

# *The Bass of Inverurie*

A visual interpretation of  
Inverurie Castle

Bob Marshall







*Untextured 3D model*

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# 1 About this project

I spent my childhood and early adult years living in rural Aberdeenshire and I must have passed by the Bass of Inverurie on countless occasions. For a long time, I remained blissfully ignorant of its significance. Castles to me, when I was young, were grand and evocative places like Crathes, Craigievar, Fyvie, and Dunnottar. Then after discovering a few books, I was amazed to learn that this rather curious earthwork was actually once a very important castle and it is one that has captured my imagination and interest ever since.

When most people are asked to picture an image of a Scottish castle in their minds, it is a safe bet that they won't be thinking of a castle like the Bass of Inverurie. This is to be expected when the castles that we normally associate with Scotland are part of the brand that markets our nation to millions of visiting tourists every year.

To the casual eye, the Bass of Inverurie may appear as just and odd-looking mound of earth rising from the middle of a graveyard, and on face value it certainly lacks anything like the grandeur of our later period castles. However, it plays a pivotal role in the evolution and development of our later castles that is all too easy to overlook.

This project is my attempt at producing a visual reconstruction of the Bass, a motte-and-bailey castle, as I believe it may have looked at the end of the twelfth and early thirteenth century. This is a personal project which I am doing for leisure and self-interest and it is my contribution to Scotland's Year of History, Heritage and Archaeology - a year-long celebration of our rich and diverse heritage in 2017.

I am reconstructing the Bass of Inverurie as part of a project to try and shine some limelight back on some of our earliest castles. To explain visually, how these developed and to see if anything can be learned from the process of using twenty-first-century technology to interpret twelfth-century castle-building. Even if I don't succeed in doing that, my hope is that this project will at least stimulate further interest and discussion of the subject. I expect that this exercise will create many more questions than it provides answers!

These notes which accompany my reconstructions document my approach to this project, citing some of the references that have influenced my reconstruction. These are taken from books, publications and local surveys but I must emphasise that there is a great deal of uncertainty and conjecture here for several reasons.

Firstly, there is limited archaeological and documentary evidence relating to the Bass of Inverurie and its associated burgh to glean enough dependable information from. This leaves me to conclude speculatively what much of the castle and its immediate environment looked like. Much of my information has been drawn from what I have read and understood from the study of other sites and from help and advice from several outside consultants.

Secondly, there is no reliable pictorial or documentary evidence describing the construction of castles from before the thirteenth century. Excavations of motte-and-bailey castles elsewhere in the country provide us with only fragmentary evidence with which to speculate upon how these castles were actually constructed. Producing an accurate reconstruction of the Bass of Inverurie is made more difficult by our understanding that Scotland's earliest castles tend to re-use the features of earlier Celtic fortresses.

The rate at which the Norman way of life spread throughout Scotland is a much slower affair than in the regions of England and Wales. So, exactly how much the Bass of Inverurie drew from both Norman and Celtic influences, is hard to determine. In the absence of enough evidence, I have attempted to blend a measure of both influences in my reconstruction, although I have leant more towards the classic Norman motte-and-bailey castle form than to that of a Celtic fortress in respect of its Royal charter.

Finally, I am working on this project purely for personal interest - combining my interest in castle architecture, their development and construction with my desire to produce interesting and engaging artwork. For these reasons, my reconstructions are limited to some extent by my imagination and should therefore not be treated as definitive.

I wish to thank the following individuals and organisations for their generous assistance and advice with this project: Simon Forder, Peter Yeoman, Will Wyeth, Claire Herbert, Aberdeenshire Council Archaeological Services, Historic Environment Scotland.



## 2 Inverurie Castle - Background

The Bass of Inverurie is a remarkable structure, for there are virtually none of these earlier period castles left in Scotland that are as well-preserved. These early type of earthwork castles were once common right across the land, some 300 have been identified across Scotland<sup>(10)</sup>, but most disappeared completely or were re-developed as the need for more substantial stone-built castles replaced them.

The Bass of Inverurie is most likely to have got its name from the Scots Gaelic word *bathais* - meaning forehead or brow. The meaning may also be linked to the shape of an upturned workman's basket although it is not clear at what point in its history the castle gets called this. It is more likely to have just been referred to as 'Inverurin' or 'Enrowie' Castle.

*Reconstruction of the Castle and Burgh of Inverurie viewed from the South East suggesting the possible division of strips of land or ruids (roods), an Anglo-Saxon unit of measurement equal to one quarter of an acre.*











*The motte as seen from the south west*



The Bass of Inverurie has the appearances of an earthwork that is completely manmade. However, it was possibly the site of an earlier fortress or stronghold in A.D. 878. It was constructed atop a mound of glacial moraine formed from compacted earth or boulder clay and this certainly seems to have survived well the unrelenting flow of the rivers Don and Urie over many centuries. The Earls of Garioch modified the shape of the mound to build their castle here three centuries later - 'scarping' away its contours to form the steeply-sided slopes of the motte which survives today.

