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ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC230

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90044)

Taken into State care: 1935 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2011

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

BURGHEAD WELL



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Historic Environment Scotland – Scottish Charity No. SC045925

Principal Office: Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

www.historicenvironment.scot

You can download this publication from our website at www.historicenvironment.scot

BURGHEAD WELL

SYNOPSIS

Burghead Well is a fascinating but enigmatic structure. It was discovered in 1809 during the laying out of the planned village of Burghead. The rock-cut well lay within the annexe of a Pictish fort, by far the largest so far identified and probably an important royal centre and naval base.

Burghead Fort, situated on a large promontory jutting into the Moray Firth, was formerly cut off from the hinterland by three lines of earth and rubble defences, of unknown date. An inner fort, consisting of a 'citadel' and an annexe, was constructed between the 4th and 6th centuries AD, the ramparts of which were constructed with a timber framework held together with iron spikes and faced externally in stone, including the famous 'Burghead bulls'. A major ecclesiastical settlement was subsequently founded at the fort. Both fort and church were destroyed, probably by Vikings, around AD 900. Much of the fort was destroyed in the early 19th century when the planned village of Burghead was built, but it was during that development that the ancient well came to light.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- AD 300 – radiocarbon dates indicate that the fort may have been constructed around this time, although more recent work in the town suggests that the fort's origins may reach back to the pre-Roman Iron Age.
- 4th - 8th centuries – the fort develops, possibly becoming an important Pictish royal centre and naval base. The Pictish bull carvings (see architectural overview below) probably date to the 600s.
- c.800 – a major ecclesiastical settlement is built on the landward side of the fort, dedicated to St Aethan.
- c.900 – the fort is destroyed by fire, perhaps as a direct result of Viking raids.
- c.1590 – the fort is recorded by Timothy Pont on his map as 'The Old Brugh'.
- 1793 – the area around the well is shown on the plan of Burghead Fort in General Roy's *Military Antiquities*, published before the defences were destroyed to make way for the planned village of Burghead. On Roy's plan, the area corresponding to the well is shown as a large depression suggesting that those drawing the map may have been aware of the well's existence.
- 1805 – eight local landowners purchase Burghead fishing village from Sir Archibald Dunbar and set about constructing a new grid-plan settlement and associated harbour, the latter designed by Thomas Telford.
- 1809 – the well is cleared out to serve as a municipal water supply for the new village. A sculpted 'Celtic' stone head is reputedly found in it. (A report that one of the famous Pictish bull carvings was also found in the well is unsubstantiated.) Following the well's rediscovery, the present barrel-vaulted

roof is built. The well is deepened using explosives, to increase its capacity. However, the flow of water is insufficient to serve the needs of the village, and is subsequently abandoned as a water supply.

- later 1800s - the well is described as 'often in a disgusting state, and not fit for the inspection of strangers'.
- 1935 - the well is entrusted into state care.

Archaeological Overview:

- There has been no formal archaeological investigation at Burghead Well, although there have been numerous excavations within the fort.
- The well was cleared out when it was 'rediscovered' in 1809, and there are no archaeologically sensitive deposits remaining in it. The well chamber was re-roofed at the same time. However, the land immediately surrounding the well has the potential to be archaeologically sensitive, particularly if it was constructed on the line of the Pictish rampart. Young (1890-1) refers to the well being in 'the centre of an enormous pile of tumbled-down walls ... Among these ruins were many bones ... Walls crop up all round the area of the bath or well ...'
- The well has been described in the past as a Roman well or bath but this interpretation was based on the incorrect belief that the fort was a Roman site. It is unclear when the well was constructed or to what phase of the fort it relates. Although it lies within the area of the fort's annexe, it is on the line of the rampart, perhaps suggesting that it was constructed either before the inner fort was constructed or when the rampart had passed out of use. The alleged discovery of a Celtic sculpted head in the well may strengthen the case for the fort, and perhaps the well too, having Iron-Age origins.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The well lies within a rectangular chamber. The latter is carved out of solid rock, has rounded angles and measures c.5m square and 4m high. It lies 6m below the present ground level, and is reached by a flight of 20 stone steps. The lowest twelve steps and their flanking walls are also hewn from solid rock.
- The well itself is 3m square and 1.3m deep. It is separated from the vertical walls of the chamber by a rock ledge 1m wide. In the chamber's SE corner is a free-standing rock-hewn pedestal, and in the NE corner is a small basin.
- The well chamber is roofed by a stone vault built after the well's rediscovery in 1809. The bank surrounding the structure is enclosed within a wall also built after the well's rediscovery.

Fort

- Much of what we know of the fort is derived from Roy's plan, drawn immediately prior to the creation of the present planned village and associated harbour. The fort encloses an area of almost 3 hectares. Three outer lines of defences, comprising ramparts and ditches probably of earth and rubble, cut off the neck of the promontory. The fort itself comprised two distinct areas – an upper 'citadel' at the SW edge of the promontory, and a lower annexe to its north. The two areas were enclosed by massive ramparts incorporating timber framework (the rampart of the annexe was further secured by iron nails) and

faced with carefully coursed stonework; they are shown as broad bands of collapsed stonework on a map dated 1747. The well lies in the eastern edge of the annexe, close to a rampart and an entrance gate.

