

Watch and Ward on the Isle of Man: The Medieval Re-occupation of Iron Age Promontory Forts

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Introduction

The Isle of Man boasts a rich selection of archaeological sites; a combination of circumstances – a varied topography and a relative lack of intensive farming techniques being most significant – has resulted in an historic landscape preserving up to 8000 years of human activity, from the Mesolithic down to the present day.

Amongst the most distinctive classes of site are the promontory forts which utilise the jagged and rocky character of much of the Island's periphery: around 20 sites are known (e.g., Bersu 1949, 77-9¹). It is likely that additional sites once existed, but these may have been lost along the north-west and north-east coastlines where cliffs of glacially deposited sands and clays are vulnerable to erosion (Figure 1). A small number of these promontories have been investigated (Bersu *ibid*; Gelling 1952, 1957, 1959), leading to a view that several, apparently Iron Age in origin, were re-occupied in the Medieval period for domestic purposes. Although relatively few of these forts have been excavated, there is a general presumption that as a phenomenon they are Iron Age in date. This conjecture may be worthy of timely reconsideration.

A previous paper by the author (Johnson 2000), speculating on the possible antecedents of the Manx farmstead, inevitably referred to these sites, as they are amongst the only lowland examples of Medieval occupation to have been excavated on Man. It was, however, proposed that, far from being domestic structures, these sites were instead associated with the Medieval coastal defence of the Island known as the Watch and Ward.

¹Bersu lists 21 sites. The Isle of Man National Monuments Record currently lists 22 forts, and a further 10 possible sites.

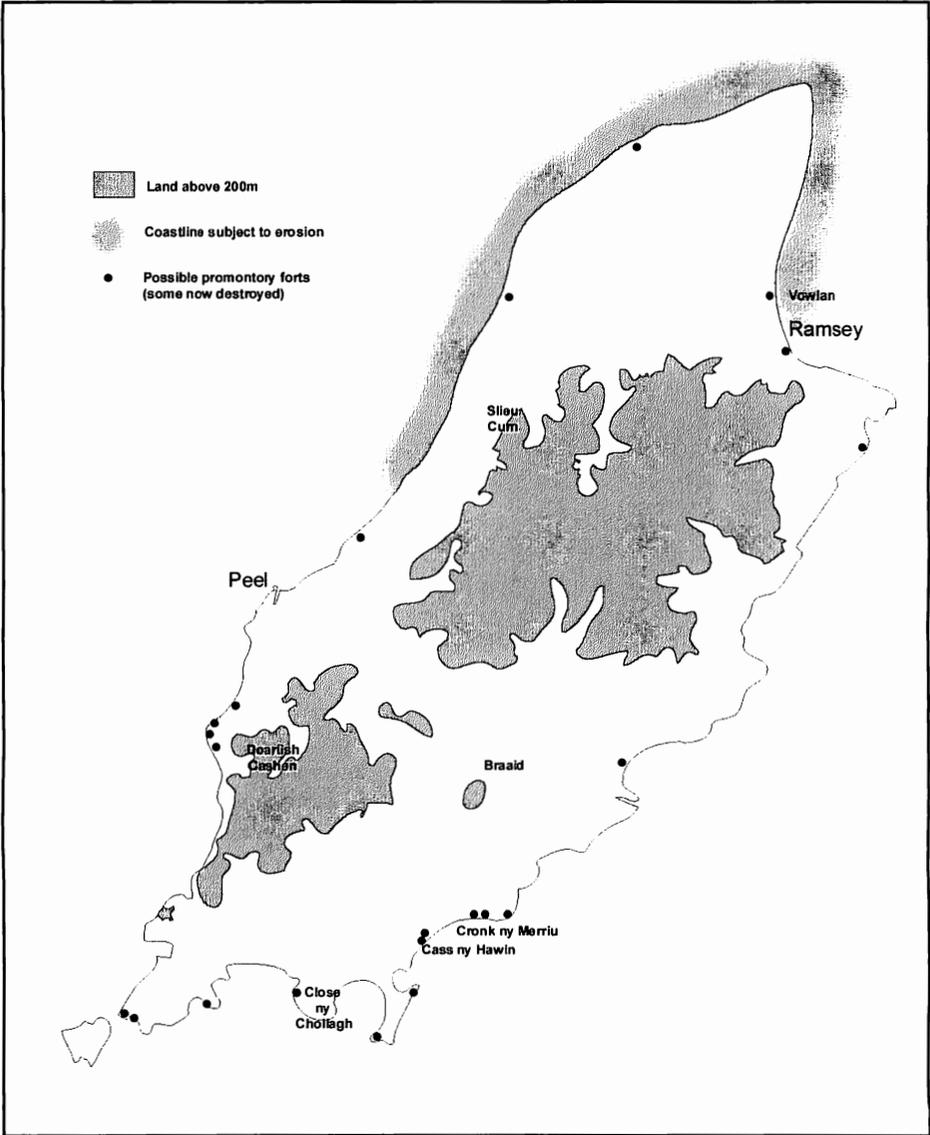


Figure 1: The Isle of Man: promontory forts and placements.

