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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SMAILHOLM TOWER



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SMAILHOLM TOWER

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

Smailholm Tower is a tall rectangular tower house complex dramatically sited on a rocky outcrop 1 mile (2.5km) SW of Smailholm village, between Kelso and Galashiels in the Scottish Borders. It was built for the Pringle family, probably during the 15th century. It was acquired in the 17th century by the Scott family; Sir Walter Scott spent some of his childhood at Smailholm.

The tower itself is the main feature of the property and is complete and roofed. Originally the tower was surrounded by a defensive barmkin wall forming a courtyard; inside this were other substantial buildings. These structures now survive only as ruins, some having been revealed by excavation during the 1980s. Beyond the barmkin (outwith the property in care), are extensive field remains of houses and yards, run-rig cultivation, enclosures and drainage gulleys, which may well be contemporary with the occupation of the tower (15th -18th century).

Smailholm Tower is primarily a visitor attraction, visited by upwards of 6,000 people each year. Two permanent displays inside the tower focus on (a) life at Smailholm Tower, using archaeological finds made during excavations, and (b) Scott and his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*.

1.2 Statement of significance

The main aspects of significance for Smailholm Tower are:

- its importance as an early example of a tower house and as an archaeological resource. Archaeological excavation and subsequent interpretation provide the visitor with a rare opportunity to appreciate the key relationship between the tower house (more private space for close family and friends) and the outer hall (used for social display and entertaining).
- the striking appearance of the tower, particularly in silhouette, and its relationship with the wider landscape setting. This dramatic sight provides an immediate “wow” factor for visitors, and connections to the history of the reivers and the oral folk tradition are easily made. It is also an opportunity to interpret how ways of seeing and understanding the tower have changed over time.
- the intimate link with Sir Walter Scott gives Smailholm a particular potency and magic. Early experiences at Smailholm were a great source of inspiration for Scott, feeding in to his novels, histories and folkloric works. Scott was, and remains, profoundly influential in shaping past and present perceptions of Scottish and Border identities.

The above short statement encapsulates our current understanding of the main significances of Smailholm Tower. A broader overview of the

cultural and natural heritage values of the place is given in the following Assessment of Values.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

Description

Smailholm tower is rectangular on plan and four storeys high, with stone vaults over the ground and top floors. A single door gives entry to the ground floor and a spiral staircase in the SE corner which rises to attic level. The walls are built in a dark grey whinstone, geologically similar to the crag upon which the tower is built. A softer red sandstone is used for much of the cut stonework, e.g. around window and door openings and to form the quoin (corner) stones. The tower is relatively plain though the hall, as a high status area, has a handsome fireplace with carved jambs and is provided with windows and window seats. Both hall and the entresol chamber above have garderobes

Main Phases of Development

There is insufficient evidence to provide certainty in dating the main phases of work at Smailholm. However evidence in the fabric points to three main historical phases of work, and these are interpreted in the context of the known historical events outlined in the Timeline (Appendix 1). In terms of its more recent history, there are the repairs and modifications carried out from the 1950s after Smailholm was taken into State care. The main phases are:

Original foundation phase: this is seen chiefly in the lower 3 floors of the tower with a tentatively suggested 15th century origin indicated by the simple form of the tower. Archaeological investigation indicates that the barmkin and the now demolished hall and chamber block in the west courtyard were built at approximately the same time as the tower. Further evidence to support a 15th century date includes:

- a carved decoration on the hall fireplace which is interpreted as a heart, an armorial device of the Earls of Douglas. The Pringle lairds were vassals to the Black Douglases, but after the latter's fall from power in 1455, became tenants-in-chief of the Crown. Therefore the heart motif was unlikely to have been used by the Pringles after 1455.
- Above the doorway is an "inverted keyhole" gunhole of a type first seen in Scotland at Threave castle c1450. However, the gunhole appears to have been refashioned from an earlier slit window, making a date earlier in the century distinctly possible.

Development phase 1: there is evidence for fairly major works during the 16th century, principally to the top storey:

- the walling of the top storey is largely red sandstone, rather than the whinstone used in the rest of the tower.
- A gunhole, of a type first seen in Scotland at Dunbar Castle c 1520, was built high up in the west gable, to cover the outer entrance. It was subsequently

blocked from the inside. The wall walks were altered and are of a type seen elsewhere in 16th century towers.

Development phase 2: mid 17th century modifications to increase comfort and provision of accommodation, dated to post 1645 coinciding with the Scott family taking possession of Smailholm. These include:

- In the top floor of the Tower, the fireplace heating the east room was removed and replaced by a window. There is evidence that many of the tower's original shuttered windows were replaced by sash and case windows.
- The main work during this phase concerns the buildings in the courtyard, discussed in the Archaeological Overview section below. One important feature surviving from this time is the remains of a mid 17th-century fireplace in the north range.

