

# Excavations at Hillslap Tower, Roxburghshire, 1983–4

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## ABSTRACT

*Excavation within the barmkin of the towerhouse was carried out in advance of the renovation of the building and its immediate environs. The investigation revealed part of the flagged and cobbled surface of the courtyard and the fragmentary remains of a building abutting the tower. It is thought that this outbuilding belonged to the original, late 16th-century layout associated with the tower.*

## INTRODUCTION (ILLUS 1–3)

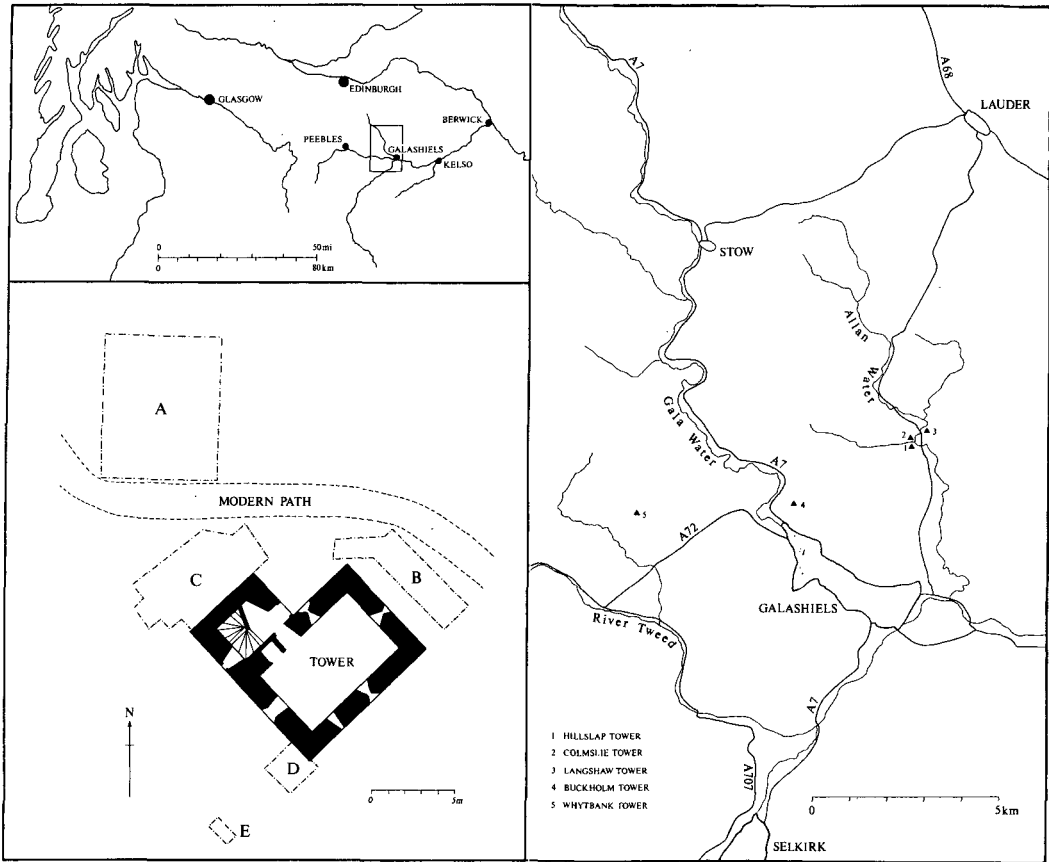
Hillslap Tower (NT 513393) lies in the parish of Melrose, close to the Lauder/Galashiels road and about 3 km north-east of the town of Galashiels. It is one of three 16th-century towers (the others being Colmslie and Langshaw) sited in close proximity to each other around the point where the narrow valley of the Allen Water broadens to receive several small tributaries. The area is surrounded by gently rolling moorland which, albeit bleak and windswept, seldom reaches over 350 m in height. Sheep grazing now predominates in this area with occasional fodder crops being grown; whereas, especially to the south and west of the tower, an earlier emphasis on arable farming is attested by extensive remains of rig and furrow cultivation reaching almost to the 220 m contour. The bedrock consists of Silurian rocks of the Llandoverly Series which are overlain by glacially deposited boulder clay (Greig 1971, pl XIII).

The tower, situated on a north-facing slope some 185 m above sea level, stands on the edge of a gentle bluff bordering the floodplain of the Allen Water; with a small rivulet running close by. Descriptions of its architecture can be found in RCAHMS (1956, 292) and in MacGibbon and Ross (1889, 547–51); and a detailed appraisal of the shot-holes within its walls is offered by Maxwell-Irving (1971, 192–223). A brief summary of the building follows.

