

Aberdour Research Report



St Fillan's Church, Aberdour. (B. Rhodes)

Sacred Landscape Project

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Introduction



St Columba's Church, Aberdour. (B. Rhodes)

Aberdour is a picturesque village located on the south-western coast of Fife. Until the modern era, it was divided into two settlements, Easter and Wester, separated by the Dour Burn from which the village and parish get their name. Both remained small settlements for much of the pre-modern period, nestled around the castle belonging to the Douglas family, with the inhabitants engaged in fishing and some limited trade from its small harbour. In the eighteenth century the harbour was improved and, for a time, became a significant transit point for the export of coal and limestone from Aberdour's hinterland. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the village developed a reputation as a bathing resort for tourists from Edinburgh and beyond. It remains a tourist destination, and a dormitory town for commuters working in Edinburgh and Dundee. Documentary evidence for religious provision in Aberdour dates only from the twelfth century, but a connection to two early saints, Columba of Iona and Fillan of Strathfillan, and a possible early church site in Easter Aberdour, provide some evidence for an earlier sacred history. In the later Middle Ages, the parish church, and a well at which miracles were performed, were both dedicated to St Fillan, while a hospital and later a small Franciscan nunnery were founded in the town under the patronage of the Douglas earls of Morton. Religious provision expanded in the modern era to cater to the town's growing population with the addition of Episcopal and Free Churches in the nineteenth century, and a Roman Catholic

Church in the twentieth. Following a number of mergers between congregations, only St Fillan's (Church of Scotland) and St Columba's (Episcopal Church) are still in use.

Aberdour also has a long connection to the island of Inchcolm which forms part of the same parish. Inchcolm has traditionally been associated with St Columba, and the Augustinian priory established there in the twelfth century was dedicated to that saint. In the early Middle Ages, it may have been part of a network of sites linking the monastery at Iona (founded by Columba c.563AD) with sites in northern England such as Lindisfarne. Aberdour was one of a number of 'detached' parishes belonging to the diocese of Dunkeld, but located some distance away from the rest of the see on the northern and southern shores of the Forth in the high and later Middle Ages.¹ The traditional connection with Columba, whose relics were held at Dunkeld Cathedral, is usually used to explain these territorial anomalies.



Aberdour and Inchcolm on Blaeu's Atlas of Scotland, 1654.²

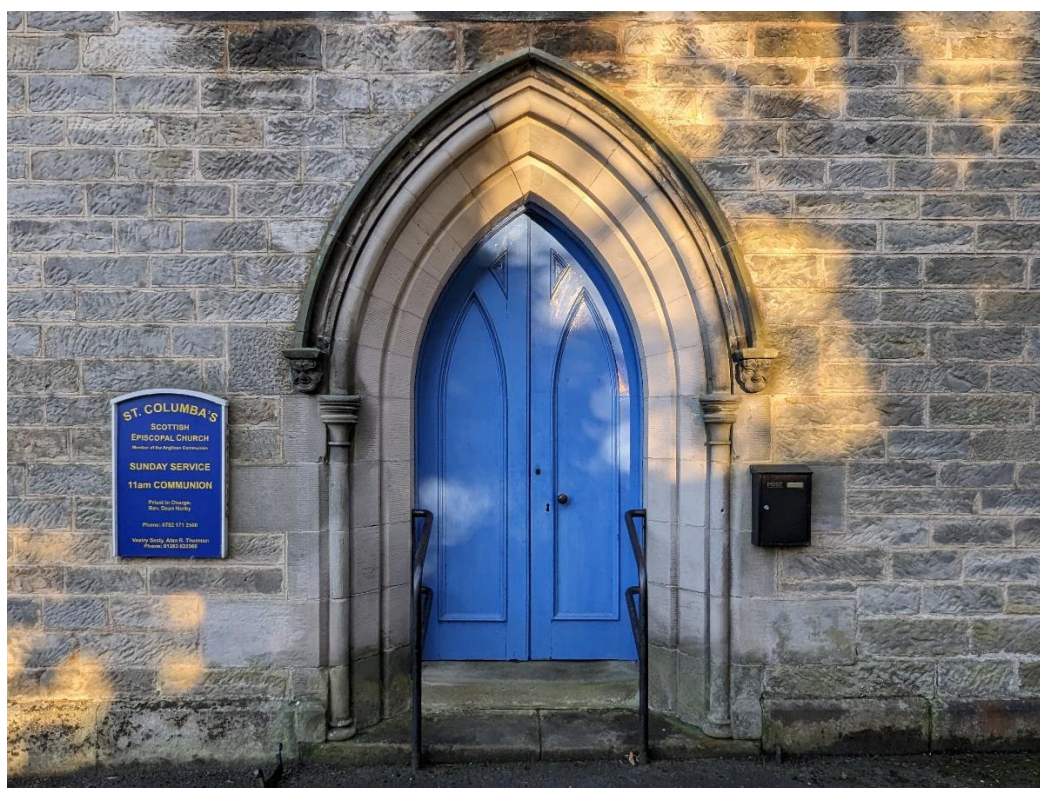
Religious Sites and the Landscape of Aberdour

¹ PGB McNeill, and H. MacQueen, eds, *Atlas of Scottish History to 1707* (Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 353.

² 'Blaeu Atlas of Scotland, 1654', *National Library of Scotland. Map Home*, Accessed 22 June, 2021, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/00000444>.

While fresh and saltwater fishing were probably the main stimulants for the foundation of communities on either side of the Dour Burn, Aberdour's connection to Inchcolm, and its possession of a healing well, played a central role in its development and identity in the high and later Middle Ages. Pilgrimage and other traffic to Inchcolm encouraged the development of the harbour, helping to stimulate the development of a secular community in the vicinity of the site. This community was able to take advantage of the fishing and trading opportunities this location afforded, and later, the mineral deposits in the rural hinterland. In the later Middle Ages, this community was served by a substantial parish church, which dominated the townscape, while the Franciscan nuns would also have been a significant presence in the village.

In the modern era, population expansion and the proliferation of churches have had a major impact on the townscape of Aberdour. The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the construction of three new churches in the town, serving Church of Scotland, Free and Episcopal congregations. The twentieth century saw the restoration of St Fillan's Church, and the repurposing of its 1790 replacement in Wester Aberdour as a community resource. The reuse of redundant churches as community resources or their conversion to housing, combined with the exploitation of the town's sacred past to attract visitors, is likely to have the most significant impact on the urban landscape in the present and near future.



Entrance to St Columba's Episcopal Church. (B. Rhodes)

1. Early Christianity (c. 500-c1000AD)

Aberdour and its parish church first enter the documentary record in the twelfth century, although it is likely that settlements, and a church of some kind, existed on either side of the Dour long before than time. It is possible that during this period the community on the east side of the burn was served by a church known as St Martin's.

