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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90119); Listed Building (LB5631); Battlefield (BTL32); Garden & Designed Landscape (GDL00157)

Taken into State care: 1925 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DUNKELD CATHEDRAL



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DUNKELD CATHEDRAL

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Dunkeld cathedral is a partly ruined structure whose ownership is shared between Historic Environment Scotland and the Church of Scotland. The ruined nave, south porch, north-west tower and surrounding grounds are in guardianship, while the roofed choir remains in the care of the Church of Scotland and is used for worship during part of the year. The cathedral stands within the remains of an early 19th-century designed landscape.

Construction of the cathedral in its present form probably began in the mid-13th century and reached completion in the late 15th or early 16th century, only 60 years prior to the Reformation.

Following the Reformation, the nave was unroofed and the choir became the parish church for Dunkeld. The parkland in which the cathedral stands was created by the Atholl family in the late 18th century. They also used the former chapter house as a family burial aisle.

The cathedral was one of the first buildings in Britain to have restoration works funded by government subsidy. Restoration was carried out with funds from the Duke of Atholl and the government in 1762 and 1814–15 and further works were paid for by Sir Donald Currie in 1908. In 1925, responsibility for the nave and tower passed to the Office of Works.

The cathedral houses a fine collection of commemorative sculpture, including a small number of early medieval carved stones, effigies of at least two bishops, the tomb of Alexander Stewart, Earl of Buchan and several memorials to the Atholl family.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

849: Relics of St Columba are transferred to Dunkeld by Kenneth MacAlpin, and are housed within a specially constructed church. Columba becomes the patron saint of Dunkeld and its abbey.

c. 1114: David I institutes territorial bishoprics in Scotland, with Cormac named as the first Bishop of Dunkeld. Cormac holds the see until around 1132.

Mid-13th century: Work begins on the choir, and is probably completed by the end of the century.

1406: Bishop Robert Cardeny lays the foundation stone of the nave.

1457: Bishop Thomas Lauder begins building work on a chapter house.

1464: Bishop Lauder consecrates the nave for public worship.

1467: Construction of the tower begins, and is completed by Lauder's successor Bishop James Livingstone (1475–83).

1560: Reformers 'cleanse' the cathedral. A local laird, a descendant of Bishop Cardeny, removes the roof of the nave soon afterwards.

1566: Dean's Manse becomes the residence of the Earl of Atholl. Parliamentarian forces destroy the building in 1653, and a new residence is rebuilt on the original site between 1676 and 1684. Between 1724 and 1750, a formal garden landscape is laid out around the house

1571: See of Dunkeld is declared void.

1600: The choir is re-roofed and used by the community as the local parish church.

c.1609: King James VI appoints new Bishop of Dunkeld. Until the abolition of episcopacy within the Church of Scotland in 1690, the post-Reformation bishops of Dunkeld resided at a tower house now incorporated into Belmont Castle.

1689: Various parts of the cathedral are damaged during the Battle of Dunkeld, and it is one of a handful of buildings to survive the Jacobite assault. Repair funds are provided by the Marquis of Atholl and the government.

1691: A further scheme of repairs on the choir is carried out for the Marquis of Atholl.

1702: Marquis of Atholl's monument erected in the chapter house, used by the Dukes of Atholl as a burial aisle.

1762: Restoration of the choir windows and re-roofing of the tower. Work is paid for by the 3rd Duke of Atholl and the State.

1791: 4th Duke of Atholl acquires the south and south-west parts of the cathedral precincts, clearing many of the buildings in that area. By around 1810, the cathedral and its precincts are incorporated into a designed landscape surrounding Dunkeld House. Around 1815, the Atholl family builds St Adamnan's Cottage to the south of the choir (this stood in the grounds until the end of the 19th century).

1814–15: Major repairs to the nave and choir under the direction of Archibald Elliot are initiated by the 4th Duke of Atholl, with further subsidies from the government.

1908: A further scheme of restoration works, focusing largely on the choir, is undertaken by the firm of Dunn and Watson on behalf of shipping magnate Sir Donald Currie.

1925: The nave, south porch and tower are taken into guardianship along with the cathedral policies. The choir remains in the ownership of the Church of Scotland.

1975: Work on replacing decayed stonework throughout the building begins.

1993, 2000: Watching briefs in cathedral precincts.

Archaeological Overview

Archaeological investigation in the cathedral and immediate area around has been limited. Two watching briefs in recent years have demonstrated the survival of archaeological deposits. In 1993, truncated remains of walling were revealed in the eastern cathedral precincts, while traces of a cobbled road surface were revealed in 2000 near the principal entrance from the town.

