

Introduction

The site and buildings that form the present Gillis Centre hold a wide and varied interest for secular, church and architectural historians.

The history of the Whitehouse site can be traced back to the 15th century when the property comprised a small estate on the outskirts of the city. Over the following centuries, the Whitehouse became connected with the outbreak of the Great Plague and accusations of witchcraft. Also, the Whitehouse holds some 18th century literary associations with some important works written within its walls.

The ecclesiastical history of the site goes back to 1834 with the founding by Bishop James Gillis of the first post-Reformation convent in Scotland. For over 150 years the present Gillis Centre was well known in Edinburgh as St Margaret's Convent and School under the ministry of the Ursulines of Jesus. Then for a brief period from 1986, the complex was renamed Gillis College and housed the senior seminary for the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh.

As well as the remaining Whitehouse dating back to 1670, the Gillis Centre comprises St Margaret's Chapel designed by James Gillespie Graham (probably under significant influence from Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin) and opened in 1835- From the same period, the gatehouse and convent building was also designed by James Gillespie Graham, and Edward Welby Pugin (son of A W N Pugin) designed the school building completed in 1863.

The Gillis Centre now provides a range of office accommodation for various diocesan commissions, bodies and organisations. In addition, the Gillis Centre houses the theological library from the former Gillis College, and provides conference facilities and residential accommodation available for commercial hire.

The Whitehouse, Convent and School Buildings

In the 15th century, the lands of Whitehouse were owned by the Hog family and named Hogstoun or Ogstoun. The name Quhytehouse was recorded around 1505 when the first mansion house was built, and the estate boundaries were marked by the streets that are now Whitehouse Loan, Whitehouse Terrace, Kilgraston Road and Thirlestane Road.

After the Reformation, the estate passed to James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell, and later to Thomas McCalzeane of Cliftonhall, Lord Provost of Edinburgh, before passing to his daughter Euphemia, Lady Cliftonhall.

Lady Cliftonhall owned the Whitehouse when the Great Plague broke out in Edinburgh in 1585. As well as other large houses, the Town Council requisitioned the Whitehouse on the outskirts of the city to accommodate plague victims. Lady Cliftonhall objected strongly to the requisition and appealed to the Privy Council. The Privy Council found in Lady Cliftonhall's favour and the plague victims were removed.

Five years later, Lady Cliftonhall was accused and tried for witchcraft. The accusations against her included consorting with other witches and enchanting a picture to cause the death of her father-in-law. Lady Cliftonhall was found guilty and subsequently burned alive on Castlehill.

In 1596, the plague returned to Edinburgh when Hew Crawford was the tenant of the Whitehouse. Five of Crawford's children died during the plague and the house had to be fumigated. The Whitehouse caught fire during the fumigation, and Crawford was accused of setting fire to the house himself. The Herries family who owned the property forced Crawford to rebuild the house.

The present Whitehouse that forms the core of the present Gillis Centre dates from around 1670. In the Whitehouse, Doctor William Robertson (1721-1793), Principal of Edinburgh University, wrote his 'History of the Reign of Charles V, and Reverend John Home (1722-1808) wrote his play 'Douglas' which was first produced at the Canongate Theatre in 1756. Also, Reverend Hugh Blair (1718-1800), Professor at Edinburgh University, wrote his 'Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres' while living in the Whitehouse.

By 1819 the Whitehouse belonged to Mrs Ann Grant, widow of Francis Grant of Kilgraston in Strathearn (commemorated in Kilgraston Road and Strathearn Road). In 1834, Mrs Grant sold part of the estate including the Whitehouse to the Church for £3,000.

The Ursulines of Jesus took up residence in the Whitehouse on 26th December 1834 with the founding of St Margaret's Convent.

James Gillespie Graham was commissioned the following year to design the chapel and extend the mansion house along Whitehouse Loan by adding the tall square gatehouse with ogee roof and rope-moulded archway. The chapel was opened officially on 16th June 1835 when the Feast of St Margaret was celebrated that year. The chapel's chancel was added in 1893 by the architect Archibald MacPherson.

