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**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90164)

**Taken into State care:** 1912 (Ownership)

**Last reviewed:** 2004

**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND  
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

# **HUNTINGTOWER CASTLE**



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# HUNTINGTOWER CASTLE

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Huntingtower Castle stands on a level site which is naturally protected on the west by a narrow valley and on the north by a steep bank sloping down to the River Almond. It was probably built in a number of phases in the 15th century as the House or Place of Ruthven by the family who had held the lands of Ruthven, Perthshire, since the 12th century. Brothers William, Master of Ruthven, and John Lindsay were granted a division of the estate in 1480. Shortly thereafter the gatehouse was rebuilt as a towerhouse (east tower) and a second towerhouse (west tower) was built close by (only 3m distant) to provide additional accommodation. From the surviving comparative evidence, this juxtaposition is unusual and combined with a rare c. 1540 painted ceiling and earlier painted plasterwork inside the towers Huntingtower is highly significant.

The Ruthven dynasty came to an abrupt end in 1600 due to the retribution that followed their part in *coups d'état* in 1582 and 1600 against James VI (1567-1625); an Act of Parliament "ordained the baronie and place of Ruthven to be changeit and callit in all tyme coming the place and baronie of Huntingtour." The castle was then occupied mainly by Murray constables on behalf of the Crown until 1663 when it then passed to that family. The space between the two towers was enclosed in the late 17th century to house a grand timber staircase a mansion house 'show-front' was partially realised to unify the south façade.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century Huntingtower was poorly maintained and after various owners and uses, it came into state care in 1912. Subsequent works carried out by the Ministry of Works and its successors included replacing the roofs and floors (those already missing were not replaced) and removing the 17th-century stair and 17th-18th century wall and ceiling panelling to reveal evidence of its earlier state.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

- The family of Ruthven, which had this as their principal residence, came to Perthshire from East Lothian towards the end of the twelfth century and rose to prominence in the later medieval period. The earliest upstanding part of the complex, the lower part of the east tower, embodies the remains of a substantial gatehouse, thought to date from the 15th century but which could be earlier.
- The 'Ruthven Raid' of 1582 was a *coup d'état*, led by the Earls of Mar and Gowrie (the fourth Lord Ruthven, created Earl of Gowrie in 1581) in which James VI was held against his will at the Place of Ruthven for 10 months in an attempt to detach the young king from the influence of Roman Catholic sympathisers. Gowrie was tried and beheaded at Stirling in 1584, his property forfeited but later restored to his heirs.
- In 1600 John, third Earl, and his brother Alexander, were killed in Gowrie House, the Ruthven townhouse in Perth, where another *coup d'état* against James VI known as the 'Gowrie Conspiracy' was foiled. After their deaths the two Ruthvens were indicted for high treason and an Act of Parliament

extinguished their name, their arms were deleted, their estates forfeited and their mutilated bodies displayed in Scotland's primary burghs.

- A succession of Murrays held Huntingtower as constable to the Crown including Sir Mungo Murray of Drumcairn between 1607 and 1613; William (later Earl of Dysart and Lord of Huntingtower) from 1643; and James, fourth Earl of Tullibardine from 1649 who acquired the castle outright in 1663.
- John, second Earl of Atholl inherited Huntingtower in 1670 (Marquis from 1676, †1703) and was probably responsible for a major proposal to remodel the towers into a visually unified house befitting his station and late 17th century expectations.
- When Mary, widow of John Murray, the first Duke of Atholl, died in 1767, the castle, already in a rundown state, and it was effectively abandoned as a noble residence.
- Between 1805 and 1815 James Buchan used it as accommodation for workers at a cloth-printing factory. Major Lindsay Mercer later inherited the castle from his father who bought it in 1863; he placed it in State care in 1912.
- Major conservation works in 1912-13 included the removal of the 17th century grand stair, plasterwork and fireplaces and 18th century wall and ceilings panelling to reveal earlier work as well as extensive repairs to the masonry and repointing.

#### Archaeological Overview

- In 1996 a small trench was excavated in an attempt to trace the water supply to the west end of the castle. This investigation was halted when it became clear that this area had never been disturbed by services and substantial clay-bonded stonework was encountered which appeared to represent a foundation raft for a tower or external stair at the re-entrant angle of the west tower. It may have corresponded to a blocked doorway in the north wall of the chamber-block at second floor level. No archaeological deposits were found when service trenches for electricity supply cables were re-excavated. (SUAT, 12 March 1996).
- A photogrammetric survey of the painted ceiling was undertaken in 1975; significant recording of this and the painted plasterwork was carried out by HSCC in 2000 and 2003.
- It is highly likely that evidence of the layout of the former courtyard and its buildings, gardens and archaeological deposits relating to 15th-17th century human occupation survive around the above-ground remains of the castle.

