

Two early medieval timber buildings from Castle Hill, Peebles
Hilary Murray and Gordon Ewart*

The site of the royal castle of Peebles lies upon Castle Hill, behind the Old Parish Church at the W end of the High Street (NGR NT 248803). The castle occupied a fine defensive position

* c/o Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments), 17 Atholl Crescent, Edinburgh

on the promontory formed at the confluence of the Eddleston Water and the River Tweed. The site today is marked by a steep-sided gravel mound, with a flat summit measuring 22 m from N to S by 35 m transversely, although it originally extended further E (fig 1 & pl 35c).

The known history of Peebles Castle is vague and it does not appear to have figured prominently in Scottish affairs. The castle certainly existed by 1152-3 when David I instituted a perpetual chantry in the castle chapel for the soul of his son, Early Henry, who died there in

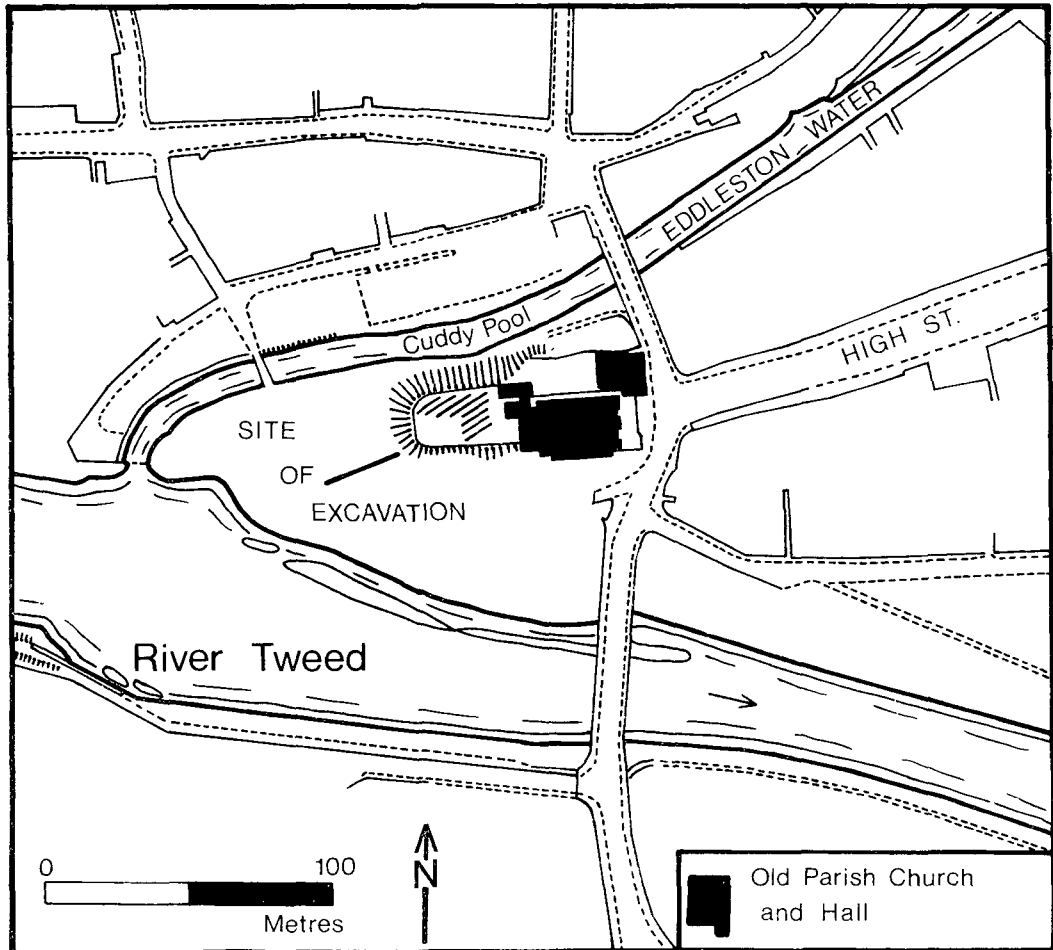


FIG 1 Peebles Castle Hill showing the site of the excavation

June 1152. Peebles had previously gained burgh status earlier in David's reign and it is likely that the castle was built at that time.

