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**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90181); Garden and Designed Landscape (GLD00237)

**Taken into State care:** 1951 (Guardianship)

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## HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# KILDRUMMY CASTLE



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.

# KILDRUMMY CASTLE

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

- Begun sometime in the second quarter of the thirteenth century, Kildrummy Castle may have been built for William, the ninth Earl of Mar.
  - The castle sits at the crest of a steep natural scarp and is defended to the N and NW by a deep ravine, the Black Den, and to the E, S and SW by a ditch. The castle was built in an important location, beside a bottleneck where routes from the south came together before being funnelled northward into Moray and Buchan.
  - The castle was built as a D-shaped enclosure castle, with towers on the four corners of the curtain wall and a mighty gatehouse at the entrance, linked by stretches of curtain wall, and all built of fine ashlar masonry.
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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

- Although the early history of the castle is uncertain, it is possible that Kildrummy Castle was built for William, the ninth Earl of Mar sometime in the second quarter of the thirteenth century, replacing the great earth and timber castle at Invernochty as the main seat of the earls. William transformed the position of earl from a semi-independent, but provincial, Celtic lord, into a great feudal baron who served the crown on the national and international stage.
- Kildrummy Castle played a prominent role in the Wars of Independence, with Edward I of England, 'Hammer of the Scots' visiting on two separate occasions; summer 1296 and again in October 1303. Edward possibly undertook building works at Kildrummy as the plan of the gatehouse is very similar to that at Harlech Castle, N Wales. Edward's mason, Master James of St George, who built Harlech, received £100 for work undertaken in Scotland. The unspecified works may well have been for the gatehouse at Kildrummy.
- Early in 1306 Robert Bruce, guardian of the infant Earl of Mar, and in possession of the castle, was crowned king on the 27<sup>th</sup> March 1306. Kildrummy was entrusted to Sir Neil Bruce, King Robert's brother, who defended the castle when it was besieged by the English that summer. In the end the castle fell to treachery, when Osbourne, the castle's blacksmith, set fire to grain stored in the great hall. The fire spread forcing the garrison to surrender. Neil Bruce was taken south and executed at Berwick, and the castle was partially dismantled to render it useless. The west curtain shows signs of rebuilding, and it may be this section that was pulled down.
- The castle was repaired by the Scots, and 1335 it was again besieged. Defended by Lady Christian Bruce and the captain of the garrison, John of the Craig, against the pro-English forces led by David de Strathbogie, Earl of Atholl, the siege was lifted by Lady Christian's husband, Sir Andrew Murray, Regent of Scotland. The resulting battle at Culblean saw the defeat of Atholl and was the turning point of the Second War of Independence.
- In 1402 Sir Malcolm Drummond, husband of Isobel, Countess of Mar and Garioch, was imprisoned and killed probably on the orders of the Duke of Albany. The earldom, the countess and Kildrummy castle were controlled by

Albany who supported the claims of Sir Thomas Erskine as heir to the earldom.

