

BUCHOLLIE CASTLE, CAITHNESS.

By JOHN MOWAT, F.S.A.Scot.

OLD Buchollie Castle, near Freswick in Caithness, is one of the most interesting ancient buildings in the county both from an architectural and historical standpoint. The Keep, which is one of the oldest lime built structures in the north of Scotland, is of the small, square, almost windowless type, built on the landward end of a precipitous rock or headland, jutting out into the sea, and with a cluster of rude clay built buildings on the protected ground behind. Girmgoe and Old Wick Castles are others of this class. It took its name from the Barony of Balquholly in Aberdeenshire, now Hatton, the former seat of the Mowats, a branch of the family who acquired the lands of Freswick from King Robert the Bruce and confirmed by charter of the Duke of Albany in 1406. The name is variably spelled, sometimes Bucholly or Bucholie, and in some old maps and prints "Freswick Castle," or "Old Freswick Castle."

As to the definite age of the structure, authorities differ. The Rev. Alexander Pope, T. Pennant, P. A. Munch, Dr. Joseph Anderson, and John Nicolson, well known antiquarian authorities, have identified the site with the Lambaborg of the Sagas, the stronghold of the daring Viking, Sweyn the son of Asleif. This brings it back to the middle of the 12th century, when, about 1148, Sweyn fortified the building, and in an historic siege withstood the combined forces of Earl Rognvald and Thorbjorn, and only gave in to save his garrison from starvation. Even then there was an existing building which he strengthened and fortified. True, an alternate site has been suggested. Mr. A. B. Taylor in his new translation

us that Sweyn and his companion Margad were let down over the cliffs to the beach below by ropes knotted together, and that, in their armour, they swam along the shore to the low land to the south. To anyone surveying the position carefully such a feat would be improbable, if not impossible, from the Broch of Ness. It would first of all entail a swim seaward, then round the Ruff of Freswick with its deep water and strong tidal currents, and then south, double the distance that it would be from Buchholme. From the latter site the feat could be accomplished within reason, and there are several places where the swimmers could make a possible landing.

In a later visit of the Norsemen, made about 1153, and described in Chapter XCIII of the "Orkneyinga Saga," when Anakol and Thorstein sailed over to Cathness, they arrived during the night and pulled up their boat into a hidden cove under some cliffs. The translator suggests that these cliffs were on the north side of Freswick Bay. Might not that landing place and "hidden cove" and "cliffs" be on the *south* side of the Bay, in the vicinity of the Broch of Ness and not on the *north* side where there are no cliffs. Such a landing place would be near to Lambaborg and to the "thicket" which is most likely to have been in the valley south of the burn of Freswick and the old house of Freswick where there is mossy ground with the remains of brushwood. As to the Hall of Freswick, it is more likely to have been further inland than the site of Freswick House at the Burn Mouth. The House of Freswick was built by the Sinclairs of Freswick towards the end of the 17th century, and there might be an earlier building other than the pre-Reformation chapel of St. Moddan on the other side of the burn, but local tradition lends to the suggestion that the Halls of the Freswick Vikings were at Tofts, half a mile inland from the recently excavated Viking settlements at the Links of Freswick. This situation is still locally known as "The Haas" and,



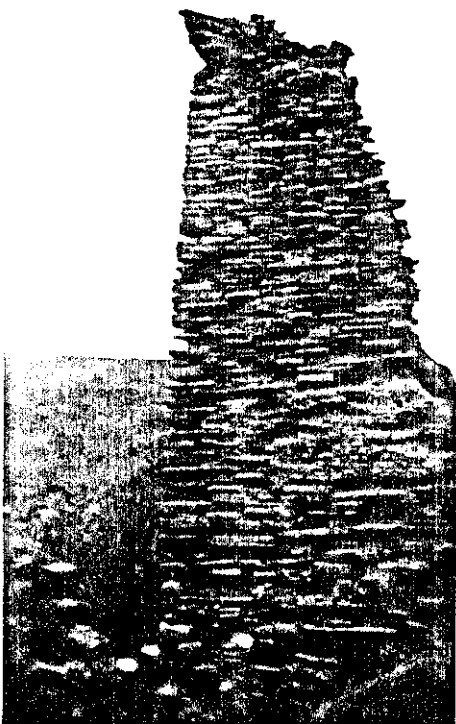
FRESWICK BAY FROM THE NORTH.
Showing Freswick House and Ness Head.

