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Statement of Significance

Blackness Castle



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Statement of Significance

Blackness Castle

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Synopsis

Blackness Castle occupies a spit of land ('black point') jutting into the Firth of Forth close by the village of Blackness and 4 miles east-north-east of Linlithgow. The property comprises the substantial remains of a medieval castle originating in the 15th century but substantially altered in the 16th century to make it one of the most formidably defensive royal strongholds in the realm. The castle's curtain walls make it appear like some great stone boat about to be launched, so earning its soubriquet - 'the ship that never sailed'. The ship analogy is continued with the naming of the castle's three towers – the 'stem' (jutting into the sea and housing the original prison and pit); the 'main mast' (the free-standing tower house within the enclosure, later used to house state prisoners); and the 'stern' (the L-planned range at the landward end and containing the former great hall). The low hill overlooking the site from the south has foundations of the medieval St Ninian's Chapel and one wall of a lectern-type dovecot of probable 17th-century date. The humps and bumps here may be remains of the 'redoubt' built by Cromwell's men during the 1651 bombardment of the castle. Ancient burials have also been found on the hill.

The castle itself served as a military garrison and state prison through the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. In 1870 it became the central ammunition depot for Scotland and remained in use as such until shortly after World War I, principally supplying munitions to Rosyth Naval Dockyard and the fortified islands in the Firth of Forth (including **Inchcolm**). The buildings on the landward side of the medieval castle (officers' quarters and soldiers' barracks) and the pier on the seaward side date from this period. Following the castle's transfer into the care of the Office of Works, major works of masonry repair and restoration were carried out in an attempt to return the castle to its 16th-century form.

Character of the monument

Historical overview

- **12th century** – Blackness Bay probably serves as the port for the newly-established royal burgh and castle of **Linlithgow**. Ships are recorded loading

and unloading at Blackness as early as 1200. Blackness may well have served a pivotal supply role during Edward I of England's attack on Stirling Castle in 1304. Whether a castle existed at the port to protect the facility is not known, but St Ninian's Chapel, situated on the hill directly to the south of the castle, is on record from the 14th century.

- **1449** – first mention of a castle at Blackness, probably built by Sir George Crichton, admiral of Scotland and sheriff of Linlithgow.
- **1454** – following the death of his cousin, William Crichton, chancellor of Scotland, Sir George is compelled to name James II as his heir and assign all his assets to him, including Blackness. George's son, James, responds by seizing Blackness and imprisoning his own father therein. The king soon arrives with his artillery – and his queen – and James is compelled to surrender. Blackness becomes a royal castle.
- **1465** – the Crown grants the castle to the burgesses of Linlithgow, who are permitted to use the castle's stone and lime to construct a harbour.
- **later 15th century** – the Crown resumes control of the castle and a succession of royal keepers (mostly sheriffs of Linlithgow) are placed in charge of it. They are remunerated with a proportion of the customs raised in the port, control over the profitable fishing and salt-manufacturing industries, and revenue raised from the royal rabbit warrens and brewery. The latter are under the day-to-day management of the priest of St Ninian's Chapel.
- **1491** – James IV resides in the castle, during which he hears mass. He revisits in 1506, during which he is entertained by four minstrels playing shawms. In 1512 he comes ashore for a short time whilst sailing aboard his latest flagship, the *Great Michael*, then undergoing sea trials in the Forth.
- **1517** – the keeper, Patrick Hamilton of Kincavill, is paid extra from the royal coffers 'because he is put to greit chargis in the keeping of wardaris [prisoners] within the castle' – a reference to the growing role of Blackness as a state prison. Among the prisoners down the years are Cardinal Beaton, archbishop of **St Andrews** (1543, for opposing closer links with Protestant England), Andrew Melville, provost of New College, St Andrews (1583, for

slandering James VI from his pulpit), and Lord Maxwell of **Caerlaverock** (1584 for displaying pro-Catholic tendencies). These are probably warded in the central ‘main mast’ tower. Other more lowly prisoners, including ‘Crukit Dande’ Ormiston, a noted Border reiver, in 1561, and John Donaldson, burgess of Stirling (1588), for cutting down trees in the royal forest of Torwood without permission, are probably confined in the pit prison in the north ‘stem’ tower.

