

Significant Artefacts

It is important for visitors and local people to understand that the Kirk and Kirkyard hold nearly a thousand years of artistry and craftsmanship. Following are expert reviews on some of the Kirk's treasures.

Needlework Panels

The Finding of Moses	7'2" x 5'10"
Jephthah and his Daughter	12' x 5'10"
Esther and Shasuerus	7'2" x 5'10"
Susanna and the Elders	7' x 5'10"

All four have borders 12" deep along both top and bottom.

These early/mid-17th century embroidered panels came into the possession of the Town Council of Aberdeen in August 1688. The Master of Kirk and Brig Works purchased them, in the name of the Council, from Baillie George Aedie for £400 Scots. They were itemized as "Four Pieces of Tapestry" or Hangings for the decorment of the King's loft in the Nicholas Kirk in dayes of Solemnitie."

Remarkably well preserved, they are a potentially unique survival of an integrated decorative scheme. Traditionally, all four have been ascribed to Mary Jamesone, daughter of the painter George Jamesone and wife of Baillie George Aedie, though it is likely that several hands were involved in the work, including her great Aunt, Jean Guild.

None of the designs is original, being based on near contemporary North European engravings, including the work of Matthaeus Merian (the Elder). The iconography was selected to allow the assignment of political identities relevant to the era of the women undertaking the stitching.

The current display of the panels is the result of a layout designed by Sir George Reid, the President of the Royal Scottish Academy in the late 19th 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 images, including a fine representation of the interior, form an independent and significant collection.

Timber and Furnishings

The woodwork at the Kirk of St Nicholas is both significant item-by-item, and as an ensemble that covers the evolution of Scottish church furnishings and liturgy for 500 years.

The earliest woodwork comprises four elements:

- The panels now forming a desk in St Mary's Chapel
- The choir stall canopies in the Museum of Scotland

- The fragments reassembled as the Deacon Convenor's chair in Trinity Hall, Incorporated Trades of Aberdeen
- The lost ceiling

City documents indicate that these were produced by John Fendour. The ceiling was begun in 1495, with an inscription indicating its completion by 1515. The ceiling of the East Kirk, described in 1811 by James Logan before its destruction 1835, resembled that at King's College Chapel, Aberdeen. It was a timber wagon roof, decorated with slender cross ribs, foliate sprays and an ornamental cornice.

The choir stall canopies and other fragments were removed from the Kirk in 1834 and eventually reached the Museum of Scotland. The canopies are of delicate but repetitive tracery, overlaid by foliate arches.

The tracery panes forming the back of the Deacon Convenor's chair in Trinity Hall were gifted to the Trades in the 1570s by Matthew Guild, who seems to have obtained fragments of the choir furnishings when they were dismantled at the Reformation.

The reused desk panels are the only part of this early work remaining in the Kirk. They resemble panels forming part of the pulpit at King's College.

All these items are significant in their own right, although none remains in situ. Any pre-Reformation woodwork in Scottish churches is a rare survivor. These items have an added importance because of their documented provenance. It is clear from close similarities that the ceiling and stalls at King's Chapel, undocumented, are also by John Fendour and his excellent team of Aberdeen craftsmen. Moreover, John Fendour worked for the King at Falkland Palace in 1501.

In the Undercroft is a partly painted scene of the adoration of the Magi, carved on four separate panels and mounted in a plain frame. These appear to be 16th century, but no further information is available on them.

Stained Glass

This Kirk, in all its constituent parts, contains a notable collection of stained glass of overall high quality. The complete collection contains glass unusual in a Presbyterian Kirk. This glass is not uniform, but diverse in style and can be considered within two broad contexts – English Studio Glass and Arts and Crafts glass –the latter by both Scottish and English artists.

Within the West Kirk, the great west window and the southwest staircase window are both by the London studio of Burlison and Grylls, whose glass is found in various Scottish Episcopal churches and private chapels. It would be of interest to know how this studio obtained this Aberdeen commission in a Presbyterian context. Both windows are late 19th century and in the identifiable House Style of this studio, whose work was always competent and often much more.

The southwest staircase window is by Geoffrey Webb – a pupil of the great C.E. Kempe, and is a medallion window, making use of this mediaeval device to contain subject matter.

Within the East Kirk, the south wall contains windows by Shrigley and Hunt of Lancaster. The influence of Burne-Jones is evident in the Angel figures, with the rich and pleasing palette of this studio evident throughout. The great Scottish stained glass pioneer, Douglas Strachan, himself an Aberdonian, was responsible for the most easterly window on the south wall – Christ with children. This is a particularly Scottish window in the vernacular of Arts and Crafts idiom. Gordon Webster was the first artist of the apse side windows. The Arts and Crafts artist Marjorie Kemp's Crucifixion and Resurrection scenes form part of the great central window of the apse.

Below in St Mary's Chapel is one of the finest Arts and Crafts windows in Scotland - Christopher Whall's Pieta window in memory of Dr. James Cooper. Douglas Strachan's very first window is also found in St Mary's Chapel.

In St John's Chapel, is Shona McInnes' contemporary window, chronicling the North Sea oil industry and in memoriam to all those who have lost their lives in the industry.

Furniture

In the transept are two benches made of panels carved in a style commonly found in Aberdeen from the late-16th to the late-17th centuries. One is the Baxter's bench of 1607, and another with miscellaneous heraldic panels is from 1677. Numerous panels produced by this Aberdeen workshop are found reused all around the Kirk. Some are set into the 1936 furnishings at the east end of the East Kirk, including a fine 1627 panel of the Deacon Convenor of the Tailor's Guild. One hundred-and-four panels line the walls of the Undercroft, dating from 1606 to c.1700. These include the back panels and canopy of the desk made in 1606, incorporating panels of the Virtues. Also in the Undercroft is a small chair with a triangular seat, and a two-seater carved bench.

Panels of similar design are found at Aberdeen Greyfriars' Kirk; Bishop Forbes' desk at King's College Chapel (1627); Crathes Castle (bed and tester, 1594); and 20 chairs at the Incorporated Trades.

West Kirk

The interior of the West Kirk is a museum piece, retaining most of its important 18th Century furnishings. It is dominated by the massive pulpit, with its enormous classical sounding board. It towers over an equally massive communion table, which rests on five sturdy columns, above a handsome plinth. Beside it are two small but elaborately carved classical Baroque benches. The chair in 17th century style with figurative back, is a 1890 reproduction for Henderson Chalmers. The pulpit and table are surrounded by balustraded enclosure for the elders. The remaining box-pews, which fill the nave, are of simple pine panels. All this interior was part of the church designed by James Gibbs, 1753-55. On the balcony is an impressive Provost's Loft, a baldachin on Corinthian columns, designed by William Crystall in 1724.

East Kirk

The East Kirk was designed by Archibald Simpson (1835-7), and subsequently burned in 1874. William Smith designed the interior following the fire, in 1875-77. The interior of this Kirk represents the Victorian Gothic, with long deal benches in the nave and gallery. The east end was redesigned in 1936 in memory of James Cooper, and as a War Memorial. The simple lines of clean modern oak forming the pulpit and Elder's seats incorporate several samples of the 17th century paneling.

St John's Chapel

The furnishings of this chapel, designed in 1990 by Tim Stead, are the most modern contribution to the Kirk. They consist of a screen, numerous high-backed chairs, a table and a lectern. They are made from laminations of different coloured wood.

Taking the first letter from the name of each tree, the layers spell out the words *We Remember You*, as the Chapel is a tribute to those who lost their lives in the North Sea oil industry. Light, serene and elegant, the woodwork in St John's Chapel is both original and unforgettable.

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