



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC147

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM13590)

Taken into State care: 1937 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2011

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

GREENKNOWE TOWER



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GREENKNOWE TOWER

SYNOPSIS

Greenknowe Tower stands on a low grassy knoll a little to the west of the village of Gordon (Berwickshire). The knoll itself may well have been the site of the original seat of the Gordons prior to their relocation to Aberdeenshire in the 14th century. The site passed through marriage to the Setons in the 15th century. According to the inscribed lintel over the front door, the present tower was built in 1581 by James Seton of Touch, Stirlingshire, and his wife, Janet Edmonstone. However, the building may represent a remodelling of an existing one.

The tower is L-shaped on plan and four storeys (plus attic) high. It was extended to the north in the later 17th century, probably by the new owners, the Pringles of Stichel. Around the tower is evidence for other buildings, including a stable, as well as the barmkin wall. The area around the knoll retains evidence for the original approach from the north (the present approach is from the south) and extensive run-rig. The tower was occupied until the mid-19th century. It was conserved in the 1930s with financial help from the Dalrymple Archaeological Fund.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- c.1160 - Richard de Gordon grants land in Berwickshire to **Kelso Abbey**, the first of his surname on record.
- 1320 - Sir Adam de Gordon takes the Declaration of Arbroath to the Pope and is rewarded by Robert I with the estate of Strathbogie, Aberdeenshire.
- 1408 - Adam's great-great-granddaughter marries Alexander Seton, to whom the Gordon estates, including Greenknowe, pass.
- 1576 - the first record of a castle on 'the landis and lordship of Greenknowe'. The 'mansion called Greneknowe' is referred to in 1577.
- 1581 - James Seton of Touch and his second wife, Janet Edmonstone, record their building (remodelling?) of the tower on the lintel over the front door.
- c.1620 - Greenknowe is purchased by the Pringles of Stichel, a local family.
- c.1660 - Walter Pringle, residing at Greenknowe, writes in his *Memoirs of a Covenanter* (published 1723) of gardens and fruit trees and a broad avenue of trees.
- c.1850 - the place is finally abandoned as a residence.
- 1937 - the tower and east part of the surrounding knoll are taken into state care. Repairs are part financed by the Dalrymple Archaeological Fund.
- 1978 - archaeological excavations locate a stable and part of the barmkin wall.

Archaeological Overview

- Little documented archaeological work has taken place. The conservation work of the 1930s, probably confined to rubble clearance, has left no record.

- Small-scale excavations were undertaken in 1978. Inside the tower these revealed the footings of a partition wall dividing the ground-floor space into kitchen and storeroom. To the east of the tower evidence was found for barmkin buildings, including a stable with its cobbled floor and drainage gullies, the cobbled courtyard itself, and a stretch of the surrounding barmkin wall. Exploration to the north of the tower showed just how disturbed the archaeology was at this point, hardly surprising given the history of building and demolition here (the two roof raggles in the north wall of the tower and the associated door slappings/blockings confirm the complex building history). The discovery there of a countersunk Mary I coin, dated 1572, didn't really help unravel the mystery.
- Field survey and aerial photography carried out at and around the site in 1978 confirmed the existence (attested in Pringle's *Memoirs*) of former gardens, and a formal parkland surrounding the tower. These included the original approach from the north, along a fine avenue of trees. Beyond lay extensive remains of run-rig. Most of this lies outside the boundary of the property in care.
- The 1978 excavations illustrated the potential for below-ground archaeology to confirm the complex building history of the tower itself. Excavation on the knoll should be able to confirm whether this site originated in the 12th-century.

