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| Taken into State care:     | 1884 (Guardianship)          |
| Last Reviewed:             | 2020                         |

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# CATERTHUNS (BROWN AND WHITE)



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### CATERTHUNS (BROWN AND WHITE)

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# I. SUMMARY

## 1.1 Introduction

The Brown and White Caterthuns are two large Iron Age hillforts which stand 1km apart on adjacent hilltops in Angus. Both have complex plans, with multiple defensive circuits<sup>1</sup> which suggest several phases of construction. Only very limited excavation has taken place, in discrete areas across the circuits.

The two sites are often spoken of together, as 'The Caterthuns'. They were taken into State care in 1884 under a Guardianship agreement, having been scheduled in the original (1882) Ancient Monuments Act<sup>2</sup>.

Both hillforts command near-360-degree views, being situated on the high points of a long ridge on the southern flank of the Grampian hills, overlooking the fertile farmland of Strathmore to the south and east. The two forts are reached by separate paths from a parking area on the minor road which crosses the ridge between them. As there is no HES staff presence on site, precise visitor figures are unknown, however the annual number of visitors for 2018-2019 is estimated to be over 1000.

## 1.2 Statement of Significance

The Caterthuns are of national importance as a pair of particularly fine and easily accessible Iron Age hillforts. The pair share many similarities of siting and plan, but also show distinct differences. The White Caterthun is visually impressive for its substantial stone-built uppermost wall, which, even in ruin, dominates its local landscape: it has justifiably been described as one of the most spectacular forts in Scotland<sup>3</sup>. The Brown Caterthun, while less visually impressive, possesses some of the most complex and elaborate outerworks of any Scottish hillfort.

Key aspects of the Caterthuns' significance include the following:

- They are excellent, contrasting examples of Iron Age hilltop enclosures, normally referred to as hillforts but whose functions probably extended beyond the defensive.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Circuits' is here employed as a neutral term, rather than 'ramparts' which implies a fortification.

<sup>2</sup> SM90069; Scheduling description accessible at: <http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM90069>

<sup>3</sup> It is also the only example of a vitrified fort (in which stone has been fused by heat) in State care.

- The unusually large number of entrances through the outer defences at both sites has been cited in support of the suggestion that here, and at hillforts more generally, such boundaries were not primarily defensive.
- They hold potential for evidence relating to the earliest use of the two hilltops.
- They have demonstrated potential to explore the date, details and sequence of defensive construction at each site, and to compare the two. (Despite the range of radiocarbon dates from the Brown Caterthun, there is not as yet a clear sequence for the different phases of Iron Age activity.)
- They hold potential for further evidence of human occupation and other activities in the spaces within and between the defensive boundaries, which remain largely unexplored. (Investigations to date have largely focussed on the enclosing features.)
- Typically, hillforts are located to exploit a rise in elevation to their defensive advantage. It is therefore unusual to have two large hillforts in such close proximity, and this has implications for our understanding of the role of hillforts and about Iron Age society in general.
- They serve as markers for a largely-vanished pattern of settlement in the region, which in most cases has vanished as the result of landscape change due to two millennia of agriculture and other human activity.
- The Caterthuns were one of the earliest ancient monuments to be taken into State care, and the history of their subsequent conservation and management illustrates how approaches to those tasks have developed over time.
- The Caterthuns are relatively readily accessible and are visited and appreciated by many groups of people. While there has only been limited research, a wide range of values are noted in relation to the experience of the site and the memories and connections it holds.

The significance of the Caterthuns lies as much in their archaeological potential as in what can be observed and has already been discovered. Further investigations could support advances in understanding of both individual site histories and wider questions about Iron Age society.

The above paragraphs outline the key significance of the Caterthuns. The following pages provide a fuller background and analyses of the sites.

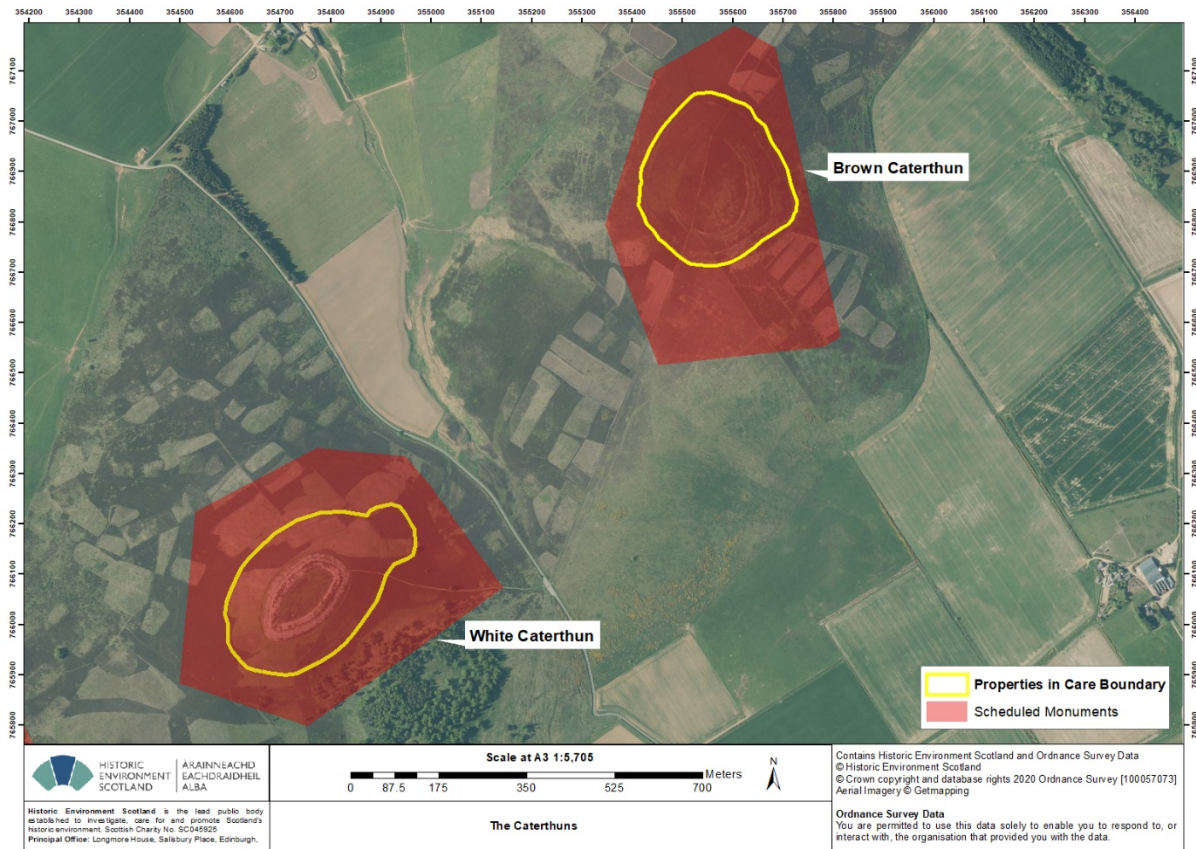


Figure 1: The Caterthuns Scheduled area and Property in Care (PIC) boundaries. For illustrative purposes only.

## 2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

### 2.1 Background

#### 2.1.1 Overview – phasing and occupation

It is possible that one or both hilltops may already have been important places long before the visible earthworks were constructed. Chipped stone tools of Neolithic or Bronze Age character and bronze axes are recorded. However, early accounts are not necessarily reliable, or entirely clear as to exactly where or even on which of the two hills the artefacts were found.

The plans of both sites, plus excavation evidence from the Brown Caterthun, suggest several different phases of construction of ditches, ramparts and other boundary features. Yet despite detailed survey and limited excavation, significant aspects of the phasing and date of the different elements of these circuits remain unresolved.

Artefacts found on the White Caterthun indicate human presence from at least the early 2nd millennium BC onwards, though there are as yet no firm dates for the different elements of the defences here, which include the remains of the most massive stone wall surviving on any Scottish hillfort. Excavation has determined that the site of the Brown Caterthun was occupied during much of the 1st millennium BC, with elements of the defences constructed and reconstructed at widely spaced intervals.

