

Looking for Tarbert Peel; an archaeological Investigation of a small structure near West Loch Tarbert Argyll.



Roddy Regan

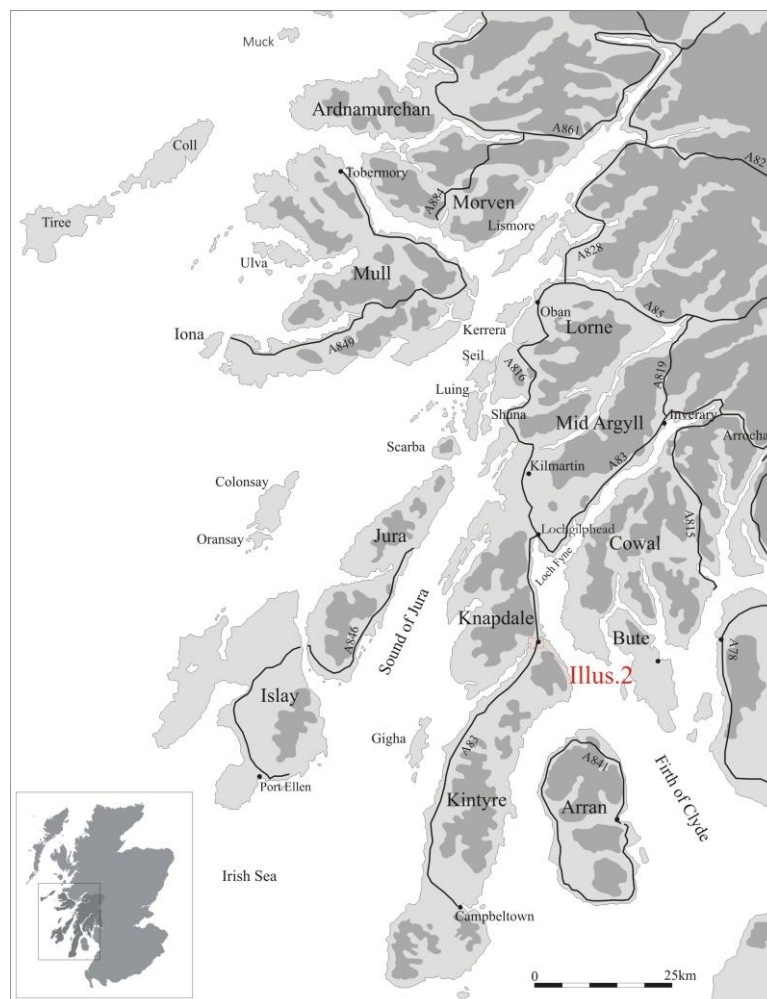


Introduction

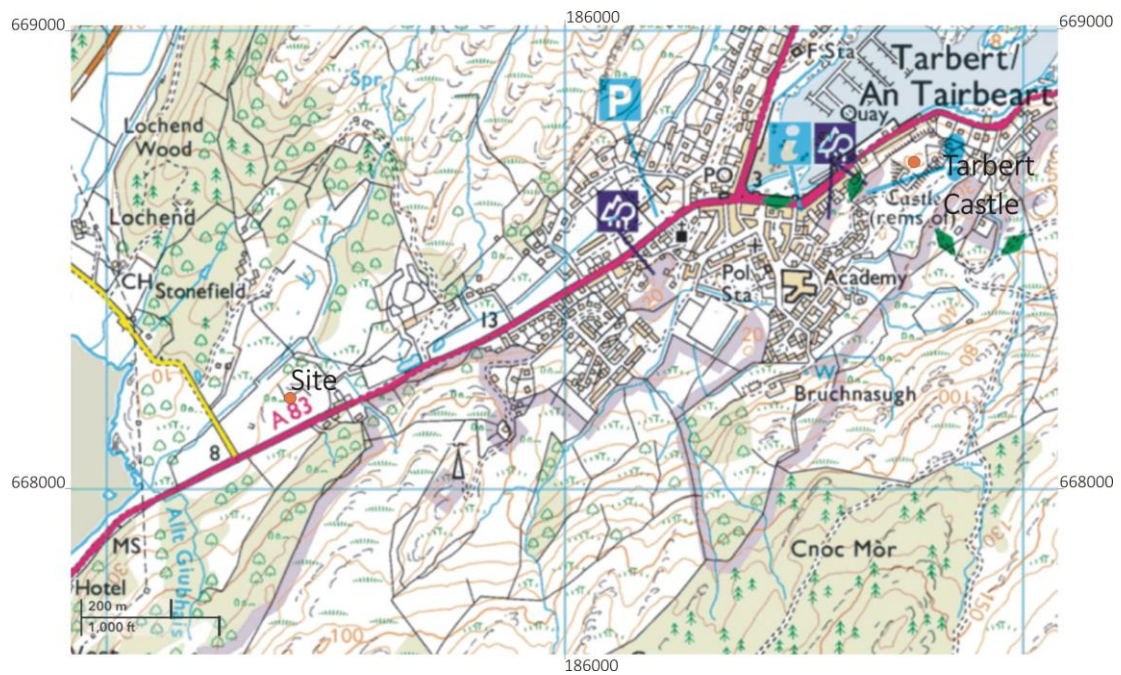
One of the most important documents we have from the medieval Argyll are the accounts of John de Lany the constable of Tarbert Castle submitted to the Royal exchequer of Robert I in 1326. Amongst the many items listed as expenses is for the building of a new peel at West Tarbert. In 2021 a small group of volunteers from the Tarbert Castle Trust (TCT) with the kind permission of the current landowner investigated a stone-built structure with the view to trying to establish whether this was connected to or could be identified as the peel structure.

Site Location

The site is located on a southwest/northeast oriented rocky outcrop in a field located between the just east of the junction of A83 and B8204 roads lying to southwest lying to southwest of the village of Tarbert and northeast of the head of West Loch Tarbert in parish of Kilcalmonell, Argyll (centered NGR NR 85382 68168). The site is located on the northeast end of a prominent ridge where the remains of a small stone structure that was the target of the present investigation. The structure would appear to be the same one identified in previous reports (see below).



Illus1: Tarbert location in Argyll



Illus 2: Tarbert and Site Location



Illus 3: Site Location



Illus 4: Site location between East Loch Tarbert and West Loch Tarbert

Archaeological and Historical Background

