

Excavations at Crichton Castle, Midlothian

John Lewis*

ABSTRACT

Excavation inside the basement of the castle's tower house, its earliest extant building, revealed little of interest; whereas investigations in the area of the late 16th-century Italianate façade on the north side of the courtyard revealed what are thought to be the foundations of the original north range, probably dating to the 15th century. The project was funded by Historic Scotland (former SDD/HBM).

INTRODUCTION

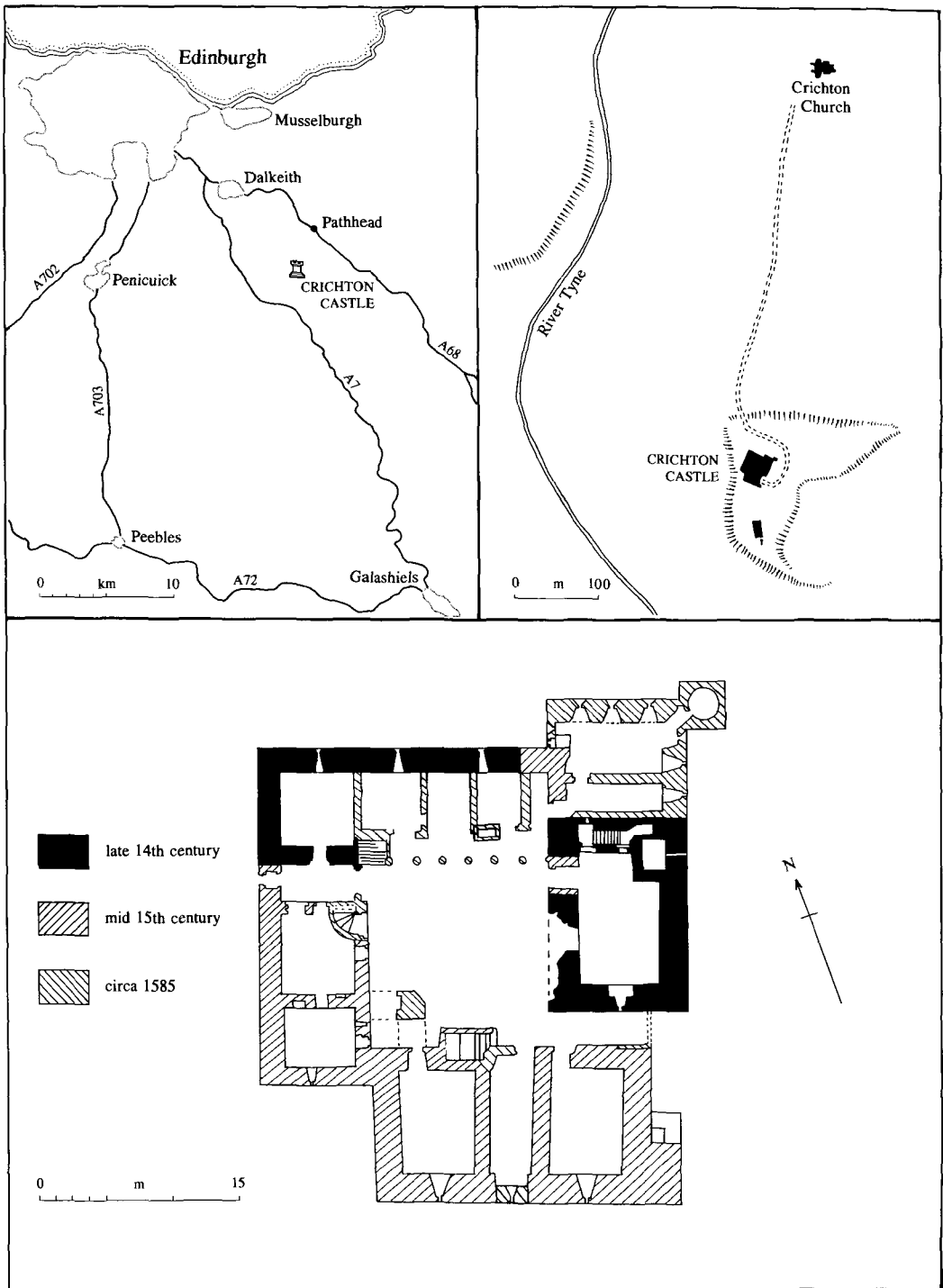
Crichton Castle (NGR: NT 380 611) stands on the edge of a steep ravine on the east bank of the River Tyne, 3.5 km south-west of Pathhead and 16 km south-east of Edinburgh (illus 1). To the east of the castle the ground continues to rise; and it is from here that the castle's masonry of Carboniferous sandstone appears to have been quarried. Sources such as MacGibbon & Ross (1887, 209–21), the Royal Commission (RCAHMS 1929, 47–51) and Tabraham (1990) should be consulted for detailed descriptions of the castle's architecture and history: a summary of these is given here.