The limited evidence for the occupation of the sites, as well as their exposed location, suggests that the Caterthuns may only have seen seasonal or occasional use, rather than being permanently occupied over extended periods of time. The unusual plan of the outer defences on both sites, with multiple entrances, lends support to the idea that such hillforts were not simply defensive strongholds, but also served as communal gathering places for a range of different social functions. It has been suggested that the entrances may point towards locations which were significant places in the Iron Age landscape. In striking contrast to the multi-gated outerworks on both hills, the massive stone wall, which forms the uppermost element of the defences at the White Caterthun, shows no trace of any original entranceway at all.

One particular question which the Caterthuns pose is why two such impressive monuments (which undoubtedly overlapped in their dates of construction and use) were deemed necessary in such close proximity? The extent to which the two functioned together, independently or in competition, remains entirely unknown, but provides fuel for speculation. Their proximity must be accommodated in any theories about the roles of hillforts in general.

Regardless of the purpose(s) behind their construction, both forts represent a very substantial investment of time, material and effort: their creation, maintenance and modification must have been matters of overwhelming importance to their builders and those who succeeded them.

## **2.12 Descriptive overviews**

This section offers a short description of what visitors may see on the ground (references to individual features follow Dunwell and Strachan 2007). Appendix 2 provides detailed descriptions of the two forts, including information derived from excavations in 1995-7 and a discussion of possible sequences.

The Brown and White Caterthuns are situated on the high points of a long ridge on the southern flank of the Grampian hills, overlooking the fertile farmland of Strathmore to the south and east. Both forts command near-

360-degree views. Sited only 1km apart, they are often spoken of together, as 'The Caterthuns'. Each is surrounded by multiple circuits of defences<sup>4</sup>, though with the exception of the innermost line on the White Caterthun, these are generally not of any great scale - they certainly do not compare with the banks and ditches around many hillforts further to the south. Excavation has suggested that the relatively low banks which surround both forts may have been topped by wooden palisades, and that other palisade lines may also have existed which have left no surface traces but may contain sub-surface evidence.

## 2.12a Brown Caterthun



Figure 2: Brown Caterthun, plan with annotated features. © Crown Copyright: HES.

The Brown Caterthun is the lower of the pair, reaching 287m above sea-level. On its gently-sloping hillside, six defensive lines surround the flat

<sup>4</sup> Doubt has been expressed as to how 'defensive' the enclosures around both sites were, and indeed whether or not 'fort' is an appropriate term. While recognising this is an entirely valid field of speculation, the conventional terms such as 'fort' and 'rampart' are used here for simplicity.



summit. These are described in outward/downward order from the summit and have been assigned a letter from *A* to *F*<sup>5</sup>.

*A* is a low bank with occasional boulders protruding. It measures about 3.5m across and up to 0.3m high, enclosing an oval area about 90m north-south by 60m east-west. There are five breaks in the bank, all of which may be original, since they align with gaps in the more substantial ramparts further downslope. Within the southern part of the enclosed area is the very faint trace of a curving ditch which may represent a circular enclosure (this has been labelled feature *H*). There is a slight dip in the surface at the very top of the hill, which often holds rainwater. Excavation showed this to be a pit dug into the bedrock of the summit and possibly one of the earliest archaeological features on site.

*B* is a substantial bank, up to 7m wide and 2m high. An external stone facing is apparent at several points in its circuit. Shallow scoops are visible just inside the bank, possibly the result of quarrying. There are nine breaks in the circuit, all probably original entrances rather than more recently formed breaches.

*C* and *D* are two slight banks which lie just outside rampart *B*, and parallel its line almost exactly. Nine gaps align more or less directly with the gaps in *B*, although the gaps to the north and south-west are slightly offset. A longer gap to the south-south-west may be the result of erosion; rabbits have been particularly active in this area.

*E* is more substantial and lies further downslope. Its alignment does not quite so closely parallel the ramparts higher up the slope, and makes occasional 'kinks' for no obvious reason. The bank measures up to 5m wide and 1m high, and has nine gaps in its circuit, of which only six align with gaps in the ramparts upslope. The hillslope just inside the bank *E* is scalloped with shallow depressions, which probably represent quarry pits.

*F* is the outermost encircling boundary feature. It consists of a low bank with a shallow external ditch and a slight counter-scarp bank beyond. It is worth remarking that this is the only rampart which appears to possess an external ditch. The near-absence of ditches, combined with the many gaps in each circuit, is a marked contrast with the majority of hillforts, and makes the Brown Caterthun less than convincing as a defensive stronghold.

In addition to these features, a low bank (feature *G*) to the south and south-east was identified on aerial photographs in 1982. It may represent an outer enclosure or an abandoned line for rampart *F*. This line is not easy to identify at ground level.

Stretches of all of the features described above have been severely affected by rabbit burrowing, especially on the south- and east-facing sides

of the hill. Walkers should take care to avoid injury, as the soil is riddled with open and concealed rabbit burrows.

## 2.12b White Caterthun

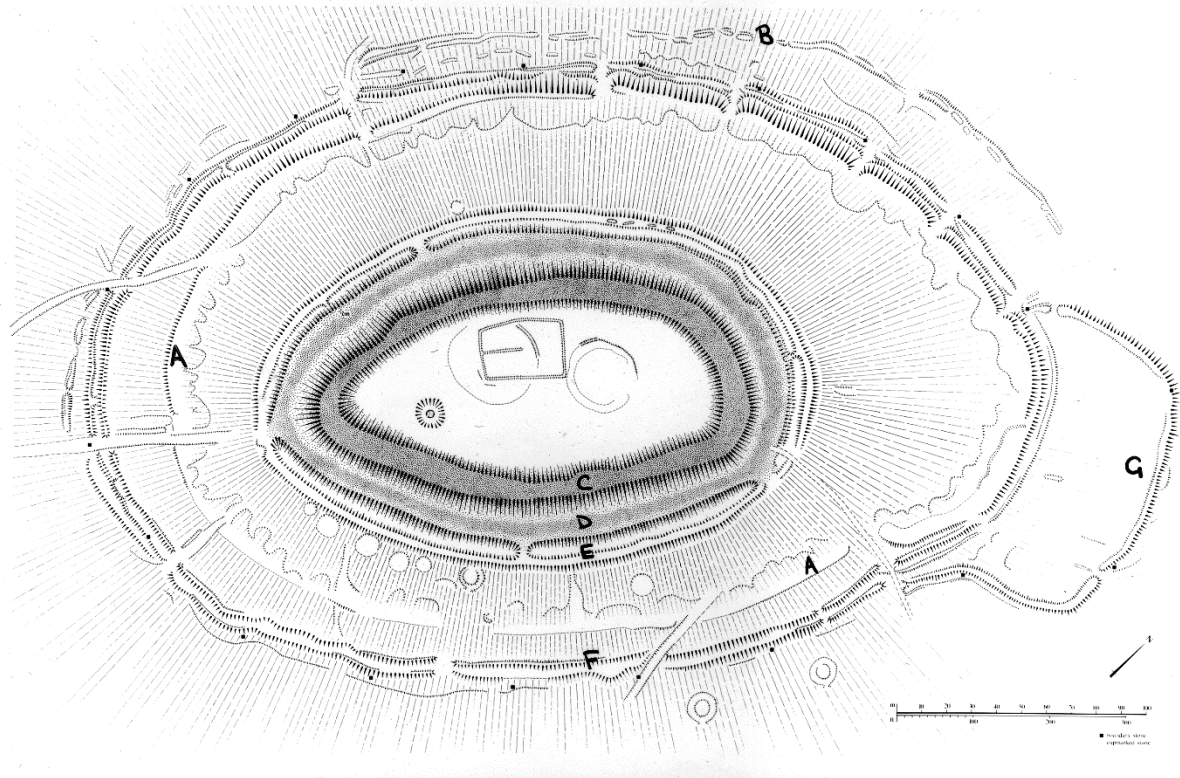


Figure 3: White Caterthun plan, with annotated features. © Crown Copyright: HES.

The White Caterthun is the higher of the pair, reaching 298m above sea-level; the hill on which it stands is also steeper than that of its neighbour. Five defensive lines encircle the summit and a further two skirt only parts of the hill. These have been assigned a letter from A to G<sup>6</sup> based on the RCAHMS interpretation of the sequence, which does not run sequentially from the summit downwards.

