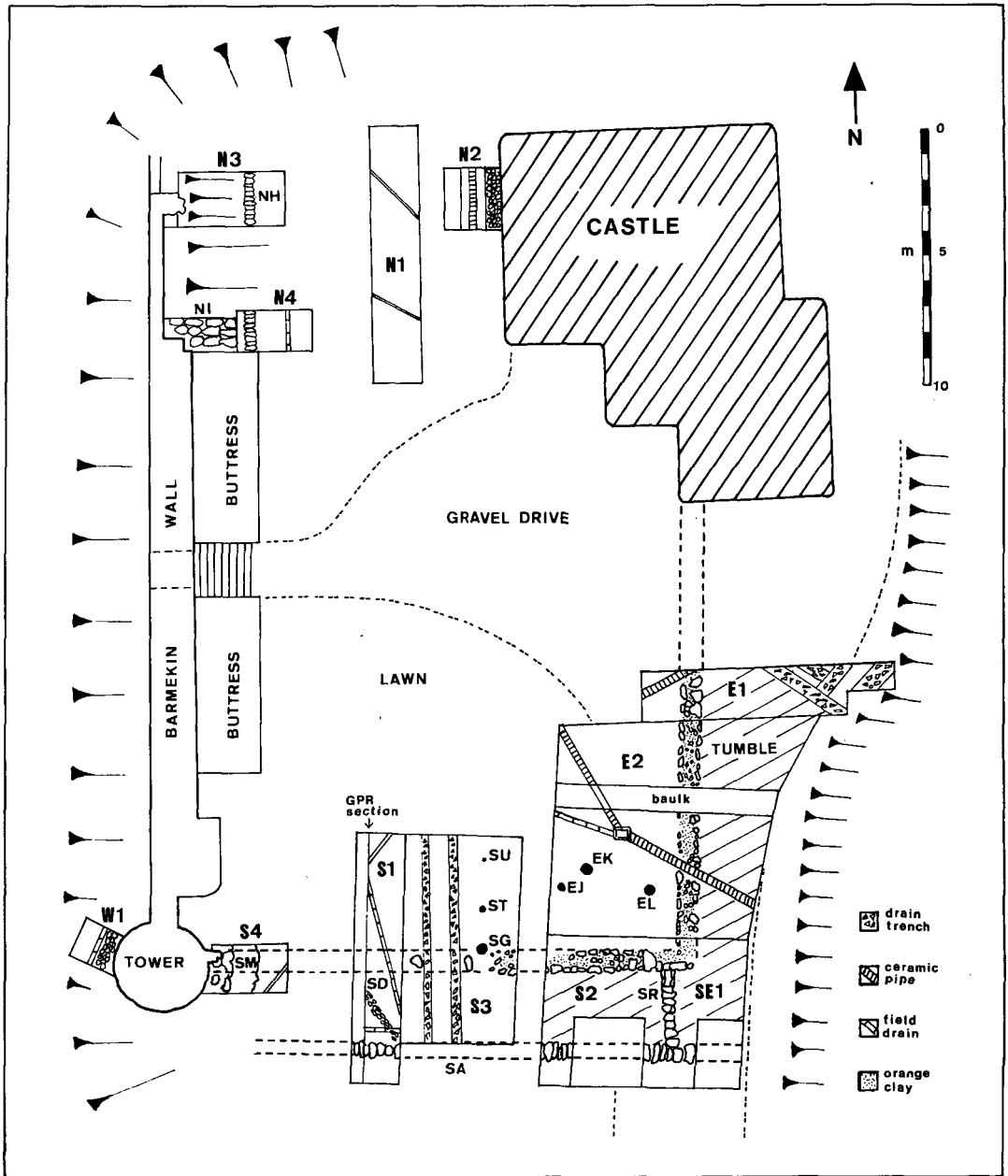
ILLUS 4 Craigievar Castle, from the south

of clay-built wall, projecting eastwards towards the castle. In this area, repairs to the barmkin wall in 1990 necessitated the removal of the facing stones on the east side. This revealed an earlier wall face which contained part of a small alcove or aumbry. On the same section of wall, next to the northern buttress, the remains of the return of a wall projecting eastwards was visible.

