KIRK OF ST NICHOLAS, ABERDEEN

Statement of Significance

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HISTORY IN THE MAKING
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Contents

(1) Introduction

Although it is only one building, St Nicholas Kirk is a remarkably complex subject for survey. It is a notable ancient monument, which has grown and altered organically from the twelfth century to the present. But it has also been over all these centuries a central spiritual institution of Aberdeen. It therefore requires study, preservation and presentation, plus development in the context of today. The Mither Kirk Project is a broadly based scheme designed to achieve that development on a wide canvas. What follows below is a summary outline of significance, based on the present state of knowledge and research.

The term 'mother church' (matrix ecclesia in Latin, mither kirk in Scots) was applied to this church in the middle ages. It indicated a church which, though not a cathedral, had superior status, which had other churches or chapels dependent on it and which had the authority to conduct baptisms. St Nicholas has been a significant institution since early times.

(2) History

The foundation date of the church is unknown, but must lie before 1157 when the first reference to it occurs in a papal document. It may have come into existence in the first half of the twelfth century, about the same time as the establishment of the burgh of Aberdeen, which was created by King David I (1124- 53). The church was rebuilt and extended in the later middle ages. By the Reformation of 1560 it was possibly the largest parish church in Scotland, and had over 30 altars within it and a 'staff' of about 20-30 priests. The church had very close connections with the burgh council and from at least the fourteenth century burgh officials named kirkmasters were appointed to be responsible for its building works. The effects of the Reformation of 1560 came relatively slowly to St Nicholas - no kirk session was appointed till 1562, and ancient carved woodwork was still being removed in 1574. In 1596 it was divided physically by a blocking wall into two separate congregations, as often happened to larger burgh churches when the Reformers felt the need for less spacious arrangements for worship.

Although medieval worship practices were forbidden and papal jurisdiction abolished in 1560, St Nicholas and the northeast generally remained rather conservative in outlook. Royal attempts to control the church in Scotland were resisted and in 1605 a General Assembly of the Church met in St Nicholas in spite of a royal prohibition. The ministers who attended it were condemned for treason and exiled. A traditional crucifix remained in place at the west end of the church until the General Assembly ordered its destruction in 1640. When the National Covenant, essentially Calvinist and anti-royal, was produced in 1638, the Aberdeen authorities refused to sign it and closed the pulpits of the town's churches to a powerful body of Covenanting Commissioners who arrived to force them to conform. The covenanting party eventually prevailed and in 1641 Andrew Cant, the most active partisan of the Covenant in the north of Scotland, became one of the ministers of Aberdeen.

The two separate but related churches, East and West, have their individual histories and both suffered upheavals and disasters. The West was the ‘civic’ church and acquired lofts for the town council and for the academics and students of Marischal College. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 resulted in some ministers being deprived for Episcopalian sympathies and many parishioners followed them. The West Church (the former nave) suffered in the early 18th century from poor maintenance and decay and in 1732 services there were abandoned. The town council had conferred the freedom of the burgh on James Gibbs, an outstanding architect and native of Aberdeen, who produced many fine buildings in England. Gibbs repaid the honour by providing free of charge plans for the rebuilding of the nave. The new structure was opened for worship in 1755: a building which reaches the highest architectural qualities of its time. The two churches did not represent the entirety of the buildings in post-Reformation times. The two transepts, north and south, separated from the rest by blocking walls, formed a central space and were named the Drum and Collison Aisles. In 1707 the Drum Aisle was fitted up for meetings of the Synod. Elsewhere, the undercroft below the East Church, which is the only other surviving medieval part of St Nicholas, was used for Presbytery meetings. These arrangements helped to link the church to the other ministries of northeast Scotland.

The East Church was the former choir of the medieval church and its structure survived well into the nineteenth century. Its antiquity made it seem unfashionable and, sadly, it was replaced in 1837 by a new building designed by Archibald Simpson. But this church survived less than 40 years. In 1874 a fire broke out in the roof. This gutted the building and also brought down the ancient oak spire. The church was rebuilt and a massive tower and steeple were erected. Both congregations had to move out and for a time they worshipped in the Music Hall.

Two events of the earlier nineteenth century had significant effects on both churches. In 1828 constitutional changes were made in church structures in order to accommodate the needs of the growing population of the city. The original parish of St Nicholas was divided into six parishes and the East and West churches served one parish each. Two new buildings were erected as parishes: the handsome North St Nicholas Church on King Street and the South Church on Belmont Street.

The other event, which occurred in 1843, was of an entirely different character and of national spread. This was the Disruption, a split of the entire Church of Scotland, centred on the question of the Church’s independence from the State and on the rights of external patrons to appoint parish ministers, as against the process of election by a congregation of their own minister, as they saw fit. The seceders formed the Free Church and had considerable support in Aberdeen. All fifteen of the city’s ministers joined the Free Church, including the ministers of St Nicholas. Many elders and members also left the established church. The West Church lost a relatively small proportion of its membership, while the East Church presented a picture of some uncertainty on the issues, both before and after 1843. As at St

Nicholas, so on a wider scale the battles as a result of 1843 were damaging to the spiritual health of both Kirk and nation.

