VI.—BELSAY CASTLE AND THE SCOTTISH TOWER-HOUSES.

By W. Douglas Simpson.

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In the later mediaeval period the trend of English castle building was away from the conception of a donjon, great tower, or keep. From about the middle of the thirteenth century this feature, so characteristic of Norman arrangements, is usually omitted, and the castle becomes simply a courtyard enclosure screened by massive and lofty curtain walls which are flanked by towers, two of these being placed on either side of the entry so as to form a gatehouse. Such a castle is Barnwell, near Oundle, built in 1264, or White castle in Monmouthshire, dating from about the same time. Towards the end of this century, increasing attention was paid to the gatehouse, which was combined with the lord's residence, in such a way as to provide a great, frontal, self-contained structure in which the lord or governor with his own household dwelt apart from the general body of the garrison or retainers, having the entrance into the castle under his immediate control. This type of "keep-gatehouse" castle is seen in such Northumbrian instances as Dunstanburgh, Bothal and Bywell. But in practice the attempt to combine a residence with a gatehouse proved unsatisfactory, as I have shown in a former paper.[1] Hence by the middle of the fourteenth century the castle plan was reverting to the scheme of a quadrangular structure consisting of well-articulated rooms arranged compactly round a courtyard, and protected externally by strong walls and stout towers. The perfect

[1] *A.A.*[4] xvi, pp. 31-42.

example of this, which is really the latest stage in the evolution of the English castle, is Bodiam, erected pursuant to a royal licence granted in 1386. By this time the days of castle building in England were virtually over. Although the recrudescence of feudal anarchy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, culminating in the Wars of the Roses, led to the erection, in connexion with already existing castles, of a number of strong towers of a specialized type, like those of Warkworth, Dudley, Tattershall, Buckden, and Ashby-de-la-Zouch,[2] these are exceptional phenomena, and do not affect the broad generalization that by this time the castle has yielded pride of place to the mansion house.

But in the north of England, along the Scottish border where warlike conditions persisted, the old Norman tradition of a square keep or tower-house was never forgotten, and throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries we find numerous baron's houses, some of them large in size, built on this plan.

For a similar reason, during those same centuries, the tower-house plan became an exceedingly common one throughout Scotland, where it remained the characteristic pattern for a laird's "house of fence" until far on into the seventeenth century. No other nation, in fact, has developed the tower-house conception to a greater extent, or rung the changes on it in such a variety of designs. Yet the pedigree of the Scottish tower-house remains an obscure one, for north of the Border there do not seem to have been any square stone keeps during the Norman period. Probably, therefore, the Scottish tower-houses of the fourteenth century, of which Threave in Galloway may be instanced as an impressive example, derive from the towers of timber or wattle and daub, which we know were frequent in the thirteenth century and for long thereafter, although none have survived to teach us what they looked like. There is,

[2] For these towers see my papers in *A.A.*[4] xv, pp. 115-36: *Jour. Brit. Arch. Assoc.*, new ser., vol. xl, pp. 177-92: *ibid.*, 3rd ser., vol. ii, pp. 121-32: *Arch. Jour.*, vol. xcv, pp. 142-58.

however, some evidence for the existence of stone tower-houses in Scotland before the War of Independence,[3] and so many castles north of the Tweed were demolished during that struggle that it is dangerous to be dogmatic upon the subject.

A feature common to the tower-houses on both sides of the Border is the provision, behind the outer wooden door, of an iron gate (Scotticé, "yett"). If the wooden door was burnt or broken up the defenders could shoot out at their assailants through the iron gate, which could not be burnt and was much more difficult to break up. In England, such gates are made with the vertical bars all passing in front of the horizontals, and the whole was boarded on the inner side. The Scottish "yetts" are of open ironwork, and are made in a far stronger and more subtle way, the bars penetrating each other, and the mode of penetration being reversed in diagonally opposite quarters of the "yett," so that no single bar is through-going. This is a much superior method of construction, and it is remarkable that it did not find its way south of the Border. The fact has been adduced as proof of the little intercourse which is supposed to have existed between the two countries.[4] But whatever may be the reason for the absence of the Scottish "yett" in England, there is evidence of a close architectural connexion between the tower-houses in both countries. One or two instances will make this clear.

