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Dear John

FEARN ABBEY: CONSERVATION PLAN

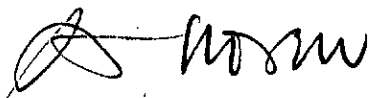
For the past few months I have been carrying out research into the preparation of a conservation plan as part of the programme for repairs to the fabric of Fearn Abbey, funded by the HLF and by Historic Scotland.

I enclose a first draft of the text. If you could find the time to glance through it and let me have any comments, that would be very much appreciated, so that I can take them into account when preparing the final draft. I have asked for any comments to be returned by Friday 19 January 2001.

The contract works are not yet underway, and we are in the process of evaluating the submissions from the archaeologists in accordance with the brief prepared by yourselves.

Best wishes for Christmas and the New Year.

Yours sincerely



Andrew Wright

enc as noted above

H.C. PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICE		
18 DEC 2000		
PASS TO	INITIALS	DATE
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JS	JW	8/1/01
FILE REF:		

AW/JD/F9725/4.3

15 December 2000

Response by
19/1/01

Law & Dunbar-Nasmith

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2.00 INTRODUCTION

2.01 Purpose of the Conservation Plan

The Conservation Plan for Fearn Abbey is an integral part of the proposal by the Congregational Board of Fearn Abbey and Nigg Chapelhill Parish Church to carry out repairs to the fabric of the former abbey church, for which funding has been authorised by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Historic Scotland. The successful bid was notified by the HLF in December 1999.

The abbey buildings have undergone a constant cycle of change and evolution, which represents a complex history, much of which can be interpreted in the stones themselves. The conservation plan has been researched and prepared in order to guide the congregation in setting priorities for repair of the present grant-funded scheme, but it will prove to be an invaluable tool for the future when proposing further repairs, adaptations or the re-ordering of the interior should that ever be considered.

The conservation plan should not be seen as an end to itself – it should be subject to regular review, particularly if further information about the history of the building comes to light. Pamphlets on the preparation of conservation plans will be published shortly by the Church of Scotland Consultative Committee on Artistic Matters, and the conservation plan anticipates that this will become a requirement of congregations when embarking on major repair schemes or the adaptation of church buildings. It may be helpful at this stage to state the purpose of a conservation plan, which has been defined as follows:

"At its simplest, a conservation plan is a document which sets out what is significant in a place and, consequently, what policies are appropriate to enable that significance to be retained in its future use and development". *James Semple Kerr: The Conservation Plan*

2.02 Scope of Conservation Plan

The conservation plan is restricted to an understanding of the fabric of Fearn Abbey, including its fittings, memorials and church furnishings; it does not extend to the burial ground or monuments, other than those contained by the walled enclosures relating to the former abbey structures.

2.03 Methodology

The following documents have formed the basis of research undertaken, defining the terms used throughout the conservation plan, and defining the general format:

- The Illustrated Burra Charter, ICOMOS Australia, by Meredith Walker and P. Marquis-Kyle, 1992
- The Conservation Plan, National Trust of Australia, by James Semple Kerr, 1996
- Conservation Plans for Historic Places, Heritage Lottery Fund, March 1998
- A Guide to the Preparation of Conservation Plans, Historic Scotland, 2000

2.04 Statutory Listing

Fearn Abbey is listed Category A

2.05 Consultations/Acknowledgement

Research into the history of Fearn Abbey has been undertaken at the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, and the author is indebted in particular to Geoffrey Stell, Head of Architecture, for his valued advice and assistance, and for having made available a draft of unpublished lecture notes prepared by Harry Gordon Slade.

The assistance of the staff and the Search Room of the Scottish Record Office is also acknowledged.

The draft text of the conservation plan has been forwarded to the following agencies, and any comments have been taken into account in the final draft:

- RCAHMS
- Regional Archaeologist, Highland Council
- Conservation Architect, Highland Council

In addition the draft of the text has been read by members of the congregation, and their comments have also been incorporated in the final draft.

2.05 Author of the Conservation Plan

Research into the history of Fearn Abbey, the examination of site evidence and the writing of the conservation plan has been undertaken by Andrew Wright of LDN Architects, for whom a CV is incorporated in Appendix 8.05.

3.02 Brief History

The establishment of an abbey church at Fearn marks the beginning of a complex history spanning almost eight centuries up to the present, during which the site has been dedicated exclusively to continued ecclesiastical use. The history is not unusual in that it mirrors, with remarkable accuracy, the traumatic changes which beset the evolution of the established church in Scotland in all its manifestations. Equally it reflects the influence of royal privilege and aristocratic patronage with the rise of the church in the emergence of the political nation.

The original conventual establishment at Fearn followed a tide of religious settlements, advancing steadily northwards through Scotland through the 12th and early part of the 13th century as the land was progressively colonised, resulting in the building of cathedral and abbey churches. There is more than a hint that the first settlement at mid-Fearn, close to Edderton on the shores of the Dornoch Firth, and an early Christian settlement, was only possible as the threat of Norse raids receded to Caithness and beyond. That the site chosen was vulnerable to attack from the sea is one reason given as to why the order moved the establishment less than 20 years later inland and southwards by about 15 miles to New Fearn, otherwise recorded in the various charters as "Nova Fernia", or "Nova Farina". A more likely reason, however, is due to an interest in, and reliance upon, agriculture, for which the plain upon which the abbey sits remains one of the most fertile in Easter Ross.

Fearn represented only one of a handful of abbeys of the Premonstratensian Order in Scotland; it was the most northerly. The order was founded by Saint Norbert in 1120 at Praemontre, or Prémontré, Laon in France, characterised by the greyish colour of the habits of unbleached wool which led to the description of the "White Canons" or "White Friars". It spread quickly, and there were soon several hundred houses in Europe. Although the order was organised on Cistercian lines Norbert decreed that it should follow the rule of Saint Augustine – new abbeys were to be colonised by thirteen religious members, including the abbot, from the mother-house. The abbey at mid-Fearn was founded in 1221/2, or possibly in 1227 by Farquhar, Earl of Ross, and colonised by Whithorn; its first abbot was Malcolm of Whithorn. The remains of Whithorn Priory are situated close to the Solway Firth in Wigtownshire, about as far south as it is possible to get in Scotland.

