DUNSTANBURGH, NORTHUMBERLAND

English Heritage, the government agency reponsible for managing the historic environment in the UK, has posted a web diary of a fascinating survey done last November of Dunstanburgh Castle in the north of England. [Link]

This is one of my favorite places. I have been visiting, photographing, teaching and writing about it for as long as I can remember – I grew up in this part of the world, and the place just keeps opening up to me in different ways.

The diary tries a little too hard to appeal – it wants to be a combo web version of the cultural task forces of TV's Time Team, Ground Force and Changing Rooms (the last two very familiar to those who watch BBC America). It doesn't need to – the story it tells is subtle and wonderfully faceted.

So a team arrived last November (2003) to look at the castle and its setting with the eye of the landscape archaeologist. They brought the usual GPS and other hightech devices, but what clearly matters is a questioning eye. (And this is just the approach taken by the two classic figures of British landscape archaeology – my friends at Lampeter David Austin and Andrew Fleming – I recall wonderful afternoons walking the Welsh uplands with them tracing the ever-so-slight undulations that betrayed an old track, leat, earthwork.)

For some time it has been clear that the great medieval fortresses of feudal Europe are not simply functional military architecture. A trend has been to see them *primarily* as symbols of power. (More on this in a moment.)

The team at Dunstanburgh asked why the place was built on this remote headland.

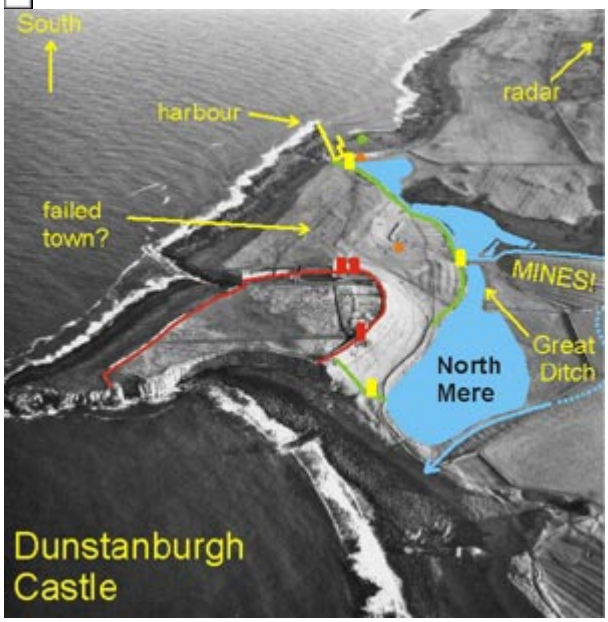
Spectacular and forbidding yes, but way off any strategic route in this most disputed of lands between England and Scotland. It was built by Thomas of Lancaster and inherited by John of Gaunt, two regal aristocrats in the forteenth century. Then the border was very much threatened, but the place saw little action. So what new did the survey team find? Traces of a landscape of ponds, meres, roads and a harbor that complements the tremendous effect of a superbly crafted gatehouse, curtain wall and watch tower atop a coastal cliff. Dunstanburgh was a showpiece castle. The way a castle should be, reflected in the meres dug round the great rock of a headland on which the fine masonry was laid.

There is even a nice connection with Arthurian romance (beloved of John of Gaunt). It is the legend of Sir Guy the Seeker. Stranded in a storm, he found, with Merlin's help, a lady spellbound in a crystal casket in a chamber beneath the ruins of Dunstanburgh. But he lost her, because he made the wrong choice between a horn and sword presented to him by a ghost.

"Now shame on the coward who sounded a horn,
When he might have unsheathed a sword."

And not just the castle – the survey looked at second world war military emplacements, including a top-secret radar station and camp for Italian prisoners of war, a shipwreck from the 1950s (a Polish trawler deliberately wrecked so the men could claim asylum), a bronze age cairn, the famous painting by Turner of

another storm and wreck, traces of farming going back millennia.



Double red towers = Earl Thomas' great gatehouse, built 1313
Single red tower = the beautiful Lilburn Tower
Green line = timber palisade of the outer perimeter
Yellow towers = probable sites of outer gatehouses
Big blue lakes = ornamental 'meres', constructed 1313
Small blue rectangles = fishponds, for breeding fish to release into the meres
Blue lines = channels for managing the water supply
Orange dots = settlements probably dating to around 1750
Green dot = the medieval fishtrap and the Polish trawler wrecked in August 1958

This is all so gratifying because the team were open enough to simply attend to what they were finding in a very intellectually honest way (the W.G. Hoskins way of Fleming and Austin). But they also did what I would have loved to have done – find the traces of the meres, of the harbor jetty, then piecing it together with local experience and recent history, and all while staying at the Cottage Inn, the local pub where we have lunch when we are lucky enough to visit this wonderful corner of England. This is Michel Serres's temporal chiffonage. Time, not linear, from then to now and no way back, but percolating around us.

But I have to admit that there is a good deal of gratification in this survey and diary because I anticipated it in a piece I wrote in my book *Experiencing the Past*, in 1990.

Back then it was the early days of the phenomenological project in archaeology – foregrounding the experience of place (see my blog comments on the politically dubious neo-romanticism of all this – [Link]) I was more interested in the kind of focus on techniques of the body often associated with Norbert Elias – so I wrote about the way the feudal lord would ride out over a designed landscape, and how such experiences constitute the site of power. I took photos and made drawings to try to capture this, and above all I tried to find a way of writing about it – the book *Experiencing the Past*.

So the castle is all about landscape – designed spaces. (See Matthew Johnson's superb book Behind the castle gate.) But this is not to say that it is a symbol of power. That is too passive a view of architecture. These settings are frames within which late feudal England was constantly recreated. Politics is always an aesthetics. And the power of the feudal lord is embedded in the management of people and land, in marking, mapping, looking over, within the gates of the residence, and without.

We (Haun Saussy and Tim Lenoir) have just taken up these themes in our freshman course at Stanford – Bodies in Place [another link to the course]. We read Richard II Shakespeare's stunningly intelligent treatment of the sovereign's two bodies. Of course, John of Gaunt is a major character in the drama and embodies the aristocracy's attachment to property. I lectured on this theme of land and identity, picking up what I had been following when trying to understand this tremendous building that is Dunstanburgh. I also juxtaposed Leni Riefenstahl's movie of the fascist Nuremberg Rally in 1934 and Martin Parr's photography – well this is a course that has outraged the Wall Street Journal (and they only let subscribers look at the article)!

Last summer Molly and I explored what was left of the jetty of the old medieval harbor identified by the team. We knew it was something – an alignment of stone and the great castle gate looks right on it … thanks to the English Heritage Team for making sense of it all for us!

Updated links – February 2006

English Heritage survey (Nov 2003) – [Link – 24 hour museum] | [Link to the survey diary]