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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90064)

Taken into State care: 1933 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2012

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CASTLELAW HILL FORT



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CASTLELAW HILL FORT

SYNOPSIS

Castlelaw Hill Fort is situated on the eastern slopes of the Pentland Hills, within the attractive landscape of the Pentland Hills Regional Park, 2 miles north of Penicuik. The prehistoric hill-fort was probably built and occupied through much of the first millennium BC. Archaeological excavations have shown that the present multi-ramparted fort visible today came about only by degrees and not as one single act of construction. Built into the ditch of the innermost rampart, close to one of the three entrances into the fort, is a well-preserved souterrain, or earth-house, possibly dating to the 2nd century AD, by which date the fort itself had been abandoned. The souterrain is now covered with concrete.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- 1st millennium BC – probable construction and occupation of the fort by local tribes.
- 2nd century AD – a souterrain, or earth-house, is built into the innermost ditch of the by-now abandoned fort.
- 1830 - a cairn standing on Castlelaw Fort is removed, revealing beneath it a stone cist containing bones.
- 1924 – Castlelaw Fort and souterrain become a Scheduled Ancient Monument. By this date the area around the fort is in use by the MOD for military weapons training.
- 1931/2 – archaeological excavations, directed by Professor Gordon Childe, are carried out on the ramparts and an area at the east gate. The souterrain is discovered during this work.
- 1933 – Castlelaw Fort and souterrain is entrusted into state care.
- 1939 – the finds from Childe's excavations are presented to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.
- 1940s – during World War II the MOD uses the area as a training ground for tanks. The present iron 'star' markers circling the fort date from this time, in an attempt to deter tank drivers from crossing the fort defences.
- 1948 – further archaeological excavations, directed by Professor Stuart Piggott and C. Margaret Piggott, are carried out at the inner east gate.
- c.1960 – the MOD builds firing ranges a short distance to the NW of the fort. These are still in use today.

Archaeological Overview:

- Two archaeological excavations, in 1931/2 and 1948, have taken place at Castlelaw. The results have been held to show that the initial fort was defended by a single palisade trench. This was succeeded by a single rampart. Excavation at the entrance on the south side showed that the rampart there had been reinforced internally with timber beams. To one side of the entrance

the palisade was outside the rampart, and on the other it was inside it. It is assumed, by analogy with the sequence at other forts (eg., Broxmouth, East Lothian), that the external ramparts and ditches were added later, producing a multi-ramparted fort in its final phase.

- There are few signs at Castlelaw of the elaboration of gate defences such as can be seen elsewhere, eg., at the north-west gate at **The Chesters** (East Lothian). The outer ditch at Castlelaw, as first dug, may not have run across the extended line between the entrances. So the original arrangement may have been quite like the simple one at the east gate of **The Chesters**. Subsequently, perhaps, the outer ditch was extended and, after the addition of the middle bank, the entrance path came up between the outer ditch and the middle bank, and swung round sharply to the left to a possibly timber-lined gateway through the middle bank. This arrangement would have provided a pragmatic defence against frontal attack.

Souterrain

- A well-preserved souterrain, or earthhouse, dating perhaps to the 2nd century AD, was found by Childe, built into the ditch of the inner rampart near the fort's east entrance. The side of the ditch had been cut back at one point to accommodate it. The main curved gallery, 21m long, had a small stone-corbelled chamber on its west side, reached by a short passage. The souterrain was probably roofed with timber and earth, and, by analogy with excavated souterrains elsewhere (eg, **Ardestie**), would have been associated with structures on the ground surface above.
- A notable feature of the souterrain is that its floor dips from the entrance to the rear. During the 1931/2 excavation it was noted that the clay floor was putty-like from damp, making it seem unlikely that the souterrain was used for storing grain. Hearths found in the side chamber seemed to go with its early use. The purpose of the souterrain is thus obscure.
- The finds from the souterrain were all of Roman origin and of 2nd century AD date. They included an enamelled bronze brooch, glass bottle fragments and Samian pottery. A Romano-Celtic mounting was also found. These suggest that the local people were either getting gifts from, or were trading with, the Romans.

Adjacent prehistoric sites

- About 100m north-east of Castlelaw Fort, and overlooking it from the shoulder of a hill, is the vestige of a palisaded settlement known as Castle Knowe (a Scheduled Ancient Monument but not in state care). On its north side two palisade trenches are just visible, set about 6m apart. The interior measures 70m by at least 30m, and at least three timber houses are marked by small platforms. On the north-east, however, the line of the palisade is continued by a low bank, with an external ditch and a counterscarp bank at its east end; and there is a short length of ditch and bank some 30m to the north-east.