The Whitehouse was extended further with the school and dormitory building designed by Edward Welby Pugin. The foundation stone for the school was laid in November 1861 and the finished building blessed by Bishop Gilhs on 25th March 1863. The original design envisaged by Bishop Gillis was for a full quadrangle and cloister, but funding proved the limiting factor and only one side was completed.

The Hermitage was built in the grounds in 1865 for Reverend Alexander O'Donnell who acted as chaplain to the convent for 25 years, and the North Wing of the convent was added to the gatehouse building in 1869-The North Wing was largely financed by Mrs Eleanor Leslie whose daughter was in the community at St Margaret's as Mother Mary de Sales. Mrs Leslie lived on the first floor of the North Wing for 22 years until her death on 8th April 1892.

Further alterations to the school took place in the 1950s and further buildings added to provide a gymnasium and classrooms.

St Margaret's Chapel

After the founding of St Margaret's Convent on 26th December 1834. James Gillespie Graham was commissioned the following year to design the chapel and extend the Whitehouse property to form the convent. The chapel was opened officially on 16th June 1835 when the Feast of St Margaret was celebrated that year.

Whilst Gillespie Graham designed the nave and aisles, the strong possibility exists that Gillespie Graham's associate Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin had significant influence over the plans for the building. The chancel was added in 1893 by the architect Archibald MacPherson who had earlier worked at St Catherine's Convent and later worked at the Sacred Heart Church, Lauriston. However, around 1846, Pugin had apparently been working either on his own design for a chancel or major alterations to a Gillespie Graham design for a chancel for St Margaret's although the work was never carried out.

In MacPherson's chancel, the High Altar was originally placed directly before the gold and jewelled tabernacle and alabaster altarpiece that was executed to a design by Augustus W N Pugin. The altar is inset with panels of green Genoa marble, and the jewels in the tabernacle door came from a jewel box that had been presented to Bishop Gillis by the Leslie family. Mrs Leslie had financed the building of the North Wing of the convent, and her daughter was in the community at St Margaret's as Mother Mary de Sales. Mrs Leslie's son, William, became a Jesuit priest and the window of St Francis Xavier to the side of the Lady Altar was installed in memory of Father Leslie.

The chapel was altered and the High Altar moved forward in 1970 in response to the amended liturgy introduced following the second Vatican Council. Until the alterations, the large silver sanctuary lamp had been suspended in front of the High Altar following the lamp's presentation to Bishop Gillis in 1837. The lamp was made in Edinburgh by Messrs Cross and Carruthers of Elm Row, and historically attributed to Gillespie Graham although the lamp was more likely to have been designed by Augustus W N Pugin.

The figure of Christ on the crucifix above the tabernacle is of 17th century Spanish workmanship and made in ivory with red garnets representing the drops of Christ's blood. Bishop Gillis brought the figure from Spain in 1862 when he travelled there in search of St Margaret's relics. Unfortunately, the ivory figure has been badly mounted onto the wooden cross during the 19th century.

The central window at the back of the sanctuary is the Annunciation Window (the Incarnation being the principal object of devotion for the Ursulines of Jesus). The window was donated by the people of the diocese of Kingston, Canada, in memory of their bishop, Dr Alexander Macdonnell, who died whilst on a visit to Scotland and was interred in the chapel vaults for 20 years before his remains were transported back to Canada in 1860.

To the right of the Annunciation Window are portrayed St Margaret and St Ignatius Loyola (the Ursulines draw their constitution from the Jesuit model), and on the left are the befound St Andrew and St Augustine (again, the Ursulines adopted many of the principles of the Augustinian rule). Interestingly, this small window of St Margaret is the only one of her in the chapel although a statue of St Margaret is placed on the outside of the central sanctuary wall.

Around the sanctuary walls are 6 statues by William Vickers of Glasgow: St Peter — erected in memory of Bishop Gillis; St Paul — in memory of Reverend Alexander O'Donnell who acted as chaplain to the convent for 25 years until being transferred to the Falkirk mission in 1871; St Teresa of Avila — in memory of Mother Margaret Teresa Clapperton who was one of the two Scottish nuns among the original 11 foundation sisters; St Agnes — in memory of Sister Agnes Xavier Trail who was the other Scottish foundation sister; St Anthony of Padua — in memory of Mother Margaret Maty; and St Francis de Sales — in memory of Mother Mary de Sales.

