



Autumn Newsletter September 2025

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An Introduction to Clan Kerr



Ferniehirst Castle

The Tower, the Laird's Apartments and the Lothian Wing

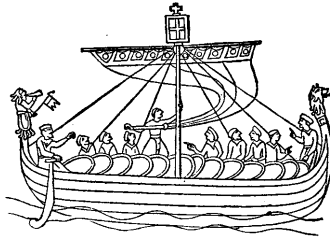
Welcome to the first of my quarterly newsletters from Ferniehirst Castle at the very root and heart of Clan Kerr. You will find an historical outline at our official website created just for you describing the Ferniehirst Kerrs and I look forward to including in these letters some more of the results of my researches, sometimes revealing skeletons in cupboards or points of particular interest, (less well known), concerning the Kerrs of Teviotdale, their histories and heritage set in the rolling landscape of the Scottish Borders. There will be poems and songs, journeys and adventures describing the derring-do of the Border Clan Kerr, those capricious, valiant, left-handed warriors feared by their English foe and favoured by the Scottish Kings and Queens at the Royal Courts in Stirling, at Holyrood Palace, Falkland and Dalkeith.

I have had the great privilege of working here at Ferniehirst, as Curator in this beautiful and historic castle for almost 20 years conducting family research and histories while guiding my visitors on a journey through time, from the building of the first tower beside the rushing Jed Water in 1470 to the beautiful present-day refurbishments completed in the 1980s



The Kerr Name

Based on the notes given in the Oxford Dictionary of Surnames the name Kerr derives from the Norwegian topographic name Kjarr translating as 'dweller by the marsh or fenny copse'. The variant spelling Carr pronounced ka reflects the Middle English change of -er- to -ar. Same surname, same root, same meaning. From Stavanger in southwestern Norway in the 10th century the Kjarr sailed their dragon ships in the wake of their Liege Lord, Prince Rollo. Banished by the Norwegian King Harold Haarfager for attacking and robbing his neighbours Rollo and his Kjarr warriors sailed to France where, in 911, after agreeing to pay **homage to King Charles III a treaty was signed and the Duchy of Normandy, named for its Norse inhabitants was created for Rollo and his warriors.** This was the first creation of the great Norman dynasty destined to make unforgettable British history at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.



The Kjarr, adopted the variant name de Kerr, becoming powerful landholders on the Cherbourg Peninsula in the Normandy region of France with influence at court and powerful allies. William de Ker was granted landholdings near to the town of Dalry in Ayrshire In Southwest Scotland after David I moved his court from Cherbourg introducing a feudal system into lowland Scotland in the 12th century.

William de Ker appropriately named the lands Kersland. He carried his signature from Cherbourg emblazoned on his war shield; the familiar chevron and mullets displayed by the Ker families with their roots at Kersland including the Cessford Kers and the Kers of Ferniehirst. The chevron indicates a builder of fortresses, the mullets represent the wheel of a spur, a device used to denote a riding family. The Kers were one of the most powerful of the Border riding families, famous for their left-handed swords and the left-handed defensive staircases they installed into their bastle houses, pele towers and castles to confound a predominantly right-handed enemy.

The uncertainty of the Scottish Royal succession resulted in the great troubles brought about by the interference of Edward I of England, coming as he did with a strategy to take Scotland for his own. John Baliol would be crowned King in 1292, and all landholders were expected to swear fealty to the Crown of England. Most 'names' including the de Kers reluctantly signed the roll in 1296, known famously as the Ragman Rolls, a name describing the ribbons attached to the parchment seals.

