

# The Church at Barthol Chapel - 150 Years of History

## Barthol Chapel Before The Church Was Built

The map below from circa 1870 shows the area that would develop into the present day village centre.

The first village school stands by an ancient graveyard. Established as a parochial school, it was erected in the year 1847 by the 4th Earl of Aberdeen, George Hamilton-Gordon. It was positioned in the western part of his vast estate to serve the local scattered farming community. The average attendance of scholars was then eighty. It is noteworthy that the 4th Earl of Aberdeen later served as Prime Minister from 1852 until 1855.

The school was also used as a preaching station once a month, when service was conducted by the Minister of Tarves Parish. The schoolhouse for the teacher is the building just to the west of the school and was built in 1850. Along with Barthol Chapel Farm, built in 1804, these are the only buildings in the village centre before the church.



Barthol Chapel circa 1870

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## A Personal Tragedy Leads To A Community Benefit

In 1874, Mary, Dowager Countess of Aberdeen, commissioned a new church at Barthol Chapel as a memorial to her eldest son, George Hamilton-Gordon, 6th Earl of Aberdeen, who had lost his life at sea in 1870. The church was to be situated near the school that they had built some years earlier and would provide a permanent place of worship for their farm tenants.

The exact site of the church, on high ground, was said to be chosen so that it could be seen from Haddo House, seat of the Earl of Aberdeen, some four miles away. The church, then named the Gordon Memorial Church, was opened in 1875.

George's brother and successor, the 7th Earl of Aberdeen John Campbell Hamilton-Gordon, granted a manse to the Church and gifted a large contribution towards its annual endowment.

## The Church And Manse Are Built

The 25th March 1874 edition of the *Aberdeen Journal and General Advertiser* newspaper carried a notice to builders stating that estimates were wanted for the mason, carpenter and other works required for the erection of a church at Barthol Chapel. The plans and specifications were available at the office of William Smith, Architect, Aberdeen.

Later that year, on 29th August, the ceremony of laying the foundation stone of the church at Barthol Chapel was performed by Countess Aberdeen in the presence of a large number of parishioners and others. A newspaper report stated that "*the Countess of Aberdeen, with her characteristic munificence, is erecting the handsome church to the memory of her son, the late Earl of Aberdeen and it will prove a very great service to the district*". John Morrison from Hattonslap presented a handsome silver trowel to her ladyship. A number of speeches were given, prayers offered up and lessons of scripture read. A well-trained choir rendered a selection of hymns. A dinner was then held in the school room for those connected with the management of the church.

