

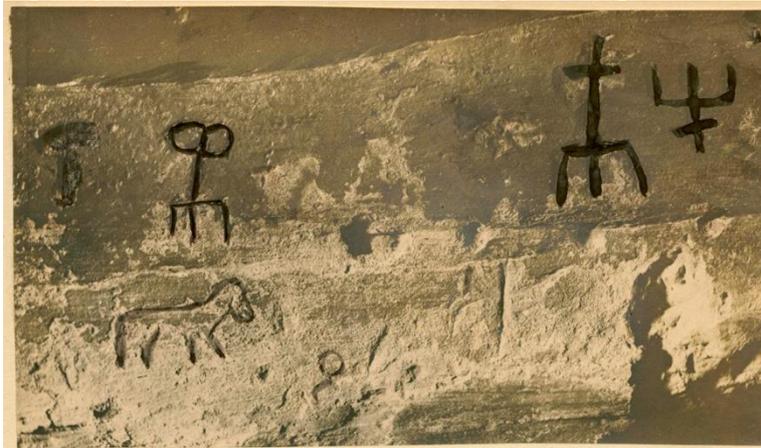
Sacred Landscape Project

Wemyss

Fig 1. Wemyss. Ordnance Survey 1st Edition, 1" Coloured Sheet 40 (1867).¹



Fig 2. J. Patrick photograph of Jonathan's Cave wall showing wolf and pedestalled crosses c. 1890.²



¹ 'Ordnance Survey One-inch to the mile maps of Scotland, 1st Edition, 1856-1891 - Sheet 40', *National Library of Scotland. Map Home*, Accessed 19 October, 2021, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/216384257>.

² 'J. Patrick photograph annotated by J. Romilly Allen of Jonathan's Cave wall showing wolf and pedestalled crosses c. 1890', *Wemyss Caves 4D*, Accessed 21 October 2021, <http://4dwemysscaves.org/catalogue/#images>.

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Bibliography

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Historical References are presented in the following format;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.³

³ Matthew Livingstone, eds, *Registrum Secreti Sigilli Regum Scotorum* (Edinburgh: HMGRH, 1908-1982), i, no. 2844.

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),

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

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Introduction

Wemyss is a picturesque coastal settlement located on the north shore of the Forth. Lying between Dysart to the east and Buckhaven to the west, it has traditionally been divided into two distinct settlements, known as East(er) and West(er) with the Den Burn (now known as the Kingslaw Burn), providing the boundary. The place-name, first recorded as *Wemes* and *Wemys* in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries is Gaelic in origin and has been translated by Simon Taylor as ‘Cave Place’ or ‘Place of the Caves’. This refers to the set of sea caves which lie along the shore to the northeast of the village of East Wemyss.⁴ In the Middle Ages, the parish of Wemyss included Buckhaven and Innerleven, and between c.1630 and the mid-1800s, Methil and Methilhill. This report will focus on Wemyss itself, much of which belonged to the Wemyss family, and who were made earls of Wemyss in 1633. The main seat of the family prior to the fifteenth century was Macduff Castle near East Wemyss, before they constructed Wemyss Castle, close to West Wemyss. Both settlements were minor trading and fishing stations in the Middle Ages. All this changed in the sixteenth century as the Wemyss family began to exploit deposits of coal in East Wemyss and Methil. Investment in the harbours at West Wemyss and Methil (from c.1630 part of the parish of Wemyss) by David, 2nd earl of Wemyss, in the 1660s, saw them become major ports for the export of coal and salt from the district. After a lull in the late eighteenth century, coal began to be mined in large quantities again in the nineteenth century, as such, Methil became one of the most important industrial ports in Scotland. This led to an increase in the population of all the coastal settlements located in parish of Wemyss, and ultimately, the subdivision of the parish and civil jurisdictions in the district, with Buckhaven and Methil separating from Wemyss in the 1890s. This industry declined in the late twentieth century, and has been replaced, to some extent with a focus on the development of green energy and tourism.

Wemyss has a fascinating sacred history dating back to the sixth and seventh centuries, when early Christians carved incised crosses in several of the caves near East Wemyss. By the high Middle Ages, the parish church of the district could be found in East Wemyss, first entering

⁴ Thomas Thomson, ed, *Liber Cartarum Prioratus Sancti Andree in Scotia* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1841), p. 353 and David Laing, ed, *Charters of the Hospital of Soltre, of Trinity College, Edinburgh, and other collegiate churches in Mid-Lothian* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1861), no. 14, Simon Taylor & Gilbert Markus, *The Place-Names of Fife. Volume One. West Fife between Leven and Forth* (Donington, 2006), pp. 579-80.

the written records in the early thirteenth century.⁵ In the late Middle Ages, a chapel was constructed in West Wemyss, however, it was not until the nineteenth century before the villagers had their own church. After the Reformation, the neighbouring parish of Methil was absorbed into Wemyss. As such, the church at East Wemyss remained the only place of worship in the district until the nineteenth century. Population growth in the modern era led to a division of the parish and the establishment of several new places of worship in Buckhaven and Methil. A Church of Scotland ‘chapel at ease’ (1835) and later a full parish church (1895) were founded in West Wemyss, and a Free Church congregation were founded East Wemyss. Since 2008, when the parishes of Wemyss and Buckhaven merged, only one church in Wemyss is active (the church formerly known as St Adrian’s). Services are held at St Adrian’s and in Buckhaven.

