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Rosyth Castle - Rosyth, Fife





Rosyth Castle

Located on the shores of the Firth of Forth in St Margaret's Hope, Fife, Rosyth Castle was built around 1450 as the residence of Sir David Stewart who had been granted the Barony of Rosyth in 1428 by James I of Scotland. The castle remained in the Stewart family until the late 17th century. One of the windows still bears the date 1635 and the initials I. S. M. N for James Stewart and his wife Margaret Napier.

The castle was built on a small island with access from the north by a causeway which was submerged at high tide. It was a fortified residence consisting of a tower house in an L-plan standing nearly 20 meters tall with thick walls, originally surrounded by an unusually tall barmkin (a defensive enclosure). Features such as gun-loops can still be seen. The courtyard within the enclosure would have contained the domestic buildings including stables, brewhouse and bakehouse. A well preserved dovecot can still be seen to the north of the castle. The original tower house was later enlarged and extended in the 16th and early 17th centuries. An armorial panel includes the initials M R for Maria Regina, each below a crown and the date 1561.

Rosyth Castle came into the possession of the Earl of Hopetoun and remained in that family until 1903. It had been unoccupied since the 18th century and stonework was reused in other structures. In time the courtyard buildings were almost raised to the ground, leaving only the tower and north courtyard wall which can still be seen today.

The HES archive offers a fascinating glimpse into the later history of Rosyth Castle and its surroundings. As well as illustrations from artists, photographers and antiquarians, the archive also shows how the castle's surroundings were shaped by events in the 20th century.

One of the earliest depictions of Rosyth Castle in the HES archive is an engraving from the late 18th century by D B Pyet showing the castle surrounded by water with sailing ships on the Forth. In 1834 it was drawn by the amateur artist Alexander Archer who illustrated its prominent position on the Forth as well as the increasingly ruinous state of the building. The artist and antiquarian James Drummond captured the castle in 1857 showing in the background the surrounding landscape in Fife, with only a few other buildings visible.

Around 1880 the castle was photographed by Erskine Beveridge showing it surrounded by water. A similar view of the castle at low tide is included in a photograph album from around 1900 which also shows the first signs of change in the area with the new Forth Bridge visible in the distance.



Rosyth Castle after 1903

In 1903 the land around the castle became the property of the Admiralty for a new naval base at Rosyth. A contemporary historian, Alan Reid, wrote about the project and how it was likely to change this corner of Fife but 'let us again express wide-spread hope and desire that, come whatever transformation may over the beautiful surroundings of the solitary castle, its place and function as a striking central object may be preserved, and a position of honour assigned it among the administrative or domestic buildings of the Base'.

Work started on the naval base in 1909, and the castle was originally intended to have been converted into a library and reading room for the Royal Navy Officers stationed there but with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 this plan was postponed. The remains of the castle were not significantly altered but its position in the landscape changed beyond all recognition. Throughout its history the castle had only been accessible at low tide but as a result of land reclamation it lost its waterfront position and became surrounded by the naval base, with its railways, cranes, power station, dry docks and other features.

The base was in use during the First World War but was largely closed by 1925. Photographers from the Office of Works photographed the castle in 1927 showing some of the new buildings surrounding it, and it was recorded in detail for the Inventory of monuments and constructions in the counties of Fife, Kinross, and Clackmannan, published by RCAHMS in 1933.

The naval base was reopened in 1938 and was in use during the Second World War. An aerial photograph taken by the Royal Air Force in 1941 shows the castle (bottom left) next to a large camouflaged building. In the dry docks HMS Prince of Wales is under repair and several military installations including heavy anti-aircraft batteries can be seen as well as the new housing in the town of Rosyth.

The site continued to expand and was the location chosen to refit the Royal Navy's nuclear submarine fleet, and today it is involved in the construction of HMS Queen Elizabeth-class carriers. From 1993 large parts of the site were sold off and the land the castle stands on is now in private hands situated at a corner of the security enclosure for the commercial port.

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<https://canmore.org.uk/site/50938/rosyth-castle>
<https://canmore.org.uk/site/79567/rosyth-hm-dockyard>
<http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM9150>



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