

An unusual and previously overlooked duck decoy in the north of Scotland

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Abstract

Duck decoys were formerly widespread in England and Wales but, as has often been remarked, were believed to be absent from Scotland. This short communication summarises what is known about a previously overlooked decoy of an unusual circular design at Ackergill Tower in Caithness. Another decoy of recent construction in Fife and two other possible decoys in Ayrshire are referred to briefly.

Key words: Ackergill Tower, Ayrshire, Caithness, Fife, Pittarhie.

Well over two hundred duck decoys are known to have been established in England and Wales, the majority of them during the 18th and 19th centuries (Shrubb 2013). Although quite widely distributed, by far the greatest numbers were located in the counties of eastern England adjoining the North Sea. Most were commercial enterprises exploiting the large influx of wildfowl each winter and were used to supply fresh meat for human consumption to the main centres of population, notably London; others, sometimes referred to as “house-decoys” were built to provide some variety to the diet of the owners of the estates on which they were located. The decoys were of two principal types. Much the commonest was a design introduced from the Netherlands in the 17th century comprising a large, well sheltered pond, about a hectare in extent, from which radiated one or more curved channels or

“pipes”, the outer parts of which were covered with netting and tapered to a collecting chamber or net at their outer end. Birds were lured into the pipes using a dog, or simply enticed into them by food (usually grain), and/or using tame, pinioned or wing-clipped birds as decoys (Payne-Gallwey 1886; Whitaker 1918; Kear 1993; Heaton 2001, 2016; Shrubb 2013). A second, less common, type of decoy consisted simply of a cage or trap with either a barrier that could be lowered to prevent birds escaping or a small funnel-shaped entrance, into which the birds were enticed again with grain and/or tame or pinioned ducks.

In his seminal publication on duck decoys, Payne-Gallwey (1886, p.188) could find no evidence that any had ever operated in Scotland, though he noted that one was begun at Moy in Morayshire, but never completed. Their apparent absence from Scotland has been widely remarked upon in

subsequent publications – see, for instance, Heaton (2001, 2016) and Shrubbs (2013). A few still exist, some such as that at Hale in Cheshire as visitor attractions, whilst others are still used for catching ducks (though now for ringing purposes), with the Berkeley New Decoy at Slimbridge in Gloucestershire being a good example. This paper draws attention to an unusual structure that appears to be a previously overlooked decoy at Ackergill Tower in the north of Scotland, a second of recent construction in Fife, and two more doubtful ones of historical interest in Ayrshire.

Decoy at Ackergill Tower, Caithness

The first large scale Ordnance Survey map of Caithness shows a circular feature marked “Decoy” close to Ackergill Tower at

map reference ND349548, some 3 km north-north-west of Wick (Ordnance Survey 1873). It is marked as a decoy on later large-scale maps, including the most recently published 1:25,000 scale Explorer series (Ordnance Survey 2012) whereas on the equivalent 1:50,000 scale Landranger maps (Ordnance Survey 2005) or the Six Inch (1:10,560 scale) maps (Old-maps, 1959–1960), a circular structure is shown but not otherwise identified.

Based on the details shown on the 1873 map, a satellite image of the decoy viewed on Google Maps, various photographs published on the internet (Anon. not dated) and a visit to the site in May 2017 when some measurements were taken, the decoy is located in a slight depression in more or less level ground just a few metres above sea