#### Artistic/Architectural Overview

##### **Architectural Development:**

- **15th century:** A gatehouse, that survives today as part of the east tower, would have provided access to the principal courtyard where the main accommodation for the Ruthven family would have been situated. It is possible that the boundaries of outer enclosures, perhaps including gardens, survive in some of the field walls to the east and there may also have been outer courtyards to the south.
- **16th century, 'the two towers':** Around c. 1500 the gatehouse pend (its arches are still discernible) was closed off and a timber floor inserted, though shortly thereafter this was replaced by a stone vault. Above was a first-floor hall, with a painted ceiling of c. 1540, a second-floor bed chamber (the

fireplace mouldings here are c. 1500), and a garret (floor missing) and wallwalk. The main entrance was on the north side with the upper floors accessed by a turnpike stair at the north-west corner. A second tower was built only 3m to the west to provide additional accommodation. The juxtaposition of two towerhouses in c.1500 is unusual and an interesting example of both functionality and societal expectations of the period. It seems unlikely that this arrangement represented separate residences for the sons of Sir William, first Lord Ruthven (guardian of James V) (†1528) and Isabel Lindsay when large estates were available to them. The towers were connected to one another by a screen wall thought to have had the main entrance to the courtyard between them and from which entry to the towers was possible. The west tower may have been built as an L-plan or the south-west chamber-block may have been an early 16th century addition. Access from the outside would have been via a doorway into its ground floor (now in steward's flat) and a stair to its first floor hall, both on its east side. A turnpike stair at its north-west corner would have led to the upper chamber, garret (floors are missing), wallwalk and doocot.

- **16th century, courtyard ranges:** The first floor hall of the lodging in the west tower would have once communicated with a single-storey great hall built in the late 16th century on its north side (the doorway survives). A 1790 illustration shows the ruin of this hall next to a dilapidated two-storey chamber block. A range extending from the east tower survived until relatively recently and is indicated on an 1849 illustration. Today there is little trace of the complex of outbuildings, courtyards and gardens.
- **17th century, 'mansion-house façade':** Major remodelling in the late 17th-century was probably instigated by John, second Earl of Atholl. Large, regularly spaced windows were inserted into the south side of the west tower and carried across the front of the new link block. Evidence suggests that it was intended to extend this pattern across the south side of the east tower (indicated by tusks on the east side of the link block). Instead, it was modified with two large windows and a new main entrance on the south side (now blocked). A grand timber stair (removed in the early 20th-century) was built at the north end of the new block between the two towers entered via a doorway in the west side of the east tower. It served the upper chambers of the west tower via anti-chambers; that on the first floor also provided alternative access to the corresponding chamber to the east. The turnpike stair in the north-west corner of the east tower was modified to extend to ground-floor level and link with the foot of the grand stair. The ground floor of the west tower was self-contained and entered via a doorway broken into its S side. Its first floor hall was accessed from the grand stair; from the 19th century also by a forestair on its north side after the late 16th century great hall had become ruinous.
- **20th century, 'state care':** New roofs (c. 1916), oak windows, doors and safety rails were inserted by 1926. The only floors are those over the ground floor vault of the east tower, its second floor and the first floor of the west tower and these were replaced in 1948. The first floors of the west and east towers are connected by a modern stepped bridge across the link block. The wallwalks can be accessed by the public due to the installation of safety barriers and gates in 1986. The ground floor of the west tower was converted into the steward's flat which extends into the north half of the ground floor of the link block; since it has been vacated in early 2004 there is now an opportunity for the significant reinterpretation of the monument (see Major

Gaps below) and improve the visitor experience. The shop was built on the site of timber potting shed in 1998.

