

3. Eastwood Insolubles

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One of the problems of exploring the heritage of an area over a fixed number of years is that there is never enough time to solve more than a few of the mysteries that confront you. Some sites have obvious explanations, some can be explained within the constraints of interpretation, and a good few attract dispute because it is so difficult to achieve a detached and objective view that ensures that you see what needs to be seen. So the overall result is a mixture of successes, so-sos and less than satisfactory answers. But what keeps you going are the unresolved sites, suspicions and surmises, and mystery locations that do not yield their secrets. Though these are rather less than scientific, and more to do with hopes and hunches, they are a constant lure for further investigation. Once your term of exploration is over, whether through enforced inactivity or moving away, these become, like the fisherman's tales, the ones that got away.

In my twenty years of exploring the eastern part of Renfrewshire I amassed no small number of insolubles. My speculations crop up frequently in the pages of Eastwood District History and Heritage and as this was my last say on the matter of East Renfrewshire, these "ones that got away" continue to haunt me.

One of the earliest sites to puzzle me was the artificial mound at "Deil's Plantation" on the Humby Road between Eaglesham and Mearns. Although this is shown on Ordnance Survey maps as a tumulus, the traditional interpretation had been that it was a motte; the wood that covers it is also known as Castlehill Plantation, which perhaps gave its name to a nearby farm, so named as far back as the 16th century. Indeed a letter amongst the Eglinton family papers in the 18th century suggested it was the original castle of the Montgomeries. However, the mound is rather small for the purpose, and sits centrally on an oval knoll, allowing no space for a bailey or subsidiary buildings. For many years it was shown as a motte in a display case at Paisley Museum. The idea that it was a burial mound seems to have come about this century through confusion with the Crosslees cairn half a mile along the road. The latter having vanished, stories about its destruction for road widening in 1825 were transferred to the still obvious neighbour, and even the capstone of the cist, still in situ at Crosslees, was supposed to have been carried there from Deil's Wood. In view of the documented court hill at Meikle Dripps, a mile and a half to the north-east, the possibility that it is a moot hill is not as absurd as popular opinion on this subject would prefer, or it could have been a beacon or gibbet mound. However, as a burial mound it is quite out of character with the other barrows in the Eaglesham area.

Still in the Eaglesham area, the earliest of my own "discoveries" to produce an enigma was a mound and circular enclosure at Longwood, a mile south-west of Deil's Wood, beside the fork in the Bonnytonmoor Road (NS 544522).

This has kept my attention since 1967, although I have not visited it for ten years. It was the cause of some embarrassment when in 1974 the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments declared they could see no evidence of prehistoric remains whatsoever. Undeterred, I made repeated revisions, trying to prove my case, without success. It has to be said that two people seldom agree on what they see in front of them, partly due to particular aptitudes, partly skill, and partly previous experiences and expectations. Also I was to have many an encounter with damning verdicts in later years, some of which reflected more on the ability of the "professionals" than on myself. The Longwood site remains for me an unceasing curiosity, which I will not resign, even at the risk of further rejection. It consists of a pear shaped mound about 26 metres across, into which runs a shallow depression, such as is usually associated with a collapsed passage, in which two earthfast stone blocks with notched edges appear, as if they had supported a stone slab roof. At about 20 metres distance on north and south are traces of a ditch, beyond which are the intermittent remains of a broad, low bank.

In the vicinity of Clarkston the New Statistical Account and several other authorities describe the discovery, early last century, of thirty-six house platforms ranged round a small hill, with six more in a circle higher up. These featured small square pits, perhaps storage pits or hearths, which won them the name Overlee Weems. Quernstones, stone cists, and artifacts such as a bronze axe have been reported from the locality of the hill south-east of Clarkston station near the viaduct over the White Cart. However, no trace of the platforms has ever been found in recent times to confirm what appears to have been a major prehistoric settlement. In 1973 I thought I had managed a breakthrough with the discovery of a circular platform built partly into the foot of the slope on the banks of the Cart. It featured a square pit in the centre filled with ash and gravel, which seemed to comply with the old descriptions. Unfortunately this turned out to be an old coal mine shaft shown on a 1912 Ordnance Survey 25 inch plan, well spotted by an Eastwood High School pupil.

I put much energy into the exploration of Mearns Muir, a large upland tract in the south of the parish, between Earn Water and the Stewarton Road. It seems, from a broad surmise of references in early charters, to have been part of the Fitz Alan's forest, and until enclosure in 1799, served as Common. Whether by selection or survival as a relatively undisturbed area, the moor is rich in small earthworks and enclosures. Unfortunately most of these defy ready interpretation and there is no evidence available to distinguish the artifacts of common land management from possible prehistoric usage.