The strategic position of Tarbert (Gaelic; *Tairbeart*) is reflected in its placename which is a toponym meaning portage a name often given to places, usually isthmuses, where boats could be transported between two bodies of water. In this case the c1.5km of land between the east end of East Loch Tarbert, linking to Loch Fyne, and the northwest end of West Loch Tarbert, the latter a narrow fjord-like loch some 14 km long that connects with the sound of Jura.

The Tarbert isthmus appears under another name in the *Orkenyinga saga* relating to the expedition by King Magnús Óláfsson (Magnus Barelegs) of Norway during his invasion of the Hebrides and Kintyre in 1098. The story of Magnús is regarded by some scholars as suspect given that the account dates to the 13th century when tensions between the Scottish and Norse crowns over the Hebrides was at its height and the Scottish king referred to in the account was Malcolm and not Edgar as it should have been at this time. Despite this, the existence of several accounts of Magnus's expedition suggests that even if the tale of Magnus drawing his boat over the isthmus is apocryphal his expedition to the *Sudreyar* did take place with Magnus later making peace with King Malcolm, this later known as the 'Treaty of Tarbert' (Anderson 1922: 113; Woolf 2004: 101). The sagas use the word *eið* (*Satirismula eið*) to describe the Tarbert isthmus, a word that has been noted elsewhere in medieval Norway to also delineate portages. It has also been argued that these portages were considered as part of the navigable sea and not part of the land, which might make sense of Magnus's claim that Kintyre was an indeed an island (McCullough 2000: 23).

