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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

MUNESS CASTLE



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.

MUNESS CASTLE

SYNOPSIS

Muness Castle is situated on a promontory at the SE corner of the Island of Unst, off the A968 2 miles east of the settlement at Uyeasound and 4 miles NE of the ferry pier at Belmont,. It once sat above a freshwater loch (now filled with peat) and overlooked an anchorage in the Ham of Muness. The castle has the distinction of being the most northerly castle in the British Isles.

The castle was begun in 1598 by a Lowland Scot, Laurence Bruce of Cultmalindie, and his wife, Elizabeth Gray; their quartered coat-of-arms and inscription is above the entrance doorway. The building is a diminutive Z-planned tower house, with circular towers at two opposing corners rather than the more usual square ones. It comprised three storeys, though the topmost storey has largely disappeared. The ground floor was vaulted and housed service offices, including a kitchen and wine cellar. The upper two provided good-sized accommodation for the Bruces, their household and guests. To the south of the building, between it and the loch, earthworks betray the former existence of gardens.

The castle was abandoned and roofless by the later 18th century. It passed into State care in 1956.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **1573** – Laurence Bruce, of Cultmalindie (formerly Fife, now Perthshire), is appointed *foud* (sheriff), admiral-depute of Shetland, chamberlain of the Lordship lands of Shetland, and bailie, justiciary and chamberlain of the lands of the Bishopric. He soon runs into local opposition for the way he wields his new powers. In **1577** the Privy Council investigate complaints, including that he was replacing elected lawrightmen by bailiffs of his own choosing, and that he was using faulty weights and measures in assessing tax payments (*skat*). In the early **1580s** he is removed from office by the newly appointed Earl of Orkney, his half-brother Robert Stewart, and never regains his position.
- **1591** – Earl Robert's son, Patrick, is appointed Lord of Shetland by his father. Following Earl Robert's death in **1593**, in the **Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall**, Patrick becomes the new Earl.
- **1598** – Laurence Bruce is building his new residence at Muness. Given similarities with Scalloway Castle, being built around the same time for his nephew Earl Patrick, it is likely that Patrick's own master of works, Andrew Crawford, and master mason, John Ross, are involved in its construction. Laurence and Patrick are soon in dispute with each other, a consequence perhaps of Patrick supplanting Bruce's position of influence with his late father, Robert. In **1602** Bruce and his son, Andrew Bruce of Scatsta, accuse Earl Patrick in the Court of Session that at Whitsun 1599 he had compelled their tenants, servants and labourers to carry stone and timber, to make and carry mortar, and to work at **Scalloway Castle** at their own expense. Patrick is later accused of using forced labour to build his new castle. The dispute wrangles on.

- **1608** - Earl Patrick and 36 men, including his master gunner equipped with a battery of brass and iron cannon, chase Thomas Black of Whalsay, another landowner he is in dispute with, to Muness, but unaccountably withdraw before being able to attack.
- **1617** – Laurence bequeaths Muness to his second son Andrew. Andrew seems to carry out repairs or alterations, for his initials were once visible below the SW turret and appear on a brass door-knocker, which survives today at Sand Lodge, Sumburgh. Laurence Bruce dies seven years later (**1624**).
- **1627** – the castle is attacked and burnt by privateers from Dunkirk, destroying all of Andrew Bruce's writs and documents in the process. The archaeological evidence indicates that the castle continues to be inhabited in some form, for timber floors are laid over the hall's stone paving.
- **1713** – the Bruces lease the property to the Dutch East India Company for four months to store the cargo salvaged from the wreck of their ship *Rynenburgh*. Five years later (**1718**) the family sell it. An inventory taken at the time makes for sorry reading, for it lists a parcel of old pewter, one old small brewing kettle, a parcel of old leather, and timber chairs. The use of the castle thereafter is unknown, but archaeological evidence suggests it was abandoned by **1750**. It was certainly roofless in **1774**.
- **1806** – An account by Charles Fothergill states: *'the walls of this edifice are yet in very tolerable repair – injur'd more by the people than time, and apartments might be rendered habitable at no great expense. The roof is however entirely gone. Kitchen convenient and in a very perfect state. The masonry is so good that it is probable artists were brought from Scotland. Inhabited within these 60 years.'*
- **1855** – a watercolour shows the ruined still with its uppermost storey largely intact. Sometime after this it was removed, apparently to create the present enclosing wall.
- **1956** – the castle is entrusted into State care and masonry consolidation follows.
- **1959** – the Ministry of Works install the present entrance doorway (the original was lost well before the castle came into State care), rescued from an abandoned house at Old Lund. This doorway, however, is of c.1700, not c.1600.

