

## St Fillan's Church, Forgan, Fife

*by* John di Folco

The ruin of St Fillan's church, Forgan (NGR NO 446259), stands within its own graveyard on a slight eminence some 80 m W of the remains of Kirkton house (RCAMS 1933, 150-1)

overlooking the marshy flood plain of the small burn which flows eastwards to empty into the Morton Lochs in Tentsmuir. The proximity of the two buildings allows the church to share in the essentially defensive nature of the site. From a flat, gentle slope to the north the ground falls quickly away before rising to form a sweep of small hills to the south and west.

Out of use since 1841 when its inconvenient situation at the SE extremity of the parish seems to have been found particularly irksome by a community increasingly influenced by the growing commercial importance of Dundee (NSA 1845, 515), the church appears to have fallen rapidly into a state of decay. According to one source (Neish 1890, 72–4), the interior fittings were claimed by various heritors as their private property who then roused some of them to the highest bidders. By the 1890s the building was ruinous, although sufficiently accessible to allow J Russell Walker (1895) to prepare a plan drawing together with a number of fine architectural detail illustrations. By the time the Royal Commission visited the site in 1927 (RCAMS 1933, no. 266, 150) the building was so densely covered with ivy that, apart from noting the existence of a semicircular arch into the transeptal aisle and that both the aisle and the E end of the church had at one time been fitted with galleries, no details were otherwise visible. It was not until 1969–70 when the Central and North Fife Preservation Society removed the thick covering of ivy that had hampered the Royal Commission that a fuller examination of the fabric of the building was made possible. The purpose of this article is to examine, illustrate and discuss some of the features subsequently revealed.

## HISTORY

A church has existed at Forgan from at least as early as 1188–1202 when Alan de Lasceles, its patron, granted to the church of the Priory of St Andrews ‘the mother church of (his) estate of Naughton, namely, the church of Forgan, with the chapel of Naughton adjacent to that church and with a ploughgate of land adjacent to the same church, and with all tithes, offerings, revenues and rights belonging to it’ (St Andrews Liber, 260), a grant which was subsequently confirmed by Margery de Lasceles in October 1266 (St Andrews Liber, 109). The possibility of an even earlier structure cannot be ruled out, but, to date, it seems to have been based primarily on documentary evidence that showed a church of Forgrund bestowed by David I on the Priory of St Andrews *c* 1156 (St Andrews Liber, 187, 197–8, 205). It now seems certain that there was confusion between the Fife church under discussion and that of ‘Forgan in Gowrie’ or Longforan (Campbell 1899, 64). The date of the dedication of the building cannot be given with any certainty as it is never referred to as anything other than Forgan in sources dating from the 12th century onwards. Indeed it is not until the end of the 17th century that it is called ‘St Philans or Forgan . . . one of the kirks of the priory of St Andrews’ by Sir Robert Sibbald (1803, 418–19). It may be noted, however, that mention occurs of a chapel of St Fillan in Glendochart in October 1318 (Dowden *et al* 1908, 119, 226), which could suggest that the popularity of that saint through association with Bruce prior to Bannockburn (Bellenden 1531, 273, 274) may have led to a number of similar dedications being made elsewhere in Scotland, as for example at St Fillan’s, Aberdour and at Luncarty (Mackinlay 1914, 168, 170) of which St Fillan’s, Forgan may have been one.

Although there is a little documentary material available concerning the fabric at the end of the 17th century and for part of the 18th, it touches only on the internal furnishings and the roof of the building (Scottish Record Office, CH 2/160 Forgan Kirk Session Minutes, entries for November 1697, April 1699, January 1726, April 1769). In 1770 there is reference to a ‘thorough

repair' being carried out but no further information is given as to what part of the fabric was involved or how extensive the work was (NSA 1845, 515).

### ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The present T-shaped structure (fig 1) is basically a composite one consisting of what has been the plain rectangular block so typical of many Scottish medieval parish churches with the

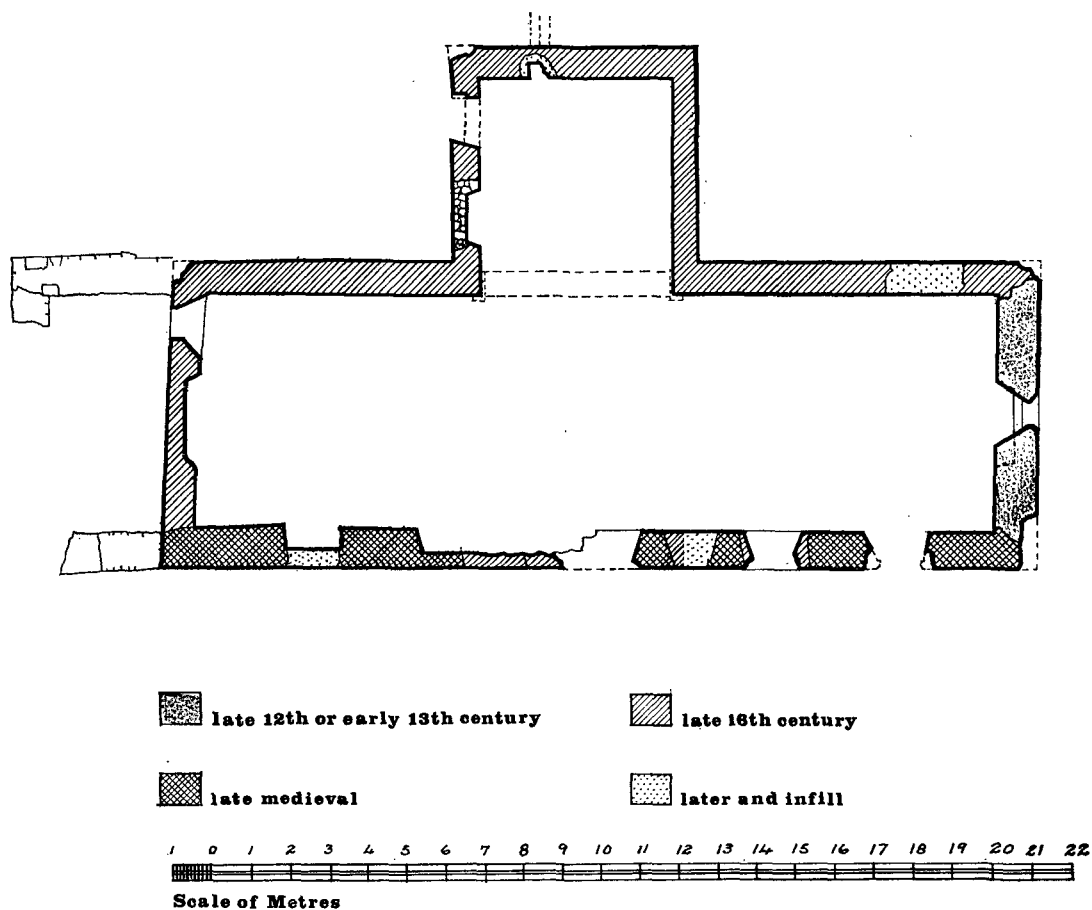


FIG 1 Plan of Old Parish Church, Forgan, Fife

addition of a N aisle in the late 16th century (Hay 1957, 13). The existing evidence indicates that the building was originally slightly more elongated in its medieval phase and that its W gable has been withdrawn by 4.11 m to its present position (fig 1). The total internal length of the church is 20.34 m; its width 6.04 m; the aisle measures 5.56 m by 4.93 m. With the exception of the E gable and parts of the S wall, which are mostly of light-grey sandstone, the fabric is largely built of locally quarried whin rubble with a few surviving sandstone quoins.