- **1534** – James Hamilton of Kincavill, keeper of Blackness, is forfeited for heresy and flees to England. His kinsman, James Hamilton of Finnart, illegitimate son of James Hamilton, 1st earl of Arran, is given custody of the castle.
- **1537-1543** – James V embarks on a major refortification of Blackness, under the direction of Hamilton of Finnart (who is also engaged to oversee the upgrading of **Linlithgow Palace**). Much of what exists today, including the enormously thickened curtain wall facing south and east with their huge, wide-mouthed gun holes, dates from this time. The central ‘main mast’ tower is probably heightened at this time. The defensive work includes a caponier (a rare form of gun-gallery), one of only two known in the British Isles; the other is at Finnart’s own castle of **Craignethan**. (It is possible that two more remain to be discovered in the outer ditch at **Tantallon**.) The work, when completed in 1543, is described as ‘formidable’.
- **1543** – James IV’s illegitimate son, James Stewart, earl of Moray, rides out to Blackness Castle from Edinburgh to be with his wife at the birth of their child. It is possible that another visitor in this year is Sir Ralph Sadler, the English ambassador, who advises his king, Henry VIII, that Blackness ‘is impregnable’. During the Wars of the Rough Wooing (1544-1560) that follow, the castle is used by the Scotto-French forces as the main ammunition depot. The caponier is raised by another storey and converted into a strong defence (called the Spur) flanking the entrance gate.
- **1567-73** – the garrison, under Lord Claud Hamilton, holds out for Mary Queen of Scots during the civil war that follows her arrest at Carberry Hill. It is

surrendered only when **Edinburgh Castle** falls to the 'king's party' following the Lang Siege.

- **1651** – the castle is bombarded from land and sea by Cromwell's forces following his invasion of the country. The garrison surrenders after 24 hours, leaving the castle badly damaged, particularly the south front; St Ninian's Chapel is probably largely destroyed during the siege.
- **later 1660s** - the castle is repaired and strengthened. The central 'main mast' tower is altered internally and a stair turret added (1667) to fit the place up as a prison for persistent Covenanter dissidents – a role it shares with the Bass Rock and Dunnottar Castle. The upper storeys of the 'stem' tower are removed to create a three-gun battery defending the castle from the sea, and the Spur is further heightened and armed to protect the entrance.
- **1691** - the garrison comprises 41 men and the castle is full of prisoners who have resisted the accession of the Protestant William and Mary.
- **1707** – following the Act of Union with England, the castle ceases to be used as a state prison but is kept in repair and occupied by a small garrison. The 'main mast' and 'stern' towers are adapted as barrack accommodation (even the huge gun holes in the 'stern' tower are blocked and converted into bread ovens).
- **1795** - at the start of the French Revolutionary Wars, the garrison comprises two gunners, a sergeant, two corporals and around 12 privates. The posts of governor and deputy-governor are held by non-residents.
- **post-1860** – following the threat of invasion by Napoleon III of France, coastal batteries are built around the Scottish coast (including a major remodelling of the seaward defence at **Fort George**). In 1870 Blackness is converted into the central ammunition depot for Scotland to supply them, and subsequent military improvements (for example, Rosyth Naval Dockyard, established in 1903, and **Inchcolm Island**, fortified in 1914). Major alterations are carried out to the castle, including installing water tanks in the landward ditch, opening a new wide entrance gate through the east curtain wall, roofing over the courtyard between the 'main mast' and 'stern' towers with a

concrete and steel structure, and building a new sea gate on the west side to access a new landing pier. Immediately beyond the filled-in ditch, new buildings are erected around a newly formed parade ground, including officers' quarters and soldiers' barracks and store. While details of links are not known, the military function of Blackness certainly made it a participant in the maintenance and expansion of the British Empire. The British Army was a key component of those endeavours.¹

