



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:  
Designations:

PIC141  
Scheduled Monument (SM90103) Garden  
and Designed Landscape (GDL00145)

Taken into State care:  
Last Reviewed:

1919 (Ownership)  
2011 (2025 update to include Empire  
connections)

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# DRYBURGH 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.



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## DRYBURGH ABBEY

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## SYNOPSIS

Dryburgh Abbey comprises the ruins of a Premonstratensian abbey, founded in 1150 by Hugh de Morville, constable of Scotland. The upstanding remains incorporate fine architecture from the 12th, 13th and 15th centuries. Following the Protestant Reformation (1560) the abbey passed through several secular hands, until coming into the possession of David Erskine, 11th earl of Buchan, who recreated the ruin as the centrepiece of a splendid Romantic landscape. Buchan, Sir Walter Scott and Field-Marshal Earl Haig are all buried here.

While a greater part of the abbey church is now gone, what does remain – principally the two transepts and west front – is of great architectural interest. The cloister buildings, particularly the east range, are among the best preserved in Scotland. The chapter house is important as containing rare evidence for medieval painted decoration. The whole site, tree-clad and nestling in a loop of the River Tweed, is spectacularly beautiful and tranquil.

## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical overview

- Circa 600 – Dryburgh was once believed to be the site of a monastery founded by St Modan, though no evidence exists to support this.
- Circa 1120 – The Premonstratensian order is founded by St Norbert of Xanten, at Premontr , northern France.
- 1150 – Hugh de Morville, lord of Lauderdale and hereditary constable of Scotland, founds Dryburgh Abbey with the help of the abbots of Alnwick and Newhouse (Northumberland).
- 1152 – the founding brethren arrive from Alnwick under their leader, Abbot Roger.
- 1162 – Hugh de Morville dies at Dryburgh Abbey, where he had lately enrolled as a canon.
- 1184/88 – the noted theologian, Adam of Dryburgh, becomes abbot before leaving the order to join the more intensely spiritual Carthusians.
- 1190s – colonies of canons are sent from Dryburgh to Ireland, founding daughter houses at Carrickfergus and Drumcross.

- 1316 – Robert I stays at the abbey briefly, whilst directing attacks on Berwick and Northumberland, but does not honour the abbey with his patronage, as for example, at **Melrose**. By this date, Dryburgh is the least significant of the Border abbeys.
- 1322 – Edward II of England's army plunders and burns the abbey.
- 1385 – Richard II of England's army inflicts further damage on the abbey's fabric, necessitating repairs (for example, the west front of the church).
- 1509 – James IV appoints Andrew Forman, bishop of Moray, as Dryburgh's commendator (administrator).
- 1516 – Abbot Andrew resigns two years after becoming archbishop of St. Andrews. A series of commendators follows.
- 1544 – the earl of Hertford's English army burns the abbey complex and associated township. In 1545 it does the same. By this time, the commendatorship is being held by the Erskine family, who build a new residence (the commendator's house) in the east range.
- 1560 – at the Protestant Reformation just ten canons remain in residence.
- 1600 – David Erskine, commendator, notes that 'all the convent [are] now being decessit'.
- 1604 – David Erskine resigns as commendator, and the abbey and its estates pass fully into the hands of Henry Erskine, Lord Cardross.
- 1786 – having passed through several hands, the abbey is purchased by David Erskine, 11th earl of Buchan, a descendent of Lord Cardross. Buchan, a leading antiquarian and co-founder of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1780, repairs the fabric and makes it the centrepiece of a designed landscape around his new residence, Dryburgh Abbey House (largely destroyed by fire in 1892 and rebuilt). He calls Dryburgh his 'Temple of Caledonian Fame'.
- 1829 – David Erskine is buried in the sacristy.
- 1832 – Sir Walter Scott is buried in the north choir chapel.
- 1928 – Field-Marshal Earl Haig of Bemersyde is buried near to Sir Walter Scott.
- 1919 – the abbey is taken into state care

## Archaeological overview

- In the 1780s the site was cleared of 'rubble' by the earl of Buchan and given significant new planting; this will probably have damaged the underlying archaeology, particularly in the cloister. After 1919 the Ministry of Works carried out further clearance work.
- Recent archaeological work in the vicinity of the east range, for drainage purposes, has demonstrated that significant archaeological deposits lie close to the surface.
- The whole of the complex in care must be deemed to be of high archaeological importance.

