

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC333

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90347); Listed building (LB5901, Category A)

Taken into State care: 2000 (Leased)

Last reviewed: 2014

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KISIMUL 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.

KISIMUL CASTLE

SYNOPSIS

Kisimul Castle (Caisteal Chiosmuil) stands on a small island in Castle Bay, at the south end of the island of Barra and a short distance off-shore of the town of Castlebay. The property comprises the substantial remains of a medieval stone castle of probably 15th-century date. What available evidence there is suggests that it was probably built by Gill-Adhamnain (Gilleonain), chief of Clan Macneil, shortly after receiving the lands of Barra from Alexander, 3rd Lord of the Isles, in 1427.

The castle complex consists of a curtain wall, irregular on plan, with remains of internal structures erected along its internal sides. Pre-eminent is the tower house at the south-east corner. There is evidence for other structures in the seawater beyond the curtain wall.

The castle was abandoned in the 18th century but repurchased by the 45th chief in 1937 and thereafter extensively and heavily restored. It was entrusted into State care in 2000.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **prehistory** – archaeological evidence suggests that the island may be occupied at some stage.
- **1164** – following the death of Somerled (Somhairle), Lord of Argyll, his vast lordship is divided between his two sons, Dugald, who gets Argyll, and Ranald, who gets the Isles. Ranald's two sons, Donald (MacDonald) and Ruari (MacRuari), inherit, with Ruari acquiring Knoydart, Moidart, Mull, Rum, the Uists and Barra.
- **1337** – Amy MacRuari marries her cousin John MacDonald of Islay, who styles himself 'Lord of the Isles'. The MacRuari estates, including Barra, pass to the MacDonalds.
- **1373** – John, Lord of the Isles, grants the estate of Barra to his son Ranald (founder of the Clan Ranald).
- **1427** – Alexander, 3rd Lord of the Isles, grants Barra and Boisdale to Gilleonan (Gill-Adhamnain) Macneil, chief of the Clan Macneil. He seems the most likely builder of the castle.
- **1549** – the first mention of 'ane castell in ane ile upon ane strengthie craig callit Keselum pertaining to Mcneill of Barray', by Dean Donald Monro, archdeacon of the Isles.
- **1675** – Crown officials attempting to serve a writ on the owner are met by 'foure scoir shott of hagbutts, guns and pistolls' and by large stones hurled from the walls.
- **1695** – Martin Martin attempts to visit, and describes the castle as having 'a stone wall round it two stories high, reaching the sea, and within the wall there is an old tower and an hall, with other houses about it. There is a little magazine in the tower, to which no stranger has access.' He mentions seeing the *cockman* [watchman] and the constable.

- **mid 1700s** – the castle is by now abandoned.
- **1797** – a fire ravages the buildings, burning the roofs and floors.
- **1838** – Roderick Macneil, 41st chief, sells Barra to Col Gordon of Cluny in order to pay off debts.
- **mid 1800s** – stones from the castle are taken and used as ballast in fishing boats.
- **1937** – Robert Lister Macneil, 45th chief, re-acquires the Barra estate, and with it the castle. Over the next three decades he clears the castle courtyard of rubble and sets about restoring it. It is more or less completed by his death in 1970.
- **2000** - Ian Roderick Macneil, 46th chief, leases the castle to Historic Scotland

Archaeological Overview:

There seems to have been no archaeological work done (either below ground or on the standing structures) either before or during the major restoration of the later 20th century. This is much to be regretted because such a study may well have been able to resolve the fundamental question of dating (see Architectural/Artistic Overview below). A building survey by RCAHMS in the 1970s, after completion of the main restoration scheme, attempted to recover as much archaeological information from the upstanding structure as possible, but the potential for standing building archaeology appears to have been exhausted.

Limited sub-surface excavations were undertaken in 2001, shortly after the property passed into care. These have demonstrated that the site retains some below-ground archaeological potential (for structures, waterlogged deposits and interesting stray-finds such as the decorative gold lace end found).

