

III.

NOTES ON FIVE DONSIDÉ CASTLES. BY
W. DOUGLAS SIMPSON, F.S.A. SCOT.

The five ruined castles described in the following paragraphs are all situated in the valley of the Aberdeenshire Don. With the exception of Tillycairn, no architectural description or plan of any of them has yet been published, and the notes and sketches of Tillycairn made by Skene of Rubislaw — which have been reproduced by MacGibbon and Ross (*Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, vol. iii. pp. 601-2)—are not dependable.

All five castles are excellent examples of the different types of fortified mansions, or "houses of fence," which were being constructed during the last half of the sixteenth century. This was a period of great building activity in Scotland, partly owing to the general improvement in social conditions and national prosperity, and more particularly by reason of the Reformation, which caused the enormous wealth of the medieval Church to fall largely into the grasp of the landed proprietors, whose increased resources manifested themselves in widespread building activities. Upwards of 65 per cent. of the Aberdeenshire castles belong to this period. Architecturally the most interesting phenomena of the time were the development of the original oblong tower-house plan by adding wings designed partly to afford additional accommodation, and partly to secure efficient flanking defence with firearms; and also the increasing attention paid to the superstructure, which appeared in the construction of corbelled turrets, crow-stepped gables, and large chimney-stacks. These upper features were invariably handled by the local architects in masterly fashion, the result being a combination of beauty with utility which has rarely been surpassed in the history of construction. All these characteristics of the age are well illustrated by the castles under review.

PITFICHIE CASTLE

is a beautiful ruin on the right bank of the Don, about a mile north of Monymusk village. It is now included in the Monymusk estates, but from about the end of the fourteenth century the lands of Pitfichie belonged to the ancient family of Hurrie, or Urrie—possibly descended from the Hugo de Urre and Maulcolum de Ouree of whom mention is made in that sad document, *Ragman's Roll*. A good summary of the main facts in the annals of the family will be found in MacPherson's

Materials for a History of the Church and Priory of Monymusk, and in Dr Davidson's Inverurie and the Earldom of the Garioch. In 1597 Pitfichie was sold to John Cheyne of Fortrie, whose descendants retained it until about 1650, when it was purchased by the Forbeses of Monymusk. The last-recorded inhabitants of the castle were William Forbes, eldest

son of the laird of Monymusk, and his wife Lady Jane Keith, daughter of the Earl of Kintore. Their household in the castle is given by the Poll Book of 1696; the crude ballad with which Lady Keith is associated will be found in Davidson's *Inverurie* (p. 405). Possibly the castle was occupied as a farmhouse for some years longer, but in 1796 Charles Dawson, editing the quaint old poem *Don*, describes it as "now unroofed" (*Don, a Poem*, ed. Charles Dawson, reprinted 1905, pp. 17-18).

The castle consists of a rectangular tower-house, 36 feet by 28, with a large round tower, 23 feet in diameter, attached to its southern corner (fig. 1). It may thus be regarded as an intermediate link between the simple oblong tower and the fully developed three-stepped or Z-plan, with towers echeloned at each of two opposite angles. Other examples of the two-stepped plan in Aberdeenshire are Balfluig, described in this paper—where the "flanker" is square, though modified by a circular staircase on the outer angle,—and Abergeldie on Deeside, where the

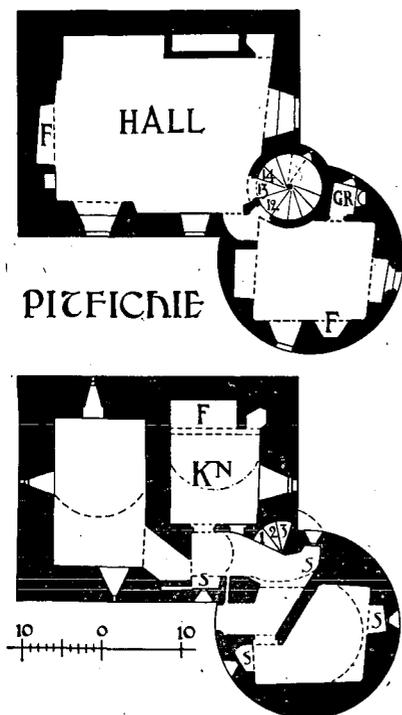


Fig. 1. Pitfichie Castle: plans of basement and first floor.

