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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

THREAVE CASTLE



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Cover image: View of Threave Castle from across the river. © Historic Environment Scotland.

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I. SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

Threave Castle is situated on an island in the River Dee 1½ miles west of Castle Douglas. The property comprises a roofless but otherwise largely complete rectangular, five-storey tower house built for Archibald ‘the Grim’ on becoming lord of Galloway in 1369. It is one of the best surviving of the new generation of Scottish tower houses built in the aftermath of the Wars of Independence (1296 to 1328 and 1332 to 1357).

Surrounding the tower house on three of its four sides is an innovative artillery fortification built between 1447 and 1455 by two of Archibald the Grim’s grandsons, William, 8th Earl, and James, 9th Earl of Douglas. This is the oldest dated artillery work in Scotland, constructed in the build-up to the showdown between the Black Douglasses and King James II that ended in the siege of Threave, and the downfall of the Black Douglasses, in 1455.

Beyond the tower house and artillery fortification are other grass-covered remains of the castle and its settlement, including a ravelin, or gun emplacement, built shortly before the Covenanting army’s siege of 1640, which resulted in the abandonment of the island castle.

1.2 Statement of Significance

- Although much of the castle has long been demolished, the surviving tower house is of such scale and design that it remains a lasting and tangible expression of the power and wealth of the mighty Black Douglasses, the foremost noble family in Scotland until their downfall in 1455.
- Archibald the Grim’s tower house is one of the largest and best-preserved of the new type of lordly residence that emerged in Scotland in the aftermath of the Wars of Independence with England and dominated later medieval castellated architecture well into the 17th century.
- The artillery fortification wrapped around the tower house c. 1450 represents one of the most important and innovative gun defences in the British Isles, helping to demonstrate the impact the new-fangled weapon was having on contemporary secular architecture.
- The large assemblage of artefacts, including most notably the many items of leather and wood found in the harbour, is the best collection from any Scottish castle, casting considerable light on life in a great lord’s household.

- The island and the wider hinterland still have much to offer in the way of archaeological discoveries.
- The island castle is one of the most enjoyable heritage visitor attractions in Scotland. That the island lies at the heart of the wider Local Nature Reserve, with its abundance of wildlife, particularly birds and bats, simply makes that visit even more memorable.

2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

2.1 Background

Threave Castle is one of the major heritage tourism destinations in Dumfries and Galloway, attracting around 6,700 visitors per year, even though it is open only during the summer months. The high, featureless and forbidding tower house of Archibald the Grim on its lonely island setting figures prominently in popular tourist literature, national as well as local, and has become one of the iconic images of the archetypal Scottish castle (alongside the likes of Eilean Donan and **Kilchurn**).

2.2 Evidential values

Following its transfer into state care, some clearance work was carried out at the castle by the Ministry of Works in the 1920s, as part of a major programme of masonry consolidation. The few surviving records show that some trenching, largely unsupervised, was undertaken outside the artillery work.

Between 1974 and 1978 larger-scale excavations were carried out by George Good, of Bristol Museums, and Chris Tabraham, Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments. These cast significant and important new light on the island as a fortified residence. They also confirmed that only the southern third of the 10-hectare island was usable for habitation; the remainder, being lower-lying, would have been under water for most of the year.

The excavations, whilst large-scale, by no means exhausted the archaeological potential of the island. The greater part of the outer enclosure remains unexcavated, and the southern area, between the fence and the causeway at the southern tip of the island, may well hold important evidence relating to both the pre-Douglas period and the outer defensive provision of Archibald the Grim's castle.

There is also the possibility that important archaeology remains across the River Dee, particularly on the higher ground to the east and the south, known as Little Wood Hill and Port Hill, where James II's military

encampment and heavy artillery would doubtless have been based in the summer of 1455, and that of the Covenanters in 1640.

Pre-Douglas activity

Evidence was forthcoming for a settlement on the island prior to the arrival of Archibald the Grim in the later 14th century. The debris of a badly burned building, interpreted as a smithy, to the south of the later tower house, was dated to the beginning of the 14th century by a coin (in almost mint condition) of Edward I of England. This coincides closely with Bruce's harrying of Galloway in 1308, and suggests that the island, an isolated and naturally impregnable place, was the residence of a leading Gallovidian nobleman who supported the Balliols.

