STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KELSO 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.

KELSO ABBEY

SYNOPSIS

The monument comprises the fragmentary remains of Scotland's senior foundation for the Tironensian order. It was founded by the future David I at Selkirk before 1113, and relocated by him to Kelso in 1128, after his becoming king. It served as a parish church as well as an abbey, and continued to serve the people of Kelso after the Protestant Reformation (1560). It was finally abandoned in the 1770s when a new parish church was built close by.

The abbey church was built on a double-cross plan that was unique in Scotland. The upstanding remains comprise the western two bays of the south nave arcade wall, the two western transepts and crossing, and the greater part of a full-height west vestibule. A vaulted outer parlour adjacent to the SW transept is the only upstanding relic of the cloister buildings. Archaeological excavations have indicated that the nave was probably six bays long. Part of the east cloister, and the infirmary to the SE of the church, have also been discovered in excavation; these are on land beyond the property in care.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- c.1106 - the Tironensian order, one of the smaller reformed Benedictine orders, is founded by Bernard of Ponthieu at Tiron, near Chartres.
- c.1113 - the abbey is founded at Selkirk by the future David I, making it the first house for any of the reformed religious orders anywhere in the British Isles. Together with David's re-establishment of **Glasgow Cathedral** c.1114, the foundation at Selkirk is the clearest expression of the future king's aspirations for the Scottish Church.
- 1128 - the Selkirk community is relocated by David I to Kelso, probably to be closer to his main royal castle, at Roxburgh, directly across the River Tweed.
- 1152 - enough of the church is complete for David's heir, Prince Henry, Earl of Northumberland, to be buried therein.
- 1165 - the abbot is granted the right to wear the bishop's mitre, the first head of a Scottish monastic house to be granted that right.
- 1243 - the church is dedicated by the bishop of **St. Andrews**. Since this was just one of numerous dedications aimed at ensuring that all churches in his diocese were fittingly consecrated, it may have no direct relationship with the building history. However, the architectural evidence suggests that it had not long been finished.
- 1303 - the abbey is attacked by the army of Edward I of England, the first of numerous attacks recorded during the abbey's existence.
- 1460 – the young James III is crowned in the abbey following his father James II's untimely death at the siege of English-held Roxburgh Castle.

- 1517 - a detailed description of the abbey is written by a priest, John Duncan. His description, now in the Vatican Archives, greatly amplifies our understanding of the appearance of the sprawling abbey precinct, including details of the abbey church and its internal arrangements.
- 1523 - an English attack causes considerable damage to the abbey fabric.
- 1545 - yet another English attack results in an abortive attempt to turn the abbey into a fortified place.
- 1559 - the abbey church is probably cleansed by Protestant Reformers.
- 1560 - after the Protestant Reformation, the western part of the nave continues in use as the parish church.
- 1607 - the abbey estates are erected into a temporal lordship for Robert Ker, future earl of Roxburgh. Ker's forebears had been commendators (administrators) of the abbey since 1507. His descendants, the dukes of Roxburghe, are still the owners.
- 1648 - a more compact vaulted church is formed within the west crossing, with a vaulted town gaol above it.
- 1773 - the congregation moves to a new parish church (Kelso Old) close by, and the abbey church is abandoned.
- 1805-16 - the post-Reformation kirk and gaol in the west crossing are demolished.
- 1823 - the first repairs of the abbey church are carried out.
- 1869 - Robert Rowand Anderson supervises the last of the major repairs.
- 1919 - the upstanding remains are placed in state care.
- 1933 - the Roxburghe Memorial Cloister (not in state care), designed by Reginald Fairlie, is built over part of the west cloister range to serve as a mausoleum for the dukes and duchesses of Roxburghe.
- 1971 - excavations immediately outside the area in state care discover evidence for the junction between the east end of the nave and the east transeptal crossing. However, the remains are so scanty that the possibility of taking a larger area into care is discounted.

