

Excavations at Balvaird Castle, Perthshire

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ABSTRACT

Excavations within the inner court of Balvaird Castle revealed the layout of the south and west ranges as well as traces of earlier masonry buildings, one of which had been incorporated into the west range. There was also evidence to suggest that the site had been occupied prior to the construction of the castle's late 15th-century tower.

INTRODUCTION (illus 1–5)

Balvaird Castle (NGR NO 169 117) is situated near the head of Glen Farg, immediately to the north of the border between Tayside and Fife and 6 km west of Auchtermuchty. Standing at the east end of the Ochil Hills on an outcrop of undifferentiated Devonian andesitic or basaltic lava (Cameron & Stephenson 1985, 37 & fig 1), the castle commands impressive views in most directions and, although the ground rises slightly towards the north-east, visitors approaching from that direction could have been easily seen from the top of the tower.

The tower, by far the most prominent building on the site, is L-shaped, with its larger chambers, including the hall, contained within the main block. Other offices, such as the kitchen at the lowest level and chambers above, were found within the smaller south wing. As a refinement on the basic L-plan, the entrance and spiral staircase are located within a small turret in the re-entrant angle between the two wings. Over the arched entrance were the arms of Margaret Barclay and her husband, Sir Andrew Murray, the second son of Sir William Murray of Tullibardine, whom she married in c 1491 (NSA, 885). According to some authorities, this places the tower's construction within the last decades of the 15th century (MacGibbon & Ross 1887, 342), although the building's rather sophisticated design may argue for a slightly later date.

Immediately east of the tower is an arched gateway, over which is a panel inscribed with the date 1567, and a passage, also thought to be a 16th-century addition, leading to the inner court or barmkin. The courtyard itself measures 20 m north/south by 17 m east/west and is defined on its north side by the tower and by masonry ranges on its remaining three sides, the east range being of the same constructional phase as the adjacent passage. An outer court, to the north of the tower, may date to the late 16th or even the 17th century: a similar date may well be applied to a walled enclosure, thought to have been a garden, and a larger enclosure, probably an orchard, which lie to the south and east respectively of the castle. In contrast to the tower, which still stands to its original height, most of the buildings grouped around both courts are now in a completely ruinous state and, prior to excavation, some of them were impossible to trace in outline. Throughout the castle the local volcanic rock was used as the principal building stone, even for wall faces, while

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ILLUS 1 Aerial view of Balvaird Castle from the north-west. *Crown copyright: RCAHMS*

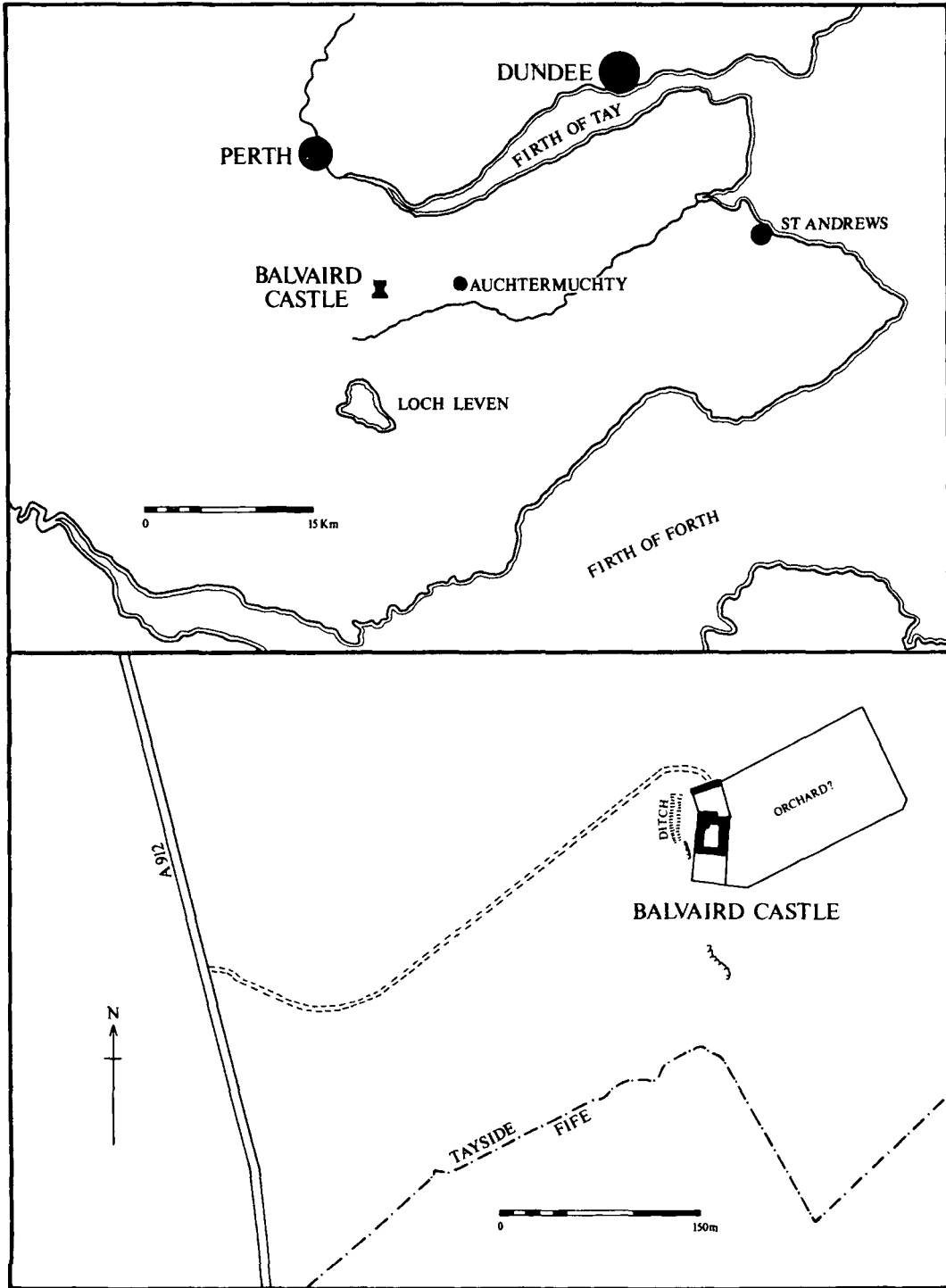
pink and red sandstone of probable Upper Devonian age (Cameron & Stephenson 1985, 29), which outcrops a few miles south of Balvaird, was used for most quoins and mouldings.

