

2. INTRODUCTION

Over the past 20 years Tarbert Castle Trust (TCT; formerly the Tarbert and Skipness Community Trust who own Tarbert Castle on behalf of the community has undertaken a series of projects to better understand the scheduled site of Tarbert Castle, Argyll and promote it within the community and beyond (www.tarbertcastle.info). This has involved an extensive community effort to maintain the castle fabric while keeping the castle grounds open to the public as a heritage park and to make the site more accessible to the public and to save and consolidate the remaining built structures including the creation of a sustainable conservation plan and a major consolidation of the Tower House. The Trust has improved access to the site by upgrading and consolidating paths through the castle site and provided improved information signage to the castle itself. In 2013, and funded by HLF (Heritage Lottery Fund), TCT commissioned a historical and non-invasive survey of the monument (Explore Tarbert Castle – YH-12-03691).

This involved:

- i) The production of a Desk Based Assessment which collated existing information about the history and archaeology of Tarbert Castle
- ii) A laser scan of the castle
- iii) A geophysical survey of the castle
- iv) A descriptive and photographic survey of the castle remains

The results of this work were combined in the subsequent report (Regan 2013a). Other works within the castle have included a watching brief and a survey of the tower (CFA 1993; Wood 2010).

While some of the history of Tarbert Castle can be gleaned from extant but admittedly scant documentation, the origin of the castle, its development along with the function of many of its component features, remains unclear. Also unclear was whether the remains of the medieval royal burgh extend along the ridge to the south of the castle. TCT decided that a programme of community archaeological excavation would help to answer some of these questions and lead to a

better interpretation, presentation, and future protection of the castle, while promoting the castle as an important place through generated publicity and the excitement of local involvement. TCT thus initiated Tarbert Castle - Our Castle of Kings, a Community Excavation Project and secured funding to undertake archaeological investigation at the site. Several areas of the castle readily suggested themselves as a focus for potential investigation, particularly the building ranges lining the Inner Bailey and the presumed entrances into the Outer Bailey. Beyond the castle to the south there was evidence of ditches and terracing while anomalies detected during a geophysical survey suggest further fruitful areas of investigation, which might help establish the presence of the putative medieval burgh. Another important consideration within any programme of archaeology that involved the general community was the accessibility and suitability of trenches that enabled the participation of as wide a group of individuals as secured resources allowed. As such, 52 volunteers along with 240 young people from local schools and youth groups took part in the excavation work. The project identified five key survey and excavation aims:

- i) To reveal and confirm the presence/absence of entrances into the Outer Bailey.
- ii) To investigate the northeast range of the Inner Bailey to the castle to examine its age and function.
- iii) To establish the absence/presence of the medieval burgh within the scheduled area.
- iv) To place the remains within a chronological and wider cultural and archaeological framework.
- v) To investigate the presence/absence of any early medieval activity.

Beyond these, each excavation area had specific aims outlined at the introduction to each trench discussion in Section 5 below. The proposed excavation within the scheduled area of the castle and burgh required Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) and with this in mind an Excavation Project Design was prepared to accompany the SMC application (Regan 2018b).