

St Paul's Chapel, Aberdeen: its history and architecture

by Wm G Rowntree Bodie

When Charles II returned to Scotland in 1660 the Episcopal Church was re-established as the National Church of Scotland. After the Revolution of 1688 the Church was once more disestablished and disendowed in 1689. At that time the Church of St Nicholas, the town kirk of Aberdeen, had two separate congregations. In 1692 Dr George Garden, who officiated in the East Church of St Nicholas, was removed from his charge by the Privy Council for 'not praying for their Majesties William and Mary'. Dr Andrew Burnet of the West Church of St Nicholas was deprived of his charge for protesting against the proceedings of the Presbyterian Clergy and imprisoned in the Tolbooth of Edinburgh.

When Anne came to the throne in 1702, as a daughter of the Jacobite King James, the Episcopal Clergy were prepared to take the oath to pray for the Queen. Dr Burnet was released from prison and returned to his former congregation who now met in Trinity Friars' Church. There was persecution by the Presbyterian Church Courts to suppress the Episcopal Communion until, by the passing of the Toleration Act in 1712, it was once more lawful for Episcopalians to meet for divine worship 'after their own manner by Pastors ordained by a Protestant Bishop' and their clergy could use the liturgy of the Church of England 'without any let or disturbance from any person whatsoever'. Upon Anne's death in 1714 most of the clergy refused to acknowledge George I, although after the Rebellion in 1715 both Dr Garden and Dr Burnet did re-occupy the Church of St Nicholas for a short time under the protection of Jacobite Magistrates. The failure of the Rebellion led to the ejection of non-juring ministers and the closing of the new chapels. Trinity Chapel was one of these. The congregations being without a Church or clergyman decided to adopt the Toleration Act under which they had operated during Queen Anne's reign.

In 1720 a document was drawn up under which St Paul's was founded. It states 'Resolutions of Burgers, Merchants, Tradesmen and Inhabitants of Aberdeen met together at Aberdeen this 2nd day of August One thousand Seven hundred and Twenty years for settling ane Episcopal Meeting House by a qualified Minister in terms of Law'. They applied for a lease of Trinity Church, but were refused this by the Magistrates, so had to undertake the erection of a new Church.

The Chapel was built in 1721 on the west side of the Gallowgate, on land overlooking the Loch of New Aberdeen. Its congregation came from the West Church of St Nicholas when the Episcopal Church was the National Church of Scotland. The design of the Chapel is said to be the work of a Jaffray of Kingswells. This was a Quaker family whose estate lay some 5 miles west of Aberdeen. In 1720, when the decision was taken to erect a chapel, it was an Alexander Jaffray who was 4th laird at Kingswells. He was then 43 years of age and was surveyor for roads and bridges in Aberdeenshire. He had designed his own house at Kingswells and given advice on architectural matters to Archibald Grant of Monymusk, and he also supervised the reconstruction

of the House of Monymusk. His grandson, another Alexander Jaffray, writing his recollections of Kingswells later in the 18th century, says of his grandfather, 'Having a taste for, and some knowledge of architecture, he constructed the house after a plan of his own -' (1935, 148). It may be significant that Alexander Jaffray 4th of Kingswells visited London in the autumn of 1720. In a letter to Archibald Grant of Monymusk he writes, 'I have not only seen all the fine buildings and gardens here and the method of execution, but have likewise observed the different agriculture thorow the country, -' and later in the letter says, 'I have settled correspondance wth the best and most usfull artists here and provided myself in all sorts of instruments and books' (Hamilton 1945, 87). Was he seeking and finding inspiration for the design of the Chapel? All that remains of Jaffray's work in Aberdeen is the gateway to the Chapel, which still stands in its original position. The Chapel was described as 'handsome and commodious' and in a modest way did reflect in some measure the style of the later Renaissance design in churches, externally in the general proportion of solid and void of the W façade, pl 30a, and the punctuation given by the smaller first-floor windows, and at the E elevation, pl 30b, by the circular windows over the entrance doors. Internally this is also seen in the Doric columns supporting the galleries, and the Ionic columns supporting the roof, while the plan follows the type of nave and aisles layout seen in many of Wren's churches, such as Christ's Church, Newgate Street, and St Bride's, Fleet Street. Its erection was contemporary with that designed by another architect associated with Aberdeen. This was St Martin-in-the-Fields by James Gibbs, built in 1722.

