

Torvean Silver Chain

Some notes derived from its discovery

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Introduction

The massive silver chain discovered at Torvean near Inverness is one of six recorded from Scotland and while it lacks the distinctive Pictish decoration found on some of the other chains, the context of its discovery make it one of the most important of the chains found. A contemporary newspaper account and an earlier 18th century map of the area recorded here give some tantalising clues as to the function of this find and the nature of its burial.

Contemporary accounts

Most accounts place the discovery of this find in 1809 by labourers during the construction of the Caledonian Canal. However a contemporary newspaper article clearly shows it to have dug up in 1807 and more significantly gives additional detail on this discovery. As this account was written in the short-lived *Caledonian Mercury* [?Inverness Journal](1807 - 1814) and the only known copy survives in Inverness Library Archives, it is quoted in part below. There may possibly be other contemporary accounts stored in Inverness family papers but these have not been found. Though the letter book of John Telford resident engineer at Corpach survives as does the letter book of Thomas Telford, we have only manuscript notes from the Matthew Davidson, resident engineer at the Inverness end of the Caledonian Canal. These include references to Craig Phatric but unfortunately no reference to the discovery of this chain.

'INVERNESS Friday, January, 1; 1808.

Some labourers, while digging in the eastern corner of Toreveon, on the line of the Caledonian Canal, lately discovered a massy silver Chain, in the side of a large

flat cairn, about two feet below the surface. The following figure will assist the ingenious in forming an idea of it.



The Chain consists of thirty-three circular links, formed of a perfectly cylindrical body, half an inch thick, neatly joined without solder. They are linked in pairs, each of which is about two inches diameter, except those at the extremities, which are 2 1/4 inches. A link, at one of the ends has, since the discovery of the chain, been taken away; but as the remaining one is of the dimensions with those at the other end, we may conclude the chain was then entire. Its whole length is 18 inches, weighing about 104 oz. The two small figures are parts of a flat and very massy ring, which has been broken since it was found; but from its form, and the appearance of wearing in the inside, it has evidently moved on some bolt. It is neatly channelled round, leaving a prominent astragal on every side. Both the chain and ring are of excellent workmanship; and whether we attend to the uniform thickness and polish of the links, the ingenuity with which they are joined, or the perfect symmetry of the whole, we cannot but pronounce it to have been the work of an artist of considerable skill.....On the supposition that it is as old as the cairn in which it was found, the other cairns, of which there are several in its neighbourhood, should be opened.....It is hinted that more of this, as well as other articles equally valuable have been found, report says a ball and bar also of silver: but the labourers keep the fact a profound secret; and we mention with regret that there is little prospect of ascertaining the truth from them.'

The cairn in which these objects were found had already been partially examined in the 18th century, for the Statistical Account of Inverness Parish written in 1791 records that *'There was, a few years ago at Kilvean, a great number of small cairns overgrown with heath. They occupied about the space of an acre, on a pretty extensive plain, and were inclosed by a ditch of an orbicular form*.*

** These cairns in the course of the proprietors improvements were removed, but by ignorant persons who wrought by the piece, and had neither leisure nor curiosity for observation.....There is a very large cairn near the river at the foot of a hill called Torvean. It some years ago was partly removed, a coffin was found composed of six thick flags.*

