

WHY KISIMUL CASTLE CAME TO BE

Glance at any map of Ireland and the west of Scotland to see why Kisimul Castle looms up from its rocky base in Castlebay. The bay is the first safe anchorage in the Outer Hebrides north of Ireland. In turbulent times its control was essential to the security of anyone living in Barra, so too to anyone seeking control of the islands further north. Moreover, the bay is within easy striking distance of in-lying islands like Tiree and coll. The speedy Norse, and later Hebridean, galleys could make short work of the Minch between sunny Tiree and Muldonaich at Castlebay's entrance.

But how to guard a large bay with the small population of Barra and the short range weapons available before gunpowder dominated warfare? Some foresighted War God had helped provide the answer geological eons earlier when the forces of the earth had created a small rocky island strategically located a few hundred yards from the inner shore. Miracle of miracles, it had fresh water! A primal geological "pipe" brings water through the underlying rock strata to what is now a dug well. The people needed only to fortify that rocky island, and the bay became quite secure against marauders. Almost surely the Norse or Celts who built the present Castle had before them the example of an ancient broch (prehistoric fort, of which many are found in Barra) located where Kisimul now stands. The solution to their defensive problems was clear, and that is why Kisimul came to be.

KISIMUL CASTLE AND THE MACNEILS

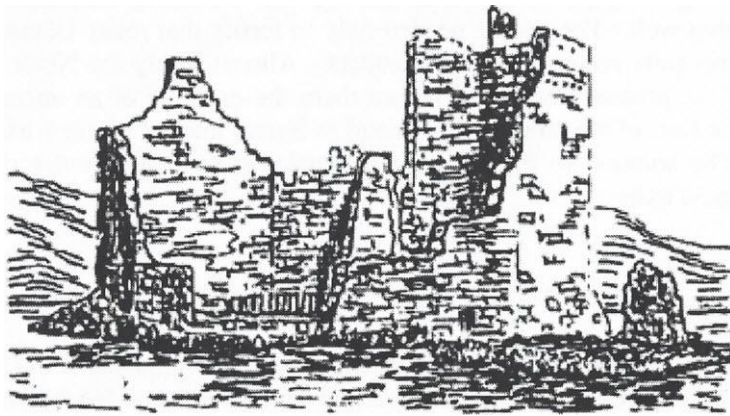
For many generations Kisimul was the home and stronghold of the Macneils of Barra, widely noted for their lawlessness and piracy, and led by chiefs like Ruari the Turbulent, 35th Chief, who feared not to seize ships of subjects of Queen Bess herself. (The numbering of the chiefs here follows a tradition tracing Macneil clan lineage to Niall of the Nine Hostages, High King of Ireland in the 4th century A.D, and numbering him as our first Chief).

As the power of the central government in Edinburgh, and later, London, gradually superseded the strength of the clans, the importance of Kisimul to the Macneils declined; in the mid-18th century it was abandoned in favour of newer and more comfortable quarters on Barra itself. In 1795 a fire destroyed the roofs and floors; Kisimul was left to the birds, to venturesome children, to the occasional visitor, and to scavengers who carried off its very fabric as ballast and for city paving stones.

A sorrowing clansman wrote generations later:

*Dark is the sea around the keep of my fathers
Gaunt the high walls of Castle Kisimul
No warder keeps watch, no eager clan gathers
Lap of waves only, and shriek of the gull.*

The decay of the Castle paralleled the decline of the clan system, the short-lived and unequally distributed prosperity of the kelp industry, the clearances and immigration of countless sons and daughters of Barra, and hard times for those who remained at home. The abandonment of the Castle was followed in two or three generations by the loss through bankruptcy of Barra itself by the Macneils of Barra, Barra's acquisition by one of the more notorious of Highland landlords, and the death in 1863 of the last of the old chiefs, Roderick the General, 41st Chief.



