STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST MACHAR'S CATHEDRAL TRANSEPTS

We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

ST MACHAR'S CATHEDRAL TRANSEPTS

SYNOPSIS

The property in care comprises the two ruined transepts lying to the east of the roofed nave of Aberdeen (St Machar's) Cathedral. The transepts, dating to the 15th and early 16th centuries, survive only as shells, but contain three fine medieval wall tombs, including those of Bishop Henry Lichton (1422-40) in the north transept and Bishop Gavin Dunbar (1518-32) in the south transept. The effigy of Bishop Lichton and an unknown canon of the cathedral, formerly in the transepts, were removed to the nave in 1950.

The nave itself, eight bays long, with a pair of spired towers over its west bays and a two-storeyed porch on its south side, dates from the 14th and 15th centuries. It has a particularly fine armorial ceiling added in the early 16th century. Following the Protestant Reformation (1560) the cathedral became the sole parish church for Old Aberdeen, and remains in use as such to this day, in the ownership of the General Trustees of the Church of Scotland. The graveyard is maintained by Aberdeen City Council.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **c. 1131** – Bishop Nechtan translates his *cathedra*, or seat, from Mortlach (Dufftown) to Aberdeen. The move is probably prompted by David I's effort to formalise the boundaries between the dioceses of Moray and Aberdeen (Mortlach), and bring their bishops under his control and away from the influence of local families. It is probable that a church is built and consecrated at the new cathedral site. Tradition holds that there was an already existing church on the site.
- **1157** – Nechtan's successor, Bishop Edward, is given papal permission to introduce a chapter of monks or canons to serve his cathedral, but nothing certain is undertaken.
- **1177-99** – during the episcopacy of Bishop Matthew Kininmund the original church is either rebuilt, or perhaps enlarged.
- **1262** - the chapter numbers fourteen secular prebendary canons. The chanonry (a walled precinct housing the various properties of the canons) is developed to the south of the cathedral, and the bishop's house is built to the east.
- **1282-1328** – Bishop Henry Cheyne reportedly has the cathedral demolished in preparation for building a new one, but the outbreak of the Wars of Independence with England interrupts work. After the hostilities abate, Robert I (the Bruce) orders that the choir of the church be completed, at the bishop's expense.
- **1355-80** – Bishop Alexander Kininmund starts rebuilding the nave and western towers, probably towards the close of his episcopate.
- **1395** – John Barbour, Archdeacon of Aberdeen, author of *The Brus* and sometimes called 'the father of Scottish vernacular poetry', dies and is buried in the cathedral.

- **1422-40** – Bishop Henry Lichton completes the nave and starts work on rebuilding the central tower and transepts. His mutilated wall tomb is in the north transept, whilst his effigy is now on display in the cathedral nave.
- **1441-58** – Bishop Ingram Lindsay roofs and paves the nave.
- **1445** – the cathedral chapter now consists of four dignitaries, an archdeacon and 24 prebendary canons, one of whom represents **Kinkell**, added in 1420.
- **1458-80** – Bishop Thomas Speirs completes the glazing of the windows and adds luxurious trappings to the interior.
- **1483-1514** – Bishop William Elphinstone completes the central tower and starts to rebuild the transepts and choir on a larger scale. During his episcopacy he founds King's College (1495), Scotland's third university after St Andrews and Glasgow, and establishes (1497) Old Aberdeen as a Burgh of Barony. He is also instrumental in setting up Scotland's first printing press (1508), and his own famous *Aberdeen Breviary* is printed by Chepman and Myllar in 1510. His tomb lies outside King's College Chapel.
- **1518-32** – Bishop Gavin Dunbar (uncle of Gavin Dunbar, Archbishop of Glasgow), completes the transepts and adds sandstone spires to the western towers. The mason responsible for the south transept is Thomas French, who is also closely associated with royal building works at **Holyroodhouse**, **Linlithgow** and elsewhere. Bishop Dunbar's finest achievement is the unique heraldic ceiling over the nave, portraying the political situation in Scotland and Christendom in the early 16th century. He also has Thomas French build the nearby Bridge of Dee.
- **1522** – Hector Boece, appointed first principal of King's College by Bishop Elphinstone, publishes his *Lives of the Bishops of Murthlack and Aberdeen*, providing much information about the building history of the cathedral (see Moir 1894).
- **1532** - Bishop Dunbar is laid to rest in a fine wall tomb in the south transept.
- **1532-45** – during his episcopate, Bishop William Stewart presents a pulpit to the cathedral; this is now Scotland's sole surviving medieval pulpit, and is now in King's College, Aberdeen. The cathedral choristers also go to the Chapel Royal, **Stirling Castle**, to sing.
- **1560** – at the Protestant Reformation the cathedral chapter has 30 canons and the diocese over 100 parishes. In January a mob from Angus and the Mearns vandalises the cathedral, destroying the library's contents and defacing the altars, before the 4th Earl of Huntly, Sheriff of Aberdeen, arrives with a force to put an end to the wanton violence. He takes the opportunity to remove the cathedral's remaining treasures to his own residence, **Huntly Castle**; these include the silk tent in which Edward II slept the night before Bannockburn, presented to the cathedral by Robert I. The cathedral church, however, continues in use, becoming the sole parish church of Old Aberdeen (known as Oldmachar). St Catherine's altar in the south transept survives into the mid-17th century.
- **1568** – on the orders of the Privy Council, the lead from the cathedral roof and the bells in Elphinstone's tower are removed. The ship taking the lead out of Aberdeen sinks as it leaves the harbour.
- **1607** - the nave, now in use as the parish church, is re-roofed in slate.
- **1638** - the north transept is sold to the 2nd Marquis of **Huntly** as a family burial aisle (his town house stood on the site of the present Chanonry Lodge).

