THE DEVELOPMENT OF DUNNOTTAR CASTLE

By W. DOUGLAS SIMPSON

Considered by themselves, the buildings of Dunnottar Castle (pl. I) are none of them imposing, and were they planted on the level mainland they certainly would not rank among the foremost of Scotland's baronial ruins. Rather their impressiveness is due to the sheer enormous mass of the peninsular rock that they crown, and to the picturesque variety in which the shattered towers and gables group themselves against the sea horizon as one views the castle from different angles. But to the student of Scottish architecture these Dunnottar ruins are of the highest interest, for they show us every stage in the development of the castle from the earthworks of the twelfth century to the palatial halls and elaborate domestic accommodation that speak of the refinement of upper-class life during the spacious days which intervened between the Union of the Crowns and the outbreak of the Civil War.[1]

As its name indicates, the rock of Dunnottar was the site of a prehistoric *dun* or fort, which served as a place of refuge for the inhabitants of the 'laich' or plain of the Mearns. It is therefore remarkable that, so far as excavation has gone, no relics assignable to prehistoric times appear to have been discovered. But along part of the southern brink of the rock lies a great blanket of midden deposit which probably will include rubbish thrown out by the inhabitants through the whole period of occupation. Until this mass has been sifted, we must be content to remain in ignorance of much, especially in regard to the remoter history of the site.

Such an important early centre of population would inevitably attract the first Christian missionaries; and the position on a storm-beaten, sea girt

[1] For detailed descriptions of the ruins, see D. MacGibbon and T. Ross, *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, i (1887), pp. 562-73; D. G. Barron, *The Castle of Dunnottar and its History* (1925), pp. xv-xxxiii (by W. Mackay Mackenzie and G. P. H. Watson); and my own *Dunnottar Castle* (4th edition, 1937).

promontory is such as specially appealed to the austere clerics of the Celtic Church. Hence the fact that the earliest recorded church on the rock bore the name of St. Ninian, together with St. Ninian's Den and Well in the immediate vicinity, and the presence on a neighbouring stack of a group of sculptured symbol stones of a type frequently found at old Pictish ecclesiastical sites—all these things seem to indicate the influence of the pre-Columban Church in Pictland that took its origin in St. Ninian's mission from *Candida Casa* (Whithorn) at the beginning of the fifth century.[1]

Dunnottar rock figures as a storm centre during the wild period of the Viking invasions in the tenth century. Here in 900 King Donald II MacConstantine fell in battle with the heathen hordes. 'Upon the brink of the waves in the east he sleeps in his gory bed', so sang a poet of the time.

With the advent of the strong kings of the Canmore dynasty, and the re-fashioning of Scotland upon an Anglo-Norman feudal basis, more settled conditions supervened. Already in the reign of William the Lion (1165-1214), Dunnottar had become established as the administrative centre of the Mearns; and at the same period *le castiel de Dunostre* figures as the scene of marvellous events in the old French *Romance of Fergus*. The castle of that time would be a thing of earthwork and timber, a palisaded mound crowned by a wooden tower, of the kind portrayed to us on the Bayeux Tapestry, and everywhere in use during the Norman penetration of Scotland. Part of this *motte* or earthen mound still survives, no doubt, in the high scarped knoll, known in the seventeenth century as the 'Mountheid', which overlooks the gatehouse (see plan, pl. II).[2] Parish church and castle side by side mark the footsteps of the Norman wherever he went, and so at Dunnottar the early parochial place of worship closely adjoined William the Lion's castle on the rock. A fortunate record preserves the fact that this church was consecrated in 1276; and to that period

[1] See my *The Celtic Church in Scotland* (1935), pp. 54-5, and my *St. Ninian and the Origins of the Christian Church in Scotland* (1940), pp. 99-100.

[2] The 'Mount' or *motte* at Tynemouth Castle occupies an exactly similar position on its peninsular site.

