

Lickleyhead Castle, Aberdeenshire: a laird's house with alterations designed by John Bell c 1626

by H Gordon Slade

A little to the south of the village of Auchleven, on rising ground overlooking the Gadie and sheltered by the northern flank of Bennachie, stands the small castle of Lickleyhead. It is not famous as one of the great set-pieces of Aberdeenshire architecture, nor has it a great history for it has changed hands nine times. Nevertheless it is a house of great charm and of considerable, if unrecognised, importance, both as an almost unspoilt example of the transformation of a *château-fort* into a *château-maison*, and as a building with strong links with the designer of Castle Fraser.

Like so many properties along the Gadie, Lickleyhead had originally belonged to a branch

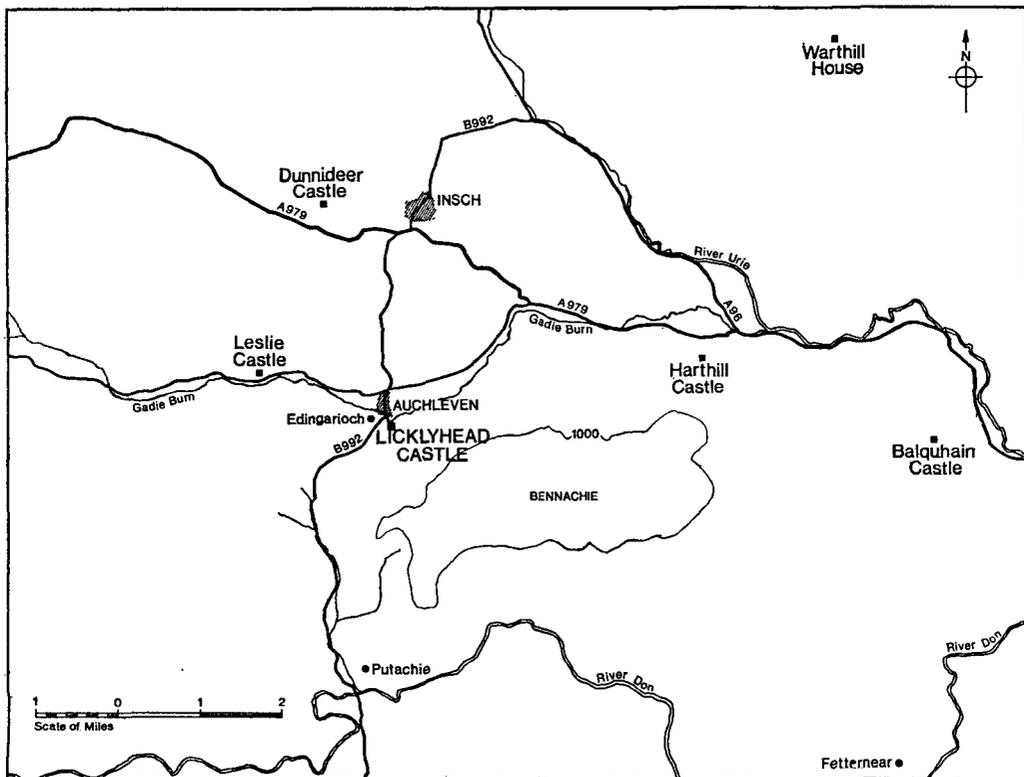
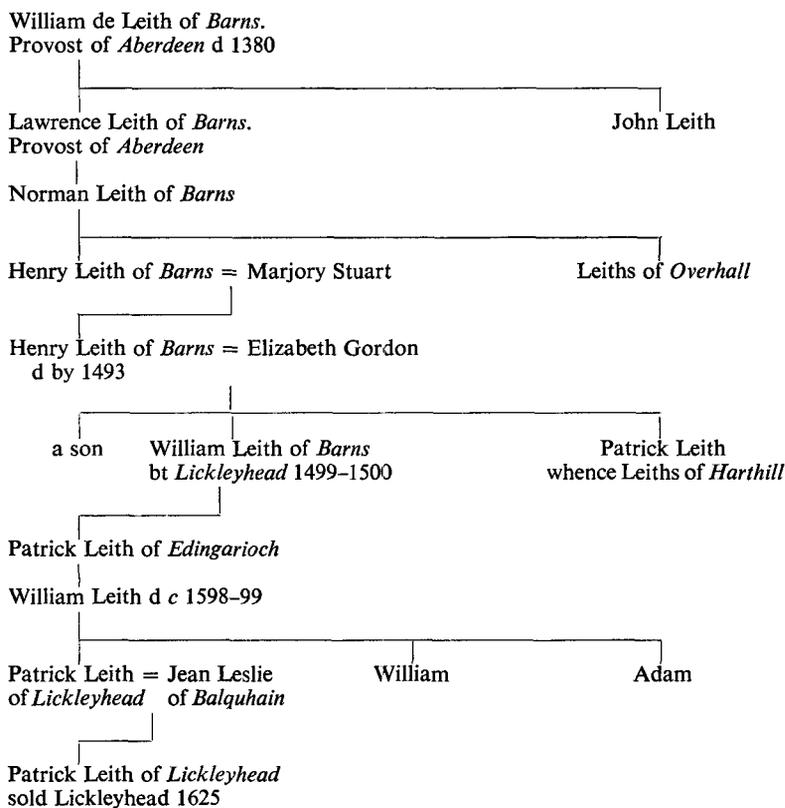


