

# **Lochindorb Castle**

**By Piers Dixon and Iain Anderson**

**Historic Environment Scotland**

## **The Site**

Lochindorb Castle (NH93NE 1) is an island castle located upon a loch of the same name, some 6.25 miles to the NNW of Grantown-on-Spey in Speyside. The Castle sits upon an island located 290 metres from the E shore of Lochindorb and occupies the entirety of the island's 1.2 acres, save for a small shelf of shoreline on 3 sides and a wider landing place to the N side.

The castle dates from the mid-later 13th century and has an enclosure, or enceinte, form; that is a tall perimeter wall enclosing a quadrilateral courtyard containing the domestic buildings of the castle. This is the earliest form of stone built castle in Scotland dating from the 13th century onwards and is the successor to the motte-and-bailey form as the dominant construction method. The castle is remote even within this sparsely populated area. It has lain ruinous and largely untouched since the state-ordered dismantling of the castle in 1455 by the Thane of Cawdor and the castle remains the property of the Cawdor Estate.

## **Earlier Documentation & Investigation of the Castle**

MacGibbon & Ross were first to publish a plan of Lochindorb Castle in 'The castellated and domestic architecture of Scotland from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries' 1887-92, correctly placing the date of construction within their '1st phase' date-range of the mid-late 13th century. W Douglas Simpson later published a plan of the castle drawn by NS Cowan in 1931 (together with a reconstruction drawing) as part of a broadsheet on the castle and shortly afterwards the Ministry of Works produced a 1936 survey plan. Finally in 1983, Corbitt published a version of the ground plan. All of these plans (consultable at RCAHMS) are inaccurate in some way, perhaps due to two factors; a reliance on the MacGibbon & Ross plan of the late 19th century as a base and limited access to the castle for new survey because of location and its over-grown condition. The Ministry plan is the only one which accurately reflects the geometry of the quadrilateral enclosure, together with the projection of the round towers from this enclosure, to a good level of accuracy.

All previous plans give slightly differing interpretations of the layout of the E range of courtyard buildings. MacGibbon and Ross have illustrated the E range as having contained three adjoining chambers, with no opening through the east wall. The southern-most chamber of the buildings is described by the same source as the chapel, however no reasoning is given for this.

Earlier documentation<sup>1</sup> mentions the possibility of the island of Lochindorb being a man-made structure, however a 1993 survey by the Scottish Underwater Archaeology Trust suggests that this is not the case; whilst there may have been some addition to the island with stone, the underwater landscape is formed by a natural combination of sand ridges and stone banking. No evidence was found either for an earlier crannog on the loch, which again was suggested in early documentation of the site.

Written description of the castle and its history is rare and almost entirely without reference to sources of information.

### **Historical Background**

During its useful life, Lochindorb was a key stronghold in the north of Scotland and is associated with several key figures in the history of the nation; in the 13th and early 14th centuries the Comyns of Badenoch and Edward I of England, and later Alexander Stewart (The Wolf of Badenoch) and the Black Douglases.

The castle is first known to have belonged to the Comyns of Badenoch and construction of the existing castle is likely to have been part of a Comyn building campaign dating from 1260-80<sup>2</sup> that also included works to Inverlochry, Blair and Ruthven in the Badenoch and Lochaber area. Of these, only Inverlochry survives in its 13th century form and this castle is the closest comparable structure to Lochindorb.

'Black' John Comyn II is recorded as having died at Lochindorb in 1302<sup>3</sup>, at which time his son was acting as Governor of Scotland. John Comyn III, as Governor, negotiated the wholesale submission of Scotland to the crown of English monarch Edward I in 1304, though Lochindorb seems to have been under English allegiance prior to this. The monarch notably used Lochindorb as a key base in 1303 with no apparent resistance from the Comyns of Badenoch, staying at the castle during his military campaign to receive the allegiance of much of northern Scotland. Lochindorb has therefore been noted as having accommodated an English king, but never a Scottish one.

