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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

HOLYROOD ABBEY



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HOLYROOD ABBEY

SYNOPSIS

The Augustinian Abbey of Holyrood was founded by David I in 1128 as a daughter-house of Merton Priory (Surrey). By the 15th century the abbey was increasingly being used as a royal residence – James II was born there in 1430 - and by the time of the Protestant Reformation (1560) much of the monastic precinct had been subsumed into the embryonic **Palace of Holyroodhouse**. At the Reformation the east end of the church became redundant (it was demolished in 1570), whilst the nave continued in use as the parish church of Canongate; Charles I was crowned therein in 1633. In 1687 the parishioners relocated to a new church in Canongate to enable James VII to convert the nave into the Chapel Royal of the revived Order of the Thistle. It was wrecked the following year by a mob, who destroyed the fittings, and broke into the royal vault. Following misguided repairs in 1758 the roof collapsed ten years later. Proposed restoration schemes in the 19th century came to nothing, though the royal burial vault was placed in order in 1898.

Of the original church only a processional door into the cloister and the excavated plan of the east end remain. The building was lavishly rebuilt over the course of the later-12th and 13th centuries, and although only the nave survives it was clearly an elegant and ambitious structure, and still displays architecture of the highest order and originality. Of subsequent work, the most notable are the later 15th-century flying buttresses along the south side, and the altered west front of c.1630. Of the cloister and wider monastic precinct scarcely anything survives, physically or in the records.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **1128** – David I founds the Augustinian abbey, as a daughter-house of Merton Priory (Surrey), although the founding canons are brought from Scone (founded c.1120). (Holyrood in turn establishes a daughter-house, St Mary's Isle (or Trail) Priory, near Kirkcudbright before 1173.) David's erstwhile chaplain, Alwin, is appointed abbot. David also permits Alwin's canons to 'build a certain burgh [Canongate] between their church and my burgh [Edinburgh]'. The first church, a modest, aisle-less cruciform building, is erected shortly after. The east processional door into the cloister to its south is its sole surviving fragment.
- **1177** - the monastic buildings are sufficiently advanced for the Papal Legate, Vivian, to hold council at the abbey, and in 1189 it houses Scotland's nobles and prelates as they gather to discuss the ransom of William I, then a prisoner in England. Around this time construction starts on a far more lavish abbey church, work that continues well into the following century. The surviving nave dates mostly from c. 1190, and the choir and transepts to its east are laid out in the grass lawn.
- **1320s** – during Edward II's invasion (1322), his first since Bannockburn (1314), his army loots the abbey of its treasures. In 1326 Robert I (Bruce) holds a parliament at the abbey. In 1328 Bruce, whilst in his sick-bed at Holyrood, secures a peace treaty (Treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton) with England.

Exchequer payments for kitchen utensils and wine (1329) confirm the existence of a royal residence in the abbey by this date.

