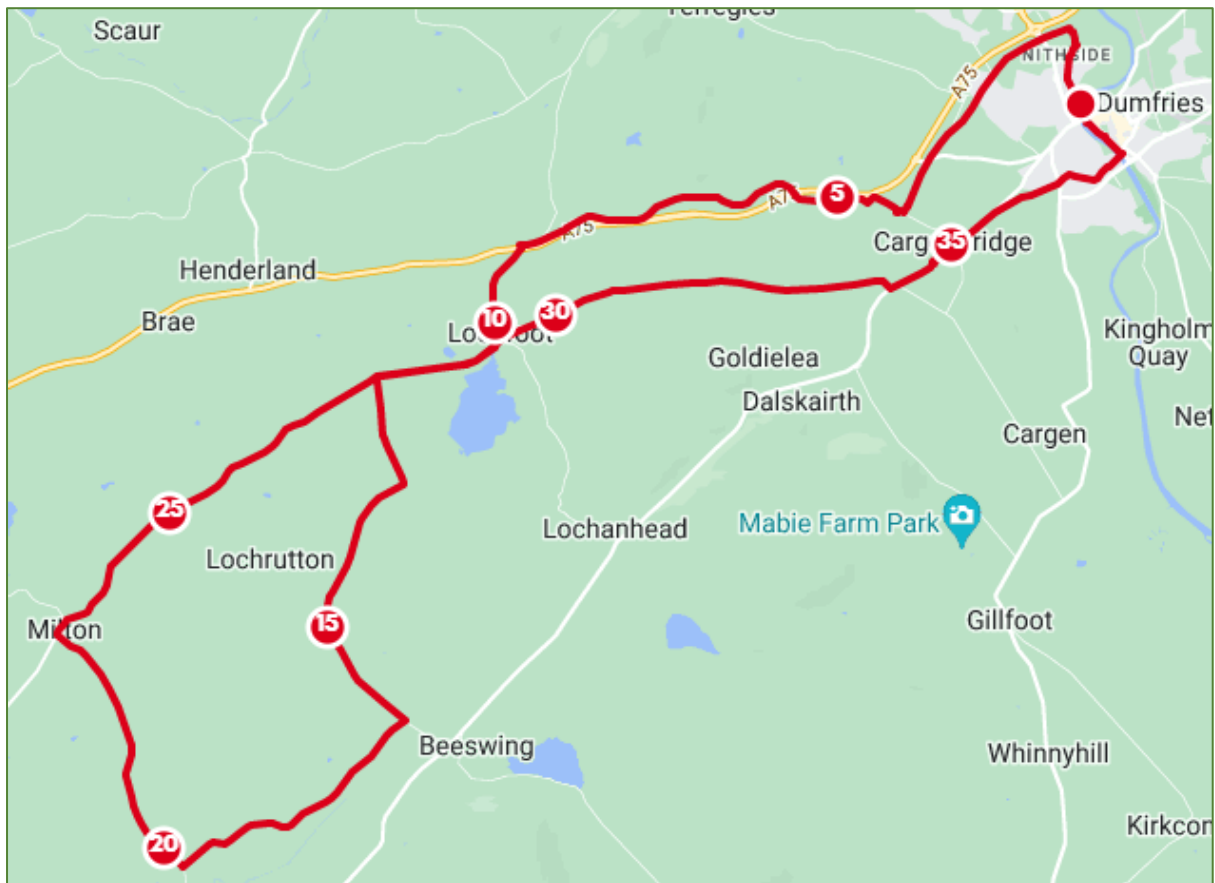


Drumcoltran Tower Curiosity Ride

Local history



Drumcoltran Tower in Kirkgunzeon.

Our route takes us west from Dumfries to Lochfoot and Lochrutton Loch before heading south to the rolling hills of Kirkgunzeon and the impressive sixteenth century tower at Drumcoltran.

A hill 'fort' at Drumcoltran takes us back to the Bronze Age and we trip over a 19th century murder. We take a glance at the history of the parish of Kirkgunzeon which is inextricably linked with the history of the tower.

