HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND | ÀRAINNEACHD EACHDRAIDHEIL ALBA

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ARBROATH ABBEY & ARBROATH ABBEY ABBOT'S HOUSE

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CONTENTS

1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

The monument consists of the remains (now mainly fragmentary) of an outstandingly ambitious royal monastic foundation, which was planned by William I 'the Lion' (1165-1214), one of Scotland's most revered medieval monarchs, as his own burial place.

Situated in central Arbroath, the abbey is about 10 minutes' walk from the train station. There is car parking for six cars immediately next to the visitor centre, which opened in 2003. There are several pay and display car parks nearby.

The interpretation in the visitor centre has not been substantially changed, other than the addition of a display on the Stone of Destiny in 2014, since 2003. The panels in the abbey itself were renewed in 2010. The display which discusses the Declaration of Arbroath and its association with the American Declaration of Independence, in the undercroft, was refreshed in **2014**. There is a café area, but only machine produced drinks are available. There are toilets. There were 11,641 visitors in 2013/14.

1.2 Statement of significance

- A major royal monastic foundation and royal burial place.
- One of the largest ecclesiastical foundations in Scotland
- An important site for the understanding of architectural inter-relationships between Scotland and England at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries.
- It is closely associated with the *Brecbennach* (literally ''speckled, peaked one') possibly a portable shrine or standard of St Columba.
- The association with the Declaration of Arbroath.
- A particularly aesthetically pleasing monument.
- A very early example of the state assuming responsibility for a monument.
- A key site for the understanding of the development of modern approaches to architectural conservation and the presentation of monuments.
- The temporary location for the Stone of Destiny after its removal from Westminster Abbey in 1950/51.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

The monument consists of the remains (now mainly fragmentary) of an outstandingly ambitious royal monastic foundation, which was planned by William I 'the Lion' (1165-1214), one of Scotland's most revered medieval monarchs, as his own burial place.

The principal element is the church, a structure with a two-bay aisle-less presbytery, a three-bay aisled choir, transepts with three-bay east chapel

aisles, and a nave of nine aisled bays. There was the trio of towers appropriate for a great royal foundation, one over the crossing and two over the west bays of the nave aisles; a sacristy and treasury block was later added on the south side of the choir. Of all of this, the best preserved elements are the lower east and south walls of the presbytery and choir, the sacristy, the south and lower west wall of the south transept, the south wall of the nave, and the west front. The last of these is the most complete part of the building, and is an enormously impressive expression of the most up-to-date European ideas on twin-towered façade design.

The principal conventual buildings, grouped around a small cloister on the south side of the nave and (atypically) a second courtyard south of the cloister, have generally survived as little more than excavated footings, apart from the south-east corner of the chapter house. Very much better preserved, are the rare survivals of an almost complete abbatial residence, which developed around an abbot's hall at the south-west corner of the cloister, and a range south-west of the church which incorporates the main precinct gate, an angle tower of the precinct wall, together with the remains of the regality hall what may have been a guest house.

2.2 Evidential values

As with most sites that have been in state care for a long period, the main campaigns of archaeological investigation were undertaken when there was no appreciation that archaeology could do more than reveal wall lines and bring interesting finds to light. At Arbroath state-sponsored excavation within the church took place as early as 1816, with further investigations in 1834-5. Excavations to the south of the south transept were undertaken in the 1840s, though exploration of the site of the other monastic buildings did not take place until after 1929.

However, it seems that excavation was generally halted once historic occupation levels had been reached, and it was thus chiefly the post-medieval overburden that was disturbed. The investigations were also limited to the areas then considered to be of immediate concern. Much of the archaeological potential of the monument is therefore likely to have survived, while outside those core areas it is almost certain that much remains to be discovered, despite the disturbance caused by burials and the construction of post-medieval buildings.

The potential of the outlying parts of the site was amply demonstrated by investigations in 2000 (on the site of the visitor centre) and 2013 (to investigate tree damage). The visitor centre excavations exposed evidence for the precinct wall and a secondary gatehouse, as well as for monastic burials and for what is thought to have been a masons' working area[1].

In 2013 an archaeological evaluation was carried out to the south-west of the cloister in order to establish at what depth archaeological remains were likely

[1] Cachart & Parry et al (2017)

to survive. These excavations demonstrated the survival of archaeological remains at relatively shallow depths. It had previously been thought that, since there had been a road and houses in this location in the late 1800s, the area had been cleared.