"flanker" is round, as at Pitfichie.

The basement contains a guardroom in the round tower, and a kitchen and cellar, with a corridor of access, in the main building. It is vaulted throughout, and the walls here are 5 feet thick. The arched doorway in the round tower is defended by two great shot-holes with a wide outer splay, and a similar shot-hole opens from the guardroom on the opposite side of the tower. The kitchen has a large arched fireplace, an oven, and a service window to the passage. Above this were other two storeys and a garret, with a large hall, measuring 25 feet 6 inches by 22 feet, on the first floor of the main house, and a private room, with garderobe, in the tower beside it. At the north-west angle of the main house

is a square corbelled turret (fig. 2), pierced with shot-holes which make up for the absence of a flanking tower at this angle. The flat skewers of this turret are clearly alterations, no doubt replacing original crow-steps. Access to the upper storeys is given by a newel stair 4 feet wide, corbelled out as a turret between the tower and the main house. The stair is lit by a series of loops, of which the lowest has been enlarged to form a window. Near its summit the turret is brought square by a simple moulding, and higher up is further enlarged by an effective label corbelling to form a capehouse, resting on a vault over the stair-head. The gable of this capehouse has, like that of the turret, been altered with flat skewers (fig. 3).

Originally the entrance to the castle was to have been in the re-entrant, not of the tower, but of the main house. It was apparently found that this would provide access too direct for safety to the main stair; hence the plan was modified and the present crooked passage introduced, with doorway in the round tower. The alteration was badly managed, as the passage encroaches awkwardly on both guardroom and kitchen. The original door was then blocked, and a shot-hole inserted to cover the new entrance; but its rear arch and bar-hole still remain to prove the alteration. The similarity



[Photo. by R. D. Bruce.

Fig. 2. Pitfichie Castle: view from N.W.

of the shot-hole to all the others in the basement, and the fact that the whole arrangement of the plan depends on its present door, with the devious passage and guardroom and staircase adjoining, prove that the alteration was effected during erection.

The date of the castle is not in evidence, but the architectural details permit of conjecture. The corbelling out of the staircase from so near the ground has a late appearance, but the external splay of the shot-holes is a primitive type, and the mouldings everywhere are purely Gothic. The tentative plan also indicates an early date, and I think the castle was erected soon after 1560. Eight yards south-

west of the castle is still preserved a fragment of the barmekin wall, with an arched gateway now used as the entrance to the farmhouse garden. The gateway is of the usual type, with a half-engaged roll moulding; but the voussoirs at the apex of the arch fell early in the year 1920, and the remaining portion is in a dangerous condition. There are some remains of a straight stair leading to a chamber in the capehouse.



Fig. 3. Pitfichie Castle: view from E.

There is little historic interest connected with the castle, and perhaps its chief claim to distinction rests in the fact that the son of its last Hurry laird was the famous Civil War free-lance, Major-General Sir John Hurry, who was defeated by Montrose at Auldearn on 9th May 1645, served under his old antagonist during the last forlorn attempt of Carbisdale, and was hanged in Edinburgh on 29th May 1650. Though he may have been born at Pitfichie, Sir John was never its laird, as has sometimes been asserted; for the property passed out of the family at a time when, if alive at all, he must have been still a bairn. He is recorded to have served in the Thirty Years' War, but the date of his birth seems unknown.

On 20th January 1590, William Hurrie of Pitfichie, along with Gordon of Knockespoek and others of lesser degree, swooped down

on the lands of Forneidlie, belonging to Duncan Forbes, broke down the houses of two of his tenants, maltreated their wives, and actually sought to burn alive their babies "lyand in thair creddillis." They also plundered these unfortunates of sixteen draught oxen, which were driven off to Pitfichie. During the following days these raids were repeated, crops were laid waste, "moveable gear" carried off, and the poor tenants were reduced to such extremes that they were "putt to beg thair meit." In the end Forbes lodged protest with the Privy Council, and the offenders were duly outlawed. Later two of the party are minuted as giving submission, but the outcome of the affair is not further known (*Reg. Privy Council*, vol. iv. p. 595).

