



# TARSET CASTLE



## EXHIBITION



EXHIBITION PRODUCED BY THE TARSET ARCHIVE GROUP FOR HERITAGE OPEN DAY 2010  
SUPPORTED BY THE NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK ACTION AREA FUND AND TARSET 2050 CIC

**Tarset**Archive  
GROUP

Supported by

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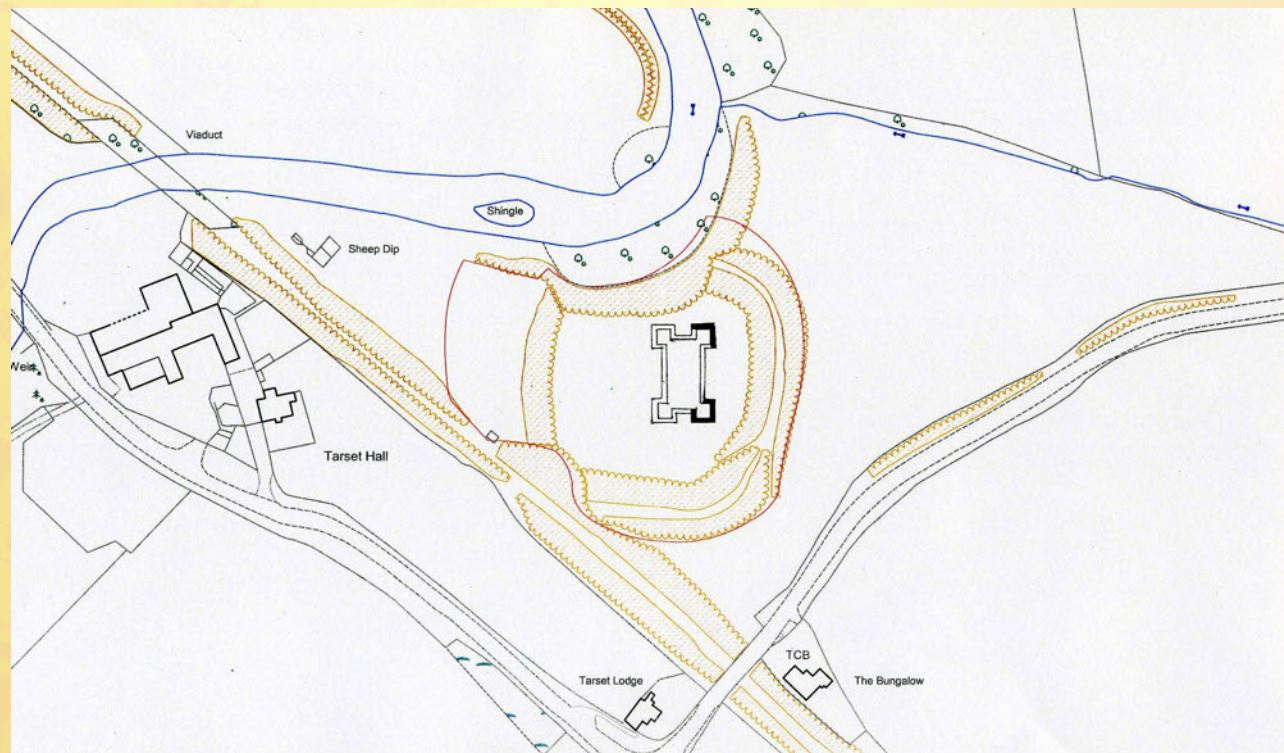


# TARSET CASTLE

## • KEY EVENTS IN CASTLE'S HISTORY •



vertical air photograph of castle and surrounding area (scale 1:1250)



plan of castle and surrounding area (based on O.S. scale 1:1250); outline of castle plotted from *best fit* of detailed survey and air photographs

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C12 <sup>th</sup>	a ringwork castle (earth and timber) probably built on the site
1244	Walter Comyn, lord of Badenoch, allowed to retrieve his stores and weaponry when Sheriff of Northumberland Hugh de Bolbec was ordered to take <i>the Castle of Tyreset</i> into his keeping to protect it from the Scots
1267	John Comyn 1, lord of Badenoch, granted licence to crenellate by Henry III
1286	John Comyn 2, lord of Badenoch, appointed one of six Guardians to rule Scotland on Alexander III's death until his heir of age
1289	John Comyn 2's court at Tarncliffe referred to in a writ of Edward I
1292-4	John Comyn 2's brother-in-law, John Balliol, king of Scotland
1306	John Comyn 3, lord of Badenoch, murdered by Robert the Bruce at Greyfriars, Dumfries; Robert the Bruce crowned king of the Scots
1308-28	Borders, including manor of Tarncliffe, ravaged by Scots invasions led by Robert the Bruce; land values plummet
1314	John Comyn 4 killed at Battle of Bannockburn
1326/9	<i>Inquisitions Post Mortem</i> of John Comyn 4 divides Tarncliffe manor between his widow and his sisters, Elizabeth and Joan
1325-69	earls of Atholl own castle when Joan marries 10th earl
1362-92	Tarncliffe leased to Sir William Heron
1369	12th earl dies; Tarncliffe inherited by his daughters
1373	Elizabeth Comyn's Tarncliffe inheritance sold by her son to Henry Percy, 1st earl of Northumberland (known as the Talbot lands)
1400 (onwards)	rest of Tarncliffe manor reunited under the Burgh family
1523	castle occupied by Sir Ralph Fenwick and 80 men to administer justice
1524	castle attacked by William Charlton of Bellingham with 200 men - Fenwick ejected
1525	Fenwick returns with 100 men and is attacked by alliance of Tynedale men and Scots; castle sacked and burnt, never to be rebuilt (stone subsequently plundered)
1598	Lord Burgh dies; Tarncliffe holding passes to Sir Anthony Palmer
1725 (about)	walls reported as <i>still of considerable height</i> but having <i>yearly suffered dilapidations</i>
1773	sketch plan of site indicates outline of external walls still discernible as rectangular building with a tower at each corner
1795 (about)	part of the walls known to be still standing
1825 (by)	<i>The very foundations have been dug up for the purpose of obtaining the stone to build a mansion house</i> (contemporary report)
1860	cutting made for Border Counties Railway through south-west corner of site
1862 to 1865	major landslip(s) on the north slope
1888	site excavated by Mr W L S Charlton: finds include a well-built hewn stone underground passage containing a fine bronze key and a sword but no plan made
1956	railway closed to passengers
2007	Tarncliffe Archive Group advises English Heritage of deteriorating condition of site
2008	English Heritage launch <i>Buildings at Risk Register</i> on site
2009	surveys and ground investigation carried out during the summer, funded by English Heritage and site owner





