



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC033
Designations:	Scheduled Monument (SM90246)
Taken into State care:	1919 (Guardianship)
Last Reviewed:	2026

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# RESTENNETH PRIORY



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.



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Cover image: Landscape views from the entrance to the grounds of Restenneth Priory, Forfar at sunset. © Historic Environment Scotland

# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## RESTENNETH PRIORY

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# I. SUMMARY

This document aims to present a holistic approach to support the definitions of cultural significance of Restenneth Priory as a Property in Care. It highlights the key features that make the site special by assessing it against six values that cover tangible as well as intangible heritage values. The most important aspects of significance for the site are summarised under *1.2 Statement of Significance* before each value is assessed individually under *2 Assessment of values*. The overall assessment takes into account the ongoing development of our knowledge of the site. The Statement informs Historic Environment Scotland’s conservation and management activity, provides the basis for interpreting the site and highlights areas where more research is needed.

## 1.1 Introduction

Restenneth Priory lies approximately 2km east of Forfar in Angus. It stands in a rural setting on a low promontory amidst pastures, bounded on all sides by mature woodland plantation or scrubby wetland carr.

The Priory was first designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument in 1923 (updated 1998)<sup>1</sup> and became a Property in Care in 1919.

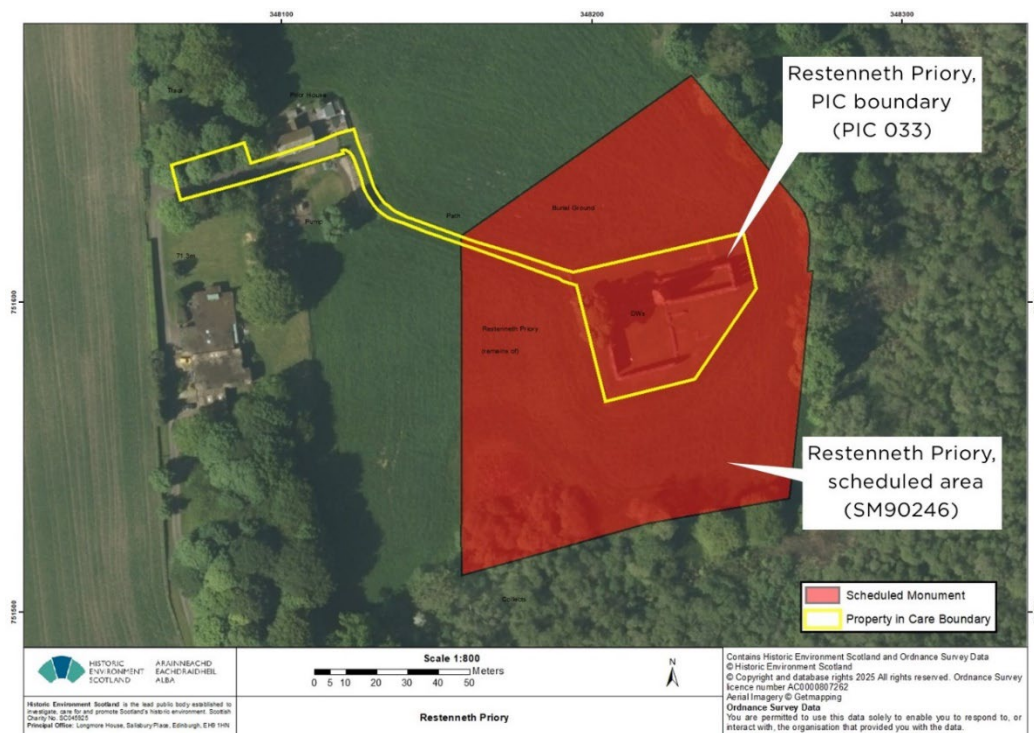


Figure 1: Restenneth Priory Property in Care (PIC) boundary and scheduled area (SM90246). Image for illustrative purposes only.

<sup>1</sup> [Scheduled Monument \(SM90246\). Restenneth Priory \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](https://portal.historicenvironment.scot/ScheduledMonument/SM90246) (accessed 17 March 2025).

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 complex is largely reduced to the lower masonry courses and wall-footings. There is a well-established but unfounded antiquarian tradition that this may have been the site of a Pictish church from the early 8th century. However, the earliest datable masonry is believed to date to the decades either side of 1100. There has been considerable later patching and re-building, particularly on the north side of the choir and in the existing walls of the cloister ranges.



Figure 2: Aerial view of Restenneth Priory from southeast © Historic Environment Scotland

Although it spent most of its later functioning existence as a dependency of **Jedburgh Abbey**, Restenneth holds an important place in Scottish history. It is one of the few churches founded in the later 11th century, probably by King Malcolm III and Queen (later saint) Margaret, giving it a significance alongside **Dunfermline Abbey** at the start of the era of medieval religious reform and revival in Scotland. Its place as a royal foundation perhaps led to King Alexander I's decision to transfer church records to here from Iona in the early 12th century. King David I was an important patron of his parents' foundation and King Malcolm IV started the process of its conversion into an Augustinian priory. It was here that King Robert I buried his young son Prince John, twin of the future King David II, in the early 14th century.