Archaeological Overview

- Some clearance work was undertaken following its taking into state care in 1919.
- The building of the Roxburghe Memorial Cloister probably resulted in the destruction of archaeological evidence for the west cloister range.
- Excavations in 1971 found evidence for the likely position of the east transeptal crossing and the east cloister range.
- Excavations in 1975 in the manse garden to the SE of the abbey church located the infirmary and its kitchen, as well as a length of the main drain and other deposits. These remains were more intact than those located in the church in 1971, and suggest that the archaeological potential of the sprawling abbey precinct is likely to be very high. The exception will be the former monastic graveyard to the north of the abbey church, which has for long been the town's graveyard.

<u>Architectural/Artistic Overview</u>

- John Duncan's description of 1517 provides an account of the complete plan of the church as it then appeared, together with details of its internal arrangement, fixtures and furnishings. In addition, Duncan describes the once sprawling cloister area and surrounding precinct (much of which is not in state care).
- The information relevant to the church is:
    (i) It was laid out with a double-cross plan, with two crossing towers;
    (ii) The main body had aisles on each side;
    (iii) A rood screen separated the monks' choir from the nave;
    (iv) There were at least twelve altars in addition to the high altar;
    (v) The sacristy was on the south side of the choir;
    (vi) The cemetery, which was enclosed by walls, lay to the north.
- The plan of Kelso is ultimately indebted to a series of major Carolingian and Ottonian churches having double transepts built within the Holy Roman Empire in the 9th/11th centuries.
- On the basis of Duncan's description, and surviving structural evidence, the church was laid out on a double-cross plan, probably with an aisle-less presbytery, an aisled choir, aisle-less eastern transepts, an aisled nave, aisle-less west transepts, and an aisle-less west vestibule. The NW transept housed the principal public entrance to the church, with an upper chamber above the doorway itself.
- It is likely that the presbytery, choir, east transepts, nave arcades and lower parts of the west transepts and vestibule were built rapidly during the first building campaign. The upper storeys of the west parts were evidently built later, layer by layer, with the west tower perhaps only completed in the early 1200s.
- The earliest surviving remains are the two bays of the south nave arcade, which cannot date from long after 1128, judging by the massive, basically cylindrical piers which support them. The engaged shafts carrying the springing of the aisle vaults and the arcade's inner-arch are paralleled at Ely and Peterborough Cathedrals.
- Above the nave arcade the triforium and clearstorey are treated as continuous arcades of small arches in front of wall passages. The rhythm of those arches pays no regard to the spacing of the arches above or below them. The single shafts and scallop- or water-leaf caps of the triforium are probably c.1160, whilst the clustered-shaft piers and water-leaf or crocket caps of the clearstorey are likely to be c.1175. The treatment of the upper storeys as separate layers of arcading, not seen at any other major Scottish church, is akin to St John's, Chester.
- The lower walls of the transepts date to the same phase of building as the nave. The NW transept façade preserves its doorway, which served as the main lay entrance to the church and where marriage ceremonies would have been conducted. The small chamber above the doorway, lit by five open narrow lancets through which sound could travel, may well have provided accommodation for a choir, eg, at Wells and Salisbury Cathedrals.
- Of the crossing tower only the south and west sides survive. It originally rose one-and-a-half storeys higher than the surrounding roofs. The tower, with its

trio of evenly-spaced equal-height lancets, is of interest as providing the most likely model for a series of towers built from the later 15th century (eg, **Glasgow Cathedral**, **Jedburgh Abbey** and St Mary's, Haddington).

- The west face of the vestibule was the frontispiece to the church. It housed the great processional doorway and a high window set above, flanked by blind arcading. The angles of the façade are surmounted by impressive octagonal turrets. As with the transept gables, the façade had a large circular window.
- Of the monastic buildings all that remains above ground is the outer parlour of the cloister adjoining the SW transept. This is a barrel-vaulted chamber with intersecting arcading on the north, south and east walls. The west entrance incorporates a doorway taken from elsewhere in the abbey after the Reformation.

