

A plan of 1545 for the fortification of Kelso Abbey

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ABSTRACT

It has long been known from surviving correspondence that the Italian gunfounder Archangelo Arcano prepared two drawings illustrating proposals for the fortification of Kelso Abbey, following its capture by the English army under the leadership of the Earl of Hertford in 1545. It had been assumed those drawings had been lost. However, one of them has now been identified and is here published, together with a brief discussion of what it can tell us about the abbey in the mid-16th century.

The purpose of this contribution is to bring to wider attention a pre-Reformation plan that had for long been thought to represent Burton-on-Trent Benedictine Abbey, but that has recently been identified by Nicholas Cooper as a proposal of 1545 for fortifying Kelso's Tironensian Abbey. The plan in question (RIBA 69226) was among a small number of papers deposited by the Marquess of Anglesey with the Royal Institute of British Architects, whose collections are now absorbed into the Drawings and Archives Collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum. This plan had been the subject of some scholarly attention as early as 1798, having been published by Stebbing Shaw, albeit without the proposed added fortifications, in his *History and Antiquities of Staffordshire* (Shaw 1798). Shaw assumed that it represented Burton Abbey and captioned it as the 'Ancient Ground Plan of Burton Abbey'. More recently, the plan was touched upon in a paper by Sir Howard Colvin (Colvin 1999).¹ Analysis of the evidence for Burton by Ian Atherton, however, had demonstrated that it could not,

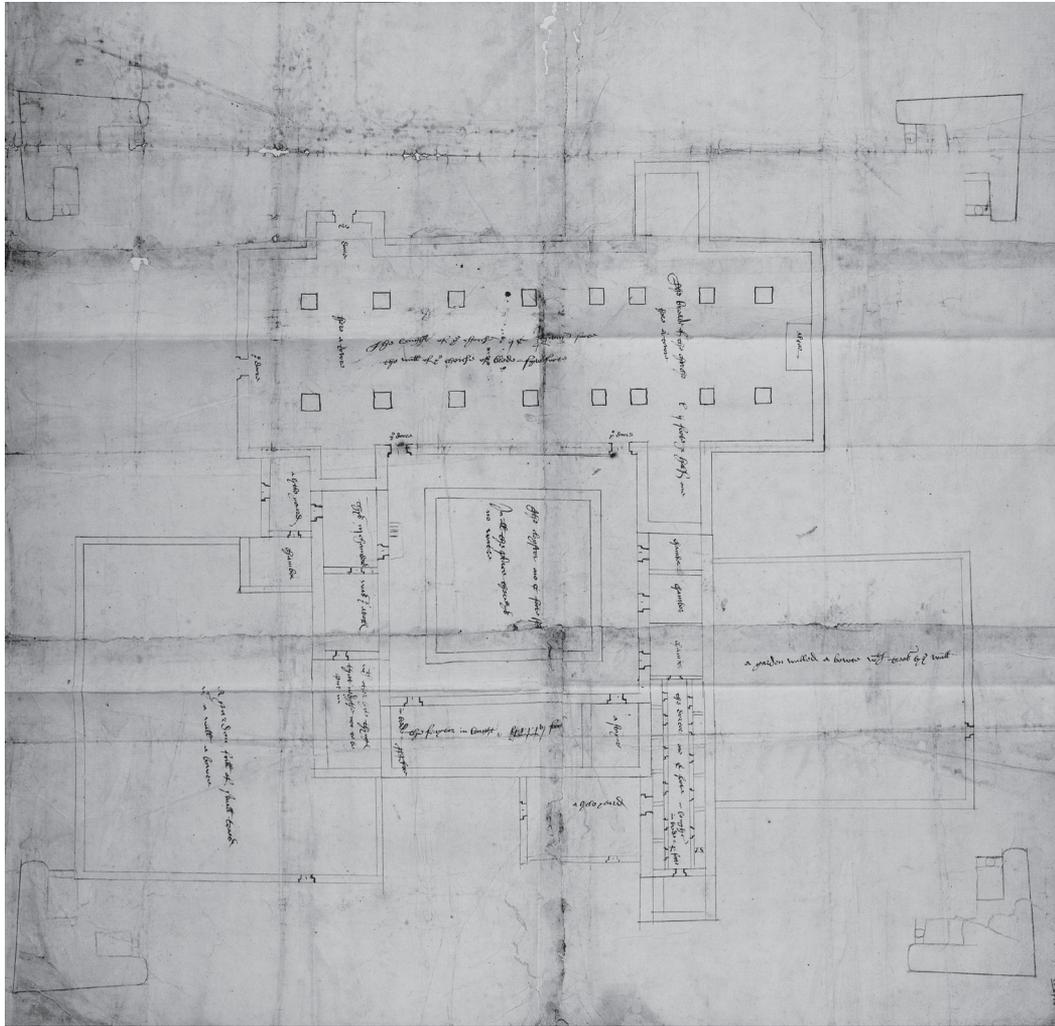
in fact, represent that abbey (Atherton 1995–6), though there was then no basis for offering an alternative identification.

