

The Collegiate Church of S. John the Baptist, Corstorphine.

THE quin-centenary of the Collegiate Church of S. John the Baptist, Corstorphine, marked an occasion memorable alike in the history of the neighbourhood and in the life of the church. The Latin inscription engraved on a stone set in the eastern wall of the chancel records that "this Collegiate Church was commenced in the year of our Lord 1429, and that same year Master Nicolas Bannachtyne was Provost of the said College, who, lying here below, died in the year 147 . Commemoration of him and his successors shall be celebrated and observed upon the 14th day of June, for which a yearly rent of £4 is set apart from the lands of Kirk Cramond. Pray for the Pope and for him." The fact that the year of his death has not been filled in is usually interpreted as signifying that Master Bannachtyne caused the stone to be prepared during his lifetime, but any evidence that exists goes to prove that not many years passed before death released the Provost from a charge that he had held with the utmost distinction for wellnigh half a century. Hammer and chisel have been used at some period to deface and almost obliterate Bannachtyne's request for prayers for his soul. The fierce joy with which the obnoxious sentence was removed is manifest in the very crudeness of the blows that have been struck, but the misguided zeal of that hand is powerless to erase the feelings of gratitude which we feel to-day towards those who in bygone years built such lasting monuments to the glory of God.

It is unknown how long before 1429 a church stood upon this site. It is recorded in the charter by which David I.—that "sair sanct to the Crown"—founded the Abbey of Holyrood in 1128 that Corstorphine Church was, along with S. Cuthbert's and Liberton, handed over to the Abbot. How old the church was at that date it is not possible to say, but the Holyrood charter proves that for at least seven hundred years this site has been hallowed by the worship of God's faithful people.

In 1376 the Barony of Corstorphine passed into the hands of one Adam Forrester, and for the next three

hundred years the story of Corstorphine Church is bound up with the annals of that house. The designation 'Forrester,' with the crest of three hunting-horns, warrants the assumption that the family originally held the office of King's Forrester. Adam, the first member of the line that comes into authentic history, was a burghess of Edinburgh, who possessed a 'tenement' in Forrester Wynd, a close that ran off the south side of High Street. As 'Custumar'—the official charged with the levying of custom on various articles—he amassed great wealth, and rose to a position of great eminence both in the city and in the State. Being also a man of piety, he determined, in accordance with the practice that prevailed at the time, to build a votive chapel where he and his descendants might be buried, and where Masses might be said for the weal of their souls. Having already built Corstorphine Castle as his private residence, he obtained the permission of the ecclesiastical authorities to build his chapel close to the south wall of the Parish Church and within the churchyard. The chancel of the present church represents Sir Adam's chapel. Owing to the unsettled state of Scotland under the Regency, the completion of Sir Adam's benefaction was long delayed, but the friendship which existed between his eldest son, Sir John Forrester, and King James I. brought about the confirmation of the charter whenever that monarch ascended the throne. The charter grants "for the maintenance of three chaplains, for the divine service celebrated and to be celebrated in perpetuity in the chapel of S. John, that lies next to the parochial church of Corstorphine, founded by the late Adam Forrester of Corstorphine, knight, for the weal of our soul, and that of our dearest consort, Johan, Queen of Scotland, and for the souls of our predecessors and successors, and for the weal of the souls of the late Adam Forrester, knight, and Margaret his spouse, their ancestors and descendants, and all the faithful deceased—twenty-four pounds usual money of our kingdom, to be levied annually and to be paid at the usual two terms, Pentecost and Martinmas by equal portions, £20 from the Fermes (rents) of our burgh of Edinburgh, and £4 annual rent due to the late Adam Forrester. . . . The said chaplains to have and to hold and to be paid the said £24 yearly while they perform the said offices, at the two terms mentioned, by the hands of the baillies of our burgh, in pure and perpetual alms

and mortmain as freely and quietly, wholly and honourably, well and in peace, in all respects as any other alms in mortmain is held elsewhere—the foresaid chaplains and their successors doing nothing beyond giving us and our successors the benefit of their devout prayers.”