The abbey buildings were described to be built of rough stone; already by 1338 when the 4th abbot, also Malcolm, began his term they were reported to be ruinous. Rebuilding commenced being completed by the abbacy of Donald II in 1372. The roof may not have received a permanent finish until the early part of the 15th century. From surviving evidence the structures must have appeared plain in appearance although the stonework had been constructed beautifully within the best monastic traditions, and it was not until the 15th century that embellishments were undertaken during the long abbacy of Finlay McFaed, who between 1442 and 1485 added Saint Michael's aisle, the remnants of which still house his tomb effigy on the south wall. McFaed carried out other embellishments to the interior of the church. He was an influential figure enjoying a close association with James III and the generous door opening at the north wall from the same period has been referred to as the "King's door", through which the

congregation would have entered the church. He may have also begun work on a new dormitory to the south of St Michael's aisle, completed by Abbot Thomas McCulloch, and this is likely to have been approached by a spiral stair off St Michael's aisle.

In the decades leading up to the Reformation several absentee abbots were appointed in the custom of granting favours by royalty to close family members or loyal subjects, by which the appointed commendators were able to draw down revenue. The most celebrated of these was the prodigy Patrick Hamilton, a cousin of James V, who was appointed in 1517 at the age of fifteen. During his term of office he continued his associations with Easter Ross until the time of his capture in 1528, during which year he was burnt as a heretic, becoming a proto-martyr of the Reformation. However unsatisfactory the custom of appointing commendators may have been, Abbot Donald Denoon who was appointed in 1528 was highly regarded, building his own burial aisle to the west of the abbey church of which the evidence has long since been removed.

Powerful associations continued with the Ross family, right up to the early 19th century. The south-east burial aisle is likely to have been built before 1550 and houses the tomb of Earl Farquhar. The Ross aisle to the north of the chancel is thought to have been erected in the early 17th century, originally for Douglas of Mulderg, and referred to occasionally as the Douglas mausoleum. In 1669, a further offer of a burial aisle had been made to Ross of Balnagown occupying the ground where the Denoon Aisle had been built, and which was reported then to be in a ruinous state, subject to the following instruction:

"Cause make use of the old stones of the old abbacie and abbot's house for a close ile and buriall place"

The new site for the burial ground was soon abandoned and by 1712 the east end of the church was commandeered as the final resting place for the family remains, and for almost two centuries thereafter there would have been a physical division between this and the rest of the church until reopened to view in the early twentieth century.

By the time of the Reformation at least five canons were resident at the abbey, when Abbot Nicholas voted for the abolition of the mass and the adoption of the Protestant Confession. In a letter of 1541 from James V to the Pope Paul III the abbey had been described as ruinous, but nonetheless it continued to show some signs of prosperity. The dormitory burnt down c.1557, but had been rebuilt by 1562. At around the same time an abbot's house, referred to above, was constructed which may have taken the form of a towerhouse from contemporary descriptions. Walter Ross was appointed the last titular abbot and by the time that the lands had been resumed by the Crown in 1587 he had already retired to Moray five years earlier. The inevitable upheaval following the Reformation continued, with the lands being granted in 1597 to Sir Partick Munro by James VI, by which time the abbey kirk had been subsumed into the parish of Tarbat from which it was not to be separated until 1628 as a parish church in its own right. From the Reformation onwards a recurring characteristic of the ministry at Fearn was the potential for dissent between the heritors, mainly powerful figures of the landed gentry, and the ministers appointed

to the charge. Throughout the 17th century, at a time of turmoil in the development of the church, ministers on more than one occasion were at odds with their congregations, or even with the General Assembly. Not infrequently dissent arose out of the refusal of the heritors, claiming penury, to instruct much needed repairs to be carried out to the fabric of the church, a recurring problem which seems to be at odds with the provision of private embellishments to the church by way of burial aisles and elaborate monuments and memorials.

After a warning about the state of the roof as much as fifty years previously matters came sharply to a head in 1742 when, only a few months into his ministry, the unfortunate Donald Ross witnessed the collapse of the entire roof of the nave during a severe thunderstorm, which happened to coincide with a Sunday service. He survived – just – but only because the sounding board afforded some protection, albeit trapping his head on the lip of the pulpit. Many of his congregation did not; contemporary and later accounts gave the number of dead varying from between seventeen and sixty. It is likely that around twenty of the congregation died instantly and others followed soon afterwards from their injuries. The roof had been of Caithness flags (the permanent finish referred to in the early 15th century had been thatch) and it was generally thought that the north wall had been pushed outwards at the time of the collapse.

In spite of the injuries he sustained the minister set about the task of building a new church, referred to by James Shand later as the "little kirk", set apart from the scene of the catastrophe and immediately to the south and west of the St Michael's Aisle, the east wall of the kirk from Shand's study of the standing archaeology being an extension of the west wall of the aisle wall. By 1743 the minister's underhand way of securing the rebuilding of the kirk aroused deep suspicion and the ire of the heritors, and in particular that of the Laird of Cadboll who wrote of his concern complaining about the "parson's actions" in a letter to Balnagown's factor, William Baillie.

Whatever the minister had achieved proved to be of limited value, and by 1771 the constant cycle of the continuing failure to invest in the fabric had re-surfaced, both buildings had been described by then as ruinous. James Rich, a surveyor from Cromarty, was invited to advise on continuing repairs to the little kirk, or whether the abbey church should be rebuilt. In the end, and without any suggestion of disharmony among the heritors, the latter option was adopted, no doubt fuelled by a generous offer from Captain John Lockhart Ross of Balnagown who challenged the heritors:

".....if the heritors would pay unto him the sum of £200 sterling he would engage to repair the abbey church and make it sufficiently finished against the 1st of November, 1773, he always getting share and all materials both new and old churches".