- In 1404 in an audacious coup, Kildrummy Castle and Isobel were seized by Alexander Stewart, the natural son of Alexander, earl of Buchan known to history as the 'Wolf of Badenoch'. Alexander married Isobel and this act was legitimised in a curious staged managed ceremony acted out before the gates of Kildrummy on 9 December 1404.
- In 1410 Alexander entertained a large and distinguished company at Kildrummy during the Christmas season. This may have been a meeting to prepare for the threatened onslaught of Donald, Lord of the Isles, the claimant of the earldom of Ross against the Earl of Buchan. Donald's invasion of the Garioch in 1411 ended with the inconclusive Battle of the Red Harlaw.
- With the death of Alexander in 1435, the Crown annexed the earldom and took Kildrummy Castle into its possession. Although often used as an example of James I's policy of keeping his nobility weak, James' seizure of the earldom was probably as much motivated by a desire on the part of the heavily indebted king to acquire the earldom's considerable revenues.
- Between the years 1436 and '38 the Crown expended considerable sums on renovating the castle with money being spent on reshingling the chapel roof and a large amount on the cutting of stone in the quarry in the Black Den. The stone was probably used to construct the barbican in front of the gatehouse. Further work was carried out between 1460 and 1479, including in 1464 the re-roofing of two towers, the 'burges tour' and the 'maldis tour'.
- In 1442 after many years of attempting to gain the earldom of Mar and possession Kildrummy Castle through legal means, Sir Robert Erskine seized the castle by force, in retaliation for which the government seized Erskine's castle and estates in Alloa. Sir Robert was forced to return Kildrummy to the Crown when James II visited the North in 1448. An Assize of Error finally rejected the claim of Sir Robert in 1457.
- In 1482, the rather shadowy figure of Thomas Cochrane, favourite of James III and supposed Earl of Mar, is recorded to have been constable of Kildrummy Castle. During the 15<sup>th</sup> century and beyond the Crown continually kept the Earldom and the castle within its own hands or those of its immediate adherents. The vacuum left by the effectively moribund earldom in part allowed the NE of Scotland to be dominated by the Gordons and their rivals the Forbeses.
- In 1510, after various grants of large parts of the Earldom to Alexander Elphinstone, a free barony of Kildrummy was granted to Alexander by James IV, with Kildrummy Castle as the chief messuage. In return Alexander was to provide 'a hundred mounted men with lances for service in the King's wars and military operations against his enemies, if any such should arise'. Alexander was to die with his king on Flodden Field.
- The Elphinstones were to carry out work at the castle, creating new accommodation resembling a towerhouse on the site of the lord's chamber attached to the hall.
- Sometime before 1531 the castle was besieged, plundered and fired by John Strachan, younger of Lynturk.

- In 1565 the claim to the earldom by the Erskines was finally recognised by the Crown, although Kildrummy Castle and the barony of Kildrummy remained in the hands of the Elphinstones. In 1626 after prolonged litigation, the Earl at last recovered the castle. However, the Erskines' interests remained concentrated in the south with their main residence at Alloa Tower.
- In 1664 the castle was captured from a Royalist garrison by Colonel Thomas Morgan.
- During the Jacobite Rising of 1689 led by Viscount Dundee, Kildrummy Castle was garrisoned and then put to the flames by Jacobite troops. In a memorandum of his losses, submitted to the Government, the Earl of Mar put the cost of repairing the castle at £900.
- The castle must have been patched up for in the summer of 1715 John Erskine, Earl of Mar, plotted a rising in support of the exiled Pretender to the throne, James Stuart. Defeated at Sherrifmuir, the Earl fled to France and Kildrummy's days as a noble residence were at an end, although some form of occupation may have continued up until the 1750s. In the 1790s it is recorded that the castle was being used a source of good building stone.
- In 1724 W Macfarlane described the castle, in particular providing a very useful description of the Snow Tower which collapsed 1805.
- The plundering of the castle for stone ceased in 1808 and some minor repairs were carried out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the decline of the castle was only really halted in 1898 when the estate was bought by Colonel Ogston, who systematically consolidated the castle. The consolidation was extensive, with much of the exterior of the stump of the Snow tower and the back curtain wall refaced in stugged ashlar. The rear-arches over what had been corbelled lintels to the window embrasures in the Warden's Tower and some of the odd features in the Elphinstone Tower all date to this early phase of consolidation. The castle was given into State Care in 1951.

#### Archaeological Overview

- The castle appears to have been extensively cleared during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century consolidation works, although more recent works have demonstrated that much of the disturbance was limited to post-medieval collapse and overburden.
- The first 'excavation' took place in 1919 in association with consolidation works and was carried out by Douglas Simpson and a troop of Boy Scouts. This exposed much of the plan of gatehouse, barbican and barbican pit. Other works included the excavation of the depth of the well in the Snow tower, and two latrine pits.
- In 1938 -1939 Simpson carried out further excavation to uncover the so called watergate, a well chamber outside the curtain wall reached by what had been a stepped and covered passage, leading from the postern gate through the N wall. This passage and chamber lies outside the guardianship area although they are scheduled.
- After the castle came into care in 1951 an extensive programme of excavation was undertaken which targeted main spaces within the castle; the towers, the hall, the kitchen, chapel and the gatehouse, as well as the external defences.
- Although the castle has been extensively excavated particularly in the 1950s, these excavations by no means investigated or cleared the whole castle.

