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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

INCHMAHOME PRIORY



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

www.historicenvironment.scot

You can download this publication from our website at

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INCHMAHOME PRIORY

SYNOPSIS

Inchmahome Priory nestles on the tree-clad island of Inchmahome, in the Lake of Menteith. It was founded by Walter Comyn, 4th Earl of Menteith, c.1238, though there was already a religious presence on the island. The priory is most famous for sheltering the four-year-old Mary Queen of Scots following the defeat of the Scottish army at Pinkie by the English in September 1547. The priory's existence ended with the Protestant Reformation in 1560. In 1604 and 1606, its estates, together with those formerly belonging to the abbeys of **Dryburgh** and **Cambuskenneth**, were erected into a temporal lordship for the 2nd Earl of Mar.

The upstanding remains comprise the mid-13th century roofless church and fragmentary cloister buildings, including a barrel-vaulted chapter house, subsequently converted into a mausoleum for the earls of Menteith; this now houses a small but important collection of memorials, including a unique double effigy of Earl Walter Stewart (died c.1295) and Countess Mary. R. B. Cunninghame Graham, founding member of both the Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish National Party, was buried in the choir in 1936. The entire island was placed in state care by the 6th Duke of Montrose in 1926.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- c.1210 - a parson of 'insula Macholem' is referred to in the cartulary of **Cambuskenneth Abbey**, indicating that the island may have been the site of an early church dedicated to St. Colman (Macholmoc), from whom the island takes its name.
- c.1238 - a small Augustinian monastery is founded on 'Inchmaquhomok' by Walter Comyn, 4th Earl of Menteith, with the agreement of the Bishop of **Dunblane**. Walter had married Isabel, Countess of Menteith in her own right, in 1233/4, thereby increasing the wealth and influence of this already powerful Comyn family. The priory was given the churches of Leny, Port of Menteith and Kippen. The adjacent island of Inchtalla may have been a seat of the earl of Menteith.
- 1258 – Earl Walter's untimely death leads to a power struggle over the earldom. Walter, son of Alexander the Steward, acquires the title of Earl of Menteith through his marriage to Mary, Countess of Menteith, cousin of Earl Walter's widow, Isabella.
- c.1295 – Earl Walter Stewart dies and is buried in the choir of the priory church, beside his wife. Their charming double effigy survives, and is now on display in the chapter house.
- 1296: Adam, the first recorded prior, swears allegiance to Edward I of England at Berwick.
- 1297 – Maurice replaces the departed Adam as prior.