Following the death of John Comyn III at the hands of Robert the Bruce in 1306, the Comyns of Badenoch lost influence within Scotland. John Comyn's heir and only son was in England being raised within the English Royal household and he was later to be killed fighting for the English at Bannockburn. Ownership of the castle either passed to the Comyns of Buchan or more likely, directly to the Crown. What is notable however, is the absence of any mention of Lochindorb in Bruce's subsequent 1307-08 campaign against the Comyns, where he first took Inverlochry then proceeded through the Great Glen to take Urquhart (under control of Alexander Comyn of Buchan in 1304) and Inverness, Elgin and Banff, then Balvenie, Duffus and Tarradale on the Black Isle. Bruce then defeated Comyn, Earl of Buchan at the 1308 Battle of Inverurie and carried out his herchip of the Comyn's Buchan heartland, ending Comyn influence in northern Scotland for good.<sup>4</sup>

With Bruce's victory at Inverurie, Lochindorb was ceded to the (now Scottish) crown and in 1308, the castle (as part of the Lordship of Badenoch) was handed to the Randolphs, Earl of Moray. From then on, as the crown of Scotland changed allegiance, so too did Lochindorb. A key date is 1335, when Sir Andrew Murray, Regent of Scotland, laid siege to the castle whilst it was again under English allegiance. The siege was broken by the military intervention of Edward Balliol, though by 1342 the castle was again in Scottish hands and in use as a prison, when Balliol's former chamberlain, William Bullock is documented as having died as a prisoner at Lochindorb.

There were two final, significant periods of ownership prior to Lochindorb's mid-15th century dismantling. First, Alexander Stewart, the notorious Wolf of Badenoch, was granted ownership in 1372 until his death in 1405. Finally, the castle was occupied for a decade by Archibald 'Black' Douglas from 1445, during which time the castle is described as having been 'munitioned and

fortified against the King'<sup>5</sup>. This does not define whether this fortification was through a building campaign, or more simply through the strengthening of the battlement and garrison of the castle.

Following the death of Archibald Douglas at the Battle of Arkinholm in 1455, Lochindorb was again held by the crown. A decision was made to dismantle the castle, on account of its 'situation and power', a task carried out by the Thane of Cawdor.

### **The RCAHMS Survey**

Two week long survey trips were made by staff from RCAHMS to document the castle remains. These had to be planned with consideration of the bird-mating season and seasonal times when foliage growth made access possible, so trips took place in March of both 2009 and 2010.

Survey work was carried out by RCAHMS surveyors John Borland, Georgina Brown, James Hephher and Heather Stoddart, RCAHMS photographer Steve Wallace and RCAHMS investigators Iain Anderson and Piers Dixon.

A new plan of the castle was established through a closed traverse of the island and perimeter walls using Electronic Distance Measurement equipment, offsetting into the courtyard and basse-court to plot building positions. This established an accurate outline plot of the castle to which additional details could be added through traditional hand measurement techniques. The relic building footprints and terrain features of the main courtyard were added to the plan using a plane table.

As with most RCAHMS building surveys, the majority of the survey drawing was carried out on-site, with only the working up of details and illustrative phasing of the plans carried out in retrospect.

In addition to ground survey and photography, a new aerial photographic record was made of the castle in April 2011. This was prompted by both a lack of detailed aerial coverage and a public contribution to the RCAHMS My-Canmore website. This photo, taken in October 2010, suggests the possibility of further relic building traces which were not detectable on the ground, mainly with respect to the details of the grass-covered building footprints within the courtyard and west range.

