



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CULROSS ABBEY



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CULROSS ABBEY

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SYNOPSIS

The monument comprises the ruins of the former Cistercian abbey of St Mary and St Serf at Culross. It was founded in the 13th century by Malcolm, Earl of Fife, as a daughter-house of Kinloss. After the Protestant Reformation (1560), the east end of the monastic church became the parish church of Culross.

The structures in care comprise the south wall of the nave, the cloister garth, the surviving southern half of the cloister's west range and the lower parts of the east and south ranges. The 17th-century manse now occupies the north-west corner of the cloister, with the garth forming the manse's garden. The east end of the abbey church is not in state care but continues in use as a parish church.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical overview

- 6th century - Tradition holds that Culross is the site of an early Christian community headed by St Serf, and of which St Kentigern was a member.
- 8th / 9th centuries - Carved stones at the abbey attest to a religious presence.
- 1217/18 - Malcolm, Earl of Fife, founds the Cistercian abbey as a daughter-house of Kinloss. Hugh, prior of Kinloss, becomes its first abbot. Various Cistercian figures from outwith the abbey serve as its abbot until 1252, when Michael, the porter, is elected.
- 1230 - Earl Malcolm is buried in the abbey.
- 1435 - Robert of Wedale, joint master of works at **Linlithgow Palace**, becomes abbot.
- c.1450 - Abbot Richard Marshall has a handsome illuminated psalter made (now in the National Library of Scotland).
- 1497/8 - Brother Matthew Taket of Culross undertakes work in the royal gardens at **Stirling Castle**.
- Early 16th century - The abbey's scriptorium receives orders for books from the Chapel Royal, in **Stirling Castle**, and Kinloss Abbey, pointing to its reputation and standing in this field.
- c.1500 - Abbot Andrew Masoun presides over the rebuilding of the choir and new west tower, and the demolition of the nave, formerly used by the lay-brethren.

- 1513 - Abbot James Stewart dies, possibly at the battle of Flodden. Thereafter, the abbey is headed by a succession of commendators (lay administrators) appointed by the crown.
- 1533-4 - An attempt to reform the Cistercian order in Scotland comes to nothing.
- 1538-9 - Loans are taken out for the repair of the 'tottering and ruinous' buildings.
- 1560 - At the Protestant Reformation, the presbytery and monks' choir become the parish church (the previous parish church was the now ruined West Kirk on the north-west side of the burgh). Some of the monastic buildings are kept in repair, for use by the commendator's family (the Colvilles) and perhaps for the four of the nine monks who refused to embrace Protestantism.
- 1589 - The abbey is erected into a temporal lordship for James Colville of Easter Wemyss (created Lord Colville of Culross in 1609).
- 1633 - The church is formally given over for parochial use by Parliament, having been in use as such for many years. If it had not been demolished before, then the nave is probably dismantled at this point.
- 1637 - A manse is built to the west of the church, incorporating the west end of the south wall of the nave.
- At some point between 1633 and 1824, the site becomes the property of the earls of Dundonald. It is not clear how much direct intervention they were responsible for, if any.
- 1776 - Archibald Cochrane, 9th earl of Dundonald (1748-1831) borrows £10,000 from Arthur Cuthbert, an East India merchant, which was secured upon Culross. The money is likely invested across the Culross estate.¹
- c.1810 - The Culross estate with abbey was sold to Sir Robert Preston of Valleyfield, Bart. It was still in the family possession in 1845. Preston accrued a massive fortune from his interests in East India shipping.²
- 1823/4 - William Stirling supervises the restoration of the church and work to the Manse, funded by Preston. This means East India profits were invested in improvements to the Manse and Church (which is not in state care) and provides a prime example how empire-derived profits directly shaped Scotland's ancient heritage.³

¹ Mullen *et al* 2024, 82.

² Mullen *et al* 2024, 82.

³ Mullen *et al* 2024, 82.

- 1905/6 - Robert Rowand Anderson remodels the presbytery and south transept.
- 1913 - The area of the monastic buildings is taken into state care.
- 1920-23 - Clearance excavations are carried out, revealing the cloister ranges. An additional area to the south and east is taken into care.

Archaeological overview

The cloister ranges, though not the garth itself, were cleared by the Ministry of Works in the 1920s, but nothing in the way of archaeological investigation has been carried out subsequently. Thus, it is hard to be sure of the archaeological sensitivity of the area in care. All ground disturbance on the site should be accompanied by archaeological involvement, aiming to identify the survival, depth and character of any archaeological features.

The cloister garth itself was not touched in the 1920s (the guardianship deed states that any disturbance requires the consent of the kirk session and presbytery). This area may represent a considerable archaeological resource, but its established garden use will have severely disturbed the upper levels.

Architectural/Artistic overview

Church nave

The 13th-century nave, largely demolished c.1500 but originally comprising a two-bay vestibule and four bays, was separated from the monastic choir by a rood screen and pulpitum. It had no aisles. Only the south wall of the nave survived the demolition. Of its chamfered wall shafts, only the westernmost survives as more than a base. In the easternmost bay is an aumbry, originally of two compartments but later reduced to one, that presumably served an altar beside the rood screen. Above it, set high so as to clear the cloister roof, is part of the jamb of a clerestory window.

