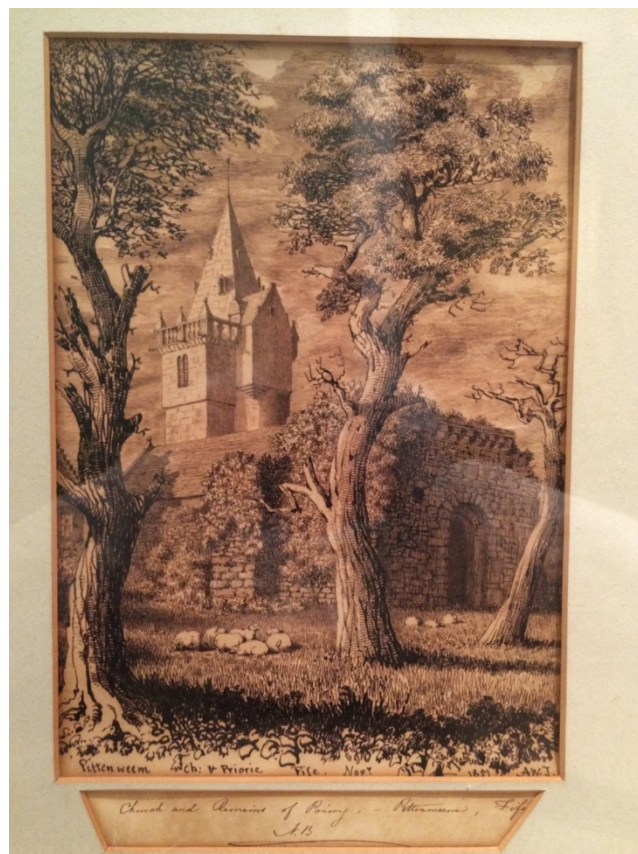


Pittenweem Priory and its Gatehouse



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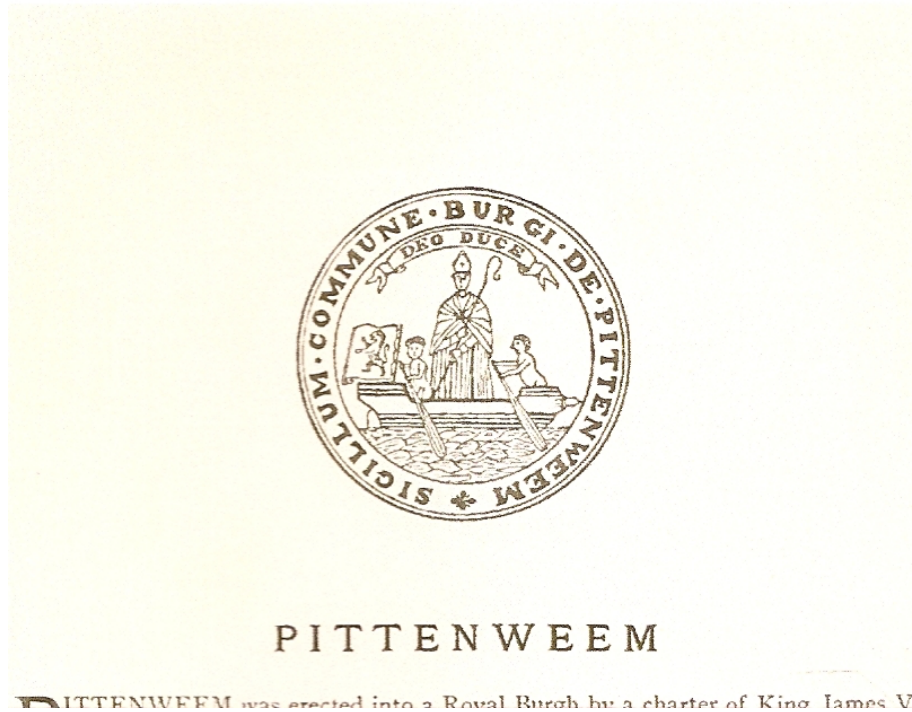
Introduction

Pittenweem priory presents one of the best preserved and most interesting collections of medieval buildings in Fife, and yet, to date, it has attracted little attention from historians and archaeologists and is largely unknown by the general public. This booklet seeks to begin filling this gap by summarising the priory's history and by highlighting some of the precinct's more intriguing architectural features, particularly its fifteenth-century gatehouse.

1.0 History of the priory

1.1 Pre-history

It is best to begin the history of the priory with the cave which gave the town of *Pittenweem* its name - Gaelic *pett + an + uaimh* = 'the estate of the cave'. The cave is St Fillan's Cave which lies beneath the priory garden at the foot of Cove Wynd. A *pit*-name like this points to early origins for the place and the cave may have been a sacred site even before the arrival of Christianity. No traces of monastic activity have been found in Pittenweem before the end of the twelfth century, but we might suppose that Cluniac monks on May Island opted to install their manor here because this was already a place of religious importance. The Christian saint associated with Pittenweem was St Ethernan / Adrian, supposedly martyred on the Isle of May in the seventh century. He was venerated all along the coast of the East Neuk, notably in Kilrenny and Anstruther, and an echo of this is to be found in Pittenweem's burghal seal :



[...] in the Sea a Galley, with her Oars in Action Argent, wherein is standing the figure of St Adrian with long garments clast girt & a Mitre on his Proper, holding in his sinister hand a Crozier Or. On the Stern a Flag disveloped Argent, charged with the Royal Arms of Scotland, & this motto, *Deo Duce*. [...]

In pre-Reformation times St Fillan's Cave was known as *fontem beate Marie Magdalene* (the 'spring of the blessed Mary Magdalene'). Its association with St Fillan seems to be largely a product of nineteenth-century imagination.