Again, the stones of the former abbey structures were to be robbed obliterating evidence of the monastic settlement on the ground.

The church had been completed by 1773, but which time the building emerged with the greatest physical changes to be imposed upon it since the Abbot Finlay II's embellishments of the 15th century. Although retaining some of the gothic features, all of the lancet windows had been blocked up with the exception of those at the east gable, retained to provide illumination to the Ross burial place. The roof had been taken down in height and its pitch reduced considerably to 45°. Remnants of the former cloisters and dormitories were swept away (the abbot's house may have gone by the time of the creation of the Ross burial ground in 1669) and the Saint Michael's aisle reduced drastically in height to provide a walled enclosure for a further burial ground. The nave was reduced in length, with the west gable being constructed as new, to which was installed a smart venetian window at high level, a feature replicated in the east gable requiring the elaborate traceried opening of the great window to be infilled. The Victorians saw the work just one century later as mutilation, but, inspired by Balnagown, the congregation must have been delighted to have received what would have appeared, by all accounts, to be a fashionable late 18th century church.

In spite of Lockhart Ross's benevolence the work was not finished, the cost having risen to £332.6s.9d. The galleries were not to be completed until 1814 under Hector MacPhail and the church was without its ceiling also until then. In 1813 the stone roof of the Ross Aisle collapsed, having been damaged in the major disaster of 1742.

Lockhart Ross died in 1790, a knighthood having been bestowed upon him, his rank elevated to that of Vice-Admiral, and his life immortalised in the elegant memorial by John Baxter II at the east gable of the church, executed in the same fashionable taste superimposed upon the old abbey church.

Records indicate that minor alterations were undertaken in 1857/8, and again in 1871. However, by 1876 the next issue over the deteriorating state of the fabric of the kirk rose up again between the minister and the heritors. The incumbent, Hugh Fraser, wrote to the chief heritor, David Munro of Allan, compelling him to act and, with the threat of taking the matter to the presbytery. Public health in relation to the constantly damp state of the Ross burial ground became a major concern and he argued that the floors should be raised and lath applied to the external walls. He went on:

"The galleries which are useless should be done away with. The pulpit which is at present most inconveniently placed should be shifted to one end of the church....."

By 1880 the feud was running still, the heritors complaining that further repairs could not be afforded, and that considerable sums had been expected in 1871 and 1877. Some of the pleadings, at least, had been acted upon. The distinguished local architect, Andrew Maitland of Tain had been involved in these earlier alterations, but those of 1877 may have involved a Mr Evans of Dingwall.

The clearest indication of what might have been undertaken comes from a plan in McGibbon & Ross's volume, published first in 1889. By then it appears that the medieval lancet windows had all been unblocked; the west door of the south wall (as shown on Shand's plan) had been changed to a window,

to be changed back again at a later date. The east door to the south wall appeared to provide the only point of entry into the church. Presumably some of the reordering of the interior had begun.

It was not, however, until 1901 that the minister's requests finally bore fruit, resulting in the virtual annihilation of all of the 18th century classical features with the exception of the bellcote, no doubt acknowledging the stinging criticism levied by the Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society. The Society had written in the most zealous terms in its Transactions of 1886-9:

"The present roof which is of a hideous modern pitch replaces the original high-pitched medieval roof".

But it was the pair of venetian windows which were the most obvious manifestations of the ungainly classicism which had been imposed upon the structure. Referring to the east gable:

".... in which is inserted a modern window of atrocious design".

And again:

"The west wall is entirely modern, and has a window with the same barbarous design as that in the eastern gable".

They recorded a description of the building at that time, noting that the whole of the church and its surroundings were again in neglect; only half of the area of the church was available for worship and the internal walls were whitewashed.

The alterations of 1901-3 carried out by the architect William C Joass seem to reflect as complete a change back to fashionable neo-episcopal planning as the earlier adaptations had superimposed the Post-Reformation ideals of the 18th century. The venetian windows were built up, the galleries disposed of and the Ross burial place dividing wall or screen removed (leaving a dwarf wall). Although many of the original lancet windows had been reopened by then, others were introduced at the west gable. The tracery of the larger window openings was reworked in a manner sympathetic to the interlacing tracery of the north gable window to the Ross aisle. The whole church was reordered, with the main entrance shifted to the west end of the church where the usual suite of offices were formed together with a lobby divided from the nave by a lath and plaster partition. It is recorded that the ceiling was lowered. A new sanctuary area was formed with the communion table pushed eastwards; the present organ belongs to this period.

In a sense the abbey church had come close to full circle, the last major alterations restoring some of the character of the original building, if not actually restoring the key features.

Few changes of any magnitude befell the church interior during the rest of the 20th century, although in the 1950s, under the auspices of the architects Ian Lindsay & Partners, a new ceiling was installed, the

walls (purportedly) were stripped of plaster and the unsavoury mock stone finish to the partition to the lobby was executed in cement mortar; or so it has been claimed.

