

Excavations at Balgonie Castle, Markinch, Fife

R S Will* & T N Dixon†

ABSTRACT

Excavations in 1978 within the courtyard of Balgonie Castle revealed an earlier east and south range, as well as traces of other buildings which were not fully excavated. These buildings seem to have been demolished for an extensive rebuilding programme in the 1640s.

INTRODUCTION

Balgonie Castle is situated outside Coalton of Balgonie, 1.6 km south-east of Markinch (NGR NO 349015), on the south bank of the River Leven. An early 15th-century tower stands in the north-west corner of an enclosure consisting of a late 15th-century north range and a much-altered 17th-century east range. The west wall dates to the 15th century while the south wall is of 16th-century date.

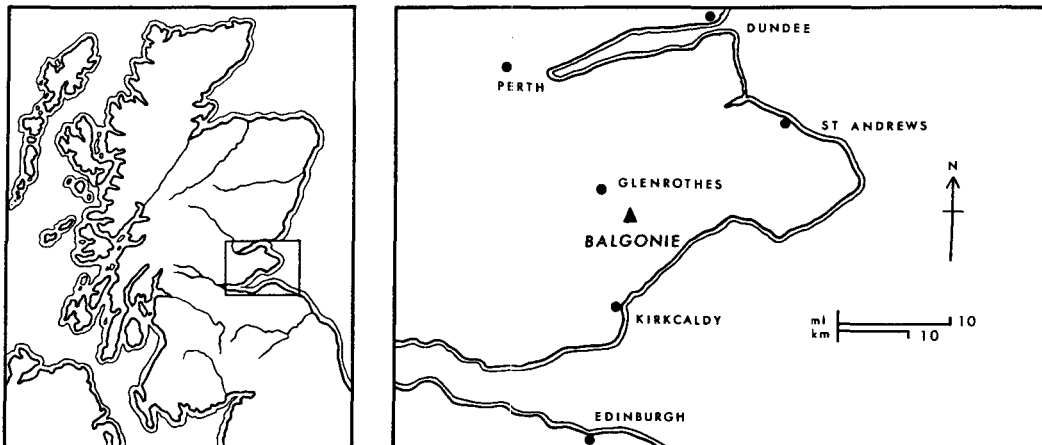
Early references to Balgonie are scarce but in the late 14th century the castle belonged to the Sibbald family: Sir Thomas Sibbald of Balgonie witnessed a charter in 1371. It is to them that the main tower can be attributed (Gifford 1988, 88–91). By the late 15th century the castle had passed to the family of Sir John Lunding (or Lundy) who added the north range. A charter of 1511 confirms to Sir Andrew Lundy of Balgonie, Sheriff of Fife, and his heirs the lands of Over and Nether Balgonie with the ‘tower, fortalice and manor’ (RCAHMS 1933, 202–7). In 1635 the estate was bought by Field Marshal Sir Alexander Leslie who, in 1641, was created 1st Earl of Leven and Lord Balgonie. The estate was sold to James Balfour in 1823 but by 1840 the castle had fallen into disrepair. The castle was bought by a Mr Maxwell in the 1970s who began to renovate the tower, it has since been sold and is currently inhabited.

THE EXCAVATIONS

Excavations were carried out in the courtyard of the castle in 1978, prior to landscaping by Fife Regional Council. The excavations, run as a Job Creation Scheme, were directed by T N Dixon. Various aspects of post-excavation work were carried out but it was only in 1990 that funds were made available from both Fife Region and H B M (Historic Scotland) to finish the report. The castle has always been in private hands and this programme was designed to coincide with the renovation of the tower house.

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ILLUS 1 Balgonie Castle: location

The initial intention was to open trial trenches at strategic locations within the courtyard to investigate the sequence of habitation and the development of the castle. In the event, after consideration of the results of trial trench C, excavation was restricted mainly to the east end of the courtyard. Seven major trenches were excavated: five inside the courtyard and two outside (illus 2).

