

THE OLD STEEPLE, DUNDEE

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Affectionately known to generations of Dundonians as the Old Steeple, the Tower of St. Mary's Church has stood watch over Dundee for over 500 years. Despite its ecclesiastical purpose as a bell-tower this venerable construction has been used as a fortress, a prison and a tourism attraction. As the burgh expanded over the centuries the surroundings for the tower changed from a rural to increasingly urban setting. Originally sited at the west end of the burgh amongst farming land the tower was still the major landmark during the 19th century when the entrance had boundary railings and was surrounded by a tenement filled street with gas lamps and horse drawn carriages. Today, it is set in landscaped grounds within a pedestrian zone where retail outlets dominate.

As well as being the highest surviving medieval church tower in Scotland it is also the most significant remnant of medieval Dundee. It was constructed as the final section of Scotland's largest burgh church, which came about as the result of a vow by David, earl of Huntingdon. Legend tells that during a storm David prayed to the Virgin Mary and vowed that if saved from shipwreck he would build a church to her memory. As he was set ashore alongside 12th century Dundee, a wheat field on the western edge of the burgh became the site for the 'Kirk in the Field'. However, it is unlikely that the tower was constructed whilst the original St. Mary's church existed, which had been destroyed in 1385 by the troops of Richard II. Due to the slow pace of rebuilding post-1385, whilst the project was under the control of the Benedictine monks of Lindores Abbey, the town council accepted responsibility and took over the project in 1442-43. It is to this second St. Mary's that the tower was attached.

Due to repeated attacks by troops between the 15th and 17th centuries many written records were destroyed that it is now next to impossible to define a precise date of construction for the tower. Conjectural evidence



St Mary's Tower. (John Gray)

includes that of 18th century historian AH Millar who stated that the church and tower 'are the same without all doubt that were built by Earl David of Huntingdon in performance of his vow' during the 12th century. However, an 1891 entry in Maxwell's *Old Dundee*, informs us that the tower as 'the only part of the structure that remains' from the first church 'is in the late decorated style prevailing in Scotland at the end of the 14th century.' Even contemporary beliefs were divided: five years after Maxwell's publication, the antiquarian AC Lamb dismissed this theory and declared that,

[] the elaborate fashion was certainly not in use in this country until near the end of the fifteenth century and its similarity to structures in other parts of Scotland that undoubtedly belong to the period from 1420 to 1480 almost settles the question.

Present opinion also rests upon these dates as influencing the style in which the tower was built. Several examples of a similar style are seen in the states of northern Netherlands from the 14th century and are most likely to

have arrived in Dundee as a result of trading links with the Low Countries. Similar features include the traceried and pinnacled parapet, the triple strip windows and the arches of the west window as well as the semi-circular arch over the double doors of the entrance. Extra support for a later construction is that tradition dictates churches are built east to west. As the tower is ornamental as well as functional it is reasonable to assume that the tower was built last and at a later date than the original St. Mary's. As the great bell was gifted in 1495 this date is understood to be close to the completion date for the tower.

With a telescopic design and divided into five stages, two parapets, and a cap-house, each of the tower's rooms is a feature in itself. The entrance hall, antiquities room, bell-ringing room, belfry and clock room each has a story to tell. The entrance at the west elevation was originally designed as the entrance to the nave of the second St. Mary's church. In 1548 a fire set by troops of Protector Somerset on behalf of Edward VI's Rough Wooings destroyed the wooden floors of the tower. This fire also destroyed the church nave to the extent that only the choir area was rebuilt to become the third St. Mary's. The transepts

remained uncovered until 1588 when the South church was created, thus creating two churches in one building. The decision to rebuild only the choir area resulted in the tower standing isolated until the construction of the Steeple church in 1789. Having to continually re-establish their parish church did not deter Dundee's residents and despite the numerous changes to its adjoining buildings the Steeple remained as its builders intended.

