



PREHISTORIC DEFENCES

Throughout early prehistory, people lived in open clusters of houses, but around 1000 BC they began to enclose their settlements within some form of defensive boundary. The reasons for this change were probably complex. The climate in Scotland had already begun to worsen, with colder and wetter weather making farming in upland areas very difficult and prompting the growth of extensive peat bogs. At the same time, people were making an increasing number and variety of bronze weapons (axes, swords, shields and spearheads). These two factors suggest that there may have been competition for fertile land and the need for defence against thieves and aggressors. But there may have been other social changes that are more difficult to perceive from the archaeological record. Some defences were so grand, or were located in such inaccessible places, that they are likely to reflect a desire to impress as much as a need for protection. Some of the largest forts were also the earliest to be built, and it is possible that they were seasonal meeting places, like the fairs of later times, where commodities could be exchanged and ceremonies take place.

Some settlements were enclosed by stout wooden stockades (palisaded sites), while others were defended by stone walls or earthen ramparts and ditches. Many sites show evidence of modification over the centuries, with one type of defence replaced or supplemented with another, ending up with multiple lines of defence (though in some cases multiple defences were part of the original design). Hundreds of such forts have survived, particularly in the uplands



An impressive and complex Iron Age fort is situated on White Caterthun Hill, Angus. Several lines of earth and stone ramparts and ditches encircle the remains of a stone-walled fort on the summit of the hill. © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

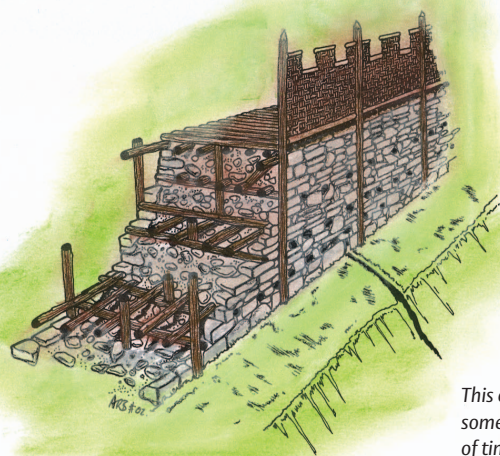
of south-east Scotland, but many others have been ploughed flat in recent centuries and are visible only as crop-marks on aerial photographs. Excavation can reveal traces of massive timber gateways and numerous round houses inside the forts. Most forts enclose less than 1.6 hectares (4 acres) and some were perhaps family homesteads rather than small 'villages', but all relied upon working arable and pasture land around the settlement. The landscape also included unenclosed houses, as well as land boundaries (linear earthworks), field-banks, piles of stones cleared from the fields (clearance cairns) and burial monuments.



In southern Scotland, the bedding trenches of palisades and timber houses are often visible as sunken grooves in the turf. © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk



It was vital to control access to forts, and this could be done by building a bank and ditch across the access route (cross-ridge dyke) or by creating an obstacle field of wooden stakes or upright stones. We assume that ramparts were topped by wooden fences or even parapets, but the evidence no longer survives. In some cases it is possible to prove that fort walls were strengthened by an internal wooden framework known as timber-lacing. If the wall was set on fire, the wooden beams sometimes burnt so fiercely that the heat caused the stonework around them to melt and fuse together.



This close-up reconstruction of a fort wall shows that sometimes they were strengthened by an internal framework of timbers as well as a parapet. If the timber caught fire, the wall would collapse and distort, and much of the stonework might become fused and vitrified.

The artist has reconstructed a landscape in which a defended homestead forms a prestigious focus for the surrounding farmland with its unenclosed houses and fields. Within two strong banks and ditches are large timber houses, raised storehouses and hay ricks.

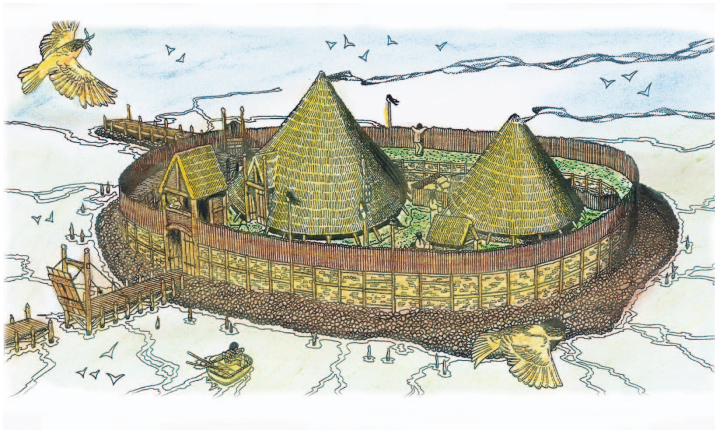
Such vitrified stone usually looks black and glassy. Experiments have shown that the firing must have been deliberate and sustained, rather than accidental, and it may have been a symbolic gesture on the part of the victor after a battle.



