

Historical Context

For more detailed reading on the subject, as well as how these political events shaped St Giles', Rosalind K. Marshall's book 'St Giles': The Dramatic Story of a Great Church and its People' is highly recommended, as these notes borrow heavily from her work.

James VI

James VI becomes monarch of Scotland and England in 1603, and moves to London, where he is head of church and state, and has the full weight of the Anglican bishops behind him: 'No bishop, no King'. The Scottish Parliament continues to meet, and St Giles' is first referenced as a High Kirk in 1596.

James only returns to Scotland in 1617, armed with the English Book of Common Prayer and the practise of communion which the King, bishops and courtiers received in Holyrood Abbey. Later, the Book of Common Prayer is dropped for fear of inciting local riots.

Charles I

Charles I inherits the throne from his father and is crowned in London in 1626 and later at Holyrood Abbey in 1633. A week later, there is a service in St Giles' he attended, which is interrupted by English chaplains who read from the English Book of Common Prayer.

By September 29th 1633, Charles decreed that St Giles' become the cathedral of a bishopric, making Edinburgh a city instead of a burgh.

Spring 1637: a new prayer book is published, which despite some concessions to Presbyterianism, closely resembles the English Book of Common Prayer and contains chapters of the Apocrypha, a saint's day calendar, and instructions as to the placement of the holy table. Neither the book itself nor its publication was approved by the Scottish General Assembly.

1637: the Jenny Geddes riots

23th July: the new prayer book is used for the first time in St Giles'. Dean Hannay steps up to read, but is drowned out by the angry reaction of the congregation. It is at this point that, as legend has it, a local woman by the name of Jenny Geddes is so enraged that she hurls her stool, brought into St Giles' to use during lengthy sermons, at Dean Hannay and shouts 'dinnae say mass at my lug!' (don't say mass in my ear). This sparks rioting across the city and the town council was inundated with petitions against the King's interference.

National Covenant: written at Greyfriars in 28th Feb 1638, the document states that Charles I violated many parliamentary, legal statues put in place to protect the Reformed Scottish Church and the signatories were therefore 'pledging themselves to defend the true religion, liberties and laws of the kingdom against any to tried to interfere with them' (Marshall). Essentially a promise to God to defend his true religion and protect their relationship to him from outside influence i.e. the King, who should not be able to overturn parliamentary law.

Charles makes some concessions, but too late; all Scottish bishops are deposed, and the Covenanters raise an army against Charles.

1639: The Scottish Parliament and General Assembly abolish Episcopacy in the country, and St Giles is no longer a cathedral.

Two Bishop's Wars later and the defeated King signed the Treaty of Ripon in 1641, legitimising all acts passed through Scottish Parliament during the wars.

Solemn League and Covenant 1643: It is now the English Civil War, and an agreement is brokered between Scottish Covenanters and English Parliamentarians. The Scots will fight against the King on the promise that Scottish form of church government would be adopted in England when the Parliamentarians win.

January 1649: Charles I is executed in Whitehall. Edinburgh Council declares Charles II is rightful heir and work starts on St Giles as the city anticipates his return from exile.

Charles II sails to Scotland soon after, but Cromwell's army defeats the Scots at Dunbar; although he escapes, Scotland is united with England as a Commonwealth. St Giles' is taken over as Cromwell's church and the services are Episcopalian, with the Scottish ministers replaced. When Cromwell died in 1658 his son, Richard, took his place but was defeated by the English Royalist army in 1659.

Charles II

Edinburgh and St Giles' begin to prepare for the arrival of Charles II, son of Charles I. However, no monarch would visit Scotland again until George IV in 1822. Charles II's first parliament annuls all law passed after 1633. However...

1661: Charles II restored archbishops to Scotland, thus making St Giles' a cathedral again.

Many of St Giles' ministers were replaced for refusing to support this reintroduction. In 1666 the Covenanters, still fighting against the interference in their worship, were defeated in the Pentland Uprisings and many were executed. Some were held in a prison known as Haddo's Hole in St Giles, which is no longer there.

Charles II died in 1685 and was succeeded by Catholic James VII and II. Despite widespread alarm in Scotland at his religion, he actually granted freedom of worship to everyone in 1687, although he did establish the then Catholic Order of the Thistle in Scotland, which today is Protestant and has a spiritual home in the Thistle Chapel at St Giles. He was deposed in 1688 in favour of his Protestant daughter Mary. In Scotland, this meant that there was an abolishment of bishops and their supporting ministers.

1690: an act passed in the Scottish Government which set up the Presbyterian church government. From then onwards, St Giles' is a cathedral in name only.