

Coull Castle

The remains of Coull Castle can be clearly seen from the Tarland Way, ahead as you leave the last wooden bridge, about 200 metres from Coull Kirk. Before you reach the Coull Road if you are travelling from Aboyne or just after you leave the Coull Road if you are travelling from Tarland.

The Castle of Coull was built by a family called the Durward in about 1228 (more than 800 years ago) Their family name means 'doorkeeper'. They were the hereditary Door-wards (doorkeepers) of Scotland, taking their name from the work they did for the Kings of Scotland. The family came from Lundie in Fife before 1200. Malcom de Lundi was appointed the King's Doorward and that is when their family name changed to Durward. They came to Coull at the end of a disagreement that had carried on for many years between Thomas de Lundin or le Durward and Duncan, Earl of Mar. The argument was settled about the year 1228, and it seems that under the settlement the Durwards acquired a large amount of land in the Earldom of Mar, including the southern half of the Howe of Cromar. Here they built Coull Castle. It was the great stronghold of the Durwards, who became a very powerful family in the middle of the thirteenth century.



The remains of the 'donjon' seen from the Tarland Way.

The ruins of Coull Castle are in the beautiful Howe of Cromar which is in an area of Aberdeenshire called Mar. Although there is not much left to see it is exciting to think that the remaining banks, ditches and stones are the remains of a very imposing castle that stood just there. Early accounts mention five towers and four gates but only part of three of these towers remain. The most obvious feature of the present ruin is the remains of the donjon (a heavily fortified central tower or keep also

called a dungeon). To the west of the donjon are the remains of the Postern Gate (a secondary gate where the people who lived in the castle could come and go without being noticed especially if there was any fighting). The people defending the castle could go out unnoticed to drive off attackers. There would have been a big, walled courtyard and part of this wall (the curtain wall) still exists. The castle stands with its back to Tarland Burn. There is a very steep drop down to the Tarland Burn, Anyone who fell down there would be badly hurt, might even drown and certainly would find it almost impossible to climb back up to the castle. At the front the castle was defended by an enormous ditch.

What happened to Coull Castle?

The castle is thought to have suffered a sudden and violent destruction by Robert the Bruce's forces during the War of Independence in 1308. There were many traces of

fire, particularly at the gatehouse where much of the stonework was vitrified plus evidence of breaches in the curtain wall and the flanking towers.

The castle was excavated in 1923.

The earliest account of the castle in 'modern times' is from the 17th century. At this time very little remained of the castle, namely a number of "little green hills". About 1912, the owner of the castle site was Dr Marshall MacKenzie. He was keen to find out more about the history of the castle and what it might have looked like. He arranged for Dr Douglas Simpson to carry out an archaeological excavation in 1923 (90 years ago this year 2013). Finds, many from the middens (rubbish heaps) of the castle, included knives, skewers, fragments of an iron cauldron or cooking pot, hinges, arrow heads, a sling ball, roofing lead, large numbers of nails and quantities of pottery. These gave some idea of life in the castle, cooking, weapons, buildings and suchlike.