

Girringale & Castle Simbani  
Evander Butcher.

## GIRNIGOE CASTLE

Inventory of Monuments Caithness. . p. 139

### 497. Girnigoe Castle & Castle Sinclair.

These castles are situated about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  m. north of Wick. A narrow rocky peninsula rising 40' to 60' with perpendicular sides projects for 400' seaward. On the N. side towards the E. is the ocean; & on the S. a deep narrow inlet of the sea, about 80' in width, cuts it off from the adjoining cliffs. Across the landward end of the promontory a trench has been cut partly through the rock from cliff to cliff, about 20' in width; and although now largely filled with debris, it is still about 14' in depth. At about  $\frac{3}{8}$  of its length the promontory has again been cut through the solid rock by an irregular trench about 14' in depth. Between these two trenches, is the outer ward of Girnigoe with the gatehouse and the later-built Castle Sinclair, while the earlier keep of Girnigoe rears itself aloft from the further edge of the second trench.

All traces of the bridge which led to the gatehouse over the first trench are gone. Through the gatehouse an arched passage about 25' long gives access to the outer ward and near its centre are the grooves for a portcullis, the slot by which it passed through the roof being now built up by the secondary structure. On the left, behind the position of the portcullis a narrow round-arched passageway gives access to the guard room. About 25 years ago (1912--1887) when a plan of the whole site was made, the main entrance passage was 24' long, nearly twice what it is now. This shows how rapid is the deterioration of the building.

Along the S side of the outer ward was protected by a strong wall which extended across the second trench to the Castle of Girnigoe, protection on the N, towards the sea being unnecessary. A postern through this wall at the base opens from the geo into the trench, by which access is gained to on the northward side to a narrow strongly defended path cut through the rock, winding in a zigzag fashion at the N. side to steps which lead up through an arched gateway to the outer ward. The floor of this trench slopes most dangerously toward the wall bounding its north end, through which there is a wide arched opening out to the sea, many



feet below, so that an enemy attempting to rush this trench by the postern ran great risk of being precipitated into the sea.. So great is the slope of the trench floor towards the sea that one could not safely walk along it unless a plank were provided. Many of these arrangements are now obliterated by masses of fallen masonry, but the plan already referred to and here reproduced (fig 33) shows them as they recently existed.

While the castle was thus almost unassailable from the land, it was still exposed to attack from the sea. by an enemy landing and making his way up the ~~geo.~~ <sup>geo.</sup>, either gaining the gatehouse by the outer trench or else effecting an entrance ~~through~~ <sup>written</sup> the defences through the postern at the second trench. To prevent this a strong wall was built across the geo, to seaward of the postern and above the reach of the waves, and the rybats of a doorway through this wall still exist at a height of 10' or 12' above the ground.

The keep of Girnigoe, rising from the second trench occupies the full breadth of the peninsula with a frontage of 36' and a depth of 28' from front to back. Two wings project from the rear of the main block; the S. one, which contained the staircase, now gone, is part of the original building, while the N. wing, containing the kitchen, has possibly been an addition. The principal entrance was by a drawbridge across the N. end of the trench, where the corbels for supporting the bridge still exist at the side of the doorway, in the front wall. From this doorway, an arched passage led to the interior, flanked on the right by a guard room entered from the seaward end. There is another guard room alongside this, entered from the S. wing. A separate stair from each guard room, partly cut out of the rock, leads down: the first to a well room below the passage and the first guard room, and the second to a dungeon. The latter stair is guarded by two doors, the first one having a bar hole. Inside this a loophole commands the end of the entrance passage and another from the



guardroom commands the seaward approach. The well-room floor is now covered with stones and boulders which have been carried in, but the drain for keeping the floor dry can still be seen projecting towards the sea. These two places are vaulted in contrary directions, and the whole of the entrance floor is also vaulted.

The hall occupies the whole of the first floor and measures 30' long by 19' broad and 13' high. It is lighted on all sides except the north across which was a bretasche. The window over the main entrance was a quaint oriel supported on corbelling with mullions and transomes, and a sloping stone roof, at the apex of which there was a carved stone with a crest of the Earl of Caithness--- a demibear rising out of a coronet. This oriel has, within the last few years, fallen and disappeared. On the opposite wall of the chamber is the fireplace with a doorway alongside leading to retiring room in the N. wing. A trap in the arched floor of this room leads down to a concealed chamber 7' high resting on the kitchen vault. The existence of this chamber could never be suspected from outside. The bretasche extended along the N side for 47' and the corbels for the floor and roof as well as portions of its joists exist at a great height overhanging the sea. A door from the retiring room leads outwards to the S wall of the building extending eastwards. In the E gable of this room ~~there~~ which is about 9' thick, there is a wheel staircase leading to the upper floors. In the S. wing on the upper floor there was another bretasche overhanging the the high door in the sea wall crossing the geo.

