



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC205
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Taken into State care:	1949 (Guardianship)
Last Reviewed:	2005 (2025 update to include Empire connections)

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# MAYBOLE COLLEGIATE CHURCH



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## MAYBOLE COLLEGIATE CHURCH

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises the substantial remains of a small medieval collegiate church, now located on the south side of the town of Maybole in Ayrshire, surviving as standing structures and as buried archaeology, within its walled precinct. Most walls are preserved to near wallhead height.

A chapel of St. Mary was founded here by Sir John Kennedy of Dunure in 1371, and transformed into a college by him before February 1382, by which date the church was largely complete.

In the late 17th century, it is described as extant and entire, being used as the family burial place of the Kennedy earls of Cassilis.

## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical overview

Maybole was capital of the Carrick lordship, and by the late medieval period was home to the castle of the earls of Cassillis, and to the town houses of the lairds of the district. The nucleus of the medieval settlement lay around this and the adjacent parish church, and in recent years has shifted up the hill to the north.

- 1371 - John Kennedy of Dunure founded a chapel of St. Mary here immediately west of the (now demolished) medieval parish church. The chapel was served by 3 chaplains and a clerk.
- 1382 - a college of priests was established in this chapel by the same John Kennedy, with the consent of the Bishop of Glasgow. The greater part of the building was complete by this time, being served by a provost, two chaplains and a clerk.
- 1516 - Maybole received a significant economic boost when John, Duke of Albany granted to the provost and prebendaries of the collegiate church a charter of erection of a burgh of barony, with Gilbert Kennedy, Earl of Cassillis, as its superior. This was the first burgh in the large district of Carrick. The college received further endowments at this time, with the fifth prebend gifted by Egidia Blair, whose tomb exists within Crossraguel Abbey.
- 1560 - at least five prebends were present by the time of the Reformation. The college continued to function for a time thereafter, mass being publicly celebrated here by 200 people at Easter 1564.
- Late 17th century - described as extant and entire, being used as the burial place of the Kennedy earls of Cassilis and other gentlemen,

who contributed to the reroofing “when it was decayed”. The adjacent houses of the prebends existed at this time.

- Though it does not seem to have had much impact on the church, the Kennedy family were direct beneficiaries of chattel slavery. Thomas Kennedy, 9th earl of Cassillis (1726–1775) was likely involved in the slave trade by the 1760s and invested in plantations worked by enslaved people in East Florida. Kennedy also invested in East India stock in 1769–71.
- A direct connection to the church is not known, but Thomas Kennedy also had a long-standing association with a freed slave, Scipio Kennedy. Scipio was trafficked from Africa as a child and brought to Scotland from the British West Indies in 1702. In 1705 he entered service with the Kennedy family. A contract of 1725 suggests he was viewed as a servant rather than a slave. However, it is likely that conditions for African and African-Caribbean people were grim, despite there being no legally encoded slavery in Scotland.<sup>1</sup>
- 18th century - the church was “in a most ruinous and filthy condition”; a wall was erected around the church c 1800 by public subscription, and this still stands today.
- The church remained in the ownership of the Cassillis and Culzean estate, in a very neglected condition, before coming into State guardianship in 1948. A major programme of consolidation followed. It is a scheduled ancient monument and a category A listed building.

## Archaeological overview

No recent, formal archaeological investigation has taken place within either the church or its associated walled precinct.

Clearance works by Ministry of Works c1950 are likely to have been superficial. The floor level has been raised within the church, and therefore there is good potential for the preservation of buried surfaces and internal graves.

The *New Statistical Account* in 1837 refers to nearby residences of the priests, including the Black House which stood at the corner of Kirk Port and Abbot Street, just east of the collegiate church precinct. The now demolished John Knox’s House, up the hill to the west, is reputed to have been the house of the provost of the church. Another of the prebends houses was known as James Gray’s house, the location of which has not been identified.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this topic see [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c.1600–1997](#)

## **Artistic/architectural overview**

The church is rectangular in plan, of coursed rubble with freestone dressings. The group of buildings measures approximately 19m east to west by 12m north to south.

The church is entered by a door at the west end of the south wall, with dog-tooth moulding in revived 13th century style. The nave has a trefoil-headed lancet to the south and another (blocked) to the north; a secondary buttress blocks a window in the west wall.

The choir and presbytery, occupying slightly over half the length of the church, is externally divided by buttresses into three bays, and there are clasping buttresses at NW and SE corners. The choir has two blocked windows to the south and one to the east, which contain remains of flowing reticulated tracery of very high quality. A recessed arched tomb, doubling as an Easter Sepulchre, in the north wall of the presbytery was probably intended for the founder, John Kennedy; it has a triple band of revived dogtooth decoration.

As with other collegiate churches, a barrel vaulted sacristy was built on the north side, entered by a door between the choir and presbytery.

There are two post-medieval burial enclosures on the north side. The sacristy was incorporated into the burial aisle built for the Kennedies of Culzean in the 17th century. This has an elaborate entrance doorway, over which is a large shield bearing the Kennedy arms impaled with others.

## **Social overview**

Not formally assessed.

## **Spiritual overview**

The church provides evidence of the greater focus being placed on achieving speedy entry into heaven following death, at least by those who could afford it. The principal function of the college was to provide a constant round of masses and prayers for the benefit of those departed Kennedys cleansing their souls in purgatory.

The popular movement of spiritual patronage at this time to endow such colleges, took place at the expense of gifts to the great abbeys and cathedrals.

## **Aesthetic overview**

Difficult to see from a distance due to the high, enclosing boundary wall.

## What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Does the medieval building work date largely from the late 14th century, or can later phases be identified?
- Why did the Kennedys need a separate collegiate church, when the parish church was nearby?
- What was the nature of the original internal decoration and fittings of the church?
- What were the customs and practices of everyday life in and around the church?
- Where were the houses of the priests and officials, and what form did these take?
- What was the location and extent of the likely associated burial ground?

## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

- The influence of religious institutions on everyday life would have been strongly felt by the late medieval inhabitants of Maybole, with their own parish church, the collegiate church next door, and the great abbey of Crossraguel only 1 mile to the south. Rents paid by the townsfolk helped support the college.
- The collegiate church is a monument to the wealth and piety of the Kennedys, whose patronage created this establishment and provided a fitting family sepulchre. The sepulchral function continued beyond the Reformation.
- Maybole demonstrates the anachronistic revival of dogtooth decoration, giving a superficially 13th century appearance, as sometimes seen in the west.
- The public mass held at the church in Easter 1564 demonstrates the persistent popularity of the old religion, especially within parts of the west.

## ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Maybole Castle; Dunure Castle; **Crossraguel Abbey; Lincluden Collegiate Church; Castle Semple Collegiate Church.**

## KEYWORDS

Kennedy family; earls of Cassilis; college of priests; Easter sepulchre.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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