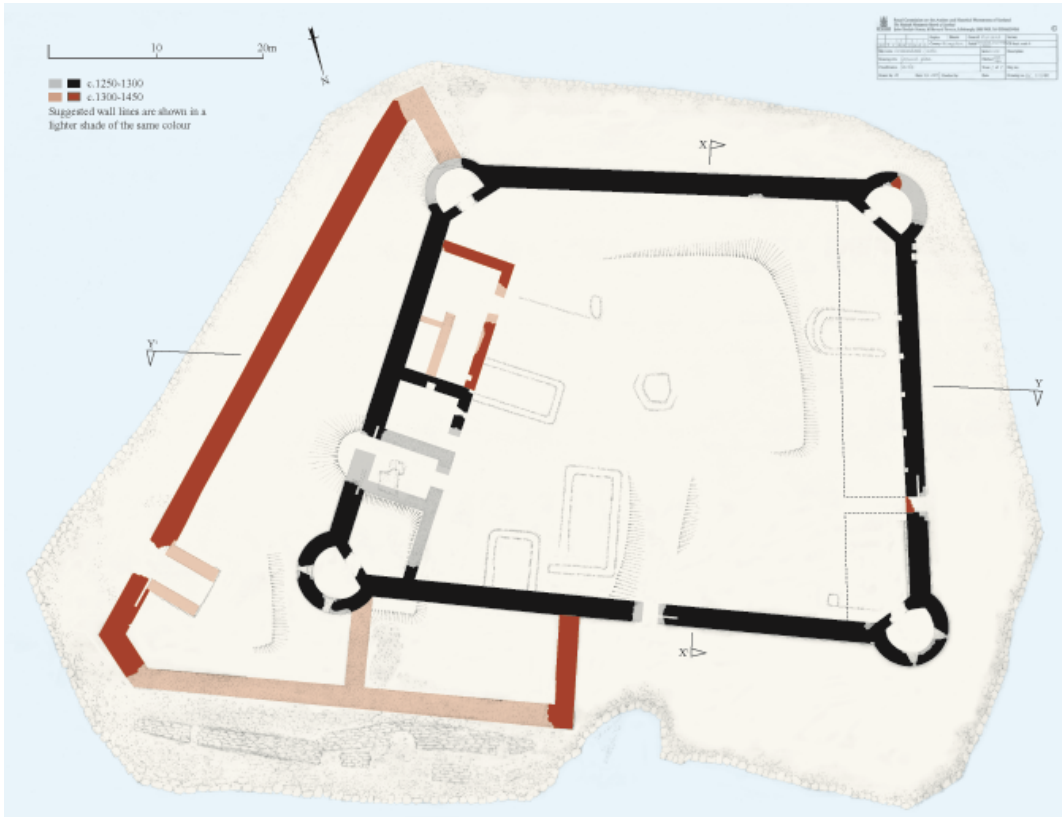


Fig 1.1 Ground level plan of Lochindorb Castle. © Copyright Historic Environment Scotland GV004942

