

REPORT ON THE EXCAVATION AT DUN SCALPSIE
ISLE OF BUTE — JULY, 1959

By R. E. MACCALLUM, M.A., Dip.Ed., F.S.A. Scot.

Introduction

The fort, believed to date from the Iron Age, is situated on a "bold precipitous rock" (Hewison)¹, about 100 feet above sea-level on the south-east shoulder of Tarmore hill (279 feet) and dominates the shore and arable land lying between Quien Loch and the sea. The rock slopes steeply for about 70 feet down to low marshy ground, but on the west side some 20 feet below the fort there is a small stretch of the 50 foot raised beach, whose level surface and good soil would make it very suitable as an annexe, particularly as it contains a spring, the nearest available source of water to the fort.

Dun Scalpsie is one of a complex of small forts: to the south-east three and four miles respectively lie the forts of Lubas and Dunagoil. To the south the Ayrshire coast can be seen from Dunure to Ballantrae and to the south-west lie the Holy Isle and the forts at Glen Sannox, some eight miles across the Sound of Bute.

There is another fort, a mile to the south-west at Port na h'aille, Clachan-ard², but this lies below the 50 foot contour line and is hidden from Dun Scalpsie by Ardsalpsie. It has, however, the northerly aspect denied to Dun Scalpsie and is in full sight of the fort at Nether Ardrosdale. All the above mentioned forts are generally attributed to the Iron Age.

Scalpsie would have been an attractive prospect to early sea-borne settlers, with its shallow sandy bay (indeed, Hewison says that "Scalpsie" is of Norse origin, meaning a shallow bay suitable for beaching small craft), good alluvial

1. J. K. Hewison, *The Isle of Bute in the Olden Times*, Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1893.
2. *Transactions B.N.H.S.*, Vol. 11, pg. 80.

soil, good pasture on the higher ground and Quien burn provides a constant supply of fresh water. On the landward side it was hemmed in by hills, a fresh water loch, and no doubt in early times by dense woodlands. It is no surprise, therefore, that Scalpsie has long been settled. In the fields below the fort are a tumulus and a cairn. The latter, associated with the "25 foot" raised beach, is all but obliterated, but the tumulus, close to the present road, was opened by Professor Bryce (cf. P.S.A.S., XXXVIII, p.56. 1903-1904) and found to contain a cist. No skeletal remains were discovered, but the artefacts — an urn, jet bead, bronze pin, and a flint knife or scraper — indicate that it probably dates from the Middle Bronze Age (1500 B.C. — 1000 B.C.).

From that time the bay has perhaps witnessed sea-borne invasions by Iron Age Kelts, Scots from Ireland, Vikings, etc. The fort was no doubt used as a defence against such invasions, a function which it again exercised during the last war. Amongst the first finds were three spent .303 cartridges lying in the turf. It was perhaps at this time that the southerly wall was tumbled down the hill-side to make way for the regulation "sand bag" walling.

Plan of the Fort.

Dun Scalpsie is mentioned by Hewison in 1893 as a dry-built, circular structure, composed of the stones lying at hand, some of which measured as much as 3 feet by 2 feet. Some parts of the wall are still in situ, but their measurements do not agree with those given by Hewison. A plan prepared at the time of the present excavation shows that the fort is oval, measuring 97 feet along its major axis, ENE/WSW. It measures 86 feet east and west, and 68 feet north and south. Hewison's measurements were 77 feet and 87 feet respectively.

Hewison also noted that the walls varied in thickness — "on the south-east side about 9 feet; north-west, at the doorway, 14 feet 6 inches; north-side, where the stones are piled 5 feet high, the breadth appears to have been 20 feet." Today there are no surface remains of a wall on the south-

east, but the tumbled rocks extend down the hillside for at least 20 feet. On the north-west the thickness is still about 14 feet 6 inches, but what appears to be an inner wall runs for a time parallel with it at a distance of 4 feet; this inner wall is about 8 feet thick and about 18 inches high, and starts at the large mound of stones noticed by Hewison at the north side, and it runs westwards along the northern line of the hill, joining the outer wall at a point approximately 12 feet beyond the entrance. It then continues for another 30 feet before petering out. The large mound on the north side is now nearer 3 feet high and is rectangular in shape, measuring 20 feet by 40 feet.