# TARSET CASTLE

• SCHEDULED ANCIENT MONUMENT • GRADE II\* LISTED • BUILDING AT RISK •



licence granted by Henry III ordered fortifications like those of the house of Adam of Jesmond; substantial remains of this building survive in Heaton Park, Newcastle (above)

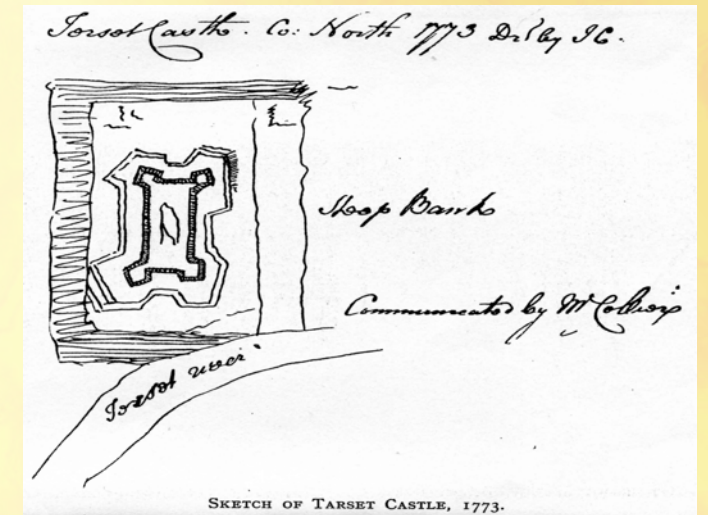
## Siting

Tarset Castle held a commanding position over the valley. The site is high above the Tarset Burn, 0.5km upstream from its confluence with the River North Tyne. There are clear views west up the North Tyne valley and south towards its contemporary Dally Castle on the Chirdon Burn.

The site was defended on all sides: to the north by a steep, unstable slope, 17m high; to the east and south by a substantial steep-sided ditch; to the west by a natural slope augmented with spoil from the ditch.

An account of 1825 states:

*This ancient castle was situated on the Tyne, about four miles west of Bellingham. Within the last 30 years part of the walls were standing. They were about four feet thick, of the finest ashlar-work and strongly cemented. About a century ago, they were of considerable height, but yearly suffered dilapidations, and now the very foundations have been dug up for the purpose of obtaining stone to build a mansion house. This old building stood in a commanding situation, and seems to have occupied nearly an acre of ground; it was evidently a place of considerable strength, being almost surrounded by a deep moat, ten yards broad, the [west] side lying on a steep descent. Hutchinson says 'at each corner have been turrets and traces of an outward wall appear'.*



1773 sketch plan showing a rectangular building with towers or turrets at each corner and what may be the outer wall, of which no trace remains



east and south of the site defended by a substantial ditch, 20m wide at the top and 4-5m deep



north side defended by a steep natural slope - now unstable due to bank erosion; active landslips threaten castle remains



c 1860 part of site lost by excavation of deep cutting for the Border Counties Railway



2007 TAG approached English Heritage about deterioration of site; as an interim measure TAG, with help from NNPA volunteer rangers, planted 1200 willow slips in an attempt to improve slope's stability



2009 detailed surveys carried out - funded by English Heritage and site owner



2009 boreholes sunk on two cross-sections of north slope and movement monitoring points installed



