

V.

TWO DONSIDE CASTLES. BY W. DOUGLAS SIMPSON,
M.A., D.LITT., F.S.A. SCOT.

Read February 28, 1942.

The valley of the Don above Alford has long been famous for its chain of ancient castles. Unfortunately most of these are now in a ruined and neglected state; and with the economic stress that the changing circumstances of our time, and above all the present war, impose upon their owners, it is to be anticipated that these picturesque and often historic buildings are doomed inevitably to slow disintegration and final disappearance. It is the purpose of this paper to place on record descriptions of two of these Upper Donside castles. Both of them are buildings of much architectural merit, neither has been fully described before, and both are fast hastening to utter decay.

TERPERSIE CASTLE.

Terpersie, or Dalpersie, Castle, in the parish of Tullynessle, stands, at a height of 685 feet above sea-level, near the head of a romantic glen hidden away in the heart of the Correen Hills, about three and a half miles west-north-west of Alford. At the mouth of the glen are the parish church and hamlet of Tullynessle, where a cart-road leaves the turnpike, and by this the ruin may be reached in a fifteen minutes' walk. On every side

¹ *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, lxxviii. p. 150.

it is enclosed by wooded or heath-clad summits; and the building itself is hemmed in by trees and the offices of a farm, so that the visitor is almost

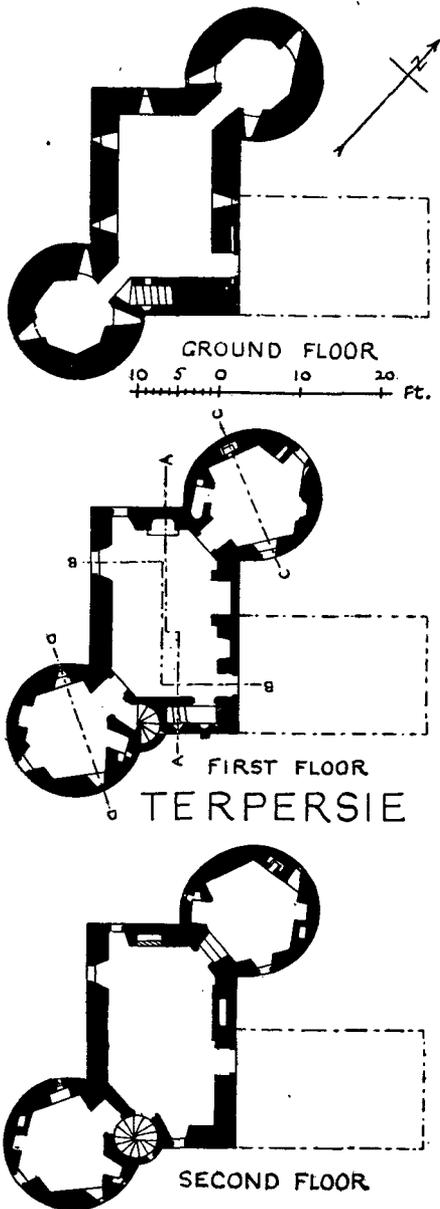


Fig. 1. Terpersie Castle: Plans.

upon it ere he catches sight of its grey walls and roofless, crow-stepped gables. Despite its unpretentious appearance, and notwithstanding the lamentable ruin that has befallen it in recent years, the building is of considerable architectural importance, and its interest in this respect is enhanced by its historical associations. It appears to be the earliest dated example of the characteristic Scottish "three-stepped" or Z-type of castle, which is specially common in the regions north of the Mounth; and it is also the example in which the peculiar features of this type of building were first recognised—by the Englishman Billings, who devotes to it the only plan given in his well-known work on the *Baronial and Ecclesiastical Antiquities of Scotland*.

The castle (see measured drawings, figs. 1-3) consists of a rectangular main building, 28 feet by 18 feet, having a round tower, 17 feet in diameter, at each of two diagonally opposite corners, north-east and south-west.¹ It was three storeys high, containing on each floor a single large apartment in the main building, and a smaller chamber in each of the towers. Contrary to the usual practice, the basement of the main building has not been vaulted: the hall floor which forms its ceiling rested on a scarcement with joist holes. This basement room formed a store, lit by four narrow loopholes and entered on the east side by a door, low, lintelled, and provided with the usual double rebate for an outer wooden door and an inner

¹ I have assumed for convenience that the long axis of the building lies north and south. The true orientation is shown on the plan.

iron "yett." The latter was secured by a drawbar. At this level, the round towers each contain a vaulted cellar, circular on ground plan but developed above into a rudely formed heptagon. The only light afforded to these cellars reaches them through three gunloops provided in the walls of each, and arranged so as to enflade the main building as well as to command the field. At this level, the walls are 3 feet thick.