The doorway led down to a raised beach 20 feet below, where a spring supplied the inhabitants with water. Hewison reported that the wall here was 14 feet 6 inches thick, the outer entrance was 7 feet and the inner 10 feet, while the wall was 4 feet high, but tumble and bracken have all but obliterated them today.

There is no trace of the fosses noted by Hewison in the south east, but these too may be concealed by tumble and overgrowth.

The Excavation.

The excavation of a section of the south side of the fort was undertaken by the writer and was mainly exploratory. In this work he was assisted by the Assistant Scoutmaster, Dr. W. Porter Mitchell, and members of the 34th Glasgow (Mount Florida) Scout Troop, and the work occupied ten days in July, 1959.

What appeared to be a wall, at least ten feet thick and four feet high, resting on a clay floor, was located, but because of the difficulty of determining whether it was a stone and earth structure or merely a mass of compact tumble, it was decided to remove a section of it. After cutting back five and a half feet, a masonry wall was revealed (Plate One). The masonry was formed of large blocks of stone carefully positioned to give a smooth face and the interstices had been neatly filled with small slivers of the same material. The wall reached a height of 35 inches,

rested on the native rock, and had a batter of one inch per seven inches of vertical height. Above and continuing for one foot to turf level was a wall of undressed boulders and turf. On removing a section of the upper wall, fragments of a bone, possibly a human femur, were recovered from the top of the lower wall.

Because of inclement weather there was insufficient time to determine the width of the wall. This work was further impeded by the great mass of tumble already mentioned, much of which will require to be removed to find the outer face.

Dun Scalpsie appears to have had a yellow clay floor, from six inches to a foot thick. Above this floor was a layer of occupation debris, yielding charcoal, bone fragments, rounded beach pebbles or "pot boilers" which had been split possibly by heat, teeth from a ruminant animal, and other finds which are listed separately. Large boulders tumbled from the wall appear to indicate that the wall had already fallen into disrepair before this occupation ceased. This occupation layer was about one foot thick.

Above was a layer of sandy gravel, possibly alluvial, some nine inches thick, and tumble still appears in this level. There is a second occupation horizon almost level with the top course of the lower wall, and it may be that the crudely built upper wall of unshaped boulders and turf was built at this time. At this level there was a very large slab, approximately two feet by 1½ feet, suggestive of paving. The ground beneath it was very hard and appeared to have been well trodden, but this of course is surmise. It should, however, be watched for in any future excavations at this site.

Finds.

1. Spindle Whorl with hourglass perforation. Schist. 5.3 cm diameter, 1.3 cm thick, and 0.8 cm perforation.
2. Comb fragment. 1.7 cm by 1.8 cm by 0.3 cm.
3. Small piece of schist with (tooling ?) marks, i.e., small scooped-out incisions. 1.2 cm by 0.2 cm.
4. Whetstone. Dolerite. 14.2 cm by 3 cm by 4.3 cm.

5. Whetstone. Schistose Grit. 2.4 cm. by 1.7 cm by 2.2 cm.
6. Small piece of slag.
7. Animal teeth and bones.

All of the above finds, with the exception of the bone fragments, are from the primary occupation layer. Bone fragments were found in both layers.

Reports on the Finds.

1. The teeth: by Mrs. H. J. Smith, M.R.C.V.S., Department of Veterinary Anatomy, Glasgow University Veterinary School. "The teeth are from a ruminant animal; both are molars, one from the upper and the other from the lower jaw.

- a) the maxillary or upper tooth appears to be the last or sixth cheek tooth. (3rd true molar).
- b) the lower or mandibular appears to be the fifth cheek tooth. (2nd true molar).

The teeth are too large to belong to sheep or goat, but are similar to those from the right side of the skull of an ox, although they may possibly be from the jaw of the red deer."