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PLATE I

DUNNOTTAR CASTLE : GENERAL VIEW FROM THE WEST

By courtesy of the Rev. Dr. D. G. Barron and Messrs. Blackwood, Edinburgh

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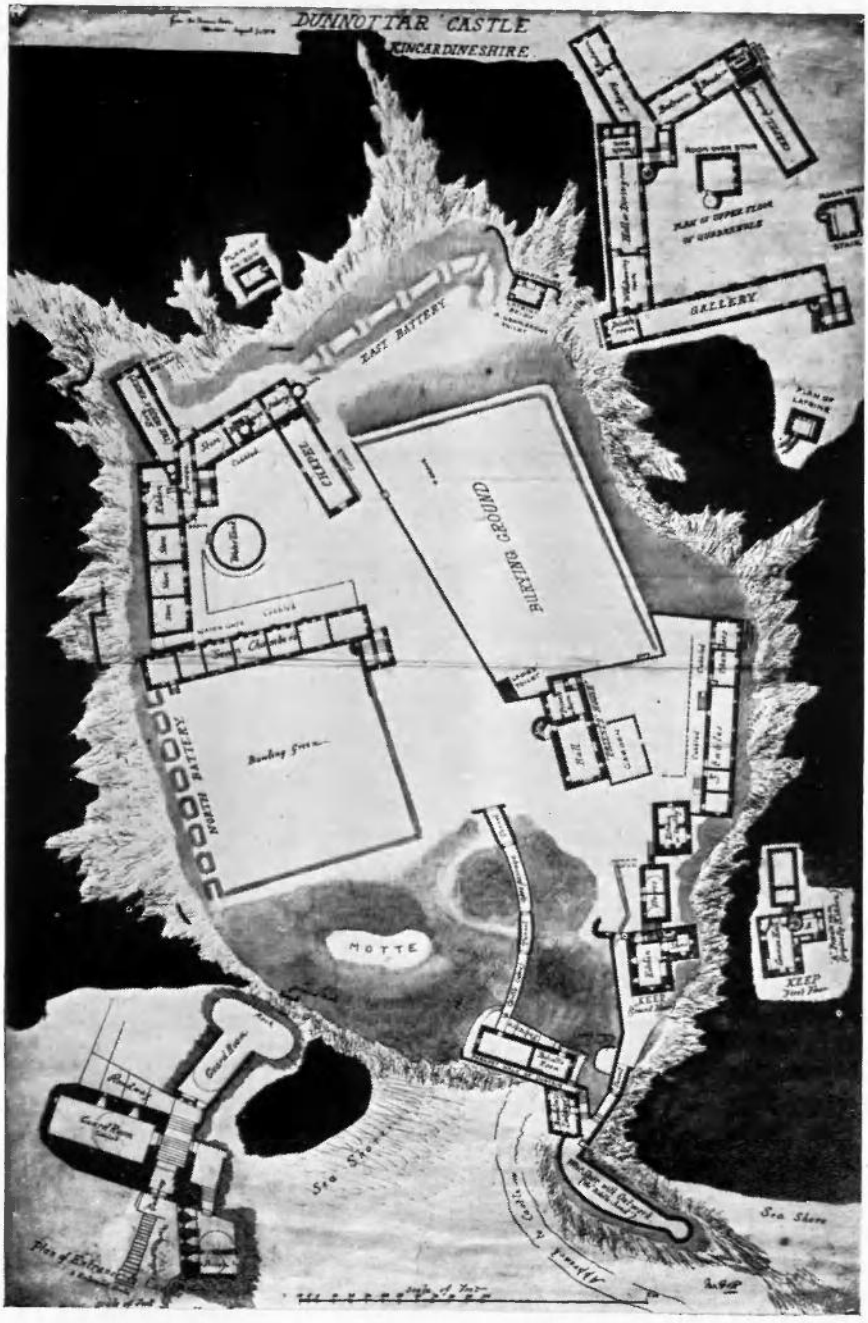


