

The hall and motte at Courthill, Dalry, Ayrshire

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SUMMARY

In a recent paper in these Proceedings, 'Re-discovering a landscape: the barrow and motte in north Ayrshire', John Linge (1987) has sought to classify as barrows rather than as mottes a number of round or oval flat-topped mounds in northern Ayrshire. One of these, the Courthill in Dalry, was excavated as long ago as 1872 and the excavation published in a report which was a model for its time (Cochran-Patrick 1878). The mound at Courthill, it was then shown, had been constructed over the remains of a rectangular timber building: Laing (1969, 113) believes this to have been a Dark-Age hall, and the covering mound a motte. Linge, however, prefers to interpret the timber building as prehistoric, and the Courthill as a barrow. It is the purpose of this paper to argue that the timber building at Dalry was a structure of the medieval period, and that the Courthill was a motte. The plans of the Courthill shown here (illus 1 & 2) have been schematically redrawn, with some necessary corrections, from enlargements of those produced by Mr Paton of Swinlees for the Cochran-Patrick report. These have proved detailed enough to support reasoned interpretation and, with the information supplied by Cochran-Patrick, to enable a reconstruction of the Courthill hall to be attempted (illus 2).

To deal first with the prehistoric parallels cited by Linge, he points out (1987, 24) that Coles and Simpson (1965, 46) compared the Courthill timber structure with rectangular, generally timbered, mortuary structures found beneath Neolithic earthen long barrows in England, and more specifically with the timber and stone structure beneath the Neolithic round barrow excavated by them at Pitnacree, in Perthshire. They believed that there was evidence of cremation between the two central posts of the Courthill timber structure (1965, 46). This must refer to what Cochran-Patrick (1878, 59) describes as 'a deposit of ashes about 3 inches thick, nearly 6 feet in length, and about 2½ in breadth' to the north-east of the south-west central post of that structure (illus 1). Amongst the ashes were small fragments of bone and parts apparently of 'deer's horn'. The presence of antler suggests that the bones may in fact have been food refuse, and that the ashes were from a hearth. The position of the ash spread within the structure would agree with this suggestion (illus 1). This then would be the first piece of evidence to indicate that the Courthill timber structure was not a mortuary enclosure but a roofed building – in fact, a hall, and so it will be termed in further discussion here. It may be noted in passing that Coles and Simpson (1965, 46, footnote 2) would not deny this possibility.

Linge cites two further rectangular structures of timber which may be placed 'in a secure early prehistoric context'. These are at Balbridie, in Kincardineshire, and at Balfarg, in Fife. The Balbridie structure is indeed considered to be a hall, whilst radiocarbon dates and pottery finds combine to suggest that it is Neolithic in date (Selkirk 1980, 326). However, its plan and, in particular, its

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V-shaped ends do not compare closely with the plan of the Courthill hall (Reynolds 1980, fig 11). Nor is the comparison with the site at Balfarg more helpful, for this is considered to be best interpreted as an open mortuary enclosure (Barclay 1985, 3, 8). Neither at Balbridie nor at Balfarg was the timber structure surmounted by a round or oval flat-topped mound.

The main evidence for considering the Courthill hall to be prehistoric must then lie in the series of flint implements found by Cochran-Patrick during his excavation. An explanation for their presence will be offered later, but it may here be pointed out that Dobie (1876, 123) reports that a piece of lead was found 'in the calcined soil of the interior fire-place', that is in a primary context. As for the nearby beaker burial, it will be seen (illus 1) that the south corner post of the Courthill hall was placed out of line, no doubt because of the obstacle presented by the beaker burial and its cairn of stones. But if, as has been implied, the Courthill hall was a probably Neolithic mortuary structure, then it should have been primary, and have preceded any beaker burial. The association of beaker burial and later hall must be quite as coincidental as that of two sixth- to seventh-century halls at Yeavinger, in Northumberland: Buildings D2(a) and D2(b), which overlay and had partly slighted a Bronze-Age cist burial (Hope-Taylor 1977, 97, fig 43, 244).