Drumcoltran Tower Curiosity Ride

Local history



Drumcoltran Tower

Drumcoltran Tower dates from the mid-16th century and comprises a plain rectangular block with a projecting staircase wing. It was a strategic location commanding the main road from Dumfries to Dalbeattie.

The church minister, writing about the parish in 1793, dismissed the '*Tower of Drumcultran*' as '*not so very ancient as to deserve any particular description*'. Mind you the same minister also thought that '*the vestiges of three Roman camps, and a Druidical temple*' were unremarkable antiquities.



Drumcoltran wasn't the main stronghold in the parish. That status was accorded to Corrah Castle, closer to what is now the village of Kirkgunzeon.

Troubled times

It is indicative of the times that in 1535 the Scottish Parliament decreed that: -

"every landed man shall build a sufficient Barmkin (a defensive enclosure) upon his lands for the protection and defence of him, his tenants and their goods in troublesome times, with a Tower in the same for himself if he thinks it expedient".

The Laird

The laird of Drumcoltran, Edward Maxwell (a younger son of Edward Maxwell of Hills Tower in Lochrutton) is believed to be responsible for the construction of the tower.

This was at the time that the Maxwell clan gained control of most of the land in Kirkgunzeon. It was also during the troubled times of the Reformation in Scotland when Mary Queen of Scots was deposed. The Maxwells, who were Marian supporters, being on the losing side needed to protect their wealth and lands.



This is an 18th century view of Hills Tower near Lochrutton, also constructed by the same Maxwell family. Its Barmkin survives to this day. The tower at Drumcoltran is smaller and much plainer in style than that at Hills.

Drumcoltran Tower is clearly marked as '*Drumcauran*' on Pont's 16th century survey of Kirkcudbrightshire.

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Defence

There is a gun-loop dated to about 1570 protecting the stair tower, but the core tower is reckoned to have been constructed in about 1550. The staircase was possibly also a later addition. There is no fancy stonework: the walls are rounded at the corners because this was the easiest and cheapest construction method.

Upstairs Downstairs

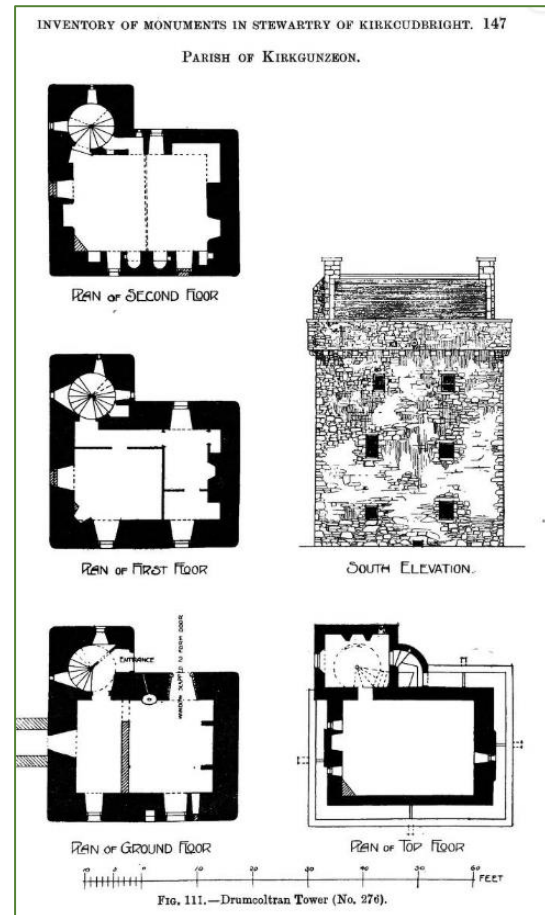


The vaulted cellar on the ground floor had a kitchen fireplace and a slop-sink that drained through the south wall.



The first floor was the laird's hall, heated by a large fireplace.

The second floor was divided into two bed chambers, each with a fireplace and a latrine. The latrine is visible externally in the centre of the south wall. There was also a recess to house a wall safe.

