

The forgotten 'Fortress of Haddington'

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To view Haddington today with its historic St Mary's Church beside the River Tyne, it appears to be a peaceful Scottish town. However, in 1549 it was a very different story for it was the site of a huge quadrangular earth and timber fortress raised by the invading English army and bombarded for weeks by the Scots and French.

The fortress was planned by Sir Thomas Palmer and constructed within the 15th century town walls around the Scottish 'Donjeon' towerhouse of Haddington. As yet though no archaeological evidence has been found for the exact location of the 'Donjeon', although it is mentioned several times by the French correspondent Jean de Beauque who came to the siege of Haddington with the French commander Andre de Montalbert in 1548. And it is from his book published in Paris in 1556 that most of the description of the 'Fortress of Haddingtoun' is taken.

To trace the roots of the Haddington fort we must go back to the English land and sea invasion of 1547 during the 'rough wooing' when the English wished to force a marriage between the infant Mary Queen of Scots the English Prince Edward. The English army of 16000 men and thirty odd warships, under the Duke of Somerset, having sacked the castles of Dunglass, Thornton, Innerwick Whitekirk and Fawside, routed the Scots army of 24000 at Pinkie, Mussleburgh, by the combined use of land and ship bombardment. However, they were unable to take advantage of this victory as there was no safe place for them to lodge in the Lothians. Also several of the great Lothian castles, such as Dalkeith, Luffness, Byers, Hailes, Tantallon and Dunbar, were still in Scots hands. The English withdrew, but plans were made to return and secure a permanent base in the Lothians from which to 'insult over and annoy the whole kingdom'. To this end several Border outposts were captured and garrisoned, in the south-west Lochwood castle, in the south-east Ferniehurst castle and Hume castle, to act as stepping stones for re-invasion.

In February 1548 a fresh English army marched on Haddington from Berwick under Lord Grey of Wilton and with the aid of local 'assured Scots' who favoured the marriage of Mary to Edward, they attacked many castles around the base camp of Haddington. Hailes, Yester, Hermanston tower, Nunraw tower, Salton, Waughton and Lennoxlove (then known as Lethington) were all captured and held by 'assured Scots' and token English garrisons.

Luffness castle at Aberlady bay was almost certainly 'slighted' at this time. The castle had successfully resisted a landing by the English fleet en route to bombard the Scots at Pinkie in 1547. The present Luffness house appears to be a 17th century tower, but surprisingly it sits on the site of a late 13th century keep, which itself was part of a huge rectangular courtyard castle

running south and east from the present house, with large drum towers in three corners and two small drum towers linked to form a gatehouse in the far east corner close to the existing beehive doocot. The entire site was surrounded by a broad freshwater ditch.

Within the terms of the peace treaty of Boulogne in 1550 the defences raised by the French around Luffness castle in 1549 were flattened, as with the English defences at Haddington and Dunglass (1). Historians have argued that the 13th century courtyard castle of Luffness was destroyed at this time. However, the treaty referred to 'new' artillery fortifications not existing buildings. So logically the courtyard walls must have been cast down before 1550 - in 1548 - so that Aberlady bay would be a safe port for English ships to land as Haddington was but 'two leagues from the sea' at this point.

Possibly Byres castle was also destroyed at this time although there is no written evidence to support this. Byres was a large castle within a series of wooden palisaded ditches, and its proximity to Haddington would make it a great threat to the English garrison. Since great quantities of timber and rubble would be required when construction of the Haddington fort got underway, Byres would have provided an ideal quarry.

Lord Grey left his men, under the command of Sir John Wilsford, to dig in at the town while he departed south to gather more supplies and men. During his absence, several of the castles taken by Grey were recaptured by the Scots and the 'assured Scots' punished. However, Haddington remained in English hands.

In April 1548 Lord Grey returned with the military engineer Sir Thomas Palmer so work was then started in full on the fort with the materials stock-piled. In fact most of the houses in Haddington had already been used in the construction of defensive 'curtain' walls. A task force was sent to sack Dalkeith castle and burn down Musselburgh. While there, the English felled many trees which may have been taken back to Haddington for use in the building work.

The fort in Haddington was a great contrast to traditional stone-built castles of the day. It was basically a massive low-set wooden and earth quadrangle with 'four strong bastions ... conveniently placed at the four corners of the wall' for heavy cannon, surrounded by a 'largely flat-bottomed ditch'. The timber-framed battlements were infilled with rubble and covered in turf to resist cannon fire. Unlike castles of the day, when holed by cannon fire, the fort could quickly be repaired with wood and earth. Some distance behind the battlements 'were several works of earth by way of platforms and ravelins' (a V shaped trench) 'where they planted a great many guns of middle size' and 'above these ... a curtain with fascines on which arquebusiers (riflemen) stood secure'. If these defences fell, the garrison could retreat to the 'Donjeon' itself which was enclosed by a ditch 'with a strong wall and four turrets' with its back close to 'the river Tyn'.

