

Timeline

Beginnings

12th century – New trading burghs established in the first half of the 12th century, including one at Aberdeen near the mouth of the River Dee.

1157 – First written reference to Kirk in a Papal document.

1277 – First named benefactor of Kirk, Richard Cementarius, also the first Civic head whose name is known. He founded the altar of St John the Evangelist.

1351 – Two bells, St Lawrence and St Mary, were gifted to the Kirk by Provost William Leith of Ruthrieston in atonement for having killed one of his bailies.

1437 – Burgh accounts show there was an organ at St Nicholas.

1477 – Work begins on a new or enlarged Kirk to accommodate community of growing burgh and increased facilities for masses for the dead. The first enlargement (before 1430s) was a new lower Kirk to the east of the building – the Chapel of St Mary of Pity – followed by an extension eastwards over it for the choir of the Kirk. Works were completed in 1520.

1498 – The enlarged Kirk was dedicated by Bishop Elphinstone, possibly the greatest bishop of Aberdeen, founder of her university and Chancellor of Scotland (NB The **archaeological (link to Archaeology)** research has confirmed that at least one pillar base from this period still survives and will be incorporated into the **new development (link to The Mither Kirk Development Project)**. Further exploration may confirm that all ten of the pillar bases are still in situ. In addition, some of the woodwork made for the Kirk at this time survives and is incorporated into the current building.)

Reformation

1513 – A lead-covered oak spire was added to the medieval tower.

16th century – The Reformation period – a religious and political movement in Europe that began as an attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church and resulted in the establishment of the Protestant Churches.

1514 – Bishop Elphinstone died.

1520-1560 – Kirk completed in 1520 and for the next 40 years the new Kirk of St Nicholas was at the height of its glory.

1533 – High expectations of the music and behaviour at the Kirk when the entire choir (apart from one aged chaplain) was dismissed.

1560 – Abolition of Papal jurisdiction in Scotland and the end of mediaeval doctrine and the practice of Mass. Rich church interiors were to be stripped and whitewashed and iconography removed so that people would not be distracted from God's glory – however, only about 10% of the population (mostly lairds, nobles and townsfolk) were actually Protestant at this time and so support for the widespread changes and destruction was limited.

1574 – The organ had already ceased to be used for worship in line with the new practices and in 1574 the civil authorities ordered that it be broken up and sold for the benefit of the poor. Two hundred years later pipework from this organ was found in St Mary's Chapel!

1596 – The wooden screen that separated the choir (for the clergy) and the nave (for the people) was replaced by a stone wall in the Kirk, producing two spaces where the preachers could be heard simultaneously. The nave became the Auld or West Kirk, while the choir was the New or East Kirk; the original crossing and aisles became mutual ground.

17th century – Despite the implication that church interiors should now be bleak and bare, carved wooden panels (now in St Mary's Chapel) date from this period and careful craftsmanship was used in the Kirk, culminating in the later 17th century with the needlework panels. Elaborate monuments added to the west wall of the Kirkyard and the unique brass from the tomb of Dr Duncan Liddell date from this time.

Decay and Rebuilding

1690 – Presbyterianism finally established in Scotland. However there continued to be Episcopal and Jacobite sympathies in the north east and the clergy of the Kirk were inclined towards the Episcopal system. When they were 'outed' they took parts of the congregation with them, which perhaps explains why the building fell into disrepair in the following decades.

1732 – The West Kirk was declared unfit for worship and ten years later the roof collapsed.

1745 – After the Jacobite threat had been ended with the '45 (during which time Cumberland's army stabled their horses in the Kirk!), plans were drawn up to rebuild the nave, and the well-known Aberdeen-born architect James Gibbs provided drawings for free.

1755 – The rebuilt West Kirk opened. The new layout (the Reformed 'choral square') had the pulpit at the heart of the space so that everyone could properly hear the preaching.

1755 – A choir came to give a demonstration at St Nicholas but the Kirk Session strongly disapproved and forbade 'in all time coming' the introduction of new tunes.

1823 – Despite the disapproval, times were changing and by 1823 the East Kirk had its own tune book in four parts. The West Kirk had one by 1839, although there were still no organs.

1829 – The granite colonnade was added along Union Street, designed by John Smith, the first city architect, in honour of John Forbes, a local philanthropist.

1835 – Rapid growth in population and the single parish of St Nicholas was divided into six. Three new parish churches were built, including one for the North Parish and one of the two ministers from the East Kirk moved to this new building. The remaining minister also wanted his East Kirk to be a large open space suited to preaching and he persuaded the Town Council to demolish the medieval choir in 1835 and build a replacement.

1837 – The East Kirk rebuild was completed.

19th century – Stained glass and **pipe organs (link to Organ under Worship)** introduced into both parts of the Kirk, and new communion silver was added.

1874 – Fire gutted the East Kirk. The building was faithfully restored to the 1837 design and a 196 foot granite tower and spire was added to replace the lost medieval one. Several items of furniture and other small articles were salvaged from the fire.

After 1874 – Council, churches and citizens combined to provide a new carillon for the Kirk of 37 fixed **bells (link to Bells under Worship)**, played by a keyboard. Only twelve of the largest bells could be heard, because they had been cast using the wrong bell metal formula.

1878 – A survey of the West Kirk showed that the majority were in favour of introducing an organ and it was officially opened in 1880 (it still forms the basis of the current organ, which was enlarged in 1927).

1887 – Organ introduced into the East Kirk.

1898 – St Mary's Chapel was restored, and its walls were panelled with much of the surviving 16th and 17th century carved woodwork, and a granite font and holy table were introduced (both enamelled).

Twentieth Century

Early 20th century – More new stained glass for both churches.

1935 – The Cowan Chapel created in the West Kirk as a thanksgiving for the life of Professor Henry Cowan, minister of the Kirk from 1869-73.

1936 – A new organ introduced in the East Kirk, replacing the one of 1887.

1937 – A new vestry was added to the West Kirk.

1930s – East Kirk reordered and refurnished as a memorial to James Cooper, minister to the East Kirk.

1954 – Aberdeen's suburbs growing and membership of the city centre churches began to decline after the Second World War. In 1954 the congregation of the 'new' North Parish Kirk was reunited with that of the East Kirk.

1952 – The bells were recast and rehung. Two years later 11 bells were added, giving the present total of 48 – the largest carillon in Great Britain.

1980 – The East (and thus North) congregation was united with the West congregation. Within a few years, the Walker Room had been created in the East Kirk to provide social space for the congregation.

1989 – Following the Piper-Alpha disaster, the north transept of the Kirk (the most ancient part of the building) was refurbished and renamed as St John's Chapel in honour of the dead and the 25th anniversary of the oil industry. The name not only revived the original dedicated in the middle ages but also celebrates the patron saint of oilmen.

1990 – The formal opening of the gates of St John's Chapel by the Princess Royal.

A New Millennium

1995 – The nearby congregation of St Nicholas Congregational (later United Reform) Church decided they could no longer afford to maintain their building. Initially the Church rented space at the Kirk of St Nicholas and shared the accommodation here. Three years later this led to a formal covenant commitment with the Kirk to work and grow together.

2002 – A union of the congregations in a local ecumenical partnership under the banner of 'Kirk of St Nicholas Uniting'.

2004 – Reflecting its significant trading history, Aberdeen is now designated a Fair Trade City (one of the first two in Scotland) and has the only dedicated **Fair Trade shop (link to Third World Centre & Shop)**.

2004 – The **Mither Kirk Project (link to Mither Kirk Development Project)** is officially launched.