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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SPYNIE PALACE



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SPYNIE PALACE

SYNOPSIS

Spynie Palace is located on a low ridge (10m OD) of Cherty Rock immediately to the south of the Spynie depression. This depression once held a post-glacial Loch, of which shores the Palace was immediately adjacent to.

Spynie Palace served as the official residence of the medieval bishops of Moray for five centuries. The bishopric is first recorded in the early 1100s. Initially, the bishops had no single cathedral centre but based their see variously on churches at Kinneddar, Birnie and Spynie. The church of the Holy Trinity at Spynie was established as the cathedral church for Moray in 1207. In 1224 the cathedral site was fixed permanently at Elgin, but the bishops opted to keep their official residence at Spynie. There they remained until the abolition of episcopacy in the Scottish Church in 1689.

Along with **St Andrews Castle**, Spynie is the best-preserved medieval bishop's residence in Scotland. The oldest upstanding parts of the quadrangular complex date to the 14th century and include a first-floor chapel and entrance gateway along the south range. To the latter half of the 15th century belongs the present entrance gate in the east range, the largely ruined great hall in the north range, and most impressive of all, the mighty tower house in the west range, the largest by volume in Scotland and known as David's Tower after its builder, Bishop David Stewart. Throughout its history, Spynie Palace stood on the banks of Spynie Loch, a sea loch that gradually silted up and was drained to its present size in 1808-12 by Thomas Telford. The site of the former cathedral at Spynie lies 500m to the SW; it is not in state care.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- c.1120 – Giric (Gregory) is appointed Bishop of Moray. His Gaelic name suggests he is one of a line of prelates appointed by the mormaers (Celtic earls) of Moray.
- 1130 - David I crushes a rebellion by Oengus, mormaer of Moray, and sets about incorporating the province more fully into his kingdom by granting lands to Anglo-Normans such as Hugh de Freskyn who builds **Duffus Castle**.
- c.1152/3 - David installs Bishop William, whose name suggests he is of Anglo-Norman origin. At this time, the bishops have no fixed cathedral or residence, but move as suit them between Birnie, Kinneddar and Spynie, all within a short distance of Elgin.
- 1203 - Brice of Douglas becomes bishop. During his bishopric Spynie becomes the settled cathedral and episcopal residence. Papal confirmation is obtained in 1206, and by 1208 Spynie is officially established as the cathedral.
- 1224 - Two years into his episcopate, Bishop Andrew of Moray, again with papal approval, moves the cathedral to **Elgin**. This time, though, the episcopal residence remains at Spynie. It is referred to in the 1290s as 'the castle of Spynie'.

