

VII.

THE EXCAVATION OF ESSLEMONT CASTLE, ABERDEENSHIRE.

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The manor of Esslemont lies on the northern margin of the ancient Thanage of Formartine, along the right or south bank of the Ythan, opposite and a little above the town of Ellon, in mediæval times the capital of Buchan. In the fourteenth century the manor belonged to a family surnamed Mareschal, from whom it passed by marriage to the Cheynes of Straloch. In 1493 the original castle was destroyed in the course of a bitter and protracted feud between the Cheynes of Esslemont and the Hays of Ardendracht; and on 22nd June in that year the Lords of Council ordained that William Hay should pay to Henry Cheyne of Esslemont and John his son, "for the dampnage and scatht sustenit be thaim in the destructioun of the Place of Essilmont, xx pundis." ¹ This was followed by a royal licence, issued on 27th July 1500, authorising John Cheyne and his heirs "to big apoun his landis of Essilmont a toure and fortalice quhair he or thai thinkis mayst expedient, and to raiss the samyn to quhat hicht thai empleissis, and thair-uppon to mak bertasing, battaling, machevling, irne yettis, portculais, draubriggis, fowssis, and all other defens and strenchtis as thai think mayst ganyng and conuenient thairto; and for thê keeping thairof to haue watchmen, garitouris, portaris, jevillours and all vthir officiaris neidfull." ² During the Reformation troubles the manor passed from the Cheyne family, and later became the property of George Jamesone (1588-1644), the famous painter. In 1646 the castle was occupied by a party of Covenanters, but some of the Royalist garrison of Fyvie, under Captain Blackater, descended on Esslemont and drove them out, killing "thirtie sex of them, and brought away ther horses and armes, with such other stufe as they had." ³ The Earls of Erroll, who had acquired the estate after Jamesone's death, sold it early in the eighteenth century to James Gordon of Ellon, who in turn disposed of it, in 1728, to Robert Gordon of Hallhead, in the hands of whose descendants it has since remained. The modern House of Esslemont, which lies about half a mile north of the ancient castle, was erected in 1799 and rebuilt in 1866.

Before the excavations now to be described, there was visible on the site only the ruin of a small castellated mansion, dating from the later sixteenth

¹ *Collections on the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, p. 304.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 317-8.

³ Patrick Gordon, *Britane's Distemper*, p. 176.

century, and standing on the east side of an enclosure bounded by a fosse—the whole area being covered by a plantation of beech and ash trees. This castellated mansion¹ is built upon a variety of the common L-plan, with a square staircase in the re-entrant angle, and a large round tower, corbelled out to the square above, at the diagonally opposite corner. Internally the house is now a complete wreck, and only the vaulted basement of the round tower survives intact. The large kitchen fire-place is still traceable in the north gable of the main building. The house was three storeys in height, having the hall on the first floor of the main building, with the laird's room in the west wing, and bed-chambers in the round tower. On the latter the corbelling is so managed that the square cap-house does not form a tangent to the circle below, but intersects it. This mannerism points to a date *circa* 1570–90.² Almost without exception, the dressed stones of the building have been torn out. It has been put into a state of thorough repair by the late proprietor.

The recorded history of the site, coupled with the fact that the present ruin, obviously a late structure, is built right on the edge of the fosse, made it likely that the remains of an older castle might lie buried in the heart of the plantation. In the autumn of 1937, the late Captain Wolrige Gordon of Esslemont, with a view to re-planting, cut down the trees—most of which were found to be about 130 years old—and cleared the site of undergrowth and rubbish. It then became obvious that the foundations of a considerable building existed immediately to the north-west of the existing ruin; and Captain Wolrige Gordon readily gave me permission to conduct investigations, the funds for which were generously provided by grants from this Society and from the Natural History and Antiquarian Society of Aberdeen.

Favoured by brilliant weather, the work of digging was carried out in February and March 1938. It revealed (see Plan, fig. 1) the stump of a strong and massive tower-house on the L-plan, measuring about 55 feet by 42 feet over the two long sides, with walls 6 or 7 feet thick, and, where best preserved, remaining to a height of about 6 feet. These walls are built of uncoursed granite rubble, with grouted hearting, and rise from a weathered plinth or offset, 9 inches high on the slope, most beautifully executed in finely dressed pink granite. The entrance, which has perished, was in the re-entrant angle, and admitted to a small vestibule, with the main stair on the left hand. The basement has contained three compartments, of which the eastern was evidently the kitchen, as appears by its slop drain. A part of the haunch of the north-west cellar vault still remains, springing at a height of 4 feet 9 inches. The southern cellar is roughly paved, and has a well-preserved service stair to the screens end of the hall, which evidently

¹ See D. MacGibbon and T. Ross, *Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, vol. iii. pp. 603–4.

