Introduction

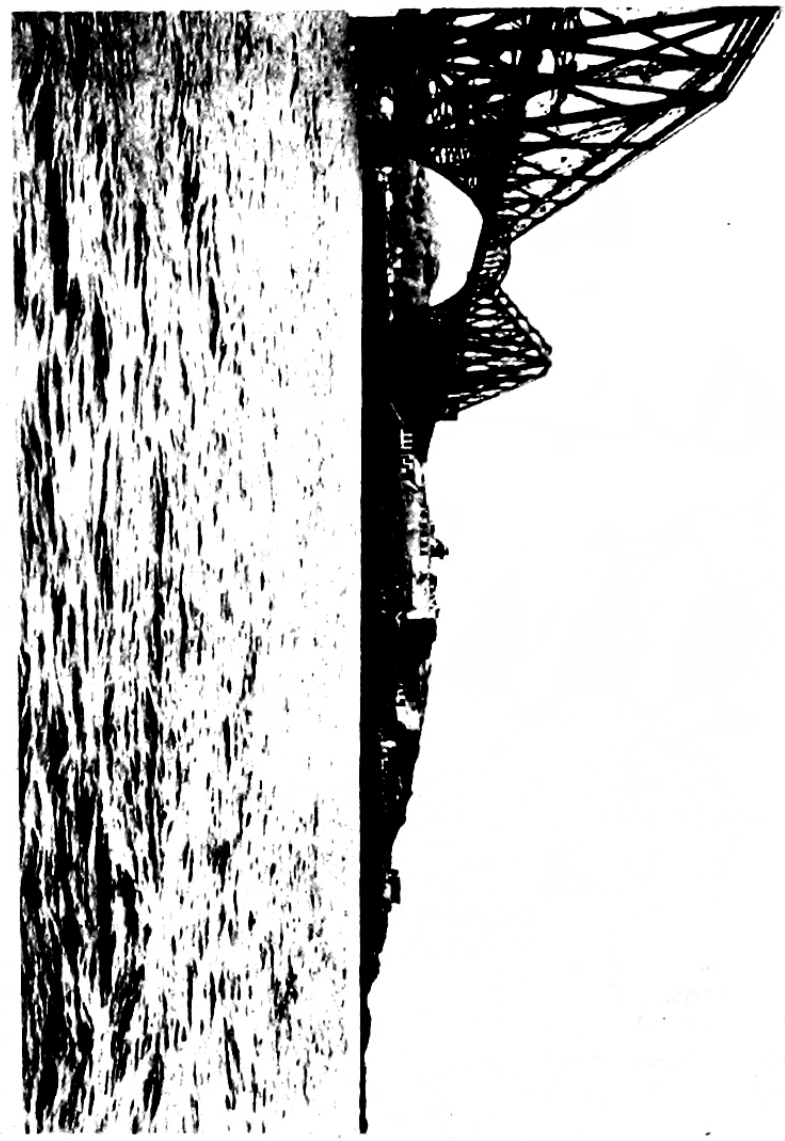
The island of Inchgarvie lies at the narrowest point of the Forth estuary, where the distance between the north and south shores is only about 1¼ miles. Located 1 mile north-east of South Queensferry and about ⅔ mile south-east of North Queensferry, it has for long been a part of the parish of Dalmeny on the south side of the Forth.

The island is long and narrow, resembling more a rocky skerry, its highest point above the sea at high tide being only 40 ft (just over 12 m). It is 5 furlongs (1000 m) in circumference and a line of rocks, visible only at low tide, runs out from its south-east point for about ¼ mile.

While the "Inch" in the island's name means, of course, "island", "garvie" has been given two different derivations. One is the Gaelic "garbh", meaning "rocky", and the other is from the garvie, a little type of sprat, which comes in here in large shoals in the winter. In the past, these fish have attracted even whales up to Queensferry, providing a rich source of income for the locals.

The island has no known history before medieval times, apart from a brief mention in John of Fordun's "Scotichronicon", in connection with an 8th century event. Apparently, Hungus, king of the Picts, defeated the Anglian king Athelstane, in a battle on the spot now known as Athelstaneford. Hungus impaled the other's head on a spear and set it up on Inchgarvie as a warning to anyone who might consider crossing the Forth to seek revenge.

Otherwise, the island's history occurs mainly between the end of the medieval period and c. 1800. After this, it was allowed to rest for a while before springing into the limelight again during the construction of the Forth Rail Bridge in the 1880s. Today, in fact, it is best known for supporting the central pier of this "modern wonder of the world".