Originally, the sisters' choir stalls occupied the centre of the chapel and were surrounded by a carved oak screen (which itself replaced an earlier iron rail) presented by Mrs Colonel Hutchison. The sisters of the community would occupy the choir stalls for the Divine Office and Mass, and pupils from the school and members of the public would be seated either at the rear of the chapel behind the screen or in the Lady Aisle or Sacred Heart Aisle.

The choir stalls were removed along with the screen during the alterations of 1970. The majority of the choir stalls have since been installed in St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh. The rood screen still remains although now-positioned one bay closer to the West door and the screen turned round so that the Calvary figures (which are of a later period than the screen itself) now face towards the High Altar. A section of the side screens, less their highly ornamental toppings, now line the Shrine of St Crescentia, and other sections have been transferred to the organ loft of the Sacred Heart Church, Lauriston.

The Lady Altar was erected in October 1877 to a design by George Goldie of London and executed by the sculptor Thomas Earp. The statue was presented by Mr Clapperton of Fochabers (a relation of Sister Margaret Clapperton), and a lamp that hung before the altar was presented by Lord Ralph Kerr who had been received into the Church in the chapel during 1853. With the building of the chancel in 1893, the Lady Altar was relocated into its present position from its original setting similar to that of the Sacred Heart Altar on the other side.

As well as the window of St Francis Xavier already mentioned, another window in the Lady Aisle is of Our Lady and St Anne and was installed by the Ryan family in memory of Mary and Anne Ryan who attended the school at St Margaret's. Also in this aisle is an icon of Mother and Child by Mrs Scott-Moncrieff that was commissioned for the chapel of St Andrew's College, Drygrange, in memory of John Gerard Mallon who died in 1981 while a student at that seminary.

The other windows in the Lady Aisle are: St James — in memory of Bishop Gillis and erected by the community; St Angela Merici — given by Clementina Reggie (in 1535 St Angela had founded an earlier institute also called Ursulines); St Ursula — donated by Rudolph, 8th Earl of Denbigh, who was received along with his wife into the Church by Bishop Gillis in the convent chapel during 1850: and St Aloysius — donated by relatives and friends of the community.

The picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour is said to be an excellent copy from the original in Rome, and the pieta was given to the sisters by Bishop Gillis. Our Lady Queen of the World, was presented by John Menzies of Pitfodels who was a close personal friend of Bishop Gillis and financed the original purchase of the Whitehouse. Mr Menzies lies buried in the crypt.

A plaque commemorates Major John Considine and Lieutenant Patrick Considine who were both killed in 1915 during the First World War. As small boys the Considines had attended the school, and for many years the Considine family served as solicitors to the community. Major Considine is buried at Loos in France, and Lieutenant Considine is buried on Malta.

The Sacred Heart Altar was also designed by George Goldie. The altar was erected in the summer of 1880 and the statue of the Sacred Heart was presented by Mr John Mellon who lived in St Margaret's Road and is noted as a constant friend and generous benefactor to the convent.

The two principal windows in the Sacred Heart Aisle are: St Joseph — donated by the Langdale family (Mother Mary Angela Langdale was named Superioress of the house in 1855) and their cousins the Constable-Maxwell-Scott family (members of which lie buried in the vaults); and St Gabriel — the gift of Mr Monteith of Carstairs in thanksgiving for the conversion of his wife by Bishop Gillis.

A plaque by the door in the Sacred Heart Aisle states that the Stations of the Cross were given by former pupils and friends on the occasion of Mother Marv Cuthbert's golden jubilee in religion in 1950.

At the west end of the Sacred Heart Aisle is the Shrine of St Crescentia who is believed to have been a young Roman girl martyred for her faith. The relics were obtained for the convent by Mrs Colonel Hutchison who had been received into the Church at St Margaret's. While granting Mrs Hutchison an audience, Pope Gregory XVI asked Mrs Hutchison what she would like as a gift. Mrs Hutchison replied that she would like the relics of a saint for her 'eldest daughter' meaning the community of St Margaret's. By special permission of Pope Gregory, the feast of St Crescentia is kept on 10th October when traditionally the relics are exposed.

