

Report on the Auldton at Moffat Sept 2005

Recent research into the origins of the Moffat family have suggested that it derives from the union of William de Monte Alto, a Norman adventurer, and his bride, a Viking heiress named Gunhilda, in the late 11th century. William was allocated lands in the north of Annandale, and it is natural to ask where made his first home. A candidate for this honour is the Auldton, situated on the eastern edge of the Moffat township.

The Auldton is in the style of a Norman earthen motte and bailey. It was first described by John Christison as part of his survey of mottes in the Dumfries and Galloway region. He published his findings in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquarians of Scotland, Vol XXV, 1891, in an article titled "Forts, Camps and Motes of Dumfriesshire" in which the Auldton at Moffat is described on pp 218-220. Christison described the mote as follows: "Moffat Mote - In a gently sloping field at the foot of Auldton Hill, 200 yards east of Birnock Water and 400 feet above the sea. The ground slopes gently from it, except eastwards where it is level. The works consist of an artificial mound, or mote proper, and a base-court. The mound, about 20 feet high, is conical and steep. Unfortunately a deep gash has been cut into it from the south, so that the interior resembles a crater with a break in one side. If the remaining rim represents the edge of the original top, its diameter could not have exceeded 40 feet. A trench, varying in breadth (reckoning from the top outside) from 9 to 20 feet, and in depth from 2 or 3 to 7 feet, encircles the foot of the cone. On the west and north the trench has a slight parapet, which, passing round to the east, becomes a massive rampart 30 feet thick. On the south towards the base-court the trench has no parapet. The mound or mote proper forms part of the general enceinte. The base-court, which measures 207 by 132 feet inside, is of a horse-shoe form, and most part of the way round ends in a scarp 15 feet long, supported by a retaining wall 4 feet high, but without a trench or counterscarp. On the east, however, the parapet, which is barely traceable on the top of the scarp elsewhere, becomes a solid rampart with a trench in front, which is continuous with the trench of the mound. The reason of these differences in the defences of the base-court is apparently due to the nature of the site, which is at the west end of a long plateau, the terminal slope of which forms a natural defence to the south and west, but which required to be cut off from the fort by additional works on the east, where the approach was level. To the north the defence was strong, as the mound is placed there. The resemblance of the Moffat Mote to the Saxon type is very strong."

In his book "The Castles of South West Scotland" (Folly Publications, 1993) Mike Salter provides a diagram of the Auldton, and some comment applying to it and similar structures. "Castles and feudalism were introduced to SW Scotland in the time of King David I. He ruled Strathclyde from 1107 to 1124 under his brother Alexander I, and then himself ruled the whole kingdom until 1153. The early castles of Scotland were not generally buildings of mortared stone. Instead they were hastily made constructions of earth and wood. Commonly earth was dug from a circular ditch and piled within it to form a mound called a motte on which was erected a wooden house or tower forming the lord's residence within a small palisaded enclosure. There might be on one side or around the motte a base court or bailey containing a hall, chapel kitchen, stables, barns, workshops, etc, normally defended by a rampart or ditch. Not

many Scottish castles have baileys and the few that do can be assumed to be places of some importance held by men of the highest rank. No timber buildings have survived, but excavations have revealed traces of them to give an idea of what they were like.” This describes the Auldton exactly, and if it proves to have been built by William de Monte Alto in circa 1095, anticipating developments under David I by a decade or so, it will be one of the earliest examples in Scotland.

It would be interesting to know if the description of a typical Norman inspired motte and bailey also applies to the Moffat Auldton. However, there has been no systematic archaeological investigation of the site. The dates of its building, its period of use and its abandonment are unknown. Christison believes it to be of Saxon origin. Salter suggests it is Norman, 1st half of 12th century. Gardiner, “Moffat Handbook” ca 1975, speculated that it might be the site of a Chapel of the Knights Templar. Francis Moffat, “The Moffats”, 1985, thought it to be the site of the residence of the Moffat Laird.

At least, all are agreed that the site is of historic importance. This was made clear by the action of Historic Scotland, who designated the site as a Scheduled Ancient Monument in 1969. I am grateful to Adrian Cox of Historic Scotland for making the documentation they hold about the site available to me and discussing possible alternative methods, other than excavation, of obtaining meaningful archaeological information.