I have to acknowledge the kindness of my friend, Dr William Kelly, architect, Aberdeen, in lending me the excellent plans of this castle, drawn by him from measurements made by Mr James B. Nicol in 1896. The photograph of the castle was kindly taken for me by my friend, Mr R. Douglas Bruce.

Two and a half miles south-south-west of Monymusk, and nearly a mile and a half south-east of Tillyfourie station on the Alford Valley Railway, stands the picturesque, ivy-clad ruin of

TILLYCAIRN CASTLE.

It belonged to Matthew Lumsden (died 27th June 1580), whose *Genealogy of the Forbes Family* is of great value to local historians. So far back as 1722 this castle is described as ruinous (Macfarlane's *Geographical Collections*, vol. i. p. 96), but nothing seems to be known as to the date of its abandonment. The date of erection is even less established, there being no inscription of any sort, though an empty panel remains over the door. The style, however, would place it about 1550: the loopholes—cruciform with an oilette below—are of an archaic type, and the internal arrangements in many respects are somewhat primitive. The castle, which now belongs to the Cluny estate, is used as a henhouse and agricultural store; but in spite of this degradation it is pleasant to record that the ruins are kept in excellent repair, and restoration has been done where necessary.

The castle (fig. 4) is a fine example of the L-plan, rounded at the corners, and measuring 41 feet 6 inches by 37 feet over its longest sides, with a circular staircase tower in the re-entrant, where also is the low arched door, well defended by loops and shot-holes. These last have a rectangular splay, as at Balfluig. The main building was four storeys

high, the wing being carried up a storey higher. In the vaulted basement are the kitchen and a couple of cellars, one of the latter having the usual narrow private stair to the hall above. The kitchen has an arched fireplace 9 feet wide, an exterior stone water-supply trough, and a service window to the main stair. While trenching the floor of the south cellar, on 20th August 1916, I had the good fortune to discover a very fine Gothic pendant, enriched with the cable moulding. On the first floor the main building contains an unvaulted hall, 25 feet by 17 feet, adjoining which in the wing is a vaulted private chamber or with-

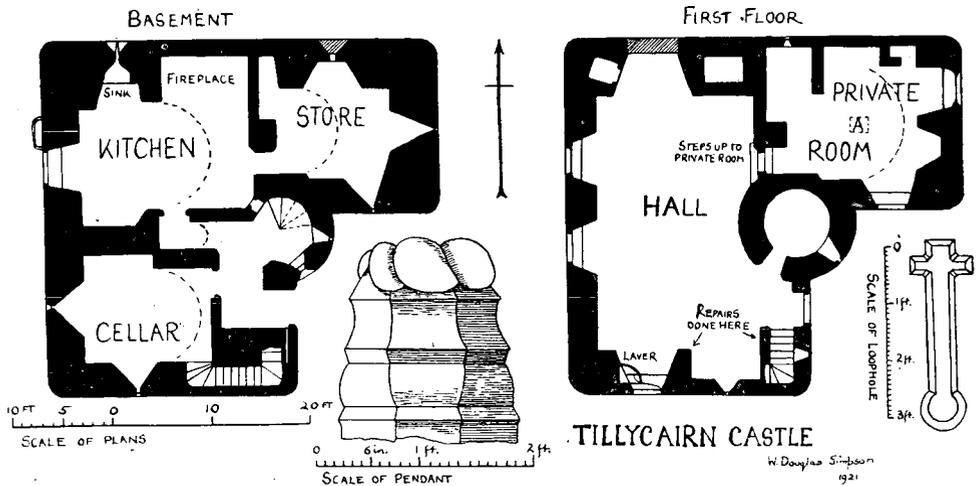


Fig. 4. Tillycairn Castle: plans of basement and first floor.

