

## IV.

AN UNDERGROUND PASSAGE AT AUCHENCASS CASTLE,  
DUMFRIESSHIRE. BY H. J. YOUNGER, F.S.A.Scot.

The ruined castle of Auchencass stands in the parish of Kirkpatrick Juxta, about 1 mile north-west of Beattock Station.<sup>1</sup> Its situation is a fine one, on high ground commanding a wide view of Upper Annandale. The castle is a thirteenth-century erection; apparently it was partially

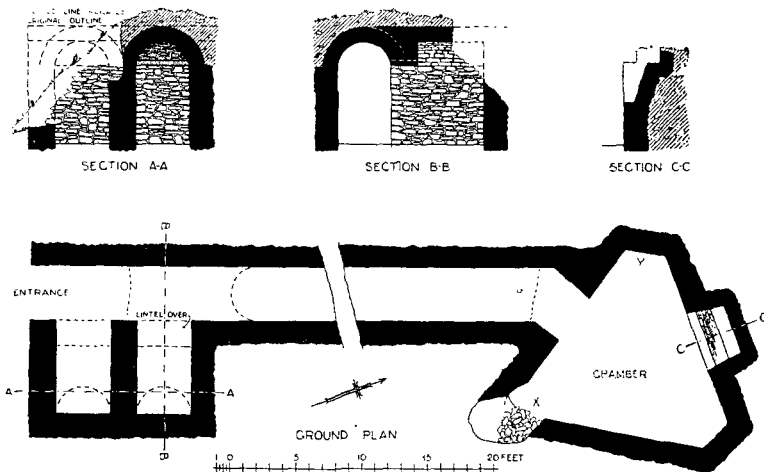


Fig. 1. Plan and Sections of Underground Structure at Auchencass Castle, Dumfriesshire.

demolished during the War of Independence and was rebuilt some time during the fourteenth century.

The underground passage which forms the subject of this paper lies some 70 feet to the east of the moat on the east side of the castle. Its purpose is not readily apparent, and the very curious building at either end of it adds to the mystery. It is hoped that the plan and the description which follows may enable some reasonable conjectures as to its possible use to be formed.

The passage itself is almost intact, but the building at either end is less well preserved. The passage runs almost due north and south, the entrance apparently having been at the southern end. The ground hereabouts slopes down towards the south, with the result that entry can be made directly from the face of the slope, as is shown in the

<sup>1</sup> For a full account of the excavation of the passage and castle of Auchencass see the *Journal of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Antiquarian Society*, 1925-6.

section AA.<sup>1</sup> The dimensions of the passage are 77 feet long by 4 feet wide. The walls are 6 feet 3 inches in height and are of uncoursed random rubble set in mortar. The roof is vaulted, the stones here also being set in lime mortar. The crown of the arch is 18 inches vertically above the top of the walls. The roof is only about a foot below the level of the ground, so it will be recognised that the passage is really a vaulted trench and not an excavated tunnel. The ground slopes down gently from the east side of the moat to the passage, but there is a small though well-defined rise as it passes over the passage. It does not seem, therefore, at the present time as though concealment had been a primary object in the construction of the passage. But it is quite possible that in the course of time the contour of the ground has altered. This is all the more possible since it is of a marshy nature, and it therefore seems reasonable to assume that the passage may originally have been so contrived that the ground above it showed no trace of its existence.

The floor has probably been laid with some sort of paving, but as it is now covered with a considerable amount of debris and is under several inches of water it is not easy to be certain of this. The passage itself, then, has no features which call for special description. It runs perfectly straight until it turns to enter the northern chamber; the walls and vaulted roof are in excellent condition. The height from the floor to the crown of the vault being 7 feet 9 inches, it is obvious that the tallest man could walk along it in comfort.

It is when we come to examine the structures at each end that we find the puzzling features. As will be seen on the plan, there are the remains of two oblong chambers on the east side of the passage at its southern end. They open out of the passage on the same level. The floor measurements of each are 7 by 4 feet and they are divided by a partition wall 2 feet thick. The southern one is somewhat dilapidated and only the ground-work remains, with the exception of the partition wall, which stands to a height of 5 feet or so. The other chamber is, fortunately, in a much better state of preservation. It is vaulted to about the same height as the main passage and at right angles to it. The height of the entrance has been restricted to about 6 feet 3 inches, due to the fact that a lintel has been used here to carry the arch of the main passage at its junction with the chamber. This is indicated by the section at BB, which also shows that a short part of the roof and a portion of the east wall have been demolished. As already mentioned, the section at AA shows how the ground falls away at the southern edge of the passage. It seems

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Mr A. P. Somerville for the plan, etc., here reproduced.

probable that the two chambers were originally of similar dimensions and that the passage extended to the outer wall of the south chamber, in which case the masonry at its entrance would have been exposed.

