

Site **Rothesay, St Mary's Chapel & High Street Well**

N.G.R NS 0862 6367 & NS 0866 6374

Project Description Excavation within the Chapel and monitoring of the removal of a well capstone

From 9th-13th December, 1996, work was enacted on monuments in Rothesay, Bute. The initial work comprised the observation and recording of the removal of a capstone covering part of a well, situated on the outer bank of Rothesay Castle moat, towards the E end. The well had been extensively altered in the 19th and 20th centuries, and is presently embedded in the revetment wall for the High Street, with only c10% of the structure exposed in plan. Access to the well is from the W, in the form of an arched vault which opens onto the outer bank of the castle moat, to which an iron grille is to be fitted.

The remaining archaeological work comprised the excavation of three trenches at St Mary's Chapel, a partly demolished 14th-century ecclesiastical building at the top of Rothesay High Street, adjacent to the present High Kirk. Two trenches were opened over the two existing entranceways to establish the presence or absence of threshold features, whereas the third trench was excavated outside the chapel to the W to locate any drains. The purpose of the excavations was to gain evidence for an eventual reconstruction of the floor and entrances of the Chapel.

Report

THE WELL

The well clearly predates the widening of the High Street, after which the well was accessed from the W, at a point where the new revetting wall had been left exposed for this purpose. A lead pipe ran from the well to a pump situated 2.9m above the present well top, providing an alternative method of drawing water once the wall was built. After the well fell completely out of use, the top was capped by a large slab of grey whin positioned along the base of the road revetting wall. This was in turn turfed over.

A trench 2.5m N-S and 1m E-W was laid across the base of the revetting wall, with turf (001) and 200mm of turf and 19th/20th-century landscaping material being removed (002), exposing the capstone (003). The stone measured 1.41m N-S and 0.53m E-W, and was 6.5cm thick. The block lay flush with the wall, and partly covered the well head, and along the E edge of the stone were two courses of modern, mortared brick. The latter were removed to expose the entire slab, which was similar to those stones used in the stair inside the adjacent castle. Indeed, as one of these stairs was found to be absent, it is clear that the step in question (the basal of a series within the castle) had been removed for the purposes of capping the well, at a

time when the wall was built. The slab was removed from the wall head to which it had been mortared, exposing the masonry of the well itself.

The well comprised roughly squared red sandstone blocks set in a light brown clay (004 and 005). The stones were well spaced within the clay matrix, often being up to 5cm apart, and the clay matrix also formed a thick seal around the outer face of the well. The total wall width was 50cm, of which 40cm was masonry, the remaining 10cm being accounted for by the clay seal. The original clay membrane over the S part of the well had been lost, and the inner faces were rendered with concrete, obscuring the original surfaces. The well was circular in plan, measuring 1.6m in diameter with a wall thickness of 50cm, almost all of the well interior is obscured within the wall, with only c15cm being visible today. The well had a full depth of 3.86m, with the water table being encountered at 2.32m below turf level. The water drawn from the well is very clear, and the reservoir refills quickly on emptying, pointing towards the conclusion that the well lies at a spring-line buried beneath the modern town levels of Rothesay.

THE CHAPEL

The small, ruined chapel at the S end of the High Street is the last remnant of a 14th century foundation built to supersede St Blane's Chapel, lying at the S end of the island. The new chapel was itself largely demolished in the 17th century to make way for a larger Reformed Church, incorporating the E chancel of the earlier chapel in its SE corner. The nave of St Mary's was completely demolished, and now lies beneath the graveyard of the later church, to the W. Only at its E end does the original chapel survive in any structural, extant form.

The present surface within the site of the chapel is considerably higher than the level of the original chapel floor; the N doorway is intact, and the arch clearly reflects a lower level for the original surface. Two trenches were opened over the two existing entranceways to establish the presence or absence of threshold features, with a third trench being excavated outside the chapel to the W to locate any drains.

Trench 1

Initially a trench was opened to locate any drainage channels alongside the original building (Trench 1), between the former and the later church. The area is presently occupied by a gravel pathway separating the present church from the graveyard. The trench was irregular in plan, measuring 1.5m E-W x 30cm N-S, located at the corner of the present church SE corner, and dog-legged to the W to follow the present footpath, which is some 5-10cm lower than surrounding levels. 0.3m of gravel and soil was removed to reveal two drains (102). These comprised a later field drain (19th or 20th-century) and a modern sewage pipe. No earlier archaeological features were identified in the trench.

