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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST SERF'S PRIORY, LOCH LEVEN



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ST SERF'S PRIORY, LOCH LEVEN

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

St Serf's Priory is an Early Christian foundation which, in the 12th century, was taken over by the Augustinians. The surviving remains consist of a simple church with the footings of nearby buildings. Along with most of the shoreline and loch, the whole of St Serf's island is designated as a National Nature Reserve, primarily for its birdlife. Because of the sensitivity of bird populations to human disturbance SNH and RSPB advise against access to St Serf's on a year round basis. For further information see SNH and RSPB websites.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- A monastery on St Serf's Island is thought to have been a royal foundation dating from the mid-9th century, shortly before the MacAlpin takeover of Pictland.
- In the middle of the 10th century the monks agreed to transfer their lands to the bishop of St Andrews in return for the provision of food and clothing. This suggests that the foundation may have been suffering from fairly delicate finances, requiring a champion and protector for the community.
- By the middle of the 11th century, the foundation was being favoured with gifts of land from King Macbeth and Queen Gruoch and such gifts continued with churches and lands in the area, including a donation by St Margaret of the rents for Balcristie in the parish of Newburn.
- c. 1150: David I granted the Culdee monastery to the canons regular of St Andrews in order to establish an Augustinian priory there. Provision was made in the grant for any uncooperative Culdees (monks of the Celtic Church) to be expelled.
- The main body of the surviving building is thought to date from the Augustinian re-foundation.
- Andrew of Wyntoun, the 14th-century chronicler, was prior of St Serf's and it is believed that he wrote his chronicle on the island.
- Through the 15th and 16th centuries the priory was increasingly often referred to as the Priory of Portmoak. Portmoak provided a base for the priory on the shore of the loch, and it is possible that this change in name reflects that the canons were living more comfortably at Portmoak rather than on the island towards the end of the Middle Ages.
- The priory was dissolved in 1580 and its lands were transferred to St Leonard's College, St Andrews.

- In 1830 the loch level was lowered by 4½ feet by the construction of sluices to provide water power for mills, thereby enlarging the island and improving its grazing potential.
- In 1834 the chapel was given a thatched roof to serve as a shepherd's house, and a cattle shed was added against its north wall. The thatched roof was removed before 1877.

Archaeological Overview

- Little modern archaeological work has been carried out on the island, although it has recently been subject to a detailed topographic survey.
- The area around the priory church was subject to archaeological investigations in the 19th century. Two burials, one crouched, were found beneath the floor of the chapel (optimistically identified as St Ronan, prior of St Serf's, and Bishop Grahame of St Andrews). Other material found included 'broken slates and rusty nails, which had been used in the roof of the building, with some leaden work of the windows, and fragments of rude pottery'.
- As part of the works associated with the conversion of the church to agricultural use, a considerable number of graves were disturbed to the south and west of the church. The footings of the chancel were also identified (but then removed) and the ground plan was shown to have been divided into four graves by two thin stone walls. The graves in the chancel were lined with slabs to protect the head of the deceased.
- In 1877, in anticipation of a visit by Andrew Kerr FSA Scot, the footings of the ancillary buildings of the priory were revealed by following a wall line, cutting away the surrounding ground to reveal what wall face survived.
- The 19th-century interventions appear to have disturbed various elements of the site, but it is unlikely that they have entirely cleared any area of the site of archaeologically sensitive material.
- The lowering of the level of the loch in 1830 means that much of the former island shore is now on dry ground and may explain the great trench cut to the west of the ruins as a harbour. The fact that this depression appears to have been dry by 1766 may be a result of silting.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

The church is a simple structure. Its box-like form is largely a symptom of its later history, having been regularised in order to take the roof of the shepherd's house. The dominant feature of the building is the quality of its masonry: it is constructed of very good cubical ashlar rising off a simple double plinth course.

Later work has been constructed in a freer rubble and has left only one small blocked lancet as an undisturbed 12th-century feature.

Social Overview

Because of the sensitivity of the bird population of the loch to human disturbance, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) advise against public access to the island. A well used walking trail circumnavigates the Loch and interprets features of interest. There is a viewpoint opposite St Serfs.

Spiritual Overview

As a religious site with a history of occupation stretching over 800 years, St Serf's is a reminder of the strength of belief which generated foundations in 'desert places'.

The site has no active role in worship.

Aesthetic Overview

The most visible element of the site, the walls of the church, stand on the highest point of the island surrounded by gently undulating rough grazing. Closer inspection reveals the footings of associated buildings, but the dominant image of the site is of the stark 'box' of the church contrasting with the open land which surrounds it.

The interior of the church is as stark as the outside, an aspect which is further emphasised by the modern concrete floor.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

We know very little about the forms of the priory at the various periods of its life. We do not understand the function of the priory buildings already identified or their relationship to the church.

We have very little information regarding the history of the priory.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- St Serf's Priory is an important example of an Early Christian foundation which was adopted by one of the reformed orders.
- The remains at St Serf's are likely to contain much evidence relating to medieval and early medieval religious establishments.
- The site's open aspect, crowned by the stark church, is evocative of the desert places sought out by Early Christian communities.

Associated Properties

St Andrews Cathedral, Loch Leven Castle, Portmoak Burial Ground

Keywords

Culdee, priory, church, Andrew Wyntoun, chronicle, Augustinian, harbour