1.2 The priory's foundation

Pittenweem priory's early history is complicated by the fact that it began not in Pittenweem at all, but on May Island. In the twelfth century, David I of Scotland (1124-1153) was modernising his largely Gaelic-speaking kingdom by adopting the European ways and manners brought to England by the Normans. Partly as an act of piety, he invited the abbot of Reading (Berkshire) to send a colony of eight or nine monks to set up a daughter-house on the May. The Reading monks would live the religious life on the island, but could survive physically only with adequate supplies of food and fuel from the mainland. For their material support, therefore, the king provided a rich endowment of lands in Rhynd (Perthshire) and on both sides of the Forth estuary. In East Lothian, he gave them sheep-runs for the production of wool, traded with the Low Countries through the port of Berwick-on-Tweed. In Fife, he granted an area of farmland for cereal production situated close to Pittenweem. This place had the added advantage of a natural harbour for getting to and from the island. To further boost the prior's income, David I grafted on to the fishing village of Pittenweem a 'new town' with a commercial status 'like that of a burgh'. Rigs (sites for a house and garden) were offered to new inhabitants (merchants and artisans) along the High Street, together with agricultural plots on burgh lands to the north of the town.

In c1143, the king duly installed May Priory's *caput* (or central) manor in Pittenweem, probably occupying an area at the east end of the High Street (*vicum principalem*) stretching from Marygate in the north to St Fillan's Cave in the south. The prior became responsible not just for his community of monks, but also, as feudal overlord of the monastic estate, for

the civil and judicial administration of his domain. This meant he had to reside for long periods ashore in Pittenweem. By the end of the twelfth century, the monks had established a significant presence in the town, with a small chapel, a manor house (perhaps on the site of the Prior's Lodging) and, we may assume, a tithe barn. A fragment of a doorway at the east end of the parish kirk dates from this time.

1.3 A daughter-house of St Andrews

The governance of the priory changed dramatically during the wars of independence (1296-1328). Having driven his monastery into bankruptcy, the abbot of Reading (Robert de Burgate) decided, in 1288, to sell off his priory of May / Pittenweem to the prior of St Andrews. Edward I was enraged at the prospect of losing this strategic foothold at Scotland's back door and for thirty years ownership lurched back and forth between the English and the Scots. In the aftermath of Bannockburn (1314) Pittenweem came permanently under the superiority of St Andrews.

The change of ownership entailed a change of religious observance: while the monks of Reading were Cluniacs / Benedictines, a closed order, those of St Andrews were Augustinians (or 'canons-regular'), an open order with a strong duty of outreach to the community. The Isle of May was evidently ill-suited to their mission, so in the first quarter of the fourteenth century monastic activity on the island was brought to an end. The May was not abandoned completely, since it generated income - from the offerings made by pilgrims at the shrine of St Ethernan and from the fur and meat

of its rabbits. A hermit was, therefore, lodged on the May to receive pilgrims, who might include persons from the highest social rank.

We know little about monastic activity in Pittenweem in the century following the transfer to St Andrews, but its traditional manorial function no doubt remained the unchanged. Anyone seeking to set up a new priory in Pittenweem would have had to provide the necessary facilities - a church, cloister, chapter house and conventual buildings (refectory, dormitory, and kitchen etc.). No steps were taken in this direction for well over a century. The Black Death of 1350 and the decades which followed took a heavy toll of the local population and would have inhibited significant new building work, even if the will had been there.

For the fourteenth century we lack even a full list of the priors. An independent monastic community elected its own head but, since Pittenweem priory was now a dependency of St Andrews, it was the St Andrews chapter that elected its priors from among their number. The priorship of Pittenweem was a coveted promotion, with added status and remuneration for little extra work, there being no community of canons to supervise. During a twelve-year period in the fifteenth century (1407-1419), it was contested by two St Andrews canons - William Nory and James Haldenstone. In 1414 Nory's men physically attacked the manor of Pittenweem, smashing doors and doing other harm. Haldenstone appealed to the Pope (in Avignon) and was confirmed fully in his position.

1.4 A full Augustinian priory

The priory's situation changed decisively in the middle of the fifteenth century. In 1447, bishop James Kennedy, who founded St Salvator's College in St Andrews, exchanged the priorship of the prestigious and wealthy abbey of Scone, which he held 'in commend', for that of the much more modest priory of May-Pittenweem, then held by Thomas Chalmers. Scholars have speculated at length about Kennedy's motives for taking this unusual step. A significant factor, not generally considered relevant, may have been the bishop's genuine desire to improve the material and spiritual well-being of his diocese.

Far from seeing Pittenweem as just another source of income, Kennedy invested in the monastic buildings on a grand scale. The fact that he displayed his armorial bearings on the Great House (housing the refectory and dormitory) and on the Gatehouse (with its adjacent fortifications) makes it pretty certain that he was responsible for building them. Parts of the Prior's Lodging may also date from this time. Kennedy is unlikely to have built the conventual buildings without, at the same time, developing the spiritual core of the priory - the church and cloister. However - and herein lies the enigma at the heart of the priory's history - these buildings disappeared after the Reformation (1560) and we have only the smallest of clues about where they were and what they looked like.

Kennedy's episcopal successors in St Andrews, Patrick Graham and William Scheves were interested in Pittenweem priory only as a potential source of revenue. In 1472 and 1487, they each in turn tried to have its revenues united in

perpetuity to the episcopal *mensa* (that portion of the property of a church appropriated to defray the expenses of the prelate). This did not happen and in 1495 James IV made one of his top diplomats - Andrew Forman - prior of Pittenweem, taking the position right out of the hands of the hierarchy in St Andrews.

1.5 The sixteenth century

Pittenweem priory came most fully into prominence in the sixty years before the Reformation, during which time it was the private fiefdom of members of the Forman family. Despite his provision to the see of Moray in 1501, Andrew Forman looks to have overseen, as commendator, an active community of canons in Pittenweem. In the years before 1509 he spent a fair amount of time in his priory and may have commissioned upgrading of the Prior's Lodging and the Great House. He appears to have expanded the monastic precinct beyond its initial core to include the Abbey Field to the east, for, in 1504, he constructed a new main entrance to the priory in Marygate, prominently displaying his coat of arms (now set into an interior wall in St John's church).

