

**PEEL: ITS MEANING AND
DERIVATIONS: AN ENQUIRY
INTO THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE
TERM NOW APPLIED TO MANY
BORDER TOWERS**

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Peel: Its Meaning and Derivations: An Enquiry Into the Early History of the term now applied to many border towers by George Neilson

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GEORGE NEILSON

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ITS MEANING AND DERIVATION: AN
ENQUIRY INTO THE EARLY HISTORY
OF THE TERM NOW APPLIED TO MANY
BORDER TOWERS

BY

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.MDCCCXCIV.

PREFACE.

THE number of enquiries, resulting from the issue of 55 copies privately reprinted from the Proceedings of the Glasgow Archaeological Society, has tempted me to print, for sale, a fresh edition, limited to 120 copies. The text is unchanged, but one or two very slight additions are made to the notes.

G. N.

34 GRANBY TERRACE,
GLASGOW, *September, 1893.*

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
THE QUESTION STATED—WHAT WAS A PEEL?	1
I. PEELS OF EDWARD I., 1298-1307—	
(1) LOCHMABEN	2
(2) DUMFRIES	3
(3) LINLITHGOW	5
(4) SELKIRK	8
(5) BERWICK	10
II. ENGLISH-MADE PEELS, 1307-1336—	
(6) PERTH	11
(7) LIDDELL	13
(8) KINROSS FORT	15
(9) STIRLING	16
III. OTHER EARLY PEELS—	
GARGUNNOCK, TARBERT, ETC.	18
IV. PEELS OF 16TH CENTURY—	
BARMKIN AND PEEL STATUTE, 1535	20
BISHOP LESLEY'S DEFINITION	22
PEEL AND BARMKIN COMPARED	24
A DEFINITION WITH EXAMPLES	27
V. GENERAL REMARKS—	
TRANSITIONAL USAGE	29
VI. ETYMOLOGY—	
FROM <i>PEEL</i> BACK TO <i>FALUS</i>	31

PEEL: ITS MEANING AND DERIVATION.

BY

GEORGE NEILSON, F.S.A.Scot.

[Originally read at a Meeting of the Glasgow Archeological Society held on
9th January, 1891; but since re-written.]

THIS paper² is an attempt to trace the historical evolution of the word 'peel'
—a name now practically appropriated to the small, strong rectangular towers
of stone³ which, sometimes moated, sometimes surrounded by a 'barmkin' or
exterior wall, stud the English and Scottish border with memorials of ancient
international feuds. It is emphatically a word with a history, to which neither
lexicographer nor antiquary has yet done justice.

1. NOTE OF EXPLANATION OF SOME CONTRACTED REFERENCES.

Bain=Calendars of Documents relating to Scotland. Ed. Joseph Bain. (Record
publication.)

Bower=Bower's Scotchchronicon. Ed. Goodal.

Exch. Rolls=Exchequer Rolls of Scotland. (Record publication.)

Hamilton Papers=(Record publication. Ed. Joseph Bain.)

L. Q.=Liber Quotidianus Contrarotuloris Garderobae, 1299-1300.

R. S.=Rolls series.

Rot. Scot.=Rotuli Scotie. (Record publication.)

Stevenson=Historical Documents Scotland, 1286-1306. Ed. Joseph Stevenson. (Record
publication.)

2. Excellent general descriptions of these towers are given by Mr. C. C. Hodges in the
Reliquary, v. pp. 1-10, and by Chancellor R. S. Ferguson, in his *History of Cumberland*, 236.
See also an interesting sketch of the border tower system in Canon (now Bishop) Mandell
Creighton's *Carlisle*, pp. 82-84. I differ from them all, however (but see note p. 33 *infra*),
as to the meaning and history of *peel*.

As is not unusual in matters philological it is necessary at the outset to discard some preconceptions,¹ to get rid of the idea that peel meant from the first what it means now, and to be prepared to find that in the course of some six centuries the signification has altered. Was our peel always a tower of stone, as all previous writers on the subject have assumed? If not, what was it? Whence comes it—from Latin *Phala*, an oval tower;² from Latin *pila*, a pile;³ from Celtic *peel* or *pill*, an earthen mound or castle;⁴ or from any of them? Before offering an answer I submit my evidence.

I.—PEELS OF EDWARD I.

The oldest proper examples of the word known to me occur in the accounts of the costs of the Scottish wars of Edward I. The first peel on record is that of Lochmaben: the next is at Dumfries. Others soon follow at Linlithgow and Selkirk.

1. *Lochmaben:*

Edward retiring from Scotland after the battle of Falkirk in 1298, had taken possession of the castle of the Bruces at Lochmaben, referred to as a *castrum*⁵ and as a *chastel*.⁶ That winter a considerable addition was made to its defensive strength, as appears from payments⁷ made to English labourers, sawyers and carpenters (*ad faciendum pelum ibidem*) for making a peel there. The entry as regards the sawyers is (*ad sarranda ligna pro constructione peli*) for sawing wood for the making of the peel. This leaves little doubt that the peel was essentially a wooden structure. Its character is further illustrated by an order⁸ issued in November, 1299, to provide for the

¹ I begin with some of my own contained in *Annals under the Bruces*, pp. 28-9.

