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ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC180

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90030);

Taken into State care: 1931 (Guardianship)

Last Reviewed: 2014

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

BARSALLOCH FORT



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.



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BARSALLOCH FORT

SYNOPSIS

Barsalloch Fort, 1.5m SSE of Port William, in Galloway, is situated on the top edge of a steep, SW facing slope around 25m OD. It comprises a D-shaped fort measuring internally about 42m N-S by about 44m transversely within well-defined defences along the three landward sides. The SW side, along the steep coastal edge, has no obvious defensive provision. The entrance into the fort was from the NE side. In the absence of archaeological investigation, the fort is presumed to date from the later Iron Age some 2,000 years or more ago, and judging by its size may have housed a small farmstead.

The fort has been heavily trampled by cattle over the years and the ramparts are much eroded. Visitor access from the coast road (A747) below has been improved relatively recently by the construction of a steep flight of steps.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **Late Iron Age** – although we cannot be sure of its date of construction, the fort is probably built to provide a securely defended farmstead, perhaps for use by a minor chief of the native tribe the Romans would later called Novantae. The date the fort falls into disuse is unknown.
- **1882** – The first Ancient Monuments Act is passed into law. Shortly after, Lieutenant-General Pitt Rivers, a leading figure in the movement to protect Britain's archaeological heritage, is appointed the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments.
- **1886/7** – Pitt Rivers visits the fort whilst staying at nearby Monreith House with Sir Herbert Maxwell, MP, a noted local antiquarian, and makes a sketch of the defences.
- **1888** – Barsalloch Fort is added to the 'schedule' of Ancient Monuments drawn up by Pitt Rivers and is taken into state care.
- **1931** – Barsalloch Fort is formally taken into state care, along with other nearby ancient monuments (**Big Balcraig and Clachan Cup-and Ring Marks** and **Torhouse Stone Circle**).

Archaeological Overview:

The level interior of the fort, measuring c. 0.1 hectares in extent, is defined on the NW, NE and SE sides by two earthen ramparts, each measuring up to about 1m high and 2m wide, separated by a medial ditch about 10m wide and up to 3.5m deep. The SW side, the cord of the D, along the edge of the steep coastal slope, has no obvious rampart or ditch defence, though the existence of a less-robust perimeter fence cannot be ruled out. The monument has been extensively damaged by cattle over the years. The entrance is also now partly obscured by a later turf dyke of unknown, but probably post-Improvement (18th century) date.

Barsalloch Fort has never been archaeologically investigated. However, by analogy with nearby **Rispain Camp**, which has been excavated in recent times,

we can reasonably expect to find one or more large round houses and their associated yards within the defensive circuit. Barsalloch probably accommodated a single extended family group, farming the surrounding land and fishing the nearby sea.

Barsalloch Fort's cliff-edge location looks down on the rocky shore of Luce Bay, where one of the earliest human settlements in Scotland – a Mesolithic site, Pate's Port, (NX 343 422) dating to the early 5th millennium BC - was discovered and excavated in 1967 and 1969.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

N/A

Social Overview:

Other than being a minor visitor attraction, Barsalloch Fort currently plays no social role.

Spiritual Overview:

Barsalloch Fort currently plays no known spiritual role.

Aesthetic Overview:

The two ramparts and their intervening deeply-cut ditch confront the viewer as obviously 'antique' elements within the surrounding contemporary farming landscape of the south Machars.

The view southward from the fort is spectacular, particularly on a clear day when the Isle of Man, the Mull of Galloway and the Irish coast hove into sight.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When precisely was the fort constructed, and for whom? Only archaeological excavation can now provide answers. How did Barsalloch equate with the nearby – and partially excavated – late Iron-Age defended settlement at **Rispain Camp**.
- How was the surrounding land being farmed when the fort was inhabited? It is becoming increasingly important to view such earthworks as Barsalloch 'in the round', and not just as entities in themselves.
- How did earthwork forts such as Barsalloch relate, if at all, to the stone-built duns that dot the coastline of SW Scotland (eg, Castle Haven (Kirkcuds) and **Torr a'Chaisteil** (Arran))?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Barsalloch is a reasonably well-preserved example of a late Iron-Age promontory fort, with particularly well-defined ramparts and ditch.
- Despite damage from pasturing cattle, Barsalloch's archaeological potential is likely to have the potential to inform our understanding of the history of human settlement in SW Scotland in the late Iron Age, and shed light on the agricultural and economic practices prevailing at that time.

- Barsalloch Fort may be of relatively minor prehistoric significance compared to the likes of Skara Brae and Stonehenge, but it has played its part in the development of 'ancient monumentry', courtesy of its link with Lt Gen Pitt Rivers, a key figure in the post-Darwinian interest in the origins of human development.

Associated Properties:

(*other locally related places*) – Burrow Head forts; Isle Head Fort, Isle of Whithorn; Laggan Camp; **Rispain Camp**

(*other Lowland Scottish Iron-Age fortifications in Historic Scotland's care*) – **Castlelaw; Chesters; Edin's Hall; Torr a'Chaisteil**

Keywords:

fort; farm; rampart; ditch; Iron Age; Novantae; Pitt Rivers

Selected Bibliography:

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