

Spynie Palace: The Bishop's Well

Archaeological investigation of the well and surrounding features



The Bishop's Well

Introduction

The Bishop's Well is situated on the north side of the path approaching Spynie Palace on what was formerly the edge of Spynie loch. It was investigated during excavations in the late 80s and early 90s at the Palace, but has since become overgrown and choked with mud and leaves. The well is currently roughly marked out with small posts, but is clearly a health and safety risk.

This document explores the archaeological implications of making the well safe through capping and fencing off, and the potential for new information about the feature and its significance to arise through these investigations. Although the primary intention is to make the well safe, a better understanding of how much survives, its relationships and importance would help us to interpret the development of the feature and the castle environs as a whole and to assess the impact of future planned works in this area.

Historical Background

Spynie Palace/Castle was for five centuries the residence of the Bishops of Moray. The church of the Holy Trinity at Spynie was established as the cathedral church for Moray in 1207, although it is very likely that it served as the cathedral from the early 12th century. Archaeological excavation suggests that a ringwork castle was constructed during the late 12th or early 13th century, probably serving as the first episcopal palace. In 1224 the cathedral was translated to Elgin, where it gained protection from the royal castle and was served by the burgh market.

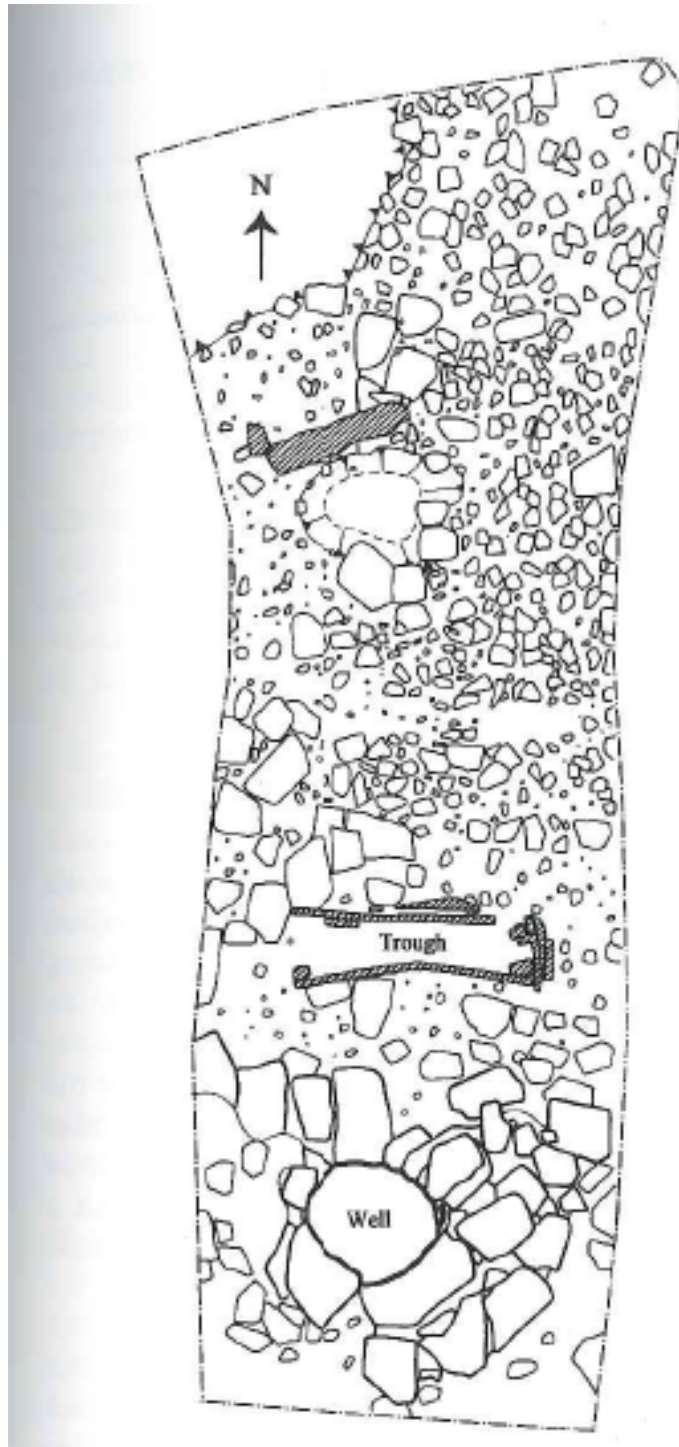
A castle at Spynie is first explicitly referred to in 1292-6, in a 'Short Description of the Kingdom of Scotland'. This describes the castles of Elgin and Spynie (*castrum de Spynie*) as representing respectively the seats of civil and ecclesiastical authority. After the burning of the town and cathedral of Elgin in 1390 by Alexander Stewart, Earl of Buchan (known to history as the Wolf of Badenoch), Robert III ordered his brothers, the earls of Buchan and Moray, '*not to interfere in any part with the castle of Spynie by further pretext*'. It is not clear if Spynie had actually suffered damage. Between 1462-7, the great tower house, known as David's Tower, was begun during the episcopacy of Bishop David Stewart, and was completed by his successor William Tulloch (1477-82). Between 1538-73 the palace served as residence for the last catholic bishop of Moray, Bishop Patrick Hepburn. After the defeat of the Marian party at Carberry Field on 15 June 1567, Queen Mary's third husband, James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell stayed at Spynie, house of his kinsman Bishop Patrick. During his stay, he killed one of the bishop's sons and seized the castle. From Spynie he fled to Orkney and then to exile in Norway. The Palace played a role in the Wars of the 1640s. In 1640, a covenanting force seized the castle from Bishop Guthrie. The palace also briefly featured in Montrose's rising in 1645 in support of Charles I. After Montrose's victory at Auldearn, Elgin was occupied and the offices of Spynie were burnt. The palace itself was besieged, unsuccessfully, by Lord Lewis Gordon, acting for the earl of Huntly. A number of inventories of Spynie Palace survive from the first half of the 17th century when the castle was occupied by the Protestant Bishops of Moray. The inventories provide information concerning room use and the structure of the house hold in this period. With the abolition of the episcopacy in 1682, the palace was annexed to the Crown, which rented it out for £12 a year. From this time the palace appears to have been stripped of its iron-work and timber.

