

The dating of the tower-houses at Comlongon and Elphinstone

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ABSTRACT

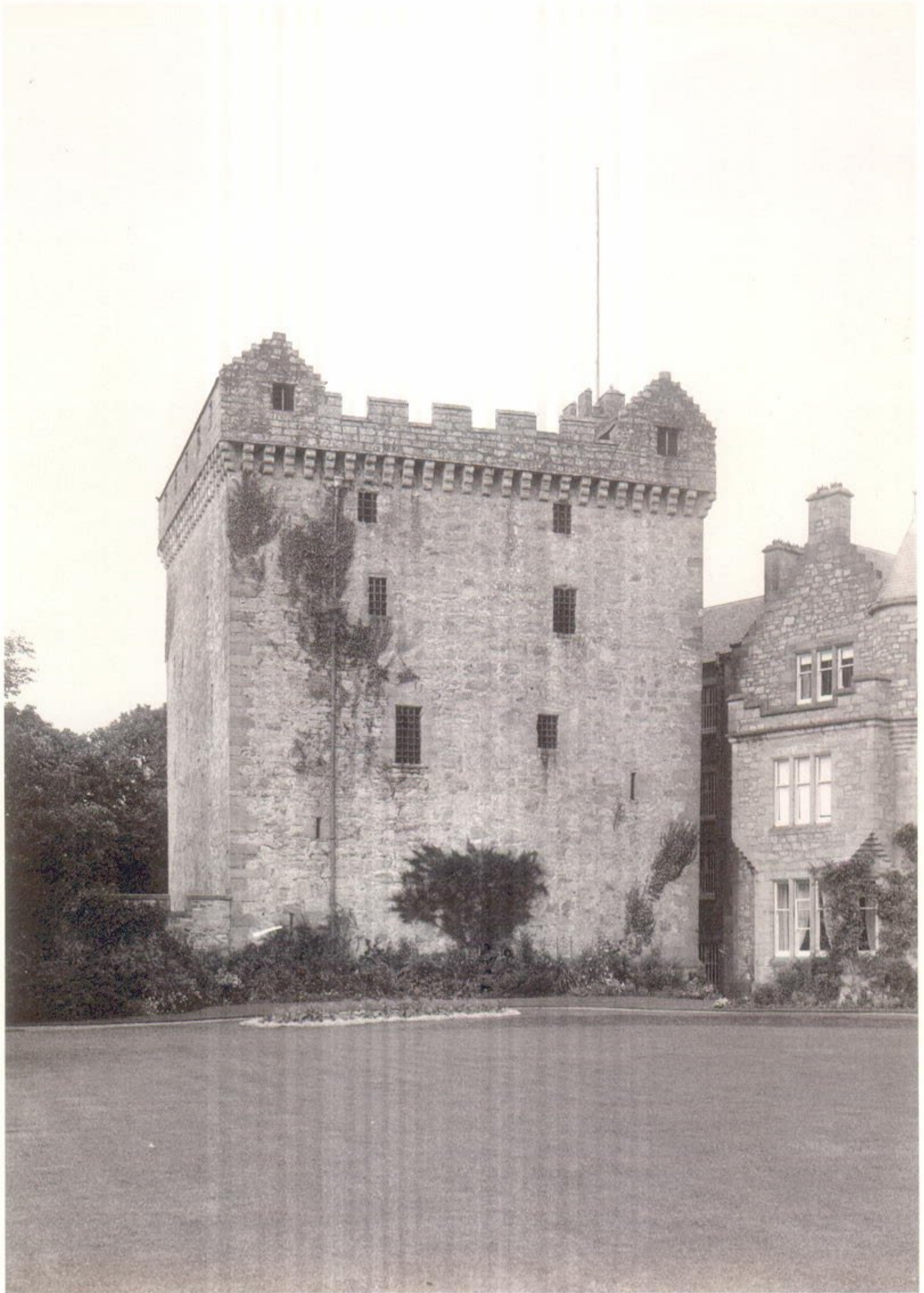
The significance of the great tower-house castles of Comlongon and Elphinstone in the history of Scottish architecture is such that the date when they were built is a matter of prime importance. In the past certain assumptions have been made, both in the dating of these two castles and, by analogy, in the dating of similar works; and these misunderstandings have now persisted for so long that they are no longer questioned. The purpose of this short paper is to look at the evidence afresh and to try to put the record straight.

