A Note on New Discoveries at Melrose Abbey

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The Cistercian abbey of Melrose was founded in 1136. It sustained damage during the English invasions of 1322, 1385, 1544 and 1545, and after the Reformation by stone robbers. The abbey is now in a ruinous state but enough of it survives to attest to the high quality of its architecture and sculptural works. Recent excavations in service trenches nearby revealed medieval architectural stones from the abbey, medieval and post-medieval walls and other features.

Introduction

Melrose Abbey and Precinct is protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM No. 90214) and lies on the north-eastern edge of the town of Melrose, Scottish Borders (NGR: NT 5349 3483, Fig 1).

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by CFA Archaeology Ltd within the grounds of Melrose Abbey during excavations for the insertion of a new gas service by Transco between November 2004 and January 2005. Excavations took place on Cloisters Road, Abbey Street, St Mary's Road, and within the grounds of Abbey House (Fig 1). All trenches were 0.35–0.4m wide and 0.8m deep. Archaeological features were only discovered within the excavated trenches on Abbey Street and Cloisters Road.

Historical background

Melrose was founded in 1136 by King David I. It was the first Cistercian abbey in Scotland. An earlier monastic settlement dating to the 7th century was founded by St Aedan of Iona some two miles away in Old Melrose (Fawcett and Oram 2004, 18).

The Cistercian monks were one of the reformed monastic orders that emerged during the 12th-century monastic revival in Europe (Deanesly 1989, 117). The Cistercian Order was established by a group of Benedictine monks who felt St Benedict's Rule was not being adhered to as rigorously as they wished, and by opting to follow it they refused feudal revenues and reintroduced manual labour for their monks. This unpaid source of labour gave the Cistercians a competitive edge, enabling the monastic order to expand and flourish. By the late 12th century the economic success of Melrose Abbey was partly dependent on Melrose wool which was traded throughout Europe.

As the abbey was situated close to the English Border it frequently suffered attacks from invading English armies, including the army of Edward II in 1322 (see Fawcett and Oram 2004, 38 for conflicting