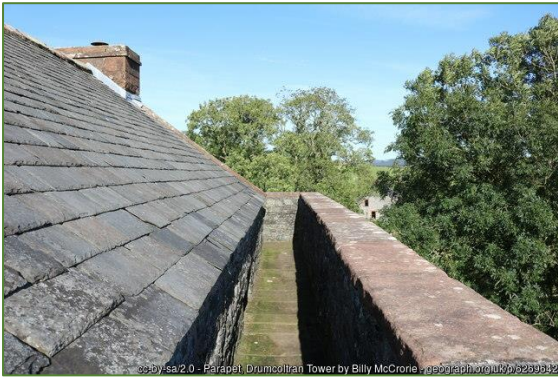


View south from the parapet

At the top of the stairs there was a small wooden floored watch chamber, which might have also been used as a study. The tower's projecting parapet walk, supported by corbels, extends around three sides of the roof providing excellent vantage points.

Drumcoltran Tower Curiosity Ride

Local history



The parapet

Doorway message

There was an inscription in Latin on a panel above the tower entrance.

It translates to: -

*'Keep hidden what is secret;
speak little;
be truthful;
avoid wine;
remember death;
be merciful.'*



Decline

Much of the interior was re-organised and the windows enlarged in the 18th century when the farmhouse was built.

The Barmkin (Scots for a defensive enclosure or courtyard) was probably demolished at this time, although it is possible that some of the old walls remain as part of the farm buildings.

The tower used to be connected to the farmhouse and was used as accommodation for farm labourers and then as a farm store

The tower was restored in the 1950s by the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works, the predecessor of Historic Scotland and is now a scheduled monument.

For some excellent photos of Drumcoltran Tower including pictures of the interior

[Drumcoltran Tower Feature Page on Undiscovered Scotland](#)

Link to Historic Scotland page for Drumcoltran Tower

[Drumcoltran Tower | Public Body for Scotland's Historic Environment](#)



Drumcoltran Tower Curiosity Ride

Local history



View towards Camphill
from Drumcoltran Tower

Drumcoltran 'Fort'

Behind Drumcoltran to the northwest there is a hill called Camphill (also known as Drumcoltran Hill). On the slopes of this hill there were large earthworks consisting of circular ditches and ramparts believed by antiquarians to be the remains of a hill fort.

Archaeologists now think the position and irregular shape indicate that it was a settlement and not a fortification. Its location meant that it had super views looking southwards and to the west.

The interior of the enclosure measured 202 feet from north to south and 189 feet from east to west.

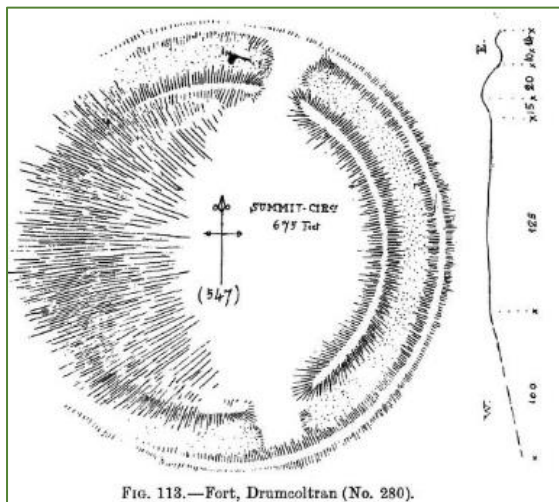


FIG. 113.—Fort, Drumcoltran (No. 280).

Bronze age swords

In 1837 a hoard of swords from the Bronze Age were discovered at Drumcoltran 'fort'. There were a dozen blades. To be accurate, they are Rapiers. With light blades, two cutting edges and a sharp point they are smaller than Sword blades. This suggests that they are from the Middle Bronze Age before new technology allowed longer blades to be made.

The Rapiers were used more for thrusting rather than slashing, as with a sword blade. Since bronze is relatively soft the blades were easily damaged in use. The notches on these blades show that these rapiers had been well used. It is believed that these rapiers may have come from Ireland. Some of these rapiers can be seen in Dumfries Museum.

