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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90055)

Taken into State care: 1908 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2012

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CAMBUSKENNETH ABBNEY



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CAMBUSKENNETH ABBEY

The ruined Augustinian abbey of Cambuskenneth is situated on flat carse land beside a loop of the River Forth, 2km to the east of **Stirling Castle**. 'The abbey of St Mary of Stirling' was founded c.1140 by David I and was closely connected to the royal castle. At the Battle of Bannockburn (1314), the abbey was used as the Scottish supply depot, and James III (died 1488) and his queen, Margaret of Denmark (died 1486), were buried before its high altar. It was abandoned for religious use at the Protestant Reformation (1560).

The abbey remains comprise mostly wall footings only, excavated and laid out in the 1860s. They include the abbey church (the west doorway of which alone stands to an appreciable height), cloister, and other buildings to the east and south-east, one of which has a gable wall surviving to full height. The most notable surviving structure is the late 13th-century free-standing bell tower on the north side of the church which reaches to a height of almost 20m. This now houses a collection of artefacts discovered at the abbey site, including a fine collection of carved stones and a log-boat found in the river nearby.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- c.1140 - David I founds 'the abbey of St Mary of Stirling'. The founding canons, including Abbot William, are brought from Arrouaise, northern France. Cambuskenneth is the only Arrouaisian house set up in Scotland, but later passes to the Augustinian order.
- 1201 - The abbey formally adopts the name Cambuskenneth.
- 1304 - Edward I of England stays at the abbey whilst inspecting progress on the siege of **Stirling Castle**. Among those attending on the English king are Robert Bruce and Bishop Lamberton, who whilst there enter into a solemn bond to fight against the English king.
- 1314 - During the battle of Bannockburn, the abbey is used as the Scottish supply depot. On the eve of battle (23 June), Earl David of Strathbogie treacherously attacks the depot, killing the officer in charge and making off with stores and food. After the battle, the abbey is used by Robert I (The Bruce) for a meeting of Parliament, at which those who had fought against him are deprived of their estates.
- 1326 - Robert I hosts another Parliament at the abbey, one of the first to admit burgesses (the 'third estate').
- 1378 - The abbey is reported to be in poor condition with the 'choir greatly ruined' following the collapse of a tower (not the free-standing bell tower but one over the church crossing) after being struck by lightning.
- 1406 - The abbot is granted the mitre.
- 1436 - The abbey church is recorded as serving as the parish church, 'ecclesiae parochialis monasterii de Cambuskynneth'.

- 1445 - The abbey is recorded as having an abbot, prior and 17 canons.
- 1486 (July) - Margaret of Denmark, queen of James III, dies in Stirling Castle and is laid to rest in the abbey church.
- 1488 (June) - James III is killed during the battle of Sauchieburn, fought close by, and is buried beside his queen in front of the high altar in the abbey church. His son and successor, James IV, attends the ceremony and in atonement for his involvement in his father's death, appoints a chaplain to sing for the salvation of their souls. Records of this fee continue until the Reformation (1560).
- 1502/8 - James IV prepares a burial place ('king's marble lair') for himself at Cambuskenneth, and possibly has his parents' bodies re-interred in the new spot at the same time.
- 1513 - James IV is killed at Flodden (Northumberland), after which his body is taken to London. He is probably buried in Sheen Abbey (Surrey).
- 1520 - During Abbot Alexander Mylne's time (1517-48), reference is made to a new abbot's house.
- 1532 - James V appoints Abbot Alexander Mylne as first president of the new College of Justice.
- 1559 - Immediately prior to the Protestant Reformation (1560), the abbey is 'ruined and cast down' by the reformers. The bell tower alone is retained, perhaps to serve as an outlook point over the Carse of Stirling.
- 1562 - The abbey is in the possession of John, Lord Erskine. Created Earl of Mar in 1565, he builds **Mar's Wark**, in Stirling, c.1567-70. Tradition has it that stone from Cambuskenneth is used in its creation.
- 1606 - The abbey, together with those of **Dryburgh** and **Inchmahome**, are erected into a temporal lordship for John, 2nd Earl of Mar.
- 1709 - The abbey site is purchased by Stirling Town Council and entrusted to Cowane's Hospital, Stirling.
- 18th century - A walled cemetery is created at the west end of the nave.
- 1864 - Extensive excavations are carried out by William Mackison, Stirling's burgh architect. Bones found in the presbytery of the church, thought to be those of James III and Margaret of Denmark, are re-interred (1865) under a new stone monument at Queen Victoria's command.
- 1874 – The dugout canoe now in the bell tower is found in the River Forth, south-west of the abbey and 50m below the site of the old ferry crossing.
- 1908 - The abbey comes into state care.
- 1939-45 - During WWII, a practice target is placed on top of the bell tower's lead roof. It is still there.

