

What does the ceiling tell us about Aberdeen in 1520?

Dunbar and Galloway expressed in Heraldry their vision of Aberdeen's political place in Scotland and Europe in 1520.

Church and politics were interlinked.

Bishops were often political advisers to Kings, travelling with them and accompanying them in court.

Aberdeen's Cathedral was keen to show a united Roman Church across Europe under the Pope Leo X. At this time Protestant reforms were gathering pace in Europe and that union was under threat.



The Holy Roman
Emperor Charles V



The Pope Leo X



King James V of
Scotland

Heraldry and shields

Knights started using 'coats of arms' to distinguish themselves from others on the battlefield nearly a thousand years ago.

Bold, bright colours and simple geometric shapes and symbols were used so they were seen easily from a distance.

Heralds were in charge of keeping a record of these designs, sometimes written down, sometimes in their heads. Many knights at that time spoke French so the language of Blazonry evolved to describe schemes very precisely using French words.

People still have coats of arms today. In Scotland this is controlled carefully by The Lord Lyon King of Arms.

See our Heraldry Activities online for more information

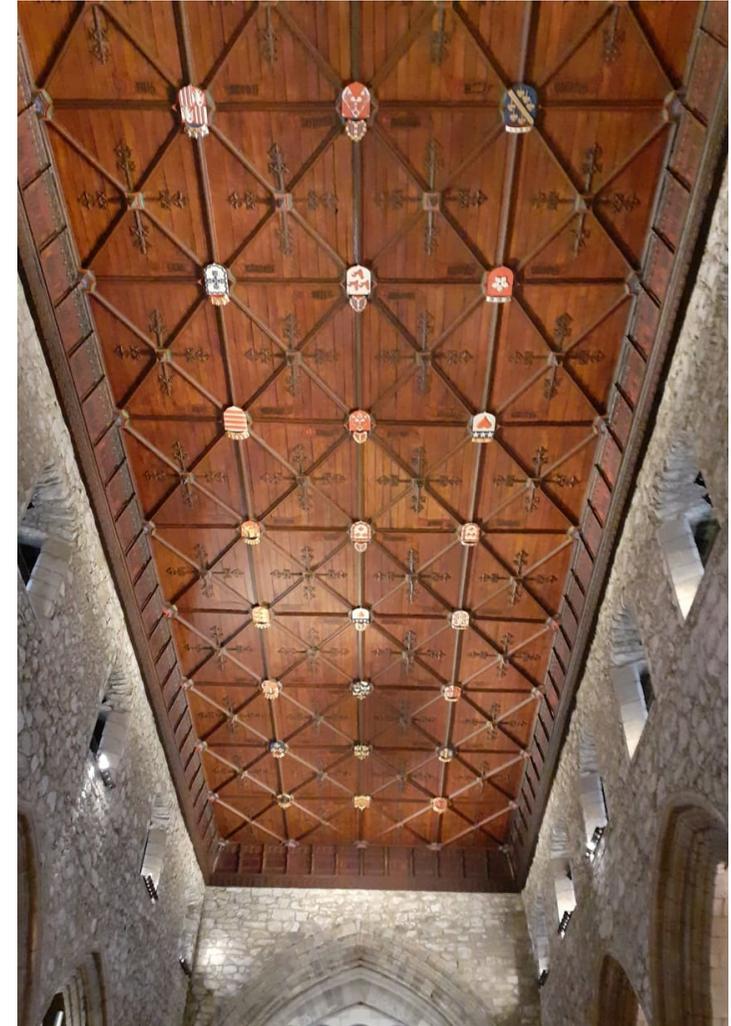
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St Machar's Cathedral Heraldic Ceiling



Leader's notes for school/group tours



Who built the Heraldic ceiling?

Bishop Gavin Dunbar was the Bishop of Aberdeen in 1520 when the ceiling was made. Alexander Galloway, Rector of Kinkell is thought to have overseen the work.

Who is on the ceiling?

There are 48 shields on the ceiling. They are arranged in 3 rows of 16 shields.

The shields closest to the east end of the church belonged to the most important people and are more highly decorated to show their prestige.

If you look towards the east end of the church and the East Window, they are arranged as in the table below.

left	centre	right
<p>The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V</p> <p>Kings of Europe France, Spain, England, Denmark, Hungary, Portugal, Aragon, Cyprus, Navarre, Sicily, Poland, Bohemia, Bourbon and Gueldres</p>	<p>Head of the Roman Church Pope Leo X</p> <p>Archbishops of Scotland St Andrews and Glasgow</p> <p>Bishops of Scotland Dunkeld, Aberdeen, Moray, Ross, Brechin, Caithness, Galloway, Dunblane, Argyll, Orkney and the Isles. Prior of St Andrews representing the monastic orders.</p>	<p>King of Scotland James V</p> <p>St Margaret</p> <p>Duke of Albany, Earl of March, Earl of Moray, Earl of Douglas, Earl of Angus, Earl of Mar, Earl of Sutherland, Earl of Crawford, Earl of Huntly, Earl of Argyll, Earl of Erroll, Earl Marischal and Earl of Bothwell</p>
<p>Old Aberdeen, a burgh of Barony</p>	<p>King's College, University of Aberdeen</p>	<p>Royal burgh of Aberdeen</p>

Some shield facts

Charles V appears 5 times as he is also King of Spain, Navarre, Aragon and Sicily.

St Margaret is the only female on the ceiling, put there instead of a consort as King James V was a young boy in 1520.

Some families such as the Hepburns appear more than once.

At the west end of the church, over the gallery, there are 3 local shields. Old Aberdeen (the bough pot of 3 lilies and 3 salmon), Royal Aberdeen Burgh (3 castles) and King's College, University of Aberdeen (an open book which contains names of Victorian restorers).

Where is the ceiling?

The ceiling is over an area of the church called the **nave**, where ordinary people could go. The east end of the church was considered more sacred and only for priests and canons.

Has the building layout changed since 1520?

In 1520 the church was much bigger than it is now. At the east end there was a large tower, two transepts either side and beyond that a choir. The tower fell down in 1688 and the choir and transepts fell into disrepair. Today the transepts are a ruin and the choir has completely disappeared.

