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# S. COLUMBA'S CHURCH, BURNTISLAND, 1592

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THE town and port of Burntisland is mentioned in early days. About nineteen hundred years ago, we read that, in 83 A.D., the Roman general Agricola examined the whole east coast of Fife, and found no place so commodious for vessels as the harbour of "Bruntelin." Consequently, upon the cliff above the harbour, where the castle of Rossend (now renamed Burntisland) stands, he planted a "specula" or watch tower. A castle was erected there in the 16th century.

It is said that, in 1130, David I gave land at Kirkton for a church. No remains of any structure of that date exist, but perhaps on this site the early church, whose ruins are there, was built. Mr. Russel Walker tells us that it was dedicated by Bishop David de Bernhame in 1243; the date of its erection is not known. Its dedication is generally held to have been to S. Adamnan, the biographer of S. Columba, but I find that Sheriff Mackay considers the dedication to have been to S. Serf.

The ruins consist of a nave and choir, with one side aisle. There are practically no stone details to guide us in the matter, and its date is therefore uncertain. But one cannot fail to notice that it was no common place of worship, as its walls are of goodly ashlar. It was deserted, in the 16th century, for a larger and later church, now called S. Columba's.

In the 15th century, James IV visited Burntisland to meet his admiral, Sir Andrew Wood, in order to inspect his new ship the *Great Michael*.

In the 16th century, James V was reported busy with defensive works, docks, and shipbuilding.

Also in the 16th century, possibly on the site of the "specula" of Agricola, a tower or fortalice was erected on the cliff overlooking the harbour; thus protecting and dominating all shipping. Mr. Young tells us in his *History of Burntisland* that "the first occupant of the Castle was George Durye, Abbot and Commendator of Dunfermline, appointed by his uncle, James Beton, Archbishop of St. Andrews. Durye was abbot from 1539 to 1564, and was the last of the abbots, his successors being commendators only."

It is reported that Queen Mary passed the night of 14th-15th February, 1569, in the castle. Abbot Durye was a zealous enemy of the Protestants, and therefore on no good terms with the burghers of Burntisland.

A grant of the lands of the Castle seems to have been given to Sir John Melville, who, for some infringement in his duties, was arrested when riding on the Clayness Sands near the Lammerlaws. He was subsequently

executed, and some say that his son, Sir Robert Melville, while others say that Sir William Kennedy, of Grange, received the grant. Sir Robert Melville, of Murdocairnie, appears as proprietor in 1586. Sir Robert became Lord Melville in 1621, and was provost of Burntisland until his death in 1635. The grant remained in the Melville family for some years, and then passed by purchase to the Wemyss family, and later through several ownerships.

In earlier times, Burntisland was called Wester Kinghorn, the parish of Kinghorn being Easter Kinghorn. Sometimes these two churches were called Kinghorn Magna and Kinghorn Parva, and divided opinions existed as to which was which.

### THE CHURCH OF 1592

In the year 1592, the parishioners of Burntisland resolved to build a new church to accommodate the growing number of worshippers. The old church at Kirkton was not only too small, but was most inconveniently situated a full mile from the town, and approached by a very hilly road. A site was selected on the high cliff on the south side of the burgh, overlooking the Firth of Forth.

The church is unique in plan and design ; no prototype is known to have suggested its arrangement. In the centre is a tower, supported on four large piers and arches, and round about these piers are built four walls enclosing a space of sixty feet square. From the four external angles of the tower, four great internal flying buttresses carry the thrust of the tower to great external buttresses at the four angles of the surrounding walls. An external view of the church from the south-east shows the external buttresses and the roofs of the surrounding aisles leaning upon the great central tower.

The superficial appearance of the building is somewhat akin to the foreign look of many of the Fifeshire coast towns, and hence many persons have thought that its design was taken from some building of the Low Countries.

Mr. Andrew Young, author of the *History of Burntisland*, from which I have freely drawn for information, wrote to a clergyman in Rotterdam, asking about a prototype, but received no reply. In connection with the Royal Institute of British Architects, there are correspondents in many foreign countries, Holland among them ; so, as a member of the Institute, I wrote to the well-known Dutch architect, Mr. Cuypers. He informed me that, in Amsterdam, there is no building like it ; a friend in Rotterdam, however, told him that the East Church, which was pulled down in 1934, was somewhat of that plan. He could not discover the date of the building. Further, I understand that there is a Jewish Synagogue in Amsterdam. It is of the 18th century, and of unique character, but it is later than the Burntisland church. Thus the uniqueness of the latter seems to be confirmed.