The site is unstaffed, free to visit, and open year-round. It is accessed from a small car park at the rear of the Angus Archives over a grassed path

which is separated from the neighbouring fields by fences. Interpretation panels are provided across the site.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 Statement of Significance

Restenneth Priory is especially important as one of the first new royal ecclesiastical foundations of a period when the Scottish Church was just entering an era of renewal, reform and expansion. Royal influence at Restenneth meant that it became one of the first ecclesiastical communities in Scotland, alongside churches of the importance of **St Andrews** and **Loch Leven**, to be converted into a convent of Augustinian canons.<sup>3</sup> It would become one of the wealthiest ecclesiastical foundations in Angus in the 1100s and 1200s.

Restenneth's remains represent the best surviving example from Scotland of an Augustinian priory-cell layout, with the full plan of the church and cloister visible. At the next best-preserved, Monymusk, only the church survives.



Figure 3: Restenneth Priory from above. The eastern limb of the church is to the left of the image. © Historic Environment Scotland

<sup>2</sup> Prior to visiting, please check access information, available at: [HES Visit a Place, Restenneth Priory \(historicenvironment.scot\)](https://www.hes.scot.nhs.uk/visit-a-place/restenneth-priory) (accessed: 24 October 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Taylor 2000; Veitch 2001; Duncan 2002; Duncan 2005.

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 church's eastern limb is a fine example of largely earlier 13th century work and can be used as an exemplar for the spread of work of this style through eastern Scotland.

The Priory became closely associated with the Bruce party during the Wars of Independence, connecting the site to both a key figure and key period in Scottish history. From the 15th and early 16th centuries, there is an extensive surviving record for protracted litigation over control of the priorate and the lands associated with the priory.<sup>4</sup>

Antiquarian interest in the 18th century placed the priory on early tourist itineraries, but it was the proposition that the priory occupied the site, or even contained part of the still upstanding fabric, of a Pictish church, that drew most attention. Its significance since has been as a focus for often contentious debates concerning the political and religious history of the Pictish and early Scottish kingdoms. The mythical association with King Naiton and the mission to Pictland by St Boniface is perhaps the most powerful example of the 'invention' of early Scottish history and the creation of a pseudo-historical narrative founded on tradition and opinion rather than firm documentary, architectural or archaeological grounds. Restenneth thus represents a unique case study for the construction of false historical narratives that have become embedded within the national canon.

As the object of early antiquarian enquiry, producing a rich record of literary and artistic descriptions and representations, Restenneth is an excellent example of the early development of heritage values based on aesthetic and artistic as well as historical grounds.

## 2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

### 2.1 Background

The ruins of Restenneth Priory have been the focus of enquiry and debate since the 'discovery' of the ruins by antiquarians and Romantics in the 18th century. The lower stages of its tower especially became the focus of 19th and 20th century interest, with some proposing that they were the remains of the oldest datable church building in Scotland, built for a Pictish king by Northumbrian masons in the early decades of the 8th century. This view

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<sup>4</sup> Dilworth 1986; Dilworth 1995.

was based on the writings of the 8th century Northumbrian monk Bede, who referenced such a foundation but did not identify the location of the church.<sup>5</sup>

Before the emergence of this theory, late 17th and 18th century interest was focused on the 12th to 16th century history of the Augustinian priory,<sup>6</sup> but in the mid-19th century the focus shifted when the Rev William Clugston of Forfar advanced a theory of Restenneth's origins in the missionary activities of a late 7th century Roman cleric, St Boniface.<sup>7</sup> In the 1860s, Clugston's idea was further developed by Alexander Penrose Forbes, the Scottish Episcopalian bishop of Brechin, who suggested that what seemed to be archaic stonework in the tower's lowest stage might be a remnant of the 'church of stone in the Roman style' and dedicated to St Peter, that Bede claimed was commissioned by the Pictish King Naiton mac Der-Ilei in the 710s.

The Peter dedication, coupled with the apparently ancient fabric in the tower, had drawn antiquarian attention to the possible significance of the site by the 1820s.<sup>8</sup> In 1868, Bishop Forbes started correspondence on this topic with John Stuart, secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and sparked the beginning of modern archaeological and historical discourse over Restenneth. Stuart's research was published posthumously in 1890 and set the benchmark for the next century of analysis,<sup>9</sup> with the Boniface-St Peter's-Restenneth thesis reaching its climax in the mid-20th century in the work of William Douglas Simpson.<sup>10</sup>

The long-contested identification of Restenneth with the Pictish church built for King Naiton was challenged successfully in academic circles through the 1992 publication of the forensic examination of the Boniface/Curadán legend by Aidan Macdonald and expanded by Macquarrie in his detailed analysis of the *Aberdeen Breviary* and its sources.<sup>11</sup> Macdonald's work suggested instead that Boniface's mission was centred on Rosemarkie in the Black Isle, where the late 7th or early 8th century monastery and later cathedral was also dedicated to St Peter and where there was a well-established cult of St Boniface or Curadán. This reinterpretation made little headway in popular histories, despite the overturning of the traditional geography of Pictland through the research of Alex Woolf and James Fraser.<sup>12</sup> This work has argued that the heartland of Naiton's kingdom of *Fortriu* lay in the district around the inner reaches of the Moray Firth and not in Angus and eastern Perthshire, but has not quite

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<sup>5</sup> Bede, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Spottiswode 1734; Bruce 1793.

