



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD  
EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA

**Property in Care (PIC) ID:** PIC247

**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90165)

**Taken into State care:** 1925 (Guardianship)

**Last reviewed:** 2018

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# HUNTLY CASTLE



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.



© Historic Environment Scotland 2018

You may re-use this information (excluding logos and images) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated.

To view this licence, visit <http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3> or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gov.uk)

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

[www.historicenvironment.scot](http://www.historicenvironment.scot)

# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## HUNTLY CASTLE

### CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1	Introduction	2
1.2	Statement of significance	2
<b>2</b>	<b>Assessment of values</b>	<b>3</b>
2.1	Background	3
2.2	Evidential values	4
2.3	Historical values	4
2.4	Architectural and artistic values	5
2.5	Landscape and aesthetic values	9
2.6	Natural heritage values	10
2.7	Contemporary/use values	10
<b>3</b>	<b>Major gaps in understanding</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Associated properties</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Keywords</b>	<b>11</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>11</b>
	<b>APPENDICES</b>	
	Appendix 1: Timeline	11

# 1 Summary

## 1.1 Introduction

Huntly Castle is a ruined medieval stronghold in the Aberdeenshire town of the same name. The underlying earthwork is a motte-and-bailey castle, originally known as the peel of Strathbogie, which was built c.1200 to serve as the seat of power for a major local lordship. It passed in the fourteenth century to the Gordon family, who extended their authority to become the most powerful magnates in the north of Scotland. They added an L-plan tower house, the foundations of which survive, and in the sixteenth century rebuilt the south range as a palatial residence, which is now the dominant building on the site. Even in its ruined state, its grandeur and sophistication invite comparison with the châteaux of Renaissance France, while later additions, both military and residential, attest to the continuing significance of the castle in the seventeenth century.

## 1.2 Statement of significance

Huntly is a truly magnificent ruin in an impressive setting; it is among the finest examples of Scottish renaissance architecture. The complex and long-lived occupation of the site tells us much about the development of lordship and building fashion in medieval and Renaissance Scotland. Many of the major trends in castellated architecture can be appreciated at Huntly. The visible remains also provide a narrative of Scotland's history in the Middle Ages, from the introduction of Norman knights in the twelfth century through the consolidation of national and local identities in the later medieval period, to the crisis of the old social order in the period of the Reformation and the Civil War.

Huntly Castle is significant on a number of counts including:

- The late 16<sup>th</sup> century work of the First Marquis, exemplified by the south front and entrance tower, is an exercise in architectural bravura, sophistication and complex iconography. Even in its part-ruined state, it remains a “showstopper”, and further study is needed to fully understand the complexities of the design.
- The earlier work of the surviving palace block is also significant and in its own right represents a work of considerable sophistication. The rest of the castle complex, though less complete, gives a good impression of the scale of the Gordon's power-base, particularly perhaps in the double storied cellars.
- The survival of the motte as evidence of the earliest castle, before the Gordon lordship, provides an easily accessible opportunity to interpret this phase of Scotland's building history.
- Huntly is an important focus for the regional history of the north-east, The Gordons played a pivotal role in the political and religious developments of late medieval Scotland, and were one of the most

powerful families north of the Mounth. The castle's ruined state, in part due to dismantling, and the deliberate defacement of some religious images, demonstrates exactly their changing political and religious fortunes.

- The castle is an important focus for the town of Huntly and a key feature in the landscape. It is appreciated as a draw for tourists and as a wedding venue. Stewards are keen to promote the Doric language and Doric tours and children's quizzes are available (2018).

## **2 Assessment of values**

### **2.1 Background**

A full account of the known history of Huntly is given in Appendix 1, Timeline.

Huntly Castle first emerges into documented history as the seat of the lordship of Strathbogie - the name-change to Huntly came only in 1506. The powerful territory was controlled by members of the clan MacDuff between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. It was in this phase that the underlying earthwork castle developed, consisting of a well-preserved conical motte which would have once carried a timber defensive superstructure, and the larger bailey on which the later stone buildings stand.

In the fourteenth century Strathbogie passed to the Gordon dynasty, who extended their power beyond the limits of the earlier lordship to become the leading family in northern Scotland: a status probably founded in part on their position as the nearest available kinsmen of the earlier earls of Buchan. They played a leading role in the politics and history of Scotland in this period, punctuated by chivalrous military exploits abroad. They expressed their status through the architecture of their stronghold, repeatedly reworking its buildings in line with evolving cultural trends. The old timber castle was replaced by a massive L-plan Tower-house (now reduced to foundations) around 1375.

During the later 15<sup>th</sup> century a large hall block was constructed (now seen in the lower floors of the palace) to the south of the site. James IV was a frequent visitor to the castle and in 1510 his daughter Lady Margaret married George, later 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Huntly.

