

Andrew PK Wright

Sir Ninian Comper: artistry in the design and furnishing of churches



Right: the rood figures at St Margaret of Scotland, Braemar, installed in 1921. The figures were sculpted by William D Gough and painted by HA Bernard Smith.

The note of a church should be, not that of novelty, but of eternity.
Of the Atmosphere of a Church (1947)¹

Abstract

This paper is a transcription of the annual lecture given in January 2021 on behalf of the Aberdeen City Heritage Trust. The text for the lecture was condensed from a conservation plan first published in March 2020 on the church of St Margaret of Scotland, Braemar, previously in the Aberdeen and Orkney Diocese of the Scottish Episcopal Church. Since 2013 the church has been in the care of a charitable trust, Historic Churches Scotland, which had commissioned the conservation plan. The paper focuses on the early works of Ninian Comper in Aberdeen, and on the direct influence of his family on the first commissions undertaken in the city. Other key works of the architect undertaken in the Northeast of Scotland are examined, concluding with the major project undertaken for St Andrew's Cathedral on Aberdeen's King Street, completed in the early 1940s.

Introduction



Above: Sir J Ninian Comper, around the time he was knighted in 1950, aged 86. © The University of Aberdeen, Special Collections

I am most grateful to the directors of the Aberdeen City Heritage Trust for having granted me the privilege of giving the Trust's annual lecture in January 2021 on a subject with which I have been involved for more than a quarter of a century. While there has been growing awareness of the current plight of too many of Sir Ninian Comper's buildings in his own home territory – principally from the curse of redundancy, and from the relentless deteriorating condition of their fabric – the focus will be on the artistry of the architect's work in designing and furnishing ecclesiastical buildings in a career of unusual longevity.

Comper would live for another ten years when the photograph (left) was taken, believed to be around the time that he was knighted in 1950 when he was aged 86. Born in Aberdeen in 1864 to the Scottish Episcopal clergyman, the Rev John Comper (1823-1903), he was given the same Christian name as his father, although he came to be known by his middle name. He signed his drawings 'JN Comper'. He certainly had his admirers, but his output as an architect tended to be side-lined as the twentieth century progressed, largely on account of his architectural nonconformity which was shaped by an unshakeable religious belief. His disdain for the organisations representing the interests of the architectural profession would not have helped a reputation which has been rescued from relative obscurity over the past three decades or so. Arguably, it is higher now than it has ever been, as interest in his work has continued to grow. His knighthood had been bestowed largely due to the efforts of John Betjeman.

The Rev John Comper: a lasting influence



Above: detail from a window commemorating the life of the Rev John Comper at St Mary's, Kirriemuir. Wild strawberries appear in the windows of the Comper glass studio after the death of Ninian's father.

Ninian revered his father and sought every opportunity to commemorate his spiritual life in his work. John Comper left Sussex in 1848 with a view to taking up holy orders in the Scottish Episcopal Church. As recorded in the window at the church of St Mary's in Kirriemuir, Angus, he took up the position of schoolmaster there. He was ordained in 1850 by the Bishop of Brechin, Alexander Penrose Forbes (1817-1875), who is also depicted in the same window. The hymnwriter and founder of the Cambridge Camden Society, John Mason Neale (1818-1866), was his examiner. Comper impressed Neale and the two men struck up a lasting friendship, with Neale invited to become Ninian's godfather. John Comper moved north to the Diocese of Moray and Ross to take up positions in Nairn, and Inverness in quick succession, but a difference of opinion with Bishop Robert Eden (1804-1886) saw him relocating to Stonehaven in 1854. During the time of his incumbency there, he became a staunch supporter of Bishop Forbes during the bitter Eucharistic Controversy of 1857-60. Forbes, a notable Puseyite, was placed on trial for heresy by his fellow bishops, an event that threatened to tear the Scottish Episcopal Church apart.

John Comper's next charge was St John's, Aberdeen, just off Union Street, to which he was appointed in 1861. A fine Tractarian church designed by the Elgin architect Thomas Mackenzie (1815-54) St John's had been completed only ten years earlier. However, it would be yet another short interlude in John Comper's early ministry: his missionary zeal was reserved for the poor of the city, and his desire was to serve those living in the slum tenements of medieval Aberdeen. A new mission church, St Margaret's in the Gallowgate, was built in 1870 for



Above: John Comper at prayer, from the window at St Margaret in the Gallowgate.

Above right: interior of St Margaret in the Gallowgate, with the Founder's Aisle to the right.

Below: an earlier window by the Comper glass studio of Dr John Mason Neale, installed originally at the convent at the Spital, and reassembled in the Founder's Aisle after the convent had closed.



which John Comper was appointed priest-in-charge. Designed by the Aberdeen architect, James Matthews (1820-1898), in its original form it was a plain church built to a low budget. Fr Comper's reputation grew as the leading exponent of Anglo-Catholicism in the far north, while his extensive contacts with prominent Anglo-Catholics south of the border would benefit Ninian directly during his formative years. The hallmarks of his mission were the recognition of the importance of the Scottish Liturgy, and his practice of ritualism in worship. Ninian's father is depicted at prayer, reciting the Scottish Liturgy, in the commemorative window installed at St Margaret's in the Gallowgate. He died in 1903, and it is often said that he died while dispensing strawberries to children in a public park in Aberdeen. The motif of wild strawberries appears in every work of painted glass produced thereafter by his son's studio.

Ninian's formative years

Ninian was packed off to school at Glenalmond in Perthshire in the firm expectation that he would follow his father and take up holy orders. However, the boy proved over-sensitive to the harsh regime of a Victorian boarding school and after suffering a nervous breakdown in 1880 at the age of sixteen, his parents reacted swiftly by returning him into their care. Ninian expressed an interest in drawing. After enrolling for lessons in art in Aberdeen, he honed his skills at the Ruskin School of Art, Oxford, declaring that he had an interest in becoming a church decorator. A family friend introduced him to the leading stained glass artist and church furnisher, CE Kempe (1837-1907), with whom he spent several months while continuing his studies at South Kensington. He would claim later, somewhat ungraciously, that he learned nothing from Kempe.

