

British Castles

June 2026



Aberdeenshire Castles
Scotland's 'Castle Country'



EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the June 2026 issue of British Castles Magazine.

This month we head to north-east Scotland for Castles of Aberdeenshire, often described as Scotland's Castle Country. Few places offer such a dense concentration of castles and tower houses, and the variety is part of the appeal: cliff-top ruins, great noble seats, compact lairdly towers, and later houses that kept the castle silhouette long after defensive needs had changed.

The first article presents our selection of the ten best castles in Aberdeenshire, chosen to show the region's range and the different roles castles played over time.

Our second feature is a profile of one of them: Dunnottar Castle, the dramatic headland stronghold near Stonehaven.

And our 'Lesser Known Castle' is another on our list: Crathes Castle, an Aberdeenshire tower house shaped by long family ownership and notable for its painted interiors and estate setting.

Our quiz is on Aberdeenshire, a region probably less familiar to readers than, say, the Highlands. See how much you know.

Finally, the gallery this month is, as you'd expect, of Aberdeenshire castles.

Chris



CASTLES IN ABERDEENSHIRE

THE BEST FROM SCOTLAND'S 'CASTLE COUNTRY'

Aberdeenshire is often called Scotland's Castle Country because castles here were not isolated showpieces. The region's wealth, long-established landed families, and strategic routes along the coast and the river valleys of the Dee and Don supported a dense landscape of strongholds and tower houses.

Over time, many sites shifted from defence to display: medieval fortification gave way to more comfortable residences, but the 'castle' look persisted as a marker of status and lineage. Taken together, the castles below show that range clearly, from cliff-edge ruins and great noble seats to compact tower houses and later country-house architecture.



DUNNOTTAR CASTLE (NEAR STONEHAVEN)

Dunnottar's story begins with its setting: a rocky headland that is naturally defensible and easy to control.

The surviving ruins are largely later medieval and early modern, but the site's history reaches back into early Scottish tradition and power struggles along the coast.

It became associated with the safeguarding of the 'Honours of Scotland' (the Scottish crown jewels). It is also closely linked to the Keiths, Earls Marischal, one of the major families of north-east Scotland. It's the subject of an article in this issue.

KILDRUMMY CASTLE (NEAR ALFORD)

Kildrummy is one of the great medieval castles of eastern Scotland, notable for its scale and the clarity of its fortified plan. It is linked to high political stakes because large castles like this were instruments of national power as well as local lordship.

Kildrummy's importance lies in how it represents the 'big castle' world of garrisons, strategic control, and aristocratic authority on a scale beyond the later tower houses that became typical in the region.

CRATHES CASTLE (NEAR BANCHORY)

Crathes is a classic north-east tower house that developed into a refined family home. It is closely associated with the Burnetts of Leys and is particularly noted for its painted decorative ceilings, which place it firmly in the late 16th to early 17th century world of status display, symbolism, and heraldry.

Crathes is a clear example of how fortified houses evolved without losing the architectural language of a castle. It's also the subject of an article later in this issue.

DRUM CASTLE (DRUMOAK)

Drum is often presented as one of the older castle sites in the region, with a medieval tower core and later domestic additions.

Traditionally linked to long-standing local ownership, it illustrates a common Scottish pattern: an early defensible nucleus that becomes the anchor for centuries of adaptation. Its historical interest lies in that long timespan and the way different periods can be read in the building's fabric.

CRAIGIEVAR CASTLE (NEAR ALFORD)

Craigievar is a compact, highly recognisable tower house, closely associated with early 17th-century Scottish 'baronial' taste: turrets, crow-steps, and a silhouette designed to impress.

It is often used as a textbook example of a laird's residence from a period when Scotland's landed families combined defensible form with domestic ambition.

The result is a castle that signals status through design as much as scale.



Craigievar Castle

CASTLE FRASER (NEAR KEMNAY)

Castle Fraser developed from a tower house into a larger and more complex residence. It is often discussed for its layered plan, where defensive features sit alongside later domestic spaces.

Historically it is tied to the social world of the north-east laird class, and it provides a useful contrast with smaller tower houses.

It shows how a fortified residence could become something closer to a great house while retaining the outward language of a castle.



