

PENETRATING THE FORGOTTEN PLAN OF DRUMINNOR.  
GPR SURVEY AT DRUMINNOR CASTLE, ABERDEENSHIRE IN 2019

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INTRODUCTION

Druminnor Castle has been the focus of eight seasons of archaeological exploration as part of the Bennachie Landscapes Project<sup>1)</sup> organised by the Bailies of Bennachie and the University of Aberdeen. In 2019 a generous grant from the Castle Studies Trust enabled 2,500 m<sup>2</sup> of lawn and car park surrounding the surviving portion of castle to be surveyed by Alpha Geosurvey Ltd using Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR).<sup>2)</sup> This was followed by targeted excavation carried out between May and October of 2019.

Druminnor Castle, as its name (gaelic ‘druim’) suggests, sits on the end of a ridge overlooking the Kern Burn. The burn marks a geological divide: igneous granodiorite to the east and Druminnor Castle on sandstone on its west; the castle sits astride a geological basalt dyke that pierces the sandstone, roughly down the line of the ridge. ‘Forbes’ is the first familial name associated with the site and may have originated as a cadet branch of the Earls of Mar, from whose lands the lordship was granted.<sup>3)</sup> The parishes of Forbes and Kern formed the core lands of the later barony of that name, with Druminnor as its caput (see Figure 1).

DOCUMENTARY HISTORY AND PROJECT AIMS

Background documentary research in 2010<sup>4)</sup> brought to light two hitherto-unnoticed estate plans<sup>5)</sup> recording the footprint of the castle on the eve of its destruction in 1800.<sup>6)</sup> Significantly, these also contained thumbnail sketches of its outward appearance (Figs 2 and 3). These plans demonstrated that the castle was over three times more extensive than formerly believed.<sup>7)</sup> The project aimed to test the veracity and accuracy of these estate plans, to contextualise a regionally important lordly estate centre within its socio-ecological landscape and to understand the dynamics of this multi-layered landscape through time. Élite settlement of the site can be demonstrated to span the period c 1150 to the early 1700s, though the origin of the site as a lordly caput may pre-date the 12th century. Its use during the 18th century appears to have been mainly of an agricultural nature with the Forbes family living elsewhere at that time. The surviving S range has seen continuous occupation since the demolition of the bulk of the castle in 1800. Given the site’s almost complete removal in 1800, its accessible nature

<sup>1)</sup> [www.bailiesofbennachie.co.uk/bennachie-landscapes-project](http://www.bailiesofbennachie.co.uk/bennachie-landscapes-project)

<sup>2)</sup> Mala GX with 450MHz (approx. 150–900MHz) antenna.

<sup>3)</sup> I am grateful to Alex Forbes, site owner, for this suggestion.

<sup>4)</sup> Shepherd, 2011.

<sup>5)</sup> RHP260/1, c 1771, Plan of that part of the lands of Forbes comprehending the parish of Kern; RHP44705, 1770, Plan of Braeside and Gartnach (Gartlay) Hill showing part to be added to the policy of Castle Forbes. Both documents are held by the National Records of Scotland (NRS).

<sup>6)</sup> Leyden 1903, 229. The demolition was occasioned by John Grant of Rothmaise who appears to have made a business out of buying up dilapidated castles and, effectively, ‘asset-stripping’ them by demolishing them and selling off the building stone. The present tower block of Druminnor survived because Grant gave it to his son, Robert, and his daughter-in-law, Henrietta Forbes of Newe, who subsequently made it their home. Grant himself was made bankrupt by 1779. Grateful thanks to Alex Forbes for this information.

<sup>7)</sup> Cf Slade 1967, 148–66.

