

An Introduction to the Historic Churches of Aberdeenshire

Aberdeenshire is home to over 140 historic churches and chapels no longer in ecclesiastical use and in varying states of preservation. Dating from the 13th to the 19th Centuries, these historic churches, known in Scots as Kirks, offer a fascinating insight into the development of Aberdeenshire – its settlements, society, architecture and more.

They tell the region's story and act as permanent record of the area's social history. They also often serve as a link between pre-Christian prehistoric communities and the early spread of Christianity, with several churches built on or beside Stone Circles, Standing Stones or Pictish Symbol Stones.

At the heart of every medieval community was the church, and today churches often represent the oldest surviving buildings in any settlement or parish. Churches were generally built of higher quality materials than domestic buildings, designed both to make an impact and to be long lasting. They illustrate the region's rich architectural heritage as well as acting as monuments to the highly skilled craftsmen who built them.

Although these buildings were built for the same purposes, as places of worship, each church is unique, developed to meet the needs of local parishioners. Buildings were altered over time, to reflect changing religious practices as well as the changing needs of the congregation. In historic churches this can be seen in the number of blocked window and door openings, for example, or where additional floors or extensions have been added.

There are many more churches in Aberdeenshire which are still in use, continuing the ecclesiastical architectural tradition of the region, and often historic churches are found adjacent to their "modern" replacements. The 18th and 19th Centuries saw a surge in the erection of new churches, and replacement churches, as populations increased, historic churches deteriorated and parishes united, continuing to adapt to the changing needs of the congregation.

While visiting the churches on this trail, take the chance to explore the surrounding graveyards to learn the stories of the parish, the people and events, their triumphs and tragedies, and to admire the fine work of the region's highly accomplished stone masons.

When exploring Aberdeenshire, please follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code:

Respect the interests of others

Respect the needs of other people enjoying or working in the outdoors and follow any reasonable advice from land managers.

Care for the environment

Take your rubbish home and consider picking up other litter as well. Don't disturb or damage wildlife or historic places. Keep your dog on a short lead or under close control where needed.

Take responsibility for your own actions

The outdoors is a great place to enjoy but it's also a working environment and natural hazards exist. Make sure you are aware of this.

www.outdooraccess-scotland.scot

Scheduled Monuments

Most of the sites listed here have been designated as Scheduled Monuments, monuments of national importance to which Scottish Ministers have given legal protection under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. It is a criminal offence to damage a Scheduled Monument. Historic sites should be treated with care and respect.

Useful links

Visit the online SMR and use the "SMR Ref" numbers included overleaf to find out more about each site: online.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/smrpub

For more information on these and other sites to visit in the area, go to:

www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/archaeology

www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/museums

www.visitabdn.com

Glossary of Key Terms

Almshouse: a house founded by charity, offering accommodation for poor and/or elderly people

Ashlar: large blocks of masonry finished with even faces and squared edges

Aumbry: a recess to hold sacred vessels for Mass

Bellcote: a small shelter to house a bell. *Birdcage bellcote:* an open, framed structure, usually of stone

Chancel: the eastern end of a church, where the altar is placed

Choir: the part of a church where services are sung

Effigy: a sculpture or model of a person. *Recumbent Knight effigy:* sculpture of a reclining knight in armour

Finial: ornamentation at the top or end of an object

Heraldic panel: carving displaying the coat of arms or heraldry of a family or individual

Lancet: slender pointed arch window

Lychgate: roofed gateway entrance to a churchyard/graveyard

Memento mori: carvings on grave monuments which serve as symbols of mortality, immortality or trade emblems. *Symbols of mortality:* skull, crossed bones, skeleton, hourglass, crossed spades, bell, coffin. *Symbols of immortality:* fruit, flowers, foliage, winged souls, crowns, heart. *Trade emblems:* rope, anchor, axe, knife

Nave: the main body of a church, west of the chancel, often flanked by aisles

Norman: an architectural style common in the 11th – 13th Centuries AD. Also called *Romanesque*

Piscina: a basin for washing Mass vessels, with a drain, usually set into/against the wall to the south of the altar

