

Excavation at Auchindoun Castle, Moray District, in 1984

Jonathan Wordsworth*

INTRODUCTION

In May 1984 the writer carried out for SDD (Ancient Monuments) a clearance excavation in the L-planned tower-house at Auchindoun (NGR NJ 3480 3745) prior to further masonry consolidation. This work was carried out in four chambers, namely the main hall and smaller chamber on the first-floor level, and the two cellars beneath these at ground-floor level. The main purpose of the excavation was to examine and interpret the entrance into the tower, as the plan published by MacGibbon and Ross (1887, I, 315) at this point is based on conjecture. The surviving detail differs little from that shown on MacGibbon and Ross's engraving (1887, I, 316).

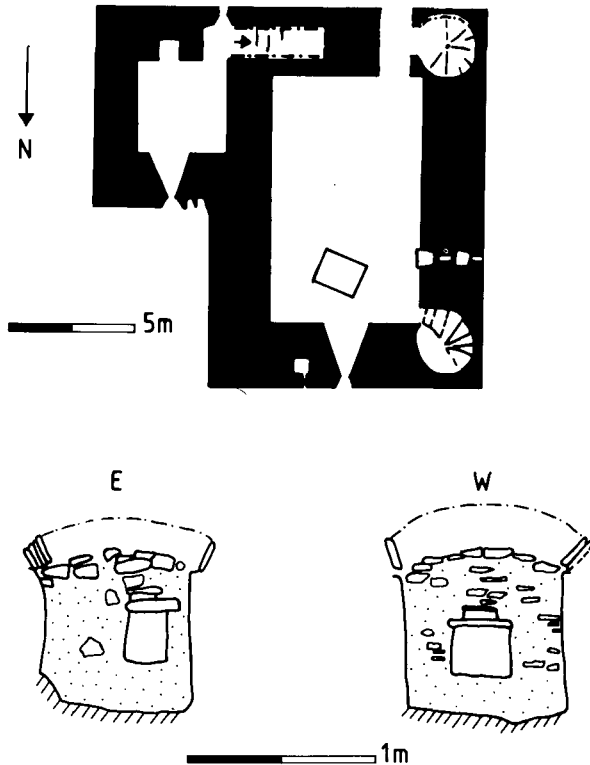
HISTORY

The documented history of the castle is sparse. Although the surrounding defensive ditches have been considered by some to belong to an earlier hillfort and there is reputed to have been a castle here since the 11th century, the standing masonry does not appear to date from earlier than the 15th century. Traditionally it is considered to have been built by Thomas Cochrane, a favourite of James III. By the 16th century it was in the hands of the Ogilvie family, who sold it to the Gordons in 1535. At some point after this it is supposed to have been fired by William MacIntosh, as recorded in the ballad, *Edom o' Gordon*. No more is recorded on the castle until 1725 when it was apparently derelict, for at that time William Duff of Braco was given permission by the Duke of Gordon to remove whatever stones he required from Auchindoun to build his new castle of Balvenie (Anderson, 1920, 12).

THE EXCAVATION

The main aim of the excavation was frustrated by extensive stone-robbing at the front of the tower-house, possibly contemporary with the granting of quarrying rights in the 18th century. The footings were 0.1 m wider for a distance of 5 m from the south-west corner and this would support MacGibbon and Ross's assertion that the entrance doorway was in this half of the south wall, rather than being more centrally placed (illus 1). The stone robbing was also heaviest at this point, perhaps because there were dressed stones worth removal. The stairwell in the north-west corner was shown by excavation to have given entry only into the main cellar and not to have served as a postern. There

*c/o Historic Buildings and Monuments, 20 Brandon Street, Edinburgh



ILLUS 1 Auchindoun Castle: ground-floor plan as interpreted after 1984 excavations and elevations of east and west ends of sunken chamber

was therefore only one entrance to the tower. The stair down to the smaller cellar in the wing could not have been in the intervening wall as suggested by MacGibbon and Ross, as this would have obstructed communication between the hall and chamber at first-floor level. Since there was a wall-face running eastward for 1.1 m from the present entrance to this cellar, it now seems more likely that, if there was a stair linking the smaller cellar with the floor above, then it ran east-west to enter the main hall from the south. If the function of this cellar was as a pit-prison, however, a stairway may not have been necessary and access may have been reduced to a trapdoor in the vault.

None of the original flooring had survived, though some bedding material for flagstone floors survived in both the small first-floor chamber and in the main cellar. The mortar and sandstone chips found in the first-floor chamber also contained the only find dating to the period of occupation, a turner of Charles I (third issue). As it lay beneath the presumed floor, it shows that there was a substantial refurbishment in the later 17th century, at a period when there is no documentary evidence of the castle being used.

THE CHAMBER

The most significant discovery was that of a stone-lined chamber cut into the bedrock beneath the floor of the main cellar (illus 1). This chamber was 2 m long by 1.7 m wide, 1.7 m deep and barrel-vaulted. Both the floor and the walls had been rendered with plaster and both east and west ends had aumbries set within them (illus 1). The primary fill was a very humic-rich clayish silt with large

quantities of animal bones including the remains of two dogs, one cat, three adult sheep, two lambs, and three cows. None of these animals was completely represented, except possibly the cat. Unfortunately there was no dating evidence and this curious deposit must be considered a dump formed after the building had gone out of use.

The function of this extra chamber remains a puzzle. The use of barrel-vaulting and its setting below floor level would have made access difficult. Although it might perhaps be thought of as a very small pit-prison, it is really too small for this and its location in the small cellar tends to rule this theory out. It may have served as an internal cold store, where perishable foodstuffs were kept, but the restricted access caused by the barrel-vault would have made it difficult to use. Alternatively, it may conceivably have been used to secure items of great value, though strong rooms are normally to be found in the lord's more private chambers. It may be hoped that its purpose will become clearer if others like it are found at other castles.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, J 1920 in Taylor, J (ed), *Cabrach Feerings*. Banff.
MacGibbon, D & Ross, T 1887 *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, I. Edinburgh.

*This paper is published with the aid of a grant
from the Historic Buildings and Monuments Directorate (SDD)*