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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST MARY'S CHURCH, AUCHINDOIR



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ST MARY'S CHURCH, AUCHINDOIR

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

- St Mary's Church is a simple rectangular church, built at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries, which served the parish of Auchindoir, in Aberdeenshire until the early 19th-century.
- The church is set on a peaceful green mound north-west of the earthwork remains of Craig Cummin Castle. The church and the castle would have been the twin foci of the estate, and their close proximity to each other neatly demonstrates the inter-relationship between secular lordship and the church.
- The south wall of the church contains an elaborately carved transitional/early gothic doorway.
- In the early 16th century a fine sacrament house carved to resemble a large monstrance (the vessel in which the host is reserved), was inserted into the north wall of the chancel, blocking an earlier lancet window.
- The church was re-ordered in the early 17th century to conform to the requirements of reformed worship.
- The church lies within a part of the burial ground that was still in use in the late 19th century. (The burial ground is not in HES care)

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

The original form of the place-name – Davachyndore (perhaps 'davochof water or streams') – refers to a unit of land and is an unusual example of a davoch name referring to a place of parochial status. This may indicate that ecclesiastical use of the site pre-dated the construction of the church.

On architectural grounds, the church is dated to the late 12th or early 13th-century. The south doorway, which exhibits dog-tooth mouldings around the hood, crocket capitals supported on nook shafts (the latter are modern replacements) and moulded bases, is particularly indicative of a date around the end of the 12th century.

The church was constructed at the end of a period when great efforts were being made in Scotland to establish and consolidate the parochial system.

The church is first mentioned in 1236 when the patronage of the church was disputed between the bishops of Moray and Aberdeen. It is entered in Bagimont's Roll around 1275.

In 1361, Thomas, Earl of Mar, by a writ issued from Kildrummy Castle, presented his clerk, Sir John of Mar, Canon of Aberdeen, to the church of Auchindoir. In the same writ the Earl gave his consent to the union of the parishes of Auchindoir and Invernochty, due to the poverty of the former church.

In 1514, the church was erected into a prebend of King's College, Aberdeen, at the instance of Thomas Myrton, archdeacon of Aberdeen and rector of Auchindoir. The prebendary was to provide a vicar at a yearly stipend of 12 marks, with a

manse and a toft, and to maintain in the college chapel a 'stallar' skilled at singing, at a salary of 4 marks, with a decent habit and surplice.

Not long after the appropriation of the church by King's College, Alexander Spittal, rector of the parish and Prebendary of the college, paid for the splendid sacrament house built into the east end of the north wall.

In the 17th century the church was altered to conform to reformed worship. The pulpit was moved to the centre of the south wall (remnants of the pulpit that were preserved in a local farm are inscribed with the date 1625 and the monogram of the then minister, Mr William Davidson). Mr Davidson oversaw other alterations, with the extensive reconstruction of the east gable, with a simple square headed doorway and a window above. Again, the work has Davidson's monogram and is dated 1638. In 1664 it was reported that the '*fabrick of the church of Auchindoir was ruined*' and a commission was sent to Mr Davidson in order '*seriously to recommend to him that he wold diligently go about repairing the fabrick of the church*'. That same year, perhaps because of the commission, the belfry was erected. The rectangular windows in the south and west wall, which are more finely finished than those through the east wall, may also date to this period.

In 1778, a plan was made of the seating arrangements of the church which shows that there was an internal gallery along the west gable, the joist holes for which can still be seen.

In 1810, the church was abandoned as it was in a '*ruinous state*' and the east end appears to have been divided off as a burial lair for the Gordons of Craig. A new church for the combined parishes of Kearn and Auchindoir was constructed about 500m to the west of St Mary's, where it stands today, also roofless.

