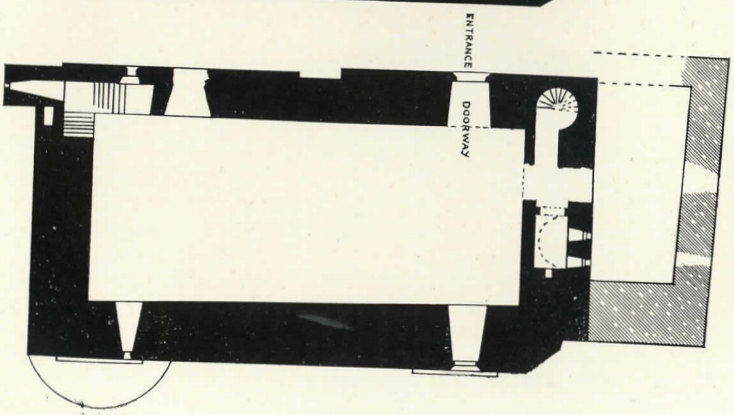
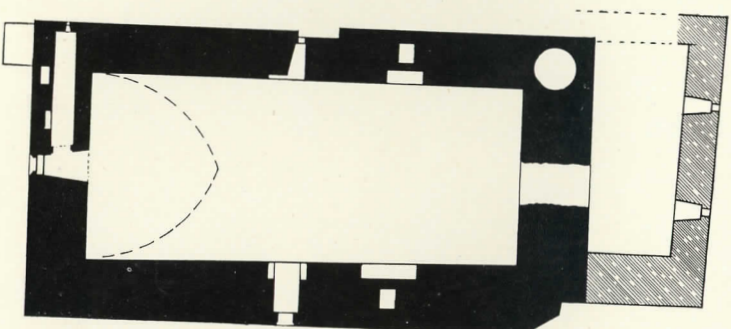
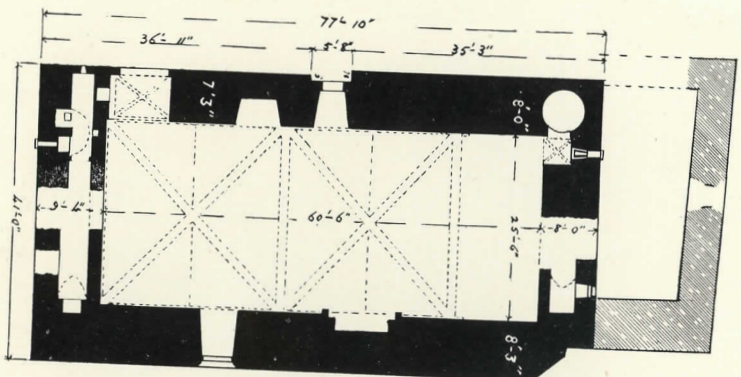