This great hall and chamber block, now known as the 'palace', was rebuilt in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century and the old curtain wall was superseded by a courtyard enclosed by ranges of buildings. The palace was again reconstructed in 1602 and it is this phase of work which is most evident today in the magnificent upper works of the palace block.

Further works continued into the 1640s, including a loggia (and perhaps a chapel) east of the palace. The east range, now very ruinous, provided a sophisticated classical entrance to the courtyard. To the east earthworks and a ravelin survive from the defences constructed during the Civil War.

After this time, Huntly ceased to be a noble residence and fell into increasing disrepair; an illustration of 1799 shows the main palace block still roofed and the rest in ruin. It passed into State Care in 1925.

## 2.2 Evidential values

The evidential value of Huntly Castle centres upon its fabric and the potential for buried deposits. The fragmentary remains of some interior features, plasterwork and decoration are vulnerable to exposure but indicate how the interiors have been laid out and decorated.

In archaeological terms Huntly consists of a well preserved motte-and-bailey earthwork with a later stone-built castle complex superimposed. In the 1920s the site was subject to a comprehensive clearance excavation for the Ministry of Works (MOW) by Douglas Simpson. As with many MOW clearances, the archaeology of the site must now be seen as compromised. However, the levels revealed by the MOW may seal earlier occupation levels.

The monument therefore remains archaeologically sensitive since the clearances cannot be taken as either having provided a definitive picture of the archaeology of the site or as having sterilised it. Some areas such as the motte may never have been touched by modern disturbance, although the presence of an earthwork artillery redoubt of renaissance type emphasises that the site may have undergone modifications at earlier dates.

A watching brief to the north of the shop in 1997 identified several wall lines. The dating of these walls was not clear, and while at least one of them appeared to post-date the sixteenth century works, an earlier clay-bonded wall could well have belonged to a much earlier phase.

Of particular note is the quality of carving displayed in heraldic and religious motifs of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century phase at Huntly. As devout Catholics the evidence of the Gordons' religious beliefs were on show throughout the castle on the magnificent frontispiece and fireplaces. The majority of the religious iconography was destroyed by Covenanters in 1640 and this destruction provides important evidence of the bitter religious conflict. Still surviving however, is the so-called 'hand of God' pointing to each name on the 1st Marquis's great inscription across the south façade of the castle (proclaiming the Gordons' rise from earls to marquises; the hand implying divine support for their cause).

## 2.3 Historical values

Huntly Castle is a site which symbolises the complex interplay in Scottish history between existing and new traditions.

The transition to the Gordons and the construction of the L-plan tower represent complex renegotiation after the Wars of Independence and the assertion of a distinctly national identity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The tall “château” which now dominates the site is an architectural statement that now overwhelms the other structures of the castle, but it cannot be properly understood without reference to the wider history of the site, in both architectural terms and otherwise. Built by the first Marquis of Huntly in self-confident answer to the demolition of the L-plan tower during the unrest of the 1590s, it is also a reworking of older residential and defensive structures to proclaim the continuity of Gordon lordship, an aesthetic response to the Renaissance and the question of Scotland’s place in Europe, and an expression of Catholic loyalty in Scotland after the Reformation.

The enigmatic ruin of the seventeenth-century range built by the 2nd Marquis, and the artillery spur juxtaposed with it, illustrate the complex tensions of the reign of Charles I - quixotic new cultural statements, arguably always impractical and perhaps never fully realised, reflect individual ambition within a national élite divided against itself by rivalry, and are visibly contrasted with the pragmatic military realities of the Civil War which saw Huntly revert from palace to garrison.

As the seat of the Gordon family, Huntly castle was probably the most significant centre of Roman Catholicism in the north-east after the Reformation, which gives the site a certain spiritual significance. In 1562, the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl’s overwhelming power, and his adherence to the Roman faith led Mary to campaign against “the Pope of the North”. By doing so she was showing the Protestant lords that she was neither prepared to put up with rivals to the Crown’s authority nor to favour Catholics. In 1601 the General Assembly arranged regular visitations to Huntly “to instruct the earl and keep off mass priests.”

#### 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

The castle is an extremely complex, multi-period site continuously rebuilt from 12<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. While the continuous use of the site is important, particular elements such as the motte and the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century incarnations are of particular importance as discrete architectural elements. The latter aspects, because of their exceptional design and decorative qualities, rank alongside the best of Scots Renaissance architecture. Added to this, the messages inherent in the religious and political iconography of the carved decoration is of exceptional interest, as is the later defacing of these symbols during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The following paragraphs give an overview of the development of the site, flag up some differing interpretations and highlight some key features.