For all his interest in Pittenweem, Andrew Forman was above all a career diplomat travelling frequently to the Continent. In 1505, he negotiated the marriage between James IV and Margaret, eldest daughter of Henry VII. In 1513 Louis XII had him made archbishop of Bourges in central France, to secure his influence on James IV. Indeed, it was Andrew Forman who induced the Scottish king to embark on the fateful Flodden campaign that same year. After this catastrophe, Forman's career was put on hold and he spent six months under house arrest in Pittenweem priory (1514-5).

However, this set-back did not prevent him from becoming archbishop of St Andrews the following year.

After Forman's promotion to the archbishopric, the headship of the priory passed first to his brother Robert, dean of Glasgow, and in 1526 to Andrew's 'nephew' John Rowle, probably his natural son. Rowle was a thoroughly worldly character who had to be compelled to take holy orders to secure his 'inheritance'. As prior of Pittenweem, he defended his material interests with ferocity: in 1530 a number of men were killed in an affray over harvesting rights on priory lands situated between Pittenweem and St Monans. His sexual appetites were notorious: he fathered four (at least) illegitimate sons. On one occasion, it was suggested that he escort the young heiress of Kellie over to Edinburgh, but the royal treasurer refused, on the grounds that no young women could ever be safe hands near the hands John Rowle. An idea of the opulence in which he lived can be gained from a magnificently carved pair of wooden cabinet doors commissioned by him and now in the National Museum of Scotland.



Pittenweem cabinet doors in the National Museum of Scotland

Rowle clearly had a good command of French, for in 1536-7 he accompanied James V (not a French-speaker) to Paris for his marriage to Madeleine de Valois. She died as soon as she set foot in Scotland, so the King promptly married another French princess, Marie de Guise, mother of Mary Queen of Scots. In 1550 Rowle again went off to France, this time accompanying Marie de Guise on a visit to her daughter. How did he finance this high living? He took up the practice, now

becoming prevalent in Scotland, of alienating the lands in the priory's estate.

By the 1550s, John Rowle was living on borrowed time. Having seen the abolition of the Catholic church in England in 1539, the Scottish hierarchy at last began thinking seriously about reform. In 1553 the now infamous Rowle was forced to resign his priorship of Pittenweem and went into retirement in Pitlithy (Leuchars), no doubt pushed by the reform-minded commendator of St Andrews, James Stewart (illegitimate son of James V). After his departure, the prior of St Andrews (John Wynram) sent inspectors to Pittenweem to root out abuse. Their visitation report makes interesting reading: singing at mass was judged to be not so good; there were problems with young boys sleeping over in the canons' private houses in the priory garden; certain canons were over-assiduous in their home visits to ladies in Pittenweem, particularly to one Elizabeth Bowse in Cove Wynd. Things were lax, but not exceptionally bad for the time. It was all too late, however. When the reformation came with John Knox in 1560, the Catholic religion was abolished and Pittenweem Priory lost its *raison d'être*.

1.6 Since the Reformation

The reformation in Scotland was doctrinally more radical than in England, but Scottish abbeys and priories were not immediately dissolved nor their buildings destroyed. In Pittenweem, the canons carried on living in the Great House and continued receiving their pensions until they eventually died off. The nave of the monastic church may have carried on being used for services, though now only for those

authorised by the new religion. The feudal lordship of Pittenweem, hitherto held by the prior, remained in existence and passed to a succession of lay commendators nominated by the Crown. These individuals lived off the residual revenues of the priory but spent little time in Pittenweem. The judicial functions of the prior fell to the hereditary bailie, a position held locally by the Scotts of Pitgorno / Abbotshall.

By the middle of the 1580s the political situation in Pittenweem was becoming difficult. The burgh was enjoying a period of economic prosperity, stimulated by the royal charter granted to it in 1541, which gave it the same commercial rights as Crail and any other royal burgh. However, four decades on, there was still no town house or parish kirk. Local burgesses, led by the Strangs, began flexing their muscles and brought matters to a head in the 'Affray of 1586', which pitted the townsfolk of Pittenweem against the armed men of the hereditary bailie. The incident triggered a high-profile trial in Edinburgh where Scott of Abbotshall and nine others were arraigned for breach of the King's Peace. As inhabitants of a royal burgh, the townsfolk enjoyed the protection of the king and were exonerated. They were swiftly authorised to build their own tolbooth (town house) and parish kirk in the priory precinct. In the same year (1586) the priory was officially dissolved and the lordship erected into the temporal 'barony of Pittenweem'. This was bought by the Erskines of Kellie in 1612 and remained in their hands until it passed to the Anstruthers of Balcaskie in 1705.

1.7 New uses for the site.

After the events of 1586, the priory precinct was physically partitioned by a high wall running east-west. The space north of the wall was retained for religious purposes: a new Protestant kirk was erected, apparently re-using a small part of the monastic nave, and the area around it converted into the parochial cemetery, with large quantities of earth imported to give sufficient depth for burials, above the foundations of the old priory buildings. A tolbooth tower was built as an integral part of the kirk, affirming the close association civic and religious authorities in the town. South of the wall, the domestic buildings of the old priory survived virtually intact. The Great House was divided in two: the refectory, at the south end, was given to the burgh to house the town hall, while the dormitory, at the north end, was used, initially at least, to house the presbyterian minister. Once a purpose-built manse was erected in the High Street (1635), the old dormitory building was used for general residential purposes by the priory's superiors.

The Prior's Lodging and other associated buildings and walls were converted into a fortified manor-house and became the seat of a secular barony. The new barons of Pittenweem, the Erskines of Kellie, were reluctant followers of the new presbyterian religion and remained episcopalians and even closet catholics. Shut off from the town, the priory became a haven for gentlefolk of episcopalian persuasion and, in the eighteenth century, a hotbed of Jacobitism. After the removal of religious laws in 1792, the priory was to become an important centre for the revival of the episcopal church in Scotland, under the leadership bishop David Low, who lived in the precinct for fifty years. St John's church (1805) is one

of the oldest purpose-built episcopal churches in Scotland. Its rectors and curates were given accommodation in the old priory buildings.

