

British Castles

January 2026



Western Scottish Isles Castles
Castles On The Isle of Mull, Isle Of Skye & More



EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the January 2026 issue (and Happy New Year!).

This month's theme is 'Castles of The Western Isles of Scotland'. Not only are these often fought over islands packed with castles, they're also located in some of the best scenery in Scotland.

We start with our pick of the best of these castles, from the Isles of Skye, Mull and elsewhere.

Our second feature is on one of these castles, Dunvegan, still home to the Clan MacLeod. Both the castle and its grounds are must sees during any visit to the Isle of Skye.

And our third article is our regular series on lesser known castles - this time featuring one of the most secluded castles in the UK: Kisimul Castle on the Isle of Barra.

As you'd expect both our gallery and picture quiz have a Scottish Western Isle castles theme.

Anyway I hope you enjoy the issue

Chris



CASTLES OF THE WESTERN ISLES

OUR PICK OF THE BEST

The castles of the Western Isles of Scotland, performed many functions: military outpost (especially related to control of seaways), Clan headquarters and a symbol of power amongst others. Many of them have histories stretching back to when the Isles were controlled by the Norsemen, predating their incorporation in the Scottish nation.

As you'd expect, given the area, they are often located amid spectacular scenery, and are a great way to see the best of the wild lands of this part of Scotland Here's our pick of the best.

CASTLE MOIL (ISLE OF SKYE)

Castle Moil, better known by its Gaelic name Caisteal Maol, is a ruined tower on a rocky headland above the harbour at Kyleakin on the Isle of Skye, looking across the narrow strait of Kyle Akin to the mainland.

The surviving structure dates mainly to the 15th century and was built by the Clan MacKinnon to control this strategic sea passage. Tradition links the site with Norse influence in the western seaways, and, In later Highland history, it is remembered as a meeting place for clan leaders.

DUART CASTLE (ISLE OF MULL)

Duart Castle, the ancestral home of Clan Maclean, stands proudly on a cliff overlooking the Sound of Mull.

Its imposing structure, dating back to the 13th century, offers stunning views and a fascinating glimpse into the island's turbulent past. Today, the castle is open to the public, featuring exhibits on clan history and beautiful gardens.

KISIMUL CASTLE (ISLE OF BARRA)

Situated on a small islet in Castlebay, Kisimul Castle is accessible only by boat. This medieval fortress, home to the chief of Clan MacNeil, is our choice as the 'Lesser known British Castle', profiled later in this edition.



Duart Castle

DUNYVAIG CASTLE (ISLAY)

Dunyvaig Castle (Dùn Naomhaig) is a ruined coastal stronghold on the south coast of Islay, near Port Ellen, overlooking the Sound of Islay.

It began as a medieval fortification and became an important seat of the Lords of the Isles, the historic rulers of the Western Scottish Isles, predating their incorporation into the nation of Scotland. The title was retained symbolically and is now held by the Prince of Wales (ie Prince William).

In the 16th and early 17th centuries it was repeatedly fought over, including clashes involving the MacDonalds and the Campbells, before government forces captured it after a siege in 1614.

LEWS (ISLE OF LEWIS)

Lews Castle is a striking Victorian-era mansion overlooking Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis. Designed by architect Charles Wilson, it has a murky past - it was built for Sir James Matheson, who made his fortune in the Chinese opium trade.

Over the years, it has served as a family residence, naval hospital, and college. After periods of neglect, it was restored and now houses a museum, cultural centre, and luxury accommodation, surrounded by extensive gardens and woodlands.

DUNTULM CASTLE (ISLE OF SKYE)

Duntulm Castle is a ruined fortress located on the northern tip of the Trotternish Peninsula, Isle of Skye. Built in the 14th and 15th centuries, it was once the seat of the chiefs of Clan MacDonald of Sleat.

The castle occupies a basalt promontory, defended by cliffs and a landward ditch. Over time, it was expanded and served as a residence and stronghold during clan feuds.

Abandoned in the 18th century, much of its stone was repurposed for nearby buildings. Today, only fragments remain, and the site is considered structurally unstable, with access limited for safety reasons.





Gylen Castle

GYLEN CASTLE (ISLE OF KERRERA)

Gylen Castle is a ruined late-16th-century tower house on the Isle of Kerrera, just offshore from Oban in Argyll and Bute, perched on a rocky promontory overlooking the Firth of Lorne.

It was built in 1582 for the Clan MacDougall, whose chiefs also held nearby Dunollie, and it guarded busy sea routes through the Inner Hebrides.

Occupation was brief: in 1647, during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, Covenanter forces under General David Leslie besieged and burned the castle.

Conservation work completed in 2006 helped secure the remains.

