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THE CHURCH AND CONVENT OF THE GREY FRIARS, ELGIN.

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I have the pleasure tonight of laying before the Society a complete series of measured drawings of the Church of the Grey Friars at Elgin, which have been executed for the Society with the most loving and scrupulous fidelity by Mr. Thomas Rae. As will be seen from the drawings, the remains of the church are considerable: a good deal more than the 'some walls' which Walcot² specifies. But of the history of the convent we know extremely little.

The two Mendicant Orders arose about the same time; and they were introduced into Scotland under the same prince, one of the best and noblest of our kings, Alexander II. (1214-1249). He was often in Elgin, and was indeed, as the historian of Elgin (Mr. Young) remarks, the "greatest benefactor that burgh and district ever had." It was in his reign that the Cathedral of Elgin was founded, as were also the Maison Dieu, and the Priory of Pluscarden. A late tradition, disbelieved by Dr. Grub,³ asserts that Alexander met S. Dominic, the founder of the Order of Friars Preachers, or Black Friars, in France in 1217; and ascribes to that interview the king's partiality for that Order. Of his partiality for it there is abundant evidence. He founded for them no fewer than eight convents. One of these was at Elgin. It stood on the north side of the city, between the High Street and the Lossie. No fragments of the building remain, but the name is perpetuated near the site in "Blackfriars' Haugh," and there is little doubt that their convent continued from its foundation in the 13th century till its dissolution in the 16th. The date of the foundation is given by Spotiswood⁴ as 1233 or 1234; and he adds that there is mention of the friars in the Chartulary of Aberbrothock. In October, 1497, we learn from the Lord High Treasurer's accounts, that King James IV., as he passed through Elgin on his way to the shrine of S. Duthus at Tain, bestowed on them an alms: "Item to the Blak Freris of Elgin 13s. 4d."⁵ "Ane Rentale," also, "of the Freris Predicatoris of Elgin in anno 1555," showing their then endowments as amounting to xlix½ merks a year, has been preserved to us: it is printed in the Preface to the *Registrum Moraviense*.⁶

In 1555, however, the Grey Friars of Elgin had no rental. Being at that time Observants, or Observantines,⁷ bound to the strictest observance of poverty, they could have none. They had no endowments whatever, beyond their house and garden. So one source of information, fruitful in regard to other religious bodies, fails us utterly in regard to these.

¹ The Rev. James Cooper was inducted into the charge of the East Church of St Nicholas, Aberdeen, in 1881, having previously been minister of St Stephen's Broughty Ferry.

² *Scoti-Monasticon*, p. 340.

³ *Ecclesiastical History of Scotland*, I., 315.

⁴ Spotiswood, *Religious Houses*, ch. xv.

⁵ Young's *Parish and Burgh of Elgin*, p. 700.

⁶ Pref. xxii.

⁷ The Council of Trent (1565) granted permission to all Regular Orders, the *Fratres Minores de Observantia* and Capuchins excepted, to possess some property in common. — Herzog.

I have said that the Franciscans, or Grey Friars, were introduced into Scotland in the same reign as the Dominicans. They do not seem, however, to have obtained such favour in King Alexander's eyes; and our historians in general⁸ mention only two Franciscan houses founded in his reign, those of Berwick (1219) and Roxburgh.⁹ But the local historians of Moray, both Shaw¹⁰ and Young,¹¹ inform us that King Alexander II. founded at Elgin a convent for the Grey Friars, as well as for the Black Friars; and though I can find no direct authority for their statements, yet there is charter evidence that in the succeeding reign, that of Alexander III. (1249-1286) the Grey Friars (Fratres Minores) were already established in the city of Elgin, and possessed a house in the quarter of the town which a constant local tradition affirms to have been the site of the earlier of two successive convents of the Order. The charter is given in the *Registrum Moraviense* (p. 281), and is to the following effect:—

Charter of William, Earl of Ross, for the support of the Friars Minor.