FIG 1 Location map

of the family of Leslie – ‘thick as Leslies on Gadie-side’ or ‘. . . on the sides of Bennachie’ are old Aberdeenshire sayings. Whether or not the story told in Douglas’s *Baronage* that the Leslies of Edingarioch obtained that land by means of marriage with Elizabeth Leith in the 13th century is of interest rather than importance, for in 1499 the lands of Edingarioch of which the chief residence was Lickleyhead of Edingarioch were sold by George Leslie of Edingarioch to William Leith of Barns, bringing the Leslie connection to an end for over five hundred years.

William Leith, to whom George Leslie had sold Lickleyhead, was a member of one of those Aberdeenshire families which combined respectability of descent with marked commercial ability. His great-great-grandfather, Lawrence, had been three times Provost of Aberdeen, but even more distinguished had been his thrice-great-grandfather, William Leith of Barns. Twice Provost

TABLE I
THE LEITHS OF *BARNs* AND OF *LICKLEYHEAD*

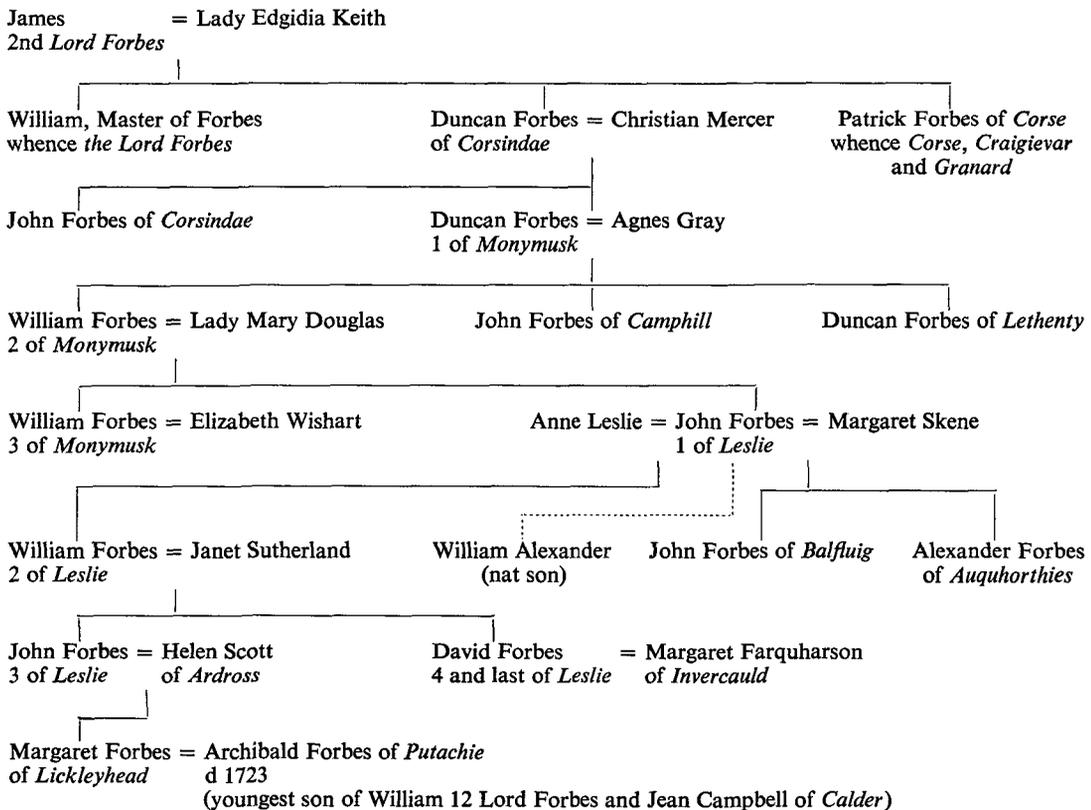


of Aberdeen, and his burgh’s representative to the General Council at Edinburgh in 1357 and to the Parliament at Scone in 1367, attendant on the Ambassadors to England in 1357, and Steward of the Household to Queen Joan, he was a man to whom public affairs came easily. He was a benefactor to the great Kirk of St Nicholas at Aberdeen, enlarging the south aisle in 1355, and giving the two great bells, Mary and Lawrence, which hung in the central tower until their destruction in the fire of 1874. William Leith gave these bells in 1351 as an atonement for having murdered a fellow magistrate, a certain Catenach. After this the family of Leith never produced a character of equal interest.