2.3 Historical values

King William I and the Foundation of the Abbey
The abbey was founded by King William I (the Lion) in 1178 for Tironensian monks. This order was first introduced to Scotland at Selkirk by the king's grandfather, David I while he was still Earl of Huntingdon. It was therefore the earliest of the reformed monastic orders to be introduced anywhere in the British Isles. Arbroath was itself colonised from Kelso (Selkirk's successor), as a conscious continuation of royal favour to this order.

In founding the abbey the king may also have been offering a calculated snub to Henry II of England, who had only recently released William from his captivity; this is seen both in the dedication to Thomas Becket, whose martyrdom Henry had inadvertently prompted. William and Becket are thought to have been close friends since childhood. In addition, it was thought that the capture of the Scottish King at Alnwick in July 1174 was due to the intercession of St. Thomas following Henry II's submission at his tomb, which would have sent a clear message to William. William and Becket are thought to have been close friends since childhood. The choice of the Tironensians was also significant, as this order was known to be under Scottish protection.

Amongst the original endowments was custody of the Brecbennach (from the Gaelic 'Breac Beannach'), an important reliquary of St Columba. The endowments which King William gave the abbey were noted in a charter of confirmation towards the end of his reign. They included the tithes and patronage of 24 parish churches, a parcel of land in every royal burgh, additional lands, fisheries, ferries, saltpans, and Arbroath itself with the right to establish a burgh therein.

Arbroath Abbey provides one of the most physically impressive testimonies to the value that was placed on the continuing religious dynamism of the monastic communities in the later 12th century. William I seems to have intended the abbey to be his mausoleum. It therefore tells us about William the Lion's personal concerns over how he wished his own body to be entombed and prayed over in his search for salvation. It was unfinished when he was buried there in December 1214, and not consecrated until 1233. Even then it may not have been completed. It is noteworthy that he chose not to be buried at the dynastic mausoleum at Dunfermline, and that is queen chose her foundation at Balmerino for her burial.

The Declaration of Arbroath
Bernard de Linton became abbot of Arbroath Abbey following the removal of John of Angus from the post in 1309 by Bishop Henry Lamberton. He was responsible for overseeing the drafting the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320. In

this document the nobility of Scotland stated its claim for national autonomy from England to Pope John XXII. Although its terms had probably been agreed upon at Newbattle, and it had subsequently been drafted in the royal secretariat, it was from Arbroath that it was issued.

The most famous words of the declaration: '*as long as a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be subjected to the lordship of the English. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself*' are strikingly modern in their tone and appeal to our modern ideas of nationhood. Thus the document has a resonance and meaning beyond the intentions of the time. However, some historians believe that its historical significance has been overshadowed by its mythic status.

The Brecbennach

Among his other endowments, William I gave the abbey custody of the Brecbennach, which is generally understood to have been a banner, relic or battle standard, possibly associated with St Columba. Carrying banners or relics to the battlefield was common practice in medieval times. The name Brecbennach is interpreted by Gaelic scholars as meaning "speckled, peaked one" an interpretation which relates it to Irish examples of reliquaries which have *breac* (speckled) within their name. In 1211 William issued a further charter confirming this grant, adding to it the lands of Forglen, and "given for god, St Columba and the Brecbennach" on condition of the holders of the land performing military service and bringing the Brecbennach with them. The obligation to render service with the Brecbennach passed from the abbey to the various families who subsequently held Forglen, and the link is retained in charters up to the 17th century.

It is unlikely that we will ever know for certain what form the Brecbennach took, or whether it still exists. However, since the mid-19th century it has been identified with the *Monymusk Reliquary* and was also thought to have been carried at the Battle of Bannockburn by Abbot Bernard of Arbroath Abbey. However, historians have since questioned if the Brecbennach is the Monymusk Reliquary, that it was at Bannockburn, or even that it would ever have been at Arbroath Abbey. Nevertheless, it is still associated with Arbroath Abbey in popular perception, and seen as a great symbol of Scottish nationhood – a tradition carried into the modern day as a current Clydesdale Bank £20 has an image of Robert I at Bannockburn, along with a representation of the Monymusk Reliquary. The Brecbennach's association with the Moneymusk Reliquary (and that of Arbroath Abbey) remains popular and enduring.