Reformation: a 16th-century movement for the reform of abuses in the Roman Church ending in the establishment of the Reformed and Protestant Churches

Sacrament House: a cupboard in a wall of the chancel for storing the sacrament

Session House: a room or building where the minister and church elders meet

Skew: the shaped stones which finish/top a gable standing above the roof covering (a Scottish term)

Skewputt: the bracket at the bottom end of a skew, sometimes decorated with carvings or heraldry

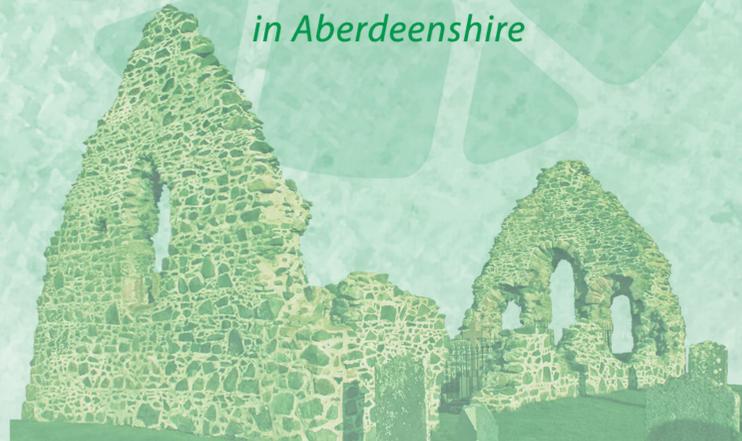
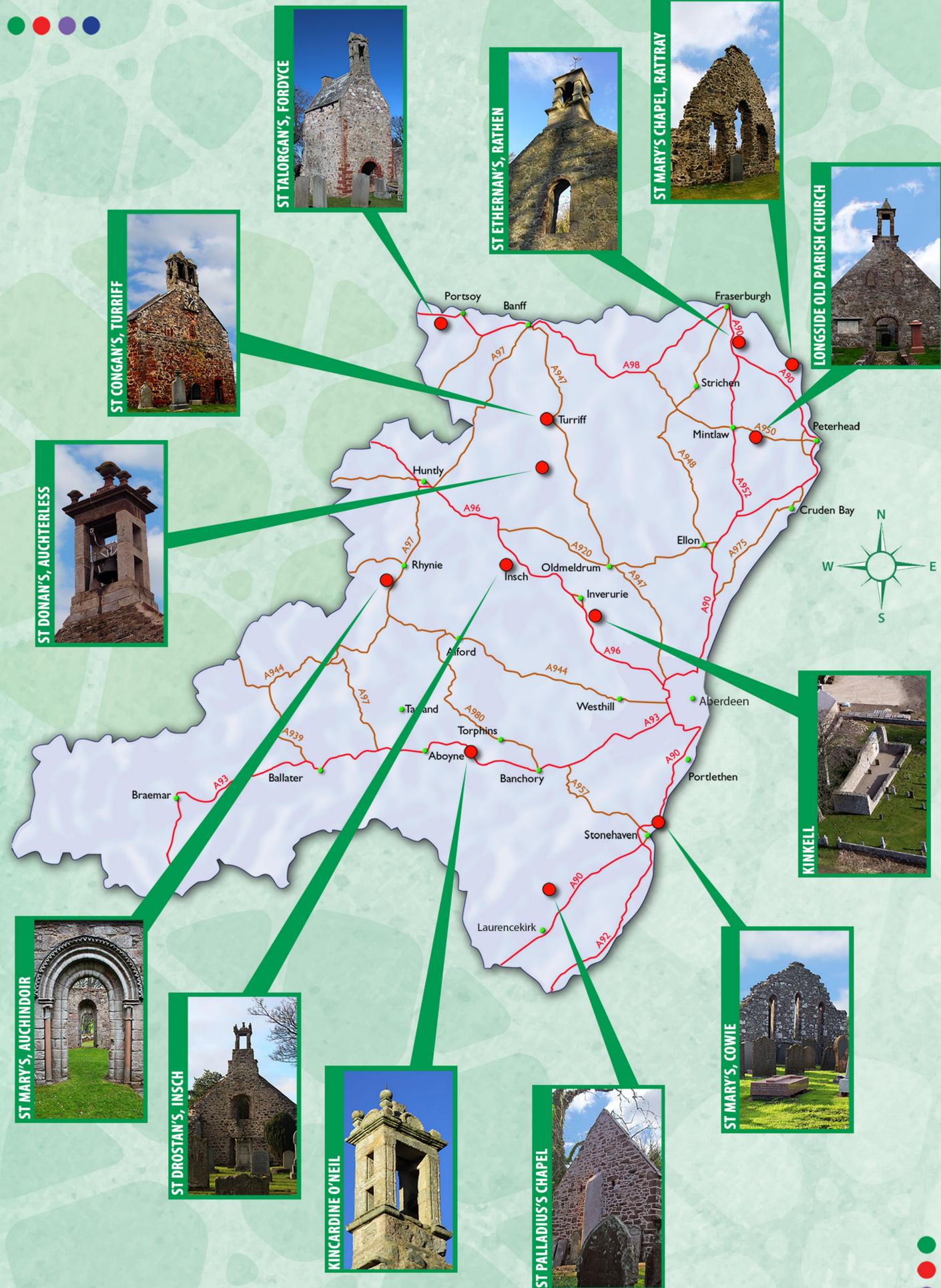
SMR: the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) is a database of information on over 20,000 sites of archaeological and historical interest