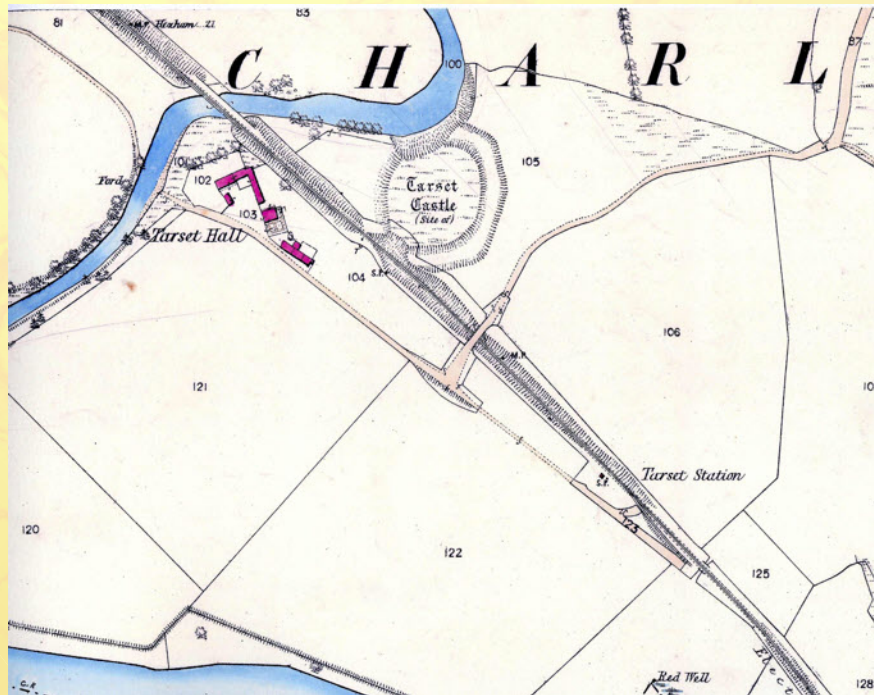


# TARSET CASTLE

## • HISTORIC PLANS •

Successive editions of Ordnance Survey Plans are a valuable source of information in local history. Plans (as opposed to maps) show topographical features to scale. They can be used to trace the development of buildings, settlements and industry in detail, and also measure the rate of natural processes, such as river erosion.

Early editions of the 1:2500 Plans (25 inches = 1 mile) cover most of the country except *mountain and moorland*, and were usually revised or re-surveyed every 20-40 years.



Plan courtesy Northumberland Record Office.

### First Edition, surveyed c.1862

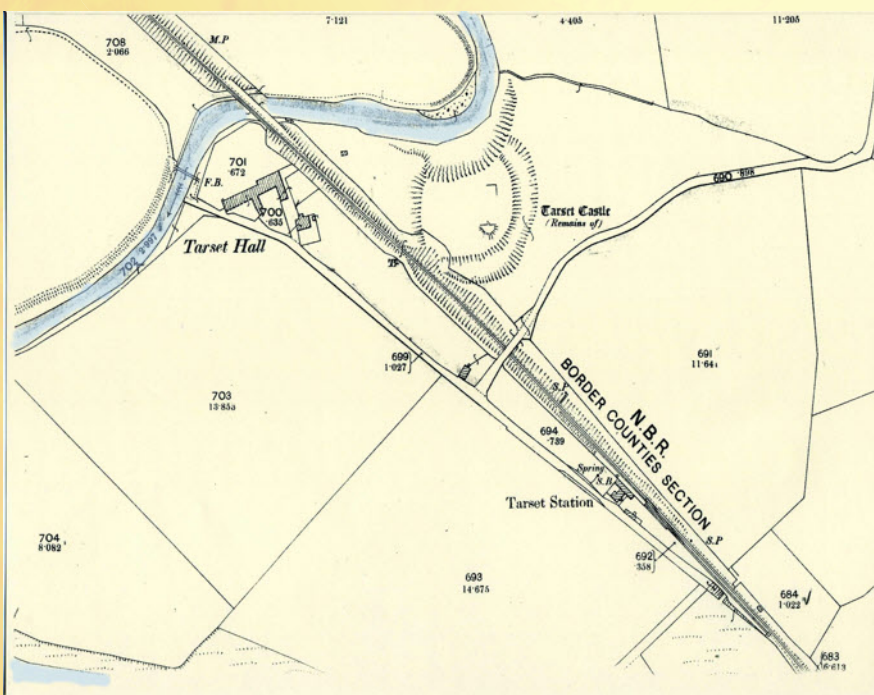
- Tarset Castle shown as *site of*
- no indication of masonry remains on castle mound
- ditch and steep landslipped slope above Tarset Burn clearly shown
- cutting for newly opened Border Counties Railway shown - it sliced through castle site and truncated castle ditch
- ford across burn



Plan courtesy Northumberland Record Office.

### Third Edition, surveyed 1922

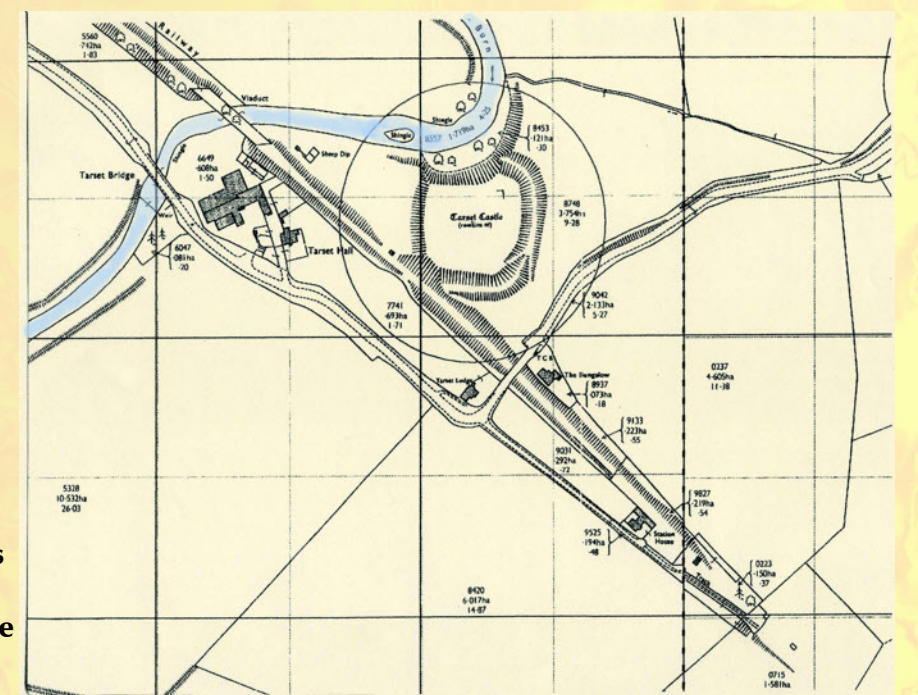
- more changes in river bed
- rock outcrops shown for first time
- no detectable changes to mound slopes
- road bridge now across burn



