



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC293

Designations: Scheduled Monument (90194)

Taken into State care: 1920 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2018

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EARL'S PALACE, KIRKWALL



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EARL'S PALACE, KIRKWALL

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument consists of the remains of the Earl's Palace, built by Patrick Stewart, Earl of Orkney, between c.1601 and 1607. It is a self-contained residence for the owner added to an existing palace complex, the Bishop's Palace. This single defensible enclosure was known as the 'Palace of the Yards' and stands immediately S of the early 12th-century St Magnus Cathedral.

The Earl's Palace represents the new residence that he built for himself, an L-shaped two-storey arrangement of buildings arranged on the E and S sides of a courtyard. There may have been formal gardens to the E. It comprised a first-floor hall, with the principal lodging comprising of an outer and an inner chamber at the north end of the hall, along with various other guest chambers. The first-floor rooms were reached by a spacious scale-and-platt stair, and there was an elaborate service accommodation at ground floor-level, including a kitchen.

The Bishop's and Earl's Palaces have therefore to be considered as an entity despite the fact they are divided by a road and are, strictly speaking, separate PICs. Joint ticketing exists, however.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- Patrick Stewart was granted the Earldom of Orkney in 1593; he was granted the former bishop's palace in Kirkwall, together with the bishopric lands, by James VI.
- c.1601-1607 Earl Patrick builds Earl's Palace (1607 said to be date above the doorway), but not to full extent of original plan. Earlier well incorporated into build. Kitchen extended during process of construction.
- Patrick Stewart organised a revolt against James VI in 1614 which led to his family's downfall. Palace besieged and building slighted by departing earl, and formally handed over to Bishop James Law. Thereafter occupied by bishops of Orkney. The history of the house of the Stewart earls in Orkney and Shetland is well researched.
- 1638-60 occupation of the site is uncertain, presumably the palace is deserted.
- Occupation by earl of Morton. A 1653 inventory of palace rooms survives, providing invaluable descriptions of how the rooms were used and furnished.
- 1671-1688 further episcopal occupation.
- 1689 passes to Crown.
- 18th century falls into ruin; a 1745 account notes the roof was stripped of slate.

- 1920 passes into state care.
- The palace is said to have been built by forced labour, the Palace is a potent symbol of the renowned violent and oppressive regime of Earl Patrick. While this interpretation has been exaggerated to some degree, there were certainly complaints from Orkney landowners with regards to the palace's construction; William Sinclair of Eday complained that sandstone quarries on his land had been worked without his consent, thousands of pounds worth of stone taken illegally for use in the palace.
- Sir Walter Scott visited during his *Voyage in the Lighthouse Yacht to Nova Zembla and the Lord knows where in the Summer of 1814*, and was impressed! He also went on to write about the palace in *The Pirate* describing its elegance.

