

THE HAUNTING, YET SUBLIME REMAINS OF CASTLE  
SINCLAIR-GIRNIGOE OVERLOOK THE BAY OF SINCLAIR  
ON THE NORTHERNMOST TIP OF SCOTLAND.





In the far north of Scotland, the icy waters of the North Sea lash a forbidding promontory jutting into the Bay of Sinclair, 29 kilometers south of John o' Groats. On a crooked finger of land stands the ruin of Castle Sinclair-Girnigoe, its sublime remains embraced by a sheer drop to the sea on the north and a massive dry moat on the south. Founded in the late fourteenth century, the castle served as the ancestral seat of the Earls of Caithness, until it was abandoned following a heavy artillery attack by rival claimants to the Earldom in 1680.

Until recently, the castle had lain untouched—its stones, one by one, being claimed by storm and sea. Today, however, the site is the subject of a major archaeological campaign and conservation initiative, prompted in part by the castle's inclusion on WMF's 2002 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*. Over the past two years, a multidisciplinary team of archaeologists, architects, and structural engineers—brought together by none other than Malcolm, the twentieth Earl of Caithness—has begun to unravel the ancient history of one of Scotland's most picturesque sites. Their findings, which have elucidated the construction history of the building, have also overturned the traditional understanding of the site and have shown the castle to be of far greater significance than previously thought.

# Ghosts of Girnigoe

**THE ANCIENT SEAT OF THE SCOTTISH EARLS OF CAITHNESS REVEALS ITS SECRETS**

by JONATHAN CLARK and SANDRA JACK

When the site was first nominated to WMF's Watch list, it was believed that the complex jumble of buildings and fallen masonry belonged to two discrete building ensembles—Castle Girnigoe, an early complex centered on an inner bailey and tower house, and a more complete suite of structures in the area of the outer bailey thought to be contemporary with a 1606 act, in which the site was renamed Castle Sinclair. But as archaeologists began probing the site, they realized that such a scenario was far too simplistic. The structures, which cover the whole of the peninsula, are, in fact, all part of a single complex built and modified over more than two centuries.

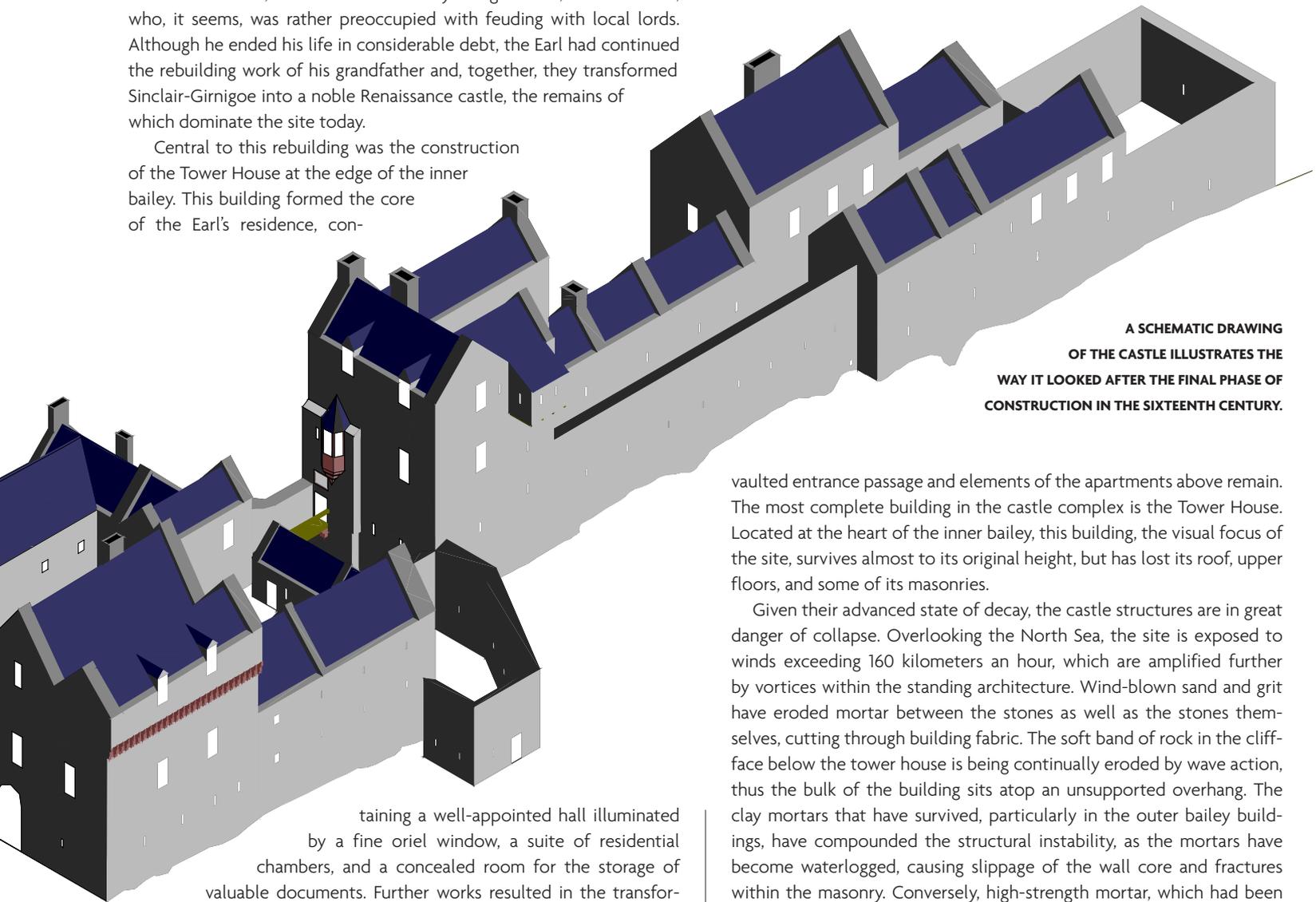
The earliest remains, found at opposite ends of the peninsula, date to the late fourteenth century, a time when the Sinclair Clan first became associated with the environs of Caithness following their acquisition of the Earldom of Orkney. Among the early edifices is a massive gate tower at the western edge of the site, the remains of which are discernable in the lower floors of the West Gatehouse. This was a building of substantial proportions, defended by a drawbridge, a portcullis, and arrow loops around its lower stories. At the eastern end of the peninsula, a sallyport, or opening, in the fortified castle wall was constructed to provide ready access to the seashore below. The passage could be used both to defend the castle should it be caught under enemy siege or to patrol the waters of Sinclair Bay.