“To all Christ's faithful people who shall see or hear this writing, William, Earl of Ross, wisheth health in the Lord. Know all that I, for the health of my soul, and the souls of my wife, children, predecessors and successors, and as the compensation imposed by a venerable father, Archibald, Bishop of Moray, on me and mine on account of damage, injuries, and lesions (done) to the churches of Petyn and Brachuli, have given and conceded, and by this my charter have confirmed to God and the Holy Trinity of Elgin, and to Archibald the Bishop, and to all the Bishops of Moray his successors, and to the chapter of the same place, in pure and perpetual alms, two *davats* of land in Ross, called Kattepoll, and one quarter of land called Petkenney, to their true bunds, and with all their pertinents, for the victual and support of the Friars Minor, who for the time being shall have inhabited the house of the said Friars at Elgin, near the Cathedral Church, or shall in future inhabit it: in such wise, namely, that the Bishop of Moray for the time being, with the advice of his chapter, shall appoint and depute some discreet and faithful man to be distributor, who each year, at the terms thereof, shall receive in full the whole income of every sort of the said lands, and distribute the same for the benefit (*exhibitionem*) and necessary uses of the said Friars as shall seem most expedient. But if the said Friars Minor are not there, or are unwilling to remain, the income of the said lands, by the advice of the said Bishop and his successors, and the chapter of Moray, shall be entirely turned to the support of two chaplains in the Cathedral Church of Elgin, perpetually to minister there for the souls of all the faithful dead; the right of instituting and depriving the said chaplains remaining in the hands of the said Bishop and his successors ... In testimony whereof, I have appended my seal to this present writing before these witnesses: Robert, by the grace of God, Bishop of Ross; the lord Colin, Abbot of New Fearn; Master Adam of Derlingtun, Precentor of Ross; Sir Matthew, Succentor of Ross; Master Roger, Succentor of the Church of Moray; Sir William de Montealto; Sir John de Cambrun; Sir ? de Dundemon, Knight, and many others.”¹²

⁸ Spotiswood, xvi.; Grub, I., 315; Bellesheim, III.

⁹ William, Bishop of Glasgow, consecrated a churchyard for the Grey Friars at Roxburgh in 1239. — Spotiswood.

¹⁰ Shaw's *History of Moray*, p. 303.

¹¹ Young, p. 89.

¹² *Registrum Episcopatus Moraviensis*, no. 220, p. 281.

