

5. Exploring the landscape using Historical Sources 'Local History on the Ground'

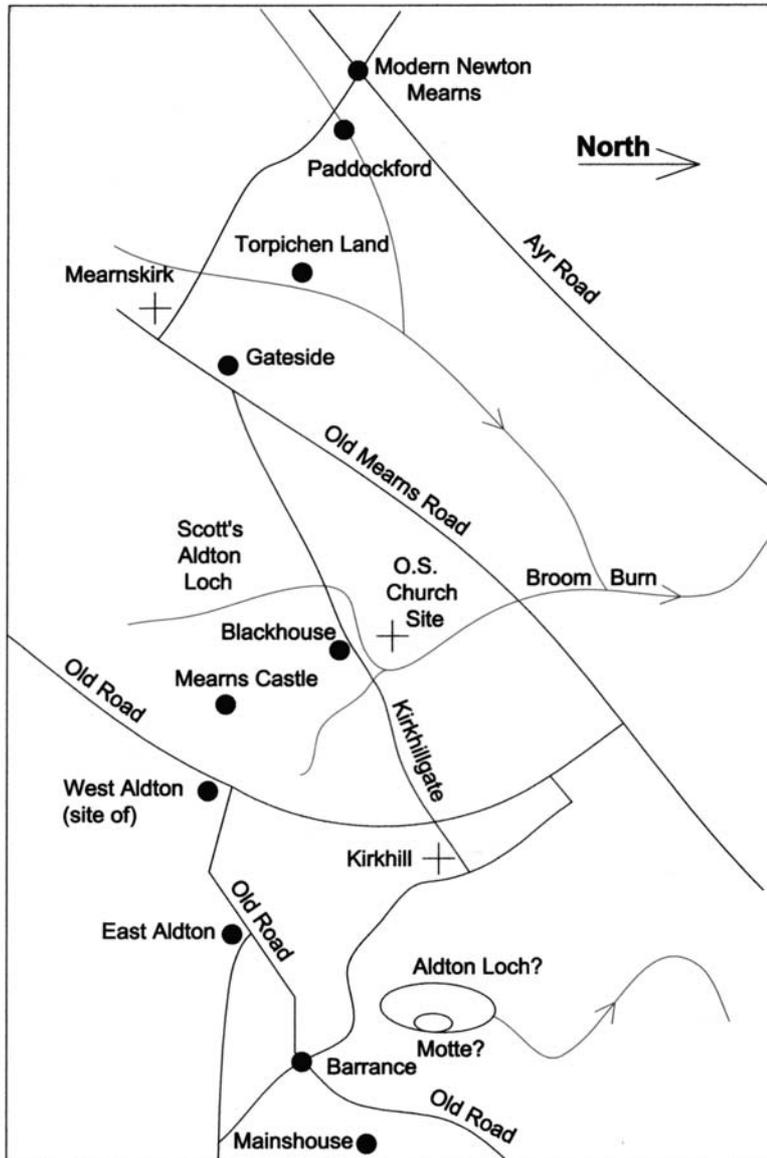
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This article is about a book which the writer set out to create as far back as the 1980s. The book has finally materialized, bearing the title "Local History on the Ground" published by The History Press (2009). The book is about archaeological fieldwork for local history and is aimed at the needs of local historians who want to go further than the available documentary evidence to try to understand the physical evidence of the past in the landscape. The subject matter may interest archaeologists, but it is not written with them in mind, as they have different fieldwork objectives. The last books to be published for the benefit of both archaeologists and local historians were by Mick Aston and Tony Brown in the 1980s ¹. However these were more about archaeology than local history. In the intervening years there have been lots of books about archaeological phenomena, but little to address the needs of local historians. "Local History on the Ground" attempts to put local history needs first.

