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ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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Taken into State care: 1913 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

BEAULY PRIORY



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BEAULY PRIORY

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises a priory church, burial ground and adjacent land forming an ornamental garden. The guardianship area therefore contains much of the core of a medieval priory which was originally far more extensive.

The floor of the church (paved with modern slabs) and the surrounding burial ground contain a large collection of gravestones.

The MacKenzie Chapel, which contains a very interesting range of carved stones, is not open to the public, and has to be viewed through a grille.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- Beauly Priory was founded in around 1230 for the Valliscaulian Order. Their patron was the local Bisset family, who followed Alexander II's initiative at Pluscarden, near Elgin.
- Named after Val des Choux ('valley of the cabbages'), near Dijon in France, only three houses of the little-known Valliscaulian order were ever founded in Britain, all in the Scottish Highlands (Beauly, Pluscarden and Ardchattan, near Oban). The order was bound by very strict rules that allowed only the prior to have access to the outside world, and this is presumably why this area appealed to them.
- The church is all that now survives of the original complex of buildings around a cloister. The Frasers of Lovat were responsible for various 15th-century architectural modifications and attempts to arrest decay. Following plundering in 1506, an indication of the decline in respect for the religious orders in this area that now prevailed, the priory was reorganised as a Cistercian house. Robert Reid, abbot of Kinloss and commendator (administrator) of Beauly from 1531, was particularly active, building a spacious prior's house and rebuilding the church's W end after a lightning strike.
- Religious life ceased at the Reformation, though members of the old community were still living there in the 1570s. The estates of the abbey were erected into a temporal lordship in 1612. The church managed to retain a value as a burial ground for the people of the town that had grown up around the Priory. The other buildings were substantially robbed, not least to build Cromwell's fort in Inverness in 1653. Cordiner (1780) illustrates the state of the ruins; the residence built by Reid survived into the 19th century.
- The question of ownership and State responsibilities became an issue in the mid-19th century. Crown ownership of the interior of the church and the burial ground to the S was confirmed in 1847, but the building was leased to Lord Lovat who was responsible for its preservation. The nature of any works undertaken by Lovat is not clear.

- 1900 the State gave permission for Lady MacKenzie to restore the MacKenzie Chapel, to plans of Thomas Ross of Edinburgh.
- The State only assumed full responsibility for the building and burial ground in 1909. In 1913, it acquired the land around the church and the boundary walls were partly realigned; further land was conveyed to the State in 1928 when it acquired the site of a former hotel to the SW, for use as a garden only.

Archaeological Overview

- Little of the guardianship area has ever been investigated, and none of it scientifically. The result is that there is little knowledge of the full nature of the site (ie the form of the claustral ranges, the wider precincts or the line of the precinct walls), or the quality of preservation. Nothing is known, for example, of what had existed on the site prior to the arrival of the monks, the precise nature of the domestic buildings arranged around the cloisters, or where the orchard mentioned in the 15th century was. Parts of the area in guardianship were built over until the early 20th century, but the presumption must be that earlier levels may survive in these areas.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- We do not know where the precinct boundaries were, but at its heart stood one of the finest medieval churches in northern Scotland.
- The church is of quasi-transeptal form, with N and S chapels, almost symmetrically placed but of differing widths, flanking the choir, and with traces of a further chapel adjoining the N wall of the nave (built around 1416). The S chapel, possibly dedicated to St Katherine, may have been adapted from part of the earlier priory's domestic buildings (which otherwise do not survive) and open off from the choir by a wide arch at a high level; both N chapels, which are likely to be have been additions, are spatially distinct from the church.
- The church was built from E to W; an oak bell tower was apparently built over the W end early in the 15th century and the W front was rebuilt after 1541. The S side of the presbytery shows the high quality of the original design, with three Y-traceried windows set internally within a continuous arcade, but the N side, with its three windows, is much plainer. The exterior has angle- buttresses and buttresses between the windows. The buttresses are spaced more widely further W, and the window tracery is of later date, as is the E window. The N transeptal chapel, possibly a sacristy, was reroofed in 1900 and is used as a burial aisle, but retains evidence of later division into 2 storeys.
- The monastic buildings originally stood S of the nave, around a cloister. The E and W ranges adjoined the church, and their remains underlie the burial ground, but the S range is likely to lie outwith the modern wall which forms the boundary of the property in care. A doorway leads from the upper floor of the E range to the S chapel, and a fireplace remains at first-floor level in the W range.

