

Abdie Research Report



Interior of Abdie Old Parish Church. (B. Rhodes)

Sacred Landscape Project

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Introduction to Abdie

The historic parish of Abdie is located in the north-western corner of Fife, not far from Newburgh. The *Old Statistical Account* of Scotland describes the parish of Abdie as sitting ‘between Abernethy and Monimail on the S[outh] of the river Tay, in the heart of the range of high lands, which, to westward, is known by the of Ochil Hills’.¹ The same publication notes that the parish church and the minister’s manse were located in the ‘middle part’ of the parish.² Throughout its history Abdie has always been a predominantly rural parish, and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the beauty of its landscape was often praised.³

The boundaries of the parish of Abdie have changed significantly over the centuries. In particular, the creation of the parish of Newburgh in the 1630s removed a significant part of the western section of the parish.⁴ Abdie was not a notable religious hub. Nevertheless, it has a distinctive religious history stretching back into the early Middle Ages.

Lines from a poem on the death of Thomas Millar, minister of Abdie, 1788-1792

*“Another hour may note the varying face
Of vale and mountain, and their beauties trace,
Our morning walks renew and frequent stand,
To mark that Abdie is a Switzerland.”*



Abdie Kirk (‘Ebdy Kirk’) on James Gordon of Rothiemay’s 1642 map of Fife. (National Library of Scotland)

¹ Anon., ‘Parish of Abdie’ in the *Old Statistical Account* (1795), vol. 14, p. 115.

² Anon., ‘Parish of Abdie’ in the *Old Statistical Account* (1795), vol. 14, p. 115.

³ Laurence Miller, ‘Parish of Abdie’ in the *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, p. 49.

⁴ Laurence Miller, ‘Parish of Abdie’ in the *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, p. 47. *Record of the Parliaments of Scotland*, 1633/6/184.

Medieval

Like many of the parishes along the River Tay, Abdie's Christian history almost certainly stretches back into Pictish times. In the 1920s some tantalising hints about Abdie's early Christian past were uncovered at Mares Craig Quarry, where a handbell of the type sometimes associated with early medieval religious sites was uncovered. The same area also produced long cist burials and remains of old masonry.⁵

Abdie's religious history becomes rather better documented in the twelfth century. There already appears to have been a church at Abdie in the 1190s, when David I gave the parish to the newly established monastery at Lindores.⁶ This church was probably on the site of the structure now known as Abdie Old Parish Church. The monks of Lindores would retain the rectorship of Abdie until the Reformation, appointing a series of vicars to hold services in the parish church.⁷



Abdie Old Parish Church. (B. Rhodes)

⁵ Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore entry for 'Mares Craig Quarry': <https://canmore.org.uk/site/30073/mares-craig-quarry> [Accessed 20 October 2021].

⁶ See Newburgh report for more details on Lindores Abbey.

⁷ Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches, entry for Abdie / Lindores Parish Church: <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158367> [Accessed 21 October 2021].

There were at least two phases of major building work undertaken at the old parish church during the Middle Ages. It is thought that the chancel and east part of the nave may date from the early thirteenth century.⁸ The western part of the nave is a little later.



Exterior of east end of Abdie Old Parish Church. The buttress on the corner is medieval. The decoration on the gable is nineteenth century. (B. Rhodes)

The surviving ruins of the old parish church provide clues about the nature of medieval worship at Abdie. There is a small aumbry, or cupboard for sacred items, at the east end of the church. Meanwhile a socket in the masonry on the south wall may relate to fixings for a rood screen.⁹ Written records likewise imply the existence of fairly typical medieval piety at Abdie. A number of testaments from the early sixteenth century record parishioners requesting burial inside the church at Abdie. Meanwhile, a reminder of the intertwining of religious and secular affairs is provided by a 1555 financial agreement between Alexander Balfour of Denmylne and Michael Downy in which a debt would be repaid by £40 being placed on the high altar of “our Lady of Ebdy”.¹⁰

⁸ Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches, entry for Abdie / Lindores Parish Church: <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158367> [Accessed 21 October 2021].

⁹ Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches, entry for Abdie / Lindores Parish Church: <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158367> [Accessed 21 October 2021].