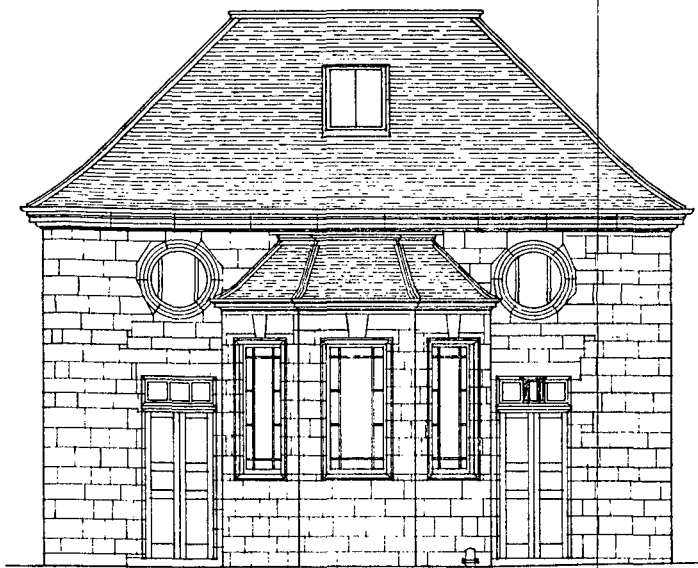
Perhaps the most outstanding feature in its interior was the magnificent organ loft and case, pl 31a. One visitor about 1725 said it was the only organ he knew of in Scotland at that time. In the list of subscribers to the organ over a number of years appears the name of the 2nd Duke of Gordon. Among others who subscribed to its upkeep from time to time were the Earl of Aboyne, Irvine of Drum and Farquharson of Finzean. When first erected there was danger that it might be damaged, so in April 1725 we find the managers giving orders to a carpenter to erect a rail about the organ 'that it meet with no harm from boys and other people that go on above the bellows'. The organ case has a striking resemblance to one in Wren's St James's, Piccadilly (1682-4). An illustration of the interior of St James's showing the organ case can be seen in W H Godfrey's *The Story of Architecture in England* (1931, fig 91).

Some of the organists at St Paul's made a name for themselves. There was Andrew Tait who is said to have been author of the well-known psalm tune St Paul, and also John Ross who became conductor and leader of the Musical Society in 1750. This body gave concerts in a hall in Concert Court off Broad Street.

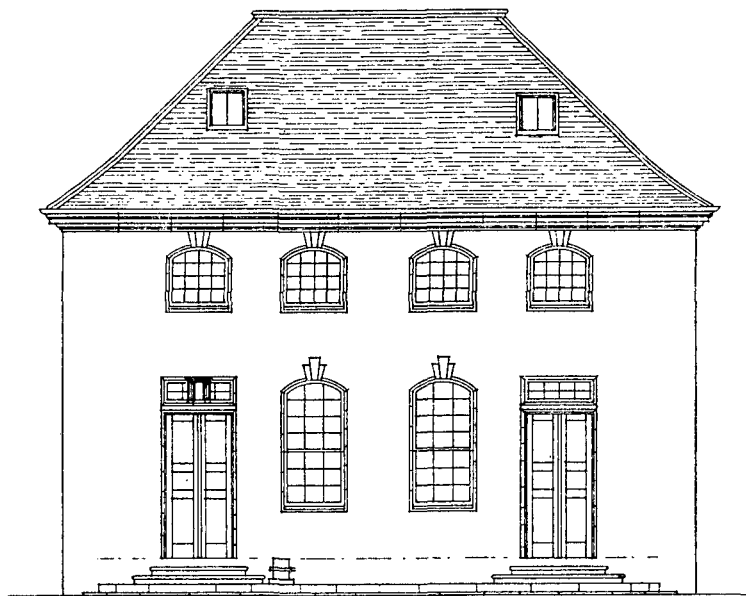
In the photograph of the E end of the Chapel a three-decker pulpit almost conceals the small apse containing the altar, pl 31b. According to Allan (1949) 'When a three-storeyed pulpit was used it was placed towards the middle of the nave against either one of the pillars, or the north or south wall. But from the Restoration onwards it became increasingly common to place the three-storeyed pulpit in the middle alley, in front of the altar. Although the pulpit stood in front of the altar it was neither there out of contempt for the altar nor to exalt preaching at the expense of Sacrament; in any case the three-decker was something more than a pulpit: it was the place from which the greater part of the liturgy was read'.

Some light fittings seen in the photographs seem to be for gas. There was a tap on those at the three-decker pulpit. The candelabras suspended over the nave appear to have candles. The first gas company was founded in Aberdeen in 1824.

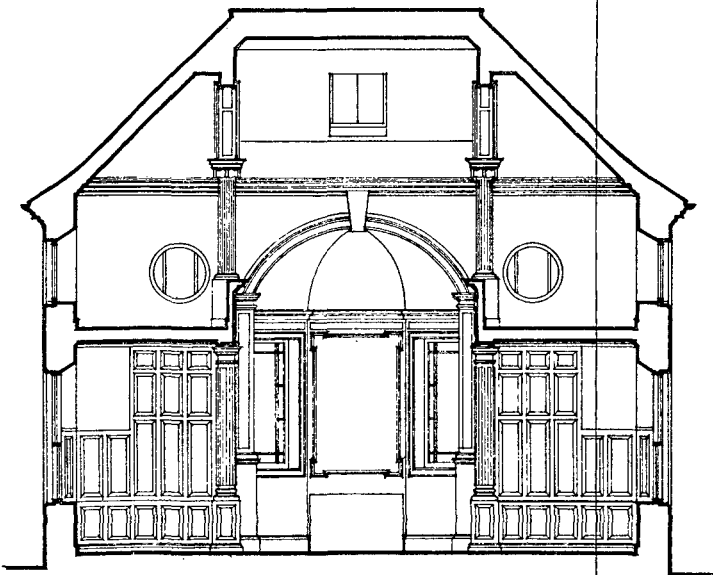
As no plans or elevations of the old Chapel seem to exist the opportunity was taken to prepare measured drawings (figs 1, 2) from five old photographs which had been taken prior to its demolition about 1865. A degree of accuracy was possible by reference to a plan of the City



