STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

HERMITAGE CASTLE

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.

HERMITAGE CASTLE

SYNOPSIS

Hermitage Castle is one of the great castles of the Anglo-Scottish border. The surviving substantial earthworks around the stone castle are thought to date from the 13th century; so also the earthworks around the stone chapel situated at a distance to the west, and conceivably the chapel itself. The great masonry castle is substantially that built by the Black Douglases in the later 1300s, though it incorporates within it a fortified structure built c.1350 by Lord Dacre, an English nobleman. Hermitage was the chief castle of Liddesdale in the later Middle Ages, but fell into disuse after the Union of the Crowns in 1603. It was partially restored as a picturesque ruin in the landscape by the 5th Duke of Buccleuch in the 1830s.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- late 12th century - It is possible that there was a hermitage in the area, connected with **Kelso Abbey**. Neither the location nor the form of the hermitage is known but the earthworks around the chapel may be a remnant of this site.
- 1242 - John of Fordun, writing in the 14th century, recounts how the construction of a castle in Liddesdale, called Hermitage, almost brought Scotland and England to war in this year. This original castle was probably a timber fortress set within the present outer earthworks. The chapel also appears to date from this period. The builder was one of the de Soules, Lords of Liddesdale and hereditary butlers of Scotland, relocating to Hermitage from their original stronghold, Liddel Castle, 7 km to the south. Ranulf de Soules, an Anglo-Norman, had been granted the lordship of Liddesdale by David I (1124-53).
- early 14th century - as a major stronghold on the Anglo-Scottish Border, Hermitage figures in the Wars of Independence. In 1300, Edward I finances repairs to it, but it changes hands repeatedly. In 1335 it is under the English control of Ralph Neville but in 1341 is captured by Sir William Douglas, the 'Knight of Liddesdale'. He subsequently joins the English and David II grants Hermitage to Sir William's nephew, also William, later 1st Earl of Douglas.
- 1342 - following the murder of the 'Knight of Liddesdale' by the future Earl, the knight's widow, Mary, marries the Englishman, Lord Dacre. The core of the present building appears to date from Dacre's tenure.
- 1371 - Hermitage is reclaimed by Earl William. Over the ensuing thirty or so years, the Black Douglases build a great stone tower house over and around Lord Dacre's building, with towers at each of the four corners.
- 1492 - James IV, not trusting Archibald Douglas, 4th Earl of Angus, entrusts Hermitage to Patrick Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell.
- 16th century - The castle plays a central role in attempts to control cross-Border warfare and reiving [raiding] then plaguing Liddesdale. The wide-mouthed gunholes are inserted c.1540 when the castle briefly becomes Crown

property. However, the role of the Earls of Bothwell as wardens of the Middle March means they retain control of Hermitage.

- 1566 - Mary Queen of Scots pays a memorable visit to Hermitage where her lover, James Hepburn, 4th Earl of Bothwell, lies recovering from injuries sustained during a skirmish with border reivers. Her return trip to Jedburgh almost leads to her premature death when her horse stumbles.
- 1591 - following the forfeiture of the 5th Earl of Bothwell, the castle again reverts to the Crown, and by 1600 is in the possession of the Scotts of Buccleuch. With the Union of the Crowns in 1603, Hermitage's strategic role on the Border lessens considerably and by the late 18th century the castle is in ruins.
- 1830s - the 5th Duke of Buccleuch carries out major repairs and reconstruction work at the castle, inspired to do so by the growing popularity of the gaunt ruin and its bloody history.
- 1900 - excavations are carried out at the chapel, and again, in 1926.
- 1930 - the castle and chapel are taken into state care.
- 1979 - the substantial earthworks around the chapel are taken into state care.
- 1980s - major masonry consolidation is undertaken at the castle to address damage caused by the 1830s 'restoration'.

Archaeological Overview

- The upstanding masonry castle was cleared of rubble in the 1830s, and this is likely to have disturbed the archaeology of the interior.
- The chapel was excavated in 1900 and 1926. Surviving carved fragments remain at the site and at nearby Hermitage Farm.
- No modern archaeological work has been carried out on either the castle or chapel, and the archaeological potential must be exceptionally high.

Architectural/Artistic Overview

Castle:
- The castle built by the Black Douglases was a tower house of unusual design. It comprises a rectangular blocked aligned east-west, with smaller towers attached to each of its four corners. The only other Scottish castle of similar form is **Crookston Castle**. The basement retains a substantial part of Lord Dacre's manor house, aligned north-south. The tower house's principal entrance was at first-floor level on the west side. This was subsequently blocked up and a gunhole of c.1540 inserted. There was a postern at ground level in the SE tower.
- Exterior: The Douglas castle is built of roughly coursed blocks of coarse sandstone, which contrast with the reddish sandstone ashlar of Lord Dacre's building. The east and west elevations are dominated by high 'flying' arches linking the adjacent corner towers. These arches in part incorporated a timber hoarding (defensive gallery) that ran around the entire top storey; the corbels and putlog holes still remain. Above these is a series of small, rectangular doorways that gave access to the fighting platform; these are rebated for external shutters. This hoarding is a most unusual survival. Only at **Threave**

Castle (another contemporary Black Douglas stronghold) is there a similar arrangement. The tower-house elevations have few openings, except in the SW tower, where they are clearly additions. The wide-mouthed gunholes were inserted c.1540.

