

Huntly Castle: Inscription on South Façade

CRT Assessment

Historical background

Huntly Castle is a complex, multi-period castle. The Peel of Strathbogie, as Huntly was originally known, was first constructed by Duncan, earl of Fife. The castle was granted by Robert I to Sir Adam Gordon, of Huntly in Berwickshire, and as the Gordons rose to pre-eminence in the north, Huntly Castle became their chief residence.

Our understanding of the architectural history is fairly imprecise, but we can be reasonably confident about the main phases of development. First built in the 12th century as a motte and bailey, it underwent several transformations. The Gordons probably acquired the lands of Strathbogie around 1376; the first towerhouse at Huntly is likely to date to around this time, its construction replacing the earlier outdated accommodation. The castle reached its height in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The 'palace' itself was built in the mid-16th century by the 4th Earl of Huntly and was added to and remodelled by the 1st Marquis in the late 16th/early 17th century. Today, the site is dominated by the 'palace' with its magnificent south façade, capped by a red sandstone superstructure of originally two-storey oriel windows, carved with an inscription.

Over the course of the 16th century the Gordons rose to become one of the most powerful baronial families in Scotland. It was under the 4th Earl and later the 1st Marquis that some of the finest and most ambitious architectural projects took place at Huntly. George, 4th Earl, travelled in France with Mary of Guise and would have visited and stayed at many of the fine French chateaux. Upon his return to Scotland he used his great wealth to completely remodel the earlier castle and Huntly, with a design that was inspired by contemporary French and Scottish architecture. It was under the 4th Earl that their power and landholdings reached a new height and by the mid-16th century their power was deemed so great that it was seen as a threat to the authority of the Crown. Mary of Guise was entertained by the Earl at his newly finished palace in 1556; so lavish was this reception and so apparent his wealth and influence that a French ambassador, one of Mary's advisors, suggested she 'clip his wings' at the earliest opportunity.

The south range was added to and remodelled by the 1st marquis in the late 16th/early 17th century, following damage during an attack in 1594. In 1599 George, 6th Earl of Huntly was returned to favour and became the 1st marquis of Huntly. The present form of the palace block with its elaborate oriel windows, the fine inscription along the south front, proclaiming he and his wife's new status as marquis and marchioness, the remarkable fireplaces and the northeast stair tower with its elaborate frontispiece declaring the Gordon allegiance to James VI and God, can all be attributed to the 1st marquis. These embellishments are overtly French in character; the 1st marquis had also travelled in France and he too seems to have been greatly influenced by the chateaux he visited and stayed in.

Building works continued during the 1640's, though some of the carvings containing religious symbolism were defaced at this time by Covenanters. By the end of the 1640's the castle was largely abandoned, though there are records of intermittent repairs and it was

occupied by Government troops in 1746. In 1752, the widow of the 3rd duke of Gordon built the nearby Huntly Lodge out of stone from the ruins of the castle. From this point on the castle served as a quarry. A sketch by Nattes in 1799 shows the roof intact, but by the turn of the 20th century it was in a ruinous state. A plea was made by Douglas Simpson¹, shortly before the property came into care, for urgent conservation work; this was undertaken in 1923/4 and the property came into state care in 1925.

Architectural description

The overall architectural scheme of the south façade, as completed by the 1st Marquis is magnificent. The upper portion is rich with exquisite stone carving that is almost unsurpassed in Scotland. It consists of three oriel windows – originally of two-storeys – and tall oblong windows between, with a pediment bearing the 1st Marquess' heraldry on a tall slender chimney above the first two windows. A carved stone relief inscription runs across the whole south front at the top and base of the windows, carved of local red sandstone; the inscription reads 'GEORGE [GO]RDOVN FIRST MARQVIS OF HVNTLIE' and 'HENRIETTE STEWART MARQUISSE OF HUNTLY' proclaiming the new position of the Gordons. On each row a carved hand points to the inscription and the individual words are separated by mullets (heraldic stars); a separate row at the centre also contains the monogram of the Marquis and his wife.

The south façade shows clear evidence of French influence, mixed with Scottish and English influences too. The inscription itself bears similarities with a series of skyline inscriptions found in England from the late 16th and early 17th centuries, at Hardwick Hall for instance, though known English examples are more developed. The inspiration for such inscriptions may be from Classical architecture. While no single chateaux provided the sole inspiration for the early 17th century remodelling, Chateau Blois is often cited as such.