Plan courtesy Northumberland Record Office.

### Second Edition, surveyed 1895

- site now shown as *Tarset Castle (remains of)* with sections of wall plotted - perhaps exposed by 1888 excavations
- north slope landslip now extends further downstream; top of slope has receded by up to 15m
- some minor changes in river bed
- footbridge across burn



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### Surveyed or revised 1980

- no changes to landslip but some trees now on lower slope
- further changes to gravel in river bed
- rock outcrops no longer shown
- ramps across ditch shown for first time
- castle masonry not shown but still visible on ground and in air photos
- railway dismantled - northern fence removed and trees growing on viaduct





# TARSET CASTLE

## • REMAINS OF THREE C13<sup>th</sup> CASTLES •

### ADAM OF JESMOND'S HOUSE

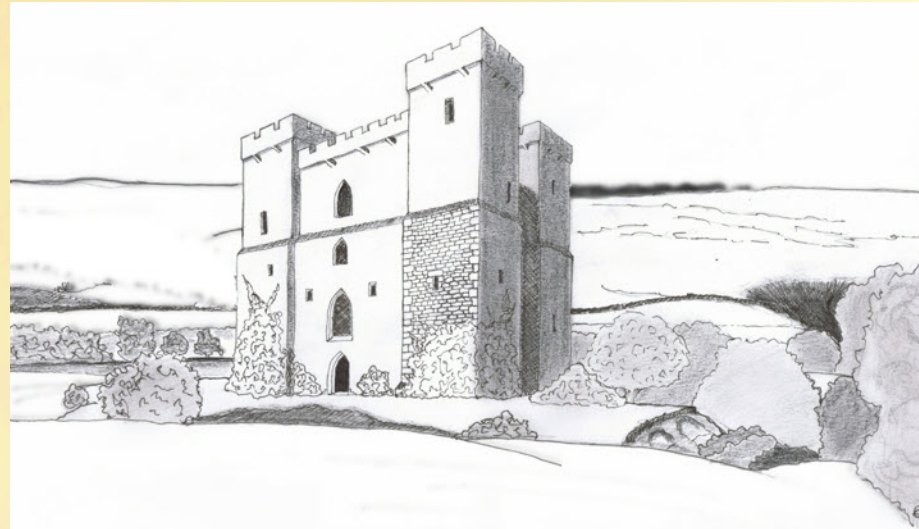


Adam of Jesmond's house at Heaton; referred to in 1267 licence to crenellate awarded to John Comyn 1



view of end wall showing towers and stonework

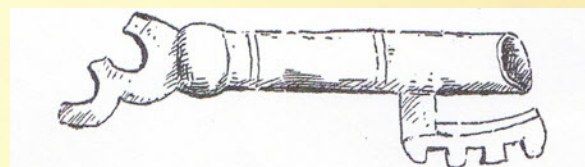
### TARSET CASTLE



artist's impression of what Tarset Castle might have looked like (stonework shown on one tower only)...



castle mound today - from same viewpoint and at similar scale

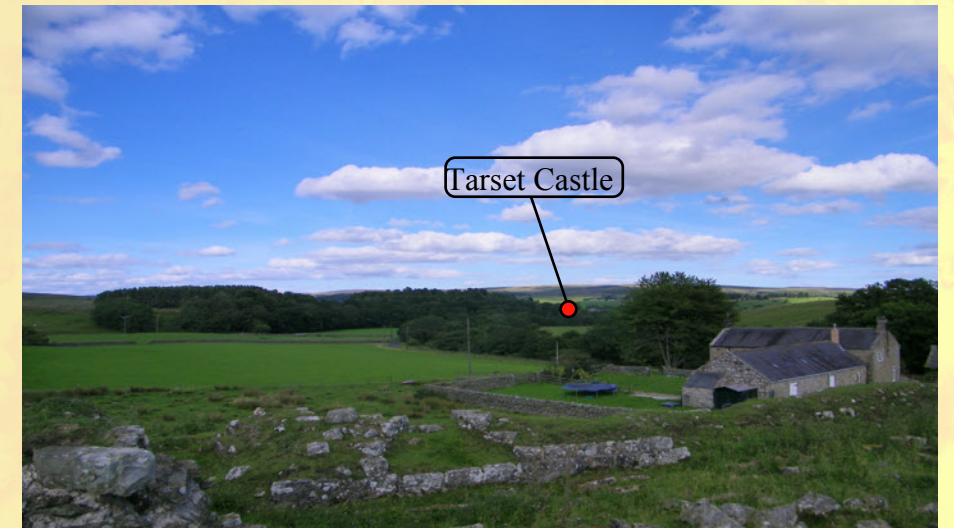


fine bronze key found in stone passageway under Tarset Castle in 1888 by Mr W L S Charlton; no plan was made so exact location of passageway unknown

