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ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC108

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90288); Garden and
Designed Landscape (GDL00241)

Taken into State care: 1866 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2011

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KING'S KNOT, STIRLING



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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KING'S KNOT

SYNOPSIS

The property comprises all that remains visible of the former royal gardens laid out beneath **Stirling Castle** on its south-west side. The gardens formed part of an extensive area of parkland known as the King's Park. A larger area of the King's Park, for which there is a separate Statement of Significance, is also in care of Historic Environment Scotland.

The King's Knot consists of grass-covered earthworks that once formed two parterres (rectangular flower gardens and walks). The earthworks are dominated by a three-tiered octagonal stepped mound, 3m high. Their date of construction is not precisely known. They are generally believed to have been created in the 1620s, part of the works carried out in advance of Charles I's coronation visit to Scotland. However, cartographic and other evidence hints that they may actually be a creation of the Commissioners of Woods and Forests in the 1860s, and that the 'old gardens' lay in the field immediately to their north.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- 1190 – the first documentary reference to the King's Park, a hunting reserve for the use of the royal court whilst in residence at **Stirling Castle**.
- 1453 – the first reference to a garden at the castle. The location is not specified.
- 1460 - James Wilson is master gardener at **Stirling Castle** and Falkland Castle.
- 1476 – following James Wilson's death, Gilles Mackgilhoise and Malcolm Makclery take over the gardens at Stirling, perhaps indicating their expansion.
- 1484 - the gardens are under the care of John Modane, again jointly with Falkland.
- 1497 - Brother Matthew Taket of **Culross Abbey** takes over the management of the gardens at Stirling. Over the next decade, the records tell of ditches (possibly small canals) being dug, stanks (fish-ponds) being created, a vegetable garden being stocked with peas, beans, onions and leeks, and orchards with plum, pear, and wine (vine?) trees. Of the stanks, one is stocked with 420 pike, eel and small fish, and the other with carp, bream and tench. 1100 young trees are planted in 1497, probably to create avenues and arbours. In 1501, thorn hedges and osier trees are added to the formal layout.
- 1502 – the *Exchequer Rolls* refer to the 'new' garden 'sub muro castri Strivelin' ('below the castle walls of Stirling'), probably Brother Matthew Taket's creation.
- 16th century - garden maintenance is assiduously continued under the later Stewart monarchs.
- 1603 - the royal court under James VI relocates to England, with inevitable consequences for the maintenance of the royal gardens.
- 1625/9 - in anticipation of Charles I's coronation visit to Scotland, significant works are carried out at **Stirling Castle**, including in the royal gardens. An English gardener, William Watts, is employed as 'maister gairdiner to his

Majestie at the Castell of Stirling', where he is noted as 'plattig [planning] and contryveing his Majesties new orchard and garden'.

- later 1600s on - the King's Park, including the royal gardens, is let out for grazing.
- 1707 - Sir Robert Sibbald, Charles II's erstwhile physician, tells of 'an orchard and the vestiges of a large and spacious garden'.
- 1777 – William Nimmo's *History of Stirlingshire* tells that 'vestiges of the walls and parterres with a few strips of fruit trees are still visible'.
- 1842 - Queen Victoria visits **Stirling Castle** and complains about the state of the gardens. In response, the Commissioners of Woods and Forests (Historic Scotland's predecessor body) set about improving them. By 1866, they had 'repaired' the King's Knot, an operation described as a 'thorough restoration and renewal'. Cartographic and other evidence suggests they did far more than that (see below).

Archaeological Overview:

- Aerial photography has revealed three concentric ditches of an earthwork underlying the King's Knot, which may indicate an earlier garden layout, or perhaps more likely something even older. The possibility that there may be a Roman fort in the vicinity has recently been suggested.
- The King's Knot has not as yet been archaeologically investigated, nor scientifically dated. Until this is done, the precise date of construction of the existing earthworks must remain in doubt. Discrepancies exist between the generally accepted Charles I date (1620s) and the available artistic and cartographic evidence. The latter - Vosterman's painting (1673), John Laye's Board of Ordnance (BO) plan (1725) and William Roy's Military Survey map (c.1750) - site the formal gardens (Laye refers to them as 'old gardens') in the field immediately to the north of the present King's Knot; nothing of note is shown on the present King's Knot site in any of them. Only with the Ordnance Survey 1st edition map (1858) does the King's Knot appear in its present location, though only the 'King's Knot' itself is identified; the 'Queen's Knot' is absent, suggesting perhaps that the Commissioners of Woods and Forests had yet to create it.
- This evidence suggests that the present King's Knot is a Victorian recreation of the original 17th-century 'old gardens', not on the original site itself but on an adjacent 'green-field' site. The Commissioners of Woods and Forests would have had the evidence of the layout and form of the 1620s garden, both in the form of the degraded earthworks of the 'old gardens' themselves (which had been let to grazing since the later 1600s) and the artistic and cartographic evidence described above. Although Vosterman's painting seems not to show a prominent 'mount', Nimmo's *History of Stirlingshire* (1777) refers to a 'mount of earth, called the knot, with benches of earth around it'.
- The riddle of the King's Knot can only be solved by an inter-disciplinary project, including archaeological excavation.
- What is undoubtedly more important than knowing the date of the King's Knot is the recognition that the field to its north has far greater archaeological potential as being the most likely site of the historic royal gardens 'sub muro