² Jamieson's *Dictionary*.

³ Professor Skeat in his *Supplement to his Dictionary*. But see note p. 33 *infra*.

⁴ I think I have heard this derivation eloquently maintained by Professor John Veitch.

⁵ Trivet (*English Hist. Soc.*) 374. Probably this castle then stood on the old site now known as the Castlehill. The argument that chiefly persuades me into that belief is touched upon in my last note on Selkirk peel *infra*.

⁶ Stevenson, ii. 333.

⁷ Stevenson, ii. 361.

⁸ Stevenson, ii. 404, 405. Bain, ii. 1112.

sure keeping of the close outside the castle, strengthened by a palisade—*custodia clausi extra castrum de Loghmaben palitio firmati*. This passage points with great clearness to the conclusion that the peel was this palisaded or stockaded close, forming an outer rampart extending the bounds and increasing the accommodation of the castle. In 1300 houses¹ had been made in the 'piel,' and in 1301 the 'pele' was unsuccessfully assailed² by the Scots. In the writs relative to Lochmaben Castle in subsequent years, very many of them conjoin the peel with the castle,³ the full name and style of which was *castrum et pelum*. In 1376 payments⁴ were made for planks and to carpenters at the new front called 'la Pele,' and the entry distinctly contrasts with that which follows for 'stanworke' of the castle itself. So late as 1397 English writs refer to the castle and peel.⁵ The nature of the peel of Lochmaben is thus tolerably definite.

2. Dumfries :

Still more so is the evidence from Dumfries. A castle was there,⁶ just as at Lochmaben, before the peel was made by King Edward in the autumn of 1300. In September Friar Robert of Ulm and with him Adam of Glasham and many other carpenters were busy in the forest of Inglewood in Cumberland making the peel, as the account⁷ phrases it, which was to be set up round about the castle of Dumfries. King Edward visited them one day. The queen visited them another.⁸ The exigencies of war demanded haste, and the work was pushed on with all possible energy. Soon we hear that the king has gone to Dumfries, perhaps escorting the workmen and the materials,

¹ Stevenson, ii. 408. *Les maisons qu'il ad fait en le piel de Loghmaben*.

² Stevenson, ii. 432.

³ In 1300 *L. Q.* 120; in 1304 Bain, ii. 1525; in 1334-36-37-38-41-56-60; *Rot. Scot.*, i. 263, 264, 276, 280, 281, 399, 479, 550, 607, 793, 846.

⁴ Bain, iv. 231.

⁵ Bain, iv. 494.

⁶ Stevenson, ii. 333, 413; *Exch. Rolls*, l. 37; *Rot. Scot.*, i. 7, 12.

⁷ *L. Q.* 165. *Carpentariis facientibus pelum in foresta de Ingehoode assidendam circa astrum de Dumfries*.

⁸ *L. Q.* 167. This entry repeats the phrase of the last one precisely.

(*pour lever son pel e efforcer le chastel*) to raise his peel and strengthen the castle.¹ Cordage and other necessaries were purchased to bind up the timber for conveyance to the peel, and other arrangements were made for the same purpose.² Precise details are lacking as to the mode of conveyance, but whilst some of the material was transported by sea up the river Nith,³ it is probable that the bulk of it was conveyed by the workmen themselves under convoy of the expeditionary force, a part of which the king had reviewed⁴ at Carlisle on 15th October. On the 18th he appears to have reached Annan,⁵ doubtless, with a detachment of his army on the march. Possibly the work of erecting the peel at Dumfries began before his arrival there, for the accounts⁶ leave it uncertain how much of the work of the carpenters and others at the peel was done at Inglewood Forest, and how much on the spot. By the 20th of October, at latest, the task was being pushed briskly forward by all hands at Dumfries. Ditchers, carpenters and smiths toiled hard at the digging of ditches and planting and rearing of beams and palisades. The wages account shews that from first to last the carpenters (on an average to the number of over 60, but sometimes over 100 being employed) laboured for 11 weeks. The ditchers, numbering about 250, worked for a fortnight only. There were about two dozen smiths. It is obvious, therefore, how greatly the carpenter-work predominated. The term employed⁷ in the entries describing these labours is usually very general—for work (*circa pelum*) about the 'peel.' We are not told very precisely what was done by the

¹ Stevenson, ii. 296. There can be no doubt that Father Stevenson is in error in assigning this letter to August, 1298. There was no peel being raised at Dumfries then. All the circumstances point clearly to the letter having been written in October, 1300. See the letter, note its contents, and compare—Bain, iii. 1154, 1164, 1165, 1171, 1172, 1174, 1175; iv. p. 446; L.Q. 13, 73, 265. The matter cannot be discussed at greater length here.

² L.Q. 74.

³ Bain, iv. 1783; L.Q. 265.

⁴ L.Q. 268.

⁵ L.Q. 260.

⁶ L.Q. 43.

⁷ L.Q. 264-5.

⁸ *Operancium circa pelum de Dumfries*, L.Q. 6, 7, 264, 268; *Pro factura et operatione peli* L.Q. 263; *Pro factura peli*, L.Q. 265, 268; *Pro pelo faciundo*, L.Q. 268.