2.0 The priory buildings

Pittenweem's monastic remains offer a picture of opposites: the sacred buildings disappeared almost without trace in the decades following 1560, while the domestic ones survived more or less intact. This gives the place a magical appeal, for the whereabouts and layout of lost buildings never cease to intrigue and tantalise. We will look here first at the medieval buildings which have survived (south of the wall) and, second, at those which have disappeared (north of the wall). A useful aid in re-constructing the medieval priory is to be found in detailed plans of the site produced in the 1830s by an architectural historian, Rev. John Sime (see p.16).

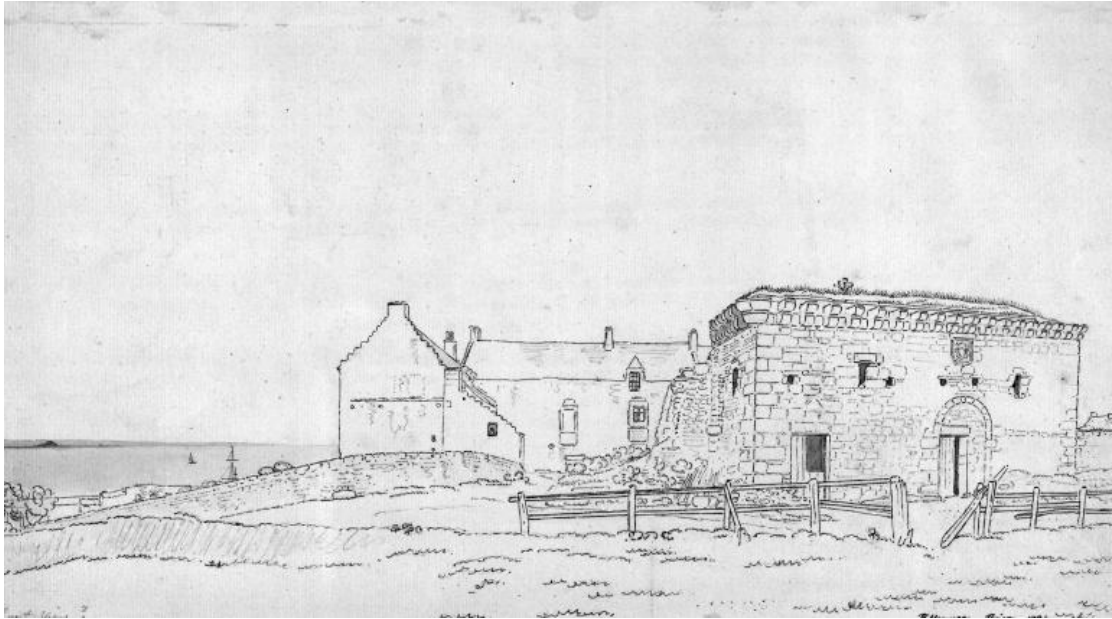
2.1 The conventual buildings

The monastic enclosure and gatehouse

Monastic enclosures served both a symbolical and a practical purpose, marking off the spiritual world within the monastery from the secular world outside and protecting the community from physical attack. They became strong statements of the power, wealth and the authority of the prior and the Church. The Pittenweem enclosure is unusual in that, in the sixteenth century, it comprised not just an impressive Abbey Wall around the whole precinct, but also an internal wall, running north - south, with a military-style gatehouse at its centre,

The monastic establishment in Pittenweem began life not as a priory, but as a *caput* manor serving a community on the May. In the twelfth century, its precinct no doubt occupied a rectangular plot of land between Marygate and St Fillan's Cave. The fact that the precinct was situated at the eastern edge of the town, with its main entrance on its exposed eastern flank, made a strong defensive wall and fortified gateway on that side essential. By the end of the fifteenth century, when a full Augustinian priory was up and running on the site, more space was required. It is probably at this point that the Abbey Field was brought 'within the great owtmest stane wall of the same prior place' and a new and more splendid entrance constructed on Marygate.

The north section of the internal north-south wall followed approximately the line of the modern wall between St John's and the Gatehouse. The line of the south section of wall is sketched in on Sime's plan (p.16), though nothing survives above ground. Its original thickness can be gauged at the point where it butted on to the south wall of the Gatehouse.



John Grose 1793

The gatehouse faces north-east. It is built of coursed rubble, with pinnings, and is two storeys in height. In the lower part is a central arch-way, above which, near the wall-head, is an empty panel-space, flanked 'at a lower level by two small windows checked for outer shutters'. The wall-head bears a parapet-walk projecting on heavy machicolated corbels of two members and circled at the eastern angles to carry 'rounds'. The style of the corbels suggests a fifteenth-century date. There has also been a parapet on the inner side of the wall, and the access to its walk was by a stair on the north gable. The roof of the upper storey must therefore have been of the lean-to variety. The central archway opens into a passage, on either side of which was a chamber, the northern one partly vaulted. We find the same round-headed arches built in the West Range - in the pedestrian entrance to the Great House from Cove Wynd, in the west doorway of the Prior's Lodging and in the windows of the refectory (now the

Town Hall). They were highly prestigious in mid-fifteenth century Scotland.

The gatehouse is one of seventeen monastic gatehouses surviving in Scotland. Stylistically, it is similar to that of nearby Lindores Abbey, Newburgh. The earliest description of it comes from James Nairne (1708)

On the east-side of the square all that remains is the entrance into the Abbey, which tho by no means magnificent yet more attention has been paid to Architecture in the building of it than in any other part of the Edifice. This building contains an arched passage on either side & likewise above lodging (tradition says) for the Porter. The passage is built up & the whole converted to the purpose of Agriculture – viz. a Barn & a Stable. Above this vaulted passage is a square stone with a Coat of Arms upon it & a motto. The Crest is an abbot's cap supported by two Angels, but time has defaced the arms and motto altogether.

