

Edinburgh Castle

Edinburgh Castle is one of the oldest fortified places in Europe. With a long rich history as a royal residence, military garrison, prison and fortress, it is alive with many exciting tales. When you climb Castle Hill, you will walk in the footsteps of soldiers, kings and queens – and even the odd pirate or two.

Though parts of it remain in military use, the castle is now a world-famous visitor attraction. It's also an iconic part of the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh World Heritage Site.



Ancient Stronghold

Edinburgh Castle's origins are truly ancient, reaching back into prehistory.

Set upon its mighty rock, Edinburgh Castle's strategic advantage is clear. Seeing the site's military potential, Iron Age people built a hill fort on the rock. Early medieval poetry tells of a war band that feasted here for a year before riding to their deaths in battle.

As well as guarding great moments in history, the castle has suffered many sieges. During the Wars of Independence it changed hands many times. In 1314, the Scots retook the castle from the English in a daring night raid led by Thomas Randolph, nephew of Robert the Bruce.

The castle defences have evolved over hundreds of years. Mons Meg, one of the greatest medieval cannons ever made, was given to King James II in 1457. The Half Moon Battery, built in the aftermath of the Lang Siege of 1573, was armed for 200 years by bronze guns known as the Seven Sisters. Six more guns defend the Argyle Battery, with its open outlook to the north.

DID YOU KNOW...

The castle is the most besieged place in Britain.

In 1639 the castle was captured in just 30 minutes, taken by Covenanter forces led by the distinguished General Alexander Leslie.

A Jacobite force failed to capture the castle during the Rising of 1715 thanks to poor planning. The ladder they brought to scale the ramparts turned out to be too short.

Royal Residence

The Honours of Scotland are the oldest Crown jewels in Britain.

Edinburgh Castle was home to kings and queens for many centuries. Queen Margaret (who was later made a saint) died here in 1093. The chapel built in her honour by her son, King David I, is Edinburgh's oldest building. St Margaret's Chapel still hosts weddings and christenings today.

The Great Hall, completed in 1511 for King James IV, hosted grand banquets and state events. But the king had little time to enjoy his new addition. James IV died at the Battle of Flodden in 1513, fighting English forces sent by his brother-in-law, King Henry VIII of England.



Above the door to the Royal Palace are the gilded initials MAH – for Mary Queen of Scots and her second husband Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley. Mary gave birth to James VI in the Royal Palace in 1566. He became king of Scotland at 13 months old and united the crowns of Scotland and England in 1603.

The Honours of Scotland are the oldest Crown jewels in Britain. Made of gold, silver and precious gems, they were created in Scotland and Italy during the reigns of James IV and James V. The crown, sceptre and sword of state were first used together for the coronation of a monarch in 1543, when Mary Queen of Scots came to the throne. The iconic Stone of Destiny, used for centuries to inaugurate monarchs, is also on display in the Crown Room.

DID YOU KNOW...



In the Second World War, the Crown of Scotland was hidden from the enemy in David's Tower – buried in a medieval latrine closet. (That's a loo, to me and you!)

The first fireworks display in Scotland took place at Edinburgh Castle. In 1507 fireworks formed part of a spectacular jousting tournament hosted by James IV.

The castle was once a royal treasury, where the nation's records and riches were kept. Jewels and treasures from around the world were kept here – including relics of Robert the Bruce, fine tapestries, and magical amulets.

Military Garrison

The first prisoners of war were French privateers caught in 1758, soon after the Seven Years War began.

Following the 'Union of the Crowns' of 1603, Edinburgh Castle was rarely visited by the reigning monarch, but from the 1650s it grew into a significant military base. Defences were rebuilt and enhanced in response to the Jacobite Risings of 1689–1746. New gun batteries such as Dury's Battery were constructed and new barracks such as the Queen Anne Building were added to house the many soldiers and officers.

Some 600 troops were housed in the New Barracks, built during the Napoleonic Wars with France. It's still in use by the military today. Regiments often had a mascot, many of whom were dogs – some of them are laid to rest in the Dog Cemetery, along with other canine companions. But soldiers once brought home a far more unusual four-legged friend to live in the castle stables. (Clue: He also had a trunk.)

Not everyone who came to the castle enjoyed their stay. Even royals were sometimes known to complain about the draughts. But life was truly grim for many of the prisoners who were locked up in the vaults below Crown Square.

As a formidable stronghold, the castle was the most secure lock-up in Scotland. Between 1757 and 1814 the vaults became home to many hundreds of prisoners of war.

DID YOU KNOW...

Ordnance Survey began life at the castle, in the drawing office of military surveyor William Roy in 1747. His work ultimately led to the national mapping organisation being set up.

In 1939 Luftwaffe pilots shot down over the Firth of Forth were brought up to the castle and treated in the military hospital.

You can still see the hole that 49 French prisoners of war left in a castle wall in 1811. All but one got away by hacking their way out and using ropes to escape down the south crag.

GLOSSARY

Garrison: a group of troops stationed in a fortress or town to defend it.

Odd: occasional.

Feast: enjoy banquets.

Siege: a military blockade of a city or fortified place to compel it to surrender.

Battery: a grouping of artillery pieces for tactical purposes.

Rampart: a protective barrier.

Gilded: covered in gold.

Jousting: a medieval sporting contest in which two opponents on horseback, usually knights, fight with lances.

Privateer: sailor on an armed private ship licensed to attack enemy ships.

Enhance: improve.

Barracks: building (s) for lodging soldiers in garrison.

Grim: depressing.

Ordnance: service of the army in charge of the procuring, distributing and safekeeping of military supplies.

Surveyor: person engaged in determining the area of any portion of the earth's surface, the lengths and directions of the bounding lines, and the contour of the surface, and in accurately delineating the whole on paper.

Hack: cut by repeated unskillful blows.

Crag: a steep rugged rock or cliff.

Finish these sentences

1. Throughout history Edinburgh Castle has been _____.
2. Today it is _____.
3. It is strategically positioned because _____.
4. The castle has suffered _____.
5. Mons Meg was _____ and the Seven Sisters were _____.
6. A Jacobite force failed to capture the castle because the ladder _____.
7. King David I built _____.
8. It still hosts _____.
9. In 1603 _____.
10. The Honours of Scotland are _____.
11. Mary Queen of Scots was the first monarch to receive _____.
12. In the Second World War the Crown of Scotland _____.
13. In 1507 fireworks formed part of a _____.
14. Edinburgh castle was once a royal treasury, which means _____.
15. In response to the Jacobite Risings of 1689-1746 _____.
16. The New barracks were built _____.
17. Prisoners were locked up _____.
18. French prisoners of war _____.