Presumably the Leslies had some form of house at Lickleyhead and there is no indication that the Leiths embarked on any elaborate building schemes. If the tower was altered or rebuilt – and if done the most likely builder would have been William Leith, the grandson of the purchaser – there is no evidence to suggest that it was ever anything more than a simple rectangular tower house.

This branch of the Leiths was as turbulent as most of its neighbours in the latter part of the 16th century. Patrick, the eldest son, was obliged to give a bond of security for his good behaviour in 1574 to the Privy Council (Privy Council, II, 727). His father, William Leith, apparently because of his support of, if not involvement with, the Earls of Huntly and Errol, was bound over in 1587

TABLE II
THE FORBES OF LESLIE AND LICKLEYHEAD



'not to undertake anything treasonable' against James VI (Privy Council, IV, 370; V, 48, 70); he had to find security in 1,000 marks for his good behaviour, and as cautioners for this he produced William Leslie of Wardis and Alexander Gordon of Lesmoir. William Leith was possibly succeeded by his son Patrick, who had married Jean Leslie of Balquhain. The date of William's death is uncertain, but his grandson – also Patrick – was served heir to his grandfather in 1620. This suggests that the second Patrick may have been a posthumous child. Patrick remained in possession of Lickleyhead for some years; in 1622 he was at feud with John Forbes of Leslie over their

rights in the muir of Bennachie, and the head rowme (or field) of Lickleyhead (Privy Council, XII, 368). The quarrel was confounded, as so many quarrels between country neighbours are, by shooting rights – especially the shooting of ‘dookis and draikes’. One of the complaints against John Forbes was that on one of his forays he ‘killed three dookis with one schott’.

Whether it was such behaviour on the part of his neighbour – ‘not only a damned poacher, but a damned good poacher’ – that put Patrick Leith out of conceit with Lickleyhead we do not know, but it was sold: sold in 1625 according to tradition; before 1629 according to the date on the house; and by 1649 according to a charter (Great Seal, IX no. 548); and sold to that same John Forbes of Leslie.

John Forbes of Leslie, the new owner of Lickleyhead, was descended from the Forbes of Monymusk (Table II). He was twice married, first to Anne Leslie, and secondly to Margaret Skene. Anne Leslie was the daughter of Lord Lindores and widow of George Leslie of Leslie, who was the last Leslie to hold the Barony and who died deeply in debt. John Forbes found it convenient to take both the land and the lady. However, it was not his first wife, but his second, Margaret Skene, who came to Lickleyhead and whose initials together with his are carved over the entrance to the tower. And it was John Forbes who between 1625 and 1630 carried out the remodelling of the old tower by the addition of the new stair tower and cap house, and the small turrets on the north side. John Forbes was a staunch covenanter and was to ally himself with Alexander Fraser of Muchal, as Castle Fraser was then called. A long building history at Castle Fraser was coming to an end and Alexander Fraser was shortly to be raised to the peerage. It seems more than mere coincidence that one feature – the two-storied round turrets with oval windows in the upper floor – should only be found in Aberdeenshire at Lickleyhead and Castle Fraser.

The children of the second marriage founded families at Balfuig and Auquhorthies, and it was John Forbes’ son by his first marriage who succeeded to lands of Leslie and Lickleyhead. This was William Forbes. He is frequently confused with a natural son of John Forbes, who was responsible for the murder of Alexander Irvine of Kingcausie. This son, variously known as ‘William’ or ‘Alexander’, hoped for the reward of 3,000 marks offered by the Estates for the laird of Kingcausie, but on Irvine’s resisting Forbes shot him. Later in 1645 when living at Lickleyhead, Forbes lost his right hand through the explosion of a gun he was holding, and Spalding was not alone in considering this to be a Divine Judgement (Spalding 1851, 397).

However, to return to the legitimate William Forbes 2 of Leslie: as Lickleyhead had been rebuilt by his father he contented himself with re-building Castle Leslie where in 1661 he started the last of the Aberdeen tower-houses, now in a shamefully ruined state. At his death William left two sons, John Forbes 3 of Leslie and David. John had a family of six daughters, and on his death Leslie passed to David, the 4th Forbes laird, who sold it. Lickleyhead remained in the family for a further generation, passing to John’s eldest daughter, Margaret Forbes. Margaret married her distant cousin, Archibald Forbes of Putachie, youngest son of William, 12 Lord Forbes, and Jean Campbell of Calder, his wife. Archibald Forbes, who died in 1723, appears still to have been at Lickleyhead in 1693, as in that year he signed an inventory at Castle Forbes as ‘Archibald Forbes of Lickleyhead’ but by 1701 it had been sold and was then in the possession of William Hay. It seems to have remained with him until 1723 when it was sold to Patrick Duff, then of Craigston.