Religious Sites and the Landscape of Wemyss

The sea caves at East Wemyss and the natural harbour at West Wemyss were the main stimulants for the development of the two communities. Although there is evidence of religious activity within the caves, they do not appear to have been primarily used as sacred sites in the same manner caves at Dysart, Pittenweem and Caiplic were. In the last millennia the presence of castles close to the settlements, and later coal mining and fisheries have been the main influence on life in the district. There were relatively few changes to religious provision in the area until the modern era., The large medieval church in East Wemyss dominated the townscape until it was joined by St George’s in the late nineteenth century. In West Wemyss, the late medieval chapel of St Mary, and later St Adrian’s church, have vied with the castle as the major structures in the village. From a peak of three churches in operation across the two settlements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, now only one is in active use. Of the two redundant structures, St Mary’s was converted into a studio first and later a residential property in the 1970s and 1980s. The pressure for such properties in sought after locations like Wemyss will likely see the conversion of St George’s in East Wemyss in the near future.

⁵ Richard Oram, ‘Dysart- History’, *Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches*, Accessed 15 April 2021, <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158540>, Taylor & Markus, *The Place-Names of Fife. Volume One*, pp. 468.

1. Early Christianity (c500-c1000AD)

Sites of Interest

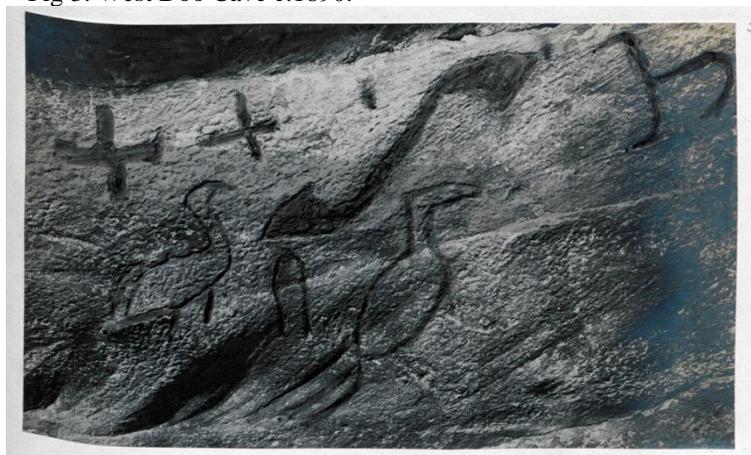
Wemyss Caves

Introduction/Nature of the Site

Wemyss first enters the written record in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, however, place-name and archaeological evidence indicates that the area had been occupied for some time by that point.⁶ Wemyss Caves include Pictish era carvings (c.600-900), while excavations of the ‘Sliding Cave’ have found materials that have been radio-carbon dated to 240-400AD.⁷ The site of MacDuff Castle, located in East Wemyss, may also have been occupied in the early middle ages, although the current castle dates from the fourteenth century.

I. Wemyss Caves

Fig 3. West Doo Cave c.1890.⁸



The caves at East Wemyss have been described by writers since at least the eighteenth century and have been the subject of the focused interest of historians and archaeologists from the 1860s when Professor James Simpson (the pioneer of anaesthetics) visited with a group of friends and published an account of the carvings found inside. Some of the earliest careful

drawings of the carvings were made for John Stuart’s *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* in 1867. Further archaeological examinations took place in the 1920s, 1980s, early 2000s, and 2019.

Christian symbols, mainly taking the form of crosses, have been found in Jonathan’s Cave, as well as the Court, Doo, and Well caves.⁹ An excavation of Jonathan’s Cave in 1988 found a skeleton, carbon dated to c.1000AD. This has led to the suggestion that it may have been the site of a burial ground or chapel in that period.¹⁰ Unlike other caves on the Fife Coast at Dysart (St Serf), Pittenweem (St Fillan), and Caiplie near Anstruther Easter (St Ethernan), no legends have survived associating those at Wemyss with a particular saint or holy man. Nor did they develop a reputation as a hermitage or place of pilgrimage, unlike those at Caiplie and Dysart

⁶ Thomson, ed, *Liber Cartarum Prioratus Sancti Andree*, p. 353 and Laing, ed, *Charters of the Hospital of Soltre*, 14.

⁷ Taylor & Markus, *The Place-Names of Fife. Volume One*, pp. 579-80.

⁸ ‘J. Patrick photograph annotated by J. Romilly Allen of birds, crosses and S-shaped figure in the now collapsed West Doo Cave c. 1890’, *Wemyss4D*, Accessed 29 October, 2021, <http://4dwemysscaves.org/catalogue/#images>.

⁹ J Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson, eds, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland. Part 1* (Edinburgh, 1903), ii, 370.

¹⁰ ‘Jonathan’s Cave’, *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 20 October, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/2625/name/Jonathan%27s+Cave+Wemyss+Fife>.

which remained sites of pilgrimage until the Reformation.¹¹ While religious institutions developed at Dysart and Pittenweem directly connected to the caves and the saints with which they were associated, this does not appear to have been the case at Wemyss, although the church at East Wemyss was located close to the site.¹² Whether the caves were ever used as places of worship remains a matter of speculation, especially given the regular reuse of the sites, in addition to continued inundations from the sea destroying most evidence.