Selected Reading

S. BRADLEY *Churches: an architectural guide* (2016) Yale University Press
J. R. HUME *Scotland's Best Churches* (2005) Edinburgh University Press
J. SHARPLES, D. W. WALKER & M. WOODWORTH *The Buildings of Scotland Series Aberdeenshire: South and Aberdeen* (2015) Yale University Press
D. W. WALKER & M. WOODWORTH *The Buildings of Scotland Series Aberdeenshire: North and Moray* (2015) Yale University Press

the Historic Churches trail

A guide to 12 of the best Historic Churches in Aberdeenshire

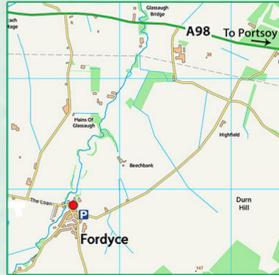


ST TALORGAN'S, FORDYCE

SMR Ref No: NJ56SE0001 // NJ 5557 6384 // AB45 25W

St Talorgan's Church is thought to have been built in the 13th Century AD, possibly on the site of an earlier church dedicated to *St Tarlarican* (Talorgan). Only the roofed tower, entrance porch and part of the chancel survive. The tower, remodelled in the 17th Century, would have stood at the south end of the nave. At ground level a 13th Century AD doorway can be seen. The tower, used in the past as a prison and a session house, is topped by an ornate bellcote dated 1661. The former chancel, to the northeast of the tower, was divided into two burial enclosures after the Reformation and contains medieval tombs of the Ogilvie family of Findlater and Boyne, including a recumbent knight. To the north of this is the roofed burial aisle, with bellcote, of the Abercrombies of Glasshaugh, dated 1679.

Directions: In Fordyce, 3 miles (4.8 km) southwest of Portsoy, on the south side of the A98. The church is located on Bridge Street. Parking is possible at the village hall at 4 East Church Street (AB45 2SZ), to the east, a 150 m walk to the church.

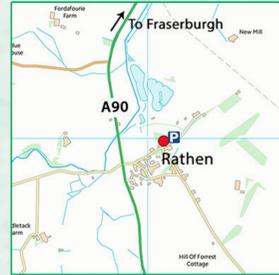


ST ETHERNAN'S, RATHEN

SMR Ref No: NK06SW0031 // NK 0011 6095 // AB43 8UL

In the old graveyard stands the ruined 17th Century parish church of Rathen, built on the site of earlier churches. The earliest is said to have been founded by *St Ethernan* or *Eddran* in the 6th Century AD, although nothing now survives. The present church was built on a T-plan. The south wall of the nave and west gable survive, with a lozenge-shaped sundial dated 1625 visible on the south wall. A large birdcage bellcote was added to the west gable in 1782, inscribed "L.A.S." for the Saltoun family. The south aisle also survives, lower than the nave, with a 1646 datestone and three other carved stone panels over the doorway, likely later additions. The grandparents and ancestors of Edward Grieg, the composer, are buried here.

