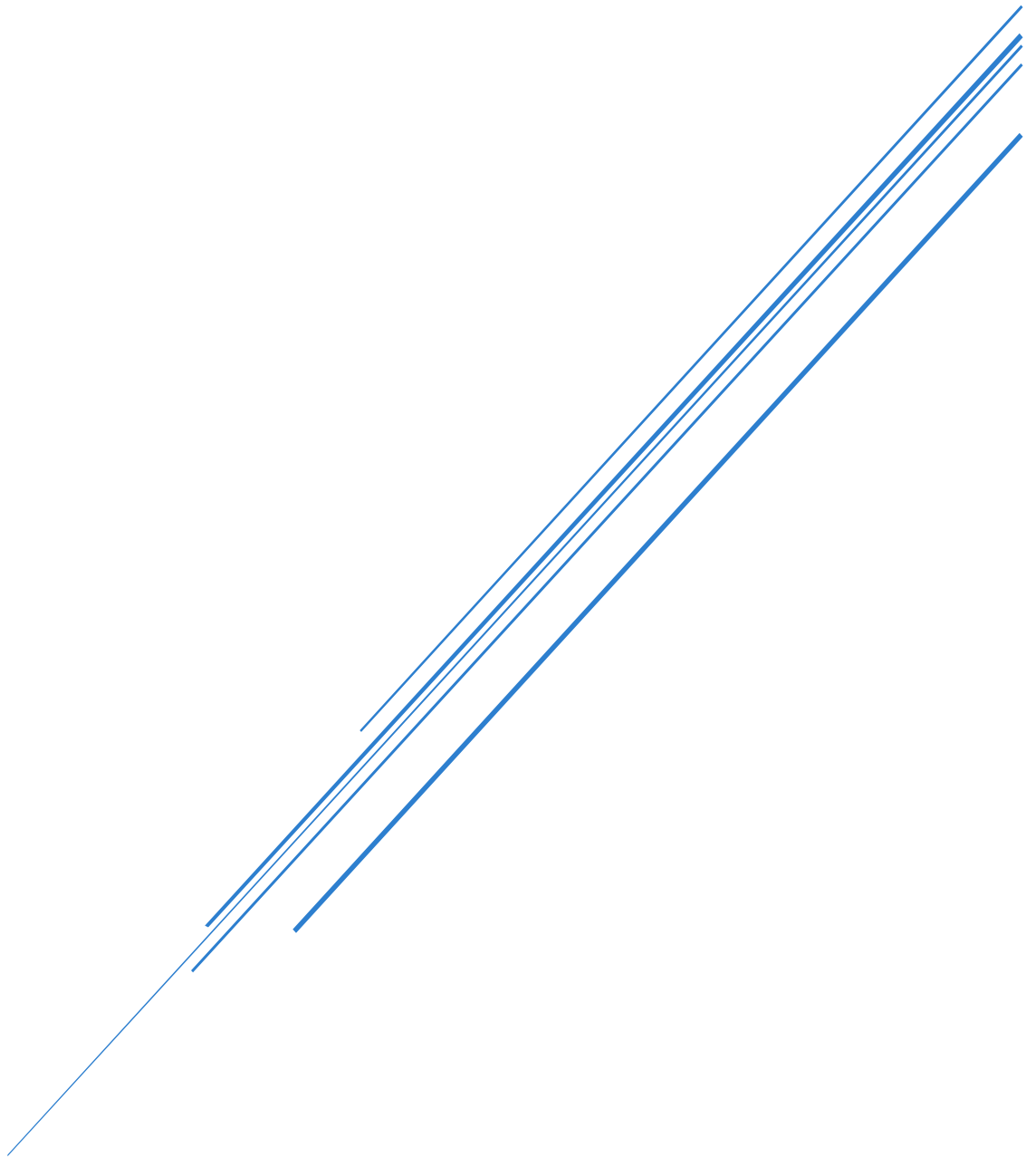


# PRE-REFORMATION PARISHES IN SCOTLAND

A Revised View



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Cushnie Enterprises, 2025

# Pre-Reformation Parishes in Scotland.

## Introduction.

In recent years, Scottish Parish Churches have been the subject of a considerable amount of investigation, carried out by a number of very able scholars, but there still remains a measure of confusion in some of the lists that have resulted from these studies. This paper is based on an approach to the subject that is supported by over 25 years of study, focussed principally on the primary sources ... such as remain!