The tower is L-shaped with its entrance in the re-entrant angle which faces north. At ground-floor level the main block comprises a vaulted undercroft, measuring approximately 7.0 m by 4.5 m within walls 1.0 m thick. It has been suggested that this basement had been divided, perhaps with a timber partition (Zeune 1992, 205). The smaller north-west wing contains the main stair which, at first-floor level, leads to a single apartment in the main block and to a turret stair that projects out from the re-entrant angle of the building. This stair gave access to the upper storeys of the building which contained private apartments within both wings but which were in a parlous state until recent restoration work was undertaken. The fabric of the tower, including its quoins, is largely of rubble masonry although the lintels and the door and window rybats are all of dressed sandstone.

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ILLUS 1 Hillslap Tower, showing the location of the tower and the layout of trenches (Based on the Ordnance Survey map © Crown Copyright)

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

An inscription above the main doorway of Hillslap Tower conveniently tells us it was built around 1585 for N C, Nicol Cairncross. By the time the tower was built, the Cairncross family was well established in the area, holding the adjacent lands of 'Cumbesley' (Colmslie). These lands were first mentioned in 1153 when King Malcolm IV granted a site to Melrose Abbey upon which they could build a sheepfold and a shed to house 100 cows (MRR 1917, xliii).

Apparently, the Cairncross family originated in Angus: in the mid-15th century John de Carincors held judicial offices in Forfar and Brechin, while Thomas Carncors was a burgher of Dundee at much the same time. One Nichol Carnecorse was a bailie of Edinburgh in 1518 and became the city's Dean of Guild in 1530 (Black 1946, 124). He and his wife, Marion Scott, did not have any children and Nichol's estate passed to his brother, William, who is believed to have been the first Cairncross of Colmslie (MRR 1917, xliii).

Hillslap, or Calfhill as it was more frequently known, was originally part of the much larger estate of Appletreeleaves which was occupied by the Darling family, first as kindly [native or

indigenous] tenants of Melrose Abbey, and later as feuars: the earliest recorded feuar was a John Darling who died in 1552 (MRR 1917, xxix). There were various divisions of Appletreeleaves leading to the emergence of Ladehope (or Ladehopemuir) which was split yet again after the Church's lands were annexed to the Crown in 1567 (*ibid*). It was Easter Ladehopemuir that became Calfhill.

As a separate entity, Calfhill first appears in 1555, when the Commendator of Kelso and Melrose Abbeys asked for an annual rent of £10 Scots (MRR 1917, 193). Eleven years later, Michael, Commendator of Melrose, had bestowed Calfhill to Charles Cairncross of Colmslie and his spouse, Marion Hoppringle, in life-rent; and to his son, John, in fee (MRR 1917, xxlx).

