

TORPHICHEN PRECEPTORY: A FOOTNOTE TO THE PUBLISHED DESCRIPTIONS¹

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As readers will know, McGibbon and Ross included the Preceptory of Torphichen in both the *Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland* and in the *Domestic and Castellated*.² It is a tribute to the thoroughness of their work that, within the limits they set themselves, their accounts are still authoritative. The only subsequent description of importance is that in the *Inventory of Ancient Monuments for Mid and West Lothian*, which gives a much more detailed account of the stages in the development of the surviving buildings and of some of their features of interest. The author of this account was, no doubt, greatly assisted by the work of restoration carried through by the Ministry of Public Building and Works in the late 1920s to which we also owe almost all that we know of the site. The student who follows either or both of these authorities should not go far wrong in his attempt to reconstruct the pre-Reformation Church. The purpose of the present article is to supplement these accounts by drawing attention to certain papers among the Torphichen Muniments, and to two drawings of the Preceptory included among the Gough Collection of Maps in the Bodleian Library³; and in particular to the fresh evidence which they offer regarding some details of the pre-Reformation buildings.

Among the papers deposited by Lord Torphichen with the Keeper of the Records is a small bundle, No. XI in the Catalogue of Templar or Torphichen Writs, containing thirty-three items. The first eight refer to Temple Lands in Linlithgow, but Nos. 9 to 33 relate to the Church of Torphichen and belong to the twelve years from the beginning of May 1762 to the end of May 1774. The occasion of all these documents was a Court of Session Case in which Walter, 8th Lord Torphichen, fought John Gillon of Wallhouse for the right to occupy the chief seat in the recently reconstructed parish church.

The most important documents for our present purpose are:

- No. 12 Plans of the old and new Kirk lodged by Lord Torphichen.
- No. 16 A Narrative in answer to false information emitted by John Gillon.
- No. 22 Gillon's Answers, and
- No. 23 Questions on Lord Torphichen's old seat, with answers.

The plan of the old Kirk (No. 12) shows a rectangular building—the internal measurements are, from E. to W., 62 ft. 6 in. or thereby, and from N. to S., 30 ft. or thereby; a line of piers divides the building into two sections, one 20 ft. across, the

¹ 1968 marks the octocentenary of the parish Kirk of Torphichen, the earliest reference to a church there being the agreement that the Chapel at Torphichen shall rank as a parish church and recognise St Michael's Linlithgow as her Mother Church (St. A. Lib. 319, Bannatyne Club, 1841), the date of which is generally accepted as 1168.

² McGibbon and Ross: *Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland*, III, 139 ff. *Domestic and Castellated Architecture of Scotland*, v, 130 ff.

³ Bodleian Library: Gough Maps 39 f. 27r.

other 10 ft. If the plan is exact in detail, the piers are octagonal, measuring 4 ft. in thickness, and set at 15 ft. 6 in. intervals. The other features are a door in the centre of the S. wall, a pulpit in the centre of the N. wall, Lord Torphichen's Loft across the W. end of the 20 ft. section and a door and a window in the back of the Loft, and three pews on ground level, in front of the pulpit, and within the 10 ft. section.

From No. 16 we learn that 'by virtue of these (i.e. Crown Grants) Lord Torphichen became sole proprietor of all the edifices he enjoyed as Preceptor. Out of which His Lordship set apart for Public Worship the west part of the old Church. The east side wall of Lord Torphichen's Great Hall served for a gable to it, through which there was a door which was the only entry to Lord Torphichen's Loft which His Lordship erected in the west end of the Church, allenerly for his own family as it had no entry but through His Lordship's own dwelling house, and was no part of the divisibile Kirk.' Later, having described Gillon's determination to build what was virtually a new Kirk, the document continues, 'all hands set to work to pull down a row of stately and magnificent pillars and arches of great strength, and as beautiful as the day they were finished. Likewise the wall of Lord Torphichen's house pulled down, and a great number of dead were raised and cast in heaps.' From No. 13 we had already learned that 'In ancient time there was a magnificent building in Torphichen, being the residence of the Preceptor, who was chief of the Order of the Knights of St John in Scotland, and which became the Mansion House of the Family of Torphichen for many years'. From No. 23 we learn that Lord Torphichen claimed that, at the time of the rebuilding, the Heritors, without authority, had taken down the W. gable of the Kirk, which was also the side wall of the Mansion House, and built up the new gable and had encroached 14 in. on the House for making a support for the bell house of the Kirk.

