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Taken into State care: 1906 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2012

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EDINBURGH CASTLE – DAVID’S TOWER



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EDINBURGH CASTLE – DAVID’S TOWER

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

David’s Tower (known initially as ‘the great tower’) was built in the later 14th century, part of David II’s reconstruction of the castle largely destroyed by his father, Robert I (Bruce), in 1314. It served as the royal lodging in the castle, replacing its 12th-century predecessor, which lay to the north beside St. Margaret’s Chapel.

The L-plan tower house stood at least three storeys high, with a re-entrant angle in the SE corner. One of the first of the new style of later medieval tower houses to be constructed in Scotland, it was unique in that its jamb, or wing, was used to provide horizontal access between the building and adjacent structures rather than vertical access through the building itself, which was the norm elsewhere. Another unusual feature was the barbican, or defensive forework, protecting the front entrance in the re-entrant angle. A short but precious stretch of the contemporary curtain wall, incorporating a postern, survives to its south. At a later stage, probably in the earlier 15th century, the L-plan was converted into a rectangle, so creating more living space.

David’s Tower was in time replaced as the royal lodging in the castle by the Palace, and downgraded in status. It continued, however, to play an important role in the defence of the castle. Its wall-head served as a gun battery, and a new gun-emplacement was built immediately to its north in 1546; the gunhole is still there. The tower was brought crashing to the ground during the artillery assault that brought the 18-month Lang Siege to an abrupt end in May 1573, and replaced by the Half-Moon Battery. It was rediscovered and cleared of rubble and soil in 1912/13. The Honours of Scotland and the other Crown Jewels were secretly buried there in WWII.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

1356: David II returns from lengthy captivity and orders the rebuilding of the castle largely destroyed by his father, Robert I, in 1314.

1368–77: David’s Tower (most probably initially known as ‘the great tower’), an L-planned tower house, is built, one of several towers all linked by a stone curtain wall. David’s Tower, probably the largest, serves as the royal lodging in the castle. It was completed only after the death of David II (1371), during the reign of his successor, Robert II (1371–90).

1382–83: Kitchens and latrines are built next to ‘the great tower’.

Later 14th century: A barbican, or stone forework, is built in the tower’s south-east re-entrant angle, to help defend the front doorway.

15th century: The barbican is demolished and the re-entrant filled in completely to create a rectangular tower.

1440: The infamous 'Black Dinner', hosted by a young James II and at which the earl of Douglas and his younger brother are arrested and beheaded on the orders of Chancellor Crichton, is held in the castle; tradition has it that the venue was David's Tower.

1448: David's Tower is first mentioned as such in the records, when four great beams are used to help repair damage caused during a siege by James II in 1444, when his ex-chancellor, Lord Crichton, held out in the castle.

1517: A room called 'the lordis hall' is formed within the tower.

1546: A gun emplacement is built immediately to the north of David's Tower, for a cannon to fire on a fixed line down over Castle Hill to the High Street. The east wall of David's Tower is probably thickened internally with a rubble wall at the same time, to help withstand artillery bombardment.

1554: David's Tower is clearly depicted on a drawing of the castle made by an English spy during the earl of Hertford's siege of the castle.

1573: David's Tower is brought crashing down during the artillery barrage that brings the 18-month Lang Siege to an abrupt end.

c. 1575: David's Tower and adjoining lengths of curtain wall are largely demolished and replaced by the Half-Moon Battery.

1695: Most of the surviving stone vaults date from the rebuilding of the gun platform atop the Half-Moon Battery. The 1546 gunhole is blocked up at the same time.

c. 1780: Two large rainwater cisterns are installed in the vaults below the Half-Moon Battery, to provide the garrison's water supply.

c. 1860: A third cistern is added to the two already in the vaults below the Half-Moon Battery gun platform. (All three cisterns are subsequently removed, probably in the 1880s.)

1891: Hippolyte Blanc, the Edinburgh-based architect then restoring the Great Hall, rediscovers part of the lost David's Tower in a coal cellar off the Sergeants' Mess in the Palace (now the Laich Hall).

1912–13: Investigation work by the recently created Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland confirms Blanc's discovery. Excavations by the Office of Works follow. Public access to the newly exposed remains is provided. The 1546 gunhole is unblocked.

1942: The Honours of Scotland and the Crown Jewels from the Crown Room (the Stewart and Lorne Jewels) are taken from their temporary home in the basement of the Palace and secretly buried in two separate locations in David's Tower. They are returned to the Crown Room at the end of WWII.

1987–88: Archaeological excavations by Peter Yeoman for Historic Scotland shed more light on the barbican.

1993: New and safe public access is provided to David's Tower, including a new spiral stair to the postern to the south of the tower.

Archaeological Overview

The major clearance of David's Tower was carried out in 1912/13 by the Office of Works, under the supervision of W T Oldrieve. Oldrieve dug down from the surface of the Half-Moon Battery, revealing the half-filled voids of the surviving remnant of the tower house. The work established the building history of David's Tower and its related structures (eg barbican, curtain wall), as well as its incorporation into the Half-Moon Battery that replaced it. However, the operation was more clearance work than archaeological excavation, and it is likely that crucial clues were removed without recognition.

More recently, small-scale work (archaeological excavation and standing building survey) has attempted to tease out further information. Most crucially, Peter Yeoman has shed more light on the barbican and the subsequent development of the re-entrant south-east angle.

