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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ELCHO CASTLE



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ELCHO CASTLE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises an exceptionally well-preserved 16th-century house with a rectangular core augmented by a large, square-plan tower to its south-west corner and another three engaged towers. Such a complex disposition of towers is unique in surviving houses of a similar date, though there are partial parallels such as Kellie, Thirlestane and MacLellan's Castles. Some decorative plasterwork survives in the main chambers. The castle is situated on a slightly elevated rocky knoll on the south side of the River Tay. Fragments of a courtyard range, the barmkin wall and a corner tower survive in front of the house. A large quarried area to the north is likely to have provided some of the whinstone used in the construction.

Elcho was probably built between 1558 and 1570 for Sir John Wemyss of Wemyss (†1571/72) and it is highly likely that there would have been a residence here before then. 'Elchoch' or 'Elkok' is mentioned several times as a place of strength in Blind Harry's *Wallace*, the epic 15th-century tale of William Wallace, and, in 1468, Elcho Castle was included in the possessions confirmed to Sir John Wemyss (†before 1502) by James III.

The castle fell out of use as a residence after 1756; however, the 8th earl re-roofed it in 1830 and built a cottage in the courtyard. The 11th earl placed the monument in state guardianship in 1930.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- 1468—The first record of the lands of Elcho is in the Register of the Great Seal when Easter Elcho was granted to Sir John Wemyss of Wemyss by James III. 'Elchoch' or 'Elkok' is also referred to in a 15th-century literary source.
- 1541—The adjoining lands of Wester Elcho contained the priory of Elcho, the house of a convent of Cistercian nuns. By the mid-16th century they were in financial difficulties and John Wemyss made several loans to them. He was appointed heritable bailie and various parcels of land were leased to him and his heirs. The *capitale messuagium de Elquhoch* is referred to as early as 1541, and in 1552 a John Wemyss is mentioned as *de eodem*, 'of that place'.
- c.1558-c.1570—It is likely that building of the present house began before the Reformation officially 'liberated' church lands as by then almost all the priory lands of Easter and Wester Elcho were in Wemyss hands. By 1558 charters are signed by Sir John *apud Elcho*, 'at Elcho' and in 1570 he owed the late Thomas Bryson or Boynting £7 for ironwork, presumable for the yett and window grilles.
- c.1633—Sir John Wemyss of Elcho (†1649) was raised to the peerage in 1628 and created earl by Charles I in 1633. A stone with 'E.I.W', for Earl John Wemyss, survives in the gable of the W courtyard building which was probably built soon after his elevation.
- after 1756—After the death of James, fourth earl (†1756) Elcho Castle seems to have been abandoned as a family residence. His son, James married Janet, daughter of Colonel Francis Charteris of Amisfield (East Lothian); the Colonel

bequeathed his fortune to their eldest son Francis provided his descendants assumed the Charteris name. And so, in 1784, Francis, the fifth earl acquired the Gosford estate in East Lothian and commissioned Robert Adam to build him a fine new mansion there.

- 1773–During the great grain famine a local farmer was using the castle as a storehouse for grain to be exported to England and France. However a mob marched on the castle, only the presence of soldiers preventing a riot. The grain was sold on the open market in Perth the next day.
- 1830–The castle was re-roofed by the eighth earl, Hon. Francis Wemyss Charteris-Douglas (†1914), and around that time the cottage on the east side of the courtyard was built. The roof survives more or less intact with its original Highland Boundary slates.
- 1930–The eleventh earl, Hugo Richard Charteris (†1937), placed the castle into guardianship.
- 1931-99–In 1931 conservation works took place on the roofs and new windows were installed. The guardianship area was eventually extended to take in the Grant of Privilege relating to the area now occupied by the toilets that were built to the east of the castle in 1954. The roof was repaired in the 90s but the slates were returned to their original positions with less than a dozen replacements. The orchard to the west was laid out in 1999.

