

Cafe Connect - December_mixdown.wav

Voiceover [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Dr Chris Croly [00:00:21] Well, ladies, gentlemen, thanks very much for joining us again for the latest episode of Cafe Connect. Cafe Connect is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen by the Public Engagement with Research Team at the University of Aberdeen. And thanks so much for joining us. I'm Chris Croly, I'm the manager of Public Engagement Research Unit at the University. This Cafe Connect series is a little bit of a response to the current social distance regulations. Normally in our cafes we would all physically meet together. We would have a conversation and at the end of it, we would encourage question and answer. And just because this is on social media and that doesn't mean that we don't want questions we really encourage people to email in questions to PERU@abdn.ac.uk, but I will read that out at the end of the podcast as well. So normally the series looks at the latest research that's happening at the university. But really today we're looking at the life of the university and we're looking at King's College Chapel, which really is so emblematic of the University of Aberdeen, one of the most important buildings in Scotland, certainly one of the most important college chapels. And I'm joined today by two of my colleagues. And we've got Marylee Anderson, who as chaplain to the University of Aberdeen.

Marylee Anderson [00:01:36] Thank you, hello.

Dr Chris Croly [00:01:36] And Dr Louise Page.

Dr Louise Page [00:01:40] Hello. Hi.

[00:01:41] Hi. So Louise is actually is a really good person to start with because Louise, is a lecturer in the School of Biological Science at the University of Aberdeen, but she has a relationship with the Chapel going back 31 years to the time when she first arrived at Aberdeen as a student. She's been a member of the choir. She has researched the history of the chapel. She's read all the books on it. She has taken a number of tours and spoken to so many people about chapel. And in some ways, you know, you really sort of emblematic, again, of the passion that people have for the chapel and the fact that the chapel as so close to the hearts of so many of the community of the University of Aberdeen. So, as I say it's great for both of you to join us here. Shall we start with yourself, Louise? How would you talk to us about the chapel? Would you start outside? Shall we take a sort of virtual tour? Imagine a visitor arriving, coming along the high street and the they come across the chapel. You've got Elphinstone Memorial in front of it. Shall we start there?

Dr Louise Page [00:02:45] Well, I would normally start there because he was our founder of the university back in fourteen ninety five and we have this amazing memorial to him outside the chapel. And from there you can look at the west end of the chapel and you can see the inscription on the West Wall which actually says that work began on the chapel on the 2nd of April, 1500. We don't know whether that's exactly true, but it was about then, certainly in fifteen hundred. And the other thing we can see from there is the amazing crown tower, which was emblematic of the political situation at the time, the fact that Scotland was a separate, independent country and the crown was an imperial crown, and that basically said that Scotland was an independent country and it didn't owe allegiance to anybody else. So that's what I normally start looking at, the west side of the Chapel from beside Bishop Elphinston, who started it all back in 1495.

Dr Chris Croly [00:03:51] Yeah, I mean I guess there's a couple of things that sort of spring to mind. You've got a very specific date of the second of April and Elphinstone, is that something he chose for a specific reason? I think Jane Geddes has suggested in her work, he specifically chosen the second of April because that's the date upon which the Temple of Solomon was started to be built and the measurements of Kings College Chapel, Bishop Elphinstone wanted to mirror those of the Temple of Solomon. But I think Jane Geddes, a retired professor of history of art from the University of Aberdeen, suggested in one of her work that that also meant that the chapel would have been bigger than the St Salvator and therefore the largest in Scotland at the time. But that's indicative of Bishop since he was a great man with great plans. And Elphinstone was a man who obviously worked for King James the third, King James the fourth, involved in international diplomacy and international trade. It was, amongst many other things, he held so many different roles. And the chapel is in some senses, a reflection of him as well. There's an interesting question here, which is I'm not sure if an of us can answer it: would he recognise the chapel if he stood in the high street and looked at it?

Dr Louise Page [00:05:05] I think he would today, because the West face is much as it would have been in 1509 when the chapel was consecrated, the tower unfortunately fell down in a storm, the top of it in 1633, but it was rebuilt very much after the original model. So it still has that imperial crown on the top. So, yeah, I think he would recognise it. And if he went inside the first bit in the West, he wouldn't because that was put in in the earlier part of the 20th century. But what he went through into where the choir stalls are, you would recognise because they have all the choir stalls that he had installed in the early part of the 16th century. And if he looked up the fantastic ceiling, he would recognise that as well, because that is part of the original chapel.

