

Features within Elgin Cathedral and in the graveyard provide a wealth of evidence for both church and everyday life from medieval times.

INVESTIGATING ELGIN CATHEDRAL

Information for Teachers





Timeline

1224 Bishop's see transferred from Spynie to Elgin; existing church expanded to cathedral

1270 Major rebuilding and expansion following fire; new west doorway

1390 Cathedral burnt by 'Wolf of Badenoch'; central tower rebuilt

1402 Cathedral attacked by son of Lord of the Isles

1560 Parliament abolishes Mass; Bishop removes to parish church

1561 Cathedral 'purged' of 'popish trappings'

1567-8 Lead and bells removed

1637 Choir roof blows down

1640 Rood screen broken up for firewood

1707 The last bishop dies

1711 Collapse of central tower with nave

1807 John Shanks appointed keeper of cathedral

Known affectionately as the 'Lantern of the North', the ruins of Elgin Cathedral are still impressive. Features within the cathedral and in the graveyard provide a wealth of evidence for both church and everyday life from medieval times.

Historical background

From the early 13th century, Elgin was the headquarters of the Bishops of Moray. Formerly based at Spynie to the north of Elgin, in 1224 the bishop was granted the right to shift his **see** or domain to Elgin. The earliest parts of the cathedral date to this time.

Part of the cathedral was burnt by a fire in 1270 after which it was substantially rebuilt. The dramatic west entrance and the octagonal chapter house date from this time.

Unscathed by the Wars of Independence, the cathedral suffered terribly in 1390 from an attack by the son of Robert II, the earl of Buchan, better known as the 'Wolf of Badenoch'. Excommunicated in 1388, Buchan swooped on Elgin in 1390 with a gang of 'wyld wykked Helandmen' and set the cathedral on fire. The cathedral suffered again from the ravages of 'Helandmen' when it was burnt by one of the sons of

the Lords of the Isles in 1402. Yet again, the cathedral was doggedly rebuilt.

In between these years of drama, life went on in the cathedral. By the time of the Reformation the **chapter** at Elgin comprised 25 **canons** (priests). They were supported by the incomes of local parish churches and were each provided with their own home. One of these can be seen close to the cathedral, known (wrongly) as the Bishop's House. Their duties were to carry out the services at the cathedral, celebrate high Mass every morning, and lead and organise sermons and processions on feast days. Many of the services were for the clergy alone and took place behind the **rood screen**, which separated the high altar and choir area from the general congregation.

Following the Reformation of 1560, when Parliament abolished the Mass, the bishop vacated the cathedral and moved to the parish church in the town. Thereafter the building steadily fell into ruin. In 1807 the first keeper of the cathedral was appointed, a cobbler named John Shanks, who cleared the site of rubble and showed visitors around. Since that time the cathedral has been in state care.



Supporting learning and teaching

A visit to **Elgin Cathedral** is particularly appropriate for teachers working on class study topics such as:

- **The Middle Ages**
- **The Reformation**

Many teachers will visit the cathedral precinct in combination with a visit to nearby Spynie Palace. The history of the sites is closely intertwined, the castle being home of the cathedral bishops.

The **Curriculum for Excellence** aspires to motivate and challenge pupils through a wide range of varied learning experiences. Site visits have a particular role to play in joining up learning outcomes across the curriculum. A visit, and use of the supporting materials, will help to:

- **develop successful learners** by challenging pupils to consider how life has changed for people. It will help them to think critically about evidence and arrive at their own conclusions.
- **develop confident individuals.** Pupils will learn about aspects of their community's past, develop an understanding of social changes, establish some of their own values and communicate their views on different historical and social issues.
- **develop responsible citizens.** It will help to increase pupils' social and historical knowledge and understanding and encourage greater respect for their own historic and built environment.
- **develop effective contributors** by broadening pupils' knowledge and understanding through investigative, creative and critical thinking.