In addition, much use has been made of the many secondary sources which have been published by bodies such as the Bannatyne, Spalding and Maitland Clubs.<sup>1</sup> Extensive use has also been made of the resources offered by the CANMORE database,<sup>2</sup> the excellent, but only partially completed, CORPUS OF SCOTTISH MEDIEVAL PARISH CHURCHES, produced by St Andrew's University,<sup>3</sup> the PLACES OF WORSHIP IN SCOTLAND (POWIS) database,<sup>4</sup> the SAINTS IN SCOTTISH PLACE-NAMES database, hosted by Glasgow University,<sup>5</sup> and the National Library of Scotland (Maps).

However, the starting point for this paper must be the work of the eminent scholar, Professor I.B. Cowan, beginning with his doctoral thesis submitted to Edinburgh University in 1961. Professor Cowan's thesis was an investigation of the "Appropriation of Parish Churches in Medieval Scotland," but, of course, he necessarily had to begin by compiling a comprehensive list of all the parish churches, monastic houses, diocese and cathedral chapters, collegiate churches and academic colleges, and all others who were either the recipients of, or the subjects of, acts of *appropriation* made during the medieval period." Cowan's work was published by the Scottish Records Society in 1967.<sup>6</sup>

At the opening of *Appendix I* of his thesis, Professor Cowan wrote:

"The following list consists of parishes in existence before 1560. Classification is alphabetical and after the name of each parish is given first the name of the diocese and then the name of the deanery in which it lay. The original pre-Reformation name of the parish has normally been adhered to, while as far as possible, cross-references to alternative names have been supplied. Parishes not to be found in this list may be assumed to be of doubtful authenticity or of post-Reformation origin, in which latter instance, reference should be made to the *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*."

This last reference pointed the way to another immensely important and many volumed work commenced by Dr. Hew Scott on behalf of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.<sup>7</sup> Although this work was primarily concerned with the names of ministers, it necessarily gave considerable detail about many of the churches across the country.<sup>8</sup>

Others have followed 'in their wake' and important contributions have been made by well-known academics such as Richard Oram, Tom Turpie and Simon Taylor, and a number of others in recent years. A great deal of work has also been carried out which has sought to record the *dedications* of Scottish churches, thus adding greatly to the body of hagiography as well as historiography that is fundamental to an understanding of the lands which became Scotland.

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<sup>1</sup> A significant number of the original charters of the cathedrals, monasteries, and noble families of Scotland have been printed by these three bodies.

<sup>2</sup> <https://canmore.org.uk/> (Accessed 11/02/2025)

<sup>3</sup> <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/> (Accessed 11/02/2025)

<sup>4</sup> <https://powis.scot/> (Accessed 11/02/2025)

<sup>5</sup> <https://saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/index.php> (Accessed 11/03/2025)

<sup>6</sup> Cowan (1967).

<sup>7</sup> Scott (1926).

<sup>8</sup> In the volumes of 'the Fasti', the reader encounters a significant drawback in that the parishes are listed according to their (post-Reformation) Presbyteries rather than the (pre-Reformation) Deaneries of which they were previously a part.



However, in more general terms, this whole area of study has been bedevilled by instances of unclear thinking and poor authorship. We encounter some writers who give no clear definition of the differences between **civil parishes** (whose boundaries are often still used up to the present day), and pre-Reformation **ecclesiastical parishes**. Some writers interchange Parish names, often confusing those which resulted from the union of two more ancient parishes (this happening both before and after the Reformation). In addition, we have those who have paid only 'lip-service' to the alterations to boundaries made necessary as a consequence of population change and variations in the prevailing financial climate. But it remains to be said that even some extensive records, professionally produced by august bodies such as the Ordnance Survey, have also been the source of a certain measure of confusion, if not error.

