

## 4. Cowden Hall

Irene Hughson & Gordon McCrae

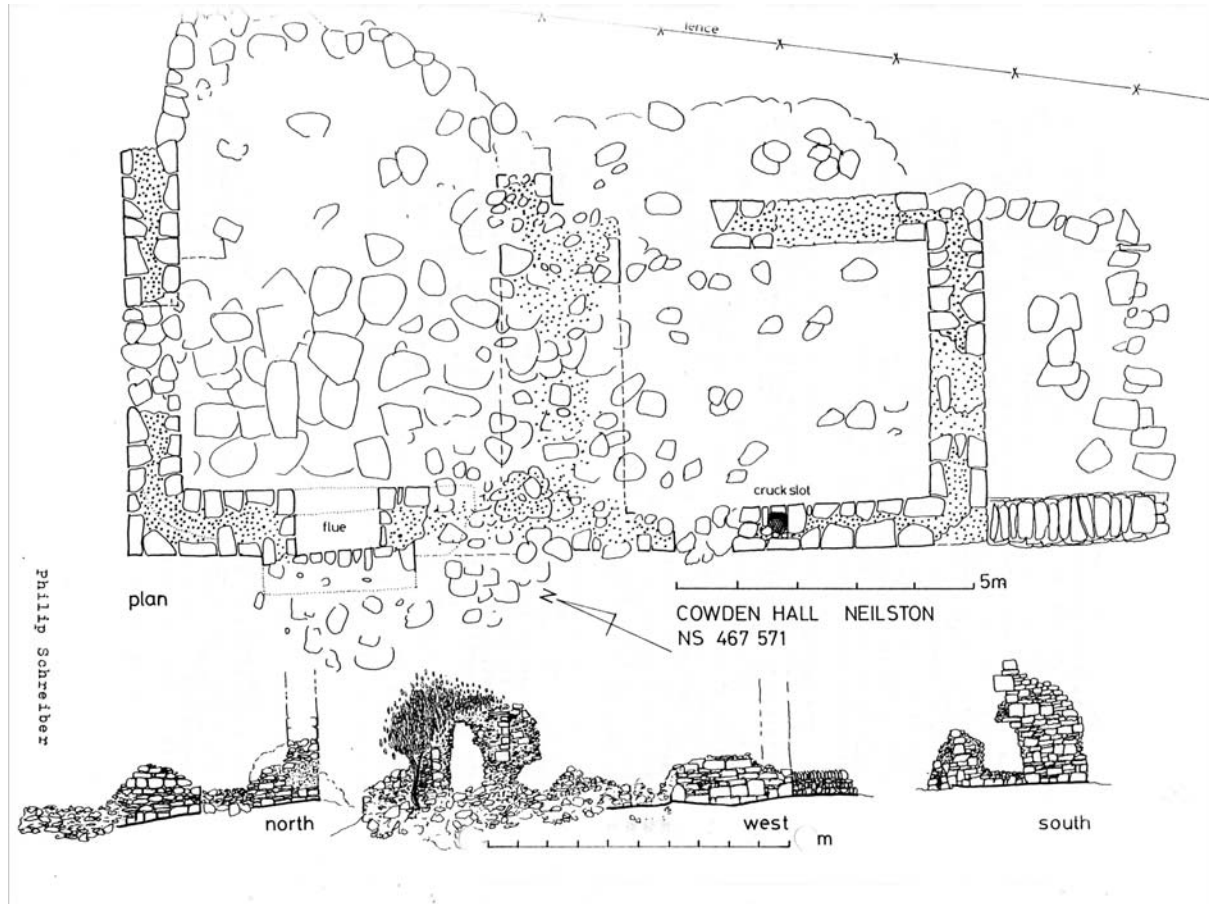
The ruins of Cowden Hall lie within the parish of Neilston in the Renfrew District of Strathclyde Region (Grid. ref. NS 467571). They are situated on level ground overlooking the Neilston Gap, a steep-sided valley with a misfit stream. Geomorphologically this valley is something of a mystery but it now contains the A736 Glasgow to Irvine road and the mainline railway from Glasgow to Kilmarnock and Dumfries. Presumably it has long been an important communication route. There is a persistent local belief, unsubstantiated as far as we are aware by any documentary or archaeological evidence, that this was the site of a 12th century castle belonging to Robert de Croc who was responsible for the building of the ringwork at Crookston. Strategically it would have been an ideal site on the western limit of de Croc's land, but it is with the ruins of a much later structure that we are now concerned.

The barony of Cowden seems to have been in the hands of the Spreulls from at least as far back as the 14th century. A Walter Spreull was Seneschal of Dumbarton and a vassal of the Earl of Lennox during Robert the Bruce's reign. In 1441 another Walter Spreull resigned Cowden in favour of his son, and from then onwards there are frequent references to the Spreull family and to Cowden in local charters (1). In 1623 the Spreulls sold Cowden to Alexander Cochrane of Dundonald. Alexander resigned it in favour of his second son William in 1634. He styled himself William Cochrane of Cowden and built a new residence in the barony. It would seem to be the remains of this building (or part of this building) that can still be seen.