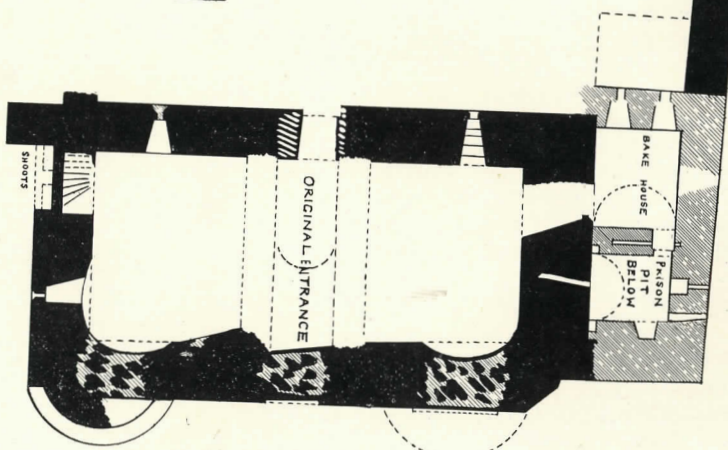
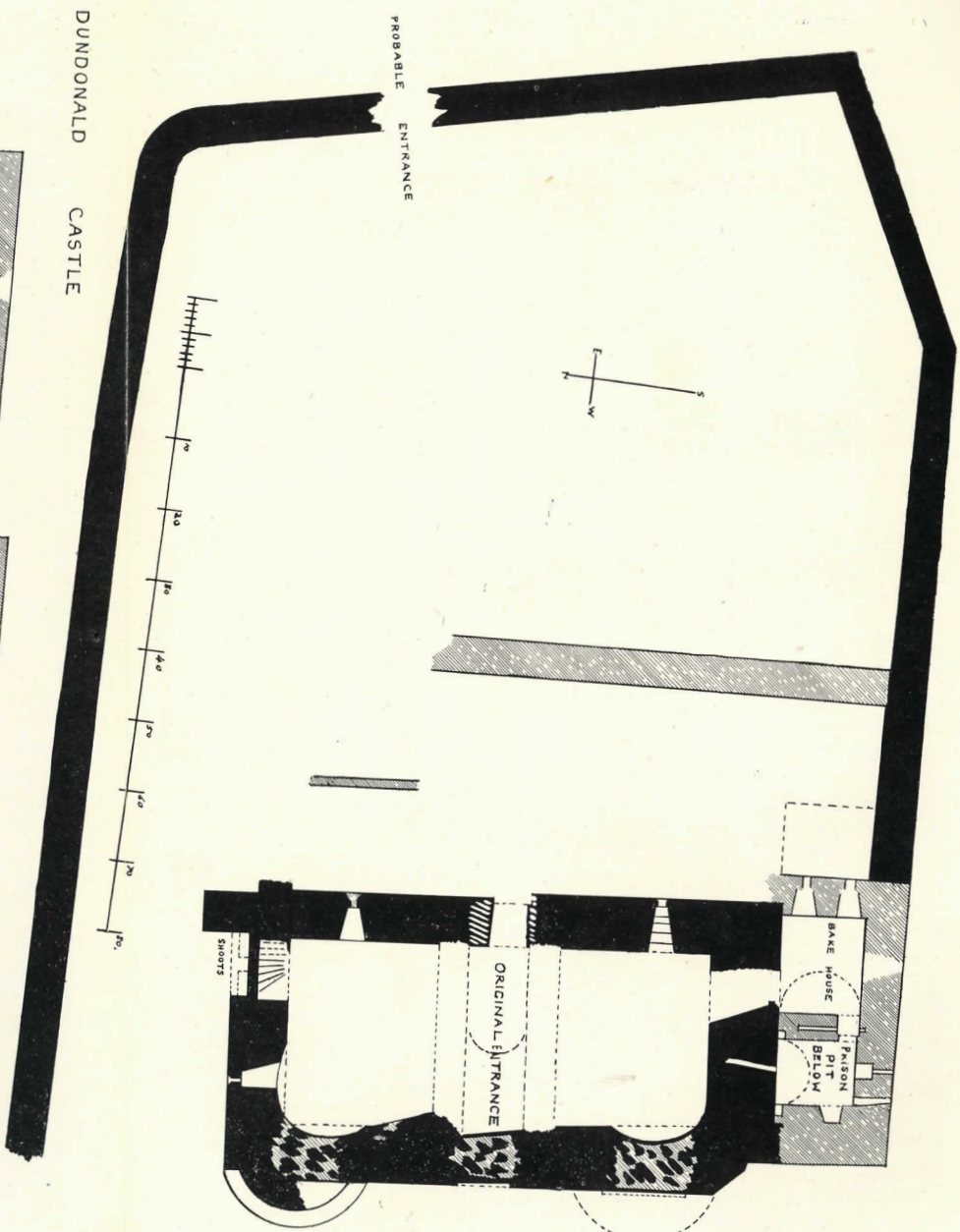


