



**The Galloway Picts Project:  
Excavation and Survey of Trusty's Hill**

**Summary Report**



[www.gallowaypicts.com](http://www.gallowaypicts.com)



# The Galloway Picts Project: Excavation and Survey of Trusty's Hill

## Summary Report

**On behalf of:** The Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History  
and Antiquarian Society

**NGR:** NX 5889 5601

**Project Number:** 3309

**Report by:** Ronan Toolis & Christopher Bowles

**Illustrations:** Gillian McSwan & Fiona Jackson

**Date:** 24/10/2012



Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History  
and Antiquarian Society (founded 1862)



Supported by  
**The National Lottery**  
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



heritage  
lottery fund

Society of Antiquaries  
of Scotland



Royal  
Commission on the  
Ancient and  
Historical  
Monuments of  
Scotland

**GUARD**  
**ARCHAEOLOGY**



## Contents

### Illustrations

Illustration 1: Site Location	4
Illustration 2: Nucleated Fort layout of Trusty's Hill	6
Illustration 3: Topographic plan of Trusty's Hill overlaid with 2012 excavation trenches	8
Illustration 4: 2012 Laser Scan Survey of Inscribed Symbols at Trusty's Hill	11

### Plates

Plate 1: Pictish Inscribed Stone	5
Plate 2: Volunteers excavating the vitrified rampart and associated occupation deposits at Trusty's Hill	5
Plate 3: Pictish Inscribed Stone after cleaning	10



Based on Ordnance Survey maps © Crown Copyright.

Illustration 1: Site Location.



Trusty's Hill, located just outside Gatehouse of Fleet (Illus 1) is conspicuous amongst the hillforts of Galloway in that it contains a Pictish inscribed stone, depicting a 'z-rod and double disc' symbol and a 'sea beast and sword' symbol (Plate 1). These Pictish Carvings are unique in south-west Scotland and has, until now, made Trusty's Hill one of the most enigmatic archaeological sites in Scotland.



*Plate 1: Pictish Inscribed Stone.*



*Plate 2: Volunteers excavating the vitrified rampart and associated occupation deposits at Trusty's Hill.*

A previous excavation of the site was undertaken by Charles Thomas in 1960, following an invitation from the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society. However, while a vitrified rampart around the summit was confirmed and occupation evidence, notably animal bones, charcoal and the lower half of a rotary quern was recorded, no evidence was encountered that could date the occupation of the fort; to demonstrate the status of its inhabitants; or to explicitly link the occupation of the fort with the carvings.

As part of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society, the Society launched the Galloway Picts Project in 2012 in order to recover, for modern analysis, the environmental and dating evidence not recovered in the previous excavation and so enhance understanding of the archaeological context of the inscribed stone at Trusty's Hill as a means of finding out what Pictish symbols are doing at this small hillfort in Galloway, so far from the Pictish heartlands in the north-east of Scotland, and if the carvings are indeed genuine

The Galloway Picts Project got underway with a GPS topographic survey of Trusty's Hill by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), producing for the first time a measured detailed plan of this Scheduled Ancient Monument, necessary preparation for the subsequent excavation to allow accurate recording of the trenches and the features. The topographic survey updates the measured sketch plan that Thomas produced during the previous excavation, providing a modern accurate plan of the site that demonstrates that Trusty's Hill comprises a fortified citadel around the summit of a craggy hill with a number of lesser enclosures looping out from the summit along lower lying terraces and crags of the hill (Illus 2). It therefore recognisably conforms to the definition of a nuclear fort, a type of fortified, high status settlement that emerged in Scotland in the post-Roman period.