An engraving from the early 1800s shows a row of cottages on the edge of the loch to the west of the palace. The 'Bishop's Well' may be a related feature, and thus post medieval. However, there is no firm evidence upon which to base a date.

In 1920 the palace was scheduled as an Ancient Monument and was given into guardianship in 1973.

Archaeological Background

It was noted in 1868 that the 'Bishop's Well' was a fairly recent name, and that the well was adapted for domestic use. The well appears on all editions of the O S maps. Investigations were undertaken in 1987, although recording was challenging because of dense mat of tree roots. The results are recorded in Lewis and Pringle's *Spynie Palace and the Bishops of Moray*.



Plan of the Bishop's Well, taken from 'Spynie Palace and the Bishop of Moray', Lewis and Pringle 2002.

An 8m x 2m trench was opened around the well, prompted by damage done by cattle which had been using the well as a watering hole. The well had been demolished to ground level. Its shaft was 1 metre in diameter with clay bonded sandstone walls 0.3 metres thick. The area around the well was, and remains boggy. To the north of the well was a floor of crude flags or cobbles overlain with a topsoil which contained 19th century pottery. North of the well was a crude rectangular trough, aligned E/W and built of planks which were kept in place by posts. The cobbles and flags continued

beyond the trough where they were disturbed by a shallow E/W gully. In the NE corner of the trench were the remains of upright posts, a post pit, a few large boulders and patches of burnt soil, none of which were investigated.

Although recorded on later maps with an apparent association with the 'fisherfolk' cottages, the antiquity of the well is unclear. Its use may in fact date back much further.

Proposed Archaeological Mitigation



The Bishop's Well

The requirement for some sort of barrier or cover to prevent access to the well is hard to dispute. Choked with leaves and hard to see, it is an obvious health and safety hazard. The well is on sloping ground, not visible from the shop, and most people would approach it from the road above, which increases the risk of an accident. This significance of the well, and therefore the impact of any intervention is currently unknown. It is potentially associated with the palace, or nearby settlement, although no interpretation is provided for it at present. Therefore, the potential benefits of undertaking investigations at the well are:

- 1) Making the feature safe for staff and visitors
- 2) Understanding the extent of the feature
- 3) Understanding the significance of the feature

Predictably, the level of intervention required increases as more of these aims are tackled. The required works to explore each of these three aims is discussed below:.

1) Making the feature safe for staff and visitors

The least invasive solution is to cap the well. Whether or not this is possible will depend on the structural integrity of the well, which will require further investigation of the feature and its immediate surroundings. It is possible that the northern part of the well has been lost. There are some detached stones downhill from the well which may have come from it.

The level of excavation required will be restricted to the clearance of soil down to the features exposed in 1987. Therefore, the archaeological impact of capping the well is potentially very minimal. Aesthetically this is also the most desirable solution to the problem, as the cap would be unobstrusive. It would require clearance of overlying topsoil and vegetation cover of the area immediately around the well, up to 1 metre in all directions. The purpose of this to expose the edges of the well and to determine whether the complete circuit of stones remains in place. This would need to be done in advance of the scheme for capping the well being worked up, as the presence or absence of the rest of the well structure will have an impact on the form which the cap takes, if it is possible to cap the well at all, and how it is fixed in place. The cap may have to extend beyond the sides of the well if it cannot be fixed into the sides, hence the need to re-expose the previously excavated surface beyond the sides of the structure.

