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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CLACKMANNAN TOWER



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CLACKMANNAN TOWER

SYNOPSIS

Clackmannan Tower stands in lofty isolation on King's Seat Hill, overlooking the town of Clackmannan from its western side. The site is potentially of great antiquity, and almost certainly the location of a royal residence, probably a Hunting lodge, from the 12th century. David II spent his sixth birthday there in 1330.

The surviving building, comprising two adjoining towers, is a complicated structure. The earliest part, the lower half of the north tower, was probably built by Sir Robert Bruce of Clackmannan c.1360, shortly after being confirmed in possession of the royal estate of Clackmannan by David II, his half-uncle. It was entered at first-floor level. At some date in the 15th century that building was comprehensively remodelled. It was doubled in height and a south tower (or jamb) added, thus creating an L-plan. Ground-floor access to the building was achieved, and a kitchen introduced. The final alterations seem to have been made in the early 17th century, following the erection of a mansion house (since demolished) at the tower's south-west corner. The impressive pedimented doorway on the east side and the notable crenellations atop the south tower probably date from this time, as does the scale-and-platt stair in the south-west corner rising to the first floor.

Clackmannan Tower was abandoned as a residence by 1800, and the mansion alone demolished by 1841. The tower itself has suffered considerably from structural damage caused by underground coal workings, and since its formal transfer into state care in 1954 major conservation works have been carried out. Plans are currently in hand to open the property to public access.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **c.1250** – A castle at Clackmannan is mentioned in a charter of Alexander III (1249-86). A royal residence, perhaps a hunting lodge given references to 'the king's forest of Clackmannan', may have been on the present site since the reign of David I (1124-53). This royal connection is reflected in place names in the vicinity, including King's Seat Hill (on which the present tower stands), King's Meadow, and Craigrie ('King's Rock').
- **1330** – David II, son of Robert I (The Bruce), spends his sixth birthday at Clackmannan with his half-cousin, Sir Thomas Bruce, illegitimate son of Edward Bruce, Robert I's younger brother.
- **1359** – David II confirms Sir Robert Bruce, Sir Thomas's son and heir, in the lands at Clackmannan. At what stage the royal demesne had passed formally into the hands of David's kinsman is not clear, but it may have been in recognition of the assistance given during his long captivity in England. Sir Robert is probably responsible for building the oldest part of the present tower (the lower half of the main (north) tower).

- **15th century** – The tower is substantially enlarged, but by which Bruce of Clackmannan is not known. The tower is heightened by two storeys and a new tower abutted to its south side. The interior is considerably reordered.
- **1551** – Sir Robert Bruce, 8th baron, has the town of Clackmannan created a burgh of barony. (The existing market cross, in Main Street, bears the weathered, but recognisable, coat of arms of the Bruces of Clackmannan, the superiors of the burgh.)
- **Early 17th century** – Further substantial alterations are made to the tower following the erection of a new mansion house adjacent to its south-west corner. Around the same time, terraced gardens are formed to the south and a new entrance forecourt created on the east side.
- **1650s** – Sir Henry Bruce begins to exploit the coal seams in the area, including those under King's Seat Hill. Following his death in 1674, his son, Sir David, continues the endeavour but overreaches himself and is declared bankrupt in 1708. He sells his Clackmannan estate to William Dalrymple, son of the earl of Stair, but retains the castle.
- **1772** – Sir Henry Bruce, last of the male line of the Bruces of Clackmannan, dies. His widow, Catherine, continues to reside there. 'As long as she lived ... the Tower of Clackmannan was frequented by her numerous friends and acquaintances, of various rank, and various ages.' One such visitor is Robert Burns, on 26 August 1787, whom she honours with a 'mock knighting', using the so-called 'Bruce's Sword' (now in the earl of Elgin's collection at Broomhall). Such ceremonies are apparently a popular fancy of the eccentric and staunchly Jacobite lady, who is considered to be as much a relic of a bygone age as her antique abode.
- **1791** – Catherine Bruce dies and 'a common ploughman' moves into the mansion. The mansion itself is demolished before 1841, leaving the ancient tower standing alone.
- **1948** – The Ministry of Works begin to carry out preservation works, whilst negotiations proceed to have the building taken into state care.
- **1954** – The tower is formally entrusted into state care. In the following year part of the east wall of the tower collapses, a casualty of the earlier mine workings; it is subsequently rebuilt.

