

BENHOLM'S TOWER, NETHER KIRKGATE, ABERDEEN

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NOTE: During publication of this paper, Benholm's Tower was the subject of public controversy in Aberdeen: the building's future apparently is that demolition is to take place, although it is proposed to rebuild stone by stone in another part of the city. This paper, however, treats its subject as it stood in 1961 – in situ – still an integral part of the Aberdonian townscape.¹

BENHOLM'S TOWER, in the Nether Kirkgate of Aberdeen, is a unique building in the evolution of Scots medieval architecture for the reason that, despite unfortunate nineteenth-century alterations and subsequent neglect, it is the only example of a 'toun ludging' planned on the three-stepped or Z-plan shape so much favoured by the castle-builders of NE. Scotland from about 1560 on. The building has also the unhappy distinction of standing on a site selected for development as commercial premises and street closure: it was decided, therefore, that this really interesting medieval structure merited an accurate survey and the production of measured drawings, with a brief account of its history.

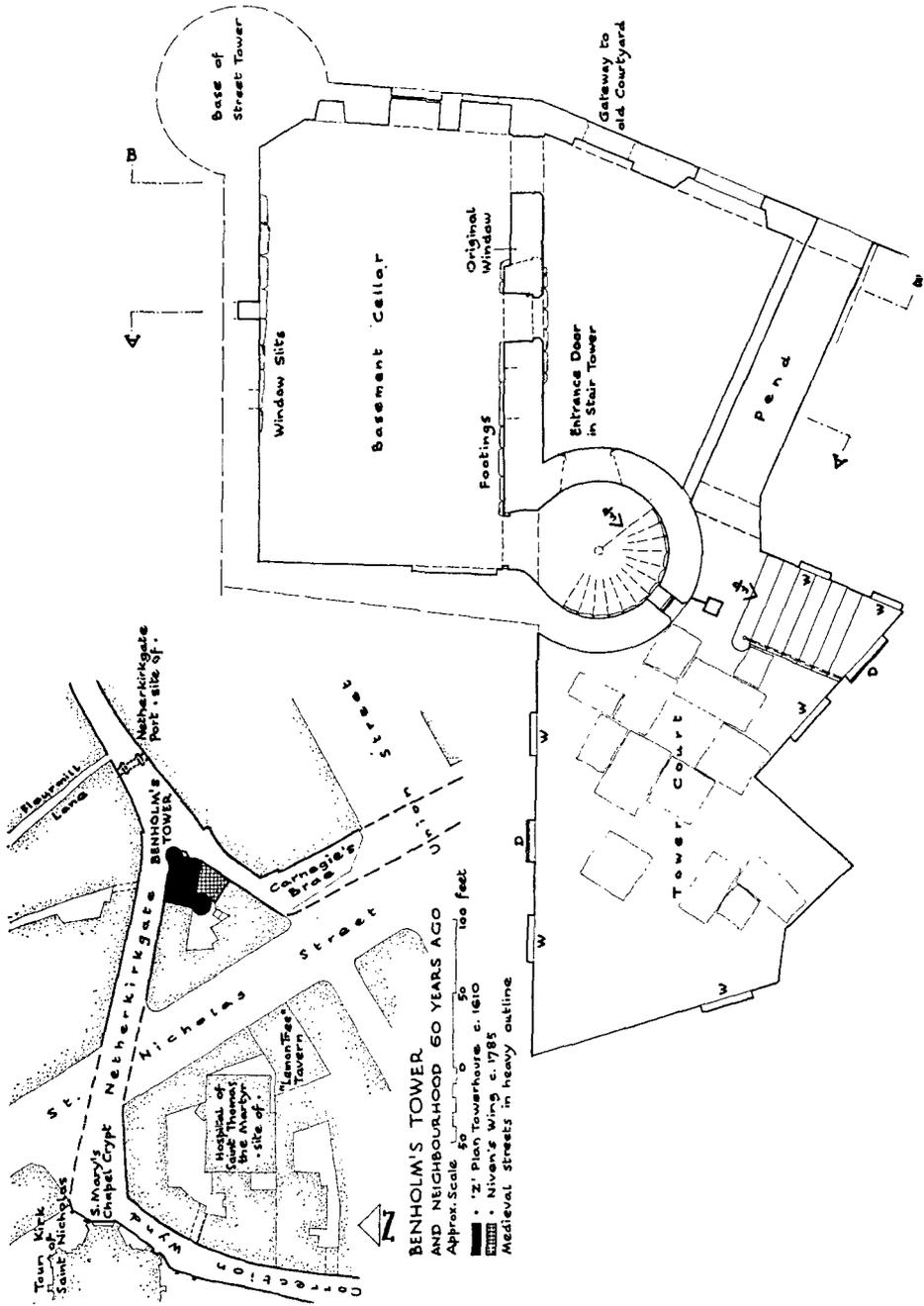
Generations of Aberdonians have known the house as the 'Wallace Tower' – evidently not a reference to the Scottish Patriot, but a corruption of the name Well-house (local pronunciation would be 'Wall-hoose') – from the well which formerly stood at the head of Carnegie's Brae.

The house was built by Sir Robert Keith of Benholm, probably after 1610 and certainly prior to 1616 when Sir Robert's death is recorded. He was the brother of George Keith, 5th Earl Marischal – founder of Marischal College in 1593 – and the nephew of Robert Keith, Commendator of Deer, who in 1587 was designated Lord Altrie being that same year confirmed by charter in the lands and barony of Benholm, a property in the Mearns he had acquired by marriage to Elizabeth Lundie, heiress of the ancient family of Lundie of Benholm.

In October 1590, Robert Keith was involved in a feud with his brother and uncle, and he seized and garrisoned the buildings of Deer Abbey with a band of accomplices. The Earl Marischal and Lord Altrie with their supporters, including forty armed citizens of Aberdeen, advanced against them. Keith's party then took refuge in Fedderat Castle, W. of Deer, where they held out until the kinsmen settled their differences. However, in March 1593, the Earl Marischal and his uncle complained to the Privy Council that Mr Robert Keith, the Earl's brother had taken unlawful possession of the Earl's house of Ackergill in Caithness.

During the last half of the sixteenth century the Keith family had gained immense possessions up and down Scotland from what had been church property, and the Marischal's brother Robert obviously intended to share in the family spoils. In

¹ Apart from Benholm's Tower, only four examples of medieval houses remain in Aberdeen. Two are in Old Aberdeen – Chaplain's Court in the Chanonry, built by Bishop Gavin Dunbar in 1519 (the oldest house in the city) and Dean of Guild Cruikshank's House (1655) at the Brig o' Balgownie. The other two are the restored Provost Ross's House (1593) in the Shiprow, and Sir George Skene's House (c. 1545) in the Guestrow.



