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**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90244)

**Taken into State care:** 1955 (Guardianship)

**Last reviewed:** 2011

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# RAVENSCRAIG CASTLE



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# RAVENS CRAIG CASTLE

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## SYNOPSIS

Ravenscraig Castle stands on the NE edge of Kirkcaldy. It was begun in 1460 as a jointure house for James II's queen, Mary of Gueldres, but work seems to have stopped at her death in 1463. It was completed after William Sinclair, Earl of Caithness, acquired the property in 1470. The Sinclairs remained owners until 1898.

The ruins straddle a high triangular-shaped promontory overlooking the Firth of Forth. The principal buildings, facing landward, comprise two lofty drum towers flanking a central block housing the main entrance. Behind it lie foundations of ancillary structures and defensive walls. The castle is noted for its array of gunholes.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview:

- 1460 - James II gives the estate of Dysart to his queen, Mary of Gueldres, and instructs his master of works, David Boys, to build her a castle. James dies shortly afterwards at the siege of English-held Roxburgh Castle.
- 1463 - Queen Mary's death results in a halt to the building works. However, records suggest that the castle was habitable, for in 1461 her steward and other staff spent 25 days there. Close examination of the structure suggests that the east tower was largely completed by her death.
- 1470 - James III grants the castle and estate to William Sinclair, earl of Caithness, in exchange for Kirkwall Castle and the earldom of Orkney. William and his heirs, the earls of Roslin, complete the building of the castle, but to an altered design.
- Mid 17<sup>th</sup> century - The Sinclair earls of Roslin abandon Ravenscraig as their principal residence in Fife, and relocate to nearby Dysart House (the present Dysart House was built in 1755-6 for General James St Clair). Whether Ravenscraig's abandonment is related to military action during Oliver Cromwell's invasion in 1650 is unrecorded.
- 1898 - The Sinclair-Erskines sell the castle.
- 1914-18 - during World War I the castle is used as a munitions store.
- 1955 - the castle is taken into state care.

### Archaeological Overview:

- In 1964 excavations undertaken by the Ministry of Public Building and Works, in tandem with masonry consolidation, showed that the rock-cut ditch was never finished. The foundations of several buildings behind the main front were revealed, including a kiln. Substantial amounts of unstratified pottery were found.

### Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- Ravenscraig is something of an enigma. It was built apparently as a residence for a queen, and yet its massively thick frontal wall bristling with gunholes has resulted in its being interpreted as an artillery fortress. Appearances, however, can be deceptive, and a closer examination of Ravenscraig shows that the castle acquired its present overtly martial air only by degrees rather than as the result of one great master plan. That said, the castle may be regarded as being among the first in Scotland built in response to the growing threat from gunpowdered artillery.
- The original design seems to have been for an impressive frontage stretching east-west across the promontory, and protected from the higher landward side to the north by a substantial rock-cut ditch. That frontal façade was to have a pair of large and lofty drum towers at either end flanking a lower central section housing the great hall over the main entrance, a similar arrangement to James I's **Linlithgow Palace**.
- The original (royal) scheme seems only to have progressed as far as digging the great ditch, constructing the curtain walls around the promontory, erecting the bulk of the east drum tower and laying out the footings of the remainder of the complex. None of the gunholes appears to date from this building campaign.
- The east tower comprised three floors of domestic accommodation above a vaulted basement housing a well. Each of the two main upper floors housed a chamber accessed separately, suggesting individual occupation rather than the linked rooms of a royal lodging. The attic floor had two smaller rooms. The only gunhole is a later insertion.
- The Sinclairs built the west tower almost from its foundations, and constructed the ground-floor vaults of the central range, apparently to support an artillery platform rather than the anticipated great hall. All the gunholes, both inverted-keyhole (as at **Threave Castle** c.1450) and horizontal wide-mouthed (introduced to Dunbar Castle's blockhouse c. 1520), belong to this building campaign. These works demonstrate a much greater concern with defence.
- The west tower was accessed independently of the rest of the main front, via a stone-enclosed forestair, in the manner of the main tower at **Doune Castle**. Its series of vertically-stacked chambers provided the sort of accommodation found in traditional tower houses, suggesting that the tower was intended as the Sinclairs' self-contained residence. Despite the external drum-plan, all the main rooms are rectangular. The larger windows are confined to those sides not threatened by land-based artillery fire.
- The central block comprised, at ground level, two vaulted cellars and porter's lodge either side of a centrally placed entrance way. The artillery platform above, open to the sky, had two deep gun embrasures of horizontal, wide-mouthed type.
- Subsequent building works included remodelling the upper levels of both drum towers, constructing latrines over the cliff edge adjacent to the west tower and building a beehive dovecot down by the shore 500m to the east of the castle (not in state care).
- Behind the main front, the rest of the promontory was occupied by less substantial buildings housing ancillary accommodation and service offices. A postern on the east side, defended by two inverted-keyhole gunholes, gave