The castle probably played a small part during Edward I's campaigns during the early 14th century and may even have been destroyed during this period, for by the middle of that century it was no longer a military stronghold. This fact is indicated by the notable omission of any reference to the castle along with 'the town and county of Peebles' which were ceded with various other towns, castles and counties to Edward III by Edward Baliol in 1334. Furthermore the grant of ten shillings to the chapel of Peebles Castle is not recorded after 1327. Castle Hill

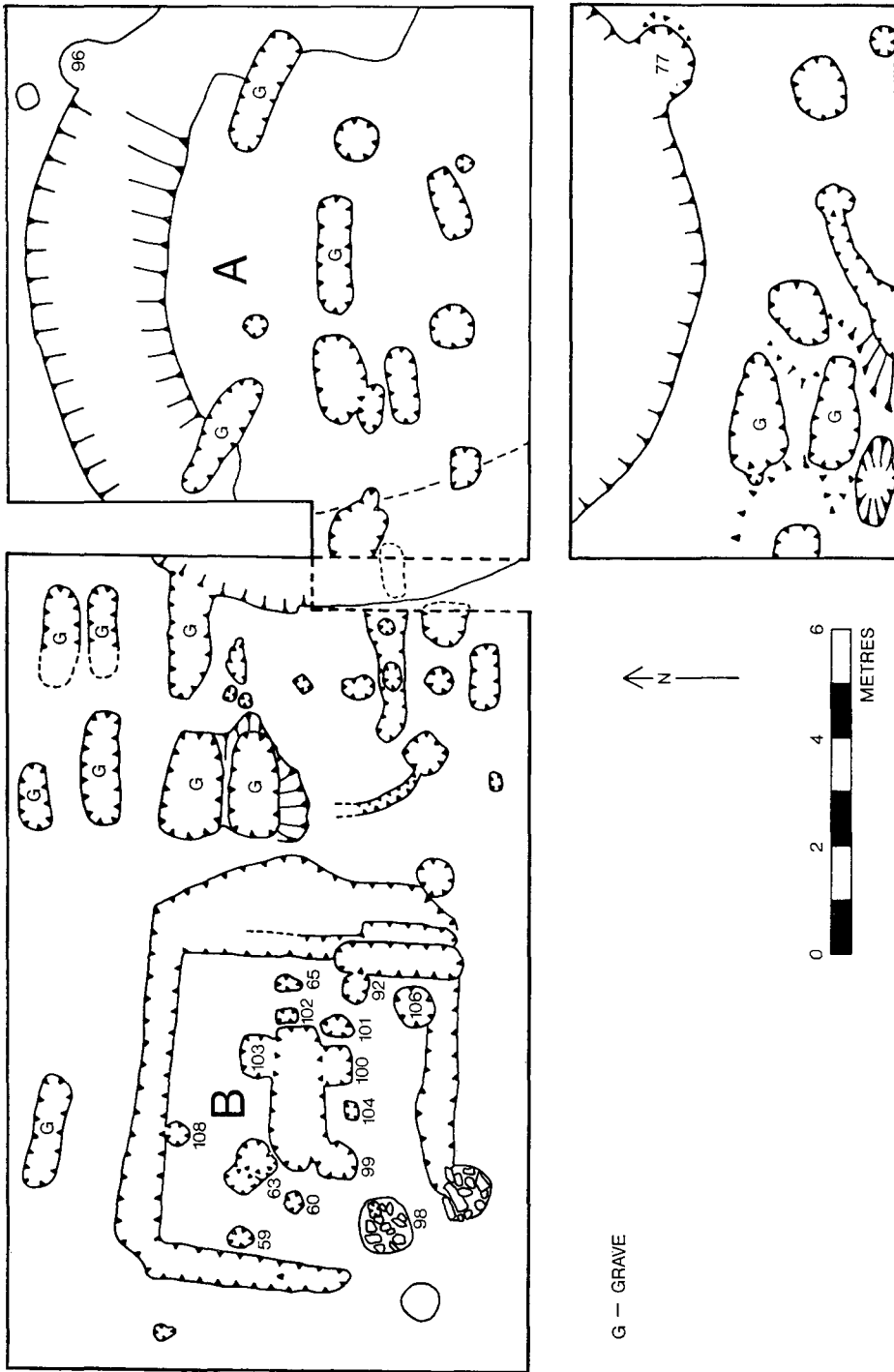


FIG 2 Peebles Castle Hill: plan showing trench layout and buildings A and B

became the property of the town during the 15th century and ultimately was used as a bowling green.