Directions: In Rathen, 4.3 miles (6.9 km) south of Fraserburgh. Turn east off the A90 to Rathen at the Rathen-Auchries crossroads. After 100 m turn left and continue along the unclassified road past Rathen Church West, following the signs for "Car Park" for 0.2 miles (300 m). The car park is the north end of the graveyard.



ST MARY'S CHAPEL, RATRAY

SMR Ref No: NK05NE0002 // NK 0850 5752 // AB42 3HA

St Mary's Chapel stands at the south end of the Loch of Strathbeg. It is thought to have been built in the early 13th Century AD by the Comyn family as a private chapel for the nearby castle and is all that remains of the medieval burgh of Ratray. The chapel is rectangular in plan, built of grey whinstone with red sandstone around the openings. Both gables survive to full height, with three lancet windows in the east gable and a single window opening in the west. The chapel is thought to have gone out of use in the 16th Century, replaced by a new Parish Church in the village of Crimond to the west.

Directions: On a minor road leading to Ratray Head, 11 miles (17.7 km) south of Fraserburgh, reached via the A90 near Crimond. From the north, 0.6 miles (1 km) after the village of Crimond take the minor road to the left signposted Ratray. After 0.8 miles (1.4 km) take the left fork signposted Ratray. Continue for 0.7 miles (1.2 km) to the ruined church on the right, with a parking area just past the church on the left.



LONGSIDE OLD PARISH CHURCH

SMR Ref No: NK04NW0004 // NK 0374 4724 // AB42 4TN

Longside Old Parish Church was built 1619-20, altered in the late 17th and early 18th Centuries, and has been roofless since the 19th Century. It is a simple rectangular plan with a fine birdcage bellcote atop the west gable. The sandstone bellcote is decorated with the coats of arms of the Sibbald and Bruce families. Elsewhere, the Keith and Cheyne families are commemorated on carved skewputts. Several blocked windows and doorways can be seen, illustrating how the church has been altered during its lifetime. On the south wall is an early 18th Century memorial featuring several *memento mori* carvings. There is also a rare lychgate at the west dated 1705, but possibly of earlier date.

Directions: In Longside, 6.3 miles (10 km) west of Peterhead on the A950. The ruined church is in the churchyard on Inn Brae. There is a car park on Main Street (A950) in the centre of the village. From here it is a 300 m walk to the church. From the car park, turn right, walk 50m along Main Street, turn right onto Inn Brae. Continue along Inn Brae for 160 m. The church is on the left.

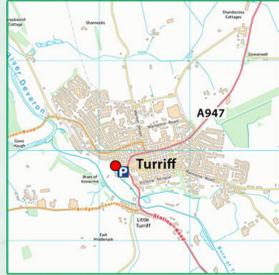


ST CONGAN'S OLD CHURCH, TURRIFF

SMR Ref No: NJ74NW0009 // NJ 7220 4983 // AB53 4BJ

St Congan's Church has a long history, perhaps beginning in the 7th Century AD. A church is said to have been built at this site in the 11th Century AD by King Malcolm III, and the lands were gifted to Arbroath Abbey in the 13th Century AD by Marjory, Countess of Buchan. The present ruins date from the 15th Century AD and show that the building was unusually narrow. The east gable, part of the choir, is topped by a spectacular double bellcote, dated 1635, decorated with the coat of arms of the Hay family and hosting a bell dated 1556. Below the bellcote is an 18th Century clock, originally from nearby Carnousie, along with a carved stone depicting ten heads, probably from the former medieval almshouse.

Directions: In Turriff, off Castle Street. Take the A947 to the centre of Turriff. At the roundabout turn into Castle Street, past the market cross which stands at the junction. There is a small free car park (signposted) on the left side of Castle Street. The church is at the end of Castle Street, a 50 m walk from the car park.