The existence of the E gable wall (pl 24a) demonstrates the fact that the chancel has been square ended, while its internal surface presents vestigial but firm evidence for ascribing this part

of the fabric to a late 12th or very early 13th century date (cf Leuchars, RCAMS 1933, 190). On the removal of the ivy a badly mutilated central window was revealed. Despite the absence of a number of the voussoirs, its round-headed rear arch and embrasure could be either Romanesque or Transitional. The sill of the window has been broken and removed and the lower part of the wall drastically thinned to accommodate a later staircase, presumably of wood, to give access to the loft, three beam-holes for which can still be seen. Daylight to the loft was obtained by driving a square-headed window through the upper level of the gable, its sill destroying the arch of the window below. The structural consequence of the removal of the internal lower wall courses and the added fenestration was to weaken the E gable to the extent that an external buttressing was necessary by thickening the wall for nearly half its height.

Where visible through the lime plastering, parts of the internal masonry are of yellow-brown ashlar set in regular courses. In the upper levels, where there has been some disturbance, occasional squared whin rubble is intermixed with the predominant sandstone which is also shaped to form the skews of an earlier, slightly steeper roof pitch (pl 24a).

The discovery of numerous, broken medieval tile fragments scattered outside the chancel and a small section of a tile floor within at some 0.69 m below the present floor level should also be considered in the general dating of this part of the church (di Folco and Harris 1972, 252–5). It has been suggested that, because of their compositional similarities, these tiles might have been laid shortly after Forgan was granted to the priory church of St Andrews.

The existing remains of the S wall are so fragmentary, being reduced for its W half in places to its lowest courses, so obviously altered, or so obscured by the accumulated soil from the graveyard, that it is difficult to locate any evidence in this section by which one could attempt to date it precisely. Fortunately its E half is more substantial, although even here the masonry varies a good deal in character and quality. It is composed of rectangular blocks of soft yellowish and grey sandstone roughly brought to courses and patched with squared whin rubble being pinned in places at its upper levels with pieces of stone slate. Traces of two windows survive in this wall. Towards the E end a doorway has been inserted by breaking through the sill of one window, the glass grooves and iron dook holes of which can still be seen in two of the jamb stones. The other, which has been widened by the removal of its jambs and heightened, has a later segmental top of poorly cut sandstone voussoirs. The positioning of these windows would suggest a symmetrical arrangement along this wall of originally four or five.

A doorway with chamfered lintel and jambs has been narrowed and infilled with rubble most likely in the immediate post-Reformation period when its roughly central position would have interfered with the arrangement of the pulpit (Hay 1957, 22). A tentative suggestion that the entire wall dates from the late medieval period is offered. As already mentioned, the W gable (pl 24b) does not occupy its original position but has been pulled back and rebuilt during the late 16th century when major alterations seem to have been made both to the gable and to the entire N wall. In the former a large window, similar in style to that in the S wall, provided the main daylight to the W loft. The erection of the access stair to the loft has occasioned the removal of a considerable quantity of walling from floor to sill level. At the same time, to compensate for light loss caused by the positioning of the loft, a lower window was inserted which, apart from prominently splayed ingoes, retains no feature of interest. There has been no attempt to bond the whin rubble of the gable with either the N or S walls, so that the whole structure, slightly askew as it is, gives the impression of shoddy and hasty workmanship. The flat apex of the gable indicates that it was at one time capped by a small belfry.

The principal and only feature of the windowless N wall is the elegant late 16th-century semicircular arch leading into the transeptal aisle and laird's loft (pl 24c). Springing from simple

oblong capitals the delicately grooved voussoirs (fig 2) and keystone of soft pink-grey sandstone are some of the few remaining architectural details which, along with the door mouldings in the laird's loft (fig 2), relieve the overall austerity of the building. Otherwise the N wall is composed almost entirely of nondescript loosely packed whin rubble with perhaps a few courses of late medieval material located towards the W end and the occasional medieval floor-tile used as pinning in a patch of later infill towards the east. While half of its height is still obscured by lime plastering thus making a structural analysis difficult, it is thought that the entire N wall, the W