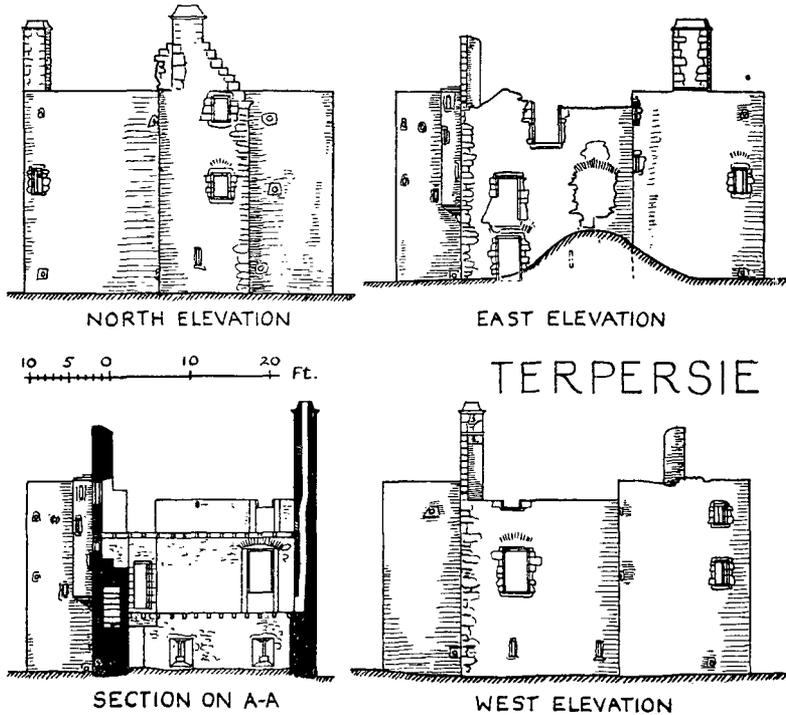
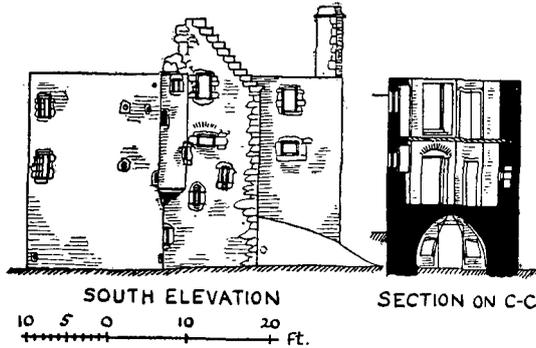


Fig. 2. Terpersie Castle: Section and elevations.

It is notable that in the present castle the door of access to the basement is not placed in a re-entrant angle, as is usually the case in buildings of this class. Immediately above the entrance is another door, also lintelled, giving access to the hall on the first floor. This had a large fireplace in the east wall. In each of the west, north, and eastern walls there is a window, and in the south wall is a door giving access to a straight stair ascending from the basement. This stair is 2 feet 11 inches wide, and its roof ascends in sections corresponding to the steps. It is lit by a couple of loopholes, one at the base and the other at the stair-head. An internal opening, opposite the lower loophole, supplies borrowed light to the basement of the main house. The upper loophole has a shallow sink, with a projecting stone spout, fitted into its sole. Near its head the stair has been blocked

by a cross-wall. Subsequently, the hall was divided by a partition, and a small fireplace of rough workmanship was inserted in its north gable.

On this level, the rooms in the two towers are hexagonal on plan, and each is provided with a fireplace and a garderobe. The south-west tower room has a single window and two gunloops, while the north-east tower room has two windows and an aumbry, giblet-checked for a shutter and



neatly fitted with a stone shelf. This room will no doubt have been the laird's chamber. On either side of the north-east window are two carefully built shafts, carried horizontally through the wall and ending outside in small holes, now blocked but still visible externally in the dressed stones on either side of the window. These openings are too narrow for firearms, and it is difficult to imagine what purpose they can have served, unless perhaps for ventilation.