2. Geological Specimens: by Mr. J. G. Scott, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.

- a) One of the many "pot-boilers," almost certainly picked up from the fields below the fort, which abound in marine alluvial deposits, was examined and reported to be "a well weather granite pebble. Possibly fractured through contact with fire."
- b) "Piece of vesicular slag, probably a by-product of smelting carried out at the site."
- c) The native rock of the hill was "Dalradian schistose grit, probably from the Ben Ledi group."
- d) The stonework of the lower wall was "coarse schist, almost a schistose grit, obtained almost certainly from near the site itself."

3. The Masonry: by Mr. R. W. Feachem, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. "The masonry of the inner face is of a classic Early

Iron Age type, the appearance of which depended, of course, upon the characteristics of the available stone rather than on any preconceived ideas on the part of the builders on what the finished article should look like . . . The structure seems to be a dun of the Early Iron Age date. The precise dating of duns is one of the matters now very much to the fore in our thinking, and at the moment it seems likely that such structures in south-west and south-central Scotland and in the southern and central Western Isles, at least, are likely to have been built by the first half of the 1st century A.D., if not during the 1st B.C."

4. Comb Fragment: by Mr. R. B. K. Stevenson, of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Edinburgh. "The fragment of bone comb is very puzzling. It is one-piece, not composite, and in that resembles Early Iron Age combs, and the moulding and broad depression is a little like the small one-piece comb from the Broch of Kettleburn (undated). But the analogy is not close and the Scalpsie comb appears to have had a projection on top or even a second row of teeth. It might just possibly be a one-piece imitation of a composite 13th - 14th century Norse comb with stepped ends. (cf P.S.A.S., LXXIII, pl. 47)."

On the recommendation of the Sub-Department of Prehistory and Roman Britain, The British Museum, London, which could add nothing to Mr. Stevenson's remarks, the comb fragment was submitted to Mr. J. F. Head, F.S.A., Uplands, Prestwood, Great Missenden, Bucks. He reported, "The moulded border is reminiscent somewhat of the upper extension seen on the handle of the Iron Age weaving comb from Danebury hillfoot, Hants. (B.M. Later Prehistoric Antiquities, Fig. 21, 4 lower), but that may be quite fortuitous and in any case it seems clear that the Scalpsie fragment cannot have served in a similar way."

5. Bone Fragments: by Dr. W. Porter Mitchell.
 - a) in the primary occupation layer were found, in addition to the teeth mentioned above, a lower

premolar tooth from an ox, and a number of small bones too indefinite to identify.

- b) in the secondary layer were found:—
 - i) Small curved bone, probably a rib of a bird. There is evidence of its having been burned
 - ii) Lower end of a fairly long shafted bone. At first thought to be human, but more likely the upper bone of the front limb of an adult horse.
 - iii) Small portion of flat irregular bone, probably sacrum of unidentified animal.
 - iv) Fragment of bone from upper end of the brooch bone of the front limb of a horse.
 - v) Fragment of a bone, likely to be from tarsal region of a horse.
 - vi) Tooth — upper molar, third left, of a horse.
 - vii) Various fragments of bone of indefinite origin.
 - viii) Deciduous tooth from young animal, probably horse.

Conclusion.

It is perhaps too early in the excavation to offer any opinions as to the age, or the builders, of the fort at Scalpsie, but there is some evidence that it might belong to the Early Iron Age, which began in Scotland with the arrival of a Keltic-speaking people about 100 B.C.

It is known that these people introduced iron, thus making forest clearance, drainage and quarrying possible, and the old pastoralism and shifting population gave way to settled farming, stockbreeding of cattle and sheep, and the erection of permanent structures, such as forts, for the Kelts were exceedingly bellicose.

The recovery of slag, a by-product of smelting, of whetstones and a spindle whorl in the primary occupation level indicates that the fort is unlikely to be of an earlier date than the Iron Age.

