

Cromwell's Highland Stronghold: The Sconce of Inverness

Allan Kennedy

On 3 September 1651, the predominantly Scottish army of Charles II was destroyed by the forces of the English Commonwealth at the battle of Worcester. This defeat paved the way for the comprehensive conquest of Scotland over the following few years, bringing the country under the control of Oliver Cromwell. The Commonwealth would rule Scotland until 1660, when Charles II returned to his thrones. During this period the Commonwealth's authority rested, ultimately, on its military supremacy, the most obvious manifestation of which was the array of forts and garrisons with which Cromwell peppered the country. Among these strongholds were four primary citadels, at Leith, Perth, Ayr and Inverness, with a fifth later appearing at Inverlochy. These fortifications were major pieces of engineering, and each had a profound effect on the surrounding communities. This article takes one of them – that of Inverness – and looks in-depth at the interplay of fort and locality, exploring the ways in which Inverness's 'sconce', as it was frequently known, shaped the local environment and local society. The article also asks what the fort can tell us about the interplay of the local and the national in Cromwellian Scotland.

The fort and its garrison

Cromwell's fort was situated on the eastern bank of the river Ness, slightly to the north of the town as it then stood, in what is now the Longman industrial estate. Inverness had in early 1652 been selected, alongside Ayr, Perth and Leith, as a suitable site for constructing a major fortification to help secure the recent Cromwellian conquest of Scotland. By this point, the town was already under occupation, housing three companies (about 200-300 men) of Colonel Thomas Fitch's regiment, the remainder of which was scattered throughout the central and eastern Highlands.¹ These soldiers were

housed in temporary barracks built on the town's riverfront, for the security of which the streets of the burgh itself, along with its castle and bridge, had been fortified with earthen ramparts. But it was recognised that sturdier, more permanent accommodation was needed, and so in the spring of 1652 the precise location was selected, and the plans laid out, by a German engineer named Joachim Hane. Construction began in early summer that year. Although the garrison moved in the middle of 1655, it took until around 1657 to complete the fort (at vast cost; £80,000 Sterling by one estimate). It may never have been entirely finished; as late as July 1658, a survey discovered that well over ten tonnes of sheet lead, required for covering gutters and guard platforms, had still not been provided. There was not even yet a proper flag.²

Incomplete or not, the fort was, by general consensus, both imposing and impressive. Covering an area of around four acres, it was pentagonal in structure, outfitted with high stone walls and a bastion at each corner. It was further protected by an encircling trench, about six feet deep, that connected with the river and so provided a moat, which at high tide was navigable for small craft. Inside the citadel was accommodation for more than a thousand men (plus officers) and several hundred horses, alongside a brew-house, a tavern, workshops, drilling space, a clocktower and a large stone magazine and granary. A further fortified expanse abutting the south of the main citadel provided space for stores, principally of wood. While there was a sally-port to the south, the main entry into the fort was by means of a ceremonial gate on the western bank of the Ness, connected to the citadel via a wooden drawbridge that also served to control waterborne access to Inverness itself. The drawbridge terminated in a long 'statlie vault' through the stone walls; at a reputed 70 feet in length, the dimensions of this passage-way give some sense of the stoutness of the fort's defences.³

The sconce was rendered all the more formidable by its weaponry. Obviously its stores contained hundreds of firearms and bladed weapons, but it was its artillery complement that really stood out. Even at the end of 1652, when the fort was newly under construction, there were ten items of ordnance in Inverness, and a further thirty-three were dispatched in July and August 1653. By 1658, the fort boasted at least thirty-six cannon: four culverins, eighteen demi-culverins, ten sakers and four minions; and it seems likely that this was not the entire complement. How usable these armaments actually were is an open question, since many lacked proper wheels or platforms, as well as powder, match and ammunition, almost all of which had to be shipped in from public stores hundreds of miles away, were always in short supply. Nonetheless, the citadel must surely have been the most heavily-armed stronghold the townsfolk had ever seen.⁴



Fig.1: John Slezer, 'The Prospect of the Town of Inverness' [sic], from *Theatrum Scotiae* (1693). The site of the abandoned citadel is visible to the left of the engraving. Reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland.