Patrick Duff, uncle of 1 Earl of Fife, was married twice, having thirty-six children, twenty-three of them by Mary Urquhart of Meldrum, his second wife. It was to his youngest son by the first marriage, also Patrick, that he left Lickleyhead. Patrick Duff died in 1763, and the 18th-century wing and alterations probably date from soon after his succession in 1731, as he had sold the property before his death.¹

Lickleyhead passed to Thomas Gordon and thence to Elizabeth Ogilvie, who married Rear-Admiral John Maitland. By him it was sold to Henry Lumsden of Auchendoir, and it was probably he who was responsible for the early 19th-century wing. In 1856 it passed to his grandson, Hugh Lumsden of Clova and Auchendoir, who in 1876 restored the house without doing too much damage – his activities were largely confined to the roof. The Lumsden connection was not to last and in 1922 the house was bought by Don Guillermo de Landa y Escamdon. It became the home of his daughter Maria Luz de Landa, Mme de Mier, known throughout the county as ‘the Grande Luz’. As her second husband Mme de Mier had married William Arbuthnot-Leslie of Warthill. Lickleyhead is now the home of their daughter, Mistress Marie-Luz Arbuthnot-Leslie, wife of Anthony Stainton, and history has come full circle, for according to a passage in ‘*Laureus Lesleana*’ the Leslies of Warthill are descended from the Leiths of Lickleyhead.

‘Ex numerosa hac prole filius natu maximus Stephanus secundus de Warthle sibi consortem adsicuit Margaritam Leith, Patritij Domine de Lickleyhead filiam, ex qua cum binis filiabus nati sunt ei totide filij, natu major Guilielmus tertius de Warthle.’

DESCRIPTION (pl 21)

As it stands today, Lickleyhead consists of a rectangular tower, 35 ft long by 25 ft broad with a stair tower, 17 ft square, attached to the SW angle. The rectangular tower contains four floors, the lower of which is vaulted, and the stair tower contains five, although its height is no greater than that of the main block. The main tower, as is usual, has its long axis running east-west and has two two-floored rounds, one on each of the northern angles. The walls are of rubble with dressings of granite. Overlapping the SE angle of the tower is a two-floored 18th-century wing running north-south and measuring 49 ft long by 18 ft broad. Projecting from its E wall is an early 19th-century wing some 21 ft square.

The oldest part of the castle now standing is the rectangular tower though it is doubtful if any of this dates from earlier than the Leith purchase of Lickleyhead in 1499; the most likely building period being the second half of the 16th century, when in the 1560s William Leith was laird. Whoever the builder was, the house then seems to have consisted of a small rectangular tower. The ground floor had a vaulted corridor running the length of the S side with the entrance at the SE end and two vaulted cellars on the north. The staircase – and a separate stair tower seems unlikely – would have been the mural turnpike in the SE corner. This still exists as the secondary stair. The internal stair did not reach to the ground floor, and access to the first floor would have been by means of an external wooden staircase to an entrance at first-floor level. At this period the kitchen seems to have been in a separate building, and if this were so it would argue in favour of an external entrance to the Hall floor.

If this is the correct interpretation of the 16th-century house, it is clear that by the time John Forbes bought it in 1625 it was both inconvenient and old-fashioned.

The Forbes alterations involved little in the way of structural alterations to the old tower. With the exception of the addition of the rounds to the northern corners of the two upper floors and the probable rebuilding of the roof, work was concentrated on a new tower at the SW corner, which provided a new entrance and stair to the main floor, a further stair to serve the upper floors, and three new bedchambers each with its own fireplace and closet. The new stair formed in the external angle between the two towers was originally surmounted by a small square cap-house which has at some later date been removed. This is unfortunate as it destroys the vertical emphasis which should be such a strong element in the design of Lickleyhead when seen from the north-west.

Although during the 16th and 17th centuries Lickleyhead would have had a courtyard surrounded by a reasonably strong wall, it seems to have been designed as a secure rather than a defensive house – the home of a laird rather than the semi-public mansion of a great magnate – and nowhere is this more evident than in the total absence of gun loops. These in fact occur far less frequently than is generally supposed, and in Aberdeenshire in the 17th century were becoming something of a rarity. Of course, every house with any pretensions to gentility boasts a number of ‘shot-holes’. Lickleyhead is no exception, claiming twelve; four in each of the rounds, one in each

