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Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC125

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90264)

Taken into State care: 1971 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2014

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST BLANE'S CHURCH



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ST BLANE'S CHURCH, BUTE

SYNOPSIS

St Blane's, Kingarth, lies in a wooded valley at the southern tip of the Isle of Bute, 2 miles south of the village of Kingarth and 7 miles south of Rothesay. The property comprises the large site of an early Christian (early medieval) monastery, and the ruins of a later medieval parish church with two graveyards.

The core of the site is defined by a long, low stone wall, thought to be the monastic *vallum* (an outer enclosure wall defining ecclesiastical space). The highest ground at the centre of this enclosure is occupied by two walled inner enclosures. The upper of the two is dominated by the parish church of c. 1200, comprising a nave and chancel and containing Romanesque ornament, which was extended to the east in the 14th century. The lower enclosure, attached to its south side and reached by a line of steps, includes the foundations of a small rectangular chapel, as yet undated. The church and both enclosures contain many interesting burial monuments.

Elsewhere in the outer enclosure are numerous visible structures represented mostly by low stone footings. These include a circular thick-walled structure known as 'the cauldron', possibly of early Christian date, and the remains of the later medieval manse. There is also a well and the socket-stone for a standing cross.

The site is one of the earliest, documented Christian sites in Scotland. It is also one of the most picturesquely situated properties in Historic Scotland's care – 'a spellbound garth hidden in the hills' (Walker).

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **6th century AD** – St Blane (Bláán) is reportedly born on the Isle of Bute. The nephew of St Catan (after whom Kilchattan, 1 mile to the NE of St Blane's, is named), Blane is said to have trained at the Irish monastery of Bangor (Co. Down), under its founder St Comgall, before returning to his uncle's monastery on Bute and succeeding him as abbot. His work later extend into Pictland to the east (eg, **Dunblane**), but little is known either of him or his cult. He is commemorated as 'fair Bláán of Cenn Garad [Kingarth]' in the 9th-century *Martyrology* of Oengus.
- **c. 630** – St Blane dies and is probably buried at his monastery. The ecclesiastical complex possibly develops around his shrine.
- **c. 660** – Daniel, bishop of Kingarth, dies. Subsequent bishops, abbots and a 'religious priest' are named in monastic annals at intervals up to the year 790. Although caution must be applied, the frequency of reference infers that Kingarth is considered a particularly important site by Irish annalists.
- **790** – the Irish documentary sources fall silent, perhaps because Bute is transferred from the Gaelic Dal Riata to the Britons of Strathclyde. There is no direct evidence for Viking raids on the monastery from the late 790s, although new archaeological evidence from the monastery on Inchmarnock, off the east coast of Bute just 6 miles from Kingarth, indicates just such a possibility. (The

relationship between Inchmarnock and Kingarth is not certain, but the former may well have been founded from the latter.)

- **10th/11th century** – to judge from the surviving sculpture at Kingarth, the place is a flourishing Norse church and burial ground. Strathclyde is now under strong Norse influence, and this is reflected, amongst other things, in the distinctive style of the sculptures found around the Clyde estuary (eg, **Barochan, Dumbarton Rock** and Govan).
- **later 12th century** – Alan, 2nd hereditary Stewart of Scotland, acquires the Isle of Bute and the other islands in the Clyde. He builds a new parish church at 'Kengai' (Kingarth) c. 1200 to serve the entire island, and grants it to Paisley Abbey. (Although now within the realm of Scotland, Bute technically remains subject to the Archbishop of Trondheim, in Norway, until 1472.)
- **13th century** – a second parish on Bute is created, covering the north half of the island and centred on **St Mary's, Rothesay**.
- **1560** – at the Protestant Reformation, the vicar, Sir James McWaraty, refuses to renounce Catholicism. After numerous attempts to force him to change his ways, he is finally removed from his manse in 1593.
- **1677** – the parish church is abandoned in favour of a new building (the Mid Kirk) in Kingarth. The manse at St Blane's is also abandoned. [Note: the new site beside Kingarth is now represented only by the cemetery.]
- **1874** – John Crichton-Stuart, 3rdmarquess of Bute, has the site cleared and tidied up. In **1894-7** he instructs Robert Weir Schultz (a London architect who designs furniture for Mount Stuart and is noted for his adherence to 'Arts & Crafts' principles) to carry out further clearance and excavation work and effect repairs to the upstanding church and enclosure walls. The manse is excavated in 1896.
- **1971** – the site is entrusted into state care by the 6thmarquess of Bute.
- **1997** – an archaeological re-assessment of the site, and the likely extent of the 3rdmarquess's excavations, is carried out by Lloyd and Jennifer Laing.
- **2007** – a new bench is erected at the site in memory of James 'Jimmy' Dalgleish, MBE, planning foreman with Historic Scotland, who had responsibility for the properties on Bute for many years.

