How Many Tower-houses were there in the Scottish Borders?
A few observations.

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Abstract

The question of how many tower-houses there were in the Scottish Borders crops up from time to time, but nobody has yet been able to give a definitive answer. This paper deals with a number of aspects of the subject, and attempts to show why there can be no simple answer. It compares the work of early surveyors and map makers in the 16th and 17th centuries, together with the written records of the period, and tries to explain some of the differences between what was recorded then and what has been learned from more recent research. At the same time, it also tries to clarify the distinction between the different types of fortified houses in the Borders during the later Middle Ages, and why this is relevant to such analyses.

At a recent conference on castles, the old question of how many tower-houses there were in the Scottish Borders cropped up once again during a general discussion. As far as I know it is a subject that has never been seriously researched in its entirety, and despite having spent well over half a century studying and researching the towers myself, it was a question I could not answer. Indeed, I do not think anyone can give a definitive answer, for a number of reasons.

For a start: What does one mean by a ‘Border Tower’, and what point in history should one take as one’s datum? These defensive strongholds came in all shapes and sizes over a period of nearly 300 years. From the great tower-house castles of the late 14th and 15th centuries to the lesser towers of the 16th century and later, more and more of these strongholds were being built, and rebuilt, while others were disappearing from the scene, for one reason or another - English invasions, clan feuds, the official razing of the homes of those declared outlaws, or those just abandoned. And then there were the strongholds of lesser families, pele-houses, bastle-houses and simple peles. Should they also be included? There is no simple answer.

The most obvious starting point for any such survey is the maps of Timothy Pont, surveyed during the closing years of the 16th century and first published by Joan Blaeu in 1654 (Koeman, 70-76). There are a total of ten maps covering the three Marches of the Borders: The Merse, Lauderdale, Tweeddale, Teviotdale, Liddesdale, Eskdale & Ewesdale, Annandale, Nithsdale, Eastern Galloway and Mid Galloway. Unfortunately, only one sheet of Pont’s original manuscripts for the Borders has survived for comparison; this covers all of Nithsdale and, separately in one corner, a small portion of Teviotdale (Stone, 187-197). Pont’s maps are of inestimable value for what they have recorded, but at the same time they are very frustrating, as he does not appear to have always been consistent in the symbols he used to denote the various townships, castles, tower-houses, etc., and Blaeu’s interpretation of his manuscripts has further muddied the water by the wholesale ‘editing’ of Pont’s symbols to provide a more standardized appearance of the maps.1 Pont’s sketches, where available, remain a much more valuable resource.

A simple count shows that the total number of individual ‘habitations’ (towers, bastles, peles, fermtouns, homesteads, settlements, etc.) that Pont/Blaeu recorded was about:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>March</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>769</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>1260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This gives an overall total of about 2488 ‘habitations’, excluding towns and large villages. But this can only be taken as a rough guide. One has also to bear in mind that Pont never mapped Upper Annandale, from Lockerbie northwards.5 A major handicap in comparing Pont’s maps with Blaeu’s copies is the absence of so many of Pont’s originals, and when the sole surviving one for the Borders is compared with Blaeu’s ‘copies’, there are major differences. For example, in Glenesslin, a tributary of the Cairn Water in Dumfriesshire, Pont marks 7 sites with a ‘tower’ symbol and 11 with a plain circle, ‘o’, whereas Blaeu just shows 18 ‘towers’ (Illus.1 and 2). This seems to have been for cartographic convenience, to produce a ‘pretty’ map, but it completely distorts the statistics, and we are left wondering how many towers there really were, not only here but elsewhere too. It is only fair to point out, however, that Pont’s manuscripts are often written in a very small script that is in many places scratchy, or overwritten, and difficult to read. If we knew for certain that the ‘o’ symbol used by Pont represented a fermtoun or homestead without a tower, it would help, but, whilst Pont correctly shows the humble ‘pele’ of...
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Illus. 1. Pont’s manuscript map of Glenesslin in Nithsdale. (Reproduced by courtesy of the National Library of Scotland).

Illus. 2. Blaeu’s interpretation of Pont’s map of Glenesslin.

