

ST FILLAN'S CHURCH

HISTORICAL/ARCHITECTURAL ACCOUNT

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The church from the south east

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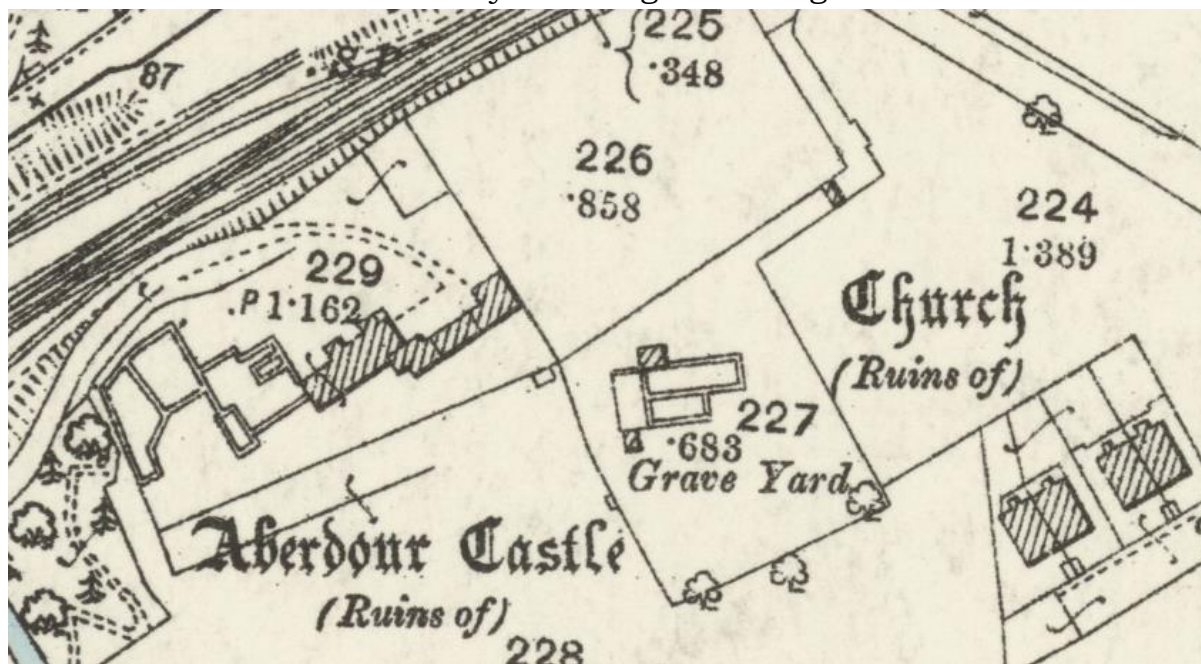
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Aberdour, St Fillan's Church

St Fillan's Church is a rarity in Scotland, a largely 12th century building that is still in use. It was certainly there in 1178, the date of a document which implies there was already a church here around fifty years earlier that was been given to Inchcolm Abbey when that was founded. In style nave and chancel would correlate with a mid-12th century date, being built of good cubicular ashlar. The chancel arch, north door and several windows survive. The south arcade at first sight looks Romanesque as well but is thought to be much later, may be as late as c1500. The south porch is later still, but the presence of a stoup or benitura in it shows that it is still pre-Reformation. Post-Reformation are the birdcage bell cote dated 1588, a transept-like north aisle was added in 1608 by the Phin family of Whitehill, and a gallery and later vault at the west end (now removed) for the family of the Earls of Morton, from the Castle.

The church was abandoned in 1790 and replaced by a new church in Wester Aberdour, now the village hall. The roofless shell survived threats of demolition and was the subject of a conservative restoration in 1925-6, William Williamson of Kirkcaldy and Kinghorn being the architect.



The Church (before restoration) and Castle from 1895 Ordnance Survey 25":1 mile map

The church is clearly associated with the Castle, the tall garden walls of which bound the churchyard on north and west; the only approach is down a walled lane from the north-east which passes through a ruined gatehouse

of some sort, then angles west under an arch in a thick wall. One feels quite remote from the old village.

