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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EDINBURGH CASTLE – GREAT HALL



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 – GREAT HALL

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The Great Hall was built in 1509–11 for James IV, over stone vaulted undercrofts most probably built by his father, James III. Measuring 29 x 12.5m externally, it was the smallest of the three great halls built by James IV from new (the others were at Falkland Palace and **Stirling Castle**) by some considerable margin, but its fine hammer-beam roof survives, one of only two late medieval roofs remaining in Scotland (the other is at Darnaway Castle, Moray). The roof's stone console-brackets are richly carved, not only with the royal cipher but also, and more remarkably, with images of Italianate Renaissance character, making the roof one of the earliest examples of Italian-inspired architecture built in the British Isles.

The only recorded use of the Great Hall for formal state occasions was in 1633, during Charles I's coronation visit. The arrival of Oliver Cromwell at the castle in 1650 saw the Great Hall crudely converted into soldiers' barracks. The building was eventually more permanently fitted out as such in 1737, with six rooms spread over three floors designed to accommodate 312 men. From 1800 to 1887, the building served as the military hospital for the castle garrison.

The Great Hall was restored in 1887–91 by the architect Hippolyte Jean Blanc, and much of what exists today internally dates from that time – the paved floor, panelled walls, west screen with its minstrels' gallery, great stone dais fireplace, and stained-glass windows. Only the hammer-beam roof is original, for the most part. Externally, only the courtyard elevation is largely original to James IV; its entrance doorway, however, is Blanc's creation.

The Great Hall has been used for important state occasions and government functions since World War II, and continues to provide a valuable and awe-inspiring venue for all manner of occasions and events.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

Later 15th century: During James III's reign, the vaults directly beneath the Great Hall are built, both to provide a state prison and to help form a level courtyard above (what became known as Palace Yard and now Crown Square).

1509–10: The Great Hall is built by James IV. The Master of Works is Thomas Kincaid, the mason responsible may well be an Italian named Cressent, and the roof may be the work of John Drummond.

1512: John Kelso is paid for slating the Great Hall.

1633: Charles I feasts in the Great Hall the day before his coronation in Holyrood Abbey. That night he sleeps in the adjacent Palace and re-enters the Great Hall on the morning of the ceremony to be greeted by 'the great and grand' prior to processing down the Royal Mile to Holyrood.

1650: Oliver Cromwell captures the castle and proceeds to have the Great Hall fitted out as soldiers' barracks, with timber bed-galleries around the walls and an open 'hall' at the centre.

1671/2: The Great Hall roof is repaired.

1737: The Great Hall is converted into a more permanent barracks (called the Barrack Hall), containing three floors, two large barrack-rooms to each floor, the whole building to accommodate 312 men.

1755: Following the building of the North Barracks (the building now known as the Scottish National War Memorial), the Barrack Hall is renamed the South Barracks.

c. 1800: Following completion of the New Barracks, the South Barracks is converted into the castle's military hospital.

1883: Major Gore Booth, Royal Engineers, rediscovers the Great Hall's original hammer-beam roof and urges the building's restoration. He and Lord Napier, retired diplomat, persuade the War Office to co-operate; more importantly, they also persuade the Edinburgh publisher William Nelson to finance the entire scheme.

1887: The military hospital is moved from the Great Hall to temporary quarters elsewhere.

1887–91: The Great Hall is completely restored, under the direction of the Edinburgh-based architect, Hippolyte Jean Blanc.

1892: HRH The Princess Louise, Marchioness of Lorne, formally opens the restored Great Hall.

1890s: The Great Hall is fitted out as an armoury, much to Blanc's regret but done by the War Office to accord with the late William Nelson's wishes.

1896: The Great Hall is transferred from the War Office to the Office of Works, and opened to visitors.

Post-1945: The Great Hall is increasingly used as a venue for State banquets and other government functions.

1985: Mikhail Gorbachev is in the Great Hall on a visit to Scotland when he is suddenly recalled to the Soviet Union following the death of Konstantin Chernenko, the then General-Secretary of the Communist Party.

1992: The European Council of Ministers gather in the Great Hall during a summit with the Prime Minister, John Major.

1996: The Stone of Destiny is formally returned to the Commissioners of the Regalia in a ceremony held in the Great Hall.

1999: Dendrochronological dating of the roof timbers by Dr Anne Crone firmly places the creation of the original roof into the reign of James IV.

Archaeological Overview

Although Hippolyte Jean Blanc was conscious of the need to restore the Great Hall based on evidence from archaeological investigation, few records from his architectural practice survive to provide confirmation.

Archaeological and related work undertaken more recently has shed important new light. Most importantly, dendrochronological work carried out by Dr Anne Crone in 1999 has firmly established that the hammer-beam timbers were felled in 1509–10. Elsewhere, archaeological watching briefs in Crown Square associated with upgrading of mains services have confirmed the existence of a pentice (lean-to covered passage) running the length of the courtyard façade. Standing building survey has shown the extent of Blanc's intervention along the south wall, required by the removal of the projecting stone latrine block.

Finally, during a recent refurbishment of the Great Hall evidence was found of Blanc's stencilled wallpaper decoration scheme, and of the original enamelled painted decoration on his 'gasoliers'.

Architectural/Artistic Overview

The Great Hall is largely a product of the 1887–91 restoration. The original medieval hammer-beam roof, however, remains, and the front elevation, facing onto Crown Square, retains further original details, together with evidence of its use as barracks.

