

Clan Crichton's Dark History



About 15 miles south-east of Edinburgh lies the hamlet of Crichton. A few hundred yards west is Crichton Collegiate Church and south of there the ruins of the formidable Crichton Castle overlook the headwaters of the river Tyne.

The first of the family on record is Thurstonus de Crichton who witnessed the foundation charter of the abbey of Holyrood in 1128. His descendants' names appear on charters over the next centuries and Thomas de Crichton joined the rest of the aristocracy of Scotland in signing the Ragman Roll of 1296 submitting to Edward I. One of his sons married the heiress to the barony of Sanquar in Dumfriesshire and spawned a powerful dynasty in the South West.

The senior line of the family reached the apogee of its power in the early 15th Century with William Crichton, who was knighted by James I in 1424. When the king was assassinated in 1437, Crichton was Governor of Edinburgh Castle, Master of the Royal Household and, soon after, appointed himself Lord Chancellor. The Earl of Douglas, the most powerful noble in the nation, became Lieutenant General of the Realm on behalf of the six year old James II.

Alexander Livingstone, who was Governor of Stirling Castle, and Crichton took it in turns to kidnap the young king and hold him as the ultimate source of power. When Douglas died, the two of them lured his 16 year old successor and his brother to Edinburgh Castle, under the pretext of dining with the young monarch, and executed them at the Black Dinner – the inspiration for the Red Wedding in George R. R. Martin's Game of Thrones.

Four generations on, Sir James Crichton inherited the barony of Frendraught, in Banffshire, in the midst of territory dominated by the Gordon earls of Huntly. Their relationship was uneasy, culminating in a dispute in 1630 when Gordon of Rothiemay was killed resisting the execution of a legal warrant in Crichton's favor. The Gordons were preparing to lay waste to Frendraught in revenge until the intervention of the Privy Council, which brokered a peace between the parties that was sealed at the Bog of Gight – the seat of the Marquis of Huntly.

The Viscount of Aboyne, heir to the Marquis, and Gordon of Rothiemay's son provided an escort for Crichton back to his castle at Frendraught, where they were entertained and stayed overnight. At about midnight a fire broke out in the tower where the guests were sleeping. The viscount, Rothiemay and four attendants were burnt alive. Onlookers could see them trapped behind the iron bars protecting the windows.

The fire was almost certainly an accident but nobody believed it. Frendraught was tried and acquitted but his lands were considered fair game. With the tacit approval of the Gordons, caterans from across the Highlands came to plunder the estate time after time. The family was reduced to poverty and in seventy years was 'stripped of all and extinguished.' The head of the Dumfriesshire branch of the family, Sir Robert Crichton, was created Lord Sanquhar in 1487 after the battle of Lochmaben Fair. James Crichton, descended from this family, was born in 1560 and brought up at Clunie Castle, situated on an island in its own loch near Dunkeld. He went to St Andrews University and graduated with two degrees aged 15. At 20 he went abroad where he earned the soubriquet 'The Admirable

Crichton.' There is enough hard evidence to show that he was quite exceptionally gifted. His reputation was embellished by his admirers, but 'by the age of twenty, he was not only fluent in, but could discourse in (both prose and verse) no fewer than twelve languages, as well as being an accomplished horseman, fencer, singer, musician, orator, and debater.' Noted for his good looks as well as his refined social graces, he was considered to have come closest to the ideal of the complete man.

After intellectually besting halls full of learned professors in France and Italy and killing assorted villains in duels, he became tutor to the son of the Duke of Gonzago. In Mantua a gang attacked him; he beat all but one, who turned out to be his pupil. Crichton stayed his sword and was stabbed in the heart by his jealous student. He was 21.

Crichton Castle comprises four contiguous buildings arranged around an inner courtyard. The 14th century tower lies at the east of the castle, and has a vaulted basement with timber entresol, and a vaulted hall above, although the south-west corner of the tower has collapsed. To the west of this tower was a barmkin. William Crichton extended the castle in the early 15th century, building a second tower to the south, forming a strong L-plan, with the gate between the two towers. The south tower was entered by a door in the center, with vaulted cellars either side. Two halls occupied the first and second floors. In the later 15th century a west block was added, with a six-story tower at the south-west, containing several bed rooms with garderobes. A stair in the south block gave access to these rooms. The north range was added at this time, closing the courtyard, but this section was heavily rebuilt in the following century.



The castle's most distinctive feature is its Italian-influenced courtyard façade, which forms part of the north range. Francis Stewart, the designer, had travelled to Italy, and was inspired by new styles and technology in buildings there, particularly the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara (c. 1582). This was the source of the diamond rustication on the courtyard wall. The initials of Francis and his wife Margaret Douglas appear on the walls, together with an anchor representing Stewart's position of Lord High Admiral of Scotland. Inside are further innovations; Scotland's first scale-and-platt stair, *i.e.* a modern-style staircase with landings, and a drawing room to the north of the old tower.

To the south of the castle is a building which may have been used as a stable block, slaughter house or chapel. This building is said to be haunted by the ghost of William Crichton.