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**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND  
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

# **ST PETER'S CHURCH, DUFFUS**



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**Historic Environment Scotland** – Scottish Charity No. SC045925

**Principal Office:** Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH



# ST PETER'S CHURCH, DUFFUS

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## SYNOPSIS

St Peter's was the former parish church of Duffus. It is first mentioned c.1190. Whether anything of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century church survives in the present ruined building is unclear. The church was much remodelled in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century to fit it out for Presbyterian worship, but incorporates several medieval features, including the fine early 16<sup>th</sup>-century entrance porch.

Within the churchyard stands a tall cross, dating probably to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, some fine table tombs and burial enclosures, and a small gabled watch house, dated 1830.

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## CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

### Historical Overview:

- c.1140 - Freskin, a Fleming already holding an estate in Strathbrock (Uphall), West Lothian, receives the estate of Duffus from David I and builds a motte-and-bailey castle there (**Duffus Castle**).
- c.1190 - The *Register of Moray* records a charter between Bishop Richard of Moray and William, lord of Duffus, son of Freskin, in which mention is made of the 'Church of the Blessed Peter, at Duffus'.
- c.1225 - the church is made a prebend of Elgin Cathedral by Bishop Andrew, formerly rector of Duffus, following a grant by Walter de Moray, lord of Duffus.
- 13<sup>th</sup> century - according to marginal notes in the *Register*, added it seems by Bishop Alexander Stewart (1529-37), in the 13<sup>th</sup> century three lords of Duffus - Hugo 'Beatus', his son Walter, and grandson Freskin II - were laid to rest in St Peter's. Hugo's tomb was near an altar dedicated to the blessed Catherine, and Freskin II's tomb was in St Laurence's Chapel, which he himself built and endowed.
- 1298 - the church is damaged during the uprising of the men of Moray against the English, which also sees the destruction of **Duffus Castle**, then held by Reginald le Cheyne, a supporter of Edward I. The rector of St Peter's subsequently receives a gift of 20 oaks from Edward to repair the church.
- 1520s - Alexander Sutherland, rector, adds the fine south porch.
- 1782 - the church is extensively rebuilt to fit it for Presbyterian worship.
- 1830 - a watch house is erected on the east side of the graveyard to deter grave robbers.
- 1869 - the church passes out of use when a new kirk is built in Duffus village.
- 1928 - St Peter's Church and its graveyard, including St Peter's Cross, are passed into state care.

### Archaeological Overview:

- There are no recorded archaeological investigations at St Peter's, although photographs in Historic Scotland's image library suggest that the floor level at the west end of the church was lowered when it was brought into care, and that

investigations were made around the base of St Peter's Cross. The archaeological potential of the monument remains high, though doubtless compromised by the presence of graves.

- The access area from the north is unlikely to be as archaeologically sensitive. However, there would have been a settlement (the kirktoon of Duffus is mentioned in the 1500s) close to the church in centuries gone by.

### Architectural/Artistic Overview:

#### Church

- The church, although much remodelled in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, probably contains rather more medieval masonry than at first appears. From the relationship of the main block to the medieval porch and stump of the medieval tower, the rebuilding of the church appears to have followed the same dimensions of the medieval church and probably incorporates the lower walls of that church, as suggested by the survival of a holy-water stoup in the south wall, to the right of the entrance porch. The church in its present form is rather barn-like, and it is possible that the medieval church originally had a narrower eastern chancel.
- The most obvious medieval feature is the porch built by Alexander Sutherland in the 1520s; its quadripartite ribbed vault displays his arms and initials on the central boss. The porch's pointed outer door is decorated with well-carved rosettes in a hollow moulding. Although some elements of the porch appear earlier, the mouldings and Sutherland's boss demonstrate that it is early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The porch demonstrates the tendency of looking back to earlier medieval forms, characteristic of late Scottish Gothic architecture (eg, **Dryburgh Abbey's** west door).
- The other obvious medieval feature is the vaulted basement of the west tower, which Timothy Pont shows standing to full height on his map of c.1590. The barrel-vaulted space is lit by lancets with a broad chamfer, similar to those in the keep at **Duffus Castle**, dated to the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, thus suggesting it is earlier than the porch, even though it too bears the arms of Alexander Sutherland on its west face. It was later used as a burial vault by the Sutherlands of Duffus.
- The rebuilding of 1782 created an elegant structure, with well-proportioned windows through the south wall (to either side of the minister's pulpit) and a 'birdcage' belfry surmounting the west gable. Internally, there is evidence for galleries along the north, west and east walls. The galleries along the north and east walls were reached by external stairs which still survive, whilst the west gallery was reached by an internal circular stair, whose remains can still be seen. The east gallery had its own fireplace, and was presumably the loft of the Sutherlands of Duffus, the chief heritor.

