

Adapting to New Technology: Roxburgh Castle and the Scottish Marches

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On 3 August 1460, King James II of Scotland was killed by a gun whilst besieging the English-held castle of Roxburgh. He did not die as a result of gunfire by the defenders of Roxburgh, however. Instead he was killed by a fragment of his own bombard, a Flemish gun called ‘The Lion’, which burst under the strain of firing. In the words of the sixteenth-century Scottish chronicler, Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie, the arrival of Scottish reinforcements:

made the king so blyth that he commandit to charge all the gunes, and give the castle ane new volie. But quhill this prince, more curios nor became the majestie of ane king, did stand near hand by, quhair the artylliarie wer dischariged, his thigh bone was dung in tuo be ane piece of ane misframed gune, that brak in the schutting: be the quhilk he was strukin to the ground, and died hastily thairefter.¹

Despite this setback, the siege was continued by James’s widow, Mary of Guelders, and the garrison was forced to surrender within a week. Subsequently the castle was demolished by the Scots and fell into ruin. This is perhaps the best-known anecdote about James II, and also about Roxburgh Castle. However the castle had been using guns successfully in its own defence since 1384. Notably, in 1436, the castle resisted the army of James I of Scotland and his formidable artillery train long enough to be relieved by an English army led by the Earl of Northumberland. This was a significant setback which prevented James from invading England and resulted in the loss of his expensive artillery.² Guns had become central to the conduct of sieges by this date, with the garrison of Roxburgh possessing its own stock of these weapons. This was a technology that had been introduced to England in the fourteenth century and which was soon used for the defence of towns and castles. These weapons had a significant effect on defensive architecture, as can be seen with surviving medieval town walls and towers, which often include gun-ports.³ B. H. St. John O’Neill has argued that from the middle of the fourteenth century onwards, guns became so large and useful in siege warfare that fortifications were adapted to counter them.⁴ This paper will examine the example of Roxburgh Castle, a key royal border castle on the East March of Scotland, to see how it was adapted to the threat and

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¹ Robert Lindsay, *The Chronicles of Scotland*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: G. Ramsay and Company, 1814), I: 159.

² Ralph A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI: the Exercise of Royal Authority, 1422-1461* (London: Benn, 1981), 161-2.

³ For instance, see John R. Kenyon, ‘Early Artillery Fortifications in England and Wales: A Preliminary Survey and Reappraisal,’ *Archaeological Journal* 138 (1981): 205-40.

⁴ B. H. St John O’Neill, *Castles and Cannon: A Study of Early Artillery Fortifications in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960).

potential of gunpowder weapons. Although little now remains of Roxburgh Castle, sufficient documentary evidence survives to trace how artillery was used in the castle, from its introduction in the late-fourteenth century to the destruction of the castle in 1460.⁵ This article will demonstrate that guns were crucial to the castle's defence and that of the East March of Scotland, yet their use did not necessitate extensive changes to the castle, and the guns were adopted with apparent ease.

Context

The slighting of Roxburgh Castle in 1460 was not the first time that the building was destroyed. In February 1314, James Douglas captured the castle in a surprise night attack using scaling ladders whilst the garrison was feasting.⁶ The original twelfth-century edifice was then levelled on the orders of Robert the Bruce 'lest the English should ever again rule the land by holding castles.'⁷ Yet the strategic significance of the site was recognised by Edward III who, in 1334, had the castle rebuilt.⁸ Thereafter, until its destruction in 1460, Roxburgh Castle was one of three places permanently garrisoned by the English Crown on the Scottish border, the others being Carlisle and Berwick-upon-Tweed. This was exceptional as few castles, even royal ones, were garrisoned, except on a temporary basis during periods of crisis. Its defence, therefore, was considered crucial to the defence of the northern border with Scotland, which was reflected in the special arrangements for its governance.

Roxburgh Castle was administered as part of the East March of Scotland, under wardens who were responsible for law enforcement and the military protection of the region.⁹ The castle, however, also had its own keepers who were responsible for its security. These men were paid directly by the English Exchequer for the wages of soldiers and for military equipment. For instance, Sir Robert Umfraville was paid £628 9s 10d for the safe custody of the castle for half a year and eight days in 1416.¹⁰ The numbers of soldiers in the garrison fluctuated over time. In 1381-2 it consisted of eighty-eight men, made up of three knights, thirty-two men-at-arms and fifty-three archers. By 1401 it was composed of 132 men, incorporating one baron, six knights, forty-five men-at-arms and eighty archers.¹¹ At least some of their equipment was paid for by the Exchequer. For instance on 1 February 1418, Simon Fleet, Keeper of the Privy Wardrobe of Henry V, paid £5 for 3,000 quarrels and one crossbow for the furnishing of the castle.¹² This can also be seen in an inventory of 1387, which included five crossbows, 400 quarrels, two bows and ninety-nine garbs of arrows.¹³ These arrangements were necessary as the castle