On the sloping ground to the west of the castle is a partially infilled ditch. Its course is now visible only for a length of about 50 m, from a small cliff face (probably an abandoned quarry) outside the walled garden to its present terminus beyond the north court; thereafter it peters out. The age and original extent of the ditch are both unknown although its infilling may have been contemporary with the construction of the castle's north entrance and/or the creation of the orchard.

THE EXCAVATIONS (Illus 6–11)

Between 1978 and 1990 a programme of repairs and consolidation of the castle's fabric was undertaken by Miller's (Special Works) for what was then the Historic Buildings & Monuments Directorate of the Scottish Development Department. During that period the buildings arranged around three sides of the south courtyard were excavated. Unfortunately, the report of the 1983 excavation of the east range still awaits publication. Investigations within the west and south ranges, together with limited trenching at the southern perimeter of the adjacent garden, form the subject of this report.

It became apparent during the first season (1988) of excavation in the west range that the layout of the south court was more complex than had been assumed: during a second season of investigations (in 1990) evidence was uncovered of at least one phase of occupation that pre-dated



ILLUS 2 Location of Balvaird Castle. Based upon the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright



ILLUS 3 Balvaird Castle from the south

the construction of the tower. Here the excavated features are divided into those that pre-date and post-date the construction of the west range; whereas a more detailed evaluation of the site's chronology is presented within the Discussion section.

PHASE 1

The partition wall (F102) dividing the ground floor of the west range into two chambers was the reused, partly demolished, north wall of an earlier building (Building 1) which had probably been aligned east/west. Little effort was made to smooth off the truncated end of this wall and its rough masonry was evident among the facing stones of the new east wall of the west range. Although the full extent of Building 1 was not determined, its north-west corner can be seen projecting beyond the outside wall of the west range; parts of the west and, probably, the south barmkin walls were also elements of this building. However, piecemeal masonry consolidation during the present century has probably destroyed much useful evidence within these walls.

Further evidence of Phase 1 occupation consisted of a spread of coal fragments (F130) up to 0.16 m deep, containing lenses of mortared rubble and clay that overlay bedrock within the north chamber of the west range. The clay and rubble inclusions indicate that F130 was probably a secondary deposit, perhaps dross from a coal store which, together with debris from that building's