[RAPIER BLADE, DRUMCOLTRAN
\(FUTUREMUSEUM.CO.UK\)](http://futuremuseum.co.uk)

Drumcoltran name

It is tempting to believe that the placename Drum-Coltran is derived, in a corrupted form, from the name of the Holm-Cultram Abbey that once leased Kirkgunzeon in ancient times.

A more plausible explanation is that it is a topographical reference with Gaelic origins. The prefix 'Drum' meaning a 'Ridge' or 'Hill', which is evident from the location, is fairly certain.

The derivation of the second element, which will have been spelt in many ways over the centuries, is much more nebulous.

One antiquarian suggested that Drumcoltran means 'Dark Hill' from 'Drum' and 'Coltra'.

Another suggested 'Fort on the Back of the Ridge'; from 'Cul' meaning 'Back' and 'Rath' for 'Fort'.

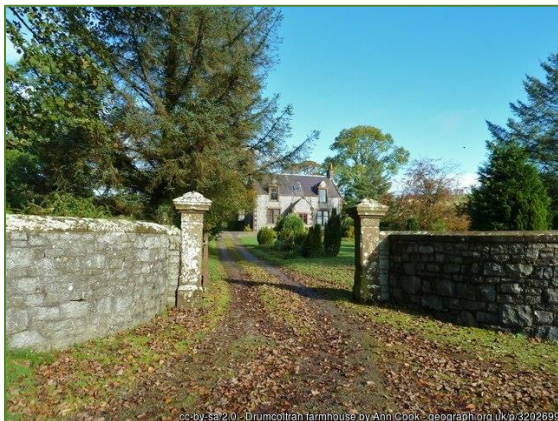
Drumcoltran Tower Curiosity Ride

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It is a hint, albeit fanciful, that there might have already been a fortification here before the 16th century tower was constructed. It has been suggested that the Abbey had a fort here to protect its property. Or it could be that the farm/estate took the name of the hill on which the Bronze Age 'fort' was located.

Drumcoltran for sale

In 1754 a notice advertising the sale of the lands of Drumcoltran, worth £25 Sterling rental, appeared in the Caledonian Mercury, the leading newspaper of its day in Scotland. The sale by Roup (auction) was to take place at the premises of a wine merchant in Dumfries.



In 1790 the Lands and Estate of Drumcoltran were up for sale by Roup. The estate consisted of 417 Scotch acres (equivalent to about 542 English acres) comprising five farms including Drumcoltran farm itself. The total rental for the five farms was £140 Sterling.

The advert referred to the proximity to the port at the 'Dub-of-Hafs', which was Dalbeattie's up-river port, now long gone (the equivalent of Dumfries' Dock Quay).



Murder near Drumcoltran

Looking south from Drumcoltran, over the pleasant green fields to the hills beyond, it is hard to imagine that this tranquil scene was the location of a brutal murder, two hundred years ago.



*From Drumcoltran to Drumjohn Farm
The murder scene*

Shot in the back

According to newspaper reports of the day in April 1807 a chap called Williamson, a Topsman (cattle drover) was on his way from Dumfries to Kirkcudbright.

Drumcoltran Tower Curiosity Ride

Local history

Williamson had stopped in Kirkgunzeon to look at some cattle on the Drumjohn farm, which we can see from Drumcoltran.

He was shot in the back, straight through his heart. The murderer then robbed him of a watch, a purse, some silver coins and an £800 bill (like a large denomination banknote).

Pursuit

The farmer heard the shot and saw the murderer run away across the fields. He sent his son and servant on horseback in pursuit while he raised the alarm.

Very soon the posse had tracked the murderer down. He was hiding in a ditch in a wood near Lochend (now known as Beeswing). The stolen property was found on him. He was also carrying two pistols, one of which was loaded.

The Murderer

It transpired that the murderer was a man called Maitland Smith, originally from Penpont, an erstwhile failed businessman who had latterly been working as a stocking-maker in Dumfries.