It was Nicholas Cooper who established the connection between the drawing and a hitherto presumed lost proposal for the fortification of Kelso, when he was working on the architectural activities of William Paget at Burton-on-Trent for a paper to be delivered to the Society of Antiquaries of London.² Proposals for fortifying Kelso were known to have been drawn by the Italian gunfounder Archangelo Arcano in 1545, in the course of Henry VIII's 'Rough Wooing' of the hand of the infant Mary, Queen of Scots, on behalf of his son, Prince Edward. Mr Cooper recognised that the double-cross layout of the church shown on the plan, with its pair of axially aligned towers, together with the proposal for fortifying the site by the construction of four bastions at its corners, made it almost certain that it was one of two proposals for the fortification of Kelso. The first of those plans had initially been sent to Francis, fifth Earl of Shrewsbury. It presumably found its way

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Theiner, A (ed) 1864 *Vetera Monumenta Hibernorum et Scotorum Historiam Illustrantia*. Rome.

Watt, D E R & Shead, N F 2001 *The Heads of Religious Houses in Scotland from Twelfth to Sixteenth Centuries*. Edinburgh: Scottish Record Society.



ILLUS 1 Kelso Abbey, Archangelo Arcano's plan of 1545 (RIBA Library Photographs Collection; RIBA 69226)

into the Marquess of Anglesey's collection as a consequence of his ancestor, Sir William Paget, first Baron Paget, being Henry VIII's Principal Secretary of State, the office holder who would have had the responsibility for seeking the king's approval for such a scheme.

Kelso Abbey was an extremely important house for the history of monasticism, not only for Scotland but for the British Isles as a whole, since its initial foundation at Selkirk in

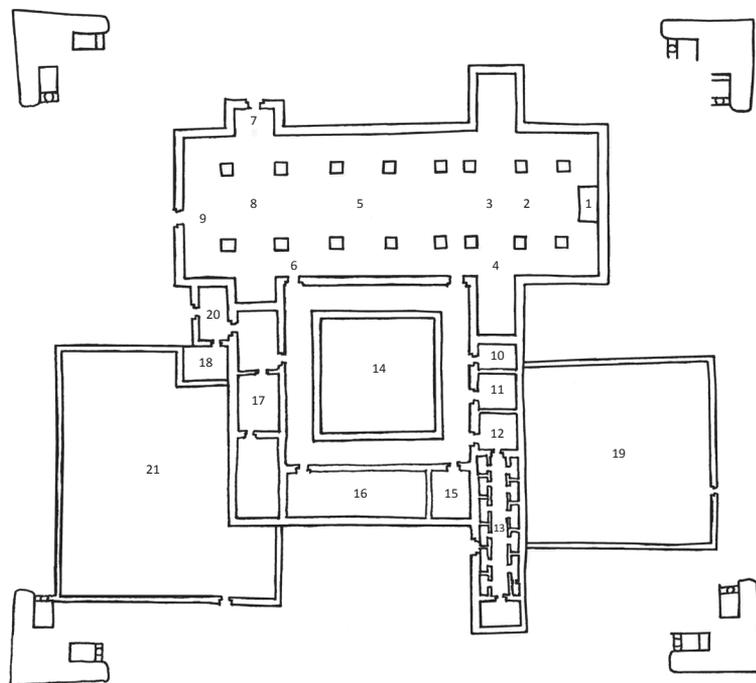
1113 has been shown to be the first for any of the reformed religious orders in these islands (Barrow 1973). It was moved to its present site at Kelso in 1128 (*Chronica de Mailros* 1835: 69). Although it now survives in no more than a very fragmentary state, largely due to the depredations it suffered during the wars with England as a consequence of its close proximity to the Border, the unique form of its church was described in a deposition

of 1517 by a Glasgow priest, John Duncan, that is preserved in the Vatican archives (*Vetera Monumenta*: 526–8).³ Duncan's description makes clear that the abbey had two sets of transepts and two square towers, an arrangement clearly indicated on the supposed plan of Burton-on-Trent.⁴ No more of the abbey church than the two west bays of the south nave arcade wall, together with the partial shells of the western transepts, crossing and western vestibule now survive. However, excavation has located what are thought to be the partial footings of the south-west pier of the eastern crossing and of the south-west corner of the south-eastern transept, and these suggest that the nave between the two sets of transepts was of six bays and that the eastern transepts were of greater lateral projection than those to the west (Tabraham 1984: 401).