The 'square stone with a Coat of Arms upon it' displayed the armorial bearings of James Kennedy (bishop of St Andrews 1440-1465). The first-floor 'lodging for the porter', with two slit windows facing east, was supported by internal stone corbels, two of which survive in the east wall. The conversion 'to the purpose of agriculture' in the seventeenth century involved the closing off of the central 'vaulted passage' leading from the outer door to the Inner Close. Of the two 'arched passages on either side' of the entrance, only the northern one survives. The southern half of the building was radically changed when the western wall was pulled down and a rough extension with a sloping tiled roof added to the SW section. The changes in masonry visible in the lean-to pantiled 'barn' indicate that it is of many phases and periods. However, the fact that the remodelled gatehouse became known as 'Bailie Hogg's Barn', leads us to think that the later

changes were implemented during Gavin Hogg's custodianship of the priory in the late eighteenth century.

The Prior's Lodging

Since its foundation in the twelfth century, May Priory required onshore accommodation for the prior and a ceremonial space for his manorial courts. The site occupied by the Prior's Lodging may have been developed for these purposes very early on. However, nothing in the surviving stonework is as old as this and it looks as though the building post-dates James Kennedy's resuscitation of the priory in the mid-fifteenth century. Having been continuously inhabited, it has subsequently undergone frequent modernisations, most recently in 1921 under the direction of Robert Lorimer.

The prior's house is an imposing three-storey building forming the south range of the Inner Court, known locally simply as 'The Priory'. James Nairne (1708) provides the earliest description of it:

Joining to this is ane house, which is all that now remains of the south-side of the square. This I remember in a very ruinous state, but it was repaired about fifteen years ago.¹

An idea of the external state of the Prior's Lodging at the end of the eighteenth century can be gained from Grose's sketch (p.18). This shows the crow-stepped gables as they were before Lorimer's 1921 restoration. Of particular interest is the extension at the east end, with a steeply sloping roof, obtruding into the Inner Close. This was demolished in 1873

¹ James Nairne, Adv. ms. 29. 4. 2, fol. 166v.

to make way for the two-storey set of rooms which now runs across the whole north elevation of the building.

John Sime's plans preserve precious information about the original building, which had an L-shaped plan, with an oblong main block of three storeys running east and west and a two-storey jamb at the east end projecting north. The sole entrance was at the foot of a round external stair tower, situated at the intersection of the two parts of the building. It opened into a clock-wise turnpike stair which led directly to the principal rooms on the first floor of the main block, with the 'Kitchen' on the left. The ground floor of the east extension communicated with the east-most of the three cellars but not, apparently, with the floor above. This now lost extension was evidently not a later addition, but was integral to an original L-shaped format.

The basement of the oblong main block contains three vaulted cellars with an arched pend or passage running through the middle. The west cellar is entered from the west through a round-arched door, matching the small west door of the Great House (late fifteenth century). It has the remains of a fireplace. The middle cellar was entered from the north and contains a confined circular stair leading to the great hall at first-floor level, a common feature in ancient domestic buildings in Scotland. Entry to the east cellar is now both from the south and from the north.

The first floor contains two rooms, 'My Lord's Dining Room' and 'The Library'. The former measures about 10m x 6m and looks to have been, originally, the great hall of the Priory. Victorian plaster-work in the north wall conceals the left jamb of a large fireplace. There are three rectangular windows in

the south wall. The 'Library' measures 6m x 5m and may have been the prior's 'solar room' (private apartment). It has a large oriel window facing the sea. The second floor contains three bedrooms, the west-most of which has a stone fireplace on its west wall dating from the middle third of the sixteenth century (*c*1540). The external appearance of upper part of the house was much altered by Lorimer's introduction of three dormer windows in 1921.

The RCAHMS 1933 *Inventory* dates the building to the latter part of the sixteenth century and it is known that the extensive repairs were carried out on all priory walls and buildings in 1576. Did this work include the construction *de novo* of the Prior's Lodging? It is doubtful. The general format of the building, with a basement comprising several vaulted cellars, a first floor containing the hall and the laird's solar, and with sleeping accommodation above, is typical of the 'hall houses' which began to appear in the fifteenth century.

The head of a monastery was expected to live in common with the rest of the community, but, as time went on, ways were found of circumventing the spirit of this rule while preserving the letter. The Prior's Lodging appears to have been physically linked to the West Range by a structure referred to in 1593 as 'the new galrie at the eist end of the hall of the said monasterie'. The use of the adjective 'new' implies that the gallery was a sixteenth-century addition, but there is little to tell us whether this was pre- or post-Reformation. Extensions of this type became fashionable from the early fifteenth century onwards. Only a short section of the south wall of this gallery survived the rebuilding of the town hall in 1821.

The West Range

This is a large building referred to in pre-Reformation documents as the *Major Domus* or 'Great House'. It contained the refectory (*fratere*), the dormitory (*dortour*) and the chapter-house (*chaptour chalmer*). A re-used armorial panel bearing the arms of James Kennedy (d. 1465), built upside-down into the top of the south gable, points to a mid-fifteenth century date.

James Nairne (1708) observed the division of the Great House into two halves:

The west side [*of the Inner Close*] remains entire & consists of two houses, one for a private family & the other appropriate for the use of the Burgh containing two rooms below and above.²

The southern part of the West Range, originally containing the refectory, was given over to the burgh in 1593, to serve as the tolbooth or town hall. The *Pittenweem Council Books* (1795-1827) provide details about major alterations made in 1821. Comparison with Grose's sketch of 1793 (p.18) shows that in 1821 the loft-space was removed and the roof lowered. To save money, the original roof-timbers were to be re-used:

The wood of the present roof it is expected will go in again, by lowering the pitch of the roof agreeable to the Plan.³

Similarly, in the new council room and gallery which were to be built on the first floor:

the jambs, lintel and hearthstones of the chimney of the present council room [were] to be carefully removed and used again in one of the low

² James Nairne, Adv. ms. 29. 4. 2, fol. 166v.