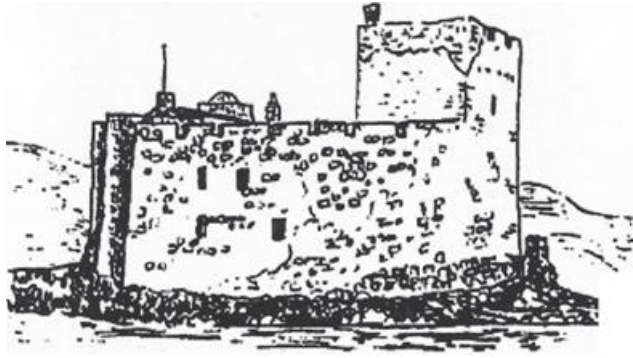
Kisimul, 1909

Kisimul Castle was, however, destined to rise again and become once more the home of the Macneil chiefs and a centre for the Clan Macneil. With the death of Roderick the General the succession passed to a branch of the family that had emigrated to Canada - as had many other Barra Macneils. Its claim to the chiefship was established legally in 1915 when Robert Lister Macneil matriculated arms as the Macneil of Barra in the Court of the Lord Lyon in Edinburgh. (He re-matriculated arms in 1962, thereby legally laying to rest various disputes which had arisen.).

Robert Lister in 1937 reacquired the Estate of Barra and the ruins of the Castle. (Some in Barra still remember his second wife, Marie, who had a deep abiding affection for Barra and its people; it was she who made possible Barra's reacquisition by the Macneil family, Robert Lister himself being a person of limited means).

In 1938 excavation of the Castle was commenced towards its eventual restoration. The major part of the work you see today was carried out, however, between 1956 and 1970, the year of Robert Lister's death. His widow, Elizabeth, thereafter restored the kitchen building pursuant to his plans. Elizabeth's financial and moral support had enabled Robert Lister to carry out the restoration. In addition to family funds, the restoration of the Castle was financed by government grant and generous contributions of numerous Macneils throughout the world.

Robert Lister, who was both the designing and supervising architect of the restoration, never needed to look beyond Barra for the on-site labour, skills, and organising ability required to complete this work. Except for such specialised things as iron work and mill work, necessarily carried on away from every construction site, every bit of the restoration was performed by Barramen. Thus the rebuilding of Kisimul was accomplished virtually entirely by the descendants of those who built the Castle originally - a continuity of life of which all with Barra heritage may be justly proud.



Kisimul, 1965

Much of the history of the Castle, of the Clan Macneil, and of Barra, is shrouded in a past no longer recallable with scientific accuracy. One seeking the truth in such circumstances must explore many avenues; many of these have been and are continuing to be sealed off from mortal view as old memories die with the unhappy decline of Gaelic culture and especially of oral history. He who seeks the truth of the Clan and the Castle must, therefore, put together much from physical science, from archaeological understanding, from the history of architecture and from broad cultural and political history, particularly Gaelic history. Even more, he must put aside his prejudices - be they intellectual, cultural, national, religious, personal, or clan pride. He must be prepared to amass a truly stupendous volume of information and correlate and sort it all out. To my knowledge, no one has done or is doing this. Until such a one comes forth, the true answers will continue in dispute and - in some measure - more fit for discussion over one or more drams than in a laboratory. This Guide is, therefore, written with full knowledge of how little we know for sure about the Castle. The Guide is part history, part legend, part prejudice; the reader wanting more science must look elsewhere, and will do so largely in vain .



HOW OLD IS THE CASTLE?

The earliest recorded reference to the Castle seems to be that of Dean Munro, who visited Barra in 1549. (Gilleonan, 33rd Chief, and member of the Council of the Isles, would have occupied the Castle until then.) Buchanan, 1582, also refers to the Castle. In 1613 Ruari the Turbulent, 35th Chief, complained in a suit against his son, Neil Og, later 36th Chief, that Ruari and his wife were "within thaire awne house and castell of Kismule in the Yle of Barry, thair doing thair lauchful effairis in sober and quiet manner" when Neil and twenty men "with swerdis, gantillatis, plaitslevis, bowis, darlochis, durkis, targeis, Lochaber axis, tua-handis swerdis, utheris waponis" came "to said Kismule, enterit violentilie thairintill and pat violente handis in the said complenaris . . . layed thame fast in the yrnis . . . and detanis the saidis complenaris fast in the yrnis within the same".

