

Private Perspectives: The Architecture and Design of Scottish Crematoria 1975-2011

In many respects Scottish crematoria and the pattern of their patronage reflect in microcosm, the wider social and architectural developments taking place in Scotland from 1895 until 2011. In concentrating on the final phase of crematorium building between 1975 and 2011, this paper explores the implications for the design and landscaping of Scottish crematoria brought about by the significant shift from public to private sector involvement. The research results from a Leverhulme Funded Project at Durham University, contributing to a forthcoming book on the History of Cremation in Modern Scotland.

The building of Scotland's 27 operational crematoria falls into three distinct phases, the first being the pioneering work of the private sector between 1895 and 1939, when 6 crematoria were opened; Glasgow, Maryhill, 1895; Edinburgh, Warriston, 1929; Dundee, 1936; Aberdeen, Kaimhill, 1938; Paisley, 1938 and Edinburgh, Seafield, 1939.

The second phase of building was between 1955 and 1975, when 13 crematoria were opened. In keeping with the governing agenda of Improvement, which promoted the harnessing of 'material betterment to secular utopian ideals', the post-war period witnessed local authorities assuming responsibility for crematoria. During this phase, all but one of 13 - Craigton in Glasgow from 1957, were now local authority sponsored.

As Rebecca Bailey points out 'The 1970s was an odd sort of decade'. It was characterized by on the one hand, the economic crisis and cessation of large-scale reconstruction programmes in Scotland, such as urban motorways and city-centre developments and on the other, the emergence of the Housing Association Movement. The building boom had come to an end as the country's stock of hospitals, schools and similar social buildings was thought to be more or less complete. The economic crisis had also played a part. The national building situation was mirrored by a corresponding halt in the building

of crematoria, where it was presumably felt that there were enough crematoria to satisfy urban needs, with only two dating from the 1970s, Dunfermline, 1973 and Aberdeen, Hazelhead, 1974. By 1975 there were 19 crematoria in Scotland, located for the most part along the Glasgow-Edinburgh corridor, with provision to the north in Aberdeen.

The slow down in crematorium building in Scotland in the 1970s reflected the pattern elsewhere in the UK, where the surge of building had taken place between 1950 and 1970, with 149 crematoria opening in the 1960s, dropping to 16 in the 1970s and a mere 7 during the 80s. Certainly by 1970 the heyday of local authority provision was over in Scotland, as in England and Wales. And by 1982, the *Architects' Journal* was arguing that 'the completion of a new crematorium in the UK is a rare occurrence'.

By the time Scotland emerged from its 18-year interregnum in crematorium building, attitudes and circumstances had changed, not only in terms of architectural taste, but also in approaches to funerals requirements. The growing secularization witnessed in Scotland since the 1960s had created new demands. The rise of modern consumerism, it was argued, had brought about a decline in community and neighbourhood and had given rise to a more competitive, opportunistic and individualistic society. In these increasingly secular, post-modern times, mourners' attitudes had changed accordingly. They had come to prefer, allegedly, a more personalized environment that accommodated emotional reflections upon the identity of the deceased in order to 'celebrate' his or her 'lived life', rather than provide a preparation for 'life after death'. Increased consumer awareness was matched by a wider range of funeral and disposal alternatives becoming available to the general public. This was all in the context of global capitalization, which began to encourage a move away from the morality of social building types. Last, but not least, public attitudes towards the environment were changing, bringing about a corresponding change in attitudes to disposal.

By the late twentieth century there was great pressure on crematoria to operate a cost-effective business and so when Scottish crematorium building entered its third and final phase in the early 1990s, it was clear that the

commercial and environmental dimensions were to bring about significant changes. As the new dawn of privately owned crematoria broke, arguments began to emerge that suggested consumer capitalism was being privileged above any kind of spiritual experience. The move towards private ownership was inextricably linked with the final, and arguably one of the most influential, of social changes, that of society's reassessment of its relationship with nature. Environmental issues surfaced when Government research and publications began to draw attention to the increase in atmospheric dioxins attributed to emissions from the combustion of 'glue, paint, embalming fluid, PVC, rubber soles of shoes and other man-made fibres'. These environmental concerns were to have a direct impact on both the existing crematoria, which had to be modified to comply with the EU requirements under the Environmental Protection Act of 1990. By 1998, most had done so. Some time later further concern was expressed about the levels of emissions released from mercury amalgam dental fillings. The EPA demanded far greater investment in filtration technology by crematoria, encouraging first national, and then international commercial companies to compete for sites in areas less well served by the 'hub' crematoria. Crematoria were now expensive for local authorities to finance and so, in the final building phase, 6 out of 8 crematoria were privately owned. This matched the pattern in England and Wales, where only 4 of the 40 crematoria opened between 1993 and 2011 in the UK (including the 8 Scottish examples) were local authority owned.