Archaeological Overview

- During the conservation works of 1931 some artefacts were discovered, those noted included a Swedish or Danish coin dated 1750, a George III halfpenny, a Charles II turner, a George III Irish halfpenny and a lead religious medal from the 19th century.
- In 1987-88 the ground- and first-floor levels of the tower at the south-east corner of the barmkin and the narrow passage to its north were excavated. Of the original ground-floor surface only a single flagstone remained; the floor would have sat on a bed of silt over foundations.
- One small section of original wall foundation was noted running beneath the cottage during a watching brief for a service trench in 1995.
- A ditch and bank were noted as a surface feature running down the west side of the road to the castle during a watching brief for fence posts around the new car park in 1998.
- In 1999 a watching brief was carried out on a small trench for a gate on the east side of the field in which the present orchard now stands, at the same time digging of the 93 tree-holes was monitored. In 1959 this field had been found to be badly tracked and had ruts running through it. The farmer had also excavated an old bank which ran through it in order to provide an easier access route for his tractors.
- It is likely that further information on lost structures such as the barmkin wall and courtyard buildings and deposits which could help our understanding of the way the lord, his family, retainers and servants lived and worked survive. Outside the guardianship area evidence for associated buildings for agriculture, servants and transport near the burn inlet to the north-east is also likely to survive.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

The house—exterior

- Elcho would have been an elegant, well-planned residence, providing convenient and private accommodation over four floors. The inclusion of corbelled-out turrets together with frequent changes from round to square-plan reflects a general adoption of elements of European architectural style by an aristocracy increasingly well-educated and well-travelled. The flamboyant silhouette must have been designed to make a statement about the prosperity, sophistication and status of its owner. Its full-height would have been highly visible from the north approach by river. At this period the fashion was for an enlarged stair tower to take a wide spiral stair up to the first-floor, with the upper floors accessed by projecting turnpike stairs. Also at Elcho are elaborate dormers, such as one on the south façade with colonettes on stone frame with a flat-topped pediment containing an ‘annulet’ or ring carving (this was the mark of cadency used by heralds to denote a fifth son and here it may commemorate the birth of Michael, the fifth of Sir John Wemyss’ eight sons). Traces of harling survive.
- Around the ground-floor are an array of 17 gunloops—an unusually high number—it is likely that they both showed defensive intent and demonstrated that the Wemysses kept up with latest developments in defensive features, rather than that their number and placement were particularly strategically contrived. Wooden cills into which the tang or prong of a gun support was inserted survive. The iron grilles over many of the windows allowed more extensive glazing to be installed, and were a continental fashion. Others of a similar date survive at the gatehouse at Falkland Palace and the north range at Crichton Castle. Those at Elcho are of the ‘cage’ or ‘basket’ variety which project beyond the wallface and were constructed in a distinctively Scottish style, the bars being arranged horizontally and vertically about a central point and threaded through one another. More typically the grid was simply set into the window surround. Before the advent of safety deposit-boxes and bank accounts, the gunloops, grilles, barmkin (on flat land to the immediate south) and yett behind the single entrance door into the towerhouse would have helped to protect against intruders and thieves. There is no evidence of grilles on the north side, perhaps partly because its topography was an ample deterrent but also because the grilles were a form of display. Also, once inside the castle, places of security, such as aumbries, would have been difficult to find.

The house—interior

- There are two possible routes to take once you enter the towerhouse: service accommodation was housed in the ground floor to the left and consisted of a long corridor off which there are three vaulted rooms. This arrangement was more convenient than a series of through-access rooms and was fast becoming a common feature around this date such as at Newark Castle, Port Glasgow. At the north end of the first room, the kitchen, is a broad fireplace with mural bread oven, with a larder off one corner. The opening in the east wall of the kitchen functioned as a serving hatch. The semi-circular stair tower

that projects from the north wall would have provided the servants with discreet access from either of the other two rooms, probably a pantry and a buttery (wine cellar), up to the great hall and chambers above.

- The main route, for those of sufficient social standing, is up the broad stair immediately in front of the entrance which would have led directly into a vestibule area partitioned off by a timber screen at east end of the hall. The first-floor room in the north-west corner tower, accessed from the vestibule, may have been the steward's apartment (the steward ran the household and attended to guests). At the opposite end of the hall was the door to the laird's great chamber, which would probably have been screened off. This room was used for private dining and entertaining privileged guests but would probably also have housed the state bed. There was an inner chamber within the round tower at the north-east corner, served by a latrine (closed stools rather than latrines were favoured by around 1580); the timber seats survive.
- Separate turnpike stairs at three corners of the hall led to groups of lodgings on the floors above, for members of the laird's family, important members of his household and guests. The stair in the thickness of the wall between the main stair landing and vestibule gave access to the two levels of chambers directly above the hall as well as to the three rooms of the south-west tower and the wallwalk. The stair at the other end of the vestibule led to the two upper rooms of the north-west tower but only to the third-floor rooms of the main block (the floor itself is now missing but the joist pockets survive). Great ingenuity has been displayed in contriving lodgings of varying scale and extent, all of which could be separately accessed, and all of which had their own fireplaces and latrines.

