

**Property in Care (PIC) ID:** PIC222

**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90130)

**Taken into State care:** 1906 (Ownership)

**Last reviewed:** 2012

**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND  
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

# **EDINBURGH CASTLE: MONS MEG**



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.



# EDINBURGH CASTLE: MONS MEG

*Note: this statement is one of a series providing a more detailed individual assessment of the significance of particular components of the Edinburgh Castle property in care. Like the others, it should be read in conjunction with the Edinburgh Castle Overview Statement of Significance which provides its wider context and sketches the relationships between various parts of the Castle site.*

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Mons Meg is one of the oldest surviving pieces of gun-powdered artillery in the world, and probably the most famous example in the United Kingdom. The iron cannon, a form of medieval siege gun known as a bombard, was forged in Mons (modern Belgium) in 1449 and presented by Duke Philip of Burgundy to James II in 1457. Known then simply as 'Mons', the 6-tonne gun was at the leading edge of artillery technology of its day, firing huge gun-stones a distance of almost two miles. By the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, however, Mons Meg was obsolete as a field gun and had become a ceremonial gun, firing 'feux de joie' on important national occasions; recorded salutes included celebrating Queen Mary's marriage to the French dauphin in 1558. Her barrel burst in 1681, during a salute welcoming the future James VII & II to Edinburgh. She thereafter lay neglected until being removed to the Tower of London in 1754 under the terms of the Disarming Act.

Sir Walter Scott and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland were instrumental in securing George IV's permission to have Mons Meg returned to Scotland in 1828. The great gun was initially mounted on the Argyle Battery but in 1836 was relocated to the summit of the Castle Rock, beside St. Margaret's Chapel. She has remained there ever since. Her present carriage dates from 1936.

Mons Meg, through her proud history and immense size, continues to be one of the castle's 'star' attractions.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview:

**1449** – James II marries Mary of Gueldres, niece of Duke Philip 'the Good' of Burgundy, in Holyrood Abbey. In the same year the duke has a great iron gun, or bombard, fabricated in Mons, Belgium, by the iron founder, Jehan Cambier.

**1457** – Duke Philip presents two bombards to James II, including one called *Mons*. They are conveyed to Scotland escorted by 50 men-at-arms. The gift also includes an unspecified number of gun-stones, quarried in Belgium.

**1460** – James II is killed at the siege of Roxburgh, apparently from wounds received when another of his cherished guns, perhaps the *Lion* (acquired by James I from Flanders in 1430), 'brak in the firing'.

**1489** – James IV has Mons Meg taken to the sieges of **Dumbarton and Crookston Castles**, then being held by the earl of Lennox. Her very presence is sufficient, it is said, to bring the rebellious earl to heel.

**1497** – James IV takes Mons Meg to the siege of Norham Castle (Northumberland). Her 'cradle' breaks almost immediately, at St. Leonard's on the southern edge of the town. Documentation of the journey indicates that she covers no more than 3 miles per day.

**1501** – Mons Meg, by now lying neglected in Edinburgh Castle, is lifted, laid on trestles and painted with red lead.

**1540** – Mons Meg may be the 'grete bumbert' (great bombard) recorded as being restocked and taken on James V's naval expedition around Scotland, in order to overawe the Islesmen.

**1558** – Mons Meg is fired from the ramparts of Edinburgh Castle in celebration of the marriage of Queen Mary to François, the French dauphin. The gun-stone is recovered from Wardie Muir, almost 2 miles (3km) to the north of the castle.

**1617** – Mons Meg is fired to welcome James VI back to the place of his birth during his Golden Jubilee visit.

**1660** – Mons Meg is fired to celebrate the return of Charles II to the throne.

**1678** – First mention of 'Mons Meg' in documents.

**1681** – Mons Meg is fired to welcome Charles II's younger brother, James duke of Albany, to Edinburgh in his capacity as Commissioner to the Scottish Parliament. The gun bursts on discharge (the fractured iron hoops near the breech chamber are still visible) and is unceremoniously dumped beside the road leading up from the Portcullis Gate.

**1754** – Mons Meg is taken by sea (on the *Happy Janet*) to the Tower of London, under the terms of the Disarming Act, passed in the aftermath of the 1745/6 Jacobite Rising. Seven gun-stones are removed with her.

**1822** – During George IV's state visit to Scotland, Walter Scott raises the question of having Mons Meg returned to Scotland. The duke of Wellington, as Master General of the Ordnance, writes to Robert Peel, then Home Secretary, declaring that he would have no objection to *Mol Meg* (sic) being returned to Edinburgh Castle, as soon as the king gives the order for its removal.

**1828** – After protracted delay, and chiefly through the persistence of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Mons Meg is brought back from London by sea (on the *City of Edinburgh* steam packet) and landed at Leith (Nov). She is temporarily stored in the Naval Yard there.

**1829** (9 Mar) – Mons Meg is formally escorted back to Edinburgh Castle by detachments from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Dragoon Guards, the 78<sup>th</sup> Highlanders, and the Royal Artillery, via a route that takes in Leith Walk, York Place, St. Andrew's Square and North Bridge. She is placed on the Argyle Battery, directly in front of the main guardhouse (since demolished).

**1835** – Mons Meg's timber carriage (the one she had whilst at the Tower of London and that was returned with her) collapses 'with a great crack'.

