# Notes on
# Failford Monastery and "Fail Castle."

### *By J. P. Wilson, Esq.*

In the reign of Alexander III. the Red Friars were introduced into Scotland by David, Bishop of St. Andrews. Two years later, in 1252, a priory for Red Friars was founded by Andrew Bruce at Failford,[1] in the parish of Barnweil, Ayrshire. This monastery took its name from its situation, which was near the mediaeval main road from Ayr via Newmilns to Edinburgh, at a point where a ford led across the Water of Fail. The old ford went through the Fail a short distance below the farm of Redrae. This ford was about a hundred yards to the south-east of the monastery. In old records the monastery or convent is styled Fail or Failford indifferently. After the Reformation, when the estates of the monastery were broken up, the full name of Failford was retained by the larger part of the estate of the Wallaces, and the "ford" dropped by the smaller part attaching to the castle.

Although Failford Monastery was in existence for over four centuries, not a great deal is known of its history; most of what is known may be found in Chalmers' "Caledonia" and Paterson's "History of Ayrshire." The Red Friars belonged to the Order of the Holy Trinity for the Redemption of Captives, sometimes known as Mathurines from their houses in Paris dedicated to St. Mathurin. The founders of the Order were S. John of Matha and S. Philip of Valois, but there is some doubt whether the date of foundation is 1198 or 1232. The habit of the Order was white, and bore a Maltese Cross. It was part of their duty to redeem Christian captives from slavery—originally from slavery among the Saracens. Unfortunately no records have survived of any work of redemption by the brethren of Fail. The Head of the Priory was known as the Minister of Fail; he appears also to have been provincial master for Scotland of the Trinitarian Order. Robert Cuninghame, the last pre-Reformation Minister, had a seat in the Scottish Parliaments of 1546 and 1560.[2]

The brothers were celebrated in song for their jovial character.

> "Of Scotland wel the Friers of Faill
> The limmery (roguery) lang hes lastit;
> The Monks of Melrose made gude kail
> On Fridays when they fastit."

(1) Charters of Crossraguel. "*Ayr and Galloway Archaeological Collections*," 13, 127.
(2) Chalmers, "*Caledonia*," VI., pp. 491-2.

Another version puts it thus :—

> " The Friars of Fail
> Gat never owre hard eggs, or owre thin kail ;
> For they made their eggs thin wi' butter,
> And their kale thick wi' bread ;
> And the Friars of Fail they made gude kale
> On Fridays when they fasted,
> And they never wanted gear enough
> As long as their neighbours' lasted."[3]

**The Ministers of Failford.**—Although the Provincial for Scotland of the Order of the Holy Trinity must have been a person of some importance, it has not been possible to compile anything like a complete list of the holders of that dignity. Chalmers mentions four Pre-Reformation Ministers of Failford :—Brother John, 1343 ; John Quhit, 1470 ; John Hamilton, 1532 ; and Robert Cunynghame, 1540, a natural son of William, Earl of Glencairn. Dr. Dunlop, our Vice-President, unearthed in the Vatican records the following reference to Brother Thomas de Morton, Minister c. 1432. It is contained in a Supplication granted at St. Peter's, Rome, on the Ides of May in the second year of Pope Eugenius IV. (15th May, 1432), and is of the following tenor :—" On the vacancy of the ministry of the house of Faylfurde, Order of S. Trinity and the Redemption of Captives, Glasgow diocese, by the death of the last minister and possessor (*name not given*), the brothers elected Brother Thomas de Morton as minister, and the said Thomas had confirmation of his election by the Provincial of the Kingdom of Scotland.[4] Subsequently he also obtained confirmation by the General of the whole Order and had new provision for the said ministry. But for certain reasons (*unspecified*) the validity of the election, confirmation and provision is doubted by some, therefore it is supplicated for the part of Thomas, who is a priest professed of the said Order, that the Pope would confirm the same by apostolic authority and provide him anew to the ministry of the said House of Faylfurde, which is an elective dignity with the cure of souls and the principal House of the said Order in the Kingdom of Scotland (£100 of old sterling of annual value). Thomas de Morton could then at last rest satisfied that he had secured his position by every possible means ; first, through election by the brethren ; then by confirmation by the Provincial and by the General of the whole Order ; and finally, by the Pope himself as the ultimate fountain of grace."

