

When the Outlaw King was in Forfar...

by Gordon Craigie



WHEN *Outlaw King* was released on Netflix last year it was generally well received by Scots. There was the usual bit of cringe, with comparisons to the historical inaccuracies of Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* from 20 years earlier, but a general acceptance that there was greater historical accuracy this time around. Still, it's strange how this matter of 'historical accuracy' never seems to be of too much importance when films are released celebrating the bravery and leadership of Churchill, the majesty and elegance of the Royals or... please excuse my sarcasm!

Maybe one of the reasons we tend to question the historical accuracy of Scottish themes is that, generally speaking, Scottish history was never taught in Scottish schools until very recently. And even if it had been much of it would be distorted through a British (or English) lens. So, apart from the spider legend and the fact he led a victorious Scottish army at Bannockburn, much of Robert the Bruce's story came as complete news to most of us.

Take, for example, the burning of our own castles and other strategic buildings in order to avoid giving hide-places for the occupying or invading

It's difficult to be precise about many aspects of Scottish history before the time of Cromwell's occupation in the 1600s

English forces to commandeer. Who knew? One such building that suffered this fate was Restenneth Priory, an ancient stone church near Forfar which is believed to be one of the earliest stone buildings in Scotland, possibly dating as far back as the eighth century. Of course, random acts of arson by your own team aside, it's difficult to be precise about many aspects of Scottish history before the time of Cromwell's occupation in the 1600s. Last month saw the 358th anniversary of the disappearance of up to 99% of our Scottish national archive – charters, legal records and state documents – when a ship returning them to Scotland sank off the Northumbrian coast. Why were they being returned to Scotland anyway? Well ... that's a story for another day!

Restenneth Priory. Pic Credit: Shutterstock



OUTLAW KING

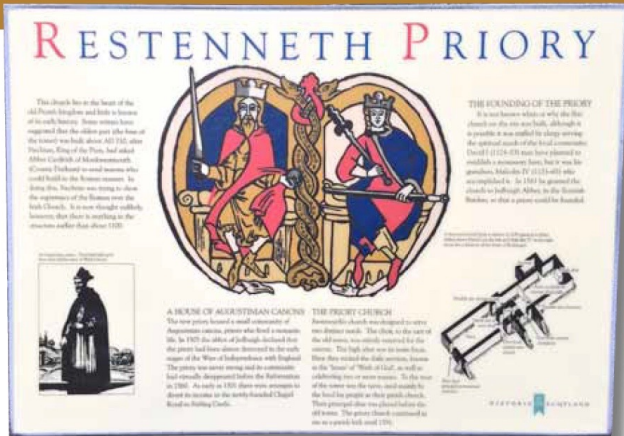


Pic Credit Netflix



Restenneth Priory. Pic Credit: Gordon Craigie

Back to Restenneth Priory... the county of Angus proudly boasts that it is the birthplace of Scotland, with the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320 establishing Scotland as an independent nation. Angus is also rich in Pictish history, and there is evidence of Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age settlements scattered around too. It was known as Forfarshire until 1928, and Forfar remains the county town of Angus. Restenneth Priory lies almost two miles east of Forfar and, although it is situated only a hundred metres or so from the main road connecting Forfar with Montrose, many people will drive by blissfully unaware



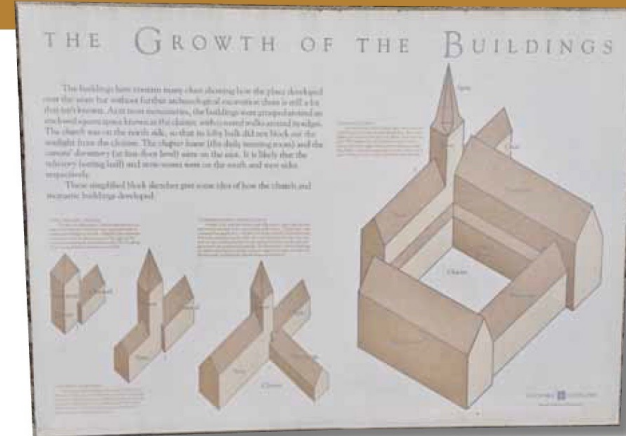
Restenneth Priory. Pic Credit: Gordon Craigie

At that time, it would have been an impressive structure standing on an island in Restenneth Loch, complete with a 14-metre-high tower

of its existence, never mind its importance. Indeed, the only time that Angus residents, or anyone else for that matter, may become aware of Restenneth Priory is when they have occasion to consult the Angus Archives. Housed in a converted conference centre, the Hunter Library overlooks Restenneth Priory and holds 800 years-worth of documents, records and photographs of the history of Angus and its people.