He had fallen into debt and had embezzled funds. Desperate (as well as stupid) it seems he decided that robbery was the solution to his problems.

It is likely that he identified Williamson as a well-to-do target at the cattle market in Dumfries. He then inveigled his way into Williamson's company at the Toll Bar on the turnpike road at Cargen Bridge (which we will pass on our way back).

Convicted

The captured man was taken off to Kirkcudbright gaol and then tried in Dumfries in September when he was sentenced to death by hanging.

The sentence was carried out on the 21st of October at Dumfries Gaol (which stood at

the corner of Buccleuch Street and Irish Street). It would have been a public event watched by a large crowd.

Hanged

Maitland Smith, exhibiting '*Christian fortitude*', was allowed to address the spectators. He acknowledged the justice of the sentence but denied other crimes that had been imputed to him. He asked that the public be sympathetic to his wife and children.

His final words were "*I sit down here with as much pleasure as I ever did in any convivial company*".



View from Drumcoltran towards the memorial

Memorial

The local people of Kirkgunzeon erected a small granite memorial in the field where the murder took place. '*Williamson's Stone*' is marked on the Ordnance Survey map. The inscription reads '*A.W. shot here 1807*'. A death mask of Maitland Smith is in Dumfries Museum.

Drumcoltran Tower Curiosity Ride

Local history

To Kirkgunzeon



Road from Lochfoot

Drumcoltran Tower is located in the centre of the parish of Kirkgunzeon. The history of the tower and the parish are inextricably linked.

On our way to Drumcoltran, as we cycle south down the lane from the Military Road, we are skirting the eastern boundary of Kirkgunzeon parish.

Once we come within sight of the village of Beeswing in the distance, under the shadow of Louis hill, we enter the hamlet of Killywhan. We are now in the parish of Kirkgunzeon.

Killywan Station

Until the 1950s there was a railway station in little Killywhan to serve the villagers of Beeswing. Kirkgunzeon village had its own railway station only 2 miles further down the line.

This railway line was the Castle Douglas and Dumfries Railway line opened as a

single-track railway in 1859 and operated by the Glasgow and South Western Railway. Before motorised transport on the roads came along the railway would have been great for the farmers to get their produce to market.

In 1860 a local resident could hop on the train to Dumfries at 7:11 am and be in Dumfries 24 minutes later (or in Glasgow by 11:30 am)

Kirkgunzeon station closed in 1950, Killywhan station in 1959 and the whole 'Port Road' railway line to Portpatrick closed in 1965.

We turn right down the lane towards Drumcoltran, but just one garden length further down the road to Beeswing the line of the old railway track can still be easily discerned on either side. It is now a straight as a die farm track (crying out to be a cycle path :-).



Killywhan

*Turn off to Drumcoltran
Site of railway station in background*

Killywhan sport

In Victorian times shooting was a favourite pastime of the gentry. As an example: in one day's 'sport' **120 hares**, 8 brace of grouse, one woodcock and a number of rabbits were shot by the laird, the Hon. M.C. Maxwell of Terregles, and six guests on his land near Killywhan Station (Dumfries Courier, 1863).

Drumcoltran Tower Curiosity Ride

Local history

To Drumcoltran



As we cycle down the lane towards Drumcoltran we are entering deeper into the parish of Kirkgunzeon.

Cumbrian connection

The earliest surviving record that refers to Kirkgunzeon is a charter from the 12th century (c1160-74) when the Lord of Galloway agreed to lease the lands of 'Kirkwinnyn' to the monks of Holm Cultram Abbey in Cumberland.

'Kirkwinnyn' was probably an area larger than the parish of Kirkgunzeon.

This wasn't a gift of land to a religious order to build a chapel or such like. This was a business deal.

The Abbey, like monasteries across Britain, was an enterprise. The monks already ran large sheep farms in Cumbria, and they wanted Kirkgunzeon as a place to graze more flocks of sheep so they could expand in the profitable wool industry. Their flocks possibly numbered thousands of sheep in size.