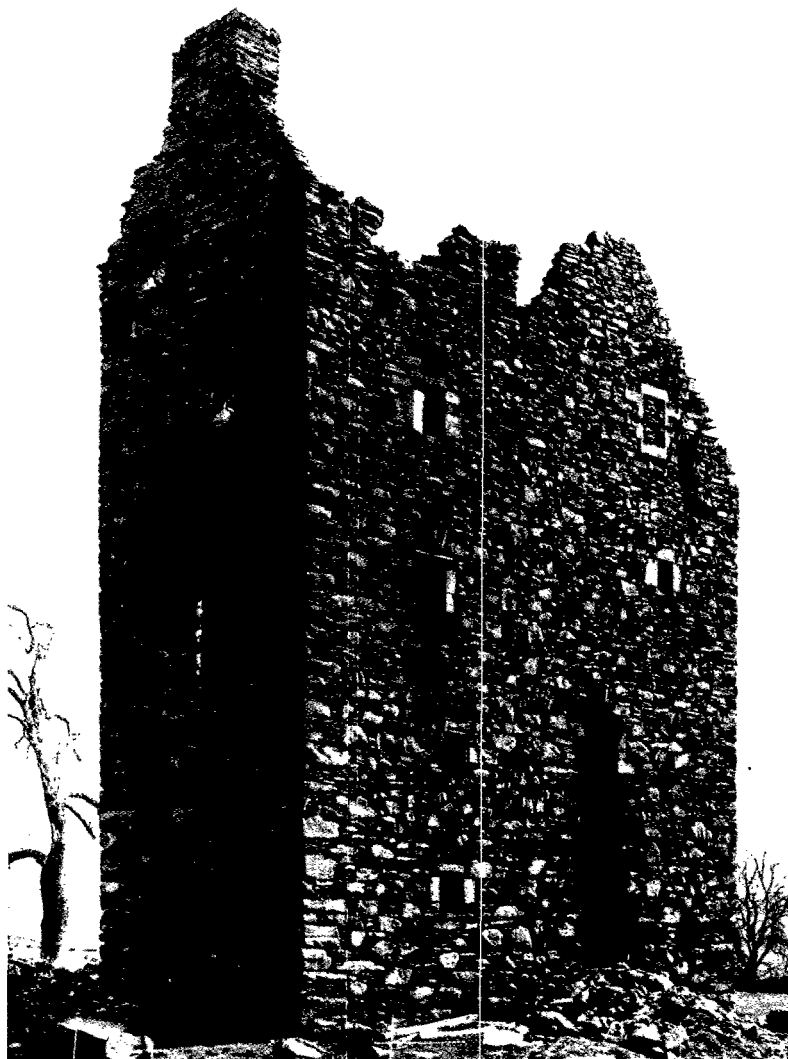
From 1577 onwards, references to 'Nicolai [Nicol] Carnecors de Calfhill' occur (RGS, 664). By 1585 he had married Elizabeth Lauder (her initials also appear over the doorway of the tower); and their tack [leasehold] of Calfhill was confirmed in 1586, 'and to an heir immediately succeeding them, for their lifetimes and nineteen years thereafter ...', (MRR 1917, 326). Towards the end of the same year, his brother, Robert, was granted an annual pension of 50 merks by Melrose Abbey 'from the lands of Maxpopill and Calfhill yielding 20 merks, the lands of Housbyre 16 merks, and the lands of Alanschaws 10 merks and the teinds of Calfhill 4 merks' (MRR 1917, 329), an indication of the property already controlled by the Cairncross family. By 1608 Nicol and his son, also Nicol, were 'heritable feuars of Hillslap, Calfhill' (MRR 1914, 67); and a charter of 1627 assured Nicol (probably the younger) of his rights to the estate of 'Calfhill, Notmanspark, Ladehope, and the 5 merks land of Maxpopil' (MRR 1917, 415).

Nicol, the builder of Hillslap, has left us few indications of his character. He seems to have been a very ordinary minor laird, perhaps with business interests in Edinburgh. He certainly appears to have been more law-abiding than some, frequently standing surety for his more impetuous contemporaries (RPC 1881, 53, 63, 83, 240, 323, 493, 592; RPC 1882, 613, 656, 681) and acting as co-guardian of donated lands until their rightful owner, Robert Lauder, came of age (RPC 1882, 691). There is one instance, however, where he, along with some others, is ordered not to harm Johnne Govane of Cardrone (Cardrona, Peeblesshire) or members of his family (RPC 1882, 709).

William Cairncross, who inherited the estate in the second half of the 17th century, caused himself a few problems by being an absentee landlord. Contemporary records describe disputes over unpaid debts (MRR 1914, 243, 308; 1915, 264); and squabbles amongst tenants over animals grazing on neighbours' crops (MRR 1914, 214, 300). Described as 'Hilslope, who dwells not within the regality', William also found his ownership challenged on at least two occasions. Within an account of the 1673 proceedings, wherein George Pringle of Buckholm, a close neighbour, claimed he owned Ladehopemuir and 'that meadow or moss called Reidcroceomos', there is mention of a charter by the Earl of Melrose which acknowledges that 'evidents and securities of the said lands were burnt by a great fire, evidences of which were produced'; although the precise location of the fire is not stated (MRR 1915, 264, 331).

The Cairncross connection with Hillslap Tower finally ended in 1759 when the Misses Elizabeth and Janet Cairncross, whose brother Hugh had already died, left moveable property worth over £12,000 Scots. Elizabeth bequeathed her share to John Rutherford of Edgerstoun; Janet willed hers to Alexander Pringle of Whytbank, an estate situated to the west of Galashiels (illus 1). Their nearest kin was a schoolmaster, Thomas Mill of Halalies, who had to resort to litigation to obtain an acceptable settlement (MRR 1917, xxix). Thereafter the tower fell into disrepair and by 1821 it was sketched as a roofless shell by Sir David Erskine (illus 7).

