

Excavations at Kelso Abbey, Roxburghshire

by Christopher Tabraham

EXCAVATION

Upon the closure of the Abbey Row school (NT 728338), the Department of the Environment took the opportunity of examining the nature and extent of those foundations pertaining to the Abbey. The ground-plan of the Abbey as a whole is scarcely known while that of the Abbey church in particular – unique in Scotland, so far as we know – still remains a mystery (RCAMS 1956, 240–6; MacGibbon and Ross 1896, 347 ff). This area merited special attention for, despite earlier efforts,¹ the overall dimensions of the structure, the appearance of the E end and the position of the Eastern crossing are still in the realms of guess-work.

A total of six areas was excavated; three in the lane leading from Abbey Row to the Knowes, two within the school ground and a sixth within the burial ground adjacent to the N wall of the school and known locally as the Purves Aisle (cf fig 1). The areas investigated were festooned with modern services – gas and electricity pipes, water and sewage drains – whilst the foundation-trenches of the school itself were at least 1.70 m deep. In addition, the former use of the land as a post-monastic burial-ground had tampered with much of the stratigraphy and, in Area 3, had reduced still further the already denuded foundations.

AREAS 1 AND 2 (fig 2)

The foundation-trenches of the E–W nave arcading, cutting into the natural river-washed sand and gravel, were located in both areas, though modern services prevented the recording of the exact position of the N lip of that in Area 2. Trench i in Area 1 measured 2.22 m in width and 0.48 m in depth and was traversed by a second foundation-trench (Trench ii) on a N–S alignment, though the foundations of the pillar that presumably stood at their intersection were not in evidence. Strangely, not a single trace of building material was recovered from this area while in the void lay a thick band of debris, comprising several fragments of stained-glass and associated window-lead and an abundance of plain wall-plaster. A layer of charcoal was spread over much of the area, varying in thickness from 0.06 m in Area 1 to 0.11 m in Area 2, which, in turn, was sealed by a further layer of destruction material containing a turner of Charles I (1632 – second issue). Only at the E end of Area 1 was there any sign of rubble foundation, presumably to support the adjoining pillar to the E.

AREA 3

The only structural remains recovered were found in this area. They comprised the massive whinstone foundations of a wall (A) aligned E–W, linking with a second wall (B) on a N–S

