

Sacred Landscape Project Location Report

The Isle of May

Fig 1. Ordnance Survey six-inch to the mile, Fife, sheet ca. 28, 1855.¹



Contents

Contents Page

Key

List of Figures

Introduction

Religious Sites and the Landscape the Isle of May

Research

Part 1. Early Christianity (c500-c1000AD)

I. Chapel//Hermitage of St Ethernan

Part 2. High Medieval Christianity (c1000-1300)

I. Cluniac/Benedictine Priory

Part 3. Late Medieval Christianity (1300-1560)

I. Chapel/Shrine of St Adrian

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

I. St Adrian's Chapel

Part 5. Late Modern Period (1800-)

I. St Ethernan's Monastery

Bibliography

¹ Ordnance Survey, Fife, sheet ca. 28, 1855', National Library of Scotland. Map Home, Accessed 10 March, 2021, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/74426845>.

Key

For the purposes of this report periods have been broken down as follows: 1. Early Medieval (500-1000). 2. High Medieval (1000-1300). 3. Late Medieval (1300-1560). 4. Reformation and Early Modern (1560-1800). 5. Late Modern (1800-2021).

Historical References are presented in the following format;

4 Dec 1516

Letters of safe conduct made with the consent of the Regent (James Hamilton, earl of Arran, regent for James V), for all people of both sexes of the kingdoms of England, Spain and the Isle of Man, of all ranks, coming to the kingdom of the Scots by land and sea, on foot or horse to the church of Candida Casa (Whithorn) in honour of St Ninian confessor on pilgrimage.²

St Ninian was the most popular Scottish saint in the later middle ages. As the safe conducts issued by James I and the regency council of James V quoted above show, pilgrims were travelling to his shrine from England, the Isle of Man and Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Italicised text = translated or transcribed primary source information from Latin or Middle Scots. The original language is kept where translation or modern spelling is unnecessary

Standard text = Dr Tom Turpie's explanatory comments or added factual information

Bibliographic details for each reference can be found in the accompanying footnote

All photographs by T Turpie unless otherwise indicated

Abbreviations

ER- Stuart John et al, eds. *Exchequer Rolls of Scotland*, Edinburgh: Scottish Record Office, 1878-1908,
NSA- *New Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh and London, 1834-45)

OSA- *Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1791-9),

RMS- John M. Thomson et al eds, *Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scotorum* (Edinburgh: Scottish Record Office, 1882-1914),

RPS- *The Records of the Parliaments of Scotland to 1707*, K.M. Brown et al eds (St Andrews, 2007-2021),

TA- Thomas Dickson, ed, *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* (Edinburgh, Scottish Record Office, 1877-1916),

List of Figures

Fig 1. Ordnance Survey six-inch to the mile, Fife, sheet ca. 28, 1855

Fig 2. Long- Cist Burial, Isle of May © RCAHMS

Fig 3. West range, view from south east © Historic Environment Scotland

Fig 4. James Gordon, *Fyfe Shire* (1642)

Fig 5. Sketch of the Ruins of the May chapel, 1869

² Matthew Livingstone, eds, *Registrum Secreti Sigilli Regum Scotorum* (Edinburgh: HMGRH, 1908-1982), i, no. 2844.

Introduction

Located five miles off the East Neuk of Fife, May is a small island less than a mile long and 500 metres wide. Its sacred past and strategic location, close to the entrance to the Forth has meant that its importance has always been disproportionate to its size.³ It first enters written records in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but there is strong evidence to suggest that the site had been occupied long before this time. The sacred past of the local area can be traced to the early middle ages and is associated with a holy man called St Ethernan. The cult of St Ethernan, and his later medieval incarnation, St Adrian, drew pilgrims to the island, and was an important part of the sacred landscape of the wider region throughout the middle ages, connecting the fishing communities at Anstruther and Pittenweem with the island. It was first home to a chapel or hermitage in the early middle ages, a Benedictine monastery in the twelfth century, and, when this relocated to Pittenweem, a chapel/hermitage again in the later middle ages. Since the Reformation, the island has been home to fishing communities, navigational aids and, since 1956, a nature reserve associated with bird watching.

Religious Sites and the Landscape of the Isle of May

For most of its past, human settlement on the Isle of May has been connected to its role as a key centre of the cult of St Ethernan, and his late medieval incarnation, St Adrian. Whether or not Ethernan or Adrian lived and died on the island, as per the legends, it is clear that a connection to the saint led to the development of a settlement there from the eighth century, if not earlier. The connection also stimulated the foundation of the priory in the twelfth century, leading to the construction of impressive buildings on the island. The need to provide safe anchorage, and hospitality, for pilgrims from the early middle ages, was a key factor in the construction of landing stages and other buildings on the island, that were later important in the development of the fishing community and lighthouse. The cult also created, or deepened, the connections between the island and a series of communities including Anstruther, Kilrenny, Pittenweem and Crail, helping to develop transport links and influencing the built landscape across the East Neuk of Fife. Their harbours served as embarkation points for visitors to the island, while the churches of Anstruther and Kilrenny, the monastery at Pittenweem, and wider features of the landscape such as the Caiplic Caves and St Irnie's Well at Kilrenny, were part of a network of sites of connected through the cult of Ethernan/Adrian. In the modern era, the

³ Heather F. James & Peter Yeoman, *Excavations at St Ethernan's Monastery, Isle of May, Fife 1992-1997* (Perth, Tayside and Fife Archaeological Committee, 2008), p. 1.

islands sacred past has led to archaeological investigation, and forms part of the attractions for the visitors who flock to the island in the summer months, using the same harbours at Anstruther and Crail as their medieval forebears.