### DALLY CASTLE



substantial masonry remains still visible at Dally Castle site; include well-carved fireplace, door jambs and external wall features



view from Dally Castle to Tarset Castle; Tarset Castle site now hidden by trees but each would have been clearly visible to the other





# TARSET CASTLE

## • THE COMYNS OF BADENOCH •

Tarset's history in the C13th was dictated by relations between England and Scotland. The Comyns of Badenoch who owned Tarset Castle and Manor were a very powerful family with huge estates in Scotland. Probably of Norman origin, they were mostly loyal to the English kings.

They controlled Scottish north/south routes from their main castle at Ruthven near Kingussie, and John Comyn 1 built the first castle at Blair in Atholl, where a tower is still known as the Cumming (Comyn) Tower. They also held lands in Lochaber, Appin and parts of Kintyre.

## THE COMYNS IN TYNEDALE

**Richard Comyn**  
m. Hextilda of Tynedale  
d. ca 1178

**William Comyn**  
m. unknown  
m. Marjorie, heiress to Earl of Buchan  
d. 1233

### Licence to crenellate

1267

*Dec. 5. Licence for John Cumyn to enclose a chamber, which he proposes to Westminster, build within his manor of Tyrsete, co. Northumberland, with a ditch and a wall of stone and lime and to fortifie (firmare) and crenellate it and so hold it fortified and crenellated to him and his heirs in perpetuity; on condition that he enclose, fortify and crenellate it in the same manner as the chamber of Adam de Gesemuth at Heton is enclosed, fortified and crenellated.*

published calendar entry from the Patent Rolls, National Archives

**Richard Comyn**, held Tynedale Estates  
m. unknown  
d. 1244 (aged 49)

**Walter Comyn**, lord of Badenoch  
m. Isabel, Countess of Menteith  
d. childless 1258 (aged 73)

also Alexander (Earl of Buchan) David, William, Fergus and daughters

their grandfather Richard Comyn had married Hextilda of Tynedale, a direct descendant of Donald Bane, king of Scots

1244 Tarset Castle sequestered by Sheriff of Northumberland to stop it being taken over by the Scots. Walter allowed to remove his stores and weaponry



**John Comyn 1**, lord of Badenoch  
m. 1) Alicia de Lindsay of Lamberton  
m. 2) Alicia de Ros  
d. ca 1278

1240 recorded as Ambassador to French Court

1258, and other years after, recorded as Justiciar of Galloway

1267 granted Licence to crenellate by Henry III (see above)



**John Comyn 2**, lord of Badenoch (wrongly known as the Black Comyn)  
m. Eleanor, sister of John Balliol  
d. 1303

1292-4 brother-in-law John Balliol King of Scotland after deaths of Alexander III and his heir, Margaret, Maid of Norway

1286-90 Guardian of Scotland; six Guardians were appointed to rule during the minority/inter-regnum

1289 writ of Edward I from Westminster to John de Swyneburn to receive the attorneys of Thomas de Hellebeck and Avise his wife in a plea in John Comyn's court of Tarset concerning lands at Fulwode in Tynedale 1289 May 20



**John Comyn 3**, lord of Badenoch (known as the Red Comyn)  
m. Joan de Valence  
k. 1306

had strongest claim to Scottish throne through both parents

1297-1306 Guardian of Scotland after John Balliol deposed by Edward I and replacing William Wallace; murdered by co-Guardian Robert the Bruce, who went on to claim the throne, rout the English from southern Scotland and ravage the borders

**John Comyn 4**  
m. Margaret Wake  
k. 1314

1316 Aylmer, son of John Comyn 4, dies

1326/9 *Inquisitions Post Mortem* for John 4's lands itemised Tarset manor, giving one third to his widow as a dowry for her remarriage (to Earl of Kent)

castle and rest of Tarset manor inherited by John 4's sisters, Elizabeth and Joan





# TARSET CASTLE

## •THE PARK•

Originally, *Park* simply meant an enclosure, but the name came to be used for areas of ground set aside for hunting.