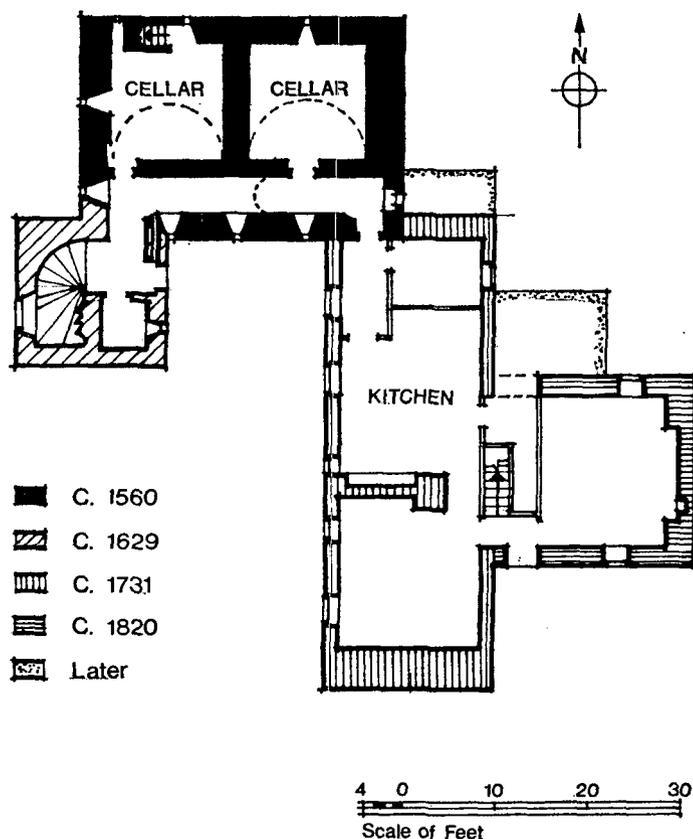


FIG 2 Plan of ground-floor level

of the chamber closets, and one under the cellar stairs. Once one of these holes has been filled by a gun barrel the marksman is firing blind, and although the chance of hitting three passing ‘dookis with one schott’ is a distinct possibility it is a slim foundation upon which to build a theory of defensive architecture. Nor do the proponents of this theory explain why it is so frequently necessary to lie flat on the latrine floor to shoot and why the shot has to go into the fresh air anything up to fifty feet above ground level.

The explanation is of course much more prosaic. These are not shot-holes but ventilation holes: the medieval latrine with its open shaft and strong draught did not suffer from underventilation but with the advent of the night box and the closed stool the problem must have become acute. Glazing in most windows at this period was fixed, so whether there were fixed windows (as in the

closets in the rounds), or no windows (as in the tower chamber closets), ventilation, other than through the chambers themselves, was necessary. This was provided by means of these so-called 'shot-holes', which could either be left open, or provided with wooden shutters or stoppers should the draught prove intolerable.

As altered by John Forbes, Lickleyhead became a comfortable and convenient Laird's house. The entrance with its moulded granite head and jambs is surmounted by a moulded granite frame with the date 1629 and the initials I F M S (John Forbes, Margaret Skene) carved on it. The space enclosed by this frame is empty but would have been designed to contain some carved or heraldic panel. Internally the entrance door was secured by a drawer bar and an iron yett. The drawer bar-hole is peculiar in that it passes through the wall so that the bar can be withdrawn into the cellar passage.

Immediately inside the entrance is a square lobby with the main stair to the Hall ahead. To the left and partly under the stairs is a small porter's room with a narrow window overlooking the entrance court. To the right is the entry to the lower floor of the main tower – the doorway separating the entry from the cellar passage is a later insertion. The cellar passage, which is barrel vaulted, runs the length of the S side of the tower. Three narrow windows open on to the courtyard, and at the SE corner is the original entrance. The doorways in the cellarage are flat headed with chamfered jambs and lintels. Both cellars have stone barrel vaults: the E cellar has no features, but in the W cellar is an inserted staircase leading up to the Hall – presumably this dates from the 1626–9 alterations. A cellar with such a stair can usually be assumed to have been the wine cellar.

The position of the 17th-century kitchen at Lickleyhead has not yet been resolved other than the certainty that it must have been in a detached building. Had it been incorporated in a tower of this sort its proper position would have been in the W cellar. This would have brought the kitchen lum to the opposite end of the house from the Hall lum. The reason for this seems to have been the provision of a primitive form of central heating. Both fires being in almost constant use, the tremendous heat that built up in the lums could be used to provide background heat at opposite ends of the house. This would have been standard planning, but not only is there no sign of there ever having been a kitchen in the W cellar, there is no room in the gable wall above, which is comparatively thin, to provide the space needed for the lum. Similarly there is no sign of the E cellar having been used as a kitchen. Here the gable wall would have been thick enough to have contained a kitchen lum had it not been for the space being occupied by the Hall fireplace and lum above. In any case the heat generated by two such lums in the same gable in any but the largest buildings would have been intolerable. The kitchen must have been either in a detached structure – this would certainly have been the arrangement in the 16th century – or in a small single-floored building attached to the SE corner of the tower, on the site of part of the 18th-century wing and making use of the 16th-century external door. This would seem to be the most logical arrangement, and would go some way to explain the very large chimney wall which divides the wing.

