

A BRIEF INVESTIGATION OF A DEFENDED DOORWAY
AT KILWINNING ABBEY

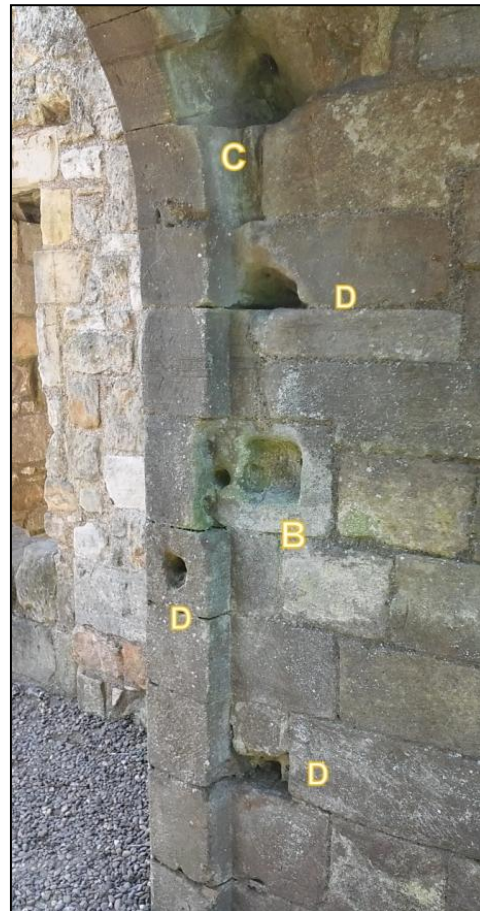
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Wandering around the Abbey ruins recently as you do, I had a close look at several holes at the side of the smaller doorway from the nave out to the cloisters. Corresponding holes are present in the door jamb opposite, immediately indicating holes left by an ancient heavy door and its associated furniture. Photographs of the clearance of the cloisters in the 1960s show that this doorway had been blocked up following the post-Reformation changes when the area became built over with housing, but during the clearance, it had been opened up again. Although it is mentioned briefly in 'The Abbey of Kilwinning' by Jim Kennedy, no specific investigation has been made of it since then, as far as we know.

What really drew my attention was the large, squareish hole about three and a half feet from the ground (A), in fact, a very deep hole that went a long way into the length of the wall. Intriguing. But a depression about four inches square and only an inch or so deep, cut out of the stone at the other side of the doorway at the same level (B) immediately gave away its purpose. This deep hole (A) must have contained a large square wooden beam that could be pulled out of the depth of the wall and across the door, the end fitting nicely into the square depression (B). And this made it a defended doorway.

Two horizontal cut-outs at either side of the arch at about six and a half feet high (C) show where a thick wooden lintel had been placed, so the door itself must have been smaller and more square than the stone archway. The other holes at both sides (D) would have been for heavy hinges and probably metal draw bolts.



Investigation of the hole by torch revealed rubble and stones, tin cans and other modern rubbish deep within it, stuff which I didn't remove, but I estimated that the wooden beam must have been at least six feet long. I also worked out that the door would have been hinged on the right looking out to the cloisters and of course would have opened inwards.

The next question was why would a door which merely led into the cloisters need such a high level of security?

The answer is to think about when the various parts of the Abbey were built. Experts agree that the nave, the public part where people worship, and the chancel, the holy part for the monks, would have been built first, in order to get a working church up and running. All the other outbuildings, the cloisters and eventually the perimeter wall were added later as time and funds permitted.

This doorway then is an original 12th century doorway which, when open, could have let in the immediate outside world and all its evils. Even in those days, thieves would want to steal valuable things from the church, so it had to be able to be locked securely for the night or at signs of other trouble. Presumably, all other doors which led directly to the outside had similar security arrangements, but none of these has survived. Later, when the cloisters were added along with the Chapter House and other parts, these would have been within the boundaries of several Abbey walls, presumably with their own lockable doors, so the security of this one would have been of decreasing importance.

Andy Baird

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