

Glenbervie and its castle

by W Douglas Simpson

The historic parish of Glenbervie, with its ancient castle and the adjoining remnant of the medieval parish church, in the graveyard of which sleep the immediate forebears of the poet Burns, lies at the northern apex of the Howe of the Mearns, about 7 miles SW of Stonehaven. The central portion of the parish skirts the left bank of the Bervie Water, and the rocks here belong to the Lower Old Red Sandstone, consisting of conglomerates and softish micaceous red or yellow sandstones with interbedded lavas, tuffs and breccias. But the northern portion, separated by the Highland Boundary Fault, is occupied by metamorphic rocks belonging to the Dalradian series, and forms a barren, hilly tract – part of the sunward slopes of the Mounth, or upland barrier separating Strathmore from Mar. Glenbervie owes its historical significance to the fact that the parish is traversed by one of the most important among the ancient routes across the Mounth – the Cryne Corse Pass, leading over from the early Christian centre at Fordoun in the Mearns to the valley of the Lower Dee at Durris (Simpson 1943, 132, 133, 135; 1949, 20, 100, 119). It was by this route that Edward I advanced in his first great invasion of Scotland in 1296. He was at Glenbervie on the night of Thursday, 12th July, marched thence over the mountain pass to the royal manor of Durris, with its Norman *motte*, where he slept on the 13th, and next day, Saturday, 14th July, descended the Dee valley to the royal burgh of Aberdeen.

At the time of King Edward's visit the manor of Glenbervie belonged to Sir John de Melville, and the parson of its parish church was John Stowe, both of whom gave in their submission to the all-conquering Plantagenet at the Peel of Lumphanan on 21st July following (Jervise 1885, 146). The Melville family are said to have come into Scotland in the reign of David I; certainly they were settled in the Mearns by the year 1200. Of one of them, said to have been Sheriff of the Mearns in the reign of James I, the famous tale is told how he so exasperated the inhabitants by his oppression that they made him into a broth upon the Garvock Hill and shared round among themselves the abominable brew! Sir John Melville's murder does not seem to be in doubt, as it is stated that a pardon, or deed of replegiation, in favour of the laird of Arbuthnott, is still extant in the charter chest of that family. Also the murder is referred to by another member of the family, Alexander Arbuthnott, Principal of King's College from 1569 until 1583 (Scott 1802, 462; Cramond 1894, 20–21; Kinnear 1910, 14–17).¹

In 1468 the Melville heiress of Glenbervie carried the barony to her husband, Sir Alexander Auchinleck or Affleck, of that Ilk in Ayrshire; and in 1492 another heiress in her turn brought Glenbervie into the hands of the Red Douglasses by her marriage to Sir William Douglas of Braidwood, second son of Archibald, fifth Earl of Angus – the celebrated 'Bell the Cat'. The first Douglas laird of Glenbervie fell at Flodden. The most famous of his line was William, who played a decisive part in securing the victory of Corrichie on the Hill o' Fare (28th October 1562) (Simpson 1949, 75–80), acquired the Donside barony of Kemnay, and in 1588 succeeded as ninth Earl of Angus. He died at Glenbervie on 1st July 1591. In 1625 Sir William Douglas of Glenbervie was created one of the original Baronets of Nova Scotia. The sixth baronet, Sir Robert Douglas,

was the celebrated compiler of *The Peerage of Scotland*. With his son's death in 1812 the baronetcy lapsed; but in 1831 it was revived in favour of his nephew, Kenneth Mackenzie of Kilcry, who thereafter assumed the style of Douglas of Glenberrie. This second baronetcy still continues in the person of the fifth Baronet, Sir Sholto Courtney Mackenzie Douglas, MC, who served with distinction in both World Wars in the Seaforth Highlanders. A member of the family was the well-known lawyer, politician and author, Sylvester Douglas (1743-1823), who in 1800 was created Lord Glenberrie in the Irish peerage.