The earliest identifiable phase consists of a motte-and-bailey castle, probably dating from the later 12<sup>th</sup> century. The motte (earth mound) is clearly visible as a flattened circular area to the west of the existing castle complex. The latter occupies the area of the “bailey” or defensive courtyard. The likelihood is that the first structures were timber: the lord’s residence atop the motte, and the hall, ancillary buildings and perhaps a chapel within the palisaded bailey. This area has not been investigated (see evidential) so interpretation of the early phases are conjectural and based on generally understood patterns of

building. How long the timber castle remained in use is not known, but it may have been up until the 1400s<sup>1</sup>.

The area of the bailey became, in the late fourteenth / early fifteenth century, the platform for a massive L-plan tower house. This was demolished in 1594 (*the greate old tower shall be blown up with powder*) and is only visible now as excavated/consolidated footings. These footings indicate the impressive size of the tower and give some idea of its original stature. However, its appearance can only be deduced by analogy with other similarly dated structures (e.g. Crichton/Craigmillar or others); around the tower was a curtain wall with ancillary structures forming a courtyard. To the south-west of the site, the two-storey range of vaulted cellars (under the palace block) may also date to this early phase of building, perhaps circa 1450. This is interpreted as housing vaults/cellars below a great hall and chamber. There is some debate as to whether the great round tower was part of the original 1450 scheme, or part of the later re-casting of this range in the 1550s<sup>2</sup>. Careful standing-building analysis has the potential to help resolve this issue.



The south façade

In the 1550s the earlier great hall and chamber block was rebuilt by George 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Huntly over the vaults of the earlier structure; in addition, the old curtain wall was superseded by a courtyard enclosed by ranges of buildings. The dating of the great round tower, as noted above, is not certain and the evidence from the building is ambiguous, however the wide mouthed

---

<sup>1</sup> W D Simpson Huntly Castle Official Guide Book, HMSO 1954.

<sup>2</sup> H G Slade discusses similarities between Druminnor (a Forbes castle) and Huntly in PSAS 99 (1966-7). He dates the building of the lower part of the Huntly palace block to circa 1452 taking Druminnor as a model, citing family links as well as possible architect/builder from the Kemlock family, and takes the round tower as being part of the original Huntly design.

gunholes in the round tower (as oppose to inverted keyhole type on the main block) do suggest that it may have been an addition. Similarly the access to the prison seems to have been reworked and the kitchen repositioned in response to the construction of the round tower<sup>3</sup>. So the 4<sup>th</sup> earl's work is understood to include the palace block (built over the older cellars), the round towers at the north-west and south-east corners, all indicated by the date 1553 and arms of the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl on skew stones. At this time the earl was at the height of his power and influence and this was reflected in his reworking of the palace. Mary of Guise was entertained there in great style in 1556, so much so that the crown became wary of the power and ambition of the "cock-o-the-north". A contemporary English ambassador regarded Huntly as the finest and best-furnished nobleman's residence in Scotland, and inventories of confiscated goods, albeit tantalisingly curt, give some hint of the level of opulence and the international cultural horizons of the family.

In planning and layout Huntly's principal floor provided a sophisticated suite of rooms forming a state apartment – the documentary accounts of the death of the earl identify the principal rooms and their social functions: hall, great chamber and bed-chamber<sup>4</sup>. The floor above contained a similar layout, interpreted as the Countess's suite. The south east tower contained a private stair, the north-west the public one.

The round tower can be compared to those found at Balvenie Castle, Edzell Castle, and the Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall. While it is probably inappropriate to ascribe inspiration for these towers to a specific building or collection of buildings, they do appear to reveal some French influence, particularly in the upper works at the Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall with its covered walkway and, less certainly, the small oriels at Balvenie. In France there was evidently a developing fashion for lodging blocks with attached single round towers, such as Tonquedec, Loches, and Suscinio, which begin to appear from the early fifteenth century. This may reflect the influence of the queen mother, Mary of Guise, and certainly George, was among those who travelled in France with Mary in 1550. The much earlier Rait Castle demonstrates that the form of hall and circular chamber block was not an alien concept in Scotland.

In 1594, as noted above, the castle was "slighted" and burned at James VI's order. The extent of the damage is not certain and is understood to have centred upon the destruction of the old L-plan tower<sup>5</sup> and W D Simpson notes evidence of burning and destruction in his 1932<sup>6</sup> account of excavation and clearing throughout the site, though clearly much of the structure of the palace block survived relatively unscathed.

---

<sup>3</sup> C McKean *The Scottish Chateau* 2001, p107.

<sup>4</sup> C McKean *The Scottish Chateau* 2001 p 109

<sup>5</sup> Though more of the old tower may have survived for longer than its present state suggests: workmen were paid to demolish some upstanding remains in the 1720s.

<sup>6</sup> PSAS 1932 Further notes on Huntly Castle

Following the 1594 destruction, the palace was again reconstructed and in the most sophisticated and sumptuous style, initially by the 1st Marquis and also by the 2nd Marquis.