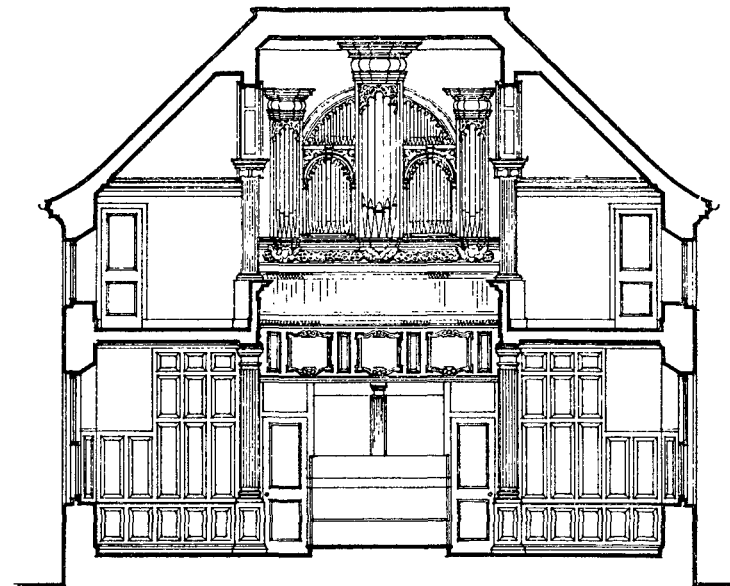
EAST ELEVATION.



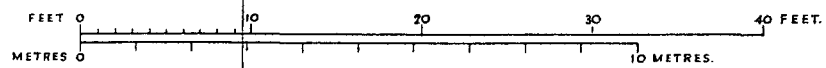
WEST ELEVATION.



SECTION B.B.



SECTION C.C.



W.G.R.B. 77.