The Bass of Inverurie is classified, and usually referred to, as a motte-and-bailey castle. It certainly bares all the standard components of one. The motte - a tall, conical-shaped mound of earth with steep-sided slopes and a flattened area at the summit. The bailey - a raised courtyard area, adjacent to but separated from the motte. The ditch - evidence from grave-digging in the area surrounding the Bass, known as the Castle Yards, revealed the traces of a silted-up ditch around the base of the motte (the Bass) and the bailey (the little Bass)(6).



*Above: The bailey (The Little Bass) taken from the summit of the motte and from the base of the motte on its north side (Dec 2016). Originally, the bailey would have been slightly larger - a pathway was cut between it and the motte in the nineteenth century.*



### 3 The Castle and the Earls of Huntingdon

The Bass or Inverurie Castle, referred to as ‘Inverurin’ or ‘Enrowie’ in nineteenth century literature<sup>(2)</sup>, was an important fortress in its time. David, Earl of Huntingdon, who built it, or instructed the building of the castle and the burgh of Inverurie in the late 1100s, was a member of the Royal Family. He was the brother of Malcolm IV, King of Scotland and the younger grandson of King David I of Scotland.

An heir to the Scottish throne until the end of the 12th century, Earl David controlled rich estates in Scotland and in the East Midlands of England including Fotheringhay Castle and founded the Abbey of Lindores in Fife.

In Scotland, David took the title of the Earl of Garioch (pronounced locally as “geary”). He probably oversaw the construction of Inverurie Castle towards the very end of the twelfth century at the time William I ruled over the Scots.

John, the only one to survive of Earl David’s three sons, inherited the title of Earl of Huntingdon and Garioch after David’s death in 1219. John also inherited the Earldom of Chester through his mother, Maud.



*David, Earl of Huntingdon depicted in Sir Walter Scott's 1832 crusader novel The Talisman.*

*Image: Public domain*



Earl David also left three married daughters, Isobel, Matilda and Ada. Isobel marries Robert Bruce the 4th Lord of Annandale, whose eventual offspring were the later rival claimants to the Scottish Crown, John Balliol and Robert the Bruce. Inverurie Castle and the lands of the Garioch pass to the Bruce family after 1237.

At the end of the thirteenth or early fourteenth century and at about the time of the Wars of Scottish Independence, the castle disappears from history. It is suggested that Robert the Bruce may have taken refuge at the Castle when he took ill on or before the Battle of Inverurie, also known as the Battle of Barra, in 1308. The illness which the Bruce succumbed to during the battle of Inverurie is a mystery, although he obviously manages to make a full recovery. In the battle, the Bruce defeated his chief domestic enemy John Comyn, the Third Earl of Buchan and the outcome produced a significant shift in the balance of power in Scotland.

The Bruce may have taken refuge at the Bass, perhaps the moated castle at Caskieben, or with his army which was camped at Oldmeldrum. However, there is no mention of Inverurie Castle. It is possible that the castle had already been dismantled or slighted to prevent it from coming under control of Bruce's enemies.

Twelve years earlier, in 1296, Edward I marched his army across the lands of the Garioch at the beginning of the First War of Scottish Independence. If the castle had still been in use at that point, it might have presented an attractive military objective for the English King, yet there are no accounts of an attempt by him to take it. A relatively small and simple fortress like this would not have been able to put up much of a resistance against a large army, so perhaps Edward dismissed the Bass as posing no threat.

This is also at a time when more substantial stone towers begin to take the place of the earlier timber castles. Many were built on top of existing mottes but the manmade earthworks of excavated earth and clay were usually inadequate for supporting the colossal weight of a large stone structure and its foundations and were thus abandoned. The safety of castles built of stone upon tall mottes could not be guaranteed due to subsidence or the threat of undermining - a tactic used in siege warfare. The motte therefore, quickly fell out of favour. The Bass of Inverurie was not replaced with a stone castle.



## 4 The Leslie's - The Castle's Constables

The first constables of Inverurie Castle, were the de Lesselyns or the Leslie's. The Lesselyn surname is derived from the lands which formed their original barony in Aberdeenshire granted to them by Malcolm III and his immediate successors to establish and strengthen the presence of the Roman Catholic Church here.

The Leslie's were the descendants of a Hungarian nobleman named Bartolf (Bartholomew) in the late 11th century. A man of reputed intellect and bravery, Bartolf was granted lands in the East of Scotland by Malcolm III of Scotland (Malcolm Canmore), (reg.1058–1093). Chamberlain to Queen Margaret, it was his duty to carry her on his own horse with her riding pillion on a pad behind the saddle. When crossing a swollen river one day, the horse stumbled. The Queen, fearing that she would fall, grabbed on to a belt around Bartolf's waist - crying "Gin the buckle bide" (Will the buckle hold). Bartolf is said to have prevented the Queen from being swept away by the river by responding "Grip fast!" and the two made it to safety. Following the incident, Bartolf had two more buckles added to his belt for extra security and so three buckles became the feature of the Leslie Arms and "Grip Fast!" became the motto.

