

## II.

NOTES ON THE STRUCTURAL REMAINS OF THE PRIORY OF PITTENWEEM. WITH PLANS. BY WALTER F. LYON, ARCHITECT. COMMUNICATED BY DR D. CHRISTISON, *Secretary*. (PLATE III.)

It is not necessary, for the purpose of this paper, to refer to the early history of the Priory, further than to say that, so far as it can be gathered from existing records, it has been detailed by Dr John Stuart, in his preface to the *Records of the Priory of the Isle of May*, printed for this Society in 1868. Dr Stuart refers to the fact that, in a deed of 1318, the Priory is styled as that of May and Pittenweemem, while in later documents it is frequently designated as that of Pittenweem otherwise Isle of May, and at times as that of Pittenweem alone. Several writers have been led to suppose from this that there were two distinct priories, one of May and one of Pittenweem; but the explanation seems to be, that "the monks of May had from the first erected an establishment of some sort on their manor of Pittenweem (which had been granted to them by King David I.), and which, after the Priory was dissevered from the house of Reading, and annexed to that of St Andrews, became their chief seat, and that thereafter the monastery on the island was deserted in favour of Pittenweem, which was less exposed to the incursions of the English, nearer to their superior house at St Andrews, and could be reached without the necessity of a precarious passage by sea."

As the name Pittenweem (or, as in King David's charter, Pit-ne-weme) signifies the bit of land or pendicle of the cave, and as its cave is associated with the early saints Fillan and Adrian, and was probably on that account a place of religious settlement or pilgrimage before the time of King David, it falls naturally to be first described.

The cave, situated about 60 feet from the shore, the floor-level being about 16 feet above high tides, is hollowed out of a soft sandstone rock, which rises to a height of 40 feet, and differs, at least in its original portion, in no way from the many similar sea-washed caverns which are found all along this coast. Advantage has been taken of the soft nature

of the rock to artificially enlarge the chambers at different periods, as at Wemyss and other examples.

The entrance is closed up by a well-built stone wall, with a doorway of dressed stones and a window over it, all apparently of late work. Much of the sides and roof close to this wall have fallen in.

The inside of the cave, at a distance of 35 feet from the entrance, is divided into an inner and outer chamber by another stone-built wall, with a doorway. The outer chamber has been much increased in height and width by artificial means, and is spacious and lofty. The inner apartment bifurcates into two portions, the one right in front being evidently the original continuation of the outer cave, which runs on and dies naturally into the ground at about 63 feet from the intercepting wall, making the whole original cave about 100 feet in length. The upper portion of the inner cave spreads to the right hand, and is apparently wholly artificial: it runs about 54 feet from the dividing-wall.

Immediately inside this dividing-wall, and to the left, is a stair 4 feet wide, cut in the solid rock, which, in a very curious and interesting manner, ascends by numerous steps to a vaulted chamber about 30 feet above. This is the so-called Oratory of St Fillan. It measures about 15 feet square within the walls, which are of massive construction, and is roofed overhead with a stone barrel vault. The whole space between the walls forming the chamber is entirely taken up by the well for the ascending stair from the cave below. There is a door on the east side of the chamber at the level of where a floor should lie: the sill of this door is about 12 feet below the garden above, to which access is gained by a narrow flight of steps. These steps appear to be of later date, and probably take the place of a more concealed access, probably a hatch or man-hole. The under side of the vaulted roof is 3 or 4 feet below the garden level above.