- **1370** – David II is buried in the choir, the first royal interment at Holyrood, thus breaking the tradition of burial in the royal mausoleum at **Dunfermline Abbey**.
- **1381** – during the Peasants' Revolt in England, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, takes refuge in the abbey.
- **1385** – the abbey is burnt by the English during Richard II's invasion, and the damage possibly necessitates the construction of a new, octagonal chapter house, whose foundations are laid out south of the choir.
- **1429** – Alexander MacDonald, Lord of the Isles, having been captured by James I, is made to kneel before the high altar dressed as a penitent, compelled to hand over his sword and seek mercy. He is then imprisoned in **Tantallon Castle**. In 1430, James's queen, Joan, gives birth to the future James II in Holyrood. He is subsequently crowned there (1437), married there (1449) and buried there (1460).
- **1469** – James III marries Margaret of Denmark in the abbey church. Around this time, Abbot Crawford (1460-83), James III's treasurer, presides over rebuilding work, including the construction of flying buttresses along the south side of the nave and a new doorway through the nave's north wall for use by the parishioners of Canongate.
- **1488** – around 25 canons are recorded as being in residence.
- **1490s** – Abbot Bellenden (1494-1500) undertakes further building work, including roofing the church in lead and providing new bells.
- **1503** – James IV marries Margaret Tudor of England in the abbey church. The impending marriage is the stimulus for James to embark on a major expansion of the royal palace, which henceforth takes on a separate identity, as '**the place and palace of Halirudehous**'. In 1505 James purchases from the abbey their lands at Newhaven, on the Forth, for the purpose of building a naval dockyard.
- **1537** – James V's first queen, Madeleine of France, dies at Holyrood and is buried in the abbey church.
- **1539** - James V makes his infant son, Robert Stewart, commendator (lay abbot) of Holyrood, thus increasing royal control over the abbey's vast resources. The following year his second queen, Mary of Guise, is crowned Queen Consort in the abbey church. James V is buried at Holyrood in 1542.
- **1544** – Holyrood, like much of Edinburgh and Canongate, is badly damaged during the Earl of Hertford's invasion. Among the treasures looted is a brass lectern, which is donated to St Stephen's Church, St Albans (Herts), where it remains to this day. When Hertford returns (as the Duke of Somerset) three years later, he finds the abbey deserted, and removes Abbot Bellenden's lead roof and bells.
- **1559** – a Protestant mob attacks the abbey church, destroying its altars. In the following year (1560) the Protestant Reformation brings the monastic regime to an end, although the remaining canons, numbering at least 21, are permitted to live out their remaining days there (only five are recorded in 1565). The nave continues in use for Protestant worship (in 1565 it has an estimated congregation of 1,000). Meanwhile, Queen Mary and her retinue continue to attend mass in the royal chapel in the adjacent **Palace**.

- **1565** – Queen Mary marries her second husband, Henry, Lord Darnley, in the abbey church. The following year Darnley is buried in the royal vault, the last to be interred there.
- **1570** – the choir, crossing and transepts are demolished, following a plea by the new commendator, Adam Bothwell, Bishop of Orkney, that he can't afford their upkeep.
- **1633** – Charles I is crowned in the abbey nave, 'with a splendour of ornament and vesture unfamiliar in Scotland'. Prior to this alterations to make the place acceptable are carried out under the direction of Sir James Murray of Kilbaberton. Desks and lofts are removed, the east gable is taken down and rebuilt with the present traceried window, the north-west tower is reduced in height and fitted with bells, and the west front and entrance doorway are repaired in a hybrid style, borrowing from both Renaissance and Gothic sources.
- **1687** – James VII instructs that the nave be converted into a royal chapel for his revived Order of the Thistle. The congregation are forced to relocate to new premises in the burgh - Canongate Church. The nave is then fitted out with fixtures and furnishings suited to Roman Catholic worship, but in November 1688 an angry mob destroys all the new additions and breaks into the royal vault, casting out the bones of the Stewart dynasty interred therein. Following James's flight into exile shortly thereafter, the adjacent **Palace** is abandoned as a royal residence, becoming little more than a tenement of exclusive flats for the senior nobility.
- **1758** – the nave is reroofed, with stone slabs replacing the lead. However, the added weight proves too much for the ancient walls and in 1768 the vaulting collapses, taking much of the north nave arcade with it. The stone rubble is sold off as building material. Almost overnight, in the public's eyes the ancient abbey goes from being a mere ruin to a romantic monument. The ground in and around the nave, however, continues in use as a burial ground.
- **early 1800s** – following renewed interest by the Crown in returning the **Palace of Holyroodhouse** to a royal residence once more, a proposal is made (1837) to turn the ruined nave into the Church of Scotland's General Assembly Hall. A scheme is drafted by James Gillespie Graham and Augustus Pugin, but nothing comes of it.
- **1856** – formal provision is made by HM Office of Works (Historic Scotland's predecessor) to open up the abbey ruin (and parts of the Palace complex) to regular public access.
- **1898** – the Royal Vault is repaired on the express command of Queen Victoria.
- **1906** – a proposal is made to convert the ruined nave into a Thistle Chapel. Thomas Ross, the noted architect and architectural historian, draws up a scheme but this is rejected on the grounds that the new stonework would destroy the church's value as an historical monument.
- **1909-11** – HM Office of Works carry out extensive consolidation works of the upstanding masonry, and excavations on the site of the abbey church's east end and chapter house.
- **1996** – Holyrood Abbey, together with the Palace of Holyroodhouse, Queen Mary's Bath and Abbey Strand, is inscribed onto UNESCO's World Heritage list as part of the 'Old and New Towns of Edinburgh' World Heritage Site.