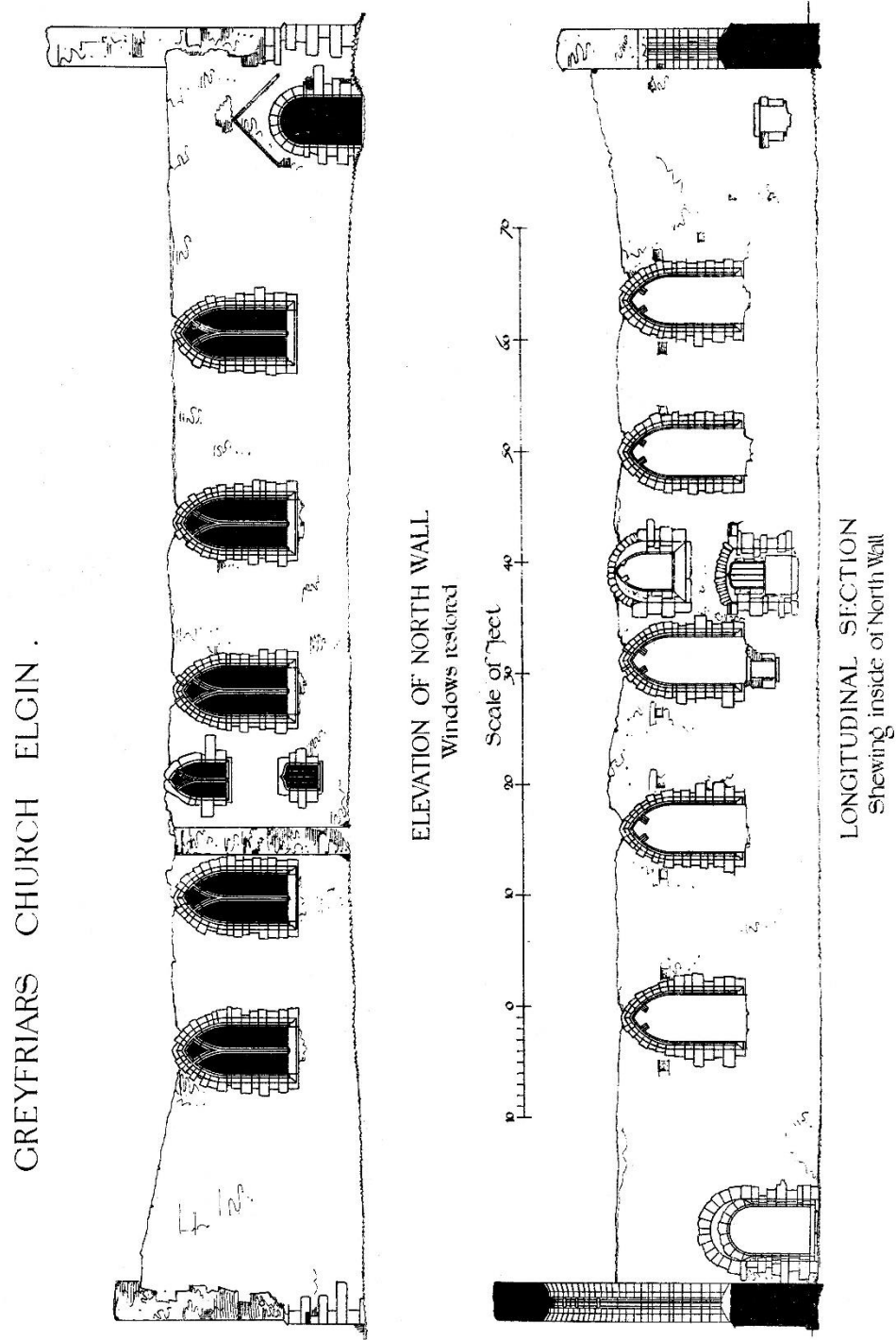


Figure 1: Interior and exterior elevations of north wall.

This charter is not dated, but as Bp. Robert of Ross died about 1273, it must have been granted previous to that time. On the other hand, it cannot be earlier than 1253, the date of the consecration of Archibald, Bishop of Moray. Bp. Archibald was something of a builder: the episcopal palace at Kinnedar, of which a few small but massive fragments still remain, was his work. The lands of Cadboll still pay a feu-duty to the Crown as coming in place of the Bishop of Moray.¹³

It is evident from this that there was an early Franciscan convent in Elgin: it is no less evident that, however "spacious" their church, and "fine" their dwellings (Shaw), there was not much in their meal giral. Clearly the good Bishop was not sure that even the Earl's bounty would induce the Friars to remain; and, ere long, there was another argument to hasten their departure. The long arm, the heavy foot, of Edward I. reached Elgin. The whole country was fearfully impoverished; and though the independence of Scotland was secured, it was long before the tranquillity or the prosperity of the kingdom was restored. The mission of the Grey Friars was to witness against the covetousness and luxury which come from wealth. There was no need for such a witness in the Scotland of those days. Moreover, it was probably a disadvantage for them that their houses in our island were governed by an English Vicar-General. Anyhow, there is no more mention for a long time of Grey Friars at Elgin.

The touching entry in the Chartulary of Elgin Cathedral concerning the wicked doings of the "Wolf of Badenoch" in 1389, contains no mention of any buildings belonging to the Grey Friars being injured. The writer, having mentioned the coronation of Robert III. at Scone in the year 1390, goes on:— "The very year before that coronation, the people of the Lord Alexander Stewart, the son of the late King, in the month of May, burned the town of Fores (Forres), and the choir of the church of S. Lawrence, and the manor-house of the Archdeacon within the town, and in June following, on the Feast of S. Botolph the Abbot, in the presence of the said Lord Alexander, they burned the whole town of Elgin, and the Church of S. Giles within the same, the Domus Dei (Maison Dieu), near Elgin, eighteen noble and fair manses of the canons and chaplains, and what is more bitterly to be lamented, the noble and ornate Church of Moray, the mirror of the fatherland, and the glory of the kingdom."¹⁴ If there was a Grey Friars convent in Elgin at that time, it must have stood just in the very quarter where the destruction was most furious: it could scarcely have escaped: and if it had perished it would have been mentioned. Next, in a list of the Cathedral clergy, in the episcopate apparently of Bishop John Winchester (1437-1458), who had been chaplain to King James I., and had come with him from England, we find "Una capellania de Ros," and "Alia capellania de Ros,"¹⁵ entries which I regard as very fair evidence that the endowments of Earl William had been converted in terms of his deed into Cathedral chaplaincies because the Grey Friars had *not* been willing to remain. At a later date (29th Nov., 1478, a charter of Bishop William Tulloch granting a lease of the lands of Cadboll to John McCulloch, though by this time the new colony of Grey Friars were settled at Elgin, gives no hint that the original destination of the endowment had been for the support of brethren of their Order:— "Terras de Catepole ... quas magnificus et potens dominus, dominus Willelmus quondam comes Rossie Sancte Trinitatis ecclesie nostre Moraviensis

¹³ Young, p. 712.

¹⁴ *Registrum Moraviense*, p. 381.

¹⁵ *Registrum Moraviense*, p. 361.