1. Early Christianity (c500-c1000AD)

Site of Interest

Isle of May: **Chapel of St Ethernan**

Nature of the Site

While there are no contemporary documentary sources for the Isle of May in the early middle ages, there is considerable archaeological and place-name evidence for early Christian practices on the island and on the nearby mainland.⁴ On the Isle there was a church or chapel from at least the ninth-century, and to the east of Anstruther, the Coves, now known as the Caiplie Caves, contain Pictish era carvings, including early Christian symbols. Two carved stones and an ancient enclosure ditch that surrounds the later medieval church at Kilrenny, a few miles inland from Anstruther, are evidence that it was an early Christian site. Edwina Proudfoot, Ross Trench-Jellicoe and Simon Taylor have concluded that it was the site of a monastery dating from the seventh or eighth centuries, perhaps founded by missionaries from Galloway, members of the British or Ninianic church. The area, and its fishing tradition, also feature in a story from the life St Kentigern of Glasgow (d. 614AD), said to have occurred in the sixth century, but first recorded in the 1140s.

The chapel on the Isle of May, the monastic site at Kilrenny and the Caiplie Caves are connected to two saints, Ethernan and Adrian. Ethernan may have been *Iternan*, a holy man whose death among the Picts was recorded in the Annals of Ulster in 669AD.⁵ The only extended account of the life and legends of this saint, (Feast days 3 March and 2 December), survive in the Aberdeen Breviary, published in 1510.⁶ No time frame for the saint's life is included in these stories, and there is no direct connection to Fife. However, the core of his cult was located in the East Neuk. The church on the Isle of May was dedicated to him (until the fourteenth century at least), as was the monastery of nearby Pittenweem, and the place-name Kilrenny means church of Ethernan.⁷ By the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries the relics on the Isle of May were said to belong to St Adrian (Feast day, 4 March). In legends first noted in Andrew of Wyntoun's chronicle (1407x24) and expanded upon in the Aberdeen Breviary (1510), Adrian was described as a ninth-century missionary from the region of Pannonia in modern day Hungary. Significantly Adrian shared his Hungarian origins with two other important

⁴ Simon Taylor & Gilbert Markus, *The Place-Names of Fife. Volume Three. St Andrews and the East Neuk* (Donington, 2009), pp. 323-325 & 39, Edwina Proudfoot, 'The Picts and the Early Medieval Period', in Omand, Donald (eds), *The Fife book* (Edinburgh, 2000), pp. 50-51, Ross Trench-Jellicoe 'The Skeith Stone, Upper Kilrenny, Fife, in its context', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 128 (1998), 495-513.

⁵ Sean Mac Airt & Gearold Mac Niocall, eds, *Annals of Ulster: Text and translation Pt. 1* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 138-139.

⁶ The legends describe a saint who was born into a noble family of Scots, before receiving his education in Ireland. Ethernan later returned to undertake missionary work in Scotland, founding a number of churches, This chain of events was fairly common in the legends of Scottish saints, and was replicated legends of St Duthac of Tain amongst others, Alan Macquarrie, ed. *Legends of Scottish Saints. Readings, hymns and prayers for the commemorations of Scottish saints in the Aberdeen Breviary* (Dublin, 2012), pp. 2-5.

⁷ Taylor & Markus, *Place-Names of Fife*, pp. 323-324 & 339. As William Beat, the minister of Kilrenny noted in the 1790s, St Iرنie's was the name given by locals to the church of Kilrenny, *OSA* i, p. 409.

saints, St (Queen) Margaret of Scotland, and St Martin of Tours (connected to St Ninian). Adrian was later martyred by marauding Danes on the Isle of May, along with a large group of (unnamed) companions. The only surviving member of the party was St Monan, the titular saint of the church and town located to the west of Anstruther. The name Adrian is a Latinised version of the Gaelic name Ethernan and veneration of Adrian was recorded in the same locations as Ethernan. Adrian is therefore almost certainly an offshoot or adaptation of the cult of St Ethernan. This fluidity in the cult of the saints is not unusual. The legends of individual saints were often adapted in this way for political purposes or to suit contemporary fashions in devotion (as in this case, to link the saint to Margaret and Ninian).

699 Annals of Ulster

*Ithernan (and Corindu) died among the Picts.*⁸

Jocelin of Furness, Vita St Kentigerni, 1147x67.

