Excavations and consolidation works at Covington Tower and Doocot, South Lanarkshire.

by Tam Ward 2018.
Excavations and consolidation works at Covington Tower and Doocot, South Lanarkshire.

Tam Ward 2018.

Abstract

Limited excavation was undertaken at Covington Tower and Doocot in 1982 in advance of proposed consolidation works on the site to make it safe as a visitor attraction. The restoration scheme as envisaged was never completed. A few archaeological details of the site were however revealed.

Introduction

Covington Tower and doocot represent the best sites of their types in the Upper reaches of the River Clyde in South Lanarkshire. The site is located at NS 975 400 and lies immediately on the west side of an unclassified road between the villages of Thankerton and Carstairs Junction. The adjacent monuments are immediately south of Covington Mains Farm (Fig’s 1 & 2).

The site was in the process of being handed into the care of the Biggar Museum Trust as part of a greater initiative by the museum to embrace the then Upper Clydesdale District into a heritage scheme, this would include creating a series of district wide visitor attractions surrounding the town of Biggar where several museums were being created and other venues being planned. In the event the plan for the outlying heritage sites came to nothing for a variety of reasons, however the BMT eventually operated eight heritage venues which were open to the public. Sadly, and for economic and administrative purposes the BMT now currently operate only two museums in the town of Biggar.

Both the tower and the doocot were extremely dangerous buildings with loose and overhanging masonry and each were filled with rubbish
and rubble to a depth of 1m. Permission was given by the then owner to carry out works in the first instance to remove any dangerous building stones and also trees growing from the ruins. The entrances to both tower and doocote were fenced off to prevent farm animals having access; in the case of the doocot, cattle were mauling the nesting boxes by rubbing against them and causing them to collapse.

The internal areas of both buildings were cleared of rubbish and rubble down to the floor surfaces and in the case of the tower precariously hanging boulders were removed from wall heads and other elevated areas of the building, thus ensuring a greater degree of safety for visitors to the sites which are easily accessible to the public at large. When the buildings had been made safer a decision was taken to excavate the floor surfaces of each and also at limited external areas of the tower.

Pl’s 1 & 2. Tower and doocot
Pl's 3 & 4. Doocot entrance and collapsing next boxes.


Excavation
The work was recorded on colour 35mm slide photography which has since been converted to digital images.

Tower Floor
After clearing the internal area of the tower of over 1m depth of rubble, the entire floor surface of 47 square metres was excavated. There was no formal laid floor surface apart from a mixture of lime and soil which presumably was laid as an earth floor; the surface area below this was the natural till, however a series of cut features were revealed.

Along the southern wall and in the NW internal corner there were gullies which are assumed to have been the foundation trenches for the building, the internal wall faces of which were vertical to their base, having no projecting plinth stones.

A series of pits of varying size and shape and an amorphous shaped gully which ran nearly the full distance from N to S and on the western side about 1.8m from the western wall, had been cut. Some of the circular shaped pits are most likely to have been post holes and these are included in the long gully on the west side, the pits varied in size from 0.1m to almost 1m in diameter, the largest centrally place pit may have been used for a storage purpose rather than a structural one, they varied in depth up to 0.3m.

In the NE corner two elongate slots lying at right angles and forming a square area in the corner may have been for a partition for a box like structure.

The most obvious feature was the long gully which appears to have been modified over time and which included what may have been
sleeper logs and also posts forming a partition structure which would have been fixed to the entresol above and which formed a timber floored mezzanine below the vaulted basement. The projecting ledges along both north and south walls are evident for this floor.

Finds of green glaze sherds, glazed floor tiles fragments, some tin plated dress makers pins and assorted but badly corroded iron items were located over the floor and in the features which appear to have been disturbed, judging by the fills which included rubble. A sandstone ball weighing 1lb was found lying in the gully in the NW corner.

Covington Tower
Excavations based on plan
by RCAHMS

Fig 3. Excavation plan.

Fig 4. Section of outside trench.
Pit prison and small chamber
A small pit prison containing a tiny slit window and a garderobe seat is built into the SW corner of the tower and is accessed via a former trap door at first floor level, and at the corner of the great hall. The chamber was almost entirely filled with pigeon guano and this was removed, the only find being an 18th century clay pipe bowl.

Similarly, in the NE corner of the tower but at the level above the great hall an entire chamber exists within the wall thickness there, this may have been a wardrobe type room as the surviving wall plaster showed the matrix of a wooden batten fixed to the wall and which may have accommodated hooks for clothing. The chamber was similarly filled with pigeon guano and this was removed but nothing was found.

