



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC245

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90145)

Taken into State care: 1969 (Interdepartmental Transfer)
1999 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2014

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

FORT CHARLOTTE



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 2019

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

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

You can download this publication from our website at

www.historicenvironment.scot

FORT CHARLOTTE

SYNOPSIS

Fort Charlotte is located in the centre of Lerwick, sandwiched between Charlotte Street (south), Market Street (west), Harbour Street (north) and the Esplanade (east), and overlooking the Bressay Sound. Next to **Fort George**, it is the most complete *trace Italienne* (angle-bastioned) artillery fortification in Scotland.

The fort originated during the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-7), when it was built to protect the naval anchorage in Bressay Sound. It was thereafter abandoned until the War of American Independence (1776-83), when it was reconstructed, much as the visitor sees it today. During the 19th century it had a chequered use as town jail and court house, custom house, coastguard station, Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) depot and armoury, and Territorial Army (TA) drill hall, the last a function it still retains, though now shared with its role as visitor attraction.

The fort is pentagonal on plan, with a seaward battery for up to 12 guns set behind a zig-zagged parapet wall facing out over Bressay Sound, and angled bastions defending the landward sides. Only the plan itself and the South Gate (one of three into the fort) date from the 1660s. Much of the rest dates from 1780-1, including most of the upstanding masonry defences, and all of the internal buildings. These comprise: the U-planned west barracks (originally housing eight barrack rooms in the centre and eight officers' rooms in the end pavilions, and now in use as the TA hall and offices); the north barracks (originally housing the commanding officer's apartment, officers' mess and an additional barrack room, above store rooms and officers' kitchen); a much modified building along the fort's south side (once housing the guardroom, artillery store and gun crew's barracks); and, beside the North Gate, the powder magazine and latrines.

From the 1920s onwards there was a recognition of the historic importance of the site, with the decision taken in 1927 to preserve the Fort as an Historic Building. Between this date and the 1970s, various arrangements seem to pertain between the Ministry of War, Ministry of Works, Admiralty and other bodies. However, it was on April 1st 1969 that Fort Charlotte was passed by interdepartmental transfer from the War Office to the Department of Environment, enabling the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works to take over the maintenance of the site. Formal ownership was transferred in 1999.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **c.1600** – Bressay Sound is increasingly being used as a safe anchorage by Dutch East Indiamen returning from the Far East with exotic goods, having been forced to take the far longer western route around the British Isles rather than the English Channel for fear of being attacked by the English navy. From Bressay Sound the merchantmen are escorted back to the United Provinces of Holland by the Dutch navy.
- **1650** – Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, invades Scotland.

