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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

RESTENNETH PRIORY



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RESTENNETH PRIORY

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Restenneth Priory lies approximately 2km east of Forfar in Angus, occupying a picturesque setting in parkland bounded on all sides by trees. The promontory stands on a low knoll, originally a promontory projecting into Restenneth Loch (drained in the 18th century).

The monument consists of the ruins of an Augustinian priory whose tower stands some 14m in height, while parts of the choir and cloister survive to wall-head height. The remainder of the priory is largely reduced to wall-footings. Although the earliest datable masonry is believed to date to c.1100, historical records suggest that this may have been the site of an earlier Pictish church, traditionally founded by St Boniface in the early 8th century. Much of the surviving masonry is of 13th century date, although there has been considerable re-building, particularly above the original cloister.

Restenneth has an important place in Scottish history. The annals of Iona were transferred to the priory in the early 12th century by Alexander I, Robert Bruce buried his young son Prince John, twin of David II, here in the early 14th century.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- c.710: Nechtan, king of the Picts, writes to Ceolfrid, Abbot of Wearmouth asking for instruction in the Roman faith and assistance to build stone churches. This request is followed by the mission of St Boniface, who founded churches across Pictland, one of these traditionally being Restenneth.
- c.1100: Alexander I (1097-1107) transfers the annals of Iona to Restenneth Priory.
- 12th century: Restenneth becomes a house of Augustinian canons and is later made a subordinate house of Jedburgh Abbey under a charter of Malcolm IV (1153-64).
- 1243: the Bishop of St Andrews consecrates the chancel of St Peter's Church at Restenneth, probably marking the completion of the chancel.
- 1305: the prior of Restenneth is granted a writ to cut oaks from the royal forest of Platir near Forfar to make repairs. During the Wars of Independence, Restenneth was burned and many of its records and charters lost.
- 1501: James IV attempts to have the Priory suppressed (it then had only two canons) and its revenues attached to the Chapel Royal, Stirling.
- c.1560: At the Reformation, Restenneth Priory and its lands pass into the hands of the Homes. The priory church remains in use as the parish church of Forfar until 1591, when the priory's dependent chapel in Forfar becomes the parish church.
- 1606: Restenneth becomes a temporal lordship for Viscount Fenton, subsequently Earl of Kellie, by an act of Parliament, later confirmed by a charter of 1614.

- 1693: William Hunter of Burnside is listed as the owner of Restenneth, who uses part of the priory as a family burial place.
- c.1700: Restenneth is purchased by George Dempster of Dunnichen, who transforms part of the chancel into a burial place for his family. Dempster later drains the loch around the priory for its marl.
- Mid-18th century: the priory is described as being in poor condition, the spire damaged by lightning, the churchyard desecrated, and the cloister garth serving as a cattle-fold.
- 1796: a plan of the priory shows the church in ruins.
- Late 19th century: following Professor John Stuart's research, the owner of the priory makes some repairs to the spire, while further restorations are made to the fabric of the remaining buildings.
- 1919: Restenneth becomes a guardianship monument, and the Office of Works initiate a campaign of repair and consolidation.

Archaeological Overview

- Significantly, there is no record of any archaeological investigation having been carried out at the priory. Stray finds from the site include a silver-gilt thumb ring discovered in 1877, and medieval pottery and have been of excellent quality. These suggest that there is excellent archaeological potential for resolving the question surrounding the date of the priory's foundation.
- Records for Restenneth Priory consistently refer to a history that may date back to the eighth century, and while there is no above ground evidence the possibility of archaeological evidence existing is high. The priory stands in the heart of the ancient kingdom of the Picts, not far from the battlefield of Nechtansmere, where in 685 the high king of Pictland, Brude MacBile, defeated and killed Egfrith, the Anglian monarch of Northumbria. In 710 Nechtan MacDerile wrote to Ceolfrid, Abbot of Wearmouth, asking for instructors to teach him the Roman faith, and also for masons to build a stone church. He promised to dedicate it to St Peter. King Nechtan's request was followed by the mission of St Boniface, who founded the earliest churches in Pictland, tradition places one of these churches at Restenneth.
- The importance of the site was enhanced when Alexander I (1097-1107) transferred the annals of Iona to Restenneth. The priory became the home of Augustinian canons regular, and Malcolm IV (1161-62) issued a charter making it a subordinate house of Jedburgh. One of the sons of Robert I (Bruce), John, was buried within the church at Restenneth. This is no doubt one of many graves potentially to be found at the site.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Restenneth is a ruined Augustinian priory incorporating earlier features. Although the earliest datable masonry, part of the surviving tower, dates to around AD 1100, historical records suggest that this may have been the site of an earlier Pictish church. Much of the surviving masonry is of 13th century date, although there has been considerable re-building, particularly above the original cloister.
- The tower rises 14m excluding the spire. It has been argued in recent years that the lowest 3m is quite distinct from the upper portions and appears to have been a porch at the entrance to a church occupying the site or part of the site

of the existing choir, built around 1100. The tower was heightened in the twelfth century and the octagonal splayed-foot spire was probably added in the fifteenth century. It has round-arched and chamfered windows, projecting from its base and terminating in tall gables with crocketed finials. The spire itself terminates in an octagonal loop. Inside the north wall of the tower is fixed a late medieval gravestone.

