

Portencross Castle History and Tradition

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The ancient kings of Scotland

There is a very old natural harbour beside Portencross Castle, and a long-established tradition that this harbour was the point of departure of the old kings of Scotland on route to Iona for burial. The 12th century Chronicle of the Kings records eighteen royal burials on the island of Iona, from Kenneth McAlpine in 858 AD until the tradition was ended by Malcolm Canmore in 1093. Historians, however, have expressed doubts about the reliability of this source, and even if Scottish kings are buried on the island at all. If it was not Iona then where were the kings buried? There are no records to consult, as much history was told and retold, not written. Tradition is all we have.

The evidence is circumstantial. At the time the thick forest and long sea lochs of the west barred most land routes to Iona. There were no direct roads from the more populated parts of Scotland to Mull and Iona, but there were well-used routes to Ayrshire through Dalry (the name means *kings' field*). Sea routes to the far west were easier but depended on oars or favourable winds.

Portencross to Tarbert in Loch Fyne is a 24 mile broad reach in the prevailing southwest winds, and the sea route from West Loch Tarbert to Mull and on to Iona was sheltered by the inner Hebrides.

Auldhill when the Vikings departed

Auldhill Dun, the site of the first castle at Portencross (i) is a more easily defended position than the present castle right on the shore. The Auldhill site is at the summit of the dolerite ridge that runs eastwards from the pier. Only the foundations now remain. In early days before the time of Bruce, Auldhill would be needed to defend Scotland from the Vikings who had captured many of the islands on the west of Scotland including for a period, Arran, Bute and the Cumbraes. Relations between the Norse and the native islanders were not always bad, so perhaps Auldhill was an observation post. After the battle in the year 1263 in a bay south of Largs, now marked by the Pencil monument, the Vikings gave up control of the islands on the west coast and the defences could be relaxed.

Connections with Robert the Bruce

One of King Robert the Bruce's staunch companions, when King Edward 1st of England invaded Scotland and Bruce was forced to go into hiding, was Robert Boyd. It was the same Robert Boyd who was present when Bruce was crowned king and later commanded soldiers at the battle of Bannockburn.

Bruce and Robert Boyd captured Brodick Castle in Arran in 1307 and, when preparing to return to the mainland, they had to be sure that the coast was clear of King Edward's soldiers who were on the look out for them. A fire was to be lit on the Ayrshire mainland as a signal that it was safe to land. Some say the fire was lit at Turnberry, but this is in doubt. The historian, Fordun, (ii) wrote that Bruce returned to his home at Carrick by a round-about route.

There is a cave on the southeast side of the Wee Cumbrae marked on the map (iii) as "the kings cave". Anyone hiding in that cave could easily see a signal fire on the Ayrshire shore.

There are other king's caves in the west of Scotland, and no one knows where Bruce was when he saw the signal fires, but he could have been on the Cumbrae.

There is a safe, hidden anchorage on the Wee Cumbrae near where a castle now stands, only two miles from the rocky harbour at Portencross, so Robert the Bruce could have sailed from the Cumbrae and even landed near Portencross.

The lands of Arneil

In 1315 Robert the Bruce, gave the lands of Arneil (now Portencross) as well as lands at Kilmarnock to his long-time supporter Robert Boyd, as a reward for loyalty (iv). At that time the stronghold at Portencross was on the hill called Auldhill and was in the hands of a family called Ross who had not supported Bruce. Were the Ross family driven away or did they stay on for a while to protect the land for the Boyds? Bruce preferred to form friendships and allies if he could, and he would want to try and keep the Ross family, who had lost their land, from becoming bitter enemies.

Why did the Castle move?

At some point it must have been decided to move the castle to the site with its natural harbour on the shore at Portencross. The castle we now see at Portencross was built around 1370. By this time the Boyds were firmly in control of the area.

Another Robert, Robert Stewart, grandson of Bruce and later to be King Robert II, knew of the importance of Portencross for sea defence and transport and may have made this suggestion to the Boyd laird. It is likely that the two families were friends because of the strong links between Bruce and Robert Boyd in the past. It would be very helpful for Robert Stewart to use Portencross with its safe harbour as a stopping point for his visits to his stronghold in Rothesay castle on Bute.

Whatever the reason, the old fort on the hill was abandoned and the new castle built right at the sea's edge.

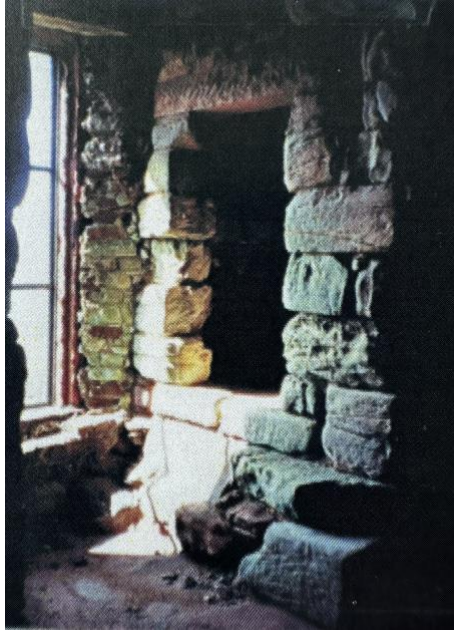
Portencross Castle sticks out into the Firth of Clyde in an excellent position for observing movements of vessels in the estuary. It is probable that the light and fast vessels called Birlins, with sail and six to eight pairs of oars, were kept at Portencross to intercept and investigate any strange ships that might appear, and to provide transport locally.