A range of narrow buildings extends for about 65' eastwards from the N. wing, and contains three chambers, the one adjoining the keep having a fireplace and a stair to an upper floor; these buildings occupy one half of the width of the peninsular, leaving a passage 15' wide between them and the south curtain. Beyond this range of buildings the ~~passage~~ peninsular widens to about 73' and narrows again towards the end. At the wide part there are various offices with a courtyard between. From a large store on the N side a vaulted passage about 17' ||



long opened out to the sea. At the extreme end of the rock and some 15' below the general level there is an oblong apartment measuring about 35' X 19'; in the floor there is a hatchway giving access to steps which lead down to a passage about 17' long, cut out of the rock and opening out to the sea on the N. side by an arched doorway. The and the other passage just mentioned were probably used for visualling the castle from the sea.

As was the case at many other castles, the limited accommodation of the earlier keep was found insufficient by the lords of a later time and a new building--- Castle Sinclair----- was built in the outer ward about the year 1606 there being no room for further extensions on the Girnigoe ward. The new castle being more accessible and nearer the land has suffered more from spoilation and is now in a complete state of ruin. It contained on the north side of the ward some 5 or 6 apartments and was in part three storeys high. Along the S. curtain there were offices with a bakery, the round oven of which, though entire a few years ago is now ruined by the falling in of its arched roof. Castle Sinclair had considerable architectural pretensions, as is shown by some finely carved corbels for supporting angle turrets and windows.

The place and details of Girnigoe indicate for it a date towards the end of the 15th century. In 1455 William Sinclair, Earl of Orkney, obtained from King James III a grant of the Earldom of Caithness. On the 7th December 1476 he resigned the lands of this earldom in favour of William Sinclair, the son by his second marriage with Marjory Sutherland, daughter of Alexander Sutherland of Dunbeath, This Earl appears to have resided much in the county.

Girnigoe figures largely in Caithness history in the turbulent times of the 16th and early 17th centuries. Within its dungeon in 1571 George, the fourth Earl imprisoned his son John, the Master, on suspicion of plotting his death. Here the Master " was kept in miserable captivity for the space of seven years and died at last in prison of famine and vermin as a disastrous subject of a cruel fortune.



Castle Sinclair was erected in the year 1606 or 1607, and was apparently deserted along with Girnigoe about the year 1679. At that date George Sinclair of Keiss during his quarrel with Campbell of Glenorchy regarding the earldom is said to have attacked and demolished the houses of Castle Sinclair and Girnigoe. The Rev. John Brand, who visited the castles in 1700 described them as in ruins and states that over the lintel of a window in Castle Sinclair he observed the date 1607. Bisop Pococke in his tour in 1760 likewise visited them and has left drawings of both castles. He mentions that the arms of Charles II are to be seen on Castle Sinclair and these are evidently shown in his drawing in the gable above the entrance. The supporters of these arms ( Dexter a lion guardant crowned gorged and chained, holding a flag charged with a cross and with the motto IN DEFENCE also there Also there is part with St George's cross and above his head a rose; and Sinister; a unicorn crowned gorged and chained holding a flag charged with St. George's cross and above his head a rose; and sinister: a Unicorn, crowned gorged and chained, holding a similar flag with a thistle above his head are preserved at Ackergill Tower.

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Cordiner supplies an illustration of both castles as they were in 1776 and Daniel gives views of them drawn in 1821

In his appendix to Horne's "County of Caithness" there is reproduced "The inventory of bedding, tapestrie & hangings of found deliquit by William Calder porter"

The ruins are now part of the estate of Ackergill (1910) now bought by Sir John Sinclair.

See Reg. Mag. Sig., Scots Peerage II p 322, Gordon's

P. 163, Douglas Peerage I, p 298, Calder's Caithness p 190, Brand's Description of Orkney etc.

P. 155 Pocock's Tour - P. 162 Forbes Journals P 212 Cordiner's Antiquities p 187 Daniel's Voyage IV & V Horne's Caithness. Cast & Dom: Arch. II 306.