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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

TORPHICHEN PRECEPTORY



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TORPHICHEN PRECEPTORY

SYNOPSIS

Torphichen Preceptory was the main house in Scotland of the Order of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, or the Knights Hospitallers. The brethren, headed by a preceptor, cared for the poor and sick, and later provided armed escorts, for pilgrims to the Holy Land. The order was introduced into Scotland by David I (1124-1153). Following the suppression of the Knights Templars c.1309, their property, including Balantrodoch (or Temple), passed to the Knights Hospitallers. At the Protestant Reformation (1560) the order, including the house at Torphichen, was abolished. Shortly after, however, the outgoing preceptor, Sir James Sandilands, acquired the forfeited estates as a temporal barony and the hereditary title of Lord Torphichen.

Today, all that remains of Torphichen Preceptory are the central crossing and vaulted transepts of the church, surmounted by a bell tower and upper chambers, the footings only of the choir to their east and the outline of the cloister to the north. The site of the nave is now occupied by the 18th-century parish church (not in state care but listed). Elsewhere in the vicinity are the fragmentary remains of part of the precinct wall (in state care) and four sanctuary markers, or 'refuge stones', defining the area of privileged sanctuary ground attached to the preceptory (not in state care but scheduled).

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- c.1099 – in the aftermath of the first Crusade (1096-99), Brother Gerard de Saxo forms the Hospitallers, established in St. John the Baptist's Hospital, next to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, in Jerusalem, into the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, the first military monastic order in Christendom. The brethren follow the rule of St. Augustine, and wear a black mantle displaying a white eight-pointed cross.
- 1144-53 - David I grants the Hospitallers land at 'Torphigan' for their first house in Scotland. They are presided over by a preceptor, and include knights, and armed serving brothers and brother chaplains, all answerable to the Grand Master of the Order, based in Jerusalem. The Scottish Hospitallers are deemed to form part of the English 'tongue' (*langue*) in Jerusalem.
- 1153-65) – Malcolm IV grants the order a toft (building plot) in every Scottish royal burgh.
- 1298 – Sir William Wallace, Guardian of Scotland, stays at Torphichen prior to the battle of Falkirk.
- 1307 – following the fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem (1291), the Hospitallers eventually establish their new headquarters at Rhodes, described as a 'bulwark of Christianity'. To become preceptor of Torphichen, an aspiring candidate is required to spend at least three years at Rhodes, and only the Grand Master of the order, based there, can legitimately confer the preceptorship.

- c.1309 – following the suppression of the Knights Templars in Scotland, most of their possessions, including Balantrodoch (Temple), Midlothian, are transferred to the Hospitallers.
- 1338 - the lands and possessions of the Hospitallers in Scotland are reported to be destroyed as a result of the prolonged wars with England. The order goes into decline for a time.
- 1433 – Sir Andrew de Meldrum returns from Rhodes to become preceptor. During his preceptorship, the crossing and transepts are rebuilt, as evidenced by an inscription on the north transept vaulting.
- 1437 – a Hospitaller, possibly Sir Alexander Seton of Gordon, bears the heart of James I to the Holy Land. The heart is subsequently brought back and buried in the Carthusian monastery in Perth.
- 1466 – Sir William Knollis becomes preceptor, despite not having been three years at Rhodes. He rises to become James III's Treasurer and Master of the Household, taking the title 'Lord of Saint Johns'.
- 1489 – William Knollis sends James III a present of a hawk whilst the latter is in residence at **Linlithgow Palace**.
- 1510 – William Knollis dies and a dispute arises over the preceptorship when James IV questions the role of the prior of the order in England in the appointment of Brother George Dundas as preceptor; his preferred candidate is Patrick Paniter, his Royal Secretary. Dundas formally takes up the post only in 1518.
- 1522 – the Turks besiege and take Rhodes, forcing the Hospitallers to seek a new base. They re-establish themselves at Malta by 1530.
- 1532 – Dundas dies and is replaced as preceptor by his nephew, Walter Lindsay, who in 1538 erects a fine monument to his uncle in the church.
- 1540 – the Order of St. John in England is dissolved.
- 1542 – Lindsay leads a contingent of the Scottish Host at the Battle of Solway Moss.
- 1546 – following Lindsay's death, Brother James Sandilands, then at Malta, becomes preceptor.
- 1563/4 – following the Protestant Reformation (1560), Sandilands resigns all the property of the Scottish Hospitallers into the hands of the Crown, and in return for a payment of 10,000 crowns, is regranted them as a hereditary barony with the title Lord Torphichen.
- 1756 - the nave of the church is taken down and a new parish church built on its site.
- 1831 – the Order of St. John is re-established in England by William IV.
- 1927 – the property (except the parish church) is taken into state care.
- 1947 – the Order of St. John is reconstituted in Scotland at a ceremony in the **Palace of Holyroodhouse**. A special service is held at Torphichen Preceptory, in the presence of the Grand Prior, H.R.H. Prince Henry, duke of Gloucester. The bell tower is re-roofed for the occasion.
- 1974 – a permanent exhibition on the Order of St. John and Torphichen Preceptory, prepared by the Order, is installed in the rooms above the transepts.

