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## DONSIDE HILL FORT.

### The Fort on Crichtie Hill, Kintore.

In our day the significance of ancient historical and pre-historical possessions in this part of Scotland is coming to be more and more recognised, and pending a careful and complete survey of these things for historical and educational purposes, a few independent notes on some of the less-known antiquities of the district will be helpful. Some time ago ("Aberdeen Journal," October 5, 1922), I had an opportunity of describing the well-marked remains of an ancient hill fort that still exist on the Hill of Keir, Skene, five miles eastward of the now well-known fort on the Barmekin, Echt. I should like to bring under attention here two other hill forts in our district, both on Lower Donside, very significant remains both of them, easily accessible from Aberdeen on, say, a Saturday afternoon in summer, and both very suggestive of the historical interest of the district many centuries ago.

The first of these is the fortification known as "Bruce's Camp" on the top of Crichtie Hill, Kintore, overlooking the bridge and ferry on the Don, Crichtie Hill, which rises to a height of fully 500 feet above sea level, immediately south-west of Port-Elphinstone, is known also as the "Shaw Hill"—a later English name, from "shaw," a wood, an expression used by our great poets from the days of Chaucer to Burns. Crichtie is the earlier Gaelic name, from "Crioich," an end, or limit, or boundary, meaning evidently that the hill marks the northern boundary of what became the lands and barony of Kintore.

#### Bruce and the Cumyn.

The name, "Bruce's Camp," implies, of course, an encampment of Robert the Bruce prior to the battle of Barra, near Oldmeldrum, between the Bruce forces and those of Cumyn, Earl of Buchan, in 1308. That was the first distinctive victory for Bruce in the long campaign that ended with Bannockburn in 1314. It was a memorable victory for Aberdeen in particular, in respect that after the victory in the field the Bruce forces, along with the Aberdonians, stormed the Castle of Aberdeen, on the Castle-Hill, which had been a menace to the town for years, and destroyed it for all time.

The earthworks on the top of Crichtie Hill are still well defined, and are of large extent, as well as of unusual shape and structure—and all these features are significant. The usual type of hill forts in Scotland (as in the case of the Barmekin and Keir Hill forts), is a circular construction round the apex of the hill, but the fort on Crichtie Hill is of irregular oblong shape, something approaching the usual form of Roman encampment. It is very large, many times the size of an ordinary hill-fort, extending over 200 paces across, at one place, from south to north.

#### Boulder and Turf Rampart.

There is practically nothing of an exterior ditch, outside the rampart, to be seen, and the rampart itself—now very much flattened and broken down—is of the usual boulder and turf construction, the stones having been gathered, evidently with great labour, from the riverside and the surrounding moorland. It was a type of structure very common in this quarter in prehistoric times, as you see it not only in the hill forts, but in the ancient grave-mounds, and other structures



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#### **Not a Roman Encampment.**

The question, then, comes to be—what was this great fort, or camp, on the top of Criche Hill? Its site was selected with great care, for as it is the highest ground in Kintore parish it commands the surrounding low country with the greatest ease in every direction. It is not an ordinary native hill fort, such as the Barmekin and Hill of Keir forts. These are very ancient, and may be contemporary with the hill forts and hill towns of the Continent in use at the beginning of the Christian era. Then it was not a Roman encampment, as although it lies close to the Roman "iter," or line of march, its construction is different from the Roman type, and—a complete reason in itself—it was not necessary for the Roman forces as the great Roman entrenchment at Kintore, now nearly obliterated, was on the low ground, not far from the foot of the hill, behind where the burgh of Kintore is now. Clearly, too, the entrenchment on Criche Hill is of great age, and would be of little use in warfare of recent centuries, so that it could not have been thrown up in either the Montrose struggles of the seventeenth century, or in the Jacobite campaign of 1745, although engagements in connection with both took place in the neighbourhood.

#### **Battle of Barra.**

We are thrown back, then, on the popular tradition that this was the camp of the Bruce forces before the battle of Barra—otherwise known as the battle of Inverurie—and there is every reason to believe that the popular tradition (as sometimes happens), is well founded, and that this fortification was constructed and occupied by the Bruce forces in 1308. If that be so, this would be the only military work remaining.



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Observe, to begin with, that this was primarily a defensive work, like all hill forts, and was in all likelihood temporary. At that time, it will be remembered, Bruce was on the defensive. He had come northward, into a hostile region, gathering strength, after the preliminary victory of Loudon Hill, for the encounter with Cumyn, the Earl of Buchan, his personal and national enemy. But he was not sure of his ground, not being ready to risk an engagement, added to which the King himself was lying sick at the time. It was the insolent surprise attack of Sir David Brechin, nephew of Cumyn, that roused the sick king to leave his entrenchments. He would then pass the ford on the Don—behind which his camp was secure—and thence through Inverurie to Barra Hill, where he inflicted the signal defeat on Cumyn and scattered his army.

**Bruce's Cave.**

It is to be noted that the cave long known as "Bruce's Cave"—now fallen in and obliterated—was in the steep bank of the Don where the river makes a sharp elbow-bend into the foot of Cricchie Hill, opposite the ancient Polnar's Chapel (a dedication to St Appolinaris), and it is significant that the best route up Cricchie Hill to the fort is from that elbow-bend of the river. You take the old Kennay Road from near the bridge over the Don at Port-Elphinstone, as far as the elbow-bend; thence you ascend and cross the newer Kennay turnpike road, and so through the Cricchie Wood, on the west side of the hill, to the top.

It may have been—probably it was—the route between the King's personal quarters and his army, and we may take it that the position was well considered, as it was in a

district with which the King was well acquainted through many years.

**Route of the Bruce Forces.**

Standing on the earthworks on Cricchie Hill you can see clearly the route of the Bruce forces, and what has been the main line of traffic to the north country through the ages. It is singular to notice that, looking southward from the fort, in the direction of Aberdeen, you observe the piece of old military road—set down erroneously in the Ordnance Survey maps as a "General Wade" road—which passes as an arrow through the prehistoric grave-mounds on the moor of Kinellar, makes precisely for Cricchie Hill as a sighting mark. If it were "produced" in a straight line it would strike the apex of the hill. The ancient line of journey passed northward through this region close by the Roman entrenchment of Kintore, thence past the many significant stone memorials of ancient culture in the Kintore neighbourhood (so largely brought to light by Mr James Ritchie of Port-Elphinstone), and across the Don by the ford and ferries that were in use there up to the erection of the present bridge—now to be reconstructed—in 1791. What great events took place in that isolated but important region in far-back times we shall never know. We can only try to get a little of the story from the grave-mounds, and trenches, and standing stones, and ancient trackways, and military structures of various kinds that are still to be found in remarkable abundance between the ridge of Tyrebagger and the neighbourhood of Cricchie Hill.