

Where stood Arthur's O'on?

Arthur's O'on or Oven was a Roman building, possibly a temple, shaped like an old-fashioned bee hive. What it was has been hotly debated. In contrast, we know exactly where it stood. Or do we?

For an antiquity lost 270 years ago, having an exact location for it is unusual. The mapped site of Arthur's O'on appears to be based on local tradition, although the written record of this fact is the New Statistical Account of 1841 (page 357). According to the Rev John Bonar, then Minister for Larbert Parish Church, it

“stood on a bank sloping to the south or south by east , about 300 feet to the north of the point where is now the north-west corner of the Carron Iron-works. There is a piece of ground of the extent of about fifty feet square, which has a well sunk in it, and is used as a washing green by the inhabitants of the adjacent houses. On this piece of ground Arthur's Oon stood. The footpath passing up the slope was long known by the name of the Oon path.”

The story of the destruction of Arthur's O'on is well known. It caused a furore at the time. Sir Michael Bruce of Stenhouse dismantled it, using the stones to build a dam on the Carron River, to power a mill. What puzzles me about such a detailed account of the site of Arthur's O'on is the extraordinary way in which Bonar describes its destroyer.

“The curious will regret that the owner of Stenhouse and Stenhouse Mill was so destitute of all regard for antiquity. He certainly was no dilettante, neither real nor pretended. He was not one of the admirers of the beautiful and of the rare in the material world, but a country gentleman who had other things to mind, and never moved much out of the parish where he was born, and died there an octogenarian. Notwithstanding all this, the building might have escaped demolition, had he not been poor, possessed a numerous family of children, his income small, and a considerable part of it derived from the mill.”

It is true that Sir Michael Bruce died aged 86 in 1795, but in 1743 he was just 34. While he is believed to have had 13 children, in 1743 he had been married only about five years and had several children. He wasn't poor, and had a substantial estate. At the time of the destruction some gentlemen offered to assist him, redeem the oven, or provide him with stone from a quarry for free, but he refused this (1). Perhaps he went ahead to get rid of an ancient monument that was a nuisance. It probably attracted numerous unwelcome visitors onto his lands, and could potentially obstruct other business schemes. How often have monuments disappeared for such reasons even in modern times?

However even after removing all trace of Arthur's O'on, the site where it stood most probably attracted just as many unwelcome pilgrims. So it comes as a surprise that the local minister in 1841 was so precise about where to go to see the site, when seemingly persuaded to put a gloss on the destruction. Do we trust this location? It doesn't match contemporary descriptions. Did the Statistical Account provide an opportunity to decoy antiquarians away from the real site with something less inconvenient to the estate? In modern terms this is a point off Stenhouse Road around the junction of Castle Drive with Adam Crescent, north-west of the former Carron ironworks. This is at a grid reference NS 87978273.

As Steer points out in 1960 “The position is, in fact, a gentle slope at the southern end of a flat topped spur, only 70 feet in height, which projects into the Carron valley” (2). Steer excavated the site in 1950 and found no trace; an investigation by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1868 was also unsuccessful (3). But the veracity of the authorised location has not been discussed in modern times.

The earliest meaningful reference to Arthur’s O’on is in 1293, when a pond was given to the monks of Newbattle Abbey for the use of their mill at Stenhouse (4). The mill was granted about a hundred years earlier, but the pond was “iux furnis Arthuri” (next to Arthur’s oven?), although as this phrase follows “Stanh” (Stenhouse) it is usually interpreted as Stenhouse Mill being near Arthur’s Oven, even though renewal grants of the mill don’t mention the oven.

The next clues are in Alexander Gordon’s account in 1726 (5). He says it was about 200 paces north of the river Carron. Though the course of the river was greatly altered in the 18th century, the parish boundaries on early Ordnance Survey maps show the old meanders, compared to other information, including the Statistical Accounts, and the river south of the official location is a quarter of a mile distant (440 yards, 402 metres). If we consider paces as less than a yard, the discrepancy is greater.