Dr Chris Croly [00:05:52] Ah, actually yes to get distracted again, the ceiling, have I read that's modelled on the Guildhall in Bruges.

Dr Louise Page [00:06:01] It is, yes.

Dr Chris Croly [00:06:02] So already we've touched upon Scotland being an independent nation we have touched upon relations with Europe. Sometimes it feels as though it's the same ideas which circulate around and around. So I get slightly distracted there. But, that's a fantastic point, isn't it? The Elphinstone from five hundred twenty five years ago or closer to five hundred seventeen, eighteen years ago would actually recognise this building. That's one of the things that makes us absolutely unique. You know, you can say absolutely unique. The point is, there is nowhere else in Scotland probably that's quite like that. but, as you enter the building itself. You come into the what's currently the antique chapel. That is not something that you would necessarily recognise.

Dr Louise Page [00:06:54] No, partly because it's smaller than that section was because the screen that separates the anti-chapel from the rest of the chapel was moved back in the 19th century in 1873. But after the First World War, that area, the west end of the chapel, was made into a war memorial. So there is this fantastic wooden panelling which was made following the arts and crafts movement at the time. And it had the names of all of the members of the university, the graduate students, even staff who were killed during the First World War. So that was hundreds of names and that was finished in the 1920s. And then after the Second World War, more names were added from the victims, from the University of the Second World War. So that is a poignant part of the university's history, but obviously not something that Elphinstone would have seen.

Dr Chris Croly [00:07:54] Following that theme: there are church services yearly to commemorate the loss.

Marylee Anderson [00:08:03] Yes, we do we have an annual remembrance service in the chapel and we kind of liaise with the universities of Aberdeen officer training corps. So all the students who are part of that come and they march from the barracks and the chapel and the chapel is full. And the Principal of the university lays a wreath alongside represent the Army, Navy and the Air Force, as well.

Dr Louise Page [00:08:37] They all have student units here at the university.

Marylee Anderson [00:08:40] So the wreaths are laid in the ante-chapel, at the memorial there and then after everybody goes out onto Elphinstone lawn, and there is a parade and an inspection which the principal is part of and that that happens annually.

Dr Chris Croly [00:08:58] Yeah, there is a point about the ceremonial life of the chapel, and of course, that's one of the most poignant and moving of the ceremonies that happens in the Chapel. But there's also ceremonies to mark Founders' Day as well.

Marylee Anderson [00:09:13] Yeah, yeah. That's always around about the 11th of February. And the moderator for the Church of Scotland comes and preaches at that service as well. And again, that's a very well attended service by the whole university community. A lot of alumni come along to that service as well.

Dr Chris Croly [00:09:32] And indeed, it should be pointed out that the courses are five hundred and twenty fifth year this year and a very significant year. And we did, we did start off the year celebrating this with events. And it just shows you that, of course, the year took a very different turn to what we expected. But yeah, just to carry in with our virtual tour or walkthrough. So we've come in to the ante-chapel, which I guess, Louise you mentioned that there's the screen. I guess originally when you came get in the door, you would have had for the ante-chapel on the west end, that would have been the nave and then the screen and then the choir. Would that be the correct layout?

Dr Louise Page [00:10:12] Yeah. The building was divided roughly in half by this amazing rood screen, which is part of the choir stalls. So that's mediaeval woodcarving put in beginning of the sixteenth century, probably finished about 1506 - 1507. And then it was moved forward in 1873 because after a long period when the chapel wasn't in use as a chapel for services, it started to be used as a chapel again, with the library being in the ante-chapel and the trumpet being for services. But then they moved it back and the library was removed in 1870. So then the screen was moved a couple of years after that in order to give a bigger area for the whole university community to meet in the eastern part of the chapel.

Dr Chris Croly [00:11:12] Yeah, I guess, there is so much history, the chapel really reflects the history of Scotland you've got the Reformation, the seven, you've got in much, much later things being reflected also. In the pre-reformation period before the Reformation, 1560's. So you would have the need for the students would have sat in the choir where the clergy would have sat.