INTRODUCTION

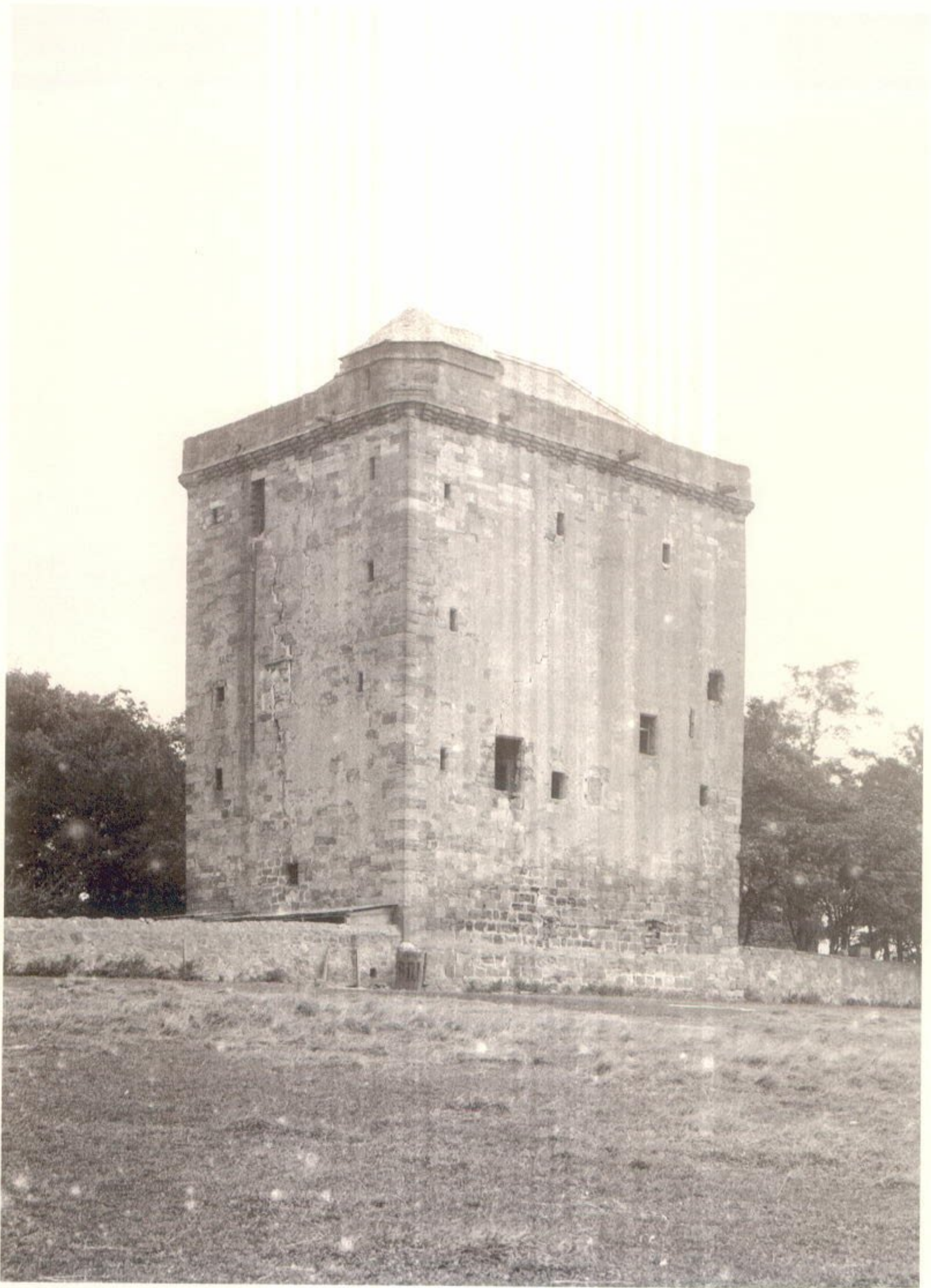
The castle of Comlongon in Dumfries & Galloway (illus 1), with its myriad of mural chambers – there are no less than 12 – and many other architectural refinements, is justly recognized as ‘perhaps the ablest thing of its kind in Scotland, and in it the plain rectangular tower-house . . . may be thought to have reached its climax’ (Simpson 1942, 20). It is a distinction it shares with the former tower-castle of Elphinstone (illus 2) in East Lothian, now sadly reduced to its lowest storey. These two castles and the massive stronghold of Borthwick in Midlothian have collectively been described by Cruden as ‘pre-eminent among all towers . . . never to be surpassed in scale or strength’ (Cruden 1960, 144). Certainly, no one questions their status. Strength, however, is the one characteristic that was, in fact, lacking at both Comlongon and Elphinstone. Comlongon’s north wall was so weakened by its mural chambers and the thrust of their vaults that it has had to be stabilized internally with massive timber supports, while Elphinstone, similarly handicapped and further weakened by subsidence, finally had to be demolished c 1963. Neither would have survived an attack with artillery, unlike Borthwick, which was besieged in 1650 and still bears the scars of Cromwell’s guns. And there are other significant differences from Borthwick, notably in their great halls, both of which incorporate the kitchen at the opposite end from the main fireplace. We know that the licence to build Borthwick was granted in 1430 (RMS, vol II, no 157), but when were the other two built?