- **1912** – the War Office hands the castle over to the Office of Works but resumes occupation on the outbreak of World War I in 1914. It finally vacates the premises in 1919.
- **1920s** – the Office of Works carries out a major programme of repair and restoration. Under the guidance of J Wilson Paterson, chief architect, the work reverses most of the recent army interventions in the castle (for example, removing the courtyard roof and blocking up the east entrance), but goes further, restoring the upper parts of the 'main mast' and 'stern' towers to how they might have originally been. During the work, a macabre discovery is made in the pit prison in the 'stem' tower – an iron manacle clasped around the wrist bones of a long-perished prisoner. A possible 7th-century cist burial is also found near the 19th-century barracks.
- **1989** – Franco Zeffirelli uses Blackness Castle as a film location for *Hamlet*, starring Mel Gibson.

Archaeological overview

Little modern archaeological work has been carried out at the property. The courtyard inside the great curtain wall has been cleared down to bedrock in most places, thus reducing the archaeological potential considerably. The same maxim applies to the floor levels in the three towers and the caponier in the Spur.

¹ For more information on the connection between the Properties in Care of Scottish Ministers and the British Empire download the full report from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c.1600–1997](#)

Nevertheless, as has been shown on other ‘bedrock’ sites (for example, **Dundonald Castle** and **Edinburgh Castle**), fissures in the bedrock still have the potential to hold undisturbed deposits.

The grass-covered area immediately around the castle’s south and east sides will have some archaeological potential. The ground to the south was created as a parade ground late in the castle’s history, but prior to then contained the rock-cut ditch protecting the main south front. In the 18th century this was recorded as containing water, probably only at high tide. That ditch now houses a water cistern serving the later 19th-century central ammunition depot, which will have destroyed some archaeology but certainly not all. The ground to the east appears to have been reclaimed from bedrock in the later 19th century but may retain evidence for the ancillary military buildings associated with the ammunition depot. The discovery in 1924 of a cist burial in front of the barracks, interpreted originally as early iron Age but perhaps more likely to be of the 7th century AD on account of the bronze armlet found in it, indicates that the site of the castle is of potentially greater antiquity.

The area in state care extends a considerable distance to the south, beyond the later 19th-century barracks and over the hill. This area will certainly have archaeological deposits associated with St Ninian’s Chapel (whose foundations remain) and the dovecot. The hill will also have been used as a gun battery during the castle’s history, and there will no doubt be evidence of these. The hill has also produced evidence for prehistoric burials, including one containing an early food vessel.

Architectural/artistic overview

Blackness Castle comprises two separate building complexes – the medieval castle, and the later Victorian barrack buildings to its south. The former is by far and away the more important in architectural terms, though the latter are not without merit.

The medieval castle

This is a quite remarkable structure. Although it appears to have begun as a tower-house castle in the mid-15th century, it soon became a royal fortress whose chief

purpose was as a garrison stronghold and state prison. The castle in its present state largely reflects that change and lacks the architectural and artistic niceties associated with later medieval residential properties.

The 15th-century tower-house castle

The central – ‘main mast’ – tower and the curtain wall date from the Crichtons’ castle, albeit substantially remodelled later. The most notable original features surviving are the crenellations (alternating lower and higher sections of wallhead) in both structures, immured in subsequent wall heightening and appearing today as ‘ghosts’ in the stonework. These provide valuable evidence, for such wallhead defences rarely survive in so complete a state elsewhere. Their existence may be compared to the rare 13th-century crenellations surviving at **Rothsay Castle**, also immured in later wall heightening.

The 16th-century royal fortress

The castle’s most important architectural features surviving are the defensive improvement works carried out for James V between 1537 and 1543 under the supervising eye of Sir James Hamilton of Finnart, the king’s principal master of works. Their chief objective was to create a formidable fortress suited for the new era of gun-powdered artillery.

