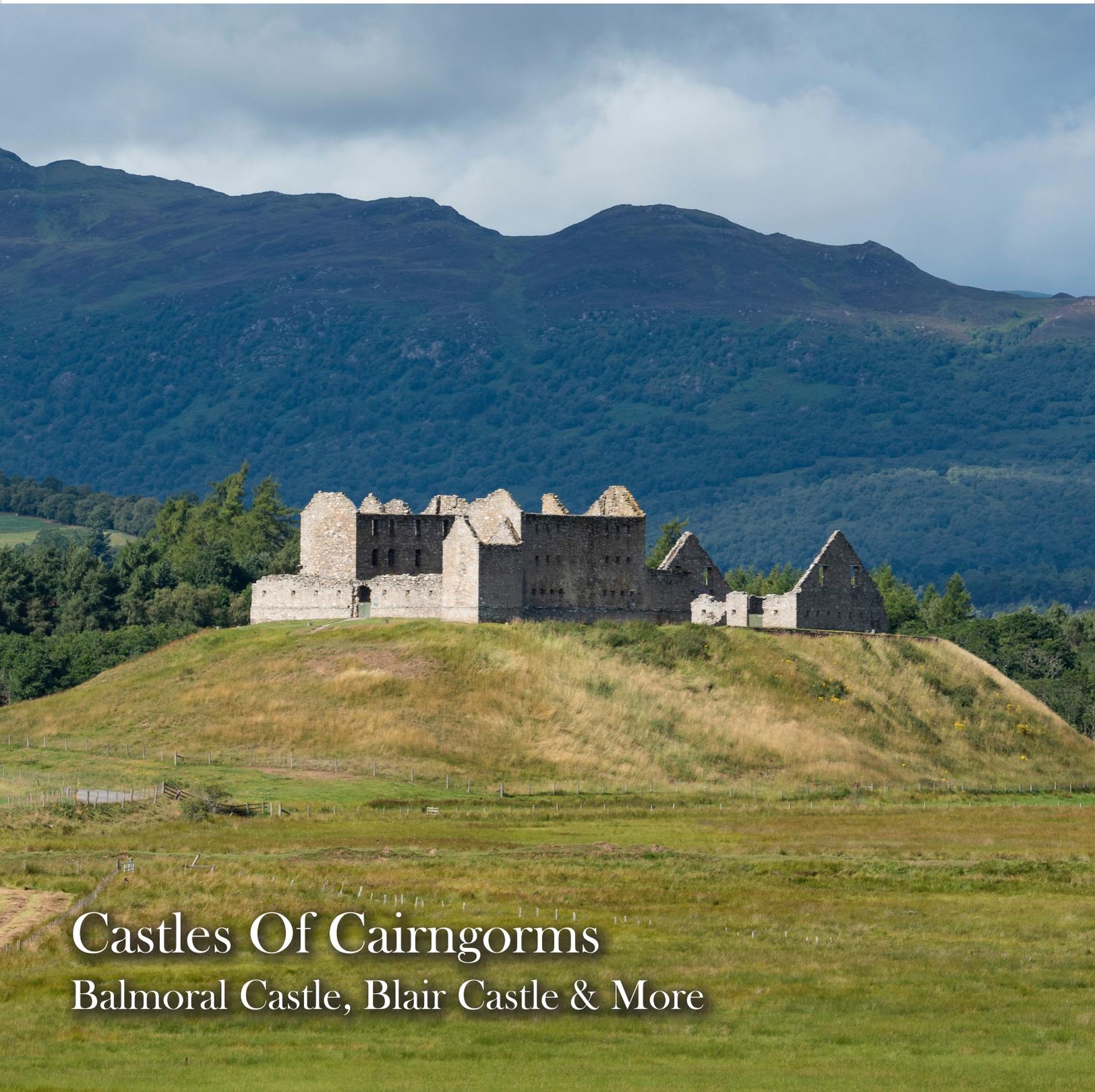


British Castles

March 2026



Castles Of Cairngorms
Balmoral Castle, Blair Castle & More



EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the March 2026 issue of the British Castles Magazine, whose theme is 'Castles Of Cairngorms'. This is the Scottish region near the Highlands and home to several fantastic castles.