ILLUS 4 The ditch to the west of the castle, viewed from the north

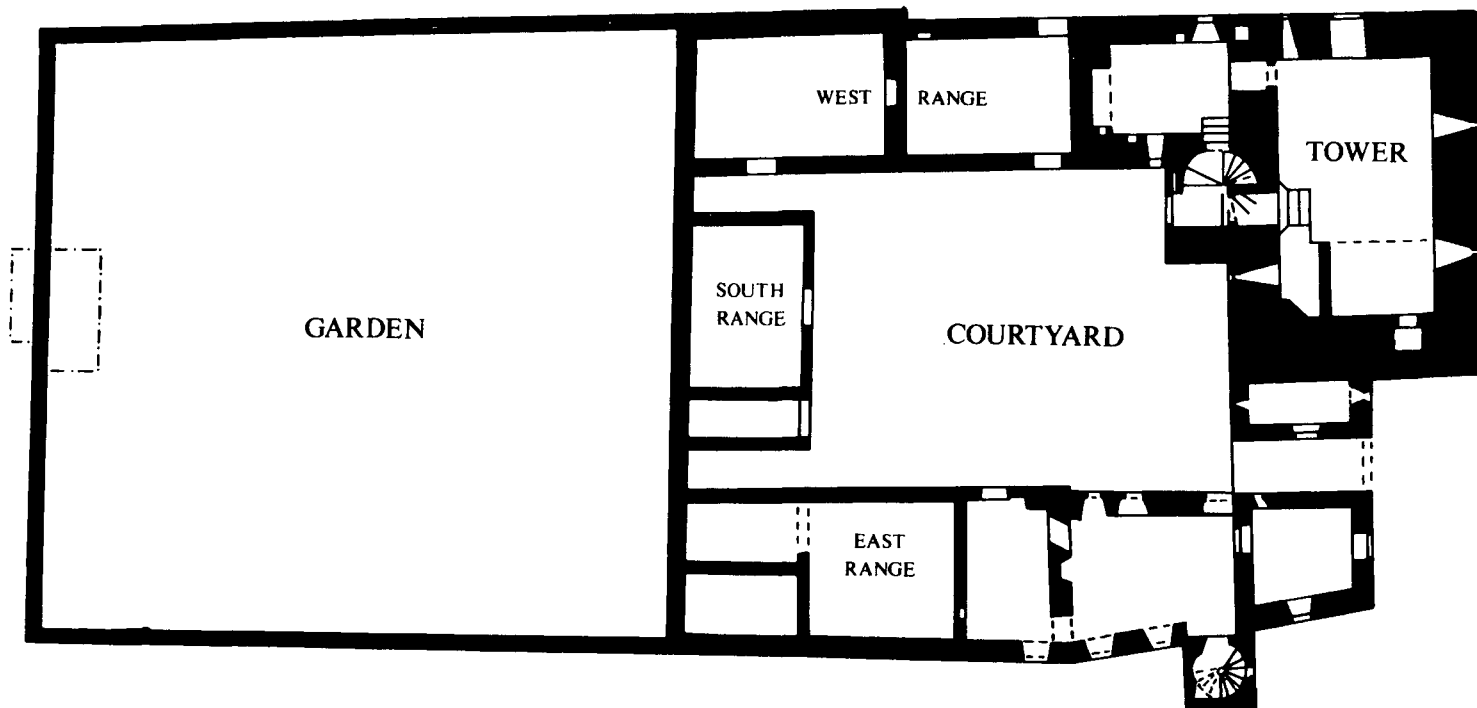
walls and floor, had been dumped on what has become the site of the west range. Layer F130 was cut by the foundation trench (F143) for the south wall of the tower's south wing and also by another structure (Building 2): the latter survived only as a fragment of clay-bonded, rubble walling (F142), sometimes set deep into crevices in the bedrock. Although Building 2 and the tower both post-dated the deposition of layer F130, the chronological and functional relationships of the two buildings are not at all clear.

There were no other excavated structures that can be positively ascribed to Phase 1 although the partially exposed masonry foundations that projected beyond those of the south barmkin wall may conceivably have belonged to a relatively early building.

PHASE 2

The west range

Building 1 was replaced by the west range when the south court became enclosed within a barmkin wall which, in all probability, was contemporary with the construction of the south and east ranges. The west range was created when the west gable of Building 1 was joined to the south-west angle of the tower and a new east wall (F105 & F106) built either side of the truncated



ILLUS 5 The tower, south court and garden

wall (F102). This earlier wall then served as the partition between the two ground-floor chambers of the new building. The two rooms were discrete units with no inter-connecting door through the partition wall.

The range measured 14.3 x 6.3 m overall with walls 4.0 m high and there was a loft contained within its roof space. The roof line is indicated by a raggle cut at an angle of 45° into the south wall of the tower and by the near intact profile of the south wall of the range. Access to the loft was by a doorway (presumably an insertion) in the south wing of the tower. At some stage, probably when the west range went out of use, the doorway was blocked and its internal recess converted into a wall cupboard. The south and north chambers measured 6.7 x 5.0 m and 5.8 x 4.3 m respectively.

The south chamber

Much of this room's floor surface was simply bedrock, chiselled into a reasonably level surface, although a single unworked flag of sandstone in the north-east corner of the room indicated that paving had been laid where the bedrock was particularly low. Access was indicated by a doorpost socket (F146) cut into a small block of red sandstone within the base course of the east wall (F105). The mortar-bonded rubble wall appears to have been of good construction although a maximum of only three courses of its masonry survived while in some places only traces of mortar marked its position.

