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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

BALVENIE CASTLE



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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

BALVENIE CASTLE

SYNOPSIS

Balvenie Castle originated as a later 13th century curtain walled castle, built by the powerful 'Black Comyns', earls of Buchan. The Comyns, the pre-eminent aristocratic family in 13th century Scotland, dominated northern Scotland but their influence stretched throughout the nation. After the Comyns' downfall at the hands of Robert Bruce in 1308, Balvenie Castle disappears from history until the 15th century when it re-emerges as a holding of the equally mighty 'Black Douglases'. When they too were wiped out by James II in 1455, the property passed to the King's kinsman, John Stewart, 1st Earl of Atholl, with whose descendants it remained until its days as a lordly residence ended in the early 1700s.

The castle is situated on the outskirts of Dufftown, on a promontory overlooking the fast-flowing River Fiddich. The massively thick and featureless 13th century curtain wall survives substantially intact, surrounded on three sides by a large flat-bottomed and stone revetted ditch. The fourth side was subsequently filled in when, around 1550, the castle was transformed by the 4th Earl of Atholl, who built the elegant Atholl Lodging at the North-East corner of the old curtain wall. Counted among the features of interest in that lodging are the stone heraldic panels and an unusual two leaved iron yett, or cross barred gate.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- c.1212 - William Comyn marries Marjorie, sole heir of Fergus, Earl of Buchan, and becomes Scotland's first Anglo-Norman earl.
- 1260s - Earl William's son, Alexander, 2nd Earl, acquires the estate of Mortlach (later Balvenie) in exchange for land in East Lothian. He probably acquires it to link his earldom of Buchan to the east with the lordship of Badenoch to the west, held by his half-brother, Walter, Earl of Menteith. (Walter's castle at Lochindorb lies just 20 miles from Balvenie.) Alexander is known as the 'Black Comyn', and Walter the 'Red Comyn'. It is probably Alexander who builds the mighty curtain walled castle as a stronghold and secondary residence; his chief residence was probably at Kelly, 34 miles to the east, where Haddo House stands today.
- 1289 - Earl Alexander dies, and his son John succeeds. Seven years later the Wars of Independence with England begin, in which Earl John plays an important, if inconstant, part, supporting at different times Edward I of England, John Balliol and Robert Bruce.
- 1303 - Edward I stays at Balvenie (6 October) on his way southward after subduing the north. The castle must have stayed in English hands for when, in 1304, Edward restores Earl John's lands, Balvenie (and Slains) are excluded.
- 1306 - John, the 'Red Comyn', is murdered at Greyfriars, Dumfries, by Robert Bruce, who soon becomes king. Earl John and King Robert become the bitterest of enemies.

- 1308 - Earl John's forces are routed by Bruce at the battle of Inverurie (22 May). Earl John flees to England, where he dies later that year. Meanwhile, Bruce embarks on the 'herschip' (ravaging) of Buchan, laying the earldom waste and destroying castles such as Slains and Dundarg. It is unclear if he slights Balvenie. In any event, the castle disappears from the historical record for a century.
- 1408 - Archibald, 4th earl of Douglas, grants the lordship of Balvenie to his younger brother, James, known as 'the Gross'. Quite when the Black Douglases acquire Balvenie is uncertain, but it seems most likely that it came through the marriage in 1362 of Archibald 'the Grim', the 3rd Earl, and Joanna Murray, heiress to that great family's vast inheritance across Scotland, particularly in the eastern Highlands. Countess Joanna dies in 1408, and the transfer of Balvenie from her eldest to her second son in this year may be no coincidence.
- 1440 - James 'the Gross' becomes 7th Earl of Douglas and devolves Balvenie onto his youngest son, John.
- 1455 - the Black Douglases are wiped out by James II at the battle of Arkinholm (May). All the family's titles and estates, including the lordship of Balvenie, are forfeited to the Crown.
- 1460 – James II bestows Balvenie on his kinsman, John Stewart, later 1st earl of Atholl. (John's wife, Margaret, had previously been married to both the 8th and 9th earls of Douglas.)
- c.1550 - John Stewart, 4th Earl (1542-79), and his first wife, Lady Elizabeth Gordon, build the Atholl Lodging, undoubtedly the castle's most attractive architectural feature.
- 1562 - Queen Mary spends two nights at Balvenie (September), during her campaign against Atholl's father-in-law, George Gordon, 4th Earl of Huntly.
- 1595 - John, 5th Earl, dies without male heir. In 1610 his four daughters surrender their interests in the estates to the Crown. Thereafter, the property changes hands numerous times, the owners including Lord Abernethy of Saltoun, Lord Ochiltree, the Innesses of Invermarkie, Colonel Sutherland of Kinminity and the Duffs of Dipple.
- 1644 - during the civil war between Charles I and his Scottish subjects, the Marquis of Montrose marches from the battlefield of Fyvie to Balvenie, where he stays for a few days.
- 1649 - Royalists fighting for Charles II are overtaken by General Leslie's Covenanters at Balvenie and routed. Among the dead is Walter Innes, Laird of Balvenie.
- 1687 - Alexander Duff of Braco acquires Balvenie. Following the overthrow of James VII (1688) and the accession of William and Mary in 1689, Balvenie is garrisoned by government troops, who promptly flee after the Jacobite victory at Killiecrankie (27 July). The castle is briefly occupied by a Jacobite force, who leave once the Rising fails.
- 1715/16 - William Duff, son of Alexander, holds Balvenie for the government during the Jacobite Rising led by his near neighbour, the Earl of Mar.
- 1718 - William Duff commits suicide at Balvenie. The castle is bought by William Duff of Dipple.
- 1722 - William Duff of Dipple dies and his son, also William, builds a new house nearby, Balvenie House, designed by James Gibbs. The ancient castle

