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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DUNDRENNAN ABBEY



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DUNDRENNAN ABBEY

SYNOPSIS

Dundrennan Abbey is situated in the village of Dundrennan, 4½ miles SE of Kirkcudbright. Founded c.1142 by Fergus, lord of Galloway, perhaps with King David I's support, it was settled by Cistercian monks most probably coming from Rievaulx, Yorkshire, the northern English missionary headquarters of the order. Unfortunately, no cartulary (register) survives for the monastery and its active history is largely unknown. It is most famous for its association with Mary Queen of Scots, who reputedly spent her last night on Scottish soil (15 May 1568) as guest of the abbey's commendator, Edward Maxwell.

The physical remains are considerable and of great beauty. Of the church, substantial portions survive of the later 12th-century east end, particularly the two transepts, and the early 13th-century west end of the nave. The quadrangular cloister on the south side of the nave is reasonably entire on plan but substantially ruined; the best preserved part is the east range, where the eye is drawn to the fine entrance front of the mid-13th-century chapter house. Among the ruins are preserved numerous fine monuments, including a stone effigy reputedly of Alan, lord of Galloway, and a rather gruesome one of a murdered abbot, his disembowelled assassin depicted at his feet.

Dundrennan Abbey has the distinction of being among the first 'ancient monuments' taken into state care, in 1840-1 by the short-lived Commissioners of Woods and Forests, forerunner of the Office of Works and Historic Scotland. Clear evidence of the substantial repair and conservation of the upstanding masonry carried out around this date survives in the present fabric.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

1098 – The Cistercian order of monks is formed at Cîteaux, France, by St Robert of Molesme.

1131/2 – the Cistercians establish a house at Rievaulx (Yorks), the first in northern England and set up to become a mission centre for the order in the colonisation of northern England and Scotland.

1136 – King David I brings the Cistercians to Scotland, settling them at **Melrose Abbey**.

c.1142 – Fergus, lord of Galloway, with David I's support, founds a house for Cistercian monks at Dundrennan. The founding brethren are probably brought from Rievaulx. The abbey acquires substantial estates in Galloway as well as County Meath, Ireland. Sylvanus becomes the first abbot.

1164 – St Ailred, abbot of Rievaulx, visits Dundrennan and notes that construction of the conventual buildings had only lately been started.

1167 – Sylvanus is elected to the abbacy of Rievaulx.

1191/2 – Fergus's grandson, Roland, lord of Galloway, establishes a Cistercian abbey at Vallis Lucis (**Glenluce**). The founding brethren are brought from Dundrennan.

1234 – Alan, lord of Galloway, dies and is buried in the abbey church.

1239 – Richard, prior of **Melrose**, is appointed abbot. In 1243 he borrows the *Melrose Chronicle* from his former institution, and it is possible that he was its author during his time at **Melrose** (1234-9).

1273 – Alan's daughter, Dervorgilla, lady of Galloway, founds the abbey of Dulce Cor (**Sweetheart**), the last of the eleven Cistercian houses established in Scotland.

c.1290 – according to the Italian merchant, Francesco Pegolotti, Dundrennan and **Glenluce** are producing some of the best wool for export of any monastery in Scotland.

1296 – Abbot Walter and the convent swear fealty to Edward I of England, at the outset of the Wars of Independence (1296-1356).

1299 – the monks seek £8000 compensation from Edward I for losses incurred during his invasions, including a plea to return 8½ sacks of 'good wool' taken by his army.

1328 – the monks appeal to Edward III of England for the restoration of their estates and revenues in County Meath, Ireland.

1440 – Sibyla, lady of Orcha (Orchardton?), is buried in the south transept. (Her gravestone, the so-called 'Nun's Stone', survives at the west end of the church nave.)

1523 – Abbot James Hay is appointed to the bishopric of Ross and replaced as head of Dundrennan by a commendator (administrator), John Maxwell of Terregles, Lord Herries.

1529 – the abbey buildings are reportedly in a state of collapse.