The castle of Archibald the Grim

The excavations cast new light on the form of the castle built by Archibald the Grim, and more importantly the nature of these early Scottish tower-house castles. Immediately to the east of the tower house itself (see Architectural/Artistic Overview below) were found the foundations of two large stone structures, interpreted as a hall block and guest range, both of two storeys, one of which contained a chapel. Their presence so close to the entrance into the tower house suggests that they were of pivotal importance, and not mere service buildings, thus destroying the Romantic image of a solitary, closed-up and inward-looking tower house.

The excavations also produced an extensive and fascinating array of small finds from this period, most of them recovered from the little harbour on the west side of the tower house. The quantity of leather and wooden objects discovered in the waterlogged deposits cast considerable light on everyday life in the castle, most notably the wooden platters and bowls bearing the Douglas 'heart', branded or carved into their bases. All these finds were disposed to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, and many of them have been placed on display in the (now) National Museum of Scotland.

The building of the artillery fortification

The excavations answered the long-running riddle as to the construction date of the artillery fortification built around the tower house.

Dendrochronological, numismatic and other archaeological evidence showed that it had been built c.1450, and not, as some had hitherto believed, after the battle of Flodden in 1513. Thus Threave's artillery fortification is the oldest surviving dated artillery work in Scotland, and among the most important in the British Isles. Its construction resulted in the demolition of the hall block and guest range, so as to provide the gunners with a clear field of fire towards the more vulnerable east and south.

The post-Douglas castle

The excavations also cast light on the castle post-1455. The most significant discovery was the dating of the crude earthen ravelin, or gun emplacement, skirting the east and south edge of the outer enclosure to the 1639/1640 siege.

Recent work

Two periods of archaeological work were undertaken in 2007 (HSCO-90301-2007-01 and HSCO-90301-2007-02).

The first of these revealed the presence of a layer of rubble in an area towards the front of the castle, near the entrance. This rubble appeared to derive from two sources; a shelly grit component appeared to be a wash deposit probably deriving from variations in river level around the island, while the presence of large igneous stones and boulders could have originated from material being upcast during the excavation of the ditch.

The second period of work, which saw turf stripped towards the northern end of the drawbridge, revealed some angular chunks of schist in the north-east corner of the trench. These may represent the fragmentary remains of tumble from the outer defensive works.

The archaeological investigations carried out to date have covered a relatively small area and therefore the property remains archaeologically sensitive, as demonstrated by the more recent work.

2.3 Historical values

- **c. 6th century AD** – the place-name Threave (formerly Trief), deriving from Old Welsh *tref*, meaning ‘homestead’, suggests that the island is inhabited at least as early as the 6th century AD.
- **1308** – Edward Bruce, brother of King Robert Bruce, carries out a devastating campaign on the pro-Balliol forces in Galloway that culminates in a bloody battle beside the River Dee. The discovery (in 1974) of a silver penny of Edward I of England (d.1307) in the burned-out rubble of a smithy on the island proves that the island is by now a significant stronghold, probably of a Balliol supporter.
- **1369** – Archibald Douglas, natural son of ‘the Good Sir James of Douglas’, Robert Bruce’s right-hand man, is made Lord of Galloway by King David II (Bruce’s son). Archibald earns the nickname ‘the Grim’ because of ‘his countenance in warfare against the English’. He resides chiefly at **Bothwell Castle**, on the Clyde, but builds Threave Castle as his power-base in Galloway.
- **1384** – Lord Archibald chases the English out of **Lochmaben Castle**, their last garrison stronghold in south-west Scotland. Four years later (1388) he becomes the 3rd Earl of Douglas.

