Illus 1 Location of site of Carthusian monastery, showing King James VI Hospital, the putative line of the water supply from City Mills and the location of archaeological watching briefs in the vicinity.
The Perth Charterhouse
Richard Fawcett and Derek Hall

Historical background

Scotland’s only Carthusian monastery was founded at Perth in 1426 by King James I, two years after his return from English captivity (Cowan and Easson 1976, 86). It was the last house to be founded in Scotland for an order of monks, though there were to be several further foundations for the mendicants. The Charterhouse was granted a site that was then outside the south-western corner of the town walls, which themselves had been rebuilt in stone on the orders of Edward III of England in 1336, and at the cost of the neighbouring religious houses (Scottichronicon, vol. 7, 123). On 19 August 1426 William de Lamotte, prior of La Grande Chartreuse, wrote agreeing to the king’s wish to found a house for thirteen monks and their servants, with an endowment of 200 marks (N.A.S. GD 79/2/1). The proposed site had been inspected and deemed acceptable by the prior of Mount Grace and one of his monks, Dean Bryce, and the services of two monks from Mount Grace were offered to ensure that the buildings were correctly laid out. A principal requirement of the new house was to offer prayers for the souls of the king and queen, their predecessors and successors. At a parliament held in Perth James I granted his charter of foundation dated 31 March 1429 which survives in the form of a confirmation by James V of 7 March 1538–9 (Reg. Mag. Sig., vol. 3, no 1928). Amongst the many benefits conferred, it was stipulated that those selling fish, milk, eggs and cheese in Perth had to first offer them at a reasonable price to the Carthusians.

One of James I’s motives in founding the Perth Charterhouse was to provide a model for the reformation of religious life in Scotland, which he deemed to be at a dangerously low ebb. In a letter of 17 March 1425 reprimanding the heads of the Benedictine and Augustinian houses he had warned that the ‘kings who formerly…notably endowed your monasteries…may repent of having erected walls of marble when…you have so shamelessly abandoned your religious character’ (Acts Parl. Scot., vol. 2, no 2). In choosing the Carthusians as the exemplar for religious life he was reflecting a wider trend in European royal patronage, although it was probably his experience in English captivity between 1406 and 1424 that was particularly important. Henry V had founded Sheen in 1414, while Cardinal Beaufort and Thomas Beaufort, duke of Exeter, kinsmen of James I’s own wife, Joan Beaufort, were patrons of Mount Grace. Indeed, Cardinal Beaufort may have provided advice in establishing the new Scottish house (Ferguson 1910–11, 184).

The Perth Charterhouse was to be known as Vallis Virtutis (the Vale or Valley of Virtue); the designation of the site as a ‘vale’, if not simply a convention, may imply that its buildings were in the hollow between the ridge where the Pomarium was to be planted and the line of the town walls. Its location, in a situation which could hardly be seen as a ‘desert’, was consistent with recent developments within the Carthusian order which had led to the acceptance of houses being founded closer to centres of population (Beckett 1988). Superintendence of the construction of its buildings was apparently in the hands of a Cistercian monk, John of Bute, and various sums towards the initial endowment were paid from the Exchequer to both John and to Dean Bryce as work started (Exch. Rolls, vol. 4, cxiii–cxiv). Money initially raised for the payment of the king’s English ransom was also soon being diverted to the new foundation, while by 1434 further funding came from the annexation of the Augustinian nunnery of St Leonard and the hospital of St Mary Magdalene in Perth (Fittis 1885, 222). Endowments came from other benefactors, and lands in the parish of Sproston that were given by the fifth earl of Douglas on 2 February 1433–4 may once have been intended for an earlier projected house of Carthusians, since it appears that the earl’s father had received papal permission to found a Charterhouse on 5 June 1419 (Fraser 1885, no 396; Cal. Scot. Supp., 68). Another important gift was the church of Errol, in which the abbey of Coupar Angus was persuaded to give up any rights it may have thought it had in 1434–5 (Cowan 1967, 62).

