

New Abbey Heritage walk

The walk begins in Shambellie House car park where you have arrived by foot, bicycle, car or off the No 372 bus from Dumfries which will have stopped by request at the gate. The first thing to notice is the magnificent surrounding trees, beech, lime, oak and Scots pine planted by the Shambellie estate in the eighteenth century and long fully grown. These, together with the surrounding hillsides, provide a beautiful setting for the village of New Abbey.

The first of the estate buildings to be seen, beside the car park, is the Baronial style **Entrance Lodge**, which dates from 1860 and was designed by James Barbour, a local Dumfries architect. This was extended to be the caretaker's house during the years 1982-2013 while Shambellie was the National Museum of Costume.

Proceed up the rhododendron fringed drive until **Shambellie House** appears above and to the left when the garden front of this small Scottish Baronial style mansion can be seen. Note the romantic profile of the building with its pepper-pot turrets, crow-stepped gables and tall chimney stacks. These are features of the style common to the work of its principal architect, David Bryce, who designed it. This was one of his smaller commissions so he visited the site only once and never saw the completed house, which had an extremely difficult building period including the shipwreck of the slates for the roof on their way from Ballachulish. The client, William Stewart, was a demanding man, as was Bryce, but the house was eventually ready in 1856. It was the seat of the Stewart family who had owned a large part of the land locally since 1625 following the earlier Dissolution of the abbey of Sweetheart in the centre of the village. It is now owned by the Shambellie House Trust who maintain it with courses in art, craft and photography as well as community events, with the gardens open for community use. The interior rooms are used for work and display as well as retaining its character as the family home of a minor Scottish Victorian landowner.

Leaving the house proceed down through the garden among more rhododendrons and fine trees, both native species and American introductions, planted in the later nineteenth century. Now take the path, formed in 2024, down towards the village, which runs beside the lime avenue planted in the eighteenth century as an approach to the village. Arriving in the main road past **Stables Cottage** where the coachman once lived, the stable yard and coach house are behind. Glancing up Beeswing Road (once Killiwhan Road leading to the nearest railway station, closed 1965) more estate cottages can be noticed in **Craigieside** before approaching **New Abbey Bridge**. This forms the entry point to the village from the north and is seen grouped with the 1890 Free Church, later **Guildhall**, now converted to domestic use, on the left, currently being repaired after a serious fire. The two arch bridge is dated 1715 but was reconstructed and widened in the 19th century when the main road was improved. Previous to the bridge there was a ford behind the Guildhall. From the crown of the bridge the New Abbey Pow can be an impressive sight after heavy rain but in the summer may be no more than a trickle among the stones; the view beyond is of the Corn Mill, with Church House and The Old House above and to the right.

Take the right fork immediately over the bridge to visit the mill, but first noting the **Abbot's Fish Pond** in the public open space on the right. This shallow rectangular canal is supposedly where the Abbey kept its fish for Fridays and is due for restoration by Historic Environment Scotland.

On the left, **New Abbey Corn Mill** is a key building both in this part of the historic village and as a visual stop looking back from The Square. It is a late eighteenth century building which stands out in all white paint and its varied roofline, with a kiln, capped by a vent with a salmon weather-vane. The miller's house is attached to the north. The mill ceased in use in 1948 and was restored by Historic Scotland in 1979, after being gifted to the nation by

Charles Stewart of Shambellie, opening to the public in 1983. Although the Stewarts built the present mill, it's still known locally as "Monks' Mill."

Thomas Millar was the first recorded miller, in 1825, and the last was John Clingan. Evidence of the medieval Abbey Mill was found when the road from the bridge to The Square was re-aligned in the twentieth century. Documents record this mill in use in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries but it may well have been older still. The current mill is worked by a large breast shot waterwheel (one that turns back on itself) turned by the water brought from the Millpond above along the wooden launder. Inside, the mill is arranged on three floors, grain, stone and sack with the sack hoist carrying the grain to the top to work its way down. All the machinery is in full working order and is a fine example of its type. It is well worth a visit.

