

IV.

OLD CROMARTY CASTLE. BY W. M. MACKENZIE, M.A., D.LITT.,
LL.D., H.R.S.A., F.S.A.Scot.

In the Chronicle of Melrose it is told how in 1179 King William the Lion and his brother David led a large and powerful army into Ross and there fortified two castles, one named "Dunscath" and the other "Etherdouer."¹ The latter has been identified with Redcastle,² in the parish of Killearnan, on the south shore of the Black Isle. Dunscath is on the north Sutor of the Cromarty Firth, opposite the town of Cromarty across the

¹ P. 22. *v.* Eirdovar, interpreted as "between the waters," *i.e.* the Beaully and Cromarty Firths, or "between brooks" (Watson, *Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty*, p. 142; *Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, p. 454). In Fordun (*Gesta Annalia*, xvi.), drawing on the Melrose Chronicle, the names are "Dunschath" and "Ederdone." Brother David is of course the Earl of Huntingdon.

² *Orig. Paroch. Scot.*, vol. iii, p. 529.

water, where the almost levelled mound and shallow depression of the ditch of the mote-castle founded by King William were still discernible till in recent years the site was subjected to military occupation.¹ The name is for *Dùn Sgàth*, "fort of dread,"² and the neighbouring farm is known as Castlecraig. We may infer a piece of land attached to the castle, as in 1456 the revenue from the "vill" (=to(u)n) of Dunscaith was granted by James II to the church of St Duthus at Tain for the upkeep of a chaplainry, the grant including the ferry of Dunscaith alternatively known as that of Cromarty,³ all being thus Crown property; and the yearly payment of ten merks [£6. 13. 4] to St Duthus being quite a good income for a chaplain, who was also a singing-master.

In the ferry we have the strategic explanation of a castle at Dunscaith, as also of that which supplanted it on the opposite shore at Cromarty. With the ferry from Ardersier to Chanonry or Fortrose it provided a short direct route to the farther north in place of the long, difficult circuit round the heads of the intervening firths. At Ardersier too, on the elevated land above Fort George, are the imposing earthworks of what has been a mote-castle,⁴ which, like Dunscaith or Cromarty, would have served as guardian of the ferry.

By this route two English agents travelled north to Orkney in the autumn of 1290, taking but one day to go from Nairn (Hinernairn) to Cromarty (*apud Crombasin*), which could be done only by using the ferry at Ardersier, as they must have done also on the return journey by Nigg, which adjoins Dunscaith, reaching Nairn again in one day's journey.⁵ By these ferries, too, King James IV shortened his pilgrimages to the shrine of St Duthus at Tain twice in 1497, and again in 1501. On the first of these occasions he lodged a night at Cromarty and made a gift of 18s. to the priest, possibly as his host. Three boats were required to convey the King and his servants.⁶ The ferries were used by Francis Stewart, Earl of Bothwell, in going to and from Caithness in 1592.⁷ Thomas Kirk travelled by them in his tour of Scotland in 1677.⁸ These cases on record just happen to illustrate what must have been a well-known easing and abbreviation of travel in these remote parts.

Dunscaith was no doubt overshadowed and reduced in usefulness when

¹ Hugh Miller wrote (in *Scenes and Legends* (1834), p. 46) that "We can still trace the moat of the citadel, and part of an outwork which rises towards the hill; but the walls have sunk into low grassy mounds, and the line of the outer mote has long since been effaced by the plough."

² Watson, *Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty*, as cited.

³ *per integras firmas ville de Dunscaithe cum le fery ejusdem: unacum passagio aque de Crombathy* (*Exchequer Rolls*, vol. vi. pp. 216, 463, 465, etc.; vii. pp. 126, 129, 356, etc.).

⁴ Known as "Cromall Mount," but in the popular version as "Cromwell's Mount."

⁵ See Stevenson, *Docts. Illust. History of Scotland*, vol. i. p. 184.

⁶ See *Accts. Lord High Treasurer*, vol. i. pp. 324-5, 363; vol. ii. p. 125.

⁷ *Reg. Privy Council*, vol. iv. p. 750.

⁸ *Tours in Scotland, 1677 and 1681*. Ed. P. Hume Brown.

on the opposite side of the Firth a tiny sheriffdom was carved out of what is now known as the Black Isle, with the appropriate accompaniments of a royal castle and a royal burgh. The earliest mention of this sheriffdom of Cromarty is in a charter of some time between 1252 and 1272 granted by the sheriff William de Monte Alto.¹ The Monte Altos or Mowats continued as heritable sheriffs till the sheriffdom in a confusing transaction is found under the superiority of the Earl of Ross, and Earl William conferred it upon Adam Urquhart, who, in a confirmation by King David II in 1364, is specified as holding the sheriffship which Earl William resigned.² The earliest mention of Adam de Urquhart is in a charter from William, Earl of Ross, in 1338.³

The Urquharts continued in possession for about three and a half centuries. In that time, however, two things of importance had happened. In 1470 King James III made over to Sir William Urquhart and heirs the Mote and Mansion Mound of Cromarty in perpetual fee and heritage to be held as freely as their possessions in burghage in the burgh, with licence to build a tower or fortalice on the Mote and equip it with suitable defences.⁴ The implication is obvious. The castle was no longer to be counted as royal: it had been made private property, a fact which strangely seems to have been forgotten, since in 1748, following on the Act abolishing heritable jurisdictions, a claim was entered by William Urquhart as sheriff for compensation for loss of the constablership of Cromarty Castle, and the Lord Advocate had to point out that the castle had ceased to be royal, having become "the private property of the claimant's authors . . . many years ago," as appeared "by the writings produced."⁵

The other incident is that in 1670 the sheriff, Sir John Urquhart, managed to secure the transfer of all the burgh lands to himself. His son, however, beset with the chronic financial embarrassments of the Urquharts, was, under legal process, dispossessed of his Cromarty lands by Sir George Mackenzie of Tarbat, afterwards Earl of Cromarty, who placed his son Kenneth there. Then Sir Kenneth's son, in a state of bankruptcy, sold the property to William Urquhart of Meldrum, Aberdeenshire, the descendant of a cadet branch of the Urquhart family, who was to be the claimant of compensation for the long-lapsed constablership of the castle. Meldrum's son sold Cromarty in 1763 to Lord Elibank, who, nine years later, disposed of the estate to George Ross of Pitkerrie, a minor Ross-shire laird who had made "an immense fortune in England as an

¹ *Earls of Cromartie*, Sir Wm. Fraser, vol. ii. pp. 445-6.

² Robertson's *Index of Charters*, p. 45, No. 27; *Reg. Mag. Sig.*, vol. i. App. 2, No. 1254.