The buildings of the monastery were mainly on ground acquired from the burgess William de Wynde. The area occupied by the precinct was specified as being defined by the garden of Baldwin Seres on the east, by the street which led to St Leonard’s on the west, by the land of Andrew Pitscottie on the south and by the land of the late John de Spens of Bothquhopil on the north (Fittis 1885, 222–3). There were ditches on all sides except towards the burgh on the east, with the main gate thought to have been situated in line with New Row (Simpson and Stevenson 1982, 33). In 1430 the precinct was extended to include land bought from Alan Thomson, which stretched from the King’s Ditch on the east to the land of Andrew Pitscottie on the west. This was presumably an area of ground between the town wall and the existing Carthusian holding (Fittis 1885, 220).

The original royal foundation charter allowed the house to have a conduit for fresh water of two feet in width, running from either the bank of the Almond, to the north of the city, or from the mill-dam of Perth, which had been royal property but which had passed to the burgh. In general these water rights appear to have been respected, although there was one major
disagreement when the council broke the conduit and interrupted the monks’ water supply, as a result of which they complained directly to James III, who settled the case in the Charterhouse’s favour on 26 February 1471–2 (Fittis 1885, 235). The line of the conduit is no longer known with certainty. If it had run in a straight line between the mill dam and the precinct it would have passed through properties which had certainly developed in the suburb of New Row by the 14th century (Spearman 1987, 47–58). This would seem to make it more likely that the conduit ran along the west side of New Row, where suburban development took place at a slower pace.

Although one of James I’s principal motivations was to provide an exemplar for the religious life, the Charterhouse was also of the highest personal importance to him as the location for a new dynastic mausoleum. As at the Chartreuse de Champmol, founded by the Valois dukes of Burgundy in 1383, or the Certosa of Pavia, founded in 1396 by the Visconti dukes of Milan, the prayers of the Carthusians had come to be regarded as a particularly effective hedge against damnation for rulers embroiled in the snares of worldly affairs. A sumptuous royal tomb was provided at Perth which eventually housed the remains of James I after his assassination in 1437, Queen Joan after her death in 1445, and Queen Margaret Tudor, the wife of James IV, who died in 1541. The tomb was presumably largely complete by 1438, when £30 was paid for a fence of Spanish iron around it (Exch. Rolls, vol. 5, 34). James had intended that his own heart should be taken on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, but it reached no further than Rhodes, from where it was returned by a knight of the Order of St John in 1445 for burial at Perth, along with the rest of his body.
Apart from its essentially spiritual functions, as might be expected the Charterhouse also provided a safe place for the keeping of valuables. As one indicator of this it is recorded that 1,000 marks was held for the bishop of Dunkeld (Dilworth 1995, 71).

The Perth Charterhouse was first attached to the Province of Picardy, but in about 1456 it was linked to the English Province. This move was deeply unpopular in Scotland, however, and in 1460 the house was placed within the Province of Geneva (Verschuur 1988, 1). Most of the original community had come from the continent, and the first prior, Oswald de Corda (1429–34) (Watt and Shead 2001, 174–6), who had been vicar of La Grande Chartreuse itself, was Bavarian. Nevertheless, one of the first group was a Scot, and a number of Scots soon joined the new house; certainly the second prior, Adam de Hangleside (1435–41), was a Scot who had earlier been a monk of Vallis Bonae near Avignon.

There is some evidence that the third prior, Laurence Hutton (1442–3), who was originally a Cistercian, attempted to introduce a way of life closer to Cistercian than Carthusian principles, and he was consequently deprived in the following year. Attempts to re-establish discipline appear to have caused some difficulties. The next prior, Patrick Russell (1443), resigned after only a short period while his successor, Michael Virey (1444–5), died before taking office, and on the appointment of the sixth prior, Bryce Montgomery (1445–6), a visitation was requested, perhaps suggesting that positive intervention was required (Ferguson 1910–11, 190–2).