- **1652-4** – Cromwell’s English Commonwealth declares war on Holland over trade routes. This First Anglo-Dutch War is fought entirely at sea and Cromwell orders (**1653**) that a fortification be built at Lerwick to protect English naval ships using Bressay Sound. It is questionable whether it is ever started.
- **1665-7** – during the Second Anglo-Dutch War, Charles II orders that a new fort be built at Lerwick. The fort, constructed by John Mylne junior, master mason to the Scottish Crown, is pentagonal on plan, with the main armament emplaced along a zig-zagged parapet wall overlooking Bressay Sound. The garrison, commanded by William Sinclair, numbers 100 men, with a further 200 quartered near by. By the time hostilities end, with the Treaty of Breda (July **1667**), the fort is still not complete. The rampart is mostly earth defended by timber palisades (the masons lacking lime for building) and the water supply is deficient. The fort is abandoned and dismantled. Today all that remains of this Carolean fort is its pentagonal plan and the South Gate.
- **1673** – during the Third Anglo-Dutch War (**1672-4**), a Dutch raiding party lands at Lerwick and burns the abandoned barracks.
- **1707** – the Parliaments of Scotland and England unite to create the United Kingdom.
- **1776-83** – during the War of American Independence, the UK fights not just the fledging American Continental Army but also France, Spain, the United Provinces of Holland and others. The British Government decides to rebuild the abandoned Carolean fort, naming it after George III’s queen, Charlotte. Captain Andrew Frazer directs repairs for the Board of Ordnance, which includes rebuilding most of the defences and constructing new internal buildings. Fort Charlotte is garrisoned in March **1781** by 270 soldiers of the Earl of Sutherland’s Regiment, commanded by Major James Sutherland. Other than a few minor additions this is the Fort Charlotte visitors see today.
- **1793** – on the outbreak of war with Revolutionary France, Fort Charlotte is re-garrisoned by a company of 100 men from the newly-raised Orkney and Shetland Fencibles. They are replaced, on their disbandment in **1797**, by the new formation, the Shetland Fencibles, raised by Captain James Malcolmson. In **1802**, following the Treaty of Amiens, the fort is garrisoned by veterans from the Invalids Regiment.
- **1808-11** – Captain Cardew reports unfavourably on the condition of the fort. He reiterates previous complaints (e.g., the insufficient water supply and the general condition of the ramparts and buildings) but also raises a new concern regarding the encroachment of buildings within the vicinity of the fort.
- **1812-15** – during the Anglo-American War new outlying gun batteries are established to the north and south of Lerwick, to support Fort Charlotte in defending Bressay Sound against privateers. No trace of either of them survives.
- **1837** – the west barracks is given over to the local authority for use as a court house and town jail.
- **1852** – a report by the Royal Engineers’ Office, Edinburgh, presents a picture of dilapidation, including unserviceable guns. It also bemoans the fact that the barracks is now ‘transferred to the Civil Authorities for a Gaol and Courts of Law’. Three years later (**1855**) the fort’s armament is entirely removed.
- **1861** – the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR), formed in 1859, establishes a drill station at the fort. Two gun platforms are reconstructed to take two 32-

pounders. Live firing is carried out until the inhabitants of Bressay (the island opposite Lerwick) complain. Between then and 1910 a variety of ordnance is mounted on the battery. In the **late 1860s** this comprises a mix of 24-pounders mounted on iron garrison carriages and 32-pounders mounted on wooden carriages roped up for naval gun drill, whilst in **1873** four gun emplacements are removed altogether and replaced by a covered practice gallery, holding two 7-inch Armstrong Rifled Muzzle Loaders (RMLs), and intended to replicate conditions on a warship's gun deck.

- **1875** – on completion of the new Sheriff Court and Prison (now County Buildings) in King Erik Street, the court house and town jail is removed from the west barracks. The fort is then pressed into use as a custom house and coastguard station.
- **1881** – the first Up Helly Aa torch procession – marking the middle of winter and held on the last Tuesday in January - takes place in Lerwick. The drill hall in Fort Charlotte soon becomes one of the key venues for the night-long celebrations.
- **1910** – following the creation of the Territorial Force (now the Territorial Army (TA)) in 1908, a TA troop takes possession of the west barracks for use as a drill hall and offices.
- **1939-45** – during WWII the fort is requisitioned by the War Office. New temporary, concrete buildings are constructed, causing some damage. These are demolished after the War. However, the west barracks continue in use as the TA drill hall and offices, and today 'G' Troop, 212th (Highland) Battery, and 105 Regimental Royal Artillery (Volunteers), are still in residence, the only Artillery Unit existing north of the Firth of Forth, after more than two centuries of unbroken service.
- **1999** Fort Charlotte disposed by Crown Estate Commissioners to Secretary of State for Scotland.

Archaeological Overview

The only recorded archaeological investigations at the fort were undertaken between 1993 and 1996 for Historic Scotland. Directed by Gordon Ewart, their aim was to inform a better understanding of the historic development of the zig-zagged seaward battery, prior to reinstatement to its 1780/1 appearance (Pringle *et al*, 2000).

The work revealed several phases of development. The earliest phase would seem to have been the turf ramparts created in 1665-7.

Other than this, no known archaeological work has been undertaken elsewhere in or immediately adjacent to the fort. There must therefore be huge archaeological potential remaining, particularly for the poorly documented early phases. For example, it would be exciting to discover if any trace of a Cromwellian citadel survives at the site, to add to those surviving elsewhere in Scotland, at Ayr, Inverlochy (Fort William), Inverness and Leith.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

Fort Charlotte is the most complete *trace Italienne* (i.e. angle-bastioned) fortification in Scotland after the mighty **Fort George**.

