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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

TOLQUHON CASTLE



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TOLQUHON CASTLE

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Tolquhon Castle consists of a 16th-century castle planned as a quadrangle incorporating an older tower, known as the Preston Tower. The castle is approached through a twin-towered gatehouse, attached to the east of which is the Preston Tower. On entering the main courtyard, the visitor is confronted by the impressive south wing with its axial stair turret and containing the main accommodation. The west wing contained a brewhouse on the ground floor with a gallery above, and on the east was a range of offices. A square tower projects from the south-east corner and a round one from the opposite angle.

The castle was approached from the north through a forecourt in which there were outer offices, including the stables (which still survive as the stewards cottage), and a doocot. To the north-west, is an extensive pleasance or pleasure ground with remnants of landscaping. The wall surrounding the forecourt contains a number of recesses – bee-boles – for skeps.

As proclaimed by the inscription above the gatehouse, the quadrangular mansion, or 'New Wark', was constructed between 1584 and 1589 by Sir William Forbes to supplement the 'Auld Tour'.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical overview

- Tolquhon Castle was one of two principal seats in the ancient thanage of Formatine – the other at Fyvie may date back to the 13th century. The Thanage was divided on the death of Sir Henry Preston, Lord of Formatine, and in 1420 the Lands of Tolquhon came into the possession of Sir John Forbes, husband of Marjorie, second daughter of Sir Henry. It is likely that Sir John constructed the Preston Tower; an armorial panel displaying his arms was found among the rubble of the tower in the 1930s.
- The castle is first documented in 1536 when it is described as a 'tower and fortalice', a common legal phrase describing a tower house with its surrounding subsidiary buildings.
- Between 1584 and 1589, William Forbes, the seventh laird, was engaged in the wholesale rebuilding and expansion of his seat. William is an interesting character and for as well as being a noteworthy builder (he had a stately tomb erected for himself and his wife in Tarves Church in addition to his rebuilding of Tolquhon and endowing a hospital in Tarves) he owned a notable library.

- When the castle was completed in 1589 an inventory (now transcribed in ‘Collections on the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff’) was taken ‘of my houiss, tour, and place of Tolquhone,’ enumerating ‘my hallis, galleries, chalmeris (chambers), vardrope, kitchingis stabillis, sellaries, lednaris (larders), pantries, librellis (libraries), or uther office houses.’ The inventory also records William’s ‘haill siluer work, buikis, bedding, tapestrie, neprie, timmer work, artalyerie (four bronze cannon cast for William in 1588 still survive) uther furniture insycht and plenishing quhatsumewer’.
- In 1600 an agreement between Willam, 8th Laird of Tolquhon and the presbytery of Ellon indicated that further building work was being planned at the castle. Fortunately, the agreement records the name of the mason working at the castle as Thomas Leper. That Thomas was the mason for the earlier work is suggested by the monogram T.L. carved on the turret skew-putt.
- In 1716, the estate was sold to ease financial pressures on the Forbes family, who had invested in the Darien Scheme. This was a failed settler-colonisation scheme in the 1690s which resulted in many losing significant sums of money. William Forbes, the eleventh laird, refused to abandon the castle, and was eventually wounded and dislodged from the castle by troops on 5 September 1718. The estate was purchased by the Earl of Aberdeen, and the castle remained occupied as a farmhouse and lodgings for farm workers until the middle of the 19th century, after which the buildings fell into decay. Although the new owners had significant connections to British Imperial governance, it is unlikely any wealth from those offices was invested into their new castle.¹
- In 1929 the castle was transferred into the care of the State.

Archaeological overview

When the monument came into care in 1929, the subsequent consolidation of the monument did entail some clearance work, particularly in the Preston tower, although this appears to have been restricted to removal of rubble and overburden. As a result, the site archaeological potential must be regarded as high, with the likelihood that remains of earlier phases of the castle survive.

Recent archaeological work within the pleasance has demonstrated that evidence of several phases of formal landscaping has survived, although the remains are slight. The evaluation has suggested that the policies were

¹ For further information on the connection between Properties in Care and the British Empire download the full report from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c.1600-1997](#)

perhaps significantly larger than now appear but that the formal gardens were initially limited to the area immediately around the castle and were aligned to the building. It has been further suggested that the castle was later set within a wider formalised landscape with avenues and vistas extending from the castle, with an extension to the west where one can still make out the yew and holy avenues.

Artistic/Architectural overview

- The quadrangular layout found at Tolquhon can be identified in several other houses of the period in the region. As at Tolquhon, Pitsligo Castle, built by another branch of the Forbes family, developed into a roughly quadrangular house around an early tower house. Boyne Castle near Portsoy, has a similar gatehouse to Tolquhon, but here the quadrangular layout was constructed completely from new, and as a consequence the quadrangular plan is more accomplished. Other comparisons can be made with Dunnottar and Edzell.
- Although the castle of 1584-9 was conceived as a single entity incorporating the older tower house, it was constructed in phases. The main accommodation in the south wing was probably constructed first and was built as a distinct unit. The gatehouse appears to have followed and is dated midway in the building programme by an armorial. The lateral wings would have been completed last.
- The castle retains its outer gate and courtyard, which help create a formal approach to the castle, with the visitor having to pass through a number of barriers, or thresholds, before reaching the owner's residential accommodation on the far side of the principal courtyard.
- The core of the castle was reached via an arched portal through the north wall, flanked by diminutive and heavily decorated drum towers. This gatehouse is one of the delights of the castle; the towers have heavily gridded windows, moulded string-courses, sculpted figures and highly decorative gun-loops, and would have been covered by conical roofs. The armorial panels consist of those of William Forbes on the bottom, and those of the James VI above.
- The twin-towered gatehouse is very much making a statement about the lineage, sophistication, erudition and wealth of its owner. Its twin-towers are an artfully playful expression of the iconography of military architecture rather than a serious defensive structure. They draw in the visitor rather than turning them away, and the whole ensemble is comparable with the gate at Rowallan, Ayrshire, where drum towers were added to the main façade, again in the later part of the 16th century. At both the imagery looks back to the great

medieval defensive gatehouses such as at Kildrummy and Caerlaverock.