The Exterior

Looking briefly at the exterior of the church, the central section of the west wall seems to be largely a rebuild of 1588, although older masonry survives below and at the corners. There are possible remains of the jambs of an opening¹ on either side of a stone tablet of 17th century character, bearing, within a frame with fluted side pilasters, the edifying inscription:

PANS². O. PILGRIM
 THAT. PASSITH . BY. THIS. WAY VPON . THYN . END
 AND . THOV . SAL. FEAR. TO . SIN
 AND . THINK. ALSO
 VPON . THE . LATTER. DAY
 WHEN . THOV . TO . GOD . MAN³. COVNT
 THEN . BEST . THOV . NOW. BEGIN.

This has been seen as relating to pilgrims visiting the nearby Holy Well, but in style it seems Post-Reformation, and the reference may be to the general pilgrimage of life rather than a specific visit to a local sacred site. Above the tablet is the west window, of two lancet lights with a vesica in the spandrel which has ogees at top and bottom, within a two-centred arch with a broad splay. Part of the coping of an earlier gable, at a shallower pitch, survives on the north; the present crow-stepped gable goes with the oversailing birdcage bellcote which is dated '1588' and has square-headed chamfered openings and a pyramidal cap and ball finial.

It is clear from the south-west quoins of the original nave that the south aisle is an addition. In the west end of the aisle, its sill a metre or so above the ground, is a blocked square-headed doorway with a roll-moulded surround; originally reached by a short external stair, this gave access to the loft above the western vault. It is an insertion, probably of the 17th century, replacing an earlier window, the sill and south jamb of which survive. Several pieces of a medieval grave slab have been used in the infill of this doorway, both inside and out (see p 13)

¹ It is not clear how these relate to the supposed 'leper's squint' window visible internally.

² 'Consider' (from French 'pense')

³ Must



The church from the north-west

The south porch has an outer arch of rough segmental-pointed form, with a simple continuous chamfer, and a 19th-century coping to its gable. The side walls have each been largely rebuilt and each has a chamfered square-headed loop that is all of the restoration. East of the porch the south wall of the aisle has three windows, two single-light ones with broad chamfered surrounds and a two-light one with a narrower chamfer, all square-headed. Their sills and lower jambs are old, but their heads and the upper parts of the wall are all restoration. The east end of the aisle has a plain square-headed window, now blocked, thought to be of 17th century date; to the north of it the south-east angle quoins of the 12th-century nave are very evident, rising to a shaped kneeler, and roof tabling of the original nave gable prior to its 1588 heightening (although the present crowstepping must be at least in part restoration).

The north side of the nave shows good cubicular masonry of 12th century date. Immediately west of the north aisle is a round-arched chamfered doorway, now a window, which looks to be an insertion and, although of simple Romanesque form, is probably of the 17th century, as may be an almost square chamfered window above and a little further west. East of the aisle another post-medieval window shown on pre-restoration drawing is now only given away by a few new stones, then further east is an unaltered round-headed 12th-century light.

The north or Phin aisle is built of coursed quite elongate blocks⁴, and its side walls have no openings. The gable end has a left-of-centre square-headed

doorway, with a narrower chamfer, and above that a bold moulded string, returned upwards at each end, and in the central stepped down under a square-headed window, which has a moulded surround and is topped by a steep triangular pediment bearing the raised letters DP, what looks like DG P and the date 1608.



North view

The chansele is largely of unaltered 12th century masonry, although there has been some patching on the south where the lower parts of two original windows had been widened into quite large rectangular openings, but were restored to their original form in 1925-6. In the renewed stonework beneath the western window are two stones with T-patterns, carefully and deeply incised, which could be parts of medieval cross slab. At the west end of the wall the square-headed priest's door may be an insertion.

The east end of the chansele has a single 12th-century window, which appears to be have been slightly widened and received an external rebate;

⁴ There are a couple of rougher courses low in the east wall, perhaps earlier fabric re-used. Two of the blocks of the upper wall have apparent incised lines, and may be sections of medieval grave slabs, but not enough is visible to be really sure.

there are several post-medieval monuments set against the wall face. The gable coping looks restoration.

The Interior

One descends a short flight of steps to enter the church by the south porch. It has been suggested that this may link to a supposed former dedication to the Virgin Mary by symbolising a ‘descent into the womb’ but is probably simply the result of the usual rising of the ground level in an old churchyard through many generations of the burials. The side walls of the porch have been rebuilt above the old eroded stone benches; on the east is a carved stone that may be part of a cross base or grave cover⁵. The inner doorway is a plain square-headed and chamfered opening, with a crudely-arched recess on the east (the stoup) which has clearly been hacked into the wall, and indistinct traces of a taller opening to the west.