² For example, it is found at the neighbouring Tolquhon Castle, 1584–9; on Waterton's Lodging, 1574, at Dunnottar Castle; and at Drochil Castle, left unfinished by the Regent Morton at his execution in 1581.

occupied the western or main portion of the tower-house, with the solar in the wing, above the kitchen—a common position, which would ensure it warmth. The service stair is in granite and of the ancient type, without an offset where the risers join the newel. The cellars are lit by narrow loop-holes, opening from wide internal bays. An unusual feature is a second service stair, ascending from the kitchen, and so placed as to supply, with equal convenience, the hall and solar. This stair is connected with the southern cellar by a passage, which has some appearance of having been forced; and as there is a door between the two cellars, all three apartments were thus in communication with each other, and with the upper floors, independently of the main stair. Where preserved, the moulding on the door jambs is a 3-inch chamfer, carefully wrought in granite. One loose granite stone shows the springer of a trilateral headed doorway, moulded with a cavetto sunk in a $4\frac{1}{2}$ -inch chamfer. But the finest architectural fragment found in the ruins of the tower-house was the handsome capital, in pink granite, shown in the sketch, fig. 1. Doubtless it came from a jamb of the hall fire-place.

Remains of an enclosure, as shown on plan, with thin walls of *petit appareil*, were found to the south of the tower-house. This enclosure is probably coeval with the later mansion.

On the scarp of the fosse there has been a curtain wall, 4 feet thick, with an external heel or footing, bringing it up to a total basal thickness of 8 feet. It is possible that this basal portion may be the remnant of an older and thicker curtain. At the two west corners of this *enceinte* are round towers, about 19 feet in basal diameter, with a three-quarter salient and diagonal gorge walls. The north-west tower has a rectangular interior, entered by a gable-checked door in the gorge wall. The remains of a third round tower, much distorted by tree roots, were found at the north-east corner of the *enceinte*; and as the old curtain runs under the east corner of the sixteenth-century mansion it is possible that the round tower of the latter may be built upon the foundations of a fourth angle tower of the older *enceinte*. The true profile of the fosse (see section, fig. 1) was recovered in a cross-cut on the west side.

Attached to the north wall of the later mansion there is an enclosure, and a cross wall runs in from the north curtain towards the tower-house.

Traces of fire were abundantly present in and around the tower-house. The only relics found were a few fragments of fourteenth- or fifteenth-century pottery—handles, rims and body pieces of green-glazed pitchers, showing the usual leaf-shaped depressions where the handle met the vessel, and one portion of a base glazed on the inside, and devoid of crinkling or pinched-down feet; a sherd with a foliaceous band from which a leafy sprig depends, and a medallion containing the head of a jester in cap and bells; and a much-worn shilling of William III. From the deeper

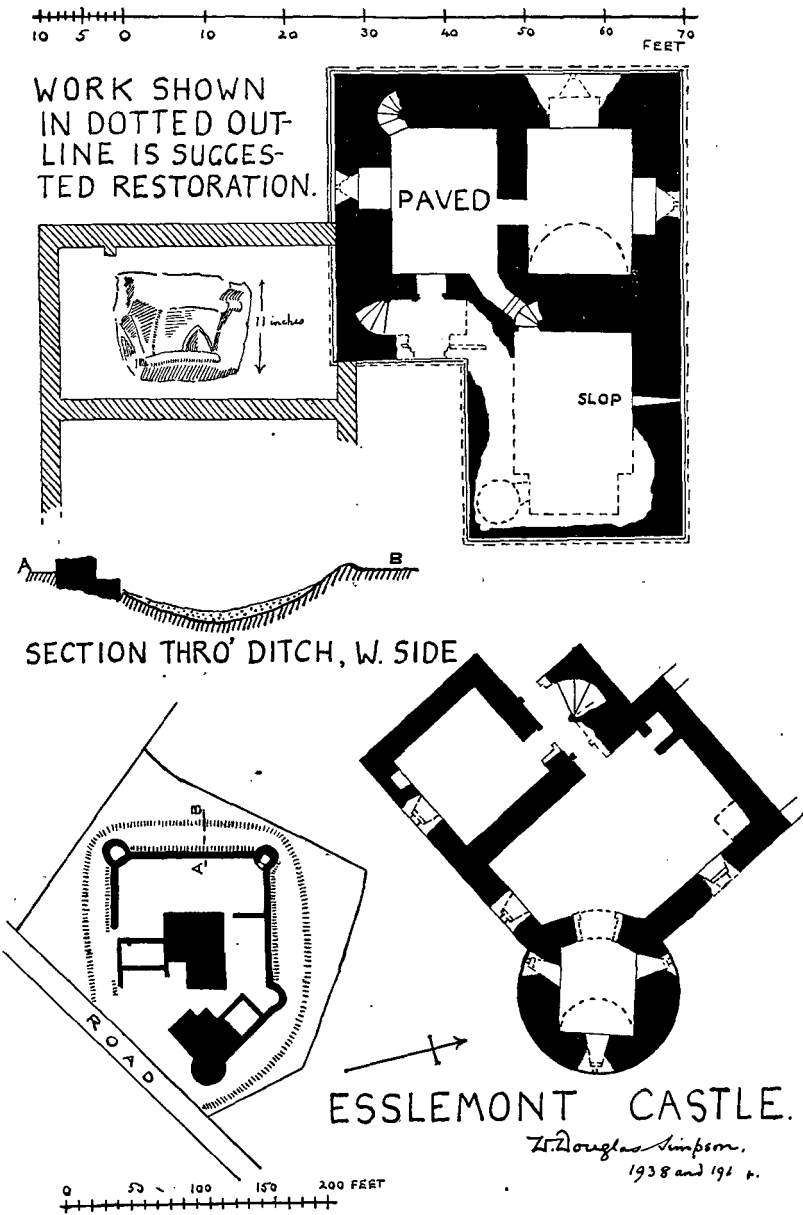


Fig. 1. Esslemont Castle: plan showing results of excavation.