Rev George Grib, 1793

The name of the parish is said to be Gaelic, and signifies a cave, in allusion to the number of natural caves on the sea shore, near the village of Easter Wemyss. There are seven a little to the east of Easter Wemyss, and all but one about 100 yards from high-water mark. Four of them were long ago fitted up for, and still are pigeon-houses. There are two at the bottom of the cliff, and immediately under the ruins of the castle of Easter Wemyss; one of them is called Johnathan's Cave, from a man who, with his family, resided some time in it; the entrance to the other is very narrow, but after having gone through it, you find yourself in a very spacious place, in which is a well of excellent water. It is annually visited by the young people of Easter Wemyss, with lights, upon the first Monday of January Old Style; but from what this custom took its rise, the writer could never learn.....¹³

1867 Stuart

In the course of last autumn, Professor Sir James Simpson, with a party of friends, was led to inspect the neighbouring caves at East Wemyss, when it was found that on the walls of some of them were sculptures, among which were several of the symbols of the Scottish pillar-stones, and crosses of varying form. It afterwards appeared that the existence of these figures had been known in the neighbourhood for many years, but were not thought worthy of notice. As this most interesting discovery seemed to have a direct bearing on the history of the symbols, I lost no time in getting drawings made of the whole sculptures. The walls of the caves are in some places covered with marks of a different character, and there are exfoliations which at times render it difficult to determine whether a figure is natural or artificial, but with regard to all the more important sculptures there is no difficulty, and I may add that after the drawings were completed, they were compared by myself with the original figures. I was induced at the same time to examine other caves on the coast of Fife and in the isle of Arran, but did not discover any additional examples of the "symbols," although, as will be seen, there are interesting sculptures in some of them.¹⁴

1895 Millar

...between Buckhaven and West Wemyss there are numerous caves or weems of considerable extent, from which it is supposed that the name of the parish has been derived.....having regard to the fact that there are sculptured markings on the wall of these caves, which show that they

¹¹ See reports on Dysart and Anstruther for further discussion.

¹² For example, the churches at Dysart and Pittenweem which are located very close to, and in the latter case connected, to the caves.

¹³ *Statistical Account of Scotland*, (1793), (OSA), xvi, p. 513.

¹⁴ John Stuart, *The sculptured stones of Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1856-1867), ii, lxxxvi and xci-iii.

*were a resort of Christians in early times....it is extremely probable that the cave contained one of the holy wells which pilgrims were wont to visit for pious purposes, and that this custom survived long after its meaning had been forgotten.*¹⁵

¹⁵ A. H Millar, *Fife: pictorial and historical: its people, burghs, castles and mansions'*, 2v. (Cupar, Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1895), ii, p. 49.

2. High Medieval Christianity (1000-1300)

Sites of Interest

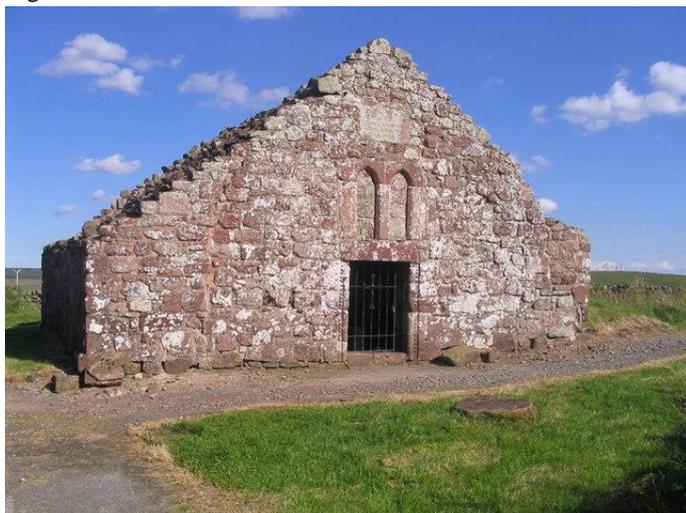
St Mary's By the Sea, East Wemyss

Introduction/Nature of the Site

The place-name Wemyss is first recorded in the 1180s when Robert of *Weme*, a clerk, appeared as a witness to a charter of the bishops of St Andrews.¹⁶ East Wemyss first appears in charters in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries when it was in the possession of Michael of Wemyss, ancestor of the family of Wemyss.¹⁷ The family were patrons of the parish church which they granted to the Hospital of Soutra in c.1230. Furthermore, Ralph and Gilbert, noted as rectors of Wemyss, appear in early thirteenth century charters.¹⁸ The settlement around that church probably developed to serve the needs of Macduff castle, with some minor fishing and trading taking place with boats drawn up on the shore (there was no artificial harbour).¹⁹ The small headland at West Wemyss provides a natural harbour for that settlement. The villagers there also worshipped at St Mary's, although no records of the settlement there survives before the later Middle Ages.

I. St Mary's By the Sea, East Wemyss

Fig 4. Soutra Aisle.²⁰



The parish church of Wemyss was first recorded c.1230 when it was granted by John of Methil, to the Hospital of Soutra. John was the son of Michael of Wemyss, men who were ancestors of the Wemyss family who would dominate the district for much of the second millennium. The hospital at Soutra, founded in the 1160s, was located on the main north/south road to Edinburgh and its purpose was to cater to pilgrims. Dedicated to the Holy Trinity, the hospital was staffed by

canons following the rule of St Augustine. The initial grant consisted of patronage of the church of Wemyss, dedicated to St Mary, with full possession granted in 1261. From 1261, all the tithes and other income from the church went to the hospital, from which a portion was reserved to pay for a priest (known as a vicar pensioner) to minister to the parishioners. A portion of this income was also paid to the church of Dysart. This indicates that in an earlier period Wemyss

¹⁶ Thomson, ed, *Liber Cartarum Prioratus Sancti Andree*, p. 353.

