



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD  
EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA

**Property in Care (PIC) ID:** PIC294

**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90144); Conservation Area (CA312)

**Taken into State care:** 1910 (Guardianship)

**Last reviewed:** 2004

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# EYNHALLOW CHURCH



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# EYNHALLOW CHURCH

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Eynhallow ('Holy Isle') comprises the well-preserved roofless ruins of a church of late Norse (probably 12<sup>th</sup>- or 13<sup>th</sup>-century date) and a settlement of post medieval date. The church consists of a rectangular nave with a porch at its west end and a square-ended chancel at the east end. The later settlement may overlie the buildings of a religious establishment associated with the church. In its later life the church was adapted into a dwelling and its earlier function was only recognised in 1851.

The monument lies on the SW slope of what is now an uninhabited island, sited in Rousay Sound, the channel between Orkney Mainland and Rousay.

It is a significant, if poorly understood, example of a Norse religious house of unknown order, but perhaps Benedictine. As such, its closest parallels lie in Scandinavia.

The island can only be reached by private/charter boat.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

- Eynhallow can be reliably identified with the *Eyin-helga* ('Holy Isle') mentioned in passing in *Orkneyinga saga* under year 1155. Because of this and other place-name evidence it is suggested that there was a religious house or 'monastery' here. There is no reliable evidence for which monastic order or which sex(es) might have been involved - both Cistercian and Benedictine have been previously suggested, but the Benedictine order is perhaps more likely. (There are no medieval documents referring to the existence of a monastic establishment in Orkney, directly or indirectly, although this does not mean they did not exist.)
- The religious house had apparently ceased to function by the Reformation, if not earlier; this is inferred from the fact that a late 16<sup>th</sup> century account of the island does not mention it, although there is a mention of the church in 1588. The church was later adapted to form a two-story dwelling. This is surrounded to the SW by a settlement consisting of at least four houses abutting each other. These appear to incorporate earlier structures; whether these are in part monastic buildings associated with the church is not certain (note the 'claustral' arrangement of buildings later appended to the church at **Brough of Birsay**, for instance).
- 1851 Demolition of four thatched cottages on the island following fever outbreak leads to discovery of church. Forced abandonment of island around this time.
- 1865-6 Survey of newly discovered buildings by distinguished architect and antiquarian, Sir Henry Dryden and T S Muir.

- 1897 The renowned Arts and Crafts architect, William Richard Lethaby, was employed by owners, the wealthy Middlemores, to clear out the site, examine the buildings further and undertake some building repair (precise nature unknown). Distinctive stone buttresses were certainly designed by Lethaby.
- 1911 Site passes into guardianship.
- 1911-24 Secondary (domestic) blocking of chancel arch removed. After 1924 some tidying up of structure, probably involving some minor rebuild.

#### Archaeological Overview

- The site was cleared out in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, so we must assume some disturbance of archaeological levels that might have helped us understand the later history of the site, at the very least. The archaeology of the island as a whole is poorly understood: there has been no survey to modern standards and any past invasive work was by antiquarians.
- The area of potential archaeological interest is considerably larger than the area in State care. There is the obvious potential for further structural remains, as well as human burials. Evidence surely exists on the island for how any community of monks or nuns exploited its agricultural resources.

#### Artistic/Architectural Overview

- There has been no recent detailed architectural study of the complex and precise dating of the church is difficult; certainly Romanesque, it probably dates closer to 1100 than 1200. There seem to have been various structural alterations in the 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century. Ancillary buildings can be assumed if the interpretation as a religious establishment is correct, but nothing reliable is known of their form.
- Given its level of reuse and adaption as dwellings, and later conservation works, the church is a complex multi-phase building that is difficult for expert and visitor alike to disentangle. The same can be said of the surrounding structures, since it is far from clear how much of what is visible can be related to the putative complex of late Norse buildings associated with this site. Critical re-evaluation of these buildings is highly desirable, although there will be a limit to what can be established without a complementary programme of archaeological work.
- Particularly enigmatic features of the site include the lower foundations for a staircase built on the S side of the nave, the destination, original form, function and date of which are unknown.
- 46 *ex situ* architectural fragments have been recorded on the site: these are described as non-local sandstone freestone and their quality suggests they have no obvious place on the buildings as they now stand. There are parallels with ornate, medieval interior stonework discovered at various places on Rousay; we can say no more than that there is a possibility that a site on adjacent Rousay was the source of this material.

- The contribution of Lethaby is important in its own right with regard to our understanding of the evolution of the church and in the context of understanding his Arts and Crafts work in Orkney as a whole. He is believed to have constructed the lodge on Eynhallow, a building which also contains an important collection of locally manufactured Arts and Crafts furniture.