The surrounding parkland should be considered as having high archaeological potential as it is known that the chanonry lay to the south and south-west of the cathedral (the chanonry provided accommodation for members of the chapter and sundry minor cathedral functionaries, such as clerks and servants). Other buildings included domestic buildings and chapels, as well as the episcopal palace, a cluster of two-storied buildings that is believed to have lain to the south-west of the cathedral. Abbot Myln states that Bishop Cardeny constructed a substantial castle nearby in 1408. Both the bishop's palace and the castle were used as a prison from the 1550s until around 1743.

It is likely that the area around the cathedral was used as a place of burial for an extended period, perhaps until the middle of the 19th century. According to the New Statistical Account, the dead from the Battle of Dunkeld were buried to the south of the cathedral.

The cathedral probably occupies the site of the original Culdee monastery, dating from at least the mid-ninth century. Traces of it may also survive within the parkland.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

Construction of the cathedral took over 250 years, although very little work was carried out in the 14th century. The building retains many original architectural features, despite having undergone several campaigns of repairs and restoration since the Reformation.

The earliest part is the mid- to late-13th-century choir, now in use as the parish church, which has particularly fine arcading on the north wall and an early 14th-century sedilia on the north wall. The tracery of the windows was replaced in the first large-scale restoration of 1814. The furniture and fittings within the choir are relatively modern, although Abbot Myln's 16th-century history of the bishops offers an insight into their appearance at the time.

Begun in 1406, the central space of the nave is three storeys in height with single-storied aisles to the north and south, accessed through an arcade of cylindrical pillars. The design of the nave shows influences from contemporary church buildings in the Low Countries, reflecting that Scottish masons and their patrons no longer looked to England for architectural inspiration. This borrowing can be seen in the use of cylindrical piers and the distinctive style of curvilinear window tracery, both featured in northern European cathedrals at this time. Neither feature appears in English ecclesiastical architecture of this period.

The cathedral's western front is dominated by the tower and the off-centred west window. The window was inserted during the construction of the tower, begun by Bishop Lauder in 1469. Study of the tracery stubs appears to indicate that it was of complex design and probably similar to a contemporary window in the south transept of St Michael's Church in Linlithgow. The ground floor of the tower retains extensive areas of painted decoration showing the Judgement of Solomon and of the woman taken in adultery, reflecting the chamber's use as the consistory court that heard various cases, including matrimonial matters.

As mentioned above, little survives of the original internal furnishings of the cathedral, but the screen dividing the nave from the choir is known to have been richly ornamented with portraits of kings, bishops and benefactors. Myln's history provides detail about the furnishings and decoration of the interior of the cathedral.

The cathedral houses a large collection of carved stones and many commemorative monuments. Amongst the earliest is the Apostle's Stone, believed to be a fragment of a 9th-century cross-slab and a probable survivor of the Culdee monastery. Several medieval stones commemorate the clergy who served in the cathedral. Effigies include those of Bishop William Sinclair (d.1337) and Bishop Robert Cardeny (d.1437), although the most impressive is that of Alexander Stewart, Earl of Buchan, better known as the Wolf of Badenoch (d.1405), which comprises a finely detailed effigy of the Wolf. This shows a knight in 15th-century plate armour, hands clasped and feet resting on a lion. Each face of the massive reconstructed sarcophagus is decorated with 'weepers', figures of men at arms carved in relief within a canopied niche.

Other important memorials include those of the Marquis and later Dukes of Atholl within the chapter house on the north side of the cathedral. Apart from the memorials of the Atholl family, the chapter house collection also includes the original gravestone of Niel Gow, the famous 18th-century Scottish fiddler who served the Duke of Atholl and his family for many years. Within the cathedral ruins is a memorial to General Charles Edward Stewart, Count Rothenstart, who died in Dunkeld after an accident in 1854.

Within the choir are a number of memorial plaques, the most notable being an 1872 bronze to the Black Watch and the Cameronian memorial for officers killed during the First World War.

The grounds maintained as part of the PIC area formed part of a much larger designed landscape created in the 18th century. An assessment of its significance stressed that it was of considerable value in every regard.

Social Overview

Although no formal studies have been conducted into local opinion toward this monument, as a live church the cathedral is presumably a significant part of the local community. Additionally, the cathedral and grounds are a significant tourist attraction.

Spiritual Overview

The cathedral choir is a place of regular Presbyterian worship and therefore remains spiritually significant.