Sites of Interest

St Martin's Church

A charter dating from 1347x55 is the earliest record of the land of *Eglismartin* (the 'Church of (St) Martin') which was located in the eastern part of the parish of Aberdour.³ Names with the *Eglis* or *Eccles* element, short for Latin *Ecclesiastes* or *Ecclesia* meaning church, tend to indicate religious foundations dating back to the Pictish era (pre-900). Elsewhere in Fife, the same name, *Eglesmartin*, is an alternative, and rarely used name for the parish and village of Strathmiglo. St Martin of Tours was a popular saint in early and high medieval Scotland, and was believed to have been the mentor of Ninian of Whithorn. By the later Middle Ages, when the place-name was recorded, there was no church on the site, and no other contemporary records survive to confirm its existence. However, tentative evidence that this had been the site of a church can be found in the Ordnance Survey Name Book of 1853-1855. In that survey, Mr Barr, the factor for the estate, noted that a stone coffin and human bones had been found at the site some years previously.



Inch Marton Plantation, Ordnance Survey, 1853-56.⁴

³ By the sixteenth century the name had changed to Inchmartin.

⁴ 'Ordnance Survey One-inch to the mile maps of Scotland, 1st Edition, 1856-1891 - Sheet 36', *National Library of Scotland. Map Home*, Accessed 24 June, 2021, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/74426853>.

Key Evidence

1347x55

*Bishop of Dunkeld's land of Eglismartin beside Beaupre feued to Inchcolm Abbey.*⁵

OS Name Book, 1853-1855

*A mixed Plantation in the grounds attached to Hillside, having numerous walks through it. Mr James Barr, Forester to the Earl of Moreton informed me there was a Stone Coffin found in this Plantation thirty years ago, containing human bones, the place cannot be pointed out.*⁶

2. High Medieval Christianity (1000-1300)

By the twelfth century lands on the east of the Dour burn belonged to the Mortimer family, whilst those on the west belonging to the Augustinian canons of Inchcolm. Aberdour was part of the trading hinterland of the Royal Burgh of Inverkeithing, following its foundation c.1160, and all ships using the harbour had to pay customs and tolls to the baillies of that burgh.⁷ The parish church belonged to the canons at Inchcolm, and was probably given to them by Alexander I (1107-1124) on the establishment of the priory in the 1120s, while the local lords also had an interest in the church.

Sites of Interest

Aberdour Parish Church (St Fillan's)

As long as there had been communities of any size on either side of the Dour there is likely to have been religious institutions to serve them. The parish church of Aberdour is first documented in the late twelfth century when it was the subject of a dispute between a local lord, William de Mortimer, and the Augustinian canons of Inchcolm. William had granted the church to his clerk Robert, and his men had assaulted some canons who came to the church to protest at Robert's investiture. In a charter dating from between 1179 to 1183, William admitted that what he had done was illegal and *the aforesaid church of Aberdour belonged to Inchcolm Priory and they held it as their own and adjacent to the mother church of Inchcolm*. It may well have been granted to the priory by Alexander I at its foundation in the 1120s, or more in the 1160s when the first charter with the endowments of the abbey was issued.⁸ A chaplain called Serlo was the priest in the 1220s, and in the late thirteenth century the church was confirmed in the possessions of the canons, and was thereafter served by a vicar pensionary (a priest paid a set wage, while the tithes were collected by the priory).⁹ Substantial sections of

⁵ D.E. Easson and A. Macdonald, eds, *Charters of the abbey of Inchcolm* (Scottish History Society, 3rd Series, 1938), no. 33.

⁶ 'Fife and Kinross-shire Ordnance Survey Name Books, 1853-1855, volume 134 OS1/13/134/16', *Scotland's Places*, Accessed 24 June, <https://scotlandsplaces.gov.uk/digital-volumes/ordnance-survey-name-books/fife-and-kinross-shire-os-name-books-1853-1855/fife-and-kinross-shire-volume-134/16>.

⁷ Patricia Dennison, 'Medieval Burghs', in Donald Omand, eds, *The Fife book* (Birlinn, Edinburgh, 2000), pp 136-144, at 139

⁸ Simon Taylor & Gilbert Markus, *The Place-Names of Fife. Volume One. West Fife between Leven and Forth* (Donington, 2006), p. 53.

⁹ Cosmo Innes, ed, *Registrum de Dunfermelyn* (Bannatyne Club, 1842), no. 168.

the current church building almost certainly date from the twelfth century. Whether it was dedicated to St Fillan at this point is unclear, the earliest reference to that saint as patron of the church is in 1390.



Aberdour Church, Interior, Chancel. (R. Fawcett)¹⁰

Key Evidence

1179x1183 Inchcolm Charters

William de Mortimer announces that the grant which he made by request and arrangement of his lord David, brother of the king of Scotland, to his clerk Robert, of the church of Aberdour (FIF), was against God and against all form of law and justice. For on the evidence of religious men, clerks and laymen, of the kingdom of Scotland, he has understood and learned that in the times of Kings Alexander, David and Malcolm, the aforesaid church of Aberdour belonged to Inchcolm Priory and they held it as their own and adjacent to the mother church of Inchcolm. When, however, he was about to give the said Robert possession and investiture of the aforesaid church by his messengers and men and clerks of the king, the aforementioned canons stood before the door of the church with their cross and many relics, and with counter-claims and protests, placed themselves under the protection of the lord pope and appealed to his presence.

¹⁰ Richard Fawcett, 'Aberdour- Architecture', *Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches Aberdour*, Accessed 22 June, 2021, <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=157640>

When these, at length, had been shamefully beaten, dragged away and put to flight, they intruded Robert. Wherefore, led by penitence, he has granted the church to the aforesaid canons and established by his charter that often times the said Robert declared to him verbally that on peace being made between him and the canons, he had forsworn it and afterwards, in William's presence and in the presence of many others, left it free and quit to the canons.¹¹

1273

Simon de Balram, son and heir of John de Balram, relates that on the Thursday next after the feast of St Leonard 1273, in the parish church of Aberdour, a controversy between him and the abbot and convent of Inchcolm was settled whereby Simon gave up all claims to the land of Broadleys in favour of the abbot and convent, ratifying the previous sale of that land in return for 40 silver merks.¹²

Fawcett, 2012

As first built, possibly around the central decades of the twelfth century, the church consisted of two rectangular compartments, with the nave being about 16.75 metres from east to west and 6.7 metres from north to south, while the chancel extended a further 7 metres with a width of about 5.3 metres.¹³



Exterior of the chancel at Aberdour Parish Church. (B. Rhodes)

¹¹ Easson and Macdonald, *Charters of the abbey of Inchcolm*, no. 5.

