This urban tower house is largely the vision of one man, Sir Thomas MacLellan. Though empty and roofless, enough remains to gain a good idea of what life was like for a wealthy 16th-century burgher of Kirkcudbright.
In the centre of the bustling town of Kirkcudbright, close to the harbour lies the intact shell of MacLellan’s Castle. This urban tower house is largely the vision of one man, Sir Thomas MacLellan. Though empty and roofless, enough remains for pupils to gain a good idea of what life was like for a wealthy 16th-century burgher of Kirkcudbright.

### Historical background

The story of MacLellan’s castle begins in the mid-15th century. James II took a break from his campaign against the Black Douglases to establish a convent known as Greyfriars in the centre of the important burgh of Kirkcudbright. Following the Reformation of 1560 the convent was disbanded. In 1569 Sir Thomas MacLellan was granted the rights to the land formerly owned by the convent. Shortly after, building on a grand new tower house began.

One of the leading families of the area, the MacLellans had risen in prominence during the 15th century. Working in customs, they profited from the town’s trade with England in hides, woollen cloth, and coal. When the Black Douglases fell from power in the mid-15th century, the MacLellans were there to benefit from the redistribution of their lands. Soon after, William MacLellan was made Provost of Kirkcudbright.

The castle was built to demonstrate the power and taste of Sir Thomas MacLellan. With only a nod to defences, this was a domestic house on grand scale. Its position in the centre of Kirkcudbright reflected the central position of the family in that society. Work progressed steadily, and the castle was probably finished around 1582, although there is the suggestion that a cash-flow problem prevented completion of the internal fittings.

Unfortunately, the family did not enjoy the castle for long. Although they continued to rise in status, with Sir Thomas’s son Robert becoming the first Lord Kirkcudbright in 1633, the family fortunes went into decline from then on. By 1741 there is a sad story that the then Lord Kirkcudbright could be seen hovering at the fringes of grand balls in Edinburgh, attempting to sell pairs of gloves to the dancers.

In 1742 the castle was stripped of its roof and contents by another branch of the family and remained neglected until taken into state care in 1912.
**Before the visit:**

- It is helpful if pupils have some of the architectural terminology of castles as this makes discussion on site easier. Words particularly relevant to MacLellan’s might include: gun-loop, turret, latrine, chamber, shield. Pupils could produce an illustrated class dictionary to explain these and other terms.
- Help pupils gain a clearer grasp of the time scale by making a time line with them, counting back the centuries and then marking on key events in the history of the castle. This could be added to after the visit.
- Discuss the servants that would have been necessary to run a castle like this. Pupils could research and investigate who would have carried out which tasks and how.

**Working on site**

When exploring the castle, in addition to our suggestions for discussion, pupils should be encouraged to look critically at what they see and to make and test theories based on physical evidence. Some general starting points could include:

- What materials were used to build the castle? Why were these materials chosen? Are there any materials which might have rotted away or been stolen since then?
- Do you think this room has always looked like this? Can you see anywhere it has been altered? Why might it have been changed?
- What evidence is there for everyday life?

Pupils can record evidence by taking notes, sketching, taking photographs, recording impressions into a tape recorder.

On the Historic Scotland website: [www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/education_unit](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/education_unit) teachers can find additional resources to help with work on site. These include compiling an Evidence Record and a My Impressions Record.

**Suggestions for follow-up work**

Following the visit pupils can pool their findings in groups to create a fuller record of the castle. This could form the basis for a range of presentation activities, for example:

- A guide book or leaflet for future visitors
- A slide show with commentary
- Imaginative writing based on the lives of the people who lived or worked at the castle – even a prisoner
- A series of drama sketches showing snapshots of life in the castle through the ages.
On the trail of Sir Thomas MacLellan

Our suggested tour route guides you and your pupils around the castle, in order to uncover as much as possible about Sir Thomas MacLellan and how he lived.

After the introduction, it doesn’t really matter on the order in which you visit the locations, so you may prefer to split your class into groups and start at different points.

