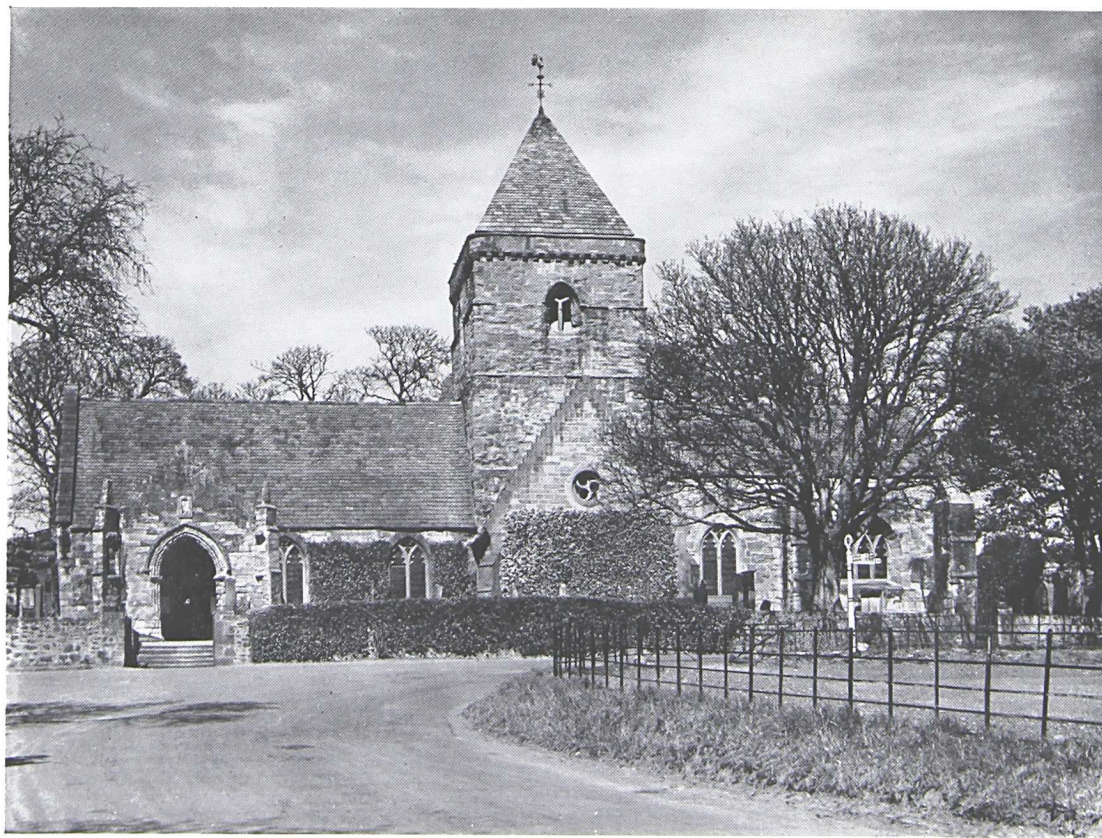


## **The Church of St. Mary, Whitekirk.**

WHITEKIRK'S early story is mostly legendary. For its history from 1294 to the Reformation we are largely dependent upon a record in the Vatican Library, which, though written at a later date, may with caution be trusted to indicate the pivotal facts. From the Reformation to 1691 the Session Records are wanting, but much may be gleaned from outside sources. From 1691 to the present day the Session Records are complete.

This shrine was not called "Whitekirk" till the fifteenth century, when James I. of Scotland called it his White Chapel. For more than a century before his reign it was known as the Chapel of Fairknowe. But when first it emerges from the voiceless ages it is Hamer, the chief ham, the place of refuge in times of danger. Hamer could offer both strength and salvation, and its holy well, potent with curative properties, was destined to draw to it the afflicted not merely of this district, nor of Scotland only, but of the whole Christian world.