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In the late fifteenth century, the castle was significantly enlarged, most likely following a grant of the Earldom of Caithness to William Sinclair in 1455 and the family's subsequent loss of the Earldom of Orkney in 1470. The second Earl lived permanently in Caithness and it is likely that he commissioned an expansion of the castle to accommodate his entire household. Additional buildings were erected within the baileys—including a large hall with extensive service accommodation and lodgings suites in the inner bailey—and a defensive wall was erected around the site, complete with loops for firing *hagbutts*, an early form of firearm.

In the sixteenth century, however, the castle underwent a major renovation put in motion by the fourth Earl of Caithness. A prominent figure in Scottish politics of the time, the Earl held the position of Justiciary for the north of Scotland and membership of the Privy Council. Following his death in 1583, he was succeeded by his grandson, the fifth Earl, who, it seems, was rather preoccupied with feuding with local lords. Although he ended his life in considerable debt, the Earl had continued the rebuilding work of his grandfather and, together, they transformed Sinclair-Girnigoe into a noble Renaissance castle, the remains of which dominate the site today.

Central to this rebuilding was the construction of the Tower House at the edge of the inner bailey. This building formed the core of the Earl's residence, con-



**A SCHEMATIC DRAWING OF THE CASTLE ILLUSTRATES THE WAY IT LOOKED AFTER THE FINAL PHASE OF CONSTRUCTION IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.**

taining a well-appointed hall illuminated by a fine oriel window, a suite of residential chambers, and a concealed room for the storage of valuable documents. Further works resulted in the transformation of the fourteenth-century gatehouse into a suite of elegant lodgings also lighted with oriel windows and a stately stairway. The hospitality of the Earls is seen in the creation and maintenance of lodgings in both baileys and the construction of a third hall opposite the West Gatehouse.

Despite its remote location, Castle Sinclair-Girnigoe became embroiled in the events of the Civil War, following its occupation by Cromwellian troops in the 1650s. Preliminary excavation results suggest that soldiers garrisoned at the castle showed little respect for their palatial surroundings, abandoning rubbish from meals, clay pipes, and pottery in and around the buildings and courtyards. Following its

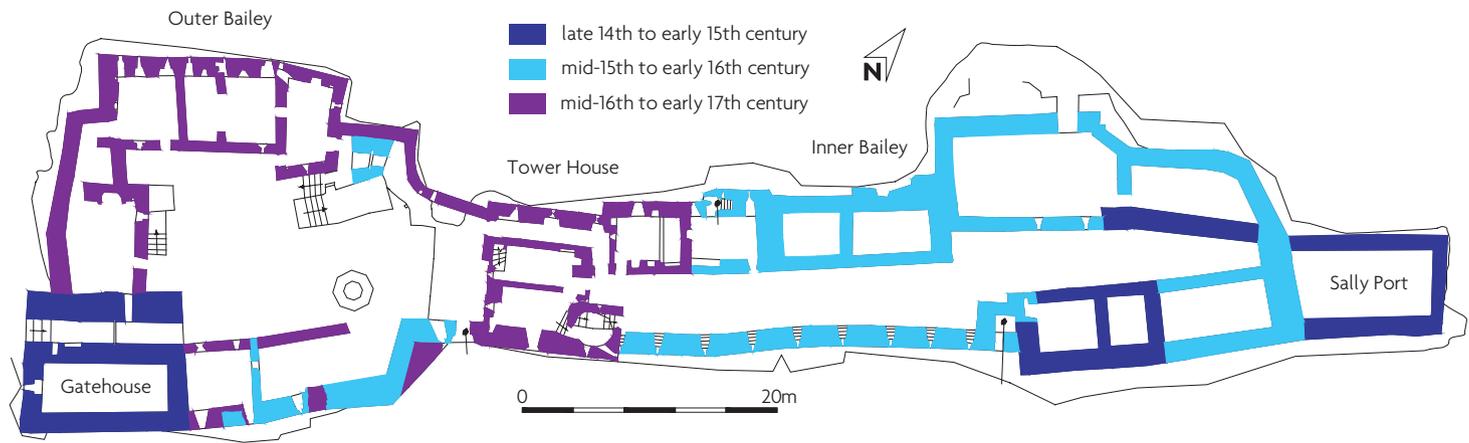
degarrisoning, Sinclair-Girnigoe continued to be used as the Earl of Caithness' residence until 1680, when, in the course of a violent feud over the succession to the Earldom, an artillery attack was launched against the castle, badly damaging its buildings and ending some two centuries of settlement of the peninsula.