It fell to the private sector to determine the aesthetics of these new spaces required to address an increasingly wide range of social, economic and psychological needs.

So how then, did Scotland respond? One notable difference between Scotland and England was the alacrity with which the canon of ecclesiastical architecture was abandoned North of the Border. Only two Scottish crematoria make overt references to styles associated with churches; Glasgow, Maryhill, 1895, is Gothic in idiom and Dundee, 1936, is in a purposeful Romanesque style, designed to look wholly ecclesiastical, the chapel being very like an Episcopal church in arrangement. And during the second phase of building, Scotland, it would seem from the outset, settled

more willingly for Modernism, albeit in a softened form which fitted with both modern societal ideas on coping with death through negation, as well as the espousal of modern technology. While this form of Modernism often attracted criticism South of the Border – author and playwright Alan Bennett characterizing it as *contemporary but not eye-catchingly so; this is decorum-led architecture which does not draw attention even to its merits . . . This is the architecture of reluctance.*

Scotland avoided many of the mistakes south of the Border by encouraging the best in local authority design, and, perhaps more importantly, exploiting the natural landscape of Scotland in the siting of crematoria, whether they be in existing cemeteries or on new sites; Cardross, 1960 and Clydebank, 1967 being good examples. Nature holds a symbolic significance as it exercises a compulsive hold on human emotions and invites a depth of human attachment. This privileging of the natural landscape was to become something of a national signature.

By 1967, Scotland had produced two of the finest crematoria in the UK. The Linn in Glasgow, by Thomas Cordiner, of 1962 and Mortonhall, Edinburgh, by Sir Basil Spence, opened in 1967. Both incidentally public authority buildings, which challenged the strong tradition of burial in Scotland by confidently – indeed, defiantly, adopting a *wholly Modernist* idiom, generally eschewed in England, but significantly, later adopted in Wales. In so doing they exposed the mediocrity of much crematorium design of the 1960s and early 1970s in England. But the days of such expressive and impressive statements by local authorities were over. Dunfermline and Aberdeen – were to be Scotland's local authority swansongs, displaying as they did, the softened version of a Modernist language – a form of functionalism with room for aesthetics.

Dunfermline, built by Fife Council in 1973, nestles in a hollow in the undeniably beautiful site. Its low-lying, intersecting planes are reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright, as are the ways in which the undisguised chimney anchors the building to the site and the internal and external spaces interact, principally by means of the glazed wall on either side of the catafalque, offering a view of a bank of trees. Aberdeen, Hazelhead, designed in 1975, by Aberdeen City Council Architects' Department, led by I.A. Fergusson, was another low-lying, concrete-clad building, with two large chapels, simple in

style and almost asymmetrical in arrangement. Deep canopies shelter the approaches to the building and notable features include the 'battered' walls, constructed from inclined pre-cast panels, 'off-white' in colour with an exposed aggregate finish of coarse Skye marble chippings. The interiors rely on high-quality natural materials, including timber and marble. Stained glass windows by the American designer Harvey Salvin, symbolize the changing seasons and the elements of earth and water. These references combine with the attractively landscaped grounds to assuage grief.

A visual analysis of Scotland's final 8 crematoria would suggest two things. Firstly, a rejection of local authority modernism in favour of a broadly vernacular idiom and secondly, a homogeneity of style, a form of 'internationalism' with a small 'I' imported from the UK. Taking first the vernacular style. While Modernists saw the return to vernacular form as encouraging a sentimentalizing of the past, principles such as a sense of place, hierarchy, scale, harmony, enclosure, materials, decoration and community unquestionably tapped into a rich vein of traditional values popular with large sections of the public both North and South of the Border. During the 1980s many English architects and members of the public, found these essentially 'human values', embodied in vernacular architecture, both attractive and reassuring – particularly in the context of crematorium design, where mourners were looking for more familiar, domestic spaces. If one discounts Moray Crematorium, which was a conversion of the Grade II Gothic Enzie South Parish Church of 1886 church undertaken in 1999 – interestingly one of only two conversions in Scotland (the other being Warriston, Edinburgh) – Scotland's third phase crematoria all subscribe to the vernacular principles cited above.

