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Hermitage Castle Grim Guardian of The Borders

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Hermitage Castle

As is the case with most ancient Scottish castles, the origins of Hermitage are obscure. The stream beside the castle was originally known as the Marching Burn but sometime about the end of the twelfth century, a reclusive hermit from whom the area derived its name inhabited the site. About the same time the land was held by a Norman family called De Bolebeck. This

family could have been responsible for some of the earthworks beside the present castle. Those Norman families who were given land in Scotland had to erect a building, partly for shelter, but also as a base from which they could exercise control over the native inhabitants. They did this by constructing a "mote and bailey using local forced labor to build a mote or mound topped by a small wooden fort and surrounded by a stout fence. It is possible that the first Hermitage Castle was built on the site of such a deserted mote and bailey. The fact that it was surrounded by bogs and marsh would have made it even more defensible. It would have been needed, for the Norman incomers would have faced a native population bitterly resentful of these ruthless, alien incomers.

The De Soulis family appear to have become Lords of Liddesdale during the reign of David I. They were already a powerful family, having lands in Northamptonshire and in Haddington where their name is preserved in the village of Saltoun or Soulistoun. It is with this family that the area started to develop its sinister reputation. In 1207, monastic records tell us a Ranulph de Soulis was "assassinated by his domestics". This Ranulph was the nephew of the first Lord of Liddesdale. It could be that this incident reflected the hostility between native serfs and Norman masters, or were the De Soulis family particularly harsh in their

dealings with the Scots peasantry? It is probable that the murder of Ranulph took place at the site of the old castle on the Liddle crags around which the original village of Castletown grew.

It would have been at this time that the village of Castletown, situated at the junction of the Hermitage and Liddle rivers, was developing. Huddled beside the castle there would have been a miserable collection of hovels, not unlike those we see in the third world today. The natives had to labor on their lord's land and he could summon them for military service whenever he required. He had the right of "pit and gallows" which allowed him to hang men or drown women as he deemed fit. Though nominally Christian, native culture was predominantly pagan in spirit; constantly invoking the old gods of Norse and Celtic mythology. Thus a belief in magic, witchcraft and sorcery underpinned their daily lives. On a ridge two miles north of the village stood a stone circle - a sacred place to the pagan. It is now known as Nine Stane Rig and it was to play a major part in folk memories of the De Soulis family.



Hermitage Castle

In 1244 Henry the Third of England announced that "a certain castle has been erected in the marches between Scotland and England which is called Hermitage". It is said that Henry used this as an excuse for going to war. Whether this is true or not, the establishment of a stronger castle in Liddesdale would have been seen as a threat to England. This castle, like its predecessor, would probably have been built of wood as stone built castles were not to appear in Scotland until the beginning of the 14th century. It

may have stood where the present ruins of the castle chapel are situated.

A Nicholas de Soulis was made Sheriff of Roxburgh in 1248 and was described as being "the wisest and most eloquent man in the kingdom". Another Nicholas was one of the claimants to the Scottish throne after the death of Margaret, the Maid of Norway and later became one of the Guardians of the Realm. John de Soulis supported Bruce during the Wars of Independence and died along with Edward Bruce, brother of the Bruce, at the battle of Dundalk in 1318. John was succeeded by his younger brother, William. This William has often been identified as "the wicked Lord Soulis" of ballad and legend, though many of the tales ascribed to him may belong more properly to his ancestor, Ranulph.

The ballads and legends tell us of a black magician, steeped in wickedness, who comes to a very nasty end. If they are not historically accurate, they probably reflect local attitudes to the DeSouls family and the dread in which Hermitage was held. It could be that much of the wickedness ascribed to Lord Soulis was

made up of memories from the old village of Castletown and later transferred to a single person.

According to one of the legends the Cout of Keelder, one of Lord Soulis' greatest enemies, was out hunting when he strayed into Liddesdale. Working his evil magic, Lord Soulis enticed the young knight and his followers to Hermitage Castle. When they arrived the wicked lord cast a spell to which all the Cout's followers succumbed. The young knight however, was protected by his magic helmet and managed to escape from the castle only to drown in Hermitage Water during a desperate struggle with the De Soulis men. On the left of the chapel, beside the spot where he is supposed to have met his death, is a mound which tradition says is the grave of the Cout of Keelder.

History tells us that in 1290, the Guardians of Scotland commanded Sir William de Soulis, Lord of Liddesdale, to arrest Sir Richard Knout, Sheriff of Cumbria, and bring him to Edinburgh. In order to do this in a legal fashion, it was necessary that Sir Richard be captured on Scottish soil. Less than a year later a document refers to the executors of the late Sir Richard Knout. We do not know how he met his death but the hill at the foot of the Chapel was long known as the Deer Park. The grave of the Cout measured some ten feet in length, a recent visitor remarked on it to the local gravedigger who replied, "Ah, weel'e ken, it's the Cout's, an' as he was a very big man aw pit other twae feet t'ill't mase!" So do legends grow!