Inchgarvie island from the southern shore

Early History : 1490 - 1649

Inchgarvie seems to have been first fortified in the last decade of the 15th century, by John Dundas of Dundas. He was granted the island and the nearby natural harbour of St. Margaret's Hope by James IV, in 1491. Along with them, he was given permission to erect a castle on the island for the protection of allied shipping from raids by English pirates. The fortress which Dundas built was probably a battlemented peel tower with curtain walls, and was regarded as one of the most important fortresses in the country at that time, guarding as it did the narrowest part of the Forth estuary and the important haven of St. Margaret's Hope.

The fortress had not been long erected when it first came into use as a prison. In 1517, Patrick Panter, secretary to James IV and later James V's ambassador to France, was held here for a while. Another inmate around this time was George Douglas, brother of the Earl of Angus, and second husband of James IV's widow.

The Regent at this time (because James V was still a minor) was John, Duke of Albany, who kept a garrison on Inchgarvie. Before leaving on a trip to France, he appointed Sir Anthony D'Arcy as head of government in his absence. Despite the fact that this gentleman was Lord Leutenant of Lothian and Merse, and Captain of Dunbar Castle, the barons in the Borders rose in revolt, and D'Arcy was murdered before he could reach the safety of Dunbar. George Douglas was a leading figure in this revolt and was imprisoned on Inchgarvie before being thrown out of the country.

Dundas protested in 1526 against the use of his castle as a prison, but he was defeated in Parliament by Sir Patrick Wemyss of Pittencrieff, and the island fortress continued to be a State Prison. Indeed, this was to be one of its main uses off and on until 1671, when the Crown purchased the Bass Rock fortress for this purpose.

In 1544, the English reckoned that Inchgarvie would be a prize worth having and, in May of that year, the island did fall under bombardment by the English ship "Galey Subtile". Henry VIII declared that the fortress be kept and maintained but, in 1550, Edward VI ordered it to be demolished.

The island is first known to have been used as a quarantine station, or lazaretto, in 1582. In that year, the "William of Leith" arrived in the Forth from Danzig. The ship was carrying the Plague and was ordered by the Edinburgh Privy Council to anchor off Inchcolm ~~island~~ (c. 4 miles east of Inchgarvie). The majority of the crew of 40 died, and the survivors were removed to Inchgarvie and Inchkeith, where they remained until they had recovered.

St. Margaret's Hope, already mentioned as a popular anchorage, was also used as a quarantine station. Ships carrying the dreaded disease were made to anchor here and remain for the required period of 40 days . Later on, disused ships were relieved of their masts and rudders and moored out in the bay. Plague victims were transported out and marooned on them until they either died or recovered.

Talking of being marooned, Inchgarvie saw another sort of this action in the early 17th century. The island lay almost in the line of the famous Queensferry crossing, and provided rogueish ferrymen with an excuse to obtain more money from passengers in mid-channel. Hardly anyone dared refuse, for they were threatened that either their goods would be dumped overboard or that they themselves would be dumped on the island! The ferrymen at this time were not under the control of the Law (though it was not for lack of trying on the part of the latter), and the service had practically become a free-for-all, with anyone who wanted to become a ferryman feeling at liberty to do so. In 1634, a ferryboat was wrecked on Inchgarvie, not because of bad weather, but because of the lack of skill of the helmsman. Fortunately no-one was killed, although a lot of cargo and baggage was lost.

Two years prior to this accident, in 1632, Charles I granted permission to the Earl of Linlithgow, Lord Admiral of Scotland, for the building of a new fortress on Inchgarvie. For the maintenance of this fort he was allowed to levy a tax of 2s (10p) per ton of coal or salt carried on ships passing the island. The Earl, perhaps, did not consider the venture worthwhile, or some kind of setback occurred for, in 1649, during the Wars of the Commonwealth, Sir James Hackett was given the task of rebuilding the Inchgarvie defences.

Military Action in the 1650s

The years 1650 and 1651 were an eventful, if troublesome, time in the island's history. Within a year of having been given the job, Sir James Hackett, who was Artillery General for Scotland, had built his fortress and further additions were made in 1650. In that year, the Crown ordered various parties to provide the fortress with the following goods:-

Edinburgh Castle to give 10 bolls* of meal of the 100 bolls given it by Sir William Dick

The Provost of Edinburgh to give 10 chalders* of coal, to be obtained from the Duke of Hamilton's coal pit

Queensferry to provide kitchen utensils and beds

In June 1650, the fortress was granted the sum of £555

Towards the end of 1650, Sir James Hackett was made Keeper of the Island of Inchgarvie by Act of Parliament, and in February of the following year the King himself visited the island in his capacity as Chief Commander of the army. By this time the fortress was equipped with 16 guns. The Wars of the Commonwealth were in full progress and the action was moving closer and closer to this little island, for Cromwell and his army were already in Edinburgh. In March 1651 the fortress obtained a doctor and a chaplain and the garrison was prepared, and able, to withstand a heavy assault, which came before the month was out. The Cromwellian fleet had captured St. Margaret's Hope and was bombarding Inchgarvie repeatedly, but without success. By July the fortress was weakening but had still not fallen, being backed up by a battery of 5 guns on the high ground above North Queensferry.

