



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD
EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

AUCHINDOUN CASTLE



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AUCHINDOUN CASTLE

SYNOPSIS

Auchindoun Castle stands on the crest of a high bank overlooking the River Fiddich, and beside the old hill road to Strathdon. The stone castle is surrounded by impressive earthworks, but whether these are Iron Age, Dark Age, or even the remains of an earlier medieval castle, is not known. The builder of the present castle is also in doubt, though tradition holds that it was Thomas Cochrane, master mason and a favourite of James III, hanged in 1482. By 1509 Auchindoun was in the hands of the Ogilvies of Deskford.

The castle consists of the remains of an L-planned, four storey tower house set within a rectangular walled enclosure. The tower was evidently a structure of some sophistication, judging by the fine vaulted ceilings at first-floor level. The tower's design and architectural details point to a construction date in the late 1400s, and the sophisticated vaults perhaps support the tradition that this was Cochrane's castle.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- 1479 - John Stewart, earl of Mar, James III's brother, dies in mysterious circumstances. Thomas (often mistakenly called Robert) Cochrane, master mason and one of James III's favourites, receives the earldom. He also becomes keeper of **Kildrummy Castle**. Later tradition, recorded by James Gordon, parson of Rothiemay, in the 1670s, has it that Cochrane built Auchindoun Castle as his Mar residence.
- 1482 - Thomas Cochrane is hanged from Lauder Bridge during a rebellion against the king.
- 1509 - the castle is recorded as being in the ownership of Sir James Ogilvy of Deskford, who in that year grants it to his nephew, Alexander Oglivy. (The building of Auchindoun had intruded on lands held by Ogilvy of Deskford.) The estate is described as 'the mains of Auchindoun with its castle, fortalice and castle hill'.
- 1567 – Alexander Ogilvy's son sells Auchindoun to Sir Adam Gordon, kinsman of the 4th earl of Huntly.
- 1571 - a party of Gordons from Auchindoun Castle attacks and burns **Corgarff Castle**, killing its occupants. This act, part of the endemic Gordon versus Forbes clan feud, is recalled in the famous ballad 'Edom o Gordon'. Apparently, in revenge Auchindoun itself is attacked and burnt by William Mackintosh, a deed resulting in him being beheaded by the countess of Huntly's cook. This deed also is remembered in a folk song: 'The burning of Auchindoun'.
- 1594 - the castle is back in Oglivy hands.
- 1670s – James Gordon, parson of Rothiemay, in his *History of Scots Affairs 1637-41*, tells of the marquis of Huntly coming upon 'one castell, seven myles

west from Strathbogye, near Balveny, callit Auchindowne castell (built, as is affirmed, by Cochrain, who was minion to King James the Third)'.

- 1725 - William Duff of Braco is given permission to remove stonework from the abandoned castle for his new residence, Balvenie House, in Dufftown.
- 1962 - the castle is taken into state care.

Archaeological Overview:

- The property was partially excavated in 1984, during masonry consolidation on the tower house. The ground floor was excavated and overburden from the stone vault between the ground and first floor was removed. A small area immediately beyond the south wall of the tower, where the main entrance lay, was also investigated. Among the discoveries was a small stone-lined feature sunk into the ground floor; interpreted as a cold store for perishable items (a similar feature was found at **Threave Castle** in the 1970s). A coin from the first floor suggested a re-flooring in the mid-1600s.
- The greater part of the courtyard, and the whole extent of the outer works, have not been archaeologically investigated and must be regarded as being of high archaeological potential, particularly the latter, which should produce evidence for the date(s) of the encircling earthworks, and the nature of the earlier occupation of the site.
- A later corn-drying kiln to the SW of the castle was filled in in the 1970s to prevent its collapse, but this too will have archaeological potential.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- Analogy with other castles suggests Auchindoun was built in the latter half of the 15th century. The L-plan tower house, the main accommodation within the castle, has four storeys. The first-floor hall, above a vaulted cellar, is now largely ruinous but retains evidence of its former sophisticated appearance. It was evidently ceiled by a ribbed quadripartite vault in two bays; what survives shows signs of a design change while building was in progress. Such vaulting is an indication of high architectural ambition. Mid-16th century Balbegno (Kincardineshire) has a ribbed groin vault that has been painted with heraldic panels that gives an idea of how Auchindoun's hall may have looked.
- A door from the hall led into a chamber in the wing, ceiled by an unribbed groin vault, a rare instance of the revived use of such a vault type, seen also at Alloa Tower. This chamber originally gave access down to a cellar that may well have served as a prison. A similar arrangement existed at Stonepath (East Lothian) and Borthwick (Midlothian), both dating to the mid-15th century. Little can be said about the upper floors given their ruinous nature.
- Unusually, the tower house sits completely within the surrounding walled circuit, rather than linking into it at some point. To the south was the gatehouse range. The east courtyard wall has at a later stage been extended out some 6.5m to accommodate another range containing kitchen, bake house and other offices. A rounded tower with gun-loops was also added to the north west corner.
- The castle stands within two circuits of earthworks. The earthworks may conceivably be the remains of an Iron-Age (possibly Dark-Age) hillfort. However, it is possible that they may belong to an earthwork -and-timber castle

pre-dating the existing masonry castle. Only archaeological investigation has the potential to unravel the mystery.

- At the south west corner of the area in care, outside the earthworks, is a corn-drying kiln, now filled in but still understandable. Probably of 18th century date, it is a reminder that human settlement continued in this remote moorland setting long after the castle had been abandoned. The kiln's existence indicates the presence of a ferm-toun in the vicinity.

Social Overview:

- Auchindoun is the perfect image of a ruined medieval castle, gaunt, forbidding and commanding a desolate landscape. Although off the beaten track and not easy to reach, it has proved popular with walkers down the years. In the 1970s the local authority included it on an archaeological motor trail, despite there being no practical motor access.
- Being far from modern habitation, Auchindoun has no known formal use other than as a heritage attraction.

Spiritual Overview:

- The castle may well have had an oratory or chapel originally, for use by the lord and his household.
- The castle seems not to have any current spiritual associations or meanings.

Aesthetic Overview:

- The grey granite castle walls are powerfully impressive, although the overall impression of the building is of a gaunt and shattered shell.
- An appreciation of Auchindoun cannot ignore its spectacular setting. The castle sits in a landscape largely devoid of settlement, in high moorland above the Cabrach Road leading south to Rhyndie.
- The steep walk up to the castle only adds to the experience of visiting it, suggesting again the idea of a forbidding, martial landscape. The powerful ruin that awaits the adventurous visitor is an emotional, as well as a physical, end point.
- The views from the castle out over Glen Fiddich are equally magical.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When were the earthwork defences surrounding the castle built?
- Was there an earlier castle on the site?
- Did Thomas Cochrane build the tower house castle, and if not who?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- The gaunt, forbidding castle in its lonely landscape setting is truly memorable.
- The castle is traditionally associated with the shadowy figure of Thomas Cochrane, a 'favourite' of the ill-starred James III.
- The castle has interesting architectural details, particularly the various forms of vaulting used in its construction.

- If, upon excavation, the encircling earthworks prove to be prehistoric, then Auchindoun becomes a rare instance where the longevity of occupation of a place, spanning millennia, is readily appreciated (as is the case at **Dumbarton Castle** and **Dundonald Castle**).

Associated Properties:

(*other associated castles regionally*) – **Balvenie Castle; Corgaff Castle; Huntly Castle; Kildrummy Castle.**

(*the other Ogilvy property in Historic Scotland's care*) - **Deskford Church.**

Keywords:

tower house, earthworks, courtyard, hall, vault, kiln, Cochrane, Gordon, Forbes, Ogilvy

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