

Property in Care (PIC) no:PIC222

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90079)

Taken into State care: 1906 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2012

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EDINBURGH CASTLE – THE DEFENCES



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 – THE DEFENCES

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The Defences are one of the chief physical features of Edinburgh Castle, dominating the castle-scape and the skyline of the city of Edinburgh. In their present form, they date from between the 16th and the 19th century, though prehistoric ditches have been found during archaeological investigations, and a precious fragment of the later 14th-century curtain wall survives entombed in the Half-Moon Battery, attached to the south side of David's Tower. Pre-16th-century defences may also survive fragmentarily embedded in later works such as the Forewall Battery.

The east side of the castle rock, facing the Old Town, was always the most vulnerable to attack. The defences on this side were of necessity far more formidable than elsewhere, but equally far more vulnerable to artillery bombardment. Gone are the Iron Age ditches that were still in use into the 14th century, and so too the later medieval defences, including the famous outwork known as the Spur, a fragment of which was recently found below the Esplanade. Today, the defences are dominated by the Half-Moon Battery and Forewall Battery, built after the Lang Siege of 1573 and subsequently modified, the last time in 1695. The Half-Moon Battery is among the best-known rounded artillery bastions in the world.

The north, west and south sides of the castle rock are girdled around with less formidable defences. These date mostly from the first half of the 18th century, built in response to Jacobite disaffection following the flight into exile of James VII and II in 1688. The northern and western defences, with their characteristic zig-zag lengths of wall topped with domed sentinel boxes, are associated with two great names: Major-General George Wade, and the architect William Adam.

Little survives today of the enormous contribution made by Captain John Slezer to the castle's defences in the later 17th century, for they were largely superseded in the early 18th century. His most conspicuous legacy, Foog's Gate and the lengths of perimeter wall to either side of it, are the subject of a separate Statement.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

Iron Age: Two massive ditches are dug on the east side of the castle rock.

1314: Following the recapture of the English-held castle, Robert I (Bruce) orders that the castle be slighted. Only St Margaret's Chapel seems to survive intact.

1335: Following the English capture of the castle, the defences are repaired and rebuilt, including a new stone-arched gateway at the north-east corner. The castle is retaken again by the Scots in 1341.

1356: Following his return from long captivity in England, David II (1329–71) orders a complete rebuilding of the castle. The works are completed only in Robert II's reign (1371–90).

Later 14th century: The oldest surviving parts of the present complex are built. These include the 1362 Well-House Tower (not in state care) at the base of the castle rock on its northern side, built to protect both a new water supply and a route up the precipitous rock face, and a new curtain-walled defence around the summit of the rock, interspersed with high, projecting towers, including David's Tower (the stump of which remains within the Half-Moon Battery) and Constable's Tower (which may be perpetuated in the rounded bastion now containing the Dog Cemetery), and most probably a third tower now embedded in the masonry below the Queen Anne Building. The Lang Stairs certainly perpetuate the late 14th-century main access through Constable's Tower to the summit. A precious fragment of that curtain wall, incorporating a postern, survives almost to full height immediately to the south of David's Tower. Portions of the curtain wall also remain, at the base of the Forewall Battery and as meagre footings on the rock immediately south of the Devil's Elbow.

1544: The duke of Hertford, with a huge English army, tries to take the castle, a prelude to the so-called War of the Rough Wooing. Though he fails, the Scots set about strengthening it, with no substantial new defences apparently having been built since the 1380s.

Later 1540s: The refortification includes remodelling the curtain wall between David's Tower and Constable's Tower to take gun-powdered artillery (the 1546 gunhole beside David's Tower dates from then), an upper artillery battery to its rear (between the former Munition House and St Margaret's Chapel, but no longer in existence) and an innovative angle-bastioned forework, called the 'forte of the castle hill' or Spur (below the Esplanade and recently discovered during archaeological excavations).

1566: The castle defences are recorded as having at least 25 cast-bronze guns mounted on them.

1573: The 18-month 'Lang Siege' comes to an end following a massive artillery bombardment that destroys much of the frontal (east) defences. Regent Morton orders a major new fortification and the rebuilding of the Spur.

Post-1573: The Half-Moon Battery and Portcullis Gate are the main legacies of the rebuilding after the 1573 'Lang Siege'.