TRENCH A

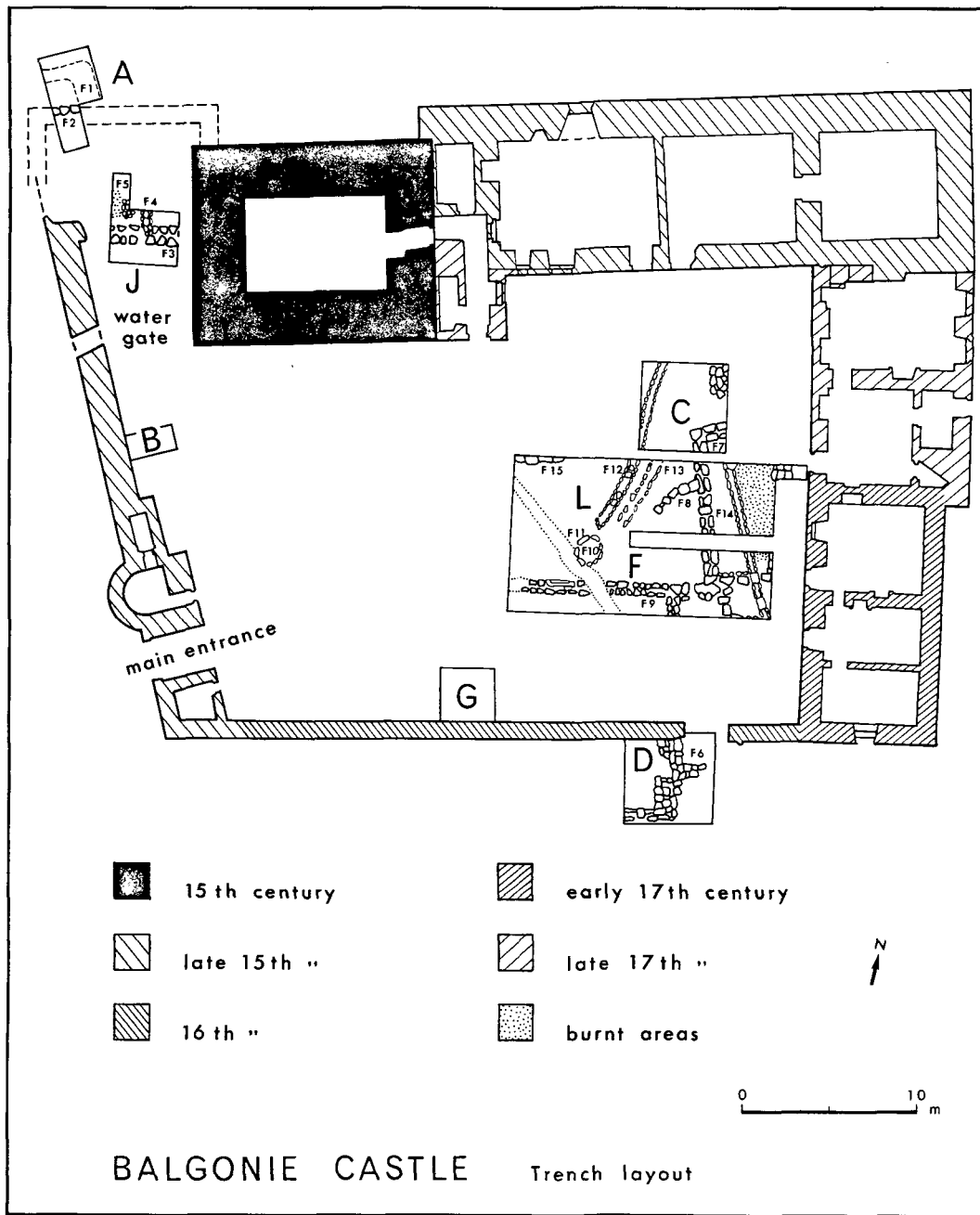
The first area excavated was outside the courtyard to the north-west of the tower. A great deal of mixed rubble and pottery made up the top layers, dating from the 18th and 19th centuries. At about 1 m in depth the foundation trench of a robbed wall (F1) was discovered, running from west to east and returning to the south. Remains of another wall (F2), also badly robbed, were uncovered running west to east to the south of the first wall. This may be the rear wall of a building suggested by a roof rattle marked in mortar on the west wall of the tower. The wall (F3) found in trench J may be the front wall of this building. An extension to the north of the trench revealed a small area of burning which may be the remains of an internal floor level.

