

# Report on the Archaeological Potential of Keith Marischal House, East Lothian

Miles Kerr-Peterson, Spring 2017



Keith Marischal House is located in the Parish of Humbie in East Lothian. The house today is largely a product of nineteenth and early twentieth century remodelling, to such an extent that even in 1887 the renowned surveyors of Scottish Castles, MacGibbon and Ross, lamented that the preceding century had removed anything for them to ‘describe or delineate’.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, built around a surviving late sixteenth century tower on the south-east corner and the rest of the property is built upon the foundations of an older house along its whole length.

This preliminary report seeks to outline the importance and archaeological potential of the lost Renaissance Palace of the Earls Marischal, which the current house once formed, the rest lying underneath the site of the current driveway in front of the house.

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<sup>1</sup> D. MacGibbon, T. Ross, *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, 5 vols (Edinburgh, 1887-1892), ii, 508.

## Historical Importance of Keith Marischal House

In the second half of the twelfth century a man called Hervie acquired the north-west part of the lands of Keith, from which he took his surname. The settlement became known as Keith-Hervey to differentiate it from Keith-Simon, the lands of Simon Fraser, later known as Keith Hundebay (from which the parish of Humby takes its name). This Hervie de Keith built a chapel on his estate, which later became its own parish alongside the Parish of Keith-Simon. Keith-Simon and Keith Marischal were eventually united into one whole manor before 1225, although the parishes remained separate until the early seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> As principle seat of the Keiths at this time, Keith Marischal would have had some notable residence befitting their status. In 1320 the Keiths were granted extensive lands in the north east of Scotland, shifting the focus of their landed influence, especially with the Castles of Dunnottar in the Mearns and Inverugie in Buchan.<sup>3</sup> Keith Marischal would have still been handy for its proximity to Edinburgh; the journey there and back could be done in a single day, as the Minister of the parish, John Nimmill, complained of having to do every Sunday in 1607.<sup>4</sup>

The settlement of Keith Marischal probably consisted of a small cluster of houses around the church on the north side of the burn, some of which survived into the eighteenth century. On the south side of the burn (the location of the present house) would have stood a castle. Although the barony of Keith is mentioned many times over the centuries, the first mention of the castle itself seems to be on the 22 April 1525 when William Keith, the grandson of the Earl Marischal, is confirmed in his earldom's possessions, including the Lands and Barony of Keith *cum turre et fortalicio*. This is a very unusual description, as castles are usually described as one or the other, not both. Turre simply translates as tower, fortalicio, literally fort, meant defended courtyard/walled enclosure.<sup>5</sup> A variation of the name of the house was 'Keith Place'; place or palace being a Scots term which denoted a noble residence which enclosed a courtyard.<sup>6</sup>

It is unknown how the many wars between Scotland and England might have impacted upon the castle. As it lay not too far from the paths of the English armies during the Rough Wooings, especially after the Battle of Pinkie in 1547, it may have suffered then, hence necessitating later building works and redevelopment. In January 1550 the lands and castle seem to have been burnt by a raiding army, for example.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> J. Balfour-Paul, *The Scots Peerage*, 9 vols (Edinburgh, 1909), vi, 25-28.

<sup>3</sup> C. A. McGladdery, 'Keith family (per. c.1300–c.1530)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/54235>, accessed 3 March 2017].

<sup>4</sup> H. Scott, ed., *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanae*, 9 vols (Edinburgh, 1915-1950), i, 377.

<sup>5</sup> J. Balfour-Paul and J. Maitland-Thomson, eds, *The Register of the Great Seal of Scotland 1513-1546*, (Edinburgh, 1883), p.68 no.302.

<sup>6</sup> Hopetoun House Archives, RHP6857: Lauder 'Plan of Keith Place, Keith Mill and Duncrahill Farm' (1801), Charles McKean, *The Scottish Chateau* (Stroud, 2001), 27.

<sup>7</sup> T. Thomson, ed., *A Diurnal of Remarkable Occurrents*, (Edinburgh, 1833), 49.