³ *Pittenweem Council Book 1821-1827*, p. 11

rooms; and new jambs, lintel and hearthstone [...] to be put into the new Hall.⁴

While the east wall of the West Range, with an oriel-window facing into the Inner Close, was retained, the west wall was pushed out by six feet towards Cove Wynd, to increase the overall size of the building. It was specified that:

The two large windows of the new council room [were] to be of the same dimension as the present windows:- such of the present rybats and soles as are entire to be used again.⁵

We might infer that the original refectory windows had the round-headed arches present elsewhere in the West Range, since the new ones are of that shape. The basement floor, with a small window opening on to the Inner Close, was adapted to serve as the debtors' prison.

The northern half of the West Range, nowadays known simply as the 'Great House', contained the dormitory and kitchen. While it has undergone much internal re-organisation since the sixteenth century, its basic masonry fabric remains intact. Built on a grand scale, the Great House is a three-storey building with a large oriel-window on the first floor, of a type which was fashionable in England in the period 1450-1550, but which is relatively rare in Scotland. It is divided internally into two parts by a thick wall and has a central entrance-door and a clockwise turnpike stair running to the two upper floors. The roof-line to the south of the internal wall is slightly lower than that to the north. Its western exterior wall is pierced by a round-arched door opening on to Cove Wynd (the *porta occidentalis monasterii*). An internal partition wall and

⁴ *Pittenweem Council Book 1821-1827*, p. 7.

⁵ *Pittenweem Council Book 1821-1827*, p. 10.

'Passage' (or transe), running from the Inner Close to a second Cove Wynd door, were introduced in modern times.

The principal rooms in the Great House are on the first floor, with lofts (*solia*) above and basements (*cellaria*) below. The top floor (*solia*) of the Great House, accessed by the central turnpike stair, has no exposed stonework to help us infer what purposes it served. The large first-floor room, sub-divided into 'Bedroom', 'Parlour' and 'Bed Closet', was in all likelihood the pre-Reformation dormitory. The room on the left, labelled 'Hall', has a large fifteenth-century fireplace and a slops sluice on its north external wall. Although separated from the refectory by the dormitory, this a candidate for the monastic kitchen. The room situated immediately below on the ground floor contains a fifteenth-century fireplace of similar dimensions and feeds into the same chimney. This room may have been the priory warming room (*calefactory*). The two basement rooms are not vaulted, the wooden floors above them being supported by exposed oak beams. The large beam in the room now known as the 'Undercroft' has been placed diagonally and looks like a post-medieval alteration.

While the Great House has survived with its original stonework largely intact, the same cannot be said of the structure which abutted it to the north. A charter of 1592 referred to the vestries and the chapter-house (*secessibus lie vestreis et camera capitulari lie chaptour-chalmer*), with basement beneath (*cellaria sub dicta camera*). The last written reference to the 'chapter-house' came in 1635, when the minister's manse was transferred from there to the High Street. It was still being used as a dwelling as late as 1833. The

building has now almost completely gone, the only visible structural evidence being a row of stone corbels on the north wall of the Great House, which no doubt supported its roof. The space it occupied is now used as a car-port. The ground-level here is several feet higher than ground-floor inside the Great House. Excavation could reveal something of the basement (*cellarium*) which existed beneath.

The water system

A supply of fresh water was of paramount importance at a monastic site, for ritual purposes, cooking, drinking, washing and the evacuation of waste, but little is known about the water and drainage systems in Pittenweem Priory. The nearest water-course was a small stream flowing north-south in the Abbey Field fifty metres to the east and was not conveniently situated for use in the main priory buildings. Of greater interest is a well reported in the 1850s:

In the centre of the Avenue leading from St John's Chapel to the present Parsonage, and at the south corner of the Ruin, or Priory Gate-way, was found, two or three years ago, a deep Well, well built, which is now covered over.⁶

It is shown on the OS 1855 (sheet 27). Situated outside the Inner Close, it might not have been the community's main source of water but could have been part of a system of conduits tapping underground springs, perhaps an inspection chamber regulating the flow of water needed for domestic purposes.

The latrines (or 'reredorter') of medieval monasteries were normally attached to the monks' dormitory or *dortour*, well away from the church. Seats would have been arranged on the first floor to allow direct access from the sleeping area.

⁶ Gordon 1875, t. III, p. 132.

Waste fell down chutes or between walls and was usually carried away by a stream or conduit. A deed of 1549 refers to the monastic drain running under the Great House and out into Cove Wynd:

[... our southern wall of the said cemetery to the north, the great house of our said monastery [...] to the east, and the drain or latrine of our said monastery directly underneath the aforementioned plot of land to the south ...]

The location and construction of this drain could be verified with the simplest of excavations.

2.2 The sacred buildings

Pre-Reformation charters refer frequently to the priory church, but none spell out clearly where it stood. The cloister garth normally projected from the south wall of the nave, but, in Pittenweem, evidence about it is so sparse that observers have doubted that it ever existed. Given that the nave of a monastic church was often kept in being as the parish kirk, our search for the missing sacred parts of the priory has to begin there.