A visit to St Michael's Camden, shortly after he had arrived in London, left an indelible impression on the youngster. Designed by Bodley & Garner the church was then still under construction and, following that visit, he harboured the notion of becoming an architect, a career prospect that would be encouraged by his parents once they overcame their disappointment. Through a friend of the Compers, in 1883 Ninian was introduced to GF Bodley (1827-1907), to

whom he was articled for four years. Bodley & Garner were the most influential London practice working on ecclesiastical buildings at the time. Apprenticeships were highly sought after: Robert Lorimer (1864-1929) had to wait a full year before he would be accepted. To his pupils, Bodley cut the figure of a benign patriarch, and his influence on the young architect was immense. In 1865 Bodley was appointed by Bishop Forbes to design St Salvador's Church, Dundee, with the decoration of the nave and chancel undertaken during the 1870s. The church is a fine example of Bodley's highly decorative style, with a tall, painted reredos set above the altar, of a type of which Comper would be so dismissive in later years. CR Ashbee (1863-1942), another of Bodley's pupils at the time, provided this memorable pen-picture of his fellow-pupil:

..... Comper is so good & so very ecclesiastical. His only interest is saints, - & a couple of clergymen, his speciality drawing angels. If for all that he could only get himself to see other people's positions or recognise even that they had any how much more substantial his angels would be. But that is neither here nor there, I want to know him - how does one get round these churchpeople of the narrow type?²

There followed Ninian's discovery of the sensational new church building at Kennington Park. Begun in 1874, St Agnes's moved forward the debate considerably regarding the design of churches, both architecturally, and liturgically. It was Gilbert Scott the younger's (1839-1897) first church, designed before he was accepted into the Catholic Church. Sadly, the church is now demolished. Fr Anthony Symondson, Comper's biographer, said of Scott:

No architect since Pugin had a more assured understanding of the liturgical function of Gothic church furniture than Scott, until the arrival of Comper fifteen years later. In comparison with Scott, Bodley and Garner seem graceful, but dilettantish.³

Later, Comper would benefit from his association with the clergy at St Agnes's, but would be critical of the design of Scott's church.

Appreciation of Comper's early work demands an understanding of Anglo-Catholic ritualism, and its impact on the liturgiology of the late Victorian church. His was the inheritance of a tradition running from AWN Pugin (1812-1852) through Bodley, in which the architect sought control of every single aspect of church design and furnishing, including clerical vestments. Before he left Bodley's office, Ninian set up a close association with the Sisters of Bethany at Camberwell, drawing full-size embroidery patterns, insisting on the highest standards of work from them. While in Bodley's office he met his future partner, William Bucknall (1851-1944), whose sister, Grace, Ninian would marry in 1890.

St Margaret in the Gallowgate, Aberdeen

The practice of Bucknall & Comper was set up in London in 1888. The prospect of carrying out major work at Ninian's father's church in the Gallowgate had been an incentive in forming the partnership. Preliminary designs for the church had been circulating already, and effectively it became their first commission. Of the ambitious schemes that were prepared, all that was executed is the vaulted narthex to the church, added onto the west end of the nave. It is of far superior construction to the remainder of the plain church and incorporates a chapel dedicated to St Nicholas. The chapel is separated from the narthex by an elaborate wrought iron screen, inspired by examples of *reja* screens in the cathedrals of Northern Spain. Ninian would have been introduced to them while



Above: St Nicholas Chapel, St Margaret in the Gallowgate.

Above right: detail of Comper's painted glass to the plain lancet window illuminating the altar table.



touring with his parents, a journey that was arranged soon after the meltdown at school, coinciding with when their son was beginning to stumble onto his own two feet in London. The painted reredos at the altar chapel is, however, not part of the original composition. It was salvaged from the altar of Comper's conventual church at the Spital.

To the celebrant's immediate right is a gem of a 'painted window', to use Comper's term for his own decorative window glass. It shows the influence of the treasures of Northern European art he discovered during his regular visits to the National Gallery in London at the time of his pupillage to Bodley & Garner. The Netherlandish School of Painters, and Hans Memlinc (c1433-1494) in particular, had a lasting influence on his work, as did English medieval glass. A visit to St Laurence at Nuremberg, so praised by Kempe, would follow later when he undertook a tour of the Rhineland, in 1896.

Right: the Founder's Aisle, St Margaret in the Gallowgate, viewed from the south.



The St Nicholas Chapel extension was completed in 1889. Erected in commemoration of both his parents, the Chapel of the Holy Name - or the Founder's Aisle - was completed nineteen years later, in 1908. The medieval context for the setting of the mission church disappeared when it was cleared

of the slums, and the inevitable comprehensive redevelopment that followed overcame the civic embarrassment they caused. The use of pantiles, and the crowsteps on the porch, features still seen in vernacular buildings in Old Aberdeen, is quite purposeful: it is a nod to the older traditions of building in the city. The plain intersecting geometry of the window tracery reflects Comper's in-depth knowledge of the many examples to be found in the city's fine array of medieval churches.

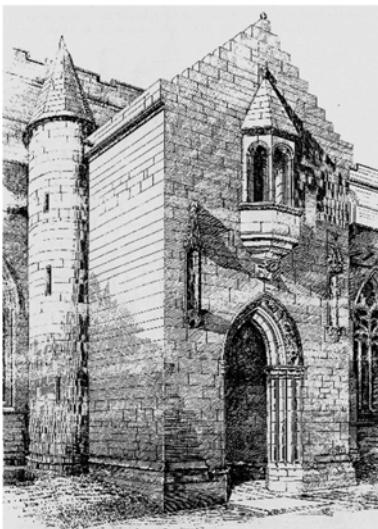


Above: the Chapel of the Holy Name, or the Founder's Aisle.

The chapel is dedicated to St Margaret of Scotland, Malcolm Canmore's queen. Her armorial bearing, of the cross flory and five martlets, adorns the painted panelled ceiling. The lavishly decorated screen is dedicated to Ninian's mother. It is beyond the screen that the painted window of his father at prayer is to be found, replicating the figure in the window already installed at Kirriemuir, but with the pattern reversed. The studied elegance of the mouldings - of the arches dying into column shafts which are devoid of carved or moulded capitals - is evident in the stonework of the chapel. It adds a level of sophistication to what would be, otherwise, plain tracery. Scott had used the same architectural detail to good effect at Kennington Park. Today, it might be said that there is the sense of a family reunion in the aisle: the window of the robed John Mason Neale by Comper's glass studio has been rescued by the present incumbent from the conventual buildings at the Spital, reassembled in one of the windows of south wall (page 3).

Convent of the Sisters of St Margaret, Spital, Aberdeen

Dr Neale founded the Anglican Sisters of the Community of St Margaret at East Grinstead in 1854. By 1862 the first of the sisters had arrived in Aberdeen to stay with the Comper family. Within the space of two years a convent was established in the city, with John Comper appointed its chaplain. Ninian's sister, Mary Ellen, would enrol in the sisterhood. Ninian's second project in the city of his birth was to design the new convent for the order. Undertaken between 1891 and 1892, and sited on elevated ground above the Spital, it was another key early project in the growing portfolio of the young practice.