It comprises a formidable perimeter wall, pentagonal on plan, with angled bastions at each corner. The rubble-built external walls have a pronounced batter. The landward-facing walls are straight-lined whilst that along the east, looking over Bressay Sound, is zig-zagged in shape, so as to more effectively provide artillery coverage over the Sound, the prime purpose of the fort. The fort had three gates leading into it – the main gate to the west and two side gates, to north and south; the South Gate appears to be the only one dating from the 17th century; it was subsequently partly blocked up. Internally, the fort has a wide, broad central parade flanked by garrison buildings to north, west and south.

The fort's pentagonal plan owes its origins to the Carolean period (1660s) whilst the garrison buildings belong to the Georgian period (1780s).

The Carolean fort (1660s)

Fort Charlotte's pentagonal form, with triangular bastions projecting from the corners, was in accordance with up-to-date European ideas of military architecture (e.g., Robert Norwood's work *Fortification or Architecture Military*, published in 1639). It was the direct descendant in Scotland of the Cromwellian forts built in the 1650s at Ayr, Inverlochy (Fort William), Inverness, Leith and Perth. Its unconventional plan – a pentagon with four straight faces and the fifth zig-zagged - is remarkably similar, though smaller and less ambitious, to Charles Fort, Kinsale (Ireland), also built for Charles II in the 1670s.

The Georgian garrison (1780s)

The rebuilding of the fort by Captain Frazer for the Board of Ordnance seems to have retained the Carolean pentagonal plan. The original main (south) gate was retained but downgraded (it was partially blocked up) and a new main entrance provided through the SW wall, whilst the upper parts of the pentagonal defensive wall were rebuilt in stone.

The present garrison buildings, including barracks, service offices (kitchen, bakehouse, etc.), powder magazine, latrines etc., owe their origin entirely to this period. They conform, by and large, to the standard forms and layouts of the time. They are by no means as architecturally sophisticated as those at **Fort George**, dating to the 1750s/60s, which is perfectly understandable; the latter was after all intended as a major statement of the power and might of the Hanoverian dynasty. The lack of good building stone on Shetland must also have been a factor.

Internally, the buildings (particularly the barrack structures) are lacking original details, having been subjected to all sorts of change of use. (Note: a cast-iron grate bearing the arms and cipher of George III, in Busta House, near Brae, Mainland, was probably originally in Fort Charlotte.)

Social Overview:

In addition to its role as a heritage attraction, Fort Charlotte remains an active TA base. It is now the only TA base existing north of the Firth of Forth, and recruits members mostly from Fife, Angus and Shetland. 'G' Troop, 212th (Highland) Battery, and 105 Regimental Royal Artillery (Volunteers) are perpetuating a tradition reaching back over more than 200 years.

The fort – and more specifically the west barracks – is an important venue during Lerwick's world-famous Up-Helly-Aa celebrations, held on the last Tuesday of January.

As a large, open space in the centre of Lerwick, the fort is well used for recreational purposes. Rights of way pass through the fort, and access therefore cannot be controlled. For most of the local community, the fort's use for Up-Helly-Aa and as an amenity space is more important than its historic value.

Perhaps on account of its historic purpose, as a defence to protect the anchorage in Bressay Sound, and its later use as RNR and TA base, the fort does not appear to have negative associations for Shetlanders, unlike other Georgian fortifications in the Highlands, particularly **Fort George** and Fort William, which are still associated in the minds of many with the Hanoverian Government's attempts to control the Highlands during the Jacobite Wars of the first half of the 18th century, and particularly the violent oppression that followed the Battle of Culloden in 1746. Fort Charlotte is not seen as an historic imposition of a hostile government.

Spiritual Overview:

Fort Charlotte is not known to have fulfilled a spiritual role, either historically or today.

Aesthetic Overview

Today, Fort Charlotte is hemmed in by buildings on almost all sides. Since being taken into State care efforts have been made to reverse the process begun at the outset of the 19th century when the garrison was removed. However, apart from some demolitions along the Esplanade, which have brought back into vision the important seaward battery of guns, little progress has been made. Indeed, some fairly recent regrettable developments have compounded the problem, such as the fire-escape at the Garrison Theatre, which obscures the fort's main entrance. This is to be regretted, for the fort's distinctive pentagonal shape is now best seen from the air.