Portencross on the coronation route

David II, son of Bruce and king of Scotland died unexpectedly in 1371. The heir to the throne was Robert Stewart, grandson of Bruce. It is known that Robert Stewart was in his castle at Rothesay when the news of David's death reached him (v).

In Scotland at that time various powerful families were always ready to take their chance of becoming king, so Robert was in a hurry to reach Scone where he would be crowned. He is believed to have landed at Portencross (v) and presumably stayed the night. Maybe they had a celebration that night before setting off with his companions for Perthshire and the coronation.

The great hall showing a window recess



The King's work at Portencross

Robert II carried out some of the king's business at Portencross, probably in the great hall of the castle on the first floor. He signed at least 12 papers, called charters, at Portencross (Arnele) and the Latin words of many of them have been preserved. Charters were laws laid down by the king and signed by him in the presence of witnesses. Many of the charters record the granting of lands in Scotland to individuals in return for political or armed support.

One Charter, which was signed by King Robert at Portencross on New Years day in 1372 (vi), is very important as it represents his efforts to bring the outer Hebrides, Mull and parts of our west coast into the realm of Scotland. This was approached, not by sending an army, but by the marriage of his daughter Margaret to John of the Isles and by making sure in the charter that the lands were inherited in a way which brought them under control of the king. Even St Kilda, the most remote part of Scotland, is included in the islands and other lands named in this charter. History records differing views about Robert II. At times he failed to support the previous king. Other say he was weak because he did not lead great armies. Perhaps he was an early believer in diplomacy.

The Portencross Armada mystery

Two hundred years after Robert II was king of Scotland, when queen Elizabeth 1st was on the throne of England, there was great rivalry between Protestant England and Catholic Spain. They both wanted control over the lands that were being discovered in the new world of the Americas and the islands of the Caribbean. Their rivalry was also about who controlled the sea. King Phillip II of Spain planned to invade England. In 1588 he gathered a huge fleet of ships, the Armada, and set off to try to defeat the English ships and land an army in England.

There were running battles in the channel, but the Armada was unable to land troops in England.

Bad weather and skirmishes with the English navy drove the Armada into the North Sea and the admiral of the Armada, Don Alonso, Duke of Medina Sidonia, decided the only thing to

do was to try to sail home to Spain by a long route, up through the North Sea and round Scotland and the Northern Isles. Only then could the Armada turn south to head for Spain, clear of the Atlantic Coast of Ireland. This was a much longer voyage than had been planned and the Spanish ships were short of food and water. A large number of the sailors and soldiers on board were sick or had been injured and ships damaged in the fighting. To make matters worse it was now September and the weather was bad with frequent storms making it very difficult to make progress towards Spain. Many ships had to attempt a landing to get water and stores. History records that of the 128 ships that set out in the Armada at least 44 failed to return home. Others were so badly damaged that they never sailed again. Many ships were wrecked on the Irish shore and one, it is believed, sailed into the Clyde to be wrecked on rocks and sink a quarter of a mile from the shore at Portencross.

Help for the survivors

What happened to the people from the Armada ship? It is believed that only nineteen were able to get ashore. Scotland was not at war with Spain and some of the survivors of the wreck were helped home, others stayed in Scotland. Recently a letter was received from a possible descendant of the crew of the Portencross armada ship, now living in Wales. His family believe that their ancestor was one of the Spanish sailors of the Armada who were wrecked, possibly in the Clyde, all those years ago. Portencross means port of the cross. It was about the time of the Armada wreck that the name of the village changed from Arneil to Portencross. Did the Spanish survivors put up a cross on the place where their comrades were lost? We do not know. There is no sign of any cross now, nor do we know the name of their ship, but it appears that the sailors were given help when they needed it.

A cannon recovered in 1740 was donated to the village and remains at Portencross



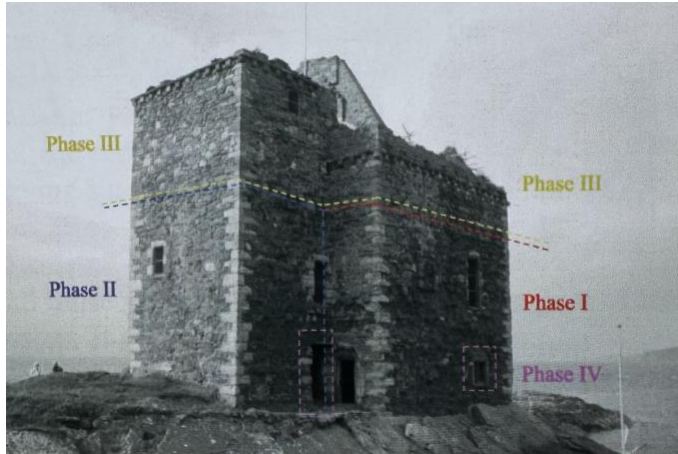
One hundred and fifty years after it sank, local people still remembered where the Armada wreck was, and a ship was able to find it and bring ashore ten brass cannon and ten iron cannon (vii).