* 1 boll = 6 bushels (1 bushel = dry measure of
1 chalder = 64 bushels 8 gallons or 34 litres)

Cromwell had to cross the Forth at some point but this was easier said than done. An army was lying in wait for him up at Stirling, while the forts at Burntisland, Inchgarvie and Rosyth were able to thwart his attempts farther down the estuary. The capture of St. Margaret's Hope, however, enabled him to ship an army of 1400 men from Blackness to Charlestown, followed by a march eastwards to Queensferry. Rosyth Castle was taken* and the Queensferry battery was captured after a fierce battle. Six days later the Inchgarvie garrison surrendered, quickly followed by Burntisland. All this occurred before the end of July 1651.

Cromwell had the Inchgarvie fortress destroyed in 1654 and it was left in ruins for over a century.

* Rosyth Castle was, supposedly, the birthplace of Cromwell's mother, who was a Stuart of Rosyth.



The ruins of Rosyth Castle today, rising from the midst of dockyard buildings. It fell to Cromwell in 1651

18th Century Developments

All this time, the island had continued to be in the ownership of the Dundases but, at the turn of the 18th century, the Crown took it over, due to the attitude of disinterest now shown towards it by that family. This is, perhaps, hardly surprising, as it was by now only a pile of broken rock with only the foundations of its once important fortress remaining.

In 1707, the island was granted by Queen Anne to Archibald, Earl of Roseberry, and who knows what he might have done with it if it had not been for the ensuing turn of events.

The Privy Council received a protest against the grant from a Walter Stewart, for the Laird of Dundas. The Council upheld his appeal and so Inchgarvie returned to the ownership of the Dundases, in whose possession it was to remain until the second half of the 19th century.

Yet again, however, a fortress was to be erected on the island. In 1779, John Paul Jones, privateer and founder of the American navy, entered the Forth with a fleet of French ships, ready to plunder merchant shipping and raid coastal towns. A fortress bearing four 24-pound guns was hastily erected on Inchgarvie, but the deterrent was not needed. The hostile fleet was soon blown right out into the North Sea again by a gale.*

* There is a traditional tale that the gale was the result of a Divine Intervention, after a Kirkcaldy church minister, the Rev. Robert Shirra, knelt on Kirkcaldy sands and prayed for deliverance. The story is told in the epic poem "The Ballad o' Bethelfield" by W. Allsop.

The fortress built to repel Jones was not pulled down, but was left to fall down of its own accord. In the late 1790s it looked as though the fortress might have to be refurbished, with the threat of Napoleon hanging over the country (several of the Forth islands were fortified at this time), but such action was not needed in the end and Inchgarvie's military defences fell slowly into a state of total decay.

Stepping Stone in the Forth

During the 19th century, Inchgarvie was not forced to suffer the degradations and defilements of war. The attraction of the little island was no less than it had been hitherto, but its potential was now to be measured not from a defensive viewpoint, but a progressive one, as we shall see.

Beginning in 1810, great improvements were carried out on the harbours of North and South Queensferry for the easier conveyance of ferry traffic. The original plans had included the construction of a new pier at Long Craigs, North Queensferry, mainly to act as a breakwater against the dangerous eddies and winds caused by Inchgarvie and the surrounding high ground. Due to overspending on other piers and unforeseen problems, however, this pier was never built. Even today one can look down from a train passing over the Forth Rail Bridge and see the swirling currents around Inchgarvie.

The 19th century being a period of progress, however, the new piers had hardly had time to settle in the water when another technological advance was made which was eventually to overshadow the ferry - the railway.

In 1847, a railway line was built between Leith, Edinburgh and Granton on the south side of the Forth, and there was another on the north side from Burntisland to Cupar, with a branch-off to Lindores, near Newburgh. In the following year the Cupar line was extended to Ferry-Port-on-Craig (now Newport-on-Tay), while the Lindores terminal was extended all the way to Perth. The vital step now was to find a way to cross the Forth and link up the rail route to the north.

Several proposals and designs were put forward during the course of the century. The first of these was for a tunnel, which would pass under Inchgarvie, but this plan came to nothing. Another plan suggested in 1818, was for a chain

bridge. Three different designs for this were prepared, all of them using Inchgarvie as a mid-way point. Once again, however, they were rejected. Another two plans were submitted; one for a bridge across the Forth at Charlestown, and another for a pontoon bridge at Queensferry, once again using Inchgarvie as a half-way point. Both plans were, of course, rejected.