The most important proprietor of the house was George Keith fourth Earl Marischal, the founder of Marischal College in Aberdeen. In 1583 he was described as having the ‘revennew greatest of any Erle in Scotlande’.<sup>8</sup> He is known to have lavished money on many other noble residences, building wholly new towers in Peterhead, Aberdeen and Brotherton, and remodelling his great castles of Inverugie, Fetteresso and Dunnottar. He also devoted considerable attention to Keith Marischal. George spent a great deal of time at court in Edinburgh and the house would have provided a useful retreat.<sup>9</sup> Coupled to this Marischal was keenly interested in his descent and the history of his family. He composed the first known genealogy of the Keith Earls Marischal, and in this he declared that the estates of Keith Marischal had been given to his ancestor Robert Keith, along with the office of hereditary Marischal of Scotland, by a grateful Malcolm II for slaying a Danish invader called Camus.<sup>10</sup> Due to the importance with which he held the site, his known architectural exuberance elsewhere, and his extensive revenues, it is very likely that Keith-Marischal was extravagantly remodelled and ranked alongside the likes of Inverugie, Fetteresso and Dunnottar. As the ancestral home of the Keiths the house would have been held in high regard as the symbol of the family’s origins and the antiquity of its kindred, in a like manner to the Campbells of Glenorchy’s reverence for their ancestral seat of Kilchurn, even though they principally resided at Breadalbane. In like manner, Keith Marischal would have been the focus for elaborate display, even if the Keith’s principal house was the more famous Dunnottar in the Mearns.<sup>11</sup>

A datestone surviving on Keith Marischal reads ‘1589’. That year the earl took out a loan against the barony of Keith Marischal, for the sum of £8,000, which may relate to this phase of building work. He borrowed a further £4,666 13s. 4d. in 1590, and the same sum again in 1592.<sup>12</sup> It was in 1589 that he travelled to Denmark as ambassador to marry Princess Anna as proxy for King James.

This selling of the Keiths’ ancestral home was apparently ‘for the purpose of aiding General Leslie’ during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, at which time the inept earl, William Keith, sixth Earl Marischal, was experiencing severe money problems.<sup>13</sup> The house and barony were sold in November 1642 to William Hepburn, advocate of the king’s council and session.<sup>14</sup> The house thereafter remained with the Hepburns until being passed to the Hopes of Hopetoun and leased out.

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Rogers, ed., *Estimate of the Scottish Nobility During the Minority of James the Sixth* (London, 1873), 31.

<sup>9</sup> National Library of Scotland MS21174, ff.29-30; National Records of Scotland GD124/15/48/1.

<sup>10</sup> William Ogston, *Oratio Funebri, in obitum maximi virorum Georgii, Marischalli Comititis*, (Aberdeen, 1623), 6-9.

<sup>11</sup> Chris Dalglish, ‘An Age of Transition? Castles and the Scottish Highland Estate in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries’, *Post Medieval Archaeology* 39/2 (2005), 243-266.

<sup>12</sup> National Records Scotland, Register of Deeds, vol. 33 fols 8r.-10v.; vol. 36 fols 110v.-112r.; vol. 47 fols 127r.-128r..

<sup>13</sup> Henry Sangster, ‘Parish of Humble’ in the *Statistical Account of Scotland*, 20 vols (Edinburgh: 1791-9), vi, 156-63.

<sup>14</sup> *The Register of the Great Seal of Scotland 1634-1651*, p.475

### **Documentary evidence for the appearance of Keith Marischal House**

The best description of the house comes from Alexander Mitchell, who was sent by Bishop Robert Keith (1681-1757) for that purpose. Mitchell was active from 1715 to 1781.<sup>15</sup> The description must date to before 1757 and Bishop Keith's death.

Mitchell's description is as follows (some punctuation added for clarity):

There is a Court 24 yards long and 19 yards broad at the east end, on the south side of the court there is a Turret standing consisting of three stories and garrets and at the opposite corner of the same side there was another Turret now demolished. The breadth of the House on the south side within is only 15 feet, part of this side and part of the east end is all that is now in repair, the foundation of which is still the old walls or vaults, five of which are still extant but all the court was vaulted round about.