During the last quarter-century of its existence the reputation of the house was to be tarnished in a number of ways. Prior Hugh Moryn (1517–35) was removed from office on charges of calumny, despite the protests of James V. There was a particularly unfortunate episode in 1543 when James Gordon, brother of the earl of
Huntly, was granted the fruits of the house by the earl of Arran, Governor of the kingdom, and he attempted to assert his rights by force. Just as unseemly was the period between 1544 and 1556 when two rival priors, Simon Galloway and Adam Forman, fought out their claims with all the means at their disposal, and for over a year the latter held the former in prison (Verschuur 1988, 2–5). Having established his claim, Forman (1556–67) was particularly aggressive in asserting his house’s rights to its possessions and privileges. Nevertheless, it is significant that from 1519 no less than six monks received the acclamation of ‘laudabiliter vixit in ordine’ for living under the rule in an exemplary manner for forty years or more (Hogg 1968, 168–9), suggesting that any troubles over the governance of the house did not greatly impinge upon the lives or spiritual aspirations of the monks themselves. It is also worth noting that, on the eve of the Reformation, there were still ten monks and the prior within the house (Dilworth 1972–74, 205), at a time when numbers had fallen in the houses of some other orders. Despite the worldly concerns of its last prior, this may be at least partly because the Charterhouse was one of the few Scottish houses that had a professed monk, rather than a commendator, as its head throughout its later history (Dilworth 1986, 62).

The impact of the Reformation

The Charterhouse was destroyed in the first onslaught of the Reformation. After John Knox preached a sermon in the parish church of St John at Perth on 11 May 1559, ‘which was vehement against idolatry’, the mob attacked the houses of the Dominicans and Franciscans and then moved on to the Charterhouse. Prior Forman’s attempts to defend his house with Highland forces from Atholl proved unavailing, and the community was allowed to depart, the prior taking away ‘even so much gold and silver as he could carry’ (Knox, History, 161–163). Once the mob had been let loose ‘within two days... the walls only did remain’ of Perth’s three great religious houses. Some of the Carthusians left for continental houses, while five moved on with the prior to their holding at Errol, possibly in an attempt to continue some form of communal life. This proved ultimately impossible, however, and the prior with another of the monks retreated to the continent in 1567, where Forman ended his days as head of Bonpas near Avignon (Verschuur 1988, 8–9).

The location of the Charterhouse

The land once occupied by the buildings of the Charterhouse, although originally outside the town walls, is now well within the bounds of Perth. It is assumed to have been within the area formed by Victoria Street to the south, Hospital Street to the north, James Street to the east, and Pomarium Street Flats to the west. Much of the area is now covered by buildings, including the King James VI Hospital, St Stephen’s Hall and a garage. In 1993 a geophysical survey was carried out in the grounds of the King James VI hospital in an attempt to see if it was possible to identify any anomalies that might be associated with the Carthusian monastery (Illus 2 and 3). No definite evidence of any buildings of the Charterhouse was identified, although it has been suggested that two areas of high resistance that were located may be of archaeological significance. Subsequently, in 2000–01, water pipe replacement along King Street was monitored by SUAT Ltd and archaeological deposits were recorded (Illus 1). The possible garden soil of either the monastery precinct or its successor, the King James VI Hospital, lay some 0.5–0.7 metres below the Charterhouse, that had since been let for garden and farm use (Milne).