St Kentigern, or Mungo as he is commonly known, was believed to have died in 614AD. In the prologue a twelfth-century life of the saint, Jocelin of Furness related the trials and tribulations of St Thanay/Enoch, the mother of the future patron saint of Glasgow. Having been raped and impregnated by a rejected suitor, Thanay was punished by his family by being first thrown from a cliff, and then, when that failed, set adrift in the Forth in a coracle;

*and carried out into deep water beyond the Isle of May. And as that pregnant girl departed from the shore all the fish of that self- same coast attended her in procession as their mistress, and after the day of her departure the take of fish there ceased. And the river- mouth, so prolific in fish as mentioned above, because it received the child unjustly condemned, remaineth unproductive unto the present day; but the fish who followed her remain where she was abandoned. From that time until now the fish are found there in such great abundance, that from every shore of the sea, from England, Scotland, and even from Belgium and France, very many fishermen come for the sake of fishing, all of whom the Isle of May conveniently accommodateth in her ports.*⁹

The legends of St Adrian in *1407x22 Andrew of Wyntounm Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland*

When Constantine was reigning

Over the Picts in Scotland,

St Adrian with his company

Came from the land of Hungary

And Arrived in Fife

There he chose to leid his life

Adrian was given permission by Constantine to dwell and preach in his kingdom

⁸ Sean Mac Airt & Gearold Mac Niocall,, eds, *Annals of Ulster: Text and translation Pt. 1* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 138-139.

⁹ Alexander P. Forbes, ed. *Lives of S. Ninian and S. Kentigern* (Edinburgh: Edmonstone and Douglas, 1874), p. 131.

*Then Adrian with his company,
 Together came to Caplachi
 And some men went to the Isle of May
 Choosing to dwell there to the end of their days
 Some others choose to go north
 At Inverary St Monan
 Who of that company was one,
 Chose him to led his life there.*

*Hub, Haldane and Hungar
 Came from Denmark at this time
 In Scotland with a great multitude
 In by the land they slew many,
 And put to death many a martyr;
 And upon Holy Thursday
 St Adrian they slew on May
 With many of his company
 In to that holy isle they lay.¹⁰*

1440s Bower Scotichronicon

There are also other islands in an arm of the sea of Ocean which is called the Firth of Forth, namely Bass, Fidra, May, where the priory is a cell of the canons of St Andrew of Kilrymont, and where St Adrian is buried with his companions, the hundred holy martyrs.¹¹

¹⁰ Francis J. Amours, *The Original Chronicle of Andrew Wyntoun* (Scottish Text Society, Edinburgh, 1903-1914), iv, 177-179.

¹¹ Donald. E. R Watt, ed, *Scotichronicon by Walter Bower in Latin and English* (Aberdeen, 1987-1999), i, p. 15.

i. **Isle of May: Chapel/Hermitage of St Ethernan**

Fig 2. Long- Cist Burial, Isle of May © RCAHMS.¹²



The Isle of May was an important early Christian site which included a chapel and shrine from at least the ninth century, and probably earlier. A number of excavations have taken place on the island (1927, 1992-1996), with the latter dig revealing two long cist-burial cemeteries and a number of other early Christian burials found under a large cairn, which can be dated to the fifth to tenth centuries. They also uncovered one building, described by Peter Yeoman as a *small church of drystone construction*, which he surmised to be a reliquary chapel dating from around the ninth century.¹³ This structure was extended in the tenth century to form a rectangular chapel, and a further expansion took place in the eleventh century to construct the church first used by the Benedictine monks when they arrived on the island in the twelfth

century.¹⁴ This pattern of expansion has led Ross Trench-Jellicoe, who carried out excavations at Kilrenny in the late 1990s, to speculate that the monastic site there may have been the earliest or original focus of the cult of St Ethernan in the seventh or eighth centuries, before it was later eclipsed as the centre of the cult by the hermitage/chapel on the Isle of May.¹⁵

1995 H F James Excavation report

*Excavation..... revealed evidence of at least four phases of church building, with each successive phase extending the structure to the E(ast). It appears that the earliest structure had drystone foundations, and was roughly 6m square, suggesting a mortuary chapel or oratory (possibly to house the bones of St Ethernan and other early monks). At a later date the building was extended by 1.6m to the E, forming a rectangular chapel evidenced by mortared foundations. This phase 2 building was further extended in the late 11th century by the addition of a square-ended apse, which was revealed during the 1995 excavations. This is probably the church that stood on the site when the monks from Reading Abbey arrived in the mid-12th century, and would have been used by them until around 1250, when they constructed their own, much larger church.*¹⁶

¹² 'Isle of May, St Adrian's Chapel', *Canmore*, Accessed 11 March 2021, <http://canmore.org.uk/collection/1952570>.

¹³ Peter Yeoman, *Pilgrimage in Medieval Scotland* (London, 1999), p. 63 and see Peter Yeoman, 'Pilgrims to St Ethernan: the archaeology of an Early Saint of the Picts and Scots', in Crawford, B E, *Conversion and christianity in the North Sea world: the proceedings of a day conference held on 21st February 1998*, *St John's House papers no. 8* (University of St Andrews, 1998), pp. 80-91

¹⁴ James and Yeoman, *Excavations at St Ethernan's Monastery*, pp. 37-40.

