Kelso

Location and topography (illus 1 and 3) *by D R Perry*

The town of Kelso is located on the east and north side of the River Tweed, opposite the confluence with the River Teviot, at the lowest bridging point of the Tweed before Berwick, where five routes converged: south to Jedburgh, west to Selkirk and Melrose, north-west to Edinburgh and north-east to Berwick by Coldstream or Ednam. In the peninsula between the two rivers stood the former royal burgh and castle of Roxburgh. Kelso developed along a terrace of fluvio-glacial sands and gravels above the Tweed, at a height of 36.3 m–38.7 m OD. Before expansion in the 19th century, it was basically a single street (now Roxburgh Street) extending northwards from the abbey. To the rear of the properties on the east side of the street a back lane, now Bowmont Street, developed; the presence of the River Tweed prevented the development of a similar lane to the rear of the properties on the west side of the street. In front of the abbey, at right angles to Roxburgh Street, is a large market area, some 500 m long and 150 m wide, but reduced by island developments to some 100 m by 150 m.

The initial settlement seems to have developed at Wester Kelso, now within the grounds of Floors Castle at the north end of Roxburgh Street, with a later separate settlement at Easter Kelso, around the abbey (Simpson and Stevenson 1980, 2). By the 16th century only one settlement, Kelso, is mentioned, though it is not clear whether the two settlements merged or Wester Kelso ceased to exist. Formerly Wester Kelso was linked to Roxburgh by a bridge, abandoned with the destruction of the burgh of Roxburgh in the 15th century, but whose ruins were still visible in 1547 (Haig 1825, 345 and 351); it was replaced by a coble or ferry (hence Coble Heugh). There was a ferry at Kelso itself in the late 17th century (illus 2). This latter ferry was replaced by a stone bridge in the mid 18th century. This bridge, of six arches, was swept away in a flood in 1797 and replaced on a different site by the present bridge, of seven arches, in 1800 (Simpson and Stevenson 1980, 6).

Historical background *by D R Perry*

In 1128 the Tironensian abbey, which David, Earl of Huntingdon and Northampton, later David I (1124–53), had founded at Selkirk about 1113, was transferred by the king 'to the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary which is situated on the bank of the River Tweed, in the place which is called 'Calchou'' (*Kelso Liber*, 5). Among the endowments for the newly sited abbey was the 'toun of Kelso with its right boundaries, in lands and waters' (ibid, 5). The phrasing of the transfer suggests that there was an already existing settlement and church at Kelso in 1128, when the abbey was transferred. The nature and extent of such a settlement are unknown, but it may be presumed to have been primarily a rural farming community, whose tenants paid to their lord (in this case the king) rents in kind from the produce of their holdings and performed labour services in the king's own fields. Such a settlement would probably have been centred on the nearby royal castle of Roxburgh, rather than on a royal hall at Kelso. Such early settlements at royal estate centres emerged into Scotland's earliest royal burghs, as at Edinburgh, Roxburgh, Berwick, Perth and Dunfermline. Similar settlements developed into non-royal ecclesiastical burghs, as at Glasgow and St Andrews, and lay burghs, as at Dundee. Archaeological evidence, in the form of domestic structures, of pre-burghal settlement in Scotland is slight: only Whithorn (Dumfries and Galloway) has produced definite datable evidence of domestic structures predating the 12th century (it was not created a burgh until 1325) (Hill 1997). Excavations at Dunbar and Perth have only provided indirect evidence of pre-burghal settlement: a very extensive cemetery at the former dating to the 11th or 12th century (Perry 2000, 291; Moloney 2001), and a ditch dated to the 11th century at the latter, possibly enclosing St John's Kirk (Moloney and Coleman 1997, 712, 775).

Between 1165 and 1171 William the Lion (1165–1214) granted the abbey's men in Kelso licence to buy within their toun, on every day of the week, except the king's market day in Roxburgh, their fuel, timber and grain, and those travelling to sell these commodities were similarly licensed. The abbey's men were also licensed to sell in their 'shops' bread, ale and flesh, as well as fish brought in their own carts or on their own horses. However carts brought from elsewhere and travelling through were not permitted to be unloaded and the goods sold except in the king's market. On the day of the king's market in Roxburgh, the men of Kelso were not allowed to buy anything in their toun, but were required to travel to the king's market and there buy what they wanted with the king's other burgesses (*RRS*, ii, no 64).