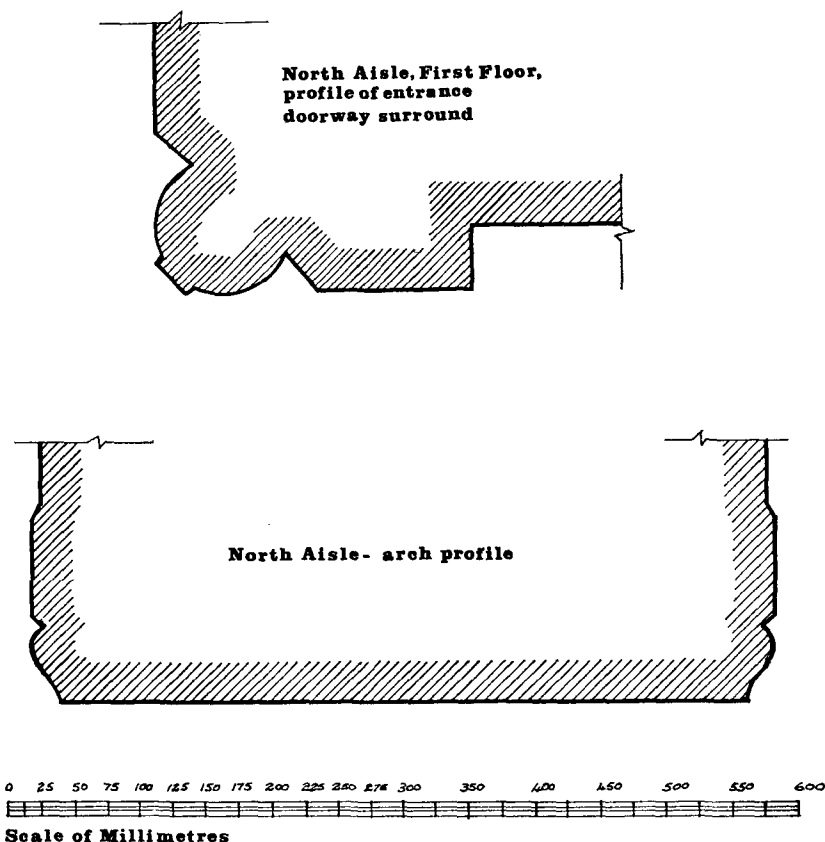


FIG 2

gable and the N aisle could all be assigned to the same late 16th-century period when the construction of a feature like the transeptal aisle with its laird's loft was commonplace (Hay 1957, 22, 29). An alteration of this kind would create an architectural symmetry and intimacy more suited to the different liturgical requirements of the Reformed faith.

The transeptal aisle had originally two storeys. The ground floor was entered by a small doorway with a crudely chamfered lintel in the W wall and was lit by a single W window now heavily damaged. The first floor, or laird's loft, was reached by an external staircase the raggles for which can still be seen in the N wall (pl 24c). From remaining fragments *in situ* or lying on the ground, the doorway to this floor had finely moulded surrounds (fig 2). Internally, beam holes are visible in the E and N walls, the latter having also a large cupboard recess. Both floors had the comfort of fireplaces which shared a common flue in the N wall. A small window above the

ground-floor entrance provided daylight for the loft. A crudely fashioned peephole with a book recess beneath looks out eastwards towards Kirkton house. There is no apparent evidence to indicate that the aisle ever functioned as a burial place as did the Denmiln aisle at Abdie (RCAMS 1933, 2).

## CONCLUSION

The largely indeterminate features of the ruin make a fuller and more ambitious interpretation extremely difficult. The successive alterations to the medieval building in which earlier masonry has been re-used, combined with the varying quality of the workmanship that is evident in many of the re-constituted parts, create an ultimate impression of disappointment at the consequent lack of architectural cohesion which is not redeemed by the few surviving architectural embellishments. None the less, despite these reservations, the building retains a kind of homely dignity in harmony with its rural setting. An unpretentious structure, severely functional and compact, it not only embodies in a modest representative way some of the main architectural changes that followed upon the Reformation in Scotland but suggests, mainly in the medieval archaeological traces it has yielded, a standard of internal finishing comparable to the more ambitious ecclesiastical buildings.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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a Inner face of E gable wall



b Inner face of W gable wall



c Transeptal arch and interior of N aisle with Laird's entrance, fireplace and cupboard recess in N wall