Archaeological Overview:

The excavations carried out by the Ministry of Works c.1950 were confined to clearing rubble prior to masonry consolidation. These are unlikely to have significantly damaged the underlying archaeology. During the consolidation work following the 1954 collapse, several structural timbers were retrieved, and these still have the potential for dendrochronology, thereby helping both to provide precise dates of felling as well as evidence for their country of origin.

The well in the basement of the north tower has been part cleared (and thereafter backfilled with gravel), but it may not have been bottomed and could yet provide valuable information.

The only other known archaeological intervention was in 1999 when a watching brief in the east forecourt showed that this had been built up to form a level terrace.

The entire structure is urgently in need of a comprehensive standing building survey, to attempt to refine a building history that is still woefully inadequate. The building survey would also potentially shed light on the tower's interior fittings, given that fairly delicate traces remain adhering to the walls. The hall in particular retains traces of a timber ceiling inserted below the vault. The *ex-situ* timbers stored in the basement of the north tower should also be dendrochronologically examined.

The area of ground adjacent to the tower has great potential for shedding light on the detailed nature of the demolished late 16th-century mansion and its accompanying formal gardens and courts.

Finally, the entire area of King's Seat Hill, on which the tower stands, would also repay archaeological study, given that the site may well have been a royal hunting lodge from the time of David I through to its transfer into Robert Bruce of Clackmannan's hands in the mid-1300s.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

Clackmannan Tower is a complex structure with a rather vague building history reaching from the 14th to the 17th century. It is unlike most other later medieval tower house castles in that the manner in which it was remodelled, on at least two major occasions, is highly unusual. The building of a mansion adjacent to it c.1600 simply complicated matters further. Perhaps this extraordinary, and extraordinarily complicated, building history is what makes Clackmannan Tower stand out as an architectural gem.

The following overview divides the structure into three historical episodes. (a) The original structure. (b) The 15th-century remodelling, and (c) The early 17th-century alterations. But first an important *caveat*: the dates of certain significant features are open to speculation, including most notably the crenellated parapet atop the south tower, variously ascribed by architectural historians to anywhere between the later 15th and later 17th century.

The original structure

Clackmannan Tower seems to have originated as a rectangular three-storey tower house (the lower half of the north tower) in the later 14th century. It is remarkably similar to the late 14th-century tower house at **Crichton Castle**. Measuring c.11 x 9m and constructed of squared and coursed buff sandstone with in-and-out quoins of grey stone, the building was accessed at first-floor level directly into the hall (sometimes erroneously identified as the original kitchen) through a door in the south wall (again much like Crichton). A straight, dog-legged stair in the south-west corner gave access down to the vaulted ground floor, divided horizontally into a cellar and entresol by a (now missing) timber floor. There was a well on the ground floor, and a square hatch in the vault for hoisting materials directly in the hall above.

Original features surviving in the hall include its high tunnel vault and the east window with a wall chamber high up in its north side, containing stone pigeonholes, interpreted as the charter store (similar raised chambers can be seen at

other towers, eg. **Cardoness**). The floor above the hall, accessed by a spiral stair in the north-west corner and presumably the private chamber, was largely rebuilt in the 15th century and only a south-facing window with stone seats remains.

The 15th-century remodelling

This remodelling, which took place at some indeterminate date in the 15th century, heightened the original tower to four storeys and an attic and added a five-storey and attic jamb, or wing, on the south, thereby creating an L-plan. (The change in the quoins in the north tower, from grey to buff sandstone, is evidence of the heightening.) The fact that the jamb rose a full storey higher than the main block, for whatever reason, makes Clackmannan unique among Scotland's countless tower houses.

This remodelling comprehensively altered the internal accommodation. The chief innovations were the creation of a ground-floor access into the original tower with a spiral stair giving access to the first floor, and the introduction of a kitchen on the first floor of the south wing. Other changes included upgrading the hall with a new fireplace (its moulded jambs topped by bell caps) and a buffet recess inserted into the north wall. The new top storey of the north tower has an unusually long wall chamber running the full length of its north side (Elphinstone Tower, (E. Lothian) (now demolished) had something similar). The wallhead battlement at the top of the tower, projecting on individual moulded corbels and with shallowly projecting 'rounds' at two corners, is typical of the later 15th century.

The early 17th-century alterations

The latest alterations to the building are now generally thought to have been carried out in tandem with the construction of a new mansion at its south-west corner, though the possibility exists that some minor alterations (eg, to the windows) were done later in that century.