Vowlan

The first site to be archaeologically investigated was that of Vowlan near Ramsey in the north-east of the Island. The excavator successfully revealed the remains of six buildings (Bersu *ibid*), several of them overlying each other, constructed on a sandy promontory overlooking the much-altered estuary of the Sulby River (a seventh structure was much smaller and stratigraphically later than the others, which led its excavator to ignore it in his interpretation of the site).

The buildings survived as little more than shadows in the sandy soil; linear trenches suggested to the excavator that wattle walls were bedded in the ground, sometimes, according to the published plans, packed with stones. Overall, the structures were rectangular in form; a linear hearth lay along the long axis, and there was evidence that the interior was divided to form a central aisle (in which the hearth lay) with a further aisle to either side along both long walls. Subsequent excavations at the promontory forts described below would suggest that these were wide 'benches' for sitting and sleeping on. The largest building was 10.5 by 4.6m, the smallest 7.4 by 3.4m (all measurements are internal); due in part to the clear presence of a hearth in all six of the buildings, all were considered domestic structures rather than animal houses. An additional area of burnt material, 1m in diameter, was found towards the edge of the promontory, and interpreted as an open-air hearth. A very little burnt clay and some splinters of calcined bone were found in the hearths, which were noted to be quite deep, often containing up to 500mm of ash. No artefacts whatsoever were recovered. Bersu interpreted the site as temporary quarters, re-occupied on several occasions, belonging to guards left behind by Viking raiding parties whose longships were drawn up on the beach.

Until post-Medieval times, when riverine erosion, longshore coastal drift, and the need to develop a modern harbour for the settlement of Ramsey resulted in the abandonment of the old riverbed, the headland at Vowlan would have guarded the mouth of the Sulby River. In the light of this clear topographical relationship, and in view of the subsequent excavation of other defended promontories, Bersu's interpretation of the purpose of the site is worthy of re-examination.

In the following decade, Peter Gelling also uncovered rectangular buildings of Medieval date, this time within promontory forts at Cronk ny Merriu, Cass ny Hawin and Close ny Chollagh. Unlike Vowlan, all of these sites also provided clear evidence for earlier origins.

Cronk ny Merriu

Of the three sites, Cronk ny Merriu provided the best-preserved house structure (Gelling 1952). The house measured 11 by 4.3m internally, and had stone-faced walls. These were 1.2 to 1.5m thick, and were filled with an earth core. It appeared from the position and quantity of collapsed facing stone that the walls had been higher on the inside, and that the roof slope had continued across the thickness of the walls to within approximately 0.6m of ground-level on the outside. A reconstruction exercise at the time of the excavation, based on the available collapsed debris, suggested that the

interior wall facing may have stood as high as 1.4m above floor level. Raised benches were set along the long walls and possibly across one end wall. These had been formed by leaving the natural soil undisturbed and excavating down to create a sunken floor level; the earth benches were revetted with stones set on edge. Two original doors were positioned towards the end of the long walls opposite each other (a third in one gable was believed to be later). There was slight and inconclusive evidence for a hearth, but the presence of a few fire-crazed stones in the floor implies that either cooking or heating may occasionally have occurred. Fired stones were also found towards the outer part of the promontory, together with a very few pieces of bone found within a posthole in the same area. Unfortunately, it is nowhere unequivocally stated that this intermittent occupation deposit was considered contemporary with the long house.

Although a dark brown earth (contrasting against the undisturbed reddish brown material from which the benches were formed) covered the floor area between the benches, and probably represents an occupation deposit, no artefacts were found except for a few fragments of broken quernstone built into the walls, and a quartzite cobble, which may have been used as a hammerstone. All of these may have related to the earlier occupation of the site, most obviously represented by the rampart and ditch on the landward side of the promontory; associated with this was a line of postholes, which appears to have supported a fighting platform. No structural evidence for actual domestic occupation predating the house was found. It was clear, however, that the rampart was in a dilapidated state when the rectangular house was built, and so predated it.

No clearly datable artefacts relating to the construction and occupation of the house were uncovered, forcing the excavator to suggest an occupation falling within a 10-12th century time frame. A few years later, when embarking upon excavation at Close ny Chollagh, the house at Cronk ny Merriu was described as 'a permanent house of Viking type ... built on a small promontory whose defensive rampart was already ruinous in Viking times' (Gelling 1957, 571). Almost two decades subsequent to excavation, however, a silver penny of Edward I was found by chance close to the rampart. Whilst this find has no archaeological context, its presence on the site must be considered in the light of the proposal put forward below that some at least of the forts were re-used for the purpose of coastal defence.

Close ny Chollagh

Cronk ny Merriu was investigated because of the obvious presence on the ground of a rectangular structure, which, it was hoped, would permit the investigation of remains more substantial than the shadows in the sand so painstakingly recovered by Bersu at Vowlan a few years earlier, and the chance to find better evidence by which to date this class of site. The lack of positive dating evidence led a year later to the investigation of another promontory within which there were again surface indications of a long house similar to that at Cronk ny Merriu; this was the site of Close ny Chollagh (Gelling *ibid*). It was hoped that the site would not only produce more precise evidence for the date of the Viking occupation of these promontories, but also demonstrate to what period the defences belonged, if once again they turned out to be earlier.