ST DONAN'S CHURCH, AUCHTERLESS

SMR Ref No: NJ74SW0032 // NJ 7137 4161 // AB53 8BA

The old Parish Church of Auchterless, dedicated to St Donan, was originally built in the 16th Century and rebuilt in the late 18th Century. A new aisle was added in 1830, but the church was replaced in the late 19th Century when a new church was built to the south. The west gable is topped by an elaborate finial bellcote housing a bell dated 1644 made by Dutch bell maker Peter Jansen, and has decorative skewputts one of which is inscribed "M A R". The church is built of granite rubble, with red sandstone around the openings. Sections of the north and east walls survive with attached memorial plaques. Alongside the ruined church is the Duff of Hatton mausoleum (dated 1877) which may have incorporated stones from the church in its construction.

Directions: In Kirkton of Auchterless, on the B992, 4.6 miles (7.5 km) south of Turriff. The remains of the church are in the churchyard of the present church which stands on the east side of the main road. There is parking for 1 car in front of the old church gate.



ST DROSTAN'S CHURCH, INSCH

SMR Ref No: NJ62NW0015 // NJ 6335 2813 // AB52 6JF

All that survives of St Drostan's Church is the west gable topped by an ornate 17th Century pedimented bellcote. The bellcote has carved uprights and finials, dog-tooth detailing, scroll moulding and the initials "MIL" for the Leslie family. There is a carved skewputt initialled and dated "AR 162-" on the south side of the gable. At the foot of the gable is the Radulfus stone, a medieval tombstone thought to honour Radulfus, chaplain of the Bishop of Aberdeen between 1172 AD and 1194 AD. The stone is a simple rectangle incised with a cross and circle with inscription reading "ORATE PRO ANIMA RADULFI SACERDOTIS" (Pray for the soul of Ralph the priest). To the left of this is the partial figure of a carved stone knight dating to the late 13th or early 14th Century AD.

Directions: In Inch, on the east side of the High Street. Take the B992 to the centre of Inch, to the car park on Martin Road (signed off Commerce Street). The church is a 160 m walk from the car park. Turn right onto Commerce Street, continue for 50 m then turn right onto High Street for 130 m. The church is on the left.



ST MARY'S CHURCH, AUCHINDOIR

SMR Ref Nos: NJ42SE0001 // NJ 4778 2450 // AB54 4JB

St Mary's Church at Auchindoir dates from the late 13th Century AD and features fine decorative stonework. The church was remodelled in the early 16th and 17th Centuries and remained in use until the early 19th Century when it was replaced by a new church to the east (now roofless). It is a simple rectangular plan church with walls surviving to roof height. The east gable is topped by a stone crucifix, the west by a 17th Century bellcote. Of note is the ornate Norman arched entranceway in the south wall, dating from the 13th Century AD, as well as the unusually-shaped finely carved sacrament house on the inner face of the north wall, dating from the 16th Century. In the south wall are a piscina and aumbry, with another aumbry in the east wall.

Directions: 12 miles (19.3 km) south of Huntly. From Huntly take the A97 south for just over 10 miles (16 km), turn right onto the B9002 (signposted to Craig and The Cabrach). Follow this road for 700 m, past a ruined church on the right (Auchindoir North Parish Church). St Mary's Church is on the left with space for parking in front of the graveyard gate or at the far end of the churchyard.



KINKELL CHURCH

SMR Ref No: NJ71NE0015 // NJ 7858 1905 // AB51 0LS

Built in 1538, probably on the site of an earlier church, Kinkell Church was abandoned as a place of worship in 1771. The church is dedicated to *St Michael*, and is thought to have been built by Alexander Galloway, Parson of Kinkell, who was also responsible for building the Bridge of Dee in Aberdeen. Rectangular in plan, built of grey rubble, much of the north and west walls survive. An unusual sacrament house, bearing the date 1524 and the initials and coat of arms of Alexander Galloway, can be seen on the inner face of the north wall, surrounded by other carved stone panels. A monument to Gilbert de Greenlaw, decorated with a knight effigy but reused as a grave marker for the Forbes family in 1592, stands inside the church.

