Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC197
Designations:	Scheduled Monument (SM90187)
Taken into State care:	1966 (Ownership)
Last reviewed:	2005

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KILWINNING ABBEY

We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

KILWINNING ABBEY

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

- The abbey consists of the fragmentary remains of a Tironensian abbey founded at an uncertain date in the second half of the twelfth century.
- The chief remains of the church are of parts of the south transept and the south wall of the nave, though enough of the plan is known to show that there was a short aisle-less rectangular presbytery, transepts with two-bay east chapel aisles, and an aisled nave of seven bays, beyond which was a pair of west towers opening into the central vessel through tall arches, and thus presenting something of the appearance of a western transept.
- The conventual buildings were ranged around a small cloister of irregular plan on the south side of the church; of those buildings, the entrance front of the chapter house survives, and the plans of the east, south and west ranges have been partly recovered through excavation, showing the refectory to have occupied the whole of the south range.
- There is a church of 1775 (with later modifications) over the site of the presbytery, and a free-standing bell tower of 1815 on the site of the north-west tower.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- The site is thought to have had early associations with St Winnin, a saint of possibly Irish or British origin, about whom very little is known.
- The abbey was founded for Tironensian monks, as a daughter of Kelso Abbey, by a member of the de Morville family, and probably Richard de Morville, son of Hugh (founder of Dryburgh), at a date between his succession to the family's estates in 1162 and his death in 1189.
- A church dedicated to St Winnin is first mentioned in 1184 (by Benedict of Peterborough), though the abbey is only first mentioned c.1207 (by Gervase of Canterbury).
- The abbey was never particularly well-endowed, and with the passing of the de Morville estates to Roland of Galloway in 1196 there was probably a major loss of patronage.
- From 1513 the abbey was ruled by commendators rather than abbots.
- By the early 16th century the monks were said to have their own chambers and yards (gardens).
- In the 1540s the bailieship of the abbey was fiercely contested between the Hamilton family and Montgomery of Eglinton.
- In 1559 the abbey was said to have been suppressed by Alexander Whitlaw, though in that same year stone was being quarried and repairs carried out; monastic services appear to have continued for some years after the Reformation.
- In 1561 the abbey was said to have been 'cast down' by the earls of Arran, Argyll and Glencairn.

- In 1592 the abbey's estates were erected into a temporal lordship for William Melville, who was also commendator of Tongland.
- The nave of the abbey church continued to serve as the parish church for the local community, and the wall at the west end, on the line of east side of the towers, is presumably a relic of that church.
- In 1775 a new parish church was built on the site of the presbytery of the monastic church.
- In 1789 repairs were said to be in progress on the north-west tower for the Earl of Eglinton.
- In 1814 the north-west tower fell, and was rebuilt in 1815.
- In 1927 the abbey was offered into state care, but this was refused when Lord Eglinton said he could not contribute to the costs of consolidation.
- The Ministry of Works carried out excavation and consolidation in 1961 and 1962 in advance of taking the abbey into care.
- In 1966 the abbey was eventually taken into state care.

Archaeological Overview

- The plan of the church was investigated in the late 19thC (c. 1878) by the architect William Galloway.
- The church and monastic buildings were partially - but inadequately – excavated in a number of campaigns between 1961 and 1963 (in advance of being taken into state care).
- There were further minor works in the north-east corner of the cloister in 1983.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- From the scant remains and the frequent changes of masonry type it is clear that what is now seen was the result of a number of building operations, suggesting that the poor endowments of the abbey may have resulted in difficulties in carrying out an extended and relatively large-scale building operation.
- The diminutive size of the cloister suggests that the church and monastic buildings as first laid out were of only small scale.
- The plan adopted for the church as eventually built, with short rectangular aisle-less presbytery, transepts with two-bay east chapel aisles, and an aisled nave was of a type probably introduced into Scotland by the Cistercians, but also adopted at a number of houses of modest scale of the other orders.
- The decision to add a pair of western towers, opening into the central vessel through high arches in a way that suggested a west transept, was probably only taken relatively late in the overall building campaign; in this arrangement there are partial parallels with the abbey's mother house of Kelso, which has full west transepts (but with a crossing tower in that case), and with the sister house of Arbroath, where the gallery arches act as flying screens since there are no vaults over the west bays of the aisles within the two towers there.