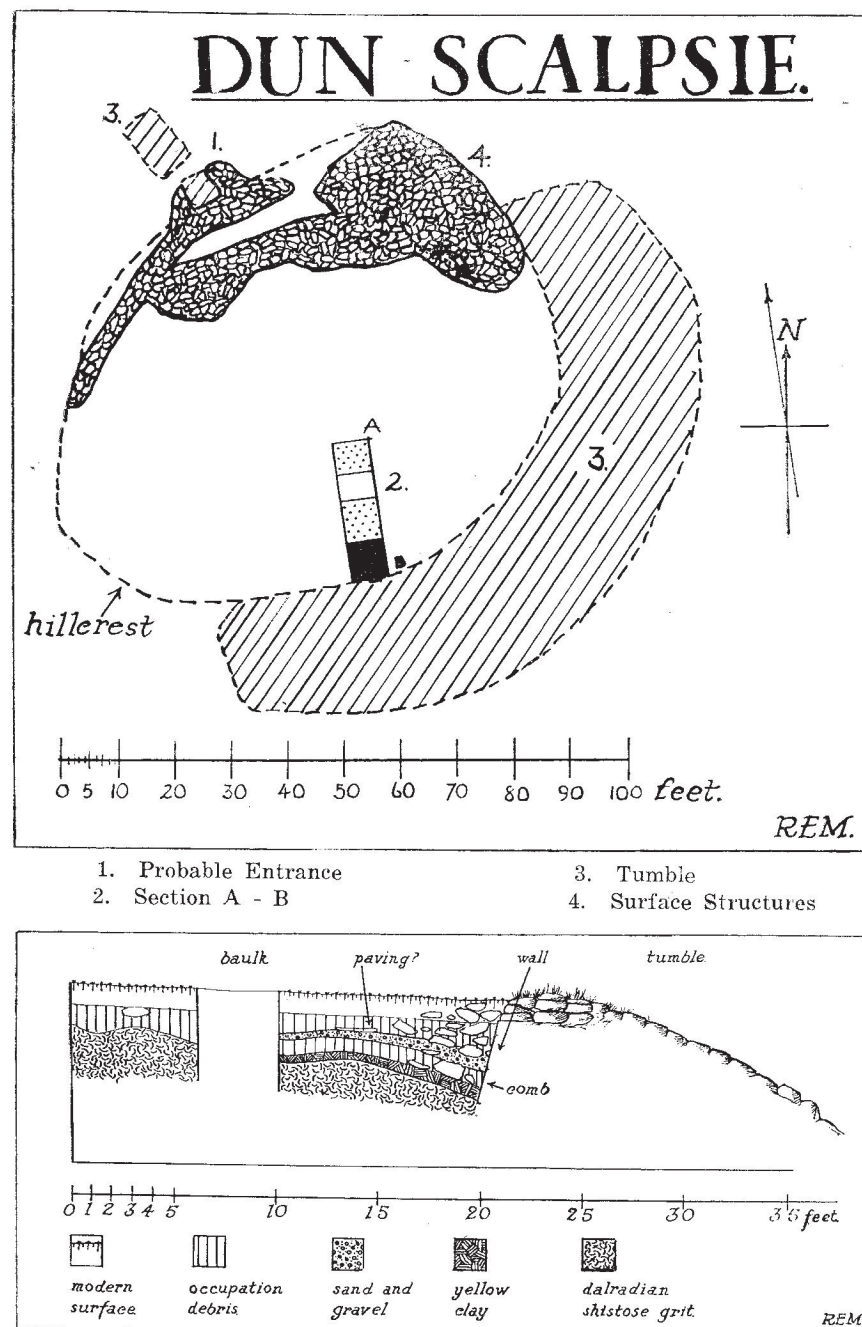
The evidence of the comb fragment is inconclusive, but Mr. Feachem noted, in his report on the masonry, that it is of a classic Early Iron Age type, and suggests that the fort is a dun of this period.

Acknowledgements.

I should like to acknowledge my indebtedness to the Marquess of Bute, who gave permission for the site to be opened, to Mr. Robert A. Milligan, the Bute Estate factor, and Mr. Ferguson, the tenant of Scalpsie.

