



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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Property in Care (PIC) ID:

PIC336

Designations:

Listed Building (LB18603)

Taken into State care:

1989 (Ownership)

Last Reviewed:

2003 (2025 update to include Empire connections)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

TORMISTON MILL



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

TORMISTON MILL

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises a late 19th-century meal mill. It is used by Historic Scotland as its shop, restaurant, toilets and small interpretation space for Maeshowe chambered tomb (on the opposite side of the road).

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical overview

1884–85: Built by Colonel Balfour of Shapinsay for the convenience of the surrounding estate tenants and crofters/farmers from the neighbouring parishes as a mill for preparing animal feed. Through the Balfours of Trenabie, it was highlighted in recent research,¹ that Tormiston Mill has the potential to have a ‘property’ empire connection.² The Balfours of Trenabie obtained significant wealth, and subsequently land, through the involvement of John Balfour (1750-1842) with the East India Company. On his return to Britain in 1790 he is thought to have doubled the already extensive fortune he had made while in the Company’s service in southern India. On his death, the bulk of his £180,852 fortune passed to his great-nephew David Balfour (1811-87), who invested heavily in agricultural Improvements on his estates. From the 1870s, the estates became divided between different members of the family. However, there can be no doubting that the passing on of empire-derived wealth did play a role in preserving Orkney’s ancient heritage. David Balfour, for example, took particular interest in Maeshowe, with subsequent generations placing other sites into care.

However, although Colonel Balfour, who had the mill built, acquired estates that had been improved through empire-derived wealth, it is currently not possible to determine if such wealth played a direct role in the construction of Tormiston Mill. It is possible the capital he used was derived from other sources. This is because it is unknown if he inherited any capital derived from East Indies activities and the Mill was built after the 1875 handover within the Balfour family of the extended properties.³

¹ Full research report can be downloaded from HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997 \(historicenvironment.scot\)](#)

² ‘Property’ connection describes land or buildings owned by either an established propertied family which participated in the Empire, or a recent enriched family which, through involvement in colonial activities, acquired the means to secure property. See Mullen *et al* 2024, 30-31 for a full definition of typology.

³ Mullen *et al* 2024, 49

1925–26: Ownership passed to Thomas Linklater, ‘Jock o’ the Mill’. Orkney Sound Archive includes a record of his son, John, talking to Ernest Marwick, a local historian, about the mill’s history and workings.

1965: Falls into disuse.

1972: Converted into restaurant and shop.

1989: Acquired by Historic Scotland and refitted as interpretation centre, etc for Maeshowe.

Archaeological overview

The upstanding site is of little archaeological interest, although there may be unknown buried sub-surface features in the immediate surroundings that relate to the early history of the mill and any earlier activity on the site.

Artistic/Architectural overview

- The mill is typical of the large water-powered meal mills built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Orkney and Caithness, with ironwork from the Thurso Foundry. It is Category B listed as a building of regional importance.
- The mill is a pattern-book example of its period: plain rectangular plan; three storeys, twin-vented kiln, three pairs of stones, large cast-iron overshot wheel and flagstone built lade. Unusually, the lade is carried on a beautifully built stone aqueduct.
- The building’s 1972 conversion won a European Architectural Heritage Award in 1975.
- The mill equipment is intact, but the modern conversion of the building for a range of purposes means that the visitor gets little authentic sense of how the building operated as a mill.

Social overview

There is a restaurant in the mill, predominantly used by tourists rather than locals.

Spiritual overview

Not assessed.

Aesthetic overview

- A solid building that makes a distinctive mark in the local landscape.
- Important component in historic landscape, not least as a rare example of a tall building.
- Sited on the edge of the Inner Buffer Zone of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS buffer zone, within the WHS Outer Buffer Zone (a National Scenic Area).

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

A detailed history of the mill and contemporary milling in Orkney as a whole, and the place of Tormiston Mill in this, would improve understanding of the site.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

This monument is of regional rather than national significance. It was taken into care because it had the potential to be used as an interpretation centre, etc for Maeshowe, rather than as an outstanding example of a mill that merited taking into care into its own right. This is reflected in the modern conversion and manifold present-day uses of the mill, which make it difficult for the visitor to appreciate how it might have functioned as a working mill.

The external form of the building is well preserved and it is a prominent local landmark visible from large areas of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney WHS, not least since tall buildings are a limited component of the Orkney historic landscape.

ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Orkney: Barony Mill, Birsay (excellent working example of a contemporary mill, open to the public); **Click Mill, Dounby** (horizontal mill).

KEYWORDS

Mill; meal; machinery; lade; Orkney.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Mullen, S., Mackillop, A., and Driscoll, S. 2024 Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997. (Edinburgh, Historic Environment Scotland). Available online: <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/publication/?publicationId=e192ea9f-0d7e-4745-b499-b0fb010a167a> (accessed: 17 December 2024).