¹⁵ Trench-Jellicoe, 'The Skeith Stone', pp. 508-509.

¹⁶ James and Yeoman, *Excavations at St Ethernan's Monastery*, pp. 37-40.

2. High Medieval Christianity (1000-1300)

Sites of Interest

Isle of May: Cluniac/Benedictine priory

Introduction/Nature of the Site

In the twelfth century, Anglo-Norman colonists and the Gregorian and Cluniac Reform movement arrived in eastern Fife, leading to the establishment of a continental style system of parishes in the area, and of monasteries belonging to new reformed orders of monks and canons. The Isle of May first enters the historical record in mid-twelfth century, when David I (1124-53) founded a house of Cluniacs monks, one such new order, on the island.¹⁷ The monks were granted significant property holdings in Fife, including an on-shore base at Pittenweem, the town of Anstruther Wester and its church, and the fishing concession for the harbours of both settlements.¹⁸

I. Cluniac/Benedictine Priory

Fig 3. West range, view from south east © Historic Environment Scotland.¹⁹



The priory of May was founded by David I, sometime around the year 1140.²⁰ It was dedicated to St Ethernan, and was affiliated to a mother house located at Reading in Berkshire. The monks were initially Cluniacs, followers of a reformed version of the Benedictine rule, before following the lead of their mother house and reverting back to the general

Benedictine rule sometime after 1207.²¹ A Benedictine monastery had been founded at Dunfermline by David's parents (Malcolm III and Margaret), and seven further houses were found in Scotland, as well as three Cluniac monasteries. Reformed European orders of monks liked the Cluniacs proved attractive to the Scottish monarchs and nobility of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries because they brought with them a strong reputation for piety. They also brought new and innovative methods in farming, and useful international trading connections. It is likely that the monks were attracted to the site on the Isle of May because it had an existing church and a connection to an important local saint.²²

¹⁷ G.W.S. Barrow, ed, *The charters of King David I: King of Scots, 1124 – 53 and of his son Henry earl of Northumberland*, ed. (Woodbridge, 1999), no. 117.

¹⁸ R. Anthony Lodge, *Pittenweem Priory* (Strathmartine Press, St Andrews, 2020), pp. 13-21.

¹⁹ 'West range, view from the south east', *Canmore*, Accessed 12 March 2021, <https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1577734>

²⁰ The earliest charter cannot be more precisely dated than to sometime between 1140 and 1153, Barrow, *David I*, no. 117.

²¹ Lodge, *Pittenweem Priory*, pp. 26-27.

²² Yeoman, *Pilgrimage*, p. 63 and James & Yeoman, *Excavations at St Ethernan's Monastery*, pp. 37-40.

The excavation of the site in the 1990s found that there was already quite a substantial building on the site when monks arrived in the twelfth century, and that it was not until c.1250 that they constructed their own larger church. Of this church, the main survival today is the west wing, which was converted to secular use in the sixteenth-century. One other important discovery during the excavation was the grave of a young man dating from the early fourteenth century, which included a scallop shell placed in his mouth. This was a clear indication that the man, who had been buried in a prestigious location close to the high altar, had travelled to Santiago de Compostela on pilgrimage.²³ The large number of burials on the island, which can be dated to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, suggest it remained an important pilgrimage centre, although the individuals buried there would also have been attracted by the pious reputation of the monks.

1140x1159

Earl Gospatrick of Dunbar grants to *St Ethernan of May* a full toft beside his port of Beil (*Bele*) (*i.e. Belhaven ELO*), by Dunbar).²⁴

1253x1255

Alexander Comyn, earl of Buchan, grants some wax or 40 pence to the light of *St Ethernan on the Isle of May*.²⁵

These grant by the earls of Dunbar and Buchan provides evidence that the monastery and shrine on the Isle of May were dedicated to St Ethernan in the high middle ages.

Remains of the priory *Historic Environment Scotland Report 1999*

The main upstanding part of the monument, the west range, still stands to two storeys and survives through having been adapted for domestic occupation after the abandonment of the rest of the priory. Its adaptation involved the addition of a three-quarter round south-western tower and an internal floor and subdivisions.

*The church, on the north side of the cloister area, was a rectangular structure in its final state, though evidence has been found of at least two earlier underlying structures of more complex two-cell plan. The east conventual range was presumably of two storeys; at its lower level it had a chamber (the chapter house?) next to the church, with an undercroft divided longitudinally by columns to the south. The south range, which was presumably the refectory, is the most fragmentary part of the complex. South of the junction of the east and south ranges evidence was found for the mouths of a drain, which presumably served the reredorter on the upper floor.*²⁶

²³ Yeoman, *Pilgrimage*, p. 63.

²⁴ Duncan, A.A.M., 'Documents relating to the Priory of the Isle of May, c. 1140- 1313', *PSAS* 90 (1956-7), 52-80, no. 53.

²⁵ Thomas Thomson, ed, *Liber Cartarum Prioratus Sancti Andree in Scotia* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1841), p. 383.