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BASEMENT FLOOR • PEND AND COURT

FIG. 1

1594, Lord Altrie resigned to his nephew, Robert Keith, the lands and barony of Benholm and by 1595, Marischal and his brother had registered a band between them. Benholm was knighted before 1612, and by 1613, in addition to his Mearns estate, he was in possession of several tenements and lands in and around Aberdeen, including Seaton (the Bishop's Ward in pre-Reformation times) and properties in the Upper and Nether Kirkgates.

Sir Robert had Benholm's Tower built in what had been virtually open country in the early seventeenth century. The Z-plan house he erected for his town ludging was a building capable of defence, for it is actually sited just outside the medieval burgh boundary, some 20 yds. W. of the old Netherkirkgate Port. Of the two round towers, one commanded the street leading to the Toun Kirk and the brae (Carnegie's Brae is now the only medieval cobbled street in Aberdeen) leading to the Green and the harbour quay, and the other overlooked the courtyard and gardens sloping to the old Loch burn. The Knight of Benholm's town house, befitting his early violent life, had in the seventeenth century appeared a veritable laird's castle. The earliest record of Benholm's Tower occurs in 1616, the year of Sir Robert's death, when the property is described as a new house with its garden in the Netherkirkgate outside the Port.

In 1617, John Gordon is designated 'of Benholm', but by the next year George, Earl Marischal, who had also succeeded to the title of Lord Altrie, was granted a charter of the lands of Benholm: it appears probable that this included the town ludging for, before Marischal died (1623), the house was occupied by Dr Patrick Dun, appointed Principal of Marischal College in 1621. Following Dun's death about 1631, Benholm's Tower was acquired by William Hay of Balbithan and thereafter it belonged successively to Andrew Logie, William Wemyss and to James Abernethie, merchant. After the latter's death in 1768, the tenement of land called 'Wallace Nook' and close was disposed to John Niven, merchant. By 1789, Niven had 'lately erected' the wing fronting Carnegie's Brae, thus building over the old courtyard, and in that year the property passed to James Coutts. Subsequent owners were John Donald Taylor from 1851-78, thence to his heirs until 1895, when James Pirie, Spirit Dealer, acquired the property - at this time the basement and ground floor were converted into licensed premises.

Since 1918, the Corporation of the City of Aberdeen have been owners and guardians of the old house, and following the 1947 Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act, the building was listed as of category 'B', indicating that it is considered of historic and architectural merit.

The original tower-house, with its central oblong block and diagonally-opposite round towers at NE. and SW. corners, has been subjected to inevitable alterations externally and internally over its long history of almost 350 years. But the basic plan remains: the central block is about 34 ft. long by 20 ft. 6 in. wide over walls generally 2 ft. 6 in. thick. The W. round tower is about 13 ft. 6 in. in diameter over a wall thickness of 27 in. The E. tower is smaller - about 11 ft. in diameter, the wall varying from 15-18 in. thick.¹

¹ These dimensions are comparable with three Donside Z-plan tower houses of the same type - oblong main block and two diagonally opposite round towers: Terpersie (1561) 28 by 16 ft. and both towers 18 ft.