The first explicit written description of any detail is that of Martin Martin, who visited Barra in 1695. He describes Kisimul much as we know it today after restoration: " ... there is a stone wall around it two stories high, reaching the sea, and within the wall there is an old tower and a hall, with other houses about it." Sad for our knowledge of the Castle was Martin's experience: "I saw the officer called the Cockman, and an old cock he his: (he refused to ferry me over). Macneil and his lady being absent was the cause of this difficulty, and of my not seeing the place."

The chief away at Martin's visit, Ruari Dhu, 38th Chief, is particularly interesting as he was the last of the old raiding and feuding chiefs. Perhaps when Martin called he was off on some Jacobite plot. Ruari had carried a huge battle axe in the great victory at Killiecrankie under Bonny Dundee in 1689. He had refused to take the oath to King William two years later - fortunately Barra was farther away from Dutch William's soldiers than was Glencoe. Twenty years later old Ruari was out again in the '15 in support James III. Or perhaps when Martin called he was off about his famous - and almost fatal - challenge of Rob Roy MacGregor, the result of which was Ruari's nearly losing his right arm. Black Ruari was even less lucky on an affair in Mull where he stabbed with a dirk. He held the fatal weapon in the wound until his faithful galley crew had carried him swiftly over the waters to Kisimul, where he let go of the dirk and promptly expired.

One wonders what Black Ruari would have thought of the name the clan bestowed on his eldest son, Roderick: The Dove of the West, who became 39th Chief after that fatal night in Mull. The old days of piracy, raiding, and duelling were over. But black Ruari's sons and clan had been with him in the '15, and his grandson, Roderick the resolute, was with Wolfe at Quebec in 1759, where both were killed at the Heights of Abraham. The latter's son, Roderick the Gentle, who in 1763 succeeded his grandfather as 40th Chief, fought in several battles in the American Revolution, with Macneil clansmen at his side. And the last of the old line of chiefs, Roderick the General, 41st, had a distinguished military career...

But back to the age of the Castle, and hundreds of years earlier. In 1427, the Lord of the Isles gave Gilleonan, 29th Chief, a charter to Barra (and Boisdale in South Uist, which we lost to Clanranald in 1601). W. MacKay MacKenzie; in the 19928 Report of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments, concluded for this (the first extant written record of Macneil control of Barra) that "The erection of the castle in its oldest form is probably to be dated after 1427". Few today would accept this kind of reasoning in ascertaining the age of the Castle. (It represents a peculiar amalgam of acceptance and rejection of Macneil clan tradition: acceptance that the Castle was built by Macneils, rejection that it dates to a far earlier time.) .

John G. Dunbar has published the most scholarly analysis of the Castle (Glasgow Archaeological Journal, Vol.5, p.2S). He too adopts an early 15th century date, but based on comparison with other West Highland castles. In doing so he dismisses several features others have seen as indicating earlier dating. These include the put-log holes in both tower and curtain wall, and the absence of vaulting and fireplaces in the tower.

