

II.

NOTE ON SOME EXPLORATIONS IN A TUMULUS CALLED THE "COURT-HILL," IN THE PARISH OF DALRY AND COUNTY OF AYR. BY R. W. COCHRAN PATRICK, Esq., B.A., LL.B., F.S.A. SCOT. (PLATE VIII.)

This tumulus is situated close to the present town of Dalry, on the north-west side, and occupies the highest point of a considerable rising ground, which is projected south-eastwards into the valley of the Garnock, and from which a wide extent of country both up and down the valley is visible. A reference to the Ordnance Survey map shows that it is 250 feet above the level of the sea, and 100 feet above the lowest part of the valley.

The Courthill tumulus itself is of very considerable size, and in an excellent state of preservation. From the accompanying plan, for which I am indebted to Mr Paton of Swinlees, who took a great interest in the work of exploration, and devoted no small amount of time and trouble in superintending it, it appears that the hill was about 290 feet in circumference at the base, of nearly circular form, and apparently nearly 20 feet high, though the excavations showed that the original surface within the mound was about 5 feet higher than at the base. The diameter of the top of the mound was about 38 feet.

Almost nothing is known of the history of the tumulus. It is not mentioned, so far as I am aware, in any of the old charters or papers connected with the district. The land on which it stands formed part of the eleven merk land of Ryesholm, a property which has long been in the possession of the Boyle family. The Old Statistical Account (1795) of the parish refers to it, and states that an attempt was made at one time to ascertain its contents by boring, but nothing being found, the work was discontinued. The New Statistical Account (1837) mentions the removal of part of the base at the beginning of the present century to fill up hollows in an adjoining field.

About the commencement of last year it became known that this fine tumulus was to be overlaid by the debris from a pit. The opportunity of making a thorough exploration of such an interesting relic was at once taken advantage of by some gentlemen resident in the district, and

immediate application was made to the proprietors, Messrs Merry and Cunninghame, for permission to excavate. This was willingly granted, and every facility afforded. The explorations were at once commenced, and carried on during most part of the summer. The greatest interest was manifested by the residents, and everything which was found was preserved with care, and is now at the disposal of the Society.

The first operation was to open a trench from the west side of the mound in towards the centre north-eastwards. This was about 5 feet wide, and was carried in for a considerable distance at a depth of about 14 feet from the top of the tumulus. About 19 feet inwards, measuring from the circumference of the base, and 14 feet from the top of the tumulus, a low dyke or line of small boulders and land stones crossed the trench, almost exactly in an alignment with and close to the oaken stakes indicated on the plan. These stones rested on the original surface, which is here about $4\frac{1}{2}$ or 5 feet above the present level of the ground at the base of the tumulus, showing that the soil had been removed, and probably assisted in adding to the hill when it was originally formed. Immediately above the stones were layers of burnt earth, mixed with pieces of charcoal and other burnt matter, and in this was found a very good flint arrow-head. Along with this arrow-head were some flint chips and fragments. Immediately above the charcoal was a stratum of dark unctuous earth, with layers of vegetable matter composed principally of fern and moor moss. On exposure, the fern was almost green, but the action of the air rapidly turned it to the colour of peat. Nothing of great interest was found till the point marked F on the plan was reached, about 9 feet from the stones, and 29 feet from the circumference, where a log or post of oak was discovered, standing nearly perpendicular, with a slight inclination to the south-west, inserted for a depth of about 2 feet in the original soil, and securely wedged in with stones. This post was much blackened, and with an appearance as if charred by the action of fire in the upper part. It was, when taken out, 4 feet 9 inches in length, the lower part for about 2 feet being artificially squared with a base of $11\frac{1}{2}$ inches by 10 inches. Marks of a sharp cutting tool were clearly observable on this part of the post. About 4 feet from the base on one side was an artificial hole, nearly circular, the diameter being about $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and nearly 3 inches deep.