<sup>7</sup> Clugston 1845.

<sup>8</sup> Jamieson 1822.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart 1890.

<sup>10</sup> Simpson 1935, 1952, 1963, 1969.

<sup>11</sup> Macdonald, 1992; Macquarrie, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Woolf, 2006, 2007; Fraser 2009.

broken the antiquarian linkage between King Naiton, St Boniface and Restenneth. Despite the revision in academic understanding, as any internet search will reveal, an 8th century Pictish origin for the church of St Peter at Restenneth remains anchored in popular narratives.

As a consequence of the misdirected focus on the myth of 8th century origins, the actual surviving historical record for Restenneth has been neglected until recently.<sup>13</sup> Remarkably, this has meant that the probably late 11th century foundation of the church by King Malcolm III has been overlooked and its eventual conversion into an Augustinian priory-cell largely ignored. This is just one aspect of the lack of research into the Scottish Augustinians in general until the early 21st century. But research by Veitch and Duncan in particular started to throw new light on the early years of the Order in Scotland and especially on the transition of some pre-existing communities of clergy into Augustinian canons.<sup>14</sup> Restenneth can now be added to the list of Augustinian monasteries, like **St Andrews**, **Loch Leven**, **Monymusk** or **Inchaffray**, that evolved from older establishments.

Historical understanding of this period of reform within the Scottish church is shaped largely by the surviving records and buildings of the continental monastic orders, like the Augustinians, Benedictines and Cistercians, who were introduced to Scotland by its kings and queens from the late 11th century.<sup>15</sup> That Restenneth was initially not a monastery, but a church served by secular clerics, yet still enjoyed the patronage of kings who otherwise promoted the incoming orders, underscores the greater complexity within the reform process than the traditional narratives of displacement of older, native forms to make way for the new orders have presented.

Although never on a par in terms of wealth or political influence with great abbeys like **Arbroath**, **Melrose** or **Holyrood**, Restenneth continued to be a direct recipient of royal patronage into the middle of the 14th century. This continued relationship with the kings of Scots is apparently very unusual for a community that was only ever a dependency of a more significant monastery, **Jedburgh Abbey**. As a consequence of its close relationship with the 12th and 13th century Scottish royal house and, from the 1310s with their Bruce successors, Restenneth was strongly associated with the Bruce party during the Wars of Independence.

That importance waned on the failure of the senior line of the Bruces and the accession of the Stewarts, who lacked any close ties with either Restenneth particularly or Angus in general. It is likely that there had been no resident monastic community at Restenneth for some decades before Scotland's Protestant Reformation settlement of 1560, but its church continued to serve as the parish church of nearby Forfar into the 1590s.

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<sup>13</sup> Oram and Fawcett, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Veitch, 1999, 2001; Duncan, 2002, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Cowan and Easson 1976.

After the Reformation, the priory lands were used as the basis for a new secular lordship, with elements gradually sold off to various Angus landholders, including in the early 18th century the Dempsters of Dunnichen, who were noted as leading innovators in the era of agricultural Improvement. It was George Dempster's drainage of the enclosing Restenneth Loch and excavation of marl from the drained loch-bed that transformed the physical setting of the priory buildings.

Much of the work to the site since coming into Care has been care and maintenance, involving, for example, the consolidation of masonry and removal of vegetation.

## 2.2 Evidential values

Restenneth Priory has significant evidential value. There is no record of any formal archaeological investigation having been carried out at the priory beyond its partial clearance by William Galloway in the 1870s,<sup>16</sup> and consolidation by the Office of Works after 1919. However, an array of stray artefact finds has been recovered over many years from around the site and portions of worked stone have been identified in nearby boundary walls. The archaeological resource is thus largely undisturbed and has the potential to add considerably to our knowledge. This is enhanced by the survival of good documentary records in various archives.

The clearance and consolidation work included the re-opening of windows and doors, and the removal of some sections of walling. The date of those blockings is not clear, nor is the extent to which their inclusion and subsequent removal has impacted on surrounding fabric.

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<sup>16</sup> Stuart 1890.



Figure 4 Interior of Restenneth Priory chancel in 1874, prior to consolidation and clearance works. © Courtesy of HES



Figure 5: The same view as Figure 4, but after clearance works. Note the removal of walling between the tower and the chancel north wall. © Historic Environment Scotland



Figure 6: A view of the west end of the nave showing the 3 windows blocked up.  
© Angus Council Collections cared for by ANGUSAlive Museums, Galleries and Archives.



Figure 7: View of the west end of the nave showing the 3 windows unblocked  
© Historic Environment Scotland

Significantly, despite its long-standing identification as a Pictish monastery, the site has produced no sculptural remains datable to earlier than the late 11th century. This stands in sharp contrast to neighbouring locations, like **St Vigean's** at **Arbroath**, Kirriemuir, Brechin and, especially, **Aberlemno**, this last site a property of the priory from the twelfth century.

There is above ground evidence for the church King Malcolm III (1057 to 1093) and his son, King Alexander I (1107 to 1124) endowed, which survives in the tower and south wall of the choir. There is the high possibility of buried archaeological evidence for that building and any associated domestic buildings and burials. The date of the first building is of great significance, for it constitutes one of the earliest upstanding examples of mortared masonry in Scotland.