drawing-room. The hall had a large fireplace, now destroyed, in the rear wall of which is a curious built-up window beneath a discharging arch, while in the ingoing on the left is a square aumbry or salt-cellar, checked for a door. At the opposite end of the hall a stone laver is contrived in a window-sill. The private room has a rough square aperture in its vault, without dressed stones (see A on plan); probably from here came the pendant found in the cellar. The upper storeys are now ruined, but have plain fireplaces, large windows, cupboards, and garderobes. The great stair in the round tower is completely destroyed, and the private stair nearly so. Massive boulders compose the lower parts of the building, where the walls are from 4 to 6 feet thick: above (fig. 5) are richly corbelled turrets, crow-stepped gables, coped chimneys, and a bold cornice on the east side at the eaves level. This cornice had supported an embattled parapet extending from the stair tower to the turret at the south-east corner, and

designed to protect the entrance below. The door of access to this wall-head still remains in the capehouse of the stair tower. A similar contrivance is found at Harthill Castle in the parish of Oyne. The

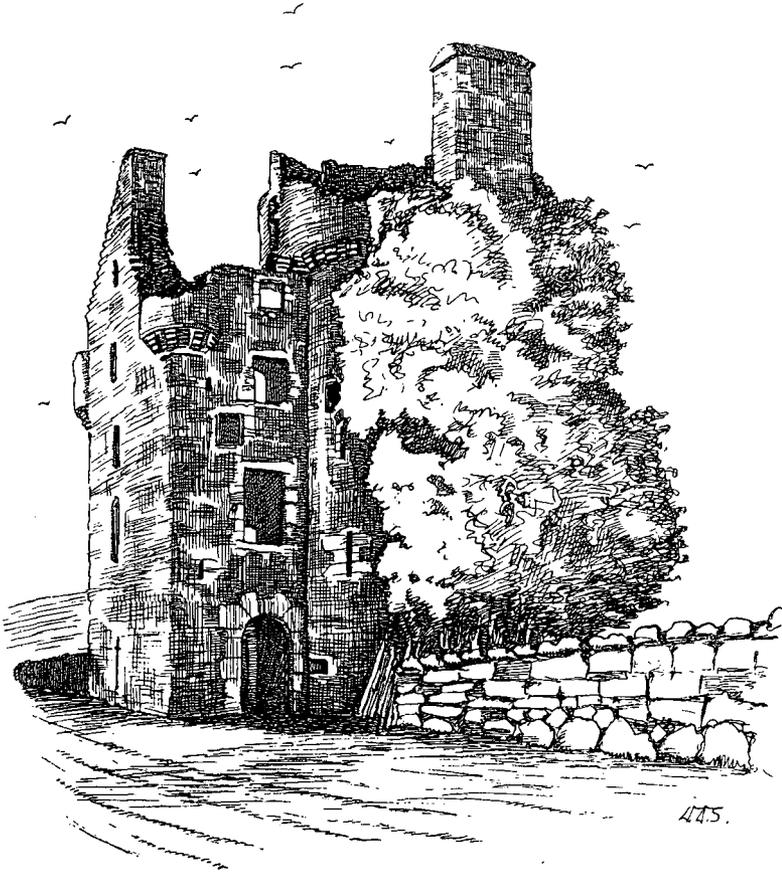


Fig. 5. Tillycairn Castle: view from S.E.

turrets are entered by short flights of steps, and have shot-holes pierced downward through the corbelling. The chimney on the south gable is perched on one side, and not on the apex of the gable as usual.

The lands of Tillycairn were granted by Alexander Seton Gordon of Cluny to James Forbes, son of Sir Alexander (afterwards first Lord) Forbes, on 30th September 1444, the grant being confirmed by James V. on 24th February 1539 (*Reg. Magni Sigilli*, 1513-1546, No. 2100).

