

Transactions

OF THE

BANFFSHIRE FIELD CLUB.



The support of The Strathmartine Trust toward
this publication is gratefully acknowledged.

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SATURDAY, 16th JULY 1938.

The Summer Meeting of the Club was held to-day when about 50 members and their friends visited Balvenie Castle, Dufftown. Sheriff More, President of the Club, introduced Dr W. Douglas Simpson, Aberdeen, who gave a short address on the history of the Castle and the chief incidents in which it figured. He thereafter led the party over the Castle and explained its architectural features. At the close, on the motion of Sheriff More, Dr Simpson was accorded a hearty vote of thanks and the custodian was complimented on the condition of the premises.

Tea was served in the Masonic Hall, Dufftown, and thereafter, on the kind invitation of Sir Edmund R. Findlay, Bart., of Aberlour, the gardens at Aberlour were inspected under the guidance of Captain M'Haffie, Factor, and the Head Gardener. The gardens were very much admired, and a vote of thanks was accorded to Sir Edmund Findlay for his kindness.

BALVENIE CASTLE,

By

W. Douglas Simpson, M.A., D.Litt.

The important Castle of Balvenie occupies a commanding position on the left bank of the River Fiddich, a little below the point where that beautiful stream receives the Dullan Water, and about half a mile north of Dufftown. From the kroll on which the castle stands an extensive view over the surrounding country is obtained. It commands the approaches both up and down Glen Fiddich, blocks the outlet from Glen Rinnes, through which the Dullan Water flows, and forbids the passage eastward through the narrow "slack" which leads by the modern Drummuir Castle to Glen Isla. Moreover, it sentinel's the old hill road leading over by Auchindoun Castle to the Cabrach and Donside, which Edward I

used on his return from Elgin in July 1296. The position of the castle is thus one of considerable tactical and strategic importance, and it may be regarded as a link in the chain of early strongholds guarding the avenues into the unruly Celtic province of Moravia. From Strathbogie Castle, where the Celtic Earls of Fife were settled under William the Lion, the high road led past Balvenie to the de Moravia castle of Boharm, thence to Muriel de Polloc's castle at Rothés, and so through the Glen of Rothés towards the Laigh o' Moray and the royal castle at Elgin.

Historical Sketch.

Balvenie Castle is in the parish of Mortlach, and as the "castle of Mortlach" it appears first on record. This was in 1304, when Edward I. issued a docket of restitution, restoring to John Comyn, Earl of Buchan, the castles of Glamis and Morthelagh.¹ Edward himself was at Mortlach on 6th October in the previous year,² and doubtless stayed in the castle, the oldest part of which, namely the great outer curtain wall, dates from the thirteenth century and is probably the work of the Comyns. In its masonry and other details this curtain wall recalls that at Lochindorb Castle in Badenoch, another fortress of the Comyns. It also much resembles the thirteenth century castle of Coull, in Aberdeenshire. So far as its original scheme is preserved, the castle appears to date rather from the later than from the earlier part of the thirteenth century. This is confirmed by the fact that it does not adjoin the parish church, as we should have expected had the castle been erected during the period of the Anglo-Norman penetration. Mortlach Kirk, which shows work of the early thirteenth century, doubtless occupies the site of the first Christian church planted here by St Moluag in the sixth century. That this is so is rendered likely by the presence at the church of two fine Pictish sculptured stones of the early Christian period. One of these

¹*Documents and Records illustrating the History of Scotland*, ed. Sir F. Palgrave, vol. I., p. 288.

²*Cal. Charter Rolls*, vol. III., p. 37.

stones exhibits a symbol not elsewhere recorded.¹

The Comyns were supporters of the English interest against King Robert Bruce, and probably their castle at Balvenie was involved in the ruin of the Comyn power during the campaign of 1308. That this was the case seems to be indicated by the evidence that a projecting tower at the north-west corner of the castle has been destroyed at an early date, as also by the clear traces of fire visible on the oldest work.