The author is also indebted to Mr. W. J. Dillon for the following extracts from the Protocol Book of Gavin Ros which refer to William

(3) Paterson, "*History of Ayrshire*," II., pp. 488-9.
    (The quatrain is quoted from Jamieson's Dictionary).
(4) This is confusing, as all other references indicate that the Minister of Failford was the Provincial for Scotland.

Houstoun as Minister of Fail, c. 1527-32. Item No. 912 is an instrument narrating that William Houstoun, minister of the house of Failfurd, of the order of the Holy Trinity for the redemption of captives, and provincial general of that order within the kingdom of Scotland, received, approved and ratified, a devout religious friar, Symon Gray, a professed member of the order, as minister of the Trinitarian place and convent of Abirdene . . . Done at Failford, 7th Nov., 1528.

Witnesses—Friars Walter Bowman, Jn. Dickson, Quintin Strang, Jn. Moffat, Jn. Allansoun and Hector Houstoun.

Even more interesting are Items No. 856 and No. 1316, which deserve to be quoted in full. The former instrument narrates " that William Houstoun, minister of the house of Failford of the order of the Holy Trinity, constituted and named Friar Thomas King (Regis), James 'Chortesium,' Jn. Danpelo, P. Grimberti and others, in writing, his procurators to compear before the Pope in Rome or elsewhere and to crave Friar Christopher Houstoun his nephew, as his coadjutor and future successor. Date 21 March, 1528 ?

Witnesses—William Houstoun, George Ferguson and Robt. Kirkland."

We have no record of what success attended this mission, but within four years William Houstoun had reason to denounce one Christopher Houstoun, no longer claimed as a nephew and explicitly stated not to be a member of the order. Item No. 1316 is very defective, but the gist is plain enough. It relates " to the proceedings of a certain Christopher Houstoune, who pretending himself to be the Provincial of the Order of Holy Trinity in Scotland, promulgated a certain pretended sentence of ex-communication, whence the Minister of Failford, feeling himself hurt, grieved and oppressed, appealed from said sentence to a venerable man, Silvester Dario, Apostolic nuncio, and his hearing, for the following reasons :—

(1) Because the said Friar Christopher never was, nor is, a member of said Order, nor did he ever publish his faculty or . . . to the appellant.

(2) Because no letters citatory . . . by virtue of which any sentence of censure could justly be pronounced.

(3) Because the said Friar Christopher, personally present among certain others to the number of 40 persons with the intention of invading the said Sir . . . in his house of Failfurd, did cruelly invade the same, with arms, viz., balistas, bows, hand mangonels (manualibus man-

gonalibus) and other offensive weapons, and they broke the gates and doors at the persuasion and instigation of the said Friar Christopher. Done at Failford . . . May, 1532.

Witnesses—Arthur Hall of Fulbar, Thos. Hamilton, — Stewart, Brothers, Jn. Dickson, — Myre, Quintin Struderis, Robt. Gavin, religious."

To add to the confusion of our picture of what was happening at the monastery in 1532, there is an entry under May of that year in the Register of the Privy Seal recording the appointment by the Pope of John Hammiltoun as Minister of Faill. Reg. Sec. Sig. II., 1267.

After the Reformation, in 1576, William Wallace, a brother of the laird of Craigie, received from King James VI. the benefice of Failfurde with its privileges and estates.[5] There are frequent references to William Wallace as Minister of Fail between 1576 and 1617, in the Register of the Great Seal, in the Exchequer Rolls, in the Protocol Books of John Mason and Robert Broun of Ayr, etc. It is abundantly clear that William Wallace exercised the spiritual as well as the temporal privileges. In No. 77 of Mason's Protocol Book (1580), for example, " William, by divine permission, Minister of the House of Failfurd," witnessed a charter at Craigie. The protocol states, " the charter is subscribed by the said Minister and sealed with the common seal of the chapter of his monastery of Failfurd." The retention and use of the title and seal are worthy of note. In June, 1598, Paterson[6] relates that " Daniel Cuninghame of Dankeith in the parish of Symington, in the quier of the Kirk of Air, presented to the Moderator of the Presbytery our sovereign lordis presentacioum of Mr. John Cuninghame to the vicarage of Symontoun. William Wallace, Minister of Failfurd, also presented the King's letters in favour of Mr. William Wallace to the same vicarage. Both parties took instruments, etc. . . ."