The 1550s palace was transformed by the addition of the double height oriel windows, flanked by the great round tower and the rectangular turret. Jean Claude Nattes' drawings give some sense of the magnificent character of the façade and the emphasis given to the roof line by the oriels terminating with dormers, the heavy corbelled parapet crowning the great round tower, and the inscriptions proclaiming the Gordons' ownership of the castle.

The mastery and refinement of proportion<sup>7</sup> and detail make Huntly stand out among its peer-group - the houses of the most ambitious and powerful nobility. It is a very individual response to the questions of nobility, culture, display, loyalty and faith.

The inspiration for the "stacked" oriels which are Huntly's defining feature is not known. It may be French, though Scottish models such as the James IV oriels at Edinburgh Castle and Linlithgow Palace may also have had a role. Many possible French models have been cited: Amboise, Blois, Bonnivet, Apremont, and La Rochefoucauld combine a series of spectacular dormers dominating the main range, though in all these cases, the windows are dormers, not oriels.

The great inscription<sup>8</sup>, carved in relief across the façade of the castle, bears some similarities with a series of skyline inscriptions found in England from the late sixteenth century, as at Hardwick Hall, and into the early seventeenth century at Castle Ashby, where it is rather more developed. In the case of Huntly and the English examples, the inspiration may be classical inscriptions. Castle Ashby is certainly a self-consciously classical building and the later loggia at Huntly was a classical feature.

---

<sup>7</sup> Mike Pendery (HES, pers comm) has noted the strict adherence to Fibonacci sequence in the relative proportions of the elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> marquis's work.

<sup>8</sup> GEORGE GORDON FIRST MARQUIS OF HVNTLIE 16  
HENRIETTE STEWART MARQUESS OF HVNTLIE 02



The south façade and inscription

Although the overall effect of Huntly is dominated by the grand château façade, it should be emphasised that it is part of a more sophisticated and complex whole. The sculptural centrepiece above the courtyard entrance is a bold statement with its rather overt Catholic iconography and its affiliation is perhaps as much Spanish as French, while the interior of the apartments is still visible in the carved stonework here. This is also an area where documentation helps to reconstruct at least the outline of the layout and furnishing of the building.

On a more practical level, the vast aristocratic pile sits physically on top of storage vaults which contained the goods and supplies which were the practical basis of territorial lordship and the seigneurial lifestyle in medieval Scotland. These interacted with other service buildings ranged around the courtyard, among which the site also contains a well-preserved ruin of a medieval brewery.

## 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

The castle is situated in beautiful parkland beside the rock gorge of the Deveron, and is approached along a wonderfully atmospheric double avenue of lime trees. The south façade of the castle is a truly impressive piece of late medieval to early Renaissance architecture, which has inspired artists such as Jean Claude Nattes and Robert William Billings. The north façade and interior also retain important Renaissance sculpture, but the aesthetics of the interior of the hall block have been diminished through the construction of modern gantries to allow access and protective covers over the heraldic fireplaces.



John Claude Nattes' sketch of the south front of Huntly Castle, made in 1799

## 2.6 Natural heritage values

The site is primarily of importance for its bat roosts and before any works take place SNH should be consulted. It is a known summer and winter roost of the daubenton bat; this is particularly significant as winter roost sites are uncommon.

Within the grounds there are semi-improved and unimproved areas of grassland that are relatively species rich, mainly the motte and the banks. The wet area beside the car park is also of importance. There are mature trees throughout the site mainly lime, beech and horse chestnut. There are likely to be nesting birds and roosting or hibernating bats.

Flower species of local importance are recumbent yellow-oxalis and monkey flower. Both could have been planted originally as a part of a garden, and both were introduced from North America. The monkey flower is edible but as the plant concentrates salt in the leaves it's very salty; early American settlers apparently used it as a salt substitute. Recumbent yellow-oxalis is also edible, it has an acidic lemon taste, (native wood sorrel, a similar related plant, tastes of apples) and was often added to salads. As the plant contains oxalic acid, (hence the taste) it shouldn't be taken in large amounts as the acid restricts the uptake of calcium.

## 2.7 Contemporary/use values

The castle is still seen as a focal centre of the town of Huntly, with events taking place within its grounds or with the castle as a backdrop. The castle is used for weddings and as a recreational attraction. There are few schools visits. The castle has suffered in the past from persistent, if relatively minor, vandalism.

Stewards at the castle have been active in promoting the Doric language, and there is a Doric quiz for children available on site.

The popular Scots ballad 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray' recounts an incident which took place in 1592 and culminated in the sixth Earl of Huntly murdering James Stewart the second Earl of Moray.

