Dunottar Castle, Stonehaven, AB39 2TL

Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI)

National Grid Reference: NO 88128 83842

Parish: Dunnottar

HES Reference: SM986

Written and researched by:

Cameron Archaeology

Commissioning client:

Dunecht Estate

Contractor:

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Date: 25 April 2025

1 BACKGROUND

1.1 The site (Illus 1) is located on a coastal promontory south of Stonehaven. It is centred on NGR NO 88128 83842.

1.2 The work was commissioned by Kenny Macpherson for Dunecht Estate. Scheduled Monument Consent has been acquired for the works set out in section 3 below and this WSI and a watching brief is required by HES during the works.

1.3 All the archaeological work will be carried out in the context of Historic Environment Policy Scotland (HEPS) which state that archaeological remains should be regarded as part of the environment to be protected and managed.

Illus 1 Location plan (*Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2025*)

2 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The Historic Environment Record (HER) and NMRE were consulted online within 1km of the proposed development.

2.1 This site is a Scheduled Monument (SM986) and is the remains of a castle (NRHE NO88SE 11; Aberdeenshire HER NO88SE0007), which probably occupies the site of a prehistoric fort. St Ninian established a church here about the beginning of the 5th century. It may also be the 'Dunfoithir' besieged in 681. In the reign of William the Lion (1165-1214) 'Dunnottar' was the place where warrants were returnable for the Mearns, and 'le castiel de Dunostre' is mentioned at the beginning of the 13th century. Another castle was erected at the end of the 14th century. In its final form the castle was forfeited in 1716 and the roofs and floors removed and sold. In 1925 the systematic repair and excavation of the ruins was begun. In its present form the extensive remains date from various periods. The oldest portion is the early 15th century keep with a range of buildings extending to the east containing stables and storehouses. The gatehouse is approached by a steep path and defended by three tiers of splayed gun-loops. The arched entrance is the only opening on a solid wall of masonry set into a cleft in the rock, and forms a very impressive and dominating entrance. The buildings to the northwest grouped round a courtyard date from the late 16th or early 17th century, including a chapel. A huge water system lies within the courtyard. There is also a bowling green to the west of this later range. The Scottish Crown jewels (The Honours of Scotland) were hidden here in 1651 as it was considered one of the strongest places in the kingdom. In 1685, 167 Covenanters were packed into a small vault (the Whigs Vault) where nine died due to the terrible conditions. An oval motte was noted in 1970. A watching Brief was carried out in 2005 during excavations for a new safety fence along the cliff top, but no significant archaeological features were found. Further watching brief undertaken during hand-excavation of post-holes along east edge of castle. Only a pit contained any structural evidence, in the form of a flat sandstone block which may have been a base for artillery behind the adjoining bank. In one posthole, near the chapel, fragments of human skull were discovered. Elsewhere there was evidence of domestic refuse in the form of animal bones. Watching brief undertaken by MAS in April 2009 over the excavation of postholes associated with the erection of a new safety barrier. In total, 39 postholes were hand excavated and recorded. All the postholes excavated produced similar fill and indicate that this pathway giving access to the castle was made up ground renewed and resurfaced at various stages. No archaeological features or finds were evident. A watching brief was carried out in March 2011 by MAS over the installation of a new composter. The composter required the digging of 14 postholes, centred on NO 88095 83903. No finds or features of archaeological significance were revealed. In January 2013 a watching brief was maintained by MAS on hand digging of postholes for two new stretches of safety fence, one beside the steps approaching the castle entrance, the other extending the west end of the existing fence. The posthole closest to the castle wall revealed two possible foundation stones of the castle wall, but no other archaeological features were observed. A watching brief was carried out by MAS in May 2015 on remedial works in three areas of the castle. No features were observed during works south of Benholm's Lodging and at the steps leading from the graveyard to the guardhouse. Cutting back of the bank between the smithy and the store to enable construction of a retaining wall yielded a single sherd of internally green glazed pottery of probable 16th century date, and pieces of clay tobacco pipe of probable 17th and 18th-19th century date. A watching brief was carried out by MAS in October 2018 during drainage groundworks for the walkway east of the Pends. The only finds were two fragments of decayed animal bone and a single fragment of roof tile in the topsoil. A watching brief was carried out by MAS in October 2018 during groundworks for shallow