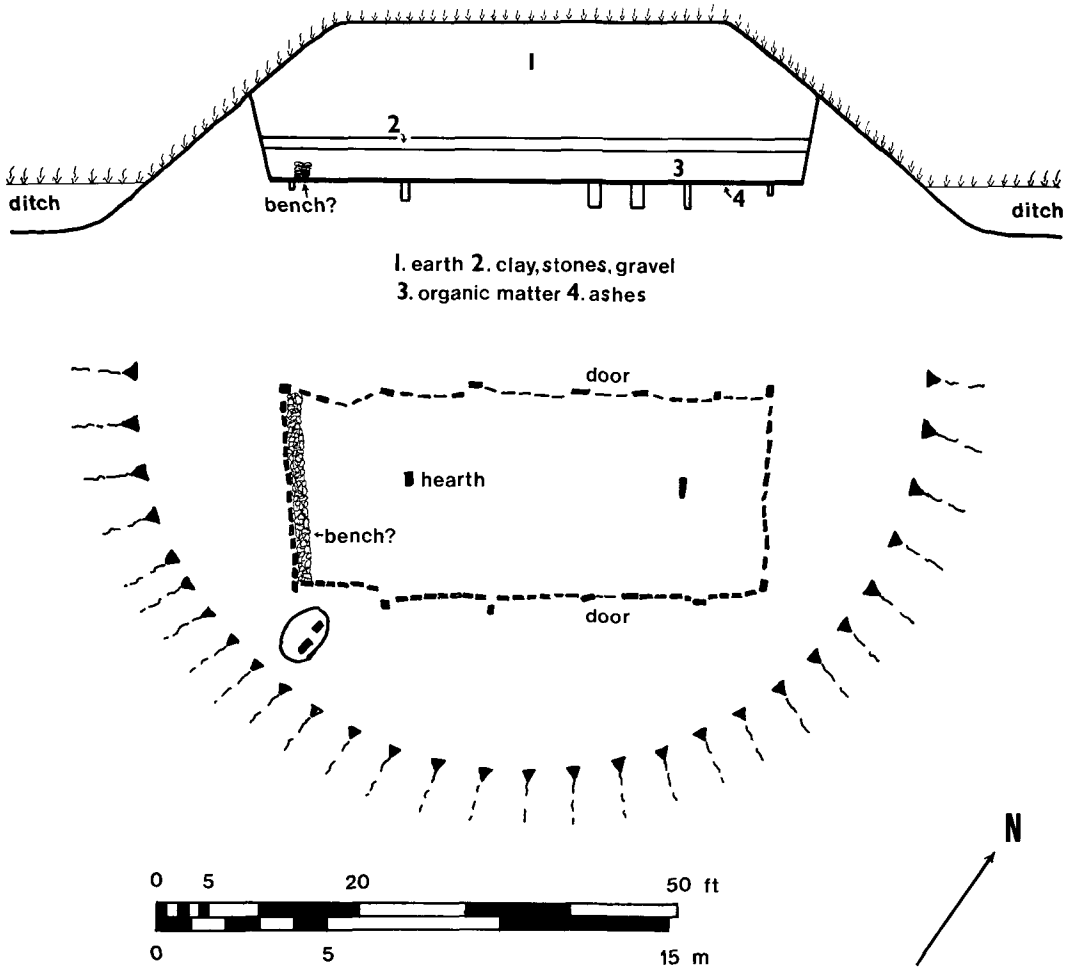
Curiously enough, the Balbridie hall finds its best parallel in the earlier (A) of two halls, the later (B) superimposed upon the earlier, also excavated by Hope-Taylor (1980) at Doon Hill, in East Lothian. A 'handful of Neolithic and Bronze Age sherds' was found in mixed deposits in foundation trenches and postholes at Doon Hill, but Hope-Taylor (1980, 18–19) maintains that these finds must derive from earlier and different contexts. The difficulty is unresolved, but there is no doubt that the plan of the later hall (B) at Doon Hill is closely linked with those of the timber structures found, and so ably interpreted, by Hope-Taylor at Yeavinger (1977). It is in buildings found at Yeavinger and more recently in Dublin, spanning the sixth to 11th centuries AD, that various features found in the Courthill hall may best be paralleled. These features will next be examined.

