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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

PRESTON MARKET CROSS



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PRESTON MARKET CROSS

SYNOPSIS

Preston Market Cross (Mercat Cross), now on the outskirts of Prestonpans, is the most outstanding mercat cross in Scotland still on its original site. It was erected around 1617, when the town of Preston was granted the right to hold a weekly market and annual fair. As Preston has declined, in favour of Prestonpans, so the mercat cross has increasingly become little more than an isolated roadside monument.

The two-storey cross comprises a drum-like base, housing the town gaol, and an upper platform, from which proclamations were made. Six classical niches with seats decorate the drum, and the corbelled parapet of the platform is embellished with eight ornate waterspouts. A tall oval shaft, topped with a stone unicorn holding a cartouche carved with a lion rampant, rises up from the centre of the platform.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- 1552 – the settlement of Preston ('priest's town') is created into a burgh. The burgh is effectively two separate communities – the town of Preston itself, and Prestonpans, the fishing settlement beside the Firth of Forth.
- 1617 – the burgh of Preston is granted the privilege of holding a weekly market and an annual fair – St. Jerome's Fair (to be held on the second Thursday in October). A handsome mercat cross is erected by the town, with the help of the Hamilton family, who live in nearby Preston Tower. The cross is not simply a symbolic monument for fair trading, but serves as a focus for a number of activities. The 'lock-up' in the ground floor serves as the town gaol, replacing the pit-prison in Preston Tower, whilst the raised platform is where proclamations are read out to the multitude.
- 1636 - the 'guild of chapmen (pedlars) of the Lothians' acquire the right to the fair and the mercat cross. They meet there annually to elect their 'king'.
- c.1700 on - the growth of Prestonpans as a major industrial centre (chiefly coal and salt), shifts the centre of gravity of the population, so reducing Preston's importance and the pivotal role of its mercat cross.
- 1839 - according to the parish minister, the cross has by now become a 'monument of departed greatness'. He writes: 'Annually, at the beginning of July, it is the scene of a little innocent merry-making. As if at the summons of some ancient wizard, in a mood of mirth and gentleness, a numerous company unexpectedly encircle the solitary pillar, and, amidst the agreeable warmth of a summer noon, interchange many pleasant and friendly salutations, in commemoration, doubtless, of important transactions which happened long ago.'
- 1851 - the Ancient and Royal Fraternity of Chapmen of the Three Lothians are still meeting 'at our ancient cross of Salt Preston where we . . . hold our Court .

. . and thereafter proceed in state to witness the sports and pastimes of the villagers.'

- 1934 - the cross is entrusted into state care.

Archaeological Overview:

- No documented archaeological work has taken place at the cross. However, given the cross's position at the heart of the old town of Preston the possibility exists that archaeological remains survive. If they do, then what was on the site before the cross was erected, and what surrounded it after 1617, might be established.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The mercat cross is a handsome structure, arguably the best surviving in Scotland. It is constructed of warm yellow sandstone, and although lightly weathered the carved decoration is still crisp.
- The cross is a two-storey structure. At ground level is a drum of masonry, 4m in diameter, divided vertically by pilasters into eight compartments. Six of the compartments contain a shell-headed niche with a seat. The other two house doors. One leads into a dome-vaulted unlit chamber at ground level, which served as the town gaol. The other leads to a narrow stair giving access to the upper platform.
- The platform, 3.5m above ground level, was where proclamations, etc., were read out to the assembled throng. It is framed externally by a parapet, with pilasters echoing those below and corbelled out on an ingenious entablature, from which project eight spirally moulded waterspouts. Above each pilaster is a socket to hold a flagpole.
- The oval-sectioned shaft at the centre of the platform, 6m tall, is topped by a unicorn, crowned at the throat and supporting a cartouche carved with a lion rampant.

Social Overview:

- The cross is a prominent local landmark, though it no longer stands at the heart of the community it was originally erected to serve. It no longer appears to play a prominent part in the formal recreational activities of the residents.
- The cross stands across a public road from two schools. As a result, the cross and its grassed area around are an unofficial playground; the projecting waterspouts make good swings! The iron gates giving access to the gaol in the ground floor and the platform above are normally padlocked.

Spiritual Overview:

- Historically, the mercat cross may well have been used for proclamations of a religious nature (eg, the signing of the National Covenant 1637/8).
- Today, the cross has no known spiritual meanings or associations, nor is it known to be used by local churches, spiritual groups or individuals.

Aesthetic Overview

- Preston Market Cross is arguably the finest historic market cross surviving in Scotland.
- The cross sits beside a minor public road in a relatively quiet part of Prestonpans. It is immediately fringed by a grassy sward, is hemmed in to its north and west by suburban housing. Across the busy public road are modern school buildings. The upper storeys of 15th-century Preston Tower are visible in the middle distance to the NW. The cross's present setting, therefore, provides no historical urban context, and now renders it an isolated roadside monument.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What stood on the site of the cross before its erection in 1617?
- What stood around the cross after 1617?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Preston Market Cross is the most handsome mercat cross surviving on its original site (Aberdeen's mercat cross was moved in the 1840s). It is unique in incorporating a gaol in its ground floor.
- The presence of a gaol is a reminder that responsibility for law and order locally in James VI's reign passed from landowners (in this case the Hamiltons of Preston) to local Justices of the Peace. The presence of the platform reminds us of the importance of such public places for local and national proclamations in an age before newspapers.
- Architecturally ambitious, the structure displays a confidence in the use of Classical detailing which does not become widespread in civic architecture for several decades.

Associated Properties

(*other East Lothian mercat crosses*) – Aberlady; Gifford; Musselburgh; **Ormiston**; Wester Pencaitland.

(*the other two-storey market cross*) – Aberdeen (not on its original site).

Keywords:

cross, mercat (market)

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