¹² Easson and Macdonald, *Charters of the abbey of Inchcolm*, no. 29.

¹³ Fawcett, 'Aberdour-Architecture'.

3. Late Medieval Christianity (1300-1560)

In 1325 Robert I (1306-1329) granted the barony of Aberdour to Thomas Randolph, earl of Moray (d.1332). Randolph used the revenues from the barony to pay for lights to be placed around his (planned) tomb in the abbey church of Dunfermline each year at Christmas, Candlemas and the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin.¹⁴ The barony was later inherited by William Douglas of Liddesdale, who in 1342 granted it in turn to his nephew, James Douglas of Dalkeith.¹⁵ In the late fifteenth century, his descendant, James Douglas, 1st earl of Morton, founded a hospital and later a Franciscan nunnery in the town, possibly to cater for pilgrims visiting the nearby well of St Fillan, or using the harbour as the embarkation point for travel to Inchcolm. In 1500 James IV (1488-1513) raised Wester Aberdour to the status of burgh of Barony, and thereafter it was no longer subject to the control of Inverkeithing. Included amongst the reasons for this act was *the need for the accommodation etc of the king's subjects arriving by land and sea from different parts of the kingdom, and especially those who congregate in the seaport called the Queen's Ferry.*¹⁶

Aberdour Parish Church (St Fillan's)

The parish church is first recorded as *St Fillan's* in 1390. Taylor and Markus suggest that this may have been a recent dedication, perhaps dating from the period when Thomas Randolph, earl of Moray (d.1332), held the barony. Randolph, like his king Robert I, was a strong supporter of the Fillan cult.¹⁷ The canons of Inchcolm retained control of the church in the later Middle Ages, with one of their number (John Scott), recorded as vicar in 1474, and at the Reformation they controlled the parsonage tithes.¹⁸ The Douglasses of Dalkeith also maintained an interest in the church, which was located close to their castle in Aberdour. In his will of 1390, James Douglas (d. 1420) left £3 6s 8d to buy a mass vestment for the church. The high medieval core of the church was expanded at some point in the fifteenth century with the heightening of the roof of the nave and the addition of a three-bay aisle on its south side. A porch at the south end of this aisle, with a recess for a holy water stoup, was added at around the same time. The aisle contained a chapel, possibly housing an altar dedicated to St James, although no contemporary evidence has survived for this dedication.¹⁹

¹⁴ Archibald, A. M. Duncan, ed. *Regesta Regum Scottorum V: The Acts of Robert I, 1306-29* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1986), no. 263, Michael Penman, *Robert the Bruce. King of the Scots* (London, 2018), p. 267, Innes, *Registrum de Dunfermelyn* no. 357 & 358.

¹⁵ Bruce Webster, ed., *Regesta Regum Scottorum VI: The Acts of David II, 1329-71* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1982), nos. 51, 239, 242.

¹⁶ *RMS*, ii, no. 2574.

¹⁷ Taylor & Markus, *The Place-Names of Fife. Volume One*, p. 55.

¹⁸ Thomas Thomson, *Registrum Honoris de Morton. A series of ancient charters of the Earldom of Morton with other original papers* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1853), no. 231, John Kirk, J, ed, *The Books of Assumption of the Thirds of Benefices* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 62-63.

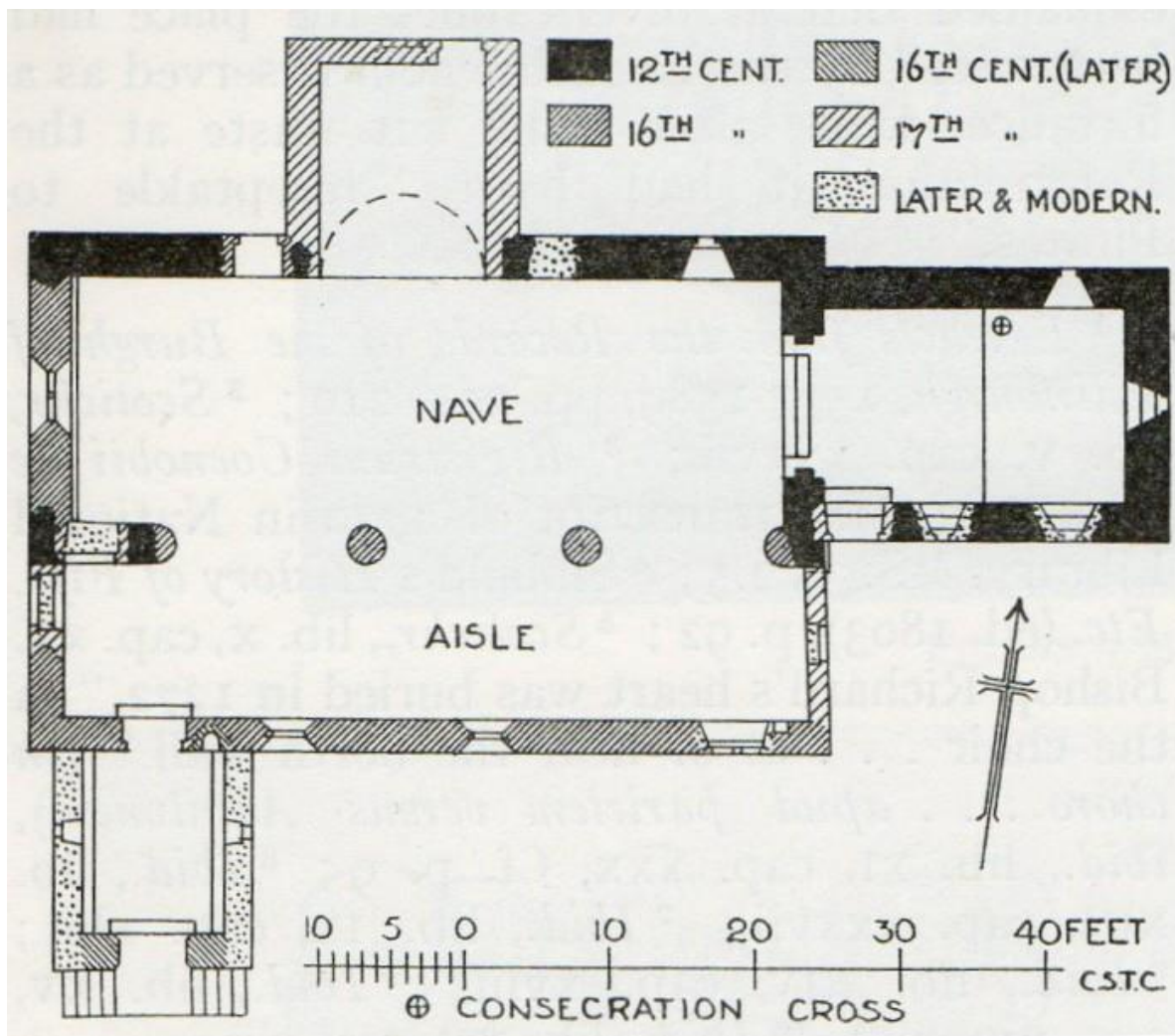
¹⁹ Fawcett, 'Aberdour-Architecture'.

