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## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# ST TRIDUANA'S AISLE



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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

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# ST TRIDUANA'S AISLE

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## SYNOPSIS

The property comprises the lower storey of a two-storeyed chapel, known as the King's Chapel, attached to Restalrig parish church (the latter still in use) by James III (1460-88). That lower storey was dedicated to St Triduana, an obscure early Christian saint that tradition holds was buried at the site. It became a place of pilgrimage for those afflicted with diseases of the eye. The surviving remains scarcely do justice to what must have been a most striking structural edifice in its prime.

The surviving structure, a vaulted hexagonal space, is almost unique in Scotland (the only other example is St Margaret's Well, now in **Holyrood Park**, but which formerly stood close to St Triduana's Chapel). The vault springs from a central pier, and its stone ribs thereby create a six-point star enclosing twelve equilateral triangles, so that in the centre of each side the apex of the vault is much further from the pier than from the window. The building's present steeply pitched roof was added in 1906, and covers what little remains of the upper chapel, including a few courses of masonry and evidence for an altar base.

The interior of the chapel now houses a fine collection of carved stones that bear testament to the quality of the missing upper storey.

## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview:

- **8<sup>th</sup> century AD** – according to legend, St Triduana plucks out her eyes and impales them on a thorn to confound Nechtán, King of the Picts, who had professed being struck by her extraordinary beauty; she subsequently retires to Restalrig, where she is buried. (Another tradition has St Triduana as one of the virgins accompanying St Regulus (Rule) to Scotland in the 6<sup>th</sup> century with the relics of St Andrew.)
- **12<sup>th</sup> century** – a parish church is erected at Restalrig. (The building is thoroughly rebuilt in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, as a unicameral chancel and nave with a sacristy on the north side.)
- **1477** – James III endows a chaplaincy for an altar in the upper chapel, indicating that building work on the new two-storeyed King's Chapel, to the south of the parish church, is well advanced.
- **1487** – Pope Innocent VIII confirms the establishment of a collegiate church (of the Holy and Indivisible Trinity and St Mary the Virgin) within the bounds of the parish church of Restalrig, built and endowed by James III ('the King's Chapel'). The pontiff describes it as 'a sumptuous new work'. Construction of a new aisled choir for the church itself is halted at James III's death in 1488. In 1497 the dean is designated as of 'the chapel royal of Restalrig'. The number of prebendary canons attached to the college is numbered between seven and twelve. (The new King's Chapel is most probably intimately associated with a nearby well-house, **St Margaret's Well** (now in **Holyrood Park**), which is a

miniature version of St Triduana's Chapel, and is probably built at the same time.)

- **1515** – James V provides an altar in the chapel dedicated to St Triduana.
- **1552** – the canons' residences (manses) are described as 'burned and almost destroyed' by the English.
- **1560** – Restalrig Collegiate Church is seen as 'a monument to idolatrie' and instructions are given for it to be 'raysit and utterlie castin downe and destroyed'. Fortunately, the order is only partially carried out, and although the parish church is described as 'ruinous' in 1607 (this year South Leith is declared the new parish for the area), the lower chapel survives and is pressed into use as a burial vault.
- **1633** – John Elphinstone, Lord Balmerino, is the first recorded burial in the lower chapel.
- **1835/6** – the 15<sup>th</sup>-century church is restored for worship once again (as St Margaret's Parish Church) by William Burn, architect.
- **1859** – **St Margaret's Well** is relocated to **Holyrood Park**, to make room for a locomotive depot.
- **1907** – the lower chapel is excavated and restored to its present form by the noted historical architect, Thomas Ross, who adds the present pitched roof and buttresses.
- **1952** – St Triduana's Chapel is entrusted into state care by the General Trustees of the Church of Scotland.
- **1962** – excavations on the north side of the church uncover the remains of the medieval north sacristy, and evidence for a scheme by James III to enlarge the church itself, evidently aborted at his death in 1488.

#### Archaeological Overview:

There has been no modern archaeological investigation at St Triduana's Chapel, although excavations in 1962 on the north side of the parish church uncovered the footings of the projecting sacristy, and evidence for a scheme to enlarge the existing (early-15<sup>th</sup>-century?) church. This suggests that, despite the presence of countless burials, there may still be evidence remaining outwith the chapel for the medieval collegiate church, including the manses and other buildings within the chanonry (canons' precinct).

Within the chapel itself, behind the plaster the masonry walls may well exhibit features that could shed added light on the architecture of this extraordinary building.

#### Architectural/Artistic Overview:

St Triduana's Chapel is a hexagon-shaped space. Three walls have windows of three pointed and cusped lights beneath three-centred arches, most uncommon in Scotland. Only one original external buttress remains, on the NE; the others are restorations of 1907. The parapet and pyramidal slate roof, topped by a wooden statue of St Triduana, are also of 1907; these hide from view what little remains of the upper chapel – a few scraps of walling, a base for an altar (at the east side) and a fragment of aumbry to its left.

