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Designations: Scheduled Monument (90193)

Taken into State care: 1920 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2003

**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

BISHOP'S PALACE KIRKWALL



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

BISHOP'S PALACE, KIRKWALL

SYNOPSIS

The monument consists of the remains of the Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall. The earliest parts date from the 12th century and it was substantially reconstructed in the 16th and early 17th centuries. The surviving building is part of the bishop's residence, presumed to have been constructed by William the Old when the bishopric and cathedral transferred to Kirkwall from Birsay in 1137. This building is but one part of the original palace complex, the eastern part of which became the site of the **Earl's Palace** in the early 1600s.

The Bishop's and Earl's Palaces have therefore to be considered as an entity despite the fact they are divided by a road and are, strictly speaking, separate PICs. Joint ticketing exists, however.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- The palace was built at the same time as the Cathedral, after the see had been relocated from Birsay to Kirkwall in 1137. It was built under the patronage and guidance of Bishop William the Old, a companion of Earl Rognvald Kolsson who founded the cathedral.
- Orkney was a part of the kingdom of Norway when this building was first constructed in the 12th century. It is here that the closest parallels for the hall are possibly to be found. Its bishop answered to the archbishop of Hamburg, Trondheim (1154-) and St Andrews (1460s-).
- December 1263: King Hakon IV of Norway died in the hall, following his unsatisfactory encounter with the Scots at the Battle of Largs. His death led to the Norse ceding the western part of Scotland to the Scottish kings. *Hakon Hakonsson's Saga* describes the event.
- In 1290 the seven-year old Maid of Norway, Margaret, died on ship while travelling from Norway to be crowned Queen of Scotland. Her body was laid to rest at the Palace before being returned home.
- Little is known of the site's history between 1300 and the early 1500s. The bishops would have faced power struggles between the powerful earls, especially the Sinclairs who built the nearby Kirkwall Castle as their stronghold. Several of the bishops during this period were accused of being corrupt and amoral. The palace is reported as being in a state of disrepair though the extent to which this was true is uncertain.
- James V briefly visited Kirkwall as part of his voyage around the Isles in 1540. It is said that he was received by Robert Maxwell, bishop of Orkney and he and his retinue may have been entertained or accommodated in the palace.

- In 1541 Robert Reid was appointed bishop of Orkney (later founder of Edinburgh University); he undertook an extensive phase of reconstruction which included adding the round tower now named after him.
- The Palace was acquired by Earl Robert Stewart in 1568. In the early 1600s his son, Earl Patrick Stewart, constructed the Earl's Palace on the eastern part of what had been the Bishop's Palace (creating the 'Palace of the Yards') and undertook further alterations to the Bishop's Palace. At this point the Bishop's Palace was converted into extra accommodation for the Earl's household.
- Patrick Stewart organised a revolt against King James VI in 1614, which led to his family's downfall. Robert Stewart and supporters of Patrick Stewart captured and held the Palace of the Yards, cathedral and Kirkwall Castle in July 1614 but were besieged by government forces under the Earl of Caithness and forced to surrender by 29th September. It is not clear to what extent the Bishop's Palace suffered during the siege; the palace was formally handed to Bishop James Law, and thereafter owned by bishops of Orkney.
- Sir Walter Scott visited during his *Voyage in the Lighthouse Yacht to Nova Zembla and the Lord knows where in the Summer of 1814*, and was impressed.
- 1920 Palace comes into State care.

Archaeological Overview

- The Palace originally stood very close to the waterfront at Kirkwall, before subsequent land reclamation.
- Nothing is known of the sub-surface archaeology within the footprint of the building, although remains associated with the wider Bishop's Palace have been found on the site of the later Earl's Palace. Buildings associated with the Palace might be expected to survive around it, in the area that was known as Laverock. Archaeological evaluation excavation in the area to the southwest of the palace in 2009 revealed archaeological deposits in four out of five of the trenches revealing evidence for medieval structures, occupation deposits and possible defences/enclosures in the form of a ditch. Though this lies outwith the area in care it demonstrates the high archaeological potential that may be associated with the monument.
- The palace retains considerable potential for further analysis of mortar and stonework which may enhance our understanding of its development history. The remains of the palace appear to be more complex than existing survey records would suggest.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The earliest upstanding elements of the palace date to the mid-1100s. The stonework can be identified in places as distinctive alternating bands of red and yellow sandstone, similar to the earliest fabric of the cathedral.