On the north side was the Marischal's great hall which reached the whole length of the Court and perhaps 19 or 20 feet broad without the Court. At the east end of this side was the Porter's house off the ground and on the west end of the same side was the kitchen. The inside wall of this hall is yet standing to the joisting.

Within the Court south side was a large scale stair about the middle and a large turnpike at the east end of the North side near the Porter's house but in the inside also. The outer entry to the court is uncertain whether in the east end or north side but most probably in the east end.

The old stone put up by Mr Ker on the door head bears the arms of the family still very Distinct.

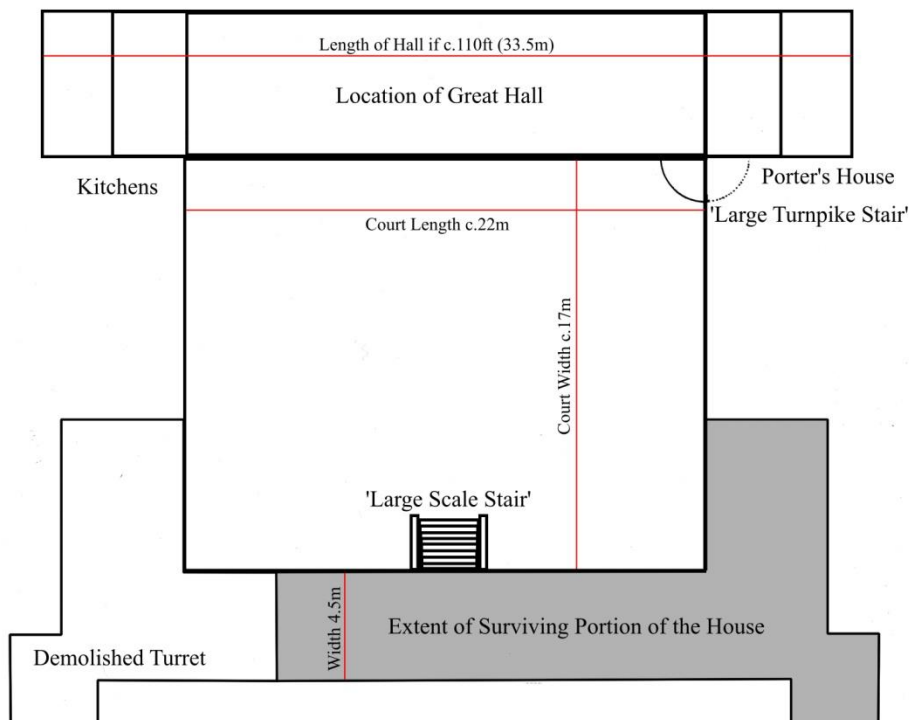
At a little distance on the north side is an old Chapel yet standing near which is the Priest's house almost now demolished. here also is a burying place.<sup>16</sup>

Mitchell's description is summarised in the following diagram:

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<sup>15</sup> David Bertie, *Scottish Episcopal Clergy 1689-2000* (Edinburgh, 2000), 99.

<sup>16</sup> National Library of Scotland, MS21175, ff. 37-8.



The house was also described in the Statistical Account of Scotland in 1793 by the minister Henry Sangster:

Perhaps the house of Keith, one of the seats of the Earl Marischal, though of no later date than 1590, may be mentioned on accounts of its hall, which surpassed anything of the kind, and was suited to the splendour of a family at that time the most opulent and powerful in the kingdom. The house itself was of the form of a hollow square: and one entire side of it, 110 feet in extent, and 3 stories in height, was occupied by a hall. Succeeding proprietors have pulled it down. The timber with which the house was built, was a present from the King of Denmark, as an expression of the high opinion he conceived of the Earl, when employed to treat of the marriage of the princess Anne of Denmark, with James VI.<sup>17</sup>

There do not seem to be any mentions of further building work under the following owners; instead they seem to have gradually demolished parts of it.

<sup>17</sup> Sangster, 'Parish of Humberie', 162.



