
THE CASTLE OF ST JOHN

STRANRAER





Text and layout Stranraer Museum 2011



Stranraer in the 1640s. Beyond the castle is the main street of the burgh leading to the tollbooth and newly built parish church. Most of the houses are clay-walled cottages with thatched roofs.

Illustration by David Simon

The Castle of St John is a fine example of an early sixteenth century tower-house. Tower-houses, domestic versions of medieval castle towers, were built and used by Scottish lairds throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Castle of St John was built around 1500 by the Adairs of Kilhilt, one of the most powerful families in Wigtownshire.

THE ADAIRS

The Adairs came from Ireland during the Middle Ages. Their main base was in the Portpatrick area and they may have built the original castle at Dunskey. Over time the Adairs extended their land-holding south to Drummore and north to Inch. By 1484 they had acquired lands in Stranraer and built a chapel there dedicated to St John. This area of land became known as St John's Croft or Chapel.



DUNSKY CASTLE.

Dunskey Castle, Portpatrick. These are the ruins of the seventeenth century tower-house. The Adairs had a castle here in the later Middle Ages.

The castle was built around 1510 near St John's Chapel and originally was called the Place of St John or the Castle of Chapel. By the late 1500s a small settlement, also called Chapel, had grown up around the tower-house. In common with other landowners the Adairs would have used the castle as a family home and a centre for the administration of the estate, collecting rents and entertaining guests. The main hall probably also served as the laird's court.

In 1595 Ninian Adair created a Burgh of Barony at Stranraer. This turned the town into a self governing community with trading privileges and provided Ninian Adair with income from property rents and other tolls collected within the new burgh. In 1608 the castle passed by marriage to the Kennedys, an important Ayrshire family, and by the 1670s it was in the possession of the Dalrymples of Stair.



The only surviving evidence of the Adairs' presence in the castle is the plaque above the front door. The worn inscription contains the names Adair and Kennedy. It may have been set up to mark the marriage in the 1590s of Elizabeth, daughter of Ninian Adair, to John Kennedy of Creechant.

GOVERNMENT GARRISON

In the late 1670s the Castle of St John was used as a military garrison. Government troops had been brought to Wigtownshire to suppress the Covenanters, whose religious dissent threatened the political establishment. The Covenanters were extreme Presbyterians who refused to accept the authority of state-imposed bishops. The Covenanting movement was particularly strong in Galloway and outbreaks of violence were common.

In 1678 John Graham of Claverhouse was appointed as the local military commander and tradition has it that he used the Castle of St John as his base. As this was then the largest building in the town, was defensible, had outbuildings for stabling and accommodation and belonged to a Covenanting sympathiser (John Dalrymple of Stair) it was the obvious choice.



*John Graham of Claverhouse.
His persecution of the Covenanters in
south-west Scotland earned him the
nickname 'Bluidy Clavers'.*

THE VICTORIAN JAIL

Little is known about the castle during the eighteenth century. The Stairs were still the owners and may have used it as a town house. By the early 1800s the building was empty. In 1820 the Commissioners of Supply, the forerunners of modern county councils, approved plans for converting the building into a 'secure and salutary jail comprehending two cells for criminals, three rooms for debtors and a Courtroom'. The cost was £785. One of the biggest changes was the demolition of the original gabled roof and its replacement with an open exercise yard for the prisoners.



The castle in 1811, just before it was converted to a prison. This is the earliest view of the building and the only one to show the original gabled roof.

The Burgh had a problem finding jailers of the right calibre. In 1828 for instance the jailer William Johnson and his assistant Frances McKnight were dismissed for fighting in the street and providing the prisoners with alcohol. Their successors, Arthur Kelly, a pensioned soldier, and David Sands, a shoemaker, were dismissed in 1830 for drunkenness and leaving the prison door open. In 1833 jailers William Stewart and Robert Telford were found guilty of gross negligence and Telford was described as 'much addicted to the habits of intemperance'.