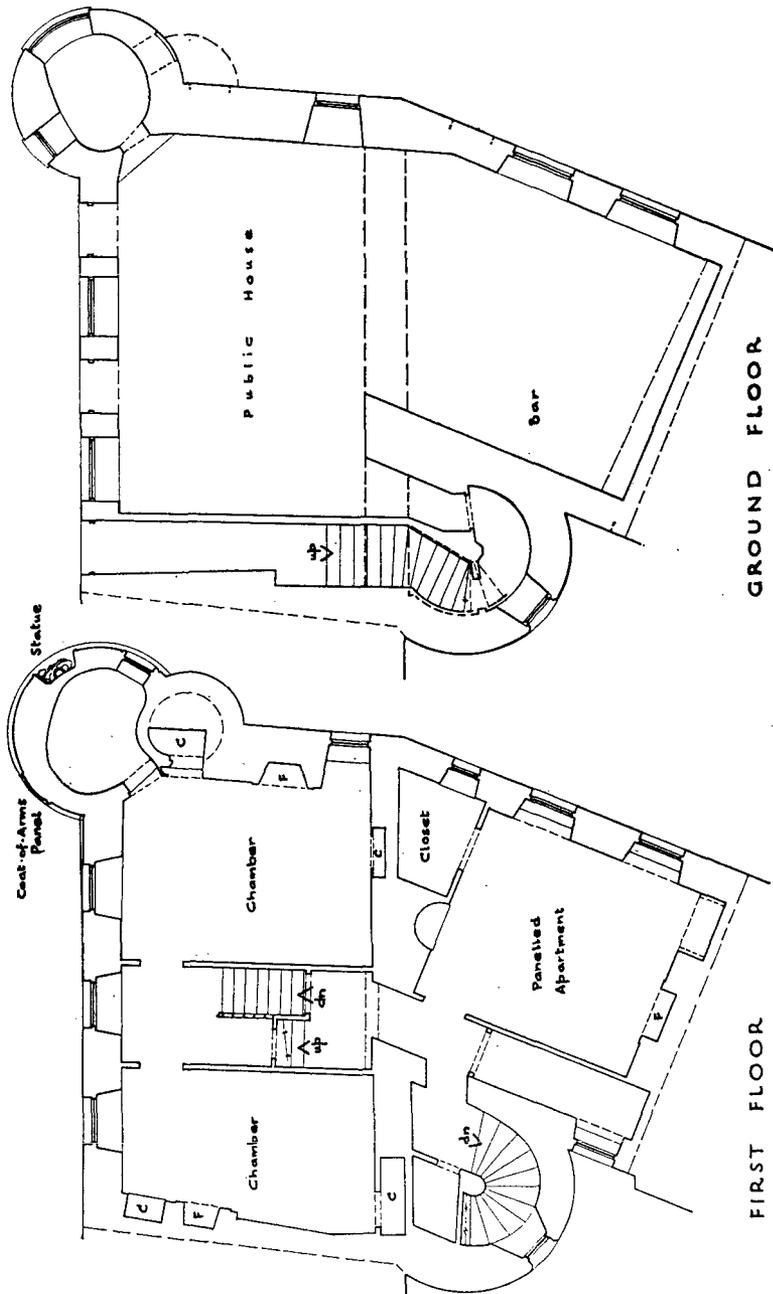


FIG. 2

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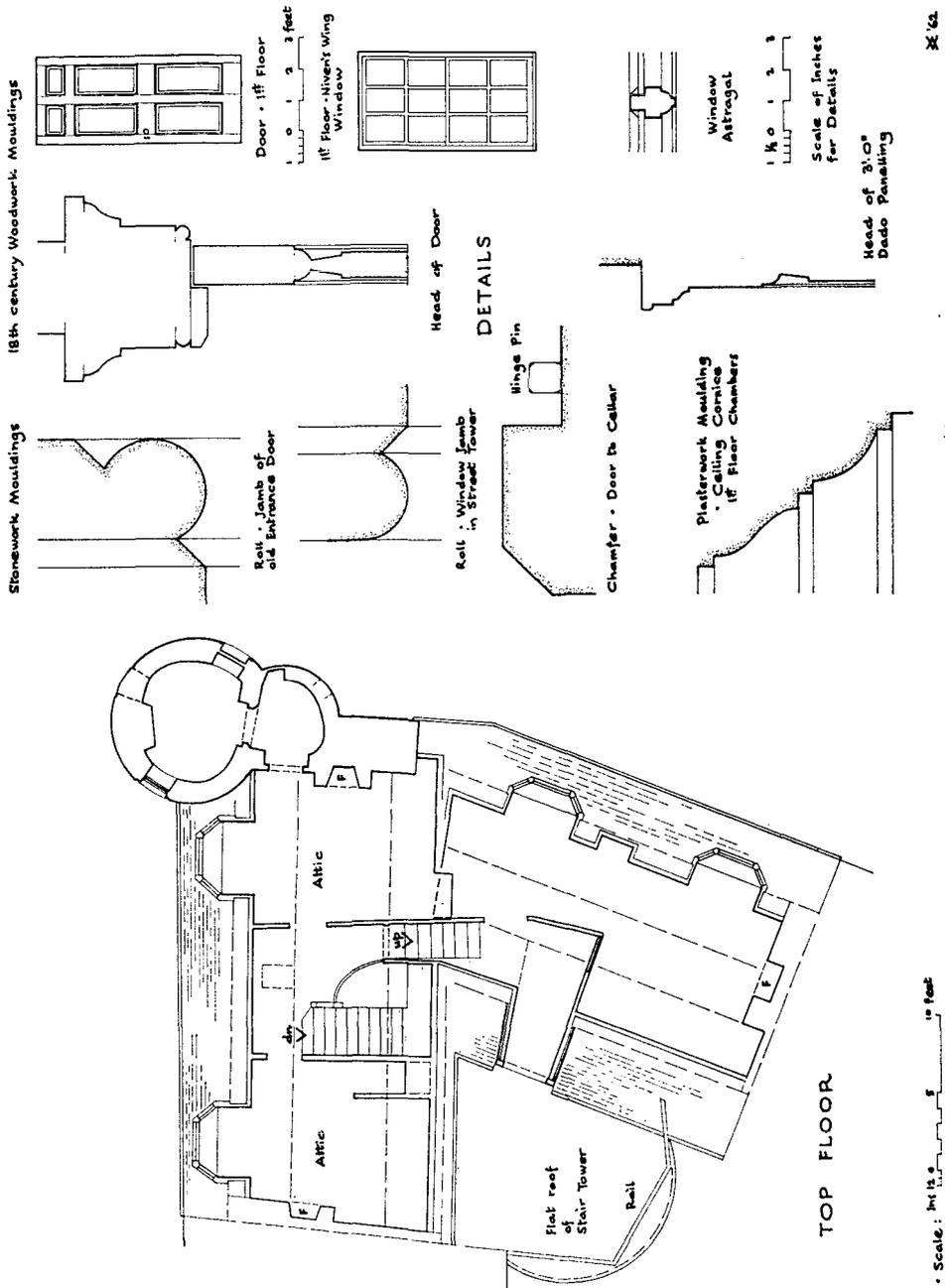
The lowest storey of the house, now the basement forming the cellarage of the licensed premises, was in the seventeenth century the ground floor (fig. 1). The walled courtyard or close (now partly built over by the S. wing added about 1785) was entered by a gateway – of which the chamfered jamb stones remain – from Carnegie's Brae, and westwards, where the flagstoned Tower Court is now enclosed by high buildings on three sides, lay the Laird of Benholm's garden. Where the W. round tower forms an angle with the main block is the main entrance door, long blocked up, but the fine roll-moulded jambs and lintel are still almost complete (fig. 3). Within the door on the left the toothings of the original stone steps in the wall indicate the position of the original circular stair. In the S. wall of the central block are the cheeks of the original cellar door (fig. 3) flanked by two windows, now built up – the chamfered jambs of the eastmost window have been re-used in the later slapping at the corner of the cellar. The N. wall has two narrow window slits: these are interesting as indicating that the street level of the Netherkirkgate is now much higher than in the seventeenth century: upmaking took place following the formation of St Nicholas Street (1805) when the hollow of the Loch burn was filled up. Of the three openings on the E. wall, the central one is a door of later date, the other two being originally window positions. The lowering of the level of the ground floor joists in more recent times and the consequent dropping of the earth floor of the cellarage explains the exposure of the 'foonds' or stone footings on N. and S. walls, and the original window soffit heights. From basement level there is no access to the E. tower.

Above ground floor level (fig. 2) in the W. or stair tower, the late nineteenth-century wooden stair now gives access from the Netherkirkgate to the upper floors of the house. Of the windows lighting the original stone stair, the lowest remains, with indications of the chamfered sandstone jambs of the two upper windows underneath the present openings. Projecting from one side of the old middle window is the square bracket for the gas lamp which, from the mid-nineteenth century had given light to the Tower Court and to the pend leading from Carnegie's Brae.

When the ground floor was drastically altered some sixty years ago, the ceiling was heightened, the upper S. wall of the main block was carried on a beam and the whole floor (including the lobby access to the stair) was laid out on one level to form the public house. These alterations removed visible traces of what had been the hall (and possibly kitchen) of the tower house, and of the wide arched fireplace which probably occupied the W. wall.