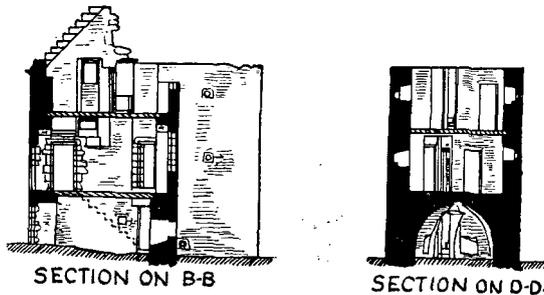


Fig. 3. Terpersie Castle: Elevation and sections.

way as the main floor, and as its details are fully set forth on the plan, they need not be further described.

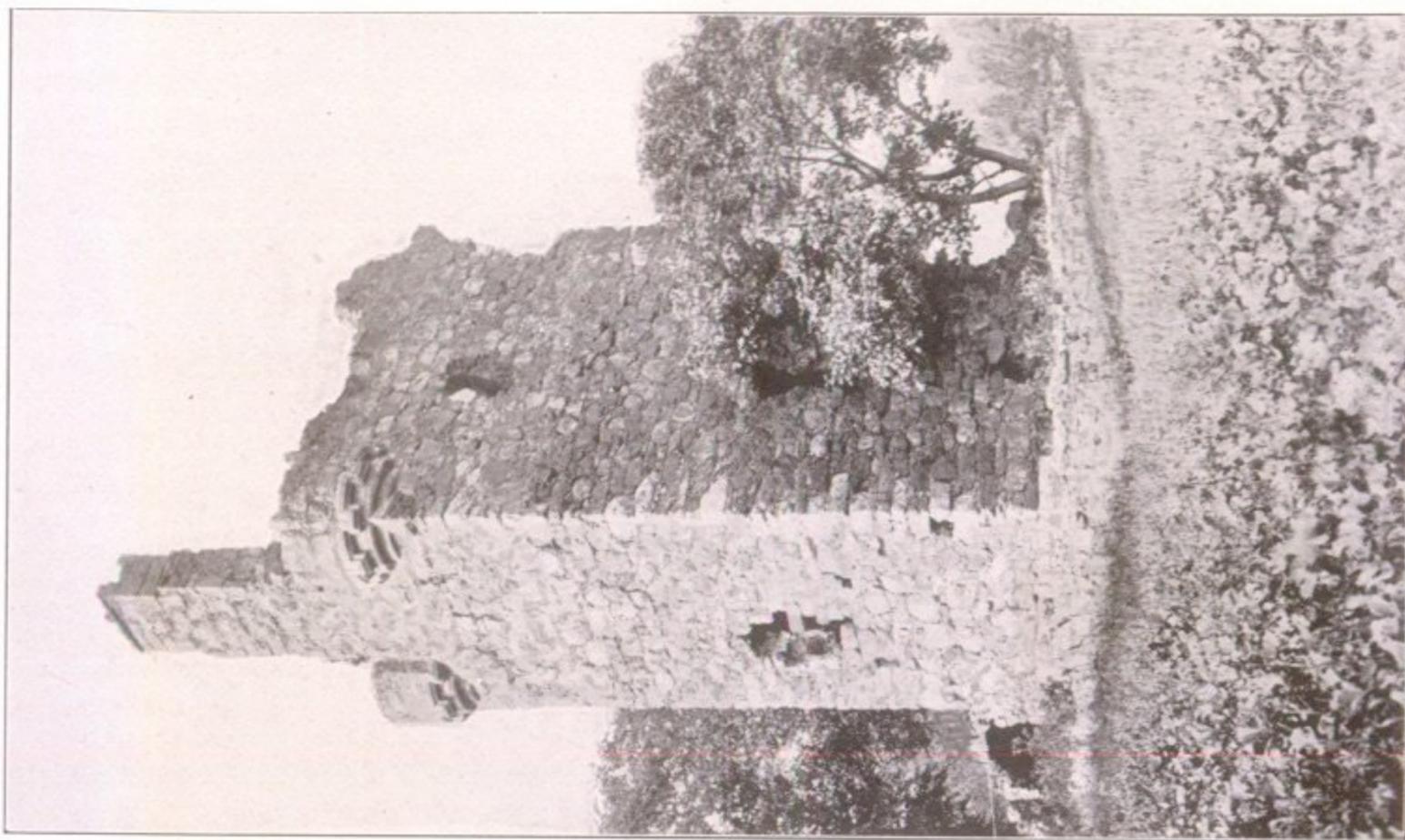
The masonry of the castle (see Pl. XXVI, 2) is rubble work of the kind prevalent in the north country during the sixteenth century, consisting of surface gathered boulders more or less horizontally bedded, with a very free use of small packing material. Roughly dressed stones are used for the quoins. The outer walls had their pinnings "battered over" with mortar, leaving the larger stones exposed, and the inner walls were plastered and white-washed. The main building was finished with crow-stepped gables having curved spur stones, and the chimneys have had moulded copes. On the north chimney of the main house the cope has a double hollow-chamfer, with filleted upper edges, all very sweetly profiled. Red sandstone is employed for lintels and jambstones, gunloops, the newel stair, and the corbel-