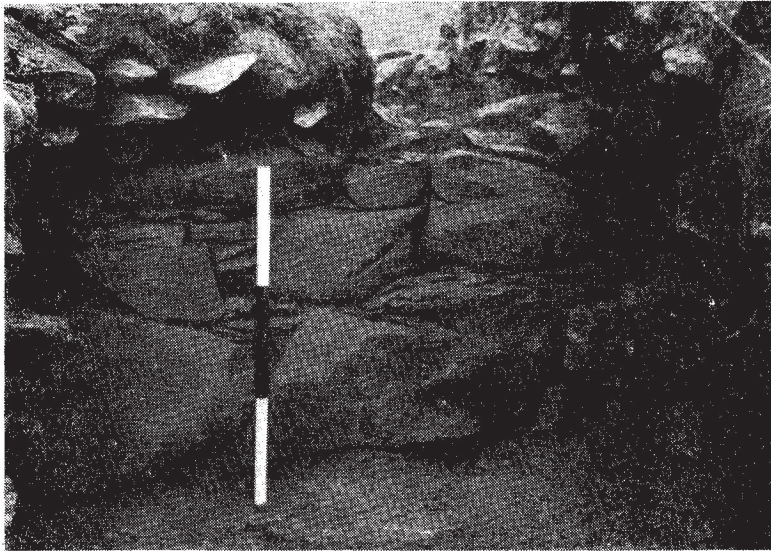
For specialist help I have to acknowledge the advice and assistance received from Mrs. H. J. Smith of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy, Glasgow University Veterinary School; Mr. J. G. Scott of the Kelvingrove Art Galleries and Museum; Mr. R. W. Feachem, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Edinburgh; Mr. R. B. K. Stevenson, National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Edinburgh; the British Museum, London; Mr. J. F. Head, F.S.A., Uplands, Prestwood, Great Missenden, Bucks.; and Dr. W. Porter Mitchell of Glasgow.

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CORN KILNS IN BUTE

By ISABEL D. MILLIGAN, M.A.

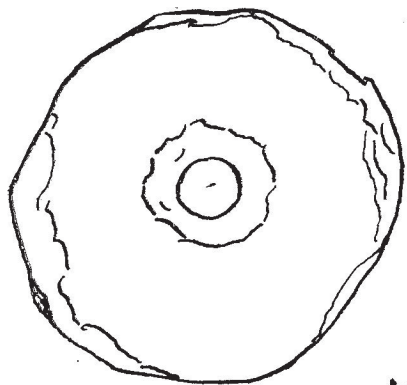


Inside Wall of Fort

[Photo: J. Bedgood]



COMB



WHORL



Finds: Dun Scalpsie

In May, 1961, Miss Marshall drew my attention to a mound in a sloping field on the west side of the road from Port Bannatyne to Rhubodach, before Ardmaleish farm house (O.S. 073689). From its general outline Miss Marshall believed it to be a corn-drying kiln similar to one excavated by Dr. Marshall in 1935 at Kilwhinleck.¹ (O.S. 055625).

With the kind permission of Mr. D. McKinnon, who allowed us to dig his field, I undertook the excavation of the mound, assisted by members of the Junior Natural History Society and friends.

On excavation we found a very well-preserved kiln for drying corn. A flue, ten feet long, runs from the base of the mound, on the seaward side, into the bottom course of the side wall of the chamber of the kiln. It slopes slightly upwards and narrows from two feet square at the outer mouth to one foot square where it enters the chamber. The chamber is extremely well made. Roughly funnel-shaped, it is built of stones bound together with clay. Some of the stones are dressed and we were impressed by the neatness of the construction of the wall in which there are seven or eight courses, rising to a height of four feet from the base of the chamber.

Further excavation revealed that the kiln is bounded by a semi-circular, retaining wall extending on either side of the outer end of the flue. On the southern side the wall is carefully built and of five courses, rising from two feet to three feet, whereas on the northern side the wall is not nearly so well made and has only about three courses. We could not trace a complete wall on this side. In between these walls and the structure of the kiln itself stones have been packed at random to form a mound.