



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC310

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM13416)

Taken into State care: 1911 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

PIEROWALL CHURCH



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PIEROWALL CHURCH

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises the remains of a medieval parish church (Ladykirk). It is situated in the village of Pierowall, the main settlement on the northern Orcadian island of Westray.

The church comprises an irregularly shaped two-cell church measuring about 22m from east to west by about 7m north to south. It is roofless with most of its walls surviving to full height. Much of the visible remains are 17th century, but medieval fabric does survive in the south wall of the nave. The east end contains two wall-mounted 17th-century graveslabs that have been housed in a modern purpose-built shelter to protect them from the elements. The church lies within a part of the burial ground (scheduled but not in HES care) that was still in use in the late 19th century.

The masonry is rubble with freestone dressings and is lime mortared except for the older medieval work, which seems to have been bedded in clay.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- Pierowall has a safe natural harbour and has been a focus of settlement on Westray since at least pagan Viking times, although to judge from Norse documentary sources it was not the most important (this was at Rapness).
- The history of this monument has largely to be derived from analysis of its fabric.
- On architectural grounds, the earliest elements of this parish church have been thought to date from the 13th century, the time when Orkney parishes are thought to have been formed, though the earliest documentary references are in the 1440s, when it was a prebend of Kirkwall Cathedral. At this time Orkney was part of the diocese of Trondheim in Norway.
- Largely rebuilt in the 17th century, when the nave was widened; constructed of a 'laird's aisle' (1674 date on skewput), possibly on the site of a medieval chancel; addition of bellcote to west gable. This ambitious programme of development, in tandem with the surviving examples of very fine 17th century graveslabs, emphasises the wealth of the community on Pierowall and the importance to people of the church.
- 1911 Passes into guardianship.

Archaeological Overview

- Minor excavations in 1988 in advance of the erection of shelters around the 17th-century graveslabs did not discover anything significant. There has been no modern standing buildings analysis of the building.

- The surviving archaeological potential of this site is presumably high, but essentially untested.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Orkney is of particular interest for our understanding of the medieval church and its architecture, through having affinities with both Scandinavia and mainland Scotland. The development of the parochial system in the 12th and 13th centuries appears to have had more in common with Scandinavia than with Scotland, while the geological characteristics of the local buildings materials necessitated unique structural solutions. Much work remains to be done in analysing the architectural form of the few surviving churches if we are to understand the source of the ideas underlying their design, and their relationship with the wider architectural world.
- On the basis of present available evidence, the architectural detailing and inter-relationship of its parts is our main source of evidence for how this monument developed through time and what it meant to the local community who built it.
- While Pierowall is likely to have been a more important settlement than that associated with the other parish church at **Westside**, the church at Westside would appear to have been more architecturally distinguished.
- The ‘birdcage’ bellcote with a ball finial is well preserved and a prominent, distinctive characteristic of the church. This is the only substantially post-Reformation church that Historic Scotland has in its care in Highland and the Islands. Elsewhere in the north **St Peters, Duffus**, although a medieval foundation with substantial medieval elements, does appear to have been thoroughly rebuilt in the late 17th/early 18th century and other churches, such as **Auchindoir**, although mainly medieval were reorganised to conform to the reformed worship.
- The two 17th-century tombstones now displayed for their protection within the laird’s aisle are exceptionally well preserved and distinguished examples of high status burial memorials (one of the persons listed owned Noltland Castle). The lettering on them is particularly fine (a match for that in the splendid, larger collection of such graveslabs from St Magnus’ Cathedral, Kirkwall). They include emblems of mortality and heraldry; in tandem with the inscriptions, these provide an interesting insight into the beliefs associated with death at this time.
- The church is a scheduled ancient monument.

Social Overview

- Not formally assessed.

Spiritual Overview

- Lady Kirk is the site of one of the two medieval parish churches on Westray, the other having been at **Westside**. Parts of the adjacent cemetery are still in use.

Aesthetic Overview

- There is little particularly distinguished about the church, but the 17th-century graveslabs are very beautiful. Set down from the modern road, the roofless church is not a prominent feature from the land.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- The existence of any surviving historical sources requires clarification.
- Nothing is known about the archaeology and hence earlier history of this site.
- Wider study of architecture of Orkney churches is required (see above).
- Sarah Tarlow has undertaken a fascinating study of the post-Reformation graveslabs in Orkney; it remains to be clarified what her study (published and unpublished) says about the Pierowall examples.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The church has medieval origins, but in its present form is largely a 17th-century building. It is the only small post-Reformation church in Historic Environment Scotland's care in the Highland and Islands, but is not in itself of particular architectural merit.
- In some respects the most distinguished and interesting component of this monument is its two fine 17th-century graveslabs, which match in their quality of carving and state of preservation the better known examples in St Magnus' Cathedral, Kirkwall.
- The site has high archaeological potential, but has been a place of burial over centuries so the scope for research-led invasive excavation is not high.
- The monument is an important component in the development of Westray's historical landscape and adds weight to the long history of significance of Pierowall harbour.

Associated Properties

For their proximity on Westray, the other medieval parish church at **Westside**, **Noltland Castle** (occupied at time when church would have been functioning nearby) and **Links of Noltland**.

St Magnus' Cathedral in Kirkwall includes a large collection of related tombstones.

Keywords medieval, post-Reformation, parish church, 17th-century graveslabs, Westray, Orkney.