

THE CASTLES OF DUFFUS, RAIT, AND MORTON RECONSIDERED

by W. DOUGLAS SIMPSON, O.B.E., M.A., D.LITT., LL.D., F.S.A.SCOT.

DUFFUS CASTLE, in Morayshire, is one of the finest examples in Scotland of an early Norman stronghold on the *motte* and bailey plan, in which a stone tower has subsequently been imposed upon the *motte*, and the palisades enclosing the bailey replaced by a stone curtain wall.

Rait Castle, in the adjoining shire of Nairn, is an excellent example of a small medieval hall-house, showing architectural detail that closely links it with Duffus.

Morton Castle in Nithsdale is another example of a hall-house, larger and more massive than Rait, and possessing the additional feature of a gatehouse, regularly defended. Here again there are constructional details strongly resembling similar features at Rait and Duffus.

In previous accounts of these three buildings,¹ I have assigned them to the latter part of the fourteenth century. This dating was more or less in accordance with the authoritative views expressed by Messrs MacGibbon and Ross, in their standard work on *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, and (more recently) by the late Dr Mackay Mackenzie in his Rhind Lectures on *The Medieval Castle in Scotland*. Dr Mackenzie in particular held the view that such stone hall-houses – or ‘palaces’ in old Scottish parlance (*palatium* = hall in medieval Latin) – do not appear in Scotland before the fifteenth century. It should, however, be stated that at Kindrochit Castle in Braemar excavation has recovered the plan of a hall-house which can be dated, on good documentary evidence, at least as far back as the seventies of the fourteenth century.²

Dr Mackenzie’s views as to the dates of this group of early hall-houses were doubtless influenced by his strong conviction as to the scarcity of domestic structures in stone and lime in Scotland before the Wars of Independence. It is, however, difficult to believe that the kings and the noble patrons who, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were erecting, or helping to erect, cathedrals, monasteries, and parish churches up and down the country, in architectural quality, if not indeed in size, fully abreast of current work in France and England, should not have been able also to provide themselves with castles or halls in stone and lime. In point of fact, evidence has been rapidly accumulating, in recent years, that the late dating proposed by Dr Mackenzie for a number of our early stone castles, and adopted in the volumes of the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments produced while he was the Commission’s secretary, must now be reconsidered.

Thus few scholars today would probably accept his strange contention that the Rothesay Castle through whose walls the Norse besiegers hewed their way in 1230

¹ *Duffus Castle, Official Guide* (Ministry of Works); ‘Rait Castle’, *P.S.A.S.*, LXXI, 98–115; ‘Morton Castle’, *T. Dumf. & Gall. A.S.*, xxii, 26–35.

² *Ant. J.*, viii, 70–75.

was a structure of compacted clay, in view of the plain statement in the contemporary record that the material was *stein*.¹ So also Castle Sween in Knapdale, on record in the thirteenth century, is, in its oldest portion, nothing but a gutted Norman keep: typologically it is probably the most ancient stone castle now extant in Scotland. Further north, Mingary Castle with its great wall of enceinte pierced by double-lancet windows like those of Dunstaffnage, must be assigned to the thirteenth century; and the same is true of its neighbour, Eilean Tioram.² It becomes increasingly apparent that the older view of MacGibbon and Ross, with regard to the survival on the western seaboard of stone and lime castles dating from before or during the War of Independence, is sounder than the more sceptical opinion of Dr Mackay Mackenzie.

Further detailed study of particular buildings is likely, in my opinion, to produce additional confirmation of the foregoing thesis. For example, in a forthcoming paper I hope to show that Messrs R. G. Collingwood and Angus Graham were right in their opinion that at Skipness Castle in Kintyre substantial remains in stone and lime survive of the *castrum de Schepehinche* on record in 1261.³

In the Orkney Islands, there is no reason whatever to doubt that the little tower still known as 'Cobbie Row's Castle' in the island of Wyre, with its Romanesque manorial chapel closely adjoining, represents the *steinkastala* recorded by the Orkneying Saga to have been erected on Wyre by its Norse owner, Kolbein Hrugá, about 1150. And at the Bishop's Palace at Kirkwall I have recently shown that the lower walling of the hall or central structure, with its polychromatic masonry and other constructional details closely recalling the twelfth-century work in St Magnus Cathedral hard by, must certainly be regarded as contemporary therewith.⁴ I am permitted to say that this opinion is completely endorsed, after personal investigation, by Mr Gerhard Fischer, the foremost authority upon the medieval architecture of Norway. Mr Fischer's own excavations at King Sverre's castle near Trondheim have shown that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Norwegian kings were erecting castles built of stone and lime in the most up to date European fashion of the time.⁵ And what the Norse could do in their own country they could assuredly do in their territories in the Northern and Western Isles and on the adjoining seaboard.

