Teacher's Notes: Monks and Nuns in Scotland in the Middle Ages

What is an abbey?

An abbey is the name for a community of monks headed by an abbot or nuns headed by an abbess.

It consists of a church, a cloister around which the living accommodation is placed, and an outer precinct for other buildings, all enclosed within a sturdy boundary wall. There are still abbeys today for example Sancta Maria Abbey near Nunraw at Garvald. (See note at end)

However, most Roman Catholic abbeys and priories of Scotland were founded before the Reformation of 1560.

Abbeys are religious centres where Christians dedicate their life to serving and worshipping God. Many of them were founded by members of royalty or the nobility, who hoped that prayers and masses offered up by the monks on their behalf would speed their passage to Heaven, freeing them to concentrate on worldly matters. Traditionally the members of an abbey lived literally a cloistered life – a life within the confines of the abbey precinct.

There were several other monastic institutions operating in a similar way to abbeys. A priory is lower in status than an abbey and is headed by a prior.

St Mary's nunnery in Haddington was, strictly speaking, a priory headed by a prioress though it is usually referred to as an abbey.

Next in line were the collegiate churches. These were small 'colleges' of priests, often attached to an important noble house.

St Mary's Church in Haddington, now known as the Kirk, was a collegiate church where John Knox sang in the choir.

Slightly different were the friaries, whose inmates went out into the world preaching, rather than devoting their lives to prayer within the cloister.

In Haddington there was a Franciscan Friary on the site now occupied by the present Holy Trinity Episcopal Church.

All of these institutions – abbeys, priories, collegiate churches or friaries – could be known as monasteries, containing as they did communities of monks, or nunneries and convents, for women. While an ordained Roman Catholic priest is called **Father** a monk is a **Brother** and a nun **Sister.**

When did abbeys start?

In the late third century, early Christians set up loose communities in remote areas of Egypt, Syria and Palestine where they could focus on and worship God without distractions.

In the fifth century the first Christian community in Scotland was founded at Whithorn by St Ninian and St Columba brought one to the island of Iona from Ireland around 563 AD. Around this

time other communities were started by St Aidan at Lindisfarne and St Cuthbert at Old Melrose. These early Celtic abbeys were characterized by austerity, discipline and devotion to God.

In the 6th century Christians from mainland Europe and Ireland brought in other types of abbey that followed the Benedictine Rule, a guide to the spiritual and administrative life in an abbey written by St Benedict. A meeting of leaders of the Roman Catholic Church at Whitby ruled against the Columban, Celtic church in favour of the Benedictine Rule.

By the 10th century these early Celtic abbeys were in decline. Some abbeys, such as Iona, had been ravaged by marauding Vikings while others had slipped from their original high moral ideals.

Queen Margaret, the wife of Malcolm Canmore, revitalised spiritual life in Scotland. For her work in founding a Benedictine abbey at Dunfermline in1072 and supporting and encouraging pilgrimages to other religious centres such as St Andrews she was later canonised as a saint.

St Margaret's Chapel, her simple chapel, can be visited at Edinburgh Castle. Her son, David I continued her work and founded around fifteen religious houses during his years in power in the twelfth century, in the north of England as well as in Scotland. He also encouraged other nobles to set up abbeys and priories, to impress God and demonstrate their wealth and power to their subjects. His daughter-in-law **Countess Ada** founded St Mary's Abbey in Haddington.

Types of Abbey

The different types of abbey and different types of monk and nun shared common characteristics.

Benedictine Abbeys

The first of the post-Celtic abbeys to be set up in Scotland were the Benedictine abbeys, for example, Dunfermline Abbey. Benedictine brothers were also known as the Black Monks because of the black robes they wore.

Cistercian Abbeys

Cistercian abbeys were established in an attempt to return to the idealism and austerity of the first abbeys and became popular in Scotland in the 12th century. The Cistercian brothers were known as the White Monks because of their unbleached, white robes. In the early days they emphasised manual labour as well as prayer. The abbeys at Dundrennan, Sweetheart and Melrose were Cistercian as was St Mary's, Haddington.