Archaeological Overview:

- No modern archaeological work has been carried out at Torphichen Preceptory.

Church

- The ruinous choir to the east of the upstanding crossing tower was subsequently used for burials and its archaeological potential will therefore probably have been severely compromised. However, the area may repay investigation, including standing building analysis, to attempt to establish whether the choir was actually ever rebuilt in the 1400s, or simply abandoned. The archaeology of the nave will similarly have been compromised, both by burials and the building of the 18th-century parish church over its foundations.

Cloister

- Clearance by the Ministry of Works following the transfer into state care in 1927 has enabled some idea of the scale of the cloister to be judged. However, given that the houses of the Knights Hospitallers did not necessarily follow the Bernardine plan used by other orders – for example, the buildings would have included a large administrative block and a hospital for non-brethren - the limited work does not enable us to say anything further about the nature of the order's domestic buildings. Clearly, the domestic buildings extended beyond the northern limit of the area in state care.
- In the absence of modern recording, it is impossible to gauge the sensitivity of any surviving archaeology. However, it may be assumed, by analogy with Ministry of Works' clearance operations at other properties, that the work will have largely been confined to wall-following, and that much archaeological potential remains across the immediate area of the cloister.

Precinct

- The property in care includes a fragment of the outer precinct wall. Its existence gives an idea of the scale of the precinct at Torphichen and suggests that areas beyond the area in Historic Scotland's care may have good archaeological potential.
- Of the three surviving sanctuary markers ('refuge stones') standing in and around Torphichen Preceptory, only one - that to the NE (Easter Gormyre) - has not fallen and been re-erected and thus still has archaeological potential. The marker in Torphichen Kirkyard appears also to be on its original site.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The upstanding remains of Torphichen Preceptory comprise: the crossing tower and transepts of the church, roofed and glazed; a fragment of the choir; the lowest courses of the nave's north wall (not in state care); the site of the

cloister to the north of the church; a fragment of precinct wall; four sanctuary markers, or 'refuge stones' (not in state care).

Church

- The oldest parts surviving are the crossing tower and the low west crossing arch, which date from c.1200. The tower has a miniscule pair of lancets under a vesica in its east and west faces. The arch has three orders facing west and one facing towards the crossing.
- Much of the remainder is good-quality ecclesiastical architecture of the first half of the 15th century. The interior is an impressive space of three strongly pronounced and nearly equal bays, with four-part vaults and ridge ribs over the rebuilt north and south transepts, and a central bell-hole into the bell-chamber above. An inscription on the north transept vaulting refers to Andrew Meldrum, preceptor of Torphichen in the 1430s.
- It seems that the major rebuilding did not include the liturgically more important choir to the east, and it has been suggested (Macwilliam) that the transepts were 'conceived as monumental versions of the private transeptal chapels in parish churches like Borthwick or Corstorphine'. The presence of a once-fine wall tomb in the south wall of the south transept perhaps confirms this. Certainly, around this time the preceptorship was increasingly being seen as a secular lordship, confirmed when William Knollis adopted the secular title 'lord of Saint Johns' in the later 15th century.
- As well as the fine architecture, the crossing tower and transepts have two other important features of interest – traces of painted decoration in the south transept below the east lancet and over the west crossing arch; and a stone-mason's 'working drawing' incised in the plaster of the west wall of the south transept. 'In situ' painted decoration is exceedingly rare in Scottish medieval churches (eg., **Dryburgh Abbey** chapter house, **Inchcolm Abbey** wall tomb), whilst the only other 'in situ' setting-out drawing is in the undercroft of **Dunfermline Abbey** refectory.
- The area above the rebuilt crossing and transepts was made into usable space, reached via the stair entered from the north transept. The floor over the north transept, which communicated with the cloister, had a single chamber with windows to east and west, and doors to north and south. The chamber above the south transept, reached from the bell-chamber, has a fireplace. The floor over the bell-chamber originally had plate-tracery windows through three of its four walls, but the south window was made into a fireplace in the 16th century, whilst the others were built up. Tradition holds that this upper area was used for the Regality Court of Torphichen after the Reformation. The area now holds a display of carved architectural fragments found at the site; none calls for special mention, except a grave-marker bearing a sword and possible Hospitallers' eight-pointed cross, found beneath the floor of the north transept.