Malcolm, son of Bartolf, is described as the first of Inverurie castle's constables. The role is then passed to a succession of Leslie sons who all take the name of Norman. At some stage after Earl David's death in 1219, Earl David's son, John, Earl of Huntingdon, issues a charter which conveys the lands of Caskieben to Norman de Leslie. Here was situated a small castle less than a mile to the northeast and within view of Inverurie castle and its burgh<sup>(2)</sup>.

Caskieben was a moated castle, the outline of which is still visible to this day. It possibly took the form of a very early manor house<sup>(5)</sup> and was built on flatter ground within an enceinte. Providing more spacious and comfortable accommodation, it was likely here at Caskieben where the Leslie constables chose to reside rather than at Inverurie Castle.

Caskieben and its lands which were bestowed on the Leslie's before 1237 and is not documented again until 1357 when it comes into the hands of Andrew de Garvaich and then to the Johnstons<sup>(2)</sup>. The castle was replaced in the thirteenth century by a stone-built castle later called Keith Hall when it passed to the powerful Keith family in 1662.

When John, Earl of Huntington died in 1237 with no children, the lands of the Garioch passed to his sister, Isobel, who married Robert Bruce, 4th Lord of Annandale - the great grandfather of King Robert I, Robert the Bruce.

The third and last of the castle's constables is Norman (Norino de Leslie). Stewardship of the castle appears to then pass to his son, Sir Norman de Leslie in 1282 but by this time the Leslies are no longer representative of the Earls of Garioch and there is no further mention of the castle.



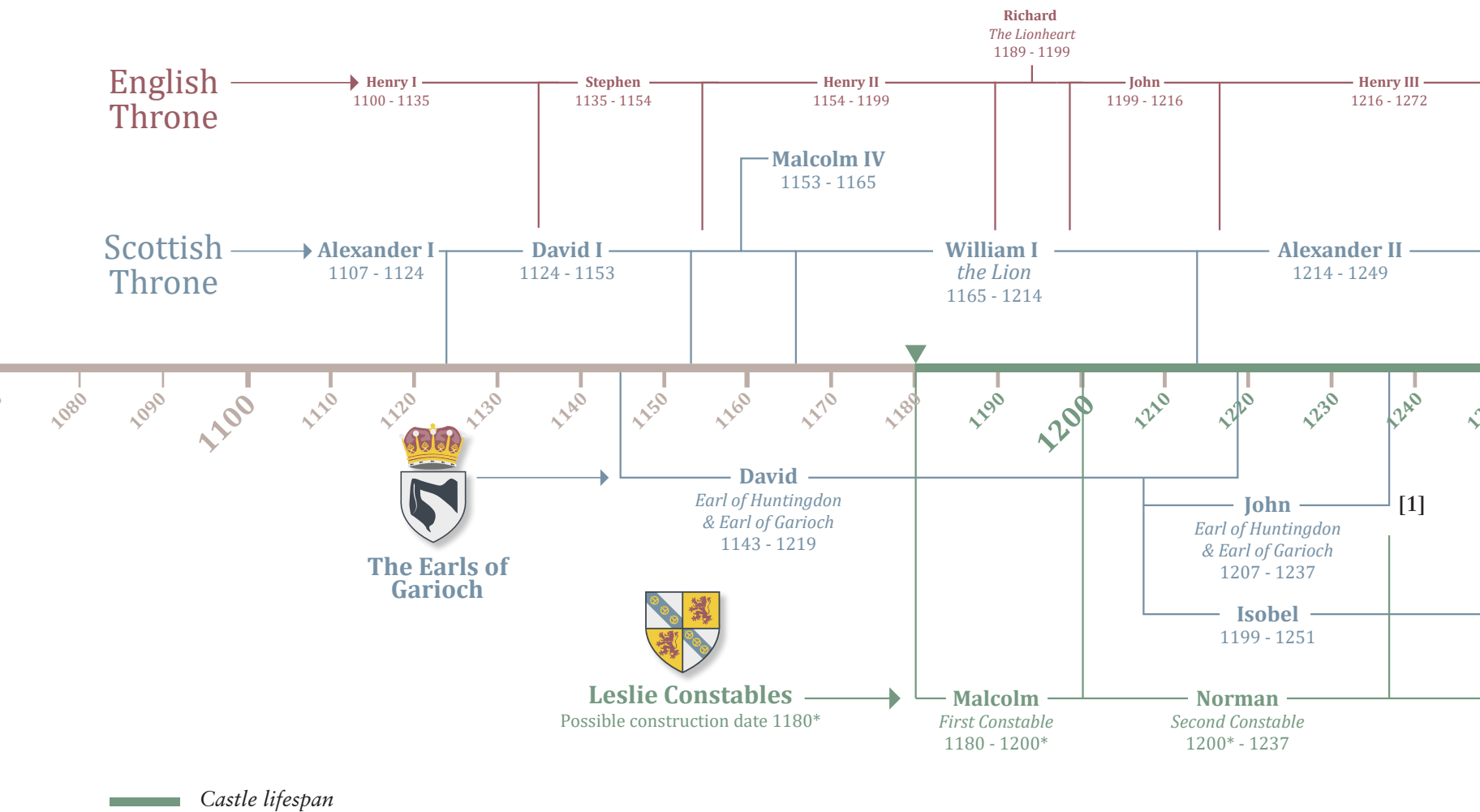
*Above: Three buckles feature on the Leslie heraldry representing the Leslie motto "Grip Fast!".*