By a charter dated 30th July 1548, the Queen-Regent grants to Master Matthew Lumsden of Tillycairn the lands of Little Linturk and Bridgend, with the alehouse and alehouse croft, which formerly belonged to John Strachan of Linturk, the grant being partly in recompense for the spoliation in June 1544, from the lands of Tillycairn, of nineteen plough oxen, eight cows, and two steers of three years old (*Reg. Magni Sigilli*, 1546-1580, No. 238). This John Strachan of Linturk in Tough was a noted reiver, who in 1531, along with Seton of Meldrum and King of Barra, was "art and part of the besieging of the Castle of Kildrummy" (Pitcairn's *Criminal Trials*, vol. i. pt. 1, p. 246), and, on 14th June 1555, was sentenced to banishment (*Antiquities of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, vol. iv. pp. 758-9). It may have been as a result of the spoliation of 1544 that Matthew Lumsden built the strong castle whose ruins remain. His son John Lumsden granted the lands of Clova in Kildrummy to his brother Alexander by a charter dated from Tillycairn on 12th January 1588, and confirmed by the Great Seal on 3rd June 1589 (*Reg. Magni Sigilli*, 1580-1593, No. 1667).

BALFLUIG CASTLE,

south-east of Alford village, is a fine example of a small fortified house dating from the middle of the sixteenth century; and its value is increased by its known date and good preservation. Now uninhabited, it affords a convenient shelter for the poultry, pigs, and implements of the adjoining farm: this being so, the internal condition of the building may be readily imagined, but at least its use for these purposes has saved it from actual ruin. Unfortunately the structure is falling into rapid decay. The roof is leaking, and the walls stand in urgent need of repairs. There is a huge vertical rent in the east face of the wing, evidently caused by a settlement, which will soon bring all to the ground. At the present stage little expense would put the building in sound condition.

The castle is designed on the plan of a double tower, comprising a rectangular main house, three storeys high, with a garret, and measuring about 34 feet by 25 feet, to one corner of which an oblong tower is affixed, forming a wing, and carried up a storey higher than the main house. Only two parallels to this plan are known in Aberdeenshire, Pitfichie and Abergeldie, and in both the wing or tower is round. At Balfluig, moreover, the exterior angle of the wing is pushed out as a circular tower, containing the main stair. A precisely similar arrangement, in a three-stepped castle, may be seen at Grantully in Perthshire. The bare, unadorned, loopholed walls, the high-pitched roof, the

strange bulky chimneys, the three tortuous stairs, and the gloomy vaulted cellars with their shot-holes and rusty iron "cleeks," complete the *toute ensemble* of an old-world fortress—the tallness of which, in proportion to its bulk, makes it a conspicuous object in almost every direction (fig. 6).

