

III.

REPORT ON THE PARTIAL EXCAVATION OF DUN BREAC, SKIPNESS.

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The site of this fort is behind the village of Skipness, about half a mile due north of the west end of Skipness Bay. It can be found on the 6-inch ordnance map, but it is not marked on the map in Dr Christison's *Early Fortifications in Scotland*. The fort was built on a mound, on the left side and near the top of a deep ravine, through which the Skipness Burn runs before it turns into the village. The mound is thus bounded on the SW. side by a precipice, which falls 95 feet into the burn, and on the others by a more or less crescent-shaped hollow, the middle of which divides it from the hill-side on the NE., while the horns fall steeply to the burn at points above and below the precipice. The sides of the ravine below the fort are precipitous and rocky.

As a consequence of its position the fort would probably have been more useful as a place of refuge than for any strategic purpose. It does not command the shore, as the mediæval castle does, nor is it near any road or track. But it is so placed as to obtain a view of the whole of Kilbrennan Sound, and of a great part of the Sound of Bute; it would also have been difficult for strangers to find. It resembles nearly all the other forts of the district in the insufficiency of its water-supply; for although it overhangs the burn, to carry water up such a difficult slope in the face of any opposition, would have been impossible.

No traditions about the fort exist in the place except that smugglers are said to have kept a look-out there.

Before the excavation began, the fort appeared simply as a mound with a flat top and sides covered with tumbled stones. No part of the wall is standing above the level of the top. The whole mound is overgrown with trees, and a path that is certainly modern in its present form, leads up the NE. side. The shape of the top, as may be seen from the plan (fig. 1), is a rough circle from which a segment is missing on the SW. The length from N. to S. is 58 feet, and the greatest breadth from E. to W. is 56 feet. The fort thus comes into Dr Christison's "very small" class. There is a fall of 5 feet from the highest to the lowest point of the flat top.

The work done on the fort has consisted of clearing the tumbled stones away from what remains of the walls, and of excavating part of the interior.