The Minister of Fail presumably triumphed as William Wallace was vicar of Symington from 1598 to 1622.[7]

On the death of William Wallace in 1617, his son, William, laid claim to the property ; but in August, 1619, " the benefice of the ministrie of Failford " was granted to Walter Whiteford, and the grant was ratified to him in 1621 and again in 1633.[8] Dr. Whiteford was one of the King's Chaplains, first Sub-Dean of Glasgow, Parson of Moffat, and finally Bishop of Brechin. By

(5) " Registrum Magni Sigilli," 1546-80, No. 2555.
(6) Paterson, op. cit., II., p. 479.
(7) " Fasti Ecclesie Scoticanae " (1920 edition), III., p. 73.
(8) Chalmers, op. cit., VI., p. 492.

progress (succession) from the family of Whiteford, half of their lands (including Fail) came to the Earl of Dundonald.[9]   In 1690, William, Earl of Dundonald, was served heir  of his father, John, Earl of Dundonald, in " the benefice of Failford, as well temporalitie as spiritualitie."[10]

**Churches and Lands belonging to Monastery.**—There belonged to the Monastery of Fail five parish churches—Barnweil, Symington and Galston in Kyle ; Torthorwald in Dumfriesshire ; and Inverchaolan in Argyll.  In addition, the Minister and brothers of Fail held the  patronage of the Church of Garvald or Gerrell[11] in the parish of Kirkmichael, Dumfriesshire, and were superiors of the Chapel of St. Andrew and certain lands in Dirleton, East Lothian.[12]   They also possessed fairly extensive lands around the monastery at Failford.[13]   Many of the names are still to be found on the map, and the curious reader is referred to the article on " The Monks' Road," p. 140 ff, for further information on this point. Some of the names most frequently appearing as (formerly) belonging to the Minister and Convent of Fail are " Law, Huntflat (or Langhuntflat), Blakfoldmedow, the house of Weltour, Brumehill, the mill of Failfurde, Spittelsyde, the Trinity land, the Trinity Woll Medow, the lands of Brounhill, Birehill, Bourtriemaling, Blaklandis, Fauldencroft, Quarrelflat, Barneflat, Quhityaird, Kilyaird, Netherbogmedow, etc., all in the Lordship of Failford." Lands were also held within the burgh of Ayr and in the parish of Auchinleck.

Robert Cunynghame, Minister of Failford at the time of the Reformation, gives the rental in 1562 as follows :—£174 6s 8d in money ; 3 chalders of bear ; 15 chalders, 4 bolls of meal ; 30 stone of cheese ; 10 hogs (young sheep), 3 stirks, 2 dozen grilses or salmon. At this time only two poor men lived in the convent ; they had £22 yearly.  Four old beadsmen lived out of the place and had each 11 bolls of meal, 12 bolls of malt, and 8 marks for habit.[14]

**Miscellaneous  References.**—According  to  Blind  Harry,  the minstrel biographer of Wallace, the hero was visited by Thomas the Rhymer at the house of his nurse in Ayr after she had nursed him back to health when he had been thrown out as dead by his English captors, 1296-7.  Blind Harry tells us :—

" Thomas Rimour in the Faile was then.
With the mynyster, quhilk was a worthi man ;
He wsyt offt to that religiouss place."[15]

(9) Crawford & Semple.  " History of Renfrew," pp. 241-2.
(10) Chalmers, op. cit.
(11) " Reg.  Mag.  Sig."  1593-1608, No. 1868 " New
        Statistical  Account "—Kirkmichael ;  Chalmers, op. cit., V., p. 178.
(12) " Reg.  Mag.  Sig.," 1580-93, No. 1568 ;  1593-1608, No. 1875 ;  1609-20, No. 1859.
(13) See various references in " Reg. Mag. Sig.," 1546-1608 ;  " Exchequer Rolls," XXII, XXIII.
(14) Chalmers, op. cit., VI.
(15) " Wallace," edited Jamieson, II., ll. 288-290.  Some authorities say that Thomas the Rhymer
        died 1293, others that he may have been living in retirement, possibly at Fail.