Over the centuries stories about the legendary wickedness of Lord Soulis grew in the fertile ground of local lore. He mistreated his peasants and terrorized his neighbors. He decoyed Armstrong, the Laird of Mangerton, to Hermitage and after entertaining him to a feast, cruelly murdered him. This deed was made all the more shocking as Mangerton had previously saved the life of his ungrateful lord. Aiding and abetting him in all this wickedness was his accomplice, Red Ringan, who faithfully carried out his master's commands. According to a ballad, their downfall came about when Soulis abducted a young girl who was promised to the Laird of Branhholm. In order to forestall any opposition, Red Ringan was sent to capture Branhholm Tower and bring the young laird to Hermitage. Red Ringan succeeded in capturing the young laird but failed to take the tower when his men got stuck in a bog. Mean while, Branhholm's brother, Walter the Bold, with a large band of men took Hermitage, rescued the captives and took Soulis prisoner. They took him out to Nine Stane Rig and there boiled him alive in a cauldron after winding him in a sheet of lead. It is said that the cauldron had been prepared for a long time and that the justification for such a barbaric act had come from the king himself. Growing weary of the constant complaints of De Soulis' tenants, he had exclaimed "Boil him if you please, but let me hear no more of him!"

History tells the story a little differently. In 1320 William de Soulis was arrested by King Robert I for taking part in a conspiracy to replace him on the throne. When he was arrested De Soulis was accompanied by over three hundred retainers, all wearing the De Soulis livery. The reasons for the conspiracy are obscure, but a number of the nobility were unhappy at the distribution of land after Bruce's victory. De Soulis also had royal blood and was a member of one of the most

powerful feudal families in Scotland and may have harbored ambitions for the crown for himself. Whatever the reasons, De Soulis was imprisoned in Dumbarton castle and the De Soulis family disappear from Scottish history for ever. Meanwhile popular resentment against the family was given full rein, helped no doubt by the Bruce propaganda machine. It was not uncommon to ascribe witchcraft to those who were objects of local hatred. It wouldn't make such a good story if "the wicked Lord Soulis" was allowed to die an ordinary death and they had Nine Stane Rig; an ancient, neolithic stone circle situated on a windswept moor and long associated with pagan or magic ceremonies. Desolate, wild and windswept, it was an ideal setting for a barbaric and heathen act of communal vengeance. It is recorded that a sheriff in the Mearns was boiled alive in a cauldron during the reign of James the First. Perhaps this incident was transferred to the De Soulis legend and given a little local color. There could also be echoes of the assassination of Ranulph de Soules by his "domestics" back in 1207. Folk memories were long in these days, even if they got a bit mixed up.

Whatever the truth, Hermitage was regarded with dread by the local people for centuries afterwards. Sir Walter Scott often visited the castle, it was one of his favorite places and he described the locals as:

"Glowrin' roun wi' anxious care Lest Redcap catch them unaware"

This "Redcap" or "Redcomb" or sometimes "Bloody Cap", was a malignant being who was supposed to lurk in ruins associated with great evil. Perhaps he is "Red Ringan", Lord Soulis' wicked accomplice. He is described as being short and thick set, with long prominent teeth, talon like fingers, eyes of fiery red and hair streaming down over his shoulders. He carried a pikestaff and wore a red cap on his head. A description detailed enough to keep the most reckless balms away from the castle ruins! When De Soulis was being led away to his grisly end, he is supposed to have flung his key over his shoulder saying it would remain where it fell until he returned. In 1806 the Duke of Buccleuch was supervising some laborers working in the ruins of Hermitage, when they uncovered the remains of a beautiful floor and discovered an old rusty iron key. There was no doubt in the minds of the laborers whose keys they had found!

The castle continued to be a center of strife and bloodshed throughout most of the fourteenth century. In 1335, Edward Balliol, who was trying to regain the Scottish crown for his family, granted it to Ralph Neville, one of his English supporters. Sir William Douglas, the famous Knight of Liddesdale and Flower of Chivalry, captured it in 1338 after having destroyed an English supply column outside Melrose. A grateful monarch rewarded him with Liddesdale and made him Warden of the Middle Marches and Sheriff of Teviotdale. However, this "gallant" knight was accused of treasonable correspondence with the English and removed from his offices. These were given to his old comrade in arms, Sir Alexander Ramsay, who had recently wrested Roxburgh Castle from the English. The Sheriffs post was a particularly lucrative one as he could appropriate all the court fines. Sir William was particularly resentful of this loss and led a force to Hawick where the new sheriff was holding court. He surrounded the courthouse and in the ensuing melee wounded Sir Alexander and carried him off the Hermitage. There, the unfortunate knight was flung in to a dungeon and allowed



