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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EDINBURGH CASTLE – NEW BARRACKS



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 – NEW BARRACKS

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The New Barracks is by far the largest single structure in the castle. The six-storey building was constructed in 1796–99, during the French Revolutionary Wars, to house a field battalion (over 600 officers and men). The vast structure was almost universally disliked from the outset, Sir Walter Scott describing it as resembling ‘a vulgar cotton mill’. Proposals were produced in the later 19th/early 20th century to reduce its bulk, but the only work carried out, in 1893, was the infilling of the arcade and the construction of the cast-iron verandah along the rear (west) elevation.

The New Barracks has remained in Army use throughout its history and today serves a variety of uses, including as headquarters of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, headquarters of the Edinburgh Garrison, office of the Army Benevolent Fund and home of the regimental association and museum of the Royal Scottish Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers and Greys), descended from the nation’s oldest cavalry regiment, the Royal Scots Greys.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

c. 1675: A redan (angled outer gun battery) is built on Hawk Hill, immediately to the west of Foog’s Gate, ‘to command the highways on that side’ (Slezer). Buildings, including a malt barn and malt kiln, are built on the open ground beyond and below Hawk Hill Battery.

1709: A Board of Ordnance plan shows two buildings beyond Hawk Hill Battery: a barracks and guardhouse (the ‘back barracks’) and laboratory; the latter was probably converted from the old malt barn and kiln. These are described as ‘out of repair’ in 1735 and are still standing in 1750. They are subsequently demolished.

1796–99: The New Barracks is built on the vacant site, the last feasible large and comparatively open space within the defences, to provide much-needed barrack accommodation for the rapidly increasing British Army during the French Revolutionary Wars. The building, possibly designed by Thomas Ruydyer, military engineer, is intended to house a field battalion (over 600 officers and men) together with specialised accommodation, including prisons for soldiers.

c. 1870: A stone structure is built at the rear (west) against the perimeter wall, probably to house latrines.

1887: A proposal by William Nelson, the Edinburgh publisher, ‘to make it [ie the New Barracks] decent architecturally ... with a castellated appearance given to it’, is abandoned at Nelson’s death that same year.

1893: The open arcade on the first floor at the rear (west) of the building is filled in with stone and fenestration and a cast-iron verandah is built along its full length.

Early 20th century: Various temporary structures (including a canteen and kitchen) are built to the rear of the building. These are demolished after World War II.

1923: The castle garrison marches out to purpose-built barracks at Redford, in the city's south-west suburbs. The New Barracks, however, continues in desultory Army use, normally only occupied by a small guard party sent from Redford, with the subaltern in command living uncomfortably in an old-fashioned flat on the top floor. Demolishing the entire New Barracks is even considered.

1999: The Victorian building at the rear, then serving as a joiners' shop for Historic Scotland, is extended to the north and converted into the Army Piping School (formerly in the south Ordnance Storehouse).

2006: Her Majesty the Queen, Colonel-in-Chief, officially opens the newly refurbished regimental museum of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers and Greys), descended from the British Army's oldest cavalry regiment, the Scots Greys.

Archaeological Overview

Little archaeological work has been undertaken in or immediately adjacent to the New Barracks. In 2004, during works to fit out part of the southern half of the building for the regimental museum of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers and Greys), stripping of plaster from walls revealed evidence for fireplaces and other fixtures.

This work, together with the absence of the original Board of Ordnance drawings, highlights the importance of routinely examining all surfaces during works of repair or alteration.

The wings projecting at the north-east and south-east corners are likely to have held latrines, in which case the cesspits at their bases probably still contain valuable evidence (discarded china, cutlery, etc) helping to chart the history of the building.

The lead roofs have graffiti scratched on them, recording names and the odd regiment, which should be recorded for posterity.

Architectural/Artistic Overview

Main phases of development: The building is essentially a single-phase building, the only exception being the infilling of the open arcade at the rear and the provision of a cast-iron verandah in 1893. Continuous Army occupation has resulted in significant alterations to the original internal room layout.

The six-storey New Barracks is the largest single structure in the castle. It is interestingly contrived to fit the difficult topography. Uniquely for a British military barracks, it was given a 'completion stone' recording its formal handover in 1799 from the Board of Ordnance to the Barrack Master General. This large and weathered stone has now been removed from its external, and exposed, location at the north end of the east elevation and placed on public display in the entrance

vestibule of the regimental museum of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers and Greys). A cast replica has been put in its place.

Viewed from the east, the New Barracks appears a ponderously classical three-storey and attic structure with a pediment at the two-bay centre enriched by guttae below the mutilated cornice. Balustrades link the Roman Doric columned porch at the centre with those at the ends.

The west elevation, by contrast, reveals the structure in all its monstrous monumentality: an overwhelming, unadorned structure of six-storeys, relieved only by the added cast-iron verandah. MacIvor describes it as a 'Georgian colossus'.

Social Overview

The New Barracks continues in Army use and, as such, has a restricted access to members of the general public.

The chief exception is the regimental museum of the Royal Scottish Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers and Greys) in the southern end of the building. The lineal descendant of the Royal Scots Greys, formed in the later 1600s and the oldest cavalry regiment in the British Army, the regiment's museum provides an important link for those seeking information regarding former serving members, as well as presenting valuable insights into the history and service record and achievements of the regiment.

A star exhibit is the Standard (with cravat and eagle) of the French 45th infantry regiment, captured by Sergeant Charles Ewart ('Ensign Ewart') at the battle of Waterloo in 1815. Richard Ansdell's famous painting *The Fight for the Standard* hangs in the castle's Great Hall, and Ensign Ewart's gravestone and memorial stand on the Esplanade.

Spiritual Overview

The New Barracks has no observable spiritual associations, other than the fact that it houses the offices of the Army Benevolent Fund.

Aesthetic Overview

The New Barracks has the dubious distinction of being the largest single structure in the entire castle. The structure soon came to be viewed as one of the ugliest elements in the castle. Walter Scott described it as resembling 'a vulgar cotton mill', whilst Lord Cockburn, judge and Edinburgh conservationist (after whom the city's Cockburn Association is named), declared: 'Look on the west side of the castle – and shudder!!' An 1887 scheme, jointly financed by the Edinburgh publisher William Nelson and the expatriate philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, to give the structure 'a castellated appearance' came to nothing. A clay model, now displayed in the Argyle Tower, shows what was proposed in the way of substantial 'improvements' to the structure in 1914, before war intervened.

The New Barracks, however, remains largely as conceived, save for the addition of the iron verandah at the rear. The one positive thing that can be said of the building is that it provides splendid views westward.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

How was the New Barracks originally intended to be used, particularly the first-floor arcade at the rear? In the absence of the original Board of Ordnance drawings, only archaeological investigation, including standing building survey, can provide the answer.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

The New Barracks is the largest single structure in Edinburgh Castle.

The building continues to play an important role as a base for the Army in the castle.

ADDENDA

Associated Properties

Some other early barracks: Berwick Barracks (c. 1720); **Blackness Castle** (late 1600s); **Corgarff Castle** (1748); **Fort Charlotte** (1780s); **Fort George** (1750s); **Kilchurn Castle** (1690s)

Keywords

barrack room; latrine; George III; battalion

Selected Bibliography

Maclvor, I, *Edinburgh Castle* (Batsford, London, 1993)