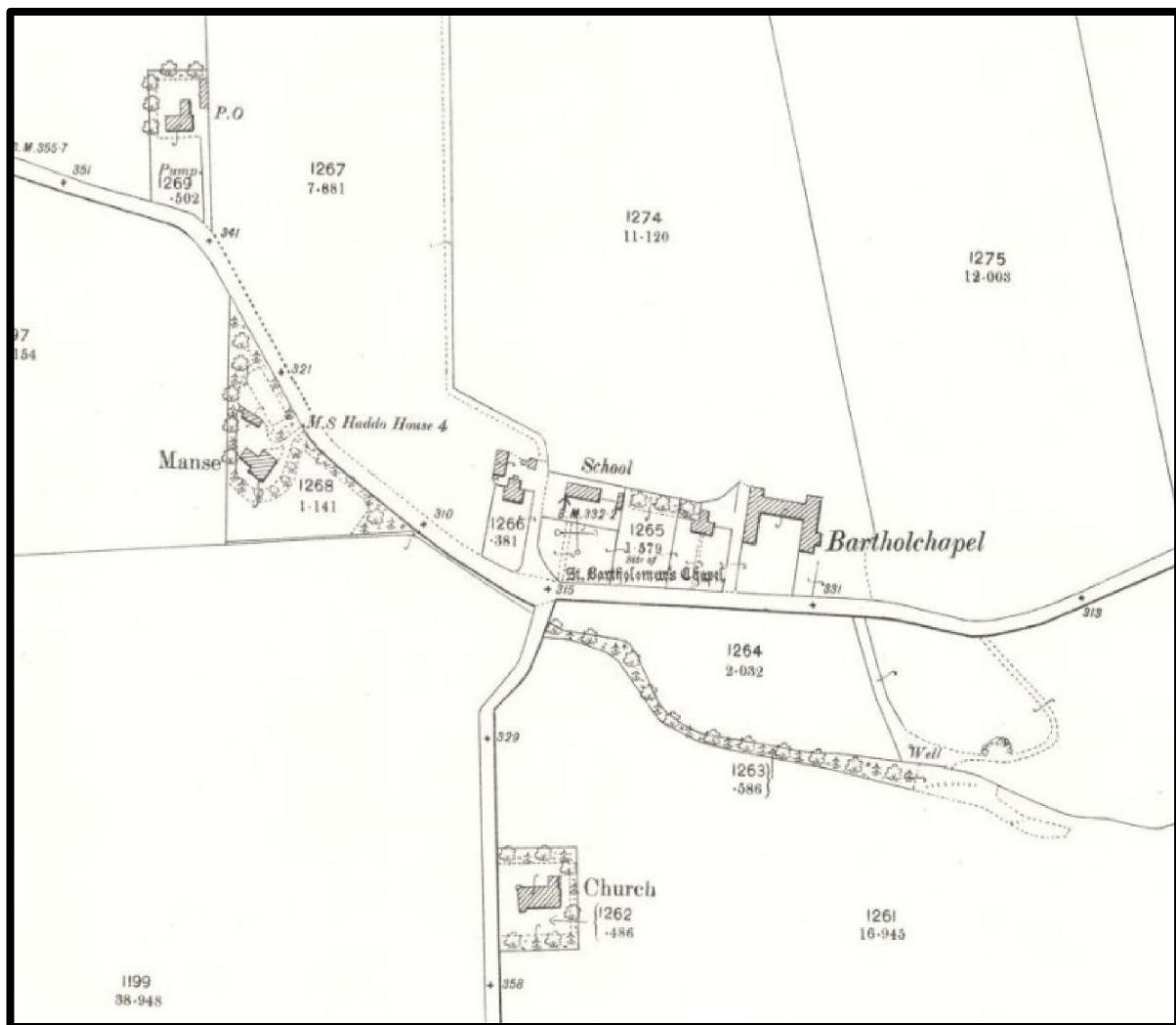
The Gordon Memorial Church was opened on Thursday 12th August 1875 by Professor Charteris of Edinburgh, who preached to a crowded congregation. Seating up to 350 persons, its construction cost £2500.

The manse was completed in early 1876 at a cost of £900. Ultimately the total amount of contributions from the Earl of Aberdeen and from the Countess Dowager of Aberdeen came to some £4800.

With the new church and manse in place, the Parish of Barthol Chapel was created by being disjoined from the parishes of Tarves, Fyvie, Methlick and Meldrum in January 1876.



The map below from 1899 shows the location of the new church and manse. Also shown is a new general store with post office just up the road from the manse. It is believed that this store was built around the same time as the manse. It can be seen that the layout of Barthol Chapel Farm changed markedly at some stage in the last 30 years.



Barthol Chapel circa 1899

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## **Our Ministers**

The following is a list of our ministers and the years they served Barthol Chapel:

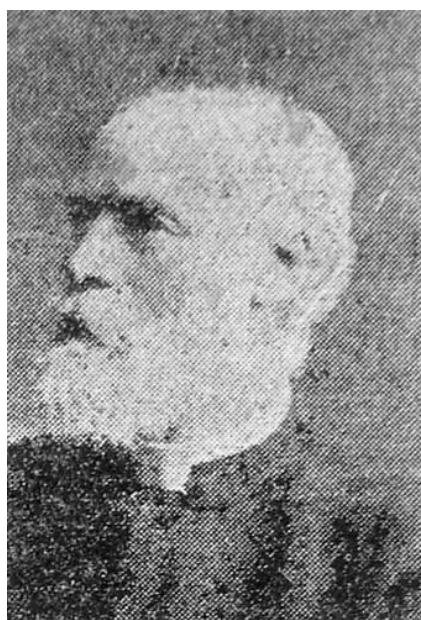
- Reverend James Forrest 1876 - 1878
- Reverend Alexander Robertson Sutter 1879 - 1924
- Reverend William George Robertson 1925 - 1927
- Reverend John Dawson McLean 1928 - 1935
- Reverend William Cowper Robertson 1935 - 1958

Barthol Chapel parish rejoined with Tarves in 1958, since then, the ministers of Tarves and Barthol Chapel have been:-

- Reverend Charles Stuart 1958 - 1963
- Reverend Alisdair William Macdonnell 1963 - 1979
- Reverend William Murdoch May 1980 - 1991
- Reverend Leslie Barrett 1991 - 1999
- Reverend Alan McKean 2001 - 2004
- Reverend Isabel Buchan 2007 - 2013
- Reverend Alison Swindells 2017 – 2024
- Reverend Aquila Singh 2025 -

The following paragraphs provide some details regarding the five ministers that served Barthol Chapel between 1876 and 1958.