C is the innermost and by far the most substantial feature. It consists of the tumbled remains of a stone-built wall which must have originally stood to an impressive height: in its ruined state it measures up to 12m across and up to 3m tall in places. Traces of vitrified material (stone fused by excessive heat) have been found within its core, which suggests it was wholly or partly timber-laced and suffered burning. It might easily have stood to a height of 10m when newly built. In places, the wall appears to consist of two thick outer skins, with traces of possible chambers between them. This wall encloses an elongated oval space measuring 145m north-east/south-west by 65m. Within this are the faint traces of two curving

<sup>6</sup> by Halliday/RCAHMS; see Halliday 1991, Dunwell and Strachan 2007, 76

ditches, possibly the remains of circular palisaded enclosures. Overlying one of these is a sub-rectangular bank which appears to be considerably later. A 3m-deep, circular depression towards the south-west end of the enclosed area appears to be a well or cistern. The whole interior appears to have been ploughed at an unknown date.



*Figure 4: White Caterthun, excavation in 1997, looking downwards from top of stone wall.  
© HES.*

*D* and *E* lie immediately outside *C* and exactly parallel its outline. *D* is a spread of stone which may represent a rampart or terrace just outside the stone wall, while *E* is a rock-cut ditch with a slight external bank. Excavation has shown *D* to be poorly defined, but *E* to be a substantial ditch, 5m wide and up to 1.2m deep, and the counterscarp bank to have supported a wooden palisade. There are four gaps in the ditch, but none of

these seems to lead to a corresponding break in the circuit of the stone wall, C. A large boulder bearing about 27 cup-marks sits on D on the west side of its circuit<sup>7</sup>. This stone has been broken, apparently in a fall from the wall above, and was repaired in 1922. Just downslope from E, on the southern side of the hill, are a number of sub-circular scoops cut into the hillside: these may represent the sites of circular houses. The clearest of these may be earlier than the outer bank of E.

Circuit A lies rather further down the hill, and takes the form of a slight terrace, which has been proposed as the line of an early rampart which was later robbed out. It follows the contour line almost exactly. There are at least six gaps in its circuit.

Circuit F consists of two closely-spaced banks with a ditch between them. It appears to partially overlie A, especially on the north side of the hill, where it is most obvious. There are at least 12 gaps in this circuit, though some may be relatively recent.

Circuit B consists of a shallow ditch and slight external bank, which is only clearly visible on the north-west side of the circuit, though even here it is fragmentary and may never have been complete. (This was only discovered, from aerial photographs, in 1992.)

G, finally, is a low bank which encloses a sub-rectangular 'annexe' outside B on the north-east side of the hill. It appears to abut the bank of B, suggesting it is later. Its south-east junction with the earlier bank respects the line of the current approach path, suggesting the latter may follow an original entrance

Much of the lower slopes of the White Caterthun are covered by heather: when long, this tends to obscure the slighter features on the lower slopes and can also make for difficult walking.

## 2.13 Early antiquarian activity: mapping, naming and digging

The maps produced by General William Roy's military survey (1747-55) were the first published work to document the Caterthuns with any precision<sup>8</sup>, showing them schematically and naming them as Brown Cather

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<sup>7</sup> See the Scotland's Rock Art Project website for information on this, and other examples of prehistoric carvings: [www.rockart.scot/rock-art-database/?scrapToolsaction=datatools:panel&id=3483F082-6FB6-4A6A-870017C45143BBE8](http://www.rockart.scot/rock-art-database/?scrapToolsaction=datatools:panel&id=3483F082-6FB6-4A6A-870017C45143BBE8)

<sup>8</sup> The Caterthuns happen to lie in a gap between the various surviving maps prepared by Timothy Pont <https://maps.nls.uk/pont/>

and Cather Tun<sup>9</sup>. Roy was a keen antiquarian, and prepared more detailed plans and sections of both forts, which were included in the Appendix to his posthumously published *Military Antiquities of the Romans in North Britain* (1793)<sup>10</sup> along with a short note entitled "... an Account of Two British Posts in Strathmore; the one called the White and the other called the Brown Cather Thun". That title strongly suggests that the two forts were known as the Brown and White Caterthun at the time of Roy's survey many years earlier, and that the names were then incorrectly entered onto the map.

Thomas Pennant visited in 1772, and refers to climbing one hill with two summits known as *White* and *Black* "Catterthun", though subsequently referring to the latter as Brown – it may be that Pennant's "Black" was simply an error, rather than an alternative name actually in use. [Though Warden in 1880 noted that the White Caterthun was also referred to as grey, and the Brown Caterthun as black or brown, he may have been doing so at least partly on the authority of Pennant.] Pennant then goes on to suggest that such forts (or "posts" as he terms them) were built and occupied by the Caledonians prior to the Battle of Mons Graupius [AD 84], and that they served to protect their women, children and possessions when they set forth to do battle.<sup>11</sup>

The forts were discussed in the (First) Statistical Account of Scotland by the Parish Minister, the Reverend J Waugh. Writing around 1791, he devotes three pages to "The Caterthun" [White Caterthun] with only a passing mention of the Brown Caterthun, which he does not name. He offers the assertion that the fort is Pictish or Danish, which would have been the normal antiquarian assumption at that date.

Referring to a report in the long-defunct periodical *Ruddiman's Magazine* for 31 August 1775, Waugh draws rather sceptical attention to claims of extraordinary finds:

'Some travellers pretend to have found on the summit several figured stones with hieroglyphic characters, and likewise a piece of a broken statue. One, in particular, makes mentions of certain gold coins with inscriptions, in the possession of some gentleman in Angus, which were got on Caterthun. If the gentleman, in whose custody these curious pieces are, would lay them before the Antiquarian Society, it might tend to remove the obscurity in which the history of this mountain is involved.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Roy 1747-55, Sheet 19/2. Viewed on National Library of Scotland website: <https://maps.nls.uk/geo/roy/#zoom=14&lat=56.7921&lon=-2.7411&layers=roy-highlands> (accessed 23 February 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Roy 1793, 205 plus Plates XLVII [White] and XLVIII [Brown].

<sup>11</sup> Pennant 1776, 157-160

<sup>12</sup> Waugh 1793, 1530-3.

The forts were mentioned by a number of commentators during the 19th century: Chalmers in 1807 reflected on the idea that there might be a hierarchy amongst forts, and also that visibility must be significant<sup>13</sup>, while Wilson in 1851 developed the idea of hierarchies further, seeing the largest forts as the most important Iron Age centres of each region, although, he conceded, ‘Caterthun is no Athenian Acropolis.’<sup>14</sup>

The only early excavation work which is recorded took place in 1845, ‘at the sight of’ D. D. Black (who was at one time Town Clerk (chief administrator) of the nearby town of Brechin). Black does not mention his work in his 1867 account of the history of Brechin, probably because the forts are located in the neighbouring parish of Menmuir, and not in that of Brechin. It was left to Warden, in 1884, to publish an account of Black’s work, which is described as trenching within and through a rectangular enclosure on the summit of what Warden describes as the Brown Caterthun but which for several reasons seems more likely to have been the White Caterthun.<sup>15</sup> Warden describes the finding of a variety of features below the enclosure bank, which may have included post-holes as well as pits containing burnt material, including fragments of sheep bones. He concludes:

‘No cinerary urns, not vessel of any kind, and no metal of any sort, were found in the course of the excavations ...there was nothing found to dispel in the smallest degree the darkness which surrounds these mysterious hills, White and Brown Caterthun.’<sup>16</sup>

In an earlier work, Warden had amplified the report of a mysterious statue reportedly found on the White Caterthun, to “several pieces of a broken statue, which appeared from the limbs and body, to have been cut by a masterly hand”<sup>17</sup> At this remove, it is hard to know how much credence to place on these extraordinary claims.

To conclude this account of early references, it is worth mentioning that the origins of the name ‘Caterthun’ remain uncertain. Early sources favoured a derivation from *cateran* (a thief, particularly of cattle), whereas more recent scholarship leans towards the ‘thun’ element being cognate with Gaelic *dun* – a fort. The ‘cater’ element has been suggested as deriving from *cathair* – a fortress or stronghold, though one alternative suggestion is *cadha* – a low pass or hill road – as in *Cadha eadar da Dhun* – the hill road between the forts.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Chalmers 1807, 87-8 (footnotes)

<sup>14</sup> Wilson 1851, 409

<sup>15</sup> Dunwell and Strachan (1997, 3-4) discuss this at length.