The first stone castle, which perhaps replaced an earth-and-timber fortification, was probably built by John de Crichton in the late 14th century. It is thought to have comprised two main buildings and several ancillary structures, all contained within an enclosing barmkin wall; evidence of this was uncovered on a previous occasion to the west of the castle. Earthen banks and ditches beyond the barmkin wall provided additional security measures.

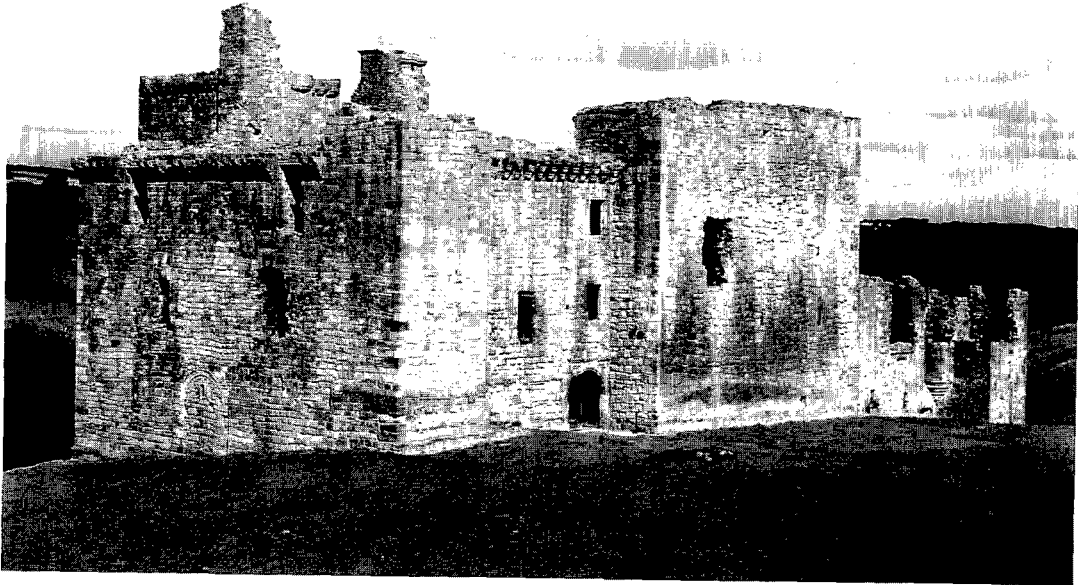
The principal residential accommodation during this initial phase of the castle was contained within a simple tower house built of coursed, squared rubble, rising to three storeys and measuring 14.1 m by 10.1 m overall. Although now reduced in height, this building still forms the east side of the castle. A semicircular vault encompasses a basement and an entresol; and the first-floor hall is contained within a high, pointed vault. Entry to the basement was originally through the north wall although this opening was blocked up when the castle was enlarged and a replacement doorway inserted in the west side of the building. There was a pit prison in the north-east corner of the tower and above it, at entresol level, a kitchen. Both were accessed from the basement. The hall, in common with the basement below, was entered from the outside through its north wall; this doorway was also sealed at a later date.

To the north-west of the tower house lay what is thought to have been a free-standing, rectangular building measuring approximately 20 m by 9 m overall. It was radically altered in the late 16th century and its original layout is difficult to envisage. However, at courtyard level there

* Scotia Archaeology Limited, 29 Hillside Crescent, Edinburgh EH7 5EF



ILLUS 1 Location and layout of Crichton Castle. (Based on the Ordnance Survey map © Crown Copyright)



ILLUS 2 Crichton Castle from the south (*Historic Scotland* © Crown Copyright)

were probably storage cellars (complete with a well in the south-east corner of the building) and an outer hall above, to augment the function of the more private dining hall within the tower house.