Above: interior of the convent chapel. The gap in the wall above the painted reredos is where the upper panel had been positioned (reproduced under licence from HES Collections) © HES

Top left: sketch by MacGibbon & Ross of the Church of the Holy Rude, Stirling.

Middle left: the soaring angled buttresses of the east end of the conventual chapel.

Left: sketch by MacGibbon & Ross of the south porch of St Michael's, Linlithgow.

The inspiration for the apsidal end of the chapel is the Church of the Holy Rude, Stirling, with the inclination towards verticality carried through with conviction to the interior of the chapel. As the first of MacGibbon & Ross's three-volume compendium of Scotland's medieval church architecture was not published until 1896, the young architect's extensive knowledge of historical source

material could only have been based on the time-honoured arrangement of visiting sites first-hand, sketching the buildings that captivated him.

Once more, Ninian's ambitions were thwarted when only one portion of a more ambitious scheme was built. If the large expanse of wall above the altar looks unresolved, this is because it had once housed the upper panel of a tall reredos, in the manner of Bodley. This is the same panel as that removed to the chapel in the Gallowgate. Much of the decorative surface treatment of the interior and vaulting, where it occurs, is also Bodleian. Soaring towards the vaulted ribs of the chancel, the elaborate carved stone canopy to the sacrament house, a feature of medieval churches of the Northeast, can only be marvelled at. The oriel window within the chapel has been inspired by the porch at St Michael's, Linlithgow. In praising the building the Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society commented that '*Comper built his father's convictions in stone*'⁴.

Sadly, awaiting new secular uses, and with the fabric deteriorating, the convent chapel remains a building at risk.

All Saints, Whiterashes



Above: the east 'painted window' at Whiterashes.

Above right: All Saints, Whiterashes, formerly a village school erected in 1858.



This small rural church could so easily be missed while travelling on the road from Aberdeen to Banff, but not to stop would be a mistake. All Saints, Whiterashes, began life as a village school designed by James Matthews in 1858. Dedicated as a chapel in 1885, Bucknall & Comper were commissioned by the Irvines of Drum and Straloch to transform the building. Extensive remodelling took place in the late 1890s and new windows continued to be added until after the Great War. The painted glass throughout the church, all of it from the Comper studio, is of a quality which is consistent in its excellence. The pattern of the bellcote added to the gable is recognisable in the later church at Kirriemuir.

The focus of the diminutive chancel is the gilded reredos panel in bas relief at the altar. It is exquisite in its detail and execution. Here, of course, were to be found the saints to which CR Ashbee had referred so pointedly. But it is important to stress that in all Comper's work the role of the church decorator was confined to supplying the object, or work of art, strictly in accordance with



Above: the chancel of All Saints, Whiterashes, with the gilt reredos panel of 1898.

the architect's drawings and specifications, and in this at least he followed the example set by Bodley. It marked a clear departure from the established role of the ecclesiastical furnishers in late Victorian churches and may summarise, even, why Comper came to express his dislike of Kempe's work.

All Saints, Whiterashes, is in regular use as a place of worship.

St Margaret of Scotland, Braemar

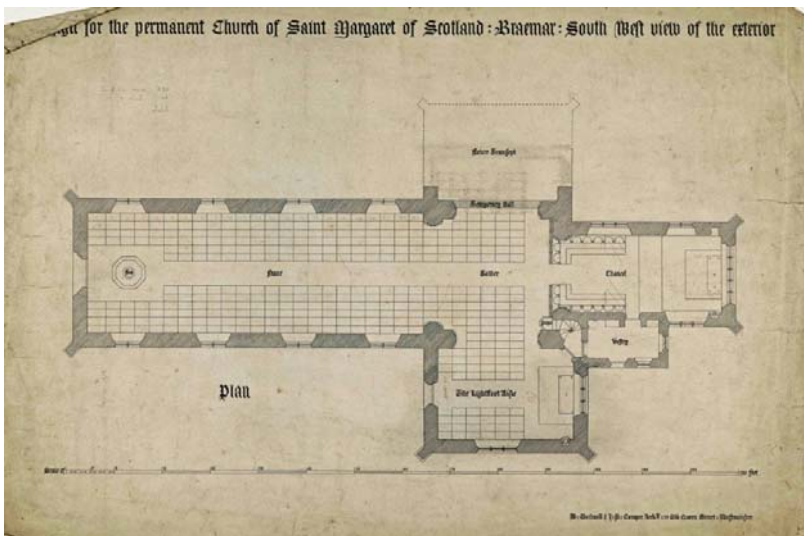
The village of Braemar, although some considerable distance from the railhead at Ballater, was swamped with visitors at the height of the summer season largely due to the 'Balmoral Effect'. Correspondingly, there were many high-ranking Anglicans seeking a place of worship, and so, to avoid embarrassment, the Scottish Episcopal Church provided a wooden mission chapel for them. Built in the space of just two months for the 1880 season, the charming, idiosyncratic design was by the Aberdeen architect Arthur Clyde (1852-1923). Set in its rather curious arboretum garden enclosed by rustic fencing, the chapel became extremely popular, having to be extended several times. In a winter storm of extreme violence in 1893, the wooden chapel was shunted sideways off its base, and while additions continued to be made its days were numbered.



Right: the wooden mission chapel at Braemar, erected in 1880 by the Scottish Episcopal Church. (reproduced under licence from HES Collections) © HES

John Comper would spend holidays in Braemar to escape the darkness of the Victorian slums of the Gallowgate, during which he would preach at the mission chapel. On one of these occasions, while walking together on the banks of the Dee, Ninian broke the news to his father that he had given up all hope of following him into the priesthood. A regular worshipper at the chapel and visitor to Braemar was the former physician, Dr John Wickham Legg (1843-1921), who had also been at one stage Prince Leopold's tutor. A well-known figure in the circles of the Royal Court, in later life he turned his back on his vocation due to failing health, concentrating on his passion for studying the liturgy. Having set up the St Paul's Ecclesiology Society in 1879, he came to be recognised as the leading liturgiologist in the country. Wickham Legg would become a key figure in promoting the work of Ninian Comper, to whom the opportunity would fall to design a new permanent church at Braemar.