Stone of Destiny

Arbroath Abbey's significance as a symbol of Scottish nationhood was further reinforced in 1951 when it was chosen to house the Stone of Destiny after about a year's absence from Westminster Abbey.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Built by a patron for whom cost was apparently of little concern, Arbroath Abbey is one of the most important buildings to have been designed at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries within an architectural province that embraced both lowland Scotland and northern England. It is the product of a period of high artistic creativity, when a synthesis of ideas of both eastern French and northern English origin was being developed, especially under the aegis of the Cistercian and Augustinian orders. Ideas that had been experimented with at places such as York, Ripon, Fountains and Rievaulx had been taken up in Scotland at St Andrews and Jedburgh, and were to reach maturity at Arbroath (and perhaps Brechin?) in Scotland, and Hexham and Lanercost in England.

Arbroath Abbey was intended by its founder and designers to be an outstandingly beautiful building: physical beauty was an essential element in the expression of spiritual values, and for William the Lion his building would have been a failure if not deemed beautiful. Much of the intended impact of the abbey church was concentrated into the design of the terminal façades of the presbytery and nave. The former deriving its chief impact from the tiered triplets of lancets, and the latter having a combination of paired towers, cavernous portal and great rose window which together demonstrated awareness of the most fashionable northern French models. This latter façade was also intended to be seen as the chief element in the abbey's main architectural face towards the outside world, which, together with a stretch of the precinct wall that included the imposing great gate and a massive corner tower, defined two sides of the outer courtyard.

Abbey Church

Laid out with an aisle-less presbytery, an aisled choir, transepts with an east chapel aisle, an aisled nave, and a trio of towers, the architecture is marked by a restrained richness of effect in which arches that either frame wall openings or articulate blank wall faces are predominant. The main window forms are lancets: single lancets in the nave aisles, tiered triplets of lancets in the east gables, and enormously elongated lancets in the south transept. The lower walls were generally decorated with blank rows of arches, except in the retained earlier work in the nave, and in the south transept there are no less than three tiers of arches, the top one fronting the passage from the night stairs. Where wall space permitted, the windows themselves might be both framed and flanked by arches, as in the choir chapels.

The three-storeyed nave was carried on octofoil clustered-shaft piers, above which was a gallery with pairs of pointed arches within a round-headed embracing arch, and at the top was a clearstorey, probably with pairs of windows behind the wall passage. This design owes much to earlier developments in northern England, while in Scotland its immediate ancestors were at St Andrews Cathedral and Jedburgh Abbey. However, the closest surviving parallel for the design is to be seen at Hexham Abbey, and we are

again reminded of the close links that existed between lowland Scotland and northern England.

Evidence in the south wall of the nave, and the relationship of that wall with the unexpectedly small cloister, suggests that the abbey had originally been planned on a less ambitious scale than what we now see. It was perhaps only about ten years after it had been founded that the first proposals were abandoned in favour of the very much more ambitious scheme that was eventually completed around the time of the dedication of 1233. That second scheme, despite surviving in no more than fragmentary state, is essential to our understanding of first rank architecture in northern Britain in the years around 1200.

The greatest creativity in the composition of external elements was expended on the terminal walls of the four arms. The tiered triplets of the presbytery gable look back ultimately to the transept façades of the great eastern English Benedictine abbey churches, though these ideas had more recently been reinterpreted by the Cistercians in northern England. The most outstanding feature of the abbey, however, was its west front. The theme of the paired towers had earlier found expression in David I's Dunfermline Abbey, but at Arbroath the combination of towers, cavernous entrance portal, arcaded gallery and massive rose window shows an awareness of the most recent French experiments in façade design. The only significant later structural addition to the church was the mid-15th-century block on the south side of the choir, which housed a sacristy at the lower level and a treasury above.

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Claustral Buildings
Apart from the south-east corner of the 13th-century chapter house, which shows similar architectural detailing as the church itself, and the vaulted basement of the abbot's hall at the south-west corner of the cloister, there is insufficient of the earlier monastic buildings to be able to comment on their character.

Abbot's house
By the early 16th century the Abbot's House itself had been expanded to form what is one of the most important non-defensible magnate's houses in Scotland. The principal rooms, at first floor level, were approached by an external forestair that opened onto an entrance corridor. From there access could be had to the spiral stair to the upper floors, and the hall, which had by then been subdivided by an inserted floor. Beyond those was a bed chamber

and closet, and an extraordinary gallery lit by a tight succession of windows. There was, of course, ample provision of latrines and fireplaces, and traces of the painted decoration remind us of the quality of life that was possible within its walls.

