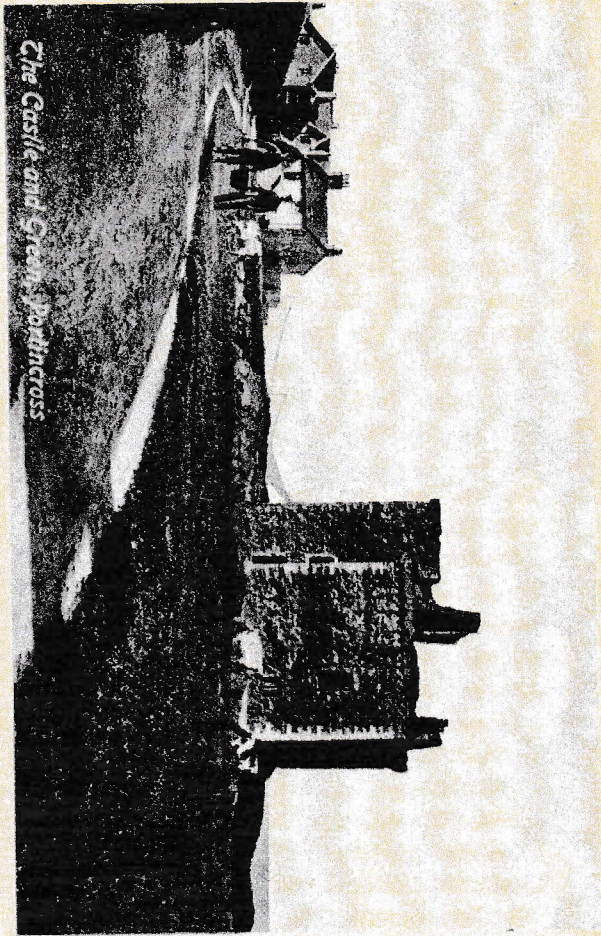


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HISTORY
OF
PORTINCROSS.

First published circa 1912/13
Reproduced from the original in 2010
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The Castle and Great Church



PORTINCROSS

THE present Castle at Portincross in all probability dates from the reign of Robert 11. (1370-1390), as there are still extant seven charters of his and the following reigns, dated "Apud Arnele," which, of course, means Portincross Castle. An earlier charter, dated from Alderneil Castle, in Cunningham, on 29th December, 1307, in the days of Robert the Bruce, most likely refers to another castle which stood on the height above Portincross, known as Auld Hill, where the foundation walls of a castle similar in dimensions to the present one are still traceable. Portincross can therefore boast of the great hero of Scottish independence holding court within its precincts in the second year of his reign. This castle formed the chief messuage of the ancient barony of Ardneil, which in 1306 passed from the De Rosses, High Sheriffs of Ayr, to the Boyds of Kilmarnock, who, through their supposed descent

from Simon, the brother of Walter, the Steward, would thus be cousins to Robert II., and what more natural than that in passing from Dundonald Castle, where he frequently lived and ultimately died, to his domains in Bute, should halt for a few days at Portincross on a visit to his relatives?

The style of the building, with its solid walls, arched roof, and small windows, points to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries as the date of its erection – before the introduction of gunpowder into warfare. In more modern times a larger window has been inserted to give light to some store-rooms, to which a portion of the building was adapted. As a mansion-house for the proprietor, it was abandoned shortly after the restoration of Charles II., but was continued to be inhabited by rather boisterous fishermen and other tenants, until unroofed by the windy January of 1739. Since then its walls have been slowly succumbing to the action of wind and tide. It remained in the possession of the Boyds until 1737, when it was alienated from them through their attachment to the failing Stuart cause, and passed in to the hands of the Craufurds of Auchenames, by whom it was held until a few years ago, when it became the property of William Adams, Esq. Lands in the neighbourhood are supposed to have once belonged to the Knights Templars, and are said to have been marked by a large cross, visible both by land and sea, and the “Temple” land of Portincross