1615–17: During works to prepare the castle for James VI's 'hamecoming', the castle walls are harled (given a rough lime render).

1639 and 1640: Two sieges of the castle, by the leaders of the National Covenant against Charles I, cause significant damage, particularly to the Spur and eastern defences, and to a lesser extent the defences on the south-west side of the Great Hall.

1649: An order to remove the Spur is only partially carried out.

1650: A siege by Cromwell's English 'New Model Army' causes yet more extensive damage. On capturing the fortress, Cromwell orders the complete removal of the Spur and its replacement by a new outwork. The present Dry Ditch may well date from this time.

1660: Following the return of Charles II to the throne, construction work continues on the new outwork, whilst the parapets of the Half-Moon Battery and Forewall Battery are repaired (1662).

1671: John Slezer arrives in Scotland to take up a posting as chief engineer and lieutenant of the royal artillery train. His priority is to plan for a more thorough repair and upgrading of the castle's defences and garrison buildings.

Later 17th century: Upstanding elements surviving from Slezer's major rebuilding include Foog's (or Foggy) Gate and the stretches of perimeter wall to either side, fitted with embrasures for artillery and muskets, together with elements from the Low Defence, Dury's Battery, Butts Battery, and walling below the Queen Anne Building.

1689: Viscount Dundee has a clandestine meeting with the Duke of Gordon, governor of the castle, at the sallyport on the Western Defences before riding north to raise a Jacobite army to fight against the new regime of William and Mary. The ensuing siege, ending in early 1690, results in further damage to the defences.

1695: The Half-Moon Battery and Forewall Battery are repaired and given the the embrasured parapets that remain there today. The 1546 gunhole is also blocked up. The Half-Moon Battery is armed with the 'Seven Sisters', cast in the castle in the early 16th century by Robert Borthwick, master gunner to James IV and James V.

1708: The aborted Jacobite Rising results in a further upgrading of the defences, presided over by Captain Theodore Dury, military engineer for Scotland. These include a major new eastern defence, known as 'le grand secret', to replace the later 17th-century hornwork, which is quickly abandoned, and improved gun batteries along the north, west and south sides, including the five-gun Dury's Battery and Butts Battery, completed by 1713.

1715: The Western Defences are almost breached during the 1715 Jacobite Rising.

1716: The 'Seven Sisters' are removed to the Tower of London for melting down, despite Scottish protests.

1724: Major-General George Wade is appointed commander-in-chief in Scotland, and proposes another major refortification of Edinburgh Castle.

1730s: Much of what stands today along the Northern and Western Defences, including the Western Defences, Mills Mount Battery, the Argyle (or Six-Gun) Battery and the Low Defence, date from this wholesale rebuilding. The works, with their characteristic domed sentinel boxes, are designed by Captain John Romer, Board of Ordnance engineer for the 'North Britain' and Hull depots, and built by William Adam, here acting not as architect but as building contractor to the Board.

1854: An inventory gives the total number of guns emplaced on the Defences as 31. They include nine 24-pounders on the Half-Moon Battery.

1858: A start is made on creating a new 'fairytale château' along the north-west side of the castle. Designed by Francis Dollman and Lieutenant Colonel Moody, of the Royal Engineers, the scheme is abandoned prematurely following public criticism that the project would spoil the castle. However, the formation of a new terrace around the north and west sides of the Ordnance Storehouses sees a stretch of the 1730s northern defences buried.

1861: One of the nine 24-pounder guns on the Half-Moon Battery becomes the first One o'Clock Gun, successfully fired by Master Gunner James Findlay on 7 June.

c. 1875 – The mid-18th-century Sallyport Guardhouse on the Western Defences is demolished.

1886: The main entrance into the castle is demolished and replaced by the present Gatehouse.

Archaeological Overview

Buried elements of the Defences have been revealed from time to time. They include:

1968–70s: The rock-bolting programme encountered vestiges of the 14th-century curtain wall on the south side of the Castle Rock, immediately outside the Devil's Elbow below the Great Hall.

1989: The foundations of the Sallyport Guardhouse were excavated.