Cistercian derives from *Cistercium,* the Latin name for the locale of Cîteaux, near Dijon in eastern France

Augustinian

The abbeys at Holyrood, Jedburgh and on Inchcolm were founded as Augustinian abbeys. The inmates of these abbeys were not monks but canons (ordained priests) although they were still bound by the monastic vows. Known as the Black Canons, they engaged with the outside world, preaching to local people.

Tironensian Abbeys

A fourth order of abbey was the Tironensian order, unique in Scotland in coming directly from France, rather than via a settlement in England. The abbeys at Kelso and Arbroath were both Tironensian. The monks here were known as the Grey Monks.

Friaries

Communities of mendicant or begging friars. The Dominican friars were known as the Blackfriars and the Franciscan friars were Greyfriars.

The Abbey Precinct

Abbeys were generally built to a standard layout, which included a **church** and all domestic buildings. Because the monks were not permitted to leave the abbey precinct unless on abbey business, everything they needed was provided within the abbey walls. The abbey was designed for efficient organization and easy movement between areas with minimum disruption.

Church

This was the largest and most important building where all services were held. Abbeys were at the cutting edge of architecture: the walls could be more than 50 metres high and two metres thick. The interior included carved columns, soaring vaulted roofs, richly coloured stained glass windows, decorative paving made from baked clay tiles and devotional statues. Some abbeys included playful touches such as water spouts in the shape of gargoyles on the roof of Melrose Abbey.

Abbey churches were built in a cross shape:

Nave

The west end of the church, for the exclusive use of lay brothers in Cistercian abbeys and for lay use in others.

Pulpitum

Stone screen which separated nave from the rest of the church.

Monks' Choir

Area for the monks with carved wooden choir stalls between the pulpitum and the crossing.

Crossing

The point at the centre of the cross shape of the church, often topped by a bell tower.

Transepts

The two cross-arms of the church, either side of the central crossing. Often contained side chapels with altars dedicated to lesser saints.

Presbytery

The eastern part of the church, housing the high altar and the sacristy.

Sacristy

Small room where the church robes and sacramental vessels were kept.

Reliquary

Container for relics – bones of saints and holy people

Cresset an oil lamp

Living Areas

Refectory

A long open dining room also known as the frater. Included a pulpit for readings during meals.

Lavatorium

A wash place close to the refectory. This had a spiritual as well as a hygienic dimension; monks would 'purify' themselves before consuming 'God's fruits'.

Kitchen

Food was prepared here. This was the only room which had a fire, other than the warming house.

Dormitory or Dorter

A long open room where the monks slept on simple bunks. It was linked to the church by a separate stair for easy access at nights. Sometimes they slept in isolated rooms called **cells** on mattresses stuffed with straw.

Latrine or Garderobe

The monks' toilet. situated at the end of the dormitory and was flushed with running water. Also known as the **reredorter**. Otherwise, they used a **pee pot,** a clay chamber pot.

Warming House

The only place in the abbey with a fire purely for warmth, it was like a common room for monks. although there was no talking permitted. That took place in….

Inner and Outer Parlour

the only rooms in which monks were allowed to talk – and even then, only on business matters. The inner parlour was for abbey business, the outer for infrequent meetings with friends or family outwith the abbey.

Lay Brothers' Range

Accommodation for the lay brothers in Cistercian abbeys.

Infirmary

For the care of the sick and elderly members of the abbey. All monks were regularly 'bled' here by leeches.

Abbot's House

The abbot was in charge of the abbey. His house was nearly always a large building and was used as a meeting place for the abbot to entertain important visitors.

Guest house

Important visitors to the abbey were accommodated in guest accommodation on the west side of the cloister.