As long ago as 1788, Cardonnel suggested that the present castle of Comlongon was already in existence in the time of David II (Cardonnel 1788, ‘Comlongon’)! While nobody would take such a date seriously today, the apparent affinity of the sophistication of Comlongon and Elphinstone with Borthwick has led to the increasing conviction that they must have been built soon after Borthwick, and probably within the period 1440–75. The Royal Commission’s *Report on Dumfriesshire*, published in 1920, describes Comlongon only as ‘an unusually complete and well-preserved example of a 15th-century tower’ (RCAHMS 1920, no 537), while Elphinstone was described in 1924 as ‘prob-

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ILLUS 1 Comlongon, Dumfries & Galloway. (Reproduction by permission of the RCAHMS© Crown Copyright)



ILLUS 2 Elphinstone, East Lothian, before its partial demolition in the 1960s. (*Reproduced by kind permission of B T Batsford Ltd*)

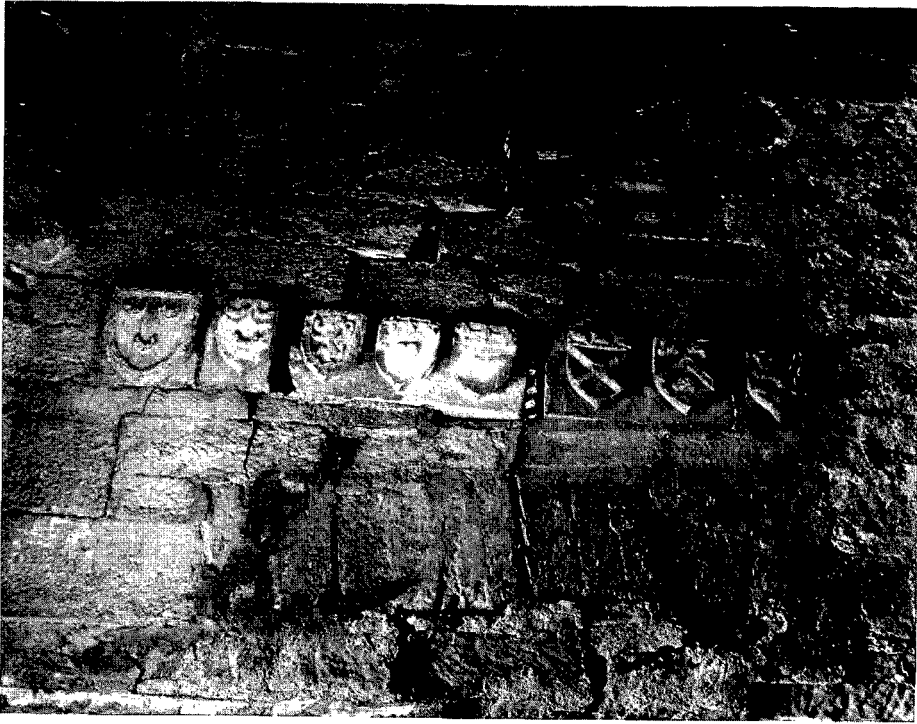
ably erected in the 15th century' (RCAHMS 1924, no 192). Three years later, Mackay Mackenzie refrained from giving any date to Elphinstone, and only went so far as to ascribe Comlongon 'to this [15th] century' (Mackenzie 1927, 187). But by 1942 Simpson was of the opinion that 'to judge by the style, this [the building of Comlongon] must have happened about 1450, or soon thereafter' (Simpson 1942, 28), and by 1960 Cruden was confident that both Comlongon and Elphinstone were only 'a few years later [than Borthwick]' (Cruden 1960, 128).¹ This belief has been sustained by other scholars since. Tranter wrote that 'Comlongon resembles the contemporary 15th-century tower of Elphinstone' (Tranter 1965, 79); Stell that 'it [Comlongon] was built probably in about the third quarter of the 15th century' (Stell 1986, 102); and recently Fawcett has dated it 'around the central decades of the fifteenth century' (Fawcett 1994, 244). Zeune even went so far as to declare that 'three out of a handful of masons' marks at both places [Borthwick and Comlongon] are absolutely identical' (Zeune 1984, 10). More will be said of this presently.

