

Excavation on Arthur's Seat fort, Edinburgh, 1995

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ABSTRACT

Excavation in advance of construction of a path to the summit investigated part of the defences of the fort on Arthur's Seat. No artefacts were recovered which would either confirm or refute its interpretation as a Dark Age or Early Historic fort. The remains of a later dyke were built on top of the rampart rubble. This dyke appears to be part of the rectilinear enclosure sited to the south-west of the inner rampart and which contains traces of cultivation. Evidence for recent soil erosion was apparent along the entire length of the proposed stone-pitched path.

INTRODUCTION

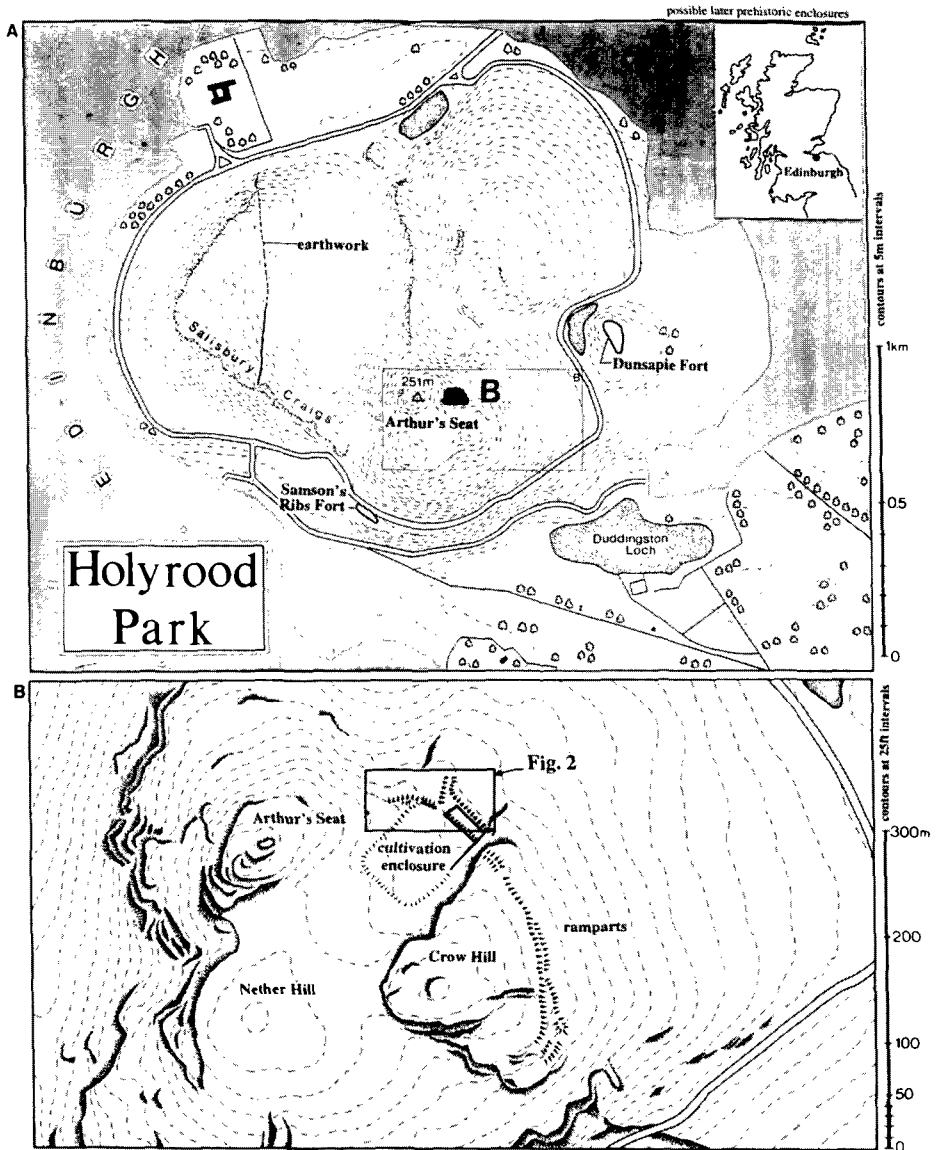
This report presents the results of an archaeological excavation carried out by the Centre for Field Archaeology (CFA) in January 1995 in advance of the construction of a new path on the eastern approach to Arthur's Seat, inside a putative Early Historic fort (NGR: NT 276 729). The work was commissioned by Historic Scotland.