An additional problem has been the way that the compilers of various *lists* have dealt with parishes which only existed for a part of the pre-Reformation period (e.g. *Rothket* in the diocese of Aberdeen). The point here is that any list, by whomsoever it has been created, can only be a list of those ecclesiastical parishes which have existed **at some period** prior to the Reformation. The differentiation is vitally important but, sadly, is not always made clear in either the titles which have been adopted by 'lists' which have been produced, or in the preamble in the introduction to their readers. There has been a great tendency to create lists of those parishes/parish churches which were in existence **at the time of** the Reformation, thus turning a blind eye to the previous five-hundred years of parish history in this country! It is a sobering thought for some researchers to realise that parishes existed for as long before the Reformation as they have since!

There has also been a very unfortunate tendency to limit the focus of a number of studies to 'parish churches', so leaving out the rich heritage of history connected with the dependent chapels and the multitude of burial-grounds that were such an important part of parish life, especially in the more remote parts of the countryside. For many members of the general population, the parish church was a distant feature, often unreachable, and seldom attended except perhaps to celebrate the major festivals of the church. I once heard an old Highlander say that, "Christmas must have been invented by an Englishman (amongst whom he included the fine citizens of Edinburgh), because no sensible highlander would ever have chosen to have such an important festival as Christ's birth celebrated in the midst of winter when the weather threw its worst across the landscape to prevent prospective travellers from venturing out!" He had a point – woe betide a Thane of Cawdor who died during the winter months and had to be carried through the drowning drifts of snow to be buried with his ancestors in the frozen ground of his family's (parish) church at Barevan!

Of course, modern technology has aided the introduction of some excellent new on-line models – such as that adopted by the Scottish Place-Names Society who, at every opportunity, emphasise that theirs is an on-going project. Using modern database technology which can react almost immediately to new information as it becomes available, these databases provide a resource which can be continually edited and added to so that they reflect the latest scholarship.

And lastly, although it pains me to say it, there is still a certain measure of reluctance amongst some – both readers and writers - to accept that a subject that dates from before the great 'watershed' of the Reformation can provide information of historical interest, if not significant importance to those who would study our country's past!

## A Critique of some Parish Lists from the Past.

Inevitably, then, we must look at the various lists which are already available to us and put forward a 'critique' which suggests why they might not be suitable for the modern scholar.

A number important predecessors are suggested below, where they are placed in order by publication date.



Innes, C. (ed.) (1851-55) *Origines Parochiales Scotiae*, Edinburgh : W.H. Lizars for the Bannatyne Club. Volume 1 - Diocese of Glasgow; Volume 2. Pt. 1 - Diocese of Argyle and the Diocese of the Isles; Volume 2. Pt. 2 – Diocese of Ross, Diocese of Caithness, Diocese of Argyle, Diocese of the Isles.



- Cosmo Innes, amongst his many other important publications, edited the work of a group of scholars – William Anderson, Joseph Robertson, James B. Brichan, and John McNab – drawing their notes together into three volumes entitled *Origines Parochiales Scotiae* (O.P.S.). This work is a veritable mine of information relating to the Church in Scotland from its earliest times.
- Much of O.P.S. involves histories of the major lands and land-holders to be found in each area (parish) and much historical information is to be gleaned regarding the ancient families which ‘owned’ them, all of which had a vital importance to the life of the Church.
- The fact that exceptionally accurate maps were included makes these volumes a fundamentally important ‘source’.
- Unfortunately, O.P.S. only came to represent what might be called the Western Church, and it is to be lamented that the work was not continued to encompass all the ancient dioceses of Scotland.<sup>9</sup>
- In its favour is the fact that Dr Innes chose to include a very impressive amount of information regarding the local chapels and burying-grounds which were to be found in the parishes. The detail is quite remarkable and in many cases had been made possible as the result of the original writers having conversations with ‘local’ residents *in situ*.



Scott, H. (1915-1961) *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ: the Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland from the Reformation*.