Murder, mayhem and a power vacuum brought fire and sword to displace the de Kers from their landholdings near Dalry. The young men, seeking adventure and glory in battle departed to fight the English occupiers. The Scottish lowland clans or 'names' established their influence and power supporting Wallace and Bruce, fighting beside the Black Douglas out of the wild forests of Selkirk and Midlothian, it is said a William de Ker was a companion of William Wallace and died when Wallace was arrested near Glasgow in 1304. When the Scottish Wars of Independence ended, the lands at Dalry were returned to the family while a fertile holding beside the Jed Water, south of Jedburgh was granted in 1306 to Ralph Ker of Selkirk Forest by Robert the Bruce recognising the loyalty of the Kers. Known as Kersheuch these were the first lands held by the Kers in Roxburghshire. Close by the little rise hidden among the great forest trees overlooking the rushing Jed Water would become the site of the enchanting towers at Ferniehirst built in 1470 when Sir Thomas Ker married his cousin Margaret of Kersheuch and founded a line of warriors and adventurers who would inspire ballads and stories and histories that will live long in the romance of the Scottish Borderland.

The Left-Handed Kerrs

If you are left-handed then you can describe yourself as ‘corry-fisted’ or ‘Kerr-handed’ or even ‘Kjarr Handed’ (used in Northeast England and pronounced Kack) referring back to the Viking Kjarrs of Stavanger in Norway and to the unusual frequency of left-handedness within the Kerr Clan.

James Hogg, the famous author and poet, known as The Ettrick Shepherd, describes the left-handed Kerrs in his stirring ballad ‘The Raid o’ the Kerrs’ first published in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine in 1830

*‘But the Kers were aye the deadliest foes
That e’er to Englishmen was known
For they were all bred left-handed men
And fence against them there was none’*

Andrew Ker of Cessford was the first of the Kerr chieftains to be recorded as a left-handed warrior in the records known as the ‘Border Papers’ compiled by the English, reporting the long years of warfare on the Scottish/English border. The Kerr most famous for his left-handed fighting men was Andrew Kerr’s Grandson Dand Kerr born in 1471, the 2nd Laird of Ferniehirst who made it his business to harass and embarrass his sworn enemy Lord Dacre the English commander of the occupying troops appointed after the battle of Flodden in 1513. Lord Thomas Dacre believed Dand Kerr of Ferniehirst had a close ally in Beelzebub and that the Devil himself rode at his left-hand side into battle.

There is no time to question if a man be left or right-handed in the ‘thick of the fight’ and a left-handed swordsman with the added element of surprise would hold the advantage in any combat, mounted or on foot. The left-handed Kerrs gained a reputation for dispatching their fair share of foes suddenly and without warning. A reputation that preceded them disquieting the morale of their enemy, gaining them an advantage not only on the field of combat but also in the defence of their castles and pele towers where counterclockwise spiral staircases were included, designed to suit the left-handed Kerr warriors. Ferniehirst Castle had a left-handed stair built into the tower when it was first constructed in 1470, and a left-handed spiral staircase can still to be seen today in the picturesque bastle house at Jedburgh built by Sir Thomas Kerr of Ferniehirst for Mary Queen of Scots visit in 1566. Well worth a visit the house is one of the few fortified houses or bastles remaining intact in the south of Scotland, a sister to the lovely old bastle-house to be seen at Ferniehirst.

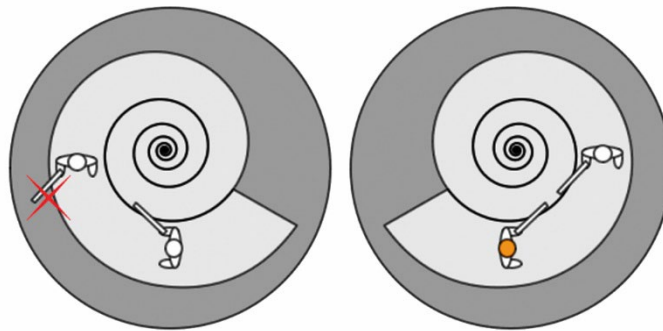
Spiral staircases would usually incorporate uneven steps, and there was always a chance a left-handed Kerr would be waiting concealed round any one of a dozen dark left-hand corners. Revealing his presence suddenly with a ‘broadsword lunge’ the Kerr warrior would dislodge a foot soldier forced to ascend on the narrow portion of each step and send him tottering backwards into his comrades below. Tumbling head over heels, they would all descend awkwardly to land in a painful heap on the ground floor.

