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SCOTLAND

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ROTHESAY CASTLE



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ROTHESAY CASTLE

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SYNOPSIS

Rothsay Castle stands in the centre of the town of Rothsay, on High Street and within a short walk of the ferry terminal from Wemyss Bay. It is one of Scotland's oldest surviving masonry castles, built for the hereditary Stewarts of Scotland c. 1200, and still owned by their descendants, the Marquesses of Bute.

The castle probably originated as an earthwork-and-timber castle of the later 12th century, and the circular moat most likely dates from then. Around 1200 the castle was rebuilt in stone, with an impressive curtain wall, uniquely circular in shape. The four corner towers were added later in the 13th century, in the aftermath of Haakon IV of Norway's attempted invasion of 1263. In 1371 Rothsay became a royal castle when the 7th hereditary Stewart acceded to the throne as Robert II. His son, Robert III, died at the castle in 1406. James IV and James V carried out major rebuilding in the early 16th century, adding the forework and chapel and raising the height of the two northern towers.

Abandoned as a residence after the Cromwellian occupation of the 1650s, the castle fell into ruin. During the course of the 19th century major works of clearance and consolidation were undertaken by the Bute family to address the decay, most notably by John Crichton-Stuart, 3rd Marquess of Bute, culminating in 1900 with the restoration of the forework.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical overview

- **early 12th century** – the Isle of Bute lies within the Norse kingdom of Man and the Isles, having been formally transferred by King Edgar of Scotland to King Magnus of Norway in 1098.
- **c. 1136** – Walter, third son of Alan son of Flaald, descended from the *dapifer* (steward/stewart) of the lords of Dol (Brittany), settles in Scotland and becomes David I's steward, a position declared hereditary by Malcolm IV (1153-65). Walter acquires extensive estates across southern Scotland, centred on castles at **Dundonald** and Renfrew.
- **1158** – Somerled (Somhairle), lord of Argyll, defeats the king of Man in battle, forcing him to flee to Norway.
- **1164** – Walter defeats and kills Somerled near Renfrew. It is possible that Bute (and probably also the Cumbraes and Arran) are now reclaimed by the Scottish Crown. A castle is almost certainly built on the island to help secure the gain, and it is possible this takes the

form of an earthwork-and-timber castle at Rothesay. The present water-filled circular moat may well date from this time.

- **1177** – Walter dies and is succeeded by his son, Alan, 2nd hereditary Stewart. At some stage, and certainly by 1200, Alan becomes lord of Bute. (He grants the church at ‘Kengaif’ [Kingarth] to Paisley Abbey 1198x1204.) Either he or his son, Walter, 3rd hereditary Stewart (1204-41), builds the formidable stone curtain wall that dominates the castle today, as well as **St Blane’s Church**.
- **1230** – Haakon IV of Norway orders Uspak (Gillespec) MacDougall, king of Man and the Isles, to reclaim Bute. Uspak’s men besiege the castle (incidentally, the first mention of the castle in the records) and eventually take it, having, according to *Eirspennill’s Haakon Haakon’s son’s Saga*, ‘hewed the wall with axes, because it was soft’. They soon have to withdraw when the Scottish fleet of 200 ships appears. Rothesay Castle returns to Walter, 3rd hereditary Stewart.
- **1241** – Walter dies and is succeeded by Alexander, 4th hereditary Stewart (he is known as Alexander of **Dundonald**, probably because that is his chief residence).
- **1263** – Haakon IV leads an expedition to reclaim his lost dominions, and Alexander surrenders Rothesay Castle without a fight. However, he succeeds in holding off Haakon at an inconclusive battle at Largs (November), and this and the wintry gales force Haakon to withdraw. Haakon dies in the **Bishop’s Palace, Kirkwall**, on the journey home to Bergen.
- **1266** – King Alexander III of Scotland and King Magnus of Norway sign the Treaty of Perth, in which the kingdom of Man and the Isles is returned to Scotland in exchange for a substantial payment. It is probably soon after this that Alexander of **Dundonald** upgrades the castle’s stone curtain wall with a projecting gatehouse containing a portcullis on the north, facing Rothesay Bay, and four projecting round towers fitted with ‘state-of-the-art’ arrow-slits and wall-head crenellations. (Alexander also builds a new stone castle at **Dundonald** around the same time.)
- **1283** – Alexander dies and is succeeded by James, 5th hereditary Stewart. Following his death in 1309, he is succeeded by his son Walter, 6th hereditary Stewart.
- **1315** – Walter marries Marjorie, then the only child of King Robert I (The Bruce). Their own child, Robert (the future Robert II), is born in 1316. (The famous Bute Mazer (now in the National Museums Scotland), a cup for circulating at ceremonial occasions, may have been made for this special occasion.) Marjorie having died in childbirth, Robert is recognised as heir-apparent (1318). However, in 1324 Bruce’s second wife gives birth to a son, David, and it is he who

