



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD  
EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA

**Property in Care (PIC) ID:** PIC222

**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90130) Conservation Area (CA19)

**Taken into State care:** 1906 (Ownership)

**Last reviewed:** 2012

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# EDINBURGH CASTLE – MILITARY PRISON



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

Historic Environment Scotland – Scottish Charity No. SC045925

Principal Office: Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH



© Historic Environment Scotland 2020

You may re-use this information (excluding logos and images) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated.

To view this licence, visit <http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3> or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gov.uk)

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland  
Longmore House  
Salisbury Place  
Edinburgh  
EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

[www.historicenvironment.scot](http://www.historicenvironment.scot)

You can download this publication from our website at

[www.historicenvironment.scot](http://www.historicenvironment.scot)

# EDINBURGH CASTLE – MILITARY PRISON

---

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The Military Prison was built in 1840–42, and enlarged in 1880. It served both the castle garrison and those brought in from other stations around Scotland. During World War I it was used exceptionally to house 'Red Clydesiders', including John Maclean. It was closed as a prison in 1923, after the castle garrison marched out to new purpose-built barrack accommodation at Redford, in the city's south-west suburbs.

The original design was influenced by the latest reform ideas for civil jails, based on the 'separate' system pioneered by Major (later Sir) Joshua Jebb, surveyor-general of prisons (eg Pentonville, London). It comprised an open 'hall' giving access to two floors of cells. Each of the twelve cells was well ventilated and fitted with a wooden bed, kit shelf and sink-cum-soil pan. The exercise yard was at the rear (west). The 1880 alterations not only added four extra cells, but more significantly a central heating system and ablutions rooms, reflecting subsequent prison reforms, chiefly the shift towards a more communal approach.

The Military Prison was among the first prisons in Great Britain built according to the enlightened ideas of the prison reformer John Howard. The building is a real gem, enabling visitors today to gain some idea of what our great Victorian civil prisons, such as Barlinnie, look like internally.

---

## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

**1779:** John Howard makes the first of three visits to Edinburgh Castle, to see for himself the conditions in which the prisoners of war are being held.

**1787:** Howard publishes *The State of Prisons in England*, articulating his ideas about penal reform.

**1816:** The Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline is founded.

**1829:** The Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, USA, is built, the first to adopt the 'separate system' whereby prisoners are held in isolation, the intention being that this would improve rehabilitation.

**1836:** A Royal Commission enquiring into military punishment sets an upper limit of 200 lashes per man, thereby increasing the need for prison accommodation.

**1837:** Major (later Sir) Joshua Jebb, of the Royal Artillery, is appointed surveyor-general of prisons.

**1839:** The general board of directors of prisons in Scotland is established. It selects the main prison of war depot at Perth (built 1811–12) as the site for Scotland's first general prison.

**1840–42:** The Military Prison is built immediately to the west of Dury's Battery. The plan is based on the new 'separate' system, pioneered by Jebb at Pentonville

Prison, London, and adopted by Thomas Brown at Perth, with two floors of cells (six cells per floor) around a central open 'hall'.

**1850s:** The west part of Dury's Battery is built on to provide a kitchen and latrines for the prison. (The kitchen has now gone, but the latrines remain.)

**1880:** The prison is extended to the rear and heightened, to accommodate four more cells, two ablutions rooms and quarters for the provost marshal, the officer in charge of the prison. A central heating system is installed.

**1916–17:** The prison is used to incarcerate 'Red Clydesiders', including John Maclean, founder of the Workers' Republican Party, and David Kirkwood, shop steward at Beardmore's, Glasgow, who subsequently became a Labour MP and Baron Bearsden.

**1923:** The prison is closed when the castle garrison marches out to new purpose-built barracks at Redford, in the city's south-west suburbs. Thereafter the building serves as secure storage space and as accommodation for the Regimental Association of the Royal Scots (the latter in the former provost marshal's quarters).

**1940–45:** The prison is used by the occupying garrison during World War II.

**1988:** Historic Scotland opens the prison to visitors, providing a small introductory exhibition and recreating two cells and the ablutions block as they might have looked in the 1840s and 1880s.

### Archaeological Overview

Little archaeological work has been undertaken in the prison. Prior to the ground floor being opened to visitors, close inspection of wall surfaces and floors, previously covered with storage shelves and plaster, revealed features reflecting the building's development as a prison, including ventilation slots, light recesses, and evidence for the original timber bed locations.