AROS CASTLE (ISLE OF MULL)

Aros Castle stands in picturesque ruins on the northern coast of Mull. Built in the 13th century, it was once an important stronghold for the Lords of the Isles and offers panoramic views over the Sound of Mull.

DUNVEGAN CASTLE (ISLE OF SKYE)

Dunvegan Castle is the oldest continuously inhabited castle in Scotland and the seat of Clan MacLeod.

Set on the shores of Loch Dunvegan, it boasts picturesque grounds, historic artefacts, and the legendary Fairy Flag. It's also the subject of our second feature this month.

ARMADALE CASTLE (ISLE OF SKYE)

Armadale Castle, located on the Sleat Peninsula of the Isle of Skye, is a ruined mansion and former seat of Clan MacDonald.

Built in 1815 in a Tudor-Gothic style it replaced an earlier house from around 1790. The site developed as a gentry residence rather than a medieval fortress.



Armadale Castle

After a 1855 fire, Armadale Castle lost its central section which was replaced. The castle continued to be used, but in 1925 the Macdonald family moved to a smaller house, leaving the main building to fall into ruin. In the late 20th century, parts were made safe by demolition/consolidation, with surviving remnants retained as the ruin seen today.

The surrounding gardens have been maintained, and the estate now includes the Museum of the Isles, which explores Clan Donald and Highland history.

KINLOCH CASTLE (ISLE OF RUM)

We end with a relatively modern castle: Kinloch Castle on the Isle of Rum, built in the late 19th century by Sir George Bullough, a Lancastrian textile tycoon. He had inherited the island from his father in 1891.

After building a mausoleum to his father on the island (and briefly changing the island's name to Rhum - he didn't wish to be the Laird of Rum), he started work on a great house to be used especially during the shooting season. Kinloch Castle was the result.



Kinloch Castle

QUIZ: WESTERN ISLAND CASTLES

See if you can match the castles mentioned elsewhere in this issue with its photo. Each castle is featured at least once, sometimes twice. Answers on page 24.

Duntulm Castle

Kinloch Castle

Dunyvaig Castle

Kisimul Castle

Lews Castle

Castle Moil

Aros Castle

Duart Castle

Armadale Castle

Dunvegan Castle





GALLERY: CASTLES OF THE WESTERN ISLES



Dunvegan Castle



Dunyvaig Castle



Dunvegan Castle Gardens



Gylen Castle







Armadale Castle Gardens



DUNVEGAN CASTLE

SEAT OF CLAN MACLEOD

Dunvegan Castle sits above the water on a rocky outcrop on the Isle of Skye. It's famous for being the ancestral home of the Dunvegan branch of 'Clan MacLeod'.

The MacLeods have been tied to this place for centuries, and Dunvegan is often described as the 'oldest continually inhabited castle in Scotland. Dunvegan is a living estate that has changed, adapted, expanded, and occasionally reinvented itself, while still keeping the same family story threaded through it.

FROM FORTRESS TO FAMILY HOME

The earliest fortification on the site is thought to date to the medieval period, with a stronghold established to control local sea routes and landholdings. Over the following centuries the castle was expanded and remodelled in stages, reflecting changing needs from defence to residence.

As regional conflict eased, Dunvegan's role shifted. Thick walls and limited openings gave way to larger windows, more comfortable rooms, and improved service spaces. Later additions created reception areas suited to hospitality, while defensive works became less important than privacy, views, and estate management.

Today, Dunvegan Castle remains closely identified with the MacLeods, with the family still connected to the estate and its management. Much of the focus is now on conservation and public access rather than defence or day-to-day governance.

Visitors tour historic rooms, view clan heirlooms and portraits, and walk the designed gardens and wider grounds. The castle operates as a heritage attraction, supporting maintenance work and helping interpret Skye's clan history for a modern audience through displays, guided information, and seasonal events.



Dunvegan Castle

CLAN MACLEOD

Clan MacLeod is part of what makes Dunvegan so compelling. The MacLeods are one of the great Island clans, and their story is intertwined with the shifting politics of the Highlands and Islands—alliances, feuds, loyalties tested, and a constant awareness that power could be gained or lost with frightening speed.

Clan MacLeod has two main branches. One is the MacLeods of Dunvegan, Harris and Glenelg, led by MacLeod of MacLeod and known in Gaelic as Sìol Tormoid. The other is the MacLeods of Lewis, Assynt and Raasay, led by MacLeod of The Lewes and known in Gaelic as Sìol Torquill.

Despite the separate lines and chiefs, both branches trace their ancestry back to Leod, younger son of one of the last Norse Kings of the Hebrides Olaf the Black, the clan's traditional founder.