In 1843 there was a damning report into the conditions at the prison. The inspectors were shocked by the poor ventilation, damp and lack of heating in the building. They also noted that many of the prisoners were dirty and ragged and had little work to keep them occupied. The report concluded:

Owing, probably to Stranraer being a seaport, and to its particular situation, the character of many of the prisoners appears to be worse or more violent than at most other places. The Chaplain considers drink the chief immediate cause of the offences which are committed.

The surviving records show that the reasons for imprisonment varied. Common crimes were vagrancy, begging, rioting and drunkenness. In 1823 one man was imprisoned for not paying tithe, a tax due to the church, and in 1834 John Dorman was simply described as 'an insane man'. Another crime reflecting moral and social conditions was the imprisonment on occasion of unmarried women suspected of concealing pregnancies. In 1827 two female servants were held and accused of killing the same new born child.

A new prison was built in Lewis Street in 1854 but demand was such the cells at the castle continued in occasional use until 1907. After this a variety of groups used the building for shop storage, meeting rooms and, during the Second World War, a fire watching station and ARP base.

Until the 1960s the castle was surrounded by a warren of shops and other buildings. The entrance to the castle was up this narrow lane known as Castle Court.



The castle in the 1560s.

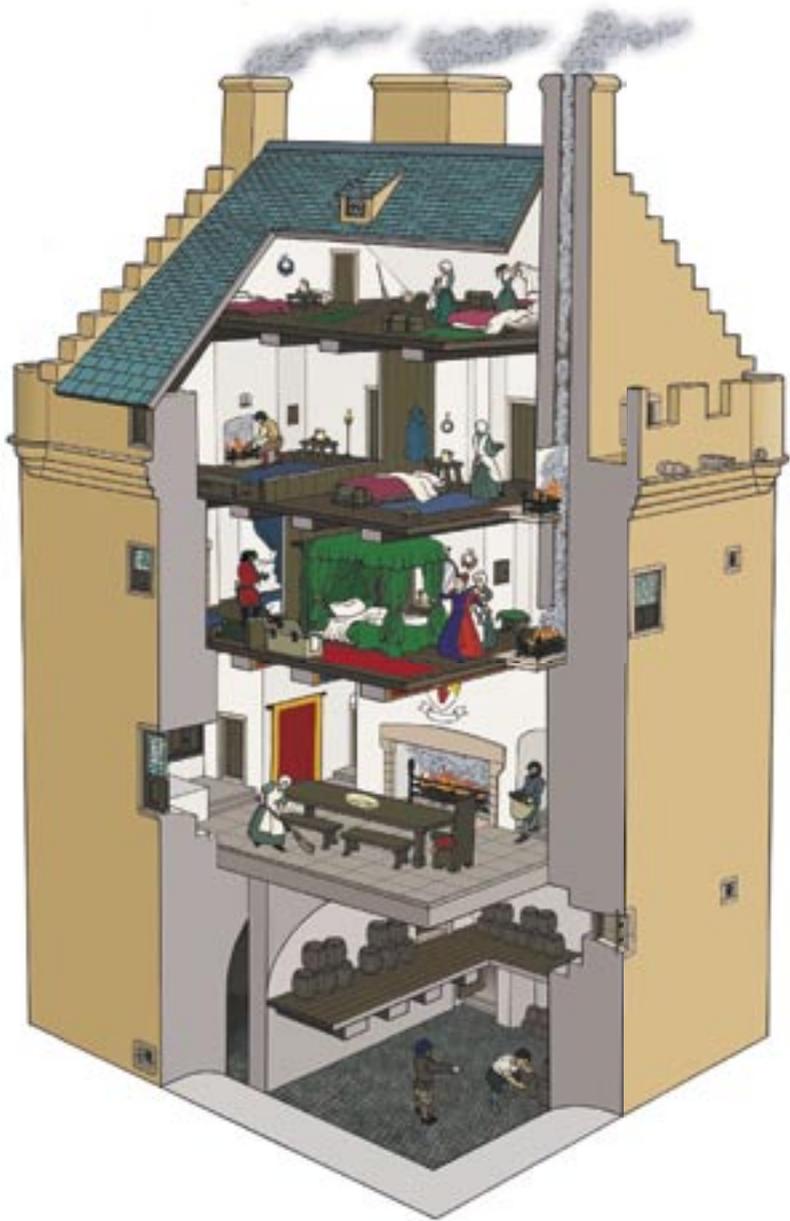


Illustration by Christina Unwin

The castle in 1820.

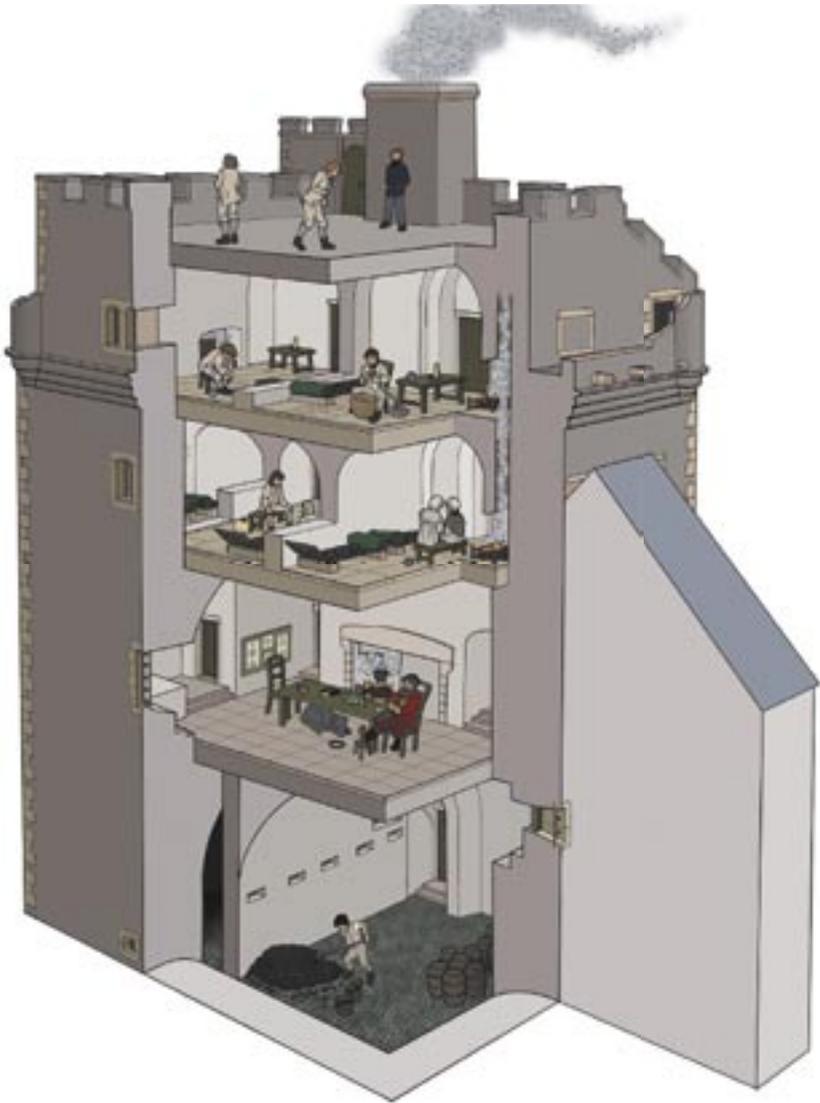
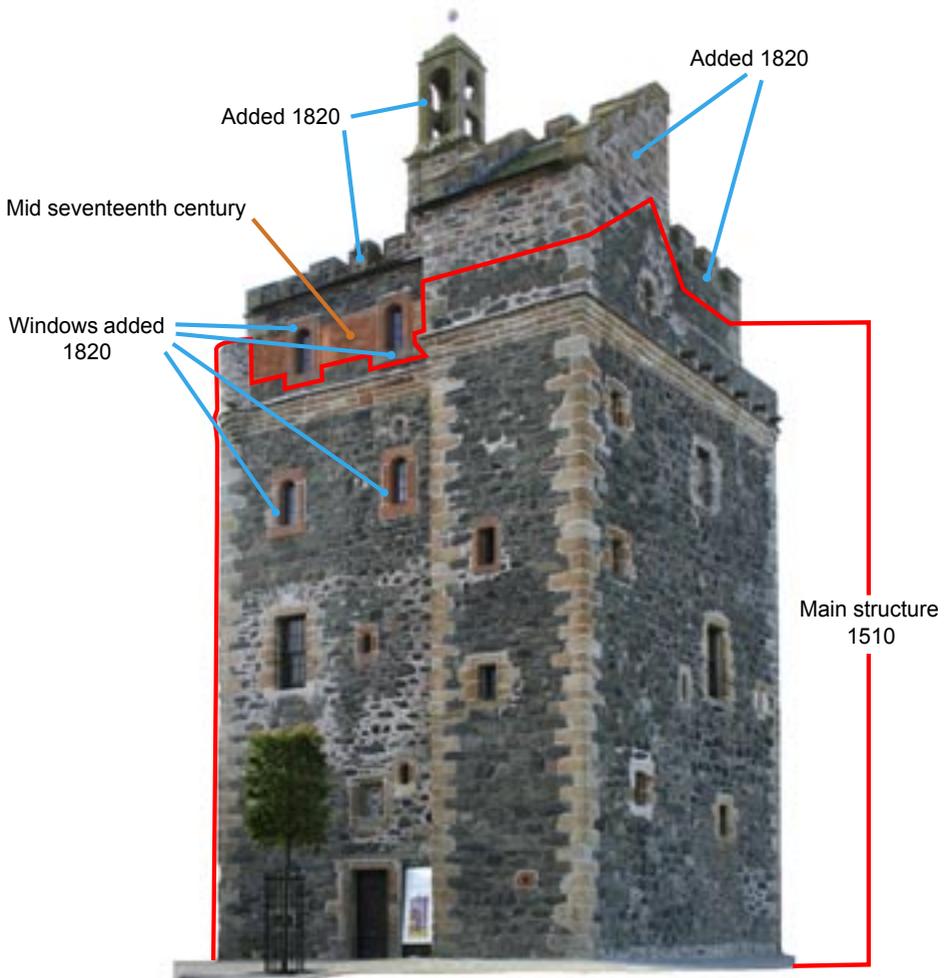