The book also has an association with Renfrewshire, in that many of the ideas were first conceived around fieldwork in Renfrewshire in the 1970s and 1980s. While the book draws on examples throughout Scotland and England, it still incorporates some of the original Renfrewshire inspiration. So writing an article about the book for a Renfrewshire Local History Forum Journal is not solely a local promotion for the book, but reflects a debt the author owes to the Renfrewshire landscape, and to past explorations and projects there. This includes a book about East Renfrewshire ².

What the new book endeavours to do is explore two approaches to landscapes, one being a strategy for exploring and reading the landscape, the other deriving topographical information from documents and old maps and plans. The two approaches should be used together, each informing the other, both to progress and to re-examine ideas. In addition the book explores how to interpret remains of the past, in conjunction with the widely available literature on types of archaeological phenomena, and how to understand the natural landscape, which both influences human adaptation, and which needs to be taken into account when interpreting the evidence.

The book is written from a British perspective, but around half the practical examples are from Scotland. One of the key illustrations used to explain the role of both fieldwork and documentary research in the book is a lost new town in Dorset, which was used as a case study. Several Renfrewshire examples are also used to illustrate the role of documentary research, and one of these is a charter about an exchange of church land between the Aldton and Newton, both in Mearns Parish. In the book I use the Newton component to illustrate the use of topographic clues in documents, but the Aldton component provides an excellent opportunity to explore the principles of the book in a Renfrewshire context.



The Mearns Church Land Charter

In most parts of Renfrewshire many of the earliest surviving charters are for lands related to Paisley Abbey. The Mearns Church Land Charter is no different, and is a tantalizing document which describes the boundaries of a piece of land, relying on transient landmarks such as thorn bushes, standing stones and long lost place names. It was one of several grants to the Abbey by Herbert de Maxwell, attributed to between 1272 and 1316 in the Register of Paisley Abbey. The document grants land in the Newton, near Mearnskirk, in exchange for land in the Aldton of Mearns. The amount of land is specified as "*octo acras et dimidiam et viginti octo perticatas terre*". This translates into old units of land: four roods to the acre, so half an acre is 2 roods, and 40 "perticatas" (falls, poles or perches) to the rood: thus 8 acres, 2 roods, 28 falls (8.66 acres).

The theory revolves around six main Mearns locations which can still be traced on the modern map: Newton, Aldton, Mearnskirk, Mearns Castle, Kirkhill and Barrance (see map). Mearnskirk is the traditional parish church centre and still the site of an early nineteenth century church. The tower of Mearns Castle survives as an

appendage to a late twentieth century church. In the eighteenth century the hub of Mearns village migrated from Mearnskirk to the Newton, which became the core settlement from then until the 1970s, when it was razed to create a shopping mall. The last three sites, Aldton, Kirkhill and Barrance lie to the east of the Castle.

The Newton Lands

The big question revolves around the original location of the heart of Mearns, long before the eighteenth century move from Mearnskirk to the modern Newton. From the written evidence, the specification for the Newton land is the more detailed, perhaps because the Aldton components are known lands being replaced, while the Newton lands are being defined for the future. As the new land is defined in extent by the old down to small fractions of an acre, it needs more precise specification:

“as the church rivulet crosses the highway that leads from the Church of Mearns to the New Manor and so up that rivulet northwards to a standing stone that is in a green furrow of land in the Croft flat, and so northwards by that green furrow of land to burn that extends westwards to another standing stone, and from that stone directly northwards to a rill at a well head, and so by that rill by the well to Paddockford and thence by the highway to the place above mentioned where the Church rivulet crosses the highway, except the land in the said boundaries belonging to the house of Torpichen.”

The Aldton Lands

As the Newton lands including Paddockford and Torpichen are already covered in the new book, the Aldton lands will be discussed here, particularly as they are more elusive, and involve a much earlier move from an Aldton to a Newton:

“Five and a half acres and twenty eight perches lie between the syke³ that bounds the crofts on the east side of the manor of the Aldton and between the burn on the west side of the Thorniflat descending to the Kirkilgat, and thence to the highway and three acres of land lie near the lake of the Aldton on the east side that is called Spragunflat”.

