



**Property in Care (PIC) ID:** PIC194

**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90112)

**Taken into State care:** 1952 (Guardianship)

**Last reviewed:** 2005

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# DUNDONALD CASTLE



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

[www.historicenvironment.scot](http://www.historicenvironment.scot)

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# DUNDONALD CASTLE

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises the well-preserved remains of the towerhouse built for Robert II (1371-90) in the 1370s, together with the remains of the barmkin enclosure to the east, and the later wing to the south. It was built on the site of an important 13<sup>th</sup> century castle of the Stewarts.

Excavations have shown that the hilltop has been occupied and defended since the Bronze Age, with major fortifications built in the Iron Age as well as in the early historic period.

Situated in the village of Dundonald, well signposted from main roads, and from the junction of the B730 and B750.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

1160: the Stewart occupation started with the arrival of Walter the first Stewart following his grant of North Kyle in c1160, and his decision to have his caput at Dundonald. He built an earthwork castle here, as well as at other places including Rothesay.

1241-82: Alexander Stewart built a mighty enclosure castle here, with twinned, opposing double-D shaped entrance towers.

1286-1370: the castle suffered repeated destruction and repair during and after the Wars of Independence. Destroyed by Robert Bruce (1298); rebuilt by the English (1298-1301) possibly as an earth-and-timber 'peel', destroyed by de Soules for Bruce, and then abandoned. Possibly refortified by in advance of Edward III's campaigns of 1330s.

1371 – mid-15<sup>th</sup> century: Dundonald became a royal castle on the accession of Robert II (the first Stewart monarch). The large, oblong towerhouse was built for King Robert who died here in 1390. Held thereafter for the Crown by constables.

1420-1550 – occupation on reduced scale, held by local families, the Cathcarts, Wallaces and Boyds.

1550-1638 – gradual decline of fabric and importance. Early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the castle was used as a prison for local offenders under ecclesiastical discipline.

1638 – bought by William Cochrane who became the first earl of Dundonald in 1669, and abandoned in favour of his new house at Auchans, 1 mile W of the castle. Stone robbed from the castle to build this house in 1644.

18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – further robbing, dumping, and landscaping, with the possible creation of gardens.

1939 – 45 – allotments created, and then used as a commando training ground during WWII.

1953 – given into State guardianship by the earl of Dundonald. The castle is now in local authority ownership. It is a scheduled ancient monument, and a category A listed building.

1960s –80s – annual seasons of major consolidation and rebuilding works, in most years, although only one quarter of the visible remains had been secured by 1983.

1985-95 – major consolidation and excavation programmes.

1997 – visitor centre built by Friends of Dundonald Castle, who provide visitor services here.

### Archaeological Overview

Major excavations took place here in the 1980s-90s for the predecessor of Historic Scotland, in advance of a major consolidation programme. These revealed the complex development of the site dating back to the Bronze Age, described by the excavator G Ewart as ‘the best preserved archaeological sequence seen at any PIC’.

Bronze Age c1000-500BC - prehistoric settlement.

Iron Age c500BC-c500AD – a hillfort was built here, with timber round houses enclosed by a timber-laced stone rampart.

Early historic c500-1000AD - excavations showed that the earlier hillfort was developed into a dun-like complex, with straight-sided buildings, within a smaller, nucleated enclosure on the hilltop. This was destroyed by fire around AD 1000, causing the rampart to become vitrified in the intense heat. This was the *dun* (fort) of the eponymous Donald, who may have been a sub-king of Strathclyde in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of imported Gaulish earthen ware pottery indicates that the occupants formed part of the trade network that extended from Europe, along the west seaboard.

c1160 - Walter the first Steward built an earth-and-timber stronghold, with a timber hall and a motte on the NE shoulder of the hill, of which nothing now survives above ground.

There is archaeological evidence to suggest that he may have transformed an existing ringwork.

The intensity of occupation of the earlier forts was considered by the excavator to be far greater than that associated with the royal castle.

Evidence was found of destruction of the later 13<sup>th</sup> century stone castle. Part of the evidence for the reconstruction of this as an Edwardian peel came from the north tower of the east gatehouse, which appears to have been hurriedly rebuilt in timber at this time.

Much of the entire area of the castle and its hilltop is of considerable archaeological sensitivity, both below and above ground. The modern excavations have reduced the archaeological sensitivity within much of the barmkin, although the surrounding terraces remain sensitive. The same applies to the area around the base of the hill, which has been boggy in the past. The latter may contain invaluable evidence in the form of midden material from many centuries of occupation of the hill, as well as a wealth of palaeoenvironmental data.

### Artistic/Architectural Overview

All that can be seen of Alexander Stewart's great castle of enclosure, is the well and the rounded stump of one of the D towers of the west gatehouse, under the north-west corner of the later towerhouse. This complex comprised two opposing gatehouses linked by a polygonal curtain wall. Like Caerlaverock, this was a keep-gatehouse castle. A rectangular stone building, tentatively identified as the chapel of St Ninian, may have originated in this period.