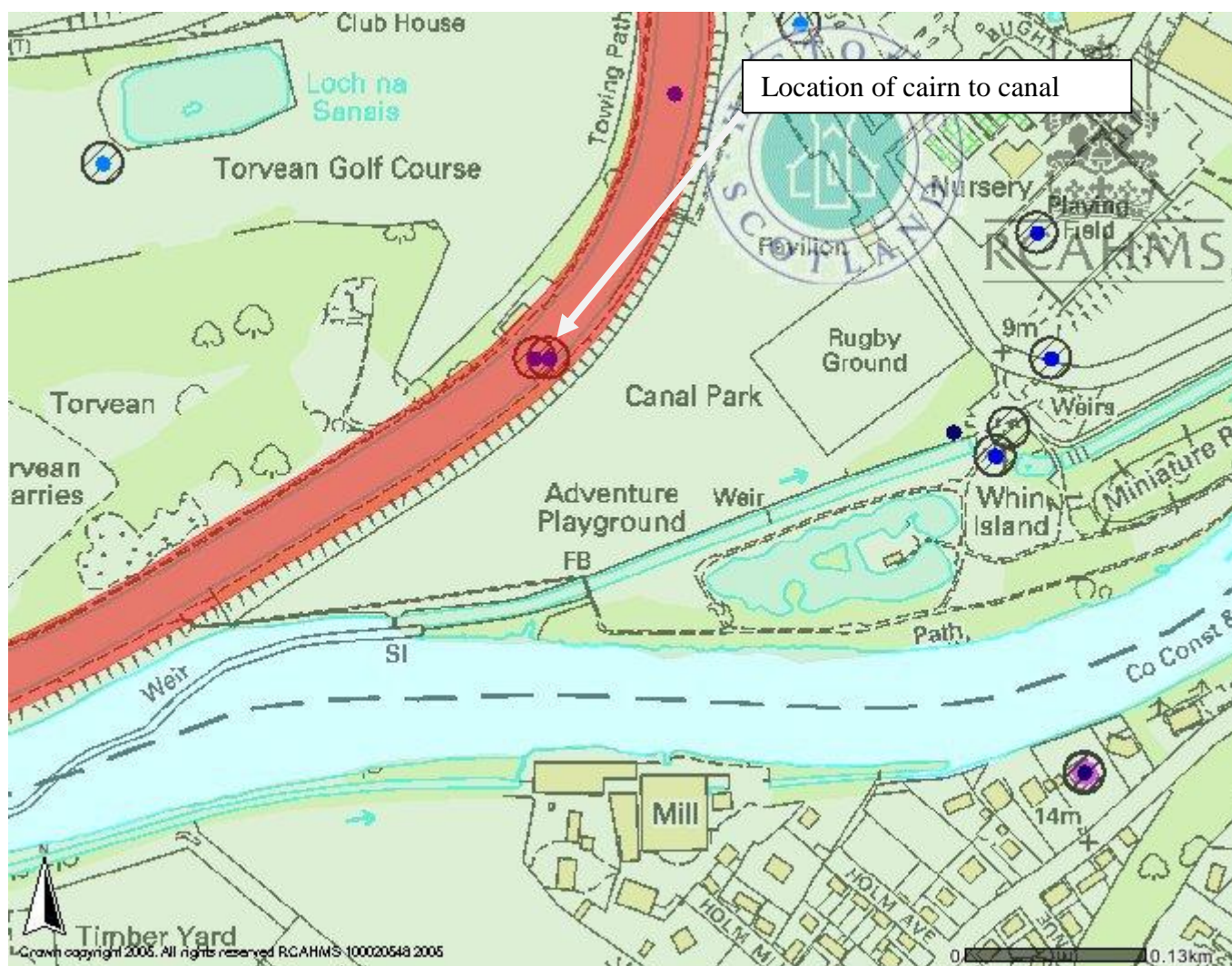
It is now impossible to establish the nature and date of the small cairns and they are not marked on the Home map of 1774 which shows the area adjacent to the cairn as being under cultivation. In 1995 aerial photography revealed an arc of ditch at NH 6578 4346 enclosing an area estimated at 60-70 metres diameter which may be the remnants of this *'orbicular ditch'*. However the discovery of a probable bronze age inhumation recorded at cNH 6571 4372 some 600 metres to the ESE suggests that these cairns and enclosure may date to an earlier prehistoric period. Indeed the cairns may only have been a relic of earlier cultivation, though the ditch of *'an orbicular form'* would imply deliberate segregation of the cairns. As the very large cairn *'was partly removed'* it cannot be denied that this may possibly have been the remains of a neolithic or bronze age cairn. However the use of the terms *'coffin'* and *'six thick flags'* to this writer are more plausibly descriptions of a long cist rather than a short cist or a passage grave.