Although the advantage of the counterclockwise spiral staircase became a feature of castles throughout Europe the English associated the left hand with evil and darkness. An advantage for the Kerrs of Ferniehirst when hand to hand combat was called for in the defence of Ferniehirst in 1523 when a detachment of Lord Somerset’s army had to battle for two days before finally breaking down the castle walls and taking Dand Kerr a prisoner. After the siege Lord Somerset described Dand Kerr’s left-handed fighters with admiration, describing them in his report to Henry VIII as ‘the boldest men and the hottest that ever I saw in any nation’

The Spiral Staircase

Based on an article by Dan Zambonini

Spiral staircases were a clever defence in medieval castles. They were customarily built with the spiral in the same direction (clockwise, when looking up from the bottom) so that the defending swordsman, who would either be coming down the stairs or backing up in reverse, could freely swing his sword. Conversely, the attacking swordsman (ascending the stairs) would have his swing blocked by the wall. This arrangement assumed that both attackers and defenders were right-handed, which most were. Left-handed swordsmen had the advantage of surprise attacks when ascending standard spiral staircases. The left arm was free to carry the sword and if the occasion arose use it against his disadvantaged enemy whose right hand would be blocked by the staircase wall.

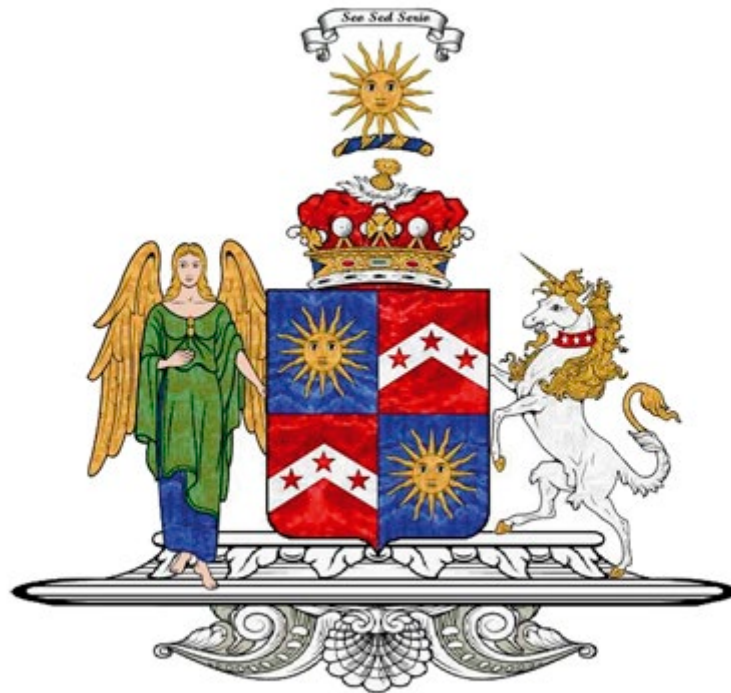


The Clan Kerr Motto and Crest

On many occasions I have welcomed a guest to Ferniehirst who, for one reason or another has arrived later than expected for the 'Curator's Tour' and with good humour quoted the Kerr Clan motto 'Sero Sed Serio'. Where did it come from? Translating as 'late but in earnest' it is said to refer to the Battle of Ancrum Moor in 1545 when the Roxburghshire Kerrs, in return for the freedom of Dand Kerr, their chieftain (held hostage by the English) were dressed as English warriors complete with the Cross of St George and sent into battle against their fellow Scots. Taking advantage of his enemies' trust that he would keep to his side of the bargain the Chieftain's oldest Son John Kerr of Ferniehirst had alerted the Scots of the English army camped on Ancrum Moor and ready for war. When the battle began the Kerrs tore off the English crosses and turned on their enemy, cutting them down; and while the Scottish troops laid a surprise attack turned the English enemy into the bright, late Winter sun. Great slaughter followed and during the final pursuit, the Englishmen fled, their commanding officers lay dead. The day was lost, after the company of Kerrs joined forces with their fellow Scots, feigning a retreat to draw the English army into a trap. Sero Sed Serio, late but in earnest.