An excavation was conducted by Mr C Miller over two phases towards the end of 1977 in advance of the projected building of a new church hall. At the time of writing this report, the bulk of the excavation records were not available to the writers. This material amounted to the notebooks, most of the photographs and plans. However it was felt that the report on the two timber structures merited publication.

The excavation uncovered a total of 294 sq m of the mound summit (about half of the total area). Three broad phases of occupation were defined: evidence of the bowling green period (early 18th century) and two series of medieval deposits – one a 14th-century occupation sealing the 12th-century timber buildings. After its demise as a stronghold, the castle was extensively robbed and the site cleared of standing structures, leaving only a short stretch of wall, an area of cobbling and a series of graves to represent the latter stages of its occupation. Seven of the graves appeared to be associated with the walling and it may be that these features are all that remained of the chapel. The graves themselves contained very little, such was the nature of the soil (only the remains of three individuals were found). The artefacts recovered (pottery sherds and animal bone) were confined entirely to the upper, disturbed levels and are, therefore, of little consequence.

The earliest phase of occupation is represented by two timber buildings which bear no apparent relationship to the features above them and so probably represent an entirely separate building plan (fig 2).

CIRCULAR BUILDING A

Plan. Roughly circular, with an irregular internal outline which has an angled NE corner. A break in the wall gully on the E side may have been an entrance.

Dimensions. c 12.40 m external diameter.

c 7.20–7.80 m internal diameter.

Wall Structure. The structure was delimited by a gully c 2.60 m wide with post-pits abutting its outer edge at the NE and SE points of the circumference. The gully was deepest along its outer edge where it was 320–550 mm deep with a nearly vertical side. The bottom of the gully gradually sloped up towards the interior of the structure where it had a maximum depth of 160–230 mm. On the W side, the inner edge of the gully appears to have been even shallower. In section there was some evidence of primary silting which had spread from the interior of the structure, reaching only to the middle of the gully. The upper fills were a series of silts and gravels sloping in from the outer edge.

Post-pits. NE (96): 0.04 m by 0.60 m. 0.43 m maximum depth.

SE (77): 1.30 m by 0.92 m. 0.60 m maximum depth.

No corresponding posts were found to the NW and SW, but the relevant area to the NW had been cut by a later grave.

Internal Details. A total of six post-holes were found inside the building but, due to the shallow stratigraphy, it was not possible to relate these firmly to the circular building and they may belong to a structure represented by a series of post-holes between the two excavated buildings.

Interpretation. One of the main problems of this structure is to determine the wall material. The width of the gully might suggest a stone wall, but its shallow irregular profile makes this extremely unlikely, particularly in the absence of the rubble which would tend to remain even

if the wall had been demolished. Clay or turf walls are rarely of this thickness and are not usually built in a foundation gully. Some type of wooden construction appears therefore to be the most probable. As the circular plan precludes the use of a sill-beam construction, the most likely solution appears to be a wall of vertical timbers set against the outer edge of the gully. This is partially confirmed by the primary silting which stopped at the middle of the gully. There was no evidence to show if the timbers were round posts or squared planks; in either case the size of the gully suggests a fairly massive construction. The extreme width of the gully and the irregular shallow inner slope are difficult to understand but they may have derived from the method used to raise or demolish the wall.

The second structural problem concerns the post-pits. Only two were found. It is possible that there were originally four at the NE, NW, SE and SW points of the circumference but the SW end was fully excavated without finding any sign of a post-pit. Posts of the size indicated by the post-pits could have carried a considerable weight and they may have been the main supports of a roof or some other superstructure. There was no evidence of the way in which they were related to the main wall, but they appear to have been contiguous, if not necessarily joined to it.

Discussion. The evidence suggests a circular building c 12 m in external diameter with a wall of large vertical timbers and a roof or superstructure supported partly by the wall and partly by two or more massive 'corner' posts on the outer line of the wall. There was no internal evidence to suggest the function of the building so interpretation depends totally on the structure and its context on the site.