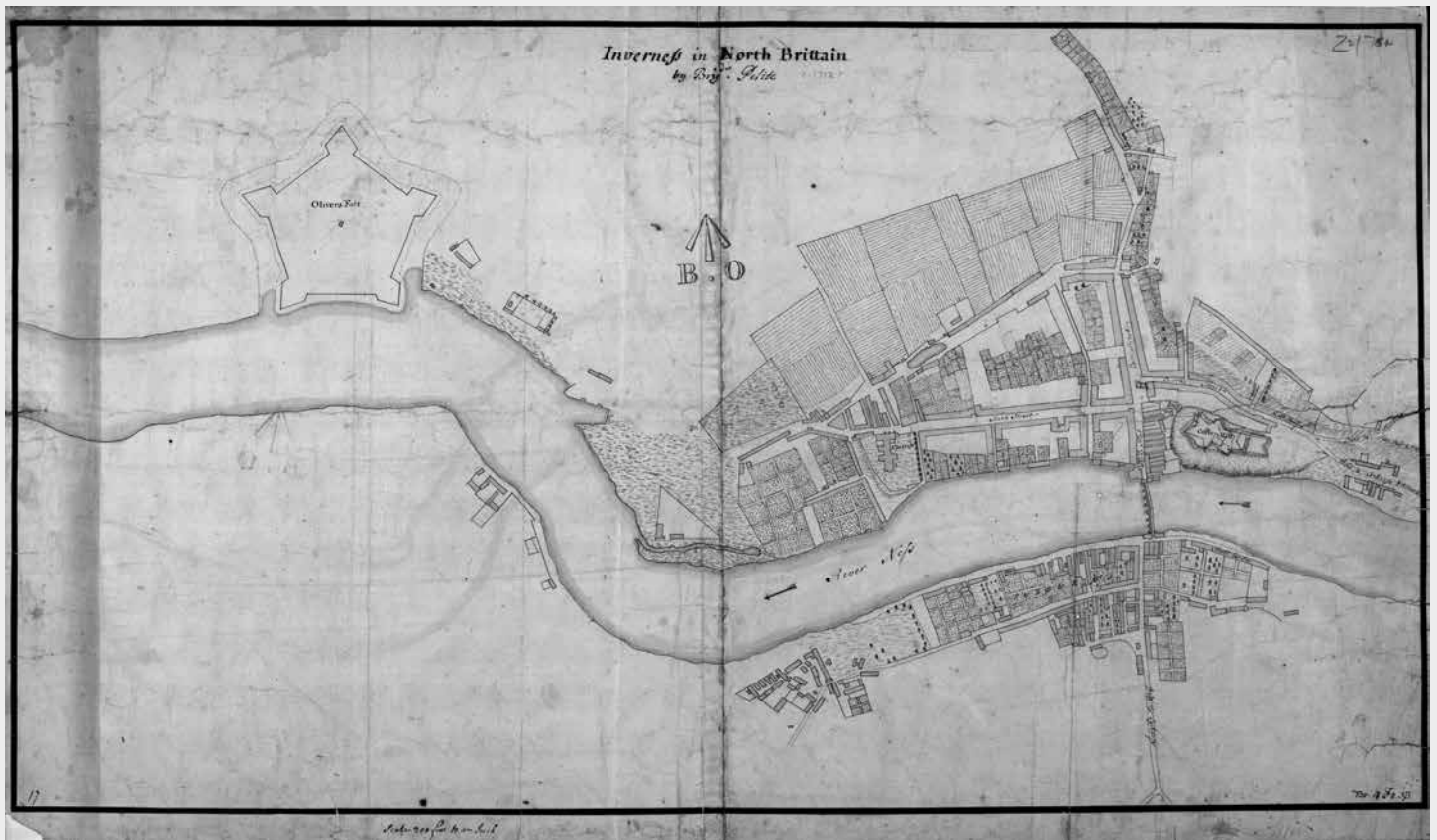


Fig.2: Lewis Petit, *Inverness in North Britain* (c.1716), showing the citadel on the left-hand side. Reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland.

Such a substantial fortification required a significant complement of men, and indeed Inverness, along with Ayr, Leith and, less consistently, Inverlochy, housed one of the largest concentrations of English troops anywhere in Scotland. During the early 1650s, before the construction of the citadel, about 200-300 men were stationed in the town. By 1656, when the fort was functional if not complete, it had an establishment of 1,362, evenly divided between horse and foot, although some of these men were dispersed throughout small satellite garrisons at Brahan, Chanonry and Loch Ness.⁵ This number likely fell in the final years of the Commonwealth, since a cost-cutting drive led the commander-in-chief in Scotland, George Monck, to suggest Inverness needed a complement of only 490 foot and 100 horse.⁶ Almost certainly, Inverness never accommodated the 2,000 men said to have been originally envisaged, but still, in an age when the town's population was likely no more than 2,500-3,000, the presence of up to 1,000 or so English soldiers represented a daunting occupation.