¹⁰ J Anderson and W Angus, *Protocol Book of Sir Alexander Gaw, 1540-58* (1910), p. 33.

Early Modern

In the summer of 1559 the Reformation rising disrupted religious observance in northern Fife. The abbey at Lindores was sacked in June 1559 by Protestant activists encouraged by John Knox and the Lords of the Congregation (the nobles who had openly joined the Reformist rising).¹¹ We do not know if Abdie was affected by the smashing of religious images and altars that swept through Fife at this time. However, at some point during the sixteenth century the church interior almost certainly underwent significant changes, probably seeing the destruction of the rood screen, side altars, and any religious images.

In the immediate aftermath of the Reformation the Protestant minister at Abdie was William Symson, about whom relatively little is known.¹² At the end of the sixteenth century the minister of Abdie was John Coldcleuch, who was also a master at St Mary's College in St Andrews.¹³ Coldcleuch did not get on with the well-known university reformer and radical Presbyterian Andrew Melville. Indeed on one occasion Melville was so irritated by Coldcleuch turning up at his chamber he shut the door in his face.¹⁴ Despite enraging his colleagues, Coldcleuch remained as minister of Abdie until his death in 1612.



Balfour Memorial Aisle, Abdie Old Parish Church. (B. Rhodes)

Throughout the turbulent years of the mid-seventeenth century Abdie had a degree of continuity in their minister, Alexander Balfour of Denmyln. Balfour was appointed as assistant minister to Andrew Murray in 1634, following Murray's death in 1644 Balfour

¹¹ D. Laing, ed., *Works of John Knox*, vol. 6, p. 26.

¹² Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae: The Succession of Ministers in Scotland from the Reformation* (1925), p. 123.

¹³ Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae: The Succession of Ministers in Scotland from the Reformation* (1925), p. 123.

¹⁴ R. Pitcairn, ed., *The Autobiography and Diary of Mr James Melvill*, p. 123.

became the sole minister, and appears to have remained in post until at least 1673 – at which point he inherited a baronetcy from his nephew.¹⁵ As minister of Abdie, Balfour survived religious war, the establishment of a republic, the restoration of the monarchy, and alterations between Presbyterianism and Episcopacy. Balfour's survival probably reflects his family's influence in the Abdie area. However, it also provides a reminder that national religious upheavals did not always completely disrupt life in the parishes. During Alexander Balfour's time as minister a memorial aisle for the Balfour family was added on the north side of the parish church.¹⁶



Seventeenth-century memorial relating to the Balfours of Denmyln. (B. Rhodes)

That being said, the Williamite Revolution of 1689 does appear to have brought disruption to Abdie. The minister at the time, William Arnott, refused to recognise William and Mary as monarchs or to accept the return of Presbyterian church government. He was removed as minister of Abdie on the orders of the Privy Council of Scotland.¹⁷ Perhaps alarmed by this cautionary example, most of the eighteenth century ministers of Abdie largely avoided attracting attention – in at least one case (Thomas Millar) devoting energies to hill-walking rather than politics.

¹⁵ Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae: The Succession of Ministers in Scotland from the Reformation* (1925), p. 124.

¹⁶ Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches, entry for Abdie / Lindores Parish Church: <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158367> [Accessed 21 October 2021].

¹⁷ Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae: The Succession of Ministers in Scotland from the Reformation* (1925), p. 124.

Late Modern

The arrival of Robert Thomas as minister at Abdie in 1796 saw a partial departure from the policy of quiet conformity. A year after his arrival in Abdie, Thomas published a political tract *The Cause of Truth* criticising the writings of the revolutionary Thomas Paine.¹⁸ *The Cause of Truth* received the support of Perth burgh council and even blessing from the Prince of Wales.¹⁹ In 1805 Robert Thomas published a sermon on *The Sufferings of Christ, The Effects of Envy*.²⁰

Unfortunately, around the time that *The Sufferings of Christ* was published, Robert Thomas also became involved in a bitter dispute about his glebe (the area of land traditionally assigned to the minister for his support).²¹ Thomas was attempting to assert rights over additional areas of pasture. The associated litigation made its way to the Court of Session in Edinburgh, and then eventually to the House of Lords. However, Robert Thomas was eventually successful in his claims.²²