Illustration by Christina Unwin

A WALK AROUND THE CASTLE

The Outside

Looking at the front or north face of the building gives you a good idea of the main building phases. Most of the building up to the horizontal stone band – the string course – on the third floor dates from the early 1500s. The walls are made from a hard, dark sandstone known locally as whinstone and the corners and window and door surrounds use a softer, lighter coloured sandstone quarried in central Ayrshire. Above the string course is evidence for a seventeenth century rebuild. The rest of the building dates from the 1820s when the castle was converted into a prison.



The Ground Floor

The entrance, with its massive nineteenth century prison door, leads to a corridor and two vaulted cellars. The cellar on the left still has two gun loops and on the walls are joint holes for a wooden floor which provided split-level storage. Notice the blocked window high in the east wall – this went out of use when a house was built against the castle during the late 1700s. The ground floor corridor has a flat slabbed roof. This type of construction is common in Ireland but is rarely seen in Scottish tower-houses. At the bottom of the spiral stairs is the entrance – now blocked – to the service or servants' stairs which led to the main hall on the first floor.

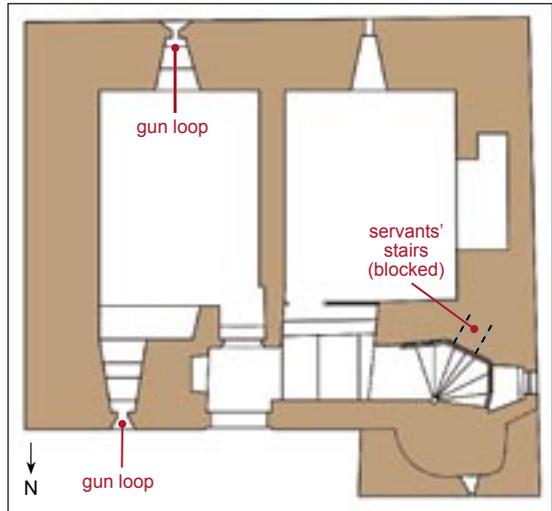
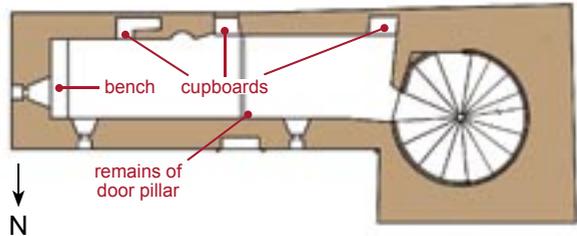


Illustration by David Simon

The gun loops were for swivel guns and muskets. By the mid sixteenth century gun loops like this were more for decoration than defence. But they were not completely redundant and in 1599 there is an account of the Castle of St John being taken by force by Alexander Gordon of Hills and Robert Gordon of Glennis.

The Servants' Room

Just before you reach the first floor a door on the left leads to a narrow room which was used by servants waiting on the family in the main hall next door. It is on two levels and along the inner wall are recesses for cupboards where the family silverware and other valuables were kept. Intramural rooms like this are an unusual feature in sixteenth century tower-houses but are sometimes found in fifteenth century towers. Is the Castle of St John older than we think or was it built to an old fashioned design?



The Main Hall

This was the main room in the castle. It was here in the sixteenth century that the laird entertained guests, looked after his business affairs and administered justice. During the nineteenth century the hall was used by the town jailer and for a short time in the 1850s it was also the town's police station.



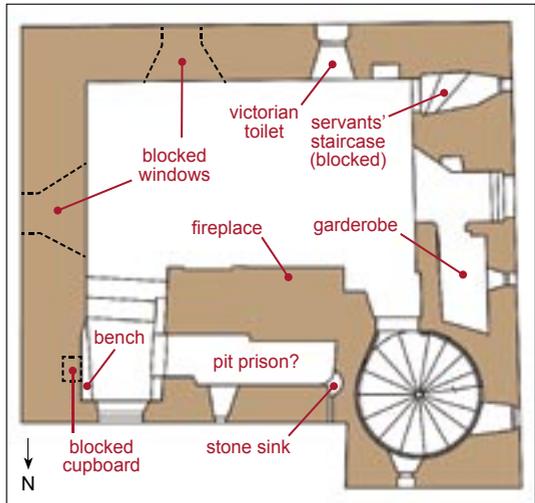
Illustration by David Simon

The hall as it may have looked around 1560.

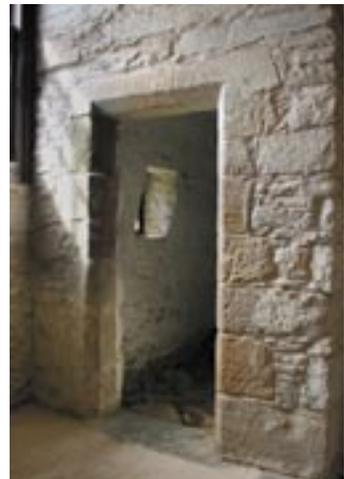
The hall has been altered over the centuries but the original fireplace can still be seen as can three of the original windows, the top entrance to the service stairs and a small toilet closet or garderobe. The outlines of two more sixteenth century windows can be seen in the south and east walls. The main hall once had a timber ceiling. This was demolished in the 1820s and replaced with the massive stone vault you see today. Another reminder of the room's nineteenth century use is the toilet chute against the south wall. This was built when the hall was used as a police station.