# DUNDONALD CASTLE





## Dundonald Castle.

By W. Douglas Simpson, M.A., D.Litt., F.S.A.,  
F.S.A., Scot., Hon. F.R.I.A.S.

"As we passed very near the Castle of Dundonald, which was one of the many residences of the Kings of Scotland, and in which Robert the Second lived and died, Dr. Johnson wished to survey it particularly. It stands on a beautiful rising ground, which is seen at a great distance on several quarters, and from whence there is an extensive prospect of the rich district of Cunninghame, the western sea, the Isle of Arran, and a part of the northern coast of Ireland. It has long been unroofed; and, though of considerable size, we could not, by any power of imagination, figure it as having been a suitable habitation for majesty. Dr. Johnson, to irritate my old Scottish enthusiasm, was very jocular on the homely accommodation of 'King Bob,' and roared and laughed till the ruins echoed."<sup>1</sup>

Such is the entry which Boswell makes, under date Monday, 1st November, 1773, in his journal of the immortal Tour. Yet the ruins of Dundonald Castle, though they might well arouse the derision of the English sage accustomed to the spacious splendours of Windsor or Hampton, are in themselves devoid neither of impressiveness nor of architectural distinction. On a distant and casual glance, they possess a full share of that arresting quality which always marks a rugged and massive ruin set on a high and commanding stance; while a detailed investigation reveals, as I hope to show, a structural history as interesting as that of any similar building in Scotland.

The royal castle of Dundonald crowns the summit of a prominent hill which rises abruptly from the plain of Kyle just west of the delightful village of Dundonald—a typical example of the feudal hamlet which, with its parish church, has grown up under the protection of the baronial towers. The abrupt rise and steep smooth slopes of the hill, no less than the beautiful green grass with which it is clad, are due to the material out of which it is composed. The hill is part of a large intrusive mass of dark grey whinstone (teschenite) which has been forced up by plutonic action into the sandstones of the Ayrshire coal field. These softer rocks have been planed down by long aeons of denudation, while the resistant igneous mass, though smoothed and rounded by the great glaciers of the Ice Age, still rears its defiant crest, and provided an ideal refuge for the unknown Celtic chief who gave it the name which it has borne ever since—Donald's *dun* or *fortalice*. The remains of a ditch near the foot of the hill, and traces of other earthworks on its flanks, are doubtless survivals from the prehistoric or proto-historic fort which the name of the site permits us to infer.

The materials of the hill, and of the surrounding *terrain*, have also conditioned the masonry, and indeed the architecture of the medieval castle that in due course succeeded the Celtic *dun*. Its

(1) Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. F. A. Pottle and C. H. Bennett, pp. 367-8.

walls in general are built of the dark whinstone, and the quarry whence the stones were won may still be seen below the western scarp of the hill. But the dressed work, both of the original stone castle and of its later reconstruction, is carried out in light coloured sandstone which probably has come from not very far afield. Its existing remnants show that the primary castle was an elegant structure, embodying doubtless much fine stonework of this beautifully tinted rock. When the later castle was constructed out of its ruins, many of the sandstone ashlar were re-used, just as they came to hand, in the building of the later or upper walls. Hence the striking and charming contrast, in these upper portions, between the dark irregular whinstone blocks and the better-shaped grey or yellow sandstones. For the vault ribs, window and door dressings, and other fine work of the rebuilding, fresh sandstone was quarried from the same formation. Limestone for burning could be easily obtained from the outcrops of this rock which skirt the northern flanks of the Craigie Hills—perhaps from the long derelict quarries at Colliobarlees, or, nearer to Dundonald, from the neighbourhood of Inchgotrick.