Close ny Chollagh is not a natural promontory, but was made defensible by excavating a ditch from the inland end of a deep, narrow sea-cut inlet on the south side of the site: the spoil from the ditch was used to create a substantial rampart, which was faced in stone. The defences were constructed to protect a group of four stone-built roundhouses occupied into the 1st century AD; the rampart was in a very collapsed condition by the time a Medieval rectangular building was constructed (Figure 2). The long south wall of this building, together with the east gable, were created by simply cutting back into the rear side of the rampart and revetting the exposed earth bank with stone. The walls survived in places to a height of three courses, perhaps 0.6m high.² The west gable took advantage of a natural rib in the bedrock; only the north wall was an entirely new structure. This survived to one or two courses in height, and was characterised by neat stone facings and a stone and earth core; it was 1.2m thick. A single doorway was positioned towards the west end.

Internally, the building measured 12.5 by 5m, and was the largest of the three coastal houses to be excavated by Gelling. Evidence for internal arrangements was scantier than at Cronk ny Merriu: a narrow bench only 400mm deep lay along the length of the south wall, and an irregular spread of four postholes led the excavator to suggest that the roof was supported as and when it showed signs of weakness or collapse, and even that it might have been single-pitch, sloping back into the rampart. There appear not to have been substantial quantities of collapsed wall material, and this is confirmed by photographs in the excavation archive. It is tempting to suggest that, unless systematic robbing subsequently took place (which would have had to be of this structure in favour of all others on the site, including the easily accessible rampart facing), the building may perhaps have never been particularly high or substantial. There was no sign of a hearth within the house, and at no point was such a feature, or even an area of burning, recorded anywhere else within the site at levels relating to the Medieval occupation.

Three other poorly built structures, interpreted as outbuildings, lay within the area enclosed by the rampart, all of them stratigraphically above the Iron Age roundhouses, and therefore not unreasonably judged to be broadly contemporary with the long house.

The most substantial of these structures comprised a 1m thick curved wall built into the angle of the rampart at the north-west corner of the site, enclosing an area approximately 7 by 3.6m. Between this structure and the long house, the incomplete remains of a circular stone building were recorded, whilst a single line of stones set on edge in the south-west corner of the enclosure suggested another, insubstantial building relying on the existing rampart for the remainder of its walls. The circular building was both stratigraphically higher, and far less substantially built, than most of the Iron Age roundhouses, and was therefore not ascribed to this earlier period; its close proximity to the single entrance to the long house is, however, somewhat uncomfortable and may therefore imply some unidentified subtlety in the site's chronology. Lastly, a set of stone steps, again well above Iron Age levels, led up onto the seaward rampart. There is certainly room to doubt that these structures were indeed contemporary with the house.

No datable finds could be ascribed to the Medieval occupation. It was considered that only the form of the long house and its vestigial bench (which was far narrower

²This estimate is derived from unpublished photographs included in the excavation archive.



Figure 2: Excavation photograph of Close ny Chollagh
(credit: Manx National Heritage).

and less pronounced than either Vowlan or Cronk ny Merriu) gave any clue of Scandinavian antecedents. As a result, a 12th, and more probably a 13th, century date was proposed for the occupation. The excavator was later even to consider the structural characteristics of the house so 'attenuated' as to opine that a 14th century date might be more appropriate (Gelling 1959, 38).³

Cass ny Hawin

Since excavation of Close ny Chollagh had not revealed a building of clearly Scandinavian style, a third promontory fort was investigated, this time at Cass ny Hawin (Gelling *ibid*). Here excavation revealed a single rectangular house orientated west-east: no other contemporary structures were met with. The floor of the house was created by digging down to the bedrock. This had been worked to achieve a fairly level surface, and was cut slightly lower in the centre to give the effect of benches along either side and across each end; the benches were between 0.8 and 1.5m wide. The interior of the house measured 9.5 by 4.5m. Beyond this cleared area of bedrock, the walls of the house were with difficulty identified in the trench sections: they were completely devoid of stonework, and appeared to have consisted entirely of turf. From the evidence of the trench sections, the walls of the house were approximately 2.4m thick; they survived to a height of no more than 0.25m, and must have been very much eroded.

Two entrances were identified, opening to the north and south close to the east end of the building. There must be some doubt as to the former, as it opens precipitously onto the northern edge of the promontory; upon investigation, the underlying rock in the cliff face does not appear unusually unstable, and there seems little reason to propose a major rockfall in the intervening centuries. The northerly entrance was not investigated further, but the southerly entrance was excavated completely, revealing a short passage through the thick turf side-wall which turned eastward through ninety degrees once outside. Two post holes marked the end of the passage, implying a doorway. Both doorway and passage are designed to avoid the prevailing wind.

Other than the nascent benches formed from the bedrock, evidence for internal arrangements was limited to six postholes and two concentrations of burnt material. Of the latter, one, positioned centrally, comprised a deep deposit of ash, under which the bedrock had been discoloured, indicating quite substantial use. The ash spread across an area of 2.4 by 0.4m, and although no kerbstones were found, was apparently clearly defined. On one of the benches, an area of burnt clay and ash, containing a potsherd, was found, and interpreted as the possible remains of a small, collapsed, oven.