²⁶ 'Scheduled Monument, Isle of May Priory', *Historic Environment Scotland*, Accessed 12 March 2021, <http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM838>

3. Late Medieval Christianity (1300-1560)

Sites of Interest

Chapel/Shrine of St Adrian

Nature of the Site

In the late thirteenth century, ownership of the Priory of May was purchased from its mother house at Reading by the Augustinian Priory at St Andrews. Sometime after 1318, the vulnerability of the island to attack, combined with the challenges of provisioning the community, led the Augustinians to transfer the monks to Pittenweem, retaining only a chaplain on the island.²⁷ The chaplain, and a resident hermit, entertained regular royal pilgrims from the fifteenth century to the Reformation.

I. Chapel/Shrine of St Adrian

By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the relics on the Isle of May were said to belong to St Adrian (Feast Day, 4 March), and there is evidence of significant numbers of pilgrims visiting the island. Mary of Guelders (consort of James II, 1437-1460) stopped at the island on her journey to Scotland in 1449, and James IV (1488-1513), James V (1513-1542) and Mary of Guise (d.1560) visited in the sixteenth century. While James IV and James V displayed a personal dedication to the saint and his relics, visits to the Isle of May could also provide the monarchs with the opportunity to indulge in hunting. This was the case in 1508 when James IV took his *culverins* to shoot seabirds. From these royal pilgrimages we learnt that in the sixteenth century the church on the island was staffed by one priest and that it was also home to a hermit. By this point the old priory buildings were in a state of disrepair. According to Mathieu d'Escouchy, in 1449 only those in danger of death were allowed to enter the old cemetery, and the Aberdeen Breviary (1510) noted that the shrine was known for miracles and was particularly popular with women who wished to become pregnant. Evidence of pilgrimage to the shrine prior to the late fifteenth century is patchy, and it may be that it was only in that period, and with royal patronage, that it graduated to a shrine of more than local importance.

1449 Chronique de Mathieu d'Escouchy

*And the next day, which was Thursday, took port near an island which is called the Ille de May, where there is a hermitage and a chapel of Saint-Andrieu, where it is said to have several bodies saints, and No one can enter the cemetery, according to the opinion of those in the country, who are not suddenly in danger of their life, even to try the dangers that may come, they have had this cemetery walled up. the environment of high walls, so that no inconvenience arises.*²⁸

3 June 1503

²⁷ Lodge, *Pittenweem Priory*, pp. 27-33 & 34.

²⁸ Christine McGladdery, *James II* (John Donald: Edinburgh, 1990), p. 45, G. Du Fresne de Beaucourt, *Chronique de Mathieu d'Escouchy: 1444-1452*, (Paris, 1863), i, pp. 177-8.

*Item, the third day of June, the King (James IV), passit to Maii, to his offerand thare, 28 shillings.*²⁹

3 June 1504

Item, the third day of June, to the hermit of Maii, the Kingis command, 10 shillings

Item, to the boats brocht the Kingis folkis on land in Maii, 5 shillings 2 pence

*Item, to the boat that hed the clerkis of the Kingis chapel in Maii to sing the mess thare, 18 shillings.*³⁰

9 July 1506

*Item, the 9 day of July, agane the Kingis (James IV) saling to Maii, for ane cote (coat) to the Moor Taubonar (drummer), 30 shillings.*³¹

30 July 1506

Item to the Kingis (James IV) offerand in Maij, 28 shillings.

Item, to the Quenis (Margaret of England) offerand, offerit be the Kingis command, 14 shillings.

*Item, to the priest of May, 14 shillings.*³²

25 Aug 1507

Item, the xxv day of August, to the Kingis (James IV) offerand in Maii, 14 shillings.

Item, to the Kingis offerand to he reliques thare, 14 shillings.

*Item, to the priest of Maii, 20 shillings.*³³

30 June 1508

Item, the last day of Juni, to the hermit of Maii, 14 shillings.

Item to ane boat of Anstruther that hed the King (James IV) to Maii and agane to Pettinweme, 28 shillings.

*Item, to ane row boat that hed the King about the Ile of Maii to schut at fowlis with the culverin, 26 pence.*³⁴

The offices of St Adrian in the Aberdeen Breviary follow the account found in Wyntoun and Bower of the missionary activities and martyrdom of Adrian and his companions. It finishes with this section not found in the fifteenth-century chronicles.

1510 Aberdeen Breviary

In the Isle of May a monastery paved with great stones had been built in ancient times, in honour of almighty God and His holy martyrs, which has been destroyed by the race of the English by assault of war. But a church remains there to this day, which is still often visited by faithful people because of so many miracles of power from day to day; women coming there in the hope of having children are not disappointed. There remains also a very famous cemetery,

²⁹ TA, ii, p. 261.

³⁰ TA, ii, p. 437.

³¹ TA, iii, p. 115.

³² TA, iii, p. 76.

³³ TA, iii, p. 293.

