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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

LOCHMABEN 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.

LOCHMABEN CASTLE

SYNOPSIS

Lochmaben Castle stands on a low grassy promontory projecting into the southern end of Castle Loch, 1 mile SE of Lochmaben. The River Annan lies less than a mile to the east. The castle was one of the most important strongholds in Annandale and the Scottish West March.

The complex once covered a considerable area, with substantial ditches evident over 300m south of the loch. The core of the castle, however, comprises two platforms standing over 3m above the rest of the promontory; these may have originally formed an island stronghold. The more northerly, beside the loch, is dominated by the substantial remains of a masonry castle of enclosure, of which the frontal wall, facing south, is particularly impressive; it has been putatively dated by archaeological excavation to the period of English occupation in the middle of the 14th century. The platform to its south, now largely featureless, most likely served as the outer ward of the masonry castle, but may have started as a 'pele' (a palisaded enclosure for a large garrison) built for Edward I of England shortly before 1300; it was unsuccessfully attacked by the Scots in 1301.

The castle has a fascinating history. It may well have originated as a curtain-walled castle built by Robert Bruce 'the Competitor', grandfather of the future Robert I, in the later 1200s. It certainly spent much of the 14th century in English possession, as their principal garrison fortress in the Scottish West March, until its capture in 1384. Thereafter, it was owned chiefly by the Crown, apart from a short time in the possession of the Black Douglases. James IV visited frequently and built a great hall here; James V and Queen Mary also visited. Following the Union of the Crowns in 1603, the castle was allowed to fall into ruin, and by the 18th century was being used by locals as a handy stone quarry. The ruins were tidied up prior to a visit by Queen Victoria in 1887.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **1124** – David I grants Robert de Bruce (I), an Anglo-Norman baron, the great lordship of Annandale. Bruce builds his *caput*, or chief seat, at Annan.
- **mid 1100s** – The Bruce lords build a motte-castle at Lochmaben, possibly as a result of flood damage to their castle at Annan, 9 miles away. The new castle lies on the southern edge of the town of Lochmaben, beside Kirk Loch.
- **1295** – Robert Bruce (V), 'the Competitor' (King Robert I's grandfather) dies at his castle in Lochmaben. It is possible that by now the Bruce castle has been relocated from beside Kirk Loch to the present site beside Castle Loch.

- **1296** - The enforced abdication of King John (Balliol), the Competitor's chief rival for the throne, heralds the start of the Wars of Independence with England.
- **1298** – Edward I of England visits Lochmaben following his victory over William Wallace at Falkirk and orders the construction of 'an enclosure outside the castle, made strong by a palisade' – a 'pele'; such peles would also be built for him at the castles of Dumfries, **Linlithgow** and elsewhere, to hold large bodies of troops and artillery. The work involves 12 carpenters and 48 ditchers, guarded by 26 crossbowmen, sent from Carlisle Castle.
- **1299** – Robert Bruce, grandson of 'the Competitor', attacks Lochmaben, but without success. The English garrison capture the constable of Scottish-held **Caerlaverock Castle**, Sir Robert Cunynghame, and impale his severed head on the top of Lochmaben Castle's great tower. The attack results in the defences being strengthened.
- **1300** – Edward I visits Lochmaben a second time, during his invasion of Galloway and immediately prior to famously besieging **Caerlaverock Castle**.
- **1301** – The Scots, led by John de Soules, attack Lochmaben. A report filed by its English keeper records that '7000 Scots had burnt our pele toun and assailed our pele'.
- **1306** – Robert Bruce becomes King Robert I and grants the lordship of Annandale to his nephew, Thomas Randolph, who is also created earl of Moray. Lochmaben is taken by the Scots but falls to Edward, Prince of Wales, before the end of the year. Edward I appoints Humphrey de Bohun lord of Annandale and keeper of Lochmaben.
- **c.1314** – the Scots successfully capture Lochmaben. The attack may well be led by Thomas Randolph, who in that same year, leads the night-time attack on **Edinburgh Castle**.
- **1323** – Robert I (the Bruce) returns to Lochmaben fresh from chasing Edward II to York.
- **1333** – following Robert I's death (1329) and the disputed succession of his son, David II, Edward III's English troops recapture Lochmaben and set about making it into their principal garrison fortress in the Scottish West March, to complement their other chief strongholds in southern Scotland – Berwick, **Edinburgh**, Jedburgh and Roxburgh.
- **1343** – the Scots attempt to retake the castle but fail.
- **1364** – the first reference to a stone castle, when the Englishman, Robert Bruyn, is 'delivered the keeping of Lochmaben Castle (viz. the stonework)'. The phrase suggests the existence of a stone castle and a timber pele.
- **1367** – Henry de Bohun, keeper, is granted licence by Edward III to bring in 'masons, carpenters and other workmen', indicating that more construction work is underway.
- **1373** – Henry de Bohun dies and the English Crown takes direct control. Fresh building work commences, and the 1375 records mention a new drawbridge and houses in the castle thatched in reeds, as well as a 'new front called la Pele', probably a reference to the present south frontal wall of the masonry castle.