William Cochrane was a wealthy and important man, closely involved in the management of Glasgow University - he founded the Dundonald bursaries in 1672 - and in public affairs. He was Sheriff depute for Renfrewshire and a Member of Parliament for Ayrshire in the 1640s. He was an active Royalist, and was raised to the peerage by Charles I. Though he was out of favour during the commonwealth, his financial affairs prospered. He inherited his father's estate and was able to make a big contribution to the fund set up to finance Charles II's return from exile. He was made a Privy Councillor in 1669 and was created Earl of Dundonald by a grateful monarch. He had already bought the Lordship of Paisley in 1653 from the exiled catholic Earl Abercorn, and the Place of Paisley was his principal residence (2).

The barony of Cowden remained in the hands of the Cochrane family. In 1725 it was claimed by the Marquis of Clydesdale in the right of his mother, a daughter of the Earl of Dundonald. It was sold in 1766 to Baron Mure of the neighbouring estate of Caldwell. Mure, a Baron of Exchequer, was another wealthy man, very influential in Scottish affairs. He was frequently in Edinburgh and London, but found time to instigate many agricultural improvements on his estates. He commissioned Robert Adam to design Caldwell House for him. In his time it is unlikely that Cowden Hall was a house of much consequence.

In 1790 part of the barony of Cowden was sold to Stewart, Orr & Company who built and operated the highly successful Crofthead Spinning Mill. A mansion called Crofthead House was built on the land belonging to the mill. Cowden Hall was probably still standing at that time and possibly being lived in by tenants of the Caldwell-Cowden estate. Crofthead House was demolished and replaced by a large mansionhouse on a different site in the 1890s. The new house was called Cowden Hall, which suggests that the original Cowden Hall was no longer in use. The 'new' Cowden Hall was demolished in the 1960s and no vestige of it remains.



'Kowden' is shown on Timothy Pont's map of the 1590s. 'Cowdenhall' is marked on Ainslie's map of the County of Renfrew of 1797. There is an engraving of 'Cowdoun Ha' Late residence of the Earl of Dundonald' in "Levern Delineated" published in 1831. The site is shown on O.S. maps.

A hurried survey of the ruins was carried out in September 1990 at the request of Neilston Community Council who at that time proposed to publish a short guide to the former policies of the 19th century Cowden Hall. These proposals were opposed by the owners of Crofthead Mill which has recently been taken over by Coats-Viyella, a company not noted in Renfrewshire for its willingness to conserve anything of value to the local people. It is feared that the mill land will be sold off to property developers, and that will probably mean the final destruction of the original Cowden Hall although it is just on the other side of the boundary fence separating the mill land from Smithyhill Farm. It is already receiving unwelcome attention from the local youth and had suffered substantially between the hurried survey carried out in September and a more detailed survey done by members of A.C.F.A. in April 1991. It can be seen from what remains that the 17th century Cowden Hall was a substantial and well built structure, in keeping with its builder's status, although the interior is full of tumble from the walls and large trees have taken root. The northern end of the west wall, where it stands about 4 metres in height is covered by ivy. The exterior and interior of the walls are faced with uncoursed stone, some of it roughly dressed, bonded with a strong mortar. There is a fire-place in the thick western wall discernable by the lintel which shows above the tumble inside. The fire-place has the form of an ingleneuk. A triangular-sectioned stone is visible still protruding from the wall. It must have capped the inward sloping wall of the ingleneuk.

The use of the name 'hall' suggests a fairly imposing building with an arrangement of accommodation similar to the oldest part of Hall of Caldwell which is about three miles to the south-west of Cowden and was built in the late 17th century, not the very modest size of building that now remains. The 1831 engraving shows a gable end of the house with a chimney at right angles to the line of the Neilston Gap, and the long axis of the building parallel to the Gap. As the long axis of what remains today is at right angles to the Gap, there is a strong case for believing that the ruins are only a part of what was there formerly. It would seem that the present boundary fence runs right through the building. It is quite likely that the part of the building on the mill side of the boundary was totally demolished when the grounds were laid out and the ornamental pond constructed in the 1890s. Although there are no visible foundations on the mill side of the fence, there is a very slightly raised rectangle with vegetation similar to that colonising the ruins.

The southern part of the upstanding ruin looks similar in construction to the northern, though the south wall which stands to a height of 3 metres appears not to be as thick as the rest. It is gable-shaped. The western wall of this part has a cruck slot visible in it. There is no sign of a corresponding cruck slot in the eastern wall which is much further reduced. It is possible that this part was either contemporary with the main structure but functioned as an outhouse, or that it was a later addition added, perhaps, when Cowden Hall was no longer a lordly residence.

Beyond the ruins on the Smithyhill side are traces of a wall entirely vegetation covered now, which runs along the edge of the steep slope broken only where a faintly discernible track comes up at an angle from the bottom of the Gap into a big rectangular enclosure or yard at the side of the Hall.

We would like to thank Mr. Fulton of Smithyhill Farm for access to the Hall, and Philip Schreiber, Ann McRory, Roseann Wilson and William Dougan of A.C.F.A.

### References

1. Register of the Great Seal: For a detailed list of references to the Spreull family of Cowden in the Register of the Great Seal and in the Lennox and Dundonald Charter Crests, reference should be made to Eilean Malden's "checklist" of Castles, Towers and Manor Places of Renfrewshire held in Paisley Museum.
2. W. N. Metcalf The Lordship of Paisley
3. The Caldwell Papers