

EXCAVATIONS AT SKIRLING CASTLE, PEEBLESSHIRE, 1962-3

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INTRODUCTION

THE site of the castle lies in an open field about 250 yd. to the W. of Skirling Parish Church (NT 072389). The remains have been under the plough and are now very scanty. They comprise a low, rectangular mound surrounded by a shallow ditch (fig. 1). The summit of the mound measures about 140 ft. from NE. to SW. and about 130 ft. from NW. to SE.; fragments of stone and lime mortar can be seen here and there upon the surface. The SW. and SE. sectors of the ditch are the best preserved, the bottom here varying in width from 15 to 30 ft.; in the centre of the SW. sector the bottom of the ditch expands abruptly to a width of 28 ft. The NW. and NE. sectors of the ditch are represented by an ill-defined area of marshy ground through whose northern limits a spring-fed watercourse runs southwestwards towards its junction with the Spittal Burn at Skirling Mill.

Documentary evidence associates this site with a residence of the Cockburns, proprietors of the barony of Skirling from the late fourteenth to the early seventeenth century.¹ Sir James Cockburn, who inherited the property in the middle of the sixteenth century, was a supporter of Queen Mary and in consequence suffered at the hands of the Regent Moray who, in 1568, 'put ane certane powder in the place of Striveling [*sic*] and demolished the samin'.² It is said that the castle was not rebuilt, and that later members of the family and some of the succeeding proprietors resided in 'a house in the village'.³ Writing in about 1792 the author of the *Statistical Account* says 'The house of Skirling appears, by the vestiges of the walls, to have been large. It was surrounded by a morass or bog, except a small space on the south-west side, and that was defended by turrets. The entry to the house was by a bridge of stone over this bog'.⁴ If this bridge was on the SW. side its site may now be represented by the expansion of the ditch in the centre of this sector. An account of the castle written in about 1860 states that 'all that now remains to mark its site is a small mound and the faint traces of what appears to have been a Moat surrounding the castle'⁵; these features are indicated on the first edition of the 6" O.S. Map, but have been omitted in later editions.

In 1958 the site was surveyed by Mr R. W. Feachem in preparation for the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments' forthcoming *Inventory of Peeblesshire*. The rectangular, moated earthwork that now forms the principal feature of the remains does not at first glance suggest the site of a typical late medieval tower-house such

¹ Buchan, J. W., *History of Peeblesshire*, III, 214 ff.

² *Diurnal of Occurrents*, Bannatyne Club, 133.

³ *New Statistical Account*, III (Peeblesshire), 102.

⁴ *Stat. Acc.*, III (1792), 254.

⁵ Ordnance Survey Name-Books, Skirling Parish.