The confirmation of Sir Adam’s benefaction, together with the provision that Dame Margaret Forrester, his widow, had made for the maintenance of two additional chaplains and two choir-boys, laid the foundation on which Sir John Forrester based the ambitious plan for making the votive chapel into a Collegiate Church. Without delay Nicolas Bannachtyne, a graduate of the recently founded University of S. Andrews, was called as the first Provost of the College, and under his direction the west wall of the chapel was removed and a narrow aisleless nave added, leaving the chapel to form the chancel of the church.

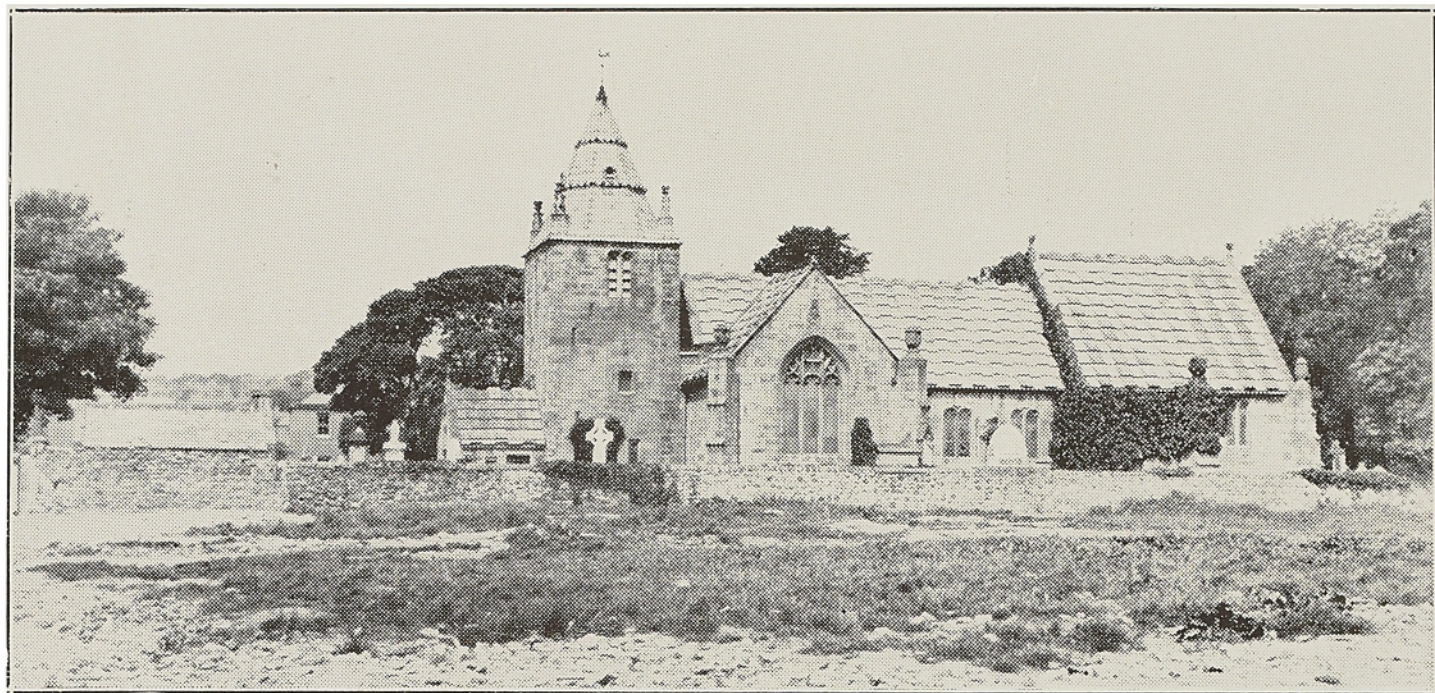
This addition was completed in 1436, and then began a long correspondence between Sir John Forrester, Pope Eugenius, and the Bishop of S. Andrews in regard to the jurisdiction of the Collegiate Church. In 1444 the papal Bull was received which gave Provost Bannachtyne and eight prebendaries the ecclesiastical superiority over Corstorphine and eight of the surrounding parishes. Through the machinations of one William de Lauedyr, the worldly son of a powerful ecclesiastical family, the parish of Ratho was soon thereafter separated again from Corstorphine, but the Collegiate Church continued to be responsible for the supply of ordinances to the rest of the surrounding district up to the time of the Reformation.

