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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90266)

Taken into State care: 1950 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2011

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST BRIDGET'S KIRK



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ST BRIDGET'S KIRK

SYNOPSIS

St Bridget's Kirk, beside Dalgety Bay, was granted to the priory (later abbey) of **Inchcolm** by William I 'the Lion' (1165-1214). It was a simple rectangle on plan. Following the Reformation (1560), it was converted for Protestant worship. Four burial aisles were also added to the medieval church, of which the finest was the Dunfermline Aisle at the west end, built c. 1610 for the 1st Earl of Dunfermline. The church remained in use until 1830, when a new parish church was erected at Fordell, 1 mile to the north.

The property in care comprises the shell of the parish church and its associated aisles, together with the surrounding graveyard, its monuments and watch house.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- 1178 - the first reference to the church, in a papal bull confirming William I's grant of the church's revenues to **Inchcolm Abbey**.
- 1244 - Bishop David of St Andrews reconsecrates the church.
- 1420s - Abbot Walter Bower of Inchcolm, in his history of Scotland, *Scotichronicon*, states that the church belonged to the abbey, and that John de Bulloch had been vicar for 16 years prior to his resignation in 1420.
- 1560 - at the Protestant Reformation, the church continues in use for parochial worship.
- early 1600s - four burial aisles are added to the church, one at its west end, two along the north wall, and one along the south wall.
- 1664 – the minister, Andrew Donaldson, a staunch Presbyterian, is declared a criminal and imprisoned in **Linlithgow Palace**. After the abolition of episcopacy (1689), Donaldson returns to his charge.
- later 1600s - timber galleries are installed in the church, and new doors and windows inserted.
- 1755 - the population of Dalgety parish is 761.
- 1830 - the decaying kirk falls out of use when a new kirk is built at Fordell, a mile away, better to serve the local coal-mining community.
- 1831 - the Earl of Moray obtains the church from the heritors of the parish.
- 1950 - St Bridget's is taken into state care.

Archaeological Overview:

- The site seems not to have been subjected to investigation, either antiquarian or archaeological. In 1987, the eleven coffins in the Dunfermline Aisle burial vault were recorded following vandalism.
- The possibility that a church stood on the site prior to the construction of the present building in the 12th century cannot be ruled out.

- The graveyard is likely to have been used for burials for some 800 years. In addition to graves, there may also be a priest's house and teind barn.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The original church was a single-cell rectangular structure of rubble construction measuring 16m by 5m from east/west. Whilst the walls of this church largely survive, much of the architectural detail dates from after the Reformation (1560). The only medieval features remaining largely unchanged are: (i) a piscina at the east end of the south wall, and (ii) two doorways at the west end of the north and south walls (both now blocked).
- Of the post-Reformation alterations, of particular note are the socket-holes supporting the galleries. The east gallery was reached by a new entrance through the east gable, accessed by a broad forestair. The south gallery was accessed through a new door in the south wall, reached by a forestair squeezed in beside a burial aisle. A third gallery was added along the north wall.
- The most significant alterations were the four burial aisles added to the north, west and south walls during the first half of the 17th century. The south aisle, now largely gone, is unnamed. The two aisles on the north were built for the Fordell and Inglis of Otterston families; the former has an archway into the church, and was lit by a mullioned and transomed window in its gable, whilst the latter was tunnel-vaulted.
- The Dunfermline Aisle, added to the west end of the church, was built for Alexander Seton, 1st Earl of Dunfermline and Chancellor of Scotland (d.1622). The two-storey structure has many fine details. The ground floor contains the family burial vault, and is ventilated by narrow slits. A polygonal stair turret on the north leads to the upper floor; its entrance door has a heraldic panel bearing traces of painting.
- The upper floor of the Dunfermline Aisle houses two rooms. These were well lit by large rectangular windows, set back in decorated margins. The main room, the laird's loft, is a well-proportioned chamber with a large opening to the east into the church, stone-panelled walls, and a stone cornice; it once had a segmented plaster ceiling. The retiring room in the south-west wing has windows in three walls and a fireplace in the north wall.
- Atop the west gable of the Dunfermline Aisle is a bellcote. The bell was removed to St Fillan's Church, Aberdour, after 1830.
- The various funerary monuments inside the church include a grave-slab dated 1540 (the earliest surviving). The graveyard has many fine monuments, including table stones and rustic 18th-century headstones. Built against the graveyard's west wall is an early-19th century watch house (session house). It incorporates an incised medieval stone.

Social Overview:

- St Bridget's is a local recreational spot, particularly popular at weekends. Cyclists and walkers pass the site on the popular Fife Coastal Path. Tourists also visit the site, though probably in small numbers.
- It is locally used and well regarded.

Spiritual Overview:

- Both before and after the Reformation, St Bridget's served a dispersed rural population. The spiritual endeavours and desires of the medieval congregation are unknown, but a brief note in Abbot Bower's *Scotichronicon* mentions a miracle caused by a mass said in a Dalgety church.
- After the Reformation, there is evidence of the lordly patronage of the church, most notably Chancellor Seton's Dunfermline Aisle. The burial vaults and galleries give a clearer picture of the spiritual distribution in the lives of early modern Dalgety Bay.
- Today, a service is held in St Bridget's on the last Sunday in June by the local Church of Scotland, and normally attended by around 80 people. Weddings and funerals are also occasionally held in the church, showing that it continues to feature in the spiritual lives of the local community.

Aesthetic Overview:

- St Bridget's is dominated by the fine Dunfermline Aisle at the west end.
- The graveyard is peaceful, with attractive monuments.
- The church interior is mostly plain. However, as with the exterior, the mortuary aspects are the most striking - particularly the burial-vault slab in the east end with rusting hooks, and the haunting Inglis Aisle.
- St Bridget's stands in an isolated and picturesque spot on the north shore of the Firth of Forth, with fine views towards Inchcolm Island, the Forth bridges and, in the distance, Edinburgh. The graveyard wall secures the serene, enclosed air of the site, as do the enveloping trees to east, north and west.
- St Bridget's is approached from the north along a path that passes fields and secluded houses. The church is hidden by the curve of a gentle hill, until very close in, giving an element of surprise to the visitor.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Was there a church on the site prior to the 12th century?
- What was the physical and social relationship of the church to the village?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- St Bridget's is of historical significance as being central to lives of dozens of generation of local people, many of whom lie buried in the graveyard.
- The archaeology of the graveyard has the potential to illustrate the demography of the parish.
- The survival of the architecture and fittings of the post-Reformation church and its attendant aisles gives insight into the interior arrangements of a typical Protestant kirk.

Associated Properties:

St Fillan's, Aberdour; **Inchcolm Abbey**.

Keywords:

Reformation, aisle, galleries, graveyard

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