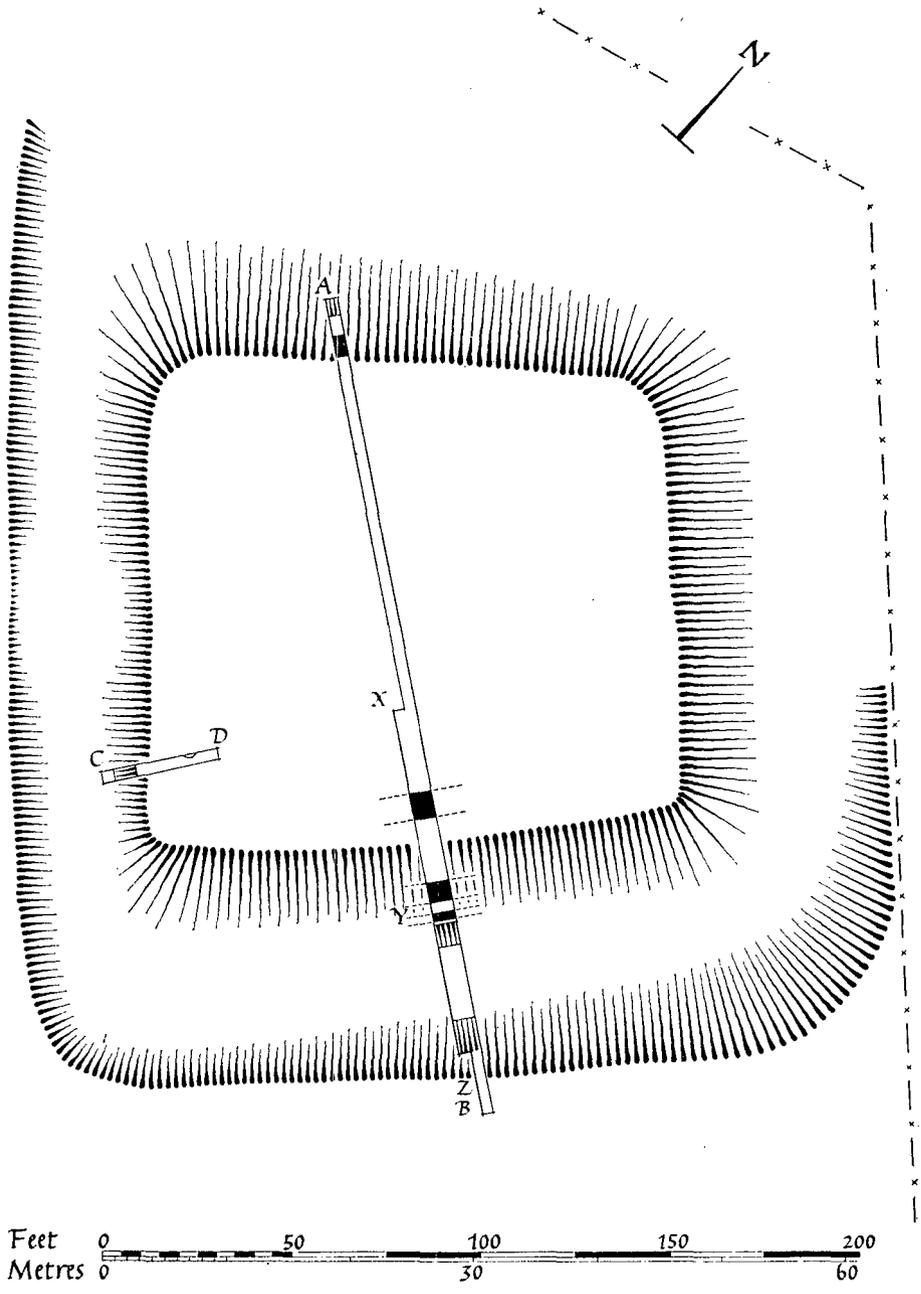


FIG. 1. Skirling Castle: site plan

as might have been expected to serve as the residence of the Cockburn family at this period. In order to test the nature of the site more fully therefore, small-scale excavations were authorised by the Commissioners and were carried out in 1962-3 by Messrs J. G. Dunbar and A. C. S. Dixon with assistance from other members of the Commission's staff and from Mr James Spence. Permission to excavate was readily granted by the Trustees of the Church of Scotland as proprietors, and by the tenant, Mr John Noble, without whose full co-operation work would have been impossible. In the preparation of the reports on the finds assistance has been received from Mr R. Kerr (coin), Mr J. G. Hurst (pottery), Mr R. J. Charleston and Mr R. Oddy (glass), Mr S. Maxwell (iron objects), Mr G. H. Collins (stones), and Miss J. M. Swann (leather). The finds are deposited in the National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh. The drawings were executed by Messrs I. G. Scott and S. Scott and the photographs are by Mr G. Quick; all are Crown copyright.