Previous conservation works to south façade

There are limited records of early conservation work to the carved stone on the south façade. Further information on previous conservation work and the present state of the carved stonework is outlined in a recent report by Christa Gerdwilker (HES)² and a summary record of changes to the inscription over the last century is provided in a separate appendix. It is evident from photographs in the appendix that a number of letters from the frieze have been missing since before the property came into care. We do not have a clear record of when these were lost. More recently a number of letters have been replaced by fibreglass copies.

Cultural significance of south façade

Huntly castle is widely regarded as one of the finest baronial residences in Scotland. The south façade and 'palace' in particular boast a fine display of early renaissance architecture that demonstrates French, English and Scottish influence. The finely carved stonework shows great skill and clearly demonstrates the wealth and power of the Gordons.

¹ Simpson, W Douglas, 'The Architectural History of Huntly Castle' in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 1921-22, Vol 56, pp 134-63.

² 'HUNTLY CASTLE: Survey of stone frieze and other ornamental stone' report by Christa Gerdwilker, Stone Conservator, Historic Environment Scotland, October 2015.

The lettering on the front is highly significant as it is one of only a handful of examples, in Britain, though the exact style of inscription at Huntly may be unique. There is a chance that the lettering, and walling of the castle would have been painted and other elements such as the carved 'hand of God' suggest that the decoration was designed to be both impressive and to legitimise the 1st Marquis' place in society and amongst his peers. The incorporation of heraldic detail into the overall architectural scheme is a rare achievement³.

The south façade is of high cultural significance. It is one of the finest examples of late medieval/early renaissance secular architecture in Scotland. The inscription forms an integral part of the overall architectural scheme designed by the 1st Marquis as a powerful demonstration of the Gordon's wealth and political significance in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. It is therefore significant not only for its rarity and architectural finesse but also for its contribution to the overall understanding of the castle and its development.

It is important that the inscription remains readable, however any scheme of repair or replacement must be consistent with current conservation principles. In general, any repair or replacement should be consistent with the overall historic character and appearance and should be the minimum necessary to conserve the monument's cultural significance. Any replacement of carved elements should be based on the original form of the letters and should only be attempted if we have a clear record and understanding of this original form. This record should not be taken from letters that have already seen significant repair, unless the original form is known, as this would compromise the authenticity of the monument. The letters are all weathered to different degrees and some letters have been lost prior to the monument coming into state care. The fibreglass letters and more recent replacement letters are of a distinctly different character to the existing original letters and there is a risk of the inscription becoming patchwork in appearance if letters are repaired or replaced on a piecemeal basis and with different materials, thus having a negative impact upon the overall aesthetic of the façade.

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³ Further information on the heraldry at Huntly and its meaning can be found in Thomas Innes' paper, 'Heraldic Decoration on the Castles of Huntly and Balvenie', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 1934-5, Vol 69, pp.387-397.

Appendix

Huntly Castle – South Façade frieze lettering replacement

Examination of a number of records and images have provided an indication to the survival and replacement of lettering from the frieze. Initial conservation work and replacement appears to have taken place shortly after the property was taken into state care in 1921. However the approach has not been consistent, for example G&O of GORDOUN and I of MARQVIS not replaced whilst O of GEORGE and V of HV were. This may relate to early concepts of conservation intervention with only lettering badly damaged or missing in recent memory replaced. Another tranche of work appears to have happened between 1942 and 2005 as can be seen by a comparison of images, and the table below. However no detailed records of conservation work or lettering replacement could be located.

	G	E	O	R	G	E		G	O	R	D	O	V	N		F	I	R	S	T		M	A	R	Q	V	I	S		O	F		H	V
1920 ¹	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	
1922 ²	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	
1942 ³	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	
2005 ⁴	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	
2015	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	

	H	E	N	R	I	E	T	T	E		S	T	E	V	A	R	T		M	A	R	Q	V	I	S	S	E		O	F		H	V
1920	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	
1922 ⁵	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	
1942 ⁶	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	
2005 ⁷	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	
2015	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	

Red = missing; orange = severely weathered; green = recently replaced/repaired.

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16/11/15

¹ NAS MW/1/1410 'Huntly Castle, Aberdeenshire: Acceptance of Guardianship' Architects report prior to monument being accepted

² Douglas-Simpson (1922) PSAS

³ <https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1447236>

⁴ <https://canmore.org.uk/collection/978984>

⁵ Douglas-Simpson (1922) PSAS

⁶ <https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1447236>

⁷ <https://canmore.org.uk/collection/978984>

Images



Figure 1: Illustration of south façade from mid-19th century



Figure 2: Photograph of south façade taken during Guardianship discussions 1920



<https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1447236>
Figure 3: Photograph of south façade taken in 1942



<https://canmore.org.uk/collection/978984>
Figure 4: Photograph of south façade taken in 2005



Figure 5: 2014 UAV image