

XI.—SHIELINGS AND BASTLES: A RECONSIDERATION OF SOME PROBLEMS

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The recent investigations of threatened monuments by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) have now given rise to *Shielings and Bastles* (HMSO, 1970), a study of the remains associated with the sixteenth and seventeenth century border farmers. This volume differs from the usual Commission publications in several ways, all of which are to be recommended. The authors are given credit for their production, in line with general scholarly practice; they have confined their attention to groups of structures, related in time and purpose, without restricting themselves to the limits of a single county, and they have added to the coherence and unity of their architectural work by the inclusion of detailed and lucid introductions to the social history of the area in which the buildings are found.

The book, which is fully illustrated by maps, plans and photographs, is divided into two parts. In the first H. G. Ramm discusses the history of transhumance husbandry and describes and lists the extant shielings, a name given to the summer dwellings, and early farmsteads and other approximately contemporary structures. During the summer the whole community migrated into the uplands, and here vestiges still survive of their rudimentary shelters, chiefly clustered in the heads of the valleys. Most are now reduced to mounds of stones, and little attention has been paid to them.¹ Mr. Ramm confines his field survey to Bewcastledale and the adjacent parts of Gilsland and North Tynedale,

¹ But for work in Upper Coquetdale not referred to by Mr. Ramm see AA⁴ xli (1963) pp. 45-63, esp. 61-3.

with a glance at other areas.^{1a} Skilfully combining the information from rentals and surveys, place names, and surviving structures, he shows how the practice of transhumance may be traced at least from the tenth century until its decline in the border uplands in the seventeenth century.

Lower in the valleys similar but larger buildings associated with stock enclosures are plausibly interpreted as farmsteads. More tentatively, it is proposed that the small circular earthworks of the moors were constructed to protect stacks of fodder in the period when winter pasturing in the high lands had replaced transhumance.

In general the conclusions are solidly based; but in a subject for which so little evidence survives it is not surprising that Mr. Ramm is sometimes tempted to make use of rather unconvincing arguments. Why should a similarity in plan between shieling 44 and farmstead 204 indicate that the shieling belonged to the farm (p. 18)? At Shiel Knowe and Shiels Brae lie clusters of shielings of a variety of types according to Mr. Ramm's typology. But are we really to believe that the derivation of both the "shiel" place names must derive from Ramm type (ii), the only type identified at both places? What does Mr. Ramm consider to have been the contemporary name for Ramm types (i), (iii) and (iv), which are found at Shiels Brae, if not some form of "schele"? There is evidence that the tenants had sometimes to be coerced into attending the shieling grounds; but to view this as proof of the final decline of the system is too simple. In Tynedale, at least as early as 1601, the date of the first surviving court roll, men were fined for refusing to go to the shielings or for returning too early.² And yet this area, as Mr. Ramm says on page 6, was regarded in 1597 as having its "chefe profit" from the shielings. The reason for the compulsion was not a decline in transhumance but

^{1a} Other apparently similar structures survive elsewhere, especially in the Breamish and College valleys around Cheviot.

² Northumberland Record Office, ZAL, 14/2.

to prevent "ill neighbourhood and wronging one another in their husbandry at home" if some were left behind.³

Much more might have been made of the shieling organization. The survey of 1604 and the rental of 1618, both published, give evidence which allows a reconstruction of the holdings in Redesdale in great detail. Here it would have been possible to show clearly how through free alienation the winter grounds were occupied by a mixture of several surnames, while the separate shieling grounds were held overwhelmingly each by men of a single surname. As a result the small communities in the lowlands were fragmented in the summer, while men from a single hamlet travelled to different shieling grounds because of their different surnames, and on one single shieling ground would be found men who between August and April lived twenty or more miles apart. Furthermore, the occurrence of the names of men who paid shieling rents but had no lowland tenements proves the remark "many have tytle in their highe landes and sommer groundes ... for that they are descended of such a surname or race of men to whom such a sommering belongeth whoe have noe lowe land or winter ground at all",⁴ a point of considerable importance in the estimation of the level of subsistence economy in the dales.

The second half of the volume, by R. W. McDowall and Eric Mercer, is devoted to a survey of the small fortified farmhouses which were built at the time of the border raids during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The name chosen to refer to these structures is "bastle", a name used in the sixteenth century⁵ and by more recent writers.⁶ Its use in *Shielings and Bastles*, however, is restricted to the smallest class of fortified houses, excluding the

³ Public Record Office E 134/18 Jas I, Mich. no. 21, and Easter no. 13; the point is made in J. Thirsk (ed.) *Agrarian History of England* IV, p. 22.

