

SIR WILLIAM WALLACE

THE STORY OF THE “THORN TREE” IN DUNFERMLINE ABBEY CHURCHYARD

The Dunfermline Abbey Church Kirk Session Burial Register has recorded burials by marking them from the “Thorn Tree” which stands on its little mount in the northern part of the Churchyard. The Thorn Tree to this day still stands on that same little mount giving glory to Sir William Wallace’s mother.

There is a tradition that the Lady Margaret de Lambinus Craufurd, daughter of Sir Hugh Craufurd, mother of Sir William Wallace, was buried in the old churchyard on the spot where the present thorn-tree is growing, but on how she came to lie here, history seems to be silent. It is added that her son wished, after her death, to erect a monument to her memory but being in pursuit of, or in flight from, his enemies he had not time to do so and as a substitute he planted the Thorn Tree.

In the autumn of 1303 Sir William Wallace had been in hiding in or near Dundee. On finding that he was being surrounded by scouts from the King of England’s army and by sworn enemies of his countrymen, he left his hiding place. In disguise and armed with a concealed sword, he and his Mother travelled on foot, south to Dunfermline. According to Langtoft’s Chronicle, they crossed a ferry over to Lindores, then through the Ochils to the south. If asked where they were going, they made answer that they were travelling to St Margaret’s Shrine at Dunfermline (it being a distance of about 43 miles). Whether this was really their place of destination or not, the answer would secure them ecclesiastical protection and allow them to proceed without molestation.

“His modyr grathit hir in pilgrame weid; Hym (self) disgysyt syne glaidlye with hir yeild; A schort swerd wndyr his weid priuale, in all that land full mony fays had he.”

From this metrical account Langtoft tells us Wallace and his mother stayed only one night in Dunfermline, setting out on the following day to Linlithgow. Shortly afterwards, however, he was in Dunfermline again probably to escape from the English spies, whom he would find in abundance in the Lothians. This time he made the forest of Dunfermline his hiding place. At this period the glen of Pittencriff was an almost impenetrable forest extending from the low grounds on the south to Baldrige Burn on the north. There were also other forests of a lesser degree, but it would most likely be in the locality of St Margaret’s Cave and the Wallace Well (Wallace’s Spa Well, which is still to be seen on the north side of the Glen burn at the foot of Towerhill) that would have been his place of shelter. In the forest of Dunfermline the renowned Wallace appears to have had meetings with friends as to the propriety of delivering himself up to Edward of England on honourable terms. When these terms were made known to Edward, he became infuriated and cursed Wallace, denouncing him as a traitor and set a price of 300 merks on his head. On hearing this, the great patriot fled from the forest of Dunfermline to the mountain wilds.

Sir William Wallace’s Mother ~ From this period down to the present time, a tradition has it that the mother of Wallace died at Dunfermline on one of her son’s flights and that she was hastily buried at the spot in the northern Church-yard marked by The Thorn Tree. This site was that of the Abbey Weeping Cross (the Churchyard Weeping Cross), which at the time of the Reformation was destroyed and a Gospel Tree (The Thorn) planted in its place. Some said if the mother of Wallace was interred at Dunfermline she would have been interred within the consecrated walls of the Abbey Church where daily services were conducted. If this tradition is correct the interment must have taken place a few weeks before King Edward I of England, (The Hammer of the Scots) and his Court took up their winter quarters in the Monastery. It is possible that once the haughty monarch heard of this event and the part played by the abbot and monks in the interment it may have been one of the reasons which induced Edward to have the Monastery fired when he left Dunfermline in May 1304.

The Thorn Tree ~ At the period of the Reformation, “Popish crosses” were cast down and destroyed as well as cathedrals, abbeys, and churches. Shortly afterwards a religious mania set in for planting “Gospel Oaks” and “Gospel Thorns” on the sites of a great many of these crosses. A Gospel Thorn was planted on this site. This Tree had reached an immense size, and was seemingly of great age, when it was blown down during a great thunderstorm in 1784, and a stem from the old Tree, which by 1844 had advanced, to a considerable height and magnitude replaced it. This was the only living and remaining memorial of the filial affection of the Scottish patriot William Wallace to his mother. Many years ago, when a deep grave was being dug near the Thorn Tree, a circular stone wall was discovered, evidently the base-wall of the original cross.

Whilst the work was being carried out on the Tower Hill in 1906, a cave was found. It had an entrance little more than a foot wide and then opened out to approximately four feet wide. There was evidence of it having been used as a place of habitation and there was a crude fireplace comprising of two freestones to support a vessel. A leather sole for a horse’s hoof and several well rusted-nails were also found.

Tradition tells us after Sir William Wallace was hanged, drawn and quartered, his head was held at the Tower in London. John Blair, Wallace’s confessor, who became a monk in Dunfermline, wrote the biography of Wallace. He and other followers collected his other body parts, which were displayed at Newcastle, Berwick, Stirling and Perth. They then brought them back to Dunfermline, where they were laid to rest beside his mother under the “Thorn Tree” in the Churchyard of the Holy Sepulture.

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