Before viewing the Millpond look opposite the Mill at **Church House**. This attractive house was built as the Masonic Lodge in 1806 and is constructed of unpainted granite rubble with sandstone dressings and a slate roof laid in diminishing courses. It was also used by the Oddfellows 1892. The upper floor was the hall, entered by a stair at the rear with the caretaker living below. From the 1880s it was used as a Parish meeting hall and Sunday School but was converted to domestic use in the 1960s as the home of the Church Beadle. Three Beadles and their families lived here before it was sold by the Church and it is now a private house.

The polite Georgian appearance of Church House is in sharp contrast to the quite different building close behind it. This is **The Old House**, which is one of the oldest and most important small houses surviving in Scotland and is considered the best example of a circa 1600 type of a semi-fortified farmhouse or bastle and the only local one still in domestic use, although there are many others on the English side of the Border. Its thick walls are constructed of unpainted granite river boulders on a base of large blocks. It has a steeply pitched Welsh slate roof, originally thatched, and small windows typical of its early origins. It seems to have been improved early in the 17th century by a member of the Stewart family and was possibly built originally by connections to Gilbert Broun the last Abbot of Sweetheart. In its early days it was intended to have cattle housed on the ground floor with the living accommodation above, approached only by a ladder to the upper door, which could be withdrawn on attack. When improved, possibly in 1622, it was given a kitchen on the ground floor and the external stair. Having been continuously occupied until 1939, sometimes with separate families up and down, it became disused until 1977 when it was repaired and given running water, electricity, drainage and an internal stair for the first time.

Across the road from The Old House a short flight of steps rises onto the Milldam. These steps were for the convenience of residents of The Old House to bring water from the pond. The large Mill-pond is also basically eighteenth century but required considerable restoration in the 1980s so as to work the restored New Abbey Cornmill. Looking across the pond the water supply enters from the Mill lade in the

far left hand corner. It exits for the Mill in the near left-hand corner and the overflow channel is at the right-hand end.

In the garden of The Old House, a new building can be seen. This was built as an annex in 2024 in a modern eco-idiom intended to both contrast with and complement The Old House and help to ensure its future use. Beyond this the overflow channel from the millpond goes under the road and down to feed the Abbot's fishpond. Next is the mid to late nineteenth century **Abbot Cottage** which was built as the police station and home for the village representative of Kirkcudbrightshire Constabulary. This became amalgamated into Dumfries and Galloway Constabulary in 1948 after which local police stations began to fall out of favour with new policing methods and the wider use of police cars. Then comes the traditional village **Joiners' Shop**, built as such, with more than a century of use and still very busy today. All villages once had such establishments along with a smithy, a cobbler and a dressmaker but this is a rare survivor.

Now the large site of **Townhead Sawmills** appears. The older building is to the right which includes the site of the original water powered sawmill built for the Shambellie Estate but leased in 1861 to John Kingan, one of the tenant farmers, whose great great grandson runs it today. The current establishment, which was bought from the estate in 1969, has been enlarged several times and continues an industrial base in the village.

Beyond the Sawmill the walk can be extended to visit the **Waterloo Monument** that can be seen on the crag to the south. This is a cylindrical tower some 20m high, which was built by public subscription in 1816 to commemorate "the valour of...British, Belgian and Prussian soldiers who...gained the victory of Waterloo...when tyranny/ was overthrown and Peace restored to the World." This is one of only two such memorial towers in Scotland. Carefully climbing the spiral staircase affords a wonderful view of the surrounding country. This extension adds about an hour and quite a steep climb to the walk so instead turn back to the Cornmill and continue straight on past **Abbey House** (called Shambellie House between 1725 and 1856) built as the Stewart family home. This has its origins in the seventeenth century but was enlarged and remodelled in the one following. It is of a Georgian character with a handsome framed doorway and sash windows set regularly across the wide frontage, but their mixed sizes demonstrate the different dates of building. A coach house is attached to the right, while a large walled garden with mature trees behind also contributes to the character of the area. The wall facing the millpond is a key part of the local setting of interesting buildings. The trees in the enclosed sloping garden in front of the house hide the façade from the main road.