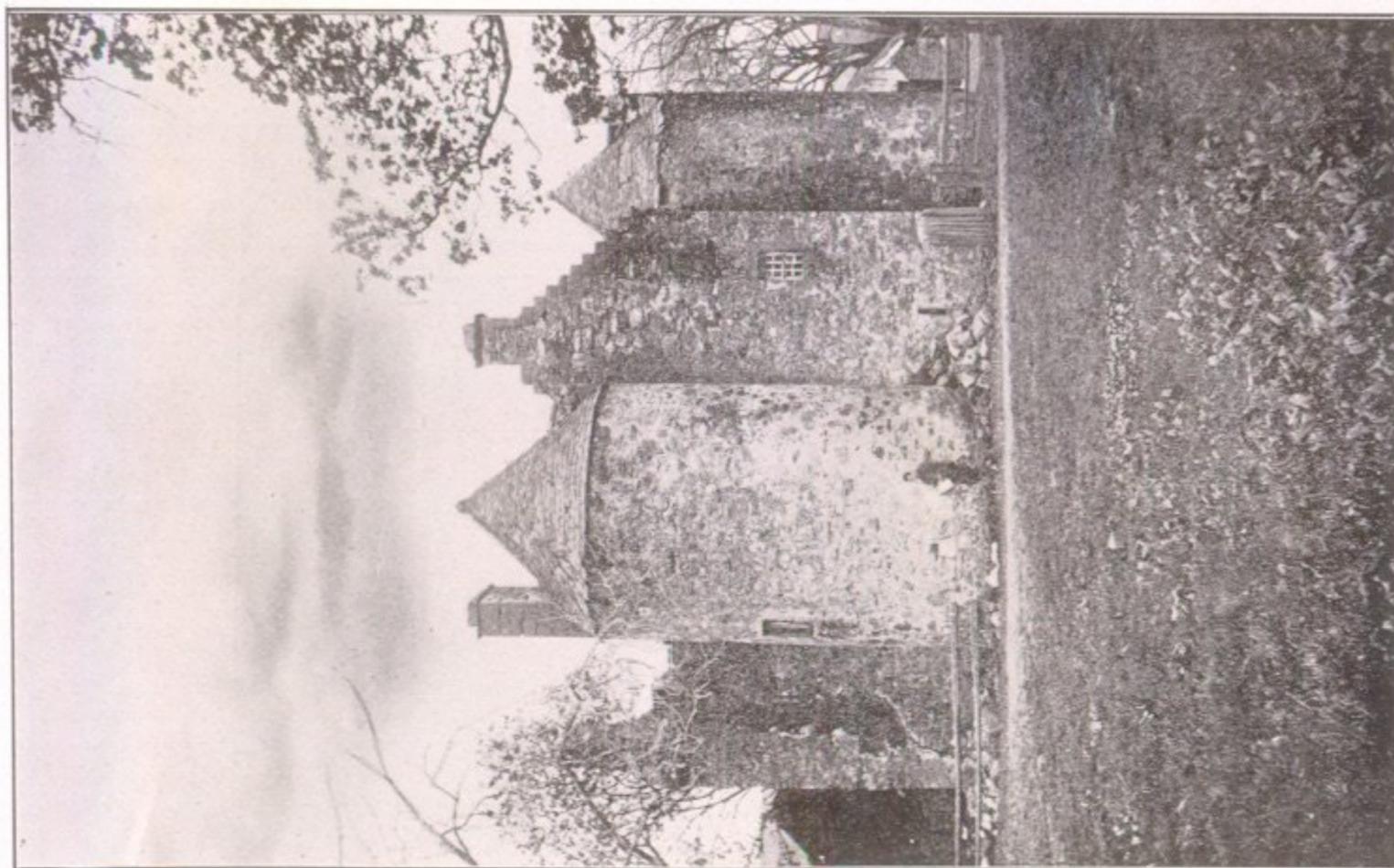
1. Terpersie Castle: Base of corbelled turret.



