

The Abbey of St Mary, Haddington – Eric Glendinning

The Abbey of St Mary, Haddington lies just to the east of the town of Haddington, East Lothian. There is little to see of the Abbey today as it has been mined for stone since the 16th century and lies within actively cultivated fields. However, an information panel based on archaeological and documentary research by Haddington's History Society, now marks the spot.

Beginnings

Although commonly called the Abbey, Haddington 'Abbey' was in fact a Priory with a Prioress at its head. It was founded by Countess Ada of Northumbria in 1158^[1]. She was the daughter-in-law of David 1st, the founder of many Scottish monasteries. The nuns were Cistercians. Cistercians were founded by St Bernard at Citeaux and were supposed to lead a simple way of life with undyed clothes, no gold in their churches and meat-free meals. The Abbey had three fish ponds. The nuns may also have eaten oysters as shells are found on the site. Scottish Cistercian monks complained that it was easier to be vegetarian in France than in Scotland's cold climate. Ada chose a site near the Tyne, important for power for a mill and for drainage, but not too close to the town.

Welcome Visitors

The Abbey served as a hostel for travellers. Margaret Tudor, daughter of Henry VII, was a guest in 1503. As a young teenager she and her retinue spent a night there on her way north to marry James IV^[2]. Before leaving London she had a symbolic marriage where James was represented by his coat. Through Margaret, her grand-daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, had a claim to the English throne. Because of Margaret, Mary's son James 6th of Scotland became ruler of both kingdoms. An earlier royal, Margaret Stewart, daughter of James II, was sent to the Abbey in 1464, aged 10, after her mother died^[3].

Unwelcome Visitors

Invading forces of the English King Edward III burnt the Abbey during the 'Burnt Candlemas' campaign of 1356. The Earl of Hertford burnt the Abbey, the Friary and Haddington in 1544 during the first 'Rough Wooing', a long campaign started by Henry VIII's ambition to marry his son Edward to Mary, Queen of Scots. This would bring Scotland under English control. "The same day (May 15th 1544) we burnt a fair town of the Earl of Bothwell called Hadyngtoun with a great nunnery and house of the friars." ^[4] Prioress Elizabeth was still raising money to repair the fire damage in 1557.

The Treaty of Haddington, 7th July 1548

The Abbey surrendered to English forces in 1547 but was not occupied. The Scottish Parliament met there in July 1548 when Haddington was under English occupation. The Parliament agreed that Mary Stuart, Mary Queen of Scots, would marry Francis, Dauphin of France. In return the French would help drive out the English. This agreement became known as the Treaty of Haddington. Mary was 6 and Francis 4. Mary was not present but her mother, Mary of Guise, was and pressed hard for the treaty. The Earl of Arran as Regent and the French Ambassador were also present. The Abbey played a part in the Siege of Haddington, 1548-49. Elements of the Scottish army were stationed there. A field to the east of the Abbey was once called Camps^[5]. An artillery platform was erected on Abbey land on the north bank of the Tyne near the Amisfield cascade, an ornamental feature created after the land was bought by Francis Charteris in 1726.

Property

The Abbey was the wealthiest nunnery in the Lothians. Countess Ada gifted most of the land between the Abbey and Haddington, much of Garvald and half the income from Crail harbour. It had five granges^[6] (sheep farms) including Nunraw, near Garvald. The Prioress was charged with defending Nunraw against 'our auld inymeis of Inglan' in 1548^[7]. The nuns owned two mills and had a tithes (10%) of the income from Haddington's mills^[8]. They had income from 26 churches^[9], property in Berwick, and a fishing on the Tweed. Much of nuns' income was in grain, mostly bear (an early barley) and oats. They used some of this to support widows, pilgrims, and beggars and provided hospitality to travellers^[10]. Its wealth and status made the Abbey a desirable prize for powerful figures, like the Hepburn family, who wanted to control its resources but also an obvious target for Hertford in 1544.

Abbey People

The Prioress was the most important person. She was supposed to be over 30, legitimate, literate and chosen by the other nuns. In practice by the late 15th century the post was controlled by the Earls of Bothwell, the Hepburn family. Elizabeth Hepburn was Prioress during the Rough Wooing. Elizabeth was appointed at 23. She was illegitimate, could not write and enjoyed a lively lifestyle^[11]. In her will she left considerable sums of money in gold to family members and servants^[12]. At peak there were at most 24 nuns^[13]. In 1557 the nuns included: • Elizabeth Douglas • Alison Ramsay • Joanna Cunningham • Katherine Farrer^[14]. A large staff of lay people served the nuns, 'sober servitours', including 3 cooks, 2 porters, a pantry man, maltman, brewer, gardener, smith, carter, ploughman, as well as stableboys, and laundresses^[15].

References

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