Early in the fifteenth century the lordship of Balvenie was in the hands of James Douglas, surnamed "the Gross," afterwards seventh Earl of Douglas, first Earl of Avondale, and Lord Balvenie.²

With the downfall of the Black Douglases, under James II., Balvenie was involved in the general forfeiture of their estates (1455); and on 25th March, 1460, the lordship and castle were bestowed upon John Stewart, first Earl of Atholl, and his wife Margaret, widow of Earl Douglas. The *reddendo* is "one red rose at the chief messuage of the said lordship, at the feast of the nativity of St John the Baptist, in name of blench ferme, if asked only." In the hands of the Stewart Earls of Atholl Balvenie remained until the beginning of the seventeenth century. On 24th September, 1562, it was honoured by a visit from Queen Mary, then on her northern campaign against the Gordons.⁴ Dying in 1595, John, fifth Earl of Atholl, left four daughters, who in 1610 resigned their interest in Balvenie to the Crown, by which the lordship was granted on 6th April of that year, as a new infeftment, to James, Lord Inverneath, second Earl of Atholl in the new creation.⁵ He had already executed a contract of alienation, disposing it

¹See *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. LX., pp. 274-7.

²Sir W. Fraser, *The Douglas Book*, vol. 1, p. 431.

³*Hist. Mss. Com.*, Appendix to Seventh Report (Atholl Papers), p. 708, No. 48.

Cf. *Registrum Magni Sigilli*, 1424-1513, p. 157, No. 750.

⁴*Acta Parl. Scotl.*, vol. II., pp. 579, 584, 586.

⁵*Reg. Magni Sigilli*, 1609-20, p. 101, No. 275.

to Lord Abernethy of Saltoun (13th December, 1609), who on 20th April following, received a charter under the Great Seal.¹ From Lord Saltoun the property passed in 1612 to Sir James Stewart, Lord Ochiltree, who two years later sold it to Robert Innes, fifth baron of Invermarkie, the new owner obtaining a charter under the Great Seal, 26th December 1615.² This Robert Innes was created a Baronet of Nova Scotia by Charles I. in 1631.

In the Civil Wars his son and grandson bore themselves as staunch Royalists and incurred heavy losses for their loyalty. After his victory at Auldearn (9th May, 1645) "upon the report of Lievetenant-General Bailie his coming north with ane armie, Montros retired to Balvenie;"³ and at the end of the same year it was occupied, on the Royalist commander's behalf, by Ludovic Lindsay.⁴ On 8th May, 1649, it fell to the Covenanters. "Before Middleton could find David Leslie, Ker, Hacket, and Strachan doe march with their troops in all hast from Rosse; and coming through Murray, they take some of the countrey gentlemen with them, and speedily cross the river Spey. They apprehend the enimies watches earlie by breake of day; they surpryse Reay and the foot forces at the Castle of Balvenie, the eight day of May one thousand six hundreth fourtie-nyne; they take him, and almost all their foot, to the number of nyne hundreth, Clankenzie, Strathnaver men, and Badenoch men; they killed about fourscore before they were taken."⁵

Under the Protectorate, Balvenie Castle received a Cromwellian garrison.⁶ In 1670 it was badly damaged during a raid carried out by James Gordon of Rothiemay, Sir John Forbes of Craigievar and others, who, as the gates were strengthened against them by tree

¹*Ibid.*, p. 103, No. 279.

²*Ibid.*, p. 493, No. 1357.

³Sir R. Gordon, *Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland*, p. 526.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 531.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 548-9. *Chronicles of the Frasers*, W. W. Mackay, pp. 339-41.

⁶See J. Grant, *Banffshire at the Revolution of 1689*, p. 36.

trunks, obtained access through the windows on the first floor.' Perhaps it was on this occasion that the fine iron yett of two leaves was partially wrecked and thereafter roughly patched up as we see it to-day. In the course of the Killiecrankie campaign (1689-90), the castle was held for a while by both sides;² and it received a Hanoverian garrison during the "Fifteen."³

The impoverishment of the Inneses during the Wars of the Covenant had led to the sale of Balvenie in or before 1658. After various vicissitudes it was purchased in 1687 by Alexander Duff of Braco, ancestor of the ducal house of Fife, in whose possession it still remains. The castle was unroofed in 1724, when the new house of Balvenie (demolished in 1929) was built to replace it—"in a moist, low, and unwholesome soil," according to a contemporary critic.⁴ The shell of the old castle, described as "a strong house with an iron gate,"⁵ was occupied for a night by the Hanoverians in 1746, and with this event its military history closed. In 1928 the castle was vested by the Fife Trustees in the custody of the Commissioners of His Majesty's Works, by whom the ruins have been excavated and repaired.

Description of the Ruins.