The minister's wish to acquire further pasture may have been related to problems with his existing holdings. Certainly, in the 1790s the manse at Abdie was described as 'unfavourable to health, as any other house in the parish; for it stands close by a lake of considerable extent in low and wet ground'.²³ Admittedly, it was also noted that the manse was 'lately repaired' and 'tolerably commodious'.²⁴ The manse was at this stage an early Georgian building, built in the 1720s.²⁵



John Dower's 1828 map of Fife, showing Abdie old church, the manse and its proximity to Lindores Loch, and the site of the new kirk at Abdie. (National Library of Scotland)

¹⁸ Robert Thomas, *The Cause of Truth, Containing a Refutation of Errors in the Political Works of Thomas Paine* (Dundee, 1797).

¹⁹ Perth and Kinross Council Archive, B59/24/1/94.

²⁰ Robert Thomas, *The Sufferings of Christ, The Effects of Envy* (Edinburgh, 1805).

²¹ National Records of Scotland, RHP6354/2.

²² Laurence Miller, 'Parish of Abdie' in the *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, p. 54.

²³ Anon., 'Parish of Abdie' in the *Old Statistical Account* (1795), vol. 14, p. 117.

²⁴ Anon., 'Parish of Abdie' in the *Old Statistical Account* (1795), vol. 14, pp. 122-123.

²⁵ Laurence Miller, 'Parish of Abdie' in the *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, p. 54.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also saw increasing complaints about Abdie Old Parish Church. In the 1790s it was regarded as old, ‘narrow’ and ‘poorly lighted’.²⁶ In the 1820s a new church was built, a little closer to the main village at Abdie. The new building was designed by the architect William Burn, and could “accommodate 500 or 600” worshippers.²⁷



The nineteenth century parish church of Abdie and Dunbog, 2021. (B. Rhodes)

As of 2024, the early nineteenth-century church at Abdie remains a Church of Scotland place of worship.²⁸ Since 2018 Abdie has been part of Lindores Parish – which also covers Newburgh and Dunbog. The old medieval parish church at Abdie is now maintained as a cemetery and heritage site.

²⁶ Anon., ‘Parish of Abdie’ in the *Old Statistical Account* (1795), vol. 14, p. 122.

²⁷ Laurence Miller, ‘Parish of Abdie’ in the *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, p. 54. Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches, entry for Abdie / Lindores Parish Church: <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158367> [Accessed 21 October 2021].

²⁸ Lindores Parish website: <https://www.lindoresparish.com/our-churches> [Accessed February 2024].

Abdie – Places of Worship – Past and Present

Abdie Old Parish Church

Denomination: Roman Catholic, Church of Scotland

Period: High Medieval, Late Medieval, Early Modern, Late Modern

Current Place of Worship? No

There has been a parish church at Abdie since at least the 1190s. For most of the Middle Ages the rectorship of Abdie was held by Lindores Abbey. The abbey benefited from income from the parish, and in exchange appointed a vicar who was meant to take services and care for the local community. In the 1450s the vicar of Abdie was an unsatisfactory character named John Laing. It was alleged that Laing was ‘an open and notorious fornicator’ who was ‘ignorant of letters and unfit to hold divine office’. After this there may have been efforts to find Abdie a more educated priest, as in 1466 a university graduate named Alexander Meldrum became vicar.

Until the late 1550s many of the parishioners of Abdie seem to have supported traditional Catholic piety. However, after the Reformation the structures of the new Protestant Church of Scotland were established relatively quickly. At the start of the 1660s the medieval church was extended by the addition of an aisle on the north side. The new aisle was funded by the then minister Alexander Balfour and his family, who lived at nearby Denmylne Castle.

In 1689 the minister of Abdie, William Arnott, was removed from his post for refusing to accept William and Mary as monarchs. Perhaps chastened by this experience, many of the eighteenth-century ministers of Abdie appear to have avoided political controversy. Indeed, Thomas Millar (minister from 1788 to 1792) was described by contemporaries as being ‘distinguished for sedateness’. However, this was not the approach adopted by Robert Thomas, who became minister of Abdie in 1796. The new parish minister became involved in political writing, publishing an attack on the revolutionary theories of Thomas Paine. At over 430 pages it was one of the longest eighteenth-century responses to Paine’s work. Robert Thomas also became involved in a bitter dispute about his glebe (the area of land assigned to a parish minister). The disagreement about the glebe went all the way to the House of Lords, which was then the highest court of appeal in the United Kingdom.

