

Crail – Site Summaries



Crail Parish Church. (B. Rhodes)

Sacred Landscape Project

St Mary's College, University of St Andrews

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February 2024

Crail – Places of Worship – Past and Present

Crail Airfield Church

Denomination: Non-Denominational

Period: Late Modern

Current Place of Worship? No

During the First World War an airfield was built at Crail, but the site was abandoned following the end of hostilities. At the start of the Second World War Crail was once more brought into military use and expanded to become an important base for aircraft from the Royal Navy. Both men and women served at Crail Airfield and a chapel was built for these service personnel. The chapel had a stained glass window paid for by Wrens and sailors based at Crail in memory of their comrades who lost their lives in World War Two. Following the war the Royal Navy removed most of its aircraft from Crail, but the site continued to be used for military training until 1960. Much of the brick structure of the chapel still survives, although the building is now derelict.

Sources

Airfields of Britain Conservation Trust, 'Crail': <https://www.abct.org.uk/airfields/airfield-finder/crail/> [Accessed 21 September 2021].

Aviation Trails, 'RNAS Crail': <https://aviationtrails.wordpress.com/2018/07/15/rnas-crail-the-mary-celeste-of-aviation-part-1/> [Accessed 21 September 2021].

Imperial War Museum, 'War Memorials Register – HMS Jackdaw (Crail Airfield) – Chapel Stained Glass Window (Lost)': <https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/78639> [Accessed 21 September 2021].



A naval inspection at Crail Airfield in the early 1940s. (Source: University of St Andrews Library, GMC-5-16-17.)

Crail Castle Chapel

Denomination: Roman Catholic

Period: High Medieval, Late Medieval, Early Modern

Current Place of Worship? No

There appears to have been a castle at Crail by the middle of the twelfth century. In 1359 the castle chapel is described as being dedicated to St Ruffinus – which is thought to be a Latinised form of St Maolrubha (an early medieval saint who was popular in north-west Scotland). There are a number of references to the chapel at Crail Castle in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, including in 1512 when a rent from Drumrack was being used ‘to support divine service in the chapel of St Maolrubha in the castle of Crail’. By the time of the Reformation the castle had fallen into disrepair and in 1563 David Spens of Wormistoun obtained permission to rebuild it. The castle chapel is briefly mentioned in 1620 but then slips out of the written record. By the early eighteenth century Crail Castle was itself in ruins. Today a small section of masonry in Castle Garden is all that remains of this former residence and fortification.

Sources

Anne Turner Simpson and Sylvia Stevenson, *Historic Crail: The Archaeological Implications of Development* (1981), p. 7.

Simon Taylor and Gilbert Márkus, *The Place-Names of Fife* (5 vols, Donington, 2006-2012), vol. 3, pp. 182-183.

Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore entry for ‘Crail Castle’: <https://canmore.org.uk/site/70949/crail-castle> [Accessed 21 September 2021].



A section of old masonry which perhaps formed part of Crail Castle. (Source: William Jack / University of St Andrews Library, WMJ-EN-115-2.)

Crail Parish Church

Denomination: Roman Catholic, Church of Scotland

Period: High Medieval, Late Medieval, Early Modern, Late Modern

Current Place of Worship? Yes

The parish church at Crail has been a place of worship since at least the twelfth century. During the reign of Malcolm IV (who died in 1165) revenues from the parish of Crail were given to the Cistercian nunnery at Haddington. The nuns at Haddington retained significant rights concerning Crail into the sixteenth century. Around 1517 Crail became a collegiate church – in other words it was served by a largely self-governing community of priests. Before the Reformation Crail parish church was lavishly furnished with statues, satin altar hangings, silver and gold crosses, and collections of religious books – all recorded in a surviving inventory. Meanwhile a famous cross known as the Rood of Crail was the focus of pilgrimage. Most of these items were destroyed in the summer of 1559 when John Knox and other Protestant activists descended on Crail. From this point onwards the parish church became the scene of Protestant worship. However, the religious changes were not embraced by everyone. In the 1560s John Melville, the new Protestant minister of Crail, faced considerable disruption to services in the parish church, with members of the congregation threatening to drag him from the pulpit by his ears. Religious controversy continued in Crail throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although disagreements became increasingly focused on which type of Protestantism should be adopted. In 1648 James Sharp was appointed minister of Crail – he would go on to become archbishop of St Andrews before being murdered by religious opponents. By the early 1800s much of the parish church was in poor repair and the east end had largely fallen out of use. Major rebuilding work took place in the nineteenth century, and further alterations were undertaken in the 1960s. However, significant sections of the medieval church survive, with parts of the tower probably dating from around 1200.

Sources

Charles Rogers, ed., *Register of the Collegiate Church of Crail* (1877).

