



HISTORIC  
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SCOTLAND

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Property in Care (PIC) ID:

PIC122

Designations:

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Taken into State care:

1909 (Guardianship)

Last Reviewed:

2014 (2025 update to include Empire connections)

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# NEWARK 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.



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## NEWARK CASTLE

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## SYNOPSIS

Newark Castle is located on the eastern edge of Port Glasgow, beside the southern shore of the Firth of Clyde and close by the Newark Roundabout on the A8.

The castle complex, which remains roofed, comprises essentially structures of two separate building episodes. The first phase, built by George Maxwell 'of New-wark and Finlanston [Finlaystone]' in the 1480s, consists of a rectangular tower house, an adjacent rectangular gatehouse a short distance to its west, and a circular corner tower at the east side (the sole survivor from the courtyard wall). This phase contains innovative gun-holes.

The second phase is chiefly represented by the three-storey building sandwiched between the tower house and gatehouse. Built by Sir Patrick Maxwell in the late 1590s as the central part of a major reconstruction of his ancestor's castle, it is one of the most remarkable examples of Renaissance architectural planning in Scotland, including rare interior furnishings and decoration.

## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical overview

- **1478** – George Maxwell succeeds his father John as laird of Finlaystone, a barony a little to the east of Newark. By 1484 he is styled 'of New-wark and Finlanstone [Finlaystone]', indicating that he had recently built a new residence at Newark (the 'locus de [place of] Newerk' recorded in 1485). The surviving tower house, gatehouse and corner tower from the courtyard wall all probably date from this time.
- **1495** – James IV stays briefly with George Maxwell at Newark Castle en route from **Dumbarton** to the Hebrides to put down disorder. He departs on the *Flower*, captained by Admiral Sir Andrew Wood, and heads for Mingary Castle, in the Sound of Mull.
- **c.1593** – Sir Patrick Maxwell becomes lord of Newark. Already he has a reputation for feuding with (and murdering) neighbouring noble families. In 1595 his mother, Marion, complains of her son's violent behaviour to the Privy Council. The complaint goes unheeded, probably because Patrick is outwardly a pillar of society, a Justice of the Peace and a friend of James VI.
- **1597x9** – Patrick embarks on a major remodelling of his ancestral home. The gatehouse is left largely unaltered but the north and east

ranges are comprehensively reordered and reroofed to create a remarkably sophisticated Renaissance mansion. The dates 1597 and 1599 are carved on the fabric. Patrick probably also has the grounds around extensively re-landscaped to provide a stunning setting for his new mansion.

- **1636** – Lady Margaret Crawford, Sir Patrick’s wife, appeals to the Privy Council for protection from her ‘unkind and unnatural husband’. Her case also stalls, though this time possibly on account of Sir Patrick’s age and infirmity. He dies shortly after. Lady Margaret, after 44 years of marriage, and having presented her husband with 16 children, leaves the family home and relocates to Dumbarton.
- **1668** – Sir George Maxwell sells land around the castle to Glasgow Town Council for the purposes of creating a decent port, harbour and other facilities to handle Glasgow’s growing trade with the Americas. (The scheme is not activated until 1693.)
- **1694** – Sir George’s son, Patrick, dies and the castle and remaining estate are sold to William Cochrane, of Kilmarnock. Newark Castle ceases to serve as a noble residence. Various tenants occupy the castle, and the grounds are rented out for market gardens. In the 1800s, for instance, Charles Williamson is renting the gardens and storing his fruit in the castle. He apparently blocks off the spiral stair midway along the north range because John Gardner, the joiner occupying the great hall, is pilfering his produce. Gardner’s predecessor, John Orr, is a rope maker with an unusual side-line, buying wild animals – panthers, leopards and bears – from passing ships and selling them on; he presumably keeps them in the cellars!
- **1699** (Sept) – the second, ill-fated Darien expedition sails from Port Glasgow for Central America.
- **18th/19th century** – Port Glasgow flourishes and associated industries spring up, chief among them ship-building. Thomas McGill’s shipyard, immediately to the west of the castle, once employs John Wood, who in 1821 builds the PS *Comet*, the first successful European steam ship, designed by Henry Bell. Most of the timber for the ships are floated in to the port in the form of full-length baulks and stored in huge timber ponds on both sides of the castle (many of the stakes which enclosed the ponds still remain and can be seen at low tide).
- **1820** – the castle is sold to Robert Farquhar, a London banker.
- **1825** – Eliza, Robert’s daughter, marries Sir Michael Shaw Stewart, and the castle remains with their descendants until the present day. Farquhar and the Shaw Stewarts had considerable plantation

interests in the Caribbean, though it does not appear they invested any of that wealth in Newark Castle.<sup>1</sup>