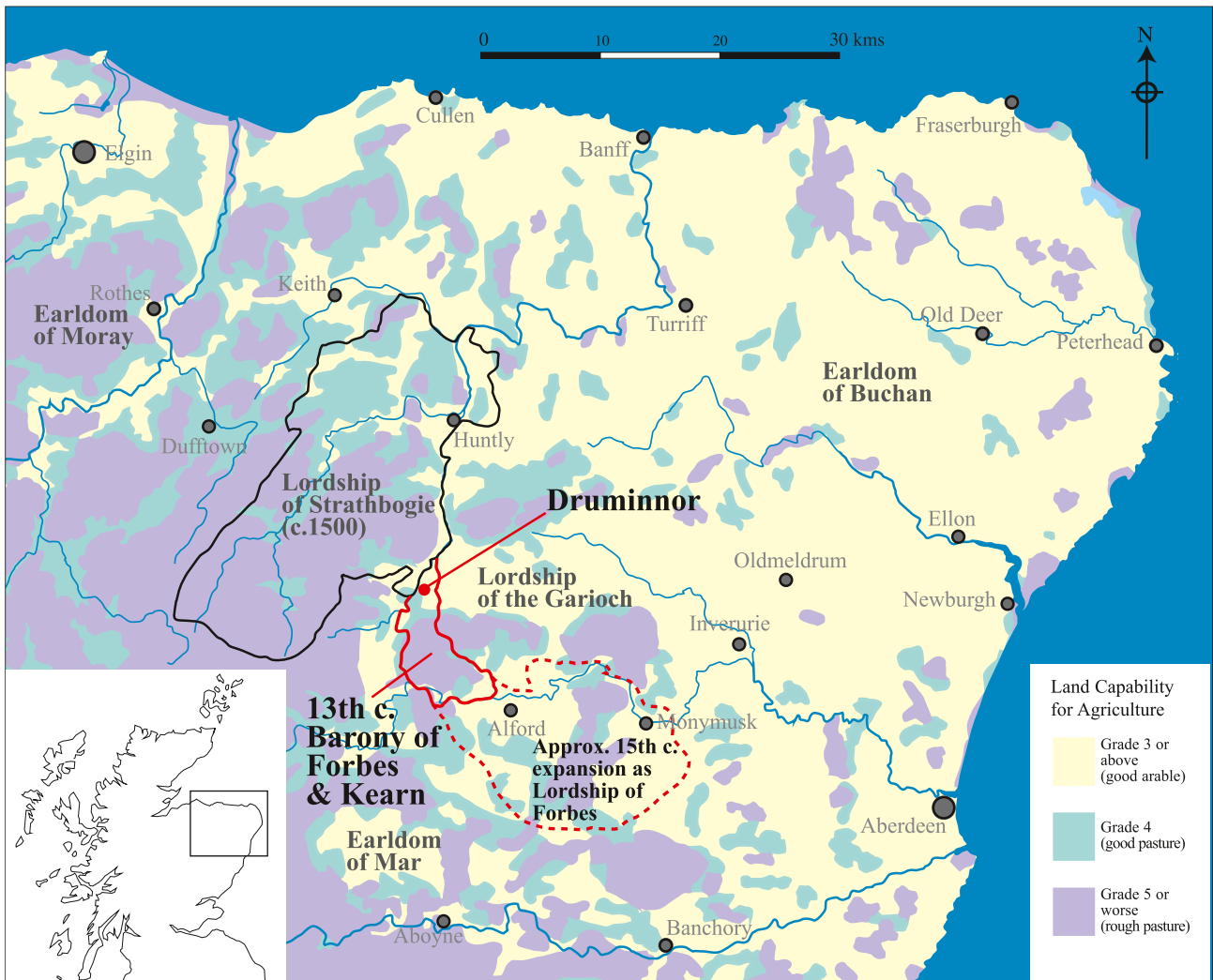


Figure 1. Location of Druminnor Castle, Aberdeenshire.



Figure 2. Druminnor Castle ground plans as shown on two 18th-century estate plans: RHP 44705 on the left, RHP 260/1 on the right. Image courtesy of Lord Forbes & NRS.

affords scope to understand aspects of pre-construction site preparation and of developmental sequences elsewhere frequently obscured by upstanding remains.

