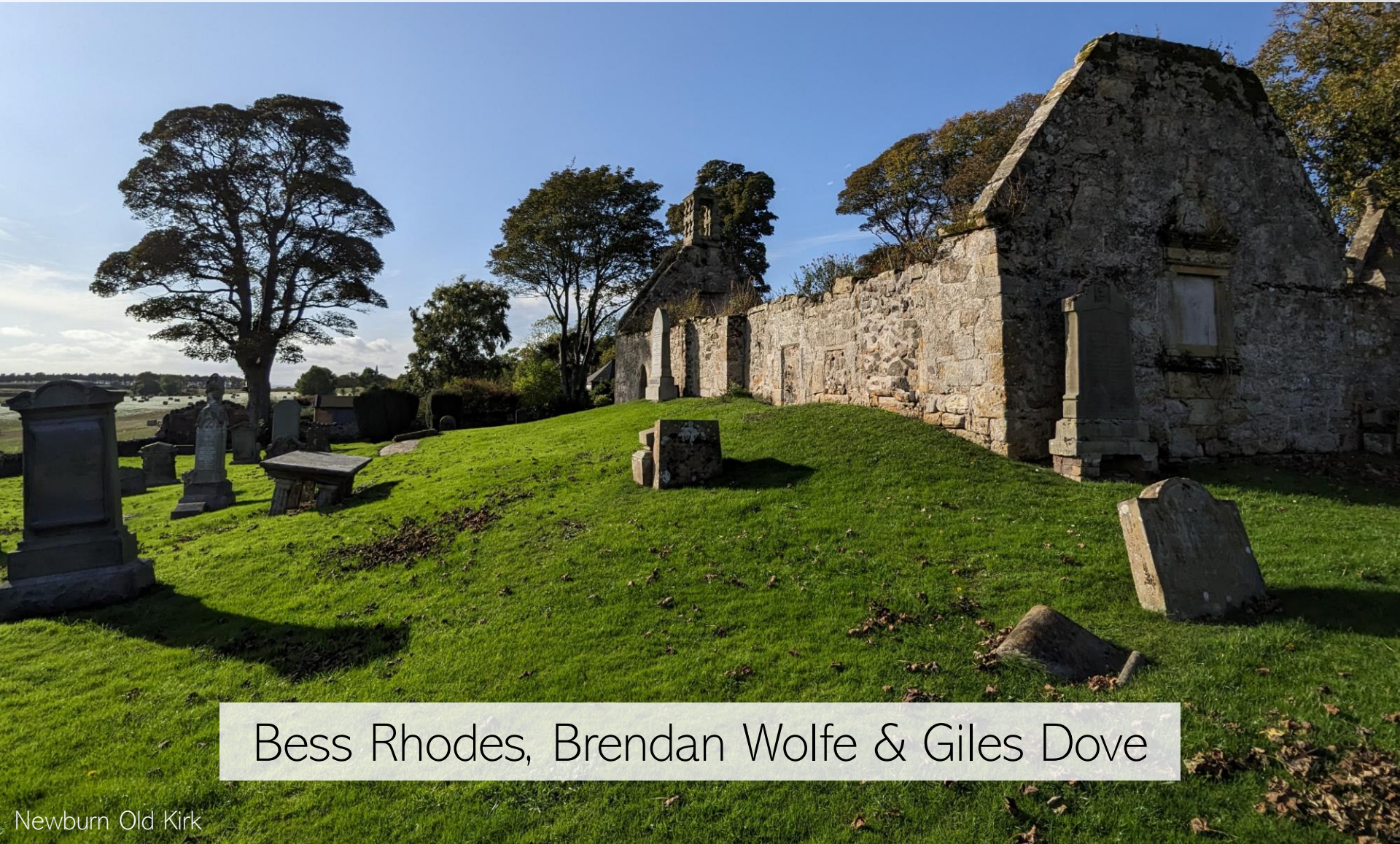


Learning from Loss

Reflections on Futures for Fife's Former Churches



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Introduction

Fife's Changing Churches

For over a thousand years Fife has been at the forefront of new religious trends in Scotland. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Pictish inhabitants of Fife were early adopters of Christianity, and blended old and new burial customs. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, places such as Dunfermline and St Andrews were among the first in Scotland to see the foundation of new Continental style monastic houses. During the sixteenth century events in Fife helped trigger the Scottish Reformation. Meanwhile, in Victorian times Fife had a strong dissenting tradition and played a critical role in the Great Disruption.