The entrance hall is unusual in that the visitor must descend three steps from the door to the floor, a feat that should not be undertaken whilst simultaneously gazing in awe at the ribbed ceiling. Within this ceiling is a central boss that partially hides the trapdoor used for pulling the bells and building materials up through the tower. Every level up to the belfry has a trapdoor in the centre of the room. It is alleged that in earlier periods there were three cells in this hall, one of which was allocated to the condemned before execution. The prevailing atmosphere within the hall makes it hard to equate this and the other, alleged, signs of imprisonment with the existing ecclesiastical images. The east wall that spent centuries blocked up now has large glass doors and fanlight that lead to the welcoming hall of the Steeple Church. In the northeast corner of the hall is a staircase with 238 steps that lead to the upper parapet and cap-house. These steps lead firstly to the antiquities room that now holds many stone relics of medieval Dundee. Its original intended function is not clear but the room appears to have been used from an early period as a prison for moral indiscretions. The room underwent a conversion into an auxiliary prison from 1834-37 until the purpose built prison at the Tolbooth was ready. Legend recalls that there was at least one prisoner incarcerated within this area before the Civil War brought his unexpected release.

When Cromwell's troops, under General Monck, arrived in 1651 the town's brave Governor, Robert Lumsden, led the defenders. There is a local legend of a six-week siege and that the Royalist defenders held out in the room for three days before being smoked out and mercilessly executed. Unfortunately, as is so often the case, historical records cannot support this chronology. After camping outside the town walls Monck's troops started shooting on the afternoon of the last Sunday in August, restarting at 4am

Steeple before the 1870 restoration, taken from the west and showing the entry doors to the Steeple Church and tower.





A conjectural map of 15th century Dundee that was compiled by SUAT (Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust), Pat Dennison, and Sylvia Stevenson. The burgh church of St. Marys is marked (on the left).

Weights that were attached to the original clock mechanism. The wires went up to the clock room three floors above and were wound manually. They are in the corner of the Antiquities room, which is the first floor, and are part of a display of stone relics.

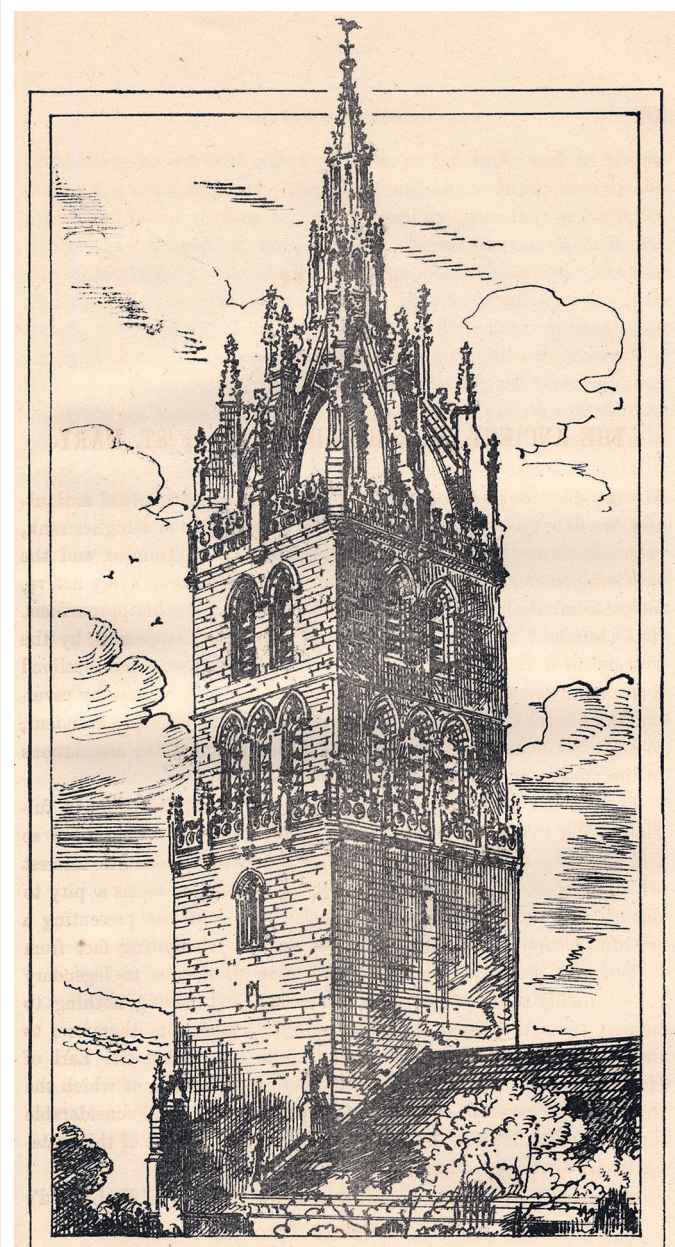


the next day, 1 September and by 11am the town walls were breached. At some point soon after the door to the tower staircase was set alight with wet straw to smoke out the garrison. Despite an honourable surrender the Governor was shot dead and his decapitated helmeted head was carried to the tower's lower parapet and inserted upon a spike of a pinnacle. It

is believed to have remained there until it fell down with falling masonry – in the year that King Charles was restored to his throne. The survivors of this event were the debtor and the door lock that held back the besiegers. This was saved and placed on the replica door and is still in operation today.