- 1308 - Robert I visits the island, from where he issues the first act of his reign – a charter of inspection to Sir John of Luss. He pays another visit in 1310.
- 1361 – Robert Stewart, son of John the Steward (the future Robert II), marries Margaret Graham, the widowed Countess of Menteith, and becomes the new Earl of Menteith.
- 1425 – The execution of Duke Robert's son, Murdoch, at **Stirling Castle** results in the forfeited Menteith lands passing to the Crown.
- 1453 – Malise Graham, newly returned from imprisonment in England, is created earl of Menteith and makes Inchtalla ('Inchtolloch') his chief residence. Inchtalla occurs regularly as Malise's successors as earls until their extinction in 1694.
- 1466 – the Port of Menteith becomes a burgh of barony, enabling the inhabitants to hold an annual fair, St. Michael's Fair, every September.
- 1508 – Pope Julius II annexes the priory's revenues to the new chapel royal in **Stirling Castle**.
- 1529 – James V dissolves the union with the chapel royal, and grants the commendatorship (lay abbacy) of Inchmahome to Robert, master of Erskine, son of John, 5th Lord Erskine (later 1st Earl of Mar). Robert regards Inchmahome as an hereditary possession.
- 1547 – Lord Robert dies at the battle of Pinkie, near Edinburgh. His father, John, has his guardian, four-year-old Mary Queen of Scots, and her mother, Marie of Guise, removed from **Stirling Castle** to Inchmahome for their safety. They remain for about three weeks.
- 1560 - the Protestant Reformation brings monastic life to an end. The 11 canons remaining are allowed to remain in residence so long as they embrace the reformed faith.
- 1604 & 1606: The priory estates, along with those of the former abbeys of **Dryburgh** and **Cambuskenneth**, are formally granted to John Erskine, 2nd Earl of Mar.
- c.1644 - the chapter house is reputed to be converted into a mausoleum to receive the body of Lord Kilpont, son of the 7th earl of the Graham line, who was murdered in the camp of his kinsman, John Graham, Marquis of Montrose.
- c.1694 - the death of William, last Earl of Menteith, sees Inchtalla abandoned as a residence. The Menteith estates pass to the Graham Earls of Montrose.
- c.1750 – the Grahams extend the family's mausoleum and add a 40m-long avenue to its west side. They also create gardens and plant trees.
- post-1810 – the publication of Sir Walter Scott's epic poem 'Lady of the Lake' makes the Loch of Inchmahome an increasingly popular tourist destination, resulting in the new name Lake of Menteith (although the 'Lake' referred to is Loch Katrine and not Inchmahome).
- 1925 – The Royal Caledonian Curling Club holds its annual Bonspiel or 'Grand Match', between the North and South of Scotland, on the Lake of Menteith.
- 1926: Inchmahome Priory is placed in state care by the 6th Duke of Montrose.
- 1936 – R.B.Cunninghame Graham, writer, traveller, politician, co-founder with Keir Hardie of the Scottish Labour Party (1888), founding member of the National Party of Scotland (1928) and first president of the Scottish National Party (1934) is buried in the priory church.
- 1941 - the island is requisitioned by the Ministry of Defence, and the buildings are fenced off to avoid damage.

- 1988 - a new pitched roof of Caithness slate is built over the chapter house, so as to reduce water penetration causing deterioration to the carved stones inside.

Archaeological Overview:

- A 'Conjectural Ground Plan of Priory' by Rev. W. M. Stirling, 1815, was reproduced in W. M. Fraser's *The Red Book of Menteith*, the author adding that 'since it was made, excavations conducted by the late Admiral Erskine have shown more accurately the foundations of the aisle and other buildings on the north side of the church.' T. Hunter (*Woods, Forests and Estates of Perthshire, with Sketches of the Principal families in the country*, 1883) also writes that 'the whole island was cleared and fenced a few years ago, and Admiral Erskine conducted extensive excavations round the Abbey and ruins about three years ago which resulted in the discovery of about thirty human skulls.'
- In 1926, the Ministry of Works opened an exploratory trench to the immediate west of the 'east processional door' of the church but no further details are known. Artefacts (a key, arrowhead, whorl, stained glass, 'old' glass, bone bead and three coins) now in the National Museums of Scotland were presumably recovered in 1928-30, during clearance of debris and overburden to uncover original floor levels.
- In 1999, a small hole dug near the church for a memorial tree revealed a layer of small rubble fragments, interpreted as part of the demolition of priory buildings after the Reformation.
- Despite these interventions, the archaeological potential remains very high, not only within the church and cloister, but also beyond the cloister, including the priory burial ground and infirmary to the east, and the gardens, orchards and other ancillary buildings to the south and west. Evidence may exist also of the pre-priory ecclesiastical foundation.
- Evidence may also exist of the yards and gardens associated with Inchtalla Castle, together with boat-landings and fisheries. Waterlogged deposits, particularly along the shoreline, would be expected to preserve organic matter such as that of middens and wooden structures.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- Inchmahome Priory is laid out in the conventional Benedictine fashion, with the conventual buildings ranged around three sides of a quadrangular open cloister, and the church on the north side. However, the way in which the east and west cloister walks were incorporated within the buildings, rather than being lean-to alleys, is more unusual. Only the Augustinian houses at **Jedburgh** and **Inchcolm** display a similar arrangement. This approach to monastic planning was more common with the mendicant orders.