¹⁷ Laing, ed, *Charters of the Hospital of Soltre*, 14.

¹⁸ Thomson, ed, *Liber Cartarum Prioratus Sancti Andree*, pp. 269 & 381.

¹⁹ Anon, *East Wemyss Village Walkabout* (East Wemyss, 2002), p. 1.

²⁰ 'Soutra Aisle', *Wikimedia commons*, Accessed 29 October, 2021, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/57/Soutra_Aisle_-_geograph.org.uk_-_519314.jpg.

appears to have been subordinate to that church, almost certainly part of a network of local churches centred on the mother church of Dysart.²¹ The church was largely rebuilt in the 1520s, and it is not clear what of the high medieval structure has survived.²²

c.1239

*John of Methil has given and granted and by this his present charter established to the hospital of Soutra all right that he had in the church of St Mary of Wemyss (FIF), for his soul and the souls of Earl Duncan (II of Fife) and others, in pure and perpetual alms, with all its liberties and pertinents and easements.*²³

22 January 1240 X 1242

*David, bishop of St Andrews, for master and brethren of Soutra; has established right of patronage of church of Wemyss (FIF) which Sir John de Methil, knight, bestowed.*²⁴

9 January 1262

*Gamelin, bishop of St Andrews, for Hospital of Soutra; has granted church of Wemyss (FIF) for their own uses, which Sir John of Wemyss, son of Michael of Wemyss, patron of church, gave, and which David, bishop of St Andrews, afterwards established, saving episcopal dues and sustenance of vicar and also saving pension paid to Dysart from church.*²⁵

²¹ Oram, 'Dysart- History', Taylor & Markus, *The Place-Names of Fife. Volume One*, pp. 468.

²² Richard Fawcett, 'Wemyss, Architecture', *Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches*, Accessed 31 October, 2021, <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158932>.

²³ Laing, ed, *Charters of the Hospital of Soltre*, no. 14.

²⁴ Laing, ed, *Charters of the Hospital of Soltre*, no.30.

²⁵ Laing, ed, *Charters of the Hospital of Soltre*, no.40.

3. Late Medieval Christianity (1300-1560)

Sites of Interest

St Mary's By the Sea, East Wemyss

St Mary's Chapel, West Wemyss

Introduction/Nature of the Site

East and West Wemyss remained small settlements in the late Middle Ages, with the western part largely owned by the Livingston family, and the east by the family of Wemyss. In the early fifteenth century, the Wemyss family, who had become important regional landowners by that point, sold MacDuff castle to the Colville family and built a new seat (Wemyss Castle) in the western part of the parish. This may have stimulated the development of West Wemyss, which became a castle town. By the early sixteenth century, a chapel had been constructed there, possibly acting as a 'chapel-at-ease' for the settlement, or as a private chapel for the Wemyss family. The parish church at East Wemyss, from the 1460s under the control of the Trinity Church and Hospital in Edinburgh, remained the main place of worship in the district. It underwent considerable rebuilding and augmentation in the early sixteenth century.

I. St Mary's By the Sea, East Wemyss

Fig 5. John Ewbank Trinity Church, Edinburgh (1825).²⁶



St Mary's, along with most of the property of the Hospital of Soutra, was confiscated in the 1460s by the Crown and granted to the Church and Hospital of the Holy Trinity in Edinburgh, recently founded by Mary of Gueldres (1460). In 1463, it was noted that the parsonage tithes of the church of Wemyss (the income from corn and other crops) were used specifically to sustain 13 bedesman at the Trinity

Hospital. We learn from these documents that St Mary's was served by a perpetual vicar, a priest who was paid from the vicarage tithes (the income from animal products). After 1502, these tithes were wholly in the possession of the Provost of Holy Trinity, who paid a vicar pensioner a salary of 20 marks per year to minister to the population of Wemyss.

From a dispute between the Provost and the Laird of Wemyss in the 1520s, we know that considerable alterations to the church seem to have taken place in 1527-1528. The records note that the church was being built or repaired by Sir Patrick Jackson, the chaplain of the Chapel of Our Lady in West Wemyss. A chapel and aisle dedicated to St Katherine of Alexandria was added to the church in East Wemyss by the late fifteenth century, founded by the Colville

²⁶ 'Trinity College Church', *Wikimedia Commons*, Accessed 29 October, 2021, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trinity_College_Kirk_01.jpg.

family (who had purchased MacDuff Castle c.1420). Katherine, whose main shrine was at Mount Sinai in Egypt, was a popular saint in late medieval Scotland. Altars in St Andrews (Holy Trinity and Inverkeithing and the churches of Cupar and Newburgh were dedicated to her. A miraculous well associated with Katherine, was located in Liberton near Edinburgh. Altars and chapels in her honour could be found in every major church in Scotland.²⁷

1425

Nicholas de Greenlaw (son of a priest) resigned the church of Wemyss and moved to Auldbar.²⁸

1433

Donald Kennedy (canon of Soutra) was presented to church on death of Robert de Kirkcaldy (also a canon). The perpetual vicarage of the Kirk Wemyss was described as 'wont to be ruled by brothers of the hospital of Soutra'. In 1438 Kennedy accused by Thomas Lauder, the master of Soutra, of detaining a certain proportion of the church. Kennedy complained that the Master takes so much yearly from the fruits that from the vicar could not be maintained from what was left.²⁹