The building merits further archaeological investigation. For example, the boiler room in the basement, complete with its Victorian boiler, has not been properly surveyed. Externally, the western half of Dury's Battery, formerly covered by ancillary prison buildings (kitchen, latrine block) would repay excavation.

### Architectural/Artistic Overview

The building comprises two main phases of development.

**Original foundation phase:** This comprises the lower two storeys of the main eastern block, consisting of two tiers of solitary confinement cells, twelve in total, six per floor, to either side of a central open hall. The upper cells are accessed via a heavily caged central cast-iron stair.

Each cell was well ventilated by a window (barred on the outside) and wall ducts, lit via a secure lighting slot in the wall only accessible from the hall, and fitted with a single timber bed, shelf for kit and sink-cum-soil pan.

An exercise yard was provided at the rear (west) of the building, accessed through a door at the west end of the hall.

**Development phase 1:** The original building was heightened and extended to the rear (west) in 1880. The new top floor housed accommodation and offices for the provost-marshal, the officer in charge of the prison. The two-storey extension housed an ablutions room and two additional cells on each floor. Internal alterations to the cells included a central heating system, powered by a boiler (still in existence) in the basement.

**Development phase 2:** The abandonment of the prison after 1923 has resulted in little change. During WWII, one of the ground-floor cells was fitted up as shower cubicles. The former provost-marshal's accommodation has since become the home of the Regimental Association of the Royal Scots, whose Regimental Museum is in the adjacent early 20th-century Drill Hall.

**Period of State care:** Two of the cells have been refurnished (including replica beds, kit shelves, sink-cum-soil pans) and dressed to recreate the two main changes to the prison regime, in the 1840s and 1880s.

The three-storey military prison is an unexceptional building externally. The heavy stone fore stair at the south end, the crow-stepped gables and the western extension date from the 1880 remodelling. The entrance into the prison itself, in the east wall, is through a suitably severe block-pedimented door. Internally, the building is a real 'gem', particularly its lower two storeys, which largely date from the original 1840–42 prison.

Of the ancillary buildings (kitchen, stores and latrines for the staff) erected against the west side of Dury's Battery, only the latrine block survives. Built of buff sandstone, it projects out from the early 18th-century curtain wall at the south-west corner of the battery, thereby reducing the number of gun bays from five to three. The former exercise yard to the west of the prison scarcely registers as such today.

### Social Overview

The Military Prison is a relatively minor visitor attraction within the world-famous Edinburgh Castle. In addition, it is used by educational groups investigating what life was generally like in prisons in the Victorian age.

### Spiritual Overview

The Military Prison has no observable spiritual associations.

### Aesthetic Overview

The Military Prison is a relatively unexceptional building externally. Its location is also quite unremarkable, tucked away as it is in the south-west corner of the castle and overshadowed by the gargantuan New Barracks to its north.

Internally, the prison itself has a cold, uninviting atmosphere that readily conjures up in the visitor's mind the harsh conditions in which Victorian-age prisoners were held. This intimidating atmosphere is heightened when one is 'locked away' in one of the cells.

## What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

What would Army service records tell us about the roll of inmates incarcerated there?

In which cells were John Maclean and David Kirkwood held?

## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key Points

The military prison was among the first prisons built in the United Kingdom according to the new 'separate system' pioneered in the United States in the 1810s and adopted by the British Government in the 1830s (eg at Pentonville and Perth).

The prison itself provides an easily accessible experience into the otherwise enclosed world of the Victorian civil prison. The recreation of two cells as they would have looked in the 1840s and 1880s graphically demonstrates the improvements in penal reform during the course of the Victorian era.

## ADDENDA

### Associated Properties

Some other 19th-century prisons: Barlinnie Prison (Glasgow); **Fort George**; Jedburgh Gaol; Pentonville (London); Perth Prison; **Stirling Castle**

### Keywords

cell; hall; ventilation; provost marshal; John Howard; Joshua Jebb; 'Red Clydesider'

### Selected bibliography

Cameron, J, *Prisons and Punishment in Scotland from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Canongate, Edinburgh, 1983)

Jebb, J, *Report of the Surveyor-General of prisons on the construction, ventilation and details of Pentonville Prison* (London, 1844)

Maclvor, I, *Edinburgh Castle* (Batsford, London, 1993)