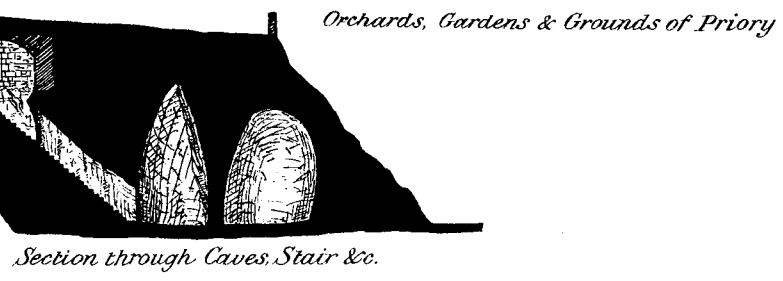
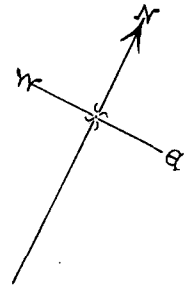
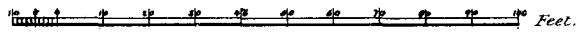
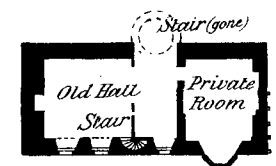
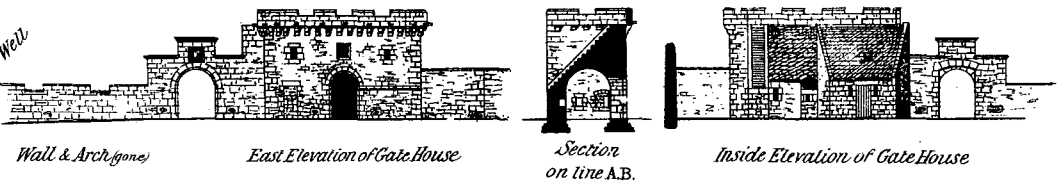
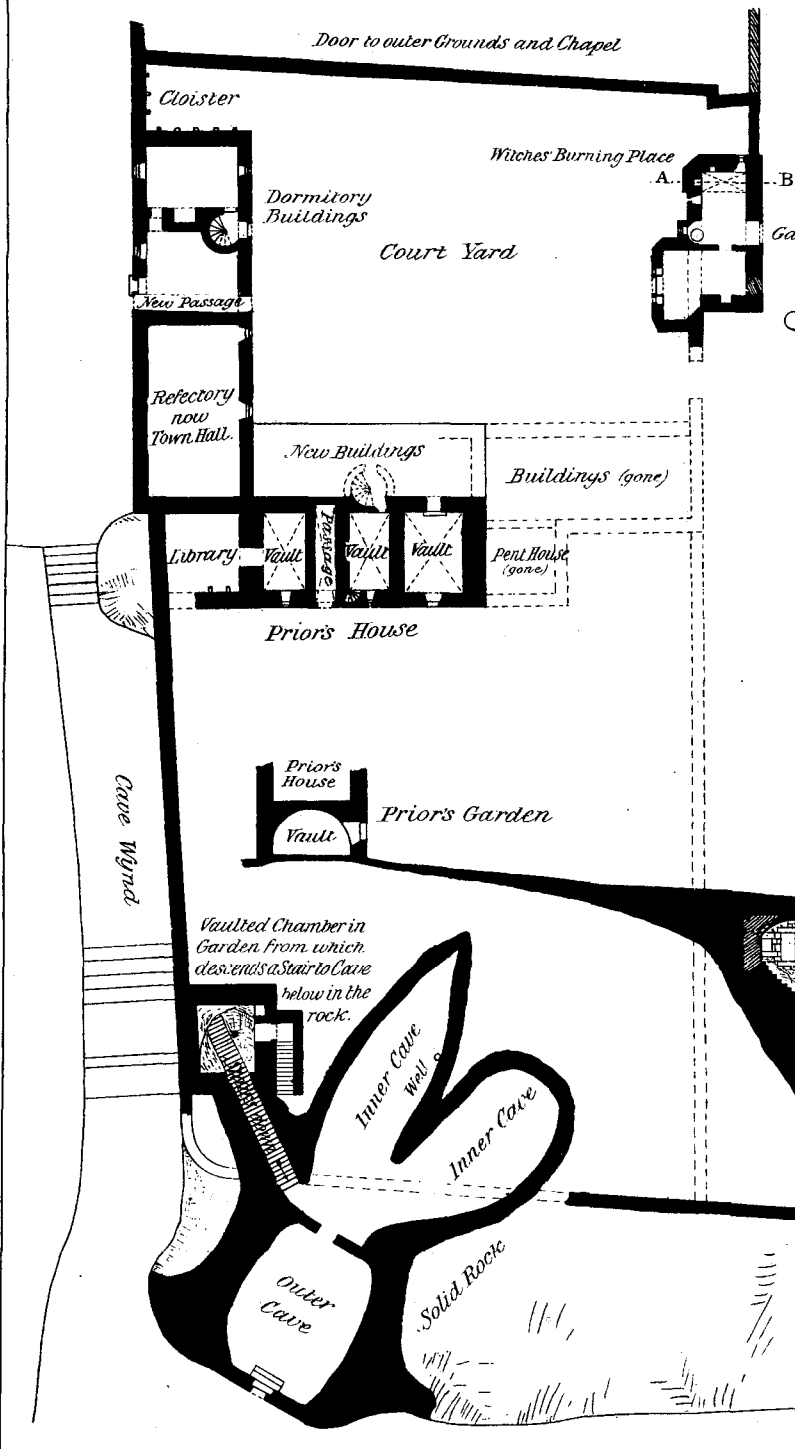
The stair from the cave lands in this chamber, on the further side from the door, and at the same level: access from the landing to the door must have been got by a movable drawbridge—schemed, no doubt, for greater security. There may have been at one time a narrow gangway of rock along the north side of the chamber, which has now crumbled away. It is possible there may have been at one time a wooden floor

### PITTENWEEM, PRIORY BUILDINGS

*Drawing shewing existing Buildings.*

*August 1892.*

*Measured by Walter F. Lyon, Architect.*



at the level of the door and stair-landing in this chamber, but no traces of such remain. There is a small recess for a lamp near the door.