2. Terpersie Castle: View from south-east.



2. Towie Castle: View from south-east.



1. Terpersie Castle: View from north-west, circa 1885.

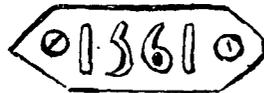
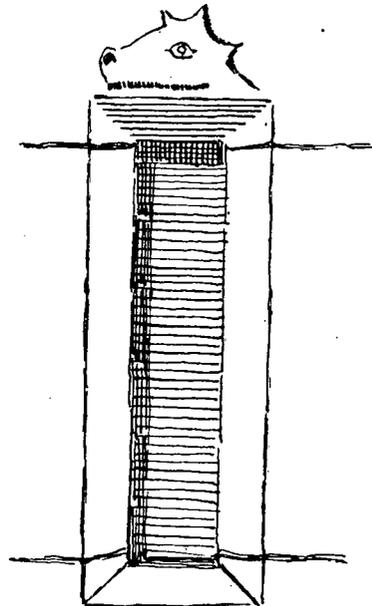


Towie Castle: View from west, drawn by James Giles, R.S.A., 1841.

W. DOUGLAS SIMPSON.

ling of its turret, and the contrast between this warmly tinted material and the grey granitic and schistose boulders of the walling adds to the piquancy of the building. For rougher lintels, the local andalusite mica-schist, which breaks so easily into flat slabs, is used, and the jambs of the loopholes in the basement of the main building are each made of a single stone of this material, set on end. The windows and doors are wrought with a heavy chamfer, ranging from $2\frac{3}{4}$ to 4 inches. All the windows were barred, and are grooved for glass—in the larger windows on the upper half only, the lower part having been shuttered. Over the lintels of the principal windows are rough relieving arches. The gunloops are plain circular openings, varying between $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches and 6 inches in diameter, with a large internal splay: they are each cut in a single stone. Beneath the lower staircase loop in the south gable there was formerly to be seen a panel (fig. 4), carved in imitation of a label affixed with screw nails, and displaying, in very comely figures, the date 1561. Above the loophole was the boar's head of the Gordons. Owing to the progressive disintegration of the building, this loophole with the carved detail was taken out some years ago, and, in order to preserve it, has been built into an internal wall at Knockespoek House, where it forms a charming niche. On the lowest corbel of the stair turret, adjoining this loophole, is the letter G., for Gordon (Pl. XXVI, 1). Above this lowest member, the corbel table consists of three filleted courses. All the decorative detail of the castle is very carefully thought out and executed, and the little building has been one of much architectural distinction.

Later, a long wing was added on the east side of the original building, containing a kitchen in the basement and two storeys above, with a new outer door and an internal newel staircase. This building is now demolished, but its plans are given by MacGibbon and Ross.¹ This new wing provided



Daylight Height, $18\frac{1}{2}$ "
Breadth, $4\frac{1}{8}$ "
Chamfer, 3"

Fig. 4. Loophole from Terpersie Castle now at Knockespoek House.

¹ *Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, vol. ii. pp. 205-8.

a dining-room on the first floor; and it was doubtless then that the old hall was subdivided and the old stair blocked. Although owing to its ruinous condition no positive indications remain, it is probable that the door leading into the old hall on the first floor was made when the new wing was added, and that this now became the principal means of access, *via* the new stair, to the living rooms in the original building.