Today, Fife is on the front line of complex debates about the future of Scotland's ecclesiastical heritage. As a region with an especially significant religious past, questions about the fate of former churches are particularly pertinent to Fife. Yet this is not the first time that Fife has faced church closures. Previous centuries also saw religious institutions shut their doors - sometimes in brutal circumstances. The experiences of these earlier periods potentially hold valuable lessons for today - we have the opportunity to learn from loss.

Present Uncertainty

Challenging Times

Fife's religious buildings face an uncertain future. A combination of smaller congregations, a shortage of ministers, and rising maintenance costs mean that a large proportion of churches are likely to shut their doors. Since 2000, more than thirty church buildings in coastal Fife have closed. The Church of Scotland (the denomination with the largest number of places of worship in the region) has plans for a fundamental re-organisation of their congregations which may trigger church closures on an unprecedented scale.

Churches, communities, and policy makers are experiencing challenging times. It is important to recognise that some of the problems religious organisations face are common to many community groups. Demographic change and a harsher economic climate pose issues for significant sections of society, and make the maintenance of communal spaces an increasingly difficult task.

A Problematic Property Portfolio?

"The Church of Scotland has too many buildings, numerous buildings that are underutilised, buildings that are too large for present day needs and buildings that are in the wrong place."

Church of Scotland Presbytery Mission Plan Act, 2021



Balmerino Parish Church



St Monans Parish Church

Particular Issues for Places of Worship

Yet churches also pose their own specific issues - whether used as a place of worship or categorised as 'redundant'. They are typically of a size and degree of architectural significance that few village halls attain. Indeed, churches are often the largest and oldest buildings in a community. In this context the Church of Scotland has a particularly onerous responsibility as for historical reasons it has inherited ownership of many of Fife's oldest religious buildings - a proportion of which predate the introduction of Presbyterianism to Scotland.

The roles that many churches play as sites of memory and commemoration also raises particular concerns. As well as war memorials (which have been relatively well-documented through projects led by Historic Environment Scotland and the Imperial War Museums), Fife's churches house thousands of individual monuments, many of which still have a meaning for local communities. If a church building ceases to be a public space access to these memorials can be restricted or ended.

Substantial Heritage Assets

"It may be assumed that the Church of Scotland has responsibility for the most substantial built heritage estate... in Scotland - more extensive in number than those cared for by Historic Scotland and the National Trust for Scotland combined..."

Historic Environment Advisory Council for Scotland, 2009

Burials

A large proportion of Fife's churches are surrounded by graveyards. Indeed, most pre-Reformation places of worship (and a small number of post-Reformation sites) also saw burials within the church building. Local authorities have responsibility for the majority of Fife's graveyards - whether or not they are adjacent to an active place of worship. However, the siting of churches beside, or at times directly above, places where human remains have been interred places restrictions on options for the development of many religious sites. Appropriate treatment of burial sites also raises significant ethical questions.

Congregations and Communities

Churches are not ordinary buildings. They are sites which communities put aside for the worship of God. Over the centuries they have been places of faith, reflection, inspiration, and communal gathering. Even for people who infrequently attend religious services, churches are often places of meaning. The closure of a church has an impact going beyond the core congregation. If mishandled, church closures may cause resentment amongst congregations and wider communities. Conversations with Fife residents indicates that the loss of a church building can be seen as the withdrawal of that religious organisation from the community.

Sense of Abandonment?