- Around half of the fort was obliterated during the construction of the present village. Even the ramparts that survive are much reduced in size because they were robbed of their rubble to build the harbour. Dating the fort is problematic. Radiocarbon dates suggest that it was built sometime between the 4th and 6th centuries AD, and destroyed during the 9th or 10th centuries.
- During the building of the harbour, 'mouldings and carved figures, particularly of a bull' were found amid the fort's stone defences, and it is tempting to imagine the citadel's rampart embellished externally with carvings, prominent among them the bull, perhaps symbolising strength and power. Around 30 such 'bulls' are mentioned, and more may have passed unnoticed. Just six remain - two in the Headland Trust visitor centre in Burghead, two in Elgin Museum, one in the National Museum in Edinburgh and one in the British Museum in London. The bulls are virtually identical, about 400mm long, and each is a masterpiece of carving, with glaring eyes and lowered head, muscular limbs and solid hooves – and in two cases an angrily swishing tail. They are likely to date from the 7th century, and perhaps mark a refurbishment of the fort at an important stage in its history.
- Both the scale of the fort – by far the largest Pictish fort known, by a factor of three - and the bull-carvings imply an importance within the Pictish confederation. The fort may well have been a royal power centre of the northern Picts, whose kingdom was known as Fortriu. Its maritime location also suggests its use as a naval base – in AD 729 a Pictish fleet of 150 ships was lost off the Moray coast. The existence of the impressive Burghead Well simply reinforces the profound importance of Burghead Fort as a tangible reminder of the Picts, Scotland 'lost nation'.

Social Overview:

- The well is seen today as a physical connection to Scotland's Pictish past. It is a tourism and recreational curiosity, and is on the 'trail' provided by the recently established Burghead Headland Trust.

Spiritual Overview:

- The well may always have had a utilitarian function as a water supply; when emptied it takes some six days to refill. However, its monumental character suggests something more important. Although impressive wells have been found at other Iron-Age sites of a predominately domestic character, the discovery at Minehowe, Orkney, of an elaborate, subterranean cistern at the apparent centre of a large, Iron-Age ritual complex has raised the possibility that structures previously thought of as wells may also have had ritual functions.
- Modern interpretations include ceremonial functions (including a shrine to Celtic water deities), a place of ritual execution (the traditional method of execution in Pictland was by drowning), and an early Christian baptistery.
- Today, the well appears to have no spiritual meaning or association. However, Burghead is one of the few communities in Scotland that still performs a fire festival, the 'Burning of the Clavie', on the 11th January, to celebrate the New

Year according to the Gregorian calendar. The origins of the ceremony are unknown, but the ritual was barred by the Church during the 17th and 18th centuries as 'idolatrous and sinful'. Most Moray coastal communities had similar fire festivals in years gone by. The ceremony involves the Clavie King lighting a tar barrel, which is then carried around the village by the Clavie Bearer and his team prior to being placed on the Doorie Hill, sited on the old fort's ramparts near to the well. In the old days the barrel was then thrown down the slope, and the fragments were believed to bring the finder good luck.

Aesthetic Overview:

- Immediately on entering the walled enclosure surrounding the well, one is faced with a flight of 20 steps leading steeply down to a huge black hole in the grassy slope; Ritchie likens it to the setting for Orpheus daring to enter the underworld. The well chamber is equally dramatic – dark and gloomy. The well itself looks bottomless, though it is only a little over 1m deep.
- The well chamber has an air of mysterious antiquity about it; this includes its stone-vaulted roof, which is only 200 years old.
- The property is physically cut off from the rest of the town by the high stone perimeter wall; the well chamber is not visible until the visitor opens the door through that wall. The location of the well is also off the town's beaten track and therefore not readily apparent to the casual visitor to Burghead.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When, and by whom, was the Burghead Well created?
- What was its original purpose, and did that change down the centuries?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Historically, there is no doubt that Burghead Fort played a dominant role in Pictish society. Its size suggests it served as a major Pictish royal stronghold, and its location that it served also as a major naval base for them.
- Despite being extensively damaged in the early 1800s, Burghead Fort remains an enormously important site for our understanding of the Pictish period in Scotland. Although timber-laced construction is not uncommon at early historic fortifications (those closest to Burghead include Portnockie and Cullykhan), only at Burghead and Dundurn (Perthshire), a royal centre of the southern Picts, have iron nails been found. The well's location suggests that it played an important role in the life of that Pictish fort, though what function it served is not known.
- The well today is a tangible, if enigmatic, link to the ancient Pictish fort, helping to draw visitors to this once thriving fishing port.

ADDENDA

Associated Properties:

(*other Pictish forts*) - Portnockie (Moray); Cullykhan (Aberdeenshire); Craig Phadrig (Inverness); Dundurn (Perthshire); Clatchard Craig (Fife).

(other ancient sites with wells) – Minehowe (Orkney); **Gurness Broch; Midhowe Broch; Jarlshof.**

Keywords:

well, Picts, fort, rampart, timber-lacing

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