



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:  
Designations:

PIC075  
Scheduled Monument (SM90172);  
Battlefield (BTL34, BTL24)  
Taken into State care:  
1976 (Guardianship)  
Last Reviewed:  
2004 (2025 update to include Empire  
connections)

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# INVERLOCHY CASTLE



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## INVERLOCHY CASTLE

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Situated about 2km north-east of Fort William and directly south of Caol, Inverlochy stands on the south bank of the River Lochy. Its immediate surroundings are now largely industrialised, with a tailrace from an aluminium smelter, railway sidings and viaduct, with a distillery nearby.

Built in the late 13th century, Inverlochy was one of several castles of the Comyn Lords of Badenoch and Lochaber. Subsequently, the castle passed to royal control and was virtually abandoned until the early 16th century when it was infrequently used by the Gordon, Earl of Huntly in his capacity as Sheriff of Inverness. Following the construction of the Cromwellian fort (1654 rebuilt in 1690) at Fort William, Inverlochy was never re-used as a military fortification, later serving as a secure store for pig-iron from Invergarry Ironworks (c.1730) before being purchased and repaired by Lord Arbinger in the later 19th century.

On plan, Inverlochy Castle is a square courtyard enclosed by thick curtain walls with a projecting round tower at each corner. The larger west corner tower, Comyn's Tower, served as the keep. Excavation has shown that additional timber buildings - stables, kitchens, bakehouse and hall stood in the courtyard. The castle's principal gateway was through the south curtain wall while a second opens through the north wall into the River Lochy. Outside the castle walls to the south-west, south-east and north-east is a defensive ditch, now heavily silted, presumably flooded with water from the River Lochy. Beyond the ditch is a slighter wall which dates from the 19th-century repairs.

Inverlochy Castle is closely associated with two significant battles (1431 and 1645) fought nearby.

## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

**c1280:** the Comyn, lords of Badenoch, built Inverlochy Castle as their chief seat in Lochaber, it protected the entrance into the Great Glen as well as controlled navigation from the River Lochy into Loch Linnhe.

**1297:** Inverlochy is the scene of a naval battle between supporters of King John Balliol and their opponents.

**1300:** John Comyn, lord of Badenoch and Lochaber, dies at his castle of Inverlochy.

**1308:** the power of the Comyn family in the north of Scotland is finally broken by King Robert Bruce. Inverlochy becomes a royal castle, though it seems that it was little used.

**1431:** James I, intent on reasserting royal power over the MacDonald Lord of the Isles, imprisons the rebellious Alexander MacDonald, in Tantallon Castle and sends the Earl of Mar and an army to seize MacDonald lands. Camped at Inverlochy Castle, Mar is surprised, and his army defeated by a small force of around 800 clansmen., Mar barely escapes with his life, returning to Kildrummy Castle half-naked and bare-foot. His son, the Earl of Caithness, is killed.

**1504:** The Gordon Earl of Huntly, appointed hereditary sheriff of Inverness by James IV, takes possession of Inverlochy, using the castle as his court. Huntly's repairs at Inverlochy were probably slight. The castle serves as a court of justice throughout the 16th century.

**1645:** The Marquis of Montrose's royalist army, with Alasdair MacColla, returning northwards after looting Inveraray endures an audacious forced march over Ben Nevis in February to surprise and annihilate a Covenanting army, composed of 3,000 Campbells and lowland Scots, commanded by the Earl of Argyll.

**1654:** following the construction of Cromwell's 'Citadel of Inverlochy' at the mouth of the River Nevis, the castle at Inverlochy is largely abandoned. This Cromwellian citadel was later incorporated into 'Fort William', built in 1690 for King William and Queen Mary (the town was originally called Maryburgh).

**18th century:** Invergarry Ironworks company uses the castle as a store for pig-iron.

**c.1860:** Sir Robert Campbell Scarlett, 2nd Lord Arbinger (1794-1861), purchases the lands of Inverlochy.

**1861:** the Hon. William Frederick Scarlett (1826-1892) succeeds his father and in 18/63 builds the nearby Castle of Inverlochy as a residence (now a hotel).

**c.1880:** Around this time, Lord Arbinger funds conservation works at the old castle, giving the ruins a suitably romantic appearance for the passing of the royal train, carrying Queen Victoria from Fort William to Mallaig. Conservation works continue on a small scale until Lord Arbinger's death in 1903. The work is likely funded, at least in part, by wealth derived from compensation received after the abolition of slavery in 1834. James Scarlett, 1st baron Abinger (1769-1844) received compensation for enslaved people in the Spring Grove estate in Jamaica.<sup>1</sup>

**1920s:** Inverlochy Castle and its surroundings are purchased by the North British Aluminium Company.

**1955:** collapse of the superstructure above the north-west gate.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this topic see [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c.1600-1997](#)

**1962:** proceedings to take Inverlochy Castle into guardianship begin. The Ministry of Public Buildings and Works begins works to consolidate and conserve the ruins.

**1976:** guardianship deed signed.

**1983-95:** excavations at Inverlochy Castle investigate the north-east and south-west towers, several area within the courtyard, both gates, as well as clearing and recording the wall-heads of the west and south curtain walls, investigating the base of the north-east tower and an area of the adjacent courtyard.

## **Archaeological Overview**

Prior to becoming a guardianship monument in 1976, there is no recorded archaeological excavation within or near the castle.

Excavations at Inverlochy Castle between 1983 and 1995 investigate the north-east and south-west towers, several area within the courtyard, both gates, as well as clearing and recording the wall-heads of the west and south curtain walls, investigating the base of the north-east tower and an area of the adjacent courtyard. Excavations at Inverlochy have followed an on-going series of repairs to the castle's fabric begun in 1983. These excavations carried out in 1983, 1989 and 1993, revealed the layout of ancillary timber buildings within the courtyard and the existence of barbicans at the north and south gates, which were subsequently demolished.

