

## 2. Paisley Abbey Drain

R.J.Malden

Principal Officer, Paisley Museums

There has been very little archaeological investigation in Paisley over the years and the recent major discovery of the main drain of the monastery occurred more by chance than by scientific investigation.

The Abbey & Monastery of Paisley was founded in 1163 by Walter Fitzalan, High Steward of Scotland, with 13 monks from the Cluniac Monastery of Much Wenlock in Shropshire. The oldest part of the church structure dates to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, having survived the burning by the English in 1307; most of the nave is 15<sup>th</sup> century and the tower and choir were rebuilt during the 1920s.

The abbey became the family church for the Stewart family from whom the present Royal family is descended. This connection also led to the Monastery receiving large grants of land which generated a high income, making it one of the wealthiest in Scotland. By 1250 the monks were repairing their fish tanks at Dumbarton, an indication of the size of the establishment at that date; the fish tanks in Paisley are supposed to have dated from 1333.

Apart from their headquarters at Cluny in France, Paisley was the most powerful Cluniac Monastery in Europe, following its elevation, in 1245. The Cluniac monks encouraged medieval tourism - pilgrimage - and Paisley became one of the four most important sites of pilgrimage in Scotland along with Scone, Melrose & Whithorn. This was mainly due to the Abbey housing the remains and shrine to the local saint St. Mirin.

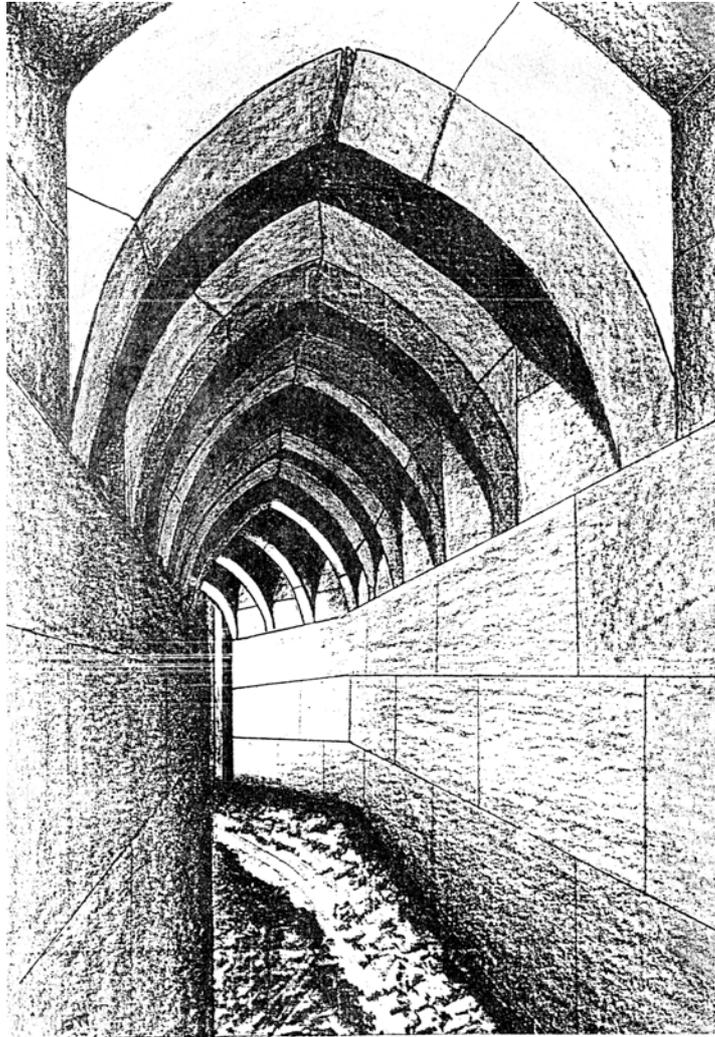
To meet these tourist demands many ancillary buildings were erected for the Monastery – Infirmary, Guesthouse, Stables – in fact the Monastery could be equated with a present day motorway service station with tourist attractions. The wealth of the Monastery enabled successive Abbots to enlarge and improve the facilities – one built a 15' stone wall around the site, a mile in length; another tried to build a tower to the church, but it fell down due to structural failure and demolished the choir. The monks of Paisley also built Crossraguel in Ayrshire, exactly halfway between Paisley and Whithorn, to improve facilities for pilgrimage.