³⁴ TA, iv, p. 130.

where (like) a heavenly chorus, his (Adrian's) body and the body of the company rest, cleansed in red blood (i.e. martyred).³⁵

21 Aug 1513

Royal charter (James IV) to Andrew Wood of Largo and Elizabeth Lundy his wife creating the Nethertoun and Seytoun of Largo into a free burgh of barony in thanks for his service in war against the English, and also granting Andrew some lands in return for which *the grantee and his successors should accompany the king and queen on pilgrimage to the Isle of May, whenever required.*³⁶

May 1538

Household accounts of James V record the expenses incurred when the king, his queen (Mary of Guise) and his retinue sailed in May of that year from Leith to the Isle of May on board the *Salamander and St Andrew.*³⁷

August 1539

Note in the margins of the Household accounts of James V for August stated that the royal officers were in Perth but that *the King and Queen (Mary of Guise) were on pilgrimage in the Isle of May at St Adrian's.*³⁸

On the following page the officer noted that in travelling from Falkland (palace) to the Isle of May the king and queen had incurred costs of £4.³⁹

9 Oct 1540

Item, gevin to him (the almoner) to be ane relique to ane bane of Sanctandriane of May, 6 ounces quarter ounce gold, 40 Scots marks.

*Item, gevin to John Patersone for making of twa caiss to the said reliques.*⁴⁰

c.1542

Letter by Mary of Guise specifying that *in case she dies before carrying through the following matters.* These included provision for someone to carry out a series of pilgrimages to shrines in Europe and to three in Scotland, those of *Saint Trygian (Ninian, Whithorn), and Saint Adrien an L'ile de May, and the True Cross of Peebles.*⁴¹

By the early sixteenth-century the church on the Isle of May seems to have been in a state of collapse.

1514x46

Letter for a collection on behalf of the Isle of May by Robert Foreman, Dean of Glasgow and Commendator of Pittenweem, *on our island called the Isle of May, where the bodies of St Adrian and his companion martyrs are buried....and where many and various Christians come*

³⁵ Macquarrie, *Legends of Scottish Saints*, pp. 68-69

³⁶ RMS, ii, no. 3880.

³⁷ NRS Exchequer Records: Household Books. 'Libri Domicilli' James V, E31/7, fol. 60r.

³⁸ NRS Exchequer Records: Household Books. 'Libri Domicilli' James V, E31/8, fol. 99v.

³⁹ NRS Exchequer Records: Household Books 'Libri Domicilli' James V, E31/8, fol. 100r.

⁴⁰ TA, vii, p. 396.

⁴¹ Marguerite Wood, *Foreign Correspondence with Marie de Lorraine, Queen of Scotland* (Scottish History Society, Edinburgh, 1923), i, pp. 78-79.

*on account of the merits of the holy martyrs, out of devotion and on pilgrimage. But the church which is dedicated to there and the buildings which were built there are thoroughly destroyed and collapsed; and since there are no resources at hand for the building and repair of the said church and buildings, nor for the support of the chaplain currently serving in them, whom we have placed there for the increase of divine worship, unless Christians by their loving alms should give their support, we exhort you all in the lord, and in the bowels of Jesus Christ beseech you.*⁴²

1710 Robert Sibbald's History of Fife

*It (monastery of the Isle of May) was much repaired to, for the great reputation St Adrian's chapel had, for that he was buried there, being murdered by the Danesand is said to have cured many barren women, who in these superstitious times went there in pilgrimage.*⁴³

⁴² Gordon Donaldson & C Macrae, eds, *St Andrews Formulare, 1514-46* (Stair Society, Edinburgh, 1942-44), i, pp. 64-65, Simon Taylor & Gilbert Markus, *Place-Names of Fife. Volume Five. Discussion, Glossaries, Texts* (Donington 2012), pp. 666-667.

⁴³ Robert Sibbald, *The history, ancient and modern, of the sheriffdoms of Fife and Kinross, with the description of both, and of the firths of Forth and Tay, and the islands in them ... with an account of the natural products of the land and waters* (Cupar, 1803, 2nd edition, original 1710), pp. 99-100.

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

Sites of Interest

Isle of May: St Adrian's Chapel

Introduction/Nature of the Site

For the Isle of May, the prohibition of pilgrimage and devotion to the saints following the Protestant Reformation of 1560 removed its primary purpose. However, the island found new uses as a fishing settlement and as an ideal site for a lighthouse beacon in the seventeenth century.

I. St Adrian's Chapel

Fig 4. James Gordon, *Fyfe Shire* (1642).⁴⁴



In the mid-sixteenth century, war and the Protestant Reformation brought an end to the Isle of May's seven-century history as a sacred site. Conflict with England (the so called Rough-Wooing) in the 1540s led to the evacuation of island by the Priors of Pittenweem and in 1549-50 the island was let in feu-

ferme to Patrick Learmonth of Dairsie. As part of this agreement Learmonth was expected to maintain the chaplain, facilities for pilgrims and the relics of St Adrian. He soon passed on the rights in 1551 to Andrew Balfour of Monquhany, who in turn passed it on to Forret of Fyngask seven years later, who sold it to Allan Lamont (c.1570), who in turn sold it to John Cunningham of Craill.⁴⁵ As some point the during these transfers of ownership, and certainly after 1560, the requirement to maintain the shrine was dropped, and parts of the monastery were converted into a house for the owner's factor. The factor was joined by fishing families, around 15 when Sibbald wrote his account in 1703, but only the lighthouse keeper and his two servants still resided there by the end of the eighteenth century. It was in 1636 that the island began its function as a navigational aid when the first lighthouse beacon was constructed, the only feature on the island in Gordon's 1642 map (Fig 10).⁴⁶ On a least one occasion the island was also used as a quarantine station for ships expected of carrying plague, although this was not a regular occurrence (and Inchkeith and Inchcolm were mainly used for this purpose in the

