

## HISTORICAL RESEARCH OF DEUCHNY HILLFORT

by Steve Ponsonby

Our recent visit to Deuchny Wood's Hill Fort site, as volunteers for a ground survey, raised all the usual questions about Perthshire Hill Forts. How old are they, who owned and lived in them, how long were they occupied, were they for defensive use only, did the animals live on site with the occupants, how do they relate to the other Perthshire Hill Forts? The list of questions seems to be endless.

First port of call for most volunteers, looking for information on their proposed site, is usually the RCAHMS website and its Canmore search facility. In the case of Deuchny a search for the place name produced 3 interesting results. Firstly for a fort, secondly for a flint Spearhead and a thirdly for a possible cairn.

The archaeological notes for the site of this "unnamed" hill, suggest it was once known as Grassy Law or the Seven Airts. It had been visited in 1922 by RRB Watson who had recorded a number of finds during his visits. Also mentioned was a reference by Perthshire's own Dr Margaret Stewart from 1953, quoting a 15<sup>th</sup> Century Manuscript held in our local Sandeman Library, alongside Dr Stewart's own bequeathed and extensive archive. This was acknowledged, with a reference to a published paper on Mr Watson's survey in the "Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland", in 1924.

This prompted a visit to the Local History section of the AK Bell Library in Perth. Amazingly I discovered there, not only a copy of the book containing Mr Watson's paper in the archives, but a copy of the 1403 document from Cupar Angus Abbey, referred to by Margaret Stewart.

Mr Watson's paper tells us, that in the records of the Kinfauns Estate, not only is the hill recorded as Grassy Law but that the Earl of Moray remembers it being known as "The Seven Airts", alleging that from its summit seven counties could be seen. It also claimed that it offered extensive views as far ranging as the Bell Rock, the lighthouse 12 miles off Arbroath in the east, and as far as the area around Tyndrum in the west.

This would explain why at the end of the First World War the site was chosen for the 1918 "Peace Celebration Bonfire". It was in fact this bonfire and its after effects, whose burnt remains are still visible to this day, which brought to the surface a small hammer stone. This hammer stone was taken to Perth Museum, where it remains today. This object, reawakened Mr Watson's interest, and his subsequent examination of the site produced a total of 9 extra finds, including a Jet fragment thought to be from a bracelet. Sadly, these 9 objects have since been lost.

However, as an accompaniment to Mr Watson's visit, Mr Thomas McLaren the Perth Burgh Surveyor drew up a plan of the Fort, marking in detail where each of the 9 objects were discovered. Given that no archaeology was recorded in context, and of course Radio Carbon Dating was decades away, we still have no idea of the age of any of the finds.

Dr Margaret Stewart's archives, from a visit in 1953, didn't really add much to the 1922 visit. She stated that many of the features referred to by Mr Watson, were obscured by dense forestry. Her own reference from this visit, mentioned the 1403 place name she attributed to the hill. Amazingly, on a somewhat forlorn request, the archive in the AK Bell library was able to produce a copy of a transcription of the original handwritten document. This was first published in the "Charters of the Abbey of Coupar Angus" in 1403.

The title of the piece was "Perambulatio Inter Cragtovne et Kynfavns", my own grasp of latin being reduced to "amo, amas, amat". My deduction was that the title translation was a Walk (perambulation, where the modern word pram, comes from) between Cragtovne and Kynfavns. Little did I think in my excitement, that when the transcription was produced that the entire contents would be in Latin.

Undeterred, a photocopy of the document was available to purchase and take away, with some trepidation I sat down in front of the trusty PC and Googled "Latin Translation". Some 3 hours later, I was dutifully rewarded with some amazing facts, both personal and geographical about what was in fact a "walk from Scone to Kinfauns".

The names of the participants were instantly recognisable as containing some of the highest ranking nobles of the time, and of the area. None other than the then King Robert III's brother, Walter Steward, Earl of Atholl, Caithness and Strathearn and grandson of Robert the Bruce. Almost all of the others were local landowners in and around Perth, who's names and lands still resonate in today's Perthshire, including David de Lyndsey, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl Craufurd, credited with organising the Battle of the Clans on Perth's North Inch in 1396.

The context of the walk (and I'm sure they didn't actually walk at all ) took the participants from Scone, no less, (probably the then Palace, given the presence of the King's brother) via Deuchny Hill to Kinfauns. Why was such a walk undertaken at all and why were so many dignitaries of the day present. I think the clue was in it's name of the "Seven Airts", mentioned by the landowner, the Earl of Moray.

A subsequent discussion, with one of the archaeologists on the day of the recent survey, brought about his hypothesis that he had heard of other such "walks" taking place in other parts of Scotland. When landowners in the presence of their benefactors (in this case the King's brother, and Earl of Atholl) could view from some lofty vantage point, Deuchny of the 7 counties, and confirm their status as landowners to this particular area or that.

The fact that such an occasion warranted recording way back in 1403 by the Abbey at Cupar Angus, with the multitude of named landowning participants, might just explain why it was recorded as such. It could have been the way of recording "Rights of Tenure" at that time.

For those looking for their own explanation, you could do worse than visiting Perth's AK Bell Library, where the Local History departments staff will be only too willing to advise and help with your search.

*Research and summary conducted by Steve Ponsonby, who volunteers on several heritage projects with TayLP and PKHT. Many thanks to him from all Trust staff.*