Amongst other areas the cobbled courtyard appears to have been untouched and this cobbling was a late feature, which suggest much may survive beneath it.

### Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The castle was built as a heptagonal enclosure castle, with towers on the four corners of the curtain wall and a gatehouse at the entrance, linked by stretches of curtain wall, and with domestic buildings within.
- The form of the castle was devised early in the building process but change in the masonry shows that it took many years for the design to be completed. The towers and north curtain wall with an integral hall were all built in a single programme. The chapel, with its projecting gable, was an early alteration in the overall design; the gable's odd angle is a result of the need to align the chapel east-west. The final major building operation was the construction of the gatehouse which probably was not built until the late 13<sup>th</sup> /early 14<sup>th</sup> century.
- The NW round tower, the Snow Tower, was the largest tower in the castle and would have provided accommodation for the lord and his family. The name dates at least from the 14th century when Barbour refers to the 'Snawdoun' but its derivation is unclear though it has been suggested it comes from the Gaelic *snuadh* for water referring to the well that was accessible from all floors of the tower through drawholes in the vaults. From description of the tower before it collapsed it was evidently a sophisticated structure with five vaulted floors with several intermediate timber floors crowned by an embattled wall walk. On at least one floor, probably the first, a mural gallery ran round the tower.
- In scale and sophistication it is comparable with the great donjon at Bothwell Castle, and as with Bothwell, parallels have been drawn with castles in France built for the Coucy family who had links with the Scottish royal family through the marriage of Marie de Coucy and Alexander II. From their description, for both are now demolished, the parallels between the Snow Tower and Coucy-le-Chateau are remarkable, although Coucy was far larger. Other parallels are with a number of towers erected by Philip Augustus of France such as at Falaise. Coucy can be seen in the context of these so-called *Tours Philippiennes*.
- The NE round tower, the Warden's Tower, is the best preserved element of the castle, although heavily consolidated in the early 20th century. This would have been the only tower that was not accessed directly from the main courtyard, but would have been reached through the hall and kitchen or from the exterior through the rear postern gate. The ground floor served as a prison with double doors securing access and a latrine within the chamber. The two upper chambers would have provided accommodation for the keeper of the castle. The tower's role as prison and residence for the warden may explain the special access arrangements for this area of the castle.
- The upper floor of the warden's tower is supplied with fireplaces and has large windows of Edwardian type (late 13th century) consisting of twin lancets and framed with a cusp-corbelled lintel. The rear arches of the openings are also of later 13th century character with corbelled lintels, suggesting that the tower either was constructed over an extended period or, perhaps more likely, that it was refurbished in the later 13th century when the

windows were altered. The exposed core on the second floor also suggests that it may have had a ribbed vault.