³It is clear from the published report that the excavator was predisposed to consider the site as a farmstead, comprising a house and outbuildings. 'The people who lived in this farmstead were probably descendants of Viking settlers. They bred sheep, pigs and possibly goats, but there was nothing to suggest that they raised any kind of crop. The flesh of their domestic animals provided part, at least, of their diet, and bones were found scattered all over the floor of the house, with particular accumulations at the foot of both short walls. It may be conjectured that they fished, and they certainly ate shell-fish - periwinkle, limpet and dog-whelk - in considerable quantities. It is not clear where they did their cooking, as there was no trace of a hearth inside the house.' (Gelling 1957, 575). Very few bones and shells from the excavation were retained, and it is difficult to judge whether or not they represent a truly domestic midden.

The postholes were arranged in an orderly manner (in contrast to Close ny Chollagh), two close to the west end, and four near the east end not far from the doorways. It is possible that the posts in these positions supported and bolstered roof frames subjected to sideways pressures from a hipped roof, and that those towards the east end additionally had to support arrangements for a roof structure over the entrance (or entrances if the northerly doorway is accepted).

As well as the hearth, defined by a 'mound of ash' (Gelling *ibid*, 35), a thin deposit of ash and heated stones extended from the hearth to the doorways. In this was found the majority of the potsherds from the site. More than twenty sherds, separated into three broad types were found, including the locally-produced granite tempered ware (Barton 1999, 228). Other finds included an incomplete pair of iron shears and an iron missile head; both of these were recovered from the occupation deposit. Six other pieces of iron, two pieces of copper alloy, and some fragments of lead slag were also recovered, none of which were identifiable as artefacts. As was originally proposed, a date as early as the 13th century is still quite feasible for those finds which are datable, such as the pottery (Davey pers. comm.), and hence for the house as well, but equally both pottery and the long-lasting design of the shears allow for a slightly more recent date.

Discussion

Clearly, Gelling was predisposed to thinking that these sites were domestic, and, particularly where additional structures occurred as at Close ny Chollagh, that they represented farmsteads. The objections to such use are several.

Firstly, there is little midden material from any of the three sites, with the possible exception of Close ny Chollagh. Even here the bones and shellfish were apparently confined to the house - there is no record of any being found outside the house from Medieval levels. One might have expected at least a diffuse spread of material to have been found across the interior of the promontory fort if it were being used as a domestic site. At Cass ny Hawin there was no sign of an occupation deposit, nor of other features, outside the house. Here it was presumed that any remains of the former had been eroded, but one feels that there equally well need never have been any. The occupation deposit outside the long house at Cronk ny Merriu is not specifically ascribed to the same period as the house. In any case, its spread was discontinuous, and consisted almost entirely of fire-crazed stones; they were not particularly numerous. In short, the lack of clear midden deposits is problematic if the sites are to be interpreted as permanently occupied farmsteads. Whether or not one proposes that rubbish was usually deposited over the edge of each promontory, the general lack of at least some domestic finds spread across the ground at these sites is difficult to accept, unless the sites were in fact used in a different way.

Secondly, although it must be said that rural Medieval sites on the Island have been shown, from limited excavation, to be quite poor in total finds, the lack of a broad range of artefacts is also worrying. Pottery from Cass ny Hawin totals approximately 20 sherds, representing only a few vessels. Only this site produced metal objects during excavation, including the broken pair of shears and the missile head. Furthermore, the date of those few finds which have been made is significant. Those from Cass ny

Hawin are no earlier than the 13th century; meanwhile, Cronk ny Merriu has an apparent casual loss - a late 13th century silver penny - which whilst unstratified, is enough to emphasise that this site at least was visited at a time when Scandinavian influence was declining. In short, these sites were apparently being used at a time when Scandinavian influence was either at least well established, or perhaps actually waning.

Thirdly, hearths are not consistently present - only at Vowlan are they a feature of every house, and of the other three sites described, only Cass ny Hawin has clear evidence for repeated hearth use - and here there was no stone kerb. This most basic domestic feature should be consistently present if these sites are to be interpreted as homesteads or farmsteads.

Fourthly, the issue of location is also problematic. None of these sites can possibly be described as choice sites for farmsteads: exposed locations, poor access and lack of direct water supply all militate against their suitability. With the possible exception of Close ny Chollagh, where additional structures have been interpreted as outbuildings (although stratigraphic evidence is only that they postdate the Iron Age round houses), there is none of the infrastructure one would expect of a fully functional farmstead.⁴

Lastly, to a greater or lesser extent, all of the structures betray imperfections in build quality, care, design or features. The house at Close ny Chollagh takes advantage of the rampart for two of its walls (despite access to good building stone), has rather ad hoc arrangements for supporting the roof, no hearth, and only one narrow bench. At Cronk ny Merriu, there is no clear hearth, but the building is probably the best constructed example to have been investigated, and it has clearly defined benches; despite this, headroom appears to have been rather mean. Cass ny Hawin has an adequate hearth, rather basic benches, a sophisticated entrance, yet is built of rather temporary materials, despite easy access to excellent building stone. The timber houses at Vowlan are somewhat irregular in plan, though the provision of benches and hearths is consistently fulfilled.

