



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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Property in Care (PIC) ID:

PIC185

Designations:

Scheduled Monument (SM90058)

Taken into State care:

1927 (Guardianship)

Last Reviewed:

2013 (2025 update to include Empire connections)

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# CARDONESS CASTLE



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## CARDONESS CASTLE

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## SYNOPSIS

Cardoness Castle is prominently located on a rocky eminence overlooking the B796, 1 mile south-west of Gatehouse of Fleet. The property comprises a complete but unroofed tower house and adjacent structures built for the McCullochs of Cardoness in the later 15th century. The tower itself is largely as built and possesses fine architectural features. The adjacent structures, in contrast, were heavily restored in the 1930s and now defy proper interpretation.

The castle is complemented by a pretty cottage at the foot of the rocky eminence, that now houses a small visitor centre.

## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical overview

- **c.1170** – David fitz (son of) Teri, lord of Over Denton, Cumberland, is granted the estate of Anwoth by King Malcolm IV (1153-65). He builds a motte-and-bailey castle at Boreland of Anwoth, a little to the south-west of the later Cardoness Castle.
- **1220** – Nicholas de Kerdenes is in dispute with **Dundrennan Abbey** over his wife Cicely's dowry. His appeal to the pope is successful.
- **1277** – Bertram of Cardoness acts as witness to a charter by Lady Dervorgilla of Galloway, founder of **Sweetheart Abbey** and mother of King John Balliol (1292-96).
- **1466** – Gilbert McCulloch, from the Machars of Wigtownshire, is the first of that surname to appear on record in connection with Cardoness. Legend tells that he acquires the property after the previous laird and eight of his nine daughters drown in a frozen loch near the castle whilst celebrating the birth of a new-born son, who also perishes. Gilbert marries the sole surviving daughter. Either Gilbert or his son, James, builds the present castle.
- **1500** – James McCulloch dies, and is succeeded by his son, Ninian. Both men acquire reputations for being disputatious and prone to violence, particularly regarding neighbouring lairds such as the Gordons and mostly over land ownership. For example, in 1505 Ninian McCulloch steals 1500 'assorted beasts' from his neighbour's barn.
- **1509** – Ninian dies, possibly executed for his crimes. His son and heir, Thomas, is a minor, and the boy's uncle, Sir Alexander 'Sandy' McCulloch, has wardship. A friend of James IV, he holds important

posts at the royal court, including as keeper of **Linlithgow Palace** and keeper of the king's falcons. He too has a nose for trouble and his two convictions against neighbours are repealed only after the king's intervention.

- **1513** – Sandy McCulloch is killed at Flodden beside his king.
- **1516** – Thomas McCulloch dies and is succeeded by his brother Alexander. He too has the McCulloch reputation for causing trouble. He is probably the 'Cutlar McCulloch' who leads a raid on the Isle of Man in the 1530s in retaliation for a raid by Lord Derby, the owner of the island, on Galloway. Cutlar McCulloch's raid proves lucrative and he returns several times, giving rise to the Manx proverb:

'God keep the good corn, the sheep and the bullock

From Satan, from sin, and from Cutlar McCulloch.'

- **1563-66** – During a time of cross-Border tension between Scotland and England, the latter sends a spy to Cardoness to assess its military capability. He reports *inter alia* that 'Cardines Towre ... is nyne foote thick of the wall, without a bermeking [barmkin], and withoute battling [battlements]'. He also notes that 'at the full sea [high tide], boates of eight tonnes may come under the wall'. In the event an invasion never materialises and Cardoness remains with the McCullochs.
- **1628** – The financial misdeeds of William McCulloch result in the family mortgaging the estate. The new owner is John Gordon, of Upper Ardwall, of a family frequently at feud with the McCullochs. However, John Gordon continues to reside at his previous house, Bush o' Bield, near Anwoth village, where in Anwoth Church c.1635 he erects a fine sarcophagus monument to his parents and his two wives.
- **1668** – The McCullochs are back in possession of Cardoness, albeit through violent means. John Gordon is shot and killed by Godfrey McCulloch, son of Alexander McCulloch, who himself then proceeds to assault Gordon's widow, Marion Peebles, dragging her out of her sick-bed and dumping her on a dung heap. Godfrey subsequently flees abroad.
- **1697** – Having returned clandestinely to Scotland, Godfrey McCulloch is discovered attending a church service in St Giles', Edinburgh, tried for his crime and found guilty. He is beheaded on 'the Maiden', one of the last people to be so executed. Cardoness Castle is thereafter abandoned.
- **1760s** – James Murray of Broughton establishes the planned 'new town' of Gatehouse of Fleet, east of Cardoness Castle.

