

7. The Case of the Proletarian Priests Sir Robert Croc and the Hospital of St Mary Magdalen at Cowglen

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All the secondary sources which mention the lost, nameless hospital established by Sir Robert Croc for the 'infirm brothers' of the priory of Paisley follow the following account, written by George Chalmers in his monumental *Caledonia* almost two hundred years ago:

'(t)he only ancient hospital that can be distinctly traced in this shire...is one which was founded for infirm men before the end of the twelfth century by Robert Croc...who settled at and gave the name to *Croc's-toun* (sic), which in after times was called Crukstoun or Crookston.....

This hospital and its chapel appear to have stood on the west side of Levern Water, between old (sic) Crookston and Neilston. Of the subsequent history and ultimate fate of this establishment nothing is known' ¹.

In fact, the location and name of the hospital are quite easy to trace. Two 13th century documents tell us that the centre of Sir Robert's estate lay neither at Neilston nor at the impressive earthwork at the later Crookston Castle, but within a set of *clausa* [enclosures] at *Cuglin*, later Cowglen Castle and ultimately the farm of East Cowglen ². Another item in the muniments of the Maxwells of Pollok, an estate plan of 1741, provide us with the name of the hospital and the layout of its lands, all adjacent to Sir Robert's modest castle ³.

The place-names in Figure 23 give us the location of the hospital. Spittle Meadow, Spittal Wood and Magdalens Muir are adjectival phrases in which the noun describes a type of pasture and the adjective its ownership: a 'spittal' [hospital] of St Mary Magdalen. They don't tell us where the *hospital* was located. They tell us where a particular form of *revenue* was located. The fourth place-name *lie* [the] *Magdalenis*, is just a noun, a compressed form of 'the land of St Mary Magdalen's' and it must have been the centre of this tiny manor. For all we know, the land of Magdalens may have included a home farm, but it certainly included the hospital.

Although Ogilvie's estate plan of 1741 records only a short section of the boundary between East Cowglen and Magdalens, it enables us to locate the territory of *lie*

¹ George Chalmers, *Caledonia*, vol. vi, pp. 828-9.

² The 'enclosures' : Register of Paisley Abbey, np. 71, p.78, c1200 x 1219, probably early in the first decade; 'Cuglin', Sir William Fraser, *The Lennox*, vol. ii, [1874], no.2, p. 2, probable date c.1180.

³ Ogilvie plans of the Lordship of Darnley [in Pollok]: T-PM 134/1C, T-PM 134/1B; Spittlecroft [Strathbungo] is in T-PM 134/1 [all in the archives dept., The Mitchell library. The 1741 plan of Magdalen Muir is at Pollok House.

Magdalenis. It lay east of the Croc demesne and north-east of Kennishead – in other words, it's in Cowglen Golf Club.

An infirm foundation

In those days a hospital was managed by a monastic community, usually for the benefit of lay people in need. It was financed by endowments to the community, whose officers had plenty of scope for extracting a 'management fee' from the enterprise. In some cases the hospital was a 'bedehouse' where patients were themselves monks - 'bedesmen' who were expected to supply prayers on behalf of those who donated gifts for their upkeep. The hospital at Cowglen was founded on rather different principles. Apart from the document concluding 'the case of the proletarian priest' [below] there is no record of the hospital in the Register of Paisley Abbey. That means there was no donation to the priory for the hospital costs, and no obligation owed by the community to the sole donor, Sir Robert Croc, or the patients. It was the first lay hospital in Scotland.