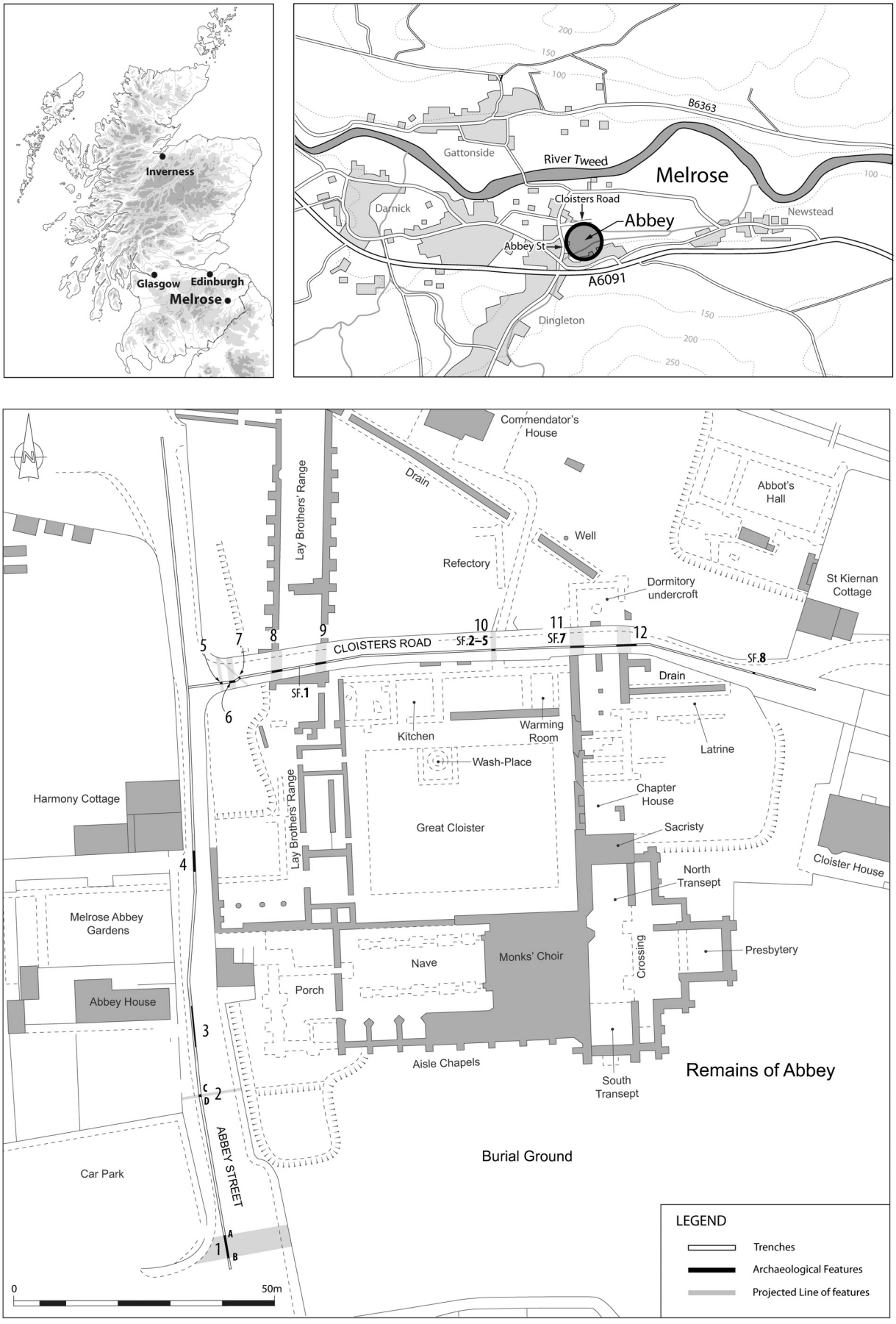

Fig 1
Trench Location Map

reports). The church was rebuilt under King Robert the Bruce in 1326 (his heart later being buried within the abbey grounds) and destroyed again in 1385 by Richard II of England. The extant church post-dates 1385, and building extended well into the 16th century.

The abbey was once again sacked, this time on the orders of Henry VIII, in 1544, and again in 1545. By 1560 there were only thirteen monks left at the abbey, compared with 130 in residence before the Reformation. The abbey no longer functioned and was pillaged for its building material from the 1560s onwards. The custodian of the abbey in 1890, J Wass, notes that the Commendator's House to the north of the cloister (Fig. 1) was built using abbey stone in c.1590, and statues were demolished in 1649. Wass stated that 'for a long period the Abbey was used as a quarry by the people of Melrose. It is said that there is not an old house in the town but has in its walls a stone from the Abbey' (Wass 1890, 29).

Archaeological discoveries

The features discovered during the watching brief are described from the south end of Abbey Street and then from west to east along Cloisters Road (Fig. 1).

Abbey Street

Only one of the features discovered in the Abbey Street trench has a counterpart amongst the currently upstanding remains of the abbey. The other features represent previously unknown structures. The features revealed were a large stone-filled pit or ditch (1), two dressed sandstone walls (2 and 3) and a stone-capped culvert (4).

A pit or ditch (1) was recorded 2m from the south end of the trench (Fig. 1). It was cut into undisturbed subsoil and was filled with undressed sandstone blocks and rubble in a yellow sand matrix (Fig 2a). Although unworked, the sandstone was of a similar appearance to that used in the abbey, but this backfilling event is undated. The east–west dimensions of this feature were greater than the service trench width of 0.4m. The projected alignment of the feature, if it were a ditch, is shown on Fig. 1, but study of aerial photographs has not revealed any linear features crossing the burial ground on this alignment.