Illus. 3. Pont’s manuscript map of the Minto area of Teviotdale.
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Brockloch, in Glenesslin, with the tower symbol (its ruins survive) (RCAHMS – Glenesslin 1994, Figs. 11, 14) on his Nithsdale map (Illus. 1), this is clearly not the case elsewhere. Fermounts, moreover, often had a tower as well for mutual defence, classic examples being found in Peeblesshire at Glentress, Langhaugh and Lour (RCAHMS 1967, Nos.505, 515, 517).

Other subtle, but important, differences between Pont’s and Blaeu’s versions of Nithsdale include: (1) Glencairn Castle, where Pont has drawn a tall tower with corbelled-out parapet, turrets and two side towers with pitched or conical roofs, whereas Blaeu has omitted the parapet and turrets and only shown small side wings without roofs; (2) Terregles, where Pont’s large tower with side towers has been reduced by Blaeu to a standard, single tower; (3) Caerlaverock Castle, where Pont’s attempt to indicate the substantial size of the 13th century castle has again been changed by Blaeu to a simple tower like any other; (4) Enoch Castle, where Pont’s portrayal of a large tower with several secondary buildings has been reduced to a simple tower with wings or a barmkin; and (5) Over and Nether Gribton, which Blaeu shows as two towers, whereas Pont clearly differentiates between the two, by indicating the former with an ‘o’ and the latter with a tower. These are just a few examples; there are many more.

In dealing with the small fragment of Pont’s survey of Teviotdale that has survived - the area around Hawick and Ancrum - Blaeu has resorted to much simpler symbols, perhaps to get such a large area on one map. The area around Minto just described, another example is the tower of Dolphinston, which is now just a site 4 miles SE of Jedburgh. It is shown as an ‘o’ (Illus. 5), yet it has a well documented history as a “tower and fortalice” (“cum turre et fortali- cio”), first in the possession of the Ainslies of Dolphinston, and then, after being acquired by marriage, in the possession of the Kers of Littledean (RMS III, No. 342; IV, No. 489; V, No. 1456; Scots Peerage VII, 330-1). “Dolphis- toun” is also specifically mentioned in an Act of Parliament of 1481, as one of the places where 20 ‘men of war’ were to be posted (APS II, 140). It is even more confusing, when one finds Mervinslaw pele-house (Illus. 15), near Jed- burgh, shown as a tower (Illus. 5), while the similar, and neighbouring, pele-houses at Slacks (Illus. 16) and Northbank only merit an ‘o’, and a fourth pele-house, at Kilnsike, appears to have been omitted altogether (despite the ruins surviving to this day) (RCAHMS 1956, Nos. 931, 933, 934). Another pele-house, at Leitholm, is also omitted from the map of ‘The Merce’ (RCAHMS 1915, No. 140).

It is misleading where groups of towers are only shown as a single entity. There are two known examples in Teviotdale. One is at Lanton, near Ancrum, where a restored tower still survives. Whilst the settlement is only shown by a single ‘o’, there are known to have been two other towers in the village (RCAHMS 1956, Nos. 433, 434). Darnick also had three towers, two of which survive, one in its entirety (Illus. 22) and the other as a much altered ruin (RCAHMS 1956, Nos. 580, 581).

Towns and other large communities are more complex, for, like the hill-towns and cities of mediaeval Italy and some other parts of Southern Europe, where defensive towers proliferated, either for individual or mutual protection, some of those in the Scottish Borders had a number of towers and bastle-houses. Jedburgh, for example, is known to have had at least six towers, Hawick had several (RCAHMS 1956, p.44), including Drumlanrig’s Tower (Illus. 20) and Lockerbie had two, with several others, now lost, close by. Bastle-houses were even more numerous, being a cheaper form of defence for communities throughout the Middle and East Marches, though only three are known in the West March. In the earlier years of the 16th century, these were by no means always
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Illus. 4. Blaeu’s map of the Minto area of Teviotdale, based on Pont’s survey.

