

Excavation of an Operational Base at the former grounds of Melville House, Fife.

Rathmell Archaeology Limited (RAL) and Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team (CART) during the archaeological mitigation of the Auxiliary Units Operational Base at Approach Wood, Mountcastle Quarry, Fife. Situated in the former grounds of Melville House. 11<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> October 2022

During October 2022 I was privileged to have been invited to work alongside archaeologists from Rathmell Archaeology Limited who were excavating the demonstration Operational Base which was located in the one-time grounds of Melville house, the Coleshill of the North. This was due to the area being excavated by Angle Park sand and gravel company, the site of the OB was earmarked for industrial scale excavation which would result in the total loss forever of this OB.

Some years previous using chapter 10 in David Lampe's book, *The Last Ditch* as a reference to the OB location, I had indeed found evidence of the OB, after having explored the densely wooded area on many occasions as well as the grounds to the north of Melville House, including the house itself. Which led to the house featuring in a BBC Countryfile remembrance special programme in 2009.

On one of my many visits I had found a complete frame of one of the OB bunk beds and nearby some rusted barbed wire with posts, which reminded me of mention in Lampe's book of a Lager type compound. Although, I couldn't confirm the wire and metal posts originated from that time. A tree situated to the south east of the OB was found have a cable which was embedded into the trunk of a tree and at one time ran up the entire length. I marked the site of the OB by GPS. [ NO 30267 13423] The discoveries prompted me to organise a site visit with Fife Council Archaeologist Steve Liscoe and Tom Rees from Rathmell Archaeology Limited. Some other items of interest were found during that site visit, such as a metal bar attached to railway sleepers over what appeared to be a large hole, a fire extinguisher which was from the 1940's era and what look like some form of ditch, which turned out to be a Ha- Ha, the significance of the Ha-Ha would become apparent later.

The site was scheduled for archaeological excavation by Rathmell Archaeology Limited (RAL) once the quarrying operation drew closer to the site of the OB. That time came in October 2022

Our first day on site was the 11<sup>th</sup> October. This involved us making an appreciation of the site with the JCB operator. The machine was equipped with a long reach arm and various buckets, which was best suited for this dig, as a long reach arm would minimise any vibration from the JCB affecting the structure of the OB, especially in the early stages of the excavation. The area had been clear felled some months earlier, enabling us to mark out the area where we were going to begin the excavation. This was predominately based on the findings of the previous site visits. With methodical progress being made in the first two full days. Shorter days by mid-October, so a full day was 8am until just after 4pm. Once the thick vegetation and undulating ground cleared to an accessible and workable level, a stepped excavation was thought the best method once we had begun to see the structure emerge, this was mainly for safety reasons of those involved and to preserve the structure at each stage of the excavation. Rathmell Archaeology Limited had a small window of opportunity in which to excavate the OB structure and record its findings. 10 days in all.

Most of the first two full days were taken up with clearance work, removing the top layer of vegetation.

As can be seen in the image below.



Image © David Blair



Progress was being made, due to the weather being on our side. Image © David Blair



But finds were soon emerging as in this image, exposing some of the ventilation pipes. © David Blair

Drone view of the site once cleared. In evidence are the Ventilation pipes. North lies to the left of image. Centre of image is the rail sleepers covering a hole in the roof of the OB, which was installed post war.



*Of note is what would have been the entrance hatch into the OB. Ha-Ha remnants to right of image*

Image © Liam McKinstry [RAL]

The structure, by now exposed to the elements, for the first time in over 80 years was starting to take on the iconic look and shape of an OB. I had located and explored, many during my research in Scotland, this one though had some interesting, if not puzzling features. I'll begin with the construction of the outer walls, these were of good quality brick laying work, and finish. At either end where the entrance hatch and the escape tunnel were, the quality of bricklaying and finish seemed to be rough. The structure of course was to be buried so the saying 'out of site out of mind' perhaps was the thought of those involved in its hasty construction?

The corrugated iron roof eventually gave way as it was in such a poor condition and that let us see inside. It was noticed once some of the infill had been removed that it did not have a concrete floor, which to me seemed rather odd. This was mentioned and the excavator did dig down further but it was into sub soil with no indication of it hitting anything solid in the way of concrete.

