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**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90253)

**Taken into State care:** 1957 (Guardianship)

**Last reviewed:** 2014

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# ST MARY'S CHAPEL, ROTHESAY



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# ST MARY'S CHAPEL, ROTHESAY

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises the chancel of the medieval parish church of Rothesay, surviving to gable height, newly roofed in 1997-98 to help conserve the effigies and tombs. Much of the fabric dates from the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The chancel contains a pair of fine canopied tombs, possibly built to the order of Robert II (1371-90) who spent much time in Rothesay Castle.

The property stands beside the parish church erected in 1796, within a historic graveyard, 1km South of the centre of Rothesay, an outstanding conservation area.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

Early 14<sup>th</sup> century - the parish had been created by this time, although the date of the foundation of this church is unknown. The chancel was probably built at this time.

1320s - St Mary's was the burial place of two successive Bishops, which suggests that the church may have contained the bishops' throne, thereby serving (along with other churches) as a Cathedral of the Isles. The church was dedicated to St Brioc and to the Virgin.

Late 14<sup>th</sup> century – the chancel was built, with the two canopied tombs set symmetrically to either side. The tombs may have been constructed for the patron of the church and his lady, likely to be Stewarts, although their identity is unknown.

1692 - the original pre-Reformation church was demolished, and a new church erected on its site.

1795 – the present church was erected, with the chancel of the medieval St Mary's church adjoining the south-east corner.

1955-56 - Historic Scotland's predecessor executed an extensive consolidation programme funded by the owner, the Marquess of Bute.

1957 - the church was given into guardianship.

### Archaeological Overview

Clearance works during repairs in 1816 revealed an early medieval sculpted stone, which might indicate that there had been a chapel on this site for a number of centuries prior to the construction of the parish church here in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, an arched recess was discovered below the tomb chest of the knight, containing remains of at least three bodies.

The internal ground level had been raised following dereliction but was lowered once more in 1998 under archaeological supervision.

The external area to the west (not in care) contains the buried remains of the medieval nave, and this is also of considerable archaeological sensitivity. The interior of the monument and the area all around will almost certainly contain many graves of all periods.

#### Artistic/Architectural Overview

The east gable of St Mary's contains a single, large three-light traceried window. In the side walls, lancets flank the position of the altar. The design of the east end is similar to that seen at St Blane's.

The most impressive features are a pair of finely executed aristocratic tombs, a lady with a child, and a knight. The knight's tomb, on the south, is the more grandiose. He is clad in plate armour, with his head resting on a jousting helmet, and his feet upon a lion. The canopied tombs face each other, centrally placed in the north and south walls. They appear to have been built with the chancel, in the location favoured by the patron and his lady. The individuals cannot be identified with certainty. The arms displayed on the knight and adorning his tomb indicate a close connection with both the Stewarts and the royal house, possibly a keeper of Rothesay Castle.

The knight's tomb was clearly used for subsequent burials, quite probably those of the sheriffs of Bute. The decoration of the tomb was altered at this time, including the addition of personal escutcheons to the tomb canopy.

The chancel contains important medieval gravestones, none of which appears to be *in situ*. One bears the effigy of a knight, with an inscription possibly relating this individual to the Comyn family. Another stone bears a cross with four circles forming the head.

The 1955-56 conservation programme involved major works, including the rebuilding of the arch over the lady's tomb in the N wall, which had completely collapsed along with a large part of the surrounding wall.

#### Social Overview

Not assessed

#### Spiritual Overview

This was part of the parish church, which played a central role in the spiritual life of generations of the inhabitants of Bute, in both pre- and post-Reformation times. The chancel did not figure in the worship of the common folk, having been appropriated by the founder's family.

#### Aesthetic Overview

The ruined chancel is rather overpowered by the adjacent barn-like Presbyterian church.

There are no good views in or out of the site. The surrounding historic graveyard provides a poignant setting.

The modern roof, containing some quite strongly expressed components, is slightly unsympathetic to the ruined stone structure, while serving a valuable conservation function.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

What is the date of the origin of Christian worship on this site?

If an early chapel did stand here, what form did this take?

Who are the patrons, buried in the wall tombs?

Where were the grave slabs originally located?

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## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- Exceptionally, the remains of both the medieval parish churches on Bute – St Mary's Rothesay and St Blane's Kingarth – are in care. This presents a unique opportunity to explore the central role of the parish church, and the cure of souls, within the lives of ordinary folk. The functions of the chapel in Rothesay Castle, and of the chapel outwith the Castle walls, could also be considered in relation to this.
- There are marked similarities between the 14<sup>th</sup> century work at both St Mary's and St Blane's, suggesting that the same patrons and masons were involved at both.
- The partial preservation and the small scale of the chancel belie the past significance of this church as a Stewart sepulchre and, possibly, briefly serving as the cathedral for the diocese of Man and the Isles.
- The position of honour of the paired tombs indicate that these were for the patron of the church and his lady.
- The tombs have the potential to inform an understanding of the commemoration and representation of the noble dead. The opportunity exists to explore the circumstances in which alteration and reuse of the knight's tomb could occur.
- The fascinating possibility exists that the tombs were constructed by Robert II, as the first of the Stewart dynasty, to help establish his family's credentials by the building of elaborate tombs for his forebears.

### Associated Properties

**St Blanes, Bute; Rothesay Castle (St Michael's Chapel); St Bride's, Douglas.**

Keywords Canopied tombs; effigies; Stewart dynasty; parish church.