Arriving now in **The Square** the main centre of the village is reached with its variety of buildings. The Square and the adjoining smaller irregular space to the east is the location of the first settlement immediately outside the gates of the abbey precinct. The buildings that enclose these spaces are set on two principal alignments. North-east/south-west being against the precinct wall and east/west being the alignment of the main road through the space, which itself follows the edge of the raised terrace above the Pow. The Square has an open aspect to the west side with the ground falling away past the Cornmill and towards the bridge. This is the commercial centre of the village, containing the shop and the hotel, as well as the post box and the main bus stops. Most buildings around The Square date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with nothing of its earliest origins overtly evident, except for their position and alignment. **5 - 11 The Square**, comprising the row to the east side and incorporating the

former Smithy, may be eighteenth century; the date 1775 is on a carved panel celebrating the Smith's art on the centre cottage. As with the Joiner's Shop every village once needed a smithy, but no longer.

Facing each other across The Square are the two inns, one no longer active. **7 The Square** was formerly the Criffel Inn but was actually built as the Commercial Inn and then rebuilt in about 1900 as the Commercial Hotel. It is unusual for a Scottish village in having a friendly Home Counties look about it. Opposite is the slightly older, sterner and, at first, temperance **Abbey Arms Hotel** which catered for visiting sportsmen coming to shoot and fish. This hotel replaced the previous Crown Inn. **6 The Square** is the New Abbey Stores, the long established village shop, run in the later nineteenth century by John Kingan's wife, Isabella. The shop and attached house adjacent are Victorian, but the warehouse behind is much older and probably 18th century, although this cannot be seen from within The Square.

Leaving by Main Street the entry to the Abbey precinct appears ahead. On the right is **5 Main Street Port House**, once the King's Arms. This is Georgian in appearance and has a fairly symmetrical front with an almost central entrance, but the small size of its windows, suggest this to have much earlier and possibly 17th century origins. Its name indicates the entrance to the Abbey Precinct and a jamb of a gateway remains attached to the house, though this would appear to be contemporary with the house rather than the abbey. On either side of the road there are estate houses once single story but heightened in brick in the early 20th century.

Main Street is very narrow at this point, and it is difficult to look around carefully, so instead take the lane to the left and away from the main road. This runs along the outside of the Abbey precinct wall and is an ancient way leading to a ford and the access to Kirkconnel and other properties on the far side of the Pow. The **Abbey Precinct Wall** surrounds a roughly square area of about 12 hectares and is said to be the finest Cistercian survival of its type in Scotland. The wall is very remarkable in appearance, being built of random granite boulders, some of great size, and yet very closely jointed, demonstrating the extremely careful workmanship that was possible in the fourteenth century and with almost no mechanical aids available. Admire the view of the fine trees along the Pow and the meadows rising towards the Barhill. Halfway along the wall the north gateway affords a striking view of Sweetheart Abbey with Criffel rising behind. At the end of the repaired section of wall climb the steps and enter the Abbey Churchyard which contains an interesting collection of the older memorials to the left as the Abbey is approached. Arriving in the car-park, straight in front is **New Abbey Bowling Green**, notable for its extremely fine and unusual setting, which adds greatly to the members' enjoyment. The green is 50 years old in 2025. The clubhouse was added to the rear of the Village Hall in 1990.

Turning now to what is the oldest, largest and most important building in New Abbey and which names the village, **Sweetheart Abbey** itself. The origins of the village of New Abbey are intimately bound up with the history of Sweetheart Abbey. It was founded in 1273 as a daughter house of Dundrennan near Kirkcudbright, which itself had been founded in the previous century by monks from France. The Cistercian Order always chose remote sites for their foundations to be free of the temptations of the medieval world but of course they could not do it all themselves and needed secular help for the building projects as well as the farming and land management. A medieval settlement appears to have developed at the precinct gates, encouraged by the economic growth of the Abbey. The Precinct Wall may have also

been a defensive structure giving some security for the villagers and their livestock, as well as a statement of power by the Abbey.

The principal surviving part of Sweetheart Abbey is the Church dating from either side of 1300. The west gable, nave and 30m tower are the main visual elements in views both within and into the village. When the Abbey was taken into Guardianship by the State in 1928, the houses between it and the road were cleared away to produce the direct view into the cloister at the east end of Main Street. This was an accepted procedure with State repaired ruins at the time but would probably not happen today.