Following the dissolution of the Monastery in about 1560, the church remained in use to the present day, whilst the other buildings were converted for private use by the Earls of Abercorn. It would appear that the earls continued to use the St. Mirin aisle as their own private Roman Catholic chapel. During the 1760s the Abercorns asset stripped the site to build the New Town of Paisley and the Abbey Bridge, which resulted in the surviving monastic buildings being demolished. During the 1930s all the properties surrounding the Abbey were bought and presented to Paisley Burgh Council, by the Abbey Surrounds Committee, on the condition that all the buildings would be demolished and that the area would remain an open space for all time.

During 1989 Renfrew District Council embarked on a five year programme to refurbish the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Town Hall into a 21<sup>st</sup> century Conference Centre. The last phase of this programme will be to re-landscape the area around the Abbey. To complement this work the suggestion was made that the outline of the Monastery building could be marked out as part of the landscaping programme, and to this end historical and archaeological investigation was started.

Most monasteries were built to approximately the same plan and their location was dependant on the drainage and water supply, which is why so many sites are

adjacent to rivers. Each Monastery had a main drain running across the site, acting as a spinal column, usually with a stream diverted to constantly flush it, into which subsidiary drains fed from other buildings. By locating the route of the main drain it should be possible to accurately place the other buildings of the Monastery.



The earliest post Reformation mention of the drain came in 1829 when it was discovered running under the garden of John Crawford, whose house was on the south side of Ellis Lane. In 1879 a 50 yard section of the main drain was discovered when a trench was dug in Bridge Street for a sewer pipe as part of the preparation for the building of the present Abbey Bridge. Various interested parties examined the drain, and it was found that it was clear for 50' to the east until it was blocked by a roof fall; and 150' to the west until silted up to the roof. The comment was made that the base of the drain was dry, but that the true base might be lower. In 1888 the British Archaeological Association visited the drain and indicated that it might be a passage to Crookston Castle. In his book on Paisley Abbey, the Revd. A.R.Howell states that, at about this time, 120 cart loads of rubbish were removed from the drain, including artefacts and fragments of stained glass. It is possible that the intention was to re-use the drain, but very irritating not to know where the 120 cart

loads were dumped. During the 1930s some parts had a concrete roof inserted, again for possible re-use. The location and existence of the drain was then forgotten. During the autumn of 1990 trial trenches were excavated by the Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust to the south and south east of the Place of Paisley to assess the depth and possible survival of archaeological remains of the Monastery. The results from these trenches, and from the use of Ground Probe Radar, proved inconclusive. But during the excavation Mr Frank Snow, of the Regional Council's Sewerage Department, indicated that he knew of an access point for the main drain. He took myself and Hugh McBrien of SUAT to a grassed area and lifting a piece of turf, revealed a previously hidden manhole cover. Under strict safety conditions, Hugh and I were allowed to the bottom of the access shaft and had our first glimpse of the great stone tunnel. In order that the structure could be checked for physical and atmospheric safety, the firm of DCS (Technical Services) was employed to send a remote controlled television camera along the drain. Though there was about 1 metre depth of water at the west end of the tunnel, the camera revealed a muddy surface to about 90 metres of finely constructed drain. The camera also revealed two other access points and that the structure was safe and there were no gas problems. In order to access the full size of the structure it was agreed to remove the silt from the base. Since the silt had been deposited at random by water movement and was not in clear stratified layers, it could be removed by vacuum suction pump. From the evidence available DCS estimated two days work to clear the full 90 metres length and funds were made available from the Museums Service to carry out this work. By the end of the second day it was clear that instead of a thin coating of mud at the base of the drain there was much nearer a 1/2 metre of compacted silt which required to be loosened by hand before removal. Fortunately funds were immediately made available from the Paisley Common Good Fund and work was able to commence immediately

. At the end of twelve days work some 30 cubic tonnes of silt had been removed from the drain, together with a large quantity of stone and miscellaneous building debris. The centre section of the drain had been rebuilt over the silt and so was left alone.

The silt removed was dumped each night at the Laigh Park Sewerage Works for later examination. In loosening the silt care was taken to remove any large items of pottery by hand, and this was removed daily to Paisley Museum. I still do not fully believe the eleventh day of the silt removal when I went to collect the most recently recovered pieces of pottery. Quite calmly I was handed a complete chamber pot of about 1550. In my experience, the recovery of complete pots does not happen in excavation, it is still hard to accept. The handle of the pot had been above the silt and instead of trying to pull it out the excavator worked carefully around it and retrieved a most amazing find without damage.