The archaeological excavation was undertaken by 65 volunteers in collaboration with GUARD Archaeology Ltd (Plate 2). A daily guided tour was promoted through posters distributed across the region and further afield, and a project web site, [www.gallowaypicts.com](http://www.gallowaypicts.com), was set up prior to the excavation and continues to be updated. A total of 184 visitors were given guided tours during the excavation. A further 14 visitors made their way to the site during the subsequent laser scan survey. The artefacts from the excavation were presented and explained to 11 Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland who visited GUARD Archaeology Ltd's Finds Laboratory on Saturday 9 June, the weekend immediately after the completion of the excavation. The interim results of the excavation were presented at the DGNHAS 150th Anniversary Conference in Dumfries on Saturday 8 September,





Illustration 2: Nucleated Fort layout of Trusty's Hill.



which was attended by 105 people. The artefacts from the excavation were further presented and explained to 9 members of the public, of all ages, who attended the GUARD Archaeology Office Open Day on Saturday 15 September, a Scottish Archaeology Month Event. Furthermore, between May and November 2012, there was coverage of the Galloway Picts Project in:

- BBC Reporting Scotland
- BBC Radio Scotland local news bulletins
- Galloway Gazette
- Scotsman.com
- Scottish Group of the Institute for Archaeologists Newsletter
- British Archaeology Magazine
- History Scotland Blog
- Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Newsletter
- Dumfries Courier
- Love Archaeology Magazine
- BBC Radio Scotland News
- Galloway News
- Daily Mail
- International news websites
- Past Horizons Magazine
- Current Archaeology Magazine
- History Scotland Magazine
- The Southern Reporter
- Archaeology Scotland Magazine

While specialist analysis has still to be completed, it is clear that the assemblage of artefacts recovered during the 2012 excavation has considerably enhanced the archaeological context of the Pictish Carvings at Trusty's Hill. As well as evidence of domestic occupation, such as the animal bones and spindle whorl, and evidence for leather working, such as the socketed iron tool, there was also evidence of high status metalworking, in the form of moulds, crucibles, heating trays, furnace lining, hearth bottoms and a possible crucible stand. Interestingly, a samian pottery sherd, dating to the 1st/2nd centuries AD had evidently been reused; it had been rubbed down on one edge, a common practice on native sites, and sometimes associated with metalworking often at periods later than the Roman period. High status metalwork itself, such as the copper alloy disc brooch and a variety of iron pins, were also recovered. Together with the E ware sherd, which indicates that the inhabitants of Trusty's Hill had access to luxury goods from the Continent during the 6th/7th centuries AD, the range of metalworking evidence suggests that Trusty's Hill was an important metalworking site with access to significant resources and craftworkers. The quality of the material assemblage appears to be comparable with other high status sites in south-west Scotland, such as the Mote of Mark, Whithorn and Buiston Crannog, and royal sites in Northern Britain such as Dunadd, Dumbarton Rock and Edinburgh Castle Rock. The quantity of material may be less than recovered from many of these other sites, but it should be noted that only 2.6% of Trusty's Hill was exposed during the 2012 excavations.

The overwhelming majority of the artefacts were recovered from Trenches 4 and 5, on the east and west sides of the central summit respectively (Illus 3). The stratigraphy of contexts within both these excavation trenches was remarkably consistent. In both cases, the collapsed remains of the ramparts sealed dark soil occupation layers that abutted the rampart and sealed an underlying construction layer. These represent securely stratified archaeological contexts for the artefactual assemblage, spanning the period from the construction of the timber-laced ramparts to the destruction of those same ramparts.

The partial excavation of the ramparts on the east and west sides of the summit also revealed consistent evidence for the timber sub-structure of the rampart in the form of large upright post-holes. It was observed that the distance of 1.6 m between the two upright post-holes in the rampart on the east side was similar to the distance between small scoops evident in the rampart surveyed along the north-west side of the summit (Illus 3), indicating that the timber structure exposed in Trenches 4 and 5 can be applied to the remainder of the unexcavated rampart.

The evidence of in-situ vitrified stone from the core of the rampart on both sides of the summit, along with the observation of vitrified stone in an exposed scarp on the north side and the spread of collapsed vitrified stone across the rock-cut basin on the south-east side of Trusty's Hill, indicates vitrification of the ramparts along the entirety of the summit rampart. The unburnt outer stone face of



