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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EDINBURGH CASTLE -

PORTCULLIS GATE, ARGYLE TOWER AND LANG STAIRS



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EDINBURGH CASTLE – PORTCULLIS GATE, ARGYLE TOWER AND LANG STAIRS

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1 Summary

NOTE: The significance of Edinburgh Castle as a whole is summarised in the Edinburgh Castle Statement of Significance; in addition, Statements of Significance are provided for some discrete elements within the castle¹. This enables a greater level of detail to be explored in relation to developmental histories, associations and conservation approaches.

This Statement focusses on the Portcullis Gate, Argyle Tower and the Lang Stairs, but should be read in conjunction with the main Edinburgh Castle Statement of Significance.

1.1 Introduction

The Portcullis Gate comprises the lower portion of the Argyle Tower which is the entrance to the middle and upper levels of the castle. As a principal entrance into the castle it was designed both to impress and to provide a crucial line of defence. The structure has a complex building history. At its lower levels it incorporates masonry from a 14th century predecessor gate-tower called the Constable's Tower². It is likely that because of the natural topography of the site this area may always have been the approach up to the summit of the rock in pre-medieval times, and so there may well have been fortified gateways here during the early history of the site.

The Constable's Tower was badly damaged during the Lang Siege of 1571–73, and was rebuilt as the Portcullis Gate in the following years, with evidence for construction programmes under Regent Morton in the 1570s, and later around 1583. The upper levels of the structure (the upper floor, parapet and roof), were added in 1886-7 as part of the Victorian aspiration to restore or recreate the medieval royal castle. It was at this point that the tower became known as the Argyle Tower, after the 9th Earl of Argyll who was reputedly imprisoned there in 1685.

The Lang Stair is a long flight of steps adjacent to the Gate which lead steeply up to the upper ward of the castle. The actual steps in their present form date to 1783, though, as with the Gate, the presence of an access route up the steep rock face to the upper ward of the castle is a much older phenomenon. A fuller description of the history and development of both structures is given in Section 2 of this document and a full Timeline is at Appendix 1.

1.2 Statement of significance

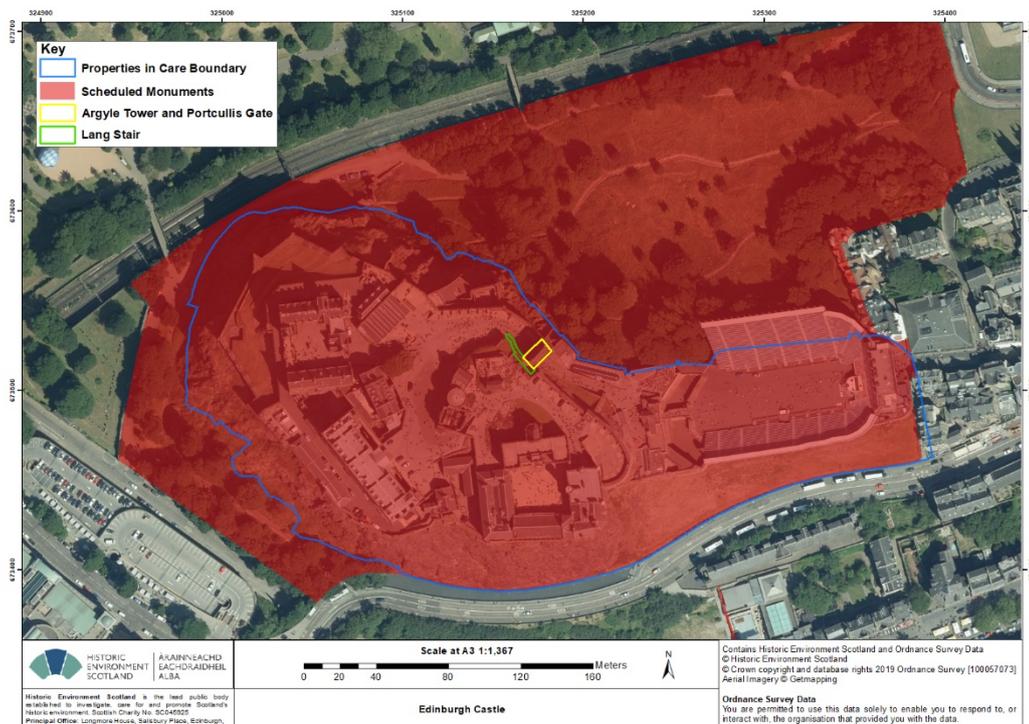
The Portcullis Gate is a complex structure with a long history and is a key location in the experience of visiting Edinburgh Castle. The use of this area as

¹ All available at <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications>

² The earliest references to construction of a gateway entrance with a stone arch come from records compiled during English occupation of the castle between 1335 and 1339; the English set about re-fortifying the castle following Robert I's destruction in 1314 (Cal Docs Scot III).

the gateway to the inner wards of the castle citadel potentially stretches back into prehistory and certainly to the medieval period. It is significant on many counts, chiefly:

- The continuity of its role as gateway and entry point, developing from the topography of the site and enhanced by subsequent building and fortification
- Its important symbolic role as the entry to the castle, demonstrated by Morton’s choice of Renaissance motifs for his 16th century work, and the Victorian re-imagining of a medieval past, which resulted in the Argyle Tower.
- The surviving physical fabric, which evidences the history of conflict and rebuilding over many centuries and which can be seen and understood by visitors. It also has high architectural interest, retaining clear evidence for medieval, Renaissance and Victorian phases of construction.
- The surviving medieval interior features are important, given that so much of the medieval castle is severely altered, it presents an important and easily visible medieval survival.
- The Argyle Tower is one of the most prominent and distinctive architectural elements of Edinburgh Castle, a landmark in its own right. It is an important orientation feature for visitors at the start of their tour of the castle.



Scheduled Area and Property in Care Boundary of Edinburgh Castle (for illustrative purposes only) with locations of the Lang Stairs, and the Argyle Tower and Portcullis Gate. Further illustrations are provided at Appendix 3.

The above short statement encapsulates our current understanding of the main significances of the Portcullis Gate, Argyle Tower and Lang Stairs. A broader overview of their cultural and natural heritage values is given below.

2 Assessment of Values

2.1 Background

The Portcullis Gate is a principal entrance into Edinburgh Castle. Elements of the structure probably date back to the mid-late 14th century, but it has been extensively modified and rebuilt over the ages, so that the visitor is now confronted by a late sixteenth century ceremonial gateway beneath a nineteenth-century superstructure.

The ashlar façade with pedimented royal arms and the barrel-vaulted entrance passage date from the rebuilding of the castle by Regent Morton in the aftermath of the Lang Siege of 1571-73. Further work was commissioned around 1583 to complete the work begun by Morton, but the exact nature of what was carried out is uncertain. The tower underwent a number of structural changes in the 17th and 18th centuries (see Appendices for details). The uppermost section of the tower was completely replaced in 1886-87 when the Argyle Tower was constructed. It was designed by Hippolyte J. Blanc, the Edinburgh-based architect also responsible for restoring the castle's Great Hall. The oldest features of the building, a medieval spiral staircase and vaulted portcullis chamber, are concealed by these later additions.