A geophysical survey was carried out at Restenneth Priory in June 2019 using both Resistance and Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) surveys. Both techniques have recorded anomalies within the cloister area which may be associated with the original cloister, though the origin of these anomalies is not clear. Other anomalies detected by both methods were consistent with foundations of walls associated with the Sacristy and the Chapter House / East Range. Within the GPR data a very well-defined anomaly has been recorded which may indicate the southern extension of the east range. Other well defined low resistance anomalies have been recorded in the resistance survey within the Nave and to the north of the Nave, though the origin is unclear. A low response suggests a cut feature like an infilled ditch, and it is possible that they are robber trenches associated with earlier phases of the priory, or they could indicate drains. Additional discrete anomalies of possible archaeological interest have also been recorded by both techniques, although their origin is less clear.

Overall, the survey has expanded our knowledge of the site and confirmed extensive archaeological features to survive undisturbed below ground which significantly adds to its evidential value.

### **Documentary evidence**

Despite long-standing popular tradition that draws on antiquarian and scholarly debates from the later 19th and 20th centuries, no records for Restenneth Priory refer to a history that dates back to the 8th century. The earliest records refer only to benefaction by King Malcolm III (1057 to 1093) and his son, King Alexander I (1107 to 1124).

The importance of the site was enhanced when according to the Dundee-born early 16th century academic, Hector Boece, Alexander I (1107 to 1124) transferred early parchment records from **Iona** to Restenneth.<sup>17</sup> The priory subsequently became the home of Augustinian canons regular, and Malcolm IV (1161 to 62) issued a charter making it a subordinate house of **Jedburgh**, who sent canons there to convert any remaining pre-

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<sup>17</sup> Boece 1522/1825.

Augustinian clerics to their order. One of the sons of Robert I (Bruce), John, was buried within the priory church at Restenneth.<sup>18</sup> This is no doubt one of many graves potentially to be found at the site.

Although there is a long-held and oft-repeated tradition that the records of the priory have been lost, there is a substantial parchment record surviving from which it is possible to reconstruct the property-holding of the priory from the 12th century to the mid-14th century,<sup>19</sup> and a rental of 16th century date that enables these holdings to be mapped.<sup>20</sup>

A rich array of materials in the Vatican archives record the seemingly endless litigation through which rival claimants sought to gain possession of the priory from the later 14th century to the mid-16th century.<sup>21</sup> These records reveal the relationship of the priory to its mother-house at **Jedburgh**, the significant value of the priory's properties, and the relationships and tensions of the canons with the secular community within Angus.

## Objects

Artefacts found at the priory include a silver-gilt thumb ring that was discovered in the ruins some time before 1877 and given to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.<sup>22</sup> A gold and sapphire ring has also been found and is now in the care of Angus Museums.<sup>23</sup> Objects also include a wide range of medieval pottery now in the National Museum of Scotland. All have been of excellent quality, pointing to the material wealth of the community. Their diversity and distribution across the site suggest that there is excellent archaeological potential for confirming the origins of the earlier church on the site, prior to the foundation of the Augustinian monastery, and exploring the material culture and lifestyle of the canons from the 12th to 16th centuries.

There is also a small collection of architectural elements and sculptural fragments in the Historic Environment Scotland collection.<sup>24</sup> They include hood moulds, arch springers and column capitals. Tomb slabs and a stone coffin are also in care.

A stone font from the Priory now resides in the Scottish Episcopalian church of St John the Evangelist, Forfar.

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<sup>18</sup> Penman 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Ratcliff 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Jervise 1861; HMC 1894.

<sup>21</sup> Bliss 1895; Bliss and Johnson 1897; Burns 1976; Dunlop and Cowan 1970; Dunlop and MacLauchlan 1983; Fuller 1994; Fuller 1998; Haren 1998; Kirk, Tanner and Dunlop 1997; Lindsay and Cameron 1934; Macquarrie, Tanner and Dunlop 2017; McGurk 1976; Twemlow 1906; Twemlow 1955.

<sup>22</sup> Anonymous 1878.

<sup>23</sup> [ANGUSalive. Object no. F2000.11. Gold Finger Ring, with Sapphire, Restenneth Priory. 12th – 13th century \(angusalive.adlibhosting.com\)](https://angusalive.adlibhosting.com/object/F2000.11) (accessed 14 October 2025).

<sup>24</sup> For more information on these items, contact [collections@hes.scot](mailto:collections@hes.scot)



Figure 8: the stone font shown at the priory. © Angus Council collections cared for by ANGUSalve Museums, Galleries and Archives



Figure 9: The font on display at St John the Evangelist Church, on a bespoke plinth. © Angus Council collections cared for by ANGUSalve Museums, Galleries and Archives.