As you'd expect with such a history, Dunvegan is home to many historic treasures, the most notable being the so-called 'Fairy Flag', still on display in the castle.



FAIRY FLAG

The Fairy Flag is now little more than a scrap of cloth, but in its time came with magical powers. Once unfurled the flag guaranteed victory to the MacLeods in any battle (supposedly).

Its origins are unclear, although two main stories exist to explain its significance. Both are, shall we say, a little fantastical but add to the flag's mystique.

The first comes from the Crusades - the MacLeods were active participants. The flag in this story is made from girdle of an evil spirit - the Daughter of Thunder no less - slain by the Clan Chief.

However, given scientific analysis dates the flag to the 4th-7th centuries (which predates the Crusades by several hundred years) this is unlikely.

The second more popular story is that its made from a blanket used by fairies (hence the name) to protect one of the early baby Clan Chiefs from the cold.



CASTLE GROUNDS & GARDENS

Dunvegan Castle is also well known for its magnificent gardens.

The castle grounds combine formal areas with more natural woodland and waterside paths, so visitors can move between lawns, borders, and viewpoints over the loch. Seasonal colour comes from a mix of hardy shrubs, flowering plants, and mature trees, with spring and summer typically bringing the strongest displays.

One of the best-known features is the Walled Garden, which supports a range of ornamental planting and often provides a calmer microclimate than the exposed shoreline.

Elsewhere, footpaths lead to quieter corners and benches, and the setting encourages slow exploration rather than a single “must-see” route. Garden access is usually part of a castle visit.

INSIDE THE CASTLE

As we've already said, the castle is well furnished with antiques and other historic artefacts having been the family home of the MacLeods for so long.

Rooms are arranged for visitors as a series of historic interiors and display spaces, reflecting centuries of MacLeod family life. Visitors typically see furnished chambers, portraits, and collections of arms and personal objects.

The atmosphere is that of a lived-in house museum, rather than a purely medieval ruin.



Inside Dunvegan Castle

VISITING DUNVEGAN

Although still inhabited by the MacLeods the castle is open to the public daily from April to October.

Tickets aren't cheap (£17.50 for an adult) but this gives access to both the castle and the gardens - and discounts are available for students, pensioners and other concessions. The Estate also runs guided tours and even seal trips if you're interested.

You can even stay on the estate - though sadly not in the castle itself - with 5 holiday cottages available for rent. An estate shop and campsite complete the facilities.

Dunvegan, then, is a wonderful place to visit as a great example of a still inhabited historic castle set in gorgeous grounds and in an amazing setting on the Isle of Skye.



LESSER KNOWN BRITISH CASTLES

KISIMUL CASTLE

Kisimul Castle is a compact medieval stronghold set on a small rocky islet in Castlebay, the main harbour of the Isle of Barra in Scotland's Outer Hebrides. Its position - surrounded by water but close to the shoreline - helps explain both its defensive value and its enduring visual impact.

The castle's Gaelic name, Caisteal Chiosmuil, means 'castle of the rock of the small bay', a reference to the islet and its sheltered setting.

Kisimul is often described as the only significant surviving medieval castle in the Outer Hebrides, and it is closely associated with the chiefs of Clan MacNeil of Barra.

ORIGINS AND THE MACNEILS OF BARRA

Tradition places the MacNeils on Barra from around the 11th century, but the documentary record for lordship is clearer later. The first record of a MacNeil, Gilleonan MacNeil, is in 1427, after the island was granted to him by Alexander MacDonald, Lord of the Isles.

The same source suggests he probably built the castle that dominates the islet.

The MacNeils were a seafaring clan, and surviving anecdotes reflect the rougher edges of island politics. For example one MacNeil, the wonderfully named Ruari the Turbulent, was arrested for piracy of an English ship during the reign of James VI in the later 1500s.