After checking in with the steward, we suggest you visit these locations, marked on the plan to the right:

1. Introduction: Outside the Castle
2. The Castle Entrance
3. The Cellars
4. The Kitchen
5. The Steward’s Chamber
6. The Hall
7. The Private Chamber
8. Greyfriar’s Church

Background information is given in the pack for each location. It is written in simple language so that it can be read aloud to pupils if desired. Also included are suggested questions for discussion.

Allow about 45 minutes for the tour.
Did you know...
Sir Thomas didn’t always make his money legally: in 1577 he got into trouble for doing business with a pirate called Leonard!

Tour notes: On the trail of Sir Thomas MacLellan

Stand on the grass by the kiosk.

Location 1: Outside the castle

Setting the scene. This can be read to pupils.

- More than 400 years ago, in the 1500s, one of the most important people in this area was Sir Thomas MacLellan. The MacLellans were in charge of taxing the ships that came into the harbour at Kirkcudbright to trade. This was quite a good job, but they really made their fortunes in the 1400s, when they shared the same enemy as the king of Scotland. King James II and the MacLellans were both enemies of the powerful Black Douglas family. When the king finally crushed the Douglases at Threave Castle, the Douglas land was shared out and the MacLellans became rich.

- In about 1569 Sir Thomas MacLellan was given a present of land right in the centre of Kirkcudbright. He decided to build himself a grand home, and work started on the castle in 1570.

- Even though he was very rich, Sir Thomas didn’t quite have enough money to put the finishing touches to his castle. After he died, his son Robert spent most of his money and by the 1700s the castle was abandoned.

- Although it is a ruin, if we look carefully, we can still work out quite a lot about Sir Thomas MacLellan and how he lived in his grand castle.

Teacher prompts | Desired pupil responses
--- | ---
Why was this a good place for Sir Thomas to build a castle? | Right in the centre of Kirkcudbright – showed how important he was. Close to the river – could keep an eye on ships coming in and out; also easy to transport building materials.

Look at the castle. How many floors do you think there used to be in Sir Thomas’s castle? | Ground floor and at least two others.
How many chimneys can you count? | 4 are visible from here, and there are at least 3 others.
What does this tell us about how comfortable the castle was? | Many fireplaces – to keep his guests and family warm.
Do you think that Sir Thomas expected to be attacked in his new home? | Probably not – the windows are very big, there aren’t places for soldiers to attack people from, there isn’t a moat or a ditch to protect the castle.

Do you think this castle was ever attacked? | Probably not – the walls are still standing, no sign of damage.

Follow the path around the castle to the left, past a well. Stop by the entrance door, where there is an information panel.
Did you know...
Grissel Maxwell was only fourteen in 1582 when she married Sir Thomas. She was his second wife.

Location 2: The Main Entrance

**Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.**

- This was the main entrance for Sir Thomas MacLellan and his friends and family. If you look at the picture on the information panel, you can see what the castle might have looked like when it was first built.

- The castle took a long time to build – more than ten years, and it probably still wasn’t finished when Sir Thomas MacLellan moved in with his wife, Grissel Maxwell. You can see their family shields above the door. The top shield has worn away. It used to show the arms of King James VI.

- You can see the well which was the main supply of water for the castle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compare the picture with the castle today. What is different?</td>
<td>Different: today there is no roof, no glass, no smoke coming out of chimneys; the river is closer, the gardens are different, the well no longer has a roof. Same: number of floors, stone walls are still intact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look at the shields above the door. On the right hand shield you can see letters and a date. What can you see? What do you think they stand for?</td>
<td>GM - Grissel Maxwell, Sir Thomas’ wife. 1582 – year that the castle was completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think the small window to the right of the door was used for?</td>
<td>For guards to check who came in and out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apart from the shields, what other carved decorations can you see from here?</td>
<td>Window to left on first floor is decorated; patterns around turret bases; carved stone line at top of wall above door. To impress people as they came in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The other side of the castle was quite plain. Why do you think Sir Thomas wanted this side of the castle to be decorated?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you look very carefully, can you spot some gun loops? – just in case the visitors weren’t friendly.</td>
<td>3 low wide gun loops about a metre above ground. 1 cross-shaped pistol holes on turret up to right. Pistol slits on tower to left.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Go into the castle, turn immediately right and then right again to the end of the corridor to stand in the end cellar.**
Did you know...