It is against this general background that I would now seek to reconsider the dating of the group of early hall-houses which are the particular subject of this paper.

At the very outset, the opinion which in 1937 I expressed about the date of Rait Castle was strongly challenged by the late Mr Herbert L. Honeyman, the distinguished authority on the medieval architecture of northern England. Writing to me on 17th November 1937, he set forth his views as follows:

I can't understand your dating unless 14th is a mistake for 13th century. If it had been I, I'd have credited the building either to Sir Gervase or Sir Andrew [de Rait], the last owners of any importance. In Northumberland it could be dated between 1260 and 1320, with the reign of

¹ For the Rothesay debate see *P.S.A.S.*, LXVIII, 117-27; *T. Glasgow A.S.*, IX, 152-83 and X, 78-79; *Annen Viking Kongress* (Papers of the Second Viking Congress) (Bergen, 1953), 93-96.

² *T. Glasgow A.S.*, N.S., XIII, 70-89.

³ *P.S.A.S.*, LVII, 266-87.

⁴ *Priðji Vikingafundur* (Papers of the Third Viking Congress) (Reykjavik, 1958), 101-6.

⁵ *Norske Kongeborger*, I, 327-32 (English summary).

Edward I as the most probable part of that period. Frankly, I simply refuse to believe that a man of some prominence, a courtier as much at home in England as in Scotland, a possible relative of the John Comyn who crenellated his well-built stone *camera* at Tarsset in 1267, could have been content to live in a 'timbered earthwork', though he might have surrounded his house with a palisaded enclosure. The building has interesting points of comparison with Dally and Haughton. In particular, the absence of a kitchen, and the imposing first floor entrance reached by a wooden stair. Is the thin end wall an original outside wall? If so, one may suppose that, as may have been the case at Haughton, there was an annexe, perhaps of timber-framed construction, reached through a door where the east wall is breached. Alternatively perhaps cooking was done in the hall?

With these queries and problems in our minds, I had the privilege on 24th April 1957 of making a thorough re-examination of Rait Castle along with Mr Stewart Cruden, F.S.A., F.S.A. SCOT., H.M. Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Scotland. The following is a summary of our conclusions:

We are convinced that the building is an excellent and (in Scotland) exceedingly rare example of a small medieval stone hall-house, and that its date must be placed quite early in the fourteenth century, during the Plantagenet occupation. The grounds on which this dating rests are the following:

- (1) The small oblong basement windows recall those in Lochindorb Castle, which can be dated with reasonable certainty, from record and from its plan, to c. 1300.¹
- (2) The great portal with its drop-centred arch and broad splays resembles those at Lochindorb and in the gatehouse of Dunstanburgh Castle – the latter being dated specifically by record to 1313.
- (3) The hall fireplace, with its curved and splayed jambs and lamp sconces, has unmistakable affinities with Edwardian fireplaces of the North Welsh type, for example at Conway and Caernarvon.
- (4) The north-west window bay on the first floor of the round tower, with its double-corbelled lintel construction, irresistibly recalls the windows in the north-east tower of Kildrummy Castle, which are undoubtedly of Edwardian date.

If these conclusions are accepted, then Rait Castle emerges as the work, in all probability, of Sir Gervase de Rait, or of his younger brother Sir Andrew de Rait, both of whom were prominent supporters of Edward I during the Plantagenet occupation.

The large fireplace on the first floor, mentioned above, is plainly a hall fireplace. My 1937 idea of a great chamber partitioned off here is untenable. We have to think rather of a broad dais, lit by one coupled window on the south and two on the north, from which side most light was needed and from which moreover a noble view could be enjoyed. This dais would be the centre of 'high life' in the hall. The eastern or lower end of the hall would be screened to shut off the outer door and the porter. This would leave a comparatively restricted space for the body of the hall, but doubtless sufficient for the indoors staff of this modest hall-house.

The scarcement provided for the hall floor is really the chase for a heavy wall-

¹ See *London Morayshire Club Magazine*, IV, 33-42.

plate or sleeper beam, into which the joists will have been mortised. Above the chase the wall-face projects somewhat.

We are satisfied that the remnant of a wall engaging with the east gable of the hall-house is older than the hall-house. It is embedded in the gable wall, and plainly is not contemporary. Had it been later, the gable wall would have been spliced, so as to show irregular jointing on either side. As it is, the masonry of the gable on both sides comes up against the embedded wall, and the joints, close against the latter, are neatly and skilfully packed in with vertical spalls or splints. Probably therefore this wall is a remnant of an older manor-house of Rait, like the long tenement on the western side, which has apparently been partly removed to make room for the hall-house and its round tower.