External excavation
Outside the NE corner of the tower an area of c30 square metres were excavated (Figs 4 and 5) since a building appeared on that spot in old photographs of the tower. The trench revealed that part of the area had been rudely paved with unconsolidated cobble stones of fist size and for the most part laid on the natural till and over an area of disturbed ground. The ground must therefore have been scraped down before the stones were laid and since they overlay Victorian rubbish in disturbed ground at a lower level and which also contained earlier pottery, glass and mortar, and more recent coal and bone, the cobbles are interpreted as being late in sequence. The original ground surface
had sloped down gently to the north and away from the tower but this had been levelled in recent times with building rubble.

No trace of the building in the photograph was found.

**Garderobe pit**

On the west side of the tower a garderobe shoot discharged at the wall base. An area of 3m by 2.25m was opened and this revealed a pit cut into the till and which was about 1.5 by 1m in area by c0.5m deep, it had a shallower gully leading away toward the moat and which presumably was for liquid run off.

Also revealed in the trench were large projecting plinth stones which formed the wall foundations.

Throughout the lower fill of the pit which was a black fine soil there was a quantity of window glass, some of which was shaped and which also showed the traces of being from a leaded window. The shapes included diamond and quarter round and they obviously came from the great hall window immediately above. Some bone was also found in the pit fill.

![Pl 7. Garderobe cess pit.](image1)

![Pl's 8 & 9. Glass from garderobe cess pit.](image2)

**Doocot**

The floor of the doocot was excavated down to natural till and revealed only a single feature; the central post hole for a potence. The potence was a revolving ladder from which to access the bird’s nests
and a hypothetical reconstruction is given in Fig 6. No finds of archaeological significance were made.

Finds
The sparse collection of finds was unstratified excepting for the glass recovered from the garderobe pit. It seems that the tower basement had been effectively cleared, perhaps during the demolition process, leaving only a small assemblage of objects on the floor.
Consolidation works.

Tower
Scaffold was erected to the full height of the internal walls, giving safe access to them to remove precarious stones and rubble and also to removed trees and shrubs growing at various places. The turf of the wall heads was left undisturbed. Guano was removed from the pit prison and corner chambers at high levels. Random boulders which had fallen to the ground around the tower were also removed. No re building works were undertaken. This work was done prior to excavations.

Doocot
The internal floor was cleared of rubbish and rubble and the next boxes were cleared of rubble and lime, previous repair work had been carried
out on the upper nesting boxes replacing sandstone slabs and blocks with bricks, judging from the unmarked bricks this may have been done in the 19th century. Much of this work was again in a state of disrepair and some of it was taken down for safety. Pole scaffolding was erected and some of this was positioned to take the weight off original but collapsing nesting boxes. The internal door lintel was found and reerected and some nest boxes were repaired with available original sandstone.

The external roof surface was cleared of trees, soil and vegetation to reveal construction details using fan shaped slabs of sandstone laid as a two-tier roundel, the slabs were lifted clearing all root systems and soil away and were re bedded in mortar.

The intention was to replace missing sections of external rat course and nesting boxes but this was not achieved on the grounds of cost, because expensive replacement stone was specified by Historic Scotland, since both the tower and doocot are Scheduled Ancient Monuments.


Fig 7. Lithograph of 1864, in Upperward of Lanarkshire.
History
Covington Parish was joined to that of neighbouring Thankerton and both places can trace their histories back to the time of David I from which time the name Villa Colbani changed through a succession of titles to the present Covington (Colban’s town or villa). It may be that the original fortalice was a moated manor house since the unusual moat (now almost completely filled in) and which squarely enclosed the tower is typical of such sites. However, nothing suggestive of such an early site was discovered within the present tower. Certainly, the tower dates to the early part of the 15th century and may be seen to be generally built as a pre-artillery castle, relying on hugely thick (3.25m) walls with their ground level embrasures, most likely designed for use with bows and arrows.

It would appear from the well researched history of the site (Irving & Murray 1864) that one Colbanus was the founder of the Parish under the reign of David I. However, the builder of the present castle was probably a Lindsay who took over from the Keith family in the early part of the 15th century, the Lindsay’s continued in possession until the late 17th century.

There is no record of any warlike activity at the castle and its present state of demise appears to be the result of abandonment, and then the quarrying of the site for stone to build elsewhere, a fate which has befallen far too many of Scotland’s ancient strongholds.