The fort on Arthur's Seat is defined by two parallel banks cutting off the main approaches to the summit from the north-east (illus 1). These banks incorporate a number of natural outcropping crags and hillocks. The remainder of the circuit is assumed to have been protected by the natural defences provided by the cliffs, perhaps strengthened by slighter walls which no longer survive. The fort was described and mapped by Stevenson (1947, 165) and interpreted as a possible Early Historic fortification on the basis of its similarity to the outer works of Dalmahoy, Midlothian. The interior of the fort shows no surviving traces of occupation. The north-western ends of the defensive banks are overlain by a pair of later stone and turf enclosures, the larger of which appears to have enclosed cultivated land (*ibid*, 165).

Erosion of the approaches to the summit from the north-east led to a scheme of ground consolidation and path construction being planned in 1995. The first phase of this involved a technique known as stone-pitching whereby irregular stones were laid in a soil matrix to create a path. This was to involve ground disturbance over an area of approximately 60 m by 2 m within the area of the putative Early Historic fort and adjacent to the north-west terminus of its inner bank. The area to be disturbed was excavated in advance of path-laying, both to investigate the early remains and assess the current erosion problem.

Prior to excavation a survey was undertaken of the area around the north-western end of the ramparts by the City of Edinburgh District Council Archaeology Service and a report on the areas of erosion was produced (Collard 1994). This report and a copy of the survey drawing were used as a base map for illus 2.

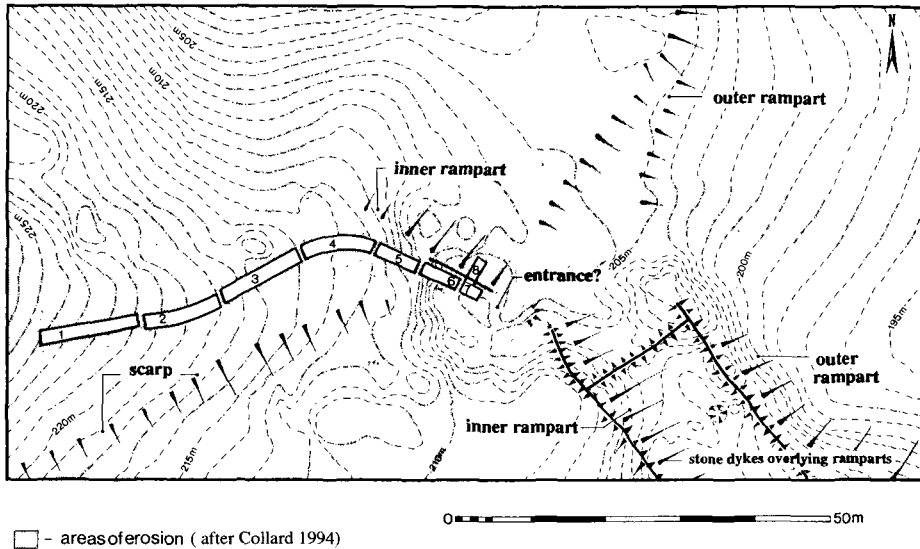
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ILLUS 1 Location map. (Based on Stevenson 1946, 47, fig 3; and the Ordnance Survey map of 1891)

EXCAVATION

Seven trenches (1–7) were excavated along the length of the path (illus 2 & 3). Within three of these trenches (4, 6 & 7) deeper local cuttings of 2 m by 2 m boxes were excavated to assess soil depth, ground conditions and degree of erosion. An eighth trench (8) was cut through the inner rampart.



ILLUS 2 Location of excavation trenches on path to summit of Arthur's Seat

STRATIGRAPHY

The entire length of the path was badly eroded with bedrock outcropping close to the surface in many areas, especially upslope. However, deeper deposits were located on the south-eastern side of the path in Trenches 1-4, and throughout Trenches 5-8 at the base of the slope.