The adjacent Lang Stairs, although comparatively recent in its present form, perpetuates the oldest access to the summit in medieval times, which passed through an adjacent structure called the Constable's Tower.

2.2 Evidential Values

The Portcullis Gate occupies a focal position within the rocky topography of the castle, straddling a narrow gap between the higher citadel of the upper ward and the steep cliffs on which the outer rampart sits, and thus controlling access to the interior of the fortress. It is approached along a causeway of medieval, if not earlier, origin which follows a precarious natural route along a level terrace clinging to the side of the rock. The position of the Portcullis Gate is defined by the natural geography of the site, and this is likely to have been the site of a defensive entrance – and thus the key to the defences – throughout the castle's history.

The Portcullis Gate is a significant monument to the architecture of several different periods, discussed more fully in paragraph 2.4 below. In summary: the upper section known as the Argyle Tower is a landmark of Victorian anachronism, the main façade is an important example of the Scottish Renaissance architecture, the west (or rear) wall retains evidence for multiple

phases of remodelling following repeated sieges between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the little-seen spiral stair and vaulted portcullis chamber appear to be one of the least-altered medieval interiors in the castle. These successive phases show how the castle has developed over time, with each new project responding to the existing architecture of previous generations, in a location ultimately dictated by the natural topography of the site. Few other buildings represent the ongoing evolution of the castle quite so clearly.

The Portcullis Gate is easily read as a grand entrance and a defensive barrier, controlling access to the inner part of the castle. A principal entranceway has stood in this location for many centuries and the developmental history of the present structure, evident in its surviving fabric, reflects the broader history of Edinburgh Castle and its defences. The Portcullis Gate, Argyle Tower and Lang Stairs retain significant potential for further study to enhance our understanding of the evolution of the castle's defences from an early date.

Small-scale archaeological excavations to the north-west of the tower in 2005 and below the Portcullis Gate in 2007 were undertaken in association with the construction of the audio-guide kiosk. Though limited in scope, these investigations demonstrated the high potential for archaeological deposits surviving in the vicinity of the structure. Both excavations demonstrated multiple phases of deposits that potentially relate to the development of the castle's access route and defences, including the Portcullis Gate/Constable's Tower. Standing building recording and interpretation was undertaken in 2015, alongside new documentary research, which has informed this current statement, especially the development history of the gateway and tower³. There is undoubtedly potential for further study of the historic fabric to reveal yet more about the multiple phases of this structure's development.

See Appendix 2 for further discussion of evidence relating to the origins and early development of this structure.

2.3 Historical values

As the entrance to the castle, the Portcullis Gate is a fortified strongpoint which embodies its history as a place of strength. Its structure shows how the castle and its defences developed through history, with various phases of demolition and reconstruction, from the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance, to Victorian reinvention.

The structure has a long time depth, spanning from at least the 14th century, though there has potentially been a defensive entranceway in this location for millennia. There are various dramatic events associated with this location that reinforce the rich historic values of the Portcullis Gate, and provide a human narrative alongside the architectural development. The historic role of the

³ (Kirkdale Archaeology, 2015)

gateway as the main entrance to the castle means that it must have been used by many prominent figures in Scottish history during important historical events – it was presumably through a gateway in this location that Alexander III rode out in 1286 on the late-night journey to Kinghorn which ended with his fall from his horse, and precipitated the Wars of Independence, changing the whole course of Scottish history; and it must have been through this route that Mary Queen of Scots entered the castle to give birth to King James VI in 1566. As all visitors pass through the gateway, there is a definite sense of connection with all the previous generations who trod this same path. These historic associations, together with other links and traditions, are detailed below.

- The early Welsh poem *Y Gododdin* identifies a strong gateway of the fortress of Eidyn as a significant feature of its defences around 600 AD, and uses it as a metaphor for the strength of the fortress's warriors – who would have ridden out through it to do battle. Centuries later, around 1170, the dramatic layout of the early masonry defences appears to have caught the attention of the major French poet Chrétien de Troyes, who incorporated it into the Arthurian tale of Sir Yvain.
- In 1255, the Earl of Gloucester was able to dramatically gain entry through the castle's gateway – English sources claim that he bluffed his way in, assisted by a cunning civil servant, while Scottish chronicles claim he was accompanied by a force of Scottish knights hostile to the regency government which controlled the fortress.
- During the siege of 1296, the *Chronicle of Lanercost* records a picaresque story of a Welsh archer defecting with King Edward I's dispatches, who sauntered up to the gate seeking admission by the Scots, and was hauled up onto the adjacent ramparts by a rope.
- In 1341, when the Scots retook the castle after a lengthy period of English occupation, the capture of the gate by frontal assault was the key to their success: masquerading as a supply convoy, they jammed the portcullis open, grabbed the keys of the inner gate from the porter and stormed the interior. The heroes were a colourful group, including a number of genuine merchants led by a certain Walter of Currie, and a force of knights commanded by Sir William Douglas, while the mastermind was a fighting priest named Walter Bullock.
- Constable's Tower, the predecessor of the current gate tower, was heavily damaged in May 1573 during a devastating bombardment that brought about the end of the Lang Siege. In the years that followed, Regent Morton sponsored major rebuilding works on the eastern side of the castle. Morton's Gateway, or the Portcullis Gate, was built on or close to the site of the former Constable's Tower. The Renaissance façade still displays a provocative iconographic statement, placing the hearts and stars of his Douglas coat of arms higher than the king's royal lion.

- The medieval chamber in the tower has been traditionally identified as the location where Archibald Campbell, the 9th Earl of Argyll, was imprisoned before his execution on 30th June 1685, for leading a failed rebellion against James VII. The tower was certainly in use as a state prison in the following century, but other vault spaces below Crown Square cannot be ruled out as alternative locations for his imprisonment. Argyle came to be seen as a Presbyterian hero, which attracted the interest of the Edinburgh publisher and patron William Nelson, who sponsored major restoration work in the castle in the 1880s. This led to the construction of the upper section now known as the Argyle Tower⁴.
- A number of other well-known prisoners are thought to have been detained here. In 1746, following the final Jacobite Rising, many men and women were confined in the castle. It is said that notable Jacobite women were imprisoned in this tower, including Lady Ogilvie. Several decades later, Robert Watt and David Downie were the last prisoners to be held here in 1794 – sentenced to death for committing high treason.
- The Victorian upper section of the tower is a prominent monument to the spirit of its age, showing how Scottish society in the nineteenth century responded to the past, with a paradoxical combination of careful scholarship, romantic anachronism, and creative enthusiasm. Nonetheless, the underlying purpose for which it was intended by its Victorian creators also remains relevant: it allows visitors to enter a recreation of a medieval Scottish castle tower, and captures a sense of former grandeur. The creation of the Argyle Tower was part of a wider programme of restoration in the 1880s, driven by an influential trio of men: Daniel Wilson (antiquarian), Hippolyte Blanc (architect) and William Nelson (Edinburgh publisher).