The histories of the two churches in the twentieth century largely represent the continuation of their traditions. Careful ‘improvements’ to fabric were designed and financed. Refurbishment of St Mary’s Chapel (the undercroft); the creation of a new vestry; the insertion of further stained glass windows; the re-ordering of the furnishings of the East Church in 1936; the refurnishing of the former north transept or Collison’s Aisle at the expense of the oil industry, to mark 25 years of operations in the North Sea - all added to the uniquely varied character of the interior of the building.

The peculiarity remained, however, of having two congregations inhabiting one building. As late as the 1970s, the Drum and Collison Aisles which lay between them gave the impression of a strip of ‘no man’s land’. But the world-wide sense of the need for churches and faiths to grow closer together began to have local effects. The East and West congregations united in 1980 and they were joined by the St Nicholas United Reformed Church in 2002.

(3) Social significance

The most helpful route towards a view of the social significance of the church is examination of the institutions associated with it and the groups of people so involved.

The principal secular institution concerned was of course the town council. Indeed the first recorded benefactor of the church was Richard the mason, provost of the burgh, who founded the altar of St John the Evangelist in 1277. The council’s concern with the fabric of the church is displayed in the appointment of the kirkmasters, four of whom were put in office together in 1399. A separate series of Kirk and Bridge Work Accounts came to be kept by council officers and this continued until as late as 1812.

The involvement of the town council has been a marked feature of the history of the church over many centuries. In the middle ages, the council raised funds in support of the church: they put taxes, for example, on certain overseas exports and allocated some of the profits of their fishings on the Rivers Dee and Don. As late as the mid-twentieth century they were still contributing: in 1954 they completed a strikingly elaborate set of bells in replacement of the medieval bells lost in a fire. And the present council is giving handsome financial support to the Mither Kirk Project.

After the Reformation the linkage of the council to the affairs of the church continued and, in some respects, became even more detailed and direct. The council came to have the right and duty of appointing the ministers and providing their stipends. The membership of the council and the kirk session overlapped and this made easier the process of intervention in church matters. The council allocated sittings and collected pew rents. After the abolition of lay patronage in 1874, the council continued to be ‘kirked’ annually in the West Church and to regard the minister as their chaplain.

Indeed the design of the West Church reflects the prominence of the Provost and councillors. The canopied east gallery surmounted by the city Coat of Arms is almost as prominent as the canopied pulpit.

Richard the mason's benefaction of the foundation of an altar was one of the principal types of gift made to the church in the middle ages. This consisted of the provision of funds to produce, in effect, the salary of a priest who would say masses on a regular basis for the souls of the founder, his relatives and friends, as directed. Others, who could not afford to found an altar, would provide smaller sums for less elaborate service provision at pre-existing altars. By the end of the middle ages, at least 30, or possibly 32, altarages existed in St Nicholas. This system meant that a large number of people, usually local, felt a strong spiritual linkage to the church and its acts of worship. And in practical terms these arrangements also meant that St Nicholas was a busy place, full of daily activities.

Altars, however, were not the only items which people gifted to their mother church. The altars themselves required decorative coverings, often elaborate. Wax for candles on and near the altars had to be provided; and many altars would incorporate images of relevant saints. Vessels for the services, vestments for the priests, service books of many kinds: all were needed, and acts of personal charity often produced them.

But who, in addition to the town council, were the others involved in the affairs of the church? Three educational institutions brought school pupils and students within the walls. By the fifteenth century the church had established its own song school, to train boy choristers to contribute to the many musical services. The song school survived until 1755. At the level of higher education, in 1593 George, Earl Marischal, promoted the foundation of Marischal College and University, situated in nearby Broad Street. Only a few years later, in 1612, a loft (or gallery) was erected in the south aisle of the West Kirk, to accommodate at services the Principal, regents and students of the college. On another gallery is a commemorative plaque recording the links of the church to Robert Gordon's College, a distinguished school dating from 1750. The ministers were among the original governors of the College and at one stage the boys provided a choir.

The commercial and industrial life of the city is represented by the presence of the Seven Incorporated Trades, who have a long association with St Nicholas and who still worship there on formal occasions. Their gallery in the West Church bears another commemorative plaque. The Baxter's' (Bakers') seat is preserved in the crossing. Portions of the Tailors' pew are also inserted in modern furnishings. In 1998 the Incorporated Trades presented a display cabinet to mark the fifth centenary of the dedication of the church in 1498.