In the medieval period circular buildings appear to have been rare and generally specialised in function. Possibilities include towers, dovecotes and industrial structures such as windmills. Most of the towers excavated on mottes appear, however, to be small and rectangular in plan. The 12th-century tower at Abinger, Surrey (Hope-Taylor 1950, fig 6) was nearly square in plan, 3.80 m by 3.40 m, outlined by post-pits with large corner post-pits. An 11th-century rectangular timber tower, 5.60 m by 5.20 m, was excavated at Hoverburg, Rhineland, (Herrnbrödt 1964, fig 9) and a 12th-century stone tower 4.20 m by 3.70 m was found at Kontich, Belgium (Borremans 1964, 13, fig 2). A closer parallel for the size is a circular stone tower excavated at Bümpliz, near Bern (Meyer 1975, 161, fig 1.2) which was c 10 m in external diameter with a stone wall c 2 m thick. If the interpretation of the structure at Barton Hill, Perthshire (Stewart & Tabraham 1974, 58, fig 1) as a timber tower house is correct, this would appear to be roughly contemporary and, although the actual form of the structure is dissimilar, it does give a local parallel for a tower structure at this date.

The large size of the building makes it unlikely to have been a dovecote. A dovecote excavated at Newstead, Yorkshire for example, was only c 4 m in internal diameter (Le Patourel 1973, fig 24).

Another possibility was that it was some sort of industrial structure such as a windmill. Although watermills were the more usual in Scotland, windmills were fairly common. The general dating of windmills in Scotland appears to lie between the mid-15th and 19th centuries (Donnachie & Stewart 1965, 277) although Duncan (1975, 351) quotes an earlier 13th-century reference to a windmill which is mentioned in the correspondence of Coldingham Priory. Further, there is a reference in a Charter of James IV, 1506, to 'the mill now constructed and built upon the site of our castlehill of Peebles' (Buchan 1925, 14-15). Buchan suggests, however, that this refers to a watermill mentioned in 1461 as 'our myl and myllingis, standand under the Castlehill under the suth syd of the said hill' (Buchan 1925, 15), and suggests that this was the Rood mill. It is therefore possible but unlikely that the 1506 reference meant a windmill on the top of the hill. The structural

evidence is interesting. The earliest type of windmill is the post-mill in which the body turns on a central post held over a pair of cross-beams. In England the cross-beams originally lay on or in the ground but later the ends of the cross-beams lay on four piers. If there were originally four posts in the Peebles structure they could be interpreted in this way. The diameter is, however, larger than is usual for a post mill (cf Bourn Mill, Cambridgeshire: Brown 1976, 50-1), and it would seem unlikely that a wall should be built around the base inside the piers, rather than outside them where it would protect the timbers.

In summary, on the basis of the structural evidence this building appears most likely to be some sort of tower.

RECTANGULAR BUILDING B.

Plan. Rectangular, with an entrance 2.24 m wide in the SW corner.

Dimensions. 5.40-5.64 m by 4.68-4.72 m.

Wall Structure. The walls were defined by wall gullies 500-640 mm wide and 100-150 mm deep (with the exception of the NW corner which was 830 mm wide).

Internal Details. A total of 14 post-holes was found inside this structure. One of them (106) cuts the wall gully and is therefore later.

Post-hole	Size	Depth
59	400 × 440 mm	200 mm
60	330 × 400 mm	200 mm
63	2 conjoined	400 × 550 mm
	post-holes	600 × 700 mm
65		450 mm
66	300 × 500 mm	260 mm
92	450 × 550 mm	-
98	180 × 250 mm	-
99	600 × 700 mm	-
100	580 × 700 mm	400 mm
101	400 × 640 mm	350 mm
102	300 × 350 mm	150 mm
103	650 × 800 mm	-
104	250 × 350 mm	160 mm
106	670 × 750 mm	550 mm
108	400 mm diam	280 mm

The four main post-pits (63, 99, 100, 103) were regularly placed 1.60 m from the inner edges of the N and S wall gullies and 1.80-1.96 m from the inner edges of the E and W wall gullies. The distance between the N and S post-pits is also 1.50-1.60 m but it is c 1.90 m between the E and W pairs of post-pits (all measurements to centres of post-pits). The double post-pit (63) may indicate that this post had to be replaced or the outer of the pair may be an unrelated feature. It is more difficult to relate the other post-holes. The lack of stratigraphy means that none of these relationships are proven although the position of the four main post-pits in relation to the wall gully makes it almost certain that these belonged to the structure.