- This multi-volume series represents the herculean life-time achievement of one man and has proved to be a most useful source for many students. However, as its title implies, it is focussed firmly on the post-Reformation period and it provides details about parish churches only *en passant* – its primary focus is on listing the succession of ministers who are known to have served in a parish, in each case providing brief biographical details. However, it is now available on-line<sup>10</sup> and can provide interesting additional background material. The reader must be aware that the entries are listed according to the post-Reformation arrangements of Parishes within the Presbyteries of the Church in Scotland, **not** the pre-Reformation Deaneries.



Cowan, I.B. (1961) ‘Appropriation of Parish Churches in Medieval Scotland,’ Ph.D. Thesis submitted to Edinburgh University.<sup>11</sup>

- Cowan’s thesis is an exceptional piece of work considering that he did not have access to the technological resources that are at the fingertips of the modern scholar. However, his study was so thorough that, occasionally, churches appeared in his lists (though not in his calculations) which were not parish churches (nor did he describe them as such) but which have been included,

<sup>9</sup> To include the Dioceses of Moray, Aberdeen, Brechin, St Andrews, Dunkeld, Dunblane and Galloway.

<sup>10</sup> The various volumes of this work are available from the National Library of Scotland (NLS) and also from ‘Internet Archive’ <https://archive.org/details/fastiecclesiaesc01scot> (changing the numeral before ‘scot’ provides access to the various volumes of the work.) (Accessed 11/02/2025)

<sup>11</sup> Cowan’s original typescript thesis (in 3 volumes) is available from the University of Edinburgh. <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/30976> (Accessed 11/02/2025)



perhaps in haste, in parish lists created by later scholars who used Cowan's work as a foundation for their own.<sup>12</sup>



Cowan, I.B. (1967) *The Parishes of Medieval Scotland*.

- In 1967, following the production of his doctoral thesis, Cowan published much of his work in a volume printed by the Scottish Record Society.<sup>13</sup> Carefully edited in the light of observations that he had received, this list is more reliable. Interestingly, the numbering system that he had used in his thesis was dropped – the entries being simply listed in alphabetical order. A measure of 'definition' is given in those instances where a parish church has been first at one location and then later at another.<sup>14</sup>
- Cowan was very careful to state clearly that the data which he presented represented a 'snapshot' of the Church **at the Reformation** (1560). For instance, the often-quoted figure of "1136 parishes" does not represent the total of all those parish churches which had ever existed in the period leading up to the Reformation. Nor, of course, did it represent the situation after the Reformation, when many parishes were amalgamated, and the new 'presbytery' structure replaced the diocesan deaneries.<sup>15</sup>
- Cowan himself ended the Introduction to this work by saying, "... I can but hope that other scholars will not only find these lists useful, but will be stimulated to correct their deficiencies."<sup>16</sup>



Simon Taylor completed extensive research, chiefly during 2000-2001, which has been published electronically by the Scottish Place-Name Society – *Comann ainmean-àite na h-alba* – in which he presented "a complete list of parishes, medieval and modern (civil, to 1975) as I have been able to compile".<sup>17</sup>

- For the medieval period he used chiefly Cowan (1967) as his guide.
- Taylor also added "information about the dedication of each kirk [which] I have put together from various sources."<sup>18</sup> He also included the century in which a church's dedication is first mentioned.
- It is, perhaps, to be regretted that Dr Taylor chose to employ 3-letter abbreviations for each parish, which, in the light of modern database technology would appear to be somewhat unnecessary. *Text fields* can now be used in search engines with complete freedom. Thankfully, in every case, Dr Taylor started by giving the parish name in full.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Inchmarnoch appears in Cowan's lists as "498. Inchmarcoch (Ab. Mar.)" although, as he himself notes, this was not a parish church.

<sup>13</sup> Cowan, I.B., (1967) *The Parishes of Medieval Scotland*, Edinburgh: for the Scottish Records Society, Vol. 93. The University of Stirling has made this publication available on-line at <https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/faculties/arts-humanities/our-research/centre-for-environment-heritage-and-policy/projects/mapping-the-parishes-of-medieval-scotland/the-parishes-of-medieval-scotland/> (Accessed 11/02/2025)

<sup>14</sup> The parish church that was initially at Rothket (Garioch, Aberdeen diocese) and which was later moved to what was previously only a dependent chapel (at Inverurie) merits two entries in his list. In his thesis, Rothket was entry number 959 in volume 2.2 and Inverurie was number 522 in volume 2.1. To a casual reader these might appear to be separate entries/parish churches.