Castle Fraser

FYVIE CASTLE (NEAR TURRIFF)

Fyvie is notable for its long, multi-phase development. It grew from earlier fortification into a substantial castellated residence, associated with successive owners and periods of remodelling.

Fyvie is linked with late medieval and early modern elite life in the north-east, and it is also known for accumulated interiors and collections. It reads as a long architectural biography rather than a single build.



Huntly Castle

HUNTLY CASTLE (HUNTLY)

Huntly is one of the region's major ruins and is closely associated with the Gordon family, among the most powerful noble houses in Scotland.

The site is particularly interesting for the way it shifted emphasis over time, from medieval stronghold to a more Renaissance-influenced residence in which display and comfort mattered alongside defence.

Even as a ruin, Huntly is valuable for showing how elite Scottish residences changed in ambition and style across the later medieval and early modern periods.

BALMORAL CASTLE (ROYAL DEESIDE)

The traditional summer residence of the Royal Family, Balmoral is probably the most famous castle in Scotland. However, it's more of a royal country house in castle form rather than a medieval fortress.

Its modern identity is tied to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who made the estate central to royal life in the 19th century. It became, with Windsor Castle, the late Queen Elizabeth II's favourite castle.

TOLQUHON CASTLE (NEAR ELLON)

Tolquhon is often described as one of the most picturesque examples of a laird's castle-house. It developed from an earlier tower into a more elaborate residence arranged around courtyards, reflecting a period when comfort and display mattered at least as much as defence.

Tolquhon is historically useful because it sits in a transitional space: still recognisably a castle in outline, but increasingly shaped as a home designed for status and domestic life.