The eight clerestory windows were designed by Augustus W N Pugin and made by Messrs John Hardman and Co, Birmingham (Pugin's favoured manufacturers who later also produced the 6 large stained-glass windows in the nave itself). The windows were completed in July 1849 and depict King Malcolm III of Scotland (husband of St Margaret) and 7 of their 8 children. Among their sons shown here are Kings Edgar, Alexander I and David I of Scotland. The only son not represented is Edmund who, after the death of King Malcolm, joined with his uncle Donald Bane to seize the throne contrary to the rightful order of succession. King Donald Bane reigned for 3 years before being defeated and expelled from Scotland. The true claimant, King Edgar, then ascended the throne and his brother Edmund was imprisoned.

The triple window situated above the West door was only inserted during the 1970s having been taken from a Protestant church that was facing demolition.

The bell of the chapel was cast in Dublin, named 'Margaret', and presented by Mrs Stevenson and her daughter of Argyle Park, Edinburgh. The foundation sisters had stayed in Mrs Stevenson's house for 5 months following their arrival in Edinburgh and before the convent was ready for occupation. The bell was blessed in 1873 by Bishop John Strain who succeeded Bishop Gillis as Vicar Apostolic of the Eastern District. Bishop Strain was later consecrated first Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh following restoration of the Scottish hierarchy in 1878.

Bishop Gillis is buried in the crypt below the chapel along with his close friend John Menzies of Pitfodels. Also in the vaults lie James Hope-Scott of Abbotsford and his wife Charlotte (grand-daughter of Sir Walter Scott, Baronet of Abbotsford) with some of their children and grand-children (Maxwell-Scotts).

The Grotto in the grounds is a replica of the grotto at Lourdes. The statue of Our Lady was presented by Mrs Miles Fletcher of Inzievar, Fife, and spent 2 days in Lourdes before being erected at St Margaret's in 1880.

Bishop James Gillis

James Gillis was born on 7th April 1802 in Montreal, Canada, the only son of Alexander Gillis who had emigrated from Fochabers in Aberdeenshire.

Gillis' education began at the Sulpician College in Montreal until the return of his family to Scotland in 1816. The following year he entered the seminary of Aquhorties, near Inverurie, but after one year was transferred to the diocesan seminary of St Nicholas in Paris and from there went on to the Sulpician seminary of Issy-les-Moulineaux. Due to ill-health, he was forced to return to Scotland in 1826 and continued his studies for the priesthood privately under Bishop Andrew Scott, Vicar Apostolic of the Western District.

Gillis was ordained to the priesthood on 9th June 1827 at the seminary of Aquhorties by Bishop Alexander Paterson, Vicar Apostolic of the Lowland District.

Gillis' first appointment was to Blairs, the estate of Mr John Menzies of Pitfodels, where he remained until 1828. John Menzies' wife had died shortly after their marriage, and Menzies had no heirs to his estate. Impressed with Gillis' enthusiasm and vision, in 1829 Menzies handed over the mansion house at Blairs plus about 1,000 acres of land to Bishop Alexander Paterson for use as a seminary.

After his stay at Blairs, Gillis returned to Edinburgh and undertook many fund-raising trips to France to finance the enlargement of St Mary's Chapel, Edinburgh (now the Metropolitan Cathedral). John Menzies had also moved to Edinburgh and acquired a house in York Place where he invited Bishop Paterson to reside with him while 'Gillis acted as the Bishop's chaplain and secretary.

During a trip to France in 1828, Gillis met Abbe Louis Marie Baudouin who had founded the Congregation of the Ursulines of Jesus. Gillis visited the Mother House of the Ursulines at Chavagnes and was impressed by the sisters' work of teaching and instructing youth. In 1834, Gillis established the Ursulines in Edinburgh and, using finance provided by John Menzies, purchased the property of Whitehouse to become the first post-Reformation convent in Scotland.