⁴ P.R.O., E 134/18 Jas I, Easter no. 13.

⁵ For example in the 1541 survey: C. J. Bates *Border Holds* [not *Strongholds*, pace *Shielings and Bastles* p. xiv] (1891), pp. 33, 34, 38, 46-8; or during the raids of 1544: B. M. Harl. Mss. 1757 f. 292-302, *passim*; Hatfield Ms. 137 no. 108.

⁶ See *AA*⁴ xlviii (1970) p. 169n3.

more expensive buildings such as Doddington or Hebburn, where the designation "bastle-house" is well established, or the typologically similar houses such as Queen Mary's House in Jedburgh or Witton Shields in Northumberland, despite the careful distinction between "pele-houses" (small buildings) and "bastle-houses" (large buildings) proposed some years ago by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.⁷ Indeed, although "bastle" and "bastle-house" are terms common in documents of the sixteenth century, few buildings so described now survive to prove contemporary usage;⁸ what evidence there is suggests that the term could cover all buildings below the rank of tower house, and it is perhaps unfortunate that "bastle" has now been limited to the smallest examples of this wide spectrum without any proposal of a substitute name for the larger houses excluded in the present study.

The problems connected with bastles are concisely stated: built mostly in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century they were the defensible houses of men, often customary tenants, who were not noticeably more important than their neighbours; it is suggested that the decline in the power of the feudal lords during the sixteenth century⁹ together with the disturbance caused to border defences by sheep enclosure and consequent depopulation compelled men to look to their own protection; that in general conditions were deteriorating;¹⁰ that the failure of landlords to exploit their lands allowed tenants to prosper in a period of rapidly increasing prices; and that, as a result, men both needed and were able to build bastles.

⁷ *County of Roxburgh* (HMSO, 1956) p. 44.

⁸ For example Fairnington (*ibid.*, no. 907), now much rebuilt, or Bellister, which looks like a tower. Akeld Bastle was described in 1541 as a bastle house (Bates, *op. cit.*, p. 33), but has to be described in *Shielings and Bastles* as "not typical" because of its "superior character".

⁹ A revision of the orthodox view has been suggested by M. L. Bush "The Problem of the Far North" *Northern History* VI (1971), pp. 40-63.

¹⁰ Recorded raids certainly become more numerous, but the close parallel between this increase and the increasing survival of documents makes any assertion hazardous.

The picture thus suggested makes considerable sense, and the value of the book is greatly enhanced by this study of the local social and economic conditions as a background to the survey of the buildings; but a closer study of the evidence compels modifications. Border society, despite the view taken, was not homogeneous, and the appearance of homogeneity is due to reliance upon reports of observers who too often preferred to group the borderers together, frequently as "North Tyndale Thieves".¹¹ The probate inventories, however, show a wide disparity in wealth within the society:¹² the average value of possessions falls into the £10-£20 range, but the variation is between £2 and £180, and a value of goods, chiefly cattle, of £40 to £60 is quite common. Since the original number of bastles is unknown it cannot be disproved that "nearly all men of any wealth at all occupied bastle-houses", but some doubt is cast on the proposition by the case of "John Browne of ye Bastall" who in 1604 and 1618 seems to have been the poorest man at Black Heatherwick,¹³ and the Nixons of High Onset stonehouse in Bewcastledale were of barely average wealth.¹⁴

The official reports of the later sixteenth century do indeed draw attention to the lack of "furnished men" to defend the border, but to link bastle-houses with depopulation is to oversimplify the situation. Absentee landlords may have been a problem in the border dales during the fourteenth century,¹⁵ but in the sixteenth century complaints refer to the fertile lowlands and especially the Merse, the valley of the Tweed, where, as is shown, bastles rarely occur.¹⁶ Indeed, contemporary accounts show that in "bastle

¹¹ *Cal. Border Papers* I, no. 50; *AA*, 1st ser., iv, pp. 168-9, 181-3.

¹² This section is based on records in R.O., Carlisle, Durham R.O., and H.M. General Register House, Edinburgh.

¹³ R. P. Sanderson, *Border Survey ... of 1604*, p. 98; *AA*, 1st ser., ii, p. 331.

¹⁴ R.O., Carlisle, will of William Nixon, 2 Jun 1609; will of Thomas Nixon, 2 Mar 1613.

