

## FINAL FLOURISH OF THE MEDIEVAL BUILDER

### ARCHITECTURAL MASTERPIECE THAT STRADDLES TWO AGES



### STIRLING CASTLE

Fans of the royal palace often emphasise its novelty – how it embodied the latest in Renaissance ideas and influenced much that was to come. But archaeologist Gordon Ewart, who has had the rare opportunity to really get under the skin of the building, says it looks to the past as well as the future. It sits on the cusp.

Behind is the long tradition of Scottish medieval building in which master craftsmen – such as stonemasons and joiners – used their practical know-how to construct everything from churches to castles. Ahead is a very different approach, increasing professionalism in architecture, survey and engineering began to take over, using new and more precise scientific approaches to measurement and design.

“The palace tends to be seen as something innovative because of features like the wonderful Renaissance sculptures on the outside walls. But when you look at the fabric and construction of the building you find something very different. It was created using all the skills and experience that medieval Scottish builders had at their command – this was perhaps the finest and among the last great flourishes of that centuries-old tradition.”

The palace is arguably as much the result of generations of practical skill, combined with only a rudimentary appreciation of prevailing architectural theory, as the embodiment of European Renaissance ideals. In addition, rather than being an all-new structure the palace was created by joining up some pre-existing structures.

Mr Ewart worked on behalf of Historic Scotland from 2003-05 to investigate the palace and its origins. It was the largest ever archaeological investigation of an upstanding structure carried out in Scotland and the results have been published shortly on a dedicated website at [sparc.scran.ac.uk/home/homePage.html](http://sparc.scran.ac.uk/home/homePage.html). Among the most fascinating finds were 14 skeletons of men, women and children in an area that is believed to have been an early medieval chapel. The old chapel was probably modified as part of the new palace building programme. This predated the current Chapel Royal which dates from the 1590s. The discovery shows that the area where the palace now stands was busy with a variety of other structures before the end of the 1530s. Those that weren't absorbed were doubtless demolished, with any useable materials being cannibalised.

Overall Mr Ewart said the palace has all the tell-tale signs of somewhere that was built using old and established techniques. New walls were often built against, or over, other castle buildings, rather than using precise scientific measurements on the ground. This may explain why a building which feels highly symmetrical actually has rather quirky dimensions, which clever builders have sought to disguise. As such it is not the result of a finely calculated architectural scheme where every part of the project was determined by pre-prepared blueprints. Instead, it owes much to an era when master builders had little more to work from than impressionistic drawings they conjured up for patrons. “They would possibly come up with pictures and say ‘I can do you something that will look rather like that’,” said Mr Ewart.

Nonetheless Mr Ewart has the sense – no more than this, as any drawings and detailed building records, have now been lost – that there was a clear plan. “You get the sense in some places, of the work being carried out very quickly and so must have been guided by someone with a clear idea of what they wanted. In fact, that is one of the wonderful things about a project like this, you really get behind the scenes and start to understand how and why things were done in particular ways. It gets you very close to the people who worked to create the palace and provides a chance to understand a bit more about what was going on their minds in terms of how practical problems of construction were solved.”

However, Mr Ewart believes we are still some way away from a full understanding of the thinking that lay behind many aspects of buildings. Changing times and cultures can make these difficult to unravel. For example, were the doors around the royal palace so thick and solid because that’s the only way people in Scotland knew how to make them – or a security measure to hold off would-be assassins while the royal family made an escape? And were the doorways set at opposite corners of a royal room a device to create a purely aesthetic effect, or to prevent someone getting a straight line of fire through both doors? Inevitably with so little to go on there is some disagreement and debate among archaeologists and historians over how to interpret buildings such as the royal palace. Mr Ewart believes that to get a real appreciation we need to recognise just how different we are in certain ways from our 16<sup>th</sup> century forebears. “This was a time when a sophisticated nobleman was someone who would write a madrigal with one hand, but might slit your throat with the other,” he said.

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