

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC315

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90317)

Taken into State care: 1931 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2003

**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

ST MARY'S CHAPEL, WYRE



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, WYRE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises the roofless, partly restored remains of a small 12th-century Romanesque chapel (set within a graveyard, which is not in HES care), sited on the small island of Wyre. It is overlooked from an adjacent hill by the contemporary **Cubbie Row's** castle and is intervisible with a modern farm sat upon a mound that is interpreted on place-name evidence (Bu) as the site of the lordly estate farm.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- Built in the second half of the 12th century by Kolbein Hruga (builder of **Cubbie Row's castle**) or his son, Bjarni (bishop of Orkney), important individuals mentioned in *Orkneyinga Saga*.
- Ruinous by 1791. Interesting 19th-century early conservation history: survey by Henry Dryden, then clearance and rebuilt at the instigation of General Burroughs. Blocked up architectural features within the wall are the result of 19th/20th-century consolidation and rebuild.
- Photographs in Orkney Archive show condition in 1920s.
- First scheduled 1929. 1931 Guardianship leads to further consolidation and clearance.
- 1933 hoax discovery of bones of a giant during clearance of chapel floor is a cause of local excitement.
- Note the debate on the dedication (Marian dedication, as opposed to Petrine, is confirmed).

Archaeological Overview

- Nothing significant or reliable is known about the sub-surface archaeology of the site given the unscientific 1930s clearance apart from the presence, as would be expected, of burials. The building and its sub-surface archaeology have the potential to provide information about the nature of a lordly Norse chapel and its subsequent use over many centuries.
- Debate about whether a piece of rare, medieval iron chain mail found lying on a ledge in chapel in 1930s (now in NMS) was recovered from the chapel or work at adjacent Cubbie Row's castle: recent research suggests it is found on the south side of nave, probably in a bench.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Evidence for Norse architectural styles and their relationship to contemporary European trends.

Social Overview

- No formal assessment of social significance exists.
- Modern Orcadian society attaches a high significance to the fact it was part of Norway for around 600 years.
- Important site to the island community – features in the local museum (converted community hall at access track road-end).

Spiritual Overview

- Former church, but no knowledge that it is still used for any religious function other than the graveyard.

Aesthetic Overview

- Elegant, simple Romanesque building
- Good example of beautiful qualities of Orkney sandstone, particularly when weathered.
- Visible association with Cubbie Row's castle, with the chapel sitting at the foot of the hill on which the castle is sited and nearby farm (sited on settlement mound).
- Sits within a neat historic cemetery with a modern extension (date of oldest gravestone needs checking).

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Most of history of the use of the chapel site is unknown, as is its wider archaeological and historical context. The well preserved complex of church, castle and farm has high archaeological potential.
- Little is known about medieval chapel sites in the Orkney Islands as a whole, although a forthcoming thesis by Sarah-Jane Grieve will hopefully go some way towards redressing this.
- The 19th-/early 20th-century works on the site are not well documented: the writing up and publication of the earlier excavations here and at Cubbie Row's Castle has not yet been done.
- The existence (as Collections suggest) of a carved stone from the site requires confirmation.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- A fine example of Norse simple Romanesque architecture.
- The site's importance is considerably enhanced by its juxtaposition with the other key components of a contemporary estate: castle at Cubbie Row's and Bu of Wyre farm (Bu being the large farm associated with Norse lordly estates).
- Value enhanced by associations with period of *Orkneyinga Saga* and historic individuals mentioned here.
- One of several well-preserved Norse churches and other contemporary buildings (castles, farms, etc) in northern Scotland, a significant proportion of which are in HES care in Orkney, Shetland and Caithness.
- A significant, if under-appreciated, part of the visible evidence for Norse character of northern Scotland which was part of the Orkney Earldom from the late 9th century to 1468. This Norse heritage is particularly valued by present day Orcadians and, indeed, Norwegians.

Associated Properties

Cubbie Row's Castle. Adjacent working farm (on top of Norse settlement). Elsewhere PIC in Orkney: **St Magnus, Egilsay; Eynhallow, Orphir church and Bu,** and **Brough of Birsay,** mainland Orkney; **Westside, Tuquoy,** Westray; Caithness: **St Mary's Crosskirk.** Orkney Islands Council has a network of so-called Saga Sites, including a Visitor Centre by **Orphir.**

Brough of Deerness (stone chapel 10th century or later) is one of many sites in Orkney with foundations of Norse chapels, but this is the main example that is formally accessible. St Boniface, Papa Westray (church, in occasional use and open to public) is broadly contemporary and its graveyard includes a distinctive Norse hogback monument. Skail, Deerness is parallel in sense of combination of residence, farm and church (latter still in use and contains hogback). Note also relationship to site of Birsay parish church and its successor as Cathedral, St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall and associated **Bishop's Palace.** In broad terms, links to other HES Norse sites, e.g. **Jarlshof,** later use of **Mousa,** etc.

Keywords Norse, medieval, Romanesque, chapel/church, graveyard, Orkneyinga Saga, Kolbein Hruga, Bjarni, bishop of Orkney.