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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SETON COLLEGIATE CHURCH



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SETON COLLEGIATE CHURCH

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

The monument comprises the roofed remains of a substantial part of Seton Collegiate Church. The apsidal choir, sacristy, crossing tower and transepts have all survived in near complete sate. The nave has long disappeared as has the domestic range which housed the small college of priests who administered the church. The college was closed following the Protestant Reformation of 1560, though it remained in use as a private chapel and for burials up to the early 20th century.

Largely constructed during the 15th and 16th centuries, the church was built by the Seton family within the grounds of their principal residence. Its immediate setting is an area of mature wooded grounds which form part of the Inventory designed landscape to Seton Castle (private residence).

The church lies close to the busy A198 between Port Seton and Longniddry and is therefore relatively easily accessible (by car) within a short drive of Edinburgh and the east Lothian coast. The car park is just off the A198 and the church is reached via a short woodland path; this continues past the site to join the John Muir Way at Seton Sands. The property is staffed and there is a small ticket kiosk with retail area. A number of architectural carved stones are displayed within the church.

1.2 Statement of significance

These bullet points encapsulate our current understanding of the main significances of Seton Collegiate Church. A broader overview of the cultural and natural heritage values of the place is given in section 2.

Seton is a remarkably complete example of a late-medieval Scottish collegiate church. The survival of the ruined domestic accommodation to the SW of the church is a unique opportunity (in a Scottish context) to present a fuller picture of the collegiate establishment and gives the site a particularly high evidential potential.

While Seton represents the work of several generations, the whole is of uniformly high quality and presents a coherent composition. The church contains some particularly fine carved stonework, most notably the piscina and the monumental tomb with its two effigies in the choir.

The church has an undoubted aesthetic appeal both in its secluded somewhat romantic setting, and in the lightness and serenity of its interior. The excellent acoustic is a particular feature and one which helps link the experience of past and present generations, especially on those occasions when music is performed.

Seton's history is reasonably well documented especially through Maitland of Lethington's near-contemporary *History of the House of Seton* which gives

some detail as to the development of the church. The Seton's were a long established noble family, particularly influential in the late 16th and 17th centuries, and maintained their connection to the Church over six hundred years. This indicates the value placed on ancient and continuing lineage as a badge of status.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

Collegiate churches were often endowed by wealthy families who maintained a college of priests to offer continual prayers on the family's behalf. These collegiate churches were often elaborate architecturally and comparatively richly furnished. Cruden¹ notes the fifteenth century as the peak building period with around 40 known to have been constructed; 8 are in the care of Historic Scotland.

The following notes give a broad outline of the history and development of Seton Collegiate Church, more detailed information is given at Appendices 1& 2.

Seton Collegiate Church probably had its origins as the 12th century parish church of St Mary and the Holy Cross. In around 1434 a chantry chapel was added to the south side of the church by Lady Catherine Sinclair to house her husband's tomb. These early structures have been subsumed into the present structure and exist only as archaeological remains.

The building we see today results from the patronage of several generations of Seton lords and ladies, after the family had secured papal approval for its elevation to collegiate status. The outlay was considerable: not only finance for the building works and furnishings, but the maintenance of a body of priests and retainers. In outline, the principal building phases are:

Late 15th century - 1513

George, 1st Lord Seton, began building the Choir adjoining the chapel built by Lady Catherine. The work was unfinished at his death in 1478. His son, 2nd Lord Seton completed the Choir vaulting before his own death in 1508. The glazing and furnishing of the choir was finished by the 3rd Lord Seton, who died at Flodden in 1513.

1513 – 1558

Lady Janet Hepburn, widow of 3rd Lord Seton, adds the N transept. Later, possibly consequent upon damage by the English in 1544, Lady Catherine's aisle was taken down and replaced by the S transept. The crossing tower was also part of this phase, though the spire remained incomplete.

This phase essentially gives us the church we see today with its cruciform plan. It is notable how the later work was concerned to blend in with the earlier, for instance continuing the stone vaulting and similar tracery detail.

¹ Cruden, *Scottish Medieval Churches*, 1986, p183

Contemporary accounts record the church was richly furnished by Lady Janet, who also financed 2 additional priests and built a range of offices.

Later history

After the reformation the church ceased to house a college of priests, and functioned as a private chapel and burial place for the Seton family. The nave was demolished after 1580 as it was no longer required for public worship. It became the burial place for the Wemyss family after they acquire the Seton estates and some restoration and alteration work dates from this period (1878).

The church was Scheduled in 1920 and taken into state care in 1948. After a period of major conservation works the church opened to the public in 1957.