In the old days everyone drank beer – even the children! The brewer in the castle would brew a kind of weak ale, which everyone would drink. It was safer than drinking water straight from the well, which might be polluted. Sir Thomas and his friends would drink wine from abroad with their meals.

Location 3: The Cellars

Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.

- This is where all the food and drink for the castle was kept. There were three cellars for food and one for wine.
- In the days before fridges and freezers, people had to find ways of making food last throughout the winter without going off. Meat and fish could be dried or salted, some fruits and vegetables could be pickled and herbs could be hung from the ceilings and dried. Rich people like the MacLellans used spices from abroad to try and hide the taste of food that was past its best!
- Sir Thomas MacLellan owned a lot of land in the area. He would rent out the land for farmers to use. Instead of paying the rent in money, the farmers might pay their rent in sacks of oats or other crops.

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How does it feel in the cellars?</td>
<td>Cool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why was this a good place to keep food?</td>
<td>No fridges – things would last longer if it was cool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What helps keep this room cool?</td>
<td>Thick walls, partly underground, small windows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today we get all our food from supermarkets. Where would the MacLellans get their every day food from?</td>
<td>Fish from rivers and sea. Deer, rabbits, game birds hunted in woods and on moors. Vegetables and fruit grown in castle grounds or on castle land. Oats and barley taken as rent. Cattle, pigs, sheep farmed locally. Pigeons kept in a dovecot. Right by the sea, where the ships from abroad would come in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some luxury food items, like wine or fruit would come from abroad. Why was the castle in a good place for this?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look in the corner to the right of the door. You can see outside through two holes. What are these holes?</td>
<td>Gun holes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So what else could this cellar be used for?</td>
<td>Cellar could be used as a room for defending the castle if necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As you come out of the cellary, look up. What used to be here?</td>
<td>Staircase.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Go back along the corridor to the end (away from the entrance door) and turn left into the kitchen at the end.
Location 4: The Kitchen

There are reconstructions of food and kitchen workers here, which help to bring this area to life.

**Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.**

- When Sir Thomas was at home, this kitchen would have been busy all the time. You will have to imagine it full of people chopping and shouting and stirring and carrying things. *How would it feel? What could you hear? What could you smell?*

### Teacher prompts

<table>
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<tr>
<td>What food can you see being prepared?</td>
<td>Pork, fish, herbs etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which of them would you find in your kitchen at home?</td>
<td>Probably all of them – though in a different form (e.g. sausages or bacon rather than a pig’s head, chicken rather than pigeon, herbs from a packet rather than a bundle of them).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look at the fireplace. How could you cook food over the fire?</td>
<td>Boil it up in a cauldron – soups, stews, vegetables. Roast it on a spit over the fire – meat. Fry it in a pan held over the fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the left hand side of the fireplace, you can see a kind of cupboard in the wall. What do you think this is?</td>
<td>An oven.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think this was used for?</td>
<td>Baking bread, pies, cakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you look closely at the fire, you can see slots where poles used to slot in. These poles were used to smoke food over the fire – maybe fish or ham.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In kitchens today there is always a sink. Where would the cooks here get their water from?</td>
<td>From well outside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you see where they would pour the dirty water?</td>
<td>Pour it down ‘slop outlet’ on right hand wall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you find the serving hatch? The cooks would hand servants the food to take upstairs to the hall for Sir Thomas and his friends to enjoy.</td>
<td>On wall opposite fire.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Go back out the kitchen and up the stairs opposite the entrance door. At the top of the stairs turn left, into the Steward’s Room, also known as the Private Chamber.**
Did you know...
In 1586 a very important guest came to stay at the castle - King James VI. The visit seems to have gone well for Sir Thomas - he won a prize of a silver gun in a shooting competition organised by the king. You can see the gun today in the museum in Kirkcudbright.