Internally, a stone vault springs from foliated capitals of angle-shafts and a clustered central pillar. Principal arcs are thrown from wall-shafts at each angle to the wall-shaft at the angle next but one, while a mid- or ridge-rib first runs horizontally to an intermediate boss, and thence curves downward to the capital of the central pillar. The only other architectural features of note are a large recess in the north wall and a small aumbry in the NE wall. The result on plan is a star-shaped arrangement of intersecting ribs defining twelve equilateral triangles, with twelve smaller right-angled triangles around the walls.

St Triduana's Chapel is thus all but unique in the context of Scottish ecclesiastical architecture; its only parallel is **St Margaret's Well**, now in **Holyrood Park** but originally located just south of the St Triduana's Chapel, which is a miniature version (less than a tenth the size) of it and almost certainly built contemporaneously with it. According to MacIvor (1962-3) the unnamed master mason responsible 'created an imaginative and original composition in the ornate but unadventurous context of 15<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish ecclesiastical architecture.'

The carved stones on display include important evidence for the design of the upper chapel. This seems to have been designed along much the same lines but with larger windows and without the central pillar; it had a central crown to judge by the evidence of the carved stones on display in the lower chapel.

#### Chapel or Well-house

Parallels for St Triduana's two-storeyed arrangement are hard to find, particularly for the later Middle Ages. (A good example from an earlier era is La Sainte Chapelle, in Paris, a two-storey rectangular building with a crypt for the saint in the lower storey and a chapel above, built in the 1240s). The only other possible parallel in Scotland is the **Blackadder Aisle, Glasgow Cathedral**, begun but not completed in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The lower chapel is often found with ground-water covering its stone-flagged floor, sometimes to a depth of over one metre. This has led to speculation that the space served as a well-house, or pool, where those 'suffering with their eyes' came to seek a remedy from the curative powers of St Triduana's water. Such structures are exceedingly rare in Britain; indeed, only two survive, both in Wales – St Winifrede's Well, at Holywell (Flint), a two-storey rectangular building, and St Mary's Well, Asaph (Denbigh), where the well-house and chapel are on the same level. The jury remains 'out' on whether St Triduana's lower space functioned as a well-house, with the balance of probability leaning slightly to 'not'.

#### Social Overview:

The property seems to have little social value, despite the fact that it is physically attached to a working parish church (confusingly called St Margaret's) and located at the heart of a densely-populated part of suburban Edinburgh.

#### Spiritual Overview:

St Triduana's Chapel, as part of the King's Chapel, was an integral part of Restalrig Parish Church for almost 100 years (c.1470–1560). As a collegiate church and chapel royal it performed an important role as a focus of royal

patronage and visits, as well as a pilgrimage destination for those seeking the intervention of St Triduana, particularly for eye disorders.

Today, what remains of St Triduana's Chapel seems to play no identifiable spiritual role.

#### Aesthetic Overview:

The exterior of the building is unprepossessing and unremarkable, semi-subterranean, dominated by an expanse of grey slate roofing, and enveloped by a typically Victorian inner-city suburb. The entrance to it is hidden behind an unprepossessing later burial aisle.

By contrast, the interior of the structure comes as a surprise and a delight to visitors, with its slender central pillar supporting an elegant ribbed vault.

The feeling of damp within the structure might initially provide a negative 'feel' but aids understanding of the building's probable original function as a place where pilgrims went to 'mend their eine (eyes)'.

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

- What was the precise form of the two-storeyed structure known as St Triduana's Chapel? Perhaps we will never know, but a detailed investigation of (a) the walls of the lower chapel, and (b) the *ex-situ* carved stones on display therein may provide additional information.
- How was the lower chapel used? Was it simply a lower chapel, or could it have functioned as a pool in which pilgrims immersed themselves?
- What was the form and layout of the collegiate church itself? Here too archaeological investigations and closer examination of the upstanding structure of the parish church, and the records associated with its restoration, may pay dividends.

### ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

#### Key Points

- St Triduana's is almost unique in the architectural history of medieval Scotland, one of the most remarkable church buildings in the country and 'easily the most original late 15<sup>th</sup>-century building in Edinburgh' (Gifford *et al*). Its only parallel is **St Margaret's Well**, which was probably built contemporaneously with it.
- The architecture of the structure is a particularly accomplished example of rib-vaulting supported on a central pillar. It is reminiscent of the best late medieval chapter houses in Scotland (eg, **Elgin Cathedral**).
- As a chapel royal, the King's Chapel became a focus for the Protestant Reformers and was one of their first targets for destruction.
- The *ex situ* carved stones on display confirm the high architectural quality of the entire structure.

#### Associated Properties:

(*other medieval ecclesiastical well-houses*) – St Winifrede's Well, Holywell (Flint, N Wales); St Mary's Well, Asaph (Denbigh, N Wales)

(other related architectural structures) – **Elgin Cathedral chapter house; Inchcolm Abbey chapter house; St Margaret's Well, Holyrood Park** (formerly in Restalrig).

(other collegiate churches in Historic Scotland's care) – **Castle Semple; Dunglass; Innerpefferay; Lincluden; Maybole; Seton**

Keywords:

altar, chapel royal; collegiate church, pilgrimage; well; James III

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