In **1343** and the following years the Friars of Fail and the Monks of Melrose were rivals for the patronage of the Church of Tarbolton ; the story of their shifts and subterfuges is related in detail in Paterson's "History of Ayrshire." In **1343** and again in **1344** John of Grame "lately lord of Tarbolton," revoked the grant of the patronage of the Parish Church of Tarbolton which he admitted he had made to the minister and house of Fale "three years past or thereabouts." Yet in **1368** there is a "charter of confirmation by John Stewart, Earl of Carrick, of a confirmation by John de Grame of Tarbolton, of a grant by himself of the patronage of the Church of Tarboton to the ministry of Faleforde."[16]

In **1360**, David II. reconfirmed certain charters which had been burned in the fire which had, at some unspecified earlier date, destroyed the monastery of Fail.[17] The monastery must have been rebuilt or repaired, however, as we find royal charters issued "apud monasterium de Failford" as late as **1559**. In **1561** the Privy Council issued an edict for the destruction of all abbeys and monasteries not already destroyed, and an order went out for the dismantling of Kilwinning, Crossraguel and Failford. The abbeys of Kilwinning and Crossraguel were partly saved by the influence of the Montgomeries and the Kennedys, who had strong reversionary interests. The monastery of Failford, on the other hand, had no champion, and its walls were razed to the ground.

**Fail Castle.**—The ruins, commonly called Fail Castle, which stand on the site of the monastery, are almost certainly the remains of the Minister's house. The order of **1561** was for the destruction of the monastery, and that was probably effectively carried out. There was no good reason, however, for pulling down the Minister's house ; indeed, there was every reason why it should be retained. Robert Cunyngham, Minister of Fail before and after the Reformation, was the natural son of the Earl of Glencairn, one of the leaders of the Protestant Party, and we know that he was for a time deprived of the ministry of Fail for his support of the Earl against the Government.[18] It is very probable, therefore, that he was prepared to carry out the instruction of the Privy Council, particularly if by so doing he could safeguard his own interest in the temporalities of his office.

The author has not been able to find any record of the building of the Minister's lodging, but there are many references to " domus " as well as " monasterium " de Fale, and it may be that this " domus " refers to the Minister's house. It may reasonably be assumed that Robert Cunyngham and William Wallace merely
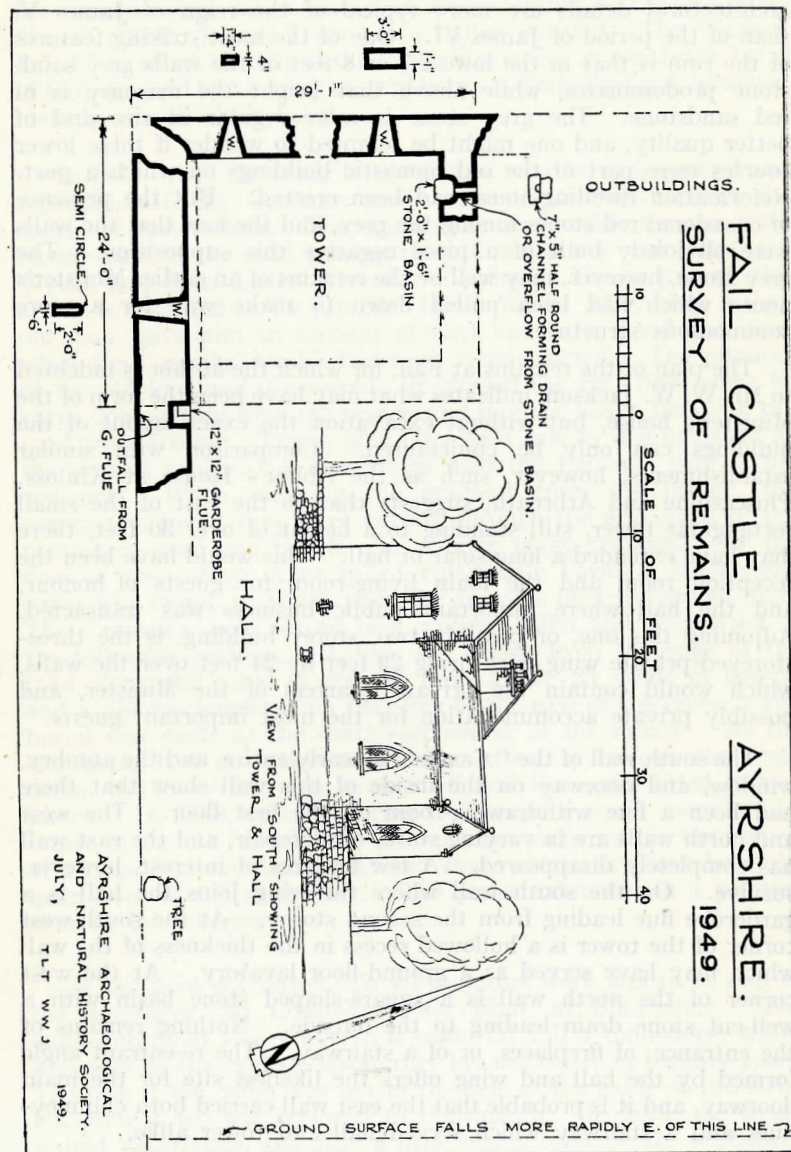
(16) " Ayr and Wigtown Archaeological Collections," 2, 144-150.
(17) " Reg. Mag. Sig.," 1306-1424. App. I., No. 145.
(18) " Reg. Privy Seal," 1544, III., No. 808.

