

**Property in Care (PIC) ID:** PIC269

**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90296)

**Taken into State care:** 1953 (Guardianship)

**Last reviewed:** 2004

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# TARVES TOMB



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.



© Historic Environment Scotland 2019

You may re-use this information (excluding logos and images) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated.

To view this licence, visit <http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/>

or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gov.uk)

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

[www.historicenvironment.scot](http://www.historicenvironment.scot)

You can download this publication from our website at

[www.historicenvironment.scot](http://www.historicenvironment.scot)

# TARVES, TOLQUHON TOMB, SOUTH OF PARISH CHURCH

---

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument consists of an early renaissance canopied tomb, which combines medieval and Classical motifs, sitting within the burial ground of the parish church of Tarves. It was built in 1589 by Thomas Leiper, mason of the 'new wark' at Tolquhon Castle, for his patron and his patron's wife. The tomb stood in the laird's aisle on the south side of the now destroyed medieval church.

---

## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview

The church at Tarves was supposedly founded by St Murdebar or Muirdebar, who came from Leinster around AD 600 (Martyrology of Oengus). It was later granted by King William I the Lion to the abbey of Arbroath.

The tomb was constructed in 1589 by Thomas Leiper, mason of the 'new wark' at Tolquhon Castle, for his patron, William Forbes, 7th laird of Tolquhon, and William's wife, Elizabeth Gordon.

A description of the medieval church building written in 1732 indicates that it had two family aisles flanking the church: one for the Gordons of Haddo, and the other for the Forbeses of Tolquhon. The latter aisle evidently lay to the south of the nave. All that now remains of the church is the south wall of the Forbes aisle, incorporating the Forbes tomb and surmounted by a pediment of pink granite, added when the rest of the aisle was demolished around 1798.

The monument was taken into guardianship in 1951.

### Archaeological Overview

There have been no formal archaeological excavations at the monument.

The monument was located within an aisle of a now destroyed church, and lies within a graveyard. As a consequence the archaeological potential of the monument is extremely high: any excavation will almost certainly come across evidence for the planning of the medieval church, as well as human remains.

### Artistic/Architectural Overview

The tomb is carved from red sandstone ashlar, contrasting with the rubble masonry of the aisle wall. It consists of a tomb chest with arcaded front, recessed into the wall and enclosed by a richly moulded semi-circular arcosolium with heavy gothic cusping. In the back of the tomb recess is a sunk panel intended for an inscribed stone.

The arch is supported by two portrait statuettes: one of the laird (Sir William Forbes), wearing a flat cap, a ruff, a puffed and slashed doublet and full puffed and slashed knee-breeches, and the other of his lady (Elizabeth Gordon), wearing a

long embroidered gown with full sleeves and a ruff. The portraits are strikingly homely, and show the fashions of the period.

The whole arch is framed by renaissance baluster shafts supporting a heavily embattled cornice. At the apex of the arch is a projecting royal crown flanked by unicorns. The left-hand spandrel contains the Forbes arms quartered with those of the Prestons, from whom they had inherited the estate. The shield is surmounted by an esquire's helmet and is flanked by the initials 'W F'. Below is a scroll dated 1589, and extending into the apex of the spandrel is another bearing the Forbes motto, 'SALVS PER CHRISTVM' (Salvation through Christ). A shield in the right-hand spandrel shows the Forbes arms impaled with those of Gordon, surmounted by a plumed hat. The shield is flanked by the initials 'E G' and a scroll in the apex reads 'DOCHTER.TO.LESMOR'.

The tomb appears to have taken as its inspiration the tomb of Bishop Gavin Dunbar in St Machar's Cathedral, which was probably constructed in the 1530s. The motifs on the Dunbar tomb are far more Gothic in nature, but the parallels remain clear: the corbel-figures supporting the arch, the roses in the cavetto round the arch, the armorial bearings and the lettered scrolls in either spandrel, and the corbelled and embattled cornice. It is unclear, however, whether the Forbes Tomb ever had an effigy or pair of effigies, although it is likely that they were intended.

The similarity of the Forbes tomb to that of Bishop Dunbar in St Machar's Cathedral (also in care) helps demonstrate the transmission and transformation of artistic ideas through the cultural break of the Reformation.

### Social Overview

No formal assessment has been carried out, although the monument does sit in the grounds of a church that remains in use.

### Spiritual Overview

The monument is a funerary memorial commemorating the life and death of Sir William and his wife Elizabeth, and helps provide information on contemporary attitudes to death. Even in death, the opportunity was taken to exhibit dynastic links and loyalty to the crown.

The monument is the only surviving fragment of the medieval parish church of Tarves.

### Aesthetic Overview

The tomb is a delightful example of high-quality micro-architecture. The portraits of the laird and his wife give the tomb a more intimate connection with the deceased.

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

We have very limited knowledge of the church within which the tomb once stood.

---

## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Key points

The tomb is a very fine example of Renaissance stone carving in Scotland. Its form demonstrates how the essential medieval forms of canopied tombs were being transformed through the use of classical decorative motifs during the late 16th century.

The sophistication of the tomb reflects the character and background of William Forbes. Although an Aberdeenshire laird of substance and a tenant-in-chief to the Crown, William was certainly not on the first rung of the nobility. Yet, in common with many of his class, he was an educated and cultured man.

#### Associated Properties

**Tolquhon Castle**, built by Sir William Forbes, which exhibits another portrait of the laird; **St Machar's Cathedral, Aberdeen**, which contains the tomb of Bishop Dunbar

#### Keywords

tomb, Renaissance, gothic