The translation is from Strang's History of Mearns (1939) which interprets “ville de Aldton” as a manor place rather than a settlement or township, likewise “novam villam” as New Manor below.

Identification: Fieldwork

The book identifies two ways to approach identification of these places. One is to look for features in the landscape which might fit the description, perhaps considering several possibilities. This is the fieldwork component. The other is to look at the available documentary evidence between then and now, which might elucidate location. In ‘Local History on the Ground’ I use the documentary clue which I previously explained in 1992, in an article in this Journal on the Renfrewshire Templelands⁴.

Before looking at the problem from the fieldwork angle, we have to define the nature of fieldwork. The book approaches this from the standpoint that local historians are looking for explanation in the landscape, trying to resolve specific problems, and endeavouring to understand the landscape historically. These objectives greatly differ from the aims of modern archaeology, which is largely about cost-effective, consistent and reliable methods of inventory of remains of the past. This may not involve working closely with or understanding the landscape, but superimposing objective schemes for scrutiny of the ground, now known as systematic survey.

While archaeologists would probably organize a group of volunteers to carry out transects across the landscape to inventory every possible feature, this may not yield the evidence we are looking for. It is likely that the evidence has long been ploughed out, or built over, or so greatly modified as to be unrecognizable as archaeology. Lack of "archaeology" however does not answer all the questions which local historians may seek to resolve, which is why the archaeology approach, often unfairly imposed on local history societies by the archaeology establishment in Scotland, may be inappropriate.

The Aldton

We also need to define the location of the Aldton. The eighteenth century farm of the same name, which formerly stood near Mearns Castle, seems to be a strong clue, but may not be nearly as old as the charter. In the example used in the new book a cottage, also called 'Newton', on the south shore of Poole Harbour in Dorset, has long been thought to mark the site of the lost thirteenth century new town. In fact it is no older than seventeenth century, when a small fishing settlement was established there. Thus modern names, particularly those which seem to 'fit' the evidence, may be a distraction.

About 700 metres north-east of Mearns castle lies Kirkhill, later an improved farm and Victorian mansion. The site has been interpreted as being embodied in the location "kirkilgat". Some writers (eg Strang and Scott ⁵) supposed the "manor of the Aldton" to be synonymous with the extant fifteenth century tower-house, ie Mearns Castle. The document also refers to the "New Manor" or possibly merely a new township (Newton) near Mearnskirk, suggesting the focus of Mearns had moved away from Aldton. The Aldton manor in the thirteenth century may not have occupied the same location as the fifteenth century tower, because defensive needs were very different in the thirteenth century. Despite the uncertainty, the area around Mearns Castle and Kirkhill is the one considered by most commentators.

What the charter tells us about the Aldton is that there was a settlement here, possibly including a manor house of some description, and possibly defended. The crofts lying east of it were most likely strips of land behind the houses of the villagers. A burn forms the east boundary of the crofts. The larger plot of land lay east of this burn, bounded by another burn on the west side of a place called Thorniflat and two routeways: Kirkilgat and the main highway. The five and a half acre plot described above, if translated to a rectangle approximately one-and-a-half times longer than its width, amounts to roughly 200 by 140 metres, comparable with a medium-sized field. However if the burns and routeways were converging, it was probably more triangular or oval in shape. Kirkilgat may signify Kirk Lydgate or Lane: the lane leading to the church. Also, possibly in the vicinity, is the Aldton Loch. Near to this, on its east side, at a place called Spragunflat, was located the smaller three acre plot. The Aldton Loch might lie north, south, east or west of the Aldton.

There are some other questions to ask about this description. Is the highway at the Aldton the same highway which we again encounter leading from the church of Mearns to Newton? Was the church always at Mearnskirk, or was it previously at Aldton? Did the Kirkilgat lead to Mearnskirk, or to the site of a former church at Aldton? We are certainly looking for roads that meet at a junction or converge near the Aldton. They might be comparable with existing roads, or have long disappeared. The locations Thorniflat, Spragunflat and loch of Aldton tell us something about the topography.