At the end where an escape /bolt hole/tunnel would have been, some oddity found here.

There was a route out into a curved double wall structure, which then led to the Ha-Ha. One assumes for demonstration purposes; this would be adequate for patrols being instructed on the OB's entry and escape techniques. With a variation on a theme being adopted for OB's constructed in other areas in Scotland, depending on the topography of that particular Aux Unit patrols locality.

One oddity was in evidence, there was a door...to nowhere... 'see image below.'



Image © David Blair

Door that seemingly led to nowhere. Nothing found on this side to indicate there was another structure to which this door led to, nor was there any door hinges or other features on the brickwork. The corrugate iron coverings seen in this image, seem to indicate they are post war. Possibly to stop anyone entering into it when in 1950 Melville House was used as Dalhousie Preparatory School for boys. [1950-1970]

To the left of the image is the double wall leading into a ditch/tunnel and then out onto the Ha-Ha which is indicated by the black line at the top of this image.

The ditch didn't have any signs of being a continuation of the brick built double wall, no signs of anything that I have found in other OB's to indicate an enclosed, covered escape tunnel.

On the other side of this wall, we found a 100 Gallon galvanised water tank. I know this as it was stencilled on the tank. This water tank was on the outside of the OB, another feature I have never seen in any other OB I have been in.

Galvanised 100 Gallon Water tank.



Image © David Blair

The tank sits precariously on bricks with wooden cover, there was a pipe in the top of the tank and another one on the other side of the double wall leading into the water tank. I noticed water was actually dripping out of this pipe.



Image © David Blair

**100 Gallons** stencilled onto the tank.



Image © David Blair

Side wall construction of better quality than at both ends of this OB. Of note is the lack of concrete floor, as seen in this image. This is after the bucket on the JCB had excavated down into what would have been the concrete floor and was by now well below that level, as can be seen by the dark soil emerging. There was an indication that instead of concrete it was a wooden floor, as remnants found rotted away when we excavated into the base of the OB floor.

Also seen at the top of this wall is the outline shape of the Corrugate iron sheeting.



Some other images of this excavation below.

Image © David Blair [CART]



Rail sleepers on which the wooden covering, I found on my first site visit. Inside there were many animal carcasses, mainly sheep, this was verified by our on-site archaeology expert. Story goes that dead sheep were disposed of into this OB. Image prior to roof collapse. Sleepers and posts are post war, probably at the same time as Dalhousie Preparatory school occupied Melville house or other land owner/farmer of the time?



Image © David Blair: Entry/Exit into and out of the OB from this side, under normal situations.



Image © David Blair. Door aperture that leads into the curved double walled escape route, right turn

**Note:** above image. What looks like white paint on the wall to the right, it could just be lime from cement? Also note the wooden strip attached to the wall. The door to nowhere would be through that door and turn immediately left.

An indication, possibly that there was a wooden floor instead of a concrete one.



Image © Liam McKinstry [RAL]

The entire OB measures 9.5mtrs from East to West along its length and 4.65mtrs at its width North to South

With the main inner chamber measuring at 6.5mtrs East to West and 3mtrs North to South.



Images © Liam McKinstry [RAL]



©RAL



Image © Liam McKinstry [RAL]

Gives a good idea of the depth at which the OB was excavated to.



Drone image.

Image © Liam McKinstry



Drone image.

Image © Liam McKinstry [RAL]

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Thanks to:

Peter Cuthbert from Angle Park Sand & Gravel Company Ltd for the opportunity to carry out these works and for facilitating the on-site work.

Rathmell Archaeology Limited (RAL) Tom Rees, Liam McKinstry, Laura Anderson and Ally Parker Banks and of course Alec Johnstone who had the challenging task of operating the machine and carefully uncovering the OB

Fife Council Archaeologists Douglas Spiers and Stephen Liscoe.

Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team [CART] British Resistance Archive [BRA]

Dr Will Ward: [CART-BRA]

And lastly to 'Stan' who remains unidentified, but helped to keep the dream alive.

The location of the OB within Angle Park Sand & Gravel Company Ltd.'s area of operations is now gone. As of October 2023, nothing remains.

If you require more background information or have any questions regarding the OB, and other finds uncovered, please do get in contact with me at:

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