**1836** – Mons Meg is relocated to the Mortar (or Bomb) Battery, immediately beside St. Margaret's Chapel, her present location. She is placed on a new bronze carriage, made especially for her by the Royal Carriage Department, Woolwich.

**1935** - Mons Meg is remounted on a new timber carriage, modelled on the one she is depicted sitting upon in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century carved artillery panels in the Gatehouse.

**1981** - Mons Meg is taken by road to British Steel, Bathgate for x-ray, to determine whether her barrel was designed to be separated into two for ease of travel. The results were indeterminate. Mons Meg is returned to the castle and moved into the Vaults.

**1985** - Mons Meg is taken by road to Fort Halsted (Kent) for x-ray. This shows that Mons was never intended to come apart after construction. On the return journey, Mons Meg is taken to the Tower of London for weighing, prior to her return to Edinburgh Castle.

**2000/1** - Mons Meg is returned to the Mortar Battery beside St. Margaret's Chapel for permanent display once again. That Hogmanay (31 December), she is 'fired' by the District Gunner at midnight to help mark the dawn of the new year.

#### Archaeological Overview:

Mons Meg has undergone a limited amount of scientific investigation in an attempt to discover whether the powder chamber and barrel were designed to be unscrewed for ease of transportation, in the manner of other 15<sup>th</sup>-century bombards (eg. the Dardanelles Gun, now in Fort Nelson (Hants)). In 1985 she was taken by road to the MOD weapons testing station at Fort Halsted (Kent) and x-rayed. The results conclusively showed that she was never intended to be separated once forged.

Six of Mons Meg's gun-stones survive. One is believed to be of granite and the others of limestone, but this has never been scientifically tested. A proper analysis may establish the source(s) of the stones (eg., the limestone may be of Belgian origin).

A seventh gun-stone, made of iron, seems to have been mislaid!

#### Architectural/Artistic Overview:

Mons Meg is a formidable piece of medieval gun-powdered artillery. She measures 3.78m in length, weighs 6 metric tonnes (6040 kg), and has a calibre of over 500mm. The massive powder chamber was hammer-forged from several blooms of red-hot iron (no iron furnace of that date could smelt so large a mass at a single firing). The barrel was then locked on to it. This was made from long wrought-iron bars welded together to form a cylinder over a temporary timber core, with iron hoops then shrunk over the bars.

The timber carriage was made in 1936, and its design is based upon the carriage depicted in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century carved artillery panels now on display in the entrance to the Gatehouse.

The six stone gun-stones weigh in excess of 150 kg.

#### Social Overview:

Mons Meg was associated with significant events in the nation's history during her active life as siege gun and ceremonial gun. She was used by James IV against the English (though she seems not to have been present at the battle of Flodden),

and is recorded as firing 'feux de joie' in 1558, 1617, 1660 and finally 1681, when her barrel burst.

Even after her demise as a working gun, Mons Meg continued to arouse great passion. This was never more so than following her removal to the Tower of London in 1754. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sir Walter Scott, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and the duke of Gordon, among others, successfully lobbied George IV and two prime ministers, Robert Peel and the duke of Wellington (in his capacity first as Grand Master of the Ordnance and then as Prime Minister) for her return. Her reappearance back in Edinburgh Castle was a carefully choreographed military event that brought thousands of people out onto the streets of Leith and Edinburgh to welcome her home, and had the bells of St. Giles ringing out in her honour.

Mons Meg has remained a significant asset for the castle, the city of Edinburgh and Scotland as a whole ever since. At every Hogmanay since 2000/1, at 'the bells', she is 'fired' by the District Gunner (the person responsible for the One o'clock Gun') to welcome in the New Year.

#### Spiritual Overview:

Mons Meg has no observable spiritual associations.

#### Aesthetic Overview:

Mons Meg is a most impressive piece of ironmongery. Although the gun has a female name, she is undoubtedly manly in appearance.

Mons Meg is awesomely situated on the summit of the Castle Rock, close beside St. Margaret's Chapel. Her muzzle poignantly points north towards the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, formerly Wardie Muir where the gun-stone she fired in 1558 was later found – a distance of almost 2 miles!

Mons Meg 's huge gun-stones are equally impressive, helping to underpin the gargantuan nature of the gun itself.

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

- What was Mons Meg's full service history as a working gun? Did she, for example, become a naval gun before being 'retired' in the mid 1500s?
- What happened to the bronze carriage made for her in 1836 but rendered redundant in 1935?
- Where is the iron cannonball that was last recorded being in existence in the 1970s?

### ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

#### Key Points

Mons Meg is one of the world's oldest surviving gun-powdered artillery pieces, and arguably the most famous example in the United Kingdom of an iron bombard.

Mons Meg is one of the treasures of Edinburgh Castle, sitting proudly on display on the very summit of the Castle Rock.

Mons Meg plays a starring role in the nation's Hogmanay celebrations.

#### ADDENDA

##### Associated Properties:

(*other 15th-century bombards*): bombard-mortar, Rhodes (Greece); the Dardanelles Gun, Fort Nelson (Hants); *Dulle Griet* ('Mad Meg') Ghent (Belgium); *Pumhart von Steyr*, Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna (Austria).

##### Keywords:

bombard, muzzle, breech, gun-stone, carriage, James II, George IV, Sir Walter Scott, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland

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