is abandoned as a residence, although it is briefly re-occupied by government troops in 1746, during the closing stages of the last Jacobite Rising.

- 1886 - Glenfiddich Distillery opens in the shadow of Balvenie Castle.
- 1925 - the property is entrusted into state care in 1925. Balvenie House is largely demolished around the same time.

Archaeological Overview:

- After coming into state care, the castle was subjected to a clearance excavation by the Ministry of Works. As a result, the archaeology of the site must now be seen as compromised. However, the levels revealed by the MOW may not have reached earlier occupation levels. The property, therefore, remains archaeologically sensitive, as demonstrated by recent archaeological work.
- In 1990, a watching brief and limited excavation in the south range discovered a large kiln, thought to be associated with a brewing vat, and a possible disturbed cobbled floor. At the west end of the range were several pits, all evidently pre-dating the adjacent west range which is probably 15th century. One pit contained many animal bones, charcoal, burnt clay and ash, but no artefacts.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The quadrangular 13th century curtain wall that conditioned all later developments is generally well preserved, except at the North-East corner where it was replaced by the Atholl Lodging. The curtain has a substantial external plinth course and retains small stretches of wall walk, as well as evidence for two projecting towers at the South-West and North-West corners, the latter a latrine tower. There may have been another at the now missing North-East corner, but no sign of one at the South-East angle. The towers appear to have been small on plan, similar to those projecting from castles of the earlier 13th century (eg, **Caerlaverock Old Castle** and Kinclaven).
- Balvenie's quadrangular plan bears some resemblance to other Comyn castles, eg, **Inverlochy** and Lochindorb, although these castles have much more impressive projecting round towers, such as became more common from the later 13th century (eg, **Caerlaverock New Castle**, **Bothwell** and **Kildrummy**).
- Accommodation within the castle was probably provided by ranges of buildings set against the inside faces of the curtain. Originally, these would have been of timber, although the masonry building in the South-East angle, later converted into a kitchen, may incorporate the remains of a 13th-century hall. The ruinous west range probably represents a lodging, comprising of hall and chamber above vaulted cellars, built for the Douglasses c.1400.
- The formidable curtain wall was further augmented by a sizeable, flat-bottomed ditch with stone revetted sides. This ditch survives in good condition along the south and west sides but has been filled in along the north and east sides, probably when the Atholl Lodging was built c.1550; a similar thing happened at **Dirleton Castle**. The east ditch was filled in to ease the main approach into the castle, and the north ditch probably became a garden/orchard.