TRENCH B

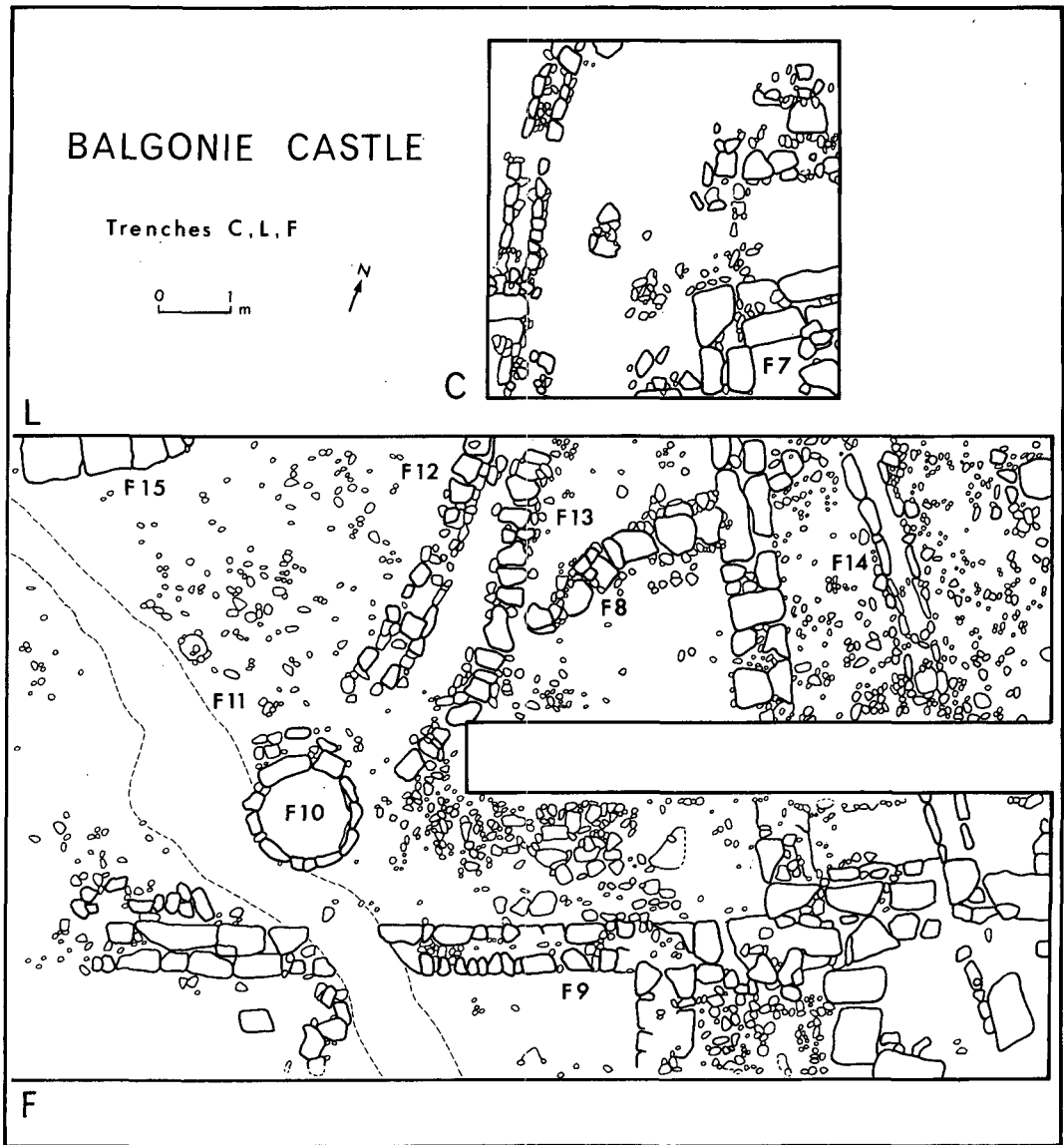
Situated along the western wall of the courtyard between the main gateway and the water gate, this trench failed to uncover any structures or other archaeological deposits. The only finds were of 19th-century date.