Interpretation. Wall gullies can hold vertical posts or timbers with an infill of planks or wattle, or horizontal sill-beams with mortised uprights, staves or wattle set into the sill. In Aberdeen (Murray forthcoming), gullies 100-150 mm deep were used for several post-and-wattle walls. It is often assumed that shallower gullies indicate the use of a sill-beam and that deeper gullies held vertical posts of planks. Fairly shallow gullies can, however, hold vertical timbers.

The 9th- or 10th-century building S11 at Portchester Castle (Cunliffe 1976, 29–32, fig 20) had gullies 460–610 mm wide but only 200 mm deep which held traces of substantial wall timbers c 310 mm by 150–230 mm. Wattle-impressed daub in the building gives an indication of the possible superstructure. Another Portchester Castle building S7 (Cunliffe 1976, 24–5, fig 17) had a similar wall gully but no traces of planking and was interpreted as having held a sill-beam, but there was no clear evidence of this. Sill-beam construction was common from the late Saxon period. Most of the early medieval examples, eg Weoley Castle kitchen (Oswald 1963, 112–22, fig 41) or The Husterknupp (Herrnbrudt 1958, fig 12, 31, 33), appear to have used sills set on the ground surface between earth fast corner and intermediate posts. Lacking more exact evidence, it would, therefore, be equally possible to interpret the Peebles building as having had either a sill-beam construction or a wall of earthfast planks or larger posts with a wood or wattle infill.

A second feature of the Peebles building is the lack of importance placed on the corners of the wall. The NW corner appears too irregular to have been very strong and the SW corner appears to have been a rather wide entrance. Similar disconnected gullies occurred in the two Portchester Castle buildings referred to above. It is also clear in the plan of building P at Cheddar (Rahtz 1963, 61, fig 23) which had a wall constructed of posts set in the gully.

The posts which must have held the greater part of the roof weight appear to have stood in the four large internal post-pits (63, 99, 100, 103), which could have held posts of up to 600 mm in diameter. If the shape of post-pit 100 is correct, the posts may have been squared. The smaller post-holes 65, 92, 101, 102 may have held posts related to the building but are out of line with the four main posts and do not seem to be a main part of the roof structure. The spacing of the four posts, which have a gap between the pairs of posts roughly equal to the distance between the posts and the wall, does not belong to the aisled building tradition in which the central aisle is fairly regularly twice the width of the side aisles. The 13th-century kitchen at Weoley Castle was a much larger structure than the Peebles building, but the position of the roof posts in relation to the walls and the very narrow central aisle are similar. Smith (1965) suggested two alternative reconstructions of this structure, one as an aisled hall with the internal posts higher than the wall-plates, the other with the internal posts of the same height as the outer wall and long tie-beams overlapping the internal posts and joined to the wall-plates. Both reconstructions used king-post roofs. Interestingly the side-aisles at Weoley Castle kitchen are c 1.68–1.98 m wide, though the central aisle of c 2.66 m is wider than the width between the pairs of posts at Peebles. It would be possible to use a reconstruction for the Peebles building similar to Weoley, with the four posts higher than the walls, tie-beams over the pairs of posts and plates over these and a king-post construction over the centre of the building with rafters between the plate and wall. This construction appears a little elaborate for such a small central area but the king-post has the advantage of putting the greatest possible amount of the roof weight on the posts rather than the wall. The choice of a king-post construction is supported by the fact that it appears to have been a northern roof type (Smith 1975, 70, fig 15). One of the few surviving medieval roofs in Scotland, the 15th-century roof of Holy Rood Church, Stirling, includes king-post construction (Hay 1976, 29). The indications are that it would have been known in Scotland in the 13th and 14th centuries, but, lacking standing examples or contemporary illustrations, this must remain speculative.