becomes king (David II) on his father's death in 1329. Robert succeeds as 7th hereditary Stewart on the death of his father in 1327.

- **1371** – On David II's death, Robert, 7th hereditary Stewart, ascends the throne as Robert II. Rothesay becomes *de facto* a royal castle. In 1385 King Robert's natural son, John 'the Black Stewart', is appointed sheriff of Bute and keeper of Rothesay, positions that hereafter remain with his descendants (the earls and marquesses of Bute). From 1377 onwards the exchequer accounts frequently record provisions being sent to Rothesay Castle for the king's use, and occasionally building works.
- **1390** – Robert II dies at **Dundonald Castle**; his son, John, ascends the throne as Robert III. He too stays at Rothesay frequently, and in 1398 his son, David, is created Duke of Rothesay (a title still held to this day by the heir to the throne of Great Britain and Northern Ireland). In 1401 (1400 according to some) he makes Rothesay a royal burgh (a landmark in Scottish history for it is the first time the term 'burgus regium' is specifically used).
- **1406** – Robert III dies at Rothesay Castle and is buried in Paisley Abbey. Throughout the rest of this century the later Stewarts seldom reside at the castle.
- **1489** – James IV, great-great-great-grandson of Robert III, succeeds to the throne. His struggle with the MacDonald Lords of the Isles brings him frequently to Rothesay, which he uses as a strategic naval base. Towards the end of his reign he begins to build a new royal lodging, called 'le dungeoun' – the present forework. The masons are John and Huchone Cowper. The work remains unfinished at his death at the battle of Flodden in 1513. His son and heir, James V, completes the rebuilding programme. According to one contemporary source (Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie), James commissions Sir James Hamilton of Finnart 'to reforme his castell and palice thair of [so that] he might remaine their sum tyme of the year at his plesour with his court and queen'. This would put the completion of the royal lodging, the heightening of the two northern towers, and probably also the building (rebuilding?) of the castle chapel, to 1539-40.
- **1542** – James V dies and is succeeded by his daughter Mary. Neither she nor her successors, James VI (1567-1625) and Charles I (1625-49), seems ever to visit Rothesay.
- **1650-59** – Cromwellian troops garrison the castle during the English occupation of Scotland. (The unusual swellings in the moat may conceivably be gun-platforms built by them.) On departure they reportedly carry out a partial demolition of the defences. This probably forces James Stewart, hereditary keeper of the castle, to

relocate to new premises in the town. Around 1681 he moves to the Mansion House, in High Street (now the Bute Estates Office).