<sup>15</sup> "In listing the parishes, the following procedure has been adopted. Only parishes in existence before 1560 have been included and for information on those of post-Reformation origin, reference should be made to the *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ*. Classification is alphabetical and after the name of each parish is given first the name of the diocese and after the name of the deanery in which it lay. The original pre-Reformation name of each parish has normally been adhered to, while as far as possible, cross-references to alternative names have been supplied." [Cowan (1967), page v.]

<sup>16</sup> Cowan (1967), page v.

<sup>17</sup> <https://spns.org.uk/resources/parish-list>

<sup>18</sup> 'Introduction and Notes to the Parish List.' <https://spns.org.uk/resources/parish-list>



- This project is open-ended and is thus available for editing in the light of newly obtained information.



#### Places of Worship in Scotland (POWIS) Database.<sup>19</sup>

- This database is another 'work-in-progress', this time the result of much hard work by Scottish Church Heritage Research (SCHR) which is a voluntary organisation.
- The user-interface of the website is still being 'refined' and this is a welcome development. Unfortunately, the authors have determined -
  - To include places of worship belonging to a variety of modern denominations.
  - Only to include sites where there are visible archaeological remains.<sup>20</sup>
  - To employ 'modern' (post-Reformation) parish and parish-location names (e.g. 'Urquhart and Logie Wester'), in the case of parishes of ancient foundation. This is compounded by the use of Local Authority names rather than Diocese in the location information.
  - Not to display NGR Data for the sites, preferring to use 'Easting' and 'Northing' – which, of course, has the advantage that it can be quickly entered into a GPS terminal. However, it might have been better to include both so as to cater for that very large section of the general public who use the popular OS Landranger series of maps. The use of NGR Data also ensures a seamless compatibility with databases such as Canmore.
- Unfortunately, this database is of only limited use for pre-Reformation research.



#### *A Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parishes.* Project team – Professor Richard Fawcett, Dr Julian Luxford, Professor Richard Oram, Dr Tom Turpie. A project funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council and 'hosted' within the School of Art History, University of St Andrews.<sup>21</sup> (© 2008)

- The user-interface of the website is excellent, and research may be carried out 'by diocese', 'by deanery', 'by county', and 'by council'. The output is concise, including Dedication, Diocese, Deanery and NGR Reference, along with a brief summary of the church's details. The student may then expand any of three options – History, Documentation, Architecture – to gain access to much more comprehensive sets of information.
- The database also includes excellent photographs of each church, and all the information is of professional research quality.
- As its name implies, this resource is limited to Parish Churches and makes no attempt to identify dependant chapels or burial-grounds.
- As a resource to aid parish research, this 'Corpus' is first-class BUT, it has a very unfortunate drawback – it only covers the dioceses of St Andrews, Dunkeld,

<sup>19</sup> POWIS Database <https://powis.scot/>

<sup>20</sup> Personal email from Mr Tom Kelly, on behalf of the POWIS Project, dated 03/09/2024: "For our inventory we are concentrating on what can be seen above or on the ground of places of worship no longer in use. There is an argument to be had as to whether we should include any of the many churches which have been demolished and their sites redeveloped with new buildings for other uses. The test for inclusion is often whether we have some images for what once stood on the site, and this is often true of anything which stood in the late 18th or 19th centuries."

<sup>21</sup> <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/index.php>



Dunblane, and Brechin. So, it shares features with OPS - first class content but limited coverage.

- Surely this is a project most worthy of continued funding in order to allow it to be completed.