Is there any accounting for the origin of this design?

We have been told that Burntisland parishioners were largely of strongly Protestant stock, and some have ventured to suggest that they went to the Bible for their plan, and that the whole design is one of Scriptural symbolism.

Their argument is probably as follows: The church is founded on a rock—the great cliff overhanging the Firth of Forth; then in the centre of all is a strong tower; round about this tower are the enclosing walls of the church to shelter the people; the roofs of these four aisles lean and rest upon the central tower; when, therefore, in any time of trouble, the people convene within these walls, they can enter into the tower of safety. This arrangement may be intended to symbolise their trust in the Lord their God.

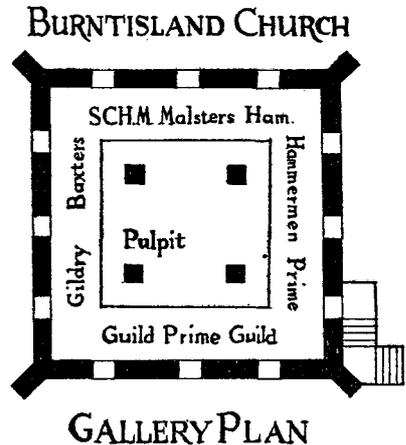
In an internal view of the church, looking east, the great diagonal arch at the south-east angle, serving as an internal flying buttress, is seen on the left hand in the corner.

In an interior view, looking south, we see the great arches of the tower, some twenty feet of span, and the four supporting piers, fully four feet square. There are no mouldings on the piers or arches, but the angles have their surfaces rounded, thus giving a feeling of strength. The caps have slightly moulded imposts. The whole masonry is excellent and the general effect is impressive.

In the plan of the church, an uncommon feature is that galleries are carried round the four sides of the building. It thus possesses considerable accommodation for an audience.

Very early in the 17th century, an important occurrence happened. In May, 1601, the church was selected for the meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Towards the close of the proceedings, an interesting incident took place, as noted by Spottiswood.<sup>1</sup> The Assembly

was called by royal proclamation, and held in Burntisland Church, owing to the king's indisposition. Mr. James Hall was Moderator. A proposition was made for a new translation of the Bible, and the correction of the Psalms in metre. His Majesty urged this earnestly and with many reasons. After his coming to the Crown of England, he set the most learned divines of the Church to work upon the translation of the Bible, and the result of their labours was the Authorised Version of 1611. The revision of the Psalms he made his own labour, so far as he could spare the time; the revision of the rest of them he commended to a faithful and learned servant, Sir William Alexander, afterwards Earl of Stirling.



<sup>1</sup> *History, III, 96-99.*

The galleries are attached to the outer walls, and do not come nearer the great piers thereof; but their fronts are of exceptional interest, for they are richly panelled, and in these panels are painted the insignia of the various trades or guilds, as we shall shortly see.

It is understood that the pulpit was always at the south-west pier. The 17th century pulpit was a beautifully panelled one. In the alterations made in 1822, this pulpit was replaced, and the north gallery front, with its possible wealth of insignia panels, was also removed and replaced by the existing one.

In the 17th century, when Archbishop Laud was visiting Burntisland to fit the church for Episcopal worship, these four galleries on all sides were a great trouble to him, for he could not see where he could make the chancel. How he got over the difficulty we do not know.

The pews in the area were not all plain seats as at present; some were richly panelled, many had canopies, and others spindle rails; the large pew adjoining the north-east pier was the Burntisland Castle pew. It is of date 1606, and its panels, shafts and canopy were carefully renovated by Sir Rowand Anderson. Under the canopy, the panelling contains the Arms of Sir Robert Melville, who sat as a Lord of Session with the title of Lord Burntisland. On the top of the canopy, the Arms of the burgh are displayed, the seat being now the property of the burgh and used as the magistrates' pew. The colours pertaining to the burgh arms are those also of the County of Fife, as was pointed out by the late Marquis of Bute.

Before the alterations in 1822, there were many finely panelled and canopied pews in the church, but in that year all were cleared away. The excuse may be that most of them were in a rickety condition. Several spindle-rail pews still remain. At one time, the vista of pews in the area of the church must have been most charming.

The exterior of the church is very simple, indeed plain, probably expressive of the simple Protestant creed. The tower, rising from the centre, has a later belfry erected as an upper stage. This was in the 17th century. It is probable that the general appearance of the building was more like the Dutch feeling of the other east coast towns, and suggested a prototype in the Low Countries. The angle buttresses to take the diagonal thrust of the central tower are about the only features of interest.