### HISTORICAL SKETCH.

Although I have met with no contemporary record of a castle at Dundonald before the later fourteenth century, a writer of the time of King Charles II. has preserved some information which, if it be received as authentic, implies the existence of a place of strength there during the Wars of Independence. Of Angus, Lord of the Isles, he relates that this chief "was always a follower of King Robert Bruce in all his wars, assisting him with his men in recovering the hold of Dundonald and another castle in Carrick from the English." And again, "the King besieged Alexander, brother to Angus, Lord of the Isles, very strictly at Castle Swin, till he was obliged to surrender the castle. When he was taken, he was confined prisoner in the Castle of Dundonald, where he died."<sup>2</sup> I see no reason whatever to doubt this story, which is accepted by the compiler of the account of the Lords of the Isles in the *Scots Peerage*.

In the latter half of the fourteenth century the castle reappears as a favourite residence of Robert II. (1370-1390) who dated many charters from within its walls. It has been repeatedly asserted that he built the existing structure, and though documentary evidence for this seems lacking, the coats of arms still visible on the walls support the assertion, while the architectural details undoubtedly belong to the later fourteenth century. After King Robert's death, the castle and its surroundings appear to have fallen

(2) *Highland Papers*, ed. J. R. N. Macphail (S.H.S.), Vol. 1., pp. 14, 15, 16.



"At the north-east corner, and in the thickness of the walls, a stair leads up to the first floor of the lower vault. The stair is lighted from a narrow slit carried through a buttress in the north wall. This buttress was probably only built as a screen for the closet shoots from the upper floors. There is another access to this floor at the south end of the east wall, by a pointed doorway about 15 feet above the level of the ground. This has been at some time a principal entrance doorway, but the arrangements at the doorway in the south wall immediately over the door to the ground floor seem rather to point to it as the original entrance doorway. It is in close connection with the staircase, and is protected with a small guard-room. From the first floor a cork-screw stair in the south-east angle of the building leads to the upper vault. As already mentioned, there was a second floor in the lower vault, but it did not extend to the south end, probably only over the northern and central chambers of the ground floor, leaving the southern chamber at the main entrance the full height from the first floor level to the vault. In this southern chamber, or entrance hall, as it may be termed, are two singular recessed constructions in the side walls, and opposite each other, terminating in flues carried up doubtless to the battlements, where, if the earth and rubbish were removed, their exits would be found. These are in all essential respects similar to the flue and recess at Yester, and seem to have been fireplaces, the overhanging part of the vault taking the place of the usual projecting hood. The windows of this floor in the side walls are very curiously constructed at the inside jambs.

"The great hall, the roof of which is nearly all gone, has been a very noble apartment, 60 feet 6 inches long by 25 feet 6 inches wide, and about 25 feet high. It was vaulted with a pointed tunnel vault, with two bays of about 25 feet each, having transverse and diagonal moulded ribs of large section, measuring  $14\frac{1}{2}$  inches across by  $10\frac{1}{2}$  inches in depth, with very depressed wall ribs between, formed of an arc of a circle. These ribs spring from corbels, and are merely ornamental, and not constructional, like those of a truly groined vault. Here the ribs are merely applied to the surface of the barrel vault (which does not require their aid), while in a properly groined vault the ribs bear the weight of the filling in of the vault's surfaces between the ribs. The method adopted at Dundonald was often followed in the vaulting of Scotch churches, as for example at St. Giles', Edinburgh, Paisley Abbey, etc., being easier of construction than true groined vaulting. The remaining portion of the roof, about 11 feet in length, next the staircase, and forming the "screens," had no ribs, but it evidently was intended that it should have the wall rib, as the springer is wrought for it on both sides, while no springer is wrought for the diagonals. A drain for the 'screens' exists in the groined stair landing, and there is also a small mural closet for utensils. The fireplace of the hall was in the west wall, but it is quite ruinous. The north-east window was of considerable size, with a groined ceiling, and in the thickness of the north wall there are several closets with vaulted roofs.