sumps in two rooms of the west range. No evidence of earlier floors was observed and there were no finds in the fill removed. A watching brief was carried out by MAS in January 2019 during creation of a path to North Bay, but no archaeological features or artefacts were observed. As part of a programme of geological examination of the cliff stability, an archaeological evaluation was carried out by MAS in September 2019 on traces of three structures on the cliffs on the north side of the castle (Murray 2007, 17; 2009, 20-21; 2011, 16; 2016, 17; 2020). Two of the structures can be visually documented back to the late 17th century and appear to be associated with the access (and its protection) between the late 16th-17th century water gate in the north range and the sea. The third structure may have been part of a late attempt to shore up or protect vulnerable areas of cliff, there is little evidence to suggest they were part of a wall encircling the summit. A watching brief was carried out by MAS in December 2019 on a test pit and drainage works to address subsidence in the floor of the dining room. The results suggested that the original floor make-up here was a compact mortar/stony layer observed in the test pit. The present, upper, surface was probably laid during the 1920s restoration. A Roman distance sculpture, the Auchendavy sculpture, one of 21 sandstone relief sculptures from the Antonine Wall, had been installed at various times in prominent positions at Dunnottar Castle, by the Earls Marischal in the sixteenth century. It remained visible there in 1642, prior to being moved to the Marischal Museum in Aberdeen and its eventual donation by George Keith, the Tenth Earl Marischal to the Hunterian Museum in 1761 (Foster, Driscoll and Alcock 1985; MacGibbon and Ross 1887-92, vol 1, 562-73; Shepherd 1996).

3 METHOD STATEMENT

Cameron Archaeology will carry out a watching brief during the excavation to repair the leaking drainage (Illus 2).

Illus 2 Plan showing details of excavation required

4 Reporting and finds

4.1 This archaeological work follows Historic Environment Scotland's Policy Statement (HESPS) which state that archaeological remains should be regarded as part of the environment to be protected and managed and the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA) Code of Conduct.

4.2 Finds of objects will be subject to the Scots Laws of Treasure Trove and Bona Vacantia and reported by the archaeological contractor to the Secretariat of the Treasure Trove Panel (National Museums of Scotland, Queen Street, Edinburgh, EH2 1JD) for disposal to an appropriate museum.

4.3 Any human remains which are encountered will initially be left *in situ.* Their discovery will be reported to the Procurator Fiscal and the client. The Local Authority archaeologist will also be informed. Their removal will comply with the provisions of Scots Law.

5 Access and Safety

5.1 Cameron Archaeology will inform Historic Environment Scotland and the Local Authority archaeologist prior to the start of fieldwork.

5.2 All relevant health and safety legislation, regulations and codes of conduct will be respected.

5.3 Staff will wear steel toe-capped boots, hard hats and hi-viz vests at all times.

5.4 An archaeologist will not enter any trench unless the sides are safe and a risk assessment has been carried out; if there is a depth greater than 1.2m, the sides of the trench will be battered or stepped. In sandy conditions the trench edges will be stepped or battered at a lesser depth than 1.2m.

5.5 The archaeologist will hand clean and record any features and some will be part excavated to determine nature and depth. Significant archaeological remains will be left in situ.

6 Recording Systems

6.1 Cameron Archaeology fieldwork number CA724 has been allocated to this site. This number will appear on all site records and finds and all post-excavation material. Cameron Archaeology recording systems will be used on this project.

6.2 A site location plan will be produced which will tie into National Grid and will locate Ordnance Survey benchmarks and TBMs used on the site.

6.3 Plans of contexts will be produced at 1:20 (or other scale as appropriate) and sections of features at 1:10. All site drawings will be on polyester-based drawing film

6.4 The OD height of contexts will be calculated and recorded on plans, sections and level book.

6.5 For complex stratification, a Harris matrix will be prepared to record stratigraphic relationships.

6.6 A photographic record will consist of high quality digital images for all main contexts as well as working and general site and location photographs.

7 Treatment of finds and samples

7.1 Sampling strategies will depend on the perceived importance of the deposit or feature under excavation. Bulk samples for sieving will be taken as necessary. A selection of samples will be sent for analysis by specialist archaeological soil analysts.

7.2 Finds will be exposed, recorded, lifted, cleaned, conserved, marked, bagged and boxed in line with archaeological guidelines. Metalwork will be assessed, a selection will be x-rayed and selected for conservation.

7.3 Organic samples will be collected or sampled and subjected to conservation, dendrochronology, carbon 14 sampling or other analytical technique as necessary.