Our first feature profiles the finest of these, starting with the most famous, Balmoral. And our gallery contains some fantastic photos of these wonderful places.

Our second article looks at Blair Castle and our 'Lesser Known British Castle' this month is Corgarff Castle, which has a dark past.

Our quiz is our usual picture puzzle - see if you can recognise many of the castles elsewhere in the issue.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this month's edition

Chris



The Cairngorms National Park is not the first place most peoples think of when they picture Scottish castles. That distinction tends to go to Edinburgh or Stirling, and fairly so. But the Cairngorms, which cover a vast stretch of the eastern Highlands, have their own quietly impressive collection of castles and fortified houses, many set against some of the most striking scenery in Britain. Here's our pick of the best....

BALMORAL CASTLE

You can hardly talk about castles in this part of Scotland without mentioning Balmoral. Situated along the River Dee near Ballater, it has been the private Scottish residence of the British Royal Family since Queen Victoria and Prince Albert purchased the estate in 1852. The castle you see today is largely Albert's work; he had the original house demolished and replaced with the handsome granite building that stands now, designed in the Scottish Baronial style that was fashionable at the time.

Balmoral is open to visitors during certain months, typically from April through July, when the Royal Family is not in residence. You won't see the private rooms, but the grounds and gardens are lovely, and the ballroom houses an exhibition of Royal life in the Highlands.

The surrounding Deeside countryside is gorgeous, and the whole area has a well-kept, genteel quality that gives you a good sense of why Victoria called it her "dear paradise,"

BRAEMAR CASTLE

A short drive west of Balmoral, Braemar Castle sits at the edge of the village of the same name. It's a more intimate affair than its royal neighbour; a tall, turreted tower house originally built in 1628 by the Earl of Mar.

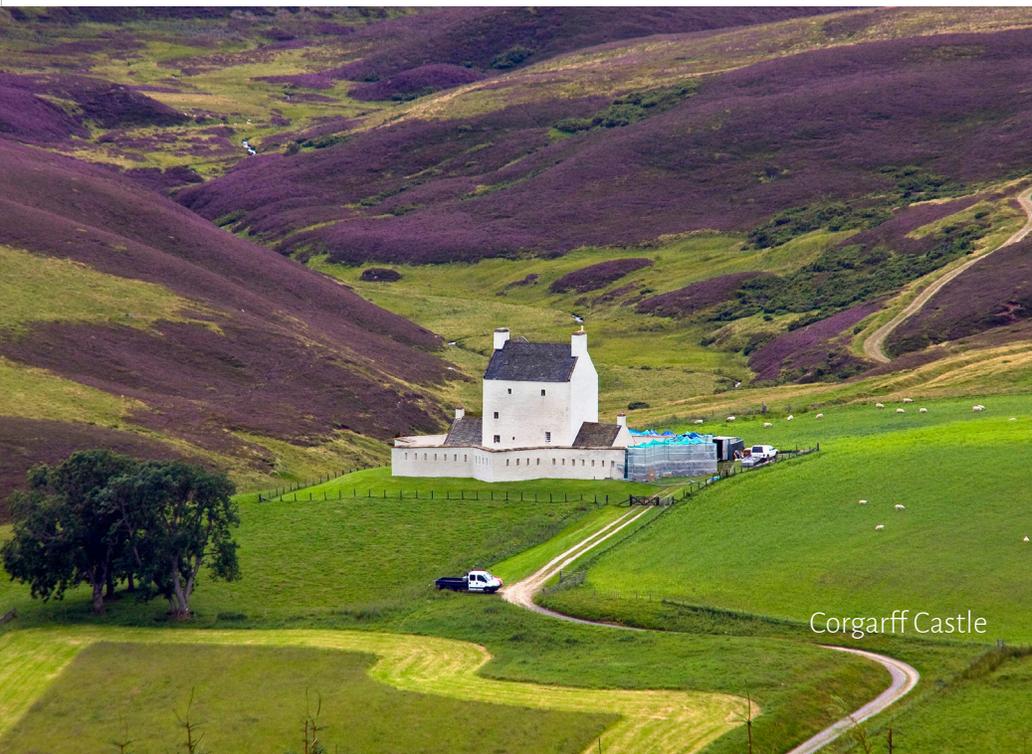
The castle has had a turbulent history, having been burned by the Black Colonel of Inverey, garrisoned by Hanoverian troops after the Jacobite risings, and at one point fitted with a distinctive star-shaped curtain wall that gives it a rather military appearance from above.