#### Graveyard

- St Peter's Cross, to the south of the church, stands c. 4.3m high upon its stepped base. An enriched band girdles the shaft near the top, but the cross-head is now much weathered. The cross is probably of 14<sup>th</sup>-century date.
- To the east of the church, against the graveyard wall, is a small gabled watch house, dated 1830. It was built to help deter 'resurrectionists' disinterring newly-buried corpses to sell to medical schools for dissection.

### Social Overview:

- St Peter's is still identified as a church, although it has not been in use as such for 150 years. It is somewhat tucked away, but still attracts visitors from near and far.
- The many gravestones continue to draw family descendants from all over the world to the graveyard.

### Spiritual Overview:

- St Peter's was the parish church of Duffus for at least 600 years. For much of that time it benefited from the patronage of the chief landowner/heritor of the parish - the Morays, Cheynes and Sutherlands respectively, who resided at **Duffus Castle**. Alexander Sutherland's 16<sup>th</sup>-century porch demonstrates this aristocratic patronage. Up to the Protestant Reformation (1560) the church rectors are likely to have maintained a high standard of Catholic liturgy and artistic fixtures.
- The purpose of the churchyard cross is unknown. It may have been a Palm Cross, used as the first station in the Palm Sunday procession. There is no known documentary evidence in support of such monuments in Scotland, but they survive in some English churchyards (eg, Hillesden, Bucks). However, the cross's location, south of the church, is not the typical English Palm Cross location, and may instead have been a secular market cross (eg, **Preston** and **Ormiston** crosses, East Lothian), taking advantage of the large, communal churchyard.
- The rebuilding of the medieval church in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century, to fit it for Presbyterian use, is typical. It focused on the minister's pulpit, positioned midway along the south wall and flanked by tall windows. It is probable that the medieval church had previously been converted to this model after the Reformation, and that the 18<sup>th</sup>-century remodelling was an upgrading of an existing arrangement.
- The memorials of the church and graveyard reveal the capacity of the monument to display the religious and physical lives of the inhabitants of the parish over the centuries.
- Today, St Peter's, also called 'the Peter Kirk' by locals, still retains its associations with the present church, as well as the meanings inherent in being a place of worship.
- 'The Peter Kirk' is used each Easter Sunday for early morning worship by the congregation of the united parish of Duffus, Spynie and Hopeman. It has also been used on occasion for weddings. It is likely that visitors will use the monument for private spiritual activities too.

### Aesthetic Overview:

- St Peter's, Duffus, is a pretty ruin, with fine details. Though bereft of a roof, like many older kirks it retains a spiritual ambience.
- The post-medieval burial vaults have some impressive features, and do not compromise the austerity of the church's overall structure.
- The graveyard has many attractive features, not least St Peter's Cross. The moss and lichen on many of the monuments add to the air of age at the site.

- St Peter's is somewhat tucked away, out of sight of the present-day village of Duffus. It is enclosed by mature trees.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Was there a church on the site prior to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the arrival of Freskin I, the Fleming, to Duffus?
- What form did the medieval church take?
- When precisely was St Peter's Cross erected, and what was its purpose?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- There was a church on this site from at least the 1190s, and probably from the time Freskin the Fleming arrived as the new feudal lord of Duffus c. 1150. This was a momentous time of change for the Scottish Church as the Crown sought to radically reorganise it, and in particular the parochial system.
- St Peter's, Duffus, and **Duffus Castle** were inextricably linked throughout the later Middle Ages, and their proximity to each other neatly demonstrates the inter-relationship between the institutions of secular lordship and the Church.
- The built fabric of the church demonstrates well the way in which churches throughout Scotland were altered to make them suited for Presbyterian worship.
- The setting of the church is most attractive, and the church and graveyard contain many fine memorials.
- St Peter's Cross appears to be in its original location, and is of national importance in its own right as being one of only 34 market crosses surviving in Scotland.

Associated Properties:

*(other related sites locally)* - **Duffus Castle; Elgin Cathedral.**

*(other market crosses in state care)* - **Merkland Cross; Ormiston Cross; Preston Cross.**

Keywords:

parish church, Reformation, porch, graveyard, market cross, watch house

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