The abbey's sufferings in the succession of wars with England began as early as 1305, when it was stated that its charters had been burnt in the war instigated by Edward I (*Memoranda de Parlamento* 1993: 188), while in about 1316, it was said that the impact of the wars had reduced the monks to begging for the necessities of life (*Liber de Calchou* 1846: no. 309). The English occupation of nearby Roxburgh Castle, until its destruction by the Scots in 1460, was also to be problematic for the abbey (*Calendar of Scottish Supplications* 1934: 177; Tabraham 1996). But the damage suffered in the early 14th century was greatly surpassed by that repeatedly wrought by English forces in the first half of the 16th century. There had already been a raid in 1522 by Lord Dacre, Warden of the Eastern March, during which the abbey's gatehouse was burned (*Letters and Papers* 1864–1932: vol 3 pt 2: nos 3098 and 3135). In the course of the Rough Wooing there were to be devastating attacks, on 26 October 1542, by the Duke of Norfolk (*Letters and Papers* 1864–1932, vol 17: nos

996 and 998; Phillips 1999: 148–53), and in September 1545 by the Earl of Hertford (*Letters and Papers* 1864–1932, vol 20 pt 2: no. 456); there may also have been an attack in 1544. Following the attack of 1545 Hertford vowed 'to rase and deface this house of Kelso so as the enemye shal have lytell commoditie of the same' (*State Papers* 1830–52, vol 5 pt 4: 515). On further consideration, however, he instead proposed that the site should be fortified, using materials from the damaged abbey buildings, and it was to illustrate how this might be carried out that Archangelo Arcano's plans were prepared (*History of the King's Works*, vol 4: 389 and 392; Merriman 2000: 149–50).

Archangelo Arcano was one of three members of a family hailing from Cesena in northern Italy who were in the service of Henry VIII, from at least 1529 (Blackmore 1976: 5; *History of Works*, vol 4: 378). He was to undertake tasks varying from spying on French military arrangements around Calais to overseeing or advising on fortifications in northern England and Scotland, including those at Wark, Holy Island, Roxburgh and St Andrews. It was in February 1545 that he submitted a first plan for Kelso with 'four bulwarks to flank it' (*Letters and Papers* 1864–1932, vol 20 pt 1: nos 141–2; *History of Works*, vol 4: 389), and he submitted a second proposal for the site in September of that year (*Letters and Papers* 1864–1932, vol 20 pt 2: nos 308, 328 and 347; *History of Works*, vol 4: 392). Although it was recorded that the king himself 'lyketh very well your nue platte', presumably in reference to the second plan, following submission to the Privy Council a number of faults were quickly identified. It was pointed out that the ground was too stony to permit the rapid construction that would be required, and that the site was greatly overlooked. The proposal was abandoned (Merriman 2000: 149–50).



ILLUS 2 Sketch key to the plan of 1545 (the spellings have been modernised). (1) altar; (2) the breadth of the church 52ft and half; (3) here a tower; (4) the door; (5) the length of the church 228ft, the walls of the church of breadth 5 feet; (6) the door; (7) the door; (8) here a tower; (9) the door; (10) chamber; (11) chamber; (12) chamber; (13) the dorter 110ft in length, in breadth 10ft; (14) the cloister 100 feet, in all the place there is no water; (15) a stair; (16) the frater in length 96ft, in breadth 30ft; (17) these three chambers were the abbot's, with other little things not put in; (18) chamber; (19) a garden walled about with trees by the wall; (20) a little yard; (21) a garden full of small trees with a wall about

It is not known if the plan that has now been identified was that of February or of September 1545, and nor is it clear what the differences were between the two drawings. What was perhaps common to both plans was a proposal for four orillon bastions at the angles of a square enclosure, creating what was in essence the simplest form of *trace italienne* fortification. On the plan in question there are also flanker gun emplacements in the re-entrant angles between the bastions and the rampart that enclosed the square area, though it cannot

be known if they were proposed from the start or if they represented an improvement in the revised scheme. Existing walls were apparently to be incorporated where possible. To the east and west of the cloister, the rampart was evidently to make use of garden walls, and it may also have been intended to incorporate the north wall of the north-east transept and the south wall of the east conventual range. The rampart would presumably have been largely of earth, albeit perhaps with some stone revetment, especially to the bastions.