If we attempt a social breakdown of those involved in the church over the centuries, we find a considerable range. Those who in the middle ages made gifts to support altars and requiem masses were largely members of the elite: wealthy burgesses, local aristocrats, lairds and senior clergy. One of the most

striking medieval benefactions was the erection, perhaps about 1440, of the undercroft at the east end, known as the chapel of St Mary of Pity. Its donor was Lady Elizabeth Gordon. As modern times arrived, class divisions became more clear-cut and significant. It is noticeable that the two congregations develop differing social characteristics. The West Church was decidedly an ‘official’ church. Yet it was not entirely inward-looking: on four separate occasions in late Victorian times the West Church sent missionaries to the Blanytre Mission in what is now Malawi. A commentator in 1909 observed cannily that ‘in every decade for several centuries the West Church has claimed the allegiance of some of the foremost sons of Bon-Accord’. His remarks on the East Church reveal a different story. ‘The congregation is a very mixed one, including almost every grade in the social scale. There are the wealthy and influential from the West End, a considerable proportion of the middle and working classes, and a large number of the very poor.’ He goes on to praise its extensive and philanthropic mission work carried on in the slums. Its communion roll in 1907 touched almost 3,000, making it one of the largest congregations in the Church of Scotland.

(4) Location

Two features of the location of the church require emphasis. The first is that it is situated at the top of a hill: a fact which has not usually been given much attention. The hill is nowadays less obvious on account of urban development over the centuries. But the topography is still clear. To the west of St Nicholas the ground falls away steeply to the valley of the Denburn. To the south there is an equally sharp drop to the area of the Green. On the east an incline runs down to the modern St Nicholas Street and the now invisible, but ancient, Putachie Burn. The north side has a slighter decline leading to the lower stretches of Schoolhill and Upperkirkgate. The church’s position on a hill naturally gave it prominence. Its hilltop situation is visually emphasised in a fine painting by a local artist, Eric Auld, which the church possesses.

The second element of location concerns its relationship to the built-up area of the town. There is controversy about where the early settlement area of the burgh had its origins. One plausible explanation is that the space later called the Green functioned as a market-place, conveniently close to the early harbour and overlooked on the east by St Katherine’s hill (perhaps a fortified site?) and on the north by St Nicholas as the parish church. If this theory is sound, then the church was a logical part of the core settlement of Aberdeen.

The church retained its centrality even when the town was later drastically remodelled, in the years around 1800. At that stage the handsome new principal street, named Union Street, ran along the southern edge of St Nicholas kirkyard. The main entrance to the churchyard and the church now lay near to the midway point of Union Street. In spite of the considerable development of the city in modern times, St Nicholas still has a notably central location and a striking visibility from many viewpoints.

(5) Kirkyard

The area of the churchyard is large and it has the benefit of six entrances, on the north, south, east (3) and west sides. Historically, it may date back to the foundation of St Nicholas. It contains memorial stones from the early seventeenth century onwards. Architecturally too it is significant, containing many fine monuments of varying types. The handsome pillared entrance facade on Union Street, designed by John Smith, the Town's Architect, was erected in 1829.

The burials are of course a microcosm of the great and good, plus the poor and modest, of Aberdeen over the centuries. Two examples will illustrate the variety of the inhabitants. Probably the finest tombstone is the Hamilton monument of 1843 (architect, John Smith), a tall, pillared, temple-like structure, enclosing a severely plain urn. It commemorates Professor Robert Hamilton (1743-1829), an eccentric but distinguished mathematician and economist, who wrote a penetrating book on the National Debt. In the northeast corner of the graveyard lies John Henry Anderson (1814-74), a magician of national and international reputation. He billed himself as 'The Great Wizard of the North' and was allegedly the inventor of the 'rabbit out of a hat' trick.

The ownership history of the graveyard underlines the close and long-lasting connection between the church and the burgh authorities. After the Reformation, the town council took over control of the kirkyard, and so gained profit from the burial dues paid. Although in 1930 the church buildings were transferred to the General Trustees of the Church of Scotland, the town council retained, and retains, ownership of the kirkyard. From an ecological viewpoint, it has been well described as 'a green oasis in the heart of the city'. It attracts the citizens, especially on warmer days, and more unexpectedly also acts as a wildlife habitat.

(6) Physical elements

(a) Architecture. In medieval Scotland all the major eastern trading communities had striking churches: Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Haddington, Linlithgow, Perth, St Andrews and Stirling. These buildings were often planned on a scale larger than that of several cathedrals. In them there are physical syntheses of ideas of both native and European origin, which offer fascinating insights into the range and fertility of Scotland's artistic contacts. Some of these churches were the product of single building campaigns, while others resulted from accretive processes over many generations. St Nicholas is a particularly fascinating example of the latter type; and, even though altered over the centuries, is one of the finest of the whole group.

Of the building that was here when the church is first mentioned in documentation (1157), nothing is identifiable with certainty, although it is not impossible that the walls of the transepts could incorporate some earlier twelfth-century work. By the later twelfth century the church had already

grown to be one of the largest parish churches in Scotland. On the basis of what now survives in the transepts, we can see that by about 1200 the church was a cross-shaped structure with a nave (later West Kirk) which had aisles, plus relatively widely projecting transepts, and a choir (later East Kirk) which had no aisles. The south transept (later Drum's Aisle) appears to have been extended in 1355 to house additional altars.