- The great hall was built using the north curtain wall with windows overlooking the Black Den. It is one of the few 13<sup>th</sup>-century great halls extant in Scotland. Albeit extensively ruined. The structure was a magnificent ceremonial space although only a few details now survive which hint at its original splendour. Along the north wall there are the remains of a stone bench. The dais end of the hall (west end) was lit by two impressive windows; the window on the north side was of two lights; the south window was later altered to form a doorway but retains some of its original mouldings including a small grotesque corbel mask.
- At the west end of the hall was a chamber block and at the east end the kitchens, forming the very familiar medieval sequence of kitchen, hall and chamber, with the chapel beyond the kitchen but probably reached from the hall by a timber gallery.
- The large chapel may have been an early modification to the plan of the castle; the east gable appears to have been thrust out through the curtain wall but the three great lancet windows which would have lit the chapel belong to the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. The chapel gable seems to have been considered a weakness at some point in the castle's history as the foundations of a D-shaped tower abutting the gable were discovered through excavation. The excavator interpreted the tower as an unfinished attempt to strengthen the gable. An alternative interpretation is that the round tower was made redundant by the construction of the chapel.
- The gatehouse was the final element of the 13th century phase to be completed, perhaps 60 or 70 years after the castle was begun. In plan the gatehouse is very similar to that at Harlech Castle in Wales and it is very possible that the gatehouse was built on his orders.
- The gatehouse and entrance into the castle was altered, probably on several occasions, to improve its defensive capabilities. The barbican or fore-work was probably built in the second quarter of the 15th century, extending the entrance transe outward and strengthening the approach to the castle. It allowed for a drawbridge and four pairs of folding gates. The ground floor of the drum towers was vaulted and then filled with rubble (obscuring the fine herring bone sandstone floor in the eastern tower) presumably to strengthen the towers from artillery fire. The developments have a parallel at Tantallon castle where a barbican was constructed in the late 14th century and where internal voids within the curtain wall were infilled as a defence against artillery fire.
- The castle did undergo a number of other alterations in the later medieval period, most significantly the construction of the Elphinstone Tower, a tower like structure replacing a chamber beyond the hall. At some point a range was also constructed against the S wall of the hall suggesting that the hall had ceased to function as such, as the range would have obscured its windows. Other changes included the cobbling of the courtyard and the erection of lean-to buildings against the curtain wall. At the same time as the courtyard was cobbled the need for defence had evidently declined and the drawbridge pit was filled in and cobbled over.

### Social Overview

- No formal assessment has been carried out.

### Spiritual Overview

- As the castle has a chapel, the site has the potential to inform our understanding of medieval Christianity and specifically the day to day religious requirements of a great lord.
- No burials were found associated with the chapel during excavations.

### Aesthetic Overview

- Kildrummy is extremely ruinous and for the visitor it is difficult to appreciate its former splendour.
- Due to its location on the crest of a slope the castle is almost hidden until one walks up the slope to the castle, but the sense of discovery is a particular attractive feature of the site.
- The most visually impressive, and most complete, element of the castle is the north west angle with the Wardens Tower and the chapel gable.

### What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- The castle is very ruinous and various episodes of consolidation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century have obscured evidence of the form of the castle.

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## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- Kildrummy Castle retains intact the complete plan of a great 13th century baronial curtain wall castle.
- Kildrummy Castle is arguably the best preserved/least altered of the great 13th century curtain wall castles in mainland Scotland.
- Kildrummy castle was the centre of one of the great earldoms of Scotland, and the scale and sophistication of the castle clearly demonstrated the importance of the earldom in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century.
- The parallels that Kildrummy has with French castles, particularly those belonging to the Coucy family, demonstrate the connections the Scottish nobility and Crown had across Europe.
- The gatehouse, and perhaps the Warden's tower, is one of the few significant examples of building work relating to Edward I occupation of Scotland.
- The castle played an important role during the Wars of Independence. The castle along with the earldom was a major prize in the politics of medieval Scotland, which the Crown carefully controlled in the later medieval period.

### Associated Properties

**Bothwell Castle, Caerlaverock Castle, Dirleton Castle** – All thirteen century baronial curtain wall castles. Bothwell in particular has many similarities to Kildrummy.

Alloa Tower – Family seat of the Erskine Earls of Mar.

**Corgarff Castle** – was built on lands held by the Earl of Mar.

Doune of Invernochty – A massive earthen work castle with evidence of masonry construction on the summit, which served as the caput of the earldom before the construction of Kildrummy.

Kildrummy Old Parish Church – Built around 1300, it would have been the local parish church to the castle and part of the medieval baronial landscape.  
Coucy Castle, France – The Snow Tower appear to have share features with Coucy.  
Harlech Castle, Wales – The gatehouses of Harlech and Kildrummy are very similar.

Keywords Curtain wall, Donjon, Gatehouse, Snow Tower, Bruges Tower, Maldi's Tower, Warden's Tower, Barbican, Earldom of Mar, Edward I, Neil Bruce, Alexander Stewart, Elphinstones, Erskines.