Archaeological Overview:

The site

The archaeological work carried out for the 3rdmarquess of Bute's was more an antiquarian clearance. The extent of that work is still unclear. An archaeological re-assessment (see Laing & Laing) in 1997 cast some fresh light on the area and extent of these operations. Evidence was found for structures that may be early medieval and later in date. However, little more can be said at present.

Unexpectedly, the Laings discovered that c. 1985 a considerable amount of waste, up to 1m deep, had been dumped on the area to the south of the cemetery enclosure. This seems to have been carried out by the **Rothesay Castle DEL** squad, under direction from HQ, to back-fill excavation trenches left by the marquess's workers.

There is a hint from visible remains, and sub-surface features revealed through geophysics, of a complex early medieval arrangement and development of

inner and outer enclosures with some internal divisions apparent, as seems also to have been the case at **Whithorn** prior to AD 730. Such double precincts are a feature of early monasteries, though their precise nature and date are still largely matters of speculation.

The site as a whole must retain a very high archaeological potential.

The early medieval sculpture and artefacts

The artefacts recovered from previous investigations (sculpture, manufacture of lignite objects) are indicative of artistic and industrial activity on the site. The most interesting finds are slate motif pieces (now in Bute Museum, Rothesay); their interest is enhanced by the large number of contemporary (c. 9th – 12th-century) inscribed slates recently discovered at nearby Inchmarnock. Such motif pieces are rare in Britain (eg **Dunadd Fort**), although they have been found on Norse sites in Ireland and Scandinavia.

Plough pebbles from Kingarth, as at **Whithorn** and **Melrose**, may be further evidence of early medieval use of the mould-board plough, advanced technology associated with early medieval monasteries that was until recently thought to be a later medieval introduction to Britain.

Surroundings

The area in care has archaeological potential immediately around it. A corn-drying kiln close to the outer enclosure was excavated in 1962 and found to contain pottery of 12th/13th-century pottery. In 1863 a coin hoard was found on the farm of Plan, within ¼ mile of St Blane's, which included 21 silver pennies of David I (1124-1153). On the higher ground to the east of the monastery are the remains of croft houses of uncertain date.

St Blane's is also close to the hill-forts of Dunagoil and Little Dunagoil, beside the sea to the west. Occupation at the latter spans the Bronze Age to the 13th century AD. The physical proximity of secular and ecclesiastical power bases is likely to be significant. Despite St Blane's present-day feeling of being somewhat remote, this southern tip of Bute was probably one of the richest agricultural areas of the island in centuries gone by.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

The appearance, and to some extent the authenticity, of St Blane's has been altered by the later 19th-century activities of the 3rd marquess of Bute. For instance, the present shape of the two graveyards seems to reflect 19th-century tidying-up and enclosure, although it is possible that Weir Schultz found evidence for earlier walls and built these up.

Grave-slabs and markers

The interior of the church and both enclosures contain numerous grave-slabs and markers, most of them much worn. In addition a large collection of early medieval sculptures are now held off-site in the Bute Museum, Rothesay, and National Museums Scotland. They form the most notable collection of sculpture in the Clyde estuary.