## 2.3 Historical values

*A full summary of historic events is given in Appendix 1.*

Although the surviving primary historical records for the priory are not abundant and certainly far less informative than the rich parchment records for Brechin and especially for **Arbroath**, the material enables the construction of a broad narrative account that traces the place of the priory and its residents through some of the key episodes in Scotland's national history. Recent re-evaluation of the remains has presented a coherent, record-based account and identified areas for further research.<sup>25</sup>

The traditional narrative of foundation c.710 by Naiton mac Der-Ilei (Nechtan), king of the Picts, who according to Bede had written to Ceolfrid, Abbot of Wearmouth asking for instruction in the Roman faith and assistance to build stone churches, can now be set aside. The mission of St Boniface, to whom Restenneth's foundation is ascribed traditionally, can be shown to have centred more likely on Rosemarkie and the political and cultural centres of the Pictish kingdom of Fortriu around the inner reaches of the Moray Firth.<sup>26</sup> The persistence of the association with the Picts does provide insight to the development of myth making in narrative histories and their connections to issues of national identity.

### **Royal patronage and the formation of an Augustinian priory**

A church was founded here probably in the last quarter of the eleventh century by King Malcolm III, possibly in association with his wife, St Margaret, underscoring their personal support for the non-Benedictine native ecclesiastical tradition in Scotland. It was further patronised by Malcolm's son, King Alexander I (1107 to 1124) and became the repository of records brought there by him from **Iona**. His brother, King David I (1124 to 1153), continued to support the non-monastic community at Restenneth. In the reign of King Malcolm IV (1153 to 1165), Restenneth became one of the well-documented examples of the conversion of a community of non-monastic priests into a convent of Augustinian canons. The priory thus develops our understanding of the complexity of this period of reform within the Scottish church.

Royal patronage continued down to the later 14th century. Royal gifts made the priory one of the richest religious establishments (after the royal abbey at **Arbroath**) to be founded in Angus, with property spread from the coast to the foothills of the mountains. Restenneth was also patron of the chapel in Forfar and Aberlemno parish church.

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<sup>25</sup> Oram and Fawcett 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Fraser 2009; MacDonald 1992; Woolf 2006; Woolf 2007.

## **Wars of Independence**

Restenneth held an important place in the Scottish Wars of Independence and became closely associated with the Bruce party. This connects the site to both a key figure (King Robert I (the Bruce)) and key period in Scottish history which for many modern Scots is strongly connected to ideas of nationhood and national identity. It was plundered by King Edward I of England and his army, resulting in the loss of records and charters. It was visited on several occasions by King Robert I, used as a refuge by canons displaced from its mother-house at **Jedburgh**, and hosted meetings of the full councils of Scottish monarchs.

King Robert I was a generous patron and chose the site as the burial for his young son, Prince John.

## **Post-Reformation**

The development of ecclesiastical sites following the Reformation of 1560 is also demonstrated by the site. Restenneth became the property of the Hume family and then passed from them to the Erskines, for whom its lands were transformed into a secular lordship. It was owned in the mid-18th century by 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. Additionally, he was a leading agricultural 'Improver' whose dredging of the Loch of Restenneth for marl to use as fertiliser created the sunken landscape around the priory that we see today. This connects the site to a transformative period in Scottish economic developments of the 18th century.

## **2.4 Architectural and artistic values**

Restenneth's building remains represent the best surviving example from Scotland of an Augustinian priory-cell layout, with the full plan of the church and cloister visible. It is in this that the primary architectural value of the site lies.

The traditional association with a Pictish king led to the now discounted theory that the arched doorway and lowest stage of walling on the south side of the tower were possibly remains of a Pictish stone church. However, rather than dating from the 8th century, a substantial part of the surviving masonry of the tower and adjoining church (the western third of the south wall of the choir) is of 12th century date. As noted above (2.2 Evidential Value), this has significant value as being evidence for early surviving mortared masonry in Scotland. Much of the masonry of the rest of the choir is of early 13th century date and can be used as an exemplar for the spread of work of this style through eastern Scotland, for example at Brechin

Cathedral and the 13th century church at Logie near Montrose. There has been considerable later re-building of parts of the cloister.<sup>27</sup>

The tower rises 14m excluding the spire. The stonework of the lowest 3m is quite distinct from the upper portions and it is likely to have been a porch at the entrance to a church built in the late 12th century that occupied part of the site of the existing choir. The tower was heightened later in the 12th century, probably to contain bells, and the octagonal splayed-foot spire was probably added in the 15th century. It has round-arched and chamfered windows, projecting from its base that terminate in tall gablets with crocketed finials. The spire itself is finished with an octagonal loop. Inside the north wall of the tower is fixed a late medieval gravestone.

The tower with its variety of architectural styles represents a valuable source not just for the debate about its own date, but also for wider arguments over the dating and historical context of similar monuments across Scotland.

The early 12th century church and tower was taken over as the priory church for the Augustinian community that was planted here around 1160, but it was quickly expanded first with the construction of a new nave to its west and the enlargement of the older choir with an extension eastwards and slight widening towards the north. The alignment of the existing church with the tower emphasises that the tower predates it. The foundations and lowest masonry courses of the nave survive. Although nothing else of the structure remains today, the fact that the nave served as the parish church for Forfar from the mid-12th to later 16th centuries, coupled with the prominent raggle for its roof that is clearly visible in the tower's west elevation, indicate that the western limb of the church was completed, despite traditions to the contrary. The relationship of the nave's foundations to the north wall of the choir indicates that the nave was earlier than the widening and lengthening of the eastern limb.