3.00 EVALUATION

3.01 Chronological List of Events

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| 1120 | St Norbert founds Premonstratensian Order at Premontre, near Laon |
| c.1221/2, or 1227 | First abbey founded at Fearn, near Edderton, by Farquhar, Earl of Ross, for the Premonstratensian Canons; first abbot Malcolm of Whithorn |
| c.1244 | The abbey relocates to Mid-Fearn, or "Nova Farina" |
| 1338- | Abbey, of rough stone, is ruinous and re-building commences under Malcolm, 4 th Abbot |
| -1372 | Re-building completed under Donald II, 9 th Abbot |
| 1408-36 | Under Abbot Finlay I the roof of the abbey thatched to give a permanent finish |
| 1442-85 | Abbot Finlay McFaed carries out embellishments to the church, building the St Michael's Aisle which houses his effigy within the south wall; the "king's door" opened up at the north wall of the church; new dormitory commenced, completed by McFaed's successor |
| 1517 | Patrick Hamilton, cousin of James V, appointed abbot at the age of 15, to die proto-martyr of the Reformation in 1528 by burning |
| 1528-40 | During his abbacy, Donald Denoon builds his own burial aisle, understood to be an extension to the west gable of the church by approximately 40 feet |
| 1541 | The abbey reported to be ruinous and neglected (letter from James V to Pope Paul III) |
| 1549 | Death of James Reid who built the "fontem" (or well?) within the cloister |
| c.1550 | South-east burial aisle thought to have been constructed at around this time, housing the tomb of Earl Farquhar |
| 1557 or 1558 | Dormitory fire |
| 1560 | Abbot Nicholas and Robert Munro of Foulis vote for the abolition of the mass and the adoption of the Protestant Confession; at least five canons thought to be resident at the abbey |
| 1561 | Fearn recorded as the third wealthiest house of the Premonstratensian order, after Whithorn and Dryburgh, with an annual revenue of £1010 |

1566	Dormitory, damaged by fire, made good under Abbot Thomas Ross
1560-70	Abbot's house constructed – either the conversion of the dormitory or possibly a new towerhouse consisting of a hall, chambers, cellars, pantry, kitchen, turnpike stair and casements
1582	The last abbot, Walter Ross, retires to Moray
1587	Abbey lands resumed by the Crown
1597	Lands conveyed to Sir Patrick Munro by James VI
early 17 th century	The building of the Ross Aisle, associated originally with Douglas of Mulderg, and referred to occasionally as the Douglas mausoleum
1609	Annexation of the abbey to the Bishopric of Ross by Parliament
1628	Parish church established at Fearn in its own right, separated from Tarbat
1637	Repairs undertaken to the kirk, including the erection of a window, door and bellhouse which may relate to one of the burial aisles
1649	The minister, William Ross, suspended by the General Assembly
1669	The Denoon aisle now ruinous and appropriated by the Ross family as its burial ground
1691	The minister, Kenneth Mackenzie deposed; no minister for seven years
1695	The roof noted to be a concern – very steep and covered with stone flags
1712	The original family line of Ross expires and the east end of the church appropriated as the new Ross burial ground
1742	Total collapse of the church roof during a Sunday service in a thunderstorm – up to 60 may have been killed, many others maimed and injured, including the minister, Donald Ross, appointed earlier in the same year
1743	The minister's actions over gaining the heritors' approval to the building of a new church becomes a matter of concern to them
1745	New church, as yet unfinished, built to the south-west of St Michael's aisle
1771	Both churches are ruinous; options prepared for the repair and rebuilding of both

- churches by James Rich, surveyor of Cromarty. Decision taken to repair the abbey kirk with funding from Captain John Lockhart Ross. Stones to be reused from the monastic buildings
- 1773 Work rebuilding the abbey kirk completed, but without galleries and ceiling
- 1790 Storm damage to new roof and west window. Monument to Vice-Admiral Sir John Lockhart Ross by John Baxter II
- 1802 Gates to the burial ground installed
- 1813 Roof of the Ross aisle collapses (damaged 1742)
- 1814 The galleries completed at each end of the church by Hector MacPhail; seating introduced; doors and windows at the north wall blocked up, compensated by doors and windows introduced on the south side and made more "gothic"; ceiling introduced
- 1815 A local antiquarian, James Shand, records the standing archaeology of the site, finding traces of the walls from the cloister extending 16 feet beyond the end gable of St Michael's aisle; the location of the "little kirk", post 1743, is also noted; the Ross aisle is noted as retaining its stone roof, but the structure is decaying
- 1857 Minor alterations and repairs, administered by Andrew Maitland, architect, of Tain
- 1871 Ditto
- 1876 Constant pressure by the minister upon the heritors to carry out improvements, claiming that the church is "damp and unhealthy". Major repair and restoration scheme mooted, possibly involving a Mr Evans of Dingwall, taking into account ecclesiological principles of church planning
- 1877 Further repairs undertaken
- 1880 Dispute between the minister and the heritors continues, the Laird of Cadboll observing that considerable sums had been spent in 1871 and 1877
- 1889 Plan of Fearn Abbey by McGibbon & Ross indicates that the medieval lancet windows to the north wall have been unblocked; a single entrance door is shown on the south wall of the nave between St Michael's aisle and the south-east chapel, the west door being shown as a rebuilt window opening
- 1901-3 Major reconstruction by William C Joass results in the galleries being removed the venetian windows blocked up, and the ceiling lowered. The Balnagown burial place is opened up, while at the opposite end of the church the west end is enclosed with three

lancet windows introduced at the west gable for vestry rooms. The tracery to the principal windows of the south elevation is renewed, and the church re-planned on fashionable neo-episcopal lines. Floor is raised and the ceiling lowered; organ installed

Late 1950s(?)

Some modernisation of the interior undertaken, consisting of a new ceiling and repointing of internal stonework and the mock stone finish applied to the timber lath partition of the west end of the church. Internal walls claimed to have been stripped of a plaster finish

1970's (?)

Sanctuary dais extended to cover the dwarf wall of the Ross burial aisle

3.03 Site Evidence: The Interpretation of Documentary Evidence

As set out in the foregoing section Fearn Abbey has endured significant change and adaptation through the many centuries of its existence; many of these changes can be witnessed in the building stones themselves. Although the history of the building of the abbey church has been set out in documentary form, its interpretation is not at all easy to follow in the standing archaeology which remains.

This section should be read in conjunction with the diagram showing the principal stages of development.

Evidence may be confused particularly by the tendency of previous generations to destroy redundant structures when rebuilding, by reusing easily won masonry for the new work. The exercise would also have served to tidy the site of extraneous structures, of which there would have been several relics of the monastic establishment in the years following the Reformation. However, the primary incentive was the opportunity afforded by making considerable savings in construction costs for new or replacement buildings. There were several occasions when robbing earlier work was sanctioned officially, although equally, there were occasions when the removal of stonework had been carefully prescribed.