Vowlan is unusual in that timber is an unlikely building material in a Manx context, although it should be noted that quarried stone is relatively in short supply in this part of the Island, due to its formation from glacial debris. There would, however, have been no shortage of turf and beach stones from which to build structures more typical of the local idiom. The presence here of postholes and foundation trenches 300-500mm across imply a post and timber sill-beam method of construction rather than Bersu's proposed wattle construction. One might infer that the buildings were more strongly and lastingly built than Bersu supposed, befitting the hearth pits filled to a depth of 500mm with charcoal and ash, which, it is contended, are too substantial for the fleetingly occupied guardhouses their excavator believed them to be. It is interesting that Bersu does not record any substantial humic deposits between any of the building levels, which suggests that the buildings could have been replaced immediately and consecutively, with little or no time elapse between. If anything, the site may have been occupied consistently and for a quite considerable length of time, if these buildings are to have had time to decay and be replaced.

⁴At Cass ny Hawin, a group of postholes was found beneath the east gable of the house, and another group were identified beneath the south-west corner of the house: all therefore securely predated the occupation associated with the long house.

It is important to note that at the time of Gelling's excavation campaign on the promontory forts, the opportunity of examining two inland farmsteads at the Braaid and Doarlish Cashen had not been taken.

In 1962 he re-investigated and re-interpreted the Braaid as a farmstead comprising a dwelling house and byre (Gelling 1964). The former was an enormous structure - by Manx standards - 20m long by 8m wide internally, with stone and earth side walls 2m thick, and gable walls of turf or turf and timber. A second structure stands just downslope from the house, 16.5m long and 6m wide, this time with straight long walls, and interpreted as a beast house with rudimentary stone stalls. A stone-built roundhouse is close by, and, whilst it is considered to be of the earlier indigenous building tradition, it is believed to have remained in use when the long houses were built. Unlike the promontory sites, the Braaid has the necessary attributes to be a substantial Viking period farmstead, provided with a house (so large it perhaps merits being called a hall) and a separate byre. Nevertheless, the site was abandoned, possibly for complicated reasons discussed elsewhere (Johnson *ibid*, 55-7).

Doarlish Cashen is the only Medieval upland farmstead yet to have been the subject of published archaeological investigation (Gelling 1970). The site comprised a group of perhaps ten structures associated with a field system. Three of the structures were excavated, and interpreted as a small rectangular house (measuring 7 by 3m internally), a corn-drying kiln, and an animal shelter. The site has recently been reconsidered at some length (Johnson *ibid*, 57-60). It is by no means certain that all of the ten structures originally identified need be contemporary; nevertheless, the arrangement of several of the buildings and their relationship to the nearby boundaries is a compelling illustration of how a Medieval farmstead might have been arranged - and is rather more complicated than allowed for within the restricted promontory sites.⁵

Although finds at Doarlish Cashen were severely restricted, a single sherd of very dark grey unglazed pottery, recovered from the floor deposit in the house, may still shed some additional light on the date of the farmstead through its similarity to material found on the slopes of Slieu Curn overlooking Glen Dhoo in the north-west of the Island. Here, a number of features have recently been surveyed; one of these features (Davey *et al.* 1997, 11, Site 15) has since been investigated, revealing a rectangular building with turf walls and containing three separate hearths. Samples from stratigraphically the earliest and latest of the hearths produced calibrated radiocarbon dates from the early and late thirteenth century.⁶ As the latest hearth also produced fragments of burnt pottery reminiscent of the material from Doarlish Cashen, these dates are a welcome confirmation of the likely age of the latter site, despite dissimilarities in construction and internal arrangement. The house on Slieu Curn contained no signs of benches, nor revetting for such structures, and the hearths were well defined rather than spread across the floor.⁷

⁵Although not conclusive by itself, recent study by the writer of aerial photographs has revealed no crop-mark evidence to suggest either field systems or additional buildings formerly associated with these sites (1:7500 colour photographic survey by BKS, undertaken April - August, 2000, Manx National Heritage Library reference PG 7304).

⁶750 ± 40BP (laboratory reference AA-28386) and 830 ± 40BP (lab. ref. AA-28387). Both dates are quoted here in uncalibrated form.

⁷Excavation has proved this structure to be stratigraphically later than the field boundary next to it, but additional survey has since suggested that the field system in this area is more extensive and complex

An Alternative Interpretation

The re-use of earlier promontory forts for domestic purposes by Scandinavian settlers wary of unfriendly indigenous neighbours would be more acceptable if more of the sites showed evidence for this. Since so few of the forts apparently contain suitable remains that can be interpreted in this manner, however, there must be some doubt whether there actually existed a need for such precautions. Certainly, on the evidence of excavation, Cronk ny Merriu, Cass ny Hawin, and Close ny Chollagh all have rectangular buildings. Meanwhile, Boirane, a site north of Dalby Point on the west coast of the Island, has been noted for surface remains suggesting a building in the interior, though these are now difficult to interpret. This is, however, out of a score of promontory fortifications generally believed to be Iron Age in origin.