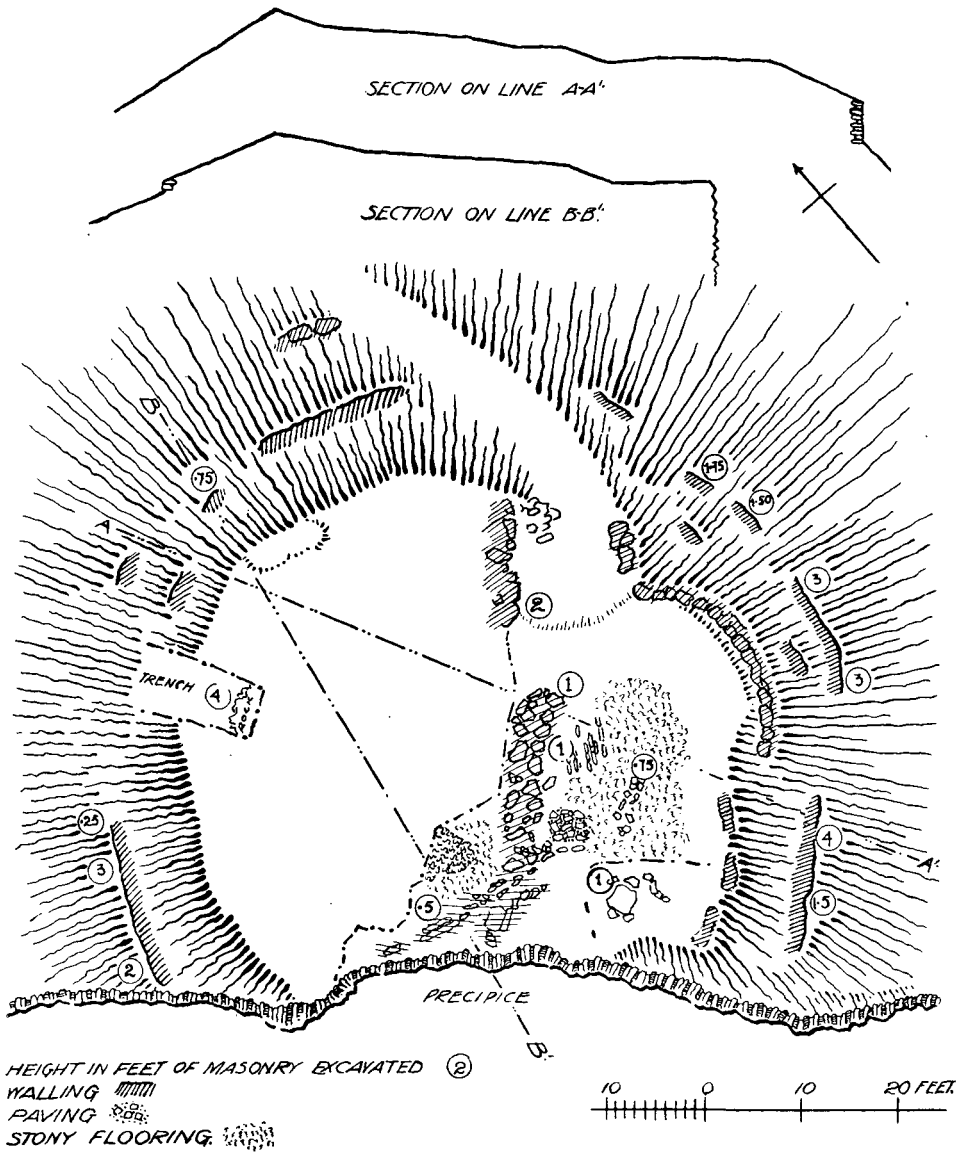


Fig. 1. Plan and Sections of the Fort of Dun Breac, Skipness.

The Wall.—As has been said already, the upper part of the wall has quite disappeared; but stone-work remains below on the faces of the mound, and from this it is possible to form some idea of the position and size of the wall. Yet even what remains has been so much damaged by the roots of the trees, and by the slipping of the stones themselves, that there are only a few pieces of masonry left sufficiently complete to be safely taken as evidence. These are indicated on the plan (fig. 1). The best of them is near the precipice on the SE. face. The most probable conclusion that can be drawn from these pieces of masonry is that the slopes of the mound were faced with built stones at least to the level of the top of the hollow on the NE. side, and perhaps lower in places on the SE.; and that a wall rose from this facing, without the interruption of a terrace, at a level about 10 feet below the S. corner of the plateau. It will be seen from the plan that pieces of building form a fairly connected line round the mound, starting at this level and not varying very abruptly, though they are actually higher on the NE. The thickness of this wall can be estimated from the extent of the inhabited area on the top of the mound. Excavation shows that a floor (which will be alluded to later) extends, in this SE. part, to the very edge of the plateau, where the slope of tumbled stone begins. The inside face of the wall therefore cannot have been farther in than the present edge of the plateau; and the stones at the edge probably belong to it, though no sign of it can be made out. This would give the wall a thickness, in this part, of about 10 feet, or less, if batter is to be taken into account.

This view is supported by the results of cutting a trench into the wall on the N. face of the mound. This trench, which is marked on the plan, was driven in for 12 feet on a level 4 feet below the top. There were no facing-stones left at this place, but the trench was begun on what seemed to be a line between two existing pieces of masonry. The cutting was at first through masonry, and then rock was found at the bottom of the trench, on which the inner foundations of the wall seemed to be resting. The trench was then carried on above the rock, until it came through the masonry to earth, in which there was a stratum containing charcoal and broken bone. The horizontal distance from the beginning of the trench to the inside of the wall in this place is 10 feet.

This wall is not well built. Although it probably had a good face, inside it is composed of large stones packed with small ones, in such a way that the whole is not all firmly bound together. There are no bond-stones lying transversely in the wall; and in cutting the trench it was possible to pull out the stones without disturbing what

was left on one side and the other. In view of this fact, it is necessary to be cautious in holding that any small piece of fairly regular masonry must have been part of an outside face; the outer part of such a loose wall could easily slip away and leave some of the large stones of the inside in a deceptive position. There were no signs of any vitrification in the wall.

The Entrance.—At the top of the path which leads up the mound, there is a gap in the stonework that runs round the edge of the plateau. It is about 8 feet broad, and on the N. side of it there is a line of masonry 2 feet high, which forms a step to the higher level of the plateau. An entrance like this would not be expected in any other fort, but the path that leads to it was certainly brought to its present form, if not built entirely, by a former proprietor of the place, who used also to keep a flagstaff on the mound. There is consequently a strong probability that the present entrance was made, or any earlier one that existed at the place was tampered with, at that time. A large tree that stands in the entrance has prevented any search for a threshold.