Hillslap achieved a modicum of literary fame through the writing of Sir Walter Scott. Describing it as a 'ruinous mansion-house' in his introduction (written in 1830) to *The Monastery*,



ILLUS 2 Hillslap Tower, viewed from the west, before the start of renovations

Scott records that 'Hillslap is remembered by the humours [moods] of its last inhabitants, two or three elderly ladies, of the class of Miss Rayland, in the 'Old Manor House', though less important by birth and fortune' (Scott 1867, 388). Within his preface Scott also discounts what seems to have already become a popular myth; that the fictitious peel-house of Glendearg was based on Hillslap and its neighbouring towers of Colmslie and Langshaw. Each, he says, has a distinct history of its own 'but none of them bear the most distant resemblance to the descriptions in the Romance of the Monastery'. He goes on, 'as the author could hardly have erred so grossly regarding a spot within a morning's ride of his own house, the inference is that no resemblance was intended'.

## THE EXCAVATION

In the late 1970s the owner of Hillslap, Mr Philip Mercer, undertook an extensive programme of restoration on the fabric of the building. This included reconstruction of the ground-floor vault and the upper storeys of the tower. During renovation work a number of moulded stones, thought to be voussoirs from a gateway that led through the barmkin wall, were recovered about 10 m north of the tower within a foundation trench for a proposed garage. Following this discovery, a brief rescue excavation was undertaken to examine the extent and condition of any remains of structures and features associated with the tower that may have survived. The specific aims of the investigation were to trace the barmkin wall and the remains of the putative gateway; and a range of buildings whose presence was implied by three roof timber slots built into the north-west gable of the tower at second-storey level.

Five small trenches were opened, their often eccentric shapes and positions governed by the need to avoid interference with building operations. An assortment of overburden and stone dumps had to be moved before the investigation could begin. The excavators were also faced with the removal of considerable quantities of rubble and other materials from each of the trenches where the debris of destruction and stone robbing was up to 0.5 m deep.

The excavation was carried out between November 1983 and January 1984 by John Cannell and Alan Radley on behalf of the then Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments) (now Historic Scotland) who funded the project.