Archaeological Overview:

Holyrood Abbey stands on a site, in a hollow, that is naturally marshy. This has resulted in a gradual raising of the ground levels over the centuries. This probably means that the later development, particularly that associated with the creation of the **Palace of Holyroodhouse**, is more likely to have sealed earlier archaeological deposits than removed them. It also makes more likely the possibility of waterlogging of those archaeological deposits.

In addition to rubble clearance within the church nave associated with early repairs (mostly unrecorded), numerous excavations have taken place over the years. The latter have succeeded in casting considerable light on the layout and detailed form of a monastery that, apart from the upstanding church nave, has largely disappeared from sight.

HM Office of Works, under W T Oldrieve, carried out investigations in 1909-11 to the east of the nave. These established the form of the missing choir and transepts of the abbey church, identified the remains of the octagonal chapter house to the south of the choir, and established the plan of the first, far smaller, church on the site. Several graves were discovered near the chapter house and within the nave. Further excavations carried out by them in 1924 revealed the footings of the first church continuing under the nave.

Historic Scotland carried out excavations and watching briefs in the 1990s and early 2000s, most as part of a major Fire and Security Upgrade of the **Palace of Holyroodhouse**. In 1995 excavations c. 30m west of the abbey nave found what was possibly a 12th-century boundary ditch; this had later been filled in and the ground thereafter used as a common cemetery for the lay people of Canongate – at least 51 individuals of mixed sex and age were identified. This part of the cemetery had gone out of use by 1500, and the graves were subsequently cut into by the foundations of a later-17th-century extension to the royal apartment in the north quarter of the **Palace** (demolished in the 19th century). The odd burial has even been found under the floor of the **Palace**.

Finally, in 2006 TV's *Time Team*, for the 'Big Royal Dig' programme, carried out geophysical survey and small-scale excavation work on the site of the cloister, to the south of the abbey church. Other than confirming that the cloister measured c. 27m², and possibly identifying the location of the monastic infirmary to the SE of the cloister, little of material benefit to our understanding of the monastery was found. It seems that the landscaping works associated with constructing the later **Palace** were more invasive and destructive than we might have wished.

Despite the somewhat disappointing results, the archaeological potential of the abbey must remain reasonably good. Whilst the area under and around the **Palace of Holyroodhouse** will have been heavily compromised, there may yet remain discrete pockets holding valuable information (as has been found to be the case at **Edinburgh Castle**), whilst the archaeological potential for the wider monastic precinct must remain high.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

The standing structural remains of Holyrood Abbey comprise the nave of the abbey church, dating mostly from the early 13th century, but with noticeable alterations made in the later 15th century and c. 1630. What survives represents a most elegant and ambitious structure, displaying architecture of the highest order and originality. The greatest regret is that its associated eastern limb (comprising the crossing, transepts, choir and presbytery) were demolished within a decade of the Reformation of 1560.

The first (12th-century) church

This is now mostly represented by marked-out remains of its footprint in the **Palace** grounds (aisle-less and cruciform), was a markedly modest structure, not surprisingly similar to the first church at its mother-house, Merton, begun 1125. The sole upstanding survival is its east processional doorway at the east end of the south nave wall; it has well-preserved, if unexceptional, Romanesque detail.