- **1685** – during the rebellion against James VII, led by Archibald Campbell, 9th earl of Argyll, the castle is burned by his supporters.
- **1690s** – Martin Martin undertakes his tour of the Western Isles, publishing in 1703 (2nd edition 1716). He describes the castle as containing ‘several little houses within’, besides the chapel. By this date the north-west tower is serving as the ‘Pigeon Tower’.
- **1718** – work begins on a splendid new mansion for the Bute family at Mount Stuart, south of Rothesay.
- **c. 1810** – during the Napoleonic Wars the gatehouse is used as a powder magazine by the local volunteer force raised to defend Bute in the event of a French invasion. The castle thus becomes part of the British Empire’s military defence at home.¹
- **1816-18** – John Crichton-Stuart, 2nd marquess of Bute, employs 70 men to clear the ruined castle of vegetation and rubble and repair the vault over the gateway.
- **1871-79** – a second, far greater, programme of clearance and consolidation is undertaken on behalf of the 3rd marquess. The works include demolishing later structures, excavating the courtyard and exploring the moat. The artefacts found are presented to the Bute Museum. In 1872 William Burges, architect, produces a condition survey on the castle, with recommendations. The report is adopted by the 3rd marquess and hereafter the focus is on masonry consolidation. (The architectural model, on display in the Great Hall, is produced as part of this programme, in 1872.) In 1877 a major fire devastates Mount Stuart, resulting in a ‘splendid palace’ being built, to a design by Robert Rowand Anderson. Work on Rothesay Castle stops as soon as building work begins on the new edifice.
- **1900** – the forework, then substantially ruined, is reconstructed in a blatantly ‘self-documenting’ red sandstone ashlar (‘a most painful contrast to the old structure’, according to the *Architectural Review*, 1900).
- **1937** – part of the ‘Pigeon Tower’ collapses and is rebuilt.
- **1953** – the 5th marquess of Bute entrusts the castle into State care.
- **1980s** – the Friends of Rothesay Castle are formed, to help promote the castle and raise its profile within the town.

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](#)

- **2006** – HRH The Prince Charles, Duke of Rothesay, visits and unveils a new Cloth of State provided by the Friends of Rothesay Castle.

[Note: the present owner, John Colum Crichton-Stuart, 7th marquess of Bute, retains the title of Captain and Keeper of Rothesay Castle. The title of Duke of Rothesay is held by HRH The Prince Charles.]

Archaeological overview

There was evidently much clearance work in the 1800s, carried out for both the 2nd and 3rd marquesses. Precisely what was done is a matter of speculation, but it goes without saying that the work was more in the nature of antiquarian clearance than archaeological investigation. The areas cleared included much of the castle courtyard and the surrounding moat. Numerous artefacts were found, which were lodged in the Bute Museum. These included an 11th-century chess-piece, iron and stone cannonballs, arrow-heads, knife-blades, a pike-head and fragments of swords, as well as more mundane objects (for example, nails and clay-pipes). The lower part of a medieval oak bridge was found in the moat.

Following the castle's transfer into State care, Stewart Cruden, for the Ministry of Works, carried out some archaeological investigations during necessary works of consolidation, including outwith the south-west tower. Here too the details are sketchy.

Even given these interventions it must be the case that the archaeological potential remains remarkably high. In particular, our understanding of the origins and early development of the medieval castle will doubtless be considerably enhanced by archaeological investigation.

[Note: the jumble of excavated wall foundations in the courtyard were covered over and the area turfed in the 1980s.]

Architectural/Artistic overview

Rothesay Castle is a most remarkable castle. It is one of Scotland's oldest surviving masonry castles, and its circular shape is unique. How it acquired that shape is not clear but it may have been determined by the circular form of the original earthwork-and-timber castle – what archaeologists call a 'ringwork' – that is presumed to have been constructed on the site in the later 12th century following the Scots recapture of Bute. (The first castle at **Dundonald** may also have been a ringwork, and ringworks are also associated with tenants of the Stewarts, including Robert Croc's **Crookston Castle**.)

The upstanding masonry is a forerunner of the great curtain-walled castles built by the leading barons in the later 13th century (for example, **Bothwell**, **Caerlaverock** and **Kildrummy**); Alexander, 4th hereditary Stewart, built

one of the most remarkable at his chief seat, **Dundonald**, of which little remains upstanding today. Rothesay can also be compared to other 13th-century castles along the western seaboard (for example, **Dumbarton**, **Dunstaffnage** and **Inverlochy**), built to help reinforce that frontier against further threats from Norway. Rothesay has highly unusual elements that contribute significantly to our understanding of the development of the castle in Scotland at a time when the stone castle was coming into its own.