FAIL CASTLE

SURVEY OF REMAINS.

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adapted the Minister's house for their private needs. The style of building suggests early 16th century rather than late, and architectural details are more typical of the reign of James V. than of the period of James VI. One of the most striking features of the ruin is that in the lowest 7 or 8 feet of the walls grey sandstone prodominates, while above that height the masonry is of red sandstone. The grey stone is more regular in size and of better quality, and one might be tempted to wonder if these lower courses were part of the old monastic buildings on which a post-Reformation dwelling-house had been erected. But the presence of occasional red stones among the grey, and the fact that the walls were obviously built of a piece negative this supposition. The grey stone, however, may well be the remains of an earlier Minister's house which had been pulled down to make way for a more commodious structure.

The plan of the remains at Fail, for which the author is indebted to Mr. W. W. Jackson, indicates what may have been the form of the Minister's house, but without excavation the exact layout of the buildings can only be conjectured. Comparison with similar establishments, however, such as the Abbot's House at Kinloss, Pluscardine and Arbroath, suggests that to the east of the small rectangular tower, still standing to a height of over 30 feet, there may have extended a long solar or hall. This would have been the reception room and the main living-room for guests of honour, and the hall where important public business was transacted. Adjoining this one, or possibly two, storey building, is the three-storeyed private wing, measuring 29 feet by 24 feet over the walls, which would contain the private quarters of the Minister, and possibly private accommodation for the most important guests.

The south wall of the " Castle " is nearly entire, and the aumbry, window, and doorway on the inside of this wall show that there had been a fine withdrawing-room on the first floor. The west and north walls are in varying states of disrepair, and the east wall has completely disappeared. A few features of interest, however, survive. On the south wall where the wing joins the hall is a garderobe flue leading from the second storey. At the south-west corner of the tower is a hollowed recess in the thickness of the wall which may have served as a ground-floor lavatory. At the west corner of the north wall is a square-shaped stone basin with a well-cut stone drain leading to the outside. Nothing remains of the entrance, of fireplaces, or of a stairway. The re-entrant angle formed by the hall and wing offers the likeliest site for the main doorway, and it is probable that the east wall carried both chimney-flues and a stairway which served hall and tower alike.

According to local tradition the last occupier of the " Castle " was the " Warlock Laird " (Walter Whiteford ?), so called because of the tricks he played on the simple, credulous folk of the

neighbourhood. It is said that a great storm was raging at the time of his funeral and that the roof was blown off the castle when his remains were taken out. In his " Strains of the Mountain Muse " (1814), Joseph Train has a ballad entitled " The Warlock Laird," in which he tells of the superstitious fear in which the Laird of Fail was held by his simpler neighbours. Train does not, however, identify the Warlock Laird.

In 1852, when the roads in the district were being improved and reconditioned, the workmen made some interesting finds in the course of excavations. The contractors responsible for the work on the part of the road passing the old monastery were Mrs. (sic) Wyllie and Son, Little Whiteflat, Catrine. The writer of this article is indebted to the late Mr. James Wyllie, who, when a very old man, gave him an account of what had been found and done when the " monks' road " had been reconstructed. The pitching of the old ford was discovered ; it crossed the Fail Burn some 80 yards downstream from the bridge, and more or less in line with the road from Redrae. Traces of a later ford can be distinguished at the present bridge. A new bridge over the Fail was part of the contract. When reducing the gradient from the bridge, the contractors found they were cutting through the graveyard of the monastery, and had to lift and re-inter many remains. At the door of the cottage (now called Fail Castle Farm) a large stone coffin was found, in which were the remains of a full-grown man. These remains were placed in a wooden coffin and re-interred in the following position. A line was drawn from the edge of the road along the gable of the old farm house, 25 yards in length, and a square completed on that line to the east of the house. The burial was made at the south-east corner of the square. As the contractor had no tackle sufficiently strong to remove the stone coffin, the lower half was broken off and the coffin lifted in two pieces. In 1888, when lowering a floor in a small room in the centre of the old farm house, the workmen came on the foundation of a large doorway facing east and west, which may have been the main door of the monastery. The stone coffin was in a position near to this doorway.