The north window. To the right is a stone bench with a blocked cupboard above.



A modern opening at the side of the north window leads to a small room behind the fireplace. This room is a puzzle. It may have been built as a pit prison. Access was through a trapdoor in the ceiling. At a later date, perhaps early in the seventeenth century, it was reused as a small kitchen and a stone slop sink was built into the outside wall.



The entrance to the garderobe chamber. This was built during alterations to the hall in the mid seventeenth century.



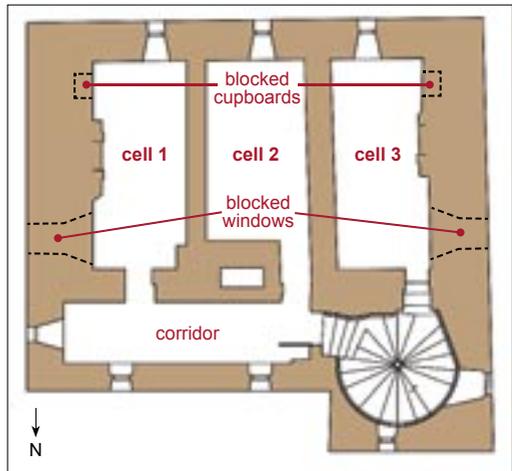
The hall fireplace. The sandstone supports and the left section of the lintel are original. The arms of the Adair family – a severed head, three severed hands and the motto 'Loyal au Mort' (Loyal unto Death) - were displayed on the wall above.



The west end of the hall. On the left is the entrance to the servants' staircase.

The Second Floor

This floor was totally rebuilt in the 1820s when the family bedrooms were ripped out and replaced with three vaulted prison cells. The rectangular blocks of red Dumfriesshire sandstone used in the prison cells are very different from the rough, whinstone walls of the sixteenth century castle. Cells 1 and 3 are very similar and both have fireplaces. There is no fireplace in cell 2 but a steel plated wall divides this room from the first floor chimney flue and must have acted as a rudimentary radiator (as well as stopping escapes). Each cell was furnished with an iron framed bed and a chair and there was a wooden shutter with a glass light in front of the windows. Cell 3 was for female prisoners. The entrance to the second floor corridor and the one above still have the original iron prison gates. A similar gate once stood in front of the stairs on the ground floor.



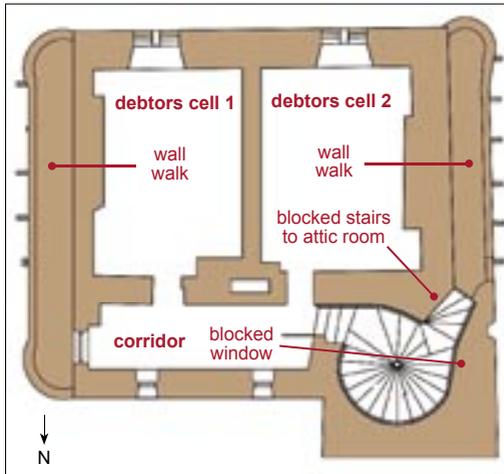
Graffiti on the fireplace in Cell 1



The central criminal cell, Cell 2.