Right: the plan of the proposed new church of St Margaret of Scotland, Braemar. Presentation drawing (1895) by Bucknall and Comper (reproduced under licence from RIBA Drawings) © RIBA



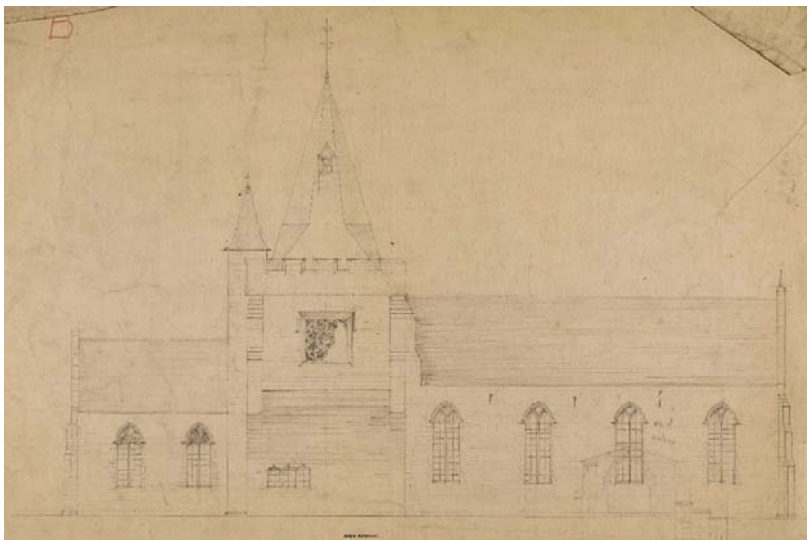
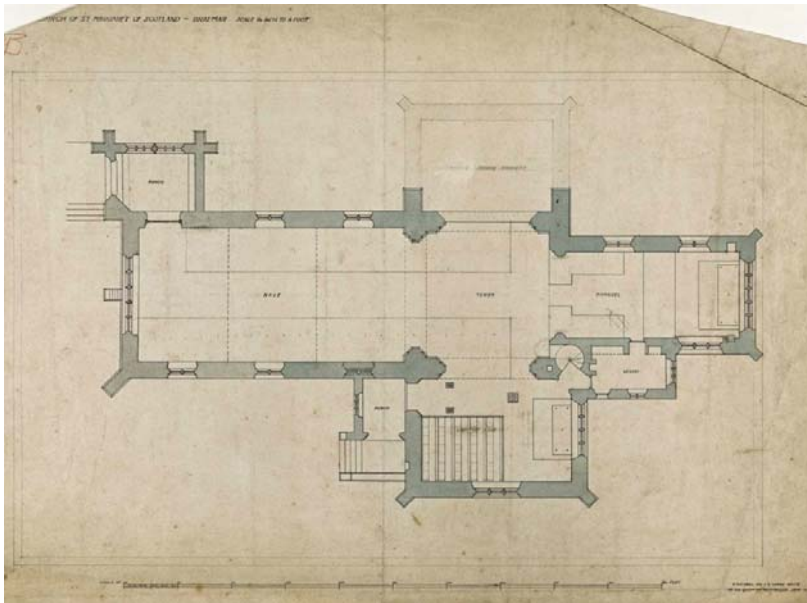
Ninian had been making a name for himself in London during a spirited debate being conducted among architects and liturgiologists on the proper form that a Christian altar should take. In the constant quest for authenticity, he had immersed himself in the reading rooms of the British Museum, studying texts

on medieval altars. He wrote a paper on the subject, but it was not until he delivered a lecture in 1893 to the Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society that he and Wickham Legg encountered one another for the first time. The design prepared in 1895 for the new church of St Margaret of Scotland embodies the liturgical principles to which both men subscribed. At both altars, a reredos is dispensed with, and four riddell posts are shown on the plan for the altar hangings. The altars are illuminated by generous windows directly above each altar, and from the side also. Views towards the altars are unobstructed from within any part of the church. In the original design, the entry into the church was through the west gable, on axis with the altar. Although the north aisle was never built, from the evidence of the architect's drawings clearly one had always been intended for the time that the church had been building.

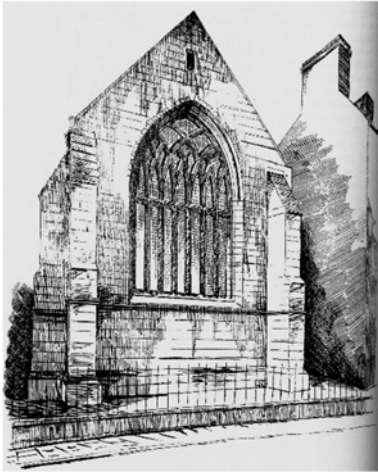
Right: 1903 plan prepared by Bucknall & Comper was prepared to show options for the locations of a west porch, with this arrangement adopted. In other respects, this plan shows the church as built, with the proposed north aisle shown in outline on plan.

Lower right: pencil drawing of the north elevation (1895) shows proposals for features which were not executed in the final plan: a broached wooden spire clad in slates, and a lean-to structure at the north aisle which may have been intended only as a temporary solution.

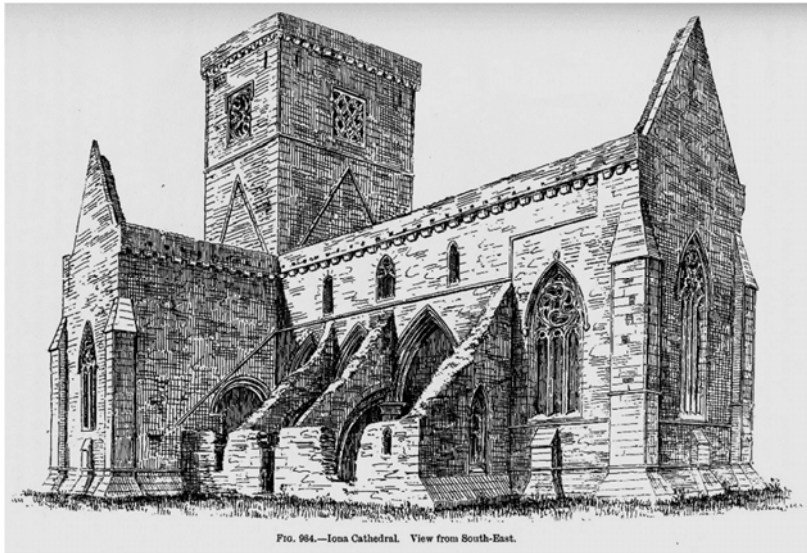
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Due to uncertainties over funding, the church was built in several phases with the Lightfoot Aisle the first part to be completed, in 1899. It doubled up as a winter chapel when the numbers of the congregation were reduced, but in practice the church would often be closed for the duration of the winter. The



Above and above right: sources of inspiration for the design of St Margaret's. Shown above is the east window of the Greyfriars' Church, Aberdeen, and the tower of Iona Abbey. Both images from MacGibbon & Ross's *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland*.



nave of the present church is foreshortened by one bay from the 1895 proposals, as shown in the plan of 1903, prepared to illustrate the proposed entrance porch at the northwest of the building. There must have been a firm intention to add the north aisle even at this late stage, as the drawing is noted 'proposed future transept'. It was never built, and the church is arguably much the poorer for it.