Aldton Loch

The loch is one of the most important clues, as it has a limited number of potential locations on the landscape, which narrows down the potential sites. The loch may have existed where drainage was impeded, possibly morainic deposits across a watercourse, or where there was a hollow, but we do not know the size of this loch. The burns may be flowing into or out of the Aldton Loch, or entirely unconnected. Thorniflat was probably a waste or scrubby area covered with hawthorn or gorse. Scott in 1939 came up with two suggestions for Spragunflat, either "srogan" for the crop of a bird, possibly indicating the shape of Spragunflat, or a broad Scots word "sproag" meaning to make love in the night, thus, suggests Scott, a courting meadow. There is also Gaelic "spreidh" meaning cattle, and perhaps indicating grazing land.

What we have here is a set of questions, or preconceived ideas about the places described in the charter. In contrast to the detached objectivity which archaeologists would use in systematic survey, we have some notions of what to look for, and these are more topographical than archaeological. Indeed there may be nothing archaeological to be found. So it would be a pity to adopt systematic fieldwork methods here when there is such a good opportunity to engage with the landscape. Of course a large part of the area is now built over, and much of the land had been altered by cultivation beforehand. The area is now on the very brink of the built-up area and under constant threat from development, both by housing, schools and recreation. Some parts have already been released for house building by the Planning Authority. Recently new earthworks have also been created by the laying out of a golf course east of Barrance. The questions in this article are thus timely, as any remaining features are on the verge of obliteration. However even under the parts already covered by housing, we can still detect some of the topography.

Scott in 1939 probably drew up a specification and imagined map, although his interpretation was influenced by the fifteenth century castle. He states (p.101) "the site of the present Mearns Castle is the inevitable site of a castle at the Aldton" on the basis that a "ton" or "vil" implicates a castle. He also speculates whether the church of Mearns was originally here, but concludes that the church must always have been at Mearnskirk, and proposes that Kirkilgat (Kirkhill) refers to a lane leading to the church. Scott then places the larger plot east of the castle extending north towards the lane from Kirkilgat to Mearnskirk near Blackhouse, and the Aldton loch in the meadow below the castle (p.103). This conclusion is similar to that of Cosmo Innes⁶ who decided that the church of Mearns was originally "*near the south-east extremity of the parish between the Kirk Burn and another the Broom Burn on the other side of which was the old village and castle of Mearns.*" Hence for many years the original church was supposed to have stood where the Broom Burn meets the Kirk Burn, three hundred metres north of the castle.

However we do not know if the Aldton included a castle or a simple manor house, and its defensive needs would have been very different in the thirteenth century compared to the fifteenth, not least considering a shift from archery to cannon. Also it would probably have needed more space for a cluster of timber buildings rather than a tower. So it is dangerous to fix the topography around the present castle. In the Dorset example used in the new book, I outlined the expected size of a planned town, with land for a church and market, and a harbour for ships, as defined by the charter, together with good communications, potential for defence, water supply and access to agricultural land. I also looked at examples of surviving remains of whatever period, which provide a resource base for assessing the potential.

The Aldton specifications are very different, and lack much in the way of remains, but include a loch, which must presumably have been drained since, as there are none in the area. It also included space for a settlement, whether or not it included a manor, but that could have been defended at least against marauders and wild animals, and an arrangement of small watercourses and roads that fit the description. There are a number of modest elevations in the area, but it is mostly gently undulating and there are not many places for the loch, apart from below the castle.