Braemar Castle

What makes Braemar especially appealing is that it is community-run. The local community leased it from the Invercauld Estate in 2007 and has done a fine job of maintaining it and welcoming visitors. The rooms are furnished as they would have been in the castle's later years, and the guides are knowledgeable and enthusiastic.

It also happens to be a stone's throw from the site of the famous Braemar Gathering, the Highland games attended each year by the Royal Family.



Corgarff Castle

CORGARFF CASTLE

A military outpost with a dark history, Corgarff Castle is more of a manor house than a traditional castle.

Its plain white tower and defensive walls made it a great military outpost for defenders against the many local rebellions.

It's also this month's 'Lesser Known British Castle' featured later in this issue

BALLINDALLOCH CASTLE

On the northern fringes of the Cairngorms, where the River Avon meets the Spey, Ballindalloch Castle has been home to the Macpherson-Grant family since 1546. That's a remarkable run for any family home, and the castle reflects it - the building has grown and evolved over the centuries, from its original tower to the comfortable and rather elegant country house it is today.

Ballindalloch is sometimes called the "Pearl of the North," which might sound like marketing, but there's something to it. The gardens are beautiful, the setting between two rivers is as picturesque as anything in Speyside, and the interior is full of the accumulated possessions and portraits of generations.

It's the kind of place where you get a real sense of continuity - of a family rooted in a particular landscape for almost five hundred years. The estate also has a herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle and sits right in the heart of whisky country, should you wish to combine your castle visit with a distillery tour.

BLAIR CASTLE

Blair castle, on the southern edge of the Cairngorms National Park, is the ancient seat of the Dukes of Atholl. It has stood in Perthshire for over 700 years. Famous for its white-washed Scottish Baronial facade, it houses Europe's last remaining private army, the Atholl Highlanders.

It's also the feature of second article in this issue.



Ballindalloch Castle



Ruthven Barracks

RUTHVEN BARRACKS

Near Kingussie, the roofless walls of Ruthven Barracks rise from a grassy mound above the Spey valley. This is not a castle but a government garrison built after the 1715 Jacobite Rising to house 120 troops tasked with policing the Highlands.

In 1745, just twelve Redcoats held off around three hundred Jacobites — though the barracks fell to a better-armed force the following year.

Ruthven's most poignant moment came days after Culloden, when thousands of defeated Jacobites gathered here ready to fight on, only to receive word from Bonnie Prince Charlie telling each man to save himself. They burned the barracks and vanished into the hills.

What you see today is essentially what they left behind — free to visit and on a quiet day entirely yours.

DRUMIN CASTLE

Not far from Ballindalloch, the ruins of Drumin Castle stand on a commanding bluff above the meeting point of the River Livet and the River Avon.

This is the earliest surviving tower house in Moray, dating from the late fourteenth century and associated with Alexander Stewart — the Wolf of Badenoch — remembered chiefly for burning Elgin Cathedral in 1390. Drumin is a ruin, so don't expect furnished rooms, but atmosphere is in abundance.

After recent masonry repairs you can climb a narrow stone staircase to the first floor and look out over the same river valleys that made this a strategic position seven centuries ago.

It's a quiet, off-the-beaten-track sort of place, and all the better for it.

