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## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# EDINBURGH CASTLE – THE VAULTS



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# EDINBURGH CASTLE - THE VAULTS

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

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The Great Hall and Queen Anne Building are supported on a series of cavernous vaults. These were built as a means to an end, the creation of the castle's principal *cour d'honneur*, formerly known as Palace Yard but now called Crown Square. Dating from as far back as the late 14<sup>th</sup> or early 15<sup>th</sup> century, the two storeys of vaults, eleven in total, have served a variety of uses down the centuries, as civilian and military stores, as soldiers' barracks, as state prison and, most famously, as a prison of war (the so-called French Prisons).

Between 1998 and 2006 archaeological investigations and detailed standing building survey was carried out, as part of Historic Environment Scotland's development project for the Queen Anne Building and Vaults. These have cast important new light on the origin and early development of the Vaults.

The Vaults began as an integral part of a high-status building, quite possibly a lofty tower with a lower range attached to its north, carried out as part of the major reconstruction of the castle begun by David II after 1356; thus making them among the oldest masonry structures in the castle. In the decades either side of 1500, they were comprehensively remodelled, and extended to the east as a prelude to the creation of the principal courtyard. The new Vaults provided a state prison, whilst the remodelled original Vaults serve as service space (probably stores for the most part) for new high-status buildings at the courtyard level – the House of the Artillery, first mentioned in 1498, and the Great Hall, completed by 1512.

The Vaults continued in use, mostly as stores, after the demise of the House of the Artillery and the Great Hall. Evidence for their use as soldiers' barracks from 1651 survives in two vaults, where brick floors incorporating stone pads for bed-galleries remain. The greatest change to the Vaults, however, was their conversion into a prison of war between 1757 and 1814, mainly for French nationals. Most of the surviving fixtures and fittings (eg. window bars and grilles, gates, doors and bed-frames) date from this period.

The Vaults now mostly house a permanent exhibition on the Prisons of War, incorporating two recreated prisons vaults and a variety of artefacts (including the wonderful ship model of the HMS *St. George*, made by French prisoners in the Vaults in 1760).

Note: This Statement does not include the vaults beneath the Palace.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

**Late 14<sup>th</sup> to early 15<sup>th</sup> century** – A large multi-level structure is built to the west of what would become the castle's principal courtyard, now called Crown Square. The structure seems to comprise a lofty multi-storey tower house at the south end with a lower (two-storey?) range extending to its north. Only the two lowest storeys

of the putative tower house survive, accessed from the west side. A straight stair rises up north from the vaults to emerge in Crown Square.

**Later 15<sup>th</sup> century** – The vaults are substantially remodelled, most probably to convert them into stores, etc. for the royal gunhouse (a 'House of the Artillery' is first recorded in 1498) along the west side of Crown Square. New vaults are also added to the east, including two built as state prisons with pits below them, accessed from the east side.

**1509-10** – The Great Hall is built above the new eastern vaults. The upper part of the tower house to its west is very probably converted into kitchens (a 'court kitchen' is mentioned in 1517), and some of the vaults beneath as store-rooms to serve the new hall; a second service stair from the vaults gives service access to the Great Hall.

**1573** – The artillery bombardment that brings the 18-month Lang Siege to an end causes great damage to the buildings to the west of the Great Hall. Thereafter, the upper parts, on the same level as Crown Square, are demolished and replaced by a crude gun battery, with guns facing south and west. The vaults continue in use as stores.

**1651 on** – During Cromwell's occupation of Scotland, the vaults are pressed into use as soldiers' barracks. This use continues, perhaps intermittently, into the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Later 17<sup>th</sup> century** – A longitudinal north/south wall dividing the westernmost vaults is built to support a new gun battery above.

**1708-13** – The westernmost upper vault is divided into three rooms to serve as the garrison bakehouse (the oven openings remain but the ovens themselves are gone).

**1737** – Two vaults are fitted out as barrack-rooms, with bed-galleries.

**1755** – On completion of the North Barracks, along the north side of Crown Square, the barrack rooms in the vaults are abandoned.

**1757-63** – The vaults are pressed into use as a prison of war, for POWs from the Seven Years' War with France. First to arrive are the 78 crew of the *Chevalier Barte*. The pressure on accommodation caused by their sudden arrival may be the prompt for rebuilding the upper floors of the Portcullis Gate for use as a state prison.

**1759** – Eleven POWs escape from the vaults.

**1760** – French POWs make the ship model, HMS *St. George*, in the vaults (now on display in the exhibition).

**1763** – 500 French POWs are marched from the castle to Leith to be repatriated.

**1776-1783** – The vaults are pressed into use as a prison of war once again, this time for POWs from the War of American Independence. Nationalities held include French, Spaniards and Dutch, as well as Americans ('Yankees') and Irish; both of the latter are treated by the British authorities as 'rebels'.

**1778** – The vaults are fitted with ironwork, fireplaces, etc. to make the prison more secure, but also more acceptable to prison reformers. New latrines are added to the east of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century ones along the Devil's Elbow.

