

The Landmark Trust

ROSSLYN CASTLE

Rosslyn (the village is spelt Roslin) is famous for three things - an ancient castle, its extraordinary chapel and a valley full of scenic romance. In the words of Sir Walter Scott, "A morning of leisure can scarcely be anywhere more delightfully spent than in the woods of Rosslyn". There has probably always been some form of fortification on the site of Rosslyn Castle, an almost insulated rock overhanging the glen of the Esk - certainly since at least the beginning of the 14th century, and maybe much earlier. William de St Clair, who came from Normandy with William the Conqueror, obtained from Malcolm Canmore a great part of the lands of the barony of Roslin, and he may well have built some sort of edifice on his new possessions.

The present castle dates from various periods having suffered a chequered history, but the earliest standing part is the remains of the tower by the present bridge. This was probably built shortly after the Battle of Rosslyn in 1302. This crushing defeat of the English involved a small Scottish army fighting three battles against different English forces all on the same day; the first contest took place on the Bilston Burn, and the second and third between Dryden and Hawthornden. Local names perpetuate the sites: Shin-bones Field, where bones have been found when ploughing; the 'Hewings', where there was great slaughter; and the 'Killburn', a stream that ran red for three days.

The only access to the castle was then, as it is now, along a single span bridge across a deep gully. Originally the gap would have been crossed by a drawbridge between ashlar piers of which only the one to the south remains. The entrance was defended by a gate of great strength, the remains of which are just visible today; it is shown in the pre 1700 drawings. In fact, as the Imperial Gazetteer of Scotland (1871) points out, "though highly pleasant and romantic, (the site) is very ill chosen for a fortalice; for while it finely overlooks the sylvan stream below, it is itself commanded by heights which press closely on its precincts, and look almost right down upon the tops of its chimneys".

The rounded keep on the south west corner was added about 1400 by Henry St Clair, the second Prince of Orkney. His son, Sir William, considerably enlarged and strengthened the castle. It was this Sir William who had travelled extensively in France and this probably explains the strong French influence in the design, such as the curious round buttresses which are similar to the Chateau of Guillard on the Seine. Sir William was also responsible for the justly famous Rosslyn Chapel, begun in 1446, and described as a 'Bible in stone', renowned for its richly carved interior. The chapel is also often compared with the Sainte-Marie-Madeleine Basilica at Vézelay in France, an earlier but similarly impressive exposition of the mason's craft, which Sir William perhaps also visited. At this time, the St Clair family was wealthy enough to dine from gold and silver ware, and Sir William was so rich and powerful that he could even mint his own coins.

No sooner had Sir William's works to the castle been completed than a fire destroyed part of them in 1447, caused by a lady in waiting looking for a dog under a bed and setting the bedclothes alight with her candle. The fire spread rapidly, ravaging a large part of the castle. According to legend, this event was heralded by a mysterious warning. Edward St Clair of Dryden, riding hounds to meet Sir William, met a great company of rats. Amongst these, being led by the rest, was an old blind rat with a straw in its mouth.

This damage was repaired, and remained intact for nearly a century, until in 1544, the castle was set on fire again, this time by the English under the Earl of Hertford, instructed by Henry VIII to "put all to fire and sword" in Scotland. Edinburgh, Leith and Craigmillar castles all suffered the same fate as Rosslyn. The castle was repaired again and from 1580 more buildings

along the south east side of the courtyard were erected by another Sir William. These included the clock tower and the great hall, underneath which three lower floors go down a further 50 feet to the solid rock. The fine moulded fireplace in the now ruinous hall bears a shield with the arms and initials of Sir William and his wife, Jean Edmonston and the date 1597.

The vaults below the present Landmark, provided the kitchens, bakery and store rooms for Sir William's more domestic quarters. They are described in the Gazetteer - "a descent of a great number of stone-stairs conducts through part of the existing structure to the bottom, and leads into a large kitchen, whence a door opens into a once famous garden". These "lower apartments are ill-lighted and confined, and possess far more of the coldness and gloom of a prison than the comfort and convenience of a modern residence".

In 1622, the date over the front door and on the sitting room ceiling, Sir William's son, yet another William, completed the castle by finishing the range his father had begun, adding confident Renaissance detailing and fine plaster ceilings. Alas this was to be short lived. In 1650, after the disaster at the Battle of Dunbar, Cromwell's troops under the command of General Monk, besieged the castle with four cannon, a mortar, and 600 troops. The walls were battered down and the castle sacked and slighted, leaving only what stands today. Monk displayed his contempt for idolatry and pomp by stabling his horses in the chapel.

The castle never recovered, and by 1788 the remains were described as "haggard and utterly dilapidated". The Gazetteer described them thus in 1871 - "the mere wreck of a great pile riding on a little sea of forest, and not far from contact with commanding rocks, - a rueful apology for the once grand fabric". The combination of decayed castle, ornate chapel and dramatic scenery fired the romantic imagination throughout the 19th century, and Rosslyn became an essential stop on any Scottish itinerary. Turner came here to paint, and Dorothy Wordsworth was to write "I never passed through a more delicious dell than the glen of Rosslyn".

For much of the 20th century the castle was occupied by a tenant, but when Miss Leech died in 1980 it fell victim to vandals who used the panelling for firewood. When the current 7th Earl of Rosslyn inherited it on his father's death in 1977, a rescue package was drawn. The restoration was completed in 1984, and Landmark undertook to let the castle on behalf of the Earl, the first Landmarkers moving in in summer 1985. It proved a very popular building, and in 2002 Collegehill House, built as an inn next to the chapel and also owned by the Rosslyns, became a Landmark in its own right.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Rosslyn Castle sleeps up to 6 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.