- On a spur projecting from the foot of Castlelaw Hill, immediately west of the MOD rifle ranges and about 650m from Castlelaw Fort, there is a ring-ditch house.
- How these two sites related, if at all, to Castlelaw Fort is not clear, though we may reasonably assume that the palisaded settlement at Castle Knowe predated the fully developed hill fort at Castlelaw. In contrast to the situation at **The Chesters**, there does not seem to have been a large concentration of settlements and field systems around Castlelaw Fort.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- Castlelaw Fort is a multi-ramparted hill fort that was probably built around the middle of the first millennium BC and which continued in use throughout much of the remainder of that millennium. It is one of a number of forts built along the south-east slopes of the Pentland Hills. At some later stage, perhaps in the 2nd century AD, by which date the fort had probably been largely abandoned, a stone-lined souterrain, or earthhouse, was built into the ditch near the east entrance.
- The fort itself measures overall about 150m long and 100m wide, with an interior some 90m long by 37m wide. It seems to have had two ramparts, each accompanied by a rock-cut ditch, and an external counterscarp bank. Breaks in the ramparts suggest that there were three entrances, one at each end and one in the middle of the south side.
- This south entrance was based around four substantial posts which may have carried a walkway over the gateway. Thus the entrance may have been impressive, but the timber lacing, and possibly lining also, of the inner rampart near the eastern gateway is not known in sufficient detail to allow an architectural reconstruction.
- The souterrain seems likely to have had a wooden roof. It is fairly roughly built. At the top of the east wall at the terminal of the souterrain there is evidence of possible re-use of cupmarked stones. It is not known what purpose the souterrain served.

Social Overview:

- The fort is reached up a dirt track from a small car park beside Castlelaw steading, itself reached by a minor road from the A702. The fort is situated within, but close to the eastern edge of, the Pentland Hills Regional Park, which is thought to attract around 600,000 visitors each year, most of them walkers. However, there is no evidence that the fort plays a pivotal role in the enjoyment of either the users of the park, or of local people.
- The fort lies within a working farm, and sheep/lambs graze on the fort.

- The fort lies immediately adjacent to MOD rifle ranges that are in active use for most of the year.

Spiritual Overview:

- It is not known what use, if any, the builders and inhabitants of the fort, or the users of the souterrain, in prehistory made of the place for spiritual purposes.
- Today, neither the fort nor the souterrain appears to have any spiritual association or use.

Aesthetic Overview

- The fort occupies a grassy knoll on the lower, eastern slopes of the Pentland Hills. From it, wide and impressive views may be had over the surrounding countryside to east and south.
- The grass-covered ramparts and ditches are easily recognisable, and provide points of undulating interest amid the gently rolling landscape.
- The souterrain, now covered with a concrete roof, provides a dark, dank internal atmospheric environment to contrast with the open-air feel of the fort itself.
- The nearby MOD rifle range, built of concrete and brick, is a stark reminder of the 'present' in a landscape mostly devoid of modern development.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When was the fort first begun and what was its history of occupation? Did it mirror that at other hill-forts in south-east Scotland that have been excavated (eg., Broxmouth, East Lothian), or did it follow a different path?
- What was the chronological and physical relationship between the fort and the adjacent prehistoric sites, particularly the palisaded settlement at Castle Knowe?
- When was the souterrain built, what purpose did it serve, and what was the relationship, if any, between its builders and the Romans?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- The fort is reasonably well-preserved, with impressive ramparts and ditches and entrance gates. The covered souterrain provides a fascinating contrast to the openness of the fort itself.
- The archaeological potential of the fort remains very high, even though parts have previously been excavated. The information retrieved could well revolutionise our understanding of the Iron-Age period in southern Scotland, and of the interaction between the native inhabitants and the Romans in the early centuries AD.
- The fort is pleasingly situated in the Pentland Hills Regional Park, a landscape very popular with walkers, horse riders and the like.

Associated Properties:

(*other prehistoric sites in the Pentland Hills Regional Park*): inc. Castle Knowe palisaded settlement; Caerketton Hill fort; Camp Hill fort, Braidwood Bridge.
(*some other prehistoric forts in the region*): Broxmouth (now destroyed); **Edinburgh Castle**; Eildon Hill North; **Holyrood Park**; North Berwick Law; **The Chesters**; Traprain Law.
(*some other Lowland souterrains*): **Ardestie**, **Carlungie**; Crichton; Pitcur (Perthshire); **Tealing**.

Keywords:

fort; hill fort; rampart, palisade, entrance, ditch, souterrain (earth-house)

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