HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DEER ABBEY

We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

DEER ABBEY

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

* The monument consists of the fragmentary remains of the Cistercian abbey of Deer, founded in 1219.
* The arrangement of the abbey follows the standard Cistercian layout, with the abbey church, of which only the excavated, and perhaps reconstructed, footings now survive, forming the N side of a cloister. The cloister is ranged around by the domestic buildings; the chapterhouse and dormitory range on the E, the refectory on the S and the lay brothers' range on the W. To the E of the E range was an infirmary building and to the south of it the Abbot's house.
* Deer is associated with the late 9th/early 10th century manuscript, the *Book of Deer*. Although the manuscript was not written at the Cistercian Abbey of Deer, it was in the possession of its predecessor community from at least from the 12th century when notes written in Gaelic were added describing the foundation legend of the Columban monastery and recording grants of land to the later *clerici*.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

* Deer Abbey was founded in 1219 by William Comyn, Earl of Buchan as a daughter house of Kinloss Abbey in Moray. In 1233 the founder died and was buried within the abbey.
* At least some of the endowments of the new abbey appear to have been earlier the property of a group of clerici or secular priests, who themselves were the successors of the first religious community at Deer. Despite these endowments, it is believed that the site chosen for the Cistercian Abbey was a greenfield site, with the older community having been based closer to what was to become the parish church of Deer. It is possible that some of the existing body of clerici were absorbed into the newly established Cistercian community.
* The first abbot, Robert, presumably from Kinloss Abbey, returned to the lead the motherhouse in 1220, and was succeeded by Alexander, Prior of Kinloss. In the following year Abbot Walran died and was succeeded by Hugh, Prior of Melrose, but in 1235 the latter returned to Melrose because the climate of Deer did not suit his frail body, and Robert, a monk of the abbey, was elected in his place. Another abbot brought up from Melrose, Adam of Smailholm, also returned rather than rule over what was described as the hovel of monks at Deer in 1267.
* In 1537, Abbot Robert Reid of Kinloss made a visitation and gave instruction for the repair of the abbey buildings, starting with the choir of the church. In the same year, the abbot and monks made a pact that they would lead a regular and reformed life.
* The community was never large but it retained its numbers well. In 1554 thirteen monks signed a rental and twelve subscribed to a charter in 1556.
* In 1543 Robert Keith was instituted as commendator and in 1587, perhaps after the last of the monks had died , the abbey became a secular lordship,

as the Barony of Altrie; although this was simply regularising an arrangement which had existed since about 1560.

- Little is known of the immediate post-Reformation history of the site. However, a plan produced in 1789 shows that the layout of the buildings was still largely comprehensible and that more buildings existed then than today. However, some of these such as a range to the NW described as 'present tenants house', refer to recent occupation of the site, while the identification of the S conventual range as 'the family's lodging' appears to refer to the adaptation of this part of the complex as a domestic range.
- In the early 19th century, James Ferguson of Pitfour enclosed the abbey in a high wall in which he set out his fruit and kitchen garden. He also cleared the site of much of the overburden and exposed the plan of the church. He may also have rebuilt a number of doorways and windows in the S range.
- In 1854 James Ferguson's successor, Admiral Ferguson, destroyed much of what remained of the abbey church when he had a mausoleum constructed over the S transept and the E conventual range.
- In 1926 the remains of the Abbey were acquired by the Catholic Diocese of Aberdeen. With the involvement of the Ministry of Works, the diocese carried out excavations on the site to uncover its plan. At the same time the mausoleum was demolished and the remains of the abbey were consolidated. The classical portico of the mausoleum is preserved as the relocated entrance to the precinct.
- In 1933 the monument was taken into care.

Archaeological Overview
- The archaeology of the site was extensively disturbed during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The clearance work of the 1800s and the excavations of the 1920s were not recorded but from photographs in the HS library the 1920s work appears to have been generally wall chasing to uncover the plan of the church and the claustral buildings.
- Although greatly disturbed, the archaeological potential of the monument must still be regarded as high. Pockets of undisturbed archaeology may still survive in areas. More recent excavation has shown significant activity associated with the medieval occupation of the monastery outside the scheduled area: the monastic drain and the monastic kiln.

Artistic/Architectural Overview
- The remains of the abbey are rather fragmentary and one has to be cautious about interpreting them due to the extensive consolidation, destruction and rebuilding that went on during the 19th century.
- The arrangement of the abbey follows the standard Cistercian 'Bernardine' layout, with the church forming the N side of a cloister. It has a short aisle-less rectangular presbytery extending eastward from a pair of transepts, each of which appears to have had an eastern chapel aisle that would have been lower than either the transepts or the presbytery. The nave would have housed the two choirs of the monks and the conversi, and its rather lopsided relationship with the transepts indicates that it had an aisle to the north side, although nothing has survived of the arcade. A similar arrangement is found at Balmerino, where the evidence points to the aisle being a secondary addition to provide space for additional chapels.

- To the south of the nave is the cloister, around which the three main conventual ranges were grouped. The main part of the E range is taken up by the foundations of the square chapter house, with the monastic dormitory above. The W range would have originally housed the converse (lay brothers) but by the later Middle Ages this range would have been used as cellarage perhaps with lodgings above. The S range is built over a basement above which would have been the refectory.
- The S range is the best preserved part of the abbey, but many of the doorways and windows that have survived appear to be later insertions. It is likely that this range was adapted as the residence of the commendator around the time of the Reformation.
- Situated to the E of the cloister and the main claustral buildings are remains of two other ranges. The one attached to the SE angle of the latrine seems likely to have been the abbot's residence. To the NE of this building there are the footings of a U-shaped complex, which may have been the monastic infirmary.

Social Overview
- No formal assessment has been carried out.

Spiritual Overview
- As an abbey, the site has the potential to inform our understanding of medieval Christianity and the aspirations of the community of abbots and monks that served the abbey.
- The site has associations with St. Columba and St. Drostan.
- Each year the Roman Catholic diocese of Aberdeen holds a pilgrimage to the site.

Aesthetic Overview
- The monument is enclosed by a high garden wall effectively restricting views of the site from many directions, particular from the roadside where the only sign of the abbey is the relocated 19th-century classical portico.
- Within the garden wall the laid out walls and ruinous structures create a contemplative and peaceful environment, in which the outside world seems distant.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?
- Due to the later alterations to the buildings in the post-Reformation period and the extensive consolidation, destruction and rebuilding of the 19th and early 20th centuries, our understanding of the surviving structures has to be treated with a fair degree of caution.
- The history of the abbey is not well documented.
- Extensive clearance work took place in the early 20th century, but we have little idea of the extent of the works and how much rebuilding it lead to.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points
- The monument is important as an example of a middle-rank Cistercian Abbey, founded by a substantial magnate, and which would have had links to other Cistercian Houses in Scotland and in Europe.

- Its importance is accentuated by its connection with the first religious community at Deer, which may have been established in the 7th and 8th centuries.
- Although written centuries before the foundation of the Cistercian community at Deer, the association with the *Book of Deer* also accentuates its importance.
- Although the remains of the abbey are not of high architectural significance and the landscape around has not been crafted into a romantic idyll, the monument has a quiet contemplative environment, which is rather captivating.

<u>Associated Properties</u>
Kinloss Abbey (the mother house of Deer), Balmerino, **Culross, Dundrennan, Glenluce Melrose,** Newbattle, Saddell, **Sweetheart** Abbeys (Scottish Cistercian Abbeys).

<u>Keywords</u>   Abbey, Monastery, Medieval, Cistercian, William Comyn, earl of Buchan, Bernadine.