From the entrance the stair rises as an irregular turnpike of reducing width to the first-floor landing. Four square-head doorways with chamfered jambs and lintels open off this landing; one into the Hall, one on to the turret stair, and two into small closets. These closets, one of which is over the porter's room and the other over the lower part of the stair, seem to have been intended as service rooms in connection with the Hall – possibly fulfilling the role of buttery and pantry. The Hall door is original, double-boarded with nails and diagonal scratch lines. The fact that this door is generally the only original one to survive in houses of this period can be explained by the later subdivision of the Hall which so often took place. The subdivision was to a standard plan,

the Hall door now separating the stair landing from an inner lobby. The door survived because there was no need to replace it.

John Forbes' Hall occupied the whole of the first floor, and measured some 24 ft long by 20 ft wide. With the exception of the fireplace, all the original features are covered by the later panelling. The planning of the Hall is standard for this type of building. At the lower end are the service arrangements with the stairs and door from the wine cellar; the fenestration was generous, two windows – one of which may be a later enlargement – in the N wall, a large one in the S wall (probably a conversion of the original first-floor entrance), a small one in the embrasure beside

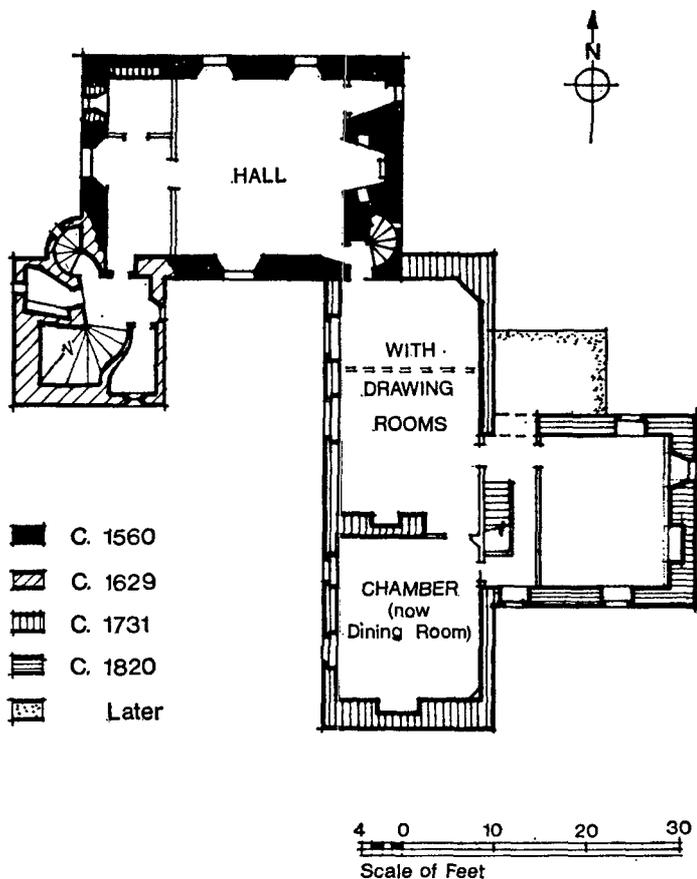


FIG 3 Plan of first-floor level

the fireplace in the E wall, and one in the centre of the W wall – the smaller window in the W wall is a later addition. With the exception of the W window in the N wall, all windows were protected by iron grills, the holes for which remain in the jambs, cills and heads. In the SE corner of the Hall is a doorway giving access on to the mural stair and to the upper floor of the 18th-century wing. With the provision of the new stair and tower the original stair became the private stair from the upper end of the Hall to the Laird's room above.

The fireplace in the E wall has a number of interesting features: the jambs and lintel are bull-nosed, and on either side of the opening in the ingoing of each jamb is an aumbry, each originally fitted with doors. That on the N side is square and at right angles to the plane of the

wall, but that on the S side is set at right angles to the splay of the jamb. It also extends through to the private staircase, though whether this is original or whether it is a case of two back-to-back aumbries being joined is impossible to determine – the latter, however, seems to be the more likely solution. At the back of the hearth the wall is formed with a triangular stone block (a section of a pyramid) against which to stack logs on end, thus forming an extremely efficient fire. This is a comparatively rare survival. If there had ever been an elaborately carved stone chimney-piece and shelf it would have been closed off to make way for the later panelling.