Long before this time, however, in 1675, the estate of Glenberrie had been sold by the Douglasses to Robert Burnett of Leys. The connexion between the two famous Mearns families was of old standing. Sir Thomas Burnett, the first Baronet of Leys, had married in 1610 Margaret, eldest daughter of Sir Robert Douglas of Glenberrie. The arms of Burnett of Leys, Douglas of Glenberrie, and Auchinleck of that Ilk, with the initials of Sir Thomas Burnett and Margaret Douglas, appear on a fine oaken wardrobe still preserved at Crathes Castle. Robert Burnett who bought Glenberrie was a cousin-german of Sir William Douglas, third Baronet of Glenberrie, whose son Robert, to whom he had conveyed the property, sold it to his Burnett kinsman, who soon thereafter clinched the bargain by taking to wife Katherine, a daughter of Sir William Douglas. The initials of Robert Burnett and Katherine Douglas are said to be on the old Mill of Glenberrie; but, if so, they are now concealed by ivy (Kinneir 1910, 18). The Burnetts remained in possession of Glenberrie until 1721, when it was sold to William Nicolson of Mergie, afterwards Sir William Nicolson, Baronet of Kemnay, these two estates being thus once more united in the same ownership. Sir William Nicolson was a pioneer in agricultural improvement, being the first person in the Mearns to raise hay from seeds. In 1831 a Nicolson heiress brought the Glenberrie property to her husband, Robert Badenach, M.D., of Arthurhouse. Their son, James Badenach Nicolson, was a prominent and highly esteemed figure in the public life of the Mearns during the latter part of last century. The estate is still in the hands of the family, and the castle is now the seat of Mrs Patience Badenach Nicolson of Glenberrie.

No doubt there will have been a manor house of some kind at Glenberrie at the time of King Edward's visit. As to the later castle, the only historical event with which it appears to have been associated was its siege by the redoubtable 'Edom o'Gordon' in 1572, during the cruel civil war between the partisans of the deposed Queen Mary and those of her infant son, King James VI. Crossing the Mounth (as I conceive) by the Cryne Corse Pass, the famous Gordon chief, at the head of a force of infantry, and 'a fyne trowpe of chosin horsemen', laid siege to 'the castell of Glenberrie in the Mernis'. At this time the owner, Sir William Douglas, was absent. We are told that the Gordons cruelly wasted the surrounding country. To raise the siege, the forces of the Regent Mar convened at Brechin; but Sir Adam Gordon, leaving his infantry 'in thair trenchis' about the castle, rode off by night with his cavalry to Brechin and surprised and scattered the Government levies (5th July 1572). How the siege of Glenberrie Castle terminated thereafter does not appear to be recorded (Colville 1833, 109-110; Buchanan 1582, 249; Boyd 1905, 335).

Glenberrie may be described as a forgotten castle. None of the books on Scottish architecture make any mention of it. Andrew Jervise even doubted whether the old castle had occupied the site of the present mansion (Jervise 1861, 91). In Sheriff Crabb Watt's standard historical work on the Mearns, it is stated about 'Glenberrie House' that 'hardly any part of the ancient castle of the Douglasses remains' (Watt 1914, xxxix). It was therefore with astonishment that, on my first visit to Glenberrie on 25th September 1949, I found myself in the presence of the substantial shell of a medieval stronghold of quite remarkable interest in respect of its design, with a vaulted basement preserved in its entirety. It is to give an account of this hitherto unknown old baronial edifice that the present paper has been written.

THE CASTLE

The site of the castle is a striking one, formed by a triangular bluff or cape of ground enclosed by the meeting of the Pilkettie Burn with the Water of Bervie. On two sides, N and S, the stance is thus defined by the steep slopes of the two streams, running out to the W into the apex formed by their junction. On the third side, towards the E, the ground is open and level, forming a wide, pleasant expanse of bird-haunted lawn, shadowed by fine old trees. Across the little burn, and directly opposite the castle on the N, is the ancient graveyard in which formerly stood the parish church, part of whose chancel has been rebuilt to serve as the burial place of the old Douglas lords of Glenbervie. To the W of the castle the Water of Bervie is crossed by the old ford, still in use, by which doubtless the army of Edward I made its northward passage on 12th July 1296; the Cryne Corse road itself survives as a cart track ascending thence along the left bank