Although there was no physical relationship between the two walls (2 and 3) identified towards the southern half of Abbey Street, and no secure dating evidence associated with them, they shared similar characteristics. The sandstone blocks used in their

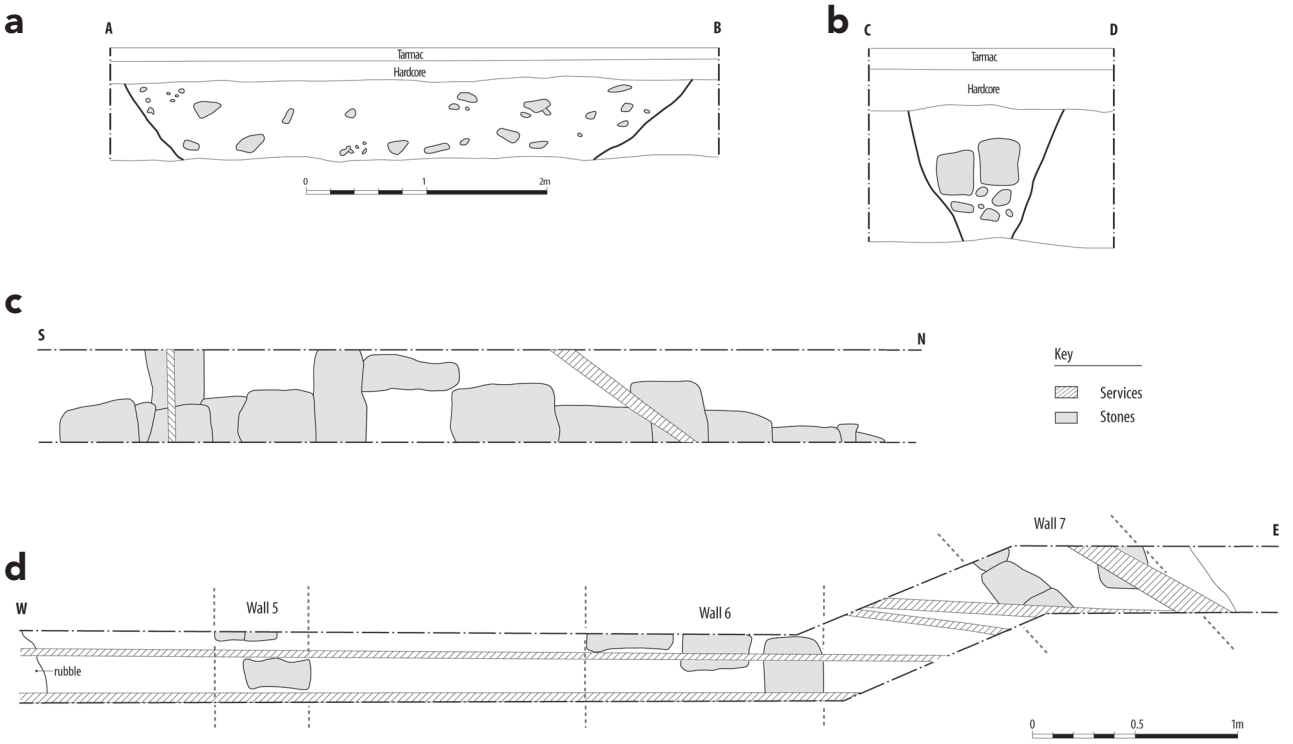

Fig 2
a – east-facing section of pit/ditch 1; b – east-facing section of wall 2; c – plan of culvert 4; d – plan of walls 5–7

construction were of similar size and colour, they were roughly dressed and bonded with mortar, they survived to one course and both were set in foundation trenches cut into the subsoil at a similar depth (Fig 2b). The stone was similar to that used in the construction of the abbey and could represent the re-use of abbey stonework, perhaps to form a boundary wall around the site at some point between the Reformation and the early 19th century.

Wall 2 aligned with a turf-covered bank to the east, situated in the burial ground of the abbey. It is unclear whether this represents terracing within the grounds, or whether it may be the remains of an earlier structure.

Map regression analysis showed that north–south wall 3 aligned with the western boundary wall of Abbey Street as depicted on the Ordnance Survey 1st Edition map (1863) and has since become buried as the road alignment has shifted. As seen, it comprised an 8m length of a single course of dressed sandstone and was recorded in the west-facing section only. It was truncated by three service trenches.

A 4m stretch of culvert (4) running south–north (Figs 1 and 2c) was present at the same depth as walls 2 and 3, although there was no physical relationship between them. The drain was cut into natural subsoil at the base of the service trench (depth 0.75m). It consisted of a series of capstones under which voids were visible, but the drainage channel itself was filled with dark brown waterborne silt and was no longer active. Services overlay the culvert but appeared not to truncate the feature.