- 1307 - Bishop David of Moray (1299-1326), a staunch ally of Robert I, returns to Spynie from self-imposed exile in Orkney. It seems likely that he begins rebuilding the palace in stone whilst residing in another of his palaces, Kinneddar, from where a number of episcopal acts are issued in the later 13th century.
- 1362 - David II stays at Spynie with Bishop John of Pilmuir, partly to escape the plague then affecting southern Scotland. Bishop John dies that year and Alexander Bur succeeds as bishop.
- 1370 - Bishop Alexander is coerced into paying 'protection money' to Robert II's son, Alexander Stewart, earl of Buchan, 'the Wolf of Badenoch'.
- 1390 - Bishop Alexander, desperate to escape Buchan's clutches, turns to Thomas Dunbar, son of the earl of Moray, for help. In retaliation, Buchan unleashes his band of 'wyld wykkyd Heland-men' on Elgin (June). The town, cathedral and 18 manses (residences of the cathedral canons) are burnt. In August, Robert III orders his younger brother 'not to interfere in any part with the castle of Spynie by further pretext'. It is not clear if Spynie escapes unscathed.
- 1397 - Bishop Alexander dies at Spynie. Robert III temporarily places the palace in the care of his miscreant brother, Buchan. In May 1398, following Bishop William of Spynie's appointment, Buchan is instructed to hand over all the bishopric's possessions, including Spynie, to the new incumbent.
- 1428 - James I stays at Spynie with Bishop Columba of Dunbar.
- 1451 - at Bishop John of Winchester's request, James II elevates the town of Spynie (depicted in Blaeu's Atlas of 1654 as being immediately to the east of the palace) into a free burgh of barony. Bishop John (1435-60) had previously served as royal clerk under James I and as 'master of the work' at the royal castle of Inverness under James II.
- 1456/7 - James II stays with Bishop John at Spynie. A barrel of salted salmon from the River Spey is delivered to the castle for the occasion.
- 1462 - David Stewart succeeds as bishop. During his episcopate (1462-76) a major upgrading of the palace is instigated. The works include a new east entrance and the massive tower house, known as 'David's Tower'. A new great hall follows before the century is out.
- 1470 - Bishop David appoints a relative, James Stewart, as palace constable.
- 1493 - James IV stays at Spynie with Bishop Andrew Stewart.
- late 15th century – Loch Spynie is cut off from the sea by gradual silting up
- 1505 - James IV visits again, whilst on pilgrimage to St Duthac's shrine in Tain, this time with Bishop Andrew Forman as host. The king is entertained by singing maidens during his stay.
- 1556 - first mention of the palace's gardens and orchards in the records. Subsequent records refer to rabbit warrens (1568).
- 1560 - the Reformation Parliament abolishes Catholicism in Scotland, although the posts of archbishop and bishop are retained.
- 1562 - Queen Mary stays two nights (17 & 18 September) at Spynie, as the guest of Bishop Patrick Hepburn (who had the wide-throated gunholes put into David's Tower). Mary is on one of her numerous royal progresses, and arrives at Spynie 'well served by her nobles, obeyed of her subjects, and convoyed by great numbers of horse and foot'. But this is a progress with a difference, for Mary is en route to 'clip the wings' of George Gordon, 4th earl of Huntly. A

month after leaving Spynie, Mary's army defeats the earl's at the battle of Corrichie (28 October), near **Huntly Castle**.

- 1567 - Following Mary's surrender at Carberry Hill, near Edinburgh, her third husband, James Hepburn, 4th earl of Bothwell, takes refuge at his Uncle Patrick's palace. After fending off an assassination attempt, and then killing his cousin, Bishop Patrick's son, Bothwell flees to Orkney, and thence to Norway and exile.
- 1573 - following Patrick Hepburn's death, George Douglas succeeds as bishop, the first non-Catholic bishop of Moray.
- 1587 - James VI annexes the episcopal estates of Moray, but allows Bishop George to remain at Spynie.
- 1589 - Bishop George dies and the post of bishop lapses. That same year, James VI stays twice at Spynie, both during hunting expeditions. Around this date, Timothy Pont's map shows Spynie Loch as an inland loch.
- 1590 - James VI creates the church lands of Moray into a temporal barony and bestows them on Alexander Lindsay, son of the earl of Crawford, with the title Lord Spynie. An unseemly struggle over control of the palace develops between Lindsay and the earl of Huntly, who maintains he is its hereditary constable.
- 1594 - James VI seizes Spynie from Huntly and in 1599 entrusts the barony to John Innes of Leuchars, also with the title of Lord Spynie.
- 1602 - Rev Alexander Douglas, chief minister of Elgin Parish, is appointed 'titular' bishop of Moray with a right to a seat in Parliament.
- 1603 - the Elgin Kirk Session notes (23 May) that certain persons were observed 'playand at the ally bowallis [bowling alley] under the castell of Spynie' when they should have been in church.
- 1607 - Bishop Alexander Douglas is allowed to reside at Spynie, and an inventory of the palace's contents is drawn up. These include reference to a 'kaiispall' (tennis court).
- 1638 - Bishop John Guthrie is dethroned following the abolition of episcopacy by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland but retains the right to stay at Spynie as he is well respected locally.
- 1640 - John Guthrie's continued refusal to sign the National Covenant sees a Covenanting force of 800 men arrive at Spynie. Guthrie surrenders his arms but is permitted to remain in the palace. Later that year, however, he is accused of simony (selling pardons), baptising illegitimates and other offences and imprisoned. By 1642 all his possessions are removed from Spynie.
- 1662 - following Charles II's return to the throne, episcopacy is re-established. Rev Murdo Mackenzie, minister of Elgin, is consecrated bishop of Moray.
- 1689 - Parliament abolishes episcopacy once more and Bishop William Hay, in post for less than a year, is deposed. Spynie Palace's 500-year history as an episcopal residence ends.
- 1740 - Spynie Kirk is abandoned for worship in favour of a new building at New Spynie. (The last surviving part stands until c. 1850.)
- 1808/12 - Thomas Telford supervises the draining of Spynie Loch to its present size.
- c.1825 - the Barons of the Exchequer, then engaged in clearance work at **Elgin Cathedral**, take Spynie Palace under their wing, build a custodian's