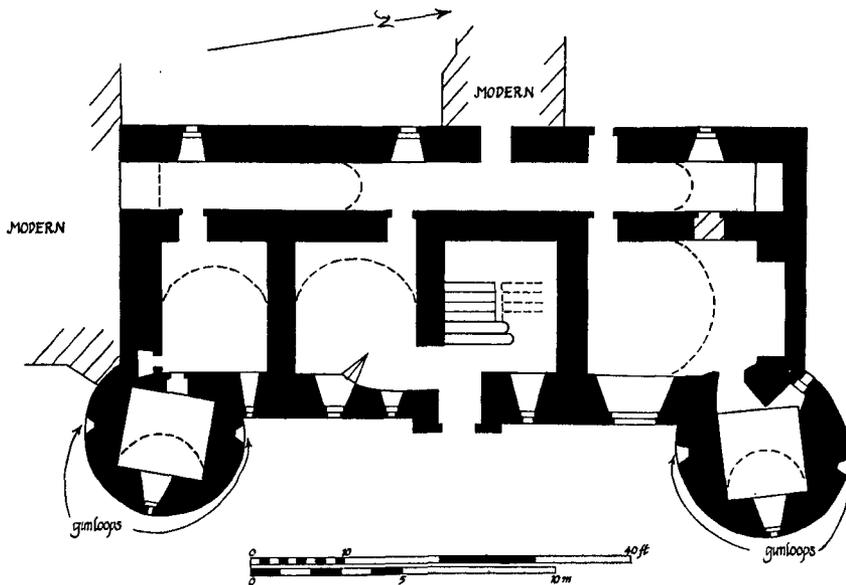


FIG 1 Plan of Glenbervie Castle

of the Pilketty Burn towards the old churchyard. A short distance up the Pilketty Burn is the ancient saw-mill, a picturesque structure, now derelict, with its roof supporting a miniature forest of waving ferns and grasses. The Milltown of Glenbervie, now no longer so used, adjoins towards the West. To the E, the Home Farm represents the former Mains of Glenbervie, the *terra mensalis* which the lord of the manor retained in his own hands to provide his table. Hard by is the old square dovecot, dated 1736. The old manse, dating in its earliest portion from about 1725, stands on the W side of the churchyard, and close to it are the Bow Butts, where of old the parishioners practised their archery, in obedience to an act of Parliament passed by James II in 1457. Thus the ensemble gives us, within small compass, a complete and vivid picture of an early manorial centre, grouped round the familiar juxtaposition of church and castle representing respectively the ecclesiastical and civil nuclei of the primitive parochial organisation, so characteristic of the Anglo-Norman penetration of Scotland. The surroundings of the venerable mansion are most striking and romantic. The deep gorges formed by the two streams are clad with fine timber,

while the undergrowth has all the fragrant lushness so characteristic of the fertile soils that the Old Red Sandstone yields in the Howe o' the Mearns.

The castle, or Glenberrie House as it is now more usually called, has been much altered and enlarged, apparently about 1700 and again in 1854. The ancient portion is a remarkable and deeply interesting structure. It forms a large oblong block, lying N and S, straddling the tip of the promontory and forbidding access to a narrow triangular area behind, which evidently formed a small courtyard in rear of the main building. At either end of the latter is a powerful round tower, with a three-quarter salient: these towers rise from a chambered plinth. The overall dimensions of the main block are about 72 ft by 31 ft (22 m by 9.5 m), and its frontal wall is 6 ft (1.8 m) thick: the round towers measure about 18 ft (5.5 m) in diameter. These have wide-mouthed gunloops, 1 ft 9 in (0.53 m) – a cubit – in breadth, disposed so as to cover the approaches and to rake the front of the main building between. In addition to these horizontal gunloops on the flanks, each tower displays frontally a vertical arrowslit, 4 ft (1.2 m) in height, with a crosslet head and an oilette at base. The dressed margins of these loopholes are modern, or at least have been recut. But their internal embrasures are ancient, and it seems probable that the loopholes had been closed up at some unknown period, and had been discovered and thereafter refurbished at the time of the restoration – in much the same way as an interesting suite of loopholes, similarly blocked and concealed behind rough-cast, have been discovered in the recent re-harling of Fyvie Castle. Crosslet loopholes with an oilette below are found in Ravenscraig Castle, Aberdeenshire, licensed in 1491, and in a group of castles in the same county, dating from the middle or latter half of the sixteenth century (Cruden 1960, 216-17).