- **1825** – Alexander Murray of Broughton has the meandering Water of Fleet below Cardoness Castle canalised to ease the passage of vessels up to Gatehouse of Fleet.
- **1845** – The *New Statistical Account* names Sir David Maxwell of Cardoness and Alexander Murray of Broughton as the land owners. Both men had connections to slavery-derived wealth. Maxwell had married Georgina Martin, whose father owned 304 enslaved people in 1768. Murray collected £1199 compensation for 121 enslaved people in 1836. Murray appears to have played a role in Improving the lands around the castle.<sup>1</sup>
- **1927** – After passing through several hands – the Gordons, Maxwells, Murrays of Broughton and back to the Maxwells – Lady Maxwell places Cardoness Castle into state care. The Ministry of Works (MOW) then embarks on a major conservation programme of the property, including reconstructing the adjacent buildings.
- **1980s** – The A75 is rerouted to the south of Gatehouse of Fleet, thereby removing the trunk road from the immediate vicinity of the castle.

## Archaeological overview

Cardoness Castle has never been properly archaeologically investigated. It was cleared of overlying rubble by the MOW after passing into state care in 1927, but all that survives in the way of records is the odd plan showing the areas excavated and the extent of the reconstruction of the buildings adjacent to the tower house (which was extensive).

The repairs and reconstruction work carried out in the early 1930s to the access ramp, retaining walls and vaults of buildings adjacent to the tower house (to the south-east and west) have possibly removed much of archaeological interest. However, much no doubt remains below ground level, particularly the further one gets from the tower house, where MOW activity was least intrusive. The survival of the hall block (and kitchen too, most probably) adjacent to the tower house is comparatively rare (see also **Orchardton Tower**) and every opportunity should be taken to see if further information regarding these outer structures, and their relationship to the tower house, may be obtained.

The c.1565 spy report notes that the tower lacked a barmkin, which seems at odds with both the vestigial evidence on the ground and what one might normally expect a 15th-century tower house castle to have. Archaeological excavation could solve this apparent discrepancy.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on these connections, see [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c.1600-1997](#)

The tower house itself has been comprehensively conserved since passing into state care, and our understanding of its architecture is reasonably comprehensive. However, a standing building survey may reveal further details of interest.

## Architectural/Artistic overview

Cardoness Castle comprises a tall tower house, accessed up a stone ramp, and surrounded by adjacent vaulted structures, albeit much restored in the early 1930s. Little can meaningfully be made of the latter, other than that they seem to have originally formed part of ancillary buildings serving the tower house, including most probably a hall block running south from the south-east corner of the tower. The hall itself would have been on the (now gone) first floor.

The tower house is impressive in itself, the more so when seen from a distance atop its rocky promontory. It is oblong on plan and five storeys and an attic high. The several inverted-keyhole gunholes, clearly original to the building, securely date it to the later 15th century. The type first appears in Scotland at nearby **Threave Castle** c.1450 and is superseded by the horizontal wide-mouthed gunhole that makes its first Scottish appearance at Dunbar Castle in the 1510s.

The tower's unadorned rubble walling rises to a flush parapet behind which the attic's gables are set back to allow a wall walk all round. The principal windows of the three main upper floors all have chamfered jambs, whilst smaller windows and simple slits light the stair and mural closets. All have glazing grooves showing that the tower house was fully glazed.

The tower house's internal arrangement and layout is typical of the 15th century, eg, one spiral stair giving access to all the floors (no back, or service stairs); open-chuted latrines; numerous wall closets; a prison and pit.

The tower house is entered at ground level through a round-arched entrance, checked for an outer iron yett (open-barred gate) and an inner wooden door. The lobby vault inside has a *meurtrière* (murder hole) from which the defenders could continue to defend the tower. Such features are rare in Scottish castles (eg, **Dirleton Castle**, of the later 1300s). There is a guardroom (porter's lodge) off to the left (west) and straight ahead a pair of doors sharing a chamfered jamb leading into what is now one ground-floor room but would originally have been two cellars. The stub of the partition wall survives. A curious feature of the west cellar are the two circular recesses in the west wall, possibly used for storing pickling or salting tubs.

The ground storey beneath the stone vault was originally divided horizontally into two. The timber floor of the upper floor, or mezzanine, has

gone but the stone corbels projecting from the side walls remain. The upper floor was entered by a door in the east wall reached from the spiral stair in the south-east corner. That stair also gave access to the small room over the *meurtrière* as well as to a fascinating two-level prison in the tower's east wall. The upper cell has a latrine and a narrow window, whilst in the floor is a hatch leading to the 'pit', a grim dark hole with only a narrow slit for ventilation. Cardoness's prison and pit are amongst the best surviving in any Scottish tower house, comparable with that at **Dirleton Castle**.