The continuous corbel course on the present summit of the east gable suggests that the hall-house had a projecting parapet on either gable, between which would be a high pitched roof resting directly on the lateral wall-heads

In 1343 Nicholas the Hermit occupied the chapel of St Mary of Rait, which is on record c. 1189-99.¹ It is possible that this may be the detached oblong building, measuring about 32 feet by 16 feet, to the south-east of the hall-house.

There are slight yet quite distinct traces on the north side of the castle suggesting that on this side at least it may have been enclosed by a ditch.

The foregoing revised dating of Rait Castle implies a similar reconsideration also for Duffus Castle. As pointed out in my former paper, the architectural connection between the two buildings is unmistakable. Both structures display the same unvaulted main interior, the same narrow oblong or lancet windows heavily chamfered, and in both is the distinctive corbelled lintelled construction over window bays or mural passages. At Duffus this construction is found alike in the keep and in the posterns of the curtain wall. The masonry at Duffus is much superior to that at Rait: the latter is 'cowan's' work, whereas the former is obviously due to a *maître maçon de franche peer* of the highest standing. It could be that the Duffus master-mason supplied the dressed work for Rait, while the general masonry work was executed by local craftsmen.

Duffus Castle and Duffus Parish Church were both destroyed during the great rising in Moray against English domination in 1297: and in 1305 Sir Reginald de Cheyne received a grant from Edward I of 200 oaks from the royal forests of Darnaway and Longmour to repair his manor of Duffus, while at the same time the parson of Duffus obtained twenty oaks for the repair of his church. Twenty good sized oaks would probably provide enough timber to replace the woodwork of a small parish church. On the other hand 200 would be totally insufficient to reconstitute the timber tower, palisades, and internal courtyard buildings of a large mount-and-bailey castle. They would, however, doubtless suffice to replace the floors and roof of the present stone keep and of such early buildings as may have existed within the curtain wall, inside which the joist-holes for such may still be seen on the side opposite the present fifteenth century stone hall. It looks as if that was the purpose to which the oaks

¹ *Registrum Episcopatus Moraviensis*, 7.

were to be applied. If all this is true, we should ascribe the stone keep and curtain wall at Duffus to Sir Reginald de Cheyne, one of the most prominent adherents of Edward I in Morayland.

When my former account of Morton Castle was published, it also, like my paper on Rait, evoked criticism as to dating from Mr Honeyman (18th January 1943):

The plan and photos would make *me* say 'Edwardian at latest' (say *c.* 1310) with later insertions. I don't know what the mouldings of the door are like, but its masonry is ill-bonded to the ashlar and may be an insertion.

Upon further consideration, I have been more than ever struck by the obviously close architectural connection between Morton and Rait, to which attention was first directed by MacGibbon and Ross.

The principle underlying the two castles is the same: a long hall resting upon unvaulted storage. The large and architecturally conspicuous doorway, entering the hall at its lower end, and the small window adjoining it to the right, correspond in both cases. The fireplace at the dais end of the hall, and the lord's rooms in a circular tower opening off the dais, are the same in both. The narrow door on the opposite side of the dais from the fireplace at Morton could easily have opened into a garderobe annexe, like the corresponding door at Rait. The continuous corbelled lintel construction, so characteristic of Rait, is present also at Morton. The large fireplace in the sole remaining gate tower of the latter is of decidedly Edwardian character; and so – though it is more ruined – is the fireplace of the great hall. Throughout the building the shoulder-headed lintel is used, and this is widely accepted as a characteristic Edwardian mannerism, though it is found both earlier and later. At Morton we have the same small oblong windows which we have noted at Rait and Lochindorb. All things considered, I now find it difficult to resist the conviction that Morton Castle should be dated somewhere in the Plantagenet occupation. On the other hand, the very anomalous mouldings of the doorway do not suggest Edwardian work; and, *pace* Mr Honeyman, I can find no evidence of the door having been inserted.

Turning now to the record, *le manoir de Morton en vaal de Nith* is on record in 1307; and later we are told that it belonged to Bruce's paladin, Sir Thomas Randolph, one of the greatest men in the land, and surely well able to house himself in fair stone and good lime. In 1357, under the terms of the treaty by which David II obtained his release from an English prison, Morton was one of the castles in the south-west of Scotland which were ordained to be demolished. Now it is clear that one half of the gatehouse, and of the south-eastern tower, have been deliberately removed, as if to render the castle untenable; and this could well have been done pursuant to the treaty of 1357. On the other hand, Morton Castle was certainly occupied until much later times – in fact, until the year 1714. Nevertheless, the partial dismantling which has clearly taken place, while rendering the castle almost useless in a military sense, is not inconsistent with the possibility of subsequent domestic occupation. It is clear that the problems of Morton Castle are difficult, and could be solved only by thorough excavation.