The church

- The church was probably the first part of the priory complex to be built and seems to date to the mid-13th century. Architectural details, such as the lofty lancet windows, the nave piers and arches, and the west doorway bear a

striking resemblance to those at **Dunblane Cathedral**, and to work at **Glasgow Cathedral**.

Nave:

- The fine processional west doorway has four orders of finely moulded arches, above which was a large window, which seems to have been subdivided into three lights. The canons would normally have entered through doorways in the south wall of the nave in the course of their weekly processions. The laity, for whom the nave may have acted as a parish church, entered through the door in the north wall.
- The nave was just four bays long, and the four surviving arches between it and the north aisle, are the oldest surviving part; there was a clerestory above. The original south wall was built on a slightly different alignment, probably following the stub of wall protruding out from the west wall of the nave.
- A three-stage, squat bell-tower rises over the westernmost bay of the north aisle. It was planned when the west wall of the aisle was begun but it fits very clumsily into the bay system defined by the inner arcade, suggesting that it was completed at a later stage.

Choir:

- The nave would have been separated from the choir to its east by one or more screens, thereby providing restricted view only by the laity of the mysteries of the mass being conducted therein by the priests. The aisle-less choir would have had stalls for the canons along the north and south walls and against the east side of the choir screen. At the east end was the presbytery housing the high altar; this was lit from the east by a once-magnificent window comprising five tall lancets. In 1930, masonry blocking the lower part of the east window was removed; this had presumably been inserted to provide a backing for the retable of the high altar.
- The celebrant of the mass and his assistants sat on three *sedilia* (seat recess) on the south side of the presbytery at certain points during services; the east seat is higher than the other two. A piscina (basin) and aumbry (to hold the chalice and patten) also survive in this south wall. The south door led to the night-stair that gave access for the canons from their first-floor dormitory in the east range for their night-time office; neither night-stair nor dormitory now survives. The north door opened into the sacristy, now represented by foundations only. Remains of wall plaster survive at various places.
- The choir was used as a burial place for patrons of the priory, including Earl Walter and Countess Mary, whose splendid double effigy was removed to the chapter house for its better preservation (see 'Stone Collection' below). Other notable interments include R. B. Cunninghame Graham in 1936.

The cloister:

- The present cloister buildings seem to date from the 15th century, and follow the alignment of the rebuilt south wall of the nave. This arrangement presumably replaced earlier ranges, foundations of which have been exposed.
- The east range comprised, at ground level, the chapter house (see below), the slype (covered passageway) linking the cloister to the infirmary and canons' cemetery to the east, and the warming house (calefactory), all of which retain their stone barrel-vaults. The canons' dormitory was on the now-missing upper

floor. The warming house has a large double fireplace at the south end and a slop-basin with drain in its east wall. Beyond the south wall of the warming house survives the water-flushed cess-pit of the latrines.

- Little survives of the south range, once housing the refectory and kitchen, other than the remains of the day-stair giving access to the cloister from the dormitory during the day. The west range is similarly fragmentary.
- On the E and W sides of the cloister the walks were within the body of the range rather than being lean-to, as was more often the case. Other known examples of this in Scotland are at Inchcolm and the rebuilt S range at Jedburgh. It is an approach to planning that is more commonly associated with the mendicant orders.

Chapter house:

- The chapter house was the daily meeting room of the community. The single barrel-vaulted space retains stone seating for the canons around three sides (south, east and north) and is lit by three lancets in the east gable. The present high gable dates from its conversion to a mausoleum for the earls of Menteith, c.1644 (see 'Stone Collection' below). Around 50 years later it was extended into a burial enclosure with a stone gateway at its west end. W. M. Stirling records that the 1693 testament of the last Earl of Menteith included explicit instructions to his nephew, Sir John Graham of Gartmore to erect a mausoleum 'upon the west gable of our burying-place... and make an entry from the said burying-place near to the east end of the gravel walk, with a stone dyke on each side, and a fine entry of hewn work upon the west end thereof, bearing our name and arms.' The 17th-century extension was removed after 1933, to facilitate conservation work on the cloister. It was re-roofed with Caithness slabs in 1988.