Mapping the Parishes of Medieval Scotland.<sup>22</sup> Research by a diverse group of scholars from Scottish universities who, in 2009, decided to formalise their common interest in medieval parishes. The study covered a broad range of aspects including – parish placenames, dedications, chapel sites, and how parishes were created *ab initio*. The project had the following aims –

- To establish a definitive list of pre- 1891 parishes.
- To maintain a census of research already completed/in progress.
- To establish an agreed methodology for establishing historic parish boundaries using a range of different disciplines.
- To establish an agreed methodology for representing parishes over time in a digital format appropriate for a web-based resource.

Having contacted Stirling University it has been determined that this project ‘fell by the wayside’ following the tragic death of Dr Alasdair Ross in 2017.



*Saints in Scottish Place-Names*. A project funded by the Leverhulme Trust and ‘hosted’ by the School of Humanities, University of Glasgow, entitled ‘Commemorations of Saints in Scottish Place-Names’, was carried out during (2010-13) and this on-line database was a product of that research.<sup>23</sup> The Project Team was Professor Thomas O. Clancy, Dr Rachel Butter, Gilbert Márkus, and Matthew Barr

- The database contains an extensive list of place-names (13,000+), mainly obtained from the OS 1<sup>st</sup> Edition 6-inch maps, produced from 1843 to 1882.
- The database can be searched by ‘place-name’ and ‘Saint’s name’ or by simple ‘browsing’. There is an ‘advanced search facility and the option to search for sites using an interactive map.
- Unfortunately, it was decided to assign each location to one of the parishes which existed in 1975. This choice is most understandable (it aids the user in finding a location using modern maps) but it immediately limits the usefulness of the data for pre-Reformation studies.
- It is possible to produce (and browse) an alphabetically arranged list of all the ‘places’ contained in the database.
- The location of places is given using NGR References, six-figure Eastings and Northings, and exact Latitudes and Longitudes. This feature should be employed as a ‘standard’ approach by others since it provides all the information which a researcher might require.
- This project aimed to provide a comprehensive list of Saints, but it was not as concerned, initially, about presenting the same degree of completeness in its lists of churches. However, it has in fact been found to be very reliable and to include an impressive proportion of the corpus of Scottish churches and chapels.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/faculties/arts-humanities/our-research/centre-for-environment-heritageand-policy/projects/mapping-the-parishes-of-medieval-scotland/the-parishes-of-medieval-scotland/> (Accessed 11/03/2025)

<sup>23</sup> <https://saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/index.php> (Accessed 11/03/2025)



- Regrettably, at the time of writing, it is proving to be very difficult to obtain information regarding this project's current status.

## Boundaries – a historical note.

The matter of boundaries, as far as they existed in Scotland previous to the Reformation, is an extremely difficult subject to understand fully. We are very short of information regarding when and how the dioceses and parishes of Scotland came about and whether there was a common 'course' followed in all areas. Also, it is essential to remember that Scotland in the Early Medieval era was not a unified country, and we can determine a variety of societal structures within it. The early days of the Church in Scotland also has a number of 'traditions' associated with it and, if we accept the often-reported comments of Queen Margaret (*Naomh Maighréad*) (c.1045-1093), a common approach to ecclesiastical administration and worship was anything but common!

*Diocese* have been known as administrative units from early Roman times, although not immediately within the realm of ecclesiastical affairs. Both before, and at the beginning of, the Early Medieval period, dioceses were *nebulous*, un-defined, affairs since many (if not most) of the bishops, active in what we now call Scotland, were *episcopi vagantes* – wandering bishops who went wheresoever their services were needed.<sup>24</sup>

