

Balmerino Research Report



Balmerino Abbey Ruins. (B. Rhodes)

Sacred Landscape Project

St Mary's College, University of St Andrews

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Introduction to Balmerino



Arable farming in the Balmerino area, 2021. (B. Rhodes)

The parish of Balmerino is located in northern Fife, on the south banks of the River Tay. It is a rural area, with a mix of rolling hillsides and arable land – in the eighteenth century the local soil was praised for producing good barley¹. There are no large centres of population. In the 1790s the parish had 703 residents.² By the 1830s the population had risen to 1070 – at which time the local residents were praised as being ‘honest, industrious, sober, and extremely exemplary in their attendance upon the ordinances of religion’.³



The parish of Balmerino on John Dower’s 1828 map of Fife. (National Library of Scotland)

¹ Andrew Thomson, ‘Parish of Balmerino’, *Old Statistical Account* (1793), vol. 9, p. 218.

² Andrew Thomson, ‘Parish of Balmerino’, *Old Statistical Account* (1793), vol. 9, p. 219.

³ J. Thomson, ‘Parish of Balmerino’, *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, p. 588.

Medieval



Remains of the nave of Balmerino Abbey, 2021. (B. Rhodes)

During the Middle Ages, the Cistercian Abbey at Balmerino was the focal point for much of the religious activity in the area – probably serving as the parish church in addition to its role as a monastery.⁴ Balmerino Abbey was founded in the early thirteenth century by Queen Ermengarde and her son Alexander II.⁵ The Cistercian community built a large abbey church and associated cloister near the River Tay. The monks had a significant impact on the local economy and landscape. They had a monastic grange or farm near Ardie Hill.⁶ The Cistercians also owned at least two mills in the area – Over Mill and Nether Mill.⁷



Probable joining point of the medieval Nether Mill stream with the River Tay. (B. Rhodes)

⁴ Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches, entry for ‘Balmerino Abbey’: <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158408> [Accessed February 2024].

⁵ Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore entry for ‘Balmerino Abbey’: <http://canmore.org.uk/site/31746> [Accessed February 2024].

⁶ Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore entry for ‘Grange Of Balmerino Abbey’: <http://canmore.org.uk/site/31737> [Accessed February 2024].

⁷ Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore entry for ‘Balmerino Mill’: <http://canmore.org.uk/site/31761> [Accessed February 2024].

Early Modern

The sixteenth century brought major upheavals to Balmerino. In December 1547 the English garrison occupying Broughty Ferry Castle raided the monastery at Balmerino. They apparently burnt the abbey, the surrounding villages, and a large amount of corn.⁸ Further disruption came in the summer of 1559, when it is thought that Protestant activists ‘reformed’ the abbey.⁹ It seems that until the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century local residents continued to use part of the abbey site as a parish church, and the minister’s manse was also in this area.¹⁰ Following the Reformation the former abbot’s house became a private residence, and during the early seventeenth century was occupied by Lord Balmerino.



The former abbot’s house, with post-Reformation alterations into a laird’s house. (B. Rhodes)

The late sixteenth century appears to have been a time of instability in Balmerino. Indeed, in 1584 the minister Thomas Douglas was attacked on his way home from church. Douglas appears to have led a lively life, being accused in 1619 of taking part in the killing of Thomas Crichton of Bottomcraig, who was travelling between Balmerino and Cupar. However, Douglas ultimately managed to avoid prosecution.¹¹ Douglas died peacefully in 1634.

⁸ *Calendar of State Papers: Scotland*, vol. 1, p. 54.

⁹ Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore entry for ‘Balmerino Abbey’: <http://canmore.org.uk/site/31746> [Accessed February 2024].

¹⁰ Andrew Thomson, ‘Parish of Balmerino’, *Old Statistical Account* (1793), vol. 9, p. 224.

¹¹ Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae: The Succession of Ministers in Scotland from the Reformation* (1925), p. 128.