A major event in the tower's history was the 1870-72 restoration under the direction of the architect George Gilbert Scott. A Restoration Committee was founded and worked tirelessly for four years to raise funds to restore the decayed and neglected tower to its former glory. The choice of architect was, however, not a unanimous decision, as the Chairman, Provost Yeaman, did not approve of an eminent architect being appointed when any competent architect could perform a restoration. It is possible that other committee members had heard of Scott's reputation for thoroughly recreating a building rather than preserving its remains. Regardless, Scott was duly appointed and submitted his report to the Committee in August 1870. He outlined the principal works needing attention as the external stonework, the tracery and pinnacles of the parapets, the external statues, and both great windows on the west elevation. These two windows had been blocked with rubble and, in the case of the wheel window that lights the Antiquities room, metal bars had been placed across it whilst a prison.

Despite the trials and tribulations of constant fundraising and one health and safety incident the restoration was hailed as a success. Public donations contributed to the majority of the total cost of £8,780 with donations from the Council amounting to £2,070. The Inauguration Ceremony was held on Queen Victoria's 54th birthday in May 1873, with the main event being the laying of a memorial stone under the central pillar of the entrance door. Below this stone was placed a glass bottle with documents commemorating those on the Restoration Committee, a selection of coins of the realm, that day's edition of the *Dundee Courier and Argus*, and a chromo-lithograph of the Tay Rail Bridge that was in the construction stage. Also included were the donors and inscriptions on the full peal of eight bells that had been newly installed. These



Design for Crown of St. Mary's Tower by Sir George Gilbert Scott.

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names and inscriptions can still be read on the bells today. As part of the inauguration ceremony the Ancient Society of College Youths, London, rang a Grandsire Triple Peal, which was the first time it had been heard in Scotland and lasted three hours and seven minutes. This occasion started a bond with the newly formed Society of Old Steeple Bellringers that lasted several decades.

The major talking point at the time of the restoration was the issue of the tower's termination. The cap-house that sits there to this day dates from the 16th century and is most certainly not the intended termination for such a tower. Scott produced a drawing showing his vision of a reproduction crown composed of 'a series of graceful flying buttresses that formed a light crown arch, out of which rise an airy fleche'. It is accepted by architects, past and present, that visible evidence of a

crown or spire remains within the upper rooms of the tower and that its creation was originally intended. However, whether it was partially or fully constructed is a longer debate than can be related here but when the subject was raised in 1872 it divided local opinion. Many felt that an imperial crown would be a suitable ornament to complement the tower that was created for Scotland's largest burgh church. One dissenter however, placed his feelings in the local paper bemoaning in poetry that this 'unworned watcher of my native town' should need 'three thousand [pounds] more'. Obviously the cost was rising as high as the tower itself!

In addition to continuing as the principal entrance to the 18th century Steeple Church the tower has also been a local tourist attraction since the end of the 19th century. An undated postcard in Dundee Reference Library col-

lection advertises the tower and shows information signs inviting people to see the ground floor exhibition for only one penny. Intermittently since then visitors have been allowed varying levels of access. During the period 1960 to 1980 visitors were able to climb the staircase to the summit and see Dundee at a perspective that shows all but is not too high to blur the fine details. Only since 1992 and the introduction of the tower to the European Doors Open Day scheme were visitors able to enter the Antiquities room to see the stone relics and bells from the old Town House. The following year the public were able to access all the rooms in the tower. In 2000, a partnership of Dundee heritage bodies enabled the tower to be opened fully to the public with guided tours taking visitors into all the rooms and to the exhibition within the cap-house. Unfortunately this facility was only available for less than two years but the tower still functions as a clock tower, with a recently renewed Westminster chime, and regularly resounds to the sound of ringing bells.

Karen Nichols studied history at the University of Dundee and has worked for the National Trust, Historic Scotland, and Dundee Heritage Trust. She now runs Scotia Heritage:

<http://www.dundeetours.co.uk/>.

Further reading

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