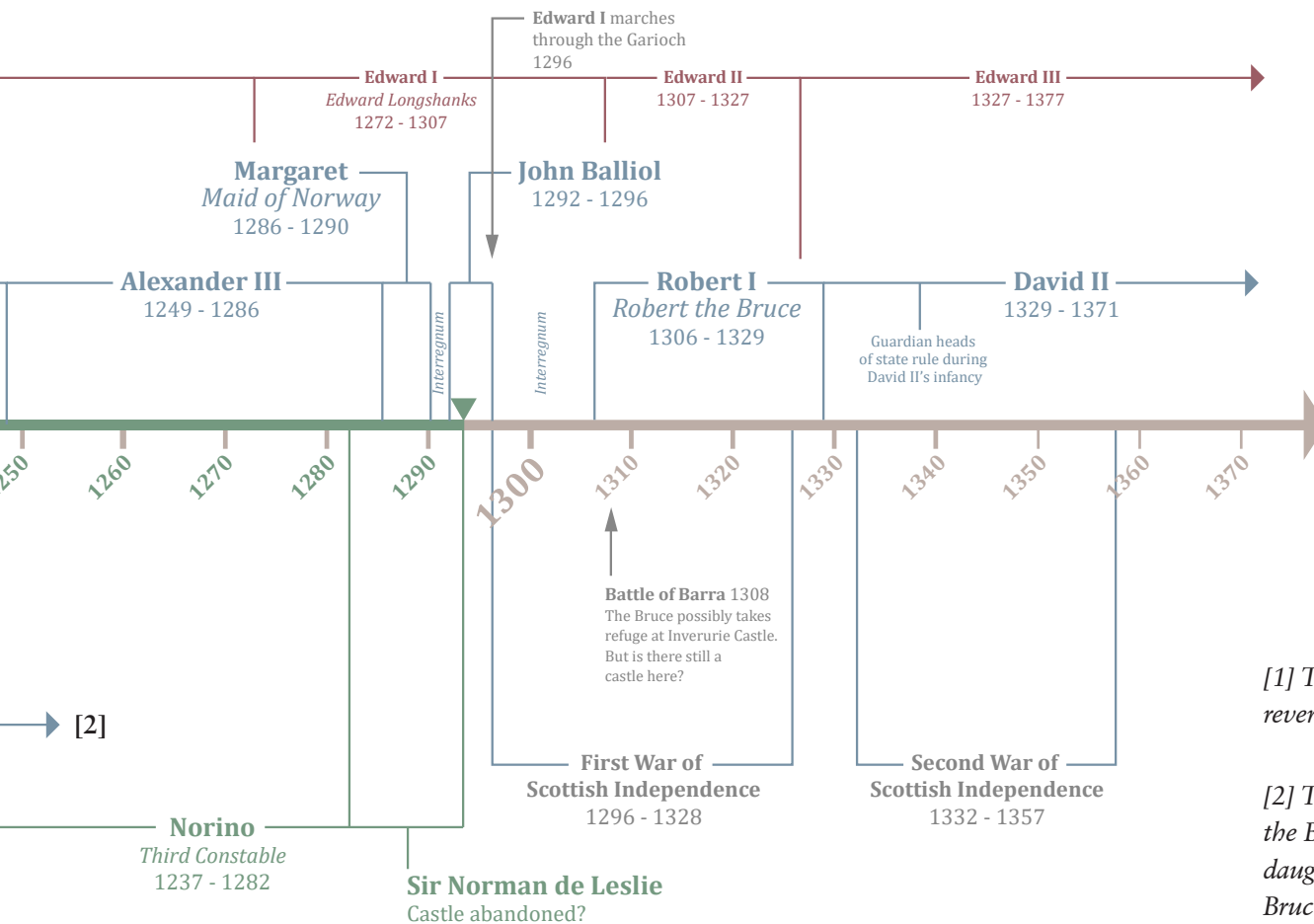
*Right: How the moated castle of Caskieben, a fortified manor house, might have looked.*





## 4 Timeline of Inverurie Castle





[1] Title of Earl of Huntingdon reverts to the crown after 1237.