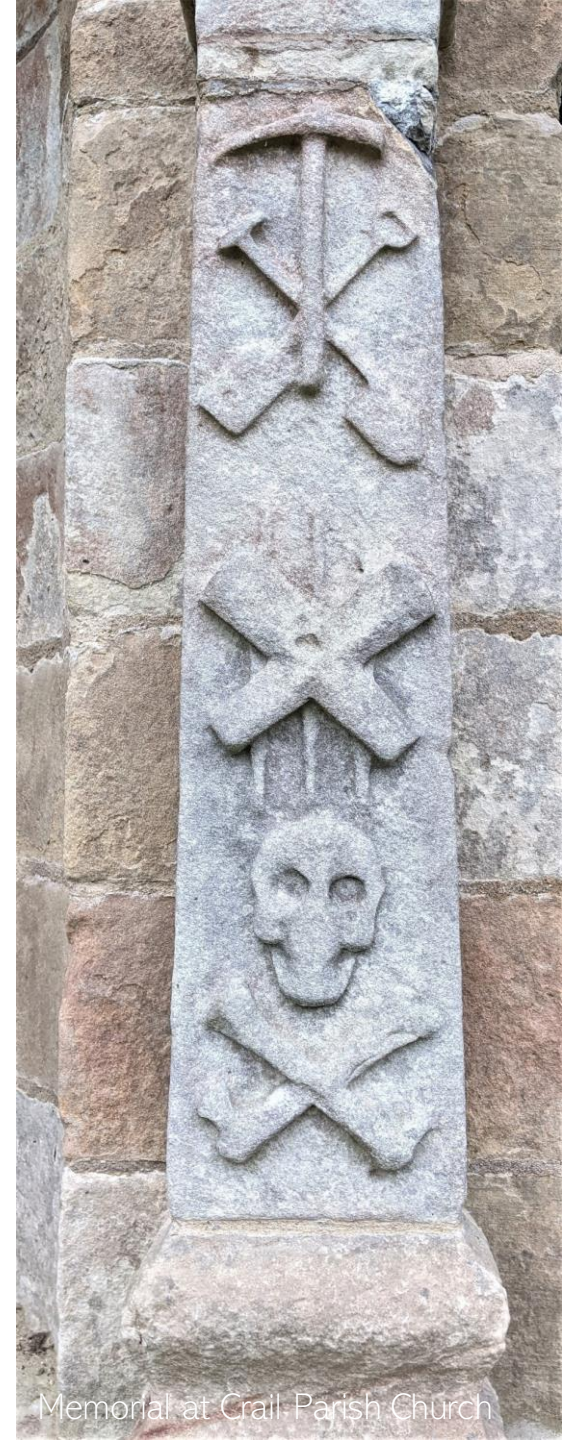
"The Church has given up on us..."

Resident of the East Neuk of Fife, 2023

A Need for Visual Inspiration?

"I want to go to a real church - I don't want to worship in a village hall."

Regular church-goer in North East Fife, 2023



Memorial at Crail Parish Church



Abdie Old Church

Past Destruction

A History of Loss

Over the last five hundred years Fife has experienced several phases of church closures. The introduction of Protestantism in the sixteenth century saw numerous monastic sites and chapels cease to fill a religious function. In the nineteenth century the demands of congregations for larger buildings, often closer to the heart of settlements, saw many medieval and early modern sites abandoned or demolished. Changing attitudes to church attendance in the twentieth century, combined with the reunification of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church, drove the largest number of closures thus far. However, current trends suggest that the twenty-first century will see more places of worship close in Fife than any previous century.

