HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND | ÀRAINNEACHD EACHDRAIDHEIL ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC101	
Designations:	Scheduled Monument (SM13225)
Taken into State care:	1973 (Guardianship)
Last reviewed:	2003

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SKIPNESS CASTLE

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SKIPNESS CASTLE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

- Skipness Castle, stands on gently sloping ground commanding the Sounds of Kilbrannan and the entrance to Loch Fyne as well as the distant prospect south to Kintyre and across to Arran.
- The building consists of a rectangular castle of enclosure with massive rubble walls, dating from the 13th or 14th century. The walls rise from a plinth and incorporate crosslet loops and entrances to the courtyard in the south and north walls and projecting towers in the south-east corner and in the west wall (the latrine tower).
- The curtain walls incorporated the walls of the two earlier buildings, a hall house on the north side of the enclosure and, opposite it, a chapel, both built in the first half of the 13th century.
- About 1300 the enclosure walls were completed and the chapel range altered to form a gatehouse, with a portcullis and machicolations for defence, and a first floor hall. At the same time, in the northeast, a three-storey block of chambers was built adjacent to the hall house on the north side of the enclosure.
- Soon after 1502 the north east tower was raised.
- The transformation to a tower house was completed later in the 16th century by the reconstruction of the upper portion of the tower, and the removal of the remainder of the east courtyard range, to leave the tower free-standing on its south side.
- The castle was abandoned about the end of the 17th century, and despite later farm use and the impact of repairs in the 19th and 20th century, the survival of good medieval masonry is remarkable.

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 hall house and chapel and enclosed the site.
- Walter Stewart, Earl of Menteith, acquired it in 1262.
- 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 Mentieth, possibly funded by King Edward I of England, or by the MacDonalds.
- The castle and lordship passed to the MacDonald Lords of the Isles in 1325 until their forfeiture in 1493, when the castle and Barony 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.
- There were repairs in the mid 17th century, soon after it withstood a siege by the MacDonalds during raids in Kintyre.

- A warrant was issued for 'razing down the castle' soon after Argyll's Rebellion in 1685. The laird successfully petitioned against carrying this out, although the castle was abandoned soon after.
- It was converted into a farmstead which meant the removal of the early courtyard buildings except the tower house, and the erection of lean-to sheds and offices against both sides of the curtain wall. These farm buildings were removed in 1898 and steps taken to preserve all that remained of the castle
- Concern about the stability of the castle in the 1950s and 60s, finally led to it being taken into care in 1973, and a major campaign of repair and consolidation continued until 1995.

Archaeological Overview

- Trial excavations in the 1960s established that the principal medieval occupation deposits had been removed before the construction of the 18th century farm buildings. A number of Christian burials were discovered in undisturbed subsoil in the south west corner of the courtyard.
- In 1993, small, targeted excavations to aid the characterisation of the main structural sequence of the site followed an extensive geophysical survey. This archaeological work demonstrated that:
  1) The castle sits on an artificially extended natural gravel terrace - one of a series of raised beach deposits.
  2) The present contours and limits of the castle mound have been extensively reworked as part of the policies of the neighbouring Skipness House (1881) and subsequently rebuilt following a fire in 1969.
  3) There was evidence that the castle mound was extended and complemented by a shallow ditch, probably reflecting the general refurbishment of the site in the later 13th century.
  4) 19th and 20th century occupation of the tower house saw the almost total clearance of redundant courtyard structures.
  5) Robbed wall lines were traceable in the form of foundation pads rather than trenches, cut against the bedding for a cobbled surface in the courtyard.
- These small-scale excavations indicate that while much of the medieval archaeology has been damaged by the later use of the site, there remain significant pockets of archaeology surviving.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Skipness Castle, one of the major medieval fortresses of the western seaboard, has had a long and complex history of architectural development. The architectural evidence indicates that the site was first occupied in the first half of the 13th century, by a hall-house and chapel and the site enclosed by an earth and timber rampart.
- About the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries the hall-house and chapel were incorporated into an enlarged and strengthened castle, enclosed by a high curtain wall provided with defensive features including crosslet arrow slits, projecting towers and crenelated wallhead to protect guards on the wall walks behind. The chapel was secularised, its place being taken by Skipness Chapel about 400m to the southeast. The curtain wall enclosed an oblong courtyard with ranges of buildings against the south, north and east walls, while the west wall was lined with a timber gallery giving access to a row of arrow slits.

- The northernmost part of the east range of courtyard buildings was altered in two phases to form a tower house. It was first heightened by three upper storeys, and the upper portion of the adjacent section of the east curtain wall was rebuilt and provided with a battlemented parapet walk. The transformation to a tower house was completed later in the 16th c by the reconstruction of the upper portion of the tower, and the removal of the remainder of the east courtyard range, to leave the tower free-standing on its south side.
- The castle was abandoned about the end of the 17th c.

Social Overview

- Skipness Castle was the administrative centre of a considerable barony, one of the great medieval lordships of Kintyre. Whether part of the estates of the MacSweens, MacDonald Lords of the Isles or the Campbells of Argyll, the owners of Skipness controlled the lives of the people who lived in this part of Argyll – the social structure underpinned all aspects of medieval life. This aspect of its importance is now lost to us.
- After it was abandoned, the castle moved down the social scale until Skipness House was built for R C Graham and a designed landscape incorporated the old castle in the 1880s at the same time the owner began to recognise the castle's antiquarian value.

Spiritual Overview

- The chapel within the castle was removed 400m away from the castle by the 14th century and there is no evidence of a private chapel or oratory within the walls, although, worship and religious patronage were important parts of lordly duties.
- There are no modern spiritual associations with the castle (as opposed to the chapel), though the discovery of Christian burials on the site is a reminder of the proximity of the early chapel.

Aesthetic Overview

- Startling setting in open ground, overlooking Kilbrannan Sound
- Approaching Skipness Castle through a slightly dishevelled Victorian landscape provides an attractive, if rather incongruous, approach.
- Looking out over the Clyde estuary and the proximity to the Stewart lands of Bute are a strong reminder of the strategic location of the castle and the importance of the sea.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Few details are known of the working of the barony or the early lordships.
- The strategic role of Skipness the estates of the Lordship of the Isles.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Skipness Castle illustrates the major changes in architectural form seen in Scottish castles from the 13th to the 16th centuries, starting with the conversion of the hall house into a castle of enclosure and finally a towerhouse emerging.

- When it was built, Skipness's strategic seaboard location, put it on the boundary between the lands controlled by the Lords of the Isles and those held strongly for the King of Scotland on Bute and beyond, on the Ayrshire coast.
- Skipness deomonstrates how the changing ownerships and allegiances have each had an impact on the buildings. That this is a continuing pattern is demonstrated by the 1881 successor to the castle, which gave it an open and accessible setting, more in keeping with the house than a medieval stronghold.
- Skipness serves as a reminder of English political and architectural influence in Scotland and Argyll in the 13th and 14th centuries.

Associated Properties
Skipness Chapel
Castle Sween, Tarbet Castle, **Lochranza Castle, Dunstaffnage Castle**
Rothesay Castle (also owned by the Stewarts)

Keywords Castle, Argyll, Lordship, McDonald, Hall House,