*The rear of Keith Marischal house in 2013. The turret on the right is the oldest part of the house and is described by Mitchell. The '1589' inscription is on the corresponding gable on the front of the house, The heraldic panel seen here is salvaged from Rubislaw. Mitchell's description of two identical turrets implies an arrangement similar to Drum Castle, below or Balcaskie House (image from: <http://www.scottishcastlesassociation.com/news-articles/articles/drum-castle-hidden-chamber.htm>)*



## Significance of Keith Marischal House

The two 'turreted' arrangement described by Mitchell and indicated through the surviving portion of the building, suggest that the south wing closely resembled the 1619 range at Drum Castle in Aberdeenshire. Alexander Irvine, ninth Laird of Drum's mother was Elizabeth Keith, aunt to George Keith, fourth Earl Marischal. Irvine also donated generously to the earl's new university of Marischal College in Aberdeen. Drum Castle is thought to be the work one of the Bell family of Master Masons, possibly John Bell, who worked on Craigston Castle and additions to Castle Fraser.<sup>18</sup>

The comparison with Drum is important. At Drum the old medieval tower stands separate to the 1619 range and this may have been the case with Keith Marischal. The footings of the original tower of Keith may lie under the lawn and formed part of the courtyard, possibly on the un-described western side. A poem of 1635 described Keith Marischal as a tower, which might support this, as well as the 1525 description of 'tower and courtyard'.<sup>19</sup> The old medieval tower, if it still stood when the palace was sold in 1642, would have been of little practical use for the new owners and of no symbolic significance for them, which may explain its quick disappearance and why it is not mentioned by Mitchell.

The Great Hall, if the descriptions given are accurate, would be a remarkable building. Mitchell gives the length at 72 feet 'and perhaps 19 or 20 feet broad without the Court', which could be taken to imply the width of the hall (although he implies that only the inside wall still stands), or that it extended a further 20 feet in addition to the 72 of the courtyard width, making 91-2 feet. If he meant 72 plus 20 feet on both sides this would match with Sangster's assertion of 110 feet. This is a very large structure. For some perspective, the 1503 Great Hall of Stirling Castle, the largest in Scotland, measures 38.5 metres (126 feet) by 11 metres (37 feet).<sup>20</sup> That of Edinburgh Castle is 82 feet by 30 feet, that of Linlithgow 98 feet by 28 feet. Of the more ambitious noble great halls the Earl of Orkney's 1606 Great Hall at Kirkwall, Orkney, was 56 feet by 20 feet, the Earl of Huntly's Huntly Castle 43 feet by 29 feet.<sup>21</sup> The Long Gallery of Dunnottar Castle, by far the largest room in that castle, was 115 feet by 14 feet 9 inches. The Great Hall there was 55 feet long.<sup>22</sup>

As this feature is described as a Great Hall in two accounts and described as three storeys in height (implying the hall itself was three storeys, rather than one room in a building range of three storeys), we may take this at face value. There is a slim chance that it is mistakenly described as Great Hall

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<sup>18</sup> H. Gordon Slade, 'The Tower and House of Drum, Aberdeenshire' *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 115 (1985), 297-356.

<sup>19</sup> W. Keith-Leask, ed., *Musa Latina Aberdonensis*, 3 vols (Aberdeen, 1910), iii, p.74

<sup>20</sup> Measurements from [<https://www.historicenvironment.scot/media/2222/stirling-corporate-brochure.pdf> accessed 3 March 2016].