- **1384** – Lochmaben finally falls to the Scots, led by Archibald ‘the Grim’, lord of Galloway, and George Dunbar, earl of March. The English grip on the Scottish West March is ended. Lochmaben becomes a Scottish royal castle.
- **1409** – Archibald the Grim’s son, Archibald, 4th earl of Douglas, is granted the lordship of Annandale with the castle at Lochmaben, He holds his first formal court here in 1411.
- **1440** – following the execution of William, 6th earl of Douglas, in **Edinburgh Castle**, James II takes the lordship of Annandale into direct royal control. Lochmaben becomes a royal castle once again.
- **early 1500s** – James IV visits frequently and orders the building of a new great hall.
- **1524** – the Maxwell lords of **Caerlaverock** are appointed hereditary keepers of the castle.
- **1542** – James V uses the castle as a mustering base prior to his invasion of northern England. He subsequently loses the battle of Solway Moss and dies shortly afterwards at Falkland Palace.
- **1544** – Henry VIII’s forces capture the castle, during the early stages of the ‘Wars of the Rough Wooing’, but lose it the following year.
- **1565 (14 Oct)** – Queen Mary and Lord Darnley host a banquet in the castle, most probably in James IV’s great hall.
- **1588** – Lord Maxwell garrisons the castle as part of a planned Catholic rebellion. James VI’s army successfully retakes it after a two-day siege.
- **1603** – following the Union of the Crowns, the castle is allowed to fall into ruin.
- **1700s** – the castle, by now abandoned, becomes a handy stone quarry for the people of Lochmaben.
- **1780** – John Clerk of Eldin visits and sketches a castle still with considerable masonry surviving, including a curtain wall crowned with 15th-century machicolations (as at **Caerlaverock**).
- **1831** – J M W Turner visits the castle and paints it.
- **1887** – Queen Victoria visits in her Golden Jubilee year. Prior to her visit the canal in front of the stone castle is cleared out so that her barge can enter. The clearance work along the south front, discovered in the 1968-72 archaeological excavations, and repairs to the south frontal wall, probably also date from this time.
- **1939 (?)** – the castle, assumed to be still a Crown property, is taken back into state care as a result of pressure from the Royal Burgh of Lochmaben.
- **1968-72** – archaeological excavations are carried out by Lloyd Laing and Aidan MacDonald, for the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments.

Archaeological Overview:

Lochmaben has proved to be one of the most puzzling of all Scotland’s castles. Doubt has surrounded the origin of the site as a whole, and the date of the upstanding masonry in particular. In an attempt to try to establish the building chronology, excavations were undertaken by the Ministry of Public Buildings

and Works between 1968 and 1972. Those concentrated on two areas – (1) the south front of the masonry castle, and (2) the outer ward to the south.

The south front of the masonry castle was shown to have had three phases; all were presumed to have been built during the 14th century. The first phase of front curtain wall was built on the line of what is now the north wall of the frontal range – that is, set back 14m behind the present front. This was to have had a central gateway flanked by rectangular towers (a keep-gatehouse possibly), with larger square towers at its outer corners. Whether it was ever built is not clear, for the gatehouse design was changed whereby the flanking towers were replaced by a rectangular barbican, housing the entrance pend and narrow guard-chambers on either side, and which projected as far as the south moat. The third phase, possibly dating to the 1370s, saw the construction of the present front (see Architectural Overview below). Unfortunately, this whole area had been extensively cleared up in Victorian times, badly degrading the archaeology and making analysis difficult. Finds were few, and none provided independent dating evidence.

