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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM13225)

Taken into State care: 1973 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2003

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SKIPNESS CHAPEL



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SKIPNESS CHAPEL

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

- Skipness Chapel stands on the eastern shore of Skipness Bay, 320m south-east of the castle.
 - It consists of a rectangular single chamber, measuring 25m x 8m, built of coursed rubble with red Arran sandstone dressings at the doors, windows, quoins and skews. It is lit by narrow splayed lancet windows in the nave and chancel and a larger, Y-traceried window at the east end and was entered through two doors in the south wall (one now blocked) and one in the north. There was a loft (presumably a late insertion) at the west end lit by a small square headed window high in the west gable.
 - The church sits in a graveyard which contains a significant group of late medieval and post-Reformation gravestones.
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CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- Skipness Castle is first recorded in 1261 when it was part of the lordship of Knapdale and in the possession of the Dugald MacSween, by which time he had probably built the nearby hall house and a chapel dedicated to St Columba.
- The castle changed hands during the Wars of Independence and it is unclear whether the enclosure walls were rebuilt and enlarged to its present layout by Sir John Stewart of Menteith or by the MacDonalds.
- Whoever was responsible for the change also relocated the chapel from the castle and constructed Skipness or Kilbrannan Chapel 320m towards the coast from the castle, and dedicated it to St Brendan [The survey of Scottish Saints dedications records no dedications to this saint. It would be worth researching this a little more.].
- The castle and chapel passed to the MacDonald Lords of the Isles in 1325 until their forfeiture in 1493, when they reverted to the Crown.
- Archibald Campbell, second Earl of Argyll was granted the estate in 1502. It remained in the Campbell family until the mid-19th century.
- The chapel remained in use until at least 1692, but may have been abandoned as late as the mid 18th century for worship, perhaps as a consequence of the erection of a nearby church at Claonaig in 1756, while the grave yard continued in use.
- It came into state care in 1973.

Archaeological Overview

- There has been no systematic clearance of the chapel and it is plain that there are burials both inside and out. There is likely to be important archaeology surviving across the site for both the medieval and post-Reformation use of the church. Archaeological assessment in advance of the graveyard extension by the local authority in the early 1990s confirmed this view.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Although a simple rectangular structure, Skipness Chapel is a good deal larger than any of the other surviving medieval chapels in Kintyre.
- It is surprisingly well preserved. It survives to wallhead height throughout and much of the architectural dressed stonework of the doors and windows is still in place.
- The nave is lit by four lancet windows, two in the south wall and one each in the north and west walls for lay folk. The main entrance in the south wall was simply decorated and provided with an internal drawbar, and there was a second lay entrance inserted in the north wall. The west wall of the nave is surmounted by a small bellcote, with the rope passing through the sill of the loft window.
- The chancel was also lit by four windows, two lancets in the south wall (with the blocked priest's door between them), one in the north and the handsome two-light window in the east wall.
- Traces of the position of a timber chancel screen can still be seen in the long walls dividing the chancel from the slightly larger nave.
- Five late medieval West Highland grave slabs survive within the chapel and the graveyard.

Social Overview

- The chapel at Skipness will have served both the principal occupants of the castle and their household and retainers. It is likely that a castle town grew up to support Skipness Castle, probably near the seaward approach. The chapel in this position would have been well placed to serve both castle and town.
- The chapel, although never parochial, continued in use as the church for the local population after the castle was abandoned and the use of the graveyard for burials gave it a strong association with the local community.

Spiritual Overview

- As a church and a burial ground Skipness retains its Christian spiritual associations and they remain important for many, not least the families with ancestors buried here.

Aesthetic Overview

- On the windswept coast of Kintyre, Skipness Chapel retains a remote and peaceful aura. Its setting, looking out over the sea, adds immeasurably to our understanding of how important the sea was to the people who built the chapel and castle.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Little is known of the functioning and administration of the chapel at any period.
- Little is known of the iconography or genealogy of the gravestones.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The builders of Skipness Castle recognised the importance of providing a chapel, not only for their own worship, but for that of the local community as well.
- The owners, Lords of Knapdale, Stewarts of Menteith, Lords of Isles and finally the Campbells of Argyll saw the support of the chapel as part of the operation of their estate, another appointment to bestow and a way of demonstrating their wealth and influence.
- The move of site and dedication in the 13th century must signify a change in emphasis in the way the castle at Skipness operated. It may simply mean that a castle town had developed close to the sea and a chapel, outside the walls of the castle was more convenient for all (including preventing the ordinary congregation from entering the castle?).
- The shift in emphasis from a chapel to serve the Castle and Estate, into a local parish church.

Associated Properties

Skipness Castle, Castle Sween

Keywords chapel, church, Skipness, Lord's of the Isles, MacSween, Knapdale