Rampart rubble

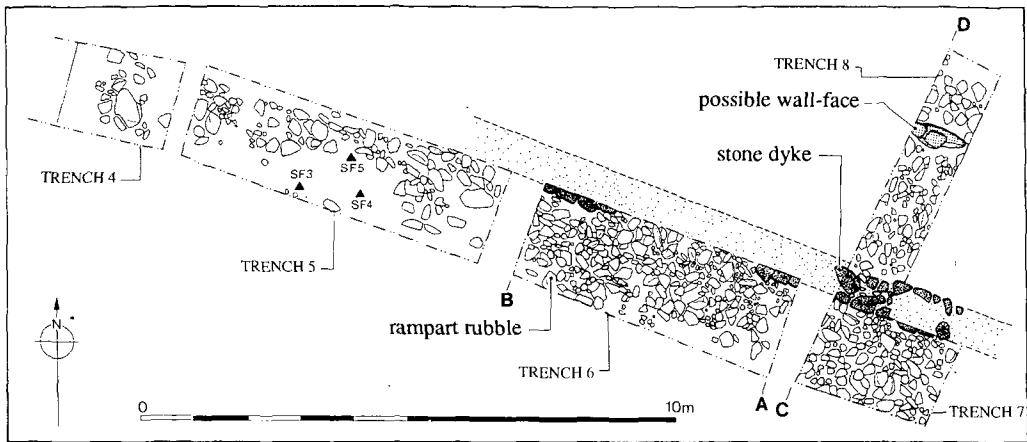
From the eastern end of Trench 4, through Trenches 5-8, there was a large spread of stones representing rubble from the rampart wall (illus 3). Trench 8 was cut through the inner rampart (illus 3 & 4). The rubble construction material was contained within a loose soil matrix. A possible collapsed outer face of the rampart was located c 3 m from the south-west end of Trench 8. This was characterized by the presence of a number of large stones.

Later stone dykes

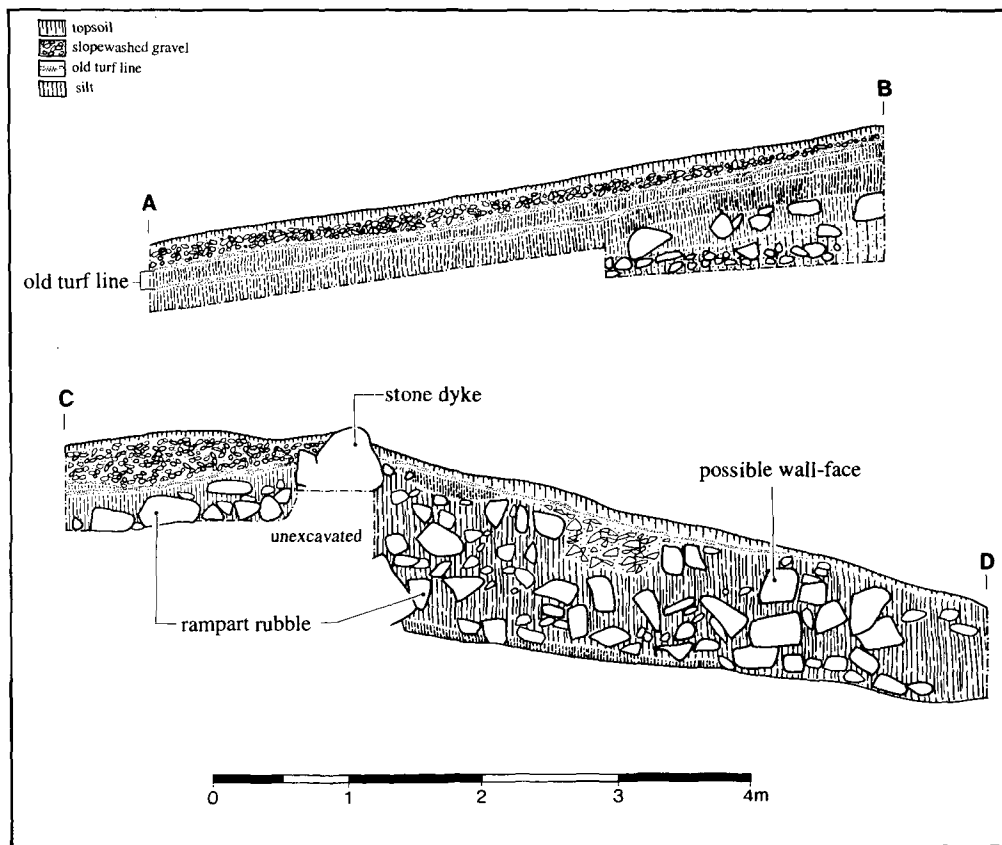
The crest of the rampart rubble was clearly overlain by stretches of wall face which relate to the stone dykes of the agricultural enclosures described by Stevenson (1947). Since the remains of the stone dyke were discontinuous and, where present, preserved to only one course in height, their full extent was not readily apparent from surface traces and the north-west and south-east ends were not located.