The earliest sculpture fragments from the site are difficult to date precisely: five cross-marked slabs (two now lost); seven free-standing crosses (four now lost); one socket stone; eleven disc-headed cross-slabs and grave-markers. Most relate to the Norse-period sculpture (11th/12th century) of Strathclyde and northern England, but a few may be earlier. The disc-headed grave-markers of Kingarth and Cumbrae are not paralleled anywhere else in western Scotland. The reputedly 10th-century 'hogback' beside the church may in fact be a coped grave-marker of probable 12th/13th-century date.

The church and the two graveyards also contain an interesting collection of 13th/15th-century grave-slabs.

[Note: we do not know if any of the early medieval sculpture remaining at the site is still in its original position.]

St Blane's Church

The upstanding ruined church in the upper of the two inner enclosures has been a fine Romanesque building in its day. Comprising a nave and chancel, it was erected c. 1200, probably by Alan, 2nd High Steward, to judge by its style. The masonry of square ashlar work is similar to that at his castle at **Rothsay Castle**, and the chancel arch is a fine, albeit weathered, example of Romanesque decoration, similar in its richness of treatment to examples at Dalmeny (W. Lothian) and Leuchars (Fife) - a leading half-shaft flanked by nook shafts to the jambs, leaf-decorated capitals with chip-carving to the abaci, and chevron to the arches.

The building was later extended. The present east end of the chancel, built of rubble masonry, has deeply-splayed lancets akin to those in **St Mary's, Rothsay**, dated to the later 14th century, and the piscina and aumbry are also in similar locations. The nave was extended a short distance to the west, perhaps in the 15th century, possibly in a programme of work that included the construction of the manse at the SW edge of the complex.

St Blane's Church has evidence of the careful conservation work carried for the 3rd marquis by his London-based architect, Robert Weir Schultz, following the principles of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). The thin slivers of slate inserted between the old and the new masonry, most obvious in the nave, are examples of the 'self-documenting' measures Schultz took to distinguish his intervention work from the original fabric.

Social Overview:

There is a tradition that the upper churchyard was used for the burial of men, and the lower churchyard for women. As late as 1661 (see Cruden), the presbytery of Dunoon, after a customary visitation to the parish, delivered a stern rebuke and enforcement against the superstitious custom. Nevertheless the practice persisted, and the minister was instructed to make the act effectual by carefully attending burials for a season to stop the continuance of the transgression.

Today, the site is popular with visitors to Bute. They come by bike, car and bus. The site lies at the southern end of a new signed walk that runs the entire length of Bute, pioneered as part the 'Discover Bute Landscape Partnership Scheme'. The charming, tree-clad site, with great views across the Sound of Bute to the island of Arran, is a popular picnic place.

Spiritual Overview:

The site is one of the earliest, and potentially most significant, early medieval Christian monasteries in Scotland.

The place certainly retains its aura of spirituality to this day. Walker writes that it is 'a mysterious atmospheric place [where] architecture and landscape seem simultaneously to conceal and yet reveal an intense and immanent spirituality'.

Today, the site is occasionally used for special services organised by the churches on Bute; these include an early Easter Morning service. The church has also been used for weddings in the recent past.

Neither of the graveyards has known lair-holders. However, in the mid-20th-century, but prior to the site coming into State care, a new burial place, defined by a low stone wall with an iron gate, was created in the lower graveyard for the McEwens of Garrochty (a nearby mansion). It is not known if the family retains an interest in the plot.

The whole site still has spirituality for many visitors, as the flowers laid on the ground and the candle in the aumbry in the ruined church found at my visit witness.

Aesthetic Overview

St Blane's, Kingarth, is approached from a road end, up along a path through a series of fields, before turning into a most delightful wooded dell, hidden from the outside world by high ground to the east, north and south, and a line of inward-facing cliffs to the west. This romantic and tranquil spot instantly gives the appearance of being mysterious and spiritual, and remote from the modern world.

From the approach to and from the site the most superb views are to be had, on a clear day, across the Sound of Bute towards the mountains of north Arran.

The whole site, shaded by mature trees and dotted about by intriguing stone structures, is fascinating to saunter around.