Cloister

The remains of the cloister buildings are grouped around a cloister garth, 31.5m east-west by 29m north-south, to the south of the church. The only remains of the cloister alleys or walks are a few corbels that once helped carry the sloping roofs. Because of the sloping ground, the main cloister buildings were constructed on terraces, with very tall undercrofts beneath.

The most complete survival is the west range. This has lost its south gable and extensions to the west; the north section is now occupied by the 1637 manse. The range housed the lay brethren (*conversi*), including their refectory at ground level and their dormitory above. Immediately south of

the manse is a quadripartite vaulted parlour, which originally opened into a room to the north with a staircase down to the undercroft. The steps to the dormitory can be seen above the parlour doorway. The refectory has three surviving bays of quadripartite vaulting springing from corbels. Underneath the refectory's southern bay is a tunnel-vaulted room, possibly the kitchen. There was a latrine in its west wall.

Of the south range only the lower part of the north wall survives, where it supports the cloister terrace. This range would have housed the monks' refectory, but only the undercroft remains. This was originally divided into two compartments, each with two aisles of quadripartite vaulting. However, later in the middle ages, this was replaced with a series of four barrel vaults, akin to **Dumfermline Abbey's** guest house, to better absorb the stresses of the embanked earth.

The east range, immediately south of the south transept, had first a sacristy then the chapter house projecting eastward of the range. Excavations showed that there was also another eastward projection further south, probably the reredorter (latrines) as the main drain ran under it. The sacristy was the only part to survive intact, until it was demolished and built over in the 1905/6 restorations. The chapter house entrance survives in a fragmentary condition next to it, indicating a door flanked by unglazed windows, as the north window and the jambs and some of the arch of the door survive. The cloister side was elaborated with dog-tooth mouldings on the arches.

Social overview

The abbey complex forms an important element in the community of Culross. Its situation, on the top of Culross Hill, also makes it a prominent landmark in the wider area. To the local community and visitors, the parts in state care are viewed as just a part of the parish church.

The medieval choir of the abbey church has long been in use as the parish church. As well as religious worship, it is a venue for concerts and other social occasions. Education trips are arranged for the primary schools of the area, from secular and faith backgrounds, as well as adult specialist groups. Members of the community have set up a group, known as SCART (Culross Abbey Regeneration Trust), which runs a coffee shop and provides guided tours.

Spiritual overview

Culross has an association with Christianity reaching back to at least the 8th or 9th century, and probably earlier. The founding of the 13th-century abbey was perhaps a conscious attempt to continue that legacy.

What survives at Culross helps illustrate how Cistercian monasteries evolved. Originally, they did not have towers, which were seen as overly ostentatious. However, the practice did not last, and Culross's late 15th-century west tower is a late echo of this evolution or decline.

Culross Abbey is the only Cistercian church in Scotland still in religious use today. Culross Abbey parish church is part of a very active local Christian network.

St Serf and Kentigern are intimately associated with Culross. Within the church is a memorial window dedicated to Serf, Kentigern and the Virgin Mary.

As a thriving parish church, the medieval choir hosts weekly services. The south transept is reserved for private prayer and devotion. At Eastertide, communion is held just within the cloister gates.

Aesthetic overview

Culross Abbey parish church is a very impressive building. The other elements of the complex are also attractive, if somewhat fragmentary. The cloister undercrofts are interesting spaces, especially given that the cloister garth's height and bulk is so visible (though inaccessible).

The remains of the abbey church are on the hilltop of this steeply sloping picturesque village beside the Forth. Walking to the abbey up this hill makes the visit more impressive. From the abbey there are some good views of the surrounding areas, and it can be seen from within the village.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROPERTY?

- Where was the early Christian monastery located?
- What was Culross's detailed history as a Cistercian house? A thorough examination of documentary sources may provide a clearer picture.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The abbey's surviving architectural elements are among the oldest in a burgh that is prized for its outstanding historic architectural heritage.

- The best-preserved element of the abbey cloister, the west range, has some of the finest surviving lay brothers' accommodation from any Cistercian monastery in Scotland.
- Culross Abbey is the only Cistercian church in Scotland still in religious use today.
- The site retains a fairly high potential for further archaeological survival, in particular the cloister garth beneath the manse garden.
- The monument is not particularly easy to understand but forms a pleasant grouping of features surrounded by mature trees.

ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

- *Other relevant local sites:* West Kirk, Culross; Culross Palace.
- *Other Scottish Cistercian abbeys:* Balmerino, Coupar Angus, **Deer**, **Dundrennan**, **Glenluce**, Holm Cultram (Cumberland), Kinloss, **Melrose**, Newbattle, Saddel and **Sweetheart**;
- *The other Historic Scotland site linked with St Kentigern:* **Glasgow Cathedral**.

KEY WORDS

Cistercian, abbey, cloister, undercroft, lay brothers, Serf, Kentigern, Colville.

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