is mentioned as held by Archibald Boyd at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Legendary lore, in which Old Nick and Young Nick, men of gigantic stature, and a single hammer used in the erection of both and tossed from the one to the other, play a conspicuous part, has gathered around the building of the very similar castles at Portincross and Little Cumbrae, which still stand facing each other, with a channel of two miles flowing between; but, of course, all such lore belongs to a superstitious age long since past. In its architectural features, McGibbon and Ross, in their well-known work on "The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland, from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Centuries," speak of Portincross Castle as situated close by the sea, and founded on solid rock, a little to the north of Farland Point, with its main block measuring 58 feet from east to west, and 31 feet from north to south, with a height of 35½ feet, in addition to which there is a parapet of 15 feet. It is of four storeys, and has an entrance both on the ground and first floors. The ground floor is vaulted, as also the hall on the first floor. There has apparently been a wall containing an outer gateway, between the castle and the edge of the rock, as the checked rybat of the jamb is still visible. A path of 8½ feet wide leads to the entrance door, inside of which a steep and dark flight of steps in the thickness of the wall leads to the first floor, and ends there. From its landing, a wheel stair in the south wall leads to the top. The central

wall, which contains the main staircase, divides the castle into two parts. The large apartment on the ground floor, which seems at one time to have been a stable, has the native rock for its pavement. The large window to the north-west would seem to have relied for protection on its proximity to deep water, the other more accessible windows being mere slits. The castle had two kitchens, one on the ground floor for retainers and servants, the other on the first floor for their master and his guests. By entering at the lower door the servants could reach the upper floors and battlements without passing through the hall. The lower kitchen measured 8 ft. 8 in. by 6 ft. 9 in., or, with its arched fireplace, 11 ft. 2 in. It had a rough doorway slapped from the outside, because of the awkwardness of the entrance from the stair, with steps both up and down in a dark passage. At the top of the stair on the first floor, a door on the right led into the hall, and another on the left into the upper kitchen. The hall measured 24 ft. by 16½ ft. by 19½ ft. to the top of the vaulting. There seems to have been an upper room in the vault, reached by a doorway from a landing in the wheel stair, but it is now built up. It was lighted by a large window over the fireplace of the hall. The hall itself was lighted by two large windows with stone seats, the one on the south having been enlarged at a later date. A mural chamber at the south-west angle entered off one of these windows. A service window opened from the kitchen into a

recess adjoining the entrance passage. At the top of the wheel stair there are two doors, both leading into the main block, one into a chamber in the roof space over the hall, and the other into the parapet walk which went round the building. On passing round this walk, a flight of steps 6 ft. wide is reached, which leads up to the parapet of the higher wing, whose additional height permits of two floors above the kitchen. By raising the parapet wall on the south side and including the walk in the room, one of the apartments in the attic would seem to have been enlarged at a later date. These rooms in the tower were evidently bedrooms, being provided with fireplaces and wardrobes.

Portincross (Portus Cruies, or Port of the Cross), variously known in olden times as Pencross, Portna-croise, Portcroash, was a one time a harbour of some importance, and may have derived its name from its being a landing place of missionaries from the Western Isles, or from the well-known tradition, that the bodies of the ancient Kings of Scotland were brought thither by the old Dalry road, to be shipped for interment in Iona. In 1536 we find a ship, belonging to Andrew Mure, a citizen of Glasgow, and carrying goods to the value of £300, attacked on its way to Portincross by pirates, Mure being seriously wounded, whilst his eldest son and four of the crew were killed. The recent erection of a pier, a place of call for pleasure steamers and other vessels, may therefore be regarded as an effort to restore the prestige of

former times. The seaward scenery from the roof of Portincross Castle is both picturesquely beautiful and extensive, reaching from Ailsa Craig on the south to the hills at the head of Loch Long on the north, and embracing Arran, Caintyre, Bute, the Cumbraes, and the upper reaches of the Firth of Clyde. Immediately to the north are three cliffs, nearly 300 feet high, known as the Three Sisters, around which the legendary lore of witchcraft has gathered, and a little further north still, on the Hunterstone estate, the Hawking Craig, recalling the days of the ancient sport. It was near to this spot that the famous Hunterstone brooch with its runic inscriptions was found about 1826, and which may now be seen in the Antiquarian Museum in Edinburgh. In the neighbourhood of Portincross salmon and lobster fishing are still carried on with some measure of success, whilst its sylvan beauties attract year by year not a few visitors, with a view to rest and the recruiting of jaded energies. Its damask weaving is now, however, entirely a thing of the past.