



GRIEG SOCIETY OF SCOTLAND

GRIEGFORENINGEN I SKOTTLAND

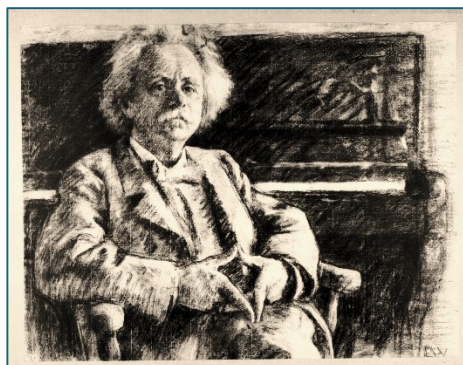
HONORARY PRESIDENT – JOHANNE GRIEG KIPPENBROECK

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A Home for the ‘Grieg Connection’ - a centre for Scottish-Norwegian cultural links

Call to Interested Parties

Background



“ I too regret the span of water between Norway and Scotland – as I get very seasick! Otherwise I should love to shake hands with you and chat a little... of our fellow ancestors. Believe me. Yours truly, Edvard Grieg. ”

The ancient village of Rathen, near Fraserburgh in Aberdeenshire, is the physical and symbolic home of Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg’s paternal ancestors. It is the physical burial place of Grieg’s great-great-grandparents, and the symbolic cradle of the ‘Grieg connection’ which, for over 250 years, has brought Norwegian family members, musicians and tourists to visit and experience its special heritage.

That special heritage centres on three elements: the Grieg ancestral gravestone and historic kirkyard in which it lies; the ruins of St Ethernan’s Kirk which Grieg’s great grandfather, Alexander, returned home from Norway to visit when still a functioning church; and the former Rathen West Parish Church, a magnificent building which sits at the heart of the village and is a feature of the landscape for miles around.

The Grieg Society of Scotland has previously worked to conserve the gravestone (commissioning professional contractors with its project ‘Monumentally Grieg!’ in 2018*), the ruined kirk of St Ethernan’s is a Scheduled Monument cared for by Historic Environment Scotland, but the former Rathen West Church, which served the local community for over 150 years, and was closed by the Church of Scotland in July 2024, is being put up for sale.

Current Situation

- The former Rathen West Church building is to be sold, possibly with land, by the Church of Scotland.
- The Grieg ancestral gravestone, exposed to the weather, is deteriorating.
- Unless action is taken soon, both the church and the gravestone will be lost – this is a point of no return.

What we are trying to do now

The Grieg Society of Scotland is trying to contact as many groups and individuals as possible to see who might be interested in a project based around acquiring the church building before it is lost as a public space.

The project could take many forms, but would focus on two key themes:

- The Grieg family link with Rathen, and saving the Grieg ancestral gravestone before its complete erosion by the weather.
- The tradition of welcoming Norwegian visitors to Rathen, and seeking to perpetuate and strengthen this in the future. Ultimately, the church could provide an anchor or focus for this relationship, which also includes wartime links, fishing industry links, oil industry links, as well as commerce and trade links, some going back many centuries.

How might we use the church building?

Priority

- A home for the ‘Grieg connection’ with the gravestone brought indoors and displayed as part of a heritage exhibition. This will create a space to visit, and a base from which to explore our wider North Sea connections in the local area.

Further Possibilities

- A venue for music, art, literature and other forms of cultural activity that further and deepen links between Norway and Scotland. The relatively remote location of Rathen could be either a barrier or feature, depending on the skills of those involved in developing the project.
- Ideally, if funding is available, professional staff would be recruited both to operate the space and to develop the ‘Grieg connection’ concept into a centre of international cultural and heritage importance. Concerts and residencies with performers from Norway, projects in Scots and Norwegian literature with literature and language specialists, commissions for composers and visual artists, joint activities between communities in Scotland and Norway, travelling exhibitions, a festival welcoming special groups such as Troidhaugens Venner, could all be imagined.

Finance

Initial Stage

- Secure the church building when it becomes available for sale. It is very fortunate that the former congregation has maintained the building with great care, and that former congregation members can also advise and participate in the continued care of the building. Based on previous church sales, the cost to purchase, set up a Trust to own the property, and provide a small fund to cover insurance and any emergency maintenance is likely to require approximately £75,000 to £100,000, the price depending on competition. Note, the Church of Scotland has a duty to seek market value.