Proposals for rebuilding the choir, to house the services of the growing body of clergy with a dignity appropriate for the importance of the burgh, were probably under consideration by the 1440s, when provision for fund-gathering began. One of the earliest parts to be started would be the undercroft or 'lower church', which was made necessary by the eastward extension over steeply falling land. This addition was made to house the chapel of Our Lady of Pity, a cult that epitomised the late medieval identification with the sufferings of Christ and his mother. Work on the choir appears to have gathered fresh momentum in the 1470s and it was eventually completed in the early sixteenth century. The dates 1510 and 1515 are said to have been inscribed on the roof. The design of the choir took much of its inspiration from the great city churches of the Netherlands, an area with which Aberdeen enjoyed particularly close trading links. This was seen very clearly in the boarded barrel ceiling, with a surface application of ribs in imitation of vaulting. This ceiling was strikingly similar to that installed about 1508 at King's College Chapel in Old Aberdeen.

The post-Reformation insertion of a dividing wall created the two churches, but the plan-view of Aberdeen produced by James Gordon in 1661 shows the medieval nave, with south porch, still in existence. The disasters overtaking the West Kirk in the earlier eighteenth century led to a total rebuilding, completed in 1755. The Aberdeen-born James Gibbs produced a dignified, perhaps austere, structure, well suited to its purpose and with monumental clarity of forms. Its style is restrained Romano-classical, with formal pediments (triangular top frontages) at the west end and a spacious barrel vaulted interior. This has three galleries, on a well thought-out plan. Gibbs had profound knowledge of architectural styles and had become the London-based leader of architectural fashion. The Radcliffe Library in Oxford and St Martin-in-the-Fields Church in London were two of his notable creations. From an architectural viewpoint, the West Kirk has never been given the full appreciation which it deserves. This is probably because it is part of a larger building and because Gibbs' active career was almost entirely pursued in England. Although a side chapel was created in the south aisle in 1936, the overall structure of the West Kirk remains very largely as it was when it left the hands of the builders in 1755. Under-valued by some, it is worth noting that the late Dr Francis Eeles, Secretary of the Council for the Care of Churches in England, commented on the West Kirk that 'of this type of church there is not a finer example in the United Kingdom'.

In 1835 it was decided to reconstruct the later medieval choir (the East Kirk), while retaining the undercroft at the east end. Although at this stage in architectural history the merits of medieval architecture were coming to be more widely appreciated, there was as yet little sense that authenticity should

be valued over superficial appearance. The distinguished architect chosen to design the new work was Archibald Simpson, whose understanding of medieval forms was inevitably still rudimentary. Reconstruction was completed in 1837, but this part of the church was badly damaged in the fire of 1874, following which it was rebuilt by William Smith. In general Smith followed Simpson's design, but chose to introduce more strident - and historically 'correct' - forms for the central tower and spire: traceried openings, many pinnacles, and gables for clocks. Smith's work left the church substantially we now see it.

But one set of internal changes does deserve mention: Dr William Kelly's sensitive restoration in 1898 of St Mary's Chapel in the undercroft. This area had been at various times a jail, a plumber's shop, a Gaelic Chapel and a soup kitchen. Kelly had a profound knowledge of medieval forms and, after re-levelling of the floor and removal of unsightly lath and plaster walling, he was able to bring back much of the original feeling to this strikingly designed fifteenth-century space.

As a result of these long processes, St Nicholas offers a fascinating admixture of the medieval, the classical and the early Gothic revival. There could be no more ample demonstration than this of the continuing aspirations of a community for its place of worship over nearly nine centuries.

(b) Archaeology. The archaeological levels beneath the kirk have been investigated on two occasions, with promising results.

In 1974, prior to the detailed planning of a new heating system, an excavation was conducted in the Collison Aisle. The levels had been disturbed by the insertion of a boiler house in the nineteenth century. But it was possible to confirm that the footings of the walls were consistent with a twelfth-century dating. A highly significant find, in an original position, was a halfpenny belonging to the reign of either David I (1124-53) or Malcolm IV (1153-65). This fits appropriately with the earliest documentary reference in 1157 and tends to strengthen the view that the church was erected in the first half of the twelfth century.

In early 2005 limited exploratory trenches were cut below the floor of the East Kirk, designed to discover if archaeological levels existed in the areas where the Mither Kirk Project would insert basement accommodation. The results were archaeologically positive. Foundation walls of the fifteenth century choir were identified and the tops of two vaulted structures were seen in the northeast corner, but were not fully explored. About 15 burials were identified, some with skeletons in reasonable condition. Finds included medieval pottery sherds, metal pins, coffin handles, post-medieval coins, ribbon and hair. Fuller archaeological investigation in the area would certainly be productive and valuable.

Few opportunities have existed to reveal the archaeology of any Scottish medieval burgh church. In this respect St Nicholas Kirk has very striking potential.

(7) Contents

(a) Historic timber-work and fittings. The woodwork of the church is significant both item by item and as an ensemble which covers the evolution of Scottish church furnishings and liturgy for 500 years.

