



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CASTLE SEMPLE COLLEGIATE CHURCH



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Cover image: View of Castle Semple Collegiate Church from south-west.
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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CASTLE SEMPLE COLLEGIATE CHURCH

Contents

SYNOPSIS	2
CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT	2
Historical overview	2
Archaeological overview	4
Architectural/Artistic overview	4
Social overview	5
Spiritual overview	5
Aesthetic overview	5
WHAT ARE THE MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROPERTY?	6
ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE	6
Key points	6
ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES	7
KEYWORDS	7
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	7

SYNOPSIS

Castle Semple Collegiate Church stands near the north end of Castle Semple Loch, close to its western shore and 1¼ miles north-east of Lochwinnoch.

The property comprises the roofless shell of a collegiate church founded by John, 1st Lord Semple (Sempill), in 1504 (his family seat formerly lay a short distance to the east). The original rectangular building comprised a nave and chancel with a tower at its western end and a sacristy (long demolished) entered off the north side of the chancel. The elaborate canopied tomb gracing the north side of the chancel was built for Lord Semple and his lady. The chancel was subsequently extended to the east with a fine polygonal apse, in memory of the founder, killed at Flodden in 1513. The grassed area immediately around the building, also in State care, doubtless contains archaeological remains of the college establishment's residences and offices as well as a grammar school and cemetery.

The property sits within the Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park and is best approached from the Castle Semple Visitor Centre in Lochwinnoch via the 'Parkhill Trail'.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical overview

- **Late 13th century** – The family first emerges on record when Robert de Semple is noted as chamberlain of the Stewarts' castle at Renfrew. The family residence is then at Eliotstoun (Elliston), across Castle Semple Loch, close to the Black Cart Water.
- **1488** – Sir Thomas Semple of Eliotstoun, sheriff of Renfrew, is killed at the Battle of Sauchieburn fighting for James III. He is succeeded by his son, John.
- **1489** – Sir John Semple, in his capacity as sheriff of Renfrew, supports James IV against the rebels, the Earl of Lennox and Lord Lyle, taking Lyle's castle at Duchal by cannon fire. He is rewarded with a lordship of parliament. He marks his new-found status by moving the family seat from Eliotstoun to a new residence on the west side of the loch (Castle Semple).
- **1504** – John, 1st Lord Semple, founds and endows the collegiate church close by his new residence, to be staffed by a provost, six chaplains (serving the prebends of Nether Pennal, Upper Pennal, Auchinlodmond, Nether Schelis, Lochwinnoch and Chapeltown), a

sacrist and two choristers. A grammar school forms part of the establishment. The original rectangular church dates from this time.

- **1513** – John, 1st Lord Semple, is killed at the Battle of Flodden and laid to rest in the elaborate canopied tomb in the chancel.
- **c. 1550** – A descendant, possibly Robert, 3rd Lord Semple, adds the fine polygonal apse onto the east end of the chancel.
- **1560** – The Reformation Act leads to the closure of the church for ecclesiastical use. At some point over the course of the next few centuries, the interior is divided by two partition walls to form three private burial aisles for local families.
- **c.1735** – The Castle Semple estate is sold to Col William McDowall, a wealthy sugar plantation owner from the Caribbean, who used enslaved labour to work his estates there. He demolishes Castle Semple and replaces it with a new mansion, in the provincial Palladian style. The grounds around are developed into a designed landscape, including an icehouse immediately to the west of the church and the so-called ‘Temple’ on the summit of Kenmore Hill. Col McDowall also creates the planned village of Lochwinnoch. The McDowalls help to establish Alexander Houston and Co., Scotland’s premier West India merchant firm.¹
- **1813** – Castle Semple Mansion is sold to the Harvey family. John Rae Harvey also owned Caribbean estates, worked by enslaved labour. His daughter, Margaret, received £8,462 in 1834 as part of the British Government’s compensation scheme after plantation slavery was abolished.²
- **1908** – James Shand Harvey goes bankrupt and the estate is sold off ‘piece-meal’.
- **1949** – Castle Semple Collegiate Church is taken into State care. The dividing walls forming the three burial aisles are demolished and the Semple burial vault in the chancel filled in.
- **1960s** - Most of Castle Semple House is demolished.
- **1970** – Clyde Muirshiel Country Park is created by Renfrew County Council. (It is formally designated Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park in 1990.)
- **late 1970s** - The fine traceried windows in the south wall of the chancel are re-instated.

¹ Mullen *et al* 2024, 78.

² Mullen *et al* 2024, 78.

Archaeological overview

There has been no documented archaeological work at the property.

The archaeology of the interior of the church will have been compromised by its extensive use as a burial place. The sole exception will be the site of the sacristy on the north side of the chancel.

The area to the east of the church may have been the college's cemetery, which is likely to have been small given the size of the college and the short life of the establishment.

The fenced area surrounding the church ruin (also in State care) has the potential to provide important archaeological information regarding the infrastructure associated with a medieval collegiate establishment. There will have been residences (manses) for the provost and chaplains, and accommodation for the sacrist and choristers, possibly in the grammar school. Such structures have almost entirely vanished from Scotland's collegiate churches. Only at **Seton** do they survive above ground.

Architectural/Artistic overview

The collegiate church has two main building phases. Both phases retain highly unusual architectural details.