Dr Louise Page [00:11:37] Actually, it actually wasn't like that because the bit in the nave behind the screen was for anybody from old Aberdeen, the members of the community

and all the members of the university in what we think of as the choir. Originally, there were only 36 staff and students at the university actually started teaching and that quickly went up to 42. And there was some original diagrams. It was very formal where everybody had to sit. So if you were a theology student, you sat in a certain place. If you were an art student, you sat somewhere else. Principal seat, which is still the Principal's seat. And there was a seat for the presenter. There were six seats for choirboys so they could add to the worship. So the university community staff and students and choirboys were all in front of the screen and then members of the Aberdeen community were behind the screen.

Dr Chris Croly [00:12:32] OK, fair enough. And yes, of course, you mentioned that the carved wood work on both the screen and the seats and you can go and see which are which - it is fairly obvious the small stalls are for the choirboys. They are considerably smaller. But you could also spot the one for Principal, is it has a cushion on it.

Dr Louise Page [00:12:50] Yes.

Marylee Anderson [00:12:51] And a little light.

Dr Chris Croly [00:12:57] You are right, this is woodwork that Elphinston would have seen that has been touched by countless generations of students through the years. And it's rich with emblems and carved regalia.

Marylee Anderson [00:13:10] I love the fact Louise tells a story about how the Bishop Elphinstone's miter is under the smallest choir seat of them all. And I think that's a really lovely picture of what Bishop Elphinstone was like.

Dr Louise Page [00:13:23] Yes, apparently he was very humble. He was actually illegitimate which back in the 15th century, was not really a good start in life. But he did rise to a really important position. But the only coat of arms from him, which is from his time, is underneath the smallest seat in the chapel. There are other carvings, which is amazing. So this thing is like the vine reflecting obviously, this is a Christian chapel. There's also things like The Tudor rose because James the fourth, who was patron of the university then, he married Martha Tudor. So that was his link to England. So that's why the two divorces there. So they are both religious and secular loyalist symbology all around in that wonderful wooden carving.

Dr Chris Croly [00:14:14] Indeed, when you mention Bishop Elphinstone's birth and whatever the marital status of his parents may have been, you know, it was clearly no impediment to his career and I speak jokingly here as I'm also a Glaswegian, but you would think maybe being a Glaswegian would be an impediment to a career, but that was not the case for Bishop Elphinstone. [Laughing]

Dr Louise Page [00:14:38] I'm from Glasgow! [Laughing]

Dr Chris Croly [00:14:42] Yes, there's so much the life and times of Scotland, Europe and policy and dynastic politics are embedded into that chapel. And then, of course, we mentioned we've alluded to the Reformation on a couple of occasions here. And one of the great things about this is, is that you have the woodwork, you have those choir stalls. And that was pre reformation woodwork, right here in 2020. And the question is, how has it survived? I mean, you know, the reformers, they didn't take it away.

Dr Louise Page [00:15:15] Well, the powers that be at university was still really embedded in the Roman Catholic tradition. So they kept on until 1569. So several years after they were supposed to stop saying Roman Catholic mass. And the story is that there were people coming up from Aberdeen to old Aberdeen where the university and the old Cathedral are wanting to change things, to tear down all of what they thought of as Roman Catholic icons and whatever. And the students and staff stood at the entrance to the quad and because it's a small entrance they could stop them coming in. And so they just continued up the High Street to the Cathedral of St Machar's, which is where Bishop Elphinstone was bishop, which wasn't protected, and they did their damage there. So although a lot of what was used in the early days, Roman Catholic times has gone, we also still have a lot that's left. So we have those wonderful seats. We have the carving from pre reformation days. And so that's down to the students and staff towards the end of the 16th century.

Dr Chris Croly [00:16:28] Sorry Marylee, was there something you wanted to add?

Marylee Anderson [00:16:31] No, no, no, I was just going to say, you can see one of the items that Louise always points out on her tours, which she does really well, underneath one of the Mersey seats is the Catholic symbol for the Holy Spirit, which is one of the only ones, I think, that still survives.

Dr Louise Page [00:16:45] Yes, it is just the letters IHS, which is something you associate with Roman Catholicism and it's thought because it's underneath the seat, if the seat is down, because they tip-up, if the seat is down, you can't see it. And so I even read one thing that suggested that somebody actually sat specifically on that seat so they wouldn't turn it up, so it wouldn't be destroyed by the reformers who might otherwise have just broken it and taken it away and burned it.