This is not a likely place for an original entrance, as it is at the top of the shortest and easiest ascent from the hollow behind: to judge from other forts, it would more probably have been at a difficult place and near the precipice. Moreover, the wall is so ruinous that there may well have been such an entrance in another place, though no traces of it remain.

The Interior.—Excavation has been confined to the S. half of the plateau: the greater part of this has been cleared, and the rest has been investigated by means of small pits. It will be best to explain the results by reference to the plan.

There is firstly a line of stonework, 1 foot high and 18 feet long, that lies to the S. of the centre of the plateau and looks like the lowest course of an internal division-wall. Another row of stones, but in this case standing on their edges, runs up to this from the NW., crosses it, and continues along the side of the paved area. It is difficult to find any explanation of these stones that stand on edge; but it is possible that they may have been intended to keep an earthen floor in place.

The paving to the S. of the masonry is made of thin split pieces of the local stone eked out with large pebbles. When first uncovered it was blackened with fire, and there were small pieces of bone and charcoal in the cracks. Near the edge of it there is a small square hole contained by four flat pieces of stone standing on end. It is $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches across, and was full of blackened earth.

In the S. corner there is another piece of flooring, but at a level

1 foot lower than the paved area. In this floor there are several large flagstones, irregularly placed; and the soil upon and between these was very much blackened and contained a great many chips of bone. Excavation came to an end here for lack of labour and expert help, so that the relation between this floor and the other paving could not be determined. However, a floor of earth and stones, on the same level as the paved area, lay over this flagged floor, and was destroyed in uncovering it, so there is some reason to think that these levels may represent two different periods of habitation. This earthen floor extends over the whole of the rest of the S. and E. parts, as far as excavation has gone. The earth is discoloured with charcoal everywhere, and is full of smooth rounded stones, either whole or split, many of which show traces of fire. There are also some larger stones, here and there, standing on their edges. The rock that comes up beside the paved area was covered with a very hard and stony piece of this flooring.

In the E. corner some small pits were sunk; and these showed that a layer of blackened earth extends to the edge of the plateau, where the stonework of the wall begins. There were chips of stone and pebbles, also in these pits at the levels of the blackened earth; so no doubt the floor is the same as that which was uncovered near-by. These pieces of flooring in the pits appear to be at two different levels; but this cannot be made out with certainty, as the ground slopes slightly.

Another inhabited floor lies inside the row of stones on edge. As far as excavation has gone, it has shown that there was here a floor of earth mixed with stones, lying on the natural sandy clay. Some of the stones are large, and are fixed more or less upright; the whole stratum is full of charcoal, and it was from this that two relics came which will be discussed later. The top of this stratum is 10 inches below the surface, but the thickness of it is difficult to determine, as some of it has been dug away. One solidly-made piece, however, seems to be at least 14 inches thick. This floor is no doubt the same as that which shows in the trench on the N. side. There it is also about 10 inches below the surface, but a depth of 8 inches brings it down to the rock. The edge of the higher level, to the right of the entrance, was also investigated; but this part seemed to be choked under the turf with broken stone, probably fallen from the wall. Signs of blackening were here also observed in the soil among the debris.

The Relics.—Very few relics have been found in this excavation. It is possible that such a convenient precipice tempted the inhabitants to throw away useless things, which would otherwise have been trodden into the floor. No metal has been found, though we discovered a small

piece of iron-slag; and all the bone recovered was in very small fragments. The only stone objects that are of any interest are two oval pebbles of quartzite with longitudinal grooves in their flat sides. These objects are believed to have been used with a pointed object of iron as strike-lights, and are found in Scotland (chiefly in the North), in Scandinavia, and in some parts of Germany and France. A number have been found in brochs, and they are said to date from the early centuries of the Christian era. These pebbles therefore support the piece of slag in indicating an Iron Age date for the fort.

Another curious stone object was found below the level of the floor, or rather buried in the floor, 5 feet from the edge of the plateau, at about the middle of the SE. side. This was a block of stone, of a roughly circular shape and irregular thickness, in the upper face of which a small round hollow had been ground. The hollow is 2 inches across and one-third of an inch deep, and the surface in which it is sunk is naturally somewhat concave; so that the stone may perhaps have been used for some kind of pounding or grinding. When it was found, it was blackened like the earth in which it was lying.

I wish to take this opportunity of thanking all those who have been so kind as to help in the excavation.