The section from 1895, looking south towards the Lightfoot Aisle, confirms how ambitious those original plans were. The tower was to have had a broached wooden steeple, similar to Alfriston in Sussex (as the architect once explained). It was never executed, to his eternal regret. The rood screen at the nave crossing was to have had a magnificent organ case at its head. The sense of opulence in the furnishings continued into the design of the steepled font cover, winched from an elaborate bracket at the west gable window. The gentle approach on the level towards the altar accords with the liturgical principles underpinning the design.

Historical sources are not difficult to identify: the tower is modelled closely on Iona Abbey, although reduced in its height to accommodate the steeple. Today,

Right: St Margaret's from the northeast, one of the best vantage points from which to appreciate Comper's compositional skill in the design of the church.





Above right: interior of the church in 1905 (reproduced with the permission of Historic Churches Scotland).

Right: picture postcard showing the interior of the church with the rood screen added (1911), but prior to the installation of the rood figures in 1921 (author's collection).



without the spire, this gives the church an abbatial appearance. The majestic east window is a close replica of that at the Greyfriars Kirk in Aberdeen, known to Ninian in his youth. It was demolished in the 1890s to make way for Marischal College. As fine as any of his windows, it gave the perfect opportunity to show off the artistry of his painted glass.

Comper ignored the cold grey granite from the local moors offered to him by the Laird of Invercauld, choosing instead granite of a warmer, pinkish, colour for the external walls. Stone slates were salvaged from the old Mar Lodge. While there are excellent views to be enjoyed of the church from within the village, curiously, it is from when standing in the playground of the local primary school that the artistry of the composition is best appreciated.

An early photograph of the church appeared in the first guidebook of 1905, written by Wickham Legg. Apart from the extent to which the plastered surfaces are already saturated from water penetration – in itself, truly shocking knowing as we do now the never-ending problems encountered with the fabric of the church – one of the attributes of the interior is its overriding monochromatic

appearance. At Braemar there are no overbearing, heavily varnished roof timbers in Comper's refined programme for the church interior: the truss chords, king posts, and boarded vault of the nave are a warm tone of light grey, leading the eye towards the spectacle of colour and pattern of the window and textiles at the east end. As the naked light bulbs remind us, as a summer church the spaces are brought to life primarily from the play of natural light from the windows of the nave and chancel. Painted glass is confined to the east window and to the windows of the south wall, providing the attractive effect of dappled coloured light invading the interior. The rood screen was added in 1911, the painted rood figures later still, in 1921. The detailing of the rood screen is exquisite; sections are minimal, to reduce its visual impact when looking towards the altar. When looking in this direction the artistry of the painted glass of the east window can be appreciated, the measured transparency of which is quite unlike the density of colouring and intense decoration found in windows by, say, an artist of the calibre of Burne-Jones.



Above: the west window of 1904.

Right: St Perpetua's heifer in the chancel window dedicated to the wife of the liturgiologist John Wickham Legg.



Apart from discovering the wild strawberries, there are some joyous moments to be found in the painted glass. The docile heifer of the martyred saint, St Perpetua, in the chancel window dedicated to the wife of John Wickham Legg, provides a highlight of colour and delicate line drawing which is unexpected. The inspired quality of the windows is not, however, confined just to the painted glass: the large west window, the last to be installed in the building, is precise in the detailing of the stonework at the intersection of the window tracery, and in the harmonious patterns set up by the diagonal lozenges of clear glass with the external iron ferramenta. A subtle change occurred, even during the period of building the church – the clear windows of the Lightfoot Aisle are tinged green, whereas those of the nave and chancel are colourless, for which Comper had sourced super-clear glass. He preferred this in his later churches.

It is salutary to pause, and think, that this church was paid for entirely by philanthropy, with the diocese making no further financial contribution beyond the cost of erecting the mission chapel which the permanent stone church replaced. The rood screen was dedicated to the memory of Eliza Scholfield, one of three unmarried sisters who spent every summer in Braemar and gave



Above and right: photographs taken in 2001 showing altar hangings designed by Comper still in position.

Middle below: the original altar frontal embroidered by the Sisters of Bethany, showing the intensity of the colours of the textiles still preserved below the fringe (above right).

Bottom: detail of the altar frontal to the Lightfoot Aisle.



limitless financial support to the church. Their fortune had been inherited from a cherished uncle in Liverpool, amassed from years of trading with the East Indies.

The main altar has gilt riddell posts, emblazoned with the lion rampant and with angels holding tapers; the treatment of the altar to the Lightfoot Aisle is plainer. Photographs taken in 2001, shortly after the church had been abandoned as a place of worship, reveal that the very same altar cloth was in use as that appearing in the 1905 guidebook. Originally darker cloth was hung to either side of the altar which gave it greater prominence. Over the years the colours of the textiles faded badly, and it was only when the fringe was lifted that the beauty and intensity of the original colours was revealed. The skill of the embroiderers of the Sisters of Bethany is apparent still in the fabric surviving from the Lightfoot Aisle. Under Comper's guidance it is believed that they were the only embroiderers in Northern Europe capable of reviving the 'or nué' style of ecclesiastical embroidery, which has the meaning of 'blended gold'. Unfortunately, when the diocese removed the main altar cloth from the church by for safekeeping, the fabric disintegrated.

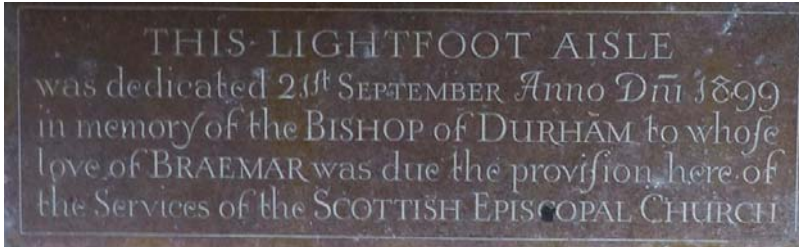
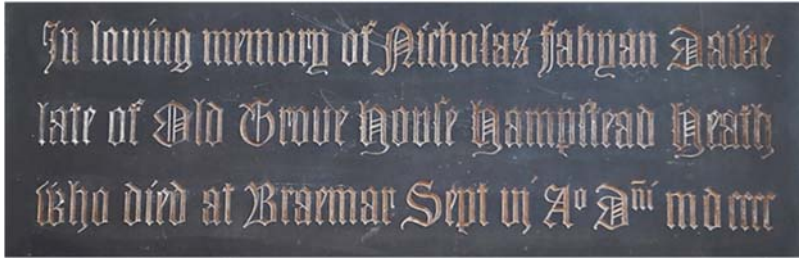
Mention had been made of the architect's control of every detail within the church. Contemporary with when the church was built, an attenuated form of Gothic script was adopted for the inscription on the architect's presentation plan drawing (see page 10); within the church it also appears in a wall memorial installed at the nave, and in the carved inscription dedicated to Eliza Scholfield on the lower panels of the oak rood screen. By the early 1930s, when commemorative panels were designed for the altar and the Lightfoot Aisle, this had changed to a more modern style of calligraphy, but of a comparable elegance in the decorative way in which each of the letters is defined. The same obsessive control of detail extended to the oak kneeling stools, and even to the wavy coat-hook rails within the entrance porches. All were manufactured by reputable ecclesiastical furnishers, sculptors, and craftsmen.

