John Hamilton was presented as ‘commendator’ (*secular head*) of Blantyre Priory on 6th October 1549, while just across the Clyde his close associate William Chirnside held the office of Provost of Bothwell Church. On the 3rd of September 1552 the two men exchanged charges and William Chirnside took up the principal position at Blantyre Priory where he continued his duties until 1567, he was to be the last head of Blantyre’s Augustinian Priory.

Martin Luther, the German reformer, had for much of his life been an Augustinian monk also, and many of his books had been smuggled into the country by Scottish merchants returning from Holland and Belgium, and it may be that William Chirnside, who, having been Provost of a collegiate church and therefore a highly educated man, had read some of Luther’s writings, or had been persuaded by the preaching of John Knox who had recently returned from two years in Geneva, but both William Chirnside and John Hamilton, by 1560, made the life changing decision to forsake their catholic offices and join the ranks of the reformers.

Chirnside had certainly been preaching on reformation principles in the old parish Church at Kirkton from as early as 1563, becoming the first protestant minister of Blantyre in the spring of 1567. His official reformed ministry spanned three decades, retiring from Luss in 1597.

Commonly called the Black Canons, the dress of the Augustinians consisted of a long black cassock with a white rochet over it, and over that a black cloak or hood. Whereas the monks were clean shaven, the Canons had beards and wore a cap or bonnet instead of their hood.

Although there was a monastic infirmary at nearby Hamilton, it is most likely that there would have been a small dispensary connected to the Blantyre priory too, with a monk there who would be acquainted with all the healing properties of the indigenous plants, in fact, the records of various natural societies in the west of Scotland show that many such plants were still thriving around the old priory in the 19th century.

It is also reasonable to assume that the priory made its own bread, and they would have collected through taxes called ‘teinds,’ the tenth part of local produce in the form of dairy products, mutton, venison, wool, cereals and vegetables etc. Anything that was required outwith these foregoing examples would have been procured during one of the fair days, when leather-workers, fletchers, potters, basket weavers, and other tradesmen from the surrounding districts would bring their wares to sell.

Although strictly adhering to their religious ordinances, the Blantyre monks frequently interacted with the local community for nigh on three hundred years. We know that they farmed in those areas of High Blantyre that were to become Bellsfield Farm and Priestfield Farm.

Tradition tells us also that the monks sunk a well for fresh water on the land that later became Croftfoot Farm, and allowed the people of the village to draw from it, before eventually gifting it to the local farmers.

One of the earliest records in connection with the priory declares the Prior of Blantyre to have been part of the Scottish parliament which met at Brigham, about 5½ miles east of Kelso, in 1290, when the negotiations between Scotland, England, and Norway were underway concerning King Eric's young daughter Margaret, known as the 'Maid of Norway,' where Frere William of Blantyre used the priory seal on a letter dated 14th March affirming an earlier agreement between the three countries.

Rather interestingly this seal appeared to be lost after the reformation, but it has been discovered that Lord Blantyre appears to have been using it at the Priory when he was Treasurer to James VI, as documents there were authenticated with an heraldic style seal bearing the words — EXALTABO IN DEO JESU MEO — which is from the Old Testament book of Habakkuk chapter 3 verse 18 "Yet I will rejoice in the LORD."

Again, in the summer of 1296, Frere William, the 'Prioyr de Blauntyr' set this seal to a document pledging allegiance to the English king, Edward I. This 'Frere' was William de Cokeburne, and when he fell into the hands of Robert de Barde in March 1303, he was described as being the 'warden of the Priory' at which time the King, John Baliol, wrote to the Sheriff of Lanark on the 5th of March to demand his release.

In 1344 one Walter de Blanctire, a Friar Preacher, was confessor to the Scottish King, Edward Baliol. This same Friar was part of an illustrious company given safe passage to London to negotiate the release of King David de Bruys (Bruce), who was at that time a prisoner in the Tower. Friar Walter's safe passage was dated 7th December 1347, when he travelled to London with William de Levington and Walter le Clerc.

One of the reasons these priors are found in such situations comes from the fact that they themselves were from distinguished families, like John de Eglyton, a Prior of Blantyre, who, being a bachelor of canon law, was lecturing in Paris in 1381 when he was described in a petition to the Pope from the young French King Charles VI, as being "of noble birth."

Founded originally as a cell of Jedburgh Abbey, it appears that some time before 1476 Blantyre Priory had been dedicated to the Holy Rood in Edinburgh, and thereafter had more of a link with Holyrood Abbey.

Both John Hamilton and William Chirnside were non monastic secular priests, so Chirnside held the priory of Blantyre "in commendam" which means he was in the place of a 'regular' Augustinian Prior.

During Lord Blantyre's tenure of the Priory, many important documents were signed and sealed there, and it is quite possible that King James VI himself visited the house on more than one occasion.

When Rev. Henry Stevenson wrote the first Statistical Account of the parish, which was published in 1791, he made the observation that his church at Blantyre bore "evident marks of great antiquity," and was in "a most deplorable condition."

Rev. Stewart Wright, in his 1885 'Annals of Blantyre' tells us tradition asserted that the style of architecture of the original Blantyre church was "somewhat akin to that of the neighbouring Church at Bothwell."

Bearing this in mind, this drawing by Captain Francis Grose from the very time of Rev. Stevenson's writing, shows the Collegiate Church at Bothwell in its original form apart from some alterations to the nave carried out in 1719.

We know not when this medieval Blantyre church was built, and information on its history is scant, but what we can confirm through church records is that two doors and two windows were added to the south wall of the church in 1705, and in 1721 the roof was re-slated. Then around 1729 when the church was reported to be in a "shattered and ruinous condition" the roof had to be taken off and the choir roof lowered to the level of the church before the whole roof was rebuilt and slated again. In 1755, another £60 worth of repairs were required, but the heritors could not afford to do all the necessary work, and so it was that by 1792 Hamilton Presbytery had no option but to condemn the building, as it was by then clearly unsafe through "decay and rottenness," and therefore not fit for holding public worship services.

The church that William Chirnside preached in at High Blantyre was reckoned by Rev. Wright to have at one time been a "holy and beautiful house," and this is borne out by tradition which states that it was both a "beautiful and a substantial structure," which had stood for 400 years or more.

Blantyre Priory was one of eight Augustinian houses founded after 1200, and all eight were established through the re-foundation of, or conversion of, a pre-existing religious site. It is therefore quite reasonable to assume that the parish church at High Blantyre was also built on some existing pagan ground, especially when we consider the Bronze Age burial cists and urns that were discovered on the neighbouring lands of Shott and Archer's Croft.

This ancient map shows the route taken by William Chirnside 450 years ago, walking parallel with the river Calder to Blantyre Church.