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Designations: Listed Building (LB11831, Category A)

Taken into State care: 1954 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST MARY'S CHURCH, GRANDTULLY



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ST MARY'S CHURCH, GRANDTULLY

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

St Mary's Church, Grandtully (or Grantully, as is traditional) is a medieval church, probably rebuilt and later enlarged by the Stewarts in the 16th and 17th centuries to serve the community of Pitcairn which extended around the walls of Grandtully castle. The church is situated to the south of Grandtully village.

To the south of the church is a small churchyard of 18th and 19th century gravestones. The burial ground is not in care.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

1240s-1250s: Grandtully church ('Carantuli') is mentioned in several papal letters to the bishops of Moray, regarding rights to the benefices from the church.

1533: Alexander Stewart of Grandtully grants lands to the cathedral-priory of St Andrews in return for a priest to take charge of the local church.

c.1636: Sir William Stewart of Grandtully extends St Mary's to the west and installs the painted wooden ceiling within the church.

1806: new parish church built at Logierait, although Grandtully remains in use serving those parishioners unable to reach the new kirk.

1883: St Mary's Grandtully again becomes the parish church for around 8 years, until a more conveniently located church is built.

1892: parish church passes from ecclesiastical usage and is divided by a cross wall. The west chamber becomes a byre, while the east room remains a family vault for the Stewarts/Steuarths.

1954: St Mary's Grandtully is taken into Guardianship.

Archaeological Overview

The archaeology of the PIC has never been tested although the ground should be regarded as being of archaeological high potential. It is probable there is a long sequence of burials within the churchyard given this site was in ecclesiastical use from at least the mid-13th century until the late 19th century.

Within the church, the most significant feature is undoubtedly the painted ceiling. Other features of note include a pair of inscribed lintels bearing the initials of S W S (Sir William Stewart) and D A M (Dame Agnes Moncrieffe) and the date 1636.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

St Mary's Grandtully is a simple, rectangular building of a single storey measuring approximately 24m by 7m and is typical of Scottish pre-Reformation chapels. Its

outward appearance is austere with lime-washed rubble walls and a slated timber roof and the buildings is almost wholly without ornamentation. The church has only two openings, a small window high in the east gable and a timber door in the north wall. Above the window is a dated lintel, with the initials of Sir William Stewart and his wife Dame Agnes Moncrieffe.

Although a church is known to have existed at Grandtully since the mid 13th century, the precise date of the present building remains unknown, but it is likely to include parts of the building recorded as standing in 1533 and subsequently repaired by Sir William Stewart around 1636.

Internally, the church is divided into two rooms with a chapel at the east end and a small room at the west end to house electrics. The interior walls are also whitewashed. There are two burial vaults in the floor, on either side of the doorway. The floor is of concrete, but was originally simply of beaten earth, and there are anecdotal accounts of parishioners scuffing up the remains of their deceased landlords whilst attending church services.

The painted ceiling is at the eastern end of the chapel and comprises painted pine boards lain east-west and fixed to the wooden brackets of the ceiling, creating the effect of a barrel vault. The ceiling is a rare survivor (the only other is at Largs Old Kirk).

A limited palette of mostly browns, reds and yellows is effectively enlivened by sparing use of vivid blues and greens, although many of these have faded with time. The scheme of decoration takes the form of 28 roundels of varying shapes and sizes depicting saints, proverbs and the heraldic achievements of the family. The background is composed of clusters of fruit and flowers, reclining angels (often bearing trumpets, garlands or palm fronds), while the roundels are interlinked by decorative strap work. All these decorative features are arranged around the central panel depicting the resurrection, the dead rising from their graves at the summons of a pair of angels sounding the last trump, while a dying figure in a canopied bed is about to be struck down by the 'King of Terrors' (a skeletal figure wielding a spear). The panel is framed within vine-draped Corinthian pillars and pediment.

As noted above, the ceiling is redolent with symbols and motifs. These fall into three broad categories. Several heraldic devices illustrate the family's connections and loyalties. Another group, probably biblically inspired, illustrates Saints, Apostles and devotional proverbs, while the third relates to the Resurrection and Last Judgement, an important consideration in the Presbyterian faith. Some motifs, such as the King of Terrors, death bed scenes and angelic figures, occur on gravestones and commemorative art of the 17th and 18th centuries as well as domestic items such as household furniture. While the meaning of these motifs is fairly obvious, others are more subtle. For example, fruit and flowers can be interpreted as illustrating heaven as a land of fruitfulness and beauty.

Although not in care, the surrounding churchyard contains a number of attractive monuments, and includes a mortsafe from the body-snatching scare of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. One memorial, dated 1784, bears a finely carved

'Abraham and Isaac' scene. Only a few of these carvings occur in Scotland, all within Angus and Perthshire.

Social Overview

The monument's present social significance is uncertain, but it features in several popular archaeological guides because of its richly decorated ceiling.

Spiritual Overview

Although no longer in use as a church, the burial vaults hold the remains of many generations of the Steuart Fotheringham family and may still be in use as a place of active burial.

The church was used as a place of Christian worship for at least 250 years, possibly much longer.

The painted ceiling is redolent with Christian imagery, while several post-Reformation gravestones in the associated burial ground display motifs reflecting the beliefs of the deceased and their families.

Aesthetic Overview

The building's austere appearance belies the richly colourful painted ceiling within. However, the interior is gloomy having only a single small window.

Visitors to the church can also view the fine 18th and 19th gravestones in the surrounding churchyard, which adds much to the aesthetic effect of the church.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

We do not have a complete grasp of the symbolism of the ceiling, or why it was created.

It is not known whether the Stewarts of Grandtully simply repaired or rebuilt an existing building.

The extent of the medieval burial ground is unknown, although there are likely to be burials all around the church given that St Mary's was in ecclesiastical use since the 13th century.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

The painted ceiling is one of only two ecclesiastical painted ceilings from the post-Reformation period that remain in situ. The ceiling is in a good state of preservation.

St Mary's Grandtully is a fine example of a Scottish pre-Reformation church, demonstrating the extreme simplicity of architecture found in parish churches at the time.

The surrounding churchyard contains a fine collection of decorated post-Reformation gravestones, one of which bears a carving of Abraham and Isaac. Only a handful of these carvings are presently known to exist in Scotland.

Historical evidence appears to suggest there has been a church at Grandtully since at least the mid-13th century.

Associated Properties

Grandtully Castle (principal residence of the Stewarts of Grandtully); **Largs Old Kirk**, (tempera ceiling of similar period); Pinkie House, Musselburgh (tempera ceiling of same date); Collairnie Castle (tempera-painted ceilings of similar date); Logierait Parish Church (replaced St Mary's as parish church in 1806); Guthrie Aisle (part of the painted ceiling is displayed in the Museum of Scotland, although it has not survived as well).

Keywords tempera; wagon-timbered; painted ceiling; Resurrection; Last Judgement; heraldry; King of Terrors; Stewart; Grantully; pre-Reformation; burial vault