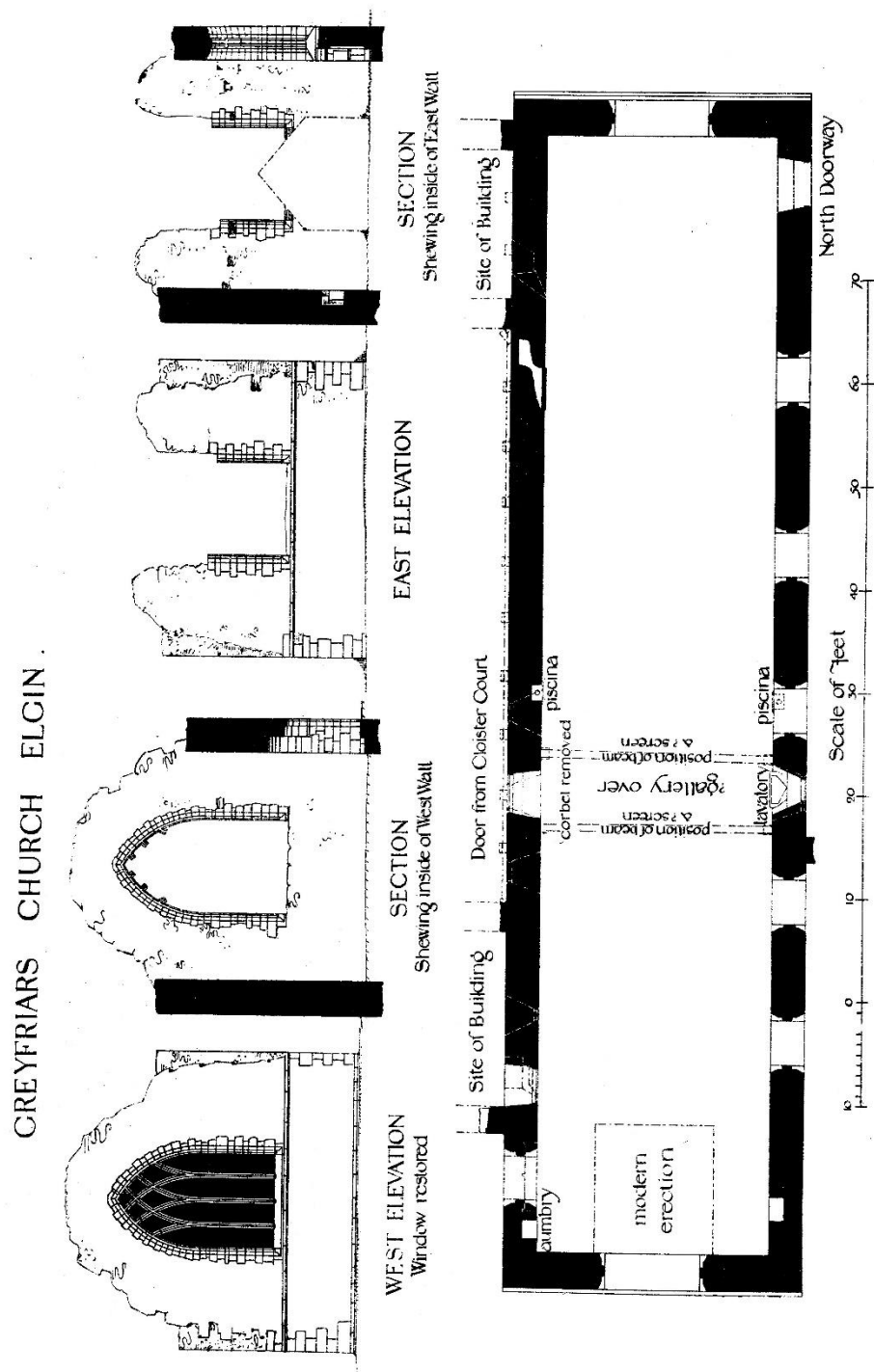


Figure 2: Plan and elevations of east and west gables.

episcopis et capitulo ejusdem qui pro tempore fuerent *ad sustentationem duorum capellanorum* pro animabus omnium fidelium defunctorum in dicta ecclesia nostra divina perpetuo celebraturorum in puram et perpetuam elimosinam dedit, &c.”¹⁶