Ancillary structures and gardens:

- Old photographs show a wall abutting the east wall of the east range. This may once have defined the northern limit of the canons' cemetery; its eastern extent has not been determined.
- Other ancillary buildings and yards associated with the priory, such as barns, stables, smithies and breweries, may have been located on the mainland, but the canons' infirmary would have been on the island, somewhere in the vicinity of the cemetery.
- Most of the features which 19th century commentators thought were priory gardens and orchards are in fact a legacy of the gardens and woodland planted by the owners of Inchtalla Castle, on the neighbouring island, abandoned only in the early 18th century. Only the ancient hazel stools and the three sweet chestnuts forming the remnant of the avenue known as Nun's Walk, are thought to be contemporary with the priory; the latter, planted most probably in the 16th century, are some of the oldest in Scotland.
- Within the castle gardens were features which became known as 'Queen Mary's Garden', 'Bower' and 'Plane' to commemorate her short stay on Inchmahome in 1547. In the late 19th century a large boxwood tree stood in the

centre of the walled garden that was said to have been planted by Queen Mary herself in remembrance of her visit.

- Originally, Queen Mary's Bower would have been an oval flower garden surrounded by clipped box hedges. New box hedges were planted from cuttings c.1860 to replace those taken as souvenirs by visitors, and the bower itself was surrounded by a wooden fence. Today, the box shrubs reach a height of c.4m, thus creating a canopy over the bower and enclosing it with a wall of stems.
- The 'Scots Plane' or sycamore that once stood near the west door of the church, recorded in a c.1930 photograph (published in *Shires and Homes of Scotland*, 1938), and estimated to have been planted around 1650-70, has since been removed.
- Elsewhere on the island are two piers, a shop (built in 1989 replacing that of 1930), and a toilet block (1970).

Stone collection:

- The grave-stones in the church choir date mainly from the 18th to the early 20th centuries. Five of the wall-memorials are dedicated to the Graham family. Other monuments have been collected together in the chapter house.
- The most important monument in the chapter house is a double effigy of an earl and countess of Menteith, most probably Walter Stewart (died c.1295), the first Stewart earl of Menteith, and Countess Mary, who predeceased him. The couple are depicted in a last embrace, each with an arm under the head of the other, which is believed to evoke a Gaelic prayer. Their feet rest on beasts. The pose is unique amongst surviving medieval sculpture of the British Isles. Medieval double effigies are rare, though double effigies of earls and countesses of Strathearn survive also in **Dunblane Cathedral** and **Muthill Old Church**.
- Other memorials in the chapter house include an effigy of an early 14th century knight, possibly Sir John Mentieth, with a shield bearing the Stewart arms; a large grave-slab depicting Sir John Drummond (died c.1372), husband of Margaret, Countess of Menteith; and a fragmentary effigy, possibly of a 13th-century cleric. Late medieval grave-slabs with interlace decoration (one, a fragment) are also on display. Among the small collection of architectural fragments is a cresset (stone lamp with five hollows to hold oil for lights); similar stones survive also at **Cambuskenneth Abbey** and **Inchcolm Abbey**.

Social Overview:

- Inchmahome is a popular destination, thanks chiefly to its scenic qualities. The Lake of Menteith is well-used for leisure activities, including most importantly fishing, and its mainland pier is easily accessed just off the A81 Callander – Glasgow road. The popular association between the Lake of Menteith and Sir Walter Scott's 'Lady of the Lake' adds to its attraction. The lake and island lie within the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, Scotland first national park.
- The fragmentary remains of the priory are but a part of the overall enjoyment of the island by visitors. The trees, shrubs and wildlife are of equal importance, and the walks and picnic spots are much valued.

- The memorials in the church and chapter house are of interest to descendants of the Stewarts, Grahams and Drummonds, as well as genealogists and art historians. The association of the island with R. B. Cunninghame Graham, first president of the Scottish National Party, gives the island a place in the national consciousness.