Precinct wall

The boundaries of most abbeys were marked by a huge precinct wall. Sturdy and several metres high, this wall surrounded and enclosed the monastery and was often constructed of stones cleared from the site where the abbey was built. This acted as a physical barrier marking the extent of the abbey and demarcating the boundaries for the monks within the monastery. It also played a symbolic role, marking the border between the spiritual life within the abbey and the temporal world beyond.

Gatehouse

Where the gatekeeper monitored and restricted all entrances and exits. You can see good examples of precinct walls and gatehouses at St Andrews Cathedral and a great wall survives at Sweetheart.

Working Areas

Chapter House

The main meeting room where the monks met every day. As well as listening to a chapter from the Rule of St Benedict, the monks would also discuss abbey business and deal with any disciplinary measures.

Treasury

To store the abbey's considerable valuables, silver and gold plate and decorations and the abbot's seals for signing documents.

Cloister

A covered walkway around a square garden where the monks could walk, study or use for silent thought

Garth

The garden in the cloister was used to grow herbs for cooking and medicine and also flowers for the altar.

Scriptorium

A room where books were written, copied and decorated.

Grange

The abbey farm

Water mill

The mill was used to grind grain produced on the farm or received as rent. The first water powered mills, for example, were in the abbeys.

Teind Barn

Rent – or teinds or tithes – paid by tenants was in the form of grain rather than money. This was kept in a barn.

Who lived in an Abbey?

Traditionally it took thirteen people to establish an abbey, representing Jesus and the twelve disciples. These monks or nuns would be sent from an existing abbey to form a new community and recruit novice monks or nuns. As there was often a requirement to donate a small endowment of land, generally they came from local noble families, often the second son. Others might be wealthy burgesses who felt they had a **vocation** or 'calling' from God. It was possible to be married with children and still join an abbey; you could arrange for food and clothes to be supplied to the family you left behind. Sometimes young children were 'donated' to abbeys by their parents, who knew that their children would receive a good education and upbringing at the abbey. It was also regarded as an investment, increasing the spiritual stock of the family. Such children were known as **oblates.** Others joined abbeys in their retirement years, desiring a strong spiritual finish to their lives. Widows often retreated to a nunnery while women who were unable or unwilling to find husbands were made to join abbeys.

In addition to the monks or nuns, Cistercian abbeys also included a community of lay brothers, sometimes known as ***conversi.*** These were men who lived within the abbey in their own accommodation and took monastic vows but undertook to carry out more of the manual labour and less of the devotional aspects of abbey life. They worked on the abbey farms, were involved with construction work and carried out other physical work. (cf modern day Sancta Maria Abbey)

They were entitled to more food and more sleep. Remains of the lay brothers' accommodation can be seen at Melrose. Occasionally lay people were allowed to enjoy a 'portion' (accommodation, clothing and meals) on payment of a lump sum to the abbey. This was sometimes used as a form of pension for royal servants.

The number of monks or nuns living in an abbey varied enormously. At its peak in the thirteenth century, there were about forty canons at Jedburgh, dwindling to eight by 1545.

Nunneries tended to be smaller.

In 1462, there were 24 nuns living in St Mary's. After 1560 that number fell to 18 and in 1573 ten nuns were still alive when receiving pensions of £20 each.

What did monks and nuns look like?

Monks and nuns were easy to recognise because of their style of clothing and their characteristic hairstyle. All monks had the crown of their heads shaved, leaving a band of hair below the ears, known as the **tonsure,** which symbolised the Crown of Thorns worn by Jesus.

This was performed for the first time before he took his vows in the church. Subsequent shaving occurred in the cloister about nine times a year.

Generally, monks' clothes consisted of a simple loose tunic known as a **habit.** Some kinds of monk wore a linen shirt under the habit, but the Cistercians wore their habit next to the skin – no warming vest

or breeches! The Cistercians' habits were undyed to emphasise their poverty; dyes were expensive. Monks also had a black apron-like garment called **a scapular** for working, and **a cowl**, a deep hood. The Cistercians stuck strictly to the Rule, with each monk having only two tunics, two cowls, a scapular for work, shoes and socks.