Mary Queen of Scots

to starve to death. Local tradition says that he extended his agony for some days by eating seventeen ears of corn which had fallen through cracks in the floor of the corn loft above his cell. The exactness of the number of ears of corn should make us a bit sceptical of this story and the fact that the room above was actually a guard room should make us even more doubtful of its accuracy. Sir William was too powerful for the king to bring to justice and no doubt such acts seem more horrific to our sensibilities than they would have been to those of a more violent age. More serious in the eyes of the crown was that the noble knight was again plotting with the English. This time he was going to allow them free passage through Liddesdale to invade Scotland. In 1352 he was murdered by his nephew while out hunting in the Ettrick forest. The nephew was granted Liddesdale

by a grateful monarch and subsequently became the first Earl of Douglas. He had to wait awhile before he would enjoy the fruits of his murderous assignment in the Ettrick Forest. The widow of the Knight of Liddesdale appealed to Edward the Third of England who was trying to consolidate his hold over southern Scotland; loyalty to the Scottish throne was not as strong as self interest as a motivating factor among the Border nobility. Edward the Third granted her claim



James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell

to Hermitage on condition that she married an Englishman. Thus encouraged, she promptly married Lord Dacre who seized Hermitage was during this period of English occupation that the oldest surviving pans of the castle were constructed along the lines of an English fortified house. The castle was eventually recaptured by the Douglasses and held by them until 1491. The castle was further strengthened and extended during this time taking on the aspects with which we are familiar to day. The strategic significance of Hermitage in these turbulent times was emphasized when a holder, Earl Archibald, was suspected of treasonable correspondence with the English and removed from his post. He could not have helped his case much when he murdered Patrick Spens of Kilspindie, a favorite of the king.

Hermitage thus came into the possession of Patrick Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell. This Earl proved to be equally suspect in his dealings with England, in 1538 the castle was taken over by the crown and made the principal seat of the Warden of Liddesdale with a standing garrison of one hundred men.

It is hardly surprising that the people of Liddesdale should have developed a reputation for thievery and savagery given their geographical situation and the examples set by their lords and masters. Liddesdale attracted outlaws, criminals and other "broken men". To a people brutalised by violence, cattle rustling,

raiding and thievery became a way of life. A contemporary remarked, "They have a persuasion that all property is common by the law of nature". Such was their infamous reputation that they were officially "cursed" by the Archbishop of Glasgow. Occasionally the crown would try and impose its authority on this wild land and even allowed English armies into Liddesdale to bring it to heel. It was not until James the Sixth ascended the throne of a united kingdom that Liddesdale began to adapt to a more peaceful way of life.

The two most powerful families in Liddesdale in the sixteenth century were the Elliots and the Armstrongs. Owing little or no allegiance to the crown, they raided with impunity in England and Scotland alike. In 1566 Mary Queen of Scots went to Jedburgh to hold a justice court. Her Warden of Liddesdale was the notorious James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell. He decided to impress his queen and bring to Jedburgh some of the Elliots who had been causing him more than a little trouble. He found this easier said than done. He was stabbed by Little Jock Elliot of the Park whom he had just shot. Elliot subsequently died of his wounds but is immortalised for ever in the lines:

"My name is little Jock Elliot And who daw meddle Wi me"

The badly wounded Bothwell was carried back to Hermitage but had to negotiate to get in as a group of Elliots, who had been imprisoned in the castle, had managed to overthrow the garrison and seize the castle. News of his wounding brought the Queen to Hermitage. Her apparent devotion to the man who was to be the prime suspect in her husband's murder and whom she later married, was to do her great harm in later years. On her return to Jedburgh, Mary became very ill. So desperate was her condition that her secretary started to make arrangements for her funeral. Years later as she prepared to lay her head on the block in Fotheringay Castle, she was heard to murmur, "Would that! had died at Jedburgh". Perhaps Bothwell also wished that he could have died at Hermitage as he lay in the Danish dungeon where he was to slowly lose first his mind and then his life.

In 1587 the castle came under the control of Francis Bothwell, a favorite of James the 6th, who was later made Earl of Bothwell. In time honored Border fashion he conspired against his patron and was forced to flee to exile. Hermitage was then granted to Sir Walter Scott of Branxholm in 1594 and remained with the Buccleuch family until 1930 when it came under the care of the Scottish Development Department. Its strategic role had disappeared with the union of the crowns in 1603 and with it went its role in subsequent Scottish history. By the end of the 18th century it had become an abandoned ruin. It was extensively repaired in 1820, but as the plan of the castle before reconstruction was lost in 1810 it is impossible to know exactly how much the restoration changed the original facade.

The Liddesdale valley became a remote, isolated place. It was not until the 19th century that a road was built to go through the valley. Much of Scot land's early history is fragmented and is mostly hidden from us. Hermitage Castle stands like a stark, gaunt symbol of dark, disordered times. Perhaps that is why it still has the power to disturb.