"Where it is" often explains "what it is," and the geographical situation of Whitekirk helps to suggest its place in history. From the summit of Fairknowe, the hill which rises to the north-west of the Church, a wide panorama is seen to extend itself on every side. To the south stretches the Garden of Scotland, the fertile valley of the Tyne, walled in by the Lammermoors; and midway between them and us stands Dunsinnot (now Traprain) Law, a mine of buried story, stronghold of Tyrant Loth, and legendary home of St. Mungo; and nearer still to our feet lies Athelstaneford, scene of the bloody battle in which Celt vanquished Saxon and raised aloft the White Saltire of St. Andrew as the national flag of Scotland. To the north stand North Berwick Law, The Bass, and strong Tantallon. Beyond the Firth of Forth the ancient Kingdom of Fife stretches towards its bulwark, the Ochils and the Lomonds. To the west the vista reaches beyond Edina's battlements (Arthur's Seat, the Castle Rock, and the Calton Hill), towards those which guard the far-off valley where the Forth issues from the heart of Pictland like a Highland host



ST. MARY'S, WHITEKIRK—FROM THE SOUTH.



descending to meet the invading foe. Here at our feet they meet and mingle, just as long centuries ago Celt and Saxon met only to be united in one greater kingdom. But it is chiefly to the east that we must look in order to understand the story. The North Sea runs in upon us in several sandy bays at the Forth, the Peffer, and the Tyne, and these with the safe harbour of Dunbar offered inviting landing to Dane and Norseman. And along this shore ran the Great North Road to Tantallon, which guarded the ferry port for Fife. Here was a panorama indeed, and when we remember that under a watchful eye every movement could be seen and reported to the king, we may justly infer that polity as well as piety prompted the zeal of Scottish monarchs for Hamer with its White Kirk, whose vigil never ceased.

Whether or not the Christian Church had already found a foothold in Lothian it is to St. Baldred of The Bass that its permanent foundation is due. He came from the Celtic Mission in Northumberland in the seventh century, and his frail craft touched land on the sandy beach at Seacliffe. There, upon a cliff near to the old rock altar of pagan sacrifice, he reared his first Church in Lothian, the "Priory" of Auldham, which continued to be planted till 1619, when it was united to Tynninghame, both being in the see of St. Andrews. From the shore of the Forth St. Baldred extended his Mission two miles to the southward, and upon a mound near to the north bank of the Tyne arose a monastery among whose monks we first hear of St. Cuthbert, and where at a later date a Norman Church was erected which served as the Parish Church of Tynninghame till 1760 when that Parish was united to Whitekirk. St. Baldred further extended his Mission two miles westwards from Tynninghame along the north bank of the river, and at the "Priest Town" he built the Church of Prestonkirk, which, though changing its outward form, has continued to this day. Of the first foundation at Hamer there is no record, but legend has it—and history would seem to corroborate the belief—that here an oratory if not a church had been built at a very early date, and in all likelihood by St. Baldred.

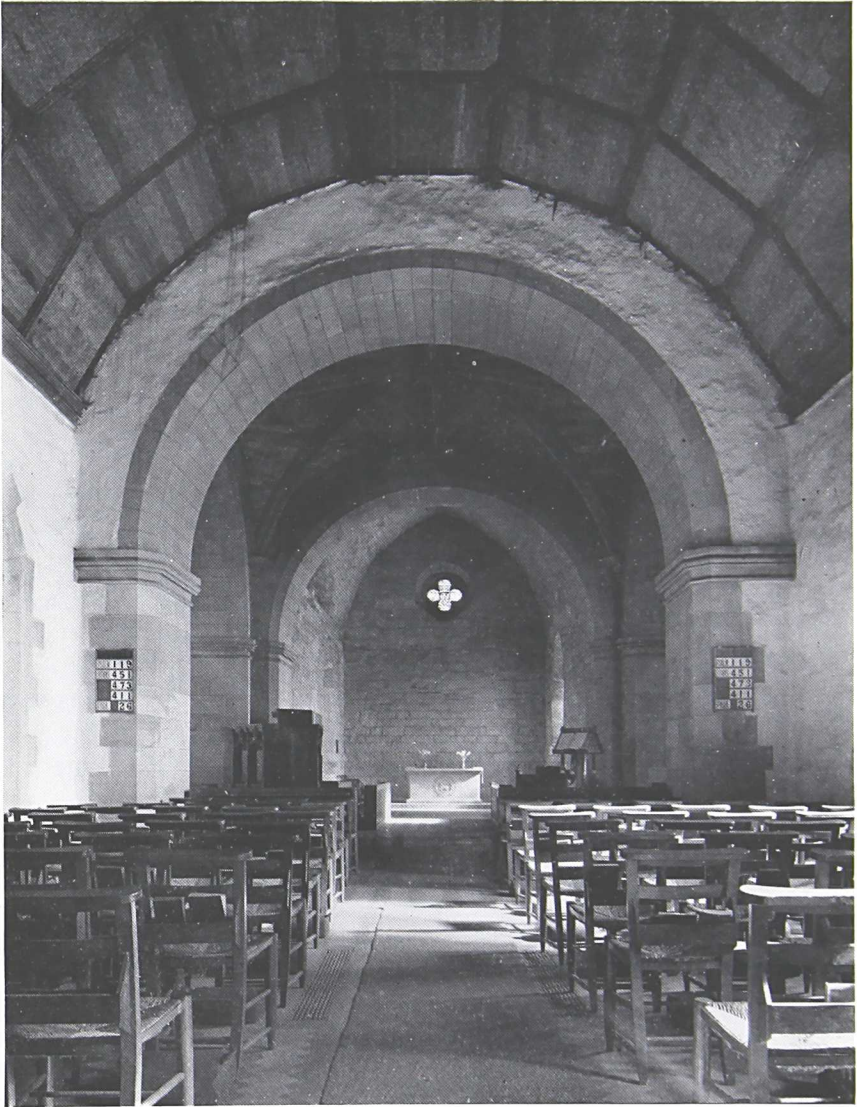
It was David I. who brought Hamer into the light of history, when in 1128 he made it a dependency of his newly-founded Abbey of Holyrood House. The Sair Sanct was an astute ruler, and to him fell the difficult task of consolidating the kingdom. He found it a congeries of warring tribes and made it a nation. When force fails love may