The surviving masonry dates from four periods.

The original curtain wall (c. 1200)

The circular stone curtain wall was most probably built around the year 1200. With **Castle Sween**, it is the earliest of the numerous curtain-walled castles built in Scotland in the 13th century, and which culminated with **Tantallon** in the mid-14th century. The thick circular wall, unique in Scotland, is built of small square ashlar, regularly coursed, characteristic of Romanesque work. It has two plain round-arched entrances – the main entrance facing north and a postern on the west (later blocked). The front entrance consisted of a single timber door, set behind plain chamfered stone jambs and secured by a draw-bar. The arch-head has gone but the rear-arch, rebuilt in 1816-18, is elliptical.

The later 13th-century additions

Substantial additions were made in the later 13th century to strengthen the castle's defensive capability, and these are remarkably important for what they tell us about the development of castles generally. The castle retains precious evidence for three aspects – (1) the addition of towers, (2) the provision of wall-head defences, and (3) the strengthening of entrances.

- (1) Four projecting drum towers were added to the original simple curtain wall. These were each three storeys high and fitted with arrow-slits of unusual 'stirrup-shaped' form (more usual 'fish-tail' slits survive at, for example, **Caerlaverock**, **Dunstaffnage**, **St Andrews** and **Skipness**). One tower (the so-called 'pigeon tower' on the north-west side) was larger on plan than the others, most likely indicating that it formed part of the lord's lodging (similar larger towers survive at **Dunstaffnage** and **Inverlochy**, for example). That the towers were added to the curtain was ascertained when a hole was made in the west side, at the junction of the north-west tower and the curtain; the hole still remains. The hole also demonstrated that the stone batter (slope) at the base of the curtain wall and towers was contemporary with the towers; the batter deflected missiles dropped from the wall-head into the besiegers' faces.
- (2) Rothesay is singularly important for what it tells us about the nature of wall-head defences in 13th-century castles. The curtain survives to almost its full height between the gatehouse and the north-west tower, and here exists a unique crenellated (indented) parapet,

fortuitously immured by a later wall heightening (see below), comprising two broad merlons (upstands), each pierced by an observation slit, and three narrower crenelles (openings) through which archers fired. These crenellations were additionally protected by a projecting timber brattice, for four putlog holes to carry it remain below the crenelles. The brattice allowed defenders to step out from the wall-head to fire directly on the enemy below. On the inside of the curtain wall survive long stretches of the wall-walk and the stone access stairs rising up from the courtyard.

- (3) The original simple entrance was also substantially improved in the later 13th century when a gatehouse fitted with a portcullis was added to the outside face. (This was subsequently ‘buried’ in the 15th-century forework – see below). This gatehouse development at Rothesay helps us to understand how the formidable later 13th-century gatehouses at the likes of **Bothwell** and **Kildrummy** came to be.

The 15th-century alterations

During the reigns of James IV and V, substantial alterations were made to the 13th-century castle. The most significant was the creation of a new royal lodging at the entrance, called ‘le dungeoun’ in 1520 but now commonly called the forework. It consisted of a two-storey residential tower built directly over the extended entrance passage, guardroom and grim pit-prison. These upper floors are incomplete but appear to have housed a large hall on the first floor (probably the king’s hall), and a two-chambered apartment above (probably the king’s outer and inner chamber). There may have been other lesser rooms in the garret). These rooms communicated with the two adjacent drum-towers (north-west and north-east) via the 13th-century wall-walks.