- The present entrance is through the south wall. This was the original entrance to Lord Dacre's manor house, but was blocked when the Douglases built the tower house. It was probably reopened after c.1540, but in its present form is a restoration of c.1830.

- Interior: The present entrance opens into what was originally the cobbled courtyard of Lord Dacre's manor house. The surviving walls are built of quality ashlar. Round-headed doorways lead into the ground floors, probably cellarage, of the two flanking blocks, to east and west. The east cellar retains a two-light window onto the courtyard, whilst the west one has a well - one of two in the building. A third doorway, at the north end of the courtyard, gave access to a spiral stair (partly restored) that led to the upper floors of the two ranges, of which little remains. The stair originally rose higher, perhaps to a wall-walk. In the Douglases' conversion, the courtyard and flanking ground floors formed three unlit cellars, accessed from above.

- The Douglases' tower house was entered from the west at first-floor level. The entrance passage retains evidence of two portcullises, one immediately within the outer portal and the other at the inner end of the passage. The first floor of the main block comprised two chambers of uncertain function, but probably a lower hall and chamber. The second floor seems to have contained a single, long chamber, well furnished with windows and a fireplace. This was presumably the great hall. The space was subsequently divided to create two smaller chambers. The upper floor, or floors, probably served the wall-walk and defensive gallery. The roofs were probably flat or low-pitched (as at **Threave**) to enable them to take light siege engines (eg, springalds).

- The doorways into the four projecting towers suggest that such towers were intended from the outset, even though they appear as 'afterthoughts'. The SE tower houses the second well and a postern at ground level, the portcullis mechanism on the first floor and a chamber on the second floor. The NE tower housed the prison on the first floor and a miserable 'pit' below. The second floor was a latrine closet serving the great hall. The NW tower defies interpretation. The SW tower was clearly the most important, not only because of its greater size but also on account of its superior quality. The ground floor (effectively the basement) was the kitchen, the first floor was probably a hall, with its own fireplace and latrine. The second and third floors housed well-appointed chambers, presumably for the exclusive use of the lord, or his castellan.

Chapel:
- The chapel survives only as excavated foundations. It was a unicameral building formed of five unequal bays and measuring 15.7m by 7.4m. The floor of the easternmost bay was raised to provide an enhanced setting for the altar. The plan and surviving stone window fragments suggest a later 13th-century date.

Social Overview

- The association with Mary Queen of Scots is a strong draw for visitors. So also is the castle's association with the Border reivers, particularly the Elliots.
- Hermitage retains its reputation as a key landmark in Liddesdale. It is seen as an icon of the qualities of strength and resilience in which Borderers take great pride.
- Hermitage is somewhat remote from modern settlement, and plays little social role. It is primarily a tourist and recreation site.

Spiritual Overview

- The name indicates a spiritual presence in the Middle Ages, and the chapel's existence confirms one.
- The chapel site is treated as a place of quiet reflection by visitors, suggesting it preserves a spiritual character. It is used for Easter services.

Aesthetic Overview

- The castle is gaunt and forbidding, its walls massive, sheer and all but featureless. The cold, ruined interior adds to its brutish, warring aesthetic. Yet it has some fine qualities - particularly the two graceful 'flying' arches, the superior quality of the Dacre building, and the inserted windows high up in the SW tower. But these cannot dispel the overall impression - that of a hauntingly grim building. This louring appearance, coupled with its bloody historical associations, has given it a place in aesthetic history as a Romantic icon, a tangible image of Scotland's supposedly bloodthirsty Middle Ages.
- An appreciation of Hermitage cannot ignore its spectacularly lonely setting. The castle sits in the midst of a landscape today largely devoid of human settlement, and whose hills are comparatively featureless. It stands as a closed-up, inward-looking ruin surrounded by a stark and lonely landscape.
- The chapel, by contrast, lying as it does some distance from the castle, and situated close to the wooded banks of the Hermitage Water, has a more welcoming feeling, a pastoral oasis amid an unforgiving countryside.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- At what date were the substantial earthworks around the stone castle created, and by whom? Also, what form did they take?
- How did the Black Douglases' tower house function internally, in terms of the hierarchy of space?
- When were the earthworks around, and to the west of, the chapel created, and by whom? And what was the relationship between this complex and the castle itself?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Hermitage Castle is one of the great medieval fortresses of Scotland. It was a seat of the wardens of the Scottish Middle March and played a strategic role in controlling passage through the strategically-important valley of Liddesdale.
- With the exception of the restoration work of the duke of Buccleuch in the 1830s, which has impaired the archaeological integrity of the castle's upstanding masonry, the entire site is one of the least disturbed major medieval castles in Scotland, and represents a profoundly important archaeological resource.
- Hermitage is an important landmark in both Borders culture and the Romantic movement in Britain. It is associated with stories which are historic, heroic and horrific.
- The repair and restoration works carried out by the Duke of Buccleuch, although they damaged the archaeological potential of the standing masonry of the castle, are an outstanding testament to the changing perceptions of our medieval past during the Romantic age.

Associated Properties

(the other castle of de Soules) – Liddel Castle.

(the other Dacre castle) – Dacre Castle (Cumberland).

(other major Black Douglas castles) – **Balvenie Castle**; **Bothwell Castle**; Newark Castle (Selkirkshire);**Threave Castle**; **Tantallon Castle**

(other similar castles) - **Crookston Castle**

Keywords

tower house, chapel, gunhole, earthworks, Douglas, Bothwell, Hepburn, Buccleuch, Liddesdale, reivers

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