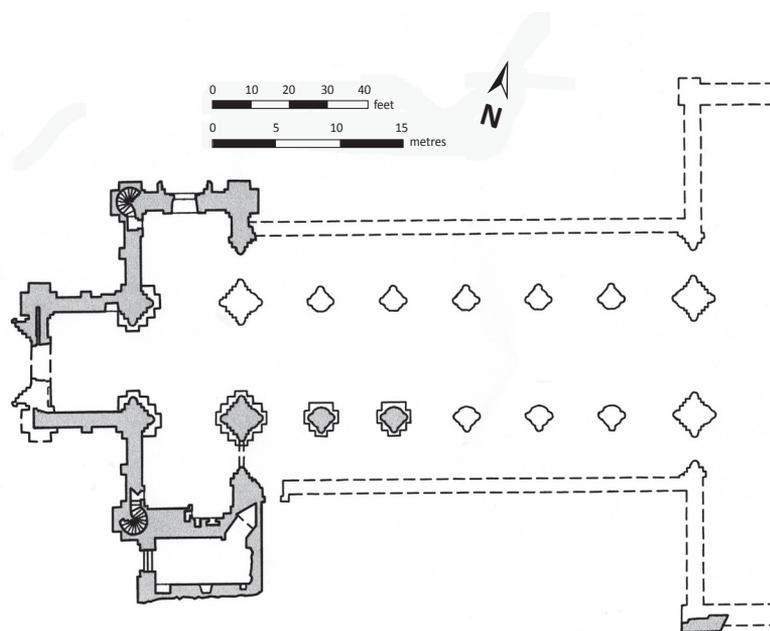
Whatever its shortcomings as a proposed fortification, the plan provides invaluable evidence for the layout and late medieval condition of the abbey, though it must be accepted that the drawing is highly schematic and that it is inaccurate in a number of respects. For example, it shows the western vestibule, beyond the west transepts, as being broad enough to be aisled, but since the shell of this part survives to a considerable extent it can be seen that it never has been flanked by aisles. Such a basic inaccuracy must also place in question the depiction of the eastern limb as being of two bays, with aisles that extend the full length. Beyond that, the nave between the two sets of transepts is shown as being of four irregularly spaced bays, whereas the archaeological evidence suggests it was of six regularly spaced bays. Nevertheless, his depiction of the eastern transepts as being of greater projection than their western counterparts is in accord with the archaeological evidence.

The details of the church plan were presumably matters of no more than incidental concern to Arcano, and we must be grateful that he provided as much information as he did. As might be expected, he showed a little more interest in the dimensions of the buildings, since the proposed fortifications would have to be raised around them, though even these appear to have been only approximately measured. He gave the breadth of the church as 52ft 6in (16m), though the internal breadth was in fact closer to 57ft 6in (17.5m).⁵ He gave the length of the church as 228ft (69.5m) with walls 5ft (1.52m) thick. The incomplete state of the building means there is no way of checking the length, but if the western vestibule were excluded from the measurement, this would suggest the lost eastern limb could have been three bays long, with a length of around 18m. Arcano gives the dimensions of the cloister as 100ft

square (30.48m square), which is not too far from the approximately 106ft 6in square (32.44m square) suggested by archaeological investigation (Tabraham 1984: 401).

Arcano's plan is of particular interest for indicating the layout and late medieval use of the ranges around the cloister, although John Duncan's description of 1517 makes clear that by the early 16th century, parts of those ranges had already lost their roofs in the wars with England. The plan suggests that, unlike what appears to have been happening at a number of other religious communities by the 16th century, the buildings were still being used communally and largely in accord with the original intentions. There is no evidence, for example, of subdivision into smaller architectural units to meet the domestic needs of groupings of monks attached to the households of various obedientiaries, as appears, in some cases, to have happened elsewhere.⁶