Yet, that the building mentioned in Earl William’s charter, has been as Shaw calls them, “fine and spacious,” there was evidence remaining to all eyes in his day (he died 1777), and for more than a generation afterwards. That first convent of the Grey Friars of Elgin stood due north of the present ruin, in what is now the garden of Dunfermline Cottage, occupying the ground between High Street and South Street. “The buildings there, probably, having become ruinous, are stated” (Mr. Young says) “to have been removed by Bishop John Innes (1407-1414). It is stated that in 1538 the buildings belonged to Thomas Young, burgess of Elgin, nothing seemingly remaining but a stone dovecot, which he disposed to Alexander Sutherland, Dean of Caithness, who shortly thereafter conveyed the same as a foundation to the Choir of the Cathedral, for prayers for the souls of his parents, Alexander Sutherland of Duffus, and Janet Innes, his spouse, and of Adam Gordon, Dean of Caithness, and the founder’s own soul. This dovecot and buildings were said to be in existence within the memories of parties not long since (in 1876) dead, and were used for building the substantial walls round the garden. Within my recollection (Mr. Young goes on) the ground was *covered with old vaults* and ruins, which were acquired with the adjoining garden, about fifty years ago, by Mr. George Fenton, then Sheriff-Substitute, who erected the present house. After a few years he sold the subjects to Mr. William Innes, who gave the place the name of “Dunfermline Cottage.” That name, I may add, commemorates (and it is I think his only commemoration) by far the greatest man who was ever Provost of Elgin, Alexander Seton, Earl of Dunfermline,¹⁷ an eminent minister of James VI., and worthy of the gratitude of all lovers of Scottish architecture as the man who made Fyvie Castle what it is, the glory of our “Scottish Baronial” style; but one rather regrets the supersession of what my uncle, Mr. Alex Cooper, who bought the property on the death of Mr. Innes, told me was its former name — “The Minorities” — after the *Fratres Minores* as S. Francis in his humility styled the Order he had founded. My uncle also had heard people speak about the old vaults, and he (like Mr. Young) believed they were the remains of the earlier Franciscan convent.

But, clearly, that earlier convent had passed away. The present remains, though on a contiguous site, belonged to an altogether new foundation. The Franciscan Order, like others, after a splendid beginning fell in the 14th century into laxity and decay. But it revived. In 1368, Paolucci, of Foligno¹⁸, laid the foundation of a reform of the Order, called *Observantine*, from the strict observance of their Founder’s rule of poverty which Paolucci enjoined upon his followers. They were not even to have shirts; they were not even to have shoes, but only wooden sandals — in Italian ‘*zoccoli*’: whence the Observanti are called in Italy Zoccolanti. This reform of the Order drew to it many earnest souls, among others (in 1403) Saint Bernardino of Sienna, who was canonized by Pope Nicols V. in 1450, five years after his death, and of whom Mrs. Jameson remarks “that there are few saints in the calendar who have merited that honour so well; — none better, perhaps, than this exemplary and excellent friar, He is venerated,” she adds, “throughout the whole of Italy, but more

¹⁶ *Registrum Moraviense*, p. 232.

¹⁷ He was Provost of Elgin in 1606.

¹⁸ Heszog, *Theol. and Eccles. Encyclopedia* (Eng. Trans.), Vol. II., Art. Francis of Assisi. He adds, ‘The name Observanti was first confirmed by the Synod of Constance (*fratres de observantia, fratres regularis observantiae*) during its ninth session (1415).’

particularly in his native Sienna." In these days when gambling is again becoming, it is to be feared, a national vice, one story often told of him may bear to be repeated. "It is said that when he preached he was accustomed to hold in his hand a tablet, on which was carved, within a circle of golden rays, the Name of JESUS. A certain man, who had gained his living by the manufacture of cards and dice, went to him, and represented to him, that in consequence of the reformation of manners in Sienna, due to the Saint's preaching, gambling had gone out of fashion, and he was reduced to beggary. The Saint desired him to exercise his ingenuity in carving tablets of the same kind as that which he held in his hand, and to sell them to the people. A peculiar sanctity was soon attached to these memorials; the desire to possess them became general; and the man who, by the manufacture of gambling cards could scarcely keep himself above water, by the fabrication of these tablets realized a fortune. Hence in the devotional figures of S. Bernardino he is usually holding one of those tablets, the *I.H.S.* encircled in rays, in his hand."¹⁹

Mrs. Jameson, and our own Spotiswood,²⁰ ascribe the foundation of the Observantine reform to S. Bernardino: that is a mistake. Unquestionably, however, it was he who gave to the movement its great impulse. The Church of the West was still unbroken: the Religious Orders were like great nerves — stretching from one end of the body to the other; and the reform of the Franciscans, begun in Italy, was very soon felt in Germany. From Germany it came to Scotland. James I. (1424-1437) who was as laudably zealous in his endeavours to reform the practical corruptions of the Scottish Church,²¹ as he was to repair the royal authority and restore the supremacy of the law in civil matters, is said to have written to the Franciscans of Cologne, desiring them to send to him some of their brethren of the Observantines to settle in his kingdom. The Vicar-general accordingly sent him Brother Cornelius of Zirichen, a Dutchman of great reputation, with several other of the Order. The first convent bestowed on them was at Edinburgh. It was founded by the citizens of that city, and the buildings are said to have been so magnificent that Friar Cornelius could not for a long time be induced to accept them. At length, by the persuasion of the Bishop of S. Andrews, he consented; and in 1446-7 he settled there a community, where divinity and philosophy were taught till the suppression of the convent in 1559.²² Their church, divided into two, and otherwise grievously altered, we know as Old and New Greyfriars — famous among the sanctuaries of the pulpit eloquence of Scotland.