Early modern tombstone at the old cemetery at Balmerino. (B. Rhodes)

During Thomas Douglas’s time as minister the local residents seem to have ceased worshipping at the abbey, and to have moved to a new parish church on a small hill, where Balmerino old cemetery now stands.¹² Indeed, the old cemetery has a number of early modern memorials in varying states of preservation. The small settlement near to the seventeenth-century church became known as Kirkton of Balmerino. In the late eighteenth century the minister’s manse was located a little distance from the church. In the 1790s the glebe (the area of farmland allocated to the minister) was apparently ‘about 9 acres, with a manse, garden, and office-houses’.¹³



John Ainslie’s 1775 map of Fife shows the seventeenth and eighteenth-century location of Balmerino Parish Church – giving rise to the nearby farm-toun becoming known as Kirkton of Balmerino. (National Library of Scotland)

¹² Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches, entry for ‘Balmerino Abbey: <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158408> [Accessed February 2024]. Andrew Thomson, ‘Parish of Balmerino’, *Old Statistical Account* (1793), vol. 9, p. 224.

¹³ Andrew Thomson, ‘Parish of Balmerino’, *Old Statistical Account* (1793), vol. 9, p. 220.

Late Modern

The 1810s saw the Church of Scotland congregation at Balmerino relocate from Kirkton to a new site in Bottomcraig. The minister's manse was also rebuilt around this time.¹⁴ However, the new church was soon felt to be too small for the growing population, and the new parish church was significantly remodelled in the late nineteenth century.



The nineteenth-century Balmerino Parish Church in Bottomcraig, 2021. (B. Rhodes)

¹⁴ J. Thomson, 'Parish of Balmerino', *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, p. 588.

In the nineteenth century an increasing number of Balmerino's residents identified as dissenters from the Church of Scotland. In 1838 it was estimated that there were about 80 dissenters in the parish of Balmerino.¹⁵ This number grew significantly in the 1840s with the upheaval of the Great Disruption and the creation of the Free Church. A Free Church congregation was established in Gauldry soon after the Great Disruption.¹⁶ This church later became Gauldry Parish Church, before closing in 2019.¹⁷



Former Gauldry Parish Church, 2023. (B. Rhodes)

As of 2024, Balmerino's nineteenth-century parish church at Bottomcraig remains a place of worship. The parish is now united with Wormit, with services on alternate Sundays.¹⁸ The long-term future of the site is uncertain.

¹⁵ J. Thomson, 'Parish of Balmerino', *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, p. 588.

¹⁶ University of St Andrews Library Special Collections, Records of Gauldry Church of Scotland, GB 227 CH3/1119.

¹⁷ Balmerino Parish Church of Scotland Trustees, 'Annual Report for Year to December 2019'. Available at: <https://www.oscr.org.uk/charityDocuments/2021-03-24-accs-re-sc002542-balmerino-parish-church-of-scotland-redacted-c7aec379-2808-ed11-82e5-000d3a875ce3.pdf> [Accessed February 2024].

¹⁸ Wormit Parish Church website: <https://www.wormitparishchurch.org.uk/> [Accessed February 2024].

Balmerino – Places of Worship – Past and Present

Balmerino Abbey, Balmerino

Denomination: Roman Catholic

Period: High Medieval, Late Medieval

Current Place of Worship? No

Balmerino Abbey was founded in the 1220s by Queen Ermengarde and her son Alexander II. The new monastery at Balmerino was a Cistercian community, and was established with the assistance of monks from Melrose Abbey. Balmerino was a relatively small monastery and appears to have had some financial difficulties during the Middle Ages. It has been suggested that Balmerino struggled to compete for resources with the larger and richer religious houses at Lindores and St Andrews. On the evening of Christmas Day 1547 an English raiding party burned Balmerino Abbey, supposedly after Scottish forces had shot with hackbuts from the religious site. The extent of the damage done by the raiders is unclear, and by 1555 at least eight monks appear to have been living in the abbey. Soon afterwards, the Reformation rising of 1559 ended monastic life at Balmerino, although it is possible that the church continued to be used for parish worship until about 1611. Today the chapter house and a sixteenth-century residence are the most notable extant remains. As late as the 1780s stones from the abbey site were being removed for local building projects.