The last pre-Reformation abbot, John Brown, resigned in 1565, whereupon Gilbert Brown became commendator and titular abbot. Gilbert remained an ardent Catholic and allowed the church to be used for Catholic worship for many years after the Scottish Reformation. In 1579 it was reported that there was still a High Altar within the abbey church, though this was removed some years later. In 1586 the abbey was granted to William Lesley and Gilbert Brown was exiled to France because of his continued participation in Catholic rites. He returned two years later only to be exiled again in the following year. When in 1608 Gilbert returned to Sweetheart, he was once more arrested but on account of his old age was allowed to remain at the monastery. It was at this time that the last of the monks were forced to leave the abbey, although Gilbert was found still saying mass in 1609. He was exiled for the third and last time and died in France in 1612. It is believed that it was his obstinacy which 'probably ensured that Sweetheart was the last British monastery at which mass continued to be said after its official abolition in Scotland in 1560'.

In 1624 the abbey was erected into a temporal lordship for Sir Robert Spottiswoode. At this time the monastic refectory was being used as a parish church. In 1731 this was demolished only to be replaced with another church on the site of the western range, the surviving blank wall shows where it stood. This too was later demolished when the present parish church was built in 1877, with the stone being used to build the United Free Church ('the Guildhall'). The abbey was used as a quarry for building materials for many years and the church eventually lost its roof. Fortunately, a group of local residents acquired the church in 1779 and protected it from further destruction. In 1928 the ruins were placed in the care of the state.

With the final closure of the Abbey in 1609 its lands reverted to the Crown and in due course the Stewarts of Shambellie became the principal land owners. The setting and layout of New Abbey are very much dependent on the Abbey, its precinct and the position of gates into the grounds. The early development of the village immediately outside the gates and, following Dissolution, the spread of the built area into the precinct grounds along the line of the road are fundamental to understanding the village and to its form and character. The designation of the whole of the unbuilt area of the Abbey Precinct as a Scheduled Ancient Monument enables a very careful planning control to be kept, maintaining the unusually open aspect of the village into the future.

Leaving the Abbey behind the east end of the very narrow part of Main Street is reached. This is framed on the right by **Abbey Cottage**, now a café and shop. This is a late Victorian picturesque design and is prominently situated forming an important visual stop at the entrance to the narrow part of Main Street

when approaching from the south. Across the road stands another pretty building, this one dating from the earlier nineteenth century, **Devorgilla Cottage**. The cottage, mostly hidden behind its tall hedge, marks the end of the built up part of Main Street. Beside and behind it stands the taller two storey **Stable**, dated 1847 and designed by local architect Walter Newall, which, like the cottage, is set at right angles to the road. It has broad eaves and prominent barge boards to the gable. With walls of painted granite, projecting sandstone margins, string courses and quoins, this building brings a quite different character to this part of the street.

Turning to the left are the village **War Memorial** to WWI and the **George V Jubilee copper beech**, then **28 The Old Manse** which is a well preserved example of a Georgian manse with two storeys and garret. It stands beside the Abbey and the site of the parish church at the time. The Manse dates from 1802 and was built by local mason William Crockett to plans by Frederick Maxwell of Terregles. The building has been little altered over the years but hides behind its high hedges so is difficult to appreciate from the street.

Beyond the Old Manse fields open out on the right while on the left the road is fringed by later houses with fields behind. All this is now protected from further development as a part of the Ancient Monument. This area is important for the more open views to the surrounding countryside, and these can be enjoyed from the two benches which celebrate Haaf-netting for salmon and local farming. To the south-west mature trees behind the parish church and in the gardens beyond, as well as the trees lining the mill lade from Loch Kindar to the Cornmill pond, form a backdrop to the three remaining pastures. This open aspect, rising beyond the trees, reaches to the Waterloo Monument and the higher hills of Knockendoch and Criffel itself, is of significance in the views across the village from both sides of the valley. To the north the pasture of the precinct and the low slopes towards Landis beyond are defined by a line of trees on the Barhill ridge. These can be seen from the road through the gaps between the houses. The celebrated view from Barhill shows the Abbey dominating the village and the valley with the great mass of Criffel behind.