The original abbey church in the 14th century was considerably longer than the present structure, and the whole conventual assembly of buildings, incorporating the usual accommodation of dormitories, cloisters, refectories, kitchens and stores, and the abbott's house added in the 16th century, would have represented a considerable site establishment at the time of the Reformation compared with what exists now. The financial status of the abbey at that time, and the appointment of commendators in the years leading to the Reformation, rather suggested that it did. Although the range of ancillary structures is built on the south wall of the abbey church, it seems unlikely that the normal arrangements of enclosed cloisters, resulting in two ranges of buildings running north to south existed here – the provision of the aisles built in the 15th and 16th centuries suggested otherwise. Unusually for a monastic foundation, the structures avoided the desecration inflicted by zealots in the name of religion up to the time of the Reformation and thereafter, and neither was the abbey to be affected by the constant sieges and warfare which sealed the fate of the more elaborate Border abbeys. Despite an uncertain future, it remained as a church-in-use.

With the destruction of the Denoon Aisle: the erection of the Ross burial ground in its place from 1669 – 1712; the building of the little kirk following the disaster of 1742; and with the building of the new west gable in 1772/3, the evidence of the late medieval monastic settlement has been obliterated effectively above ground level. Evidence of the remains of the "little kirk" was established by James Shand in 1815, and his meticulous drawings record the west wall of St Michael's aisle extended southwards into what constituted then the site boundary wall. He identified also the location of graves where excavations revealed foundation stones understood to relate to the medieval work. Further archaeological

investigation may reveal more definitive information about the original abbey layout – perhaps without resorting to excavating the site.

Of what remains of the work of 1338 –72, it can be seen that the hewn masonry has been cut, dressed and laid to a very high standard of accuracy by skilled masons who may have worked on other monastic establishments; stylistic comparisons have been made with Pluscarden Abbey in Moray. It is generally supposed that the original church had been severely plain in appearance, with paired lancet windows without cusping to each bay of the north and south walls, punctuated by regular buttressing, of which evidence remains at the chancel of the east end where the stringcourses of the buttresses can be seen to relate to the original work. The arrangement may also be evaluated from the remaining bay at the west end of the north wall, which confirms that the building of the west gable in 1772/3 had interfered with one of the original nave bays.

The lancet windows to north and south walls of the nave were blocked up in their entirety by the time of the alterations of 1814, as recorded in Shand's record drawings. The plans prepared by McGibbon & Ross prior to the publication in 1889 suggest that the bulk of these windows had been opened up again by then. However, the two high level small plain lancet window openings remain blocked at the west end of the south wall, sitting above a string course corresponding with the apex of the cloister roof of which four corbels remain, which would have carried a beam parallel to nave wall upon which trusses of the cloister roof would have rested. The cusping to these windows, replicating that of the arcading to the sedilia, is visible on the inner wall face. The position of a third window can be made out further to the east, now obliterated substantially by the alterations to accommodate the arch to the present nave window.

The eaves of the church was likely to have been higher originally, although this cannot be verified from the remaining evidence of the stone coursing at the wallheads. Certainly the roof pitch had been considerably steeper to have accommodated the pointed arch of the east gable of the main window, the profile of which can still be made out above the four lancets illuminating the sanctuary area, and which are taller than those of the adjoining walls to reinforce the significance of the choir and altar.

Still extant within the south wall of the chancel area can be found a well preserved piscina, sedilia and holy water stoup, the last item partially hidden behind the carcasing of the organ. It may give a clue as to the location of an external door, which could not have been far removed from the present doorway given the remaining fragments of the stringcourse to either side on the external wall. It seems unlikely that it could have led onto an extension of the cloister, given the proximity of the walls of the St Michael's and south-east aisles, and the dates when they were likely to have been built. It can be deduced from the height of the arcade combining the piscina and sedilia, and from the level of the seats, that the floor of the chancel must have been approximately half a metre or so lower and the floor of the original church would have been considerably lower than the present ground level. The dwarf wall which enclosed the Ross burial place, created c.1712, cuts across the middle bay of the sedilia.

Shand claimed that the openings in the sedilia were niches. The text from the legend to his plan reads as follows:

"Niches of the Wall, where the effigies of Saints had been placed, and the Size of the Life – In the Largest Niche, the Figure had been in a sitting Posture".

Given the use to which the sedilia would have been put, it is perhaps unsurprising that no evidence of this can be found; it may be no more than a fanciful supposition.

The broad doorway cut into the north wall, now blocked up, is understood to have been introduced by Abbot Finlay McFaed, of whose more lasting legacy the St Michael's Aisle three enclosing walls remain, considerably reduced in height from when they stood at the same level as the wallheads to the original abbey church. A substantial arched opening connected this to the nave. Although infilled and with a later traceried window installed, the profile of the original arch can still be made out. It is highly likely that the aisle was reduced in height to provide good quality stone for the 1771-3 rebuilding, at which time the walls were roughly halved in thickness and refaced in combed ashlar masonry with a flat stone cope. This arrangement proved to be advantageous in that it preserved the earlier masonry on the inner face, in particular the fine decorated tomb of the abbot and, in the east wall, an aumbry. The door opening on the west wall is likely to have discharged into the cloister, for which the aisle may have provided an enclosing wall. The line and height of the former walls is revealed where the masonry has been made good in following the alterations of 1771-3, and in view of their height they would have been likely to have been buttressed as the main church.

As low as the original floor may have been, the floors of the aisles constructed off the north and south walls of the chancel must have been close to the present ground levels, judging by the door threshold details. The earlier of the chapels, on the south side, is now ruinous with much loss of facework to the masonry. The window openings to the west and east walls reveal a simple Y-tracery pattern, now lost. The aisle houses the effigy of Earl Farquhar, set within an enclosure at the south wall.