Archaeological Overview

In 1975, during masonry consolidation, some clearance excavations took place. The aim was to investigate the surviving archaeology on the first floor. Evidence was found that there had been two periods of flooring, and that the second period dated from the early 18th century.

In the hall the original floor had been stone-flagged; large, irregular shaped-flags had been fitted together with small stones filling the gaps. Not all were removed when the second floor surface, of timber construction, was put down above them. Evidence for the level of this second floor was preserved in the NW corner, where a small area of wall plaster survived intact. The walls had been replastered after the floorboards had been laid. The surviving fragments of flooring were pine.

In the SE tower the hearthstone of the fireplace had clearly been reset at a slightly higher level, and the make-up of the later floor included considerable quantities of 18th-century pottery and other finds. The chamber between the hall and the SE tower had also had a later wooden boarded floor, as demonstrated by surviving joist slots. Packing material between the slots also contained 18th-century finds, including a clay pipe.

There may be further archaeological evidence remaining in the ground floor (was there a well?), and standing building survey may also add to our understanding.

The field to the south of the castle has traces of outbuildings, and what may have been a terraced garden. A turf-covered stony mound, c 7m across and 1m high, in the same field is locally thought to be refuse from Muness after it was burnt in 1627, though it seems more likely to have been a garden feature of some kind.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

Muness has the distinction of being the most northerly castle in the British Isles. The building is also a fine example of a Jacobean fortified house built on the unusual Z-plan.

Exterior

Built c. 1600, the building comprises a main block, measuring 22.5 by 7.9m externally, with circular (rather than the more usual square) towers at the NW and SE corners, and with corner rounds or turrets atop the diametrically opposite corners. The structure is built of rubble masonry, using locally quarried stone, with imported freestone for the dressed stone margins. The exterior walls still have the remains of the lime harl that would have created a uniform appearance.

The building has some particularly fine dressed details, which have been described as 'refined and inventive' (Gifford). Of particular interest are: (a) the armorial inscription, (b) the corbelled turrets, and (c) the gunholes/shotholes.

The armorial inscription is positioned directly over the front entrance. (Incidentally, the entrance door, with its lugged and corniced architrave, does not belong to Muness but was brought from an abandoned house at Old Lund and inserted here in 1959.) The arms are now somewhat worn, but the inscription below, in Gothic lettering, is not, and bears helpful detail:

LIST ZE TO KNAW YIS BUILDING QUHA BEGAN
LAURENCE THE BRUCE HE WAS THAT WORTHY MAN
QUHA ERNESTLY HIS AIRIS AND OFSPRING PRAYIS
TO HELP AND NOT TO HURT THIS VARK ALUAYIS
THE ZEIR OF GOD 1598

The corbelled turrets consist of three continuous mouldings topped by two rows of chequer-set moulded corbels with dummy shotholes in the gaps between.

Similar corbelling exists also at **Scalloway Castle** and at the **Earl's Palace, Kirkwall**, strongly suggesting a single guiding hand at work (ie. Andrew Crawford and John Ross, Earl Patrick Stewart's master of works and master mason respectively; Crawford's tombstone is in Tingwall Kirkyard.)

The gunholes/shotholes are many and varied, but unlike the menacing display at **Noltland Castle**, Muness's shotholes appear rather as 'a catalogue display of the different varieties available from a skilled mason mason' (Gifford). They include inverted keyholes, quatrefoils, circles and saltires. Here again the circular and quatrefoil gunholes are present at **Scalloway**.

Interior

Internally the accommodation is well planned. The ground floor is divided into four vaulted rooms connected by a vaulted corridor running the length of the building. The west chamber is a well-equipped kitchen with a large fireplace and integral oven and a slop-drain. The east chamber was probably the wine cellar, given the narrow stair that links it to the hall above. A modest scale-and-platt stair, somewhat of a novelty at this date, gives more formal access to the upper floors.