The brass cannon were marked with the Tudor Rose and inscribed in English, "Richard and John Phillips made this piece 1584". This puzzled the finders and made them wonder if the wrecked ship was Spanish after all, but we now know the explanation. Because of the size of the Armada fleet, cannon were in short supply in Spain. Before the Armada sailed, eight shiploads of English cannon reached Spain and were put aboard the Spanish ships, although Elizabeth had banned this trade.

One of the iron cannon, 2.56m long and with a bore of 15 cm, a demi cannon (medios canones) of the type used by large Spanish ships of the period, was given to the villagers of

Portencross as a reward for help during the salvage operations. It is still here, waiting for a place in the castle when it is opened again.

The Castle now



Portencross Castle remains a striking building, despite the loss of its roof in a gale in 1739. On the ground floor are cellars and there is a large kitchen with remains of an old fireplace over 3m wide. On the first floor, the 14th century great hall, with its vaulted ceiling, is also intact.

Archaeologists believe that the castle was built first as a Hall House which included the great hall, phase I in the figure above. An east wing, phase II, and upper floors, Phase III, were added in the early 15th century. Alterations, phase IV, were probably added by fishermen after the castle was abandoned by the laird in the seventeenth century.

It comes down to us as a remarkably intact medieval building, but in a neglected state. Action to consolidate the structure is urgently needed.

Portencross Castle is of national significance. It helps our understanding of an important part of our history - the period after Bannockburn and the establishment of the Stewart kings. It is protected as a Scheduled, A-listed Monument.

References

- i. Auldhill, Portencross. D.H.Caldwell et al., *Archael. J.* 1998: 155; 23-81
- ii. Quoted in the edited edition with notes by A.A.M. Duncan of John Barbour's *The Bruce*. Cannongate classics 1997; p 192.
- iii. Ordinance Survey Explorer series no 341, Greenock Largs and Millport.
- iv. *Regesta Regum Scottorum*. Volume 2, *The Acts of Robert I*, Ed A.A.M Duncan, Edinburgh, 1988.
- v. Steven Boardman in " *The Early Stewart Kings. Robert II and Robert II!*" 1996, Tuckwell Press; p3. Also Personal communication to FOPC.
- vi. *Charter 520 In Register of the Great Seal of Scotland. AD 1306 to 1424*. HM Register House Edinburgh, 1912.
- vii. *A Tour Throughout the Whole Islands of Great Britain*. 1769, 7th Edition London. pages 297-299. Compiled by Daniel De Foe and continued by Mr Richardson.

Acknowledgements

The photograph of the castle and its phases is by kind permission of ARP Lorimer, Architects. The other photographs are by FOPC members, principally Ann McLachlan. Responsibility for the text rests with Alastair Glen (lightly edited by Frank Crawford in 2026).

The accompanying CD (now an audio file on the Portencross Castle website) provides a professional assessment of the castle from an experienced archaeologist and historian and the architect for the project, recorded at Portencross castle on 29th May 2004 for our "Not Open Yet Day" at the time of the BBC program Restoration. Thanks are due to the speakers for permission to record their talks.

The speakers in order are:

- Frank Crawford, Compere.
- Dr David Caldwell, Keeper of Scotland and Europe, National Museum of Scotland. Edinburgh.
- Peter Drummond, Architect, ARP^[1]_[SEP]Lorimer, now of Austin Smith Lord.
- Alastair Glen, Chairman FOPC.
- Walter Kolon , Vice-chairman

Sound recording: Neil Glen.

Saving the Castle

Friends of Portencross Castle (FOPC), a recognised Scottish Charity (SC028181) was formed in 1998. It is dedicated to the conservation of the castle and retaining it and the surrounding shore in public ownership, by way of a Trust.

Friends of Portencross are making progress with its aims and are now at the critical stage in attracting grant assistance for the work required.

FOPC plans to conserve the structure, make it watertight and the interior safe. The roof will become a vantage point available for visitors to enjoy. British Nuclear Group, generously donated the castle to FOPC and are helping with work to safeguard the fabric over the next few years until conservation work can begin. FOPC which now has responsibility for the castle needs to raise £100,000 as its share of the costs of castle consolidation and in addition needs funds for long term maintenance. We welcome donations to help achieve these goals.

You can help by making a donation to:

Friends of Portencross Castle

<https://portencrosscastle.org.uk/donate/>

Or become a Guardian of Portencross Castle

<https://portencrosscastle.org.uk/donate/#guardian-form>

Or Contact:

Ann McLachlan

Secretary FOPC

Auldhill Cottage, Portencross, KA23 9QA.

www.portencrosscastle.org.uk