Before the visit

- It would be helpful if pupils had an idea of some of the key terms relating to the cathedral life, e.g. **nave, tower, aisle, altar, bishop, canon, chapter, spire, chapel, Reformation, Mass, tomb.**
- The cathedral has changed dramatically over the years. Discuss with pupils how and why buildings change. Discuss how wind and weather can affect a building as well as the deliberate destruction following the Reformation.
- The role of the Church in everyday life in medieval times is hard for today's children to grasp. Research into everyday life at this time will help show its influence. It would also help if pupils had some idea of who bishops and canons were and what their role was.
- Help pupils gain a clearer grasp of the time scale by making a time line with them, counting back the centuries and then marking on key events. This could be added to after the visit.

Working on-site

Pupils should be encouraged to look for physical evidence. Useful starting points are:

- What materials were used to construct the cathedral? Where did they come from? Why have some survived and not others?
- How was the cathedral protected against intruders?
- Can you see any ways in which the cathedral has changed?

Pupils can record by:

- Taking notes.
- Making quick drawings.
- Taking photographs.
- Using tape-recorders to describe what they see, hear, feel, and smell.

On the Historic Scotland website:

www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/education_unit teachers can find additional resources to help with work on site. These include compiling an *Evidence Record* and a *My Impressions Record*.

Suggestions for follow-up work

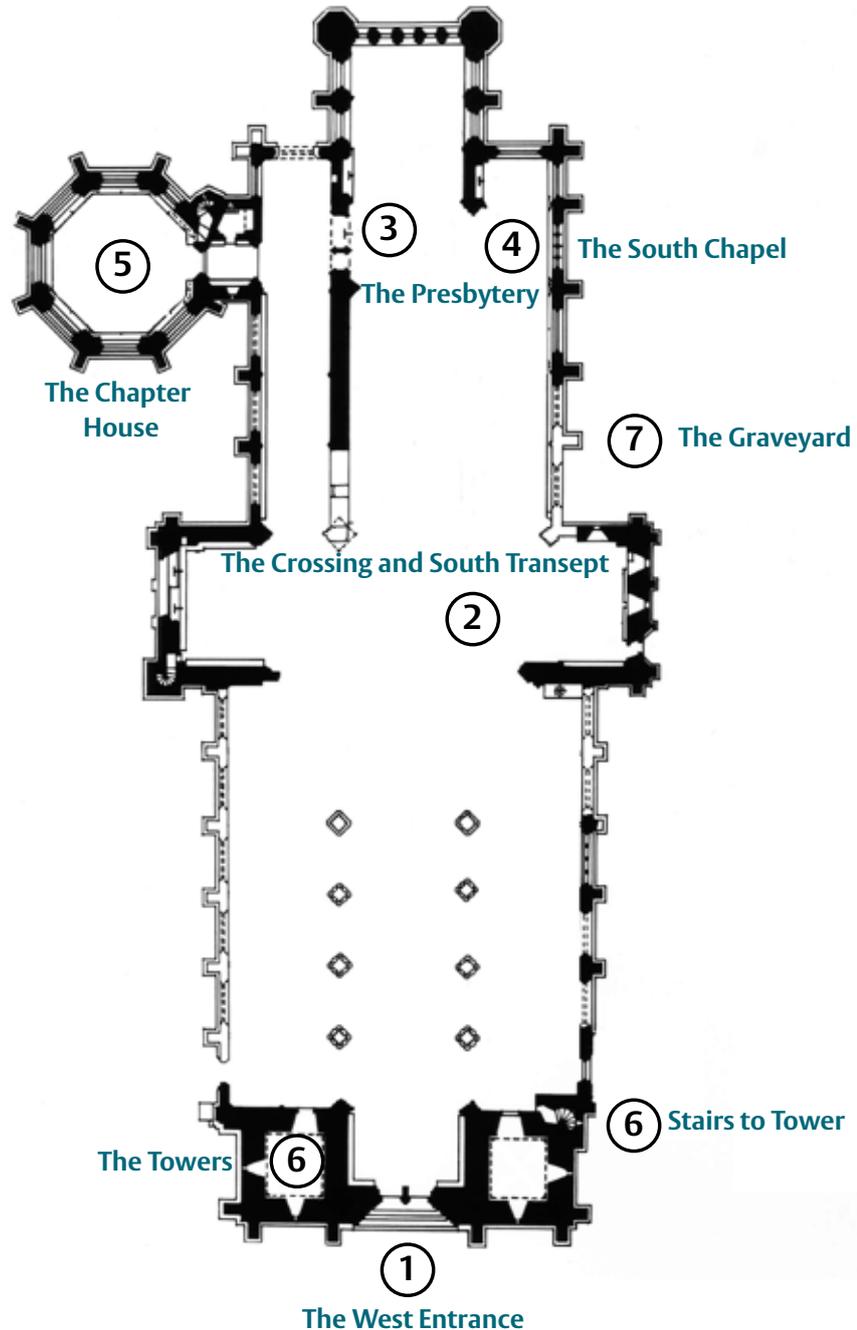
Following the visit pupils can pool their findings in groups to create a fuller record of the cathedral and the lives of the people who worked there. This could form the basis for a range of presentation activities, for example:

- A guide book for future visitors.
- A slide show with commentary of their visit.
- Imaginative writing based on the lives of the canons at the cathedral, perhaps taking in a key event such as the attack by the Wolf of Badenoch.



Plan of Elgin Cathedral

A ground plan of the cathedral



Tour route

Though ruined, there is much to explore in the cathedral. Our suggested **tour route** focuses on features that highlight aspects of medieval church life. It takes in seven key locations, marked on the plan at right:

1. The West Entrance
2. The Crossing and South Transept
3. The Presbytery
4. The South Chapel
5. The Chapter House
6. The Towers
7. The Graveyard

Background information is given in the pack for each location. It is written in simple language so that it can be read aloud to pupils if desired.

Also included are suggested **questions for discussion**. The focus is on encouraging pupils to **interpret** the building and deduce what they can from clues they see around them.

Ideally divide your class into groups of about 10. Allow about an hour for the suggested tour.



Did you know...

Elgin Cathedral is sometimes known as the **Lantern of the North**. Why do you think it has this name?

Tour notes: Elgin Cathedral

Stand in front of the main west entrance.

Setting the scene. This can be read to pupils.

- Let's go back nearly 800 years, to the middle of the 13th century. This cathedral is new and has high towers and dazzling stained glass windows. It is by far the biggest and grandest building in the area.
- This was the headquarters of the most important church man in this part of Scotland: the Bishop of Moray. He was in charge of all the local priests. He lived in Spynie Palace and his cathedral was the centre for church life in the area.
- Cathedrals were usually big grand buildings. The bishops wanted to impress the local people with the power of the Church.
- There were about 25 priests, called canons, who worked here at the cathedral.





Location 1: The West Entrance

Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.

- This is the grand entrance to the cathedral. Only the bishop himself and the canons would use this door on saints’ days and other great occasions. Ordinary people came in though the side door.
- This doorway used to look very colourful. There used to be a beautiful stained glass window above the door. The carvings would have been painted in wonderful colours.
- There would have been wooden doors too, probably decorated as well. If you look just inside the doorways, **can you see where the doors would have bolted shut?**



Bullet holes inside west entrance



West entrance



West entrance with bishop's head

<p>Teacher prompts How did the builders make this entrance look special for the bishop?</p> <p>If you look carefully, you can find a small carving of a bishop’s head.</p>	<p>Desired pupil responses Fancy decorated arch. Carvings on the pillars. Stained glass window. Carving of head is to the right of the doors, at the outermost arch.</p>
<p>Some of the decorations have been stolen. How many places can you see where there used to be statues?</p> <p>The cathedral is also known as the Church of the Holy Trinity– God, Jesus and the Holy Ghost. There used to be a carving of the Holy Trinity between the doors. Can you see the place where it would have been?</p>	<p>Two little alcoves either side of the doorways, three alcoves above doors.</p> <p>In the big oval space between the two doorways.</p>

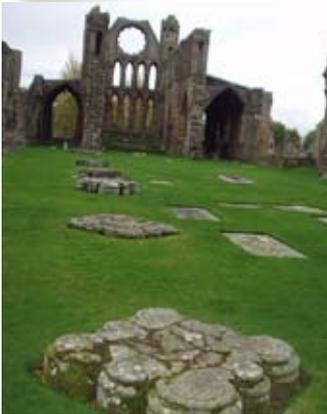
- Go through the doorway. Turn around and look back. To the left of the doorway you can see some little holes on the wall. These are bullet holes! After the church fell into ruins and wasn’t used any more, this wall was used for target practice.