The original building was a plain rectangle, housing a nave and chancel, with a small, axial west tower and a sacristy (long demolished) projecting from the north side of the choir. It was rubble-built and unbuttressed. Internal corbels show that there was a screen dividing nave from chancel, and evidence for a stair against the north wall suggests that there was a loft over that screen. The south flank of the choir is lit by three highly unusual flat-headed two-light windows (reconstructed in the later 1970s using carved stones re-used as building rubble in subsequent post-Reformation remodellings). Apart from the fact that the main lights are separated from the upper lights by curving decorative bands of eccentric form, they are broadly similar to those in Carnwath Collegiate Church (Lanarks), dated to the 1420s, which are themselves inspired by English parallels (with short upper lights reaching up to a lintel).

The second phase is the ashlar-built, three-sided apse at the eastern end. The slender $\frac{3}{4}$ -shafts at the external angles point to a construction date towards the mid-1500s (Fawcett). However, the complex shapes of the arches cut into the lintels at the heads of the three two-light windows are without parallel. This apsidal form is in itself unusual, but it is paralleled at the later 15th-century choir of **Crossraguel Abbey** and, on a larger scale, at King's College, Aberdeen (1510-17).

Of especial interest is the founder's tomb in the north side of the chancel, even though it lacks its effigy. Whilst it is in the expected position (where it

could also serve as an Easter sepulchre), it is as intriguingly eccentric as the south choir windows and those in the polygonal apse. Its cusped arch, supported on each side by short arcs, has a flat central section, which is surmounted by a recess with shallow foliate carving. Fawcett suggests that this is perhaps closer in spirit to a decorative approach favoured in Ireland than anything found in Scotland.

Social overview

Until the creation of Clyde Muirshiel Country Park in 1970, Castle Semple Collegiate Church was difficult to access, being at the end of a tortuous route from Howwood to the north-east. Today, the church ruin is readily accessible along the 'Parkhill Trail' from Castle Semple Visitor Centre, beside Lochwinnoch 1 mile to the south.

This much improved access has raised the profile of the property somewhat, and it features on the Park's website as a place of interest for walkers and cyclists alike.

An example of this enhanced public profile came in 2004 when the 500th anniversary of the college's foundation was marked by the local community with a number of events, including a play set in 1504 centred on the life of John, 1st Lord Semple.

Spiritual overview

A collegiate church, such as Castle Semple, manifests the paramount importance attached in the medieval period to ensuring the speedy passage of the souls of the noble dead through purgatory and into Heaven. The sole purpose of this church was as a place where the college of priests performed masses, and celebrated the liturgy, with enriched ceremony and music, in perpetuity for the benefit of its noble patrons.

This function ceased following the Reformation Act of 1560, rendering the building redundant. However, it retained its use as a burial place, and in time three private burial aisles were created within its shell.

Today, a service is held in the church on occasion.

Aesthetic overview

Castle Semple Collegiate Church, in common with most other collegiate churches in Scotland, is now divorced from its original 'noble house' landscape context (**Seton** is a rare example where this relationship still exists).

The present setting is rather dull and closed-in, with a somewhat depressing atmosphere, not helped by the muddy approach to it along a farm track.

The same can be said of the church building itself, for despite its unusual architectural elements it is somewhat plain and not a thing of beauty.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROPERTY?

- Where was the collegiate establishment's residential accommodation located, including its grammar school, and what form did these take? A geophysical survey and subsequent archaeological investigation could well cast significant light on a little-understood aspect of medieval collegiate church life.
- Where precisely was Lord Semple's castle? A detailed survey and excavation over the site of Castle Semple House might yet produce clues.
- How was the glass held in the apse windows?
- Though certainly owned by families with slavery-derived wealth, it is not clear how much of that money was invested directly in the church, though members of the Harvey family are buried there.³

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- Castle Semple is one of the better preserved collegiate churches in Scotland, founded under the patronage of a single lordly family.
- The church building has both unique and highly unusual architectural features.
- The founder's tomb is one of the finest examples of a medieval burial monument in Scotland.

³ For more information on the connections of this site to the British Empire, see [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c.1600-1997](#)

ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

(*other relevant properties locally*) – Castle Semple House (remains of) and landscape features (inc. icehouse, walled garden, entrance gates and ‘Temple’); Peel Castle, Castle Semple Loch (built c.1550 for Robert, 3rd Lord Semple)

(*other medieval collegiate churches in Historic Environment Scotland’s care*) – **Dunglass; Innerpeffray; Lincluden; Maybole; Seton**

(some *other canopied tombs for secular lords*) – **Beaully Priory** (Mackenzie of Kintail); Corstorphine Collegiate Church (Forrester of Corstorphine); Cullen Church (Ogilvie of Findlater); Fordyce Church (Ogilvie of Deskford); **Lincluden Collegiate Church** (Douglas); **Maybole Collegiate Church** (Kennedy of Dunure); Renfrew Old Parish Church (Ross of Hawkhead); **St Bride’s, Douglas** (Douglas); **St Clement’s, Rodel** (Macleod of Dunvegan); **St Mary’s, Rothesay** (Stewart); **Seton Collegiate Church; Tarves Tomb** (Forbes of Tolquhon)

KEYWORDS

nave; chancel; apse; window tracery; founder’s tomb; Semple family; provost; chaplain

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