2) Understanding the extent of the feature

The extent and survival of those features identified around the well in 1987 is not fully understood. More extensive investigation would give a better idea of how well the identified surfaces survive. Root activity and erosion may have displaced much of what was recorded originally. Furthermore, the area to the south (uphill) of the well was not recorded in 1987. More extensive clearance of topsoil than was proposed for (1) would also allow us to consider whether fencing off the well is a possibility. Putting a permanent fence around the well would be a more visually intrusive solution, although it would have the advantage of protecting the structure of the well from damage. Fencing off the well would require the excavation of a minimum of four trenches to support posts, and preferably these should be located away from known archaeological features.

Investigation of the wider area would entail the planning and recording of the current state of the well, including any detached stonework which is visible on the ground. Once this has been done an area equating to approximately 2 metres in each direction from the edge of the well would be cleared of soil and plant cover. This should take it back to the surface which was exposed in 1987, ie a similar process to that described above for the investigations preceding the capping of the well, but covering a wider area. This will require clearance of an area of approximately 1 metre to the south and west of the well which has not previously been investigated. The area will be hand dug to the same level as the previously exposed area and no deeper, likely impacting on topsoil only. Once exposed, the area will be archaeologically recorded so that the survival of the features noted in 1987 investigations can be assessed. The stones which form the cobbling will also be numbered on plan.

If it is possible to locate the fence posts off of the features identified in 1987, the trenches for the posts will still require an archaeological watching brief.



Detached stonework near the well

3) Understanding the significance of the feature

The significance of the well and the associated surfaces is unclear. The only dating evidence comes from the overlying soil, which contained 19th century finds. The paving/cobbling was not excavated or lifted in 1987. We do not know how old it is or if there is anything under it. There is no definable relationship to the palace, other than the proximity of the well to the building. It appears on all OS maps, but we cannot say anything about its history or origins.

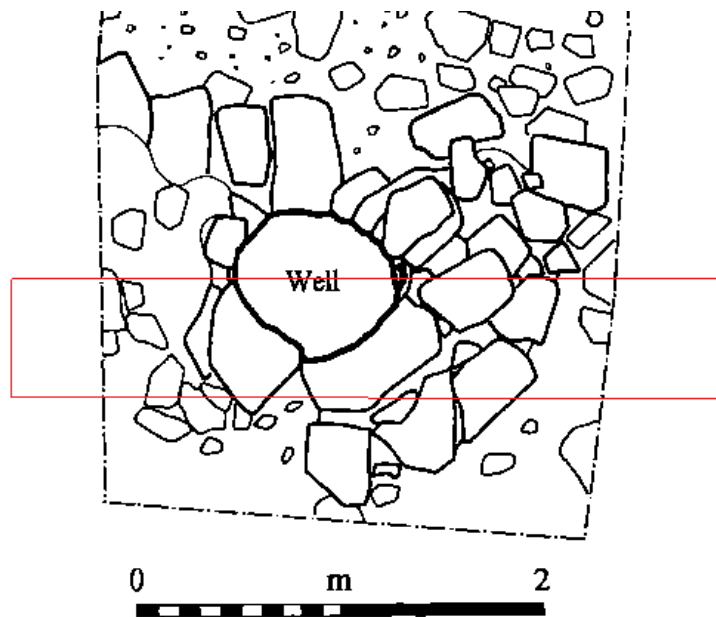
In order to rectify this, consideration might be given to the excavation of a small trench running E to W across the site of the well. The purpose of this trench is would be to:

- Ascertain what is under the cobbled surface
- Establish how far to the east and west archaeological material extends
- Determine whether this is a 19th century arrangement or something older.
- Establish the relationship between the well and the surfaces identified in 1987

This trench will therefore help to establish the significance of the well and locate it more clearly within the history of the development of the castle environs, as well as assist in the location of the fence posts, should this solution be taken up. If the significance of the well and the associated features is better understood, it will be easier to assess the impact of further archaeological interventions to make the area safe.

The archaeologist will carefully lift the paving/cobbles, which will have been numbered during recording in order to facilitate reinstatement. Once the cobbles have been lifted, the archaeologist will excavate a narrow trench stratigraphically to the approximate depth required for the posts. If significant archaeological features are encountered, work will stop and assessment will be made as to whether it is appropriate to continue. If necessary the trench may be extended to make sense of archaeological deposits, although should this be necessary, HES Heritage Management will be consulted in advance.

Following investigation, the test trench will be lined with a permeable membrane and backfilled. The rest of the area around the well which was cleared for recording will also be covered and backfilled in the same way.



Approximate location and size of proposed trench

Recommendation

The least invasive solution to the health and safety risk posed by the well is to cap it, if this is possible. Therefore we recommend that option 1 is enacted in the first instance. If the state of the well is such that it is not possible to achieve this, option (2) should be adopted. This will allow us to explore the extent of the features around the well and so whether it might be possible to fence off the well without impacting on these features. If the extent of the features around the well is such that positioning the fence off of them is clearly impossible, option (3) should be considered in order to better understand the significance of the features and so assess the impact of partial loss in order to make the area safe.

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