SCOTTISH DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT
SCHEDULED ANCIENT MONUMENT
BRAAL CASTLE: HALKIRK: CAITHNESS: HIGHLAND
ARCHITECT'S REPORT: JOHN KNIGHT: INSPECTED 31 MARCH 1981

1. GENERAL

The castle comprises a rectangular tower, now two-storeys high, with an entrance in the south-west angle of the first floor. The entrance elevation will be taken as facing south for the purposes of this report.

2. EXTERIOR

SOUTH ELEVATION

Wall is standing on ground held by a retaining wall: the adjacent land presumably having been excavated when the later house was constructed. The south-west angle appears to have collapsed at this time and has been rebuilt giving the castle a spurious rounded corner which changes to concave at upper floor level. Other areas of rebuilding are also evident. The Caithness thin slab construction is reasonably sound but small fractures can be traced and several voids occur which must be consolidated by the insertion of pinning stones tamped with cement mortar kept well back from the surface. Care must be taken not to fill or reduce the window apertures. The sink outlet must be carefully preserved.

WEST ELEVATION

Again areas of rebuilding are evident particularly below the bulge at wallhead level. Approx 2 metres length of masonry at this level will require to be taken down and rebuilt. The area should be photographed first and the larger stones numbered with emulsion paint to guide the rebuilding. Further rebuilding may be necessary at the north quoin at this level following closer inspection from a scaffold. Fractures which are clearly evident should be stitched by carefully reconstructing the bond and placing larger slabs across the fracture lines but all within the bond. If the core of the wall is found to be unstable, reinforced concrete bonders should be inserted and the face work reinstated to conceal them. The tumble below the ground floor slit which is presently allowing access to the interior should be built up in matching stonework supporting the hanging jamb stones but kept recessed to show that it is a later build. If it is thought desirable to keep this access open, then the jamb stones will require non ferrous bars (Delta metal or equivalent) inserted beneath them and driven into the core for support.

NORTH ELEVATION

The stonework here is in better order with the first 3 metres or so lime pointed. Nevertheless fractures and voids occur above which require pinning and tamping. A window dressing is about to fall and should be taken out and built back in securely. A slight overhang occurs at wallhead level.

EAST ELEVATION

Soil and vegetation should be cut back and it is recommended that the adjacent large tree be felled as its extensive root growth must be undermining the masonry. Bad fractures occur and must be stitched with the insertion of reinforced concrete bonders in the core. Pointing up in cement is not acceptable. The heavy growth of ivy should be poisoned and subsequently removed, see attached specifications.

3. WALLHEADS

The wallheads are extensively covered with grass and self sown saplings etc. This is providing an effective capping keeping much direct rainwater out of the core of the walls but has become so extensive that the roots are pushing out the upper courses which are weak. It is recommended that the turf capping be retained but severely cut back to prevent people walking on the edge and placing more pressure on the outer stonework. All seedlings and long grasses must be poisoned and the turf cover kept under control. Cutting back will reveal the extent of masonry consolidation required but downtakings must be kept to the absolute minimum as the mural staircase is one of the most interesting survivals and must not be reduced. The alternative to retaining the turf cover is to consolidate the exposed wallheads by pinning and pointing in stonework in such a way as to guide rainwater off. This would of course be preferable but requires skilled work to achieve a satisfactory wallhead appearance. A heavy cement capping placed on the wallheads would not be acceptable.

4. INTERIOR

Stonework is generally more sound with some interesting detail surviving particularly the sink and internal splays to the windows which appear to be designed to house a timber framework.

Extensive voids occur however which require pinning with Caithness slab tamped with cement mortar kept well back. Fractured lintels and roofing slabs to staircases may require the support of non ferrous flat bars. A bad tumble occurs in the upper fireplace embrasure which should be removed and the jamb stones consolidated by taking out and building back in. The overburden on the floor should be left undisturbed in this case as this would otherwise require archaeological supervision.

5. CONCLUSION

While the Castle is in little danger of collapse, there are some potentially dangerous bulges at wallhead level which must be dealt with. The answer is not a wholesale downtaking however as has been suggested. Each elevation should be scaffolded in turn and a close examination of the bulged areas carried out. As stated above cutting back the turf cover will reveal the extent of consolidation necessary which will require to be carried out by a masonry contractor with some skill in the repair of ancient structures. In the meantime the present access should be closed off to prevent children and others reaching the wallheads and warning notices affixed. (Access to the wallheads should be prevented of course in the long term). A repairs programme nevertheless must be put in hand as soon as possible.

John Knight
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7 April 1981