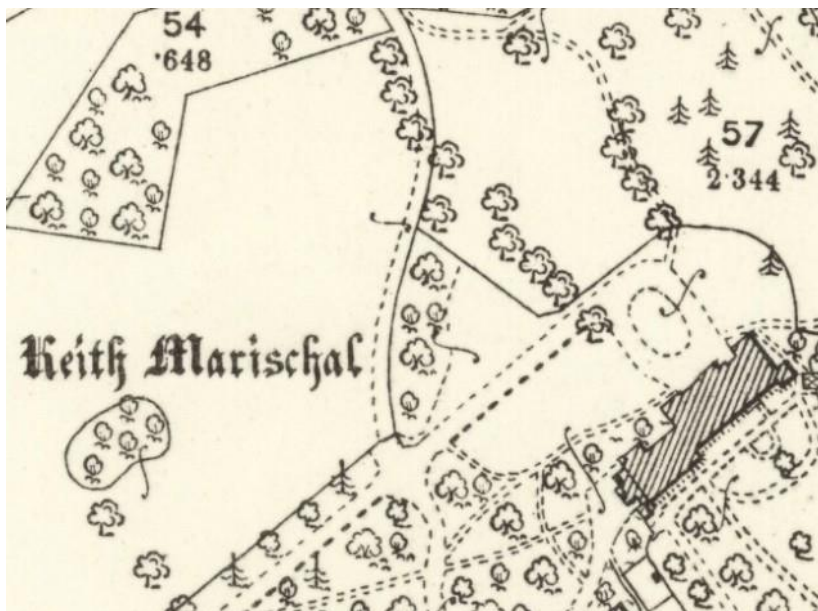
<sup>21</sup> Deborah Howard, *Scottish Architecture: Reformation to Restoration 1560-1660* (Edinburgh, 1995), 22, 41, 70, 78-79.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Gordon Barron, *The Castle of Dunnottar and its History* (Edinburgh, 1925), xxvii-iii.

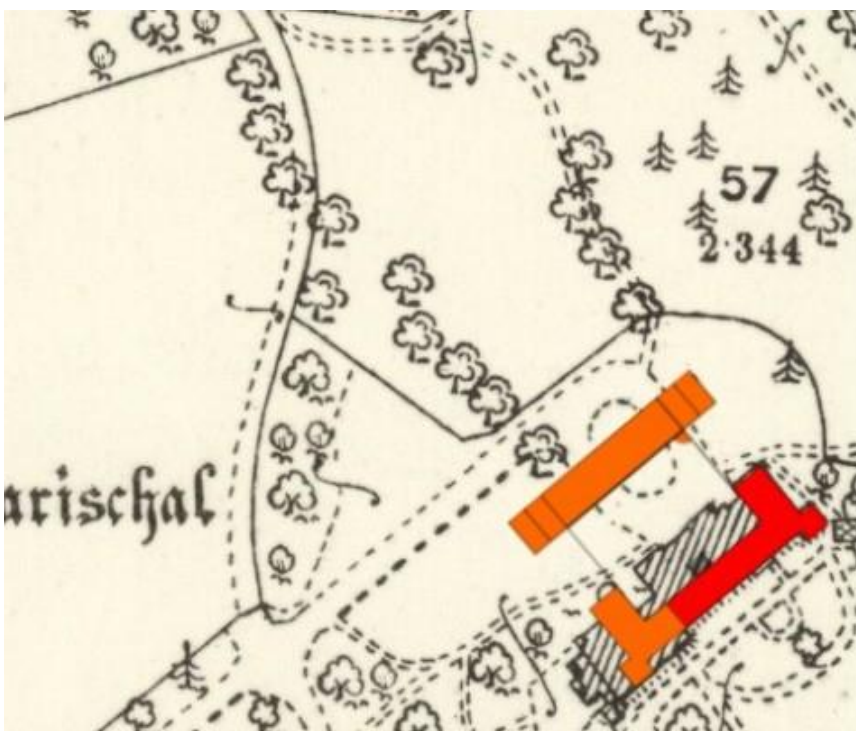
instead of Long Gallery, which were known to have such long lengths, although they only occupied a single storey on the top floor. However, at Keith Marischal this would have been much more likely to have occupied the top storey of the south range, as this could then have overlooked the formal gardens and enjoyed the most sunlight.

### Proposals

In order to establish the dimensions and extent of the Earls' palace a geophysical survey is proposed for the lawns in front of the house. In theory, since demolition there have been no later building phases or significant earth movements, so the foundations or at least some trace of them should be easy enough to detect. This will give us a ground plan of the lost palace and allow us to reconstruct what has been lost.



*The Existing house on the 1907 25 inch to the mile OS Map for Humble and with the house described by Mitchell overlaid.*







*Google Maps satellite image of the house above and overlaid with Mitchell's description*