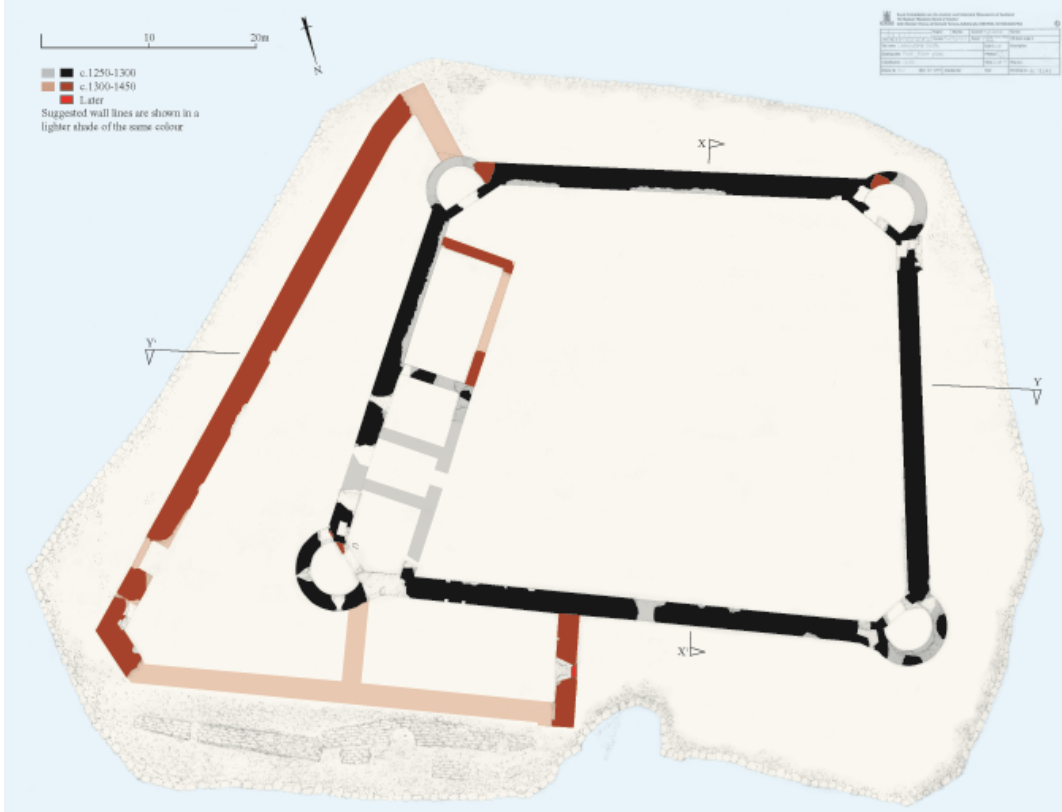
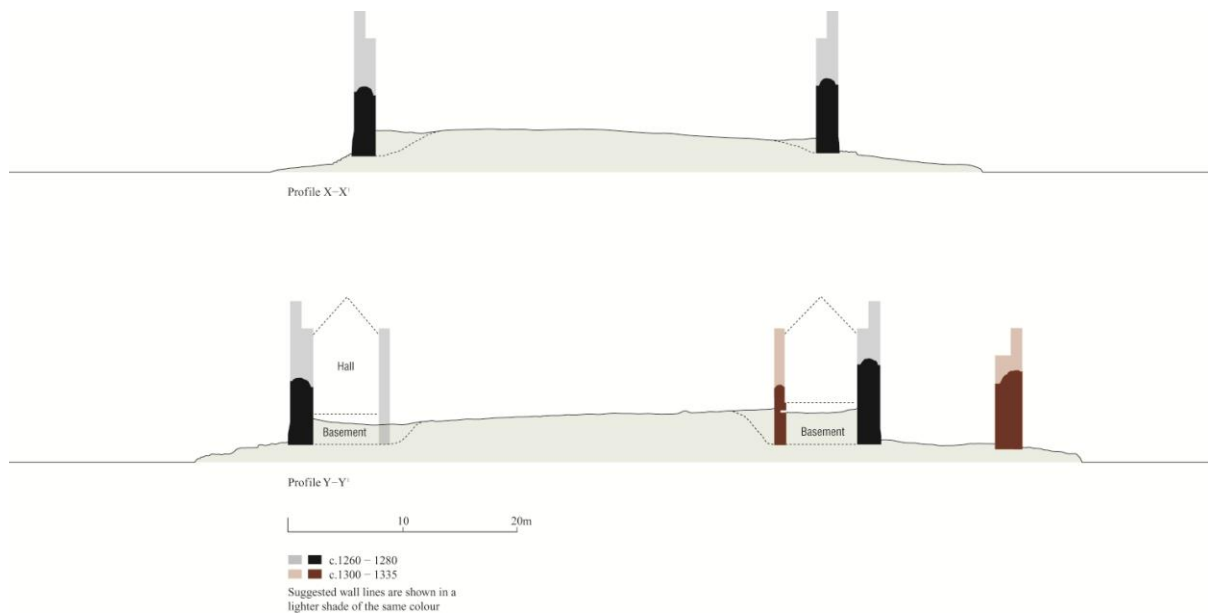


Fig 1.2 First floor level plan of Lochindorb Castle. © Copyright Historic Environment Scotland GV004943



**Fig 1.3 E-W and N-S profiles through castle. © Copyright Historic Environment Scotland GV004944**

### The RCAHMS Survey

The new plans of Lochindorb Castle illustrate the two main phases of development that have been identified. The majority of the remains of this enceinte castle date from the 13th century. The original footprint (shown in black on the survey plans) consisted of the four enclosure walls forming a quadrilateral courtyard, with a round tower adjoining each corner and internal building ranges on the E and W sides. The second phase of development at the castle (shown in red on the aforementioned plans) adds a thicker defensive wall to the E and N sides of the island, forming an outer courtyard between this and the original E wall and incorporating a large new hall into the N external wall of the original enclosure. The main courtyard E range has been extended at some point, whilst some of the W range has probably been taken out of use whilst the castle was still inhabited. The footprints of some relic buildings, possibly both 1st phase and later additions, are also scattered across the main courtyard (shown in outline only on the survey plans).