### TRENCH A (ILLUS 3)

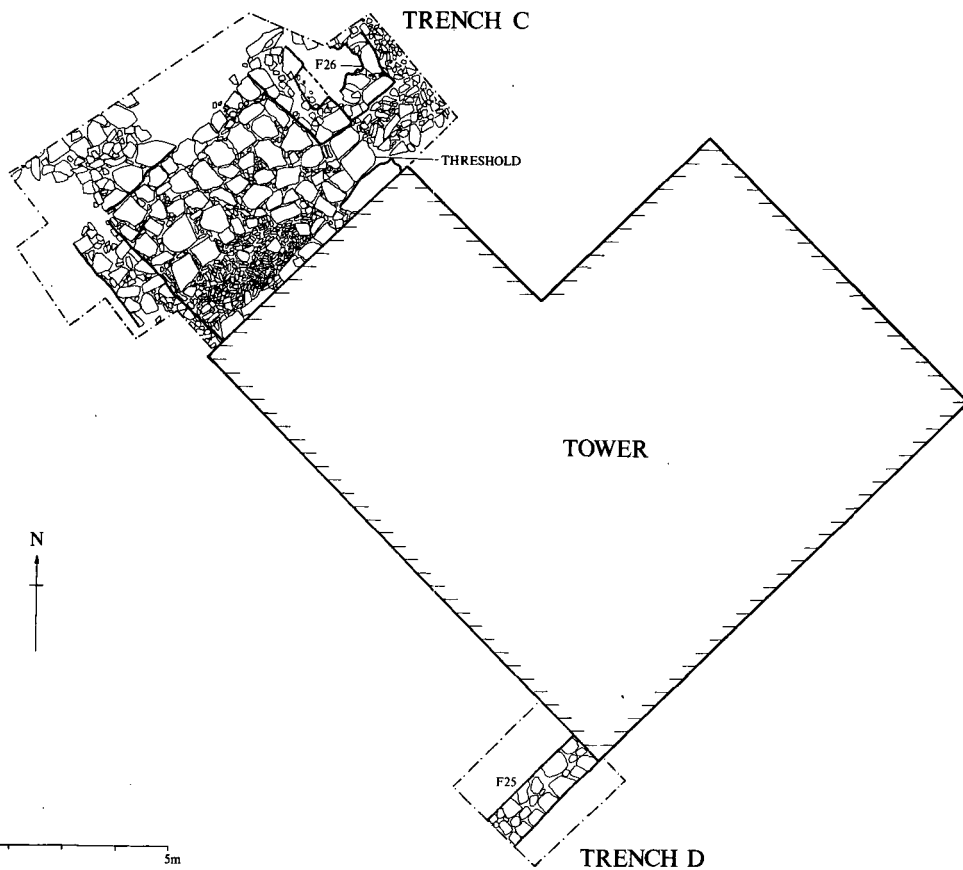
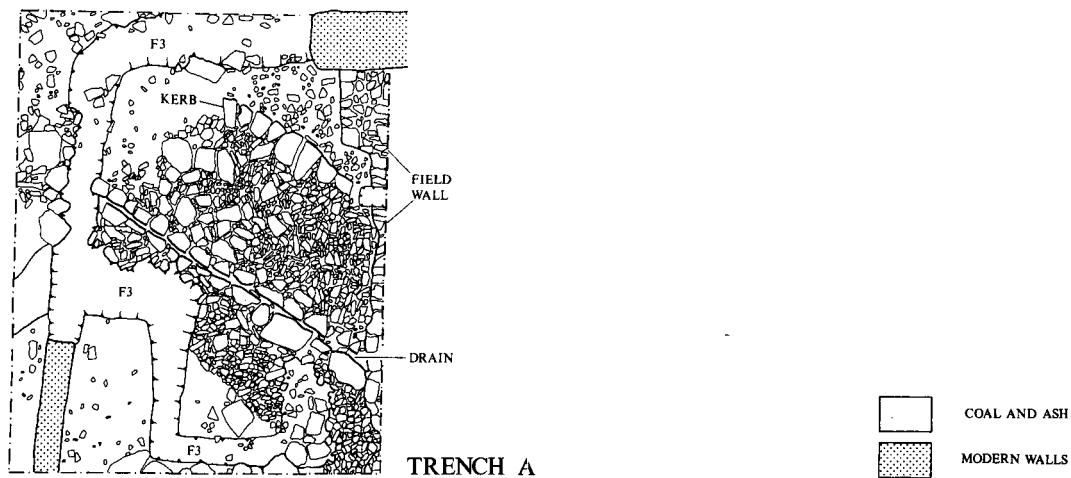
Trench A was located immediately north of a modern path and some 6 m north of the tower's north-west wing. It measured 9 m north/south by 7 m east/west and encompassed the foundation trenches (collectively termed F3) for the new garage. The foundations of a recently dismantled drystone field wall ran along the east side of the trench, abutting the north-west wall of the tower in Trench C (see below). Foundation trenches for the garage ran along the north edge of Trench A, returning southwards near its western side. Except where concrete had been laid in the south-west corner of the trench, these foundation cuts lay open, having been dug 0.2 m into the clay subsoil through the metalled surface of the courtyard.

This surface was composed of large, flat sandstone slabs, typically 0.5 m across; and smaller, sub-angular pieces of sandstone set on edge and pressed directly into the subsoil to a depth of 0.2 m. Smaller pebbles were used to fill remaining gaps. There was no pronounced orientation to these cobbles. On their north-east side there was a clearly defined kerb of large, flat sandstone boulders, up to 0.6 m across, set into the subsoil and projecting 0.1 m above it. Alongside the kerb was a spread of angular, sandstone rubble sitting on undisturbed boulder clay. It is possible that this is all that remained of a wall that once enclosed the yard.

The courtyard surface towards the north-west of the trench was clearly incomplete; the cobbles probably having been robbed away from the point where the ground sloped gently downwards. There they were replaced by a spread of rough sandstone slabs which did not form a well-defined surface and which appeared to have been deposited at random. Their relationship with the cobbles further east was unclear, the connection having been severed by the foundation cut for one of the garage walls.

The south-west side of the cobbles had also been cut by the garage foundations although it appeared from the surviving remains that the cobbles had been laid against another feature, probably a wall. A single, large boulder that lay against this edge was conceivably the only survivor of this wall, perhaps the north-east wall of the building partially uncovered in Trench C (see below).

The surface of the courtyard followed the natural slope, dropping 0.2 m towards the north-west over a distance of 7 m. Running SE/NW across the cobbled surface was an open drain, its sides constructed of two parallel lines of flags. Evidently, the slabs were chosen for their naturally chamfered inside faces which formed a gully 0.25 m wide and 0.15 m deep and which sloped down gently towards the north-west.



ILLUS 3 The excavated features in Trenches A, C and D

Towards the south-east corner of Trench A there was a patch of partially burnt coal and ash, measuring 1.4 m by 0.6 m and 0.1 m deep, which had been cut by the garage foundations and which continued westwards beyond the trench edge. This material is assumed to be the debris from a nearby hearth although its original provenance and date of deposition remain unknown.