- **1887** – MacGibbon and Ross note that several families inhabit part of the building (the east part) and that the rest is ‘in great dilapidation and disorder’.
- **1909** – the Shaw Stewarts entrust Newark Castle into state care. The castle is the second castle to pass into state care following the passing of the Ancient Monuments Protection Act 1900, which extends the scope of the original Act of 1882 (the first is **Scalloway**). The Ministry of Works’ custodian takes up residence in a flat on the top floor of the east section (this is only removed in the late 1970s).
- **1983** – Lamont’s Shipyard, immediately to the south and east of the castle, closes down and is demolished in 1984. The grounds to the east of the castle are then landscaped by the local authority to form an attractive parkland – Newark Castle Park. Ferguson’s Marine, immediately west of the castle, is now the only ship-yard remaining on the Lower Clyde. (In 2014 Ferguson’s Marine announces that it too is to close, but it is saved at the last minute.).

## Archaeological overview

Archaeological excavation work, directed by John Cannel for Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments), was carried out in 1984, in advance of the demolition of Lamont’s Shipyard, principally to determine the full alignment of the courtyard wall but also to enable services into the castle to be upgraded. The excavations succeeded in revealing the complete alignment, and also cast some light on the nature and building history of the ancillary ranges that complemented the still-roofed castle core. Additional small-scale work was carried out in 1997 (see Lewis for both programmes of work).

In 2007 and 2008 a detailed archaeological study, including dendro-chronology, was carried out on the timber roofs of the castle, during a major conservation project on the roof above the north range. The results cast considerable new light on their structural design (see Hanke), and confirmed that they were assembled in or shortly after 1598. They incorporated re-used timber that may conceivably have been recycled from earlier buildings.

[Note: Newark Castle formerly housed roof timbers brought from **Glasgow Cathedral** in the 1950s, during roof repairs there. Whilst at Newark these were dendrochronologically dated to the 13th century by Professor Mike

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<sup>1</sup> [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c.1600-1997](#)

Baillie, of Queen's University, Belfast. They have now been returned to Glasgow].

## Architectural/Artistic overview

Newark Castle comprises building work from two separate episodes – the 1480s and the 1590s. Both exhibit innovative features, particularly so the latter. The whole complex retains its original timber roofs (albeit much repaired), marking it out as a rare survival from medieval and early modern Scotland.

### The 1480s castle

The earliest fabric is represented by three structures - a tower house, rectangular on plan and rising through three storeys; a gatehouse, also rectangular and rising through three storeys; and a corner tower from the courtyard wall, circular on plan and rising through two storeys.

The tower house is fairly typical of its time. Originally free-standing, it was entered at ground level from the east end of the north side (blocked in the 1590s), and access to the upper floors was via a spiral stair in the north-east corner. The ground floor housed vaulted storage space, originally divided horizontally into two areas. The first floor was the hall, with a large fireplace and a privy. The second floor, the private chamber, was similarly provisioned. There may have been a third floor, or garret, but this topmost level was drastically altered in the 1590s, together with less major alterations to the tower's fenestration and internal circulation arrangements (see below).

The gatehouse comprised at ground level the principal entrance into the innermost courtyard; this is a stone-vaulted pend with a stone bench along one side and a porter's lodge on the other, from which a spiral stair led to the upper floors (blocked in the 1590s). The two smallish upper rooms perhaps formed a single apartment – a hall and chamber – for the steward.

Although it is usually assumed that the tower house and gatehouse are contemporary, it is possible that they are of different periods. There is a certain sophistication within the gatehouse's upper rooms not evident in the tower house; the windows have stone seats, the fireplaces have fine bead-mouldings compared to the simple splays of those in the tower house, whilst the arched aumbry (cupboard) in the first floor is exceptional. The gatehouse is also provided with gun-holes, of 'inverted keyhole' and 'dumb-bell' form, where the tower house is not. Such gun-holes first appeared in Scotland in the late 1440s (for example, at **Threave**) and spread slowly in the ensuing decades (for example, **Cardoness**). They were still innovative by the time of their appearance at Newark.