KILDRUMMY CASTLE

Kildrummy Castle, in upper Strathdon, is a different proposition entirely.

Built in the mid-thirteenth century as the seat of the Earls of Mar, it was once one of the most powerful fortresses in northern Scotland — often called “the noblest of northern castles.”

It’s a ruin now, but even in its broken state, the scale is impressive.



Kildrummy Castle

The shield-shaped plan, the remains of six towers, and the thick curtain walls all speak to a castle that was built to dominate and to endure.

Kildrummy’s history reads like a summary of Scottish medieval conflict. Edward I of England visited twice during the Wars of Independence. Robert the Bruce sent his wife and daughter here for safety in 1306, only for the castle to fall through treachery - a blacksmith was bribed to set fire to it from within, and was reportedly paid in molten gold poured down his throat.

The castle changed hands repeatedly over the centuries before finally being abandoned after the failed Jacobite Rising of 1715. It’s managed by Historic Environment Scotland and is open from April through September. The nearby castle gardens, laid out in the old quarry from which the castle’s stone was cut, are a pleasant bonus.



These are not the grandest or most famous castles in Scotland, and that’s rather the point. What they offer instead is atmosphere, history, and an unusually close connection to the landscape around them.

In the Cairngorms, the castles don’t compete with the scenery. They belong to it.

QUIZ: CAIRNGORMS CASTLES

See if you can match the Cairngorm Castles locations mentioned elsewhere in this issue, and listed below, with its photo. Each castle can appear more than once. Answers on page 24

Ballindalloch Castle

Blair Castle

Ruthven Barracks

Kildrummy Castle

Braemar Castle

Corgarff Castle

Drumin Castle

Balmoral Castle





GALLERY: CASTLES IN THE CAIRNGORMS



Balmoral Castle

Braemar Castle



Corgarff Castle





Drummin Castle

Blair Castle Grounds







Crathie Kirk On the Balmoral Estate



BLAIR CASTLE

HOME TO EUROPE'S LAST PRIVATE ARMY

If you drive north from Perth on the A9, the main artery through the Scottish Highlands, the mountains begin to close in somewhere around Pitlochry. A few miles further on, just past the famous Pass of Killiecrankie, you reach the village of Blair Atholl.

And there, set against a sweep of parkland with the Grampian peaks rising behind it, stands Blair Castle — a vast, white-harled fortress that has controlled the gateway to the Highlands for the better part of eight centuries. It is, by any measure, one of the great houses of Scotland, and one of the most rewarding to visit.