If the re-occupied promontories did not serve as domestic sites defensible to landward, there seems little justification for them to be put back into use again unless it were for more strategic reasons. If instead the sites excavated by Bersu and Gelling are considered from the perspective of providing coastal defence, a rather different picture emerges. Those forts investigated by Gelling provide an interesting illustration of the practicality of providing a coastal watch along the south-east and southern edge of the Island. Cronk ny Merriu (Figure 3) overlooks Port Grenagh, the only possible landfall on a rocky stretch of coastline; Cass ny Hawin likewise guards the mouth of the Santon Burn, another suitable landing spot on a dangerous coast. In contrast, Close ny Chollagh instead provides a perfect view across the whole of Bay ny Carrickey, the shore of which would have been usable under most tidal conditions.

Cronk ny Merriu and Cass ny Hawin are both visible from Hango Broogh, a small fortification on the east coast of Langness which guards Derbyhaven, a sheltered tidal bay well suited to longships.⁸ Recent excavation (Doonan et al 2001, 42-4) suggests that Hango Broogh may have been used as a beacon, and quantities of charred gorse, suitable as highly flammable kindling, have been recovered from a deliberately excavated fire pit. One wonders whether Bersu's open-air hearth at Vowlan might also have served a similar purpose.⁹

In applying these considerations to the west coast of the Island south of Peel, we find that Boirane, its surface remains not proved by excavation, combines a fine observation position with sufficient proximity to one of the few landing places along this stretch of coast. Two, perhaps three, more earthworks are recorded in the vicinity, between them providing very adequate coastal defence. Two of them, and one other a few miles away, are called Boirane (or its derivatives), a word used to refer to historical earthworks (Garrad 1990; Thomson 1992). The proximity and inter-visibility of these sites begs tantalising but as yet unanswerable questions about the existence of a system of coastal protection, and the time at which this may have existed, if indeed they are all of similar date.

than first thought (Johnson forthcoming). The complexity of remains associated with the Slieu Curn structure is in contrast to the promontory forts.

⁸The harbour features several times in the Chronicle of the Kings of Man and the Isles and was clearly both vulnerable and a favoured landing place for invaders and pirates.

⁹1070 ± 50BP (laboratory reference Beta-154618) and 1280 ± 50BP (lab. ref. Beta-154617). Both dates are quoted here in uncalibrated form. The dates are, however, very early in the context of this discussion, and may relate to an early example of a watch beacon, or indeed a structure of some completely different purpose.



Figure 3: Aerial photograph of Cronk ny Merriu
(credit: Manx National Heritage)

Another site, in the south-west of the Island, offers a further tantalising illustration of how a coastal system of watch and ward may have extended around this particularly difficult and secluded stretch of coastline. The site of Burroo Ned lies on a forbidding headland protected to landward by natural topography and a 150m long rampart. Within it lie the unexcavated and ephemeral remains of several sub-circular buildings, and one rectilinear structure. Sockets in exposed areas of bedrock are thought to represent the foundations for signalling posts. It is tempting to see Burroo Ned as a vantage point from which to observe not only the neighbouring coastline (itself almost impenetrable because of cliffs and tides) but also the nearby Calf of Man, an islet which for many years was the preserve of the Lords of Man and which was potentially more vulnerable.¹⁰ At the first sign of danger, any such signal post would have been visible from the intervening high ground to the north-east, and a warning could thence be relayed on to the remainder of the Island's defenders.

Coastal defence - the watch and ward phenomenon - on the Isle of Man has been discussed by Cubbon (1930) and Megaw (1941), their work given impetus by the rediscovery of a document of 1627 listing the wardens for the day- and night-watches, and the locations where those on duty were to muster.¹¹ They were able to suggest locations for the majority of the sites from which a coastal watch was kept, day and night (Figure 4). The list is reproduced (Figure 5).¹² Of particular interest is that, whilst the daytime watchers were positioned on 'hills for day watch' giving elevated views out to sea, the night watch was kept at 'hills and ports for night watch' - sometimes from hills, but more often from, or close to, ports or, more precisely, potential landing places.

It must not be forgotten that the 1627 document records a system based on the sixteen coastal parishes, at that time in existence for about five hundred years, operating at a period long after the apparent time at which the various promontory forts were being re-used. Not unreasonably, however, both authors infer that the principle of watch and ward had been in existence from very much earlier times. Only Cubbon (1983, 18-19) and Bersu (1968, 88) have since tentatively suggested that the re-occupied promontory forts might be part of a coastal defence system. Quite reasonably, Cubbon (*ibid*) included the unusual structure initially interpreted by its excavator as a

¹⁰The Calf of Man was off limits to the Manx, and used by the Lords of Man for hunting. Its defence continued to prove a headache, resulting in the creation of at least two batteries of cannon there during the 1600s (Cuphey 1967, 56).

¹¹Castle Rushen Papers, Manx National Heritage Library reference CA1 Box 6 1600-1627.

¹²Notes relating to Fig. 5.

The text has been left unmodernised. Names in italics are not otherwise known. Some modern alternatives have been added ([]) to allow easier location.

Cronk Mooar and Knock y Dooney are prominent pagan Viking burial mounds.

Cronk ny Arrey Laa ('hill of the day watch') occurs in the parishes of Jurby, Bride and Rushen (twice). The name is not mentioned in the 1627 document, and may postdate it.

Cubbon (1930) identifies certain of the sites by looking at contemporary landownership evidence for the wardens. This is reflected in the locations marked on Fig. 4.

