

3. Johnstone Castle

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As our contribution to the 1997 *DOORS OPEN DAY* the Archaeological Section of the Forum was asked to put on a demonstration dig at Johnstone Castle over a weekend in September - real Time Team stuff!

Looking at the background history we ran up against the first problem. What was the real Johnstone Castle? Timothy Pont's map of 1595 shows Johnstone (*Ihonftoun*) Castle to be sited on the other side of the Black Cart Water, near Kilbarchan. This "house and lands of Johnston" have interesting links to another subject explored by the Forum in the past year. Crawford attributes some considerable age to this site as "An ancient family, of the surname of Wallace, did possess these lands for several ages". The lands were acquired by the Houston family in the reign of Charles II and in 1733 George Houston (or Houstoun) sold the house and lands to Major James Milliken. He demolished the house and built a modern mansion called Milliken House as the Houstons had retained the title of Johnston.

So on to Johnstone Castle No.2. At Easter Cochrane the Houstons occupied the Tower House which they renamed Johnstone Castle. This was the situation in 1796 when John Ainslie's map was published. This Tower House was not the Cochrane Castle later to give its name to the housing estate. That building, in Auchengreoch Road, was already a ruin by the early 18th century. A later George Houston erected a small tower on that site in 1896, building in a plaque with the Cochran arms and the date 1592 although Cochran's holding of the land goes back much further, certainly to the mid 15th Century and possibly the 14th Century.



However, let's return to Johnstone Castle. The Houstons prospered from local mines and mills, allowing them to "improve" and enlarge the Castle from the rather spartan tower. The result was the substantial 19th century mansion house, recognised by everyone from the photograph in the present day Johnstone Town Hall. Its main claim to fame was a visit in September 1848 by Frederick Chopin, fleeing the revolution in Paris. In its turn this building was demolished about 40 years ago to leave the remains of the Tower House with some of the Houston's "Gothic" style additions still attached.

Looking at the remaining structure the basic late medieval Scottish Lairds' Tower

House can be identified. From the outside there is a three storey, L-shaped tower with an entrance in the re-entrant angle of the NE corner. At roof height there are crow stepped gables and a garret. Above the entrance some corbelling remains and on the east gable is an angle turret which may have been a later addition. Projecting from the west wall are the remains of part of the Mansion house with the rolled stone-work of the sides of "Gothic" arched windows clearly discernable.

For the "demonstration" excavations, two trenches were cut out. Trench A on the north side of the Tower was where we expected to find the remains of the 19th century foundations. Trench B, on the south side, was more speculative. Here we hoped to find some earlier remains.

TRENCH A

In line with the stub of the wall showing the remnants of the arched windows opened trench _m by _m, from the wall. Here we expected to cross the corner of the foundations. After carefully deturfing, setting the turf aside so that it could easily be replaced, about 15cm of topsoil, which included a variety of spring bulbs, was also carefully removed.

The next layer was clearly a mixture of subsoil and rubble from the 1950s demolition. From this rather unstratified layer some 35 "finds" were recovered. These are listed in the appendix. Most were items to be expected in a "modern" demolition zone. The glass, thick by present day standards was likely from the 19th century windows and the pieces of pottery were also typical of that period. A marble with a red flash through it, of the type most of us could remember playing with as children was also found.

Removal of this infill eventually revealed the foundation layer we were looking for. This consisted of stone more roughly dressed than that of the house walls above ground level.

TRENCH B

Meanwhile over on the south side, some more speculative digging was going on. We really did not know what we might find, but hopes were high that given the alignment of the remains of the Tower House, we would uncover some related early structures. Immediately on deturfing the area marked out for Trench B we hit a substantial concrete slab which looked about all of 50 years old. In true Time Team style we discussed the implications of this discovery and decided to returf the area and extend the trench _m further to the east.

As in Trench A, under the turf and topsoil, lay a mixture of subsoil and rubble from the 1950s demolition. A total of 47 "finds" were recovered and again these are listed in the appendix. Again building materials from the 19th Century structure predominated. Pieces of glass of a uniform thickness varying in colour from a greenish hue through yellowish to clear, appears to be window glazing. Roofing material included pieces of slate containing the remains of nail heads. In post excavation examination of the material found, what was originally thought to be pieces of coarse pottery turned out to be heavy plaster or rendering from the walls of the demolished building.

Evidence of children was also uncovered in this trench when two small green bricks of a ceramic material were found. It was among the small collection of ceramic material that the most exciting find of the day appeared - a sherd of grey pottery, with a pitted green glaze only on the outside of the pot. This type of pottery was found in abundance in the Paisley Abbey drain a few years ago. It is possible therefore that here we have a little evidence of occupation of the site in the early post medieval period (15th-16th century). We do need a health warning here though - the find was in an unstratified layer and could have been brought to the site a long time after its manufacture.

Once all this infill had been removed some very crudely dressed stone was revealed. Unfortunately time ran out for the team and we could not investigate further. The stonework was so crudely fashioned that it was not possible to tell at the time whether it was structural or bedrock. Even as the latter, however, this stone may have been the foundations of an earlier building. Further excavation will be required to test this theory but even with the "health warning" noted above, the presence of the sherd of post-medieval pottery is a hopeful indication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A full report of the excavation, with the drawings and plans will be published as a short Occasional Paper.

Bruce Henry, Neilston
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References

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