The medieval Abbey

Coupar Angus Abbey was established in 1164 by Malcolm the Fourth and, by the 14th century, had become what was probably the wealthiest religious house in Scotland. The Abbot and monks have left their mark in the site of the market outside the gates, to the north of the site of the Abbey Churchyard, and in the town itself however, there is no evidence prior to the 13th century that the town was founded on a pre-existing settlement.

The Abbey was in a region of extensive rural settlement and was situated on a strategic site. The River Isla and its tributary, the Coupar Burn, were vital for the town's economy, providing water and transport. The name Coupar is possibly derived from the Gaelic term for “camera”, a reference to the Roman camp which once occupied the location.

The Abbey Churchyard sits on a slight rise above the River Isla and within a loop of its tributary, the Coupar Burn. The local area was a focus for religious and secular activity, and the Abbey played a significant role in the history of the region. The Cistercian Abbey was one of three founded in North Perthshire, the other two being Innerchaffray (an Augustinian Abbey) and Elcho (a Premonstratensian monastery). The Abbey's position on the map of the area shows the importance of the Abbey. The monks and their followers would have been familiar with the surrounding countryside, which was rich in natural resources.

The Abbey gradually fell into decline after the Reformation, and by the 18th century, it was almost completely derelict. The building was stripped of its finery, ornament and the “idolatory” arches, and a Mortuary was established. Although built as a mausoleum, the building is anecdotally described as a Mortuary and the interior is fitted out with a sink and a natural stone anatomy slab.

The Gatehouse

The Gatehouse is the only remaining part of the Abbey and is a Scheduled Monument. It sits in a separate rectangular area and is owned by Moray Estates. The condition of the arch has been surveyed and there are sections of masonry, which are currently under consideration by Historic Scotland. The drawing from the 18th century suggests that this was the only remaining part of the Abbey still standing. The old plan of the Abbey shows that there were fortifications at each corner of the walled Abbey Precinct. However, Pont's Map and Lord Balmerino's painting indicate a tower.

The Watch House

The roughly octagonal building was erected by public subscription in 1852. However, it re-uses medieval fragments of masonry. In particular, the frieze at the top of the wall appears to be sections of the Abbey's massive fluted columns. Inside, there is a fireplace to warm the men who kept watch through the night for body snatchers, who posed a threat particularly in the first three decades of the 19th century.

The Murray of Simprim Mausoleum

This was built in 1850 as the family burial tomb for William Murray of Simprim, a wealthy landowner. Although built as a mausoleum, the building is anecdotally described as a Mortuary and the interior is fitted out with a sink and a natural stone anatomy slab.

Further information

Acknowledgements:

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Defending the Dead: The Legacy of the Body Snatchers (2007) by Timothy Pont Map c. 1580 (under license to the National Library of Scotland).
The gravestones and the grass are generally in good condition. There are few older stones from before the 19th century and Jervise noted in 1875 that many older stones had been moved away. However, those monks’ stone coffins, which were originally found at the East end of the church and now lie beside the gatehouse and older stones around the watch house, are amongst a small number which have survived.

**Key to Gravestones**

1. Two coffin stones, tapered and sized — believed to have been the tombs of Cistercian monks. Ship on south face.

2. Thomas Bell (1815), comedian of the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh. Headstone erected by the Dundee Eccentric X Society, in testimony of their esteem and respect for Mr. Bell, an honorary member. “The curtain dropped on the drama of his existence and he retired of the world to the sorrow and regret of those who had the pleasure of his acquaintance.”

3. George Wighton (1703), a table stone featuring angels and souls and with block lettering “Here lies ane honest man.”

4. Ogilvy (1731), a Resurrection scene featuring trumpeting angels.

5. Ann Miller (1760), deep carving with two figures. Erected by her husband Charles May “Writer in Angus”.

6. Ann Young (1731), merchant symbol on West face and a Resurrection scene on East face, complete trumpeting angels with feathered wings.

7. Thomas Small (1773). A Minister Associate of Coupar Angus who died at the age of 28. West face-torches symbolise the life eternal (lit) and mortality (extinguished) and palm frond in the centre. This stone is now badly decayed.