We know that in 1315 Robert I (1306-1329) was at Tarbert where he received a charter resignation from John of Glassary at Tarbert next to Loch Fyne (*apud Tarbart' iuxta Louchfyne*). This historical mention gives some credence to Barbour's story in *'The Bruce'* where the Scottish king had his boats drawn across the Tarbert isthmus repeating the feat of Magnús Óláfsson (Duncan 2007; 566-567).

Extract from Barbour's '*The Bruce*'

Bot to King Robert will we gang
That we heff left unspokyn of lang.
Quhen he convoyit to the se
His broder Edward and his menye
With schippes he maid him yar
Intill the Ilis for till fare
Walter Steward with him tuk he
His mawch, and with him gret menyhe
And other men off gret noblay.
To Tarbart thai held thar way
In galayis ordanit for thar far,
Bot thaim worthy draw thar schippes thar,
And a myle wes betwix the seys
Bot that wes lownyt all with treis.
The kyng his schippis thar gert draw,
And for the wynd couth stoutly blaw
Apon thar bak as thai wald ga
He gert men rapys and mastis ta
And set thaim in the schippis hey
And sayllis to the toppis tey
And gert men gang tharby drawand,
The wynd thaim helpyt that wes blawand
Sua that in a litill space
Thar flot all weill our-drawin was.
And quhen thai that in the Ilis war
Hard how the gud kyng had thar
Gert schippis with the saillis ga
Out-our betwix the Tarbartis twa
Thai war abaysit sa uterly
For thai wyst throu auld prophecy
That he that suld ger schippis sua
Betwix the seys with saillis ga
Suld wyne the Ilis sua till hand
That nane with strenth suld him withstand.

As mentioned above the presence of a possible 'peel' or tower at the head of Loch Tarbert is suggested by an entry of the list of expenses presented to the Scottish Exchequer by John De Lany Constable of Tarbert Castle and dating to 1326 (Stuart & Burnett 1878, 50-55).

*Et Johanni cementario, per duas indenturas, pro fabrica dicti Castri, xxviiij li. viij s. viij d.
Et eidem, in parte solucionis pro Construccioone unius Pele nove apud Tarbart occidentali iiij li.*

Translation

And John the mason, for two indentures, building the said castle, £28, 7s. 8d.
And also, as part payment for building a new '*pele*' at Wester Tarbart, £4.

Another entry within the accounts indicate that a road was also constructed between East and West Loch Tarbert.

Et in soluciones facta dicto Willelmo Scot, in partem solutionis viginti marcarum conuencionatarum secum ad tascam, pro itinere faciendo ab uno Tarbert usque ad alium, per dominum Regem, per duas litteras de recepto ipsius Willelmi, viij li.

Translation

And in the payment made to the said William Scot, as part of the payment of the agreed twenty marks kept in safety, for making a road from one Tarbert to the other, for the Lord King, by two letters of receipt of the said William, £8.

Et in dimida celdra farine epmta et liberata dicto Willelmo Scot, causa curialitatis, ex precepto Domini Regis pro dicto itinere faciendo, xvj s.