It was finally agreed that in winter, Scottish Cistercians were allowed to wear their entire wardrobe all at once for warmth. Some monks wore a leather belt. Augustinian canons wore white surplices over their black habits when in church.

Nuns wore similar garments – a loose **tunic**, or **habit**, tied around the waist with a cloth or leather belt Nuns cut and covered their hair with a white linen **wimple** worn down to the eyebrows, covering the forehead, and a **veil**, the most significant and ancient aspect of the habit. Nuns' veils were black, whereas those worn by the lay sisters were white Over the top they wore either a cloak or a cowl. Some Orders – such as the Dominicans – wear a large **rosary** on their belt. Benedictine abbesses wear a cross or **crucifix** on a chain around their neck.

Just like the monks, Cistercian nuns wore a **scapular** when working.

At Dundrennan you can see carved stone slabs clearly showing the clothes worn by an abbot and a nun and at Iona there is a carved slab showing the clothing of the Prioress Anna Maclean.

What happened when you became a monk or a nun?

After a probationary period lasting about a year, successful novices were invited to take the following three **vows**:

• Poverty – to own no property

• Chastity – never to marry

• Obedience – to obey the orders of the abbot or abbess

These were serious, lifelong promises, committing the novice to a lifetime in the service of God, away from worldly pleasures. Monks were bound to their vows by the fear of the spiritual consequences of breaking them.

Monks and nuns also took a vow of stability, promising to stay in the same religious house for the rest of their lives. This ensured a stable and secure community, in which ties of affection were doubtless very strong.

Monks spent much of their lives in silence, speaking only on official matters or when absolutely necessary.

Unless on abbey business, monks and nuns were supposed to spend their lives within the abbey

compound. In certain priories, nuns were permitted to visit their homes and families for a certain number of days per year and visits by family were sometimes permitted; you can see the remains of the outer parlour, the room for such meetings at Jedburgh Again, though, depending on the style of the abbot, this rule may or may not have been strictly enforced. There are numerous recorded cases of nuns escaping

from their nunneries for nocturnal adventures – Isobel Bennet, treasurer of Catesby Priory in the 15th century slipped out of the priory into town and spent a riotous evening carousing with the Augustinian friars. Another case, however, around 1143 describes how a monk at Revesby Abbey in Lincolnshire begged to be freed from the order. When the abbot opened the door to release him, it is reported that he 'felt the empty air as though it were a wall of iron' and returned to his cloistered life.

Discussion

From the moment the monk or nun took their vows they were subject to the rules of the order which governed every aspect of their lives, from how they spent their days to how they folded their habits at night time. Interesting issues to discuss with pupils – could they manage to give up aspects of their lives which they find pleasurable? How would giving things up make them feel?

A Day in the life of..... a monk or a nun provided a highly structured rhythm to the day and year. The day revolved around church services, punctuated by meals, time for work and study and a daily meeting.

The daily routine in the summer followed this structure:

0130 **Nocturns** – Prayers followed by sung service

0330 **Matins** prayers

Back to bed

0600 **Prime** prayers – first mass of the day

Meeting in chapter house

Spiritual work

0800 **Terce** prayers and sung mass

0900 Reading

1130 **Sext** prayers

1200 Main meal of the day.

Rest and

private prayer

1430 **None** prayers

Physical work

1730 Supper

1800 **Vespers**

1930 Light supper

followed by

Compline service

2015 Bedtime

Worship

Monks and nuns attended eight church services a day, known as **offices**. They started at night with the sung service **Nocturns**. A bell would ring to wake the community, telling the monks it was time to file to the church to pray. As they slept in their habits, the monks needed only to put on their hoods or **cowls** and night shoes before descending the night stair which led from the **dormitory** directly to the church. Monks stood in the **choir stalls**, leaning against small carved ledges known as **misericords.**

Throughout the service an official known as a **circator** paced up and down with a lamp, perhaps like the **cresset** on display at Jedburgh, which he shone in the face of any poor monk who had nodded off.