In 1837, Gillis was nominated titular bishop of Limyra and coadjutor with the right of succession to Bishop Andrew Carruthers, Vicar Apostolic of the Eastern District. In St Mary's Chapel on Sunday 22nd July 1838, Gillis was consecrated bishop by Bishop Peter Baines, Vicar Apostolic of the Western District of England. With the death of Bishop Andrew Carruthers on 24th May 1852, Bishop Gillis succeeded him as Vicar Apostolic of the Eastern District.

Meantime, John Menzies had moved from York Place to Greenhill Cottage across from St Margaret's, and Bishop Gillis had taken up residence there too. During this time, Gillis acted as chaplain to the Ursulines of Jesus and provided advice on the running of the school at St Margaret's. John Menzies died in October 1843 and was buried in the chapel crypt.

In 1844 Bishop Gillis purchased the parks at Greenhill hoping to build a cathedral and seminary on the site. The idea remained dormant for 5 years when Edward Welby Pugin was commissioned to produce designs that were exhibited publicly in 1850. However, the lack of sufficient funding resulted in the project for St Margaret's Cathedral finally being abandoned and the Greenhill parks were later used for building.

With the cathedral project not feasible, Bishop Gillis focused on St Patrick's church in the Cowgate. St Patrick's had been built as an Episcopal chapel in the early 1770s and purchased by the Catholic Church in 1856. Gillis hoped to transform the church building into a Roman-style basilica and plans were drawn up, but the Bishop's vision did not materialise in this instance either.

As well as the Ursulines of Jesus, Gillis introduced many other religious orders into the Eastern District including the Society of Jesus (Lauriston, Edinburgh), the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (Leith), the Sisters of Mercy (Convent of St Catherine of Siena, Lauriston), and the Little Sisters of the Poor (Gilmore Place, Edinburgh). He also established within the District the Brotherhood of St Vincent de Paul.

During Gillis' vicariate, numerous missions and churches were founded including within the city St Patrick's at the Cowgate, the Sacred Heart at Lauriston and St Mary's at Leith. Outside the city, the churches and Mass centres that were opened included Dalkeith, Haddington, Bathgate, Peebles, Jedburgh, Kelso and Galashiels.

Bishop Gillis died at Greenhill, Edinburgh, on 24th February 1864. The Requiem Mass took place in St Mary's Chapel before the coffin was taken in procession to St Margaret's Convent where the Bishop lies buried in the crypt.

The Ursulines of Jesus and St Margaret's Convent

In 1802, Abbe Louis Marie Baudouin founded the Ursulines of Jesus as a teaching order based at Chavagnes en Pailles near Nantes in France.

During a trip to France in 1828, Bishop Gillis had met Abbe Baudouin and visited the order at Chavagnes. Impressed by the sisters' work of teaching and instructing youth, Gillis recognised a potential role for the order in Edinburgh.

Eleven foundation sisters travelled from Chavagnes to Edinburgh in 1834 to found the first convent in Scotland since the Reformation. Following their arrival, the sisters spent the first 5 months staying with Mrs Stevenson of Argyle Park in Edinburgh before the Whitehouse was ready for occupation on 26th December 1834. The new convent building and chapel designed by James Gillespie Graham were completed the following year.

Two of the 11 foundation sisters were Scottish: Sister Margaret Teresa Clapperton and Sister Agnes Xavier Trail. Sister Margaret Teresa belonged to a prominent Catholic family from Fochabers that was well known to Bishop Gillis, and entered the Ursulines of Jesus when 21 years old. In contrast, Sister Agnes Xavier was the daughter of a Church of Scotland minister from Panbride, Forfarshire, and only converted to Catholicism when aged 30 years old.

Miss Trail was a gifted artist and in 1824 travelled to London where she studied under Andrew Robertson, the celebrated miniature painter. Following her studies in London, Miss Trail undertook a tour of Italy including Rome. Due to her strong Presbyterian beliefs, Miss Trail's friends referred to her as "The lady who has gone to Rome to convert the Pope". However, during her tour, Miss Trail developed a deep interest in the Catholic faith and was finally received into the Church during a visit to Rome in 1828.