[2] The Garioch lands pass to the Bruces through Earl David's daughter, Isobel, who marries Robert Bruce, 4th Lord of Annandale and Gr. grandfather of Robert I.



*A reconstruction of the Bass of Inverurie as it might have looked between 1200 and 1230.*

*This view of the castle is from the North West with the river Urie sweeping around the castle on the left and the river Don to the right of the castle where it is joined by the river Urie.*

*We have no evidence that a timber tower stood at the summit of the motte. There may have been a much simpler structure here - perhaps a single storey hall house similar in size and construction to the buildings I have shown in the bailey.*









## 6 Reconstructing the Bass of Inverurie

One of my aims with this reconstruction was to make an attempt to visualise the relationship between the castle and its surrounding landscape. My work began by creating a simple plan drawing of the medieval burgh and locate the likely roads and river crossings (see plan on opposite page).

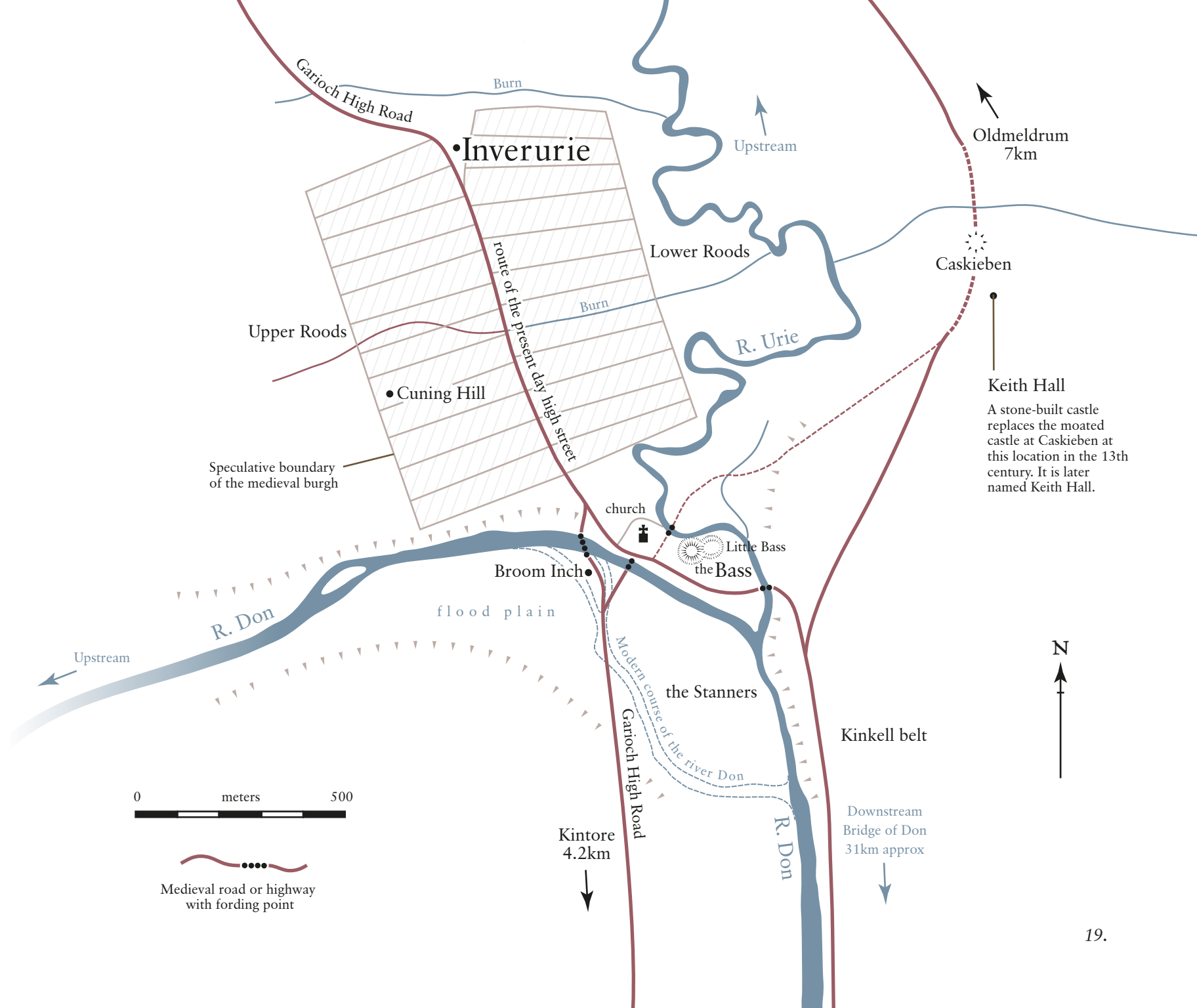
My plan drawing is based on modern Ordnance Survey map data, information taken from the descriptions Revd. John Davidson provides in his historical notes published in 1878<sup>(2)</sup>, and from a survey conducted in 1999 to determine the location of the medieval burgh<sup>(1)</sup>. The survey was unable to yield any conclusive evidence that can positively identify the burgh's location and concludes that that it was probably no more than a rural agricultural settlement aligning with the course of the modern High Street of Inverurie.