Interior looking east

⁵ Discovery and Exacavation in Scotland (1987) p 12. E & B.Proudfoot . Brief description, suggesting that it might be part of a cross base. Available online at <https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-753-1/dissemination/pdf/1980/1987.pdf>

Inside the church the walls are now of bare stone (in places heavily pointed) with occasional patches of old plaster. High in the west wall of the aisle is a blocked doorway (formerly at the head of an external stair) giving access to the lost western gallery which extended across aisle and nave. There is another blocked doorway high up in the stub of wall at the west end of the arcade, giving access to section of gallery overlooking the nave (where there is now a much smaller gallery carrying the organ pipes).

The internal face of the west wall of the nave has an odd chamfered offset c 1.0 m above the floor, and in the centre of the wall above it a rebated window, square-headed and with a broad external splay, blocked close to the line of the external face of the wall. Set beneath the west window, this is traditionally a 'leper squint'. Externally it is hidden by the 17th century inscribed 'Pilgrim' slab already described.

The south arcade is of three broad semicircular arches, each of a single chamfered orders, springing from cylindrical piers and semi-cylindrical responds with simple capitals that are chamfered below with a moulded ring at the abacus, and have moulded bases. The internal sill of the two-light window near the east end of the wall is lowered to form a sedile, and alongside it to the east is a small square-headed recess identified as a piscina, although now without any evidence of a bowl.

The north aisle opens to the nave by a high round arch which is no more than the intersection of its barrel vault with the nave wall, with a simple chamfer applied; Russell Walker's 1888 drawings show a wall with a square-headed window here, with a dotted line indicating the section of the vault behind. He also shows part of a round-arched opening immediately to the east of the aisle; the straight joint formed by its east jamb is quite apparent, and the turn of its arched head (although this is set considerably higher than his drawing implies). This seems to be placed a long way east for a north doorway; was there a side chapel that pre-dated the Phin aisle? The square-headed window a little further east (see exterior description) is now barely discernible inside. Immediately west of the aisle is the later north door of 17th century date, with a shouldered rear arch, and then a square-headed window, set high (so as to light the Morton gallery) which has a markedly asymmetric plan, the east side being square with the wall and the west splayed.

The chancel arch is clearly original, an arch of two square orders (with a hoodmould) that has imposts squared above, and grooved and chamfered below, springing from jambs of the same section at their tops, although below this the inner order changes section into a semicircular half shaft; the

bases have been renewed although the chamfered plinth beneath them is in part old.

In the chancel there has been extensive re-facing below the two windows on the south, as they had been enlarged but were returned to their original proportions in the restoration. Any sign of a piscina near the east end of the wall has been erased by this work, but opposite on the north wall is a square-headed recess, directly below an original window. It has been suggested that this may have been a sacrament house, but its lintel has the incised date 1670 (which may of course be secondary). Behind the lintel there is no top to the recess, but an opening upwards into the internal splay of the 12th century window above. One possibility is that this might have been a flue, and the recess housed an oven used in the preparation of wafers, as in the sacristy of Hulne Friary in Northumberland.



Midway along the north wall are remains of a consecration cross (left) incised on old plaster, a simple cross within a double circle being augmented with four intersecting arcs. Stylistically this could be of the 12th century. There are much slighter remains of what may have been a similar cross on the south wall opposite.

The present roofs of the church, with simple collar-beam trusses, are all of 1925-6. A large corbel directly above the capital of the easternmost arcade pier presumably relates to an earlier roof structure.

Discussion

This is one of only a small handful of well-preserved Romanesque parish churches in Scotland. It is clearly associated with other near-contemporary structures: Alan de Mortimer had acquired the barony of Aberdour in the early 12th century, and built the castle in its earliest form, and with it the church, which was given to Inchcolm Abbey when that was founded perhaps in the later 1120s. The parish church, the early hall house which forms the lower part of the Castle keep, and the first phase of the Abbey church (considerably smaller than the parish church) all have similar cubicular Romanesque masonry.

