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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

MELROSE ABBEY AND PRECINCT



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MELROSE ABBEY AND PRECINCT

SYNOPSIS

Melrose Abbey was founded in 1136 by David I as a daughter house of the Cistercian monastery at Rievaulx. It was built up-river from the site of an earlier monastery ('Old Melrose'). The abbey is noted for producing the *Chronicle of Melrose*, and for being the burial place of Robert I's heart. The buildings were severely damaged by the English throughout the 14th century, and were rebuilt on a grand scale after Richard II's invasion of 1385. After the Protestant Reformation (1560), a parish church was set up in the monastic choir.

The property in care comprises: the shell of the 15th-century abbey church, including a fragment of the original 12th-century church; the consolidated lower walls and footings of the cloister buildings; the restored commendator's house; the former Manse (The Cloisters); a disused brewery; Priory Farm and Abbey House. The rebuilt abbey church was designed and constructed to the highest architectural standard, and is an invaluable indicator of changing attitudes to the design of major church buildings in the course of the later middle ages. The cloister buildings are known from excavation, apart from the commendator's house, which was restored in the mid-20th century to serve as a museum for the wonderful collection of archaeological finds made during the clearance work.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- c.640 - a Christian monastery is founded at Old Melrose, 3 miles (5 km) down-river of Melrose. Founded by St Aedan (d. 651), its most famous member was St Cuthbert (c. 634-687).
- 839 - Old Melrose is raided by Kenneth I (Cináed mac Ailpín) of Scotland, and soon after by the Danish conquerors of York. It passes out of use not long thereafter. There is no evidence of Christian settlement at Melrose itself prior to the 12th century.
- 1098 - the Cistercian order is founded at Cîteaux, France, by Abbot Robert of Molesme.
- 1136 - David I founds Melrose as the first home for Cistercian monks in Scotland. It is colonised by monks from the great northern English missionary base of Rievaulx, and dedicated in 1146.
- 1137 to c.1266 - the *Chronicle of Melrose*, Scotland's most important monastic chronicle, is written at the abbey.
- 1140 - Melrose establishes a daughter house at Newbattle.
- 1150 - Melrose establishes two more daughter houses, at Holm Cultram (Cumberland), and Kinloss (Moray).
- 1159 - Waltheof, David I's stepson and second abbot, dies at Melrose and is buried there. Revered as a saint, his body is reputedly found uncorrupted in 1171. St Waltheof's cult continues into the 13th century.
- 1164 - Melrose establishes another daughter house at Coupar Angus (Angus).

- 1227 - Melrose establishes its last daughter house, at Balmerino (Fife).
- 1249 - Alexander II is buried at Melrose following his death in Argyll.
- 1265/6 - Abbot Reginald plays a key role in negotiations leading to the Treaty of Perth that brings Argyll and the Isles back under Scottish rule.
- 1295 - Abbot Patrick supports the Franco-Scottish alliance of 1295 against Edward I. The abbey suffers accordingly during the Wars of Independence that follow.
- 1331 - Robert I's heart is interred in front of the high altar, following its return from Spain, whither it had been taken by 'the Good Sir James' of Douglas. (Bruce's body was buried in **Dunfermline Abbey** at his death in 1329.) The abbey is subsequently favoured as a place of burial by the Earls of Black Douglas until their downfall in 1455. The 1st Earl (1384) and 2nd Earl (1388) are both buried there.
- 1385 - the abbey suffers a devastating attack by Richard II of England's army, and requires major rebuilding. Much of the present church dates from this phase, including work by the French-born architect John Morow, and continues until the Reformation.
- 1391 - Abbot Gilbert of Roxburgh is granted the right to wear the mitre, making him one of the most powerful churchmen in the kingdom.
- 1424 - James I arrives at Melrose following his release from English captivity.
- c.1440 - the monks order new choir stalls from Cornelius van Aeltre of Bruges, but these have still not been delivered by 1441. Around this time the former lay brothers' choir in the nave becomes the parish church for the people of Melrose.
- c.1450 - Abbot Hunter builds a tower house at Mauchline, on the abbey's Ayrshire estate.
- 1502 - James IV visits Melrose to begin negotiations for the Treaty of Perpetual Peace with England. During his stay he pays 'drink silver' to the stonemasons.
- 1535 - James Stewart, James V's 11-year-old illegitimate son, becomes the abbey's first commendator (lay administrator). An attempt to reform the Cistercian order in Scotland around this time is fiercely opposed by the chapter at Melrose.
- 1545 - the abbey suffers its last attack from an English army.
- 1558 - Prior Ralph and ten monks celebrate Easter in their church. Two years later (1560), the Protestant Reformation effectively brings monastic life to an end, though the few brethren left are permitted to remain in residence.
- c.1586 - Andrew Pringle of **Smailholm Tower** acquires one of the nave chapels as a burial aisle.
- 1590 - James Douglas, appointed commendator in 1569, builds a new residence (the commendator's house) to the north of the great cloister. John Watson, described as 'last convent', dies shortly hereafter.
- 1609 - the abbey estates are erected into a secular lordship for John Ramsay, 1st Viscount Haddington.
- c.1610 - part of the monks' choir is converted into a Presbyterian church.
- 1621 - the congregation move into a new church formed within the former monastic choir.
- 1808/10 - a new parish church is built on Weir Hill, west of the abbey. The duke of Buccleuch assumes responsibility for the ancient ruins.

