

Seagate Castle, Irvine

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Quarried for its materials in 1746,¹ ruinous by 1760,² with some remedial works undertaken by the Earls of Eglinton in 1810 and 1883 and by public authorities in the late 20th century, this structure remains fragile and slowly declining.³

Documents are few, the best being in stone on the building: the joint armorials of Dame Agnes Drummond (c.1535-1590) and Hugh Montgomerie (1531?-1585), 3rd Earl of Eglinton, providing a date range of 1562, when they married, and 1585, the year Montgomerie was assassinated.⁴ But the castle's story is more complicated.

The barony of Cunninghame, together with Dryburgh and Lauder, appears to have been granted by King David I (1124-53) to Hugh de Morville (d.1162), soldier and courtier, constable of Scotland, 'foremost Anglo-Norman supporter of the Scottish crown after David I's enthronement'.⁵ Perhaps the story of Irvine's castle begins then. But in any event, there is a consensus that a castle existed at Irvine by 1184,⁶ while the fact of the Treaty of Irvine 1297, during the Wars of Independence (begun 1296), strongly implies a secure military stronghold existed at that date.⁷ Successors to the de Morvilles came and went, and Seagate Castle was for long the Irvine town house of the Montgomeries, Earls of Eglinton, whose main residence was Eglinton Castle, 3km to the north.

But does Seagate denote the medieval castle, or its site? Coastal Scotland's early stone castles tended, where possible (as in the case of nearby Turnberry), to occupy a navigable location. Seagate, however, is 200m from the river. Yet it is possible that the site was once immediately navigable, because it is well documented that the sea was pushed

westwards over the centuries by the localised pile up of accumulating sandbanks.⁸ A similar story can be told regarding Musselburgh, Midlothian, whose medieval harbour was silted beyond use by the late 17th century.

Irvine's medieval burgh plan – street front buildings with parallel backland strips or tofts – is essentially orthodox,⁹ except in relation to Seagate. Here, a street – also called Seagate – splays off towards the castle, cutting a diagonal slice across the backlands, its alignment being precisely that of the castle's front wall, which faces south-west. That the splay begins not on the street front, where a gushet site would be usual, but at what seems the back of demolished houses, may suggest that the castle site was pre-existing when given a new connection to the town, and that the castle's amenity outweighed burghal matters. Linlithgow's town plan was modified around 1540 to accord with the palace's new south entrance, so the idea of a fairly radical urban planning intervention existed in the Renaissance age. However, whether Seagate marks the medieval castle site still remains not proven. There was surely no great ashlar-faced structure such as Bothwell, to judge from the absence of such masonry either at the site or in re-use nearby.

The castle awaits a proper archaeological survey. It is clearly evident, though, that it is not of one build, and therefore cannot be dated simply by the armorials alone. It is immediately clear that the front wall comprises more than one building phase: the stonework at the lower level/ground floor consists of what seem randomly-gathered stones of different types and colours (for instance, black whinstone, light-coloured freestone). This contrasts with the masonry above, which is of a fairly uniform brown stone, evidently quarried for the specific