Linge (1987, 24) states that the form of Courthill is 'portrayed to us in a stylized manner'. This may be true of the sections, but hardly of the plan produced by Paton. It is true that there are inaccuracies. The plan (Cochran-Patrick 1878, 55) appears to be correct, but the accompanying east-west section does not correlate with it, inasmuch as the socket holes of the two large posts supporting the ridge timber and the socket holes of the door posts, though correctly positioned in relation to each other, are shown in the section as between 3 and 4 ft (c 1 m) too far to the west. Section and plan are shown here in correct relationship (illus 1); the correction is confirmed in Cochran-Patrick's text (1878, 57) and by Dobie (1876, 123). Moreover, Dobie (1876, 122) states that the original surface beneath the mound sloped slightly to the east, whereas it appears as level in the original Paton plan. These considerations notwithstanding, the plan of the hall produced by Paton appears detailed and accurate enough to justify further discussion and inference.

The two large posts placed centrally within the hall were obviously intended to support a ridge timber, whilst the absence of similar posts in the two end walls shows that the roof must have been hipped. Since, as it has been suggested, the hearth was beside the south-west ridge post, it is likely that a smoke hole was left in the hipped roof at that end of the ridge (illus 2).

There were opposed doorways in the sides in the north-east part of the hall. Cochran-Patrick (1878, 59) records that the door jambs were carefully squared and each provided with a groove on one edge. They were substantial timbers, varying apparently in size from 1 ft 3 in by 6 in (0.30×0.15 m) to nearly 2 ft by 9 in (0.60×0.23 m). The grooves, described as from 2 to 3 in (0.05 to 0.08 m) in breadth, could therefore easily have been cut into the narrower sides of the jambs. In one instance at least the groove was discontinued about 4 in (0.10 m) from the end of the jamb which had been set into the ground.

With this information and the evidence of Paton's plan it is possible to work out the construction



ILLUS 1 Schematic plan and section (after R W Cochran-Patrick)

of the sides and ends of the hall. Dobie (1876, 122–3) states that the corner posts, and others regularly spaced out, were carefully squared and wedged into postholes. The somewhat smaller timbers forming most of the walls he describes as of split oak, driven into the ground at intervals of a few inches. These timbers are here estimated, from Paton’s plan, as varying from 6 in to 1 ft (0.15 to 0.30 m) in breadth and never less than 3 in (0.08 m) in thickness. Dobie (1876, 123) records that all these timbers were burnt-off near the surface of the ground. For what filled the spaces between them – ‘intervals of a few inches’ (Dobie 1876, 123) – no explanation is offered by either Dobie or Cochran-Patrick.