Spiritual Overview:

- In founding the priory, the Earl of Menteith believed that, through facilitating daily prayers of the canons and supporting their priestly work, he was acting to ensure the salvation of his soul and those of his immediate family. The presence of a religious community so close to one of his chief residences served also to underline his family's importance, and to provide a mausoleum for the dynasty.
- The island was the home of a community of Augustinian canons for over 300 years, from the 13th to the 16th centuries. Even before their arrival c.1238, the island was the focus of a religious settlement that may well have reached back into the early Christian era.
- Today, the priory ruins are recognisable as ecclesiastical buildings, whilst the atmosphere and location, in a serene lakeland setting, simply add to the island's spiritual qualities.
- The priory church is likely to have been used as the parish church; this association may have some bearing on the importance of the island to the local community.

Aesthetic Overview:

- The approach to the island, by boat from the Port of Menteith (where there is a wooden boathouse (1935), jetty (replaced 1965) and visitor car park), is within the idyllic setting of the gentle lakeside slopes and other islets. On the horizon all around loom heather-clad hills, most notably the Trossachs to the west. The island lies within the boundary of the Ben Lomond and the Trossachs National Park.
- The beauty of the priory's island setting is immediately apparent to visitors. The bounteous and varied trees undoubtedly contribute to the island's air of magic and mystery. Mists over the lake evoke romantic associations with Walter Scott's epic poem 'Lady of the Lake'.
- The priory buildings, although now fragmentary, have a graceful serenity about them. This is perhaps most evident in the church, where the slender, curved lines of the west doorway, nave piers and east window intertwine attractively with the soft grey, lichen-clad walls. The gravestones in the choir add that aura of age and solemnity. The stone-vaulted chapter house, the only roofed space within the cloister, provides in its silence and gloom, an opportunity to reflect on those who made this their spiritual and domestic home all those centuries ago.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When was the first religious presence on the island established, and what form did it take?
- What was the history of the earldom of Menteith prior to the 13th century?
- How did the Augustinian canons and the earls of Menteith use the island, and what other structures/yards did they build?
- When was Inchtalla Castle built, and what form did it take throughout its existence?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- The island's history is intertwined with that of the earldom of Menteith, one of Scotland's great aristocratic titles.
- The island has other important historical connections, including most popularly with the child Mary Queen of Scots, and R. B. Cunninghame Graham, founding member of the Scottish National Party.
- The priory church is a significant legacy of Augustinian medieval architecture.
- The cloister's east and west alleys are unusual, in that they were once wholly or partly incorporated into the body of the ranges.
- The memorials in the chapter house, particularly the unusual 13th- century double effigy of an earl and countess of Menteith, are important visible and tangible expressions of courtly love and knightly status in the later Middle Ages.
- The natural history of the island is of undoubted importance, not only for its historical associations with the Augustinians and the earls of Menteith, but also for its varied, unusual – and rare – species. The sweet chestnuts, believed to date from the 16th century, are among the oldest in Scotland.

Associated Properties:

(other places associated with Inchmahome Priory): **Cambuskenneth Abbey; Dryburgh Abbey; Dunblane Cathedral**, Inchtalla Castle.

(other Augustinian houses in Scotland): Abernethy Priory; Blantyre Priory; Canonbie Priory; **Holyrood Abbey**; Inchaffray Abbey; **Inchcolm Abbey; Jedburgh Abbey; Loch Leven Priory**; Monymusk Priory; Oronsay Priory; Pittenweem Priory; **Restenneth Priory; St Andrews Priory**; St Mary's Isle Priory; Scone Abbey; Strathfillan Priory.

(other seats of the earls of Menteith): **Doone Castle**.

(other double effigies): Borthwick Church; Corstorphine Church (two); Dalkeith Collegiate Church; **Dunblane Cathedral**; Houston Church; **Muthill Old Church**; Renfrew Church; **St. Bride's, Douglas**.

Keywords:

priory, island, lake, bell-tower, chapter house, carved stones, earls of Menteith, Augustinian, Mary Queen of Scots, Cunninghame Graham

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