Thus Cocklaw tower,[5] alike in plans and elevations, might serve as a fair specimen of the Scottish plain rectangular tower-house of the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. It may be compared with Sauchie Tower in Clackmannanshire.[6] The general resemblance between the two buildings is so close as to call for no analysis.

[3] On this point see my remarks in *The Book of Dunvegan* (Spalding Club); vol. I; p. xxxix, footnote.

[4] *Hist. North.*, vol. VI, pp. 76-7: *Arch. Ael.*[2] XI, p. 17.

[5] For a description, see *Hist. Northumberland*, vol. IV, pp. 180-4.

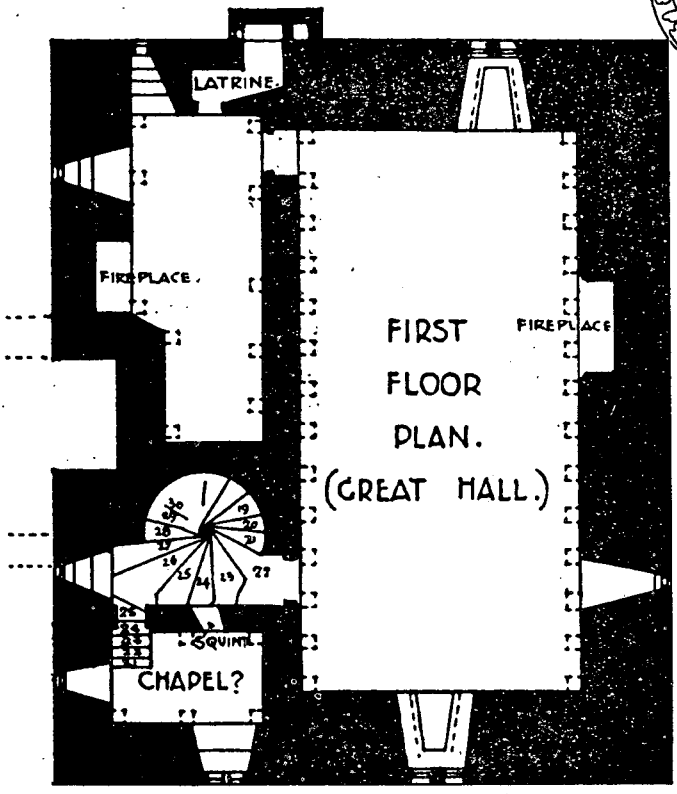
[6] See D. MacGibbon and T. Ross, *Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, vol. I, pp. 265-70: *Anc. Mon. Commission, Report on Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan*, pp. 309-12.

As time went on a desire crept in for better accommodation than was provided by the simple rectangular tower, with its single room on each floor, and complete lack of privacy. A favourite way of obtaining extra space was by building the tower with a wing, known in Scotland as a "jam," attached to one side, like the letter L. This would give at least one extra room on each floor, and often more, as the chambers in the wing, being generally private apartments, did not require to be built so lofty as the halls in the main house. Or the wing might be used for the staircase, whereby a more convenient access was obtained to the different floors of the tower-house, and the danger was avoided of weakening one of its angles by the well of the spiral stair. Another advantage of the plan was that it suggested a strong position for the door, which is usually placed in the re-entrant angle, screened by the limbs of the building.

The L-plan was one of the most favourite types of tower-house in Scotland, and scores of examples exist from the late fourteenth century onwards. It also occurs in the northern counties of England—as seen, for example, at Lemington tower,[7] which may be compared with such a Scottish instance as Greenknowe castle, Berwickshire.[8] Built in 1581, this latter tower is younger by two centuries than Lemington, and yet it offers no more accommodation than its fourteenth century prototype. It will be noticed, however, that in the Scottish tower the main newel stair stops at the first floor, a corbelled turret stair thereafter serving the upper floors, so that the entire space of the "jam" or wing, above the main floor, is available for rooms. This ingenious contrivance is very commonly found in the later Scottish tower-houses.