The 12th century church had a two-cell nave-and-chancel plan very typical of the period. The south aisle has been dated to c1500, with a pseudo-Romanesque arcade that has similarities to 15th century work at Dunkeld Cathedral. It is thought to have housed an altar dedicated to St James. The west end of the nave poses puzzles; there are possible remains of jambs visible externally that might relate to an arch into a vanished tower, but internally any detail is hidden by heavy pointing. There are some other oddities in the fabric hereabouts, the internal chamfered plinth/set back which might make some sense if what is now the west wall of the nave was once the east wall of a tower, and the strange blocked 'wrong way round' window which would be more comprehensible if it was an opening from within a separate structure, looking into the church. Was the tower a medieval addition? (there are no signs of any side wall returns in the extant 12th-century masonry at each end of the wall). If there was a tower it was presumably removed in or before 1588, the date of the present gable, and probably the west window below it.

The west end of the church was modified when the western gallery was introduced (probably in the mid-17th century) with a vault being constructed under it for the Earls of Morton in the mid-18th century.

The chancel of the church was also used as a burial aisle by the Earl of Moray, although this caused some controversy as to whether he had any right to do so.

Congregation numbers plummeted after a dispute with the Earl of Morton, who appointed a new minister against their will, and the family argued that a new church be built in the village. This eventually took place in 1790, and the old building was de-roofed and left to ruin, although it is recorded that 'a lady of title' wished to have the church and churchyard levelled as they were inconvenient for her pursuit of hunting (Rutherford 1973, 19).

In the later 19th century the church was recorded by Russell Walker (1888); his plan and elevations are useful but flawed in that they omit some post-medieval features, such as the Morton gallery and vault, which were clearly not thought of interest.

The 1925-6 restoration aimed at returning the church to its medieval form, although the Phinn aisle was kept as a choir loft above its sealed-off vault. Early features were conserved and restored, and the building returned to a form amenable to contemporary worship, although evidence of the post-medieval phase entailing the insertion of family vaults and private galleries, a frequent one in Scots churches, was inevitably sacrificed in the process.

Principal References

Corpus of Medieval Scottish Churches

online at <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/>

(This is the primary source for the church, and provides a more technical architectural description than this, and also a fuller list of references. There are a few minor variations with this account (primarily the suggestion that there might have been a west tower) in suggested interpretations of features)

Russell Walker J (1888) Pre-Reformation Churches of Fife and the Lothians

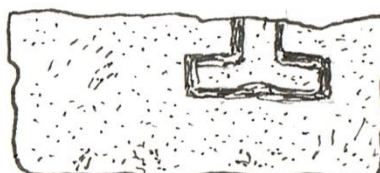
Rutherford, D.W. (1973) St Fillan's Church, Aberdour (current guide book)

<https://www.churchservicesociety.org/sites/default/files/journals/1946-15-22.pdf>