- East of the gatehouse, where it was clearly visible on the castle's great frontispiece is the oldest standing part of the castle, Preston's Tower; this is balanced on the other side by a projecting round tower. A similar combination of elements is to be found at Edzell Castle. At both, the incorporation of the older tower in such a prominent location could be seen as an attempt to demonstrate the noble lineage of the owners, through the retention of identifiably older elements in their new residences.
- Preston's Tower is typical of a simple 15th century tower house and is far more massively constructed than the latter work. It was entered through a ground entrance with a double door, and has ground floor cellage, a first-floor hall and accommodation on the upper floors. It would have been surrounded by subsidiary buildings and yards enclosed by a barmkin wall of which there may be archaeological evidence.
- The principal accommodation occupies the south side of the quadrangle. The ground floor is vaulted and consists of a large kitchen with three cellars linked by a corridor. The upper floors and the gallery in the upper floor of the west range are reached by a scale-and-platt staircase. On the first floor is a hall with an elaborated sandstone floor of hexagonal flags (although very much restored) and the laird's private chamber beyond, with a small closet. From documentary sources, it would appear that these rooms had painted ceilings with scriptural texts. The floor above appears to have been a duplicate suite of rooms, perhaps for the lady of the household. The upper floors were reached by a stair in the drum tower extruded from the centre of the south facade, which at the upper level is corbelled out into a crow-stepped cap-house. Above the main stair landing are two storeys of chambers served by a small stair.
- The nature of the accommodation is what one would expect from a sophisticated contemporary tower house. This is emphasised by a comparison with the House of Schivas, also in the parish of Tarves. The house is essentially a late 16th century tower house built on a slightly reduced version of the plan of the south range at Tolquhon. The House of Schivas also has identical gun loops to those found at Tolquhon, suggesting the same master mason, Thomas Leiper, was involved at both houses.
- The gallery is an early example of this type of room to be found in Scotland and is well thought out with access from the wide scale-and-platt, an extension over the gatehouse and access to chambers in the round tower.

- The survival of the outer court and polices at Tolquhon helps to demonstrate the wider landscaping and setting which would have surrounded towers and castles of this importance but which have often been lost.

Social overview

The castle is currently used as a recreational attraction. It receives little other community use.

Spiritual overview

None.

Aesthetic overview

Tolquhon is one of the most picturesque castles in Scotland, situated within the green and pleasant remnants of its policies and surrounded by unspoiled countryside.

The approach to the castle, through the outer court and up to the diminutive gatehouse, is delightfully unexpected. The sense of discovery is increased when one enters the courtyard and the heart of castle and is a particularly good example of how the approach to such a residence was meant to be articulated.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Little is known of the use of the site before the division of the thanage of the Formatine in the early 15th century. The other main centre of the thanage, Fyvie, probably dates back to at least the 13th century.
- The nature of the 15th century castle – it must have been far more extensive than merely the tower house.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Tolquhon is an extremely well-preserved example of a late medieval fortified mansion, built as a single entity but incorporating an earlier structure.

- The contrast between the earlier tower house and the later mansion house demonstrates the gradual move away from strongly fortified residences to more palatial houses which nonetheless retained an outward militaristic appearance. The contrast was one that Sir William was obviously anxious to achieve, perhaps to emphasise the lineage of the Forbes family with the lands of Tolquhon.
- Tolquhon demonstrates many features, such as the carefully planned main accommodation and the long gallery, to be found in similarly architecturally sophisticated tower houses and fortified mansions of this period, many of which are to be found in Aberdeenshire and Angus. However, at Tolquhon, the plan has a coherence rarely seen at other castles, where the development was more piecemeal.
- The sophistication of the building at Tolquhon reflects the character and background of William Forbes. Although an Aberdeenshire laird of substance, and a tenant-in-chief to the Crown, William was certainly not on the first rung of the nobility. Yet, in common with many of his class, he was an educated and cultured man. That a properly educated gentleman should have been knowledgeable of all things military is not only demonstrated by William's building work, but also the four cannons William had cast. As with the castle, these were more show pieces than serious artillery.
- Set in its policies, Tolquhon is one of the most charming castles in Aberdeenshire. The diminutive gatehouse is one of the distinctive and attractive features of the castle.

ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

The Tolquhon tomb, Tarves churchyard – the elaborate tomb built for William Forbes and his wife, Elizabeth Gordon.

Edzell Castle

Pitsligo Castle – another Forbes castle built on a quadrangular plan.

House of Schivas – tower house perhaps built by same mason.

KEYWORDS

Fortified mansion, tower house, garden, gallery, gatehouse, William Forbes.

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