The lower stages of the tower contains stonework of more than one period, visible especially on its south side. The western archway, which is off-centre to the rest of the tower structure, has clearly been cut through a solid wall and its form is intended to mirror the eastern archway, which is an original feature. This cutting through was done when the nave was added to the west of the earlier church. It appears that the original entrance to the church came through the south doorway into the porch-like area beneath the tower, which linked with the early church through the high archway in the east wall.

Apart from the western third of its south wall, which belongs to the earlier church, and the substantial rebuild visible in the central third of its north wall, the choir is largely of the first half of the 13th century. As the relationship of the south wall to the tower and the clear pitch of the

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<sup>27</sup> Fernie 1986; Oram and Fawcett 2022 for detail.

original roof on the tower's east elevation show, the early church was only slightly wider than the tower before its north wall was removed, and a new wall constructed around 1 m further to the north. This widening meant that in addition to the east and west arches of the tower a narrow passage from the nave to the choir was formed along the north side of the tower.

Although eccentrically placed, it demonstrates that the tower was retained as a conspicuous landmark. The now headless windows of the east end of the choir were tall lancets, which a late 18th century drawing of them in their complete state shows were all of the same height. The north and south walls contain tall, slender lancets with a hood-mould, except for the middle pair of the north side, which were replaced when this section of wall was rebuilt in the 19th century, and the east window on the south side, the head of which was renewed around the same time.

The lower part of the south wall, next to the tower, belongs to the early church. Its upper part was modified in the later 12th century and contains a high, round-arched doorway, (now built up) through which apparently ran the night stair that led to the choir from the canons' dormitory on the upper floor of the east range of the cloister. This portion of the earlier choir was likely retained when the rest of the east limb was rebuilt because the east range of the cloister already butted against it. Within the choir near its east end, on the south side, the piscina sits within a pointed arch and a little to the west of it is the elliptical arched recess that held a probably wooden sedilia for the officiants at the mass. There is an external projection to accommodate this recess in the thickness of the wall. The south wall also contains an aumbry and an arched tomb recess. Slots and checks in the interior of the east gable possibly held supports for a reredos behind the high altar.

Outside the choir on its north side are the remains of a building that projected northwards, possibly a sacristy but also possibly a lateral chapel. Its remains lack architectural features and are too fragmentary to date.

The remains of a chamfered plinth towards the west end of the nave's south wall suggests that it was constructed before the cloister to its south was added. Very little of the cloister remains other than the high inner walls of the south and west ranges; of the east range foundations of the chapter house are visible, including portions of the stone benching. South of this was the parlour and warming house, whose chimney projection can be seen in the foundations of the eastern wall. At the south end of the east cloister walk can be seen the lowest tread of the day stair that provided access to the dormitory, which ran the length of the range at first-floor level. The south range probably housed the refectory and kitchens. The south and west sides survive as lofty walls of uncertain but probably medieval date, as the corbels to support a wall-plate along the wall-head

and the various beam holes beneath them appear to relate to the roof structure of the cloister alleys.

## 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

The priory stands on a low knoll within a picturesque setting of grassland edged with woodland, overlooked from the north-east by the craggy ridge of Turin Hill. Trees screen the priory from the nearby roads and from a large area of gravel-extraction to the south. The knoll was originally a peninsula projecting into Restenneth Loch, whose waters were drained in the 18th century and its loch-bed dug out to extract marl for use as agricultural fertiliser. This gives the site a greater sense of elevation than it had in the Middle Ages.

The 'picturesque' location has attracted artists since the later 18th century. The priory ruins have been described by antiquarians and travellers, including Richard Pococke, bishop of Meath and Thomas Pennant, and appear in numerous drawings and engravings, including representations by George Hutton and Francis Grose.<sup>28</sup>

Restenneth Library, built in 1972 to house the Hunter Library and archives of the Hunters of Burnside, and now home to the Angus Council Archives, offers a fine vantage point from which to admire the priory and its setting.

There are several interesting fragments of medieval grave-slabs and high-quality though badly decayed, post-Reformation burial monuments within the choir and around the priory buildings. Some of these appear to relate to the priory's three-decade 'afterlife' as the first post-Reformation parish church for Forfar

## 2.6 Natural heritage values

The site itself is amenity grassland, considered to be of little interest to wildlife. It contains no animal or plant species considered to be of particular significance. However, Restenneth Moss, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, lies a short distance to the north and east of the elevated ground occupied by the priory ruins. The Moss, which is largely covered by willow, hazel, birch and alder carr, reeds and other wetland plants, is an important wetland habitat and is richly biodiverse. It is important also as an example of a regenerated wetland infill of a drained loch-bed that was excavated to remove marl in the second half of the 18th century.<sup>29</sup> A bat roost was recorded here in 1993.

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<sup>28</sup> Kemp 1887; Pennant 1776; Grose 1797.

<sup>29</sup> [NatureScot. Restenneth Moss SSSI \(1346\) \(sitelink.nature.scot\)](#) (accessed: 17 October 2025).



### 3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

Geophysical survey in 2019 expanded our understanding of the site but also raised new questions about the form and layout of the cloister buildings and the structures to the north of the choir.<sup>31</sup> A lack of archaeological excavation has severely limited knowledge of the extent of the priory's core group of buildings and extent of or relationship to any outer precinct and gatehouse. The absence of invasive archaeological investigation has ensured that any remains that could belong to an earlier ecclesiastical foundation remain unknown.