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

2.4.1 Overview

The Portcullis Gate and Argyle Tower present the classic image of a castle tower, and occupies a prominent position on the ramparts of the castle, visible from both the Esplanade and Princes Street. The upper section known as the Argyle Tower is a Victorian creation, but with its battlements, corner turrets, and its high-pitched, stone-flagged roof, it presents a suitably ‘medieval’ appearance – indeed, its purpose was to recapture something of the early appearance of the castle, and counteract the Georgian style of many of its other prominent buildings.⁵ The fabric of the current structure retains evidence for numerous different phases of development that reflect its long

⁴ (Wilson, 1886, p. 123)

⁵ (Morris, 2011).

history. The following paragraphs outline key elements of the surviving architecture.

2.4.2. The medieval interior

Perhaps one of the most interesting elements of the gatehouse structure, and the one which contains the most indications of its pre-1573 appearance, is the interior space concealed beneath the Argyle Tower, which is not normally open to visitors. This area is entered from a Victorian doorway near the top of the Lang Stairs, but once inside, the visitor descends a spiral staircase of distinctly medieval character, whose steps have elegant semi-circular cutbacks at their inner end, a feature closely paralleled in the fifteenth-century keep of Castle Campbell in Stirlingshire, representing one of the few extant indications of the quality of stonework once employed in the castle's medieval apartments.

At the base of the stair, the visitor steps into a vaulted chamber positioned above the vaulted entrance passage. Its architecture is well-proportioned, but very plain – the only details are a portcullis slot in the floor (now filled by a reproduction portcullis), a barred window looking backwards into the middle ward of the castle, and the faint traces of a second window overlooking the entrance, blocked in the 1880s presumably to provide additional support for the weight of the Argyle Tower above.

In contrast to the extant window in the opposite wall, Blanc's plans show that this opening had a deep arched embrasure in which a flight of steps led up to the aperture – a distinctively medieval design, found as early as the eleventh century at Colchester Castle and recurring in the twelfth century at Monmouth, Carlisle and Dover. However, the feature was still employed in the basement of Carrick Castle in Argyll, generally dated to the fifteenth century, and it cannot be precisely dated here. Nonetheless, like the staircase, this window is of clearly medieval character, without any parallels in the palace architecture of the Renaissance, and its window opening was blocked between the 1570s and 1650s by a heraldic sculpture of the Scottish royal coat of arms. Moreover, as this window is centred above the entrance archway, it suggests that the basic proportions of the passageway predate the rebuilding of the 1570s.

2.4.3. The Renaissance gateway

Beneath the Victorian superstructure is a buff ashlar façade (on the eastern side) and an arched gateway, leading into a vaulted passage. The decorative façade, reminiscent of a classical triumphal entrance, dates to the 1570s, carried out by the government of the Regent Morton. The work was at least partially carried out under the supervision of Sir William Makdowell, the royal Master of Works, whose previous works ranged from artillery embrasures in the castle to open-air timber theatre for the 1554 revival of the *Satire of the Three Estates*.

The Renaissance façade is an important example of the architecture of the sixteenth-century in Scotland, showing the adaptation of classical motifs to

the requirements of Scottish patrons – integrating a classical pediment and pilasters with the more traditional requirements of heraldry and military architecture. As a key entrance to the castle, the Portcullis Gate is necessarily strong and military in character, but it was also designed to impress, and its architectural detailing, still very much in evidence, is in marked contrast to the solid mass of the battered (sloping) walls of the contemporaneous Half-Moon Battery and the plain rampart of the Forewall. In this, the Portcullis Gate was similar to principal entrances into major artillery fortifications elsewhere (e.g. the castle's outermost gateway, through the 1548 Spur, also had an elaborate doorway that was subsequently dismantled and rebuilt in Parliament House, while as early as the reign of James IV, the triple entrance of **Stirling Castle's** gatehouse borrowed the layout of a Roman triumphal arch).

The architectural detail, inspired by classical motifs, consists of a segmental arched gateway flanked by slim pilasters, above which carved seated lions flank an aedicule – a little blind opening with a triangular pediment and Ionic columns – that presumably originally contained a shield emblazoned with the royal arms (the present shield was placed there in 1887). The frieze beneath the aedicule's pediment is decorated with the hearts and stars of the Douglas family – Regent Morton's heraldry. The Renaissance detailing is variously described as applied 'with flair, enhanced perhaps by a lack of full scholarly understanding' (Maclvor) and 'ignorantly, though with considerable conviction' (Gifford et al)⁶, and its quirky effect is intensified by a stylistic contrast between the upper and lower sections of the façade. The entrance gateway and the tiered pairs of pilasters flanking it are clearly intended to be understood as a triumphal arch – thoroughly Renaissance in concept and principle – but are rather idiosyncratic in style and implementation, with parallels in the entrance to **Mar's Wark** in Stirling, and the window surrounds of Morton's own residence at **Aberdour Castle**. In contrast, the Ionic aedicule above them is a much more orthodox and assured essay in the classical aesthetic, which simultaneously integrates the contrasting idiom of medieval heraldic iconography – perhaps the result of new input mid-way through the project⁷.

2.4.4. The Lang Stairs

The south side of the Portcullis Gate abuts a steep cliff, part of the natural circuit of crags around the castle's rocky central citadel (the upper or inner ward). In the gap between the Victorian superstructure of the gatehouse and the much-rebuilt parapet adjoining the Forewall Battery, an open-air staircase known as the Lang Stairs rises up, providing access to the citadel from the middle ward behind the gateway. There has been a flight of steps leading into the castle in this approximate position since at least the fourteenth century, but it was originally a spiral staircase inside a tower, and it is not entirely clear

⁶ (Maclvor, *Edinburgh Castle*, 1993) (Gifford, 1984)

⁷ Many secondary sources claim that upper half of the façade belongs to an entirely separate phase of restoration begun in 1584. While there were payments for work on the Portcullis Gate recorded around this time, this assumption does not seem credible, as both documentary evidence and the aedicule's heraldic iconography indicate that it is an integral part of the Regent Morton's restoration, built between 1573 and 1581.

when it was replaced by a straight outdoor stair. The current configuration is only clearly documented in the middle decades of the seventeenth century⁸, and it is not clear if any of the visible structure is actually this old: the steps themselves were re-laid in the 1780s, and the retaining balustrade was modified in the Victorian period.