DUNNOTTAR CASTLE : GENERAL PLAN

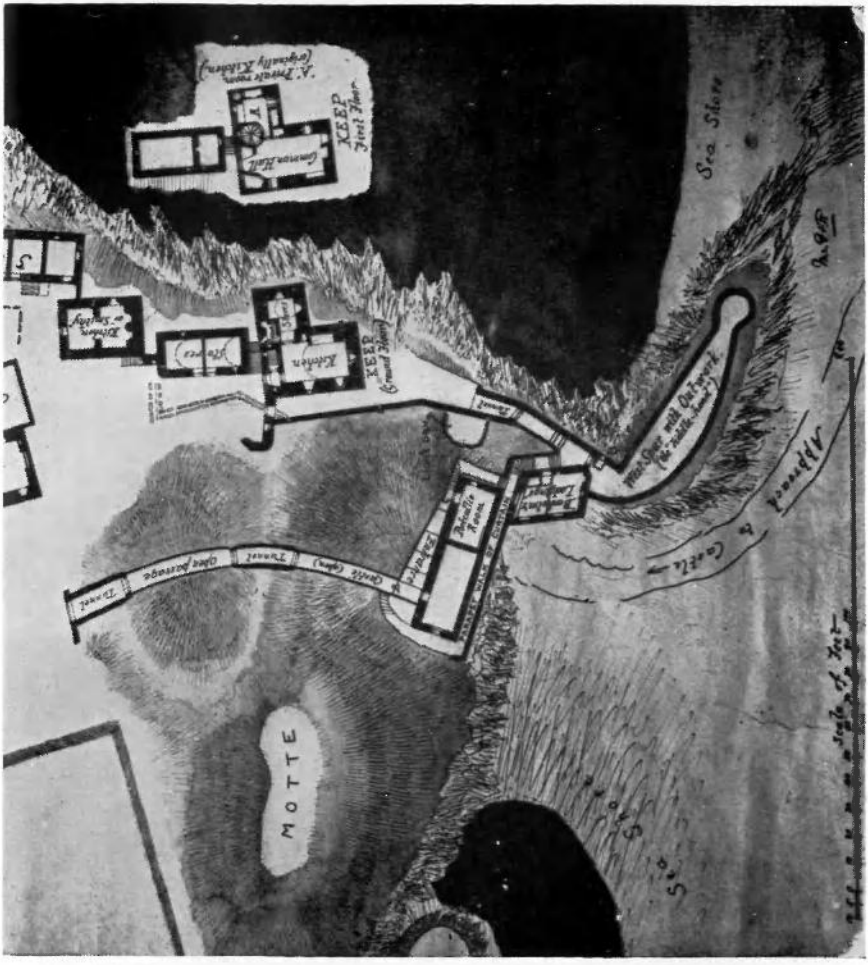
belong a couple of lancet windows, in the First Pointed style, still to be seen in the south wall of the present castle chapel.

In the Wars of Independence Dunnottar Castle played a notable part. Now for the first time, in the year 1336, documentary evidence of stone fortifications is forthcoming; though it is unlikely that any masonry of that early date survives in the present ruins, with the exception of the two chapel windows aforesaid. In 1346 the fifth Earl of Sutherland received a licence from David II to erect a fortalice on the rock; but it does not seem that this permission was ever acted upon. The oldest portions of the existing military works appear to be the thick frontal curtain wall with its portcullised entrance, and the massive tower-house. These will have been erected by Sir William de Keith, Marischal of Scotland, at the time of his famous quarrel about the rock with the Bishop of St. Andrews, which was decided by a bull of Pope Benedict XIII in 1395. The trouble lay in the fact that the Earl by his fortifications had impeded access to the sacred precincts on the rock, and therefore the frontal curtain had doubtless already been built; the tower-house perhaps, is a little later.

As we have it, the elaborate gatehouse (see plans, pls. II and III) dates from the end of the sixteenth century, and doubtless it is the work of the fifth Earl Marischal. The tall building flanking the entrance, known as Benholm's lodging, with its wide-mouthed gunloops; the long winding passage within; the two tunnels; and the guard-room with its embrasured screen are all of about this date. On the other hand, the frontal curtain with its arched and portcullised entry is manifestly much more ancient, and as has been suggested above, may date from the end of the fourteenth century. The question thus arises: how was the access to the summit of the rock managed at that early period? Did it follow the lines of the present sunk and tunnelled roadway, or had it a different course? An answer to this question, I think, is suggested by the buildings on the Fiddlehead, as the narrow spine of rock, projecting landwards from the tower-house, is called. In the southern angle of this work is a retaining wall,

the lower part of which, pierced by a postern, has all the aspect of an early date. So has the thick wall which runs northward from the tower-house across the root of the Fiddlehead. Having regard to all the circumstances, therefore, it seems probable that in the fifteenth century the ascent to the castle area turned right immediately inside the gateway, and, climbing steeply up the back of the present Benholm's Lodging,—on the lines of what is now the stair (seen to the right in pl. IV) descending to the wall walk of the curtain—approached the tower-house *via* the neck of the Fiddlehead. A relic of this earlier access must be the stair (to the left in pl. IV) behind the portcullis room, which at present is almost meaningless, descending now only to a small post which would enable a harquebusier to command from the rear the middle or transverse length of the existing entrance passage. I imagine that the original stair came up behind the portcullis room, round its southern gable, and so connected with the wall walk on the curtain and the stair leading from it up to the Fiddlehead. The tunnel at present spanning the neck of the Fiddlehead is probably of the sixteenth century. But why was so costly a structure erected for the defence of a passage which at present only leads from the castle garth out to the spur-work on the Fiddlehead ? It seems difficult to escape the conclusion that when this tunnel was made the new entrance did not exist, and that the tunnel was intended to bar what at that time was the sole access to the castle area—leading up from the gateway to the neck of the Fiddlehead, and hence through the tunnel and past the tower-house to the rock platform.