**Location 5: The Steward’s Chamber**

*Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.*

- Running a castle was like running a hotel. There could have been around 20 servants working at the castle when Sir Thomas was at home with his family and guests. Can you think what kind of servants there would have been? (cooks, cleaning maids, servants, kitchen boys/girls, bakers, brewers, poulterers in charge of chickens, dairy maids, stable boys, messengers, gardeners etc).

- To help him run the castle, Sir Thomas had a right hand man – the steward. The steward was in charge of the household and all the servants in the castle. If Sir Thomas was away, the steward was in charge of the castle.

- This room was probably the Steward’s Chamber, where the steward lived and worked. Up above there used to be other bedrooms.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are two rooms leading off the main room. Have a look at them, and see if you can work out what they might be.</td>
<td>Smaller one is the toilet closet. Larger one was probably a bedroom or a study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look out of the window by the fireplace. What can you see? Why do you think this window is here?</td>
<td>View of path coming up to castle. To allow the Steward to keep an eye on who’s coming and going.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would this have been a comfortable room to live in? Remember, in the old days there would have been hangings on the walls, furniture and of course a roof.</td>
<td>Yes, reasonably comfortable. Big windows, big fireplace, private toilet, warmth coming up from kitchen below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think Sir Thomas thought his Steward was an important member of the household?</td>
<td>Yes, probably, given the size and quality of his room.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Leave the room and go back to the top of the stair. Instead of going straight into the great hall, go along the gallery parallel to the stairs, into the small alcove at the end (you may have to do this in small groups). In this alcove you can find the laird’s lug.*

- Look through this little hole. What can you see? What do you think this hole might have been for?

- This was called the **laird’s lug** – or the lord’s ear! This was a kind of spyhole into the hall, so that Sir Thomas could hear what people were saying about him!

*Move into the next room – the Hall.*
Did you know...

Sir Thomas’ children and grandchildren did not live as grandly as Sir Thomas. One of his descendants, also called Sir Thomas, made his living selling gloves to dancers at balls in Edinburgh.

Location 6: The Hall

Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.

- This was the most important room in the castle: the hall. This was where Sir Thomas would do business, entertain his guests or dine with his family.
- If you look at the picture on the information board, you can get some idea of what it used to look like.

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The roof has rotted away now. Can you see any signs of where the ceiling used to be? Do you think there used to be any other floors above this one?</td>
<td>Holes visible to show where beams used to slot in. Yes, perhaps two. You can see fireplaces on the wall opposite the fireplace in the hall. Clear triangular marks showing position of roof.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look even higher. Can you see where the roof used to be?</td>
<td>No, just for warmth and light.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look at the big fireplace. Do you think this was used for cooking? Inside it you can see a small hole to the left. What was this for?</td>
<td>This is the other side of the laird’s lug!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many ways into this room can you find? Which ones were used by Sir Thomas?</td>
<td>Four ways in: Entrance we came in by – main grand entrance for guests. Entrance at the top of the stair leading up from ground floor opposite main doorway. This was used for carrying dishes of food up from the kitchen and was used by servants. Stairway to left of fireplace – this led down directly to wine cellar and then used to lead upstairs. Doorway by this stair leading to next room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which ones were used by servants?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look through the big window to the left of the fireplace. What could Sir Thomas see from this window?</td>
<td>Ships coming in to the harbour.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Move through into the end room – the private chamber.
Did you know...
Sir Thomas had a big family – seven children! Unfortunately none of them were interested in living in the castle, and eventually it was taken over by a different branch of the family, who took everything out of it, including the roof and then sold it.

**Location 7 : The Private Chamber**

**Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.**

- This was a private living room for Sir Thomas and Lady Grissel. They would sit here and chat with close friends or family, or conduct secret business meetings.
- There used to be other floors above this one. Historians think that altogether there were 15 rooms where people could stay. Sir Thomas must have had lots of friends.

