Scottish yetts and window grilles

During the CSG Stirling meeting members saw two yetts still in place: Doune, a two-leaved yett with a wicket gate, c. 1390s, and Blackness, (above), single leaf and in place since 1693. David Christison (1883 & 1888) was the first to document Scottish yetts and these papers are still the standard works on the subject. Alastair Maxwell-Irving supplemented Christison in 1994 with his paper ‘Scottish yetts and window grilles’ adding a few extras that Christison had missed, and delving into the fascinating processes of manufacture and origins, possibly from northern Italy, Venice, and the Tyrol. Christison identified about 46 extant examples of these grated iron doors (listed in Appendix 2, Maxwell-Irving, 1994, who has added another 3). To this list should also probably be added Blackness (and Drummond). Blackness served as an ordnance depot from the 1870s onwards and the castle was largely out of bounds for at least two generations of castellologists from this time onwards; so Christison’s omission of the yett in two papers published in the 1880s is unsurprising. Probably its first appearance in antiquarian record is as fig. 239 in the RCAHMS Inventory account. The earliest documentary reference to yetts appears in 1377. This concerns the building of David’s Tower in Edinburgh, by David II, completed by 1379 (only the basement remains). It would be surprising therefore to find any yetts older than the one installed at Doune, although another yett at Doune, believed to be that from the base of the steps up to the Lord’s hall is no longer present (Christison suggests it had found its way to Darnick Tower, Roxburgh). As Alastair Maxwell-Irving readily admits following many years of research, how the Scottish form of iron grille first came to be made, either as a yett or a window grille, remains a mystery. In Scotland, yetts were traditionally made using a “through and through” construction, forged so that the vertical and horizontal pieces penetrated or formed sockets (eyes) for the others in alternate panels, creating a structure almost impossible to dismantle. The grille apertures were left open. The usual method was to build the yett in quadrants with all the bars in a quadrant passing either vertically or horizontally through the mating bars as illustrated (p. 121). This method of construction for gates is not seen outside Scotland, although window grilles constructed in this manner are found in northern Italy and Tyrol. None, however, are known to predate the earliest Scottish examples.
A few grated iron doors are found in England, but were constructed using a different method. For the English-style gate, the vertical bars all passed in front of the horizontal bars, and were riveted or fixed in place (see CSGJ24 pp. 263-4); the spaces were infilled with oak, making the gate solid. One notable exception, however, is constructed using the Scottish method: a yett from Streatlam Castle, now held at Bowes Museum. Streatlam was rebuilt by Sir George Bowes following damage in the 16th century; the Bowes family had connections in Scotland, which may have inspired the yett construction.
Window grilles

Scottish iron window-grilles were made in the same symmetrical interlacing fashion as yetts. Most were integral, secured within the stone jambs and sills and would have had to have been inserted as the ashlar architraves were built up. This appears to have been the case at Doune, which has very early examples of embedded window grilles on the exterior south wall, even though the windows are not square but pointed and cusped two-light. Only the holes in the broken masonry remain, evidence of robbing out of the iron grilles. A few tower-houses have the caged type of grille - projecting outward beyond the wall-face - remaining in situ, including Elcho, Tolquhon and Falkland Palace (gatehouse), although in the latter case this example must be quite late and retrofitted; it does not appear on the David Roberts 1846 drawing. Most original grilles - mainly on the south chapel façade, c. 1513 - at Falkland, conform to the Scottish embedded rectangular type (above left). However, those at Stirling (King’s Palace only, c. 1530s, above right) are the cage type, but fabricated in the traditional Scottish way. It is probable that the ‘cage’ type of fitting eventually replaced the embedded grilles, perhaps due to costs and ease of fitting. The only other examples of this type of manufacture known outside Scotland are those window grilles found in the Tyrol area, and in Venice at the Palazzo Ducale. Maxwell-Irving develops this interesting connection in some detail. Of course there are thousands of ground-floor iron window grilles found all over Italy added in 15th century and later-era palazzi, usually of the cage type, but one is hard pressed to find any fabricated in the Scottish way apart from those mentioned above.