John's son, William (later Chancellor of Scotland), was probably responsible for adding the south and west ranges and extending the north range to link with the tower house, thereby converting Crichton into a courtyard castle (illus 2). At the same time, the original doorways into the tower house were blocked and replaced with one at basement level in the west wall; another at first-floor level gave access to the newly extended north range. As a result of these changes, the focus of the castle was switched from its east and north sides to the south range through which entry was now gained by a round-arched doorway. At courtyard level this building measured 20.1 m by 11.6 m and comprised vaulted cellars on either side of a transe. Above the cellars were William de Crichton's new quarters. These included a new hall at first-floor level, much more elaborate than its predecessor, which was entered by a forestair leading from the courtyard. A spiral stair, contained within a small jamb in its south-east corner, led to an upper level, now roofless, which contained the Chancellor's private apartments.

The southern portion of the west range resembled a small, six-storey tower, with service or residential accommodation on each floor. On its north side it linked with a two-storey wing (later heightened by another floor) which contained a kitchen at first-floor level. Between this building and the north range is a passage leading to a postern gate.

Although originally a 15th-century construction, the north range was totally rebuilt in about 1585 by Francis Stewart, Earl of Bothwell, who remodelled its ground-floor cellars and inserted a kitchen and a large dining room within the floor above. On its second storey were



ILLUS 3 · The interior of the tower house, showing modern drains cutting the basement floor; viewed from the north

several bedrooms and yet another kitchen. The external angle between this building and the original hall was taken up with a new building, containing a bakehouse at courtyard level and a parlour on its first floor. The most striking feature of the north range is its Italianate façade, a reflection of the architectural influences Bothwell may have experienced during his exile in Italy (he returned in 1581). Above the seven-bay open arcade at courtyard level is a wall face with very prominent nail-head ornamentation, the like of which is unknown anywhere else in Scotland. Also unique was the straight scale-and-platt stair at the west end of the range, evidently the first in Scotland.

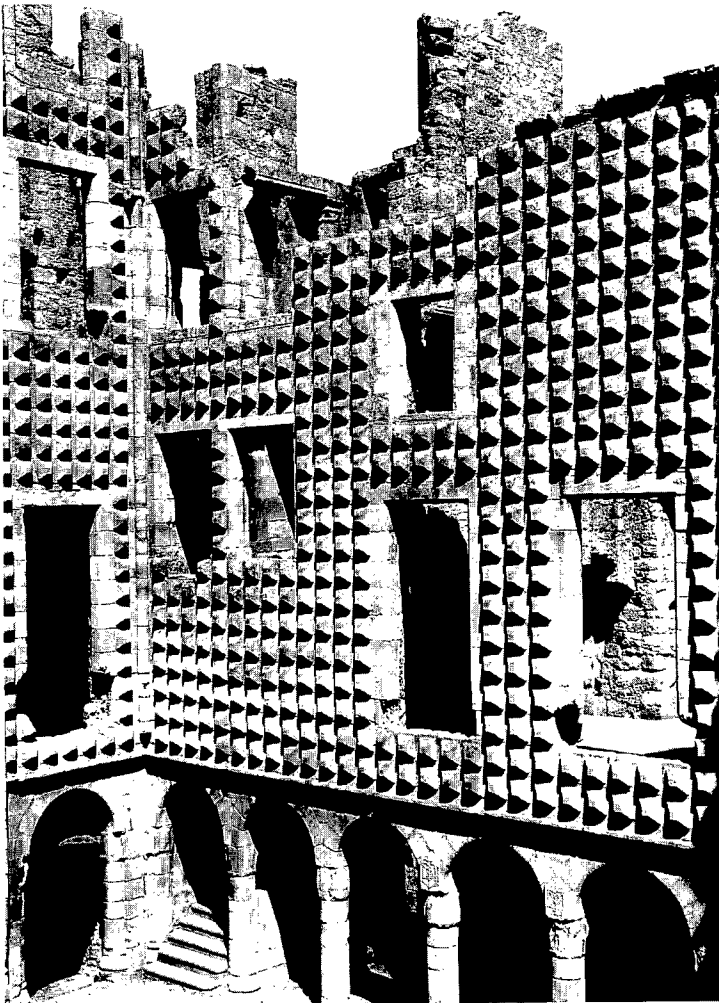
As well as the main castle buildings, there would have been other structures contained within the castle's outer defences. All but one are now demolished. The surviving building stands about 40 m south of the castle and, despite its superficial resemblance to a chapel, was a stable with residential quarters and probably a hay loft above. To its immediate south can be seen the foundations of several other structures whose functions remain unknown.