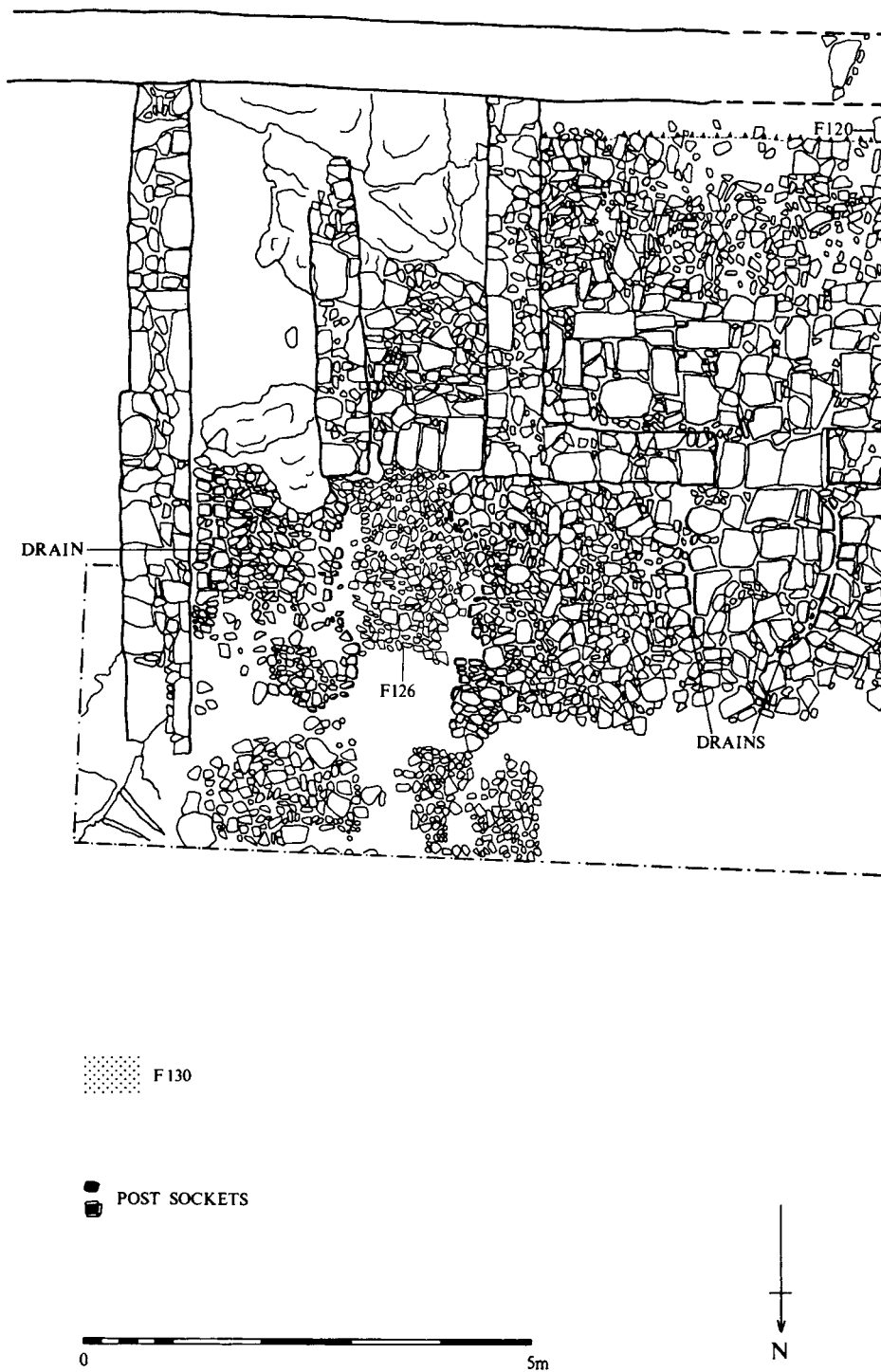
Midway along wall F102 was a fireplace (F104), 1.15 m wide and recessed 0.70 m into the wall. Little more than a single course of each of its roll-moulded jambs and part of the sill (all of red sandstone) survived; the hearthstone, sides and fireback all being missing. The remainder of its stonework was mortar-bonded rubble which contrasted with the clay-bonded masonry of the wall itself. This indicates that the fireplace was most likely an insertion and probably contemporary with the west range rather than with Building 1. Ashes and coal fragments filled the adjacent fissures in the bedrock, perhaps a particularly large cavity having been extended to serve as an ash pit. The high quality of the mouldings in the fireplace points to this room having been, at least primarily, a residential apartment. No debris associated with occupation or stratified artefacts of any sort were recovered from within this room; the fireplace, while 16th-century in style, might have been in a secondary context.

A large breach within the south gable is thought to indicate the position of a window, to the immediate right of which were the remains of an aumbry. In contrast to the south wall, much of the west wall had been demolished to foundation level.