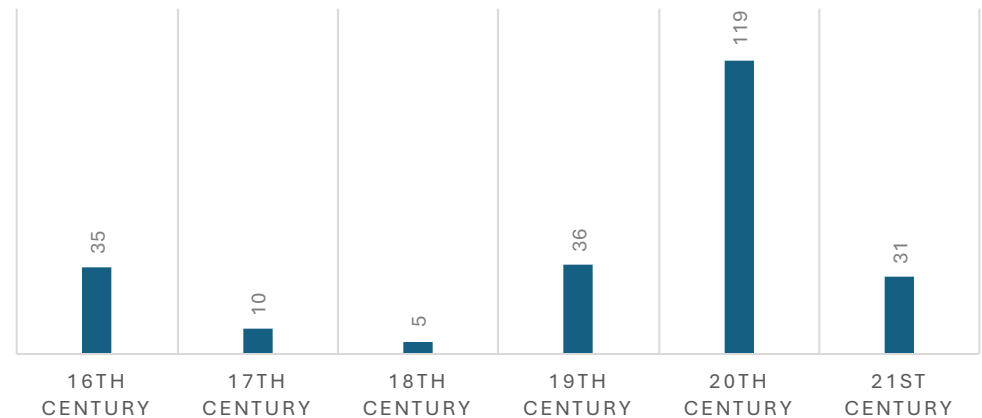


Fig. 1. Number of churches closed [all denominations] per century in Fife's coastal parishes.

Prevalence of Ruination and Demolition

In Fife, demolition or dereliction has historically been the commonest outcome for disused places of worship. Researchers at the University of St Andrews have analysed the fates of 237 former churches in coastal Fife which closed between 1500 and 2022. This is thought to be the first study to compare the outcomes for disused Scottish churches across several centuries. More than half of the former churches in coastal Fife were ultimately demolished or fell into ruins. Perhaps unsurprisingly, demolition or dereliction was particularly common in earlier centuries. Of the churches in coastal Fife which closed before 1900, more than 80 percent ultimately experienced major ruination or destruction. However, the demolition of former churches remained common in the twentieth century, with over 40 percent of the churches which shut their doors in the twentieth century ultimately being demolished.

Defaced or Pulled to the Ground

"Thereupon ensued a pitiful vastation of Churches.. No difference was made, but all the Churches [were] either defaced, or pulled to the ground. The holy vessels, and whatsoever else men could make gain of, as timber, lead and bells, were put to sale. The very Sepulchres of the dead were not spared..."

Archbishop John Spottiswood of St Andrews, 17th Century



Culross West Kirk



Former St Andrew's Church, Buckhaven

Journeys to Dereliction and Destruction

Relatively few churches are demolished immediately after closure. Instead they often gradually fall into dereliction, sometimes going through various failed uses before eventually being deemed beyond repair. This is an old pattern. For instance, after the Reformation Balmerino Abbey continued to serve as a parish church and then an elite residence before abandonment. During the twentieth century a significant proportion of Fife's churches went through unsuccessful attempts at alternative uses before eventual destruction - a reminder of the importance of realistic planning for the maintenance and repurposing of former churches. The large number of proposed church closures in Fife over the next decade make careful planning for the future a particular priority. There is likely to be a glut of redundant churches on the market, not all of which will automatically find buyers capable of tackling the challenge of maintaining these extraordinary buildings.

Sinking into Decay

"As you must expect a great deal of antiquity in this country of Fife, so you must expect to find all those antient pieces mourning their own decay, and drooping and sinking in ashes."

Daniel Defoe, 18th Century

Loss and Regret

Historical examples suggest that even when the closure of a major religious building seems eminently justified it usually leaves behind a sense of loss. Furthermore, later generations often question the reasoning of their forebears in disposing of significant religious and community landmarks. Research into late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century attitudes towards the events of the Scottish Reformation indicates that the destruction of churches was frequently regretted. Even committed Presbyterians subsequently criticised the closure of “useful” religious spaces. Perhaps the most fundamental lesson of past experiences of church closure is that we are not just taking decisions for our own time.

