

# WHAT IS A BASTLE?

Bastles were two-storey defensible farmhouses built in the Border region around 1600. Many bastles were very similar in design and construction. A typical bastle was 10-12m long and 5-6m wide externally.

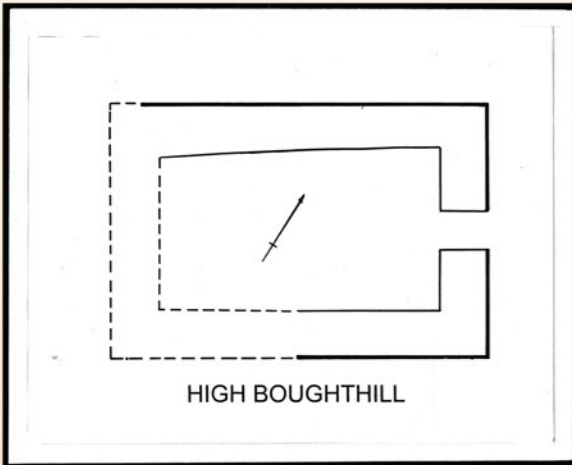
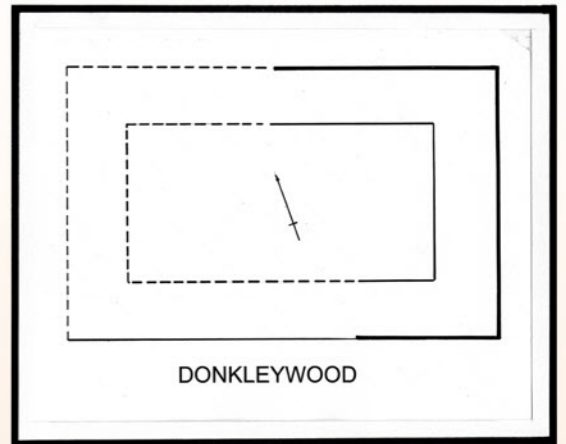
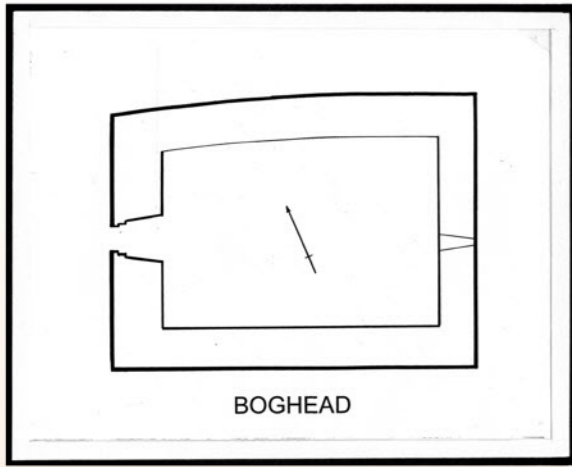
They were usually built of large roughly dressed stones on a spread foundation. The quoins (corner stones) were very large, often weighing as much as 1 tonne. 300kg, stones were common. At ground floor level the walls were 1 to 1.6m thick.

The ground floor housed some animals and probably fodder. The norm was to have a single small entrance with one or two timber doors. These were secured by drawbars. There were usually only a few ventilation slits and no windows. In some bastles the ground floor was vaulted.

The upper floor provided basic living space with a few small windows. It was reached by internal stairs or a ladder and trapdoor. Some bastles had an external upper floor doorway. If original, this doorway would have been accessed by a removable ladder. External stone stairways were added later. There was usually a fireplace set into an end wall and recesses for storage.

Bastles would have been costly to build but the design clearly worked since it was widely used.

This design was only superseded when the occupiers felt it was safe to live downstairs and wanted more room and comfort. None of Tasset's bastles survives in its original state. All have been altered, and many completely or partly demolished and the stone re-used.



South-east gable wall with original ground floor byre doorway, now blocked



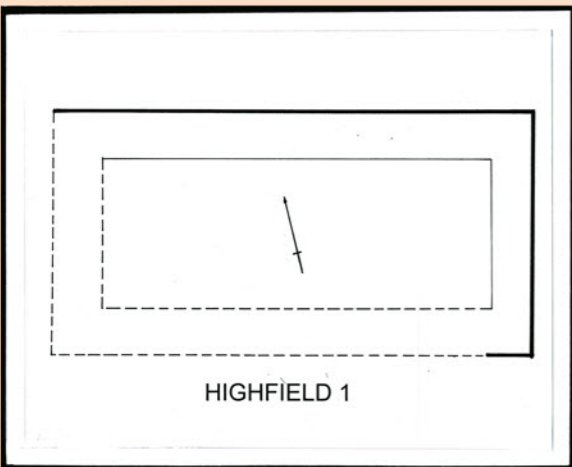
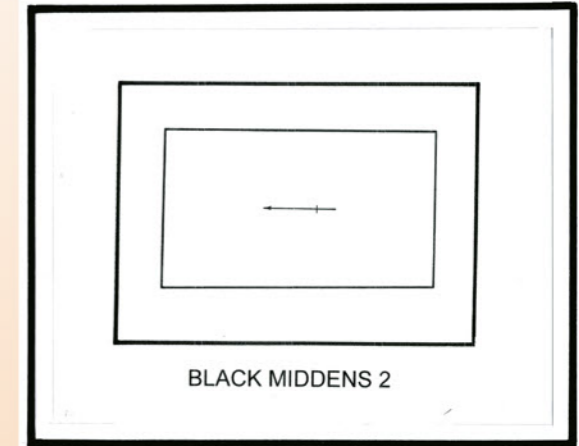
Back (north-east) wall with small window on upper floor; ground floor window, formerly a ventilation slit, now blocked



North-west gable wall with small ventilation slit on the ground floor



Front (south-west) wall facing across the Tasset Valley; two small windows very restricted view; later ground floor doors and stone stairway



## Why build bastles?

By the mid 16th century, farmsteads had been established in the valleys of the river North Tyne and most of its major tributaries. Originally the buildings were of wood.

These permanent settlements were established on land previously used for summer grazing. Pressure from an increasing population meant that the livings became sparser and thieving increased.

A report of 1541 on the state of the Borders describes the headsmen's houses as built of 'great square oak trees' with turf and earth roofs. There is no mention of stone.

From about 1550 the climate deteriorated with the onset of 'The Little Ice Age'. Wet summers and stormy winters led to crop failure, famine and disease. Produce imported from the lowlands increased in price while at the same time cross-border raiding increased.