In viewing the Home map of 1774 it is possible to make out an oblong feature of either a cist structure aligned NE/SW (albeit out of scale and thus more suiting a neolithic chamber) or the remnants of a structure.



The exposure of a 'coffin' of stone flags at the main cairn is surely significant and possibly connected to the discovery of the silver chain and the other possible silver objects. The reference to a coffin rather than a cist implies that this was a long cist that was exposed and thus potentially iron age and perhaps even pictish in date. Equally in 1808 the cairn was described as large and flat, also supporting an Iron Age/Pictish date with parallels to sites such as Gaskbeg, Dunrobin (Close-Brookes, 1981,).

Though there are at least two maps drawn of the area showing Torvean and the lands of Bught to the east from the 18th century (RHP 671 & 6440) as well as a series of maps showing the projected route of the canal before its construction (eg RHP 1107 drawn in 1807) none of these maps shows the cairn. For its form and size we have to rely exclusively on the Home map and the written accounts. Using the scale on the Home map this makes the cairn around metres in diameter. Though clearly the cairn must have been disturbed and probably robbed earlier in the 18th century when the coffin was found (possibly at the same time as the smaller cairns were being removed) the indications are that this was a long cist burial of probable pictish date.



Placename evidence

The ascription of the site of Kilvean and the more distant fort site known as Torvean point to an early christian association with this area. The first Statistical Account would support this as it also states that *'this is supposed to be the dormitory of Bean, a saint of the Culdee order, from whom the place and hill derive their name'*, must be given some credence, especially with the survival of the Kil name to the present day. While Bean or Veian may well have had an early Christian cell on this site, it is however, more likely that the cairn was, as it appears, a burial cairn and that the name was transferred from a timber or wattle structure to a nearby forgotten heap of stones. Alternatively the 'orbicular' ditch could itself be defining an early Christian site. While Ross () derives the name Bean from the Bishop of Mortlach who flourished c1012, other writers such as Watson (1926,122-123 & 310-312) would more firmly ascribe this name to the 6th century Columban monk named *Baíthen*.who succeeded Columcille at Iona. The lack of early charter evidence is unhelpful, though the survival of the *cil-* name suggests either a strong tradition or more probably a later foundation. As there was a chapel at Kinmylies from at least (Moray), it is not impossible that an earlier medieval chapel or Pictish cell was sited here – though no connection can now be made and we are left with the place name for the hill and for *Kilvean* now associated with the area to the north east of the hill. According to the Home map, the earliest detailed topographical map of the area, Kilvean lay to the south east of Torvean with Bught being a later name for the area – probably deriving from the Bucht family who owned land here from the 15th C when the first property records for Inverness survive. There is nothing in the surviving descriptions of the cairn to suggest it had originally derived from a structure, though clearly the surviving accounts are imprecise.

Relationship of cairn and chain

Given the association of the Torvean chain with a possible Pictish burial cairn, however tenuous, it is legitimate to ask what is the association between these features. None of the other pictish silver chains has been found in what is likely to be an original context and indeed only the chain found at Parkhill,

Aberdeenshire also lies within what is now considered to have been pictish territory. Though no decoration was found on the Torvean chain, its similarity in form and artistry to the Parkhill and Whitecleuch chains with their distinctive decorated terminal rings clearly place it in the same tradition. If it was part of some burial rite why was it disposed of separately to the 'coffin'. Either the deposition was later than the presumed burial or it was felt more appropriate to separate this chain (and the other items that have not survived) from the burial.