1988–90: The large-scale excavations carried out in conjunction with constructing the Vehicle Tunnel found the first evidence for the existence of Iron Age ditches, beyond the north-east corner of the castle rock. These had been re-cut and were still serving a defensive function into the 14th century. The archaeological work at the other (west) end of the new tunnel, beside Mills Mount Battery, found evidence of (a) an earthen rampart and a slightly later ditch, both dating to the 16th century, (b) part of Slezzer's Inner Traverse, and (c) a stretch of the 1730s northern defences subsequently hidden during the Dollman/Moody works of 1858.

1999/2000: Work at the Argyle Battery and Low Defence found evidence of pre-1730s defensive work.

2000:

The archaeological work carried out to date has added immeasurably to our understanding of the castle's defensive provision over at least two millennia, and shows the potential for further discoveries, even in the superficially most unpromising areas.

Architectural/Artistic Overview

Half-Moon Battery and Forewall Battery: The Half-Moon Battery, built in the 1570s, has a significant place in the history of fortification in Scotland. Its rounded form is rooted in the pioneering gun-powdered artillery works of c. 1500 (eg Stephan von Haschenberg's bastion at Camber, Sussex, completed in 1514), and subsequently developed, most notably by Albrecht Dürer, in a treatise published in

1527 that proposed massive D-shaped bastions with battered outer walls. The 'Device' forts of Henry VIII along the English south coast (eg Walmer, Deal and Calshot) were probably inspired by that. By the later 16th century, the form was becoming obsolete save for difficult sites like Edinburgh.

The Half-Moon Battery allowed for a battery of heavy guns giving a wide horizontal sweep of fire. This was augmented by a battery of guns on the adjacent Forewall Battery. This uniform level for the main fighting platform of a front is one of the key features that distinguishes artillery fortifications from multi-level medieval defences, with their lofty towers and much lower curtains. The only concession at Edinburgh Castle was the retention of the 1546 gunhole at a lower level, for a heavy gun to fire on a fixed line down over Castle Hill to the High Street.

The present configuration of the individual stone gun platforms on the Half-Moon Battery, dating from Victorian times, is misleading in that it suggests that each gun was positioned at an angle of 90° to the parapet wall. Close inspection of the outward splays of the gun embrasures indicates that the majority of the nine guns emplaced there were positioned in a manner that enabled them to be fired due east in the direction of the Old Town.

Both batteries still retain their iron beacon baskets, lit during times of national emergencies to warn of impending attacks. A third survives on the parapet of the Low Defence.

Foog's Gate and associated perimeter wall: The perimeter wall flanking Foog's Gate, built in the later 1600s, a century after the Half-Moon Battery, is all that remains conspicuously standing of the comprehensive refortification of the castle supervised by Captain Slezer. Incorporating embrasures for both artillery and muskets, it is a modest construction, entirely appropriate for its 'inner line' defensive role. It is to be regretted that Slezer's outer defensive works were all either replaced or comprehensively remodelled in the early 18th century.

Dury's Battery and Butts Battery: These two modest five-gun batteries, providing the main armament to the less vulnerable west and south, are substantially as built by Captain Theodore Dury in 1708–13. Largely rebuilds of Slezer's earlier batteries (the projecting latrine on the east side of Dury's Battery is probably a legacy from Slezer's time), they are comparatively straightforward structures, quite unlike Dury's outrageous scheme for the main east front, nicknamed 'le grand secret', which was aborted at an early stage and of which only slight traces remain in the sloping ground to the north and south of the Esplanade.

Dury's Battery was supported by another gun battery, located immediately to its east but at a higher level (effectively to the west of the Great Hall). This too originated in Slezer's time. Dury retained the function, if not the form, of this higher gun battery when he built the Queen Anne Building, and his gun ports, facing west and south but subsequently blocked up, are still in evidence.

Butts Battery also dates from Dury's time, but was much modified in the 1730s as part of Wade's refortification of the Northern and Western Defences. The domed stair turret dates from then. Intriguingly, Butts Battery appears to have been raised in height (eg the original studded doors have been spliced and extended at the

bottom) in 1858, as part of the ambitious plan to make the north-west side of the castle appear more like a 'fairytale château'. Mercifully, the upper terrace behind the Ordnance Storehouses, with its mock medieval gateway dated 1858, was the only part of the scheme to be realised. Such was the opprobrium visited upon the project that the terraced covered way was nicknamed 'Col. Moodie's limekilns'.