This charter marks one of the earliest recorded stages of the development of Kelso as an urban community. At this date the settlement was clearly an agricultural settlement, whose inhabitants also practised fishing. Their 'shops' were the windows, *in fenestris*, of their homes, from which they were
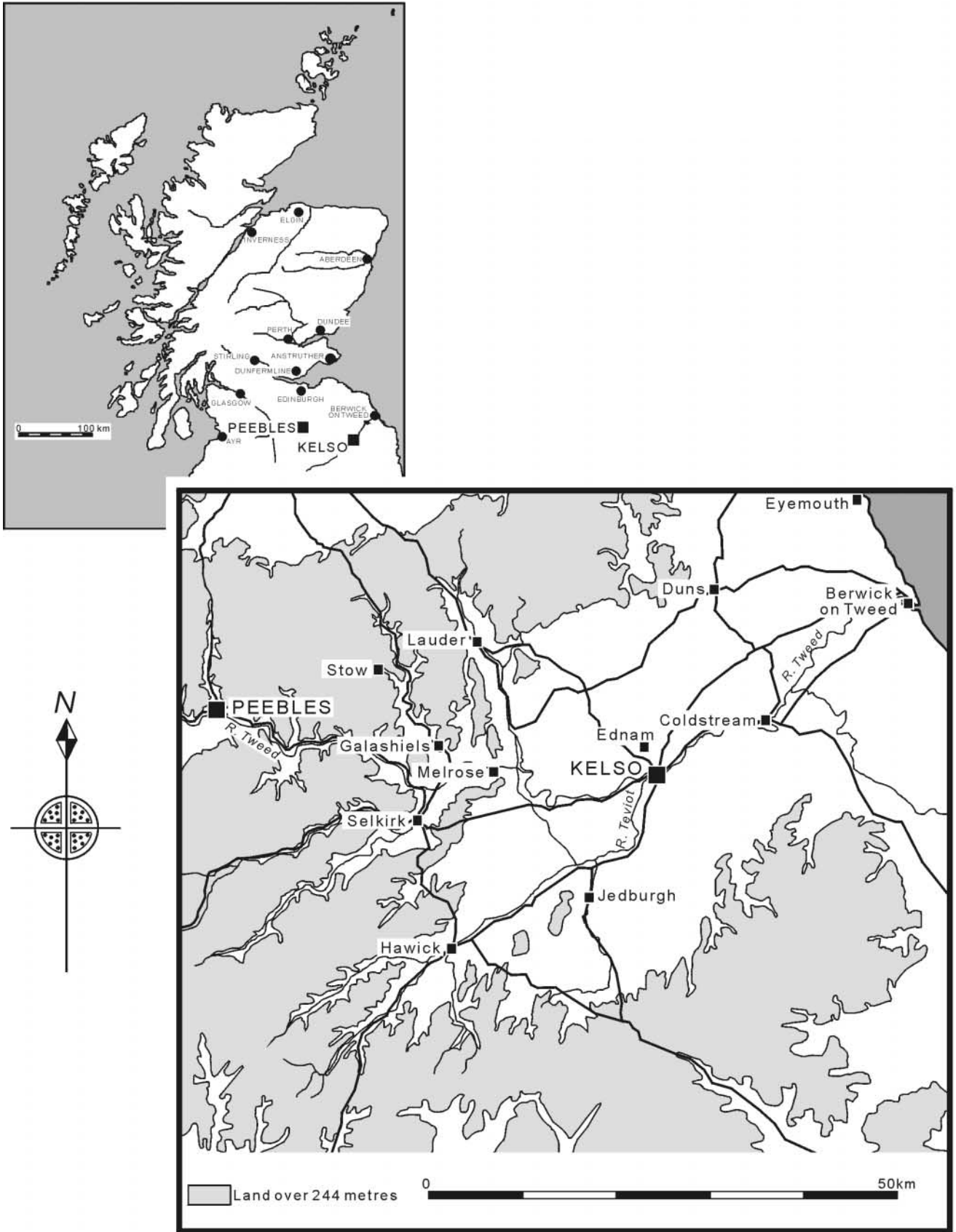
Illus 1   General location

Illus 2   The Prospect of the Town of Kelso, from John Slezer, Theatrum Scotiae, 1693. (Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.)

permitted to sell only their own agricultural or fishing produce, but no manufactured goods, except ale, which may have been home-produced. Strangers were similarly limited in what they could sell. These privileges granted to the inhabitants of Kelso were not to interfere with the trading privileges of the king's own burgh across the river at Roxburgh, whose market revenues belonged to the king. However the abbey was not granted a formal market in Kelso as the bishops of St Andrews, Brechin and Glasgow or Arbroath Abbey were granted markets for their towns (*RRS*, ii, nos 115, 190 and 197). Clearly the king was not wanting any competition to his own burgh at Roxburgh.