A notice in the "Obituary of the Grey Friars Convent of Aberdeen"²³ mentions under the date 1469 "the death of the venerable father, Friar John Richardson, who was one of the first of the brethren who brought the Sacred Observance to this kingdom," and tells how 'he received a place' (of settlement of a community of Observants) 'in Edinburgh, and a second place in S. Andrews,²⁴ and was the principal agent in securing this our third place.' The Greyfriars Convent of Aberdeen was thus the third convent that the Observantines possessed in Scotland. It was founded, we know, in 1450.

¹⁹ Mrs. Jameson, "*Legends of the Monastic Orders*," pp. 293-4.

²⁰ Spotiswood gives the date 1419.

²¹ Grub, I., p. 363.

²² Spotiswood, xvi.

²³ *Miscellany of the Spalding Club*, Vol. I. For a translation see "Greyfriars Church, Aberdeen" (1889), p. 15-26.

²⁴ *Miscellany of the Spalding Club*, Vol. I. For a translation see "Greyfriars Church, Aberdeen" (1889), p. 15-26.

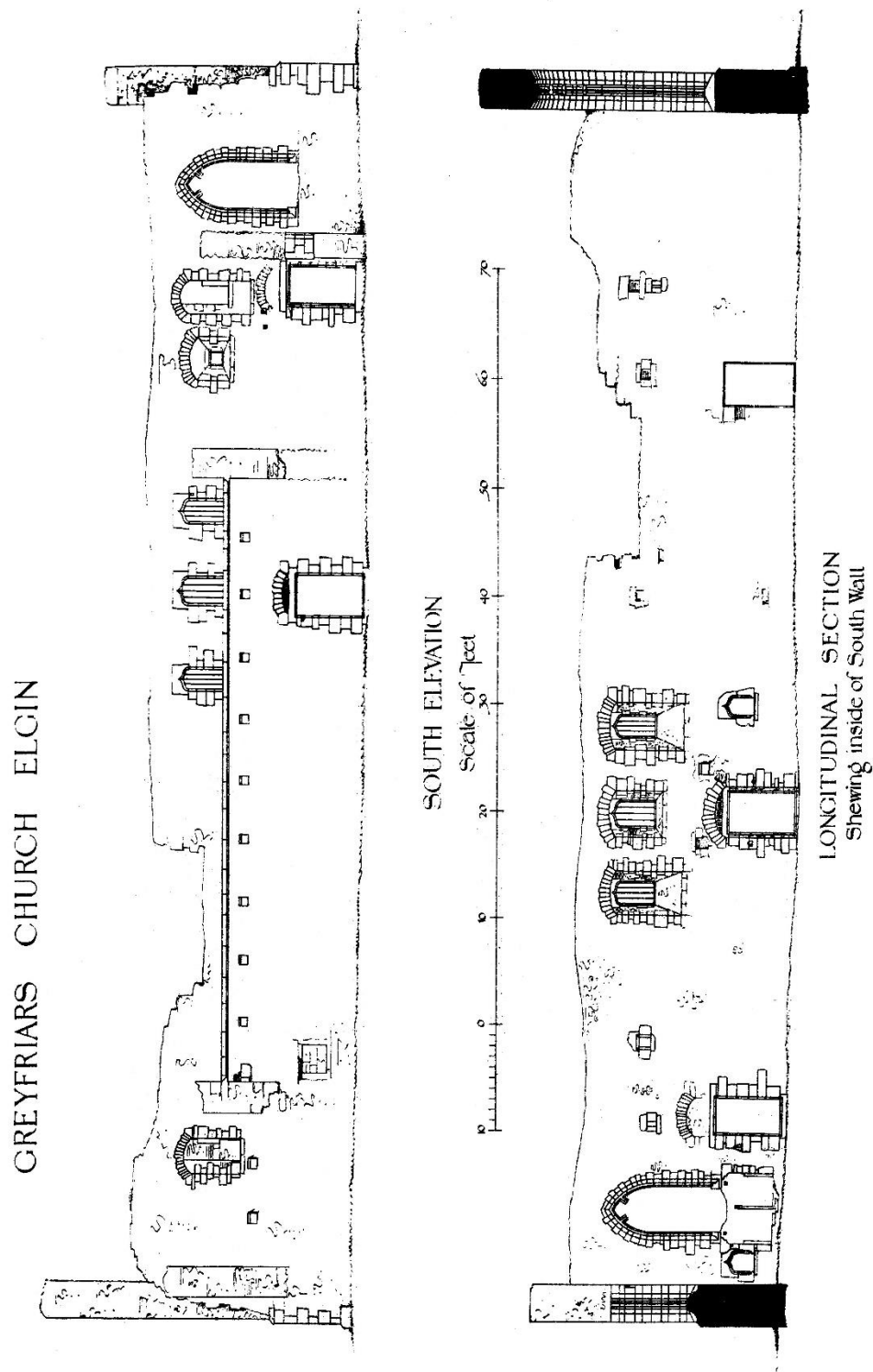


Figure 3: Interior and exterior elevations of south wall.

This disposes of the statement made by Mr. Young and others that the Elgin Convent was founded by *Bishop* John Innes, who died in 1414. There was another Bishop John Innes, Bishop of Caithness, a Morayshire man, a brother of the Laird of Innes; but he too was dead before the foundation of the Aberdeen convent: he died in 1445. The “John Innes” whom Spotiswood, following Dempster, mentions as the founder of the Elgin Convent, was probably a layman. He was not the Laird of Innes, for the Laird of the period was named James²⁵; but there is reason to believe that he belonged to that family. The date assigned for its foundation is 1479, which agrees with the style of the building, as well as with statements in the Aberdeen “Obituary,” and with the further mention in the same document of “John Strang” (*ob.* 1517), a priest and maker of glass, most faithful in his workmanship, who executed many things in the way of his art in very many convents throughout the province, and especially in the convents of S. Johnstone (*i.e.*, Perth), Ayr, *Elgin*, and Aberdeen,” and of “Mr. Adam Gordon, late Parson of Kinkell (*ob.* 15[]8) ... who was for many years very munificent towards this convent, and also to the convent at Elgin.”