In 1873, the Forth Bridge Company was formed and was given permission to erect a bridge by an Act of Parliament in the same year. The Company finally accepted a design by Sir Thomas Bouch, designer of the first Tay Rail Bridge. Bouch's Forth Bridge was still not to be the one we see today, however. His plan was for a suspension bridge carrying 2 tracks 100 ft apart (30m). The two central pilla were to be built on Inchgarvie and so the Forth Bridge Company bought the island from the Dundas family for £2700.

Work had begun on these two towers when the Tay Bridge collapsed in December 1879. The construction of Bouch's new bridge over the Forth was immediately halted, and was never taken up again.

Work on the present bridge was begun in 1883, yet again using Inchgarvie as the base for the central pillar of the main structure. For this pillar, or pier, the contractors used CAISSONS - large, iron barrels - with the following statistics:-

Diameter at base = 70ft (21.5m)

Diameter at top = 60ft (18.5m)

Height = 50 - 60ft (15.5 - 18.5m)

Weight = up to 500 tons

These were towed out and sunk into position in deep water. They were then filled in with ballast to weight them down. The ballast was mainly concrete, but the remains of the Inchgarvie fortress of 1779 were also robbed for this purpose. The base was then built inside these caissons and the pier was completed by March 1885.

The bridge itself was finished in 1890 and was opened on the 4th of March by the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII).

It is worthwhile noting the vital statistics of the Forth Rail Bridge here, in order to show the massiveness of the structure which little Inchgarvie is helping to support.

11,700 cubic feet of masonry, approx. 400 cubic metres

21,000 tons of cement (or tonnes)

55,000 tons of steel

8,000,000 rivets

Number of men employed in the construction = 5,000

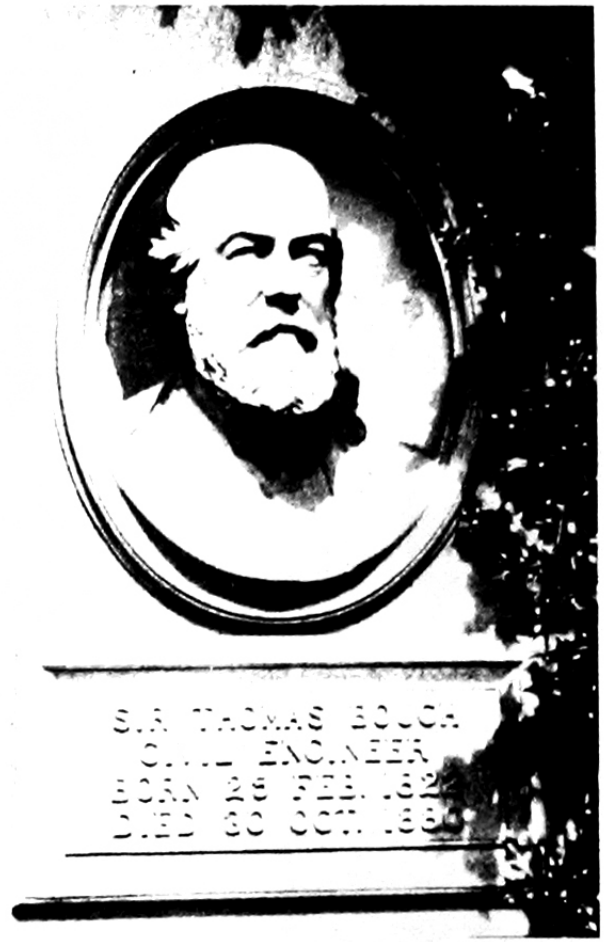
Number of accidents = 500

Number killed = 57

Money for salaries and wages = £1,045,000

Total cost of the bridge = £3,500,000

It is a comforting thought to know that the bridge is actually twice as strong as it needs to be, for it has since been closely examined, but I wonder how much more difficult it would have been to achieve this feat if that little island had not been lying there in mid-channel, like a stepping stone in the Forth?



Bust of Sir Thomas Bouch, designer of the ill-fated Tay Railway Bridge, who also designed a bridge over the Forth. Born 1822, died 1880. The bust is carved in relief on his tombstone in Dean Cemetery, Edinburgh

Conclusion

In the present century, the island became a military base again during World War One for the protection of the naval base at Rosyth and the Forth Rail Bridge itself, for it was, as it still is, an important part of the communication and transport system.

Today, most people's view of Inchgarvie is had by looking down from a train on the bridge, but it can also be seen easily from either shore. The closest that one is likely to get, however, if one does not have access to a private vessel, is from the pleasure boat as it passes by on its way from South Queensferry to Inchcolm island.

The island can be said to be in retirement now, its military ruins gazing out at the world with hollow, unseeing eyes, the haunt of seabirds during the nesting season. Indeed, it is quite difficult to believe that this small, rocky outcrop has experienced so much activity down the centuries.



The network of girders of the Forth Rail Bridge as they look from immediately below