access to the beach below. The curved wall at the southern tip may have belonged to a gun tower defending the castle from seaward attack.

#### Social Overview:

- Ravenscraig Castle has little associative values, either personal or with historical events. The name Sinclair lives on in the nearby suburb of Sinclairtown. The name Ravenscraig is more commonly associated locally with Ravenscraig Park, a large and popular recreational amenity spreading eastward to Dysart. (Ravenscraig Park was gifted to the people of Kirkcaldy in 1929 by Michael Nairn, the linoleum magnate, who resided at Dysart House, formerly a Sinclair property.) The three 1960s tower blocks that overwhelm the castle from the north are also called Ravens Craig.
- The castle is presently managed as a visitor attraction by Fife Council, with Historic Scotland retaining responsibility for its maintenance. The property is freely accessible from Ravenscraig Park. However, the interiors of the two towers and artillery platform are normally locked. The site has a history of vandalism and anti-social behaviour, and even though Historic Scotland used to employ custodians, they were more akin to a security guard than a visitor services manager. Today, the two towers are the almost exclusive domain of nesting fulmars.
- The castle is close to the Fife Coastal Path (part of the North Sea trail) that runs through Ravenscraig Park.

#### Spiritual Overview:

- Ravenscraig Castle probably had a chapel or oratory during its time as a noble residence, though where in the complex it was located is not known.
- The castle has no known spiritual associations or meanings today.

#### Aesthetic Overview:

- The castle sits on a coastal promontory whose sides fall precipitously to a shingle beach and the waters of the Firth of Forth almost 30m below. It is a notable landmark, but chiefly only from the beach; glimpses only may be had from the landward side.
- The castle's dramatic setting is somewhat diluted by the aspect to the north - not only by the approach path walling, but also by the low-rise red-brick housing immediately beyond, and overpoweringly by the three 1960s tower-blocks (Raven's Craig) to the NW.
- The views out from the castle to the south and east, over the Firth of Forth to Edinburgh and as far as the Bass Rock, are wonderful.
- The impressively-solid frontal façade is characterised by its simple form and fine ashlar masonry. Though the towers are asymmetrical, this is not too unsettling, for it is difficult to view the castle from immediately in front.
- The internal spaces of the two towers (not normally accessible) are reached by narrow, tortuous access stairs, with the result that moving through the building presents a sequence of unexpected spaces.

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

- How was the castle intended to be used by Queen Mary of Gueldres, and by the Sinclairs who later acquired the property?

## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key Points

- Although not initially intended to be heavily fortified, Ravenscraig demonstrates well the impact of the development of gun-powdered artillery on castle design in the later middle ages.
- The castle's structure and buried archaeology represent a significant resource in understanding the domestic economy and organisation of a late medieval/early modern aristocratic household.
- Ravenscraig is an attractive, idiosyncratic ruin in a striking location overlooking the Firth of Forth, and commanding wonderful views across the Firth of Forth.

### Associated Properties:

*(other associated royal castles)* - **Doone Castle; Linlithgow Palace.**

*(other Sinclair castles)* - Roslin (Rosslyn) Castle, Girnigoe Castle (Castle Sinclair).

*(other castles with noted artillery fortifications)* - Dunbar Castle; **Tantallon Castle, Threave Castle.**

### Keywords:

ditch, tower, artillery, gunhole, Mary of Gueldres, James II, Sinclair

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