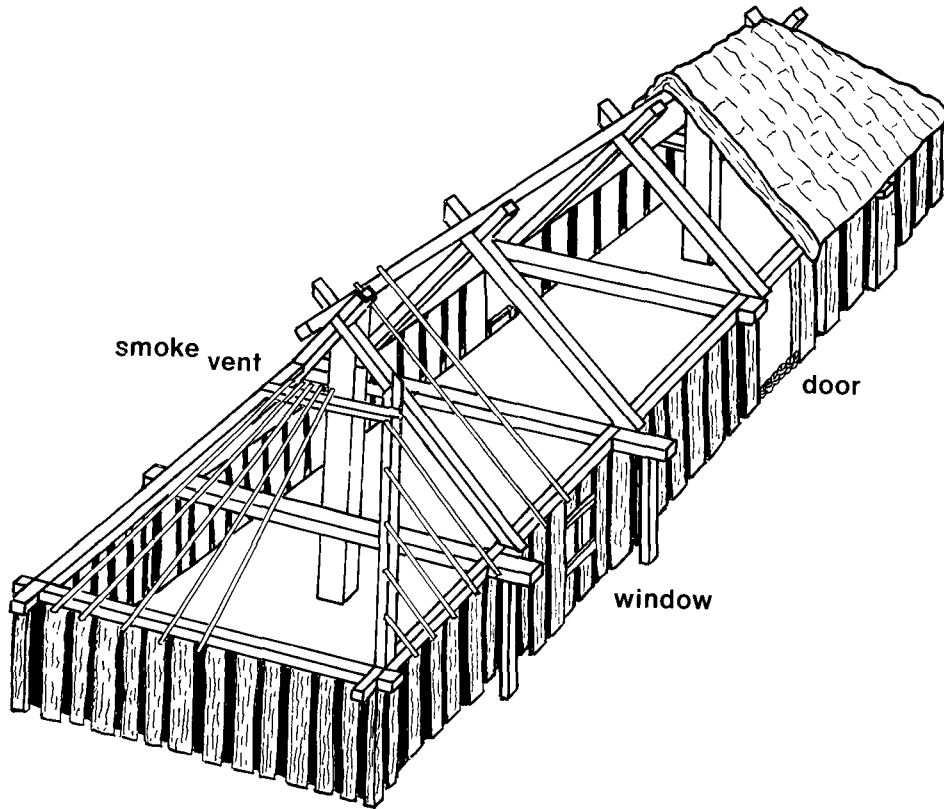
It is suggested here that these split oak timbers had grooving, like the door jambs, on their narrower sides, and that between every two a thinner board had been inserted, with its edges chamfered so that it would fit into the grooves of the split oak timbers to each side of it. These intermediate boards, however, would not have been set into the ground but upon it. They therefore do not appear in Paton’s plan, though the original wall would have been continuous and without gaps from ground level upwards. The grooves in the door jambs would have enabled them to connect with

these walls. This type of construction was demonstrated by Hope-Taylor at Yeavinger (1977, 36–9, with figs 8–9), for example in Building D2(b), of his Style IIIC, perhaps of the sixth to seventh centuries AD (1977, 96, fig 43; 148–9, fig 71; 271). Similarly-constructed walls, set upon sill beams, were found in Building CP 85/1 at Christchurch Place, Dublin, of the mid/late 11th century (Murray 1983, 94 (fig) –7).

The Yeavinger and Dublin buildings just cited were both aisled, with paired and not central roof posts. It would appear that in aisled buildings the walls were load-bearing structures. In order to counteract the tendency of the walls to bulge outwards, under the thrust of the roof, external buttresses were normally provided, inwardly inclined and bearing against the wall plates (Hope-Taylor 1977, 36–9). The plan of the Courthill hall, on each of the longer sides, shows squared timbers placed towards the outer side or indeed altogether outside the line of the wall and presumably, therefore, unable directly to support the wall plate. These must be the posts regularly spaced out, carefully squared and wedged into postholes, recorded by Dobie (1876, 122–3) and mentioned above. Lengths of several of these timbers survived, but neither Dobie nor Cochran-Patrick reports any as grooved, which implies that they were not incorporated into the line of the wall. However, they appear to be too near to the line of the wall – 9 in (0.23 m) or less – to have served usefully as inclined buttresses. At Yeavinger the postholes of such inclined buttresses seem never to have been less than 1 ft (0.30 m) away from the wall base, and might be up to as much as 4 ft (1.22 m) distant. At Courthill these outer timbers are paired across the hall, and they have therefore been interpreted in the reconstruction as vertical posts bearing cross beams to give additional support to the wall plates whilst also tying the two wall plates together (illus 2). Similar supporting posts, to judge by the spacing employed, would have been required where the doorways have been placed. Of the four door jambs two are paired across the hall, and it is suggested that these might have served to carry a cross beam (illus 1 & 2).

