



Clan Donald and Dunyvaig Castle

The medieval castle of Dunyvaig, perched on the headland of Lagavulin Bay, Isle of Islay, is a legacy of Clan Donald and a treasured item of Scotland's cultural heritage. The castle was the naval fortress of the Lords of the Isles between the 14th-16th centuries when they rivalled the Kings of Scotland in their political influence, military power and patronage of the arts and the church.

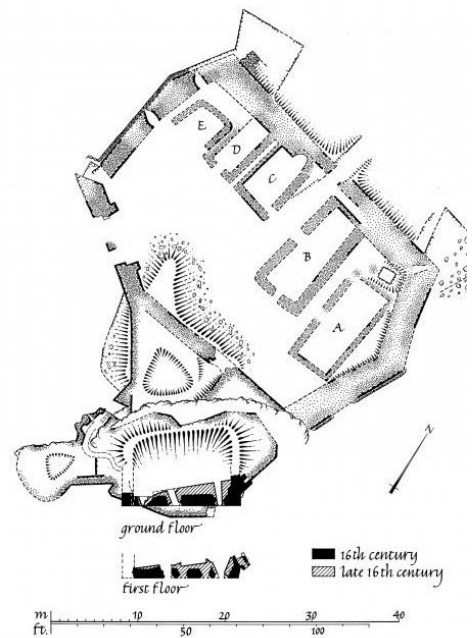
Today the ruins of Dunyvaig remain picturesque but are unsafe, rapidly deteriorating and have a risk of collapse. Deposits containing unexcavated remains from Clad Donald's past are at risk of being washed away. Urgent repairs and consolidation are required to save Dunyvaig for present and future generations.



THE ROOTS OF CLAN DONALD

Clan Donald's Celtic and Viking origins coalesced in the person of Somerled MacGilebride, founder of the Kingdom of Argyll and the Isles. Slain at the Battle of Renfrew in 1164, Somerled left three sons, Ranald, Dugald and Angus. Ranald took the title of King of the Isles and Lord of Argyll. When he passed away in 1207, Ranald left two sons, Ruairi and Donald, giving rise to MacRuairis and Clan Donald. Donald's son and successor was Angus Mor, the first designated Lord of the Isles.

By the 14th century the Lords of the Isles matched the king of Scotland in their political influence, military power and patronage of the arts. Clan Donald played a formative role in the emergence of Scotland as an independent nation, with its legacy most evident in castles throughout the Highlands and Islands. Dunyvaig Castle, perched on the headland of Lagavulin Bay, Isle of Islay, is one of the most spectacular and significant of the castles



Much of Clan Donald's history resides within the remains of Dunyvaig. Somerled likely had a fortress on the headland, from where he planned his campaigns and launched his fleets. While the Lords of the Isles used Finlaggan as their administrative centre, it was from Dunyvaig Castle that Clan Donald protected its lands and expanded its influence throughout the Highlands and Islands. That extended to Ireland after John MacDonald, grandson of Angus Og, married Margaret Bisset of Antrim in 1390. He took Dunyvaig as his main residence, becoming known as John of Dunyvaig and the Glynn, and the founder of Clan Iain Mhoir, Clan Donald South.

Dunyvaig remained central to Clan Donald South during the political turbulence and military campaigns of the 15th and 16th centuries, becoming a symbol of their identity. After castle was taken by the Royalist-backed Campbells, brave MacDonalds retook the castle on two occasions before their final defeat in 1645, when their leader, Col Ciotach, was starved into surrender and executed.

DUNYVAIG CASTLE TODAY

Dunyvaig was abandoned in the mid-17th century. Nature took over, transforming the castle into an idyllic location, one enjoyed by generations of islanders and visitors to Islay. Dunyvaig has become a place for walking and taking picnics, for children to play and others to touch the walls and engage with the long and proud history of Clan Donald.

