HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND | ÀRAINNEACHD EACHDRAIDHEIL ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC117
Designations:	Scheduled Monument (SM90082)
Taken into State care:	1932 (Guardianship)
Last reviewed:	2015

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

COULTER MOTTE

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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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:
Historic Environment Scotland
Longmore House
Salisbury Place
Edinburgh
EH9 1SH
+44 (0) 131 668 8600
www.historicenvironment.scot

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

COULTER MOTTE

SYNOPSIS

Coulter (Culter) Motte Hill is located on the east bank of the River Clyde at Wolfclyde, beside a side road off the A72 1¾ miles SW of Biggar.

The property comprises a grassy mound, c. 2.5m high and 12m in diameter, within a fenced enclosure. The mound is a fair example of a motte, a form of earthwork and timber castle introduced to Scotland during the Anglo-Norman era in the 12th century. In the absence of archaeological excavation, however, it is impossible to say whether the structure dates from then or from the Wars of Independence in the early 14th century, when an almost identical motte hill was built near Roberton, just 8 miles up-river from Coulter.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **c.1160** – King Malcolm IV grants land in Upper Clydesdale to Flemish immigrants, in so doing overruling the claim by the diocese of Glasgow to the rents and tributes therefrom. The immigrants include Baldwin, who is granted the estate of Biggar, not far from Coulter, where he builds a fine motte-and-bailey castle. It is possible that Coulter Motte Hill is built around the same time by another Fleming.
- **c.1250** – Alexander 'of Culter' witnesses a charter by Maldowen, earl of Lennox. He may be residing at Coulter Motte Hill.
- **early 14th century** – during the Wars of Independence the situation in Upper Clydesdale becomes fraught with difficulty, lying as it is on the border between the Bruce lands of Annandale and the Balliol lands of Galloway. Archaeological excavation has demonstrated that at least one motte castle in Upper Clydesdale - at Moat Farm, beside the Clyde in Roberton parish, just 8 miles from Coulter Motte Hill - is built during this time. The possibility that Coulter Motte Hill also dates from this time cannot be discounted.
- **1860** – the Symington, Biggar and Broughton Railway is built immediately to the north of the motte hill. The construction of Coulter Station results in destruction of part of the site.
- **1931** – road contractors begin to remove the west side of the motte hill for sand and gravel, but stop when the Ministry of Works asks them to 'hold off'.
- **1932** – Coulter Motte Hill is transferred into State care.
- **1950** – the railway line is closed to passenger traffic and Coulter Station closed.
- **1966** – the railway is finally closed.

Archaeological Overview:

Other than the simple fact that the grassy mound is undoubtedly a motte of medieval date (it was classified as a 'tumulus' on the 1st edition of the OS 6" map of 1864), little else of confidence may be said for no archaeological investigation of it has yet been made.

It is conceivable that the motte-castle was built by one of the immigrant Flemings, probably sheep-farmers, invited to settle in Upper Clydesdale by Malcolm IV (1153-65). The incomers seem all to have been related, either through blood or close friendship, and their spokesperson/leader was Baldwin, who was granted Biggar, where he built a fine motte-and-bailey castle. It is possible that Coulter Motte Hill was built at the same time by a kinsman of Baldwin.

However, excavation by Chris Tabraham in 1978 at another supposedly Flemish motte in Upper Clydesdale – beside the Clyde at Moat Farm in the nearby parish of Roberton - demonstrated unequivocally that it was built in the early 14th century, and not as was formerly supposed by the Fleming 'Robert the brother of Lambin' (whence the place-names Roberton and Lamington).

It is important to stress that the existing motte-hill at Coulter probably was not the sum total of the castle built at the site. There would definitely have been a ditch encircling the base of the mound, and almost certainly a bailey, or outer court, also, associated with, and most probably attached to the mound, where the service offices (stables/bake-house, etc) were located. Elsewhere in Scotland, aerial photography, field-walking and archaeological excavation have shown that such service courts need not have been artificially elevated but simply enclosed by a bank and ditch.

Finally, the comparatively small size of the motte compared to others in Scotland may reflect its more lowly status, either as a residence of a minor landholder or as a garrison post controlling a river-crossing. Baldwin of Biggar's motte-and-bailey is more impressive, as are two others in Clydesdale, the royal castle in Lanark and that at Carnwath, most probably built by William de Somerville, a close acquaintance of David I, Malcolm IV's father.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

Coulter Motte Hill has no visible architectural features.

Social Overview:

Other than Coulter Motte Hill being perceived by the then owner in 1931 as a 'nuisance' and a haven for rubbish, it seems to have no known social significance today. The owner in 1931 noted that travelling folk often stayed there.

Spiritual Overview:

It is doubtful if Coulter Motte Hill had a castle chapel in medieval times. The property fulfils no known spiritual role today.

Aesthetic Overview

Coulter Motte Hill is attractively located beside a winding in the River Clyde, and surrounded by broad green pastures.

The railway viaduct (now disused) crossing the River Clyde immediately on its west side provides a pleasing distraction, as well as reminding the visitor that

the motte-hill was probably strategically sited to overlook an important river crossing.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When, by whom and for what purpose was the motte castle built? In the absence of documentary evidence, only an archaeological investigation can now determine whether Coulter is a contemporary of Baldwin of Biggar's motte-and-bailey castle, or another example of a motte built during the emergency of the Wars of Independence. Further work in documentary sources may provide clues, as they did in the case of the excavation at the nearby motte at Moat Farm.
- How big was the original castle? Here again only excavation, coupled with more intensive field-survey and aerial reconnaissance, can determine the full extent of the medieval castle, but it is likely to be larger than the area in State care.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Coulter Motte Hill is a fairly typical example of a Scottish motte – modest in height and diameter and seemingly missing its bailey, or service court.
- Should Coulter, on excavation, prove to date from the mid-12th century, then it has significance as marking the royal policy advocated by David I and Malcolm IV in introducing Norman feudalism into Scotland.
- Should Coulter, on excavation, proved to date from the early 14th century, then it joins the motte-castle at nearby Moat Farm, Roberton, as an example of an outdated castle form being revivified during a period of national emergency and internal strife. The re-emergence of the motte a century and more after it went out of fashion is echoed also in Denmark, in remarkably similar circumstances.

Associated Properties

(*other Upper Clydesdale motte-castles*) – Abington (Crawfordjohn); Biggar; Carnwath; Lanark; Moat Farm (Roberton)

(other earthwork-and-timber castles in Historic Scotland's care) – **Druchtag Mote Hill**; **Duffus Castle**; **Greenknowe Tower (?); Huntly Castle**; **Lincluden Collegiate Church**; **Peel Ring of Lumphanan**

Keywords:

earthwork and timber castle; bailey; ditch; Flemings/Flanders; Anglo-Norman era; Wars of Independence

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