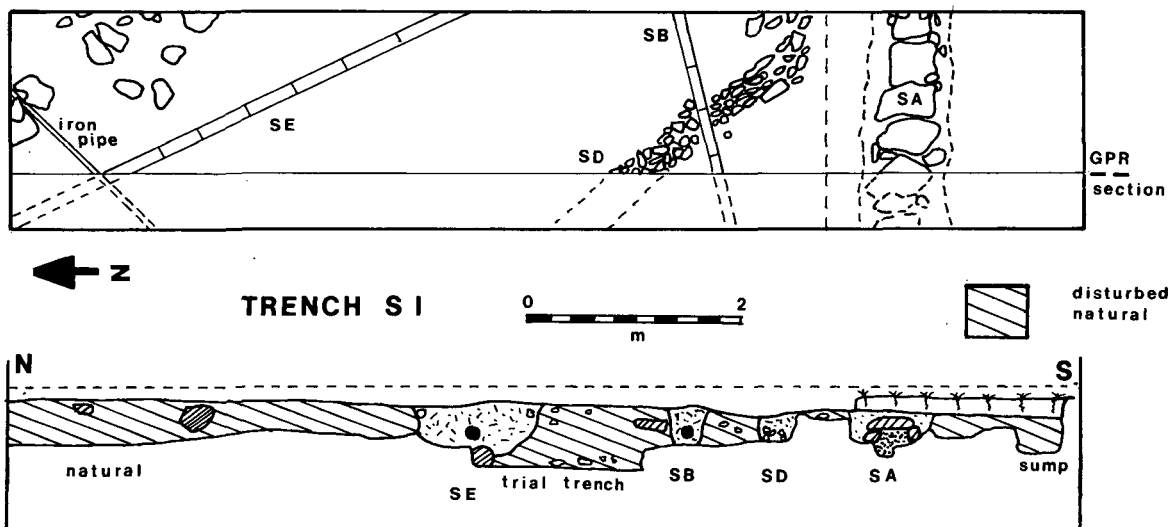
Prior to the excavations, a ground-radar survey was carried out by Oceanfix International Ltd. This was based on the same grid as the excavation to allow for later comparison. Although the survey results were not fully available before the excavation started, they did appear to be sufficiently encouraging to suggest that some internal structures still survived.

## THE EXCAVATION

Two trial trenches, N1 and S1, were cut across the north and south areas of the site where structures were indicated on Brown's plan of 1776. A third trench, E1, was laid across the area where the east wall had stood, now beneath the gravel driveway of the castle (illus 5).



ILLUS 5 Excavation site plan



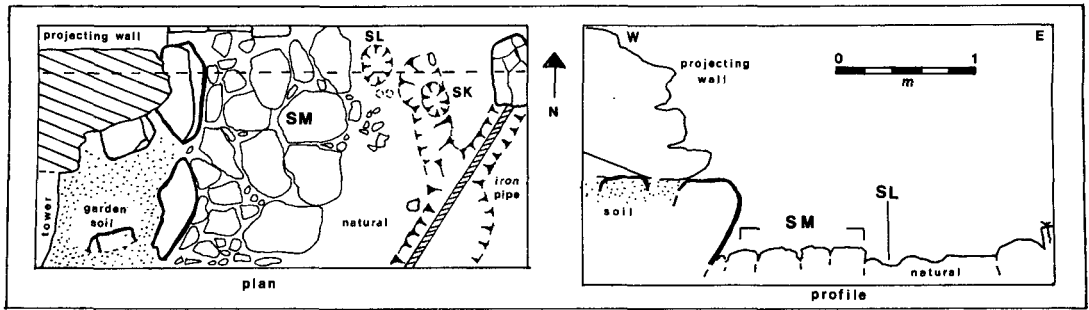
ILLUS 6 Plan of Trench S1 and eastern section, showing the level upper surface of natural

Excavation of N1 proved negative, while S1 revealed a large stone drain (SA) running across the trench from west to east with a smaller stone drain (SD) running diagonally towards it. This trench also contained a number of relatively modern field drains. It was noticeable in each of the two trenches that a remarkably level upper surface of the natural boulder clay lay immediately below the topsoil (illus 6). Only in E1, 0.6 m below ground surface, were the remains of a wall found (EF) with an area of loose stones lying to the east of it.