THE EXCAVATION

Summary of Results

A trench cut through the SE. sector of the ditch was subsequently extended across the full width of the mound; a second trench was cut across the outer perimeter of the mound on its SW. side. The castle was found to have been defended on its SE. side by an upcast bank, a wet ditch about 30 ft. in width and 4 ft. in depth, and by what were probably outer and inner enclosure-walls measuring about 4 ft. 6 in. and 7 ft. in thickness respectively. Traces of what may have been a single enclosure-wall were found on the outer NW. perimeter of the mound, but no corresponding remains were noted in the trench cut across the SW. perimeter. No remains of any structure were found upon the summit of the mound and it seems probable that all the internal buildings of the castle were thoroughly dismantled and their traces subsequently obliterated by the plough. The finds indicate that the castle was occupied in the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There was no evidence of any earlier occupation of the site.

The Ditch and Bank

The SE. portion of the trench A-B (cf. fig. 1) exposed the remains of a flat-bottomed ditch dug out of the gravel subsoil to an original average depth of 4 ft.; the ditch measured 31 ft. in width at the lips and 21 ft. at base (cf. fig. 2). The lower part of the ditch filling was waterlogged and was cleared with considerable difficulty with the aid of a pump. The presence of well-preserved vegetable deposits, including the twigs and branches of trees, and the excellent condition of the leatherwork finds, suggested that the ditch had always been water-filled, and this seemed to be confirmed by the fact that immediately after excavation (in June 1962) the water-level in the ditch rose to an average depth of 2 ft. 3 in. (Pl. XXXVI). There was no evidence that the ditch had at any time been cleaned out or recut, but the deposit could not be regarded as being closely stratified since many of the heavier objects were likely to have gradually worked their way downwards towards the ditch bottom. Nevertheless nearly all the finds from the lower levels of the ditch that could be