- post 1810 - Buccleuch begins repairing the ruined abbey, starting by removing the east and west walls of the Presbyterian kirk.
- 1815 - the church manse (now The Cloisters) is built to the east of the abbey church.
- 1839 - the Abbey Brewery is established by James Simpson to the north of the manse.
- 1919 - Buccleuch places the abbey church in state care. Other parts of the precinct follow thereafter.
- 1921 - during clearance and consolidation, fragments from St Waltheof's shrine and a heart burial, thought to be King Robert Bruce's, are discovered in the chapter house.
- 1940 – the Commendator's House is restored to house the artefacts found during the clearance and consolidation works.
- 1942 - a German prisoner of war camp is erected on Priory Farm.
- 1948 - Abbey Hotel, overlying the west end of the abbey church, is demolished.
- 1996 - the 'Robert Bruce' heart casket is rediscovered and reburied.

Archaeological Overview

- The abbey underwent clearance excavations after being taken into state care in 1919, most of the work being carried out between 1921 and 1936. The few excavation records surviving suggest that most of the investigations stopped once medieval levels had been recognised. It is therefore possible that significant archaeological deposits remain. Many of the artefacts recovered, and now on display in the Commendator's House, were found in the main drain.
- The excavations defined the plan of the first church, begun after 1137 and complete enough for a dedication in 1146. The post-1385 floors in the presbytery and chapels were found to be paved with yellow, green and brown glazed tiles forming geometrical designs.
- The chapter house was 'cleared' in 1921. Three stone coffins were found close to the west door, as well as fragments of a monumental tomb, interpreted as the shrine of St Waltheof. The most intriguing find was a cone-shaped lead container, thought to hold the heart of King Robert Bruce.
- In 1948, further excavations at the SW corner of the nave followed the acquisition and demolition of the Abbey Hotel.
- In 1996 a geophysical survey of the main abbey complex detected hitherto unknown buildings, including one between the 16th-century Commendator's House and the 13th-century Abbot's Hall, as well as defining the full extents of the chapter house and refectory.
- In 1996/7 the chapter house was re-excavated. The initial building had been extended eastwards in the 13th century and modified in the 14th century. By then it had an elaborate tiled floor.
- There has been very little archaeological investigation of the wider precinct, much of which is beyond the property in care. However, recent archaeological work in Priorwood Gardens (NTS), to the south of the abbey, suggests that medieval levels may be well preserved beneath deep deposits of garden soil.

Architectural/Artistic Overview

Church:

- The original church, revealed in the 1920s excavations, was a variant of the 'Bernadine' plan of Cistercian cruciform churches, originating in Clairvaux in the 1130s. It had a short rectangular presbytery, transepts with three chapels on the east side of each, and an aisled nave. Notably, the chapels flanking the presbytery stepped forward to create an echelon plan, which was also created at Rievaulx and Fountains.
- The only surviving part of the first church is the lower walling of the west front, which is of uncoursed rubble and devoid of mouldings, showing that it was fully in step with the rigorously austere first principles of the Cistercian order. A Galilee porch, of which no more than one base and a corner of footings survives, was added against this front, probably in the late 12th century.
- Rebuilding post-1385 was on a massively enlarged scale, though the architectural evidence points to the retention of as much of the old building as possible, which was progressively demolished in tandem with the new work's progression.
- The new plan was essentially an enlargement of the original, retaining the echelon arrangement by having two-bay chapels flank the rectangular presbytery. The presbytery had three aisle-less bays, the transepts three bays with east aisles for additional chapels, the rebuilt choir of three aisled bays and the old nave retaining five bays and its Galilee porch. Alongside the south aisle of choir and nave was an additional aisle of chapels.
- The earliest architectural element of the rebuilding is the presbytery, built soon after 1385 by an English or English-inspired master mason. His design shows a particularly close awareness of works in east Yorkshire (eg, Beverley Minster and York Minster). The principal elements are the three full-height windows in the north, east and south walls, with the east the tallest and rising into the gable. Each was heavily moulded, in the super-decorous treatment that was to dominate the abbey henceforth. The tracery of the south and east windows is rectilinear in character, of which there are few other examples in Scotland. Given its liberal spread at Melrose, it points to both an early date in the design and an English designer.
- The delicate 'net' vault over the presbytery appears to have reflected ideas developed in the English west country (eg, Tewkesbury Abbey and Gloucester Cathedral). There was also some cross-fertilisation with current Scottish experiments in pointed-barrel vaulting, in which the stone-flagged roof is built as an integral part of the vault.
- The presbytery's east gable is very rich. The two corners are framed by pairs of buttresses set at right angles to each other, which extend upwards through three stages, and are enriched with tabernacles (2nd) and blind arcading (3rd). Above the east window is a series of shallow tabernacles. Running across the upper part of the gable is an ogee super-arch, originally capped by a finial. Comparisons can be drawn with Howden Collegiate Church (Yorkshire), Ely Cathedral's Lady Chapel and York Minster (pre-1373).
- By 1400, the wars with England had resulted in a deep antipathy for ideas of English origin, and in the later works at Melrose we see ideas being developed

which were more acceptable to Scottish sensitivities. These are most evident in the crossing and transepts.

- The crossing and transepts straddle the earlier Anglophone phases of work, and represent an important new phase in inspiration. The south transept in particular is an example of the increasing use of non-English ideas and masons in Scotland. The architect was the Parisian, John Morow, who signed his name in the transept and also listed his other work in Scotland – including **St Andrews, Lincluden Collegiate Church, Paisley Abbey and Glasgow Cathedral**.
- The crossing is mainly retained, though of the tower there remains only the west wall and some of the south. It had a fine machicolated openwork quatrefoil parapet.
- The transept walling survives. The north transept is relatively plain, as the cloister and chapter house were on this side of the church. The south transept gable, however, is a show-piece, probably because it faced the main gateway into the precinct. It is architecturally similar to the east gable, retaining its tabernacle and ogee super-arch design. Unlike the east gable, though, it has a doorway in the centre, over which are sculpture-filled niches. The most striking element of the gable, and its key difference from the presbytery, is the tracery, which points to the new-found Continental influence, dominated by sinuous forms and spherical triangles.
- The monastic choir occupies the three eastern bays west of the crossing. It is enclosed at its west end by a pulpitum, the stone screen that divided the monks' choir from that used by the lay-brothers to the west; the pulpitum has a fine west cornice and a carved boss of the head of Christ in the ceiling beside the stair within. The remains of the low walls that separated the choir from the aisles still survive, giving some indication of the isolation of the liturgical area from the nave. However, the monks' choir, as well as the aisles, originally had tierceron vaulting. The choir vaults were supported externally by flying buttresses, which are tabernacled and pinnacled. Internally, the choir retains the tunnel vault of the 1621 parish church.
- The nave, which seems not to have been replaced by the time of the Reformation, barely survives above ground level. Preserved at the west end are the footings of the Galilee porch added to the original building. The porch was wider than the central nave, but not as wide as the aisles. It was two bays deep, with arcades on four piers. There is a single surviving base, c. late 12th century.
- Along the south side of both choir and nave was a chapel aisle, added in the early 15th century. It may have been inspired by Morow, since it had been adopted at some Continental Cistercian abbeys (eg, Fontfroide, France). Indeed, the vault of the first (most easterly) chapel is ghostly French Flamboyant/Late Gothic. The chapel aisle is of particular importance for its variety of window tracery forms. It was apparently never completed.

Cloister and precinct:

- The two cloisters (one for monks, the other for lay-brothers) were built north and west of the abbey church, an unusual arrangement probably necessitated by the main water source, the River Tweed, being north of the church.
- Little survives of the monastic cloister. Late medieval blind arcading remains on the exteriors of the west wall of the north transept and north nave wall.

However, enough of the surrounding three ranges survives as footings sufficient to provide cogent plans.