The 13th-century nave and west front

These mostly date from a major rebuilding of the abbey church in the early 13th century. Excavations have shown that the new building was of cathedral-like proportions, in sharp contrast to its predecessor, and the surviving nave demonstrates beyond any doubt that it was a most elegant and ambitious structure, designed by an intelligent and imaginative master-mason who clearly was indebted to work at Lincoln Cathedral (particularly St Hugh's Chapel and the transepts), begun in 1192. The nave's lofty, elegant proportions have few peers in 13th-century England, whilst its stone vault (albeit rebuilt in the later 15th century) is unparalleled in Scotland (except at 15th-century **Melrose Abbey**).

The west front is the undoubted highlight, described (Cruden) as 'one of the most imaginative and successful exercises in early 13th-century ecclesiastical architectural composition in Britain'. It is of interest particularly for its eccentrically placed corner towers, lavishly decorated (the north tower alone remains, the south tower being demolished to make room for the adjacent **Palace**) and the screened arrangement of the windows, both unparalleled elsewhere in Britain at this date. The deeply recessed entrance doorway is almost French in its cavernous recession, though the detailing is early English Gothic.

The 17th-century alterations

The alterations made to the nave prior to Charles I's coronation therein in 1633 were largely concentrated on the imposing west front and the east end. The west front was confined mostly to adjusting and embellishing the 13th-century detailing, including raising the door lintel and adding cusped arches to the front screen of the clerestory windows. Between those windows a stone tablet in a strapwork frame records his majesty's restoration. Sadly, the surviving north-west tower was shorn of its medieval superstructure at the same time, and its replacement belfry has subsequently gone missing, resulting in the tower's present stubby appearance.

The monuments

The ruined abbey has a number of monuments of merit. They include most memorably the monument to Robert Douglas, Viscount Belhaven (died 1639), in the north-west tower (renamed the Belhaven Tower in his memory); the black and

white marble Corinthian aedicule, by John Schoerman, encloses a recumbent statue of his lordship, but which is remarkably similar to that of Sir Dudley Carleton, Viscount Dorchester, in Westminster Abbey made in 1640 by Nicholas Stone, for whom Schoerman worked.

Also of interest is the memorial to Alexander Mylne (died 1643), architectural sculptor who carved statues for Parliament House (Justice and Mercy); the memorial was restored by his son, Robert Mylne, Charles II's master mason, and moved to its present site, the former north transept, in 1857.

Social Overview:

The remains of Holyrood Abbey – the upstanding nave and the foundations of the east end of the abbey and chapter house laid out in the grass lawns – lie within the purlieu of the **Palace of Holyroodhouse**, Her Majesty The Queen's official residence in Scotland. As such, security is at a premium and access by members of the public is strictly controlled. Paying visitors to the Palace are permitted to access the nave at the end of the formal (guided) tour of the Palace itself, and are then allowed to stroll around the grounds, unless security protocol demands otherwise. At other occasions (eg, the Royal Garden Party in 'Royal Week'), invited guests are free to explore the abbey.

With public access closely regulated, the ruined abbey's social role within the wider community is much restricted, although glimpses of the nave may be freely had from beyond the **Palace** boundary, most notably from **Holyrood Park**.

Spiritual Overview:

Holyrood Abbey (the name Holy Rood may derive from its most precious relic – the Black Rood - a fragment of the True Cross brought to Scotland by David I's mother, St Margaret) was established primarily to serve a spiritual function, and the surviving nave retains a role symbolic of the strength of religious belief in the Middle Ages. Its subsequent history, from the Reformation (1560) to the overthrow of the Stuart dynasty (1688), testifies to the religious turmoil that permeated all levels of society in that era.

The abbey was a place of burial throughout its long history, not just for the Augustinian canons but also for the wider community of Canongate, who worshipped in the nave from long before the Reformation until their relocation to Canongate Church in 1688. Even thereafter, the abbey grounds continued in use as a common cemetery. The abbey also served as the principal royal mausoleum in the later Middle Ages.

Today, there is little evidence to show that the ruined abbey currently fulfils any spiritual role.

Aesthetic Overview:

The ruined but substantial abbey nave stands today as a remarkable garden feature, providing a suitable foil to the neat, refined and complete façades of the adjacent **Palace of Holyroodhouse**.