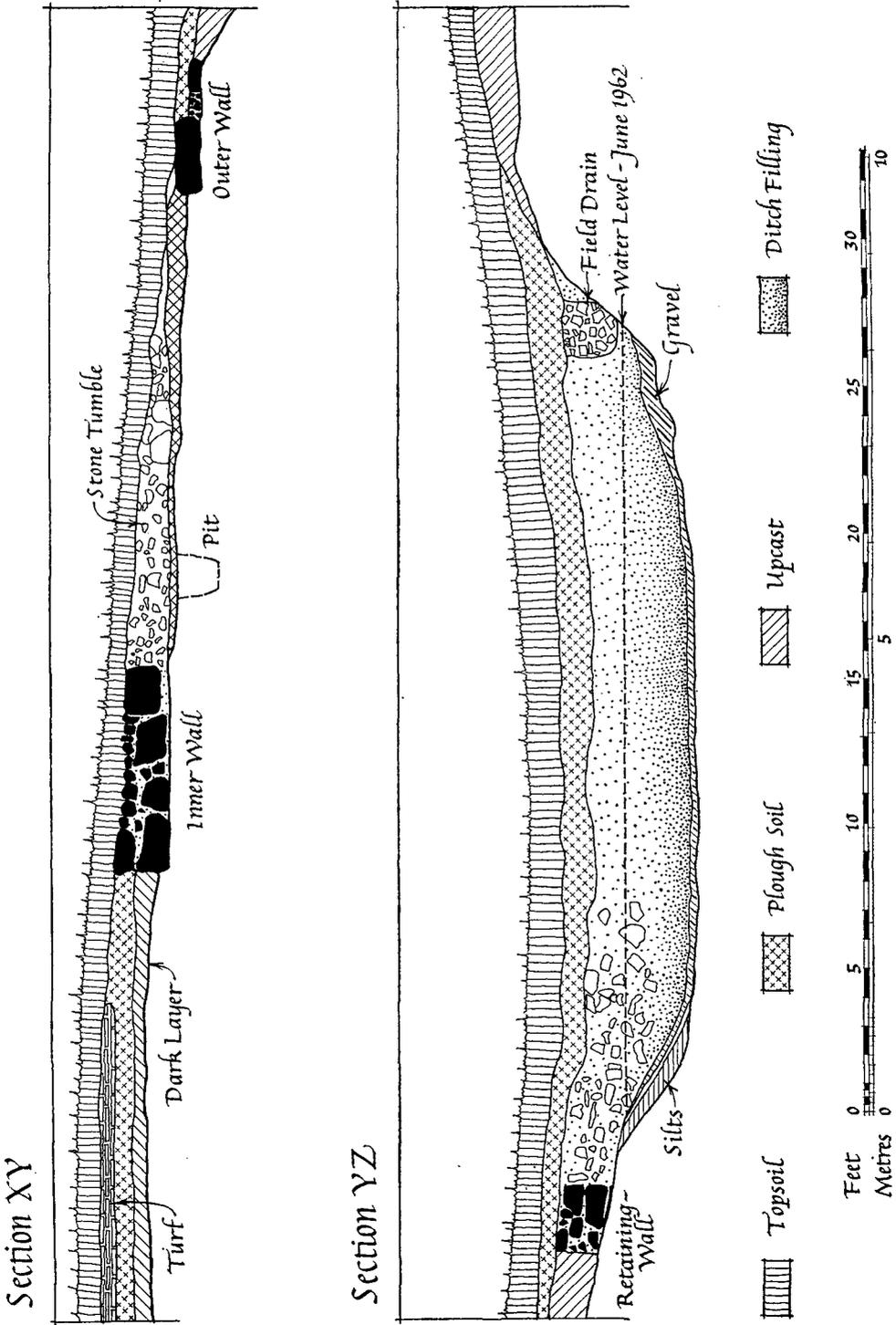


Fig. 2. Skirling Castle: sections

dated from intrinsic evidence belonged to the late fifteenth, sixteenth or early seventeenth century.

Some of the upcast had been placed on the SE. side of the ditch to form an outer bank of which the surviving remains measured more than 18 ft. in width and up to 1 ft. 6 in. in height. These dimensions, however, had resulted from the levelling action of the plough, and the original dimensions of the outer bank were not ascertained. The remainder of the upcast had been placed on the inner or NW. side of the ditch to level up the outer perimeter of the mound. Here the upcast material was found to have been packed against a retaining-wall constructed of stone with lime mortar; this wall measured about 2 ft. in thickness and was preserved to a maximum height of 1 ft. 10 in. (Pl. XXXVII, 1). The outer side of the wall, overlooking the ditch, was found to have a good, vertical face, and the inner side a ragged face.

The inner lip of the NW. sector of the ditch was identified 4 ft. 6 in. from the NW. end of Trench A-B, and that of the SW. sector 9 ft. from the SW. end of Trench C-D, but no attempt was made to penetrate the ditch deposits at these points. In neither sector was any trace found of a retaining-wall.

The Walls of Enclosure

About 4 ft. inside the retaining-wall of the SE. sector of the ditch there were exposed what appeared to be the footings of a stone wall measuring 4 ft. 6 in. in thickness (Pl. XXXVII, 1); no traces of lime mortar were observed in the interstices. About 16 ft. NW. of these footings there were exposed the lowermost courses of a second wall measuring 7 ft. in thickness and up to 1 ft. 5 in. in height (Pl. XXXVII, 2); this wall was bonded in lime mortar except for the lowermost portion of the core, which was largely composed of small stones bonded in mud. Neither wall appeared to be associated with a floor, and as both ran parallel to the SW. sector of the ditch they were provisionally interpreted as outer and inner walls of enclosure. The only feature noted in the area between the two walls was a shallow pit measuring 4 ft. 2 in. by 1 ft. 6 in. and having a depth of 1 ft. 4 in.

About 5 ft. inside the inner lip of the NW. sector of the ditch there was exposed a rough footing of stones measuring about 6 ft. 3 in. in width and up to 1 ft. 6 in. in height; no traces of lime mortar were seen in the interstices but lime mortar and oyster shells were observed in the overlying top soil. This footing appeared to run parallel to the NW. sector of the ditch and was provisionally interpreted as the foundation of a wall of enclosure corresponding to the outer enclosure-wall of the SE. sector. No trace of an inner enclosure-wall was found in this area.