Period of State Care: 1950 – present. The main works during this phase comprise:

- General repairs and consolidation of masonry and insertion of new timber floors.
- The present glazing pattern, which re-creates the original sash and case windows of post-1645 date.
- The present iron grate in the hall fireplace is not original to the tower but was brought from **Dunfermline Palace** in the 1970s.
- Archaeological excavation around the Tower, see below.
- Capping of the stone vault with a sedum and grass roof to aid weather protection in 2011.

2.2 Evidential values

Major archaeological investigation and excavation was undertaken during the 1980s (detailed at Appendix 2 below). This resulted in a re-interpretation of the site as it was confirmed that the western courtyard had been quite heavily developed from an early date. The footings of a substantial “hall and chamber” block gave the lie to the earlier understanding of the place as a “lone tower” providing very restricted accommodation. The excavation also allowed better interpretation of the mid-17th century house built on the site of the hall and chamber block.

The excavations also demonstrated that the eastern courtyard had never been built on, but probably remained a garden throughout the site's 300-year existence. Interestingly, no well was found anywhere in the complex

The excavations themselves represent a rare example of comprehensive area excavation, to modern standards, of a medieval castle site in Scotland. The project represents one of a few sites (others being **Threave Castle**, **Dundonald Castle** and Cruggleton Castle) where the role of Tower and Hall have been clearly elucidated on multi phase sites

The surrounding land (outwith PiC boundary and the Scheduled area) was also studied, but without excavation. It is assessed as likely to be of high

archaeological value in terms of potential to present a fuller picture of the supporting infrastructure of a border laird's house.

Smailholm therefore has high archaeological value both in terms of the extent of knowledge gained from investigation and the potential to recover further evidence. As noted above, part of this value lies outwith the PiC boundary. Fuller details on the extent of archaeological works carried out at Smailholm is given at Appendix 2.

2.3 Historical values

Smailholm possesses both illustrative and associative historical value. In common with towers of 15th century origin and comparable status (e.g. Cranshaws and Corsbie castles) it provides evidence in its physical fabric, architectural development, documented history and through archaeological investigation and associated finds, of the life of the mid-ranking gentry through 15th – 18th centuries. The archaeological finds comprise carved architectural pieces, as well as objects of stone, ceramic and metal. The collection contains no great 'surprises' or particularly precious artefacts. Their value lies in what they tell the viewer about Border life as lived by a well-connected local landed family and their household.

The particulars of Smailholm's Border character, reflected in its defensive siting and architecture, and brought to life by its association with the Pringle family and the Border reivers, make an immediate and strong connection with many visitors.

Additionally, and uniquely, the strong association with Sir Walter Scott and the role of Smailholm as inspiration for Scott's antiquarian and literary genius contributes greatly to the tower's historical importance. The *Minstrelsy* exhibition provides a tangible connection to Scott's work and also to the wider cultural context of the Border ballads.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

In terms of its architecture, in plan-form and detail Smailholm is a comparatively simple building. This reflects the middling status of the Pringle family, as compared with the exalted status of their Douglas lords reflected in Newark (Selkirkshire). In terms of its architectural design, therefore, Smailholm is representative of its type, rather than being exceptional or innovative.

The tower itself, apart from works to the top storey, remains substantially unaltered and retains its original plan form. This is relatively unusual as many towers underwent extensive remodellings, often encased in later extensions, or were abandoned to ruin. The restricted site and the fact that Smailholm ceased to be the principal residence of the Pringles of Smailholm from mid-16th century may have contributed to this. Sir Walter Scott's influence saw to running repairs during the late 18th century and from this time consideration of its antiquarian interest is likely to have been a factor in managing the place. MacGibbon and Ross (1887-92) record Smailholm as being in good state of preservation with recent works to the roof.

The loss of the courtyard buildings in their successive phases means that as a complex, Smailholm is not as complete as it could be (**Castle Campbell**, for example, provides a more complete example of a tower-house castle, though one of higher status). In interpreting the function and social use of space in the tower, it is important to remember the role of these lost courtyard buildings (see Appendix 2) and reconstruction drawings can be used to illustrate this aspect of Smailholm's architectural development.

Smailholm's artistic value is bound up with notions of 18th and 19th century Romanticism. It clearly was an inspirational place for Scott, and indeed our perceptions of the place today are coloured very much by his interpretations of the site. JMW Turner is probably the most famous artist to have painted the tower, working at the behest of Scott, and the tower remains a popular subject for many artists.

In terms of literature, the main association is also with Scott. Scott's interest in collecting traditional tales and ballads was sparked by the stories he had heard as a child at Smailholm. In 1802 he published the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* which remains an important source for studying folklore and a fundamental text for the romantic movement in the UK and Europe.

