

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC323

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90309)

Taken into State care: 1913 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

URQUHART CASTLE



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.

URQUHART CASTLE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

This monument comprises the remains of a complex medieval castle on a promontory on the north shore of Loch Ness.

The north end of the castle is marked by a mostly 16th-century tower which, although lacking much of its south side still rises to its full height. Other buildings in the castle are not as well preserved as this. They include the great hall and kitchens, a chapel, gatehouse, smithy, dovecote and other buildings of unidentified purpose. Excavation at the south end of the castle has shown the presence of a defensive structure dating from the first millennium AD. A ditch formerly crossed by a drawbridge protects the landward side of the castle. At the north end of this ditch is a large kiln. The presence of the kiln next to a large, open, gently sloping area suggests that there was a small settlement beyond the walls of the castle. The existence of occupation beyond the ditch was confirmed during the excavations associated with the developments in 2000, when two buildings of 13-15th century date were uncovered.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- Small fragments of vitrified rock have been recovered from the upper bailey, suggesting that the rocky promontory was fortified in the Iron Age.
- On present evidence, Urquhart is the most likely candidate to have been the residence of Emchath, a Pictish nobleman visited by St Columba during his mission to the area in the 6th century AD and recorded by his biographer, Adomnan. The discovery of a fragment of a Pictish brooch and the form of settlement support the view that this was a Pictish site of some importance.
- Urquhart has a distinguished medieval history as a castle, with an occupation spreading over 500 years, from the 13th to the 17th centuries.
- Soon after 1230, Alexander II granted the lordship of Urquhart to his son-in-law Alan Durward. He began to transform the site into a medieval stone castle.
- 1275 the Lordship passed to John Comyn, lord of Badenoch and Lochaber, but in 1296 Edward 1st of England captured it and appointed Sir William Fitzwarine as keeper.
- Andrew Moray attempted to capture it in 1297, but failed. However, by 1303, the castle was back in Scottish hands when it was again retaken by Edward of England. Followers of King Robert the Bruce annihilated the Comyns in 1307 and Urquhart returned into Scottish Hands.
- In 1346 John, 3rd Earl of Moray, Lord of Urquhart, died and the castle reverted to the Crown. It was maintained by a succession of constables and played an increasingly strategic role in the struggles against the MacDonald Lords of the Isles. This conflict saw several invasions of Glen Urquhart from the West, with the territory changing hands often and acrimoniously, with the obvious impact on the occupants of the Glen and on the rents from the estates. It was not until 1476 that John MacDonald was forced to resign his claim to the Earldom of Ross and withdraw to the west.

- The land was then granted to George Gordon, 2nd Earl of Huntly and leased by him to Sir Duncan Grant of Freuchie. In 1509 the Grants were given the lordship of Urquhart directly from the Crown and ordered to rebuild and repair the castle and police the area.
- In 1545, the MacDonalDs again attacked the castle, encouraged by the actions of Henry VIII in the 'Rough Wooing'. It was the last the glen saw of the 'men from the west'.
- By 1650 it was no longer a noble residence and it was only briefly used during the Civil Wars of the 17th century. Cromwell ignored Urquhart during the 1650's, instead relying on a frigate on the loch.
- In 1689, it was garrisoned for the last time when Captain James Grant held the castle with 300 men against the Jacobites. In 1692 Grant of Freuchie complained that the soldiers had blown up some of his buildings when they left.
- Urquhart was never repaired. It came into care as a monument in 1912 and consolidation was carried out after WWI.

Archaeological Overview

- Ministry of Works undertook largely unrecorded clearance work in the early 20th century. During these works an exceptionally large collection of finds was retrieved, (some of which are published) including a very fine 15th century bronze water jug. Many of the objects have now been returned to the site and are on display in the visitor centre.
- Professor Leslie Alcock investigated the early historic claims for Urquhart in the 1970's, but also found significant later medieval deposits including a midden.
- In advance of works for the visitor centre an archaeological evaluation was undertaken, including watching brief out on all works and some larger scale excavation. Discoveries include a timber buildings on the landward side of the ditch, dating to the 13th – 15th century and light industrial activity.
- A comprehensive excavation report is in preparation by GUARD (to include a report on finds from Alcock's excavation written by SUAT).

