

---

## 2 Introduction *by Gordon Ewart*

---

These broken arches and tottering columns – these deserted cells and weed-grown aisles – these neglected monuments of belted Knights and mitred Abbots (Thomson 1845, 358).

The extensive ruins of Dundrennan Abbey lie to the east of Dundrennan village, east of the A711, the road between Dalbeattie and Kirkcudbright (*illus 1*). The abbey buildings occupy an artificially enhanced terrace to the north and west of a sharp bend in the course of the Abbey Burn (*illus 2 & illus 3*). The selection of this site exploited the naturally rising profile of the west side of the valley, as well as the lowest lying area of well drained ground within the valley. The A711 road and the present village of Dundrennan occupy a further terrace upslope from the abbey site, and define the likely maximum extent of the entire abbey precinct. The building in 1874 of the present manse, now a private house with gardens to the north and formerly an orchard to the west, saw the clearance of abbey structures towards the south-west of the complex. These post-medieval buildings towards the southern end of the abbey terrace appear to confirm the viable extent of ground suitable for building, and probably closely echo the

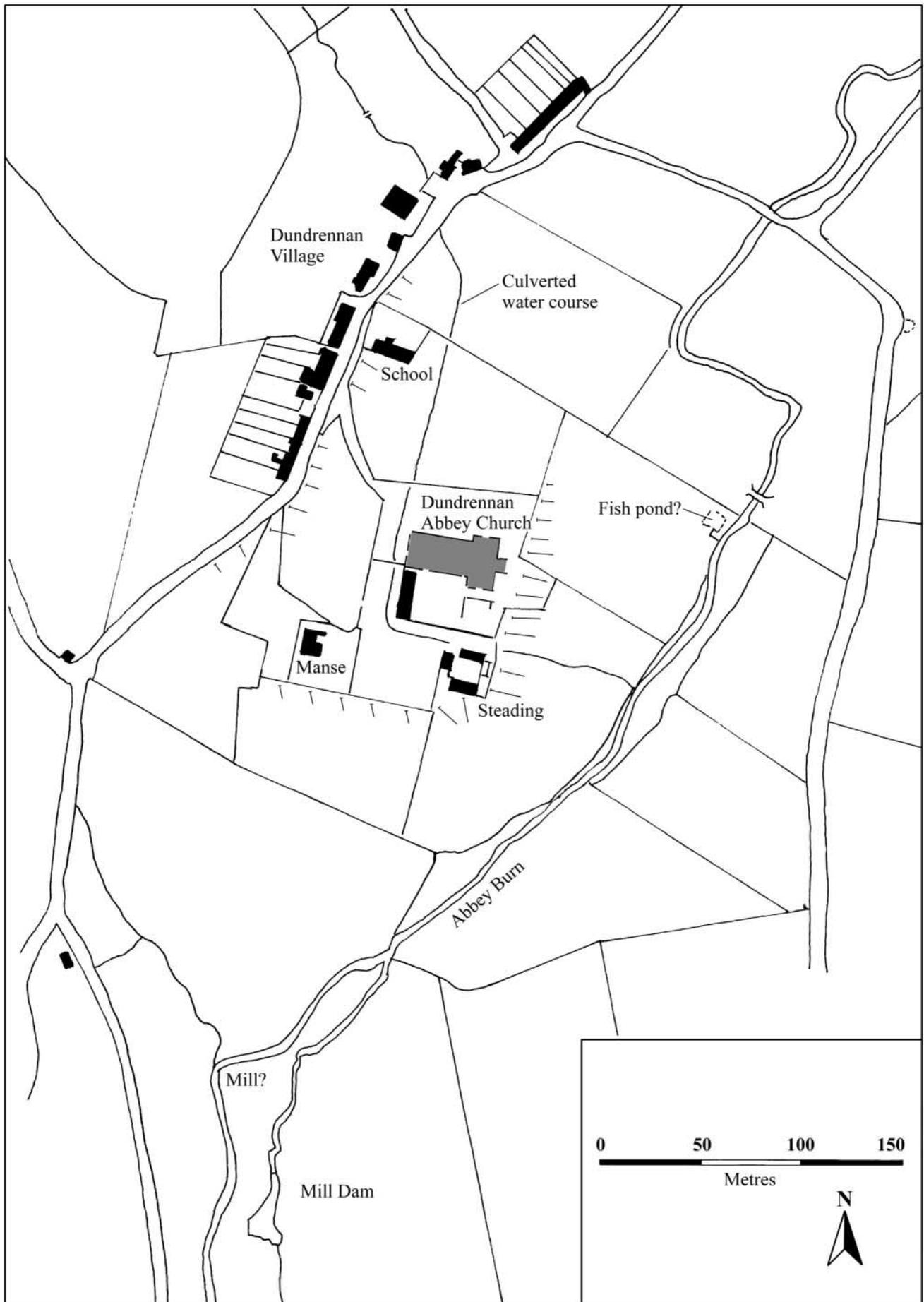
locations of early ancillary structures to the south of the cloister itself.

The village and abbey occupy a wide area within the steep-sided valley of the Abbey Burn. Much of the cloister still survives alongside the abbey church, although many of the stone buildings have been robbed for local house building and drystone dyke construction. The south range however, prior to the recent programme of work, was virtually completely hidden, with only the doors from the cloister to the refectory, kitchen, warming house etc being visible within the area defined on the south side by a 19th-century boundary wall separating the manse from the ruined abbey (*illus 4 & illus 5*).