Translation

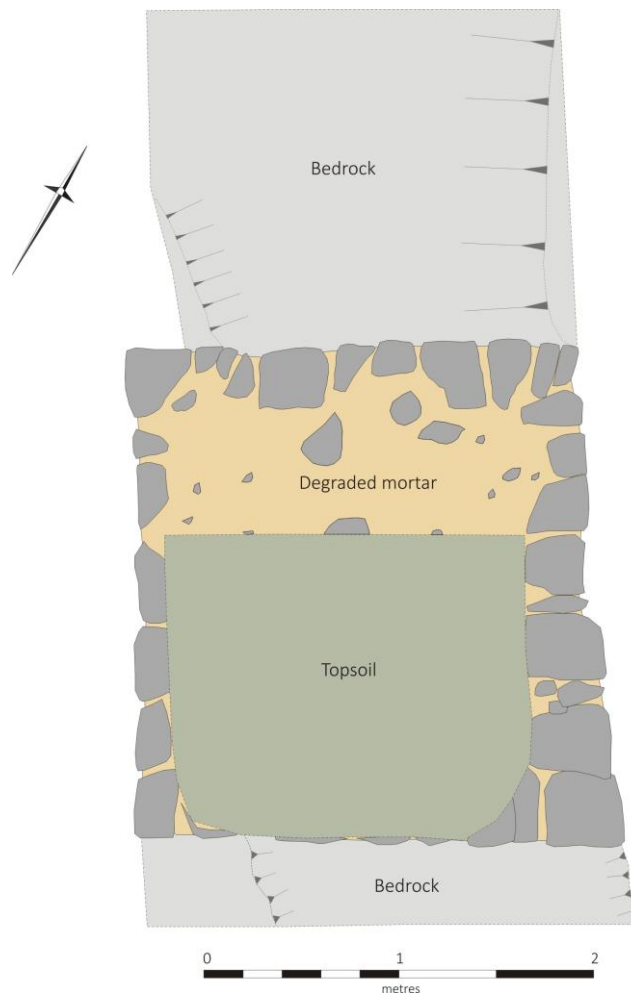
And half a chalder of meal bought and delivered to the said Willliam Scot, under the jurisdiction, by order of the Lord King for the said road 16s.

Apart from the 1326 exchequer roll Tarbert and its castle continue to appear regularly in the exchequer rolls between 1327-1329 with one appearance in 1330 (Stuart & Burnett 1878: 52-58, 69, 118, 127, 135, 136, 153, 175, 184, 187-189, 191, 196, 201, 207, 213, 223, 237, 239, 287).

The practice of hauling large boats across the Tarbert isthmus appears to have continued into the 18th century when Thomas Pennant in 1772 in his *A Tour in Scotland* states that:- 'It is not very long since vessels of nine or ten tons were drawn by horses out of the west loch into that of the east, to avoid the dangers of the Mull of Cantyre, so dreaded and so little known was the navigation round that promontory. It is the opinion of many that these little isthmuses, so frequently styled 'Tarbat' took their name from the above circumstances; *tarruing*, signifying 'to draw', and *bata* 'a boat' (Pennant 2019; 159). Boats of up to ten tons were relatively small sailing vessels.

An article in the '*Kist*' in 1987 identified some building footings on a rocky knoll at the head of West Loch Tarbert which postulated that these may be the remains of the peel, although neither their exact location nor a description of the remains was provided (Ferguson and MacKenna 1987; NRHE ID (Formerly Canmore ID) 39328).

In the early 1990's a local landowner reported the location of six large oak timbers in a boggy field in the low-lying land between East and West Loch Tarbert (Carnbaan timber track, NRHE ID 98865). The timbers and the site were later investigated by AOC (Scotland) who reported on the results. One timber remained in situ, some 55cm below the present ground surface, while a discrete area of large boulders and stones. It was conjectured that these stones might be a surface relating to the use of the foundations of a small rectangular building on a nearby rocky outcrop. Despite taking samples no date was obtained for the timbers (Crone 1994).



Illus 5: Plan of the Structure

Site Description

Located on the northeast end of a prominent ridge were the remains of a drystone structure that are the subject of this report. The vegetation, consisting of bracken and grass scrub and the overlying topsoil cover, was removed from the area immediately around this structure and partially removed from its upper extent. This revealed a rectangular stone and mortar structure built directly onto bedrock and was constructed over and between a dip in the rock ridge. The structure measured 2.6m by 2.5m and stood up to 0.9m high on its southeast side and here constructed in 4 to 5 rough rubble-built courses. The outer edge of the structure was constructed of larger schist and limestone blocks, likely locally sourced, with a maximum size of 0.45m by 0.4m by 0.3m. These edge stones retained an internal core of a mixture of smaller rubble and light brown coarse sandy material, the latter suggesting this was a degraded mortar, although no surviving hard or compact mortar was noted between and around the stones.