Gatehouse and precinct

The precinct wall, gatehouse and mural tower extending west from the south-west tower of the church, may be 13th in origin, though they were all remodelled to varying extents in the later middle ages; their scale speaks eloquently of the abbey's wish to cut itself off from the world, for both spiritual and defensive reasons. The main front of the four-bay-long gatehouse passage had a great traceried window and decorative blind arcading above the arch of the passage. Later, perhaps around the early 16th century, the window was reduced in scale, and a machicolated wall-walk and crow-stepped gable were added. The massive mural tower at the north-west angle of the precinct contained two floors of well-appointed lodgings above vaulted lower storeys, and, like the gatehouse, was remodelled in the years around 1500, with the addition of a machicolated parapet and the insertion of some fireplaces in the lodgings.

Behind the wall, between church, gatehouse and tower, were vaulted ranges. That next to the church, containing what appears to have been a hall and chamber, may have been a guest house. The range between the gatehouse and tower is traditionally said to have housed the abbey's regality court, from where its vast estates were administered and justice provided for the inhabitants of those estates.

A unique picture of the abbey is provided by a description in 1517 by Arthur Boece, a clerk in the diocese of Brechin who described the interior of Arbroath abbey to an Italian cardinal in 1517. This briefly describes the buildings and the furnishings of the church.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

The beauty of such buildings can survive almost any degree of loss and dereliction, and a ruined state was to appeal particularly to those aesthetic theorists of the 18th and 19th centuries, who relished the melancholic contemplation of the contrast between high aspirations and fallen state. Hardly surprisingly, Arbroath figured in the itineraries of many 18th-century tourists, and engravings of it were a feature of the standard works; indeed, it had been a part of the essential canon of Scotland's ruins since Slezer's *Theatrum Scotiae* of 1693. The towers and gables of the abbey are also a notable landmark, with the oculus of the south transept (the 'round O' as known locally) being used as a navigation aid.

It was because of Arbroath's aesthetic value, as well as its historical significance, that efforts began to be made not only to ensure its preservation, but also to improve its setting, from a remarkably early date. As early as the 1830s Robert Reid was urging that surrounding properties should be acquired and demolished so that the abbey could be seen to better advantage. We

might now have qualms about destroying the urban context that had grown up around the abbey, and about 'sanitising' its appearance. Nevertheless, the harmony of the smooth green lawns and rugged red masonry is deeply satisfying, and is also an important piece of evidence for the history of attitudes towards monuments of this kind. Indeed, what the abbey can now tell us about the development of ideas on the most appropriate ways of displaying and looking at beautiful ruins is yet another of the factors that gives it such paramount importance.

2.6 Natural heritage values
Possible bat roost / see statement of natural significance

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Social values
Community: Since the Reformation the abbey has continued to serve a variety of different social functions, including the use of the shell of the abandoned church as a favoured burial ground. Beyond this, some of the buildings have served various secular purposes: the abbot's house has been a school and a factory, while part of the gatehouse range was used for civic purposes by the burgh. More recently, the iconic significance of the abbey in the national consciousness encouraged those who had taken the Stone of Destiny from Westminster Abbey to deposit it on the site of the high altar in 1951. The abbey has also for long been the home of the Arbroath Pageant, which was a matter of great pride to the local community, and which has recently been revived.

Spiritual values
Arbroath Abbey has historical spiritual significance at a number of levels. It provides one of the most physically impressive testimonies to the value that was placed on the continuing religious dynamism of the monastic communities in the later 12th century. It tells us about William the Lion's personal piety; it is noteworthy that he chose not to be buried in what was by then regarded as his dynasty's mausoleum at Dunfermline, while his own widow later chose to be buried at her own more modest foundation at Balmerino.

Use values
Economic: Arbroath Abbey is a significant tourist attraction for the town and surrounding region

Access & Education
Costumed guided tours are available at the abbey.

Corporate Value
Like many great sandstone monuments in the care of Scottish Ministers, Arbroath Abbey suffers from weathering and consequent erosion, which has led to the loss of much of its architectural detailing. Over the decades many different strategies have been adopted to try and arrest the degradation of the

stonework. These can be observed with a trained eye, and can educate visitors in changing practices leading up to present day approaches to conservation.