### 1<sup>st</sup> Phase Quadrilateral Enclosure

Our survey suggests that the gate located to the N end of the E elevation, facing the shortest distance to shore, has served as the principal entrance to Lochindorb. The original entrance and E elevation is today completely obscured by the 2nd phase additions and would originally have had an area of open ground in front of it. The E shoreline of the island does not, however, lend itself to moorings, probably leading to the inclusion of a second postern gate on the N elevation of the 1st phase enclosure. This N postern has been previously suggested as the principal entrance, however, there is no evidence here for a gatehouse, or even the provision of protective fire from arrow-slits on the corner towers. The N gate, whilst today of significant size, has lost any dressed stone that existed here to indicate importance and the original gate could have been much smaller in size. Whilst the E gateway itself is even more collapsed than the N gate, the traces of bar-slots on both sides of the doorway indicate the scale of an entrance matching that in the outer perimeter. Upon passing through this doorway, there are the footings of a narrow entrance passage through the E range at ground level, giving the possibility of a defensive chamber above. It is also flanked closely to

the N by the largest and most defensible of the 4 corner turrets, with an arrow-slit (since altered) offering direct defensive fire to the gateway.

### **Main Courtyard Buildings**

The only upstanding building remains within the courtyard are integrated into the original E wall, with different parts attributed to both the 1st and 2nd phases.

Within this E range, there is evidence at ground floor for an entrance passage flanked by a single chamber on either side. The evidence at first floor suggests that a single long chamber sat above. The E range is extended to the S with a 2nd phase, two-storey addition, which has been described in earlier descriptions of the castle as the 'chapel'.

The 1st floor chamber of the E range appears to have functioned as one of the principal spaces of the castle. This is the only part of the 1st phase castle where evidence remains of window apertures in the curtain wall, all other openings occur on the round towers. At the north end of this 1st floor chamber, ashlar surrounds survive on both a cupboard and jamb of an earlier door into the NE tower, again giving evidence of this space being of some importance within the castle. This first floor room has also had a garderobe, which was later remodelled as an access through into the 2nd phase hall added to the north side of the castle.

The 2nd phase addition to the E range is evidenced in two ways; firstly, the W (courtyard) wall is not tied into the earlier building and simply butts up against the S end of the range. This is more visible now that part of this 2nd phase wall has collapsed, exposing the facing stone of the 1st phase building turning the corner onto the S face. Secondly, evidence remains for a window opening in the S wall of the 1st phase range. This would have later been internalised by the 2nd phase addition to the S, but still retains the splayed jamb form of an external window.

The NE round tower, and the chambers within it, do not appear to have related directly to the functions of the E range. Here, there are three distinct upper floor levels, the lowest of which is accessible from the main 1st floor of the E range. From this level, there is a step down into the 1st floor of the NE round tower of around 0.8m. There is no evidence of a stair connecting these two spaces; however there has been a connecting doorway so it must be assumed that a stair existed. At an intermediate level between the round tower and E range floor levels is the garderobe within the N wall, which was stepped down into from the main 1st floor chamber. The significant floor level change between tower and chamber does not suggest that the 1st floor of the tower simply functioned as an offshoot of the main 1st floor range. Indeed, the change in floor level begs the question about whether there are two phases of building work here, but there is no physical evidence to suggest this, indeed the aforementioned window openings in the E courtyard wall relating to the E range evidences a single phase of works. Instead, it suggests that whilst passage between tower and chamber is possible, it might not be part of how the castle's circulation was intended to function on a day-to-day basis.

### **West Side of Courtyard**

There are now no upstanding buildings on the W side of the courtyard, which has seen a significant rise in ground level since the castle fell out of use. A postern gate is located towards the N end of courtyard wall which remains clearly visible externally but is mostly obscured by the raised ground

level internally. This postern has been blocked with a rubble fill, attributed to the 2nd phase, making the rubble-arched head of the gateway that is not now underground all but invisible on the internal wall face.