The above supposition also explains the location of the tower-house, which is thus seen to stand athwart the original approach to the summit of the rock. The thick wall running northward from the tower-house secured its precincts on the opposite side. Thus in the original scheme the tower-house lay in a triangular courtyard or close, between walls, north and east, and the brink of the cliff to the south, and reached from the west by a narrow and tortuous stair coming up from the main entrance. In this scheme the postern formed a convenient emergency access from Oldhall Bay,



DUNNOTTAR CASTLE: PLAN OF GATEHOUSE, GREAT TOWER, ETC.

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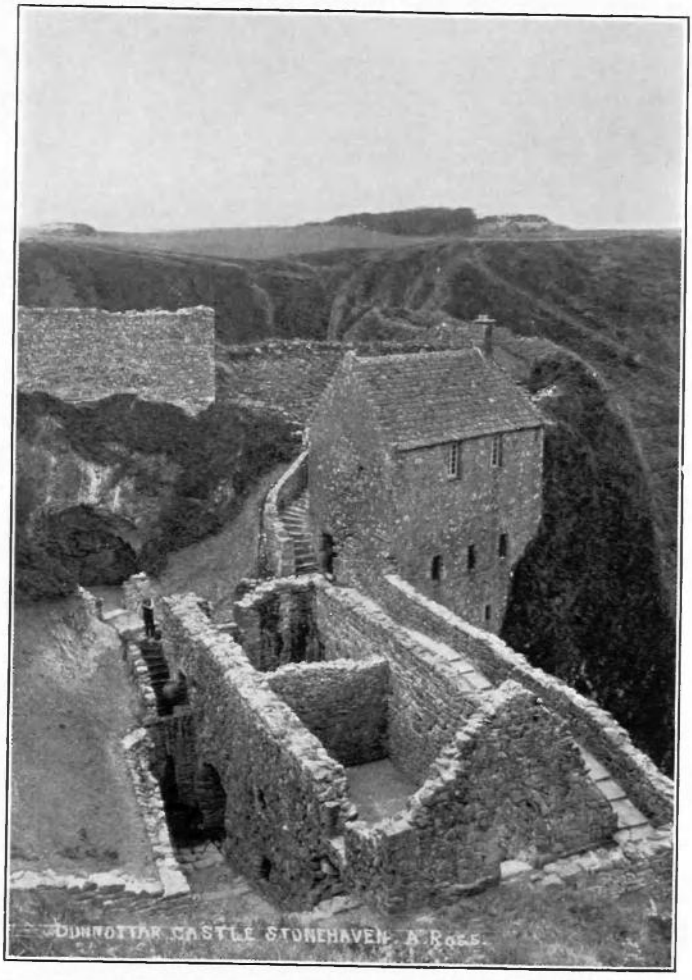

DUNNOTTAR CASTLE. VIEW OF GATEHOUSE BUILDINGS FROM THE 'MOUNTHEID'

useful for hauling up supplies brought in by sea, which otherwise would have had to be carried right round the Fiddlehead.[1]

Subsequent development at Dunnottar Castle represents a process of expansion from this early lay-out at the south-west corner of the rock.

The tower-house itself (fig. 1) is a good and well-preserved example of the characteristic Scottish L-plan. Only, as the re-entrant angle looks seawards the entrance is not here, as usual, but in the opposite face. On this secure site, the strong position offered for the door by the re-entrant angle was not so necessary, and on the other hand the tower, being turned as it were round about, extends its arms to welcome the sun, admitting the maximum amount of light into all its principal rooms.

The first step in the process of expansion took place within the tower-house itself. At some period, perhaps about the year 1500, the small kitchen alongside the hall on the first floor was found insufficient for growing culinary requirements, and so a new and larger kitchen was made in the cellar below the hall, the original kitchen being converted into a living room. The loss of storage thus entailed resulted, in due course, in the building of a block of two cellars next to the tower-house, with servants' quarters overhead.

All these buildings on the early site at the south-west corner were afterwards known collectively as the 'Old Work'.