Sanctuary markers

- The four surviving sanctuary markers (the Ordnance Survey labels them 'refuge stones'), although not in state care, call for mention. They comprise the one in the churchyard to the south of the present kirk, and three others within a 1 mile radius of the preceptory – at Easter Gormyre, to the NE, at Westfield, to the SSW, and at North Coulston, to the SW. They are deemed to have defined the boundary of the area of privileged sanctuary surrounding Torphichen Preceptory. The one in the kirkyard has cup-marks on it. Though modest stones individually, collectively they are unique survivals in Scotland. The only other 'set' in Britain are the four markers around St. John's, Beverley (Yorks).

Social Overview:

- The preceptory is attached to the east end of the present parish church of Torphichen, and now derives most of its meanings from it. However, Torphichen Preceptory has become confusingly associated with both Templar and Masonic myths, due to modern-day misunderstanding of medieval history.
- The villagers use the 'Maltese Cross' as a logo.
- The preceptory is very much appreciated by the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, a major international charity, accredited to the United Nations, whose organisations provide first aid, health care and support services in over 40 countries around the world. The Order's charitable work, with volunteers and staff of over 250,000 worldwide, is carried out by the St. John Association in Scotland. The Order's committee at Torphichen acts as keykeeper of the property, opening it to visitors on weekends during the summer.
- The parish church is used for concerts and group events, as well as weekly services, but this seems not to involve the parts in state care. The monument is primarily a visitor attraction.

Spiritual Overview:

- Historically, Torphichen Preceptory is evidence of the enormous spiritual investment Western Christendom placed on the Crusades. Though deemed repugnant today, the spiritual *raison d'être* of the Knights Hospitallers was of considerable importance in the later Middle Ages and finds echoes in Scottish literature of the period, eg., Richard Holland's *Buke of the Howlat*.
- The church at Torphichen was the focus of religious life not only for the brethren of the order but also for the laity of the parish. The surviving upstanding remains – the crossing and transepts – together with the now missing choir and nave, formed a cruciform shape that was an architectural expression of the Christian cross.
- Today, the crossing and transepts are no longer used for religious services. However, the use of the adjacent kirk for weddings spills over into the area in state care, eg., for photography.

Aesthetic Overview

- Torphichen Preceptory has a somewhat stern militaristic aesthetic, with a dour, grey exterior further accentuated by the martial-esque wall-walk around the crossing tower. Internally, the simple, lofty spaces - a succession of three similar bays of elegant, airy vaulting - are impressive.
- Torphichen Preceptory looms over the characterful village of that name, with clusters of houses to the west, north and south, but in general open fields to the east, with views to the enveloping hills. The property has a peaceful setting.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What form did the choir take, both originally and following the extensive rebuilding of the mid 1400s?
- How was the cloister laid out? Did it vary from the standard Bernadine plan?
- What was the extent and nature of the preceptory's precinct?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Torphichen Preceptory was the Scottish headquarters of the Order of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, one of the two military orders established by the Roman Church to help the crusading movement of Western Christendom.
- The surviving medieval fabric incorporates valuable architectural remains from the later 12th century and mid-15th century.
- The painted wall decoration and stone-mason's incised working drawing are rare survivals.
- Although not in state care, the surviving sanctuary markers are unique survivals in Scotland.
- Torphichen Preceptory remains an important focus for the village of Torphichen, as well as for the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem.

Associated Properties:

(other sites associated with the Knights Hospitallers): Temple Old Church; Maryculter old church; St. John's Gate, Clerkenwell Priory, London; Rhodes Old Town walls (inc. Palace of the Grand Master); Valletta fortifications, Malta.

(other sanctuary markers): St John, Beverley (Yorks)

Keywords:

Hospitallers, Templars, crossing tower, transepts, wall painting, cloister, precinct, sanctuary marker

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