2.4.5 The Argyle Tower

The upper section of the Portcullis Gate is a Victorian-era structure known as the Argyle Tower, constructed as part of a large-scale restoration project in the 1880s, which aimed to recapture something of the castle's medieval character, lost amid various Baroque and Georgian accretions.⁹ This was designed by the architect, Hippolyte Blanc, who had joined the Office of Works in 1865, and by 1877 had risen to become Chief Assistant before forming his own practice based in Edinburgh in 1878. Also involved were the publisher William Nelson, who funded the project, and the archaeologist and antiquary Sir Daniel Wilson, an Edinburgh native who was probably the foremost academic (rather than architectural) expert on Scotland's early buildings; he had emigrated to Canada to take up a sequence of senior university posts at Toronto, and provided frequent advice by letter.

The intention was to recreate the character of a medieval castle, but at the time there was considerable discussion and opposed views over what this meant. Nelson was primarily interested in preserving the space immediately above the passage believed to be where the 9th Earl of Argyll spent his final hours. Blanc recognised that this structure could preserve remains of the former Constable's Tower, but there was very little evidence to confirm this or to indicate the appearance of this earlier structure. There seems to have been a conscious decision to ignore the 16th-century and later architecture. However, the exterior of the Argyle Tower as built actually corresponds very closely to the superstructure which it was proposed to add to the Portcullis Gate itself in 1583 – a plan which Sir Daniel Wilson may have known about, as he can be shown to have studied the documents in which the proposal is laid out.

Blanc used a comprehensive range of features drawn from late medieval Scottish architecture – a projecting corbelled parapet with chequer-set machicolations, rounded turrets referencing crenelated bartisans, a stone-slabbed roof and a restored crenel complete with wooden shutter. His one concession to 'modernity' is the use of lead rainwater downpipes, suitably dated 1887. Though it is notable that no attempt was made at deception; the use of machine cut stones make the 1880s work a clear separation from the older structure below. Internally, the Argyle Tower is entirely of Blanc's creation, with a similar repertoire of late medieval features to the exterior. It contains a single interior space inspired by the great halls of medieval Scottish castles, with a high, ribbed barrel-vaulted ceiling, deep window-embrasures flanked by paired stone seats, and a hood-moulded fireplace,

⁸ A depiction of a long straight flight of stairs immediately to the south of the gate is shown on a plan of the castle by Gordon of Rothiemay, dated to 1647.

⁹ What follows is largely based on Morris (2011) and (Donovan, 2008, pp. 81-4)

which was intended as a grand setting in which to display the Honours of Scotland.

Although the vocabulary of features and details is historically accurate, the interior and exterior of the tower do not form components of a coherent whole, but are in fact two separate essays in medieval architecture – a point subtly emphasised by several deliberate incongruities. Perhaps most tellingly of all, the basic architectural relationship between the inside and outside of the Argyle Tower is innately unlikely, with the ‘great hall’ rising through the parapet-line into a roof-space that is presented externally as a caphouse. In addition, the fireplace in the ‘great hall’ was designed from the outset to be non-functional – the middle section of its chimney is solid masonry, and the upper flue serves as a ventilation shaft for the room, through the opening visible at the top of the wall above it. The matching chimney on the other gable is simply a dummy placed there for aesthetic reasons, providing balance to the roofline and contributing to the external illusion of a more complex internal apartment.

A key theme is the importance of “appearance” and “status” in both Morton’s gateway and the Victorian re-imagining of the Argyle Tower. Both are attempts to convey particular messages about culture, power and scholarship.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

The Portcullis Gate and Argyle Tower present an impressive, if somewhat daunting, sight to visitors progressing up the relatively narrow lower approach road. Only when they have passed through the gate does the castle become more expansive and friendly. The carved renaissance façade provides a sense of ceremony, emphasising its triumphal/processional role as a symbolic final gateway through to the castle.

The Portcullis Gate and Argyle Tower are also prominent features in the castle-scape, particularly when viewed from the Esplanade and Princes Street. One of the most impressive aspects is the steep height of the outer ramparts below the level of the entrance roadway, which is most readily appreciated from the pathways along the slope of Castle Bank in Princes Street Gardens. There is a picturesque juxtaposition of the towering masonry with the grassy verges, flowers and trees on the slope below.

Internally, the 16th-century barrel-vaulted portcullis room provides a suitably chilling atmosphere in which to contemplate the fate of the 9th Earl of Argyll.

The dramatic approach on entering the castle, and the fabric of the western wall, are somewhat obscured and diminished by essential visitor infrastructure either side of the barrel-vaulted passageway. The entrance is a critical point in controlling visitor flow and access today as it has been for centuries.

2.6 Natural heritage values

The steep slopes of the Castle Rock create a dramatic setting for the castle. The area is designated as part of a composite Site of Special Scientific Interest (Arthur's Seat Volcano SSSI) which includes Arthur's Seat and Calton Hill. The areas are linked by their complex geology and this is reflected in the richness of the plant communities that are present. The exposed outcrops of rock around the Portcullis Gate contribute greatly to the character of this part of the castle.

2.7 Contemporary / Use values

Access

The Portcullis Gate / Argyle Tower is visible to all visitors to Edinburgh Castle, though access to the interior is limited. The ticket scanning point is set immediately before the Portcullis Gate; every visitor to the castle must approach and pass through the vaulted entrance. Only the upper floor of the Argyle Tower interior is open to the public. There is no access to the medieval spiral staircase and vaulted portcullis chamber or to the Victorian battlements of the Argyle Tower: access here is relatively problematic because of narrow and steep staircases, and the lack of modern amenities such as handrails and electric lighting.

Recreation and amenity

The Portcullis Gate functions primarily as a prominent visual focus within the castle, a piece of architectural sculpture – thus fulfilling the intention behind the two major reconstructions of the gatehouse in the 1570s and 1880s. It is an iconic building in its own right, not just an impressive formal entrance for visitors to the fortress, but also forming part of a landmark in Edinburgh.

The vaulted entrance provides a rite-of-passage for all tourists, and marks the transition between the heavily modernised entrance area and the military interior of the fortress.

The upper floor of the Argyle Tower previously housed the 'Castles in the Air' exhibition on Victorian proposals for restoration and recreation of the medieval castle. A new exhibition, 'Fight for the Castle' was opened in autumn 2018 covering the castle's history during the Wars of Independence era. The new exhibition features audio visual displays, a replica (though stylised) trebuchet and artefacts from HES's collection, found during excavations between 1988 and 1990 at the castle.

3 Major gaps in understanding

While our understanding of this structure has improved considerably in recent decades, owing to work undertaken by Driscoll and Yeoman¹⁰, Kirkdale Archaeology and new research into the primary documentation relating to the castle, there remain a number of outstanding questions:

¹⁰ (Driscoll & Yeoman, 1997)

- What is the chronology of the multi-phase masonry in the rear wall and can we more confidently relate any of these different phases of construction to the historic records?
- When were the spiral staircase and vaulted chamber built?
- How does the present structure relate to earlier access routes, defences and gateways?
- What was the exact nature of the structure prior to Blanc's work? Does anything of the Constable's Tower still remain to be discovered beneath the structure?
- What is the history of the "prison door" inside the tower and when was it and the the present set of gates installed?