Inglis & Carr of Kirrimuir heralded the final phase with their design for Parkgrove, Froikheim, Angus, in 1993 for Ken Parkes a local one-time potato farmer, turned engineer, who had joined forces with Funeral Director Ernie Taylor from Forfar, to build the crematorium. The design draws its inspiration from abstracted classicism, with the employment of strong intersecting axes, reinforcing the ritualistic and processional functions traditionally associated with burial. It invokes the traditional nave and transept of a traditional church,

with intersecting roofs culminating in the masonry flue, which is expressed simply and honestly. The architects argued that 'The ceiling finishes to the porte-cocheres and the continuity of the surface finishes between internal and external areas help to reinforce the dialogue between the inside and outside. This device has produced an architecture extroverted and outward looking rather than introverted and gloomy'. They reported that the use of 'high-tech' materials has been avoided throughout with traditional masonry and timber forming the main aesthetic. This conservation-minded approach has been extended into the landscaping where most of the original site features have been retained and supplemented as necessary to complement the building. It was hoped that this building, in its handling of materials and spaces and overall response to human needs, will have that sense of scale and proportion which people respond to at both a conscious and subconscious level and that the lives of the bereaved relatives will be enriched by the sense of place and purpose created here.

Inverness, followed, designed in 1995 by Graham Rennie of the Highland Council for Inverness District Council had attracted great local opposition, not least from The Free Presbyterian Church in Scotland. Built on a tranquil and rural location on the outskirts of the town, it is traditional in design and construction and respectful of Highland traditions in its quest to assume a role in the local community.

Holmsfirth Bridge, Irvine, was designed in 1997 by Martin Critchell, to whom the Great Southern Group had turned for the design of their crematorium at Bodmin, Cornwall in 1989 where Critchell's preference for domestic scale and feel is immediately apparent. Simon Field of the Great Southern Group had talked to Critchell about the importance of acknowledging 'rural communities' in crematoria. It has a strikingly simple plan, the prominent feature being the chapel, where mourners are seated facing a large window through which they can derive comfort from the timeless landscape that surrounds them. This domestic 'feel' was continued at **Aberystwyth**, in Wales, designed in 1994 for The Crematoria Investment Company Ltd (having taken over The Great Southern Group) and three Local District Councils. The design draws once

more from a broadly vernacular vocabulary, the simple, domestic character being sensitive to the environment as well as respecting Welsh traditions. Stones were culled from demolished historic buildings in the town and Welsh companies and craftspeople were involved in the commission. Critchell's **Heart of England Crematorium at Nuneaton** in Warwickshire, built in 1995 again for The Crematoria Investment Company Ltd is again domestic in appearance, in traditional brick construction with hardwood windows and doors.

Doubtless on the basis of his work in Wales and England, Critchell was commissioned by The Caledonian Cremation Company to design **Holmsford Bridge**. Critchell provided another domestic design, with white rendered walls, a tiled roof and discreet chimney. The chapel has a boarded ceiling and – by now – characteristic floor-to-ceiling window behind the altar, giving panoramic views across the Ayrshire countryside, including the River Irvine and the span of the Holmfirth Bridge. On approach there is a large pool crossed by a wooden bridge from the car to the porte-cochère. The beautiful location, on the banks of the River Irvine, has its own fishing rights and provided the opportunity to combine the Gardens of Remembrance with riverside walkways. Critchell's domestic vocabulary was designed to comfort and console by dint of familiarity. There is a balance between private and public in all his work, which translates well in his crematoria designs, where mourners are provided with an architectural and landscaped environment, which allows for both public ritual and private contemplation. The manager at Holmfirth Bridge reported that mourners always made very positive views about the landscape, where, from the large window of the crematorium, kestrels have been seen to rise during services. The style of the building has given rise to some interesting responses from the public; it has been mistaken for a golf club, hotel and restaurant, so excellent are its parking facilities and welcoming ambience. Holytown, 2004, was a *Dignity* project, its architect Philip Baldry of Art-Tech Ltd, Concept Studio, Great Yarmouth. This is again in a modern vernacular idiom, leading one visitor to mistake it for a Toby Carvery, once again raising the question of architectural style and confusing associative values.