Against the south edge of Trench A there were several large, flat, thin slabs whose full extent remains unclear. The easternmost of these stones was incised with a shallow socket, 0.1 m across and 0.05 m deep, which may have been associated with the doorway suggested by the sandstone voussoirs found nearby. Unfortunately, because of widespread disturbance and the relatively narrow limits of the excavation, the south-east corner of Trench A was poorly understood.

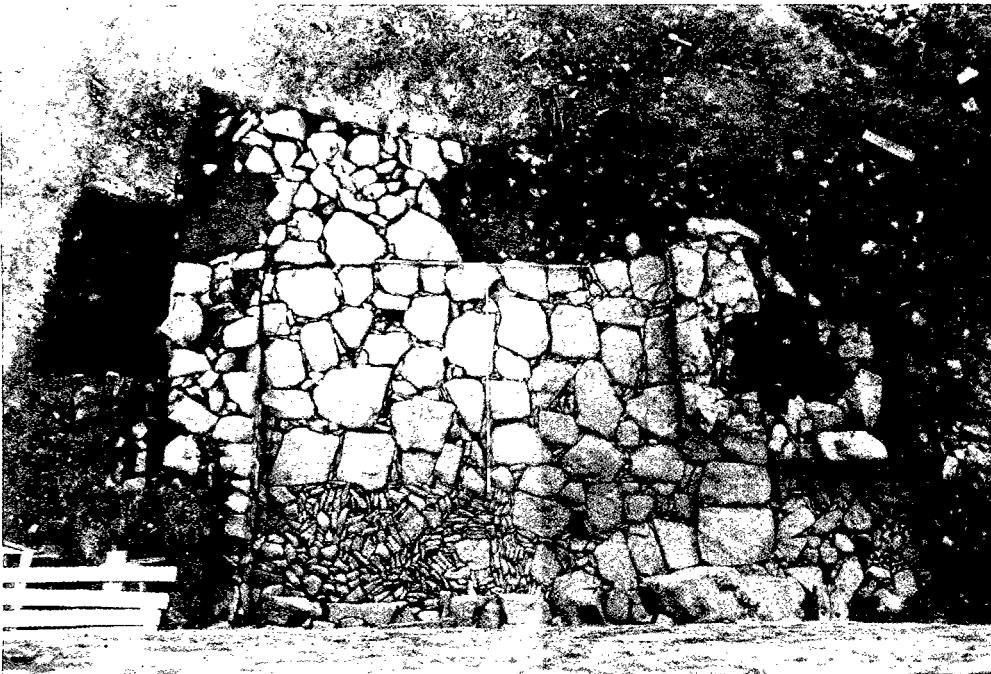
#### TRENCH B (ILLUS 3)

Measuring 6.5 m NW/SE by 2.0 m wide, this trench was located alongside the north-east wall of the tower, to determine whether the barmkin wall had been built against it. The overburden, up to 0.5 m deep and comprising mainly sandstone rubble in a dark brown, clayey loam, lay directly over undisturbed boulder clay; recently installed services ran obliquely across the trench towards the tower.

A small westward extension, measuring 2.5 m by 1.5 m, again revealed nothing other than rubble. There was no trace of a wall or any other feature of archaeological interest within Trench B.

#### TRENCH C (ILLUS 3 & 4)

Trench C was opened against the north-west wing of the tower, in an effort to uncover the remains of an outbuilding, evidence of which could be seen in the form of three sockets for roof timbers in the north-west wall of the wing. The trench was very irregular, measuring a maximum of 8.2 m by 4.3 m.



ILLUS 4 Trench C, from the south-east

After the removal of the field wall which continued along the east side of Trench A, together with collapsed masonry from that wall and other overburden, the reasonably well-preserved remains of a stone building were revealed abutting the tower. It is not clear whether the entire ground plan of the building was uncovered or if the excavated structure was merely one of its apartments. Outside the building and occupying the north-east part of the trench were the remnants of a metalled surface resembling the cobbling in Trench A and presumably a continuation of it. Entry to the ground-floor level was through a doorway, 1.0 m wide, in the north-east wall, adjacent to the tower. The threshold of this doorway comprised two sandstone flags, showing considerable signs of wear, which rose 0.4 m above the level of the courtyard and 0.07 m above the floor of the building. There was no trace of any door fittings.