4 Associated properties

Other Scottish royal castle defences:

Dumbarton Castle; **Doune Castle** (intact iron gate, perhaps of the fifteenth century)

Other works of similar date to the Portcullis Gate façade:

Aberdour Castle (ancestral seat of Regent Morton, with attenuated Tuscan pilasters on its Renaissance window surrounds which echo those flanking the Portcullis Gate archway); Drochil Castle (also commissioned by Regent Morton); **Crichton Castle** (north range); **Dunfermline Abbey** (north-west tower) **and Palace**; Fyvie Castle; **Stirling Castle** (Chapel Royal?).

Other notable works by Hippolyte J. Blanc:

Carnegie Centre, Dunfermline; Cluny Parish Church, Edinburgh; **Edinburgh Castle's Great Hall**; Mayfield Church, Edinburgh; St. Cuthbert's, Princes Street, Edinburgh

5 Keywords

Edinburgh, vault, pilaster, royal arms, Regent Morton, William Schaw, Hippolyte Blanc, tower, portcullis

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Other Resources

Lang Stairs Listed Building Description:

<https://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/LB48221>

Portcullis Gate and Argyle Tower Listed Building Description:

<https://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/LB48227>

Edinburgh Castle Scheduled Monument Description:

<https://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM90130>

Old and New Towns of Edinburgh World Heritage Site:

<https://www.historicenvironment.scot/advice-and-support/listing-scheduling-and-designations/world-heritage-sites/old-and-new-towns-of-edinburgh/>

Portcullis Gate and Argyle Tower:

Canmore ID 52093

Site Number NT27SE 1.04

NGR NT 25177 73522

Lang Stairs:

Canmore ID 253940

Site Number NT27SE 1.58

NGR NT 25158 73529

Appendices

Appendix 1: Timeline

We cannot be certain of the origins and earliest history of this structure; historic records suggest the first stone-built arch and gateway was constructed in the 1330s. Substantial building work in the 1370s involved construction of a gate tower which has generally been assumed to relate to construction of the Constable's Tower, a predecessor of the Portcullis Gate. The earlier references included below relate to defences, entrances or events assumed to be in the approximate location of the current structure.

- c. 600** The ancient Welsh poem *Y Gododdin* describes the fortress of Eidyn, almost certainly located on the Castle Rock. The strong gate of the fortress (*dor* or *tewddor*) is referred to by the poet, and used as a metaphor for the strength and hardiness of the young warriors of the fortress's warband. Given the topography of the Castle Rock, it is *just* possible that this gateway is the earliest documented precursor of the Portcullis Gate. It was evidently a thick wooden door, providing access through ramparts which perhaps took the form of earth or turf banks faced with drystone rubble, crowned with palisades of alderwood.
- c.1170** The Arthurian poem *Yvain* describes the palace of the 'Lady of Lothian', with a narrow approach that can barely accommodate two knights riding side-by-side, an outer gate guarded by a portcullis, a narrow entrance passage with the porter's lodge on one side, and a second gateway, similar to the first, providing access to the interior. This corresponds to detailed descriptions of the castle's entrance defences in the early fourteenth century, and suggests that the poem is presenting a fictionalised portrayal of the gate complex of Edinburgh Castle as it already existed in the twelfth century. In addition, the author of *Yvain*, Chrétien de Troyes, is one of the most important European literary figures of the period – his story imagines the heroic Sir Yvain pursuing the Black Knight into the castle, being trapped between the gates when his horse is slain by the fall of the portcullis across its hindquarters, and then being hidden in the lodge by the sympathetic female gatekeeper.
- 1255** During a political crisis, the Earl of Gloucester, an English nobleman, succeeds in gaining access through the castle gate to meet with the teenage royal couple, King Alexander III and his wife Queen Margaret, daughter of King Henry III of England. The basic fact of the incident is not in question, but sources provide very different details – English sources claim that Gloucester simply bluffed his way in assisted only by a cunning civil servant, while the main Scottish chronicle claims he was accompanying a force of Scottish knights hostile to the regency government which controlled the fortress. They also disagree about the context – the Scottish sources describe a power struggle between 'government' and 'opposition' factions in Scottish politics, while English

sources assert that the crisis was a more personal one, provoked by the fourteen-year-old Queen Margaret because she wanted to move to a less rugged and misty residence than the castle, and to start sharing a bed with her thirteen-year-old husband King Alexander III.

- 1296** The castle is besieged by King Edward I of England, during the opening campaign of the Wars of Independence. A Welsh crossbowman charged with carrying English dispatches to London decides to defect, walking up to the gate, holding a discussion with the guards, and being hauled up by a rope to the adjacent ramparts. The castle holds out with apparent ease against a protracted bombardment by English trebuchets, and only surrenders as part of the general capitulation by the government of John Balliol.
- 1314** Scottish forces, led by Sir Thomas Randolph establish a blockade which prevents supplies from reaching the castle's main gate, and then capture the fortress through a daring night climb up the cliffs and over the ramparts. Robert I orders destruction of the castle's defences to prevent the English from re-using the garrison.
- 1335** The English reoccupy the castle, and set about repairing it. In the first phase of reconstruction, two entrance gateways and the door of the adjacent porter's lodge are repaired with wooden arches known as "crooks" – the outer gateway sits beneath timber battlements, and has two pairs of crooks, suggesting the existence of a portcullis slot (a detail attested c. 1170 and again in 1341). By 1340, at least one of the gate arches is being rebuilt in stone, and the approach road is being widened to allow cavalry to ride in and out more easily.
- 1341** Scots recapture the castle during a daring raid, recorded in several detailed sources and corroborating the descriptions of the defences in 1170 and 1335. A party of merchants with packhorses gain entrance through the outer gate, using a wooden prop to hold the portcullis open, and overpowering the porter to seize the keys to the inner door (the fact that the porter was *between* the gates corroborates the location of the lodge). Once through the second gate, they upend the packhorses' baskets to block access through the entrance of the tower, which seems to have been the main route of approach for the defending soldiers. A force of knights and Highlanders then storms the castle and overwhelms the English garrison. The exact nature and locations of the various gates and defences referred to in the sources is uncertain, but there is general agreement in recent reviews of the sources that the main gate the Scots had to force access through was likely to have been in the approximate location of the present Portcullis Gate.
- 1375** During the reign of Robert II, the entrance to the castle is extensively modified, with the construction of a gate tower, a new entrance with a bridge, an iron gateway and a paved roadway, and adjacent ramparts. Payments for the project are recorded over the next eight years, and the

total cost is at least £422.14/6d (equivalent to around a decade's income for a knight) and probably considerably higher. In **1402** and **1412** there are references to maintenance work on the gate and bridge, in **1434** the porter's lodge was rebuilt, and in **1438** the iron gate was repaired. After this point, there appears to be a gap in the relevant documentation on the castle's upkeep until the sixteenth century, making it uncertain whether large construction projects occurred in the interim. This is the only *documented* project which could describe the construction of the basic structure of the Portcullis Gate as it survives today, although it is equally possible that it actually records work at another gateway elsewhere in the castle.

