

XI.

PITSLIGO CASTLE, ROSEHEARTY, ABERDEENSHIRE.

BY W. DOUGLAS SIMPSON, O.B.E., M.A., D.LITT.

This survey of Pitsligo Castle was made on behalf of the Buchan Field Club, and I am indebted to the Council of the Club, through the late Dr J. F. Tocher, for a grant towards the expenses. Although the Castle is one of the most important and interesting in Aberdeenshire, it has hitherto never been surveyed or described, so that the undertaking was a most suitable one for the Buchan Club to sponsor. I am particularly obliged to Dr Tocher for his interest in the work, and to Mr Geoffrey L. Goddard, B.A., formerly of King's College Library, Old Aberdeen, for assistance in making the measurements and for taking a photographic record.

Full accounts of the Forbesees of Pitsligo will be found in *The Scots Peerage* and in *The House of Forbes*, by A. and H. Tayler (Third Spalding Club). The tower-house, which is the oldest part of the Castle, is thought to have been built by the founder of the family, Sir William Forbes, on his acquiring the estate in 1424; and it has every appearance of being of about that date.

The nucleus of the Castle (see plan, fig. 1) is a massive oblong tower-house, measuring about 52 ft. in length by 37 ft. in breadth, over walls some 10 ft. thick, grouted internally and faced with large, well-coursed boulders, showing the sparing use of pinnings which characterises 15th-century rubble masonry in Scotland. On the angles and at the voids the dressings are carefully wrought in a coarse, dark red freestone, apparently from Delgaty. The tower now survives to a height of two storeys only, or about 35 ft., the topmost storey having been taken down soon after the year 1700. The basement is covered with a barrel vault, about 10 ft. high, from the crown of which still depend an iron ring and two iron shanks, all now much rusted away. On the rough plaster of the vault the marks of the "lagging," or centering boards, are still very clear. This basement vault formed a store. It is entered directly through the only doorway in the tower, placed near the south end of its eastern wall. The front portal has disappeared, and only the inner half of the entrance passage, which is about 4 ft. wide, remains, with the rear portal opening into the cellar. This doorway is round arched, 6 ft. 4 ins. high, with a 4-inch chamfer, continuous on arch and jambs, the arch being formed of three massive stones. From the entrance passage, on its north side, a straight stair, 3 ft. 6 ins. wide, now greatly ruined, ascends in the

thickness of the wall, and turning the north-east angle, entered the hall by a door, now blocked. At the opposite or western end of the cellar a loophole (afterwards enlarged into a window) opens in a wide-arched high recess, from the north side of which a narrow and roughly contrived service stair, also much ruined, 2 ft. 6 ins. wide, and roofed with sloped ascending lintels, turns the north-west angle of the tower—where it was lit by a small window,

