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Last reviewed: 2012

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EDINBURGH CASTLE – ORDNANCE STOREHOUSES



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EDINBURGH CASTLE – ORDNANCE STOREHOUSES, MORTUARY AND BACK WELL

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The two Ordnance Storehouses (North and South) were constructed in 1753–54 to complement a nearby powder magazine built in 1748. All three structures were designed by William Skinner, engineer with the Board of Ordnance, who also designed the mighty Fort George. In 1896/97 the magazine was demolished and the two storehouses transformed by the English architect Edward Ingress Bell to serve as the castle's military hospital. In 1999 the buildings were remodelled again, this time to house the National War Museum of Scotland. In 2011 Field-Marshal Earl Haig's equestrian statue was relocated to the courtyard from its original location on the Esplanade.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

1628: A well (the 'back well') is dug 'within the west wall of the castell' by Thomas Hilson and John Perkie, quarriers – an indication that this area of the castle rock, hitherto unused, is starting to be developed.

1649: Gordon of Rothiemay's view of the castle shows a single building at the western extremity of the castle, probably the powder magazine mentioned in a report dated 1679 ('the west syde of the castle whereupon the powder magazine stands'). The Back Well and the powder magazine may have been created around the same time.

1709: The powder magazine is described as 'a good solide house two stories high ... each room may hold 800 barrells of powder'. By this date it has a train shed immediately to its north, for the artillery train.

1748: The 17th-century powder magazine and train shed are demolished. A new, far larger powder magazine designed by William Skinner, the Board of Ordnance engineer who is also engaged at the time on designing mighty **Fort George**, is constructed on the same site.

1753/54: Two Ordnance Storehouses, also designed by Skinner, are built adjacent to the new magazine. The complex is enclosed by a stone wall entered through a gateway flanked by stone sentry boxes. The two-storey Storehouses accommodate the artillery train at ground level and, on their upper floor, the small arms and military equipment then being stored in James V's Munitions House in Crown Square (where the Scottish National War Memorial stands today). Mons Meg is taken to the Tower of London in the same tidying-up operation.

1896/97: The 1748 powder magazine is demolished and the two Storehouses are converted into a military hospital (to replace the one then in the Great Hall), to a design by E Ingress Bell, consulting architect to the War Office. The entrance gates are relocated to make way for the hospital kitchen, whilst the hospital's Mortuary is erected behind the south Storehouse in Back Well Yard.

1898: The Royal Army Medical Corps is formed.

1939: The first German Luftwaffe aircrew shot down over Britain, near Humbie, East Lothian, are brought to the military hospital.

1947: The redundant military hospital is adapted as the headquarters of Scottish Command prior to its relocation to Craigiehall House, to the west of the city, in 1955.

1979: The north Storehouse is adapted to accommodate part of the Scottish United Services Museum (then mostly housed in the Palace and Queen Anne Building). By now, the south Storehouse is housing the regimental museum of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers and Greys) and the Army School of Piping.

1987: The Back Well is cleared out and a Victorian hand-pump, brought from Hoselaw Farm in Roxburghshire, is erected beside it.

1999: The two Storehouses are adapted to house the new National War Museum (the successor of the Scottish United Services Museum), formally opened by HRH Princess Anne. Archaeological excavations and watching briefs are carried out in tandem with the work.

2011: The equestrian statue of Field-Marshal Earl Haig is relocated from the Esplanade to the courtyard.

Archaeological Overview

Archaeological work was carried out before and during the works in 1998/9 to adapt the two Storehouses as the home of the National War Museum.

Evidence was found, 3m under the west end of the south storehouse, for the 17th-century powder magazine. The work was limited, sufficient to indicate that that area was not capable of being used for an air-handling plant serving the new museum development. Incidentally, the presence of this first powder magazine seems to be expressed externally in the west wall of the south storehouse, where a section of greenish stone is evident at the lower level.

Significant remains (mostly stone footings) were found in the courtyard of the 1748 magazine (demolished 1890s).

Directly beneath the floor of the south Storehouse, a number of shallow pits were discovered in which redundant military equipment (including gun-flints, iron and brass shot-gauges and leather belts) had been dumped some time after 1753/4.

Standing building survey of the two Storehouses recovered evidence relating to their original 1753/4 appearance, including the stairwell in the south Storehouse and some of the ground-floor arcades in the north Storehouse.

In 1987 the Back Well was cleared out. Finds were few and mostly of early 20th-century origin.

Architectural/Artistic Overview

Original foundation phase: The two Storehouses, built in 1753/4, were two-storeyed, pitched roof structures. Their ground floors were open arcades, to allow access for large, carriage-mounted guns. The southern end of the south Storehouse was brick-vaulted to provide additional space for the adjacent powder magazine. The upper floors of both Storehouses were originally not partitioned, to provide a warehouse facility. The entrance gates into the courtyard from the east, with their flanking stone sentry boxes, were originally centrally positioned.