Illus. 5. Detail of the Jed Valley from Blaeu’s map of Teviotdale, showing the paucity of ‘tower’ symbols. ‘Dolfintoun’, for example, was a known tower-house.
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built entirely of stone, and the roofs were of thatch, so they fell an easy prey to English raiding parties, especially in the 1540s (L & P, Henry VIII, XIX, Nos. 333, 625; XXI, No. 1279). In November 1544, no less than “16 strong bastell houses” were burnt in Lessuden alone in one raid by Sir Ralph Eure (Armstrong, lxx). Towers of stone often merited special mention, such as during a raid in November 1543, when “a stone house in Overhowden [was] spoyled”, while other towers were “burnt” (Armstrong, lviii), and a year later “a towre of the lord of Bucklughe’s called Mosse-House [was] smoked very sore” (Armstrong, lxvi).6 In the same month, Sir Bryan Layton burnt Litleton Hall and stables and all the other houses therabouts, “saving the stone house” (Armstrong, lxvi). Incidentally, the callous disregard for life and property in these raids was staggering. One English report for 1543-4 records 222 towns and 133 houses burnt, 4 towns ‘spoiled’, 8 other properties damaged, 89 Scots killed and 695 taken prisoner, as well as more than 11,000 horses, cattle and sheep taken or ‘burnt’ (in the general conflagrations of barns, etc) (Armstrong, lv-lxiii).

Blaeu’s map of Liddesdale is quite different from Teviotdale; it shows 157 habitations, only three of which are mere ‘o’s. The rest are all shown as towers, including the major stronghold of Hermitage Castle. Were they really all towers? Certainly life in Liddesdale was hazardous to say the least. By comparison, a less formal survey of the area was carried out only a few years earlier for Lord Burghley by Edward Aglionby. Popularly known as “Aglionby’s Platte”, it is dated ‘December 1590’ (Illus. 8) (Archaeologia XXII (1829), 161-171). It does not claim to be a comprehensive map of the area, but names 108 significant Scottish towers from Liddesdale to Annandale (excluding the castles of Caerlaverock and Lochmaben). Interestingly, twenty five of these are towers in Upper Annandale that were omitted from Pont’s ‘Annandale’ (Blaeu Atlas 2006, Map 10, ‘Annandale’); but even that list omits some of the surviving towers, such as Lochhouse Tower (Illus. 18), Glelæ, Boreland, Breconside, Frenchland, Blacklaw, Mellingshaw, Raechleugh, Kinnelhead and Whamfray,7 as well as omitting others, such as Dinwiddie, whose site is now lost.8 In Liddesdale itself, 21 ‘significant’ towers are shown on the Scottish side of the Border - as well as 23 on the English side. But it was by no means the whole story. In the parish of Castleton alone, the RCAHMS, in their Inventory for Roxburghshire, list 17 known ‘sites’, apart from ruins, and in the county as a whole 52 ‘sites’.9

The recorded sites are largely those where ruined walls could still be seen, or local tradition identified heaps of rubble, when the earliest Ordnance Survey maps were made. The case of Dolphinston has already been mentioned, where the O. S. map shows the “site” within a small clump of trees. Other sites, such as Cockburn’s Castle and Eldinhope in the Yarrow valley, recorded the “remains of” towers, where all that can be seen today is a heap of overgrown stones barely even showing the outline of the former walls. These were commonly the successors of earlier towers of timber, so many of which fell victim to the English raids of the 1540s. In 1544, Lord Wharton “burnt Bonshaw, Robgyll and all the houses, peills, steds, and corn in their way” in Kirtleside, Dumfriesshire (Armstrong, lxvi); but when the Earl of Sussex came on the rampage in 1570, he felt he had to employ much more drastic measures, demolishing and destroying with gunpowder “The Castell of Carlavrok, . . . Closburne, Tynnell, Bonshaw, and dyvers uther houssis” (Irving, 43). Bonshaw is known to have been rebuilt around that time, and in 1585 it was described by Lord Scrope, the English Warden of the West March as “one of the strongest howses of that border” (Illus. 12) (Border Papers I, No. 321). Nearby was another Irving tower, Woodhouse, whose name was presumably self-explanatory; it too was rebuilt in stone, the ruins of which may still be seen.10

Whilst timber towers were going up in smoke right across the Borders in the 1540s, a whole new generation of stone towers started to come on the scene after the Reformation of 1560. This was a direct result of the Reformation itself. Lands that had formerly been possessed by the church were now acquired by the local nobles and their families, leading to much greater security in their possession. This in turn led to a great increase in the building of stone towers, especially after the English incursions of 1570, and again in the 1580s. The dates on many of these towers record their construction.11

Just as the Romans had established signal stations throughout their empire to give rapid warning of trouble over long distances, so the Borderers had as early as the 13th century estab-
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Illus. 6. Detail from Blaeu’s map of the Manor Valley in Tweeddale, showing an abundance of ‘tower’ symbols. Peebles is on the right.