Miss Trail returned to Panbride the following year, but was later forced to leave Scotland to consult an eye specialist in London. During this period, Miss Trail stayed as a boarder at the Benedictine Convent at Hammersmith where, in the summer of 1832, she met the future-bishop James Gillis. Miss Trail heard about Bishop Gillis' plans to introduce the Ursulines of Jesus to Edinburgh, and later wrote to the Bishop offering to join the community.

Miss Clapperton and Miss Trail travelled together to Chavagnes where they entered the novitiate on 31st August 1833. The following year, Sister Margaret Teresa and Sister Agnes Xavier returned to Scotland with the other founding sisters of St Margaret's.

The original sisters established a school at St Margaret's for the education of girls from wealthy families. In addition, a separate school was opened at Milton House in the Canongate for poor and destitute children. Also, the sisters' ministry included visiting the sick and poor especially within Craiglockhart Poorhouse and Edinburgh prisons. In time, daughter houses to the convent were established at Portobello, Perth and Berwick-upon-Tweed.

In 1858 the sisters acquired several acres of the Strathearn Parks to protect their privacy, and in 1875 they purchased several acres to the north of the Whitehouse to maintain a distance between the convent and the new tenement buildings of Thirlestane Road.

Edward Welby Pugin was commissioned to construct the new school buildings and dormitories in 1861. The original design envisaged by Bishop Gillis was for a full quadrangle and cloister, but funding proved the limiting factor and only one side was completed.

The sisters' teaching mission was further extended in 1884 with the opening of St Ann's Seminary in Strathearn Road as a school for young Catholic girls.

Various notable people visited St Margaret's Convent over the years including members of European royalty. In 1843, the convent was visited by the Duc of Bordeaux whom the French sisters styled King Henri V of France. Eight years later the ex-Queen of France, Marie Amelie, Duchess of Orleans, and other members of the former royal family visited the convent when a Requiem Mass was held for the soul of the Duc of Orleans. In 1871, the Emperor and Empress of Brazil paid an unexpected visit after noticing the convent while driving past in their carriage.

After over 150 years, St Margaret's school closed in 1986 due to falling numbers of pupils. The Ursulines had purchased St Margaret's Tower in Strathearn Road in 1909, and the remaining sisters took up residence in the Tower following closure of the school.

Gillis College

Over the centuries, the education of Scottish priests had traditionally taken place on the Continent until the establishment in 1714 of the first post-Reformation seminary in Scotland at Eilean Ban in Loch Morar. The Jacobite Rebellion introduced complications almost immediately and the seminary was forced to close the following year. In 1716, the seminary was re-opened at Scalán in Glenlivet where the college remained until 1799 when the students transferred to a new college at Aquhorties near Inverurie in Aberdeenshire.

In 1829, Mr John Menzies of Pitfodels handed over his mansion house and estate of Blairs to Bishop Alexander Paterson for use as a seminary, and the students from Aquhorties transferred to Blairs College which remained open as a junior seminary until 1986. In addition to Blairs, students for the priesthood continued to be educated either on the Continent or at several other colleges in Scotland established and closed over the years.

In the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh, the senior seminary of St Andrew's College was opened at Drygrange, Melrose, in 1953. After 33 years, falling numbers of students led to the seminary being relocated to the site of the former St Margaret's Convent in Edinburgh.

The new seminary was formally opened on 7th September 1986 and named Gillis College in honour of Bishop James Gillis. The college remained open for only 7 years when the decision was taken to establish one senior seminary for Scotland. Gillis College was closed in the summer of 1993 when the remaining students were transferred to the newly designated Scottish national seminary of Scotus College at Bearsden, Glasgow.

Gillis Centre

Following closure of Gillis College as a seminary in 1993, the Gillis complex has been redeveloped as the base for a range of commissions, organisations and groups.

In particular, the Gillis Centre provides office accommodation for various administrative bodies of the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh including the offices of Chancery, Finance, and Fabric and Planning. Other diocesan agencies based at the Gillis Centre include the Ecumenical Commission, Justice and Peace, Religious Education, Scottish Marriage Care, Social Care and Youth Service.

In addition, the Gillis Centre houses the theological library from the former Gillis College with the library regularly open for public use. The Centre also provides conference facilities and residential accommodation available for commercial hire.

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