Progressing past the first two fields a footpath appears to the right heading towards the church. At the far end of the path is the former coach house of Kindar Lodge which lies beyond. This was sympathetically converted to domestic use in 2023 and given a modern extension. On the left stands **New Abbey Parish Church** which was designed by the Dumfries architect, James Barbour, who also designed the Shambellie House entrance lodge and the Guildhall. The church was built in 1876-7 reusing the cut granite from the demolished Kindar Mill. The red sandstone dressings and purple roof of Welsh slates add colour to what is otherwise a fairly plain design, the cheapest of three offered by the architect when he was commissioned.

Returning to the gap by the driveway to Kinder Lodge take the signed footpath through the trees, which can be rather muddy. This will add 20 minutes to the walk and can be avoided if preferred by progressing past the church and back to Main Street. Going through the trees the path enters the site of the demolished **Kinder Waulk Mill** and exits through a doorway in a surviving section of wall. Up the steps and the embankment of the Mill Lade is reached. The surviving section of the Mill, now a private house, with its cut granite walls and small paned iron windows, is typical of the offices of such a building. The site of the main mill building is now the garden. A Waulk or Fulling Mill was for cleansing and preparing

cloth and this process involved washing and beating with water powered paddles and hammers. The water to power the machinery was provided by the **Mill Lade** which also went past the Mill and on eventually to the Abbey Mill Pond. This Lade, which runs for 1 kilometre from Loch Kindar, was originally constructed by the monks in the Middle Ages but is now mostly dry as the outflow from Loch Kindar was later diverted into the Sheep Burn which runs under the bridge at the southern entry to New Abbey.

The footpath runs along the remains of the Lade for 150m or so and then reaches Kindar Drive. Turn left and proceed back to Main Street through the public housing first developed by Kirkcudbrightshire County Council in the 1930s and then extended in the post war period. This development drew the centre of population away from the old one round The Square with the hotels and post office/shop to a new centre round the churches and the school, and this part has been further strengthened by the Shebburn Surgery in 1992 and more social housing in early C21.

Back on Main Street turn left again. Across the road is **New Abbey School**, the Victorian School and Master's house, both now private houses, front the road, while the 1960s replacement is hidden behind. Opposite stands **27-29 Main Street**, a row set end on to the street. The gable wall of No 27 shows the signs of a lower, more steeply pitched cottage that has had an upper storey added. The older walling is also of interest for its use of large boulders with galleting. It, together with the old School opposite, forms a visual gateway to the historic part of the village. This is where the Abbey Precinct wall also ran and the footings of this can be seen in the footpath running between the old Master's House and the **Church of St Mary (RC)**. This is an undemonstrative building of 1824 with the church hidden from view behind the presbytery as was necessary before the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act. It is constructed of granite with red sandstone dressings and was designed by Walter Newall. Return along Main Street being very careful when the narrow section is reached. Three terraces of single-storey and two-storey houses line this section. It is possible that all of the houses probably began as traditional single storey, possibly with rooms in the roof. One house appears to have been rebuilt as two storeys and others appear to have been heightened. On some houses boulder bases are still in evidence indicating earlier origins while some appear to be later rebuilds. Other unusual features on the buildings include the two, possibly medieval, carved stones set into the front of **14 Main Street** (Rosewall) one of which is said 'to commemorate three maiden ladies who kept a ferry over the Nith and displayed their piety and their strength by transporting from the other side of the river all the free stone required for the Abbey' which you are welcome to believe, and the small shop front of **9 Main Street**. Only two of the buildings are non-domestic, the **Oddfellows** (now Village) hall of 1892 and the cafe at Abbey Cottage. The scene today can be compared directly with photographs from the 1880s and 90s which show that though details have been altered the essence remains; this street has a clear relationship with the past and yet buildings have been enabled to adapt to present needs.

Back in The Square you might visit the shop or the pub or wait at the bus stop to return to town. Otherwise the walk is now complete and it only remains to retrace your steps back to Shambellie car park. Thank you for visiting New Abbey and enjoying what the village has to offer as so many others have done before.