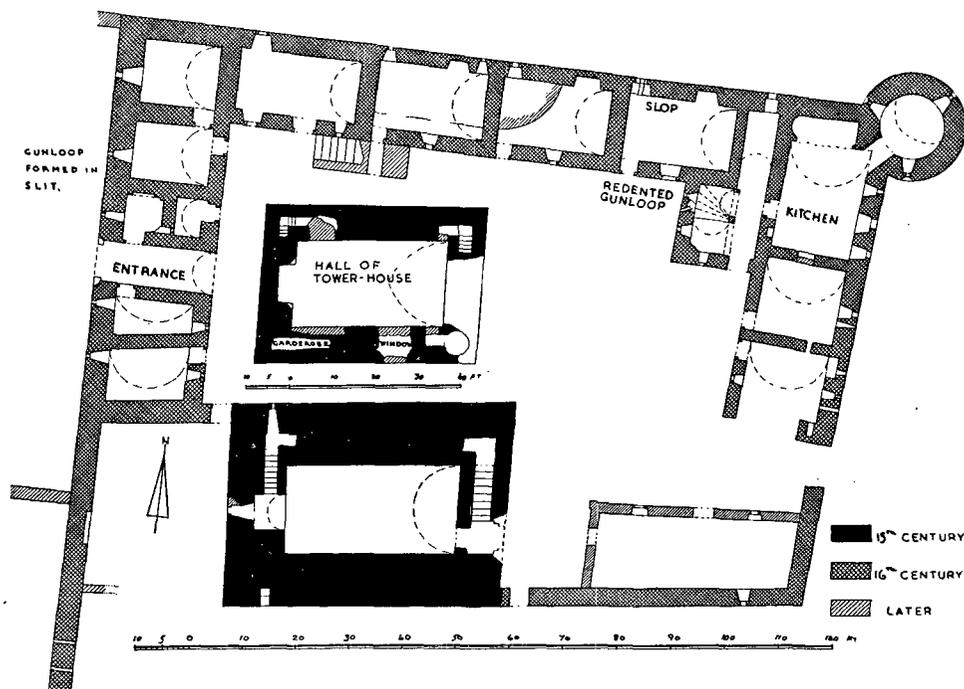


Fig. 1. Pitsligo Castle: plan.

now blocked—and emerges in the hall by a door, likewise now built up. The north side of the window arch from which this stair opens in the basement is carefully built of large freestone ashlar blocks. The enlargement of the loophole in the basement was done by cutting back the northern side; outside, a new jamb was constructed with a properly wrought rebate, the original jamb on the opposite side having a straight reveal.

The hall has measured about 36 by 20 ft. It is covered by a lofty barrel vault of pointed section, 22 ft. in height, formed with flat stones laid on their edges. In addition to the two stairway doors already alluded to, the only features of the hall that survive are the remains of the large fireplace at its western end, and the door, now blocked, leading to the spiral stair in the south-eastern corner, by which the second floor and the battlements were

reached. This staircase is now a mere empty well. The fireplace is represented only by a ragged void: jambs and "bress" have long ago been torn out. It is 4 ft. deep and has been about 10 ft. in external width. In the south wall of the hall indications of a blocked window recess may be seen, and nearer to the south-west corner there was evidently a garderobe, as shown externally by a blocked loop and by the garderobe vent, still open below: within the hall, the patching of the wall where the chamber was built up is quite visible.

At the west jamb of the blocked window a wasted iron hinge still survives, and numerous nails indicate that latterly the walls of the hall had been cased in lath and plaster.

The views of Pitsligo Castle by Fettes (*Scotia Depicta*, 1804) and James Giles (1839)¹ depict the tower very much in its present condition, except that in the former drawing the outer door is shown as yet intact, being a round arch very similar to the inner one still preserved.

In a Description of the Parish of Pitsligo, written by Mr Patrick Cook in 1723, the following interesting account of the tower is found:

"To show the simplicity and rudeness of those times: the old Tower of Pitsligo was built about three hundred years ago, eighty feet long and thirty-six feet broad; the walls 9 feet thick. It was about one hundred and fourteen foot high divided into three storeys of which two are yet standing. The whole house consisted of three rooms; the lowest was the kitchen, and is twelve foot high; the second was the eating room, and is twenty-five foot high; the third, which was taken down about twenty years ago, was the sleeping room for the whole family, and had in it twenty-four beds. Both the lower rooms were vaulted."²

In the latter half of the 16th century this tower-house was incorporated with a large quadrangular mansion, in which it occupies a position near the west end of the south front. This mansion encloses a courtyard measuring 98 ft., east and west, by 54 ft. north and south. The principal buildings lie on the west and north sides, and are continued partly on the west side; but elsewhere the design appears never to have been completed. Midway in the west front is the entry, a barrel-vaulted trance, 7 ft. 8 ins. wide and 21 ft. 10 ins. in length. At the north-east angle of the building is a bold round tower, 18 ft. 7 ins. in diameter, over walls 3 ft. 6 ins. thick. Within the courtyard, at this corner, is a square porch or staircase tower.

The basement contains the usual vaulted cellarage and offices, with a spacious kitchen in the north-east corner. Two at least of these vaults were occupied as living-rooms, as appears by the remains of enriched fireplaces, with good Gothic caps and jambs. The porch tower contained a fine

¹ *Aberdeenshire Castles*, by James Giles, R.S.A., published by the Third Sp. Club, 1936 (see Pls. XXX, XXXI).