On the upper floors of the main tower the arrangements were simple. The second floor, reached both from the private stair which rose no further and from the main turret stair, was devoted entirely to the Laird's Room with its fireplace in the E gable. There are two closets in

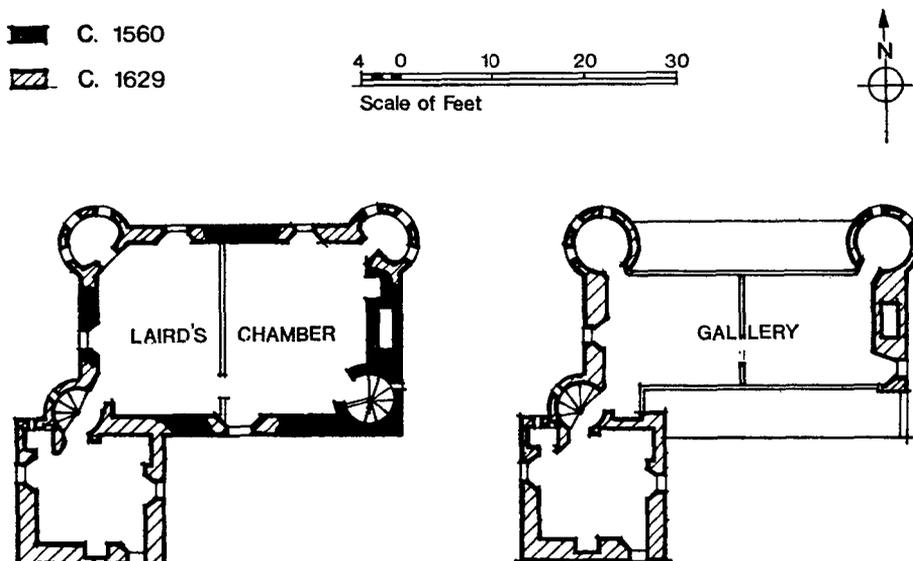


FIG 4 Plan of second-floor level

the lower floors of the rounds opening of this room, each one liberally endowed with ventilation holes. The floor above, which is formed in the roof space, was probably designed as a gallery, as was so often the case, and only subdivided into chambers later. The closets in the upper part of the rounds, which open off this floor, are lit by small fixed oval lights. This and the absence of any ventilation holes at this level suggests that this floor was not intended to provide bedrooms.

The accommodation in the tower, except for the missing cap-house, provides few surprises. The three chambers, each about 12 ft sq and each with its granite chimney-piece, are neat and commodious. In the NE corner of each one is a small closet designed as a garde-robe and to accommodate the closed-stool. All these closets are provided with a wall recess to take the necessary lamp and dry grass and a ventilation hole. Nothing could be neater.

The greatest interest of Lickleyhead at this period lies in the external detailing. Whilst it is clear that considerable thought has gone into the planning even within the limits imposed by a small tower-house, it is in the use of certain features on the exterior that one sees a rather more sophisticated hand at work than was general in the smaller towers.

Apart from the entrance already discussed, the decoration is concentrated on the dormers, the stair turret and the rounds. With the exception of the western one on the N front all the dormers have steep triangular pedimented heads, the exception being semicircular: all are ornamented

with three balusters, two at the springing and one on the apex, and the sloping sides of the triangular heads are ornamented with scrolled devices – a similar feature is to be seen at Castle Fraser, and balustered and scrolled dormers are found at Drum, a house associated with the designer of Castle Fraser. The stair turret, supported on seven tiers of corbelling, springs from a knob treated with formalised acanthus decoration.

However, it is in the two rounds that the greatest interest lies. Rounds of course in themselves are so common as to be of little extra interest, but rounds which rise through two floors are exceptional, and are normally only found in houses of the greatest consequence and architectural pretensions – Castle Fraser, Craigievar, The Earl's Palace at Kirkwall and Glamis are all of this class, and the first two are associated with the same family of masons, the Bells. Lickleyhead has no such pretensions; nevertheless the rounds rise through two floors and are derived from the Castle Fraser models. The arrangement of the fenestration, square windows with intervening ventilation holes on the lower floor and oval lights, or more properly pointed ovoids, on the upper floor are so similar as to be a direct copy, and it is difficult not to assume that the design of Lickleyhead was the work of John Bell, the master mason of Castle Fraser and possibly of Drum and Craigievar.

Between the purchase of Lickleyhead in 1723 by Patrick Duff of Craigston and the death of his son, also Patrick, forty years later the house underwent a major transformation. The interiors of the old tower were re-cast, and a new wing of two floors was built at right angles to it. The first floor of the old tower was re-planned in a manner which is now becoming recognised as standard. The Hall was reduced in size by about a third, the lower end being partitioned into a lobby opening off the head of the main stair, and a small closet or chamber, the remainder forming a Great Chamber. The partitions were timber framed and covered with panelling. The two smaller rooms have lost their original panelling, but the Great Chamber still remains largely intact, and was carefully restored by Don Guillermo de Landa when he bought the house in the 1920s. The bolection moulded panelling is arranged in three tiers above a plain skirting. There is no chair rail and the original deep box cornice which must have existed at one time has disappeared. The panelling is checked round the fireplace opening which is surmounted by a moulded cornice section chimney-shelf – although this appears to date from Don Guillermo's repairs. The panelling is painted a deep sage green, and this, according to oral tradition, is the colour that it always has been.