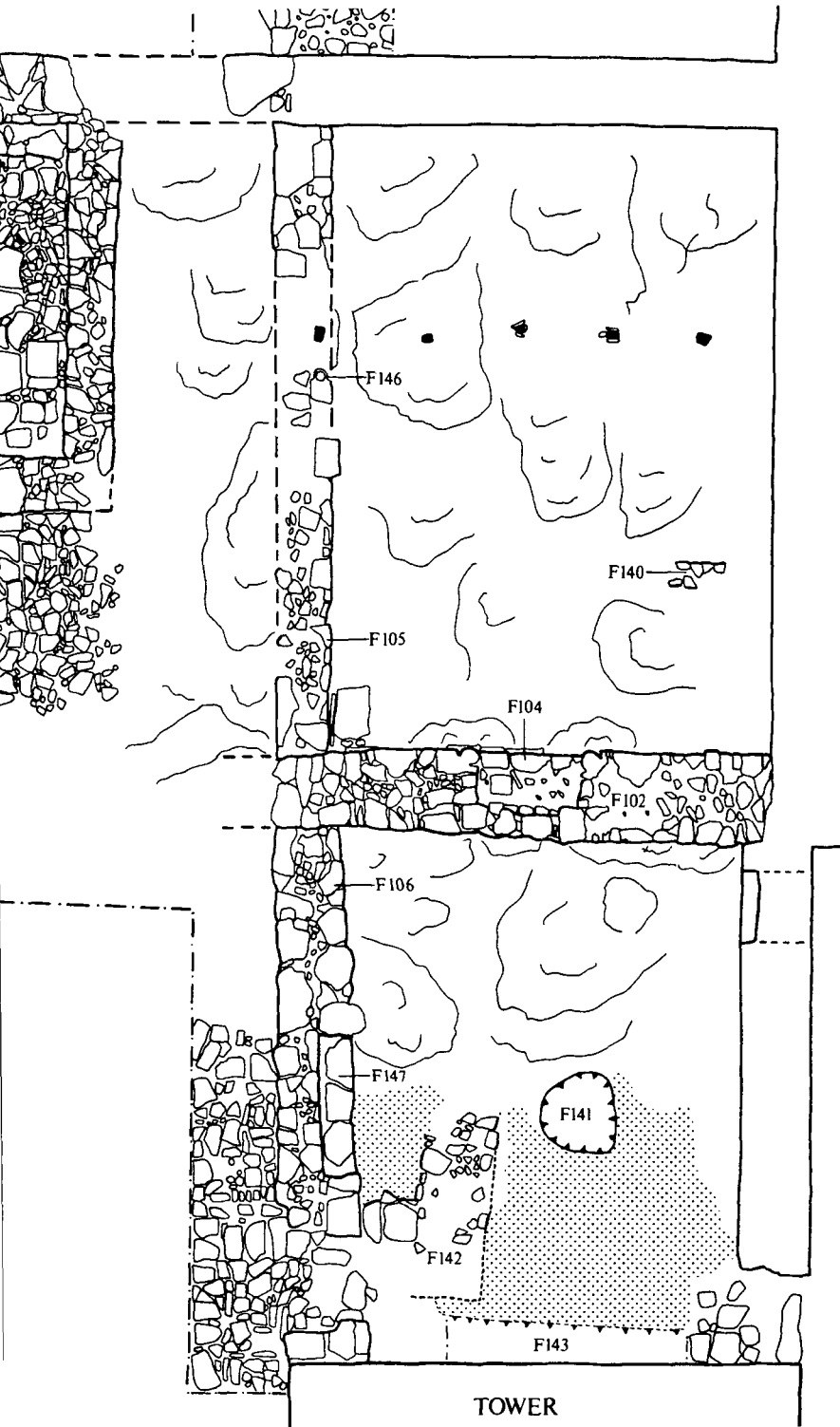
Five post sockets, spread equidistantly apart, up to 0.14 m across and cut 0.06–0.09 m into the bedrock, are interpreted as the settings for the uprights of a timber partition. On the inside face of the west wall, aligned with these sockets, was a possible door check although this may simply have arisen from the partial rebuilding of the wall during the present century. If the fragmentary, single-coursed masonry feature F140 was the vestige of another partition, then the room must have been subdivided into three, roughly equal apartments. It is difficult, however, to reconcile the use of such small apartments with that of fireplace F104 and hence any subdivision must be seen as a secondary characteristic of the south chamber.

The north chamber

This, the smaller of the two chambers, was defined by the south wing of the tower, a narrow east wall (F106), truncated wall F102, and the west barmkin wall which did not quite align with



