

THE CHAPEL OF THE ORDER OF THE THISTLE

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Star of the
Order of the Thistle

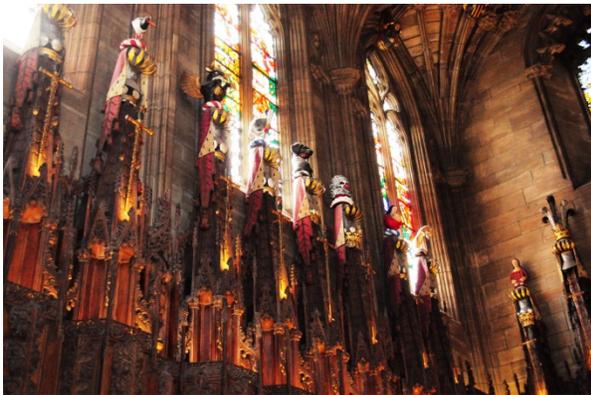
While the City of Edinburgh offers a wide range of tourist attractions it also offers a small corner of heraldic heaven. For enthusiasts of heraldry, and the associated aspect of phaleristics, a tiny corner of St. Giles' Cathedral is a gem. Located on High Street, better known as the Royal Mile, the Cathedral is an easy landmark to find on your way to or from Edinburgh Castle. The building dates back to the twelfth century and has gone through various structural changes and religious, social and cultural evolutions in its existence. It is the home of the Church of Scotland in Edinburgh and has been the centre of religious life in Edinburgh for over 900 years. The Cathedral has a distinctive crown steeple that can be seen

the length of the Royal Mile as well as from other points in Edinburgh.

Tucked away in a quiet corner of the Cathedral is a small area of recent completion; the Thistle Chapel. By recent I mean 1911. This is the chapel of Scotland's foremost Order of Chivalry, The Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle. This chapel is a prominent display of heraldry as the arms of the Knights of the Order are displayed on the stalls.



Thistle Chapel entrance
Photo: Steve Cowan



Thistle Chapel stall canopies with
carved helmets and crests
Photo: Steve Cowan

(Some background on the Order of the Thistle: While its ancient history dates back to the eighth or ninth century, and various attempts that may have been made in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, the modern revival of the Order dates from 1703 under its reestablishment by Queen Anne. Membership was originally the Sovereign and twelve Knights, increased to sixteen Knights in 1827. In 1987 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II allowed the regular admission of women to the Order. There are four Extra Knights and Ladies Companion members from the Royal Family, the latest being Prince William in 2012.)

Access is through a single door and controlled by a volunteer guide who conducts twenty minute tours each half hour. While the Cathedral is large and open, the Thistle Chapel is quite small. It is about 12 metres long (40 feet) and half that in width. Along each side of its length are the stalls of the knights; above each stall is a beautiful carved canopy of the helm and crest of the Knight. On the back of each stall are the achievements, or metal stall plates, of the Knights who have used and are using each stall. As you enter the Chapel you pass the spectacular Sovereign's stall with its elaborate woodwork and heraldic carvings. Look for the bagpipe playing angel.



Thistle Chapel looking west towards the Sovereign's Stall
Photo: Steve Cowan



Thistle Chapel stall plates
Photo: Steve Cowan

Don't forget to look up, way up. The ceiling is a delightful array of heraldic images with angels holding shields.

In the main area of the Cathedral there are also the banners of the knights on display. Several of the side aisles have regimental Colours hung high above. Some of the Colours are very faded and tattered alluding to the many decades, if not centuries, since the Colours have been laid up.



Banners of the Knights and Ladies of The Order of the Thistle
Photo: Steve Cowan



Regimental Colours
Photo: Steve Cowan



HRH Prince Andrew leaving St. Giles Cathedral at the
Battle of Britain Service 24 September 2015
Photo: Steve Cowan

As luck would have it, when my wife Judy and I were wandering the top half of the Royal Mile we could not access the Cathedral or its immediate area; seemed that there was a special service taking place that sunny September afternoon. At the Cathedral entrance there were various military personnel all dressed in Royal Air Force (RAF) uniforms and they appeared to be waiting for a service to finish as they formed up in ranks and stood to attention. There was a large crowd of onlookers, mostly tourists, and I was able to stand in a building stairway to see who emerged from St. Giles. The date and air force personnel, as well as an array of World War Two aircraft displays on the entrance

grounds indicated this was the local Battle of Britain Service. After waiting only a few minutes, His Royal Highness Prince Andrew came out of the Cathedral, chatted with RAF members and clergy before departing. Prince Andrew, dressed as an Air Commodore in the RAF, was wearing his sash for his membership in the Order of the Garter. Only his mother, father, older brother, sister and nephew are Sovereign and Royal Family members of the Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle.

I thoroughly recommend a visit to St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh Scotland. There is a suggested donation of a few pounds to access the Cathedral. If you want to take photographs you will need to purchase a Photo Permit for £2, a mere bagatelle for what you will see and an interesting souvenir. No extra charge for the Thistle Chapel, just a matter of getting a place for the limited group access. You will be rewarded with seeing historical and colourful aspects of heraldry and chivalry.

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