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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SWEETHEART ABBEY AND PRECINCT WALLS



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SWEETHEART ABBEY

SYNOPSIS

Sweetheart Abbey is situated in the village of New Abbey, on the A710 6 miles south of Dumfries. The Cistercian abbey was the last to be set up in Scotland. It is regarded as one of the most beautiful monastic ruins in Scotland, and is particularly famous because of the touching circumstances of its foundation, by Lady Dervorgilla of Galloway in 1273, in memory of her husband, John Balliol, founder of Balliol College, Oxford. In 1289 Dervorgilla was buried before the high altar with the 'sweet heart' of her late husband resting on her bosom. A 20th-century monument to Lady Dervorgilla in the south transept incorporates fragments of its 16th-century predecessor.

The existing remains comprise most of the abbey church, which largely dates to the later 1200s but bears evidence that it may not have been completed until after the Wars of Independence (1296-1328 and 1332-1357). This later work was funded by Archibald the Grim, 3rd Earl of Douglas and Lord of Galloway, who was described as the abbey's 'founder and reformer'. Of the cloister buildings little now survives other than foundations. However, the abbey's precinct wall remains remarkably intact; enclosing 30 acres (12ha.), it is the second best-preserved monastic precinct wall in Scotland after that at **St Andrews Cathedral Priory**. Much of it is in state care, whilst the rest is a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

1098 – the Cistercian order is founded at Cîteaux, France, by St Robert of Molesme.

1136 – King David I brings the Cistercians to Scotland, settling them at **Melrose Abbey**.

c.1142 – Fergus, lord of Galloway, with King David's support, founds a house for Cistercians at **Dundrennan**.

1191/2 – Fergus's grandson, Roland, lord of Galloway, establishes a Cistercian abbey at **Glenluce**. The founding brethren are brought from **Dundrennan**.

1233 – Dervorgilla, daughter of Alan, Lord of Galloway, marries John de Balliol, lord of Barnard Castle (Co. Durham). The couple acquire a rich estate of lands in Scotland, England and Picardy (France).

1234 - Alan of Galloway dies and is buried at **Dundrennan**. Dervorgilla inherits eastern Galloway, centred on Buittle Castle.

1249(?) – Dervorgilla gives birth to her youngest son, John, future king of Scots.

1263 – John de Balliol provides funds for poor scholars studying at Oxford University.

1260s – Dervorgilla founds a Dominican friary in Wigtown, and probably also a Franciscan friary in Dumfries. Her founding of a third friary, for Franciscans in Dundee, is open to doubt.

1268 – John de Balliol dies, and Dervorgilla has his heart embalmed and placed in an ivory casket. Where John's body itself is buried is not known.

1273 – Dervorgilla establishes the abbey of Sweetheart (Dulce Cor), by granting a charter of endowment ‘to God and the church of St Mary of Sweetheart and the monks of the Cistercian order of the convent of Dundrennan, for the abbey to be built in honour of God and the Blessed Virgin Mary’. The founding brethren come from **Dundrennan**, and the first abbot is John. They are given the parish lands of Lochkinderloch (now New Abbey) and Kirkpatrick Durham, both formerly belonging to **Dundrennan Abbey**, for income, and use Bogue Quay, where the New Abbey Pow joins the Nith estuary, for exporting and importing goods.

1282 – Dervorgilla confirms her late husband’s patronage of Oxford students, now known as Balliol College, formulating its Statutes and giving it its first seal.

1289 – Dervorgilla dies at one of her English estates, Kempston (Beds.) and is buried with her husband’s heart in front of the high altar at Sweetheart Abbey. By this date the presbytery, crossing, transepts and a greater part of the nave are most probably finished.

1292 – Dervorgilla’s son, John, becomes king of Scots.

1296 – King John is deposed by Edward I of England at the outset of the Wars of Independence (1296-1328 and 1332-1357). The abbot of Sweetheart swears fealty to King Edward at Berwick Castle.

1299 – the abbot petitions Edward I for £5,000 in compensation for damage caused to the abbey’s property.