The 15th-century curtain wall was enormously thickened on its most vulnerable east and south sides, the principal entrance was relocated to the less vulnerable west side, where it was further protected by a most unusual defensive feature, a caponier (from the Italian *capannata* ‘little hut’); a vaulted gun gallery sited in a ditch. The south front, facing the threatening high ground, was doubled in height to create the ‘stern’ tower, which now housed the principal residential accommodation for the keeper (thus freeing the ‘main mast’ for prison accommodation). This brute mass of masonry was relieved only by an array of horizontal, wide-throated gun holes and one large segmental arched window in the ‘stern’ that was probably intended to double up as a gun emplacement in time of siege.

These defensive works lack the subtlety of the elaborate fortification systems then being developed in northern Italy (whence *trace Italienne*) and beginning to permeate through the rest of Europe. Rather, Blackness’s fortification follows on

from the ideas introduced to Scotland by Governor Albany at Dunbar Castle following the Battle of Flodden in 1513; a similar scheme of strengthening was undertaken at **Tantallon Castle** after James V's siege of 1528. Interestingly, Hamilton of Finnart served his 'apprenticeship' in Albany's entourage and may well have played a leading part in **Tantallon's** refortification. The hallmarks of Finnart's work are (1) the massive wall thickening, (2) the proliferation of wide-throated gun holes, and (3) the use of caponiers. All three are in evidence at his own castle, **Craignethan**, built in the 1530s.

During the reign of Mary (1542-67) the castle was further upgraded when the caponier was substantially heightened to form a more comprehensive defensive Spur covering the main entrance.

17th- and 18th-century changes

Subsequent alterations to the 16th-century royal fortress were comparatively minor by comparison. They included changes to the defences in the 1690s, most obviously to the Spur, which was raised yet again and remodelled for heavy guns and musketry (the great iron yett at the entrance gate dates from this time), and the 'stem' tower, which was greatly reduced in height to create a three-gun battery (as at the Elphinstone Tower in **Stirling Castle**). Changes to the accommodation included (1) refitting the 'main mast' tower in the 1660s as a prison for Covenanters (the spiral stair tower at the north-east corner and internal iron fittings date from this time), and (2) altering the accommodation in the 'stern' tower for use as barracks. The existence of a fine William IV period (c.1835) iron basket grate, manufactured by the Shotts Iron Co., in one of the 'stern' tower rooms indicates the process of change was on-going.

The 20th-century restoration

At the end of the First World War the castle reverted to the Office of Works, who carried out a major scheme of restoration, chiefly designed to unpick the significant alterations carried out to the castle by the War Office in the 1870s to convert it into a munitions depot, but also to grasp the opportunity so presented of returning it to something resembling its medieval form. The works were directed by J. Wilson Paterson, chief architect, who was simultaneously carrying out a restoration of

Inchcolm Abbey, similarly badly affected by military occupation during the Great War.

These restoration works went far beyond what would normally be acceptable today. They included not only the removal of the Victorian alterations (for example, the concrete and steel roof over part of the courtyard) but also the removal of earlier interventions (for example, the 17th-century floor inserted into the 16th-century hall in the ‘stern’ tower). By far the most conspicuous work was the ‘restoration’ (on the flimsiest of evidence) of the wallheads of the ‘main mast’ and ‘stern’ towers.

The Victorian barrack buildings

Both buildings are attractive stone-built structures. The officers’ quarters on the west side are the more militaristic in appearance, with crow-stepped gables and low towers over the entrance, the whole built of hammer-dressed ashlar, and marks the impact of the Scottish Revival into even army architecture. The less aggressive soldiers’ barracks owes more to its more muted Georgian predecessors (for example, **Fort George**).

The other Victorian structure worthy of mention is the landing pier, a fine stone and iron structure built in 1868 by Head, Wrightson and Co., but substantially restored in 1996.

Social overview

Besides being a noted visitor attraction on the south side of the Forth estuary, Blackness Castle has become in recent years a popular film location for example, Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet*, starring Mel Gibson, in 1989, and Neil Marshall’s ‘sci-fi’ *Doomsday* in 2007. Most notably, it was used for *Outlander*, and has become a popular site with fans of the show.

The castle is reached not only by road through the village of Blackness but also by an attractive coastal path from Bo’ness. The adjacent stretch of coast, Blackness Bay, is part of the Firth of Forth Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a combination of scattered salt marsh and rare grassland that attracts a great deal of interest from nature lovers, including the Marine Conservation Society.