Conclusion/discussion
The work which was undertaken certainly made the place a safer place to visit, given the nature of loose rocks etc and the fact that access was unrestricted; an accident seemed inevitable before that work. Unfortunately, transference of the property by the owner to Biggar Museum did not happen on the advice of the owner’s legal advisers, and because funds could not easily be raised to have replica stone work made, the initiative to repair the doocot was abandoned. The pole scaffold which upheld the nesting boxes was left in place hopefully remaining until some other scheme may be devised to carry out the remedial work necessary to prevent serious collapse internally.

The archaeological work established a few points of interest regarding the tower and its occupation. The glazed floor tiles were probably part of the original 15th C great hall floor and the window glass indicates a patterned leaded window above the latrine pit, perhaps dating to the 17th century. The relatively small collection of mostly green glaze pottery probably represents much of the occupation period of the castle. The stone ball is either a cannon or more likely a ballista ball and may belong to the earlier part of the site's history.

It would have been desirable to investigate the moat at several places to determine its true nature and extent, however, at the time of the above work it was being systematically infilled by the farmer who even
pushed in the spoil heaps and rubble removed by the excavator (against his wishes!).

The moat (Pl 16) is assumed to have encompassed the tower in a square plan and may have been an earlier defence system for a moated manor house pre-dating the stone tower, it is likely that evidence for its crossing will exist and because it is a waterlogged feature, good organic preservation is likely. The moat would have been supplied with water from a spring uphill and it seems that the SW corner has been deliberately breached to empty it, it is therefore most likely to have been a water filled moat when in use.

Sadly, the site [2018] has now deteriorated once more with trees and shrubbery growing from the walls of both buildings, entrance fences now gone and the site once again uncared for. It really is a sad indictment of our national heritage in built and buried form, that even though given prominence as important national sites through the Scheduling system, in fact having legal protection, they are simply allowed through neglect and disrespect to fall apart.

Illustration of the castle executed in the mid-19th century (Fig 7) show that it has undergone few changes since that time, indicating that little interference with its structure has taken place since then. The moat has probably been mostly infilled since that time, however, on the up side and regardless of what has been dumped into it, one must assume that any archaeological deposits or finds remain intact.

Despite nearly every national institute in the heritage of Scotland, and the governments at local, regional and national levels purporting the value in economic terms through tourism, and the importance of cultural identity, the real truth in the matter is that only the most prestigious sites are cared for and given prominence. The remaining sites and monuments which are of course numerically vast in comparison are quietly ignored.

The often-repeated sound bites; “there can be no future without a past”, “we are a product of the past”, “the past is important”, seem as meaningless words indeed, from the people who are empowered to do something to preserve it.

Acknowledgement
Mr Johnston of Covington Mains Farm allowed the work to be undertaken. A small team of trainees from the Clydesdale Employment Training scheme worked under the supervision of the writer who also led the volunteer archaeologists from Biggar Museum; to them all the writer is indebted.

The Royal Commission for the Ancient Monuments of Scotland supplied their survey plan of the castle (Fig 3) to be superimposed with the excavation details.
To all the writer is indebted.

References

Appendices
Photographic list
The colour slides have been copied digitally and both originals and digital copies have been lodged with the National Monuments Records of Scotland. A set of black and white negatives are also available. Covington 35mm slides. Excavation of the tower and the doocot.
[Note: some pictures are of differential quality]

COV 1 Tower and doocot
COV 2 Tower from N
COV 3 Tower from NE
COV 4 Ditto
COV 5 Doocot from S
COV 6 Tower entrance from N
COV 7 Tower interior before excavation looking SE
COV 8 Tower interior before excavation looking W
COV 9 Tower interior before excavation looking E
COV 10 Tower interior before excavation looking SE
COV 11 Garderobe outlet before excavation
COV 12 Garderobe outlet before excavation
COV 13 Tower from W
COV 14 Diggers inside tower
COV 15 Diggers inside tower
COV 16 Diggers inside tower
COV 17 Diggers inside tower
COV 18 Diggers inside tower
COV 19 Post hole
COV 20 Ditto
COV 21 Floor details in tower
COV 22 Floor details in tower
COV 23 Floor details in tower
COV 24 Floor details in tower
COV 25 Floor details in tower
COV 26 Floor details in tower
COV 27 Detail of arched door
COV 28 Small room
COV 29 Detail of wall
COV 30 SW corner of moat
COV 31 Floor details in tower
COV 32 Internal floor excavated showing depth of material removed. Stewart and Steven Ward
COV 33 Details of Garderobe pit excavated
COV 34 Details of Garderobe pit excavated
COV 35 Details of Garderobe pit excavated
COV 36 Details of Garderobe pit excavated
COV 37 Details of Garderobe pit excavated
COV 38 Details of Garderobe pit excavated
COV 39 Working at Garderobe pit. Alf Ward
COV 40 Working at Garderobe pit. Alf Ward
COV 41 SW corner of moat and tower
COV 42 Detail of small chamber in NE upper wall
COV 43 Detail of ground floor after excavation
ditto
COV 45 Internal floor excavated showing depth of material removed. Stewart and Steven Ward
COV 46 Detail of pit potence inside doocot
COV 47 Detail of doocot roof, slabs re bedded
COV 48 Detail of doocot roof, slabs re bedded
COV 50 Detail of doocot roof, slabs re bedded
COV 51 Detail of nest boxes inside doocot
COV 52 Detail of nest boxes inside doocot
COV 53 Detail of nest boxes inside doocot
COV 54 Detail of nest boxes inside doocot
COV 57 Detail of nest boxes inside doocot
COV 58 Detail of nest boxes inside doocot
COV 59 Detail of nest boxes inside doocot
COV 60 Detail of nest boxes inside doocot