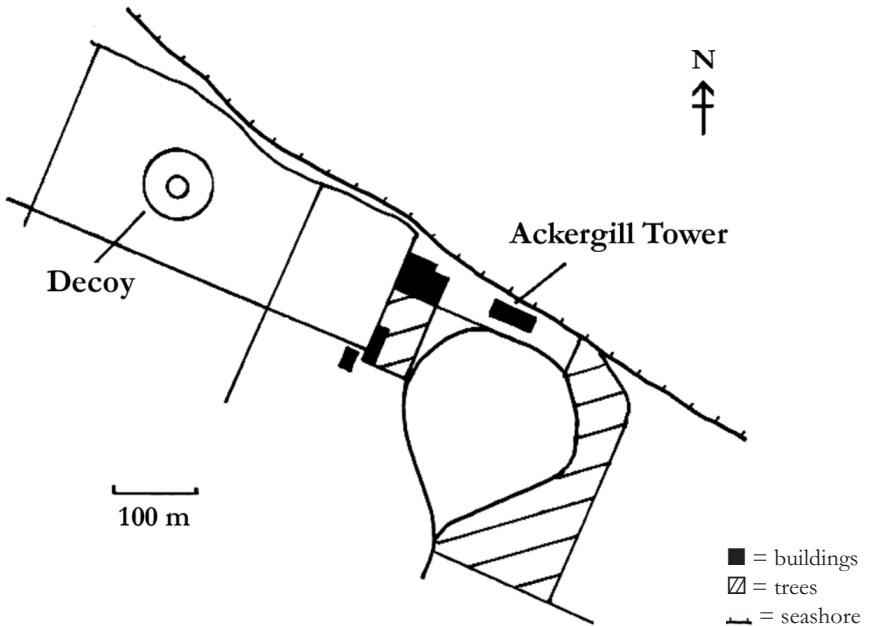


Figure 1. Location of the Ackergill Tower Decoy in relation to Ackergill Tower.



Figure 2. General view of Ackergill Tower Decoy as seen from the top of Ackergill Tower, by R.M. Sellers.

level, *c.* 75 m from the seashore and *c.* 300 m northwest of Ackergill Tower (Figs 1 & 2). The decoy is enclosed within a circular drystone wall built on a slight embankment, and *c.* 64 m (210 ft) in diameter and 1.2 m (4 ft) high. This wall is now in a poor state of repair and has fallen down completely in a number of places. The only obvious entry points are narrow gaps in the wall approximately at its westernmost and southernmost points, with possibly a third at the north-eastern edge of the structure (although this may be no more than a collapsed wall over a drainage channel). The area within the wall consists of a strip of land *c.* 3 m (10 ft) wide, a ring of water *c.* 3 m (10 ft) across, a broader ring of land *c.* 12 m (40 ft) wide, a second, broader, water channel *c.* 6 m (20 ft) wide with, at its centre, a circular, domed island *c.* 18 m (60 ft) in diameter (Figs 3 & 4). Crossing the channels are the remains of three wooden

footbridges, two over the outer channel and one over the inner one. Though clearly old, it seems unlikely that these date from when the decoy was built, and are presumably replacements for earlier structures for which all trace has vanished. The decoy has been sited to take advantage of a natural seepage of water from its landward side towards the sea; a narrow ditch between the two water channels and extending northeast beyond the decoy allows excess water to flow out towards the sea. Much of the area within the wall is now marshy ground with just a small area of open water, some stunted Sycamores *Acer pseudoplatanus* at its western side and a few small willows *Salix* sp. to the south.

Almost nothing is known about the origins of the decoy or how it was operated. The Ordnance Survey Name Books for Caithness (Anon. 1871–1873) record that it was:

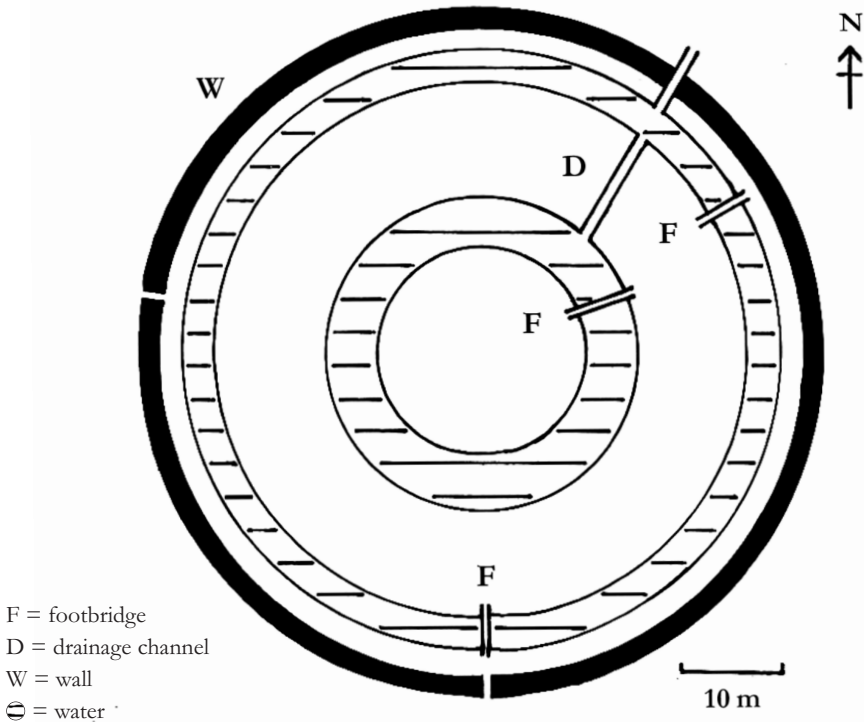


Figure 3. Plan of Ackergill Tower Decoy (approximate scale).

“A circular enclosure, in the centre of a field skirting the coast, about ¼ of a mile north-west of the Castle, having been erected for the breeding of swans, and the harbouring of wild birds, now quite forsaken excepting being visited by an occasional Snipe”.

Three people from the nearby village of Ackergillshore are given as the “Authorities for spelling” for both the “Decoy” and for “Ackergillshore”; these were presumably some of the “several poor fishermen” mentioned on the same page and who lived in the two houses then comprising Ackergillshore (rather than the residents of Ackergill Tower).

Leet (1997), on the other hand, ascribes a rather different function to the decoy, in the following words:

“The Ackergill Duck Decoy was used for shooting wildfowl in Victorian times. The shape provides poor fields of fire so I assume that an older structure was pressed into service.”

These comments are, however, speculative (confirmed by G. Leet, *in litt.*); there is no evidence for any earlier structure here, and, as described above, the site appears to have been selected specifically for use as a decoy.

Ackergill Tower is a five-storey tower house dating from the late fifteenth or early



Figure 4. Close up of the Ackergill Tower Decoy showing the central domed island, the inner ring of water and the southernmost of the three footbridges, by R.M. Sellers.

16th century. It underwent renovation in the middle of the 18th century and was substantially remodelled in the baronial style in 1851–1852 (Miller 1977; Beaton 1996). It is possible that the decoy was constructed in connection with one or other of these rebuilding works, though there is no direct evidence for this. If it does date from the later period, it can only have been in use for a very limited time, given that it was “quite forsaken” by the early 1870s. A date prior to about 1830 might be suggested by the fact that none of the ornithologists (E.S. Mackay, H. Osborne, R.I. Shearer and W. Reid) active in the Wick area in the decades after this make any mention of it, and all wrote fairly extensively about birds in Caithness (Sellers 2018).

The idea that the decoy was constructed for the breeding of swans seems rather fanciful. Mute Swans *Cygnus olor* were unknown as wild birds in Caithness in the 19th century and it was not until 1925 that they were first recorded breeding in the county (Manson 2002). The only swan to be seen regularly in Caithness at the time was the Whooper Swan *C. cygnus* (Manson 2002). These occurred regularly in fields by the decoy during the latter half of the 20th century (I. Leith, pers. comm.) and this was presumably the case at earlier periods. Perhaps it was this proximity to the decoy that gave rise to the idea that it had something to do with swans. It may also be telling that Alexander Sutherland, the gamekeeper at Ackergill during c. 1830–

1870, was considered a “great authority” on swans in Caithness (Mackay 1918), and it is possible that Sutherland used the decoy as a refuge for injured or captive swans (though the structure is far from fox-proof, so not ideal for such a purpose). The notion that the decoy was constructed for shooting wildfowl seems unlikely for the very reasons that Leet (1997) himself noted, and if it did indeed find a later use for this purpose it was only in a transient way.