Development phase: During the conversion to military hospital, the north Storehouse was raised by one storey and given an extruded stair tower at its south-west corner. The south Storehouse was simply given a new roof. Both Storehouses were much altered internally to create accommodation for wards, offices, storerooms and toilet facilities. In the same operation, the entrance gates along the east side were repositioned off-centre to accommodate the hospital kitchen, and a stone viewing terrace was built along the west side of the courtyard. The hospital mortuary was built behind the south Storehouse, in the Back Well Yard.

The entrance into the north Storehouse was given a semi-circular pediment carved with a serpent entwined around a wooden rod, a cockerel and the Greek word ΑΣΚΛΗΠΙΟΣ (Asclepius). According to Greek mythology, Asclepius, son of Apollo, was the god of medical art, who used snakes to discover healing herbs and sacrificed cocks. The serpent-entwined rod became the 'logo' of the Royal Army Medical Corps, formed in 1898, the year after the castle's military prison opened for business.

Period of State care: For their conversion to the National War Museum, the two Storehouses were substantially refurbished. The blocked ground-floor arcades on the south Storehouse were re-opened and the western viewing terrace converted to form an internal link between the two structures. Most of the later partitions in the south Storehouse were removed, and the original stairwell brought back into use. The brick vaults at its southern end were retained.

In 2011 the equestrian statue of Field-Marshal Earl Haig, sculpted by G E Wade in 1922/3 and originally erected on the Esplanade, was re-erected in the courtyard. It seems much more at home in its present context.

The Ordnance Storehouses in their present form are largely as reconstructed in 1896/7. The conversion to military hospital, designed by E Ingress Bell with subsequent amendments by T Ivor-Moore, was done in a rather heavy Scots Baronial style, with corbelled parapets, crow-stepped gables and pedimented dormers predominating. This essay in Scots Baronial proved to be 'the tail-piece to an intensive endeavour throughout the century to make the castle conform better to the romantic historical awareness of the 19th century' (MacIvor). Some of the schemes were realised (eg St Margaret's Chapel, Portcullis Gate/Argyle Tower, Gatehouse, Great Hall), whilst others failed to get beyond the drawing board (eg the Prince Albert Memorial and New Barracks). Ingress Bell's remodelling at least had the beneficial effect of doing away with the austere, ponderous mass of the Georgian magazine and storehouses that then dominated the north-west corner of the castle.

Social Overview

The Ordnance Storehouses today are the home of the National War Museum, a department of National Museums Scotland. As such it is much visited, not only by those visiting the castle but people from Scotland and all over the world looking for specific historical and family-related information provided by the museum's extensive collections, archives and library.

Spiritual Overview

As ordnance storehouses, the buildings had no spiritual associations. However, their subsequent re-use as a military hospital meant that the complex was imbued with spirituality, through healing and death. The ornate door pediment on the north Storehouse is a tangible reminder of the former, and the mortuary in the Back Well Yard a reminder of the latter.

The current use of the buildings as the National War Museum, embracing over 400 years of military history, evokes spiritual reactions in those visiting the collections and searching the archives, who are moved by the many stories of valour and sacrifice made.

Aesthetic Overview

Viewed from the courtyard, the Ordnance Storehouses have no outstanding aesthetic qualities; indeed the Scots Baronial 'make-over' has been described by one authority as 'insipid' (Gifford *et al*).

Internally, the spaces are varied, a mix of the dark and enclosed with the reasonably spacious and airy.

The view from the viewing terrace westward over the city provides the visitor with a rare glimpse of this pleasing prospect.

The single most remarkable aesthetic quality of the Storehouses is the view of them from the north-west, particularly from West Princes Street Gardens, from where the three-storey north Storehouse really does dominate the castle rock. This prospect attracts the eye, and the photographer's lens, equally as much, perhaps, as that from the castle's south-east, looking towards the Half-Moon Battery.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- How much remains of the 17th-century powder magazine and its train shed? Further exploration under the west end of the south Storehouse would prove fruitful.
- What is the detailed history of the military hospital? A search of Army records, etc. could well pay dividends.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

The Ordnance Storehouses are rare survivals of Georgian military architecture, associated with William Skinner, who also designed mighty **Fort George**.

The 1896/7 conversion to a military hospital, whilst a rather insipid essay in Scots Baronial, represents the last attempt in Victorian times to try to make the castle look more medieval in appearance. The building of the hospital coincides with the formation of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

The present use of the buildings as home of the National War Museum provides visitors with fascinating and important insights into the military history of Scotland over the course of the last four centuries.

ADDENDA

Associated Properties

Other ordnance storehouses: **Fort George** (1750s)

Other Ingress Bell commissions: Victoria Law Courts (Birmingham)

Keywords

powder magazine; hospital; ordnance; William Skinner; Ingress Bell; Asclepius

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