1300 – Edward I invades Galloway, capturing **Caerlaverock Castle** in the process. On his return he stays at Sweetheart, where he may receive word from Pope Boniface VIII asserting that Scotland belongs to the Holy See and demanding that Edward withdraw from the country.

1301 – Edward I’s son, the future Edward II, invades western Scotland. Legend tells that when Prince Edward threatened to make a pilgrimage to St Ninian’s shrine at **Whithorn**, the Scots had the saint’s image removed to Sweetheart. However, St Ninian himself miraculously returns his image to **Whithorn** that same night in time to receive the English Prince.

1308 – the monks complain to Edward II of England about losses incurred during the Wars, through the burning of granges (sheep farms) and destruction of their goods.

1331 – Bishop Simon of Galloway bemoans the abbey’s ‘outstanding and notorious poverty and manifest prostration’.

later 1300s – following the Wars of Independence, and with the abbey’s income insufficient to carry out building repairs damaged by war and fire, Archibald the Grim, 3rd Earl of Douglas and Lord of Galloway, finances the rebuilding. The work includes the south transept chapels, the west part of the nave and west front of the church.

1380 – Thomas de Kirkcudbright, a monk at *Dulcicorde*, is granted a safe conduct by Richard II of England to travel to Oxford to study.

1397 – a lightning strike damages the abbey church, necessitating further repairs.

1500 – the south cloister range is rebuilt as four vaulted cellars, with a refectory above the inner two vaults. The work probably reflects the downsizing of the chapter following the abolition of lay-brothers in the Cistercian order. The abbot and chapter also start to feu lands to secular landlords, including the Maxwells of **Caerlaverock**.

1548 – the abbot and chapter constitute Robert, 5th Lord Maxwell, heritable bailie of the abbey.

1557 – the abbot and 15 monks, probably reflecting the full complement of monks remaining in the abbey, subscribe a charter.

1560 – the Protestant Reformation formally brings monastic life to an end. However, Lord Maxwell refuses an order by the Lords of the Congregation to demolish the place ‘quhair he was maist part brocht up in his youth’. However, further assets are disposed of, including the corn mill and associated waterworks beside the New Abbey Pow at the west end of the abbey precinct (where **New Abbey Corn Mill** now stands).

1565 – Abbot John Broun (Brown) resigns, and retires to Abbot’s Tower, NE of the abbey. He is replaced as commendator by his kinsman, Gilbert Broun, a devout Catholic who continues to say mass in the abbey church. As late as 1579 ‘there yet stands an high altar in the New Abbay’.

1587 – Gilbert is forced to flee to France following the Act of Annexation, but within two years he is back at Sweetheart.

1603 – Gilbert is arrested and imprisoned in **Blackness Castle** before being forced into exile again.

1608 – Gilbert is back at Sweetheart but is soon in trouble again. In 1609 his chamber at Sweetheart is found to be full of ‘...Popish books, copes, chalices ... etc’ and he flees to France a third time, where he dies in 1612.

1624 – the abbey estate is erected into a temporal lordship for Sir Robert Spottiswoode and Sir Robert Hay. By this date the parish church of Lochkindar – Kirk Kindar - formerly on an island in nearby Loch Kindar, is now sited in the refectory in the cloister’s south range.

1633 – Charles I grants the abbey’s revenues to the newly-formed Bishopric of Edinburgh, but with the demise of the new diocese shortly afterwards the revenues are returned to Sir Robert Spottiswoode, who assumes the title Lord New Abbey. The parish name changes from Lochkindar to New Abbey around the same time.

1719 – William Paterson, founder of the Bank of England (1694) and MP for Dumfries burghs, is buried in the graveyard on the north side of the abbey church.

1731 – a new parish church is built in the cloister’s north range. The refectory’s east window is incorporated into the new kirk.

1779 – a consortium of local gentlemen, led by William Stewart of Shambellie and the parish minister, purchase the abbey with the objective of repairing it. The sellers had already demolished the chapter house and the buildings lying to its south and were going to use the abbey church as a stone quarry too. By this date the south range is in use as brewhouse, byre, stable and school-house for use by the parish minister.

