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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90100)

Taken into State care: 1949 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2013

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DRUMCOLTRAN TOWER



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

www.historicenvironment.scot

You can download this publication from our website at

www.historicenvironment.scot

DRUMCOLTRAN TOWER

SYNOPSIS

Drumcoltran (Drumcoltern) Tower is located about 1 mile north of Kirkgunzeon, on a minor road to the west of the A711. It comprises a tower house, built on the L-plan and rising to three storeys and an attic high. The stair tower, projecting from the main block on the NW side, rises a further one storey. The tower house is complete to its roof. It shows evidence of having been significantly altered internally, probably in the 18th century, when a farmhouse was built immediately to its west. Nothing but a solitary door jamb remains of the original barmkin (courtyard) buildings survive, and the tower house is now surrounded by several farm outbuildings.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **c.1161** – Uchtred, Lord of Galloway, grants the estate of Kirkgunzeon to the Cistercian abbey of Holm Cultram, Cumberland, for use as a sheep grange.
- **c.1370** – Holm Cultram Abbey disposes of its Kirkgunzeon estate because ‘Englishmen cannot dwell in Scotland’. (The place-name ‘Ingleston’ survives to the NE of the tower.) The new superiors are the Herries family of Terregles.
- **1550** – The superiority of the lordship of Kirkgunzeon passes from the Herries family to the Maxwells, when Agnes Herries marries Sir John Maxwell, son of the 4th Lord Maxwell. The couple possibly build the tower shortly thereafter.
- **1668** – The Maxwells sell the property to the Irvings. During their tenure, the tower is re-ordered internally.
- **1875** – Having passed from the Irvings via the Hynds to the Herons, Drumcoltran returns to the Maxwell family.
- **1887** – MacGibbon & Ross note that the tower is still partly inhabited.
- **1911** – RCAHMS visit and report on the decayed and dangerous state of the upper floors, roof, gables and parapet cope.
- **1949** – The tower is taken into state care, along with another Gallovidian Jacobean tower house, **Castle of Park**. A programme of repair and conservation is carried out.

Archaeological Overview:

Drumcoltran Tower has never been archaeologically investigated. However, the potential exists for significant remains of the former barmkin, barmkin wall, gardens, orchards and so forth, to survive, albeit somewhat compromised by the construction of the later farm buildings. Archaeological investigation may also show if any structures older than the later 1500s existed on the site.

The upstanding architecture of the tower house has also not been adequately surveyed. If it were, fresh light might well be thrown on the issue of whether the

structure was originally rectangular in shape (see [Architectural/Artistic overview](#)). The timber roof survives, though how much of it is original is open to question. Nevertheless dendrochronological examination may provide valuable clues as to dating.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

The existing structure consists of a relatively plain, L-shaped tower house, rising to three storeys and an attic high, with a corbelled parapet finished with a straight cope. The stair tower, projecting from the NW corner, rises to an extra storey, but has no parapet. The main block has, unusually, rounded corners, perhaps resulting from a lack of availability of decent ashlar blocks locally. The external facades were probably harled originally. The ground-floor door jamb built into the east wall confirms the existence of a barmkin, now demolished.

The projecting stair tower houses the entrance doorway, defended by a rectangular gunhole of a type fairly widespread across Scotland from the 1550s onwards but most common in the Stewartry (eg, **Caerlaverock Castle** and **Carluith Castle**). Above the door are two moulded stone frames, one now empty (but probably originally holding an heraldic panel), the other now housing a stone inscribed with a suitably Jacobean platitude in Latin, which translates as: 'Keep hidden what is secret; speak little; be truthful; avoid wine; remember death; be pitiful.' MacGibbon & Ross (1887) record that this stone was then built into the adjacent farmhouse.

It has been argued (see RCAHMS) that the tower was originally rectangular on plan, and that the stair tower was an addition. The evidence for this is not conclusive, and although it is the case that more tower houses are producing evidence of remodelling (eg, **Greenknowe Tower**), this may not necessarily be the case with Drumcoltran.

The tower's internal arrangement is largely typical of later 16th-century Scottish tower houses in that it consisted of a kitchen and cellar at ground level, a hall on the first floor and private chambers above, with a small chamber, perhaps a study, at the head of the stair tower. The topmost storey is somewhat unusual in that it has only one fireplace, in the west wall, and no normal windows, just three small lights placed high in the walls. The most interesting room is the bedchamber on the second floor, where there is evidence for a fireplace, bed recess, privy and, in the SE corner, a recess housing a wall-safe (as at, eg, **Huntingtower** and **Glenbuchat Castle**). Much wall plaster remains *in situ*.

The tower house as now existing exhibits good evidence for its internal remodelling, most probably carried out in the 18th century. The work included slapping a doorway (now blocked) through the west wall at ground level to connect with a new-built farmhouse, the partitioning into two of the first-floor hall (including the insertion of a second fireplace), and the enlargement of most of the window openings.

Social Overview:

Other than being a minor visitor attraction, Drumcoltran Tower currently plays no social role.

Spiritual Overview:

Drumcoltran Tower currently plays no known spiritual role.

Aesthetic Overview:

The tower stands complete and roofed, its monolithic form giving it a certain majestic presence. However, its somewhat plain architecture, coupled with its stripped-out interior, give it a rather bleak appearance.

The approach to the tower is attractive, viewed through mature trees. The tower itself is surrounded by farm buildings.

The tower's wall-head offers fine views across the surrounding rural landscape.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Was there anything in the way of structures on the site prior to the construction of the present tower? In particular, it would be of interest to discover if the medieval monastic grange belonging to Holm Cultram Abbey was on or about the site.
- What was the extent and form of the adjoining barmkin and surroundings policies (gardens, etc)? Only archaeological excavation can now solve this mystery.
- When were the alterations to the tower's interior carried out? A detailed standing building survey and dendrochronological examination of the roof timbers, coupled with a study of the documentation, may help cast light on Drumcoltran's more recent history as a residence. An examination of the adjoining farm buildings to the west of the tower may also offer clues.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Drumcoltran Tower is a reasonably-well preserved example of a Jacobean laird's residence. The fact that it still retains its roof gives it an advantage over many other such towers.
- The surviving tower house provides good evidence to show how a typical Jacobean laird's residence was arranged internally.
- The austerity of its architecture seems to reflect the virtues stated in the inscription over the entrance doorway.
- The tower shows how such Jacobean tower houses were remodelled by later generations to make them 'fit for purpose'.

Associated Properties:

(*some other Gallovidian Jacobean tower houses*) – Barjarg Castle; **Carsluith Castle**; **Castle of Park**; Hills Tower; **MacLellan's Castle**; Plunton Castle; Sorbie Tower

(*some other Jacobean tower houses in Historic Scotland's care*) – **Carnasserie Castle**; **Claypotts**; **Corgarff Castle**; **Craignethan Castle**; **Elcho Castle**; **Glenbuchat Castle**; **Greenknowe Tower**

Keywords:

tower house; barmkin; Jacobean; inscribed panel; gunhole; Maxwell

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