- The east cloister range survives as consolidated lower walling. North from the church was: a sacristy (mid-12th century), chapter house, day stair, parlour, and an extended chamber (probably the novices' day room) with a central row of cylindrical piers to carry vaulting (all probably remodelled 13th century, but with late medieval changes). The latrine projects east of the range, above the great drain. It would have been approached from the dormitory, which would have occupied the entire upper floor of the range.
- The chapter house underwent three modifications. One of the motivations behind rebuilding it was a wish to house St Waltheof's remains more appropriately, and fragments of a canopied shrine-tomb, found during clearance work in the 1920s and now on display in the Commendator's House Museum, may be his.
- The north cloister range was dominated by the refectory, originally aligned east-west, but subsequently realigned north-south. It was probably on the first floor, over a vaulted undercroft. The warming house and day stair were probably to its east, and the kitchens to its west, where they could serve both the monks and the lay-brethren.
- The footings of the west range survive, as does part of the lay-brothers' cloister to its west, which extends westward under a public road. Though there was probably originally a lane between the great cloister and the lay-brothers' cloister, as at Byland Abbey (Yorks), these were unified probably in the 13th century. At the north end of the extended west range is an aisled hall, perhaps the infirmary, off its west side.
- Another 13th-century addition was the abbot's house NE of the main cloister, recorded as being built by Abbot Matthew (1246-61), and representing an early departure from the principle that the head of the house live with his monks.
- In 1590, a commendator's house was built to the north of the refectory, attributed to James Douglas on the basis of an initialled lintel. This building was restored in the 1930s to house the wonderful collection of artefacts found during clearance and excavation.

Post-monastic buildings

- Of the post-monastic buildings in state care, the most impressive architecturally is the former church manse (now The Cloisters). Built 1815 to a design by John Smith, the two-storey building has a south-facing doorway with corniced architrave and fanlight. A two-storey canted bay was later added to the west.
- The surviving roofed buildings of the brewery, established to the north of The Cloisters in 1839, comprise a two-storey and loft range with a wide central pend entered from the north. Above the segmental arch is the fast-fading inscription 'Simpson and McPherson Ltd Brewers and Maltsters'. To the SE of the building is a roofless, ruined masonry block with vaulted chambers at ground level which may have a monastic origin, perhaps the infirmary.
- Abbey House, on the west side of Abbey Street, is a late 18th-century two-storey and attic, three-bay house with an early 19th-century Tuscan pilastered entrance doorway on the south side.

Social Overview

- The abbey is perhaps most associated in the popular imagination with Robert I (the Bruce), courtesy of his heart being buried there. Sir Walter Scott is also closely associated with the abbey ruins, and it was he who was instrumental in J.M.W. Turner painting it. The 'Melrose Pig' carving high up on the south side is a particular favourite with visitors.
- Melrose is also associated with an affluent and picturesque area of Scotland, which still has close roots to the abbey. The graveyard contains many local ancestors. Also, local involvement is encouraged via HS education outreach programmes.
- Nationally and internationally, Melrose benefits from the unitary image of the four Border Abbeys (the others are **Dryburgh**, **Jedburgh** and **Kelso**).
- Melrose Abbey continues to mean a great deal to the burgh and its hinterland, being prominent on the town's website. Without the abbey, Melrose would not be the outstanding tourist destination it is.
- Melrose Abbey plays an active role in civic affairs (eg, the local traders' association, the Melrosian walk, Christmas parade, and Masonic walk).

Spiritual Overview

- The abbey was intended as the successor to an earlier Christian community nearby (Old Melrose).
- It was the first Cistercian foundation in Scotland, and a key factor in the reorganisation of the Scottish Church in the 12th century. It became the mother-house of five more abbeys - Balmerino, Coupar Angus, Kinloss, Newbattle (all in Scotland), and Holm Cultram (Cumberland).
- The abbey's links with St Ailred of Rievaulx and St Waltheof demonstrate the extent to which it was part of the spiritual renewal represented by the Cistercian order in Europe in the 12th century.
- As with all early Cistercian foundations, Melrose's 12th-century architecture exhibits the effect of St Bernard of Clairvaux's determination to return the monastic life to one of austerity and minimal elaboration. However, as the later architecture and sculpture indicate, the abbey's religious observances over time became much more elaborate and ornate.
- Its decline from that founding austerity was a milestone on the path towards the Protestant Reformation in Scotland (1560).
- After the Reformation, the abbey continued as a place of worship for the people of Melrose, and as a burial place (eg, the Pringles of **Smailholm Tower**'s burial aisle was in a south nave chapel).
- Today, Melrose retains its Christian, and more general spiritual, associations. Its attractive ruins, set beside a large and beguiling graveyard full of old headstones, contributes to its Romantic spirituality.
- Melrose Abbey is still seen as a church, and a place where Christianity lingers on.
- The abbey is host to a number of spiritual uses, most notably pilgrimages from various groups, and an Advent carol service in December. Funerals and weddings are also held there.
- The abbey is on the cross-country St Cuthbert's Way Walk.