According to the Balbithan Manuscript,¹ the castle was surrounded by a moat, of which no trace now exists. It will have been fed by the Esset Burn, which flows past to the west.

For all its seclusion, Terpersie is not unconnected with incident. William Gordon, the first laird, was a cadet of Lesmoir,² and acquired the lands in 1556 from the Bishop of Aberdeen. He appears to have borne his part in the troubles of his day, fighting at the battle of Corrichie (1562), and also at those of Tillyangus and the Craibstone (Aberdeen) in 1571, as well as at the battle of Brechin in the next year. In 1561 he built the castle, as recorded on its walls. In 1645, Terpersie Castle was burnt by the Covenanting army under General Baillie—not during the campaign of Alford, as is usually stated, but while he lay encamped “betuixt the kirkis of Coull and Tarlan” in May of that year.³ The marks of the conflagration may still be traced, particularly on the south-west tower, and many of the freestone dressings are badly splintered with fire. George Gordon, the fifth laird, was concerned in the murder, under barbarous circumstances, of Alexander Clerihew, tenant of Dubston, a property belonging to Lord Forbes, across the Esset Water from Terpersie. This shocking affair took place in November 1707, and although an indictment of Gordon and his two sons is preserved among the papers at Castle Forbes,⁴ no action seems to have been taken against the perpetrators. The last laird, Charles, being the elder of the two sons involved in this outrage, took part in the rising of 1745, and returning in disguise to his home after Culloden, was unwittingly betrayed by one of his bairns, who called out “Daddy” in the presence of redcoats ransacking the house. A recess where he hid himself during the search, under the roof of the south-west tower, was long pointed out. The unfortunate father was duly hanged at Carlisle (15th November 1746): the eldest boy, a lad of sixteen, who had been “out” with his father, was banished to Jamaica, where the scion of so many proud lairds became a mahogany cutter. His wife and other children were turned out of doors; the estate was forfeited, and, like so many others, was bought up by the York Buildings Company. Terpersie’s

¹ *House of Gordon* (New Spalding Club), vol. i. p. 46.

² For the Gordons of Terpersie, see *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 327-72.

³ John Spalding, *Memorials of the Troubles*, vol. ii. p. 472.

⁴ Printed by A. and H. Tayler, *Cess Roll of Aberdeenshire*, 1715 (Third Spalding Club), pp. 120-2. The Clerihew family were of long standing in Tullynessle. In the parish graveyard is the monument of Alexander Clerihew, farmer in Middleward, Tullynessle, who died 1st May 1848, aged 67 years.

last letter to his wife, written the night before he died, is notable for its simple dignity and pathos.¹

Eventually the Terpersie estate became the property of the Gordons of Knockespoek, in whose hands it remains. The castle itself was inhabited as a farmhouse so recently as 1885. Its destruction since that period is one of the most deplorable cases of vandalism and wanton neglect in Scotland. The whole of the new wing was demolished to provide materials for a byre, the roofs of the original portion, having become unsafe, were taken down, and now there remains but an empty and mutilated shell, fast crumbling down into utter decay—overgrown with rank weeds and shrubs, and choked with fallen stones, rubbish and filth. Fortunately, good pictorial records exist of the building while it was still intact, and enable us to understand what a charming and distinctive little piece of old Scottish architecture has been heartlessly sacrificed.² In the original structure, the main building had a high-pitched roof with dormers, and the towers were capped with conical helmets surmounted by ball-finials. The annexe was of plainer design, but had a round arched door, with bowtell moulding, dormer windows, flat skewes, and a moulded chimney cope.

The measured drawings submitted herewith are prepared from a pencil survey made about 1912 by the late Mr George A. C. Moir, architect, Aberdeen. They are of value because the ruins have greatly deteriorated since the survey was made. I am indebted to Mrs Moir for placing the original drawings at my disposal. The photographs on Pl. XXVI were taken by Dr John Craig, F.S.A.Scot., Aberdeen. The sketch reproduced as fig. 4 is made from a photograph by Mr A. W. Ross, Schoolhouse, Clatt, who also kindly took the measurements of the loophole.

TOWIE CASTLE.

The church and castle of Towie occupy a striking position on the crest of an old terrace of the River Don, which forms a steep grassy slope, about 20 feet in height, overlooking the fertile haugh through which the river now winds, in graceful loops, eastwards towards Sinnahard and

¹ *The Lyon in Mourning* (Scot. Hist. Soc.), vol. i, pp. 252-3.

