

RUSCO TOWER



Rusco Tower is a very typical building of the end of the 15th century. It has several features which illustrate this, amongst which are the large number of mural chambers (seven in all), the corbelling which supports the parapet wall, walls up to seven feet thick, and more unusual, watersheds above the main windows.

The tower consists of five floors with a stone vault above the second storey. This vault served the double purpose of preventing fire from spreading upwards and denied access through the building by any means other than the staircase, which could be defended fairly easily. The main concept of defence was, like Cardoness, that it should be protected from the wall-head from where missiles could be thrown down at anyone trying to gain entry. As gunpowder and cannons were only in limited use by the time Rusco was built, it was never meant to withstand this sort of siege, but merely to repel any attempt to reclaim stolen goods or gain revenge for a murder.

It seems possible that some of the men who were involved in the building of Cardoness Castle proceed to Rusco when the former was finished. The land on which Rusco was built was given in 1484 by John Accarsane jointly to his daughter Mariota and Robert Gordon, her husband, who was the second son of Sir John Gordon of Lochinvar. Robert had what was a regrettably common but turbulent career, during which he was variously charged with complicity in murder, for which he was put to the horn, stealing a roof belonging to the Abbot of Kirkandrews, and kidnapping the heiress-wife of a neighbour to secure her land, etc., etc. Their marriage produced six sons and two daughters, and from this power-base the Galloway Gordons increased their power and wealth, latterly as Viscounts Kenmure.

Mariota, the first lady of Rusco, had a rather eventful life. When Robert died she married Thomas McLellan of Bombie. This did not please her eldest son so he seized her and sent her for safe keeping to the Borders and when her new husband raised a court action in Edinburgh for her release, he was killed in the High Street by the son and friends. She was released but, needless to say, she did not remarry.

Not many years after it was completed Rusco became a second home, for Robert Gordon and his family had become heirs of Lochinvar, following the death of Robert's elder brother at Flodden in 1513. This was a considerable blessing for it meant that no money was spent on developing or 'improving' the fabric of the building, although during the 17th century a two-stage extension was added on the north side.

Rusco Tower has been owned by several families over the past five centuries: The Gordons owned it until about 1670, when it was bought by a family McGuffog from Wigtownshire. They sold it at the beginning of the 19th century to the first of two families called Hannay, who were not related. They in turn sold it to the Murrays who held it for a short time at the beginning of this century. Around this time it was the home of two farm labourers and their families, including a pig that lived on the parapet ! The late Commander Cochrane then purchased it. The present owners of the estate of Rusco, the Gilbeys, bought it in 1968 and I acquired it, with some eleven acres, around 1972, thus bringing back the Carson name after nearly five hundred years. By this time the tower was derelict with no roof, floors, doors or windows, with trees growing out of the parapet and green slime on the walls.

After three years of planning work started in 1975 and, in spite of two years when the work had to be stopped for lack of money, all the main reconstruction was finished by the end of 1979. That is not to say that all the work was finished, for improvements have been carried out since, and of course there is maintenance work, which is sometimes a problem and expense. In 1982 the garden was started and has been expanding ever since.

The restoration work was assisted by grants from the Historic Building Council for Scotland, as were the driveway, cattlegrid and cobbling by the Manpower Services Commission, through the Community Enterprise Programme. Wherever possible and practical the building has been restored to its original state and this does apply to most, if not all, of the stonework. It has been returned to the purpose for which it was intended, namely a home.

The Exterior

The armorial panel above the front door shows, in the top half, the arms of James IV of Scotland, signifying the direct ownership of the land from the crown, and in the lower half are the arms of Gordon (three boars' heads) and Accarsane (three crescents) quartered. Looking upwards you will see the imitation cannons which are the means of discharging the water from the roof and parapet walk. These are only to be found on the front of the building; round the back semi-hexagonal spouts were inserted exactly as they were originally. The pointing in the stone wall was done with a similar finish to the original, with shingle from the seashore. The pale pink stone with which we replaced all the damaged stone dressing came from Alnwick in Northumberland; the only quarry still open for stone anything like the one originally used, which came from Turnberry or Ailsa Craig, and was sailed round the Solway, not only for Rusco but also for Cardoness where its 'dried-blood' colouring can be clearly identified. The window on the ground level was inserted later, replacing arrow/gun slits like those at Cardoness, which we have copied elsewhere on the ground floor.

The extension, which many local people remember as a ruin was added during the 150 years after the building of the tower. Unfortunately it was not built to the same standard, and by the time the recent restoration was carried out the walls were literally crumbling away. The outline of the entire building is preserved in situ. In taking down the rear wall of the building, where it was joined to the tower, a garderobe chute was uncovered; this came from the parapet walk level and has been left open to show what the drainage system was like. There was one of these from each floor in the building, some of which are now used as conduits for plumbing and electrical and telephone cables.

The Interior

There are five doorways from the entrance lobby, the first being the front door, the second, on the right, the cloakroom, which used to be a guard room; the third (now stoned up) was the entrance to the larger part of the undercroft, which was formerly a safe place for stock in times of danger, and the fourth one (a slightly smaller opening, now the workshop) was possibly for smaller animals. This room also has in its far

corner an oven or manger. The fifth door opens to the stairway which leads up 75 steps to all floors. The height of the doorways at this level is not an indication of the small stature of people in those days: - it was a means of defence. The first doorway off the stair gives entry to the upper prison with its garderobe still as it was, and a trap door giving the only access to the pit, again with its own garderobe but no window, where the more dangerous malefactors, or valuable hostages would be confined.

The next door off the stair gives access to what would have been the servants' sleeping loft, now in use as a dining room and kitchen. We do not know what the original purpose of the next little room was but it makes a useful store.

The next doorway leads to the great hall. which is and always was the heart of the tower. In it were held the Barony Courts when they were the means of enforcing law and order in the barony. Guests would have been entertained at this level, dining at the long trestle tables and then sleeping on the floor. In the south-west corner is the garderobe chamber, now a 20th century w.c. The small recess would have held an ample supply of damp moss - before the invention of loo paper!

There is a little study, entry to which is at the level of the window seat in the west wall. When this doorway was covered with a tapestry it would become a secret room and it has a small hole for listening to any conversations in the hall when visitors or witnesses thought they were alone. Such an arrangement is known as the 'laird's lug'

Above the fireplace are the arms of the present Baron of Rusco. There are no less than four windows in the great hall. one in each elevation. although the north-facing one was originally a servery which was knocked out into the third story in the 17th century part, only to be changed to a window after that building fell. The other three windows had glass in the top half and shutters in lower half.

Immediately above the great hall and through the next doorway off the stair, is the solar or laird's private apartments. We do not know how this level was divided internally but now it is partitioned into a bedroom and, at the back of the left-hand side a bathroom, (re-using old garderobe as a w.c.) and on the right a utility room for clothes, washing, drying and sewing, and also for breakfast etc.

The top floor, the garret contains two further bedrooms, one of which we call the dovecot, on account of the 'pigeon-hole' beds; and a bathroom in between them. Out on the parapet walk can be seen the roof with heavy stone slabs which were taken from a derelict farm building near Forfar. The parapet wall has been restored to the profile as it was at the beginning of the last century, although the embrasures were much deeper to facilitate the defence of the tower from the battlements. This is a convenient point at which to remind ourselves that Rusco Tower was built as a place of strength and was uncompromising in that achievement. The fact that it was a family home also in no way detracted from this, although it must be admitted that, after 500 years, the emphasis has been somewhat reversed!.

Graham Barron

Baron of Rusco
c.1985