³ Macfarlane's *Genealogical Collections*, vol. ii. p. 376; *History of the Family of Urquhart*, Henrietta Tayler, pp. 7, 9.

⁴ Macfarlane, as cited, vol. ii. p. 375: *lie Mote & Montem Mansionis de Cromathy*. There are some misreadings in this copy of the charter.

⁵ See *Claims under Act, etc.*, in General Register House, Edinburgh.

army agent." ¹ Among the extensive improvements which "the Scotch agent" carried through on his new estate was the removal of the deserted old castle in 1772, ² after which he built near by on the commanding site a mansion of the period.

Later writers interested in the castle as the home of Sir Thomas Urquhart, translator of Rabelais, had to borrow their descriptive notices from the accounts of old people who had seen it, as reported by Hugh Miller. ³ It was thus learned that this castle had stood in an angle of the hundred-foot escarpment immediately behind the town, occupying in fact, as we now know, the site of an earlier mote-castle. ⁴ From the base of the escarpment what was once the causewayed High Street ran to the sea, and hereabouts stood the old market cross. ⁵ One of the annual fairs granted to the burgh was "St Norman's market," but there was no saint called Norman, and the name simply associates the existence of the market with the Norman sheriff. ⁶ The later substitute for the mote-castle rose, we are told, "in some places to the height of six storeys, battlemented at the top, and roofed with grey stone," but with an extension from the main building only three storeys in height; that "one immense turret . . . occupied the extreme point of the angle," and there were "other turrets of smaller size"; while a "small court, flagged with stone," extended to a high outer wall with a gateway.

Broadly speaking, this description answers to the elevations and plans hitherto unknown and published here, with the original captions, for the first time. Unfortunately they bear no indicator of the cardinal points. It appears that by 1746 the castle was in need of repair and that some new building was contemplated. The drawings at this time (Pl. XII) show cracks on wall surfaces, which are indicated also on the floor-plans (Pl. XIII). Subsidence of the building is suggested, which may well have been the case if the tower had been erected upon the actual mote-hill, a result which is clearly seen in Duffus Castle a few miles north of Elgin. ⁷

How far the repair, noted in the plans as begun in 1747, actually went, and whether the new buildings then projected were constructed, one cannot say. The "immense turret" at the angle of the eminence would seem, in the plan of 1747 (Pl. XIV, 2), to be scheduled for removal, but, as noted in the

¹ Tayler, as cited, p. 188; *Tales and Sketches*, Hugh Miller, p. 348.

² *Statistical Account*; Miller's *Scenes and Legends*, p. 80.

³ *Scenes and Legends*, pp. 78-82.

⁴ See p. 62.

⁵ *Scenes and Legends*, p. 453.

⁶ See p. 62; for the lay-out of the burgh cf. *The Scottish Burghs*, W. Mackay Mackenzie, pp. 58, 59.

⁷ The *Statistical Account* says that when the castle was pulled down, "Several urns composed of earthenware were dug out of the bank immediately around the building, with several coffins of stone. The urns were placed in square recesses formed of flags. . . . They were filled with ashes mixed with fragments of half-burned bones. The coffins contained human skeletons, some of which wanted the head."

traditional account, appears to have been still standing at the final destruction. In any case the plans, after the sale of the estate, found their way to Craigston Castle, on the only share of the Urquhart lands still in possession of one of the name, a junior branch of the Meldrum line¹; and to the kindness and co-operation of Major Bruce Urquhart of Craigston is due their reproduction here.

The castle of these drawings obviously followed on the grant and licence of 1470 to Sir William Urquhart, who, however, died in 1475.² According to the great Sir Thomas it was Sir William's grandson, Sir Thomas, who built the castle, which (of course) "exceeds any in this kingdom," in 1507, adding that it was "contrived by a French architect."³ There is no reason—allowing for the single characteristic of exaggeration—to doubt this statement: the place, with its crown of "pepperbox" turrets, does look more French than Scottish, when compared with towers of the latter class in the same century.

The building is in two parts of different dates (Pl. XII). The older tower rises in five storeys to a height of about 52 feet to the corbel course and 71 feet at the roof ridge. It is 43 feet long and 32 feet in depth, and is slightly L-shaped, having a "jam" or projection 10 feet deep at the south-west corner. Each of the six angles is surmounted by a small turret corbelled out from the wall-face and crossed by the double line of corbels that surrounds the tower below the crenellated parapet at the wall-head. These corbels, however, are placed chequer-wise, that is the lower course blocks the spaces between those above, and so, with nothing to support, are of no structural value, and, by blocking the interspaces which as "machicolation" would have given openings commanding in defence the foot of the wall, of no military value either. In fact a military provision has been converted into a purely architectural adornment.⁴ Other towers of the period showing the same adaptation are Rusco, Kirkcudbright, bearing the date 1514; Edzell, Perthshire; Craignethan, Lanarkshire; the tower on Little Cumbrae, etc. The crenellations on the parapet, too, look merely formal. The roof, traditionally of flagstones, has gables with "corbie" or "crow" steps, another sixteenth-century feature common in Scotland till the end of the eighteenth century and believed to have been imported from France or the Low Countries.⁵

The entrance to the tower is in the "jam," opening on an ample spiral stair with steps five feet wide, serving all floors and having