Dr Chris Croly [00:17:12] I think there's probably a sense that the Reformation was quite pragmatic in Aberdeen, in the Northeast doesn't seem to be any wholesale violence or taking down of images or what have you, that happened elsewhere. And the community does not just in the university, but the Northeast as a whole, splits probably 50 50 quite peacefully between Catholic and Protestant. Actually, I'm reminded of the city council records that when the reformers came in to Aberdeen actually Aberdeen Borough Council as actually in session, when the reformers come into the town and they record that the reformers commending the did attack the likes of the Carmelite, White Friars and the Dominican's in school. And there's a bit of despoiling and taking away of goods. And the council records that that's happened by people who came into the town from Angus and Mearns, but not you understand any Aberdonians.

Dr Louise Page [00:18:11] All right. Well, that's good to hear. One of the things I like about the chapel today is the fact that is ecumenical. So obviously, we have our chaplaincy university services there invite preachers from different traditions. The Roman Catholic Church uses it again. And so they were both Roman Catholic and Protestant services, which is fantastic because it reflects the whole community of university, which isn't just one denomination. So, yeah, it is very broad and that's one of the things I love about the chapel.

Marylee Anderson [00:18:50] Abbot Jamison once preached in the pulpit and where did it come from again?

Dr Louise Page [00:18:57] St Machar's Cathedral originally.

Marylee Anderson [00:18:59] Bishop's Stewart's pulpit and Abbot James had love preaching that because he preached at our ecumenical service, he preached at the Catholic Service and he loved how it symbolised the kind of coming together of the kind of Catholic Protestant that he really enjoyed preaching from it. Yes, I think it's a really good symbol of that.

Dr Chris Croly [00:19:18] Yeah, it is. And even just across the road in The Snow Kirkyard of St Mary's that you have a fair continuity of burials of Catholics: the memorial for the Menzies family, the lairds of Pitfodels were too many times incumbent of the role of Lord Provost of Aberdeen. And there was that kind of peaceful retention of relations between the two here. Yes, this is good. This it's almost reflected in now in current practice. Yeah, and we touch upon the pulpit there, which came from St Machar, so that's old.

Dr Louise Page [00:19:53] It is very old it dates from the first half of the 16th century, I think 1535. So it was in St Machar's Cathedral for a long time. It was there and it was in use until the 18th century. And then they moved it and then it came into the chapel because at that point in the 19th century, the chapel had started being used for university services again, but there wasn't a pulpit. So it came to the university, in I think it was the 1880's. I'm not sure if I've got the date exactly right, but it came to the university in the second half of the 19th century and there were these lovely panels, from William Stewart's time, the bishop of Aberdeen way back in the 16th century. We still got his coat of arms and the initials W.S. so it was put together again in what was then a Protestant chapel. And it's still used today.

Dr Chris Croly [00:20:57] And of course, once the chapel sort of comes back into use and actually, sorry that's the point, we should say a little bit of that intervening period between the Reformation, but it comes back into use but we come back to that in a second. But just as we're talking about it coming back into use, I think most of the windows date from this reuse period of the late 19th century onwards.

Dr Louise Page [00:21:18] Yes, we don't have any of the original glass. The oldest window is the west window, which is late 19th century, but most of the windows, well more than half of the windows are 20th century. And they were designed by Douglas Strachan. And he designed windows for a lot of places in Scotland. And the Aberdeen Chapel windows start off, I think, before the First World War. And then the oldest is in the 1930s. So all of the east end windows were designed by Douglas Strachan, and I think most moving is the War Memorial window. You refer to the anti-chapel, which is now the war memorial, part of the chapel, and the big window there on the north wall is one that's designed by Douglas Strachan and it shows the two constituent parts of the university. So the crown of King's College and the tower down in New Aberdeen of Marischal College, which came together to form the University of Aberdeen. It just shows basically soldiers, students are soldiers in that windows that comes from 1920 and so our windows are modern.

Dr Chris Croly [00:22:32] Yeah, getting back to that point the history of the chapel as effectively the history of Scotland the history that has affected Europe, the world here as well. Those were all encapsulated into the building itself. And again, we touched on its different uses of it now, the ecumenical services and of course, is the part the chapel plays in the life of the wider community of Aberdeen. Marylee is there something you'd like to say along the lines of the special place at the chapel in the life of the university.