Taking the evidence of these documents, together with that of the plan, we can confidently state that the Preceptor had a private house, or apartments, that these lay immediately to the W. of the Kirk, approximately on the site of the present vestry of the parish church, and that they probably extended northwards along the W. side of the cloister. We can further state that whatever else the house consisted of, it contained on the first floor a Great Hall, that when this house was erected one of two things happened—either the existing W. gable of the nave was incorporated into the side wall of the new house; or the gable was taken down and a new wall built to serve the double purpose of providing both the E. side wall of the house and the W. gable of the nave, and that this wall, like the N. gable of the transept, was pierced by a window and a door, the door opening presumably on a stairway at the W. end of the nave.

These documents are, so far as is known to the present writer, the only surviving evidence for the existence of this house, and the only reference to the particular use made of any part of the buildings, other than the church. The second great contribution of Documents No. 12 and No. 16, in which No. 22 (John Gillon's Answers) supports them, is to establish beyond all doubt that for approximately two hundred years the parish church was the nave of the pre-Reformation church, altered only in

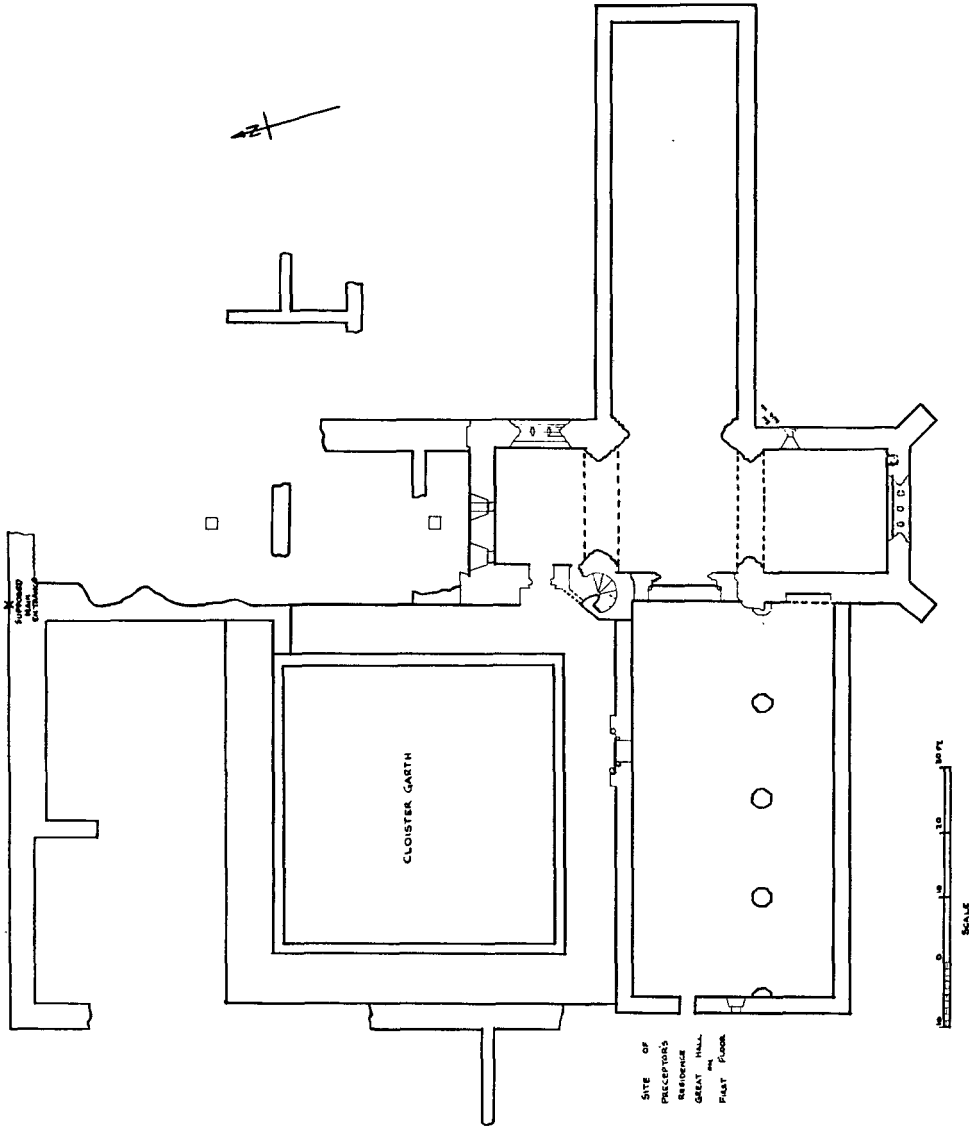


FIG. 1. Plan of Torphichen Preceptory

two respects – (a) by being cut off from those places and buildings which remained the property of Lord Torphichen and (b) by being furnished to meet the needs of Reformed Worship: and further to establish that this section of the pre-Reformation church consisted of a nave approximately 20 ft. wide and, on the south side an aisle approximately 10 ft. wide – nave and aisle being divided by a pier arcade of four bays.

Gillon in his Answers (No. 22) confirms in his own way what we have learned from Torphichen about the nave of the pre-Reformation church. He writes, 'This building, which is properly called the Choir, is in reality the only standing part of the Great Cathedral which when entire, had been of the shape of a St John's Cross. The two points to the east and west are now pulled down to the foundations. And the part standing is the two short legs to the south and north with the nave or centre. This like the popish churches at the Reformation still continued to be the place of worship. It appears that the Church lately pulled down had been the west leg of the Cross, which is probable from the row of pillars which ran from one end of it to the other.'