Walk through the doorway and down the course of the old aisle. Look for a big statue to your right and stop beside it.



Did you know...

Bishops today still wear similar clothing. They wear the pointed hat called a **mitre** and carry a stick like a shepherd's crook, called a **crozier**. This is because a bishop is meant to be guiding the people in the same way that a shepherd looks after his flock. A bishop also traditionally wears a special cross around his neck and a ring to show that he is 'married' to the Church.



View east down nave, showing pillar stumps



Statue of bishop

Location 2: The Crossing and South Transept

Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.

- Where we are standing used to be in the centre of the cathedral. There would have been a high tower and a grand aisle, called a nave. **Can you see the remains of the huge pillars that would have held up the roof?**
- This cathedral has had quite an unlucky history. In 1270, not long after it was finished, a big fire destroyed a lot of the buildings. Then in 1390 one of Robert II's sons, who was known as the 'Wolf of Badenoch', attacked the cathedral and burnt it down again. The central tower collapsed twice as well. But every time the cathedral burnt down was a chance to rebuild in the latest style.
- This is a statue of one of the bishops. We can tell it's a bishop because of the clothes he is wearing and the things he is holding. The statue used to be high up on the central tower before it collapsed.

Teacher prompts

Look at the statue. What special things is he wearing and holding?
Look out for other statues of bishops as you go round the cathedral.

Desired pupil responses

Pointed hat called a **mitre**; holding a stick (a **crozier**).

Go around the back of the wall that the statue is leaning against. Look to the left of two tombs, on the outside wall.

Teacher prompts

Find what looks like a little cupboard in the wall, on the left of two tombs. Look at it closely and feel the shape of the bottom of it.
What do you think this could have been used for?
This was where the silver plates and goblets used in church services were washed.

Desired pupil responses

There is a basin shape with a hole for drainage.
Washing objects.

Carry on towards the east end of the cathedral. Stop beside two ornate triangular-based pillars about 5 metres from the end of the cathedral.



Did you know...

The wooden screen was called a **rood screen**, from an old word meaning a cross. It had a painting of Christ on the cross on one side of it, with stars behind it. It would have reached high up to the ceiling. It was broken up in 1640 for firewood – by a Presbyterian minister!



View into presbytery



Site of bishop's throne

Location 3: The Presbytery

Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.

- Eight hundred years ago we would not have been allowed into this part of the cathedral. This was a very special place reserved for the bishops and the canons. The high altar was here and this was where the most important Catholic service, the Mass, was celebrated.
- Ordinary people had to stay behind a wooden screen that used to divide this area from the rest of the church. They would hear the singing or chanting from the choir but would not see the service taking place.
- You can see how high the cathedral once was. There would have been a wooden roof stretching over us, which was probably beautifully decorated. There were high galleries for the people to walk along if they needed to clean the windows. **Can you see the doorways at the top level?**
- Look at the two pillars with triangular shaped bases. The pillar on the right has had part of it cut away. The bishop sat on a grand seat here. It would have been very ornate, with lots of decoration. It was called the **cathedra** – which is how this building gets its name.

Teacher prompts

Imagine that the stained glass is still in the windows. What pictures are on the glass?
What does it look and feel like with the light coming through the windows?

Desired pupil responses

Scenes from the Bible.
Coloured light coming through would have been very impressive and beautiful.

Continue down to the end of the Cathedral.

- The high altar used to be here at the end. This was where the service called Mass used to take place. There are special seats for the bishop and his assistants in the service.

Teacher prompts

Look at the wall to the right. Can you see the remains of arched stone seats?
How many are there?
They are called **sedilia**.

Desired pupil responses

Four stone seats remain.

Turn right into the roofed south chapel, where there are tombs with carved stone figures.



Did you know...