Illus. 7. Detail from Blaeu’s map of The Merse around Home Castle.
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lished beacons on the hilltops to warn of English invasions; and in 1448 it was decreed that these be further augmented by additional beacons on designated hilltops up the principal valleys (APS I, 352). At a more local level, families and groups of families had likewise sited their strongholds in such positions that they too had chains of communication, especially up the valleys. This became much more evident in the second half of the 16th century, when the new towers were built. The lines of sight can still be followed. Thus one can follow the link along the major valleys of Tweeddale, Teviotdale, Liddesdale, Eskdale, Annandale and Nithsdale, as well as along such lesser valleys as Manor Liddesdale, Eskdale, Annandale and Nithsdale, the major valleys of Tweeddale, Teviotdale, and these can clearly be followed on the Blaeu maps. It is only in the Merse in the east and Galloway in the far west that the links are less obvious. The Merse, being less hilly, relied largely on a few key sites, such as Smailholm and Home, both of which had a vast field of view (Illus. 7). There was also a beacon at holm and Home, both of which had a vast field of view (Illus. 7). Despite the ravages wrought by English incursions - as well as those wrought by the Scots in return - beacons did serve a purpose. An English raid on Old Roxburgh in June 1545 had to return - beacons did serve a purpose. An English survey of the once important castle of Cally barely qualifies.

The distribution of towers in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright, the eastern half of Galloway, is more problematic, as the history of the district becomes further removed from the frontier politics of the Borders the further west one goes. Whilst Blaeu shows about 725 individual habitations or settlements in the area, only 92 are shown with the symbol used for ‘towers’, and only 38 of these lie west of the Ken-Dee valley. This compares with 618 towers, twice as many as previously listed; and 190 habitations for Annandale and 114 for Eskdale and Ewesdale, a total of 304 habitations for roughly the same area.

If one narrows the comparison in those surveys to just one valley, Kirtleside, the RCAHMS lists just 16 sites, compared with 14 on Aglionby’s Platte and no less than 42 on Blaeu’s map (Illus. 9). As the majority of the sites shown by Blaeu were once known towers, including two sites not marked as towers that were in fact towers (Mossknowe and Redhall), why the discrepancy? Some of the more remote sites, such as Dumbretton, Tudenby, Kirtlehead, Winterhopehead and Carruthers, are associated with ‘homesteads’ and ‘settlements’ as recorded on the earliest Ordnance Survey maps, and a few, such as Kirtlebridge and Gretna, are known villages. If one adds to this perhaps a generous half dozen other ‘settlements only’, that still leaves about 31 actual towers, twice as many as previously listed; and if one were to extrapolate that across the whole of Annandale and Eskdale, it would give a total for that area of about 230 towers. The difficulty...
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One question that is not easily answered is: What qualifies as a ‘tower-house’? In most cases in the Borders, the answer is fairly obvious, whether one is dealing with the great tower-house castles such as Threave, Newark, Neidpath (Illus. 10) or Cardoness (Illus. 11), or the lesser towers of the 16th century, such as Hillslap (Illus. 21), Kirkhope (Illus. 19), Bonslaw (Illus. 12) or Fourmerkland (Illus. 13). Large or small, they were all towers or fortalices built as ‘strongholds’ for their owners. On the other hand, the great castles of enclosure, such as Caerlaverock or Roxburgh were not, despite the fact that they incorporated towers within their overall plan. Morton, too, started life as a castle of enclosure, which was later partly rebuilt.  