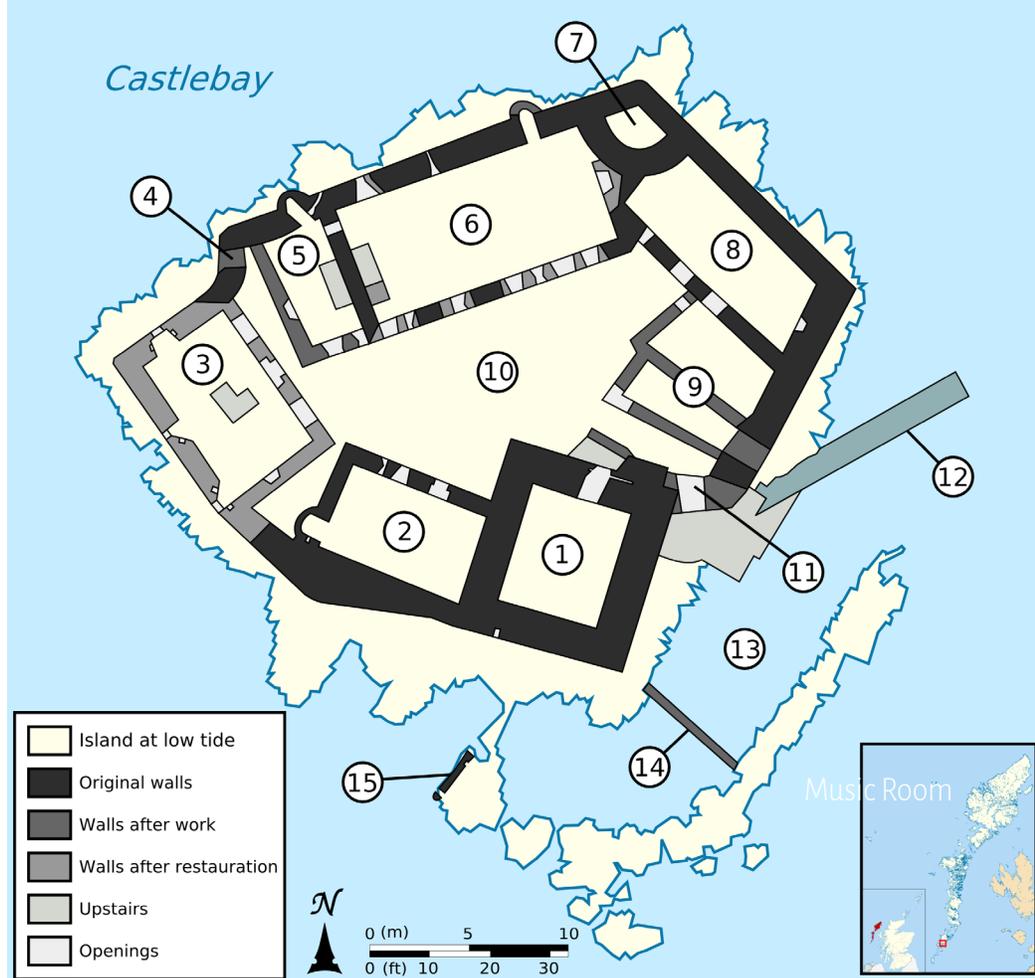
Kisimul Castle

CONSTRUCTION

Kisimul's main construction is dated to the 1400s. The core was a three-storey tower house used by the clan chief, with a curtain wall wrapped around the small rock to form an enclosed courtyard.

Within this confined space sat several ancillary buildings that supported daily life and ceremony: a feasting hall, a chapel, the tanist's (heir's) house, and the gokman's (watchman's) house.

Even on an island site, basic services mattered and a well was dug near a postern gate that draws fresh water from an underground seam.



Outside the curtain wall, beside the original landing place, it also records foundations of the crew house, where sailors serving the chief's galley had quarters.

Together these details underline that Kisimul was not only a defensive statement but also a working base for a maritime lordship - small in footprint, but organised for control, hospitality, worship, and watchkeeping.

DECLINE, RESTORATION, AND STATE CARE

Like many clan seats, Kisimul's fortunes rose and fell with the family's economic position. Heavy debts forced the MacNeil chiefs to sell Barra in 1838.

A descendant,*Robert Lister MacNeil, later bought the estate in 1937 and began restoring the ancestral seat. In particular Many of the courtyard buildings were restored. The tanist's house served as the MacNeils' family home for a period.

Clan MacNeil passed the care of castle to the State in 2001, leasing it to 'Historic Scotland' for 1,000 years for £1 and a bottle of whisky. It is therefore now a publicly run building, accessible by visitors.



Inside Kisimul Castle

VISITING TODAY

Unfortunately current access is affected by conservation work, with the castle closed for restoration works.

However, visitors can use a visitor engagement centre at Castlebay Community Hall (seasonal opening times are provided by Historic Scotland), and boat trips around the castle are run from April to September on limited days, with advance booking required.

The intention is to reopen the castle for visitors after the work is completed (although when this will be is currently unknown) and would be well worth the trip.

Quiz Answers: 1. Aros Castle; 2. Dunvegan Castle; 3. Armadale Castle; 4. Gylen Castle; 5. Kisimul Castle; 6. Dunyvaig Castle; 7. Kinloch Castle; 8. Gylen Castle; 9. Lews Castle; 10. Armadale Castle; 11. Castle Moil; 12. Kisimul Castle; 13. Duntulm Castle; 14. Duart Castle



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