In the main house the upper floors show alterations of the late eighteenth century, contemporary with the S. wing added during John Niven's ownership. The central stair had led up from a door from Netherkirkgate, but the lower flight was removed during the ground floor alterations. The two chambers at first floor (fig. 2) – on either side of this central stair – have wall panelling to dado height, the doors have characteristic eighteenth-century details, and the ceilings have heavy plasterwork

diam.: Asloun (c. 1563) 34 by 24 ft. and both towers 19 ft. diam.: Pitcaple (c. 1570) 49 by 29 ft. and towers 18 and 13 ft. diameters. At Dunnottar Castle, the tall house flanking the entrance gate is known as Benholm's Lodging, named after James Keith of Benholm, a son of George, 5th Earl Marischal. The lodging has stone vaulting, is five storeys high, with formidable tiers of gunports, and dates from the end of the sixteenth century.



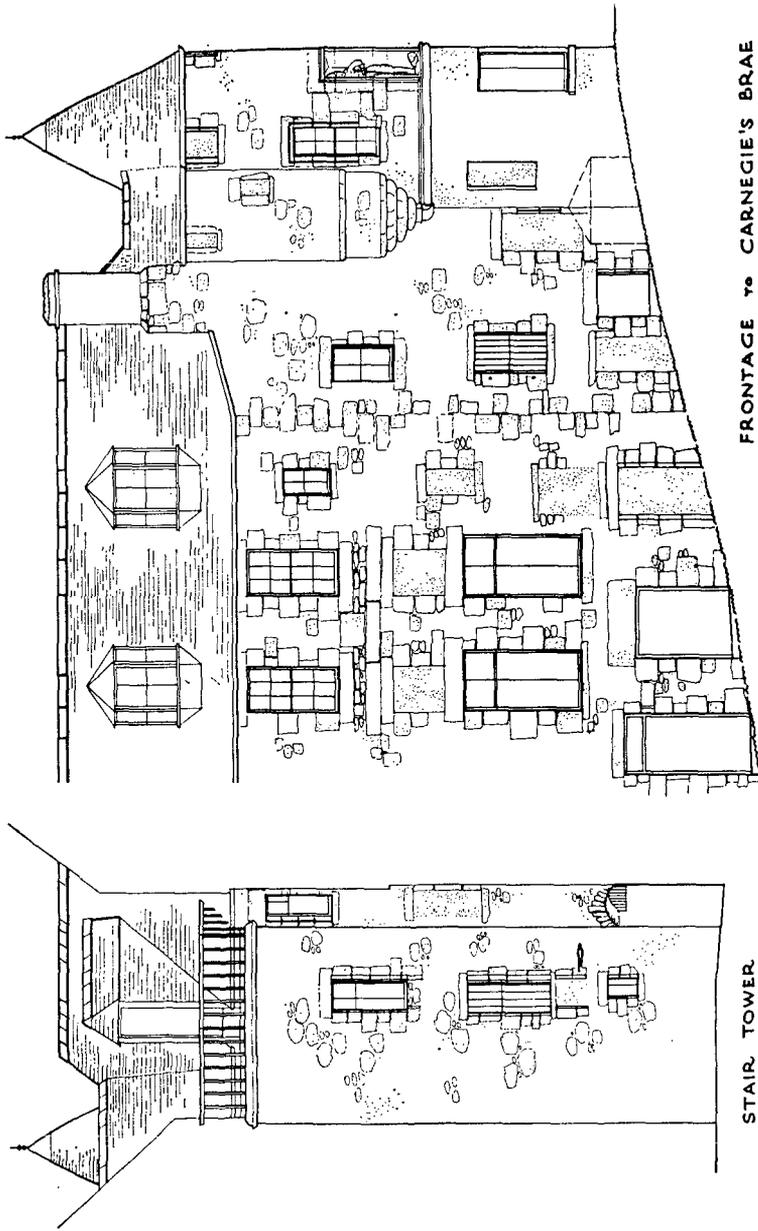
cornices (fig. 3). A cupboard in the SW. corner of the westmost room occupies the position of the seventeenth-century doorway from the old stone circular stair. In the E. room floor joists are 5 in. deep by $4-4\frac{1}{2}$ in. wide. The three N. wall windows are eighteenth-century insertions – the window opening flanking the fireplace in the E. room is original, as is the one window in the E. tower room: here the upper window jambs are grooved for the leaded glass panes of the seventeenth century – the lower half had been shuttered; the sill has sinkings for the original bars. To the right of the access to the tower is a small shelved cupboard with door, showing on the left the jamb of older doorway which had led to a now built-up turret stair climbing to the topmost chamber of the round tower.

The apartment in the S. wing is at a higher level than the main house first floor and is approached from the half stair landing by a slapping through the S. wall to a short passage which is also linked – by another opening – with the top of the half-round wooden staircase in the W. tower. The S. wing apartment is much as it had been in Niven's time – the walls are finely panelled from skirting to plaster ceiling cornice – wall panelling and window shutters have the same mouldings as the door panels. An arched alcove remains to the left of the fireplace, and on the N. wall, adjoining the irregular shaped little closet (unpanelled) is an excellent semicircular niche with rounded arch over open shelving with cupboard below dado height. This well-proportioned room (14 ft. 6 in. long by 12 ft. 9 in. wide by 9 ft. high) is still, notwithstanding its present neglected condition, a remarkable example of eighteenth-century craftsmanship (fig. 3).

The roof timbers of the towerhouse are exposed in the N. wall of the closet, and also at the landing of the half-round timber stair: ties are 5 by 3 in., rafters are 7 by 3 in. at 20 in. centres. Both in the main block and in Niven's wing, the top floor rooms are also on different levels (fig. 3), consisting of three attic rooms (lit by roof dormers of nineteenth-century date) and the uppermost room of the E. tower and adjoining turret. Two small square windows – now built up – had given light to the top of the now vanished turret stair, from which a doorway with splayed jambs gives access to the top room of the tower. This tower room, its ceiling above eaves height, has three windows, all having roll-moulded jambs – the middle window equidistant between the other two. A later intrusion is the fireplace, long disused. Of the six open fireplaces in the building, most are Victorian in date – none are seventeenth-century survivals.

