



Europe's Medieval Pasts: The Scottish Perspective

Discussion on the Scottish Burgh Survey

Summary of Discussions on 25 June 2020 by Dr Megan Kasten

Following the presentations by Pat Dennison, Simon Stronach, and David Caldwell, the digital 'floor' was opened to wider discussion amongst panellists and participants. Derek Hall and many others agreed that the Scottish Burgh Survey is and was a vital tool used by heritage professionals, often on a daily basis. The discussion centred around three main themes through which the Burgh Survey could be improved: 1) online accessibility, 2) a value-focused approach to future work, especially including community work, and 3) a more holistic approach which takes both the urban and rural medieval past into account.

One of the primary concerns of the webinar participants was that the earlier Burgh Surveys are not easily accessible online. While many could remember seeing them digitised somewhere, it was difficult to find them. Mary Macleod pointed out that in addition to their minimal online presence, the lack of publicity for the earlier versions made them less available to and underutilised by planners. It is possible to find entries for the Burgh Surveys on Canmore by searching their collections for 'Historic Scotland. Scottish Burgh Survey,' though this needs to be accessed using Microsoft Edge (or its equivalent on other operating systems) to download the files. Peter McKeague has since acted on this and is endeavouring to make it more easily accessible/findable.

Another point of discussion that was highlighted during Simon Stronach's presentation was that the Burgh Survey was not designed to emphasise the social value of the medieval resources. The development of community interest in their medieval pasts was often an unintended consequence of the Burgh survey. In some areas, the communities have continued to take on research themselves, as is the case with Dunfermline. Ingrid Shearer pointed out that gaining access to local

knowledge and information happens instinctively for some researchers. However, often community projects accrue volunteers that are self-selecting, are already interested or have the confidence to approach the archaeologist. To reach a wider range of people in the community, the project needs to be designed and structured to address the communities' specific needs. While going to the communities and listening is critical, it also depends on social dynamics of the community.

Finally, several participants pointed out that the medieval pasts of rural Scotland were not addressed with the Scottish Burgh Survey. Mary Macleod stated that while the Burgh Survey raised the profile of urban medieval archaeology with non-archaeologists, this was to the detriment of non-monumental rural medieval archaeology. The value of the Burgh Survey should be promoting a more holistic approach to medieval archaeology, rather than swinging between urban and rural. Piers Dixon pointed out that the Scotland's Rural Pasts project showed that there was public interest, the question becomes how to develop that interest.

Overall, while the Scottish Burgh Surveys are a useful resource, they are in need of updating. The first and second series were old-fashioned in that they were primarily focused with describing and assessing the medieval remains and features of a town; not much thought was put into how the evidence could be used to enhance the present-day communities. Future assessments should be community-oriented rather than geographically-circumscribed to incorporate local knowledge and experience and generate social value, as Pat Dennison did in her work. The original Burgh Surveys were completed on short time-scales, which Simon and Ingrid pointed out would not work as well with communities-focused work. It is necessary to build relationships with and become embedded in the community, as these long-term projects lead to more powerful benefits. Ingrid recommended that evaluation of such a project should be built in from start to finish, so that a community's relationship with the place, the archaeology, the history, medievalism could be understood and demonstrated. If we were to reimagine the Burgh Surveys or revitalise them, it would be necessary to draw out the value of long-term commitment to convince decision makers.

At the conclusion of the webinar, it was suggested that a major medieval conference would be a valuable way to discuss these issues and identify ways forward. While there were some glitches experienced during the event, several participants said they preferred the digital format, as it was more accessible to those working in the commercial sector.

Questions and comments submitted to the Zoom Q&A by participants

1. The early surveys were vital for those of us who were part of the SDD funded urban monitoring project in the mid 1980's.
2. We (SUAT) later produced a series of archaeological updates to some of the early surveys (St Andrews, North Berwick for example). This was done on the back of the explosion of development in many Scottish burghs. The benefit of properly considered watching briefs became clear. It also highlighted the need for such surveys to be 'live' and updatable documents.
3. Why are the (historic) burgh surveys not available online as a resource?
4. Given the push for archaeological research frameworks why have the (historic) burgh surveys not been adopted as proto-frameworks for burgh ARFs to nest below the regional ARFs?
5. Can we recognise the independent burgh surveys that have been researched and published outwith the SBS vehicle - often delivered with community outreach & engagement.
6. A few other thoughts. Engagement with LA planning departments is vital.
7. Online availability of existing surveys would be useful. The concept of the burgh survey changed after local govt reorganisation. The smaller medieval burghs tend to have been ignored (Cromarty, Auchterarder for example). What will happen with future urban regenerations, should we be engaging early on with Townscape Heritage Initiatives?
8. Surely the critical question on live use in development management is that of current archaeologists in commercial practice and local authority curation?
9. Discussing accessibility to volumes of those sat in institutions with libraries - what about the rest of us ... why not open access, esp Series 1 and 2!
10. Look at some of Series 3 SBS like Mauchline where there had been (effectively) no archaeological intervention. Did the SBS not lose its way into trying to pacify ignored regions rather than targeting those burghs that needed urgent support to assist development management?
11. If we're looking at CAA as a parallel for SBS to have grown into ... well these are delivered by LAs so they they have subscribed to their findings when they undertake development management. Should this discussion now not be led by ALGAO?