⁵ For the difficulties in studying the use of gunpowder weapons on the Anglo-Scottish border, particularly in non-royal castles, see David Grummitt, 'A Military Revolution in the North? The Impact of Gunpowder Weaponry on the Anglo-Scottish Marches,' in *England and Scotland at War, c. 1296-c. 1513*, eds. Andy King and David Simpkin (Leiden-Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2012), 285.

⁶ Michael Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages: the English Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 298.

⁷ Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years War. Volume I, Trial by Battle* (London: Faber, 1990), 141.

⁸ Roxburgh Castle was, however, recaptured by the Scots in 1342 before the English regained control in 1347. Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years War. Volume I, Trial by Battle*, 141, 408.

⁹ S. B. Chrimes, 'Some Letters of John of Lancaster as Warden of the East Marches Towards Scotland,' *Speculum* 14 (1939): 4-5.

¹⁰ Harris Nicholas, ed., *Proceedings and Ordinances of the Privy Council of England*, 2 vols (London: Record Commission, 1834), II: 178.

¹¹ AHRC-funded Database, 'The Soldier in Later Medieval England,' accessed 5 May 2014, <http://www.icmacentre.ac.uk/soldier/database/>.

¹² The National Archives [hereafter TNA], E 403/633 m. 11.

¹³ TNA, E 364/23 rot. E dorse.

was located in a relatively isolated area, which was subject to disorder and Scottish attacks. Successive English kings were, therefore, keen to ensure that the castle was adequately defended, as can be seen in the provision of gunpowder weapons.

The Use of Guns at Roxburgh Castle

The year 1384 saw the first recorded reference to guns at Roxburgh Castle.¹⁴ This occurred at a tense time in Anglo-Scottish relations which, since the late-thirteenth century, had often been characterised by warfare. By the middle of the fourteenth century these hostilities had become part of the wider conflict between England and France known as the Hundred Years' War, with the Scots allied to the latter. The resumption of war with France, following the breakdown of the Treaty of Brétigny in 1369, meant that the border regions came under renewed threat of attack. In January 1384 a Scottish force captured the English-held castle of Lochmaben, before launching a raid into Cumberland.¹⁵ Almost certainly as a response to this attack, the decision was made to improve the security of the border region by the government of Richard II. By a writ of 15 February of the same year, four guns with 60lbs of saltpetre were delivered to the keeper of Roxburgh Castle, Sir Thomas Percy, for its defence.¹⁶ Subsequently, on 20 March, a commission was appointed to assess the artillery and fortifications of Berwick and Roxburgh Castle, as a result of which one further gun was purchased for the defence of the castle ten days later.¹⁷ This was not the first time gunpowder weapons had been sent to royal castles, with artillery despatched to Queensborough and Dover castles in the 1360s and 1370s.¹⁸ Yet the 1380s was a period in which they were being used in increasing numbers in royal castles and were therefore considered necessary for the adequate protection of fortifications.¹⁹

The provision of ordnance was needed as the danger from both France and Scotland intensified in the coming years. This was despite a large royal expedition to Scotland in 1385 led by Richard II. A joint Franco-Scottish army considered attacking Roxburgh in July of the same year, but was deterred by its strong defences.²⁰ The keeper of the castle, Thomas Swynburne, was subsequently sent 86lbs of gunpowder in August.²¹ Scotland was a signatory to the Truce of Leulinghem between England and France in 1389 but tensions on the border remained high.²² This is likely to have influenced the decision in 1397 to send to the castle a further three guns from the royal arsenal at the Tower of London, together with other equipment, such as gun-stones, lead shot, gunpowder, tampons and fire pans.²³ In the early fifteenth century the rebellions by Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland against Henry IV threw the border regions into chaos, with Berwick captured and burnt by the Scots in 1405. This is revealed by letters sent by John of Lancaster, the third son of Henry IV, to the royal council. In a letter of 1406 he stressed the poor state of the fortifications of Berwick and the need to restock the castle with guns.²⁴ By 1414 this had still to be addressed; he once again wrote to the council, emphasising that 'the walls of the town and castle of Berwick were in a ruinous condition

¹⁴ T. F. Tout, 'Firearms in England in the Fourteenth Century,' *English Historical Review* 26 (1911): 699.