As with many medieval buildings, Benholm's Tower has no main frontage or façade. On the Nether Kirkgate side, alterations to the elevation, particularly just prior to 1900, have detracted from the Scots domestic aspect of the old house – ashlar granite and smooth cement rendering were not features of medieval building craftsmanship (fig. 5, Pl. XVI: 1). The side of the house facing Carnegie's Brae is of considerable interest (fig. 4) – the architectural evolution of the Tower becomes apparent where the old blocked window openings indicate the original floor levels of both the main block and Niven's wing. There is record ¹ of a forestair (existent before 1785) to the blocked door just below the corbelled stair turret. The junction

¹ Joseph Robertson's article in *Aberdeen Magazine*, vol. II (1832) – p. 194 *et seq.*



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FIG. 4

Scale: 1 in. = 10 feet

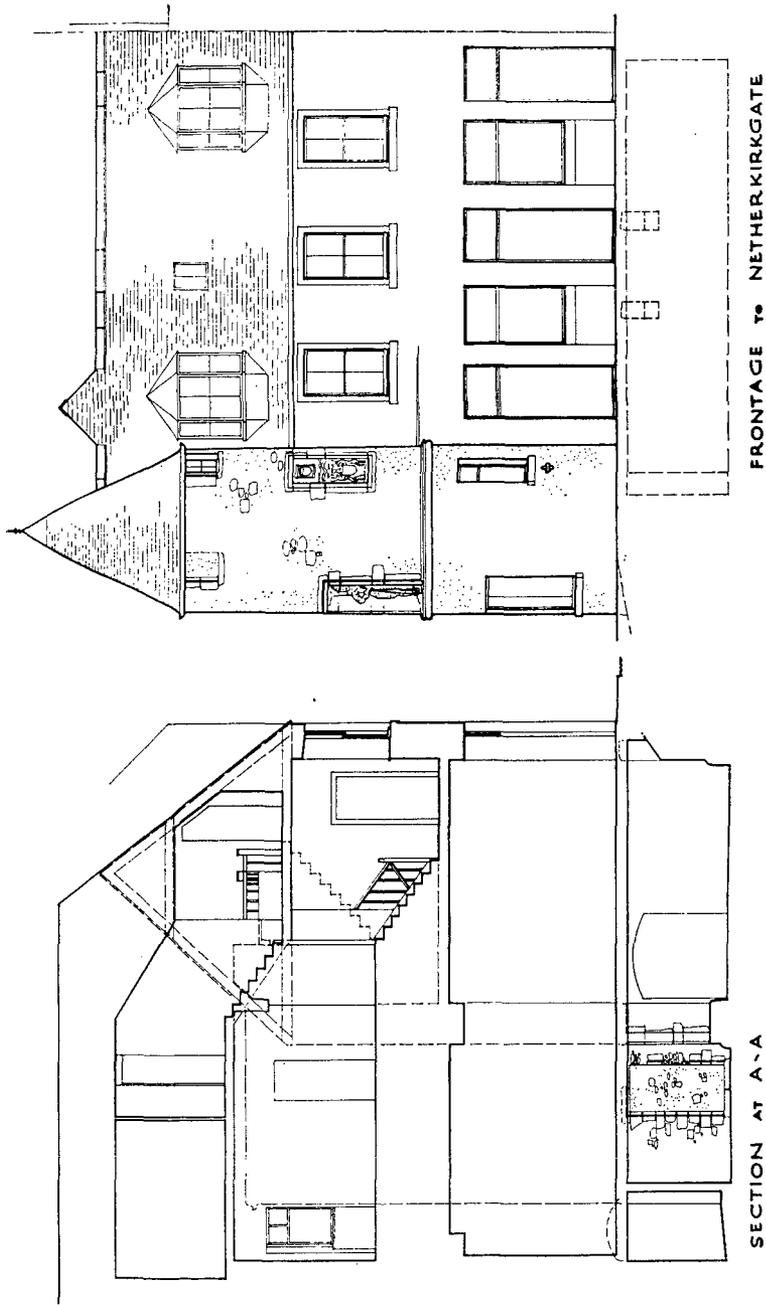
of the E. gable of Benholm's house with the later wing is obvious where the quoins are not bonded through below the top seven courses: there also remains evidence of the old line of the skew where the eaves still slope up to the chimney (now topped by later brick extension). The ridge of the S. wing roof is higher than that of the main house; all the ridging is stone, and, excepting a section of the S. wing roof, the original Scots slating is still in place. The heightened roof of the wing dates from the formation of the nineteenth-century attics; there is a recess between the two dormers in the sloping ceiling (fig. 3) indicating an earlier eaves dormer. A similar recess in the S. wall of the eastmost attic would be the position of a dormer in the towerhouse before the wing was added.

The pend to Tower Court has an arch formed in granite at the base of the W. stair tower (fig. 4). The masonry of this tower (Pl. XVI: 2) – large rounded granite stones with small pinnings, and sandstone dressed work – is typical of sixteenth/seventeenth-century work. The flat lead roof with its timber railing is a later, possibly eighteenth-century alteration replacing the original conical slated roof similar to that on the E. tower.

Of the whole building, undoubtedly the most striking portion is the E. tower; it has been part of the Aberdonian townscape and a familiar feature to citizens and tourists for many decades. Apart from its prominent position at the Neuk – looking W. to the Toun Kirk of St Nicholas on one hand, and up the Nether Kirkgate to the ancient heart of the town on the other – this tower contains most interesting architectural features which are integral not only to it but to the whole building (figs. 4, 5, Pl. XVI: 3). Standing 27 ft. high from street to eaves, the tower has the subtle batter which is a characteristic of Scots military architecture, while the roof has a definite bell-cast lip round the eaves (Pl. XVII: 1). The original lead gutters are still in position at the wallhead of both circular towers. The small turret projects out on four corbel courses resting on a carved spurstone terminating the roll-moulded string-course which encircles the tower at first floor level: linked to this by a similar surrounding moulding, smaller in scale, is the recess with the statue on the NE. face of the tower (fig. 6, Pl. XVII: 2). The recess is 5 ft. 7 in. high by 2 ft. 11 in. wide by 15 in. deep at the top. The stones forming cheeks and lintels are tied in to the tower walls and have every appearance of being original work. The statement, attributed to Andrew Jervise,¹ that the figure itself was taken from a tomb in St Nicholas kirkyard and set up in the recess by John Niven, may explain this extremely interesting piece of sculpture. However, despite the accumulation of paint and patching on the statue, close inspection reveals that the dress and armour are contemporary with that of the first decade of the seventeenth century: the theory cannot be dismissed that here we have a portrait in sculpture of the founder of the building, Sir Robert Keith of Benholm.² Also at first floor level (fig. 6, Pl. XVII: 3), and facing W. along Nether Kirkgate, is an armorial panel displaying two coats-of-arms. The upper shield (there are no supporters or crest) is now indecipherable but there is the possibility that it

¹ *Old Landmarks of Aberdeen*, Munro and Burr (1886), p. 12.