Within the line of this post a considerable mass of burnt ash was found, and the surface of the ground showed distinct traces of the action of a fierce and long-continued fire. The cutting of the trench afforded a good opportunity for examining the nature of the contents and structure of the mound. Measuring from the top of the hill, it was found that the ordinary earth occupied from 10 to 12 feet of the whole section. This had apparently been taken from the land immediately adjoining the tumulus, and heaped up over the other deposit. No remains were found anywhere in it. Immediately below was a thin band or layer of yellowish clay, mixed with small stones or gravel, about 12 or 14 inches in depth in most places. This rested on a deposit of dark unctuous earth, from 3 to 3½ feet in depth near the post, but varying in other places from 1 foot upwards. This dark earth was found to contain layers of fern, moor moss, coarse grass, reeds, &c., mixed with small pieces of charred wood. Immediately below it in several places, and resting on the original surface, was found a thin layer, from 1 to 2 inches in depth, of grey and red ashes, with occasionally small fragments of bone, of which some were with difficulty preserved, and are now in the Museum. The largest of these was apparently part of the bone of a large deer. In many places the earth below this bed of ash was reddened by the action of fire to the depth of 3 or 4 inches. It very frequently happened that a thin layer of very highly compressed moss and bracken covered the ash, without, however, showing any trace of the action of fire. The flint chips and worked flints were found immediately above the bed of ash. A selection of these is now in the Museum, and amongst them a curious worked flint scraper or punch of the usual form.

After carrying in the trench some distance beyond the centre of the hill, and down to the original surface, it was resolved to remove all the earth over the dark stratum, and lay bare the original surface. A very considerable amount of work accomplished this, and a very curious palisaded structure was disclosed, the description of which will be best understood by reference to the ground plan (Plate VIII.) Its extreme length from end to end was 46 feet, and the breadth 20 to 21 feet. The sides were composed of small oak stakes, generally flat, set into the original surface, and almost touching each other. All these were much decayed, and showed traces apparently of the action of fire. Four of

these stakes, marked K on the plan, presented the remarkable peculiarity of a regularly hollowed-out groove on one side. These four stakes were much larger than those forming the sides and ends, and were placed in pairs opposite each other. They were carefully squared, and formed evidently with some sharp tool. Each was pitted into the original soil, and firmly wedged in with stones. The space between each pair was about 3 feet, and was filled with small round hazel and birch posts, about 2 inches in diameter, and showing the extremities artificially sharpened. The following measurements, taken from one of these stakes when first discovered, will give a good idea of the others. The breadth was 1 foot 6 inches, with the thickness at the top varying from 4 to 5 inches. The length of the part preserved was 2 feet 1 inch, but the upper portion was very much decayed, and had evidently been longer. The groove ran the whole length of one side, and the breadth of it was from 2 to 3 inches. It was about 4 inches from the end of the stake, which had been fixed in the original surface. The depth of the groove varied from three-quarters of an inch to an inch and a half. The other three posts varied slightly in size from this one, but presented the same general appearance, and each showed a groove of similar size.

At F another large post or stake of oak was found, 9 feet inwards from the line of stakes, and apparently corresponding to the one first discovered. These interior posts were more firmly fixed into the soil than the others. Extending eastward from the western post was a deposit of ashes about 3 inches thick, nearly 6 feet in length, and about $2\frac{1}{2}$ in breadth. Amongst the ashes were numerous small fragments of bone, and parts apparently of deer's horn. It may be noticed here that the pieces of bone when first exposed were white, but in the course of a very short time they became a beautiful bright blue colour. Between one pair of these grooved stakes, at the place marked L on the plan, a piece of hard oak, shaped somewhat like the blade of an oar or paddle, was discovered. The length was 1 foot 2 inches; the breadth across $5\frac{1}{4}$ inches, decreasing to $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches.

Having completed the investigation of the palisaded structure, it was determined to follow the line of stones which had been met with in cutting the first trench. The earth having been cleared away, a cairn of stones was found, beneath which was a hole sunk into the original

surface. This is marked M on the plan. This hole was in a line with the west end of the structure, and about 3 feet southwards from the corner post. It was about 4 feet 10 inches long, by 3 feet wide, and 3 feet 5 inches below the original surface. The stones filled the hole, and were raised apparently about 3 feet above the surface. At the bottom of the cavity a flat sandstone, about a foot square, was found, carefully bedded in clean sand from the river. Near it was a piece of blackened oak, similar to the stakes of the structure, and all about were fragments of a fine and highly ornamented urn. These fragments have been most

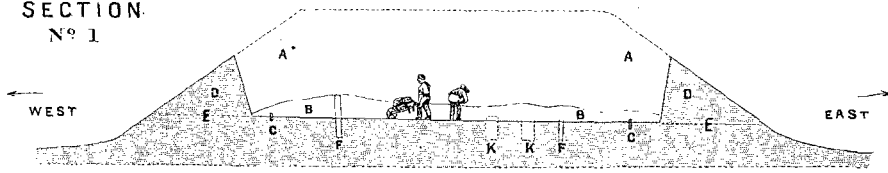


Urn found in Court Hill, Dalry. (Height $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches.)