If we now follow the passage northwards we find that it suddenly turns about forty degrees to the east, and opens out, on the same ground level, into the apartment depicted on the plan. At the present time the floor is littered with stones and is overgrown with grass and rushes. It was also under several inches of water when it was last visited for the purpose of measuring it up. The apartment stands open to the sky, its roof having disappeared together with the last 2 feet of the passage roof. It is assumed that it was originally roofed, since it does not seem logical that access to an unroofed chamber should have been through a well-roofed passage of such a length.

With the exception of the points marked X and Y on the plan, the walls are in good condition. They are of similar construction to the walls of the main passage, *i.e.* uncoursed random rubble set in mortar, and they also rise to a height of 6 feet 3 inches from the floor level. At this height, and continuing round the whole periphery of the chamber, a ledge has been formed about 12 inches wide; and at the back of this ledge a wall again rises to a height of 12 inches, the ground level being about another 12 inches above this. The existence of this ledge might indicate that it was formed for the purpose of carrying a vaulted roof. Such vaulting would be semi-elliptical and would be constructed of three main parts, each of which would spring from one of the three long sides of the chamber. Thus constructed it would perhaps rise to a maximum height of 7 feet 9 inches at the apex—*i.e.* to the maximum height of the main passage. In this way it could have been covered with earth so as to conform roughly to the general ground line. Alternatively the chamber may have been roofed with wood, in which case it is impossible to say what form the roof may have taken, though one would imagine that the apparent secrecy of the passage would require a flat roof to this chamber.

At the corner of the chamber, marked X on the plan, the wall has fallen in for a few feet of its length, but there still remains part of what has been a shallow recess of a curved form. A shaped semicircular stone was found on the site, and as its outer curve practically conformed to that of the recess it seems probable that it belonged there. It is possible that it was part of a chimney and that there was a fireplace in this corner. The raggle on the stone in question suggests that the roof abutted it. The raggle probably contained the lead flashing.

The east wall has no peculiarities, but the north wall shows one curious feature. At about the centre of its length a recess is formed, its

construction being as follows: The wall rises vertically from the floor to a height of 3 feet 3 inches, at which height a ledge 9 inches wide is formed. This is shown in the section at CC. From the back of this ledge the wall rises on a slope to a height of 6 feet 3 inches from the floor—*i.e.* to the height of the wall-head ledge. The depth of the recess at this point is 22 inches from the main wall-face. A ledge, similar in dimensions to the one already described, runs along the back of the recess but not along the sides. The width of the recess is 4 feet 6 inches. It was probably used in conjunction with a window or hatch at a higher level.

On the short length of wall marked Y on the plan only the wall-head ledge, with a few courses of stone below, remain intact. From the floor to a height of 5 feet or so the wall has been demolished and the masonry above has been shored up with a wood lintel of recent construction. This is the work of some earlier investigator, who has evidently determined to find out whether there were any signs of a communicating way with the castle at this point. Nothing, however, is revealed behind the wall save the natural soil undisturbed in any way. If there had been communication with the castle this would seem to be the likeliest place to look for signs of it. Nowhere else in the passage or chambers does the masonry show any signs indicating the possibility of a secret entrance, and it may be added that within the castle itself no traces have been found of the beginnings of any subterranean passage. It seems, therefore, that we must discard the theory of a communicating way, and the problem of the purpose of the passage is thereby made much more difficult. In their survey of Dumfriesshire, the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments hint that the passage may have been used as a sally port. It hardly seems likely that this can have been the case, for two principal reasons. One is that, as has just been explained, it is almost certain that there is no communication between passage and castle. The second is that the passage is tactically unsuited, both in its construction and position, for such a purpose.

It is easy enough to offer destructive criticism of suggestions put forward in this problem; the difficulty is to present any suggestions which can be upheld with the slightest degree of confidence. The whole problem is extremely baffling, and it is greatly to be hoped that someone will be able to shed light on it. Whoever does so will earn the gratitude of many antiquaries and others who have puzzled in vain over the Auchencass passage.

Since writing the above, Mr Richardson, the Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Scotland, visited the site with me. He considers the structure to be of eighteenth-century date, but refrains from making any suggestion as to its use.