Tolquhon Castle

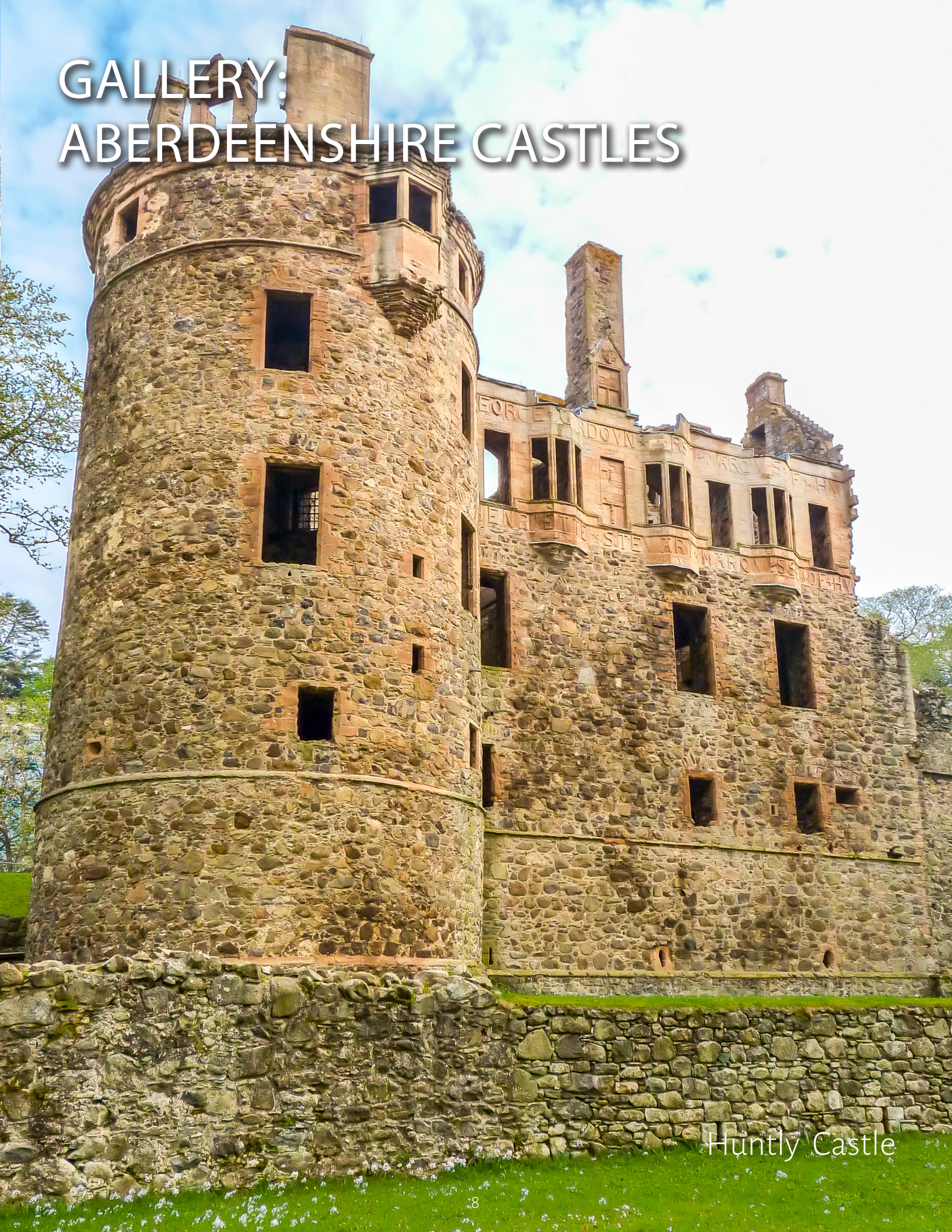


QUIZ: ABERDEENSHIRE

Test your knowledge of Aberdeenshire, its castles, geography, history and local culture. Answers on page 24

1. Which is the only football (soccer) team from the Aberdeenshire region currently playing in the Scottish Premiership?
2. What large mountain range sits partly within Aberdeenshire and forms a major UK national park?
3. Aberdeen ____ is a breed of beef cattle, famous worldwide for its high-quality meat.
4. Which monarch and their spouse purchased Balmoral Castle?
5. What is the name of the river that runs through Aberdeen and reaches the North Sea at the city?
6. What resource industry is a major employment source in the region?
7. Which festival of traditional Scottish games is held annually in the Aberdeenshire village of Braemar?
8. Aberdeen is known as the _____ City after the rock with which many of its buildings are built?
9. Which is closest to Aberdeenshire: Dundee, Edinburgh or Glasgow?
10. Approximately how many castles are in Aberdeenshire: 50, 100, 300 or 500?
11. Which famous Scottish king is traditionally associated with the area, including the wider Moray and Grampian region?
12. What is Doric, associated with the region? An architectural style, local dialect or the ancient name for clan leaders?
13. Which female singer from the 1980s was born in Aberdeen?
14. Are people from Aberdeen known as Aberdonians, Aberdeenians or Abodians?
15. Who wrote 'The Old Man Of Lochnagar', a children's story based in the Balmoral region?
16. What are the Aberdeenshire brands Glendronach, Fettercairn, Glen Garioch and Ardmores types of?
17. If you travelled due West from Aberdeenshire, what Scottish region would you be in when you hit the sea?
18. Which of these Scottish regions shares a border with Aberdeenshire: West Lothian, Perthshire, Argyll or Fife?
19. Which pink-walled castle in Aberdeenshire is said to have inspired Walt Disney's Cinderella Castle?
20. What is the name of the traditional Scottish soup made of chicken, leeks, and potatoes that originated in this region?

GALLERY: ABERDEENSHIRE CASTLES



Huntly Castle



Balmoral Castle Tower

Crathes Castle







Inside Craigievar Castle



Inside The Grounds of Dunnotar Castle

Crathes Castle





Craigievar Castle



DUNNOTTAR CASTLE

SPECTACULAR CLIFF-TOP STRONGHOLD

Dunnottar Castle stands on a rocky headland just south of Stonehaven in Aberdeenshire, a location which explains much of its long importance. Steep cliffs protect it on three sides, while a narrow land approach creates a natural choke point. Over many centuries, that geography made Dunnottar a useful place to hold, a difficult place to take, and a memorable place to associate with major events.

Although the buildings visible today are mainly later medieval and early modern, the site's story reaches back much further. Dunnottar's own historical account places early activity here well before the stone castle, linking the headland to early fortifications and to the wider pattern of power and conflict along Scotland's eastern seaboard.

EARLY ORIGINS

Dunnottar is often introduced as a medieval ruin, but it is better understood as a strategic place used repeatedly across periods. The castle's official history frames it as a site of importance for over a thousand years, and the very name 'dun' reflects the idea of a fort.

In medieval Scotland, coastal strongholds mattered for obvious reasons: coastal movement was a major route for travel, communication, and war. A defended headland could watch the sea lanes and provide a base that was harder to surprise than an inland residence.

