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SCOTLAND

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## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# ORCHARDTON TOWER



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## ORCHARDTON TOWER

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# 1 Summary

## 1.1 Introduction

Orchardton Tower, at Old Orchardton, 1 mile south of Palnackie, comprises the roofless and ruined remains of a tower-house castle built by one of the Cairns family c.1460. The tower house itself, surviving to its battlemented parapet, is circular in shape, and as such is widely regarded as unique in Scotland. In most other respects its layout conforms to the standard 15<sup>th</sup>-century tower-house plan, with a vaulted basement (separately accessed), first-floor hall and two upper storeys of private accommodation. Immediately adjacent lie the more ruinous remains of outer structures, including a comparatively rare two-storey hall block.

## 1.2 Statement of significance

Orchardton Tower has several features of note:

- Orchardton Tower is regarded as unique among Scotland's many later medieval tower houses as a near-freestanding circular tower.
- Orchardton Tower is also well-nigh unique as an example of a tower house existing alongside its most important barmkin building, the outer hall. These outer halls rarely survive above ground today (eg, **Crichton Castle** and **Tantallon Castle**) but are increasingly being discovered in archaeological excavations (eg, **Smailholm Tower**, Sauchie Tower, **Threave Castle**).
- Despite being extensively cleared of rubble in the 1920s, Orchardton Tower still has great archaeological potential to contribute towards a better understanding of the nature of lordly residences in later medieval Scotland.
- Orchardton Tower is also notable for its well-preserved medieval layout, particularly in the interior of the tower – although roofless, the building has neither been ruined nor rebuilt.
- In short, Orchardton Tower offers both an unusual architectural form – a circular tower-house – and an unusually well-preserved example of a typical late-medieval laird's castle.
- The above short statement encapsulates our current understanding of the main significances of this site. A broader overview of the cultural and natural heritage values of the place is given below.

## 2 Assessment of values

### 2.1 Background

#### Summary Chronology

- **1440** – a tombstone of this date in the south transept of **Dundrennan Abbey** appears to commemorate a “lady of Orchardton”,<sup>1</sup> perhaps the wife of the local man-at-arms John Cairns, whose son of the same name is the first recorded laird of Orchardton in the 1450s.
- **1455** – John Cairns holds the lands of ‘Erysbutil’, which can be identified as Orchardton, in exchange for an annual rent of £6 to the Earl of Douglas; when a civil war breaks out between King James II and the Earl, he chooses to back the king, and is rewarded in 1456 when he is confirmed as laird and his rent is reduced to just one penny.<sup>2</sup> He probably builds the present tower.
- **1469** – John Cairns is recorded as laird of Orchardton, the first unambiguous evidence for the current place-name.<sup>3</sup> The name may simply indicate the existence of an orchard nearby, though similar spellings have also been used historically for the various places now called Urquhart – the latest scholarship regards all of these as sharing the same Celtic derivation, meaning ‘settlement beside a small wood’.
- **1558** – Orchardton is partitioned among three sisters, with the eldest apparently receiving the tower house. Sir Robert Maxwell, brother of Lord Herries, subsequently buys up the various fragments, gaining the

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<sup>1</sup> A.H. Christie, *The Abbey of Dundrennan* (Dalbeattie 1914) pp. 148-150. The fragmentary Latin inscription reads *domina Or/cheal-*, but while Victorian antiquaries were happy to accept ‘Orchea’ as a Latin rendering of the place-name, a form such as ‘Orcheardtoun’, extending into the subsequent gap in the inscription, is probably preferable. In addition, the frequently-quoted reconstruction of the lady’s name as Sibylla seems very tentative, extrapolated from a lost fragment recorded as reading *-lv sil-* in 1856 (A.B. Hutchison, *Memorials of the Abbey of Dundrennan in Galloway* (Exeter 1857), p. 28); in 1422, John Cairns was married to a woman named Elizabeth (Lawlor, pp. 54-55).