In brief, the historical vignettes and plans depict a six-storey tower on the NW corner of a double courtyard castle plan. A third entrance court is shown on the W side. Leyden's<sup>8)</sup> eye-witness account of the lower courses of the removed tower notes that 'The wall is about nine feet thick, and the cement is exceedingly strong'. After the demolitions of 1800 a large 'mansion' was built over the castle's former SW end in 1841.<sup>9)</sup> This was demolished by a new owner, Margaret Forbes-Sempill, in 1961.<sup>10)</sup>

<sup>8)</sup> 1903, 229.

<sup>9)</sup> Wright 2003, 30.

<sup>10)</sup> *ibid*, 6.





Figure 3. Druminnor Castle thumbnail sketches as shown on the two 18th-century estate plans: RHP 44705 on the left, RHP 260/1 on the right. Image courtesy of Lord Forbes & NRS.

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS: 2012–2019

Annual excavations since 2012 have slowly been confirming the general veracity of these plans and their reasonable accuracy. Elements of the eastern, service courtyard (Lower Courtyard) have survived under later landscaping and can be shown to overlie an earlier ditch C14-dated to the first half of the 15th century.<sup>11)</sup> This accords well with a suggested date for the construction of the main, Upper Courtyard in the middle part of that century. Indeed, Jhon Kamloke and Wilyhame of Euerkype's receipt dated 1440 attests payment for their work done<sup>12)</sup> and a royal license to make the place defensive dates to 1456.<sup>13)</sup> The latter appears, on the basis of the excavated evidence, to have been retrospective.

While the Lower Courtyard remains were sealed by subsequent landscaping, the reverse appears to have occurred at the 15th-century Upper Courtyard whose remains were cleared away to the top of the underlying basalt dyke and sandstone bedrock. Approximately 0.8 m of hardcore was then added intermittently over the intervening 150 years in order to create carriage and, more recently, car parking space. This has led to severe logistical difficulties with regard to targeting archaeological remains, but the GPR survey has been very helpful in this regard. An important early flag was a circular shaft, approximately 1.5 m in diameter and extending more than 4 m below the modern car park, which was archaeologically-confirmed to be a well (see Figure 4). This located the interior of the tower and gave a firm spatial point from which to work.



Figure 4. Druminnor Castle photogrammetric image of the medieval well. Image courtesy of Emil Tanasie.

Figure 5 shows elements from the processed GPR data that relate to the estate plans and to other, previously unattested features; it also plots the location of archaeological trenches and elements of the castle recognised by excavations carried out since 2012.

The present tower block (A) can be related to the 18th-century estate plan. Excavations in the Lower Court have demonstrated the castle's 16th-century extent in this direction and revealed a process of subsequent development. (F) is the underlying early 15th-century ditch into which the first 16th-

<sup>11)</sup> SUERC-78170.

<sup>12)</sup> Ill. Ant. AB, iv, 395.

<sup>13)</sup> Ill. Ant. AB, iv, 400.