An alternative parallel is a building dated AD 1050 ± 120 which was excavated at White Fort, Co Down (Waterman 1956, 76–9, fig 4). The structure, which was 5.50 m by 5.20 m, had four internal posts and although they were near the face of the mud wall, the excavator has suggested that the inner 600–900 mm of this exceptionally wide mud wall was a bench, in which case the distances between the wall and roof-posts would be more comparable to those in the

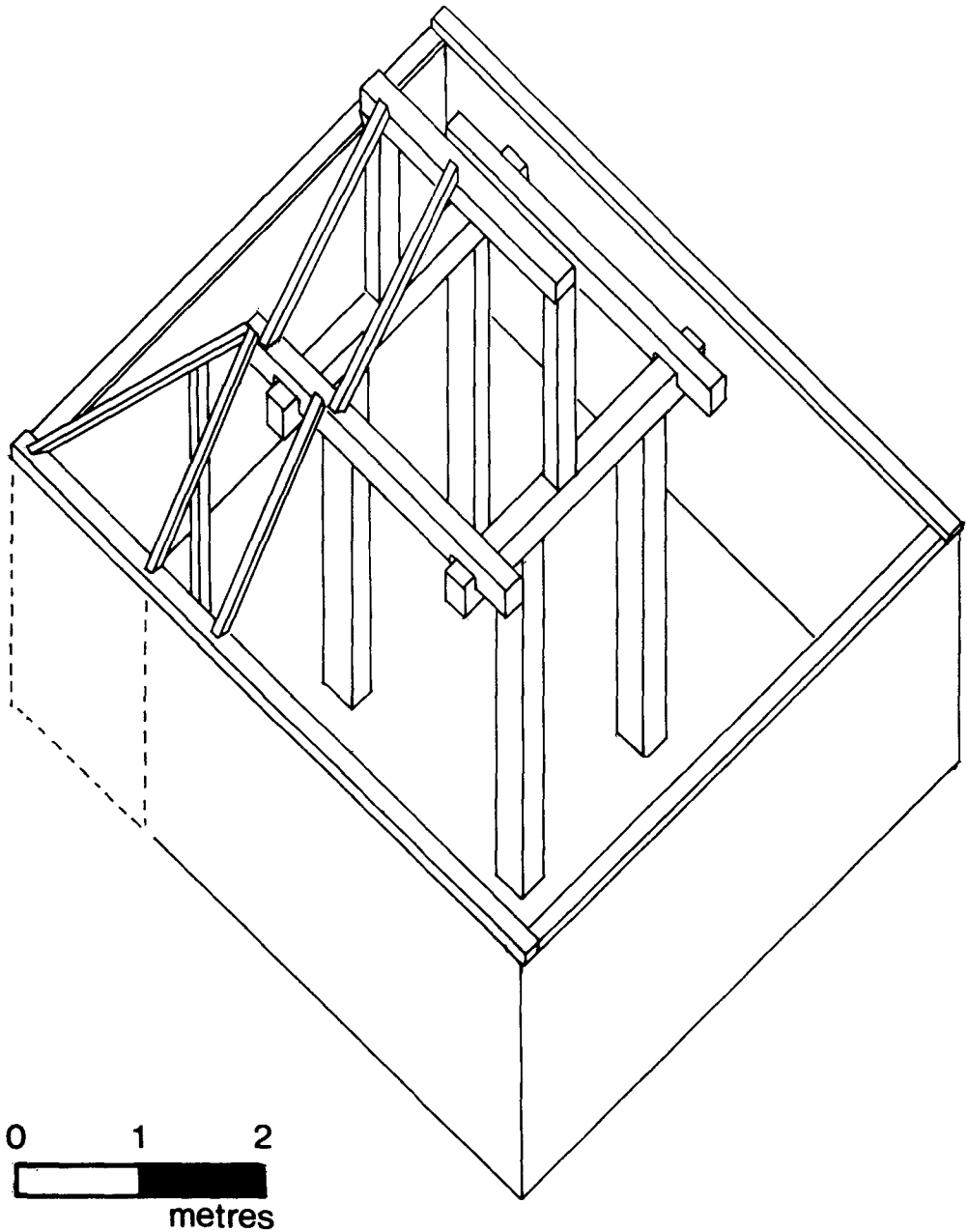


FIG 3 Peebles Castle Hill: hypothetical reconstruction of building B

Peebles building. White Fort was reconstructed with a high clearstory built on the four posts and a lower roof pitch over the area between the posts and wall. One feature of this reconstruction which could be used in the Peebles building is the lower pitch of the rafters between the posts and wall. This can be achieved by lowering the height of the roof posts slightly and has the advantage of further reducing the pressure on the wall.