conquer. And in David's hand the Church was an instrument of fusion. His watchful care for Hamer had its counterpart in the pious interest he took in St. Clement's, Harris. The Western Isles, the last refuge of the Picts and Scots, were harried by the Norsemen, and the necessity of that ruined daughter Church of Iona was relieved by King David out of the revenues of his newly constituted Abbey, and this gave the monks of Holyrood a claim to St. Clement's which they afterwards substantiated. In the south-east of the country another problem presented itself, viz., the union of Celt and Saxon, Saxon and Norman, St. Andrew's Cross and Holy Rood. Whether or not this motive was uppermost in David's mind, the fact remains that Hamer with its holy well and guest house for pilgrims on the route to Kilrymont must have played an important part in that long and difficult process of fusion.

The record in the Vatican Library begins with the year 1294, when it attributes to the then Countess of Dunbar the building at Fairknowe of a chapel and chantry in honour of Our Lady in token of gratitude for a miraculous cure received at the holy well. The story is that the Countess, while escaping from the Castle during a siege, obtained a hurt while being lowered into a boat. She was landed at Pepper Sands and carried to Hamer, where "an hermit told her that if she had faith to drink of that holy well she would find relief, which she did, and had no sooner done drinking than she was perfectly recovered from all bruises and made whole." This miracle she made known to the Prior of Coldingham, and in the following year caused the chapel and chantry to be built. The Prior of Coldingham seems to have adopted for his design the central plan of his ancient Priory Church.

The fame of Hamer as a place of healing spread quickly, and in the following century its renown was national. In 1309, Abernethy, the religious capital of the North with the Cross of St. Andrew, and Melrose, the religious capital of the South with the Black Cross or Holy Rood, met in Whitekirk to make it a national shrine and place of pilgrimage. And the following story indicates how important a place Whitekirk had already taken in the religious life and feeling of the nation. It comes from the grievous year of the Burnt Candlemas, 1356, when Edward III. was invading Scotland, laying waste with fire and sword. The English armies had ravaged Berwickshire and Lothian. The beautiful Abbey Church of Haddington, the Lamp of Lothian, had





ST. MARY'S, WHITEKIRK—INTERIOR.

been given to the flames and the enemy was laying siege to Dunbar Castle. The ships for revictualling the English Army had come north to the Firth of Forth. Some of the sailors (John of Fordoun calls them Pirates, Sons of Belial) landed from their ships and laid unholy hands on Whitekirk, the treasures of which were already great. Within a long aumbry in the south-west pillar under the tower, which some have called a leper squint, a boy belonging to the place had hid himself away, and from his covert watched the sacriligious deeds of those ungodly men. Their leader invaded the sanctuary and insulted the image of the Virgin, tearing a ring so rudely from her finger as to mutilate her hand. Whereupon a heavy crucifix fell upon his head and killed him on the spot. The others gathered up the treasure, and dragging in chains behind them two Canons of Holyrood who had been recently appointed its custodians, hurried to the ships and hastily put to sea. But as in the case of another miraculous deliverance when "God blew, and they were scattered," so these English sailors were overtaken by a violent storm, their ships foundered, and they with their ill-gotten booty went to the bottom. The ships being destroyed, the army had to retire, and Scotland is said to have been saved because of the insult offered to the Virgin within the shrine at Whitekirk.