The later Ross aisle, probably of the early 16th century, had been rather more elegant, with its delicately carved interlacing tracery still in position to the north gable window below which sits a finely carved armorial panel framed by pedestals, columns and a fractured entablature in a rather base form of classicism. An unusual feature of this aisle was the stone roof of flags, waggon-vaulted to the interior, supported on five stone coupled ribs of which just two remain. A deep chase cut into the flat stone skews at the gable would have accommodated the roof finish, and similar chase is visible in the face of the channel buttress. The aisle is also in a ruinous state. There would have been an interconnecting doorway into the chancel presumably with stops leading down through the thickness of the wall, evidence of which may be found behind the present pulpit. The smaller windows of the aisle also had simple Y tracery, again lost.

The stone floor of the chancel, set above the original floor level of the church, was probably created in 1712 when the Ross burial ground of 1669 at the west end of the church was abandoned in preference to this location. The large slabs have iron rings let in to aid their removal for fresh burials. Local knowledge suggests that there may have been a crypt below the burial slabs, but this seems unlikely in view of the relatively high water table of the site; the void may relate to that created by the building up of the floor above the original medieval level. The earliest of the wall memorials is dated 1719, but the finer monuments of the mausoleum post-dated the roof collapse of 1742.

There is now no evidence to be found of the troubled rebuilding exercise in the area of Saint Michael's Aisle, presumably to the south-west of it, to create the "little kirk". Nor can it be established when the archetypal Post-Reformation layout with the pulpit reserved for the centre of the south wall might have been adopted – it could have awaited the re-building of 1771-3. At that stage, with the prospect of building galleries at each end of the church, perceived symmetry around the pulpit and sounding board might have been possible.

Apart from the new roof and the associated bellcote, the most obvious signs of the 18th century work are to be found in the construction of the new west gable, intended to shorten the length of the nave, and with the insertion of the venetian windows now blocked up. The projecting keystone to the central arched bay of the insertion at the east gable is incised with the date 1772. It is highly probable that the modern window openings to the south wall, described as "Gothic" by Shand, were introduced also at this time. The evidence of the masonry coursing, and the interruption of the string course and the lack of buttresses over the centre of the wall give weight to the suggestion that the collapse of the roof in 1742 had pushed the north wall outwards, requiring it to be rebuilt substantially in 1771-3; the evidence on the interior is less convincing, but it is highly likely that the stones from the original work would have been reused in the rebuilding exercise.

The stonework at the west gable has unusually pronounced ladder pinnings, which appear almost exaggerated and quite unlike any other work in the church. The trusses of the replacement roof have an unusual kingpost detail, perhaps more akin to the work of a shipwright than a carpenter.

Traces of a yellow ochre limewash can be detected in both door lobbies and elsewhere throughout the internal masonry of the church. This appears to run contrary to the claim that the church had been plastered at one time. The limewash is likely to relate to the 18th century work as it carries *behind* the later pitch pine doorframes to the lobbies. It may have served to unify the internal wall surfaces to disguise the many changes, but also to give an enhanced overall architectural effect. The only evidence of the remains of the galleries is to be found in patching of the nave walls where the pockets for the beams supporting the gallery fronts would have rested, and some incisions into the cills of the chancel where stub posts may have been introduced.

The church must have looked somewhat strange for the forty years or so for which it was lacking the end galleries. The Rosses of Balnagown continued to embellish their mausoleum at the east end, and some very fine monuments were installed there in 1790 and 1814.

It is reasonable to assume that the ground floor level of the church when the major reconstruction had been completed in 1773 was above the level of the stone slabs to the Ross mausoleum, by the two steps visible at the centre of the dwarf wall which can still be detected below the modern timber staging. It is not easy to define precisely when the floor of the nave was raised to the present level, the extent to the works which involved Andrew Maitland of Tain in 1858 and 1871, nor indeed that of Evans in 1876 or thereabouts. That it had been raised so high suggests an attempt to overcome the endemic problems of dampness due to the depressed floor level in relation to the surrounding high ground levels, reported upon so vociferously by the minister in the 1870's as a health hazard.

As the organ and dividing partition at the west end of the nave are both known to be contemporary and relate to the major alterations undertaken between 1901 and 1903, it is logical to assume that the floor, together with the pews, can be dated to this time. The extent of matching tongue and grooved flooring in the area of the organ would tend to support this suggestion. The external steps and adjustments to the thresholds to the doors at the south wall would also have been undertaken at this time, when the tracery to the principal windows was replaced. Repairs were also undertaken to the stonework to the medieval lancet windows; presumably when they had been reopened (likely to have been pre-1889), and in order to accommodate the new leaded light window assemblies.

In rearranging the sanctuary furniture it is possible that the pulpit had been relocated from elsewhere in the church, judging by the adjustment carried out at some stage in the base of the steps. Given the reinstatement of the lancet windows to the nave, and the modification of the south door to a window, it is possible that some reordering of the interior along ecclesiological lines had already begun, although this trend, if indeed it had begun, does not appear to have been recorded in the Transactions of the Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society of 1886 to 1889 when some note of encouragement might have been sounded towards the completion of an exercise already begun, if only tentatively.

The provision of the usual offices at the west end of the church, together with the insertion of the three small lancet windows to match the medieval work, was undertaken at the turn of the 20th century. It is the only area of the church where plaster finishes occur to walls and ceilings. The doors are four panelled of varnished pitch pine with chamfered arrises, and match the pair of doors at the timber and lath partition between the lobby and the nave. Some alterations have occurred in this area – a partition has been removed to create a larger vestry room, and a wc and store introduced to the north corner where the linings are of plasterboard.

Somewhere in this area a boiler house had been located, the flue for which is still recognisable from within the open loft area; the chimneystack itself appears in photographs up to c.1940, and may have been taken down when the roof was reslated.

At the time of reslating, rather unsatisfactorily the original roof sarking, presumably distressed from woodworm infestation, was renewed in a compressed board material with an overlayer of bitumen.

