

NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND MEDIA RELEASE

4 February 2021

Project reveals lost defences of Scotland's Disney castle

Historians reveal forgotten defensive side of picture-perfect Craigievar Castle in Alford

The lost walls and fortifications of one of Scotland's most famous fairytale castles have been revealed in a new project carried out by the National Trust for Scotland.

Using 3D technology, past archaeological studies and plans and paintings of Craigievar Castle, the 16th century 'barmkin' walls have been rediscovered and mapped out and visitors are now able to walk the defensive lines and discover another chapter of the castle's incredible history.

Built in 1576, Craigievar in Alford is one of the country's most famous tower houses, regarded by experts as a picture-perfect example of the Scottish Baronial style. Its unmistakable pink walls are also believed to have provided the inspiration for the castle in Walt Disney's Cinderella.

However, the original plans show a forgotten past and the castle, which attracts thousands of visitors to the North East every year, hasn't always stood in isolation and was once adjoined by a lower enclosing wall, known in Scots as a 'barmkin'.

Using a wealth of primary sources, as varied as information from an archaeological excavation carried out in the early 1990s to watercolour paintings of the castle, historians have rediscovered the lost walls and, using flagstone paving and interpretation panels, created a path which retraces the original 16th century plans.

"The purpose of a barmkin was to offer the tower house a private and secure courtyard," explained Annie Robertson MRICS, who works as a chartered surveyor for NTS in the North East of Scotland. "Access was often limited to one main entrance with an iron or timber gate, which would be guarded by a gatekeeper to make sure that any trouble was firmly quashed outside the walls.

"There was a wall-walk (a raised, protected walkway) at the head, giving the watchmen a better vantage for monitoring the surrounding approach. It was also useful during a defensive attack, allowing fire to rain down from above.

“Inside the courtyard there were usually a number of structures or ‘laigh biggins’ (low buildings), which provided areas for the ancillary aspects of life in a tower house. These may have included a brewery, dairy, bakehouse, stables, byre, stores, laundry or buildings to house tradespeople such as blacksmiths, carpenters, chandlers or weavers. The courtyard would have been a busy place, full of the noise and smells of people going about their daily work.

“Some livestock may have also been brought in for over-wintering or to protect them from thieves, particularly during any times of conflict. This hive of activity is much unlike the peaceful tranquillity surrounding many tower houses today.”

The wall would have dramatically altered Craigievar’s appearance and, seen from a distance, its slender, seven storey tower would have looked heavier and more deeply anchored to the ground.

Barmkin walls were an integral part of early tower house architecture in Scotland, their size and form depending on the location, defensive needs and political climate. Today, the footprint of many courtyard castles and houses, including Leith Hall near Huntly, follow the lines of the old barmkin enclosures.

Craigievar still has one section of surviving barmkin wall and this is extremely rare, with nearly all barmkins falling victim to changing tastes and fashions or demolished to accommodate more wings and rooms.

“At Craigievar, we don’t have any records to tell us exactly what activities were accommodated within the barmkin,” continued Annie. “But through archives, estate plans and archaeological investigations we know that there were a number of structures within the courtyard.

“To the north, a building made from timber or stone filled the gap that now exists between the castle and the surviving barmkin wall. To the south, archaeologists have found post holes, indicating that there was once a structure here made from timber, likely a lean-to with stone slabs forming the roof covering.

“The new interpretation at Craigievar follows the outline of the lost sections of the barmkin wall, with the flagstones placed above the archaeological remains of the wall footings below. Visitors can now walk along this path to the past to appreciate the size of the courtyard that once stood as strong as the castle.

“A new graphic board also offers a glimpse of the castle with the barmkin and laigh biggins below.”

Dr Daniel Rhodes, NTS archaeologist, added: “To be able to take our archaeological knowledge and recreate the past for our visitors to enjoy is a fantastic opportunity. It must have been a bustling courtyard often full of livestock and people. A real comparison to today’s fairytale beauty.”

The project involved NTS staff and archaeologists as well as local volunteers and supporters, including Professor Ian Young and his wife Sylvia, who have enjoyed a long association with and deep love of Aberdeenshire.

Surrounded by gardens and miles of woodland trails, which are home to the rare pine marten, Craigievar also houses an impressive collection of artefacts and art, including several works by Henry Raeburn.

You can walk the new pathway at Craigievar Castle and find out more information about the property, as well as up to date Covid-19 restrictions and guidelines, here:

<https://www.nts.org.uk/visit/places/craigievar>

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Editor's Notes:

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