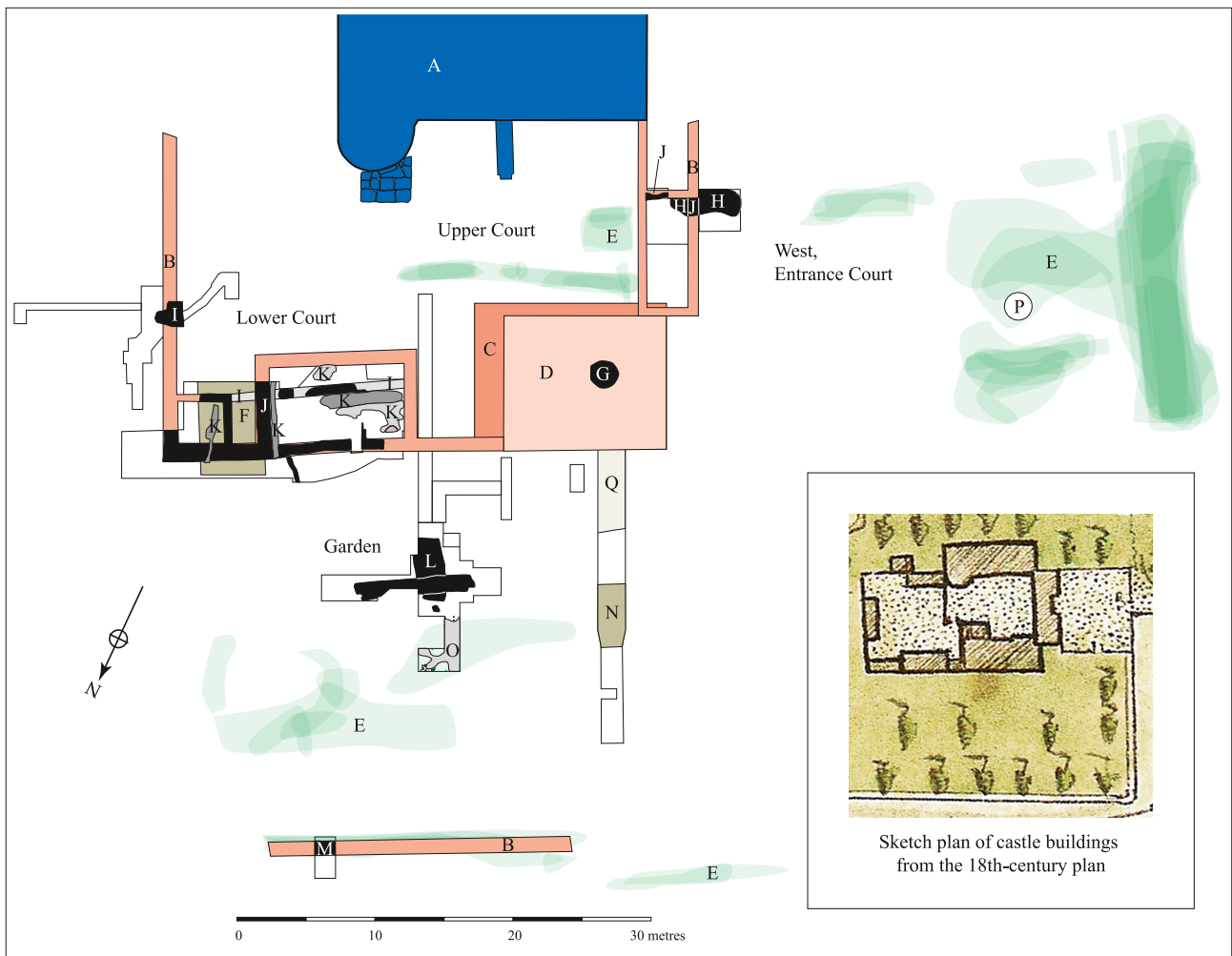


Figure 5. Druminnor Castle composite site plan showing extant structures, excavated features and processed GPR data.

century wall collapsed and which was subsequently re-built. A formative range of buildings, evidenced by wall-line (I) was later replaced by a larger building (possibly a stable) replete with central drain, cobbled surfaces and possible loose boxes.

Elements of the western (gatehouse) range can be reconstructed with reference to the surviving portions of mid-12th-century kiln (H) and to portions of wall (J) that must logically relate to that gatehouse. The GPR survey appears to show the entrance road to this range, swinging south of the Bell Tree [P] to align with the arched entranceway (also shown on the 18th-century sketches) that appears to have overlain the 12th-century kiln.

The possible footprint of the tower can be suggested with reference to the well, the estate plans, the line of the excavated N barmkin (defensive enclosure) wall and the eye-witness account of 1800, permitting a reconstruction of its N and W lines and internal faces. What at present remains unknown is the full extent of the tower's S and E walls, though one sketch and the eye-witness account note its rectilinear plan, with the long side clearly running along the E–W axis. (D) represents its minimum footprint while (C) may be considered its maximum.