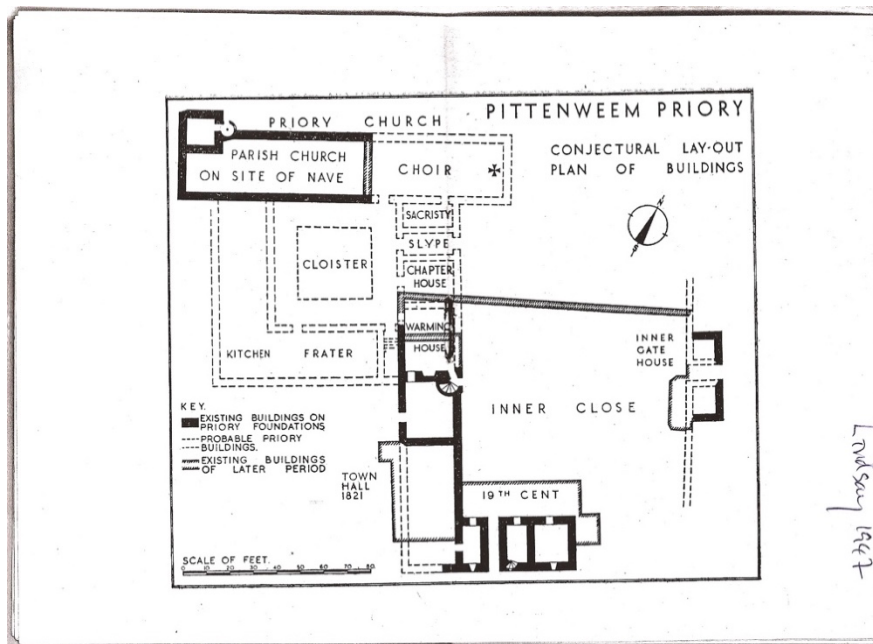
The earliest depiction of the parish kirk is Alexander Archer's 1838 line-drawing which shows the building from the NE as it was before extensive re-configuration in 1883.



Pittenweem parish kirk from the north east (Alexander Archer, 1838)

Archer's drawing reveals nothing within the kirk's fabric which could have belonged to an earlier, medieval building. The surface of the burial ground yields no clues about what had stood there previously, other than that this large, level space is too perfect a site not to have been developed in the middle ages by the priory.

Aware that monasteries usually conformed to a standard pattern, Ian G. Lindsay projected the traditional ground-plan on to the Pittenweem site to produce the following conjectural lay-out of the buildings:



I. G. Lindsay's conjectural layout plan of the buildings

Lindsay assumed that the parish church is an adaptation of the monastic nave, with the claustral range in its usual place on the south side. His plan raises a number of difficulties: it places the nave and cloister in a space occupied by the pre-Reformation cemetery; it has the claustral range extending across an ancient thoroughfare (Cove Wynd), the alignment of which has formed the precinct boundary with the town since the foundation; the kirk's fabric does not appear to incorporate substantial portions of an earlier monastic nave. It is preferable, therefore, to look for the lost monastic church in the large empty space to the east.

The monastic cemetery

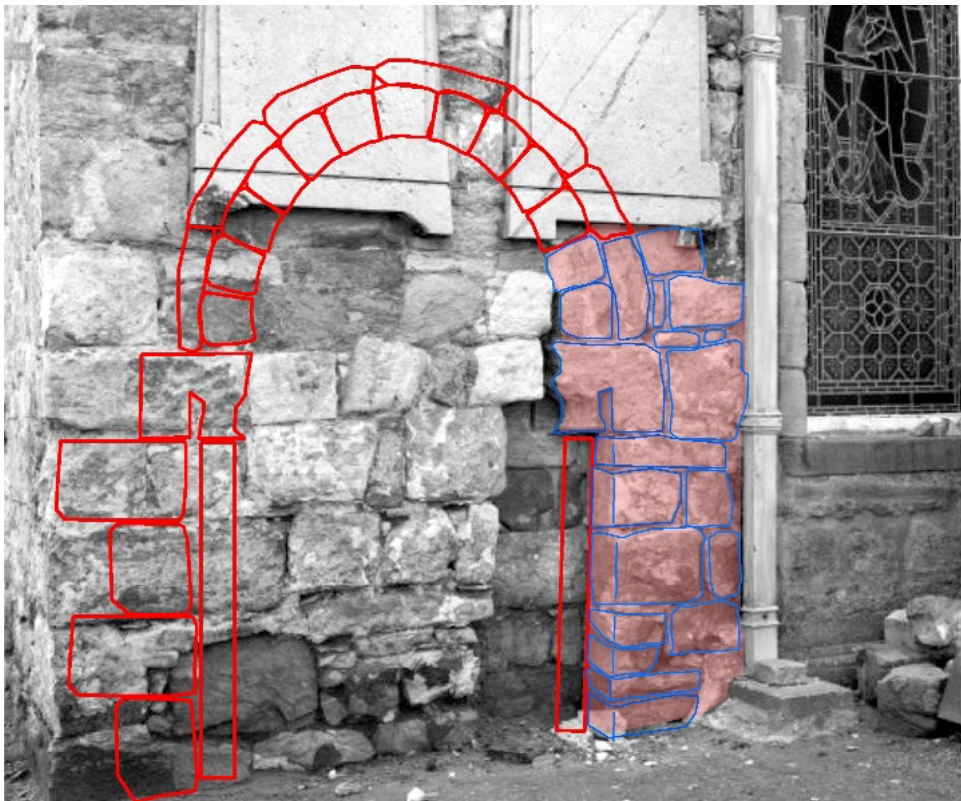
Excavation of various late medieval priories shows that, while the monks tended to be interred within the church and underneath the claustral range walk, the lay population could be buried in the cemetery surrounding the church. For Pittenweem people, the parish church was a mile away in Anstruther Wester, so many would have preferred burial in a sacred site closer to home. Charter evidence indicates that the monastic cemetery lay outside the complex of conventual buildings but within the boundary of the priory. It occupied a strip of ground a quarter of an acre in size, averaging 10-15m in width, running from the west end of Marygate in the north to the Great House in the south, with its own enclosure on three sides and the wall and west elevation of the priory buildings on the east. It would appear, therefore, that the post-Reformation kirk was constructed across the middle of the medieval cemetery, which it divided in two.

The parish kirk and tolbooth tower

The symmetry of this building and the neatness with which it incorporates the tower suggest that the parish kirk was largely purpose-built in the late sixteenth century (c1590). A date-stone set into the south wall gives the date '1592' (others have read the eroded inscription as '1532'). The main entrance to the kirk was sited at the west end of the south wall. Part of the stonework of the lintelled doorway (now blocked up) is visible above the lean-to roof of a boiler-house, accessed by a flight of steps to the original ground-level 1.5m below. However, the building has been altered many times since, notably in 1883 when the whole of the north side was rebuilt and gothicised, making it difficult to know exactly what the

original structure was like. A blocked-up round arch in the centre of the south wall probably opened into a short now south aisle, demolished c1810.