### 3 Major gaps in understanding

- The form of the original motte-and-bailey castle.
- The nature of the late fourteenth century tower house is unclear, apart from its general plan, as is the exact date of its destruction.
- The original form and subsequent development of the palace is not well understood.
- The extent of the twentieth century clearances are uncertain and therefore the archaeological potential is unclear.
- More research is required on the medieval and later designed landscape elements of the site
- More research is required into the apparent use of the Fibonacci sequence in the relative proportions of the elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marquis's work
- More research is required into the possible sources and influences in the design of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marquis's work and into the context of other comparable show houses of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century

### 4 Associated properties

**Auchindoun Castle** – Was a Gordon stronghold in the 16th and 17th centuries.

**Ruthven Barracks** – Occupies the site of an earlier fortress controlled by the Gordons between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.

**Bog of Gight (Gordon Castle)** – Became the Gordons' favoured seat from the late sixteenth century.

**Elgin Cathedral** – Burial palace of the Gordons.

**Inverness Castle** – Another Gordon residence in the seventeenth century.

### 5 Keywords

Gordon, palace, motte-and-bailey, tower house, Catholicism, Renaissance.

## Bibliography

### Appendix 1 – Timeline

**1187** – King William the Lion defeats a revolt in the north of Scotland.

Historians have conjectured that in the aftermath of this conflict the king gave the lordship of Strathbogie to Duncan II, Earl of Fife, the head of a powerful native kindred known as the clan MacDuff, who had aligned themselves with the modernising and outward-looking policies of the royal government. It is further conjectured that Strathbogie was given to Earl Duncan to create a bulwark against rival native chiefs in Moray who were more hostile to the royal dynasty and its modernising aspirations, and that the family had no earlier presence in the area. However, no direct evidence exists to support these

conjectures about the origins of the lordship of Strathbogie, and there is no conclusive reason to favour this particular context for its creation. It should be noted that other comparable northern lordships were established at an earlier date: Duffus no later than the 1160s and the Garioch by c.1180. What is clear is that the earliest motte-and-bailey phase of Huntly Castle was constructed at some point before the 1220s, and that the name of the clan MacDuff family is commemorated in Ben Macdui (“MacDuff’s Mountain”), the second tallest mountain in the British Isles, which probably marked the bulwark of the lordship of Strathbogie. By the 1220s the castle and lordship were held by Earl Duncan’s younger son, David of Strathbogie. The lordship is traditionally regarded as containing forty-eight davochs, component units of territory whose origins are probably older than the twelfth century, making it several times larger than a typical Scottish barony of this period. In another indicator of its large size, it had six parish churches in the early thirteenth century, though the two nearest to Huntly were united under a single priest in 1222.

**1224** – An apostolic letter of Pope Honorius III asserts that Earl Duncan’s son David of Strathbogie has been withholding revenues due to the church from Rhynie and other lands in his lordship. This is the first explicit reference associating a branch of the clan MacDuff with the lordship of Strathbogie, although contrary to what is claimed in some secondary sources, the document does not state that David had “planted himself in the Peel of Stathbogie” to resist attempts to resolve the dispute.

**1232** – The dispute between David of Strathbogie and the Bishop of Moray is resolved. Morinus, seneschal of Strathbogie, is mentioned as one of the men who witnesses the agreement. His name is probably a native Celtic one and his duties may have been primarily administrative within the lordship, he may have also held the military command of the castle and resided there.

**12??** – John de Strathbogie, David’s son, marries Ada, Countess of Atholl, thus uniting the lordship of Strathbogie and the earldom of Atholl. Their descendants retain the “de Strathbogie” surname alongside their title as earls of Atholl, but it is possible that this acquisition diminishes the significance of their northern castle.

**12??** – Earl David, the son of John of Strathbogie and Countess Ada, marries Isabella, daughter of the countess of Angus and her husband Richard of Dover, a grandson of King John of England. Although the Angus earldom passes to Isabella’s elder half-brother, this marriage brings a substantial English inheritance to the Strathbogie family, including Chilham Castle in Kent.

**1270** – Earl David dies on crusade in Tunisia and is succeeded by his young son, Earl John II.

**1296** – John II de Strathbogie, Earl of Atholl, and his kinsmen Sir Lawrence of Strathbogie, David of Strathbogie and John of Strathbogie, are taken prisoner at the Battle of Dunbar. Earl John is sent to the Tower of London and the

other three to the castles of Windsor, Northampton and Fotheringay. In 1297, all except David reluctantly agree to serve the English king, although at least Earl John and Sir Lawrence subsequently revert to the Scottish side. Perhaps surprisingly, the castle was only a minor player during the Wars of Independence.

**1306** – John de Strathbogie, Earl of Atholl, supports his brother-in-law King Robert the Bruce and fights at the Battle of Methven. After the defeat he is entrusted with taking the king's wife and daughters northward. Taken prisoner by the English, sympathisers attempt to save him from execution on the grounds that he is a cousin of the king of England, through his descent from King John, but Edward I responds by simply increasing the height of the gallows upwards by thirty feet.