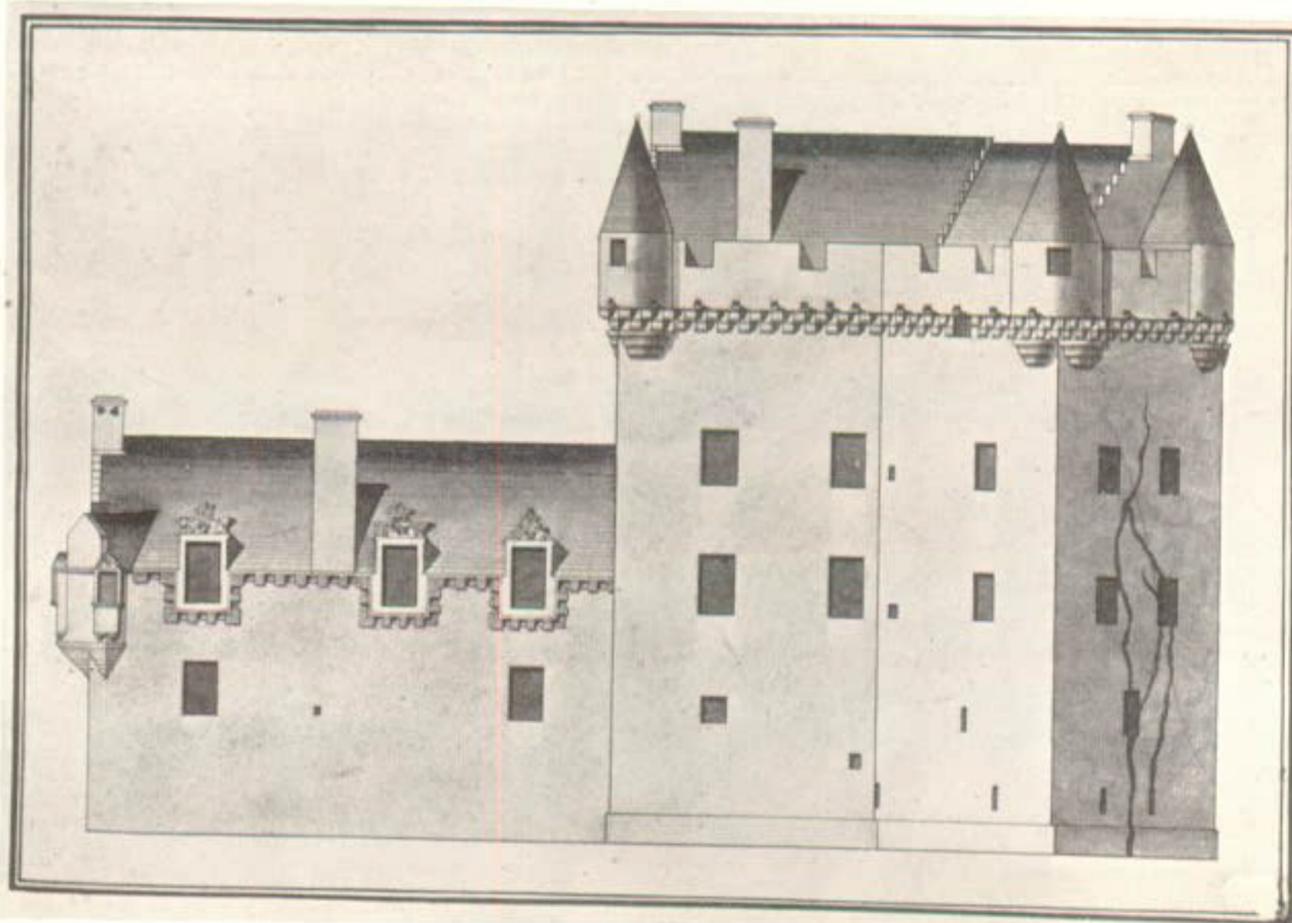
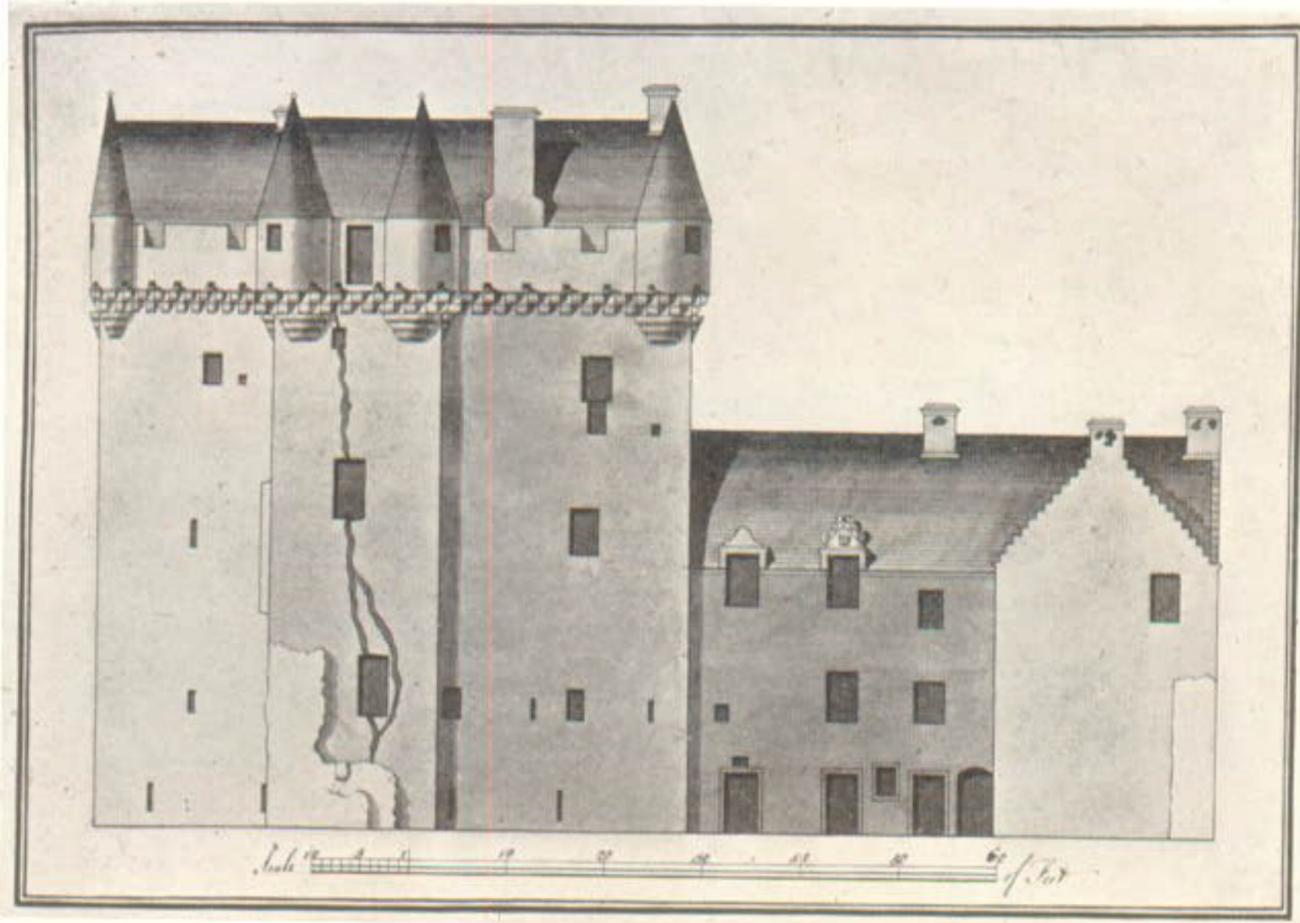
¹ *History of the Family of Urquhart*, Henrietta Tayler, p. 187.

² Tayler, as cited, p. 18.

³ Quoted in Tayler, p. 22. Of course at this date only the tower is in question.

⁴ See *The Mediaeval Castle in Scotland*, W. Mackay Mackenzie, pp. 90-1; *Growth of the English House*, J. A. Gotch, p. 59.