**1779** – John Howard, prison reformer, makes the first of three inspections of the prison (the others are in 1782 and 1784). He finds 64 POWs in two vaults (the ones fitted out as barracks in 1737).

**1780** – The number of prisoners stands at almost 1,000, including 140 poor wretches pulled from the wreckage of the French frigate, the *Marquis de la Fayette*, sunk in the West Indies. Of the 29 French POWs to die in captivity in the castle, 21 are from the **Marquis** alone.

**1781** – The notorious Irish pirate, Captain Luke Ryan, is imprisoned in the vaults, along with the 235 crew of his ship, the *Calonne*. The 95 crew of the *Rohan Soubise* are also imprisoned, in the two vaults under the Great Hall; some carve their names on the doors there (these are now on display in the exhibition).

**1796-1801** – The vaults are pressed into use as a prison of war once again, this time for POWs from the Wars with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. The first to arrive are the crew of a Dutch frigate, the *Zephyr*. Nationalities now include also Poles, Danes, Germans and Italians.

**1799** – With overcrowding again an issue, some POWs are sent to a newly-opened POW camp at Norman Cross, Peterborough.

**1801** – In anticipation of a peace treaty (the Treaty of Amiens), all remaining POWs are sent to Chatham for repatriation.

**1803** – POWs begin to return as the War with Napoleonic France begins.

**1804** – All POWs are sent to a new camp at Greenlaw, near Penicuik. Thereafter, the castle becomes a 'high security prison', for escapees, trouble-makers and banknote forgers.

**1810** – The huge numbers of POWs from the Peninsular War means the castle once again houses large numbers of POWs.

**1811** – Forty-nine POWs escape from the vaults, by cutting a hole in the South-West corner of the lowest vault.

**1814** – All remaining POWs in the castle are marched to Leith for repatriation.

**c.1815** – the flights of steps linking the Devil's Elbow with Dury's Battery (in use as a former POWs exercise yard) is built.

**c.1872** – The west pit-prison is converted to a munition store. It goes out of use c.1911.

**1887-91** – Whilst restoring the Great Hall, Hippolyte Blanc has the parapet of the Devil's Elbow rebuilt and the narrow ventilation slits in the prison pits enlarged and glazed.

**1897** – R.L. Stevenson's unfinished novel, *St. Ives*, which opens in the 'French Prisons' in Edinburgh Castle, is published posthumously.

**1979** – Mons Meg is brought into the vaults for conservation. She is finally returned to the Mortar Battery, beside St. Margaret's Chapel, in 2001.

**1999-2003** – A comprehensive standing building survey and limited archaeological excavations are carried out in the vaults, as part of the Queen Anne Building project. The work includes a detailed inspection of the surviving timber bed-structures in one of the vaults.

**2004** – The Prisons of War permanent exhibition opens in the vaults. The exhibits include two reconstructed POW vaults and a display of artefacts, including the 1760 ship model of the HMS *St. George*, objects made by the POWs and three doors much carved with graffiti.

### Archaeological Overview

Archaeological excavations, detailed standing building recording and dendrochronological work were carried out between 1998 and 2006, most of it in connection with the conversion of the Queen Anne Building and the creation of the Prisons of War exhibition. These cast considerable new light on the development of this western side of Crown Square in the three centuries or so prior to the construction of the 1708-13 barracks.

The investigations also shed new light on the use of the various vaults, first as barrack-rooms, thereafter as a prison of war, and finally as an ammunition store.

The main conclusions are detailed in the Architectural/Artistic Overview below. Overall, the lesson learned is that, without the detailed and painstaking standing building survey, our understanding of this part of the castle would have been very much the poorer.

### Architectural/Artistic Overview

#### **Main Phases of Development**

Archaeological excavation and standing building survey carried out between 1998 and 2003 found much new evidence relating to the previous use of the site, beginning in the later 14<sup>th</sup> or early 15<sup>th</sup> century and continuing up to the time the Queen Anne Building was constructed in 1708-13. As a result, a clearer understanding of the development of this important site close to the core of the later medieval castle was obtained.

**Foundation phase:** The origins of the site later occupied by the Queen Anne Building lie in a large structure or structures built in the later 14<sup>th</sup> or earlier 15<sup>th</sup> century, as part of the major reconstruction of the castle initiated by David II after 1356. This makes the surviving masonry amongst the oldest surviving in the castle.

The earliest structural evidence indicates the presence of a multi-storey range of buildings extending the full length of what later became the Queen Anne Building. The southern half was probably a lofty, multi-storey tower, of which only the lowest two storeys survive – a bottom floor of two vaulted cellars and a second level of two further rooms, the westernmost of which was initially divided horizontally to form a loft or mezzanine; some of the stone corbels supporting the mezzanine still project from the east and west walls. This upper level was well lit by windows (grilled) to south and west, and accessed from the west through a wide, round-headed doorway. Access up to the North-West corner of Crown Square was by a stone stair rising from the east side.