ILLUS 6 Plan of excavated structures in the south court





ILLUS 7 The west range from the north

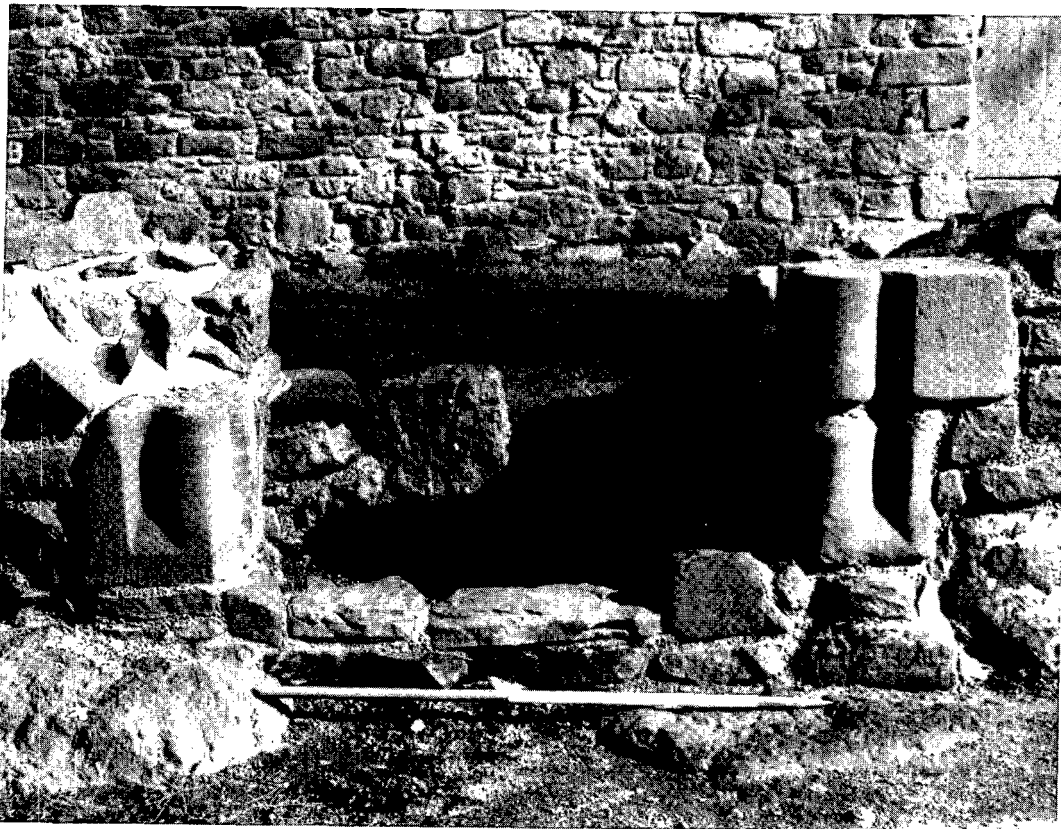


ILLUS 8 Wall F102 from the east, showing truncated masonry

the west wall of the south chamber. At the north end of both side walls was a doorway, each about 1.0 m wide. One gave access from the courtyard; the other opened on to the castle's exterior which suggests that it was a secondary insertion dating from a time when defence was not a priority. Other openings in these walls had been blocked. In the lower courses of the west wall, at its south end, was a window within the blocking of which was a smaller aperture; also sealed with masonry, this is interpreted as a slop outlet. These features had been partially obscured during masonry consolidation and were not evident on the wall's outer face. Within the few surviving courses of the east wall, a recess (F147), 1.50 m long and 0.30 m deep, may have been the remains of a wall cupboard.

The room was floored with yellow-buff clay, up to 0.09 m thick, except in the south-east corner where the bedrock was particularly high. Pressed into the upper surface of the clay was the debris from demolition and other materials post-dating the abandonment of the building; there were also 19th-century artefacts which may be contemporary with the later usage of this building. There was no fireplace anywhere within the room, merely smoke-blackened masonry resulting from fires that post-dated the building's destruction.

Cut into the clay floor were two pits, both of which contained large quantities of 19th-century pottery. One pit also yielded a nearly complete bone comb (illus 14) which, being of



ILLUS 9 Fireplace F104 from the south

medieval or early post-medieval date, was evidently residual. The second pit (F141), sub-rectangular in shape and cut 0.30 m into the bedrock, contained large quantities of iron slag within its fill of soils and mortared rubble. The late dates of infilling of these pits and the subsequent accumulation of large quantities of rubble, up to 1.5 m deep in places, demonstrate that the range was abandoned only in comparatively recent times.

The south range

The original building comprised a single chamber, measuring 5.20 x 3.0 m internally, and was built against the south barmkin wall which stood to a maximum height of 3 m at the time of the excavation. The remaining three sides of the range were defined by narrow rubble walls of which no more than three courses survived. Midway along the north wall was a doorway, 1.00 m wide, which gave access over a threshold of large sandstone flags to the ground-floor interior. The well-worn floor surface consisted of squared sandstone flags and neatly laid cobbles, the boundary between the two perhaps indicating a change of function at some time although there was no evidence as to what those functions might have been. There was no evidence of a fireplace within the building, perhaps suggesting that it was merely a store.



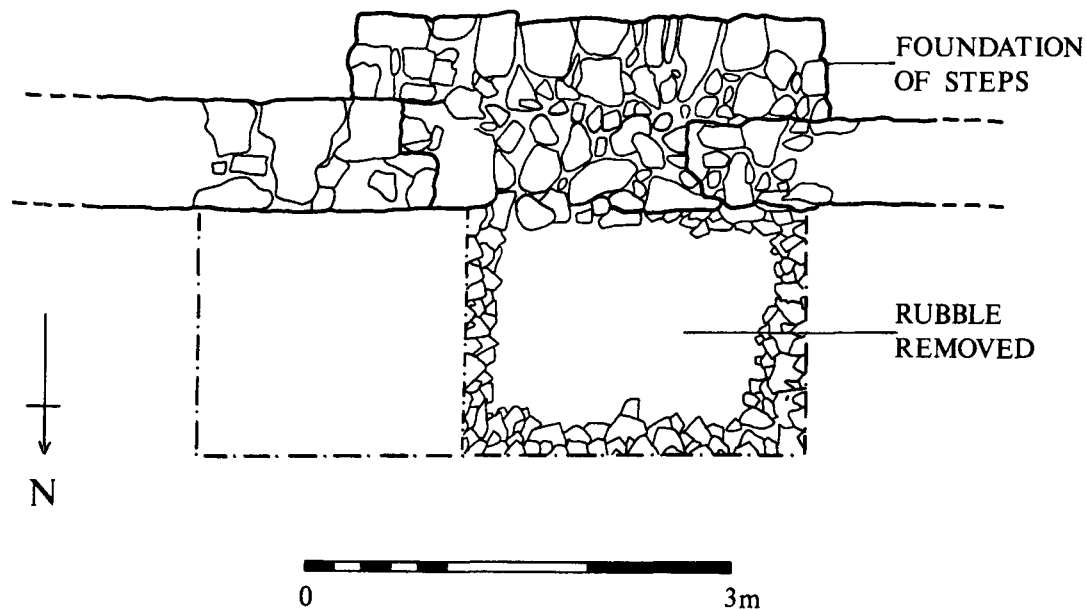
ILLUS 10 The south range and garden viewed from the north

Adjacent to the south wall of the building ran a line of mortared masonry (F120) that petered out into a narrow linear cut. This may have been the base for shelving or, less likely, the remnants of wall thickening. The latter implies that there was a roof of considerable weight while the somewhat flimsy nature of the north wall suggests otherwise. Indeed, it is quite possible that the south range was simply a single storey, lean-to building.