1802 – a new manse is built immediately to the south of the cloister.

1875-7 – a new parish church is built 250m south of the abbey. The former kirk in the north range is demolished, and the medieval refectory window in it is re-erected on the site of the chapter house.

1927 – Sweetheart Abbey is entrusted into state care. An extensive programme of debris clearance and masonry repair is put in train.

1929 – Lady Dervorgilla’s effigy, holding the heart of her husband, is found in the presbytery.

1932 – a new sarcophagus monument, incorporating Dervorgilla's effigy and other fragments from the 16th-century monument, designed by the Office of Works is placed in the south transept.

1966 – a new graveslab to Lady Dervorgilla and John de Balliol, designed by the Ministry of Public and Works, is placed in the presbytery, to mark the 700th anniversary of the founding of Balliol College.

1990 – a Requiem Mass is held in Balliol College chapel to mark the 700th anniversary of Lady Dervorgilla's death.

Archaeological Overview:

Sweetheart Abbey was extensively repaired after being taken into state care in 1927, the work including a major campaign of clearance excavation, both within the church and over the east and south cloister ranges, when the lower walls of the conventual buildings were discovered and laid out. The clearance work in the church unearthed several gravestones, including most notably, in 1929, Lady Dervorgilla's 16th-century effigy, clasping her husband's heart to her bosom, and that of Abbot John, the first head of the house. A lead drum found in the presbytery in 1930 was analysed by Professor Arthur Robinson in 1931, who found that it contained traces of hair and blood, with the implication that it might be the heart burial of John de Balliol.

It is likely that this clearance work did little more than remove upper stone debris and follow stone walls. In all probability there is much of archaeological interest and importance surviving within and around the church and cloister.

In the course of placing a stone in the presbytery in 1966 to commemorate the 700th anniversary of the founding of Balliol College, a lead coffin was found.

The large parish burial ground to the north of the church is likely to have caused considerable destruction of buried archaeological remains relating to some of the abbey's precinct buildings. However, the fields to the east, largely undisturbed, may yet reveal substantial evidence for extra-cloistral buildings, most importantly the infirmary. There will be a great drain somewhere, formerly bringing water into the precinct and taking waste out.

Recent work

Work undertaken in 2012 (HSCO-90292-2012-01) saw the excavation of a small trench on the west side of the Abbey, close to the present entrance. The work revealed occasional fragments of red sandstone, possibly from the nearby, and ruinous, West Range of the abbey.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

The abbey church

The upstanding architectural remains comprise much of the abbey church. These are of importance because they retain significant late-13th-century Gothic architecture, including a lavish display of bar tracery, amongst the earliest in Scotland. The church also shows considerable evidence of having been altered, possibly even completed, a century later. This late 14th-century architecture is deemed to be not so accomplished as the original.

The church was laid out to the characteristic Cistercian 'Bernardine' plan adopted by the order from around the second quarter of the 12th century, despite the fact that this type of plan had largely been abandoned for new churches elsewhere in Europe by the later 1200s. This comprised a short, rectangular and aisle-less presbytery of three bays, flanking transepts with two-bay eastern chapels, a central crossing with a squat tower above, and an aisled nave.

Although set out according to Cistercian austere precepts, the presbytery was richly treated, doubtless because it was destined to be Lady Dervorgilla's burial place. It was adorned with fine liturgical fixtures, including sedilia and double piscinae. Along the flanks and in the east gable was a series of windows, the majority designed with fashionable bar tracery. This tracery, introduced into England from France in the 1240s, was only taken up in Scotland from the 1270s, as at **Dunblane**, **Elgin** and **Glasgow** Cathedrals, at Pluscarden Priory and here at Sweetheart.

This opulent display of tracery continued into the transepts. However, the absence of vertical bay divisions in the transepts' two-storeyed east elevations suggests that, as with the plan, the builders may have continued to adhere to Cistercian austerity precepts. This is perhaps also to be seen in the use of clustered shaft piers for the arcades, although such piers had again become fashionable (eg, at the Augustinian priory church of Bridlington, Yorkshire).