Wrapped securely within the belt of the present Clan Chieftain, the 14th Marquis of Lothian the Sun in Splendour was first used by the de Kers of Normandy as early as the 13th century. This attractive motif decorated the shields and arms of the powerful Lothian Kerrs who adopted the Sun in Splendour in 1631 after the 3rd Earl William of Lothian (1605-1675) became the Earl of Lothian, following his marriage to the Countess of Lothian. As a mark of royal favour, he received a coat of augmentation, (a modification or addition to a coat of arms, granted by a monarch as a mark of favour), featuring the sun-in-splendour in the arms and crest. These arms were quartered with his existing Kerr of Jedburgh arms featuring the mullets and chevron, (see below)



The sun taking precedence in the first quarter and as the primary crest. These 17th century arms have descended to the present 14th Marquess of Lothian,



The 16th century shield of Dand Kerr (1471 – 1545) at Ferniehirst Bastle House featuring the chevron and three mullets, heraldic devices used by the Kers since their beginnings in Normandy. The chevron refers to castle or abbey building and the mullets (the spinning part of a spur) describe a riding family. As a powerful reiving family, the Kerrs were known for their riding skills without reigns, saddles or stirrups.

The Clan Kerr Plant Badge

Clan badges were used by Scottish clans as a means of identification in battle.

A sprig of a specific plant, used to identify a member of a particular Scottish clan would be worn affixed to the bonnet behind the Scottish crest badge or pinned at the shoulder of a lady's tartan sash. The plant badge used by the Kerr Clan is the beautiful Bog Myrtle.

Google describes Bog Myrtle as a complex, sweet, spicy, and resinous aroma with fresh, herbal, and citrusy notes, often likened to rosemary or a woody, balsamic scent. When the leaves are crushed, the characteristic smell evolves, becoming more potent and releasing aromatic oils that serve as a traditional, effective insect repellent, particularly against midges.



I love the sweet smell of my bog myrtle soaps and it does act as a midge repellent. It's the perfect plant for a Scottish Summer evening, although it can be hard to source.

I purchase mine at the link below. Try some!

[Key Ingredient Bog Myrtle Essential Oil – The Highland Soap Co](#)

Links

I hope you have enjoyed reading my newsletter as much as I have enjoyed writing and illustrating the articles.

If you are considering a short stay at Ferniehirst you won't be disappointed. Take a look at our beautiful castle site at the very heart of your Clan heritage.

You can book a short stay at the castle, choose the castle apartments, the enchanting and exclusive Lothian Wing or our cosy Log Lodge.

Booking details at
www.ferniehirst.com

The Curators site at www.clankerr.co.uk continues to make Kerr history with over 1000,000 Kerr visits to date.

Come and experience the history and heritage of Clan Kerr while Enjoying the beautiful Scottish Border countryside.

I have prepared an illustrated guide to a selection of Kerr sites within easy Travelling distance from Ferniehirst at:

[In Kerr Country](#)

You will find information about your tartans at:

[Tartans | clankerr.co.uk](#)

Monteviot House is the residence of your Clan Chieftain the 14th Marquis of Lothian
Well worth a visit as you explore the Kerr sites. Open only in July.

The famous Monteviot Gardens are open from April 31st October, a must see!

Click here to view the Monteviot site:

[Monteviot House & Gardens](#)

Go to Fishpal for all information about fishing at Monteviot:

[FishPal - Scotland - Tweed - Monteviot](#)

What's The News ?

Would you like to include your local event? perhaps you have a Clan Gathering coming up, Have you got something in particular you would like to see included in our newsletter? I look forward to hearing from you. Email me from www.clankerr.co.uk

My best wishes to you all until next time

Slàinte Mhath

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P.S. (a little treat, discovered recently)



The earliest known illustration of the 'Kerr Tartan' designed by **John Sobieski Stuart**

Taken from the book Vestiarium Scoticum published in 1842

[John Sobieski Stuart: Biography on Undiscovered Scotland](#)