At some stage the range was extended eastward by the addition of a small chamber, only 1.30 m wide internally, which was floored with cobbles except at the south end of the room where the bedrock was high. There was no access between the main building and its extension, entry to the latter being through a doorway in the north wall. Again, there was no indication as to what use this chamber was put.

The courtyard

The courtyard, adjacent to the south range, comprised sandstone flags and large, tightly packed cobbles. Two shallow V-shaped drainage channels removed rainwater from the area adjacent to the building's doorway to a point where it simply soaked away into the ground. Remnants of a similar drain were found against the west wall of the east range. The courtyard surface outside the north chamber of the west range was of lesser quality, comprising loosely



ILLUS 11 Plan of excavated features at the south end of the garden

packed sandstone flags and rounded boulders. There were no flags or cobbles between the south and west ranges, presumably because the high level of the bedrock had rendered them superfluous. Adjacent to the north baulk, however, the courtyard surface had been replaced with angular rubble (F126) which may indicate a fairly recent disturbance or perhaps earlier stone-robbing.

The walled garden

The garden to the immediate south of the main courtyard measured 22 m square and was enclosed by rubble walls which are now totally ruinous. A small trench was opened midway along the enclosure's south wall to establish whether a breach in the wall and an adjacent platform of masonry were associated with a doorway and a stair beyond it.

Investigations in this area were very limited and the findings were far from conclusive. It seems unlikely that the voided rubble that covered the whole trench, both to the interior of the wall and below its foundations, was all contemporary although no boundary was evident within the material. Although the evidence was certainly not irrefutable, it may be reasonable to speculate that most of the rubble was deposited after the garden wall was built, perhaps as a base for a walkway around the garden's perimeter, and that the masonry platform beyond the garden formed the foundation of a stone stair, the steps themselves having been removed.

FINDS (Illus 12 & 13)

Of the artefacts recovered from the excavation, most were found within topsoil and overburden and are of limited value for determining the dates of occupation and the uses to which the buildings were put. Throughout the debris within the south and west ranges there were fragments of miscellaneous iron objects, a few sherds of post-medieval pottery, numerous sherds

of 19th-century pottery and glass, and fragments of ceramic pantiles and split sandstone roofing slates. At least some of the split stones were probably from the roof of the tower which was repaired in 1815 (Scone arch) although it was impossible to say which materials were used for roofing the west, south and east ranges.

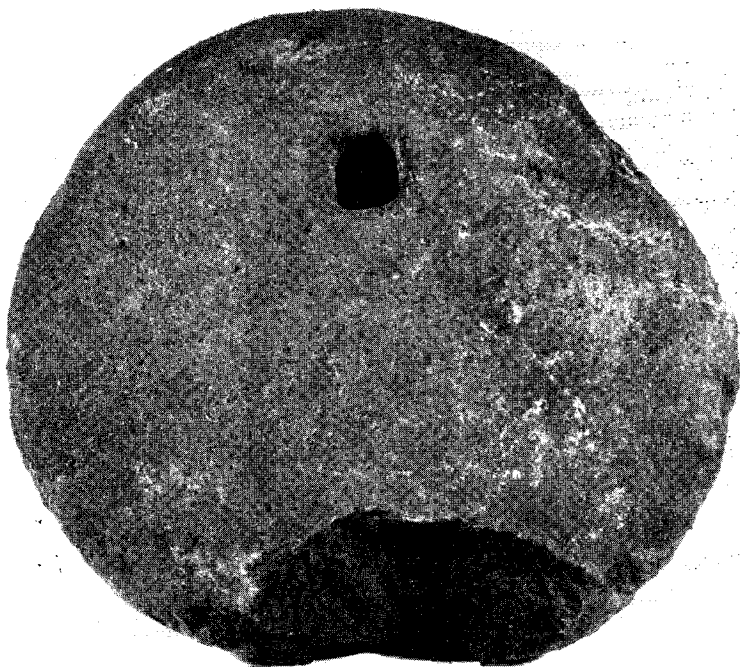
Two objects, although retrieved from unreliable contexts, are considered worthy of detailed study, and are described below.

The curling stone

Within the rubble that overlay the floor of the south range was a flat, rounded boulder of dark grey basaltic lava measuring 260–280 mm in diameter and 70–90 mm thick, and weighing 12.8 kg. On its upper surface, 55 mm from the edge, was a rectangular hole, 30 mm by 25 mm across and 25 mm deep, where the handle, probably of iron secured with lead, would have fitted. The loss of a large fragment from the upper surface may have led to the stone's abandonment.

It is inconceivable that a heavy object would be taken to this hilltop location unless it was the property of one of the castle's residents and, hence, the stone should not be viewed as a chance find. The likely venue for the Balvaird curler(s) was Loch Leven (illus 1), which was very popular from the 16th to the 20th century (Smith 1981, 26).

Handle stones, which replaced kuting stones and the earlier 'loofies' (both unworked



ILLUS 12 The curling stone

boulders), became widespread after c 1650 although the earliest known example was a crude two-handed stone, inscribed with the date 1551, recovered from a pond at Dunblane (Murray 1981, 36). The weight of the Balvaird stone was typical of early handle stones, those used during the 18th century usually being much heavier.

