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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST MARTIN'S CHURCH, HADDINGTON



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ST MARTIN'S CHURCH, HADDINGTON

SYNOPSIS

St. Martin's Kirk, in the Haddington suburb of Nungate, is a rare example in Scotland of a 12th-century parish church. Its subsequent history is obscure, but it may well have been where John Knox, father of the Protestant Reformation in Scotland, worshipped in his childhood; Knox was born in Nungate c.1514.

The nave is the only part of the church to survive. Complete to the wall-head but roofless, it retains some interesting features, including a round chancel arch and numerous square holes that go right through the walls, interpreted as holding timber scaffolding. The ruin today stands somewhat forlornly on the outskirts of Haddington.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- c.1153 - Alexander de St. Martin receives the estate of Athelstaneford, near Haddington, from David I. Alexander is presumed to be related to the St. Martins, who come to England from Normandy in the retinue of Earl William de Warenne, in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest, and settle on the Warenne estates in southern England.
- c.1158 - King David's daughter-in-law, Ada de Warenne, countess of Northumberland, founds the Cistercian nunnery of St. Mary, 1km east of Haddington.
- c.1170 - Alexander de St. Martin gives to the nunnery 'the lands, tenements and other pertinents of St. Martinsgate', a suburb of Haddington lying east of the River Tyne. In time, St. Martin's becomes known as Nungate, focusing on *Nungait*, the road linking Haddington and the nunnery. St. Martin's Kirk is probably in existence by this date.
- c.1514 - John Knox is born in Nungate, in a street called Giffordgate lying along the riverside, and presumably attend St. Martin's in his formative years.
- 1564 – following the Protestant Reformation (1560), Elizabeth Hepburn, the last prioress, feus the nunnery lands to William Maitland of Lethington (now Lennoxlove).
- 1621/2 - the nunnery is erected into a temporal lordship for John Maitland, master of Lauderdale (see the Statement of Cultural Significance for the **Lauderdale Aisle**, St. Mary's, Haddington). What happens to St. Martin's Church in the aftermath of the Reformation is unclear, but the disappearance of the chancel suggests that the building was converted for Presbyterian worship (a similar change affected the **Cross Kirk, Peebles**).
- 1911 - the property is taken into state care.

Archaeological Overview:

- According to MacGibbon and Ross, excavations supposedly undertaken prior to 1896 recorded the discovery of the chancel, to the east of the surviving nave, measuring 12ft square. However, excavations undertaken by the Ministry of Works in 1912, following the transfer of the property into state care, failed to reveal the chancel foundations.
- That said, the archaeological potential in and around the footprint of the medieval church must be deemed high, given modern scientific methods. The chancel may yet be detected, together with other church-related features both inside and immediately adjacent to it. There will also have been a graveyard for the inhabitants of St. Martinsgate/Nungate. The possibility of physical and artefactual remains of St. Martinsgate/Nungate, in the field around the surviving church (but not in state care) cannot be ruled out.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The rectangular nave is all that remains standing above ground of the medieval church. It is fairly complete, and built from irregularly coursed red sandstone with lighter coloured ashlar dressings. It was architecturally altered later.
- Obviously original (ie, 12th-century) features include the majority of the windows and the chancel arch in the east wall. The small chancel arch has a hoodmould and plain impost at the springing point. Of the four windows in the north and south walls, three are round-headed with broad internal splays, indicating a 12th-century date.
- Later details (possibly 13th century) include the two doors into the nave, through the north and south walls, and the pointed tunnel vault, of which a portion survives at the west end. The six external buttresses, of a different (grey) stone from the walls and built to counter the thrust of the vault works, may be contemporary or added later.
- The nave is relatively plain. The only sophisticated detail surviving is the round-headed piscina (basin for washing the vessels used in the mass) to the south of the chancel arch, and indicating the presence of a side altar in the nave.
- The nave walls are unusual in being pierced by numerous square holes at various heights, which penetrate the full wall thickness. They could have been putlog-holes for holding scaffolding during construction work. Similar features are seen in the cloister walls at **Restenneth Priory**, St. Helen's Church, Cockburnspath, and the later medieval great hall at nearby **Hailes Castle**.
- The absence of the chancel makes it very difficult to assess the form and detail of the church as a whole.
- A short distance to the south of the kirk lie the damaged remains of a peculiar square pillar with a fluted cornice (not in state care). McWilliam describes it as 'looking like a stranded gate pier' and questions whether it may have been a sundial. It seems to have little if anything to do with St. Martin's Kirk itself.

Social Overview:

- St. Martin's Kirk is not well known, other than to the residents of Nungate, owing to its seclusion and distance from the town centre of Haddington. However, being quite large and isolated from other structures, as well as being close to a busy road (Whittinghame Drive), it presumably forms part of the background social consciousness of the people of Haddington and its environs.
- The property seems no longer to serve any use other than as part of the play area for the residents of Nungate. A children's play park and football pitch lie in the adjacent grassy areas.

Spiritual Overview:

- Historically, St. Martin's Kirk served as the local place of worship for the inhabitants of St. Martinsgate (later Nungate).
- The church was appropriated by the Cistercian nunnery of Haddington, and the revenues and teinds collected would have gone to support their activities.
- It is not known when St. Martin's ceased to serve its spiritual functions.
- Today, St. Martin's Kirk is still identifiably a church building, but it is derelict and has little spirituality about it. Communication with Haddington churches has revealed no current spiritual use of the site by them.

Aesthetic Overview

- St. Martin's cuts a somewhat forlorn figure. It stands relatively isolated on the outskirts of the town, with a few mature trees for company, and its gables seem awkwardly tall for its long, thin body. It retains a sense of claustrophobia within, with its uniformly dark material and ruinous condition.
- The structure is bordered by suburban sprawl to the west and south, of which only the west is partly screened by trees. The pleasant landscaped grounds of Amisfield House, across Whittinghame Drive to the east (now a golf course), have little beneficial impact on the church. The property has little sense of serenity.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What was the history of St. Martin's, and when did it cease to serve a religious use?
- What form did the chancel take?
- How extensive was the church's graveyard?
- What remains of the medieval suburb of Nungate in the area surrounding the ruin?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points:

- St. Martin's Kirk is a comparatively rare, albeit somewhat plain, example of 12th-century parish architecture in Scotland.

- St. Martin's has a high archaeological potential that could provide valuable information about a medieval urban church and its parishioners over several centuries.
- St. Martin's may well have been the childhood kirk of John Knox, architect of the Protestant Reformation in Scotland.

Associated Properties

(other related sites locally) – St. Mary's Church, Haddington (including the **Lauderdale Aisle**); Nungate Bridge; St. Mary's Nunnery (site of).
(some other 12th-century parish churches in East Lothian) – St. Andrew's, Gullane; St. Baldred's, Tynningehame.

Keywords:

nave, chancel, putlog holes, graveyard, Cistercian nunnery, John Knox

Selected Bibliography:

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