The *Minstrelsy* exhibition, donated by the Saltire Society in 1983, comprises exquisitely-crafted costumed 'doll' figures, created by local artist, Anne Carrick and tapestries and a painting by her husband, MacDonald Scott.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Smailholm has very high landscape value for the drama of its immediate crag-top setting, the extensive views from the tower and its contribution to the wider landscape as a highly visible landmark. Allied to these visual aspects its historical and Romantic associations with the "steel bonnets" easily capture the imagination of the onlooker. Scott himself described the tower as 'standing stark and upright like a warden.' The comparative isolation of the site, remote from urban centres and local villages, is very evocative for many visitors.

Smailholm Tower is a real 'eye-catcher' in the rolling landscape of the Merse, out of all proportion to its modest scale. It can be seen from many miles away, and from pretty well all directions. The tower also gives spectacular views out from the wall-heads over that same rolling landscape, particularly to the Eildon Hills to the west, to Hume Castle to the east, but also, most surprisingly, on a clear day, to distant Bamburgh Castle, on the Northumbrian coast, 33 miles (53 km) away.

The immediate environs of the site comprise a well-preserved pre-Improvement landscape of enclosures, houses and access routes within which the tower stands as the most prominent feature. The prominence of the site in the wider landscape is in part a function of the local topography but also reflects a wider tradition of exploiting natural eminences for both defensive purposes and visual impact.

2.6 Natural heritage values

The property is assessed as being of local importance for its natural heritage value and a full Statement of Natural Heritage Significance, with species lists, is available at Appendix 3. Some key features are:

- Bats roost within the tower.
- Around the tower there are areas of semi-improved and un-improved neutral grassland, a habitat which is one of the most threatened lowland habitat types.
- Some individual plant species are quite rare for this location, all being towards the extreme of their distribution. Welled thistle, common mallow, common stork's-bill and white stonecrop are mainly found in the south east of the country and England. To find one is unusual and to find all four must be more than coincidence. Perhaps they were introduced on the fleece of livestock or feed hay? English stonecrop was introduced from England and is rare here, it is now more common in the west of Scotland.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Visitors

Smailholm's primary use is as a visitor attraction, attracting in excess of 6,000 visitors each year. The features which visitors most remark upon are:

- the dramatic setting and views
- history and the Border Reivers
- the Minstrelsy exhibition.

Smailholm is still perceived as a symbol of Borders identity and as a tangible link to border legend and storytelling traditions. These aspects make it a particularly valuable education resource for story telling and creative writing.

Local Community

Apart from its educational value accessed by local schools and its role as a tourist draw in a relatively remote area, Smailholm's chief value to local communities is probably its contribution to sense of identity and its landmark quality. It contributes powerfully to the popular notion of Scottish Borderers in medieval times, fiercely independent of authority and strongly bound by family loyalties.

Historic Scotland

A conservation project to address water penetration through the tower's roof was undertaken in 2011: grass and sedum were seeded into a clay base layer over the stone vault.

This project built upon other HS research into the use of soft-capping, primarily to protect roofless structures. Smailholm allowed the technique to be trialled for the first time over a whole roof and the results of ongoing monitoring will guide conservation activity at this site, and also inform conservation practise in a wider context.

3 Major gaps in understanding

- Was there an earlier settlement at Smailholm Craig?
- When precisely was the tower built?
- How was the tower used following the Scotts' rebuilding after 1645?
- What was the nature and form of the surrounding archaeological landscape?

Associated properties

(other relevant local sites) - **Dryburgh Abbey Melrose Abbey**; Old Gala House, Galashiels. Abbotsford.

(other Black Douglas castles) - **Hermitage Castle**; Newark Castle; **Threave Castle**.

Keywords

tower house, yett, gunhole, barmkin, reiver, Pringle, Scott

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: timeline

12 th century	Smailholm parish church is built
1303 (May)	Edward I of England stays at Smailholm during his invasion
1408	Archibald, 4 th Earl of Douglas, inherits the demesne lands of Smailholm following death of his mother, Joanna, countess of Murray. In that same year, Robert Pringle (or Hoppringal), Archibald's squire and his ranger (factor) in the forest of Ettrick, is granted demesne lands of Smailholm by his lord.