The River Don most likely followed the route of the present Keithhall road and joined the river Urie at the point where the current bridge is. The Don now joins the Urie some 300m downstream from where both rivers originally met in the twelfth century as local excavations suggest<sup>(1)</sup>. Combining the burgh plan with information extracted from OS maps and height data, I constructed a 3D model of the landscape extending to roughly 16km<sup>2</sup>. I manually added in the historic course of the river Don.

To produce the 3D model of the motte and bailey, I took the measured dimensions of the site from survey data and combined this with historical Ordnance Survey Maps. Landscaping work carried out in the nineteenth century in order to establish the graveyard, levelled out some of the physical features surrounding the Bass which included a ditch that encircled the motte and bailey. A photograph taken before the landscaping was carried out, appears to show a terraced area to the North and west of the motte which could be interpreted as part of an earthwork rampart which pre-dated the castle.



*A view of the motte from the north taken from the Revd. John Davidson's topographical and historical account of the Garioch, 1878.*







Inverurie castle is the creation of a powerful Earl who held large estates in England and who may have set out his vision here using the same blueprint as other castles built in the south. But to what extent did the castle adopt the form of the motte-and-bailey castles that we typically associate with the Anglo-Norman period?

There were earthwork fortifications scattered throughout Scotland well before the arrival of these Norman settlers and so the builders of the castle at Inverurie would likely have made use of whatever resources were immediately available to hand in order to speed up its construction.

Earl David fought in the Crusades in support of Richard I and is likely to have been influenced by castles far superior to the one at Inverurie on his journeys to and from the holy land. But there was probably nothing like the kind of resources and manpower available to build such structures in the sparsely-populated far reaches of northern Scotland.

How much time the Earl spent at his northerly stronghold isn't known. He probably would not have stayed for longer than a few weeks of the year to avoid draining the resources of his lordship. He may have only used it as a simple hunting lodge. My visual interpretation hopefully blends together a Norman-influenced castle with elements of an earlier Celtic fortress.

## The Motte

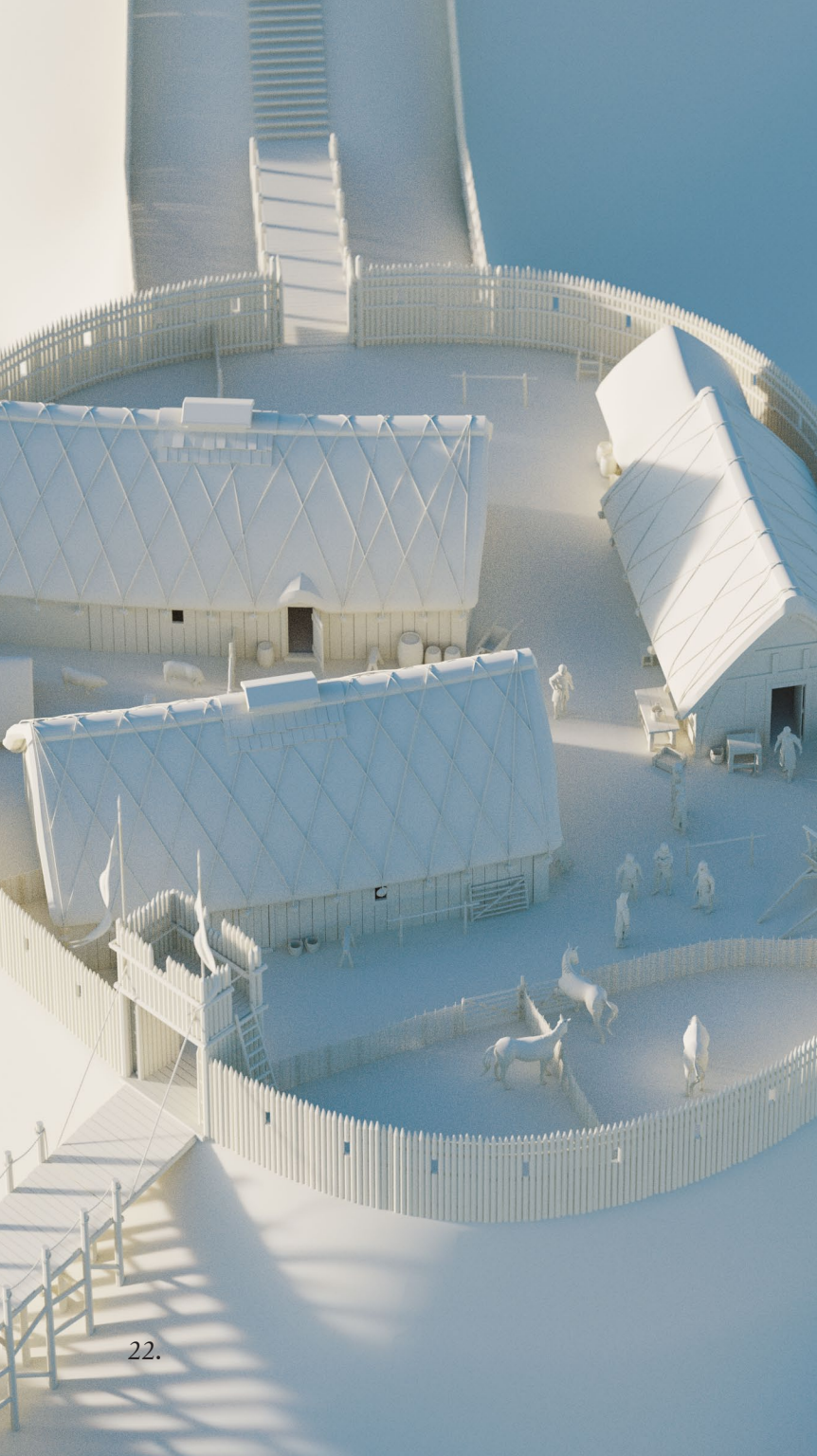
In my reconstruction I have shown a timber tower at the summit of the motte although there is no evidence that there was one. The Bass may have had a single-storey structure at its summit perhaps circular in form and constructed of timber and daub with a conical grass roof.