## Architectural/artistic overview

### Church

- In plan the church comprised an aisle-less presbytery of three short bays, an aisled choir of two bays, a towered crossing with transepts to north and south, each with east chapel aisles, and a nave of six irregularly spaced bays. A screen wall crossed the nave between the two piers west of the crossing.
- The church survives in fragmentary condition. The most complete parts are: the north transept and adjacent north chapel aisle; the south wall of the south transept; the west front incorporating the west doorway. Lower sections of walling form the remainder.
- The walls of the presbytery are largely reduced to the level below the windows, and are mostly as restored by the earl of Buchan.
- The choir and transepts had three storeys, with a tall arcade, a compressed triforium of simple cusped circles above, and a clearstorey gallery at the top with single-light windows and an arcade of multiple arches. The work suggests a protracted building period - the outer wall and arcades are early 1200s, the cusped circles c.1250s and the clearstorey perhaps of the 1270s.
- The west front, rebuilt to its present form after the 1385 attack, has an impressive central doorway with four continuous orders of mouldings.

### Cloister

- The site of the abbey slopes down from the church southwards to the River Tweed, with the result that the main group of buildings around the cloister were constructed partly on artificial terraces.

- The cloister is on the terrace immediately below the nave. It never had a west range, a feature shared with Premontre and with Alnwick, its mother house.
- The east range is one of the most complete examples of monastic building to survive in Scotland (surpassed only by **Inchcolm Abbey**), and in its primary form dates from the late 1100s. Reading north/south, it comprises: sacristy/library, parlour, chapter house, warming house, slype (vaulted passage giving access from the cloister to the burial ground to the east) and finally a structure interpreted as the novitiate (novices' room). The canons' dormitory would have run the entire length of the upper floor, terminating in the reredorter (latrine block) at the far south end.
- The chapter house is the earliest complete example in Scotland. It is orientated west/east and projects beyond the east wall of the range. Its entrance from the cloister is most impressive, with a Romanesque door the equal of the adjacent south-east processional doorway into the church. Internally, the chapter house has a high barrel vault, and a floor level several metres below the cloister. It has intersecting blind arcading along the east wall, below three pointed windows. There are significant areas of painted decoration, some along the north wall imitating the blind arcading along the east wall.
- The more ruinous south range housed the refectory (raised up over a vaulted undercroft) and kitchen to its west. The most notable feature is the 15th-century twelve-petal rose window high up in the refectory's west wall, similar to that inserted into the west front of **Jedburgh Abbey** around the same time.
- Along the outside of the west wall of the cloister, at some late date, a small building, incorporating three barrel-vaulted cellars, was constructed.
- Immediately south of the south range is the grass-lined great drain that flushed the reredorter at the south end of the east range. A gatehouse forms part of a stone bridge crossing that drain. It survives as a small gabled rectangle with arched gateways on the two main sides and an upper floor. It bears the arms of the Greenlaw and Ker families and is probably of the early 1500s.

## Social overview

- The dominant associations of Dryburgh today are with Sir Walter Scott and Field-Marshal Earl Haig, whose tombs are in the abbey church.

- The memorialisation of Haig links Dryburgh to the British Empire as Haig rose to commanding heights of the military that supported the expansion and perpetuation of the British Empire. As an officer in the British Army he served in Sudan, South Africa, India and was ultimately commander in chief during the First World War. For further information on Properties in Care and the British Empire see [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997](#)
- Otherwise, Dryburgh has little relevance except as a romantically situated ruin. There is some connection with the local community, who derive pride from the property, and there is interaction with local groups, but little interaction with schools.
- The abbey was probably always relatively isolated from centres of population, and that continues to be the case today. The nearby Dryburgh Abbey House, Dryburgh Abbey Hotel and the village of Dryburgh scarcely intrude upon the property.
- The abbey is primarily used for recreation and tourist purposes. More specifically, the abbey is used for a procession on Royal British Legion Scotland Founders' Day (21 June).