Further repairs are carried out in 1642-4, including re-slating the nave roof and repairs to the central tower and transepts.

- **1654** – the cathedral and the bishop's palace to its east are used as a stone quarry by Cromwellian troops to build a fort on Castle Hill.
- **1688** – the central tower collapses during repair work attempting to shore it up, causing extensive damage to the two transepts in the process. A wall is subsequently (1704) built across the east end of the nave. Despite suggestions that the abandoned transepts, crossing and choir be rebuilt, nothing is done.
- **1689** – following the abolition of episcopacy in the Scottish Church, Bishop George Haliburton is formally deprived of his office.
- **1725** – more stonework from the transepts is taken to help repair King's College.
- **1911** – the ruined transepts are transferred into state care.
- **1943** - a Luftwaffe air-raid causes damage to the building, including the dividing wall between the transepts and the nave. The two effigies in the transepts (of Bishop Lichtoun and an unknown canon) are removed to the nave for their better protection, and a new stained-glass window, by William Wilson, is installed.
- **1995 –** a special service commemorating the 500th anniversary of the founding of Aberdeen University, and attended by Charles, Duke of Rothesay, is held in the nave.

Archaeological Overview:
There have been no recorded archaeological investigations within and immediately around the transepts themselves. Nevertheless the archaeological potential must be high. Any excavation is very likely to come across human remains as the transepts continued to serve as a place of burial long after the Reformation. There is also the likelihood that the remains of the pre-15th-century cathedral may survive.

There has also been no recorded archaeological excavation within the wider cathedral chanonry, the walled precinct in which was situated the bishop's palace (now occupied by a redundant University hall of residence), the manses of the canons and other cathedral dignitaries, the song school, hospital, etc. There were four ports (gates) into it. Nothing remains above ground but here too the archaeological potential must be high.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:
The transepts
The property in state care comprises the ruined north and south transepts and central crossing, all lying to the east of the cathedral nave. The transepts now only stand to slightly over 3m high and contain no remarkable architecture, except for the three wall tombs (see below). The two west piers of the crossing, partly visible from the transepts, date from the mid-1300s and show figure sculpture and 'knife-cut' foliage, closely resembling work at **Melrose Abbey**. However, more remarkable is their form; they each have a massive cylindrical core and almost equally massive half columns towards the four principal directions. These are of a type seldom found outside the Netherlands. Such massive cylindrical piers (the eight-bay nave has similar piers), more usually associated with the Romanesque, were becoming fashionable once more in many countries – except England –

particularly the Netherlands (eg, St Rombout's, in Mechelen, begun 1342). It was with the Netherlands that Scotland enjoyed its closest commercial links after the Wars of Independence, and the arts of that area became increasingly influential. (Bishop John Rait, Bishop Alexander Kininmund's predecessor, was a canon of a church in Bruges, the city through which most Scottish trade with the Netherlands was directed.) These piers are possibly an early pointer to a willingness on the part of Scottish patrons and masons to look directly to the Continent for new architectural ideas.