Although the 8th century Pictish origin for the church has been disproven, there was a pre-Augustinian church at Restenneth from the later 11th century. We have only fragmentary understanding of what happened to it between its foundation and the establishment of the Augustinian community there.

A possible re-used, undecorated recumbent gravestone of 11th or early 12th century type employed as a foundation for the south-east buttress of the choir in the mid-13th century is a potential indication of a more extensive early cemetery around the east end of the headland occupied by the priory ruins. That hypothesis requires testing.

We currently lack full measured drawings of the collection of carved stones of 12th to 18th century date gathered under the tower. A proper survey of this material would permit identification of components from now lost structures, including the cloister arcade.

There are only two modern PhDs that investigate the early establishments of the Augustinian order in Scotland and the nature of their land estate portfolios.<sup>32</sup> There has been no published study of the operations of Augustinian priory cells, despite their prominence (**Jedburgh** had three: Restenneth, Blantyre and Canonbie; **Holyrood** had St Mary's Isle; and **St Andrews** had **Lochleven**, Monymusk and, ultimately, Pittenweem). The record base of Restenneth suggests that it is possible to recover a detailed record of the interaction between these communities and their mother-houses, and between canons based in these houses and the families of their original patrons and the wider local community.

We have only limited understanding of the immediately pre-Reformation state of the priory and extent of its functional buildings. This includes a lack of understanding of the arrangements for the continued use of parts of the priory church into the 1590s as the parish church for Forfar. Archaeological investigation of the nave area and approach from the north-west might help to resolve some of these questions. Further detailed investigation of

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<sup>31</sup> Ovenden 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Veitch 1999; Ratcliff 2013.

the post-Reformation parish records for Forfar might also help resolve uncertainties over this last phase in its ecclesiastical use.

The dating of visible phases of work in the priory tower remains uncertain, despite decades of research seeking to prove or disprove a possible 8th century date for the lowest stage in the south side. That focus has resulted in a lack of research relating to the dating of the upper parts of the tower. A detailed architectural survey of the ruins, including photogrammetry and measured drawings of the elevations would provide a basis for further research.

We do not have the precise location of the burial of Prince John.

## 4. 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); Scottish Episcopalian church of St John the Evangelist, Forfar (possesses the font from Restenneth priory); **St Andrews Cathedral-priory** (the bishops of St Andrews were diocesans for Restenneth and closely involved in the development of the priory); Monymusk Priory (a significant pre-Augustinian community converted into an Augustinian priory, with surviving medieval church); Brechin Cathedral (important pre-twelfth-century monastic centre and bishopric from mid-twelfth century, with strong architectural similarities between the choirs at both Brechin and Restenneth); **Holyrood Abbey, Cambuskenneth Abbey and 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); Glamis Castle (the bulk of the surviving record materials for the priory are in the archives of the Earls of Strathmore and Kinghorn held there).

## 5. KEYWORDS

Church; Augustinian canon; Priory; tower; **Jedburgh Abbey**; King Malcolm III; King Alexander I; King David I; King David II; King Malcolm IV; King Robert Bruce; Prince John; George Dempster of Dunnichen; Wars of Independence; antiquarians; Alexander Penrose Forbes; John Stuart.

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## Further Resources

Trove ID: 33745

Trove Site Number: NO45SE 10

NGR: NO 48222 51600

Trove entry: [www.trove.scot/place/33745](http://www.trove.scot/place/33745)

Scheduling Description accessible at: [SM90246, Restenneth Priory \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](http://SM90246.portal.historicenvironment.scot)

Historic Environment Scotland – Scottish Charity No. SC045925

Principal Office: Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH

Restenneth Priory 25

A number of artefacts from Restenneth Priory are held within the National Museums of Scotland collections and Angus Archives and Museum collections. The National Museums of Scotland collections database can be searched via: [NMS, Search our collections \(nms.ac.uk\)](https://nms.ac.uk); and the Angus Archive and Museum collections database can be searched via: [ANGUSalive, Angus Archive and Museum Collections Online \(angusalive.adlibhosting.com\)](https://angusalive.adlibhosting.com)

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX I: TIMELINE

- **Circa 1070 to 1093:** King Malcolm III probably founds the church of Restenneth on the lands of the royal estate centred on Forfar.
- According to late medieval tradition, Alexander I (1107 to 1124) transfers the parchment records of **Iona** to the church at Restenneth.
- King David I (1124 to 1153) grants the church of Restenneth income from **Montrose** for the lights of the altar and the support of its clergy.
- **Circa 1159:** King Malcolm IV (1153 to 1165) starts the reform of the church at Restenneth and, by his grant (confirmed in 1161) provides for it to become a house of Augustinian canons under the oversight of **Jedburgh Abbey**, whose dependency it became.
- **1243:** Bishop David de Bernham of St Andrews consecrates the church at Restenneth, probably marking the completion of the expanded chancel.
- **March 1290:** an un-named prior of Restenneth appends his seal to the Scottish ratification of the Treaty of Salisbury and letters agreeing the marriage of the Maid of Norway to the future Edward II of England.
- **August 1296:** Robert, prior of Restenneth, submits to the overlordship of Edward I of England at Berwick-upon-Tweed.
- **1303:** apparently extensive damage caused to the priory buildings (including the stripping of lead from its roofs) and loss of its early parchment records, possibly associated with the English siege of nearby Brechin Castle.
- **1305:** the prior of Restenneth is granted a writ by Edward I to cut oaks from the royal forest of Platar near Forfar to make repairs.
- **June 1317:** King Robert I (the Bruce) is resident for the first time at the priory, possibly for the burial of his stillborn child.