lodge in the grounds (1828 but demolished 1994) and plant hardwood trees nearby.

- 1838 - the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods, Forests, Land Revenues, Works and Buildings, successors of the Barons of the Exchequer, sell Spynie to the trustees of the late Earl of Fife.
- 1852 – The Morayshire Railway builds a branch line from Elgin to Lossiemouth which passes close to the east of the palace.
- 1937 - James Ramsay MacDonald, native of Lossiemouth and Labour's first Prime Minister, is buried in Spynie churchyard.
- 1973 - Alexander Dunbar of Pitgaveny entrusts Spynie palace into state care.

Archaeological Overview:

- In the 1800s, stray finds made in the vicinity of Spynie Palace (a pottery urn and three bronze axes, now in Elgin Museum), together with the discovery of numerous shell middens, indicated a strong prehistoric presence in the area.
- In the 1980s and '90s, the palace and immediate surroundings were extensively excavated as part of a major masonry consolidation programme. Much light was thrown on the architectural development of the palace, as well as uncovering further evidence of prehistoric activity. The excavations are fully published (see Lewis and Pringle), and what follows is a summary only.
- The excavations were by no means exhaustive, done chiefly to aid masonry consolidation. Of those areas excavated, particularly the great hall in the north range, excavation did not fully investigate the occupation layers, and as a consequence areas still have a high archaeological potential. Certain areas within the palace footprint were left untouched (eg, the central area of the courtyard), as was most of the ground beyond the curtain wall, and thus the area should be considered to have a high archaeological sensitivity.
- Period 1: pre-bishopric occupation: Several pits or depressions were found in the palace courtyard, including one containing animal bone, shell and pottery of probable Bronze-Age date. Other pits containing shell waste and a hearth were found in the vicinity of Castle Cottage to the west, and although not specifically dated point to further evidence of prehistoric activity.
- Period 2: the early years of the bishopric: A shallow ditch, 7m wide and aligned east-west, found just outside the south range, pre-dated all extant buildings. The ditch, presumably associated with the early palace, was levelled when the south range and SE corner tower were built. Sherds of 12th-century pottery were found in it, the earliest dating evidence for the palace so far recovered.
- Period 3: 13th-century occupation: Excavation east of David's Tower revealed the corner of a structure subsequently largely built over by David's Tower. Fine *grisaille* glass (13th century) was found, as well as pottery. The full ground plan of a smaller building was found cut into subsoil nearby. The courtyard area seems not to have been as large as that enclosed by the period 4 curtain wall.
- Period 4: the remodelling of the palace (14th to early 15th century): Much of the present curtain wall dated from this phase, including the NW and SE projecting towers and the probable remnant of a third, circular, tower in the SW corner, entombed in David's Tower. In the south range was the original entrance gateway. The south range also produced the best evidence for internal structures, in the form of a building immediately to the east of the gateway,

whose upper floor may have served as a chapel (see Architectural Overview). Portions of the missing SW curtain wall were also discovered. SW of the palace a short section of metalled road was found, probably that linking the palace to Holy Trinity Church.