This is positively all that we know of the benefactors of the convent. Not the name of one of its friars has come down to us. They had no rentals to be taxed, no lands to alienate; and probably, like their brethren at Aberdeen, they fled when the Reformation came, and let who would take possession of their house.

That the convent was founded by an Innes is confirmed by the fact that after the Reformation (85 years after it, no doubt) the buildings were in possession of the Inneses — having reverted, we may suppose, as other religious foundations of the period did, to the representatives of the founder’s family. It belonged to the Laird of Innes in 1645, when Montrose, after his victory at Auldearn, harried the lands of the Covenanting gentlemen of Moray. He “plundered but did not burn” the Greyfriars.

But if the foundation of the Elgin Convent is twenty-nine years later than that of Aberdeen, *the existing remains* at Elgin are no doubt earlier. The Church which fortunately still stands beside Marischal College, and will stand there, we hope, for centuries to come, was the *second* church that was erected for the Observantines of Aberdeen. “Our new church,” they say, “which was built from its foundation by ‘Bishop Gavin Dunbar’ (1518-32). The style of the Greyfriars Church at Elgin points to a date a good many years earlier: nay, it seems not unlikely that Gavin Dunbar, who came from Elgin, had it in mind when he built the church at Aberdeen. The Aberdeen church is indeed handsomer: more regular in design, with buttresses, and larger and finer windows, and its polished ashlar puts to shame the plain rubble construction of its Morayshire sister. But the design of the two churches is very much alike, and in the points which they have in common they differ from the Grey Friars Church, Edinburgh, which is aisled: those of Elgin and Aberdeen being aisleless.”²⁶

The Plans submitted show at a single glance what the Greyfriars Church at Elgin was. It was a long, narrow building (117 feet x 29 feet 2 inches) running east and west, with a

²⁵ James of the Beard, 16th Laird of Innes, “Was indeed a great proprietor. Married to Huntly’s daughter, “cousin” of the Earl of Ross, “cousin” and trusted friend of the great lord the Earl of Buchan, the King’s uncle — this laird of Innes was a person of consequence, and worth winning for the King’s (James III.) party.” A “John of Innes,” mentioned in two of his charters, was probably a kinsman, and may have founded the convent. — *Family of Innes*, pp. 18, 84.