Historians wanted to find out more about Bishop John of Winchester, so they opened up the coffin. To their amazement, the coffin was empty! Someone had stolen the body and the things buried with him! Why do you think anyone would want to steal a body? (probably buried with rich jewels).



Tomb of Bishop John of Winchester



Tomb of William de la Hay

Location 4: South Chapel

Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.

- Bishops and people who had given lots of money to the cathedral were buried inside the cathedral in special tombs.

Teacher prompts

Look at the first tomb on the left. Look at the clothes on the statue.

Who do you think is buried here?

His name was Bishop John of Winchester. He died in 1460.

Look carefully at the tomb and see if you can find a carving of an animal anywhere.

If you look very carefully at the upper inside part of the tomb area, you can see faint sketches on the stone. What can you see?

Desired pupil responses

A bishop – wearing mitre hat.

Carved lion at his feet.

Sketches of angels.

Now look at the nearest tombstone in the grass. What job do you think this person did?

His name was William de la Hay. If you look very carefully you might be able to find his name on the tomb.

There is a lion at his feet again – but part of it is missing. Which part?

People used to believe that lions would help you get to heaven. One of his enemies cut the lion’s head off, perhaps to stop him getting to heaven!

A knight – wearing a sword, helmet, armour, and belt.

Lion’s head is missing.

Go back through the doorway you came in by, cross the presbytery, and go through a narrow passageway to enter the octagonal chapter house.



Did you know...

Lots of the canons had other jobs and often didn't turn up at the cathedral, sending vicars instead. The canons all had houses given to them by the bishop, so they were quite well off.

Location 5: The Chapter House

Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.

- The canons who worked at the cathedral had a meeting in this room every morning. They would read a chapter from a book written by St Benedict, which told them how to behave and live as canons. That's why this room is called the **chapter house**. They would also discuss any business or problems.
- The canons held seven church services a day and celebrated Mass too. On feast days they organised processions and special sermons.
- The roof is very complicated but it's held up by only one pillar! It's amazing that it was built more than 500 years ago.
- It used to look much fancier. The windows would have had stained glass. The carvings on the ceiling were painted too.



Central pillar in chapter house



Lectern in chapter house

<i>Teacher prompts</i>	<i>Desired pupil responses</i>
The most important of the canons was called the dean. Can you see where he would sit?	Large seat opposite the door as you come in.
The windows are modern. Look at the designs on them. Can you see these designs anywhere else in the chapter house? What other designs can you see?	On the roof and at the top of the pillar. Flowers, faces, shields, St Andrews cross.
There is a special place for putting the Bible to read from. Can you find it?	On the pillar.

- As you leave the chapter house, look to the left of the small green door on the left of the main door. If you look very carefully, you can see a carving of the head of James I, wearing a crown and holding a sceptre.

Come out of the chapter house, turn right, and head down the nave again to the towers at the west entrance. Turn into the door up the south (left) tower.



The west towers



View east from tower



The 'Bishop's' house

Location 6: The Towers

Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.

- We are going to climb up the cathedral tower to the top. As you go up, have a look at the steps. They are made from old gravestones.
- The towers used to be even taller and probably had spires at the top.
- As you go up, count how many floors the towers had. There are some rooms on they way up.

Start climbing the tower from the entrance to the left of the West Entrance. At the first floor level, cross over and continue climbing up the other tower. This stairway leads all the way to the top and allows you to come out on to the roof of the tower. The other stairway continues up to the top – but then just stops, with no view.

- From the top you can look down and see the whole cathedral again. Can you find:
 - The statue of the bishop?
 - The chapter house?
 - The remains of the pillars?
- Look towards Elgin. The town would have looked very different then. **Can you see an old house close to the cathedral?** This is known as the Bishop's House, but this is wrong because one of the canons lived here.
- There used to be a wall all around the cathedral. **Can you see any parts of it?** Look for a gate in the precinct wall.

Make your way carefully down again and head out of the cathedral into the graveyard.



Did you know...

The lead from the roof and the cathedral bells were loaded onto a boat at Aberdeen and set sail for the Netherlands, where they were going to be sold. Unfortunately they were so heavy that the boat capsized.



Scotland's tallest gravestone?