The building was defined on its north-east and south-west sides by rubble walls, each approximately 0.80 m wide, which were exposed for lengths of only 2 m and 3 m respectively. The south-west wall stood to a maximum 0.3 m (three courses) high and was constructed of two faces of mortar-bonded sandstone rubble enclosing a core of rubble and soil. This wall had no foundations, sitting directly on the subsoil; and, although abutting the west wall of the tower, it was imperfectly aligned with it. Nevertheless, the absence of gunloops in the north-west wall of the tower indicated that the adjacent building was probably contemporary with it. The north-east wall of the outbuilding was constructed with well-mortared rubble of which up to three courses still stood. Against its outer face, adjacent to the entrance, were the insubstantial remains of a rubble-built structure (F26). The core of this feature had been removed, as had some of the adjacent masonry of the north-east wall. It could be suggested that this void reflected the former location of a stair, leading to the upper storey(s) of the outbuilding, although its diameter of only 1.0–1.2 m makes it unlikely that it was a circular stair. This structure overlay the cobbles of the courtyard, indicating that it was a secondary feature.

The excavated chamber extended 3.0 m from the tower and was 3.9 m wide internally. Its north wall had been robbed out, apart from a few boulders at its south-west end. The stone floor, which had survived virtually intact, consisted mainly of large, sub-angular sandstone flags, the interstices packed with sandstone chips. In the south corner of the room, however, the flags gave way to much smaller, tightly packed cobbles. There was no obvious reason for this distinct change in the style of floor surface; it may simply indicate repairs at some stage although there was little sign of wear at any point on the floor surface.

#### TRENCH D (ILLUS 3)

This trench, measuring 2.5 m square against the south corner of the tower, contained a stretch of rough stone walling (F25), loosely butted onto the building. The wall, only the bottom two courses of which survived, was 0.75 m wide and was built of random sandstone rubble, bonded with a loose, dark loam. Although of rather crude construction, this wall was nevertheless quite different in character from nearby field boundaries and is assumed to be contemporary with the use (although not the construction) of the tower.

#### TRENCH E

Trench E, measuring 1.5 m by 0.8 m, was opened some 4 m south-west of Trench D to determine whether the wall identified in Trench D extended this far from the tower. The trench proved to be quite sterile archaeologically and it was abandoned after a short time.

#### THE FINDS

Of the few finds recovered, none was from a securely stratified context. Most of the pottery appears to be 18th-century in date, coincident with the abandonment of the tower in 1759.

The moulded stones recovered from the garage foundation trenches (illus 6) were all very similar in character. These 10 pale yellow sandstone blocks were components of a door jamb, decorated with a semicircular moulded shaft and with an inward opening rebate; one of these



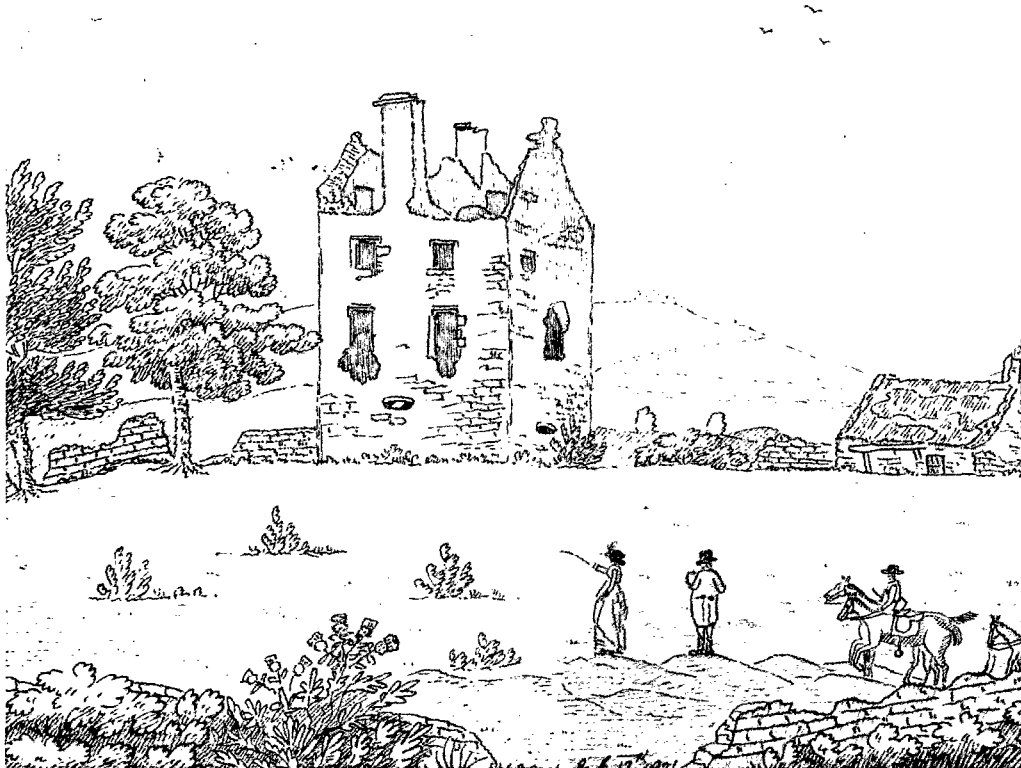
stones was pierced with a small socket. Two of the stones were very slightly curved, probably being springers for an arch although there are no arched openings in any part of the tower.