² *Coll. Shires Aberd. and Banff*, p. 439. It will be noted that while the length and height of the tower as given are wildly out, the other dimensions are reasonably accurate.

stair, 6 ft. 4 ins. wide, turning round a solid, octagonal, ashlar-built pillar, and carried on short vaults and heavily chamfered arches. All this detail is very finely executed in freestone; the uppermost transverse arch has been carried on a very bold and massive moulded corbel. The first floor of the mansion is now greatly ruined, but the hall was in the short east wing and the withdrawing-room and private apartments extended thence along the northern range. Above this there was a third storey, partly in the roof. The round tower was of three full storeys and a garret, and contained well-appointed bedrooms. There was also a room in the upper part of the porch tower, and this and the garret must have been reached by an internal spiral stair, which appears to be represented by a huge mass of overgrown ruin.

The architectural features of the mansion are simple but good. Its masonry is typical of its period, showing a lax texture and a very free use of pinnings. The windows generally have a $2\frac{1}{2}$ -in. chamfer. In the basement of the round tower are wide-mouthed gunloops; at its eaves-level is a plain cavetto string-course, and its chimney stack has the usual offset and a weathered cope. The roof of the tower was a cone. The porch tower has two plain tabled offsets, and from a vaulted alcove under the stair, containing a slop drain and water conduit, opens a redented gunloop—a pattern not commonly found in Scotland.¹ On the porch tower are two coats of arms and the empty panel for a third. One of these shields shows the royal arms of Scotland, with the initials I.R. and the date 1577, in good Gothic lettering and numerals. The other stone is dated 1603, and has a fine presentation of the royal arms of the United Kingdom. Above the main entrance to the quadrangle is a third stone, showing the arms of Forbes and Fraser quartered (three bears' heads muzzled coupé and three fraises), impaled with those of Buchan (three garbs). Over this shield are the initials A. L. P. for Alexander, second Lord Pitsligo, and M. L. Æ, for his wife, Lady Mary Erskine, eldest daughter of the seventh Earl of Buchan. Beneath is the date 1663. One of the loopholes on the north part has been altered to serve for musketry. All the wrought detail throughout the mansion is done in red Delgaty freestone.

In front of the Castle is a large oblong forecourt, measuring about 233 by 78 ft., within massive coped walls, 7 ft. high and 3 ft. 7 ins. thick. On the west side is the outer gate, a fine semicircular archway, slightly drop-centred, 6 ft. $10\frac{1}{2}$ ins. wide and 8 ft. in height, moulded with a bold edge-roll. Over it in a reconstructed gable is a much weathered stone showing the initials of Alexander, second Lord Pitsligo, the motto HAEC · CORP · SYDERA · MENTEM,² and the date 1656.

It is sad to have to relate that the remains of this very interesting Castle

¹ For this type of gunloop see my *The Earldom of Mar*, p. 137.

² This motto is found also at Leslie Castle, Aberdeenshire, dated 1661. Some such word as DELECTANT is to be supplied.

are now in a most deplorable condition, totally uncared-for, encumbered with farmyard litter, and slowly yielding to the cumulative processes of decay. Before 1803, when Fettes published his drawing, part of the north range was reconstituted as a farmhouse, the living-rooms, above the ancient vaults, being reached by a picturesque forestair. This building, shown by Fettes with a tiled roof, was later slated, and continued to be occupied as a cottar house until a few years ago. It is now derelict, and fast hastening to join the common ruin. The topmost step of the forestair is a massive freestone, evidently from the main spiral stair of the tower-house: it is 3 ft. 10 ins. long, exclusive of the newel.