In the latter half of the sixteenth century there was built, towards the middle of the castle area (see plan, pl. II), a self-contained house, having on the ground floor a hall and *camera* or withdrawing room, while above the latter was a chamber, reached by a spiral stair in a projecting round tower, which was corbelled out to the square overhead, in a usual Scottish manner, so as to contain a small room, served by a turret stair. This building is often called the 'Priest's House'; but that is purely a fancy name, and its other designation 'Waterton's Lodging', though more authentic, is an incidental one, due to the use of the

[1] If the above reading of the evidence be true, the fifteenth-century lay-out of gatehouse, inner court and great tower at Dunnottar, with reference to the peninsular site as a whole, will have had a considerable resemblance to that of Scarborough Castle.

house by Forbes of Waterton in the seventeenth century. The real purpose of the house was accurately surmised by Bishop Pococke, who visited Dunnottar

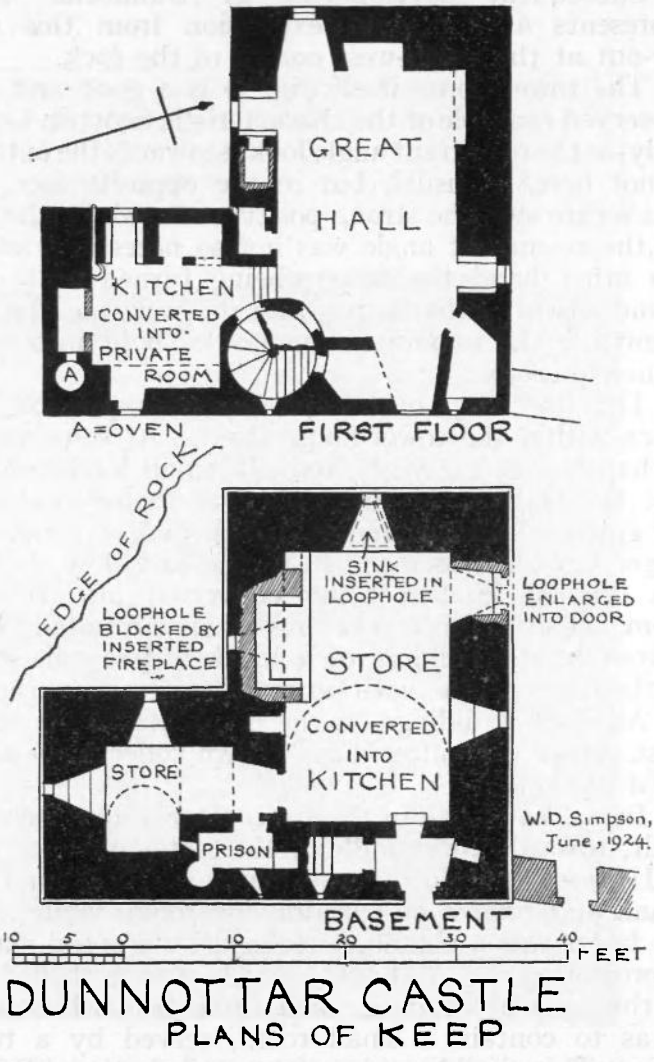

FIG. I. DUNNOTTAR CASTLE. PLANS OF THE GREAT TOWER

Castle in 1760, and describes the building as 'an entire house as if designed for a part of the family'.[1] The fourth Earl Marischal, familiarly known to his contemporaries as 'William o' the Tower', died in

[1] *Tour through Scotland*, 1760 (Scottish History Society), p. 212.

1581, and was succeeded by his grandson, George, the fifth Earl—the fourth Earl's eldest son, also William, having predeceased his father. This William, Master of Marischal, had married Elizabeth Hay, a daughter of the Earl of Erroll, and dwelt in Dunnottar along with his father. The father evidently continued to occupy the old tower-house, hence his nickname. No doubt it was for his son that the new house was built; and, as Bishop Pococke saw, it provides a complete lodging, with hall, *camera* and bedrooms, obviously designed for a separate household.[1] By contrast with the old tower-house it forms what in Scottish parlance would be called a 'ha-hoose'—i.e. a building in which the hall, not the tower, is the nucleus of the plan. Usually in such houses the hall is on the first floor, raised upon vaulted cellars; but here at Dunnottar, where ample storage was elsewhere available, cellars were not required, and the hall is thus on the ground floor.