Archaeological Overview:

- The 1864 excavations were carried out by William Mackison, burgh architect of Stirling, with the permission of the landowner (the directors of Cowane's Hospital, Stirling) and the town's provost and magistrates. Those partaking in the 'digging' included J.T. Rothead, architect of the nearby Wallace Monument, local councillors, ministers, military officers and the Belgian consul general. The work, principally wall following, exposed the foundations of the church and

cloister, as well as buildings to their east and south-east. Artefacts discovered included pottery, stained glass and a chess piece.

- During the excavations, a large oak coffin was discovered in the presbytery, 2m below ground level and underneath a large slab of 'course blue marble or mountain limestone'. The two adults found therein were considered to be the remains of James III and his queen, Margaret of Denmark. Quite who the child found there also might have been is not known. The grave slab may have been 'the king's marble lair', commissioned by James IV from a Flemish or German craftsman in 1501. The last reference to the existence of the grave slab ('magnifice extractus') is in 1574 when it was 'lately to be seen in that place'. The bones were re-interred in 1865, by command of Queen Victoria. The tomb fragments, of blue-black Tournai limestone, are in the bell tower.
- In 1997 a resistivity and topographical survey undertaken around the two groups of buildings to the east of the abbey church found no features of potential archaeological significance. However, this may be because of a high water table during the survey. A similar survey was carried out to the west of the bell tower in 2000, coupled with trial trenching in an area to the south. (GUARD, 'Cambuskenneth Abbey Environs Project', 2000).
- Despite all of the above, the area in care is likely to have high archaeological potential, as are the areas immediately beyond the guardianship area (the wider monastic precinct). Groundbreaking works should be avoided.
- The great bell from the bell tower is reported to have fallen into the River Forth whilst being taken away at the Reformation.

Archaeological Finds

- Over 50 coins have been recovered from varying depths in the plough soil in surrounding fields. Ten of the 36 found in 1983 date between the early 13th and 16th centuries.
- The log boat found in 1874 sticking out of the mud in the River Forth immediately west of the village and Hood Farm (and now in the bell tower) originally measured nearly 8m in length and was carved from a single piece of oak. The log boat has yet to be radiocarbon dated but dated examples of log boats show that they were in use over several millennia. Of the six comparable finds in the River Tay, two have been dated. One to 1000 BC and the other to AD 500.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

Church

- Overview: No doubt a temporary church and some domestic buildings were erected soon after the abbey was founded, but such remains as exist today suggest that the main period of building activity was in the 13th century.
- The church is cruciform on plan and comprises an 8-bay nave with an added north aisle, a choir with an aisle-less square-ended presbytery and transepts, the latter each with two east chapels. A tower, on record as having collapsed in

1378, was presumably that over the central crossing, and not the surviving free-standing bell tower.

- The only portion that still stands to any height is the west doorway. On each side of the opening, the bases and caps of five disengaged shafts remain. There is slight evidence for a pulpitum (screen) separating the nave from the canons' choir. At the north-west corner of the north transept is evidence for a mural stair. In the south transept, the north chapel retains evidence for an altar.
- The stone 'tomb monument' in the presbytery, surrounded by iron railings, marks the site of the discovery in 1864 of the purported mortal remains of James III and Queen Margaret. The monument, designed by Mr Matheson, of the Board of Works, and created by John Rhind, was officially unveiled in 1865.

Bell tower

- The bell tower, sited 6m north of the west end of the church, probably dates from the later 13th century. It was restored by Mackison in 1864/5. Described by RCAHMS as 'an exceptional structure for Scotland', its impressive bulk was probably intended to be seen from **Stirling Castle**.
- The square tower rises through three main storeys to a height of 19.5m. It has buttresses at the middle of each wall and buttresses at three of the four corners. The fourth (north-east) corner carries the stair turret, formed as an engaged octagon. The entrance is on the south side, its moulded pointed doorway is advanced slightly under a triangular gable. A second smaller door on the east side is now blocked.
- The ground floor has a tierceron vault with a central circular bell hole, for hauling up the great bell. The square openings in the vault have evidence of bell rope wear. The surrounding stone wall bench was inserted in 1864/5.