"At a later period extensive additions were made to the castle. It was lengthened at the south end to the extent of 17 feet 6 inches by a breadth of about 34 feet, and carried up as high as the original castle, from which the various rooms of this addition entered. On the ground floor was a bakehouse, with ovens projecting outside into the inner bailey, but the bakehouse and ovens are so choked up with rubbish and ruins that their details are not easily made out. A room at the south-west corner enters off from above the arched roof of the bakehouse, the door of which was strongly secured against the inmates with a sliding bar. It may have been a dungeon, being provided with a drain to the outside, a fireplace, and a communicating drain to the

main building. This portion of the castle is in such a ruinous state that it cannot further be described.

"In line with the south wall of this addition the bailey wall extends eastwards for about 120 feet. It is 5 feet 6 inches thick, and in some parts 15 feet high. The breadth of the bailey is on an average about 121 feet. The entrance was probably in the east wall, and in confirmation of this idea there are the remains of outworks about 16 yards in front of this wall on the brow of the hill and on either side of the pathway. The castle garth was divided into an outer and inner court by a wall 5 feet thick, running parallel with the east front of the castle, and about 30 feet distant from it. In the centre of this space are the ruins of another parallel wall 16 inches thick, probably for offices."

From the above description it will be evident that in Dundonald Castle we have to deal with a complex structure, which has undergone various alterations. The unravelling of these, and the determining what was the original state of the building, can scarcely be a simple task, nor one likely to eliminate every element of controversy or doubt.

It seems clear that the keep was originally designed as a gatehouse; that this was either not completed, or more probably was dismantled during the Wars of Independence; and that the building was thereafter reconstituted as a tower-house of the normal fourteenth-century pattern, though on a much larger scale than usual—as befitted a royal castle. The gatehouse, which also formed the principal residence of the lord or constable, stood in front of the castle with its courtyard behind it, and was approached by a winding path, cut into the western slope of the hill, and ascending from south to north. This path is still distinctly visible, and at its summit a level platform, about 65 feet in greatest breadth, intervenes between the edge of the scarp and the castle front. In the original scheme, the gatehouse portal was flanked by two segmental bastions, of which the battering bases were solid, while the upper portions doubtless contained embayments opening from the main rooms, as in the gatehouses of Criccieth, Dunstanburgh, Llanstephan, and other comparable English castles. A considerable portion of the battering base of the northern bastion remains, while the patch where the other one has been removed is perfectly evident. Between them, also, is quite visible the infilling that now takes the place of the portal. All the dressed stones of its jambs and arch were taken out when the entry was blocked: but part of the overhanging masonry, showing the rough irregular curving profile left by the tails of the voussours when these were torn out, remains to tell of the vanished portal.

Inside the keep, the infilling of the entry is equally distinct, with the overhanging original masonry above. On the north side of it, there is still to be seen the stub or tusk of a massive party-wall, about 4 feet thick, crossing the gatehouse so as to form the



north side of the trance. On the south side, a conspicuous joint in the masonry marks the position of the corresponding party-wall, the corework of which is evident, though this wall has been cloured off flush. This remnant defines the limit of the infilled work where once the gate-arch stood and gives us a width of some 9 feet for the trance.

On the opposite or eastern side, within the keep, the evidence of a former archway is no less clear. The present arched door here is placed in the middle of a conspicuous infilling, and the irregular jointing on both sides where the dressed jambs of the original rear-portal have been withdrawn is unmistakeable. Above the present door, a rough irregular chase or slot, in the form of a segmental arch, shows where the vaulting of the trance has been pulled out. The height to the crown of the vault was about 12 feet.