Stone in internal face of east wall of porch



0  50 cm

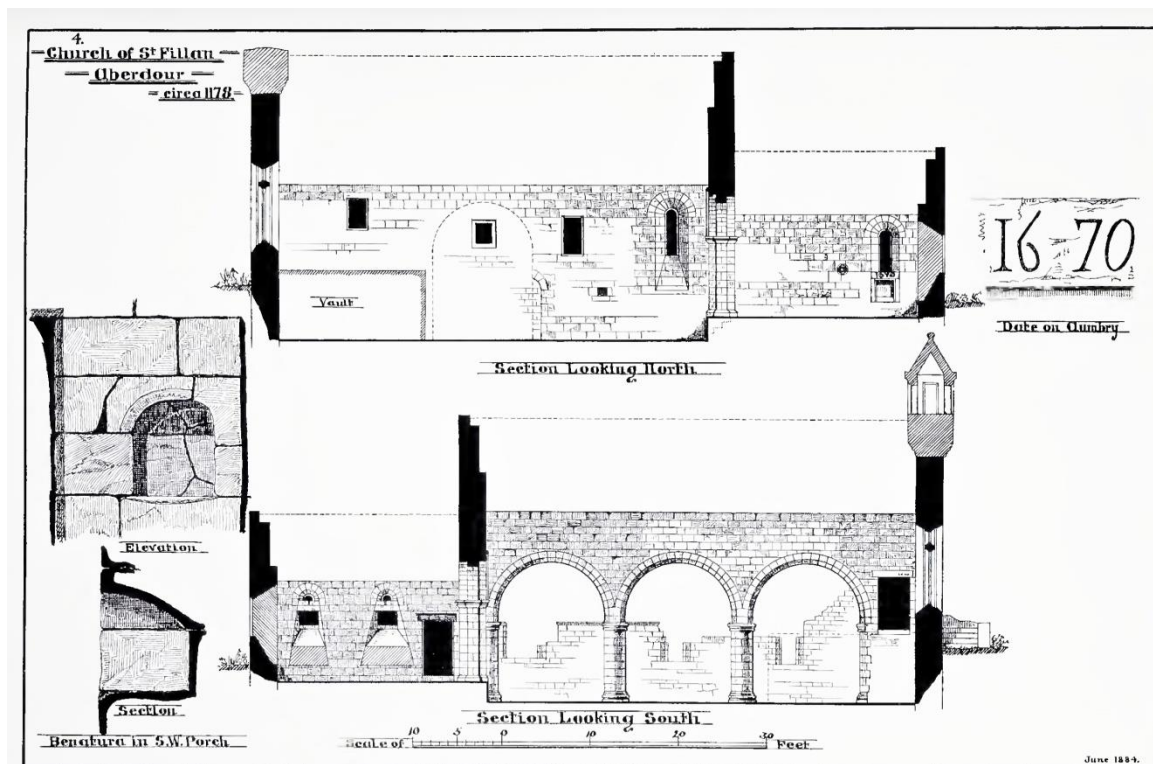
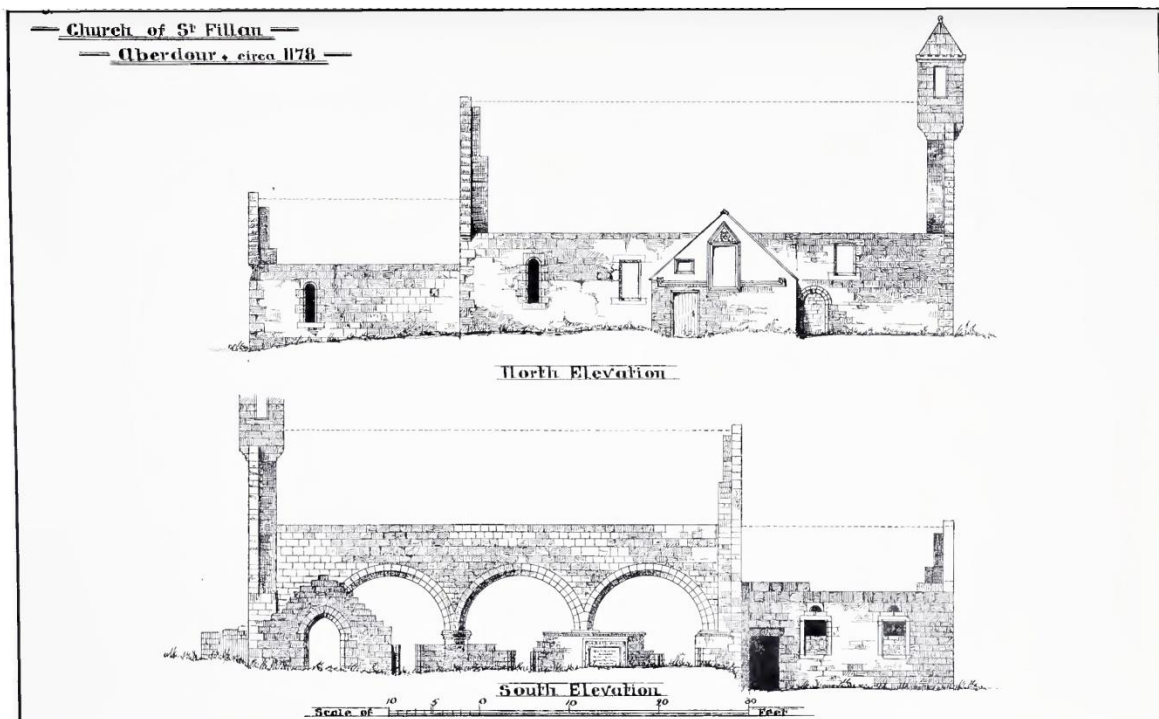