Three of the five lancet windows at this level are 'blind'. Access to the upper floors is via a stair at the north-west corner. The first floor is lit by more lancets, except through the west wall where each bay is centrally lit by a pointed-arched opening with two-light foliate tracery set between blind arcading. The step down into the first floor suggests that the floor level was once higher. The top floor (bell-chamber) has two taller pointed-arched windows with Y-tracery flanking the central buttress on each side. Blocked-up beam holes or cut off corbels indicate that the upper floors each had an intermediate framed floor or gallery. The corbelled and crenellated parapet was substantially restored in 1865, and the roof also dates from that time.

Monastic buildings:

- The cloister lies to the south of the church. This too is represented now by low stone footings dating to the 1860s. On the east side were the sacristy, slype (covered passage) and square chapter house with central column (its base part of a re-used grave slab). The south range housed the refectory. The west range, assumed to have been the cellarium, has long disappeared. The measures taken to preserve the abbey foundations during the 19th and early 20th centuries have substantially altered their character.
- The remains of structures beyond the cloister represent two main groups, one to the east and another to the south-east. The east group had a primary north/south range containing cellars that probably date to the 15th century.

The lowest treads of a stair indicate an upper storey. The long single room at its north end may have been an infirmary. Another range, at right-angles to its east, may indicate an outer courtyard area. The structures at the south-east stand two storeys high at the east end, with the room over a post-Reformation dovecot having been added or rebuilt. It is possible this formed part of the abbot's hall referred to in 1520.

Abbey precinct

- The abbey was bounded on three sides by the River Forth, and on the fourth side (north) by a bank and ditch. On William Roy's Military Survey map of 1747-55, the west end of the boundary is shown terminating at an orchard. Close to the north-east corner of the north transept of the church are foundations which may represent the enclosing wall of a garden or orchard. The name 'St James' Orchard' suggests that this ground may once have been connected with the abbey.
- The ruins John Slezer depicts in the foreground of his panorama of Stirling in *Theatrum Scotiae* (1693) cannot be identified with any certainty as one would expect this view to be framed by the tower and the west end of the nave. Three sub-rectangular anomalies were located immediately west of the present ruins in 1997, and it is likely that these represent foundations for additional buildings associated with the abbey, such as the ruins of the above-mentioned abbot's hall or part of the south wall of the nave.
- Slezer also shows a wall with a buttress and gateway next to an attached dwelling on the riverbank. A low wall footing bonded with lime mortar was noted in 1997 at this location and this could be part of the abbey's Water Gate, the main entrance to the precinct from Stirling burgh and a landing-place for goods.
- To the west of the tower, anomalies found during survey work have been interpreted as building platforms with dividing trackways. These are associated with rubble spreads which may be collapsed walling. They could relate to agricultural buildings associated with the monastery but could equally be post-monastic.

Stone collection

- Four stone fragments, believed to have come from the 1508 'king's marble lair' were reassembled on the ground floor of the bell tower in 1946. Samples were analysed by the British Geological Survey in 1960 and confirmed as being blue limestone, quarried at Tournai, Belgium. Other fragments from the tomb may survive amongst the stones on the upper floors. A small piece of the inscription plate is preserved in the Smith Art Gallery and Museum, Stirling.
- Nine 13th/14th-century grave slabs from the abbey are also in the bell tower. These include a coped 13th-century grave slab which came from the base course of the south transept in 1955.
- Of the other architectural fragments, there is an incomplete cresset (lamp), which originally contained 12 cups, and the lower part of a late medieval recumbent effigy with a human head resting on a lion.

Social Overview:

- The abbey site is held in great affection, both as an ancient monastic building, and also for the role it played in the great battle of Bannockburn. Indeed, it is the only tangible reminder of Bruce's momentous victory over Edward II (with the exception of **Stirling Castle** itself). Several of Cambuskenneth village's residents are local historians and take an active part in passing on the tradition and raising awareness of its importance. It could be said to define the village, for the abbey is used as an icon on the village website.
- The abbey is also intimately associated with James III and his queen, Margaret.
- Cambuskenneth village experienced significant new building in the 1960s, doubling in size as a result.
- The abbey grounds are only accessible now during the summer months. Access to the bell tower is only possible on special occasions. Tours, including those arranged under the annual Stirling Council 'Doors Open Day' event and by societies such as the Wallace Society, are normally well attended. The Community Council uses the abbey for Christmas Carols.
- Cambuskenneth is on a popular short-distance walking route from the footbridge over the River Forth from Stirling and then on to Abbey Craig and the Wallace Monument.
- Cambuskenneth Abbey significantly helps the historical and social self-identification of the community, being a source of pride and joyful use. It is popular as a venue for events with the local community. However, according to the Cambuskenneth Community Council, the abbey does suffer from some misuse and vandalism.