But that leaves three other categories of stronghold, already mentioned, which were built for defence by the lesser, and poorer, landowners or tenants: bastle-houses, pele-houses and simple peles. Bastle-houses and pele-houses - as the terms are now used - had much in common, the principal difference being that the former had vaulted basements and sometimes internal stairs, but neither was ever more than two stories high, with perhaps an attic. They certainly could not be described as ‘towers’, yet they were treated the same by Pont, and they served the same purpose as ‘strongholds’. Like many towers, they also reserved the basement for livestock and storage, whilst living on the floor above. One clear distinction, however, was their size and shape. The ratio of length of side wall to width of gable for bastle-houses and pele-houses was much greater than for an average tower. Bastle-houses are much commoner on the English side of the Border, where many have survived the rigours of time, either in groups in villages or on their own amongst the hills; but this may not always have been the case, as so many on the Scottish side were reported destroyed or burnt during English incursions (supra). Surviving examples in Scotland include...
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Illus. 9. Kirtleside (from Blaeu’s map of Annandale). (Note:- Bonshaw and Bonshavside have been transposed).
several ruins and sites in Berwickshire; the oldest part of Old Gala House in Galashiels (Illus. 14) (RCAHMS 1957, 41-3); several incorporated into later buildings in Peebles (Buchan I, 251); the ruins of Kinnelhead and Raecleugh in Upper Annandale (Maxwell-Irving, 172, 215); a recently identified bastle in New Abbey (Ward, 30); possibly Queen Mary’s House in Jedburgh; and a number further north in Lanarkshire (Ward, 26-30).

Pele-houses, on the other hand, appear to have been confined largely to the wild moorland of Southdean parish in Roxburghshire, where almost complete, but roofless, examples are found at Mervinslaw and Slacks (supra) (RCAHMS 1956, Nos. 932, 934). Two more ruins are found at Kilnsike and Northbank (RCAHMS 1956, Nos. 931, 933), while a second site has been identified at Slacks, and other sites nearby at Hilly Linn, Hindshaughhead, Longslack Sike, Watties Spindles and White Hill (RCAHMS 1994 - Southdean, 11-17). The ruins of Glenae Tower, in Annandale, also suggest a pele-house (Maxwell-Irving, 147).

Pelles (as opposed to pele-houses) were in some respects the simplest of all towers, though the sole surviving complete example, at Sundaywell in Glenesslin (Illus. 17) (Maxwell-Irving, 241), although now modernised, shows that they were not restricted to two floors, but were indeed ‘towers’. They represented a simple form of tower that appears to have been largely confined to the valleys north and west of Dunscore, in Nithsdale. Built of clay mortar — like most bastles and pele-houses —, they were small and almost square with walls about 3ft (0.91m) thick. Their basements were not vaulted, and unlike the more typical towers, there is no evidence that any of them had stone stairs. Another at nearby Bogrie was only finally demolished in the 20th century. The rest are now so ruinous that only the lowest courses of the walls and heaps of rubble survive, and most of that has been robbed to build dykes. Brockloch, further up the same valley, is a typical example (Maxwell-Irving, 266; RCAHMS 994 - Glenesslin, 13-14). It was shown by Pont as a ‘tower’ (Illus.1), while other probable sites in the valley only merited an ‘o’. Other known sites in the neighbouring Cairn valley, such as Stewarton and Auchenfedrick, are not all marked or named; but none are shown as towers. Pont shows some 18 towers further up the valley, but in addition uses another, simpler symbol for a further 43, which might have been peles. Blaeu does not discriminate between them, showing them all as towers.

None of this, of course, gives a definitive answer to the question of how many towers there were in the Borders; but it does create a picture of a fairly dense distribution of towers in the valleys of the Tweed, Teviot, Manor, Liddel, Esk, Ewes, Kirtle, Annan and the Nith and its tributaries, as portrayed by Pont and Blaeu; a less dense distribution in some other valleys; bastle-houses, pele-houses and peles in the poorer headwaters of valleys such as Glenesslin and in the windswept moorland of Southdean; and a more settled life as one travels further west in Galloway, with a relatively small number of great tower-house castles and - if the surviving sites are to be taken as representative - few of the lesser towers of the 16th century. The evidence would appear to show that the vast number of ‘habitations’ shown by Blaeu in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright are very misleading, as, unlike elsewhere in the Borders, the vast majority were nothing more than homesteads, fermtouns (farmsteads) and settlements without any tower at all, or indeed the perceived need for one.