The nave shows distinct signs of change during the course of its building. Within the two-storeyed eight-bay nave, construction of the arcade level and the upper parts of the monks' choir (the two easternmost bays) probably progressed rapidly. The upper parts of the four western bays, however, seem to have been completed some time later. After the two east bays, although the openings on the interior of the clearstorey continued to be treated as triplets of trifoliate-headed openings down the full length of the nave, the windows themselves on the exterior change, from triplets of openings to five openings within a semi-circular arch. This noticeable change is also reflected in the increasing breakdown in the vertical correspondence between the arcade arches and the clearstorey windows; this could suggest that there was a temporary roof above the arcade in the west bays, making strict alignment more difficult to achieve. The supposition must be that the building work was interrupted by the Wars of Independence, resuming only in the later 14th century, with Archibald the Grim as patron. The abundance of fire-cracked masonry further suggests that major rebuilding was required as the result of fire damage.

This supposition is further borne out by evidence in the west front. The hood-moulded and pointed doorway is more probably later 14th than later 13th century, and the great window above it terminates in a rose window that, whilst it has similarities with the mid-13th-century east window in Kirkwall Cathedral, is more likely also to be of the later 1300s. The trefoiled triangular window at the very top of the gable is also probably later 14th century. Unfortunately, the great west window was subsequently largely infilled, probably for structural reasons, thereby making analysis difficult. This infilling may be as late as the later 1400s.

The monuments

The abbey church has several fine monuments. Undoubtedly the finest is the 1993 sarcophagus monument commemorating Lady Dervorgilla in the south transept. Designed by J Wilson Paterson and James S Richardson, of the Office of Works, it incorporates fragments from a 16th-century predecessor, and a female effigy, her hands clasping a heart-shaped casket, discovered in 1929 and probably also once part of the 16th-century monument.

Other notable medieval monuments include the graveslab of a 13th-century abbot in the south transept, comprising a red sandstone slab ornamented with a floriated cross and a pastoral staff, and a broken slab in the north transept incised with a sword and shield. Several post-medieval monuments also survive, to notable local families, including one to Daniel Timblett (died 1888), who for many years was keeper of the abbey.

The parish burial-ground to the north of the abbey church (still in use and not in state care) has many fine monuments, and the burial enclosure of the Stewarts of Shambellie, begun by William Stewart (died 1845) who was instrumental in saving the abbey church from demolition.

The precinct wall

The abbey's precinct wall is one of the property's most significant legacies, for it is the second best-preserved monastic precinct wall surviving in Scotland after that at **St Andrews Cathedral Priory**. The stone wall surrounds the precinct on three sides – north, west and east – with a water-filled moat defining the south side. This wall stands up to 4m high in places and is built of granite boulders, some of them quite massive, probably cleared from the area at the time of the abbey's foundation. There is structural evidence for at least two gates, the better preserved midway along the west wall (behind Port House). Not all of the precinct wall is in state care.

Social Overview:

The importance of the abbey to the local community in times past is indicated by the fact that it was purchased in 1779 by a local consortium in order to ensure its preservation, the previous owners having pursued a policy of using the abbey buildings as a stone quarry.

Today, Sweetheart Abbey is one of the principal tourist attractions in Dumfries and Galloway. However, since it is possible to view the abbey church at close quarters without paying an admission fee, the actual recorded number of visitors does not reflect the true figure.

The abbey church is a much-valued backdrop for wedding photography.

Spiritual Overview:

Sweetheart Abbey was the spiritual home of a community of Cistercian monks for almost 300 years.

The presbytery of the church was built to house the body of the founder of the abbey, Lady Dervorgilla, and its architectural richness reflects that heightened status.

The tradition that Dervorgilla retained her late husband's heart in a casket because of her profound love for him, and that this heart was buried with her, has given the abbey a particular place in the affections of those of a romantic disposition. The master and fellows of Balliol College, Oxford, in particular, maintain links with the abbey.