Cloisters Road

Cloisters Road bisects the grounds of the Abbey from east to west and the upstanding remains of monastic buildings can be seen either side of the road, some of which evidently run under and are sealed by it. The foundations of a number of these upstanding wall lines, as well as some that are not now visible in the abbey grounds, were recorded during the excavation. Preservation of features was generally good, although disturbance was noted due to the presence of services. Archaeological features identified during the excavation included the remains of walls (5–12), a possible midden, and isolated finds of architectural stones.

Seven architectural stones were recovered (SFs 1–5 and 7–8). All are of the same buff-coloured sandstone and, with the exception of SF7, came from secondary contexts. From their form and context of recovery the finds can be tentatively dated to the 13th century (see Fawcett and Oram 2004). The stones are described below with the relevant findspots, and full details are available in the archive (Jackson 2008).

A deposit of reddish soils with fragments of tile, brick and rubble was recorded at the west end of the trench. It was interpreted as a relatively modern deposit unrelated to the construction and architecture of the abbey. In section it abutted wall (5) to the west and may represent the tumbled remains of its upper courses, where stonework gave way to brickwork.

At the west end, three walls (5–7) were similar in material used and depth of construction (Fig 2d). They varied between 0.4m to 1.1m in width and were two to four courses high, and all were heavily truncated by service trenches. Walls 5 and 6 were on the same north–south orientation, but wall 7 was on a different alignment. There was no evidence for mortar bonding in any of them, although this may have degraded. The walls were constructed on the underlying subsoil and represent the foundation courses of structures that have no visible counterparts within the abbey grounds today. If walls 5 and 6 were the remains of two sides of the same structure then the internal space would have been only 1.5m wide. The subsoil between these two walls showed no evidence of flooring or disturbance.

Two of the three walls were sealed by a midden deposit which contained oyster shell and fragments of bone, but no dating evidence. The deposit abutted wall 5 to the east, rather than sealing it, which may suggest that it was standing later than wall 6. The midden material had been disturbed and possibly re-deposited during the insertion of services.

Walls 8 and 9, orientated north–south, aligned with the upstanding west and east walls of the Lay Brother's Range respectively. Both were just over 2m wide and consisted of dressed stones bonded with mortar, with a rubble core. Wall 9 was poorly preserved in section; a stain of mortar representing the width of the wall was recorded. A mortar spread defined the construction cut of wall 8 and only three large dressed stones, not coursed, could be seen in plan and section. Between the two walls was a rubble fill, and either side of them

were similar deposits of rubble in a red sand matrix; these deposits may include some of the collapsed remains of the range.

A vault rib stone, SF1, was recovered from the rubble layer between the walls. Stone vaulting was a feature of many of the structures at the site. This find is of plain chamfered form and is consistent with vault rib stones found elsewhere on the site. A large number of comparable loose stones survive and have been recorded at the site (Markus 1996).

Some 30m to the west, wall 10 may have been part of the eastern wall of the re-aligned refectory. The wall, comprising a single course of undressed stone bonded with mortar 0.7m wide, was set into the natural subsoil and aligned north–south. It probably represents the foundation course or rubble and stone core of the wall or one of its buttresses, the facing stones having since been truncated or removed. It was sealed by a deposit of light yellow sand and clay which contained fragments of shell, rubble, red tile and patches of degraded sandstone. Finds from this layer comprised an iron strip in poor condition, fragments of animal bone and a clay pipe stem, and four fragments of architectural stone.

The four stones were two broken cylindrical nook shafts of nearly identical form and diameter (SF3 and SF5); one fragment of moulding (SF4); and a small fragment of fleur-de-lis decoration (SF2). The two nook shaft fragments, both 123mm in diameter, are possibly from the same constructional feature, perhaps a window in wall 10, and very closely resemble the nook shafts associated with the windows of the second refectory building (Fawcett and Oram 2004, 193, fig 90). Numerous parallels are also recorded by Markus (1996, vol. 3: MEL/cs/16–34). The fragment of moulding with roll and narrow fillet is consistent with mouldings found elsewhere at the site in association with a variety of features and probably dates to a later (13th- or 14th-century) phase of construction. It is likely, given its slight curve, that the moulding is from a vault rib or voussoir (cf for example the south transept doorway; Fawcett and Oram 2004, fig 56). There is evidence that the stone was whitewashed at one time. It is impossible to ascertain the origin of the small fragment of decorative carving, SF2. The fleur-de-lis is commonly associated with the French monarchy; it is also a common artistic motif in the early medieval and later periods. Hall (1974) suggests that in religious symbolism it may represent the Holy Trinity or the Archangel Gabriel, notably in representations of the Annunciation.

