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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90033)

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Last reviewed: 2004

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EARL'S PALACE, BIRSAY



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.

EARL'S PALACE, BIRSAY

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises the remains of a 16th- and 17th-century palace of the Stewart Earls of Orkney. It represents a new residence started in the third quarter of the 16th-century after Robert Stewart acquired the temporal possessions of the Bishop of Orkney, who had a residence at Birsay. The Palace originally had three ranges around a courtyard. Later in the 16th-century, further building works were carried out and a fourth range added. The Palace was out of use as a residence before 1700.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- The bishops' palace (until mid 16th-century): The Bishop of Orkney had a residence at Birsay, exact location unknown. It was probably demolished when the Earl's Palace was built. Earlier, but undated, building remains do survive on the site of the Earl's Palace.
- The construction of the Earl's Palace (1560s/1570s): Robert Stewart had the Palace built between 1569 and 1574. It consisted of three two-storey ranges around a courtyard. Rectangular towers projected from the NE, SE and SW sides, and possibly from the NW. There was a gate in the S range, beneath the principal hall. The lord's chamber was in the SE tower (or, alternatively, at the N end of the E range).
- The re-ordering of the Palace (later 16th and 17th centuries): Two-storey N range added, with hall and chamber above kitchen and cellars. Alteration of the W wall of the E range and new stair built in the NE corner of the courtyard. These works probably took place under Robert Stewart in the 1580s. A 17th-century source has Robert's son Patrick completing the Palace. The staircase in the angle of the S and W ranges could be a later addition.
- A re-organisation of the function of many of the rooms took place and 17th-century sources describe the use of many of the rooms. The first floor of the W range was a long gallery, with a study at the N end in 1653, if not before. The ground floor of W range had five chambers. An entrance to the Palace through the W range had been blocked by the mid 17th-century.
- The first floor of the S range was a gallery, with chambers in the SW and SE towers. A 17th-century description records one gallery had a ceiling painted with Biblical scenes.
- The ground floor of the E range housed a kitchen, a brewhouse and bakery, a chamber, and a two-chambered 'Girnell House' (granary). Previously, it had housed a kitchen and several chambers. Most of the upper floor does not survive, but in 1653 it housed a 'Litle Hall', with chambers in the NE tower. S of the hall lay a series of chambers.

- The Palace was still being used by the Earls of Morton, successors to the earldom, in the 1650s. In 1653, it was commandeered by Cromwell's troops. By 1700, it was roofless.
- c1700 to the mid 20th-century: From the late 17th-century, the Palace was roofless apparently standing to wall height; any use is unknown. In 1858 or 1868 a large proportion of the W wall blew down. By the mid 20th century the ruins of the Palace were used by the adjacent farm. Some partition walls in the W range were lowered to allow tractor-access to the N end, and the walls of the S range may also have been lowered. The farmer had moved stone to block some openings. There was a pigsty in the S range and a garage/workshop in front of the SW tower. In 1960, the courtyard was being used as a midden.
- 1981 transfer to State care.

Archaeological Overview

- Archaeological work on the site has been limited to a number of small excavations associated with clearance works and the installation of services: some useful information about room function and phases of construction has been gained from these.
- It is quite probable that the remains of associated gardens and other features outwith the Palace walls are situated in parts of the guardianship area and beyond (17th- and 18th- century illustrations of the Palace feature these).

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- In its earliest phases, an immediate architectural predecessor to the more distinguished Earl's Palace, Kirkwall.
- In their architecture and furnishings the Stewart Palaces link the Northern Isles, via Scotland, to the mainstream of European artistic fashion of their day.
- A 1653 room by room inventory of the palace's contents helps bring the use and occupation of the building to life.

Social Overview

- Not assessed.

Spiritual Overview

- Thought to be the site of a former bishop's residence. Note proximity to modern parish church of Birsay, which is thought to be the site of the Cathedral prior to its 12th-century move to Kirkwall. Even after seat was transferred, bishop continued to have considerable interests in this area.

Aesthetic Overview

- The ruins are fairly denuded and few individual architectural features of particular aesthetic merit survive. The main visual attribute is the mass of surviving ranges as they appear on the skyline, visible for quite some distance. A particularly good view is obtainable along the coast from the intervisible site of the **Brough of Birsay**.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Little is known of much of the archaeology of the site (such clearance as there has been has largely been to floor levels). There is the potential for remains of the earlier bishop's palace to survive beneath the present ruins.
- Physical evidence for the surrounding historic landscape, including the gardens.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Likely site of earlier bishop's palace; immediate area is associated with the pre 1150s Cathedral of Orkney.
- Although much denuded, sufficient survives of the palace to give a good sense of the scale and layout of the buildings.
- Associations with the infamous Stewart Earls: cruel but cultured.
- 17th-century Inventory illuminates what this building looked like and how its spaces were used.
- Early drawings provide good graphic evidence for the surrounding historic landscape, including the presence of gardens.

Associated Properties

Earl's Palace, Kirkwall, Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall, Scalloway Castle, Jarlshof (Sumburgh House), Noltland Castle, Muness Castle.

Brough of Birsay on geographical grounds (but there may also be a close link between the Norse ecclesiastical activity here and in what is now Birsay village).

Keywords Stewart Earls of Orkney and Shetland, Palace, gardens, Birsay, Cathedral, Inventory, painted ceiling.