Ecclesiastical architecture obviously was not his strong subject, and he would like to claim the whole pre-Reformation church for the parish; but he very definitely concedes that the now superseded parish church was the W. leg of the Cross, and that it was divided into two parts by a single line of piers – just as is shown in the Plan.

Surviving masonry establishes the details of the crossing and transepts in their final stages of development; eighteenth-Century documents do the same for the nave – but what of the choir?

It has been suggested that the final development of this section of the church was left uncompleted at the Reformation¹ and that the wall which fills the E. archway of the crossing is to be understood as a temporary screen beyond which the reconstruction of the choir was proceeding, or to proceed, and that had the work been completed it would have been removed. In support of this view it is argued that the wall must be pre-Reformation, because after the Reformation no one would have sufficient interest to be at the expense and labour of building it.

It must be admitted that on these points we are largely in the fields of conjecture and speculation, but it is interesting that Gillon states the church was entire at the Reformation, and that one of his principal charges against the Lords of Torphichen is that they cared so little for it that they allowed much of it to fall into disrepair. Had it been possible to do so, Lord Torphichen would surely have challenged this statement as one of the false informations emitted by John Gillon and, in defence of his ancestors, would have insisted that they were in no way responsible for the delapidations of this part of the Church, which had not been completed at the time when it passed into their possession. In the absence of such protest we may reasonably conclude that he agreed that the Church was entire at the time of the Reformation, and that 'the east point' had subsequently been 'pulled down to the foundations'.

If we accept what appears to be the agreed evidence of these two eighteenth-

¹ RCAMS (*West Lothian*), 234.

century protagonists, we are still left with the solid filling wall, calling for explanation. The papers offer at least one possible pointer in this connection. On their evidence we can state that in the eighteenth-century building was cheap. Lord Torphichen, wishing to put the worst possible face on Gillon's activities as a builder of new and unnecessary churches, tells us that the actual cost of the whole building was 'near £300'¹ and the value allowed to his lordship for the mutual wall between Kirk and Choir was £5. This of course proves nothing, except that if it seemed to Lord Torphichen to be to his advantage to fill in the archway, he might very reasonably spend the few pounds involved on adapting his own property to his own use.