Architectural/Artistic Overview

- The tower appears, on the face of it, to be a fine example of a late 16th-century tower house (the lintel above the front door is dated 1581). On closer inspection, however, the lower part of the building is clearly constructed of different stone, suggesting that the 1581 date refers to a major rebuilding, including obviously a substantial heightening.
- The structure as rebuilt in 1581 is a fine, and largely representative, example of a Jacobean tower house, though it does have some unusual features.
- The main block of the L-plan building is four storeys high plus attic. The ground floor housed the kitchen in the north end, with a wide fireplace inglenook, and a smaller store-room to the south. On the first floor was the hall, with another fine, decorated fireplace in the east wall. Above the hall were three more floors of private chambers, with the usual windows, aumbries and privies. The privies, however, all had 'closed' stools, not open-chuted latrines - a feature just coming into vogue c.1580 (eg, **Crichton Castle's** north range).
- The jamb, or wing, at the NE corner of the main block, housed the main stair rising from ground level as far as the first floor. Thereafter, the upper floors were reached by a spiral stair contained within a 'round' corbelled out within the re-entrant angle. This enabled the upper part of the jamb to provide additional rooms.
- The wall heads were topped with attractive 'roundel' corner turrets springing from corbels, and crow-stepped gables. There is a sprinkling of small round pistol holes.
- Features of interest include: (a) a fine iron yett still in its original position at the entrance doorway, (b) a laird's lug (spy hole) to the left of the hall fireplace and accessed from the private stair to the upper floors, (c) a sundial at the SW corner, and (d) a horizontal gunhole in the east face of the jamb.

- Evidence for subsequent alterations to the tower include: (a) the lowering of window sills in the first-floor hall, and (b) the roof raggles and associated door slappings/blockings on the outer face of the north wall. These demonstrate how, in the 17th century, successive owners tried to upgrade and extend the accommodation. The complex building history of this change is now difficult to establish following the works of the 1930s.

Social Overview

- The site is associated with the Gordon surname, one of the great Scottish clans, although they are today most closely identified with their later medieval heartlands in NE Scotland. The association between Greenknowe and the village of Gordon to its east is now scarcely evident, largely because a railway embankment screens the view.
- The tower is associated with the Pringles, a noted Border surname.
- Greenknowe is primarily a low-intensity visitor attraction. There is no current concerted use of the property by local people.

Spiritual Overview

- Greenknowe Tower itself does not seem to have had any spiritual use in the past, though the existence of a family chapel somewhere on the knoll in medieval times may be assumed.
- The tower was the residence of a noted Covenanter in the time of Charles II.
- The tower has no known spiritual associations today.

Aesthetic Overview

- Greenknowe Tower is strikingly tall and slender, more so than historically, when it was to an extent masked by its surrounding barmkin wall and ancillary buildings. It is built mainly of warm red sandstone, which makes it look most appealing on its grassy knoll and fringed around with ageing deciduous trees. The tower was very much a country seat, certainly not a stronghold, and its surrounding gardens, grounds, parkland and avenues were once important components in the *ensemble*.
- Greenknowe Tower stands in a relatively isolated rural location, surrounded by deciduous trees and green fields. Behind it, to the north, is rising ground, and in the foreground, on the south and west, is the flat boggy land now called Gordon Moss (a Site of Special Scientific Interest). The remaining stretch of railway embankment (the rest largely removed during the 20th century) to the east acts as a physical and visual barrier towards the village of Gordon.
- Greenknowe Tower allows visitor access to the wall-head at the top of the jamb, from where fine views out over the rolling landscape can be had.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Was the grassy knoll the site of the first Gordon castle in Scotland?
- What precisely was the form of the pre-1581 structure?

- What did the surrounding courtyard comprise in the way of buildings, yards and gardens?
- What was the nature and form of the designed landscape around the tower?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Greenknowe Tower is a rare instance where an ostensibly early Jacobean (late 16th-century) tower house can demonstrably be shown to be a remodelling of an older building.
- The knoll surrounding the tower provides great archaeological potential, not only for casting light on the comprehensive nature of a later medieval laird's residence (house, yards, gardens. etc) but also for any previous castellated residence, particularly that of the Gordons in the 12th/13th centuries.
- The iron yett and the carved inscription above the front door are rare survivals.

Associated Properties

(some other Gordon/Seton family castles) – **Auchindoun Castle**; Gight Castle; **Huntly Castle**; Touch House.

(other nearby tower houses) – Corsbie Tower; **Smailholm Tower**.

Keywords

tower house, yett, barmkin, gunhole, Gordon, Seton, Pringle

Selected Bibliography

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