TRENCH J

Positioned against the west wall of the tower between trench A and trench B. Within a very few centimetres of the surface a masonry wall was uncovered, c 1.2 m long and surviving to two courses in height (F3). A stone-built drain (F4) ran from the centre of the wall to the north. On the north side of the wall, in the west end of the trench, burnt stones and earth were evidence of a possible hearth (F5). The area immediately to the south of the wall appeared to have been cobbled.



ILLUS 2 The positions of the trenches excavated



ILLUS 3 Plan of Trenches C, L, and F

TRENCH D

Just outside the South-east Gateway, this trench was excavated in order to uncover any evidence of the gatehouse indicated by the filled panel above the gate arch. The lower courses of the west wall of this structure were exposed, c 0.8 m thick and 1.0 m long, returning to the east for about 0.8 m (F6). These courses had been broken through by the contractors who had excavated a trench for the modern services to the tower. This west wall of the gate house had been incorporated into the east

wall of a row of 18th-century cottages which were built along the south wall (outwith the courtyard) and which were still standing at the beginning of this century (RCAHMS 1933). The front east/west wall of the cottages was also uncovered.

TRENCHES C, F & L (ILLUS 3)

These trenches (illus 3) made up the major part of the excavation and incorporated trial trenches E and H. All these trenches were in the eastern end of the courtyard. Trench C was the first to be excavated and the results from it dictated the placing of the two major trenches F and L. Although these started as separate trenches, the dividing baulks were later removed. Therefore F refers to the southern area of the trench and L to the north.

In the south-east corner of Trench C was the corner of a mortared stone wall standing one course high and two courses thick (F7). This structure extended through trench L into F where it returned to the east. A Charles I turner dating to the 1630s or 1640s was recovered from the material sealing this feature. F7 would appear to represent an earlier building or an east range of the castle; it had an internal length of 7.8 m; the internal width was not fully exposed but it was in excess of 4 m. The west wall was c 0.8 m thick and the north wall c 0.9 m thick. About 2 m from the north-west corner of the west wall was a chamfered doorstep with a rebate 1.1 m long on the inside. The stone was very worn and a stone path (F8) led from the threshold out to the courtyard. To the east of the drain, which ran through the house, was a deep deposit of ash suggesting a possible midden.

A similar building with less substantial walls was uncovered in trench F on an east/west alignment, not quite at right angles to the first building. A threshold similar to that of F7 was also discovered in the north or front wall of this building (F9). The interior of this building appeared to have been slabbed with sandstone, at least in part, and there was also evidence of cobbling.

A well, lined with pink sandstone (F10) and with a diameter of 1.25 m, was uncovered 0.8 m from the front wall of F9. As the well was directly in front of the threshold it is unlikely that the two were both in use at the same time. Both the wall and the well were damaged by the contractors laying the modern service pipes. The well was excavated to a depth of c 1.8 m but could not be excavated farther due to ground water seepage and the lack of safety equipment. Finds from the upper layers included lead flashing and other demolition debris. To the north of the well was an area of large firmly set stones (F11), one of which had three holes bored through it; the function of these holes is unknown.

A stone-built drain (F12) ran to the north, continuing on through trench C. About 1 m to the east of this drain were the remains of a lower, earlier drain (F13). Another stone-built drain (F14) began just inside the north wall of the first building (F7) and seems to have cut through the south wall. A section of a pink sandstone wall (F15) was uncovered in the north-west corner of trench L but there was insufficient time to excavate further there.

TRENCH G

This was opened at the foot of the inner face of the south wall of the courtyard. The only structural evidence was the foundation trench of a wall, completely robbed out, at the same level as the base of the main wall. This was sealed by disturbed midden material containing both post-medieval and modern pottery.