Finds list

Covington Tower Finds Catalogue
Three areas at Covington Tower were excavated by BMT in 1982 during an operation to make the site safe for visitors. The internal area of the tower, the garderobe pit and a trench on the north side of the tower excavated. No objects were found in the doocot.

Finds from inside the tower.
CT 1 Stone ball of sandstone, 70mm in diameter, found in the NE corner of the tower floor. Ballista or cannon ball? Weight 1 lb.
CT 2 Quantity of course ware pottery sherds; 60 of, plus 9 rims, 3 handles and 2 base sherds, green and buff coloured and non glazed pieces.
CT 3 Lead cast spindle whorl with raised and radiating line decoration, 25mm diameter with 9mm hole.
CT 4 Silvered dress making pins 4of, two with wired on heads and two with cast heads, 20mm – 35mm long. Also small cop per alloy ferule from lace end.
CT 5 Quantity of brick floor tile fragments36 in total. Two main types; unglazed pieces 50mm thick (8of), dark green glazed type, 30-35mm thick (6of) and yellow glazed 30-35mm thick (14 of). Misc pieces
(8of). All red coloured brick with one almost complete example in green glaze.

CT 6 Brick (tile?) with perforations through, 40mm thick, perforations would have been c15mm diameter one side and taper to 2mm hole on other side. [May be modern?]

CT 7 Two fragments of 19th C bottle necks with string rings.

CT 8 Misc’ glass, mostly bottle, probably 18th C and few pieces of window glass.

CT 9 Small quantity of modern glass/pottery

CT 10 Small quantity of severely corroded iron including a chisel.

CT 11 Clay marbles 10of and pipe stems 11of

CT 11a Quantity of assorted bone. From both the tower and the cess pit

Finds from cess pit

CT 12 Large quantity of window glass sherds mostly small pieces but the following described as being diagnostic, all have edges and mostly these are formed by knapping the glass to shape using pliers and leaving edge scars, some pieces have edge stains where the lead stripped held the glass:

12/1 Complete diamond shaped pane, 40mm by 42mm
12/2 Complete quarter round pane, 73mm by 53mm
12/3 Complete quarter pane same as above but in three parts
12/4 Acute angled piece 50mm by 25mm
12/5 Ditto 50mm by 30mm
12/6 Ditto 45mm by 30mm
12/7 Rectangular piece 60mm by 35mm
12/8 Corner piece 45mm by 60mm
12/9 Ditto 40mm by 50mm
12/10 Ditto 35mm by 45mm
12/11 Corner piece but with chamfered corner, 75mm by 35mm
12/12 Corner piece with angled corner 30mm by 20mm
12/13 Ditto 45mm by 25mm
12/14 Rectangular piece 30mm by 29mm
12/15 Angled piece same as No’s 12 and 13, 22mm by 22mm
12/16 Chamfered piece same as No 11, 25mm by 25mm
12/17 Edge piece with slight bulbous and smooth edge 70mm by 38mm (two parts, modern break)
12/18 Ditto 45mm by 30mm (two parts, ancient break)
12/19 Ditto 35mm by 30mm
12/20-40 various pieces with edges showing (all in glass topped box)

Finds from external trench on north side of tower

CT 13 Assorted material, some course pottery, glass, bones, marbles and bead (below)

CT 14 Blue coloured glass bead, 10mm diameter with 3mm hole.

Finds from garden bank in 1999

CT 15 Fragments of floor tiles 4of.