Parishes, it is believed, may represent Iron-Age structures, although their genesis is commonly accepted as being a feature brought about in Anglo-Saxon times which was then consolidated by the Normans. In Scotland, as in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria and Mercia, parishes often developed as a consequence of the establishment of *minster* churches – what in old northern Christian traditions were often called *Herað* and *Heraðs-kirkja*. Minster Churches, such as St Mary's at Charlbury in Mercia (now Oxfordshire),<sup>25</sup> were sometimes known as a *matrix ecclesiae*, and they often acted as a 'Mother Church' within an extended area containing several smaller churches. It is not difficult to understand the attractions of such a system in Scotland – most particularly in the 'northern' parts – where communities were often at some considerable distance from each other. Few were of such a size that they could support a parish church but one parish church (perhaps located within the largest community) could support several dependent chapels – in Mercia these were often called *field churches*. But it was only during the reign of King David I (1124-53) that a deliberate, centrally controlled, policy of founding parishes and erecting parish churches was established across the now unified Scottish nation, and the motivation was taxes! Unless individuals knew which land-division they were part of they could not be certain to whom, and where, they should pay their *tithes* or taxes. The ancient land-divisions, known as *dabhaichean* (s. *dabhach*) had been used for generations to define the extent of *lordships* and this practice was extended in order to define 'tax areas'. The work carried out by the late Dr Alasdair Ross showed conclusively that the parishes which came to exist within the province of Moray were composed of multiples of previously 'understood' *dabhaichean*.<sup>26</sup>

## Structure of the New List from Cushnie Enterprises.

For all the reasons given above it was determined that the new list presented here should be prefaced with certain 'definitions.'



<sup>24</sup> See 'The Function of Bishops in the Early Church.' [https://www.cushnieent.com/articles/nature\\_bishops.htm](https://www.cushnieent.com/articles/nature_bishops.htm)

<sup>25</sup> [Charlbury Mynster](#) Charlbury had certainly four dependent chapels/churches – Fowler, Finstock, Cote and Tapwell (and later Shorthampton). It is commonly accepted that Charlbury was founded by a Saint called Diuma (d.658), who had come south from Northumbria, but whose mother community was that on Iona.

<sup>26</sup> Ross (2003), i., 228. "... it could be demonstrated that the unit of land called the *dabhach* was common to both secular and ecclesiastic landholding, and that in many cases these units of land remained in use and unchanged into the nineteenth century." [229] "First, it is now clear that the parishes in Moray were originally created from multiples of *dabhaichean*. Exactly when this may have happened is unclear though the formation of the parish is usually ascribed to the reign of King David I (1124-53). The evidence for the relationship between the *dabhach* and the parish seems incontrovertible, since only one of the 440 *dabhaichean* in Moray ever crossed a parochial boundary, and that particular boundary is known to have changed on at least four occasions after the sixteenth century."



In the lists presented in this paper:

-  Names are given of any church which can be confidently shown to have been, at any period of time prior to the Reformation (1560), a parish church.
  - Including those that were chapels for a significant time during their history, being only later raised to *parochial* status.
  - Including those Parish Churches which were 'elevated' to collegiate status, (e.g. *Dunbar College*).
  - Including those parishes which 'disappeared' before the advent of the Reformation, (e.g. *Rothket* in the Garioch Deanery of Aberdeen diocese and *Balhallach* in Mar Deanery of the same diocese).
  - Including those parishes which resulted from the 'division' of a parish into separate (new) parishes.
  - Including those parishes which made use of a part of (usually the nave) of a cathedral, monastic, or collegiate church building (e.g. *Aberdeen – St Machar*) to act as a Parish Church.
-  All dependant chapels are included in the database which supplies the foundation for these lists, as are burial-grounds and other ecclesiastical establishments. This includes those *cells* and *muintirs* established in the era of the Early Church. Fully comprehensive lists of all the churches, chapels and burial grounds that have so far been identified are currently being prepared.

The lists which we present do not appear here in print but, rather, are obtainable by following the appropriate *links* in the Appendices to this paper, and by then downloading the data from our website. This allows us to carry out routine maintenance whilst also permitting changes and edits to be made more easily. Consequently, when a list is downloaded the student can rest assured that it is the 'latest version'. These downloads are all (.pdf) documents and bear a *date-stamp* to show when they were last edited. The information is free – the material is not subject to our copyright - but we would respectfully request that any use of the data is acknowledged as having originated from [Cushnie Enterprises](#).



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<https://spns.org.uk/resources/parish-list> (Accessed 15/01/2025) (This is an on-going project.)

## Databases.

'Places of Worship in Scotland (POWIS) Database'. <https://powis.scot/>

'A Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parishes'. <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/index.php>

'Saints in Scottish Place-Names'. <https://saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/>