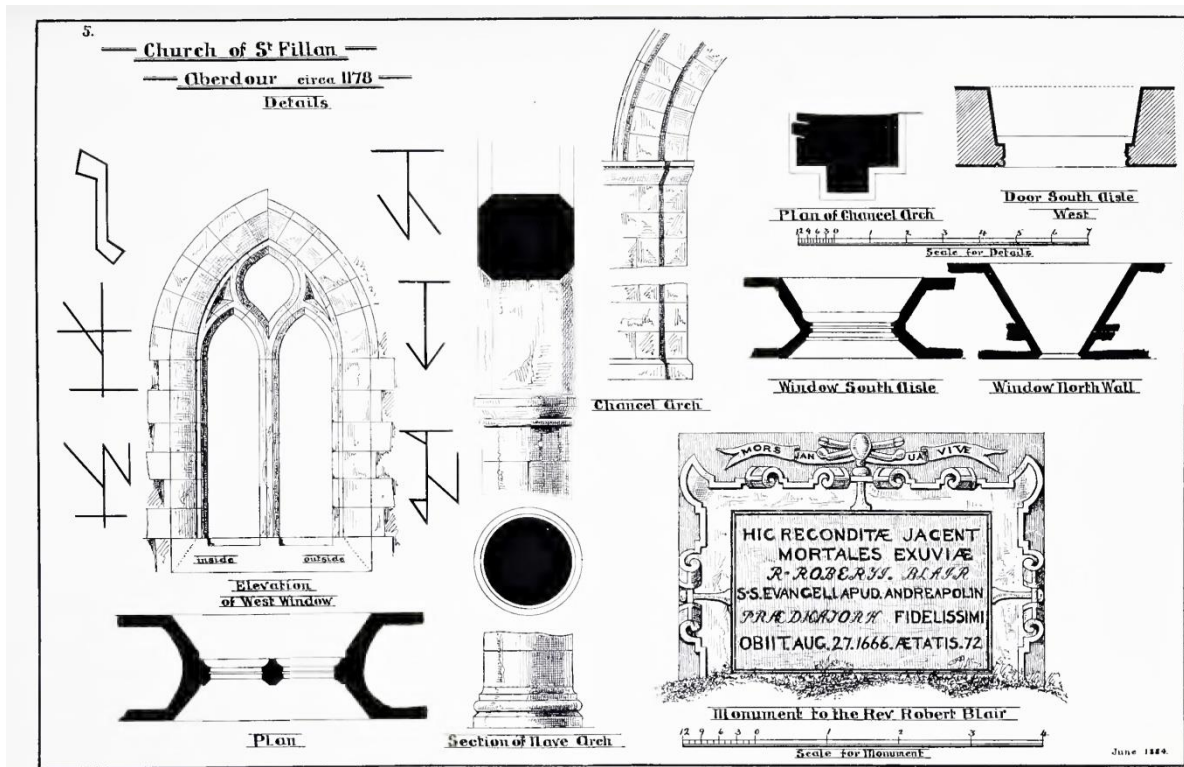
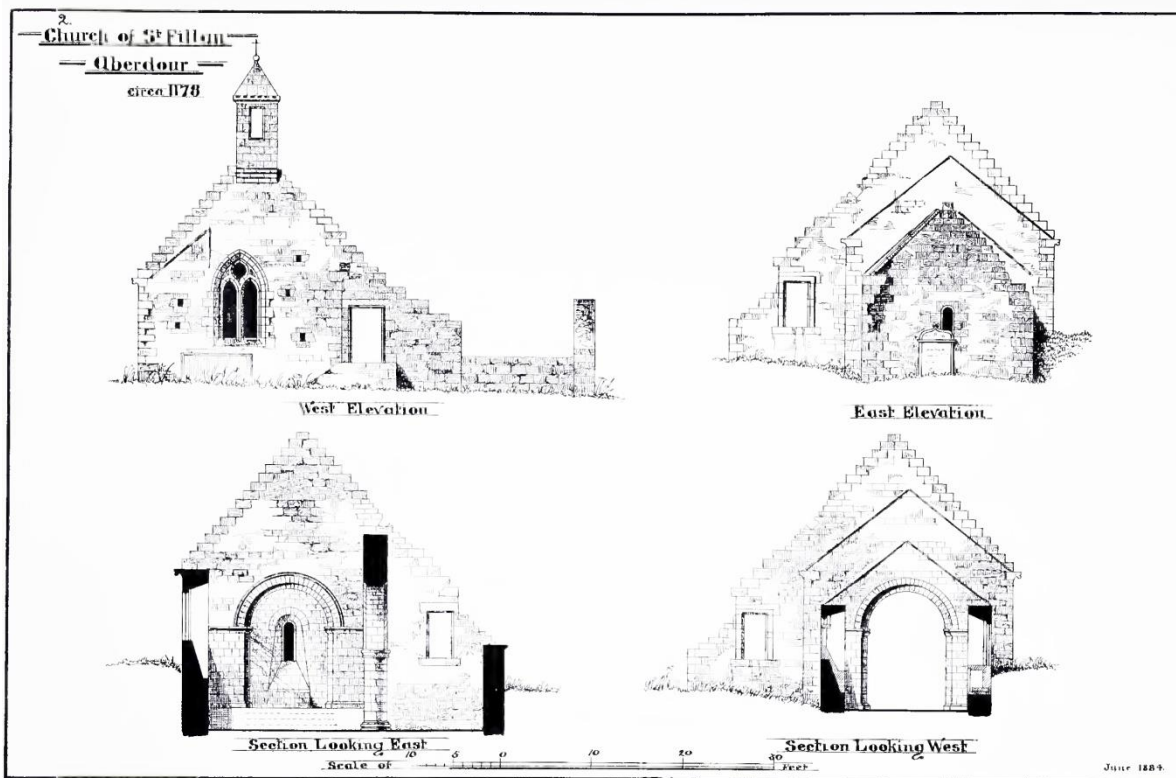
**Stones in external face
of south wall of chancel**