² See the beautiful water-colour by James Giles, R.S.A., dated 1840, published by the Third Spalding Club (*Aberdeenshire Castles*, plate lxvi): the lithograph in Sir Andrew Leith Hay's *Castles of Aberdeenshire*, 1865, p. 23 (for the date of this work see *Aberdeen University Review*, vol. xxiii, p. 204, note 5): the drawings of Billings (1845-50) and MacGibbon and Ross (1887) already referred to: a sketch by William Leiper, R.S.A., done about 1884, in Captain Douglas Wimberley's *Notes on the Family of Gordon of Terpersie*, 1900: the sketch by W. Taylor in the second (1887) edition of Leith Hay's book, p. 142: and a fine photograph, dated 1870, in the *House of Gordon*, vol. ii. frontispiece. The illustration reproduced herewith, Pl. XXVIII, is taken, by courtesy of Aberdeen Journals Ltd., from *Picturesque Donside*. The photograph from which it was made was taken by Robert Brown, Inverurie, about 1885.

Drumallachie. The castle stands at the extreme lower point of this terrace, the ground falling rapidly from the base of the building—on the north side towards the river, and on the east and south-east sides, more gently, into a wide hollow through which descends a small tributary, the Water of Towie. Behind the castle stand the church and churchyard, with the manse, manse steading, school and schoolhouse old and new, the parochial hall, and the farm of Mains of Towie; the whole group of buildings forming the nucleus of the parish, and together almost achieving the dignity of a village. Westward, the site is defined by a deep transverse hollow, or miniature ravine. Hence the position is both a commanding one and also one difficult of access. Withal it is a spot of great beauty. The tall

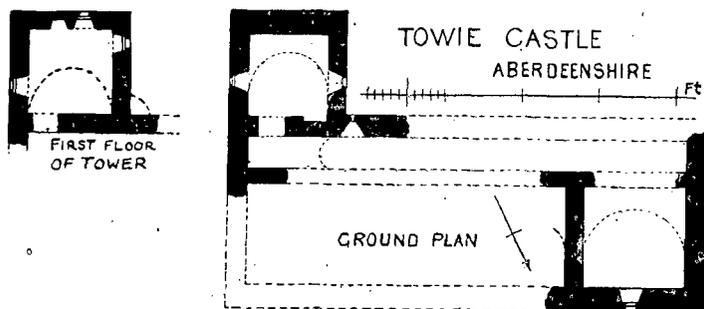


Fig. 5. Towie Castle: Plans.

turreted tower of the old castle, and the plain yet dignified church, surrounded by the headstones and table-stones of those whose work is done, are embosomed in venerable trees: and as the turnpike road up Strathdon lies a mile away on the opposite side of the river, the ancient baronial centre is vested in an atmosphere of old-world peace that is ill to come by in these bustling and fretful times.

As originally built, or designed, Towie Castle (see plans, fig. 5) consisted of an oblong main building, measuring about 62 feet 6 inches by 25 feet, over walls 2 feet 8 inches thick; to the east end of its south front, and projecting from this front only, is attached a tower, measuring 12 feet 6 inches by 15 feet 3 inches. The basement was vaulted throughout, and contained a row of cellars in the main house, with a corridor of access along the south side, and another cellar in the tower. But all the main building has disappeared save the western end cellar and the walls adjoining the tower, which last, though ruinous, still stands to its full height. The western cellar is now in the final stages of decay. Large portions of its vault have collapsed in recent years, and the back or north wall—in which is a small window, whose dressed stones were subsequently withdrawn and the opening built up from inside with stones bedded in clay—has parted company with the vault, and now leans outward at a dangerous angle.

In the corridor, a loophole survives near the re-entrant angle of the tower. It is well formed in Kildrummy freestone, and the daylight measurements are: height, 2 feet 6½ inches; width, 3¾ inches, within a 2½ inch chamfer.