THE EXCAVATION

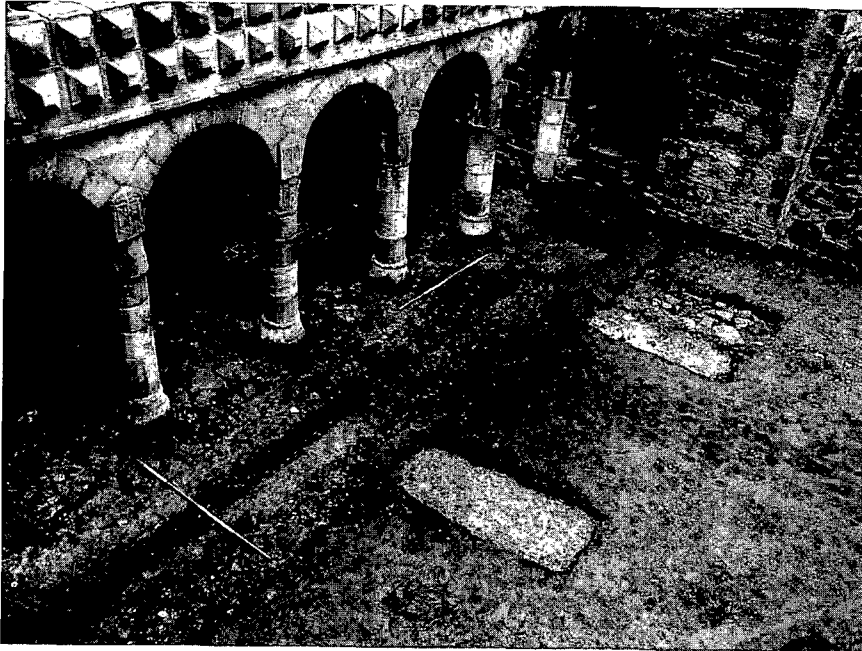
Excavation began within the basement of the tower house (the earliest standing building) in advance of repairs to the building's masonry. Because this was completed well ahead of schedule, the investigation was extended to include the north end of the courtyard, on each side of the colonnade below the Italianate façade of the north range. This work, which was carried out early in 1985, was instigated by the Scottish Development Department (Historic Buildings & Monuments) (now Historic Scotland) and directed by John Cannell.

THE TOWER HOUSE (ILLUS 3)

Turf, topsoil and other recently deposited soils and mortar spreads sat directly on the plastic clay subsoil which constituted the floor of this basement chamber. Into this material had been cut the bedding trenches for the tower walls, those on the south and west sides being exposed during the excavation. Also cutting the clay were several drainage trenches, all aligned north/south, some of which were partly excavated to reveal the modern ceramic pipes therein. The northern ends of these drains were disturbed by another recent intrusion, the setting for modern steps leading from the doorway in the west wall. At the extreme south end of the room were two post-holes, each approximately 0.4 m in diameter and over 0.3 m deep. One of them was cut through the bedding trench for the south wall of the tower; the other disturbed only the subsoil. Although only two post-holes were uncovered, in all likelihood they represented temporary works associated with the construction of the tower after its foundations had been bedded.