Now we know from No. 23, that, before the jurisdiction was abolished, Lord Torphichen 'kept the Quire (i.e. the crossing and the transepts) mostly shut up, and used it for a Court House, and the space above it was the Prison House of the Regality'. For these purposes the transepts and the rooms over them would be fully adequate—the choir would be an embarrassment. Court House and Prison would be more convenient, and more secure, if cut off from it. At this date no one can say that this is why the filling wall was built, but at least it offers a very good reason why it might have been built at a date subsequent to the Reformation. The existence of the wall need not, therefore, throw doubt on the statement that the Church was entire at the Reformation, nor make it unreasonable to assume that the final restoration of the church, including the choir had been completed before that date.

At the very least it can be claimed that this small bundle of papers throws new light on the domestic arrangements of the Preceptory, a little confirmatory light on the construction of the nave, and a small shaft of light by which we may explore the problem of the cut-off choir. We are indebted to the 8th Lord Torphichen for having secured that the facts were put on record, and to the 13th Lord Torphichen for having made them available to students.

We are also indebted to Richard Gough for preserving and possibly for actually making, two drawings—though it has to be admitted that they raise rather than answer questions. The interest of these drawings is threefold. They provide a contemporary record of the state of the buildings at the time when the reconstruction of the parish church had just been completed; and if they do not absolutely confirm Gillon's statement that the E. part of the pre-Reformation church had been pulled down to the foundations, they certainly establish the fact that only very modest fragments of the walls remained *in situ*. They record certain features which no longer existed when Thos. Ross visited the Preceptory a little more than a century later—namely the structure like a bell-cap which surmounts the S. gable of the tower, and appears in the first Gough drawing above the turret of the wheelstair (Pl. XII, 1). In the drawings of Thos. Ross this has become a simple chimney-head, and if the Inventory be correct and the fireplace in the room below belongs to the sixteenth century, the ornamental structure in the earlier Gough drawings must have capped the chimney. Weather, or some other force apparently removed it between the two visits.

The other alteration, being constructional is, perhaps more difficult to explain.

