

2. Early Farm Buildings in Scotland

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In many parts of Scotland, particularly the progressive farming counties, the transformation of agricultural improvement from the eighteenth century was so thorough as to almost totally obliterate what had gone before. It is only in recent decades that archaeologists and building historians have been able to build up a picture of what a Scottish medieval farmstead might have looked like had one survived intact. There are neither the records nor surviving buildings from this period to work from, to the extent that there are in England. But medieval and post-medieval settlement studies are very much a growth industry; the evidence is being scrutinised as much from the air as on the ground. One of the approaches that enables historians to get closer to earlier buildings and farm practices is through the careful examination of evidence from small scale farming areas where earlier traditions have had a better chance of surviving.

The oldest standing farm buildings in Scotland are connected with monasteries which were the best endowed and organised farming institutions in the Middle Ages. On the south bank of the Tay at Balmerino is a Cistercian Abbey church with a farm steading close by having a 15th century monastic barn - a rare survival in Scotland. Many monasteries, especially Cistercian ones, had a well established system of outlying farm centres, usually called granges. There is a lot of historical information on the grange of Kelso Abbey, for example, and the physical remains of grange type structures are beginning to be identified, most notably in the border counties.

Castles and fortified houses, many of which grew up on secularised ecclesiastical estates in the 16th and 17th centuries, also have a strong farming context. This shows in the actual settings of the buildings their design; and the associated outbuildings and enclosures which generally betray evidence of a mixed farming economy. Surviving examples, though, tend to be in the marginal upland areas best suited to sheep and black cattle.

At Pendean, above the Gladhouse Reservoir in the Moorfoot Hills, south of Edinburgh, there are the ruins of one such building which at one time was an outstation or stock ranch belonging to Newbattle Abbey. It gained an independent existence as house and steading in the 17th century, from which the visible remains date. The main domestic structure is a ruin and the outbuildings are now merely humps and bumps but much else in the way of adjacent ranges and pens also show up from the air.

The surroundings of virtually any tower in an area such as this produce the same evidence; one such is the early 17th century tower at Dryhope near St Mary's Loch in the central borders. In these areas, special measures were necessary for defensive or fortified farming for cattle thieving was a fact of life, particularly in the second half of the 16th century.

Many of the towers of the western borders were built with the ill gotten proceeds of livestock theft mainly at the expense of farmers on the English side of the border.

An Act of the Scottish Parliament in 1535 laid down that each landowner of £100 rental should build in a convenient place for himself and his tenants a barnkin, 60ft square with walls 3ft thick and 18ft high, with tower if necessary, into which the laird and his tenants could bring their goods and livestock in troubled times.

Some surviving barnkins, such as the one at Buckholm near Galashiels which was rebuilt by the Pringle family in 1582, are about this size. Early enclosures associated with towers are to be found everywhere around Scotland, serving not only for grazing but perhaps also for hay or crops and later as gardens.

The most celebrated of the surviving fortified farmsteads is the group of stone houses arranged around the upper reaches of the Jed Water. Products of the uncertain conditions of border life, they were built to allow farmers to bring their stock inside while they themselves had their living quarters above.

Many farmsteads up and down the country, running into the hundreds, betray some degree of continuity with their medieval past. Ruinous towers standing alongside later farms are a commonplace of the Scottish countryside.