

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC222

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90130), Listed Building (LB48228, Category A)

Taken into State care: 1906 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2017

**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

EDINBURGH CASTLE – ST MARGARET’S CHAPEL



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.

EDINBURGH CASTLE, ST MARGARET'S CHAPEL

1 Introduction

Note: This document focusses on St Margaret's Chapel, which forms one element of Edinburgh Castle, and should be read in conjunction with the Statement of Significance for Edinburgh Castle.

St Margaret's Chapel stands on the highest summit within Edinburgh Castle. It is a small and deceptively simple building measuring some 10m x 5m externally. It is built onto a rocky outcrop and is aligned on an east-west axis. While it is broadly rectangular on plan, the proportions and angles are not exact and the walling (particularly externally) exhibits a variety of stone types and finishes, indicating different builds and re-builds. Internally the barrel vaulted nave is separated from the apse by a chancel arch which has fine Romanesque detailing; the arch is not exactly symmetrical and the east window is also off-centre.

The chapel probably remained in use as a church until at least the sixteenth century, but it is not clear when worship in the chapel ceased. There is some uncertainty about which chapel documents are referring to, as there were several chapels associated with the castle at various dates. For instance, a chapel abutted St Margaret's at the east; from at least the 17th century this was the garrison chapel, which was later rebuilt and subsequently demolished in 1850¹.

By at least the 17th century St Margaret's came to be used as a store building for some of the Castle's artillery supplies. Its former use appears to have been forgotten as it is not mentioned in histories of Edinburgh in the late 19th – early 19th century. Its true identity was recognised by Daniel Wilson in 1845. This led to its restoration in the 1850s and it resumed its role of venerable monument and spiritual focus for the castle (at least until the building of the National War Memorial, completed 1927). This long and varied history gives the chapel a complex architectural history as a building, and a complex identity as a religious and cultural symbol.

Piecing together the chapel's history and development is not straightforward and several different interpretations have been mooted². All agree that portions of the structure date from at least the 1140s; this date being fixed to the dating of the chancel arch on stylistic grounds. However, parts of the structure may be even earlier, if the chancel arch is understood as a modification, dating of the chapel could be pushed

¹ There was also the Great Chapel, a much larger edifice perhaps dating from the late 13th century, and located on the north side of Crown Square, where the National War Memorial now sits.

² Wilson, Sir D., "Notice of St Margaret's Chapel, Edinburgh Castle", *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. 21 (1886-87), pp. 291-316. Fernie, E., 'Early Church Architecture in Scotland', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. 116 (1986), pp. 393-411. Gifford, J., Macwilliam, C. & Walker, D., *The Buildings of Scotland: Edinburgh* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984)

back to the early 1100s and possibly further back to the lifetime of Queen Margaret. Furthermore, references hint at there being a chapel or religious foundation on this part of the Edinburgh Castle site for several centuries before David I.

Its association with Queen, later Saint, Margaret was of prime importance to its restoration in the 1850s, and continues to be the greatest historical and perceptual focus today. The significance of the building and its story is at odds with its unremarkable external appearance, however on entering the chapel many visitors are struck by the special atmosphere of the place, by the feeling of antiquity and spirituality.

A fuller Timeline highlighting key dates within the Chapel's long history is given at Appendix 1.

2. Statement of Significance

St Margaret's Chapel is a structure of unique significance and importance both in the context of its role within the Castle and more widely in a national context as a very early religious building. While there are still differing hypotheses to explain the Chapel's obviously complex origin and development, there are broad areas of agreement as to why the Chapel is important.

- With its well-preserved Romanesque architectural details and long history of continued use, it is certainly the oldest intact³ building in the Castle and indeed in the city of Edinburgh. Arguably, it is among the oldest intact buildings in Scotland (its only obvious rivals are the round towers at Brechin and Abernethy whose original interior layout is unknown, and much-rebuilt chapels on Iona and Inchcolm).
- The Chapel is one of the few intact examples of early Romanesque architecture in Scotland, and probably also the earliest of these. Most other buildings of this period are either roofless ruins, or else so extensively rebuilt and enlarged that only fragments of the original architecture remain.
- The traditions associating the chapel with St Margaret (d 1093) have imbued the building with a particular importance since at least the thirteenth century. Margaret remains a key figure in Scotland's national story and the association remains strong whether or not any portion of the extant chapel dates from her lifetime.
- The Chapel is also the focus for the early religious associations for the Edinburgh Castle site including potential dedication to St Michael and the potential association with a nunnery or other religious foundation on the site.

³It is acknowledged that terms such as "intact" and "unique" should always be used with caution. Strictly speaking, no building of any age is likely to be "intact". However, as St Margaret's is believed to have been continuously roofed, occupies its same basic footprint and elevation from at least the 1140s and though subject to some rebuilding during the 19th century it preserves enough early fabric and design intent to be considered an "intact" example.