<sup>16</sup> Warden 1884, 368.

<sup>17</sup> Warden 1880, 46-7

<sup>18</sup> Will 1963, 62-3

## 2.14 Conservation and other work since 1884

In the years immediately after the Caterthuns came into care, boundary markers (stones incised VR, for *Victoria Regina*) were put in place, as were noticeboards. The latter were replaced in 1908 and several times since, with each successive generation of signage tending towards a more informative and less minatory tone.

In 1922, the large cup-marked boulder on the White Caterthun was repaired with metal clamps after it had rolled (perhaps impelled by human hands) down the slope from the upper wall.

In 1949, the Ordnance Survey installed a concrete triangulation pillar on the summit of the White Caterthun, during their completion of the detailed survey of Scotland. As with many such survey stations, this has since been removed, leaving only its concrete base set with a small metal stud. (It does not appear that the White Caterthun formed part of the primary or secondary triangulation network, unlike some other monuments, such as the fort of Burnswark in Dumfriesshire.)

The two sites have never been fenced off, and land-use has continued to be undertaken by local estate and farm staff, as it is today. The main use of the White Caterthun is as grouse-moor, with occasional burning of the heather in broad strips to encourage the variety of habitats which favours grouse. A small conifer plantation on its southern slope was cut back in area during the early 20th century, to remove trees planted on and near the outermost circuit of the prehistoric earthworks. The Brown Caterthun has seen mixed land-use, with the northern and western sides used as lightly-grazed (by sheep) grouse-moor while the southern and eastern flanks have been more heavily grazed, mainly by sheep.

Access to the two sites is by desire-line footpaths, parts of which are occasionally maintained when serious erosion or waterlogging is noted. Access is difficult for people with limited mobility. An interpretation panel is sited beside the car-parking space beside the public road from which both paths lead<sup>19</sup>.

Rabbit infestation of the south-eastern slopes of the Brown Caterthun increased from the late 1980s, with the potential for serious damage to sub-surface deposits of archaeological significance. There was also minor but concerning rabbit activity on the White Caterthun's lower slopes. This led to excavations in 1995-6 (Brown Caterthun) and 1997 (White Caterthun), which shed considerable light upon the nature of the enclosing earthworks.

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<sup>19</sup> Further access information is available at: <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/brown-and-white-caterthuns/>

As noted above, the two sites have never been enclosed by fences, though modern fence-lines cross the Brown Caterthun to facilitate agricultural activities. In 2009, accidental damage occurred to the outermost main defensive line (rampart *F*), by vehicles carrying material for fence repairs. This led to a small rescue excavation in 2011, which provided additional information to supplement the 1995-6 results<sup>20</sup>.

The main threat to the integrity of the sites continues to be the activities of rabbits, primarily on the Brown Caterthun.

## 2.2 Evidential values

The evidential value of the Caterthuns is exceptionally high, for what their constructional details, physical fabric, location and setting can tell us about life during the Iron Age, and particularly about how communities came together to undertake major construction projects.

However, before this evidence is considered, it is important to remember that the two sites – and particularly the White Caterthun – have produced a range of casual finds of pre- Iron Age artefacts. Some of these are of high quality, such as a Neolithic carved stone ball, which suggests that these summits may have been special places from the earliest days of post-glacial human presence in Angus. The siting of the forts, therefore, did not take place on a blank canvas, but in the context of long human use and possibly veneration of these places.

Only a small percentage of either site has been disturbed in recent centuries, and they retain huge potential to yield further information through future research, including non-intrusive methods as well as by excavation.

Returning to the evidence for Iron Age activities, the experience of the limited investigations so far undertaken is that there is considerable variability, even within features which appear to be single entities such as individual circuits of earthworks believed to belong to a single phase of construction. While the Caterthuns are certainly capable of producing much additional information, the interpretation of that evidence will continue to prove problematic: almost everything we think we know about the sites, beyond the exact details of what was recorded in each excavation trench, remains provisional.

Even without excavation, the location and surface details offer evidence, though it is also hard to interpret. The White Caterthun is set in a wider area which appears to contain a number of other sites of Iron Age date, notably the remains of circular houses and possible fields on the western

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<sup>20</sup> Unpublished report: HSCO-90069-2011-01



flanks of the hill (outside the area in care) – though some of these were removed during road-building around 1918. The area around the Brown Caterthun seems to have no remains of similar character, perhaps because the soils of this area are better and may therefore have seen more cultivation and therefore destruction of earlier remains. It is likely that post Iron Age agricultural activity has destroyed the above-ground elements of such remains, as seems to have been the case over much of the adjacent farmland of Strathmore, where there is extensive settlement evidence including enclosures, circular houses and souterrains, but all of it now reduced by cultivation to ground level and only visible on aerial photographs taken under favourable conditions.

Within each site, the large majority of well-recorded evidence is from analysis of aerial photographs and recent trenching, which concentrated on the earthworks – ramparts, ditches and banks.

Despite this work, it has not yet proved possible to demonstrate the detailed sequence of construction at either site: the limited radiocarbon dating for the Brown Caterthun tends to suggest a pattern of gradual expansion of the enclose area over time, which would be in partial contradiction of the pattern suggested from surface survey and analysis of aerial photographs. What excavation has shown is that each ‘phase’ of earthworks is not a single, simple entity: there is evidence for repeated re-cutting of ditches and repair of earthworks. Evidence has been found for the insertion of previously unforeseen single and double palisades into and through features. It has been suggested that some double palisades may have faced earth-filled walls rather than operating as free-standing, parallel, fences. The use of substantial quantities of turf and timber in rampart construction has been demonstrated. Despite these advances in knowledge, there is still far from adequate evidence to permit reliable detailed reconstructions of the appearance of either site at any period in its history.<sup>21</sup>

The massive stone wall crowning the White Caterthun remains almost entirely unexamined: it has been suggested that it may consist of two thick outer skins of masonry with an inner core of rubble, perhaps with hollow chambers. It seems certain that it was partly framed and/or faced with timber, since vitrified stone has been found. But the potential remains that the timber-laced and part-vitrified wall may be an earlier stump, around which the massive stone wall we see in ruins was built. Investigating this would not be a simple matter and has, probably wisely, not yet been attempted.<sup>22</sup> It may be that techniques yet to be developed will in time allow cross-sections of the wall to be taken without destructive excavation.

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<sup>21</sup> Though Alan Braby, (Armit 1997, 60) has offered a bold attempt.

<sup>22</sup> Kieran Baxter’s visually stunning aerial imagery, showing just how magnificent the White Caterthun may have looked before it was burned, is largely conjectural. Accessible at: <http://www.topofly.com/showreel/>

Finally, it has to be considered that, as well as obviously uncompleted circuits (such as line *G* at the Brown Caterthun and *B* at the White), it is likely that most elements of the sites' earthworks were never regarded as 'finished', but were being modified even as they were constructed, with their improved replacements already in planning.<sup>23</sup>

Yet the earthwork circuits are better understood than the spaces between them. These have received very little attention since the 1840s, and we are not even sure which of the two sites was excavated then. Surface traces of structures inside the Caterthuns are certainly present, notably the group of probable house-platforms on the south side of the White Caterthun. Interestingly, these sit outside a major ditch and bank, and could potentially represent the remains of be an associated construction camp. There are also clear traces of circular palisaded enclosures within the summit enclosure, which have not yet been dated.

While the areas between the earthwork circuits seem relatively free of evidence for structures, the excavations at the Brown Caterthun have demonstrated that, almost without exception, activity was taking place within 'blank' spaces. This evidence takes the form of pits, post-holes and surfaced areas, but is, however, fragmentary and hard to interpret.

The evidence we have so far is therefore insufficient to answer even the most basic questions, such as whether the forts were ever occupied for extended periods of time, what occupants did on a daily basis, or how they related to those who lived in the surrounding landscape. We can, however, be certain that the answers to these questions would have varied over time.