By the time of Robert Thomas, the medieval church at Abdie was deemed increasingly out of date. It was criticised as ‘an old narrow building, low in the walls, and poorly lighted’. In the 1820s the congregation moved to a new building a short distance away. The old church soon fell into disrepair and by 1836 was in ruins. Today the building is completely roofless, though most of the external walls still stand. Several notable medieval and early modern tombstones can be found in and around the old church.

Sources

Anon., ‘Parish of Abdie’ in the *Old Statistical Account* (1795), vol. 14, pp. 113-124.

Laurence Miller, ‘Parish of Abdie’ in the *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, pp. 47-55.

Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae: The Succession of Ministers in Scotland from the Reformation* (1925), pp. 124-125.

Robert Thomas, *The Cause of Truth, Containing a Refutation of Errors in the Political Works of Thomas Paine* (Dundee, 1797).

Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore entry for 'Abdie Old Parish Kirk':

<https://canmore.org.uk/site/30063/abdie-old-parish-kirk> [Accessed 21 October 2021]

Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches, entry for Abdie / Lindores Parish Church: <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158367> [Accessed 21 October 2021]



The ruins of Abdie Church today. (Source: Open Virtual Worlds / University of St Andrews)

Abdie and Dunbog Parish Church

Denomination: Church of Scotland

Period: Late Modern

Current Place of Worship? Yes

Abdie and Dunbog Parish Church opened its doors in 1827. It was built to replace Abdie's medieval parish church. The architects for the new building were James Milne and William Burn. In the 1830s the new church was described by the minister of Abdie as a 'plain substantial building'. It was intended to accommodate between 500 and 600 people (perhaps standing close together). In the 1960s the parish of Abdie united with the nearby parish of Dunbog, and the parish church at Dunbog closed a little later. Abdie and Dunbog is now part of a new parish known as Lindores, which covers Newburgh as well. On Sundays the same minister celebrates services in the Church of Scotland parish church in Newburgh, and the church at Abdie.

Sources

Laurence Miller, 'Parish of Abdie' in the *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, pp. 47-55.

Places of Worship in Scotland, 'Abdie and Dunbog Parish Church':

<http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/4674/name/Abdie+%26+Dunbog+Parish+Church+Abdie+Fife>

[Accessed 21 October 2021]

St Andrews Presbytery website: <http://www.standrewspresbytery.org.uk/standrewschurches.cfm?ChurchID=35>

[Accessed 21 October 2021]

Overview of Records of Abdie Kirk Session on Archives Hub:

<https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/f3da8229-3b57-34b9-8399-ef834c96410e> [Accessed 21 October

2021]



Abdie and Dunbog Parish Church in 2021. (Source: Open Virtual Worlds / University of St Andrews)

Mares Craig Quarry

Denomination: Roman Catholic

Period: Early Medieval

Current Place of Worship? No

The hill known as Mares Craig was for many years a stone quarry. In the 1920s a Celtic handbell, of the type associated with early medieval religious foundations, was discovered here, along with a considerable number of dressed stones and lime mortar. Human remains, some of them in what may have been long cists (a type of stone box for burials), were also found in the area during the early twentieth century. It is therefore possible that Mares Craig was the site of an early medieval chapel. Unfortunately, the likeliest locations for this building have since been destroyed by quarrying. The place-name Mares Craig may also have religious associations. The name is recorded as far back as 1541, when it was spelled 'Mariscrag'. It is thought that this may be a reference to the Virgin Mary (to whom the nearby Lindores Abbey was dedicated).

Sources

Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore entry for 'Mares Craig Quarry':

<https://canmore.org.uk/site/30073/mares-craig-quarry> [Accessed 20 October 2021]

Glasgow University, Place-Names of Fife website, 'Mares Craig':

<https://fife-placenames.glasgow.ac.uk/placename/?id=2398>



The site of the Mares Craig quarry in the early twentieth century. (Source: 1920 Ordnance Survey map of Fife and Kinross, Sheet VI.SE. Available at: <https://maps.nls.uk/view/75530896>)