Fig 3
Semi-octagonal column, SF8, from a rubble layer at the east end of Cloisters Road, showing the lines or mason's marks

The refectory was re-aligned 90° to the cloister sometime during the mid 13th century and reflects a common modification at Cistercian abbeys, and it is this second refectory to which wall 10 must have belonged (Fergusson 1986; Fawcett and Oram 2004, 191). By re-aligning, a bigger refectory could be achieved and is testament to the expanding economic success of the Cistercian order. Fergusson suggests that refectories were moved so that the kitchen could form part of the cloister, ensuring that the monks stayed in the cloister even when helping in the kitchen (Fergusson 1986).

Walls 11 and 12 aligned with the western and eastern walls of the dormitory undercroft respectively. Wall 11 was a single course of dressed stone set into subsoil and was 2.65m wide, with a mortar and rubble core. Wall 12 survived as two courses of dressed stone 1.95m wide, and was bonded with mortar and set directly into the natural subsoil. A single large rectangular dressed stone with chamfered edge, SF7, was recovered *in situ* from the western edge of wall 12. This stone is likely to have formed part of the ground course of a wall, possibly the same wall that forms the western wall of the eastern range, which was probably constructed in the 13th century.

Immediately to the east of wall 12, a grouping of large undressed yellow sandstone blocks within a fill of yellow clay, sand and rubble were noted. They were only seen in plan (1.9m wide), and were not removed as they sat at the base of the trench. It could not be determined whether these were structural or rubble remains, but they could be part of a structure relating to the latrine and its outflow into the main drain.

The rest of the trench at the eastern end of Cloisters Road revealed no more structural remains. The section testified to the degree of disturbance caused by the insertion of multiple services. A dressed stone (SF8) was retrieved from these disturbed deposits. The base of a semi-octagonal respond, it is of interest for the lines or mason's marks that have been incised on the top of the stone (Fig. 3). These were created with a ruler and compass, as part of the process of marking up the stone prior to carving. Incised lines indicate that the first attempt at marking out was incorrect and had to redone for two faces of the column shaft.

Conclusions

The precinct at Melrose is thought to have encompassed an area of 16ha (Fawcett and Oram 2004, 69), but with increasing secularization of the town after the Reformation, new roads, notably Abbey Street and Cloisters Road, as well as houses with walled gardens started to be built within the confines of the precinct. This led to the dismantling of earlier monastic structures and re-use of the materials.

Many of the archaeological and subsoil deposits revealed by this narrow service trench excavation were heavily disturbed due to the presence of a large number of other underground services. Despite this, buried archaeological remains including walls, a midden and a stone-capped culvert were all discovered sealed under the modern road make-up. This project has thus confirmed the value of archaeological monitoring when excavating even the narrowest of service trenches across sites such as Melrose Abbey. It has also demonstrated that vestigial remains of medieval and later walls may survive the damaging forces of the post-Reformation restructuring of a monastic precinct.

Whilst it was possible to identify which buildings five of the exposed wall bases belonged to – those aligned with the walls of the Lay Brothers' Range, the dormitory undercroft and the refectory – none of the other archaeological features discovered can be securely identified as remnants of the monastic buildings. This is partly due to the confined width of the excavation trenches, but also because building material from the ruinous abbey was used for later secular buildings, giving the outward appearance of similarity in foundation walls of different dates. Nonetheless, the demonstration that remains of wall foundations (2, 5–7) and the culvert (4) – monastic or otherwise – are sealed under the modern road surfaces within the town opens the important possibility that further remnants of previously unidentified monastic buildings could survive beneath the turf mounds within the enclosed areas of the Abbey grounds.

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