These Royal Stewart works certainly also included heightening the curtain wall, in an angular grey whinstone, which resulted in the immuring of the early crenellated parapet. It possibly also involved the building (rebuilding?) of the chapel on the east side of the courtyard – a two-storey rectangular block, with the chapel itself on the upper floor above a storage basement. The chapel itself incorporates one or two stone furnishings of note, including a piscina set below a trefoil arch and a water-stoup beside the entrance door at the west end of the south wall.

The c. 1900 restoration

The restoration of the forework in 1900 is another example of the ‘self-documenting’ restoration work carried out by the 3rd marquess of Bute. It compares most closely with his restoration work at **St Andrews Cathedral-Priory**, likewise executed in a deep red sandstone ashlar; even at the time it was seen as jarring – ‘a most painful contrast to the old structure’ according to the *Architectural Review*. The use of such an overtly different material contrasts with the marquess’s more restrained and muted ‘self-

documenting' restoration work elsewhere (for example, **St Blane's**, **Kingarth** and **Whithorn Priory**).

Social overview

Rothsay Castle, by dint of its very location in the heart of the town, plays a significant role in the life of the people of Rothsay, and of the islanders of Bute generally. That role has been significantly raised following the creation of the Friends of Rothsay Castle in the 1980s. Formed with the aim of promoting the castle as a destination for visitors and as a venue for civic events, the Friends hold three annual events in the hall (including a St Andrew's Day dinner), and special events in the courtyard. They have been particularly keen to promote the historic link between the Isle of Bute/Scotland and Norway.

The Friends and the Bute family have furnished the hall with historic artefacts and reproduction furnishings. They recently provided a Cloth of Estate bearing the arms of James IV, which now hangs above the hall's great fireplace.

Spiritual overview

Rothsay Castle would have had a chapel from the outset; certainly a chaplain is recorded on the castle staff in the early 15th century. The present chapel, dedicated to St Michael, stands almost complete but roofless, a testimony to the importance of religious services to the regimen of castle life.

In 1993 a simple wooden cross was erected in the chapel to the memory of John, 6th marquess of Bute.

Today the castle is popular as a venue for wedding ceremonies. These take place in the chapel, or in the hall if the weather is inclement. The Friends of Rothsay Castle have previously pursued the possibility of re-roofing the castle chapel, but this has not progressed.

Aesthetic overview

The castle is a dominant structural feature standing at the centre of the town of Rothsay. Its partially ruined but still formidable curtain wall replete with projecting drum towers and dominant rectangular forework, the whole mysteriously mirrored in the encircling water-filled moat, provides the 18th-/19th-century town with a real sense of history and heritage. The well-manicured grass is dotted about with some fine shrubs and trees, particularly along the south side.

The castle's immediate surroundings, whilst much improved over recent decades, are still something of a 'dog's breakfast', with some poor quality modern public buildings, gap sites and a certain shabbiness vying with a softer, older townscape. Perhaps a few more shrubs around the moat wouldn't go amiss.

The stark dark red sandstone ashlar of the restored forework jars somewhat with the ancient castle masonry.

The long, darkened entrance passage provides a suitably moody, ancient atmosphere, enabling the visitor to reflect on the medieval past with its images of knights and lieges, wars and sieges. This sense of history diminishes as the visitor progresses upstairs to the restored hall, with its 'clutter' of artefacts, etc.

The castle courtyard is a reasonably pleasant, sheltered spot in which to sit and marvel at the ancient masonry, built in an age when the kings of Norway still assumed they held sway here. The ruined castle chapel lacks a certain architectural and spiritual finesse.