The tower has contained three full storeys and a garret. Its basement is a vaulted cellar, entered from the long corridor, and lit by a loophole on either side, east and west. In the front wall outside are seen two pieces of freestone rather roughly formed and placed like the two halves of a circular gunloop, but they are not in contact with each other and there is no internal evidence of such a gunloop having existed.¹ The first floor formed a private room, entered off the hall on the main floor, the joist-holes of whose ceiling remain in the northern wall of the tower. This private room is vaulted, the height to the crown of the vault being about 14 feet. In the south wall are a fireplace and a window, and in each side wall is a window. Above this was another room, now inaccessible; and from this room a turret stair in the re-entrant angle mounted to the tower garret.

The masonry of the tower is typical of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the north country. It consists of uncoursed rubble of surface gatherings—granites, felstones, quartzites and schists—with an occasional piece of freestone and one or two ice-borne boulders of the conspicuous and handsome Glenbuchat diorite. Pinnings are very freely employed as small packing material between the large stones. The quoins are formed, quite roughly, of boulders, though care has been taken to select those of a shape suitable to produce a fairly accurate corner: where necessary, they have been roughly dressed for this purpose. From all the windows and the fireplace the wrought stones have been torn out, but the rough relieving arches remain. At the wall head, the tower finishes frontally with two boldly corbelled turrets, within which rises a tall chimney stack. These turrets have two courses of continuous filleted corbels, above which is a label-moulded or key-pattern course. The quoins below mitre into the middle course of corbelling. All this enriched work is very carefully executed in granite. In the frontal angles of the turrets are small gunloops, screened by projecting stones. Between them these turrets reduce the gable to a mere chimney stack, which is carried up, with one lateral offset, to a height of some 40 feet above ground level. There is the usual projecting cope. On the sides of the chimney are the raggles of the conical turret roofs. The staircase in the re-entrant angle is carried out on four courses of continuous filleted corbels, wrought in granite. As at Terpersie, the outer walls of the castle have been "battered over" with mortar, and the internal walls were grounded with plaster.

Both in the tower and the main structure the vaults have been built

¹ This feature is shown in Giles' drawing, reproduced herewith (Pl. XXVIII), by courtesy of the Third Spalding Club.

separate from the side walls. This weakness in construction, together with the thinness of the walls in proportion to the height of the building, is mainly the cause of the unfortunate condition in which the ruins are found to-day—in spite of the excellence of the mortar, the interiors of the walls having been, for the most part, grouted in run lime. Although the tower at first sight appears to be in a much sounder condition than the detached vault, its front wall is seriously breached, and its two vaults are in a parlous state.

Probably the entrance doorway of the castle was in the middle of the south front, with a square stair leading up to the hall on the first floor. The most likely place for the kitchen will have been in the heel of the main building.

Towie was an ancient property of the Forbeses,¹ and this branch of the family have obtained historical notoriety through the dreadful tragedy of November 1571, so touchingly commemorated in the beautiful ballad of *Edom o' Gordon*. But the scene of that catastrophe, as I have already shown in these *Proceedings*, was not Towie but Corgarff; and in any case, until 1618 the capital messuage of the barony of Towie was not here but at Nether Towie, a mile to the south-west.² The present castle will therefore have been built subsequent to 1618, and with this date its architectural features—the elongated L-plan, the thinness of the walls, and the style of the corbelling—are in full agreement. According to a writer of 1797,³ the castle was never finished. "It broke three lairds in rearing up what of it now remains; and the three different kinds of work are visible to this day." No trace of this alleged threefold masonry can now be seen; but the state of the remains, which have not materially changed since James Giles made his drawing in 1841, is not inconsistent with the idea of an uncompleted undertaking. Whether this be so or not, the ruins form a characteristic and interesting specimen of the latest phase in Scottish baronial architecture.

The plan reproduced herewith is based on that made by the late Dr David MacGibbon, half a century ago, when the building was more entire. I have revised his survey and added a plan of the first floor of the tower.

Towie Castle now belongs to Captain Hugh P. Lumsden of Clova.

¹ See A. and H. Tayler, *The House of Forbes*, pp. 438-9.

² See *Proceedings*, vol. lxi. pp. 86-95. At Nether Towie there lies, on the edge of a garden patch overhanging the ruined mill, a fragment of a window lintel or sole wrought in Kildrummy freestone, with vertical tooling and a 3-inch chamfer, carefully mitred at the reprise of the jamb. It looks like sixteenth-century work.

³ *Don, a Poem*, ed. 1905, pp. 7-8.