The succession of George Keith, fifth Earl Marischal —statesman, traveller, scholar, antiquary and founder of a University—was a landmark in the development of Dunnottar Castle. For it was he who moved out from the cramped and encumbered early site at the south-west corner of his ancestral rock, and sought instead more elbow room on the still unoccupied and level north-eastern quarter, where ample space was available for the accommodation of a large household with numerous servants and guests—such as befitted a great nobleman of the time. The new building, known as the 'Palace', provided a complete habitation by itself, and is arranged in the form of a quadrangle open to the south, with a large water tank in the centre. This 'palace' (see plans, fig. 2) was erected in two stages. The oldest portion is the west range, with its staircase tower. The basement of this range contains seven lodgings or guest chambers, and over them is a long gallery, with a gallery chamber at the upper end. When the north wing of the 'palace', containing kitchen[2] and cellarage, with dining and with drawing rooms above was erected, it blocked the

[1] Cf. Barron, op. cit., p. 41.

[2] The three kitchens at Dunnottar —the original one on the main floor of the tower-house, the later one contrived in its basement, and the final one in the 'palace'—afford an instructive study in culinary development.

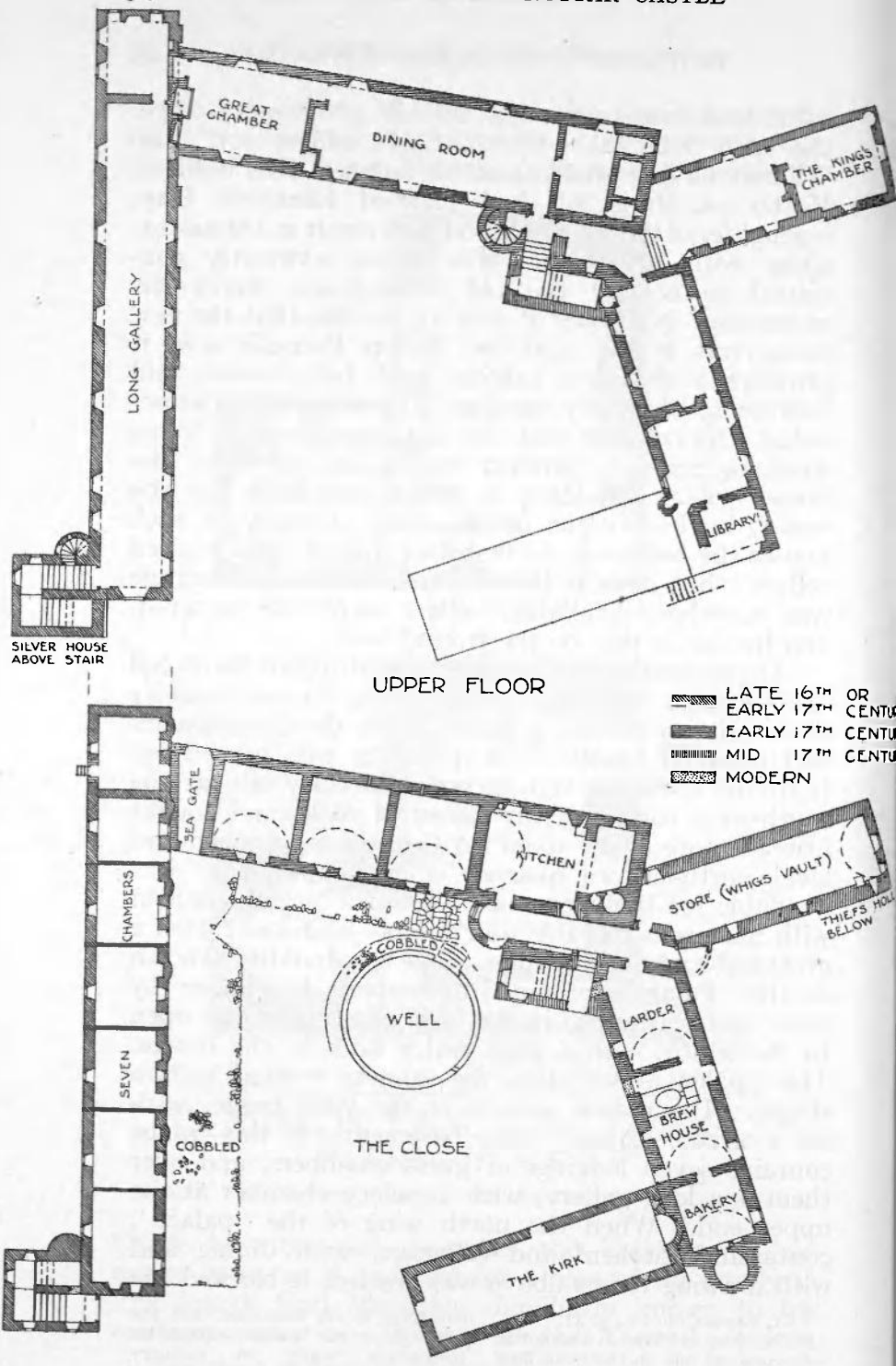

FIG 2. DUNNOTTAR CASTLE. PLANS OF THE 'PALACE'