The original settlement of Kelso seems to have lain further west of the abbey than the present town, which developed beside the abbey. The abbey would have been founded at an isolated site, away from human habitation, so that the monks could have peace and quiet to carry out their devotions. By the end of the 13th century, there were two Kelsos: the burgh of Wester Kelso and the toun of Easter Kelso, the former held in feu-ferme from Kelso Abbey by the burgesses, the latter held by the abbey for its own use (*Kelso Liber*, 349 and 470). At the latter was located the abbey mill, first mentioned between 1189 and 1195 (*RRS*, ii, no 317). The mill was situated on the

Tweed to the west of the abbey, at the end of a weir across the river. It is not known who founded the burgh of Kelso or Wester Kelso, but it is recorded between 1237 and 1399 (*Kelso Liber*, 285, 349 and 412). The excavations at Trench 3 at Wester Kelso reported on here have located it to the north-west of the abbey, near a former ferry crossing to Roxburgh at Coble Heugh. By the 16th century only one Kelso is mentioned in a description of the toun in 1517 (RCAMS 1956, 241) and in a rent roll of the abbey's property of c 1567 (*Kelso Liber*, 489).

It is probable that Wester Kelso was abandoned as a settlement in the course of the wars with England. An English garrison held Roxburgh Castle until 1460, the castle being situated across the Tweed from the abbey. The royal burgh of Roxburgh also disappeared about this time. The abbey, and presumably the burgh and/or toun of Kelso, suffered frequently in the course of English raids in the 14th and 15th centuries and again in the 16th century.

From 1511 the abbey was held by a series of commendators, including James Stewart, illegitimate son of James V (1513–42), Francis Stewart, Earl of Bothwell, cousin of James VI (1567–1625), and Sir John Maitland of Thirlestane, chancellor and king's secretary (Cowan and Easson 1976, 68–9). In 1602 the abbey lands were granted as the

barony of Sprouston to Robert Ker, Lord Roxburgh, in whose favour the abbacy was erected in 1607 into the temporal lordship and barony of Halydene (*RMS*, vi, nos 1342 and 1607). In 1614 James VI erected the toun of Kelso into a free burgh of barony in favour of Lord Roxburgh's son and heir, William Ker (ibid, vii, no 1055). No mention is made of the earlier existence of the burgh of Kelso, although in 1593 a series of statutes for the kirk and toun of Kelso included the requirement of the inhabitants to 'lift away their middingis' from the front street and to pave the street, all future laying down of 'middingis' being forbidden (*HMC* 1894, no 95). Such measures are known from other burghs and may signify a continuation of Kelso's status as a burgh. Although there is no record of the burgh between 1399 and 1614, a reference in December 1534 to a 'lawsuit in the court before the bailies of Calco' suggests that a burgh court was functioning (Maley and Elliot 1993, 17).

In addition to destruction by English raiders, the town, or parts of it, suffered accidental destruction by fire in 1644 and 1684 (Simpson and Stevenson 1980, 3). The latter fire, when the homes of 306 families were destroyed, is alleged to have particularly affected Wester Kelso (ibid, 3 and 20), but a map of the affected area suggests it was the market area beside the abbey that was burned (RHP 42577, reproduced in Cavers 1993, 66). Despite the deliberate and accidental destructions of Kelso, the town maintained its existence as an agricultural community. In 1517 60 dwellings are recorded, nearly all of the inhabitants being husbandmen and cultivators of the fields of the monastery (RCAMS 1956, 241). About 1567 some 196 'small maillis' (including seven Almerie holdings) are listed in an abbey rent roll, along with 24 'greit maillis', in addition to 19 holdings in the Almerie (Almonry) lands of the abbey (*Kelso Liber*, 522–31). There is little detail for most of the small mails apart from the tenant and rent, but 20 'onsets' and 12 'half onsets' are mentioned along with three barns, two kilns and two booths; most of the tenants were cottars (ibid, 489), although a cordiner, flesher and fisher are listed. In the Almonry lands one onset and a half onset are mentioned along with three barns and two kilns. Presumably the 'half onsets' were houses divided between two tenants, although whether the houses were divided vertically (ie, were two-storeyed) or horizontally is unclear. In 1630 there were 27 feuars of the lands in the town and territory of Kelso, as well as 21 feuars of 'Willands' and crofts in Kelso (Jeffrey 1864, 43–4). In 1792 there were 376 houses (Simpson and Stevenson 1980, 23).

Previous work

The only previous excavations in Kelso were carried out in the precincts of the abbey in 1971 and 1975 (Tabraham 1984).