The castle tower remains standing on a precipice of rock. The sides of its former sea gate, although the arch has long since collapsed. The courtyard wall also remains, enclosing the grass-covered trace of from buildings of an unknown date and purpose. The castle's sea walls are standing, although with much of their facing stones collapsed onto the rocks below.

Dunyvaig Castle is now a scheduled monument (SM4747). It owned by Diageo PLC, owner of Lagavulin Distillery located next to the castle ruins.



SEARCHING FOR SOMERLED AND JOHN OF DUNYVAIG

Had Dunyvaig been Somerled's fortress? What had the castle looked like in its hey-day? Had it just been a naval fortress or centre for craft activities and trade? How many people had lived there, and how had they been supplied?

In 2018 Islay Heritage, a community-based charity, began a programme of archaeological excavation to find answers to these questions – the first to be ever undertaken at Dunyvaig. Within two seasons of work the once-hidden and long-forgotten architecture was being exposed. Pottery indicated trading links from across Europe and animals bones from kitchen waste providing evidence of medieval feasts.

Coll Ciotach's defences from the final siege of 1645 were found: turf walls that had been made to block off the sea-gate entrance and rebuild the stone walls that had been destroyed by the Campbell artillery.



The excavations found the seal matrix of Sir John Campbell who became laird of Islay in 1614. It was discovered within the ruins, likely dropped by the fleeing Campbells as the McDonalds made their final assault in 1645.



AT RISK OF COLLAPSE

The excavation project was set to delve deeper into Dunyvaig's history, all the way back to John of Dunyvaig and even to Somerled himself. But it had to stop. By 2020 it had become evident that the castle walls were at risk of collapse, making it unsafe for work to continue.



Centuries wind, rain and sea-spray had eroded the soft mortar that held the stone walls in place, risking masonry collapse. A programme of repair had been started in 1989 but never completed. The tower was prevented from collapse but work to support the courtyard and sea walls was never implemented allowing two more decades of decay. The risk of collapse is now exacerbated by climate and sea level change: the castle walls area already battered by high tides, and the predicted sea level rise of the next two decades may have a devastating effect.



THE SEA WALL AND SEA GATE

The eastern sea wall is at greatest risk. Its facing stones lie scattered across the beach exposing the soft mortar and rubble behind to erosion which will inevitably lead to complete collapse. The wall secures unexcavated deposits containing a record of Dunyvaig's, Clan Donald's and Scotland's past. These will be washed away if the wall collapses.



The remains of the sea gate are at particular risk. This Seagate is unique structure for a medieval castle in Scotland. Boats had once been pulled through it to overwinter within the castle walls. Its two remaining sides have lost so much stone they are at risk of falling down.



A CONSERVATION ASSESSMENT

In 2022 Islay Heritage commissioned a conservation assessment of Dunyvaig, undertaken by Groves-Raines Architects.

The report is available at
<http://islayheritage.org/conservation-assessment-ofdunyvaig-castle/>.

The report concluded that:

‘key areas of the castle are in a parlous state...examples of incremental deterioration and minor collapses have been observed all over the site ... the outer walls are of increasing concern. This may well be a tipping point of the castle, which may be further exacerbated by the forecast sea level rises and increased storm events resulting from climate change’.

Groves-Raines Architects 2023

Groves-Raines Architects estimated the costs of repairs and consolidation of the castle to be £800,000.



SAVING DUNYVAIG CASTLE

Islay Heritage is leading a fund raising campaign to save Dunyvaig and its hidden history of Clan Donald for future generations.

Historic Environment Scotland has offered up to £400,000 towards costs, provided that matched funding can be secured prior to the end of 2023.

A request has been to Diago plc, the site owners, to meet their responsibility and provide a financial contribution. If they do, and however much that might be, funding support is required from all who value cultural heritage

As of 6 May 2023, Islay Heritage has raised £25,000 from donors. It must reach a target of at least £100,000 to have a hope of saving the castle from devastating collapse.



DONATE HERE



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