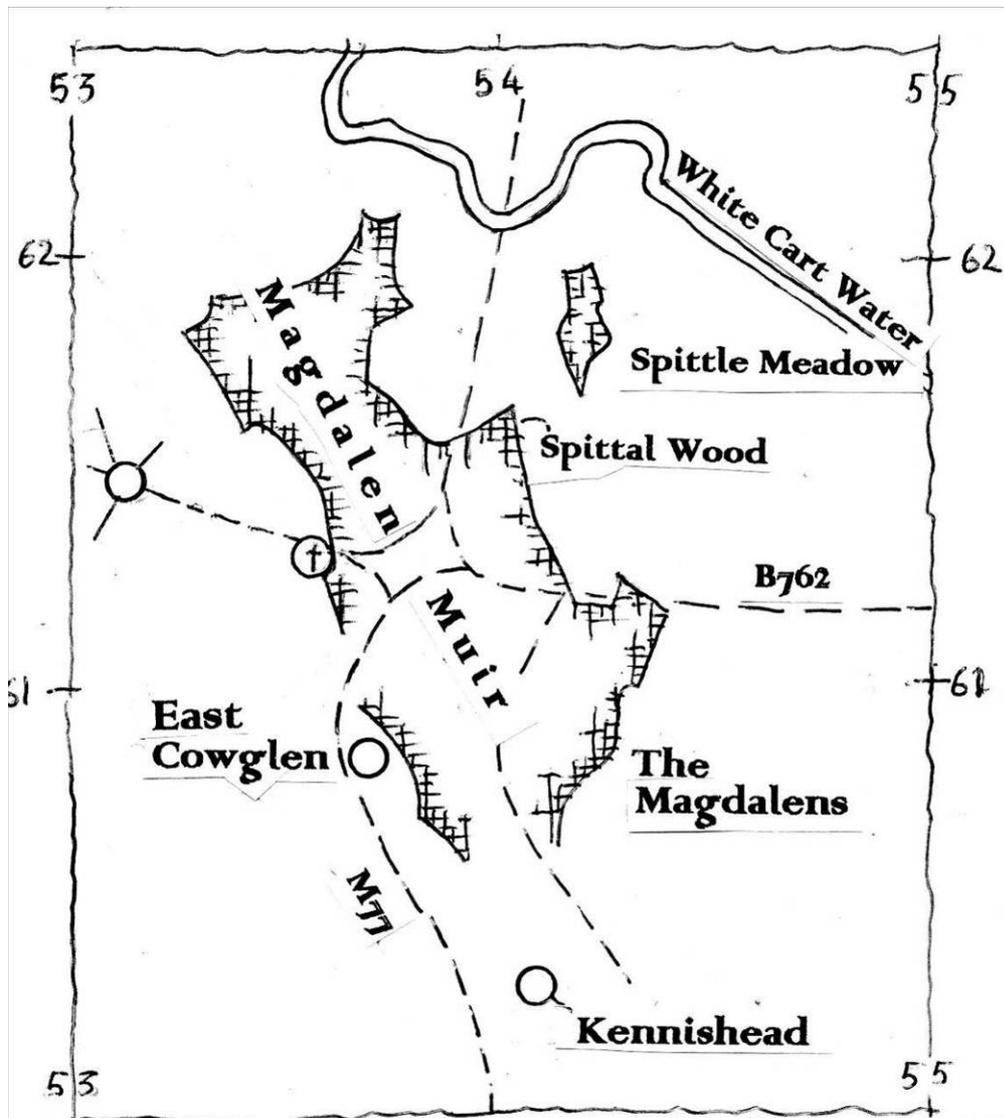


Figure 23: Places Mentioned in the Text

The stone cross on the muir boundary dates from the 13th century. It may have been dedicated to St James. (It was the starting and finishing post for the annual horse race on St James Day). Map based on Ogilvie's 'A Plan of the Lordship of Darnley' etc 1741.

It is possible that this unusual arrangement was the result of an earlier contract. In the first few years of the 13th century Sir Robert was one of two landholders in the parish of St Mirin who were granted the right to an oratory [a private chapel] in their own manor-houses ⁴. They were responsible for the construction, maintenance, and provision of the chapel, and paid fees for the use of one or other of the priory's chaplains. In return they were recognised as 'dear friends' of the priory and, probably, as *conversi*, laymen entitled to spend their last days 'in the odour of sanctity' as associate members of the community. One can only guess Sir Robert's age – he was probably well over fifty ⁵. At this time the priory had, probably, not much more than the original twelve beds in the monks' dorter. If the prior had promised bed-space to local donors eager to enjoy their retirement in close contact with the four saints of the Paisley church, he also needed to shift a few of the less active monks out of the premises.

It may be that the hospital for 'infirm brothers' at Cowglen began as a small bedehouse. We know that it had no chapel [see below]. The monks must have relied on access to Sir Robert's oratory and the services provided there by a peripatetic chaplain. The patients had 'hired men' to support them, but, located away from the monastic campus with its herb garden and its capacity for preparing specific diets and medication, the hospital is unlikely to have provided very much in the way of care.

It is possible that a hospital without a chapel was a hospital without a name. The dedication to St Mary Magdalen may have taken place some years after the foundation, when Sir Robert added a chapel and a chaplaincy to the hospital. Either way, the Cluniac Order favoured the Magdalen and promoted her as a patron saint of victims of infectious diseases – especially leprosy. That may explain why the hospital was positioned on the other side of the muir, but the document below indicates that the hospital was not initially a hospice for the terminally ill or for lepers: if they 'chanced to die' their 'corpses would be brought to Paisley'.