<sup>2</sup> *Rotuli Scaccarii Regum Scotorum. The Exchequer rolls of Scotland*, ed. G. Burnett and G.P. McNeill (23 vols., Edinburgh 1878-1908) vol. vi. pp. 210, 262-63. The first reference occurs in the royal accounts for the period 25 May 1455 – 17 September 1456, and notes that “sasine of these same [lands] has not been recovered by John Cairns” (*sasina non recuperata de eisdem per Johannem Carnys*); this refers to the need to formally renew his rights following the transfer of feudal overlordship from the exiled Earl of Douglas to King James II, and shows that he *already* held Orchardton before this period; he probably remained in *de facto* occupation throughout, and had recovered sasine, and gained his rent reduction, by 9 October 1456. For a full discussion of the identification of ‘Erysbutil’ as Orchardton, correcting some recent confusion, see Alastair Livingston, “The Gaelic Clans of Galloway”, unpublished research paper (2011), p. 3

[[http://www.academia.edu/703210/The\\_Gaelic\\_clans\\_of\\_Galloway](http://www.academia.edu/703210/The_Gaelic_clans_of_Galloway), accessed 19 Nov 2015].

<sup>3</sup> *Registrum Magni Sigillii Regnum Scotorum. The Register of the Great Seal*, ed. T. Thomson, J. Maitland Thomson, J. Balfour Paul, J. H. Stevenson and W. K. Dickson (11 vols., Edinburgh, 1814-1984), vol 2, No. 976. Earlier references may await discovery.

tower house in 1616 and completing the reunification of the lairdship c. 1640; his son becomes a baronet in 1663.<sup>4</sup>

- **1746** – Sir Robert Maxwell, 7<sup>th</sup> baronet of Orchardton, returns from exile in France and fights on the Jacobite side at Culloden. After the defeat of the Jacobites, the disinherited outlaw manages to regain his inheritance from his cousins (he is said to have formally challenged them “at the door of Orchardton Castle”),<sup>5</sup> and builds a new mansion 1 mile SSW of the old tower. (This is largely demolished and replaced in 1881 by the present Orchardton House.)
- **c. 1790** – the local artist Alexander Reid sketches Orchardton, showing that the tower is still roofed at this date, with a thatched laird’s house or farmhouse to the south (now completely vanished). A similar view is drawn by the antiquarian Francis Grose, perhaps based on Reid’s sketch.
- **1815** – Walter Scott has his novel *Guy Mannering, or the Astrologer*, published, a story loosely based on the figure of Sir Robert Maxwell, 7<sup>th</sup> baronet of Orchardton.
- **1912** – Orchardton Tower is taken into state care, along with another Kirkcudbrightshire tower house formerly owned by the 7<sup>th</sup> baronet, **MacLellan’s Castle**. The tower was taken into state care in 1912. In addition to conservation of the stonework, the roof of the caphouse was renewed, and flagstone floor in the first-floor chamber were added, as were the modern doors in the two entrances. It was planned to replace the metal bars in the windows with wooden window-frames, but this was not carried out.

## 2.2 Evidential values

The primary evidential values of Orchardton comprise the structure itself and its below ground archaeology. The four-storey tower house itself stands to wall-head height, whilst the adjoining barmkin (courtyard) buildings survive to first-floor level. While the circular form of the tower is the most eye-catching feature, apart from this plan form the site is also particularly notable for the survival of the tower-house and hall block alongside each other, which is rare in Scotland. The circular plan form and other architectural features are discussed in 2.4 below.