J. Modd.

until about one hundred years ago, there were considerable stone structures which formed the quarry ground for a number of houses erected by the proprietor of the estate about that period. Wherever situated, there is little doubt but that there were more pretentious Viking settlements on Freswick Bay than those recently excavated, where the crews of the Viking ships wintered and feasted after the close of their summer and autumn cruises in the West, something that would fit the description of the house of Skeggi mentioned in the *Burnt Njal Saga*.

The ruins of Buchollie Castle are fully described in the "Inventory of Monuments and Constructions in the County of Caithness," 1911, and the late John Nicolson made a careful survey and measurement of the buildings. The front Keep, which measures 14 ft. by 20 ft., rose to a height of 30 ft. and, until a generation ago, the front west wall remained the full height. In "The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland," by MacGibbon & Ross, there is a plan and drawing supplied by the late Rev. Alex. Miller, D.D., of Buckie, which shows this wall complete with battlemented cornice and supporting corbels of sandstone now almost gone. All the stonework of the main building has been quarried out of the adjoining cliff, except for a narrow facing of hearn red sandstone which surrounds the doorway and the upper windows, now much decayed and mostly fallen away. The mortar consists of a strong mixture of lime and sea-shell sand which, from its composition, has evidence of having been taken from the beach at Duncansby. The foundations about four feet in thickness are grafted on to the solid rock.

The ground floor contains the four feet six inches arched entrance and one arched compartment on the right with one slit window towards the drawbridge entrance. The mid storey chamber, with two small windows facing the



BUCHOLLIE CASTLE.
S.W. Corner.

J. Mowat.



BUCHOLLIE CASTLE.
Interior of West Wall of Keep.

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by JOHN MARSH, F.S.A. Scot.

Buchholme Castle, Caithness.

5

land, seems to have been carried on wooden joists the holes of which can still be seen. The upper chamber, of which only one small window remains, had the appearance of being vaulted. The rock on which the castle stands is about 100 feet high at the cliff edge and is connected to the main precipice by a narrow neck of land, eight to ten feet wide, level with the height of the rock. Through this narrow isthmus there has been cut a trench six or seven feet wide and down to some eight or nine feet below the threshold of the entrance door. This entrance must have been at some time spanned by a wooden jiffing bridge similar to that used at Ginnigoe Castle.

It is difficult to imagine a more dreary or desolate situation for a homestead. And yet it must have been the home and rallying point of many generations of the Mowat family, whose early history is so interlinked between Balgubolly in Aberdeen and Buchholme in Caithness, that it is now difficult to unravel. That they were a leading family, with various branches in both Counties, during the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, is evident from the very scanty records available. The lairds are so often styled sometimes of Balgubolly, sometimes of Buchholme and Freswick and sometimes of Freswick only that it is a problem for the most expert genealogist. They were linked in marriage with the prominent families in Aberdeen and Caithness as well as later in Orkney and Shetland. A daughter of the laird of Buchholme was the mother of the first Sinclair of Ulbster.

The walls of the old castle, that betoken a turbulent race in turbulent times, are fast crumbling to decay. Yet bound up in its grey ruins, on which must have battered five or six centuries of North Sea wind and spray, are chapters of thrilling history, and we would fain think that not the least of these episodes were the escapades of Sweyn the Viking.

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119



PLATE V.—Bueholie Castle (No. 32).