

Property in Care(PIC) ID: PIC282

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90065)

Taken into State care: 1957 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

CASTLE OF OLD WICK



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.

CASTLE OF OLD WICK

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

- Castle of Old Wick, Caithness, comprises a plain square tower and associated remains built on the landward end of a 30m high, narrow promontory, between two precipitous geos.
- The promontory is cut off by a steep-sided, flat-bottomed ditch (8.5m wide and 3m deep), which must originally have been crossed by some sort of drawbridge. Outside the ditch, on either side of the approach path, are the low foundations of rectilinear structures which may have guarded the entrance. Beyond the tower, the entire promontory was apparently enclosed by a low stone wall within which can be seen the foundations of two rows of rectilinear buildings leading down to an enclosure at the tip of the promontory. These are presumed to have been for accommodation and a range of other domestic and industrial purposes.
- The tower stands to a height of about 9m and measures 7.3m by 4.8m internally within walls 2.1m thick. Inside the tower, probably entered at 1st floor level on the NE side (where little of the wall survives), were a basement with three floors above. There is no vaulting, the floors being supported on scarcements. The absence of intra-mural stairs suggests that rooms were accessed by wooden ladders, although a visitor in 1776 describes stairs. Originally each floor was lit by a window on the SE wall, but again little of this wall now survives. No fireplaces are built into the walls. An engraving of 1821 shows a building of unknown date surviving to the NW of the tower.
- The southern cliffs of the promontory on which the monument sits form part of an SSSI.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- The castle may have been built by Harald Maddadson, the Earl of Caithness. From 1159, he was sole earl in Orkney and Caithness and this castle may have been built as his chief seat on the mainland. The castle's location reflects the maritime orientation of Caithness.
- From the end of the 11th century Caithness was apparently recognised as part of the Kingdom of Scotland by the kings of Norway, although the earls of Orkney were said to have done homage to the king of Scots for their Caithness earldom before then.
- The first documented owner was Sir Reginald Cheyne, in the 14th century, which is the period to which some have preferred to date the surviving remains. The castle later passed to the Sutherlands of Duffus, then to the Oliphants, and on to the Sinclairs in 1644. Thereafter, ownership rested with Lord Glenorchy,

who sold it in 1690 to the Dunbars, whose descendants placed the castle in care.

- 1957 taken into guardianship following concern about its rapidly deteriorating condition due to natural processes of building decay exacerbated by coastal erosion and its exposed location.

Archaeological Overview

- After coming into state care, excavations took place within the interior of the tower and part of the dangerous SE wall of the tower was clearly demolished or fell between 1952 and 1961. Unfortunately the files cannot be traced.
- In 1987 Caithness County Council excavated and laid the current path through the earthworks to the NE side of the tower, without the necessary permissions.
- Nothing is therefore known about the monument from archaeology. The surrounding remains are unexplored and likely to contain the evidence of many centuries of occupation.
- There is no accurate modern topographical survey of the promontory, although Lamb's 1971 survey is a reliable observation of the features surrounding the tower.
- It seems that one timber may survive in a joist hole high in the interior of the castle. Its potential for dendrochronological dating needs to be followed up.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- If 12th century, this castle is the best-preserved Norse castle in Scotland, a rare survival of a little understood form of monument. However, in the absence of distinguishing architectural features, it is impossible to accurately date the upstanding remains of the tower on art-historical grounds.
- The stonework and the, now substantially lost, timber components (significant in a now largely tree-less setting) of the castle are evidence of an extensive lordly and military power.

Social Overview

- The monument is on a coastal walk within easy walking distance of the S side of Wick, and its views, if not the monument itself, are appreciated by local walkers.
- Safety factors – the precipitous cliffs and the close-by gun range - have led Historic Environment Scotland not to actively promote the monument, although the local authority has been keen to do so.

Spiritual Overview

- Not assessed.

Aesthetic Overview

- The views of the castle on its precipitous, thin geo are very striking. The tower itself is of stark but sturdy build.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Nothing is known of the sub-surface archaeology of the site. It is likely that the site retains archaeological evidence for use of the site pre-dating, contemporary to and post-dating the life span of the castle. The footings of the buildings beyond the tower are well-preserved and the potential for recovery of good quality archaeological data is extremely high.
- The date of the tower and its associated remains is unknown. Relatively little is known about such early northern castles in Scotland in general.
- A modern archaeological survey of the topography of the site would be a good interpretative tool. Geophysical survey could help to clarify the nature of the surrounding remains. Invasive archaeology would be required if the upstanding remains are to be dated.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Castle of Old Wick is potentially one of the earliest and best-preserved castles in Scotland, but this cannot be confirmed because of the dearth of distinctive architectural features and the absence of any archaeological knowledge.
- If 12th century, one of very few known Norse castles known anywhere in the British Isles (they did not build them in their Scandinavian homelands, although at least four are mentioned in the *Orkneyinga Saga*).
- Belonged to a part of Scotland that was a remote part of the Scottish Kingdom by end of 11th century at least (earls of Orkney did homage to kings of Scots for Caithness): the use, history and occupation of this power centre therefore relates to the ebb and flow of Scottish/Norse authority in this area, and the tensions that existed between these as Scottish kings extended their authority.
- The Castle is a distinctive landmark on a very attractive section of the Caithness coast (note SSSI), close to one of the largest centres of population in northern mainland Scotland.

Associated Properties

Cobbie Row's, Orkney is earliest documented Norse castle in Scotland. **St Mary's Crosskirk** on grounds of proximity and possible contemporaneity. Note also group of HS Norse sites in Orkney (see ISCS for **Cobbie Row's**).

Keywords Norse, Scottish, medieval, castle, outbuildings, Orkney earldom, Caithness, Norway