*The west end of the nave,
showing possible straight joints
indicating jambs of tower arch on
either side of secondary inscribed
panel*

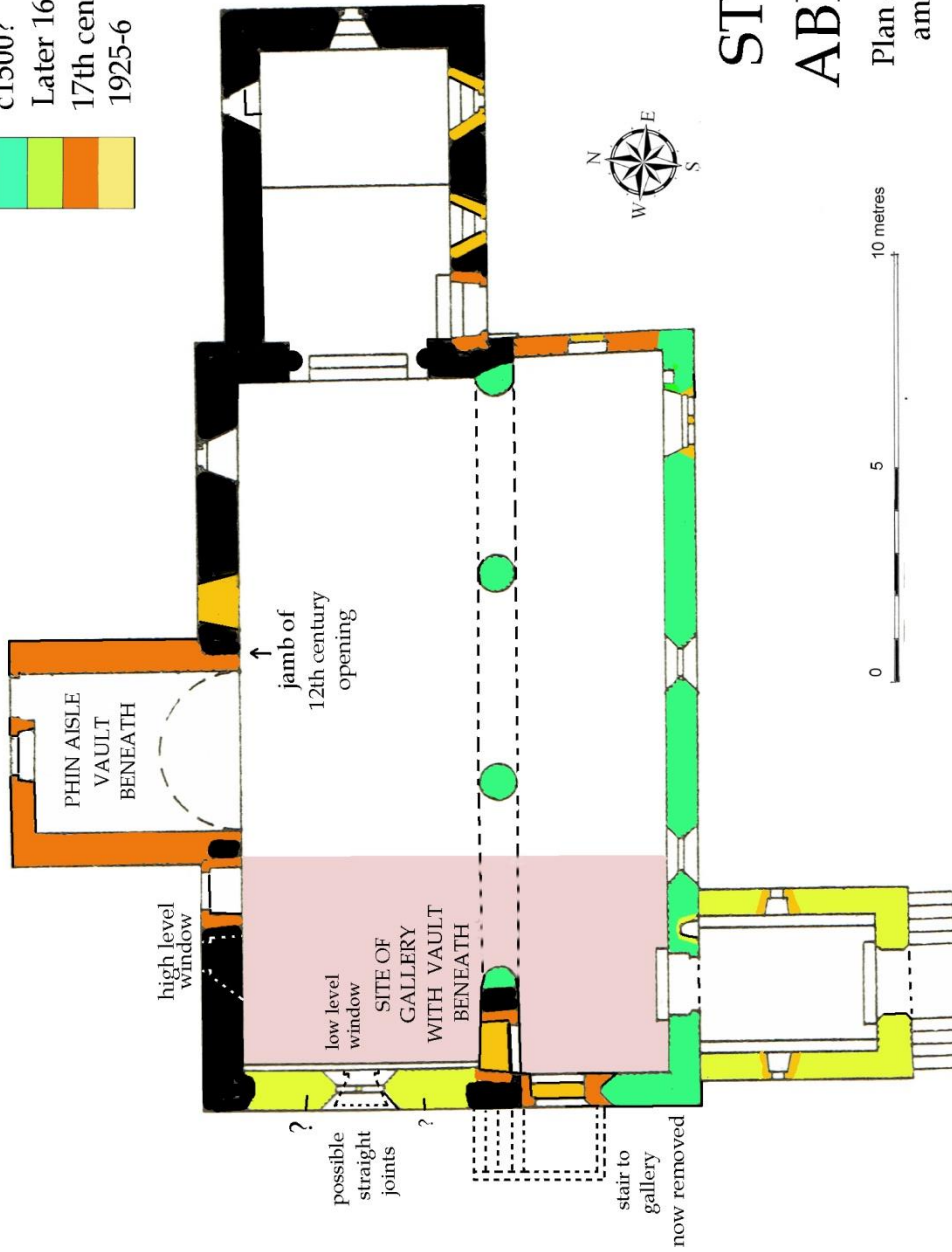
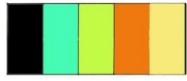
Elevations after Russell Walker (1888)