In short, the proven and potential evidential value of the Caterthuns is immense, but our ability to interrogate such evidence with meaningful results has, to date, proven limited. It is therefore fortunate that the overwhelmingly majority of both sites remains archaeologically (and so far as is known, otherwise) undisturbed, legally protected and represents a hugely important 'archaeological reserve'<sup>24</sup> for future research.

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<sup>23</sup> Ian Ralston argues the case for incompleteness (Dunwell and Strachan 2007, 11 and elsewhere)

<sup>24</sup> 'Archaeological reserve' is a term used in Article 4i of the 1992 Valletta Convention (The European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (revised)) (Council of Europe 1992) to refer to sites and areas which are known to have archaeological potential but which are better preserved for future research rather than being subjected to destructive investigation in the short term. It equates, approximately, to scheduled monuments under Scottish heritage legislation as this presently operates, with a strong presumption against excavation unless an exceptional case exists.

## 2.3 Historical values

The primary historical importance of the Caterthuns is their ability to contribute to evidence-based narratives about how society in northern Scotland may have operated, and changed, during the early to middle Iron Age. The Caterthuns also offer evidence to support considerations of how that society related to its own heritage, in respect of re-using sites which had seen use in earlier times.

Appendix 3 provides a number of theories about their genesis, purpose, context and relationships both to each other, and to other Iron Age structures.

## 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

### 2.41 Architecture and design

Architectural value is difficult to ascribe to prehistoric monuments such as the Caterthuns. There seems little doubt that each phase of enclosure took place as part of a clear overall plan, and almost certainly under some form of hierarchical supervision rather than as an egalitarian community enterprise. However, the variety of details evident on hillforts, and the variability within even short sections of enclosure, tends to suggest that a large degree of adaptability was allowable within the overall architectural concept.

### 2.42 Construction

The details revealed by excavation show that the various circuits of defences were generally composed of widely-used elements, combined in different ways. The exception is the massive timber-laced, stone wall crowning the White Caterthun. This is an order of magnitude larger than anything before or later on these sites: indeed, it may have been the widest (and therefore potentially tallest) of these structures ever constructed in Scotland, and can reasonably be described as an example of cutting-edge Iron Age construction techniques. It would be of great interest to know where it dates within the sequence of construction of such sites in northern Scotland – is it an early prototype which proved so expensive of time and labour it was never repeated, or perhaps the last and greatest flourish of this style of building?

## 2.43 Artists' representations

Published early plans and schematic sections of the two forts commence with those illustrating Pennant's Tour (1776), though those by Roy (1793) were surveyed much earlier and in more detail. Christian Maclagan's 1875 volume adds little by way of detail. Christison (1900) added more detail from field observations, and in the later 20th century the officers of RCAHMS produced ever more detailed plans. All of these were essentially technical representations of the remains as they existed at the time of visits.

There seem to be few early artists' impressions of what the defences might have looked like when recently constructed. Alan Braby's lively conjectural illustration for Armit (1997) of a gateway in the outer works at Brown Caterthun is the earliest so far located.

More recently, Kieran Baxter has produced 'fly-through' footage which superimposes digital reconstruction onto moving aerial (drone) photographic footage, with impressive effects.

Both Braby and Baxter show some details which might not be regarded as strictly accurate or contemporary (in the case of Braby, the line of palisades relative to banks is rather more parallel than the excavation results at Brown Caterthun suggest, while in Baxter the co-existence of twin palisades with the massive stone-faced wall at White Caterthun is not proven, and seems, on balance, unlikely) but these are minor criticisms of brave efforts. It is perhaps surprising, given the impressive scale and long-recognised importance of these sites, that more artists have not attempted such depictions.

No published instances have been noted of the Caterthuns serving as the inspiration for creative artworks outwith the confines of archaeology, but it is likely that they form subjects for landscape painting.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Both sites, but particularly the White Caterthun, are attractive, as are the short approaches on foot, with wide views southwards towards the fertile farmland of Strathmore and north towards the higher hills of the southern Grampians. The steeper but shorter approach to the White Caterthun is probably the more pleasant for the average visitor; the path skirting the mature plantations and rising steadily up the heather-clad slope towards the tumbled stone of the upper rampart. The Brown Caterthun is perhaps

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<sup>25</sup> It would be surprising if no such artworks exist – a search of local art galleries might be productive.

more of a connoisseur's site: though the path is gentler, the earthworks lack the sheer scale of the summit wall at this fort's higher neighbour.

Both sites are perhaps at their most impressive and photogenic from the air, and a selection of aerial views of various dates have been published, with many more held in HES collections. The sites show particularly well under a light dusting of snow (see Figure 9).



*Figure 5: Aerial view from west, showing both sites. © Ian Ralston.*

## 2.6 Natural heritage values

The land immediately around the Caterthuns is not designated for the protection of species or habitats, or for landscape qualities.<sup>26</sup>

Visitors to the sites walk along short paths. The path to the White Caterthun climbs quite steeply through heather with some gorse, past an ageing conifer plantation, while that to the Brown Caterthun crosses level and sometimes boggy heather and grass. A variety of typical farmland and moorland birds are usually audible or visible, for example skylarks *Alaudia arvensis* and curlews *Numenius arquata*. Stonechats *Saxicola rubicola* are locally resident in summer, singing from the top of gorse bushes. Common buzzards *Buteo buteo* are frequently seen overhead. The only mammals regularly seen on site – all too regularly – are rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus*.

The bedrock geology belongs to the Teith Sandstone formation, with superficial deposits of Devensian Till<sup>27</sup>.

## 2.7 Contemporary/use values

For contemporary communities, much of the value of the Caterthuns lies in their landscape setting and sweeping views: they provide enjoyable short walks, which are particularly popular amongst dog owners. Even for non-walkers, the parking area offers a sweeping view over Strathmore, ideal for picnic lunches. On-site interpretation is provided by a simple interpretation board

A preliminary assessment of the social values pertaining to the Caterthuns was undertaken in 2019 as part of a doctoral research project<sup>28</sup>. The research identified a number of different communities who value the hills, and the forts at their summits, including:

- Local residents
- Residents in the wider area
- People originally from the area
- Relations and friends (either visiting or commemorating)

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<sup>26</sup> SNH protected area map accessed online 26 February 2020.

<sup>27</sup> British Geological Survey GeolIndex, accessible at: <http://mapapps2.bgs.ac.uk/geolindex/home.html>

<sup>28</sup> Wrestling with Social Value, Elizabeth Robson (project website accessible at: <https://wrestlingsocialvalue.org/>) The Caterthuns were identified as a case study for this PhD research. A rapid, researcher-led study was undertaken which principally trialled semi-structured (3) and structured (14) interviews, in combination with transect walks (3), multi-sensory/embodyed reflections and observation (15.5 hours). This was complemented with a document review and online search of public participatory media (such as YouTube) and websites (such as WalkHighlands.co.uk).

- Walkers
- Dog owners
- Runners and cyclists (as well as private/individuals, there have been running and cycling races that incorporate or pass between the hills)
- Berry pickers
- Drone pilots
- Photographers
- Owners, workers and users of the estate
- Campers

Even from this rapid survey it is clear that some people feel strong attachments to the Caterthuns, whether they visit frequently or only occasionally. Aspects identified include: the experience of the place in changing light and weather, feeling of solitude or contemplation, a focus for local knowledge, a sense of belonging and connection, as reference points in the landscape, and a place of memory – memories of lost loved ones or of past events or practices. Practises tied to seasons such as berry picking (blaeberries) and memories of childhood visits were mentioned as important.

Excavation of the rock-cut pit at the summit of the Brown Caterthun retrieved three modern coins, perhaps reflecting the longstanding and widespread “good luck” practice of throwing coins into water.<sup>29</sup>

Images of the sites (general aerial views) have frequently been used in archaeological guides and reference works, but do not feature prominently in general guidebooks for the area.

### 3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

There are many unanswered questions surrounding hillforts, despite over a century of excavation, study and theorising. A deeper understanding of the individual and shared history and use(s) of the Caterthuns will also contribute to a broader understanding of the wider phenomenon of hillforts, of which Scotland has several hundred. Additionally while the Caterthuns has been the subject of some research into their social values, further research could address a wider range of users. Aspects such as the interrelationship of past and current land management on the experience of the site, and memories of it, could be explored.