Mid 15 th century	Probable building date for Smailholm Tower, including the tower, barmkin wall and hall and chamber block ¹ .
1455	The downfall of the earls of Black Douglas.
1459	another Robert Pringle succeeds his brother George in Smailholm Craig.
1513	Four members of the Pringles of Smailholm are killed at the battle of Flodden.
1536	First mention of Smailholm Tower in the documentary record.
1544-8	During the 'War of the Rough Wooing', the Pringles of Smailholm suffer several attacks by English soldiers and reivers ('raiders') operating out of Northumberland. In 1548 John Pringle becomes an 'assured Scot' - that is, he swears not to attack Englishmen operating in Scotland in return for immunity from attack himself. No further raids are recorded.
Mid – 16 th century (post 1520)	Alterations to the top storey of the tower giving the present layout with two wall walks – the date for this is not certain.
1574	Andrew Pringle of Smailholm feus the greater part of Smailholm Craig to a kinsman, George Pringle of Wrangholm, retaining only the tower and sufficient pasture to graze four horses. By this date, Andrew is more comfortably residing in Galashiels (in the property now known as Old Gala House). He also appropriates one of the south aisle chapels in Melrose Abbey as the family burial lair, and is buried there in 1585.
1632	Sir James Pringle, Andrew Pringle's successor, retires to Smailholm Tower because of financial insolvency. He dies there three years later.
1640	In the Civil War between Charles I and his Scottish subjects, Smailholm Tower is temporarily occupied by Covenanters, led by Sir Andrew Ker of Greenhead, who beat off an assault by Royalists serving with Lord Ker's regiment of foot.
1645	The estate of Smailholm Craig, with its tower, is purchased by Sir William Scott of Harden, near Hawick, a relation by marriage of Sir James Pringle. He leases the property to his grandson, Robert 'Beardie' Scott, great-grandfather of Sir Walter Scott.
Later 17 th century	In the courtyard, the old hall and chamber block is mostly demolished and a new 2-storey house built adjoining the west side of the tower. It is likely that this house, rather than the tower itself contained the principal living accommodation for "Beardie" Scott's family

¹ Use of blue text indicates events which can be directly related to the surviving fabric at Smailholm

1729	'Beardie' dies, leaving his widow to live out the rest of her days in the decaying tower. His son, Robert, meanwhile builds a new farmhouse, Sandyknowe, close by.
1772	Sir Walter Scott, then 18 months old, is brought to Sandyknowe from Edinburgh for health reasons. He spends the next five years there, playing in the shadow of the old tower. That experience, coupled with the Border tales told to him by his Aunt Janet, have a profound imaginative effect on him, which he subsequently pays homage to, for example in his epic poem <i>Marmion</i> , published in 1808 - ' <i>And still I thought that shatter'd tower/ the mightiest work of human power...</i> '
1814	Walter Scott publishes the earliest historical and archaeological account of the tower in his <i>Border Antiquities</i> . Shortly before his death, in 1831 he pays an emotional final visit to Smailholm in the company of the noted artist, Turner, who makes sketches.
1950	Smailholm Tower is taken into State care.
1970s	Masonry consolidation of the tower house is completed, and missing floors and windows reinstated.
1979-81	Archaeological excavations are carried out over the entire area of the surrounding barmkin.
1983	The Saltire Society purchases (with help from the Scottish Tourist Board) a private exhibition on 'Scott and his <i>Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border</i> ', created by two local artists, Anne Carrick and MacDonald Scott, and donates it to Historic Scotland for permanent display in the tower. The artefacts found in the excavations are also put on display.

Appendix 2: Summary of archaeological investigations

Archaeological investigations carried out in 1979-81 resulted in the entire barmkin being excavated. These determined, among other things:

(i) the west courtyard was originally provided with two single-storey buildings, placed to north and south of a central entrance path - a hall and chamber block along the north side, and a two-roomed kitchen block on the south side. Nothing was found that could reliably date the construction of either structure.

(ii) during the 17th century, the hall/chamber block was comprehensively rebuilt as a two-storey L-shaped self-contained house. The standing remains of the fireplace in the south wall date from this period (the original hall had a brazier stance in the centre of the room), as does the

fireplace in the east wall of the easternmost chamber. The upper floor was presumably reached by a timber stair in the narrow room at the west end.

(iii) no well was located anywhere.

(iv) the east courtyard was never built on, but used as garden/open space throughout the tower's time as a residence. The barmkin wall on this east side had subsequently been rebuilt much thinner and on a slightly different alignment, possibly because the original had collapsed or failed.

(v) artefacts were few. Most were retrieved from a trench excavated immediately to the north of the tower, directly below the latrine outlets.

Field survey, carried out on the ground around Smailholm Tower at the same time as the archaeological excavations, proved beyond doubt the considerable archaeological potential here. Remains of houses with attached yards, run-rig cultivation and enclosures are littered everywhere - so too drainage gulleys leading to the mill pond (Timothy Pont marks a mill on his 1580s map and one is mentioned in 1636).

Under the Historic Scotland Minor Archaeological Works on PIC, three short programmes of archaeological monitoring have been undertaken. None of the following revealed anything of archaeological significance.

March 1999:	Monitoring of assessment of stability of bedrock
January 2000:	Recording of an undated stone lined drain in the castle car park
April 2012:	Recording of new stepped access to the castle