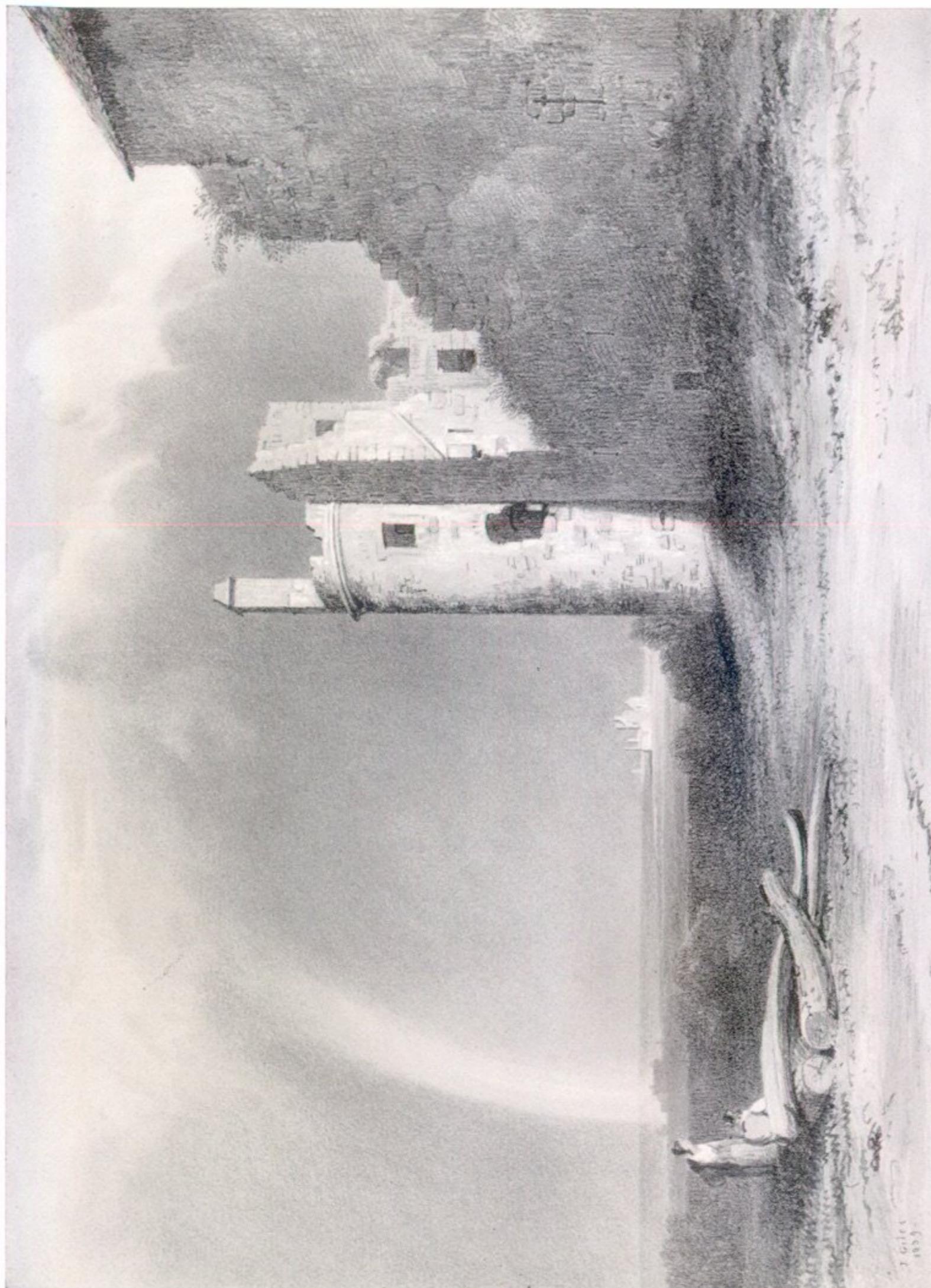
Acknowledgment is due to Mr George Chalmers, Castle Farm, Pitsligo, for courteous permission to measure and study the ruins. Previously the tenant, Mr Chalmers, last May purchased the farm from Lord Wintour, the representative of the Forbeses of Pitsligo.

