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**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

CARNASSERIE 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.

CARNASSERIE CASTLE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

- Built between 1565 and 1572, Carnasserie Castle stands upon the summit of a ridge at the upper end of Kilmartin Glen, near the modern road between Lochgilphead and Oban. The castle probably occupies the site of an earlier medieval castle, and there is a possible early medieval defended site near the castle.
- In appearance, Carnasserie resembles a medieval keep with an adjoining domestic range and stair tower. Despite this antique appearance, Carnasserie was a fashionable residence incorporating many of the latest Renaissance influences, and marks the fusion of the medieval tower and the great hall into one integrated layout. Carnasserie also incorporates several defensive features such as a parapet walk around the E tower, corbelled angle turrets and numerous gun-loops and pistol-holes providing near all-round protection.
- Carnasserie was built as a residence for Bishop John Carsewell, the first Protestant Bishop of the Isles, a close associate for the 5th Earl of Argyll who granted the lands and castle of Carnasserie to his chaplain in 1559. According to a 15th-century charter, an earlier castle stood in the immediate vicinity, occupied by the MacLachlans of Strathlachlan, and it is likely that the earlier structure either provided the masonry for Bishop Carsewell's new residence or was partly incorporated into the new castle.
- Although burned in 1685 by Royalist forces during the Marquis of Argyll's rebellion against James VII, Carnasserie Castle is nevertheless a well-preserved structure and the walls of the E tower and domestic range surviving almost to their original height. Carnasserie is one of the best examples of an early Scottish Renaissance castle and many fine architectural details survive. The design and decoration found at Carnasserie closely parallels work at Torwood Castle, completed in 1566 for the Forresters of Garden, and Bishop Carsewell probably hired the same masons from Stirling who had worked at Torwood.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

1436: Charter issued by John MacLachlan of Strathlachlan at 'Carnastre'.

1529: Carnasserie is amongst the lands confirmed by royal charter to the future wife of the 4th Earl of Argyll as part of the marriage-settlement.

1544: John Carsewell graduates from St Salvator's College, St Andrews

1555: John Carsewell becomes Rector of Kilmartin Church, residing at Kilmartin Castle.

1559: 5th Earl of Argyll grants the eight merklands of the two 'Carnestris' on John Carsewell, rector of Kilmartin Church and his private chaplain.

1565: Building work begins at Carnasserie, funded through the revenues of the bishopric of the Isles that Carsewell gained the rights to. Carsewell publishes the

first printed book in Gaelic, a translation of John Knox's liturgy, the *Book of Common Order*.

1567: Carswell formally presented to the bishopric of the Isles and the abbacy of Iona, probably due to his influential patron rather than his reputation as a zealous Reformer. Carswell never formally consecrated due to the opposition of the Church of Scotland to episcopacy, but uses the style of bishop anyway.

1572: John Carswell dies at a great age. His funeral is not without incident: *en route* to burial at Ardchattan Priory, his coffin was swept away by a sudden squall and lost at sea. Safely recovered after four days, the body is interred within the chapel attached to the priory. Carnasserie Castle and lands remain in the property of the Carswells until 1643. Carswell's descendants remain in the Kilmartin area until the 18th century.

1594: John Campbell of Ardkinglass is imprisoned and interrogated under threat of torture at Carnasserie for the murder of John Campbell of Cawdor.

1643: The Marquis of Argyll gives the lands of Carnasserie and its castle to Dugald Campbell of Auchinbreck.

1681: Sir Duncan Campbell of Auchinbreck begins building works at Carnasserie, notably altering the S façade of the hall.

1685: During Argyll's rebellion against James VII, Carnasserie is captured, partly blown up by a Royalist force commanded by MacLean of Torloisk, and left as a burnt-out shell. In 1690, Campbell of Auchinbreck petitioned for £20,000 Scots in compensation for the murder of his uncle during the siege and the damage caused to Carnasserie, then still regarded as one of the finest houses in Argyll. No attempts are made to renovate the castle, and Auchinbreck is ruined as a result of the Marquis' revolt.

1829: Neill Malcolm of Poltalloch purchases the castles of Kilmartin and Carnasserie along with their associated lands from the Duke of Argyll.