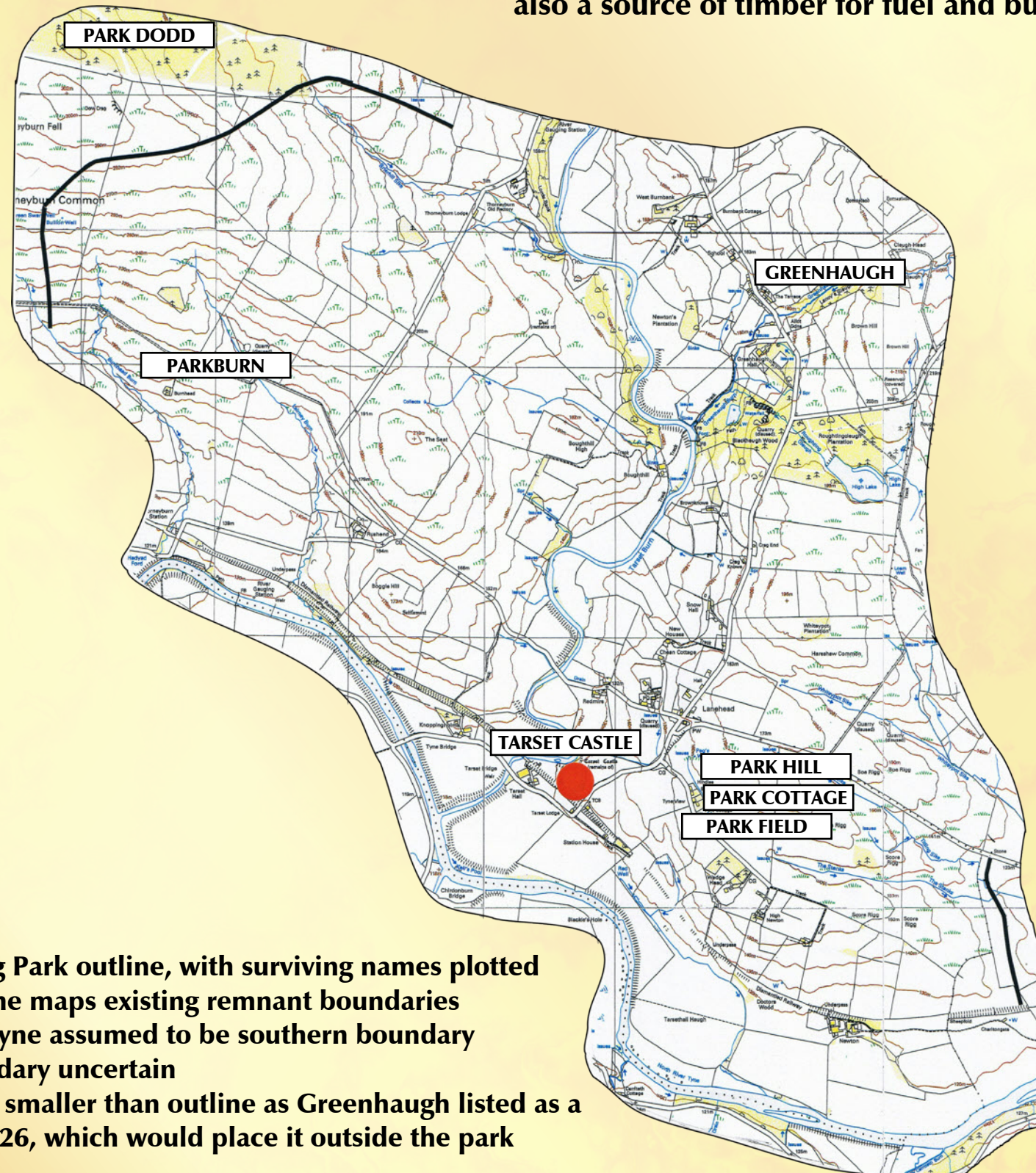
These areas were often known as *Deer Parks* and associated with castles or other important residences. Hunting provided food as well as sport, and the Park was also a source of timber for fuel and building.

Three lines of evidence for the Park at Tarsset:

- **Documentary references** as in the *Inquisitions Post Mortem* of John Comyn 4 in 1326, when the Park was valued as *formerly worth yearly in herbage £10 and now 3s. 4d.* due to the depredations of the Scots.
- **Place names** A number of Park place names exist on both sides of the Tarsset Burn which may have originated at this time.
- **Boundaries** A 2km long boundary on Thorneyburn Common differs from the head dykes known to be used to keep stock out of inbye land. This boundary has its ditch on the inside, suggesting that it was used to keep game in. A similar 0.5km section west of Charlton may mark the eastern limit of the Park - and later formed part of a township boundary.

Map approximating Park outline, with surviving names plotted

- solid black line maps existing remnant boundaries
- River North Tyne assumed to be southern boundary
- eastern boundary uncertain
- Park possibly smaller than outline as Greenhaugh listed as a shieling in 1326, which would place it outside the park



Park Cottage



sight line from Park Cottage to castle  
(view over Park Field and Park Bank)



Park boundary on Thorneyburn Common





# TARSET CASTLE

## • THE MANOR OF TARSET IN THE LIBERTY OF TYNEDALE •

### The Normans

The Normans were slow to reach Tynedale, which did not acquire its first feudal overlord until 1157. Before that, in the early medieval period, place names and parish lands are the only clues to landholdings.

### The Liberty of Tynedale

Remote places like the upper North Tyne were usually organised as liberties, where local lords had power to govern on behalf of the king instead of the king's sheriffs and officers. The Tynedale liberty was about 200,000 acres and its capital was Wark.

### The Manor of Tarsset

*Manor* describes the extent of the land and property held by a nobleman, as well as a system of administration. Tarsset was a larger manor than either of its neighbours, Bellingham and Chirdon.

### A question of identity

In the comparative peace of the C13th, in 1279, Tynedale is described as being in the kingdom of Scotland, while still English territory operating English law. This could only work while Scottish rulers were compliant and on good terms with the English kings.

By the end of the century this arrangement had broken down, giving way to long periods of violent warfare through the next three centuries.

### Courts

The lords owed allegiance to the senior court in Tynedale at Wark, which they had to attend once a month. They also had their own manor courts, like that at Tarsset mentioned in the 1289 writ of Edward I.