1541 – Adam Blacadder is appointed commendator by the Crown.

1545 – Adam Blacadder, the prior and nine monks are recorded as being in residence.

1560 – the Protestant Reformation brings monastic life to an end.

1562 – Adam Blacadder dies and is replaced as commendator by Edward Maxwell, son of Lord Herries. A committed Catholic, he refuses to demolish the abbey buildings.

1568 – after defeat at the battle of Langside, Queen Mary stays with Edward Maxwell prior to escaping to England (16 May) by boat from the mouth of the Abbey Burn (now Port Mary). According to a near-contemporary account she stays at Terregles (Dumfriesshire), but she may well have spent her last night in Scotland in Dundrennan, though not necessarily in the abbey itself.

1599 – Edward Maxwell dies and is replaced as commendator by John Murray, groom of King James VI's bedchamber and later earl of Annandale.

1606 – the abbey is erected into a temporal lordship for John Murray.

1621 – the abbey lands are annexed to the Chapel Royal in **Stirling Castle**.

1743 – John Mack and Thomas Kerr, masons, build a new parish church at Rerrick (Rerwick), SE of Dundrennan, to replace the former kirk in the east end of the abbey church. (Note: the building work carried out by Mack and Kerr may be an enlargement of a 17th-century building.)

later 1700s – various early travellers visit Dundrennan, among them Bishop Pococke (1760) and Francis Grose (1791), and collectively bemoan the parlous state of the buildings.

1838 - Lord Selkirk, of St Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, carries out some clearance and repair work.

1839 – Lord Cockburn, judge and antiquarian, visits and describes the dreadful state of the place as 'a humiliating national scandal'. His comments inspire Adam Maitland, owner of Dundrennan, to ask the state to assume responsibility for the ruins under the terms of the 1587 Act of Annexation.

1840 – the Lord Advocate rules that the abbey is indeed Crown Property under the 1587 Act, and the Commissioners of Woods and Forests (later the Office of Works) assume responsibility. A large programme of building conservation is carried through, under the direction of the Commissioners' architect, William Nixon.

1864-6 – a new parish church for Rerrick is built in Dundrennan village. A new manse and minister's stables, to the NW of the ruined abbey, follow in 1874.

1906-14 – excavations directed by Alexander Christie, carried out in the adjacent manse garden, find evidence for the refectory and south end of the west range. The chapter house is also excavated.

1991-4 – archaeological excavations undertaken by Kirkdale Archaeology in the south cloister range find evidence for the warming house, novices' day room, great drain and reredorter.

Archaeological Overview:

Dundrennan Abbey was partially cleared in 1838, as part of a programme of masonry repair and laying out of the ruins by Lord Selkirk. Further clearance work was carried out by the Commissioners of Woods and Forests following the property's transfer into state care in 1840-1. No documentation survives to show the full extent of these excavations, though by analogy with contemporary excavation works elsewhere they are likely to have been confined to rubble clearance and 'wall following'. The Commissioners also demolished the farm steading and stackyard lying immediately to the west of the abbey church.

Excavations in 1906-14 by Alex. H Christie in the adjacent manse garden, to the NW of the cloister (and then beyond the area in state care), reportedly reveal the extent of the remodelled refectory, built on a north-south alignment to replace the original one that ran east-west. The excavations also uncovered the south end of the west range, which was as long as the rebuilt refectory. Further work took place in 1912 in the chapter house, during which more gravestones were discovered.

Most recently, archaeological excavations in 1991-4, directed by Gordon Ewart, in the SE corner of the cloister, exposed, among other features, the lower walls of the reredorter's undercroft and a stretch of the great drain. The finds have been entrusted to the Stewartry Museum, Kirkcudbright.

Undoubtedly, much in the way of archaeological evidence remains to be discovered, both within the property in care and in the immediate surroundings.

Recent work

Work undertaken in 2005 (HSCO-90114-2005-01) saw the excavation of a trench along the western frontage of the Abbey Church and the West Range of the Cloister.