All prayers were sung unaccompanied in a form known as **Plainsong** or **Gregorian chant**: unaccompanied choral prayer This would have been one of the constant sounds underscoring life in the abbeys. They may have been accompanied by music on simple portable organs.

In addition to the communal services, monks were expected to spend time every day in private prayer, in one of the small chapels usually found in the church **transepts** and **nave** aisles. Any abbey business was discussed as part of the daily **Chapter Meeting**.

Taking place in the **Chapter House**, the most important element was the reading aloud of a chapter of St Benedict's Rule – the guidelines for monastic life, set down by St Benedict in the 6th century. After this would be confessions, discussion of the day's work and any disciplinary matters to be dealt with.

Study

A key element of the monk's life was study of religious texts and silent contemplation. This often took place in the shelter of the **cloister**. The religious communities were among the few literate people at this time, so although physically cut off and cloistered from the outside world, through reading and study the monks were in fact more widely informed and educated about the world than most

Work

All but the most elderly or infirm monks or nuns were expected to spend some of each day carrying out work for the abbey.

Some worked in the **garth**, cloister garden, or on the **grange** – the abbey farm. Some of the abbeys became very wealthy through sheep farming and the wool industry. Melrose Abbey, for example had 15,000 sheep in the 14th century – more than almost anyone else in Europe! The monks here traded with Europe, their ships docking at a special harbour in Bruges.

As time passed, monks spent less time doing manual labour and more time studying. Some worked in the **scriptorium**, copying out and decorating religious manuscripts, illustrating them in glowing colours and with beautiful designs. The magnificent gospel-book now known as the **Book of Kells** is thought to have been created at the abbey of Iona before being taken to Kells in Ireland for greater safety.

Other monks created Latin grammars to educate the novices. You can see **inkpots** used by monks at Arbroath and at Melrose. Abbeys were the centres of literacy at this time; it was hardly surprising that it was Abbot Bernard of Arbroath who was asked to draft the famous **Declaration of Arbroath**, possessing as he did both the skills of writing and the education to phrase the letter appropriately. Walter Bower, the author of ***Scotichronicon,*** a history of the Scots which he began writing in 1441 was abbot at Inchcolm Abbey at the time. Abbots in fact spent much of their time away from the abbeys carrying out secretarial tasks at court. (*The Name of the Rose* Umberto Eco)

How were abbeys organised?

The most senior figures were the abbot or abbess and the prior or prioress. The abbot headed the abbey and had overall responsibility for everything which happened there.

In theory, the abbot was elected by the monks but in practice this was usually a political appointment made by the king and confirmed by the Pope.

The abbot was the bridge between the abbey and the world outside, so he generally lived in separate accommodation where he could entertain and meet with royalty and important members of the nobility.

Because of his duties, the abbot was frequently absent from the abbey. The abbot's house at **Arbroath** gives some idea of how grand these houses could be and how far some abbots had slipped from the original ideals of poverty and humility.

Beyond the abbey walls, the abbot held the position of a substantial landowning lord and often played a role in politics. Abbot Bernard of Arbroath, for example, not only inspired the troops at Bannockburn by marching at their head with the **Brecbennoch reliquary** (now on display in the Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh), but also drafted the famous political letter to the Pope, the Declaration of Arbroath.

The prior was the second in command at the abbey after the abbot. He was responsible for the day to day running of the abbey, and often deputised in the abbot's absence. The abbot and prior were assisted in their roles by a number of key positions held by obedientaries.

Precentor

The precentor oversaw all church services.

Sacrist

The sacrist took care of all the church items – the vessels used in services for example, the shrines and ornaments.

Cellarer

The cellarer was responsible for the supply of food drink and fuel.

Infirmarian

The infirmarian and his assistants took care of any sick or elderly monks in the abbey infirmary.