### Spiritual overview

- The Premonstratensians were part of a 12th-century reform of the Church, a European cultural phenomenon that found fertile ground in Scotland under David I.
- Dryburgh was founded by Hugh de Morville, lord of Lauderdale and constable of Scotland, and his wife, Beatrice de Beauchamp. Their reasons for patronising the order were principally inspired by the belief that by so doing they would secure their spiritual future after death. Hugh enrolled as a canon at Dryburgh late in life and died there in 1162.
- Dryburgh's *raison d'être* was largely spiritual, though the community did have landed and economic interests. The canons lived according to the *Rule* of St Augustine, and carried out priestly duties locally (for example, saying mass, and preaching).
- Abbot Adam of Dryburgh was an important theological figure in the later 12th century.
- The Premonstratensians (and Augustinians) were replaced in the affections of the public from the 14th century on by the various orders of friars, whose simpler life, lived closer to the centres of population, had wider appeal.



- The abbey continues to have spiritual associations and meaning. People are known to come to the site for spiritual reasons - its history, its tranquillity and the spiritual events that continue to be held there in. The site's spiritual character is specifically mentioned by visitors. The local Christian churches hold an Easter Sunday service in the abbey grounds, and churches from other parts of the UK also hold services from time to time. The abbey is also used by the Royal Arch Masonic Lodge. Wedding ceremonies are increasingly popular. The graveyard to the north of the church continues in use, albeit infrequently.

## Aesthetic overview

- Dryburgh Abbey is naturally beautiful, its pink-red masonry of Upper Old Red Sandstone contrasting wonderfully with the surrounding greenery of the trees and grass.
- A key contribution to the site's aesthetic qualities are the trees, most of them planted by Buchan as part of his naturally sculpted landscape. They include the Dryburgh Yew, one of the hundred Heritage Trees of Scotland. Accompanying the trees is the bird life, which adds noise and movement to the site, as do the rushing waters of the River Tweed. Dryburgh Abbey is described in Historic Scotland's *Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* as 'the ultimate picturesque garden folly'.
- Complementing this Eden-esque idyll are the sensations of the chapter house – including its rare mural painted decoration and its wonderful acoustic.
- Dryburgh nestles amid the rolling Border hills. It is isolated physically from the nearby village, and is enveloped largely by mature parkland. The neighbouring Dryburgh Abbey House and Dryburgh House Hotel give added points of interest to the landscape.

## What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Was there an early Christian predecessor to the medieval abbey?
- What was Dryburgh's history in the 400 years of its existence? In the absence of a cartulary, the documentary record is very poor.
- What was the precise nature and extent of the 11th earl of Buchan's late 18th-century 'Temple of Caledonian Fame'?

## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- Dryburgh Abbey is a fine example of a moderately sized, moderately wealthy monastery which for 400 years pursued a way of life common amongst the religious houses of medieval Scotland, and across western Christendom.
- The painted wall decoration in the chapter house is a remarkably rare survival. In few other medieval monuments in Britain is it possible to speak with authority about the internal decoration of such buildings.
- Dryburgh Abbey has a great significance in the history of the Romantic movement, particularly through the work of the 11th earl of Buchan to create a 'Temple of Caledonian Fame', and its association with Sir Walter Scott.
- The present-day appearance of Dryburgh Abbey has been carefully contrived to evoke a romantic idyll. While this is of interest in the history of landscape design, it is also a dominating factor in the appreciation of the site.

## ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

- *Dryburgh's mother house:* Alnwick Priory (Northumberland).
- *The other Border abbeys:* **Jedburgh; Kelso; Melrose.**
- *The other Premonstratensian houses in Scotland:* Fearn Abbey; Holywood (Dercongal) Abbey; Souleseat Abbey; Tongland Abbey; **Whithorn Priory.**
- *Other associated local properties:* Dryburgh Abbey House (home of 11th earl of Buchan); Abbotsford (home of Sir Walter Scott); Bemersyde House (home of Field-Marshal Earl Haig).

## KEYWORDS

abbey, monastery, medieval, cloister, chapter house, Premonstratensian, David Erskine, Sir Walter Scott

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