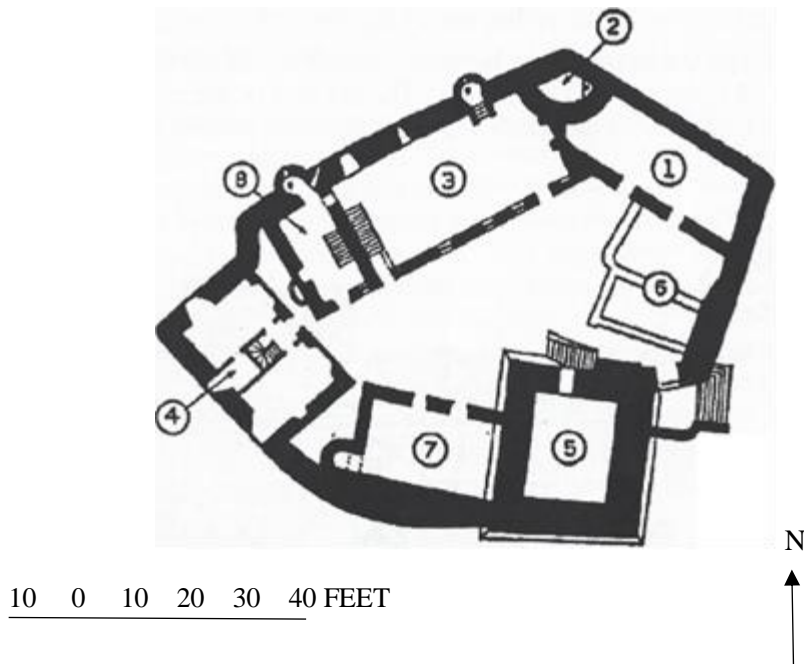


Several experts have put the date of Kisimul much earlier than the 15th century. Mac Gibbon and Ross, who studied virtually all Scottish castles in the late 19th century, saw Kisimul as in the period 1200 - 1300. Sidney Toy suggests that it belongs to the 13th century. Stewart Cruden's view is that "we can confidently attribute this most interesting Hebridean castle to the thirteenth century and even suggest that the keep is a twelfth century structure". These earlier dates are in harmony with The Statistical Account of Barra (1791-99) which states that "The tradition here is, that this fort was built upwards of 500 years ago".

By far the oldest date attributed to the Castle is 1030 A.D. It comes from Clan Macneil tradition as related by Robert Lister, who made a lifelong study of the Castle and its history and who knew its fabric in minute detail. He attributes this date to the beginning of the exterior curtain wall (then 12 feet high), by Neil of the Castle, 21st Chief, and approximately 1120 A.D. to completion of the large tower, by Donald, 23rd Chief.

EXPLORING THE CASTLE

As the boat nears the Castle note the large ring of rocks to the east of the landing place. It is probably the remains of a fish catchment basin built to trap fish whenever the tide went out, thereby insuring the inhabitants of Kisimul with a continually available food supply. Between the basin and the Castle wall is a sloping beach - the berth of Kisimul 's Galley, famed of a story and song.



1, Chapel; 2, Watch-tower and Dungeon; 3, Great Hall; 4, Tanist House; 5, Great Tower; 6, Gokman's House; 7, Kitchen House; 8, Marion's Addition. The numbering on the plan shows the order in which Robert Lister believed the Castle was built (all following the original 12 foot curtain wall.)

After landing, look to the right to see the outline on the wall of the old entrance to the Castle. On this wall is the sturdy harled surface once covering all of the Castle walls. The harling may be 19th century preservation work; if not it's well over 200 years old, and almost surely much older. (My own guess is that some of it is 19th century and some much older.)

At the bottom of the low wall on the far side of the steps to the entrance is a stone bollard, worn smooth by the ropes used to moor the galleys (although not originally in this precise location). About fifty feet farther on around the corner of the Great Tower are the remains of a wall, all that is left of the Galley Crew House, the only building outside the walls. (Its occupants could help defend the Castle entrance facing the galley Crew House.)

The entrance lights are modest, as are the yett and oaken doors. Decorating the lights are the padlocks and red hand from the coat of arms of the Macneil chiefs. Above the door, carved in stone, is the coat of arms of the Macneil of Barra.

Upon entering the courtyard or barrnkin, straight ahead are the foundations of the Gokman's (Watchman's) House (6). The outlines of the original entrance to the Castle can be seen on the Castle curtain wall which formed one wall of the Gokman's House.



St. Kieran S Chapel

Directly across from the entrance to the Castle is St. Kieran's Chapel (1) in which was found one of the most important artefacts discovered in excavating the Castle: a baptismal font made of Irish sandstone. Robert Lister is buried in a vault in this Chapel. His widow, Elizabeth, expected to be buried there also, but her son chose to place her next to his own father's in Vermont.

Upon emerging from the Chapel you will see two buildings across the long axis of the courtyard. The one to the left, nestled against the Great Tower (5) is the Kitchen House (7). It contains a large oven on the ground floor and another on the first floor. Skylights in the roof make the first floor one of the brightest rooms inside the Castle. You will notice inside the Kitchen House the splayed base of the Great Tower which forms one wall of the Kitchen House.