At the south-east angle of the church is an outside stone stair leading to the Prime Guild seats in the gallery. It is a goodly piece of design, with handsome balustrading and pleasantly-grouped terminal balusters. The design of the angle buttresses can here be better seen and the strength of them discerned.

There is a bell in the tower. It was recast in 1708 by Mrs. Isobel Meikle, of Edinburgh. There is no inscription.

## THE GUILDRY SEATS AND INSIGNIA

The gallery plan indicates the position of the guildry seats. Taking the north gallery first, we have the Schoolmaster at the extreme left hand ; then the tailors ; then the hammermen. In the east gallery, the Prime Guild, that is, the sailor craft ; in the south gallery also the Prime Guild ; in the west gallery, a part of the Guildry, and maltsters and bakers.

## THE INSIGNIA

In 1822, the gallery fronts were painted over, and the special panels with insignia of the guilds obliterated by many coats of paint and varnish. In later days, Mr. Andrew Young, the historian, worked hard to interest people in the removal of this blemish, and, after some timorous attempts, it was discovered that, with great care, these paintings could be revealed to view.<sup>1</sup>

*West Gallery.*—There are only two painted panels on the west gallery front. One is a modern one, giving historical dates referring to the old kirk at Kirkton, the 800th centenary of which was commemorated on the 8th of June, 1930, the church having been founded in 1130.

Adjoining this modern panel is an old one, bearing a sheaf of wheat in the centre and a S. Andrew cross over it, formed of two bakers' reels or shovels, with the date 1622. The seats of the maltsters were over the modern panel, and that of the baxters over this old painted panel.

*North Gallery* had the seats of the schoolmaster, the tailors and part of the hammermen ; but this gallery front is modern and contains no old paintings.

*East Gallery.*—Here were the remaining seats of the hammermen (smiths, wrights and masons) ; but in front of their pews there are no paintings.

When we come to the pews of the Pryme Gilt (Prime Guild : the ship masters and seamen), we have in the left-hand panel a 17th century brig in full sail. On the poop is an iron grille for a beacon fire. The detail of the Union Jack may call for remark, also the carrying of two S. Andrew crosses on the two masts, as this was illegal after 1606. The reason for this is found on the adjacent panel, which contains in the upper part a decorated label with the date 1602, four years before 1606. Under this decorated date is a plain label with the year 1733, which tells the year in which was decided the number of members to be elected to the Town Council by the trades. The Prime Guild were naturally the seafaring community, but Mr. Young informs us that members of this Guild were much employed by the Guildry of the burgh.

<sup>1</sup> A National Buildings Record has been formed for Scotland, with the purpose of having a record of the notable buildings in Scotland, so that if, by enemy action, they be damaged or destroyed, they may be, in part or whole, restored ; or, at the worst, a record of their appearance will be preserved. Among the notable buildings, the church at Burntisland is included, and, moreover, the unique collection of Guildry insignia on the gallery fronts has been copied, in so far as drawings in colour have been prepared.

The next panel shows a larger type of warship, called a carrack, which was in use from James IV's time till the middle of the 17th century. The arms displayed are the Royal Arms, not the Scottish. Note the colours: the ground of the flag is not blue but red, and the cannon are gold, not black. This was evidently for decorative purposes.

Adjoining this panel is one with a compass, designed to show approximately the local difference between the geographical and the magnetic north.

Appropriately enough, the next panel shows a master mariner of the 17th century, dressed in a four-tailed coat, and with rosettes on his shoes, taking the altitude of the sun by a cross staff and astrolabe.

In the next panel is another brig, carrying a S. Andrew Cross at the fore, and the Union Jack of its first form, as used between 1606 and 1707.

The second last panel on the east gallery front is of a sloop "of its own species," supposed to be a dispatch vessel, probably of date 1650 to 1707.

The final panel on this front, at the angle with the south gallery, contains the motto frequently met with: "God's Providence is our inheritance."

The panels on these gallery fronts are all framed by pilasters and segmental arches. The caps are rather crudely detailed, but the general effect is quite satisfactory.

The paintings themselves have no pretensions to be works of fine art, yet, as typical examples of work done by a class of artists now extinct—the sign-painting craft—they are of great interest.

*South Gallery.*—The corner panel contains a devout expression quaintly worded: "Though God's Power Be Sufficient To Govern Us, Yet For Man's Infirmity He Appointeth Angils To Watch Over Us."