At this ground level, the western wall up to the external scarcement and internal overhang referred to by MacGibbon and Ross is all in substance part of the original structure. So also no doubt are the gable walls at this level. The void in the south gable, which they regarded as the original entrance, is obviously a loophole with wide inward splay, which was enlarged into an entrance to the bakehouse when this was built against the south end of the keep. The lower part of the east wall of the latter will likewise be a remnant of the original structure. It is notable that this lower portion is almost entirely built of basalt, without the admixture of freestone blocks which are freely and conspicuously present in the upper part. On this front the early work thus appears to be incorporated up to at least first floor level. It is most likely that the large pointed arched doorway at this level was the original chief entrance to the gatehouse, reached doubtless by a stone or timber forestair. In such gatehouses, the first floor of necessity formed a fighting-deck, and would be divided into three compartments like the basement; the central compartment housing the portcullis tackle and other defensive machinery, while the two side rooms provided quarters for the garrison. This disposition naturally led to the main entrance being placed in one of these side rooms. The state room or principal apartment will have been on the second floor, as it continued to be in the reconstructed building.

When the gate-house was reconstituted as a keep or tower-house, the front and rear portals were built up, their dressed stones having first been removed. The stump of the north bastion was worked back with new ashlar into the superimposed wall-face, and corbelled out in a skilful and attractive manner, so as to support the quoin of the new north-west angle above. The south bastion appears to have been wholly removed, and the tower-house was finished off above with a canted angle, all wrought in excellent ashlar. On the

east wall, the new ground floor entrance was set in a shallow recess, which no doubt would have been covered overhead with a flying arch, concealing a *meurtrière* or a series of *machicoulis*. Internally, the two partition walls which enclosed the trance, with the vault which they supported, were taken down, and the whole interior of the tower house was thrown into one long and lofty vaulted basement, subdivided, in the fashion so often seen in our old Scottish towers, by a timber loft set at the haunch of the vault. Whether or not the old main entrance to the gatehouse remained in use as such is doubtful: probably it was continued in service as a window. At all events, a new entrance to the tower-house was provided in the south wall, at the level of the first floor, or timber loft. On one side of the entrance passage a door gave access to the newel stair in the south-east angle, while on the opposite side another door admitted to a guard room. Such a disposition is a very common one in Scottish tower-houses—for example, at the Dean Castle, not far away.

The two curiously constructed fireplaces, opposite each other in the haunch of the vault at the southern end of the tower-house, suggest that this part of the building was used as the kitchen. Confirmation of this idea may be found in the conduit which leads into the tower through its south wall, opening from the prison afterwards built up against this gable. This conduit slopes in to the tower-house, and was clearly designed to lead in water from a supply trough outside. Contrivances of this kind are very common in ancient Scottish houses. The window next the fireplace on the west side, and the loophole opposite, show by their sloping internal jambs that they also were originally designed as fireplaces, but altered perhaps in the course of construction: the loophole on the east, which has an ogee-pointed head, is awkwardly adjusted so as to bring it in to the external recess. The entresol floor, inserted under the long vault at its north end only, is obviously an afterthought, and a loophole in the north gable has been extended downwards so as to light the intermediate apartment thus formed.

The date when the gatehouse was converted can be fixed with some approach to certainty. On the west wall of the building is a series of five heater-shaped shields, with armorial bearings as follows (taking the shields from north to south):—

(1) The Lion rampant of Scotland, within the royal tressure, the shield being suspended by a guige or strap from a tree, in the manner of a challenge.

(2) The fess chequy of the Stewarts, the shield hung from a tree by a guige.

(3) The lion rampant and royal tressure.



(4) A weathered shield, hung by a guige. In a favourable light, the charge can be seen to be paly of six. It is therefore that of the ancient Earls of Fife, and must commemorate the marriage of Isabella, Countess of Fife, with Walter, son of King Robert II.

(5) The chevron of Carrick,<sup>13</sup> the shield being hung from a tree by a guige.

At the south-west corner are a couple of lions opposed passant gardant, with their tails curled between their legs; and on the canted angle adjoining is a human head. There have been two similar human heads, one on each face of the buttress at the north-east angle of the tower, just below the weathering.

The presence of the Scottish royal arms alongside that of the Stewarts shows that the tower-house in its present form was built after the accession of Robert II., that is, after 1370: and as he is known to have lived much at Dundonald, where he died in 1390, we need not doubt that he it was who carried out the reconstruction. This heraldic evidence is confirmed by the architectural details, notably the scroll-moulding on the corbel caps in the great upper vaulted hall.