The other building at the far end of the courtyard is the Tanist House. Although Tanist commonly means heir, since the Castle restoration this house has been the private quarters of the chief. Visitors are not admitted to this building. Fell free, however, to walk past its front door to take a look at Kisimul's indispensable fresh water well snuggled next to and half under Marion's Addition (8). The initials in the jaunty little carving on the Tanist House are for Robert and Elizabeth.

Turning back to the Great Tower (5), a few steps up the stairway outside its wall brings you to a small doorway, the entrance to a very low passageway through the wall of the tower (six feet thick at this point). As you emerge from this passageway a ladder towards the left goes down to a storage area. A ladder to the right goes up to the Barracks Room. This high room has a sleeping loft, which can be reached by the steep wooden steps along the wall. The lintel above the window to the west (right) is from Mingulay, a gift of Calum and Morag Macaulay, whose father brought it to Barra after Mingulay was evacuated about 1910. A stair, built inside the tower wall goes from this level to the next. If you use these steps watch both your feet and your head! The steps are of different heights in order to trip any invaders. (Other easier access is available to the tower above.)

As you back down the ladder to go outside again be careful not to bang the back of your head - the Castle is very hard and unforgiving to heads. When you turn around and duck down to go outside the passageway, note the holes on either side of the doorway; these are for bars to close off the door against intruders.

Now go up the outside steps to the parapet walk. Before proceeding up the modern wooden steps to the main entrance of the Great Tower, note the bretasche overhanging the Castle entrance. This projecting wall enabled guards to drop stones on intruders while remaining largely protected from arrows and other

projectiles. It may perhaps have been through this defensive position that Black Ruari in 1690 threw "large stones from the roof of his house" at a notary trying to serve a writ. But the "four score shots from guns, pistols, muskets, hagbutts, and other invadive and forbidden weapons" probably were fired at the notary from other positions on the wall.

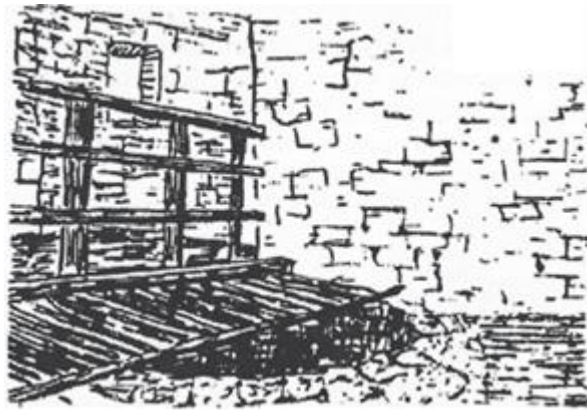
The wooden steps take you to the entrance to the Great Tower proper. Just inside the Barracks Room. The intramural steps up from the entrance are more gentle, but the door into the Chief's Apartment at their head is very low, so watch your head.

The Chief's Apartment is, apart from the Great Hall (3) which you will see later, quite the grandest room in Kisimul, with excellent views in all directions, and relatively light and airy. It has, moreover, its own private toilet, at the end of the long passageway in the wall opposite the entrance door. From this apartment the chief could be in command of the entire Tower, with fighting men having direct interior access from their quarters below in the Barracks Room, and with direct access for the defenders to the battlements at the next higher level. These can be reached by the continuation of the intramural stairs in the wall facing Castlebay Village. If you go on to the battlements, not the fine greenish slate forming the drains along the parapet walk. (It is original; the slate on the roof is modern, as is the cresset in which signal fires may be lighted.) Also note the bretasche directly over the Tower entrance, whereby that entrance was defended.

Upon emerging from the Tower, at the bottom of the wooden steps continue along the parapet walk, instead of taking the stone steps back down to the courtyard. The wall is very thick at this point, to accommodate the old portcullis slot, visible through a wooden grate in the walk. This slot was unknown until Robert Lister discovered it after hearing the following old Barra story: Two boys sneaked over in a boat from Ledaig one afternoon and stole the handle for the windlass used to raise and lower the portcullis gate. Came evening and time to secure the Castle, and much was the consternation until the childish trick was learned.