### Inquisitions post mortem

An *inquisition post mortem* catalogued the land and property of estates for inheritance and other purposes. After John Comyn 4's death, and the subsequent death of his only son, the IPMs carried out in Tarsset made detailed records of the extent and worth of the manor. They also clearly illustrate the catastrophic effects of the Scots incursions.

(NCH XV (1940), 244-5; CalDocScot III, no. 886; Cal IPM VI, no. 697 – AD 1326)

John Comyn held of the king in chief the manor of **Tyrset in Tyndale** by the service of one and a half knights' fees and doing suit at the court of **Wark in Tyndale** every three weeks:

- The manor and orchard used to be worth in time of peace 2s. yearly, and now nothing lying waste and destroyed by the Scots.
- There are 38 acres of demesne land each worth in time of peace 12d., of which there are in occupation 10 acres which are farmed out at 3s. 4d to be paid at the feasts of Pentecost and St. Martin, the price of an acre 4d. and the rest lies waste from want of tenants.
- There is a park which was worth yearly in herbage £10, and now 3s. 4d.
- There is a hope called **Tyresthope** formerly worth yearly in herbage £26 13s. 4d., and now 13s 4d to be paid at the said terms.
- There is another hope called **Emelhope**, formerly worth yearly in herbage £6 13s 4d., and now nothing because of want of tenants.
- There is a shieling called **le Grenehalgh**, formerly worth yearly in herbage £8 and now 2s 6d; also hope called **le Caryte** formerly worth yearly in herbage 106s. 8d. and now 4s. 6d.
- And a hope called **Kielder** formerly worth in herbage £26 13s. 4d. yearly, and now nothing because it lies waste for want of tenants.
- And a shieling called **Kielderheys** formerly worth in herbage £4 yearly and now worth nothing for the same cause.
- And a hope called **Thorneybourne** with **le Brendis** formerly worth in herbage £12 10s yearly and now 13s. 4d.
- And there are 14 bondages in **Charleton** pertaining to the said manor, each containing one toft and 20 acres of land and each being formerly worth 20s. yearly, of which there are in occupation 20 acres which are farmed out at 6s. 8d. to be paid at the said terms. The rest lies waste and uncultivated.
- And a pasture called **Byrchenshop** formerly worth 13s. 4d. yearly and now nothing because it lies waste.
- And a hamlet called **Grenestede** formerly worth 60s. yearly in herbage and now 3s. 4d.
- And a hope called **Doncliwode** formerly worth yearly in herbage £8 and now 10s.
- And a hope called **Waynhop** formerly worth yearly in herbage £9 and now nothing because it lies waste for want of tenants.
- And a park (at **Waynhop**) formerly worth yearly in herbage £8 and now nothing for the same cause.
- And a hope called **Trivetbourne** with **le Grene** formerly worth yearly in herbage £26 13s. 4d. and now 20s.
- And a hope called **Poltrerneth** formerly worth yearly in herbage £12 and now nothing.
- And a hope called **le Belles** with **le Bowhous** formerly worth in herbage £12 now nothing.
- And a hope called **Stokhalgh** with **le Bernes** formerly worth yearly in herbage £9 and now 6s 8d.
- And a hope called **Haucop** formerly worth £10 13s. 4d. and now nothing for the cause aforesaid.
- And a hope called **Sundayhaygh** formerly worth yearly 53s. 4d., now 3s. 4d.
- And there was a water mill formerly worth yearly £30, and now nothing because it lies broken and out of order.”

(CalDoc Scot III, no.979 – AD 1329) Not extended formerly:

- 42 acres of demesne in **Tyrsete manor**, each worth 12d
- a hope there called **Shouelburne**, worth £26 13s. 4d.
- Another called **Smal** and **Yerhalgh**, worth £14

*Background information and detail of the Inquisitions courtesy of the Archaeological Practice.*





# TARSET CASTLE

## • A CASTLE UNDER THREAT •

### The situation

The whole of the north slope is a very old landslip, which has developed due to erosion on the outside of a sharp bend in the Tarset Burn.

### Landslips

The form and activity of landslips can depend on factors which may include

- underlying geology
- weathering of slope materials
- effects of ground and surface water
- extent and rate of erosion of the toe of the slip - in this case, the river bank
- man's activities, especially planting or removing vegetation

### Zoning

These factors may not be uniform throughout a large landslip like the north slope. Over time, parts of the slip move in different ways and at different rates. These variations can often be mapped by dividing the slip area into *Zones*, each with its own set of characteristics.