The major feature of possible antiquity is an earthwork across the south-west approach to the summit of Mearns Law, through which passes a deep hollow way. On the summit are a number of hut foundations, possibly just shielings, and a group of rectangular outlines, very faint, arranged in line, the largest 28 metres long and about 7 metres wide. There are two circular enclosures with additional defences, one at Black Craigs, NS 499522, near Crow Hill, the

other on Barrance Hill, NS 511532, where the remains are cut through by a trackway, and partly overlain by some rectangular foundations. In addition there are a number of plain circular enclosures which may have been sheepfolds. Most of my speculations here were dismissed as recent agricultural enclosures and boundaries by the Royal Commission on Monuments when they visited the moor in August 1979. However, the division of the moor into farms in the 19th century is well documented and these features do not ally with the holding boundaries or any marked enclosures or buildings.

The two recognised hillforts within the district are themselves puzzling. Dunwan Hill near Eaglesham has prominent ruined walls in a circuit around the base of the hill, although part of the circuit on south-west corresponds to a mediaeval estate boundary (Auchenhood). The purpose of these walls, especially well preserved on the north side, is perplexing, since any attacker surmounting them was faced with a much greater obstacle: steep craggy hillslopes. They might have made attackers more vulnerable at a good spear throwing angle before they got into the shelter of the hill. After Duncarnock Hill in Mearns was reprieved from quarrying I made a point of making yearly surveys of different aspects of its defences, in order to keep the monument in view of public attention. I was particularly puzzled by the apparent sequence of defences across the south-east approach and the remains on the north summit. Anyone wishing to learn more about Duncarnock, Dunwan or Mearns Moor can consult my musings on pages 14 to 20 of Eastwood District History and Heritage.

I am still searching for the missing 1157 estate of Talahret (or Talahec), one of the nine named territories in Renfrewshire given to Walter FitzAlan by David I, and confirmed by Malcolm IV when he added Inchinnan and Partick. Popular theory points to Hurlet, near Nitshill, but this is named Hulvishedhill in 1413. In the charter sequence Talahret comes between Pollok and Cathcart, and it is most likely to refer to the Barony of Eastwood, first mentioned in the mid-13th century. There is a small division of Cathcart Parish, on part of which the Cooper Institute is built, which was known as Talgartlie in the mid-15th century, and later as Taggartland or Tankerland. This, with Langside, Newlands, Bogton, Merrylee and Cochrane's Lee (Netherlee), seems to have formed a later addition to the Cathcart estates. It is possible that Talahret consisted of Eastwood and the part of Cathcart south and west of the river.

This brings me to two enigmatic sites, Lee Castle and the Druid's Temple at Cleuch. The former is a motte-like hill in a small park behind shops on Clarkston Road, between Netherlee and Stamperland. In 1984 I discovered a large quantity of pottery here, mostly dated to the 14th century, but ranging from 13th to 16th century. While I was able to establish ownership back to the 15th century, possibly as far back as 1413, I cannot account for its earlier history. It is said that when the ruins of the castle were removed to enable ploughing, many human bones were found.

The Druid's Temple is the popular name given to a small promontory on the hillside overlooking Eastwood in what is now Cathcart Castle Golf Club, formerly the farm of Cleuch. It consists of an enclosure 20 metres across containing a building about 12 by 9 metres and a smaller building beside the entrance to the enclosure. It suggests a small tower-house but the Ordnance Survey prefers a prehistoric origin. The defensive potential of the site would favour a fortified site of either period, and in plan it could equally be an iron age or dark age homestead. However, the location, within fifty metres of the Mains lands of the Barony of Eastwood, makes a mediaeval origin a distinct possibility.

There is another enigmatic castle site in the district at Langrig, NS 532548, a kilometre west-south-west of Mearnskirk church. Although a late 13th / early 14th century charter suggests the existence of an old and new vill and presumably castle of Mearns (the existing tower is mid 15th century), possible sites for both can be identified at both Aldton and Newton. The site found at Langrig in 1975 is too remote from the latter, and doesn't match the geographical information in the charter. It does not fit in with any theory I can devise. Yet there was clearly a strong fortification here. It comprises the foundations of a building 12 metres square over 2 metre walls, on a level rock platform 27 metres long and 16 metres wide, with traces of an enclosure wall. This is contained by a ditch, and there are other remains on the hill to south which might have formed a bailey or ward.

The last "insolvable" in this account may by now have disappeared, since I have not visited it for about six years, and have not been able to obtain assurances as to its survival. When the Maxwells acquired Upper Darnley about 1820 they demolished the upper storeys of an old tower house by Darnley Mill, NS 529595, to provide building stone for their new house. In Taylor's "The Lavern Delineated", the cottage reconstituted from the old tower could still be recognised as the stair tower at one angle had been converted into a dovecote. Although on my last visit the cottage was much modernised, the dovecote cum stair tower was still there. Was this really the castle of the last of an old line, Ludovick Stewart of Darnley, who was ruined by debt in 1679?