Continue along the wooden walk over the top of the flat Chapel roof. The holes in the wall along here are put-log holes. Logs were placed through these holes, and then boards laid across them to form an interior parapet walk. In addition, they probably projected outside the Castle forming the foundation for wooden hourds, or war heads, on the outside of the wall. (It is this feature which particularly convinced Stuart Cruden of the old age of the Castle, since stone wall heads had elsewhere replaced wooden by the 15th century.)

At the end of the wooden walk is the Watch-tower and Dungeon (2). The top of the pit beneath the walk-way was originally floored over, presumably including a trap door through which prisoners could be thrown or lowered to the bottom of the dungeon. One wonders if it was in this dank hole that Neil Og kept his father, Ruari the Turbulent, and his stepmother "in the ymis" as complained of in the 1613 writ. (The "pit and gallows" were the ancient punishments over which the chiefs of clans had jurisdiction. That this was a "pit" is demonstrated by the garderobe in the floor; this particular toilet is flushed twice each day by the tides.) The room you are standing in was a guardroom; very convenient it was, since prisoners could be guarded simply by having the next relief sleep in the room while the guard on duty walked the ramparts above. (The Watchtower and Dungeon can also be reached from the other direction).



The Dungeon

Continuing through the door on the other side of the Watchtower brings you to a part of the Castle re-built quite differently from the original. In the old days this wall walk would have been out in the open, and to your left would have been the thatched roof of the Great Hall (3) below. (Roofs were restored with slate rather than thatch as a concession of authenticity in favour of durability.) as a matter of fact - at least in times of war - you would have been walking several feet high up along boards laid on put-logs. The put-log holes along here are now glassed over to make this corridor weatherproof; it is not, however, damp-proof, and you will note the moss and ferns growing along the outer wall, securing their moisture from the rock itself. In the floor of the corridor is a glass plate.

Originally this was a hatchway from the Great Hall below, a building sometimes used for barracks. The three rooms to your left as you walk down the corridor are modern innovations; the first one is the beginning of a Castle museum. The spinning wheel was made by Donald MacNeil, Mingulay, 19th century. Nil Peigi MacDonald (well known as a musician whose accordion kept many a dance going into the wee hours) painted the two Barra scenes.

Upon corning to the short corridor to the left you have reached what may well be the last building erected within Kisimul, Marion's Addition (8). Marion was daughter of MacLeod of Harris; she first married MacLean of Duart, and after his death married Gilleonan Macneil of Barra. (Gilleonan it was who in 1427 received the charter of the Lord of the Isles to Barra and Boisdale.) Duart gave Marion the island of Coll, but on her death it was to go to their younger son, Iain Garbh MacLean. Now, Gilleonan Macneil not only took Marion as his bride, but also took Coll and its Castle Breachacha, and Iain Garbh left for Ireland in dark mood indeed. Some years later Iain Garbh returned to Coll with a force of men and engaged Gilleonan in combat; Gilleonan was gaining the upper hand over Iain when he was fatally stabbed from behind by one of Iain's men. (A stone from the field of battle in Coll is in the display case.) Marion persuaded Iain not to kill his young half-brother, Ruari Macneil, and the three adjourned to Kisimul, where Marion had this small building - with the only original fireplaces in the Castle - constructed for herself and Ruari. ¶

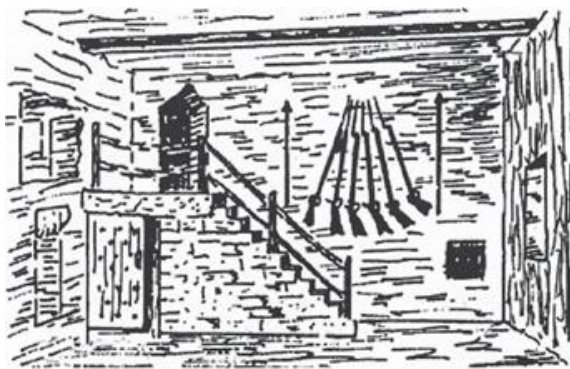


Castle Sinclair

Stories about Marion abound. She is charged with having had a henchman behead two sons of Gilleonan by a prior marriage, in order to make her son Ruari heir to the Macneil chiefship. Whether that was the case, Ruari did indeed become the 30th Chief. Iain Garbh, according to a Coll tradition, built a castle on a loch in Barra; Robert Lister makes a convincing argument that it is the now ruined tower often known as Sinclair's Castle (after a romantic Victorian novel about it), located on a wee island in the loch at Tangusdale. (You can readily see this wee castle from the road, and if you are lucky you may see swans in the loch too.)