Scotland at this time had some forty-one collegiate churches scattered up and down the land, and the term implied not what one to-day regards as a collegiate charge, but rather a constitution similar to that of a cathedral. The ‘Provost,’ who presided over a ‘College’ or ‘Chapter’ of clergy, was responsible for the religious supervision of the Order, and was himself subject to the Bishop of the diocese. Practically no trace of the rules which governed the Corstorphine College has been found, but the charter defines their duties as consisting in celebrating the service customary to each holy day, and saying daily the Placebo and Dirige, with commendation of the souls of the King and Queen, their predecessors and successors, of the Founders, their ancestors and descendants, and all the faithful deceased. The Provost was resident,

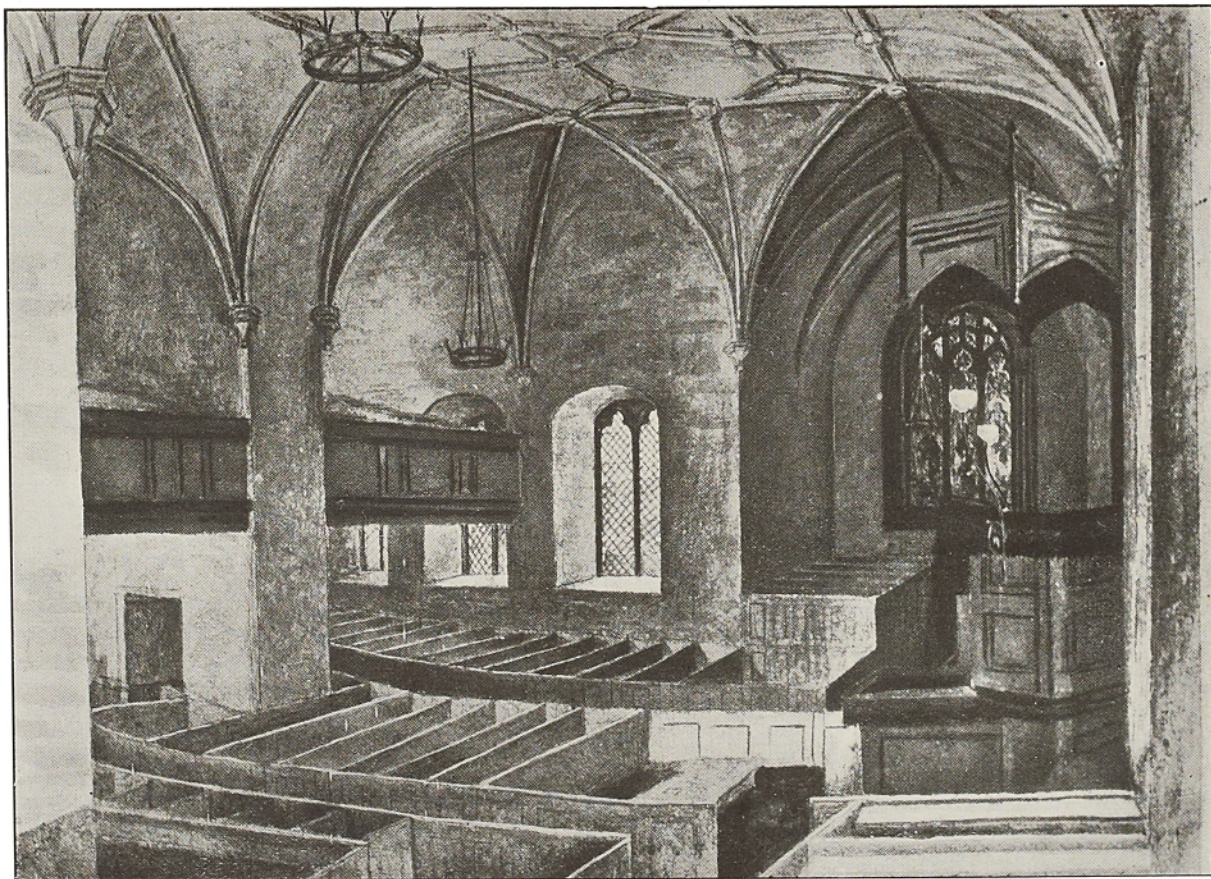
and it would appear from such scanty records as exist that two chaplains served each day for three months at a time. Whether these Collegiate Churches arose with the purpose of counteracting the evils incidental to the monastic system is a matter of question, but they were certainly an expression of the zeal and munificence of men of wealth in erecting churches and endowing chaplaincies for the maintenance of daily services and the provision of religious ordinances.

