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Designations: Listed Building (LB28011)

Taken into State care: 1906 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2012

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EDINBURGH CASTLE – ESPLANADE



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 – ESPLANADE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The Esplanade was created in its present form in 1816–20, to celebrate the British Army's victory over Napoleonic France at the Battle of Waterloo. The Esplanade has subsequently become home to several monuments of a military nature, including most notably a hero of Waterloo, Sergeant (Ensign) Ewart. Every August, during the Edinburgh International Festival, the Esplanade plays host to the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo.

The Esplanade is the latest man-made structure erected on Castle Hill. Limited archaeological excavation has recently brought to light evidence for Iron Age ditches at the upper (west) end and a 16th-century artillery work known as the Spur. Given the 3,000-year history of occupation of the castle rock, the archaeological potential beneath the Esplanade is likely to prove of immense interest and value.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

1546/7: Ditches ('fosses') are recorded being dug on 'castell hill', the open ground between the castle and the town, during the War of the Rough Wooing with Henry VIII's England.

1548: An Italian military engineer, Migiliorino Ubaldini, arrives in Scotland and oversees the building of 'the forte of the castle hill', better known as the Spur, an innovative *trace Italienne* artillery fortification, to help the Scots defend the castle against English guns.

1560: Mary of Guise, the queen regent, writes of instructing workmen to construct a flank on the side of the gate 'de lesperon' (the Spur).

1573: The Spur is extensively damaged during the latter days of the 'Lang Siege' of 1571–3. It is substantially rebuilt in 1576, when Regent Morton 'caussit maissons begin to repayrit the forewark to the forme of a bulwark . . . for the resett and rynning [running] of many cannons'.

1625–40: Soil from the Castle Hill is used ceremonially to represent Nova Scotia for those of Charles I's subjects purchasing baronetcies of that distant land.

1639/40: Two sieges in quick succession, during the Bishop's Wars against Charles I, result in yet more extensive damage to the Spur.

1649/50: The Spur is removed. Its stone entrance gate is re-used 'for beautifying the outer court' of the new Parliament House in Edinburgh's High Street. Temporary siege works are erected on the site of the Spur in an attempt to withstand another siege, this time by Oliver Cromwell. After capturing the castle, Cromwell orders a new defensive forework, called a hornwork, to be built on Castle Hill.

Later 17th century: Following the return of Charles II to the throne (1660), work continues on completing the new hornwork. Elements surviving include the Dry Ditch at the upper (west) end of the Esplanade.

1708: Following the aborted Jacobite Rising, work begins on constructing a large defensive outwork on Castle Hill, designed by the military engineer, Theodore Dury. The so-called 'Grand Secret' is abandoned at an early stage due to major misgivings by the military authorities.

1752–55: William Skinner, the Board of Ordnance's chief engineer of North Britain, has the rough terrain of Castle Hill graded and landscaped to form a parade ground for the castle garrison. Demolition material from the building of the Royal Exchange in Edinburgh's High Street (the site now occupied by the City Chambers) is used in the process. To either side of the parade ground 'Walks on the Hill' are created where the citizens can promenade. The works progress slowly.

1814: Following Napoleon Bonaparte's capture in early 1814, a scheme to celebrate the momentous occasion by formalising Skinner's parade ground to create an Esplanade is proposed. The French Emperor's escape from Elba forestalls the project.

1816–20: Following Bonaparte's defeat at the battle of Waterloo, the Esplanade project goes ahead. The parade ground is widened and laid with granite setts, and enclosed by low stone walls graced by decorative railings along the north side and dummy turrets/sentry boxes on the south side.

1822 (August): The first ceremonial occasion is held on the new Esplanade, when George IV returns the Honours of Scotland to the castle at the end of his visit to Scotland.

1839: The first monument is erected on the north side of the Esplanade – a bronze statue of Frederick, Duke of York and Albany, by Thomas Campbell.

1854: The town council of Edinburgh asserts its legal right to ownership of the Esplanade, but the court finds in favour of the Crown.

1861: A Celtic cross commemorating the 78th Highlanders, by R. Rowand Anderson, is erected.

1875: A Celtic cross to Colonel Kenneth Douglas Mackenzie, by John Steell, is erected.