- In later centuries, prominent historical figures are known to have made use of the chapel, including King Edward I of England, and King James IV of Scotland.
- Along with the Argyle Tower (Portcullis Gate) the rediscovery of the Chapel was key to the “reinvention” of the Castle as a national monument and the 19th and early 20th century re-presentation of the Castle as an icon of national identity.
- For visitors, the Chapel offers a unique and very tangible connection to the early medieval castle, both as an “authentic” space and by its close association with Saint Margaret. The aesthetics of the interior which combines simplicity with high quality masonry and stained glass, enhance its spiritual qualities and encourage a sense of reverence in many.

This small building therefore combines tangible and intangible heritage values at the highest level of importance. Ongoing research and more detailed analysis of the structure in a comparative context should help increase understanding, however, in the interim the above short statement encapsulates our current understanding of the main significances of this site. This Statement will be kept under review as the outputs of ongoing research become available.

3. Issues for further consideration

Many issues regarding the interpretation of the chapel are still the subject of debate and include:

- The development of the earliest phases of the present building, particularly:
 - The dating of the rubble plinth
 - Whether or not the east end and chancel arch are alterations to an earlier rectangular chapel/oratory
 - How compelling is the argument re geometry of the chapel as proposed by Fernie⁴ to support its interpretation as a single design concept
 - The interpretation of the blocked openings in the west gable
- Did the chapel originate as a freestanding structure or was it integrated with other structures, particularly:
 - Was it ever part of a tower, such as Rochester, Bamburgh or Carlisle
 - What might be the form of associated structures such as chamber and treasury be like
- What was the relationship of St Margaret’s to the other chapels and structures known to have existed in the Castle, particularly:
 - How did St Margaret’s function in relation to the Garrison Chapel

⁴ Fernie, E., 'Early Church Architecture in Scotland', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. 116 (1986), p 409 n3.

- What about the other locations within the castle specifically named in association with Margaret, such as St Margaret's Tower and St Margaret's yett?

Appendix 1 Timeline

5th-10th century – “a church in honour of St Michael the Archangel on the top of the hill which is today called Edinburgh” is said to have been built by a group of Irish and/or Anglo-Saxon nuns. The claim is made by an author called Conchubranus, working no later than the first half of the twelfth century and probably drawing on an earlier source,⁵ which suggests that St Margaret's Chapel was perceived as having a long religious history dating back well before the time of Malcolm III and St Margaret, but it is hard to recover a historical basis from Conchubranus' complex narrative, which is based on the assertion that St Monenna of Kileavy in Ireland was identical to St Modwenna of Burton-on-Trent in England, and contains highly varied chronological indicators – further complicated by references to St Edith and St Osyth, were among the nuns; a date in the late seventh century (coinciding with the Anglo-Saxon occupation of the area in 672-685) has been regarded as plausible by scholars, but remains very tentative.

1093 – Queen Margaret, wife of Malcolm Canmore, dies in the royal residence on the Castle Rock, Edinburgh.

1124 – David I, Margaret and Malcolm's son, inherits the throne. He probably sets about building a new castle on the Castle Rock.

c.1130s - The present building is probably constructed. There is debate whether this was a free-standing structure or one forming part of a larger royal residence, conceivably a tower-keep such as King David builds (or completes) at Carlisle Castle.

c. 1140s – David I grants “the church of the Castle” to Holyrood Abbey, along with associated lordship rights which do not seem to be new innovations.

c. 1150 – the date by which the *Life* of Monenna must have reached its extant form: in this text, it is claimed that a chapel on the highest point of Edinburgh Castle was founded by a group of nuns many centuries earlier.

1249 – Queen Margaret is canonised by Pope Innocent IV as St. Margaret of Scotland.

⁵ *Conchubrani Vita Sanctae Monennae*, ed. M. Esposito (Dublin, 1910) [offprint from *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 28C (1909-10), pp. 202-251], esp. pp. 229-30, 233-34, M. Esposito, “The Sources of Conchubranus' Life of St Monenna”, *English Historical Review* 35 (1920), pp. 71-78, A. Boyle, “The List of Abbesses in Conchubranus' Life of Saint Monenna”, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 3rd Ser., 34 (1971), pp. 84-86; *Geoffrey of Burton: Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, ed. & trans. R. Bartlet (Oxford 2002), pp. xiv-xix, 122.

1278 – the royal chamber in Edinburgh Castle is identified as “St Margaret’s Chamber”, a reference to the biography by Turgot, which implies a nearby chapel.

1291 – King Edward I of England comes to Edinburgh and receives the submission of several local church leaders in the chapel.

1296 – King Edward returns as an invader, besieges the Castle, and carries off treasures including royal chapel furnishings.

1314 – Robert I's forces recapture the castle from the English and raze it to the ground. Only the chapel seems to remain intact.

1328 – Many sources cite a reference to repairs on St Margaret’s Chapel at this date; in fact, the document in question relates to a chapel in Roxburgh Castle.

1336 – Master John the glazier re-glazes four windows in St. Margaret's Chapel for the occupying English garrison. This is the first reference to use the name “St Margaret’s Chapel”.

1366 – regular church services in the Castle have shifted from St Margaret’s Chapel to the newly-repaired Great Chapel.