Key Evidence

1390 and 1392 Testament of James Douglas

Item do lego tres libras vj s. viij d. pro uno vellimento emendo ad ecclesiam sancti Fulani de Aberdouer

[Also I leave £3 6s 8d to buy a mass vestment for the church of St Fillan of Aberdour.²⁰]



Aberdour Church Plan. (RCHAMS)²¹

²⁰ David Laing, ed, 'Testament of Sir James Douglas, lord of Dalkeith, knight, 30 Sept 1390', *Bannatyne Miscellany* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1836), ii, 105-112 at p.105 and 117.

²¹ Fawcett, 'Aberdour-Architecture'.

St Martha's Hospital and St Fillan's Well

James Douglas, 1st earl of Morton (d.1493) founded St Martha's hospital in Aberdour in 1474, close to a holy well dedicated to St Fillan. The water from the well was believed to cure nervous ailments, blindness, and deafness, and it was intended that the vicars of the parish church of St Fillan should be the rectors of the new foundation.²² While there are no contemporary references to the popularity of the well, David Ditchburn has suggested that the construction of the hospital in the 1470s is a good indication that increasing numbers of pilgrims were coming from afar to visit the site.²³ A charter of 1486 (by which point the hospital had been converted into a nunnery), provided that in case anyone should build on the land to the south of the nunnery, space for a road no less than 16 ells (an old measurement of equal to 37 inches) in breadth should be retained between the hospital and the well.²⁴ The location of the well is recorded in the name of an eighteenth century house named 'Wellside', located at 45-47 Main Street Aberdour.²⁵ The tradition of those with eye problems visiting the well and using its water, seems to have survived well beyond the modern era. Writing in the 1850s, William Ross stated that this was a practice that was within living memory.



Former site of Hospital, Ordnance Survey Map, 1854.²⁶

²² Taylor & Markus, *The Place-Names of Fife. Volume One*, p. 55.

²³ David Ditchburn 'Saints at the Door Don't Make Miracles?' *The Contrasting Fortunes of Scottish Pilgrimage, c.1450-1550*, in J Goodare & A.A MacDonald, *Sixteenth-Century Scotland. Essays in Honour of Michael Lynch* (Leiden, 2008), 69-98 at 95-96.

²⁴ Thomson, *Registrum Honoris de Morton*, no. 233.

²⁵ 'Aberdour, 45, 47 Main Street, Wellside', *Historic Environment Scotland*, <http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/LB3635>.

²⁶ 'Ordnance Survey One-inch to the mile maps of Scotland, 1st Edition, 1856-1891 - Sheet 40', *National Library of Scotland. Map Home*, Accessed 24 June, 2021, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/74426857>.

The proximity of the site to Inchcolm means that it is possible that the hospital could also have been intended to serve any pilgrims heading to that island, where an image of St Columba was the subject of miracle stories.²⁷ The dedicatee St Martha of Bethany was a biblical figure included in the gospels of Luke and John. She was the sister of Lazarus and witnessed his resurrection. Dedications to Martha were not common in Scotland. The hospital/nunnery in Aberdour is one of only two recorded dedications to the saint in medieval Scotland, the other was an altar in Aberdeen Cathedral founded in 1491.²⁸ By 1486, frustrated that the project had not been realised despite a number of endowments of lands, the earl of Morton granted the lands and building to four sisters of the Order of St Francis, and a bull of 1487 extinguished the name and rights of the hospital.

Key Evidence

22 July 1474

*James, earl of Morton and lord of Dalkeith, having received the acre of land in the district of his town of Aberdour on account of the sudden resignation of John Scot, Canon of Inchcolm and vicar of Aberdour, to whom it had granted at farm, . . . grants and gives freely and without any retention with the express agreement of his sons, that acre around the building to almighty God and his most blessed mother, Our Lady Mary, ever virgin, and blessed Martha, host of Our Lord Jesus Christ, for the maintenance of the poor, and the entertainment of pilgrims and wayfarers, in pure and perpetual alms.*²⁹

In the same charter of 1486 that granted the lands and building to the nuns there is a reference to the well,

16 Oct 1486

*In honour of almighty God and the most glorious virgin Mary his most devoted mother, blessed Martha, friend of our lord Jesus Christ, and of all the saints of heaven, on account of the improvement of the worship and service of God, we have given, granted, and by this our present charter confirmed to the said almighty God and his most blessed mother the virgin Mary and to Saint Martha, and to the devout sisters of penitence of the third order of Saint Francis . . . the aforesaid acre of land. . . . there should be left such a space as then existed between the house of Clement Cant and the house of David Hume, that there might be in all time coming a road not less than sixteen ells in breadth, leading to le pilgramys well.*³⁰

A grave slab of unknown date incorporated into the west window of the church of St Fillan records the passing of pilgrims. The inscription reads:

Pans o pilgrim

²⁷ Donald. E. R Watt, ed, *Scotichronicon by Walter Bower in Latin and English* (Aberdeen, 1987-1999), vii, pp. 109-111.

²⁸ This was a joint dedication with SS Congan, Katherine, Margaret and Barbara, Cosmo Innes, eds., *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis* (Aberdeen: New Spalding Club, 1845), i, 348.

²⁹ Thomson, *Registrum Honoris de Morton*, no. 231.

³⁰ Thomson, *Registrum Honoris de Morton*, no. 233.

*that passith by this way
upon thine end
and thou sal fear to sin
and think also
upon the latter day
when thou (to God) man count
then best (thou now) begin.*³¹

William Ross-1857-1859

*I find no tradition in the neighbourhood in which reference is specifically made to a pilgrims' well; but some old people speak of a well that used to be frequented as lately as the close of last century, by persons afflicted with sore eyes; and they assert that many came from great distances to bathe their eyes in its water. This well, which has now for a considerable time been filled up, was situated - about thirty yards to the south-east of the south-east corner of the old churchyard.*³²

St Martha's Franciscan Nunnery

James Douglas, earl of Morton (d.1493) founded St Martha's hospital in Aberdour in 1474. However, by 1486 this project had not been realised, and the earl granted the lands and building to four Sisters of the Third Order of St Francis by the names of Isobel and Jean Wright, Frances Henryson, and Jean Drossewith.³³ The following year the foundation was confirmed by Pope Innocent VIII (1484-1492), who noted that the community should be organised along the same lines as other Third Order nuns in France and Flanders. This meant that they should be under the care of the Observant Franciscans and profess vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.³⁴

The Third Order were a branch of the Franciscans formed in the thirteenth century, but it was not until the fifteenth century that organised communities were recorded, mainly in northern Europe. The nuns were generally associated with hospitals, and the convent at Aberdour was one of only two such communities in Scotland.³⁵ The dedicatee, St Martha of Bethany, was a biblical figure included in the gospels of Luke and John. She was the sister of Lazarus and witnessed his resurrection. Dedications to Martha were not common in Scotland. The hospital/nunnery in Aberdour is one of only two recorded dedications to the saint in medieval Scotland, the other was an altar in Aberdeen Cathedral founded in 1491.³⁶ The convent was

³¹ Cited in David. W Rutherford, *St. Fillan's Church, Aberdour* (Aberdour, 1974), p. 10.