It seems more likely that the Ackergill Tower decoy was intended as a place for catching ducks, as the word “decoy” in its title implies, although the possibility that the term has been applied erroneously to the structure cannot be entirely eliminated. There is no space within the structure for a conventional pipe for catching ducks, but the central island looks a suitable location for a cage trap, perhaps of the type described by Bub (1995) as an “automatic duck trap”. One advantage of such traps is that they require little man-power to operate them – perhaps no more than a daily visit to replenish the food provided and remove birds that have been caught. Such traps, appropriately sited and properly operated, can catch good numbers of birds, particularly Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* and Teal *A. crecca*, as, for instance, at Netherby in Cumberland (Sellers 2016; Sellers & Greenwood 2018). The Ackergill Tower decoy is, however, very exposed with no surrounding trees (those currently growing within the perimeter wall appear to be of comparatively recent origin) and, even as constructed, had only a limited supply of open water. It is unlikely to be the sort of place that ducks would frequent in any

numbers and it is doubtful that it was ever a success.

The circular construction of the Ackergill Tower decoy appears to be unique. Nothing like it is described by either Payne-Gallwey (1886) or Whitaker (1918), nor is anything similar mentioned in standard works on wildfowling (Macpherson 1897) or bird-trapping (Bub 1995). Given its unusual layout and location in the north of Scotland, however, it is not difficult to understand how it came to be overlooked by Payne-Gallwey (1886) and why it has remained unknown by later writers on decoys.

Other potential duck decoys in Scotland

The Ackergill Tower structure may not be the only forgotten decoy in Scotland. The Ordnance Survey Name Books (Anon. 1855–1857a, b) mention two other sites to which the word “decoy” has tentatively been attached. The first, referring to Fergus Loch, Ayrshire records that:

“In the middle of the Loch is a low level round Island partly a marsh and partly wooded in which are some scattered stones said by the country people to be at one time a castle and by Patterson a monastery. There is no trace of the foundation at present there is no mortar or cut stone visible nothing to indicate that it was either a Castle or Monastery more like the remains of a Decoy for Wild Duck and other water fowl which visit to it in thousands.”

For the second, at Loch Goosey, also in Ayrshire, the Ordnance Survey Name Books say that:

“... there is a low round Island on the South Side producing coppice ... there is the ruins of a Small

House or rather Hut on it for what object it was erected Tradition does not say I think it was intended for a Decoy house as at the [present] time it is much resorted to by wild duck and likely has been by Geese in former times as the name of the Loch itself ...”

The apparent positioning of these supposed decoys on islands in lakes where wildfowl were abundant in winter certainly makes this interpretation feasible; a number of cage-type decoys on islands are known from England, the one at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire being a good example (Payne-Gallwey 1886).

Modern duck decoy in Fife

It is also worth putting on record the existence of a modern duck decoy of conventional design at Pittarhie, Fife (P. Bowden-Smith, pers. comm). Here a single “pipe” has been added to a pond roughly 0.5 ha in size, set up to act as an agri-nutrient filter. Preliminary trials have shown the decoy to be effective as a means of capturing ducks. The pond, however, is quite shallow, and quickly became choked with weeds, rendering it much less effective as a decoy, and as a consequence is currently out of use. There are plans to deepen the pond, add a second pipe, and ultimately use the decoy as a bird-ringing site.

Acknowledgements

I thank staff at Ackergill Tower for granting me permission to visit the decoy. I am indebted also to Iain Leith, Chairman of the Wick Heritage Society, for his advice about the history of Ackergill Tower and the presence of Whooper Swans hereabouts in

the non-breeding season, to Bill Fearnie for help with locating source material, to Geoff Leet for answering my queries about his article on concentric earthworks, to staff at Nucleus (The Nuclear and Caithness Archives), Wick for allowing me access to their collection of maps, to Mark Oksien for drawing my attention to the presence of a decoy at Pittarhie, Fife, and to Patrick Bowden-Smith for information about this decoy. Thanks also to Jeremy Greenwood, Malcolm Ogilvie and Eileen Rees for their comments on an earlier draft.

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