Documentary evidence points to work to the interior of the church having been undertaken during the late 1950s or thereabouts. It is probable that the v-joined varnished linings to the ceiling panels were introduced at that time, inserted between the pitched pine casings to the bottom chords of the roof trusses, which may relate to the modifications carried out by the Victorians, or perhaps later in 1901-3. There is evidence that the stone corbel brackets with the attractive dogtooth mouldings have been built into the walls, the stone appearing quite fresh and with the pointing much lighter than the surrounding masonry, with evidence of disturbance to the course lines.

No convincing evidence can be found of the suggestion that the plaster to the nave walls had been stripped off in the 1950s and the remnants of limewash would appear to support the supposition that the walls had never been plastered. The warm coloured ashlar of the church interior is as finely hewn and pointed as the exterior. What is more likely is that it had been re-pointed extensively in the unattractive dark coloured cement mortar at the same time as other repairs and alterations were undertaken. This treatment is carried through to the face of the timber partition, referred to so disparagingly by Harry Gordon Slade:

"A new ceiling was erected, the walls were stripped of their plaster, and the lath and plaster west wall replaced by the present confection which has all the aesthetic charm of a model of the Forth Bridge in extruded porridge".

The sanctuary area has been reworked on a number of occasions. The dais with its two steps, if not Victorian, probably relates to the work undertaken at the turn of the 20th century. The dais has extended rearwards in recent years in chipboard decking over the top of the Ross burial place, enveloping the stone dwarf wall. It has been created no doubt to give greater space in this area, but architecturally it appears unresolved.

Of the remaining church furnishings, the font is in white marble post-1914, and the lectern of light varnished oak, post-1975. Apart from the elaborate memorials to the Balnagown family, the most impressive memorial is at the west end of the north wall of the nave, dedicated to William Baillie Rose, who died in 1834.

4.00 ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The cultural significance of Fearn Abbey is summarised as follows:

- It is the most northerly of the medieval monastic foundations on the Scottish mainland.
- It is considered to be one of only eight remaining conventual churches in Scotland, which remain as churches – in-use, being spared the desecration which befell so many similar structures during the course of the 16th century.
- The abbey has been created by one of the lesser monastic orders in Scotland, the Premonstratensians.
- During the 15th century, strong associations were established with the Kings of Scotland, with corresponding embellishments to the original abbey buildings.
- The burial aisles are important relics of the last phase of the monastic foundation; although ruinous they are unchanged from when they were first constructed, and their survival may be related to an antiquarian interest in the site from the early 19th century onwards.
- The burial aisles and the burial place within the east end of the kirk are significant in representing the considerable influence of the family of the Earl of Ross, who was the founder of the first abbey at Mid-Fearn, and later, the family of Ross of Balnagown.
- Commensurate with the above, the armorial panels, effigies and memorials within the burial aisles and at the east end of the kirk are of high artistic quality.
- Originally plain in appearance, the church has endured through its history constant change and adaptation reflecting changing patterns of worship imposed by the major milestones in the history of the church in Scotland.
- Specifically, fashionable architectural solutions follow the demand for ecclesiological change, often having radical effects on the fabric of the building, reflecting the following main phases:
 - medieval abbey church
 - adaptation to a Post-Reformation layout
 - late 18th century classical embellishments
 - 19th century “neo-episcopal”, harking back to earlier medieval form and character
 - Radical change has been made possible by the state of the fabric, throughout the centuries reported constantly to be ruinous right up to the turn of the 20th century, leading to cycles of repair and rebuilding.
- It was often the centre of intrigue, particularly during the 16th century up to the time of the Reformation, when absentee abbots were appointed through privilege and royal association; one such was the celebrated Patrick Hamilton, a relative of James V, who was regarded later as a proto-martyr of the Reformation.

- The church suffered an unusual catastrophe in 1742 when, during a thunderstorm, the church roof collapsed at a time coinciding with a church service leading to the destruction of the church and the loss of many lives.
- The original abbey building, although plain, reflected the highest standards of the mason's craft; the four lancet windows, superimposed by the great traceried window at the east gable would have been matched only in the North of Scotland by Pluscarden in Moray.

5.00 VULNERABILITY

This section deals with specific risks encountered with the fabric of the building, and is unrelated to such general decay as may be overcome by regular maintenance.

The site and surrounding area are known to have a relatively high water table. The low floor level of the original abbey church, as modified in the 18th century, continues to pose problems of dampness, being set well below the surrounding ground level – a consideration highlighted in the 1870s when extreme concerns were expressed about risks to health with particular regard to the proximity of the adjoining graveyard. Although attempts have been made to deflect rainwater from downpipes following the re-roofing exercise, the arrangements are makeshift and are relatively ineffective. The raising of the nave floor (which has not been altogether successful architecturally) was intended to overcome this, but the floor timbers remain at risk from fungal attack from transmitted dampness from the walls and solum beneath the floor. There are no underfloor ventilators to alleviate this risk; their introduction would change the appearance of the medieval masonry and would be unacceptable.

The unusual king post construction of the roof has resulted in deflection of the bottom chords of the principal trusses. The north and south walls over the centre span of the roof are no longer buttressed; they might have been weakened following the collapse of 1742. However, there are no signs of persisting problems, from which it may be concluded that the structure is presently in equilibrium, but it needs to be monitored over time. Woodworm is already present in the roof timbers, and could become an agent in changing the basic equilibrium.

The risk of greatest loss, however, occurs in the standing archaeology of the remaining burial aisles. The medieval work of the St Michael's aisle appears to be reasonably well protected by the refacing work of 1772 or later, but the Ross aisle and the south-east aisle are particularly vulnerable due to erosion and the loss of face of the masonry, exposing the core of the wall construction. Both have been at risk through neglect over several centuries, the Ross aisle more so following the collapse of the roof in the early 19th century. As in the past they are unlikely to remain a priority for repair, given the endeavours of the congregation to maintain a large parish church and hall for the primary purpose of worship.