*Excavation of a fort rampart at Eildon Hill North.
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In choosing a location for a fortification, much use was made of natural defences: coastal promontories, cliffs, isolated hilltops, rocky knolls and rivers. Water could be a defence in itself, making access difficult. Islands in lochs had been used for settlements since early times, but from about 850 BC a special form of island dwelling was developed, known as a crannog.

This was sometimes a round timber house raised on timber piles above the level of the water, but more often an artificial, or partly artificial, island was used. With a sturdy base of stakes, stones and earth, a platform could be created for one or more



This is an artist's impression of a substantial and prestigious crannog. There is a timber walkway to the shore, with a drawbridge to control access and a stout entrance gateway. Another entrance serves the small jetty for boats, and in the foreground is a fishing coracle, a smaller version of a hide-covered curragh.

houses, storehouses and working areas. The crannog was often linked to the shore by a narrow causeway of stone or timber. In prehistoric times, the houses on crannogs were circular, but by the 7th century AD rectangular houses were being built.

In northern and western areas where timber was scarce substantial circular houses built of stone typify the settlement of the period. The largest of these structures, known as brochs, are unique to Scotland. A broch is essentially a prestigious fortified house and seems to have evolved around 400-200 BC from earlier massively-built stone roundhouses. It is characterised by hollow-wall construction, which allowed greater height as well as a stair within the wall, and the tallest examples could properly be termed towers. A single doorway and no windows made them nigh impregnable, while inside there may have been one or more upper floors of timber. Most are in coastal locations, and some were surrounded by small villages of domestic houses












enclosed by ramparts and ditches. Until brochs went out of fashion around AD 200, they would have been a remarkable sight. Most survive today as grassy mounds of stone, though some are more complete.

While in the south of Scotland many people had returned to living in unenclosed settlements by the time that the Roman army invaded in AD 79, many of Scotland's prehistoric defensive sites continued to be occupied, even sporadically, into the early historic period.



There are the remains of a stronghold on this rocky knoll, surrounded by stones that have fallen from its collapsing walls. © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

TIME-LINE

End of the last Ice Age Wildlife colonises land Mesolithic hunting settlers		12,500	
		8500	Flint scatters Shell mounds, rock shelters
Neolithic farming settlers		4000	Chambered tombs and houses Cupmarked rocks
		3000	Stone circles, henges, and standing stones
Metal technology (gold, copper)		2000	Burial mounds and short cists Hut-circles
Climate deteriorating Fortifications begin		1000	Burnt mounds Hillforts
Iron-working technology		500	Crannogs
		200	Duns, brochs, wheelhouses, and earth-houses
		BC ▲	
		▼ AD	
Roman army in Scotland		79	
Waning of Roman influence		200	Roman camps, forts and roads, Antonine Wall
		400	
Introduction of Christianity Picts, Gaels, Britons and Anglians		600	Long cist graves
Start of the Viking Age		800	Early Christian and Pictish carved stones, chapels
Emergence of Scottish nation		1000	Pagan Viking graves and settlements
		1100	
First burghs		1200	Stone-built churches
		1500	Mottes, abbeys, stone-built castles
Reformation of the Church		1600	Tower-houses
Agricultural improvements & Industrial Revolution		1800	Deserted villages and farms
		1900	Coal mines and heavy industries
Two World Wars		2000	Gun batteries and airfields

FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPH:

Forts in eastern Scotland have often been ploughed flat in recent centuries, but here the ramparts and ditches have survived despite ploughing around and within the fort.

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Historic Scotland is an agency within the Scottish Government and is responsible for administering the legislation that protects ancient monuments (buildings, ruins, archaeological sites and landscapes). It provides general advice on the conservation and protection of Scotland's heritage.

Historic Scotland's Education Service encourages the use of the historic environment as a learning and teaching resource.

Over 300 historic properties are looked after by Historic Scotland and are open to the public for enjoyment and education. For information, including free leaflets, telephone 0131 668 8600.

Our data service website contains details of scheduled monuments and has GIS datasets available to download:
<http://data.historic-scotland.gov.uk>

The following leaflets are available from Historic Scotland:

Scheduled ancient monuments: a guide for owners, occupiers and land managers

Managing Scotland's archaeological heritage

Grants for Ancient Monuments: a guide to grants available for the preservation, maintenance and management of ancient monuments

Archaeology on farm and croft (produced jointly with Archaeology Scotland)

Scotland's listed buildings: a guide for owners and occupiers

The carved stones of Scotland: a guide to helping in their protection

Metal detecting - yes or no? Metal detecting, scheduled ancient monuments and the law

A leaflet on *Treasure Trove in Scotland* is available from the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh

A number of *Historic Scotland Technical Advice Notes*, on topics such as the use of lime mortars, the conservation of thatching and stonecleaning, are available; catalogue from and orders to: Historic Scotland Conservation Group
Tel: 0131 668 8638
e-mail: hs.cgpublications@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

This information leaflet is one of a series produced by Historic Scotland.

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