It was reported that the stones were found in close proximity to each other, which suggests that they had collapsed more or less *in situ*.

## DISCUSSION

Towards the end of the excavation it was decided that the area of investigation should be extended between Trenches A and C and perhaps eastwards from those trenches. Unfortunately, those proposals were never implemented and the excavation results are less extensive than had been hoped. Nevertheless, it is still possible to draw certain conclusions from the excavation findings; and to speculate to some extent on how the tower's ancillary buildings were arranged within its barmkin.

The only ancillary structure uncovered was one chamber of a range of buildings that abutted the north-west wing of the tower. On the evidence of beam sockets in the outer wall of the tower, this building had stood at least two storeys high. Almost certainly it extended beyond the cross wall whose footings were exposed at the north end of Trench C; although its walls were completely robbed out from within the area of Trench A. In all probability, the robber trench for



ILLUS 5 Sketch of Hillslap Tower in 1821, viewed from the south-east (Crown Copyright RCAHMS)



ILLUS 6 The moulded stones uncovered during the initial investigations at Hillslap

the north-east wall of the building coincided with the south-west limit of cobbling in Trench A. Such a building would have been at least 13 m long.

There was no conclusive evidence as to how entry was gained to the first floor of this building; although access to a loft could have been gained from the ground floor by a ladder. There was no positive evidence of a stair. The void within the north-east wall and the abutting stone structure (F26) was too small to accommodate even a narrow spiral staircase although this projecting masonry could conceivably have been the foundations of an external flight of steps. There were two similar stone platforms abutting the south (kitchen) range at Smailholm Tower, Roxburghshire, which may have been used for storage (Good & Tabraham 1988, 251). Although the Hillslap example was somewhat smaller, it too may have had such a function, perhaps holding a water butt. A less likely explanation is that F26 was the base of an oven although there were no traces of burning or heat-affected stonework within or near to it. Furthermore, there did not appear to be a hearth within this small basement chamber, indicating that it was not a kitchen or a related office such as a brewery or bakery.

In short, there was no positive indication as to the function of this room: perhaps it was simply a store. There was no obvious reason why its floor should be part flagged and part cobbled although such a design was certainly not exclusive to Hillslap. A similar arrangement can be found in the south range of courtyard buildings at Balvaird Castle, Perthshire, where again there is no obvious explanation for such a variation (Lewis 1992, 376). Perhaps there had been a change of

function to all or part of the room; it may have been necessary to effect repairs to its floor; or its builders may simply have exhausted their supply of convenient flagstones.

Unlike all the other walls at basement level of the tower, its north-west wall had no gunloops, indicating that the building that abutted it almost certainly belonged to the original arrangement associated with the tower. What is unclear, however, is just how far the courtyard and its buildings extended in any direction. Even the barmkin wall could not be identified with certainty although the rubble wall (F25), revealed in Trench D abutting the south corner of the tower, seems a strong candidate. Although this wall was not encountered in Trench E, its remnants evidently extended well beyond the tower in 1821 (illus 5). Alternatively, the barmkin wall may have been an extension of the outer wall of the excavated building; although, equally, such a wall could have marked the limit of an inner court.

There was some evidence to suggest that there had been an entrance into a courtyard towards the north end of Trench A. The 10 moulded door-jamb components unearthed during the excavation of the garage foundation trenches (illus 6) are substantial enough to have come from an external gateway rather than from the door of a building. An example of such a gateway can be seen at Buckholm Tower, located 3.5 km south-west of Hillslap (illus 1) and built around the same time (RCAHMS 1956, 294; figs 399, 400).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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