ELPHINSTONE CASTLE

With so much scholarship increasingly confident in a dating around the middle of the 15th century, why is there a need to take a fresh look at the question? First, let us consider Elphinstone. MacGibbon & Ross, writing in 1887, were much more guarded in their appraisal of the building. They wrote that Elphinstone 'resembles ordinary fifteenth-century work, while the corbelling, cable moulding, and gargoyles at the parapet, some of which are carved to resemble cannons, cannot be earlier than the end of the century' (MacGibbon & Ross, vol I, 236). The parapet walk is, in fact, a later reconstruction, dating from the latter half of the 16th century, a point fully appreciated by the Royal Commission (RCAHMS 1924, no 192).

One argument that has been put forward in support of a mid-15th-century date for Elphinstone is the incorporation of the arms of Johnston of Annandale in the armorial panels above the hall fireplace. According to MacGibbon & Ross, this had often led to the assumption that the tower must have been built by Sir Gilbert Johnston, who acquired Elphinstone by marriage to Agnes, daughter and heiress of Sir Alexander Elphinstone of that ilk, the last of his line, who was killed at Piperdean in 1435 (MacGibbon & Ross, vol I, 237); and Fawcett reiterates that it was 'dateable on heraldic grounds to around 1440' (Fawcett 1994, 245). Sir Gilbert, who had been 'faithful squire' to King James III in 1472, was still alive as late as 1482,² when he was witness to a charter (RMS, vol II, no 1618); but the Johnston arms could equally well relate to his son, Sir Adam Johnston of Elphinstone, who was still witnessing charters in 1506 (RMS, vol II, no 3008). A point that has not been mentioned elsewhere is the fact that the heraldic display was incomplete. The photographic record of Elphinstone (illus 3) clearly shows that, immediately to the right of the last shield, the wall was at some period opened up to admit more light to the hall (and later crudely filled in again), with the consequent loss of four or five armorial panels.³ The truth is that the heraldic evidence is far from conclusive in providing a precise date. Indeed, Sir William Fraser, in his history of the Elphinstone family, points out some anomalies in the arms themselves (Fraser 1897, vol I, xi).

On the other hand, Sir William Fraser provides a very convincing argument as to why Elphinstone could not have been built by Sir Gilbert Johnston. After the death of Sir Alexander Elphinstone in 1435, there was protracted litigation over the succession to the Elphinstone estates between his daughter, Agnes (who is said to have been born posthumously), and the heir-male of the family, his younger brother Henry; and the matter was not finally resolved until 1476, when the appointed arbiters divided the estate between the two claimants, and awarded Elphinstone itself to Agnes (Fraser 1897, vol I, x, 14). By then, however, the litigation had proved so disastrously costly that neither Agnes's inheritance, nor her husband's slender means as a younger son of Adam Johnston of that



ILLUS 3 Armorial bearings about the hall fireplace at Elphinstone (*Reproduced by permission of the RCAHMS© Crown Copyright*)

Ilk (Fraser 1894, vol I, cccxxiv), could possibly have supported the cost of any new tower, let alone one of Elphinstone's stature. The new tower had to wait until the family's coffers had once again been replenished.