The finest of the northern English tower-houses is be-

[7] *Hist. Northumberland*, vol. VII, pp. 176-80.
[8] MacGibbon and Ross, *op. cit.*, vol. III, pp. 542-6: *Anc. Mon. Com., Report on Berwickshire*, 2nd ed., pp. 90-3.



yond question Belsay in Northumberland.[9] Its date of erection is unknown, but the architectural detail clearly points to the fourteenth century, and probably to a fairly early date therein. The square-faced ashlar masonry is characteristic of the first half of the century; the corbelling of the turrets finds its closest parallel in the Gate next the Sea of Beaumaris castle, built after 1316, and in the barbican of Harlech castle, about 1291; while the cope-moulding on the merlons is carried round the embrasures in the same way as on the Eagle tower at Caernarvon castle,

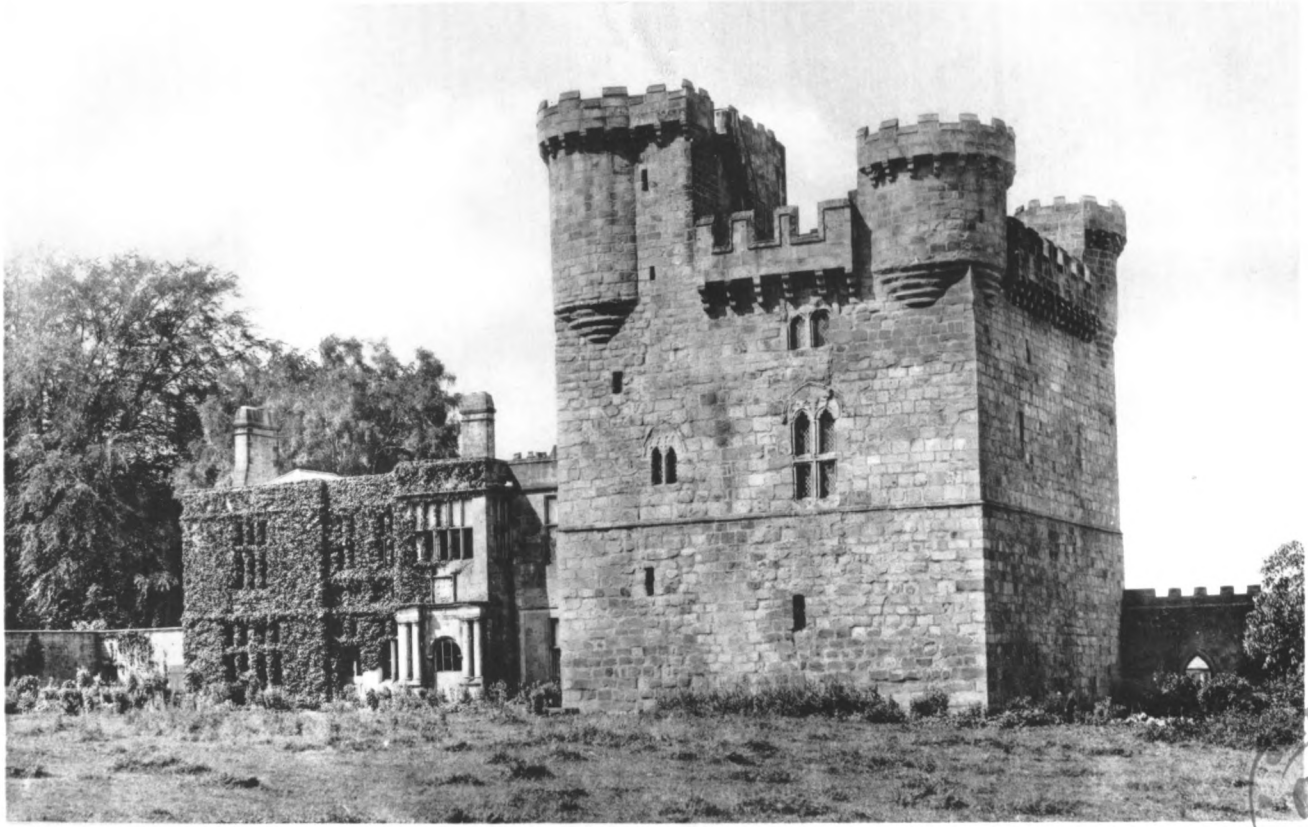
[9] For a full descriptive and historical account, see Sir Arthur Middleton, *Belsay Castle*, privately printed, 1910.

belonging to the building period 1285-91. Such a moulding may have been useful in throwing back an arrow: as an ornamental device, it is certainly not successful.

