

EdinburghLife

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and the Lothians

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Parish Church**
Historic Hidden gem

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Robert Burns in Edinburgh (cont'd)



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The land and buildings then passed through several hands and eventually under crown charter was passed to the Session of South Leith Church in 1614 to found a hospice which later became the King James VI hospital and continued in existence until 1822.

South Leith Church has had royal connections for hundreds of years, both directly and indirectly. The first provable royal link with South Leith Church is in 1327 with Robert the Bruce and possibly with William Wallace as well. According to court records Robert the Bruce came to Leith to receive treatment for Leprosy from the Knights of St John. William Wallace wrote his famous letter to the burgers of Marleburg from Leith, to let them know it was safe to return to Scotland to trade after the battle of Stirling Bridge.

It was also in Leith that James I became a key person in the founding of the Preceptory of St Anthony. How-

coats of arms of a royal house can be seen. However, there is no proof that Mary Queen of Scots came to South Leith - the coat of arms is here due to the fact that it came from the old Tollbooth of Leith.

The church owns a number of interesting artefacts such as helmets worn by the guards whose responsibility it was to protect the kirkyard from body snatchers, who would steal fresh corpses from graves to sell for autopsies. There are also cannon balls which were fired through the Kirk by English troops during the Siege of Leith in 1560, in order to encourage the French troops to leave. Both armies eventually agreed to end the conflict by the signing of the Treaty of Edinburgh. Perhaps the most valuable artefacts are two silver communion goblets once owned by King James VI. However, for security, these are stored elsewhere.

Initially the main church of the area was Restalrig but when in 1560 it was demolished on the orders of the General Assembly, South Leith Church became de facto the parish church for Leith. Early records refer to the Act of Parliament of 1609, when the Church changed from Catholic to Protestant and its first minister after the Reformation was David Lindsay, who went on to serve six terms as Moderator of the Church of Scotland.

of houses, the supply of food, the cleansing of the streets and the burial of the dead (the remains of whom are still excavated from time to time in Leith Links) A century later, Leith became congested when after the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie at Culloden, highlanders flooded into the town. Later still, thousands of Irish emigrants arrived. With living conditions squalid and cramped, diseases spread very quickly and in the nineteenth century Leith had the highest death rate in Scotland.

Details of the interior of the Church, its grounds and its parishioner are also fascinating.



The grave of John Pew



Carved angels hold shields displaying scripture



The coat of arms of Mary Queen of Scots

In the days before pews, each part of the church congregation area was divided into designated areas for specific tradesmen and professions. Throughout the church are plaques showing where each group of people sat. Indeed, parishioners wanted their burial plots outside to be as close to the part of the church where they worshipped as possible!

The magnificent roof of the church was made from 906 pieces of timber shipped from Russia. Within the structure there are numerous carvings of angels, each holding a shield displaying a verse of the bible.



Canonballs from the Siege of Leith in 1560

ever, his work was not completed as he was murdered at Perth in 1437. It is of interest that the Logan family of Leith through Euphemia Ross, a daughter of Robert II, had royal connections. This gave South Leith Church the right to a royal coat of arms over the West door which was unfortunately removed long ago.

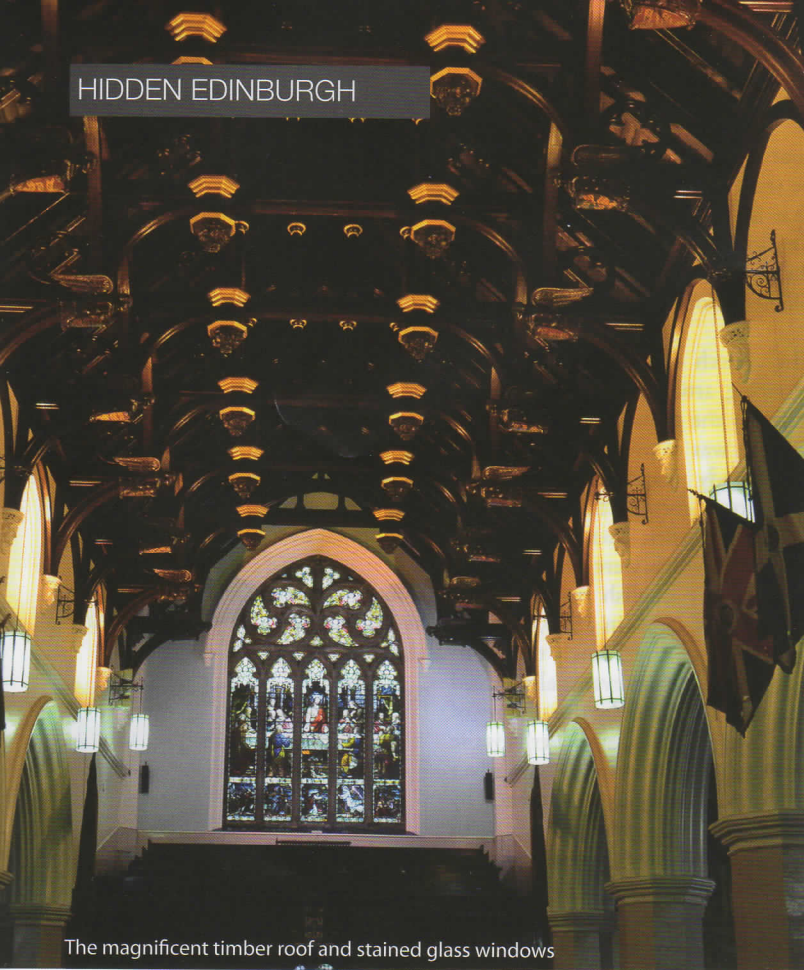
In the church tower below the clock can be seen the coats of arms of James VI of Scotland and I of England and Charles I and inside the tower can be seen the coats of arms of Mary de Guise and Mary Queen of Scots. This is the only place in Scotland where four consecutive