ILLUS 4 The Italianate façade of the north range



ILLUS 5 The north side of the courtyard, viewed from the south-west, during the excavation; the well can be seen behind the columns of the Italianate façade

THE NORTH RANGE (ILLUS 4-6)

The principal area of investigation extended similar distances either side of the colonnade at the front of the north range and measured approximately 12 m east/west by 5 m north/south. In addition, there were two small extensions on its south side. Below the turf, topsoil and other modern deposits there were several features of interest, most of which appeared to support the perceived building sequence in this part of the castle. The excavated features can be placed into two distinct phases of construction, as described below.

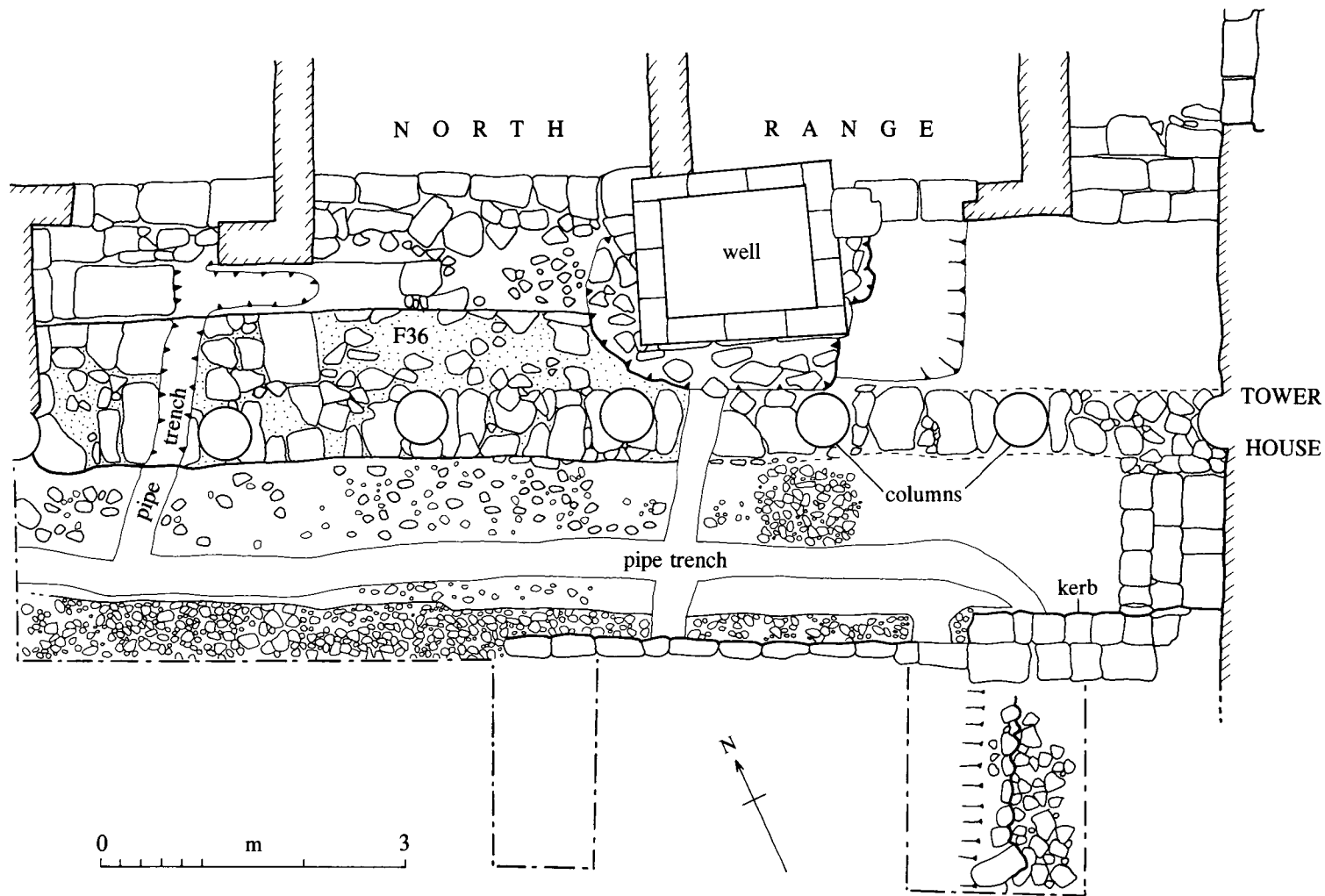
Period 1

The earliest structure to be uncovered consisted of the foundations of an east/west wall lying directly below the columns of the Italianate façade. These foundations (F36) of tightly bonded, mortared, sandstone rubble were 1.5 m wide and were set into a trench that had been cut into the subsoil. The remains of the wall ran from below the stairway which led to the first floor of the north range, extending about 8 m to the east of it. There was no indication that wall F36 had extended as far as the 14th-century tower house. Indeed, on the evidence of a cut just beyond the well (see below), it may have returned northwards from this point. This wall appeared to predate all other excavated structures and is tentatively interpreted as the south wall of the original north range which was contemporary with the 14th-century tower house.

The well was located in what appeared to be the extreme south-east corner of the primary north range. It was circular with a diameter of approximately 2 m and had been cut through bedrock to a depth of about 20 m.

Period 2

The radical alterations carried out within the north part of the courtyard during Period 2 can be equated with those undertaken by the Earl of Bothwell, c 1585. The south wall of the primary north range had been demolished and, on the evidence of excavation, its foundations buried from view by this time.



ILLUS 6 Plan of the excavated features on the north side of the courtyard

Without doubt, the most significant detail uncovered was the means of construction of the row of columns supporting the courtyard façade of the north range. The columns stood on the tightly packed rubble infill of a trench 0.8 m wide, which had been cut into the foundations of wall F36. This seems to indicate that the Period 2 builders were unaware of the remains of the earlier wall which may have been hidden beneath post-demolition deposits. The columns form seven open bays on the north side of the courtyard and one returning along its west side; they are 16-sided with bell-shaped bases (although superficially they appear circular), measuring approximately 0.5 m across; they are spaced regularly at intervals of 1.43 m. The foundations of the columns extended below the steps leading to the west doorway of the tower house, indicating that the steps are either contemporary with or later than the north range façade; whereas the doorway itself is thought to date from Chancellor Crichton's occupation (see *illus 1*).