⁴⁴ 'James Gordon, *Fyfe Shire* (1642)'. *National Library of Scotland. Map Home*, Accessed 10 March, 2021, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/00000999#zoom=6&lat=2576&lon=5015&layers=BT>

⁴⁵ Lodge, *Pittenweem Priory*, p. 114.

⁴⁶ Lodge, *Pittenweem Priory*, p. 114, Sibbald, *The history, ancient and modern, of the sheriffdoms of Fife*, p. 100.

seventeenth century).⁴⁷ Local traditions surrounding the chapel on the island survived the Reformation, with Sibbald in 1703 and Pococke in 1760 having heard of the association between the shrine and women hoping to get pregnant. Continuing this late medieval tradition, the island was firmly identified with St Adrian in these accounts, although Pococke confused him with St Hadrian.

1710 Robert Sibbald's History of Fife

The west side of this isle is inaccessible, because of its high and steep rocks, but towards the east it is low and level. There were in ancient times four places where boats arrived, called Tarpithol, Altarstans, Pilgrims-haven, and Kirk-haven. The best station and road for ships is not far from the east side, while the west wind bloweth violently, the isle shelters them.

The isle is well provided with fountains of sweet water, and a pool or small lake : in the isle there is no corn <but good grass for pasture of an hundred sheep, and some twenty cows

There is a light-house upon the isle, which was erected by Alexander Cuninghame laird of Barns, by permission of king Charles I. : the king gave infeftment of the isle to John Cuninghame, with the liberty to build a light-house, to light the ships which sailed near it in the night-time : he built there a tower forty foot high', vaulted to the top, and covered with flag-stones, whereon all the year over, there burns in the night-time a fire of coals, for a light light'; for which the masters of ships are obliged to pay for each tun two shillings.

*There is good fishing about this isle all the year over, because many fish haunt about it, many seals are slain upon the east side of it.*⁴⁸

1760 Richard Pococke

*There being very good fish at the isle of May opposite to this place, in the mouth of the Frith of Forth : where there was a Cell of Canons Regular of St. Augustine which belonged to the Monks of Reading in Yorkshire founded by K. David to All the Saints, and afterwards was dedicated to St. Hadrian : Bp: Lamberton of St. Andrews purchased it from the Abbott of Reading and gave it to the Canons Regular, tho' Edward the Illd. protested against it. Barren Women used to go to this Cell in Pilgrimage.*⁴⁹

Rev James Forrester, 1791

South-East from Anstruther, and six miles distant from it... .., stands the Island of May; which after the desolation of the Abbacy of Pittenweem, was supposed to belong to the parish of Anstruther Wester, the mother church, and in this light is annually visited by the minister of Anstruther Wester, while it was inhabited by 14 or 15 families.

⁴⁷ J. H. Burton et al, eds, *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1877-1970), 1st series, iii, p. 330.

⁴⁸ Sibbald, *The history, ancient and modern, of the sheriffdoms of Fife and Kinross*, pp. 99-102.

⁴⁹ Daniel Kemp, ed, *Tours in Scotland by Richard Pococke 1747, 1750, 1760, Bishop* (Edinburgh, 1887), p. 274.

*On the island is a lighthouse... the architect who planned and built the tower, perished in the return to his house, in a storm, which some old women, then supposed to be witches, were burnt for raising.*⁵⁰

1803 Edition Robert Sibbald's History of Fife (comment by editor)

*There were formerly about fifteen fishermen' families on the isle, but at present there are no inhabitants, except the keeper of the light had his two servants.*⁵¹

⁵⁰ OSA, iii, 84.

⁵¹ Sibbald, *The history, ancient and modern, of the sheriffdoms of Fife and Kinross*, p. 101, n1.

5. Late Modern (1800-2021).

Sites of Interest

St Ethernan's Monastery

Introduction/Nature of the Site

The Isle of May continued to be an import lighthouse station in the nineteenth century. The Northern Lighthouse Board purchased the island in 1814 and a modern lighthouse was built there in 1816 by Robert Stevenson. The lighthouse keeper, his two assistants and their families were the only permanent occupants of the island until 1972 when they began to reside on the mainland, and then in 1989 the light was fully automated. By that point ownership of the island had passed to the Nature Conservancy Council, who in 1956 had successfully campaigned to have the island designated as a national nature reserve in order to preserve its seals and seabird like guillemots, fulmars, terns, gulls and puffins.⁵² In the modern era the island has maintained its association with nearby fishing communities like Cellardyke. This association involved annual trips to the island in the nineteenth, one of which in 1837 ended in tragedy, and it is from Anstruther that boat trips depart to the island to see its wildlife and the ruins of the priory today.