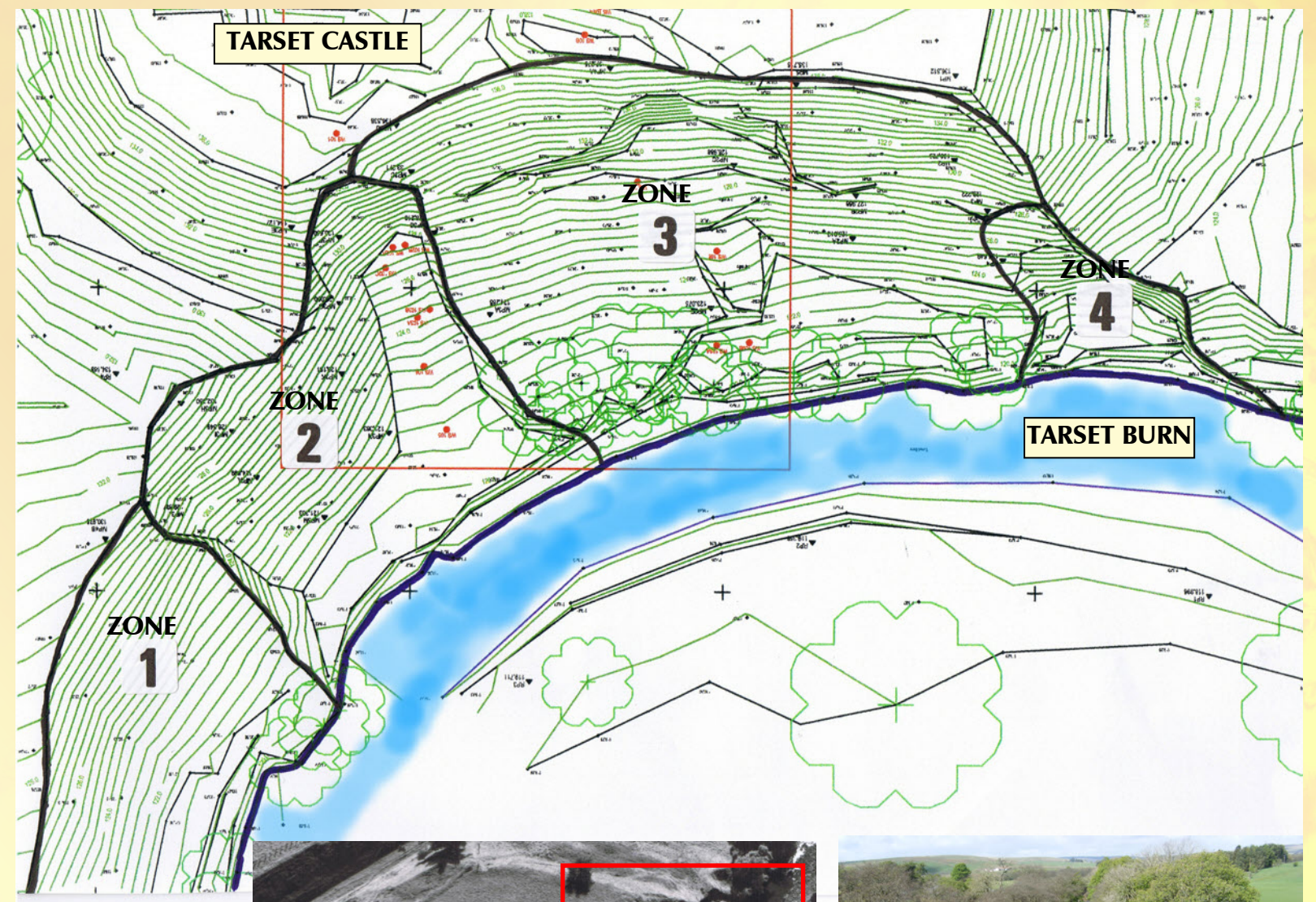
### The north slope

The north slope has been divided into four zones on the basis of

- slope profiles
- slope materials
- tree cover and bank protection

### Preparing for rescue

Zoning has been used to design the ground investigation and as an aid to risk assessment. It will also guide the design of the most appropriate remedial measures for each part of the slip.







# TARSET CASTLE

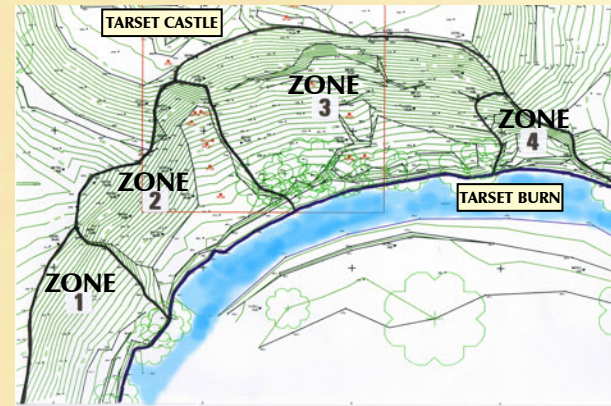
## •THE NORTH SLOPE RISK ASSESSED•

### Zone 1

slope relatively stable - further movement here would not affect Castle directly but could seriously affect Zone 2 downstream

### Zone 2

whole zone active - further movement here will affect Castle directly (both ditch and part of mound) and impact on Zone 3 downstream



Zoning map of north slope

### Zone 3

potential for large movements which would directly affect castle remains: either failure of back slope or more deep-seated slip of lower slope - or both

### Zone 4

currently limited in extent, posing little threat to castle - but likely to spread downstream

## ZONE 1



slope well-wooded (aiding stability) but significant water ingress from a spring-line on the back scarp

## ZONE 2



back slope - active slip leaving bare clay scarp; seepage from bed of sand softens fallen debris

## ZONE 3



back slope - active slip leaving large bare clay scarp with overhangs held together by turf; site of late 19th century slip

## ZONE 4



no protection from Tarsey Burn which is eroding clay bank leaving steep scarp



Tarsey Burn bank - bedrock thought to be close to river bed; trees provide some protection from erosion but clearly vulnerable with exposed roots



burn bank - trees lost in recent memory; apart from loose boulders, no protection now from rapid erosion process



burn bank - as in zone 1, trees on bank have precarious hold with exposed roots vulnerable (especially to flood); ground movement also pushing trees over



burn bank - loose debris only; no vegetation to protect bank from erosion