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<sup>29</sup> Dunwell and Strachan 2007, 52. The presence of a United States dollar is suggested as reflecting the presence at nearby RAF Edzell of a US-operated military tracking station from 1960 to 1997.

In terms of the archaeology of the site, all of the questions below have all been asked in print in a variety of publications:

- Why were two such major monuments constructed so close to one another, and how did they relate to one another?
- What were the detailed sequences of construction at each site, and were changes synchronous or not?
- What was the nature and context of pre- Iron Age use of the summits? Did they have a special status for Neolithic and Bronze Age communities?
- What was the purpose of the enclosing earthworks – were they intended as defences against attack, or were they boundaries which controlled access to a special place?
- How many more invisible boundaries, such as palisades, remain to be discovered?
- What was the sequence of their construction?
- Why are there so many entrances in the outer earthworks? Is their orientation related to settlements around the forts, as has been suggested?
- What was the structure and function of the massive stone wall at the summit of the White Caterthun, and how does it relate to similar structures on other sites in Angus and elsewhere?
- What activities took place within the enclosed areas of each site? Were they ever occupied for extended periods of time, or only for occasional /season use? How did use vary over time? Were specialised activities/industries undertaken on site?
- How large were the ‘territories’ around the Caterthuns? Did they serve purely local functions or were they centres of a much larger region? How do the numerous roundhouses on the flanks of the White Caterthun relate to whatever went on at its summit?
- How did those who built the Caterthuns organise the task – was each circuit built in segments over an extended period, were they constructed rapidly? What was the social structure of the time: what inspired so many repeated episodes of construction and modification? How was the workforce fed and supplied with materials such as timber?
- When were the Caterthuns abandoned, or at least why did the maintenance and replacement of the earthworks cease? Did this mark a major change in society?



- Was there deliberate destruction, especially of the timber-laced stone wall on top of the White Caterthun, but also of timber stockades on the Brown Caterthun? What was the context of such action?
- Were the sites re-occupied at any period after the Iron Age and, if so, for what purpose(s)?
- And finally – which of the two sites was actually excavated in the 1840s, and what are we to make of the old claims of extravagant finds such as gold medals and fragments of sculpture? If these objects ever existed, do they still survive in some private collection?

## 4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

### 4.1 Associated properties managed by HES:

- Edin’s Hall (hillfort, broch and settlement, Scottish Borders)
- Chesters (fort, East Lothian)
- Castlelaw (fort and souterrain, Midlothian)
- Dunadd (fort, Argyll)
- Holyrood Park (fort, City of Edinburgh)
- Ardestie (souterrain, Angus)
- Carlungie (souterrain, Angus)
- Tealing (souterrain, Angus)

### 4.2 Other associated sites:

Sites listed below are accessible to the public but not in State care: visitors should pay attention to local signage and requests, and observe the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.<sup>30</sup>

- Eildon Hill North (fort, Scottish Borders)
- Traprain Law (fort, East Lothian)
- Finavon (fort – vitrified, Angus)
- Tap o’Noth (fort – vitrified, Aberdeenshire)
- Hill of Dunnideer (fort – including vitrified elements, Aberdeenshire)
- Denoon Law (fort – vitrified, Angus)

## 5. KEYWORDS

Iron Age; fort; vitrified; rampart; ditch; roundhouse; Caterthuns.

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<sup>30</sup> [www.outdooraccess-scotland.scot/](http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.scot/)

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Note: Footnotes throughout the text offer page numbers where appropriate. If no page number is given, this indicates that reference is being made to the general thrust of the publication cited rather than a specific point of detail.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX I: TIMELINE

- 1747-55 Sites mapped by General William Roy.
- 1772 Visit by Thomas Pennant.
- 1791 Sites described by J. Waugh in *Statistical Account of Scotland* (published 1793).
- 1793 Both Brown and White Caterthun described in Roy's *Military Antiquities*.
- 1845 Trenching "at the sight of" D. D. Black (account not published until 1885): it is not clear if this was on Brown or White Caterthun - more probably the latter.
- 1882 Scheduled (named in the first Ancient Monuments Protection Act, 1882).
- 1884 Taken into State care by guardianship agreement.
- 1885-7 First notice boards and 'VR' boundary markers set up.
- 1899 Described by D. Christison (published 1900).
- 1918 Roundhouses to west of White Caterthun destroyed for road building material.
- 1922 Cup-marked stone on White Caterthun repaired/replaced.
- 1949 Ordnance Survey 3rd-order triangulation pillar set on White Caterthun (since removed, apart from its base).
- 1961 Discussed by Richard Feachem (published 1966).
- 1989 RCAHMS detailed survey and interpretation of sequence (published 1991 for White Caterthun, 1997 for Brown).
- 1995-6 Damage survey and excavations on Brown Caterthun (results published 1995).

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|------|--|
| 1997 | Damage survey and excavations on White Caterthun (results published 1995).                       |
| 2000 | Rescheduled.   |
| 2010 | Rescue excavation following vehicle damage at two points on circuit <i>F</i> of Brown Caterthun. |

## APPENDIX 2: DETAILED DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION OF SEQUENCES

### 2A: Brown Caterthun

The Brown Caterthun is the lower of the pair, reaching 287 m above sea-level.

On the summit of the hill, within the area enclosed by feature *A*, a shallow basin generally assumed to have been a spring was excavated and found to be a rock-cut basin filled with silty deposits rich in burnt grain and charcoal. The later of two phases of this infill produced radiocarbon dates indicative of an age of between 800 and 500 BC, indicating that the hilltop was in use at the very beginning of the Iron Age.

On the gently-sloping hillside, six defensive<sup>31</sup> lines enclose the flat summit. These are described in outward order from the summit, and assigned letters from *A-F*.

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<sup>31</sup> Doubt has been expressed as to how 'defensive' the enclosures around both sites were, and indeed whether or not 'fort' is an appropriate term. While recognising this is an entirely valid field of speculation, the conventional terms such as 'fort' and 'rampart' are used here for simplicity.



*Figure 6: Brown Caterthun, aerial view from south. © HES.*

The innermost line (rampart A) is a bank or rampart enclosing an oval area about 85m by 60m. The southern part of this bank was examined during excavations in 1995 and 1996. It was shown to consist of sandy soil set on a cobbled base, with two parallel slots running along its length, presumably for wooden palisades. These slots ended about 2m apart at a gated entrance through the bank. The passage through this was cobbled, and a spread of cobbles extended into the interior, where a number of pits and post-holes testified to the former presence of timber buildings. (It is possible that this area was trenched in 1845 but there is some doubt about this: see above - 2.13 Early antiquarian activity). Radiocarbon dates from material under the bank produced a determination in the range 360-40 BC, suggesting this was one of the last features constructed.



Figure 7: Brown Caterthun, excavation in 1996, showing entrance and double palisades of enclosure A. © HES.

The next rampart (*B*) lies between 25m and 55m from the first. Between the two, a shallow platform on the east side of the hill was investigated in 1996, revealing a timber structure with hearth waste and coarse pottery. This was most likely a circular hut or house, and it is possible that other similar structures may lie in the same area. Feature *B* is a heavily built rampart, with nine gaps in it; probably original entrances. It proved on excavation to have a boulder core, an outer revetment of stone and a rubble inner bank. A trench in its southern part revealed the remains of a timber breastwork which had burnt down and collapsed inwards.

Radiocarbon dates suggest this was built between 490 and 390 BC. The rampart was subsequently capped by a turf layer, suggesting it was repaired after the destruction of the breastwork. The easternmost gap through this heavy rampart was shown on excavation to be a narrow entrance passage about 7.5m long and 2.7 to 2.8m wide, defined on each side by a line of three post-holes. This entranceway was approached from the outside by two parallel palisade trenches, which might have acted to channel those approaching towards the entrance. However, these palisades appeared to be of relatively earlier date compared with the rampart<sup>32</sup> and

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<sup>32</sup> A lively artist's impression of this gateway, drawn by Alan Braby, appears in Armit 1997, at page 60. It probably overplays the regularity of the gateway and palisades, serving as a reminder that we know little about the appearance of above-ground structures.

may relate to an entrance through a now-vanished earlier defence on the same alignment.