No traces of a wall of enclosure were found in the Trench C-D, cut across the SW. perimeter of the mound.

Internal Buildings

Although the Trench A-B extended across the full width of the mound it revealed no traces of any internal structures whatsoever. In Trench C-D the only structure noted was a portion of a drain which had been dug into the natural gravel, edged

with large stones, and covered with slabs of red sandstone. This was located 15 ft. inside the inner lip of the ditch, into which it had in all probability discharged.

Conclusion

The earthwork represents the last remains of a late medieval castle associated with the Cockburns of Skirling. The finds indicate a continuous occupation of the site from the second half of the fifteenth century to about the end of the sixteenth century, and this accords reasonably well with the documentary evidence already cited to the effect that the castle was slighted in 1568 and not thereafter reoccupied. The almost complete absence of all traces of internal structures in the areas selected for excavation makes speculation as to their nature unprofitable, though there is no reason to doubt the author of the *Statistical Account's* statement that remains of substantial stone buildings were still visible at the end of the eighteenth century. The combination of a surrounding ditch and bank with a wall, or walls, of enclosure invites comparison with the neighbouring castle of Boghall, Lanarkshire,¹ whose scanty remains may also be ascribed to the later medieval period.

CATALOGUE OF FINDS

(* Objects illustrated)

Pottery (fig. 3)

1. Five small fragments of costrels. Fine, hard white or buff ware with no trace of glaze. Northern French origin. Sixteenth or early seventeenth century, cf. *P.S.A.S.*, LXXXVI (1951-2), 168, Nos. 31-32.
2. Fragment of fine white fabric showing traces of thin external glaze, partly green and partly colourless.
3. Fragment of hard white fabric containing a fair number of grits. Pronounced rilling on external surface. No trace of glaze.
4. Fragment of hard, rather gritty white fabric showing external rilling. Thin, yellowish-green external glaze.
- *5. Fragment of hard, gritty white fabric. External surface decorated with incised cross-lines under green glaze.
6. Three fragments of fairly hard white fabric containing a few grits and small air-pockets. Fired to pink on external surfaces. No trace of glaze.
- *7. Part of a small, flat-bottomed, straight-sided vessel having a knife-trimmed base and beaded rim. A narrow incised band encircles the vessel midway up the sides. Very hard, close-textured, dark-grey fabric containing small air-pockets. Perhaps an importation. Height $3\frac{3}{8}$ in., diameter at rim $2\frac{1}{2}$ in.
- *8. Fragments of at least one small, straight-sided vessel, perhaps a jar. Fairly hard grey fabric, in places fired to pink, and containing grits and air-pockets. Greenish-brown glaze on both surfaces.
- *9. Base-fragment of small straight-sided vessel. Dark grey fabric containing air-pockets. Green external glaze.
10. Fragment of brown, Frechan stoneware. Second half of sixteenth century.
11. Small fragment of grey stoneware.
- *12. Rim-fragment. Light grey fabric fired to pink at surfaces. Light green external glaze.

¹ MacGibbon, D. and Ross, T., *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, III, 320 ff.

- *13. Rim-fragment. Hard, close-textured grey fabric with patches of yellow stain. Brown and green external glaze.
- *14. Rim-fragment. Fairly hard grey fabric partly fired to pink. Traces of green glaze inside rim.
15. Small fragment of tubular spout. Hard, close-textured reddish fabric. No trace of glaze.

