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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KILCHURN 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.

KILCHURN CASTLE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Kilchurn Castle is the substantial remains of a late medieval castle built on a rocky promontory at the north-east end of Loch Awe, bounded on the landward side by a ditch. There is a four-storey tower built in the mid-15th century by Sir Colin Campbell, 1st of Glenorchy at its eastern angle with other ranges forming a courtyard to the west of the tower. The upper storey of the tower was reworked in the third quarter of the 16th century by Sir Colin Campbell, 6th of Glenorchy, who introduced the corbelled angle-rounds. To the south of the tower originally stood a laigh hall. One wall of this building survives as part of the outer wall of the castle. Between the site of the laigh hall and the tower is a two-storey range (with garret) which is first on record in 1614 but appears to have been substantially altered in the rebuildings of 1690-98. At this time John, 1st Earl of Breadalbane, rebuilt the whole of the north side of the castle as a three storey barracks with garret. He also added the three corner towers and a new stair to the tower. The building was unroofed by about 1770. Outside the walls of the castle can still be made out a defensive ditch to the north and east and the remains of a stone-built boat landing.

Domestic offices for Kilchurn Castle stood on the south side of the loch to the south west of the castle, they included a stable, barn, byre and lime and corn kilns clustered near a small harbour all of which were abandoned by 1680.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- 'Elankylquhurne' formed part of the lordship of Glenorchy which was granted by Duncan Campbell of Lochnaw to his son Colin in 1432.
- Sir Colin Campbell 1st of Glenorchy, Knight of Rhodes, probably built the castle as his principal stronghold before 1450; since a charter of John Stewart, lord of Lorn was signed at 'Castrum de Glenurquhay' in 1449.
- Sir Duncan Campbell 'biggit the laich hall of Glenurquhay' before his death in 1513 and for the remainder of the first half of the 16th century it was the principal home of the Campbells of Glenorchy the 3rd and 4th lairds died there in 1523 and 1536.
- Throughout the 16th century keepers or constables were appointed, most were members of the Clan Gregor. In 1550 John Campell, 5th of Glenorchy appointed John M'Conoquhy V'Gregor to provide watchmen and to keep the tower head clean.
- The defensive role of the castle was strengthened by Sir Colin, 6th laird, when he rebuilt the wall heads, adding the angle turrets.
- In the second half of the 16th century the Campbells moved their attention to their estates around Loch Tay in Perthshire. Building Balloch (Taymouth) and Finlarig Castle at either end of the Loch. Despite this change of emphasis, Sir Duncan Campbell did not abandon Kilchurn, repairs continued. His dispute with the MacGregors of Glenstrae in the first decade of the 17th century has been blamed for the state of the domestic buildings when he came to repair them in 1614, rebuilding the south-west range and linking it to the tower-house by the rebuilt south-east range.

- During the 1640s it was garrisoned on behalf of the Marquis of Argyll, but not attacked.
- In 1654 Sir John Campbell of Glenorchy and the Marquis of Argyll were besieged here for two days by General Middleton – but he did not have time to take it before General Monck's army approached and Middleton abandoned the siege.
- 9th Earl of Argyll landed at Kintyre in rebellion against James VII and II. John Campbell, 10th of Glenorchy and 1st Earl of Breadalbane offered his services to the Government as a rallying point for loyal highlanders. In the event, Argyll came nowhere near.
- The Jacobite Rising of 1689 destabilised the highlands, but The Earl of Breadalbane resisted the garrisoning of government troops in Kilchurn. However, during his reconstruction of the castle starting in 1690 the Earl altered the accommodation and added the barrack block along the north curtain.
- Little use was ever made of this barrack accommodation. In 1715 a government force occupied the castle (although, like many others, Breadalbane himself acted for both sides in the conflict).
- During the 1745 Rising the castle was garrisoned by 12 officers and 200 militiamen under the command of Captain Colin Campbell of Skipness to control the movement of the highlanders who might travel to join the Rising.
- By the end of the 18th century the castle was leased by fishermen to salt and preserve fish.
- Having been hit by lightning before 1770 it was roofless and left to decay.
- The castle came into state care in 1953.

