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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

TRINITY HOUSE



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

www.historicenvironment.scot

You can download this publication from our website at

www.historicenvironment.scot

TRINITY HOUSE, LEITH

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Trinity House is a fine well-proportioned classical Georgian house on Kirkgate in Leith. Designed by the architect, Thomas Brown, in 1816, it was built at a cost of £2,500 for the Corporation of the Trinity House of Leith to provide a suitably impressive place in which the Corporation's members – the shipmasters and ship owners of Leith – could meet and conduct their charitable work.

It is the contents of the house rather than the building itself that sets Trinity House apart and gives it its own unique cultural significance. The interior – particularly the fine Convening Room that occupies the entire first floor and the Master's Room on the ground floor – is filled with valuable collections of maritime paintings and portraits of former Masters of Trinity House and other notable figures associated with the House. These paintings and the fine furniture were commissioned specifically for the House from some of the most notable painters and craftsmen of their day including, for example, the painter, Sir Henry Raeburn and the furniture maker, William Trotter.

With the establishment of the Trinity House Museum Trust in the early 1960s, an eclectic array of ship models, navigational instruments and many other objects and curios collected by sea captains over several generations were put on public display and the House opened (by arrangement) to visitors. Every one of these objects has a story to tell and together they illuminate the colourful history of the House and its members. They interpret in a unique manner an important but perhaps overlooked part of Scotland's past – its rich maritime history.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- The roundel set into the floor of the entrance lobby of Trinity House has, in the centre, the House's heraldic arms surrounded by the legend 'Trinity House, Leith 1380'. This is the traditional date for the foundation of the Fraternity of Shipmasters and Mariners of Leith, later to become the Corporation of the Trinity House of Leith.
- As one of several craft guilds or Trade Incorporations being set up in Leith in the later 14th and early 15th centuries, the Fraternity was founded as a charitable body to give support to the seafaring community of the medieval port of Leith. The Fraternity does not appear in the surviving documentary record until 1532 by when it is clear that it was a well-established and influential organisation with its own building and administration.

- Originally supported by donations from its members, the Fraternity was given the rights c. 1500 to levy a tax – ‘Prime Gilt’ – on every ton of cargo entering or leaving the port of Leith. Mary Queen of Scots confirmed these rights in 1566 by granting a precept under the Privy Seal ratifying ‘the gift, foundation, erection and institution of the hospital and of prime gilt’.
- The mariners’ hospital or almshouse referred to in the precept was built by the Fraternity c.1555 on the site of the present building.
- The Fraternity’s charitable work continued to be supported by the levying of Prime Gilt until its abolition in 1861, by which time a further source of income had become well-established – the piloting of shipping through the Firth of Forth and off the east coast of Scotland and northern England. The House was the authority for the training and licensing of pilots for the Forth Pilotage Authority, under the jurisdiction of the Board of Trade, until 1922.
- In 1797, by Royal charter, the Fraternity was reconstituted as the Corporation of the Trinity House of Leith under the management of a Master and Assistant Master elected by the members of the House. The Corporation was required to hold business meetings quarterly, the minutes of which survive in the Corporation’s archive (now largely held in the National Archives of Scotland) and, through the recorded debates, these provide a unique insight into the charitable and business dealings of the Corporation over the past 200 years.
- In the same year Admiral Duncan won a notable naval victory over the Dutch at the Battle of Camperdown. This achievement was marked by the Corporation by commissioning Sir Henry Raeburn to paint a portrait of Admiral Duncan, now hanging above the fireplace in the Convening Room and by installing a fine commemorative fireplace in the Master’s Room.
- By the early 1800s the Corporation recognised that the old mariners’ hospital building, much adapted for changing use over the years, was beyond further repair. In 1816, the architect, Thomas Brown, was commissioned to design a new building - the present House – on the site of the old hospital. The building work, undertaken by Thomas Beattie at a cost of £2,500, was completed in 1818.
- The construction of the new House marked the beginning of the Corporation’s period of greatest wealth, power and influence, reaching its zenith in the mid 19th century (the heyday of world-wide maritime travel) and sustained into the early post-World War II years, only to decline with the reduction in merchant shipping and the advent of airfreight.
- In 2000, with its membership diminishing, the Corporation invited Historic Scotland to take over the management of the House and in 2004, following the winding-up of the Trinity House Museum Trust, ownership of the House and contents was passed formally into the care of Scottish Ministers on 27 September 2004.