St Blane's Church is a handsome, if somewhat ruined, example of Romanesque architecture, particularly its chancel arch.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When was a monastery founded at the site, and how did its nature and layout change through time? Although some antiquarian examination of the site was carried out by the 3rd Marquess of Bute in the later 19th century, the extent of

that work is imperfectly understood. It is certain, however, that the site presents a most important archaeological resource. The relationship of the site with the nearby secular power centre at Little Dunagoil also merits further exploration, whilst ongoing PhD research by Rachel Butter regarding place-name evidence for the early church in Argyll and Bute, as well as recently completed fieldwork on Inchmarnock, both have the potential to provide a better context for St Blane's as an early Christian monastery.

- When did monastic life come to an end, and why, and what was the nature of religious activity thereafter? Archaeological excavation, coupled with more detailed documentary work, should cast further light on the later 1st millennium activity.
- What stood on the site in the later medieval period in the way of buildings and structures? In addition to archaeological investigation, a fuller study of associated documentation (eg, presbytery records) may cast additional light on the twilight of parochial activity at the site.
- What purpose did 'the Cauldron' really serve?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- St Blane's is one of the earliest, and probably one of the most important, early medieval monasteries in Scotland. This can be inferred from documentary sources, the nature and scale of the physical remains (important parts of which are visible, if poorly understood –eg, the *vallum*, internal enclosures and structures, such as 'the cauldron') and the long and complex development of the site. A close relationship with the local power centre at Little Dunagoil seems likely.
- The foundation of the site is ascribed to St Catan or St Blane in the later 6th century. We know little of the life or cult of either saint, but St Blane in particular appears to have been an important man whose influence extended deep into Pictland.
- The importance of the site extends into 10th / 11th-century Norse times, as witnessed by its large and unusual collection of sculpture, and into later medieval times when a splendid new parish church was built in the Romanesque style.
- The archaeology of the site is poorly understood due to the lack of modern scientific investigation, but its potential remains exceedingly high, despite antiquarian disturbance and more recent tipping.
- The conservation of the upstanding stone structures, particularly St Blane's Church itself, are good examples of the kinds of works undertaken at historic sites by the immensely wealthy 3rd marquess of Bute in the later 19th century. Their physical legacy is strong in Scotland, involving renowned architects (in St Blane's case the Arts & Crafts' inspired Robert Weir Schultz). The full extent of Schultz's intervention at the site, however, remains in doubt.
- St Blane's, Kingarth, is among the most beautiful and tranquil properties in the care of Historic Environment Scotland.

Associated Properties

(*some other relevant sites on Bute*) – Dunagoil Fort and Little Dunagoil; Inchmarnock and St Ninian's Chapel; Kilmachalmaig (St Colmac's) Cross; Kilmichael Chapel (site); Kingarth Cemetery (site of later parish church); **Rothesay Castle; St Mary's, Rothesay;** St Ninian's Chapel, Straad

(*museums holding artefacts found at St Blane's*) – Bute Museum, Rothesay; National Museums Scotland

(*some other significant early Christian monastic sites in Scotland, Isle of Man and Ireland*) – Applecross (Wester Ross); **Eileach an Naoimh;** Hoddom (Dumfries.); **Iona;** Kiltiernan (Co. Down); Nendrum (Co. Down); Reask, (Co. Kerry); Ronaldsway (IOM); **Whithorn**

(*some other parallels for the Romanesque chancel arch*) – Cruggleton (Wigtowns); Dalmeny (W. Lothian); Duddingston (Edin.); **Dunfermline Abbey; Edrom Church;** Legerwood (Berwicks); Leuchars (Fife); Tynninghame (E. Lothian)

(*some other sites with important Bute family connections*) – Cardiff Castle (Wales); Castell Coch (Wales); Dumfries House (E. Ayrshire); Falkland Palace (Fife); Mount Stuart (Rothesay); **Rothesay Castle; St Andrews Cathedral; Whithorn Priory**

Keywords:

early Christian; medieval; monastery; *vallum*; parish church; Romanesque; chancel arch; burials; carved stones; St Blane; St Catan; marquess of Bute; Robert Weir Schultz

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