Dispute of 1527-28

A long running dispute between David, laird of Wemyss and Sir John Dingwall, provost of Trinity College, Edinburgh (vicar of the church of Wemyss), over some of the tithes of West Wemyss and the Kirkland of Wemyss led to a case heard in St Andrews. The dispute was eventually settled by arbitration. Three years' worth of teind sheaves for 1526-28 were to be restored to the Provost. The arbiters also advised the Provost to yield up the offerings due to him from the Lady chapel of Wemyss, because the parish church of Wemyss was being built or repaired by Sir Patrick Jackson, the chaplain there.³⁰

19 Oct 1527

At a court held in St Andrew a dispute between the David, laird of Wemyss and Sir John Dingwall, provost of Trinity College, Edinburgh (vicar of the church of Wemyss), respecting the teinds belonging to the provost as vicar. The judges pronounced in favour of David that; *Sir John had wickedly and unjustly interjected his extrajudicial appeal to the Roman Court (the Papal Curia)..commanding the said vicar... ..to pay half the sum £99 8s 8d Scots within two months (the other half thereafter).*³¹

6 Feb 1528

The case went to arbitration and reached a settlement that in order to allow both parties to *shake hands and forgive ilk ane the rancor of their hearts.....the provost should peaceably lead the teind shieves of Wester Wemyss.... And of the Kirkland of Wemyss for three years...*

²⁷ Tom Turpie, *Kind Neighbours. Scottish Saints and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 70-89.

²⁸ W. H Bliss, ed, *Calendar of entries in the Papal registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland; Papal letters*, (London, 1893), (CPL), vii, 380-81.

²⁹ Annie I. Dunlop, ed., *Calendar of Scottish Supplications to Rome, 1433-1447* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press 1983), (CSSR, iv), no. 112, CPL, ix, 21.

³⁰ William Fraser, *Memorials of the family of Wemyss of Wemyss* (Edinburgh, 1988), i, 111-113 & ii, 274-278.

³¹ Fraser, *Memorials of the family of Wemyss of Wemyss*, ii, 274-6.

The judges also noted that; *the offerings of the chapel of Wemyss pertaining to the said provost by of the parish church of Wemyss, because Sir Patrick Jackson, chaplain thereof was biggand and purposed to big and continue, the judges asked the provost to supersede the said offerings for Patrick's good deeds.....*³²

Altars and chapels in parish church

26 October 1541

*The King has handed over to feufarm to Norman Leslie, feudatory of the earl of Rothes, and to Elizabeth Lindsay his wife, the lands of East Wemyss [...] with the donative advowson of the aisle and altarage of **Saint Catherine** within East Wemyss parish church, shire of Fife.*³³

Dec 1545

*Thomas Birrell in town of Freuchie binds himself to deliver in East Wemyss on the feast of St Andrew (30 Nov) two bolls of barley **for the altar of St Mary** situated in the parish church of East Wemyss.*³⁴

6 Jan 1597

*Instrument of Sasine in favour of Sir John Boswell of Balmuto, knight, of a fourth part of the lands of Spittal, in lordship of Lochoreshire and sheriffdom of Fife, together with the coal of half of the lands of Dundonald, lying as above; on precept of sasine in charter dated 3 December 1596, by Robert Colvill, son and apparent heir of James Colville of East Wemyss, **chaplain of St Katherine's Chapel**, in parish church of Wemyss, and said James, patron of said chapel, in favour of said Sir John Boswell.*³⁵

³² Fraser, *Memorials of the family of Wemyss of Wemyss*, ii, 274-6

³³ John M. Thomson et al eds, *Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scotorum* (Edinburgh: Scottish Record Office, 1882-1914), (RMS), iii, no. 2493

³⁴ William Muir, ed, *Notices of the Local Records of Dysart* (Glasgow: Maitland Club 1853), p.15.

³⁵ National Records of Scotland (NRS), Boswell of Balmuto Papers, GD66/1/110.

II. St Mary's Chapel, West Wemyss

Fig 6. Ruins of St Mary's Chapel (SCHR 2021).³⁶



Sir Patrick Jackson was recorded as the chaplain of the 'Lady Chapel' in West Wemyss in the 1520s. This chapel was connected to the parish church in East Wemyss, as a dispute of 1527-28 noted that offerings at the chapel should be paid to the patrons of that church. No record survives indicating when the chapel was constructed. There is, however, an interesting, but unlikely, local legend that it was founded by Spaniards fleeing the Inquisition in the late fifteenth century.³⁷ In the 1530s Jackson invested money in the chapel and built a manse, protecting both with a sea wall, and in return the laird of Wemyss confirmed the chapel's possession of various lands and granted rights to a doocot and local salt pan. The purpose of the chapel is unclear from the surviving documents. It may have been a private place of worship belonging to the Wemyss family due to its location in the gardens of the castle and perhaps even falling under their patronage. However, it was also connected to the parish church, so it may have been an early chapel-at-ease for the villagers of West Wemyss. The chapel was abandoned at the Reformation, before being converted into a four-storey house by David, 1st earl of Wemyss, in the 1620s.³⁸ Some ruins of the house still survive.

