

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC047

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90263);

Taken into State care: 1950 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2011

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST ANDREWS WEST PORT



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.

ST ANDREWS WEST PORT

SYNOPSIS

The West Port is the sole surviving entrance gate into the burgh of St Andrews, and one of only two town gates surviving in Scotland. Built in 1589, on the site of an earlier gate leading into South Street, the gateway was 'completely renovated' in 1843.

The property consists of a central round-arched entrance flanked on its west (outer) face by two polygonal towers, each pierced by a gunhole. The whole structure is topped by a corbelled parapet adorned with cannon waterspouts and two carved panels dating from the 1843 renovation.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- c.1580 - John Geddy's plan of St Andrews shows an earlier gate in the same location as the present West Port. It is one of eight ports controlling access into the burgh.
- 1589 - Thomas Robertson, mason in Blebo, west of St Andrews, is contracted (18 May) to build a new gate (the present West Port), in the style of Edinburgh's Netherbow Port. Other masons involved include Patrick and John Arthur and Walter Scott.
- 1650 - Charles II enters St Andrews through the West Port en route to his coronation at Scone.
- 1843 - the provost of St Andrews and Mr John Grant of Kilgraston have the dilapidated West Port 'completely renovated'. This includes demolishing the 1589 guardhouses built against the east (inner) face and replacing them with ball-finialled buttresses 'at once elegant and powerful'.
- 1935 - the West Port is scheduled.
- 1950 - the West Port is taken into state care.

Archaeological Overview:

- In 2002, investigations associated with street-scape changes showed that the area around the West Port was much disturbed by modern services. However, the foundation course of a wall was uncovered on the north side of South Street, immediately east of the West Port. Aligned west/east, it was flush with the base of the main central arch and consisted of several large blocks of sandstone, some bonded with mortar. This may be the remains of one of the guardhouses removed in 1843. It is not clear whether the feature was integral to the original 1589 gate or a later addition.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The West Port consists of a central round-arched entrance flanked by two semi-octagonal towers facing west (ie, away from the town). The towers and arch are capped with a corbelled parapet punctured with cannon spouts. The parapet wall has squarish gunholes set in moulded frames. Each tower is

pierced by a wide-mouthed gunhole with a narrow slit above. A blocked round-headed doorway can be seen in the outer face of the north tower.

- The model for the port was Edinburgh's Netherbow Port, itself modelled on Paris's Porte St Honore. (The Netherbow Port was demolished in 1764, but its appearance is depicted on the City of Edinburgh's arms.)
- Over each arch face is a carved panel. Both were carved by Balfour Simmers 1844/5. The east (inner) face panel bears the arms of the city of St Andrews, and the west (outer) face a depiction of David I on horseback, who founded the burgh c.1140. The latter panel replaced an original panel showing the Scottish Royal Arms.
- The walls to north and south of this central section link with adjacent properties. The walls may be original to 1589 but the pedestrian archways through them are of the 1800s. The larger north archway is round-headed, and the smaller south archway is pointed.

Social Overview:

- The West Port is a noted feature in the town-scape of St Andrews, and a symbol of civic pride. The Saltire flag normally flies from the parapet.
- It remains open to vehicular traffic, though now one way only. It has no specific recreational or burgh use, and its parapet is no longer normally accessible to visitors.

Spiritual Overview:

- It is possible that the port's predecessor in medieval times may have been used in religious processions (eg, the feast of Corpus Christi). However, the building of the present gate in 1589, after the Protestant Reformation (1560), was more likely a statement of secular civic pride, to help distinguish the new-found status of the burgh from its former ecclesiastical masters.
- Currently, the West Port has no spiritual association or use.

Aesthetic Overview:

- The West Port remains a notable structure, contributing positively to the historic fabric of Scotland's oldest university town. It is still in use for passage, and thus preserves some of the aesthetic effect of archway. However, being now within the burgh rather than at the edge robs it of much of its aesthetic as an entrance-way.
- The West Port sits at the lower end of one of the town's three premier streets. Viewed from the west it has an impressive monumental quality. Viewed from the east it forms a natural boundary to the town's historic core.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When was the first port in South Street built?
- What did the 1589 port look like prior to its remodelling in 1843?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- The West Port is the only medieval town port surviving in its original location in Scotland (the only other port, Elgin's East Gate, is no longer on its original site). St Andrews' West Port is an important reminder of the burgh's early modern civic culture and pride.
- As the only town gate surviving in Scotland on its original site, the West Port helps to demonstrate how the nation's ancient burghs expressed civic pride through their monumental points of entry.

Associated Properties:

(*other St Andrews ports, all monastic*) - **Pends Gate**; Teinds Yett; Mill Port (Sea Yett)
(*the only other Scottish town port*) - East Gate, Elgin (not on original site)

Keywords:

gate, port, burgh

Selected Bibliography:

Fleming, D.H., 'Contract for building the West Port of St Andrews', *Transactions of the Edinburgh Architectural Association*, vol.8 (Edinburgh, 1928)

Gifford, J., *The Buildings of Scotland: Fife* (London, 1988)

RCAHMS., *Inventory of Monuments and Constructions in the Counties of Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan* (Edinburgh, 1933)

formerly Principal Historian