Archaeological Overview

- The Earl's Palace was built over the eastern part of the courtyard of the Bishop's Palace. Since the 1980s there has been limited archaeological work in the W courtyard and around the E range in advance of introduction of services and improved visitor facilities. Remains associated with the Bishop's Palace phase have been encountered beneath the visible remains: a subsurface ditch and associated waterlogged deposits to immediate E of E range which may have formed boundary of ecclesiastical residence, back-filled between mid 14th and early 15th century; sub-surface clay- and mortar-bonded walls exposed in excavations to immediate E of E range which may be contemporary with walls exposed by earlier clearance at N end of E range. These were probably outbuildings and provide evidence for domestic and craft activities.
- Archaeological discoveries in the W courtyard have largely been limited to recovery of information relating the gardens shown in a plan of 1836. Around the E side of the E range the present ground level was found to differ little from that which existed when the palace was built. Beneath garden soil, well-preserved medieval deposits were found (see above).
- Nothing is known of the area to the S occupied by the bowling green, etc, although the head of a stone cross was found there in 1928. The ground has built up here and does not appear to have been significantly landscaped when the bowling green was constructed.
- It is likely that significant archaeological deposits survive within the courtyard area and to the east and south of the palace; deposits may inform our understanding of the development of the site, domestic life, and the layout of gardens and earlier outbuildings.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- 'Possibly the most mature and accomplished piece of [early] Renaissance architecture left in Scotland' (RCAHMS 1946). The whole complex attests to Patrick Stewart's grand aspirations and cultured tastes.
- In their architecture and furnishings the Stewart Palaces link the Northern Isles, via Scotland, to the mainstream of European artistic fashion of their day.
- Fine armorials, now worn and largely illegible, were placed over the main entrance, with its ornate door surrounds emulating Doric columns. Other architectural details, notably the oriel and bay windows, shot-holes and corbelled turrets, 'scale and platt' main stairway, are very sophisticated and distinguished. Staircases were often the focus for display in Renaissance buildings (see also **Noltland Castle** and Fyvie Castle), and this example is arguably one of the finest example of a 'scale and platt' in Scotland (see also **Scalloway Castle**). The oriel window is one of the most ostentatious oriels in Scotland (see also **Huntly Castle**) and this fashion (previously seen in English Tudor gate-houses, but also decorating the Renaissance palaces and town halls of Germany and France) is a reflection of an outward looking age and ever-broadening cultural scene.
- The huge fireplace in the kitchen and the extensive ground floor storage vaults give us an impression of the scale of income and consumption that must have taken place at the palace during the Earl's rule.
- Early drawings provide important clues about important elements of the building that are now missing.
- The Palace is a good example of how lordly residences have become more domestic in nature, yet in their design certain features still hark back to earlier castellated dwellings.
- The design of this Palace influenced the evolution of the Scots Baronial style in the 19th century; likewise the oriel windows also made a big impression on Charles Rennie Macintosh whose style is once again popular in Scotland.

Social Overview

- Not assessed.

Spiritual Overview

- The earliest, pre-Earl's Palace levels relate to the residence of a bishop and form part of the core of a cathedral complex.

Aesthetic Overview

- The ornate windows of the palace are a particularly pleasing feature of the main, elegant first-floor levels.

- The profile of the ruined Palace is a prominent feature on the local skyline.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Very little is known from archaeological sources about any of the occupation of the site, including the pre-Earl's Palace levels. We cannot be precise about exactly what was here. We might expect, for example, an ornate garden to be associated with the later palace, but there is as yet no evidence for this.
- The palace is deceptively complex and it appears that its development history is not as straightforward as current assessments would suggest. The site would benefit from detailed standing building analysis to better understand its development, original appearance and subsequent alterations.
- Little is known about how the palace was used in the years following Patrick Stewart's downfall, for instance how much time were the Earls of Morton resident here? More may be gleaned from fresh historic research.
- The evidence for the influence of this building on later Scots building styles needs drawing together by an appropriate expert.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- 'Possibly the most mature and accomplished piece of Renaissance architecture left in Scotland'.
- Direct association with the infamous, tyrannical Stewart Earls; a symbol of their social and cultural ambitions.
- Its significance is enhanced by its close relationship with the Bishop's Palace and the Cathedral – important surviving elements of historic Kirkwall.
- High potential to contain information about the underlying 12th-century Bishop's Palace.
- A key architectural building in the transition of Scottish lordly architecture from its earlier castellated phase towards purely domestic houses.
- A building whose style has had a profound influence on the development of Scotland's distinctive 19th and 20th century architecture.

Associated Properties

Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall, St Magnus Cathedral, Bishop's Palace, Birsay, Scalloway Castle, Jarlishof (Sumburgh House), Noltland Castle, Muness Castle, Huntly Castle, Fyvie Castle.

Keywords

Stewart Earls of Orkney and Shetland, Renaissance architecture, oriel and bay windows, 'scale and platt' stair, Bishop's Palace, St Magnus, Inventory, Sir Walter Scott, Scots baronial style, Charles Rennie Macintosh

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