

II.

THE CASTLES¹ OF RAVENSNOOK AND UTTERSHELL, MIDLOTHIAN.

BY IAN C. HANNAH, F.S.A.Scot., F.S.A.

Upon the banks of the North Esk stands a remarkable series of ancient seats of very different character and date.

Brunstane supplies a fine specimen of the work of the sixteenth century. Penicuik House, prematurely in ruin, with its beautiful Square close by, now fitted as the residence, forms a most superb example of a great eighteenth-century mansion. Ravensnook, Uttershill, and Woodhouselee are interesting lairds' houses belonging to the sixteenth century. At Rosslyn is a striking castle clinging to the steep valley-side, presenting examples of the work of different periods ranging downwards from the fourteenth century. Hawthornden has the remains of a mediæval red sandstone tower, and close beside it stands a picturesque residence of the seventeenth century, magnificently placed. The palace at Dalkeith is a huge but not very successful eighteenth-century structure, which incorporates part of the ancient castle of the Grahams and the Douglasses. It is the only one of the series that is not peculiarly Scottish. So far as its external architecture is concerned it might equally stand in an English park. Other castles and seats stand upon the banks of the Esk, but as the river was never navigable they have no special connection with each other.

Among the least known, and yet assuredly by no means the least interesting, of the buildings named are the little mansions of Ravensnook and Uttershill, both locally known as castles. The former stands almost hidden among dense woods; the latter is a conspicuous object from the road that leads out of Penicuik for Peebles and the south.

Ravensnook Castle stands in a most romantic situation overlooking a wide sweep of the Esk valley from the higher ground; the whole countryside is now covered by the plantations of the policies of Penicuik House, and the ruins are close to the very long and now abandoned carriage-drive that comes out at the lodge on the Peebles road. Separated only by a field is the curiously planned obelisk which Sir James Clerk (builder of Penicuik House) erected to the memory of Allan Ramsay in 1759.

The name evidently suggested to Scott the well-known line:

Rest thee in Castle Ravensheuch.

(*Lay of the Last Minstrel*: VI. xxiii. 2.)

¹ So the structures are locally termed, but they were merely the houses of inconsiderable lairds.

A roll of David II. (1329-71) records a carta, given by Elizabeth Auldburgh, of the lands of Braid, Baulay, Colmanstoun, and Ravinnisnuick, to John Burgens Virgin.¹ The document is not dated.

In 1527 James V. granted to William Sinclare de Rosling (with much else) "Estir et Westir Ravinnisnuke, et Carnehill, cum partibus, *le outsettis*, tenentibus, &c."² In 1542 he confirms and gives anew, *inter alia*, "terras de Eistir et Westir Ravynnysnuke et Carnehill, cum partibus, &c., ortis, pomeriis, columbariis, tenentibus, &c."³

The further particulars given in the confirmation seem rather to suggest that some development had been going on at Ravensnook since 1527. The character of the existing ruins would perhaps suit this date.

These entries appear to give no support to the local tradition that Ravensnook was once the property of Oliver Sinclair, the favourite of James V. and opponent of the Reformation, who was captured by the English at Solway Moss in 1542. That he owned Ravensnook is stated as a fact in the first *Statistical Account*.⁴ The idea may have originated from the circumstance that another Oliver Sinclair undoubtedly occupied Ravensnook. Oliver Sinclair "de Wester Ravynnysnuke" appears as the second witness to a document by which James VI. confirms a charter of Edward Sinclare de Harbertschyre granting to his germane brother William Sinclair the barony, castle, lands, etc., of Rosling, and also "terras de Eister et Wester Ravynnysnuke et Carnehill, cum tenentibus," as well as other property.⁵

In 1594 Oliver Sinclair of Ravensnook was caution for £10,000 for Sir William Sinclair of Rosling to answer before the king and council. Relations between the two branches of the family were far from what might have been hoped, and in 1604 John Fairlie of Comistoun was surety for Sir William Sinclair of Rosling not to do bodily harm to his tenant, Oliver Sinclair of Ravensnook.⁶

In 1730 Sir John Clerk, the famous antiquary (d. 1755), secured from the Sinclairs of Rosslyn the superiority of Ravensnook, whose actual soil his family had for some years possessed. It still belongs to the Clerks, absorbed into the Penicuik policies.

Of the actual building at Ravensnook most disappointingly little survives. It met, during the eighteenth century, the fate that has over-

¹ *Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scotorum*, vol. 1306-1424, ed. John Maitland Thomson, App. 2, No. 1402, p. 607.

² *Ibid.*, vol. 1513-46, No. 527, p. 117.

³ *Ibid.*, No. 2768, pp. 640-1.

⁴ Ed. by Sir John Sinclair, 1794, vol. x. p. 425.

⁵ *Reg. Mag. Sig.*, vol. 1530-93, No. 615, pp. 190-1.

⁶ John J. Wilson, *Annals of Penicuik*, Edinburgh, Constable, printed privately, 1891, p. 36.

taken so many of the ancient monuments of Scotland, including Arthur's O'on. The circumstances are given in an account written by Sir John Clerk himself in the year 1741: "I have seen Ravensnook Tower 40 or 50 feet high, and it was against my inclination that it was pulled down; but as my father, who wanted stones for the park dyke, found here the readiest provision, I submitted. The tower of Penicuik was pulled down on the same account, but if I had stones in readiness I would repair them both. Old houses and Towers are, I think, the Honour and pride of a country."¹

The house was small, about 60 feet long and probably not more than about a third as much in width. Its remaining walls are nowhere over 6 feet in height, and to anyone with no interest in antiquities it might appear a most insignificant ruin.

It bears little mark of date, but seems clearly to belong to the sixteenth century. It is constructed of the local, gritty, nearly-black whinstone (usually employed for dykes) in good but rough rubble masonry, some of the blocks quite large, though there are no properly worked quoins. It is rather remarkable for the variety in the thickness of its walls, the west one being only just over 3 feet, the north one 4, and the east, which was evidently full of mural chambers, over 7 feet. No traces of the south wall appear above ground. Thick and rather clumsy walls are inevitable with such a material; no worked detail is possible.

There are two distinct portions, not regularly bonded together, though there is no indication of any difference in age. The east part had a tunnel vault of rubble on the same axis as that of the building, but only about 12 feet long. (This was always a favourite way of covering a basement in Scotland; at Whim House, Peeblesshire, it occurs in building of the late eighteenth century.) In the north wall, close to the north-east corner of the building, is a water inlet, commonly found in sixteenth-century work. The chamber above the vault was extended into the east wall by one of these mural recesses which are at all periods far more usual in Scotland than further to the south. The walling is so completely ruinous that its character is quite uncertain.

The hall was presumably in the western portion, but no detail of any kind is to be seen. As John Wilson in his *Annals of Penicuik* mentions two gables 57 feet apart, it seems possible that originally there were two storeys with an attic above. Large beech trees are now growing within the area of the tower, whose scanty remains are rapidly disintegrating. From a short distance it looks little more than a heap of stones.

¹ *Memoirs of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik*, ed. for Scottish History Society, 1892, p. 253, note.

Not far away, probably in sight before the plantations were made, is the Castle of Uppershill or Outershill, whose ruins are far better preserved, and the tower houses are so similar that the original appearance of Ravensnook may probably be largely restored from a study of Uppershill. Although, till about twenty years ago, in the parish of Lasswade, it stands practically in the town of Penicuik, high up above the Esk on Castle Brae, looking northwards over the whole settlement, with the Pentlands rising beyond—a perfectly magnificent view. The situation is very fine; below the bluff on which the building stands another stream—the so-called Leadburn, which below Uppershill becomes the Blackburn—flows into the North Esk.

Uppershill was formerly the property of the Prestons of Craigmillar, to whom it passed from the Penicuik family in the early seventeenth century, and in the *Register of the Great Seal*, under date 2nd February 1641, is an interesting entry in which Charles I. confirms a charter of David Preston of Craigmillar granting to George Preston, his son, and Jeanne Gibsoun, his future wife, and their heirs male “*terras et baroniam de Prestoun alias Gourtown cum maneriei loco de Uppershill, molendinis, piscationibus, tenentibus, &c., in parochia de Leswaid, vic de Edinburgh.*”¹ Before the end of the century the property passed to the Clerks, by whom in 1920 it was sold to the paper-mills, in whose possession it remains.

The structure is slightly longer than that of Ravensnook, and it was certainly finer in its appointments. It forms a simple oblong of two storeys with a former attic, but having lost its gables it presents a somewhat box-like and unsightly outline. The effect as seen from the road below is certainly poor, but the interior is singularly interesting, giving a very good idea of a compact little Scottish mansion of the sixteenth century. Uniform as it appears, there is no doubt that it was built at two different times.

The ruins are very tolerably perfect, except for a large gap on the south. The fabric forms a compact oblong of about 65 by 23 feet, standing east and west. The walls are rather over 3 feet thick, built of excellent rubble, improving into ashlar in parts and with large ashlar quoins. The stone is nearly all from the local carboniferous beds, but some varied material is used, including a compact and gritty conglomerate, probably taken from the bed of the river. The masonry is very much neater and better than that of Ravensnook. There are no absolutely clear indications of date, such as mouldings might supply, but the building has every appearance of belonging to two periods during the sixteenth century. Masons' marks do not appear to exist, but the

¹ Vol. 1634-51, No. 964, p. 352. Much else is included in the grant.

weathered, rather gritty stone is not a very suitable material for their preservation. Virtually the only detail is a plain, bold roll-moulding round the outer door, and some windows, all square-headed, mostly with relieving arches, of characteristically Scottish type. It is perfectly preserved round the east window of the solar.

The main entrance was by means of a door in the middle of the south side. Over it is a deeply-recessed panel, from which, most unfortunately, the armorial bearings have disappeared. It opens to a passage across the building, having the hall on the west and the imposing kitchen on the east. On the lower floor this passage was divided by a wall. The northern part was covered by a rough tunnel vault. The stairs must have been got into the corridor, but only a mass of ruin remains. Three steps on the left of the front door led downwards to the undercroft of the hall, entered also by a door at the north end of

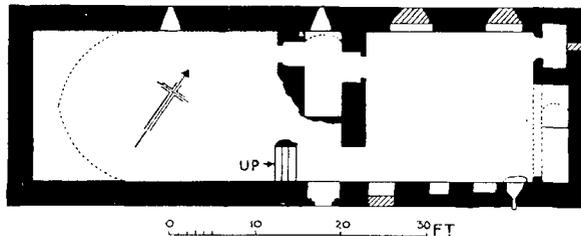


Fig. 1. Plan of Uttershill Castle: Kitchen on the right, undercroft of hall on left.

the passage, which was on a lower level. The undercroft was roofed by a very massive, just pointed, tunnel vault, which has unfortunately fallen from the absence of any protection against the wet. The chamber was evidently a store; in its north wall is a narrow splayed window piercing the spring of the vault by a lintel. The work is very rough, but substantial and well built. This western portion of the castle is evidently a little earlier than the eastern, which was added when greater domestic comfort was desired.

The hall, as so frequently the case in Scotland,¹ was thus upon the upper floor; it must have been in its way a rather striking chamber, some 30 by 18 feet and better lighted than any other chamber in the tower. Upon the north are four very depressed mural arches resting upon the very simplest of piers, except in one case where the thinning of the wall necessitates a corbel. Such recesses were provided to permit buttery furniture to be inset. Two of the arches enclose windows;

¹ Sometimes in England too, *e.g.* the so-called abbot's lodging at Netley, the hall of Winchester College, the older hall in the palace at Chichester.

another window in the north part of the west wall has been partly built up before the house was allowed to fall into decay. The fireplace must have been east or south; perhaps the former is more probable. It is noteworthy that end fireplaces were much more usual in Scottish halls than in those of more southern climes, where the fire was usually in the middle of a long side. The roof was clearly a wooden ceiling, having an attic above. The hall was entered by two doors, one at each end of the upper corridor, the lintel of the northern projects from the wall.

The kitchen was on the lower floor, and its chief feature is the

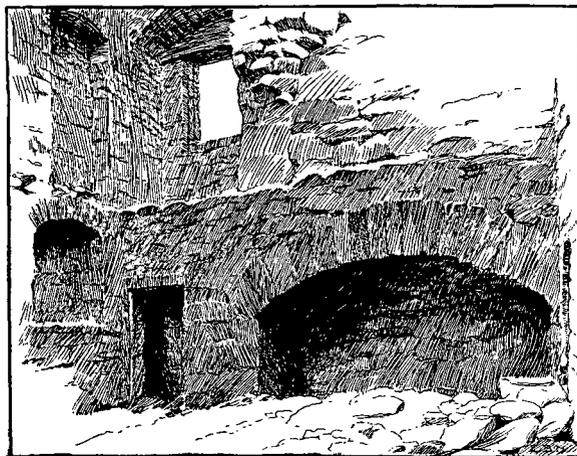


Fig. 2. Mural Chamber and Kitchen Fireplace, Uttershill Castle.

enormous fireplace in the eastern wall, placed towards the south. It opens by a huge segmental arch of about 11 feet span, and the chimney being on the south the northern portion of the space behind is covered by a tunnel vault impinging upon the side of the large arch, which has proved strong enough to form a satisfactory abutment. The wall-space north of the great fireplace is used to form a small mural chamber which measures 5 feet 9 inches by 3 feet 9 inches, and is entered through a door whose iron hinge staples remain. It had a small window on the east, later built up. It was used to store powder in recent times, both for the mines and the rifle-range.

In the south wall of the kitchen are three ambry-cupboards, the furthest west being a blocked doorway, and to the east of them, close by the fireplace, a slop sink with gargyle on the exterior, locally known

as a jaw-box. The low windows on the north have been built up, though without them the kitchen must have been rather dark.

The holes for the great joists that supported the ceiling are very conspicuous, and above them the walls become a little thinner.

The chamber over the kitchen must have formed a very fine bedroom or solar about 1 foot lower in floor level than the hall. Both were, of course, entered from the upper corridor; it is remarkable that no trace of the stair remains. Possibly it was of wood, though this was very unusual in Scotland at the time. At each end of the corridor was a little square window of the usual simple type, but the northern is remarkable in that its lintel and jambs have holes for iron bars on what are now their outer edges; possibly these are re-used stones, but the grating may have been purely external. Other windows display less distinct traces of the same feature.

The solar had a large fireplace over that of the kitchen, of which only slight traces remain. The floor at this (east) end was supported on the masonry above the kitchen fireplace and the mural chamber to the north. Over the latter the solar has a large window in a deep recess. It is of the usual character, a bold roll-moulding surrounding the exterior, a relieving arch of depressed form appearing in the masonry above. Close by in the north wall is a deep cupboard recess. On the south there are two of these close together. That furthest east is rabbeted for a shutter; the other was originally pierced as a doorway, which was probably approached by an outside stair of wood. Further west is a small square window; to the east of the mural cupboards is a very remarkable ambry which extends into the wall eastwards at right angles to its opening.

There are now no indications whatever of the nature of the attics above. They were obviously of considerable importance to the household, seeing that without them the whole castle contained only three large rooms and a capacious store.

In 1899 there was found among the ruins a stone bearing the date 1511, and (with other marks that could not be deciphered) the letter P. (Penicuik). This has now been lost, but it was seen by the zealous, local antiquary, R. E. Black, to whom this paper is much indebted.

The date seems probably to belong to the western part of the building. In the Cowan Institute is now preserved a stone bearing, on a shield, the three unicorns of the Prestons, and on each side the initials O. P.—the first letter bearing some resemblance to a bugle. This probably came from Uttershill, but for a time it was built into Pomathorn farm. Neither of these stones would fit the panel over the door.

There are no traces of any outbuildings. The structure stands

among trees. What remains is in excellent condition though almost entirely neglected. It is impossible to resist the reflection that it could be restored to form a delightful little modern residence, though in winter the position might probably be found to be very much exposed to storms. The building is certainly worthy of more careful preservation. The kitchen doors were walled up fairly recently.