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The castle lies on a promontory jutting out into Loch Ness, and is cut off on the landward side by a deep ditch, originally crossed by a drawbridge. A masonry curtain wall encircles the promontory, setting it firmly in the tradition of the great castles of the 13th century, including Kildrummy, Bothwell, Skipness Rothesay and Dirleton. The plan of each is determined by the topography, but they use a similar architectural vocabulary of high curtain walls and the internal buildings ranged around one or more inner courts. At Urquhart the 'hour glass' shaped site is divided into two courts, the upper bailey and the nether bailey, with the earliest buildings apparently constructed in the upper bailey.
- The 14th century gatehouse has drum towers flanking the round arched entrance, only the lower stories survive of the original. (A damaged section of the tower blown off in 1689 lies in front of the gatehouse.) In its present form the accommodation for the Steward on the upper storey dates to 1509. This gate must replace an earlier gatehouse, probably towered on the same site. On the loch-side, a watergate serves the castle's landing place – of vital importance in a place where water transport was the norm.
- Most of the internal buildings are now so fragmentary that it is difficult to define a date or be certain of their form. A cross wall once divided the site (remains of

it are visible a little to the north of the watergate) into two courts. The upper bailey in the south contains the fragmentary remains of a possible smithy and the footings of a possible keep of 13th century date. To the north is the nether bailey containing a range of 14th century buildings (later remodelled) built against a heavily buttressed, east curtain of similar date, the buildings possibly included a kitchen, hall block and great chamber.

- The only structure anywhere near complete is the towerhouse, built in 3 phases - a 14th-century basement and postern, three main storeys of accommodation above dating to the 16th century and finally the decorative parapet carried on a string-course, heavily machiolated over the entrance and provided with a square corner tower at each of the angles as well as the attic were added 1623 by John Moray, master mason.
- A new visitor centre was constructed north west of the castle in 2000.

Social Overview

- As a premier stopping point for visitors to the Highlands, Urquhart represents for many their introduction to the colourful and complex history of the area.
- It is now used for events which bring in an audience unused to visiting ancient monuments.
- Historic Scotland's developments at the site unsettled some in the local community who saw them as threatening the local economy, particularly the Loch Ness monster 'industry'. Historic Scotland should remain aware of these sensitivities.

Spiritual Overview

- The suggested link to St Columba's missions to the area is well known.
- There is no known modern spiritual link to the site. Although there was probably a chapel in the nether bailey it is no longer recognisable.

Aesthetic Overview

- It is the views from and of Urquhart Castle that make it justly famous, its location on a promontory in Loch Ness, arguably the most spectacular of any castle in Scotland.
- The aesthetic appeal of the inside the castle has been affected by the works required to make the site accessible to visitors, it has lost some of its charm.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- An understanding of the complex archaeology is urgently needed the report of the recent excavations will go some way to meet this.
- Information on the prehistoric, Pictish and early medieval occupation remains tantalisingly slight. Further archaeological investigation and, for the later periods, documentary research also, would improve our knowledge.
- The history of the struggles between the Crown and the Lords of the Isles is usually written from the Crown perspective, an assessment from the Lordships perspective would balance the interpretation of this period of Scottish history.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Urquhart Castle is an impressive ruin in a truly majestic setting.
- The complex and long-lived occupation of the site tells us much about the development of lordship, building fashion and royal control in the Highlands.

- The survival of an early historic site of considerable importance and complexity underlines the strategic significance of the site, and supports other archaeological evidence from the area that there was a considerable and well organised prehistoric and early historic population in this region.
- The visit of St Columba to a named Pictish nobleman possibly living at Urquhart is important for our understanding of Pictish society and the spread of Christianity in Scotland.
- The castle served a vital strategic role before and during the Wars of Independence, and later, as a royal castle, in the actions against the Lords of the Isles.
- The successive owners, keepers and constables played an important role in the administration of the Highlands.
- Images of Urquhart Castle are now some of the best known views of Scotland around the world.

Associated Properties

Inverlochy Castle a 13th century castle at the south end of the Great Glen Inverness Castle, a royal castle and garrison fortress for much of the Middle Ages, now replaced by a 19th century structure.

For curtain walled castles, **Kildrummy, Bothwell, Caerlaverock and Dirleton.**

There are many towerhouses introduced into existing castles, including **Skipness, Castle Tioram, Duart and Dunstaffnage.**

For the Pictish settlement, early historic forts such as Dunadd, Dundurn and Craig Phadraig (near Inverness).

For St Columba connection, the range of sites across Scotland that he is known to have visited from his base at Iona including Craig Phadraig and the possible Columban foundation at Portmahomack, on the Black Isle

Keywords Castle, tower, curtain-wall, gatehouse, royal castle, Grant, Durward, MacDonald, vitrified fort, Pictish, St Columba