The Case of the Proletarian Priests

At this time, the priory of Paisley had a small team of (probably) over-worked priests. They were run-of-the-mill clergy employed by a religious community to carry out secular tasks - the provision of the sacraments at the monastic church, its

⁴ The oratory: Register of Paisley Abbey, no. 71, p.78, c1200x1219, probably early in the first decade.

⁵ Croc's age: he was listed as a knight in a charter of the priory, dated 1165x1173. As a man 'coming up through the ranks' he was probably knighted well after his teens, and was probably born in the 1140s. Source: [Register of Paisley Abbey, no. 8, pp.5-6.

dependent chapels, and at the parish churches donated to the community; together with clerical work and some secular business. They represented the community during property transactions, and are recorded in the witness-lists of charters. They probably played a key rôle in the priory's 'income-generating' programmes, for a travelling priest without the financial entitlements of a vicar or a parson could collect along his 'circuit' rather more in the way of teinds (tithes) and oblations ('offerings') than a parish priest - and cost less. At this time there was only one 'full-time' resident chaplaincy [in the Steward's burgh and castle at Renfrew]. The priory was about to get a second one – at the Cowglen hospital.

The only substantive information we have on the early days of St Mary Magdalen's lies in a document which, in its opening section [the first two paragraphs of the translation below] appears to be a record of Paisley priory's grant of a chapel and a chaplain to support Sir Robert's hospital. We might assume that the provision of the sacraments to retired monks in a country hostel provided by the generosity of a landed patron is an entirely happy event; but the charter recording the transaction is not pleasant to read. Here, Prior Roger and the community of Paisley are seen to have pressurised Robert Croc into building another chapel, providing and exposed him to a public humiliation in the presence of the royal chaplain and the dean of Glasgow. The rubric was added by a copyist of the 15th century; the paragraphs are mine.

About Robert Croc's chapel for the sick:

'... (P)rompted by piety, we have granted..... to the infirm brothers of the hospital which Robert Croc has built on his land, a chapel and a chaplain who is to celebrate divine office there.

'The aforesaid Robert Croc, .. will provide the chaplain with a stipend and essentials and all other things relating to the practice of divine office; excepting in their entirety the rights of our church of Paisley.

'Moreover, whoever is the chaplain provided by us for that place, he will first swear loyalty to us and to the mother church and he will neither do nor permit to be done anything of any sort which will cause damage to our church, whether regarding offerings or parish revenues.

'Indeed, the aforesaid Robert has sworn that no (such) damage will accrue from his (appointees) and their successors, and that his heirs will swear likewise if they should wish to have grace.

'And, indeed, if any of the brothers or their hired men chance to die there, their corpses will be brought to Paisley, without the celebration of mass at the chapel.

'Witnessed by Herbert, Dean (of the chapter of Glasgow), William, Chaplain to the King, Philip of Partick, Master Robert of Hedun' ⁶.

⁶ Register of Paisley Abbey, no. 70, pp.77-8, c1196xc1214. As this document post-

The fact that Sir Robert Croc had been required to swear an oath binding himself – and his successors - *before* the community of Paisley gave permission for the creation of a chapel at the hospital suggests that the abuses had already taken place, and Sir Robert was being compelled to resolve them.

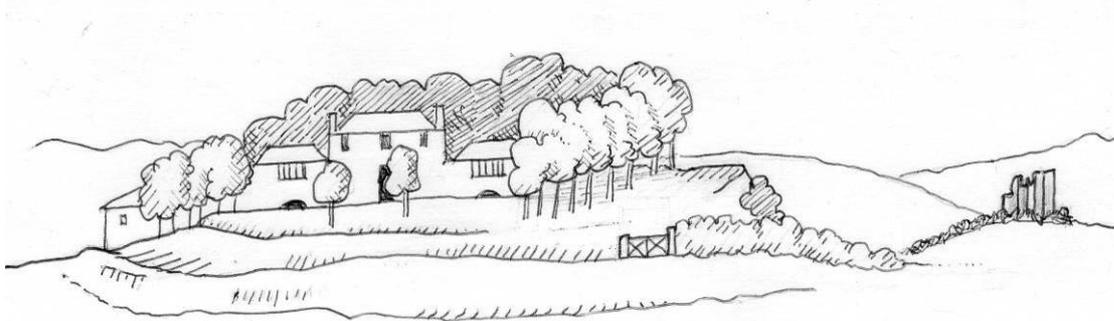


Figure 24: The 'enclosures' of Cowglen

This view of East Cowglen shows two concentric bank and ditch enclosures, possibly much older than the 13th century. These may be the 'enclosures' of Sir Robert Croc's manor house later Cowglen Castle. Crookston Castle can be seen to the north west. This was drawn from an 1830s painting of East Cowglen in the Pollok House Collection.