Foundation phase: The Great Hall, measuring 29 x 12.5m externally, dates from the closing years of James IV's reign (d.1513). Dendrochronological examination of the hammer-beam roof confirms that the work took place during 1509–10, and the meagre documentation indicates that the roof was slated in or shortly before 1512. The fact that some of the stone console-brackets are carved with James IV's cipher confirms the ascription to James IV, rather than James V (1513–42).

Externally, the building had a pentice, or lean-to corridor, along the Crown Square side. The elevation itself was surmounted by a projecting battlemented parapet supported on stone corbels, identical to that which once graced the wall-heads of the adjacent Palace.

Edinburgh Castle's Great Hall was the smallest of the three erected by James IV within the first decade of the 16th century (the others were at Falkland and **Stirling**), and by some considerable margin. However, the cramped nature of the site available may have prevented his Master of Works, Thomas Kincaid, from constructing a longer building. This constriction perhaps also had a bearing on doing without the bay windows at the east (dais) end. In most other respects, the hall is similar to those at Falkland and Stirling, with the hall standing above an undercroft. As at Stirling there was a pentice running along the lower part of the building on the courtyard side. The large, mullioned windows and transomed windows that lit the hall from the south are possibly French- or Flemish-inspired, whilst the fine hammer-beam roof may have been based on English prototypes (eg Richard II's Westminster Hall and Edward IV's Eltham Palace).

Undoubtedly the single most important surviving original features, other than the timber roof itself, are the stone console-brackets supporting the roof's hammer

beams. They are of Italianate Renaissance form (eg the grotesque male head is closely paralleled on the **Sceptre**, presented to James IV in the 1490s), and have the same classically inspired idiom as the corbels of the great cornice of François I's building at the château of Blois, begun in 1515, one of the innovative buildings of western European architecture. This has led some to offer a more conservative dating of Edinburgh's roof into the reign of James V. However, the dendrochronological evidence has firmly rejected that possibility, and the roof perfectly illustrates the advanced architectural and cultural taste within the reach of the Scottish sovereign.

Development phases: Little remains from the conversion of the Great Hall, first to soldiers' barracks (1650s–1800) and then to military hospital (1800–87). The main intervention surviving from the barracks era is probably the segmental-arched central entrance from Crown Square, which most likely dates from the later 17th century, though some would have this as the original entrance, on the basis that its form is similar to the 16th-century doorways off the transe in the Vaults. This, however, seems most unlikely as it is centrally positioned, whereas public entrances into great halls were from the 'lower' end. This central doorway was later blocked and a smaller door inserted, quite possibly during the 1737 remodelling. Nothing now remains of the two upper floors inserted in 1737, or of the numerous partitions erected to create six large rooms, or of the fireplaces to heat them, or of the dormer windows in the roof to light the top storey. The main intervention from the military hospital was the construction of a projecting stone latrine block through the south wall.

Restoration phase: Much of what survives today dates from the restoration by Hippolyte Jean Blanc (1887–91). Hippolyte Blanc joined the Office of Works in 1865 and by 1877 had risen to become Chief Assistant. In 1878 he left to form his own practice. In 1886/7 he created the Argyle Tower atop the Portcullis Gate.

Externally, Blanc removed the projecting stone latrine block from the south wall and re-fenestrated the elevation; he also repaired the wall-heads and re-roofed, and provided the present entrance from Crown Square. Internally, he gutted the place, removing all the floors, partitions and fireplaces, and, other than the hammer-beam roof (which he simply repaired, strengthened and redecorated, replacing several of the missing or badly damaged stone console-brackets), completely refurbished and redecorated it, much as we see today; only his stencilled wall decoration has gone.

Blanc was under the impression that the Great Hall was in fact the 'great chamber', dated to c.1440 (we now believe that the great chamber is embedded in the ground floor of the adjacent Palace). The details of the late Gothic panelling and west screen are details based on the early sixteenth century choir stalls of King's College Chapel, Aberdeen, and the great hooded fireplace in the east wall is based on the one in the hall of Borthwick Castle

Blanc's restoration has resulted in a magnificent Victorian interior, but certainly nothing James IV would have recognised.

Social Overview

Since its restoration in 1887–91, the Great Hall has played an important role in national life, used for all manner of State, governmental and Army uses, and in more recent times as a high-status venue for all manner of events (eg the Eurovision Song Contest, Hogmanay celebrations).

Spiritual Overview

The Great Hall has no observable spiritual associations, other than its use as a venue for the Army's annual carol concert.

Aesthetic Overview

The Great Hall is an outstanding example of heavy-handed Victorian restoration.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

What remains to be discovered behind Blanc's panelling and plastered walls that could inform our better understanding of the building history of one of Scotland's most important late medieval buildings? Information such as the location of the original entrances (public and royal) may remain, as well as more light on Blanc's references to changes in the masonry that he observed during the course of stripping out.

What remains to be found of Blanc's papers, drawings and photographs (he was a keen photographer)? Despite searches, these have proved elusive, but if discovered they could provide much important information on the archaeology of the structure as he found it.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

The Great Hall's original hammer-beam roof is one of only two late-medieval roofs surviving in Scotland (the other is at Darnaway Castle, dated to the 1380s).

The restored Great Hall is a magnificent Victorian interior, even though nothing surviving would be recognisable to James IV.

The Great Hall plays a pivotal role in national life as an important, high-status venue for State and government occasions.

ADDENDA

Associated Properties

Other great halls of James IV: Falkland Palace, **Linlithgow Palace** (a remodelling of one built for James I), **Stirling Castle**

The only other medieval hammer-beam roof surviving in Scotland: Darnaway Castle in Moray

Keywords

vault; hammer-beam roof; corbel; barracks; fireplace; panelling; stained glass; armoury; James IV; William Nelson; Hippolyte Blanc

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