These four positions were further supported by other positions. In smaller communities it was common for some members to have more than one position.

Roundsmen or circatores

They toured the abbey during periods of work to check that there was no gossiping or bad behaviour.

Almoner

The almoner organised the distribution of **alms** – donations to the needy of the surrounding community.

Chamberlain

The housekeeper organised the washing of habits and the cleaning of the abbey rooms.

Fraterer

The fraterer was in charge of the refectory where people ate. He was responsible for the table linen, the crockery and the lavatorium, where the monks washed their hands before eating.

Novice Master

supervised the training of monks new to the abbey.

Kitchener

The kitchener and his assistants cooked the food and made sure it was fairly distributed.

Guest master

The guest master looked after any visitors to the abbey and acted as a go-between to the abbot.

Domestic arrangements

Life in the abbeys was communal. The monks did everything together – slept communally in a dormitory, although some provided separate cells, ate together in a refectory; prayed, worked and studied together. All of this took place in silence.

The main meal of the day was usually taken around midday. After washing their hands outside the refectory, the monks would file through in silence; grace would be said, a gong would sound and then the meal could begin. Throughout the main meal a monk would read from a religious text. Meals were eaten in total silence and in an atmosphere of great solemnity.

Food was generally vegetarian and frugal, at least in the early days, consisting mainly of bread, vegetables and eggs, washed down with weak ale. Fish was served on a Friday and important visitors would be offered meat on other days. One source states that nuns in a fifteenth century English priory were entitled to a daily ration of a loaf of bread, two herrings and half a gallon of ale. Over the course of the year these nuns could look forward to a pig each, two stone of cheese and eighteen penceworth of beef.

What was life like for nuns?

There were only a few nunneries in Scotland, and those which did exist tended to be small and not wealthy. There was a Benedictine priory at Lincluden by Dumfries, an Augustinian priory on Iona and the

Cistercians had nunneries at Berwick, Coldstream, Elcho, Haddington and Manuel. Their lives would have followed a similar pattern to their male counterparts.

The main difference was the presence of men in the nunneries. Since women were not permitted to take religious orders priests were needed to tend to the nuns' spiritual needs, saying mass, hearing confession and administering the sacraments such as the Eucharist (Holy Communion) and Extreme Unction, the Last Rites for the dying.

Male lay brothers would have been employed to perform some of the harder physical tasks, but much of the work was done by the nuns themselves.

Nunneries were headed by an abbess and priories by a prioress.

What happened to the abbeys?

Most abbeys are in ruins today and in many cases – including St Mary's Haddington – nothing remains above ground. What happened?

Throughout their history the abbeys frequently came under attack. Relatively wealthy places, they were targets for all kinds of raiders. In the ninth and tenth centuries, for example, abbeys were raided and plundered by Vikings after the gold and silver church plate. By 849 AD Iona Abbey had been attacked so frequently that many of its treasures were removed permanently to Kells in Ireland for safety.

Many abbeys, particularly those in the Scottish Borders suffered during the intermittent wars with England between 1296 and 1550. Melrose and Dryburgh Abbeys were both badly damaged during the wars of the14th century while Jedburgh and Kelso were devastated by the English invasions of the 1540s. At Jedburgh the raids led to the collapse of the roof, forcing the monks to hole up and build a makeshift smaller church within the shell of the original church.

Other abbeys were not financially able to rebuild; the days of noble and royal largesse to the abbeys were long gone and they no longer commanded the respect of former times. Those abbeys which did survive the raids found themselves out of political favour when it came to the Reformation of the

Church in the sixteenth century. As bastions of the Roman Catholic Church, and in many cases bastions of the kind of idolatry and dissolute life against which reformers such as John Knox railed, the abbeys were in some cases invaded by angry mobs. Statues and images were decapitated, rich hangings were ripped to shreds and stained-glass windows smashed. Melrose Abbey is unique in having so many surviving statues – though some of them are headless. When Protestantism was declared the official and exclusive religion of Scotland in 1560, abbeys' days were numbered.

