

EXCAVATION AT BLACK JACK CASTLE, CRAIG, ANGUS

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INTRODUCTION

THE site, traditionally that of the first castle of Dunninald, is situated in the parish of Craig, about three miles due S. of Montrose and 300 yds. SW. of Boddin farmhouse (N.G.R. NO 710535). It is a small rocky promontory about 100 ft. above sea-level and separated from the land by a ditch which is crossed by a causeway (fig. 1). The promontory is precipitous on three sides and is very much weathered at the seaward end. Before excavation the only evidence of occupation was the faint trace of a wall or rampart enclosing a rectangular area on the flat top of the promontory and extending on the west side towards the seaward end.

The existence of a castle on this site is mentioned in the records of the Scottish Parliament (in connection with an attack on Red Castle by Andrew Gray), in the Old Statistical Account, by Warden, Jervise, and A. H. Millar.¹ The story of the attack on Red Castle throws some interesting light on the owner of Black Jack. He was Andrew Gray, third son of Patrick, Lord Gray of Fowlis and Castle Huntly. In 1579, for some reason not recorded, he attacked Red Castle, Lunan Bay, which was occupied by Lady Innermeath and her son and daughter. Gray burned down the outworks and laid siege to the tower in which the Innermeath family had taken refuge. The siege was carried on from 27th February to 2nd March despite royal mandates ordering Gray to desist. Eventually the castle was relieved by a joint force under the provost and baillies of Dundee and Erskine of Dun. In 1581 Gray again attacked Red Castle, plundered it and held the servants prisoner for some weeks. For this second misdemeanour a messenger was sent to serve a summons on Gray, but according to the messenger's account he was not able to do so. He states that Gray spoke to him 'our the wall of Dunenald and out of the windois thairof, he causit hade the zett and durris fast and wald not latt me in, I deliuerit ane coppie of the summondis to the said Androis spous . . .'. Presumably Gray's wife was not with him at Black Jack. Gray's lands and goods were confiscated but he appears to have put himself right with the law at some later time and regained his property. The messenger's description of Black Jack suggests a well-fortified building of the tower-house type.

THE EXCAVATION²

In 1957 an excavation was commenced with the object of ascertaining whether the site known as Black Jack was indeed that of the castle and the date and nature of the building and whether there had been any earlier occupation of the site. The

¹ See list of references p. 253.

² The site-plan and section drawings made during the excavation have been deposited in the library of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

excavation was carried on at intervals over a period of five years by means of small squares which could be completed and filled in again in a week-end.

The results were disappointing. No structural remains were found. The surface indications of a wall proved to be no more than heaps of small rubble with large quantities of mortar. Most of the area within the 'rampart' was littered with mortar,

BLACK JACK

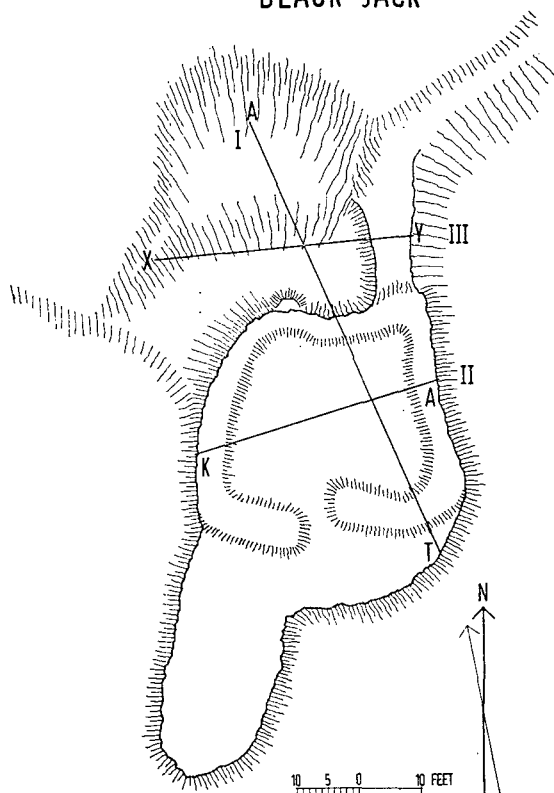


FIG. 1. General plan of the site

small stones, and a fairly large number of roofing slates and nails – some of the nails still being in place in the slates – and a certain amount of burnt material including coal.

The solid rock was reached at an average depth of 18 in., and this appeared to be the level of occupation. Traces of mortar on the rock and an area of red clay suggested the plan of a room, perhaps the lowest floor of a tower. In the extreme NW. corner of the area a large mass of ash was found filling and surrounding a round hole, 1 ft. 11 in. in diameter and 10 in. deep, hollowed out of the rock. This appeared to be the base of a fireplace but, as there was no flue connected with the hole, the hearth must have been at a higher level to allow for sufficient draught.

The only trace of walling was at the SE. corner of the area where three courses of a wall were visible on the precipitous side of the promontory. A section at this point revealed two faces of a wall, 7 ft. wide, the centre filled with small rubble. The stones composing the faces were roughly rectangular in shape and 9 in. to 1 ft. long. Only one course of the inner face remained while three were visible on the edge of the precipice.