Internal decoration

- Of the surviving stretches of plaster frieze in the great hall and adjacent great chamber only small sections of finish coat with chevrons, thistles, fleurs-de-lis and roses remain on the south wall of the hall and at the south-west corner of the bedchamber. These probably date from the middle of the 17th century and the design seems to celebrate Scotland's relationship with England and France. Originally, there would have been narrow cornices above the friezes but these were replaced with roll mouldings, both above and below, at a later date. Areas of wall plaster also survive. Some conservation work was carried out by HSCC, most recently in 2002. A particularly interesting feature of the house is the evidence for timber fixtures and fittings, in the form of draught enclosures round doorways, internal partitions, and battens for mounting hand-held guns.

Ancillary structures

- The barmkin wall is now completely demolished other than where it linked with a small, circular tower to the south-east and for short distances to the north and west. A gunloop survives in the base of the tower and is similar to those in the house itself. A range of buildings stood on the west side of the courtyard but, apart from its south gable, this now survives only as foundations. A stone with 'E.I.W' indicating John, first Earl of Wemyss, on the upper part of this gable would suggest that it was built shortly after Sir John became earl in 1633.
- The ground-floor of the barmkin tower contains a circular domed oven, 2.2m in diameter, formerly accessed from a building on either the south or east side.

There was a fireplace on the ground-floor and probably a second above sharing the same chimney. The ground-floor was covered by a stone vault, part of which survives. The base of the angled wall in front of the opening to the oven was damaged during the building of the c.1830 cottage. It later became the custodian's residence but is now leased out. A temporary timber building took its south-west functions as the shop and ticketing point.

- On the present approach to Elcho next to the steading there is a fine 16th-century beehive-shaped dovecot, 5m in diameter (not in care) with a modern roof. It would have provided pigeon meat and eggs for the Wemyss household, especially in the leaner winter months.
- One approach to the castle would have been by boat along the River Tay, and then into a burn inlet which would have functioned as a small harbour. The quarry used to be flooded and connected to the river by a cut; it is possible that boats were able to enter this area too. The quarry has now been filled in and planted as a 'wilderness garden'.
- The orchard was planted in 1999; there was no evidence on which to base the layout so that the species and the plan were based on records of other 16th and 17th-century orchards. As well as an orchard, the castle is likely to have been surrounded by elaborate and fragrant formal gardens, gravelled walks and parkland.

Stone Collection

- There are a number of moulded architectural fragments in two rooms on the ground-floor of the towerhouse, their condition has been assessed by HSCC but their provenance is not known.

Social Overview

- There has been no formal assessment of the significance of the castle to the local community.
- The monument is still owned by the Wemyss (Charteris) family and will therefore have significance to both the immediate family and genealogists.

Spiritual Overview

- There was a 16th century connection of the Wemyss family to the priory of Elcho and the site of the medieval nunnery is still in the vicinity of the present castle.

Aesthetic Overview

- The present approach to the castle is by a track through a farmyard to the south-west, past the associated dovecot, and not from the River Tay: it has been suggested that this site and others could be linked up by a boat tour in the future.
- Trees form a backdrop to the north and east, the recently planted orchard is laid out to the west, the car park, shop and cottage are in the immediate foreground.
- Elcho stands within an agricultural/rural landscape, with buildings associated with the nearby farm. These buildings can be seen from the upper floors and wallwalk, along with views of the River Tay and its opposite bank.
- Elcho Castle has been the subject of interest for artists because of its picturesque qualities.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- The form/layout of the courtyard buildings and any ancillary structures out with the barmkin is not known.
- Little is known of changes to and uses of castle post-1756 to 1930.
- The provenance of the stone collection is not known.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Its arrangement of round and square towers around a rectangular core has no exact parallel in surviving Scottish architecture.
- Given its completeness Elcho allows for comparison in form and planning to other residences of the 16th century and has the potential for improving that understanding and that of the living arrangements of landed society at that time.
- Of special interest is the profusion of gunloops at ground level, the iron cage grilles and yet, and the remains of decorated internal plasterwork.

Associated Properties

Kellie Castle; **Glenbuchat Castle**; Drochil Castle; **Maclellan's Castle**; Falkland Palace; **Crichton Castle**; Thirlestane Castle; **Newark Castle, Port Glasgow; Rowallan Castle.**

Keywords house; castle; medieval; Early Modern; Wemyss; dovecot; frieze; plasterwork