COMLONGON CASTLE

In the case of Comlongon, we find ourselves on firmer ground, for, although not widely known, the licence for its construction has survived.⁴ It is not dated, but was probably granted 1500–1.⁵ It reads:

A Letter of Licence made to JOHNE of MURRAY of Cokpule and his aeris, to big a towre and fortalice apone his landis liand in Ananderdale, and to mak apone the sammyn macholing, corbalsalze, irezettis and windois, etc., and to ras and big the said towre to quhat hicht he ples, but ony impediment, etc. (RSS, vol I, no 692).⁶

John Murray of Cockpool succeeded his father, Cuthbert, in 1493, and the following year had sasine of the lands of Ruthwell, etc, which included the lands of Comlongon (Scots Peerage, vol I, 222; Excheq Rolls, vol X, 770).⁷ Although he was subsequently knighted, little seems to be known of his life, except that he was evidently in favour at court. It was this John Murray, who, having received the Licence, built the present magnificent tower, which was to be one of the finest and most sophisticated tower-castles of its age. It was a surprisingly ambitious venture, for despite the high

offices held by various of its members,⁸ the family had a tradition of keeping a fairly low profile. Nor are they known to have been especially rich or prominent at that time.

The tower itself is first mentioned in 1507/8, when, on 15 February, James IV granted to Sir John Murray of Cokpool a charter of 'the lands of Cokpule, Ruvalé-tenement [Ruthwell], the tower and fortalice of Cunlungane [Comlongon], etc.', which Sir John had personally resigned, and for special favour incorporated them into the free barony of Cokpule (RMS, vol II, no 3194).⁹ By the same charter, James IV also created the 'Town of Ruvalé' and the lands of the same in Ruvalé-tenement a free burgh of barony, now to be called the Burgh of Ruvalé (Ruthwell).¹⁰ This charter was confirmed by parliament the following year (RMS, vol II, no 3346).

Zeune's reference to three masons' marks being found at both Comlongon and Borthwick would seem to be an error (Zeune 1984, 10). A thorough survey of the fabric of Comlongon has been carried out, and only the marks of three different masons have been found, two of which bear no resemblance whatever to any of the 14 or so different marks known at Borthwick. The only mark that does bear a resemblance, the intertwined **W**, which in various forms is common to many masons' marks, is not in fact the same. Masons' marks are fairly precise, and there are important differences between the **W**s at Comlongon and Borthwick.¹¹ Moreover, as Fawcett acknowledges, similar masons' marks do 'not necessarily mean that the same master mason was responsible' (Fawcett 1994, 246).

COMMON FEATURES

The one characteristic of Comlongon and Elphinstone that is most immediately recognisable as being different from most other tower-houses is the large kitchen fireplace at the opposite end of the great hall to the main fireplace. This arrangement, however, is not unique to these two towers, as it is found in at least five others, a group of four – Little Cumbrae, Fairlie, Law and Skelmorlie – in Ayrshire, and Saddell in Kintyre. These were all noted by MacGibbon & Ross, who give detailed plans of each (MacGibbon & Ross, vol III, 173–83, 197–200). They all appear to date from the beginning of the 16th century, though actual dates are only available for two: Skelmorlie, which was built by William Cunningham, eldest son of the Earl of Glencairn, sometime around 1502 (Close 1992, 86); and Saddell, which was built for the Bishop of Argyll between 1508 and 1512 (RCAHMS 1971, no 313). On the evidence of licences granted in 1534 and 1537, it is likely that the tower on Little Cumbrae dates from that time; the former was granted to Robert Hunter of Hunterston for a 'mansion' (RMS, vol III, no 1432) and the latter to the Earl of Eglinton, with 'power to build a tower' (RMS, vol III, no 1675). Cruden was of the opinion that the four Ayrshire castles dated from the 'end of the fifteenth century or the commencement of the sixteenth century' (Cruden 1960, 139).

Another distinctive feature that was found at both Comlongon and Elphinstone¹² was the moulding of the fireplace jambs in their great halls. They were both alike, and also very similar to the mouldings to be seen at Cardoness, in the Stewartry; but quite unlike Borthwick. No precise date is known for the construction of Cardoness, but it has generally been 'attributed' to the end of the 15th century (MacGibbon & Ross, vol I, 247; Stell 1986, 101). Perhaps the dating of Cardoness should also be looked at again.

Two other features that were similar at both Comlongon and Elphinstone, but quite different at Borthwick, were the *ground-floor* main entrances and the mural prisons *without* garderobe facilities. Both of these features are more typical of 16th-century work.