A section across the ditch showed a roughly U-shaped ditch. The upper part of the seaward side was nearly vertical and the rock appeared to have been cut away. The bottom was filled with a little silt and a large amount of small rubble and mortar and some bones. There was one piece of dressed stone among the rubble and this, with the short length of walling mentioned above, was the only dressed stone found on the site.

THE FINDS

Apart from the bones, most of which were found in the ditch, and the slates and slate nails of the type found on other late medieval sites, some very small sherds of pottery were found scattered widely on the flat summit of the promontory. The most interesting pottery finds were made in the area of the clay 'floor'. A score of rather hard reddish-buff sherds with orange-brown glaze are from more than one vessel. Strongly profiled rim fragments (fig. 2) suggest a pot 6 in. in diameter, glazed on the inside. A lug, or possibly loop handle, comes from a more open vessel 8 in. across. There is also part of a smaller lug or handle. Eight fragments with similar but darker glaze on both sides have a diameter of about 9 in. A fifteenth-sixteenth century date has been suggested for all these, but Mr J. Hurst, F.S.A., has identified them as a little-studied type of late seventeenth-century ware found in SE. England (unpublished) and the Netherlands. It seems probable that they were imported to



FIG. 2

Angus from the Continent, for at one point the clay 'floor' is bounded by a band of mortar which suggests a wall and in the angle formed by these two materials were found several small pieces of Delft pottery.

Captain H. J. S. Banks, R.N., who has made a study of this type of pottery and who helped with the excavation, is of the opinion that they are of the type of Delft which was imported to this country in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. Four of the small pieces of Delft have blue on white decoration, one also yellow. Two are glazed both sides representing one or two dishes; the others with glaze outside and rough stoneware finish inside are probably from two different pots or jugs. Of the latter one has in part a very bubbly inner surface and its colour and quality of glaze outside also differ slightly from the others. Mr Hurst suggests that it may be early sixteenth century in date, with a south Netherlands origin.¹ If so

¹ cf. *Ant. J.*, XIX (1939), 285.

the early date, and occurrence further north than any other piece so far recognised in Britain, is of considerable interest. There are also a piece of pale grey stoneware, from the base of a jug, a very small piece of hard white fabric with thick green glaze outside and yellow inside, and another of red fabric with black glaze on both sides. Part of a clay-pipe stem is probably also seventeenth-century.

It is noticeable, as Mr R. B. K. Stevenson has remarked, that there were no pieces of the jugs of hard grey fabric with yellowish or dark olive green glaze such as occur on sixteenth-seventeenth-century sites in southern Scotland, and is once associated with a mid seventeenth-century coin hoard.¹ But there was other pottery that may be described as late medieval: wall-sherds of reddish-buff rather soft fabric, single pieces of varied thickness representing about 10 different vessels, five of them with greenish orange glaze on the inside (possibly lost from the outside) generally thick, but now thin and patchy; one with yellow glaze on outside only. One piece of small jug (?) has a harder, strongly wheel-marked, fabric.

The remains of iron objects were well preserved. A fragment, perhaps from the tang of a knife, has rust-impregnated remains of wood on either face and a rivet-cap reduced to copper oxide. An oblong washer 1.3 by 0.4 in. with central hole, could also be from a knife. A dozen iron hand-made nails, the longest 3½ in., have heads up to 0.6 in. across. The remaining items comprised: stout hinge-staple 2 in. high and at top 0.9 in. in diameter; three large hooks of varying thickness; a twisted piece of sheet iron; part of the spring for a lock (?) 4 in. long; three unidentifiable pieces, one apparently complete, sub-rectangular, 2 by 1¾ in.; two squarish lumps c. 2 by 1 by 1½ in. of spongy iron in course of being worked. Thin window-glass may be represented by two very small pieces.

The bones found on the site were sent to Dr A. S. Clarke of the Royal Scottish Museum who very kindly reported on them. They consisted for the most part of the bones of sheep and ox, both being the small breeds of the type of the Shetland sheep and Celtic ox. There were also some bones of fish and goose; again this was a small type about the size of the grey-lag. Dog was also represented.

CONCLUSIONS

No definite evidence of occupation earlier than that of the sixteenth century was found during the excavation. It would seem that the castle at Black Jack had been completely demolished and the dressed stone used for some other purpose. This may have been for the building of the second castle of Dunninald – now a ruin in the grounds of the present Castle – about the end of the seventeenth century. It seems likely that the castle at Black Jack was built by the Andrew Gray mentioned at the beginning of this paper. He died before 1608 when he was succeeded by his grandson, another Andrew. The castle was probably of the type represented by the remains at Kaim of Mathers and Whistleberry on the Kincardineshire coast.

We are indebted to Captain J. de B. Stansfield of Dunninald for permission to excavate and for the interest he took in our work. He has kindly agreed that the

¹ Grangemouth: *P.S.A.S.*, xxxiv (1899-1900), 16.

finds should be divided between the National Museum of Antiquities and Montrose Museum. We should also like to thank Mr R. B. K. Stevenson for his help in the examination and dating of the finds.

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