It will be noted that no cross beam passed near enough to either of the central ridge posts to be joined to it so as to give additional rigidity to the hall structure. This implies that there was no attempt at truss joinery, but that the ridge timber was supported only by rafters bearing directly on to the wall plates and, of course, by the two ridge posts. At Yeavinger ridge posts appeared only in the later buildings, and Hope-Taylor suggests that one, C4(b), which had central ridge posts, showed the ultimate decline of the wall as a load-bearing structure (1977, 143). He further hints (1977, 95) that a shortage of massive timbers might have contributed towards the change to a more economical use of timber. The Courthill hall implies that where plentiful good timber was available the solidly built load-bearing wall remained in favour, for it would have produced a building likely to have a long life. Nevertheless, substantially built and roomy as it was, the Courthill hall would appear to reflect an ability on the part of its constructors to handle massive timbers combined with a rather primitive approach to joinery.

In the suggested reconstruction the wall timbers are shown as described above (illus 2), and it has been assumed that windows might have been needed to give some light in the part of the hall away from the doors. The walls might have had additional finish. Hope-Taylor was able to show at Yeavinger that in Building D2(b), already mentioned, the walls externally were directly rendered with daub, whilst internally they were lined with a daub-rendered wattle screen (1977, 97–8). Either or both of these finishes might have been applied to the walls of the Courthill hall. Certainly wattle and daub were in use at Courthill, for Cochran-Patrick describes the space between the door jambs as ‘filled with small round hazel and birch posts, about 2 inches in diameter, and showing the extremities artificially sharpened’ (1878, 59). This construction must represent a wattle and daub sill across the doorway on the south-east side (illus 2). A precisely similar feature is shown in the suggested reconstruction of Building CP 184/1, perhaps mid 11th-century in date, at Dublin (Murray



ILLUS 2 Suggested methods used in construction of 12th-century hall

1983, 78–9, illus 31–2). It will be seen that the opposite doorway is shown by Paton as also having upright timbers as part of its sill, though this is not borne out in Cochran-Patrick's text (1878, 59).

As for roofing, it is suggested that turves were used. It has been recorded that in Ireland in recent times such 'turves' might be 2 ft (0.60 m) wide and 20 ft (6.10 m) in length, long enough in fact to overlap the ridge (Beresford 1979, 128). The beaker burial points to prehistoric activity in the vicinity of the Courthill hall. Thus brought to the site within such roofing turves could have been the various flint implements which were found 'immediately above the bed of ash', 1–2 in (0.03–0.05 m) in depth, which was evidently what was left of the floor and its covering after burning and subsequent compression by the overlying motte material (Cochran-Patrick 1878, 57–8). Perhaps most of the flints fell with the turves, as the building burned, but some may well have been shaken out by the wind and have fallen on to the floor long before the fire.

Another internal feature described in the text but not shown on Paton's plan is the 'low dyke or line of small boulders and land stones' which was 'almost exactly in an alignment with and close to the oaken stakes' (Dobie's 'split oak' posts) forming the south-west end of the building (Cochran-Patrick 1878, 56). The measurements given show that these stones must have formed a line about 18 in to 2 ft (0.46 to 0.60 m) inside the end of the building; they may have stood to a height of about the same dimensions. It seems likely therefore that they were the filling of a bench which ran across the south-west end of the hall (illus 1), perhaps with a wooden front and top destroyed by the fire. Cochran-Patrick goes on to record that 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' (1878, 56). This is very much the sort of deposit which might have resulted from the collapse on to a bench of a partly burnt roof of turves, one carrying the arrowhead with it.

Cochran-Patrick (1878, 57) also notes a considerable amount of ash in the vicinity of the south-west ridge post, and infers the action of 'a fierce and long-continued fire'. It has been suggested above that this is where the hearth was placed, and if he is right then this is also where the fire which destroyed the hall may have begun.