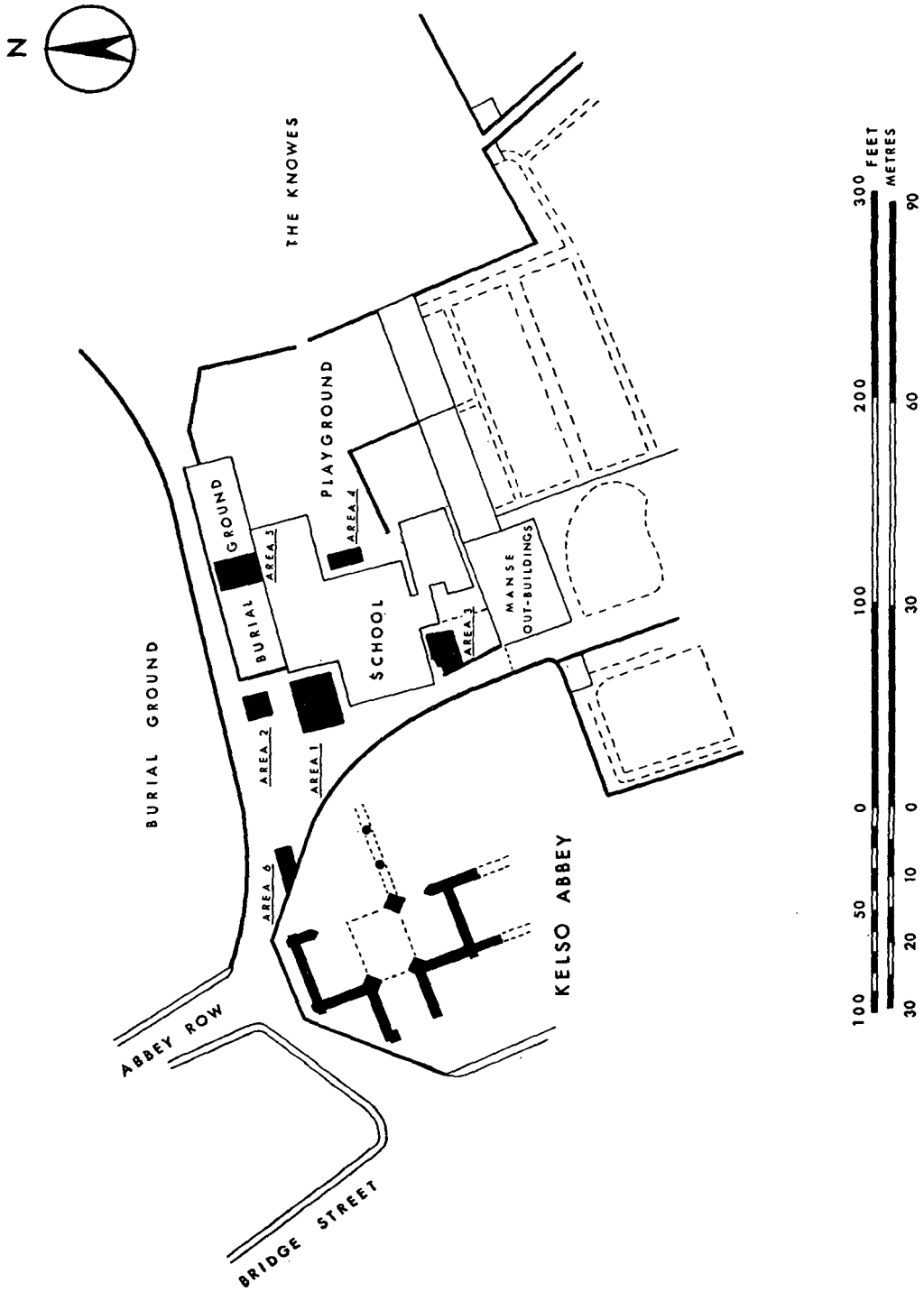


FIG 1 Kelso Abbey excavations 1971

axis and in alignment with the N-S foundation-trench located in Area 1. There was no trace of facing-stone and it was not possible to evaluate the precise thickness of either wall; wall A had been cut by the school foundation-trench while the W part of Wall B ran under the access road to the Manse. The nature of their construction was substantial. The base course comprised two lines of large whinstone boulders into which had been rammed smaller rocks and clay. A second course, no less significant in size, had been laid upon this and treated in the same manner. The third course showed obvious signs of rebuilding – and rebuilding most likely after a substantial conflagration. A large number of the limestone boulders in this third course bore signs of heavy burning, not only on their upper side but underneath also. They were obviously not burned *in situ* as the burning was not uniform over the whole course. It is possible that they were part of the original fabric though it is more likely that they represent a ‘patching-up’ operation – and one of a very debased form.

AREAS 4, 5 and 6

No evidence for the monastic ground-plan and, in particular, the length and nature of the E end, was forthcoming from these areas.

CONCLUSIONS

The paucity of building-stone and foundation material from the excavations serves to illustrate archaeologically what is implied in the documentary evidence. The structure that housed the Tironensian monks of Kelso, situated as it was four miles from the troubled border, was a natural target for destructive forces throughout its four centuries of history; indeed, for a time after the Wars of Independence, it had even to be abandoned (RCAMS 1956, 240) and it is subsequent to this or some similar event that the rebuilding with burnt limestone boulders can best be ascribed. Facing-stone is noticeable by its absence² though one has only to walk around the burgh to discover whither it strayed. More puzzling perhaps is the complete absence of rubble foundations at the intersection of the foundation-trenches in Area 1 and this poses the problem of the opposing fates with which the two ends of the church met. The W end still towers like ‘some antique Titan . . .’ above the surrounding cluster of houses whilst the E end would appear to have been thoroughly robbed. The Duke of Hertford’s resolve in 1545 to ‘rase and deface this house of Kelso so as the enemye shal have lytell commoditie of the same’ (RCAMS 1956, 240) would seem to have included the total uprooting of the foundations at the E end – but why did his forces, and subsequent pillagers, stop there? A reference in John Duncan’s deposition to the Vatican in 1517 provides the probable answer (RCAMS 1956, 241): ‘The church is divided by a transverse wall into two parts; the outer part is open to all, especially parishioners both women and men, who there hear masses and receive all sacraments from their parochial vicar. The other part, the back of the church, takes only monks who chant and celebrate the Divine Office.’

The Abbey church was bipartite for it served both the monks to its S side and the inhabitants of the burgh and parish on the N, and, long after the last monk had been dislodged from the E end, the W end continued in use as a parish church. It would appear from this that both the English armies and the reformers of 1560 simply desired to debase the monks and destroy only that which was wholly monastic. One fears for the legacy that would have been left us had the abbey church been totally immune from secular contact.

The location of substantial foundations in Area 3 and their apparent relation with the

robbed-out trenches in Area 1 would indicate that this was on the alignment of the E cloistral range, yet this perhaps creates more problems than it solves. The nave of the church would have to be limited to one of six bays, which is exceedingly stunted. For an Abbey of such importance and great wealth one would have expected at least two more, yet trenching further to the E revealed nothing to substantiate this. The lack of stratigraphy and the absence of stratified material, coupled with the relatively small area excavated, forbids any positive statement: only by further excavation in the Manse garden to the S could this be resolved. The idea of such a short nave may seem strangely unacceptable yet this strangeness extends to the whole building. The existence of W as well as E transepts makes it unique in Scotland and a rarity over Britain as a whole. Even with only six bays, the length of the church from the W porch to the start of the E crossing is over 52·0 m which is 5·0 m longer than the equivalent portion at Arbroath Abbey, also a Tironensian House of substantial proportions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to acknowledge both Kelso Town Council and Roxburgh County Council for their approval and help throughout the excavations. I am indebted to Mr Gordon McCrae who acted as assistant supervisor and to the firm of Ballantynes of Kelso for supplying all practical needs. I am grateful also to Dr McCracken of Kelso for providing me with much useful information concerning the Abbey and burgh.

NOTES

- 1 Excavation by HM Office of Works in 1933 failed to reveal any positive evidence for the location of the E transepts.
- 2 The sandstone facing-stones recovered were a corner-stone with a chamfered edge from Area 4 and a fragment of shaft from Area 2.

REFERENCES

- MacGibbon, D and Ross, T 1896 *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland*, vol I. Edinburgh.
 RCAMS 1956 Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, *The County of Roxburghshire*. Edinburgh.

The Society is indebted to the Civil Service Department for a grant towards the cost of this paper.