By courtesy of the Rev. Dr. D. G. Barron and Messrs. Blackwood, Edinburgh

door of the end lodging in the west wing, so that a new door had to be slapped out on the outer side. Thus the west wing was clearly the first to be built. On the other hand its long gallery is obviously an integral part of the whole 'palace' scheme, which must have been envisaged from the outset.

As completed, the 'palace' contained the principal public rooms in its centre block, and in the east range the private rooms of the family, over the brew-house and bake-house. This east range joined up with the old parish church, which was reconstructed to form the castle chapel. Ample as was the accommodation thus provided, it was still further extended in the next century, when a long wing was built out to the north-east, containing additional private rooms, with a vaulted store below—the notorious 'Whigs' Vault' in which the Covenanters were incarcerated in 1685.

This 'palace' or 'new work' at Dunnottar Castle is a most remarkable structure, and there is nothing quite like it in Scotland. But it bears a strong general resemblance, though simpler and on a much smaller scale, to Kirby Hall in Northamptonshire (fig. 3). In both, the central portion of the quadrangle contains the hall and withdrawing room, and along one wing extends a great gallery over lodgings or guest chambers, the gallery being reached by a square stair attached diagonally to one corner. In both houses the guests in the lodgings had to cross the open court to gain the hall, which was still, in the traditional fashion, the common dining place. At Kirby the family rooms open off the dais end of the hall, from which also the gallery is entered. But at Dunnottar, although the gallery enters from the withdrawing room, or upper end of the central block, the family rooms are off the screens end of the hall. Both at Kirby and at Dunnottar the hall, following the medieval tradition, has nothing over it, and so there was no means of communication from the upper rooms on one side of the court to those opposite. To overcome this inconvenience, at Kirby in its final form, five independent staircases were provided, and at Dunnottar the two stair towers, with their associated turret stairs, are devised to meet the same difficulty. Finally, and without wishing to overdo the parallel, the extra