- Period 5: Upgrading the palace (15th to 16th century): In addition to the building of David's Tower (dated by heraldry, see Architectural Overview), archaeological excavation demonstrated that the period 4 palace was comprehensively modified. Among the chief changes were: (a) the building of a new gate through the east range, and the blocking of the earlier one in the south range; (2) remodelling of the south, west and east ranges, including rebuilding of the SE and NW towers; (3) the building of a new, capacious banqueting hall-block along much of the north range (including a well in the basement), together with associated works to the remainder of the range to its west. Outside the curtain, to the east and south, were found remains of another cobbled road and walls.
- Period 6: The final years of the bishopric (late 16th to late 17th century): In addition to minor changes to the courtyard buildings, the main discovery was of a wall immediately outside the curtain wall, close to the SE angle of David's Tower, interpreted as a defensive wall perhaps erected during the troubles of the 1640s (though it could conceivably be part of the gardens and orchards mentioned in records).
- Period 7: Post-bishopric Spynie: Excavation to the west of the palace found evidence of the fishing hamlet depicted on an engraving c.1800, including part of a dwelling and a grain kiln.

Recent (2017) survey work carried out in the woodland to the north of the Palace has identified a number of features which may relate to a harbour and lochside settlement.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- Nothing remains visible of the original bishop's palace built in the early 13th century, and only tantalising fragments survive from the 14th century. What does survive above ground dates mostly from the later 15th century, following the decision to relocate the main entrance from the south to the east range.

14th-century structures:

- The earliest surviving masonry dates from the 1300s. It can be seen in the south and west ranges and in the basement of David's Tower. The two-storey south range comprised a large upper room; three large, pointed traceried windows (later blocked) remain in the south curtain wall. Certainly a chapel by the 15th century, this may have been its function from the outset. Below it, at ground level, are the remains of the earlier entrance gateway. The west curtain wall also retains evidence for three narrower, pointed traceried windows; these may have lit an earlier hall, given its location beside a large circular tower in the SW angle of the courtyard, the basement of which alone remains, entombed in David's Tower. This tower may have served as the bishop's lodging.

Later 15th-century structures:

- In the later 15th century, the entrance gateway in the south range was blocked and a new, more impressive gate was built through the east range. The gate has flanking buttresses supporting corbelled semi-hexagonal turrets. Between the turrets, a pair of flattened arches, carried forward on a central projecting corbel, support the parapet. The gate was fitted with a portcullis. Directly over the portal is a stone panel bearing the arms of the bishop who ordered its construction; now frustratingly badly worn, these are tentatively identified as Bishop John of Winchester's (1435-60), though the closest architectural parallels (eg, Middleham, Yorkshire) would date the gate to c.1400.
- To the left of the new entrance gate is a tall tower projecting from the SE angle. Excavation showed that it was not built from new, but a substantial rebuilding of an earlier tower. The other angle tower at the NW corner, beside the postern, or Water Gate, through the north range, may also be a rebuilding. Both have inverted-keyhole gunholes, typical of the later 1400s. A third tower was the mighty David's Tower at the SW angle, built as the bishop's lodging.
- Towards the close of the 15th century, a hall and chamber block was built along the north side of the courtyard, to the east of the Water Gate. Although greatly ruined, its arrangement is similar to other hall-blocks of the time (eg, **Dirleton Castle**).
- Whilst no harbour is visible today, elements of the surviving Palace indicate of the presence of one. When the north range was constructed in the late 15th century a Watergate and passage was also constructed through the North curtain wall heading towards to Loch. This Watergate may well have replaced an earlier opening in the curtain wall.

David's Tower:

- David's Tower, measuring 19m by 13.5m and 22m high, was one of the largest tower houses built in Scotland. It has a vaulted basement, sunk 1.5m below the courtyard pavement, with five more storeys and a garret above; the fourth storey was also vaulted over.
- The tower's exterior is austere and plain, devoid of architectural details except at the parapet, which is carried on large triple corbels, with rounded turrets at three of the four corners. The fourth corner housed the cap-house atop the spiral stair.
- The principal entrance to the tower is at first-floor level on the east side, overlooking the courtyard. Originally defended by a wooden door and iron yett, it was altered in the 1800s. There were two other side entrances, both at ground level leading to the two basement cellars. The circular cellar is all that remains of the 14th-century round tower that projected from the SW angle.
- The floors above the basement comprised a large room, or rooms, with smaller closets and latrines honeycombed in the east wall. A single spiral stair in the NE corner provided access to them all. The inherent weakness of the east wall led ultimately to its inner skin collapsing; the present concrete structure was installed in the 1980s to prevent further collapse.
- The south exterior wall houses armorial stone panels, indicating that the tower was begun in the time of Bishop David Stewart (1462-77) and completed by his successor, Bishop David Stewart (1477-82). The wide-throated gunholes at the tower's base were put there in Bishop Patrick Hepburn's time (1538-73), as his coat-of-arms attests.