The outer ward, an oblong enclosure measuring c.167 x 90m, was partially investigated but only at its SW corner. This showed that the platform had been artificially built up from clay to over 1.25m high, and been subsequently heightened and provided with a palisade. Finds here were also few, but the lowest level contained early-14th-century pottery, whilst the heightening contained later 14th-century rowel spurs – thus roughly confirming the documentary evidence, for an Edward I pele subsequently strengthened by Edward III.

The excavations may possibly have resolved the dating of the south frontal wall beyond reasonable doubt, but they failed to resolve the question of the Edwardian pele. It is generally assumed that the outer ward originated as the pele ordered by Edward I in 1298, and that the masonry castle was built in the 14th century. The difficulty is that this would make it the only Edwardian pele built on a 'greenfield' site; all the others (Berwick, Dumfries, Dunfermline, Linlithgow and Selkirk) were added to existing castles, to provide secure accommodation for a large, temporary garrison and their baggage, artillery, etc. Whilst not improbable, the 1298 description specifically refers to 'an enclosure outside the castle, made strong by palisade' confirming that it conformed to the other peles.

A possible solution to this difficulty is to postulate that the original Bruce motte-castle, built beside Kirk Loch in the 12th century, had been abandoned during the 13th-century and replaced by a masonry castle beside Castle Loch – highly plausible given the number of new curtain-walled castles being built in Scotland by the senior nobility during that century, most notably **Bothwell** (the Olifards) but including, within the vicinity of Lochmaben, **Caerlaverock** (the Maxwells), Tibbers (the Siwards) and Buittle (the Balliols). It is perfectly possible to see the first phase of south curtain wall found during the 1968-72 excavations as dating from the later 13th century. (The relocation of a great castle is certainly attested also at **Caerlaverock**, where the Maxwells moved a short distance away after 50 years at the 'old castle'.) This scenario would make more sense of the 1298

reference to an enclosure outside the castle, and the 1301 reference to a 'pele' and 'pele toun' - the pele referring to the former Bruce castle, and the pele toun to the 1298 'enclosure'.

A geophysical survey was undertaken in 2016 of the PIC area and available areas of the Peel to the south of the castle. Anomalies within the castle could well be structural remains, and others within the Peel suggest possible well-defined areas of activity just to the south of the castle entrance and respecting a likely trackway leading to the drawbridge.

Given that the 1968-72 excavations were limited in scale, and that they demonstrated the high archaeological potential of the southern platform, further archaeological excavation may well cast further light on what is a fascinating historical conundrum.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

Lochmaben Castle is one of the most puzzling castles in Scotland in terms of its building history (see Archaeological Overview above). The 1968-72 excavations did, however, resolve, beyond reasonable doubt, the dating of the masonry castle's south frontal wall to the English occupation in the middle of the 14th century.

The masonry castle comprises a rectangular curtain-walled castle (sometimes castle of enceinte or castle of enclosure), c.45 by 36.5m. Much of what survives, other than the south frontal wall, is so fragmentary that it defies interpretation. The outer walls, although standing high in parts, have been wholly robbed of their facing stones and are now shapeless fragments. Stone buildings came away from them inside the court, but what form they took it is impossible to discern. Among them will have been James IV's great hall.

Sadly, there is now no evidence of the fine machicolated parapets depicted by John Clerk of Eldin in 1780 crowning the wall-heads; these may well have been added during the Black Douglases' tenure of the castle in the first half of the 15th century, for those they built at Bothwell Castle, their chief seat, still remain in situ. It is possible that Lochmaben's machicolations survive now as buried archaeological artefacts.

The south front has proved to be one of the most intriguing, and puzzling, structures in medieval secular building in Scotland. It is a formidable U-shaped forework that was added to the outside of an existing castle to create a well-nigh impregnable face. Its walls still stand 12m high and were faced in high-quality red sandstone ashlar work. The main frontal (south) wall is featureless save for the centrally-placed entrance gate. This gateway was approached over a broad water-filled moat by a turning drawbridge; the pit for its counterpoise survives, similarly constructed of quality dressed ashlar. The ends of that wall terminated in walls, equally high, that were carried southward over the moat to the northern edge of the outer ward on arches wide enough to allow boats to pass through, thus creating a dock for vessels patrolling Castle Loch. These wing walls are unique in Scotland and almost unparalleled in

Britain; the only other known example is at Edward I's Beaumaris castle (Anglesey), dated to c.1300.