The work carried on into June 1548 without any attack from the Scots who had already called on the French for help in evicting these unwanted and hostile tenants. By this time the fort had a garrison of 2500 'Englishmen' being made up mostly of Spanish, Italian and German mercenaries.

In the middle of June, the French fleet arrived at Leith with over 100 ships, including 16 galleys, a brigantine and three great ships with an army of almost 10000 men, under the command of Andre de Montalbert, Sieur d'Esse. First they fortified Leith making it a safe camp. They then sailed to Aberlady bay bringing ashore heavy cannon and arrived at Haddington just in time to prevent the English from pulling down St Mary's Church. The French threw up earthen trenches around St Mary's and made two camps beside Lennoxlove castle with a smaller camp alongside Hailes castle. Following this a fort was raised beside Dunbar castle.

The Scots camped towards the Garletons raising earthen cannon platforms to the north and east of the town (2). The Scots had six cannon from which in one day they fired 340 balls, causing minor damage to the fort. During the night the walls were quickly patched and infilled by the English so that when the infantry assaults finally came after a week's bombardment, it was still impossible for the Scots and the French to get in, and many were killed in the attempt.

In the middle of July 1548 a parliament was held at St Mary's and a treaty signed by which Mary would marry the Dauphin Francis, heir to the French throne. So Mary could never marry Prince Edward, thus symbolically ending the wars of the 'rough wooing'. However, even after Mary was sent to France under the protection of a huge French fleet, the English continued to occupy Haddington. The siege dragged on with the Scots and French bickering over how to storm the fort, so no further ground assaults were made.. The Scots and French did have one success, they defeated and slaughtered a relief convoy of 1500 English horsemen. After this small victory, Mary of Guise, mother of Mary Queen of Scots, rode to St Mary's church to congratulate the French troops there. However, the church came under fire from the fort and a cannon ball almost struck the Queen Mother herself with several of her entourage being injured. The church tower caught fire but was quickly quenched with water from the Tyne.

The bombardment of Haddington had to be abandoned in August 1548 when another English relief convoy of 12000 infantry and 1800 cavalry arrived under the command of the Earl of Shrewsbury supported by a fleet of warships in the Forth. The French fled their camps at Hailes and Lennoxlove and retreated to Leith. Lennoxlove castle was burnt down by the English along with the French fort at Dunbar.

Meanwhile out to sea a French galley, possibly evacuating the garrison from Dunbar, was chased and sunk by the English fleet off Tantallon castle. However, several of the English vessels were damaged by heavy cannon fire from Tantallon's seagate gunners. These gunners were later thanked by Mary of Guise.

Around September 1548, most of Shrewsbury's men were sent south to engage the Scots and French attacking English-held Border castles. Hume castle had already been captured by Lord Home, and Ferniehurst was also under threat. Troops were also drawn from Haddington to build a small earth and timber fort at Dunglass, even trenches were raised around Dunglass church to make it a strong camp to protect communication lines to Haddington.

By November 1548 the English at Haddington were keeping a low profile due to the fact that disease was sweeping through the camp. Had this been known, no doubt the Scots and French would have made an all-out assault on the fort instead of harassing the English foraging parties. Although at one point Archibald Campbell, fourth Earl of Argyll and his 'half-naked' Highlanders from Castle Campbell did manage to get into the fort at night. Totally unsupported by the French, they were forced to flee under heavy fire from the garrison.

By the summer of 1549 Ferniehurst was taken after a siege by the Scots and French. The defeated English commander with his garrison, ran towards the French lines to surrender, but was beheaded in mid-flight by a Scot whose wife he had raped. The Scots bought those of the garrison who had surrendered to the French and beheaded them all. They played bowls with the severed heads. With this bloody fall of Ferniehurst and other outposts connecting Haddington to the south, the fort became more of an isolated camp than a safe base. With the arrival of a new French commander, de Thermes, who quickly raised a strong artillery fort round Luffness castle, any chance of escape by sea was gone.

The plan of de Thermes was to starve the English out. He reasoned that the garrison might still try to escape by sea as the land route would be suicide. So watch was kept on English ships in the Forth. De Thermes was further convinced when some English warships sailed into Aberlady Bay to test the Luffness defences and were quickly forced back to sea by the French bombardment. However this proved to be a red herring because the entire English garrison evacuated Haddington at night late in September 1549 and fled by land to Berwick taking the Scots and French totally by surprise.

So, abruptly the build-up of armies, attacks and counter-attacks was over in one night with neither party feeling the victor. With the treaty of Boulogne in 1550, the fort was dismantled. Today the fort can no longer be traced due to modern roads, housing and cultivation. So sadly nothing is left to remind us of the forgotten 'Fortress of Haddington'.

Notes (EHG)

(1) Earth works remain at Dunglass and were visited by the Society in 1995.

(2) An earth platform, tilted towards Haddington and similar in size and elevation to the artillery platforms of this period (see the example in Leith Links), is located on the north bank of the Tyne near Abbey Bridge. It may be worth investigating the date of this construction.