The story of the later medieval woodwork, clearly considerable in quantity and of high quality, is a sad tale of destruction and dispersal. The East Kirk ceiling, destroyed in 1835, was the major loss. Much of the woodwork was made by John Fendour, with a team of local craftsmen. He also created the choir stalls at King's College Chapel and worked on the royal palace at Falkland in 1501. Seven panels forming a long desk in St Mary's Chapel are the only major part of the early woodwork now remaining within the church. They resemble work at King's College. Four bays and two partial bays from the canopy-front in the choir are now in the Royal Museum, Edinburgh. They are of delicate tracery overlaid by leaf decoration. Several tracery panels have been assembled to form the back of the Deacon Convener's chair at Trinity Hall, the home of the Incorporated Trades. They were gifted to the Trades in the 1570s by Matthew Guild, who seems to have obtained fragments of the choir furnishings when many were dismantled after the Reformation.

All these items are significant in the own right, although none remain in their original position. Any pre-Reformation woodwork belonging to a Scottish church is a rare survived. But these pieces have an added importance because of their documented provenance and the linkage of many of them to the name of John Fendour, a first-class craftsmen.

In St Mary's Chapel is a partly-painted scene of the adoration of the Three Kings, carved on four panels in sixteenth-century style. These panels were originally in Ruthven Church, Inverness-shire, and were gifted to St Nicholas in the late nineteenth century.

Various benches and panels of medieval and seventeenth-century date are in different parts of the church. In the transept are two benches made of panels carved in a style commonly found in the Aberdeen area from the late sixteenth century to the late seventeenth century. One is the Baxters' (Bakers') bench of 1607 and another has miscellaneous heraldic panels of 1677. Incorporated in the 1936 furnishings at the east end of the East Kirk there is a fine 1627 panel from the chair of the Deacon Convener of the Tailors' Guild. Lining the walls of St Mary's Chapel are 104 panels ranging from 1606 to about 1700.

The West Kirk furnishings have a particular fascination. The interior is a museum piece, retaining much of its original furniture. It is dominated by the massive pulpit with its enormous classical sounding board. It towers over an equally huge communion table resting on five sturdy columns. The box pews which fill the nave are of simple pine panels. Almost more remarkable is the survival of the set of roof chandeliers, made in London in 1755. They were

carefully and tastefully converted for electricity about 1939. Very few, if any, Scottish churches still possess their lighting system from such an early date.

The interior of the East Kirk, designed by Smith in 1875-7, represents the Victorian Gothic, with long deal benches in the nave and gallery. The east end was redesigned in 1936, in memory of the Rev James Cooper. The simple lines of clean modern oak forming the pulpit and elders' seats incorporate several examples of seventeenth-century panelling.

The most recent furnishings made for the church are the work of Tim Stead and were placed in Collison's Aisle in 1990, as a memorial by the oil industry. They consist of a screen, numerous high-backed chairs, a table and a lectern. They are made from lamination of different coloured woods. Taking the first letter from the name of each tree, the layers spell out the words We Remember You. Light, serene and elegant, this ensemble of timber-work is both original and unforgettable.

(b) Stained glass. Located in all the main, and architecturally differing, parts of the kirk, the fifteen pictorial or figurative windows are diverse in style and in date of origin (1884-1990), but, in general, are carefully related in design and colour choice to their particular aspect and location in the building.

The four earliest windows are all examples of English Studio glass. Two in the West Kirk come from the London studio of Burlison and Grylls, and give evidence of this firm's appreciation of the architectural qualities of a building and of their wide colour range. They, but especially the directly visible great West Window, together with Geoffrey Webb's 1927 window, lend a quiet glow to the classical interior of the West Kirk. The south wall of the East Kirk holds two smaller late nineteenth-century windows from Shrigley and Hunt 'one of the under-recognised exponents of Aesthetic stained glass'.

Two English and Scottish 'Arts and Crafts' pioneers in stained glass, Christopher Whall and the Aberdonian Douglas Strachan, each designed a window for St Mary's Chapel at the time of its restoration in 1898. Whall's focal window is assessed as one of the finest 'Arts and Crafts' windows in Scotland and to have had a seminal influence on Aberdeen glass in terms of design and treatment. Strachan's window, although by no means his finest, has the distinction of being his first. It is significantly different from his 1908 window directly above it in the East Kirk. This later 'peculiarly Scottish window', using glass of varying character and high quality, has, in some conditions of light, a truly stunning effect.

Of the three large three-light windows in the apse, the powerfully drawn central window (1936) is by Marjorie Kemp. Its neighbours (1961) are fine examples of the distinctive work of Gordon Webster. This Scottish group coheres well in scale and use of colour.

The basket tracery (1519) of the large window in St John's Chapel holds the thoughtfully designed glass of Shona McInnes (1990), which takes advantage

of the northern light, and finds additional life in the movement of the churchyard trees.

In addition to their significance in general terms of art history and aesthetics, as discussed above, the windows also, for those who inquire into the donors or persons commemorated, shed light on the social history not only of Aberdeen but in some cases more widely, as well as reflecting changes in the ecclesiastical and theological scene.
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The main West, East and North windows provide instances. John Gray Chalmers, donor of the West window, leads us to a line of printers and publishers with, at its head, James Chalmers (son of a minister of St Nicholas), founder of the *Aberdeen Journal.* In its pictorial form, a contemporary writer approved of this window as 'based on close adherence to the Bible narrative.' A strong biblical basis is evident in all the earliest pictorial windows (as in many of the later ones) and was an important element in making them acceptable in the face of a long-standing tradition of suspicion of any attempt to give such visible expression to religious truths and teachings.