It had been stipulated that all sculpture work was to be sent to the proprietor, Sir Edward Hunter Blair, at Blairquhan. The only sculptured stones were this coffin lid and a tombstone, which were sent to Blairquhan, where they lay neglected for seventy years. The rest of the coffin was left in the field at the gable of the farm, but later it too was removed to Blairquhan. In 1922, the writer visited Blairquhan, and after a little search came on the sculptured stones lying half buried in a shrubbery. The proprietor's attention was drawn to the stones, and he had them cleaned and displayed in the entrance hall of his mansion.

On the tombstone the arms[19] are Dexter—a shakefork between three mascles ; Sinister—three collars ; on a Chief indented, as many hunting horns. These are the arms of John Cunningham, Dean of Guild, Ayr, and Barbara Hunter, his spouse, married about 1660. There is, however, no definite proof that this is their tombstone. On the coffin lid is what appears to be the Royal Arms of Scotland—the Shield bearing the Double Tressure, Lion Rampant, and the Sword of State. The point of the sword has gone with the part broken off the lid. This coffin lid may be attributed with reasonable certainty to the late 14th century, a period when the Stewart Kings paid frequent visits to their family stronghold at Dundonald. It seems very probable that the occupant of this coffin was of royal descent, and the writer suggests that this may be the grave of Walter Stewart, second son of King Robert II. and his first wife, Elizabeth Mure of Rowallan. Little is known of this Walter beyond the fact that he grew to manhood, married Isabella, Countess of Fife in her own right, and died without issue, 1360.[20]

A holy water stoup was found on a farm near the monastery ; it was being used as a drinking dish for poultry. It is of grey sandstone and rectangular in shape, measuring 11 inches long, 9 inches wide, and 6¾ inches deep. It is now in safe keeping at High Greenan.

### Chronological Summary of Main Facts.

1252    Monastery founded at Failford.

1296-7  Thomas the Rhymer staying with the Minister of Fail.

1335    Charter dated at Monastery.

1340-44 Brother John, Minister of the Holy Trinity of Fail, sought to obtain the patronage of the Church of Tarbolton.

?       Destruction of (part of) the monastery by fire.

1360    David II. confirmed charters destroyed in the fire.

1368    Confirmation of the grant of the patronage of Tarbolton Church.

1384    The King granted to Sir John de Lyndesay the patronage of the Church of Fayle.

1413    Friar Andro of Cargill, Minister of Fail. (Register of Panmure, p. clxiii).

(19)  We are indebted to Sir James Hunter Blair for the description of the stones at Blairquhan.
(20)  Douglas, "Peerage of Scotland," p. 276.

1432    Thomas de Morton, Minister of Fail.

1470    John Quhit, Minister of Fail.

1501-32 William Houstoune, Minister of Fail.

1532    John Hammiltoune, Minister of Fail.

1538    Temporalite pertaining to the mynisterye of Fayle (now vaikand) gifted to James Hammiltoune of Fynart.

1540    Robert Cunyngham, Minister of Fail.

1544    Gift of the abbay and ministery of Failfurde to Robert Hammiltoun, "because Maister Robert Cunyngham supported the Earl of Glencairn in contrare the governour and his folkis upon the Burrowmure of Glasgow."

1546    Robert Cunyngham, Minister of Fairfurde, member of Parliament.

1551    The Queen confirms the charter of Friar Robert Cunyngham, Minister of the House of Failfurde.

1559    Documents signed " apud monasterium de Failfurde."

1560    Robert Cunyngham, Minister of Failfurde, member of Parliament.

1561    Order issued for the destruction of Kilwinning, Crossraguel, and Fail.

1562    Account of the rental of the monastery.

1567    Robert, Minister of Failford, present at the Coronation of King James VI.

1576    The King grants to William Wallace the titles and estates of the benefice of Failfurde.

1584    William Wallace, Minister of Fail, cautioned for non-payment of Exchequer dues.

(Many references in period 1576-1617).

1617    William Wallace, son to the late Minister, claimed benefice of Fail.

1619    Dr. Walter Whiteford appointed Minister (confirmed 1621, 1633).

1690    William, Earl of Dundonald, succeeded his father in the benefice of Failford.

### MONASTERY OF FAILFORD.

Since the article on pp. 129-139 was set up, further information has come to hand and this will be published in a later volume.