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Spiritual overview

Blackness Castle may conceivably have housed a chapel in it at some point, for the private use of the Crichtons and later the keepers of the royal castle. However, St Ninian's Chapel, sited on the hill overlooking the castle from the southern side, will have been the principal place of worship for the castle occupants in medieval times.

The castle is associated with the imprisonment of religious dissidents (Covenanters) during the notorious 'Killing Time' in the reigns of Charles II and James VII in the later 17th century. They were held in the 'main mast' tower, and the remains of prison fittings (iron bars and locks) are still very much in evidence.

Today, the castle has no identified spiritual value, though the grounds were used for Sunday School picnics in the 20th century.

Aesthetic overview

Blackness Castle is often referred to as 'the ship that never sailed' and this epithet is instantly understandable when the property is viewed from the seaward side, particularly immediately down-river. The building complex looks just like a great ship that has not quite made the launch, its pointed prow projecting into the water and its square stern standing high and dry on the beach. This nautical impression is reinforced by the castle's three towers; the small 'stem' at the prow, the lofty 'main mast' amidships and the solid 'stern'.

The castle when viewed from the land, whether from the grass immediately in front or from the hill overlooking it from beyond the barracks, takes on an altogether different demeanour: a formidable, brute mass of masonry scarcely relieved by any redeeming features and conjuring up images of war and siege.

The impression that one is in a place wholly devoted to war and siege is reinforced inside the castle. The courtyard and buildings, stripped right back to the bedrock and basalt, appear severe, bare and hard. The interiors of all three towers are dark and almost utterly devoid of enlivening features.

The one aspect that offers relief from this overpowering antique military presence is the view out from the wall walks of the curtain wall, but most especially from the

battlements of the ‘main mast’, which offer fascinating vistas over the Forth estuary, and most especially the iconic Forth Bridges down-river to the east.

What are the major gaps in understanding the property?

- What was the form and layout of the original 15th-century castle, and was there anything of a defensive nature on the site prior to that date? It is just possible that a combination of archaeological excavation and standing building study could yet add to our current imperfect understanding of the origins of the castle.
- What is Blackness Castle’s detailed history? As yet no thorough investigation of the documentary sources has been made, even though extensive records survive in Edinburgh, London and elsewhere. Areas meriting detailed study include (a) the Scottish Crown’s occupation up to 1707, (b) its post-Act of Union use as a military base and prison, and (c) its role as the central ammunition depot Scotland 1870-1919.

Assessment of Significance

Key points

- Blackness Castle was one of Scotland’s foremost political prisons through the stirring times of the 16th and 17th centuries.
- The upstanding masonry fabric exhibits well the improvements in defensive fortification through the later medieval period made necessary by the development of gun-powdered artillery. Notably the massive thickening of the curtain walls, the array and disposition of the wide-throated gun holes, and perhaps most fascinating of all the introduction of the caponier, an almost unique survival in Britain for its day.
- Blackness Castle is a good example of the way in which a medieval fortification could be adapted and remain of practical use to the military long after its ‘sell-by-date’. The fortress’s use as Scotland’s central ammunition

depot from 1860 – 1919 further highlights Blackness's pivotal role in national defence.

Associated properties

(*some other castles of the Crichtons*) – Braal (Sutherland); Brunstane (Midlothian); **Crichton**; Cairns Tower (Midlothian); Sanquhar (Dumfries)

(*other significant royal fortresses*) – **Dumbarton Castle**; Dunbar Castle; **Edinburgh Castle**; **Stirling Castle**

(*other castles with caponiers*) – **Craignethan**; **Tantallon** (?)

(*some other castles with iron yetts*) – **Balvenie**; **Doune**; Drummond; Dundas; **Greenknowe**; Mingarry; **Smailholm**

Keywords

tower; curtain wall; caponier; artillery; prison; garrison; barracks; munitions; Crichton; James V; Hamilton of Finnart; Covenanters

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