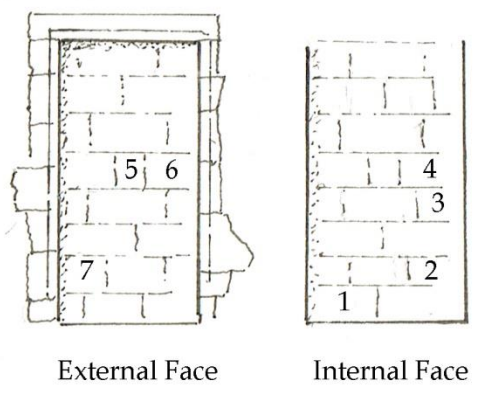
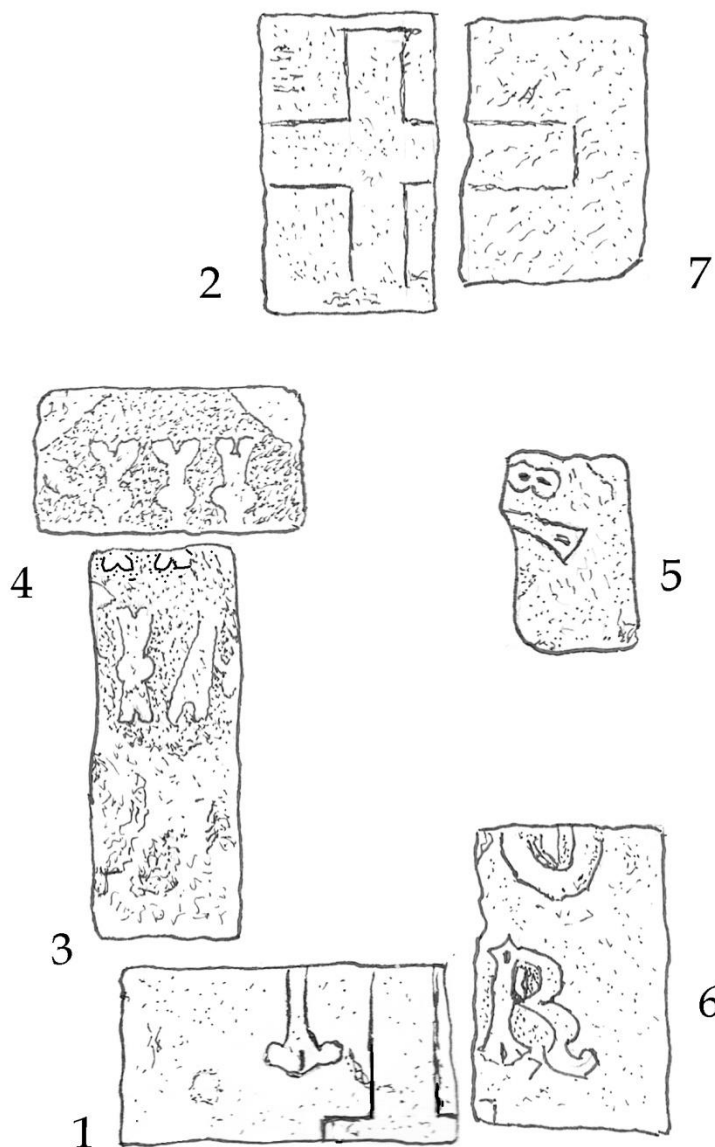
12th century
c1500?

Later 16th century
17th century
1925-6



ST FILLAN ABERDOUR

Plan after RCAMS 1933
amended PFR 2022



St Fillan, Aberdour

Pieces of medieval cross slab re-used in blocking of doorway in west end of south aisle.

Arrangement conjectural