Dispute of 1527-28

A dispute between the David, laird of Wemyss and Sir John Dingwall, provost of Trinity College, Edinburgh (vicar of the church of Wemyss), regarding some of the tithes of West Wemyss and the Kirkland of Wemyss led to a case heard in St Andrews. As part of the settlement, it was noted that the arbiters also advised the Provost to yield up the offerings due to him from the Lady chapel of Wemyss, because the parish church of Wemyss was being built or repaired by Sir Patrick Jackson, the chaplain there.³⁹

6 Feb 1528

The case went to arbitration and reached a settlement that in order to allow both parties to *shake hands and forgive ilk ane the rancor of their hearts.....the provost should peaceably lead the teind shieves of Wester Wemyss.... And of the Kirkland of Wemyss for three years...*

The judges also noted that; *the offerings of the chapel of Wemyss pertaining to the said provost by of the parish church of Wemyss, because Sir Patrick Jackson, chaplain thereof was biggand*

³⁶ 'Wemyss Chapel Gardens', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 29 October, 2021, <http://scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/4629/image/13165/name/Wemyss+Chapel+Gardens+Wemyss+Fife>.

³⁷ Anon, *West Wemyss Village Walkabout* (East Wemyss, 2002), p. 23.

³⁸ 'Wemyss Chapel Gardens', *Places of Worship in Scotland*.

³⁹ Fraser, *Memorials of the family of Wemyss of Wemyss*, i, 111-113 & ii, 274-278.

and purposed to big and continue, , the judges asked the provost to supercede the said offerings for Patrick's good deeds.....⁴⁰

February 1536

David Wemyss of Wemyss, publicly acknowledged to the chaplain of St Mary's Chapel of Wester Wemyss (Patrick Jackson), who had just expended more than £1000 on the chapel and manse, that he and his predecessors had bestowed on the chapel various portions of lands.....the chapel also had a salt pan attached to it and a dovecot.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Fraser, *Memorials of the family of Wemyss of Wemyss*, ii, 274-6

⁴¹ Cited in Fraser, *Memorials of the family of Wemyss of Wemyss*, i, 117.

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

Sites of Interest

St Mary's By the Sea, East Wemyss

Introduction/Nature of the Site

The early modern era was a period of considerable development for Wemyss and the surrounding district. There is evidence for coal mining in Methil and East Wemyss from the late sixteenth century, which also stimulated local salt production.⁴² By the mid-1600s, a stone harbour was built by David, 2nd earl of Wemyss, at Methil. Similar works seem to have been undertaken at West Wemyss for the export of coal and salt.⁴³ In the early 1600s, the parish of Methil was absorbed into that of Wemyss, and the church at East Wemyss remained the only place of worship in the parish. In 1793, the minister noted that there were a small number of *dissenters* in the parish, those not belonging to the established church and with no formal congregations.

Rev George Grib, 1793

*There are but few dissenters in the parish. There is a Burgher Meeting place at Buckhaven, but has no minister. Those of the Anti-Burgher persuasion have places of worship at in the parishes of Dysart and Markinch. There are about 24 who join the Presbytery of Relief, and 6 of the Episcopal persuasion.*⁴⁴

I. St Mary's By the Sea, East Wemyss

Fig. 7. St Mary's By the Sea (Fawcett).⁴⁵



There is no direct account of the arrival of the Reformation in Wemyss, however, the church seems to have been relatively easily adapted to the new, preaching based, form of worship that dominated after 1560. After Methil was absorbed into the parish of Wemyss in the early 1600s, considerable alterations were made to the building, which was now located at the centre of the expanded parish. In the 1640s, the earl of Wemyss constructed a family mausoleum outside the church, which would become known as the Wemyss Aisle. This led to an extension of the building eastward, with the burial place connected to the earl's private loft in the church by a stair. Two further aisles were added to the church in later 1600s, and what Fawcett describes as a *square birdcage*

⁴² *RMS*, vii. No 1026.

⁴³ Angus Graham, 'Archaeological notes on some harbours in Eastern Scotland' in *Proceedings of Society of Antiquities of Scotland*, 101, (1968-9), 200-285 at 281-282.

⁴⁴ *OSA*, (1793), xvi, 529.

⁴⁵ Fawcett, 'Wemyss, Architecture'.

bellcote was added to the west gable.⁴⁶ There was further work in 1792, and the minister George Grib was pleased to describe it as a *well-lighted, warm and decent place of worship*.

1636 (8 Sept) *visitation of the church by the Pres of Kirkcaldy found the minister (Patrick Mearns) to be competent, while the earl of Wemyss and lord Elcho were ordered to arrange the 300 marks pa for the new schoolmaster.*⁴⁷

1644 (21 Aug) the earl of Wemyss agrees to build a place for burial outside the kirk of Wemyss.⁴⁸

1658 (26 Sept) the kirk session considering the condition of the kirk yard dykes which are altogether ruinous. The session orders a collection for the repair.⁴⁹

1659 (12 June) *it was the mind of the session to strike through a window besouth the little kirk door that leads to the pulpit for making greater light in the church.*⁵⁰

1682 (6 May) the minister and session order a collection to be made for the repair of the church.⁵¹

1688 Margaret, Dowager Countess of Wemyss requests in her will that she be buried *In our isle at the church of Weymss.*⁵²

Rev George Grib, 1793

*The church is an old gothic building in the form of a cross; there are evident marks of considerable additions to it; but no date that can fix its age.... It was repaired and much improved in 1792, and is now a well-lighted, warm and decent place of worship. The church and manse are in the thriving village of Easter Wemyss, the most central part of the parish.*⁵³

⁴⁶ Fawcett, 'Wemyss, Architecture'.

⁴⁷ NRS Presbytery of Kirkcaldy, Minutes, 1630-1653, CH2/224/1, fols. 191-192.

⁴⁸ NRS Presbytery of Kirkcaldy, Minutes, 1630-1653, CH2/224/1, fol. 464.