1883: A granite obelisk to the 72nd Duke of Albany's Own Highlanders, by McDonald, Field & Co., is erected.

1905: A Celtic cross to the Scottish Horse, by Stewart McGlashan & Son, is erected.

1923: A bronze equestrian statue to Field-Marshal Earl Haig, by G E Wade, is erected.

1938: A monument (a block of Swedish granite) to Ensign Ewart, the hero of Waterloo, together with part of his gravestone recovered from a cemetery in Salford (England), are placed on the Esplanade, the last memorials erected.

1950: The first performance of the Edinburgh Military Tattoo is held on the Esplanade.

1979: A bronze plaque to the witches put to death on the Castle Hill, by John Duncan, RSA, is placed on a wall at the east end of the Esplanade.

1989: Archaeological excavations immediately to the west of the Esplanade uncover evidence for two massive and deep ditches dating from the later Iron Age and continuing in use into the central Middle Ages.

2009–11: Excavations in advance of constructing new Tattoo stands find evidence for the 16th-century Spur. As part of the operation, the Scottish Horse memorial is repositioned in a recess and the equestrian statue of Earl Haig relocated to the National War Museum.

Archaeological Overview

The area of ground beneath and around the Esplanade is undoubtedly of considerable archaeological potential, given that the history of occupation of the castle rock reaches back over 3,000 years. During that time, Castle Hill has seen a range of uses, including most importantly as an outer defence, as an outer ward, or enclosure, and as a place of execution. Two limited archaeological investigations, coupled with evidence from boreholes, have highlighted this potential.

Excavations directed by Peter Yeoman in 1989, during the formation of the vehicle tunnel, found evidence in the Coal Yard immediately to the west of the Esplanade for two massive ditches that must have cut off the top of Castle Hill. They had been created in the later Iron Age and were still in use in the 14th century.

Excavations in 2009–11 by CFA Archaeology uncovered evidence under the Esplanade for the 16th-century Spur. Small though the area excavated was, the exercise highlights the potential for further discoveries.

Architectural/Artistic Overview

Main phases of development: The Esplanade is essentially a creation of 1816–20, with monuments added, mostly along its north side, at various dates.

The enclosure walls to north and south are understated when compared to the imposing mass of the Gatehouse to its west and the towering height of the castle beyond.

The monuments are a mixed bag, understandable given the century that separates their erection. They call for no special mention, particularly now that Field-Marshal Earl Haig's bronze equestrian statue has been re-sited beside the National War Museum elsewhere in the castle.

Social Overview

Since its creation in 1816–20, the Esplanade has provided an open area of ground where citizens and visitors can promenade, and from which wonderful views of the castle and across the city to south and north may be had.

The Esplanade has hosted ceremonial and other events from the outset, and these continue throughout the year, most notably with the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo each August and the concerts that immediately follow it.

Spiritual Overview

Historically, the Esplanade was occasionally used as a place of execution, including witch burnings.

The Esplanade currently has no observable spiritual associations, although a bronze plaque, erected in 1979 at the east entrance to the Esplanade and recording the burning of witches, may evoke feelings in those who see it.

Aesthetic Overview

The Esplanade itself is a broad, somewhat ugly spread of tarmac. It is usually littered with parked vehicles, and during the month of August is enveloped by the stands erected for spectators to the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo.

The view of the castle from the Esplanade is arguably the best that can be had. Its towering height, and the powerful curved mass of the Half-Moon Battery, are breathtaking.

The views out from the Esplanade, to the north and south over the city to the landscape beyond, are splendid.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

What else lies beneath the Esplanade, other than the Iron Age/medieval ditches and the 16th-century Spur? Given the extraordinarily long history of occupation of the castle rock (over 3,000 years), its archaeological potential must be high.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

The Esplanade is an important amenity space in Edinburgh's Old Town, used throughout the year by citizens and visitors alike to admire the castle and the fine views to north and south. Every August it plays host to the world-renowned Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo.

The archaeological potential of the Esplanade is extremely high, given that the castle rock has a history of occupation spanning over 3,000 years.

ADDENDA

Associated Properties

Other castle esplanades: **Stirling Castle**

Keywords

artillery work; parade ground; William Skinner; military tattoo

Selected Bibliography

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