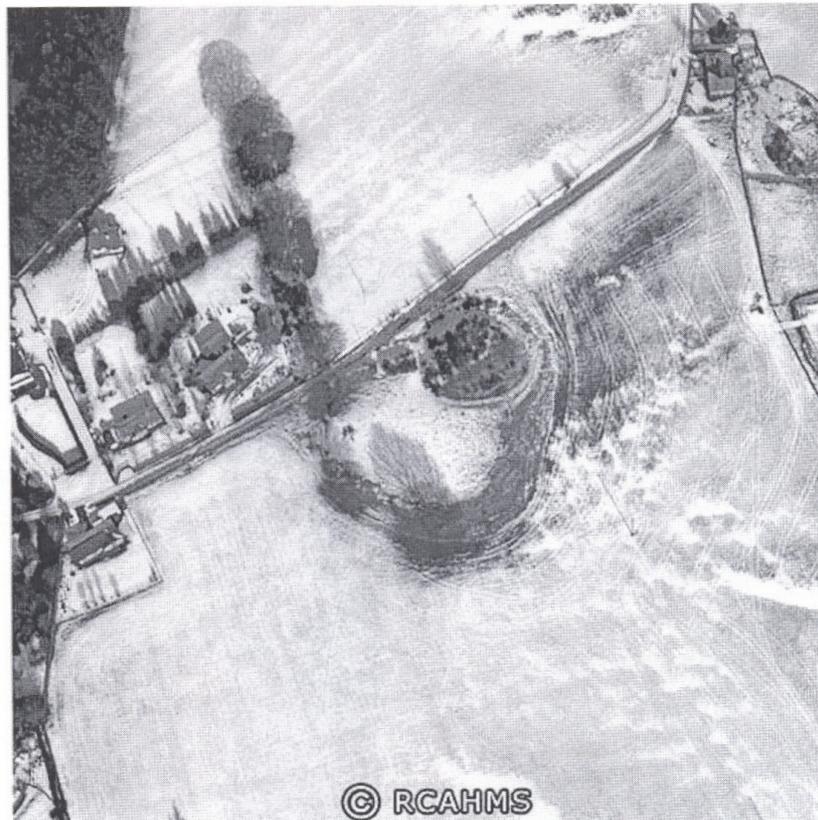
At the Annual General Meeting of the Clan Moffat UK & Eire, a resolution was passed urging that more information be sought regarding the Auldton. It would be satisfying to either confirm or refute the notion that it might be associated with William de Monte Alto. This would be obtained by seeking dating evidence from the monument or its surroundings. It would also be useful to ascertain the present state of preservation of the monument, to determine whether or not it is at risk from encroaching vegetation, or the destructive activity of badger, and if so what measures might be needed to consolidate it.

Such investigation can only be obtained with permission of the Land-Owner. Accordingly, we will seek to persuade him of the desirability of obtaining more information. It will be necessary to convince him that any disturbance of his land will be of the absolute minimum, and that he will be involved in no expense. Furthermore, since the Auldton is a Scheduled Monument, it is not possible to investigate it archaeologically unless Scottish Ministers were to give consent. However, the information may be obtainable from the non-scheduled area surrounding the site. One possibility would be through a systematic field walking project, which could provide a scattering of objects such as sherds of pottery or other man-made artefacts which would provide a date. Another possibility would be a resistivity survey, which would provide a map of walls or ditches in the vicinity. It will be necessary to enlist the support of the Dumfries Council, and the Moffat Museum in such an enterprise.