7.4 Cameron Archaeology can confirm that arrangements are in place to cover all necessary processing, conservation, specialist analysis and subsequent storage of finds and samples.

8 Post-excavation and publication

8.1 The responsibility for funding the Post-Excavation work lies with the client/developer. A DSR will be prepared and submitted to HES and the client within 4 weeks of the end of fieldwork and if appropriate a Post-Excavation Research Design (PERD) will then be produced outlining the scope of post-excavation work. The results of which will then be collated into a final report.

8.2 Publication will take place in a suitable journal. The costs for this publication are also the responsibility of the client/developer.

9 Archive

9.1 Copies of the fieldwork report will be sent to HES and the Local Authority archaeologist.

9.2 A brief summary of results will be submitted to *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, along with the appropriate fee.

9.3 An OASIS report will be completed for this site within 4 weeks of the end of fieldwork.

9.4 The site archive will be lodged with HES and Local Authority archaeologist following their requirements detailed in https://www.historicenvironment.scot/advice-and-support/applying-for-consents/scheduled-monument-consent/reporting-and-archiving-requirements-for-archaeological-work/

10 REFERENCES

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11 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Kenny Macpherson, Dunecht Estate for initiating this project and Catherine Parker at HES for her advice during the works.

APPENDIX 1

Archaeological and historical sites

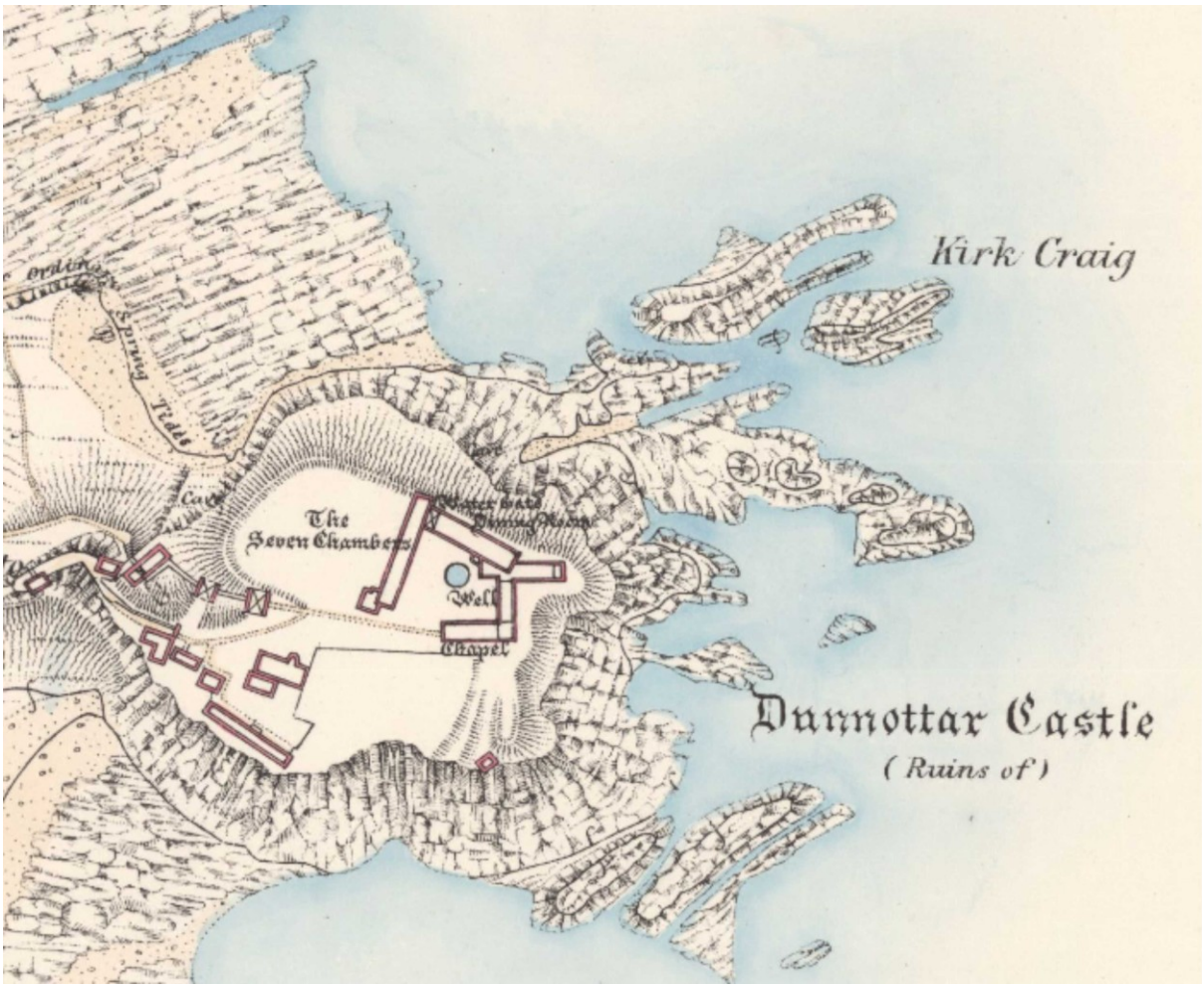
Aberdeenshire HER online

Dataset	Dataset UID	Name	OS NGR	Classification
HERABER	NO88SE0015	St Ninian'S Chapel	NO 88156 83866	CHAPELS, WINDOWS
HERABER	NO88SE0012	St Ninian'S Well	NO 87995 83906	WELLS
HERABER	NO88SE0106	Diligence, North Sea	NO 88030 84000	SHIPWRECKS
HERABER	NO88SE0135	Dunnottar Castle, Well	NO 88162 83890	WELLS
HERABER	NO88SE0130	Dunnottar Castle, Benholm's Lodgings	NO 88038 83891	BUILDINGS
HERABER	NO88SE0113	John And Isabella, Dunnottar Castle	NO 88100 83780	SHIPWRECKS
HERABER	NO88SE0096	Dunnottar	NO 87852 83913	MUSKET-BALLS
HERABER	NO88SE0133	Dunnottar Castle, Stables	NO 88087 83832	STABLES
HERABER	NO88SE0026	Mains Of Dunnottar	NO 87726 83931	CROPMARKS, PITS, RING-DITCHES
HERABER	NO88SE0132	Dunnottar Castle, Smithy	NO 88075 83850	SMITHIES
HERABER	NO88SE0134	Dunnottar Castle, Priest's House	NO 88098 83856	PRESBYTERIES
HERABER	NO88SE0007	Dunnottar Castle	NO 88112 83874	AUMBRIES, BAKERIES, BASEMENTS, BREWERIES, CASTLES, CHAPELS, CHURCHES, CISTERNS, CORBELS, DRAINS, FIREPLACES, FORTS, GALLERIES, GARDEROBES, GATEWAYS, GUARD-ROOMS, GUN-LOOPS, HOUSES, KITCHENS, LATRINES, MANSIONS, OVENS, PASSAGES, PORTCULLISES, POTTERY, PRI
HERABER	NO88SE0016	Dunnottar	NO 87887 83957	DITCHES
HERABER	NO88SE0131	Dunnottar Castle, Entrance Gateway And Guardrooms	NO 88048 83890	GATEWAYS
HERABER	NO88SE0136	Dunnottar Castle, Quadrangle	NO 88179 83887	CASTLES