What abuses? Well, the church was fiercely protective of its revenues. Some oblations, fees, or donations were being made in or around Cowglen and Magdalens and were not reaching the priory. The perpetrators appear to have been the peripatetic priests acting as chaplain at Cowglen. Perhaps one or more of them had secretly celebrated mass for the 'infirm brothers' and their lay servants, and, as a result, some additional offerings had been made directly to the chaplain rather than to the community of Paisley. Perhaps some of Sir Robert's tenants had solicited the infirm brothers of Cowglen for prayers in return for herbs and fresh food straight from the field. It may be that tenants on Sir Robert Croc's land, asked why they hadn't supplied the tiends and offerings due to the priory and its chaplains, answered that they'd 'already given', directly, at Cowglen.

There may have been another problem. Sir Robert Croc was 'a striver', the first member of his family to achieve knighthood, the first to arrange marriages with other families of that class, and the first to build a private chapel and become the donor and 'dear friend' to the local priory. In his extreme old age he was to embark on an ambitious - and personally disastrous - project of establishing a parish church on his lands further up the Levern valley, at Neilston ⁷. There are indications that he was

dates the granting of the oratory and gives the impression that none of the 'infirm brothers' have yet died, it's probably only a year or two later.

⁷ Register of Paisley Abbey, nos. 100, pp. 105-5 and 101, p. 105, c.1226-27.

somewhat assertive for a man with no pedigree⁸. It may be that Prior Roger wanted to put an uppity knight in his place.

The Later History

In 1269 a descendant of Sir Robert Croc surrendered his lands in Renfrewshire to the Stewarts. Over the next thirty years or so the lands were dismembered. The title to Cowglen, the *caput* ('head place') of the estate was purchased by the Maxwells of Nether Pollok. Thereafter, the hospital lands, *lie Magdalenis* (The Magdalens), *Magdalene muir*, and *Spittlemedow* (now Spittal Woods) are recorded in the Pollok cartulary and estate plans. At some point in the following two hundred years one of the Maxwells granted a further piece of land to sustain the hospital – Spittalcroft, at Strathbungo, just north of the modern Queens Park.

No record has survived of the management of St Mary Magdalen's, or of the circumstances of its almoners; but we know that in the early 15th century (and probably much earlier) it was a profit-making enterprise. It was still a charitable institution, supported by alms from the local landholder; but its income was divided between the almoners and whoever was granted its 'fruits'. We don't know who disposed of these profits – the hospital is not mentioned in the records of Paisley Abbey, the Diocese of Glasgow, or any other agency, ecclesiastical or lay – and it is mere happenstance that we know of it at all.

In or around the 1420s, a prior of St Andrews picked up a letter of petition and had it copied into his notebook as a potentially useful piece of information. It identified the hospital of St Mary Magdalen of 'Pol(l)ok' as a source of unearned income⁹.

Written in 1417, the letter requested the 'fruits' – the surplus income - of the hospital. The petitioner was Finlay of Albany, Vicar-General of the Friars Preachers (the Black Friars, or Dominicans) in Scotland. Being a close relative of the Duke of Albany, Regent of Scotland, Finlay was probably granted his income from the Cowglen hospital, but after the return of James I from captivity, he supported a rising of the Duke's kinfolk, was forced to flee to Antrim, where he died; and the prior filed his letter, for future reference.

By the time of the Reformation many of the older hospitals had been closed. The cartulary of the Maxwells of Nether Pollok records the hospital lands as parts of the estate, so we should assume that St Mary Magdalens ceased to provide for almoners at some time between 1417 and the Reformation.

⁸ It would take another article to justify this comment. In the writer's view the fragments of information we have about Sir Robert [four documents, a seal, a map, and numerous appearances as a witness to charters] suggest that, despite his positive contribution to the church and to his estates, he was rather tactless about his achievements and aroused outright hostility from at least one of the Stewards, the priory of Paisley, and the Chapter of Glasgow.

⁹ St Andrews Copiale, p. 389, in Ian B Cowan and David E Easson, *Medieval Religious Houses: Scotland*, 1976, p.188.

A note ...

All the evidence which enables us to locate the medieval hospital, the fortified residence of Sir Robert Croc nearby, and the (probable) prehistoric earthwork which Croc re-used, has been in the public domain for at least 140 years. During that period Cowglen and Magdalens have been the subject of planning permission for various hospitals, coalmines, housing estates, a golf course, the National Savings Bank complex, two car-parks, a motorway, a grandiose retail centre, and a dump for asbestos from the former St Bellarmine's Secondary School. Planners, archaeologists, and historians have, over many years, declined to work together to protect this particular corner of the `built heritage'.