Buildings as Proclamations of Faith

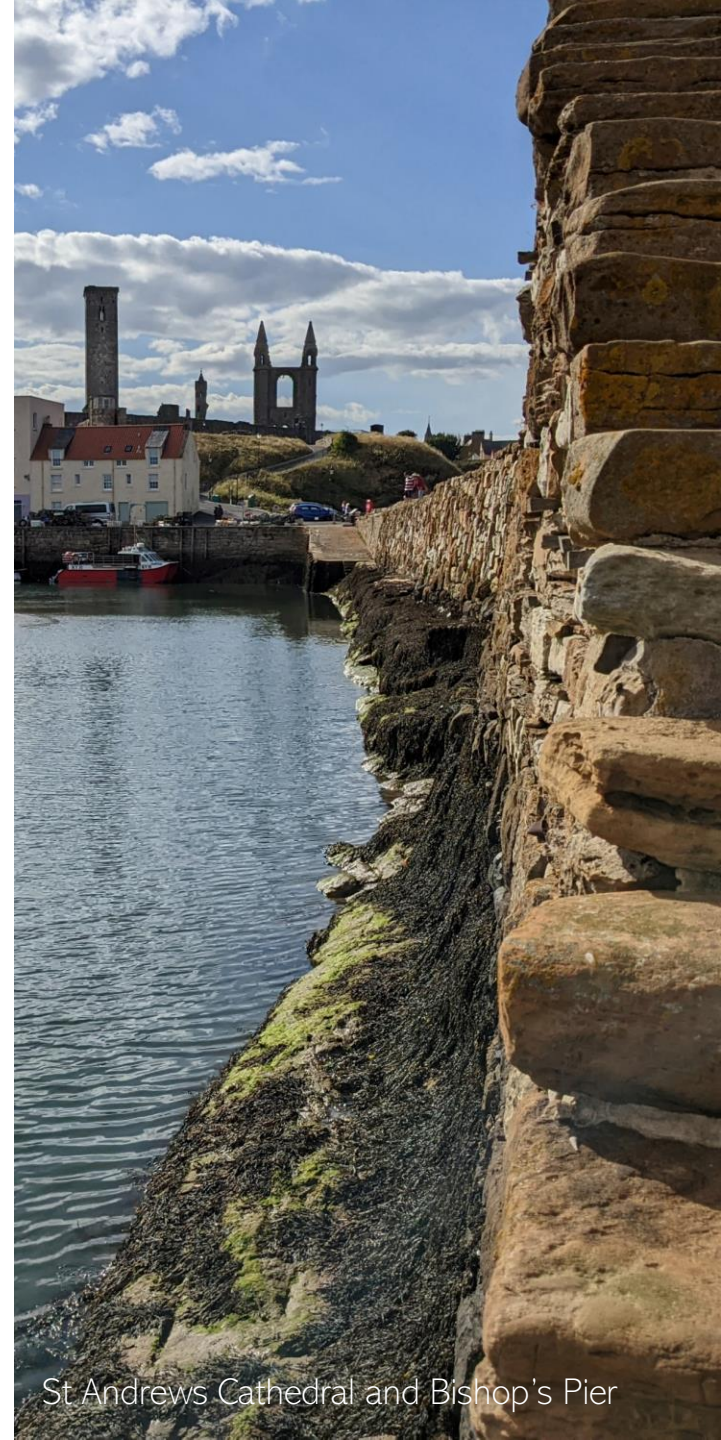
“If I had been brought up in Germany, or in any other country where Christ is truly preached... and... had taken travel to visit this land, and then should have seen the... desolation of your kirks... I could not have judged that there had been any fear of God... in the most part of this realm...”

David Ferguson, minister of Dunfermline and moderator of the General Assembly, 16th Century

Casting Down Useful Spaces

“I will not justify all... things done at that time, in casting down some kirks which had been useful for God’s service...”

John Row, minister of Carnock, 17th Century



St Andrews Cathedral and Bishop's Pier

Future Priorities

Recording Sites and Traditions

Fife's religious heritage is at present poorly recorded and understood. The majority of Fife's churches, including some medieval structures, have not received measured surveys or been subject to other forms of detailed analysis. As a result we have a limited knowledge of the built heritage that currently exists. Recent investigations at Markinch Church revealed that far more of the medieval structure had been preserved than previously recognised. Research at the universities of St Andrews and Stirling suggests that many other Fife churches may have unappreciated older elements concealed within later structures. It is vital that we record and recognise what has survived from the past before making decisions that may lead to damage and destruction.