In any reconstruction of the Peebles building, the SW corner poses a considerable problem. Possibly the ends of the rafters could have been supported on the top of wall-plates extending over the apparently open corner. Post-hole 98 could have held a post which helped to support a corner rafter.

Discussion. There was no structural or internal evidence of the function of this building. The apparently very wide entrance and small size suggest that it was not a major building.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors are indebted to Miss Alison McIntyre and Mr Christopher Tabraham for their help in assembling this paper; and their gratitude also extends to those who assisted on the excavation – Mr C Bowman, Mr G E L Gueritz, Mr J H Lewis and Mr D C Stewart. Special thanks must be given to the minister, the Rev David C MacFarlane and the Kirk Session of the Old Parish Church of Peebles, without whose help the excavation could not have been mounted.

REFERENCES

- Buchan, J W 1925 *A History of Peeblesshire, vol ii*. Glasgow.
- Borremans, A 1964 'Fouille d'une motte féodale à Kontich (prov d'Ancers, Belgique)', *Chateau Galliard*, 1 (1964), 9–20.
- Brown, R J 1976 *Windmills of England*. London.
- Cunliffe, B 1976 *Excavations at Portchester Castle, volume ii: Saxon*. Rep Res Comm Soc Antiq London, 33.
- Donnachie, I L & Stewart, N K 1965 'Scottish Windmills: an Outline and Inventory', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 98 (1964–5), 276–99.
- Duncan, A A M 1975 *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom*. Edinburgh.
- Hay, G D 1976 'Some aspects of timber construction in Scotland', in *Building Construction in Scotland: Some Historical and Regional Aspects*, Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group, 1976, 28–38.
- Herrnbrodt, A 1958 *Der Husterknupp. Beihefte Bonner Jahrbch*, 6, 1958.
- Herrnbrodt, A 1964 'Stand der frühmittelalterlichen Mottenforschung in Rheinland', *Chateau Galliard*, 1 (1964), 77–100.
- Hope-Taylor, B 1950 'The Excavation of a Motte at Abinger in Surrey', *Archaeol J*, 107 (1950), 15–43.
- Le Patourel, J H E 1973 *The Moated Sites of Yorkshire. Medieval Archaeol Monogr Ser*, 5.
- Meyer, W 1975 'Das "Alte Schloss" von Bumpliz ein mittelalterlicher Adelsitz', *Chateau Galliard*, 7 (1975), 159–72.
- Murray, C (ed) forthcoming *Aberdeen Excavations*.
- Oswald, A 1963 'Excavations of a Thirteenth-Century Wooden Building at Weoley Castle, Birmingham, 1960–61', *Medieval Archaeol*, 6–7 (1962–63), 109–34.
- Rahtz, P 1963 'The Saxon and medieval palaces at Cheddar, Somerset – an interim report on excavations in 1960–62', *Medieval Archaeol*, 6–7 (1962–63), 53–66.
- Smith, J T 1965 'The Structure of the timber kitchen at Weoley Castle, Birmingham', *Medieval Archaeol*, 9 (1965), 82–93.
- Smith, J T 1975 'Medieval Roofs: A classification', in Swanton, M J (ed), *Studies in Medieval Domestic Architecture. Roy Archaeol Inst Monogr*, 1975, 45–83.
- Stewart, M E C & Tabraham, C J 1974 'Excavations at Barton Hill, Kinnaird, Perthshire', *Scot Archaeol Forum*, 6 (1974), 58–65.
- Waterman, D M 1956 'The Excavation of a house and souterrain at White Fort, Drumaroad, Co Down', *Ulster J Archaeol*, 3 ser, 19 (1956), 73–86.

The Society is indebted to the Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments) for a grant towards the cost of publishing this paper



a Food vessel urn sherd: Vessel B (scale in millimetres)



b Food vessel urn sherd: Vessel B interior (scale in millimetres)



c Peebles Castle Hill: aerial view of Peebles from the W with Castle Hill at the confluence of the Eddleston Water and the River Tweed