Bishop Dunbar oversaw the completion of the south transept, by the royal master mason Thomas French; an inscription commemorating Thomas's son, who died in Aberdeen in 1530, is faintly discernible in the south transept's west wall: 'Heir lyis Thomas the son of Tomas Franch, Master Mason of Brig of Dee and this isle 1530'. This is the oldest surviving inscription in the entire graveyard.

The wall tombs
Of the three wall tombs the finest is that of Bishop Gavin Dunbar (d.1532), in the south wall of the south transept. Above a tomb chest, decorated with trefoil blind arcading, it has a segmental arch with cusps and crockets, while a hollow in the moulding is decorated with square flowers. All this is framed by buttresses and a horizontal cornice. (This tomb, or another very like it, was evidently the inspiration for that built for William Forbes of **Tolquhon** and his wife, Elizabeth Gordon, in the medieval kirk at **Tarves** in 1589; the Reformation was clearly no barrier to the transmission of artistic ideas.)

Another fine, but plainer, wall tomb lies to the east of Bishop Dunbar's, but for whom it was built is not known. In the north wall of the north transept are the remains of the tomb of Bishop Henry Lichton (d.1440), who was responsible for the construction of the north transept. Only the tomb chest survives; the bishop's fine effigy is now displayed in the nave.

The nave
Whilst the transepts are unexceptional, except for their wall tombs, the surviving nave to their west, with its south porch and two western towers, survive as 'austerely imposing works hewn mainly from the intractable local granite' (Fawcett 1997).

The west front is now the cathedral's great glory externally. Its two towers, topped by machicolated parapets and massive stone spires, are particularly impressive tower-house-like structures, whilst between them is a processional doorway surmounted by a window formed of seven narrow equal-height openings.

Internally, the undoubted glory is the ribbed heraldic carved oak and painted ceiling placed over the nave by Bishop Dunbar and Alexander Galloway, rector of **Kinkell**, in the 1520s. Three rows of shields – one depicting the kings of Europe headed by the Holy Roman Emperor; one the Pope and all the prelates of Scotland; and the third the king of Scots with his nobles – are shown processing towards the figure of the Christ child, the king of Kings, that once adorned the pulpitum east of the central crossing. This ceiling is unique, though it was

undoubtedly the inspiration for that over the choir in **Glasgow Cathedral**, installed in 1912.

The effigies
Three effigies, all 15th-century in date, survive and are displayed in the nave's north aisle. Two are still in state care, because they were brought from the transepts in 1950 for their better preservation. One is of Bishop Henry Lichton (d. 1440), somewhat weathered but depicted in his mass vestments and mitre. The other is of an unknown canon of the period. The best-preserved effigy is that of Canon Walter Idyll (d. 1468?), still *in situ* in his wall tomb; he too is depicted in the vestments worn by canons of that time.

Note: the cathedral's pulpit, presented by Bishop William Stewart (1532-45) on the evidence of its heraldic decoration, is now in King's College Chapel. It is Scotland's sole remaining substantially medieval pulpit.

Social Overview:
St Machar's cathedral still serves as a parish church (the Cathedral Church of St Machar, Old Aberdeen), and as such is used for all manner of parochial activities besides services, including a bell-ringing group and a variety of musical events.

The building also remains an important focus for civic activities within the wider metropolis of Aberdeen and NE Scotland.

The Friends of St Machar's are very active in the cathedral, including fund-raising and publishing valuable 'occasional papers' related to the history and architecture of the building.

Spiritual Overview:
The site occupied by St Machar's Cathedral has been a place of worship for nine centuries; indeed, if tradition holds true, the spot may have served as a religious site since the early centuries of Christianity in Scotland.