The Church has always worked closely with the community in social, educational and health matters and in 1645 it took over the organisation of relief when the town and parish lost 2,736 people in the great plague which lasted for several months. The Church arranged for the cleaning

South Leith Parish Church is not the easiest place to find as it is barely visible from the main thoroughfare, tucked away as it is beyond a supermarket car park, between Henderson Street and Constitution Street. However, if you make the effort to visit, you will be richly rewarded, for this church is one of the most fascinating in Scotland.

The origins of South Leith Parish Church can be traced to the Order of the Knights Templar and the Order of the Knights of St John. In a charter dated 1230, Gilbert, son of Henry of Leith, donated land to the Knights of St John Hospitler of Torphican, which in turn led to the granting of this land in Leith - to Godfrey de Saulton, Grand Master of the Order - for the building of a Hospice. In 1390, as a result of the two Orders coming together, the Preceptory of St Anthony was formed.

The Preceptory of St Anthony was the Church or Monastery of the Knights of St Anthony, who came into Scotland from Northern France (with their principal house in Vienne, the South of France). The Preceptory of St Anthony (Monastery and enclosed Monastic grounds) was of considerable size, occupying the area from what is now the foot of Leith Walk along Great Junction St, along the Water of Leith to Parliament Street and then across to Constitution Street and back to the foot of Leith Walk. The Preceptory continued in existence until 1560 when the Reformation was completed in Scotland and all links with France were broken.



The magnificent timber roof and stained glass windows

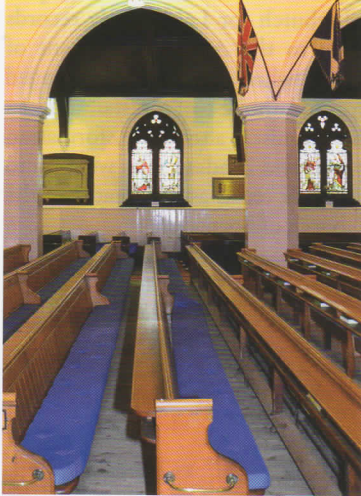
Given the origin of the timber it was believed that the roof design was very similar to that of St Isaac's in St Petersburg, although this is now in doubt.

Historic Scotland has confirmed to South Leith Parish Church that their stained glass windows are among the best in Scotland. Indeed, one of the stained glass windows which dates back to the 19th century is a copy of Da Vinci's The Last Supper.

There are also many memorials to past conflict from around the world in which members of the congregation have taken part, from the battle of Prestonpans up to the Second World War. One of the greatest tragedies to beset Leith was the Gretna Rail disaster of 1915 in which two companies of Royal Scots (raised in Leith) in an express troop train collided with a local train standing on the track, after which another express train crashed into the wreckage. 215 men were killed and 191 men were seriously injured. This is believed to have been the worst railway disaster in British railway history. Many of the dead were buried at Rosebank Cemetery and the Company colours now hang within the church as a memorial to those who lost their lives.

Outside in the kirkyard is the tombstone of John Pew, who was blind.

Flags hang in commemoration of past conflicts



The story goes that Robert Louis Stevenson saw the tombstone whilst attending a funeral at the church, and was so inspired by what he read on Mr Pew's gravestone that he made him the character 'Blind Pew' in Treasure Island! Also visible are the remains of the hospital wall which originally had been part of buildings owned within St Anthony's Preceptory. The hospital was demolished in 1822.

As befits a church boasting such rich history, there still remains a certain amount of pomp and circumstance. The Church houses a seat specifically reserved for the Provost of Leith and every November the City High

Constables ceremonially march him in and out of the church. In keeping with Leith's nautical history, there is an annual seafarer's service and recently Princess Anne visited the Church as part of the unveiling the Seafarers Memorial, which stands in front of the Malmaison Hotel.

Today, although the congregation has substantially reduced, South Leith Parish Church is still a hub of the local community. There is choir and a music group, and a very strong Boys Brigade, known as the Edinburgh Leith and District Battalion. One of the church's main projects for the last twelve years has been assisting a girl's boarding school in Chipembe, Zambia. South Leith Parish Church discovered that the pupils were underachieving as a result of hunger. They therefore provided money for the purchase of cattle, sheep and chickens. Latterly they have also provided computers for the school. As a result, Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda visited



Tradesmen worshipped in specific areas of the church

the Church to personally thank the congregation for their help.

Finally, the church hall nearby has a library area and a computer and there is a well patronised cafe, which provides food and non alcoholic drinks at very reasonable prices. Additionally, there is a twice weekly lunch club run by Edinburgh Supported Living which charges just £3.20 for a two course lunch.

South Leith Parish Church has a fascinating past and today has an active and important place in the community. It is definitely worth a visit.

The Church has always had strong links with the seafarers of Leith



Did you know?

At one stage four and a half thousand people took communion in the church. In order to have sufficient services to cater for this demand, communion was spread over two and a half days! This was the biggest congregation in Scotland at the time. Now sadly the congregation roll is down to four hundred and seventy five.