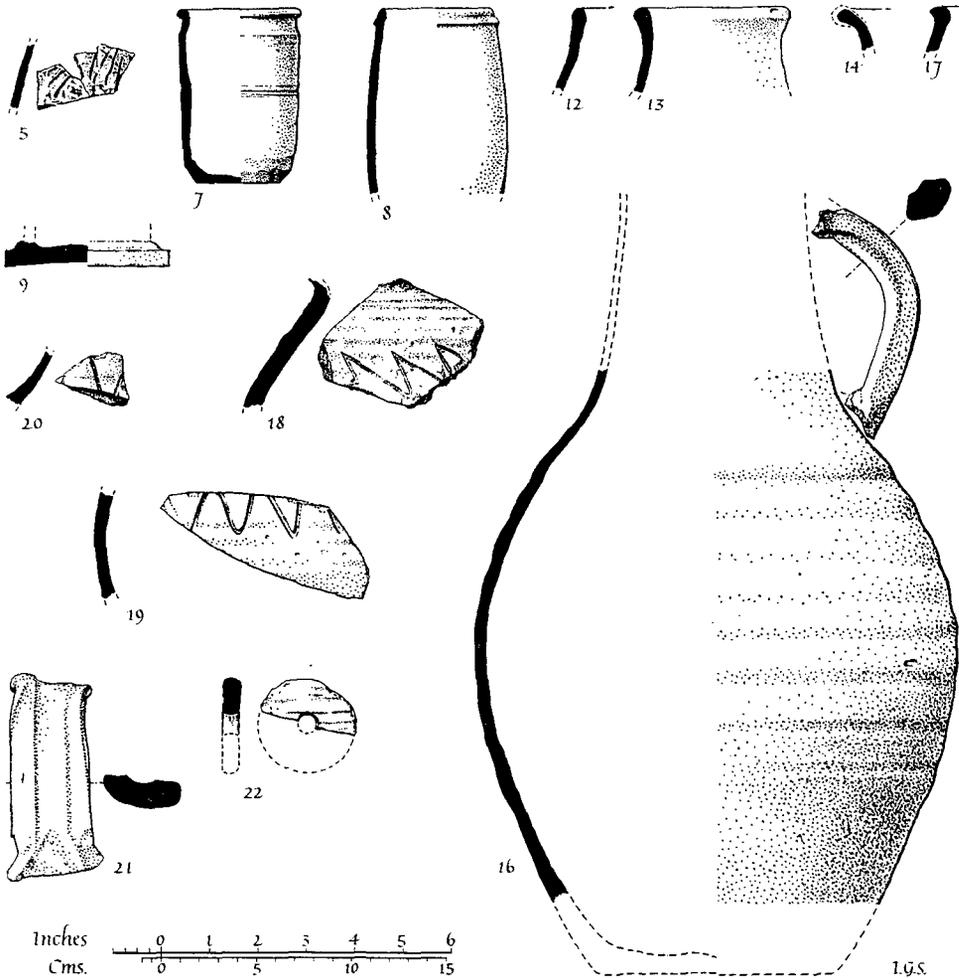


FIG. 3. Skirling Castle: finds of pottery

- *16. Fragments of pitcher. Coarse, dark-grey fabric. Strap-handle with raised ridges. Rilling on upper portion of vessel. Thin, light green glaze on external surface.
- *17. Rim-fragment. Coarse dark-grey fabric fired to pink on external surface. Thin, patchy, light-green glaze. Found in association with No. 16.
- *18. Fragment of orange-red fabric, perhaps from shoulder of jug. Incised zigzag decoration, and some rilling, on external surface. Traces of light-green glaze on both surfaces.
- *19. Fragment of coarse, dark-grey fabric fired to pink on inner surface. Incised zigzag decoration and green glaze (discoloured) on external surface.

- *20. Fragment of fairly hard grey fabric fired to pink on inner surface. Incised lines beneath green glaze (discoloured) on external surface.
- *21. Strap-handle of light grey gritty fabric, fired to orange on inner surface. Light green external glaze.
- *22. Fragment of coarse grey fabric, fired to pink on external surface. Trimmed and perforated to form spindle-whorl or similar object. Diameter 2 in.
- 23. About five dozen miscellaneous fragments not worthy of detailed description.

