

Dalmeny Church—The Work of Restoration.

THE story of this restoration is a romance,—a romance in stone and lime and of voluntary labour given with enthusiasm.

Dalmeny Church is admittedly the completest of our Norman Parish Churches in Scotland, its doorway with its wealth of early symbolic sculpture is unrivalled, while the arrangement of its structure with sanctuary, chancel, and tower arches is unique. Now that the work upon the eastern portion is finished we make a claim which may seem to many readers audacious, but which we believe is no overstatement—that the chancel of Dalmeny Church is the most perfect Norman chancel in Britain.

This little old Church, which is so precious a heritage from that inspired period of ecclesiastical architecture, has had many “escapes” in bygone years. Its walls bear evidence of the bullets of Cromwell’s day. In the eighteenth century it was decided to take down the chancel, arches, vaulted roofs and walls, and to continue the line of the nave walls as far as the eastern extremity of the building; mercifully, however, the estimates exceeded anticipations and the project was abandoned. In the nineteenth century one of the heritors cast covetous eyes upon it as a private possession, and offered to appropriate it from the Church of Scotland and build a new church for the parishoners. The attempt almost prevailed; indeed it was greatly by a technicality that this church, where worship has continued in unbroken continuity for eight centuries, was saved to continue to fulfil the function of its foundation and to be the Parish Church of the people of Dalmeny.

Charmed though its life seems to have been, Dalmeny Church did not entirely escape the destroying hand of time or the improving hand of man. About 1488 the tower arch flattened so much as to become unsafe, and was built up; for this purpose the stones of the structure (possibly the lower portion of a tower which was never completed) which abutted on to the west gable were used,

for many of them are marked with the distinctive marks of the masons who dressed the stones for the other parts of the building. In 1670 the Laird of Dalmeny cut out a portion of the north wall of the nave and built himself an aisle. By 1766 the chancel arch showed ominous signs of distress. To lighten its burden the superimposed gable wall was removed and, to accommodate this structural alteration, the exterior walls of the choir were heightened and the roof, which had previously come down a step at the chancel arch, was run straight along to the gable above the Sanctuary arch.

All through the centuries, doors and windows were tampered with in the most light-hearted way, and every alteration weakened the old walls. Lofts, of which two remain, were erected promiscuously. The foundations were undermined to receive burials, and pews were cut back into the main walls. One worthy father of a family of twelve was granted permission to extend his pew twelve inches into the south wall of the nave, and the recess ten feet long by eight feet in height was recently disclosed, revealing a wooden lintel, rotted through, endangering the whole wall face.

By 1816 the cumulative effect of these alterations was so unsightly that the entire interior was treated to a generous covering of lath and plaster. At the same time wooden floors were laid at absurd levels, and a stucco ceiling was constructed for the nave in imitation of the vaulting system in the choir and apse. The pillars of the arches were cut away, a laird's retiring room was built on to the choir, and a mausoleum erected on to the added aisle. In 1832 the old belfry was replaced by one of deplorable design and considerable insecurity.

It is distressing to catalogue the calamities which had befallen the old kirk, but it seems necessary to do so in order that the nature of the restoration work may be understood. The first tentative proposal for amendment was an extremely modest one. It was to put the Communion Table in its rightful position in the apse in place of the ascending tiers of circular pews which had furnished the sanctuary. This necessitated the alteration of the pews in the choir which faced down the church, because it was obviously impossible for worshippers to be seated with their backs to the Holy Table.

The proposal became engulfed in a larger scheme almost as soon as it was mooted. One of our elders offered to

present a new Communion Table, one more worthy of the place it was to occupy, and other members of the Kirk-Session and congregation subscribed funds to put the apse into a condition fitting to receive the Table. The heritors and the Presbytery gave their approval and the Kirk-Session resolved to proceed with the work on the apse and the reseating of the choir so far as that could be accomplished within the limits of £250. This sum was more than had been subscribed at the moment, but the Session were optimistic. Dr Thomas Ross undertook the designing of the Communion Table, and Mr J. S. Richardson, H.M. Inspector of Ancient Monuments, promised his guidance in the execution of the structural work, and secured for us the services of a foreman mason who had long experience in this type of work.