³² William Ross, 'Notice of the Hospital of St Martha at Aberdour, Fife', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, volume iii (1857-60), pp. 214-220, at 218.

³³ Cited in Ross, 'Notice of the Hospital of St Martha at Aberdour, Fife', p. 217.

³⁴ Alison More, 'Tertiaries and the Scottish Observance: St Martha's Hospital in Aberdour and the Institutionalisation of the Franciscan Third Order', *Scottish Historical Review* Vol. 94, No. 239, Part 2 (October 2015), 121-139 at 122.

³⁵ The other was at Dundee, although its existence is disputed, Ian B Cowan and David E. Easson, *Medieval religious houses in Scotland: with an appendix on the houses in the Isle of Man* (London, 1976), p. 154.

³⁶ This was a joint dedication with SS Congan, Katherine, Margaret and Barbara, Innes, eds., *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis*, i, 348.

popular with James IV who granted alms to the nuns, mainly consisting of food, on a number of occasions during his reign. In 1560 the house was disbanded, when the four remaining sisters Agnes Wrycht, Elizabeth Trumball, Margaret Crummy, and Cristina Cornawell leased their lands and buildings to James Douglas, 4th earl of Morton (d.1581).³⁷

Key Evidence

16 Oct 1486

*In honour of almighty God and the most glorious virgin Mary his most devoted mother, blessed Martha, friend of our lord Jesus Christ, and of all the saints of heaven, on account of the improvement of the worship and service of God, we have given, granted, and by this our present charter confirmed to the said almighty God and his most blessed mother the virgin Mary and to Saint Martha, and to the devout sisters of penitence of the third order of Saint Francis . . . the aforesaid acre of land.*³⁸

1487 Innocent VIII letter to Abbot of Inchcolm confirming the foundation

*If the sisters of the third order were to be introduced into the kingdom of Scotland, where they had not yet been established, the women of that kingdom would be able to devote themselves to works that were pleasing to heaven and would find an opportunity to work towards the salvation of their souls’.*³⁹

1489

*Payment of 10 li to the chaplain celebrating Mass in the house of St Martha of Aberdour, receiving 10 li annually from the great customs of the said burgh, as revealed by letters of the king under the signet and subscription shown over the account, in alms. Isabella, mother of the said sisters, admitting receipt, for the year of the account.*⁴⁰

1496

*Payment of 2 bolls of corn to the sisters of St Martha in alms of the king (James IV) and by his special mandate.*⁴¹

1499

*Payment of 8 bolls of barley to the sisters of St Martha of Aberdour for two years.*⁴²

18 Mar 1501

Royal Charter (James IV) erecting Wester Aberdour into a burgh of barony in favour of Inchcolm and its abbot (Thomas). Included amongst the reasons for this act was *the need for*

³⁷ Ross, ‘Notice of the Hospital of St Martha at Aberdour, Fife’, 218

³⁸ Thomson, *Registrum Honoris de Morton*, no. 233.

³⁹ Cited in More, ‘Tertiaries and the Scottish Observance’, p. 122.

⁴⁰ *ER*, x, pp. 135-136.

⁴¹ *ER*, x, pp. 585-586.

⁴² *ER*, xi, pp. 146-156.

*the accommodation etc of the king's subjects arriving by land and sea from different parts of the kingdom, and especially those who congregate in the seaport called the Queen's Ferry.*⁴³

18 Aug 1560

*Agnes Wrycht, mater, Elizabeth Trumball, Margaret Crummy, and Cristina Cornawell, sisters of the order of St Francis, at the nunnery of Aberdour, set in feu to James, Earl of Morfcon, the eight acres commonly called "The Sister Lands," with their place and garden in the town of Aberdour ; and this they do, with their hand at the pen led by notary, on the 18th August 1560 (the convent seal, which bears an effigy of the Virgin, is affixed).*⁴⁴

4. Reformation and Early Modern Period (1560-1800)

Although Easter Aberdour became a Burgh of Regality in 1638, the two villages remained fairly small until the eighteenth century. At this point the earls of Morton funded improvements to the harbour which transformed Aberdour into significant transit point for coal and limestone from the family's estates in the interior, and, combined with some weaving and other small industrial activities, led to an expansion in the village's population and the blurring of the old distinction between Easter and Wester Aberdour. Following the suppression of St Martha's Nunnery at the Reformation, the church of St Fillan remained the only formal place of worship in the town, before it was replaced by a new parish church in 1790. In 1723 however, Robert Liston was installed as the minister at St Fillan in an act that led to a split in the congregation. Liston was the choice of the patron, James Douglas, 14th earl of Morton, and was presented against the wishes of the majority of the elders and congregation who favoured a man called Thomas Kay. Unlike Inverkeithing, where a similar situation led to the foundation of a rival congregation in 1752, no new church was constructed in Aberdour. However, some of the population travelled to non-conformist churches elsewhere, with as many of 199 recorded in the congregation of the Burgher Church in Crossgates, while two elders at the Anti-burgher church Burntisland represented members who were from the parish of Aberdour.⁴⁵

Key Evidence

1723 Synod of Fife

*And it's well known that the body of that people have been, and still are, utterly averse and opposed to Mr. Liston his settlement amongst them; so that it will be dissentiente et renitente ecclesia, and so directly contrary to the Word of God and the judgment of orthodox divines. And it cannot be denied that the congregation of Aberdour is Christian, having right to choose their own Pastor.*⁴⁶

⁴³ RMS, ii, no. 2574.

⁴⁴ Ross, 'Notice of the Hospital of St Martha at Aberdour, Fife', 218.

⁴⁵ Robert Small, *The History of the Congregations of the United Presbyterian Church 1733-1900* (Edinburgh, 1904), i, p. 370, ii, 363.

⁴⁶ Cited in William Ross, *Aberdour and Inchcolme* (Edinburgh, 1885), p. 388-389.