Grave of glove maker

Location 7: The Graveyard

Background information for teachers. This can be read to pupils.

- In the 1500s, many people thought it was wrong to have rich and expensive things in a church. They felt that people might start to worship the things, especially statues, rather than God. This was why the statues were taken from the main entrance and from other places in the cathedral. They also felt that the bishops were getting too rich and proud. These people became known as Protestants because they protested against the traditional church.
- In 1560 Parliament decided that it was illegal to have Catholic church services. The bishops moved out and the cathedral was abandoned.
- The roof, which was made of valuable lead, was removed and so were the cathedral bells. This meant that the cathedral started to rot and fall down. The painted rood screen was broken up for firewood and eventually the central tower collapsed.
- Gradually tourists started becoming interested in the cathedral. In 1807 a local cobbler called John Shanks was appointed keeper of the cathedral and on his own he cleared away a lot of the stone that had fallen down so that people could look around the ruins. His white painted tomb is right at the east end of the graveyard, facing east, second in from the end.
- In the meantime, the grounds around the cathedral were still a popular place to be buried. There are lots of amazing graves here. Have a look around and see if you can find:
 - A grave from each of these centuries: 1500, 1600, 1700, 1800, 1900.
 - A really tall gravestone (there's one more than 5 metres high).
 - A gravestone with a skull or a skeleton.
 - A gravestone with a sand timer.
 - A gravestone that mentions the person's job on it.
 - A gravestone with your first name or surname on it.

Our suggested tour is now finished.



FAQ

Q What is the minimum number of adults required for supervision?

A 1 adult to 10 pupils.

Q Is there disabled access?

A Wheelchair users can gain access to the cathedral complex but the chapter house and towers are, sadly, inaccessible.

Q Are there lunch facilities?

A Pupils can picnic on-site. In poor weather pupils can have their lunch in the chapter house.

Q Where are the toilets?

A Toilets are available by the Visitors Centre.

Q Do you carry out risk assessments on behalf of schools?

A Risk assessment of the site is the responsibility of the teacher in charge of the group. Hazard information sheets available on the Historic Scotland website provide information that can help teachers prepare their risk assessments.

Q Is there a shop?

A There is a shop that sells postcards, guidebooks, and souvenirs.

Visiting Elgin Cathedral

Pre visits: We strongly recommend that teachers should make a **free** visit to the cathedral to familiarise themselves with the site and to make a risk assessment before bringing school parties.

Booking a visit: Phone 01343 547171 to book a visit, discuss your needs, and confirm opening times with the steward. If staff are available, it may be possible to arrange a guided tour.

Cost: Admission is free to a range of educational groups including school parties. More information about who qualifies for free visits can be found on the Historic Scotland Education Unit website (see below).

Location: In Elgin on the A96.

Parking: Coaches can park outside the Cathedral.

Health and safety: Please note the following:

- Beware of narrow steep stairs and heights if you go up the towers.
- Pupils should not run around unsupervised and should not climb on the walls.
- As part of our commitment to Green Tourism, we ask that any rubbish be disposed of back at school.

Historic Scotland Education Unit:

For further information about school visits, activities, and resources for teachers visit:

www.historic-scotland.gov.uk

Additional resources

For teachers

Fawcett *Elgin Cathedral* Historic Scotland 1999. The official guidebook to the site which includes detailed information, maps, and lots of photographs.

Fawcett *Scottish Cathedrals* Historic Scotland 1997. Detailed information about Scotland's cathedrals and cathedral life.

www.bbc.co.uk/history/scottishhistory/index.shtml A clear overview of the periods with helpful essays on the medieval church and the Reformation.

www.scran.ac.uk Images of objects associated with the medieval church and lots of photographs and engravings of the cathedral.

For pupils

Dreary Horrible Histories: Bloody Scotland Scholastic 1998.

www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/education/sysm/scots/index_choice.shtml This excellent website looks at the life of monks in pre-Reformation Scotland.

www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/education/as/burghlife/ This website explores Burgh life in 1566.

www.ltscotland.org.uk/scottishhistory An excellent library of resources with some good pages on the Reformation.

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