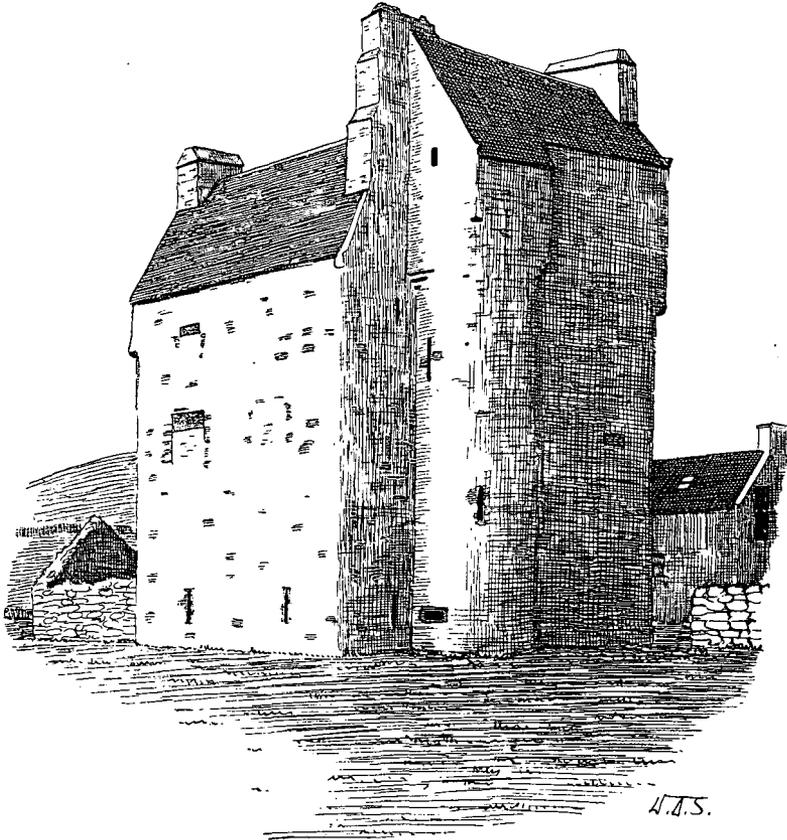


Fig. 6. Balfluig Castle: view from S.W.

The interior exhibits some features of note. Beneath the main stair, which is 3 feet 6 inches broad, a small chamber is formed, roofed over by the ascending steps: probably it was a prison, as in the great tower at Dunnottar. There is the usual private stair, and at the top of the main house a subsidiary flight gives access to the uppermost storey of the wing. The upper rooms have been a good deal pulled about in recent times. There are two halls, one above the other, in the main house, with private rooms adjoining in the wing: that beside the lower

hall is vaulted, being the only room above the basement so treated. This arrangement is found also at Tillycairn, Culquhunny, and Asloun, all described in these notes. The wooden floors are everywhere in sad dilapidation. Only the basement (fig. 7) remains unaltered: it has two cellars, or a cellar and a guardroom, and a large kitchen with fireplace, sink, and drain, all well preserved. The fireplace is fine, with a span of 7 feet: one voussoir has evidently been used for sharpening knives.

High up on the east face of the main house three corbels and two closed doorways indicate a brattice or hoarding to defend the entrance below, which is also flanked by a couple of shot-holes, while a third

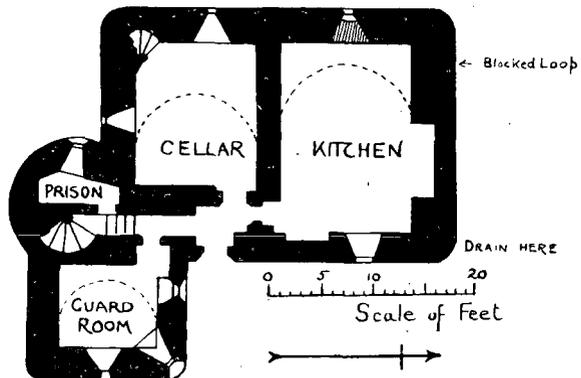


Fig. 7. Balfuig Castle: plan of basement.

opens from the prison beneath the stair. These shot-holes have the rather unusual rectangular splay which is found also at Tillycairn. I have noticed other examples at Castle Stalker in Appin, and at Balone and Fairburn Castles in Ross-shire. This style of shot-hole seems peculiar to the remoter parts of the country. There are no turrets and no crow-steps, but the rounded angles of the building are brought out to the square below the eaves in a manner which recalls the wonted turret to the eye. A similar method of treatment may be seen at Tilquhillie Castle in Kincardineshire, which dates from 1575; but there is some evidence that the gables at Balfuig have been mishandled at a late period. The roof over the main house is ancient and very substantial: that over the wing dates from about 1885. In this connexion it may be noted that in the *Description of the Alford Valley Railway*, 1859 (p. 40), the castle is described as "partially in ruins." It ceased to be regularly occupied about the beginning of last century; the walls are covered with very modern plaster—beneath which, in the vaults, are patches of the

original coating of clay and straw. Over the circle-headed doorway in the re-entrant is incised the date 1556.