- **February 1318:** King Robert's second known visit to Restenneth.
- **1321:** King Robert orders an inquest into the priory's property and rights, to replace its lost parchment records.
- **May 1326:** King Robert and Queen Elizabeth at Restenneth for the burial there of the elder of their infant twin sons, John.
- **Circa 1333 to 1340s:** canons from **Jedburgh** driven from their abbey by Anglo-Scottish warfare take refuge at Restenneth.
- **18 June 1342:** following his return from exile in France, King David II holds a full council of his nobles and clergy at the priory
- **10 June 1344:** David II grants the priory a full confirmation of its lands and privileges and extends their income to the second teinds of all royal lands in Angus.
- **January 1369:** David II pays his final known visit to Restenneth (the last royal visit the priory ever received).
- **15th century:** repeated and protracted litigation between rival claimants to the priorate of Restenneth.
- **1465:** priory said to be in a ruinous condition and 'devoid of all canons'.
- **May 1476:** Pope Sixtus IV attempts to unite the priory and its resources perpetually to the *mensa* (the properties from which the abbot was supported in his office) of the abbot of **Jedburgh**. Possible withdrawal of canons from Restenneth.
- **October 1486:** hearing held in the chapel of St James at Forfar concerning disputed rights to income from Restenneth between William Rutherford, prior of Restenneth, and David Stewart 'pensionar of Restenneth' and priest of Aberlemno. Rutherford restores monastic life at the priory.
- **1501:** James IV attempts to have the Priory and its revenues (valued at £120) annexed to the Chapel Royal, Stirling. At that date, it was claimed there were only two resident canons, but the revenues could have sustained at least four more.
- **1509:** James IV secures the dissolving of the union to the Chapel Royal and papal agreement for its 'restoration' to the Archbishop of St Andrews, James's illegitimate son, Alexander Stewart.
- **1523:** priory re-united with the abbatial *mensa* at **Jedburgh** and passes into the hands of the Home family.
- **post-1523:** no evidence for continued residence of canons at Restenneth.

- **1560:** with the Reformation, Restenneth Priory and its lands were confirmed in the hands of the Homes.
- **1591:** following a petition from the burgesses of Forfar, the priory church ceased to function as the parish church of Forfar. Restenneth's formerly dependent chapel of St James in Forfar becomes the burgh's parish church.
- **1593:** Andrew Home, commendator of Jedburgh, confirmed in possession of Restenneth for life.
- **1606:** following Home's death, Restenneth reverted to the crown but was erected into a temporal lordship and free barony for Thomas Erskine, Viscount Fenton (a grandson of the 4th Earl of Home), subsequently Earl of Kellie, by an act of Parliament, later confirmed by a charter of 1614.
- **1623:** Erskine installs George Fletcher of Ballinshoe as the first of a succession of tenants in possession of the priory lands and buildings.
- **Circa 1682:** Angus antiquarian and topographer, John Ochterlony of Guynd, publishes the earliest known description of the priory ruins.
- **1693:** William Hunter of Burnside is listed as the owner of Restenneth, who uses part of the priory as a family burial place.
- **Circa 1700:** Restenneth is purchased by the Dempsters of Dunnichen, who transform part of the chancel into a burial place for the family. George Dempster later drains the loch around the priory for its marl.
- **1734:** publication of John Spottiswood's account, describing the relationship with Jedburgh and the condition of the buildings.
- **1760:** antiquarian and traveller Richard Pococke, bishop of Meath, visits and describes Restenneth during his tour of Scotland.
- **1772:** Thomas Pennant visits and describes Restenneth during his second tour around Scotland.
- **1790:** Irish lexicographer, traveller, draughtsman and antiquarian Francis Grose visited, described and drew the priory ruins.
- **1796:** a plan of the priory shows the church in ruins.
- **1843:** Rev William Clugston's *New Statistical Account* entry sets out the suggested origins of Restenneth as a foundation of St Boniface in the early eighth century.
- **1868:** Bishop Alexander Penrose Forbes visits the ruins and writes to John Stuart, Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, with suggestion that the tower might contain re-used stones from St Boniface's early church. Stuart endorses Forbes's view and becomes

a leading proponent of deeper investigation of the ruins, although his detailed research is not published until 1890/1, long after his death in 1877.

- **1870s:** following John Stuart's research, he persuades the owner of the priory, George Hawkins Dempster of Dunnichen, to make some repairs to the spire and secures permission for the eminent architect/archaeologist William Galloway to undertake clearance and recording work at the ruins, while further restorations are made to the fabric of the remaining buildings.
- **1919:** Colonel Reginald Hawkins Hall-Dempster and The Commissioners of Works agree guardianship for the priory. A campaign of repair and consolidation is initiated.
- **1996:** Ownership of the priory changes. The new owners enter into a new guardianship agreement with the Secretary of State for Scotland (now Scottish Ministers).