Dunnottar's position, with its dominant views and constrained access, is one reason later Scottish noble families invested heavily in building and maintaining it.

WARS OF INDEPENDENCE AND THE KEITHS

Dunnottar's written history becomes clearer in the late medieval period, when the castle appears as a contested asset during the Wars of Independence and their aftermath. The official Dunnottar timeline notes that English forces seized the garrison in 1336 during the Second War of Independence, reflecting how strategically valuable the site was in a period of shifting control and rival claims.



A turning point for the built castle came in the late 14th century with the rise of the Keiths. Dunnottar's history states that in 1392 Sir William Keith, Great Marischal of Scotland, built what is described as the first stone castle at Dunnottar, now known as the Keep.

From that point, Dunnottar became closely tied to the Keith family and the office of the Earl Marischal, giving it a role not only as a residence but also as a centre of elite power in the north-east.

The Keep

A FORTIFIED HOUSEHOLD

Like many Scottish castles, Dunnottar combined defence with domestic life. The surviving remains include strong defensive elements, but they also reflect a functioning noble household with accommodation, service buildings, and spaces intended for status as well as security.

The castle's present form is the product of successive building phases, with later additions creating a more complex 'castle community' rather than a single tower or curtain wall.

This matters because Dunnottar's later fame is not only about battles. It is about the ways a powerful household operated: hosting major figures, managing a large estate, and serving as a secure repository for valuables - sometimes national ones.

Dunnottar's owners were significant enough to receive major royal figures. The castle's official history records that Mary Queen of Scots visited Dunnottar in the 1560s, including a stay in September 1564. Details like this are useful because they locate the castle in a specific social world: a place important enough to host a monarch, and comfortable enough - at least by the standards of the time - to accommodate a royal household.



Dunnottar From The Air

THE 17TH CENTURY AND THE HONOURS OF SCOTLAND

Dunnottar's best-known national episode is its connection to the Honours of Scotland (the crown, sceptre, and sword). The castle's own description highlights that it is famous for saving the Honours from Oliver Cromwell's army in the 1650s.

In more detailed accounts, the basic story runs as follows: after Charles II was crowned at Scone in 1651 using the Honours, the advancing English forces made it unsafe to return them to Edinburgh. Responsibility for the Honours lay with the Earl Marischal, and the decision was taken to place them at Dunnottar.