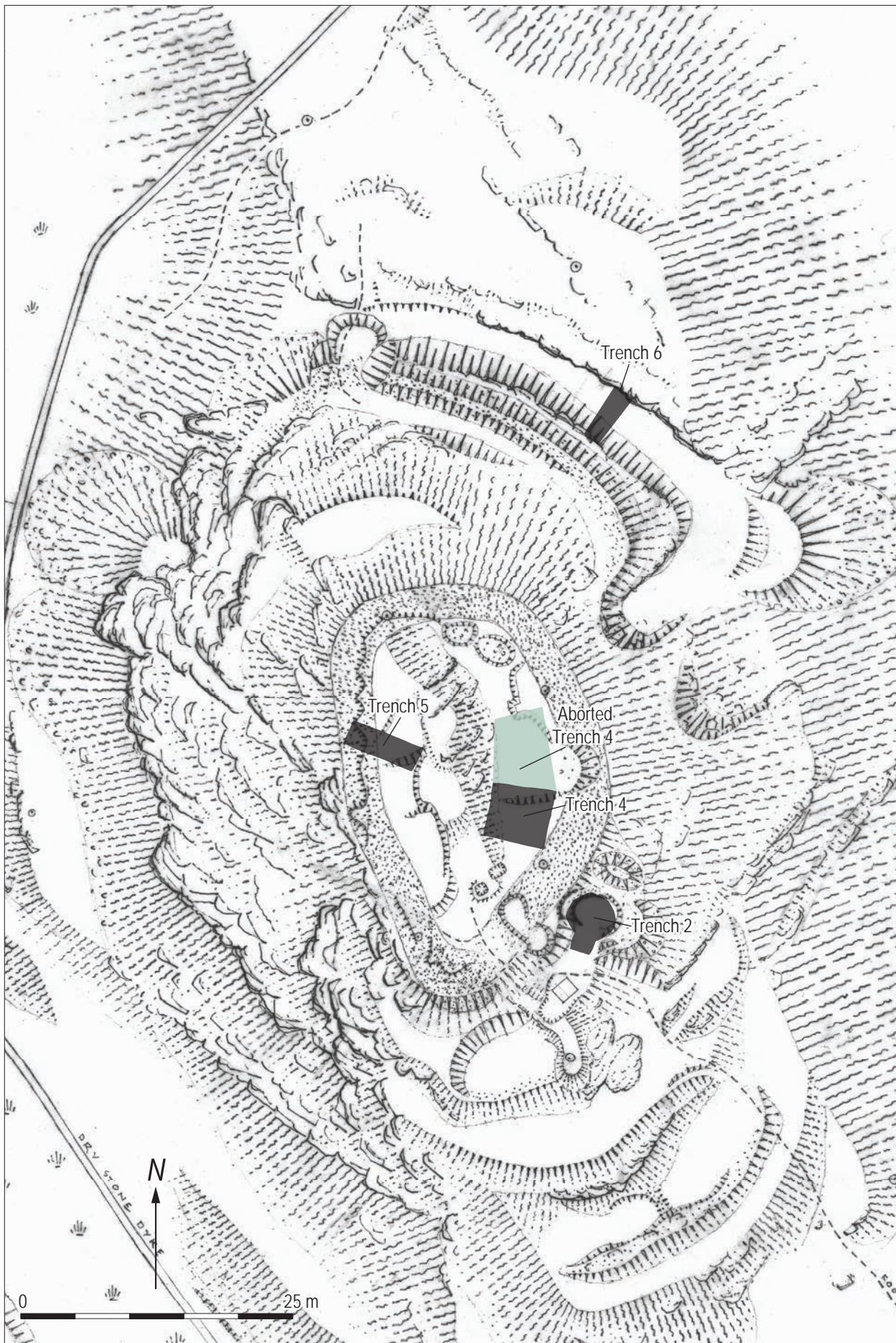


Illustration 3: Topographic plan of Trusty's Hill overlaid with 2012 excavation trenches.





the rampart on the east side had collapsed separately prior to the burning of the rubble core, probably as an attempt to deliberately boost draughts to the burning of the timber sub-structure of the rampart. The only apparent remains of material employed to burn the ramparts comprised the charcoal rich dark soil occupation deposits abutting the interior face of the ramparts on both the east and west sides of the summit, which probably represent the accumulation of detritus during the occupation and destruction of the site. The scale and method of setting the ramparts alight at Trusty's Hill unequivocally demonstrates the spectacular and systematic, symbolic and practical, destruction of the defences after capture by assailants; the magnitude of resources required to achieve such destruction indicates that Trusty's Hill demise was the result of warfare.

