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Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC238

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90095), Listed Building (LB2209)

Taken into State care: 1938 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2011

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DESKFORD CHURCH



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DESKFORD CHURCH

SYNOPSIS

Deskford is a ruined late medieval parish church, formerly dedicated to St John. It is recorded as having been rebuilt in 1541, and in 1551 its interior was graced by a fine sacrament house, gifted by Alexander Ogilvy of Deskford and his second wife, Elizabeth Gordon. The church continued in use after the Reformation, but was abandoned in 1872 when a new parish church was built nearby.

The church is a simple rectangle, measuring 20m by 7.7m. Although the roof has gone, the walls survive to their full-height, and the west gable is topped by a bell-cote. The sacrament house near the east end is undoubtedly its finest surviving feature, and among the most elaborate surviving in Scotland. NOTE: the free-standing tower to the north of the church, and once part of it, is not in state care, although it is a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- 1541 - first mention of 'the chapel of St John' in Deskford, which is recorded as having been rebuilt. From 1545 the building is described as a church. The chapel was a pendicle of Fordyce Church, and was appropriated by the chapter of Aberdeen Cathedral, which provided a curate.
- 1551 - Alexander Ogilvy of Deskford and his second wife, Elizabeth Gordon, present a finely-carved sacrament house to the church. This is a type of church furniture designed to reserve the consecrated Host (the wafer believed to be transformed into the body of Christ during transubstantiation) in appropriate reverential surroundings. The rebuilding of the church appears to be complete by this time, as the sacrament house is partly inserted into a window embrasure.
- 17th century - the church is altered for Reformed worship. The insertion of the laird's loft appears to have cut across, and so damaged, the sacrament house.
- 1872 - the church has its roof removed and its walls consolidated, following the completion of a new parish church nearby. At the same time the sacrament house is enclosed in a wooden frame with a closely-fitting door with flat stones added to the wall-head to provide added protection from the elements.
- 1938 - Deskford Church is entrusted into state care, largely on account of its fine sacrament house.
- 1980s - a protective glass screen is erected over the sacrament house.

Archaeological Overview:

- There have been no archaeological investigations. The raising of the floor levels by almost 1m after 1872 has probably helped to seal archaeological deposits.

- It is possible that there was an earlier church on the site, in which case the archaeological potential is high. However, the presence of graves will undoubtedly have caused damage.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- As with the majority of late medieval rural parish churches, Deskford is a simple rectangular building with no structural distinction between nave and chancel; a timber screen would originally have delineated the two areas. Although the church was altered in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation (1560), features still survive from the late medieval church. They include a blocked window in the south wall of the sanctuary, with a splayed segmental rear-arch defined by a thick roll on its interior arris, and two part-recessed holy-water stoups with ogee-arched heads, also in the south wall. In the north wall is the magnificent sacrament house.
- There is no doubting the function of the sacrament house, as one of the carvings consists of two angels supporting a monstrance (the vessel in which the Host was kept and displayed). The inscription states:
- THIS . P(rese)NT . LOVEBLE . VARK . OF . SACRAME(n)T . HOVS . MAID . TO . YE . HONOR + LOVI(n)G . OF . GOD . BE . ANE . NOBLE . MAN . ALEXANDER . OGILVY . OF . YAT . ILK + ELEZABET . GORDON . HIS . SPOUS . THE . ZEIR . OF . GOD. 1551.
- It is the only known example with an inscription referring to the structure as a sacrament house. It is attractively detailed with vine leaves trailing around the locker and on the panel within which it is set.
- Devotion to the host grew throughout the later middle ages. In NE Scotland it was promoted by Alexander Galloway, rector of **Kinkell Church**, where there is another fine sacrament house, and canon of Aberdeen Cathedral. The endowment of a church with an elaborate sacrament house became a popular expression of lay and clerical devotion; Alexander Ogilvy also presented a sacrament house to St Mary's Collegiate Church, Cullen, which also houses his elaborate monumental tomb. The survival of this and other sacrament houses in NE Scotland reflects the region's adherence to Roman Catholicism and Episcopalianism.
- The post-Reformation alterations to the church are typical of the efforts made to make existing churches suitable for reformed worship. These included placing the pulpit against the south wall flanked by tall windows, installing a laird's loft at the east end, reached by an external stair (now gone) via a door high in the east gable, slapping new doors through the north and south walls, for use on communion days, and erecting a simple bell-cote to call the faithful to prayer. Fortunately, the alterations did not include destroying the sacrament house, although the new laird's loft cut across and damaged it.