The fort and the local community

James Fraser, the Restoration-era minister of Kirkhill, famously claimed that the English soldiers stationed in Inverness were on very good terms with the local population, so much so that their departure in 1662 was the occasion for significant mutual regret:

Never people left a place with such reluctance. It was even sad to see and heare sighs and teares, pale faces and embraces, at their parting farewell from that town. And no wonder; they had peace and plenty for 10 years in it. They made that place happy, and it made them so.⁷

Cordial as relations may have been, however, there is evidence of tension as well. In part, no doubt, this was rooted in simple antagonism between occupied and occupiers; the murder in 1653 of three English soldiers by three local youths at Kinmylies, near Inverness, was surely informed by this sort of visceral dislike, especially since the perpetrators promptly ran off to join Glencairn's rising.⁸ In more general terms, discontent was rooted in the economic burdens involved in hosting the garrison. In March 1656, for example, Alexander Cuthbert, bailie of Inverness complained that the garrison's soldiers were damaging the local economy by killing black fish in the Ness – in other words, reducing fish stocks by taking too many young fish.⁹ Alongside this sort of asset-depletion, anxieties focused on the fact that it was principally up to Inverness itself, as well as the surrounding country, to provide such necessities as could not be imported from state stores – grazing for horses and oxen, for example, or peat for fuel, or bedding, or baggage horses when required. In a petition for General Monck drawn up around 1655, the gentlemen of Inverness-shire reflected bitterly on the heaviness these burdens:

Our continued pressours lye so heavy upon us, beyond all the nychbouring shyres and paroches about us, as wee can keep no longer silence, but must lay open our feares to your Honour as to the only physitian, who can best cure this our languishing disease.¹⁰

Of course, complaining about taxes, either in cash or kind, was hardly unique to Inverness-shire or to the 1650s. Nonetheless, the stridency of this language, and the unusual detail with which the petition proceeded to itemise the alleged 'pressours', clearly reflect the significant economic burden involved in hosting one of Cromwell's major regional strongholds.

But while hosting a large body of English soldiers was necessarily burdensome, the fort and its garrison also provided the Inverness area with some economic opportunities. The town council managed to secure an annual income of forty shillings in duty by feuing out the public carse-land upon which the fort was constructed, for good measure also securing a promise that the English would provide timber for the upkeep of the bridge over the Ness.¹¹ During the construction phase, local workmen commanded wages of a shilling per day. Thereafter there were sufficient opportunities for 'diverse of the Scottish nation both men and women [to be] entertained as servants to the officers of the regiment quartered at the sconce' that Monck identified their presence as a potential security threat in 1658. There were also, again to Monck's consternation, several local men drawing wages as soldiers.¹² Meanwhile, the presence of the garrison ensured heightened Invernessian access to high-quality consumer goods like fine cloth, claret wine and medical supplies, while also providing a new market for local merchants – men like Alexander Dunbar, who sold £200 worth of unspecified goods to the garrison at the start of 1654, and who may have been synonymous with the Alexander Dunbar of Bennetfield who sold the garrison stone from his quarries. Hugh Fraser of Struie found the situation even more lucrative, allegedly providing the fort with 30,000 merks worth of timber across the 1650s; other local landlords, like Alexander Chisholm of Comar, also made money providing wood.¹³ There were, in short, opportunities, and not just burdens, in hosting the sconce.

The Commonwealth was sensitive to the costs its presence entailed, and made efforts to ensure that exactions related to the upkeep of the garrison did not become too egregiously unfair. Thus, in 1655 the garrison was ordered to call a conference of all the chief men of the north-Highland shires with a view to devising the most equitable possible formula for furnishing the soldiers with money and supplies, so that the cost 'may nott lie whollievpon the shire of Invernesse'. Simultaneously, orders were issued to ensure that any landowners whose land was used to pasture garrison horses would not be forced to do so for longer than three months, and in the meantime should be compensated at the rate of 2d per horse per day. This last was apparently a holding measure, for later in the same year the government commissioned a survey of the pasture lands around Inverness so that it had up-to-date information about who should be paid compensation, and at what level.¹⁴ Initiatives like this could not of course change the fact that the population of the Inverness area was being lumbered with additional financial burdens for the upkeep of the garrison, but they did at least indicate that the English authorities wanted to make these impositions as equitable as possible.

