



Fig. 1. South-facing aspect of the tower, Fetternear, constructed in the 1570s, photographed in 2005.

Reconstruction of a chamfered doorway from a late 16th-century tower at Fetternear, Aberdeenshire

Penelope Dransart

Research at Fetternear forms part of the Scottish Episcopal Palaces Project. During August 2015, I worked with a small group of volunteers to focus on the use of stone and slate in the different phases of a building with a complex history of development. This report draws attention to three chamfered stones and the tower from which they were removed.

Fetternear (NJ 72331708) was the summer palace of medieval bishops in the diocese of Aberdeen. By the 1280s, it had become a stronghold and place of refuge. In 1566, in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, Bishop William Gordon granted the barony of Fetternear including its *turre et fortalicio* to William Leslie, ninth Baron of Balquain. During the reign of Mary Queen of Scots, Leslie was

sheriff of Aberdeen and he served as deputy to the Earl of Huntly. The tenth baron, John Leslie of Balquhain, became Sheriff-Principal of Aberdeen. In *Historical Records of the Family of Leslie* (1869), he is remembered for his extravagance because he encumbered the Balquhain and Fetternear estates with debt and he ‘never rode out without an escort of at least twenty vassals or followers, who attended him on horseback’.

It is likely that the tenth baron was responsible for building a tower in the 1570s, partially to replace buildings of the bishop’s palace that have not survived above ground. This tower is now visible at the east end of the mansion, which overlies and incorporates part of what was formerly the bishop’s palace (Fig. 1). Most of its window openings are enlargements of earlier small windows or new insertions into the fabric of the walls. H. Gordon Slade (1970) thought that the south-eastern window of a cellar was the only ground-floor window to be

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Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the outer face of the chamfered doorway, photographed in 2015.



Fig. 4. Reconstruction of the chamfered edge of the doorway, photographed in 2015.



Fig. 2 Excavation of a trench through the infilled moat in July 2010. The uppermost chamfered stone in figs 3, 4 and 5 is visible in the photograph.

enlarged and that the others on that floor were probably ‘part of the original build’. When he surveyed the building, however, the vegetation was dense and in the intervening years a great deal of the rendering has fallen from the walls. A reassessment was therefore necessary.

Between 1994 and 2010, survey, architectural analysis and excavation took place at Fetternear to explore the now-vanished bishop’s palace, the late 16th-century tower and the post-medieval mansion. During the 2010 field season, three chamfered stones were found closely adjacent to each other in a trench excavated through deposits in an infilled moat, a short distance south of the tower (Fig. 2). These stones are well cut in granite and fit together to form part of a door opening. As assembled for photography, they are 0.64 m in height (Figs 3, 4 and 5). The stones alternate short and long in three dimensions, making a stable structure, perhaps coming from the top of a door opening because the uppermost stone presents a diagonally sloping face which could have supported a lintel (Fig. 4). Finely worked diagonal tooling is visible on the outer surface of the stones (with the chiselling trending from top left to bottom right). Broadly spaced diagonal tool marks are visible on the surfaces not intended for outward display and the lower-



Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the chamfered doorway to demonstrate how the doorway would have been keyed into the rubble masonry of the walling, photographed in 2015.

most of the stones has a carved slot on its upper surface to receive a metal cramp (Figs. 6 and 7).

These stones might have been removed from a doorway at the second floor level of the tower when the opening was filled with rubble masonry (Fig. 8). An alternative explanation is that the stones surrounded a door in a building that stood at right angles to the tower. In any case, there must have been a cantilevered wooden walkway to allow access from one building to the other. Footings of this now demolished structure have survived in part and were excavated during various field seasons between 1995 and 2010 (Fig. 9).

The reconstructed doorway is comparable with one surviving at first floor level inside the 1570s tower, providing access to a round stair-tower (Fig. 10). This building was modified in the 17th century and at least twice more in the 19th century. It is likely that the chamfered



Fig. 6. The upper surface of the lowermost of the three chamfered stones, photographed in 2015.

doorway was dismantled *c.* 1818, when the roofline was altered and ashlar-cut battlements were installed. Completion of the pottery report (which is anticipated within two years) probably will help confirm the date for the deposition of the chamfered stones in a pit cut into the infill of the moat. Outwardly, the current state of the 1570s tower is largely obscured by more recent changes and these excavated stones contribute to a more detailed reconstruction of its late 16th-century appearance.

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All photographs by courtesy of Scottish Episcopal Palaces Project

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Fig. 7. Detail showing the slot for a cramp in the lowermost of the three chamfered stones, photographed in 2015.



Fig. 8. Detail, taken in 2003, showing the blocked up doorway on the second floor of the tower.



Fig. 9. Excavation in July 2004 of the area south of the 1570s tower, showing the footings of the west-facing wall of a demolished building, which formerly stood at right angles to the 1570s tower.



Fig. 10. The inside of a doorway on the first floor of the 1570s tower, leading to the stair tower. Photograph taken in 2005.