Social Overview:

- For the local community, Deskford Church is perceived as an integral part of the village landscape. Its main social connection is through its being situated in a graveyard. It is visited by people from all over the world, mostly from the New World, seeking their ancestors.

Spiritual Overview:

- Deskford St John's was a parish church served by Catholic clergy prior to the Reformation. As the sacrament house demonstrates, the church existed primarily for the celebration of the Mass and the resultant display of the Host.
- The reverential sacrament house was a focus for prayer and devotion, and was adorned suitably. The angels carrying the monstrance indicate the late medieval trend for celebration and exhibition of the Host.
- After the Reformation, the church continued to serve the parishioners, though without the focus of the mass or other sacraments (except an occasional communion service and baptism). Nonetheless, the fact that the sacrament house was retained speaks of some pride, even devotion, to the old traditions. NE Scotland was noted for its continued adherence to Episcopalianism after the Reformation.
- The evidence of the internal changes after the Reformation, principally the focus on the pulpit rather than the altar, is evidence of the change of religious orientation from the Mass to the preaching of the word of God. The theatrical and simulative worship of Latin Catholicism was replaced by a more simple sacramental system and limited liturgy.
- Today, the ruin is still perceived as a church by those who visit. It is occasionally requested to be used as a wedding setting, including Humanists. The surrounding graveyard, still in use, has importance for people seeking ancestors.

Aesthetic Overview:

- Though the ruin is quite plain, it has a number of pleasing architectural and artistic features. There is glazing around the sacrament house, which is necessary for its preservation.
- The ruin sits in an attractive graveyard, with trees dotted around it. The village of Deskford itself is small, surrounded by a large clump of trees and neat fields. Altogether, the pretty ruin is complemented by the prettiness of its surroundings.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When was the first church built on the site, and what did it look like prior to the rebuilding of 1541?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Deskford Church is a reasonably well-preserved example of a late medieval parish church. The simplicity of the architecture is typical of many small rural parish churches built in this period. However, the survival of the sacrament house sets the building apart from most other examples in NE Scotland.
- The sacrament house is a particularly fine example of this type of church furnishing, and is the only example with an inscription that refers to the function of a sacrament house. Presented by the laird, Alexander Ogilvy of Deskford (who donated another to St Mary's, Cullen), the sacrament house is an

example of the emphasis on personal salvation through church endowment that was a prominent feature of the late medieval church.

- The sacrament house demonstrates how medieval forms were being transformed through the use of classical decorative motifs during the 16th century. Its similarity to several others in NE Scotland helps demonstrate the transmission and transformation of artistic ideas.
- The fabric of the church demonstrates the manner in which the church was altered for reformed worship in the 17th and 18th centuries.
- The site has high archaeological potential, but being a place of burial over centuries the scope for research-led invasive excavation is not high.

Associated Properties:

(*other Scottish sacrament houses*) - Cullen; **Kinkell** (1524); Kintore; **St Mary's, Auchindoir**; Fowlis Easter; Old Deer; Monimail; Newburn; Roslin; St Salvator's, St Andrews.

(*another property of the Ogilvies of Deskford in Historic Scotland's care*) - **Auchindoun Castle.**

Keywords:

parish church, sacrament house, holy water stoup, Ogilvy

Selected Bibliography:

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