FIG 2 St Paul's Chapel, Aberdeen: elevations and cross-sections

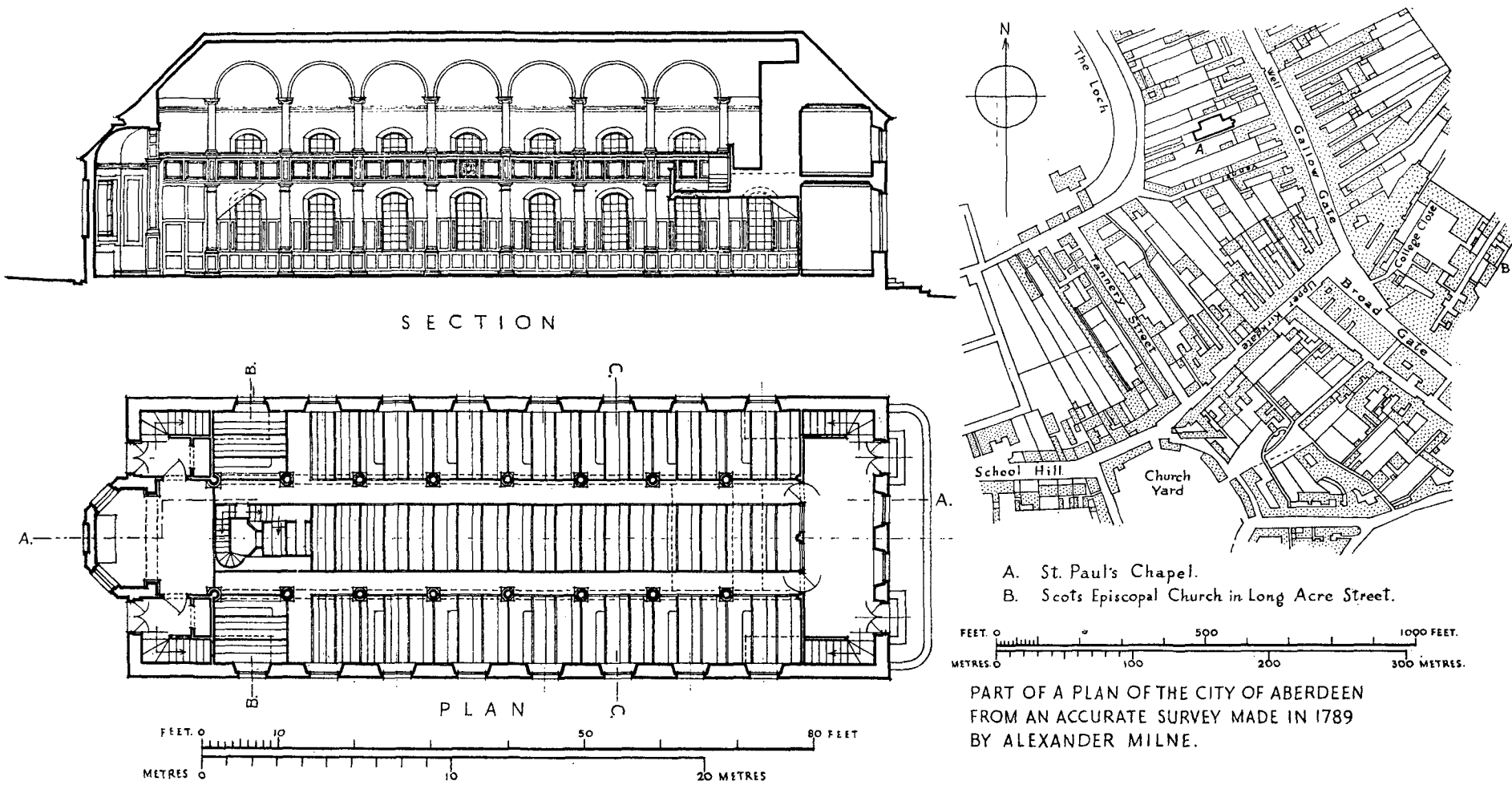


FIG 1 St Paul's Chapel, Aberdeen: plan, longitudinal section and location map

of Aberdeen made from an accurate survey taken in 1789 by Alex Milne. It was possible from this plan to obtain an approximate external length for the Chapel, and by using principles of perspective in reverse to work other sizes from the photographs. The scale of Alexander Milne's Plan was given in Scots statute chains of 24 ells or 74 ft each. The Scottish ell equally 37 in. It was found the length of the Chapel was about 100 ft. Although the scale of the drawings must be considered approximate, the proportions could be nearly accurate.

As my intention is to represent the Chapel as originally conceived by the architect I have not included the aisle which was added to the N side of the Chapel in 1764. The lofts, or cock-lofts as they were called, which were erected over the main gallery at the E and W ends of the Chapel have also been omitted.

In an early map of Old and New Aberdeen by G and W Paterson, dated 1746, the Chapel is shown with a *flèche*, and according to Gammie (1909, 306) there 'was a handsome cupola about 9 feet in diameter.' It seems possible that the cupola formed a ceiling light within the lower portion of the *flèche*.

When the Chapel was built 'seats and desks' from Trinity Chapel, belonging to the Trades Incorporation, were removed to St Paul's and re-used in the gallery. If there was a passage next the outer wall there would remain space for only two rows of pews.

The stair risers and treads are conjecture. The pattern shown cannot be far from the original as internal features such as door entrances and exposed stair soffits provide visible clues and confining elements.

The outside cornice is shown as stone because in the photograph of the east elevation there is a suggestion of jointing, but it is possible it could have been a built-up wooden one.

Whether the upper arcade should have pointed arches or semi-circular ones presented a problem. There is not sufficient evidence from the photographs to give a definite answer regarding the treatment of the entire arcade. Several things influenced me in deciding to show the arcade with semi-circular arches. The lofts appear to be an afterthought and to have been added later to give additional seating before, or when, the N aisle was built in 1764. Alexander Jaffray would have been 87 in that year if still alive, so he is unlikely to have been consulted about such an alteration. The joists supporting the lofts are exposed, suggesting less care has been taken with them than with the soffit of the lower gallery. The panelling to the loft contains four panels between the columns whereas there are only three at the gallery level. If the loft had been erected at the same time as the lower gallery one would have expected but three panels. Introducing pointed arches at the lofts may have been done to allow slightly more light into the area of the centre nave. This seems trivial, but not impossible when nondescript development takes place later. In pl 31a there is more shadow down the left-most arch than there is in the adjoining pointed arch suggesting it could be semicircular. Pointed arches are out of harmony with the general style of design adopted for the building.

There is further evidence of a lower standard of design of later work, in the frontage of the gallery to the N aisle, pl 31a. Although the triglyph motif is in accord with the Doric column supports it is out of place and unnecessary. No doubt the curve of the gallery made it desirable to restrict the width of the panels, but a better solution would have been to keep them the same depth as for the old gallery and change their width when they came into the straight part of the gallery serving the N aisle. Although the photographs do not show them, there must have been four columns supporting this part of the gallery, giving three bays identical to those facing them in the S gallery.