Three of the archaeological finds, including an iron helmet, are on display in the Argyle Tower.

Architectural/Artistic Overview

David's Tower survives only as a stump of the original, and one that has been substantially compromised by building works associated with its successor on the site, the Half-Moon Battery. The result is that its original form and layout, as well as its subsequent developmental history, are imperfectly understood.

Original foundation phase: David's Tower was originally built between 1368 and 1377. What stood on the site, if anything, prior to then, is not known. The tower was built contemporaneously with an associated curtain wall, one short stretch of which survives on the south side of David's Tower. Evidence for the curtain wall on the north side of David's Tower was found by Peter Yeoman in archaeological excavation.

David's Tower itself comprised an L-plan tower at least three storeys high beneath battlements. Only the basement of the main block remains, whilst the jamb to its south has most of its first floor intact. The ground floor of the main block seems to have formed one large space, entered through a doorway off a passage along the west side. Part of a turnpike stair giving access to the (now missing) upper floors survives at the NW corner. Evidence for two first-floor windows, lighting the 'lordis hall' perhaps, was found during recent works giving access for the public.

The surviving portion of jamb uniquely provided only horizontal access, not vertical access, which was invariably the case with later medieval tower houses. Obvious 14th-century details are the two vertical arrow-slits, fishtailed at each end, doorways with almost triangular pointed lintels formed from two stones, and flagged soffits supported on transverse ribs (as also at **Tantallon Castle**).

Little remains of the barbican built in the re-entrant angle, other than stone wall footings and part of an arch embedded in the east wall of the later chamber. A

length of contemporary curtain wall survives to the south, incorporating a postern defended by two gates; the outer gate has a draw-bar slot.

Development phase 1: The most significant alteration to the original tower was the demolition of its barbican and the infilling, probably to full height, of the re-entrant angle to create further accommodation. Only the bottom storey remains, beneath a tunnel vault. The surviving features, including a latrine at the south-east corner and two south-facing windows (one more a squint than a window), are not closely datable, but a date in the first half of the 15th century seems most likely. At some later date, the east wall of the south-east chamber was thickened to incorporate a fireplace. A half-mezzanine, probably a sleeping loft, was formed above it at the same time.

Development phase 2: In 1546, the curtain wall to the north of David's Tower was demolished and replaced by a gun emplacement for a single cannon firing through the horizontal gunhole in its east wall. The massive rubble thickening on the inside of David's Tower's east wall was probably also associated with this upgrading of defensive provision at a time of national emergency, the War of the Rough Wooing. The wall thickening is comparable to that carried out for James V at **Tantallon Castle** after the 1528 siege.

Destruction phase: The destruction of David's Tower in 1573 resulted in what was left of it being entombed in the Half-Moon Battery. Other than the inside 'face' of the Half-Moon Battery itself (most obvious in the area to the south of the Tower), the most conspicuous features of the Half-Moon Battery are the various upstanding walls and vaults supporting its gun platform. Two phases are apparent, the last relating to the final repair to the Half-Moon Battery in 1695. The 1546 gun-emplacement was blocked up during the 1695 repair work.

Period of State care: Following the clearance work of 1912/13, timber handrails and stairs were provided to permit public access. In the 1990s, a further upgrade was carried out; all the redundant service pipes (including a gas main) were removed, the old timber stairs and walkways removed, and new access arrangements installed, including a metal stair to the curtain wall and postern on the south side of the tower.

Social Overview

Other than its role as an important part of the visitor experience at the castle, David's Tower has no social association or use.

Spiritual Overview

N/A

Aesthetic Overview

David's Tower is a dark, dank and eerie place. It instantly conjures up in the mind's eye images of the darker side of medieval life, such as bloody sieges and grim pit-prisons, whilst its primary purpose, as royal lodging, remains distinctly remote and almost impossible to appreciate.

David's Tower comprises a series of gloomy spaces, all differently sized and on varying levels. The whole experience leaves the visitor utterly amazed but completely confused. That the surviving stone vaults have nothing to do with David's Tower is largely responsible for the latter feeling.

The 1546 gunhole provides the visitor with the only glimpse of the outside world in the entire place. The view through its throat graphically demonstrates where the main threat to the castle came from in medieval times.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

What form and layout did the original tower house take? Perhaps we will never know, but further examination of the surviving standing structure may yet reveal more clues.

What was the precise nature of the barbican at the re-entrant angle, and to what use was the infilled re-entrant angle put?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

David's Tower was among the first of a new form of tower house to be built in Scotland from the later 14th century on. Although only the stump of the L-plan structure remains, it had features that made it unique among its peers.

David's Tower and its adjacent stretch of contemporary curtain wall are among the oldest structures surviving in the castle, exceeded in date only by St Margaret's Chapel.

David's Tower is one of the highlights of a visit to the castle, its dark, dank, multi-level spaces easily creating images of medieval warfare and siege.

That David's Tower was used to hide the Honours of Scotland in WWII adds to its historical importance.

ADDENDA

Associated Properties

Other late 14th -century tower houses in state care: **Craigmillar; Crichton; Crookston; Doune; Dundonald; Hermitage; Lochleven; Threave**

Keywords

tower house; curtain wall; re-entrant angle; barbican; gunhole; vault; David II

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