

Damsay

Bay of Firth



in the Bay of Firth (called *Aurriðafjorðr* – salmon/trout inlet – in saga days) lie two small islands or Holms. The outermost of these is called Damsay and although uninhabited today it was, in the saga times, home to Blan who was the keeper of a castle that once stood there. As well as the castle, there was a drinking hall and chapel on the island and so rather than being an isolated holm, this was the centre of a medieval estate situated to control and monitor access to and from the sheltered Bay. The island features several times in *Orkneyinga Saga*, once as the overnight refuge of a fleeing murderer, Sweyn Asliefarson, of whom more later, and perhaps most famously as being the place where Earl Erlend Haraldsson was murdered in 1154.

The small chapel, of which only ruins remain, was dedicated to Mary and known as a place of pilgrimage especially for women. Another tradition records that there was once a nunnery on the island and that the first church on Damsay was dedicated to St Adamnan (giving the island its name – though this derivation is not universally accepted). The fact there was an ancient place of pilgrimage on this island is well-attested although we do not know the date or nature of the foundation.