The isolated corner tower at the north-east corner of the complex is all that remains of the courtyard wall that formally enclosed the castle core. This

too has innovative gun-holes, making it contemporary with the gatehouse. (Its upper floor was later converted into a dovecot, probably in the 1590s.)

### The 1590s castle

Patrick Maxwell's upgrading of his ancestral seat is what now marks out Newark Castle as something special in terms of Scotland's early modern secular architecture. His architect, unknown to us, created, in the space between the tower house and gatehouse (perhaps previously occupied by the great hall), a well-articulated U-plan lodging, exquisitely adorned inside and out. The dates carved onto the exterior – 1597 and 1599 – most probably mark the three-year period it took to complete the remodelling.

The exterior is an essay in Renaissance architectural detailing. Executed in fine sandstone masonry it combines projecting angle-turrets, crow-stepped gables, ornamental chimneys, pedimented windows and doorways, and cable mouldings in a masterful way. The symmetry of the courtyard elevation has extended to the adjacent tower house, where the plain 15th-century windows have been given elaborate treatment and the top floor battlement removed and replaced by a fenestrated but open belvedere carried on a single row of corbels; this is one of the earliest in Scotland. A similar symmetry adorns the north side, facing one of Scotland's principal water highways; here, in the words of McKean, 'the gables of the wings, with their turrets and elaborate aedicules, are set back to emphasise the projection and nobility of the main house ... [whose] ... façade is designed about a circular staircase corbelled from the first floor ... flanked by tall, slender chimneys framed by dormer windows.'

This exquisite treatment and juxtaposition of elements is continued in the interior; for example, the broad scale-and-platt staircase rising from the ground floor to the *piano nobile* (here again, among the first to appear in Scotland though not as innovative as that **Crichton** of the 1580s); the splendid fireplace in the north wall of the first-floor dining room (almost identical to one in Spedlin's Tower (Dumfries) dated to 1605); and in the charming, galleried space on the second floor, with its symmetrical layout and studies in the tiny projecting turrets. The inclusion of a gallery, an indoor exercise room that by the late 16th-century became a place to display family portraits, whilst not innovative was certainly unusual in a house of a laird of modest regional importance.

Unfortunately, almost all of the original (1590s) decorative treatment, fixtures and furnishings have long since disappeared – with one very notable exception. In a first-floor room in the east wing, adjacent to the old tower house, is a small chamber that still retains its pinewood wall panelling, stool closet (itself an innovation of the late 1580s) with its door still hanging from its hinges, and vestiges of a painted ceiling. The wall panelling incorporates cupboards, one of which opens out to form a fold-down bed, known as a 'press-bed'. A visitor to Scotland in 1598, the year Patrick Maxwell was watching his new mansion being built, wrote: 'Their



bedsteads were then like cubbards in the wall, with doors to be opened and shut at pleasure, so as we climbed up to our beds.’ Newark’s press-bed appears to be the sole surviving 16th-century interior bedroom fittings in Scotland (**Rowallan** has a more standard bed-recess).

## Social overview

Newark Castle was long hidden behind shipyards, out of sight and out of mind. However, with the decline of ship-building, all but one ship-yard (Ferguson’s Marine immediately west of Newark Castle) have been demolished and the castle has emerged once more to resume its prominent position in the Port Glasgow landscape. Today, the castle is largely surrounded by green parkland, named Newark Castle Park, thanks to the regeneration efforts of Inverclyde Council. Now, only the cranes of Ferguson’s Marine to its west, and the stakes forming the timber ponds in the Clyde offshore, remain as reminders of the port’s ship-building heritage.

The castle is well-used by educational groups, mostly from Inverclyde and Renfrewshire, but also from further afield. The fact that the building is roofed and floored, and surrounded by parkland, makes it ideal for youngsters.

Newark is also used on occasion for wedding photography, though its uses as a wedding ceremony venue has recently been ended.

In recent years, the castle has benefited from the growth of Greenock as a destination for cruise ships. This welcome development has been inspired by the Inverclyde Tourist Group.