Balvenie Castle is a structure of very high interest, showing work belonging to the three chief periods of secular building in Scotland—the thirteenth, the fifteenth, and the later sixteenth centuries. The castle began as a great quadrangular enclosure, measuring 158 feet by 131 feet externally, formed by a curtain wall 7 feet thick and 25 feet in height.

¹W. Cramond, *Rohiemay House*, p. 18.

²Grant, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-2, 35-6, 41-3; *Act. Parl. Scotl.*, vol. IX., pp. 467-8.

³*Major Fraser's Manuscript*, ed. Lt.-Col. A. Ferguson, vol. II., pp. 64-5.

⁴See W. Cramond, *The Castle and the Lords of Balveny*, pp. 20, 26.

⁵*Ant. Shires Aberdeen and Banff*, vol. II., p. 257.

⁶A. & H. Tayler, *Jacobites of Aberdeenshire and Banffshire in the Forty-Five*, p. 30.

At the north-west corner¹ was a rectangular tower, and at the north-east corner a large buttress containing a vaulted garderobe. There was no projecting work at the south-west corner. How the remaining angle of the enclosure was finished we do not know. Along the north side there was an unvaulted range, and along the south side at its west end was a building two storeys in height, also unvaulted, and containing living rooms, with a garderobe (afterwards dismantled) in the west wall.

Early in the fifteenth century, under the Douglasses, a lofty hall, with a pointed barrel vault,² was inserted in the south-west range, having underneath it a vaulted basement, containing a kitchen fireplace at its east end. Towards the close of the next century, when the whole castle was reorganised by the building of the new house to the eastward, the inner wall of the Douglas hall was heightened and an extra storey built above it, while more light was admitted to the hall itself by enlarging its windows towards the courtyard.

The new house comprised complete domestic accommodation in itself, having vaulted living rooms in the basement, dining and with-drawing rooms on the first floor, and private rooms in the south-eastern round tower, 28 feet in diameter. The kitchen at the east end of the basement below the Douglas hall was now given up, and its fireplace blocked; a bakehouse, with oven later lined with brick, was made in the western end of this basement, the garderobe of the Douglas hall now being closed, and its shaft converted to serve as the bakehouse flue. Along the west curtain a

¹For convenience in description, I have referred to the side containing the entrance as the south front, and to the others accordingly. The actual orientation is shown on the plan.

²This is probably "the large parlour, yet called the Danes' Hall" in 1732, at which time the oldest portion of Balvenie Castle was thought to have been built by the Danes. *Collections on the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, p. 649.

kitchen and brewhouse were built and cellarage was inserted in the old building at the north-west corner. Evidently it was because room for these offices was available elsewhere round the courtyard that the vaulted basement of the new house was designed for living rooms, in a very unusual manner—paralleled, doubtless for the same reason, at Huntly Castle. Communication between the new house and the offices below the Douglas hall was obtained by cutting down a narrow service stair through its east gable. Through the new house was carried the entrance, defended by a splendid two-leaved iron "yett" which has been clumsily repaired after partial destruction. Heraldic details show that the builder of the new house, which is fully equipped for defence by firearms, was John Stewart, fourth Earl of Atholl (1542-79).

Aesthetically considered, his building is a fine conception. Frontally it is marked by a charming row of oriel windows, and the great scroll displaying the arrogant motto of the Stewart Earls of Atholl:—FURTH . FORTUIN . AND . FIL . THI . FATRIS. *Fatris*, otherwise *Ferteres*, is the plural of an old Scotch word *ferter* (Latin, *feretrum*) meaning coffer.¹ On the courtyard side, great dignity is lent to the composition by the two stair towers, one of which is corbelled out to form a cap-house, reached by a turret stair in the usual manner of the period.

There is evidence that Atholl planned to build a narrow wing extending along the inside of the east curtain, doubtless to contain a gallery on the first floor, after a fashion then becoming common in large houses. For this purpose the upper part of the curtain for a length of some 45 feet was taken down, so as to rebuild it with the necessary windows. This range was to have a flat promenade roof, like that over the *loggia* at Huntly Castle; and the corbels and water table of this proposed roof still remain in the part of the wall at the

¹After many bungled efforts (my own included) to interpret the Balvenie inscription, this was pointed out by Dr W. Mackay Mackenzie in *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. LXI., pp. 179-81.

south end which was completed. But the design was never realised, the upper level of the curtain was built again as a blind wall, and the north end room of the new house was covered in with a shed roof, access to this room being gained from the courtyard by an external stone stair against the east wall.