## **Artistic/Architectural Overview**

The quadrangular form of Inverlochy Castle indicates that the Comyns were familiar with mainstream military fortifications. The quadrangular castle evolved during the 13th century, reaching its zenith in Edward I's great Welsh castles such as Harlech. In Scotland, castles of this type include examples as geographically diverse as Kildrummy, Auchencass and Bothwell.

Inverlochy is simple on plan, comprising a square courtyard enclosed by substantial curtain walls approximately 3m thick with projecting round towers at each corner. The largest, Comyns' Tower on the north-west, served as the keep, or donjon housing the Comyns' private apartment.

Each tower had a single chamber per floor, linked by a broad curving stair set into the thickness of the wall that ran from the ground floor to the second storey. The north-east tower's basement chamber possesses no stair to the upper floor, so access must have been through an attached wooden building, several of which were found during excavations in the



courtyard. These included buildings such as a hall, a kitchen, a bakehouse and stables.

Both the north and south gates possessed portcullises and two-leaved gates, with simple outworks in the form of barbicans, though these were demolished at an unknown date. The south gate had a small internal gatehouse, part of which still stands.

## **Social Overview**

In the absence of any formal studies, it is difficult to assess Inverlochy's current social significance with any accuracy. Certainly, the battle of 1645 is prolifically remembered in Gaelic song and poetry, notably the poem 'Là Inbhir Lòchaidh' by Iain 'Lom' MacDonald and the well-known song 'Alasdair Mhic Colla Ghasda' about Alasdair MacColla the great hero of Clan Donald.

The castle lies adjacent to one of the most popular tourist routes in Scotland. Fort William is a popular base for anyone visiting the area of Ben Nevis and the Great Glen.

Inverlochy Castle features in many popular archaeological and architectural guides to the area and has associations with several Scottish families, such as the Cummings (descendants of the Comyns), MacDonalds, Gordons and Campbells. A dramatised account of the 1645 Battle of Inverlochy appears in Scott's romance 'The Legend of Montrose'.

## **Spiritual Overview**

The castle has no known spiritual associations, although at least two sets of human remains have been found during excavations. These may relate to a Pictish settlement traditionally said to have stood at Inverlochy before being destroyed by Danish raiders.

## **Aesthetic Overview**

Inverlochy Castle stands in an area renowned for its natural beauty, with the Great Glen, Ben Nevis and Loch Linnhe nearby. Unfortunately, the adjacent derelict land, industrial remains and a screen of trees as well the high security fencing (3.5m wire mesh fence topped with barbed wire) mars the castle's setting and its relationship to the wider landscape, particularly the river. The intended impact on Queen Victoria as she sat in her railway carriage as it crossed the adjacent railway viaduct has all but disappeared.

## What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- The documentary record is largely silent as regards the occupation or use of Inverlochy Castle between 1308 and 1504.
- Our understanding of the arrangement of outworks remains very limited.
- The extent and nature of the repairs made by the Earl of Huntly are unknown.
- The castle occupies a strategic position for marine transport, yet we know very little about the arrangement of any jetty or harbour at Inverlochy Castle. A blocked doorway in the north curtain suggests supplies and personnel were brought to Inverlochy by boats.
- No research has been undertaken to investigate whether there was a settlement associated with the castle or indeed what might have stood on the site prior to the Comyns' arrival.

## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

- Inverlochy Castle is a rare example of an unaltered 13th century Highland castle. Its quadrangular form is akin to the fortifications built by Edward I showing that the Comyns' net spread far and wide.
- The castle was built by the powerful Comyn Lords of Badenoch, important players in the Scottish Wars of Independence until their downfall in the early 14th century at the hands of King Robert Bruce.
- From its position at the mouth of the River Lochy, the castle commands the landward routes through the Great Glen and Glen Spean, as well as the navigation from the River Lochy to Loch Linnhe
- Although the timber structures within the castle have not survived, the recent archaeological excavations have given us a clearer idea of how the castle functioned by tracing their layout and establishing their purpose.
- Inverlochy Castle has been the scene of two battles fought in the vicinity of Tom na Faire to the south-west of the castle. Victory for the MacDonalds in the first battle ensured the continued existence of the powerful Lordship of the Isles. The second battle was an important victory, representing the Marquis of Montrose's generalship combined with the tactics of the great Gaelic warrior Alasdair MacColla and their ability to use the enmity felt by other clans towards the Campbell's in the 17th century.



- The adjacent industrial sites have dramatically changed the immediate setting of the castle, but their presence echoes the siting of the castle to exploit the natural lines of transport and communication in the area.

## Associated Properties

**Dunstaffnage Castle** (similar 13th C fish-tail arrow-slits); **Kildrummy Castle** (a larger quadrangular castle with ); Auchencass (a late 13th century quadrangular castle in fair condition); Lochindorb (dated to the late 13th century); Black Castle of Moulin (another Comyn quadrangular castle, said to have hosted Edward I in 1303 who possibly offered guidance on the construction of the outer walls); Pevensey Castle, Wales (similar period and design); Flint Castle (earlier than Inverlochy, but of similar design).

## Keywords

quadrangular castle; curtain wall; tower; barbican; gatehouse; keep; garderobe; Comyn; King Edward I of England; King Robert Bruce; James I; MacDonald; Lord of the Isles, Alisdar Carrach; Earl of Mar; first Battle of Inverlochy; Earl of Huntly; Sheriff of Inverness; Marquis of Montrose; Earl of Argyll; Campbell; Duncan Campbell of Auchindoun; Alistair MacColla; Covenanters; second Battle of Inverlochy; Iain Lom/John MacDonald

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