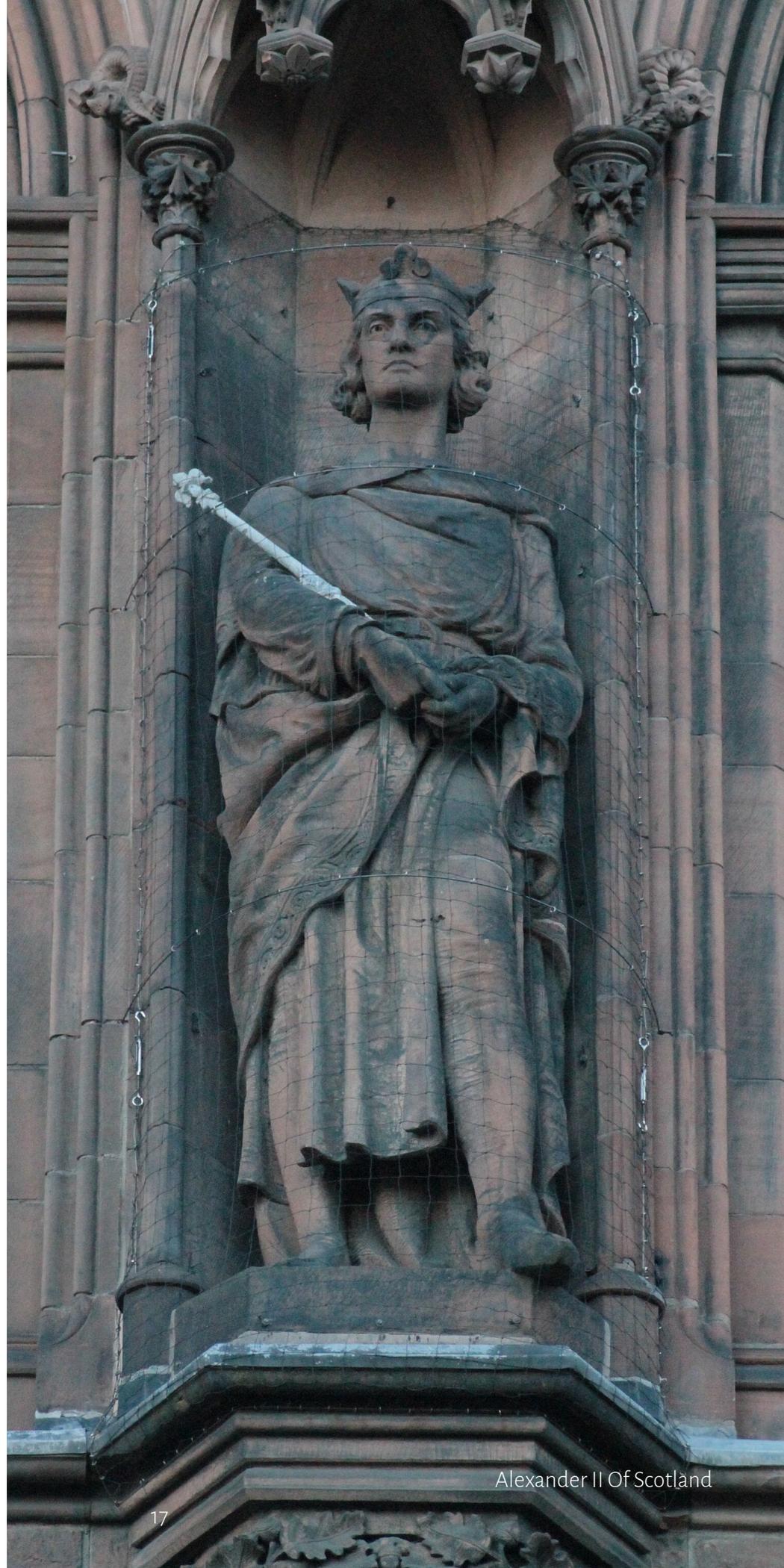
AN UNINVITED BEGINNING

The castle has one of the better origin stories in Scottish history. In 1269, while the Earl of Atholl was away on crusade, a neighbour by the name of John Comyn of Badenoch decided to build a tower on the Earl's land.

When Atholl returned and discovered the interloper, he complained to King Alexander III. The complaint evidently did little good in the short term, because Comyn's Tower still stands as the oldest and tallest part of Blair Castle today. The Earl simply absorbed it into his own stronghold, and it has been growing and changing ever since.

That ability to absorb and adapt is one of the defining qualities of the place. What you see today is not a single building from a single period but an assembly of structures spanning nearly every era of Scottish architecture.

The medieval tower gave way to a sixteenth-century great hall, which was later enveloped by a Georgian mansion in the 1740s, which was then re-castellated in the Victorian period to give the building its current romantic, turreted appearance. The white harling on the walls ties it all together and conceals the many seams beneath.



Alexander II Of Scotland

GATEKEEPER OF THE HIGHLANDS

Blair Castle's position in Glen Garry made it one of the most strategically important strongholds in Scotland. Whoever held it controlled the main route north to Inverness.

It was therefore often in the centre of events: it was besieged by Cromwell's forces in 1652 and held until the Restoration in 1660. In 1689, Viscount Dundee - "Bonnie Dundee" - used it as his base before the Battle of Killiecrankie, two miles to the south.

He and his officers held their council in the castle on the eve of the battle. The Jacobites won the day, but Dundee was killed; he is buried in the in the castle grounds.