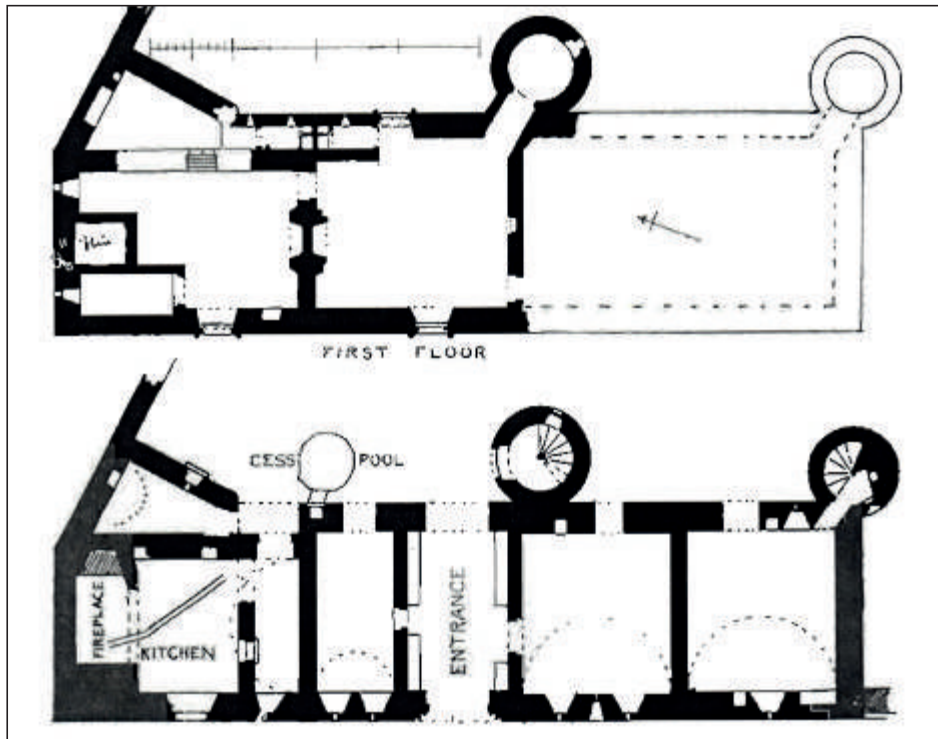
Seagate Castle, Irvine



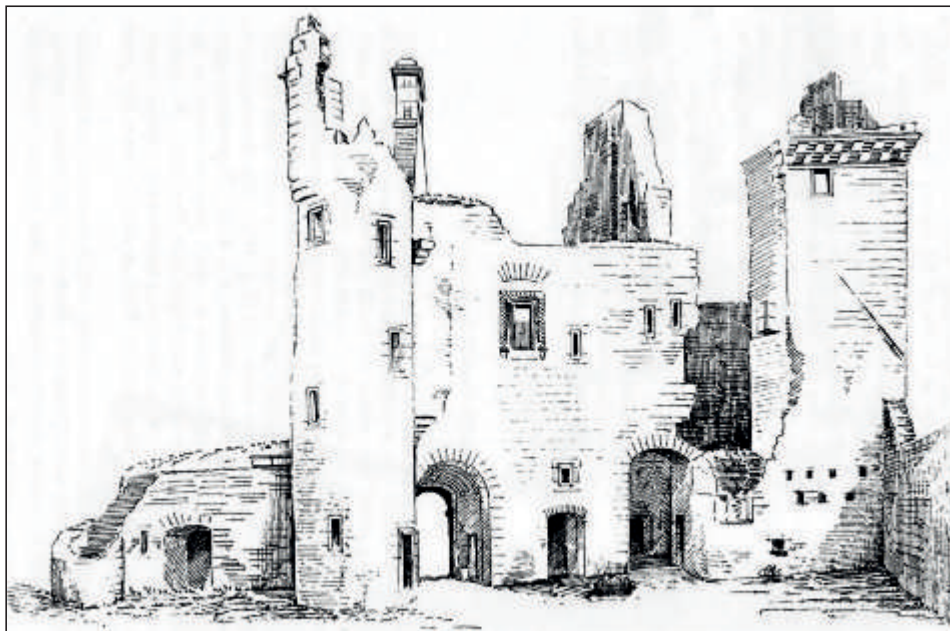
ABOVE: Fig. 1. Seagate Castle: oblique view of main front showing differentiation between low level masonry and the more consistently brown masonry above, indicating different building phases, 2019. (Copyright: author).

LEFT: Fig. 2. Seagate Castle: view of main entrance, showing neo-Romanesque dog-tooth moulding. The ashlars are thinly bedded into the surrounding stonework, suggesting the entrance has been inserted into pre-existing walling, 2019. (Copyright: author)

Seagate Castle, Irvine



ABOVE: Fig. 3. Seagate. Plans: ground and first floor. MacGibbon and Ross, Vol. 4. 237: BELOW: Fig. 4. Seagate. View from the courtyard. MacGibbon and Ross, Vol. 4. 239



Seagate Castle, Irvine

purpose of building that area of wall. The contrast is matched by a change in the colour tone of the south-west quoins from reddish below to yellowish above. There are irregularities even within the superficially uniform brown-coloured walling; for example, towards the left hand side of the front, there are changes in the nature of the walling as opposed to the more homogenous-looking central wall area. The north-west gable inset (that is, where the gable walling narrows in thickness) seems to accord with a break in the front wall's construction, as there is a horizontal line with neater masonry at the higher level than what exists below. At ground level, blocked, and sourced from two different quarries, there are four wide-mouthed gun-holes of a form generally said to have been introduced into Scottish architecture from France in the early 16th century by the Duke of Albany at the blockhouse at Dunbar Castle, East Lothian.

So the ruins are not all of one date. More, though, can be said regarding the Montgomerie-Drummond phase, namely that its decoration ties it firmly to the Hags-Kennure group, that is the fashion popular in South-West Scotland around the 1570s-1600s. This style is characterised by a Romanesque revival using features such as dog-tooth and chequer-corbelling. A carefully-chosen fine-grained light-coloured Ayrshire stone capable of being tooled with the finest detailing was used for the highlights. Amongst anomalies suggesting much of this work was inset into pre-existing masonry are the short 'tails' on the main entrance where longer tails would be expected in primary work.