But the relationship between the fort and the surrounding community went beyond the socio-economic. Like Cromwell's other garrisons around Scotland, Inverness's sconce developed into the key node of regional administration. At the most basic level, this encompassed security, with the presence of hundreds of troops obviously serving to sustain English control. But more broadly, it also involved supervision of law and order. Instructions received in mid-1655 by the fort's governor, Thomas Fitch, reveal the prominence of his troops' role in the regard:

The Generall is informed that the Country about Invernesse and parts adjacent doth abound with Thievis,

Robbers, and other loose and idle persons both Men and women, and through the vnwillingnesse of the Country to proceede against them by reason the Law seldome takes away their lives, and soe opens a Gappe for them to Seeke Revenge vppon their prosecutors, and often tymes begetts new Troubles. [He authorises Fitch] with the assistance of the Country to apprehend, all Fellons, whores, or other idle persone which hee shall thinke fitt to bee transported beyond seas, and to secure them and keepe them.¹⁵

As well as keeping the peace and enforcing order, Inverness's garrison might perform several other functions. For instance, when in 1653 the Commonwealth decided to review the extent of school provision in the presbytery of Dingwall, it was Fitch, as governor of the garrison, who oversaw the investigation.¹⁶ Fitch was also appointed in 1654 to arbitrate a tax valuation dispute between the gentlemen of Ross and those of Inverness-shire.¹⁷ The following year, he was instructed to assess the damage done to the lands of Neil Macleod of Assynt during the civil wars, with a view to setting equitable tax burdens.¹⁸ In June 1656, Fitch's second-in-command, Colonel Man, was asked to provide the names of suitably-qualified local gentlemen to serve as justices of the peace.¹⁹ In early 1657, the garrison was ordered to find and restore a number of cows recently stolen from John Macleod of Drynach, should they be discovered to have been taken to the Inverness area.²⁰ And in 1658, the garrison was, not for the first time, required to assist in the delivery of legal letters to their intended recipient, in this case Alexander Fraser, master of Lovat.²¹ The list could go on, but these examples serve to illustrate the broad-based role of Inverness's garrison as a catch-all agent of local administration. Of course, the Commonwealth state had a formal infrastructure of local government, and it is also true that regional luminaries continued, as they had done for the Stuart kings, to administer the locality, either informally or as office-holders. But the reality was that, in a militarised state, the fort was inevitably a major power in local politics, forcing it to become arguably the dominant influence on the day-to-day governance of Inverness and the surrounding area.

Abandonment and legacy

Upon the restoration of Charles II to his British and Irish thrones in 1660, the elimination of Cromwell's Scottish strongholds became a national priority; indeed, one of the first things the Scottish Privy Council did upon reconvening in 1661 was to order the slighting of all the forts, with Alexander Stuart, 5th earl of Moray being charged with razing the Invernessian sconce.²² But despite the Privy Council's orders, the work failed to progress, not least because the king, worried about the security of the Highlands, refused to withdraw the remaining soldiers until the spring of 1662 – a stance wholeheartedly endorsed by Inverness's town council, anxious as ever that the burgh's position 'in the mouth of the hylands' left it vulnerable.²³

Although abandoned, the sconce was clearly not demolished, since in 1666 the burgh council made arrangements for a partial removal, to be overseen by one John Sempill. It appears that these provisions were ineffective, however, because by 1675 enough material remained in place for the council to decree that 1,000 loads of stone should be moved from the sconce to help construct a new pier for the town.²⁴ A big part