[The castle formerly housed a collection of prints and drawings depicting Newark Castle and Port Glasgow, together with a bust of John Wood of Port Glasgow, builder of the PS *Comet* steamboat. These were donated by the former Town Council but have recently been returned to their care.]

## Spiritual overview

It is possible that Newark Castle had a chapel or oratory somewhere in the complex or vicinity in the later 15th century, but no physical or documentary evidence survives.

Today, the castle appears to play no spiritual role.

## Aesthetic overview

Good views are obtained of the castle when approaching Port Glasgow from the east along the A8. The only jarring feature is the shipyard crane and somewhat brutal sheds of Ferguson’s Marine to its west.

Until the 1980s the castle was almost invisible, surrounded as it was by two shipyards. The removal of Lamont’s Shipyard, and the landscaping of the

area to the south and east of the castle as parkland, replete with footpaths and picnic places, now provides a suitably open area, helping to replicate the once extensive gardens and grounds surrounding the castle in its heyday as a noble residence.

The castle overlooks the southern shore of the Firth of Clyde. There are fine views, both at ground level and from the belvedere atop the old tower house, out over the water to the hills of Dunbartonshire, and up-river towards **Dumbarton Rock**.

Externally, the castle's roofed and largely complete appearance presents a most agreeable spectacle. In particular, Patrick Maxwell's 'make-over' has produced an elegant essay in Renaissance architecture. Executed in warm red sandstone, it combines projecting angle-turrets, crow-stepped gables, cable mouldings, pedimented windows and doorways in a masterful and exquisite way. Perhaps the most assured composition is that presented by the north elevation, fronting the Clyde, with an almost perfect symmetry appropriate for one of the country's principal water highways.

Internally, the castle presents fascinating contrasts, from the darkened spaces in the ground-floor cellars of the north range and tower house, through the lighter and airier rooms on the upper floors of the north range, to the open-air belvedere atop the tower house.

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

- What, if anything, stood on the site of the present north range? Further archaeological and standing building survey work may yet find evidence that this pivotal space was the site of the later 15th-century great hall.
- How did the courtyard complex develop over time? Excavation in 1984 demonstrated that there is still much archaeology surviving to add to our understanding of the castle as a noble residence. It must be doubted, though, that any archaeological evidence survives of the castle's wider landscape and setting, as hinted at in later maps, given the density of the industrial occupation.
- What was the detailed history of the castle after its abandonment as a noble residence? A detailed study of relevant records and documents could well cast more light on this equally fascinating aspect of the castle as residence.

## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- Newark Castle is one of the finest secular buildings to survive from late medieval Scotland. It is a case-study of the transformation of the lordly residence from the medieval, overtly defensive, cramped and ill-lit structure, into an elegant Renaissance mansion, epitomising the triumph of comfort, style and panache over strength and security.
- The original (late-15th-century) work in the gatehouse and the one remaining courtyard tower incorporates some of the first gun-holes to appear in Scotland.
- The late-16th-century transformation of the tower-house castle into a Renaissance mansion is one of the most articulate, cohesive and imaginative works surviving in Scotland. Its use of symmetry on the external facades, and adoption of innovative features internally (for example, the scale-and-platt stair and gallery) display a surprising degree of sophistication for the house of a relatively minor laird.
- The interior contains the oldest fitted wardrobes in Scotland.
- The castle is intimately associated with Sir Patrick Maxwell, a quixotic cultured and enlightened ‘ruffian’.

## ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

*Some other Maxwell castles* – **Caerlaverock; Drumcoltran Tower; Haggs; Pollock House; Stanely**

*Other castles with 15th-century gun-holes* – **Ardrossan; Balvaird; Broughty; Cardoness; Craigmillar; Craigston; Crichton; Largo; Linlithgow Palace; Ravenscraig; Tarbert; Threave**

*Some other significant Renaissance architectural workmanship in Scotland* – **Caerlaverock; Castle Fraser; Crathes; Crichton; Dunnottar; Fyvie; Glamis; Innes House; MacLellan’s; Pitsligo; Rowallan; Seton; Tolquhon**

*Other surviving interior timber work* - **Rowallan**

## KEYWORDS

Renaissance architecture; tower house; gatehouse; courtyard; dovecot; gun-hole; scale-and-platt stair; painted ceiling; timber roof; bed-press; gallery; belvedere; Maxwell; ship-building

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