Prior to the Reformation, the cathedral was of considerable spiritual importance as it housed several relics of St Columba, one of Scotland's most important saints.

A 16th-century Antiphonary held by Edinburgh University Library is believed to have come from Dunkeld Cathedral. The volume provides information about settings and music for the masses held at the time.

Aesthetic Overview

Dunkeld lies within an area of National Scenic Status. The combination of the backdrop of the Highlands, a fine view of the River Tay, and designed parkland surroundings create an undeniably picturesque setting and set off the cathedral to good effect.

The cathedral itself is particularly striking and contains many fine architectural details. The choir is finely appointed inside, and has attractive stained-glass windows and a number of fine bronze memorial plaques.

The paintings within the tower's ground-floor chamber are a rare survival.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

Very little is known of the Culdee monastery, particularly when the community first established itself at Dunkeld. Its site is believed to have been occupied by the cathedral, although some traces may survive beneath the surrounding parkland.

It is not known with any certainty when construction of the choir began.

Excavation within the cathedral precincts has been extremely limited to date, and our understanding of the extent of the chanonry and the location of the medieval graveyard is sketchy. Documentary and map evidence suggests some buildings within the chanonry may have survived until the 18th century, when the area was cleared by the 4th Duke of Atholl. Aerial photography has shown cropmarks of what is interpreted as the bishop's palace, suggesting that the preservation of archaeological deposits is likely to be high.

The fate of St Columba's relics after the Reformation is unknown. It is possible these were destroyed by the Reformers or lost. Another tradition maintains that they were spirited back to Ireland and hidden there.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

Dunkeld has been an ecclesiastical centre from at least the mid 9th century, when relics of St Columba, one of Scotland's most important saints, were transferred from Iona and remained at the cathedral until the Reformation.

The cathedral took over 200 years to complete, work beginning in the mid 13th century and finishing around the late 15th or early 16th century, although very little construction occurred in the 14th century due to the instability of the Scottish state.

Architecturally, the cathedral has many significant features, particularly the choir's fine arcading and the nave's western window, which may have been amongst the most detailed in Scotland at the time. The architecture of the nave is particularly important, being an example of the shift towards architectural trends from the Low Countries that occurred in Scotland from the late 14th century onwards.

The cathedral houses a significant collection of sculptured stones, including the Apostles Stone, an important link with the Culdee monastery, medieval memorials of cathedral clergy, bishops effigies and the tomb of Alexander Stewart.

The paintings within the ground-floor chamber of the tower are significant, illuminating the room's use as the consistory court.

Notable individuals associated with the cathedral include Bishop Gavin Douglas, the makar, who translated the Aeneid into Scots verse, and Alexander Myln, Abbot of Cambuskenneth, a former canon of the cathedral, episcopal historian, and the first president of the Court of Session.

Abbot Myln's history gives an insight into the workings of the cathedral and a history of the line of bishops, lending considerable detail to our understanding of the cathedral's furnishings and development of its rituals. Similarly, there is a contemporary account of the 'cleansing' of the cathedral during the Reformation.

Dunkeld was one of the first historic buildings in Britain to receive public funds from the government for restoration works. The restorations of 1762 and 1814–15 were both part-funded by the Dukes of Atholl and the government.

The cathedral grounds were part of the policies of Dunkeld House, an outstanding designed landscape created in the 18th century and further enhanced and augmented in the 19th and early 20th centuries by the Dukes of Atholl.

Associated Properties

Iona Abbey (association with St Columba), **Inchcolm Abbey** (formed by the first community of canons who attempted to settle at Dunkeld in the 12th century), Salisbury Cathedral (model for the canon's rule and order of service at Dunkeld), **St Andrew's**, **St Machar's** and **Elgin Cathedrals** (all display architectural influences from the Netherlands), St Michael's Kirk, Linlithgow (south transept window is believed to be similar to the great western window at Dunkeld), **Cambuskenneth Abbey** (Alexander Myln, Master of King's Works, statesman, historian and first president of the Court of Session was appointed abbot of Cambuskenneth Abbey in 1517), Belmont Castle (residence of the post-Reformation bishops).

Keywords

St Columba; Culdee; Apostles Stone; Kenneth MacAlpin; David I; Bishops William Sinclair, Robert Cardeny and Thomas Lauder; Augustinian canon; vicar choral; cathedral; Salisbury Cathedral; choir; nave; sacristy; chapterhouse; aisles; chapel; Alexander Stewart Earl of Buchan; Abbot Alexander Myln; Reformation; Cameronian; Jacobite; Battle of Dunkeld; Marquis of Atholl; Dukes of Atholl