These alterations had their greatest impact on the lowest two storeys of the building, chiefly as a result of creating a new front entrance from the east, through a doorway framed by fluted Doric pilasters and surmounted by a triangular pediment, its tympanum carved with a tree. The doorway led to a pend which cut straight through the 15th-century re-entrant angle and its spiral stair to a door at the west end giving access to the adjacent mansion. A scale-and-platt stair added to the west side of the south wing gave formal access to the tower's upper storeys. The curved passage through to the hall on the first floor of the north wing is also of this period.

It is possible that the notable crenellated parapet carried on moulded machicolations atop the south jamb dates also from this period, even though it is of a type more usually attributed to the 15th century (eg, **Bothwell** and **Craigmillar**). If so, this marks Clackmannan out as an unusual instance where the 'ancient' (the lofty, forbidding and crenellated tower) is placed alongside the 'modern' (the new two-storey mansion) in a consciously 'showy' attempt to celebrate the chivalric antiquity of the Bruces of Clackmannan whilst heralding their glorious future.

Social Overview:

Clackmannan Tower looms over the town of Clackmannan from its western side, and thus has a significant presence locally. It is a notable element of Clackmannanshire's pre-industrial landscape, and a symbol of local pride. It does, however, suffer from low-grade vandalism.

Because of the property's structural problems, it has hitherto proved difficult to open the building to public access on a regular basis, though it is opened for special occasions (eg, Doors Open Days). The result is that the building figures little in the social life of the local community. However, plans are currently in hand with others (including the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) to have the tower opened on a more regular basis, chiefly to take full advantage of the wonderful views to be had from the battlements, particularly those on the south side overlooking the River Forth.

Spiritual Overview:

Historically, as a seat of the Bruces of Clackmannan in later medieval times the tower would have had a chapel within, where the family and household worshipped daily.

Currently, the tower appears to have no spiritual role. However, because of 'several personal experiences within the tower', a full-scale ghost hunt was organised locally, to be carried out by PEG (Paranormal Encounters Group).

Aesthetic Overview

Clackmannan Tower's situation on an open hilltop in the valley plain of the River Forth is dramatic. It can be seen from many miles around, and the views out from King's Seat Hill and even more spectacularly from the tower battlements across the Forth valley are likewise wonderful.

The relative completeness of the building means that it retains much of the impact sought by its builders. A great monolithic structure, whose outward severity is offset by the handsome treatment of its wallheads.

The labyrinthine interior of the building lends the tower a sense of mystery which is augmented by the subtle deviation from the horizontal and vertical of just about every surface as a result of mining subsidence.

Natural Significance Overview

Two species of bats have been recorded roosting in the building ; common pipstrelle *Pipistrellus pipistrellus* and brown long-eared bat *Plecotus auratus*.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Was there a castle on the site prior to the construction of the present building in the 14th century? An archaeological survey of King's Seat Hill would doubtless cast new light on the origins of the site prior to the time of Sir Robert Bruce of Clackmannan in the 1350s.
- What is the detailed chronology and constructional development of the present building? A comprehensive standing building survey (including dendrochronology of the timbers), coupled with a detailed investigation of the records of the Bruces of Clackmannan, may hopefully result in a more accurate understanding of the building history of this remarkable, and

remarkably complicated structure.

- What was the detailed arrangement of the later mansion, and of the gardens and grounds laid out contemporaneously with it? Here again an archaeological study would doubtless pay dividends.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Clackmannan Tower is a rare, and largely complete, example of a fine 14th-century residence, which, through alteration and extension, served as a noble seat of the Bruces of Clackmannan for over three centuries.
- The architectural history of the existing upstanding structure is fascinating, but also complicated, making it an important building in an understanding of the development of noble residences in the later medieval and early modern times.
- King's Seat Hill has probably been occupied by a royal residence of some form since at least the 12th century and is likely to be an area of high archaeological potential.
- Clackmannan Tower is a remarkable landmark in the Forth valley, and commands extensive views in all directions.

Associated Properties

(some other Bruce residences) – Annan Castle; Broomhall; Culross Palace; Earlsall (Fife); **Loch Doon Castle**; Lochmaben (Old) Castle; **Muness Castle**; Pittarhie Castle (Fife); Stenhouse Castle (site of); Thomaston Castle (Ayr); Tulliallan Castle; Turnberry Castle

(some other notable tower houses in the area) – Airth Castle; Alloa Tower; **Balvaird Castle**; **Blackness Castle**; **Castle Campbell**; Drummond Castle; **Lochleven Castle**; Rosyth Castle; Sauchie Tower

Keywords:

tower; hall; crenellation; machicolation; David II; Bruce; Lady Catherine; Robert Burns

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