The Collegiate Church of S. John the Baptist at Corstorphine was therefore an extension of the original Forrester Chapel that was built immediately south of the Parish Church. This almost certainly accounts for the unusual feature of the transepts being built at the west end of the nave. When in 1646 the Parish Church was taken down, its site was occupied by an aisle, thrown out as an extension to the Collegiate Church, and with some minor alterations the church which now stands is identical with that building. Internally, however, tragedy awaited the structure. The zealots of the Reformation had done a certain amount of damage, and the soldiers of Cromwell, out of enmity inspired by the fact that the then Lord Forrester was serving with the Royalist troops, caused grievous harm to be done to the building. But the greatest act of vandalism was reserved for William Burn, the architect, whose heavy hand had already been laid upon S. Giles' and Dunfermline Abbey. In 1828 the 'restoration' of the ancient church was committed to his care, and he was certainly thorough in the changes that he wrought. When the chancel had been converted into a porch, and blocked with a stone staircase; when galleries had been erected over the nave and aisle; when the chapel on the north side of the chancel had been turned into a heating chamber; and when the old stone walls and roof had been covered with stucco, the hand of man was stayed, surely because it could do no more. It was due to the untiring zeal of the late Rev. James Fergusson that sufficient funds were collected to allow the architectural skill of the late Mr George Henderson in 1905 to bring back seemliness, strength, and beauty to this ancient house of God.

The present building, therefore, represents the form of the Collegiate Church. In the chancel—Adam Forrester's chapel—the original walling is rough, and must have been finished with plaster and decorated in colour.