²⁶ The Greyfriars Church in Stirling has completely perished. The stately Town Church there, often *called* the Greyfriars, did not belong to the Foundation.

round-headed door, for the public, on the north side of the nave at the west end, as in King's College Chapel, Aberdeen, though nearer the end. This doorway bears traces of having been protected by a porch. As in King's College Chapel and Greyfriars, Aberdeen, the great line of windows is on the north side of the church (here, the true north). Their jambs are boldly moulded; in each there is a Y-shaped mullion to support the glass. The east and west gables are plain; each has a tall window of four lights, and basket tracery. A single buttress breaks the line on the north side. On the south side there are indications of the conventual buildings; four walls which run due southward — the eastmost of these exhibiting the splay of a window. The Church is prolonged one bay beyond that wall, and there its south wall is pierced, as the chancels of King's College and Elgin Cathedral are, by a large Gothic window, which must have shed a rich light on the high altar. Along the greater part of the south wall externally are a series of corbels, which may have supported, between the two westernmost walls, a floor, and against the middle part of the church to roof of the friars' cloister. Two doors on the south side (again as at King's College) gave the friars access to the nave and choir of the church respectively; while above the conventual rooms and the cloister roof a series of smaller windows, square-topped — save for an ogee curve — permitted the summer sunlight to fall upon the worshippers. The windows opening from the conventual apartments are skew-lights, so as to allow any one confined to these apartments by sickness or duty to obtain a view of one or other of the chief altars of the church.

The east gable is much broken, and the site of the high altar is occupied by a last century building, which covers the vault of the Kings of Newmill, a family of considerable local distinction. The church has been divided, as the manner was, by a screen, the site of which, a little more than half way down the church, is indicated by a tier of two small windows, in the north wall. That there were two altars on the western side of this screen, on either hand of the entrance to the choir, is rendered certain by the two *piscinae* which remain at the points near where those altars were, one on one side of the church and the other on the other. The screen, though of wood, was a substantial structure, composed of two stout partitions, with a gallery above spanning a central entrance to the choir. The door from the cloister on the south must have entered between the partitions: the similar space in the north end of the screen was a lavatory, as the stone basin in the lower of the two windows on the north remains to show — an arrangement which perhaps explains the wall recess remaining in a similar position in King's College Chapel, Aberdeen. There are traces of a third *piscina* on the north side of the high altar, while there is a plain sacrament-house and a range of *sedilia* at the east end of the south wall, under the large window above referred to. The beauty of proportion is everywhere present; the curved and lines are unusually graceful for a Scottish church of so late a date; but everything is as plain as it could be, and there is not an inch of ornamental carving.

The church was in use, not for worship, but as the place of meeting for criminal courts, between the Reformation and the middle of the seventeenth century. In 1676 we find John Paterson, Bishop of Ross (who had once been minister of Ellon), allowing "the crafts," or trades," of Elgin, to make use of it "for their counsell and meeting place, to all intents and purposes relating to civill affaires only;" and in 1684, it was disposed by his son, John Paterson, Bishop of Edinburgh, to Provost King, in the hands of whose descendants, in the female line, the property remained till the present year, when it was purchased by the Sisters of the Roaman Catholic 'Convent of Sainte Marie of Mercy.'

After the Revolution (1688) Provost King, who was an Episcopalian, gave the use of it to the non-juring clergy, and the Episcopalians worshipped in it for about sixty years thereafter. The sermon preached in it on the occasion of the death of Mrs. Ann Tulloch or King, the Provost's daughter-in-law, who died in 1716, is still extant; and within its walls, some ten years later, Bishop Gadderar celebrated the Holy Eucharist, and administered the rite of confirmation.²⁷ The Episcopalians were at that time very numerous in Moray; but after the '45, the severe Penal Laws rapidly diminished their numbers. Among those who "preferred their loyalty [to King George] to their Church" was the then proprietor; and from that time to this there has been no Divine Service in the Grey Friar's Church. Ere—"long, about the middle of last century," the roof fell in; but the walls of the fabric are good yet, and the roof could be restored at small expense. It was a hope which I long cherished that the old edifice might be secured for a second church for the Parish of Elgin. I am persuaded that buildings of this pattern, furnished as this one was with a substantial screen, the nave used for preaching and the choir for the celebration of the Holy Communion, would be found admirably adapted for use among us.

On the south side of the church is a house, which is still a comfortable and elegant mansion.²⁸ It dates for the most part (Mr. Young writes) from 1691, when Provost William King took possession of the building; but the thick-walled vaulted kitchen, and the frescoed fire-place in the dining room, which was re-discovered about fifteen years ago, and displays the admonitory scroll, "NULLI CERTA DOMUS," may go back to the friars' days. They well might, as it happened, have made that their motto.



²⁷ J. B. Craven, *History of the Episcopal Church in Moray*, p. 106.

²⁸ There is a tradition in Elgin that Madame Talleyrand, the wife of the famous statesman, was educated at a boarding-school which was conducted in this house.

Notes.

- ✠ The term “lavatory” on page 11, does not carry with it the modern sense of the word. A lavatory in the medieval ecclesiastical sense was simply a place for washing or cleaning items. It was not a toilet.