In the photograph, pl 31b, which illustrates the interior looking towards the E, a panel can be seen displaying the coat of arms of Henrietta, Duchess of Gordon. In recognition of her

contribution to the Chapel Funds, the managers set aside a seat for the Duchess and her family and instructed that the coat of arms of the family be 'put upon the breast of the seat'. This was done in 1728. Her son the 3rd Duke of Gordon, was baptised in the Chapel by the Rev John Gordon, the minister at that time. This heraldic panel is illustrated and dealt with in detail by Burnett (1975).

St Paul's has had some interesting people among its worshippers. James Ray, of Whitehaven, who was a volunteer in the Duke of Cumberland's army, writing in 1745 said 'There are two Episcopal meeting-houses, one of which is very handsome, having a neat organ and many other ornaments. The other was likely to be attained of treason, but I do not know how it fared. But there were two other Episcopal meeting-houses that our soldiers burnt; but with good husbandry and frugality not consuming the pile at once, as was often the case – the wood being industriously reserved to heat our bakers ovens'. Ray continues, 'What gave the most concern was that so many of the handsomest Scots ladies were attendants at these meeting-houses' (Turreff 1871, 203).

The well known Gregory family of Dalmaik (Drumoak) were associated with St Paul's. Originally MacGregors they settled in Deeside and assumed the name of Gregory. When Rob Roy MacGregor journeyed up Deeside in 1714, to enthrone members of his clan for the 1715 Rebellion, he visited his relatives at Dalmaik. Dr John Gregory, Professor of Medicine at King's College, worshipped at St Paul's. His son James was baptised there in 1761. James became Professor of Medicine at Edinburgh and in 1799 became First Physician to the King in Scotland. It was he who invented the disagreeable but effective Gregory's Mixture.

In 1772 the Rev John Wesley went to the morning service at St Paul's Chapel, and wrote, 'Here, likewise, I could not but admire the exemplary decency of the congregation. This was the more remarkable, because so miserable a reader I never heard before'.

During Dr Johnson's tour in Scotland he and James Boswell were having breakfast with Professor Thomas Gordon at the New Inn, Aberdeen. It was Sunday, 22 August 1773. Boswell (1785, 85) records of the Professor 'He had secured seats for us at the English Chapel', and continues, 'We found a respectable congregation, and an admirable organ well played by Mr Tait', which suggests the Chapel was popular and well attended. Dr Johnson (1775, 20) in his journal mentions he 'sat under the Rev John Gordon', and includes this, 'In Aberdeen there is an English Chapel, in which the congregation was numerous and splendid. The form of public worship used by the Church of England is in Scotland legally practised in licensed chapels, served by clergymen of English and Irish ordination, and by tacit connivance quietly permitted in separate congregations supplied with ministers by the successors of the bishops who were deprived at the Revolution'.

A member of the congregation in the early days was a young man who later became Bishop Kemp, the first Bishop of Maryland, USA.

The poet Lord Byron also worshipped at the Chapel when a boy. He lived with his mother nearby in Queen Street, and later in Broad Street, during the last decade of the 18th century.

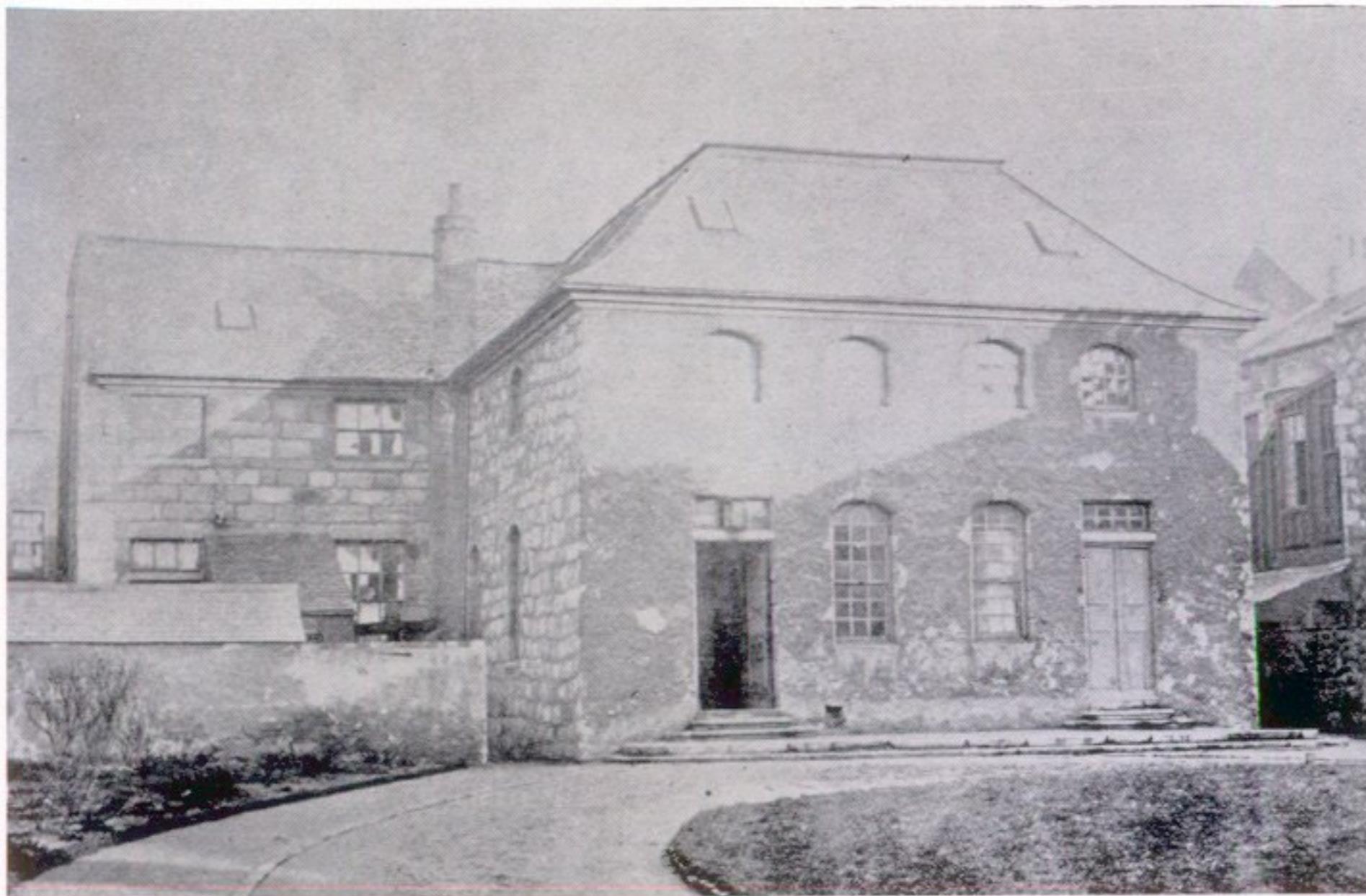
Early in the 18th century dancing for fashionable society was introduced to Aberdeen. The magistrates considered its introduction would be helpful in teaching the young 'manners and good breeding'. Their first choice of instructors was not entirely successful so they advertised for a person 'of a sober, discreet, and moral character' as a dancing master for the town. Mr Francis Peacock was recommended by an Edinburgh dancing master, and appointed to the post in 1747. His first born, Elizabeth, was baptised in St Paul's in 1749, and subsequently so were another daughter and three sons. He is commemorated in Aberdeen by having Peacock's Close named after him.

About 1865 the Chapel was demolished and replaced by a Gothic structure which continued to be a fashionable city church and, up to the time of the First World War, some in the congregation still arrived for the service in their private carriages. The horses were fed and watered in Campbell's stables nearby while the owners were at worship.

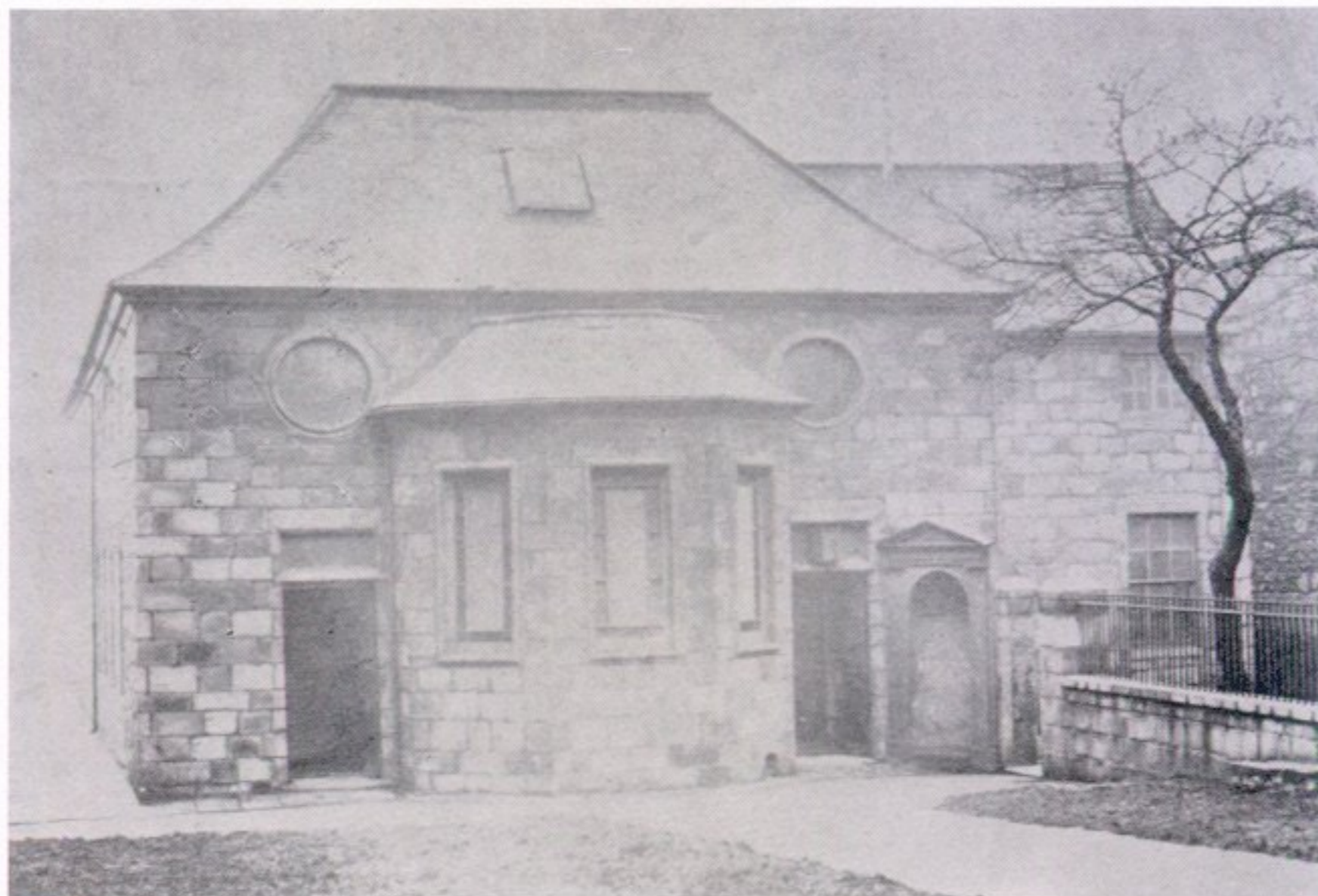
Col Thomas Innes of Learney was the first Lay Representative at St Paul's. As a youth his grandson Thomas, later to become Lord Lyon King of Arms, could also be seen in the congregation with his grandfather. The military funeral of Col Innes took place from St Paul's in 1912.

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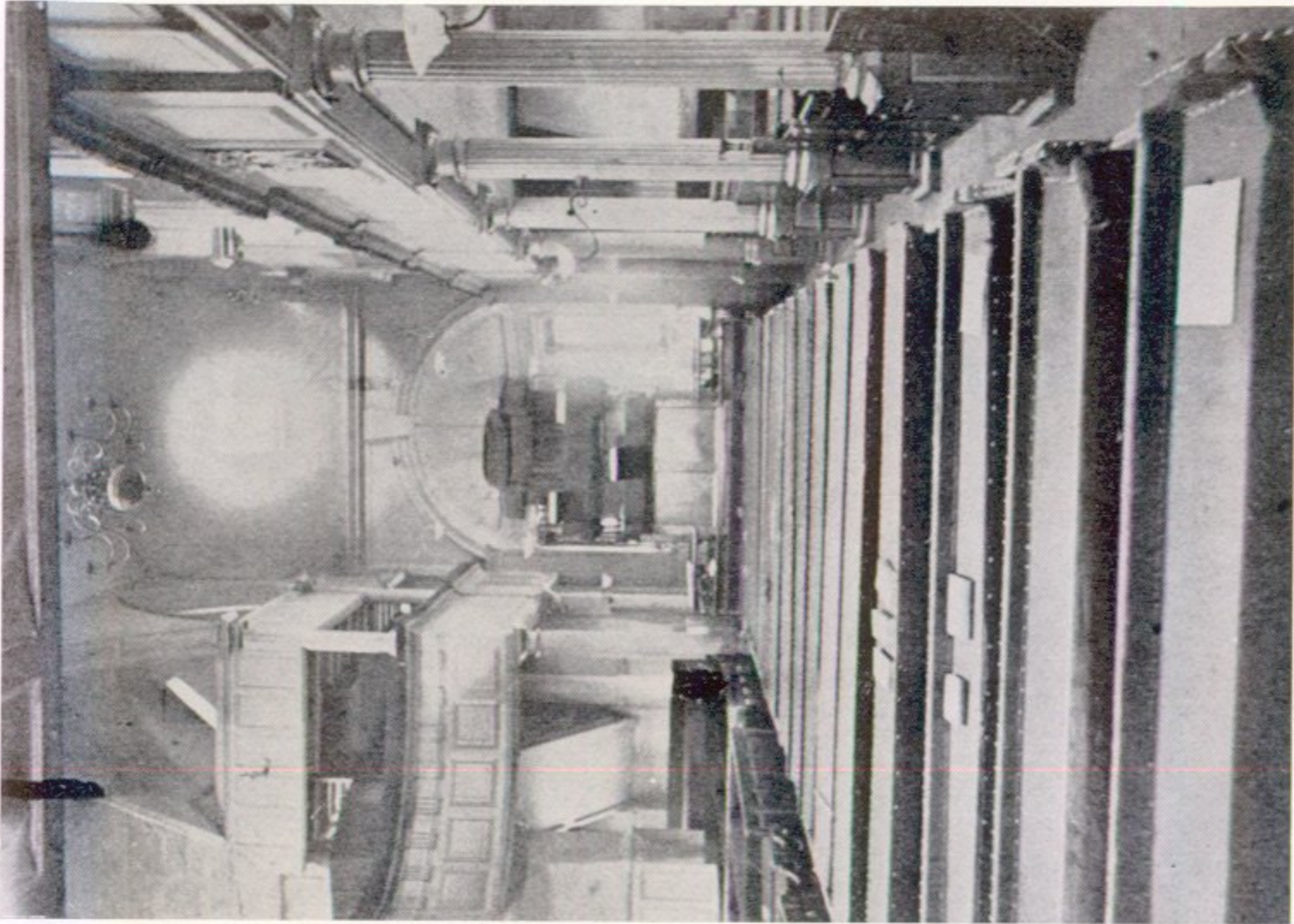
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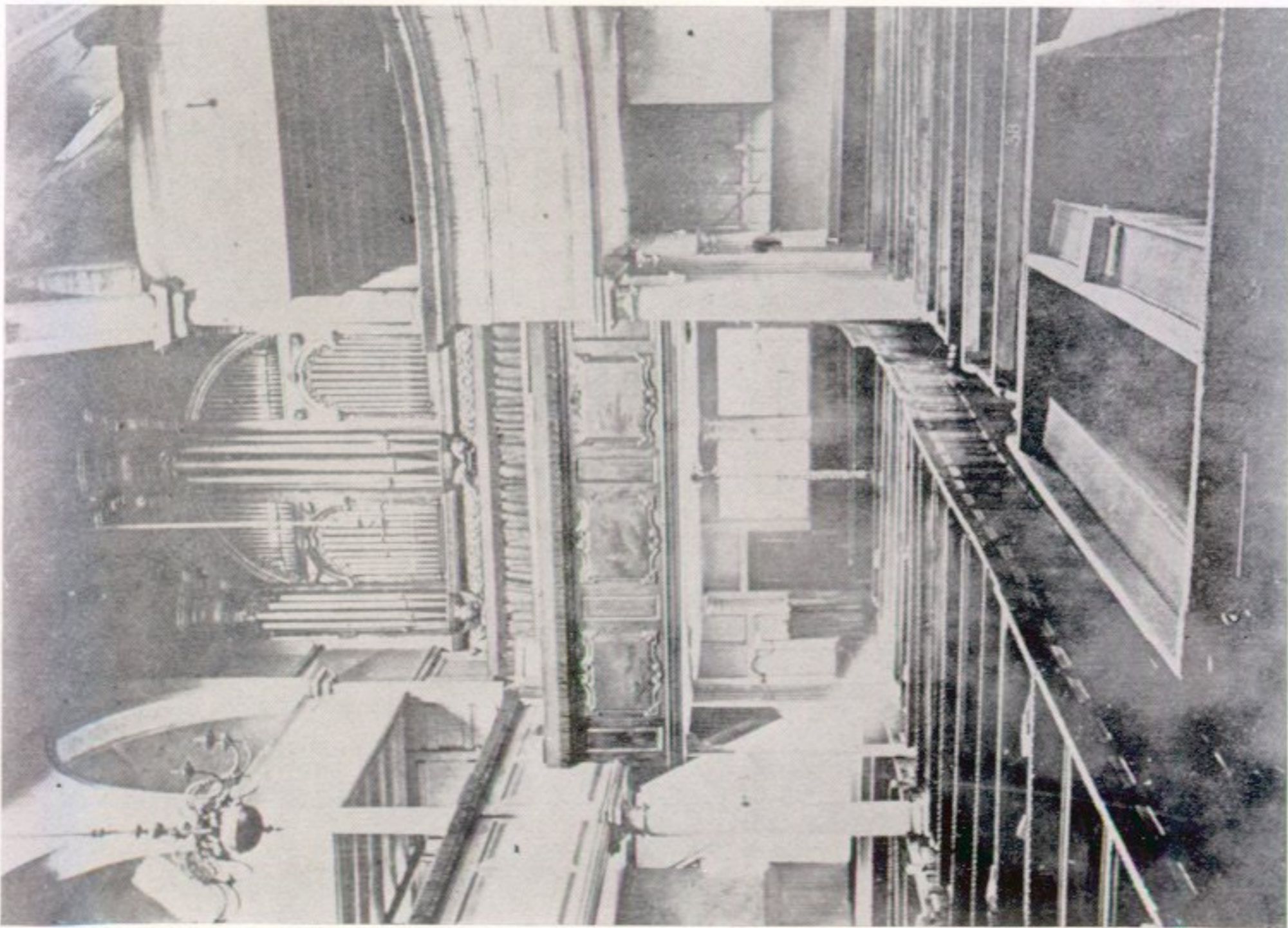
a W façade from Loch Street



b E façade from Gallowgate



b Interior from W: three-decker pulpit; heraldic panel (top right)



a Organ loft and case