Throughout its occupation, the castle, with its strategic location, functioned not only as a seat of military power, but as the cultural, social, and artistic center of Scotland's northernmost reaches. Over the centuries since its abandonment, however, the castle's buildings have been robbed of both dressed stones and timbers. The West Gatehouse, originally one of the more substantial buildings on the site, suffered considerably in the seventeenth-century attack. Today, only its

vaulted entrance passage and elements of the apartments above remain. The most complete building in the castle complex is the Tower House. Located at the heart of the inner bailey, this building, the visual focus of the site, survives almost to its original height, but has lost its roof, upper floors, and some of its masonries.

Given their advanced state of decay, the castle structures are in great danger of collapse. Overlooking the North Sea, the site is exposed to winds exceeding 160 kilometers an hour, which are amplified further by vortices within the standing architecture. Wind-blown sand and grit have eroded mortar between the stones as well as the stones themselves, cutting through building fabric. The soft band of rock in the cliff-face below the tower house is being continually eroded by wave action, thus the bulk of the building sits atop an unsupported overhang. The clay mortars that have survived, particularly in the outer bailey buildings, have compounded the structural instability, as the mortars have become waterlogged, causing slippage of the wall core and fractures within the masonry. Conversely, high-strength mortar, which had been used in the construction of the tower house, has fostered still more problems, namely causing large areas of masonry to collapse as a single piece.

Fearing that the castle was reaching a point beyond which it would be nearly impossible to prevent its total collapse, Malcolm, the current Earl of Caithness, established the Clan Sinclair Trust in 1999 for the purpose of preserving the site as a critical document in the history of Scotland. To simply arrest the decay, he reasoned, a major conservation initiative had to be undertaken. The Earl brought together a



multi-disciplinary team to deal with all aspects of the castle's conservation, and, with the help of Historic Scotland, the Heritage Lottery Fund, Highland Council, and Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise, they developed a comprehensive conservation plan. As part of this effort, the Earl nominated the site to WMF's 2002 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*, hoping to attract the funding and technical assistance necessary for its implementation.

**A PLAN OF THE CASTLE REMAINS, ABOVE, SHOWS THE PHASES OF ITS CONSTRUCTION OVER MORE THAN TWO CENTURIES. TODAY, THE CASTLE IS THE SUBJECT OF A MAJOR CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN.**

For the past two years, archaeological research conducted by a team from the University of York has been carried out in tandem with a complete structural assessment of the site and emergency stabilization. Aside from clarifying the complex architectural evolution of the castle, work carried out to date has prompted a dramatic shift in our aspirations for the site. At the outset, the goal was simply to arrest further degradation of this sublime ruin. It has been realized, however, that the site has far more potential than originally thought in terms of its historic and economic value for this region of Scotland.

The castle, though relatively little-known even within the country, is of national and international significance. The trust is now interested in opening and presenting this highly significant site to the public. The creation of a new attraction of this type in Caithness has the potential to act as a major economic regenerator within the region, particularly within the nearby town of Wick. Visitor numbers to this area have increased in recent years, and the site's proximity to the Caithness Glass Factory and the Castle of Mey raises the possibility for joint promotion and marketing. Furthermore, the castle's location within one of Scotland's richest biodiversity zones only enhances its allure. Conservation of the site, installation of visitor services, and the implementation of a proper management plan will take an estimated five years to complete. The trust plans to set aside some 30 acres surrounding the site, which will be designated a nature preserve.

Conservation of any historic building is an ongoing process, and it is intended that through opening Castle Sinclair-Girnogie to the public, the costs of upkeep and conservation will be met by funds raised from visitor revenue. To follow the progress of the ongoing restoration project, visit: [www.castle-sg.org](http://www.castle-sg.org) or contact the Clan Sinclair Trust, 137 Claxton Grove, London W6 8HB. ■