² Other sculptured figures of this period are to be seen at the following north-east castles; Tolquhon (gatehouse – 1586), Fyvie (1599), Edzell (pleasance – 1604), Huntly (fireplace dated 1606 shows figures strikingly similar to that on Benholm's Tower).

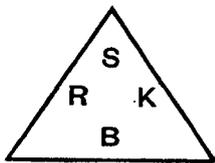


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FIG. 5

bore the cross of St John below the simple motto 'Pro Fide': the Knights of St John, although disbanded at the Reformation, retained the superiority of several properties in Aberdeen. The larger part of the heraldic panel has the shield of the Keiths – *argent, on a chief paly of six, or and gules* with crest and supporting stags, all under the motto 'Veritas Vincit' (Truth Conquers). The whole panel is completely over-painted and requires expert cleaning. Of the weapon-holes which must originally have defended the tower-house, only one is now visible – a fine example of a gunport of the quatrefoil type.

Benholm's Tower was kept in reasonable condition until about fifty years ago – photographs dating from pre-1900 show the walls well-harled; and a bold weather-cock finial surmounts the E. tower roof. From old illustrations we can gather something further about the earlier appearance of the house. An engraving by J. C. Nattes done about 1800¹ gives some idea of the Nether Kirkgate frontage with the original projecting or corbelled parapet at wallhead – thus the Tower had presented a more 'castellated' look at that time: also portrayed is a carved stag's head (the Keith's heraldic beast) set in over the statue recess, the figure itself at that time having the sword pointed up over the left shoulder. A fine drawing² of Benholm's Tower was made *c.* 1791 by James Skene of Rubislaw, the friend of Walter Scott, and shows clearly the other string-course of the round tower below the lowest windows; it vanished after the central window was enlarged. At this time mention was made³ of the house being referred to as 'Keith's Lodging' and that from the building had been taken a triangular stone (undoubtedly the tympanum of one of the original dormers) with the following initials:



i.e. S(ir) R(obert) K(eith of) B(enholm)

An old print of *c.* 1850⁴ shows, above the statue recess, a tablet with projecting canopy over – of this, like the stag's head in the drawing of *c.* 1800, there is now no trace.

It can fairly be claimed that despite its neglected state, Benholm's Tower, whose history is linked to both Town and Gown in Aberdeen, has been in the past and is still in the present a sturdy old building displaying many of the structural, heraldic and sculpturesque features of good Scots medieval architecture.⁵ The Z-plan shape of the towerhouse is particularly appropriate in the city of the region which evolved

¹ Fittler's *Scotia Depicta*, Pl. 4.

² *Aberdeen Magazine*, vol. II (1832), frontispiece.

³ *ibid.*, p. 194 *et seq.*

⁴ Fraser, G. M., *Aberdeen Street Names* (1911), facing p. 72.

⁵ MacGibbon and Ross, *Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, vol. V (1892), pp. 77–78, give a brief description and underline the building's unique quality with illustrations of the east tower and of the statue recess.

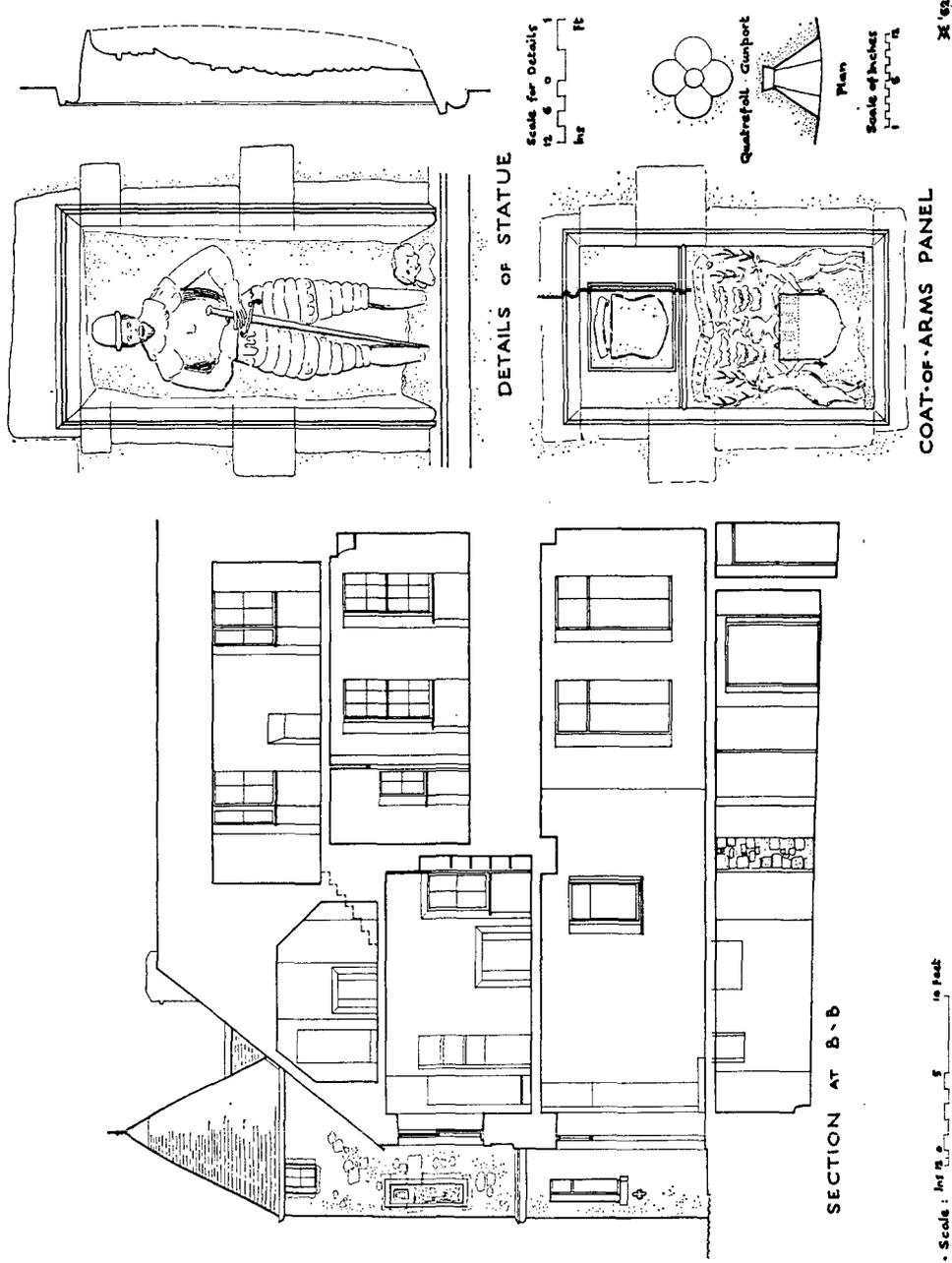


FIG. 6

the three-stepped castle plan, and for this alone the building is of singular architectural merit and importance.