It will be seen from the plan (illus 1) that the hall builders found the beaker cairn an impediment, for it clearly proved necessary to place the south corner post out of line. Perhaps it had been necessary also to remove a quantity of cairn stones, and these may be the material which went into the bench along the south-west end. The builders evidently encountered the beaker pit and smashed the beaker probably *in situ*. Cochran-Patrick implies that a post similar to those used in the hall was planted in the cavity (1878, 60), whilst Paton shows two such posts, about 9 in (0.23 m) by ± 1 ft (0.30 m) in size, in his plan. These posts stand apart from the building, and cannot have been structural. They find a curious parallel in Building D2 at Yeavinger, which by a further coincidence also overlay a Bronze-Age cist. The Yeavinger post, of massive size, stood some 4 ft 6 in (1.37 m) away from the north-west corner of Building D2. Hope-Taylor suggests that such free-standing posts may have been emblematic, and possibly totemic (1977, 96, fig 43; 270).

Paton's plan shows that as a result of the fire the sides of the hall eventually collapsed from the south-east, so that debris from the south-east wall and roof must have filled the interior. Of the south-west ridge post only 4 ft 9 in (1.45 m) survived out of a height estimated here at 15 ft (4.57 m) above ground. In describing the debris the term 'layers' is twice used: 'layers of burnt earth, mixed with pieces of charcoal and other burnt matter', and 'layers of fern, moor moss, coarse grass, reeds, etc, mixed with small pieces of charred wood' (Cochran-Patrick 1878, 56-7). The layering may imply the presence of fallen roof turves, but some of the other plants mentioned could hardly have been derived from the roof. Cochran-Patrick noted that the original ground level on which the hall had been built was about 4½ to 5 ft (1.37 to 1.50 m) above the base level of the mound at the time of excavation, and surmised that soil had been removed from round the mound and used to add to its height (1878, 56). The difference between the levels, according to Paton's plans, ranged from about 3 ft 3 in (1 m) to about 5 ft 3 in (1.60 m). *Pace* Linge (1987, 24) these differences do not suggest 'an initial scrape-zone of surface vegetation and topsoil', used to build a barrow. They do imply nothing less than a ditch round a motte, into which Cochran-Patrick's sections had intruded.

It is therefore suggested here that the first stage in the transition from burnt-out hall to motte was to mark out the area of the ditch and to clear the vegetation and topsoil from that area down to the subsoil. As cleared, this material was dumped inside the ruins of the hall, presumably over partially-burnt turves from the roof, to form the deposit of 'dark unctuous earth' containing 'layers of fern, moor moss, coarse grass, reeds, etc.', 3 to 3½ ft (0.90 to 1.07 m) deep near the south-west ridge post, but varying in depth in other places from 1 ft (0.30 m) upwards (Cochran-Patrick 1878, 57). It is noteworthy that Cochran-Patrick (1878, 56-7) specifically states that this layer of 'dark unctuous earth' was stratified above the 'layers of burnt earth, mixed with pieces of charcoal and other burnt matter' (which above has been interpreted as fallen roofing turves), found in the vicinity of the presumed bench set against the south-west end of the hall.

Overlying the 'dark unctuous earth' was the 'layer of yellowish clay, mixed with small stones or gravel, about 12 or 14 inches' (0.30 to 0.35 m) 'in depth in most places'. This layer, it is suggested, represents subsoil derived from the bottom of the newly dug ditch. Its rapid sealing of the previous layer, and its impervious nature, would account for the exceptionally good preservation of the organic material beneath it, for presumably it must have been well tamped down so as to form a firm

base for the rest of the motte. The excavation of the ditch bottom would readily explain this, the only redeposited subsoil present in the make-up of the motte, the upper part of which Cochran-Patrick states was formed of 'ordinary earth' (1878, 57).