Simon Taylor and Gilbert Márkus, *The Place-Names of Fife* (5 vols, Donington, 2006-2012), vol. 3, pp. 181-183.

Walter Wood, *The East Neuk of Fife: Its History and Antiquities* (1887), pp 420-421.

Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches, entry for Crail / Crelyn Collegiate Church: <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158486> [Accessed 22 September 2021].



Crail Parish Church in 2021. Marks from the changing rooflines of the church over the centuries can be seen on the tower and end wall of the nave. (Source: Open Virtual Worlds / University of St Andrews.)

Episcopal Chapel, Bankhead Brae

Denomination: Episcopal

Period: Early Modern

Current Place of Worship? No

When the Church of Scotland adopted Presbyterianism at the start of the 1690s a number of ministers refused to support the change. The minister of Crail, Alexander Leslie, was among those who opposed the re-establishment of Presbyterian government and worship. Leslie was removed from his position as minister at Crail parish church and instead set up a small Episcopal congregation. This new congregation built a chapel at Bankhead Brae, overlooking Crail Harbour. The Episcopal community was relatively sympathetic to the Jacobite cause, and when Crail was occupied by Jacobite forces during the winter of 1715 to 1716 they briefly held what the kirk session disapprovingly called ‘the English service’ in the parish church. The associations between Episcopalianism and Jacobitism would prove the undoing of the chapel at Bankhead. In 1745, during the turmoil of another Jacobite rising, supporters of Presbyterianism attacked the Bankhead Brae Episcopal chapel and tore it down.

Sources

Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae: The Succession of Ministers in Scotland from the Reformation* (1925), vol. 5, p. 193.

Anne Turner Simpson and Sylvia Stevenson, *Historic Crail: The Archaeological Implications of Development* (1981), p. 4.

Walter Wood, *The East Neuk of Fife: Its History and Antiquities* (1887), p. 421.



Bankhead Brae in Crail. An Episcopal chapel was located in this area during the early eighteenth century. (Source: Open Virtual Worlds / University of St Andrews.)

Holy Trinity Catholic Church

Denomination: Burgher Church, United Presbyterian, Free Church, Roman Catholic

Period: Late Modern

Current Place of Worship? Yes

The site now occupied by Holy Trinity Church has been a place of worship for several different denominations. A church was built here in the 1790s for Crail's Burgher congregation. In 1847 the congregation became part of the newly created United Presbyterian Church. A few years later, at the end of the 1850s, the original Burgher church was demolished and replaced by the current building. The complex history of the divisions and unions within Scottish Presbyterianism meant that in 1900 the congregation then became part of the United Free Church, and the building became known as Crail West United Free Church. During the Second World War the Roman Catholic Church purchased the site – a project which was undertaken partly because of the significant number of Polish servicemen then stationed at Crail Airfield. It is today known as Most Holy Trinity Catholic Church and remains a place of worship.

Sources

Places of Worship in Scotland, Crail United Presbyterian Church:

<http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/10539/name/Crail+United+Presbyterian+Church+Crail+Fife> [Accessed 22 September 2021].

Places of Worship in Scotland, Holy Trinity Catholic Church:

<http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/6632/name/Holy+Trinity+Catholic+Church+Crail+Fife> [Accessed 22 September 2021].

Crail Sunday Mass Eventbrite page: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/crail-sunday-mass-845am-tickets-113198638174> [Accessed 22 September 2021].



Holy Trinity Church in 2021. (Source: Open Virtual Worlds / University of St Andrews.)

‘Prior Walls’ / Chapel Site by the Sea

Denomination: Roman Catholic

Period: High Medieval, Late Medieval

Current Place of Worship? No

By the late eighteenth century there was a tradition in Crail that there had once been a medieval priory by the sea, a little to the south of what is now called Prior’s Croft. In reality the name probably arises from the land being owned by the nuns at Haddington Priory. However, there may have been a small chapel in this area in the Middle Ages. In the 1790s it was noted that there stood by the sea ‘a ruin evidently of great antiquity, the east gable of which is still standing’. This ruin bore ‘the name of the prior walls’. The gable (which according to a nineteenth-century writer had ‘Gothic windows’) was washed away by the sea during storms in about 1801. Some foundations remained visible into the 1860s, but by the twentieth century they too had been lost to coastal erosion.

Sources

Andrew Bell, ‘Parish of Crail’ in the *Old Statistical Account* (1793), vol. 9, pp. 450-451.

William Merson, ‘Parish of Crail’ in the *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, p. 964.

Anne Turner Simpson and Sylvia Stevenson, *Historic Crail: The Archaeological Implications of Development* (1981), p. 21.