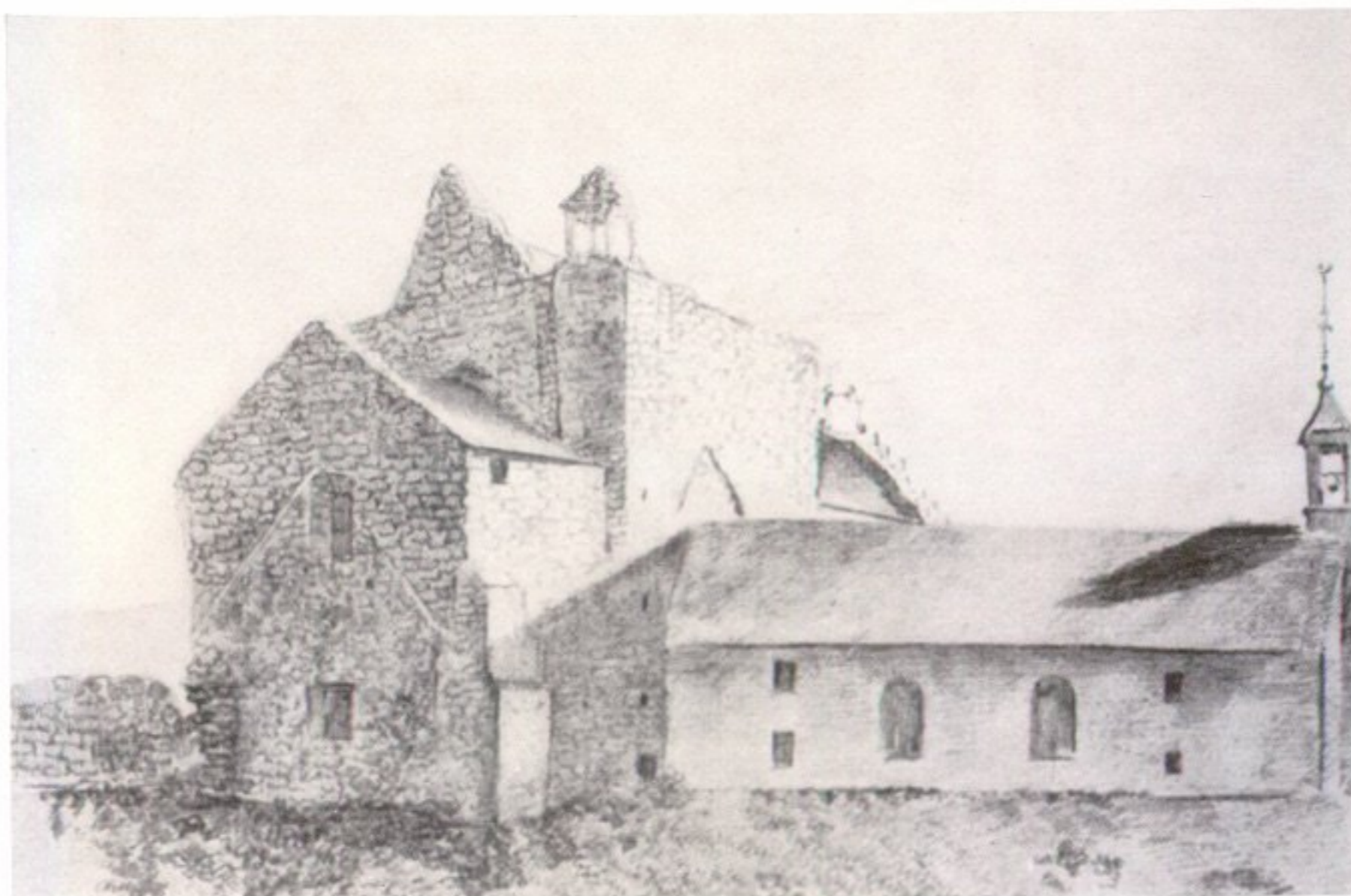
¹ Torphichen Muniments, xi, 16.

The Inventory suggests that the parapet of the tower and its superstructure are sixteenth-century, which would mean that what Gough saw, what Thos. Ross saw and what we see today are substantially the same. The fact is that Gough shows no trace of the water spouts depicted by Ross, and the topmost courses of the tower look quite different and much more finished in Ross than they do in the earlier drawing (Pl. XIII). A comparison of the two almost compels the conclusion that someone, probably in the nineteenth century, concerned to preserve the tower, and possibly with a certain regard for the good of the Kirk, improved the superstructure. No positive evidence for this conclusion has emerged so far, but family tradition is that the buildings were in a sadly dilapidated state when the 12th Lord Torphichen succeeded to the title, and Estate Papers, kindly examined by the present Lord Torphichen, establish that, from time to time, he expended various sums on the maintenance of the buildings. Family tradition and the comparison of the two drawings would seem to combine to suggest that the parapet of the tower and its superstructure, might be as late as the second half of the nineteenth century, say *c.* 1879.¹

The published accounts are authoritative for the broad picture, and are likely to remain so; but the collation of the minor strands of evidence² offers an interesting and possibly rewarding exercise.

¹ But compare the drawings of Gough and Ross with those of Archer (1836) in the Collection of the National Monuments Record.

² In addition to the material referred to above there is a plan among General Hutton's Papers in the National Library, and there are various references to building activity in charters and other records.



1. Gough drawing of the Preceptory from the N.



2. Gough drawing of the Preceptory from the S.

(Photos by courtesy of the Bodleian Library, Oxford)



Sketch of Torphichen Preceptory by Thomas Ross