Typologically, Balvenie Castle, as we now have it, illustrates a thesis found in certain of the larger Scottish castles from the fourteenth century onwards, such as Tantallon, Caerlaverock, Doune and Sanquhar. In these castles the weight and mass of the building is concentrated frontally in a great self-contained edifice, providing complete and isolated accommodation for the lord, his family and their personal suite, and having the main entrance under his direct control. This accommodation, in castles of the type, is always distinct from a large hall provided for the general body of the retainers: in the present case the older Douglas hall was available for this purpose. The whole design at Balvenie, with its great frontal tower covering the entrance, has strong affinities with Doune. Elsewhere I have shown¹ that this special type of castle was evolved in France, as a result of the breakdown, during the Hundred Years' War, of the older feudalism, in which a lord defended his castle and maintained his power by the military service of his vassals who dwelt around. These short term levies, ill-armed and undisciplined, were no longer suited for the new developments in the art of war; and so the kings and the great barons came to rely on mercenaries, which meant the admission of standing garrisons in their castles. The presence of these turbulent hirelings, who did not owe the natural fealty of vassals to their liege, was always inconvenient and often dangerous. Hence arose the need for the lords to provide separate accommodation for their paid retainers, and to house themselves and

¹See my papers on Doune Castle in *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. LXXII., pp. 73-83; on Caerlaverock Castle in *Trans. Dumfries and Galloway Nat. Hist. and Antiq. Soc.*, vol. XXI., pp. 180-204; and on Sanquhar Castle, *ibid.*, pp. 258-74.

their own servants in an isolated portion of the castle, with the entrance in their safe keeping. Thus evolved, this type of castle soon became standardised, particularly when the advantage in sheer design was perceived which the frontal consolidation of the habitable buildings offered over the older method of scattering these more or less haphazard around the courtyard. Balvenie, as reorganised after 1542, must have been one of the latest examples in Scotland of this type of castle; yet it should be noted that the characteristic frontal massing of the habitable portion, and its absorption of the gatehouse, had already been achieved before the Atholl period. This is shown by the position of the Douglas hall, and also by the fact that, above the present inner arch of the entrance is preserved the remains of an older and pointed arch, no doubt dating from the Douglas period.

The contrast between Balvenie and the older type of castle may be seen by a glance at the plan of Kildrummy,¹ where the residential part of the castle is withdrawn to the rearward of the building, as far as possible from the entrance gateway.

Midway in the courtyard is a well, 3 feet 9 inches in diameter, 50 feet deep, with 4 feet of water, resting on a brander of oak.

A remarkable feature of Balvenie Castle is the great stone-lined fosse, the inner revetment of which was raised so as to form a dwarf curtain wall, defended by at least one round tower or bastion, covering the approach. No doubt this ditch belongs to the earliest period of the castle.

NOTE.

For a good and full historical account, see W. Cramond, *The Castle and the Lords of Balveny*, 1892. The ruins, as they existed before the recent excavations and repair, are described in D. MacGibbon and T. Ross, *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, vol. I. (1887), pp. 386-90: and more fully, in my own paper on "The Development

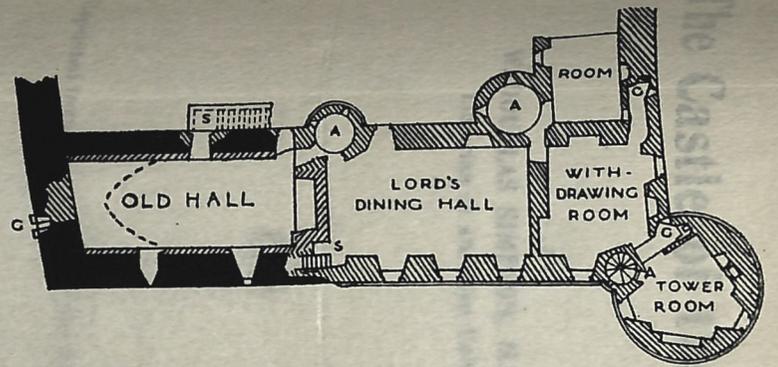
¹See *Trans. Banff Field Club*, Dec. 1933.

of Balvenie Castle," in *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. LX., pp. 132-48. See also the *Official Guide*, by J. S. Richardson, H.M. Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Scotland.