Over the years I have explored a number of possibilities, mostly in the area around Barrance Farm, which name is suggestive of ruins as in old English *burh* and *burgaens*. The adjacent farm name Mainshouse also hints at the mains or demesne lands of the manor. The area is of interest partly because there is a large hollow north of Barrance and south-east of Kirkhill, containing a stream along the backs of bungalows in Laigh Road, which appears to have been dammed by morainic material, now breached, and could have formed the lake. On the east side of this is a natural rocky mound the isolation of which appears to have been enhanced by digging around the base on the south-east arc, like a moat. There is also the elevation on which Barrance Farm outbuildings are situated. From the earliest detailed maps from Ardgowan Estate Papers, Barrance has a layout akin to a pre-improvement fermtoun, like Flenders to the north. Because of the recent abandonment and vandalism of Barrance farmstead (burnt out in 2008), the proposed redevelopment, and the modern golf course adjacent, I have raised concerns about it as a possible locus for the Aldton Loch and Aldton itself, in case the opportunity to investigate the possibility is lost.

Besides topography there is the question of the high road (*altam viam*) and “kirkligat”. Scott (1939) identifies the latter as the path from Kirkhill towards Mearnskirk that passed close to Blackhouse where it crossed the Old Mearns Road near Gateside. The modern Ayr Road through Mearns is a creation of the twentieth century. As far back as Roy’s Military Survey 1747-55, the main route through this part of the country was the Old Mearns Road, and ought logically to be the “*altam viam*”. On that basis, a plot of five and a half acres bounded by both the high road and kirkligat ought to be about a kilometre west of Mearns Castle and closer to the north-east of Mearnskirk. Hence the Aldton could have been more or less synonymous with Mearnskirk. However, like the Ayr Road, it may have moved. There is an old long distance routeway, of uncertain date, passing through Flenders, Barrance and East Aldton to the site of West Aldton Farm by the castle. This is offset around the modern field boundaries, and is another contender for early high road status. It intersects with Kirkhill Road at Barrance Farm. However it does not appear on Roy’s Military Map, and by the time of Ainslie’s county map in 1796 it is just one of a number of farm roads. All the same, the evidence suggests that we are dealing with road intersections around Kirkhill, Aldton, Barrance and Mearns Castle, even if not necessarily the fifteenth century castle location.

The Solution

This is a project “still under construction” which hasn’t yet achieved concrete answers. What I have come up with is a mass of ideas linking the c.1300 document to later historical evidence and present day topography. In the example in the book, the lost new town in Dorset, I came up with a similar range of possibilities. However, as with the Newton half of the charter, I was able to produce other documents which in fact gave a clear location of the Dorset town about a kilometre west of the previously supposed Newton site.

The situation at Aldton in Mearns doesn’t seem to be so easily solved from documentary research (so far), although some of the missing place names may still

await rediscovery in charters and sasines. However possible answers could also come from fieldwork. The fieldwork proposed in the book is informed by documentary research and insight into landscapes. It is historian-friendly fieldwork that engages with the landscape, and uses the resource of prior knowledge. Systematic fieldwork, while it serves archaeological purposes aimed at inventory very well, has seldom been helpful to local historians.

I hope this dialogue has made fieldwork more accessible to local historians. If not, the much greater number of examples in the new book itself may achieve that end. Hopefully it will also encourage local historians to explore their local landscapes.

Notes

1. Aston, M., *Interpreting the Landscape – Landscape Archaeology and Local History* Batsford (1985); Brown, A., *Fieldwork for Archaeologists and Local Historians* Batsford (1987).
2. Welsh, T.C., *Eastwood District History and Heritage*, Eastwood Libraries (1989).
3. A syke is a small watercourse or ditch and hereafter 'sykes' in the text are denoted as 'burns'.
4. Welsh T.C., *The Renfrewshire Templelands* RLHF Journal Vol.3 (1992).
5. Strang, J.A. "A History of Mearns Parish" (Unpublished 1939); Scott, A.B., *Old Days and Ways in Newton Mearns*, Pickering & Inglis (1939); See also Maitland Club *Registrum Monasteri de Passelet* (1982).
6. Innes, C., "*Origines Parochiales Scotiae – The antiquities ecclesiastical and territorial of the parishes of Scotland*" Bannatyne Club (1850).