1885 William Ross

*The forced settlement at Aberdour proved one of the wedges by which the old Church of Scotland was rent in twain. This case, moreover explains the otherwise so inexplicable, that, when Dissenting Meeting- Houses were opened in Burntisland and Inverkeithing, the church-going inhabitants of Aberdour flocked eastwards and westwards, and connected themselves with these congregations. The story is told that, on a certain Sabbath-day, a servant at the manse said to the minister's wife that the whole people of the village seemed to be flocking to Burntisland.*⁴⁷

Aberdour Parish Church (St Fillan's)



Aberdour Church bellcote, c.1588. (B. Rhodes).

No account survives of the arrival of the Protestant Reformation in Aberdour, but the parish church is likely to have been ‘purged’ around March of 1560 when the Abbey of Dunfermline was sacked by the Lords of the Congregation.⁴⁸ In the early years following 1560, a shortage of Protestant ministers meant that the charge at Aberdour was combined with Saline and Dalgety, and it was not until after 1602 that this church had a single minister. The church itself was quickly adapted to the new form of worship. The west end of the nave became the burial vault of the Earls of Morton, probably in the 1580s when a bellcote was added to the west

⁴⁷ Ross, *Aberdour and Inchcolme*, p. 363.

⁴⁸ A. J. G. Mackay, ed. *History and Chronicles of Scotland by Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie* (Scottish Text Society, Edinburgh, 1899), ii, 168.

gable. In 1608 a rectangular lateral aisle was added to the north side of the nave to provide a similar gallery and burial vault combination for the Phins of Whitehill.⁴⁹ In the seventeenth century the chancel seems to have been used as a burial place for the earls of Moray. In 1652 a relation of the earl was called before the Kirk Session accused of burying his father in the 'quair' of the church (i/e the chancel). He excused himself, explaining that he thought it was '*an isle pertaining to the Earl of Moray and not to the church*'. For much of the eighteenth century the location of the church so close to their country seat had been a point of contention for the Douglas family, and in 1790 they successfully close St Fillan's and opened a new church in Wester Aberdour.⁵⁰ Shortly after move in 1792, the minister noted that the majority of the population of the parish attended his church, with some 263 of the 1,792 people of the parish, travelling to secession churches elsewhere.

Key Evidence

1641 Synod of Fife

The deplorable estate of the great multitude of people living in the mids of such a Reformed shyre as verie paganes because of the want of the benefit of the Word, there being three kirks far distant under the cure of ane minister, to wit'; Aberdour, Dagetie and Beath; the remeid whereof the Synod humblie and earnestlie recommedis to the Parliament...⁵¹

1652 Kirk Session

The chancel, or ' quair ' of the church, was used as a burying-place as late as the year 1652, when Mr. James Stewart was summoned before the Session for burying his father there, contrary to an Act of the General Assembly.⁵²

1885 William Ross Early Modern Practice from the Session records

As far back as the Session Record goes, there is notice of the church bell ringing three times on Sabbath mornings, and most evidently these various ringings were not intended merely to give the people a note of time. Immediately after the Reformation, it was, as we have already hinted, proved necessary to use all available means to enlighten the people in Bible knowledge — the Roman Catholic clergy having left them in deplorable ignorance. With a view to this, the church bell rang at eight o'clock on Sabbath morning, to call the people together to hear the Word read, which was usually done by the Reader, this service apparently lasting about an hour. At ten o'clock the bell rang again, to summon the people to the reading of the Word and prayer; and the regular service, for devotional exercises and the preaching of the Word by the minister, began immediately after the ringing of the third bell at eleven o'clock.⁵³

1792 Robert Liston (minister), Old Statistical Account

⁴⁹ Fawcett, 'Aberdour- Architecture'.

⁵⁰ Rutherford, *St. Fillan's Church, Aberdour*, p. 17-18.

⁵¹ Charles Baxter, ed, *Ecclesiastical Records. Selections from the minutes of the Synod of Fife, 1611-87* (Abbotsford Club, Edinburgh, 1837), p. 127.

⁵² Cited by Ross, *Aberdour and Inchcolme*, p. 296.

⁵³ Ross, *Aberdour and Inchcolme*, p. 237

*They population of 1,792) are all of the Established Church, except for 263 Seceders.*⁵⁴

Liston had some comments to make on the parishioners;

*To improve the condition of the people, care should be taken to improve their morals; and particularly to establish their virtue upon religion, the only stable foundation for good morals. The higher ranks of life might do much good in this respect. They who, by their practice, weaken the influence of religion among the people, do much hurt in society; but they who give their countenance to religion are public blessings, and do honour, both to the soundness of their own heads, and the goodness of their own hearts.*⁵⁵

5. Late Modern (1800-2021). Religion in modern Aberdour

Aberdour's harbour remained an important export hub for coal and limestone into the late nineteenth century. By the time that this trade declined, the town was already connected to Leith by a daily ferry service and was established as a holiday resort. As early as 1857 Barbieri commented on the popularity of the town for bathing, and in 1887 Beveridge noted that it was a favourite summer resort for people from Fife and Edinburgh. The main attractions, according to Ross (1885) were the castle, and the ruins of St Fillan's church.⁵⁶ The opening of the Forth Rail bridge in 1890, and of the station in the town in the same year, confirmed the town's status as a tourist attraction. The population of the parish grew rapidly in the early nineteenth century, from 1,260 in 1801, to 1,945 in 1851, and Episcopal and Free Churches were established in the village to cater to this population. Population growth has been sluggish since, with the village of Aberdour recording 1,972 inhabitants in the 2011 census.⁵⁷ As well as the restoration of St Fillan's in 1925-1926, a Roman Catholic Church was established in the village in 1971. In the 2011 census 41% of the population were recorded as having no religion, with 723 belonging to the Church of Scotland and 136 to the Roman Catholic Church (136 belonged to other Christian and Non-Christian denominations).⁵⁸ Unions between the various Presbyterian denominations, and a steady drop in church membership and attendance, have resulted in only St Fillan's (Church of Scotland) and St Columba's (Episcopal Church) remaining in use today.

Key Evidence

1857 Barbieri

*it has long been a favourite bathing-resort from Edinburgh, though it is likely to be superseded by Portobello.*⁵⁹

⁵⁴ OSA, iv, (1792), p. 332.

⁵⁵ OSA, iv, (1792), p. 336.

⁵⁶ Ross, *Aberdour and Inchcolme*, p. 159

⁵⁷ 'Aberdour', *Wikipedia*, Accessed 13 July 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aberdour>

⁵⁸ 'Aberdour, Religion', *Scotland's Census*, Accessed 4 August, 2021, <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/tableView/tableView.xhtml>.

⁵⁹ M. Barbieri, *A Descriptive and historical gazetteer of the counties of Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan* (Edinburgh, 1857), p. 71.