¹⁵ Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years War. Volume 3, Divided Houses* (London: Faber, 2009), 518.

¹⁶ Tout, 'Firearms in England,' 699.

¹⁷ *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1381-1385* (HMSO, 1900-), 424-5; TNA, E 364/27 rot. F, F dorse.

¹⁸ Tout, 'Firearms in England,' 692, 695.

¹⁹ Tout, 'Firearms in England,' 678.

²⁰ Sumption, *The Hundred Years War. Volume 3*, 547-48.

²¹ TNA, E 364/26 rot. A dorse.

²² Sumption, *The Hundred Years War. Volume 3*, 676-678, 844-5.

²³ TNA, E 364/23 rot. B; E 364/32 rot. E dorse; Tout, 'Firearms in England,' 700-1.

²⁴ Chrimes, 'Some Letters of John of Lancaster,' 7.

and were now fallen in many places...and that the cannon, gunpowder, arms, artillery, and victuals in the town had been insufficient ever since the fire and the rebellion of Northumberland.²⁵ Roxburgh also appears to have been affected by the rebellion and Scottish attacks, with an inventory of 1410-11 revealing that the number of guns at the castle had fallen to four.²⁶ Five years later a commission was given in 1416 to Sir John Clavering and Robert Harbottell to survey the state of the fortifications together with the artillery at the castle.²⁷ This commission listed serious defects in the defences of the castle, yet the garrison was able to resist a Scottish siege the following year.²⁸ Nevertheless the need was felt to reinforce the weaponry of the fortress, with £26 13s 4d paid for the purchase and carriage of guns to Roxburgh on 15 November, and a further £20 expended for the same purpose in July of the following year.²⁹

By contrast, the border regions were relatively peaceful during the early years of the reign of Henry VI, in large part due to the captivity of James I of Scotland and the service of large numbers of Scottish soldiers in the war in mainland France.³⁰ Following the release of James I in 1424, a gradual breakdown in relations with Scotland occurred which led to the outbreak of war in 1436.³¹ This prompted the government to greatly reinforce the defences of the key northern fortifications, as can be seen by the account of John Skipton, Clerk of the Works for the King, for the years 1426-1434.³² The account included the purchase of twelve guns for Berwick and Roxburgh together with six guns for Carlisle. An additional quantity of four guns was given to Berwick, six to Carlisle and five to Roxburgh, together with gunpowder, saltpetre, gun-stones and other weapons. Furthermore, in May 1434, £54 was provided by the Exchequer for the purchase of artillery and £54 for the repair of Roxburgh Castle.³³ The commencement of hostilities in May 1436 resulted in the despatch of additional quantities of gunpowder.³⁴ These were required as Roxburgh was besieged by a Scottish army led by James I, which was well equipped with artillery.³⁵ Following the lifting of the siege, a further three barrels of gunpowder were sent to replenish the castle's stores, together with bows, arrows and other equipment.³⁶

No further evidence has survived for guns at Roxburgh Castle after this date, yet it appears likely, based on the previous evidence, that the garrison had a sizeable quantity of artillery in its possession for the siege of 1460. It has been suggested that responsibility for procuring ordnance had devolved to the wardens of the marches in the 1440s and 1450s.³⁷ However it is also possible that the weaponry in its arsenal was considered adequate for its defence: for instance the garrison successfully resisted a siege in 1456.³⁸ The fall of Roxburgh Castle in 1460 is therefore likely to have been due to the chaos caused by the

²⁵ Chrimes, 'Some Letters of John of Lancaster, 12.

²⁶ TNA, E 364/46 rot. D dorse.

²⁷ TNA, C 47/2/49 f.23.

²⁸ H. M. Colvin, *The History of the King's Works*, 6 vols (London: H. M. S. O., 1963-1982), II: 820-1.

²⁹ TNA, E 403/633 m.4; E 403/636 m.9.

³⁰ Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI*, 155.

³¹ Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI*, 157-61.

³² TNA, E 364/74 rot. N.

³³ TNA, E 404/50 f.295.

³⁴ TNA, E 403/723 m. 14; E 404/52 f.387; E 364/75 rot. G, G dorse.

³⁵ Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI*, 161-2.

³⁶ TNA, E 404/53 f. 173.

³⁷ Grummitt, 'A Military Revolution in the North?', 290.

³⁸ Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI*, 812.