Marylee Anderson [00:23:08] Yeah, I mean, I guess like Louise said earlier, that the chapel is ecumenical and it's used by a lot of different groups, obviously Catholic mass on Sundays we have Anglican Eucharist that happens on a Wednesday. And also we have some local groups using it as well. So we have the Russian Orthodox Church community, they use it often for special occasions. And the Louise will know, music concerts and things like that. I guess like from my perspective, the chapel today for me is this place of just real peace and tranquility that's open for the whole community. It's where the kind of a gap between Earth and God, if you like, kind of exists. So many people, when they go into the chapel, will say that it just feels like that place of real peace and you only have to flick through the visitors book to see that. So we try and have it open every day, there's a dedicated, quiet time just for anybody to go in and then retreat from what can be the kind of madness of campus life as well. So, yes, it's used by a lot of people for that too.

Dr Louise Page [00:24:27] There's a wonderful brass plate as you go in the door from the quad on the back of the screen where there's a quote from Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress and it just starts 'here one may, without much molestation be thinking'. And I point that out to visitors at the chapel and say, well, that for some people, it's the most important. It's a place where you can get away from the hubbub. And it doesn't include in it that the Bunyan says before that 'I love to be in such places where there was no ratching with coaches, nor rumbelling with wheels'. So, that's how I think of the chapel sometimes.

Marylee Anderson [00:25:09] Yes, I think it's true. I think for so many people, they walk in and you just relax.

Dr Chris Croly [00:25:17] And of course, weddings as will use the space.

Marylee Anderson [00:25:19] Yes, and actually and this is one of the things we do get quite often fairly regularly is wedding blessings. So we've had quite a few alumni who come back 50 years later for wedding blessings. And they're always lovely to be involved, with. But I guess weddings are maybe partly our only exclusive aspect of the chapel use because we are only open to and graduates and staff from the university and Robert Gordon University as well. So that is probably the only part of it that is a little bit exclusive is weddings. And we do have occasional funerals, memorials, baptisms as well. We are very much part of the community.

Dr Louise Page [00:26:04] As Marylee mentions, baptisms and we have a wonderful font which was given us on the occasion of the centenary of the University by the Incorporated Trades of Aberdeen, and that just shows the link between the university and the city.

Dr Chris Croly [00:26:18] Indeed, yes. It might be worth mentioning there as well William Guild, of course, who initially trained to be or aimed to be a Bishop hadn't he and then became principal of the university. But he was a great benefactor of the Incorporated Trades he gifted and bought what was the site of the Red Fryers, The Trinity in Aberdeen and gifted it to the Incorporated Trades hence they meet in Trinity Hall, which is, I think the third incarnation of so to this day. But yes, I mean, the links between town and gown go way beyond this. The university is part and parcel of the life of the northeast of Scotland, really.

Marylee Anderson [00:26:58] There is an annual service as well where we celebrate that connection, annual Seven Incorporated Trades service. So that's exactly what that's for is to celebrate the closeness between the city and University.

Dr Chris Croly [00:27:13] So we've kind of explored ruined the chapel with this architecture, its significance is meeting to the communities. Is it anything you want to add Louise, is there a point we haven't touched upon? Well, obviously, there's thousands of points we have not touched upon, something that you feel kind of feel we can not go without saying.

Dr Louise Page [00:27:35] I don't think so. I think we've covered so much of it. And obviously there's so much more to explore. And hopefully when the chapel is open again, and we're back to more normal times and people can come in and discover it for themselves.

Dr Chris Croly [00:27:50] Yeah, I think that's very much the point, isn't it? I mean, this is a teaser trailer, if you like. And the chapel will, yes, once we have passed through, as we will do the current phase that we are in and things return to a little bit like, what were and get the chapel will be open and people come to the chapel and find out what it means to each individual as they come through to be able to discover for yourself. And I think that's one of the great things about this, is it's a gem that you discover.

Marylee Anderson [00:28:25] Yeah. It just always amazes me, though, that people will be on campus and they don't even realise it or they've never been inside, you know, and when people come to welcome week, we always have these tours and Louise often does them. We do have a lot on attendance, but it amazes me how many people have not or are not aware of the chapel and what it's like. Everybody's welcome once those doors are open to go and visit.

Dr Chris Croly [00:28:59] Well, Marylee and Louise, thank you very much for the briefest of brief introductions, to a building whose history and significance is untellable in half an hour, really. So, thanks very much for that. And again, if people would like to e-mail with questions, you can e-mail and to PERU@abdn.ac.uk. We would very much welcome your questions. But in the meantime, Marylee and Louise, thank you very much for joining us today.

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