

Stirling Castle and Town

Eight thousand years ago, when the first prehistoric people ventured up the valley of the River Forth, the rocky crag where Stirling Castle now stands already dominated the flat, marshy carselands around it. Here, protected by sheer cliffs on three sides, was a safe, dry place to live.

Not surprisingly, people have been living on that same volcanic rocky outcrop ever since those early visitors first camped there. The castle's crag has become the very heart of Stirling - so much so that local folk are still known as 'Sons of the Rock'.

As time went by, this prominent rock became a stronghold for those who lived on its summit. The warrior Celts planted a hillfort there, for this was an area of bitter warfare between rival tribes, each seeking to control the hill which dominated the river valley and its shallow crossing points.

Roman soldiers stood on the same crag as they looked north to the hostile lands beyond. Standing like a rocky island between hills to the north and south, they could see how the castle rock controlled all movement along, or across, the marshy valley around it. Here was the strategic heart of Scotland.

Following the departure of the Romans, the castle rock became the focus of new struggles. Located at the extremity of rival Pictish, Scottish, Britonic and Angle kingdoms ('the crossroads of four different cultural streams' as one account puts it), the area became a battleground for power. Whoever held the rock controlled the river crossing and so the whole region. Well might the name Stirling mean 'the place of strife'. It is also fair to say that the entire kingdom of Scotland was forged within sight of the castle rock, when king Kenneth MacAlpine of the Scots defeated the Picts in 843. A large standing stone in the grounds of Stirling University is believed to mark the possible site of that important battle. Thereafter, as the Scots went on to defeat the Angles and so gradually establish the modern kingdom of Scotland, their kings were to turn many times to the strength and strategic dominance of that fortress hill.

In 973 king Kenneth 111 mustered an army at Stirling, where he was almost certainly staying, before going off to defeat a

From then on, a continuous succession of Scottish kings used Stirling Castle as one of their most important administrative strongholds. At a time when there was no permanent capital in the country - the 'capital' was wherever the king held his parliament - a remarkable number of royal acts were issued from Stirling.

In 1124 king David 1 made Stirling one of the first royal burghs in Scotland, granting special favours which allowed it to develop into an important medieval trading town. This was partly to ensure a supply of local craftsmen and merchants for his own buildings within the castle - after all, the royal household required the constant provision of everything from candles and cooking pots to exotic foreign fustuffs, fine cloth and wine. From then on, the merchants and craftsmen of Stirling continued to enjoy a close relationship with the royal family up at the castle, as they supplied its everyday needs. In 1140 the same king David also founded nearby Carnbuskenneth Abbey, an Augustinian house similar to Holyrood Abbey which he also established close to his residence at Edinburgh Castle. Clearly Stirling and Edinburgh were now emerging as the two most favoured royal residences in Scotland.

Monarchs

Thereafter, a long procession of monarchs came to enjoy Stirling. King William the Lion improved the amenities of his castle by establishing a royal hunting ground, still known as the Kings Park, below the ramparts. During the years which followed a colourful royal mixture of births, coronations, deaths, murders, parliaments and kidnappings occurred within the castle walls.

The Douglas Garden, for example, recalls the murder by King James II of his warlord enemy the eighth Earl of Douglas, whose body was thrown into this area from a window above, while the 'Heading Stone' on the nearby Gowan Hill marks where at least five dukes and earls were executed as traitors in the 15th century.

For many, the greatest king to live at Stirling was James IV, responsible for much of the present appearance of the castle. This Renaissance king, founder of Aberdeen University and