levels of the site a number of animal bones were collected. These were submitted to the Natural History Department of Aberdeen University: but by a sad mischance they were destroyed, in the course of a clearance in the laboratories, before they had been examined.

The plan and details of the tower-house, the style of its rubble masonry, and above all the use of finely tooled granite instead of freestone for its dressings, combine to suggest that it dates from the first half of the fifteenth century. Its affinities are clearly with the "granite interregnum"¹ in Aberdeen, which gave us the nave of St Machar's Cathedral (1424-40) and the "Pity Vault" in the Town's Kirk, built *circa* 1438. The base course of our tower-house strongly resembles in profile the offsets on the cathedral buttresses, and its rubble masonry approximates closely to that in the interior of the nave. This tower-house was no doubt the "Place" destroyed by the Hays in 1493: of that destruction the traces of fire probably are a memorial. The licence to build a new fortalice, issued in 1500, was obviously not at once acted upon, as the second building dates from near the end of that century. No doubt the ruins of the older castle would serve as a quarry for its successor: indeed one or two of its dressed stones may still be seen in the latter.

On the documentary evidence alone, it might be contended that the building erected pursuant to the licence of 1500 was the tower-house. In that case the "Place of Esslemont" destroyed in 1493 would doubtless have been a less substantial edifice—of timber, perhaps, or of wattle and clay. But apart altogether from the chronological implications of the granite ashlar, such a view would leave unexplained the traces of a conflagration found all over the tower-house, and would require us to believe that so massive and durable a structure, after no more than three-quarters of a century's existence, was deliberately pulled down to the ground in order to give place to the existing mansion.

The rectangular curtain wall with its round towers, enclosing the central structure, recalls that at Threave Castle; and, still more closely, the *murus mantelinus* which, now absorbed into a seventeenth-century mansion, encloses the massive L-shaped tower-house, dating from prior to 1453, that forms the nucleus of Hatton House in Midlothian. The fosse may be older than the stone buildings it encloses, and perhaps reaches back to the time of the Mareschals. Unlike the usual Anglo-Norman arrangement, the manorial chapel did not, in this case, closely adjoin the capital messuage. It stood at Chapelton, a good mile to the south. Here, says a writer of *circa* 1725, "there are the ruins of ane chapell, but nothing remarkable about it."²

¹ See Dr W. Kelly, "Architecture in Aberdeen: a Survey," in *British Association, Report of Meeting, 1934, Scientific Survey of Aberdeen and District*, pp. 58-9.

² *Collections, ut supra*, p. 308.

NOTE ON THE CHEYNES OF ESSELMONT. By FRANCIS G. GRANT,
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The estate of Esslemont was possessed by the Marshall family, which came to an heiress Janet who married as second wife Sir Reginald Cheyne, 7th of the name. She was probably the daughter of William Marshall of Esslemont. On account of this marriage the Cheynes have since quartered the Marshall arms with their own. Sir Reginald was the great-great-grandfather of Sir Patrick Cheyne of Esslemont and Elizabeth Annand. He was the father of Thomas of Esslemont and Jerome minister of Tingwall and Archdeacon of Shetland who died 1584. The latter had secured the Archdeaconry lands in Shetland, which he made over to his nephew Patrick of Esslemont, who had a charter of same under the Great Seal on 23rd March 1588 in consideration of his zeal in propagating the gospel. The family thereafter settled in Shetland and were ancestors of several families of the name, viz. Cheyne of Vaila and of Tangwich, most of whom had to part with their estates, and on 5th April 1733 George Cheyne of Esslemont had become so reduced in circumstances that he appeared before the Kirk Session of Tingwall in great distress asking for charitable supply, and was granted a crown out of that day's collection.

NOTE ON A SHERD FROM ESSELMONT CASTLE.

By J. S. RICHARDSON, F.S.A.Scot., Curator of the Museum.

The fragment of brown stoneware bears distinctive patterns which indicate that it was made either at Cologne, or at the neighbouring potteries at Frechan. The stamped portrait medallion is of the Early Classic Renaissance type and no doubt owes its origin to inspiration from Flanders, where this form of medallion occurs frequently in wood panels.

The leaf-and-stem band ornament also indicates the Cologne tradition borrowed from Flanders.

The vessel, of which the sherd has formed part, was manufactured towards the second half of the sixteenth century.