The vistas out from the curtain wall and the forework are quite limited, but they do provide good views down onto the moat with its ducks, and glimpses out to the pier and the open sea beyond.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property

- When was the earthwork-and-timber castle built, and was there a pre-existing Norse fortress on the site? A proper archaeological exploration would surely cast considerably more light on the origins and early development of the site, given that there seems to have been little archaeological investigation up to now beyond the curtain wall.
- What was the building history of the courtyard through time? Much more antiquarian investigation seems to have taken place here, thereby reducing the archaeological potential, but the existing high surface levels suggest that such work may not have been so deep as to have removed too many stratified deposits. Further archaeological investigation would surely add considerably to our understanding of the development of the castle through time.
- What is the building history of the present chapel? A more thorough standing building study might add some insights, coupled with excavation under and around its footprint.
- What more can we learn about the history of the castle since its abandonment in the later 1600s, and particularly the 19th-century interventions by the 2nd and 3rd marquesses? A comprehensive study of the documentation held nationally, locally and within the

Bute family archives would add considerably to our understanding of the process of change and renewal at the castle.

- Why were the ‘swellings’ in the moat added, and why – Cromwellian gun positions or 19th-century landscaping? An archaeological excavation would surely solve this riddle.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Rothesay is one of the most important castles in Scotland. It is one of the earliest masonry castles surviving substantially intact to the present time, and with a history of aristocratic use spanning five centuries.
- The castle has had an unbroken 800-year association with one of Scotland’s pre-eminent noble dynasties – the Stewarts (Stuarts) – who served as hereditary stewards of the country’s sovereigns before founding the Royal Stewart dynasty in 1371, through Robert II. The close connection with the present heir to the throne, The Prince Charles Duke of Rothesay, and the Crichton-Stuarts, hereditary keepers of the castle, continues to this day.
- Rothesay’s architecture holds some well-nigh unique features. In particular, its circular plan and 13th-century wall-head crenellations make it a most distinctive survival, with the potential to inform an understanding of the early development of castle building in Scotland.
- Rothesay stands alongside the likes of **Dunstaffnage** and **Inverlochy** castles, as a group of castles built in the 13th century to help the Scottish Crown counter threats to the western seaboard from the kings of Norway.
- The Norse sagas describing details of the two sieges of Rothesay Castle, in 1230 and 1263 – particularly *Eirspennill’s Haakon Haakon’s son’s Saga* – are an important early source for the process of siege warfare generally, and provide invaluable information about the castle itself and its occupants.
- The castle served as a valuable royal castle from 1371, providing sovereigns (particularly James IV and James V) with a useful naval base from which to police the western seaboard and counter the threat posed by the MacDonald Lords of the Isles.
- The conservation, and partial restoration, of the castle by the 2nd and 3rd marquesses of Bute in the 19th century, are an influential

chapter in the story of ancient monumentry and the conservation movement, which culminated in 1882 with the first Ancient Monuments Act.

- The castle continues to play an important role in the civic life of the townspeople of Rothesay and the Isle of Bute.

ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Other related places: Bute Estate Office (formerly The Mansion House), High St; Bute Museum, Stuart St, Rothesay; **Dundonald Castle**; Mount Stuart; **St Blane's Monastery**, Kingarth; **St Mary's Chapel**. Rothesay

Other significant Scottish early-13th-century stone castles: Castle Roy (Inverness.); **Castle Sween**; **Dirleton**; **Dunstaffnage**; Kinclaven Castle (Perths); **Lochranza**; Mingarry; **Skipness**

Some other castles with 13th-century 'shovel-' or 'fish-tail' arrow-slits: Brodick (Arran); **Caerlaverock**; **Doone**; **Dunstaffnage**; **Inverlochy**; **St Andrews**; **Skipness**

Other castles with early crenellations: Craigie (Ayr); **Skipness**

The other residences of the Royal Stewart dynasty: **Doone Castle**; **Dumbarton Castle**; **Dunfermline Palace**; **Edinburgh Castle**; Falkland Palace (Fife); **Holyrood Palace**; Kindrochit Castle (Aberdeens); **Linlithgow Palace**; Newark Castle (Selkirks); **Ravenscraig Castle**; **Stirling Castle**

KEYWORDS

moat; curtain wall; drum tower; gatehouse; hall; chapel; prison; portcullis; arrow-slit; crenellations; siege; Norse; steward/Stewart/Stuart; Robert II; James IV; James V; marquess of Bute

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