- **1400** – Earl Archibald dies at Threave Castle, and is buried in Bothwell Collegiate Church. He is succeeded as earl of the ‘Black Douglasses’ by his son, also Archibald, whose wife is Princess Margaret, daughter of King Robert III.
- **1424** – Archibald, the 4th Earl, is killed at the battle of Verneuil, France, fighting for the French against the English. His widow, Margaret, is thereafter confirmed as Lady of Galloway by her brother, King James I, for the duration of her lifetime. She resides at Threave Castle and actively rules over the lands.
- **1440** – William, 6th Earl of Douglas, and his younger brother David, are beheaded in **Edinburgh Castle**, after dining with King James II (‘The Black Dinner’).
- **1444** – Lady Margaret’s granddaughter, Margaret ‘the Fair Maid of Galloway’, marries her cousin, William, 8th Earl of Douglas, thereby uniting the many Black Douglas lordships across Scotland.
- **1447** – Lady Margaret is forced to demit her hold over Galloway to her granddaughter’s husband, Earl William. The artillery fortification is begun in this year, presumably at his instruction.
- **c.1450** – Lady Margaret dies, penniless, probably at **Lincluden Collegiate Church**, and is buried in the choir there (her tomb still visitable today)
- **1452** – Earl William is murdered by King James II at **Stirling Castle**. His widow, Margaret, then marries his younger brother, James, the 9th Earl. The showdown between the ‘Black Douglasses’ and the Stewart monarchy intensifies.
- **1453** – James, 9th Earl flees to exile in the court of King Henry VI of England.
- **1455** – King James II defeats the Black Douglasses at the battle of Erkinholme (Dumfriesshire), and besieges Threave, the last castle to hold out for the now exiled 9th Earl. After two months the Douglas garrison walk out with honour and Threave becomes Crown property.
- **1456** – the first mention in the records of an ‘artillery house’.
- **1460** – James II visits Threave again, en route to the siege of English-held Roxburgh, where he is killed in a tragic accident.
- **1473** – Threave is given to Margaret of Denmark, queen of King James III. There is no record that she ever visits.
- **1502** – King James V visits Threave whilst on pilgrimage to the shrine of St Ninian at **Whithorn**.

- **1526** – Robert, Lord Maxwell, of **Caerlaverock** is made hereditary keeper of Threave by King James V.
- **1544** – the castle is captured by the English during the Rough Wooing but quickly returns to the Maxwell's control
- **1579** – Adam Crosser, a petty thief, is imprisoned in the tower house.
- **1639** – Robert Maxwell, 1st Earl of Nithsdale and a Royalist, fortifies and garrisons Threave in anticipation of an attack by the Covenanting army fighting Charles I. The outer ravelin, or gun emplacement, dates from this time.**1640** – the Covenanters capture Threave and instruct the laird of Balmaghie to dismantle the tower house to render it militarily useless. Stone, wood and metal are recycled elsewhere (for example, at Barscobe House) and the stone vault in the tower is 'stopped up' (that is, broken open).
- **c.1810** – the tower house is fitted out for possible use as a prison for French soldiers captured during the Napoleonic Wars. The present entrance door into the tower house dates from this time.
- **1913** – Edward Gordon, owner of Threave Estate, entrusts Threave Castle into state care. Major masonry consolidation follows immediately, including the reforming of the stone vault in the tower house broken open after the 1640 siege.
- **1948** – Threave Estate, including the island, is entrusted to the National Trust for Scotland. The castle, however, remains the responsibility of the Ministry of Public Building and Works.
- **1974-78** – large-scale excavations are carried out at the castle, directed by George Good and Chris Tabraham (see Archaeological Overview below).
- **1976** – the timber drawbridge is reinstated across the ditch.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Threave Castle was once a large and sprawling complex of buildings, courtyards and defences, but all that remains standing above ground today are the mighty tower house built by Archibald the Grim c.1370 and the artillery fortification built by the 8th and 9th earls of Douglas c.1450. Both are outstanding and important examples of later medieval architecture.

The tower house

This was among the first of a new form of castle residence to emerge in the aftermath of the Wars of Independence (1296 to 1328 and 1332 to 1357). The form became the most popular, and enduring, castle type in later medieval Scotland. The floors were piled up, one on top of the other, to

produce a self-contained private residence for the lord within the wider castle complex.

The rectangular building, which would originally have been harled, is massive (18.6m by 12.2m) and 21m high. Windows are generally on the smaller side, particularly on the more vulnerable south and east sides. Only on the west and north sides, which face the river and the intractable boggy ground beyond, are of decent size. The one entrance doorway was at first-floor level on its east side. (Note: the present entrance was formed c.1810, in preparation for the tower's use as a Prisoner of War camp.)