Of the ruined structures adjacent to the tower, two features are of note: directly in front of the tower are the remains of a rectangular stone turret containing a spiral stair leading (presumably via a wooden bridge) to the tower’s original entrance doorway. Beyond this stands a hall-block (the hall itself was on the upper floor, above a vaulted basement). Given the lack of

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<sup>4</sup> McKerlie v. 83-93; Lawlor, p. 66, 178-181, J. Riddell, *Tracts, Legal and Historical, with Other Antiquarian Matter chiefly Relative to Scotland* (Edinburgh 1835), 99-101

<sup>5</sup> Gourlay, p. 153.

cooking facilities in the tower, this block may also have contained the kitchen. These represent a precious survival, for such structures, being less robustly constructed than their parent tower houses, were prone to major alteration/removal in later times (eg, the hall-block at **Threave Castle** was demolished in its entirety c.1450, whilst the surviving hall-block at **Crichton Castle** is today barely recognisable, entombed as it is in a later 16<sup>th</sup>-century remodelling). Excavations at **Smailholm Tower** revealed the hall-block and kitchen side by side, demonstrating that the two spaces worked in tandem.

There were probably further ancillary structures in addition to the compact ruins immediately adjacent to the tower. A linear feature suggesting a substantial outer enclosure extends around the tower to the north, while illustrations from the late eighteenth century show a substantial farmhouse or laird's house to the south of the tower, of which no trace now remains. A boundary wall bisected the site between them – the area to the south was evidently levelled to create a flat space between the tower and the farmhouse, accounting for the disappearance of the linear feature in this area, while a number of tall trees grew up on the opposite side, perhaps protecting the surviving ruins from spoliation.

### 2.3 Historical values

This historical values of Orchardton Tower primarily relate to its connection with the Cairns family and its subsequent owners. These families were primarily of local importance (though not parochial in terms of their interests and connections) and Orchardton serves to illustrate their lifestyle and concerns. It also has interesting and strong connections with other HES-managed sites in the area, particularly Maclellan's Castle and Threave.

#### **The Cairns family**

The Cairns family, documented as lairds of Orchardton from 1455, had previously served the Stewart royal dynasty and the House of Douglas in various administrative, military, domestic, and diplomatic capacities, including involvement in the construction of Edinburgh Castle and Linlithgow Palace.<sup>6</sup> They are an interesting example of a family with good social connections who acted as gentleman-servants for higher-ranking dynasties, perhaps because they had only relatively modest revenues of their own – the £6 rent reduction they received for supporting King James II against the Earl of Douglas in the

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<sup>6</sup> Lawlor, pp. 1-6, 31-66, esp. pp. 58-59. The documented history of the family begins in the late fourteenth century with three brothers who were clearly close relatives of the Lothian baron Duncan Cairns of that ilk (though I can find no primary source confirming the oft-repeated claim that they were his younger siblings): William, constable of Edinburgh Castle, John, custumar of Linlithgow, and Master Alexander, Provost of Lincluden; between them they played prominent and varied roles in the service of the Stewart royal family and the Earl of Douglas. Contrary to what is sometimes claimed (e.g. RCAHMS p. 58), there is no evidence that Master Alexander Cairns was laird of Orchardton, and in fact it seems inherently unlikely, as it is not identified as part of the lairdship centred at Carsluith which he bequeathed to his nephew John, the son of William; John also inherited the lairdship of Cults from his father, and the custumarship of Linlithgow from his uncle John, and probably served the Earl of Douglas as a man-at-arms in France in the 1420s; his son, another John, retained Carsluith, Cults and the custumarship, and is the first documented laird of Orchardton in the 1450s.

1450s may have been instrumental in securing their transition to self-sufficient lairds, as they promptly ceased to pursue official roles, and refocused their activities as members of the local gentry in Galloway.

The lairdship was divided between three heiresses in 1558, and the Court of Session imposed an impractically complex partition in which every individual piece of ground was to be subdivided separately. A local nobleman, Sir Robert Maxwell, gradually bought up all the pieces to reunite the lairdship for himself.