Trench 2

The trench lay E-W across the N entrance to the former chapel, and measured 0.9m E-W x 0.3m N-S, with a pre-determined depth of 30cm. 8cm of gravel overburden was removed to reveal 10cm of post-usage deposits containing demolition and levelling materials. At the base of the trench, at a depth of 30cm a fine door step (203) was uncovered, comprising a single chamfered sandstone block, consistent with other masonry in the chapel. The stone was well worn in the middle and was cracked across its mid point, and measured 0.78m x 0.23m, with a height of 10cm.

Trench 3

Trench 3 was the largest of the three trenches excavated, and encompassed both the W entrance to the chapel and an area adjacent to the entrance outside the building. This was the original entrance from the nave to the chancel, and became the principal exit from the chapel to the graveyard on the demolition of the nave. The masonry of the W wall of the chapel featured sandstone ashlar elements, and the door was not centrally placed, indicating that the wall may be in part, or in total, a rebuild. The trench measured 3.3m N-S x 1m E-W, and extended 40cm into the building itself, although the full width of the threshold was 1m. Excavation revealed a sequence of layers post-dating the 17th-century demolition of the nave. 8cm of turf and topsoil removed onto 10cm of levelling material (306) containing human bone fragments (graveyard infill). Below the make-up for the graveyard was a 12cm depth of mortar-rich soil (307), interpreted as a demolition spread. This in turn overlay a level of broken slates and finally the buried masonry representing threshold levels (310).

The excavated evidence revealed two phases of rebuilding of the W wall. The two sandstone slabs forming a step into the chapel (310) were sited centrally along the wall, whereas the later door is offset by 50cm. In addition, the wall had apparently been widened to the N, and the presently visible wall had been built over both this rebuild and the site of the former door.

Period I : Dolerite walls edged with sandstone ashlar would have framed the initial, central doorway with threshold 310.

Period II : The first alteration to the initial plan was an enlarging of the doorway to the N, and possibly also to the S, evinced by the addition of 50cm width of dolerite cobbling (311) set at the base level of the sandstone doorstep (310). The cobbles are well worn and indicate that the entrance was in use for some time. The side wall to the N of 311 survives as two courses of dolerite blocks (303) offset from the blocks below (those of the original, narrower doorway).

Period III : The second period of alteration is evinced by two courses of levelling slabs (312) over the cut-away remnant of the initial alterations to the door. This wall-levelling is capped by ashlar edged dolerite masonry (302) forming the present ruinous N side of the Chapel W wall. The area to the S of the door is of a similar build, and probably also dates to the second

period of rebuild. Further, the edge of the wall to the S overlies a red sandstone slab, founded over late post-usage deposits, so the second rebuild is a comparatively late occurrence.

Interpretation

The Well

Late 19th-century photographs show the castle moat as an infilled space, with houses and barns built on the area between the present town and the castle. The moat was re-excavated earlier this century under the instructions of the Earl of Bute, and so the ground levels around the well date from this period, and bear no relation to the earlier ground surface.

The Chapel

The second period of building is probably datable to the 19th century, whereas the first rebuild post-dates the late 17th-century demolition of the nave. Both the uncovered thresholds relate to an original ground surface within the chapel, but to restore the original floor level would entail a further rebuild of the W wall, as this is founded on post-demolition deposits. However, the material overlying the floor of the original chapel has been demonstrated to be later infilling, and could be removed without serious loss to the archaeology of the site.

Summary Phasing:

Period I : 14th-century Nave & Church

Period II : 17th-century demolition of nave, rebuilding of W wall and enlarging of doorway

Period III : 17th-19th-century build-up of demolition debris and graveyard material over thresholds

Period IV : 19th-century + 2nd rebuild of W wall

Contexts

Context	Description
WELL	
001	Turf & topsoil over well head capping
002	Bank material on W side of moat, abutting wall
003	Whin slab sealing W side of well
004	Light brown clay lining and matrix of well
005	Roughly squared red sandstone blocks forming well walls
006	2 broken whin stones, surviving structure over the well
CHAPEL	
Trench 1	
101	Backfill of pipe trench
102	Ceramic drain
Trench 2	
201	Late gravel footpath
202	Dark brown soil and mortar debris
203	Threshold stone
204	Mortar sand below 202
Trench 3	
301	Turf & topsoil over threshold and exterior to W
302	Present dolerite & sandstone wall on N side of entrance
303	Wall below 302, earlier rebuild
304	Present masonry wall forming S side of W entrance
305	Slate & sandstone levelling below 304
306	Debris below 305, bone-rich disturbed graveyard material
307	Mortar-rich brown soil below 306
308	Slate and mortar demolition debris, early
309	White mortar on slab 310
310	Moulded sandstone slab forming earlier threshold
311	Area of dolerite blocks set in mortar forming potential period 2 threshold
312	Same as 305
313	Original dolerite wall seen in base of Trench 3

Finds

No finds were retained