**1307** – During his campaign against the Comyns, Robert Bruce is taken ill at Inverurie and brought to Stathbogie. At around this time Earl David II defects to the English, a move which may have been connected to his marriage to Joan Comyn, the daughter of the "Red Comyn" who was slain in a quarrel with Bruce and his men in 1306.

**1312** – Earl David switches back from the English to rejoin Robert Bruce.

**1314** – David of Stathbogie, Earl of Atholl, defects once again from the Scots to the English, perhaps because of his Comyn connections, but also because he is angered by the acrimonious collapse of a relationship between King Robert's brother and his own sister. The decision seems like a mistake, as it is almost immediately followed by the crushing Scottish victory at the Battle of Bannockburn. As a consequence David lost his Scottish lands, which included the earldom of Atholl and the lordship of Strathbogie. The lordship of Strathbogie was then granted to Sir Adam Gordon of Huntly in Berwickshire, the beginning of the meteoric rise of the Gordon family. The appointment of Sir Adam can perhaps be explained in part by the fact that he was the most senior representative of the Comyn bloodline on the Scottish side, and the Comyns had commanded great influence across much of northern Scotland.

**1320** – Sir Adam Gordon delivers the Declaration of Arbroath to Rome.

**1326** – The exiled Earl David III dies in England. Although his defection in 1314 saw him driven out of Scotland, it ensures that he regains his English estates centred on Chilham Castle in Kent. The death at Bannockburn of his brother-in-law Sir Aymer Comyn meant that, through his wife, he came to inherit the vast Valoignes and Valence lordships south of the Border, all of which pass to his son, the titular Earl David III.

**1333** – Edward Balliol, the son of an old rival of the Bruces, attempts to regain the Scottish throne. Among his supporters is David III, the titular Earl of Atholl, who pursues a complex and independent policy in the north, defecting to the Scots in 1334 but rejoining the English in 1335. Edward is defeated and slain at Culblean in November 1335; his wife Countess Catherine is forced to take

shelter in Lochindorb Castle, where she withstands a siege until Edward III of England personally rides to her rescue in July 1336. This marks the effective end of the Atholl family's attempts to regain Strathbogie, although Earl David IV, who may have spent his early childhood in Scotland, lays a legal claim in 1363, which is abandoned on his death 1369, leaving only daughters. The line of heirs descends through the female line to a cadet branch of the earls of Northumberland who called themselves "Percys of Atholl", then to the lords Burgh of the Tudor period, and eventually to a family who used this line of descent to claim an English peerage, being recognised as the "Barons Strabolgi" in 1916 on the basis of a summons to the English parliament issued to Earl David III in 1322.

**1357** – John Gordon, baron of Strathbogie and grandson of Sir Adam, is taken prisoner by the English, apparently while returning from France after fighting in the Battle of Poitiers.

**1376** – The Gordons are granted a new charter to their northern lands, designed to reaffirm their control after the extinction of the Atholl family in the male line. The next year, John Gordon distinguishes himself by raiding England, defeating a larger pursuing force at Carham, and then fights in the Scottish victory at the battle of Melrose. By the 1390s he is known as "Sir John Gordon, lord of that ilk", and on his decease in 1395 the "relief" of the lordship of Strathbogie, equivalent to a year's revenue for the baron, is rated at 700 merks (just below £500), a significant sum by the standards of the time. He leaves two illegitimate sons, "Jock and Tam", ancestors of many branches of the Gordon family, but he is succeeded as lord of Strathbogie and Huntly by his brother Adam. It was probably around this time, when the Gordons felt assured of their new lands, that they constructed the large L-plan towerhouse in the bailey of the old earthwork castle, replacing the obsolete existing accommodation.

**1402** – At the battle of Homildon, Adam, Lord of Gordon, begs forgiveness from Sir John Swinton, with whom he has a feud. Swinton accepts the apology and dubs him a knight. The two charge together against the English and gain a heroic death.

**1408** – Sir Adam's daughter Elizabeth Gordon becomes heiress and marries her distant cousin, Sir Alexander Seton. By the 1430s, the family appears to be claiming the title of Lord Gordon, but it appears that there was no formal royal act creating a new "lordship of parliament" - rather, the family appear to be claiming equivalent rank based on the pre-existing significance of the lordship of Strathbogie.

**1440** – Sir Alexander Seton of Gordon carries the heart of James I on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, travelling via Bruges, Basel, Venice, and Rhodes. Returning via Rhodes, he dies there, where he bequeaths his movables to the Knights Hospitaller, the rulers of the island. By 1451 the Hospitallers have obtained 1700 ducats from the bequest: another indication of the impressive status of the family.