Modern erosion deposits

The south-western side of the rampart rubble was sealed below an orange silty loam which contained four iron nails (SF 3-5) and a number of modern artefacts, including slag, glass shards (one from an early 19th-century bottle neck) and plastic. This soil layer was sealed in turn beneath a series of buried turf layers and slopewashed deposits (illus 4, A-B).



ILLUS 3 Plan of trenches 4-7, showing remains of rampart and later stone dyke



ILLUS 4 Sections A-B and C-D

FINDS

Most of the finds were shards of bottle glass. All the identifiable shards were of 19th- or 20th-century date. None of the remaining artefacts was diagnostically earlier than the 19th century. Several square-sectioned iron nails with lopsided flattened heads were recovered from a number of contexts. The majority of the artefacts recovered are probably the result of accidental losses by visitors to Arthur's Seat. However, the concentration of nails may be associated with features, such as wooden fences, related to the rectilinear enclosures. A full list of the finds is available in the archive of the project records.

DISCUSSION

RAMPART AND FORT

The excavation revealed a large spread of stones representing the collapsed remains of a terraced rampart at least 5.4 m wide and up to 1.2 m high. A possible collapsed wall face, defined by a number of stones larger than those comprising the rest of the rampart core, and corresponds well with the comment by Stevenson (1947, 165) that some large revetting of the rampart could be seen 8–15 ft out from the line of the later dyke. The remains can be compared with Cruden's late terrace rampart on Traprain Law (Cruden 1940). No artefacts were recovered which would either support or deny Stevenson's interpretation that this was a Dark Age or Early Historic rampart. This interpretation was based on the similarity in construction of the ramparts on Arthur's Seat with the outer works on Dalmahoy Hill, Midlothian. Unfortunately it is impossible to date accurately ramparts by their methods of construction alone. This has been amply demonstrated by the wide range of dates obtained from timber-laced ramparts throughout Scotland; indeed the outer works at Dalmahoy themselves remain undated (Stevenson 1949).

Although the method of rampart construction and the lack of artefacts from the excavations preclude more precise dating of the fort on Arthur's Seat, perhaps the size of the enclosed area could be interpreted as chronologically diagnostic. The fort falls within the category previously termed 'minor oppida' (Feachem 1966), although the use of this term is no longer favoured in a Scottish context (Ralston 1979, 448). It does, however, enclose a large area (c 8 ha) and has been compared to other large forts such as the adjacent earthwork site on Salisbury Craigs (10 ha) or Traprain Law (16 ha) and Eildon Hill North (15.5 ha). Recent excavations on the latter site have shown that, at its largest extent, the fort dated to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age (Owen 1992). Unfortunately, not enough large-scale, modern excavation has been undertaken on these large enclosed sites to allow them to be grouped together as a chronologically distinct type.

AGRICULTURAL ENCLOSURES

The excavation confirmed Stevenson's interpretation that the faced dyke, visible in places on the summit of the rampart mound, was indeed a later addition and probably relates to the rectangular enclosures and the area of cultivation. These enclosures are marked as 'old fences' on the Ordnance Survey map of 1881 and were evidently already out of use at that time. Unfortunately, no clear dating evidence was obtained for the construction and use of these enclosures.

EROSION

Prior to the excavation, a field visit to the site indicated how severe were the areas of erosion. Deep gullies had been worn by water run-off and were filled with loose stones. Bedrock was

visible in patches across the area of the excavation. It seemed unlikely that any major deposits would be preserved *in situ* in the upper section of the excavated pathway, although there appeared to be accumulated slopewash deposits on the south-western side of the ridge. This was confirmed by the excavation. Clear evidence for erosion, either in the form of soil depletion or soil accretion, was visible in all the excavated trenches. In Trenches 1–3 the north-western portions of the trenches had become eroded almost down to bedrock while the other side revealed buried turf lines. These buried turf lines were also visible in the lower trenches (5–7). The artefacts found within these buried turf lines suggest that most of the erosion has occurred in the last 200 years. Of particular note is the deep (0.4 m) deposit of slopewashed stone and silt in Trench 7, which overlies the buried turf layer, and has thus protected the archaeological remains, although rendering them superficially less distinct.

ARCHIVE

A full archive of the project records has been deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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