It is not clear if the plan depicts the ground storey or the first-floor level, but since doorways are shown into the cloister walks it seems that it is mainly the former. In the west range there were three chambers that made up the abbot's residence, with a fourth chamber extending to the west, and 'a garden full of small trees with a wall about it' that was presumably provided for the pleasure and amenity of the abbot himself. In the south range there is a refectory (fraytor) running parallel to the south cloister walk, of which the dimensions are given as 96 × 30ft (29.26 × 9.14m), and which has a stair at its east end. There is no trace on the plan of the lesser refectory referred to in the description of 1517, which was perhaps a place where meat could be eaten, so that at least the letter of the rule against eating meat in the refectory could be observed.⁷ Since the two refectories are specifically referred to as being on a side of the cloister, it may be that one had been



ILLUS 3 Plan of Kelso Abbey in its existing state (Brian Pringle after Richard Fawcett)

inserted over the other, with the upper one reached by the stair at the east end of the range.⁸

As might be expected, the east range was the most complex of the three. There is a succession of three chambers extending southwards from the south-east transept, and these were, perhaps, the sacristy, chapter house and warming room. To the south of those, the dormitory (dortor) is depicted, which was presumably at the upper level, and beyond which is a small space that was, perhaps, the latrine. The plan of the dormitory is of particular interest for providing what appears to be a unique depiction of an arrangement of individual cubicles, with six on each side of a central corridor-like space. Since records suggest that there were twelve monks in the house by the time of the Reformation in 1560 (Cowan & Easson 1976: 68–9),⁹ this could possibly be a precise

depiction of the arrangements. The plan gives the dimensions of the dormitory as 100 × 10ft (30.48 × 3.05m), and though the stated width sounds improbable, this dimension could refer to the central corridor rather than the dormitory hall as a whole.

The area proposed for fortification in 1545 was confined to that covered by the church and main nucleus of conventual buildings, excluding the many houses and lodgings that were referred to in the description of 1517. An aisled building to the east of the main complex that was located by excavation in 1975–6, and that was plausibly identified as an infirmary hall (Tabraham 1984: 374–5 & 399–401), is not shown, though the east wall of the enclosed garden to the east of the east range appears to be approximately where the west wall of the infirmary was found. This could suggest that the infirmary had been so badly damaged in the course of one or more English

attacks that it had been demolished and the site given over to a garden. The plan also excludes a complex of buildings to the south-west of the abbey that was located through excavation in 1996–8, and which included a building tentatively identified as a granary (Lowe 2005). These latter buildings, which are likely to have been within the outer courtyard, were thought by the excavators to have been abandoned before the secularisation of the abbey, and this could have been as a result of damage caused in the ‘Rough Wooing’. This perhaps provides supporting evidence for the infirmary having been similarly already demolished. Whatever the case, however, it seems likely that it would have made good sense on grounds of both economy and speed of construction to limit the area suggested for enclosure by the proposed fortifications. It may also have been the intention to improve sight lines by demolishing any monastic or burghal structures in the immediate vicinity of the enclosed area, whatever their state of preservation.

There can be little doubt that the succession of English attacks in the 16th century left the abbey structurally devastated, and any prospects of subsequent recovery would have depended on extremely dynamic leadership. Whether or not those who acted on behalf of James Stewart, the infant bastard of King James V appointed commendator in 1534 (Watt & Shead 2001: 125–6), would have had any interest either in reconstruction of the buildings or in fostering a revival of conventual life cannot now be known. What is certain is that a century and a half later in 1693, when John Slezer depicted the abbey from the south, its church was in much the same fragmentary state that we now see, though parts of the south claustral range appear to have survived up to that stage and to have been adapted for use of some kind (Slezer 1693: pls 50 and 51). In 1648, a compact parish church had been

formed in the western transepts and crossing area, with a new bellcote, dated 1649, above the gable of the north-west transept, where the main entrance for layfolk continued to be located.¹⁰ The new church was covered by a stone vault, presumably of barrel form, and above it was the town gaol, which was also vaulted. This arrangement is partly visible in a view of 1784 amongst the papers of General Hutton in the National Library of Scotland (Adv. MS 30.5.22, 157b), and in the engraving dated 1790 that was published by Francis Grose (Grose 1789–91). Proposals to build a more architecturally ‘seemly’ parish church within the west part of the abbey were put forward by James Nisbet in 1770 (National Archives of Scotland, RHP 8466/4),¹¹ but it was instead decided to build a new church to Nisbet’s designs on a different site. The walls and vaults of the inserted parish church were progressively removed between 1805 and 1816, after which there were campaigns of repair in 1823 and 1866; the abbey was placed in state care by the Duke of Roxburghe in 1919.