January 1927 saw the start made. The apse was cleared and curtained off. The walls were stripped and cleaned. Ruinous pieces were rebuilt and broken stones were mended and the dook-holes, made for attaching the laths to the walls, were indented with stone patches. The original splay of the east window was discovered and rebuilt through a happy discovery typical of the good fortune which has continued to favour every section of the work. Two stones of the jambs of the window beneath the level of the sloping sill had not been completely cut away when the window was widened, and these indicated the exact original dimensions. The responds of the Sanctuary arch were restored, and the vaulted roof was exposed; this, though cracked from end to end, was in a wonderful state of preservation, consisting of a kind of lime concrete which rings to a tool like steel.

As we began to take the plaster off this roof we found great difficulty owing to the extraordinary unevenness of the surface beneath it. It seemed all furrows and ridges, and mystified us until one of the masons found the explanation in the method by which the vaulting had been constructed. From the groining ribs to the Sanctuary arch and the three window arches had been stretched a rough framework of wood; on to this was poured the hot lime compost which formed the under shell of the roof. When this had set hard the woodwork was removed, but each piece of timber had left its indentation in the lime. Every line of this framing is clearly visible to-day, and for the light it sheds upon early methods of construction this roof is of great historical interest.



The Parish Church of Dalmeny.

The Sanctuary.

F. C. Inglis.



The Parish Church.

Chapel of Garioch, Aberdeenshire.

See page 87.



Keystones of the Sanctuary Arch in Dalmeny Church.

See page 81.

The walls also have their own peculiar interests. The put-log holes cut before the stones were built indicate the means of scaffolding employed; traces appear of a flat roof covering the high altar; but of especial interest are the mason marks which are still plainly seen on 80 per cent of the original stones, and enable us to trace the work of individual masons throughout the building.

The original floor level was unmistakably determined by the scarcement which runs round the apse walls, and was two feet six inches below the level of the floor as we found it. In the earth removed from the floor many objects of interest were found, the most important of which was a piece of 12th century stained glass of a beautiful rich blue, with the remains of a pattern which strongly suggests the border of a window. Blue of that texture has therefore been introduced round the windows of the apse which otherwise consist of clear "Norman Slab" glass arranged in small diamonds.

During the work in the apse the instability of the east side of the Sanctuary arch made it advisable to examine the state of the other (west) side of it. The plaster with its mock carving was removed, and it became apparent that the condition of this arch was so serious as to necessitate immediate attention. Actually the position was this. The walls had given so as to be very distinctly off the plumb; the arch had flattened and spread about three inches; the two keystones had dropped three and a half inches, and in this position had been wedged up with small pieces of wood; the bottom of the stones had been knocked off, and the whole was then covered over with plaster on which the stone pattern was falsely but symmetrically traced! The small photographs facing this page show (1) the two keystones as they appeared when the plaster was removed; (2) the same stones rebuilt into their positions with the necessary pieces added. After the stones had thoroughly "set" the faces and under surfaces were carved, and the result is seen in the large photograph facing page 80.

In all cases where deficiencies in stones are made good, the added piece (indent) is left protruding until it is "set," it is then cut back and dressed with an axe to the lines and level of the old stone. By this means uniformity of texture is attained, and although by examination of the individual stones the patches are easily located, yet, when one looks at the wall as a whole, the patches do not ob-

trude or attract attention. The great secret in all this class of repair is to have careful and skilful workmanship and a supply of the right stone. We have been singularly fortunate in both these matters. The workmanship of the two masons employed does not need to fear comparison with that of the craftsmen engaged in the original structure, and our position with regard to stone is an exceptionally happy one.

At first, local farmers by keeping a look-out upon old dykes, gateposts, and other old structures in the neighbourhood were able to keep us supplied with sufficient quantities of the proper stone. We got upwards of 20 cartloads in this way. These stones were traced to a deep disused quarry about 300 yards from the church, and when the supply of "stray" stones was exhausted we were enabled to dismantle two old quarrymen's cottages built entirely of the stone we were seeking. We have now gone a step further, and have reopened the old quarry, and all the paving stones for the nave are supplied from this source—the stones being raised by a contrivance of wire ropes and pulleys while "power" is supplied by good steady farm horses. Our supply of stone is thus guaranteed and, what is also of great importance, it entails no expense whatever. Other materials also, which usually add greatly to the cost of such an undertaking as this, have come to us as gifts. The wood for scaffolding, for instance, we received from the local shale oil works which were dismantled last year, and sand, of which we have had about 60 loads, is presented and carted by another farmer who makes this his distinctive contribution. All our transport from Edinburgh, cement and suchlike, is done by a local dairyman whose motor lorry visits the Capital twice daily. But this is a divergence from the main theme.