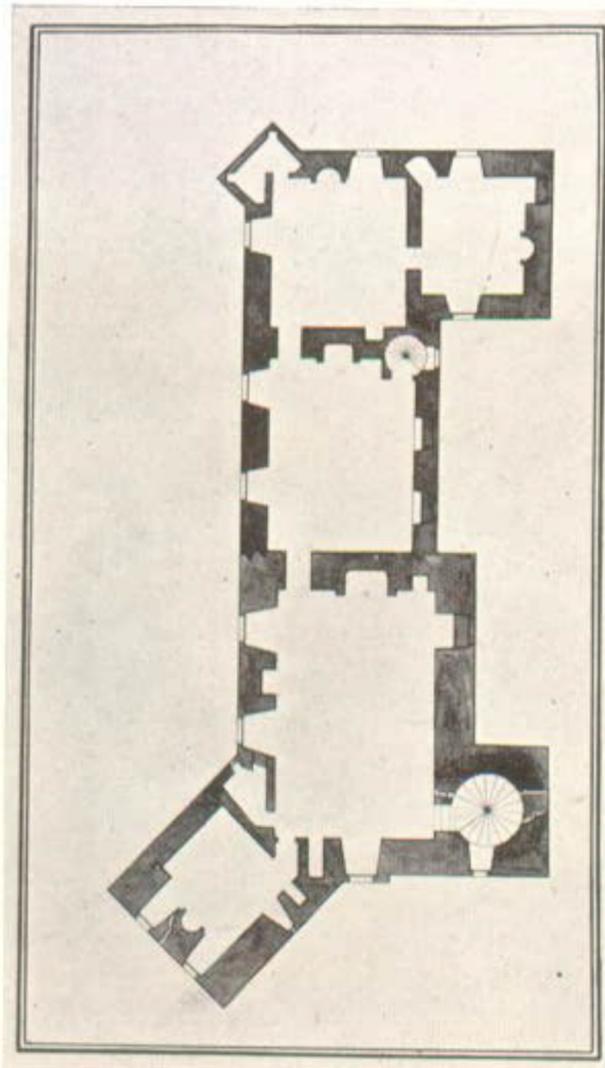
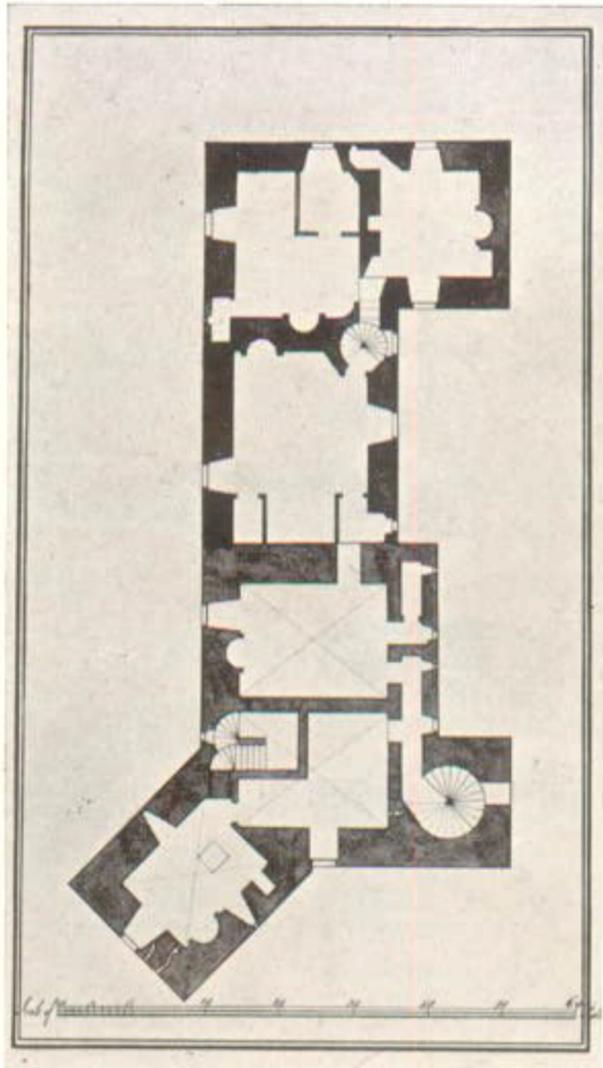
⁵ In England "probably due to the Flemings," being a feature of East Anglian brickwork but "seldom found elsewhere in England" (*A Short History of the Building Crafts*, Martin S. Briggs, pp. 56-7).



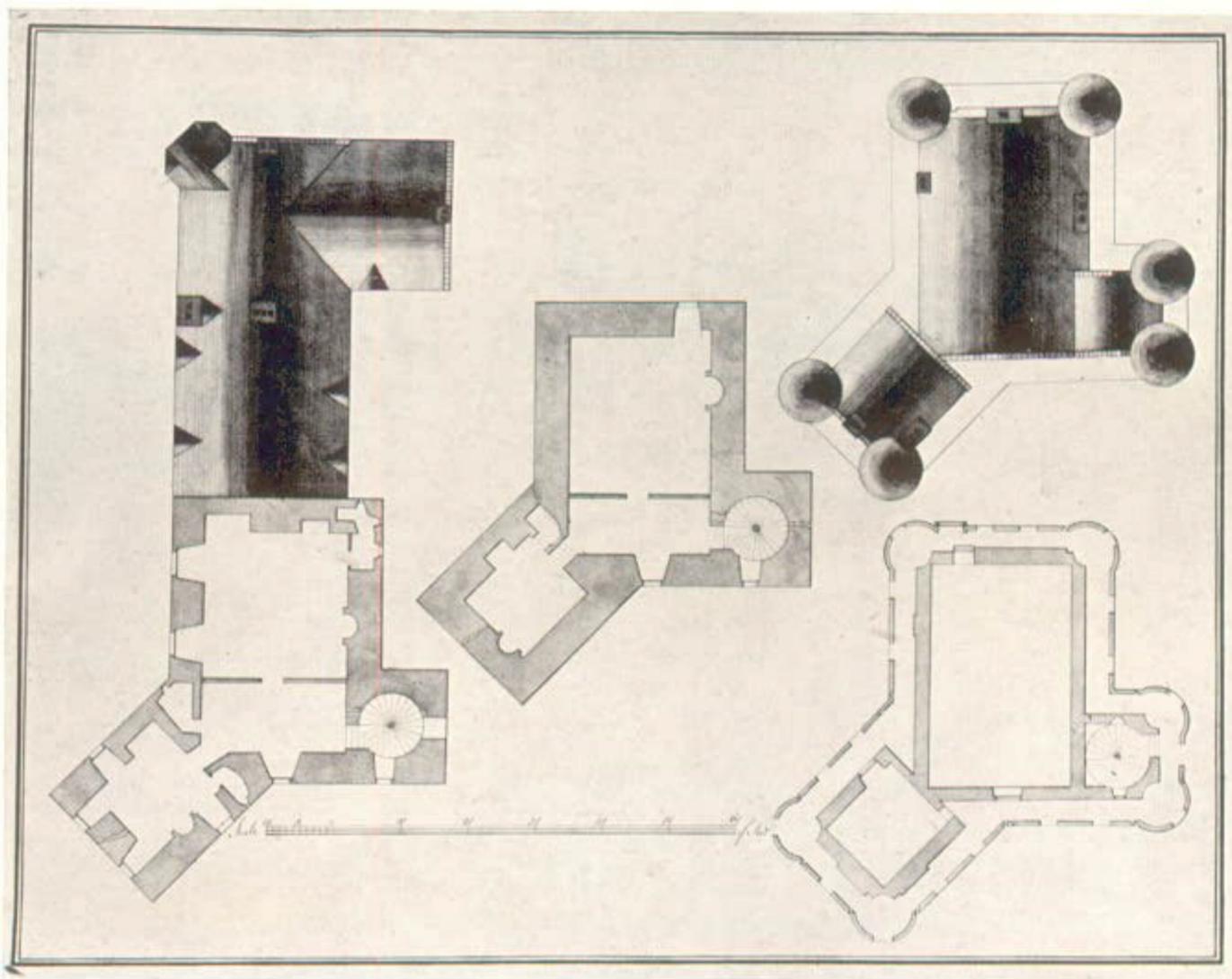
North and South Elevations of the Castle of Cromarty as it was in 1746.

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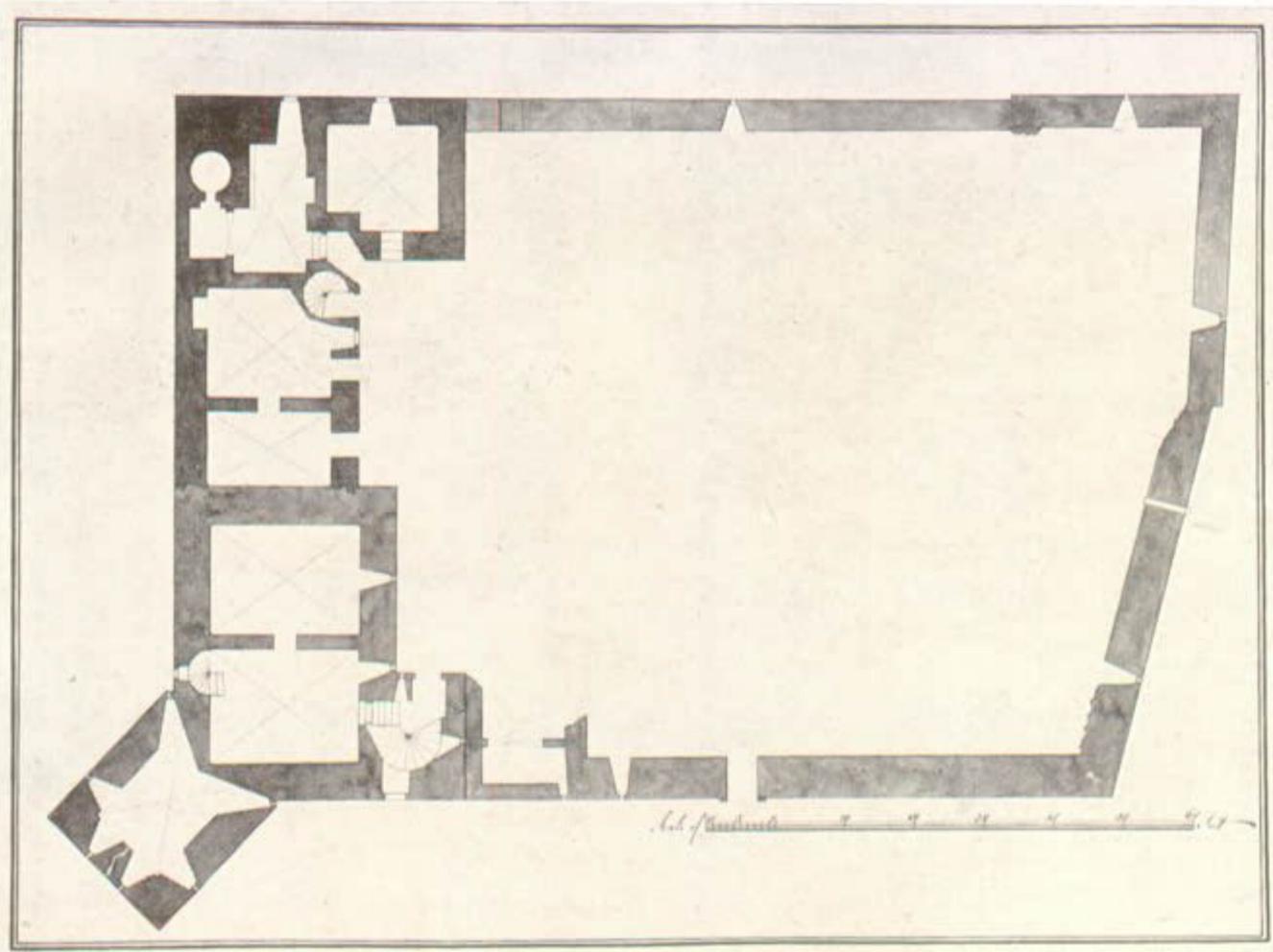


1. Plan of the 1st and 2nd Storys of the Castle of Cromarty as it was in 1746.

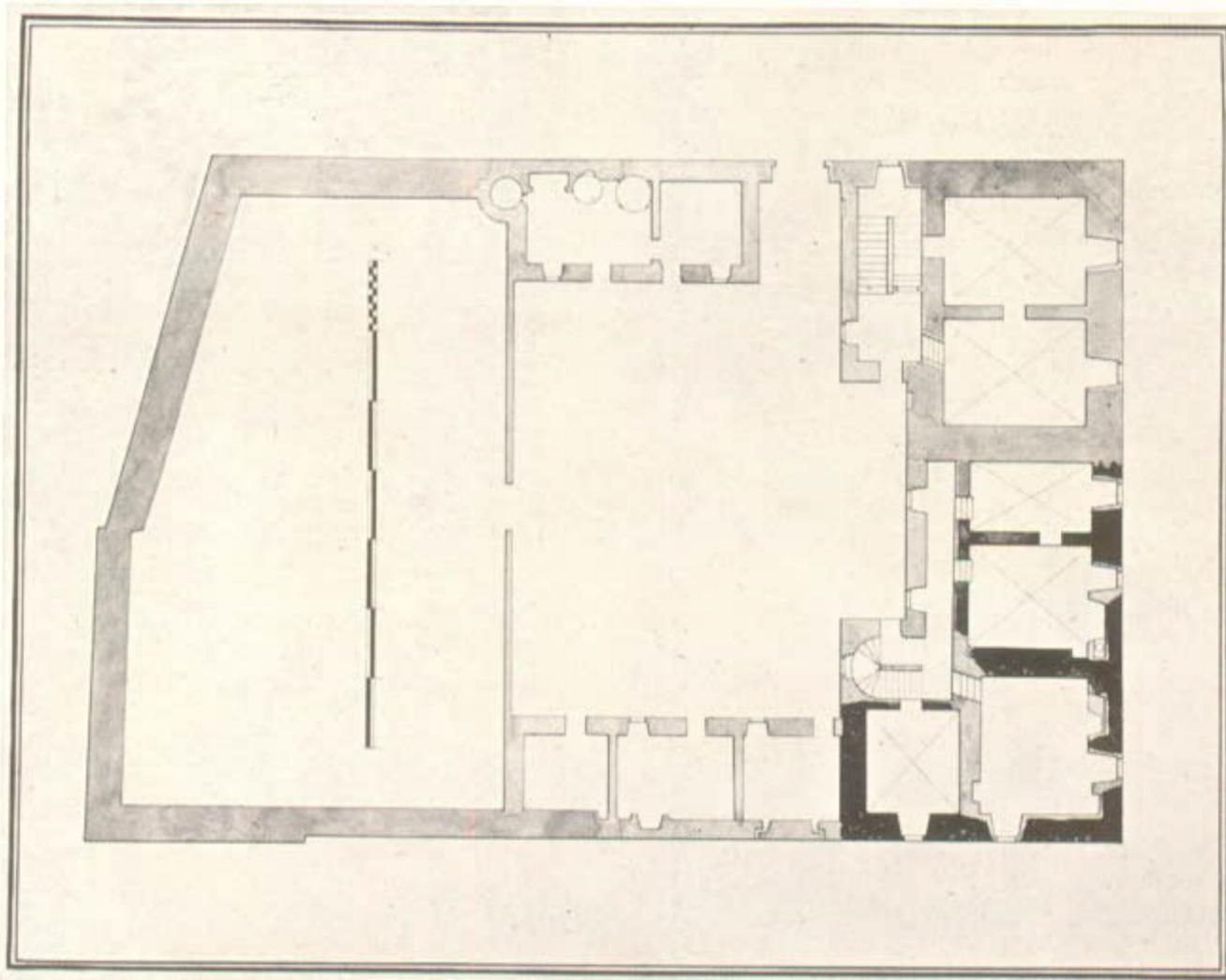


2. Plan of the 3rd, 4th and 5th Storys, and Roof, of the Castle of Cromarty as it was in 1746.

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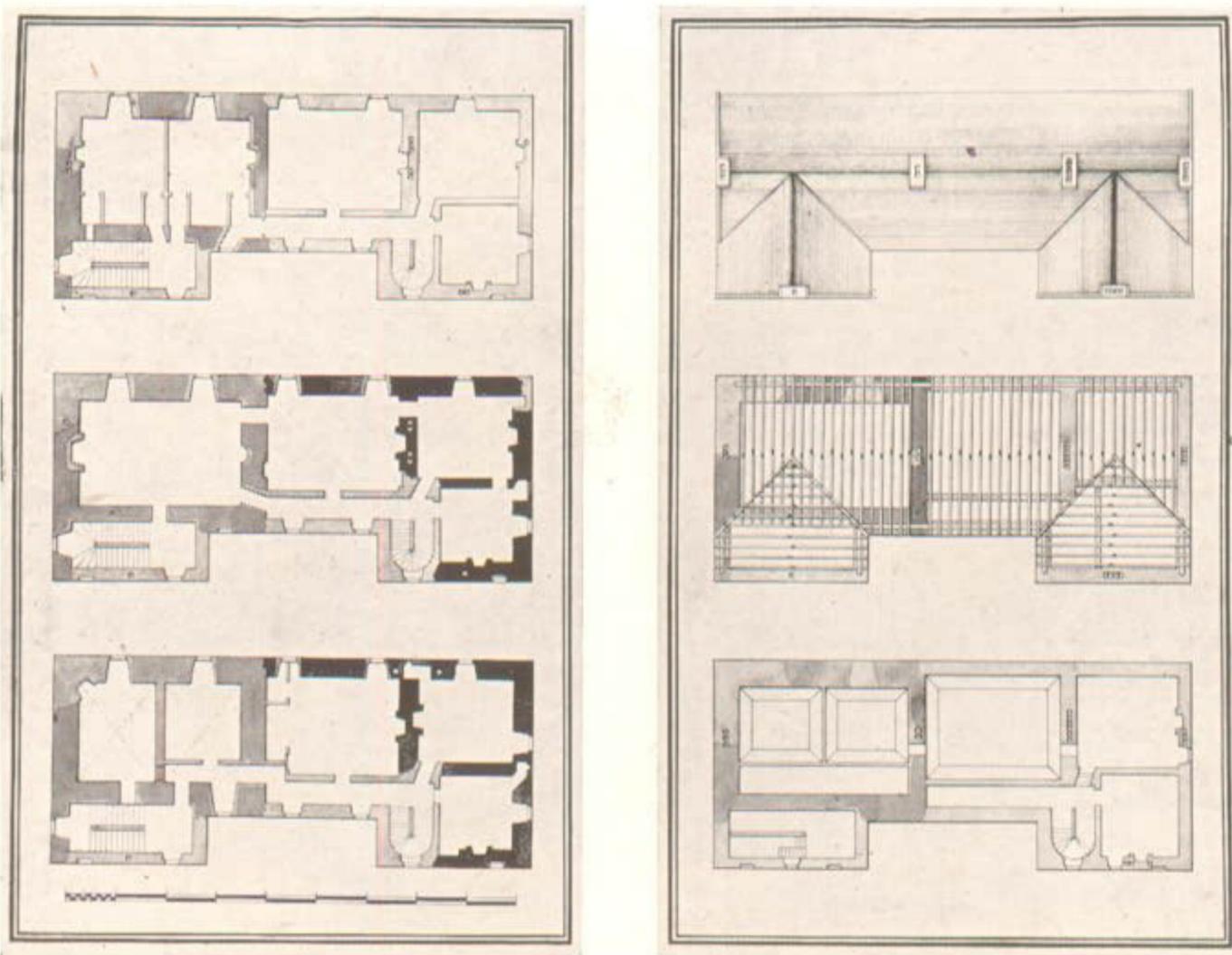


1. Plan of the Ground Story and Court of the Castle of Cromarty as it was in 1746.

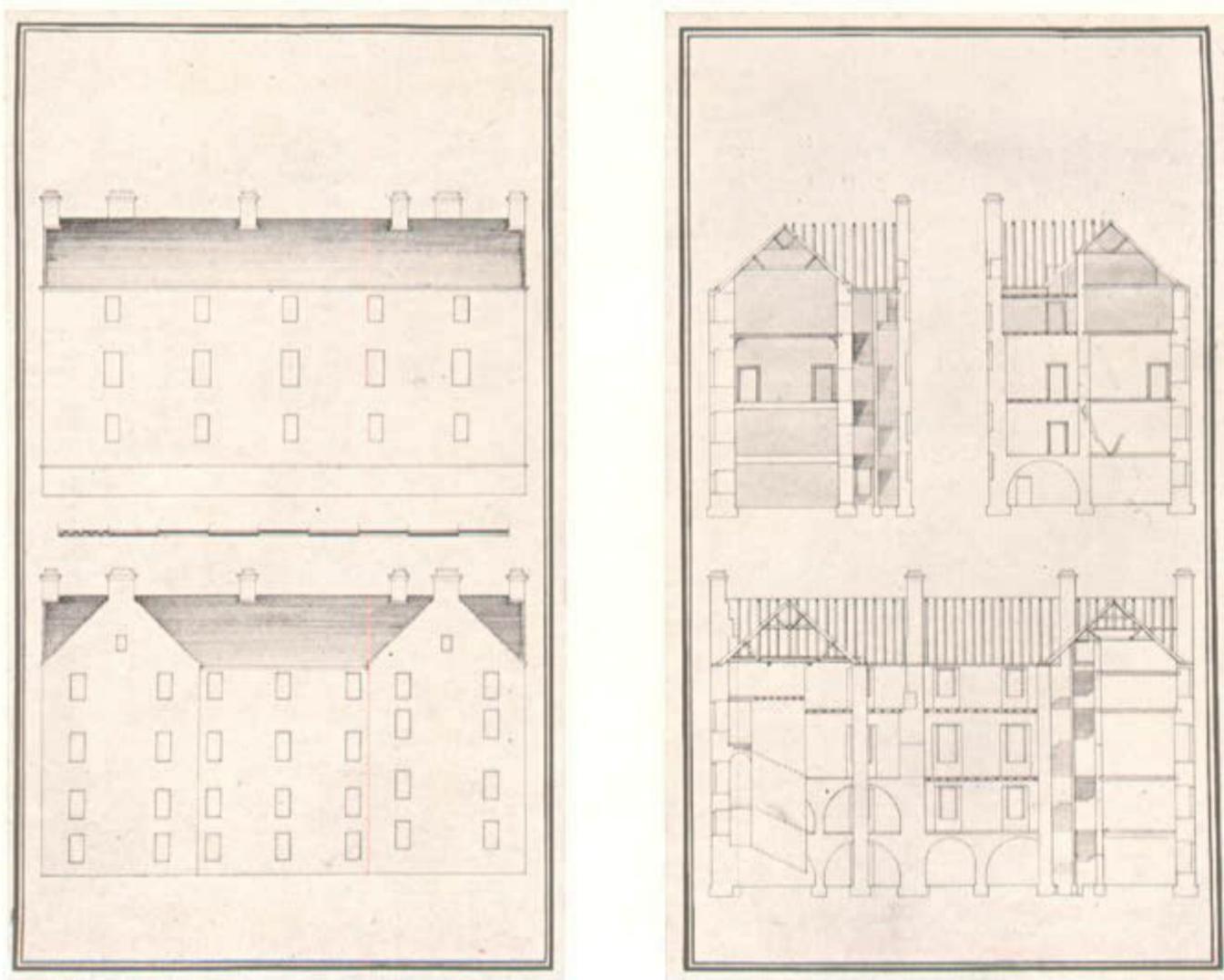


2. Plan of the Ground Story and Court of the Castle of Cromarty as begun to be repaired in 1747.

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1. Plan of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Storys, Garretts, Section of the Roof and Roof of the Castle of Cromarty as begun to be repaired in 1747.



2. North and South Elevations and Sections of the Castle of Cromarty as begun to be repaired in 1747.

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a straight flight down to the ground storey, which was partly below the surface and has two vaulted intercommunicating apartments, while the room in the great tower at the angle is also vaulted, but has no entrance from outside, being accessible only by the hatch in the room above. At this level the windows are only slits or very small: on the outer face is a plinth or basement course. On the first floor (Pl. XIII, 1) the main spiral stair opens on a corridor or lobby giving independent access to each of two rooms, which also are vaulted, and from one of which the vaulted apartment in the adjacent great turret is entered, while a small partitioned space has its own spiral and flight stairway from the room below, apparently leading to an entresol under the first-floor vault of the turret. In the east wall of the adjoining room is a recess the width of the corridor, having two small lights. The main spiral continues upwards but appears not to hit each level exactly; possibly the steps have been renewed.

In the turret room is a hatch which, as already said, is the only access to the room below. That, then, may be the "pit" or prison referred to later on.

Above the first floor there is no vaulting, and that, as well as the second floor, has communication with the later building (Pl. XIII, 1) The uninterrupted apartment on the second floor may, on that account, have been the hall of the tower, though its position as such is unusual. The fireplaces throughout are circular or rectangular, and there are several oddly shaped intramural closets, some of which at least may have been utilised for a sanitary purpose; while the two uppermost floors are also each subdivided by a partition. The plan at parapet level (Pl. XIII, 2) shows an opening from the main spiral stair to the parapet, also entrances from the parapet to the tower room and that in the great turret.

Sir Thomas Urquhart tells us that the builder of the tower "rode pompously with a retinue of 50 domesticks,"¹ and credits him in the Pedigree and elsewhere with a family of twenty-five sons and eleven daughters.² Urquhart of Cromarty had lands and mansions also in Banffshire and Aberdeenshire, but, unless there was other local provision, the assemblage of such a household must have taxed the accommodation of the Castle at Cromarty beyond its capacity. However, in 1631-32 the father of the great Sir Thomas was engaged in "building a house for his better accommodation," but could obtain timber for the purpose only in Norway, for the purchase of which he was empowered by the Privy Council to export "beir and meal."³ This is the lower house of urban type attached to the tower (Pl. XII) within the older precinct, as we see done rather earlier in Dirleton

¹ Tayler, p. 22.

² The traveller Richard Franck (see p. 67), in 1658, says thirty sons and ten daughters, "yet not one natural child amongst them (as I was told)."

³ *Reg. P.C.*, vol. iv. (New Series) p. 202.

Castle, East Lothian, and in Caerlaverock, Dumfriesshire, at about the same time.

Like the tower this house, too, is L-shaped, being fitted into the north-east corner of the enclosure. It is in three storeys, rising 27 feet to the wall-head (Pl. XII), where there is a corbel course returning round the dormer windows finished with pediments. Those on the outer face are ornamented with scrolls and vases, that to the extreme left having a floral finial, while the other two show finials of diamond shape.¹ The first of these encloses a shield bearing three boars' heads for Urquhart. The middle pediment displays the interlocked initials S.T.V. D.C.E. for Sir Thomas Urquhart, the builder, and his wife Dame Christian Elphinstone, while the remaining one bears on a shield a chevron between three boars' heads for Elphinstone. On the inner face one pediment is a blank, but the other has the initials D.C.E. above, for Dame Christian Elphinstone, whose arms, it may be inferred, occupied the somewhat obscure shield below.

The house, apart from the wing, measures overall 52 by 26 feet. The corner apartment was separately entered from the courtyard, was vaulted, and apparently was a kitchen with fireplace and oven (Pl. XIV, 1). The adjoining apartment in the wing was also independently entered and vaulted: both were partly underground. In the rest of the house the ground-floor rooms were also vaulted and each had its own entry, while a spiral stair gave access to the rooms above, in two of which partitions appear to have contrived smaller chambers. At the corner projected a balcony, rising to the attic, with its own roof and two windows (Pl. XII).

From this house probably came the two sculptured slabs already described in the *Proceedings*,² the larger and more important of which is now in the Museum here. At the time of the destruction this three-storeyed building was "so completely fallen into decay that the roof and all the floors had disappeared."³ This, with what has already been said of the apparent survival of the great turret,⁴ would seem to imply that the repairs as begun in 1747 were not carried to completion. They would surely have been good enough for another thirty years.

Whatever be the case, some important alterations were at least contemplated (Pls. XIV, 2, XV, 1). Access to the upper storeys was to be not by spiral staircases but by straight flights from a more roomy approach. The balcony, like the main turret, was to be removed. What is conjectured above to be the kitchen loses such features, and new windows are inserted

¹ The traditional description is therefore wrong when it says that the pediments "terminated above in two knobs fashioned into the rude semblance of thistles"; also in saying there are dates (*Scenes and Legends*, p. 80).

² Vol. 1926-27, pp. 181-91. "All the other sculptures of the castle, including several rude pieces of Gothic statuary, were destroyed by the workmen" (*Scenes and Legends*, p. 82).

³ *Scenes and Legends*, p. 79.

⁴ Page 63.

in this ground-floor suite of rooms. The entrance to the courtyard was to be widened. Apparently the architectural purpose of these alterations was to give greater symmetry to the front of the castle, a Georgian rather than a mediæval aspect.

The same idea affects the new houses contemplated against the walls of enclosure (Pls. XIV, 2, XV, 2), but these cannot be said for certain to have been erected. Apart from the vaulting shown the plans offer no special features.

Cromarty Castle played no particular part in national history except in so far as it was furnished with an English garrison for a short time during the Cromwellian occupation of Scotland. Apart from that its annals are wholly domestic.

The earliest note is that embodied in *Northern Memoirs* written in 1658 by Richard Franck, a Cromwellian trooper, who, with a companion, had made a journey through Scotland. At Cromarty he notes the "Laird Urquhart" with the large family, which so far corroborates what is claimed by Sir Thomas Urquhart in his notorious genealogy, and states that he "lived to the utmost limit and period of life¹; whose declining age," Franck continues, "invites him to contemplate mortality, and cruciate himself, by fancying his cradle his sepulchre, wherein he was lodg'd night after night, and hal'd up by pullies to the roof of his house; approaching as near as the roof would let him, to the beautiful battlements and suburbs of heaven."²

The only intimate connection on record of the great Sir Thomas Urquhart with the castle is how he and his brother Alexander, in December 1636, were guilty of confining their father from Monday to Friday "in sure firmance within ane upper chamber, callit the Inner Dortour [*i.e.* dormitory] within his place of Cromertie." The Court of Justiciary secured a reconciliation between father and sons, and Sir Thomas later wrote a handsome tribute to his extravagant parent.

Seven years later the Castle was the scene of a more tragic occurrence, which is related by a contemporary. On the first of February "Hutcheon Ross of Auchincloche" and two other gentlemen arrived at the Castle, "whair they war maid welcum, soupit mirrellie; but rekleslie gat ane collatioun whiche wes prepairit for ane uther, and wes all thrie found dead in there bedis on the morne. Pitifull to behold! It is said the young Laird of Calder wes merrit to Cromartie's dochter, who there efter becam mad, and of whome his young ladie had no plesour. Thus he being with hir in the place of Cromartie, this potioun wes in a quairt stoup provydit for him, bot fell utherwayes as ye heir; whereupon young Calder, be his friendis, wes haistillie removit out of that place, and nevir moir tryit."³

¹ 1474-1557, and so died at eighty-three.

² *Northern Memoirs, etc.*, published 1694; ed. 1821, p. 216.

³ Spalding's *Memorials of the Troubles*, vol. ii. pp. 228-9.

One other record adds something to our knowledge of the Castle. In 1676 we find a "kaird" or tinker accused before Sir John Urquhart of a varied series of crimes—"dailly stealling of corne-stacks in 3 or 4 places"; breaking into two booths in Cromarty and stealing 20 merks from the one, "merchant waires" from the other; "Stealling the communion cup of the Kirk of Tarbet" and timber from the bulwark of Cromarty; coining false money "and making of ill half crowns by laying on them of quicksilver"; adultery, poisoning his wife and committing perjury about it. "For which crymes he was secured in the pit [prison] of the castell of Cromartie and on the 28th of May, being Sunday, made ane passadge throw the prison wall, being elleven feet thick, and made his escap, and stealed and away took ane pewter stoup and ane pair of blankets he had in the prison . . . brocht to the gallows at the Ness of Cromartie and hangit thereon be the neck to the death and his bodie cut down and intered at the gallows foott." ¹

Eleven feet is a thickness of wall not to be found in any of the drawings.

The last occupants of the Castle were "an old female domestic and a little girl," and it was the latter, when over seventy, who could tell Hugh Miller "that two threshers could have plied their flails within the huge chimney of the kitchen; and that in the great hall, an immense dark chamber lined with oak, a party of a hundred men had exercised at the pike." ²