Outside this solid rampart, lying parallel and relatively close to it, are two relatively slight ramparts (*C* and *D*) with entrance gaps aligning (in some cases a little obliquely) with those in the more solid rampart (*B*). These banks proved on excavation to be little more than low dumps of soil. A palisade trench lay 3m inward from the innermost of the pair.



Figure 8: Brown Caterthun, excavation in 1995, showing burnt timbers in rampart E. © HES.

Further down the slope, and about 45m away from the previous ramparts, is a low rampart (*E*) with eight entrances. It survives as a bank about 4m wide and up to 0.8m high. Excavation showed this to be an earthen bank laid on a foundation of turfs, partially defined by lines of boulders, with a raft of timbers laid on top. These had been burnt in situ. Over this destruction level were a series of dumped deposits of sandy soil and angular fragments of sandstone: these might represent repair work or might simply be non-combustible rampart material, which collapsed at the time of the burning. A pebble-covered surface lay just within the rampart. Underneath the rampart deposits, a curved area of cobbles may represent the remains of an earlier structure. An entrance passage and its flanking rampart terminals were excavated in 1995 and 1996. Two levels of burnt timbers were noted, and produced radiocarbon dates of 750 to 500 BC. The height of the rampart's external face was increased by a rock-cut platform just outside it. The entrance was defined by four rock-cut post-holes. A stone alignment and a low bank marked an avenue leading towards the entrance from downslope.



This rampart (*E*) has a distinct inward kink on its eastern side, while the outermost one (*F*) kinks slightly outward. Between the two is an oval space which on plan has the appearance of a holding pen.

The outermost rampart (*F*) appears as a bank about 3m wide and up to 0.4m high, with a shallow external ditch. It encloses an area exceeding 300m by 275m, and has between eight and ten gaps in it, most of which appear to be original entrances. On excavation, this rampart proved to be a simple dumped earthen bank. Charcoal below the bank and above the turf-line which it buried, was radiocarbon dated to 400 to 200 BC. The external ditch proved to be deeper than expected, reaching 1.6m deep and 2.3m wide. It was cut into subsoil. Traces of a palisade slot were found immediately outside the ditch but not aligned with it, and may represent an earlier structure. A trench found on the crest of the rampart may represent a palisade. The easternmost entrance gap was examined and found to be about 2.8m wide, with a cobbled surface and drain but no clear trace of any gate structure. The northern rampart terminal and ditch hooked inward, with a secondary bank extending uphill and defining the southern side of the oval enclosure between the easternmost portions of ramparts *F* and *E*.

Rescue excavation in 2011 following vehicle damage alongside modern fence-lines allowed new sections of the ditch and counterscarp of *F* to be examined. These lay further to the south than the areas examined in 1995-6, and examined an area less affected by rabbit burrowing. The ditch was found to be deeper (up to 2m), with sharp cut at its bottom and to have filled in rapidly after it had been cut (or after it had last been refreshed, if it had been well-maintained). This was suggested to represent either deliberate infilling or the catastrophic collapse of the outer face of the rampart which lay upslope. Some time later, this ditch had been recut across its full width, but to a shallower depth, and again filled in rapidly, with the infilling material this time suggesting collapsed stacked turf, some of it burnt. Traces of a stone-filled slot appeared to represent the remains of a palisade which had been cut down through the counterscarp bank but possibly pre-dated the bank flanking the entranceway as well as the rampart upslope from the ditch. There was evidence that some of the timbers used to construct the palisaded had been squared off.

Drawing this together, and recognising that many elements of the defences have still not been dated, one possible scheme of development would see the use of the very top of the hill coming earliest, with some sort of settlement within which grain was processed between 800 and 500 BC. This may have been unenclosed or only lightly enclosed. A sizeable area of the hilltop was then enclosed (rampart *B* and terraces *C* and *D*) before 400 BC, with rampart *E* added not long after. Rampart *F* seems to have come next, between 400 and 200 BC. It seems that the enclosed area was gradually extended outwards and downslope over time, with the exception

of the small enclosure on the uppermost part of the hill, which seems to have been constructed last of all, between 350 and 50 BC.

Once established, each line of defence appears to have been maintained, with widespread evidence for repair and rebuilding. But this must remain a provisional interpretation, given that only a tiny fraction of the length of each boundary feature has been examined. Perhaps the most striking conclusion is that, with the exception of Ramparts *B* and *E* and the ditch of *F*, all of the upstanding boundary features appear to be relatively slight: they may have served more as bases for wooden palisades than as defences in their own right. But surface appearances can be deceptive, and more excavation would be needed to prove or disprove this general proposition.

## 2B: White Caterthun



*Figure 9: White Caterthun, aerial view from the south-east. © HES.*

The White Caterthun is the higher of the pair, reaching 298m above sea-level, on a hill which is steeper than that of its neighbour. Five defensive lines encircle the summit and a further two skirt only parts of the hill. These have been titled *A* to *G* (by Halliday/RCAHMS, see Halliday 1991, Dunwell

and Strachan 2007, 76). [The lettering is based on RCAHMS interpretation of the sequence, and confusingly is not sequential from the summit downwards.]

*C* is the innermost, and by far the most substantial feature. It consists of the tumbled remains of a stone-built wall which must originally have stood to an impressive height: in its ruined state it measures up to 12m across and up to 3m tall in places. Traces of vitrified material (stone fused by excessive heat) have been found within its core, which suggests it was wholly or partly timber-laced and suffered burning. If the timber-lacing occurred throughout the wall, it might easily have stood to a height of 10m when newly built. In places, the wall appears to consist of two thick outer skins, with slight traces of possible chambers between these, but this is not certain. This massive wall encloses an elongated oval space measuring 145m north-east/south-west by 65m. Within this are the faint traces of two curving ditches, possibly the remains of circular palisaded enclosures. Overlying one of these is a sub-rectangular bank which appears to be considerably later. A 3m-deep, circular depression towards the south-west end of the enclosed area appears to be a well or cistern. The whole interior appears to have been ploughed at some unknown date. Several observers have suggested that *C* is closely related to a small group of 'oblong forts' in the North-East, including Finavon, Tap o'Noth and the second main phase at Turin Hill. The first two of these are strongly vitrified and none of the oblong forts show any obvious entrance through their enclosing wall.<sup>33</sup>

*D* and *E* lie immediately outside *C* and exactly parallel its outline. *D* is a thick spread of stone which was thought to represent a rampart or terrace lying just outside the stone wall, while *E* is a rock-cut ditch with a slight external (counterscarp) bank. Excavation has shown *D* to be poorly defined, whereas *E* is a substantial ditch, 5m wide and up to 1.2m deep. The counterscarp bank was shown to have supported a substantial wooden palisade. There are four gaps in ditch *E*, but none of these seems to lead to a corresponding break in the circuit of the stone wall, *C*. A large boulder bearing about 27 cup-marks sits on *D* on the west side of its circuit. This stone has been broken, apparently in a fall from the wall above, and was repaired in 1922. Just downslope from *E*, on the southern side of the hill, are a number of sub-circular scoops cut into the hillside: these may represent the sites of circular houses. The clearest of these may be earlier than the outer bank of *E*.

*A* lies rather further down the hill, and takes the form of a slight terrace, which has been proposed as the line of an early rampart which was later robbed out. It follows the contour line almost exactly. There are at least six gaps in its circuit.

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<sup>33</sup> See Dunwell and Ralston 2008, 67-72, for discussion of the relative dating of hillforts in the North-East.

*F* consists of two closely-spaced banks with a ditch between them. It appears to partially overlie *A*, especially on the north side of the hill, where it is most obvious. There are at least 12 gaps in this circuit, though some may be relatively recent.

*B* consists of a shallow ditch and slight external bank, which is only clearly visible on the north-west side of the circuit, though even here it is fragmentary and may never have been complete.

*G*, finally, is a low bank which encloses a sub-rectangular 'annexe' outside *B* on the north-east side of the hill. It appears to abut the bank of *B*, suggesting it is later. Its south-east junction with the earlier bank respects the line of the current approach path, suggesting the latter may follow an original entrance

A tentative sequence of construction had been suggested prior to excavation by Halliday (1991). This is based on aerial photographs and surface observations and runs thus:

Circuit *A* and part-circuit *B* > Circuits *C*, (*D*) and *E* > Circuit *F* > Annex *G*.