The castle saw action again during the Jacobite risings of 1745–46. Bonnie Prince Charlie stayed here twice during the campaign. Blair Castle holds the distinction of being the last British castle to have been besieged: by Jacobite forces in early 1746, just weeks before the disaster at Culloden.

The Murray family, then owners, were divided in their loyalties - a father on the government side, sons among the rebels - an example of the impossible choices these conflicts imposed on Highland families.





Atholl Highlanders

EUROPE'S ONLY PRIVATE ARMY

No article about Blair Castle would be complete without mentioning the Atholl Highlanders, because there is simply nothing else like them. They are a ceremonial infantry regiment — roughly a hundred men, including a pipe band — and they serve as the personal bodyguard of the Duke of Atholl, chief of Clan Murray. They are the only legal private army in Europe.

The story of how this came about is a good one. In 1844, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert stayed at Blair Castle during a tour of the Highlands. The Duke provided a bodyguard of Highlanders to protect the royal party during their visit, and Victoria was so charmed that she presented them with colours — essentially granting the regiment official status in perpetuity.

The Atholl Highlanders have paraded at Blair Castle ever since, armed with nineteenth-century Lee–Metford rifles and dressed in the Murray of Atholl tartan. They have never seen active service, but every May they assemble on the castle forecourt for their annual inspection, and the Duke travels from South Africa to take the salute.

It is wonderfully anachronistic, and all the more appealing for it.

CASTLE INTERIOR

Blair Castle was one of the first great private houses in Britain to open its doors to the public, beginning in 1936, and it remains the most visited historic house in Scotland.

More than thirty rooms are open, and they reward careful attention. The Entrance Hall displays weapons used at Culloden, arranged in the elaborate decorative style beloved of Victorian Scottish houses.



Inside Blair Castle

The Drawing Room has a ceiling considered one of the finest in Scotland, with Louis XVI gilt furniture and embroidered covers worked by the third Duchess and her family. The Tapestry Room contains Mortlake tapestries that once belonged to Charles I, sold off by Cromwell after the King's execution.

And the Victorian Ballroom, commissioned by the seventh Duke as a home for the Atholl Highlanders, is decorated with 175 pairs of antlers — a number that sounds excessive until you see them arranged overhead, at which point it simply looks magnificent.



Blair Castle Grounds

CASTLE GROUNDS

The grounds deserve time as well. There is a nine-acre walled garden restored to its original Georgian layout, with fruit trees, a Chinese bridge, and a Gothic folly.

The parkland contains some of the tallest trees in Britain, including a Grand Fir that stands over two hundred feet high.

And the ruins of St Bride's Kirk, where Bonnie Dundee lies buried, are a quiet, atmospheric spot well worth the short walk.



LESSER KNOWN BRITISH CASTLES

CORGARFF CASTLE

If you continue further into the hills along the A939 toward Tomintoul, you'll come across Corgarff Castle, standing in lonely splendour on an exposed stretch of moorland in Strathdon.

This is a different sort of castle altogether. It's a plain, whitewashed tower house surrounded by a star-shaped defensive wall, and its setting is so remote and windswept that you immediately understand why it was chosen as a military outpost.

To the casual eye, Corgarff might look more like a fortified farmhouse than a castle. But its history runs as deep and as dark as anywhere in Scotland, and the building's plainness is, in its own way, part of the story.

A CASTLE AT THE EDGE OF THINGS

Corgarff sits at roughly 1,400 feet above sea level, near the headwaters of the River Don, on the old mountain road that crosses the Lecht pass between Deeside and Speyside. It is high, exposed country — the kind of place where winter arrives early and stays late, and where the road between Cock Bridge and Tomintoul is routinely the first in Scotland to close for snow.

The castle commands this route, and that strategic position explains why, for all its apparent remoteness, Corgarff found itself at the centre of events again and again over the course of three centuries.