This date seems to run counter to the evidence produced as a result of the archaeological excavations of 1968-72, which postulated a date for the construction of the south frontal wall of around the mid-14th century, and more probably the 1360s or 70s. If this was so, then the possibility exists that it was the work of John Lewyn, master-mason from Durham who presided over new defensive works at Roxburgh Castle for Richard II of England between 1378 and 1387 and who was also responsible for rebuilding the outer gatehouse at Carlisle Castle between 1378 and 1383.

Social Overview:

The castle was a popular venue for municipal celebrations in the 19th century, most notably the visit of Queen Victoria in 1887. The many picnic parties visiting the castle ruins used 'an inelegant brick and iron shelter against the west wall', demolished in the 1970s.

Today, the castle is a minor visitor attraction. However, it benefits from being situated beside Castle Loch, and part of the Castle Loch Nature Reserve, which is popular with anglers, yachters, bird watchers and walkers. In recent years new paths, information boards and sculptures have been installed, largely with Heritage Lottery funding. In 2014 the loch was purchased by the local community, and the Castle Loch Lochmaben Community Trust was formed to ensure its continued conservation for the town and its visitors.

Spiritual Overview:

Lochmaben Castle would have had a chapel, or oratory, in it, where the royal family, or keeper, would have heard mass daily; a now-lost settlement called 'Priest Dykes', marked on Roy's *Military Survey of Scotland* c.1751, may be related to the castle's priest.

Today, the castle plays no obvious spiritual role.

Aesthetic Overview:

The ruined Lochmaben Castle lurks within dense woodland. Glimpses only may be had of the waters of Castle Loch.

It is difficult for visitors to comprehend the huge size of the castle complex, for the outer ditches are now difficult to make out. The southern platform is heavily overgrown and badly maintained by Historic Scotland, even though it is most probably the only Edwardian Scottish pele to survive.

The masonry castle has lost most of its original high quality red sandstone ashlar, and the resulting rubble core renders it almost formless and uninspiring.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When precisely was the southern platform constructed, and what purpose(s) did it serve? The limited archaeological excavation carried out in 1968-72 failed

to resolve this thorny issue, but demonstrated that the archaeological potential is high.

- When was the first stone castle built? Whilst the archaeological excavations provided evidence to support a later-14th-century date for the south frontal wall, they were unable to ascertain precisely when the original masonry castle was built. Further excavation may shed light on the possibility that the original castle was built in the later 13th century by Robert Bruce ‘the Competitor’.
- How extensive was the castle, and did it start out as an island stronghold? Detailed survey and geophysical work, coupled with archaeological investigation, could well shed light on these questions.
- Where was James IV’s great hall, in which Queen Mary and Lord Darnley hosted that banquet in 1565?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Lochmaben Castle may well have originated as the chief residence of Robert Bruce ‘the Competitor’ in the later 13th century, and subsequently served as a childhood home of his grandson, King Robert I, one of the most iconic figures in Scottish, and British, history.
- The castle incorporates the only Edwardian pele in Scotland that still has visible earthworks surviving.
- The castle played a pivotal role throughout the 14th century, during the protracted wars of Independence with England. In the early decades it changed hands, but from 1333 to 1384 it served as the chief garrison fortress of the English in the Scottish West March. Only Lochmaben and Roxburgh now retain architectural evidence of English occupation in southern Scotland.
- The south frontal wall, now the chief upstanding fragment of masonry surviving, is unique in Scottish secular architecture and almost unparalleled in Britain. It is possible that it is another example of the work of John Lewyn, Richard II’s master mason, whose best-preserved work is the outer gatehouse at Carlisle Castle.
- The entire castle complex, including those elements deemed to be beyond the area in state care and Castle Loch itself, presents immense archaeological potential.

Associated Properties:

(other locally related places) – **Caerlaverock Castle**; Dumfries Castle (site of);
Lochmaben Motte; **Morton Castle**; **Threave Castle**

(other Edwardian peles built in Scotland) – Dumfries; **Dunfermline**; **Linlithgow**;
Selkirk

(some other relevant royal castles) – Berwick; Carlisle; **Edinburgh**; Jedburgh

Keywords:

curtain wall; ditch/moat; pele/peel; Bruce; Edward I; Edward III; Douglas;
Crown; Maxwell

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