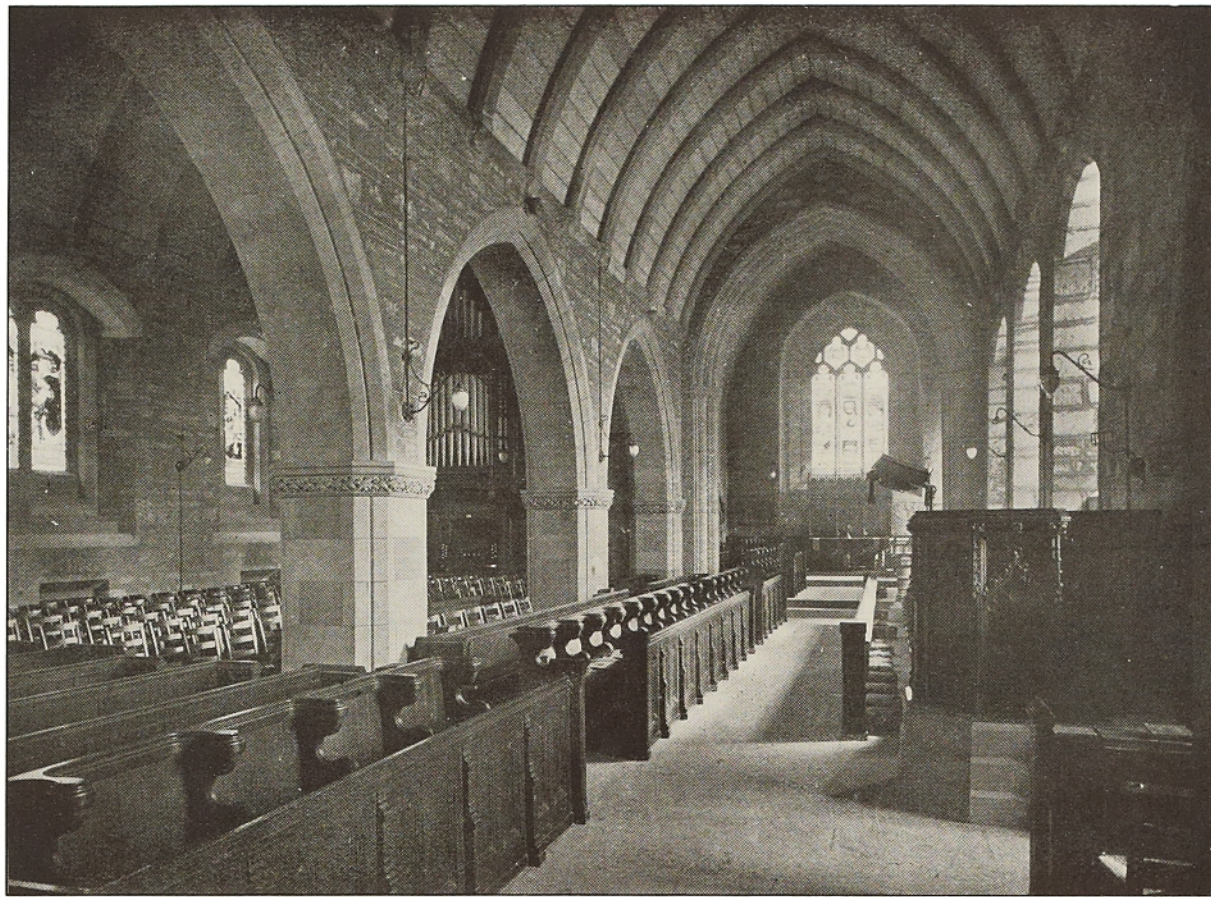


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Collegiate Church of S. John the Baptist, Corstorphine.

Interior (before Restoration).



Collegiate Church of S. John the Baptist, Corstorphine.

Interior (after Restoration).

The sedilia in the south wall were probably inserted when the chapel was enlarged into the Collegiate Church. It is uncertain at what date the stone effigies of the Forresters were introduced, but with their heraldic shields beneath and their crests above, they are monuments worthy of any cathedral in the land, and exhibit as good an example of mediæval sculpture as exists in Scotland. Some sculptured tombstones were at the time of the last restoration removed from the floor, and in order to save them from further damage were set in the walls of the church, and add a definite note of interest. On the west ingoing of the south door the dates 1429, 1455, and 1769 are cut into the stones of the wall, and the first two of these dates are the earliest known examples of Arabic numerals used in Scotland. In the chantry chapel, which is now used as the vestry, one of the old altar stones, with the five crosses inscribed, is inset beneath the east window—probably its original position. Close beside the pulpit stands an old post-Reformation hour-glass. The glass is said to have been Florentine in character but was broken, and had to be replaced by a British bulb. Fortunately or unfortunately, the glass is no longer in commission.

No account of Corstorphine Church can close without some reference to the 'lamp' which for wellnigh two hundred years shone forth from the eastern gable to light the way for pilgrims from the east over the desolate and swampy ground that lay in the direction of Edinburgh. The pulley by which the lamp was raised and lowered was taken down about 1796. For the endowment of the light a piece of ground lying on the left bank of the Water of Leith at Murrayfield was gifted by one of the Forrester family, and was known as the 'lamp acre.' If the need for the lamp no longer exists, its symbolism remains unchanged, and the fact that the church is dedicated to S. John the Baptist heightens the significance, for was it not his part to point the way to Him who is the Light of men?

So from the days when Rome held sway, through the troublous years when Presbyter and Bishop struggled for ascendancy, to the present day of Reunion, this ancient church has stood, impregnable before the storms of wind and weather, an abiding witness, in the midst of all the changes of thought and opinion, to the essential unity of the Christian faith. Forms of government, whether temporal or ecclesiastical, change, but the com-

monwealth formed out of the traditions of the past continues. The form of preaching changes, but the substance of preaching remains—the proclamation of the eternal Gospel. The manner of worship changes, but the spirit of worship causes the faithful not to forsake the assembling of themselves together in the place where prayer is wont to be made. The old grey walls, the sculptured figures of those who in bygone days built this house to the glory of God, the thoughts stirred by the memory of the prayers and praises that have kept this place holy to the Lord throughout the passing generations—these things together make an ‘atmosphere.’ Happy is the people who in offering the tribute of their common worship have the aid of what is seen and temporal in raising them to the vision of those things which are unseen and eternal.

OSWALD B. MILLIGAN.