The priory's official guide claims the church was founded by Nechtan mac Der-ilei, King of the Picts, around the year 715, but that not much is known about the first 400 years of its history. Dundee-born philosopher and historian Hector Boece recorded that King Alexander I had ordered the annals of Iona to be relocated to Restenneth in the twelfth century, an act which clearly recognised the priory as an extremely important place. A few years later, Restenneth was gifted to Jedburgh Abbey by King Malcolm IV and thereafter became a convent for Augustinian canons, while also serving as the parish church for Forfar. The building itself was probably not completed until 1243, when it was consecrated by the Bishop of St Andrews. At that time, it would have been an impressive structure standing on an island in Restenneth Loch, complete with a 14-metre-high tower.

But, how does Restenneth link to Robert the Bruce? During the (so-called) Wars of Independence both Robert the Bruce and the invading English King Edward I destroyed many strategic buildings across Scotland. It is known that Bruce



Restenneth Priory. Pic Credit: Gordon Craigie

destroyed Forfar Castle, and likely that he was responsible for the burning of Restenneth Priory too. There is evidence that he had repeatedly stayed at Restenneth and he clearly felt some remorse or allegiance to the priory as he subsequently remained a benefactor and buried his two-year-old son, Prince John, there around 1327 – the only member of his family not to be interred at Dunfermline Abbey.

Despite some repairs being made, Restenneth was never again to achieve either its grandeur or its importance. By the time of the Reformation the lands fell into private ownership and by 1591 it had ceased to be the parish church of Forfar. The official guide states, "The last flurry of excitement experienced by the priory was during the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 when it sustained damage by troops before it settled into gentle obscurity." Around 1790 its surrounding loch was drained and the area given over to cattle. The ruin was adopted by the forerunner of Historic Scotland in 1919 and now stands as a partially preserved reminder of important times past. From Picts to Augustine monks, from Bruce to Jacobites, yet seemingly unknown by most of its neighbours. Due to our lack of knowledge, mainly through never having been taught our own history, how many sites like Restenneth Priory lie undiscovered, unrecognised or unloved all over Scotland?



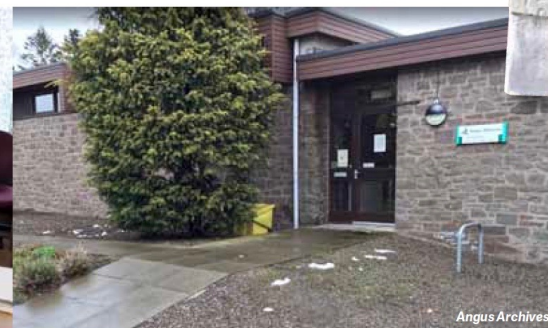
Restenneth Priory. Pic Credit: Shutterstock



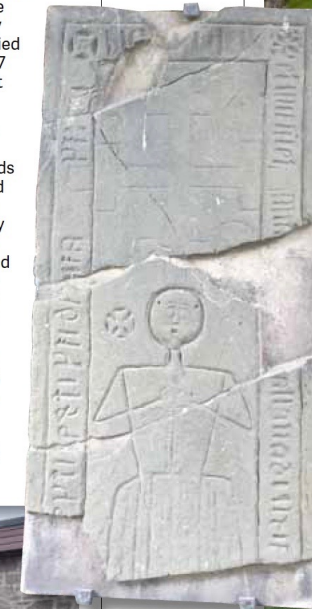
Restenneth Priory. Pic Credit: Shutterstock



Angus Archives



Angus Archives



Restenneth Priory. Pic Credit: Gordon Craigie

It is known that Bruce destroyed Forfar Castle, and likely that he was responsible for the burning of Restenneth Priory



Restenneth Priory. Pic Credit: Gordon Craigie