1887 Beveridge

*The village of Aberdour, which is charmingly situated in a warm and well- sheltered recess by the seashore, and has long been a favourite summer resort, not only for people in Dunfermline and other Fife towns, but likewise for the inhabitants of Edinburgh and Leith.*⁶⁰

Aberdour Former Parish Church



Aberdour Former Parish Church, 2000. (E. Malecki)⁶¹

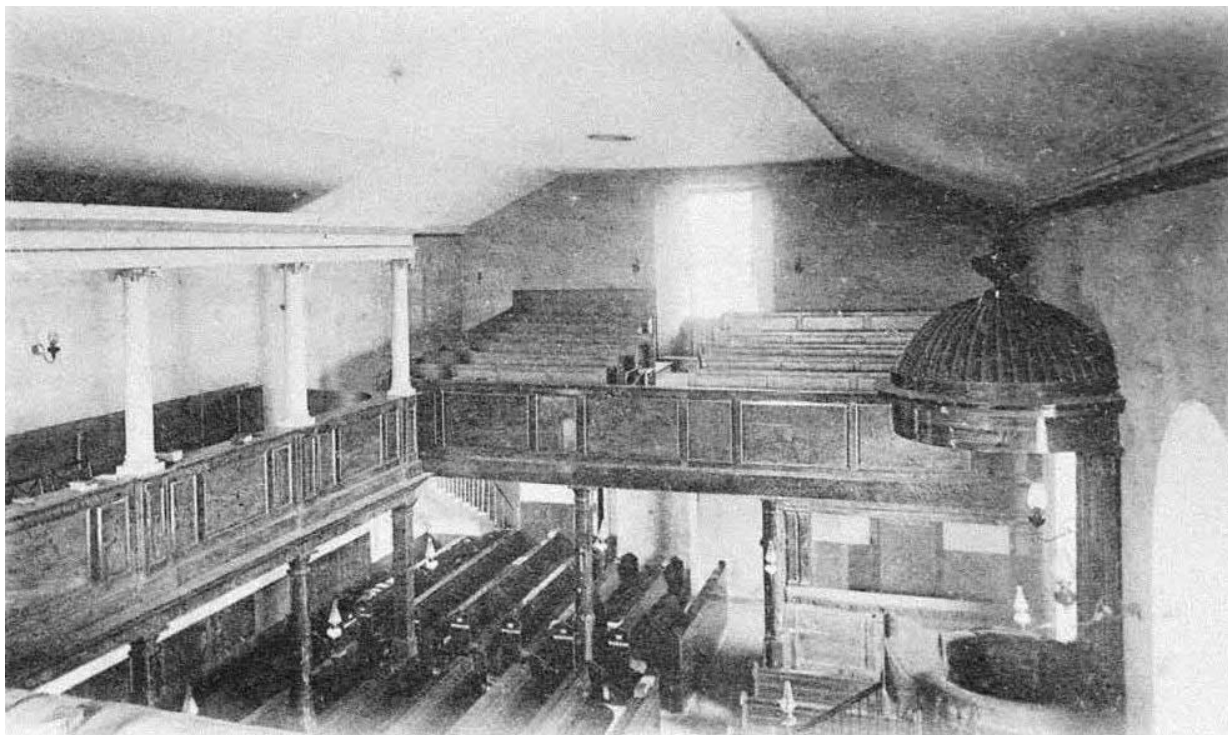
For much of the eighteenth century the location of St Fillan's Church so close to their country seat at Aberdour Castle had been a point of contention for the Douglas family. In 1790 they successfully closed St Fillan's and opened a new church in Wester Aberdour.⁶² It was located close to the main road, but was considered by some observers to be too distant from some of the northern parts of the parish. The church received few additions in the relatively short time that it was in use, aside from a striking war memorial built in 1919. Following the restoration

⁶⁰ Erskine Beveridge, *Between Ochils and Forth* (Edinburgh, 1887), p. 46.

⁶¹ 'Aberdour Former Parish Church', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 13 July 2021, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/7758/name/Aberdour+Former+Parish+Church+Aberdour+%28Dunfermline%29+Fife>.

⁶² Rutherford, *St. Fillan's Church, Aberdour*, p. 17-18

of St Fillan's in 1926, it was converted into a church hall and continues to be well used by community groups and for events and activities.⁶³



Aberdour Former Parish Church Interior (before 1926).⁶⁴

Key Evidence

John Leighton 1840.

*The church is situated near the village, and though convenient for that part of the parish, is too far distant from its more northern parts.*⁶⁵

Rutherford 1974

*It is clear from correspondence that the Countess of Morton wished the church closed and another opened in Wester Aberdour...She did not care for worshippers coming so close to the castle. The plan fell through, but the same idea was behind the ultimate closure of St Fillan's in 1790 and the building of the Parish Church (now a church hall).*⁶⁶

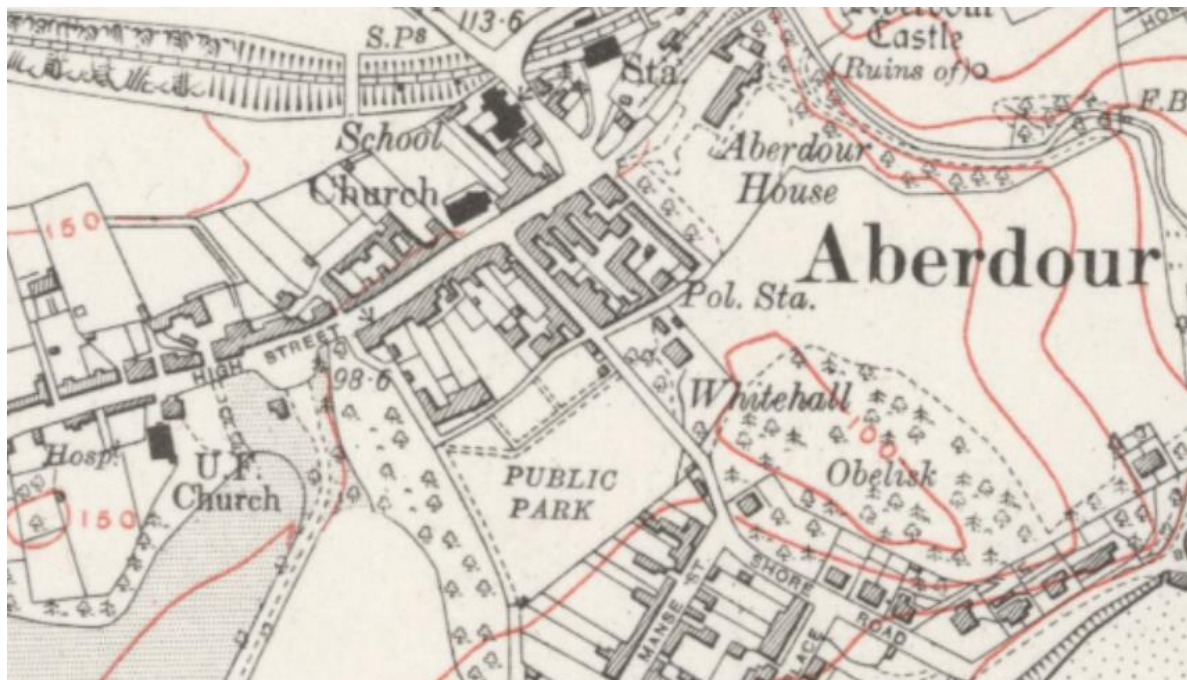
⁶³ Alexander Smith, *The Third Statistical Account of Scotland. Fife* (Edinburgh, 1952), p. 376.