2.2 Evidential values

The primary evidential values of Seton are contained in its physical remains, both upstanding and below ground. There has been some excavation and ground disturbance on the site. In 1947, exploratory excavation revealed to the SW of the church, remains interpreted as the domestic accommodation of the collegiate establishment. This offers a unique opportunity to give visitors a rounded picture of a collegiate church together with associated domestic and ancillary ranges.

Modern archaeological excavation in 1988 prior to drainage works revealed many burials. There is very high potential for further buried remains over the whole site.

Carved stones from Seton Palace are displayed against the east boundary wall. Two fragments date from before 1600, when the 1st earl of Winton built a new residence to replace the medieval castle, and the remainder to c.1630, when the 3rd earl enlarged and embellished it to impress Charles I on his coronation visit of 1633.

Additional information comes from the 1561 account by Maitland of Lethington² *History of the House of Seyton*. This includes a rare inventory of furnishings from the 16th century.

2.3 Historical values

The primary historical values for the church derive from the way it **illustrates** the importance of religious devotion, death, ritual and redemption in the mindset of pre-reformation Scotland, and its long **association** with the Seton family

Along with some of the great late medieval burgh churches, such as St Giles, Edinburgh or St Mary's, Haddington, Seton illustrates a shift in building

² Sir Richard Maitland (1496 – 1586) was a noted poet and writer. He married Martha, daughter of George, 2nd Lord Seton, hence his writing the family history. Their son William Maitland of Lethington was a noted supporter of Mary Queen of Scots and served as her Secretary of State in 1558; his wife Mary Fleming was one of the “Four Marys”.

activity (and therefore allocation of resources) away from the great cathedrals and monastic institutions towards smaller scale parish and collegiate churches. The practice of noble families (or indeed trades guilds or Burghs) endowing Collegiate churches, where colleges of priests offered perpetual prayers for the redemption of the patrons, was well established in late medieval times. The high quality and rich decoration which characterises Seton reflects the image the family wished to present of its status and piety.

The Setons were a long established and well-connected noble family strong in their support for the Stuart monarchs and for catholicism. George 3rd Lord Seton died at Flodden and his widow, Janet (daughter of the earl of Bothwell) oversaw major works to the Collegiate Church.

During the 16th and early 17th centuries, the family were particularly involved in Stuart court politics. Mary Seton, one of the “Four Marys” was the daughter of the 6th Lord Seton and Marie Pieris, a lady-in-waiting to Mary of Guise.

Perhaps the most famous Seton was George 7th Lord Seton, a prominent supporter of first Mary of Guise and then Mary Queen of Scots for whom he was Master of the Household before her exile in 1568. His eldest son and heir, Robert, was created Earl of Winton in 1600 and was a great favourite of James VI. Another son was Alexander Seton, Earl of Dunfirmline who was among James VI’s most trusted councillors. He was Chancellor from the Union of the Crowns until 1622 and was tutor to the young Charles I. These brief notes give an indication of the status of the family, and it is notable that while their architectural efforts centred upon the building and re-building of Seton Palace, they retained the old collegiate church as the burial aisle.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

The primary architectural interest of the church derives from its completeness and integrity in illustrating the design and decorative detail of this kind of church building. The high quality of some of the carved detail adds to its artistic value, for example the piscinae and the effigy tombs. For a fuller architectural description see Appendix 2.

In analysing Seton’s place within the development of ecclesiastical architecture Richard Fawcett³ identifies Seton as a very important building. While acknowledging that many of its architectural motifs found earlier expression elsewhere, and so Seton cannot itself be counted as a prototype, he regards Seton as representing a developed synthesis of these various motifs.

For instance, the ground plan, with aisle-less three-bay choir and three-sided apse is similar to contemporary collegiate churches at Trinity College, Edinburgh (demolished) and Dalkeith. The two- and three-light windows have curvilinear tracery similar to examples at Jedburgh and Melrose abbeys (much of the present tracery is 19th century work to the original pattern.

³ Fawcett R, 2011, The Architecture of the Scottish Medieval Church 1100 – 1560, Yale UP , p288.

Fawcett concludes: *On any estimation it must be regarded as a seminally important building in which these ideas were brought together in a fresh and carefully balanced synthesis that was in turn to provide a model for a number of later buildings.*

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Our appreciation of Seton today is very much as a picturesque and romantic place with a feeling of seclusion (despite the presence of the A198).

Exterior and Landscape Setting

Seton is a most attractive and well-preserved church which, though no longer used for church worship, nonetheless presents an engaging mix of solemnity, serenity and picturesque beauty. The church sits enchantingly amid mature trees and peacefully tucked away behind its high stone precinct wall. The warm yellow-brown sandstone walls are nicely balanced by the well-tended green grass and foliage. The stone remains of the priests' residences, with a small burn running through them, further enhance the ensemble. Beyond them, to the west, lies Robert Adam's graceful 18th-century Seton House.