¹⁵ J. A. Tuck, in *Northern History* VI (1971), p. 27.

¹⁶ *Shielings and Bastles*, p. 63.

country" overpopulation was regarded as the problem,¹⁷ and local opinion was that the cause of this was the custom of partitioning land among all the sons.^{17a} Despite the recent view that partible inheritance was a custom of the manor of Harbottle alone,¹⁸ it can be shown that the other border manors admitted partition at least in practice,¹⁹ and that therefore its effect, impoverishment, increasing each generation, was to some extent felt throughout the uplands.²⁰ It is thus much odder that so many of the borderers were able to build bastle-houses.

Here McDowall and Mercer validly draw attention to the favourably low rents paid by almost all the borderers, especially those who were tenants of Crown lands. But to regard them as the "beneficiaries of this (Crown) policy or rather lack of policy" may be a misstatement. It does not seem to have been noticed how radically the distribution of Crown lands on the border changed during the sixteenth century. Until the 1480s no substantial part of the uplands was in full royal possession, and the acquisition of Bew-castledale and the resumption of Tynedale, and their establishment under royal officers were the first stage in a policy which continued until 1603.²¹ After the Dissolution the Crown became proprietor of extensive monastic lands; with few exceptions the upland estates were retained, while the lowlands were alienated. This was not for lack of buyers of upland property,²² and it is notable that at this time a deliberate attempt was made by the Crown to acquire further upland estates, such as the lordship of Redesdale,

¹⁷ J. Hodgson, *Hist. Northld.*, 3 ii, pp. 233-4, 243.

^{17a} *Ibid.*, and cf. *N.C.H.* xv, p. 159.

¹⁸ S. J. Watts, "Tenant-right in Early Seventeenth-Century Northumberland", *Northern History* VI (1971), esp. pp. 70-1.

¹⁹ P.R.O., E 164/42, f. 29 (Burgh), f. 94 (Gilsland); the evidence of equally divided holdings and of testamentary division shows general practice of the custom.

²⁰ For the problem elsewhere see J. Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming* (1957), esp. pp. 41-4; H. E. Hallam, "Some Thirteenth Century Censuses", *Ec. Hist. Review*, x (1958), esp. p. 360.

²¹ See *NCH* xv, p. 285; *Rot. Parl.*, vi, p. 204; *CW*², xxix (1929), pp. 67-8.

²² For example, P.R.O., E 318/697.

Hexhamshire, and the Dacre enclave in Bewcastledale, all of which were exchanged for lands away from the border.²³ After the rising of 1569, furthermore, most of the forfeited upland property, including the barony of Langley, remained under Crown control despite the succession of Earl Henry. By the later sixteenth century, therefore, the Crown was in control of almost the whole of the upland border.

It is clear, as McDowall and Mercer say, that the Crown made no attempt to exploit rents. In 1604 Crown rents were slightly less even in nominal value than in 1500, even though the value of money had declined considerably.²⁴ Indeed, the Bewcastle tenants of 1604 were paying less per acre than those of 1296,²⁵ and in general the Crown rents were considerably less than those of the Dacres or the Percys.²⁶ But this was not due simply to inertia. The records of Crown leases show that favourable terms were being made on the condition that the leaseholder performed some service to the Crown, either by enclosing the lands,²⁷ by maintaining fortifications,²⁸ or by the construction of new fortified houses,²⁹ at least one of which was to be "a substantial house of stone and timber, commonly called a bastle house".³⁰

²³ *Lett. & Pap. H. VIII*, xxi (2) no. 638.38, cf. *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1550-3, p. 125; Clare Cross, "Economic Problems of the See of York" in J. Thirsk (ed.) *Land, Church and People* (1970), esp. pp. 66, 75-6, *Dep. Keeper's Rep.*, ix, p. 204; *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1550-3, p. 441.

²⁴ *Shielings and Bastles*, p. 71; during the Crown tenure of Hexhamshire the rents declined (cf. *NCH*, iii, pp. 66-104).

²⁵ Contrast Sanderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-36 with P.R.O., SC 11/154.

²⁶ E.g. P.R.O., E 164/37, f. 187v-189; E 164/72, *passim*. These rents remained unchanged in Crown hands; contrast the action of Lord William Howard on entering into the Dacre lands (T. H. B. Graham (ed.), *Gilsland Survey*, pp. x-xi).