Spiritual Overview:

- The foundation of Cambuskenneth by David I was integral to his policy of reforming the Scottish Church. The Arrouaisians, a branch of the Augustinian order, were yet another religious order invited to Scotland by the king, who favoured the reformed Benedictine orders. Cambuskenneth was their only house in Scotland, and as with the order in general, was later identified as purely Augustinian.
- James III's adoption of Cambuskenneth Abbey as the burial place for his queen, Margaret of Denmark, was due to the abbey being closest to **Stirling Castle**, where his estranged queen resided. Throughout its existence, the Augustinians at Cambuskenneth doubtless provided a spiritual and clerical service for the royal court whilst in residence there, in much the same manner as the Augustinians did at **Holyrood** (Edinburgh), **Jedburgh**, **St Andrews Cathedral-Priory** and Scone.
- The church served as a parish church for the laity locally, certainly in its latter days, and possibly from its foundation. It would have been their source of spiritual supplication.
- Though still remaining a nominally Christian monument, it has little active association with Christian churches or communities. Indeed, the original status of the tower as the bell tower of an abbey church is no longer immediately obvious. The abbey is not linked to any of the local churches by activity, though visitors do occasionally pray there.

- The small cemetery at the west end of the church nave is maintained by Stirling Council. It has special importance to the families of those buried there, as well as to genealogists.

Aesthetic Overview:

- Cambuskenneth is a unique monument in its landscape, an unlikely survival that hints at the fine quality of the monastic complex of which it was once part. The bell tower in particular has aged well, being sturdy and impressive. The place is mostly peaceful by day, with minimal audible noise from the town around it. The grounds are well kept, and add to the overall peaceful, monumental feel.
- Cambuskenneth village, whilst strictly a suburb of Stirling, has a separate aesthetic character. Indeed it can still be called a village. The abbey in turn is secluded from both the village and the town, a factor that adds to its peaceful atmosphere.
- The views from the top of the bell tower are especially good, described in the 1860s as 'extensive and varied'. The town and castle of Stirling dominate to the west, and the River Forth, twisting and winding to the estuary, prevails to the east. The battlefields of Bannockburn (1314), Sauchieburn (1488) and Sheriffmuir (1715) are all visible, as is Abbey Craig (with its Wallace Monument), from where William Wallace and Andrew Moray commanded the battle of Stirling Bridge (1297). The foothills of the Southern Highlands, including Dumyat (418m), dominate the view north, serving as a perfect foil for the low-lying fertile plains of the Central Belt to the south.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What was the extent of the monastic precinct? The 1997 survey report identified the need for further survey during low tide and using techniques less susceptible to ground water to improve the quality of the data. The survey also suggested the anomalies and features tentatively associated with the Water Gate, a village, the abbots' lodgings or other building platforms to the west of the guardianship area should be tested.
- What is the date of the log boat? Radiocarbon dating would confirm whether it served as the abbey ferry mentioned in the documentary sources.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- The abbey was an important royal foundation, built in close proximity to **Stirling Castle**, an important royal residence throughout the Middle Ages.
- The late 13th century bell tower is a rare and impressive survival associated with an abbey church.
- The abbey lays claim to being the final resting place of James III and his queen, Margaret of Denmark.

- The monument has the potential to add to our knowledge and understanding both of the development of ecclesiastical architecture and the role of the church in the political world of medieval Scotland.
- The 1864-65 excavation and restoration were relatively well reported for that time and though some evidence has been lost due to the techniques employed and extent of rebuilding, it is nonetheless an important example of Victorian conservation.

Associated Properties:

(*other related local sites*) – Bannockburn Visitor Centre; **Mar's Wark, Stirling; Stirling Castle.**

(*other Augustinian houses in Scotland*) – Abernethy Priory; Blantyre Priory; Canonbie Priory; **Holyrood Abbey**; Inchaffray Abbey; **Inchcolm Abbey**; **Inchmahome Priory**; **Jedburgh Abbey**; **Loch Leven Priory**; Monymusk Priory; Oronsay Priory; Pittenweem Priory; **Restenneth Priory**; **St Andrews Cathedral-Priory**; St Fillan's Priory; St Mary's Isle Priory; Scone Abbey.

(*other 12th/ 13th-century free-standing bell towers*) – **Dunblane Cathedral** (originally); Lindores Abbey; **Muthill Old Church** (?).

Keywords:

church; bell tower; Reformation; Arrouaisian; Augustinian; David I; James III; Margaret of Denmark; antiquarian; log boat

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website: <http://www.cambuskenneth.info/>