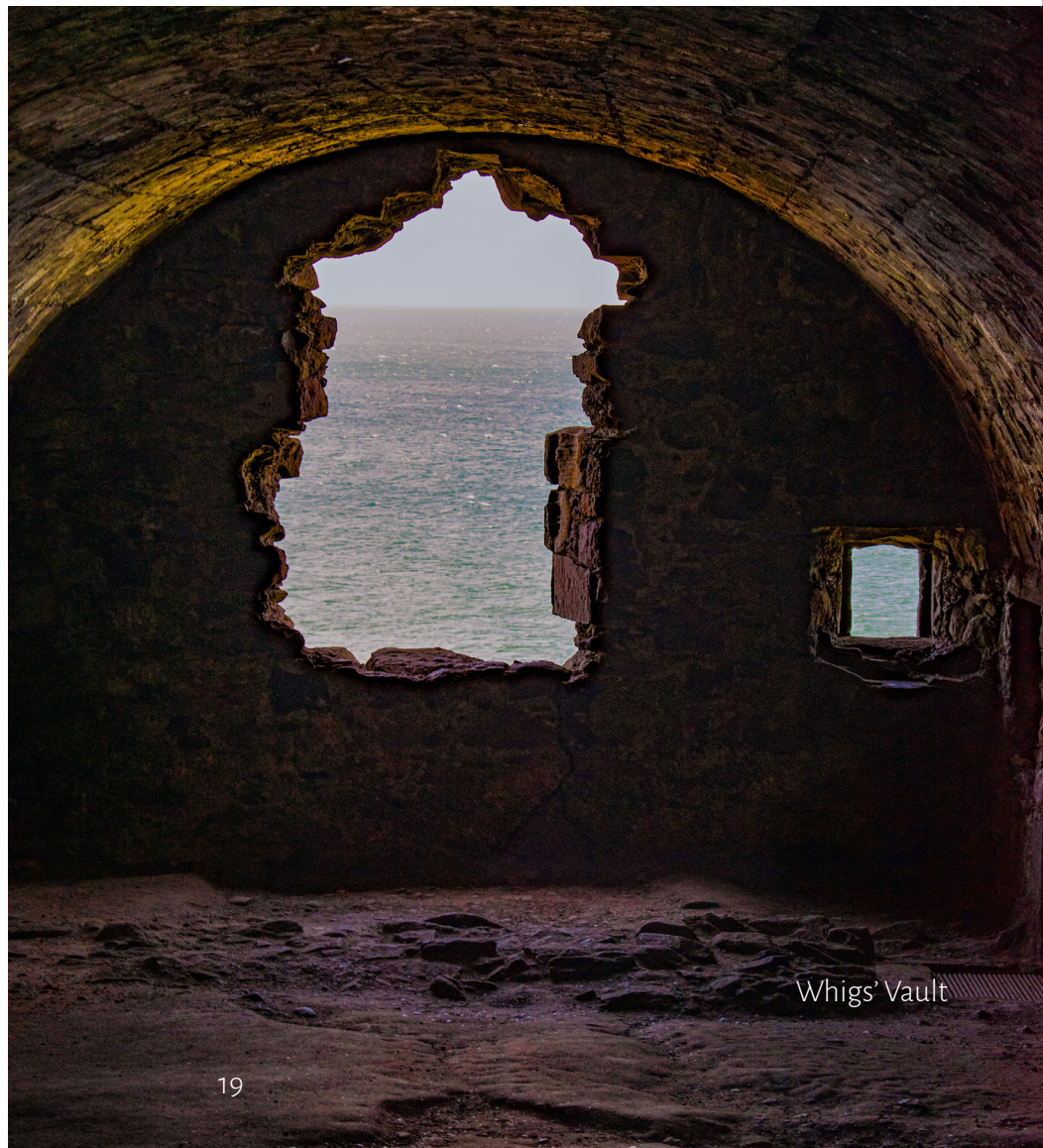
The Honours were then concealed and later removed from the castle during the period of pressure and blockade, with the planning and practical work often associated with figures connected to the castle household and local parish life (notably Elizabeth Douglas and Christian Fletcher in commonly repeated accounts).

Whatever version of the tale is followed in detail, the significance is clear: Dunnottar functioned as a secure 'last resort' stronghold at a moment when the physical symbols of Scottish sovereignty were at risk.

THE WHIGS' VAULT

Dunnottar is also associated with a harsher chapter of later 17th-century Scottish history. In 1685, during a period of intense religious and political conflict, a large group of Covenanters (often associated with Whig/Covenanter resistance) were imprisoned in a cellar at Dunnottar, an episode that has become known as the Whigs' Vault.

This episode is often used to show how castles could serve as instruments of state coercion as well as noble display: places not only of protection and hospitality, but also of confinement.



JACOBITISM, FORFEITURE, DECLINE & RESTORATION

Dunnottar's decline is tied to the political upheavals of the early 18th century. Broadly, its fortunes fell with those of its owning family.

The castle is described as declining after the last Earl Marischal forfeited his titles following participation in the Jacobite rising of 1715.

After forfeiture and sale, Dunnottar was stripped of many valuables and fittings, accelerating the transformation from working great house to roofless ruin.