1389 – by this date, regular services have shifted back to St Margaret’s Chapel. Efforts are made over the next few years to keep the Great Chapel in regular use, but it ceases to be mentioned after 1403, and by 1425 St Margaret’s Chapel is explicitly identified as the normal place of worship in the Castle.

1473 – James III and Queen Margaret attend a church service in the Castle on St Margaret’s day (19th June). This may take place in St Margaret’s Chapel, but the next reference, in 1475, suggests that attempts are once again being made to bring the Great Chapel back into use. Architectural fragments suggest an ambitious rebuilding project on the Great Chapel, but this is probably interrupted when James III is overthrown in 1488 and a simple timber roof in 1496 may simply render it weathertight.

1497 – King James IV attends church services in the Castle on St Margaret’s Day and also on the Nativity of St Margaret on 16th November. These St Margaret’s Day services evidently continue for much of the reign, with surviving documentation from 1502, 1505, 1506 and 1507. It is likely that the king is joined by his daughter the Lady Margaret and her two African ladies-in-waiting (one of whom is also called Margaret), who are resident in the Castle from 1504.

1512 – references indicate the provision of a roof for a ‘new chapel’ in the Castle. This may mark the construction of the adjacent Garrison Church which replaces St Margaret’s Chapel as the primary place of worship for the Castle.

1539 – As part of wholesale changes to the castle, prompted by the relocation of the royal family to **Holyrood Palace**, the Great Chapel (probably out of use since c. 1480) is converted into a military arsenal building. It is unclear how, if at all, this affects St. Margaret's Chapel.

1560 – The coffin of the Queen Regent Mary of Guise lies in state in the Castle's chapel, perhaps meaning St Margaret's Chapel.

1593 – The Protestant religious authorities note that there is a chapel in the Castle, apparently no longer used; they urge its use for Reformed worship and the appointment of a minister. It is unclear if this refers to St Margaret's Chapel, the Garrison Church or even the long-disused Great Chapel.

1633 – thirty-six feet of metal banding is supplied for windows in the chapel; this seems a rather large quantity for the windows of St Margaret's Chapel, but it is impossible to be sure.

1649 – 'fifty-eight' square feet of glass are supplied for the chapel windows; given the use of a 'glazier's foot' of around nine inches, it is likely that the total area is really around 30 square feet; nonetheless, the total still seems too large for St Margaret's Chapel.

c. 1650 – two illustrations of the castle give contradictory depictions of the castle's church. One shows a building that resembles St Margaret's Chapel, while the other depicts a more ornate building of early sixteenth-century type, corresponding to the adjacent Garrison Church.

1650 – The religious authorities once again call for the Castle to be designated as a parish.

1661 – the Castle is designated as a Church of Scotland parish, served by a garrison chaplain.

1670 – a plan of the Castle shows the first unambiguous depiction of the Garrison Church, now forming a single architectural range with St Margaret's Chapel.

1689 – when the Garrison Church is damaged during a siege, the garrison chaplain moves his services to a vault beneath a gunpowder store. This is perhaps a reference to St Margaret's Chapel, suggesting that it had passed out of regular religious use, but that its religious function was still remembered, and that it remained available for use.

1719 – The chapel is identified on plans of the Castle as a gunpowder store.

1771 – A tourist handbook draws attention to the ecclesiastical origins of the building, and shows that its traditional association with St Margaret and King Malcolm III is still remembered.

1817 – The adjacent Garrison Church is enlarged.

1829 – The old chapel is in use as a store by the Master Gunner.

1845 – Daniel Wilson, antiquarian and secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, rediscovers St. Margaret's Chapel for what it is, hidden amidst the buildings and yards then in use by the Master Gunner.

1851-53 – St. Margaret's Chapel is restored to something approaching its original form, by Maximilian Grant, architect, and Lieut. Col. George Phillpots, Royal Engineers. New stained-glass windows – three representing St. Margaret, Malcolm III and David I and the fourth, in the west gable a simple cross and inscription – are installed, together with a neo-Romanesque doorway at the west end of the north wall. The present vault over the nave dates also from this time. The adjacent garrison chapel is demolished in the same campaign.

1877 – St. Margaret's Chapel is entrusted by the War Office into the care of the Office of Works, which opens it to the public.

1885 – A proposal to further restore St. Margaret's Chapel, financed by William Nelson, the Edinburgh publisher, with Hippolyte J. Blanc as architect, comes to naught.

1922 – The existing stained-glass windows, representing St. Andrew, St. Columba, St. Ninian, St. Margaret and William Wallace, and designed by Douglas Strachan (who would later design the windows for the Scottish National War Memorial) are installed.

1934 – The Chapel is refurbished and dedicated (16 March).

1939 – John Wilson Paterson, Office of Works architect, replaces the Victorian neo-Romanesque doorway with one of more simple design.

1942 – St. Margaret's Chapel Guild is formed, under the patronage of H.R.H. The Princess Margaret.

1993 – The St. Margaret Chapel Guild helps fund the chapel's refurbishment and refitting, in celebration of the 900th anniversary of St. Margaret's death in the castle.