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SCOTLAND

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EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA

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Designed Landscape (GDL00019)

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Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ARDCHATTAN PRIORY



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ARDCHATTAN PRIORY

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Standing on the north bank of Loch Etive, the Valliscaulian priory of Ardchattan, was founded in 1230 or 1231, probably by Duncan MacDougall, Lord of Lorn and owner of **Dunstaffnage Castle**. A church, dedicated to St Mary and St John the Baptist, with associated conventual buildings was erected around that time. The church consisted of a small choir and crossing, N and S transepts with paired transeptal chapels, and a nave with a narrow north aisle. The conventual buildings were disposed round a cloister on the S side of the church, but the W range was represented only by a cloister walk and an outer retaining wall. Considerable alterations took place in the 15th century, including the enlargement of the choir and the rebuilding of the refectory.

Today the choir, S transept with its two chapels and some fragments of the nave and crossing of the church survive. However, only the choir transepts and chapels are in care. The remainder is incorporated within Ardchattan House, formed from the conventual buildings of the priory originally soon after 1600. It incorporates the prior's room and the refectory with a 15th century scissor-truss roof and wall pulpit. The house was greatly altered in 1852 in Scots Baronial style.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- Ardchattan Priory is one of a small number of monastic houses founded in Argyll. It is a Valliscaulian house founded about 1230 on a site with no recorded Early Christian associations (although the existence of a cross slab indicates an early Christian chapel nearby).
- This order followed an austere way of life related to that of the Cistercians which emphasised the ascetic religious life rather than manual labour. Beyond France the Order only settled in Scotland and Germany. Within Scotland they had houses also at Pluscarden and **Beaulieu**.
- On the death of Somerled, Lord of the Isles, in 1164 his lands had been divided and Dougal the eldest son was given Lorn. Dougal's son Duncan (the first MacDougall) probably built Ardchattan Priory (he also built **Dunstaffnage Castle** before his death around 1240).
- Ardchattan was a small foundation, which may have had as few as six monks by the early 16th century and only three or four by 1561.
- Around 1510, Prior Duncan MacArthur revived the religious life at Ardchattan and continued a building programme.
- From 1545 the priory was administered by a commendator, John Campbell, who passed it on to his son, Alexander, in 1580.
- The priory was secularised towards the end of the 16th century and passed into the hands of the Campbells. They converted the S range of the conventual buildings into a private dwelling house; the choir and transepts of the church continued in use for parochial worship.
- In 1644 John Campbell of Ardchattan supported the royalist cause and a decade later he garrisoned Ardchattan on behalf of Charles II during Glencairn's Rising. The Cromwellian captain garrisoning Dunstaffnage

attacked the priory, taking prisoners and inflicting some damage on the buildings.

- The monastic church fell into disuse, except for the purpose of burial, following the erection of a new parish church in 1731-2.
- The house was enlarged and remodelled between 1847 and 1852 by a Glasgow architect, Charles Wilson, and numerous minor alternations have been carried out since. But the monastic refectory still survives as the nucleus of the present mansion, whose offices and outbuildings now extend over the site of the former nave and cloister.
- The remaining portions of the choir and transepts of the monastic church passed into State care in 1954.

Archaeological Overview

- The archaeology of the site could add significantly to our understanding of the medieval church in the West Highlands. Because of the continued use of the site, the archaeology of Ardchattan Priory has been disturbed, but there has been no large-scale scientific excavation of the site and the small-scale investigation (see below) shows the quality of the archaeology and indicates the wide presence of burials.
- 1995 – Small scale excavation was carried out by Scotia Archaeology in advance of building a stones shelter. This identified a series of paths running alongside a garden wall which probably dates to the 19th century.
- 1998 – A watching brief for a hole designed to provide a base for the Ardchattan Cross in the upstanding arch, connecting the nave and the choir, encountered disarticulated skeletal material, most of it evidently human. An articulated burial was also found at the N end of the trench. Fragments of wood, with a corroded iron attachment, presumably part of a coffin, ran parallel with, and N of the skeleton.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- All the buildings are constructed of local granite rubble with freestone dressings, the detail of the carving (particularly the form and nail-head ornament of the transept window) and the quality are similar to Dunstaffnage Chapel, also built by Duncan McDougall
- The 13th-century church consisted of a small choir and crossing, N and S transepts with paired chapel and a narrow N aisle, with the conventual buildings around a cloister on the S side of the church, with an E and S range. The West side was only closed off by a walk, not a range of buildings. Of this period only the S transept and some of the crossing is now visible to visitors (some is incorporated in the mansion).
- A major scheme of reconstruction was begun and partially completed during the 15th and early 16th centuries when a new and much larger choir with an adjacent N sacristy was erected, and parts of the crossing, N transept and nave were rebuilt. The south range of the conventual buildings was also remodelled, a new refectory being constructed on the site of the original one. All these buildings survive today either in whole or in part, but much is incorporated within the mansion house, including the refectory with its scissor-truss roof, of a type that had probably been common from the thirteenth century, but is now only represented elsewhere at Glasgow Cathedral.

- During the 17th and 18th centuries, a number of private burial aisles were added to the church, although none is now an active burial site.
- Of the many funerary monuments and carved stones to be seen at Ardchattan, one stone is of special interest. This is a cross-decorated stone with fine, intricate carvings of 10th-century origin. It was presumably brought to Ardchattan from some nearby Early Christian burial ground and cut down for re-use as a grave marker.
- In addition, there is a collection of about 30 carved stones, mostly gravestones, including several particularly fine grave slabs in the West Highland tradition.

Social Overview

- There is no formal assessment of the social significance of Ardchattan, although it is known that the owners of the mansion continue to cherish their association with the priory.

Spiritual Overview

- As a priory, the site has the potential to inform our understanding of medieval monasticism and its place in the wider community.
- Although no existing burial rights are known, the site's long use as a graveyard for local families gives it a special spiritual association for those families.

Aesthetic Overview

- It was built in a fine lochside location.
- Although in a delightful rural setting the immediate environs of the priory are dominated by the mansion house and gardens (which have their own pleasing aesthetic and incorporate features which may have monastic origins, including the remains of a fishpond and a walnut tree) and its associated outbuildings.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- The details of the Lords of the Isles associations with the site.
- Very little is known of the early history of the priory or of the lands gifted to the monks.
- The archaeology of the site is little understood.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Ardchattan Priory is one of the few surviving examples of a medieval religious foundation in Argyll.
- One of only three Valliscaulian houses in the UK.
- The quantity and standard of architectural elaboration of the church sets above many of its contemporaries in the west of Scotland.
- The dedications and ecclesiastical foundations of the sons of Somerled enriched the West Highlands and should be seen as actions demonstrating their pre-eminent political standing.

- The Reformation left part of the church in parochial use while the remainder and the conventual buildings were converted to private use by the Campbells of Ardchattan, the successors of the commendators.
- The medieval and later grave-slabs are a material demonstration of the power and wealth of the medieval community. Many represent the two families most closely associated with Ardchattan, the McDougalls and the Campbells.
- As a multi-period site, that is in part still in use, it contains evidence of the changing requirements of the owners.

Associated Properties

Pluscarden Priory, **Beaully Priory** the other Valliscaulian houses in Scotland **Dunstaffnage Chapel (and Castle), Iona Abbey and Nunnery**, Saddell Abbey and Oronsay Priory are all built by the same family
Killean Church, Kintyre has similar decoration,

Keywords Valliscaulian, Priory, Lordship of the Isles, MacDougall, Campbell, nail-head decoration,