Yorkist victory at the Battle of Northampton and the unlikelihood of relief from a divided England.³⁹

The Guns and Fortifications

Gunpowder artillery was clearly important for the defence of the castle, yet little evidence survives regarding the types of weapons available and how they were used. It is possible, however, to gain some limited insights using the extant sources. The majority of the early guns were of bronze, including the initial four guns sent to the castle in 1384, two of which were described as being large.⁴⁰ This had changed by the fifteenth century, with the accounts of John Skipton listing all of the guns as being of iron, each supplied with three chambers.⁴¹ These weapons fired a variety of different types of ammunition. For example, of the three guns supplied in 1397, two fired lead shot and one gun-stones.⁴² They were also bound to wooden beds known as ‘stocks’ to support the weight of their barrels.⁴³ Further equipment was provided to the garrison for accessories to use their guns and to make gunpowder. From 1387, the castle stores included a pestle for the purpose of mixing the components used for gunpowder, possibly in conjunction with horse and hand mills.⁴⁴ Fire pans and touches were also supplied for igniting the gunpowder to fire the guns, whereas tampons were used to separate the gunpowder from the ammunition.⁴⁵ It is not possible, however, to determine who used these weapons and how they were stored.

Equally, it is unclear how often the guns were used and how they were deployed in the castle. There is also no evidence that its fortifications were adapted to make use of gunpowder weapons, as none of the extant accounts of work mention architectural features such as gun-ports or bulwarks.⁴⁶ By contrast, castles such as Cooling and Portchester had gun-ports by the 1380s, whereas Berwick was in possession of a bulwark by the 1430s.⁴⁷ A 1484 survey of Hammes Castle, a fortification in the Pale of Calais, does suggest, however, that the guns are likely to have been placed on the towers and above the gatehouse.⁴⁸ The example of Hammes is particularly pertinent as very few modifications were made to it in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, despite it being an important frontier fortress which used guns in its own defence.⁴⁹ This suggests that, at least in some cases, medieval castles did not need to be adapted to make use of gunpowder weapons, although other castles on frontiers, such as Berwick and Guisnes, were substantially adapted in the late medieval period.⁵⁰

³⁹ Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI*, 813.

⁴⁰ Tout, ‘Firearms in England,’ 699, n. 24.

⁴¹ TNA, E 364/74 rot. N. For a definition of chambers, see Howard L. Blackmore, *The Armouries of the Tower of London, I: Ordnance* (London: H.M.S.O, 1976), 223-4.

⁴² Tout, ‘Firearms in England,’ 700-1.

⁴³ Tout, ‘Firearms in England,’ 696-7. For a definition of stocks, see Blackmore, *The Armouries of the Tower of London*, 245.

⁴⁴ TNA, E 364/23 rot. E dorse. The components of gunpowder were saltpetre, sulphur and charcoal.

⁴⁵ Tout, ‘Firearms in England,’ 700-1; E 364/46 rot. D dorse. For definitions, see Blackmore, *The Armouries of the Tower of London*, 246.

⁴⁶ Colvin, *The History of the King’s Works*: II, 820-1; TNA, E 101/483/4; E 101/483/8.

⁴⁷ Kenyon, ‘Early Artillery Fortifications in England and Wales,’ 207, 209; TNA, E 364/75 rot. G, G dorse.

⁴⁸ TNA, E 101/198/13 f. 91v.

⁴⁹ Colvin, *The History of the King’s Works*: III, 370-1.

⁵⁰ Colvin, *The History of the King’s Works*: I, 453; TNA E 404/79 f.156.

Castles and Guns: A New Perspective

Gunpowder weapons were essential to the defence of Roxburgh Castle and the marches of Scotland as a whole. As one of only three places permanently garrisoned on the border with Scotland, successive English governments were prepared to spend sizeable sums of money on ensuring the garrison was adequately supplied with ordnance. This mainly occurred at specific periods of tension with Scotland, such as in the 1380s, as well as around the sieges of 1417 and 1436. As a result, the numbers of guns at Roxburgh increased throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These weapons were, therefore, considered necessary for the defence of fortifications in this period. Despite this, there is no evidence that the fortifications were adapted to accommodate their use, which suggests that they were adopted with comparative ease. This is in contrast to other border castles, such as Berwick and Guisnes, whose defences were extensively modified to accommodate artillery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. George Ferrers, writing in 1558, described the castle of Hammes as ‘of old workmanship, without rampiers or Bulwarks: yet, nevertheless, by the natural situation thereof...could not easily be approached unto: either with great ordnance for the battery, or else with an army to encamp there, or a siege.’⁵¹ Roxburgh Castle is also situated in a strong defensive position, on a steep hill between the confluences of two rivers. It appears, therefore, that fortifications were not adapted to accommodate guns in a universal fashion.

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⁵¹ Colvin, *The History of the King’s Works*: III, 370-1.

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