The central East windows of both the Kirk and St Mary's Chapel bear the name of James Cooper, minister of the East Kirk, and founder, in 1886, of the Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society. Having the study of 'Church Architecture with its allied Arts' as one of its primary purposes, it enabled Dr Cooper, especially through its published Transactions, to exercise a widespread influence on the preservation and enhancement of the nation's ecclesiastical heritage – an influence also exercised by others associated with him in the Society and evidenced elsewhere in this kirk by other windows and artefacts.

And, of course, the Shona McInnes window, gift of the oil industry, points to an important element of present-day Aberdeen life.

Although not falling within the narrow definition of 'stained glass' used above, the side windows in the West Kirk deserve mention. The glass in these was supplied by the great Victorian decorator, Daniel Cottier, with the stained and decorated panels of a design simpler than his usual, to meet local requirements.

In summary, the Kirk of St Nicholas holds a series of windows of high quality, which has considerable aesthetic and historical value. Some, indeed, are of national significance.

(c) Effigies. The group of seven effigies in the Kirk has been described by Dr Tobias Capwell, Curator of Arms and Armour, Glasgow Museums, as 'one of the most significant single collections of the art-form remaining'.

They are significant for several reasons. They form the largest group of medieval effigies in Scotland. They are in a comparatively excellent state of preservation and are superb examples of their types and sub-types. Four represent men and three women. Three of the men are presented in full

armour, the fourth in civilian dress. Two of the armed effigies are accompanied by effigies of their wives. Only thirteen such survive in Scotland and several of these are in poor condition.

The effigies are reasonably accurate images of the subjects as they were in life. This extends to the style of armour. The subjects are shown in the kind of armour which they wore in life, even though by European standards it was old-fashioned. Full plate armour was an expensive luxury and in a comparatively poor country like Scotland it was not unusual for older and outmoded equipment to remain in use. The accoutrements of the St Nicholas effigies are good examples of this. They are well detailed but old-fashioned.

The effigies are dated by Dr Capwell as 1430-65. It is significant that so many date from the middle of the fifteenth century and there are sufficient similarities to make this dating secure. Attribution of the subjects is less secure. The identification of the effigies in Drum's Aisle as being of Sir Alexander Irvine of Drum (died 1457) and his wife Lady Elizabeth Keith (died 1459) is secure in view of the fine brass plate, probably the oldest of its kind in Scotland, which formed part of the tomb. It is affixed to the wall beside the effigies. Sir Alexander's armour is clearly superior to those of the other two armed effigies.

The armed effigy in St John's Chapel in the north transept has long been identified as representing Robert Davidson, provost of Aberdeen, who was killed at the Battle of Harlaw in 1411. The weapons, sword and dagger are entirely intact and are thus extremely rare survivals.

The third armed effigy is attributed of Provost Gilbert Menzies (died circa 1452). This is in poorer condition, but has some fine details such as cuirass straps and shoulder defence rivets. It is located in the south aisle next to the effigy of his wife, Marjory Liddel.

The attribution of the other two effigies to Provost John Collison and his wife Margaret Setoun is unlikely and impossible if the effigies are dated 1430-50.

This is a highly significant group of effigies which ought to be better known and also the subject of further research.

(d) Wall hangings, paintings. The most notable wall decorations in the church are four large embroidery panels. After hanging for many years at the rear of the town council loft in the West Kirk, they are now on a wall near the West door.

The subjects of the panels are well-known incidents in the Old Testament, including, for example, 'The finding of Moses' and 'Susanna and the Elders'. In date they belong to the first half of the seventeenth century, perhaps within the reign of King Charles I (1625-49). It is on record that they came into the possession of the town council in 1688. The Master of Kirk and Bridge Works purchased them, on behalf of the council, from Baillie George Aedie for £400

Scots. They were itemised as ‘Four Pieces of Tapestry’ or ‘Hangings for the decorement of the King’s Loft in Nicholas Kirk in dayes of Solemnitie’.

Remarkably well preserved, they are potentially a unique survival of an integrated decoration scheme. Traditionally, their creation has been ascribed to Mary Jamesone, daughter of the Aberdeen painter George Jamesone and wife of Baillie George Aedie. But it is likely that several embroiderers were involved in the work, including her great-aunt Jean Guild.

None of the designs is original, as they are based on near contemporary North European engravings, including the work of Matthaeus Merian the Elder. The iconography has been selected to allow the assignment of political identities relevant to the era of the embroidery-making.

The current display of the panels follows a layout designed by Sir George Reid, President of the Royal Scottish Academy, in the late nineteenth century. Further evidence of the involvement of the Reid family of artists with the Kirk is witnessed by the presence of a number of their paintings. These, including a fine representation of the interior, form an independent and significant collection.