Midway in the fore-face of the building is the entrance. This is now wholly modern. Over it is the Badenach Nicolson coat of arms: *or*, three falcon's heads erased *gules*, armed *azure*, with the motto *Nil sistere contra*. Within the entrance a modern wooden stair on the scale-and-platt system, with a single platt, ascends to the upper floor. Otherwise, the basement, including the two towers, is vaulted throughout, and contains a fine suite of cellars, with a spacious kitchen at the N end, and a corridor of access along the W or inner face. The vaults are all of single barrel construction, those of the cellars being rectangular like the others. Agreeably to its greater length, the kitchen is vaulted on the long axis of the main building, the other vaults in which are transverse. These vaults are amply conceived; in particular that of the corridor is 8 ft (2.4 m) high, and makes an impressive appearance. Owing to their modern use as pantry and wine-cellar respectively, the vaults in the round towers do not now reveal any trace of the embrasures of their gunloops. The arrowslit in the N tower remains open, and it is interesting to note that across the inside of its crosslet head a low elliptic arch is introduced, which, while not impeding the admission of light or the use of the loophole by a defender, makes it difficult to shoot in from outside. This device is not infrequently found in medieval *archères* (Simpson 1961, 32). From the pantry vault hangs an iron ring, from that of the wine cellar, now fitted up with brick bins, depends an iron 'cleek', or double hook. The doors throughout the basement are lintelled, with a 3 in (76 mm) chamfer on lintel and jambs. Two small windows, one on the W and the other on the E side, retain their iron grilles, the mode of penetration of the bars being reversed in opposite quarters, in the characteristic Scottish manner.

The upper parts of the house, towers and all, have been more or less modernised, inside and outside; and, as the walls here are comparatively thin, it seems likely that little ancient masonry may survive above an offset which crosses the N gable at a height of about 8 ft (2.4 m) above ground. The N round tower retains a comely slated roof in the old style; but the S tower is now crowned with a corbelled and crenellated parapet in local red sandstone, dating from 1854, within which rises a quaint round turret, capped with a conical helmet. This turret was designed as a

smoking room! (Editor's note: pl 19c shows the S tower in the form described here, but it has since been remodelled to match the N tower as shown in a more recent photograph, pl 19a.)

On the first floor the internal disposition of the main block is reversed, the corridor here extending along the E or fore-face. It gives access to two large rooms on either side of the stair landing. The S room now forms the dining-room, while the N is a private room. It seems quite likely that these two rooms may represent the ancient hall and solar or withdrawing room – the latter, as so often is the case, being placed above the kitchen for its greater warmth. This room retains its fine bolection-moulded panelling in red pine – probably 'eastland boards'. At this level, the two round towers each contain a charming circular room.

The plan of Glenbervie Castle is most remarkable and of the highest interest. The fact that the two round towers are placed both on the same side of the main structure, instead of being écheloned at diagonally opposite corners in the usual Scottish manner, raises at once the question; what was the original plan of the castle? It might at first glance appear that we have to deal with the remnant of a design, perhaps never completed, consisting of a central quadrangular courtyard enclosed by a *corps de logis* with a round tower at each of the four corners. This is a plan sometimes found in Scottish houses of the sixteenth century, such as Boyne Castle in Banffshire (Simpson 1938, 11–28). But for such a structure the triangular site offers insufficient room. Moreover, the corridor on the west side runs the whole length of the building, which it would not have done had the structure formed, or had it been intended to form, one side of a quadrangle. It looks, therefore, as if we may have to deal rather with the type of building found in Ravenscraig Castle, Fife (Simpson 1938), or Morton Castle in Nithsdale (Simpson 1940, 26–35; 1959, 10–14), where a triangular promontory is cut off on the only accessible side by a screen of building thrown across it, with round towers at the free angles, so as to command the approach. At Ravenscraig the building, thus frontally massed, is pierced centrally by a trance giving access to the courtyard behind. At Morton this access is gained through a gatehouse, regularly defended, at one end of the frontal building. On the other hand, at Glenbervie there has clearly been no such central entrance passage leading through to the courtyard. Inverugie Castle in Aberdeenshire, built early in the seventeenth century by the fifth Earl Marischal, shows the same scheme as Glenbervie, with two frontal towers and no passage through the building between them (MacGibbon and Ross 1887–92, 324–8). But Inverugie is a lightly built and almost unfortified structure, and the round towers have clearly been designed merely for effect; whereas Glenbervie is a formidable fortalice, the round towers of which are plainly meant to confront an attacker with defiance. In its frontal massing of the main structure, Glenbervie takes its place among a whole sequence of Scottish castles, from the fourteenth century onwards – the grandest of the group being Doune in Menteith (Simpson 1962).