- 1489** James IV is entertained at the castle gate by a band of English pipers, while Mons Meg is brought out of the fortress for the siege of Dumbarton.
- 1515** A castle gateway, possibly in the location of the present gateway, is the scene of a dramatic confrontation between the two factions struggling to lead the government of Scotland. On the one side stands the Queen Dowager Margaret Tudor, who controls the castle. Facing her are a delegation of noblemen sent by her rival the Regent Albany. As reported by the English official Lord Dacre, the Queen arrives at the gate with her three-year-old son King James V, his eighteen-month-old brother in the arms of his nurse, and her young second husband the Earl of Angus. She orders the gates to be opened, and argues with the noblemen, but then orders the portcullis to be dropped in their faces. At around the same time, payment is recorded for work on "the portcullis of the outer gate", including the addition of metal chains, perhaps replacing ropes to raise and lower it. Also in 1515, there is a reference to repair work on "the long stair in the Castle", but it is unclear whether this refers to the Lang Stairs or one of the long straight flights of steps in the buildings around Crown Square (in the early seventeenth century, the term usually denotes the straight staircase inside the Palace).
- 1535** A variety of shrapnel-firing guns are laid out in front of a gateway of the castle for inspection by King James V – perhaps at Portcullis Gate.
- 1541** The gate tower and adjacent porter's lodge are given slate roofs. This may simply be a regular refurbishment, but it is also possible that the entrance structures had retained the traditional wooden roof tiles known as 'shingles' until this date.
- 1544** An English spy's drawing, made during an attack on Edinburgh by the Earl of Hertford on behalf of Henry VIII, depicts the castle's entrance defences consisting of two consecutive crenellated barriers projecting at approximately right angles from the Forewall, beyond which a slender tower rises behind the battlements, followed by a more prominent tower, apparently round rather than square, near to the chapel in the Inner Ward.

- 1560** Another English drawing of the castle during an invasion by Elizabeth I's forces depicts a large rectangular tower near to the site of the Portcullis Gate and another smaller tower beyond it to the west.
- 1573**
(Jan) An English military survey of the castle mentions that "the Constable's Tower" is located at the north end of the castle's Forewall, standing some 50 feet high, "and in the bottom of the same is the way into the castle, with 40 steps". It is very unclear whether this refers to a spiral staircase of the sort documented in 1341, or a straight flight of steps in the manner of the modern Lang Stairs. An associated plan of the castle, adapted for a woodcut illustration in a near-contemporary history book, depicts a rectangular enclosure abutting the Forewall in the approximate position of the Portcullis Gate, with a tower rising directly above it on the battlements and another further to the north-west.¹¹
- 1573**
(May) A devastating artillery bombardment brings the 18-month Lang Siege to an abrupt end. A contemporary diary which itemised the artillery damage to the castle in detail refers to the destruction of the "north quarters of the portcullis" on 24 May 1573; a derivative source, the *Historie of James the Sext*, later expanded this to describe the collapse of the "whole tower of the portcullis", but Hippolyte Blanc, during his reconstruction of the tower in the 1880s, reached the conclusion that the extant structure of the tower substantially predates the Lang Siege, with its original cannonball-shattered wall concealed behind the Renaissance façade. This is supported by multiple pieces of architectural evidence discussed above in paragraph 2.2. The Regent, the Earl of Morton, orders the rebuilding of the main east defence to a new form. Morton's Gateway (later known as the Portcullis Gate) is built on or near the site of the former Constable's Tower.
- 1575** Commenting on the Regent Morton's activities, the *Historie of James the Sext* remarks that "he caused the master mason to set up the monument of his arms on the newly-built port of the castle, above the lion of Scotland, as yet extant to this day". The reference is to the stars and hearts still visible on the frieze of the Renaissance aedicule on the Portcullis Gate.
- 1577** Sir William Makdowell, Master of Work, is paid for 'bigging of the inner yett', presumed to be a reference to the Portcullis Gate.
- 1581** The Regent Morton is put on trial for treason and executed, apparently disrupting the rebuilding of the Portcullis Gate.

¹¹ This text has been printed at least twice: Andrew MacGeorge, *Miscellaneous Papers, principally Illustrative of events in the reigns of Queen Mary and King James VI*, (Maitland Club, Edinburgh 1834), pp. 161-63, and Anon., "A survey of the Castle and Town of Edinburgh, January 1573.—Journal of the Siege of the Castle of Edinburgh, April and May 1573", *The Bannatyne Miscellany* 2 (1836), pp. 65-80 at pp. 69-70.

- 1583** A survey of the major royal residences by the Master of Works, Robert Drummond of Carnock records that the Portcullis Gate is incomplete, with rain-water running down an empty portcullis slot to rust the hinges which should support a gate. It is proposed to complete the tower with a two-storey lodging for the garrison commander, finished externally with battlements, corner turrets and paved wall-walks. Most secondary sources claim that this project was subsequently carried out by Drummond's successor William Schaw, but there appears to be no evidence whatsoever to support this conjecture. Several reputable sources have compounded the confusion by misidentifying the upper half of the Renaissance façade with its prominent heraldic pediment, and the vaulted chamber behind it, as surviving traces of this putative project – in reality, this part of the façade is unquestionably part of the Regent Morton's earlier project interrupted in 1581, and the vaulted chamber behind it almost certainly predates 1573. It seems unlikely that any major structural changes took place to the Portcullis Gate at this date except perhaps for the completion of the paved roof platform and its encircling battlements – it is also unclear whether the absent portcullis and iron door were ever added.
- 1607** A dramatic prison break is staged by Lord Maxwell and Sir James MacConnell, both of whom are detained in the castle for their involvement in local unrest (it may have been relevant that they were both Catholics and their opponents were Protestants). This begins with a drinking-game against the guards in a basement cell on the south side of Crown Square; after they steal the guards' swords and fight their way out of the castle, an accomplice opens a small door built into the Portcullis Gate, but a scuffle ensues in which the gatekeeper and his wife are injured; nonetheless, the gatekeeper manages to lock the gate, trapping one Maxwell accomplice inside, who has to escape over the north wall, while Maxwell and MacConnell fight their way through the middle gate and leap over the wall on the south side of the castle above the West Port – MacConnell is injured, but later escapes in 1615 (along with his entire private library) and receives a royal pardon; Maxwell escapes, but his subsequent attempts to secure amnesty degenerate into a squabble in which his key rival Sir James Johnstone is killed, and Maxwell is eventually executed.¹²
- 1650** Two contrasting illustrations of the castle at around this date are known, one by the mapmaker James Gordon of Rothiemay, was commissioned by the burgh council in 1647 but probably finished slightly later, while the other depicts the castle during the siege of 1650, and appears to be the work of the castle's master gunner at the time, Thomas Binning – it illustrates his book *A Light to the Art of Gunnery*, published in 1676. Rothiemay depicts a fairly generic Portcullis Gate and what is probably the first illustration of the Lang Stairs alongside it (though it is also possible that this is simply an area of shading). Binning's depiction

¹² (Pitcairn, *Ancient Criminal Trials in Scotland*, 3Vols, 1833, Volume 3: pp. 10-11, 41-43).

shows a clearly recognisable Portcullis Gate, with the pedimented embrasure above the archway, and a simple battlemented platform on top which would be retained until the eighteenth century. Both illustrations also appear to show a tower rising above the battlements at the western end of the Forewall, directly above the Portcullis Gate – though it is possible that these are intended to depict the caphouse of the tower immured between the Half-Moon Battery and Forewall. After the 1650 siege, the castle is surrendered to Oliver Cromwell's republican army, and the royal coat of arms is reputedly removed from the façade of the Portcullis Gate, revealing a medieval window opening which is put back into use until the 1880s.