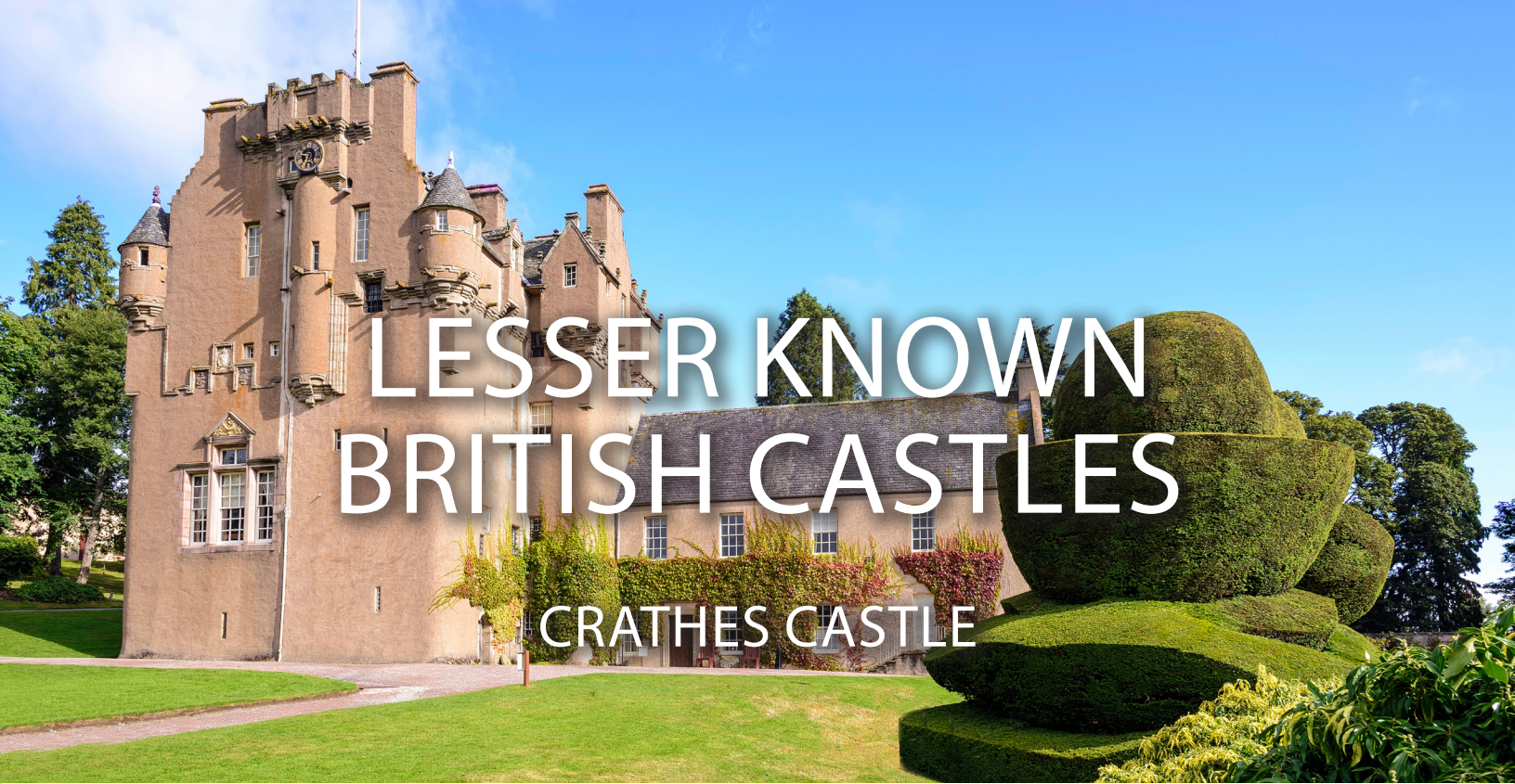
This pattern is common in Britain's castle landscape: buildings do not become romantic ruins simply through age.

They often decline quickly through deliberate dismantling, opportunistic reuse of materials, and the removal of anything valuable once a household is no longer maintained.

Thankfully the twentieth century saw the castle's fortunes recover when, in 1919, Lord and Lady Cowdray purchased the castle and undertook significant restoration, resulting in the stronghold we see today.



The Castle & Surrounds



LESSER KNOWN BRITISH CASTLES

CRATHES CASTLE

Crathes Castle stands in Deeside, Aberdeenshire, and is one of the clearest surviving examples of the north-east Scottish tower house evolving into a more comfortable, highly decorated family home. It is often described in a single breath - turrets, crow steps, painted ceilings - and that is fair as far as it goes.

But Crathes is most interesting when it is treated as a long, layered household rather than a single 'castle moment'. The building carries the marks of changing priorities: security and status in its form, domestic refinement in its interiors, and a steady estate identity that lasted for centuries.

A TOWER HOUSE IN THE MAKING OF LAIRDLY SCOTLAND

Crathes belongs to a broad Scottish pattern that took shape from the later Middle Ages into the early modern period. Across Scotland, particularly in the north-east, landowning families built upward rather than outward.