castris', which date from the later 15th century, and where the formal garden for Charles I's coronation visit was most likely located.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The grass-covered earthworks comprise two adjoining elements, known today as the King's Knot and Queen's Knot. The former is distinguished by a three-tiered octagonal stepped mound, 3m high, within a square pattern of paths. The latter, now partly truncated by Raploch Road, is formed of a lower four-compartment parterre enclosing an oval.
- In late medieval times, the term 'knot' or 'knott' meant an ornamental garden where the flower-beds had twisted designs formed of dwarf evergreens. By the early 16th century, French Renaissance gardens (eg, Blois, Fontainebleau) consisted of a series of square enclosed knots - elaborate patterns made up either of plants or coloured earths, the whole encompassed by open or closed inter-connecting arbours. These were invariably placed directly beneath the state apartments so that the garden's patron might best appreciate them. By the early 17th century, the fashion was for huge geometrical gardens, heavily imbued with symbolism. (Later writers have interpreted the King's Knot's imposing octagonal mound as the setting for King Arthur's Round Table, though without evidence.)
- Other than the King's Knot, little is known of the design of the royal gardens at **Stirling Castle**, whether inside the castle walls, or externally within the King's Park. The difficulty in accepting the King's Knot as an integral part of the royal gardens at Stirling is two-fold. Firstly, it is not located directly beneath the state apartments (ie, King's Old Building (James IV) and Palace (James V)); that honour goes to the field directly to the north of the King's Knot, where Vosterman and the BO plans place them. Secondly, it stands isolated, whereas one would normally expect it to form part of a far grander garden landscape.

Social Overview:

- Stirling very much benefits from being an overtly historic town, appreciated by locals and visitors alike. The King's Knot, in its own modest way, simply reinforces that identity.
- The King's Knot is physically separated from the castle it once served, and is freely accessible. As a result, it is well-used by the local community for recreation and dog-walking. The feature is affectionately known locally as 'the cup and saucer'.

Spiritual Overview:

- Renaissance gardens were principally pleasure-grounds but their designs were often heavily laced with 'divine and moral remembrances' (eg, the 3rd Earl of Pembroke's garden at Wilton House (Pembrokeshire), created in the 1630s, had an equilateral triangle in honour of the Holy Trinity). Whether the King's Knot had any such spiritual association is not known.
- Today, the King's Knot appears not to have any spiritual associations.

Aesthetic Overview:

- The King's Knot is a pleasing and unusual feature, particularly on a sunny day, despite it being partly hemmed in by roads and houses
- When viewed from the castle battlements, as was originally intended, the neat, trim lines of the parterres are spectacular, the more so as the distant backdrop is composed of mountain peaks of the Southern Highlands.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What, if anything, was on the flat ground below the castle rock prior to the creation of the King's Park in the 12th century?
- What was on that ground after the 12th century prior to the creation of the King's Knot?
- When precisely was the King's Knot created? Only once this is known will we be in a position to establish by whom and why.
- Most importantly, what in the way of royal gardens remains to be found in the field to the north of the King's Knot?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- The King's Knot appears to be the last surviving physical remnant of the royal gardens that would have once been such an important feature of **Stirling Castle**, particularly from the 15th century on.
- The surviving grass-covered earthworks form one of the most distinctive, if puzzling, garden features in Scotland.
- Should the King's Knot prove to date from the 16th or 17th century, and not a Victorian recreation, then it has the potential to enhance our understanding and appreciation of the former royal gardens that once dominated the view westward from the castle battlements.
- The swathe of open ground below the castle battlements, including the site of the 'old gardens' and the King's Knot, as well as the sole remaining part of the medieval King's Park, is the best preserved deer-park and pleasure-ground at any of Scotland's royal castles.

Associated Properties:

(other related sites locally) – **Stirling Castle ; King's Park, Stirling ; Mar's Wark, Stirling**

(other significant late medieval garden designs) – **Aberdour Castle; Drummond Castle; Edzell Castle; Falkland Palace; Kinross House; Lincluden Collegiate Church; Palace of Holyroodhouse; Pitmedden; Tolquhon Castle**

Keywords:

earthworks, parterre, knot, Charles I, Queen Victoria

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