Robert Potter & Partners built Roucan Loch, outside Dumfries in 2005. Established in 1964 with offices in Ayr, Dumfries, Glasgow and Stranraer, with wide-ranging experience. The only facility serving Dumfries and Galloway, Roucan Loch is set in 10 acres of natural countryside, bordered to the north by mature Scots pine woodland, and to the south by the Loch itself. The landscape setting was the key to the design of the building, emphasizing the peaceful atmosphere of the place. Glazing on both sides of the service room frames the views to the woodland and the loch. The building is positioned as close to the loch as possible to allow natural light to reflect into the service room from the surface of the water. It was specifically designed to host small-scale services (held in addition to a main service in the Church or Chapel of Rest). The use of materials is paramount. The building has a glulam timber structure and uses western red cedar externally and yellow pine internally. Quite understandably, the crematorium was commended by the Glasgow Institute of Architects in 2005. The following year, the firm designed South Lanarkshire, Blantyre, the only other local authority crematorium of this period. The manager reports that *Dignity* were involved initially, but allegedly pulled out on the basis that the local authority 'kept changing the goal posts'. This was to be the first project in Scotland to incorporate mercury filtration. The construction was fraught with difficulties, not least of which, the builder 'going bust'. The manager maintains the building is poorly sited in a saucer within the landscape. Drainage is adequate until there is heavy rain. But the salient drawback is that mourners look up towards the dual carriageway. From a stylistic point of view, Blantyre begins to represent a somewhat homogenous style common to its contemporaries south of the border. The clock tower has an undeniable likeness to a Tesco supermarket. Interestingly, the firm went on to project manage the much acclaimed Crownhill Crematorium project for Milton Keynes Council. The chapel is recorded as having 'an uplifting interior', used for blessings at weddings and the fine acoustics of the chapel have resulted in the local orchestra using it for practice and performance', providing powerful evidence of a new crematorium played an extended role in the community. Livingstone was the first of two crematoria to be designed for The Westerleigh Group in partnership with West Lothian Council, by Stride Tregowlan, a leading English practice based in the

southwest. Opened in 2010, it conforms to the modern vernacular style, which the owners contend 'has a light, natural look, in sympathy with its rural surroundings. A sculpture depicting three deer - presumably in response to the resident herd of fallow deer on the site - was commissioned from *Mor Design* following a long consultation process with the local community as part of the planning agreement with the Council and led by the authority's arts officer.

Scotland's most recent crematorium to serve the Borders opened at Melrose in 2011. Again by Stride Treglowan for The Westerleigh Group, the project met with fierce opposition for the Melrose and District Community Councillors and 1350 members of the public, including the Save Scott's Countryside Group, on account of its proximity to Abbotsford. *The Borders Telegraph* reporting one objector as saying it 'was the biggest disaster since the Romans arrived in Melrose'. Situated adjacent to Wairds Cemetery, which is within the Eildon and Leaderfoot National Scenic Area, on the slope of Eildon Hill North it enjoyed protected status. Objectors were taken to look at the recently opened Livingstone, which they concluded was 'relatively unobtrusive', 'simply designed', 'tastefully decorated' with 'an attractive use of wood and natural stone'. The style, by now recognizable, was not the problem; the objectors conceding that it could be 'the right building in the wrong place'.

Interestingly, Martin Crittall, Robert Potter & Partners and Stride Treglowan all had experience in the healthcare sector, suggesting a parallel with places of healing and comfort.

The modern vernacular, however, was not without its critics. In 2003, Hugh Thomas, the architect of three English crematoria - the much admired Bury St Edmund's, West Suffolk, 1989; Banbury, 1999 and Sittingbourne in Kent, 2003, talked about what he perceived to be the problem of aesthetics in provincial architecture, where there was great opposition to modern design:

So, am I stuck with having to produce crematoria in a 'traditional' style? Whatever is the traditional style for a crematorium, a building genre which itself is only a hundred and thirty years old in Western Europe? What is meant, clearly, by those who insist upon a traditional style, is something recognizable within their own vocabulary of church, barn, farm buildings, and

now presumably, Tesco – and all in heavily appropriate materials. But slate is not local to the east of England; nor Velux rooflights, nor is the whole concept of a crematorium’.

Somewhat amusingly, but quite tellingly, the ubiquitous nature of contemporary, quasi-vernacular in crematorium building gave rise to the following. In March of last year, *The Times* reported that Tesco’s plans to build a supermarket in Sherborne in Dorset had been met with fervent resistance from the local community. At a local meeting 250 people made their views clear. Tesco’s architects’ visions were covered in *Post-it Notes*; none positive; ‘*You/Tesco are not to be trusted and are not wanted*’; ‘*Tesco has no style or grace, loud and brash . . . a hateful organisation*’. Indeed the kindest thing written about the design for the new store, due to replace a 1960s hotel on Sherborne’s outskirts was that ‘*it looked like a crematorium*’. And so, within a period of ten years, Tesco supermarkets were now being compared with crematoria, rather than the other way round.

By continuing, as far as possible, to commission Scottish architects, private providers in Scotland have chosen to privilege a sense of community and tradition. Recent designs are of a type and the architect responsible for Melrose has expressed to me his belief that ‘things have further to go’ in terms of crematorium design. His firm intends to hold an in-house competition for their next Westerleigh project. It begs the question of what the future holds for crematorium design in Scotland.