Archaeological Overview

Excavation to date has consisted of clearance work, with the exception of the work in the basement of the barracks in advance of drainage. This work helped define the original extent of the defensive circuit – identifying that some of the 1690's building work was constructed beyond the original curtain wall. It also provided evidence that the rainwater disposal system may have flushed the latrine beneath the barracks.

The archaeological potential for the courtyard, the remainder of the promontory within the ditch and the area of domestic offices on the south shore of Loch Awe is extremely high.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The castle is built of local rubble masonry with dressings of chlorite schist, probably quarried nearby.
- The mid 15th century tower house has three storeys and a garret, originally entered at the level of the first floor hall but now reached through a doorway with a dated armorial insignia of John Campbell, 1st Earl of Breadalbane, and his wife Countess Mary Campbell of 1693. Circulation is now achieved by way of a stair in the courtyard added in the same campaign of work at the junction between the tower and the south-east range. The main apartments of the tower are on the first floor and two small stairs within the wall lead from the hall to the upper chambers and the parapet walk. The work of the 1570s included the

addition of the four angle-turrets, of which three are in place, but lower courses of the west turret although intact, lie on the ground in the courtyard.

- Little survives of the domestic accommodation of the 15th century laich hall or the early 17th-century south-east range, but when complete, access was possible between these two buildings and they linked to the hall in the tower using its original main entrance. There is only very fragmentary evidence for the structure in the north-west of the courtyard that was demolished to make way for the barracks.
- The curtain wall of the castle has been rebuilt as each of the successive ranges were constructed or reconstructed, consequently its present form dates to the final reconstruction in the 1690s, when the northern ranges of barracks were constructed along with cylindrical towers at the changes of angle in the curtain wall.
- Both of the ranges of barracks are two storeys over basement kitchens. There were four rooms leading off a corridor on each of the floors in the north-west barracks and two rooms and a corner-tower room in the north-east range. Each room had a fireplace, window and door and the latrines were against the wall which connected the two ranges of barracks. Circulation between the floors was in a turnpike stair in the re-entrant angle between the two ranges.
- The stone of which the castle is constructed does not easily lend itself to ornament, the additional turrets on the towerhouse and the two dated, armorial door-heads form the main ornament of the castle. There are two stones in the stone collection that have been dormer pediments, probably from the rebuilt south-east range of 1614. In addition, the castle is well supplied with pistol loops but with no provision for heavy artillery.

Social Overview

There is no formal assessment of the castle's value to the local community but it is well visited despite being hard to reach.

Spiritual Overview

No chapel has been identified on the promontory

Aesthetic Overview

Above all, Kilchurn Castle's setting and silhouette are spectacular. It has the appearance of rising from the waters of Loch Awe and viewed from almost any angle it appears as a craggy, monolithic mass against a magnificent backdrop.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- early origins
- detail of the internal layout and defences of the 15th century castle
- extent of harbour provision and use of waterways
- extent of the domestic/ancillary accommodation on the southern shore of the loch
- detailed information on the functioning of the castle both as a principal seat and later under a McGregor captain or keeper.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Kilchurn Castle has a strategic location at the head of Loch Awe.
- The castle was the main administrative centre of the Glenorchy Lordship.

- Kilchurn's strategic location meant it retained its military importance. In the 1690s it was the site of the first purpose-built barracks in Scotland.
- The Campbells, including the Campbells of Glenorchy, evolved as the strongest single family in the West Highlands of Scotland.
- The extent of Campbell control in the west of Scotland was astonishing. Their administrative infrastructure was at once impressive and all-encompassing, stretching from Perth to the western seaboard. Along with the Campbells of Inveraray, the Campbells of Glenorchy (later Earls of Breadalbane) played a significant part in the administration of that control of the eastern half of the Campbell lands.
- The architecture of the castle is a remarkable evocation of a military stronghold from the 15th to the 17th centuries.

Associated Properties

Balloch/Taymouth Castle, Finlarig Castle – Campbell of Glenorchy castles
Innis Chonnell, Inveraray, Campbell Castles on Loch Awe.

Keywords Castle, Breadalbane, Campbell, Glenorchy, Barracks, Towerhouse, Loch Awe.