As originally constructed, the gatehouse stood in front of a walled courtyard, whose dimensions were conditioned by the site, and are doubtless represented in the main by the existing barmkin wall. But the early wall, instead of lapping over the north gable of the keep as it does now, joined the gatehouse near that end of its east front, where the stump of the old curtain, 4 feet thick, still remains in the lower part of the keep. On the opposite side, the curtain joined the gatehouse at its south-west angle, where its tusks still remain, embodied in the jamb or annexe subsequently built against the south gable of the keep. This annexe was obviously designed to provide extra chambers or private rooms in a structure that consisted mainly of large public or semi-public halls. The inner apartment at its ground level is undoubtedly, as MacGibbon and Ross surmised, a prison: it has a fireplace and a garderobe, and its door is barred against the interior. In the floor are traces of an aperture, now choked with rubbish. Very likely underneath it is a "pit" or dungeon. Such a double arrangement is common in Scottish castles of the fifteenth century, where we often find a prison, reasonably fitted up for the comfort of the occupants, with a noisome pit or place of more rigorous confinement underneath. Probably the addition to the tower-house was made during this century. It is noticeable that in this addition, except for the quoins, freestones are exceedingly scarce: it is almost all built of basalt, and in much smaller work than the tower.

(13) See "The erle of Carrick of auld" in Sir David Lindsay's *Heraldry*, 1542, ed. 1822, Note 38.

Our analysis has thus enabled us to recover a tolerably clear idea of the original arrangements of Dundonald Castle. As first built, it must have much resembled the earliest stage of Criccieth Castle in North Wales.<sup>14</sup> Like Criccieth, it is perched upon a lofty hill, the whole level area of whose summit it occupied. Like Criccieth, it consisted of a gatehouse which was also the owner's residence, straddling the site so as to block the approach, and having in its rear a court-yard enclosure screened by a curtain wall. This early castle was probably built towards the end of the thirteenth century, perhaps during the English occupation. We may surmise that it came to grief during the struggle for independence. Probably it was destroyed by Bruce, in accordance with his usual policy, some time after he recovered it from the English. Or else it may have been dismantled during the Second War of Independence, in the minority of David II. Subsequently it was restored, or rather reconstituted on quite other lines, as a royal residence by Robert II. Elsewhere<sup>15</sup> I have shown that such "keep-gatehouses" proved in practice inconvenient, owing to the difficulties inherent in combining a fortified entry with a residence. Hence, in a number of cases both English and Scotch, the entry was walled up, a new gate to the castle was provided in another part, and the keep-gatehouse became a keep or tower-house pure and simple. This is in effect what has happened at Dundonald. Here the whole castle was turned round about, and a new entrance opened in the barmkin on its eastern front. Very possibly there had always been a postern hereabouts, as at Criccieth.

#### NOTE.

Since the foregoing was set up I have been able, through the courtesy of Mr. Andrew Shearer, who kindly provided ladders, to inspect the uppermost floor of the castle, and to confirm that nothing requires to be added to the excellent description of MacGibbon and Ross. A noticeable feature is the fine suite of masons' marks, beautifully preserved, on the freestone wall-ribs.

Alexander, fourth High Stewart, who died in 1283, was designated "of Dundonald" (*Scots Peerage*, Vol. I, p. 13), which points to his having had a residence there. The Editor also calls my attention to the fact that Walter, third High Stewart, who died in 1241, is styled "Lord of Dundonald" in William Stewart's *Buik of the Cronicles of Scotland*, ed. W. B. Turnbull, vol. III, p. 98. These additional facts support the evidence given above that there was a castle at Dundonald in the thirteenth century.

(14) See *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, Vol. XCVIII., pp. 1-51.

(15) *Antiquaries Journal*, Vol. XXVI., pp. 145-71, with other papers cited therein.