The tower house - tall, compact, defensible in outline - was a practical solution in a landscape where authority could be contested and where display mattered. A tower house did not need to withstand an army in the way a major royal fortress did, but it did need to project strength, protect people and goods, and make a statement about who held the land.

Crathes sits in that tradition. The building is usually dated mainly to the 16th century, with later changes and additions, and it illustrates how a 'fortified house' could remain a castle in silhouette while becoming a more settled residence in daily life.

In other words, it looks martial, but its story is as much about family continuity and taste as about conflict.

THE BURNETTS OF LEYS AND THE WEIGHT OF CONTINUITY

Crathes is closely associated with the Burnetts of Leys, a family whose long tenure shaped both the building and the way it is remembered. Long ownership matters in a place like this.

A castle held for generations becomes a store of habits and decisions: rooms repurposed, stairways altered, decoration updated, repairs made with the materials and skills of the time.

It is one of the reasons Crathes feels coherent rather than piecemeal. The castle's identity is not simply architectural; it is genealogical: household identity is linked to objects and traditions.



Horn of Leys

The most famous example here is the 'Horn of Leys', associated in family tradition with Robert the Bruce. Legend has it that this beautifully carved, jewel-encrusted ivory horn was bestowed upon the Burnetts by Bruce himself in 1323 to celebrate the family's title of 'Royal Foresters'. Whether taken as strict documentary history or as an inherited story repeated through generations, it shows how Scottish landholding families expressed legitimacy and loyalty through tangible symbols.

INTERIOR

If the exterior of Crathes speaks the language of defence, the interior speaks the language of status and refinement. Crathes is particularly noted for its decorative painted ceilings and beams, associated with late 16th- and early 17th-century tastes. Painted ceilings are not unique to Crathes, but the castle has one of the more memorable concentrations, and the survival is important. In many historic houses, ornamental schemes were later covered up as fashions changed - plastering over older surfaces, repainting, or simplifying rooms for a 'cleaner' look.

At Crathes, the painted work became a defining feature of the house's identity, and its preservation and re-exposure in the modern era reflects a shift towards valuing early interiors as heritage rather than as outdated décor. The imagery itself - heraldic motifs, symbolic figures, decorative patterning - fits a period when landowners used interiors to present lineage, alliances, and learning.

The ceiling is not a private surface; it is the kind of feature meant to be noticed by guests. In that sense, Crathes is a record of how Scottish lairds wanted to be seen: rooted in family, connected by marriage and politics, and stylish.

FROM DEFENSIVE HOUSE TO ESTATE CENTRE

Castles like Crathes were never only buildings. They were centres of estates - places where rents were collected, decisions taken, relationships managed, and local influence exercised. Over time, as the need for private fortification eased and expectations of comfort rose, many tower houses were adapted rather than abandoned.

Crathes reflects that gradual shift. The core remained, but the daily experience of the house became more domestic, with greater emphasis on reception rooms, decoration, and the routines of a settled household.

THE CASTLE GROUNDS

This is also where the grounds become part of the story. Crathes is associated with a long garden tradition, including a walled garden and yew planting often linked by tradition to the early 18th century (a date cited is 1702 for some of the yews).

A walled garden is a practical piece of infrastructure - shelter, cultivation, control of conditions - but it is also an indicator of stability and resources. It suggests a household thinking not only in seasons but in decades. Whatever the thinking the grounds are lovely and well worth a visit in themselves.





Crathes Castle & Grounds

MODERN STEWARDSHIP AND WHAT SURVIVES

In the 20th century, Crathes entered a new phase as a conserved historic property. The transfer to the National Trust for Scotland in 1951 is a key marker here. It placed the castle in a framework designed for long-term preservation, public interpretation, and the maintenance of interiors and collections that might otherwise have been dispersed or lost.

That shift is part of the wider British story of how private houses and castles survived into the present: not by freezing time, but by adapting to new forms of ownership and care.

Quiz Answers: 1. Aberdeen FC; 2. The Cairngorms; 3. Angus; 4. Queen Victoria; 5. River Dee; 6. Oil & Gas; 7. Highland Games; 8. Granite; 9. Dundee; 10. 300; 11. Macbeth; 12. Dialect; 13. Annie Lennox; 14. Aberdonians; 15. King Charles III; 16. Whisky; 17. The Highlands; 18. Perthshire; 19. Craigievar Castle; 20. Cock-a-leekie soup



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