## Reverend James Forrest 1876-1878



James Forrest was born at Strichen near Fraserburgh on 9th April 1843. In 1860 James entered Aberdeen University as an arts student and graduated with an MA in 1865. His studies in divinity at the university lasted from 1864 to 1869.

He then acted as schoolmaster at Auchterless, about 8 miles from Barthol Chapel, for a “*number of years*”. James started his duties as a pastor in the Barthol Chapel area in March 1874, before the Gordon Memorial church and manse were built. James was formally ordained on 23rd March 1876 as the first minister of Barthol Chapel.

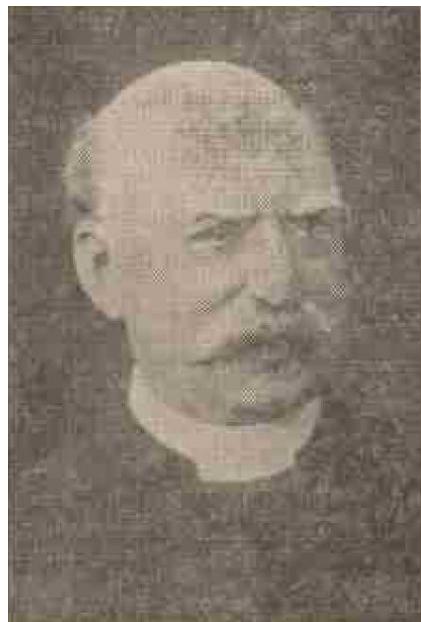
Less than three weeks later and just three days after his 33rd birthday, on 12th April, James married Catherine Gray, the eldest daughter of the Reverend Alexander Gray at the Gray family home, the manse at Auchterless.

On 1st February 1877, Catherine gave birth to their first child, Isabella Gray Forrest at their home, the manse at Barthol Chapel. James and Catherine’s second child, their first son, was born at the manse on 3rd September 1878. He was also named James.

Sunday 20th October 1878 was the last Sabbath on which then Reverend Forrest would conduct divine service as Minister of the Gordon Memorial Church. He was about to move to be minister of the parish of Lonmay. The church was fully occupied and, according to one newspaper report, “*many seemed deeply affected with the thought that they would hear his voice no more from that place as their minister*”. The report finishes with the words “*By the young he is specially beloved*”.

James was minister at Barthol Chapel for about two and a half years.

## Reverend Alexander Robertson Sutter 1879 – 1924



On 16th August 1851, Alexander was born at Dunbar, Haddington, East Lothian. He was educated at Dunbar School and Edinburgh University. After being licensed by the Presbytery of Dunbar in July 1874, he became assistant at West Church Aberdeen and at Newbattle Church in Dalkeith. He had also worked, for several months, in a large manufacturing district of Lanarkshire.

As yet unmarried, he was inducted into his one and only charge at Barthol Chapel on 14th May 1879 at the age of 27.

In his younger days golf and curling were said to be his two chief recreations.

On 3rd June 1909, the newspapers reported the marriage of Reverend Alexander Robertson Sutter (now 57 years old) to widow Flora Ramsay, at the prestigious Palace Hotel, Union Street, Aberdeen.

The Reverend Alexander Sutter formally retired in November 1924 at the age of 73. *"The Rev. A.R. Sutter, who, owing to advancing years and the indifferent state of his health, retired from the ministry after nearly half a century's successful work in the church and parish of Barthol Chapel."* He was made the recipient of a number of gifts *"testifying to the regret at his resignation and the goodwill that had existed between him and the congregation during his long ministry amongst them."*

Reverend Alexander Robertson Sutter was, by far, the longest serving minister at Barthol Chapel, serving the community for over 45 years.