It is obvious that the present wooden stair must occupy the position of a stone predecessor, whether on the newel or the scale-and-platt design.² Such a central stair would of course communicate towards the rear with the long corridor, and thus provide the necessary connection between these offices and the public rooms above. On every count, the plan is a remarkable one, and it is not easy to cite precise parallels. Something similar, however, is found at Dunbeath Castle in Caithness, first on record apparently as the 'Castell of Dunbeth' in 1439 (Innes 1859, 16). Here on a promontory site, isolated from the mainland by a ditch, we have a rectangular frontal block straddling the area from cliff to cliff. The entrance is central, but there is no trance or through passage leading to the courtyard behind. The basement is vaulted and contains a kitchen and three cellars: but there is no corridor of access, neither are there any flanking towers, which the constricted site does not permit.

Glenbervie Castle contains much that is valuable in portraits and other paintings, furniture,

china, glass and needlework, but these do not come within the scope of this present study. Only one piece of the ancient fittings of the house now remains. This is an oaken panel, measuring 1 ft 8 in long by 10 in broad (508 mm by 254 mm). On it is carved in relief a shield of florid Renaissance design, displaying the arms of Douglas of Glenbervie, thus: quarterly, first and fourth, a heart (here uncrowned), on a chief three stars for Douglas; second and third, a cross raguly, for Auchinleck. On either side are the initials V.D., and above the inscription 1548 | DIE: APR · 9. The lettering is extremely good. Traces of heraldic colouring remain on the shield. The arms are those of Sir William Douglas of Glenbervie, afterwards the ninth Earl of Angus. Probably the panel may have formed the door of an aumbry, or perhaps of a tallboy or cupboard.

GLENBERVIE CHURCH

The old church of Glenbervie, a prebend of Brechin, was dedicated to St Michael.³ Partly rebuilt in 1771 and enlarged in 1798, in 1826 it was abandoned in favour of the present barnlike building on a cheerless site a bowshot to the north. Of the former church only the Douglas burial aisle, in what was the presbytery of the medieval edifice, now remains. This fragment, at present almost smothered in ivy, is entered by a plain door in the W wall and lit by a single, unmoulded, round arched window, probably of the eighteenth century, on the S side. It contains the altar tomb, now somewhat dilapidated, of the ninth Earl of Angus and his Countess, Egidia Graham, with their coat of arms and an inscription in Latin, which bears that the widow erected the monument in memory of her husband and herself; the date of her own death has never been filled in. Above this monument is a long panel in three large slabs, dated 1680, and displaying the gruesome mortuary emblems that were just then invading funerary art, together with the heraldic bearings of the Hassa, Olifant, Melville, Auchinleck and Douglas families, and an immense inscription recording in florid Latin the descent of the barons of Glenbervie from Hugo Hassa, a native of Germany, whose date is given as AD 730, and who married Germunda Dervies, heiress of Glenbervie!⁴ Underneath the burial aisle is a vault, with side benches for the coffins of the Earl and his lady; these, however, have now disappeared.

On a detached fragment of the old church is a modern brass commemorating the ancient family of Stuart of Inchbreck. It was erected by John Stuart, Professor of Greek at Marischal College, Aberdeen, who died in 1827, and who in his day was a distinguished Fellow of our Society and contributor to our *Proceedings*. Far more interesting are two table-stones which cover the paternal great grandparents and great granduncle of Burns (Kinnear 1910, 85-96). These were restored in 1885, and again in 1951.

In addition to St Michael's, there was also a chapel, with a well, dedicated to St Mary, at Dellavaird, about a mile further up the Bervie Water. In the Den of Drumlithie is St Conon's Well and the reputed site of his chapel. St Conon is said to have died on 26th January 648: he may be the same as St Machonog to whom the church of Inverkeilor in Angus is dedicated (Forbes 1872, 307-8).

The original nucleus of population in Glenbervie was at the Kirkton, which indeed is said to have been made into a burgh of barony under the Douglasses. The present village centre is Drumlithie, a mile to the ENE. It does not seem to be earlier than the sixteenth century; in 1585 there was a chapel at Drumlithie, under the patronage of the laird of Glenbervie (Innes 1856, II 345). The village was for long a centre of the hand-loom weaving industry. The people were staunch Episcopalians, and their chapel was burnt by the Duke of Cumberland's troops in 1746. The present Episcopal church dates from 1863.

