

The Scottish Borders – Peles (Tower Houses) and Bastles



Bonjedward House

Timpeandean Tower ruins

Peles (tower houses) and bastles is a simple classification (by me) of homes in the Scottish Borders from the 13th to 17th Centuries.

It has been said that peles (tower houses) and bastles were built along each side of the Scottish and English Border in this period.

The peles were built of stone, they had very thick walls, and were lived in by rich and poor. They had two doors with the outer one being made of iron and the inner one was wooden. Windows were tiny, and the ground floor was for storage or to keep animals safe. On the upper floors were the living areas and they were reached by a narrow spiral staircase. It is said that peles were never more than two stories high and perhaps some had an attic. But I think that there is evidence that some were four stories high.

Bastle houses were more numerous than the peles. They were common throughout the Middle Marches. They were also made of stone, but the roofs were thatched, making them easy prey for English raiding parties. The 1540's was a heightened period of these raids. The disregard for life and property was said to be staggering – whole towns and houses were burnt, 90 Scots killed, 700 taken prisoner and about 11,000 horses, cattle and sheep were stolen or burnt.

In the days of what was known as the 'rough wooing' (1543 to 1551) two towers of Bonjedward owned by the Douglasses were razed and the Douglas Laird's house was burnt to the ground.

Some of the towers burnt in the 1540's by the English were towers constructed earlier with timber. Stone towers began to be built from about the 1560's onwards.

The bastle houses, like the towers had basements reserved for livestock or storage. Living quarters were on the floor above.

Some of the Scottish Borders areas had numerous towers and bastles. The Teviot was one area where there was a dense concentration of tower houses. Jedburgh was known to have had at least six towers. The Teviot also had bastle houses, but they were more common on the English side of the border.

'The tower was likely to have been raised according to a statute of the Parliament of Scotland in 1535, that required

large landholders in the Borderlands to build barmkins of stone and lime, sixty square feet in area and with walls of one ell thickness and six ells in height for the resett and defense of him, his tennents, and his gudis in troublous tyme'. (via Douglas Archives).

A typical Laird's house had begun to be developed from the mid. 16th Century and continued till the latter part of the 18th Century. The process began more specifically around 1540 to 1640 and by the latter part of the 17th Century the new type of residence (for Lairds, Merchants etc, in Scotland) was nothing like the tower house. It grew out of the bastle rather than the tower and the move was away from fortification and defensive purposes, to domestic requirements. There were generally no vaults and the living area was on the first floor.

The fortress mentality was brought to an end after the Union of the Crowns in 1603. Destructive raids by Reivers on both sides of the borders was scaled down.

The 18th Century Bonjedward House at Bonjedward now sometimes referred to as Jedneuk House or Bonjedward House, Jedneuk obviously has a story of the past within it's walls. The interior is 'known to contain walls' of an old Bonjedward tower. More specifically 'The house contains walls of great thickness, probably the remains of Bonjedward Tower. There is a single storey ... and rebuilt outbuildings to the North West (Lothian Estate Offices)'. The offices called Jedneuk are said to be on the old stables area. 'To the North there is an extraordinary 2

storey lodge, the ground floor and stacks roughcast with long and short ashtar dressing, the upper floor weatherboard’.

“It seems there was an earlier building on or near the site (of Bonjedward ‘modern Mansion House) on or near the same site from 1671”. [Bonjedward House and Walled Garden – British Listed Buildings].

The remains of the 16th Century Timpendean Tower which is at Timpendean farm and originally part of the Bonjedward estate is a reminder of past times. It is said to be a Pele. The tower is surrounded by much older earthworks consisted of three floors and a vaulted cellar. There is evidence of a previous addition as there are bond stones on two walls. ‘The east door and basement fireplace are latter additions to the original house. The first floor contained the great hall and the second floor consisted of sleeping quarters. Those floors were reached by a circular staircase on the east wall. Part of the nearby earthworks were dammed and filled with water for defensive purposes.’

Cunzierton was once a stronghold of the Douglasses, and the house there was likely either a Pele or a Bastle –

- In 1540 Cunzierton was associated with William Douglas of Bonjedward. “There is now no trace of William Douglas of Bonjedward’s house at Cunzeirton in the Cheviot Hills, but of its razing and the theft of his cattle in 1540...”

- Zeune (1992) supposes that Cunzeirton must have been a pelehouse or bastle with livestock kept in the ground floor otherwise eight cattle and oxen ‘therein’ would not have been lost. In general, however, the livestock may have been kept on the property or ‘place’ rather than in the house itself.

References –

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