Archaeological Overview

There have been no archaeological investigations at Auchindoir. The archaeological potential of the monument is extremely high, and any excavation is very likely to come across human remains, and perhaps also earlier church buildings on the site.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

As with the majority of parish churches built after the earlier 12th-century, Auchindoir is a simple rectangular building with no structural distinction between the nave and the chancel; a timber screen would presumably originally have delineated the two areas. The simplicity of the plan may reflect the increasing tendency of the major ecclesiastical institutions from the late 12th century onwards to appropriate parish churches, leaving the parish system impoverished. However, the details at Auchindoir, such as the two original doorways, the lancet windows and the chamfered base course, all demonstrate the continued efforts to provide appropriate buildings to serve the parishes, even if any elaboration of the buildings was limited to a small number of finely wrought details.

The layout of the church is still clearly identifiable, with a main south door for the laity, a less ostentatious door through the north wall opposite, a later priest's door towards the east end of the south wall leading into the chancel, a holy water stoup

next to the priest's door, and the remains of a piscina (the basin for washing the vessels used during Mass) and the magnificent sacrament house within the body of the chancel.

The sacrament house is a particularly fine example of this type of medieval church fixture, which was designed to reserve the host, the wafer which was believed to be transformed into the body of Christ during transubstantiation, in appropriate reverential surroundings. There is no doubt of the function of this aumbry as a sacrament house, as it is carved to resemble a large monstrance, a vessel in which the host would be kept and displayed. The devotion to the host grew throughout the later Middle Ages, and in the north-east of Scotland the endowment of a church with an elaborate sacrament house was a popular expression of lay and clerical devotion. In this context, it is noteworthy that Alexander Spittal was a colleague of Canon Alexander Galloway, who may have been responsible for sacrament houses in three different churches, including Kinkell, where he was rector.

The construction of the sacrament house may have been part of a wider reorganisation of the chancel area of the church, with the slapping through of the priest's door and presumably other alterations to fixtures and furnishings that have now been lost.

The post-Reformation alterations to the church are very typical of the efforts made to make existing churches suitable for reformed worship such as placing the pulpit against the south wall and the construction of the modest bellcote. Fortunately, the alterations were not too drastic, and preserved features such as the sacrament house, which was a clear reminder of the old faith. The survival of this and other sacrament houses, although presumably covered over from the mid-17th century onwards, may reflect that Aberdeenshire was an area where Roman Catholicism and Episcopalianism remained strong after the Reformation.

Social Overview

The church is currently used as a recreational attraction. It receives little other community use.

Spiritual Overview

As a parish church in use for some six centuries, the site has the potential to inform our understanding of medieval Christianity, the aspirations of the rectors, vicars and ministers who served the church, and the congregations who worshipped within it.

Aesthetic Overview

The church and burial ground are located in a particularly beautiful and peaceful spot within mature trees in an upland landscape, which add much to the appreciation of this monument.

The church, although simple, has a number of fine architectural details which are aesthetically very striking.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

The existence of any further surviving historical sources or references requires clarification.

Nothing is known about the archaeology and hence earlier history of this site.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

St Mary's, Auchindoir is an extremely well-preserved example of a late 12th /early 13th century parish church. The simplicity of the architecture is typical of many small rural parish churches built in this period. However, the survival of the fine architectural details is relatively unusual and demonstrates what is often lost from other examples.

The sacrament house is a particularly fine example of this type of church furnishing, and the only example where the whole aumbry is carved to represent a monstrance (although several others have representations of angels holding up a monstrance). Sacrament houses are a physical manifestation of an important aspect of late medieval Christianity – the veneration and adoration of the Body of Christ's in the form of the consecrated host.

The physical evidence contained within the fabric of the church, together with documentary evidence, demonstrate the manner in which the church was altered for reformed worship in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The site has high archaeological potential but is a place of burial over centuries so the scope for research-led invasive excavation is not high.

Associated Properties

Kinkell Church, St Fergus', Dyce, St Machars Cathedral, Kintore Church, Craig Castle.

Keywords Parish Church, Sacrament House, Post-Reformation.