The bedding trench for the cellar frontage had been cut through a spread of coal-rich soil which overlay the demolished wall F36. Continuous with that bedding trench was the cut associated with the rebuilding of the well head nearby. This was built of ashlar which, for no obvious reason, had been laid slightly askew from adjacent structures.

Running westwards from the south side of the tower steps was a stone kerb which was two stones wide (0.64 m) for its first 1.5 m but only one stone wide thereafter. From that point the kerb had been relaid, probably in recent times, although its bedding material of tightly packed rubble in a loam matrix extended westwards almost as far as the west range. Within the east trench extension was a line of mortared rubble, at right angles to the kerb. It was not possible to investigate this feature further and its interpretation as the remnant of another kerb running along the east side of the courtyard remains very much a tentative one.

Evidently, the area in front of the cellars had been paved although only a few flags remained: stone robbing and intrusions (such as modern drainage trenches) had removed such materials.

DISCUSSION

Although there is no artefactual evidence to help date any of the features uncovered during the excavation, some of the structures exposed at the north end of the courtyard have certainly added to our knowledge of the castle's layout. The most interesting of these was wall F36. Its demolition definitely preceded the construction of the remodelled north range. Indeed, on the evidence of the bedding trench for the colonnade cut into its upper, surviving masonry, all memory of this wall appears to have been lost by the time the Earl of Bothwell set about his grand design.

Given its position in relation to the tower house and the north range, it is doubtful that wall F36 had been a barmkin wall. It is far more likely that this was the south wall of the original north range, demolished either when the south and west ranges were added by Chancellor William de Crichton in the mid-15th century or when Francis Stewart embarked upon his grandiose redevelopment of the castle over a century later. The evidence of the excavation suggests the first of these two dates.

The cut returning northwards just beyond the well may denote the position of the original east wall of the north range: there was certainly no indication that wall F36 had extended eastwards beyond this point. Although the putative south-east corner of this building might seem too close to the nearby well, it should be noted that the well's ashlar superstructure is probably an addition and that its original, circular shaft is somewhat smaller in size. Furthermore, it is not unknown for a well to be cut into the wall of a building, as is evident in the basement of the 15th-century tower at Sauchie, near Alloa (Cannell & Lewis, *this volume*).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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