Of great archaeological interest, however, is a fragment of a blocked-up doorway, dating from about 1200, situated towards the east end of the north wall. The surviving remains include the decorated capital and recess of a nook-shaft that flanked the west jamb of a doorway, together with vestiges of the round-headed arch and carved hood-mould above. This part of the parish kirk was clearly not new-build.



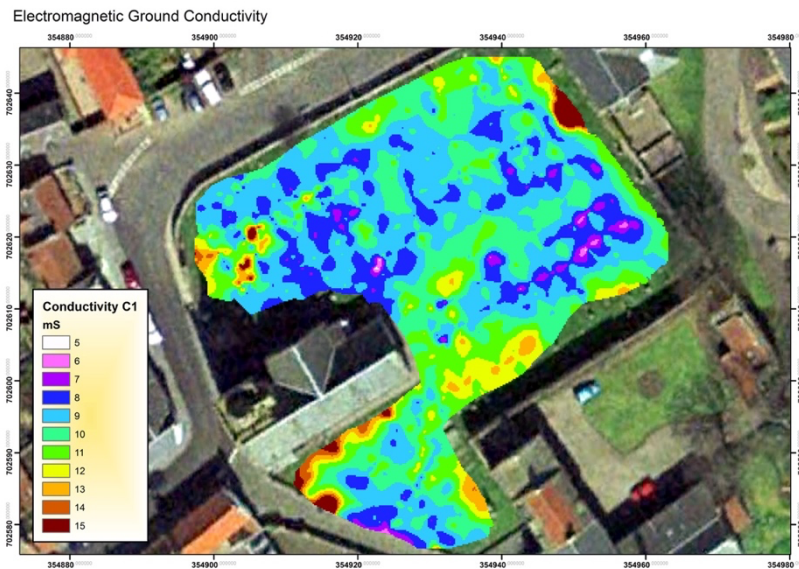
Fragment of a doorway of c. 1200 at the NE corner
(Courtesy of Douglas Speirs).

Much historical significance attaches to this discovery since the doorway dates from a period when there was no formally constituted monastery in Pittenweem. On the assumption that north doorways of this kind were usually placed toward the west end of the nave, it makes it likely that the greater part of the later monastic church, which has long since disappeared, stood in the present churchyard on the same alignment to the east.

The monastic church and cloister

Pre-Reformation documents refer to the church only with reference to the cemetery outside its west end. John Sime's 1833 plan of the precinct (p.16) points to the whereabouts of lost medieval buildings: firstly, a fifteenth-century wayside chapel on Marygate, known locally as the 'Old Confessional). It was demolished in 1854 but a carved ogee-headed arch recovered from the masonry has been built into a house wall in Milton Road; secondly, parallel sets of 'old foundations discovered in digging graves', which are in alignment with the east end of the parish kirk and the north end of the Great House. These may have been the monastic wall dividing the cemetery from the north garden of the priory. However, none of this tells us how far the monastic church extended to the east or anything about the structures which may have stood on the large area of ground to the NE of the modern kirk.

Excavation of the grave-yard may be ruled out, but non-invasive exploration is possible. In 2015 Richard Bates of St Andrews University conducted an electro-magnetic ground conductivity survey of the kirk-yard which produced the following image:



Resistivity survey of the burial ground

The areas of highest conductivity (dark brown) correlate with soil disturbance during exterior maintenance of St John's church, renovation of the south wall of the kirk and the demolition of the Session House in Cove Wynd (c1850). The areas of lowest conductivity (pink and blue) correlate with proximity to the local bedrock (carboniferous sandstone) and/or with foundations of buildings (most likely constructed of the local sandstone). The image confirms Sime's location of 'old foundations discovered in digging graves' to the north of the kirk and points to the presence of buildings in the north half of the graveyard. However, the most interesting pattern is an elongated rectangle aligned with the kirk's east end. This seems to show the footprint of a building of impressive proportions, perhaps the nave, choir and presbytery of the monastic church, with two side-aisles north and south. Any remains are very deep underground, however, for vertical probes have so far located nothing.

As for the cloister, since this was normally placed on the south side of the nave, RCAHMS 1933 concluded that much of it stood within the Inner Close, now cut off from the monastic church by the post-Reformation east-west wall:

All that can be identified with certainty as part of the conventual buildings is the gatehouse, but the enclosure into which it opened, evidently the cloister, is bounded on the west and south by buildings which date in part from the 15th century.⁷

In some Augustinian houses the cloister walk was ‘at least partly within the body of the ranges, as on the east and west sides of the cloister at Inchmahome, and [...] on the south side of the cloister at Jedburgh.’⁸

As we see it today, the Inner Close is a domestic courtyard. The stonework of the surviving buildings shows nothing to indicate the earlier existence of a cloister garth or covered walk. The only archaeological finds are of a purely domestic nature: glazed encaustic tiles, pewter vessels, and a dish of brown earthenware, all now in the National Museum of Scotland. However, the ground-level is several feet higher than it was in the sixteenth century, large quantities of earth having been brought in to convert the space into a garden. An excavation of the Inner Close would be easy to carry out.

⁷ RCAHMS 1933, p. 388.

⁸ Fawcett 1994, p. 107.

Concluding remarks

Pittenweem priory occupies a site of religious importance going back, possibly, to the Iron Age, and played a significant role in the history of medieval Fife. So far, it has received little attention either from historians or archaeologists. The sacred buildings may have been lost but information about them is almost certainly waiting to be recovered, deep underground, using modern techniques. The domestic buildings survive intact, and, there too, valuable information is there to be extracted, perhaps through dendrochronology on ancient beams. It is hoped that booklet this will stimulate interest in the site and encourage others to help unlock its many remaining secrets.

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June 2019

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