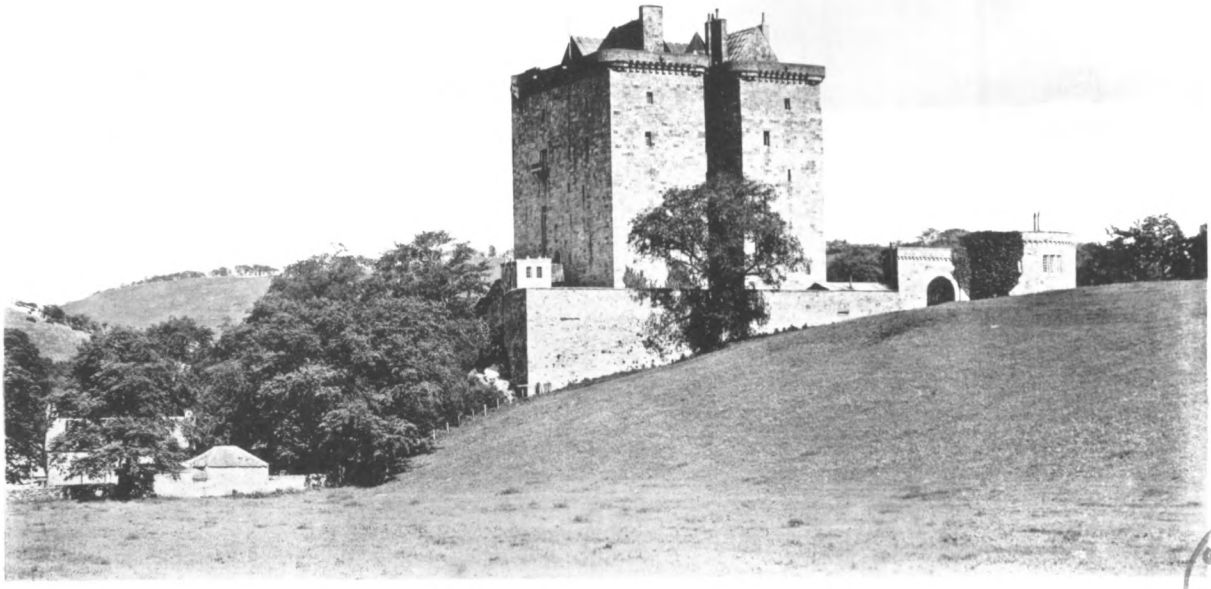
Externally, Belsay castle appears to be an almost square tower-house, with a shallow recess in the middle of the west face: but this outside aspect obscures the real design of the castle, which, as revealed by the plan, consists of a rectangular tower, with its axis lying north and south, and having on the west side two projecting wings, which between them enclose the entrance passage, the door to which was covered by a bretasche opening from the second floor. The main building contains three lofty rooms, one above the other: the lowest, which is vaulted, being the kitchen, and those above forming the hall and upper hall respectively. In the southern wing is the newel stair, circling up to the summit of the tower, and also a series of six small rooms, of which the uppermost is above the flat roof of the main tower and extends also over the newel stair head, this room being reached by an external flight of stone steps. The two lowest and the two topmost rooms in this wing are vaulted. In the other wing are four storeys of apartments—a vaulted cellar, reached by a passage from the entrance lobby, and three large, unvaulted, living rooms above. Corbelled turrets, each containing a vaulted chamber, crown three of the angles of the tower; and the stair head, with its associated rooms, forms a fourth turret, which is larger than the others and also rises to a higher level. Round the main building runs a boldly corbelled and machicolated parapet, and similar parapets, smaller in scale, are found on the turrets.

Any study of Belsay must include the tower of Chipchase castle,[10] the architectural details of which resemble it so closely as to make it evident that both buildings were designed by the same master-mason. Chipchase, however, has only one wing, which contains the newel stair, with chambers adjoining, like the southern wing of Belsay. It