Cumbria in Scotland

Holm Cultram Abbey had only been founded ten or fifteen years before the Kirkgunzeon deal. At that time Cumbria was territory held by Scotland and the Cistercian monks who established the new abbey were from Melrose Abbey.



So began a two-hundred-year link with the abbey in Cumbria during which the thousands of acres of Kirkgunzeon were one gigantic sheep farm.

The Kirkgunzeon name

From the Kirkgunzeon community website.

"One of the things many people ask about is the name Kirkgunzeon, which is pronounced 'Kirkgunnion'.

Whilst 'Kirk' is common in place names, signifying the village was named after an early church, there is more debate about 'gunzeon'.

Some believe the early names of Kirkwinnyn or Kirkwinnyn indicate it was named for St Winning, others suggest it comes from Guinneain a Gaelic variant of the name 'Finnian' or 'Finian' thought to be St Finian of Moville in Ireland.

The explanation of the letter 'z' in the name is almost certainly that given for the occurrence of the letter in other Scottish names like Menzies.

At one time the alphabet used in Scotland included a letter 'yoch' which was written like a flat headed 'g'. When this letter fell out of use it was mistaken for a 'z' and written as such".

[COMMUNITY WEBSITE OF KIRKGUNZEON, DUMFRIES & GALLOWAY, SCOTLAND](http://www.kirkgunzeon.com)

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Local history

Lord Herries

In 1368 King David (son of Robert the Bruce) granted the land of Kirkgunzeon to one of his supporters, John Herries, a Frenchman.

Herries built his castle in Terregles, so Kirkgunzeon wasn't home to its lord. Instead, he was an absentee landlord, and the land was rented out to tenant farmers.

The Maxwells

In the 16th century, on the death of the 3rd Lord Herries of Terregles (and Kirkgunzeon) the Herries male line failed. The lands and title passed to Sir John Maxwell who had married Agnes Herries (for love of course, not her inheritance).

Sir John played a part in a key moment of Scottish history. He led Mary Queen of Scot's cavalry at the fateful Battle of Langside and after the defeat he took Mary to safety. First to his home at Terregles and then possibly a night in Corrah Castle in Kirkgunzeon, before she spend her final hours in Scotland at Dundrennan Abbey.

The farmland in the parish totalled about 8,000 acres. Back in the days of the monks most of this would have been pasture land for sheep but by the 18th century about 3,000 acres had been converted into arable land and by the mid-19th century this had doubled again.

Lowland Clearances

The church minister in 1845 reported that formerly there used to be several cottages on every farm occupied by farm labourers but as the Agricultural Improvements continued these had been swept away.

It was also the policy of the Maxwell landowner to turf out tenant farmers when their lease ended so he could merge several small farms into a large farm.

Kirkgunzeon in 1842

"The surface of the parish is, in general, hilly; yet contains a considerable proportion of fine flat land.

The hills, the greater section of which ranges from north to south along the east, are, in some instances, heathy and fit only for sheep pasturage, but, in other instances, are covered with soil and verdure, and serve either for tillage or for the feeding of black cattle.

The lowlands are, for the most part, very fertile; but, till improved by draining and the removing of obstructions, were rendered in a great degree impracticable to the plough by swamps, little stony hills, and large isolated blocks of stone".

Though cultivated and enclosed, and quite lovely enough in the eyes of the mere farmer, even these best parts of the parish have a chilled and naked appearance, nearly destitute of trees, and chequered with thin stripes of stone dyke as a succedaneum for the lively hedge.

TOPOGRAPHICAL, STATISTICAL, AND HISTORICAL GAZETTEER OF SCOTLAND, 1842.

Kirkgunzeon, even to the present day, has remained a very rural parish and the village that grew up around the church and mill was tiny. The present church building was built in 1790 and replaced a chapel that dated back to pre-Reformation times.

Many thanks to the Cycling Dumfries committee members who reconnoitred, mapped and led the Drumcoltran Curiosity Ride.

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Any suggestions or corrections to this local history jumble are most welcome, Jim

jimmackison@btinternet.com