
3 Historical context *by Gordon Ewart*

3.1 Foundation and early history: motives and origins

Dundrennan Abbey was founded by Fergus, Lord of Galloway, in 1142 as a daughter house of the Cistercian monastery of Rievaulx in North Yorkshire (Scott 1988). Unfortunately, there is no surviving monastic cartulary for Dundrennan and the sporadic references to the abbey in such sources as the *Chronicle of Melrose* (Stevenson 1991), the *Life of Ailred* (Daniel 1978) and records transcribed in the *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland* (Calendar) shed little light on its early history. However, there can be little doubt that Fergus' reasons in founding Dundrennan were, by and large, the same as those held by monastic patrons throughout medieval Christendom. In the 11th and 12th centuries monastic patronage offered the aristocratic benefactor both spiritual and temporal benefits. By supporting a particular house and monastic order a patron could seek to court the favour, and thus the support, of an important religious and political institution. No doubt this played some part in persuading Fergus to found a religious house in Galloway. In his choice of the Cistercian Order, however, it may be the case that he was following both royal example and acting in accordance with the persuasive influence of Archbishop Malachy, the papal legate of Ireland. One authority (Brooke 1994, 88–9) has suggested that the foundation of Dundrennan was a direct consequence of Archbishop Malachy's visit to Fergus in 1139. There can be little doubt that Malachy, a friend of Bernard of Clairvaux and a supporter of the Cistercians (as attested by his foundation of the Cistercian monastery of Mellifont in Ireland) must have advocated the cause of the white monks at Fergus' court and thus may have brought the Order to the Gallovidian ruler's attention. Additionally, Fergus may have had David I's Cistercian foundation of Melrose (founded in 1136) in mind when he in turn founded Dundrennan. After all, Fergus clearly considered himself a member of the highest ranking nobility in Scotland, even to the extent of styling himself *Rex Galwitensium* (ibid, 79) and it may be the case that he associated the Cistercian Order in particular with royal patronage. Whatever the case, the foundation represented the beginning of a dynamic relationship between the early medieval Lordship of Galloway and the Cistercian Order.

Fergus endowed Dundrennan with a massive landed estate which comprised the whole of what is now the parish of Rerrick. This core estate was supplemented by a series of smaller grants of land. The earliest reference to the demesne lands of the house

dates to 1305. In that year Edward I of England confirmed the lands held by the monastery according to the charters granted by its founder and others. The lands were listed as follows :

Gairstange, Newelathe, Ouerlathe, Netherlathe, Aghengoile, Oure Reraik, Nethre Reraik, Roskerald, Aghencarne, Clonfinaghe, Barlocwod, Barlok, the isle of Estholm, the hospital of Crithe, Kirkpatrick Durand, and Aghenkippe in the county of Dunfres, and Biskeby and Culfaldan in the County of Wigton (Calendar II, no. 1702, 461).

Dundrennan also owned property in Ireland, which had been donated some time before 1286. An English document of 1328 related that the abbot of Dundrennan petitioned Edward III

at the request of the king of Scotland to restore their land of Bretneston in the county of Meath in Ireland, from which they were ejected when the war began, for no other reason than that they were Scots, as he is bound to do by the treaty (Calendar III, no. 969, 175).

As with other Cistercian houses the successful exploitation of the abbey's landed property was largely due to the order's use of lay monks or *conversi* as domestic and agricultural labourers on the estates. Thanks to the presence of a large number of *conversi* during the early years of the abbey's existence, the great estates of the house were successfully exploited and the community sustained. In Scotland the Cistercians were involved in sheep farming and wool production on a massive scale, which drew them into European markets (see 12. Mammals and birds). The monks of Dundrennan were also found trading in England in 1266:

[Henry III] at the instance of Sir John de Balliol, took under his protection, the Abbot, monks and friars of Dundreynan Abbey in Galloway and their men coming to England with wool and other goods to traffic therewith; and gives them leave to buy corn and other victuals there to take to Galloway for their sustenance, they paying the usual customs on the same (Calendar I, no. 2414, 479).