1932: Sir Ian Malcolm of Poltalloch places Carnasserie in Guardianship along with several other important monuments on his estate.

1995: Carnasserie Castle is scheduled.

Archaeological Overview

- Within the grounds of the castle is a fragment of a slab bearing five cup marks, although it is unclear whether the stone is *in situ* or has been brought here. The Kilmartin Glen is renowned for its dense concentration of prehistoric rock art in Kilmartin Glen.
- The remains of an enclosure, variously interpreted as a dun or an earlier castle, lie 20 metres N of Carnasserie Castle. The enclosure is roughly oval on plan and measures 18m by 14m within a wall 1.6 to 2.2 metres wide. The wall is best preserved on the S where inner and outer faces stand about 0.4 metres high, while elsewhere, it is visible as a turf-covered scatter of stones. The entrance, about 0.6 metres wide, is in the SW. There are no internal features.
- Archaeological investigation within the castle has been limited. A small excavation in 1998, prior to drainage works, revealed only deposits contemporary with the construction of the present castle.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Carnasserie Castle is a good example of the Scottish Renaissance architectural style of the 1560s, and was regarded at the time as one of the finest residences in Argyll. In both design and decoration, Carnasserie is similar to Torwood Castle, built in 1566 for Alexander Forrester, Provost of Stirling. Such are the similarities that Bishop Carsewell probably brought the same masons to work on his own dwelling.
- Aligned E-W, Carnasserie comprises a five-storey E tower with an adjoining three-storey range and stair tower. Although now a roofless shell, both the E tower and W range are virtually complete, standing almost to wall-head level. The stair tower is less complete.
- Resembling a medieval keep, the E tower is decorated with two moulded stringcourses, one of which runs at third floor height and becomes an eaves cornice along the wall-head of the adjacent hall, while a Classical frieze supports the upper storey parapet with its corbelled angle turrets. The tower's vaulted ground floor chamber likely served as a wine cellar and has a well. A stair in the S wall connected this room to the chamber above, which probably served as Bishop Carsewell's principal reception chamber judging by the quality of carved decoration. The hearth in the N wall is framed by a large and elaborate pilastered chimney piece, executed in the highly fashionable Renaissance style of the 1560s. Other architectural details of note in this room include the finely moulded door surrounds. Similar chimneypieces exist in the chambers above, which were supported on joisted floors with runner beams resting on stone corbels. The uppermost floor of the tower is ruinous, but was originally surmounted by a caphouse and a parapet walk that had three angle turrets, now reduced to their corbelled bases. Although a traditional architectural feature, the corbelling at Carnasserie Castle is elegantly executed.
- The attached range contains a first floor hall with a series of vaulted chambers below housing the kitchen and store-rooms. The large, arched kitchen fireplace and wall-oven survive, along with a water conduit, suggesting that the castle's well was used only in emergencies. A large chamber, probably the castle's great hall, occupied the entire first floor, with access to the adjacent reception room in the E tower and a small entresol to the W. The windows in the S wall were almost certainly enlarged in the 17th century. The hall probably had a stone flagged floor, and a beamed ceiling indicated by the presence of beam slots in the outer walls. Although there is no indication of decoration in the hall, it is likely that the ceiling was brightly painted and the walls hung with tapestries or had painted plasterwork. Little survives of the floor above, but the rooms probably served as private accommodation, and the presence of an elaborately carved bracketed window sill indicates that it was richly appointed.
- A single entrance lies in the re-entrant angle formed by the stair tower, and is protected by no less than five gun ports on the ground floor. Further protection is provided by a small guard chamber beneath the main stair. Surmounting the

door is a panel bearing the arms of the 5th Earl of Argyll and his bride Joan Stewart (a natural daughter of James V) and the Gaelic motto 'Dia le ua nDuibh[n]e' (God be with O'Duibhne). This echoes the dedication in Carswell's translation of the *Book of Common Order* (O'Duibhne being an archaic Gaelic title used by the chiefs of the clan in the 13th century). Above is an elaborately carved two-tier aedicule (an opening framed by two columns, an entablature, and usually a pediment, placed against a wall) that originally framed a pair of now lost armorial panels, perhaps in the manner of those found at Huntly Castle. The stair tower gives access to the ground floor of the hall and the vaulted chamber in the base of the E tower, while the main stairway runs to the upper floors of the range.