The old tradition that this was the Oratory of St Fillan is therefore, I fear, quite untenable, as there is no room for such a purpose ; moreover, the building itself is manifestly many centuries later in date.

About 21 feet from the inside termination of the inner cave is still to be seen the Holy Well of St Fillan, but it is little better than a drip from the side wall.

The three chambers of the cave have all the appearance of having been enlarged in later times, probably much having been done by those engaged in smuggling pursuits. It has been said by some writers that an underground passage led from the so-called oratory to the Prior's house, but I find no appearance of this, and the formation and slope of the ground do not give countenance to the supposition.

THE MONASTIC BUILDINGS.—When entire, the grounds of the Priory must have extended to about 3 or 4 acres, laid out in the usual way with orchards, gardens, &c. We read of buildings of some importance, such as the chapel and infirmary, with one or two gateways, all now swept away.

The existing buildings consist of a nearly square courtyard of about 76 feet, with the different blocks arranged on three sides. The interesting gatehouse lies on the east, the Prior's house on the south, and the great house, comprising the refectory, dormitory, &c., on the west side of this courtyard, which was called the inner close, in which many glazed encaustic tiles have been turned up. On the north side is a high wall, apparently of later construction.

The Prior's house consists of a rectangular block, 56 feet by 26 feet. The lower storey is vaulted in the usual way with stone arches in three apartments, with an arched pend or passage running through the building. These vaults were used for stores : in one a curious and very confined stone circular stair leads to the Prior's reception-room over. The imaginary underground passage from the so-called oratory is said to have communicated with the foot of this stair. As the room above was also the Prior's dining-hall, I fear a more prosaic reason must be given for the stair, namely, for access to the wine-cellar below ! a very common feature in ancient domestic buildings in Scotland, as Messrs M'Gibbon & Ross

have so clearly shown in their admirable work on the subject. This dining-hall, which is on the first upper floor, measures about 30 by 20 feet; and adjoining, there is a smaller room, 20 feet by 15, which was doubtless sacred to the Prior himself. The attic floor over this was devoted to bedrooms.

Access to the different floors was gained by a circular stone stair obtruding into the inner court, which was removed when the new front was erected to the north. To the north-east there was a small wing, which is shown in Grose's view, and on the east gable there is a row of stone corbels, showing a lean-to roof to an excrescence now removed. Foundations of other buildings have been struck running east from this block towards the boundary-wall of the Prior's garden and to the archway, which I have shown as restored on my plan.

This gateway was probably erected when the buildings were secularised, and is indicated on Grose's and other views by a large break in the wall, showing where it had stood, the gate having been removed probably on account of the dressed stones of which it was principally built.

The Prior's house has had much of its antiquity wrested from it, the whole of the upper floors being completely modernised.

At the west end of the Prior's house are the scanty remains of what old documents call "The New Gallery," and later on "Bishop Bruce's Library." Only a short bit of the south wall remains. There is a curious row of bold stone corbels on the *inner* side of this wall, about 25 feet from the ground. They look like corbels for supporting a parapet walk, but being on the inside they cannot well be for that purpose; possibly they may have supported the principal beams of the roof or an inner gallery, and hence the name.

Running north from here, and bounding the courtyard on the west, lies the large block called "The Great House," which includes in its walls the refectory and dormitory for the humbler brethren of the establishment. The refectory lies next to the new gallery, but the east wall only remains, the modern town-hall having been built in its place.

Next come the buildings of the dormitory, which are entire and of very substantial character. They are divided into two parts by a massive wall, in which is placed a broad circular stone stair, which runs up the

whole height of the building, at the foot of which is an entrance-door from the inner courtyard.

The basement of this block shows no signs of having been vaulted, as the old accounts say. Probably the vaults were removed to give more room for the base purpose for which it was used in later years, namely, a herring-barrel store.

There is very little of interest left in the rooms above, all their original features having been destroyed in the varied ups and downs to which they have been subjected.

Scott of Abbotshall, the *feuar* of the place in 1588, gifted the great house by charter to the town, to be turned into "ane honest, comely, and decent kirk," and other purposes. In place, however, of this, they built the present parish church. Subsequent litigation arose as to what should be done with the buildings, which ended in the town obtaining the refectory portion, and the rest was successively used as a manse, grammar-school, a dower-house for the Kellie family, an Episcopal chapel, and finally the herring-barrel store, as I have said before.