DISCUSSION

The excavations, although mainly confined within the present courtyard, uncovered an earlier phase of the castle's history and pointed to a major re-building programme in the 17th century; this is supported by historical references and by the coin evidence. Two Charles I turners dating from

the 1630s or 1640s were found in the layer sealing the foundations of the two buildings found in areas F and L; these buildings may have been demolished at this time to make way for the present east range within an enlarged courtyard. The function of the two buildings is unknown but the evidence of hearth and midden material suggests that they may have been kitchens or accommodation quarters. Pottery recovered from the midden material found between the two buildings would date these deposits to the 15th and 16th centuries.

The two buildings, and the other various walls, suggest a smaller courtyard with a possible south range. Unfortunately the excavation was unable to uncover the full extent of the walls. Considering the concentration of walls in areas C, F and L it is surprising that the two trial trenches B and G, along the west and south walls, failed to uncover any features or deposits. This western area was presumably used as a courtyard throughout the history of the site.

THE FINDS

(full reports are deposited in the National Monuments Record of Scotland)

THE MODERN POTTERY

G Cruickshank & R S Will

The largest ceramic group on the site was representative of the post-medieval to modern period; unfortunately they were recovered from unstratified deposits and cannot be related directly to the occupation of the castle. The sherds mainly derived from the pottery industries of central Scotland. The assemblage produced the only example of a maker's mark naming the Fife Pottery at Kirkcaldy (1790-1930). The sherd has a whelk shell motif and the inscription '... Fife Pottery ... & Co.'; it is thought to date to the period when John Heron owned the factory in the 1830s (Cruickshank 1982).

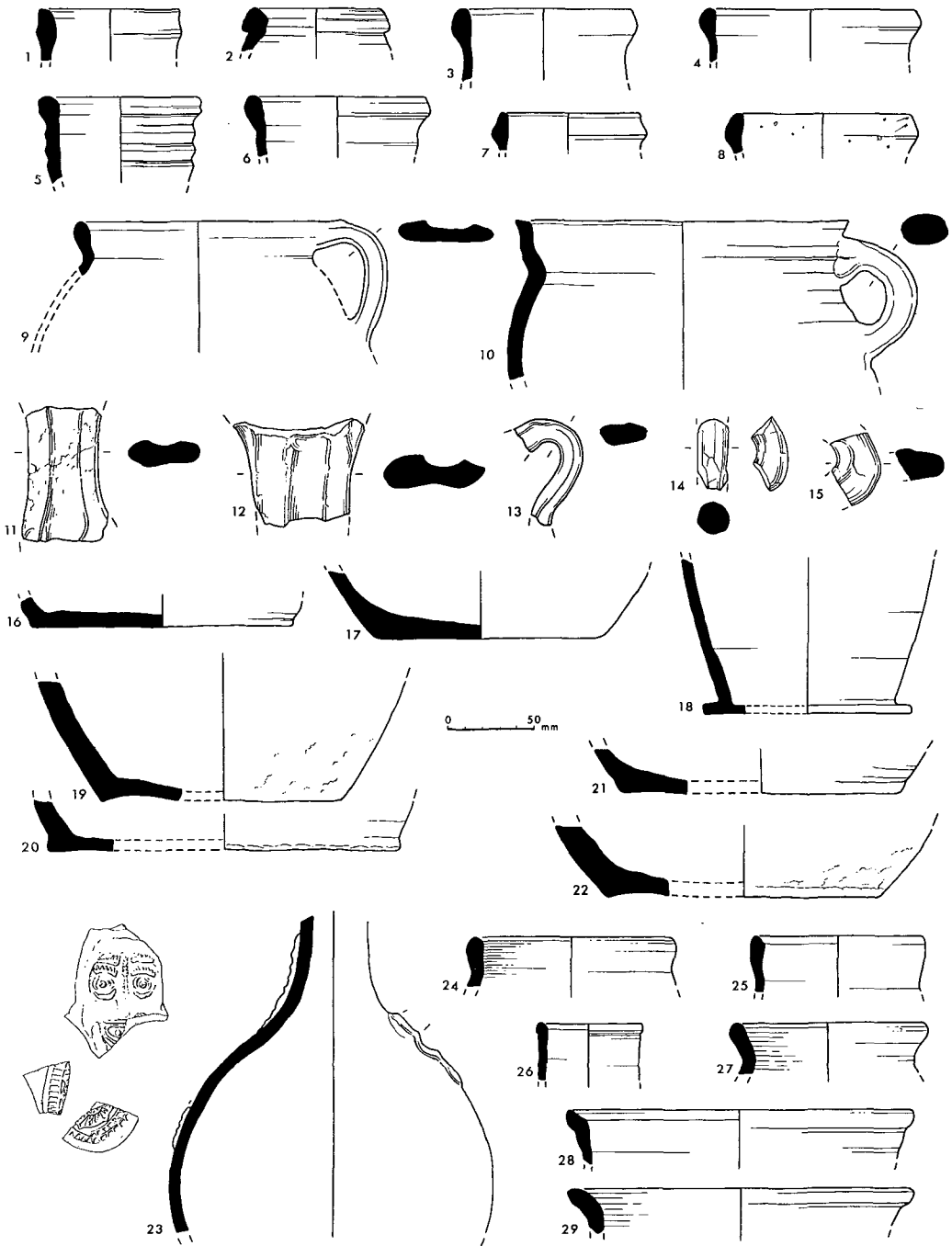
The remaining body sherds represented earthenware dishes, bowls and plates from the 19th century. These vessels demonstrate the vast range of decorating techniques in use at the time: hand painting; transfer printing; sponge printing and slip-trailing, along with various combinations of these methods. Sponge printing was a speciality of the Kirkcaldy potteries and is well represented.