## Reverend William George Robertson 1925 – 1927



William George Robertson was born in Calcutta, India around 1873. His father was Reverend James Robertson who had been ordained by the Presbytery of Turriff and sent to Calcutta in 1871 to act as a missionary.

William graduated MA at Aberdeen University in 1894. First bursar at the Aberdeen United Free (UF) College, he left it with the Lumsden and Sachs Scholarship, and graduated BD, with honours, in 1898. Licensed and ordained by the UF Church Presbytery, he was from 1898 to 1908 Professor at Wilson College, Bombay. In 1908 he was unanimously elected Principal of Gujarat College, Ahmedabad. In 1912 the Secretary of State for India appointed him to the Indian Educational Service Imperial Branch, and 1919 he was promoted to the special grade.

The date William married his wife Elisabeth is not known; however, one record intriguingly states that the ceremony took place in China.

In 1923 Mr Robertson was unanimously admitted by the General Assembly to the ministry of the Church of Scotland. He returned to Scotland in 1924.

February 1925 saw his induction service at Barthol Chapel, William was then either 51 or 52 years old. Despite the inclement weather there was a large congregation at the service. Among the worshippers were the Marquis and Marchioness of Aberdeen and Tamair, as well as members of the Presbytery of Ellon.

A vacancy for minister in the Parish Church of Cullen arose in the summer of 1927 and Reverend W.G. Robertson was duly induced to the charge of Cullen Parish Church on 28th September 1927.

Speaking at the translation, the Rev. T. McWilliam, Foveran, referred “*in laudatory terms to the ability, geniality, and helpfulness of Mr Robertson during his all too short stay in the Presbytery, and expressed the regret of the brethren in parting with one who had won the esteem of all.*“

## Reverend John Dawson McLean 1928 – 1935



John Dawson McLean was born on 22nd July 1870 to parents Reverend Alexander McLean and Patricia Collins McLean. His father was the Minister of Strachan Parish, Kincardineshire.

John was educated at Milne's Institution Fochabers in Morayshire, following which he entered Edinburgh University and graduated MA, BD. His first assistantship was at Slains, Aberdeenshire and he was also assistant at Dalziel, Motherwell, and later at St Andrew's, Perth. He was ordained at St Modan's, Falkirk, in August 1899, and while there, his ministry was "*most successful*". He was ordained to Maryton on the 5th of January 1905.

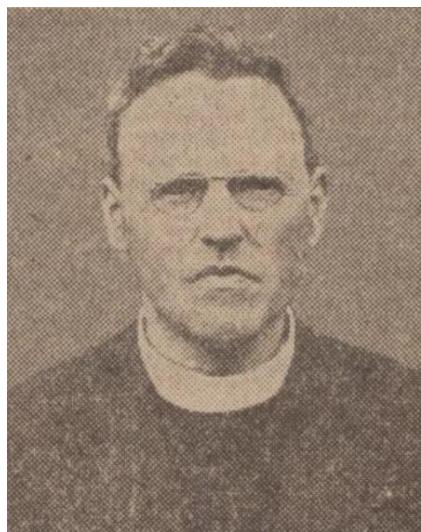
It appears that John never married.

The Reverend John McLean was inducted by the Presbytery of Ellon to the church and parish of Barthol Chapel on Thursday 12th January 1928.

At the beginning of February 1935, it was reported that the Presbytery of Aberdeen had agreed to translate the Reverend John D. McLean to Finzean, Feughside, which is about 5 miles west of Strachan where he was born. In accepting the call to Finzean, Reverend John D. McLean spoke of his happy years at Barthol Chapel, adding that Barthol Chapel was a healthy place as, during his ministry, he had buried a woman resident aged 105 years and three people over ninety.

On the evening of 13th February 1935, Barthol Chapel folk turned out in full force to bid godspeed to their minister, who was leaving for Finzean after seven years' devoted service in the parish. They regretted his departure, but they wished that his work in his new parish would be greatly blessed. "*They had been strengthened and encouraged by his preaching and all had appreciated his visitations. His work in the Sunday School was a great one, and his kindly, thoughtful teaching would help to mould the minds of the young folk and make them worthy citizens of the Empire*".