However, this sequence is open to revision. While the 1997 excavations produced no definitive proof of relative dates, it is hard to see how a palisade set on the counterscarp bank would have functioned in combination with the much more impressive stone wall *C* upslope. (It is entirely possible that *C* may have been built on top of the remains of an earlier and less impressive rampart, with which an outer palisade would have made more sense.) In addition, the impression gained from the broad, smooth profile of the ditch *E* was that it may have been kept open for an extended period of time (pers. comm. Richard Strachan 2020). These two observations taken together might suggest that *C* was built some considerable period of time after *E*.

### **Can the sequences of enclosure be reconciled between the two sites?**

On the Brown Caterthun, the evidence points towards a last main phase of enclosure around 200 BC. It is possible that the outer works on the White Caterthun followed a similar pattern, with the uppermost works (*except* the distinctive stone wall *C*) followed later by additional works outwards and downslope. Such a reading might accommodate the idea of the massive summit wall *C* as the last major phase of construction on either site, perhaps in the last two centuries BC, which would be consistent for the dates most recently suggested for the analogous 'oblong fort' of Finavon<sup>34</sup>. In short, both hills may have undergone a broadly similar sequence of enclosure up until 200 BC, with a final massive construction, in a new style and possibly for an entirely new purpose, then taking place only on the higher summit, that of the White Caterthun.

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<sup>34</sup> Alexander 2002

## APPENDIX 3: INTERPRETATIONS

Scotland's hillforts have been the subject of much study and excavation. Attempts to understand them have given rise to numerous theories about their genesis, purpose, context and relationships both to each other, and to other Iron Age structures.

Scottish hillforts seem to demand consideration in a wider geographical context, since enclosures of broadly similar character occur throughout the majority of the British Isles and continental Europe.

Archaeological narratives which prevailed from the start of the last century until the 1970s, linked the development of Scotland's hillforts (along with the brochs and duns of the far north and west) to the arrival of successive waves of settlers arriving from further south, moving at least partly in response to Roman expansionism on the Continent. This supposed process (which became known as 'diffusion') was deemed to have led to a 'Celtic' culture, based largely on pastoralism. Hillfort excavations in Scotland were limited in both number and scale, and narratives were largely based on the comparison of site plans.

Based on a very small number of small-scale excavations, elaborate systems of development were drawn up. These hypothesised how one type of defensive enclosure gave rise led to the next, centred upon the unproven assumption that these changes were almost synchronous across large areas (although with developments in Scotland always following after southern Britain) and that there was a single logical sequence of development across the whole country<sup>35</sup>. Some aspects of the construction and abandonment of forts were explicitly linked to the influence of the Roman army after its first appearance in Scotland in the late 70's AD. For example, the vitrified forts were for a time held to be the direct result of destruction by the Romans.<sup>36</sup>

These ideas were largely abandoned once increasing evidence began to emerge (including from the Brown Caterthun) in the late 1970s and through the 1980s and 1990s, that many Scottish hillforts had begun to be constructed long before the dates required for such explanations, and also that the sequence of enclosure boundaries varied markedly from site to site. The idea that Scotland's hillforts ever grew to become hilltop towns<sup>37</sup>, as may have been the case in the late centuries BC in southern Britain and on the near Continent, has also been abandoned, with the prevailing view

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<sup>35</sup> The assumed general sequence was: palisaded settlement > single-ditched fort > multiple ditched fort > undefended settlement. Illustrated in Armit 1997, page 51 and elsewhere.

<sup>36</sup> Simpson (1943, 59) advanced this hypothesis

<sup>37</sup> As suggested by Childe (1935) and later developed by Feachem (1966, 77-82). The latter introduced the term 'oppidum' to describe the largest hillforts in Scotland, adopting the word for a town from Julius Caesar's account of his conquests in Gaul.

being that, for most of their existence, hillforts functioned primarily as domestic and agricultural enclosures.<sup>38</sup>

Most recent studies have tended to emphasise the role of hillforts as central places or regional centres within their own territories, and to concentrate upon their detailed structure and possible functions within a local context, rather than considering them as elements of wider systems. The detailed differences between hillforts have been emphasised more than the similarities, and the emphasis has been on trying to understand the histories of individual sites. At the same time, high level hypotheses have emerged, including the arrangement of daily activities within houses and settlements according to cosmological principles. Such generalised theories are hard to substantiate or refute with existing techniques.

Research into long-distance contacts and the large-scale movements of people have not been favoured in recent decades, due to their association with ‘discredited diffusionism’. As the authors of one recent excavation report put it:

“Celticism and the ‘big picture’ narratives that might link the ... community to some kind of Europe-wide Celtic continuum have become almost taboo for many Iron Age archaeologists.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite the current lack of enthusiasm for such themes amongst Iron Age researchers, the influence on hillfort construction and use of the inter-regional exchange of ideas (and even of people) remains a valid field of inquiry. It remains to be seen whether recent advances in scientific methods, in particular the increasing use of ancestral DNA analysis of human remains, will encourage the research agenda back towards larger geographical perspectives and reconsideration of the possibilities of population movement and long-range contact as opposed to (or at least combined with) indigenous development and local invention. That said, one of the defining features of our surviving evidence of the northern Iron Age is likely to stand in the way of such research – the near-total absence of human remains from the early and middle Iron Age.

The Caterthuns, with their differences and similarities, their distinctive landscape setting and their undoubted potential for the survival of a wide range of types of physical evidence, have frequently been cited in the development of past and current theories, and continue to represent an extremely important research resource as new ways of understanding Scotland’s Iron Age ‘special places’ are developed.

As one example of this, it was suggested (prior to excavation) that the multiplicity of entrances could mean that the Brown Caterthun (and possibly the White) might not be of Iron Age origin, but could instead

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<sup>38</sup> Harding 2012, 87

<sup>39</sup> Armit and Mackenzie 2013, 13

represent a northern variant of the ‘causewayed camps’ known from the Neolithic period in southern Britain.<sup>40</sup> Whilst not disproven, this theory is no longer seriously entertained, even by those who proposed it, but serves to demonstrate how the absence of hard evidence allows wide-ranging speculation.

A sub-narrative, which has developed over the past century and more, concerns the date and purpose of the impressive stone enclosure which crowns the White Caterthun. This appears to be one of a small group of heavily-built, timber-laced stone forts in the north-east which have undergone intense burning, to the extent that the stones are partly fused, or ‘vitrified’. The classic example of these forts is that nearby at Finavon<sup>41</sup>.

The origin and cause of vitrification, whether it was accidental or deliberate (and if so for what motive) and the physical processes by which it took place, have prompted many theories – some pushing the bounds of credulity – and some experimentation. The balance of evidence seems to be that vitrification was not undertaken as a construction process, but there is otherwise no firm consensus on the context in which it took place. The main options seem to be accident, destruction during an attack, ostentatious destruction after conquest (or to mark a change in the social order), or ritual cleansing of a site – all of which might to some degree have occurred in combination.

Aside from the question of vitrification, the fact that these ‘oblong forts’ all seem to lack any sign of entranceways has led to the suggestion that they are something very different from the normal run of hillforts, to the extent that a function as ritual enclosures rather than defences has been advanced for consideration.<sup>42</sup>

These ‘oblong forts’ were once thought to date to the early centuries of the Iron Age, around 600–500 BC, but more recent research suggests they may instead belong in the last two centuries BC.<sup>43</sup> The White Caterthun’s summit wall is the largest known example of such a feature, and understanding how its date and mode of construction relates to other sites of this class, would represent a major advance to understanding these perplexing monuments.

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<sup>40</sup> Barclay 1997, 147 (The suggestion was removed in the revised edition, published in 2003.)

<sup>41</sup> Canmore ID 34813: <https://canmore.org.uk/site/34813/finavon>

<sup>42</sup> Harding 2004, 87. Though a few years later, Harding had softened his views on the oblong forts, merely pointing out that the “apparently restricted access” must have “inhibited their use as normal domestic and agricultural enclosures” (Harding 2012, 86-7).

<sup>43</sup> Alexander 2002, 45

## APPENDIX 4: SOCIAL VALUE ASSESSMENT

Available as a separate document on request from Historic Environment Scotland Cultural Resources Team.

Please contact [crtenquiries@hes.scot](mailto:crtenquiries@hes.scot)