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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90269)

Taken into State care: 1888 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2013

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST NINIAN'S CHAPEL



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ST NINIAN'S CHAPEL

SYNOPSIS

St Ninian's Chapel stands close to a rocky inlet on the seaward (south-east) side of the Isle of Whithorn. It consists of a rectangular stone chapel, measuring 9.5m by 5m, of probable 13th-century date, within the remains of a stone-walled enclosure defining a roughly oval area 30m in diameter.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **12th century** – a chapel is built at the Isle of Whithorn, both to serve the local population and pilgrims making for the shrine of St Ninian at **Whithorn**, 3½ miles away to the north-west.
- **c. 1300** – the chapel is rebuilt to its present form.
- **1882** – the first Ancient Monuments Act passes into law. Shortly after, Lieutenant-General Pitt Rivers is appointed the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments.
- **1887** – Pitt Rivers visits the chapel whilst staying with Sir Herbert Maxwell of Monreith, MP, and makes a sketch of the site. He adds the site to his 'Schedule' of Ancient Monuments.
- **1888** – the chapel passes into state care, the first ruined church to do so under the Act.
- **1898** - the chapel gables are rebuilt under the direction of P. MacGregor Chalmers, architect, and the work financed by the 3rd Marquis of Bute (then also engaged on rebuilding parts of **Whithorn Priory**).
- **1948/9** – C A Raleigh Radford directs a small excavation at the site.

Archaeological Overview:

St Ninian's Chapel itself was archaeologically investigated in 1948/9 by C A Raleigh Radford, an eminent early Christian archaeologist. He found no evidence for early Christian remains, though the foundations of a narrower (12th century) chancel were discovered. Radford dated the present chapel to around 1300. At least one post-medieval burial had been inserted in the chapel. Radford also dated the stone enclosure wall to about 1300. However, its roughly circular form may indicate an early Christian origin.

Beyond the confines of the enclosure wall lie other archaeological features, some of which may possibly be contemporary with the enclosure wall. Most significant, though, is an impressive promontory fort, known as Isle Head Fort, situated to the south-east of the chapel. What relationship, if any, the two sites had to each other remains to be seen, but recent initial survey work points to the whole promontory site being of considerable historical and archaeological importance.

No crosses/stone memorials of early Christian date have yet been discovered at the promontory site.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

The chapel as it stands is a uni-cameral rectangular building measuring 9.5m by 5m. It is substantially ruined, with only the east and west gables standing to any height, though these largely date from the restoration carried out in 1898 under P. MacGregor Chalmers (1859-1922), architect of several Gallovidian churches (eg, Ardwall and Colvend), and responsible for the restoration of the chapter house at **Glenluce Abbey** in 1910-11. There is evidence for a south door, an east window of pointed form, originally of two lights, and smaller lancets in each of the three other walls. The only internal features surviving are two wall recesses near the east end of the south wall, interpreted as a piscine and credence, a third recess in the opposite (north wall) and a projecting stone corbel in the east wall, of unknown function. Evidence for a stone wall-bench along the west wall and part of the north wall were discovered in excavation.

This state of ruination possibly makes the structure seem plainer than it might have been. The 12th-century church at nearby Cruggleton, for example, has a fine Romanesque chancel arch and doorway. (According to the 1948/9 excavations, the original chapel was bi-cameral as at Cruggleton, but why it was later simplified is a mystery.) However, there is no evidence of anything of architectural finesse, and what remains of dressed stonework and gables is largely the result of the 1898 restoration.

Social Overview:

Other than being a minor visitor attraction, St Ninian's Chapel currently plays no social role.

Spiritual Overview:

St Ninian's Chapel clearly played a significant spiritual role in medieval times, chiefly as a focus for pilgrims heading for the shrine of St Ninian at **Whithorn**. This aspect of popular religion persists to this day, with many visitors using the place to reconnect with medieval spirituality. A 'Witness Cairn', where modern pilgrims add a stone to a pile, has been created at the entrance to the field from the Isle of Whithorn.

The spirituality of the area is further reinforced by the existence of a memorial bench beside the 'Witness Cairn', in commemoration of the seven young men who died when the local fishing vessel, the *Solway Harvester*, sank in the Irish Sea in 2000.

Aesthetic Overview:

Although St Ninian's Chapel stands close to the village of Isle of Whithorn, its setting, on a windswept hillock close to the rocky shore, provides a powerful and eerie evocation of the countless souls who passed through the door, now lost on the wind with the mewing of the gulls.

The views out from the chapel, particularly to the south and east, are outstanding, encompassing the Dumfries & Galloway coast, the outline of the Isle of Man, and the peaks of the Lake District in the far distance.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Does the site have early Christian origins? The lack of any early Christian sculptural stones from the site suggests not, but only archaeological excavation can now provide the answer.
- What was the detailed appearance of the chapel in its heyday?
- What else besides the chapel stood within the enclosure, if anything? The possibility exists that there was a burial ground and a priest's house?
- What stood around the enclosure, and was the adjacent fort contemporary with the chapel? A detailed archaeological survey is needed, to make sense of the numerous vestigial features in the ground around the chapel.
- When was the chapel abandoned as a place of worship?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- St Ninian's Chapel formed an integral part of the liturgical landscape of pilgrimage to the shrine of St Ninian at **Whithorn**. These included chapels (eg **Chapel Finian**), crosses (eg, **St Peter's Stone (now in Whithorn Museum)**) and the **Laggangairn Standing Stones**), caves (**St Ninian's Cave**) and wells (eg, **Chapel Finian** and the Wells of the Rees).
- St Ninian's Chapel played a part in the formative years of monument protection in Britain, through its association with Lt-Gen Pitt Rivers, the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments, and the 3rd Marquis of Bute, one of the pioneers of monument conservation.

Associated Properties:

(*other locally related pilgrimage places*) – Barhobble Chapel?; **Chapel Finian**;
Glenluce Abbey; **Laggangairn Standing Stones**; **Whithorn Priory**

Keywords:

early Christian; medieval; chapel; pilgrimage; Pitt Rivers; MacGregor Chalmers;
3rd Marquis of Bute

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