The Third Floor

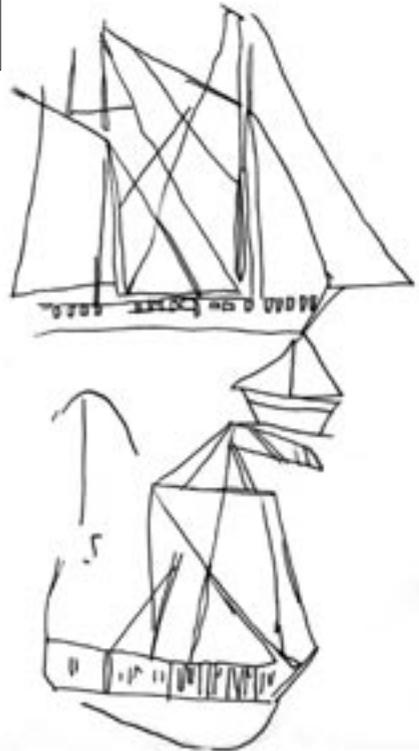
This floor was used in the 1500s by the castle's servants. It too was ripped out in the 1820s and replaced with two debtors' cells. These cells are larger than those on the floor below, a reflection of the slightly better standards given to those imprisoned for debt. At the far end of the corridor the remains can be seen of a blocked door – now a window – which led to an external walkway and



there is another door and parapet walkway at the west end of the corridor near the stairs. Both walkways date from the sixteenth century. Close to the west parapet door is a small spiral staircase, now blocked, which led to an attic in the roof of the original castle. Part of the door at the top of these stairs can be seen high in the north wall of Cell 2.

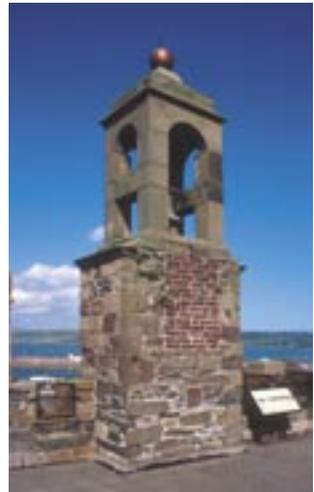
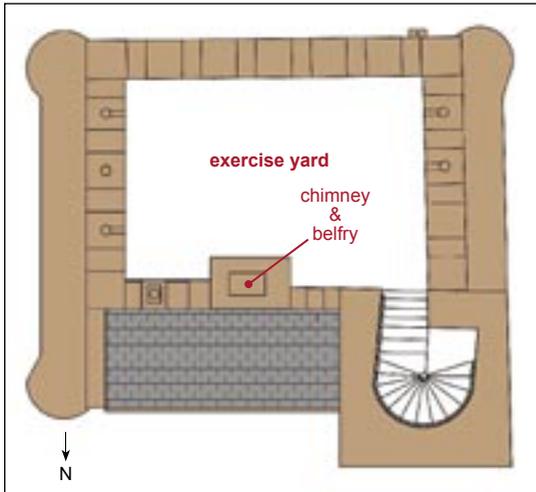


Ship graffiti on the door of Cell 1.



The Roof and Exercise Yard

In 1820 the original gable roof was demolished and the area at the top of the castle was converted to an exercise yard for the prisoners. The names of some of the prisoners can be seen carved into the sandstone slabs on the parapet wall. The bell and belfry were added to the chimney top some time in the nineteenth century.



The medieval chimney with its Victorian belfry.



The view from the roof in 1895. The buildings in the foreground were demolished in the 1960s. The two paddle steamers are the "Princess May" and the "Princess Victoria" which sailed between Stranraer and Larne.





Stranraer in the 1860s. The Castle (left foreground) is hidden by shops and houses.

Illustration by David Simon



The Castle of St John is situated in the centre of Stranraer.

It is open during the summer months
and by special arrangement at other times.

For further information and opening times
contact Stranraer Museum tel.: 01776 705088;
e-mail stranraermuseum@dumgal.gov.uk
www.dumgal.gov.uk/museums

The Castle of St John was restored in 2010 by Dumfries and Galloway Council
with assistance from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic Scotland and Landfill Communities Fund.