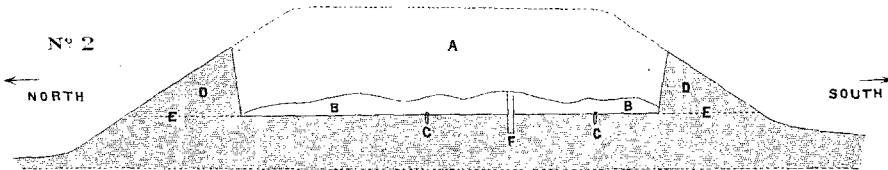
carefully collected and put together by Mr Paton of Swinlees. It is to be remarked that the layers of gravel and soil were continued beyond and over the cairn, showing that it was *in situ* when the tumulus was formed, though from the fact of the piece of oak being found amongst the stones, and the urn having been broken, it had evidently been disturbed at the time the upper part of the tumulus was formed.

In conclusion, I have to acknowledge the interest taken in this work by the Messrs Paton of Swinlees and Hillhead, Mr Robert Love of Threepwood, and other gentlemen, and the obligations I am under to the gentlemen named for the care with which all the measurements, &c., were taken, and for revising the details now submitted.

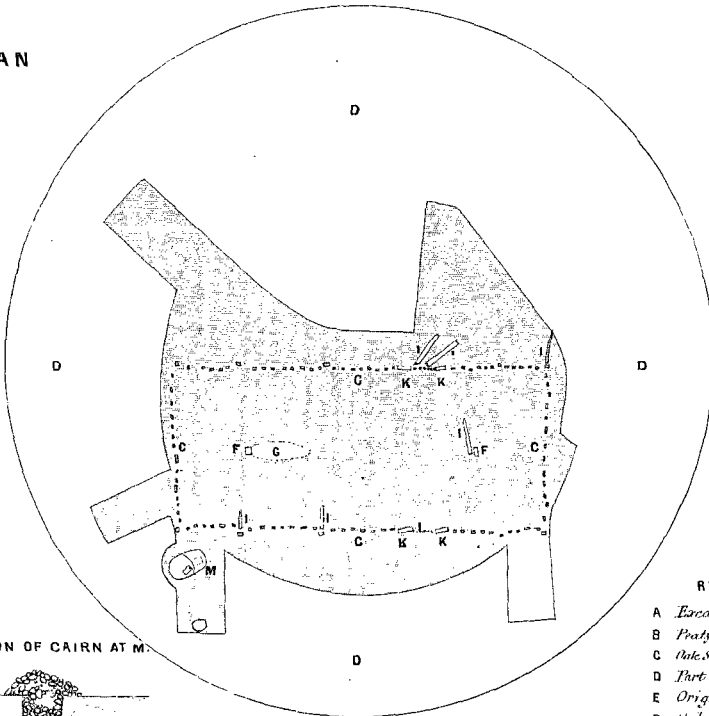
SECTION
N^o 1



N^o 2



PLAN



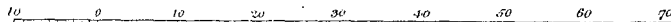
SECTION OF CAIRN AT M



REFERENCE

- A Excavated Earth
- B Praty Soil and Marsh silt
- C Oak Stakes forming an enclosure
- D Part of Mound not removed
- E Original Surface
- F Oak Stakes
- G Ashes &c. the soil much calcined
- I Burnt portions of fallen stakes
- K Four Stakes with grooves
- L Position of Paddle?
- M Small Cairn containing Urn &c.

Scale of Feet



W & A W Johnston, Edinburgh.

PLAN & SECTIONS OF EXCAVATIONS OF COURTHILL, DALRY.