CONCLUSIONS

In the light of all the evidence relating to Comlongon and Elphinstone, it would appear that they both belong to the same general period around the turn of the 16th century, or not long afterwards;

and it is self-evident that there was a common factor in their design. There was certainly a family connection between the Johnstons of Elphinstone and the Murrays of Cockpool,¹³ and it is quite possible that it was one of them who instigated the new kitchen arrangement, later to be copied elsewhere. There was, however, no connection with Borthwick, other than that each represented a supreme example of a tower-house castle of its respective period.

By bringing forward the construction of Comlongon, and probably Elphinstone too, to the turn of the 16th century, we have perhaps helped to explain why the new arrangement did not become more widespread. The subsequent absence of tower-house castles of this sophistication in the south of Scotland may be attributable to Scotland's disastrous defeat at Flodden in 1513, when the great families lost not only the flower of their youth, but also their wealth. For many years thereafter, there was little tower building at all in the Borders and adjacent counties. Indeed, there is some evidence that building in the Borders was discouraged. In 1528, the Council ordered the demolition of a partly built tower south of Coldingham 'sen it stands so nerr the bordouris of Ingland and may turne this realme to hurt and dampnage' (Acts of Lords of Council in Public Affairs, 277).¹⁴ It was not until seven years later that parliament, realizing how vulnerable the kingdom had become, passed its celebrated Act 'For bigging of Strenthis on ye Bordouris' (APS, vol II, 346). This required that

evry landit man duelland in ye Inland or upon ye bordouris havand yare ane hundreth pund land of new extent Sall big ane sufficient barmkyn . . . of Stane and lyme contenant thre score futis of ye square ane Eln thick and vi Elnys heicht for ye Ressett and defens of him his tennentis and the gudes in trubulous tyme wyt ane toure in the sami for him self gif he thinkis It expedient And yt all uthir landit men of smallar Rent and Renew big pelis and gret strenthis as yai pless for saifing of yare selfis men tennentis gudis.

Only then did tower-houses begin to reappear on the scene in southern Scotland.

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NOTES

- 1 It is perhaps worth noting that Cruden also attributes Balvaird in Perthshire to the same period, whereas it is now thought to date to c 1500 (Fawcett 1994, 257).
- 2 He was a conservator of the truce with England in 1484 (Bain 1881, vol IV, no 1505).
- 3 National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS) photographic record of Elphinstone Tower.
- 4 The reason the licence is not well known is that there is no mention of 'Comlongon' in it. It is the same reason why the date of building of the nearby Hoddon Castle and Repentance Tower, in 1565, was not known for certain until Joachim Zeune recognized the significance of a contemporary reference to their construction: neither was named (See Maxwell-Irving 1987, 204).
- 5 The licence cannot have been recorded earlier than 13 May 1501, the date of the preceding entry on the same Folio (Fo.50) of the Register (RSS, vol I, no 691), though it could have been granted earlier,

- possibly even prior to 1500 (though certainly not before 1494, when John Murray had sasine (*supra*)). Entries in the MS Register are not in chronological order.
- 6 'A Letter of Licence granted to John Murray of Cockpool and his heirs to build a tower and fortalice upon his lands lying in Annandale, and to include in the construction machicolations, corbelling, iron yetts and windows, etc, and to raise and build the said tower to whatever height he pleases, without impediment, etc.'
 - 7 The family's earlier stronghold had been at Cockpool, on the edge of the Solway, and it was from this that they took their designation. See Reid 1954, 190–2.
 - 8 His father had sat in the Scottish parliament, and had also been one of the commanders at the battle of the Kirtle in 1484, when Albany and the Douglasses were defeated; and his grandfather had been a commissioner for the peace with England in 1457 and later Warden of the West March.
 - 9 The cost of the charter was £100 (ALHT, vol IV, 5).
 - 10 See Pryde 1951, 100.
 - 11 The NMRS has photographs of masons' marks at Elphinstone. Two of the simplest marks have parallels at Borthwick, but neither is of an unusual form, and their rudimentary nature – compared with the more elaborate and more precise marks also found there – would suggest the work of apprentices.
 - 12 NMRS photographic record of Elphinstone Tower.
 - 13 Both families had lands around Moffat, in Upper Annandale; and although they were in dispute in 1504, they had also intermarried.
 - 14 Armstrong's (1883, 245n) interpretation of the report of this case in *Balfour's Practicks* as a general inhibition on building in the Borders is, however, not supported by the original record.
 - 15 Elphinstone Tower is the property of Lord Elphinstone.

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