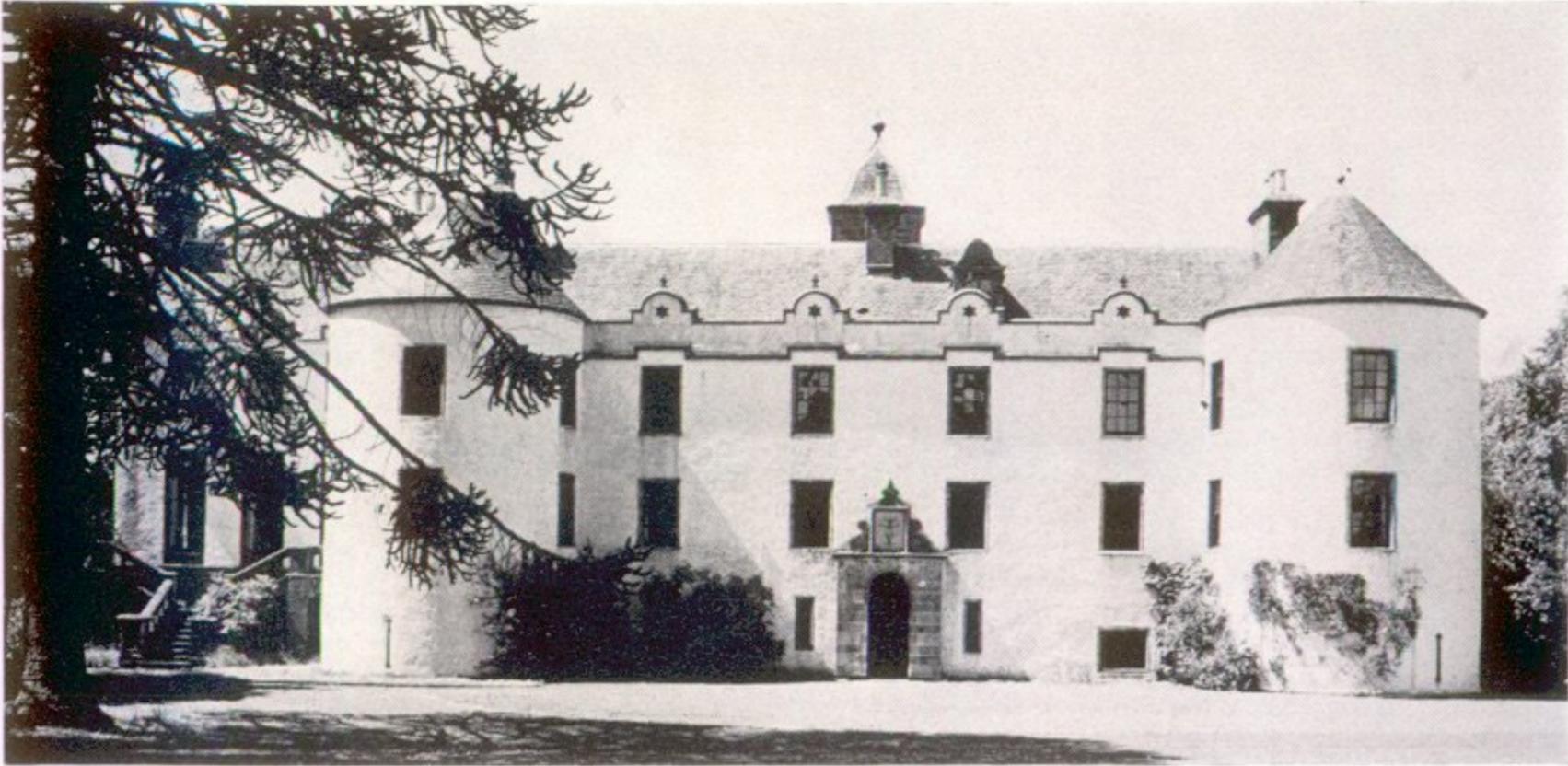
NOTES

- 1 A somewhat similar yarn forms the theme of Leyden's ballad of Lord Soulis.
- 2 The two steps descending in a curve from the vestibule to the cellar on the south (see plan) are modern.
- 3 Michael Fair used to be held at Drumlithie, the village centre of the parish.
- 4 The inscriptions on the altar tomb and the genealogical tablet are transcribed and translated in full by Andrew Jervise (1879, 344–5) but he gives the Earl's age as 95 instead of 59.

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Editor's note: the posthumous publication of this paper is by permission of Mrs W D Simpson and the University of Aberdeen. Fig 1 was redrawn by Miss A Tuckwell from a sketch plan made by Dr Simpson.



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