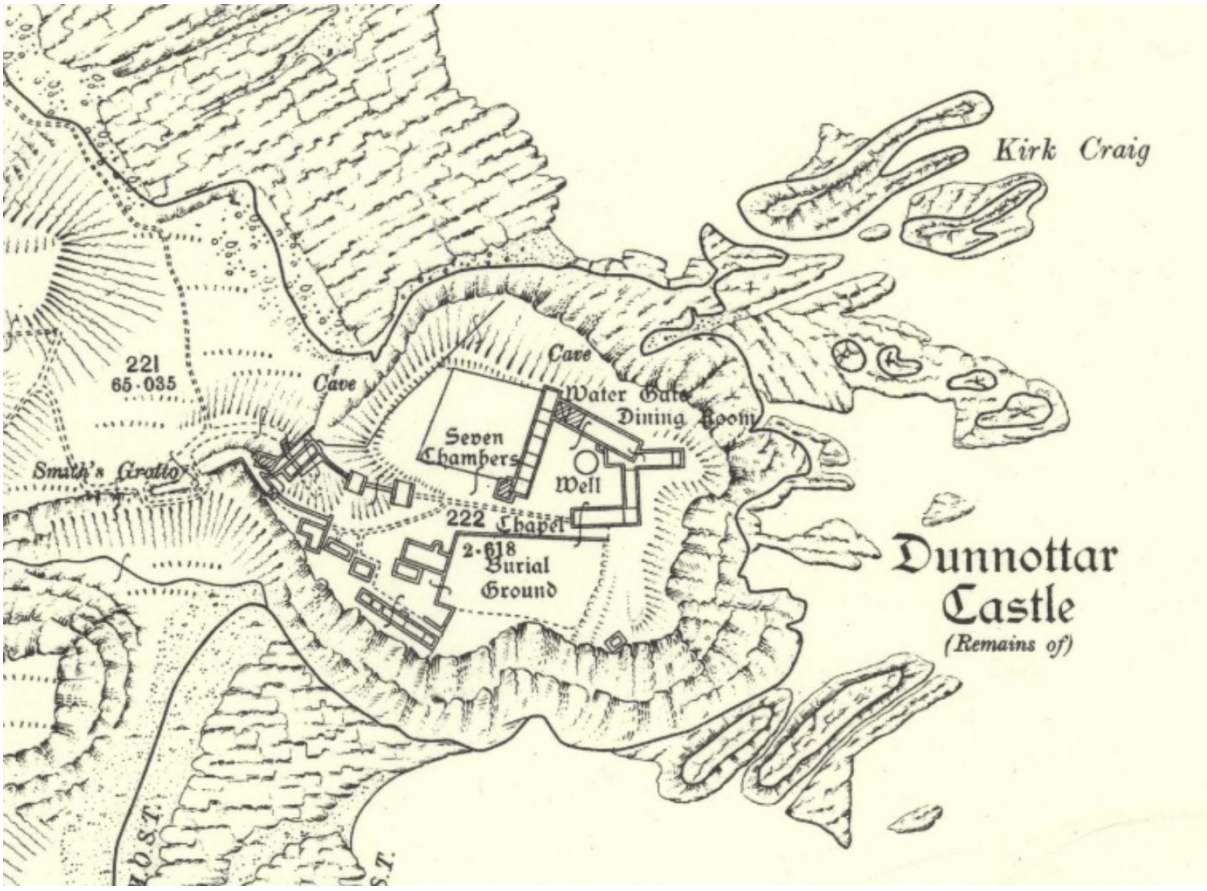
NRHE online

Dataset	Dataset UID	Name	OS NGR	Classification
Canmore	229793	Dunnottar Castle, Priest's House	NO 88088 83849	PRESBYTERY (POST MEDIEVAL)
Canmore	229783	Dunnottar Castle, Benholm's Lodgings	NO 88028 83884	BUILDING (16TH CENTURY)
Canmore	229799	Dunnottar Castle, Entrance Gateway And Guardrooms	NO 88038 83883	GATEWAY (PERIOD UNASSIGNED)
Canmore	229795	Dunnottar Castle, Stables	NO 88077 83825	STABLE (PERIOD UNASSIGNED)
Canmore	36992	Dunnottar Castle	NO 88128 83842	CASTLE (MEDIEVAL)
Canmore	279050	Dunnottar Castle	NO 88120 83840	NO CLASS (EVENT)
Canmore	229792	Dunnottar Castle, East Guardhouse	NO 88163 83817	GUARDHOUSE (16TH CENTURY)
Canmore	229796	Dunnottar Castle, Quadrangle	NO 88169 83880	CASTLE (MEDIEVAL)
Canmore	229800	Dunnottar Castle, Graveyard Walls	NO 88120 83855	WALL (PERIOD UNASSIGNED)
Canmore	229798	Dunnottar Castle, Well	NO 88152 83883	WELL (PERIOD UNASSIGNED)
Canmore	229829	Dunnottar Castle, Approach Tunnels	NO 88075 83873	TUNNEL (PERIOD UNASSIGNED)
Canmore	37000	Dunnottar Castle, St Ninian'S Chapel	NO 88156 83863	BURIAL GROUND (POST MEDIEVAL), CHAPEL (16TH CENTURY)
Canmore	229788	Dunnottar Castle, Keep	NO 88047 83857	KEEP (15TH CENTURY), TOWER (PERIOD UNASSIGNED)
Canmore	229785	Dunnottar Castle, Smithy	NO 88065 83843	SMITHY (PERIOD UNASSIGNED)

APPENDIX 2 MAPS



Illus 3 First Edition OS map (*copyright National Library of Scotland)* Kincardineshire XVII.8 (Dunnottar)Survey date: 1865, Publication date: 1866



Illus 4 Second Edition OS map (*copyright National Library of Scotland)* Kincardineshire XXI.1Revised: 1901, Published: 1903