#### Social Overview

- There is no ferry service to this uninhabited island, which is an SSSI and Rural Conservation Area owned by Orkney Islands Council. Scientists engaged in a long running study of the bird population are the only regular, if temporary, residents. As such, the island is only accessible to those who have/have hired a boat. There is an annual, locally-organised outing to the site in summer.
- There is physical evidence for the bird counting at the guardianship monument itself and on other standing buildings on the island (nest locations are often marked and numbered).

#### Spiritual Overview

- The place-name, 'Holy Isle', is evidence that the special spiritual role and qualities of this island were recognised by the Norse and can be taken to imply that this was the main/exclusive use of this small island.
- Despite the island's name, the tradition of the existence of a church building on the island seems to have been lost between the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and its rediscovery in 1851.

#### Aesthetic Overview

- The presence of Lethaby's buttresses can scarcely be missed. Their simple and bold design is in keeping with Arts and Crafts principles and is thus a most interesting addition to this multi-period build.
- Now entirely rough moorland, albeit with many visible traces of its former occupation, this largely inaccessible island feels remote, although it is sandwiched between two of Orkney's largest islands. In medieval times any religious establishment sited here would have had the advantage of living in their own defined space, yet being close and readily accessible to the wider maritime community on adjacent islands.

#### What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Examination of antiquarian sources post-dating the recognition of the site as a monastery may help elucidate the history of recent changes to its fabric. Of particular interest is the work undertaken by Lethaby in 1897; a MS is referred to that describes his works. SMF has located a shorthand transcription of this, as well as a short-hand transcription of what is apparently his instruction for works to the church, in Orkney Archives. Further work is needed to transcribe the latter and make sense of it. There is the possibility that the original is in the Lethaby Archive in the V&A, presently being researched by Dr Annette Caruthers of the University of St Andrews. This material is of relevance not simply for what it can tell us about Eynhallow church, but it could also augment the history of this celebrated Arts and Crafts architect.

- We know nothing of the site's surviving archaeology. Geophysical survey might be a useful starting point, as well as topographic survey of its immediate surrounds.
- Little is known of the archaeology of the island as a whole, the nature and development of which is likely to be intimately related to that of the church/domestic site.
- The church would benefit from a modern stratigraphic analysis of its complex structure by a trained buildings archaeologist and architectural historian, building on the 1994/5 photogrammetric survey. The upstanding remains, particularly the surrounding settlement, are very poorly understood and would also benefit from a detailed buildings survey and architectural survey.
- Further research on the *ex situ* architectural fragments is desirable to try and establish what they relate to and why they are on Eynahallow. This will require associated research on Rousay, for instance.

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## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- This is a complex and rather poorly understood monument, yet of enormous significance as the only known site in late Norse Orkney which is likely to have been a 'monastery', to judge from place-name evidence and the recognition of an early church (but note possibility that church site at Birsay may also have had a similar function).
- Although much altered by later domestic reuse (which is interesting in its own right), key and sometimes unusual features of the church survive.
- Further research has the potential to unravel some of the complexities of the history and development of this site, and its island context. This includes further research into surviving 19<sup>th</sup>-century documentary archives related to this site.
- The contribution to the site in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century by the architect Lethaby is significant in its own right, and for our understanding of the work of this celebrated Arts and Crafts architect in general. More remains to be learnt of his work at the site.
- The island is particularly significant today for its nature conservation interests, the interests of which are enhanced by the fact that it is uninhabited. This modern-day use can be contrasted with the former, busy occupation of this island, whether in prehistory, by the Norse religious community or the families that later farmed it.
- Value is enhanced by association with the period of the *Orkneyinga saga*.

- One of several well-preserved Norse buildings 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 the Norse character of northern Scotland which was part of the Orkney earldom from the late 9<sup>th</sup> century to 1468. The Norse heritage is particularly valued by present day Orcadians and, indeed, Norwegians.

#### Associated Properties

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

Non-HES monuments at Westness, Rousay (accessible to public); Linton Church, Shapinsay, etc.

Orkney Islands Council has a network of so-called Saga Sites, including a Visitor Centre by **Orphir**. Old scheme includes OIC having panels at or near some of our sites, although not here. They have plans to better develop and promote this network and are involved in a European-funded project, Destination Viking Sagalands. This is led by a government agency in Iceland and focuses on how sagas (and storytelling) can contribute to rural regeneration in the participating areas (South Greenland, various parts of Iceland, Faroes, Orkneys and the Lofoten and Troms areas of Northern Norway, in addition to a project in Northern Sweden). Relationship to HES sites yet to be discussed.

In broad terms, links to other HES Norse sites, e.g. **Jarlshof**, later use of **Mousa**.

Lethaby connection in Orkney: lodge on Eynhallow, Melsetter House, Westness House.

Keywords Norse, medieval, Romanesque, church, 'monastery', Benedictines, Orkneyinga saga, post-medieval settlement, Eynhallow, Orkney, Norway, Henry Dryden, William R Lethaby.