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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SCOTSTARVIT TOWER



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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

You can download this publication from our website at

www.historicenvironment.scot

SCOTSTARVIT TOWER

SYNOPSIS

Scotstarvit Tower is a roofed tower house situated on a ridge overlooking farmland, 3.3km south of Cupar. It was probably built in the late 15th century by the Inglises of Tarvit. Sir John Scot of Scotstarvit remodelled it after he purchased the estate in 1611, and renamed it Scotstarvit.

The six-storey tower is on the L-plan, with the staircase in the small SE wing. The tower now stands alone but was formerly surrounded by ancillary buildings. Scotstarvit is not without whimsical architectural interest, perhaps reflecting the somewhat bizarre nature of Sir John himself, a leading figure in the political and cultural life of his day and author of the imaginatively-titled *Scot of Scotstarvet's Staggering State of the Scots Statesman*. In his time the house was said to have become 'a kind of college' for men of learning.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- 1487 - the Inglises of Tarvit are confirmed in possession of the barony, and probably build the tower (then called Inglis Tarvit). However, the absence of a mention of the building in a 1550 charter confuses the issue, so the date of construction remains unproven.
- 1611 - the barony is purchased by John Scot (1585-1670), who acts as James VI's director of Chancery, Lord of Session and Privy Councillor. In addition to being a pillar of the establishment, Sir John is also a leading cultural figure. The husband of Anna Drummond, sister of the poet, William Drummond of Hawthornden, he not only writes the somewhat eccentric polemic against corrupt politicians, *Scot of Scotstarvet's Staggering State of the Scots Statesman*, but also organises the publication of John Blaeu's *Atlas of Scotland*. He renames his property Scotstarvit.
- 1627 - Sir John remodels the tower house, altering its upper storeys and roof-scape and adding ornate sculptural elements within. However, the quiriness of the interior must raise doubts as to whether Sir John actually resided there, or used it solely to indulge his somewhat unusual outlook on contemporary life.
- 1696 - a new mansion, Wemyss Hall, is built 1 km NW of Scotstarvit. The subsequent history of Scotstarvit is unknown, but MacGibbon & Ross (1887) refer to 'modern' partitions in the third and fourth floors, indicating habitation into the modern era.
- 1905/7 - Wemyss Hall is largely demolished and replaced by the present Hill of Tarvit. The new owner, the Dundee jute magnate F. B. Sharp, has his architect, Robert Lorimer, relocate the ornate stone chimney piece, dated 1627, from Scotstarvit's top floor to Hill of Tarvit's smoking room, where it remains to this day.

- 1930s - Scotstarvit is in use as a store.
- 1940 - Scotstarvit Tower is transferred into state care.
- 1948 - Hill of Tarvit is entrusted into the care of the National Trust for Scotland.
- 1956 - Scotstarvit's outbuildings are demolished.

Archaeological Overview:

- Scotstarvit Tower has not been subject to modern archaeological investigation.
- As the tower has no kitchen, this may have been located outside, in the barmkin. There was a well 50m to the tower's south. A roof-raggle on the stair tower's south wall indicates the former existence of a single-storey structure, and there are traces of structures to the west also.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The original tower took the L-plan form with the vertical access stair in the SE wing. All the openings are modest, and simply chamfered. However, the walls are of dressed and squared ashlar, unusual for the late 15th-century date and for such a modest-sized building. The walls rise undisturbed to the corbel table that carries the parapet.
- The parapet, and all that rises above it, are the work of Sir John Scot. The date 1627, together with the initials of Scot, his wife and their son, are on the heraldic panel over the stair turret doorway. The parapet has large gunholes (for show only). Crow-stepped gables crown the main roof and the stair is topped with a conical roof.
- Internally, the main block consists of two high tunnel-vaulted spaces, one above the other, each divided by an entresol. Above them is an unvaulted top chamber and attic. The entrance doorway was originally fitted with two doors, the inner one an iron yett (now missing).
- The ground floor is lit only by narrow slits in the east and west walls, is devoid of any other feature of interest and was presumably a storage cellar. The entresol above, now missing its floor but whose supporting corbels remain, has comfortable windows incorporating stone seats, but unusually no fireplace – a situation closely paralleled at **Affleck Castle**, Angus.
- The third and fourth floors, below the upper vault, have similar windows but also fireplaces, including a reasonably-sized one on the third floor. MacGibbon & Ross (1887) noted that both floors were partitioned into two smaller chambers. The third floor is the only one with a latrine. It also has a small servery, entered from off the stair beyond and linking to the room via a small, narrow opening. A stone sink on the right immediately on entering the room confirms the room's use as a dining room of sorts.
- The top storey and attic date to Sir John Scot's time. The attic fireplace was once graced by an ornate classical stone chimney piece, bearing the initials of Sir John Scot and Dame Anna Drummond, the date 1627 and carved thistles, roses and fleurs-de-lis, but this was removed to Hill of Tarvit in 1906. However, the heraldic panel above the door to the turret remains. The insertion of such an elaborate fireplace in an attic is unusual, but then Sir John Scot was an unusual character. Was the attic his study perhaps, where he wrote his *Staggering State*?

- Four carved stones on display in the tower (two dated 1723 and bearing the initials WB – for William Balfour?) were reportedly brought from Wemyss Hall and therefore seem to have no bearing on Scotstarvit itself.

Social Overview:

- Scotstarvit is a prominent landmark, and can be seen from the main road south from Cupar. Its gaunt appearance makes it rather memorable.
- The tower is linked to the Hill of Tarvit and its estate, which is managed by the National Trust for Scotland. Their holding comprises not just Lorimer's mansion but also extensive gardens and grounds which are popular with visitors, families and walkers. Scotstarvit is freely accessible, and the key for entering Scotstarvit is held at Hill of Tarvit (in exchange for a small deposit). The staff there say that there is a steady flow of visitors to the tower.
- The tower's intimate association with Sir John Scot, an undoubted luminary of his time, could be made more of.

Spiritual Overview:

- It is conceivable that the tower may have had a small oratory in it prior to the Protestant Reformation (1560).
- The tower currently has no spiritual meanings, associations or uses.

Aesthetic Overview:

- Scotstarvit is a somewhat plain tower house, though this is balanced by the high quality of its external masonry and attractive roof-scape. The corbelled parapet, crow-stepped gables, tall chimney stacks and conical turret conjure up a martial imagery, an aesthetic aided by the bareness and hollowness of its interior, within which echoes resound.
- Scotstarvit's general setting is rural and agricultural, despite it being not far from a main road. Although set on a rise, it is partly screened by trees. A single-storey cottage to the east is perhaps too close for comfort; presently unoccupied and neglected, the NTS are about to refurbish it. From the tower roof, the landscape's influence is limited, except to the north and west, where fine views over the Eden valley may be had.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When was the original tower built?
- How did Sir John Scot make use of his remodelled tower, and what happened to it thereafter?
- What were the nature and function of the buildings outside the tower?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Scotstarvit Tower is a fine example of a simple late 15th-century tower house with fine early 17th-century embellishments. The quality of the original ashlar construction is an important characteristic of the building.
- The tower's current form owes much to Sir John Scot of Scotstarvit, an important political and cultural figure of his time.

Associated Properties:

(the other related site locally) - Hill of Tarvit.
(other similar tower houses in the area in Historic Scotland's care) - **Affleck Castle; Balvaird Castle.**

Keywords:

tower house, armorial, chimney piece, crow-stepped gable, Scot

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