Development Stage

- Secure sufficient funds to commission professional advisors to develop an initial operational plan and budget based on the contributions of interested parties. This will need an advisory committee to be formed, consisting of funders and volunteers. There is no firm idea, at this stage, as to how much this development plan would cost, but a good estimate might be £25,000. The ultimate ambition for this 'home for the Grieg connection' is, of course, based on the enthusiasm of funders.

Conclusion

This exercise is about finding out who might be interested in developing the project, what funding might be available, and if purchase of the building is a viable idea.

We are trying to create a pool of groups and individuals who would be willing to help champion the project and show that it has a wide base of moral support in both Norway and Scotland.

The Grieg Society of Scotland (a network of knowledgeable and interested individuals) is a facilitator at this stage and wishes to see the establishment of an independent body to take the project forward.

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Biography : <https://monsgraupius.org/biography>

Grieg Society of Scotland website : <https://griegsocietyscotland.org/blog>

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‘Monumentally Grieg!’ – completion of conservation of the Grieg ancestral gravestone at Rathen, 2018.



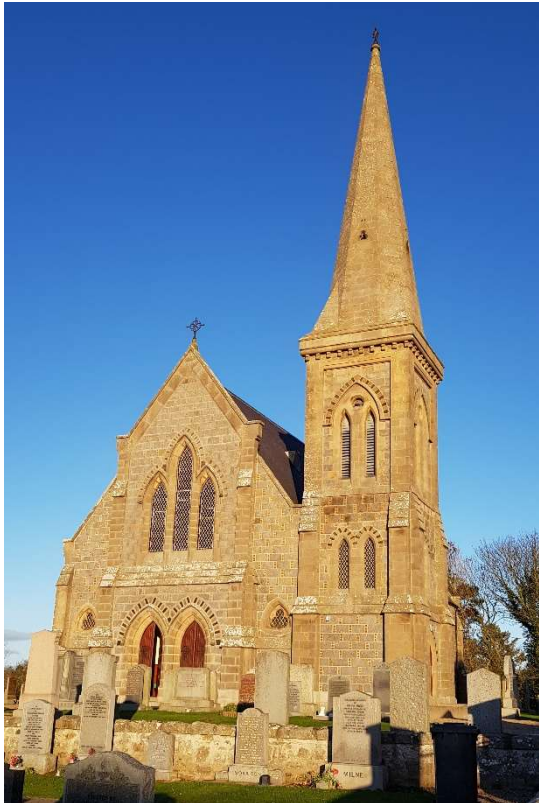
Children from Rathen Primary School learn from the professionals working on the Grieg gravestone about conservation techniques, what it means to look after local heritage – and what to do when you find bones!



Alexander, Edvard Grieg’s great-grandfather, who left the family croft near Rathen in the 1770s to settle in Bergen in Norway. He and his siblings erected the gravestone to the memory of their parents, Ann and John, who farmed at Mosstoun of Cairnbulg nearby.



Troldhaugens Venner (Friends of the Edvard Grieg Museum, Bergen) visiting the gravestone on a special music & heritage tour hosted by the Grieg Society of Scotland in 2023.



The magnificent façade of the former Rathen West Parish Church. The building, which dates from 1870, is constructed of local granite and is in excellent condition.



Music, heritage and friendship – the children of Rathen Primary School , Trolldhaugens Venner and the Grieg Society of Scotland meet together in the welcoming and elegant space of Rathen West Church in 2023 (before its closure).



Having fun learning about their local heritage and links with Norway – the children of Rathen Primary School enjoy the big building! And enjoy asking questions too!



Grieg or Greig? It doesn't matter, both spellings are inscribed on the composer's ancestral gravestone at Rathen. Norway and Scotland are closely linked! Edvard Grieg often talked of how his great-grandfather, Alexander, sailed from Fraserburgh to Bergen.



Fraserburgh harbour – next port, Bergen! Fraserburgh, just 5 miles from Rathen has many links, both historical and contemporary, with Norway. Grieg's Scottish great-grandfather became active in the fishing industry in Bergen.

Images: Grieg Society of Scotland