A combination of its extraordinary plan and extremely fragmentary state means that Kelso has always puzzled historians, and it has consequently attracted widely ranging speculations about its medieval appearance. We are therefore particularly fortunate that the rediscovery, in about 1920, of the description of 1517 provided partial answers to some of the questions that have to be asked,¹² while excavations in the 1970s and 1990s amplified our understanding of both the abbey church and the wider monastic precinct (Tabraham 1984; Lowe 1996–9). The identification of the plan of 1545 has now added a further invaluable strand of information about the medieval form of this most fascinating abbey. It might be added that this plan will be of the greatest value in informing any future assessments of archaeological sensitivities

and decisions on where excavation might be best directed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Nicholas Cooper for bringing his research to my attention and for encouraging me to produce this paper, and I also owe thanks to Lawrence Butler for alerting me to Mr Cooper's research. I am grateful to both of them for their comments on an early draft of this paper.

NOTES

- 1 The plan was also referred to by Colvin in a paper delivered at a conference in Oxford organised by Dr Lawrence Butler in November 1985 on 'The Use or Afterlife of Dissolved Monastic Houses, 1540–1640'. In a footnote to the paper published in 1999 he commented that the bastions sketched on the plan indicated that Lord Paget of Beaudesert (to whom Burton Abbey had been given) considered the license to fortify he had been granted was 'more than just an old fashioned "license to crenellate"'.¹
- 2 'The development of a mid-Tudor house: William Paget at Burton-on-Trent', delivered at Burlington House on 17 March 2011.
- 3 Duncan's deposition was subsequently published and discussed in Ferguson 1919–22, and in RCAHMS 1956: 240–1.
- 4 No other church in Scotland is known with certainty to have had this arrangement of double transepts and towers, though it is possible that the collegiate burgh church of Stirling was planned to have a crossing tower that was axially aligned with the western tower, in the early 16th century, on the evidence of the western piers of the choir. The ultimate source of Kelso's double cross plan and axially aligned towers could lie in Ottonian and Romanesque Germany, though the more immediate inspiration is likely to have come from one of the great Benedictine abbeys of the eastern counties of England, with which David I must certainly have become familiar before his accession to the Scottish throne in 1124. Both Bury St Edmunds, started in 1081, and Ely, started in 1082, had double transepts and

axially aligned towers, and building was still in progress at both of those when work commenced at Kelso.

- 5 Lawrence Butler has suggested to me that the differences between the dimensions given by Arcano and the actual dimensions could be because he was using a non-standard measuring rod, on which 1ft was the equivalent of 13 modern inches.
- 6 The possible late-medieval adaptation of some of the conventual buildings in the neighbouring abbeys of Melrose and Dryburgh is briefly touched upon in Fawcett and Oram 2004: 60, and Fawcett and Oram 2005: 119–24.
- 7 The architectural provisions adopted to allow the consumption of meat in Benedictine houses are discussed in Harvey (1993: 41–6), where the construction of rooms associated with the principal refectory, known as the *cawagium* and the misericord at Westminster Abbey, are discussed.
- 8 By an extraordinary coincidence, there is another description of a Scottish Tironensian house dating from 1517 in the Vatican archives, in that case relating to Arbroath Abbey, a daughter of Kelso. (*Vetera Monumenta*, no DCCCCXXV.) In that description, a priest, Arthur Boece, said that Arbroath also had two refectories, one for common days and the other for feasts. Lawrence Butler has pointed out to me that at the Cistercian abbey of Kirkstall there is evidence of a floor having been inserted c 1450 in the refectory in order to create two levels of dining halls, with the lower level being served by a newly constructed meat kitchen. One wonders if something similar could have been done at Kelso.
- 9 Duncan's description of 1517 says that at that stage there were 36 or 40 monks plus the abbot, though that figure may be over-ambitious.
- 10 It is made clear in Duncan's description of 1517 that the nave had always served the parish as its church, with a wall (presumably the pulpitum) separating the part used by the laity from that used by the monks. (*Vetera Monumenta*, 527.) For a brief summary of the parochial history of Kelso see Cowan 1967: 92–3.
- 11 Reproduced in Terry Friedman, *The Eighteenth-Century Church in Britain*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011: fig. 353.
- 12 Although the description had been published in 1864 (*Vetera Monumenta*, no. DCCCCXXVII),

the entry was not indexed, and it seems it was first re-encountered only in about 1920 by John Ferguson (Ferguson 1919–22).

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