Marion was buried in a chapel on Uinessen, a small island across the bay, from which Coll is supposed to be visible. One story has her being buried vertically so that she forever faces in the direction of her beloved Island of Coll.

Except for the storey on which you are now standing, Marion's Addition was restored as it was originally built. (Prior to the restoration it was one of the least ruined parts of Kisimul.) To your left is a line painted to show the line of the original gable end of the Great Hall (3), which also formed the gable of Marion's Addition. (The rooms on the right are not open to the public.) Descending the stairs brings you to a pleasant small room with a fireplace. This is an original fireplace, thereby showing the building necessarily to be of a relatively late date. Please do not go further downstairs in this building, but instead turn to the left and go through the door on to the landing at the top of the steps down into the Great Hall.



The Great Hall

The Great Hall is about 20 by 40 feet. Originally it was one storey high, the ceiling height being slightly less than eight feet. Later, however, the ceiling was raised to 13 feet. The only original window piercing the curtain was of the Castle is that facing the village of Castlebay in this room. The stairs down which

you walked are new in the restoration, as is the door into the courtyard under those stairs. In the approximate location of that door once was a window of mammoth dimensions for its day: 3 feet 4 inches wide and 8 feet 6 inches high! Its remains may be seen to the left of the door where the two small windows are now located. In between that great window and the window overlooking the bay was the Harper's Gallery. Both the large window and the Gallery are mentioned in Clan stories and poetry.

In spite of the fine room formed by the Great Hall, it was, nevertheless, a "black house" with neither fireplace nor chimney. The remains of the fires in the centre of the room could be seen when excavation was carried out preparatory to restoration.

A floor was once placed across the entire Great Hall at a height of 7 feet, thereby doubling its capacity for sleeping fighting men or women and children coming to the Castle in times of stress. (Kisimul may have been one of the rare Scottish castles capable of holding the entire community in event of emergency.) Or perhaps the chiefs needed the extra space to carry out customs described by Martin Martin: "When any of these tenants are so far advanced in years that they are incapable to till the ground, Macneil takes such old men into his own family, and maintains them all their lives after ... If a tenant's wife bore twins the master had to take one of them and bring it up in his own family."

Things to note about the Great Hall include the privy, another with twice daily tidal flushing, and the hatchway to the parapet walk, above which you walked earlier (now covered with a wooden grill). The great beams are not original, but are railway switch ties, floated over to the Castle from the steamer bringing them to Castlebay.

The following items are on a permanent display in the Great Hall: two grinding stones, two large tables, a collection of English muskets and pikes from Culloden, all being gifts to the Castle, the latter by the later Duke of Argyll. It is somewhat ironic to find these military pieces displayed in our Great Hall, since the Macneils were loyal Jacobites throughout history.

They were at Worcester against Cromwell, at Killcrankie with Dundee, refused Dutch William's oath, and were out again in the '15. Although Roderick, Dove of the West, failed to raise the clan in the '45 for Bonnie Prince Charlie, he was nevertheless imprisoned until 1747 on suspicion. There is little doubt that he was one of a handful of Highland chiefs who remained ready to try again after Culloden.

The cast iron urn, probably late 18th century, comes from Eoligarry House, now demolished. Whenever possible a full length portrait of Robert Lister, 1939, is displayed.

The coat of arms of the Macneil of Barra over the fireplace contains the following items of particular interest:

Vincere vel Mori - Victory or Death - the Clan Macneil war cry; the rock symbolising mighty Biula Craig, the 700 foot sea cliff on Mingulay; the castle in the sea - Kisimul; the galley showing the Macneil ties with the Lords of the Isles as well as Kisimul's Galley' the bloody Hand of Ulster and the nine fetterlocks claiming descent from Niall of the Nine Hostages; the lion of Scotland; and the dryas, the clan badge.