Social Overview:

- Spynie Palace is tucked away out of sight, and as a result is not so well known as it deserves to be. Its historic link with Elgin has largely gone, though locals use the former railway branch line that runs to the east of the site for recreation. The medieval bishopric of Moray has little resonance today.
- Despite its proximity to Elgin, Spynie has little social function beyond modest tourism and some educational value. The area is probably more popular for its wildlife, largely because of the adjacent thick woodland that now covers the largely drained Spynie Loch.

Spiritual Overview:

- As the residence of the medieval and early modern bishops of Moray, Spynie Palace was central to religious policy and government, affecting the spiritual lives of thousands of people.
- As Scotland's most complete medieval bishop's palace (along with **St Andrews Castle**), Spynie gives some understanding of the functioning of the medieval church and its leaders. The palace is an ostentatious building that speaks volumes about the self-imagery and social projection of medieval prelates.
- The palace housed a chapel (in the south range) and a private oratory for the bishop (in an upper floor of David's Tower).
- Today, there is little, if any, connection with the Church in Scotland. Perhaps it is not its history that provides the primary spiritual association, but rather the sense of peace its setting engenders.

Aesthetic Overview:

- The site is well-maintained and peaceful. The monumental, and largely complete, David's Tower dominates the roofless and ruined courtyard buildings. The complex has an air of faded majesty about it, mingled with romanticism.
- Spynie Palace nestles on the edge of thick woodland, occupying what was once Spynie Loch. To its south are fields on a gentle slope. A disused railway branch line passes close to its east.
- The woods to the west block vision of the castle from the approach road. Only from the south are the palace ruins fully visible. David's Tower alone projects above the tree line, but for how much longer? Spynie is nonetheless an evocative sight and experience.
- The battlements of David's Tower provide fine views in all directions, particularly to the north and east, enabling the visitor to grasp the former magnitude of Spynie Loch and its relationship to the North Sea.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When did humans first settle beside Spynie Loch?
- When was the first church at Spynie built?
- What did the original bishop's palace look like?
- Where precisely was the town of Spynie, and what form did it take?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- The area around Spynie Palace was inhabited in early prehistory. Until the close of the Middle Ages, the site lay on the southern bank of a sea loch, Spynie Loch, providing shelter from the open sea and access to good fishing grounds.
- Spynie Palace is the best preserved medieval episcopal residence in Scotland, marginally more complete than **St Andrews Castle**. Our understanding of its history and architecture is also the most complete thanks to the information gained from the recent archaeological excavations, study of the standing structures and documentary research.
- As the principal residence of the bishops of Moray, Spynie Palace was one of the most significant power centres in Moray. The Crown used it on occasion as a guest house when travelling in the area.
- David's Tower is the largest tower house by volume in Scotland. Its monumental scale is a material demonstration of the power and wealth of medieval prelates. It serves to show that such men had an importance greater than their religious responsibilities, and were often powerful magnates fully conversant with the symbols of power used by their secular counterparts.
- The surviving remains demonstrate well how medieval castles developed during the course of the later Middle Ages.
- Aesthetically, the ruin greatly enhances the location, creating a surprisingly beautiful and picturesque experience.

Associated Properties:

(the other medieval cathedral sites in Moray) - Spynie Kirk (site of); Birnie Kirk; **Elgin Cathedral**; Kinneddar Kirk (site of).

(other surviving Scottish episcopal residences) - **Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall**; Bishop's Palace, Fetternear; Dornoch Castle; **St Andrew's Castle**.

Keywords:

tower house, entrance gate, great hall, chapel, bishop, heraldic panel

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