### **Interior Decoration:**

- The painted ceiling in the first-floor hall of the east tower was exposed in 1912-13 (though it is illustrated in a watercolour sketch by A. Lyons, apparently dated 1905 but 1912 photographs show the 18th century wall and ceiling panelling in place). It is decorated with knotwork pattern on boards in black and the joists have leafwork, fruit scrolls and zoomorphic coloured patterns. It may date to c. 1540, making it one of the earliest surviving Scottish Renaissance painted ceilings (a later date of c. 1580 was suggested by R. L. Snowden (HSCC report, 1989)).
- The construction of the painted ceiling is unusual for its type. It is divided into four bays by five principal beams; each bay consists of alternate boards and narrower beams running at right-angles to the principal beams. More typically ceilings are constructed of closely spaced beams with boards in between, the decoration running in the same direction. Following treatment of the dry rot beams and boards may have been reinserted out of sequence in 1913/14 (surmised during analysis of HSCC' 2000 photographic and schematic survey). Various modes of conservation are known to have been carried out on several occasions, most recently in 2001-02 with further work planned.
- There are ten areas of painted plasterwork in the first floor chambers of the east and west towers revealed in 1912-13. These include floral designs, a hare, 'Adam', deer, angel, *trompe l'oeil* cube pattern, friezes and an Erskine & Ruthven coat of arms. This shield seems to date to before 1513, when Margaret's (daughter of Sir William, First Lord Ruthven) first husband, John Erskine of Dun was killed at Flodden along with her brother William, Master of Ruthven; the other murals are probably by the same hand and stylistically roughly similar in date. These fragments are important survivals of early 16th century interior decoration. The painted plasterwork has been extensively over painted as part of earlier conservation treatments and some of the vulnerable areas have been protected with glass since 1913-14.
- The more important rooms were fitted out with new wainscoting, plasterwork and fireplaces as part of the 17th-century remodelling. These too, in addition to the grand stair and 18th century panelling were removed shortly after Huntingtower came into state care.
- A fragment of embossed and gilded leather hanging, possibly of Spanish origin, said to have come from the castle, is now in Perth Museum.

### Social Overview

- There is no known vandalism that affects the monument; the steward was resident within the ground-floor of the west tower until 2004; the flat is now empty.
- The site is the summer roost of a colony of c. 200 pipistrelle bats; the bats hibernate within the castle from October to March.
- There does not appear to be significant interest from the local community in the castle.

## Spiritual Overview

Not known.

## Aesthetic Overview

- The general setting of the castle could be described as suburban as it is situated behind the A85 trunk road close to the Perth city bypass on the west fringe of the city; the castle is visible above the two-storey terraces on the main road.
- Beyond this the setting becomes decidedly rural with the Mains of Huntingtower farm steading on the west side of the short 200m approach to the castle with grass fields on the remaining sides and mature trees on the downward slope to the north. It does seem to evoke the original setting of the castle though lacking its high courtyard walls, formal gardens and orchards.
- The castle is a distinctive structure on a flat river terrace and has a dominant presence in the wider landscape. (The visitor car park and timber-built shop are situated to the immediate south-west of the castle).

## What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- We know little of the 15th century castle complex beyond the existence of a gatehouse which partly survives in the ground floor of the east tower. A geophysical survey and/or research excavation would greatly enhance our understanding of the property.
- Our understanding of the immediate setting of the castle could be improved by research in the fields to the south and east of the PIC where formal gardens and orchards, and possibly outbuildings, are likely to have been situated.
- Our understanding of the development of the above-ground remains could be enhanced by archaeological standing building recording (particularly since the vacation of the steward's flat) and comparison with contemporaneous architecture and documentary sources.

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## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- The c. 1540 ceiling is believed to be one of the earliest surviving tempera-painted Scottish Renaissance ceilings and the ceiling construction is highly unusual.
- The remnants of early 16th-century painted plasterwork are significant survivals illustrating interior decoration within major houses of the period.
- The castle is unusual for its composition as two juxtaposed towerhouses over the 16th and most of the 17th centuries; it is certainly the best-preserved example.
- James VI was forcibly held at the castle in 1582-83 (the 'Ruthven Raid') and the Protestant Ruthvens' attempted to hold the king a second time in 1600 at their Perth townhouse (the 'Gowrie Conspiracy'); these significant historical events add to the importance of the castle and had a direct impact on its evolution.

- The late 17th century remodelling of the castle into a single stately residence and the partial unification of the south façades is important for what it reveals of lairdly fashions and society at that time.

Associated Properties

**Newark Castle** (Port Glasgow), Macduff's Castle, Cramalt Tower, **Kinneil House**, Castle Girnigoe and Castle Sinclair

Keywords towerhouse; Ruthvens; Murrays of Tullibardine; James VI; medieval; Scottish Renaissance; painted ceilings; painted plasterwork/mural decoration