The necessary treatment of the west side of the Sanctuary arch brought us unpremeditatedly and almost unconsciously into the choir—an extension of the original scheme. Funds were still coming in, and so the Kirk Session authorised another £250 worth of restoration in the choir. At this point an interesting position arose last Easter. The apse would be finished in approximately six weeks and work would start in the choir. Two habitable parts of the church would be divided by the part which according to ordinary methods would be unusable for some months to come. How could that be avoided? The problem was solved by the splendid spirit of the

young men of the district, who offered their services to do what they were considered capable of in the evenings after their work was done. So we formed a "gang" of twenty young men who attacked the choir while the masons continued their operations in the apse. The work of the gang was strictly limited. They dug down the floor of the choir—and incidentally finished that of the apse,—put in a proper bottom of stones, two feet deep, and on top of this laid a brick floor, run together with liquid cement, and above this a course of tar blinded with sand. The floor was ready for the masons to lay flag-stones. The gang removed the plaster from the walls, raked out all the joints—manufacturing special tools from scythe blades to get into the narrow joints. They washed the walls with soda and wire brushes, and the walls were ready for the masons to mend and point. They took the plaster off the vaulted roof and treated the surface of it—for it was crumbling and disintegrating—with the beaten-up whites of five hundred eggs. This method of preservation was determined upon after various experiments suggested by Mr Edwards of the Museum of Antiquities. Lime and white of egg form a chemical compound with great powers of resistance. The lime was already in position, so we applied the second ingredient, and the whole surface took on the consistency of a gigantic egg-shell.

The Retiring Room, already referred to, completely obscured the outside of the north window of the choir, which had also been built up and plastered across inside, so the gang removed the room and opened up the window, which is the only one remaining in its absolutely original state. In this way the choir passed through its worst stage of lime, dust, earth, tar and water, while the skilled work still continued in the apse; and thereafter the mending of the walls proceeded piece by piece without interfering with the use of the Church on Sundays.

Space does not permit to detail the matters of interest in the choir—old burial stones, consecration crosses, 12th century inscriptions, traces of doorways, fireplaces, rood-lofts, etc., which tell eloquently the story of the changing customs of the centuries. The photograph facing page 80 shows the position at the beginning of last July with the apse completed, the choir halfway through its process of repair, and the chancel arch still clothed in its deceitful coat of carved plaster concealing the deficiencies in the stone. The whole of the chancel was finished in December,

by which time—apart from the paving of the floors—250 new stones and 200 stone indents had been built into the old fabric.

With the beginning of this year we embarked upon the second stage of our project, viz.—the interior of the nave. The same methods are still employed, the preliminary work of the “gang” done by lamp light in the evening, followed by the skilful craftsmanship of the masons. Bit by bit the work proceeds, so that the church has been in full use each week-end, although in the early part of the week it is often more reminiscent of a shell-shocked ruin than a place of worship. And, of course, we continue to make interesting discoveries—an aumbrey, the site of the holy-water stoop, a 12th century stone sarcophagus, the arch from the tower into the nave whose shafts are in perfect preservation,—but that must be another story.

The financing of the undertaking has been a thing of constant marvel—the widow’s cruse in modern days. We have now taken more than £1000 out of the treasury, and yet the coffers, although many times most uncomfortably low, have never been without a week’s wages ahead. At least two years’ work lies before us still. Many problems remain undetermined, but in every case there is sufficient evidence remaining from the past to ensure the right solution of every problem of reconstruction. For long the design of the belfry seemed to be an exception to this providential preservation of evidence, but in March of this year an etching turned up, made prior to 1832, and so again conjecture gives place to certainty. Thus experience teaches us to go on in faith, and concentrate upon perfecting the little part of the work actually in hand. The local enthusiasm, and the labour and services which flow from it, continues to grow. The church is becoming known to an ever-increasing circle of those who love things old and beautiful and sacred, and all give what they feel they can for the continuance of the work. Our great hope is that, by 1930, the eight hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the church, we may have accomplished the labour of love to which we have set our hands. At all events the work goes on, and we are interpreting a great lesson in faith.

Laus Deo.

W. NEIL SUTHERLAND.