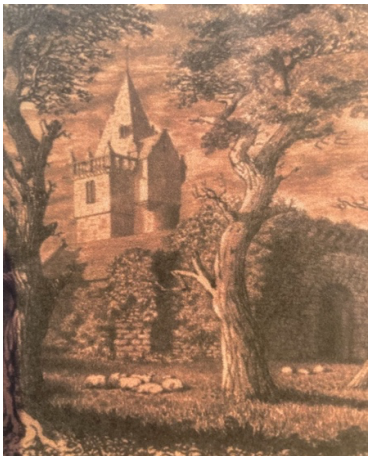

Image courtesy Toby Anstruther

HISTORY OF THE PRIORY

From Prof Anthony Lodge's publication 'Pittenweem Priory and its Gatehouse'

To view the whole publication including Section 2 'The Priory buildings' see www.enfps.co.uk/what-we-do/Pittenweem Priory – Interpretive Panels

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 and 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, wherin 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 *c*1143, 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 Roule lived can be gained from this magnificently carved pair of wooden cabinet doors commissioned by him.The doors are now 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 Pitlethy (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) th 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 of 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.