Concerning the history of Balfluig there is little to tell. Its Forbes lairds were an offshoot from the Corsindae family: the estate, which in 1650 was erected into the barony of Alford, was sold in 1753 to the Farquharsons of Haughton. In 1704 one of the lairds appears as Lord Commissioner to the Scottish Parliament. According to the *Description of the Alford Valley Railway*, "next it at one time there was another

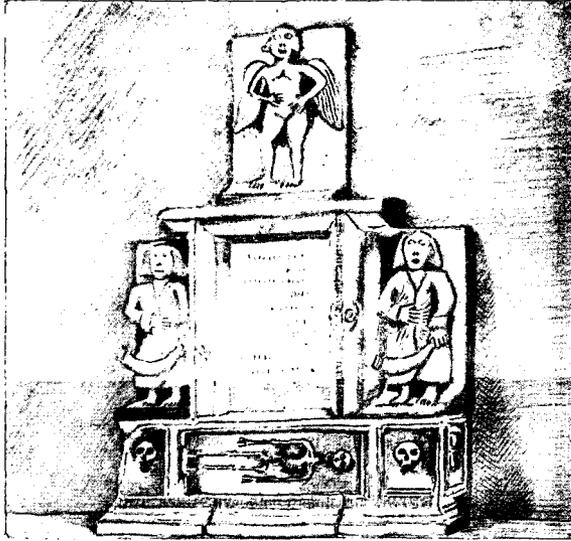


Fig. 8. The Balfluig Monument at Alford Church.

and similar castle, but all traces of it have gone. Tradition says that anciently the castles belonged to two proprietors, and were in such close juxtaposition that the owners in fits of jealousy used to fire at each other from the high castle walls—the story ending that the one killing the other, the survivor died miserable." A similar story, with less tragic ending, is told of Hallforest and Balbithan in the same county. Can this other castle have been at Endovie, where, according to Dawson (*Don*, ed. 1905, p. 17), a fortalice existed?

Built into the west wall of Alford Kirk is a monument of the Balfluig family, which is a fine and eminently characteristic specimen of the taste of its time (fig. 8). The old church, dating from 1603, in which it originally stood, was removed in 1804 to make way for the present building. The central part of the monument is occupied by a plaque, measuring 1 foot 6 inches by 2 feet, and on this is the following inscription:—

—its history seems a complete blank. The existing remains, however, to some extent tell their own story. In the *Old Statistical Account*, dated 1795 (vol. xv. p. 474), the castle is described as “a square building, with a round tower at each of two opposite angles, of which there is one still remaining, though the greater part of the house was pulled down forty years ago. The first storey was all vaulted, and there was a well in one of the vaults; but the towers were a continuation of one vault above another to the roof.” This statement is fully borne out by the ruins at the present day (fig. 9). The solitary tower, at what had been the north-east angle, still stands, and, draped in luxuriant ivy, is now an extremely picturesque object. It had been about 19 feet in diameter, with walls

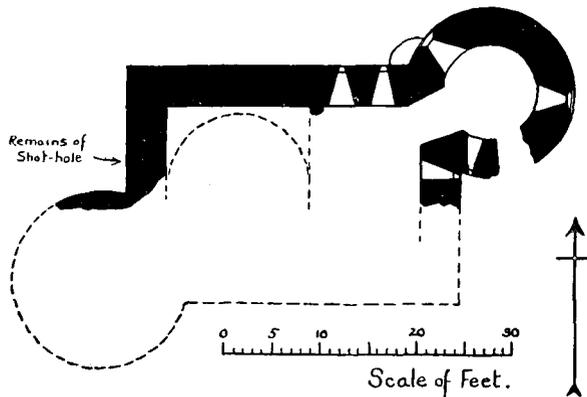


Fig. 9. Asloun Castle: plan of basement.

4 feet thick. On the south side is the doorway, of which one jamb, with a half-engaged roll, and a small portion of the lintel remain: overhead is an empty panel for an inscription or coat of arms. The interior of the tower is much destroyed, but sufficient details exist to show that it contained the main stair, rising to the first floor, above which the building was served by a turret stair whose corbelling is still preserved in the north re-entrant. Over the landing of the main stair was a dome vault, which remains, having a fine cable-moulded sandstone pendant. Above this the tower contained at least two storeys of living-rooms; the lower of these is well enough preserved to indicate that it must have been agreeably appointed, having several small windows and nooks and a garderobe. Beneath the stair, in the basement of the tower, there seems to have been a guardroom, from which open two broad-mouthed shot-holes. The inner walls of the tower show patches of yellow plaster.