The radiocarbon dating indicates initial occupation of Trusty's Hill around 400 BC. However, it is unlikely that the summit rampart originates to this time, as an early sixth-early seventh century AD date was obtained from the construction layer beneath the rampart on the east side and another early sixth - mid seventh century AD date was taken from the vitrified rampart itself on the west side. Rather, it is more likely that the Iron Age material, such as the radiocarbon dated charcoal and glass bead fragment found within the foundation trench of the vitrified rampart on the west side, is residual, probably having been swept up from the interior of the site and laid out as a bed of material for the timber frame and stone core of the rampart. The Iron Age occupation of Trusty's Hill appears to have been followed by a hiatus before the hill was re-occupied in the early fifth to early sixth century AD and fortified with a timber-laced rampart around its summit between the early sixth and mid seventh century AD. This rampart was destroyed probably around the end of this period in the early-mid seventh century AD. Furthermore, the date of AD 661-773 taken from the lowest fill of the rock-cut basin opposite the Pictish Carvings demonstrates that the basin derives from at least the last phase of occupation and that use of this feature may have continued after the destruction of the fort.

While the archaeomagnetic dating was unfortunately unsuccessful, the radiocarbon dating corresponds quite closely with the bulk of the artefacts, such as the E-Ware pottery sherd, the metalwork and crucible sherds which are predominantly late fifth-early seventh centuries AD, but with some residual Iron Age artefacts, such as a glass bead fragment present. Interestingly, this broadly accords with Charles Thomas' interpretation of two phases of occupation; that of an original Iron Age site re-occupied in the fifth - early seventh centuries AD. The likely date of the destruction of the ramparts at Trusty's Hill, in the early-mid seventh century AD, may possibly correspond with the likely date for the destruction of the Mote of Mark further to the east and raises the possibility that the destruction of these two sites was the result of a single campaign of warfare across the entire region, instead of discrete episodes of localised conflict.

The 2012 excavations reached a greater depth than the 1960 excavations, demonstrating that the occupation deposits encountered in Trench 4 in 1960 overlay the collapsed rampart and may perhaps be better characterised as post-destruction deposits, while the stone rampart encountered in Trench 5 in 1960 was in fact the interior rubble collapse of the rampart rather than the rampart itself. The recovery of a significant number and quality of artefacts from the backfill of Trench 4, notably the disc brooch, also demonstrated that the 1960 excavation had not recovered the full artefactual assemblage contained within the deposits it encountered. However, this was almost certainly due to the scarce resources and torrential rain that the 1960 excavation endured throughout its duration. On the one day during the 2012 excavation during which it rained, it was noted that it was exceedingly difficult to observe artefacts in the now sticky dark soil deposits, even when sieving. Fortunately, the 2012 excavation was overwhelmingly conducted in ideal sunny dry conditions, which, together with greater volunteer and professional supervisory resources and the employment of a large dry sieving table for almost the entirety of the excavated soil deposits, maximised the recovery of artefacts. Other than topsoil, the only excavated soil deposits not sieved on site during the excavation, were those deposits taken for palaeoenvironmental assessment. The subsequent process of wet-sieving, sorting and assessment recovered several important artefacts, including clay mould fragments and the glass bead, again maximising the recovery of artefacts from the 2012 excavation.

The excavation of Trench 6, however, did not recover any new evidence (Illus 3). Indeed, it was difficult to reconcile the single uniform deposit encountered within the rock-cut ditch with the stratified deposits exposed during the 1960 excavation.



The results of the cleaning (Plate 3) and laser scan survey of the inscribed stone, undertaken subsequent to the excavation by the Centre for Digital Documentation and Visualisation LLP, still requires detailed specialist examination, but ogham is clearly not apparent along the southern edge of the inscribed stone (Illus 4). While this is in some ways disappointing, it nonetheless offers a correct and comprehensive depiction of the inscribed stone at Trusty's Hill for the first time and corrects several more discrepancies from previous depictions.