Floor-Tiles

- 24. Six fragments of floor-tiles. Coarse, dark-grey fabric fired to pink on lower surfaces. Light-green glaze on upper surfaces. Original dimensions uncertain, but evidently 4 in. square or larger with a thickness of $\frac{9}{10}$ in.

Glass (fig. 4) Nos. 25-31 probably of Venetian origin except where otherwise stated

- *25. Goblet-base of clear glass with lower portion of an apparently conical bowl. First half of sixteenth century. Diameter at base $3\frac{1}{8}$ in.
- 26. Small fragment of clear glass with raised rib. Sixteenth century.
- *27. Part of a beaker-base with scalloped foot. Yellowish glass. Sixteenth-early seventeenth century. Perhaps Netherlandish. Approximate diameter at base $2\frac{1}{2}$ in.
- 28. Part of folded base of a drinking glass. Clear glass. Sixteenth-seventeenth century.
- 29. Fragment of clear glass with incorporated 'stone'. Sixteenth-seventeenth century. Perhaps Netherlandish.
- 30. Two rim-fragments of clear glass. Multiple, horizontal opaque white threads on external surfaces.
- 31. Small rim-fragment of very thin clear glass showing beading below rim on external surface.
- 32. Fragment of clear glass, perhaps part of the edge of a 'Crown' sheet of quite considerable dimensions.
- 33. Five fragments of window glass, some at least from lozenge-shaped panes.

Leather Objects (fig. 4)

- *34. Fragments of forepart upper from a woman's or youth's shoe of about 1550-60, decorated with symmetrical pinking and slashing.
- 35. Two fragments of upper from the same shoe or from one of similar size.
- *36. Fragments of a child's shoe of the second half of the sixteenth century having a very narrow instep and a double welt. Some remnants of the original thread.

Clay Pipes (fig. 4)

- *37. Bowl similar to Oswald's type 5 (c. 1640-70); cf. *Archaeological News Letter*, Vol. 5, No. 12 (1955). Traces of an incuse mark on base, perhaps a triple-towered castle device, which appears to be an Edinburgh mark. cf. *P.S.A.S.*, xciv (1960-1), 207 f., No. 37.
- 38. Fragment of stem. Each side bears a stamped inscription: dexter, [?ТОВА]CCO; sinister, 296 w WHITE[?]. Nineteenth century.

Coin

- 39. 'Crosraguel' copper penny, probably issued by Bishop Kennedy at St Andrews. The striking of coins by the Bishop was authorised in 1452; their issue seems, from the number of varieties known, to have gone on for a long time, but it has not yet been found possible to date them accurately. This coin is of Sir George Macdonald's Second Variety; cf. *P.S.A.S.*, LIV (1919-20) 32 f., and LXXXIV (1949-50), 109 ff.

Iron Objects

- 40. Mason's chisel. Length $6\frac{3}{4}$ in. About $\frac{1}{2}$ in. square in section with bevelled edges.
- 41. Two door hinges, one being a socket pin and the other a band.