My acknowledgments and thanks are due to Mr Forbes Marr, Aberdeen, for his invaluable assistance in the photography and survey work, and to the Town Clerk of Aberdeen for providing facilities for entry to the building and also for access to documentary evidence.

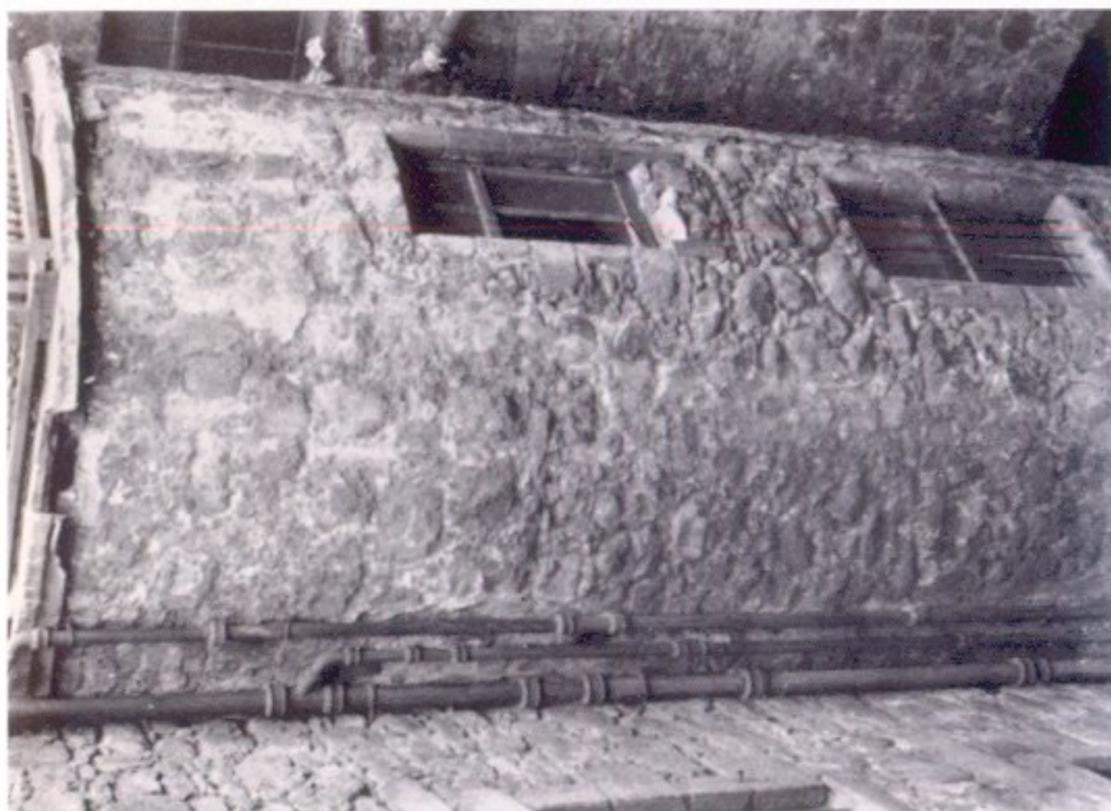
APPENDIX

Bibliography and Reference Works

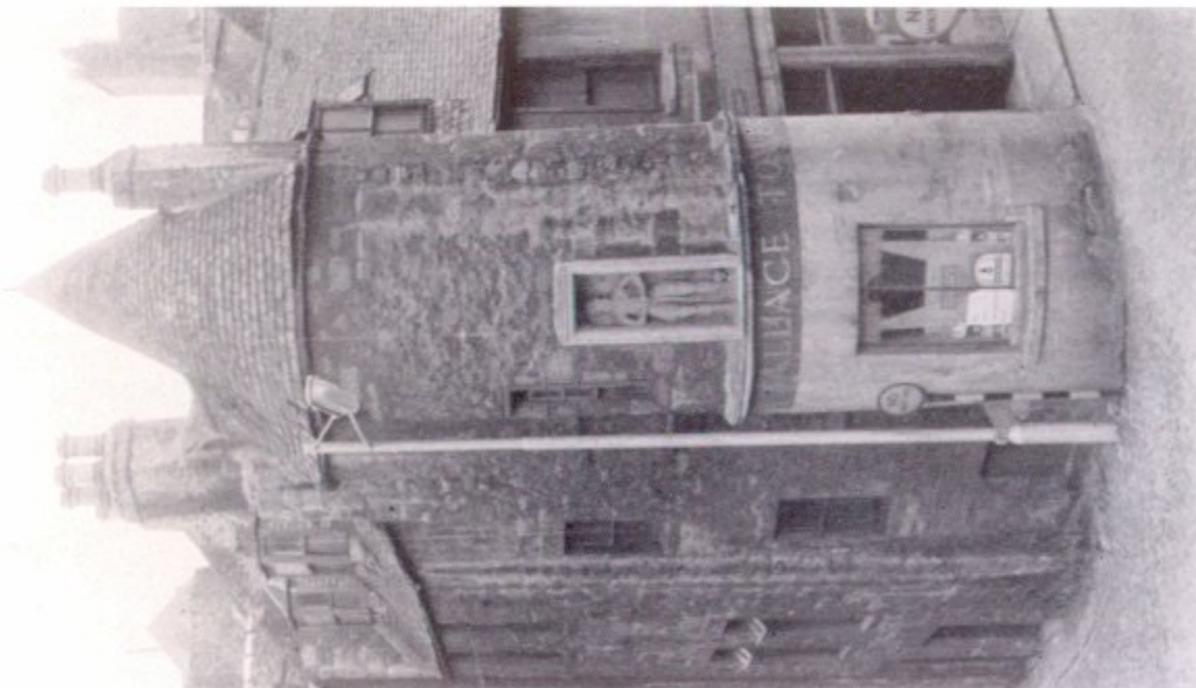
1. *Title Deeds of the property.*
2. *Register of the Great Seal.*
3. *Register of Privy Council of Scotland.*
4. *Records of the Sheriff Court of Aberdeenshire* (New Sp. Club, 1904-7).
5. Buchan, P., *Historical and authentic account of the ancient and noble family of Keith* (1820).
6. *Aberdeen Magazine*, vol. II (1832).
7. Munro, A. M. and Burr, G. G., *Old Landmarks of Aberdeen* (1886).
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9. Lawson, A., *A book of the parish of Deir* (1896).
10. Anderson, R., *Aberdeen in Bygone Days* (1910).
11. Fraser, G. M., *Aberdeen Street Names* (1911).
12. Wyness, F., 'Wallace Tower in Danger', *The Scotsman* (21 Nov. 1959).