The area immediately beyond the curtain wall, particularly in the waters around the island, also has potential to cast light on the castle's history, and particularly its role as a centre of a maritime lordship.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

The medieval castle

Kisimul Castle is a curtain-walled castle. Prior to its restoration in the 20th century it comprised an enclosing stone curtain, irregular on plan simply because it follows the outline of the rocky islet on which it stands, rising sheer to the battlements. Internally, it had a stone tower house rising through three storeys and ruinous foundations of a number of buildings.

Kisimul is a paradox. It is one of the most important medieval castles of the western seaboard of Scotland, and certainly the best-preserved in the Western Isles, with numerous unusual features, and yet it remains an enigma. Who built it and when are questions that remain frustratingly unsolved, expert theories ranging from the 12th to the 15th centuries. This question of date has a major bearing on our understanding not only of castles on the western seaboard but of Scottish medieval castles generally.

MacGibbon and Ross and Cruden are the main proponents arguing for Kisimul being consistent with an early (ie, 13th-century) date. (Cruden even suggests that the tower house, which was built before the curtain wall, may be of the 12th century, because of its simple form - ie, it is unvaulted and lacks fireplaces.) Their reasoning was based on the featureless curtain wall (no windows or slits), the existence of a portcullis, and the evidence suggesting that the curtain wall was topped by a defensive timber hound (as at Castle Tioram and **Rothsay Castle**).

Others prefer a 15th-century date, chiefly it would seem because the castle is not mentioned in either John of Fordun's late 14th-century list of island fortresses or the 1373 grant of Barra and Boisdale to Ranald, son of the Lord of the Isles (which does refer to Castle Tioram and 'Vynvawle' (Borve?)). Turner and Dunbar see parallels with other 15th-century West Highland castles (eg, Breachacha, on Coll), which is also of a similar size, and has neither vaults nor integral fireplaces. Dunbar also demonstrated that Cruden's defensive hound was of secondary construction, probably dating to the early 16th century. On balance, this later dating seems to be the more likely.

The castle restored

The castle was substantially restored between 1937 and 1970 by Robert Lister Macneil. The curtain wall was substantially repaired, and the very ruinous building foundations in the courtyard heavily reconstructed. The work was carried out without proper archaeological recording, either sub-surface or standing building, with the result that large elements of the recreation cannot be justified on the grounds of surviving evidence (eg, the Tanist [heir's] House, restored in 1957-8), and makes the task of resolving the dating question very difficult.

Social Overview:

Kisimul Castle is of local, national and international significance as the official seat of the chief of Clan Macneil. The castle is periodically used for Clan gatherings (eg, during the 2014 Homecoming). As such it is a significant feature in the identity and history of the people of Barra. Anecdotal evidence would seem to suggest that their association with the castle is largely totemic.

The castle is also of social significance because of its role as an important heritage property in the tourism industry of the Western Isles.

There is no doubt that the 45th chief's restoration crusade in the later 20th century aroused a great deal of interest locally and nationally (eg, plenty of media coverage), and a significant part of the local value placed on the property today doubtless results from the 45th chief's romantic vision of 'the Castle in the Sea'.

Spiritual Overview:

It is uncertain whether the building currently called 'the chapel', and used as such, is still consecrated. However, the Macneils and Historic Environment Scotland assume so and treat it with the appropriate respect. It certainly contains mortal remains, and there are a number of wall-mounted memorials to

other Macneils too. This significance is probably largely confined to the immediate relatives of those buried or commemorated there.

Aesthetic Overview

Kisimul Castle is spectacularly sited on an island visible from all sides of Castle Bay, and especially from the town of Castlebay itself, thus making it one of the most impressively sited castles in Scotland. The view of it from aboard the Oban-Castlebay ferry as it rounds the Orosay headland to the south-east is truly memorable. These vistas are of iconic significance in the Western Isles, nationally and internationally, and play a significant part in promoting the island to the Macneil diaspora.