Externally, the imposing west front retains a certain majesty, despite its ruined state, and the stubby form of the NW tower. The south wall, where the tall, pinnacled flying buttresses interplay with the rows of arcades and lancet windows, also retains an antique splendour; likewise the east wall, with its impressive traceried window.

Internally, whilst the ruined fabric holds impressive and important architectural detail, the overall effect can often be mildly uninviting, courtesy of being constantly in the shadow of the adjacent **Palace**. The rather damp and dank environment doesn't encourage visitors to dwell and admire some quite extraordinary medieval ecclesiastical architecture.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What, if anything, was on the site prior to the founding of the Augustinian abbey?
- What was (a) the detailed form of the east end of the abbey church, (b) the layout and form of the monastic cloister, and (c) the wider monastic precinct?
- What did the interior of the abbey nave look like (a) after the Reformation, (b) after the 1630s 'make-over', and (c) after the conversion to a Chapel Royal in 1688?
- What was the detailed history of the abbey as a monastic institution?
- Will we ever find the bones of Henry, Lord Darnley?

The answer to some of these 'gaps' may be found in more detailed archaeological investigations and closer examination of the relevant documentary sources.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Holyrood Abbey was one of the most important monastic establishments in medieval Scotland, and its abbots frequently served in positions of authority in the wider political domain.
- The abbey's proximity to the royal castle of **Edinburgh** gave it a particularly important role, mainly in providing a suitable setting wherein the sovereign and royal court might impress visiting diplomats and conduct affairs of state. Out of the monastic cloister grew the **Palace of Holyroodhouse**, which today serves as the official residence in Scotland of the British monarchy.
- Following the Protestant Reformation (1560) the abbey nave continued in religious use as the parish church of Canongate. However, its occasional use by the Crown for formal religious functions of a quasi-Catholic nature (eg, Charles I's coronation in 1633 and James VII's attempt to establish a Chapel Royal there in 1687), ensured that the building remained at the forefront of the religious turmoil that bedevilled the 17th century.
- The standing remains of the abbey church represent a notable architectural achievement of the early Gothic in Scotland, with innovative features, particularly on its west front, that are found nowhere else in Britain.

- The alterations to the nave made c. 1630 for Charles I's coronation display a remarkable sympathy for its Gothic predecessor, and provide an invaluable resource to aid our understanding of the development of Scottish architecture from the later medieval into early modern times.
- The underlying archaeology of the abbey has scarcely been examined, and has the potential to provide important insights into the layout of a major monastic establishment.
- The ruined abbey nave, set adjacent to the majestic **Palace of Holyroodhouse** and sitting amidst fine landscaped grounds, is an attractive and romantic monument, providing a suitable contrast, and a perceived antiquity, to the royal residence.

Associated Properties:

(other linked sites) – Burgh of Canongate; Canongate Church; **Edinburgh Castle**; Merton Priory (Surrey); **Palace of Holyroodhouse**

(the other Augustinian houses in Scotland) – Blantyre Priory; **Cambuskenneth Abbey**; Canonbie Priory; Inchaffray Abbey; **Inchcolm Abbey**; **Inchmahome Priory**; **Jedburgh Abbey**; Monymusk Priory; Oronsay Priory; Pittenweem (May) Priory; **Restenneth Priory**; **St Andrews Cathedral-Priory**; St Mary's Isle Priory; **St Serf's, Lochleven**; Scone Abbey; Strathfillan Priory

(other medieval royal burial places) – **Arbroath Abbey** (William the Lion); **Cambuskenneth Abbey** (James III); **Dunfermline Abbey** (Malcolm III & St Margaret/Duncan II/Edgar/Alexander I/David I/Malcolm IV/Alexander III/Robert I); **Iona** (Macbeth/Lulach/Donald III); **Melrose Abbey** (Alexander II); Paisley Abbey (Robert III); Scone (Robert II)

Keywords:

monastery; Augustinian; church; Chapel Royal; nave; chapter house; cloister; Romanesque; Gothic; coronations; royal mausoleum; David I; Charles I; James VII

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