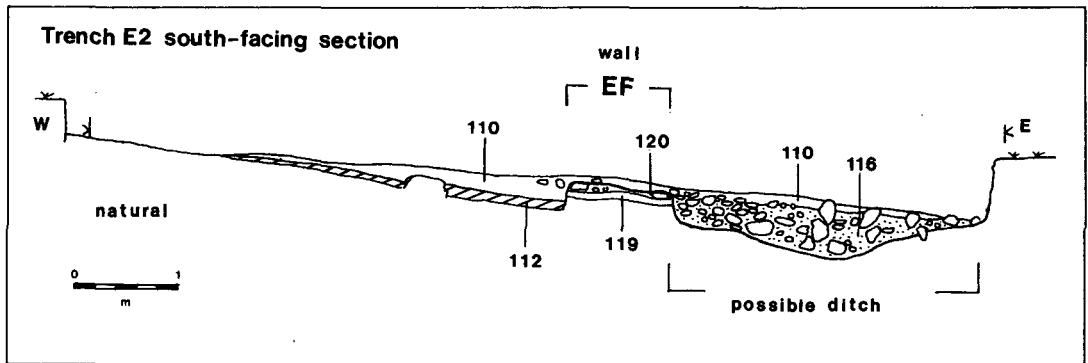
An area between the east and south trenches was opened up; this was cut by a number of 19th- and 20th-century drains, but excavation revealed a layer (110) of dark humic earth containing fragments of pottery, clay pipes, glass and bones, all of differing dates and obviously redeposited. This layer thickened as it ran eastwards and in turn overlay an area of loose stones on the eastern side of the trench. When layer 110 was removed, the basal course of the east wall of the barmkin was revealed as an outer and inner row of facing stones which were set into orange clay. The core of this wall consisted of orange clay and small stones.

Part of the basal course of the south wall survived from the south-east corner for some 8 m westwards; thereafter, the remains were reduced to two single stones on the line of the wall, before eventually disappearing altogether. A large boulder lying to the east of the wall had probably been a quoin. Again the stones were set in orange clay; within the clay infill a coin of Elizabeth I, dated 1573, was found. A trench was cut against the east side of the round tower, in the area where the easterly projecting wall stood. This revealed a row of large stones lying 0.5 m out from the base of the tower, following the curve of the tower. The remains of the projecting wall overlay these stones (illus 7). At a lower level an area of rough paving stones lay against the outer face of these stones. A small investigative trench against the west side of the round tower proved that the row of large stones did not continue round the tower. Two more drains, however, were uncovered.

Abutting the southern face of the south wall was a stone drain (SR), cut into the natural,



ILLUS 7 Plan and section of Trench S4, against the east side of the tower



ILLUS 8 Section of Trench E2

which ran south into a continuation of the stone drain (SA). Where it abutted against the wall the drain had no capstones but as it ran southwards, towards (SA), capstones had been placed over it. The drain did not cut the wall, nor was it cut by it.

The remains of both the east and south walls sat on a layer of greyish-brown soil, 50–100 mm thick, probably the original land surface. No evidence was found of a foundation trench on any stretch of the surviving wall. The natural swept up to the outer faces of both the east and the south walls.

Against the east wall, and sealed beneath layer 110, were the remnants of an earlier horizon (112), mottled grey-black (illus 8). From within this layer came two coins of James VI, and a half of a circular stone gaming piece. To the east of the wall, beneath the stone tumble, the remains of a possible shallow ditch, 3 m wide, survived.

No evidence of internal walling was found within the courtyard, where the south range was depicted on Brown's plan. However, six post-holes were found in this area; three of them, SG, ST and SU, formed a straight line, with SG, the deepest and most convincing, lying hard up against the internal face of the south wall. The post-holes were covered by layer 110.