- To the S of the castle lay a garden, laid out during alterations carried out in 1681. At the same time, a door was formed from a window in the garden facade of the first-floor hall. There are traces of outbuildings to the N-W of the castle.
- The castle is provided with numerous gun ports, such as those protecting the doorway, or the row of 'dumb-bell' gun-loops along the ground floor of the S façade. There are numerous small windows and openings throughout the castle probably serving as pistol-holes.
- Documentary sources note the existence of an earlier castle on the site and there are indications of re-used masonry in the lower part of the N wall of the E tower, several 'dumb-bell' gunloops may belong to this earlier structure. The use of continuous moulded string courses create a sense of unity throughout the hall-tower design.
- Fragments of moulding and architectural stonework, kept in one of the vaulted cellars, include a carved waterspout from the E tower parapet and at least one fragment of a window.

Social Overview

- No formal studies have been carried out into the social significance of this monument, although the castle features prominently in several historical and architectural guides.
- Carnasserie's association with the MacLachlans of Strathlachlan, Earls of Argyll and the Campbells of Auchinbreck is likely to be of interest to people engaged in family history research. Carnasserie features prominently on the website of the Clan Campbell Association of N America.

Spiritual Overview

- Carnasserie Castle has no known spiritual significance at present, although it was the residence of the Protestant Bishop of the Isles in the late 16th century.
- Bishop Carswell completed work on his Gaelic translation of the *Book of Common Order* while residing at Carnasserie.

Aesthetic Overview

- The immediate setting of the castle is particularly scenic, surrounded by mature woodland at the head of the Kilmartin Glen.
- From Carnasserie Castle, visitors have good views down Kilmartin Glen on fine days, particularly from the parapet. The cairns of the linear cemetery and several standing stones are all visible.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Our understanding of the previous castle of Carnasserie is particularly limited. The 'dun' site nearby has been suggested as a medieval ringwork subsequently robbed for stone during the construction of Bishop Carsewell's residence.
- Details of Bishop Carsewell's life are sketchy, particularly the suggestion that he was related to the Campbells of Corsewall.
- Current interpretation at the castle makes no mention of the cup-marked stone, and the diversity of prehistoric rock art within the Kilmartin Glen.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Carnasserie Castle ranks amongst the best examples of a Scottish Renaissance residence in Scotland. Although a roofless ruin, it has many fine Classically-inspired architectural features, most notably the armorial panel above the entrance and the fireplace in the E tower's withdrawing chamber.
- Carnasserie marks the beginning of a shift in Scotland from the tower-house to the country mansion with its integrated layout.
- Architecturally, Carnasserie is very similar to Torwood Castle, completed in 1566, and it is generally thought that Bishop Carsewell enlisted the services of the same masons. The craftsmanship of the castle walls is particularly high, remarkable given its remote location and the difficulty of working the local schist.
- Bishop Carsewell is celebrated in Gaelic tradition as the author of the first printed book in that language, and appears to have been a scholar of Gaelic literary traditions.
- Carnasserie is associated with the ill-fated rebellion of Archibald Campbell, 9th Earl of Argyll, who rose against the accession of James VII in 1685. It was held for the Earl by the Campbells of Auchinbreck before being burnt by a Royalist force commanded by MacLean of Torloisk.
- The cup-marked slab is a reminder that Kilmartin Glen is one of the richest areas of prehistoric rock art found anywhere in Scotland.

Associated Properties

Kilmartin Castle (residence of Neil Campbell, Rector of Kilmartin and husband of Carsewell's daughter); Torwood Castle (Carsewell probably hired the masons from Torwood); **Ardchattan Priory** (Bishop Carsewell's burial place); **Achnabreck, Ballygowan, Cairnbaan, Kilmichael Glassary** (rock art sites in Kilmartin Glen)

Keywords tower-house; range; gun-loop; parapet; Renaissance; chimney piece; O'Duibhne; John Carsewell; Bishop of the Isles; Reformation; Protestant; Book of Common Order; Earls of Argyll; Argyll's rebellion of 1685; King James VII; Campbell of Auchenbreck; MacLean of Torloisk