The W side of the courtyard gives evidence for the remains of two phases of buildings. The 1st phase is a long range thought to have comprised of a hall and adjoining chambers, the 2nd phase a grass-covered building footing which may be a post-occupation use of the site. The hall range is evidenced by a series of five large socket holes distributed along the length of wall to the left of the postern gate. These sockets are roughly level with the top of the postern gate. The socket holes are of significant size and would have held joists which suggest a building on a scale of a hall sat along this side of the courtyard. As the castle would presumably have had a hall prior to that which was added to the N of the courtyard, this is likely to be the location of its predecessor. To the right of the postern, a small projecting scarcement gives evidence for another building with a floor level roughly level with that of this hall. Fragments of projecting stone which run across the top of the postern suggest that this floor level may have projected across the top of the postern gate.

The scarcement to the N end of the W wall meets the diagonal wall across the entrance of the NW round tower. The level of this scarcement is roughly level with that of the identifiable floor level within the NW tower suggesting a more direct relationship between tower and chamber than that described in the NE tower.

The second phase of building along this W wall is evident in the visible footings of a small rectangular building located towards the S end of the wall and projecting at right-angles into the courtyard. This footing appears more recent than the two main phases of building identified and is considered to be contemporary to a similar footing that has abutted the join between 1st and 2nd phase on the E range. What this later W footing does suggest, is that the W side of the courtyard has been raised by filling in the aforementioned basement level after the 1st phase W range (or at least the 1st phase hall) has been removed. We can put no date on this work and could represent a phase of occupation either before or after the dismantling of the castle's fortifications in the mid-15th century.

### **The SW and SE round towers**

The SW and SE round towers evidence an important difference in function in comparison with the tower and chamber relationships described earlier on the N side of the castle. There is no significant evidence that demonstrates that the SW and SE round towers were connected to the W and E building ranges respectively. It might therefore be assumed that each of these towers had a self-contained function, presumably a mixture of defensive and circulation. Reference has been made to a water-pit dungeon<sup>6</sup> having existed at Lochindorb, said to have been the place where William Bullock perished whilst imprisoned in the castle in 1342. There are today no obvious remains of such a cell in the castle but the SW and SE tower basements are the most likely locations for this dungeon. The SE tower which seems to have been fairly extensively remodelled in the second phase, by 1342 may no longer have been suitable, and the SW tower's proximity to the water makes it a more likely candidate.

Each round tower appears to have had a garderobe set into the adjoining enclosure wall, the projection of which returns to the curve of the round tower. However none of these garderobes are accessible from the round towers, not a problem on the N towers which were abutted by buildings,

but evidencing that, on the S towers, some type of access arrangement to both garderobe and round towers has been lost. There is no physical evidence for stone structures such as steps or chambers in either the SE and SW corners of the courtyard, suggesting a timber structure might once have existed which gave access to the upper levels of the round towers, the garderobes and perhaps also wall walks at a higher level.

Of the three garderobes for which evidence remains, two survive unchanged. The entrance and chamber of the NW garderobe survive intact, with the modest projection of this structure from the external wall suggesting this was a small structure serving perhaps only one garderobe. The garderobe related to the SW round tower is a much larger example projected much further from the wall and is by far the best preserved, offering significant insight into the previous form of the castle. Here, three clearly defined chutes survive intact, the lowest of which relates to the surviving garderobe chamber at first floor. This gives evidence for at least one further building storey having existed above those currently surviving, with the other most likely serving a wall walk.

## **2nd Phase Outer Defensive Wall**

The first phase courtyard of Lochindorb is set back from the E and N shores of the island and at some point this appears to have been identified as a weakness. The castle has been considerably strengthened by the addition of a tall defensive wall only a few steps from the water's edge, forming an outer court to the E side of the castle and incorporating a large hall on the N side.

The 2nd phase principal entrance to the castle is through a pointed arch gateway located to the N end of the E defensive wall. Evidence of both a bar-hole and portcullis slot remain, together with a section of finished wall at 1st floor level, demonstrating that a portcullis chamber sat above the gateway. It appears that a small gateway building accommodating this portcullis chamber was the only building which butted the 2nd phase E defensive wall, which has otherwise ran the length of the E side of the island and returned to meet the exterior wall of the 2nd phase hall on the N side of the castle, and to the S, dog-legged back on itself to abut the SE corner tower of the 1st phase. Whilst the length and height of this 2nd phase wall mostly survives to the E, sections at the N and S ends appear to have been removed during the dismantling of the castle so that the E side of the island is no longer enclosed. To the N of the 2nd phase gateway, the defensive wall is split and twisted and at ground level on the outer face of this E wall, there are damaged sections which suggest an attempt to remove the wall through undermining or exploding may have been made, but this has not been successful.

