HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND | ÀRAINNEACHD EACHDRAIDHEIL ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC326
Designations:	Listed Building (LB551 Category A)
Taken into State care:	2006 (Ownership)
Last reviewed:	2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ARDCLACH BELL TOWER

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.

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ARDCLACH BELL TOWER

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Ardclach comprises a small detached tower, built as a prison and watch tower and used as a bell tower for the nearby church. The parish church (not in HES care, disused) was founded 1626, apparently on a virgin site, and is sited some 0.3 km away, some 60m lower in the valley of the River Findhorn, in the former county of Nairn.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- The tower is dated 1655 externally, and internally a further plaque displays the monogram MGB for Alexander Brodie of Lethen and his wife Margaret Grant, on whose estate it was situated. It is suggested that the building of the tower may have been a response to attacks by Royalist forces on Brodie, a noted Covenanter. If it is any earlier than this date, it is not greatly so.

- Local traditions relate to the manufacture of the first bell, its use and loss. Little tradition attaches to the later, smaller, bell.

- There are few known documentary sources for the building (kirk session records refer to 17th-century usage).

- The battle of Auldearn took place nearby on 9 May 1645, when Montrose's Royalist army defeated the Covenanters. Montrose plundered Brodie's estate on several occasions.

- 1760 tower had fallen into disrepair, but Kirk organised repair.

- Came into guardianship 1963 (listed 1971, scheduled 1995).

Archaeological Overview

- Nothing is known of the site on archaeological grounds, whether above or below ground. The exterior of the building is harled, which limits buildings analysis.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Detached belfries (combinations of tower and belfry) are unusual in Scotland. Clynekirkton and Latheron were both built as detached towers (ditto Daviot, now lost) and are quite different to Ardclach.

- The two-storey tower, approximately 4.3m square, is constructed of harled stonework with ashlar dressings and with a slated, double- pitched roof with a stone ridge. Accounts vary as to whether the belfry is a later addition or not. If so, the tower seems to have originally been built to be a watch tower (hence its hilltop location) and local prison (the ground floor). The belfry, with a pyramidal capping and openings in all four sides, is on the S gable. Below this is a stone dated 1655, but which phase in the building's development this represents is

unclear. The tower is entered at the SE corner and contains a windowless vaulted chamber on the ground floor, together with stairs to the upper floor, which has a chimneypiece in the north wall, flanked by two gunloops. There is one further gunloop in the N gable and three windows, two in the E and one in the W wall, all at first floor level.

Social Overview

- Not formally assessed.

Spiritual Overview

- Part of a post-Reformation church complex/landscape.

- Not formally assessed.

Aesthetic Overview

- The tower is what might be described as 'dinky', but its distant aesthetic qualities and landscape setting (which is significant - see above) are rather lost because of the afforested surrounding landscape.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Architectural phasing: the addition of the belfry needs confirming through archaeological building analysis, although the harling of the building will hamper this.

- Can anything more be said about the Brodie family, or the later history and use of the site?

- Nothing is known of the site from archaeological investigation.

- Function: how easily did the tower double-up its diverse functions as secular prison/watchtower and ecclesiastical bell-tower? What did this mean in practical terms?

- Context: what of the community that the church and bell served?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

Detached belfries are very unusual; Ardclach is all the more unusual for being an adaption of an earlier watchtower and prison tower. Of this small group, Ardclach has been described as 'by far the most interesting' (Hay 1957).

The tower is an individual response to the troubled times of the mid-17th century when Covenanters and Royalists opposed each other. As a prison and watch tower, Ardclach is therefore again a most unusual construction.

While the architectural qualities of the building can be appreciated on the approach to and at the site, its wider landscape setting and its significance are not so easily apparent due to trees, etc. However, the church still stands not far away, so a wider exploration of the surrounding landscape permits connections to be made.

There remain significant gaps in our understanding of the architectural development of this site and its context, notably the community that it served.

Associated Properties
Lathreron, Caithness and Clynekirkton, Sutherland are other examples of detached belfries.
Earlier examples of detached bell towers would include medieval roundtowers, the only Scottish examples being at **Abernethy** and **Brechin.**

Keywords Bell tower, prison, watch tower, post-Reformation, Brodie of Lethen family, Covenanters