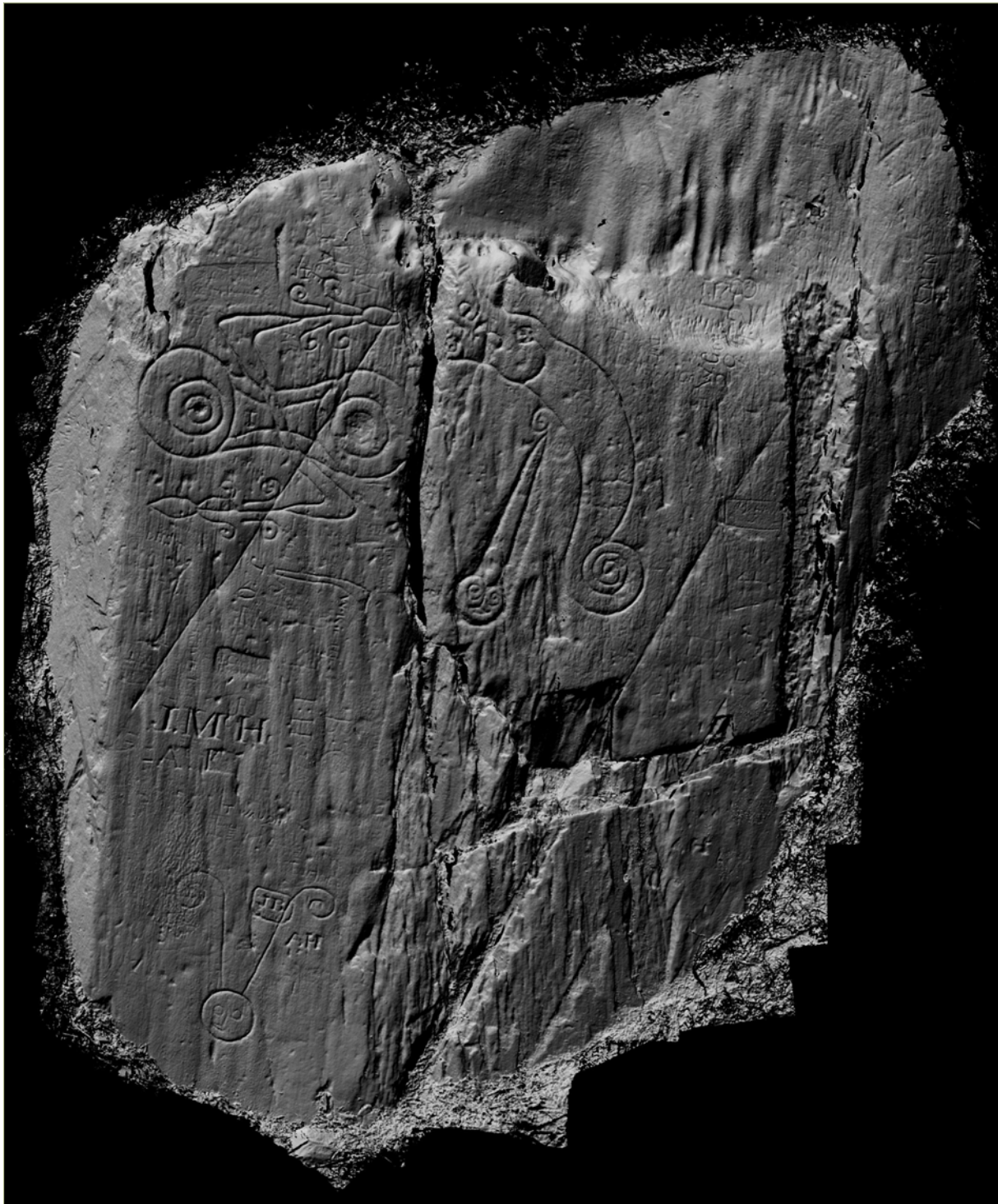
*Plate 3: Pictish Inscribed Stone after cleaning.*