The result of this extramural development means that first-time visitors have no real concept of the scale and form of the fort until they are inside the artillery wall. Here at least is a relatively uncluttered prospect of the fort as it looked, by and large, in 1783. There have been piecemeal additions to the Hanoverian garrison buildings since then, but these do not disfigure too greatly.

By far the best prospect internally is that from the zig-zagged seaward battery overlooking Bressay Sound, recently re-instated and re-armed (albeit with

replica 18-pounder cast-iron guns), and providing the visitor with the *raison d'être* for the fort's existence.

The fact that most of the garrison buildings are not normally open to the public must be somewhat frustrating, but access to the darkened spaces in the powder magazine, latrines and cistern helps to conjure up a picture of a rather dreary soldier's life in George III's army.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What, if anything, of the Cromwellian fort was built? It is just possible that documentary evidence, in the form of correspondence or 'platts' (plans), survive, such as have added greatly to our understanding of Cromwellian fortifications built elsewhere in Scotland. Further archaeological exploration may also encounter evidence, for such artillery forts were not insubstantial.
- How much of the Carolean fort's artillery defences survive in the present fabric, and what form did its garrison buildings take? Standing building survey coupled with archaeological excavation may yet reveal that more of the first fort survives, and locate traces of the burned-out barracks and other buildings and yards.
- What is the history of use of the fort through the 19th century? A detailed examination of the Shetland Archives should cast additional light on the later role of Fort Charlotte as court house and town jail, custom house and coastguard station, and RNR and TA training base.
- 20th century history of ownership of the site remains a little confused; some clarification would be helpful.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- After **Fort George**, Fort Charlotte is the most complete bastioned artillery fortification surviving in Scotland.
- Fort Charlotte is the sole surviving monument in Scotland linked with a largely forgotten episode in Britain's martial history, the Anglo-Dutch Wars.
- Unlike the majority of 17th- and 18th-century artillery fortifications and garrison barracks constructed in Scotland, Fort Charlotte was built as a reaction to an external rather than an internal threat.
- The South Gate is a rare example of the building work of John Mylne jnr.
- Fort Charlotte, most unusually, still retains an active military role, a distinction it shares now only with two other 17th- and 18th-century military bases - **Edinburgh Castle** and **Fort George**.

Associated Properties

(other significant 17th-century artillery fortifications surviving in Scotland) – Ayr Citadel; Duns Law (Berwicks); **Edinburgh Castle**; Leith; Oliver's Fort, Inverness; **Stirling Castle**

(other significant 18th-century artillery fortifications surviving in Scotland and Northern England) – Bernera Barracks (Highland); **Corgarff Castle**; **Edinburgh**

Castle; Fort Augustus; **Fort George**; Fort William (also known as Inverlochy); Ravensdowne Barracks (Berwick); **Ruthven Barracks**; **Stirling Castle**

(*some other building works by John Mylne jnr*) – Airth Old Church (Stirlings); Cowan's Hospital, Stirling; Heriot's Hospital, Edinburgh; Tron Kirk, Edinburgh;

(*other 18th-century Fort Charlottes*) – Bahamas; Jamaica; St Vincent & the Grenadines

Keywords:

artillery fort; bastion; gun emplacement; barracks; powder magazine; drill hall; Anglo-Dutch Wars; War of American Independence; John Mylne junior; Shetland Fencibles; Royal Naval Reserve; Territorial Army

Selected Bibliography:

Cruden, S., *The Scottish Castle* (London, 1981, 2nd ed.)

Fojut, N & Pringle, D., *The Ancient Monuments of Shetland* (Historic Scotland, Edinburgh, 2004)

Gifford, J., *The Buildings of Scotland: Highlands and Islands* (Penguin, London, 1992)

Pringle, D, Ewart, G & Ruckley, N., '...an old pentagonal fort built of stone': Excavations of the battery wall at Fort Charlotte, Shetland', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, vol.34 (London, 2000)

Saunders, A., *Fortress Britain: Artillery Fortification in the British Isles and Ireland* (Beaufort, Liphook, 1989)