Social Overview

- The abbey does not appear to have any intrinsic associations, other than as the burial aisle of the dukes of Roxburghe.
- The abbey is still an integral part of Kelso's civic life (eg, it forms the frontispiece to the town's website).
- The abbey is primarily a recreational and tourist attraction. It occasionally serves as a dramatic background for photographs, etc.

Spiritual Overview

- The abbey is a testament to David I's early ambitions for a revitalised Church in his kingdom.
- The abbey remained a favoured royal monastery throughout its existence. It was where in 1152 David I buried his only son and heir, Henry, earl of Northumberland, the father of Malcolm IV and William I. James III was crowned there in 1460, following his father James II's tragic death at nearby Roxburgh Castle. The Tironensians enjoyed much royal favour. William I, for instance, invited them to found a daughter-house, **Arbroath Abbey**, where he himself was buried.
- The abbey church most likely served as the parish church from the outset, and continued as such after the Protestant Reformation of 1560 until its abandonment in the 1770s.
- The present-day ruin, set within its railed enclosure scattered about with gravestones, is still perceived as a spiritual place.
- The SW transept and the Roxburghe Memorial Cloister are the burial places of the dukes and duchesses of Roxburghe, the principal landowners in the area.

Aesthetic Overview

- Although what survives is but a small fragment of the original complex, it is nevertheless widely recognised as forming a pleasingly-grouped series of elements, with a tower rising from within three arms of equal scale. The figurative elements of Kelso - its pleasing repetition of circular and semi-circular elements, set within vertical and horizontal lines - are aided by the uniform

grey-coloured sandstone from which it is wrought. In its prime, the abbey must have been one of the most impressive structures in Scotland.

- It is a sign of the high value placed on the abbey remains that positive efforts to ensure its continued preservation began to be made from the early 1800s, when appreciation of medieval architecture was only just beginning to take root.
- Although the abbey lies on the periphery of the town's historic core, it is closely hemmed in to north and west and is therefore largely inconspicuous from it. The ruins are enclosed by iron railings. On its west side lies a modern road. To the NE lies an attractive old graveyard, studded about with mature trees, and the charming octagonal late 18th-century Old Parish Church.
- The towering superstructure of the abbey is more visible from outside the town, particularly from across the River Tweed to the west. This is the viewpoint most favoured by artists from the late 1600s, and which continues to provide artistic inspiration.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What was the overall form and appearance of the monastic precinct in general, and of the eastern arm of the abbey church in particular?
- How did the Tironensians at Kelso interact with their brethren elsewhere, particularly their mother house at Tiron?
- Where is the burial place of Prince Henry, Earl of Northumberland (died 1152)?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Kelso Abbey was the first house of the reformed monastic orders to be built anywhere in the British Isles.
- The plan of the abbey church is highly unusual, rare in Britain and without parallel in Scotland.
- The abbey was pivotal to the reorganisation of the Scottish Church in the 12th century.
- The abbey's architectural remains are important for the understanding of cultural inter-relationships between Scotland, England and Europe in the high Middle Ages.

Associated Properties

(other linked local sites) - Kelso Old Parish Church; Roxburgh Castle; Roxburgh burgh (site of); Floors Castle (ancestral seat of the dukes of Roxburghe).

(the other Border abbeys) – **Dryburgh; Jedburgh; Melrose.**

(other Tironensian houses) - **Arbroath Abbey; Kilwinning Abbey;** Lindores Abbey; Lesmahagow Priory; St Dogmael's Abbey (Pembrokeshire, Wales); Caldey

Priory (Pembrokeshire); Pill Priory (Dyfed, Wales); Thiron (mother house of the order in the Ile-de-France); Hambye (Normandy).

Keywords

Romanesque, Tironensian, David I, nave, transept, cloister, parlour, Roxburghe

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