But what of the future of the church? It has been passed by the diocese to the diligent care of Historic Churches Scotland, and through the auspices of the St



Above: wavy coathook rails in the entrance porches.

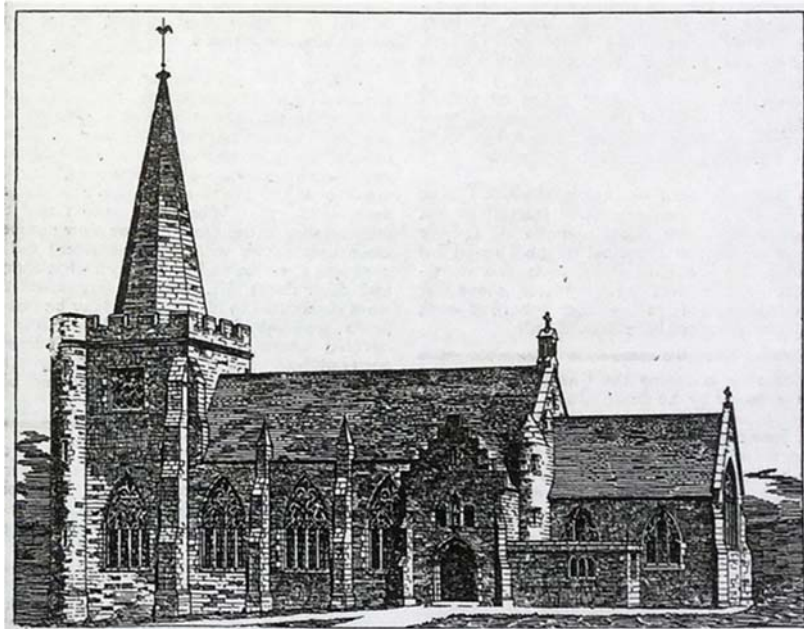
Above right: changing styles in calligraphy, from 1904 (upper panel) and from thirty years later (lower panel).



Margaret's Trust the building is presently used for musical performances and exhibitions of an extremely high standard. Plans are afoot, but they are heavily dependent upon securing public funding. In the meantime, the church continues to deteriorate in the harsh climate of Braemar.

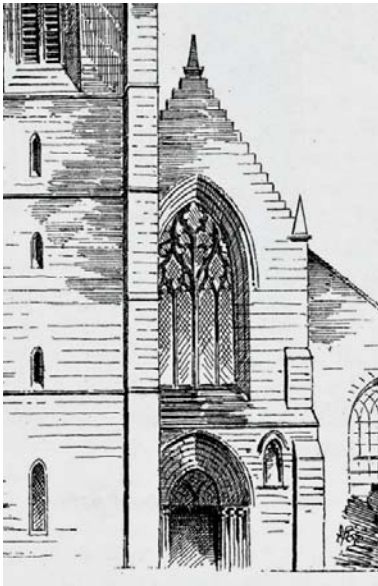
It is another of Comper's buildings at risk.

St Mary's, Kirriemuir



Above: sketch of the proposal for the new church of St Mary, Kirriemuir, as it appeared in *The Scottish Standard Bearer* (August 1903).

As St Margaret's was nearing completion in 1904, the partnership with William Bucknall was in the process of being dissolved. This coincided with the time that the design for a new church of St Mary's at Kirriemuir was being developed. The previous church, on a more central site in the town, had only recently burned down. For the architect, there was, of course, a deep resonance because of his father's early ministry at Kirriemuir. The tower at Iona exerts again a strong



Above: sources for inspiration for the design of St Mary's. Brechin Cathedral, illustrated by MacGibbon & Ross.

Above right: St Mary's from the southeast.

Right: the nave of St Mary's, looking east towards the chancel. The north aisle is to the left with its altar and the window dedicated to the life of the Rev John Comper at the east end of the aisle.



influence. So soon as it was realised that the steeple was not to be built, Comper increased the height of the tower to emphasise its presence at the west end of the nave.

The form of the buttresses, with the pinnacles at their head, should be noted: Brechin Cathedral was likely to have been a further source of inspiration. Illustrations on the previous page by MacGibbon & Ross show the nave before it was altered in 1902, by John Honeyman. Comper described his own nave windows as 'sharply pointed', and the flamboyant tracery appears to have been based on the west window at the cathedral. Moreover, the prominent circular stair towers within the composition could well have been inspired by the famous Irish round tower of around 1100.

Comper went to great lengths to ensure that the stone colour matched the distinctive red sandstone of the locality; as the performance of the local stone could not be relied upon, he turned to the quarries at Dumfries. With raising the height of the tower, square window openings were introduced on all four sides above the height of the roof ridge to match more closely the Iona tower, a feature left out of the original design, and from the church at Braemar. Without its steeple, the silhouette of the embattled parapet was made more interesting. The inspiration for the porch was again St Michael's, Linlithgow.