Illus 6: Structure from the west



Illus 7: Structure from the northeast



Illus 8: Structure from the southeast



Illus 9: Structure from the northwest



Illus 10: Structure from above

Conclusion

The construction of the peel appears to have been the responsibility of John the mason who is mentioned in the exchequer roll entry that immediately proceeds the entry for the £4 towards the building of the peel. This shows that John the mason was also responsible for building the walls of Tarbert Castle. If the part payment for the peel was indeed made to John, then it should be assumed that some form of masonry structure was involved. However, even if this is the case, the peel entry is for a part payment which means we have no way of knowing the full cost of the peel structure which we might be able to compare it against the cost of other buildings at Tarbert Castle, perhaps given us some indication as to its size. We also cannot be entirely confident what the exchequer account entry meant by the term '*pele*'. Neilson has shown that earlier Scottish '*peels*' dating to the very late 13th century and early 14th century, and often constructed by the English, were essentially wooden structures or palisades sometimes with associated ditches, the word later becoming attached to stone tower-houses from the 15th century (Neilson 1894).

The structure uncovered by this project was undoubtedly a masonry platform of some kind, but its nature remains elusive. Being constructed over a dip in the surrounding natural bedrock the stonework effectively leveled the space between this natural dip to the height of the surrounding bedrock at the west and east and its purpose could be interpreted as providing a wider level area along the top of the ridge. The width of the structure is very similar to the width of the wall of the outer bailey at Tarbert Castle, although admittedly this could just be a coincidence. The site itself would have been visible from the walls of Tarbert Castle and affords a good view of the head of West Loch Tarbert. It is also possible other less obvious and related structural features lie within the vicinity, but none are readily apparent. In isolation this structure would be hard to interpret as being part of any peel structure as mentioned in the exchequer roll entry. However, as we do not know the exact nature or size the peel and have not fully investigated the surrounding area it would be equally unwise to entirely dismiss this platform structure as having nothing to do with any peel structure given the fact that Adam the mason appears to have been responsible in part for the peels construction suggesting the building of some form of masonry structure.

The builder of the road between the two Lochs, William Scot, appears in other exchequer rolls entries being responsible for digging a ditch and construction a mill-pond and lade, as well as constructing a park boundary. His speciality would appear to be works involving excavation/soil movement and possibly timber construction. The remains of what may be part of a 'timber trackway' was found close to site in the 1990's. While the timbers might represent part of a haulage trackway without a firm date and given that this portage was still being used in the 18th century equating this with any medieval activity must be treated with similar caution.

At present neither the platform we investigated nor the road between the two lochs have been positively identified and may still await discovery. However, the construction of the Castle the road and the peel were undoubtedly part of an overall scheme by Robert I to control the route over the Tarbert Isthmus. Part of this scheme might be the construction of another building also mentioned in the 1326 exchequer roll.

In faccione unius domus de novo in Insula cum cooptura pro eadam, et pro capella, x s. iiij d.

Translation

For building of a new house on the Island with a roof for it, and for a chapel, 10s. 4d.

It is perhaps not a stretch of the imagination to equate the entry of the exchequer roll with a building identified on Eilean Da Ghallagain at the head of West Loch Tarbert (NRHE ID 39336). In May 1455 John, Lord of the Isles is found on '*Cleandaghallagan in Knapadal*' granting a charter to Paisley Abbey, (Munro and Munro 1986, 86). The signing of the charter presumably took place within some form of building on the island and the RCHAMS has recorded a building with '*unexpectedly substantial*' footings not typical of later agricultural buildings and has suggested the building may have been used in connection with nearby anchorages. As such, the above-mentioned buildings and features that appear to be part of Robert I's overall scheme to control access to his western seaboard still await to be positively identified.

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