Equally at risk are the effigies, tombs and armorial panels within the burial aisles which are finely carved, but vulnerable to loss of essential detail from the accelerating mechanisms of stone decay. The extent to which they are at risk of loss of detail can be established by studying record photographs taken through time.

6.00 CONSERVATION POLICIES

6.01 Definition

Conservation policies are essential for making decisions about future repairs to Fearn Abbey and their priority and, in the context of the historic tradition of continuing evolution to represent the future worship needs of the congregation. Again, quoting from Semple Kerr, conservation policies should address the following issues:

- Retain or reveal significance
- Identify feasible and compatible uses
- Meet statutory requirements
- Work within procurable resources

6.02 Conservation Policies

Conservation policies for Fearn Abbey are summarised as follows:

- Sympathetic repairs using traditional materials and with the best craft skills available should be sought to maintain the fabric of the building in such a state so as to arrest the agents of decay and to reduce the risk of damage from water penetration from whatever source.
- Specifically, a programme of repair should be embarked upon to resolve the ongoing problems and their attendant risks to the underfloor area of the building from residual site dampness.
- The masonry of the burial aisles should be consolidated to prevent further stone decay and impaired structural performance from loss of the stone face..
- The armorial panels, carved memorials and effigies of the burial aisles should be consolidated or protected against further loss of detail by trained conservators.
- The remaining features of the chancel of the medieval church should be protected and preserved, namely:
 - sedilia
 - piscina
 - aumbry
 - holy water stoup
- The enclosing dwarf wall to the former Ross burial place at the east end of the kirk should be preserved without further change; consideration should be given to restoring the burial place so that the monuments can be viewed and its integrity can be understood as part of the history of the church.
- Tied in with above, consideration should be given to re-ordering the church interior and sanctuary furniture to give a more resolved architectural solution within the spirit of the constant change to which the building has been subjected, and to respect the form of the medieval abbey church.

- In conjunction with any reordering exercise, consideration should be given to the installation of appropriate lighting to the church interior, highlighting the architectural features and the spatial qualities of the interior.
- The unsightly dark cement mortar should be removed from the internal masonry and replaced in lime pointing without damaging the original fine ashlar joints.
- The mock stone cement finish to the partition at the west end of the nave should be removed and replaced in a lime plaster finish to which a traditional limewash or traditional distemper paint should be applied.
- Sympathetic repairs should be undertaken to the leaded glass windows by trained conservators, matching original techniques and glass in order to maintain the overall architectural effect. There should be a presumption against the installation of stained glass to the church interior.
- A comprehensive programme for interpreting of the history of the church and its various phases of development should be implemented to both the interior and exterior of the building to add to a wider knowledge and understanding.
- Limited archaeological investigation should be undertaken to establish the extent of the site establishment of the medieval conventual settlement.
- Any excavation of subsoil drains to reduce the level of dampness of the site should be carried out in accordance with an agreed archaeological brief, and under the supervision of an archaeologist.
- Measures undertaken to carry out conservation repairs to the fabric of the building, together with the work of conservators, should be reviewed for their effectiveness on a regular basis, preferably outwith the cycle of normal quinquennial inspections.
- In view of the lack of buttressing to the middle sections of the north and south walls to the nave, regular monitoring should be undertaken of the roof timbers to ensure that the present state of equilibrium of the structure is maintained.
- Consideration should be given to providing access for those with disabilities, taking into account the implications of the Disability Discrimination Act; a full audit within the terms of the Act is recommended.
- The particle board sarking to the roof should be removed and replaced with traditional board sarking.
- Work undertaken to the historic fabric of the abbey should be fully recorded by way of drawings, photographs and reports, the information to be disseminated as set out in section 7.0.

7.00 IMPLEMENTATION AND REVIEW

7.01 Updating the Conservation Plan

The conservation plan should be deemed to be a dynamic document, subject to regular review and updating. Any additional knowledge gleaned about the history of the building during the course of the current programme of repairs should be recorded appropriately. Equally, any work of repair or alteration carried out to the fabric of the building should be fully recorded and documented, the evidence should be kept in a file associated with the conservation plan and in such a way as to be accessible to researchers in the future.

7.02 Archaeology

Any archaeological investigations should be recorded fully. The fabric of the building, as recommended in the conservation policies, may lend itself to further archaeological investigation to throw light on its history and such work should be carried out in accordance with an approved archaeological brief.

7.03 Review

Upon completion of the construction works programme for the present grant-aided scheme, the fabric should be inspected at regular intervals not exceeding five years. Reports should be in a prescribed format, equating to a quinquennial survey setting out any recommendations for repair and maintenance for monitoring the fabric, together with an assessment of priority and cost. The survey should be undertaken by an appropriately qualified professional. However, as indicated above, in the first years following the completion of the present programme of repair, or any repair programme thereafter, it would be prudent to carry out brief inspections of the fabric on a more regular basis, in order to gauge the extent to which the repairs have been successful in ameliorating the present problems encountered with the fabric of the building.

It is recommended further that at five-yearly intervals, the conservation policies should be reviewed on a formal basis, to be undertaken by, or on behalf of, the Congregational Board.

7.04 Dissemination

A copy of the conservation plan should be lodged with the National Monuments Record for Scotland, together with any documentary research evidence and measured survey drawings.

Reports arising from any archaeological investigations should be published widely and extracts submitted to the Council for Scottish Archaeology.

The ongoing care for the fabric of Fearn Abbey will require to meet conditions imposed by funding agencies in addition to the recommendations set out above, including its protection by appropriate building insurances to cover loss and reinstatement from fire and other causes.

Not To Scale
FEARN ABBEY

Drawing Title
CONSERVATION PLAN
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Drawing No.
F9725/09

Scale: 1:1000
Date: 10/07
By: [Signature]
Checked: [Signature]
Reviewed: [Signature]
Approved: [Signature]
Drawn: [Signature]
Rev. A: 12/10/09 SCM
Scale changed

14th century
15th century
16th century
17th century
18th century
20th century

1903
1712
c.1970