There are two interesting square bay windows corbelled out from the first floor of this block, and looking upon the inner courtyard—a very rare feature in Scottish architecture. Various carved stones, showing bold sculptured heads of saints, were formerly to be seen built into an adjoining wall, until an iconoclastic mason pared them down flush, as he said, "to make the wa' uniform." Two very quaint oak doors or shutters were found here, showing carved heads, of much spirit, which I need not describe, as they are now in the Museum.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the great house, at the part marked "cloister" on my plan, is an open space, with a row of stone corbels, indicating low, lean-to roofs. There is mention made in old deeds of buildings in this part called "the chapter chamber, vestries," &c.; and no doubt other chambers did extend to the north towards the present church, where I imagine the Priory chapel at one time stood, but great doubts exist on this head.

By the strong indications of ancient work in the present church, I am inclined to think that the old chapel is incorporated into that building.

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings*, vol. ii. p. 4, and *Archæologia Scotica*, vol. iii. p. 309, and plate xi., No. 2.

The church tower is a late erection, and was probably built about 1620 ; it bears the characteristics of the Scottish domestic style of the period rather than the ecclesiastical. The stair turret might quite well be part of a private country-house of the Renaissance architecture of that time, the windows having, with other details, the domestic one of shot-holes drilled through the stone sill. The gable, corbelled out square off the circular under part of the stair turret, is thoroughly domestic. The steeple alone indicates the church, but even this feature is a very common one in the little town-halls to be found in many of the towns in Fife. The infirmary appears to have stood to the east of the chapel ; none of it, however, remains.

A square building, measuring 20 feet each way and about 14 high, stood till later years projecting into the Marygate. It was locally called the "confessional," and was covered with a stone-flagged roof : it seems to have been part of the north boundary-wall of the Priory grounds. This wall is said to have been so magnificent and broad, that two sentinels could walk abreast along the top. There was a great gateway also in this wall, all traces of which are gone. Another fortified gateway appears to have stood close to the present Episcopal church, but by the description it must have been, I think, the East Port of the town, spanning the Marygate, as we read of a stair and passage going over it from the Priory grounds to the other side of the street.

The only gatehouse now standing, and perhaps the most interesting portion left of the Priory buildings, stands on the east side of the courtyard or inner close, and must, I fancy, have been the principal entrance to the monastery. It is a rectangular block 35 feet by 17 feet, and is about 30 feet high. Unhappily it is now much hidden up in a luxuriant growth of ivy. It was finished on the top with a parapet, boldly corbelled out from the wall, with open bartizans at each corner. The parapet is now gone. The corbels are of the pattern common enough on domestic work of the latter end of the 15th century.

The archway shown on the east side at one time ran through the building, giving access to the inner court, the other end of which is now blocked by later alterations and additions. The inside is in two apartments : the one at the north end is bounded by a curious arch which

spans the inside space ; it is apparently of no use, but on examining the outside from the courtyard, an open stair is seen running up to the parapet walk supported upon it. Why they did not make the north wall thick enough to contain this stair, is one of these mysteries which continually puzzle the student of mediæval architecture. It was at the foot of this stair, near the north-west corner, that the witches of Pittenweem were burnt and afterwards buried.

The parapet seems to have gone round three sides of the block. The west or inner wall to the courtyard is only about 9 or 10 feet in height, supporting a pent roof, which starts from the parapet level on the east wall ; corbels are here placed to hold the wall-plate for the roof. It is possible that this roof was of later date, and that originally the whole block was roofed flat at the level of the parapet walk, but there is no indication of this now. The projecting splayed bay to the court is a late addition, probably about 1600, when much of the newer portions were added on. The roofs are very much damaged and nearly gone. There is a well, built of stone, at the south-east angle of the gatehouse, which is now covered over. The whole of the buildings, but especially the gatehouse, which is really a most interesting piece of ancient work, are in a sadly neglected state, being greatly overgrown with a network of ivy, which bids fair to envelop and destroy the fabric.

It is deplorable to see so many of our old buildings in Scotland thus given over to the mercy of the weather, rank vegetation, and other destroying factors, when for the matter of a few pounds they might be preserved for many a generation to come. As an instance of this, I may mention that of Pitcullo Castle, a few miles from Pittenweem, which, quite in the memory of people now living, was roofed and in habitable repair. I can myself recollect its almost perfect condition about twenty-five years ago, when I made a sketch of it, before the present luxurious growth of ivy had hidden up its many quaint and uncommon characteristics. Preston Tower is another building which was quite entire twenty years ago, except for the roof. Attention was drawn to its lamentable condition a year or two ago by myself and a few other enthusiasts, when we were fortunate enough to save what remained from the utter ruin to which it was fast hastening.