Atholl Lodging

- The exterior façade of the Atholl lodging is an impressive piece of late medieval architecture, particularly the bold round tower at the North-East corner. There was a certain vogue around the time it was constructed (the mid-1500s) for adding round towers to existing ranges of high-status buildings (eg, **Huntly Castle**, **Edzell Castle** and the **Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall**). While it is inappropriate to ascribe inspiration for these towers to a specific building, or collection of buildings, they do appear to reveal awareness of French prototypes, perhaps reflecting the influence of the French-born Mary of Guise. (In France, there was evidently a developing fashion for lodgings with attached single round towers from the early 15th century.) However, in Scotland, earlier castles (eg, Rait and Glamis) demonstrate that the form of hall and circular chamber block was not an alien concept.
- The exterior façade is richly embellished with architectural flourishes. These consist of an array of wide-throated gun holes, surely intended more for show than for defence, projecting bowed oriels on the top storey, and a fine display of heraldic panels, some of which survive and firmly date the construction of the Lodging to the 1550s. Three coats of arms are displayed at wall head level. That of John Stewart, 4th Earl of Atholl, has a long scroll below it, with the family motto 'Forth fortune and fill thy coffers'. Above the entrance doorway, as well as above the doors leading off the courtyard into the stair turrets, are vacant niches that would also have contained the Atholl arms.
- The entrance passage still retains a rare example of a double-leafed yett, or cross barred iron gate (there is another at **Doone Castle**). On the courtyard elevation of the Lodging there is part of an arch above the present entrance passage, all that remains of the pre-1550 entrance pend.
- The courtyard façade has a more functional appearance than the exterior, but is still impressive, with two circular stair towers projecting either side of the entrance pend. The grander stair to the left, serving the private chambers of the lodging, is capped with a square top floor, perhaps a study, carried on continuous corbelling.
- The Lodging provided the necessary accommodation for the earl and countess and their respective retinues. The ground floor consists of four chambers, which, unusually, were not stores but living rooms, for each had a latrine and fireplace. These would doubtless have been used by members of the household; for example, the chamber in the ground floor of the grand round tower is linked by a stair to the earl's inner chamber directly above and so may have accommodated his steward. The first floor comprised a three-room apartment ;hall, outer chamber and inner chamber; the function of a fourth room, connected to the outer chamber, is not clear but may have been a study, perhaps even a chapel. The top floor mirrored this layout, minus the fourth room, and provided an apartment for the countess. This disposition of rooms is very similar to that found in the palace at **Huntly Castle**, as reconstructed in the 1550s.

Social Overview:

- The main associations and meanings of Balvenie are not clear, other than generic themes such as medieval war and siege. Associations with families who owned it (especially the Comyns, Douglasses and Stewarts) seem to have lapsed.

- The castle is primarily a recreation and tourism destination, with a 'suntrap' courtyard and a nice picnic area on the grass in front. Local schools use the castle for educational trips. A local piping event is also held at the castle.

Spiritual Overview:

- In medieval times, the castle would have housed a chapel. The castle is tangentially associated with Queen Mary's campaign against the 4th Earl of Huntly, a campaign advanced by the Protestant nobility to 'clip the wings' of the overtly Catholic lord.
- The castle maintains no known spiritual associations, nor is it used for spiritual gatherings.

Aesthetic Overview:

- The entrance façade is arguably the castle's most attractive feature, whilst the monumentality of the 13th century curtain wall is its most martially impressive one.
- The castle courtyard is a pleasing open space, especially in the afternoon sunlight, nicely complemented by the verticality of the lofty, turreted Atholl Lodging rising up from one corner.
- Balvenie Castle is visually separated from Dufftown itself, which lies to the south and South-West. It is thus set in beautiful countryside, with a hill rising up to the east, and forests and fields to the west. Altogether, the castle's surroundings are very attractive, and the air is enhanced by the pleasant aroma wafting up from the nearby distillery.
- From a distance, the castle is shrouded by the surrounding trees beyond the outer ditch. There is a current programme of tree maintenance which aims to open up the site by lifting crowns and removing shrubby growth, giving glimpses of the castle from a distance, whilst retaining the pleasant wooded surroundings.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Was there anything on the site prior to the Comyn castle?
- What form did the Comyn castle take internally, and what were the original entrance arrangements?
- What damage did Bruce exact on the castle, if any?
- What building works did the Douglasses carry out?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Balvenie served as a formidable stronghold for three great magnate dynasties ;Comyn, Douglas and Stewart , for over 500 years.
- The formidable curtain wall with its encircling ditch is one of a small but distinguished group of castles of enceinte built in Scotland in the later 13th century.

- The 16th-century Atholl Lodging is a particularly fine example of late medieval secular architecture. Its design, showing French influences, demonstrates the manner in which Scottish aristocratic patrons gained inspiration from the Continent, as well as from existing buildings within Scotland.

Associated Properties:

(*other notable Comyn castles*) ; Cairnbulg; Dundarg; **Inverlochy**; Kingedward; Lochindorb; Old Slains; Rattray; **Ruthven**.

(*other sites in Historic Scotland's care associated with the Comyns*) ; **Deer Abbey**.

(*other notable 13th-century curtain walled castles*) ; **Bothwell**; **Caerlaverock**; **Dirleton**; **Kildrummy**.

Keywords:

curtain wall, ditch, lodging, tower, yett, heraldry, Comyn, Douglas, Stewart

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