The tower was probably no more than a final place of refuge if the castle were to come under attack. It is unlikely to have offered any accommodation. Mottes were centres of Royal and local administration and justice. They acted as customs control points, military garrisons as well as lordly residences<sup>(5)</sup>. It was a lookout post or a watchtower and a secure place to store valuables and collected taxes.

As much as anything, the central role of the tower probably had a lot to do with making a very bold statement. It would have been the focal point of the burgh and an awesome sight to behold to all those who approached it from afar. The intention was to impress but at the same time, discourage would-be attackers.







## The Bailey

The Bass of Inverurie has a small bailey which could only have provided enough space for two or three buildings such as a hall house, kitchens or workshops. I have interpreted two hall-house type structures in my reconstruction - their function is conjectural but my view is that one perhaps offered slightly more comfortable accommodation for important guests such as the Earl and his retinue. There is just about enough room for a third building which could be kitchens and some coralling for horses.

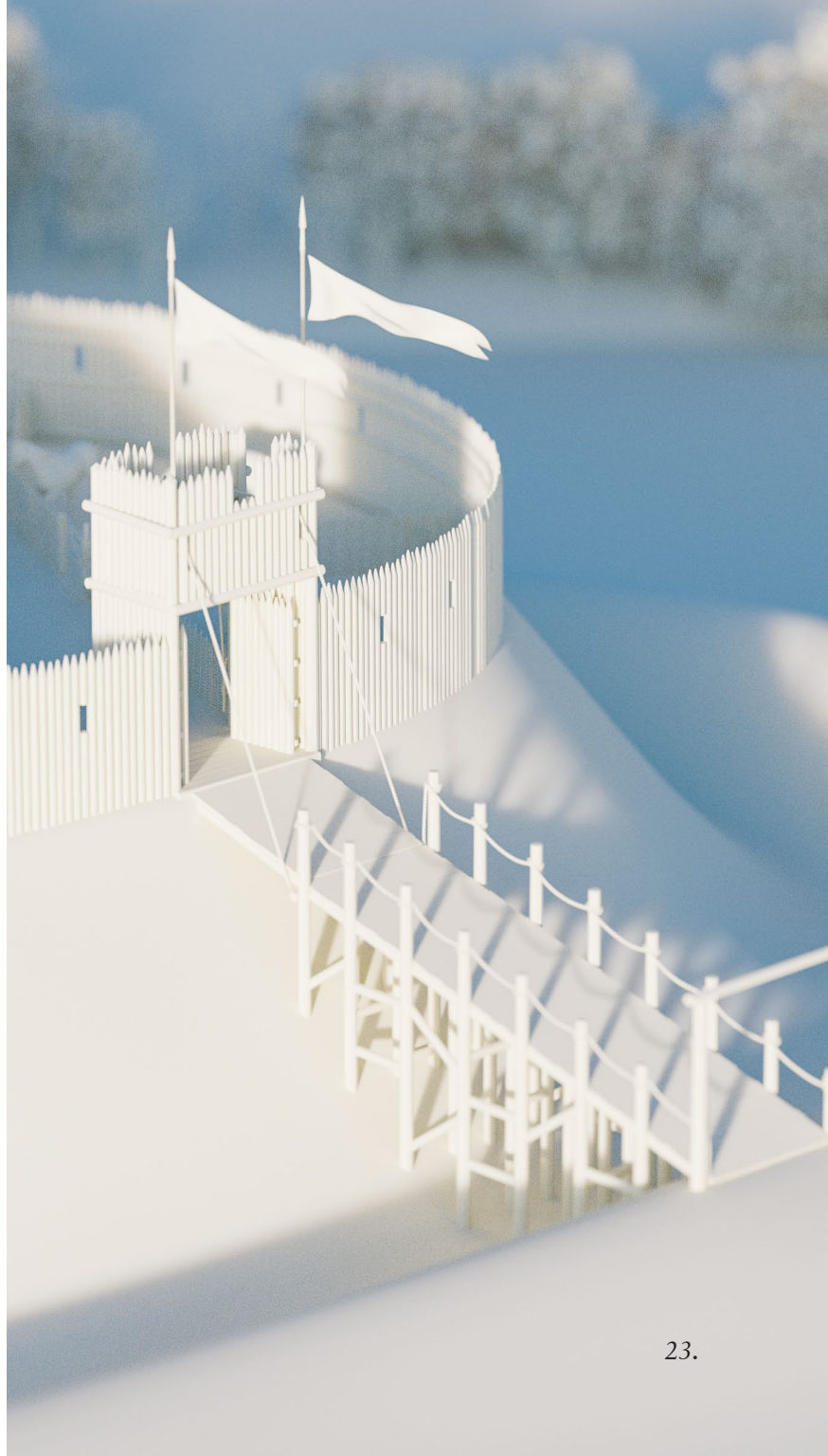
The Leslie constables and stewards most likely resided at Caskieben - a moated castle located nearby which is believed to have offered far more comfortable accommodation<sup>(2)</sup>.