THE MEDIEVAL AND POST-MEDIEVAL CERAMICS (ILLUS 4)

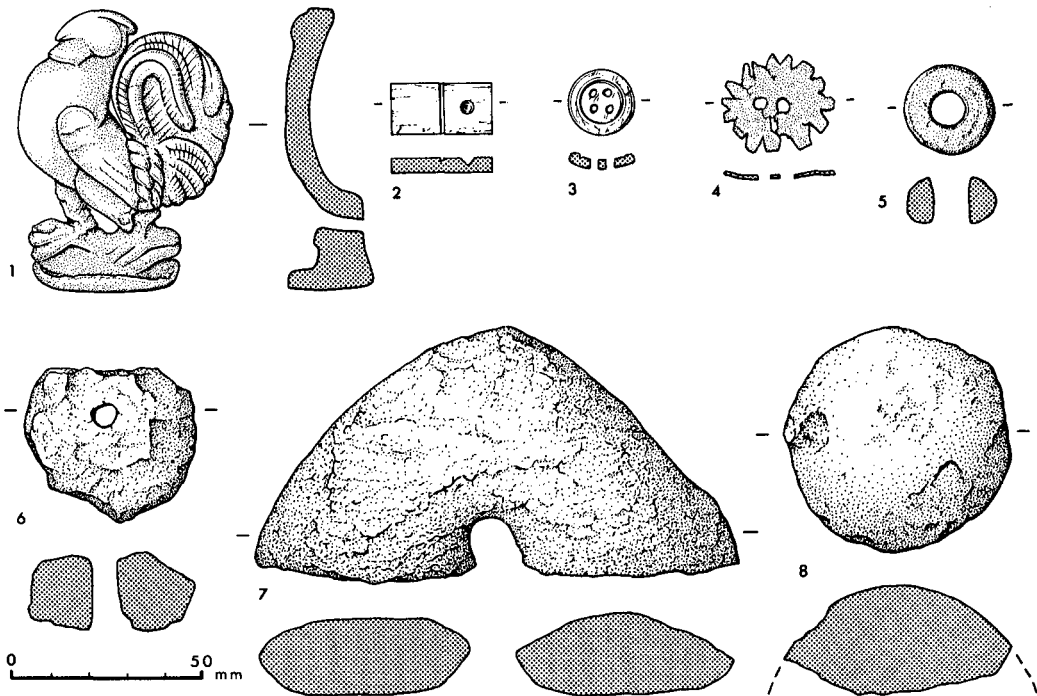
R S Will

The trenches (95 contexts) produced 538 medieval and post-medieval sherds. The medieval sherds belonged mainly to the Scottish East Coast White Gritty Ware Tradition (illus 4 nos 1-8, 11-17), (Cox 1984, Haggarty 1984) with additional sherds of Scottish post-medieval reduced ware (nos 16, 18, 21 & 22). A larger group in an oxidized fabric probably dating to the 16th and 17th centuries, similar to the published material from the kiln site at Throsk on the upper reaches of the Forth (Caldwell & Dean 1992), were also recovered (nos 9, 10, 24, 25-9). Most of these vessels would have been made locally and are not of a very high standard, being quite crude and thick walled with evidence of knife-trimming on the base sherds (nos 16-22).

The range of vessels was quite limited, with the bulk of the sherds belonging to cooking/storage pots or to jugs, although a lug handle from a bowl was also found (no 15). The jugs had both strap and rod handles; of the later chamber pots (nos 9 & 10), one has a strap handle and the other a rod handle. Sherds from a 16th-century German stoneware Bellarmine (no 23) were recovered and represent the only imported pottery on the site.



ILLUS 4 The medieval and post-medieval pottery



ILLUS 5 Miscellaneous artefacts

THE CLAY PIPES

C J M Martin

A good sequence of clay pipes is represented by approximately 250 fragments, including 21 bowls. The date range is from c 1610 to the late 19th century and includes pipes from Holland and England, although, not surprisingly, the bulk of the pipes were made in Edinburgh. The earliest bowl was probably English (c 1610-30) but also present were two bowls by William Banks, Scotland's earliest pipemaker who operated in Canongate from 1622 to 1642. In fact, all 21 pipe bowls can be dated to the 17th century and it is the stems that represent the local 19th-century pipemakers at Kirkcaldy and Dunfermline. (For a full account, see Davey 1987, 263).

GLASS

K R Murdoch

In total, 120 fragments, mainly of bottle and window glass were recovered from unstratified contexts. Analysis of the material revealed that datable items were polarized into two distinct groups, one dating from around 1700 and a more numerous group from around 1800. The earliest material dates to c 1690 and is from a squat wine bottle.