The crowded interior with its domestic scale (eg, the Tanist's house) has a certain charm and gives the visitor an impression of an occupied courtyard, an attribute missing from so many ruinous castle sites. The 20th century restorations in concrete are fairly evident throughout the site.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When was the existing stone castle built, and what was its subsequent building history? Despite extensive documentary research and preliminary archaeological work (by RCAHMS and Historic Scotland), key questions about the origins and development of the present structure remain unanswered. Further archaeological work has the potential to elucidate some points - eg, the nature of the early gateway, the form of the early hall and its relationship to the so-called 'chapel', and the history of occupation of the island in prehistoric and early medieval times.
- What lurks beneath the waters immediately around the castle? The remaining potential here surely remains high, and underwater archaeology should be able to cast further light on the nature and date of the boat house and fish trap, and much more besides.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- The Western Isles never had many medieval castles, and of those Kisimul is by far the best-preserved. Although apparently built as the residence of a comparatively minor clan chief, it formed part of the historically significant and geographically distinctive Lordship of the Isles. As such, it is an icon of Gaeldom, a highly recognisable survival in an area when Gaelic military power, culture and language held absolute sway.
- The sub-surface, and probably underwater, archaeology has the potential to unravel the early history of the island and the castle, to address key unanswered questions and to increase the cultural significance of the site.
- The restoration works carried out by the 45th chief of Clan Macneil have undoubtedly played an important part in the revival of the property in modern times – both as a tourism asset and particularly as an icon for the world-wide Macneil clan and official seat of its clan chief.
- The scale, extent and nature of the restoration works have however compromised the appearance and historical integrity of the curtain wall, hall,

'chapel', prison tower and kitchen; only the tower-house has remained largely unaltered.

- Nonetheless, the castle fabric retains numerous features of considerable archaeological importance (eg, portcullis and crenellations) that contribute towards our general understanding of the development of the castle as a place of defence and residence in later medieval times.
- Kisimul Castle is one of the most spectacularly and stunningly sited castles in Scotland, and has become, with the **Calanais Standing Stones**, an icon for the Western Isles.

Associated Properties

(other medieval castles in the Western Isles) – Borge Castle (Benbecula); Caisteal Bheagram (S Uist); Castle Calvay (S Uist); Dun MhicLeoid (Castle Sinclair) (Barra)

(other similar castles) –Dunollie (Oban); **Dunstaffnage**; Tioram (Moidart)

(some other restored medieval castles) – Duart (Mull); Duntroon (Argyll); Dunvegan (Skye); Stalker (Appin); Mingary (Ardnamurchan); Breachacha (Coll);

Keywords:

medieval; curtain wall; tower house; hall; gateway; sea; galley; Tanist (heir); Macneil clan; restoration

Selected Bibliography:

Cruden, S., *The Scottish Castle* (London, 1981 2nd ed.)

Dunbar, J G., 'Kisimul Castle, Isle of Barra', *Glasgow Archaeological Journal*, vol 5 (Glasgow, 1978)

Fojut, N, Pringle, D & Walker, B., *The Ancient Monuments of the Western Isles* (HMSO, Edinburgh, 1994)

Gifford, J., *The Buildings of Scotland: The Highlands and Islands* (Penguin, London, 1992)

Holden, Timothy G. 'Kisimul, Isle of Barra. Part 1: The Castle and the MacNeills', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* vol.146 (Edinburgh, 2017)

MacGibbon, D & Ross, T., *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland* vol 3 (Edinburgh, 1889)

McNeil, R L., *Castle in the Sea* (1964)

RCAHMS., *Inventory of Monuments and Constructions in the Outer Hebrides, Skye and the Small Isles* (HMSO, Edinburgh, 1928)

Turner, D J & Dunbar, J G., 'Breachacha Castle, Coll: excavations and field survey', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol 102 (Edinburgh, 1969-70)