On the floor above there are remains of bolection panelling on the N, E and S walls which suggest that *this floor remained undivided in the Duff alterations, and that it was not until the 19th century that it was made into two rooms.*

The new wing was designed to provide kitchens and service rooms on the ground floor with an entrance from the courtyard in the W wall, and access for service into the cellar passage. Later alterations of the 19th and 20th centuries have obscured all the earlier features. On the upper floor this wing is now divided into two rooms, a drawing-room and a dining-room, but this does not seem to have been the original arrangement. The fielded panelling in the drawing-room, which opens off the Great Chamber at the foot of the private stair, has been considerably altered and re-fitted together. The splayed angle in the NE corner appears to conceal a corner fireplace, the chimney of which perches insecurely on the crow-steps of the E gable of the tower house. As originally planned, what is now the drawing-room appears to have been divided into an ante-room and private room, with a large bed-chamber beyond. This last room is now the dining-room, and preserves no original features, having been re-decorated this century in the best Maples-Georgian, although the chimney piece is a late 18th-century one of an Edinburgh pattern, brought from the Arbutnot-Leslie house at Warhill by the Grande Luz.

The Duff re-planning was not extensive enough to satisfy the requirements of the 19th century and further additions were made to the house. Judging by the surviving trim these date from c 1825–30 and were probably the work of Henry Lumsden of Auchendoir, who had bought Lickleyhead from the Ogilvie-Maitlands. These alterations involved building a new wing at right angles to the Duff house containing a further kitchen on the ground floor and a large room of unspecified use, but with a decent chair-rail, cornice and chimney-piece, on the floor above. The large bed-chamber at the S end of the Duff wing became the dining-room, and in order to provide adequate service access most of the E wall of the Duff wing was removed, and a staircase and landing formed in its place. The staircase has rather better detailing than would normally be found on a backstair, and it is possible that this wing was designed for occasional occupation when the rest of the house was shut up.

Like so many houses of this type, Lickleyhead was landscaped in the last century. All vestiges of the courtyard and its attendant service buildings were swept away, and it is impossible to tell what has gone. Apart from the detached kitchen there must have been store rooms, a bakehouse and brewhouse, a dairy, a byre and some stabling, together with the courtyard wall and gatehouse. There is a serious need to excavate the undamaged site of such a courtyard, for until this is done it is impossible to see these small tower-houses in their proper context.

NOTE

- 1 Patrick Duff of Premnay, son of Patrick Duff of Craigston, married his cousin, Margaret Duff, in 1721. She was the daughter and heiress of William Duff of Braco and only ten years old at the time. Patrick Duff was her guardian and considerably older than she was. The marriage was to secure her future.

REFERENCE

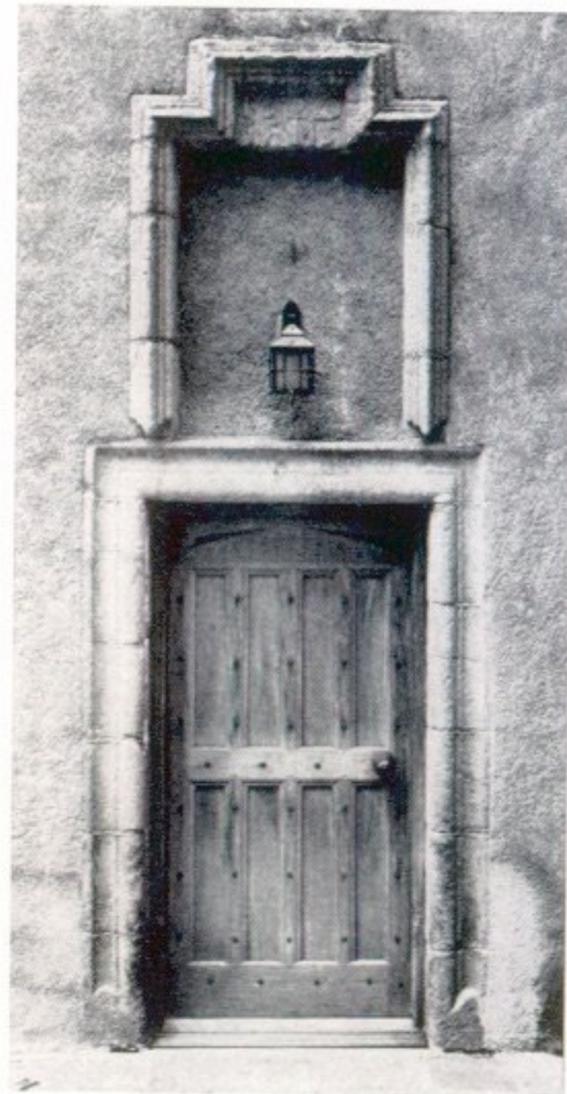
Spalding, John 1851 *Memorials of the Troubles in Scotland*, vol II. Spalding Club.



a View from SW



b View from NW



c Entrance