Gordon also says it was “on the Declivity of a considerable rising ground” such that the lowest four courses and a basal plinth were buried on the uphill side. Each course was up to 22 inches high, and if the basement was thicker, we can estimate that the buried portion was as much as 10 feet. The diameter is 28 feet, greater including the plinth, but there are indications here of a 1 in 3 slope. That isn’t the gradient at the official site, but lower downhill around Stenhouse Road, the cutting of the road into the slope a little to the west would fit that description. This impression of the siting of Arthur’s Oven is also borne out by the 1757 drawings in Stukeley’s *Carausius*. Gordon also comments that even though it “is not upon an eminence”, across the low country of the Carse of Falkirk it could be clearly seen from Kinneil, about 7 miles away.

A “gentleman in Falkirk” who played in it as a boy, described it around 1748 as having been “in a bottom, near the River Carron” (6). “Bottom” might usually describe land at the lowest point, or the floor of a valley. All the evidence points to a low-lying site near the foot of rising ground, steep enough to excavate the foundations into the slope. Other accounts suggest that Arthur’s O’on was further east.

In 1712 someone wrote “it stands at the east angle of the garden of Stenhouse which belongs to Sir William Bruce, in the Carse of Bothkennar, two miles by west of Orchardhead” (7). Orchardhead is on the Forth about a mile north of Grangemouth, Orchardhead being the address of the unknown writer in question. The official site of Arthur’s O’on is 2.75 miles from Orchardhead, but the eastern edge of the Stenhouse lands would be two miles away. We know from the feus to the Carron Ironworks from 1759 to 1781 that Stenhouse lands extended to Blackton (Millquarter), Roughlands and Nailer Row (8). Also the mineral line used to connect the ironworks to quays at Carronshore cut across the south-east corner of the park. So Arthur’s O’on could be perhaps five hundred metres east of the authorised site.

This possibility is borne out by one of Roy’s plans in 1793, showing the course of the Antonine Wall, Plate XXXV. Written diagonally, in two lines, rising from left to right, across the south-east of Stenhouse: “ Here stood Arthur’s Oon”. The left hand end, to which locality the oblique writing

might refer, is directly north of Carron Bridge, at the south-east corner of a square, probably depicting the park of Stenhouse. This information isn't given in Roy's Military Survey 1747-55, but both maps show a road, rising from Carron Bridge, passing immediately west of the mansion, which appears to define the west side of the park. The authorised site of Arthur's O'on lies on or beside this road, apparently at the then south-west corner of the park. Later maps from 1817, after the Carron Iron Works dams had been established, show the Stenhouse Road turning west round the edge of the dams, and the park extending further west across the line shown by Roy. Both Steer and Crawford describe a hollow way on the west of the authorised site (9), but none of the earlier descriptions mention a road, nor do Stukeley's illustrations show one, although Sibbald describes a broad ditch north of Arthur's O'on. The Reverend Bonar pointed out that it was by a footpath long known as the Oon path, but I suspect this is the old road shown on Roy.

It might be argued that the site of Arthur's O'on is academic. It was after all entirely destroyed. There's no archaeology left. However, where it stood gives a sense of place. The possibility that the landowner might have created a decoy site, to keep the antiquaries at bay, is intriguing. Clearly the authorised site differs in so many ways from how it was previously described.

For something as iconic, which has been an enduring fascination for centuries, knowing where it stood is likely to mean a great deal to people living around it. It was built by the Romans, but respected and perhaps protected by later peoples for their own reasons, so it is just as much a symbol of the Dark Ages, the Early Historic or the Middle Ages. It is a little sad that in the last few decades it has dropped out of sight because of the dry factual indifference of archaeology.

We need to know and care, and still marvel at Arthur's O'on. Heritage is not just about digging up artefacts.

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Notes:

- 1 Surtees Society vol 80 The family memoirs of the Rev Wm Stukeley part III, p430
- 2 Steer, K A (1960) Arch. Jnl CXV p99-110
- 3 Proc Soc Ant Scot Vol VII, p396
- 4 Innes, C (1849) Reg. S. Marie Neubotle 1140-1528, p175 & p75, 174,187,190; Hall, D (2006) Scottish Monastic Landscapes p61
- 5 Gordon, A (1726) Itinerarium Septentrionale p21,25, 31
- 6 Surtees Society vol 80 p432
- 7 Steer, K. A. (1969) More Light on Arthur's O'on, Glasgow Arch Soc. vol 4 (4) p92
- 8 Falkirk Archives, papers of Sherriff Family
- 9 Steer 1960; Crawford O.G.S. (1949) Topography of Roman Scotland North of the Antonine Wall p150