The impression one gets today, on entering this area, is of vaulted cellars, which is extremely misleading, for the surviving architectural details (eg. windows and corbels) point to a structure of some quality.

**Development phase 1:** These lower storeys were extensively remodelled in the later 15<sup>th</sup> century. The mezzanines were removed and the upper storey vaulted over. A vaulted transe was also formed within the west entrance, and the wall along the south side of that transe, with their large doorways leading down to the lower vaults, with segmental arched lintels, date from this phase.

These works represent a considerable downgrading of the original structure, and were probably done to provide service access and stores for a new high-status building at courtyard level above, most probably the royal gunhouse (a 'House of the Artillery' is mentioned in 1498), formed within the north end of the original range.

This phase also included the building of a new set of vaults to the east, part of the process of creating the new courtyard. Two of these vaults were built as prisons with grim pits beneath them. They are very similar, in all but size, to the prison and pit in the later 15<sup>th</sup>-century Haliburton range in **Dirleton Castle**; each prison had a decent fireplace, and window, whilst the grim pits beneath were separately accessed by a steep stone stair, at the top of which was a latrine, and lit by a narrow ventilation slit, with no sign of a fireplace. The prisons were reached from the east by a stretch of wall-walk (now called the Devil's Elbow), at the end of which were the latrines.

**Development phase 2:** The creation of the Great Hall above the new set of vaults in 1509-10 impacted on the original vaults, which were further remodelled to provide storage cellars for the kitchens in the upper level of the tower (a 'court kitchen' is mentioned in 1517). The relationship between vaults, kitchens and great hall is paralleled to a large extent by that in the east range of **Linlithgow Palace** (also built for James IV). A second service stair, rising up southward to the Great Hall, most probably dates from then.

**Development phase 3:** The superstructures above the vaults were subsequently badly damaged, most probably during the 1573 artillery bombardment that brought to an abrupt end the 18-month Lang Siege. They were demolished down to the level of Crown Square, leaving only the vaults intact. Subsequent alterations were made. These included:

- c.1680 - building a longitudinal north/south wall in the two westernmost vaults, to support a new gun battery above;
- c.1710 - dividing the westernmost upper vault into three rooms to provide a garrison bakehouse;
- 1737 - fitting out two of the western vaults as barrack-rooms (evidence in the form of brick floors with stone pads for the bed-galleries was found in 1981).

**Development phase 4:** Between 1757 and 1814 the vaults were used almost exclusively as a prison of war. Much of what we see in the vaults today in the way of fixtures and fittings (eg. iron bars, grilles and chains, doors, and the two large south-facing windows) dates from this phase. The doors recovered from the eastern vaults in the 1980s, and now on display in the exhibition, have provided, through their graffiti, fascinating insights into the use of the vaults as prisons of war.

**Development phase 5:** Subsequent minor alterations included the conversion of the western pit-prison into a munitions store in the 1870s. Tradition has it that this was where David Kirkwood, one of the 'Red Clydesiders', was held during WWI, but the Military Prison seems a more likely place of confinement.

**Period in State care:** In 2003 the western vaults were incorporated into the Prisons of War permanent exhibition, and the two vaults reconstructed as they may have looked in 1781 are based on the archaeological evidence gained through archaeological investigation and survey. The east vaults were fitted out as part of the castle's education suite, whilst public access was formed to the western pit-prison (the former ammunition store).

### Social Overview

The vaults are primarily a visitor attraction. However, their historic use as prisons of war (they used to be known collectively as 'the French Prisons') means that the vaults have a special relevance to the countrymen of those foreign nationals incarcerated therein (French, Spanish, Dutch, Italians, Danes, Germans, Poles, Irish and Americans).

### Spiritual Overview

The Queen Anne Building has no observable spiritual association.

### Aesthetic Overview

The vaults have little visual impact on the castle-scape, other than adding to the drama of the south elevation and face of the castle rock.

Internally, the cavernous vaults instantly convey an impression of dark, dank prisons in which miserable wretches languish. That this impression runs counter to



the one that probably prevailed (the prisoners were reasonably well fed and allowed outdoors for most of their day) seems not to register with today's visitors.

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

- Does anything further in the way of archaeological evidence remain to be found that will add to our understanding of the development of this part of the castle?
- Do records/roll-calls of prisoners of war survive for other nationals, as they have survived in the French archives for their nationals held here in the War of American Independence?

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## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key Points

- The vaults are amongst the older masonry structures surviving in the castle, near-contemporary with the late 14<sup>th</sup>-century David's Tower.
- The vaults were built principally to form the level platform that formed the castle's *cour d'honneur*, now known as Crown Square.
- The use of the vaults as prisons of war during the various wars with France and her allies in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century continue to catch the imagination of visitors today.

### Associated Properties

(some other Historic Environment Scotland castles with prisons and pits):

**Auchindoun; Blackness; Bothwell; Cardoness; Dirleton; Huntly**

(some other castles used as prisons of war): Carlisle; Kinsale, Ireland; Portchester (Hants).

### Keywords

stores, barrack-room, prison, prison of war

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