Interior

The interior is not claustrophobic but atmospheric. Though it does not convey anything of the character of historical Seton, it nonetheless feels old, enduring and intimate. The choir has a wonderful acoustic quality. This and the peaceful ambience and feeling of spirituality are features often appreciated by visitors.

The bare stone walls and feeling of space and light which characterise the interior today and are so appealing to visitors, is perhaps at odds with historical reality. Colleges required more liturgical furnishings than a parish church and Seton was probably richly furnished. 16th-century records for Seton include a rare inventory of the costly items once held there, including vestments of damask, silk and velvet, a silver crucifix, monstrance and chalice, as well as hangings for the altar.

2.6 Natural heritage values

The site is a mixture of mixture of amenity grassland and neutral grassland and some semi-natural ancient woodland. While these provide important habitat, the site is not designated for natural heritage reasons. However it supports some important species, for instance providing summer and winter roosts for pipistrelle and brown long-eared bats.

A number of the plants found here may have had historical uses either as medicinal uses or for their aesthetic attractiveness. Of particular note are the many non-native plants probably introduced in association with Seton Castle gardens, including: white stonecrop *Sedum album*, lesser periwinkle, *Vinca minor*, fox and cubs *Pilosella aurantiaca*, feverfew *Tanacetum parthenium* and pink sorrel *Oxalis articulata*. English stonecrop *Sedum anglicum* columbine

Aquilegia vulgaris and common mallow *Malva sylvestris*, are native to Britain but out with their normal range and probably introduced.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Ongoing religious worship

Seton has maintained a religious dimension and is still used occasionally for ecumenical services and weddings. A group sings Taize music on a monthly basis.

Community

Although known to locals in nearby population centres (eg, Longniddry, Prestonpans and Tranent), the church does not figure much in community social activities, though in recent years it is figuring more as a place of recreation as well as a concert venue.

As a tourist destination it encourages more non-local people to visit, and indeed the property features commonly in guides to Lothian.

Major gaps in understanding

- What was the form and appearance of the original medieval parish church, of which only the foundations of the nave now exist above ground?
- What was the nature and use of the ruined buildings to the SW of the church?
- Who was buried in the mural tomb in the north wall of the choir?
- What do we know about the likely earlier setting – 15th/16th century – how has this changed?

Associated properties

(other related local sites) – Aberlady Parish Church (the other mausoleum of the Wemyss family); Gosford House (seat of the earls of Wemyss); Seton House; Winton House (former seat of the Seton earls of Winton)

(other collegiate churches extant in the Lothians) – Corstorphine; Crichton; Dalkeith; Dunbar; **Dunglass**; St. Cuthbert's, Bothans; St. Mary's, Haddington; St. Giles', Edinburgh; **St. Triduana's, Restalrig**

(other collegiate churches in state care) – **Castle Semple; Innerpefferay; Lincluden; Maybole; St. Mary on the Rock, St. Andrews**

Keywords

nave, crossing, choir, sacristy, vault, tracery, effigy, piscina, monumental tomb, Seton, Wemyss, Winton.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: timeline

Blue text indicates events which have direct bearing upon the fabric of the place.

- 1242 the first mention of a church at Seton appears on record, when the Bishop David of St. Andrews consecrates the building. This does not necessarily imply a new structure (the bishop was apparently correcting an earlier oversight), and there has probably been a church on the site from at least the 12th century.
- C1434 Lady Catherine Sinclair, widow of Sir John de Seton (d.1409), the local lord, adds a small chantry chapel onto the south side of the church to house her husband's tomb.
- 1450 Sir John and Lady Catherine's son, George, is created 1st Lord Seton.
- 1470 The 1st Lord Seton secures Pope Paul II's approval to elevate the church to the status of a college, to be staffed by a provost, six prebendary canons, a clerk and two choristers. They are to say matins, high mass, evensong and compline daily for the souls of the founder and his family. However, the creation is not ratified due to the pope's sudden death. Lord Seton, however, embarks on building the new choir and sacristy before his death in 1478.
- 1492 George, 2nd Lord Seton (d.1508), finally secures papal approval (from Alexander VI) for the establishment of the college. He continues his father's building work.