The tower clearly stood on the basalt dyke and on an adjoining outcropping of solid sandstone, both of which were truncated and levelled with re-deposited quarried sandstone 'hardcore'. Foundations, as such, were unnecessary. Demolition in 1800 saw the site cleared down to the bedrock and the adjoining compacted hardcore fill. A further platform constructed of quarried sandstone lies to the north of the tower (Q), level with the top of the basalt; this was presumably constructed at the same time as the tower. Since the well was cut through not only the basalt dyke, but also the hardcore deposit,

so it either post-dated the tower that was built upon this levelled hardcore surface or was contemporary with the tower, with both post-dating the hardcore. However, this time lapse may have been of a very short duration.

Although, sadly, artefactual dating evidence is thus far lacking, circumstantial evidence might suggest that the tower was built during the later 13th century. Stylistically, it might fit well with other examples in NE Scotland, such as Drum, Hallforest and Dunnideer – the latter seemingly noted in a charter to Lindores Abbey in 1260.<sup>14</sup> It might not be coincidental that the Forbeses received their land charter in 1271x2: potentially the tower formed a visible expression of their rise in social standing. More importantly, the surviving S range, seemingly built in the mid-15th century, sits in a rather awkward topographic position, hanging over the edge of a steep bank overlooking the Kearn Burn. An adjacent, pre-existing structure could account for such an eccentricity in siting.

Another platform construction underpinned the 15th-century Upper Court build. Here, excavation indicates that the courtyard overlay a levelled platform of re-deposited weathered sandstone; at least part of this was likely provided by the digging of the ditch beneath the Lower Court (F). This platform extended eastwards to approximately the line of the wall (J). The Lower Court, constructed two or three generations later, had no such foundations and the line of the former E wall of the Upper Court is not presently known.

#### FURTHER GPR SURVEY RESULTS AND FUTURE EXCAVATION

The GPR survey also successfully located the line of the outer garden enclosure depicted on the 18th-century plan. Although covered with 1.5 m of landscaping material, the wall survived to a metre in height and a metre thick beneath. Further work is required to investigate the date of this feature and to see whether it follows the line of an earlier enclosure. However, within the later garden, a range of other structures has started to come to light: a substantial ‘façade’ with projecting platform (L) may be related to formal garden landscaping; its orientation, mirroring the line of the early 16th-century barmkin of the Lower Court, may suggest that design possibility. Metalled and cobbled surfaces (O) may reflect an earlier period of use when the castle acted as the management centre of its demesne farming landscape<sup>15</sup> or else denote formal garden features. The 12th-century kiln<sup>16</sup> [H] may belong in the former context. Other remains newly-revealed by GPR, including an intriguing curving linear feature noted in the Upper Court, may supply further evidence of earlier landscape contexts for the castle. These additional features will, hopefully, be attended to next season.

Finally, a set of features beneath the Bell Tree (P) point to an interesting landscape story that may not be possible to answer during the lifetime of this sycamore tree. This sycamore is one of only a handful of trees named on the 1st edition OS maps of Scotland; photos from the 1880s show it looking very similar to today. It was reported as one of ‘two venerable sycamores’ in the Second Statistical Account of 1840 and a planting date in the 1600s may not be unreasonable. Considering the ground levels known through excavation and as survive in relation to the surviving S range, the sycamore must have sat upon a substantial mound within the western court, overlooking the entrance route. Quite why this tree persisted while all the surrounding grounds were so thoroughly altered may suggest a form of ‘heritage’ agenda of the landowner. However, as noted, we are unlikely to ever know the full answer to that particular Druminnor mystery.

<sup>14</sup> Drum: Greig 2004, 454; Hallforest: Slade 1985, 315–6; Dunnideer: Lind. Chart. 1903, 152–3.

<sup>15</sup> Shepherd 2015, 35–69.

<sup>16</sup> SUERC-67036; SUERC-76174; Shepherd 2018, 1–32.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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