The tower house was built around 1530, probably by the Elphinstone family, though it later passed to the Forbes clan of Towie. In its original form it was a simple rectangular tower with walls nearly six feet thick, a vaulted hall on the first floor, and chambers above. It was not, by the standards of the time, a grand building. But it was solid, and it controlled the pass, and that was enough to make it worth fighting over.

THE BURNING OF CORGARFF

Corgarff's darkest chapter came in November 1571, during a bitter feud between the Forbes and Gordon clans.

The Forbes men were away, and the castle was held by Margaret Campbell, wife of the laird, along with her children, servants, and household. When Adam Gordon of Auchindoun arrived with his men and demanded the castle's surrender, Margaret refused and reportedly shot one of Gordon's men through the knee with a pistol.

Gordon's response was savage. He piled kindling against the walls and set the castle alight.

Margaret, her children, and twenty-four others burned to death inside.

The event was so shocking that it entered the popular imagination and was commemorated in the old Scots ballad "Edom o' Gordon," one of the great tragic ballads of the Border and Highland tradition.

The castle was eventually repaired, but the memory of that November night has never entirely left the place.



Corgarff Castle

THE CASTLE THAT KEPT CHANGING HANDS

After the burning, Corgarff's troubles were far from over. In 1607 the castle was seized by local bandits who used it as a base for plundering the surrounding area until it was recovered by the Earl of Mar in 1626.

In 1645, James Graham, the Marquis of Montrose occupied it during his Royalist campaign in the Civil War, by which time the building was reportedly in ruins. It was repaired once more, only to be burned again in 1689 by Jacobite supporters who wanted to deny it to government forces.

When the Earl of Mar launched the Jacobite Rising of 1715 from nearby Kildrummy Castle, he came to Corgarff to assemble and equip his army before marching on to Braemar. After that rising failed, government forces burned the castle yet again.

Thirty years later, during the 1745 Rising, Jacobite forces were using Corgarff as an arms store. In early 1746, a forced march by three hundred government soldiers and a hundred dragoons through the snow from Aberdeen caught the Jacobites off guard.

When the troops arrived, the rebels had fled so hurriedly that a cat was found asleep in front of the still-burning fire. It is one of those small, vivid details that brings the past sharply into focus.



FROM TOWER HOUSE TO BARRACKS

Battle Of Culloden

After the final defeat of the Jacobites at Culloden in 1746, the government bought Corgarff and set about transforming it into a military garrison. The conversion was thorough. The old vaulted ceiling of the hall was removed and an extra timber floor inserted to create a barracks dormitory.

Single-storey pavilions were added on either side to house a bakehouse and brewhouse. And around the whole complex, the government built the distinctive star-shaped curtain wall, fitted with musket loops, that gives Corgarff its unique silhouette today. The wall was not designed for a grand siege — it was designed to keep a small garrison safe in hostile territory.



For nearly a century, Redcoats were stationed here, first to suppress lingering Jacobite sympathies and later to combat the illegal distillation and smuggling of whisky, which was rampant in these hills. At its peak the garrison comprised about fifty men, two officers, and a great deal of boredom.

The soldiers' quarters have been restored by Historic Environment Scotland as they would have looked in the years following the 1748 conversion, complete with cramped sleeping arrangements, a communal eating area, and graffiti scratched into the ceiling by men with time on their hands. A small whisky still from the period sits in one of the pavilions — a reminder of the trade the soldiers were there to stamp out.

The garrison was finally withdrawn in 1831, and after that the castle gradually fell into decline. Its last residents were the Ross sisters, known locally as the Castle Ladies, who left during the First World War.

Quiz Answers: 1. Ruthven Barracks; 2. Ballindalloch Castle; 3. Corgarff Castle; 4. Kildrummy Castle ; 5. Blair Castle; 6. Drumin Castle; 7. Braemar Castle; 8. Ballindalloch Castle; 9. Blair Castle; 10. Ruthven Barracks ; 11. Balmoral Castle; 12. Kilchurn Castle; 13. Drumin Castle; 14. Blair Castle



British Castles Magazine

published by british-castles.com