What we can be reasonably certain of, is that the summit of the motte and the bailey were both protected by a palisade - a protective wall constructed of vertical timber posts or pales. The defences of these palisaded castles would have been sufficient to ward off raiders, but probably not a determined assault. Until the Wars of Independence, these were relatively peaceful times, so the threat of a full-scale attack would have been minimal.

## Entrance Gate

The position of the main entrance gate as I have shown it in my reconstruction is another point of conjecture. Again, we simply do not have enough evidence to explain the location of these features, so I have employed some guesswork. If castles were partly about making a bold statement, then directing visitors around the castle before entering it would certainly create a lasting impression.

There are some suggestions that in the nineteenth century, the remains of an oak gangway were uncovered somewhere on the south slopes of the Bass but there is a lack of clarity over exactly where this was uncovered. Were these remains found on the slopes of the motte, or the bailey? Or were these the remains of a timber structure that linked the upper and lower enclosures? From what we understand of the structure of motte-and-bailey castles, there is usually a steep series of steps which ascend the motte from the bailey. Sometimes this is interpreted as a flying bridge.





*Reconstruction of the Bass of Inverurie as it might have looked between 1200 and 1230. This view of the castle is from the North East with the river Urie in the Foreground and the river Don just behind the castle. The two rivers meet at a point just out of view to the extreme left of the image. The area around the castle is prone to flooding. Today the river Don joins the Urie at a point several hundred yards further south than is shown in my reconstruction.*









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## About the artist

Bob Marshall has worked as a graphics artist and multi-media designer since the early 1990s. Originally from Aberdeenshire and now living and working in East Lothian, he discovered a hidden passion for producing historically-themed illustrations and 3D models following a series of private commissions in 2009. He has since produced artwork for Historic Environment Scotland, English Heritage, Glasgow School of Art and The Royal Collection Trust, and he has been involved in numerous other interpretation projects for clients across the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The focus of Bob's work is the production of high-detail visualisations and animations using computer 3D modelling techniques. Medieval, Georgian and Victorian architecture and the interpretation of our industrial and seafaring heritage are some of the subjects that he takes special interest in. Discover more of his work at [www.bobmarshall.co.uk](http://www.bobmarshall.co.uk).





At the meeting point of the rivers Don and Urie, at Inverurie in Aberdeenshire, are to be found the striking remains of a late twelfth-century earthwork castle known as the *Bass of Inverurie*.

Upon this giant mound of earth, which today dominates a modern graveyard, once stood an impressive castle constructed of timber. It was held by the Earls of Garioch who were members of the extended royal family of Scotland and the ancestors of King Robert the Bruce, until the end of the thirteenth century.

Illustrator and historical reconstruction artist Bob Marshall, explores and imagines what the Bass of Inverurie might have once looked like with the help of expert advice and with the aid of twenty-first century digital visualisation technology.



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