The first section of the trench ran down the centre of the track leading from the metal gates at the south-west corner of the Abbey Church to the old orchard towards the south. Within this trench an architectural fragment of roll moulding, 160mm in length and covered with white render or paint, was recovered. The piece probably originated as part of a window or fireplace.

The second section of the trench ran for 12m through the site of the Narthex. The work revealed a sump of unknown date, covered by a possible grave slab (presumably purloined from the abbey graveyard), as well as a masonry wall stump. This is possibly part of the original build of the Narthex, or simply a remnant of a later buttress.

Work undertaken in 2008 (HSCO-90114-2008-01) relating to the installation of drainage, access ramps and a fence in the vicinity of the Stable Block, revealed a complex sequence of surfaces and periods of levelling. Of particular note was the discovery of a largely intact cobbled surface immediately beneath the topsoil. This appeared in four discrete locations, and this led to the conclusion that its construction was contemporary with that of the Stable Block itself. Beneath the cobbled surface a drain was discovered, running in a westerly direction towards the nearby manse, along with a sherd of green glaze pottery of uncertain date.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

Introduction

The abbey's architectural legacy comprises the partial remains of the church and cloister. These remains, though fragmentary, include outstanding examples of the early Gothic in Scotland. However, the architectural evidence has been compromised by the well-intentioned works of stabilisation and repair carried out in the 1830s and 40s, when it was not appreciated that future techniques of analysis would require that evidence be uncontaminated by such interventions. As a result, any attempt to interpret the architectural evidence is fraught with difficulty, and what follows here must be regarded as provisional.

The church

The church was built to a 'Bernardine' plan, with an aisle-less presbytery, transepts with 3-bay east chapel aisles, and an aisled nave of eight bays. The best surviving parts are the flanks of the west parts of the presbytery, the east walls of the two transepts and the north and west walls of the north transept, and the west wall of the nave, which stands to around one-third of its original height. The north and south walls of the nave survive only as lower walls and excavated foundations, whilst the low crossing tower has gone.

The building as we see it today is an early remodelling of the first stone-built church constructed around the mid-1100s. The latter may have been laid out to a simpler plan, and with more austere detailing, with an aisle-less presbytery, transepts with smaller chapels, and quite possibly an aisle-less nave (judging by the way the plinth course of the north transept seems to make no allowance for turning down the north nave aisle).

This first church was remodelled in the third quarter of the 12th century, possibly as early as the 1170s. This seems to have involved rebuilding the greater part of the

transepts and adding the aisles to the nave. The work reflects the latest ideas in northern English Cistercian architecture, as seen at Roche and Byland, in which ideas of ultimately French inspiration had been anglicised. The most significant features are the three-storeyed east elevations of the transepts, with bundled-shaft piers and chalice caps to the arcades, and small arches (decorative in the north transept and open in the south transept) at gallery level, the latter a departure from original Cistercian practice, which had seen such a feature as 'unnecessary luxury' (Gifford). It seems the initial intention was to vault the presbytery and transepts, but this was evidently abandoned after building the vault over the presbytery and in the course of building the north transept (which was probably the earlier of the two transepts). The vault over the presbytery appears to have been removed later. The round-arched north transept doorway, with crocket caps, was clearly also of this later 12th-century work. The new church was probably completed in the early 1200s with the building of the west end of the nave, on the evidence of the (partly restored) central doorway, with nail-head and pellet decoration to the moulded caps supporting the four orders of its pointed arch.

The church exhibits numerous traces of early Victorian interventions. The most obvious are: (a) the presbytery's north and south doors, the latter a much-restored trefoil head enriched with nail-head ornament re-used presumably from a cloister building; (b) the nave's north and south walls, almost entirely restored in the 1840s, including possibly the 12th-century foliated and moulded caps in the south wall; and (c) the west gable, substantially rebuilt in 1841-3.