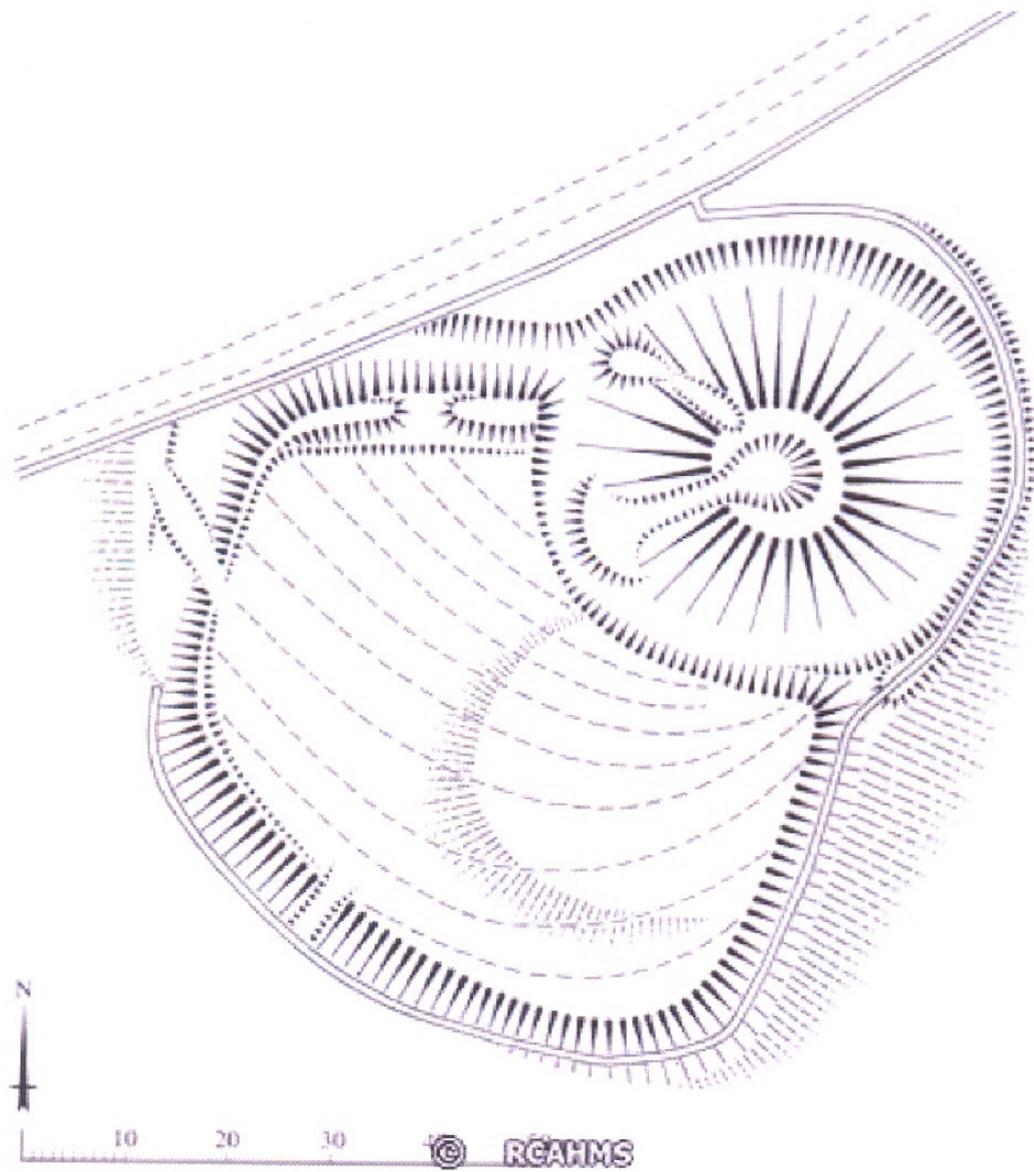


Photograph of the Auldton, August 2004

(Colin Moffat)



Aerial view of the Auldton, 1991



Schematic Diagram of the Auldton

APPENDIX (December 2005)

A meeting was held regarding possibilities of seeking further information on the Auldtoun. The participants first inspected the monument itself, and then conferred in a meeting. The photograph shows the participants regarding the motte from the ditch on its northern flank. The minutes of the meeting are appended on the following page.



The Auldtoun at Moffat. Left to right are Adrian Cox, Scottish Heritage; John Murray, Director, Moffat Museum; Margaret Anderson, Clan Moffat (sister of Clan Chief); Andrew Nicholson, Archaeologist, Dumfries & Galloway Council; Colin Moffat, Clan Moffat, Chairman of Auldtoun Project.

MINUTES

Meeting regarding the Auldton, Venue, Redacres, Moffat; Friday, 9 Dec 2005, 11:30

Participants: **Adrian Cox**, Scottish Heritage; **Andrew Nicholson**, Dumfries & Galloway Council; **John Murray**, Moffat Museum; **David Kennedy-Moffat**, Clan Moffat; **Margaret Anderson**, Clan Moffat; **Colin Moffat**, Clan Moffat.

Apologies: **Brian Walker**, Land-Owner; **Jane Brann**, Dumfries & Galloway Council

The participants inspected the site of the Monument, on a day that was cold, cloudy, but dry. Then re-convened at Redacres for a meeting. Chaired by Colin Moffat.