The size of the cairn and the association with the chain clearly show that this was the place of burial of some important chieftain. The temptation is, of course, to ascribe these to Bridei mac the most powerful chieftain that we have records for living in Inverness. The traditional dating of these chains to the 7th century on art historical grounds does not contradict this and the fact the Torvean Chain at 104 ozs or gms is the heaviest of the recorded chains may also have some significance. If Bridei was the most powerful of kings of pictland of his time, then is it not likely that this symbol of office would be more puissant than those of his sub-kings? Whether this gives credence to the fort on Torvean Hill being the seat of the Pictish kings of Inverness in preference to the more favoured option of seeing this fort either on the present Castle Hill or the reputed site of 'Auld Castell' hill is less certain (Given that Small's limited excavations at Craig Phadraig suggested a less monumental use for this site in the Pictish period). The relationship between the fort and the former cairn site is now disjointed by the former sand and gravel quarry and the fort itself is badly overgrown by scrub trees and dense bracken. It has not been examined since Aitken and Christianson did their topographical surveys in the late 19th century.

Function of chain

The chain must surely have been a symbol of authority and the arguments that it was either worn as an arm ring or cloak fastener seem unconvincing. At cm long this would have been a massive bicep! As a cloak fastener it also does not make sense as the sheer weight of the chain at gms would surely tear any garment. The chain only makes sense as a neck ring similar to a torc. The sheer weight of the chain is best carried as a tight fit around the neck rather than a looser chain like later burghal chains. It is easier to spread the weight around the neck than have it hanging loose from the neck to the chest.

Possible ball and rod of silver

It is tempting to see the missing ball and rod of silver, as equivalent to the surviving symbols of the modern monarchy, the orb and sceptre. While this is conjecture and given the tenuous nature of the evidence, it may seem presumptuous to construct an interpretation of Pictish regalia from these, the context of the cairn and the silver chain make this an idea worth exploring. However tenuous this connection this is not impossible and given we have so little evidence of what symbols of power were at this time, it is worth speculating a little further on this.



While the orb is familiar to us today as the *Orb Crucifer* and part of the coronation rite, it has a long history as a symbol of sovereignty as the picture below shows. Indeed it was present on Roman coins from the 1st century AD and may well have antecedents beyond this. (And this is to ignore the significance of this symbolic acceptance by kings and emperors - beyond the specialist knowledge of scientists and sailors - of a circular world some 1500 years before Copernicus!)

A rod of silver could signify many things. While a sceptre may seem to us the most logical symbol of authority and is shown as such on various Roman and earlier coins, this is not the only form of power. The whiteness of a silver rod may itself have been seen as containing sacral powers. Indeed the earliest coronation ceremony that survives the 9th century *Pontifical of Egbert* mentions both a sceptre (*sceptre*) and a staff (*baculum*). To confuse the issue further Roman Consuls were awarded sceptres of ivory (*sceptrum eburneum*)

Bas relief of Diocletian embracing Maximian (late 3rd Century AD? Vatican)

It may indeed be significant that modern analysis of the silver from this and other chains () has suggested that these were made from Roman silver () perhaps

giving additional legitimacy to their wearers. Though skilfully made they are also bold and strong symbols of power.

In this connection it is worth considering the origins of chains themselves. Are they a natural development from the earlier Iron Age torcs, such as those of Snettisham or those from Scotland as recently described (Hunter,) or is this connection more closely connected with Roman subsidies and support. The smithing is almost certainly native from Roman silver but is there any significance in the derivation of *Diadems* from an East Mediterranean tradition (*cf Wikipedia entry -A diadem (from the Greek 'diadema' from 'diadeo' to bind round, or fasten) was originally a white ribbon, ending in a knot and two strips that were placed often on the shoulders, that surrounded the head of the king to denote his authority.*)

Conclusions

With no surviving physical evidence of either Torvean Cairn or the possible ball and rod of silver, much of the previous discussion must remain speculation. However these tantalising survivals do suggest that the Torvean silver chain (and by inference the five other chains) were symbols of regality restricted to the tribal chiefs or kings of Pictish Scotland. When and in what context they were worn we will never know but the context for the Torvean chain suggests that this was a deliberate statement of regal power. Given the possible links to Rome and traditions from the Mediterranean, the chains and the other symbolic objects that may have been linked to them suggest that the legitimacy of these Pictish kings was being strengthened by association with symbols and material derived from outwith Pictland.