In the following century the fame of Whitekirk had become international, and in 1413 it counted among its visitors 15,653 pilgrims of all nations.

In 1435 a distinguished visitor came to these shores in the person of Æneas Sylvius, a scion of the noble house of Piccolomini, which numbered many illustrious men among its members. This young Italian nobleman, perhaps gay, certainly brilliant, was gifted with a remarkable genius for diplomacy, and, at the age of thirty, was sent to Scotland by the Pope to urge King James I. to go to war with England. The season was mid-winter, and violent storms encountered in the North Sea threatened to engulf the frail vessel. In his extremity Æneas vowed that if he got safely to land he would make a pilgrimage to the nearest shrine of the Blessed Virgin. The storm at once abated. The ship anchored at Dunbar, and Æneas made the journey—ten thousand paces—barefoot upon the frozen ground. To this self-imposed ordeal in the severity of a Scottish winter has been attributed the rheumatic gout which claimed him its repeated victim till his dying day. But the influence was deeper than physical; for when he

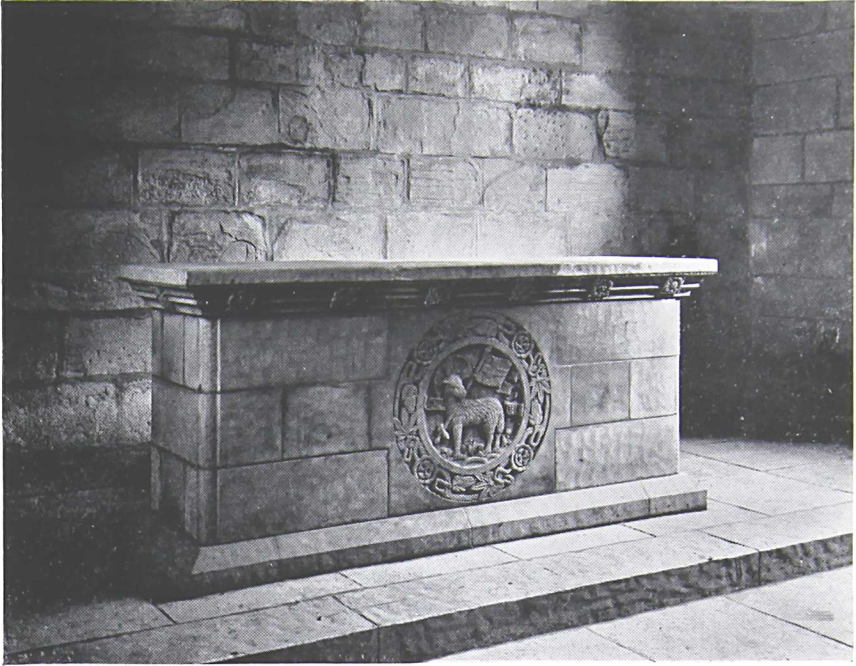


returned to Italy he took holy orders, and in 1458 he was elected to the Papal Chair, taking the name of Pius II. As Pope he was able and illustrious, and as scholar he was eminent among the best of his day. In his writings he has left an interesting record of his visit to Whitekirk in which he tells of the place, and of the homes, the appearance, the character, and the customs of the people, and how he first saw a Church-door distribution of coals to the half-naked poor, the country being then denuded of trees. This record is the only light we have upon the domestic life of Scotland in that age. That was in 1435.