Evaluation of the state of the monument.

Questions to be considered were: Has it already been damaged, or is it at risk of damage from, children playing, encroachment of vegetation, action of animals, (e.g. badgers), erosion? If so, what should be done? Consolidation? Stabilisation? Is funding necessary? If so, are grants available? If so, how does one apply?

Adrian Cox summarised the condition of the site, which he felt had deteriorated over the years, and was still at risk. He felt that it is a site of great importance and that the issue of badger damage and vegetation clearance should be addressed as priority in order to prevent further damage to the motte. There appear to be several setts of badgers in the centre of the motte, and that their actions are eroding the centre severely. The bailey is in good condition. The schedule placed on the site includes the presumption that there should be no excavation of the site but there could be other types of non-invasive investigations carried out in order to date the site.

John Murray suggested that the trees and shrubs should be cleared as soon as possible, especially as any trees falling due to age or adverse weather will pull much of the earth away with them, causing serious damage.

Adrian Cox said that a grant could be applied for from Historic Scotland, but it would not cover the whole cost. It is important that the matter is raised with the Land-Owner. Andrew Nicholson pointed out that it may be possible for the Land-Owner to obtain further funding for this through the agri-environmental scheme. Colin Moffat thought that other funding avenues were also possible, not excluding donations deriving from Clan Moffat. In any event, the options presented to the Land-Owner must be such as to require from him the absolute minimum of resources in time, finance and facilities.

Adrian Cox will write to the Land-Owner (Mr. Brian Walker) suggesting a way forward for a management plan, and inviting him to propose a scheme of works that can be costed.

John Murray suggested that another way to raise funds would be to form a local organisation, in order to promote the interest of Moffat residents, who have been surprisingly generous for comparable projects in the past. There is also local knowledge available for clearing the vegetation with the minimum of disturbance.

Seeking further information regarding the monument, especially dating

Clan Moffat are taking a pro-active interest in the origin of the family, and its relation to the town of Moffat. It has been determined that the progenitor of the family was William de Monte Alto, who came to Annandale in 1097. By inference, he made his home somewhere in the region, and the Auldtoun is a primary candidate. Clan Moffat are desirous of finding evidence either supporting or refuting this hypothesis.

From the other viewpoint, the period of the Auldtoun is wholly unknown. It has, over time, been suggested that it might be a Saxon stronghold, a Norman castle, the seat of the Moffat laird, a chapel of the Knights Templar, the seat of the Johnstone family.

Primary questions requiring answer are: When was the Auldtoun built? During what period was the Auldtoun in use? When was the Auldtoun abandoned?

Bearing in mind that the Auldtoun is a scheduled Ancient Monument, the meeting was asked to consider whether or not there is there any viable strategy of examining the monument itself? (a) the motte, (b) the bailey, (c) the surrounding area. It was decided that a Field Walk would be less practical at the moment, because the field has recently been planted out to grass. A Field Walk could be undertaken at a critical moment in the future after the farmer has ploughed the land, but prior to his planting of crops. This would need liaison with the Land-Owner (or tenant), and quite possibly a rapid reaction.

Adrian Cox and Andrew Nicholson both agreed that a Resistivity Survey of the Bailey and a careful selection of the surrounding areas could yield much information. This could be done by hiring a professional team (but this might be expensive); or by having Clan Moffat organise volunteers. This would require experienced supervision, and both Adrian Cox and Andrew Nicholson, whilst being unable to contribute in their working capacity, felt they might be able to recommend suitable volunteers, not excluding themselves in a private capacity.

A resistivity Survey would provide evidence of walls and ditches. Also of possible post-holes or cess-pits. The best chance of dating the monument would be to excavate a post-hole or cess-pit – but this would be a subsequent project, with new justifications and permissions needing to be sought.

Andrew Nicholson told the meeting that Meg Todd's Motte, despite being a mere 200 meters to the south, was unrelated to the Auldtoun Motte. Meg Todd's Motte was Neolithic, whereas the Auldtoun Motte is Norman.

Actions: Adrian Cox will make written contact with the Land-Owner, suggesting a Management Plan. Margaret Anderson will inform the Land-Owner of the results of the meeting. Dependent on the results of consultations with the Land-Owner, Clan Moffat will prepare itself for future action.

It would seem likely that a subsequent Meeting would be useful in the time-frame of March or April 2006.