The excavation of Trench 2, on the other hand, did encounter deposits consistent with the previous work. Furthermore, excavation of the primary waterlogged deposit was undertaken and several soil samples and fragments of wood were recovered. The radiocarbon date taken from one of these fragments of wood indicates that this feature was contemporary with the occupation of the fort and still open and presumably used in the later seventh - eighth centuries AD, after the fort had been destroyed. It was not apparent, however, that this was a guard-hut as Thomas proposed. Instead, it would be more correct to describe it as a rock-cut basin that collected surface water, as Thomas himself noted. Its form and location in relation to the remainder of the settlement, outside the central summit enclosure, at the entranceway opposite the Pictish carvings, indicates that its purpose, however, was not simply functional. It is perhaps more likely that it served a votive purpose, as part of a ritualised entranceway. The radiocarbon date from the primary fill of the rock-cut basin suggests that it was of sufficient importance to merit continued use long after occupation of the hillfort had ended. The record in 1794 of several silver coins of Edward VI and Elizabeth I being found nearby to the Pictish Carvings might suggest continued use of this votive well until as late as the sixteenth century.

Furthermore, comparisons can be drawn with the only two other Pictish Carvings known outside Pictland. While one of these, found in Princes Street Gardens, was self-evidently not in situ, its location was at the foot of Edinburgh Castle Rock, from which it almost certainly derived. The summit of Edinburgh Castle Rock has been confirmed by archaeological excavation to have been a high status site during the 5th - 7th centuries AD, corroborating the historical evidence that this was Din Eidyn, the royal stronghold of the Gododdin, the kingdom of the Britons of south-east Scotland. The other Pictish Carving known outside Pictland is located at Dunadd, the royal stronghold of the early Scots Kingdom of Dalriada. The nucleated fort layout of Trusty's Hill, with an upper citadel and lower precincts, is similar to Dunadd. The material assemblage recovered from the 2012 excavation of Trusty's Hill is closely comparable with Dunadd. Furthermore, the association of the rock-cut basin and the Pictish Carving with the entranceway to the summit is suggestive of a ritualised area as the immediate archaeological context for the Pictish Carvings at Trusty's Hill. This is remarkably similar to the surrounding context of the Pictish Carving at Dunadd, where the inauguration stone, upon which the Pictish Inscription is carved, is associated with a small rock-cut basin and located at the entranceway to the summit enclosure. If this is what marks out Dunadd as of royal predominance over other forts in Argyll, this may also mark out Trusty's Hill in the same way over other forts in Dumfries and Galloway.



Not only is it clear that Trusty's Hill was occupied between the 5th - 7th centuries AD, indicating that the Pictish Carvings at the site are genuine, but the archaeological context of the Pictish Carvings, that of a ritualised entranceway to the summit of a high status nucleated fort, is closely comparable with Dunadd. This may imply that Trusty's Hill too was a royal stronghold of an early medieval kingdom in Scotland.



*Illustration 4: 2012 Laser Scan Survey of Inscribed Symbols at Trusty's Hill.*

The kingdom of Rheged is remembered only in scant historical sources and early medieval poetry. Historians and antiquarians have long thought that Rheged existed somewhere in Cumbria or Dumfries and Galloway, although the firm archaeological evidence to support this was lacking. The discoveries from Trusty's Hill, along with the evidence from Whithorn and Mote of Mark, proves that Galloway was central to Rheged in the sixth and seventh centuries AD and had far flung contacts and trade with



Gaul and the Byzantine Empire. Given that this evidence is not found elsewhere in Dumfriesshire or Cumbria, Galloway is now emerging as the likely backdrop from where powerful kings like Urien of Rheged and his son Owain 'Bane of the East', briefly dominated northern Britain.

However, the programme of post-excavation analyses, comprising specialist analysis of the artefacts and environmental evidence, is currently ongoing and will result in a new publication that may reveal even more new insights into the occupation of Trusty's Hill and significantly enhance understanding of early medieval politics, power, economy and contacts in northern Britain during the early medieval period.

The Galloway Picts Project is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, GUARD Archaeology Ltd, the Mouswald Trust, the Hunter Archaeological Trust, the Strathmartine Trust Sandeman Award, the Gatehouse Development Initiative and the John Younger Trust.



## **The Galloway Picts Project**



**[www.gallowaypicts.com](http://www.gallowaypicts.com)**