After the Protestant Reformation (1560) the cathedral's secular chapter of canons and cathedral dignitaries was abolished. However, the building continued in use as the parish church of Old Aberdeen, rendering obsolete the Snow Kirk (the church of St Maria ad Nives, or St Mary of the Snows), founded by Bishop Elphinstone c. 1500 which stood SW of King's College. The new cathedral parish church was served by one part-minister and a nominal bishop whose main interest lay at St Nicholas Church, New Aberdeen. In the early 17th century, the south transept housed the altar of St Catherine, and in 1638 the north transept (St John's Aisle) was purchased by the Marquis of Huntly for use as a private burial aisle.

St Machar's Cathedral finally ceased to function as a bishop's seat in 1689, following the abolition of episcopacy in the Scottish Church. The nave, however, continued in use as the parish church of Old Aberdeen. It remains in use as such to this day, under the auspices of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

<u>Aesthetic Overview</u>
St Machar's Cathedral stands at the heart of Old Aberdeen, whose cobbled streets and charming old houses easily evoke images of centuries gone by. The impressive roofed cathedral building presents a surprisingly militaristic aspect, with its grey granite build and machicolated western towers with their heavy stone spires.

The ruined transepts, in stark contrast, are squat and tucked out of sight. They give the impression of being somewhat unloved. Low-level vandalism afflicts them and the modern protective cover over the tomb of Bishop Dunbar is occasionally used as a shelter by the homeless.

<u>What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?</u>
- Was there an early Christian church on the site, and what was the form of the 12th-/13th-century predecessor of the present cathedral? A detailed archaeological study may yet be able to cast additional light on the origins and early development of the cathedral site.
- What was the detailed form of the east end of the cathedral (ie, transepts and choir)? It would be useful to see what other evidence exists, in addition to Gordon of Rothiemay's and John Slezer's later-17th-century prospects, to show how the cathedral looked prior to the collapse of the central tower in 1688.
- What was the layout and form of the cathedral chanonry in the high Middle Ages, and how did it change after the Protestant Reformation? A detailed study of the available documentation combined with archaeological exploration has the potential to tell us much more of the wider aspect of cathedral life beyond the cathedral building itself.

<u>ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE</u>

<u>Key Points:</u>
- The ruined transepts are unexceptional but they do contain several very fine late medieval wall tombs, particularly that of Bishop Gavin Dunbar.
- The transepts are only a small part of a much larger building, of which the nave is still extant and in use, and the choir has long been demolished. The transepts should be seen in context and not in isolation.
- St Machar's Cathedral is almost entirely a late medieval structure. Nothing of its predecessor can be identified within the standing fabric of the building.
- The 15th-century west front and the nave's unique early 16th-century heraldic ceiling are the crowning glories of the cathedral.
- The stylistic details of the eight-bay nave demonstrate the flow of architectural ideas direct from Continental Europe, particularly the Netherlands, in the aftermath of the Wars of Independence with England.
- The building history of the cathedral was particularly well documented by the historian Hector Boece in the early 1500s, before the upheaval of the Protestant Reformation took its toll.
- St Machar's Cathedral has remained in continuous use for religious purposes for well over 600 years, and continues today to serve as the parish church of Old Aberdeen, and as a popular venue for concerts, etc, serving the wider community.

Associated Properties:
(other medieval cathedrals in Scotland) – **Brechin**; Dornoch; **Dunblane**; **Dunkeld**; **Elgin**; **Fortrose**; **Glasgow**; Kirkwall; Lismore; **St Andrews**; **Whithorn**

(locations of other notable later medieval wall tombs) – **Beauly Priory**; **Castle Semple Collegiate Church**; Corstorphine Collegiate Church; Cullen Collegiate Church; **Dunkeld Cathedral**; **Elgin Cathedral**; Fordyce Church; **Fortrose Cathedral**; Kirkwall Cathdral; **Lincluden Collegiate Church**; **Maybole Collegiate Church**; **St Bride's Church, Douglas**; **St Mary's Church, Rothesay**; St Salvator's, St Andrews; **Seton Collegiate Church**; **Tolquhon Tomb, Tarves**; **Torphichen Preceptory**

(other bishops' effigies) – **Dunblane** (Bishop Clement(?)); **Dunkeld** (Richard de Cardeney); **Elgin** (John de Winchester, John de Pilmuir (?) & John de Innes(?)); **Fortrose** (John Fraser(?)); **Glasgow** (Robert Wishart)

Keywords:
St Machar; cathedral; bishop; transept; heraldic ceiling; tomb; Reformation

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