The principal rooms were on this first floor. At its centre was a spacious hall, flanked on either side by apartments that formed an element of the lodging. The apartment off the upper (west) end of the hall was the laird's private apartment, comprising four rooms spread over two floors. These were, firstly, a withdrawing chamber off the hall, with a smaller closet in the projecting tower, and, on the upper floor, an inner bedchamber, with a closet in the projecting tower and a small study in the turret room. Off the lower (east) end of the hall was a chamber paired with a room in the corner tower forming the usual apartment arrangement at this date, of outer and inner chamber. This apartment may have formed accommodation for a junior member of the family or a guest. It is less clear how the remainder of the upper floor was used, given its state of dereliction.

Conclusion

Muness is an architecturally impressive castle by the standards of its time. It is tempting to see that by building Muness Laurence Bruce was attempting to compete with his kinsman, Earl Patrick, even if only in a Shetland context. The scale of Muness in contrast to **Scalloway**, built by Patrick around the same time, simply reflects Bruce's standing in society and resources available to him as a substantial landowner, rather than as a member of the aristocracy.

His house, whilst not of the scale of **Scalloway** or the **Earl's Palace, Kirkwall**, demonstrates the sophisticated nature that the tower-house form had reached by 1600, with innovative features, such as the scale-and-platt stair, integral kitchen and multi-roomed apartments. However, and somewhat unusually for this date, there is no provision for stool closets, although it is possible that they existed, but in timber and not as separate closets.

[Note: a finely carved oak panel formerly in the castle is now in the National Museums Scotland. It suggests that the hall was once panelled in oak.]

Social Overview:

Other than being one of the main heritage attractions on Unst, the property seems not to serve any specific social role.

Spiritual Overview:

There would not have been a chapel in the castle at this post-Reformation (1560) date, and the Bruces, their household and guests would have worshipped in the local parish church.

The castle seems not to have any spiritual role today.

Aesthetic Overview

The castle sits amongst a few croft buildings, its unusually squat (for a tower house) form giving it a perfect scale for the surrounding landscape. The building impresses but does not overwhelm.

The outside elevations have some fine architectural flourishes, particularly the elaborately corbelled turrets, making it stand out as a building of some substance.

The castle now stands alone, lacking its accompanying service offices, courtyards, gardens and outer precinct wall. Instead, a low stone dyke now hems it in, giving a false impression of how the building would have appeared in its heyday.

The interiors provide a nice contrast between light and shade.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What was the history of the castle and its residents following the death of Laurence Bruce? Although his life is reasonably well documented, further research is required to establish what use was made of the building thereafter, particularly following the fire of 1627, and how the castle fitted into the fabric of life on Unst in the 17th and early 18th century.
- What form did the castle complex take, specifically in regard to associated service buildings, gardens, etc? A field survey and archaeological excavation should provide the answers.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Munness is a well preserved fortified laird's house of the Jacobean age. It enables visitors to appreciate how the internal spaces might have been used by the family, their household and guests.
- The structure was one of a select number of impressive new fortified residences (inc. castles, palaces and fortified mansions) being built in Shetland and Orkney in Jacobean times by rich and powerful lords.

- The building exhibits fine and innovative architectural details, including most notably its corbelled turrets, array of gunholes/shotholes, and scale-and-platt stair.
- Muness and its contemporaries link the secular architecture of the Northern Isles with developments elsewhere in Scotland and beyond.
- Muness is a tangible illustration of the increasing Scottish influence over the Northern Isles, following their acquisition by the Scottish Crown in 1469.
- Laurence Bruce, its builder, was a significant player in the political history of Shetland at a particularly turbulent period.
- Muness and **Scalloway** are the only tower houses in the Shetland Islands.

Associated Properties

(*other associated places in Shetland*) – **Jarlshof; Scalloway Castle**; Tingwall Kirkyard, Unst Heritage Centre

(*associated castles in Orkney*) – **Earl's Palace, Birsay; Bishop's and Earl's Palace, Kirkwall; Noltland**

Keywords:

tower house; Z-plan; armorial panel/inscription; hall; scale-and-platt stair; gun-holes/shot-holes; corbelled turret; Laurence Bruce; Earl Patrick Stewart

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