### **The Maxwell family**

The lairds of Orchardton took their part in the violent blood-feuds of the period, though these events are not directly connected to Orchardton Tower itself. In 1527, William Cairns, the laird's son fought in a skirmish between two gangs of Galloway gentlemen on Edinburgh's High Street, in which the leader of the opposing faction, MacLellan of Bombie, was slain. In 1608 Sir Robert Maxwell attempted unsuccessfully to mediate the dispute between his cousin Lord Maxwell and his rival Sir James Johnstone of Annandale – sadly, the parlay he brokered between them degenerated into a squabble, Sir James was shot dead, and Lord Maxwell was executed for the crime.

The story of how the 7<sup>th</sup> Baronet recovered his inheritance is highly romantic, to the extent that it is hard to disentangle fact from fiction (and Sir Walter Scott turned it into a novel). Contemporary accounts report that he was sent to a Jesuit seminary in France and effectively disinherited, then dropped out to join the French army (or rather a Jacobite regiment in French pay), with whom he fought as an officer at the battles of Fontenoy and Culloden, before returning to Galloway as an outlaw. Recognised by his former wet-nurse, he was able to escape punishment (on the basis of his French commission, making him a mercenary rather than a rebel), and successfully challenged the cousins who had usurped his inheritance. A relatively reliable source asserts that the young Jacobite officer formally confronted them at the door of Orchardton Tower itself.<sup>7</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the unusual circular design of Orchardton Tower became a story in itself, with various fanciful accounts attributing it to the Vikings or the Picts.

## **2.4 Architectural and artistic values**

The most outstanding single feature of Orchardton is its circular plan form as a semi-freestanding tower. There is much speculation as to the inspiration for this feature which is discussed below. In addition to its circular plan, Orchardton Tower's well-preserved interior fittings and the substantial ruins of the other buildings provide a detailed insight into the domestic arrangements of the late-medieval Cairns lairds and the post-medieval Maxwell baronets. The archaeological interest of the ancillary ranges is discussed more fully at para 2.2 above.

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<sup>7</sup> Gourlay, p. 153.



### The circular plan

The unusual circular shape of the tower has prompted various theories. One nineteenth-century antiquary hailed it as “a fine specimen of the Danish Rath”, while the Victorian novelist S.R. Crockett had one of his characters refer to it as “the Old Pict’s Tower of Orchardton”.<sup>8</sup> More recently, and rather more plausibly, it has been claimed that the closest parallels to Orchardton’s circular shape are to be found in southern Ireland, but no direct connection of the Cairns family with that area has been discovered.<sup>9</sup> That said, most southern Macher lords in the 15C had connections with trade in the north Irish Sea region. They would likely know (or know of) towers such as Dundrum and understand them as a very visible demonstration of power to traders in the port.

Prominent circular residential towers are known from many Scottish castles – some, such as Bothwell, Dirleton and Kildrummy are thirteenth-century, but Tantallon is probably fourteenth-century, and others, like Caerlaverock, Dalhousie, and the fragmentary examples at Glasclune, Falkland, Brodick and Dumbarton, may be equally late or later, and the intact donjon at Cortachy (generally dated to the fifteenth century) may also have originally been free-standing. The ‘Constable’s Tower’ at Edinburgh Castle is also thought to have been circular, and may be particularly relevant because of its connection with the Cairns family – the John Cairns documented as laird of Orchardton in the 1450s was the grandson of a former constable of Edinburgh, who would have resided in the Constable’s Tower, and may have even been involved in building it – he and his brother were responsible for extensive construction work at both Edinburgh and Linlithgow Palace, while another brother probably oversaw the building of Lincluden Church for the Earls of Douglas.

It is therefore likely that the Cairns family had a range of reference points for Orchardton, which probably included Edinburgh, Bothwell and potentially others such as Dundrum. Borrowing a feature normally associated with royal fortresses and magnates’ strongholds and adapting it to the more compact plan of a laird’s residence would have flattered the reputations of the Cairns. Moreover, we should never dismiss the joy of novelty and the desire to stand out. The form of Orchardton when newly built would have been a rare feature in the region, and a point of conversation then as it is now.