The abbey complex was used for parochial worship even before the Protestant Reformation of 1560, and continued to be so used until 1877. The abbey was also used as a burial-place for the local community, and the parish burial-ground, to the north of the abbey church, continues in use as such to this day. The village's War Memorial is located to the SW of the abbey cloister.

Aesthetic Overview:

The Abbey is widely acknowledged as being a particularly beautiful and handsomely proportioned ruin. Viewed from a distance - eg, the granite massif of Criffell and the Waterloo Monument to the west, or the farm of Landis to the NE - the overriding impression is one of a former majesty and presence, no less awe-inspiring now than that which it presented in its heyday in the later Middle Ages.

The abbey church provides the principal focal point of the picturesque village of New Abbey, voted Scotland's best small town in 2012. Its high walls and lofty central tower dominate the mostly single-storey buildings clustered in its western shadow, whilst the red sandstone hue provides a warm counterpoint to the white harling of much of the rest of the village.

The view along the nave from immediately outside the west front has to be one of the best at any ruined monastery in the British Isles. The contrast between the red sandstone masonry, with that majestic run of nave arcading, and the lush green grass from which it rises simply takes one's breath away.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What clues remain in the upstanding stonework to shed further light on the complex building history of the abbey? A full standing building survey may yet cast further light on the relationship between the later 13th-century and later 14th-century building works.
- What form did the original cloister take, and how did it develop over time? The archaeological excavations of 1929-31 probably only scratched the surface and much doubtless remains to be discovered. It would be fascinating, for example, to discover what form the lay-brothers' (west) range took, and how/when it was affected by the ending of the lay-brother regime in the 15th century.
- How was the wider abbey precinct used? Hardly any archaeological excavation has taken place beyond the limits of the property in state care, and there would seem to be considerable potential here for examining the nature and development of this aspect of monastic life.

- What was the history of the monastery over the course of its 300-year life? The lack of a monastic cartulary (register) means we know very little about the abbey both as a religious institution and as a major landholding corporation. A detailed examination of associated documentary sources is required, as well as a topographical study of the surrounding landscape. Is there evidence, for instance, of a medieval precursor at Shambellie Grange?
- What further can be drawn out about the life of Dervorgilla as a powerful medieval patron for instance in relation to building works and the foundation of Balliol College?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Sweetheart Abbey was the last foundation of the internationally-renowned Cistercian order in Scotland.
- The abbey church was the burial place of Lady Dervorgilla, and the final resting-place of the heart of her husband John de Balliol, the parents of King John, one of Scotland's most famous, but luckless, monarchs.
- Dervorgilla and John de Balliol were the founders of Balliol College, Oxford; the abbey and college retain a close link to this day.
- The abbey church survives remarkably intact and as such provides us with one of the most instructive buildings for the study of Gothic architecture in Scotland.
- The abbey church was among the first great medieval buildings to be actively preserved from destruction, when it was purchased by the local community in 1779.
- Sweetheart Abbey is arguably the key component in the picture-postcard village of New Abbey.

Associated Properties:

(some locally related places) – Abbot's Tower, Bogue Quay; Buittle Castle; **Dundrennan Abbey**; Kirk Kindar; **New Abbey Corn Mill**; **Threave Castle**

(some other related places) – Balliol College; Barnard Castle; Bailleul-en-Vimeu, Picardy

(the other Cistercian monasteries in Scotland) – Balmerino; Coupar Angus; **Culross**; **Deer**; **Dundrennan**; **Glenluce**; Kinloss; **Melrose**; Newbattle; Saddell

(other major works of later 13th-century ecclesiastical architecture) – **Dunblane Cathedral**; **Elgin Cathedral**; **Glasgow Cathedral**; Pluscarden Priory

(other monastic precinct walls surviving in Scotland) – **Arbroath Abbey**; **Crossraguel Abbey**; Pluscarden Priory; **St Andrews Cathedral-Priory**

Keywords:

Cistercian; monastery, Gothic; church, cloister; precinct wall, abbot; Dervorgilla; Balliol; Archibald the Grim

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