3 Major gaps in understanding

- Little is known of the layout or form of buildings beyond the inner core of conventual buildings and the north-west boundary of the precinct, though it is likely that much archaeological evidence for these will have survived.
- A systematic study and analysis of the documentation associated with the site is needed.
- We do not know why Arbroath was chosen as the site for William's great foundation.
- What is the thinking on what may have prompted the switch from the first phase building, apparently on much smaller scale, to the much grander Abbey?

4 Associated properties

- Other Tironensian Houses: **Kelso Abbey**, **Kilwinning Abbey**, Lesmahagow Priory, Lindores Abbey.
- Related major later 12th-century works: **St Andrews Cathedral, Jedburgh Abbey**, Brechin Cathedral.
- Other major royal monastic mausolea: **Dunfermline Abbey, Iona Abbey, Cambuskenneth Abbey, Holyrood Abbey**.

5 Keywords

medieval architecture; ecclesiastical architecture; ecclesiastical/monastic history; Scottish medieval history; conservation history.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Timeline

- 1178 The abbey was founded by King William I (the Lion) in 1178 for Tironensian monks.
- 1214 Building of the abbey church was sufficiently advanced for William to be buried before its high altar
- 1233 The church is dedicated on 8 May
- 1272 A fire was caused by a great storm
- 1320 The 'Declaration of Arbroath' signed on 6 April 1320, in which the nobility of Scotland stated its claim for national autonomy to Pope John XXII. Although its terms had probably been agreed upon at Newbattle, and it had subsequently been drafted in the royal secretariat, it was from Arbroath that it was issued.
- 1350 The abbey is attacked by the English
- 1378/9 The abbey is attacked by the English
- 1380 The church was struck by lightning.
- 1384 Repairs were presumably nearing completion when a contract with a plumber for re-roofing the choir was signed on 16 February
- 1410-49 The two-storeyed sacristy and treasury block was added during the abbacy of Walter Paniter

- 1474 A maintenance contract signed with the wright Stephen Liel suggests that ongoing maintenance was taken seriously.
- 1517 A unique picture of the abbey is provided by a description in 1517 by Arthur Boece This briefly describes the buildings and the furnishings of the church, at a time when other sources indicate there were still twenty-seven monks, all of which suggests it was still in a healthy state.
- 1543 The abbey suffered a first attack by the Reformers, though religious life may have continued up to the time of the Reformation parliament of 1560.
- 1551 The abbey was firmly in the control of the Hamilton family, who had obtained the commendatorship, and for whom the abbey estates were erected into a temporal lordship in 1606 and 1608.
- 1560 The Protestant Reformation
- 1580 Parts of the abbey were being dismantled to build a new parish church within the burgh.
- 1693 John Slezer's views in *Theatrum Scotiae* were published, and the buildings were in much the same condition we now see. Some buildings, including most notably the sacristy, the abbot's house and parts of the gatehouse range were kept in repair through being put to new uses; but the rest was regarded as little more than a quarry for building materials, while the unroofed church had become an extension of the graveyard, with areas for burial acquired by the leading local families.
- Late 1700s The abbey appears to have been regarded with growing pride by the burgh's leaders, and, as appreciation of the merits of medieval architecture re-emerged in the later years of the century, attempts began to be made to actively preserve what had survived.
- 1799 The burgh magistrates asked the Barons of the Exchequer, who were technically responsible for the abbey under the terms of the Act of Annexation of 1587, for a grant towards repairs. This was refused.
- 1809 Robert Stevenson was in Arbroath for the building of the Bell Rock lighthouse. The burgh commissioned him to repair the south transept gable (the 'round O').
- 1814 A petition of the future Lord Panmure to be appointed Keeper of the Fabric prompted the Barons of the Exchequer to institute proceedings in the Court of Session to determine ownership of the remains, with judgement given in favour of the crown.
- 1816 The Barons started major works of clearance and stabilisation of the ruins, which were probably more invasive than would now be deemed appropriate.
- 1834-5 Further work carried out on the basis of a report by Robert Reid, in which we see the emergence of attitudes which foreshadow our own, in the wish to conserve the ruins in their existing state rather than to restore them to their supposed historic state.
- 1842 Subsequently, efforts were made to bring other buildings of the complex into state care, and the land adjacent to the south transept was purchased.
- 1905 The gatehouse range was acquired.
- 1924 The abbot's house was acquired.
- 1929 The final major enlargement of the area in care, when the area of the claustral ranges were acquired.