

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC318

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90086)

Taken into State care: 1951 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2006

**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

ST MARY'S CHAPEL, CROSSKIRK



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.

ST MARY'S CHAPEL, CROSSKIRK

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Crosskirk is situated on the north coast of Caithness. It comprises the roofless remains of the medieval chapel of St Mary (later adapted as two burial enclosures) lying east-west within a square burial ground. Adjacent, but rejected for guardianship in the early 1960s, are the excavated and now largely destroyed remains of a fort, broch and external settlement (these are part of the scheduled area, however).

The chapel was originally entered from the west through a door (now blocked) with inclined jambs. The present south door is of uncertain date but probably modern, and may replace an earlier window. The chancel is largely a modern reconstruction. The chancel arch is similar to the west door. The north wall of the nave seems to survive to its original height, some 2.5m above present ground level, but the west and south walls are less complete. The east and west gables of the nave show that it had a pitched roof. The walls are built of irregularly coursed whinstone slabs and those of the nave are approximately 1.25m thick. The burial ground is enclosed by a stone wall; it contains a large number of gravestones.

The chapel is reached after a short walk along tracks and across fields.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- St Mary's Chapel was a dependent chapel within the parish of Reay, and may date from the 12th century. No evidence has been found of an earlier Christian/early medieval foundation within the present graveyard, but a Pictish symbol-incised stone is reported to have been found in the area, and excavations recovered two long-cist burials (note: not orientated east-west). This area may therefore include an early burial ground/place of religious significance. The association of early medieval chapel sites with broch sites is an observed phenomenon elsewhere, e.g. in Orkney, and is interpreted in various ways that include there being a close relationship between the religious and secular elite.
- By the end of the 11th century, Caithness was recognised as part of the Kingdom of Scotland by the kings of Norway, although under the direct control of the Earls of Orkney who were said to have done homage to the king of Scots for the Caithness Earldom before then.
- 1726 one source ascribes the chapel to St Peter, but writers from 1769 have assigned it to St Mary, as supported by the fact that a holy and healing well 300m to the south is dedicated to St Mary.
- 1948 guardianship; consolidation work shortly after.

Archaeological Overview

- Archaeological investigation to date has been limited to the area east and outside the graveyard where the broch once stood. Here the proximity of Iron-Age structures suggests that prehistoric remains may also survive in the guardianship area, but there has been no archaeological investigation of this. A grass-covered wall, 31 m long and 0.5 m high, has been noted running north-east from the north-east corner of the chapel, which is probably superimposed on it, but the date and function of this wall has not been explored.
- The prehistoric settlement will have formed a stone quarry for the chapel construction, and there is evidence of a purposeful levelling of the ground in the medieval period. An earlier medieval cemetery could well be sealed beneath this levelling horizon.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The chapel is thought to be 12th-century in date, although on architectural grounds it is difficult to date because of the simplicity of its form. If so, it the oldest and best-preserved upstanding ecclesiastical building in Caithness. In form, it resembles contemporary churches in Orkney and Scandinavia rather than those elsewhere in the Scottish Highlands in its possession of separate nave and square-ended chancel. There may be parallels for the sloping door and chancel arch jambs in Irish architecture.
- The walls of the chancel seem to have been largely reconstructed (probably in 1871) on the earlier foundations. (The original floor level of the chapel is probably about 0.6m lower than present ground level).
- A symbol-incised stone is thought to have come from Crosskirk, on the basis of the antiquarian descriptions of its findspot. It was given to the King of Denmark but is now thought to be lost.

Social Overview

- An unpublished graveyard survey was undertaken in 1985 by Kirkdale Archaeology for Historic Scotland. The gravestones (earliest dated 1692) are of great potential social interest for their genealogical and historical information.
- No formal assessment of social value has been undertaken.

Spiritual Overview

- The spiritual value that modern communities attach to this particular monument has not been assessed.
- The graveyard is no longer used for burials.

Aesthetic Overview

- The simplicity of the church, notably its west doorway, is very pleasing. Overall, the well-preserved historic graveyard with medieval chapel at its core forms a cohesive and attractive whole.
- The cross-country approach to the site affords good views of the coastline.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- An archaeological/architectural buildings survey to modern standards would be beneficial. Because of its architectural simplicity, very little has been written about this site and its parallels from the perspective of architectural history.
- Nothing is known of the archaeology of the church site, including its precise relationship to the adjacent Iron-Age settlement.
- The medieval church in Caithness is not as well understood as we might like, although there is some historical evidence for how it might have been structured and the relationship between Orkney earls and Scottish bishops in this period.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- St Mary's Crosskirk is a poorly documented monument, about which nothing is known on archaeological grounds. However, despite some later rebuilding, it is well-preserved, and apparently the earliest upstanding ecclesiastical building in Caithness.
- The architecture is simple, and hence difficult to date, but in its form and style it resembles contemporary churches in Orkney and Scandinavia rather than those elsewhere in the Scottish Highlands. This is a reflection of how Caithness was under the control of the Orkney earldom at this time, despite being technically part of the Scottish Kingdom, as well as the wider maritime connections and outlook of this part of Scotland.
- Although nothing is known of the archaeology of the church and graveyard, it was sited next to, if not over, part of a substantial Iron-Age broch settlement, the core of which has been excavated. Not only does the church and graveyard therefore have high remaining archaeological potential, but there is the potential to understand the site's local context over several millennia.

Associated Properties

St Mary's Chapel, Wyre, St Magnus, Egilsay; Eynhallow, Orphir church, Westside (Tuquoy) and Brough of Birsay, mainland Orkney; Norse settlements at **Cobbie Row's, Bu of Orphir**, Orkney; **Castle of Old Wick**, Caithness.

Keywords chapel, medieval, Caithness, Orkney earldom, graveyard, gravestones, broch