### **Reverend William Cowper Robertson 1935 – 1958**



William Cowper Robertson was born on 15th June 1878 at Guthrie, Angus. He was the eldest child of Lewis Peter Robertson and Margaret Robertson. His father was the school master and registrar at the Guthrie Public School.

William attended Edinburgh University where he graduated in 1902 aged 24. Thereafter he was licensed by the Presbytery of Edinburgh in 1905. At the beginning of August 1907, after a number of years as assistant at Liberton Parish Church, Edinburgh, the 29 year-old Reverend W. Cowper Robertson MA was ordained and inducted minister of the parish of Cleish, Kinross-shire.

On 4th January 1908, he married Jessie Katherine McGregor at Mayfield Kirk, Newington, Midlothian, Edinburgh. Together William and Jessie had two daughters.

In July 1917, it was reported that he took up duties for four months with the YMCA in France in support of the war effort. Thereafter he returned to Cleish. Reverend William Cowper Robertson was appointed as minister to the Scots Kirk, Rue Bayard (near the Champs-Élysées), Paris in October 1927. William stayed at the Scots Kirk for about 7 years until his appointment at Barthol Chapel in 1935.

The Reverend William C. Robertson, now 57, was inducted to the charge of Barthol Chapel on 27th June 1935.

The Reverend William Cowper Robertson retired as minister at Barthol Chapel in 1958 at the age of 80, after serving 23 years.

## Noteworthy Village Events

The following table lists some of the most noteworthy events of the last 150 years.

1875 – Gordon Memorial Church opened	1930 – A £700 extension to the new school approved
1876 – Manse completed	1931 – Barthol Chapel SWRI formed
1876 – Rev James Forrest ordained	1931 – Lord Aberdeen relinquishes ownership of the church and manse
1879 – Rev Alexander Sutter ordained	1932 – Church clock installed in memory of Miss Sophie Arthur
1887 – Post Office opened in the general store	1935 – Rev William Cowper ordained
1894 – funds raised for a church stable	1939 to 1945 – Second World War. Church Women's Guild and SWRI combine to form a single working party
1900 – The woodwork in the church vestry caught fire, extinguished by a pail of water	1958 – Barthol Chapel rejoins Tarves Parish.
190? – School House Cottage built for assistant teacher	1959 – Manse sold into private ownership
1914 to 1918 – Great War. Substantial support provided by the community, the Church and Haddo House Estate	1962 – Robbery and serious assault at Barthol Chapel post office
1919 – Lord Aberdeen sells 50,000 acres of his estate. Tenants given first opportunity to buy their holdings	1968 – New school opens (the third building)
1919 – The church was badly damaged by lightning	1970 – Village shop closure
1919 – Peace celebrations at Haddo House	1974 – The old hall was put up for sale
1919 – Barthol Chapel War Memorial unveiled	1975 – Church Centenary
1921 – Barthol Chapel Church Women's Guild formed	1978 – Haddo House transferred to the National Trust for Scotland
1925 – Rev William Robertson ordained	1980 onwards – Expansion of housing in the village
1927 – Rev John McLean ordained	2023 – Last service held at the Church
1929 – New school opened by Lady Haddo. The cost of the school building was £3000, 88 pupils were registered	2025 – Funds secured to create a community hub in the Church 150-year anniversary
1929 – Efforts to purchase the old school for use as a public hall were successful	2025 – The church was purchased for the benefit of the community

### **The Barthol Chapel Church Centenary Celebrations**

In anticipation of the 1975 Barthol Chapel Parish Church centenary, a sale of work was held in the nearby school in June 1974. The event, which raised £302, was opened by the Marchioness of Aberdeen, thus forging a direct link with the kirk's opening for worship in August 1875.



A centenary appeal was launched and all former members of the congregation, parishioners and friends were approached to contribute. The object of the appeal was to install a reconditioned pipe organ in place of the electronic one. The redecoration of the kirk was also to be taken in hand, as well as support for the overseas work of the kirk.

The photograph shows the scene at the Barthol Chapel Parish Church centenary celebrations on 10th August 1975. The Moderator of the General assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Right Reverend James Matheson (right) along with the Reverend A.W. Macdonnell of Tarves and Barthol Chapel lead the congregation in procession from the hall to the church.

## Reflections On 150 Years Of Community Spirit

### In the Beginning

In the first part of the 19th Century, Barthol Chapel village centre was nothing more than the site of an historic graveyard surrounded by a widely scattered community of small, mainly subsistence farms.