The most important single feature of the exterior are the three rows of chequer-set joist holes around the top of the walls on three sides. These supported a temporary timber defensive gallery, or hoarding, accessed through nine openings in the top storey. Such a feature is exceedingly rare in British castles, and the few parallels in Scotland include **Rothsay** (13th century) and **Hermitage** (also a Douglas castle of the later 14th century). The remains of a more usual oversailing defensive gallery, a stone machicolation, survive high up on the east wall, directly above the entrance doorway.

Internally, the tower comprised five floors of accommodation – a cellar in the basement, housing a well and prison, which appears to have been a later addition; the first floor, housing the entrance, a reception hall and kitchen; on the second floor the lord's hall; on the third floor two rooms, interpreted as an outer chamber and inner (bed) chamber; and on the top floor a large, unheated space possibly reserved for the garrison in an emergency. The upper floors were accessed by a spiral stair in the north-west corner.

Features of particular note are: the hall's large west and north windows, which were mullioned and transomed; the fireplaces, including an attractive 'joggled' lintelled example in the second-floor bedchamber; and the timber floor structure at the higher level, with beams 7m long supported on massive cross-braced members.

The tower shows signs of alteration during its use. The basement prison is clearly an early after-thought. So too possibly was the spiral stair, judging by the fact that the tower's north-west corner is the only one not to be a perfect right angle, and that it has most of the tower house's few masons' marks carved on it.

The artillery fortification

The artillery fortification ('artillery house' in 1456) wrapped around the tower house is among the most important in the British Isles. The main part faces east and south, towards the higher ground from where an artillery bombardment was likely to come. It consists of two lengths of stone wall fitted with vertical slits. The wall has three circular gun towers – one at the junction of the two walls and one at each end. The towers were three floors

high and fitted with gunholes. The central gun tower is complete except for its timber floors; the other two are much more ruinous. The secondary part of the artillery wall faces west to enclose the 1370s harbour and consists of a much thinner wall now reduced to its foundations (it was substantially rebuilt to its present form in the 1970s). The two main walls were fronted by a rock-cut ditch that, although shallow, would always have been water filled.

This artillery fortification is of a highly unusual form, incorporating elements that were then both conventional (for example, its exclusively stone construction, and the presence of arrow slits for conventional weapons such as cross- and long-bows) and innovative (for example, the battered (sloping) outer wall-face, and the provision of dumbbell- and keyhole-shaped gunholes). It is undoubtedly the oldest surviving artillery fortification in Scotland, though it was almost certainly not unique for its day; for example, the Douglas castle at Abercorn, now an archaeological site with nothing standing above ground, was probably even more heavily fortified than Threave but was largely destroyed in the same campaign that resulted in the siege of Threave in 1455. Threave's gun towers are presaged at certain English sites, including Canterbury's West Gate (c.1380), Norwich's Cow Tower (1398/9) and Southampton's God's House Tower (1417).

Whilst Threave's artillery wall did not catch on (subsequent artillery works were formed mostly of earth with a stone face – known as *Trace Italienne*), its innovative vertical gunholes certainly did, and many examples can be seen at later 15th- and early 16th-century Scottish castles (for example, **Cardoness**, **Craigmillar** and **Newark**). The type was eventually ousted by the horizontal wide-mouthed gunholes that first appeared in Scotland at Dunbar and **Tantallon** by 1520.

Conservation period

The conservation of the tower and artillery fortification in the early 20th century is of special interest because it illustrates well the 'best practice' of the day, particularly the use of the 'inch back' technique (whereby new-build was lime-tamped but not flush-pointed) to highlight areas of rebuilt masonry; this is particularly evident in the tower's stone vault, where the hole made by the Covenanters was made good by the Ministry of Works masons. One feature, the kitchen fireplace, is dated (1912).

Archaeological small finds

The many small finds recovered during the 1970s excavations included numerous objects of artistic interest, most particularly the lead seal matrix made for Princess Margaret c.1403 and a 15th-century silver-gilt locket. All these have since been entrusted to the National Museums Scotland.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

The gaunt, forbidding mass of Archibald the Grim's tower house appears to rise from the river, looming over the surrounding landscape of water and flat farmland. It is visible from considerable distances.