The spiral stair rises through the full height of the tower, giving access to all the upper levels. The third floor housed just one room, the hall. This has clearly been a handsome room, well lit through finely proportioned windows furnished with stone seats, and with quality carved masonry details, most notably the capacious fireplace in the north wall with jambs of clustered shafts but now lacking its lintel (an engraving of 1760 shows its top was decorated with carved foliage), and the shelved aumbry west of the fireplace with its fine ogee-shaped head (cf., the one in the hall at **Orchardton Tower**). Four wall chambers open off the hall, one fitted with a latrine.

The upper floors are now without their wooden floors. The floor immediately above the hall was originally one large room, probably the great chamber, entered through a round-headed door in the east wall, but was subsequently divided into two. The original fireplace in the west wall has jambs of clustered shafts, like its slightly larger twin in the hall below. Rare remains of internal decoration are above it: two fragments of moulded cornice, one with stylised foliage and the other a rope moulding. There is abundant evidence of wall plaster elsewhere in the building.

## Social overview

Other than being a visitor attraction, Cardoness Castle currently plays no social role.

## Spiritual overview

There would have been a chapel, or oratory, in the castle in its heyday, for everyday use of the lord and lady and their household. The parish church was at Anwoth village. Today the castle plays no known spiritual role.

## Aesthetic overview

Cardoness Castle is impressively set on a rocky promontory. Its large scale (the oblong tower rises over 21m high) and situation make it a highly visible landmark, particularly from the south and east. It features in numerous

paintings of the 18th and 19th century, notably William Daniell's 1815 aquatint.

It should be noted that this setting was markedly different from that pertaining in the castle's heyday. The spy description of c.1565 observed that the sea at high tide came right up to the rock, and that at low tide 'men may ryde under the place upoun the sandes one myle'. The canalising of the Water of Fleet in 1825 changed all that, though even before then it is clear from engravings (eg. Daniell's aquatint) that the sea had already receded some distance from the rock and that the castle's sea-girt setting had long been softened by the 'greening' of the surrounding sands.

Close-up, the castle has a fine setting, with specimen trees and neatly tended grounds. The pretty cottage at the foot of the path leading up to the castle, with its trim cottage garden, adds to the serenity and charm of the place. Formerly the custodian's cottage, it now serves as a welcoming shop and small interpretation point.

The views outward from the top of the tower are also fine, particularly southward down the Water of Fleet in the direction of the Solway Estuary, which can be seen on a clear day.

## WHAT ARE THE MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROPERTY?

- How was the tower's interior fitted out and furnished originally, and when and for whom were the alterations to its upper storey layout carried out? A full standing building survey may yet furnish more details of the former appearance of the upstanding tower house.
- How did the whole castle complex appear in its heyday? There would seem to be a discrepancy between the remains surviving on site, suggesting a barmkin of some size and complexity, and the c.1565 spy description noting that the tower lacked a barmkin. A fuller analysis of the wider castle complex is needed.
- Did the profits of Caribbean slavery have any direct impact on the castle?

## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- Cardoness Castle is impressively situated in the landscape, set as it is on a rocky promontory visible from miles around.

- Cardoness Castle incorporates one of the best-preserved 15th-century tower houses in Scotland. It is particularly striking externally, and has numerous features of importance, including inverted-keyhole gunholes, a *meurtrière* ('murder hole'), a grim prison and pit, and some fine carved architectural details, particularly in the hall and great chamber.
- Cardoness Castle is inextricably linked to the history of the McCulloch family, a noted (and notorious) Gallovidian family, famous for its feuds with neighbouring families, particularly the Gordons.

## ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

- *Other locally related places:* Anwoth Old Church; Barholm Castle (another McCulloch residence); Boreland of Anwoth motte-and-bailey castle; Hills Tower (another McCulloch residence)
- *Some other notable 15th-century tower houses in south-west Scotland:* Comlongan Castle; Hills Tower; Old Place of Mochrum; Orchardton Tower
- *Some other castles in HES's care with notable prisons:* **Blackness Castle; Bothwell Castle; Castle Campbell; Dirleton Castle; Dundonald Castle; Hermitage Castle; St Andrews Castle; Tantallon Castle; Threave Castle; Tolquhon Castle**

## KEYWORDS

tower house; barmkin; prison; *meurtrière*; hall; McCulloch; Gordon

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