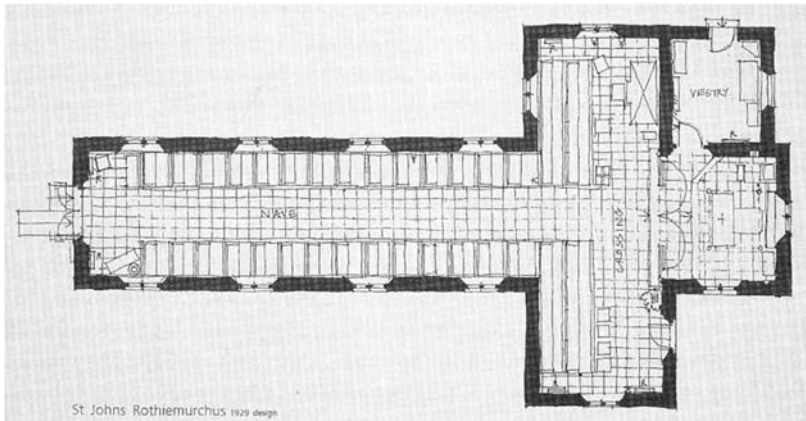
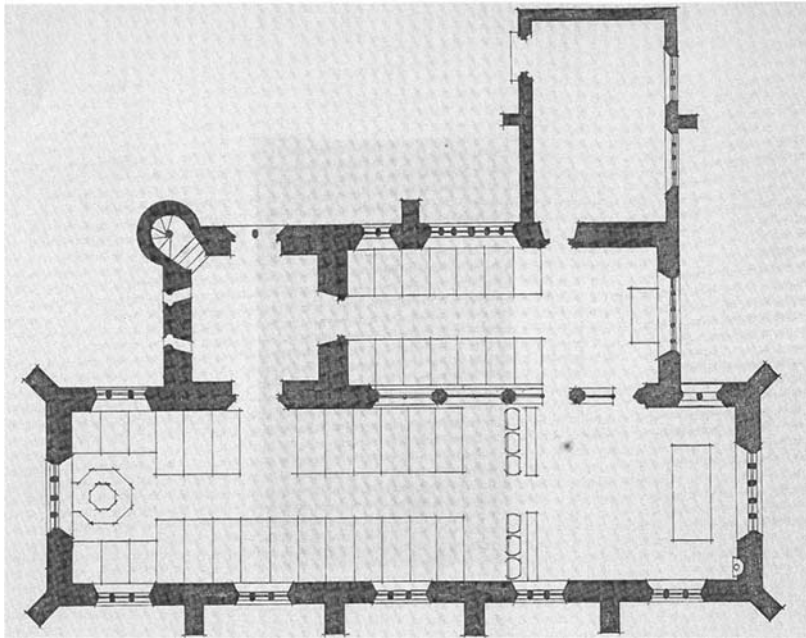
Unlike Braemar, a rood screen was never installed although integral to the original design, preserving the clear view towards the altar. There are no transepts, and the need for a side chapel is satisfied through the addition of a north aisle which has a small altar placed at the east end. It acts as a shrine to the memory of John Comper. The north wall is windowless, and the aisle is illuminated by borrowed light from the windows of the south wall of the nave, filtered through the openings of the nave arcade. There is a 1929 window by Comper below the tower, gifted by JM Barrie, whose family worshipped here. St Mary's is a church cherished by its congregation and by those in the wider community, and a scheme of extensive repair work has been undertaken recently.

St John the Baptist, Rothiemurchus



Above: the rural church of St John the Baptist, Rothiemurchus, from the northwest, within its woodland setting.

To the other side of the Cairngorms from the Angus Glens, and from Braemar, on the road leading to the ski slopes is the small rural church of St John the Baptist, Rothiemurchus. The first church design was commissioned of Comper in 1911 by John Peter Grant of Rothiemurchus. A foundation stone was laid in 1913, but that was all. After the laird's death in 1927, the need for a church became apparent to serve local Episcopalians and the growing number of summer visitors to the area. The start was inauspicious, with the budget set at only £2,850. Knowing that the architect was then heavily engaged in designing the lavish new cathedral in Aberdeen, the Bishop of Moray taunted Comper with his reputation: *I know that you do not much like building an inexpensive church.....*⁵



Above right, and right: plans for the abortive design for the 1911 church (upper) and 1929 church (lower), carried out to a limited budget. Both drawings reproduced courtesy of LDN Architects.

The earlier design of 1911 was, in most respects, unremarkable. The winter chapel is approached directly from below the tower, which gives access to the nave also. The plan shows evidence of Comper's radical views on the place of the altar in Christian worship – it is pulled clear of the east gable, so that the celebrant faces the congregation. This re-conceptualisation of the altar followed visits to sacred sites around the Mediterranean in the years after 1905 and promoted the architect's fascination with the Christian basilican form. The deceptive simplicity of the 1929 plan, in the form of a latin cross consisting of



Above: interior of St John the Baptist, Rothiemurchus, with its exaggerated perspective towards the baldachino of red damask cloth at the final bay of the plan, at the east end.

repeating squares, provides little hint of what awaits when the building is entered.

Comper seemed unperturbed, initially at least, by the bishop's exhortation not to exceed the tight budget. In meeting the brief, Comper's overriding aim was, quoting his own words, to *.....get dignity coupled with the greatest simplicity*⁶. This he achieved by specifying cheap, modern materials such as brick and concrete, which could be concealed by applying the traditional finish of harling externally, and by plastering surfaces internally. The mastery of the design lies in the manipulation of the forms to accentuate the apparent length of the church. Comper succeeded by exaggerating the vertical height of the nave with the elegant plain white groined vaulting, and by providing an uncommonly wide central aisle. Thus, the sense of perspective towards the vivid damask red cloth of the tent of the 'baldachin', as Comper referred to it, is enhanced. The architectural language is varied, but that for the pews is restrained classicism. No more than two parishioners could sit alongside one another on each pew, and if they were to sit in comfort they needed to be slim. There is only clear

glass, as the architect wished to create an awareness of the charming woodland setting from within the church.

Perhaps, because of the building's relatively small size, and its remoteness, the architect's achievement at Rothiemurchus has tended to be overlooked. But what is being played out here, with conviction, is an architectural programme that embraced the spirit of austerity of the interwar years and which would find full expression in the new church of St Philip and St James, Cosham, near Portsmouth. Completed in 1937, that church would be acknowledged as having one of the finest of Comper's late church interiors.

The church of St John the Baptist continues in use as a place of worship and has suffered relatively few changes to its appearance.

The concept of beauty



Above and above right: gilded reredos panels for All Saints', Whiterashes (1898, left), and the panel intended for St Margaret in the Gallowgate (1936, right) on display at St John's Church, Aberdeen.



The reredos panel at Whiterashes from the late 1890s will be recalled from earlier in the paper. Comper designed a 1936 version of a fine gilded reredos panel for his father's own church at the Gallowgate, but it found its way to St John's instead. Both panels show the extent to which Comper's art had veered from scholarly medieval sources towards classicism in the intervening years. The inspiration for the later work were the bas reliefs of the Florentine sculptors of the Italian Renaissance.

Looking at the centre of the panel in greater detail, it raises the question of what constitutes beauty in Comper's art. The aspiration of achieving lasting beauty lay at the heart of everything the architect created. However, his definition of the concept of beauty was never primarily an aesthetic one and, in his writings, it is perceived as one of the eternal values of the Christian faith, reflecting the image of Christ⁷.