Northern and Western Defences

The defences that now dominate the northern and western flanks of the castle are associated with three important names – Major-General George Wade, who ordered them; Captain John Romer, the Board of Ordnance's engineer, who designed them; and William Adam, the famous architect, here employed as building contractor by the Board.

The defences, comprising the Western Defences, Mills Mount Battery, the Argyle (or Six-Gun) Battery and Low Defence, have no innovative features. However, their angled lengths of wall and domed sentinel boxes, the latter particularly favoured by Romer (see also **Dumbarton Castle**) have provided one of the most dramatic elements in the prospect of the castle ever since.

Guns: The guns mounted on the defences today have no known historical association with the castle, with the sole exception of Mons Meg (see separate Statement), on display on the Mortar (or Bomb) Battery beside St Margaret's Chapel.

The black-painted, muzzle-loading cast-iron guns, mounted on cast-iron carriages, are a mixture of authentic cast iron 18-pounders of c. 1810 and modern (non-functioning) replicas. It is unlikely that guns of this type were emplaced on the castle's defences until the Romantic revival of the 19th century, when they helped to give the ancient fortress a suitably martial air.

The One o'Clock Gun, emplaced on Mills Mount Battery, is now a 105mm field gun. It was installed in 2001, as a replacement for a 25-pounder field gun of WWII vintage that had served the purpose since 1971. Prior to that date, the One o'Clock Gun was emplaced on the Half-Moon Battery.

Social Overview

The Defences, together with their accompanying guns, are enjoyed by all who visit the castle. In addition, the Half-Moon Battery, Forewall Battery, Northern and Western Defences figure prominently in the numerous fireworks displays.

Mills Mount Battery has been the home of the world-famous One o'Clock Gun since 1971 (it formerly stood on the Half-Moon Battery), and is joined by other modern field guns on special occasions where multiple gun salutes are required (eg the sovereign's official birthday).

Spiritual Overview

The Defences have no known spiritual use.

Aesthetic Overview

The Defences provide some of the most dramatic prospects of the castle. The massive, rounded mass of the Half-Moon Battery dominates the view from the east. The view from Princes Street and the West End is dominated by the angled lengths of the Northern and Western Defences, topped by their domed sentinel boxes.

The views out from the Defences are equally dramatic. The panoramas to the north from the Northern Defences and the Mortar Battery beside St Margaret's Chapel, out across the New Town to the Forth estuary, are by far the most outstanding, courtesy of the uninterrupted vistas and landscape. The views to the west hold less drama, whilst the views eastward, over the Old Town to Holyrood Park, from the Half-Moon Battery, are only glimpsed at for the most part, through the embrasures of the Half-Moon Battery and Forewall Battery.

The cast-iron 18-pounders on display, although not intrinsically authentic, help to provide scale and meaning to the gun batteries.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

What more remains to be discovered of the Iron Age defences at the east side of the castle rock, and of their subsequent history in the defence of Dark Age Din Eidyn and the medieval castle?

What more remains to be discovered of the major refortification of the summit in the mid-16th century? In particular, it would be fascinating to discover what lies beneath the gun platform of the Forewall Battery.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

The Defences are representative of the history of artillery fortification over more than two centuries. The 1573 Half-Moon Battery especially is among the most remarkable, if somewhat eccentric, versions of the rounded bastion as pioneered by Albrecht Dürer in the 1520s. Foog's Gate and its associated perimeter wall (c. 1680) is one of the few tangible reminders of the profound contribution made by Captain Slezzer to the defence of the realm in Charles II's reign. The Northern and Western Defences, built to help resist the ongoing Jacobite threat, are associated with three renowned names from the 18th century: George Wade, John Romer and William Adam.

The Defences combine to provide the castle with one of the most dramatic skylines of any ancient site in the world.

ADDENDA

Associated Properties

Other Scottish royal artillery defences: **Blackness Castle; Dumbarton Castle; Fort Charlotte; Fort George; Stirling Castle**

Some other 16th -century rounded bastions: Castle Rushen, Isle of Man; Deal Castle, Kent; Half-Moon Battery, Carlisle Castle; Lord's Mount, Berwick-upon-Tweed

Keywords

bastion; rampart; ditch; artillery; John Slezer; Theodore Dury; George Wade; John Romer; William Adam

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