Directions: 1.4 miles (2.5 km) southeast of Inverurie. From the south end of Inverurie take the B993 (signposted Keithhall and Whiterashes) for 0.7 miles (1.15 km) until the main road takes a sharp bend to the left at a junction with a minor road that goes straight ahead. Take this minor road (signposted Kinkell church). After 600 m, where the road bends to the left, turn right into a narrow lane. Continue for 500 m. The church is on the right with space alongside the wall for parking. **Please do not block the lane to the farm.**



KINCARDINE O'NEIL OLD PARISH CHURCH

SMR Ref No: NO59NE0001 // NO 5920 9964 // AB34 5AZ

The former Parish Church of Kincardine O'Neil, dedicated to *St Mary* the Blessed Virgin, is said to have been built in the 1330s AD and was in use until the 1860s. It was burnt and rebuilt in 1733, restored in the 18th and 19th Centuries, and the ruin consolidated in the 20th Century and again in 2017. A church is thought to have occupied this site since the 5th Century AD when local saint, *St Erchard*, established a place of worship in the village following his ordination. The church was originally larger and at the east end was a hospital, whose foundations can still be seen today. The north and south walls are buttressed, the south containing a series of thin lancet windows set high in the wall. The north wall contains a fine 14th Century AD Gothic pointed recessed doorway, now blocked up. The west gable is topped by a bellcote added in the 17th Century.

Directions: 8.6 miles (13.8 km) west of Banchory, on the North Deeside Road (A93) in the centre of Kincardine O'Neil village. Travelling west on the A93, the church is on your left. Continue past the church for 140 m and turn left into The Spaldings; 30 m along this road is a car park on the right.



ST MARY'S CHURCH, COWIE

SMR Ref No: NO88NE0020 // NO 8843 8729 // AB39 3RH

The ruined St Mary's Church, also known as Cowie Chapel, stands on a cliff top overlooking Stonehaven Bay. Originally dedicated to *St Nechtan* (*St Nathalan*), it was re-dedicated to *St Mary of the Storms* in 1276 AD. It was built in the 13th Century AD, and was renovated and enlarged in the 16th Century. The east gable survives to roof height and includes three narrow lancet windows. The south wall, rebuilt in the 19th Century, contains a late medieval doorway. Although much of the north wall has been removed, an aumbry can still be seen. An arched vault at the west end built in 1842, now grass covered, was used as a mort house. The church went out of use in the 1560s.

Directions: 1.2 miles (2 km) northeast of Stonehaven. From the centre of Stonehaven take the B979 northwards. At the roundabout take the second exit, a "no through road" signed to the Golf Course. Continue for 380 m past the caravan park. On the right is a car park. The path alongside the road leads to the golf club access road, where there is a footpath to the right to the church. **Please note: do not park at the gold course.**



ST PALLADIUS'S CHAPEL, AUCHENBLAE

SMR Ref No: NO77NW0018 // NO 7261 7841 // AB30 1WQ

Dating from the late medieval period, St Palladius's Chapel is thought to have been built on the site of a cell built by the saint in the 5th Century AD. The oldest part of the church is said to date to 1244 AD, when a new church was dedicated on this site by Bishop David of St Andrews. The church was restored in the 16th and 18th Centuries, abandoned in 1828 when a new Parish Church was built alongside, and restored again in 2006. The east gable survives to roof height. On the inner face is a piscina and arched recess. Below the chapel is a large crypt traditionally said to have held the sacred relics of St Palladius. During building works in 1787, a Class II Pictish stone was found. Named as the "*Fordoun Stone*", it is now housed in the Parish Church.

Directions: In Auchenblae, 12 miles (19.3 km) south west of Stonehaven. From Stonehaven, travel south on the A90 for 7 miles (11.2 km), then turn right onto the B966 (signed for Auchenblae). Continue on the B966 for 2 miles (3.2 km), turn right on to The Waters for 0.8 miles (1.3 km) then turn left on to Kirkton Steading. The new church will be on your left; the old chapel stands in the churchyard. Parking is possible alongside.