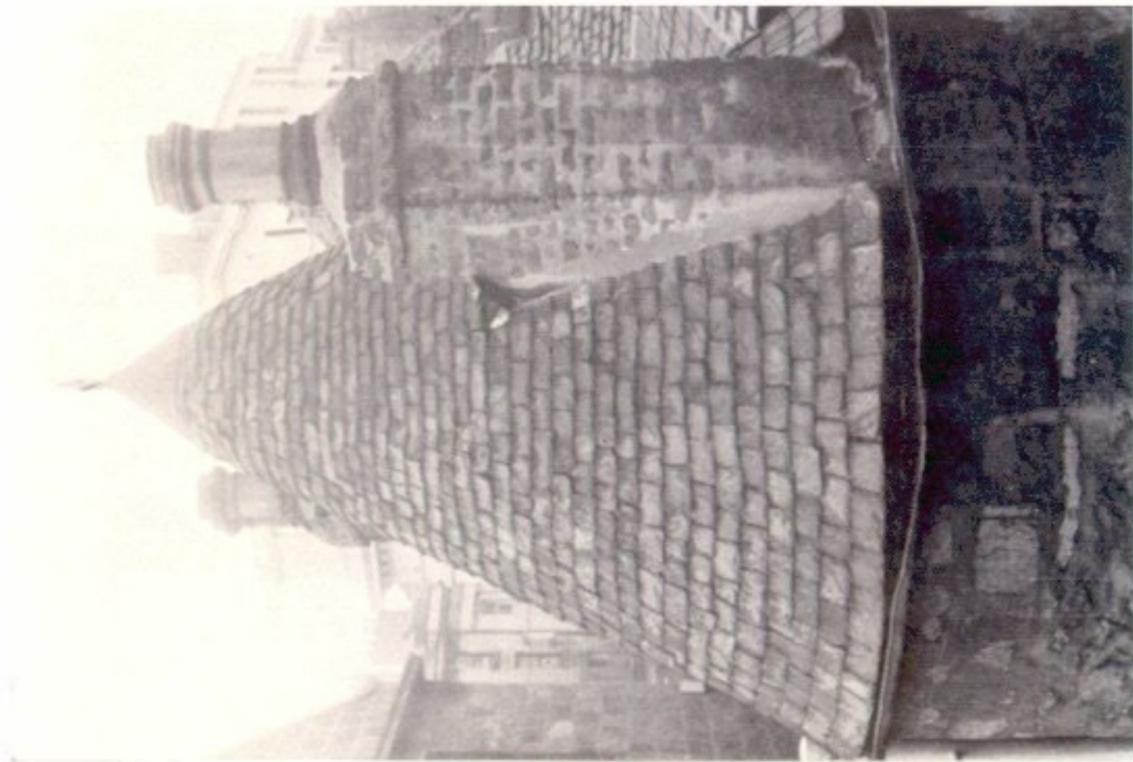
1. Benholm's Tower from the Nether Kirkgate



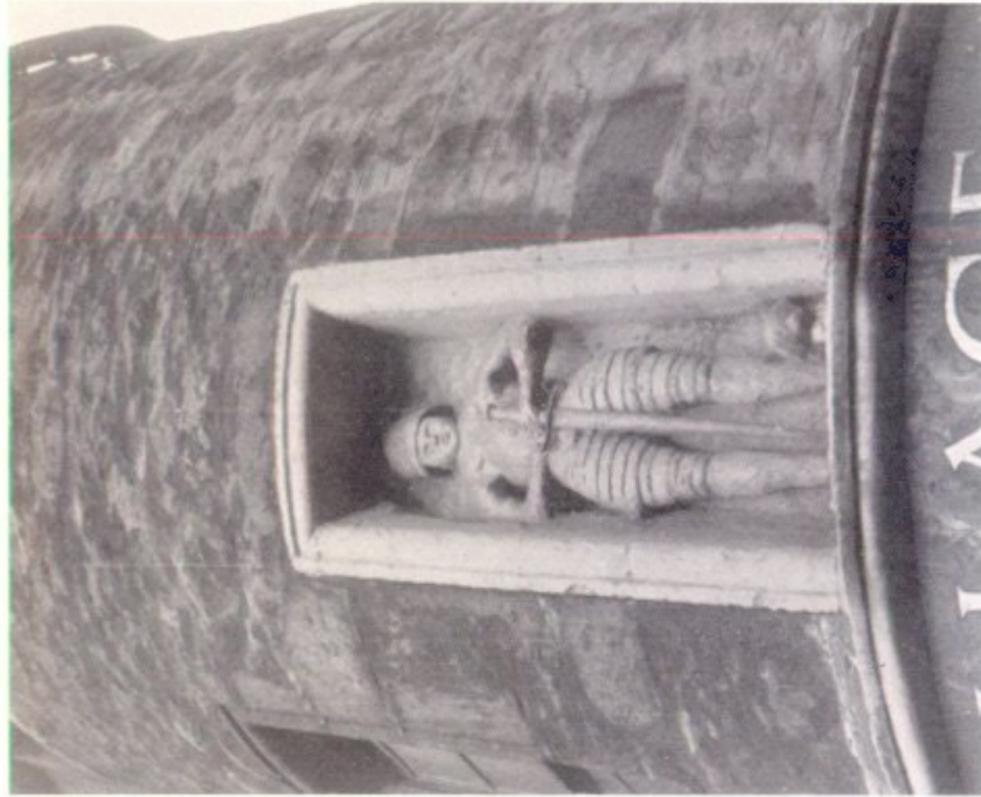
2. West stair tower



3. East tower and Carnegie's Brae frontage



1. Roof, east tower



2. Recess with sculptured figure



3. East tower: heraldic panel