In some cases, for example at Jedburgh and Dryburgh, the abbeys and their remaining monks embraced the reformed religion and the abbots were replaced by lay commendators. No new monks joined the abbeys and in most cases the brothers were allowed to live out their remaining days in the crumbling abbey ruins. In some cases, the abbey churches were remodelled to become the parish kirk; in most cases, however, the abbeys were regarded as a useful source of shaped stone,

reused in other, secular buildings. A window lintel in a house in St Andrews, for example, was discovered to be a split effigy of a bishop, obviously from the nearby cathedral.

In the nineteenth centuries the abbeys were 'rediscovered' as romantic ruins by tourists or concerned locals who in some cases mounted campaigns for their restoration. At Sweetheart Abbey, for example, a group of local people banded together in 1779 to raise funds to preserve what was left of the old abbey church, one of the earliest examples of conservation work for its own sake. Dryburgh was purchased by the Earl of Buchan in 1786 to preserve the ruins.

Nowadays the abbeys are peaceful tourist attractions.

Investigating an Abbey

Sancta Maria Abbey is a working Trappist (*Ordo Cisterciensis Strictioris Observantiae*) monastery. The Order of Reformed Cistercians of Our Lady of La Trappe branched off from Cistercians. It was the first Cistercian house to be founded in Scotland since the Scottish Reformation. Founded in 1946 by monks from Mount St Joseph Abbey, Roscrea, Ireland, it was consecrated as an Abbey in 1948. It nestles at the foot of the Lammermuir Hills, near Garvald on the southern edge of East Lothian

The monks lived in Nunraw Tower–part medieval part Victorian mansion while work on the new building begun in 1952 was completed. They then used Nunraw as guest accommodation until 2014 when it was sold to a private buyer to turn into a family home.

St Mary's Cistercian Abbey Haddington

See separate notes.

Teacher's Notes: St Mary's Cistercian Abbey

All the houses of Cistercian nuns were priories. Although frequently referred to as an abbey, St Mary's never had that status.

It was founded around 1158 by Countess Ada, after death of her husband, Henry Earl of Northumberland and Huntingdon, (younger son of David I) She was the mother of two Scottish Kings: Malcolm IV and William the Lion.

Haddington had formed part of Ada de Warennes's dowry.

Like most Cistercian houses, the Roman Catholic priory was dedicated to Saint Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ.

Countess Ada endowed the nunnery with surrounding land and mills as well as other lands in the county and Crail in Fife. She also granted land to Alexander de St Martin who in turn, gifted the land to St Mary's. The chapel of St Martin, built around 1159, was intended to provide a place of worship for local people. It was given to the Abbey in 1170. The road connecting St Martin's to the nunnery was called the Nungait, and as Haddington developed, the suburb of Nungate grew around the kirk.

The nuns received teinds from these lands to fund their living costs. Many benefactors and donors granted them land in exchange for the nuns praying for their souls.

In 1356 during Burnt Candlemas Edward III ravaged and destroyed Lothian, burning Haddington and the whole monastery.

Candlemas falls on 2nd February and commemorates two feasts: the Presentation of Jesus, the Light of the World, to the Temple, and the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

At Candlemas people took their annual stock of candles to be blessed in a ceremony, hence the mass of the candles.

After fire, flood….

The Miracle of the Flood

In September 1358, the nunnery was endangered by disastrous flood when the Tyne overflowed its banks but saved by the action of a pious nun. She took the image/statue/painting* of the Virgin Mary from the church and threatened to drown it unless St Mary saved the abbey from flood. When she held up the image intending to throw it in the river, the water receded. (See the priory seal)

Famous guests

Princess Margaret, daughter of James II, was placed in the nunnery after her mother's death. James III granted her guardian, Alison Maitland, a yearly allowance of 5 marks as guardian and servant of the princess. Whether or not she was educated is uncertain but the princess was a single woman of good station or rank whom nunneries took in as paying guests.

