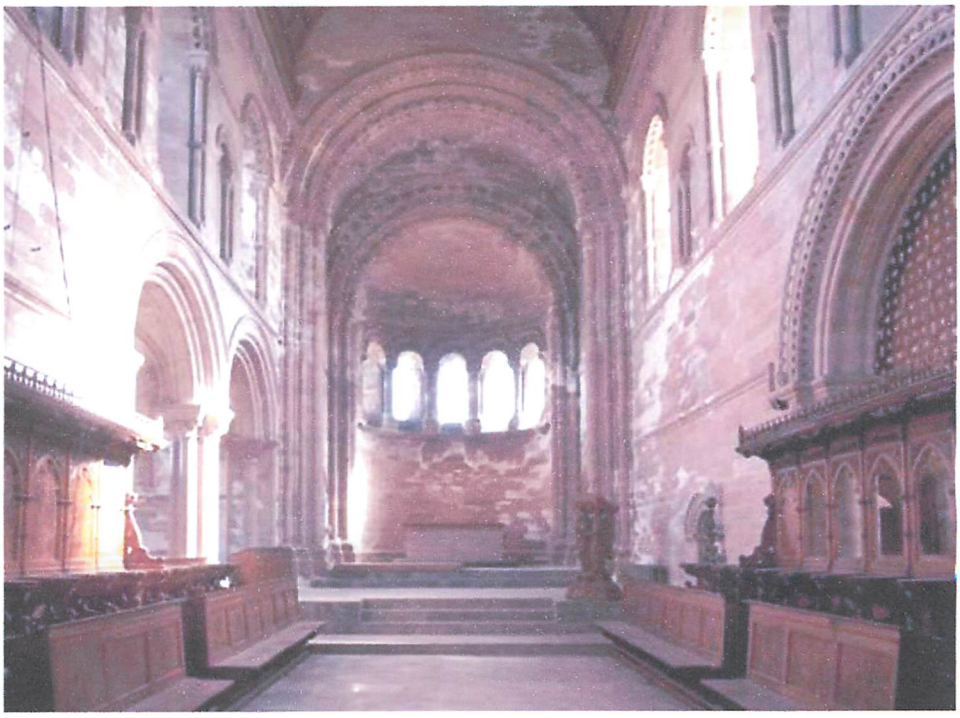
Dunecht House Aberdeenshire

Dunecht Episcopal Chapel

The ownership of the barony of Echt had been in the hands of the Forbes family since the late 15th century but had become dilapidated. In 1829 William Forbes commissioned Aberdeen City Architect, John Smith, to design a replacement house for the ruinous original dwelling. The house and lands were sold to the 24th Earl of Crawford and the 7th of Balcarres in 1845. He died in 1869 at his home, Haigh Hall, near Manchester and was succeeded by his son, Alexander William Crawford Lindsay, the 24th Earl, a considerable scholar of theology, genealogy, and the fine arts; he collected one of the century's greatest libraries.



At a chance meeting during a dinner party at Haigh, he met George Edmund Street, the architect, who suggested a library and chapel be built at Dunecht to store his precious volumes away from the polluted conditions of the English Midlands. Lindsay was persuaded and asked Street to design a building in his beloved Florentine style to include a subterranean mortuary chapel in white marble as a Lindsay shrine.

Whilst on a trip to Italy and Egypt, the 25th Earl died suddenly in Florence and his body was brought home to Dunecht to be interred in the mortuary chapel, as yet unfinished. Hurriedly, joiners set to work to fix up the pews and the funeral service took place, with the interment of the body in the mortuary chapel in the vault below.

Less than a year after the interment, the vault was found to be open and it was discovered that the Earl's body had been stolen. Seven months later, on 18th July 1882 the body was found lying amongst trees a quarter mile from the House. After the national sensation, and the investigations, a disgruntled estate worker confessed to the crime and was jailed for the felony.

This incident unsurprisingly, left distaste for Dunecht with the family. It was decided that the great library would not transfer from Haigh, and the 26th Earl, Ludovic, slowly completed the building as a memorial to his father. As the late nineteenth century downturn in the British economy showed no signs of abating, Ludovic decided to sell the estate. It was sold to Alexander C. Pirie, a woollen manufacturer of Craibstone in Aberdeenshire, Pirie began improvements but fell into financial difficulties letting the estate to Sir Weetman Pearson, the civil engineering magnate and Liberal politician. He was eventually given the option to purchase in 1909. The following year he was raised to the Peerage becoming Baron Cowdray.

Although services were suspended in Dunecht Chapel in 1945, the Comper east window of St Andrew's Cathedral was stored there to avoid war damage before being installed in 1948.

Stuart Donald