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ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC309

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90231)

Taken into State care: 1910 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

NOLTLAND CASTLE



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NOLTLAND CASTLE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises the substantial remains of a castle of 16th-century date, built by Sir Gilbert Balfour, apparently not finished to its intended design.

It is a Z-plan castle constructed from 1560 onwards (an oblong block with towers on two diagonally opposing corners). The castle, now roofless, consists of an oblong main building measuring about 27m east to west by about 11m transversely and containing a hall and chamber above a vaulted kitchen and cellarage. Square towers project from the south-west and north-east corners of the main building. The south-west tower measures about 9m square and the north-east tower about 8m. Although the main building of the castle was designed to have 3 upper storeys, only the north-east tower and the adjoining chamber block of the main building appear ever to have been completed. These are finished with corbelled parapets and cylindrical turrets, within which rise the crow-stepped gables of the high-pitched roofs. The main building has 71 gun-loops, arranged in tiers. On the south side of the castle stand the south wall and footings of a range of 17th and 18th-century buildings both inside and outside a courtyard.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- The castle is sited close to Pierowall, probably Orkney's best natural harbour, in a good defensive position.
- **1529** Jo Ben's early account of Orkney refers to 'an excellent fortalice or castle not yet finished'. On architectural grounds it is thought that this is not referring to the present Noltland Castle, but could this mean that there was an earlier castle on this site?
- **1560-1574** – construction begins in several intermittent stages. The importance of the castle is enhanced by the colourful role that its builder, Sir Gilbert Balfour, played in the political affairs of Scotland and Sweden at this time. Balfour was given the land by his brother-in-law, Bishop of Orkney and Shetland, in 1560. Balfour has connections with Mary Queen of Scots and was implicated in the murder of Cardinal Beaton in 1546. His decision to build his fortified home in Westray is likely to have been influenced by a need to make himself less obvious on grounds of personal safety.
- **1572** castle temporarily seized by Lord Robert Stewart.
- **1598** Earl Patrick besieged the castle.
- **1650s** – castle said to have been fired by Covenanters after it provided a refuge for some of Montrose's army after its final defeat (traces of burning formerly visible).
- **17th century** – range added to the south, enclosed in courtyard.
- **1745** – occupied by defeated Jacobite officers; set on fire by Hanoverians.
- **18th century** - other structures erected outside the east and west walls of the courtyard, entrance to which bears an inscription.
- **1910/11** taken into guardianship.

Archaeological Overview

- Excavations were carried out in 1925 within the courtyard on the north side of the castle; an early Christian graveyard was disclosed adjoining the west side of the castle. Little is known of this, but the presence of these earlier burials as well as some structural remains adds further weight to the archaeological potential of the castle. The precise location of these unpublished excavations is not clear. In modern times there have only been a number of minor watching briefs in advance of services, and these have revealed nothing of particular interest.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The castle was built to be the fortified, elaborate and comfortable home of a wealthy and important man. As such its external design is overtly militaristic (the number of gunloops is particularly impressive, if somewhat 'over the top') and stark, while in its interior there are spacious service areas on the ground floor and grand living quarters above. The visitor is able to appreciate from its layout how servants, visitors and family would have gained access to different parts of the building.
- Noltland is the first of the Renaissance castles/palaces/fortified mansions to be built in Orkney and Shetland. It is also the first major building to be constructed anew in Orkneys since its 12th-century Golden Age (but note that Bishop Reid had begun a programme of rebuilding works at Bishop's Palace in Kirkwall in the mid 16th century). We do not know who the architect was or whether it was necessary to import specialist building skills to Orkney for this purpose. Either way, the construction of the castle was a highly resource-intensive activity.
- The broad stairway with its carved stone newel post is particularly architecturally distinguished and would have been intended to impress all those who entered the castle and processed upstairs to the lord's quarters. Staircases were often the focus for display in Renaissance buildings (see also **Earl's Palace, Kirkwall** and Fyvie Castle), and this is one of the finest example of a 'scale and platt' in Scotland.
- Red Eday sandstone was imported for the construction of some of the architectural details.
- It is a scheduled ancient monument.

Social Overview

- There has been local interest in using internal and external spaces at the castle for occasional community events.
- No formal assessment.

Spiritual Overview

- Not assessed, but the presence of an earlier cemetery beneath part of the castle should be noted.

Aesthetic Overview

- The surviving form of the castle, with its elaborate internal and external architectural details, is very handsome indeed. The large number of ornate gun loops has a very dramatic effect. The castle's outline, with distinctive tall crow-stepped tower gables, is visible over a considerable distance.
- The upper levels of the castle give extensive views over Pierowall harbour, the northern Orkney islands beyond, and occasionally Fair Isle, reminding us of the importance of maritime communications, as well as the need for security.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Nothing reliable is known of the site's below ground archaeology.
- We might anticipate formally laid out gardens associated with the early castle; the area defined by the later courtyard is described in the 18th century as a garden. Geophysical survey might be the first step to finding out more about what survives.
- Whether, and if so how, this site was used before the present castle building and its place in late medieval Westray and Orkney, specifically its relationship to late Norse settlement in the island.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The castle is a very well preserved fortified house of the second half of the 16th century. It is possible for the visitor to appreciate how the internal space of the castle might have been used by servants, family and visitors alike.
- It belongs at the beginning of a very busy period of castle, palace and fortified mansion construction in Orkney and Shetland by a series of rich and powerful secular and ecclesiastical lords.
- The construction of a castle such as this links the architecture of northern Scotland with developments elsewhere in Scotland, and beyond.
- The main staircase is a particularly fine example of its type, its carved newel being of particular note.
- The castle is on the site of an earlier cemetery; the site has high archaeological potential, as yet untapped.

Associated Properties

Earl's Palace, Kirkwall, Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall, Bishop's Palace, Birsay, Scalloway Castle, Muness Castle, Huntly Castle, Fyvie Castle.

Elsewhere on Westray, primarily because of geographical proximity: **Links of Noltand, Westside Church** and Tuquoy, **Pierowall Church.**

Keywords castle, garden, Gilbert Balfour, Stewart Earls of Orkney and Shetland, 'scale and platt' stair, Renaissance architecture, Westray, Orkney