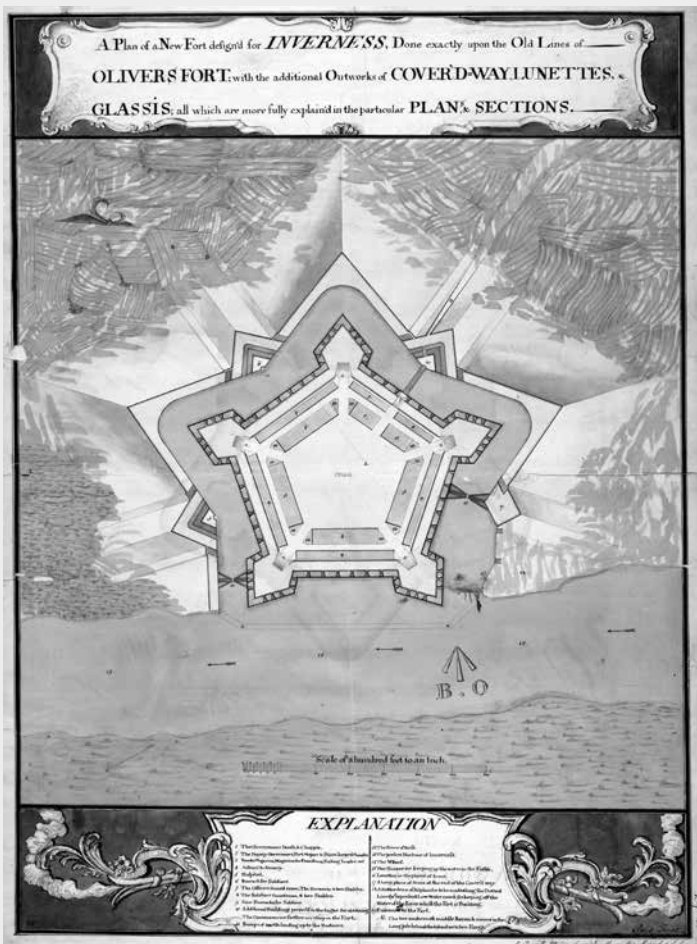


Fig.3: Lewis Marcell, *A Plan of a New Fort design'd for Inverness* (1746), preserving the plan of the original Cromwellian citadel. Reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland.

of the problem seems to have been that nobody was quite sure who had prior right to the land on which the sconce was constructed, and therefore who was responsible for the costs of demolition. The Privy Council's decision in 1662 to allocate the physical remains of the fort as payment for outstanding debts contracted during its construction seems not to have helped.²⁵ So the fort simply mouldered, its buildings falling into disrepair and its stonework no doubt gradually pilfered for local building projects. The site also seems to have been exploited in other ways: Phineas Pett, an English timber speculator, turned part of it into a secure wood store in 1666-7, while William Rose of Merkinch was rebuked by the burgh magistrates in 1682 for using it as a midden.²⁶

But throughout its lingering afterlife, the fort remained a noteworthy physical presence. Its still-substantial remains were captured in John Slezer's famous woodcut depiction of the Invernessian townscape, published in 1693 as part of his *Theatrum Scotiae*, and it was also carefully depicted in later maps, such as those of Lewis Petit (c.1716) or John Bastide (c.1725).²⁷ The remains of the Cromwellian citadel acquired new relevance in the 1740s, when the British government seriously considered building a new fortification on top of them as a replacement for the original Fort George, which had stood on Castle Hill before being destroyed by the Jacobites in 1746. The military engineer Lewis Marcell drew up detailed plans closely based on the original Cromwellian design, but ultimately, of course, the second Fort George was constructed on a much grander scale at Ardersier.²⁸

The Cromwellian fort, meanwhile, continued to fade away. In the 1790s, when the *Old Statistical Account* was compiled, all that remained were some interior earthen ramparts and the surrounding ditch, both of which were still extant by the time of the *New Statistical Account* in the 1830s and 1840s.²⁹ Today, consumed within Inverness's urban sprawl, only sections of the northern ramparts and eastern bastion can still be seen, although there is also a clock tower, much later in date but allegedly built upon original foundations. These fragments, the last remaining traces of Cromwellian fortifications anywhere in Scotland, were entered as a scheduled monument in 1960.³⁰



Fig.4: The remnants of the citadel's northern ramparts and bastions, now consumed by industrial development. Author's collection.