The cloister

The cloister, a 31m-square court, lay on the south side of the nave, and was surrounded by the usual three ranges of buildings. The east range, which extended no further south than the outer wall of the south range, had a sequence of: sacristy/library, aisled four-bay chapter house, parlour, and day room or novices' room of three double bays; a reredorter projected eastward from the SE angle of the range. Of the south range, only part of its north wall survives, whilst the west range, consisting of a series of barrel-vaulted cellars at ground level with the remains of spiral stairs giving access to the first floor (now mostly gone), resulted from a wholesale remodelling later in the abbey's existence, probably as the result of the abandonment by the Cistercians of the use of lay-brothers.

Undoubtedly the finest architectural feature surviving is the west façade of the chapter house, rebuilt anew in the central decades of the 1200s. Its finely detailed cinquefoil-headed central doorway and flanking two-light cusped windows are so lavishly enriched with moulded and foliate decoration as to indicate that original Cistercian ideas of architectural restraint had by then been abandoned. The three aisles of the interior were covered by vaulting carried on small filleted octo-foil piers rising from complex water-holding bases.

Another doorway surviving towards the west end of the south range is likely to be of similar date as the chapter house; although not quite so lavishly detailed it has an elegant combination of continuous and shafted orders. This must have been the entrance into the refectory.

Monuments and carved stones

The abbey retains numerous important monuments and a large number of carved stones.

Church: In the north wall of the north transept chapel is a tomb recess holding the now-limbless effigy of a knight, perhaps that of Alan, Lord of Galloway (died 1234). Against the nave's west wall are four fascinating graveslabs, discovered in the chapter house and south transept in the 1840s and erected here in 1888: (a) the 'Abbot's Stone', carved with a recumbent figure of an unknown abbot (possibly 13th century), a dagger plunged into his heart, his feet resting on his disembowelled assassin; (b) the so-called 'Nun's Stone', incised with the figure of a woman (sometimes erroneously interpreted as a nun but more likely a widow under vows) and an inscription translated in 1857 as commemorating the lady of Orchaie (? **Orchardton**) (died 1440) (a cast replica, the original is in the west range vaults); (c) the 'Cellarer's Stone', depicting Patrick Douglas, cellarer at Dundrennan in the late 15th century; and (d) one to Sir William Livingstone of Culter (died 1607), son of one of Queen Mary's faithful servants, decorated with his coat of arms.

Chapter house: In the NW corner a fine slab of blue Tournai marble (?14th century) once mounted with a Flemish brass depicting a knight and his lady. Also graveslabs to former abbots (12th – 14th century), including an elaborate one to Giles (14th century), carved with a central cross, its head enclosed in a ring within which the arms are decorated with traceried panels, its foot on a stepped Calvary, and its sides flanked by (left) a crozier sprouting flowers, and (right) rosettes alternating with fleurs-de-lis.

West range: This houses a large and important array of carved stones recovered from the Victorian clearance work and the archaeological excavations of the 1990s. The highlights are the cusped arch heads from the arcades of the cloister walk. It is proposed that these be redisplayed in the Victorian manse stables to the south of the cloister, recently repaired and reroofed for this purpose.

Cemetery: The cemetery in and around the presbytery houses numerous fine 18th and 19th century tombstones to the dead of Rerrick parish.

Social Overview:

Dundrennan Abbey's chief social role is now as a major heritage attraction in Dumfries & Galloway.

The abbey has become intimately associated in the public's mind with Mary Queen of Scots, who is reputed to have spent her last night on Scottish soil in the commendator's lodgings in the abbey. Whether she did or not seems largely immaterial, for the queen certainly passed the abbey on her way to Abbey Burn Foot, whence she embarked by boat for England.

Despite the abbey's location within the village of Dundrennan, it seems that it plays no significant role in contemporary community life.

Spiritual Overview:

Dundrennan Abbey was the home of a religious community for over 400 years. It was visited by St Ailred of Rievaulx, head of Dundrennan's mother house and one of the great spiritual leaders of the Cistercian Order.

The abbey was an important burial place not just for the monastic community but for the leading nobility and gentry of the region.