In the area of the north range, apart from the initial trial trench N1, three other trenches were cut. One, N2, was cut against the west wall of the castle, where the junction with the exterior north wall of the barmkin might have been expected. Again, apart from three later





ILLUS 9 Coin of Elizabeth I, dated 1573, found within the south wall of the barmkin

drains, no other structural evidence survived. Another trench, N3, was laid out against the barmkin wall, in the area where the remains of the clay-built wall survived. Here the ground sloped rapidly away from the west wall with only a slight build-up of soil above the natural. A third stone-built drain (NH) was found but no structural evidence of the north range survived.

A fourth trench, N4, was cut in the corner against the north buttress and the east face of the standing barmkin wall. This proved that a group of stones (NI) were not contemporary with the north range, but had been placed there at a later date; the stones overlay a dark humic layer containing 20th-century pottery, which in turn overlay some builders' rubble from the time that the buttresses were built.

## THE FINDS

The majority of finds dated from the 17th century to the early 20th century. Any mid- to late-20th-century finds were generally found in the topsoil. Only four artefacts were found in a stratified context, three of these being from the same horizon, layer 112, against the east wall. Both the James VI coins (see the coin report, on fiche) would have been in common use in the 1620s when the construction of the castle was nearing completion. The finding of the well-worn Elizabethan I coin of 1573, within the foundations of the east wall, demonstrates that the wall must have been built a number of years after that date as the coin had obviously been in circulation for some time before being lost (illus 9).

Unfortunately the pottery sherds were from a redeposited horizon but did nevertheless include some interesting material (see the report, on fiche). One of the more interesting larger groups consisted of earthenware, in an orange to grey fabric, of Scottish and Dutch/German manufacture. In this group were body-sherds of pipkins and a leg from a tripod pipkin or jug, typical of the German wares. Similar material was found at Scalloway Castle (Lindsay 1983, 567–9 & fig 6). A few sherds of this fabric could be of 17th-century date, although the

majority appear to be 18th and/or early 19th century. Sherds of a Delftware-type tin-glazed earthenware are of the same date range, though again a few may be earlier. Also present were sherds of German stoneware, with a single sherd from a blue-decorated Westervald vessel probably of the 18th century.

The fragments of clay pipes all appear to date to the 17th and 18th centuries, with approximately half of the assemblage being of Dutch manufacture (see the report, on fiche).

The majority of the glass assemblage consisted of bottle-glass, with many examples of 17th- or 18th-century wine bottles (see the report on fiche, illus 11). A few finer pieces of glass included two neck and shoulder fragments of late 18th-century medicine bottles and the foot of a wine glass. The earliest glass appeared to be fragments of late medieval window glass showing shaping by a chipping technique.

## DISCUSSION

Today, there is a considerable drop in height of 1.5 m between the ground at the entrance gateway on the external (western) side of the barmkin wall and the ground on the inner side of the wall at the foot of the stairs.

At some time in the late 19th or early 20th century, two large stone buttresses were built to strengthen and support the west wall. This work would have necessitated digging foundation trenches and would have caused considerable disturbance. It is presumed that the stairs from the entrance gateway were inserted at the same time.

An early 19th-century etching in the castle illustrates the area prior to the buttresses being built and shows the ground falling from the barmkin wall towards the castle. A similar incline still exists to the north of the castle today. As a result, there must have been, as there still is, a serious drainage problem, especially during heavy rain, with water sweeping down the slope to be halted by the east wall of the barmkin. As boulder clay does not drain well it must have resulted in considerable flooding. This may account for the position of the drain (SR), with a small channel leading off from the lower end of the courtyard, through the wall and into the open drain. Indeed, to judge by the number of drains criss-crossing the site, drainage has evidently been a continual problem over the years.

The level upper surface of the natural ground in the western area, as well as the absence of any structural remains, suggest a deliberate clearance of the site. The lack of any stratigraphy above the drain (SA), on the extreme edge of the disturbed area, points to the wholesale removal of soil; this landscaping and the building of the buttresses were probably part of the attempts to alleviate the flooding problem. The footings of the east wall and the remains of the south wall have survived because they were downslope and thus away from the area principally affected. The midden-like make-up of layer 110 suggests the dumping of material to build up a level area outside the present entrance to the castle. The artefacts suggest an early to mid-20th-century date for this landscaping.