The castle's layout is difficult to interpret.¹⁰ The arched main entrance – central on the front wall – leads via a vault (ribbed, not

unlike Linlithgow palace's porch) to the courtyard, or close. The two vaults south-east of the entrance seem equal-sized and thus, superficially at least, part of a uniform building phase; the fact that the arch orientations to the north-west conflict with these may be unremarkable, because frequently the kitchen vault – as here – was aligned with the main front walling. The same is seen at, say, Cortachy Castle, Angus, or, nearer home, and prior to its demolition, Ardmillan Castle, Carrick, Ayrshire.

From the close, a stair would have been necessary for access to the floor above, which was the principal floor or *piano nobile*. Upon entering the close there are two unequal-sized stair turrets on the right. However, it is difficult to read a coherent two-/three-room apartment such as is set out so lucidly at, say, the effectively-contemporary Castle Menzies, Perthshire which was reconstructed from 1572; there, a stair deposits the visitor at the lower end of the hall, with one or more smaller but grander rooms leading from the hall's 'high' end, beyond, including a chamber of dais. At Seagate, it is tempting to suggest that the legacy of older walling restricted what was achievable, and that the hall occupied the area south-east of the off-centre gable which was lower than the remainder of the front. A moulded plinth stone within that space projecting from the north-east side wall may indicate that a grand fireplace was once there, as one might expect for a castle hall of the period (e.g. Elcho Castle, Perthshire, and Baberton House, Edinburgh) rather than in a gable, as was a frequent earlier pattern seen at the 15th-early 16th-century great halls of the royal palaces of Linlithgow, Stirling and Edinburgh.

It is not immediately clear how or where a prestigious entrance, necessarily at the hall's lower end, would have existed to serve such a

Seagate Castle, Irvine

plan, but to accord with the normal castle-plan formula of the period, the part-extant circular south-east tower, smaller than the off-centre one, may have given access to the lower end of the hall. Perhaps the more substantial stair tower was for the earl's access to the high end of the hall, although the present appearance of the walling certainly does not suggest this. Alternatively, access may have been via a now-lost chamber on the south-east. The general point is that the normal 'rules' are difficult to apply confidently, and, again, we are dealing with a complex legacy of multi-phase work. The single cross-wall within the more extant north-west element seems rather thin, but according to the MacGibbon and Ross plan it had been intended from the outset to carry two back-to-back projecting chimneys by which it is 'sandwiched'. Regardless, this analysis does admit the interpretation that there once existed a three-apartment sequence of great hall – chamber of dais – bed chamber.

It is worth reiterating that Seagate Castle clearly merits a proper archaeological appraisal, not only to enhance an understanding of what exists, but also to address the issue of the medieval castle and whether this could be its site, a 'persistent place', together with a scrutiny of how the castle relates to the urban development of medieval and early modern Irvine.

Notes

¹ This is an abbreviated version of 'Seagate Castle and some Family Resemblances', which is to be published in a collection of papers by the *Ayrshire Federation of Historical Societies and the Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*. Timbers were taken for Ardrossan's new church (*New Statistical Account*, v, 205-6; Anon [W. Dobie], *The Parish Churches and Burying-Grounds of Ayrshire* (Glasgow, 1847), 2-3.)

² National Records of Scotland, RHP 3/25.

³ https://irvinescotland.info/irvine_that_was_seagate-castle/ Accessed October 2019.

⁴ The assassin was Sir David Cunningham of Robertland, afterwards King James's architect, 1602-7 (Aonghus MacKechnie, 'Sir David Cunningham of Robertland: Murderer and Magna Britannia's First Architect', *Architectural History*, 52 (2009), 79-115).

⁵ Keith Stringer argued that although 'conclusive proof is lacking' Hugh de Morville was 'most likely' granted lands in Cunninghame with Largs by King David I, 'whose main castle was erected at Irvine' (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), 39, 444-5 at 444).

⁶ Anne Turner Simpson and Sylvia Stevenson, *Historic Irvine: the Archaeological Implications of Development* (Glasgow, 1980), 7. These authors supported the contention that an 1184 mention of a castle of 'hirun' concerned Irvine.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ In 1841 it was reported that 'long subsequent to Pont's time [i.e. the early 17th century], the sea came up close to the town, and vessels were loaded and discharged at what was then and is now termed the Seagate. Within the memory of persons now alive, the sea has receded considerably on this coast...' (*New Statistical Account*, v, 620).

⁹ In 1322, King Robert I confirmed a charter of King Alexander II; it was afterwards a burgh of barony under the Stewarts (Anne Turner Simpson and Sylvia Stevenson, *Historic Irvine: the Archaeological Implications of Development* (Glasgow, 1980), 2).

¹⁰ David MacGibbon and Thomas Ross, *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, iv (Edinburgh, 1892), 234-40 at 237. It is possible that this plan was drawn by the architect William Railton of Kilmarnock, who certainly advised the authors on the building's history (ibid., 240n).