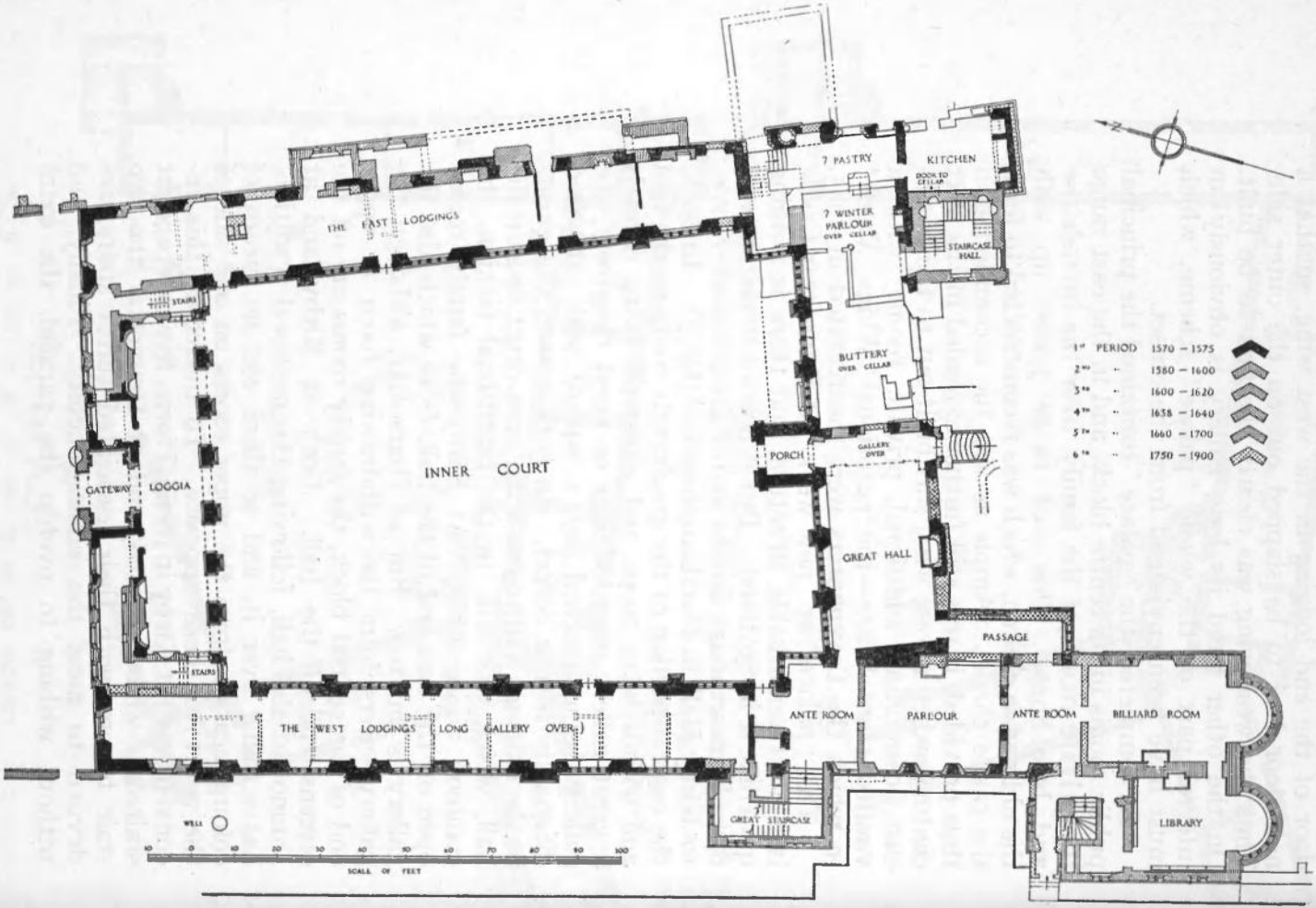

FIG. 3. KIRBY HALL. GENERAL PLAN

accommodation provided at Kirby by a subsequent building in the south-west external angle, corresponds remarkably in principle to that added in the seventeenth century in a similar situation at Dunnottar.

The rooms in this latest wing have been usually described as 'the Earl Marischal's suite', contrasted with the Countess's suite, which is supposed to consist of the rooms in the east wing of the 'palace'. These assignations, however, lack authenticity. In an eighteenth-century survey, the lodging at the east end of the north-east wing is called the King's chamber, and it is therefore thought that Charles II slept here during his visit to Dunnottar Castle in 1650. Accordingly the outer room has been dubbed the Antechamber. But the title 'King's chamber' on the old plan is obviously a secondary and incidental one, doubtless given to the room after Charles's visit. It was not designed as a royal lodging, and it is simply absurd to describe the large and well-appointed outer room as an ante-chamber. It should be noted that this room abuts on the kitchen gable, and must have borrowed a good deal of heat from its cavernous 'lum'. This circumstance probably gives the clue to the purpose of the room, which we can hardly err in recognizing as a winter parlour, a refinement which was common in the larger English houses of the period, and is generally found, for the reason which I have indicated, in the immediate neighbourhood of the kitchen.[1] Another feature which recalls Elizabethan arrangements is the presence, in the original part of the 'palace'. of a 'surveying place' or vestibule attached to the kitchen, communicating with it by a service hatch, connected with the main stair, and having a buffet for dishes. The 'surveying place' is so marked on a number of John Thorpe's plans, and it is explained by Mr. Gotch[2] as 'a serving room, where the dishes were overlooked before being taken to the hall or the winter parlour'.

It is therefore clear that the affinities of the 'palace' at Dunnottar Castle are to be sought in Elizabethan country houses. In the case of the west wing, with its lodgings below and gallery above, and

[1] J. A. Gotch, *Early Renaissance Architecture in England*, p. 62.

[2] op. cit., p. 236.

square stair of access attached to one corner, the parallel between Dunnottar and Kirby is exceedingly close, and is emphasized by the fact that no similar example exists in Scotland. There is no evidence that the Earl Marischal ever visited Kirby, and no need to suppose any connexion between the two buildings. But English influence on Scottish architecture, particularly in respect of plan, is so scarce before the Restoration period as to make this building at Dunnottar one of the highest importance. The English influence, it should be noted, is restricted to the plan : in all its architectural details, the ' palace ' is as Scotch as it could be. This is in complete contrast to the usual practice, in which minor Renaissance details, such as mouldings and plaster work and internal decorations generally, are superimposed upon houses essentially Scottish in plan.

The other buildings of Dunnottar Castle—the smithy and stables range on the south quarter of the rock and the necessary house at its eastern apex—are all of late date, and present no features of special interest.