The abbey church became a place of worship, and the ground around it a place of burial, for the local lay community in the later medieval period, and continued in use as the parish church long after the Protestant Reformation, quite possibly until 1742.

The abbey has recently been used for weddings and baptisms, but this has now been ended. An annual service is held each August in the abbey church, organised by the local minister and kirk session. (Note: the parish church in Dundrennan has recently been closed and is currently up for sale.)

The abbey church is occasionally the focus of informal worship. Recently, for instance, a party of Polish Cistercian monks visited and held an impromptu act of worship in the abbey nave.

Aesthetic Overview:

Both in its setting and in the quality of its architecture, Dundrennan Abbey is widely acknowledged as one of Scotland's most beautiful monastic ruins. Set within wooded pastures on the lower slopes of the Abbey Burn, the grey sandstone rises up to climax in the imposing walls of the transept and presbytery, which stand virtually to full height.

It is noteworthy that the abbey does not seem to have attracted much early artistic interest. Perhaps this was because of its pre-conserved derelict state. Francis Grose wrote in 1791 that 'it was once both a beautiful and extensive pile, but is now miserably dilapidated'. The clearance and repair works carried out in the early Victorian era certainly gave the ruins a much more acceptable appearance to Victorian tourists.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What form did the conventual buildings take, including the layout of the wider monastic precinct, and how did this change over the 400 years of monastic life? It is doubtful if the archaeological clearance work of the 1830s and 40s did little more than scratch the surface of the underlying archaeology, and much of value remains to be discovered, both about the origins of the monastery and its subsequent development.
- What was the building sequence of the abbey church, and how was the nave designed? Although the Victorian conservation works were considerable, it is possible that a standing building survey may yet shed new light on the development of one of Scotland's most significant and splendid Cistercian monasteries.

- What was the detailed history of the abbey? The lack of a monastic cartulary means we know little about this aspect, but a systematic examination of the associated documentation might yet yield valuable insights. Most importantly, it might well shed light on the abbey's extensive landed interests, in Ireland as well as in Scotland, particularly their granges (sheep farms).

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Dundrennan Abbey was the second house (after **Melrose Abbey**) of the hugely influential and international Cistercian order established in Scotland.
- The upstanding abbey ruins comprise some of the most important and invaluable medieval ecclesiastical architecture surviving in Scotland, enabling us to understand better the architectural transition from Romanesque to Gothic, and the move by the Cistercians themselves away from an austere design philosophy towards a more elaborate one.
- The abbey houses an important collection of monuments and carved stones, including the possible effigy of Alan, lord of Galloway, and a graveslab depicting an assassinated abbot and his murderer.
- The graceful ruins are now intimately associated in the public's imagination with Mary Queen of Scots, who is reputed to have spent her last night on Scottish soil therein.
- The deteriorating abbey remains were an exceptionally early case of a medieval monument being actively conserved and entrusted into state care.

ADDENDA

Associated Properties:

(*other related places*) – **Glenluce Abbey; Orchardton Tower**; Rerrick old parish church; Rievaulx Abbey (Yorks)

(*other medieval monasteries founded by the lords/ladies of Galloway*) – **Glenluce Abbey** (Cistercian); Holywood (Premonstratensian?); **Lincluden Nunnery** (Benedictine); Souseat (Premonstratensian); **Sweetheart Abbey** (Cistercian); **Whithorn Priory** (Premonstratensian)

(*some other major Scottish ecclesiastical buildings incorporating early Gothic architecture*) – **Arbroath Abbey; Holyrood Abbey; Jedburgh Abbey; Kelso Abbey; St Andrews Cathedral**

(*the other Cistercian abbeys in Scotland*) – Balmerino; Coupar Angus; **Culross; Deer; Glenluce**; Kinloss; **Melrose**; Newbattle; Saddell; **Sweetheart**

Keywords:

Cistercian; Gothic; monastery; church; cloister; chapter house; abbot; Fergus lord of Galloway; Mary Queen of Scots

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