- The earliest part of the church with diagnostic architectural detail is the south-east processional doorway from the cloister to the south nave aisle; its water-leaf caps and ring moulded arch order point to a date in the later 12thC, although the dogtooth of the hood mould suggest it is unlikely to be long before c.1200.
- The most complete part of the church is the south end of the south transept, the gable wall of which is related to Arbroath in having a triplet of lancets rising through the level corresponding to gallery and clearstorey, and a circlet in the gable (this circlet is flanked internally by paired lancets opening onto the wall passage at this level, while an intake above the circlet suggests there may have been a ceiling of polygonal profile).
- Of the east wall of the main vessel of the south transept little more than one of the arcade arches and the south stump of the gallery survives in identifiable form; these show that the internal elevation was of three storeys, divided into bays by wall shafts rising from the abaci of the piers, with a tall gallery having spandrels decorated by blind quatrefoils; there is little to suggest the form of the clearstorey.
- Views of the north-west tower before its collapse show it to have been heavily buttressed and with pairs of single lights to the belfry stage; a view by Grose, shows it as having a saddle-back roof between crow-stepped gables, though a view of 1806 in the Hutton collection shows a crenellated parapet and low spire, which are presumably attributable to the repairs of 1806 by the earl of Eglinton.
- One of the most intriguing parts of the abbey complex is the chapter house entrance, which has the characteristic formula of a central doorway flanked by openings subdivided into two lesser openings; this appears to be a fully Romanesque composition though it would be retardetaire for a date as late as Kilwinning's foundation, and the plastically modelled mouldings and capitals suggest it may instead be a case of late medieval Romanesque revival.

Social Overview

Not formally assessed

Spiritual Overview

- The abbey is thought to perpetuate a site associated with St Winnin.
- The abbey was the spiritual home of a monastic community for nearly four hundred years.
- The abbey church served as the place of worship of the local community for most of the Middle Ages.
- The abbey continued to be a place of pilgrimage – James IV visited in 1507.
- The abbey church continued to serve as the place of worship and burial place of the local community after the Reformation, with a new church and bell tower being built within parts of the area of the monastic church in the late 18thC and early 19thC respectively.

Aesthetic Overview

- In its final form, and as the result of a rather extended building programme, the abbey church was evidently a building of considerable architectural pretensions, with a dramatic grouping of three towers.
- The north-west tower as rebuilt in 1815 is a prominent visual focus within the town of Kilwinning, and served as the burgh's bell tower.
- In the mid-20thC efforts (which would probably no longer be considered as acceptable) were made to improve the setting of the abbey by clearing later buildings from the site in order to expose the foundations and footings of the monastic buildings, and the abbey can now be seen to greater advantage than before.
- It could not be said, however, that, apart from the modern bell tower, the abbey makes a significant contribution to the townscape of Kilwinning.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- The plan of the church and monastic buildings is incompletely understood.
- Little is known of the overall architectural forms and detailing, apart from the south transept and chapter house entrance.
- The institutional history of the abbey has been only partly investigated; the cartulary was said to be at Eglinton in the 18thC, but has been lost.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The abbey was a significant foundation for the Tironensian order, an order particularly favoured by the Scottish royal house.
- The south transept is an important example of early 13thC architecture.
- The original arrangements at the west end appear to suggest the Tironensians favoured spaces akin to west transepts.
- The chapter house entrance may be an example of the late medieval revival of Romanesque forms.

Associated Properties

- Other Tironensian houses: **Arbroath Abbey, Kelso Abbey**; Lindores Abbey, (Fogo Priory), (Fyvie Priory), (Lesmahagow Priory).
- Other foundations of the de Morville family: **Dryburgh Abbey**.
- Other major early 13thC works (relating to south transept): **Dryburgh Abbey, Dunblane Cathedral, Glasgow Cathedral, Holyrood Abbey**; Pluscarden Priory

Keywords

Monastic, Tironensian, medieval architecture, St Winnin