To the N, the 2nd phase hall is butted against the original courtyard wall between the NE defensive tower and N postern, with the continuation of the 2nd phase defensive wall enclosing the hall's N side. All that remains of this hall today are the W gable wall and footings on the N shore. Large sections of this N wall are to be found lying flat but intact in the adjacent shallow water, suggesting that this wall has been undermined and pulled/blasted down as opposed to natural decay.

The 2nd phase hall addition has necessitated alteration of the 1st phase castle on the NE corner. The E gable wall of the hall returned onto the N side of the NE defensive tower and several large socket holes are evidence of where tuskers have tied the returning wall into the tower. This has necessitated the removal of the garderobe serving this NE tower, with the garderobe's entrance passage re-modelled to form a double-passaged first floor entrance into the hall from the upper



chamber of the E range. This is the only surviving entrance into the hall, though it might be assumed that another, ground floor entrance was located on the E wall giving access from the outer court.

The possible internal form of this 2nd phase hall is evidenced by several features. Large socket holes have been hollowed out close to the base of the N courtyard wall, demonstrating that timber floor joists ran N-S across the width of the hall. A row of socket holes also runs vertically up the remaining N gable wall of the hall. These socket holes suggest that a wall (presumably timber) has divided the main volume of the hall off from the N courtyard wall, with an intermediate space sitting in-between the two. At the top of the courtyard wall, toward the E end of this intermediate space there are also two socket holes which penetrate through the full thickness of the wall, showing that a structure of some type has been supported by and projected from the wall. As the hall was accessed from the E range at first floor level, it can be interpreted that there was some type of gallery and stair structure in this space between the hall and courtyard wall. The aforementioned socket holes and presumed timber wall are located in a position that, when considered alongside the clear raggle of the thick N wall that has now collapsed, place the large surviving W window at the centre of the presumed hall space.

No definitive date for the 2nd phase can be given, as the majority of the remains are simply plain, featureless wall-faces. The form of the pointed-arch E gateway bears resemblance to that of the 1st floor hall at Rait Castle, which is usually dated to the early/mid-14th century. Otherwise, there are no obvious built features which definitively demonstrate the built style of either Edward I's castles or alternatively 15th century styles which may confirm that the Douglas occupation of Lochindorb included a building campaign. The dating of the 2nd phase can also be considered alongside the known historic events at the castle. RCAHMS have tentatively attributed the 2nd phase work to the period between 1300 and 1335; on the basis that Edward I is the most likely occupant to have had the means for a building campaign on this scale and there are examples of him having altered and extended castles extensively even for the shortest of visits. We have also considered that by 1335, when the castle was laid siege to unsuccessfully by Andrew Murray, a siege which is thought to have taken place from the E shore. Murray would surely have attempted to get foothold on the island had the 2nd phase not been in existence, rather than laying siege from the shore. As this siege failed, the castle must have been near impenetrable at this time, suggesting the castle had been strengthened in the early 14th century.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomson, R., 1902, 'The Castle of Lochindorb', *Trans Inverness Sci Soc Fld Club*, vol. 5 (1895-9); Sinclair, J. (ed.), 1791-99, *Statistical Account of Scotland*, Vol. 8, p. 259.

<sup>2</sup> Oram, R., 2005, 'The Comyns to 1300', in Oram, R. and Stell, G. (eds), *Lordship and Architecture in Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> Laing, D. (ed.), 1872, *Wyntoun Chronicle*, vol. 2, pp. 311-12.

<sup>4</sup> Young, A., 1997, *Robert the Bruce's Rivals: The Comyns, 1212-1314*.

<sup>5</sup> Simpson, W. D., post 1934, *Lochindorb Castle*, p.11.

<sup>6</sup> Cumming, A. D., 1912, 'Loch-in-Dorb, an ancient royal fortress', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, vol. 46 (1911-12), p. 362.