- 1670** The first in a series of plans and prospects of the castle by John Slezer shows the Portcullis Gate and the first unequivocal depiction of the Lang Stairs alongside it.
- c.1674
-1690** A series of drawings of the castle by Slezer show changes occurring to Portcullis Gate during this period. The buttress-like wall stepping down the rocks from the corner of the gatehouse is visible from 1674, but the sloping lower section of the tower's own wall seems to have been added later, to mask a tall buttress of bare rock. Behind the Portcullis Gate, an inner entrance was built, which controlled access to the Lang Stairs but also provided a suitably formal entrance, with gate piers surmounted by spherical finials (it has been suggested that these may be the ornaments which now flank the entrance to hospital square and the western defences). Beyond this in turn, a third wall was built, with a doorway flanked by loopholes for muskets to sweep attackers with volleys of gunfire.
- c.1696** A 'bird's-eye' view of the castle by Slezer depicts the top of the Lang Stairs in the form it retains today, enclosed by an L-shaped length of wall surmounted by a wall-walk and sentry-box, with a pair of embrasures looking down the steps that seem designed to sweep the approach with shrapnel, and a right turn through a doorway into the Inner Ward.
- 1685** Tradition holds that Archibald Campbell, 9th Earl of Argyll, is imprisoned in the chamber above the Portcullis Gate the night before his execution at the Mercat Cross, in Edinburgh.
- Mid-18th
century** The battlemented platform on top of the Portcullis Gate is built up into an apartment with a pitched slated roof. Contemporary maps now refer to it as the 'state prison', and the fact that the former state prison in the vaults under the Great Hall was turned into a prison of war in 1757 may be the reason for its relocation.
- 1783** The Lang Stairs are reformed to their present 70-step configuration, the work possibly being carried out by prisoners of war in the castle.

- 1792** Two men sentenced to death for treason, Robert Watt and David Downie, are imprisoned in the 'state prison'.
- 1850s** As part of a proposal for a thorough reconstruction of the castle in a mix of Norman, Baronial and Chateausque styles, it is planned to heighten the Portcullis Gate with a tall, battlemented superstructure. The scheme is not carried out, although the Garrison Church, located at the top of the Lang Stairs next to St Margaret's Chapel, is demolished.
- 1883** Lord Napier is shown round the castle by Major Gore Booth, Royal Engineers. As a result, the retired diplomat writes to *The Scotsman* urging the restoration of the Great Hall and the Portcullis Gate. William Nelson, the Edinburgh publisher, is persuaded to finance both schemes.
- 1885** Nelson appoints Hippolyte Jean Blanc, an Edinburgh-based architect, to draw up plans for the restoration of the Great Hall, Portcullis Gate and St. Margaret's Chapel (the last project does not proceed).
- 1886-7** The upper part of the Portcullis Gate is entirely rebuilt, and named the Argyle Tower (after the 9th Earl of Argyll). Nelson hoped that the Argyle Tower would become the new home of the Honours of Scotland. A large plaster model of the castle is created by Julius Geercke at the War Office's request. It is subsequently donated to the Royal Scottish Museum.
- 1913** Archaeological finds from the excavations in David's Tower are placed on display in the top floor.
- 1949** Julius Geercke's castle model is presented by the Royal Scottish Museum to the Ministry of Works for display in the Argyle Tower. During the 1950s the model is taken to various trade shows in London, Canada and the U.S.A. It has since been removed from the Argyle Tower to make space for a new permanent exhibition.
- 1985(?)** A replica portcullis is set into one of the portcullis slots.
- 1990's** A permanent exhibition - 'Castles in the Air' - is installed in the top floor, alongside the castle model, to illustrate the various Victorian initiatives (realised and aborted) designed to make the castle look more 'medieval'.

Appendix 2: Origin and early development of the Portcullis Gate

Although the architectural character of the Portcullis Gate is strongly shaped by the work in the 1570s and later, a close inspection of the structure reveals a more complex history. While restoring the building in the 1880s, Hippolyte Blanc discovered that the ashlar façade conceals an older frontage, whose rubble facing shows signs of damage from cannonballs, and which must predate the siege of 1573. This has been further reinforced through analysis of primary documentation and standing building recording and interpretation.

It seems clear that the basic structure of the Portcullis Gate was built before the Lang Siege of 1573, but the exact configuration of the entrance before that date is not clear. Elements of the structure may have been demolished, notably the Constable's tower, which evidently stood near the Lang Steps and rose some 50 feet above the adjacent cliffs according to an English military report of 1573. The three sixteenth-century sketches of the castle produced by English military personnel offer some clues – two of them indicate a rectangular entrance structure which might be the Portcullis Gate, and all three illustrations suggest two towers on the ramparts above the entrance. One of these towers may be represented by the curved, turret-like structure at the foot of the Lang Stairs, while the outline of the other (which perhaps survived past 1650) may be preserved in the thick south wall of the gatehouse and the L-shaped rampart at the head of the Lang Stairs. This layout is certainly plausible, but it remains very conjectural, and unless new documents are found, any hypothesis must be backed up with archaeology.

The second question concerns the date at which the extant Portcullis Gate tower was built. Gaps in the available documentation makes it possible that a major construction campaign could have occurred without any clear record of it being known, especially in the mid-to-late fifteenth century – and it is also possible that the tower represents an agglomeration of several structures of varying dates, rationalised after 1573. That said, the only clearly-documented building campaign that might correspond to its construction is dated to the years 1375-1383 in the reign of King Robert II, but there are other possible candidates for this scheme – it has been associated with the keep known as David's Tower, or it might alternatively relate to outer defences situated forward of the Portcullis Gate.