⁴⁹ NRS Wemyss Kirk Session, 1655-1668, CH2/365/2, fol. 100.

⁵⁰ NRS Wemyss Kirk Session, 1655-1668, CH2/365/2, fol. 141.

⁵¹ NRS Wemyss Kirk Session, 1668-1701, CH2/365/3, fol. 134.

⁵² Fraser, *Memorials of the family of Wemyss of Wemyss*, ii, 258.

⁵³ *OSA* (1793), xvi, 526.

5. Late Modern (1800-2021).

Sites of Interest

St Mary's By the Sea, East Wemyss

St Adrian's Parish Church, West Wemyss

St George's Parish Church, East Wemyss

Introduction/Nature of the Site

After a lull in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, coal began to be mined in large quantities the parish of Wemyss in the late nineteenth century. As such, Methil became one of the most important industrial ports in Scotland. This led to an increase in the population in all the coastal and inland settlements, and ultimately to the subdivision of the parish and civil jurisdictions in the district, with Buckhaven and Methil separated from Wemyss in the 1890s. The population of the parish of Wemyss, even shorn of its eastern part, has grown steadily in the modern era from around 5000 in 1851, to 15,000 in 1901 and 28,000 in 1951. Much of this population live in inland mining settlements. In 2011 the population of East Wemyss was 1,928, while around 250 people live in West Wemyss.⁵⁴ In 1838, the minister of St Mary's, John Maclachan, noted that around 100 people out of the population of East and West Wemyss belonged to Non-Conformist churches.⁵⁵ A Church of Scotland 'chapel of ease' was established in West Wemyss in 1835, and elevated to full parish status when the new church was constructed in 1895. In East Wemyss, a Free Church was built in 1843. The congregation re-joined the Church of Scotland in 1929. From then until 1973, there were three Church of Scotland charges in Wemyss. A series of amalgamations between the various congregations took place in the 1970s and early 2000s. Since 2008, one Church of Scotland parish covers East and West Wemyss and Buckhaven. As of that date, one minister serves the newly named parish of Buckhaven and Wemyss Parish, with services alternating between churches in Buckhaven and West Wemyss (St Adrian's).⁵⁶

I. St Mary's By the Sea, East Wemyss

In 1810-11, considerable work was done on the church at East Wemyss. Fawcett suggests that *the rectangular two-, three- and four-light transomed windows, which light much of the church, together with the crowstepped gables, probably date from these operations.*⁵⁷ However, in 1838, the minister commented that the church was *far too small* for the parish. This pressure for space was relieved through the foundation of a 'chapel at ease' in West Wemyss (1835), a *quod sacra* parish in Methil in 1838, St David's Church in Buckhaven (1869), and the secession of a large part of the congregation joining the Free Church after the Great Disruption in 1843. Major repairs were carried out in the late nineteenth century, which,

⁵⁴ 'Parish Populations, Fife', *GENUKI*, Accessed 25 October, 2021, <https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/sct/FIF/ParishPopulations>

⁵⁵ *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, (1838), (NSA), ix, 399-400.

⁵⁶ 'St Adrian's Parish Church', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 25 October, 2021, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/8060/name/St.+Adrian's+Parish+Church,+united+with+Buckhaven+Wemyss+Fife>.

⁵⁷ Fawcett, 'Wemyss, Architecture'.

combined with the addition of a hall in the 1920s, have made it difficult for architectural historians to judge what of the medieval structure remains. The Free Church congregation of St George's re-joined the Church of Scotland in 1929. There was a union in 1976 between that congregation and those of St Mary's and St Adrian's churches in West Wemyss. As a result, St Mary's was closed for worship. It was first converted into a recording studio, and since 1985, it has been used as a private house.⁵⁸

Rev John Maclachan, 1838

*The parish church is in East Wemyss, and is conveniently situated for the great body of the people as it could well be. It is an old building in the form of a cross. The date of its erection cannot be ascertained. It has undergone several repairs; and, although the construction is bad, yet upon the whole it is a decent and comfortable place of worship. It has sittings for about 1000 persons. It is by far too small for the parish. From 900 to 1000 communicate annually. The people are very attentive to the ordinance of religion.*⁵⁹

*There is a Dissenting meeting-house in connection with the United Associate Synod, situated on the Links of Buckhaven, about two miles from the parish church.....the congregation is respectable and divine service is well attended.*⁶⁰

1840 Leighton

*The parish church, which is in the village of east Wemyss is an old building in the form of a cross, but the date of its erection is unknown. It is seated to accommodate 1000 persons. The number of communicants are from 900 to 1000 annually. The present incumbent is the Rev. John M'Lachlan ; the patronage is in the town council of Edinburgh.*⁶¹

1862 Westwood

*East Wemyss, in which is the Parish Church, a building in the form of a cross. It was rebuilt by General William Wemyss upon the site of an old Church, the date of whose erection is not authenticated. There is also a Free Church in East Wemyss.*⁶²

1988 Gifford 1988

*Being converted into a recording studio (1985). Crowstep gabled harled kirk in a small graveyard beside the harbour. The core is probably of 1528, when the church is said to have been virtually rebuilt. Typical late medieval skinny rectangle, with a small one bay chancel at the E end...*⁶³

⁵⁸ 'St Mary's By the Sea, Wemyss, Fife', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 25 October, 2021, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/4627/name/St.+Mary%27s+By+The+Sea+Wemyss+Fife>.

⁵⁹ NSA, (1838), ix, 399.