No relevant 17th century archaeological remains are known to relate to these sites, but Cass ny Hawin and Hango Broogh are convenient for Ronaldsway; Close ny Chollagh for Scarlett and Poolvaash; and Cronk ny Merriu for Port Grenagh.

Although provision is made for more than one night port in the parishes of Maughold, Lonan and Malew, this is far from adequate on the ground.

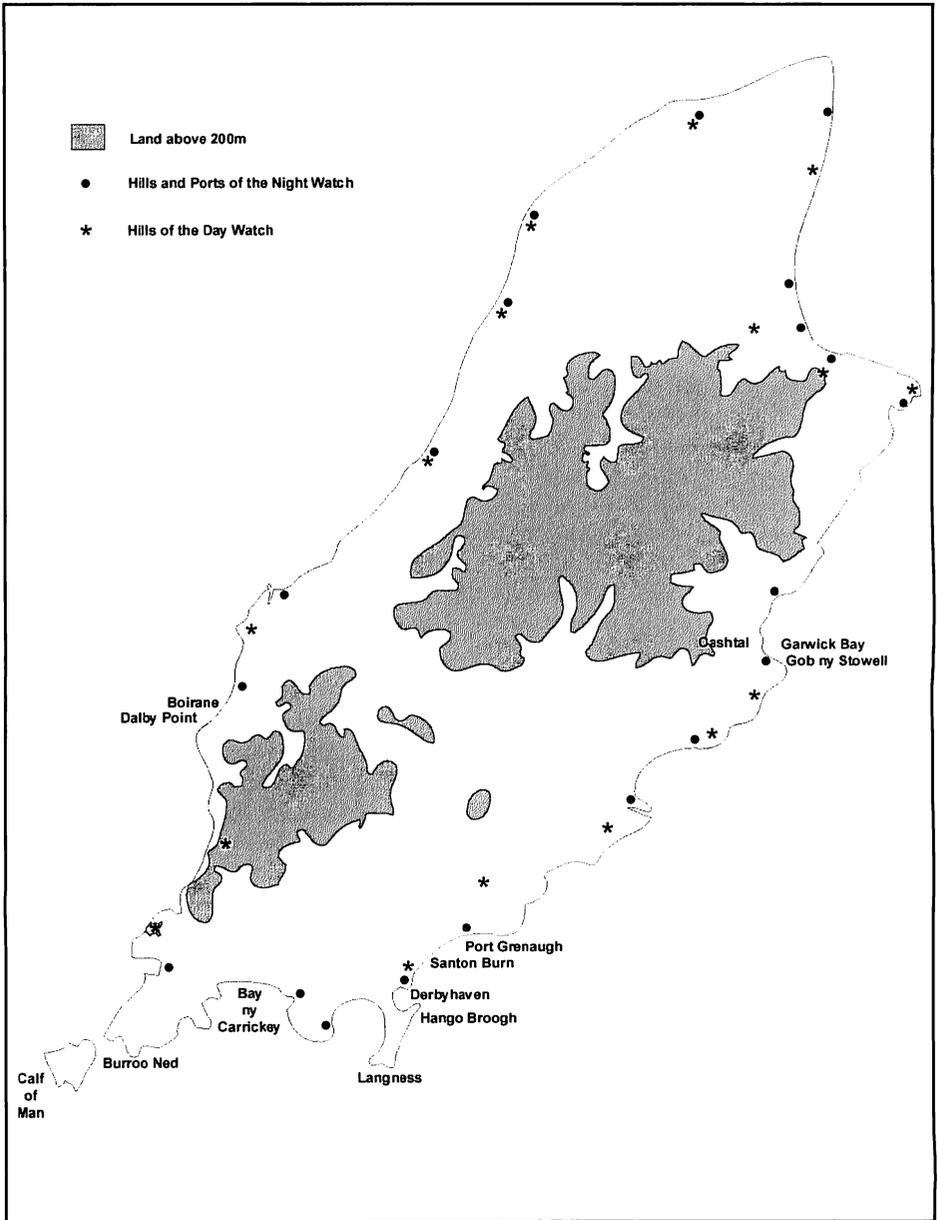


Figure 4: The Isle of Man: watch and ward stations and placenames.

A pfect Remembrance conteyning all the names of
the wardens both of the day and night watches throught
the Isle of Man together with the names of evry
pish and place where the watches are kept.
Ao dni 1627

