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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90237)

Taken into State care: 1925 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2011

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CROSS KIRK, PEEBLES



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CROSS KIRK, PEEBLES

SYNOPSIS

Cross Kirk, in Peebles, comprises the remains of the nave of a 13th-century church built to mark the discovery of a sacred cross and the supposed relics of St Nicholas. By the mid 15th century, a community of Trinitarian Friars was established there, resulting in a cloister being built to the north of the church. After the Reformation (1560), the church became the parish church of Peebles (replacing the burnt-out St Andrew's Church), and at least three burial aisles were added to it. The church was abandoned in 1784.

The property in care comprises: the roofless nave of the church with its west tower and associated burial aisles, the grassy site of the chancel, and the footings of the cloister buildings.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- c.1260 - a fine cross is found on the site, followed shortly after by the discovery of a stone urn containing cremated human remains, believed to be those of St Nicholas. (The cremation is more likely to be of Bronze-Age date.) The place soon becomes associated with miracles, with the result that Alexander III (1249-1286) finances the erection of a church, named Cross Kirk, on the site, to house both the cross, the relics and the saint's shrine.
- c.1474 - a community of Trinitarian friars is established at the church. The cloister to the north of the church and the west tower of the nave probably date from around this time.
- 1530 - a yearly feast is established to celebrate the finding of the Holy Cross of Peebles.
- 1549 - both Cross Kirk and the nearby St Andrew's parish church are burned by the English. Only Cross Kirk is repaired.
- 1561 - in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation (1560), the friars are expelled, and the church appropriated as the town's parish church. The site apparently remains as a pilgrimage centre into the next century.
- 1656 - major alterations are carried out to fit the kirk for Presbyterian worship. The work includes abandoning the chancel and constructing a new east gable where the chancel arch once was, and inserting galleries. Subsequently, three burial aisles are added - two on the south side (the Erskines of Venlaw and Hay aisles) and one on the north side (the March aisle).
- 1666 - plague sufferers are confined in the crumbling cloister buildings.
- early 1700s - the cloister buildings are used as a school.
- 1784 - the church is abandoned as the parish church and unroofed. By 1811, much of the south wall has fallen. The cloister buildings are largely gone by 1796.
- 1923 - the Office of Works carries out excavations at the church.
- 1925 - the property is taken into state care.

Archaeological Overview

- Since the Office of Works' clearance activity in 1923, there has been no reported archaeological excavation. Dr Richardson's work concentrated on the area of the shrine in the south wall. A stone cist was discovered under the wall, which contained fragments of bone; the speculation was that this may have been St Nicholas's grave discovered c.1260. Evidence was also found to support a late 18th-century description of the shrine (see below).
- The entire area of the property in care must be considered archaeologically sensitive.

Architectural/Artistic Overview

- The 13th-century church was basically a rectangular structure built from whinstone with buff sandstone dressings. It had a thick-walled, vaulted sacristy entered off the north wall of the chancel, near its east end. The 13th-century west doorway is now the most significant architectural feature surviving in the church.
- The greatest decorative emphasis formerly was probably on a small feretory towards the east end of the south wall of the nave. Dr Dalgleish's description of 1790 refers to the shrine having a tomb-like arch above it, making it double-sided, thereby enabling pilgrims access to the shrine without having to enter the church. Fragments of a grave-slab showing a cleric are thought to come from the shrine.
- The nave is now walled off at its east end by a wall that re-used stonework from the dismantled chancel. A medieval window is re-sited in its upper part. The lintel of the door through this wall is dated 1656. The nave walls are marked by the joist pockets of the galleries inserted in 1656.
- The west end of the nave was enhanced by a five-storey tower. The lowest storey, the porch, has a barrel-vaulted ceiling. The tower had a spiral staircase at the SW angle from the first floor upwards, and early views show that the wall-head was capped with a corbel-table and a parapet. Some of the upper storeys have fireplaces, and were habitable, possibly for the cleric responsible for the relics.
- At least three post-Reformation burial aisles were added to the north and south walls of the nave. That built for the Erskines of Venlaw against the south wall c.1804 is now just a decaying shell.
- Little survives of the cloister buildings to the north of the church other than low footings. The cloister was square, and had ranges around all three sides. The only feature to break the rectangular profile of the ranges is some parallel walling east of the east range, presumably part of the chapter house.

Social Overview

- Cross Kirk is mainly associated with the Beltane festival, which marks the riding of the Boundaries and the crowning of the May Queen combined. These take place in June. The festival was the brainchild of Clement Gunn in the

1930s, and is now a week-long festival. One of the events at the start of Beltane is a service held at Cross Kirk (transferred to the Old Parish Church in bad weather).

- The Beltane festival week aside, Cross Kirk has a modest recreational and tourism use. It is used by local guides in their tours of the town.

Spiritual Overview

- The place was possibly a Bronze-Age burial site.
- The site of the later church was directly related to the early Christian cross found there.
- Medieval Cross Kirk testifies to the belief in miracles in medieval Scotland, as well as representing the hopes of its patrons in securing their passage through purgatory to the after-life.
- The Trinitarians were a religious order of friars specialising in the physical care of Christians, having expanded their role from the original duty of rescuing Christian captives from ransom. Thus the pilgrimage centre of the church was an ideal setting for the charitable order.
- For Peebles churches today, Cross Kirk is a place of Christian unity. This is particularly apparent during the town's Palm Sunday procession. Cross Kirk thus retains its identity as a church, and as a place of prayer and Christian worship.
- The Beltane service is non-denominational, and is presided over by a local minister, who is installed as the Warden of Cross Kirk. It is well attended. It was founded by Dr Gunn, the first Warden, in 1930, who is remembered by a bronze plaque in the church.
- The Palm Sunday procession is Cross Kirk's other annual spiritual event, attended by all the town's churches. A short service at Cross Kirk is followed by a walk through the town, with people following a Silver Band and waving palm crosses. As each church building is reached, members of that church drop off the procession to attend their own service.
- In addition, Cross Kirk is used for individual spiritual activities.

Aesthetic Overview

- The ruined Cross Kirk can be described as stark, given its plain wall construction and the absence of most of its original architectural details. However, its aesthetic – of a religious ruin's ancientness – is preserved, particularly in the nave.
- Cross Kirk is near the centre of present-day Peebles. Houses and other buildings surround it. However, the ruin is largely screened from its urban neighbours by attractive clumps of mature Scots Pine. Its character, of ancient ruin and spiritual separateness, is thus preserved.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- What was the precise form of St Nicholas's shrine?

- What form did the chancel take, and the cloister added in the 15th century?
- No general study of the Trinitarians (Red Friars) in Scotland has been produced, though there are authoritative accounts of the Franciscans and Dominicans.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Cross Kirk is a good example of a pilgrimage site that owes its existence to a holy discovery on a particular spot rather than the acquisition of a relic or relics from elsewhere.
- Cross Kirk is the best-preserved urban friary surviving in Scotland.
- As a site which may have Bronze-Age, Early Christian and medieval religious value, it is an interesting example of the way in which different ages have interacted with their own mortality.

Associated Properties

(other relevant local sites) - St Andrew's Old Parish Church; Peebles Old Parish Church.

(other sites of Scottish Trinitarian friaries) – Aberdeen; Dunbar; Failford Ayrshire); Houston (East Lothian); Scotlandwell (Fife).

(other friaries in Historic Scotland's care) - **Dominican Friary, St Andrews.**

Keywords

Trinitarian, nave, chancel, shrine, pilgrims, cloister, Bronze Age

Selected Bibliography

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