The third question concerns the exact spatial and architectural relationship between the extant Portcullis Gate and the early entrance layout documented between the 1170s and 1340s. This layout is known to have comprised two consecutive gateways separated by a narrow alley, followed by a spiral staircase leading up through a tower into the Inner Ward, while the Portcullis Gate consists of a single tower with two gate positions at either end of a vaulted passageway, beyond which stands an open-air staircase. One possibility is that the entire entrance complex was located in the area of the current tower, but the closeness of the rock to the roadway in this area restricts the available space for the porter's lodge and turnpike stair, and would imply that the early route was much narrower than the present arched

passage. Alternatively, the passage between the two early gateways could be represented by the road leading up to the Portcullis Gate from the post-medieval Outer Barrier entrance, a route which archaeology has shown was flanked by a guardhouse and closed by an outer gateway – but this road is the obvious candidate for the widened causeway constructed in 1340, which lay outside the gate complex, and the excavators posited a sixteenth-century date for the structures they uncovered here. Whatever the answer, it seems practically certain that the passage where the Portcullis Gate now stands would be controlled by at least one of the two early gateways, and parts of the lower masonry on the rear (west) wall of the Portcullis Gate may represent a visible survival of these early structures.

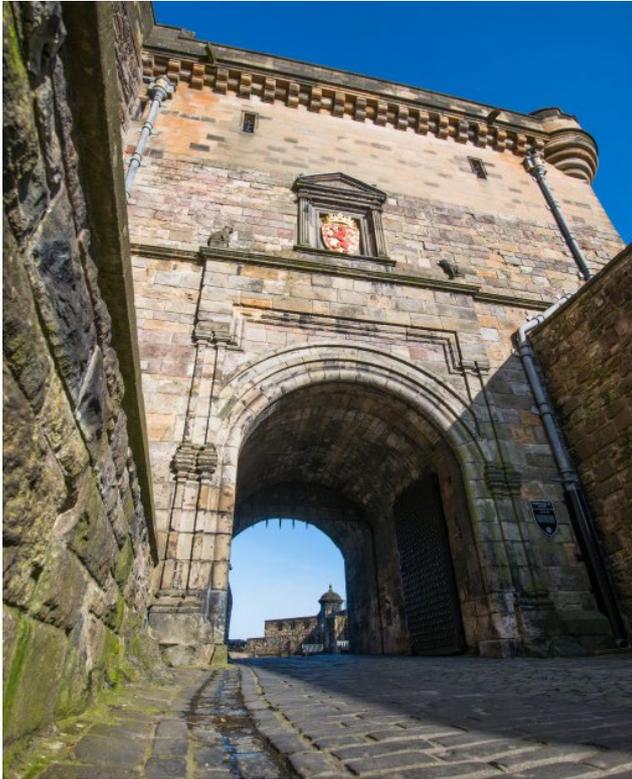
Elements of the surviving upstanding fabric and from archaeological excavations provide further clues as to the developmental history, but major gaps in our understanding remain. The back (west) elevation reveals indications of a complex building chronology, as it seems to contain masonry of several phases. The coursed, squared blocks of grey masonry immediately above and around the gateway may predate the heightening of the gateway into a tower, and may perhaps therefore be associated with the construction work between 1335 and 1339. Higher up on the same wall, there is a vertical discontinuity in the masonry above the right-hand pier of the gate arch, suggesting that the southern flank of the building may be of a different build from the rest – this is a thick wall containing a medieval spiral staircase and may indeed be an even more substantial baulk of masonry than it appears to be externally, as its masonry probably extends beneath the adjacent landing of the Lang Stairs. The remainder of the wall is heavily patched with dark stones, which are also used in similar contexts elsewhere in the castle and have been identified as the traces of repair work after the Lang Siege in 1573. Above the arch of the entrance passage also visible on the west side of the tower is a single iron-barred window lighting the former gear room for the portcullis behind.

Further complexities are evident when we consider the evidence for the successive defences adjoining the present portcullis structure to the north and northeast that form part of the outer defences facing towards Princes Street. In this context, mention should be made of the massive wall or buttress structure which abuts the Portcullis Gate on the north side of the approach road, a baulk of solid masonry (perhaps wrapped around a rock outcrop) which extends forward for some 15m in length, and is nearly 4m thick for much of its length. Excavators in 1988-1990 noted that this is one of the earliest stone-built defensive structures along the approach road, implying that it was constructed at a relatively early date in the castle's history (certainly no later than the 1540s and potentially several centuries earlier).¹³ This hefty bulwark presumably represents a remnant of an earlier gate structure or an associated tower or rampart, and it is possible that the north flank of the Portcullis Gate is wrapped around a western continuation of the same underlying structure. One element of this outer wall does seem to

¹³ (Driscoll & Yeoman, 1997, pp. 86-7)

appear on Slezer's early illustrations – the buttress-like projection stepping down the cliffs where the rear corner of the Portcullis Gate abuts the ramparts of the Middle Ward to its west; this might potentially be a fragment of an older tower or curtain wall.¹⁴

Appendix 3: Images

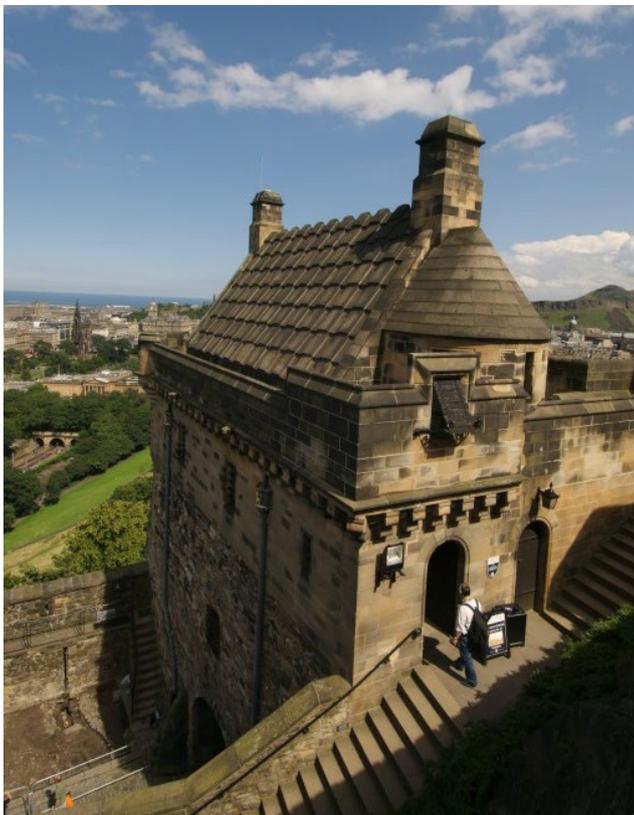


Portcullis Gate and Argyle Tower, looking north-west

¹⁴ The buttress-like wall is already seen on 'The Prospect of the Castle and City of Edenborough, from the North Loch', dated 1673 [Edinburgh City Council *Capital Collections* website, www.capitalcollections.org.uk/index.php?a=ViewItem&i=10738, accessed March 2019].



Lang Stairs, Portcullis Gate and Argyle Tower, looking south-east



Lang Stairs, Portcullis Gate and Argyle Tower, looking north-east