- At the core of the palace is the 12th century hall, a room which we can assume to have been amongst the most impressive domestic buildings ever built in Norse Scotland; it was certainly the only episcopal palace to be built in Norse Scotland.
- The exact original form of the early bishop's palace is unknown, but it is likely to have been similar to that of a Norwegian royal palace or hall house, with a large hall for entertaining and business, and adjoining private accommodation for the bishop. It is suggested that a square tower may have provided such accommodation, adjoining the northeast corner of the palace range, though nothing survives of this today. The archway of the Watergate may retain fabric from an early entrance into the complex.
- Hakon Hakonsson's Saga includes an invaluable description of the Palace at the time of Hakon IV's death in 1263.
- A number of different towers are referred to in various sources relating to the palace complex, including the 'Manse Tower, the 'Chapel Tower' and the 'Moosie Toor' – it is not clear if these all relate to the same round tower that currently exists, or if some terms refer to an earlier tower that formed part of the original palace.
- The palace underwent significant alterations and improvements under the ownership of Bishop Robert Reid. His scheme transformed the building into a fine renaissance residence that reflects his cultured tastes, with ample residential quarters as well as strong defences.
- It is likely that the Reid Tower was built with defence in mind as much as comfort. The location of the tower, projecting from the northwest corner of the palace range and overlooking the castle to the north, is an ideal location to provide firearm defence; numerous gunloops pierce its walls offering protection to the west, north and east. The tower is a clear reflection of the fact that the bishop had to defend himself from the militarism of others, including no doubt the Sinclair rulers of Orkney.
- The tower is not purely utilitarian in its external architectural form as, in addition to the niche for the statue of St Rognvald, it has ornate bracketed corbels to give support to the wall head parapet walkway, which appears to have been roofed over in the French fashion.
- The various phases of construction and alteration of the palace range are uncertain; the buttressing against west wall and inserted ground floor vault are typically assigned to Robert Reid.
- Some defensive modifications may have been made by Earl Patrick early in the 16th century. Other Renaissance additions, such as the basket-corbelling beneath the windows on the east side, belong to this period and complement the new work of the Earl's Palace. Earl Patrick may have subdivided the accommodation on the upper floors of the palace range to provide additional accommodation for his retinue.

- In their architecture and furnishings the later phase of this building links the Northern Isles, via Scotland, to the mainstream of European artistic fashion of its day.
- Part of the Watergate, an original entrance into the Palace of the Yards, was removed and rebuilt into a stretch of the wall of the Palace in 1877.
- Early drawings provide clues about important elements associated with the building that are now missing.
- There is a reused statue of St Rognvald (made c. 1300) in a prominent position on the exterior of the Reid Tower (the original is now in the nearby Tankerness House). The statue is identified as St Rognvald since it is of a noble, secular figure apparently holding a lyre. Rognvald Kolsson succeeded his uncle, St Magnus, to the Orkney earldom (1136-1158) and founded St Magnus Cathedral in his honour. He was thus a man to whom bishops of Orkney would have owed a great debt. This statue is therefore important not just on art historical grounds, but for the additional evidence it contributes to our understanding of the relationship between Orkney's Earls and the church. The *Orkneyinga Saga* refers. If Rognvald Kolsson, this is the only representation of him. It is also a good example of the episcopal patronage of sculpture. Adjacent to it is what is thought to be a worn shield with the arms of Bishop Reid.

Social Overview

- Not known/assessed.

Spiritual Overview

- This was built to be the residence of a bishop and is a core part of a Cathedral complex. It is likely to have contained a small chapel or place for reflection and private worship.

Aesthetic Overview

- Next to the Cathedral, the Palace of the Yards is the biggest historical edifice in Kirkwall. Bishop Reid's tower is a particularly prominent feature of the townscape around the Cathedral (it overlooks the approach to the Palace from the town).

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Nothing is known of its sub-surface archaeology, which might help in understanding the development of this site (here and under the **Earl's Palace**).
- What is the history of the site between late 1200s and the early 1500s?
- We know little about the extent and appearance of the palace complex under Robert Reid.

- Modern appreciation and understanding of the site is hindered by the modern roads which physically dissect it, and mature trees that obscure views across the courtyard.
- The site would benefit from a fresh detailed survey and analysis to better understand the architectural details and development sequence; as with the adjacent Earl's Palace the upstanding remains appear to be more complex than previous descriptions would suggest.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The best preserved and most spectacular late Norse domestic building in Scotland.
- In its early life the Palace was a key component of an important Norwegian medieval town which had, at its core, a cathedral complex. The palace and cathedral are the best preserved components of this, along with Kirkwall's distinctive street plan (and any underlying archaeology) (Kirkwall is arguably the best preserved Norwegian medieval town). The Bishop's Palace is the earliest surviving domestic building in the town. We can assume there was also houses for the associated dignitaries and canons.
- Part of Britain's most northerly cathedral complex.
- Place where an important Norwegian king, Hakon IV, died after doing battle with the Scots at Largs in 1263.
- Associations with the infamous Stewart Earls; a lesser part of the secular palace complex that includes 'possibly the most mature and accomplished piece of Renaissance architecture left in Scotland'.

Associated Properties

Earl's Palace, Kirkwall, St Magnus' Cathedral, Bishop's Palace, Birsay, Scalloway Castle, Jarlishof (Sumburgh House), Noltland Castle, Muness Castle. Hakon's Hall, Bergen and Archbishop's Hall, Trondheim, Norway. Bishop Reid: **Beaully Priory**, Kinloss Abbey.

Orkney Museums, Tankerness House for original Rognvald statue and related sculpture from St Magnus.

Keywords

Palace, Bishop, Hakon Hakonsson's Saga, Orkneyinga Saga, Bishop William the Old, Earls of Orkney, including Earl Rognvald, St Magnus Cathedral, Bishop Reid, Earl Stewarts, Norwegian, Bergen, Trondheim, Sir Walter Scott

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