At that time agriculture was undergoing rapid improvements, the industrial revolution was well under way and the British Empire was yet to see its zenith. These wider shifts set the stage for the development of the village that followed.

Largely under the influence of the Earls of Aberdeen and the Church, a focus for the community was introduced by the building of the school, with schoolhouse and then the church, with its manse. A village shop, with post office soon followed, later School House cottage was built to accommodate an assistant teacher. When the second village school was opened in 1929, the first school building was turned into a village hall and it hosted numerous community events, recording up to 300 attendees.

### Example Community Events in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Dances	“At homes”
Whist drives	Choir recitals
Fancy dress parties	Christmas parties
Lectures and talks, for example on literature, poetry, crafts, thrift, practical country skills and travel	Burns nights
Sales of goods	Celebration of national events such as Empire Day, coronations and silver jubilees
Sales of work	Excursions
Flower shows	Children’s picnics
Events at Haddo house	Halloween party
Trips out for children	Poppy days
Local fair	Shows with humorous sketches
Baking competitions	Competitions - baking, garden produce, handy craft
Music recitals	Lantern lectures, for example climbing in the Cairngorms
Scottish country dancing balls	Pageants
Teas	Support the Haddo House Young Women’s Improvement Association
Plays	

Lord and Lady Aberdeen, the Barthol Chapel ministers, school masters and local farmers clearly provided community leadership to bring about social cohesion based on the foundations of shared engagement in agriculture and a common Christian faith.

Wartime was when community spirit really excelled, particularly during the Great War. In addition to fund raising, the collective effort produced food and home comfort parcels, as well as warm winter clothing for members of our armed forces, prisoners of war and refugees.

In the 1920's and 1930's, community organisations such as the Church Women's Guild, the SWRI (and more recently the BCCA) were formed to foster our community spirit.

### **A Changing World**

Over time, the shared community foundations slowly slipped away and so the village population began to have less and less in common.

Firstly, the influence of Haddo House and Estate started to wane after much of its land was sold in 1919. In 1931 Lord Aberdeen relinquished ownership of the church and manse, not long before his death in March 1934.

As elsewhere, the role of the Church in society declined in the 20th century. To underline this one Aberdeenshire minister said, in 1935 "*They were living in a materialistic age, in which moral and spiritual influences seemed to have lost their grip, and that the duty of worshipping God in the sanctuary too much neglected.*" Ultimately Barthol Chapel parish was rejoined with Tarves in 1958 and the manse was sold.

The number of people engaged in agriculture has also reduced significantly due to increasing mechanisation and other efficiencies.

For many years, the people of the area frequently came together for the purpose of shared entertainment, mutual improvement and fund raising. With the advent of radio, television, cinema and other media, the number of such gatherings significantly declined. The ability to easily travel to nearby towns and Aberdeen for entertainment and provisions was another factor in this decline. Ultimately, in the 1970s, the village shop closed followed soon afterwards by the closure of the village hall.

An increase in personal mobility allowed families engaged in non-agricultural industries to settle in the district, commuting to local towns and to Aberdeen for their work. From around the 1980s onwards, this increased mobility enabled the expansion of housing in the village centre from around half a dozen in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to twenty at the time of writing. It is noted that planning permission has been granted for a further four houses at the eastern edge of the village.

Finally, it is worth noting that one highly valued communal village institution has endured throughout all this change, namely the village school, now in its third building.

## **Looking Forward**

The church at Barthol Chapel held its last service in June 2023 and in December 2025 was purchased to become our new Community Hub.

The Barthol Chapel Community Hub charitable organisation aims to boost the sense of community and togetherness within the district. Their vision is to convert our 150 year old church into a multi-use hub at the heart of the community.

Their mission is to support the local community by offering a versatile hub that caters to the diverse needs and interests of local residents. Through this venue, they aim to facilitate connections, learning and growth, thereby enriching the lives of those they serve.

## Acknowledgements

The following organisations are acknowledged for providing sources of the material used in this brief history.

- Haddo House Estate – historical church photographs
- Maps – National Library of Scotland <https://maps.nls.uk>
- British Newspaper Archives – newspaper reports of local events  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>
- Ancestry - <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/>
- Findmypast - <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/>