The typical criteria of well-drained, secluded, wooded valleys for Cistercian foundations of the 12th century are well met at Dundrennan. The sharp bend in the course of the Abbey Burn also provided suitable areas for cultivation to the east of the main abbey buildings, a further favourable condition for its foundation. The river drained the area of the abbey and adjacent fields, creating the potential for gardens and orchards, although the ground is prone to flooding. The supply of water to the abbey was probably via one of the known tributaries feeding



*Illus 2 View of the site from south-east*



*Illus 3 Dundrennan Abbey and environs (Based on the Ordnance Survey of 1908)*

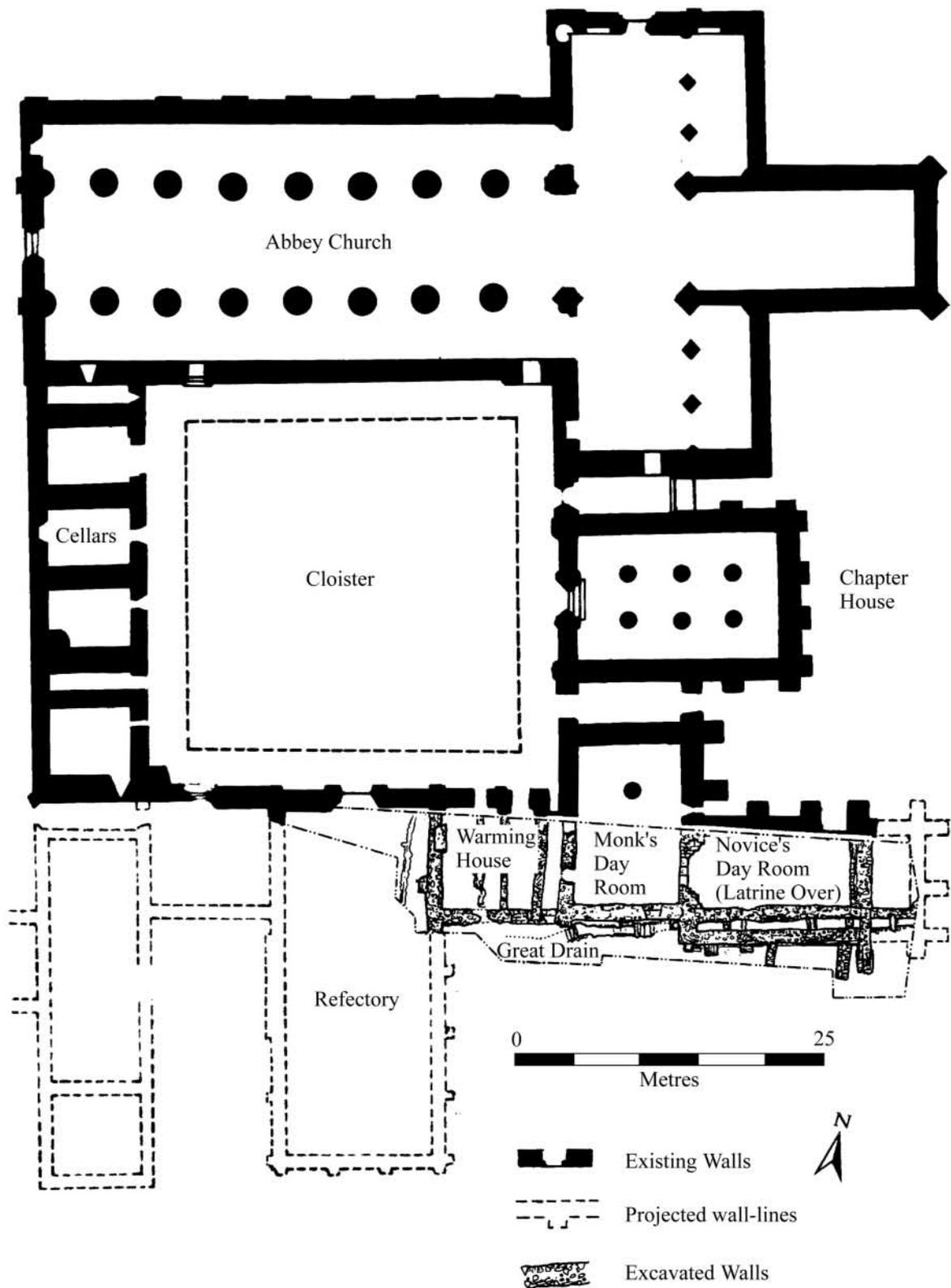


*Illus 4 Room 4 under excavation, from west*

into the Abbey Burn from the west. A culverted water course runs down towards the nearby site of the present school, and may well represent a fresh-water supply to the abbey, now obscured.

The local topography is the result of a series of small river systems draining the granitic uplands, which form the promontory between Auchencairn Bay to the east and Kirkcudbright Bay to the west.

The Abbey Burn itself rises near Doon Hill, and flows past the abbey for a further distance of 2.4 km (1.5 miles) to the Solway Firth at Abbey Burn Foot. The shore around the mouth of the Abbey Burn was quarried to supply stone for some of the moulded elements of the monastic buildings, and the area formed a natural harbour, still used to the present day.



*Illus 5 Principal rooms of the abbey and the area of excavation*