The panel to the east shows the figure of a denizen of the fore-castle, yet he has buckle shoes, and at his waist the end of a frill ornament. He is supposed to be engaged in what the sailors call "fathoming a rope." Some seriously-minded people have imagined that the seventy-two inches in a fathom may bear some allusion to the three-score-and-ten years allotted to man's life.

The next panel is of a master mariner holding in his right hand an astrolabe, and in his left hand a cross staff, both out-of-date instruments used in those days for getting the sun's altitude. Mr. Young thinks that the costume of the figure suggests about the year 1680; but he tells us that these instruments were rarely used so late as that time, as Davis' quadrant was known from the beginning of the 17th century.

The adjoining panel again shows a form of compass, which attempts to show the difference necessary to allow in steering to Burntisland.

The panel to the west has a ship's captain taking the altitude of the sun with a Davis quadrant. This instrument was in use from 1594 to 1740. It will be observed that, whereas all the other mariners are shown

the west when taking their altitudes, this one is facing east, as in this instrument the man has to turn his back to the sun.

The next panel is not very distinct, but represents a naval battle, a Scottish ship being in the foreground.

These panels complete those pertaining to the Pryme Gilt or Seamen's Guild, and the adjoining ones belong to the seats of the Guildry. The ornamental label with the date 1711 commemorates the year in which their Charter of Incorporation came into practice, although the Guildry was known in 1622. The adjoining panel holds the date which attests the year when the frontages of the seats were arranged between the Guildry and the Prime Guild. The next panel contains the scales which were part of the arms of the Guildry.

The last painted panel bears the date 1733, and the mysterious figure 4. This figure was used by merchants, and examples are to be seen in the kirkyard here, and at Craill. It is supposed by some to represent the four great burghs, Edinburgh, Stirling, Berwick and Roxburgh. Anyhow, 1733 was the year of the Guildry first enjoying the benefits of the Act of Parliament of 1732, by which fourteen of its members were entitled to seats in the Town Council, and, as a consequence, obtained a monopoly in the Magistracy.

But this figure 4 has further interest. In the Seal of Stirling, this figure is shown in reverse, also we find the same reverse showing in a stone in the kirkyard here. Some, therefore, hold that it is not a figure 4 at all, but some special sign. The late Mr. Alfred A. Murray, W.S., who was an authority on such matters, said that it had no reference to the four burghs, nor to any number, it being of earlier date than the numeral "4." In Britain, it is found only along the east coast, the shores which had most trading with the Continent.

In 1907, under the careful supervision of the late Sir Rowand Anderson, improvements were made. The stonework of the great piers and the dignified arches were chiselled, the church decorated, and the castle pew, now the magistrates' pew, was restored.

In order that we may understand the history of improvements, these are recorded on painted panels on the sloping parts of the ceiling above the galleries. On the west gallery, 1234 is noted as the date of the church at Kirkton. On the north gallery, 1592 to 1594, as the erection of this church. The east gallery records that the translation of King James's authorised version of the Bible was proposed at an Assembly held in this church. Above the south gallery, the date 1907, when the above mentioned restoration was undertaken.

Since then, further works were done in the late Mr. Rogan's day, a new pulpit taking the place of that of 1822, and a communion table and a font were designed in keeping with the 17th century woodwork of the church.

And now, as we look upon this early post-reformation building so emblematical of the sturdy faith of the people, who contrived so original

and so striking a design, let us pause for a moment to consider the thought underlying its purpose.

It was founded upon a rock as Scripture declared. The site was the high cliff overlooking the Firth of Forth. Then it was built round about a high tower. The roofs of the surrounding walls leant upon the central tower.

May these facts not have some pointed allusion to certain familiar words of the Old Testament? In II Samuel, we read (verse 22), "The God of my rock, in him will I trust, he is my shield, my high tower, my refuge." In Psalm 61, we read, "From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee. . . . Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy." Again, in Micah iv, "O tower of the flock, the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, unto thee shall it come, even the first dominion; the kingdom shall come to the daughter of Jerusalem."

This wonderful building, therefore, is full of symbolism, the four walls of it leaning upon the strong tower in its midst, the tower of strength and safety. Well may we recall these words from the third chapter of Micah: "Yet will they lean upon the Lord, and say, Is not the Lord among us? None evil can come upon us."

So we may take this wonderful temple, in its strength, solemnity, and sublimity, as symbolising the confiding trust of the people, as expressed in Proverbs xviii, 10: "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it and is safe."