The evidence in sum implies that the construction of the motte followed closely upon the destruction of the timbered hall at Courthill. Some historical conclusions may therefore be drawn. The hall and the motte were contemporary, so that the dating of the motte must also date the hall: it may well have been, of course, that the hall was an old building at the time of its destruction. It may be accepted that no motte would have been constructed in south-west Scotland until the time of David I, younger brother and eventual successor of Alexander I, king of Scots (1107–1124). David seems to have been entitled, perhaps by the bequest of his elder brother Edgar, king of Scots (1096–1107), to parts of southern Scotland, probably Scottish Cumbria, Teviotdale and Lothian south of Lammermuir (Barrow 1960, 163). Alexander, however, proved unwilling to cede, and it would appear that not until about 1113 was David able to gain effective control over his inheritance (Duncan 1978, 128), and then only because Henry I of England, brother-in-law of Alexander and David, had threatened to send an army against Alexander (Kapelle 1979, 203). David, thereafter known as Prince of Cumbria, used his enhanced status to introduce Anglo-Normans, many of them tenants from the estates granted to him in England. Others were friends, such as Robert Brus, a wealthy noble in his own right, with tenants of his own, who was granted Annandale as his fief. These Anglo-Normans and their followers were to play a leading part in the organization and government of southern Scotland after David succeeded Alexander in 1124. Probably between 1124 and 1130 David granted Cunningham to Hugh de Morville, later Constable of the kingdom (Barrow 1980, 72). It may well have been during de Morville's tenancy of Cunningham that the Courthill of Dalry was built.

The timber hall at Dalry, it may be surmised, had been the centre of an estate forming part of the old kingdom of Strathclyde, which during the 11th century had fallen under the control of the king of Scots. The hall appears to show that a mode of construction familiar in the sixth–seventh centuries, as at Yeavinger, had persisted into the 12th century in Ayrshire. The planting of the motte upon its ruins signals in the most brutal manner the change to the new Anglo-Norman system – the old landholder and his way of life supplanted by de Morville's man upon his motte. Such action was known in England, too. At Sulgrave, in Northamptonshire, in the later 11th century, the Norman tenant built his ringwork over the site of the hall of his Saxon predecessor (Davison 1969). At Dalry no blood need necessarily have been shed, for the simplest way to obliterate the hall was to burn it down, but the choice of site for the motte was a sign to all that the change was permanent.

Linge (1987, 29) maintains that of the 22 supposed sites of mottes listed for Ayrshire north of the River Irvine 'none could be readily accepted for OS classification or publication as a motte' after examination during the 1982–3 survey of the sites. These 22 sites must largely correspond with the 25 probable or possible mottes recorded by the writer from the literature for the same area. Linge is surely right to throw doubt on to some of these identifications. One obvious test is access to water. The living, on their mottes, need water: the dead, in their flat-topped barrows, do not. With these and other considerations in mind, the writer would enter a plea that the following sites should continue to be classified as mottes:

- Ardrossan parish – Montfode, NS 227438 (James 1986);
- Dalry parish – Courthill, NS 292495 (present paper);
- Kilmarnock parish – Dean Castle, NS 436394;
- Largs parish – Shaw Glen, Skelmorlie, NS 199663;
- Loudoun parish – East Newton, NS 519385;
- West Kilbride parish – Glen Mount, NS 210501.

It is likely, in the writer's opinion, that several sites not listed above may prove to be mottes, but certainly not, for example, Knockrivoch, in Ardrossan parish, against which Linge makes a convincing case (1987, 27, illus 3).

The aim of this paper has been to reclassify the Courthill, Dalry, as a motte, probably of the 12th century. This does not vitiate Linge's recognition (1987, 23) of the 'large, artificial earthen mound with a characteristic flattened top' as a type of prehistoric barrow. This is a valuable concept, which may help to explain similar mounds beyond Ayrshire. Two may be suggested for consideration, the first a tumulus at Lickprivick, East Kilbride parish, Lanarkshire (Wilson 1936, 92, with illus). The second, Greenlaw, in Kirkcudbright (NX 751640), is a cairn rather than a tumulus, but is flat-topped. Originally noted as a motte it has been tentatively but surely rightly classified by Yates as a cairn (1984, 138–9, SK41).

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