I. Isle of May: St Adrian's Chapel

Fig 5. Sketch of the Ruins of the May chapel, 1869.⁵³



In the nineteenth-century the Isle of May's important sacred past began to attract the focus of antiquarians who visited the island, sketched the ruins and wrote about it in a range of travel and historical publications. Although most of these writers followed Sibbald (1710), in associating the island with St Adrian, there was some confusion as to his identity, and Barbieri (1857) and Wood (1887) were convinced that he had been a bishop of St Andrews. The location of the ruins, and some of the pilgrim-related place names on the island, were recorded in the

⁵² 'Isle of May', *Nature Scot*, Accessed 26 March 2021, <https://www.nature.scot/enjoying-outdoors/scotlands-national-nature-reserves/isle-may-nnr/isle-may-nnr-visiting-reserve>

⁵³ Mathew Conolly, *Fifiana: or Memorials of the East of Fife* (Glasgow, 1869), p. 204.

name books that accompanied the accurate map to depict the island, compiled by the Ordnance Survey in 1855.

In the twentieth century, the island became a focus of archaeological interest, beginning with a field visit by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions of Scotland in 1927. The officers of the commission focused on what they called the *chapel*, which they identified as the only surviving portion of the priory. The next major survey took place over four excavation seasons between 1992 and 1996. Led by the Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division, they discovered the multiphase occupation of the site from the ninth century onwards that informed the early sections of this report.

1838 George Milligan, minister of Elie and respondent to the 2nd Statistical Account *The Isle of May...is generally supposed to belong to Anstruther Wester; but it is also claimed by Crail...on the island are the ruins of a priory, which formerly belonged to the Abbey of Pittenweem, and of a chapel dedicated to St Adrian.*⁵⁴

John Leighton 1840.

*The island belonged at a very early period to the monks of Reading, in Yorkshire (sic), for whom David I. founded here a cell or monastery, and dedicated the place to all the saints. Afterwards it was consecrated to the memory of St Adrian. William Lamberton, Bishop of St Andrews, purchased it from the monks, and bestowed it upon the canons regular of the priory. It was subsequently conferred upon the priory of Pittenweem.*⁵⁵

1857 Barbieri's *Descriptive and Historical Gazetteer of the Counties of Fife*

*There are the ruins of a monastery and of a chapel consecrated to St Adrian, Bishop of St Andrews, who was killed by the Danes in 872 and was buried in Anstruther Wester.*⁵⁶

1887 Wood, *The East Neuk of Fife*

*The May, or the Green Isle, as the name is said to signify, was the seat of St. Adrian. His name was probably Odran, as we find a subsequent Bishop of St. Andrews called Macgilla Odran, i.e. son of the servant of Odran.*⁵⁷

Sibbald and Ordnance Survey Place-names

The Pilgrims (first recorded in 1855)

The name applies to two spiral rocks rising nearly perpendicularly out of the sea on the west side of the island and contiguous to Pilgrims' Haven.⁵⁸

Pilgrims-haven (first recorded in the 1803 second edition of Sibbald's *History of Fife*).⁵⁹

⁵⁴ NSA, ix, 611-612.

⁵⁵ John M. Leighton, *History of the County of Fife: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (Glasgow, 1840), iii, p. 104.

⁵⁶ M. Barbieri, *A Descriptive and historical gazetteer of the counties of Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan* (Edinburgh, 1857), p. 85.

⁵⁷ Walter Wood, *The East Neuk of Fife: its history and antiquities* (Edinburgh, 1887), pp. 7-8.

⁵⁸ Taylor & Markus, *Place-Names of Fife. Volume Five*, p. 678.

⁵⁹ Sibbald, Robert. *The history, ancient and modern, of the sheriffdoms of Fife and Kinross*, p. 99.

The OS name book gives no explanation as to how it obtained its name, writing only ‘a small bay or creek on the west side of the Island, near its south end. Sometimes used as a landing place during easterly winds’. However, it is most likely connected with the well-documented medieval pilgrim traffic to the island. While not the site of the modern harbour, it is the nearest landing place to the medieval church.⁶⁰

Lady’s Well (first recorded in 1855) or *Pilgrims Well* (in 1976)

The well, 1 m in diameter is situated on the south-west facing slope, overlooking Pilgrims’ Haven. The earlier name, *Lady’s Well*, might be thought to refer to our Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, but OS 6 inch (1855) also shows *Lady’s Cave* near the well, and according to a story in OS Name Book it got its name from being the dwelling of a lady whose husband abandoned her on the Isle of May. There are further accounts which relate the well to St Thenew, mother of St Kentigern.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Taylor & Markus, *Place-Names of Fife. Volume Five*, p. 678.

⁶¹ Taylor & Markus, *Place-Names of Fife. Volume Five*, p. 678-679.

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