Aesthetic Overview

- Melrose Abbey has a rich and impressive aesthetic character, due to a number of contributing factors.
- It is constructed principally of pink-red sandstone, and thus different in tone from the other Border abbeys. The aesthetic is aided by the sumptuous sculptural detail, largely inconspicuous at its neighbours.
- The size of the presbytery and choir, and the fact that both are roofed, have implications for an individual's relation to the medieval building aesthetic. A true sense of how large it could be, and the contrast in lighting between the presbytery (which always was fairly lit) and the more enclosed choir, is important. It could be argued that Melrose thus maintains some of its medieval aesthetic. The nave, on the other hand, is tragically robbed of its enormity, and only the aisle chapels preserve the sense of length.
- Melrose is an icon of the Scottish Romantic movement, in literature and art. It was a continuing source of inspiration to Sir Walter Scott, both in the design of his house at Abbotsford, and in the subject matter of his novels, and through him it became known to a wide audience. It has been a popular image in successive representations of the region or Scottish history. Turner painted it for one of Scott's publications. As it stands today, Melrose is a textbook Romantic ruin, rising from its landscape without the associated clutter of occupation.
- The abbey has a serenity, even though near several roads. This ambience is a noted point of Melrose's aesthetic attraction.
- Arguably, the most negative aspect of the abbey's aesthetic is the existence of 18th/19th-century boundary walls and an access road (Cloisters Road) immediately to the north of the great cloister. These physically intrude into the monastic precinct, and make it very difficult for the visitor to relate the two separate parts together.
- The physical context of Melrose Abbey is the town to its SW, and a countryside aspect to the north, east and south. The abbey complex has a number of trees in its immediate perimeter, with well-maintained fields beyond, and the towering height of Eildon Hill North brooding over all from the south.
- The result of this context is the preservation of the Romantic character of an abbey ruin against a rural landscape, which importantly coincides with views towards, and from, key architectural elements of the abbey - for example, towards the presbytery, or from the south transept gable.
- Towards the west and SW, the abbey area is walled in, with the town immediately beyond.
- The wide area of the precinct allows good views into the abbey from the west, as well as the more distant countryside, maintaining a vague vista of the ruinous abbey against a rural landscape. Thus the Romantic character of this key aesthetic monument carries on.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- How did the original church and cloister look, particularly the relationship between the main cloister and the lay-brothers' accommodation to its west?

- What was the precise layout and appearance of the wider abbey precinct?
- What was the detailed history of the abbey, including its extensive economic interests, particularly sheep-farming and its many granges across the Southern Uplands?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Melrose was the first Cistercian abbey founded in Scotland, and key to the development of the order in Scotland.
- The rare *Chronicle of Melrose*, though not very specific about either the abbey or the nation, nonetheless provides important historical evidence, particularly for religious trends (eg, the sanctification of St Waltheof).
- Built over an extended period, the abbey charts the development of artistic patronage and Scottish medieval architecture. The post-1385 church is arguably the single most important building for understanding Scottish late-medieval architecture.
- The abbey is one of the most beautiful ruined monuments in Scotland, largely because of its distinguished architectural and sculptural content.
- Melrose has important socio-historic resonances, particularly its association with Robert I's heart, and Sir Walter Scott.
- The collection of artefacts recovered from the site, and now on display in the Commendator's House, is among the best at any abbey in the British Isles.
- Melrose continues to be a socially and spiritually significant monument.

Associated Properties

(other related local sites) - Melrose Parish Church; Old Melrose; **Smailholm Tower**.

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

(Melrose's mother house) – Rievaulx Abbey (Yorks).

(Melrose's daughter-houses) – Balmerino; Coupar Angus; Holm Cultram; Kinloss; Newbattle.

(other Scottish Cistercian abbeys) – **Culross; Deer; Dundrennan; Glenluce; Saddle; Sweetheart**.

Keywords

Romanesque; Gothic architecture; David I; presbytery; cloister; commendator; lay-brothers; Robert I; Cistercian.

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