The absence of a foundation trench on the east side of the east wall of the barmkin may be the result of the shallow ditch being cut after the wall was built. On Brown's plan (illus 1) a line is drawn on the east side of the wall in a similar position to this ditch. This must have made the footing of the wall rather unstable. All the tumble lay on the outer side, away from the courtyard, which may mean that the wall collapsed outwards owing to the lack of a foundation trench.

The south range had certainly disappeared by 1791 as is evident on the plan of that date (illus 2). With no evidence of any internal walling being found it is suggested that the south

range may have been of a wooden lean-to type, using posts and wooden partitions, rather than stone walling. The reorganization of the western area would have destroyed any evidence of other post-holes there. A number of pieces of stone roofing-slabs were found in the area which may indicate that the range was roofed with this material.

Although Brown's plan shows only one round tower at the south-west corner, Macgibbon & Ross (1887, 104), followed by Tranter (1977, 37), refer to a second round tower in the south-east corner. Where they obtained their information from is unknown, but certainly archaeological evidence revealed no such tower having existed in that area.

Apart from the slight build-up of material, layer 112, against the east wall, no other contemporary occupation horizon was found. In his guidebook, W D Simpson suggested that the courtyard may have been paved. Having found no evidence to the contrary, apart from the very small patch of cobbles against the south wall, this could well explain the lack of contemporary debris.

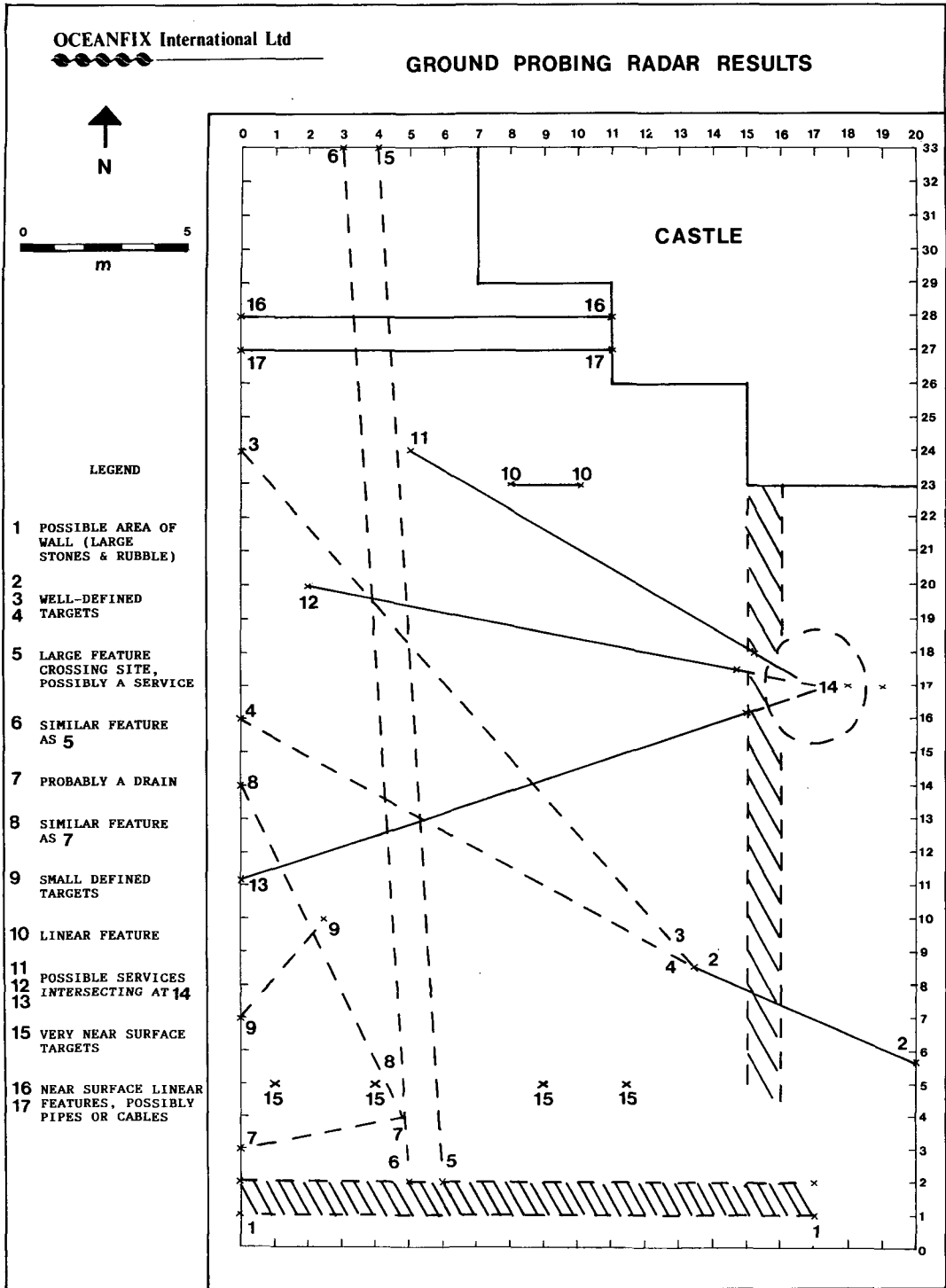
The problem of the present round tower remains. There are several arguments against it being original. It is not securely bonded into the west wall; the upper gun-loop on the west side is obviously a re-used stone; the width of the wall projecting eastwards from it is only 0.5 m wide, compared with the 0.9–1 m width of the remains of the south and east walls. There is no evidence of clay bonding, as is the case in the remains of the north wall and which is also evident in the foundations of the east and south walls. There is also the question of the large stones beneath the present wall. Could these be the foundations of an earlier tower, or merely a landscaping feature ?