²⁷ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1555-7, p. 322; 1560-3, p. 243; 1563-6, no. 1406, 1934; 1566-9, nos. 1384, 1394, 1411, 1500, 2101, 2194, 2349, 2357; 1569-72, no. 902. On the border, enclosures formed a protection against raiding, and not a threat as suggested in *Shielings and Bastles*, p. 69; cf. B.M., Cott. Calig. B x f. 160-66v.

²⁸ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1566-9, no. 2376.

²⁹ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1566-9, no. 814; Doddington Bastle may have been built as a result of the Commission of 1583-4: cf. Bates, *op. cit.*, p. 65-9, *NCH*, xiv, pp. 158-9.

³⁰ *NCH*, iv, pp. 404-5n.

To what extent the Crown was thus able to initiate the building of bastles is not clear. Leaseholders formed only a small fraction of border tenants,³¹ and little is known of arrangements made with customary tenants, who formed the largest proportion of borderers.³² But Crown interest in the subject is sufficiently obvious, as indeed McDowall and Mercer indicate,³³ even though it stopped short of direct payment; a concealed subsidy to help new constructions may be suspected. The bastle-houses built high in the dales by the more lawless borderers, such as Thomas Charlton of Hawkhope, one of the "great theves but lyved in proud estate",³⁴ may thus be a response to those being built under Crown encouragement lower down the dales.

Disagreement on a subject for which so little direct evidence survives is not surprising, and any controversies about interpretation do not detract from the substantial contribution to the study of highland farming and vernacular building made by *Shielings and Bastles*. More familiarity with the documentation³⁵ might have altered some of the views taken, as indicated above, but the introductions are concise and informative, and the descriptive lists are on a par with the Commission's normal productions. Even though the rigid division between shielings and bastles has obscured the fact that the book is a treatment of the summer and winter dwellings of the same people, the Commission has shown how much valuable work can be done by a study in depth of a group of structures which individually might be considered barely to merit a mention in the pages of a County Inventory.

³¹ By 1604 20.4 per cent in Wark manor, but only 3.1 per cent in Langley, 0.6 per cent in Bewcastle and 0.3 per cent in Harbottle: Sanderson, *passim*.

³² But contrast *Lett. & Pap. H. VIII*, xiv (1) no. 1355, xx (1) no. 1336, xxi (2) no. 774; *Cal. Pap. Rolls*, 1563-6, no. 316.

³³ Page 72.

³⁴ *Cal. Border Pap.*, ii, no. 214.

³⁵ For example, the originals of the Gilsland Survey maps, which are much more legible than the Carlisle photocopies, are in the Durham Department of Palaeography (Howard of Naworth, c. 713); some others of the arguments *a priori* could have been proved more easily by citation of evidence.

APPENDIX

It is inevitable that sites are overlooked. The following list includes the additional "bastles" at present known to me; those marked with an asterisk were suggested to me by Miss R. B. Harbottle; I would be glad to hear of further possible sites.

1. *Complete but rebuilt*

Whitton	NY 058011
Brinkheugh	NZ 121984
Holmhead	NY 569638
Haltwhistle,	Castle Hill NY 712642 (demolished).
	Main Street NY 708641 (demolished).
	See AA ⁴ xlviii (1970), pp. 169-81; Castle Hill was deliberately omitted from <i>Shielings and Bastles</i> .
*Beltingham	NY 789638
Stamfordham	NZ 076719
*High Callerton	NZ 161705 Omitted on typological grounds.
Hope	NU 096015

2. *Remains fragmentary*

*Ridley Stokoe	NY 738855
*Stokoe Crag	NY 753856
*Starsley Burn	NY 702882
Fallowlees	NZ 019943
Highfield	NY 754908
Plenmeller	NY 715632
Farlam	NY 555587
Tower Brae	NY 569723 Listed as Farmstead (188).
Girsonfield	NY 889942
Bradley Hall	NY 778675
Farlam Hall	NY 570601

3. *Typology uncertain*

Tocket	NY 865729
Crew Castle	NY 568778

4. *Scotland (Shielings and Bastles, p. 63n)*

In addition to the sites listed in RCAM, *Roxburgh*, nos. 931-4, recent excavations have confirmed the identification of *ibid.* no. 982 as a "bastle". The vaulted bastles of Hawick, demolished c. 1884, are illustrated in W. S. Robson, *Story of Hawick* (ed. of 1947), p. 83: the example at 51 High Street, Hawick, unnoticed by RCAM, still survives in a modern shop. A vaulted bastle is described under the name "Windydoors Tower" in RCAM, *Selkirk*, no. 15, and was called a Peillhouse in the seventeenth century.