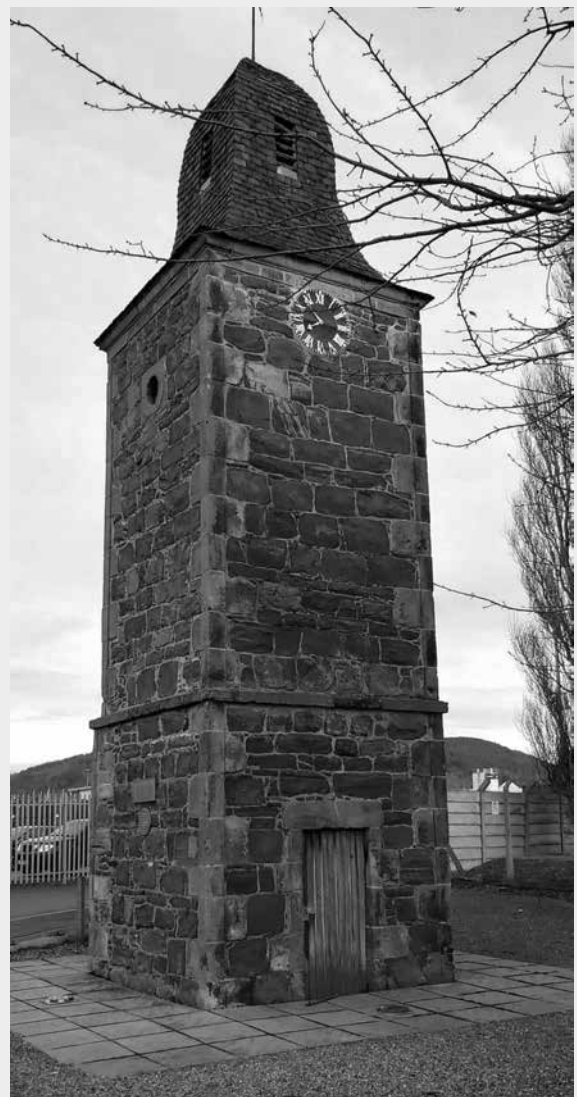


Fig.5: The clocktower, built on the site of the citadel and, by local tradition, using materials from the abandoned citadel. This is the only historic building remaining on the site. Author's collection.

Conclusion

The story of Cromwell's Invernessian fort reflects some of the key dynamics of the English occupation of Scotland during the 1650s. The Commonwealth was always at root a hostile military regime, and the hulking presence of the citadel, not to mention its complement of hundreds of troops, was brutal testament to that fact. Yet the soldiers and their citadel were also part of the surrounding community. They provided economic opportunities, both for Invernessian townsfolk and for local lairds, and the soldiers began to develop social linkages with the natives. Just as significantly, the important political and administrative role of Cromwell's garrisons was fully reflected in the Invernessian experience, so that, far from being merely a tool to keep recalcitrant Highlanders quiet, the citadel on the banks of the Ness evolved into arguably the most important single node of English governance and justice in the far north – duties it consistently sought to perform in collaboration with, and while avoiding unduly antagonising, regional elites. In Inverness, as elsewhere in Scotland, English rule was at once firmly military and carefully calibrated to hide the iron fist within the velvet glove.

From a local history perspective, the citadel's story demonstrates the ways in which great national events – in this case, conquest and military occupation – could profoundly influence and reshape local communities. This was certainly true in simple physical terms, since the construction and operation of the fort not only provided Inverness with an imposing addition to the townscape that would linger for centuries, but also caused the complete or partial eradication of several older buildings in the wider area, especially religious ones, whose stones were allegedly plundered to help supply materials. But it was also true in less tangible ways. The English soldiers, for example, were responsible for exposing Invernessians to Quakerism for the first time, albeit this does not seem to have yielded any long-term effects. A more significant legacy was claimed by Daniel Defoe at the start of the eighteenth century. He wrote that many English soldiers quietly settled in Inverness after their disbandment, with the consequence that, firstly, Invernessians learnt to speak near-perfect English with a recognisably English accent and, secondly, they internalised 'civilized' English habits in terms of dress, customs and agricultural methods.³¹ The veracity of both assertions is open to question, but perhaps it is less fanciful to imagine that Invernessians' alleged exposure to English luxuries helps explain why Restoration-era townsfolk imported quite such substantial volumes of wine, confections, dried fruit and spices.³² More concretely, the security of having so many soldiers nearby clearly influenced Inverness's corporate mind-set, producing an acute sense of vulnerability after 1662 that found practical expression in sustained – albeit not entirely effectual – efforts to establish a permanent citizens' militia. Cromwell's northern stronghold might have been created primarily as a tool of domination and control, but in the decade of its existence it embedded itself within the surrounding community, and as such it was the primary mechanism by which the British republic influenced and moulded the small, remote town at the mouth of the Ness.

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Dr Allan Kennedy is Lecturer in History at the University of Dundee. He specialises in early modern Scotland, with a particular interest in the later seventeenth century and the relationship between Highlands and Lowlands.