- A bank runs N-S across the burial ground, marking an earlier W boundary.
- The guardianship area includes a large number of grave monuments, including the splendid medieval tombs of Prior MacKenzie (d. 1479) and Sir Kenneth MacKenzie (d. 1492), as well as a large and diverse range of more recent gravestones (see 1985 survey).
- Thomas Ross, the architect who rebuilt the MacKenzie Chapel, is one half of the famous duo of MacGibbon and Ross, famous for their 3 volumes on *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland* and the 5 volume *Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*. His work at Beaulieu is in his characteristically scholarly style.

Social Overview

- Not formally assessed.
- Families still have an interest in the gravestones of their ancestors; some lairs are still active.
- The Gaelic name for Beaulieu is 'Manachainn 'ic Shimidh' meaning 'Lovat's Monastery'

Spiritual Overview

- The construction of this priory, a massive undertaking, is representative of a period when kings and their supporters founded many religious houses, not just out of piety (although this should not be under-estimated) but also because the presence of the network of monasteries promoted social stability and the monks could provide administrative support for the workings of the realm.
- Not formally assessed (see also above).

Aesthetic Overview

- The French monks who founded the priory considered this a 'beautiful place' (*Beaulieu*, hence Beaulieu). The priory is indeed sited close to a series of scenic bends in the river, but this relationship is no longer obvious because of subsequent urban growth around the site, as well as its tall boundary wall. Beaulieu's strategic location undoubtedly influenced its siting.
- As approached from the central square in Beaulieu, with its medieval market cross, the ruins and burial ground, with its mature trees, have an integrity as a historic landscape and create an attractive and quiet place to visit. The formal gardens maintained on the former hotel site are 'neat' but have little immediate aesthetic (on indeed intellectual) connection with the burial ground.
- The guardianship area includes several mature trees, including an ancient elm, which are of interest in their own right on nature conservation and historic landscape grounds.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- The archaeology – we know so very little, including full extent of site.
- The urban context – how did the town of Beaulieu develop and how does the priory and its history relate to this.
- Detailed research and assessment of significance of the carved stones gravestones: only a basic record has been made.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- We do not know the full extent of the precinct at Priory but its core survives - one of the more architecturally distinguished medieval churches in northern Scotland.
- One of only three houses of the little-known French Valliscaulian order ever founded in Britain, all three found in the Scottish Highlands (**Ardchattan** also in HES care).
- The construction of this priory, a massive undertaking, is representative of a period when kings and their supporters founded many religious houses, not just out of piety (although this should not be under-estimated) but also because the presence of the network of monasteries promoted social stability and the monks could provide administrative support for the workings of the realm.
- While the interior of the church does not contain any of its movable furnishings, its fine architectural details, such as its windows and their different forms, enable us to reconstruct how this space might have been used.
- The priory includes an excellent and diverse range of burial monuments, from impressive late 15th-century high-status tombs to the headstones of 19th and 20th-century townspeople.
- The priory and burial ground, including their mature trees, have an integrity as a historic burial landscape. This burial ground and its gravestones retain an interest for the descendants of those buried here.
- Thomas Ross, the noted late Victorian architect and architectural historian, restored the MacKenzie Chapel.

Associated Properties

Ardchattan, Pluscarden, for other houses of Valliscaulian order. In a geographical and architectural sense, the nearest related significant ecclesiastical foundations are at **Fortrose**, **Elgin** and Dornoch. Robert Reid, abbot of Kinloss, was also Bishop of Orkney and is associated with **Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall**. In a wider monastic and ecclesiastical sense, Historic Environment Scotland's Estate includes a large number of related properties including: **Dryburgh Abbey**, **Jedburgh Abbey**, **Kelso Abbey**, **Melrose Abbey**, **Dundrennan Abbey**,

Glenluce Abbey, Lincluden Collegiate Church, Sweetheart Abbey, Whithorn Priory and Museum, Dunglass Collegiate Church, Holyrood Abbey, St Triduana's Chapel, Seton Collegiate Church, Culross Abbey, Dunfermline Abbey, Inchcolm Abbey, St Andrews Cathedral, Cambuskenneth Abbey, Dunblane Cathedral, Inchmahome Priory, Crossraguel Abbey, Kilwinning Abbey, Maybole Collegiate Church, Dunkeld Cathedral, Arbroath Abbey, Restenneth Priory, Deer Abbey.

Keywords Priory, Valliscaulian, Cisterican, Bisset family, Frasers of Lovat, MacKenzie family, medieval, graveyard, gravestones, elm tree, Thomas Ross