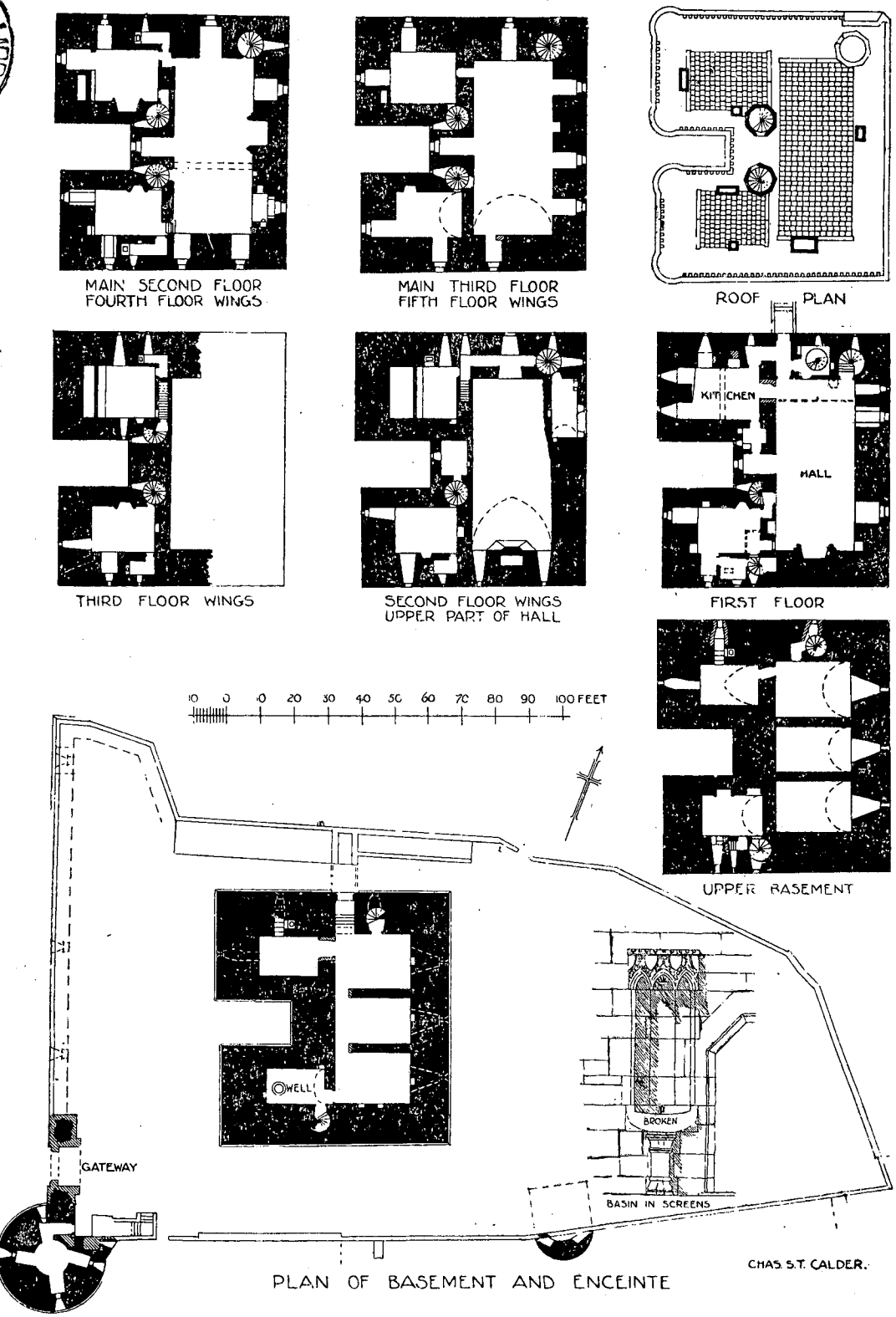
[10] *Hist. Northumberland*, vol. IV, pp. 333-8.



BELSAY CASTLE AND JACOBEAN HOUSE FROM THE SOUTH EAST.



BORTHWICK CASTLE FROM THE BRIDGE.



PLAN OF BORTHWICK CASTLE.

might thus be held to be an earlier effort of the master-mason, but on the other hand the provision of wall chambers, including a well-furnished oratory, is more elaborate than at Belsay.