The site of the supposed ‘priory’ ruins. (Source: 1895 Ordnance Survey Map of Fife and Kinross, sheet XXIII. Available at: <https://maps.nls.uk/view/75533145>)

‘The Nunnery’ / Chapel Site on Nethergate

Denomination: Roman Catholic

Period: High Medieval, Late Medieval

Current Place of Worship? No

A plot of land on the south side of the Nethergate in Crail has long been known as ‘The Nunnery’. However, written records suggest that there was at no point a convent of nuns in Crail. The name is perhaps derived from an association with the nuns at Haddington Priory (who owned property in Crail and had for many years the patronage of the parish church). It is possible that there was in the Middle Ages a small chapel on this site. In the nineteenth century human remains were discovered in this area during work to level the road surface. Along the boundary of the property there is an old wall which has been tentatively dated to the sixteenth century. A stone with what appears to be a medieval consecration cross could be seen in this wall in the late twentieth century.

Sources

William Merson, ‘Parish of Crail’ in the *New Statistical Account* (1845), vol. 9, p. 955.

Anne Turner Simpson and Sylvia Stevenson, *Historic Crail: The Archaeological Implications of Development* (1981), pp. 20-21.

Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore entry for ‘Crail, Nethergate, Doocot Park, Garage and Garden Wall’: <https://canmore.org.uk/site/70950/crail-nethergate-dooct-park-garage-and-garden-wall> [Accessed 23 September 2021].



The site of the supposed ‘nunnery’ on Nethergate – perhaps in reality a medieval chapel. (Source: Open Virtual Worlds / University of St Andrews.)

Rose Wynd Hall

Denomination: Free Church

Period: Late Modern

Current Place of Worship? No

The early nineteenth century saw major divisions in the Church of Scotland over secular interference in religious affairs. In the 1840s a large number of relatively evangelical ministers broke away from the established church and founded the Free Church of Scotland. There was considerable support for the Free Church in Fife, including in Crail. Between 1843 and 1845 the Free Church congregation worshipped in a hall on Rose Wynd. They then moved to a church where Crail Community Hall now stands.

Sources

A.J.G. Mackay, *A History of Fife and Kinross* (1896), pp. 168-169.

Places of Worship in Scotland, Rose Wynd Hall:

<http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/10536/name/Rose+Wynd+Hall+Crail+Fife> [Accessed 23 September 2021].



Houses on Rose Wynd in 2021. (Source: Open Virtual Worlds / University of St Andrews.)

St David's Church

Denomination: Free Church, Church of Scotland

Period: Late Modern

Current Place of Worship? No

Towards the end of the 1840s the Free Church congregation in Crail built a church on the road then known as Jockeys Port (now called St Andrews Road). The original Victorian building was demolished near the beginning of the twentieth century, and replaced with an imposing Gothic revival building designed by James Davidson Cairns. The new building was influenced by both Scottish and English architectural traditions. In 1929 the Free Church rejoined the Church of Scotland. This meant there was more than one Church of Scotland congregation in Crail, and the former Free Church became known as St David's. The building continued as a place of worship until the 1950s when it was converted into a church hall. It is now owned by Crail Community Partnership and is run as an event space for the local area under the name Crail Community Hall.

Sources

Crail Community Hall, 'About the Hall': <https://www.crailcommunityhall.co.uk/about-us> [Accessed 23 September 2021].

Places of Worship in Scotland, 'Crail Community Hall':

<http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/8404/name/Crail+Community+Hall+Crail+Fife> [Accessed 23 September 2021].

Ordnance Survey Map of Fife, 1855, sheet 20: <https://maps.nls.uk/view/74426837> [Accessed 23 September 2021].



The west gable of Crail Community Hall – formerly St David's Church. (Source: Open Virtual Worlds / University of St Andrews.)

Kilminning Chapel

Denomination: Roman Catholic

Period: Early Medieval

Current Place of Worship? No

On the coast a little way north of the burgh of Crail (near Crail Airfield) is land known as Kilminning. This name is thought to derive from the Gaelic for ‘Church of Monan’. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries human bones were often dug up here. Following the discovery of further human remains in the 1960s, archaeological investigation was undertaken which revealed a long-cist cemetery and a rectangular stone building – possibly the remains of a chapel. The combination of the place name, burials, and foundations strongly suggest that Kilminning was an early medieval religious site.

Sources

Simon Taylor and Gilbert Márkus, *The Place-Names of Fife* (5 vols, Donington, 2006-2012), vol. 3, pp. 209-210. ‘Kilminning (Crail Parish)’, in *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland* (1997), pp. 35-36

Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore entry for ‘Kilminning Castle’:

<https://canmore.org.uk/site/35358/kilminning-castle> [Accessed 23 September 2021].



The coast at Kilminning. Remains of what may have been an early chapel have been discovered in this area. (Source: Open Virtual Worlds / University of St Andrews.)