### Other architectural features

The circular tower house, at 8.5m in diameter, is remarkably small by the standards of the day (**Cardoness Castle**, by comparison, measures 14 x 10m

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<sup>8</sup> J. Train, *An Historical and Statistical Account of the Isle of Man* (2 vols., Douglas 1845) vol. i, p. 277 n. 2, S.R. Crockett, *The Raiders* (London 1894, Edinburgh 2001), p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> References to Orchardton as ‘unique’ are at least as old as Lawlor p. 50, RCAHMS p. li; the Irish analogy was proposed by H.G. Leask, *Irish Castles* (Dundalk 1941), and has been widely repeated since. Examples of round tower-houses in southern Ireland include Nenagh, Ballynahow, Moorestown, Kockagh, Farney, and Fethard in County Tipperary, Doonagore and Newtown in County Clare, and the perhaps rather earlier Parkavonear in County Kerry and Reginald’s Tower in Waterford; the round donjon at Dundrum in County Down is geographically nearer, but was built before 1211.

overall). Its granite rubble walls rise, unbroken by stringcourses, to the simply moulded corbels under the crenellated parapet, which is carried up as a gabled caphouse over the single internal stair. The roof is now missing. The tower's detailing is remarkably plain, with only the main windows lighting the upper three storeys and the original (round-arched) entrance doorways given simple chamfered dressed margins. Nonetheless, the building is subtly enlivened by a large number of essentially functional architectural features – the outflow of the toilet chute, tiny slit windows lighting the basement, staircase and garderobes, rainwater outflows above the string-course of the parapet, and a 'murder-hole' between the corbels immediately above the original entrance.

Access into the upper floors of the tower was subsequently altered, possibly in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the original entrance doorway was abandoned in favour of a new opening (the present entrance) formed from one of the two original hall windows and approached by a flight of stairs. No other significant alterations are evident in the fabric, but the flat wallhead of the parapet may date from the same period, as the removal of battlements to create a less military silhouette was fashionable in the early seventeenth century.

The tower's interior layout is largely typical of contemporary tower houses despite its unique circular form. The ground-floor cellar is separately accessed, with no internal communication to the upper levels (a similar arrangement originally pertained at Preston Tower, East Lothian, for example). What is puzzling here is that the doorway does not appear to be well-defended – perhaps the doorway is a secondary feature, or else the fortified appearance of the tower was always mostly for show.

Whereas the ground-floor cellar is rectangular and barrel-vaulted, each of the three upper storeys comprised a circular room with a timber ceiling (the upper floors are missing but the wide scarcements for carrying the joists remain). The upper floors are accessed by a tight spiral stair terminating in the small caphouse at the wall-head. The first-floor hall, measuring just 5.2m in diameter (that at **Cardoness Castle**, by comparison, is c. 8.5 x 5m), has two sculptural features of note – (1) on the door jamb leading to the stair a conical corbel carved with foliage on its left side, probably a lamp cresset, and (2) a fine trefoil-headed aumbry/piscina to the right of the fireplace. The latter is clearly medieval in date, but whether it is *in situ* or was subsequently brought here from a nearby church is not clear (candidates include the chapel of Kirkmirran and the old parish church at Buittle). Given the Catholic sympathies of the Maxwell lairds, it is possible that a domestic space was adapted to double as a clandestine chapel after the Reformation, a practice well-known from seventeenth-century recusant houses in Aberdeenshire – but it may also be a genuine item of medieval domestic furnishing; a similar feature exists beside the hall fireplace in **Cardoness Castle**.

The second floor was probably the bedchamber. It has a similar repertoire of features – two windows with flanking seats, an aumbry, fireplace, and garderobe – but lacks the sculptural details found in the floor below, and the

windows face east and west, to catch the morning and evening light. The blank space directly opposite the door, warmed by the flue of the hearth in the hall below, probably indicates the location of the laird's bed. Above this was a very plain chamber of uncertain function, lit by a rather impractical window set low down near the floor (its position is necessitated by the fact that the upper part of this room's walling consists of the inner masonry of the parapet and wall-walk). The staircase terminates in a caphouse at parapet level, and the encircling wall-walk is well-preserved.