Local religious traditions and other forms of intangible heritage should also not be ignored. There is a need for projects recording the memories and customs of the congregations of current and former churches before these recollections are lost.

Insufficient Information

"The current state of information does not allow for a full and reliable overview of the extent and condition of Scotland's ecclesiastical heritage.."

Historic Environment Advisory Council for Scotland, 2009



Markinch Parish Church

Supporting Communities

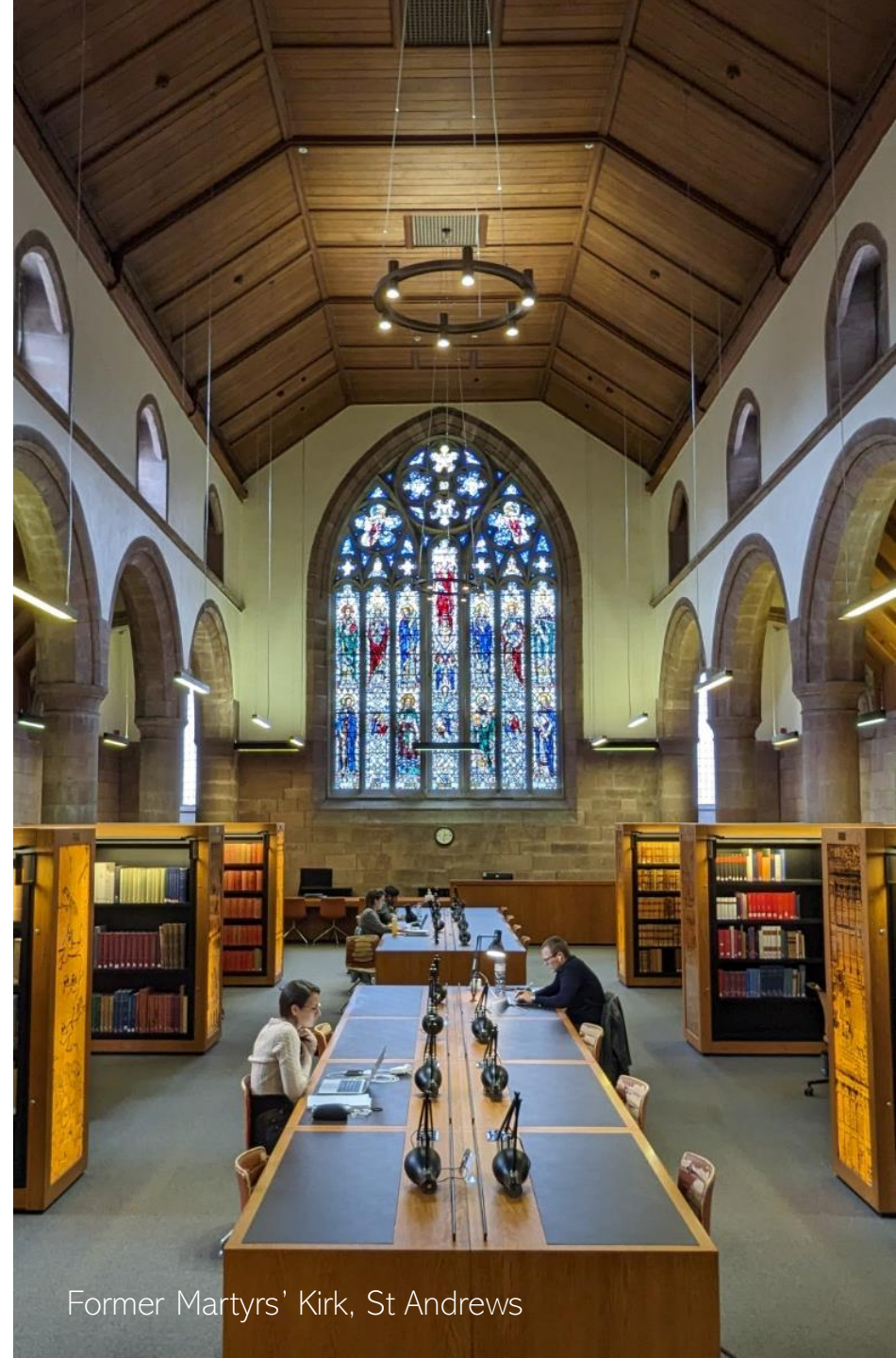
Churches have historically been devoted to the worship of God and the service of surrounding communities. In many parts of Fife the church is the main communal space and the only suitable venue for concerts or large meetings. A significant proportion of churches also provide vital support to the vulnerable. The loss of a church is typically also the loss of a community asset.