**c.1445** – Sir Alexander's son, also Alexander, is made first Earl of Huntly. He adopts the Gordon surname and soon receives the extensive lordship of Badenoch.

**1452** – Alexander is an important supporter of James II in the civil war against the Earl of Douglas and his brothers, and was made lieutenant-general of the kingdom, with viceregal powers in the north: the first appearance of a status which will be repeatedly conferred on his heirs. Earl Alexander wins an important victory over the Douglas faction at the Battle of Brechin, but in retaliation Archibald Douglas, Earl of Moray attacks the lands of Strathbogie and burns the castle. The power of the Douglases is crushed by 1455, but Earl Alexander promptly marries the widowed Countess of Moray, the “dove of Dunbar”, in an unsuccessful attempt to block the claims of the Crichton family to that earldom. He later remarries to Princess Anabella, James II's sister, and to Elizabeth Hay, though it is not entirely clear which of his children descend from which wife.

**c. 1455-1501** – Earl Alexander repairs and reconstructs his castle, adding the huge hall and chamber block which was built over the south edge of the bailey, destroying the old earthwork defences but creating what must have been, even at this stage, an impressive façade looking out from the castle. The traditional date of 1455 simply reflects the end of the civil war between James II and the Earl of Douglas. Earl Alexander died at Strathbogie in 1470 and was buried in Elgin Cathedral (his monument still survives), leaving his son George, the second earl, to complete the works.

**c. 1494-1505** – James IV was a frequent visitor to Strathbogie, his most important visit being for the marriage of Earl George's daughter Catherine Gordon and Perkin Warbeck, a pretender to the English throne who was recognised in Scotland as “Richard IV”. Earl George is succeeded in 1501 by his son Alexander, the third Earl. The Lord High Treasurer's accounts record two separate occasions when drink silver was paid to the masons by the king, confirming that building work was still underway until at least 1505.

**1506** – The name of the castle is legally changed from Strathbogie to Huntly by royal charter. The change of name was designed to affirm that the castle in Strathbogie was the seat of the Gordon family, although it appears to have been initially unsuccessful, as in 1544 George, the fourth Earl sought an act of parliament to change the name to Huntly, and the castle and town continued to be known by both names in the seventeenth century.

**1510** – John, Lord Gordon, son and heir of Earl Alexander, marries Lady Margaret, daughter of King James IV, reaffirming the family's control of Badenoch and temporarily extending their territory into Atholl. He dies in 1517, followed by his father in 1524, leaving Lady Margaret to consolidate the family's Highland powerbase for her young son George, fourth Earl of Huntly.

**1547** – George, 4th Earl, becomes Chancellor of Scotland, followed in 1549

by acquisition of the earldom of Moray, and travels to France in 1550 with the queen regent Mary of Guise. Upon his return he uses his great wealth to remodel Huntly, almost entirely rebuilding the palace block from the first floor up, perhaps also adding the great round tower to the palace. The reconstruction is commemorated in the crow-stepped gables of the palace, the lowest of which display the initials and heraldic insignia of Earl George and his countess Elizabeth Keith, of the Earl Marischal, and the date 1553. The relationship of the gables to the block below indicates that at this stage, the upper part of the southern frontage took the form of a two-storey caphouse behind a parapet and wall-walk.

**1556** – Earl George holds a spectacular reception at Huntly for Mary of Guise. Despite their previous loyalty, the power of the Gordons in the north is now such that it is seen as a threat to the authority of the crown, and the festivities elicit the advice from the French ambassador that Mary should clip his wings.

**1562** – The English ambassador to Scotland describes Huntly as “the best furnished of any house I have seen in the country”. The fourth earl’s overwhelming power, and his adherence to the Roman faith, make him an obvious enemy of the Protestants, who call him “the Pope of the North” rather than his usual nickname, “the Cock of the North”. Mary Queen of Scots leads a campaign against the Earl. By doing so she shows the Protestant lords that she is neither prepared to put up with rivals to the crown’s authority nor to favour Catholics, though she also fulfils the ambitions of her half-brother Lord James, who appropriates the earldom of Moray. Earl George dies, probably of a heart attack on the battlefield of Corrachie Hill. The castle is ransacked with some of its remarkable furnishings making their way to Darnley’s house at Kirk o’Field, Edinburgh. An inventory taken at the time includes the vestments and treasures of Aberdeen Cathedral, including the tent in which Edward II had slept the night before Bannockburn. Huntly probably held these as part of a plan by which Church valuables had been given for safe keeping to Catholic sympathisers throughout Scotland.