The castle can only be approached by a long walk from an adjacent farm steading and a short boat trip. The two combine to help transport the visitor both physically and emotionally back in time to the later Middle Ages with all those images of war and blood-feud. The circular walk to and from the island provides stunning views of Threave Castle, including those that James II would have had in 1455.

The green, grassy holm and surrounding landscape contrasts with the dour, grey, almost featureless appearance of the tower house as one approaches it, and this is further reinforced when one enters the dark and dingy basement. However, when one ascends to the hall the tower can reveal a somewhat more benign face, altogether lighter and more airy and with some surprisingly fine architectural features (for example, the joggled lintel in the bedchamber and the large mullioned windows in the hall.)

The upper windows provide fine views out over the River Dee and the surrounding farming landscape. However, there is no formal access to the wall-head where those outward views take on an even grander aspect, particularly southward down the Dee as it snakes its way towards the sea.

2.6 Natural heritage values

The castle sits at the heart of a Local Nature Reserve (LNR), developed by the National Trust for Scotland (who own Threave House and Estate). The island and its hinterland have long been famous for wintering geese, but more recently ravens have taken to roosting in Archibald the Grim's tower house, ospreys have taken to nesting elsewhere on the island, and the LNR has become Scotland's first bat reserve. In 2016 a pair of peregrine falcons were found to be nesting in the castle. The island is now part of a fascinating circular wildlife trail taking in various bird hides and viewing points.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

To be assessed.

Spiritual values

In its heyday, the island stronghold would have housed a chapel or oratory for the household's use, but Threave Castle plays no known spiritual role today.

The castle custodian in the 1960s maintained that the tower house was haunted by the ghost of Archibald the Grim.

3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

- When was the island first inhabited? The 1970s archaeological excavations proved that the island has a history of settlement reaching back in to 13th century, before Archibald the Grim's arrival. Further excavation may well prove that its story reaches even further back, into the Dark Ages.
- What was the nature of the residence destroyed by Edward Bruce in 1308, and whose residence was it? The 1970s excavations merely scratched the surface, and it is clear that much more awaits discovery about this pivotal period in Galloway's political history, and the preceding era of the native lordship of Galloway.
- What was the overall form and appearance of Archibald the Grim's castle? Here too the 1970s excavations were comparatively small-scale and much else awaits discovery, particularly the nature of the wider castle complex. Where, for example, were the workshops located that produced all those leather and wood off-cuts found in the harbour, and what form did the castle's outer defences take?
- What in the way of settlement, etc, lay beyond the island? It would be fascinating to discover, for instance, whether there was a castletoun on the west side of the River Dee, opposite the harbour, and whether there is any evidence for James II's likely siege camp on Little Wood Hill.
- The Gordon family accumulated considerable wealth through trade links with South America, undoubtedly involving profiting from the labour of enslaved people. To what extent did this impact, if at all, their management of the castle and island?¹

4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

- Other locally related places: Barscobe Castle (built in the 1640s with stone from Threave Castle); **Caerlaverock Castle** (chief seat of the Maxwells); **Lincluden Collegiate Church** (established by Archibald the Grim and the burial place of Lady Margaret of Galloway); **Sweetheart Abbey** (refounded and probably completed by Archibald the Grim)

¹ For further information on the connection between Properties in Care 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](#)

- Other later 14th-century tower houses: **Craigmillar Castle**; **Crichton Castle**; **Crookston Castle**; **David's Tower, Edinburgh Castle**; **Doune Castle**; **Dundonald Castle**; Hallforest Castle (Aberdeens); **Hermitage Castle**; Neidpath Castle; Newark Castle (Selkirks)
- Other buildings in southern Scotland intimately associated with the Black Douglasses: Abercorn Castle; **Bothwell Castle**; Bothwell Collegiate Church; Douglas Castle; **Hermitage Castle**; Newark Castle (Selkirks); **St Bride's, Douglas**; **Tantallon Castle**.

5. KEYWORDS

tower house; hall block; harbour; artillery fortification; gunhole; Black Douglas; Maxwell

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