⁶⁰ NSA, (1838), ix, 399-400.

⁶¹ John M. Leighton, *History of the County of Fife: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (Glasgow, 1840), iii, p. 170.

⁶² A. Westwood, *Westwood's parochial directory for the Counties of Fife and Kinross* (Cupar, 1862), pp. 214-215.

⁶³ John Gifford, *The Buildings of Scotland, Fife*, (London, 1988), p. 203.

II. St Adrian's Parish Church, West Wemyss

Fig. 8 St Adrian's Church, West Wemyss.⁶⁴



In a response to growing population of the area in the early nineteenth century, a Church of Scotland 'chapel at ease' was built in what is now Church Street in West Wemyss in 1835. It was intended to save the villagers the long walk to East Wemyss. This structure was replaced by a full parish church in 1895, and briefly served as a local gymnasium before it was demolished to make way for housing in the 1930s.⁶⁵ The new church, built on Main

Street by the architect Alexander Tod, and mainly funded by the Wemyss family, was called St Adrian's. Described by Gifford as a *Simple crow-stepped cruciform church... built of pink sandstone rubble*, in the 1960s the cost of required repairs led the Church of Scotland to decide to close St Adrian's. However, it was saved in 1972 by Captain Michael Wemyss who established the Wemyss Trust to fund the repairs and future maintenance.⁶⁶ In 1976, a union between the congregation and those of St Mary's and St George's in East Wemyss resulted in the formation of Wemyss Parish Church. This continued until there was a further union with Buckhaven Parish Church in 2008. Since that date, one minister serves the newly named parish of Buckhaven and Wemyss Parish, with services alternating between Buckhaven and West Wemyss.⁶⁷

1862 Westwood

*West Wemyss, in which there is a Chapel in connection with the Established Church, coal-works, saw-mill, brick-work....2. East Wemyss, in which is the Parish Church, a building in the form of a cross. It was rebuilt by General William Wemyss upon the site of an old Church, the date of whose erection is not authenticated. There is also a Free Church in East Wemyss.*⁶⁸

1888 Gifford

*Simple crow-stepped cruciform church of 1890-95, built of pink sandstone rubble...*⁶⁹

⁶⁴ 'St Adrian's Church and Churchyard, Main Street, West Wemyss', *British Listed Buildings*, Accessed 25 October, 2021, <https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/200393189-st-adrians-church-and-churchyard-main-street-west-wemyss-wemyss#.YYFsKm3P02x>.

⁶⁵ 'West Wemyss Church of Scotland', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 25 October, 2021, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/10493/name/West+Wemyss+Church+of+Scotland+Wemyss+Fi> fe.

⁶⁶ 'St Adrian's Parish Church', *Places of Worship in Scotland*.

⁶⁷ 'St Adrian's Parish Church', *Places of Worship in Scotland*.

⁶⁸ Westwood, *Westwood's parochial directory for the Counties of Fife and Kinross*, pp. 214-215.

⁶⁹ Gifford, *The Buildings of Scotland*, p. 426.

III. St George's Parish Church, East Wemyss

Fig 9. St George's Parish Church (Bess Rhodes)



At the Great Disruption in 1843, a large group of the congregation of East Wemyss parish church broke away and joined the Free Church. They began building a church in Main Street on land donated by Mrs Swan the following year. It opened for worship in 1846. The congregation remained constant with 331 noted in 1848 and 324 in 1900.⁷⁰ In 1929, they re-joined the Church of Scotland and took on the name St George's, moving to a new building in 1936-37. The old church

was then used as a storeroom for a factory. It was finally demolished in 1995 to make way for a sewage works.⁷¹ The new church, described by Gifford as *competent dead end Gothic revival*, was united with St Adrian's in West Wemyss in 1973, and with St Mary's in 1976 to become Wemyss Parish Church. This continued until there was a further union with Buckhaven Parish Church in 2008, and St George's was closed.⁷²

Gifford 1988

*Competent dead end Gothic revival by Peter Sinclair, 1936-37. Red sandstone gabled front with the lower stages of a tower on the r....*⁷³

⁷⁰ William Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland, 1843-1900* (Edinburgh, 1914), ii, 147.

⁷¹ 'Wemyss Parish Church (former)', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 25 October, 2021, [http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/8059/name/Wemyss+Parish+Church+\(former\)+Wemyss+Fife](http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/8059/name/Wemyss+Parish+Church+(former)+Wemyss+Fife).

⁷² St Adrian's Parish Church', *Places of Worship in Scotland*.

⁷³ Gifford, *The Buildings of Scotland, Fife*, p. 106.

Epilogue. The Sacred Landscape of West and East Wemyss in the Twenty-First Century

From a peak of three churches in operation across the two settlements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, now only one (St Adrian's) is in active use. There is a tradition of the swift reuse of redundant churches in Wemyss dating back to the seventeenth century, when the late medieval chapel of St Mary in West Wemyss was converted into a house by the lord of Wemyss. With the construction of St Adrian's church in West Wemyss in the 1890s, the former parish church (1835) was converted into a gymnasium before being demolished to make way for housing in the 1930s. The first Free Church building (1846), made redundant following the construction of St George's in the 1930s, was used as a storeroom before being demolished in 1995. The medieval church of St Mary's in East Wemyss was first converted into a studio and then later a residential property in the 1970s and 1980s following mergers between congregations in East and West Wemyss. The current demand for residential rather than commercial property in sought after locations such as Wemyss will likely see the same result at St George's in East Wemyss in the near future.

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