The excavation confirmed the identification and location of most of the drainage features identified in the radar survey (illus 10). The area where the radar identified the wall remains as a number of discrete stones was verified by excavation. There were, however, some areas where features exposed during excavation were not represented on the radar survey plan. In particular, a stone drain (SR) was not identified on the survey but was found on excavation. When the relevant radar data were re-examined the drain could be identified even though it did not appear as a clear feature on the radar trace. The ground surface there had shown the transition in media from grass to gravel above the drain, rather than a combination of this transition and the drain. In certain areas the excavation plan showed a large volume of stone tumble which was not represented in the radar traces. This tumble could be identified in the raw radar data but it was not recognised as a significant feature by the radar operator. Overall there was a good correlation evident between the plan of the excavation and that of the ground radar survey (see the report on fiche).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the name of Craigievar has been on record since 1457 no evidence was uncovered of any activity on the site prior to the 16th century. The excavation revealed part of the basal course of the south wall and most of the lowest course of the east wall. No evidence was found of internal walling within the courtyard area. The presence of a number of post-holes suggests that these buildings were of a lean-to type rather than of stone structure. The western area of the courtyard and any surviving evidence of the north range of buildings had been destroyed in the late 19th or early 20th century when the two buttresses were constructed and the area was landscaped. At the same time the eastern area was heightened and levelled, using midden material, in order to provide a large level area for the present driveway.

Many other castles in Grampian Region, of a similar date to Craigievar, have lost their



ILLUS 10 Ground radar plan

barmkin walls; Crathes Castle on Deeside is one such. At Craigievar it is fortunate that the west wall did not suffer a similar fate as the other sections of the barmkin. With the recent restoration work to the wall this remnant will now survive and enable visitors approaching from the west to obtain a glimpse into the past.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First I would like to thank the following from the National Trust for Scotland for their help during the excavation: Ian Davidson, David MacKay, George Cruickshank and David Kidd, and the Trust itself for funding the excavation. My grateful thanks go to the excavation staff: Kirsty Sabine, who also supplied the location plan, and Michael Greig, who assisted with post-excavation work, and to the many volunteers who helped over the period of excavation, especially Bruce Mann.

My thanks also go to fellow contributors Bill Lindsay, Stewart Thain, Colvin Greig and Gordon Williamson. A special thank you is due to Peter Simkins of Oceanfix International Ltd for his generous contribution of a free ground radar survey, and to Nicholas Bogdan for arranging it. Thanks are also due to Jim Henderson for his photographs which form illustrations 1, 2 & 4 and Richard White for his photograph forming illustration 9. Finally I would like to thank Ian Shepherd and my husband Colvin, without whose backing I could not have worked on the project.

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