Pishes	wardens for day watch	hills for day watch	wardens for night watch	hills and ports for night watch
Patr [Patrick]	Jo: Crosse	Knockaloe	Henry Ratclif	<i>Orestill</i>
Germa [German]	Wm Bridson	Knockaloe	Wm Bridson	Peeletowne [Peel] Trybane (crossed out) [Whitestrand]
Michael [Michael]	Jo: Cayne	Borodail [Glen Mooar]	Jo: Cannon	Borodail [Glen Mooar]
Ballal [Ballough]	Sr Nich: Thompson	<i>Whetston hill</i>	Phill Corleod	<i>Whetston hill</i>
Jureby [Jurby]	Wm Clarke	Knockmore [Cronk Mooar]	Wm Clarke	Knockmore [Cronk Mooar]
Andreas	ffinlo Mrtin	Sonday hill [Knock e Dooney]	ffinlo Mrtin	Sonday hill [Knock e Dooney]
Bryde [Bride]	Wm Cowle	<i>Blew hill</i>	David Xpin	Cranstall port [Cranstal] <i>Dease hill</i> (crossed out)
Kk: Christ Ayre [Lezayre]	Jo: Curghe	Scayhold [Sky Hill]	Demster Xpin	Hangmans hill [Vowlan]
Magald [Maughold]	Ro: Xpin Jn Ro: Christian	Slewage [Slieau Lewaigue] St Maghalds head [Maughold Head]	Ro: Xpin Jn Ro: Xpin Sen Tho: Xpi	<i>Ronaige</i> Port Donan [Dhyrnane] Ramsey
Lonan	Phil Moore	<i>Sr Wms hill</i>	James Kermod Phill Moore	Laxsey [Laxey] Gob Stoell [Gob Stowell]
Conchan [Onchan]	Tho: Bancks Ric Scaris- breck	Howe [Howstrake] Carnane	Tho: Bancks Ric Scaris- breck	port Conchan [Onchan Harbour] Duglas towne [Douglas]
Sanctan [Santon]	Xpher Brew	Knockloghan [Knock y Laughan]	Jo: Moore	Gren Vicke [Port Grenough]
Mallow [Malew]	nil	Barrow (crossed out) [The Broogh]	Demstr Xpin Wm. Pickard	Reynoldsway [Ronaldsway] Scarlett
Arbery [Arbory]	Jo: Cubon	<i>Echewle</i>	Geo.Symen	Polbash [Pooillvaish]
Kk Christ Russhen [Rushen]	Danold Duke	Bradoe [Bradda]	Gilbt Nelson	port Yrne [Port Erin]

Figure 5: Watch and ward stations in 1627 (Castle Rushen Papers, MNHL ref CA1 Box 6 1600-1627).

period grain store (Bersu 1967) but later reassessed as a house of the same period¹³ at the Cashtal, Ballagawne, despite its location some distance from the shore. This site, and its purpose, would benefit from reassessment.

Given the location of these promontories overlooking, or close to, sheltered inlets and river mouths, it is reasonable to view them as part of a system based more on a pragmatic need to watch those points on the coast where a raider might land than on a rigid requirement to muster a group of guards from each parish. Certainly Cronk ny Merriu is a clear candidate for the 1627 Santon port for the night watch located at 'Gren Vicke' (today's Port Grenough), whilst Vowlan could meet the same criterion for Lezayre's 'Hangman's hill'. Under a pre-parochial system, if one is to be postulated, Cass ny Hawin would also have provided a very necessary guard at a river mouth, whilst Close ny Chollagh would have secured a wide and vulnerable bay - until the delineation of Arbory and Malew left it in the 'wrong' parish.¹⁴ Whether the Cashtal, Ballagawne, situated 750m from a landing spot at the mouth of the Garwick stream, can be regarded as sufficiently close to the coast to fit the pattern is questionable; what is not in doubt is the perceived need as late as 1627 to mount a night guard at Gob ny Stowell on the south side of Garwick Bay, close to a small beach which continued in use with crofting fishermen until the nineteenth century despite a complete lack of harbour works.

A strategic approach to watch and ward, when applied to the intricate and varied coastline of the Isle of Man, would surely result in a response which sought to protect those parts of the coast that were vulnerable to seaborne attack. As is implied by the foregoing, sandy beaches, sheltered havens and secluded inlets and river mouths all fall into this category, particularly whilst the easily beached longship and galley were the principal means of travel. By the 17th century, ships were of rather different character, requiring more often than not a specially constructed quayside; let it not be forgotten, however, that land attacks using ships' boats meant that those less accessible coastlines were still as vulnerable as before.

Perhaps the document of 1627 has unduly influenced consideration of Medieval and post-Medieval coastal defence on the Island, and has led to an expectation that the watch would be kept at one specific location per parish (or more in a few exceptional circumstances as it indeed acknowledges). What should now be clear is that this would have been inadequate for the practical protection of the coastline, and that instead the watch would have been maintained from those locations where it was necessary. It is also salutary to consider the extent to which the Island's north-west and north-east coastlines have altered since the 1627 document was written, for whilst Cubbon's (1930) identification of hills and ports for the day and night watches can point us towards the general location of the most significant mustering points, we should not be too confident of being able to identify every location where Manxmen once shivered through the night keeping a watch for unwelcome visitors. Certainly where the rockier coastlines of the Island have withstood the sea better, we can be more confident of

¹³See notes by Cubbon (Bersu 1967, 88-89, 114-119).

¹⁴The Arbory night port was at Polbash (now Poolvaish), complete with a miserably insignificant limestone rock outcrop known as Cronk y Watch ('Watch Hill' / 'Hill of the Watch'). Clearly the need for a watch at this point on the coastline was still felt, but the parochial basis for recruiting the manpower meant that a less suitable muster point was identified.

unlocking the full extent of the system. Previous consideration of watch and ward has concentrated on written evidence and the early Manx statutes, perhaps at the expense of the actual locations at which watch was kept: combining the insights these sources provide of the intent of watch and ward with a re-assessment of the archaeological finds made by Bersu and Gelling, and with continuing fieldwork, provides the exciting prospect of understanding the way in which the system actually developed, functioned and was eventually abandoned.

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