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Illus. 10. Neidpath Castle.

Illus. 11. Cardoness Castle.


Illus. 13. Fourmerkland Tower.
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Illustration 14. Old Gala House. (Original Bastle-house incorporated into NW wing of later house).


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Illus. 17. Sundaywell Tower. (The Pele tower has been modernised and converted into a farm-house).

Illus. 18. Lochhouse Tower, omitted from Pont’s map of Annandale.


Illus. 20. Drumlanrig’s Tower in Hawick.
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Notes

1. Blaeu’s desire for standardization is clearly seen in his maps for other parts of the British Isles (Blaeu’s Atlas reprinted by Thames & Hudson) as well as some of his maps for Mainland Europe, such as France, Belgium, Cologne, Northern Italy and Russia (Atlas Maior of 1665). There is, however, often a lack of standardisation where a given place appears on two, or even three, overlapping maps, appearing with one symbol on one and another on the other(s). It is not known whether this originated with Pont or Blaeu.

2. 406 in the Merse and 53 in Lauderdale.

3. 129 in Tweeddale, 483 in Teviotdale and 157 in Liddesdale.

4. 114 in Ewesdale and Eskdale, 190 in Annandale, 231 in Nithsdale, 431 in Eastern Galloway and 294 in Mid Galloway.

5. The reason for this omission is not known, especially when he included Corehead on his map of Tweeddale. More than 30 known towers were completely omitted, as well as the old castle at Auchencass and several lost sites.

6. A month later, Sir Ralph Eure “won by assault the Mosse Towre” after a siege of 5 hours (L & P, Henry VIII, XIX, Pt. 2, No. 191; Hamilton Papers, II, No. 318), which was elsewhere described as a ‘strong’ tower.

7. See Maxwell-Irving 2000, pp.78, 87, 89, 143, 147, 172, 208 and 215.

8. Lost sites are now being found by archaeologists using geophysical techniques, such as ground radar. This has been successfully employed in recent years to map out ‘lost’ Norman castles, abbeys and medieval towns and villages in England, as well as much older sites.

9. In their Inventories for the Borders as a whole, the RCAHMS list 144 ‘sites’, based largely on the early Ordnance Survey maps, but this is far from being a complete list.

10. The ruins were consolidated, with a new stair to the parapet walk, in 1877.

11. e.g. Carsluith (1568), Corbet (1572), Greenknowe (1581), Maclellan’s (1581), Hillslap (1585), Isle (1587), Fourmerkland (1590).

12. The stone-vaulted top floor of Evelaw’s wing could only be justified as the base for a beacon.

13. No doubt the vaulted top floor of Barholm’s wing, in Galloway, served a similar purpose to that at Evelaw, though possibly with another object in mind, as Barholm was far from the Border, but very close to smuggling activities in the Solway.

14. A further Act of the Scottish Council in 1587 ordained that “the lieges . . . keep watch night and day, and burn bales according to the accustomed order observed at such times upon the borders” (Lockhart, W. E. ‘Historical Notes relating to Branxholme’, THAS, 1906).

15. Balmangan, Barholm, Cally, Cardoness, Carsluith, Cumstoun, Kenmure, Kirkconnell, Machermore, MacLellan’s, Plunton, Rusco and Threave. Little is left of Balmangan and Cumstoun (see Maxwell-Irving, pp.68, 115), and even less of Cally.

16. The map actually shows 2 more towers than are given in the list.

17. The story of Morton’s architectural history is too complex to discuss here.

18. Although these three types of building are in general architecturally distinct, some architectural historians are not happy with such stereotyping.


22. e.g. Garlies, Cardoness, Rusco, MacLellan’s, Threave and Kenmure.

23. Parliament defined the Borders as all the territory between the North Sea and the river Cree in Galloway.
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TDGAS Transactions of the Dumfriesshire & Galloway Natural History & Antiquarian Society. Dumfries, 1862-

THAS Transactions of the Hawick Archaeological Society. Hawick, 1856-