Once the majority of the 90 metre section had been cleared Paisley College of Technology took extensive video film of the structure and the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments interrupted their pre-planned schedule to survey and photograph the drain for the National Monuments Record. At the western end the top of the structure is two metres below ground level and consists of an arched stone lined and floored tunnel, some two metres in height, and one and a half metres wide. The centre section, rebuilt at a much later period is only half a metre high and a metre wide with a rubble floor. The eastern section is nearly two metres wide with a fine paved floor, and is nearly two metres high. The pointed arches change to curved

arches either side of the remains of the monks' refectory or toilet, and the tunnel is finally blocked beneath the dual carriageway in Bridge Street. There are four inlet drains which will hopefully lead to some of the conventual buildings of the Monastery.

The main problem is that the original water source still survives and fills the drain to the depth of the silt, about half a metre. This water has to be pumped out each time the drain is examined. The next stage is to trace the rest of the route of the drain, potentially another 200 metres, and to remove more silt. Monk Construction Ltd. have generously offered to assist in locating the route by digging access points, and the first stage has been to excavate a new manhole to the east of the blockage. This will enable an assessment to be made as to whether the whole of the remaining drain is blocked and whether the existing blockage can be removed. If the drain is accessible beyond the blockage then perhaps two more access points will be required.

The discoveries so far have confirmed the importance of the site. The presently available section of drain dates to about 1350, and is of the highest standard of construction. The structure alone is rated by Historic Scotland & the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments to be the finest medieval drain in Scotland. Should a further section of similar construction and length be revealed, the total will be the finest medieval drain in Europe.

The 30 cubic tonnes of silt were sieved by Archaeology Projects Glasgow which is linked with the Department of Archaeology at Glasgow University. The small items retrieved were numbered and conserved at the university before individual artefacts were studied by experts. Though it is too early for a full report on the finds, an indication of their importance can be made. The initial dating of material from the silt shows an early 15<sup>th</sup> century timescale, leading us to believe that the drain itself may have been built c.1350, and would probably have replaced an earlier system.

Prior to the extraction of the silt very little was known about West of Scotland medieval pottery and certainly no quantities had been found. From the silt we have the remains of at least 350 vessels and over 100kg of pottery shards dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some of these wares were locally made, some imported with at least one example of the base of a stoneware jug from Germany, and rare fragments of a Bellerme face jug.

Of the six coins found, five were twentieth century. The sixth was a Groat of Robert III (1390-1406), minted in Edinburgh. The broken matrix of a seal has not yet been identified or dated, but may have belonged to one of the later Abbots of the Monastery. Evidence of leisure pursuits include a bone dice and two tuning pegs from a stringed instrument. These are the only such pegs so far discovered in Scotland.

It has always been presumed especially in a weaving area that the monks of Paisley would obtain their cloth locally. When a bolt of cloth was produced tax had to be paid. On payment of the tax a lead seal was affixed to the bolt and from these seals it was often possible to identify from where the cloth came. Usually these seals are found singly and never before in an archaeological context. In Scotland to date a total of six seals have been found on various sites. So far we have extracted eight seals from the drain and it has been possible to identify their place of origin. One comes from London, one from Ulm in Germany, one from Valenciennes and three from Arras, in France. Far from buying locally the monks imported their cloth. More

importantly a fragment of cloth still adheres to one of the seals so we will be able to identify the type of wool used.

Amongst the building material was a great deal of slate fragments. Great care had to be taken with these as some had designs scratched onto the surface. One piece has fragments of a poem, scratched in two different hands, on both sides. The piece of slate of the greatest significance has a fragment of music scratched on it, dating from about 1450 and is thought to be the earliest piece of Scottish polyphonic music to survive in Scotland.

It is quite clear that, when all the items have undergone detailed examination, and the remaining silt has been removed and studied, Paisley will have produced not only significant information about the great monastery, but also one of the most important archaeological discoveries in Scotland.

Our thanks go to Renfrew District Council for their continuing support, the continued assistance of the Regional Archaeologist and the Department of Archaeology at Glasgow University. Without the continuous support from the Regional Council's Sewerage Department and project could not have proceeded. Thanks also for the generous sponsorship given by Monk Construction Ltd and Paisley College of Technology. In the longer term it is hoped to open a section of the drain to the public and initial discussions are in progress with Scottish Power to achieve adequate lighting and pumping facilities.