The main block is roughly rectangular in plan (17.9m by 12.1m within walls up to 2.15m thick) and comprises three principal storeys with halls on the first and second floors. The towerhouse is unusual in that it comprises two feasting halls, one above the other, with originally, no residential provision. The Laich or Lower Hall would have been used for more public entertaining. It was divided by a timber partition that separated the hall from a service area. The floor beneath the Laich Hall would have been used for storage. The Great or Upper Hall on the top storey would have been reserved for more private entertaining.

The second-floor hall is carried on a pointed barrel-vault and is divided into two principal bays by transverse and diagonal moulded ribs, with depressed wall-ribs between. These ribs do not actually support the vault. The west facade bears the royal arms and those of the Stewarts, and incorporates splayed semicircular angle-buttresses at the ground floor flanking the former entrance (subsequently infilled). A wing was added on the south in the 15th century to provide additional private chambers and a prison.

Fragments of the barmkin wall, 1.0m thick, can still be seen running around the upper perimeter of the hill, in places surviving to a height of 3.0m. The enclosed space was divided by the contours into a higher outer court, and a lower inner court. The planning of the latter was determined by a pre-existing chapel, which was cleverly used to create a narrow entrance to this court, giving access to the tower forestair. The inner entrance here was provided with a direct link at the higher level between tower and chapel.

Useful comparisons can be drawn with Threave and Doune, the latter being roughly contemporary with Dundonald, and built around 1380 by Robert II's son, Robert, duke of Albany.

### Social Overview

Visitor access is managed by the Friends of Dundonald Castle, whose stated aim is to 'bring the castle back into village life'. They organise numerous local events and weddings here throughout the year. They, in partnership with south Ayrshire

Council, have developed a purpose-built visitor centre, shop, café, and exhibition, as the gateway to the castle.

### Spiritual Overview

The chapel has the potential to inform an understanding of the central role of worship in the lives of the Stewarts and their household.

### Aesthetic Overview

The ruined castle occupies an attractive hilltop setting, providing a tangible link with the past. The views out vary from rolling agricultural fields and woodlands, to the immediate setting of the village to the west, and somewhat dominated by views of the industrial sprawl around Prestwick Airport to the south-west. There are fine views beyond this to the coast, and to Goat Fell on Arran beyond.

When Dr Johnson visited in 1773, he was unimpressed, being “very jocular on the homely accommodation of ‘King Bob’, and roared and laughed until the ruins echoed”, as reported by James Boswell.

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

What was the date and status of the original prehistoric hilltop settlement?

Was the prehistoric occupation continuous or otherwise?

Who was Donald, and what did his dun look like?

Could the stone castle of enclosure have been built by the English during their occupation of Dundonald in the Wars of Independence?

Where were the king and his family expected to sleep in the original design of Robert II’s towerhouse?

What was the appearance of the decoration and furnishings of the principal spaces within the towerhouse?

What were the precise disposition and function of ancillary buildings within the barmkin?

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## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- Substantial excavations in the 1986 and 90s, in advance of an extensive programme of conservation and presentation works, have revealed considerable detail of the development of the site, which has been a chief place of defensive settlement since early prehistory.
- Dundonald is a prime example of continuity of settlement and fortification of a naturally defensible site from early prehistory into the later medieval period. As a long-lived seat of power, this gave legitimacy to each successive incumbent lord.
- This is a key strategic location. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a stronghold here, held by the king’s loyal steward, was intended to counter threats from Galloway in

the south, and from the Norse in the west. This was the feudal administrative centre of the lordship of Kyle Stewart, granted to Walter Fitzalan c1160.

- Dundonald, along with the castles of Renfrew and Rothesay, were the chief residences of the early Stewarts.
- Dundonald charts each successive phase of development of castellated architecture from an earth and timber motte in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, to the construction of a great royal tower house castle by 'King Bob' (Robert II) in the 1370s.
- The scale and design of the 13<sup>th</sup> century castle of enclosure, was in the mainstream of north European castle building at this time, reflecting the power and wealth of the Stewarts.
- Like Bothwell, Dundonald was not completed before it was badly damaged during the Wars of Independence.
- The integrated planning of the towerhouse at Dundonald can be compared with the contemporary towerhouse at Threave, both combining public, private, and service space within a single, discrete, strongly defended unit. Although unlike Threave, there seems to have been no provision made for private chambers at Dundonald.
- The castle was a favoured residence of Robert II and Robert III. The former died here in 1390.
- The layout of the castle today, is very much as it was in the later 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. There are few royal castles of which this can be said.

#### Associated Properties

**Dunadd**; Dunnollie; Mote of Mark; **Dumbarton Castle**; **Rothesay Castle**; **Bothwell Castle**; **Caerlaverock**; **Kildrummy**; Dunstanburgh (Northumberland); Rhuddlan (N Wales); **Threave**; **Rowallan**; Paisley Abbey

Keywords prehistoric hillfort; kingdom of Strathclyde; dun; earthwork castle; Walter FitzAlan, 1<sup>st</sup> Steward; Alexander Stewart; keep-gatehouse; Wars of Independence; peel; Robert II; towerhouse.