⁶⁴ 'Church Hall, St Fillan's Church Aberdour', *St Fillans Church*, Accessed 13 July 2021, <https://stfillanschurch.org.uk/church-hall/>.

⁶⁵ John M. Leighton, *History of the County of Fife: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (Glasgow, 1840), iii, p. 250.

⁶⁶ Rutherford, *St. Fillan's Church, Aberdour*, p. 17.

Aberdour Free Church



United Free Church on Ordnance Survey Map 1921.⁶⁷

In 1840 Leighton noted that no *dissenting congregation* was found in the parish of Aberdour, although the minister Hugh Ralph, labelled 70 families as *seceders* in 1845.⁶⁸ Shortly after the Great Disruption in 1843, a Free Church congregation was founded in Aberdour. They opened a church, called St Colme's, in 1845, close to the location of the parish church. By 1848 it had a congregation of 318.⁶⁹ In 1900 it became a United Free Church, by which point the congregation had fallen to 117, and in 1929 it re-joined the church of Scotland. In 1940 the church the congregation joined St Fillan's and the parish church of Dalgety in a triple union, and in the 1950s the church was demolished.

1845 Hugh Ralph (Minister) New Statistical Account

The number of families in the parish belonging to the Established Church is about 357; of Dissenting or Seceding families, about 70, a great proportion of which occasionally attend the parish church; of Episcopalian families, 1; of Roman Catholic families, 1.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ 'Ordnance Survey Fife and Kinross sheet (includes: Aberdour; Burntisland), 1921', *National Library of Scotland. Map Home*, Accessed 13 July, 2021, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/75533974>.

⁶⁸ Leighton, *History of the County of Fife*, iii, p. 250, NSA, iv (1845), p. 718.

⁶⁹ William Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland, 1843-1900* (Edinburgh, 1914), ii, p. 139.

⁷⁰ NSA, iv (1845), p. 718.

St. Columba's Episcopal Church



Episcopal Chapel on Ordnance Survey Map, 1854.⁷¹

There is some debate as to when the Episcopal Church congregation was founded in Aberdour. In 1845 Hugh Ralph noted that there was one Episcopal family in the parish, but did not mention a church. It was certainly there by 1854 when it appears on an Ordnance Survey Map, and Barbieri made a note of it in 1857. It was founded by the Moray family for their estate workers, and the congregation seems to have been boosted in the twentieth century by service families who were stationed in western Fife during and between the two world wars.⁷² It is currently part of the All-Soul's group, which is a union of the congregations of churches in Inverkeithing, Burntisland and Aberdour, with combined total of 150 parishioners.⁷³



St Columba's Church, 2024. (B. Rhodes)

⁷¹ 'Ordnance Survey, Fife, sheet 40 (includes: Aberdour; Dalgety, 1854', *National Library of Scotland. Map Home*, Accessed 13 July, 2021, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/74426857>.

⁷² 'St Columba's Episcopal Church, Aberdour', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 13 July 2021, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/6107/name/St.+Columba%27s+Episcopal+Church+Aberdour+%28Dunfermline%29+Fife>.

⁷³ 'About Us', *All Souls Fife*, Accessed 13 July 2021, <http://allsoulsfife.org.uk/about-us.html>.

Key Evidence

1845 Hugh Ralph (Minister) *New Statistical Account*

*The number of families in the parish belonging to the Established Church is about 357; of Dissenting or Seceding families, about 70, a great proportion of which occasionally attend the parish church; of Episcopalian families, 1; of Roman Catholic families, 1.*⁷⁴

Aberdour Parish Church (St Fillan's)



Aberdour Old Church, Buckner.⁷⁵

Soon after its closure in 1790, the roof of St Fillan's church was removed, and it came close to being completely demolished. It remained a picturesque ruin throughout the nineteenth-century, until shortly after World War I when minister, Robert Johnstone, concocted the bold plan of restoring the church. The restoration was carried out in 1925-26 by the architect William Williamson of Kirkcaldy and Kinghorn, who was confronted with a building without a roof, with walls covered in ivy, and a tree growing in the chancel arch. He removed the Morton vault and completed the restoration at a cost of £4,000 in time for a grand reopening on 7 July 1926.⁷⁶ In 1940, the congregation joined the former Free Church of St Colme's and the parish church of Dalgety in a triple union. It remains an active place of worship, using the former parish church as a church hall.

⁷⁴ NSA, iv (1845), p. 718.

⁷⁵ 'The Early Years' *St Fillans Church*, Accessed 13 July 2021, <https://stfillanschurch.org.uk/st-fillans-church/>.

⁷⁶ Rutherford, *St. Fillan's Church, Aberdour*, pp. 21-23.

St. Teresa's Roman Catholic Church, Aberdour

In 1845 Hugh Ralph noted that one family in the parish belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, but it was not until 1971 that a RC congregation returned to Aberdour. It was built in the Hillside area of Aberdour, close to the school. It is no longer in active use, although when the congregation left is unclear.

Key Evidence

1845 Hugh Ralph (Minister) New Statistical Account

The number of families in the parish belonging to the Established Church is about 357; of Dissenting or Seceding families, about 70, a great proportion of which occasionally attend the parish church; of Episcopalian families, 1; of Roman Catholic families, 1.⁷⁷

6. Epilogue. The Sacred Landscape of Aberdour in the Twenty-First Century

Unions between the various Presbyterian denominations, and a steady drop in church membership and attendance, have resulted in only St Fillan's (Church of Scotland) and St Columba's (Episcopal Church) remaining in use today. The former parish church was closed on the reopening of St Fillan's in 1926, and has been in use as a church hall ever since. The Free Church closed in the 1940s and was demolished in the 1950s, while the date at which the RC church ceased to be used is unknown.



The path leading to St Fillan's Parish Church, Aberdour. (B. Rhodes)

⁷⁷ NSA, iv (1845), p. 718.

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