The bone comb

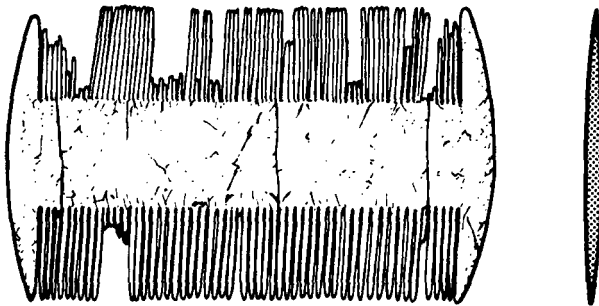
Within the fill of a presumed 19th-century pit in the north chamber of the west range was a nearly complete bone comb measuring 64 mm long, 38 mm wide and 1.5 mm thick with convex ends. On one side of the plain, rectangular central plate were 65 teeth (12 per 10 mm); opposite were 88 smaller teeth (16 per 10 mm), each row being 12 mm long. This type of comb was common throughout the medieval period and into the 18th century although this example was of higher quality than most recovered from early post-medieval contexts (for comparisons see Grew 1984, 110 and Fox & Barton 1986, 240).

DISCUSSION

Regrettably, it is all too common to find that structural and material evidence of the early occupation of sites set upon rocky summits has been virtually obliterated by later generations of builders, keen to place their new foundations firmly on solid bedrock. The west range at Balvaird was no exception to this rule. Nevertheless, the substantial deposit of coal fragments (F130), cut by one of the tower's wall foundation trenches, appears to confirm that this site was occupied before the late 15th century. Building 2 also cut layer F130 although its location, near to but not abutting the tower, suggests that the two structures were not contemporary; furthermore, because the tower is still standing and Building 2 is long demolished, the latter would seem to be the earlier of the two structures. Unfortunately, there were no artefacts associated with either the coal or Building 2 and both remain undated.

Building 1 remains an elusive structure. There is no doubt that it pre-dates the west range, yet neither its date of construction nor its overall ground plan is known. Although fireplace F104 has been interpreted as a 16th-century feature, it appears to be an insertion and hence more likely to date the construction of the west range than that of Building 1. It is also possible that the fireplace was a reused structure, thus potentially placing the west range in an even later period.

The most clearly defined part of Building 1 was its north-west corner and the adjacent



ILLUS 13 The bone comb, length 64 mm



ILLUS 14 The north-west corner of Building 1, viewed from the north-west

sections of its north and west walls, although there would seem little doubt that a section of the south barmkin wall had originally formed part of the same building. There was no indication of the building's south-east corner within the masonry of the barmkin wall although much of the architectural detail may have been lost during various consolidation programmes.

It was not possible to fully excavate the courtyard area and hence the north wall of Building 1 has not been traced beyond F102's point of truncation. Nevertheless, the line of that wall may well be marked by the limit of metalling within the courtyard. Furthermore, it is suggested that rubble F126 may be the backfill from the robbed east wall of Building 1. Support for this theory may lie in the similarity between the cobbles and flags in this part of the courtyard and those forming the floor of the (later) south range; the whole surface may have originally formed the floor of Building 1. The structure thus postulated would have measured approximately 14 x 6.8 m internally, making it a building of some size and importance.

On the evidence that at least some of its masonry was still standing when the west range was begun, Building 1 must have stood at the same time as the tower. Indeed, it is quite possible that the two buildings belonged to a single phase of construction. This arrangement was similar to that at Smailholm Tower, near Kelso, where a residential range of similar dimensions to those of Balvaird's Building 1 coexisted with a tower of probable late 15th-century date (Good & Tabraham 1988, 260). At Smailholm, the two buildings were enclosed within a barmkin wall: however, at

Neidpath Castle, near Peebles, there existed during the 16th century a massive tower and an ancillary range which, although standing some distance apart, were not surrounded by or connected to a barmkin wall until much later in the castle's history (RCAMS 1967, 244).

Within the area of excavation there was no evidence of any defensive structure older than the west range and its associated barmkin wall – although an earlier wall, thus far undetected, may have enclosed an area larger than that of the south court. It is also possible that the tower and Building 1 were protected by the ditch which has since been infilled, probably in 1567 when the doorway and passage leading to the south court were built. It may be that the orchard was laid out to the east of the castle around the same time. Alternatively, the ditch may have belonged to an earlier (?timber) castle or even to an early historic or prehistoric fort.

The castle was the family's principal residence until 1658 when Baron Balvaired, as Viscount Stormont, moved to Scone. Thereafter many of the castle buildings remained occupied well into the 19th century. In 1815 an estimate was tendered for major repairs to the roof of the tower which at that time was covered with split stone (Scone arch) but these repairs were insufficient: thirty years later the castle was described as being 'in a ruinous state' (NSA, 850). In this case, the term 'castle' probably refers to the tower for, according to the evidence of excavation, at least one of the south court buildings (west range) was still in use some time later. A watercolour by F Lyon and dated to 1890 depicts all of the castle buildings as being roofless.

LOCATION OF ARCHIVE

All data retrieved from the excavation has been lodged with the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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