Archaeological Overview

- Trinity House was built on the site of at least one earlier building. The only extant remains of the 16th century mariners' hospital to be incorporated into the present building were the basement vaults and an inscribed panel dated 1555, now built into the S wall.
- Although no documentary evidence survives prior to the 16th century, it seems clear that a well-established organisation with its own building may well have existed for over a century prior to this date. Whether or not this earlier (possibly 15th or even late 14th century) building occupied the same site as the present Trinity House is not known and has not been tested archaeologically. Nonetheless, its existence is possible and should be borne clearly in mind should the necessity for any below-ground interventions arise in the future.
- A watching brief was undertaken by Kirkdale Archaeology in 2002 during minor works to the floor of the basement vaults. A similar level of archaeological supervision will be required in the N pavilion during the clearance of collapsed debris and removal of invasive vegetation prior to recording and consolidation.
- Trinity House is located within the medieval burgh of 'Old Leith' (defined by Great Junction Street, Constitution Street, Bernard Street and the Water of Leith) and Kirkgate, on which Trinity House is situated, is one of the oldest and principal streets of Leith. Although heavily developed since the 1960s (the Kirkgate Shopping Centre), significant archaeological remains outwith the immediate environs of the House may still remain undisturbed.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Trinity House is a Category A Listed Building.
- It is a two-storey three-bay symmetrical classic house with single storey pavilions and a vaulted 16th century basement. There is a fluted Greek Doric porch to the centre of the front elevation, with paired columns and piers behind, dentilled cornice and balustraded parapet, a segmental-arched tripartite doorpiece with a two-leaf panelled door and radial astragals to the fanlight.
- Above the door is an inscription 'REBUILT IN 1816, JOHN HAY Esq, MASTER' with the arms of Trinity House.
- On the South elevation there is a pavilion at ground floor level with a stone dated 1555 embedded in the end wall.
- The interior features of particular note include:
 - the geometric Imperial stair leading from ground to first floor, lit by a stained glass war memorial window by J R Cook (1933)
 - The convening room on the first floor with elaborate deeply cut painted plaster ceiling, frieze on a nautical theme, unusual painted murals to the corners, and a fluted and carved surround to Venetian window

- The large black marble fireplaces and the elaborate, deeply-cut plaster ceiling and frieze on a nautical themes in the Convening Room.
 - The ornate 'Camperdown' fireplace in the Master's Room
- The paintings and furniture are all of high quality with excellent provenance (in several instances the original sales receipts signed, for example, by Raeburn still survive in the extensive documentary archive of the House).

Social Overview

- The history of Trinity House has developed in parallel with that of the town and port of Leith. In many respects the Fraternity and later the Corporation through its close community involvement and influence, both locally and on a broader national stage, has played a large part in the shaping of Leith.
- For people born and brought up in Leith, Trinity House is well-known and a respected and important part of the local community and of what it means to be a 'Leither'.
- As a seafaring nation, Scotland has an important maritime history. Trinity House is an important part of that national story both as an institution and through the lives of its many members.
- The Masters and Mariners also founded a grammar school which began in the vaults of Trinity House in the 17th Century. This school was Leith Academy which is now sited on new premises.

Spiritual Overview

- Several Trinity Houses in England (for example, at Berwick-on-Tweed, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Hull) drew their name from religious foundations – the Trinitarians. However, Trinity House, Leith (and Dundee – demolished in 1890) had no such links (drawing their name from a corruption of the word Fraternity). Nonetheless, from its late 14th century foundation, Trinity House, Leith has continued in its charitable role of providing aid for the 'old and decaying seamen' of the port and town of Leith.
- Although the grandeur of both the interior and exterior of the House and the wealth of its content were achieved through the levying of taxes – 'Prime Gilt' – on the import of cargo into Leith from the 1560s until its abolition in 1861, this commercial success underpinned generous charitable giving and 'good works' by the House throughout its history.
- The House actively supported the churches of Leith. The members paid for a quarter of the cost of South Leith Church and a seventh of the North Leith and had the right to appoint the second minister in South Leith. The kirk session appointed a teacher to instruct boys in mathematics and navigation and a

schoolroom was provided in the vaults of Trinity House between 1636 and 1710.

- By longstanding tradition, the House hosts a drinks party in the Convening Room for the congregation following the annual Seafarers' Service held in South Leith Church every November.

Aesthetic Overview

- Visitors entering Trinity House for the first time are struck immediately by the unexpected nature and unique character of the interior.
- Its undoubted appeal is difficult to characterise. The 'cluttered' style of presentation is from a bygone age and by modern standards presents many practical difficulties in the care of the collections. However, the preservation of the aesthetics of the interior is as important to the whole as the proper care of the individual elements of the collection. To achieve the former makes the latter much harder but very careful thought must be given to any proposed 'improvements' and the temptation to 'make changes for changes' sake' resisted if the 'essence' of Trinity House is not to be diluted and lost.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- A substantial part of the documentary archive was removed from the House for safe-keeping by the National Archives of Scotland in the late 1990s and has yet to be fully catalogued. Research access to this material may well add significantly to our understanding and knowledge of the history of the House and its contents.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

- 'The glory of Trinity House is not the architecture, which although good, is not exceptional; it is the collection within the house that sets it apart'. Doreen Grove, Merit Assessment August 1999.
- Trinity House is remarkable for the complete survival of its original furniture, fittings and decorative schemes as well as the collection.
- All records of the incorporation including details accounts for building and interior work survive and are held at Trinity House.
- Trinity House has an important place in Scotland's maritime history.

Associated Properties Kinnaird Head Lighthouse (?)

Keywords Trinity, Raeburn, Trotter, Prime Gilt, Camperdown