Many assume that former churches can become community centres or heritage sites - uses that retain public access. Yet only 20% of churches which closed in coastal Fife during the twentieth century remained as public spaces. The vast majority were converted into residences or demolished. The loss of religious space is a particular hardship in rural communities which have often already lost other local shared spaces such as libraries, shops, and schools.

Loss of a Community's Pillars?

"The loss of a culture that was shared, with the loss of a moral centre of faith... is a local iteration of a western transformation. It may yet be preparing a bill of sorts, for the heedless consumption of a community's pillars."

John Lloyd, *Financial Times* article on Fife church closures, 2023



Former Martyrs' Kirk, St Andrews



Burntisland Parish Church

Preserving National Heritage

Throughout recent centuries churches in Fife have closed. What sets the current situation apart is the volume of closures and the historic nature of the churches being identified as redundant. For much of the twentieth century it was mainly Victorian places of worship which were shutting their doors. However, now many medieval and early modern sites are at risk. At least seven category A listed churches in Fife have been proposed for closure. These are buildings of national significance. The historic nature of these churches place constraints on possibilities for conversion. In this context it should be noted the importances of certain church interiors. For instance, the interior of Burntisland Parish Church, with its central focus and early modern paintings, is part of the historic character of the building. Specific policies for A listed churches should be considered. These are a small number of sites, which hold unique architectural significance.

Comparisons from Other Parts of Europe

"In [other comparable] countries there are... schemes through which historic places of worship can be assisted. Some are general heritage... programmes, whilst others are... targeted at places of worship. In all cases, funding from outside the individual faiths is aimed at protected buildings."
Report on Church-State Relations, 2008

Providing for Mission

Churches were built to serve a religious function. As well as providing spaces for worship and inspiration, they also serve as a visible reminder of the presence of faith communities. Equally, the dereliction and erasure of these structures also sends an implicit message about the place of religion in modern society (even if congregations do continue to meet in spaces such as village halls).

Many architecturally interesting church buildings hold the ability to engage people who do not identify as particularly religious. Significantly, in England attendance at services at cathedrals has risen, against a backdrop of overall declining religiosity. Serious consideration of how religious organisations in other parts of the world encourage footfall to historic churches should be undertaken. In disposing of Fife's more impressive church buildings faith groups may be giving up some of their greatest assets in reaching out beyond their existing congregations, and assisting the long-term preservation of Christianity in the region.

Assets for Mission?

"A firm passion has been expressed that historic church buildings should be preserved, could continue to be used as places of worship, and could be developed as assets for mission."

Fife Presbytery Mission Plan, 2022



Former Boarhills Church

Sacred Landscapes of Fife

About the Project

This reflection on futures for former churches has arisen from the Sacred Landscapes of Fife project - a collaboration between theologians and historians, based in St Mary's College at the University of St Andrews.

The Sacred Landscapes project aims to research and record Fife's extraordinary religious heritage, and to spark conversations about sustainable futures for current and former places of worship in the region.

You can discover more at the project website:
<https://sacredlandscapes.org/>

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