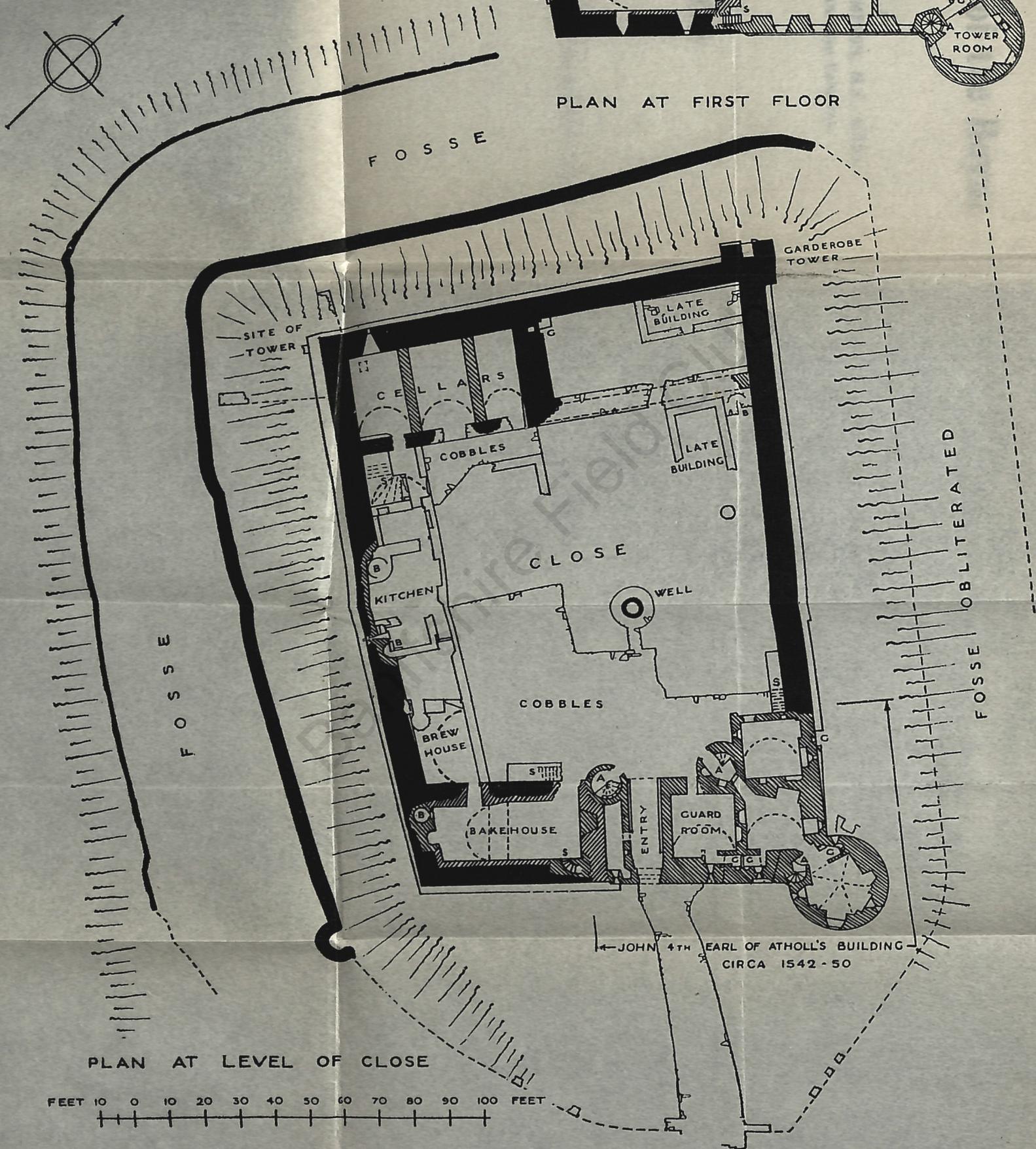
The present paper has been compiled as part of a programme of research supported by a travelling grant from the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland. The plan is based on the official survey by H.M. Office of Works, through the courtesy of Mr J. Wilson Paterson, C.V.O., M.B.E., F.S.A.Scot., H.M. Principal Architect in Scotland.

- S STAIR
- A TURNPIKE
- B OVEN
- C GARDEROBE

13TH CENTURY.
 CIRCA 1400.
 16TH CENTURY.
 FOUNDATIONS IN OUTLINE



PLAN AT FIRST FLOOR



PLAN AT LEVEL OF CLOSE

FEET 10 0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100 FEET

BALVENIE CASTLE: PLANS.