Little else of the castle remains except portions of the north and

west walls, and the springing of a vault; but the Z-shaped arrangement of the whole, with the outline of the other tower, may still be discerned. The north wall had been about 29 feet long, the west wall 13 feet. In the former a couple of long loopholes, next the tower, seem to have lit a passage from the entrance to an inner door, one jamb of which, wrought into the wall, partly remains. Despite its poor preservation it is clear that this castle must have been a good specimen of the three-stepped building, and its demolition is greatly to be regretted. What survives is in evil case, choked with filth and rubbish, and overgrown almost completely with ivy, which renders very difficult the examination of its architectural detail. The castle is almost hidden in trees, and, with the little burn of Strow hurrying past to the south, presents an exceedingly romantic appearance.

This castle corresponds closely in structure and dimensions with Rohallion Castle on Birnam Hill, Perthshire, described in *Proceedings*, vol. liv. p. 207, fig. 3.

A charter of excambion between John Forbes of Towie and "John Cowdell de Asslowne," dated 21st July 1563, and confirmed by the Great Seal on 24th June following, is issued from Asloun (*Reg. Magni Sigilli*, 1546-1580, No. 1469).

CULQUHONNY CASTLE

is a meagre ruin in the parish of Strathdon, about 19 miles above Alford. It stands finely on a terrace overlooking the river, between the Newe Arms Hotel and the hall of the Lonach Highland and Friendly Society. All that is known about the castle is that it belonged to the Forbeses of Towie. Tradition bears that it was never finished, and the state of the ruins seems rather to confirm this supposition. The building (fig. 10) is on the L-plan, measuring about 45 feet by 38 feet over its long sides, west and north. The walls are 4 feet 6 inches thick. The doorway occupied the usual position in the wing, but is gone; one jamb of a loophole which had flanked it in the same wall still remains, and there is a long loop in the adjoining face of the main house. From here also the approach is defended by a wide-mouthed shot-hole, which is the only architectural detail that remains in the ruins. There is a small nook for a lamp or keys on the right hand, just within the door. Later, another entrance has been slapped out on the west side. Owing to the greatly ruinous condition to which the castle is now reduced, its interior arrangements are largely obliterated, but the plan of the basement may still be ascertained. From the door a straight passage led through to the spiral stair, about 4 feet 6 inches wide, at the back or north side of the building. In

the basement were three vaulted apartments, of which that at the north end of the main house was the kitchen, with its fireplace in the north wall. Off the south cellar is a curious long vaulted room, about 4 feet broad, which may have been a prison. Above this the main house has entirely perished or was never built, but the first storey

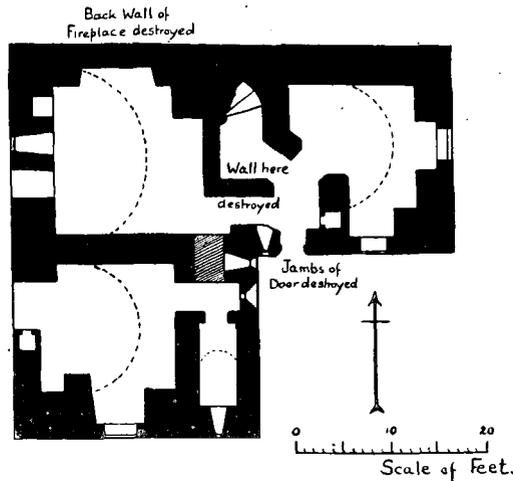


Fig. 10. Culquhunny Castle: plan of basement.

of the wing is still in partial preservation. It contains a vaulted private room, with several windows and mural recesses, and a small fireplace to the east.

This castle is now in a most unfortunate condition. Much of the vaulted basement has fallen, and the interiors, already choked with ruin, are littered with refuse from the adjoining hotel, which almost precludes a detailed examination of the building. The whole is smothered in weeds and grass, and partly hidden by an overhanging mantle of ivy. Although possessed of no historic importance, the castle is still a genuine fragment of old Scottish architecture, and as such is entitled to a better fate.