- The bell tower was incorporated within the priory church, presumably erected soon after the foundation in the 1150s. The alignment of the church emphasises that the tower predates it. The foundations of the nave survive, and although nothing else of the structure survives it is unlikely that the suggestion that it was unfinished is supportable, given that the raggles for the roof are clearly visible. The relationship of the foundations to the choir indicates that the nave was earlier than the choir.
- The choir is largely early thirteenth century. At the west end it runs from the tower and in addition to the east and west arches of the tower a narrow passage from the nave to the choir was left along the north side of the tower. Although eccentric, it demonstrates that the tower retained was a conspicuous landmark. The windows of the east end of the choir were tall lancet windows. Some of the north wall of the choir has been rebuilt, but it has tall slender lancets with a hood-mould, except for the middle pair of the north side (replaced) and the east window on the south, the head of which has been renewed.
- Part of the south wall, next to the tower, is older than the thirteenth century and shows a high round-arched door, (now built up) that led to the night stair into the canon's dormitory. This portion of the earlier choir may have been retained because it formed the north gable of the dormitory. Near the east end of the choir, on the south side, the piscina sits within a pointed arch and a little to the west of it is the elliptical arched recess for the wooden sedilia. The south wall also contains an aumbry and an arched tomb recess. Beyond the north wall are the remains of a sacristy, too fragmentary to date.
- Very little of the cloister remains; of the east range foundations of the chapter house are visible, including portions of the stone benching. South of this was the parlour, with the dormitory over all. The south range housed the refectory. The south and west sides now have a lofty wall of late date.

Social Overview

- The absence of any formal studies makes it difficult to make an informed assessment of Restenneth's present social significance. However, the site features in many popular archaeological and historical guides for tourists.
- Traditionally, Restenneth is a royal foundation, established by St Boniface at the behest of Nechtan, king of the Picts. In the middle ages, the priory enjoyed royal favour. In the 18th century, the Priory became the burial place of the descendants of George Dempster of Dunnichen, an advocate and local MP (who secured his seat through bribery)

Spiritual Overview

- Although disused as a place of active worship since 1590, Restenneth remains a spiritually significant place due to its lengthy history as an ecclesiastical centre, particularly its association with St Boniface, as well as the long

sequence of Christian burials in and around the property. Restenneth reflects the change in religious authority within the 8th century Pictish kingdom, Nechtan turning away from the traditions of the Columban church in favour of the Anglian/Roman church.

- Although the location of many graves remains unknown, it should be assumed there are a large number of burials, including that of Prince John, son of Robert Bruce and twin brother of David II. Part of the chancel remains a place of burial for the Dempsters of Dunnichen, while the other part was used by the Hunters of Burnside.

Aesthetic Overview

- The priory stands on a low knoll within a picturesque setting of grassland. Restenneth Moss, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, lies a short distance to the north-east. Trees screen the priory from the nearby roads and railway lines.
- Restenneth Library, built in 1972 to house the Hunter Library and archives of the Hunters of Burnside, offers a fine vantage point from which to admire the priory and its setting.
- There are a number of interesting, though badly decayed, post-Reformation burial monuments within the choir and around the priory buildings.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Our understanding of the site is limited by a lack of archaeological investigation of the priory. Excavation and/or geophysical survey could establish the extent of the priory buildings, as well as identifying any remains that could belong to an earlier ecclesiastical foundation.
- If there was an early church at Restenneth, what happened to it between its foundation in the early 8th century and the creation of the medieval priory?
- The dating of the priory tower remains uncertain, although most commentators have rejected the idea that there is any 8th century work. Recently, there has been a lack of research relating to the dating of the upper parts of the tower, with most debate focussing on the lower levels. A detailed architectural survey of the ruins would provide a basis for further research.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Restenneth has a long history as an ecclesiastical centre, traditionally having been founded as a church by St Boniface in the early 8th century.
- The priory tower comprises a variety of architectural styles and represents a valuable primary source not just for the debate over its own date, but for wider arguments over the dating and historical context of similar monuments across Scotland.
- The medieval priory became the repository of the Annals of Iona around 1100 AD, possibly as result of the loss of the Hebrides to Norway.
- According to documentary records, the medieval priory enjoyed royal patronage. Restenneth was also patron church of the chapel in Forfar and Aberlemno parish church.

- Following the Reformation, Restenneth became the property of George Dempster of Dunnichen, one of the last British MPs to buy his election with bribery. Dempster was also a social reformer, radical, and supporter for representation of the American colonies in Parliament.

Associated Properties

Jedburgh Abbey (Restenneth's mother house); Forfar parish church (Restenneth was the mother church for Forfar until c.1590); Aberlemno parish church (Restenneth was patron of the parish); Carsebarracks Episcopal church (possesses the font from Restenneth priory); **Cambuskenneth Abbey & Inchmahome Priory** (broadly contemporary houses of Augustinian Canons); **Chapel Royal, Stirling Castle** (James IV attempted to have Restenneth suppressed and its revenues diverted to the Chapel).

Keywords Nechtan, King of the Picts; St Boniface; Anglian; church; Augustinian canon; Priory; tower; Jedburgh Abbey; King Robert Bruce; Prince John; George Dempster of Dunnichen