- C 1510 George, 3rd Lord Seton, completes the choir vault, glazing, paving and erection of choir stalls. He is killed at Flodden in 1513.
- Post 1513 George's widow, Lady Janet Hepburn, completes the rebuilding by adding the north transept, demolishing Lady Catherine's south chapel and replacing it with a new south transept, and building the crossing tower, though this remains unfinished at her death in 1558. She also adds two more prebendaries to the college, increasing its spiritual capital.
- 1544 the English reportedly strip the church of its valuables during their attack on Edinburgh.
- 1560 at the Protestant Reformation, the church ceases to house a college of priests, then numbering eight prebendaries. Their accommodation is converted into a mill and brewhouse serving the adjacent palace.
- 1577 George, 5th Lord Seton, who was Queen Mary's Master of the Household prior to her flight into exile (1568), has the church's great bell cast in Holland.
- 1580 Seton parish is united with Tranent. Thereafter, Seton Church functions purely as a private chapel for the Seton family. Seton Palace is built to the west of the church by Robert, 6th Lord Seton, created 1st earl of Winton in 1600.
- 1603 The 1st earl of Winton dies. His funeral at Seton Church is attended by his good friend, James VI, who happens to be heading south at the time for his coronation as James I of England.
- 1611 James, 1st earl of Perth, the 5th Lord Seton's son-in-law, is buried in the church.
- C 1630 Seton Palace is extended by the 3rd earl of Winton.
- 1716 the Seton earls of Winton forfeit their titles and estates, including Seton, for their part in the 1715 Jacobite Rising. Seton Church, damaged by the Lothian Militia during the Rising, is purchased by the York Buildings Co., and passes out of ecclesiastical use.
- 1789 Seton Palace is demolished and replaced by the present Seton House, designed by Robert Adam for Alexander Mackenzie, an Edinburgh lawyer. Fragments from the old palace are removed to the church for safekeeping.
- 1851 a report by George Seton notes that windows and doors of the church are blocked up, and that the south transept is being used as a carpenter's shop.
- 1878 the 9th earl of Wemyss, of Gosford House, the new owner of Seton, reserves the building as his family's burial place. He unblocks the windows and doors, and relocates memorials in the choir to the transepts.
- 1920 the property becomes a scheduled ancient monument.
- 1948 the 12th earl of Wemyss entrusts the property into state care.
- 1957 after a period of major conservation works, the church is opened to visitors.

Appendix 2: Architectural description of key elements of Seton Collegiate Church

The Church

The upstanding remains comprise the choir, sacristy and transepts. The nave to the west has almost entirely disappeared (the case also at Crichton Collegiate Church). There was formerly a small early 15th-century chantry chapel on the south side of the church, but this was demolished and replaced by the existing 16th-century south transept.

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The choir is of three bays, and aisle-less, with a three-sided apse to its east - a layout similar to the contemporary collegiate churches at Trinity College, Edinburgh (demolished) and Dalkeith, and characteristic of late 15th-century architecture. It had a pointed barrel vault, with decorative vault ribs confined to the apse only, where they enhanced the high altar. The two- and three-light windows were also characteristic of the time, with curvilinear tracery similar to examples at **Jedburgh** and **Melrose** abbeys. A particularly fine piscina (basin for washing vessels during the celebration of Mass) in the south side of the apse has a semi-octagonal tabernacle head with decorative carving in its ceiling matching that in the apse itself. The north wall has a fine monumental tomb housing two effigies attired in 15th-century dress. – the knight in plate armour and the lady in a long mantle. Who they represent is unknown, but it is possible that they were brought from the early 15th-century chantry chapel.

The sacristy off the north side of the choir is barrel-vaulted and was originally divided into two floors; the upper floor, originally reached via a ladder, was probably the treasury, where church valuables were stored. The ground floor sacristy has a fireplace and a piscina, suggesting that it too had an altar. On the west wall is a large inscribed panel to George, 5th Lord Seton.

The transepts and crossing are externally in keeping with the choir, and each consists of a two-bay rectangle. The piscina formerly serving the altar in the south transept has a bowl carved with a splendid winged bat. The holy-water stoup in the west wall of the crossing has a bowl carved with three heads. The transepts and crossing now house memorials, carved stones and other objects from the church. The exceptionally fine monument commemorating James, 1st earl of Perth (d.1611), in the south transept has a large wall-tablet flanked by detached marble columns and an epitaph composed by the noted Scots makar, William Drummond of Hawthornden. This and the more mundane memorial to James Ogilvie of Birnes (d.1617), in the north transept, were relocated from their original position in the choir in 1878. Other objects include two early 15th-century baptismal fonts, seemingly the work of the same mason as they both bear the arms of Sir John Seton (d.1434) and and lady, Katherine Sinclair, and the great bell, cast in Holland by Adrian Steylaert in 1577.

The domestic quarters of the college of priests stand a short distance to the SW of the church. They almost defy meaningful description.

Carved stones from Seton Palace are displayed against the east boundary wall. Two fragments date from before 1600, when the 1st earl of Winton built a new residence to replace the medieval castle, and the remainder to c.1630, when the 3rd earl enlarged and embellished it to impress Charles I on his coronation visit of 1633.