MISCELLANEOUS ARTEFACTS (ILLUS 5)

Unfortunately all the more unusual finds from Balgonie come from relatively insecure contexts or appear to be relatively modern. David Caldwell and Ann Clarke were consulted for these finds.

- 1 Lead-based cockerel, this was found in the upper layers of trench D and may represent a crest or mascot.
- 2 A wooden domino from trench L in remarkably good condition; 19th century.
- 3 A bone button from the upper layers of trench B; possibly 17th century.
- 4 Possible wheel from a spur found in trench L.
- 5 Undecorated stone spindle whorl.
- 6 Possible stone spindle whorl, from trench J.
- 7 Stone loom weight found in the upper layers of trench L.
- 8 Fragment of a stone cannonball from trench L; 17th century.
- 9 A lead musket ball, not illustrated, was also found.

ANIMAL BONES

Catherine Smith & G W Ian Hodgson

In total, 513 bones from mammals and birds were identified. These represented cattle, sheep/goat, pigs, dogs, hare, small animals (eg rat) and birds. Fish remains were obtained from four locations but these are not identified as to species.

Only two locations, one from within building F7 and the other from a 17th-century midden, yielded a sample of more than 50 bones. In each of these cases the animal remains reflect an economy heavily dependent on sheep or goats and cattle, with apparently little reliance on pig as a source of meat. The evidence suggests that lamb, kid and calf were eaten, but that most of the sheep and cattle were successfully reared to between the ages of three and four years. There was some evidence that prestige high-meat-yielding joints of beef and mutton were removed from the site. Most of the animal bones were very deliberately split as though for the extraction of marrow. Pig bones were scarce, but a single pig bone indicated the presence of a very large pig, possibly kept for breeding purposes. Most of the other bones fell within the size ranges reported for medieval Perth (Hodgson *et al* 1982) The bones and teeth bore no sign of disease, but a single cattle metapodial was splayed, possibly indicating that it came from a draught animal.

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