CORRIGENDUM

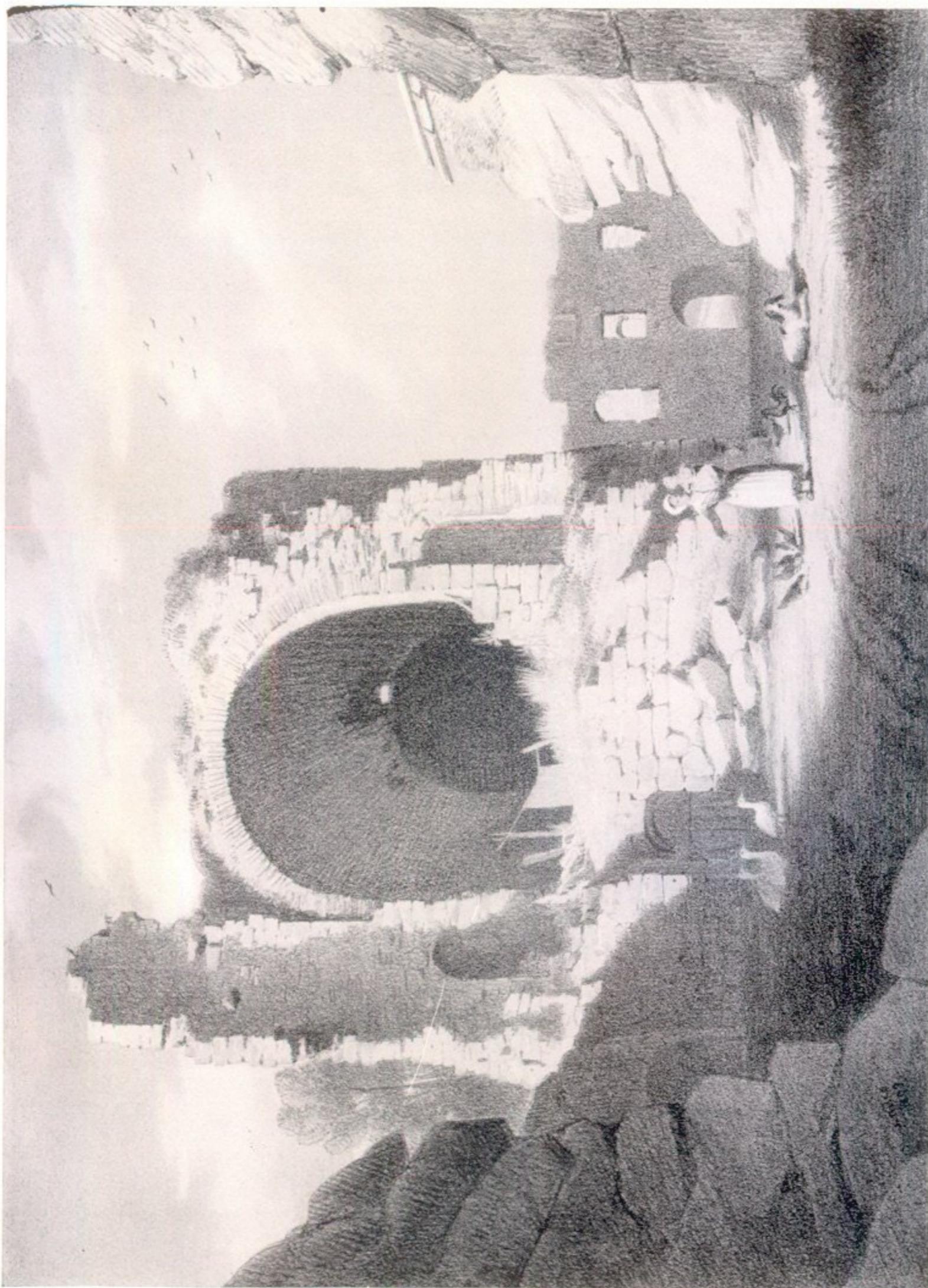
Page 129, line 13: *for* "Wintour" *read* "Clinton".



Pitsligo Castle: general view from east.



Pitsligo Castle by James Giles (1839).



Pitsligo Castle, The Courtyard, by James Giles (1839).

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