Margaret left in 1477 but in 1489 she then entered another convent at Elcho where prioress received payment for her expenses until 1502.

The Thistle and the Rose

1503 another princess, the English Margaret Tudor, daughter of Henry VII and sister of Henry VIII, spent a night at the nunnery when she came to Scotland to wed King James IV. Although 16th century opened with this marriage alliance and with a treaty of perpetual peace between the 2 kingdoms it included phase of bitterness in Anglo-Scottish relations.

The Rough Wooing

Defeat of Flodden 1513 was not followed by an invasion but that all changed in 1542. After the defeat at Solway Moss in 1542 James V died unexpectedly and his new-born daughter Mary became Queen of Scots at 9 days old.

With the birth of his son Edward, Henry VIII saw a chance to unite the two kingdoms: by marrying Edward to Mary.

However, Mary's French mother, Mary of Guise, preferred to strengthen the Auld Alliance with France and turned to them for help. This angered Henry who began the period of harassment known as the **Rough Wooing** throughout the 1540s.

The Siege and the Treaty of Haddington

In 1547 after the Scottish army were defeated at the **Battle of Pinkie** the English made Haddington their headquarters to command the surrounding district. The French joined forces with the Scots to lay **siege to Haddington**. So began the 'the **lang siege'** which lasted 19 months, the longest in Scottish history.

In return for French help, the Scots agreed to betroth Mary to Dauphin Francis, the heir to the French crown.

7 July 1548 the **Treaty of Haddington** was signed at the abbey on the banks of the Tyne. Mary was sent to France where she was brought up to be the next Queen of France.

The Prioress

No Cistercian nun was to be made prioress under the age of 30 but this rule was often ignored by noble families who put their daughters in the position so that they could glean the rich revenues.

20-year-old Mariota Douglas who became prioress in 1443 seems to have been concerned with recovering revenues that had not been paid. One way of ensuring payment was to curse or excommunicate debtors.*

House of Hepburn

In the 16th century the most powerful family in East Lothian was the **Hepburns of Hailes**, the seat of the **Earls of Bothwell**. In 1517 Prioress Janet Hepburn was appointed but died 2-3 years later.

According to the rule of the order the nuns elected a new prioress known as M.H. she seemed the perfect candidate: a woman of 40 of good family, humble, pious sweet-tempered, zealous, comely and more importantly born of lawful bed.

This paragon of virtue was accepted and confirmed by archbishop of St Andrews.

Then John Hepburn, prior of St Andrews, requested that Elizabeth Hepburn a 23-year-old nun, be appointed instead. Described as the daughter of an Augustinian canon and kinswoman of Hepburn, it left little doubt she was his illegitimate daughter.

The complete opposite of M.H. Elizabeth appears in records as joining a hunting party with court of James V and may have been guided by the interests of her mighty family than nunnery

Records show that she vigorously pursued bad debts and challenged Lord Hay of Yester in various disputes about cutting peats, rights of passage and estate boundaries. As well as pursuing him in court she threatened him with **cursing** and **excommunication**.

The Reformation

On the eve of Reformation and expecting a crash she granted charters of land to various kinsmen.

1560 Roman Catholic religion was banned no religious services were allowed and the Latin mass became illegal and the prioress could no longer curse or excommunicate debtors.*

Before her death in 1563 Prioress Elisabeth granted a charter to William Maitland of Lethington, secretary of state.

In 1566 the gift to Maitland was revoked and the abbey gifted to another Hepburn prioress, Isobel. she married Andrew Schethum of Skelpie. Ironically, the nominal prioress needed her husband's consent to resign a share of the parish church to Lindsay of the Byres.

In 1462, there were 24 nuns living in the nunnery. After 1560 that fell to 18 nuns and in 1573 ten nuns were still alive when receiving pensions of £20 each.

Total value of the abbey in 1563 was £2,500 Scots annually which is worth about £500,000 today.