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On the right hand side of the fireplace is a small hole. This was where salt was kept.</td>
<td>Salt kept here because it was dry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think they kept salt here?</td>
<td>It was used for preserving meat in the winter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know what it was used for?</td>
<td>It was very expensive and valuable, so Sir Thomas wanted to keep an eye on it!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think it was kept here, in Sir Thomas’ private room, rather than downstairs in the kitchen?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you find the toilet in this room?</td>
<td>In corner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think it had the little window?</td>
<td>For fresh air and light.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a drain for the toilet?</td>
<td>No – this is a ‘dry closet’. People would use a kind of bucket, which a servant would then take away and empty outside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would it empty?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above this room was Sir Thomas’ and Lady Grissel’s private bedchamber.</td>
<td>Fireplace, three windows outside, one window into hall. Toilet in the corner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What clues can you see which tell us what it used to be like?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Our tour of the castle is now ended. For a change, you could descend by the servant’s stair at the far end of the hall. If you look up, you can see the remains of the spiral stair reaching up .**

**If time permits, it is worth visiting the small Greyfriar’s Church close by the castle.**
Location 8: The MacLellan Monument in Greyfriar’s church

The tomb is at the far end of the church, on the left.

Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.

- This church is all that is left of a monastery which used to be where the castle is now. When Sir Thomas was given the land, he sold off the church to be used as the town church of Kirkcudbright.
- Sir Thomas died in 1597. His son Robert had this memorial built to him and to Grissel Maxwell, Sir Thomas’ wife.
- There are lots of things to look for on this tomb. Can you find...

| A carving of Sir Thomas and a carving of Grissel. | Either side of the archway. |
| A shield with a ship, the sign of Kirkcudbright. | Above the Latin inscription. |
| An angel watching over them. | Right at the top. |
| A knight missing part of his body. | Carved statue at the bottom – missing his feet. |
| Symbols of death. | A skull and crossbones, a sandtimer (showing that your time has run out). |
| The names MacLellan and Grissel Maxwell written in Latin. | Above the arch. |

Did you know...

The knight sleeping at the bottom of the tomb may be meant to be Sir Thomas. Sir Robert might have been doing a bit of recycling here – this knight probably came from another tomb, as it doesn’t quite fit in the space.
Visiting MacLellan’s Castle

Pre visits: We strongly recommend that teachers make a free visit to the castle to familiarise themselves with the site and to make a risk assessment before bringing school parties.

Booking a visit: Phone 01557 331856 to book a visit, discuss your needs and confirm opening times with the Steward. Please note that the castle is open during the summer months only.

Tours: If staff are available it may be possible to arrange a tour. Please discuss this when booking.

Cost: Admission is free to a range of educational groups including school parties. More information about who qualifies for free visits can be found on the Historic Scotland Education Unit website (see below).

Location: In the centre of Kirkcudbright on the A711.

Parking: Coaches may be parked by the harbour.

Health and safety: Please note the following:
- Pupils should be supervised at all times.
- Pupils should not climb on the walls.
- As part of our commitment to Green Tourism, we ask that any rubbish be disposed of back at school.

Historic Scotland Education Unit:
For further information about school visits, activities and resources for teachers linked to MacLellan’s Castle, visit: www.historic-scotland.gov.uk

Other places to visit:
The Stewartry Museum, St Mary Street, Kirkcudbright Tel: 015577 331643
This lovely museum includes many objects from the area’s past, including the silver gun won by Sir Thomas MacLellan in 1587.

Additional resources

For teachers:
Doreen Grove MacLellan’s Castle 1997
Historic Scotland The official guidebook; essential reading for teachers for further details on the architecture and history of the site.

Historic Scotland Education Investigating Medieval Castles in Scotland 2005
Historic Scotland. An excellent booklet designed for teachers with lots of background on castle life and suggestions for class activities.

www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/kirkcudbright/MacLellanscastle This site has some lovely photographs and a good historical overview.

For pupils:
Phil Roxbee Cox What were Castles For? Usborne Publishing Ltc 2002.

www.nationalgeographic.com/castles/enter.html Explore a virtual castle.

http://home.freeuk.net/elloughton13/castle1.htm A good source of pictures of castle life which can be downloaded.

http://kotn.ntu.ac.uk/castle/castl_fm.html Activities based on Nottingham Castle.

www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/education/as/burghlife/ Explore 16th century burgh life in Scotland.

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