## 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Orchardton Tower is set in gently rolling countryside. It is reached via a pretty single track road and the impression is one of rural tranquillity. The tower makes a picturesque focus for the landscape set in lush pasture and woodland with views to the hills to the north.

For many, its diminutive scale and cylindrical shape make Orchardton one of the most immediately appealing of towers, perceived as lacking the element of grimness or threat of many of its brethren. Excellent views are to be had from the wall-walk.

## 2.6 Natural heritage values

The site is assessed as having little natural heritage significance.

## 2.7 Contemporary/use values

### **Access**

Orchardton Tower is relatively remote and most visitors arrive by private car.

### **Education**

The relative completeness of the tower itself, together with its accompanying barmkin buildings, allows the visitor's imagination to visualise life when the Cairns and Maxwell families were in residence.

### **Recreation and amenity**

Orchardton Tower is most attractively situated in a quiet valley, with good views south and east down towards the Solway Firth (but frustratingly not of the Firth itself), but with more limited views inland, to north and west. It is as delightful a picnic spot as can be found anywhere.

## 3 Major gaps in understanding

- When precisely was the tower house built? Dendrochronology of timbers in the tower's basement might provide an accurate date, as well as indicate the source of the timber.
- What inspired the tower's circular shape, often described as unique in Scotland? As some of the closest parallels are to be found in SW Ireland, it would be helpful to establish whether the Cairns family had any links with Munster in the later medieval period. Alternatively, it may have been modelled on circular towers in other Scottish castles, such as the lost Constable's Tower in Edinburgh Castle and the fragmentary

White Tower at the apex of Dumbarton Rock – if so, it may serve as a model for understanding those structures.

- Is the aumbry/piscina in the hall in situ, or was it brought from elsewhere? A standing building survey may answer this and other details of the internal arrangement of the tower. How extensively was the arrangement of doorways and window openings modified or modernised during the tower's relatively long period of occupation?
- What was the form and appearance of the hall-block? Given that this is one of the very few later medieval outer halls surviving in Scotland, it would repay more detailed investigation.
- What was the overall layout of the site, and how did it change over time – the evidence for ramparts to the north and an eighteenth-century house to the south indicates that the site was both larger and more complex than it immediately appears.

#### 4 **Associated properties**

*(other locally related places)* – **Lincluden Collegiate Church**; Orchardton House; **Carluith Castle** (Cairns property); Rusko Castle (Cairns property)  
*(some Irish examples of circular tower houses)* – Balief (Kilkenny); Ballynahow (Tipperary); Knockagh (Tipperary); Newtown (Clare); Reginald's Tower (Waterford); Synone (Tipperary)  
*(some other notable 15<sup>th</sup>-century tower houses in SW Scotland)* – Comlongan Castle; **Cardoness Castle**; Hills Tower; Old Place of Mochrum  
*(some other surviving castle hall blocks)*: **Crichton Castle**; **Tantallon Castle**

#### 5 **Keywords**

tower house; circular; aumbry/piscina; hall block; Cairns; Maxwell

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Summary of archaeological investigations

1920s. There is the odd survey plan, but little else in the way of documentation to indicate quite what the operation involved. The small finds, comprising coins (inc. a 'Crossraguel' penny of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century), pottery, glass and clay pipes, were subsequently entrusted to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.<sup>10</sup>

It is highly likely that much of archaeological value remains to be discovered, particularly in and around the structures adjacent to the tower itself. There may be archaeological potential existing beyond the area in state care, particularly in the field to the east.

The surviving timbers in the vaulted cellar may repay dendrochronological examination, for although some are clearly modern replacements one or two may be original, hopefully confirming the construction date of the tower.

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<sup>10</sup> NRS MW1/699, MW1/700.