Very little is known of the architectural appearance of the house, although in his account of its destruction, John Knox makes a point of describing it as ‘a building of wondrous cost and greatness’. Bishop John Lesley of Ross, whose sympathies were very different from those of Knox, said it was ‘the fairest Abbey and best biggit [built] of any within the realm of Scotland’, he also said that it was destroyed ‘lest that any remains of so many magnificent buildings and so splendid a place should remain to posterity’ (Lesley 1830, 272). In his Muses Threnodie, Henry Adamson said of the Charterhouse ‘This Abbey’s steeples and its turrets... Were cunningly contriv’d with curious art, And quintessence of skill in every part.’ (Adamson 1638, 34–37). Of the wider precinct, we know there was an orchard on the west side of the site, and this may have survived as the ‘Pomarium’ depicted on maps of 1774 and 1792 (Rutherford 1774; MacFarlane 1792); indeed the usage is still perpetuated in the name of Pomarium Street. A dovecot also survived for some decades, and repairs were still being made to it in 1633. The only structure that may have originated at the Charterhouse of which anything is now known, however, is a gateway said to have been rebuilt as a porch in the east bay of the south chancel aisle at St John’s Parish Church in Perth. This was destroyed before the end of the eighteenth century, but a view of the church of 1775 published in The Chronicle of Perth shows what appears to be a round-headed opening of at least four highly enriched orders (Illus 4 as reproduced in MacGibbon and Ross 1897, 110). So far as the depiction can be considered reliable, such details point to a date in the later fifteenth or earlier sixteenth century.
Illus 4 Engraving showing the former doorway of the Carthusian monastery relocated to the southeast end of St John’s Kirk. (From The Chronicle of Perth)
the street surface. Opposite Nos 1 and 2 Graham’s Place the edge of a trench on a north–south alignment, some 11 metres long, filled with stone rubble, sand and mortar, was recorded in the western half of the pipe trench. It may have been a robber trench of one of the buildings in the monastic complex. Also outside No 1 Graham’s Place, above natural clay, was a sequence of three thin deposits: reddish brown sand with occasional medium pebbles, 0.08 metres thick, above which was compact greyish brown sand, 0.09 metres thick, above which was crushed mortar, 0.06 metres thick. They were sealed beneath the garden soil, and may have been former surfaces or occupation deposits associated either with the medieval Charterhouse or the post-medieval King James VI Hospital. Outside Nos 3 and 4 Graham’s Place were layers of sandstone fragments and possible occupation deposits. The layers of sandstone fragments may represent courtyard surfaces, or they may be debris from the construction of either the monastery in the fifteenth century or the hospital in the mid-eighteenth century. They were similar to the layers of sandstone fragments found outside the west front of Arbroath Abbey, which were concluded to be debris from the construction of the abbey (Cachart and Perry forthcoming). The other layers were occupation levels associated with the monastery or the hospital (Cachart 2001). In June 2005 monitoring of the digging of a new cable trench to 6 King Street revealed topsoil to a depth of 0.60m, there was no sign of anything that might relate to the monastery or the hospital (Cachart 2001). In June 2005 monitoring of the digging of a new cable trench to 6 King Street revealed topsoil to a depth of 0.60m, there was no sign of anything that might relate to the monastery (Illus 1). So far there has been little or no opportunity for controlled archaeological investigation which might confirm either the site of the main monastic nucleus or the extent of the precinct.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Mick Aston for his views on a first draft of this paper.

References

Adamson, H 1638, The Muses Threnodie.
Cachart, R and Perry, D forthcoming ‘Excavations in advance of the new visitor centre at Arbroath Abbey, Arbroath’.
Calendar of Scottish Supplications to Rome 1418–22, ed E R Lindsay and A I Cameron, (Scottish History Society) Edinburgh, 1934 (Cal Scot Supp).
Cowan, I B 1967 The Parishes of Medieval Scotland (Scottish Record Society), Edinburgh.
Dilworth, M 1995 Scottish Monasteries in the late Middle Ages, Edinburgh.
Fraser, W 1885 The Douglas Book, Edinburgh.
Lesley, J 1830 The History of Scotland from the Death of King James I in the year 1436 to the year 1561 (Bannatyne Club) Edinburgh.
Macfarlane, William 1792, Map of Perth.
Milne, Rev R, Text of a lecture on The Carthusian Monastery, in the A K Bell Library Archives, Perth, MS 2.47.
National Archives of Scotland, Muniments of King James VI Hospital, Perth, GD 79/2/1 (NAS).
Register of the Great Seal of Scotland, ed J M Thomson et al (Reg Mag Sig).
Rutherford, A 1774, Map of Perth.
Simpson, A T and Stevenson, S 1982 Historic Perth, the archaeological implications of development (Scottish Burgh Survey) Glasgow.
Abstract
This paper discusses the documentary evidence for the Carthusian monastery in Perth and considers the possible location of the buildings based on recent fieldwork in the area.

Keywords
Carthusian
King James VI Hospital
New Row, Perth
Reformation
watercourse

This paper was published with the aid of a grant from Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust.