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**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

MORTON 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.

MORTON CASTLE

SYNOPSIS

Morton Castle stands overlooking Morton Loch, on the south-west slopes of the Lowther Hills, 2 miles NNE of Thornhill. The impressive, and impressively sited, ruin consists of a two-storeyed hall block with part of a towered gatehouse attached to its west end. Archaeological remains are evident immediately outwith the standing remains, and all is enclosed by a large ditch on the south side cutting off the promontory on which the castle stands.

Morton Castle has been described as ‘as imperfectly understood as any castle can be’ (Stell), and the matter of who built it and when remains a mystery, with a date ranging anywhere between the 13th and 15th centuries; the balance of probability, principally on architectural grounds, is that it was built by Sir Thomas Randolph, earl of Moray and a trusted lieutenant of Robert I (‘the Bruce), around 1300. There may have been an earlier castle on the site.

The picturesque loch below the castle on its north side was artificially created long after the castle was abandoned as a lordly residence. The castle itself was carefully conserved in the later 1800s by William, 8th Duke of Queensberry, and transferred into state care by the 11th duke in 1975.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **1170s** – Hugh ‘Sans Manche’ (‘Sleeveless Hugh’), from the Honour of Richmond (Yorks), acquires the estate of Morton, possibly through marriage to a daughter of Ralph fitz Dunegal, native lord of upper Nithsdale (Strathnith). The great ditch on the south side of the castle may date from his time, or perhaps from the time of Ralph or Dunegal.
- **1200s** – at some stage the lordship passes to the Randolph family, descended from Ralph fitz Dunegal. Thomas Randolph, the elder, is a major player in the region, serving as sheriff of Dumfries and king’s chamberlain under Alexander III. It is possible that the present stone castle is built by either Thomas Randolph, the elder, or his son, Thomas, the younger.
- **1306** – following Robert Bruce’s accession to the throne, Thomas Randolph, the younger, Bruce’s nephew, joins Bruce in his fight against Edward I of England. He is captured at the battle of Methven and temporarily forfeits the lordship of upper Nithsdale, and with it the estate of Morton. He escapes, rejoins Bruce and becomes one of his most loyal lieutenants. Among his many achievements are the following: attends Bruce’s first parliament, at **St Andrews** (1309); becomes earl of Moray (1312); successfully leads a daring night-time raid on English-held **Edinburgh Castle** (1314); successfully takes the Isle of Man and is rewarded with the lordship of Man (1317); leads a brigade at Bannockburn (1314); leads punitive raids into northern England (1315)

on), including retaking Berwick (1318); successfully petitions Pope John to recognise Bruce's right to the throne (1323); becomes Guardian of Scotland following Bruce's death (1329); arranges Scotland's first coronation (David II in 1331). He dies in Musselburgh in 1332, preparing military operations against the 'disinherited'.

- **1357** – the first mention of a castle at Morton is in a treaty resulting in David II's release from captivity in England. A condition of the treaty is the destruction of 13 castles in Nithsdale, including Morton. Some scholars have suggested that the treaty refers to an earlier castle that was destroyed, with the present one being built after this event. However, it is more likely that the existing castle is the subject of that treaty, and that the destruction is limited to disabling the gatehouse and east tower. As in many other cases of supposed destruction, the damage falls short of total destruction, and the castle is soon reoccupied.
- **post 1332** – at Randolph's death his estates pass through two heiresses into the Dunbar family. The barony of Morton eventually comes into the possession of George Dunbar, 10th Earl of March.
- **1372** – Agnes Dunbar, the earl's sister, marries Sir James Douglas of Dalkeith, and brings the barony of Morton with her as a dowry, although March remains the feudal superior. In 1382 the barony, together with Mordingtoun and Whittinghame, passes to Agnes and James's son, also James. In 1420 James the younger inherits Dalkeith and **Aberdour** and c. 1430 becomes a 'Lord of Parliament', taking the title Lord Dalkeith.
- **1433** – the Earl of March is declared forfeit, and shortly thereafter Lord Dalkeith obtains a new enfeoffment of Morton, to be held in regality directly from the Crown. The grant by James II, dated 1440, refers to 'the barony of Morton with the castles thereof'.
- **1456** – the castle is once again specifically documented when Robert Dalziel of that ilk is recorded presenting himself at the outer gates of Morton Castle to seek enfeoffment for a portion of land.
- **1458** – James, Lord Morton, marries Joan, James II's sister, and is created earl of Morton. (Somewhat confusingly, the earldom is not received for the barony in Nithsdale but for the estate of Mortoun, in Midlothian, which had been held by the Dalkeith branch of the Douglasses since the 13th century.) The barony of Morton remains with the earls of Morton, with a few breaks, until 1680. However, they appear to have taken little interest in Morton, which is far removed from their core estates and residences, at Dalkeith and **Aberdour**.
- **early 16th century** – the whole barony is leased to the Douglasses of Drumlanrig, a powerful local branch of the extended Douglas 'empire'. However, Morton appears not to function as their primary residence.
- **1544** - Patrick Douglas, a younger son of Sir James Douglas of Drumlanrig, receives a tack for the Mains of Morton, and a lease for the castle, as part of a marriage contract. He and his wife live there with their retinue.
- **1581** – James Douglas, 4th Earl of Morton, is executed for his part in the murder of Lord Darnley, James VI's father. His title and estates, including Morton, pass to his nephew, John, 8th Lord Maxwell, of **Caerlaverock**.

- **1588** – the castle is reportedly burnt, along with those at Langholm and Castlemilk, by James VI during a campaign against Lord Maxwell, 5th earl of Morton, a devout Catholic, who had been plotting with the Spanish to invade England through Scotland. The Douglasses of Drumlanrig are close allies of the Maxwells at this date.
- **1608** – the castle is sold to Sir William Douglas of Coshogle, and in 1618 to Sir William Douglas of Drumlanrig (later 1st earl of Queensberry).
- **1653** – a sasine records the enfeoffment of William Douglas of Morton ‘as heir to his said father in the £5 land commonly called the mains of Morton, comprehending the castle, tower, fortalice, manor place, house, yards and pertinents’.
- **1714** – the castle is abandoned as a lordly residence, although it seems that more low-born occupants take up residence in and around the building. An engraving by Captain Grose, published in 1789, shows the ruin in much the same condition as today, whilst the first *Statistical Account of Scotland* (published 1794) reports that ‘a great deal of stone has been carried away at different times, to build houses and dykes in the neighbourhood’. At some point, probably not before the later 1700s, Morton Loch is created out of the boggy ground to the north of the castle promontory.
- **1870s** – William, 8th duke of Queensberry, carries out repairs at the castle (a new timber door has the date 1877 carved into it). The repairs are clearly visible as tile-demarcated areas of rebuilding and patching.
- **1975** – Walter, 11th earl of Queensberry, entrusts Morton Castle into state care.

Archaeological Overview:

Morton Castle has never been archaeologically investigated. The conservation work carried out by the 8th Duke of Queensberry in the later 1800s did involve clearance work but this is likely to have been superficial. The archaeological potential therefore remains exceedingly high.

A comprehensive archaeological investigation would undoubtedly pay dividends. It should resolve the continuing uncertainty surrounding the castle’s date of construction (small-scale excavations uncovered floor tiles of late 13th-century date; these are now in Dumfries Museum) and establish whether there was an earlier castle at the site. It would determine the nature and extent of the medieval castle, and cast light on its post-medieval, post-lordly use as a residence.

The castle also merits a full standing building survey, to inform our understanding of (1) how the castle functioned as a lordly residence when first built, (2) how it functioned following its partial destruction, and (3) the extent of the conservation works carried out by the 8th duke of Queensberry.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

Morton Castle has been described as 'as remote and imperfectly understood as any castle can be ...yet it is one of those rare buildings that still manages to convey the mystical aura of the Age of Chivalry' (Stell).

The standing remains comprise a two-storey hall-block with part of a twin-towered gatehouse attached to its west end and a fragment of a circular angle-tower at its east end. The walls are faced with good-quality ashlar hewn from the local silver-grey sandstone. Lean-to structures attached to the rear (north) side of the hall-block defy interpretation.

Of the gatehouse, only one of the two D-shaped towers remains standing. The position of the drawbridge is indicated by footings only, a portcullis slot survives in the sole remaining side wall, and corbels indicate that the entrance passage was timber-ceiled and not stone-vaulted. The one surviving gate-tower housed a pit-prison and four upper floors.

The hall-block was originally reached via a now missing stair turret and through the large arched and moulded doorway at the west end of the rear (north) wall. This doorway has been described as 'the best piece of detailing in the building ... obviously worked with an eye to contrast and effect, and with a proper regard to its importance' (Cruden). It gave access to the upper floor. Beside it are remains of two lesser doorways.

The upper floor was the main hall in the castle. It has the vestiges of a fine canopied fireplace in its south wall and large mullioned and transomed windows. Whether the long room was originally subdivided, into hall and chamber, is not clear, but the fact that a doorway at its east end connected with the circular angle tower beyond suggests not, and that the lord's chamber was housed in the attached tower. Only a small fragment of that tower remains, and it defies further interpretation.

The ground floor seems to have served as a common hall (for the lower orders of the household), for it too has a canopied fireplace, in the east wall, but is more meanly lit by a row of small oblong windows along the south wall. How it was accessed is not known, for the present doorway is a later slapping through.

There were two lean-to structures built against the outer north wall of the hall-block, as can be seen from the rows of corbels and roof plates. The western lean-to was of single-storey only, and possibly provided storage or stable accommodation. The eastern lean-to was two-storeyed, with an odd-looking double-splayed window looking into the upper hall. How this space functioned is also unclear.

The dating of Morton Castle has been hotly debated, with some suggesting dates as early as 1260-70, and others a date as late as post-1440. On architectural grounds, the evidence seems to point to a date around 1300. The shoulder-head lintels, the pointed rear-arches, the square ashlar masonry, the canopied fireplaces, the detail of the first-floor entrance doorway and the

mullioned and transomed windows lighting the upper hall all fit more comfortably with the earlier date.

Morton resembles a small group of hall-castles, both in its general form and in its architectural details, although it has to be said that its incorporated gatehouse is a unique feature. Rait Castle (Nairnshire) most closely resembles Morton, with an oblong hall block and attached round tower (though minus the gatehouse). Although the dating of Rait too is debated, the similarity of its details to those at the nearby St Barevan's Church and Lochindorb Castle almost certainly places it in the early 1300s.

Although Morton's gatehouse is much ruined, when complete it would have been one of the most impressive elements of the castle. Castellologists have compared it to that at **Caerlaverock Castle**, but the similarities are superficial. A better parallel might be the so-called Black Gate at Newcastle Castle, built c.1247, raising the intriguing possibility that Morton may have been built by an English master-mason.

Post-medieval structural works are evident in the fabric. Within the hall-block are foundation walls and roof-raggles of two-storeyed buildings inserted into the building at a later date (perhaps as late as the 17th or 18th century), whilst the tile-demarcated areas signify the 'self-documenting' repair works carried out by the 8th duke of Queensberry. The stone footings of humble one-storeyed cottages are also visible outside the gatehouse.

Social Overview:

Other than being a minor visitor attraction, Morton Castle currently plays little community use, being remote from modern settlement and notoriously difficult to find (the sense of discovery is one of the castle's charms).

In recent years the Drumlanrig Castle & Country Estate has developed a short nature trail around Morton Loch which passes the castle. This adds quality to the visit, complementing the architectural and historical information provided by Historic Scotland with information about local flora and fauna. In addition, Morton Loch is used by anglers, whose enjoyment must be complemented by the presence of the ancient castle ruin overshadowing them.

Spiritual Overview:

Morton Castle will have had a chapel or oratory in it during its use as a medieval lordly residence. However, since its abandonment, the property has played no known spiritual role.

Aesthetic Overview:

Morton Castle is spectacularly situated. It stands remote from other signs of habitation, on a grassy promontory overlooking a small, pretty loch, and set against the dramatic backdrop of the heather-clad Lowther Hills.

The castle has been described as having a 'lurking quality', and the visitor gets a sense of discovery when first encountering it. The ruin is aesthetically

impressive, particularly when approached from the south, with the gaunt fragment of gatehouse to the left, the great frontal mass of the hall-block in the centre, and, as one nears it, the still, blue waters of the loch beyond.

On close inspection the visitor finds that the rude mass of masonry has some fine sculptural details (eg, the first floor hall entrance and canopied fireplaces) to hint that this haunting ruin was once a noble residence in the Age of Chivalry.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When was the frontal ditch built? It is possible that there was an earlier castle on the site, but the ditch may be older still.
- Who built the present castle, and when? Only archaeological excavation can now provide the definitive answer.
- What was the detailed form and extent of the stone castle? A detailed standing building survey, coupled with selective excavation (eg, on the gatehouse and at the rear (north), could well pay dividends.
- What was the nature of the post-medieval occupation of the castle, particularly within the hall-block? Here too archaeological excavation would cast light.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Morton Castle is one of only a handful of late 13th-/early 14th-century hall-house castles that have been identified in Scotland; it is also the most complex of them all by far.
- The castle was fronted by one of the most impressive gatehouses of any Scottish castle.
- Other than the repair works of the Duke of Buccleuch in the later 1800s, the ruin is one of the least disturbed major medieval castles in Scotland, and therefore represents a particularly significant archaeological resource. It has the potential to shed considerable light on our understanding of castle building in the later Middle Ages, particularly the 13th-century.
- Morton Castle is spectacularly sited, its remote and lonely setting perfectly conjuring up a perfect image of the 'Age of Chivalry'.

Associated Properties:

(other Scottish hall-castles) – **Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall**; Craigie; **Duffus**; Kindrochit; **Lochranza**; Rait; **Skipness**; Tulliallan

(other castles associated with the Douglas earls of Morton) – **Aberdour**; **Caerlaverock**; Dalkeith; Drochil; Drumlanrig; **Lochleven**

(some other buildings conserved in Victorian times using a similar 'self-documenting' technique) – **St Blane's, Bute**; Sanquhar Castle; **Whithorn Priory**

Keywords:

hall house; gatehouse; ditch; Douglas; Morton; Buccleuch; Queensberry

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