Similarly, in 1280 Edward I confirmed an earlier charter of 1267 whereby monks of Dundrennan travelling to Ireland were given permission to 'buy to the extent of 240 crannocks of wheat and as many of oats or meal, wines, and other victuals for the sustenance of their house' (Calendar II, no. 182, 58). The Abbey was therefore linked to a complex European trade network, exporting wool and possibly wares produced in the abbey workshops and, in turn,

importing grain from Ireland and wines from France.

Cistercian abbots were also important players in the field of local and European politics. Ailred of Rievaulx helped to pacify Fergus and his sons shortly after 1153 (Brooke 1994, 95–9), and the abbots of Dundrennan and Glenluce adopted a pro-Gallovidian stance in opposition to the leanings of the Scottish Crown during the ecclesiastical and political struggles following the death of Alan of Galloway and the Bishop of Whithorn in 1234 (ibid, 133–9). These episodes demonstrate the degree of political clout wielded by Cistercian abbots in the 12th and 13th centuries.

The importance of Dundrennan among the Scottish Cistercian monasteries may be further inferred from the instances when abbots of Dundrennan were appointed to the abbacy of the mother house at Rievaulx. When Ailred of Rievaulx died in 1167, for example, he was succeeded as abbot by Sylvanus of Dundrennan; and similarly Roger of Rievaulx was succeeded by Leonius of Dundrennan in 1239.

3.2 Later history: commendators and ministers

The success of the Abbey as the earliest and wealthiest Cistercian foundation in the region was not maintained into the later 13th century, due primarily to the decline of the system of *conversi*. An indication of the mixed fortunes of the abbey during the 13th century survives in the form of petitions to the English Crown. In 1299 the community applied for compensation from Edward I after damage inflicted at the start of the Wars of Independence, and the English Crown was again petitioned in 1328 for the restoration of abbey lands in Ireland.

The history of subsequent years is largely obscure. By the mid 16th century the community of brethren was relatively small, numbering a single prior and nine monks in 1545. By 1565 Edward Maxwell, third son of Sir John Maxwell of Terregles, fourth Lord Herries, had been appointed commendator. Thus, by the immediate post-Reformation years, the superior was no longer a cleric and the demise of Dundrennan as a religious house was already well advanced. Under the Maxwells in this period Dundrennan

served as the administrative centre for the old abbey estate and was maintained. Edward Maxwell received Mary Queen of Scots at Dundrennan in May 1568 before her departure to England (MacGibbon & Ross 1896, vol. 1, 388). With the death of Maxwell, in 1598, the commendatorship passed to John Murray, ultimately Earl of Annandale. The abbey was made a temporal lordship in 1606 and what remained of its vast estate was bestowed on Murray. In 1621 Murray resigned and the abbey was eventually annexed to the deanery of the Chapel Royal, Stirling.

Part of the abbey church remained in use as a parish church until 1742. The abbey was robbed of stone for the construction of the Kirkcudbright Old Courthouse in 1642 and the site was regularly quarried throughout the 18th century. In 1789, Reverend William Robb described how the abbey ‘was tore down to build the present manse and a large clauchan of houses beside it, built with freystones, and a gentleman’s house close by’ (Christie 1914, 92).

Interest in the site as a place of antiquity commenced with the initial clearance of the ruins on behalf of the Earl of Selkirk in 1838 (Christie 1914, 93–4). A more concerted programme of work commenced shortly after, when the then owner, Adam Maitland of Dundrennan, conveyed the abbey into the care of the state (NAS MW1/594). This was prompted primarily by concern for the safety and management of the ruined abbey, but also by an appreciation of its historical significance. By 1841 a boundary wall was established around the monument which in turn delimited the manse property from the cleared abbey structures. This arrangement survived until the recent programme of archaeological excavation on the south range, after which part of the wall between the manse and abbey was eventually removed (illus 4). The mid 19th-century programme of rationalisation saw the demolition of buildings on the south side of the cloister in 1843 and a new manse was eventually built in 1874, close to the site of its demolished predecessor. After 1906 the local Church of Scotland Minister, Reverend Alex Christie, embarked on an increasingly ambitious series of archaeological excavations on various parts of the abbey. This culminated between 1911 and 1914 with extensive work on the west range, chapter house and refectory (Christie 1914).