Although at first sight Belsay castle gives the impression of a very uniform and straightforward piece of building, on a closer inspection it appears that the tower has undergone important later modifications. To begin with, the large kitchen fireplace in the main basement room is obviously an insertion, as appears from the disturbed condition of the masonry above its arch, and also from the fact that it is not placed centrally in its wall. Then again, the door which opens into the kitchen from the passage connecting the entrance lobby with the vaulted basement of the north wing seems also an afterthought. And thirdly, as Sir Arthur Middleton has pointed out, the present battlements are the result of an alteration in the design carried out, in all probability, while the castle was being built.[11]

The small room on the first floor of the southern wing has been said to be a chapel, apparently because a hatch opens from this room on to the newel stair. Through this opening, it is suggested, a person outside could obtain a view of an altar at the east end of the room. Why such provision should have been made to enable a single person thus uncomfortably to observe a service from an exceedingly awkward position on a winding stair, nobody has troubled to explain. The so-called chapel has no ecclesiological fitments of any sort, and the opening in question—which, incidentally, has been reduced in size—is nothing else than a service hatch of the type so commonly found in mediaeval houses. This hatch, in my opinion, supplies the key to the original purpose of the room. I conceive that this room was at first designed to be the kitchen, but that the plan was altered while the castle was in course of erection, and a more adequate kitchen provided in the basement of the main building. Sir Arthur Middleton has called attention

[11] Middleton, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

to the evidence that a pause in the building work occurred when the tower had reached the first floor, and the change in design was no doubt made when work was resumed.[12] It is noteworthy that in the original scheme, if my reading of it is correct, the kitchen would have corresponded precisely in position to that in Chipchase tower. When the new kitchen on the ground floor was made, a service door was broken through so as to provide direct access to the northern cellar, without intruding on the entrance lobby.

If the foregoing view be accepted, then the plan of Belsay castle emerges as a singularly ingenious and skilfully articulated adaptation, to a tower framework, of the lay-out of an ordinary mediaeval house, with a central hall having the kitchen and service accommodation at the lower end, and the solar or lord's private apartments, opening off the other. At Belsay the screens or service department of the hall was at its south end, as is shown by the narrow loophole provided in the east wall to light it.[13] Into the screen, in the normal way, opens the stair of access, and the kitchen hatch provided for convenient service. At the upper end of the hall was the dais, and from this access was obtained to the solar or lord's private room in the north wing. This room, it will be noted, has no communication with the newel stair, although such could easily have been made. Thus the solar could be entered only after passing through the whole length of the hall, and in this way the privacy and security of the lord were maintained. The same arrangements are reproduced on the floor above. Thus we see that the plan of Belsay castle is really a highly specialized one. The south wing, communicating with the screens end of the hall, contains the kitchen, and above it doubtless the servants' rooms, while in the north wing, opening from the dais, are the family apartments. The

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 35-6. Of the mason's marks seen in the so-called "chapel," eight, occurring in all forty-four times, belong to the original staff, and five, occurring fifteen times, belong to those who came on duty when the tower was already partly built.

[13] Or, perhaps, rather a music gallery above, as the loophole is high.

isolation of the service from the domestic quarters is thus complete, the hall separating them, and providing the only means of communication between the two departments.

This plan of Belsay, with its well-conceived specialization of the two wings of the tower, is of great interest because it is also the plan of the grandest of Scottish tower-houses, Borthwick castle, in Midlothian. Borthwick castle,[14] the licence to crenellate which was granted in 1430, is much larger and more elaborately designed than Belsay, and is executed with a beauty of masonry and richness of detail unsurpassed in any like structure in the British Isles. But the principles governing the design of the two buildings are identical. In both, the wing associated with the entrance is at the lower end of the hall, and contains the kitchen and service accommodation; and the wing at the upper end of the hall is set aside for the family apartments.

A comparison of the plans of Borthwick and Belsay will clearly bring out the superiority in design and the greater complexity of the internal arrangements in the Scottish tower. Leaving aside what is merely elaboration in detail, from the point of view of basic conception the chief difference is that at Belsay the two wings between them mask, from the first floor upwards, the entire western half of the tower, so that the hall on this side is blinded: whereas at Borthwick the deep recess between the wings penetrates on all floors back to the main tower, so that the great hall and the rooms above it can be lit on this side as well as on the other three: and, incidentally, a view in all directions is obtainable from the principal apartments. The lofty pointed barrel vault, without ribs, which spans the hall of Borthwick belongs to a type very common in Scotland, but Mr. Honeyman tells me that it is most unusual in the northern English towers. It is interesting to note that this type of vault is employed in the kitchen at Belsay.

[14] See MacGibbon and Ross, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 344-52; *Anc. Mon. Com., Report on Midlothian and West Lothian*, pp. 3-9; *National Art Survey of Scotland*, 1923, plates 31-7.

Here it seems to have been built in sections, with short lengths of centering, and the different sections are very imperfectly bonded.

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