The Bishop Seabury Memorial: St Andrew's Cathedral, Aberdeen

And so, to return to Comper's Aberdeen. The great new cathedral of St Andrew promised to be the architect's most important commission, by far, but it also proved his greatest missed opportunity. Given the depressed state of the global

economy at the time when it was conceived in the late 1920s, had work commenced it would have suffered a similar fate, no doubt, to Lutyens's Metropolitan Cathedral in Liverpool which never rose above its crypt. The new cathedral would commemorate the role of the Scottish Episcopal bishops in consecrating Bishop Samuel Seabury in Aberdeen, in 1784, thereby launching the Protestant Episcopal Church across North America. This was at a time when Episcopalianism in Scotland remained a persecuted religion.

Could it be considered a mercy, even, that the new cathedral was never built? It is said sometimes of an exact contemporary, the English composer Frederick Delius (1862-1934) that whenever he attempted a large scale composition, his musicality suffered as a direct consequence, and the same might apply to this design of Comper's on a grandiose scale. Although the new cathedral was to have incorporated the architect's thoughts on radical liturgical planning, the exterior looked somewhat overwrought and, for its time, atavistic in the assembly of its many parts. With the Wall Street Crash determining that the new cathedral would be stillborn, American interest was resurrected in the mid-1930s when it was channelled towards the reordering of the existing cathedral. Designed by Archibald Simpson (1790-1847) when he returned to Aberdeen in 1816, having completed his training in London, it is competently Gothick, in the style of Thomas Rickman (1776-1841). The rather nondescript street porch was added by Robert Lorimer in 1911 (cathedral status followed shortly afterwards, in 1914). Lorimer had already removed Simpson's galleries from the interior, adding a screen. GE Street (1824-81) added a chancel in 1880 with an apsidal end, with associated furnishings.

Right: the interior of St Andrew's Episcopal Cathedral, Aberdeen





Above: ribbed vaulting to the north aisle, the decorative plaster castings at each bay representing eight American states of the Union.

Simpson, Street, Lorimer - all architects of the first rank. Comper had been harshly critical of the nineteenth century 'cathedral restorers' and yet, given a reasonable budget with which to work, he cast aside the principles of William Morris's SPAB and trampled all over the work of his predecessors. He imbued the reordering of the interior with work carried out on a noticeably higher artistic plain, which is also superior in terms of its craftsmanship. The overall tonal treatment applied to the walls and roof of the interior, as a foil to the decorative features, recalls Braemar, and Rothiemurchus.

Betjeman was unqualified in his praise by the time the work had been completed in 1941. He wrote seven years later:

You push open the door, and your heart gives a leap - there stretching away, as in an old Dutch oil-painting, is Comper's superb renovation of the interior⁸

If the 1648 painting is studied of the Grote Kerke, Harlem, by Pieter Jansz Saenredam (1597-1665) in the collection of the National Galleries of Scotland, there is a clear link to Comper's decorative treatment of the plastered vaults of the aisles. At the north aisle each of the painted plaster casts represents an American state that made up the Union at that time, conveniently 48 of them in number. Represented above the south aisle are the armorial bearings of the leading Episcopalians of the Northeast, families that would have suffered from religious persecution, or because of their suspected Jacobite leanings.



Above and right: the gilded ciborium above the main altar set against the classically inspired painted glass of the east window.



The treatment of the chancel shows Comper at his most sumptuous. The surrounding walls of the chancel are kept relatively plain so that the focus remains on the ciborium, set against the backdrop of classically inspired painted glass of the east window which is predominantly blue in colour. Liturgically, and architecturally, this reflects his views on the centralised altar, and the full extent of the architect's shift from Northern European sources to the inspiration he gained in later life from Sicily, North Africa, and the islands of the Aegean. Reflected here are the contrasts he witnessed between the white-washed buildings and the vibrant blues of the sea and sky. Comper claimed that the columns were water-gilded, burnished with an agate stone.

St Andrew's Cathedral is departed on a more sombre note – early in 2021 the building was declared by the diocese redundant for the purposes of worship. It is yet another of Comper's buildings at risk in the Northeast of Scotland.

Historiography

If the reader's appetite has been whetted by this article, or by the original talk, Fr Anthony Symondson's publications are highly recommended. He is the leading authority on Comper's work, as mentioned before. The leaflet prepared for the 1988 exhibition of the architect's work at the RIBA is an excellent publication⁹, and it provides a good, and well-balanced, introduction to his life and work. On the front cover of the biography by Symondson and Bucknall, published in 2006¹⁰, is St Mary's, Wellingborough, for which Comper was appointed around the time that Braemar was nearing completion. It is widely regarded as the architect's masterpiece. Recommending the book comes, however, with a health warning – other than in the helpful gazetteer prepared by Stephen Bucknall, the fine churches at Braemar, Kirriemuir and Rothiemurchus are substantially missing from the text. This is hard to explain as they are among relatively few examples of new churches for which the architect was responsible both for their design and of the programme of ecclesiastical furnishings. They have also survived in a substantially unaltered state with high levels of authenticity. Of interest too is the unpublished dissertation by Francis B Tocher on Comper's work in the Northeast of Scotland (*The Scottish Episcopal Churches in the Aberdeen Diocese by Sir John Ninian Comper*, Scott Sutherland School of Architecture, c1978) if only for recording the principal sites at that time.

Comper's surviving work in Scotland deserves significantly wider recognition, especially at a time when such a high proportion of his buildings in the Northeast of Scotland are classified as being at risk.

Author

Andrew Wright is a former diocesan architect of the Diocese of Moray, Ross and Caithness, and before he retired in 2020 he was accredited as a conservation architect with membership of the Ecclesiastical Architects and Surveyors Association. He served on the Church of Scotland Committee on Artistic Matters and since the inception of the Scottish Redundant Churches Trust (now Historic Churches Scotland) in 1996 he has acted in the role of an Honorary Architectural

Adviser. As a former partner of Law and Dunbar-Nasmith, based in Forres, Moray, he was responsible for the design of new churches at Knockando in Moray, and Emmanuel Church, Bridlington, in the East Riding of Yorkshire. A member of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, in 2001 he set up his own consultancy, focusing on research and writing for the preparation of conservation plans and providing advocacy for the historic environment. A Past President of the RIAS, Andrew Wright has represented the architectural profession at different levels and has served on several government advisory bodies. A Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, he is presently a trustee of the Historic Scotland Foundation. In 2001 he was awarded the OBE for services to the Architecture and Built Heritage of Scotland. He was invited to give the inaugural lecture of the Aberdeen City Heritage Trust in 2008.

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Quotation references

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