(e) Silver plate. The St Nicholas collection of silver plate (with a few pewter items) comprises some 34 groups of objects. Communion plate of course predominates.

There are a number of significant silver items, including two sets of beaker cups, 10 in total, by Coline Allan. He was one of Aberdeen’s most important eighteenth-century goldsmiths, who worked from 1748 until his death in 1774. Allan favoured an ornate manner, but the St Nicholas items follow the northeast pattern of plain tapering beaker, in a Dutch fashion. Two other beaker cups are by Peter Lambert of Aberdeen, dating from about 1810. His output is not prolific and these cups are therefore an important contribution to extant holdings of his craftsmanship. There are few other examples of Aberdeen work, but many pieces come from the key silversmithing cities of London, Sheffield, Birmingham and Edinburgh.

The bulk of the silver communion plate is Victorian or early twentieth century, with inscriptions referring to events in the histories of the congregations or to individual members and elders. The Cooper Cup and Paten are particularly interesting. They are sterling silver made in 1899 to the designs of Aberdeen architect, jeweller and enameller James Cromar Watt, who worked in the ‘Arts and Crafts’ tradition. The two pieces commemorated the active ministry at the East Church of Dr James Cooper, noted ecclesiologist. The cup is set with Scottish freshwater pearls from the rivers Ythan and Don, along with carbuncles, carnelians and agates. Watt has enamelled on the foot and shaft discs bearing Christian symbols. The enamelling on the paten has a central figure based on a drawing by his friend the stained glass artist Douglas Strachan. Examples of Watt’s craftsmanship are not now commonly found and the Cooper pieces are important evidence of his notable skills. He also contributed enamel-work to the restoration of St Mary’s Chapel in 1898.

(f) Organs. There are in total three organs in the church. The Willis organ in the West Kirk is one of three in Aberdeen, built by a firm at the pinnacle of British organ building since Victorian times. The Compton organ in the East Kirk will be retained and updated in the Mither Kirk Project. This organ is unique in Scotland and one of very few such organs still extant in the UK. It uses a novel and short-lived magneto-electric action. In Drum's Aisle there is a small chamber organ of 1818.

(g) Bells. The history of the St Nicholas bells is a lively tale. In 1351 two major bells were added to those already existing. These two were named Mary and Lawrence (commonly called 'Auld Lowrie'). The set of bells served for over 500 years, until the disastrous fire of 1874, in which the old steeple and the bells fell to destruction. A new set of 37 bells, cast in Belgium, was soon installed in the new tower, in the form of a carillon. Unlike a 'peal' of hanging bells, operated by ropes, a carillon has fixed bells, rung mechanically, usually from a keyboard. But this new instrument proved unsatisfactory: its sound was jumbled and did not carry well. In 1952, at the expense of the town council, the bells were re-cast and effectively tuned. Then in 1954 a further 11 bells were added, making the structure, with 48 bells, the largest carillon in Britain.

(8) Documentary background

For effective assessment of the history and achievements of an institution there must be reliance on an adequate body of archives created by or about that body. In this respect St Nicholas Kirk is remarkably well provided.

Only three town parish churches in medieval Scotland have left surviving record volumes or cartularies, and St Nicholas is one of these. This manuscript was written in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but contains some material reaching back to the fourteenth century. It was published by the Spalding Club in two volumes (1888, 1892), under the able editorship of Rev. Dr James Cooper. Post-Reformation records of the church also exist, principally Kirk Session minutes, commencing in 1562. Selections from these were published by the Spalding Club in 1846. On account of the very close links between the church and the town council, already emphasised, much material on the church survives in the burgh records. These constitute the earliest and fullest set of town records in Scotland. Following a single roll of 1317, the record volumes survive from 1398 onwards, in an almost unbroken series. The Spalding Club published selections for the period 1398-1625 in two volumes (1844, 1848), but this printed material is only about 10% of what is contained in the 56 manuscript volumes concerned. Some other items from the series are published in Cooper's volumes, above; but a great deal of record information on the church remains still in manuscript form. Other relevant series include sasines, deeds, letter-books, treasury records and the Kirk and Bridge Work accounts already noted. Much on the history of St Nicholas could yet be extracted and used from the Charter Room of Aberdeen Town House.

(9) Outline of the Mither Kirk Project

The Kirk of St Nicholas Uniting has been working on the Project since 2002. During medieval times the church was at the heart of daily life in the burgh. More recently, it has become separated from those who come to the city centre. Through the Mither Kirk Project an attempt is being made to open the building for wider use and to enable everyone to appreciate the value of the heritage it represents. As part of the planning process, the following statements have been adopted for the Project:

Vision Statement. The Project will create an active, bustling location with bright, attractive spaces, and high quality, people-oriented facilities inside a refocused Kirk of St Nicholas, more in touch with the community and integrated within a re-energised city centre.

Mission Statement. The Project is for local people and visitors to meet and interact, learn about Aberdeen, their heritage and the developing world, within a welcoming, caring and inclusive setting.

