

Why is Caerlaverock castle important in the history of Dumfries and Galloway?

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Caerlaverock is in the Southwest of Scotland and is one of the most impressive castles on the Scottish border with England. Sitting near the Solway firth guarding access to the river Nith and the approach to Dumfries, it is the only castle in the UK that is shaped like a triangle. The name of the castle is thought to mean Fort of the Skylark and this is interesting as even today there is an abundance of different habitats that support a variety of wildlife in the area including the Skylark and the natterjack toad. The castle is now owned and run by Historic Scotland and is a popular and well-known attraction that encourages visitors and economic activity to the area. This is a continuation of its purpose as a focal point. This essay will explore the significance of Caerlaverock to Dumfries and Galloway by analysing its strategic purpose, its military history, the unique architecture and its cultural and symbolic role as well as being a top modern day tourist destination.

The strategic importance of Caerlaverock castle is due to its positioning. It is located on the Solway firth near the mouth of the River Nith. This means that it took on importance in terms of the trade of goods as well as the security of the area. Its placement in the tidal marshes made it an excellent defensive position, although this also proved to be the undoing of the early castle. What makes this area particularly unique is that there are two castles in close proximity to one another. The first castle was built by the Maxwell family. These were Scottish Lords who were granted this area around 1220 most likely because King Alexander wanted someone, he could trust to secure his southern border, and Maxwell had been his trusted advisor; his Chamberlain. Using the technique of Dendrochronology, the first castle was built in the 1220s and the second castle in the 1270s. The first castle stood on slightly higher ground to the south of the present site. Archaeological excavations have shown that it was a simple rectangular stone fortification surrounded by a ditch. However, the ground was too soft and waterlogged which made it difficult to maintain the foundations of the building. It may also have been just slightly too far inland to control the approaches of the Solway Firth effectively. The second castle that was built on firmer ground was closer to the sea and had a triangular design. The fact that a new building, which was larger and more impressive, was planned, paid for and completed in a relatively short period of time shows that the castle was more than a residence for a wealthy family. This was an important military structure that shaped medieval Dumfries and Galloway.

The Castle's military significance was also shown during various conflicts. Perhaps the most significant was during the Wars of Independence. In 1300, Edward I led a campaign in the Southwest Scotland to reassert English control following the early stages of the Wars of Independence. Edward I besieged Caerlaverock with 87 knights, 3000 men, and siege engines. Caerlaverock may have been targeted because the Maxwells were loyal

supporters of King John Baliol, the Scottish King who had been deposed, by Edward, in 1296. The expedition was recorded in poetry in the primary source; The Roll of Karlaverock.

“...So stoutly was the gate of the castle assailed by him [Edward I], that never did smith with his hammer strike his iron as he and his [troops] did there.

Notwithstanding, there were showered upon them [those Scottish men inside the castle] such huge stones, quarrels, and arrows, that with wounds and bruises they were so hurt and exhausted, that it was with very great difficulty they were able to retire.”

The Roll of Karlaverock, 1300.

Despite Caerlaverock being extremely well defended, the castle fell in just two days. Some of the Scottish defenders were hung from the sides of the castle in punishment, and the castle fell to the hands of the English for 12 years. Edward I was successful but ultimately the castle fell back into the hands of the Maxwells. This shows that strength and limits of Edward's power. He had a formidable military force but never won the hearts and minds of the Dumfries and Galloway population.

Edward's siege of Caerlaverock certainly wasn't the last time it saw battle. The castle was besieged again in 1356 by Scottish forces, as the Maxwells were seen as being too close to the English and then by the English in 1544 and 1570 due to continued tensions between the Scottish and English. The last siege was in 1640 as Caerlaverock became involved in the battle of the Three Kingdoms (1639-51) which included the English Civil War.

The Maxwell family were long standing Royalists with Catholic sympathies. This made them obvious enemies to the Presbyterian Covenanters who dominated the south-west. The position of Caerlaverock made it a possible landing point for Royalist reinforcements or supplies from Ireland. So, in June 1640 the castle was bombarded with cannon where heavy damage was inflicted and the Maxwells were forced to surrender after around 13 weeks of resistance. According to Sir Henry Vane, an English politician, the Earl and Countess of Nithsdale and their page were allowed to leave, but 40 defenders called Maxwell were put to the sword. The Castle was also then partly demolished, and never rebuilt, as a means of depriving the Royalists of a base. The events at Caerlaverock illustrate the clash between medieval and early modern warfare. The Castle, long the centre of military power was now obsolete because of improvements in technology e.g. cannons which could reduce walls that took years to build, in days. For Dumfries and Galloway, the 1640 siege represented the decline of the Maxwell family as a regional power as they were stripped of estates and titles over time.

Caerlaverock is also important due to its unique architecture. With its triangular layout and water filled moat it is innovative and well adapted to the marshy terrain that surrounds it. The castle has an imposing twin towered gatehouse and other rounded towers which are examples of advanced defensive features. The gatehouse was improved upon by the 8th Lord Maxwell, in response to the feuds with the Johnstones of Annan. In the early 17th century, when the Maxwells were pronounced the Earls of Nithsdale and appointed to the Privy Council of Scotland, they constructed an impressive residential structure within the castle walls, known as the Nithsdale Lodgings or apartments. This renaissance design has three floors, with a two-roomed apartment on each floor. There are service chambers in the south range, with a large kitchen, a bakehouse, and a servery. Although, destroyed shortly after, during the 1640 siege, this move from purely a military to domestic function, demonstrates that Caerlaverock was at the forefront of the changing nature of castles and their functions. Castles were becoming more symbolic of power and status and thus having lavish living quarters added to their appeal and signified that the Lord was someone of importance and wealth. By contrast to the Renaissance Nithsdale Lodgings, the west range and its embattled tower are starkly medieval. The tower, is known as Murdoch's Tower, because tradition says that Murdoch, Duke of Albany, was imprisoned here by James I in 1425 before his trial and execution in Stirling.

The symbolic role that Caerlaverock has always had continues to this day. The castle continues to be noteworthy and is breathtaking against its natural backdrop. This was a building that was intended to make a statement about its presence, and which could not be ignored. It is still a source of prosperity and provides a livelihood for many. In the past, it would have oversaw the trade into Dumfries and today it attracts thousands of visitors to the area who spend their money on leisure activities. But Caerlaverock symbolises the resilience and story of Dumfries and Galloway. This is an area that was at the forefront of conflict between the English and the Scots and was at the centre of religious and local strife. Caerlaverock could not escape this conflict and like the Maxwell family it no longer was the cornerstone of power within the region.

Ultimately, Caerlaverock is an important part of Dumfries and Galloway's local history. It is an embodiment of the power that the castle once held and of their ultimate demise at the onset of gunpowder. It shows the ingenuity of the people of Dumfries as they designed and redesigned this powerful structure to overcome the natural obstacles of marshland and the power struggles between England and Scotland as well as religious tensions. The Castle is no longer owned by wealthy and influential families and is now owned by the state and managed by Historic Scotland. There are events planned throughout the year that continue to make Caerlaverock an attraction and significant place to Dumfries and Galloway. It's triangular design and moat with imposing towers are used as a backdrop for venues such as weddings which is symbolic of Caerlaverock's initial purpose; to stand out, to be noticed and to bring peace to the people within it.

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