Sources

Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore entry for 'Balmerino Abbey'. Available at:

<http://canmore.org.uk/site/31746>

R. Oram, ed., *Citeaux: Life on the Edge – The Cistercian Abbey of Balmerino, Fife (Scotland)* (2008).

W. Turnbull, ed., *The Chartularies of Balmerino and Lindores* (1841).



Remains of the Chapter House at Balmerino Abbey. (Source: Bess Rhodes / University of St Andrews)

Balmerino Old Parish Church, Balmerino

Denomination: Church of Scotland

Period: Early Modern, Late Modern

Current Place of Worship? No

The burial ground towards the southern edge of Kirkton of Balmerino reflects the site of the old parish church. According to local legend the parish church moved here from Balmerino Abbey in 1611 because the aristocratic family who then owned the abbey precinct ‘could not bear the noise of the psalms on Sunday’. The ‘Kirk of Balmerinoch’ is clearly marked on the early seventeenth-century map of Fife created by Robert Gordon (where it is shown in a similar position to the surviving burial ground). Around 1811 a new parish church was completed nearer to Bottomcraig and the church at Kirkton of Balmerino was abandoned. By the mid-nineteenth century the old parish church was marked on maps as ‘ruins’. The wider site continued in use as a graveyard – a function it still serves today.

Sources

James Fraser, ‘Map of the counties of Fife and Kinross’ (1846). NLS, EMS.b.1.34. Available at:

<https://maps.nls.uk/counties/rec/7232>

Robert Gordon and Timothy Pont, ‘Fyffe Imperfect’ (c.1636-52). NLS, Adv.MS.70.2.10 (Gordon 54).

S. Taylor and G. Markus, *The Place-Names of Fife* (2010), vol. 4, pp. 149-150.

J. Thomson, ‘Parish of Balmerino’, *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, p. 593.

W. Turnbull, ed., *The Chartularies of Balmerino and Lindores* (1841), p. 74.



The old parish church graveyard at Balmerino. (Source: Bess Rhodes / University of St Andrews)

Balmerino Parish Church, Balmerino

Denomination: Church of Scotland

Period: Late Modern

Current Place of Worship? Yes

Balmerino Parish Church opened in 1811. Previously the residents of Balmerino had worshipped at an older church in Kirkton of Balmerino. In 1838 Balmerino Parish Church was described as ‘a plain building without any ornament’. However, in the 1880s the church was remodelled to provide more seating and additional exterior and interior decoration was added at this time. In the 1930s the Church of Scotland united Balmerino with the nearby congregation at Gauldry. Worship continued in both churches until the early twenty-first century. Balmerino is now united with the parish of Wormit.

Sources

Historic Environment Scotland, ‘Balmerino Parish Kirk’, Listed Building Designation. Available at: <https://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/LB2529>

J. Thomson, ‘Parish of Balmerino’, *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, p. 593.

‘Union of Balmerino and Gauldry Churches’, *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 23 October 1937.

Wormit Parish Church website: <https://www.wormitparishchurch.org.uk/>



The nineteenth-century parish church at Balmerino. (Source: Bess Rhodes / University of St Andrews)

Coultra Church, Coultra

Denomination: Roman Catholic

Period: High Medieval

Current Place of Worship? No

During the twelfth century there was a parish church at Coultra. However, this appears to have been abandoned in the thirteenth century when the congregation moved to Balmerino – where they probably worshiped in the nave of the newly founded Cistercian abbey. The exact site of the medieval church is not known.

Sources

G.W.S. Barrow, *The Acts of William I, King of Scots, 1165-1214* (Edinburgh, 1971), pp. 342-343.

C. Innes and P. Chalmers, eds, *Liber S. Thome de Aberbrothoc* (Edinburgh, 1848), vol. 1, p. 26.



Countryside at Coultra. (Source: Bess Rhodes / University of St Andrews)

Gauldry Parish Church, Gauldry

Denomination: Free Church, United Free Church, Church of Scotland

Period: Late Modern

Current Place of Worship? No

A Free Church congregation was established at Gauldry in the 1840s. The site of the church is clearly marked on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey (published in 1855). Supposedly, the church building was converted from an old weaver's shop – with the congregation purchasing the site in the 1860s. The congregation at Gauldry became part of the United Free Church in 1900 and then rejoined the Church of Scotland in 1929. In the 1930s the Church of Scotland congregations at Gauldry and Balmerino united. Worship continued at Gauldry into the early twenty-first century. The church finally closed in May 2019. The property was sold in 2020 and has been converted into a dwelling.

Sources

Balmerino Parish Church of Scotland Trustees, 'Annual Report for Year to December 2019'. Available at: <https://www.oscr.org.uk/charityDocuments/2021-03-24-accs-re-sc002542-balmerino-parish-church-of-scotland-redacted-c7aec379-2808-ed11-82e5-000d3a875ce3.pdf> [Accessed February 2024].

W. Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland, 1843-1900*, (Edinburgh, 1914), vol. 2.

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