Acknowledgements

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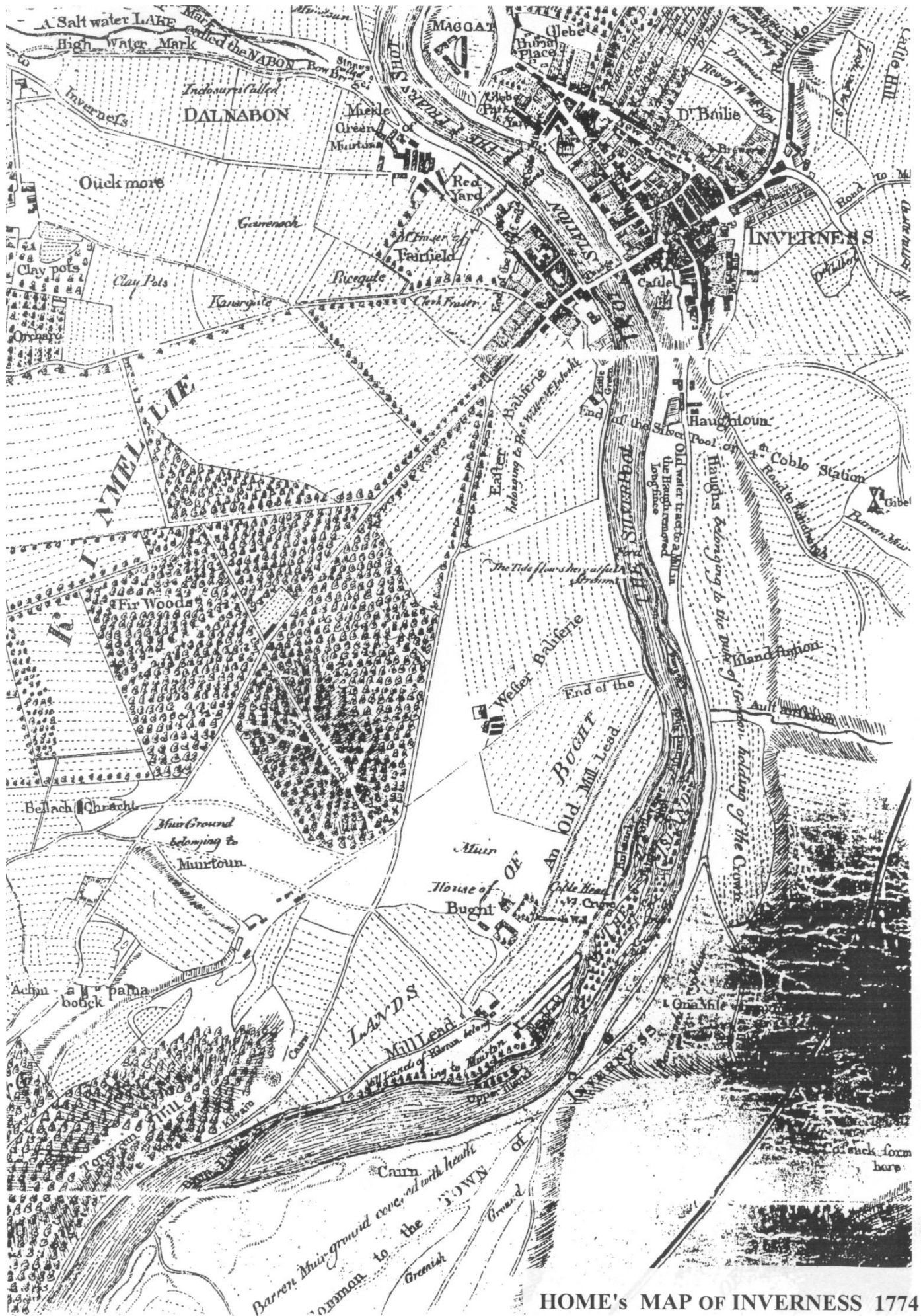
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HOME'S MAP OF INVERNESS 1774