**1569** – The castle is restored to George, the fifth Earl.

**1576** – Earl George dies playing football. The account of his death offers some information about the internal arrangements of the palace before the destruction of 1594. The palace is called the New Werk. The Earl collapsed and was carried into the castle; they ‘buire him in to his own chalmer, and laid him in his bed: quhilk chalmer was ane round within the grit chalmer of the New warke of Strathbogie’ – a chamber in the great round tower which lay beyond the great chamber. The great chamber is also referred to as the ‘chalmer of daice,’ and had two doors: the ‘chalmer durre’ leading into Lord Huntly’s bedroom and the ‘vtter chalmer durre’ entering the great chamber from the hall. Thus, the division of hall, outer chamber and inner chamber was in place in 1576.

**1594** – George, sixth Earl of Huntly joins with the Earl of Errol in a revolt against James VI. Although the “Catholic Earls” win a dramatic victory at

Glenlivet, the rebellion collapses due to their unwillingness to directly face the king in battle. The Earl goes into exile and his castle is slighted by the crown. The sources state that 'nothing was left unhocked savinge the greate olde tower which shall be blown up with powder', while the instruction of the privy council was to cast down the castle to the ground. However, the palace does appear to have survived largely intact. The L-plan towerhouse, which is now reduced to its foundations, appears to have suffered the most damage. However, eighteenth century estate papers suggest that it was not destroyed to the extent we see today as workmen were being paid to demolish the remains in the 1720s.

**1597** – George is restored to his lands and titles, and in 1599 is created first marquis of Huntly. He repairs the palace and adds to it on a more elaborate scale. The present form of the palace block with its elaborate oriel windows, the fine inscription along the south front, proclaiming he and his wife's new status as marquis and marchioness, the remarkable fireplaces and the north-east stair tower with its elaborate frontispiece declaring the Gordon allegiance to James VI and God, can be attributed to the first Marquis.

**1636** – The 1<sup>st</sup> Marquis dies, succeeded by his son George, 2nd Marquis of Huntly. He continues to work on the palace, constructing the now-ruinous east range, and a visitor to the castle in 1643 recounted that the second marquis was personally supervising the works. The period is also characterised by the increasing religious and political tension which leads to a complex civil war across Scotland, England and Ireland. In 1640 Covenanters defaced the religious carvings including those on the great frontispiece. In 1644 it is occupied by the Marquis of Montrose, who is being pursued by the Marquis of Argyll. After the collapse of Montrose's rising the castle is held by Lord Charles Gordon until 1647, when the forces of General Leslie starved out the garrison; the defenders were hanged and their officers beheaded. In the same year the second Marquis is held in his own palace on his way to execution in Edinburgh, and it was at Huntly that his escort was shot. The enemies of the Gordons install a garrison in the castle and Argyll attempts to gain control of the lordship, but the family recover their position after the restoration of Charles II in 1660, and are elevated to Dukes of Gordon in 1684. The wars of the 1640s mark the last phase of the castle's political or military significance, and it is often thought to have ceased to serve as a major residence of the Gordon family. However, there are accounts in estate papers of glazing repairs to the castle in the early 18th century, and references to the demolition of the old L-plan tower, now known as "Cumming's Tower" – the Strathbogie Earls and the Comyns appear to have been garbled into a single family. The palace was occupied by government troops in 1746.

**1752** – Duchess Catherine, the widow of the third Duke of Gordon, builds the nearby Huntly Lodge out of stone from the ruined castle. From this point the castle serves as a quarry.

**c.1780-1800** – The castle attracts attention from antiquaries. Even at this date the palace remains roofed and habitable although it is largely abandoned, and

the rest of the castle has been reduced to rubble. Charles Cordiner, who visits in 1776 and describes painted ceilings and a chapel chamber. The Statistical Account published in 1794 mentions that 'most of the apartments are still in tolerable preservation; particularly the ceilings, which are ornamented with a great variety of paintings, in small divisions, containing many emblematic figures, with verses, expressive of some moral sentiment, in doggerel rhyme'. The author goes on to mention two square towers on the avenue to the castle which defended a gate. These appear to have been demolished when the Gordon Schools were constructed (1839). In 1799 the artist Jean Claude Nattes visits to sketch the palace for the lavishly illustrated book *Scotia Depicta*, and shows the roof intact though the small corner turret is already gone.

**1839** – The architect and antiquary Robert William Billings visits Huntly and depicts the palace as a roofless ruin, in more or less the state it is now, the resulting engravings being published in volume 3 of the *Baronial and Ecclesiastical Antiquaries*. The *New Statistical Account*, published in 1845, states that the castle was last inhabited around forty years earlier, and that much of the interior had been removed around a decade earlier during the enlargement of Huntly Lodge: now the Castle Hotel, the extension in question being dated 1832. Its author distinguishes between "Huntly" and "Strathbogie", regarding the ruins on the north side of the bailey, then heavily overgrown with ivy, as representing the older castle destroyed in 1594.

**1924** – The castle is given into state care. The avenue is added in 1925.