Project Description. The Project serves the needs of both local people and visitors to Aberdeen by opening up the exceptional opportunities provided by this church and its buildings. Our aim is that it will become a place of spiritual and physical refreshment for young and old alike, seven days a week. It will make available appropriate commercial facilities such as a coffee shop, fair trade shop, conferencing, offices. It will develop opportunities for people to explore their history and heritage as well as their relationship with the developing world. It will allow the congregation to continue to offer a warm welcome, spaces for silent meditation, counselling, and - of course - primarily Christian public worship.

The Proposed Changes. The Mither Kirk Project involves a major restructuring of the East Kirk and the reinstatement of St Mary's Chapel to be a place of peace within the city centre. Drum's Aisle and the West Kirk are not directly affected, although we intend to offer a greatly enhanced visitor experience in order that many more people are encouraged to appreciate the heritage of the entire site.

The Kirk has been divided since the late sixteenth century into two sanctuaries separated by Drum's Aisle (formerly the south transept). Strong links with the City remain, and the Kirk is used at least twice a year for civic services.

The East Kirk is a high building extending over the top of the medieval St Mary's Chapel. The latter is at present used for the Third World Centre shop. The outline of the present sanctuary structure was established in 1837, but has undergone repair (after the fire of 1874) and refitting since then.

The concept is to introduce a floor at gallery level in the East Kirk to create a new sanctuary upstairs. The fixed pews will be retained, supplemented by moveable chairs, the organ will be renovated and the features of the apse will

be retained. However, this space, which still has considerable height, has the potential to serve as a multipurpose space for concerts (up to 400 seats), other arts-related activities, conferences and exhibitions. The present ground floor of the sanctuary would become 'commercial', housing a café (franchised by Foyer), the Third World Centre and its educational wing (Montgomery Development Education Centre), a small meeting room (capacity ca 40), an 'internet' space for access to family history and archive materials and offices (one probably becoming the administrative home for the Aberdeen International Youth Festival).

The entrance by St Mary's Chapel will be restructured to allow wheelchair access from street level, with a lift to all floors. St Mary's Chapel would be restored to a place of quiet and tranquillity for all in the city centre, with the city centre chaplain based adjacent to it. Under the present Church, behind St Mary's Chapel, a new area would be created housing the kitchen for the café and other facilities. In this area there is the potential to create a community kitchen for teaching healthy eating skills to disadvantaged groups. Active discussions are taking place about this option. There will also be some offices/small meeting rooms. In order for this area to be created a full archaeological excavation is required – scheduled to start in October. This follows an exploratory dig earlier this year which showed that the ground is largely undisturbed despite the considerable building work over the centuries.

Planning permission has been granted, but building work can only start after the archaeology has been completed (perhaps Spring 2006) with a tentative completion date of Summer 2007.

The Church is actively involved in raising the funds required (estimated at £2.5m), having contributed £500k from its own resources. At present we are dealing with the statutory bodies in seeking funds. Around the turn of the year we intend to begin approaching the non-statutory sector. For this we are in the process of setting up a Development Board and Board of Trustees. The Development Board is to be chaired by David Paton. At present we have the Marquess of Aberdeen and Temair, David Irvine of Drum, Lord Provost John Reynolds and Rev. Prof. Alan Main as Trustees.

(10) Conclusion: summary of significance

The overall significance of St Nicholas can be summed up in three words: antiquity, coherence and quality.

The great age of the building, in its various parts, has been frequently emphasised above. Its context in this respect can be well presented in the words of Dr William Kelly. 'The great burghal church of Aberdeen not only has national and international relationships, but also retains older living masonry than does any other medieval building in Aberdeen or its neighbourhood: work older by 200 years than the oldest extant part of St Machar's Cathedral, and 350 years earlier than King's College Chapel'.

Yet almost more striking than its venerability is the cohesion of its many constitutent parts. A building created in the 800 years or so between the mid-twelfth and the mid-twentieth centuries could well have emerged as an incoherent architectural jumble. Almost all of the changes carried out over the centuries have displayed appropriate sensitivity. Although there is undoubtedly visual variety, the whole effect, both external and internal, presents a sense of unity.

The quality of design, construction and fitting-out of the church has remained high across the generations. A selection of names of some of the designers and craftsmen discussed above will act as a reminder of various peaks of achievement: the anonymous architect of the Chapel of St Mary of Pity; John Fendour, wood designer; Coline Allan, silversmith; James Gibbs, architect; Archibald Simpson, architect; William Kelly, architect; James Cromar Watt, jeweller and enameller; Douglas Strachan, stained glass artist; Tim Stead, woodwork designer. Dr Kelly again expressed the position well. ‘ There was nothing daring or brilliant in the conception or the execution of any part. But the whole church expressed the character of the people: solid, honest, kindly, homely and hospitable, and somewhat rugged; yet she is beautiful, the Mother Church of the Burgh of Aberdeen.’

The ultimate significance of the Mither Kirk Project is that it aims to build on all these features and to take the church forward into the twenty-first century: physically, communally, institutionally and spiritually.