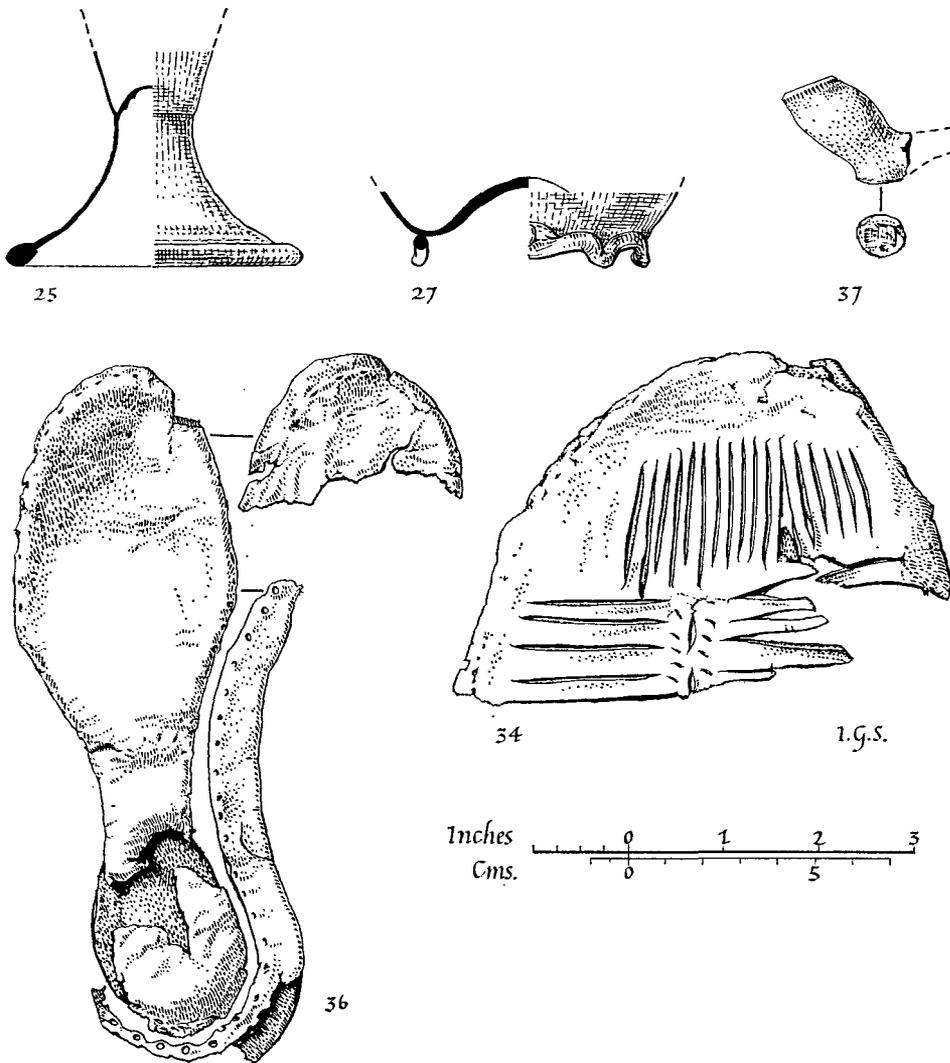


FIG. 4. Skirling Castle: objects of glass and leather; clay pipe

42. Part of a table-knife. The handle is circular in section and appears to be integral with the blade.
 43. Unidentified object.

Wooden Objects

44. Slate-peg. Length $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. cf. No. 49.
 45. Peg-like object 15 in. in length. Rectangular in section, measuring 1 in. by $\frac{1}{2}$ in. at one end and tapering to a point at the other end. Also part of a second object of similar character.

Bricks

46. Fragment of light, orange-brown fabric. $4\frac{1}{4}$ by $1\frac{5}{8}$ in.; length uncertain.
 47. Fragment of dark, reddish-brown fabric. 4 by $1\frac{5}{8}$ in.; length uncertain.

Stone Objects

48. Fragment of dark red sandstone of local origin measuring 2 ft. 1 in. by 6 in. by 10 in. Apparently part of a cavetto-moulded string-course.
49. Fragments of a number of roofing slates showing holes for wooden slate-pegs. cf. No. 44.
50. A number of oyster shells. Perhaps used as masonry pinnings.
51. Fragment of plain plasterwork, probably from an internal wall-surface.

Bones

52. The skull of a horse (deposited in the Royal Scottish Museum). A few other animal bones were noted but not retained.

*The Society is indebted to H. M. Treasury for
a grant towards the cost of this paper*



Skirling Castle: section across SE. sector of ditch