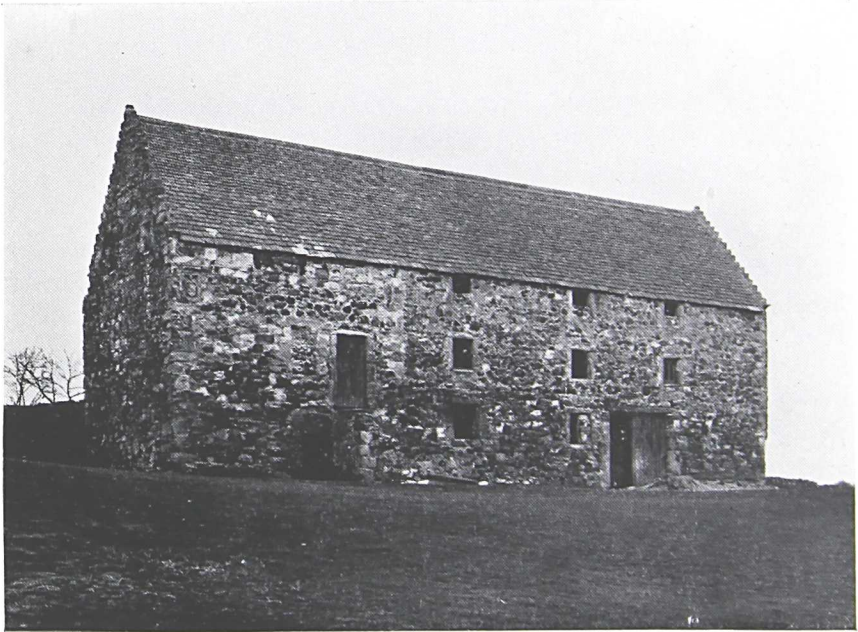
In the next year came the tragic death of King James I., and Scotland was left with a boy king who was virtually a prisoner in Edinburgh Castle. The late monarch had taken a great interest in his White Chapel, and was credited with having rebuilt the pilgrims' houses. Now the widowed Queen, devising a means of escape, asked of Sir William Crichton, the Governor of the Castle, permission to go on pilgrimage to Whitekirk. Her petition was granted. She packed two trunks. In one she put her wardrobe. In the other she hid the boy king. Both trunks were placed safely on board ship at Leith. The ship put to sea and turned not eastwards to Whitekirk but westwards to Stirling, and the boy escaped into Stirling Castle.

In 1439 an important architectural change took place. The Choir was remodelled and the stone-vaulted roof was built. (This roof alone withstood the fire which gutted the Church in 1914.) The work was carried out "agreeable to the mode of Peter de Maine," who, coming from Mayenne in France, is thought to have been the architect of fifteenth century Melrose and the ancestor of the Meins of Newstead, who founded Freemasonry in Scotland. And thus it came about that from Brittany through this Peter of Mayenne there arrived at Whitekirk a third stream of Celtic influence, the others having come from the Iona Mission in Northumberland, the first directly with St. Baldred and the second indirectly through Durham and Coldingham.

In so far as history speaks it is James IV. who is the monarch most intimately acquainted with Whitekirk. His visits were frequent, and though they were not the barefoot pilgrimages of Æneas Sylvius, they were prompted withal by a sincere piety and a real affection. He came as the Church's benefactor and the friend of the poor. We read of him that while "profuse in his offerings generally there were certain shrines which he never passed by unremembered



ST. MARY'S, WHITEKIRK—THE HOLY TABLE.



WHITEKIRK—THE TITHE BARN.



when he happened to be in their neighbourhood—such was St. Mary of Hamer or Whitekirk.” And the figures of his pursebearer prove that here indeed was liberality at the shrine and generosity to the sick and needy.

It would be good to have a picture of one of these royal visits in the heyday of Scotland's life, of the glittering cavalcade, of the relaxations devised to relieve the tediousness of the journey—falconry and the cards—and more especially of this brave and generous man, this monarch highly gifted and greatly beloved, “the gloir of princely governing,” coming among his simple folk and with them humbly offering his devotions at the shrine.

But soon this gay life was to be quenched for ever. Flodden, Scotland's calamity, was at hand, and from that dark day Whitekirk's glory fades. The breath of autumn passes over it. Its is now a departing glory, an ever-increasing decay, till the wild fury of the Reformation bursts upon it and blasts it utterly.

In 1537 we find James V. giving to his unworthy favourite, Oliver Sinclair, permission to pull down the pilgrims' houses and build with the stones thereof a house for himself. This meant that he was to play the part of spy and report to the king all the movements going on around the baronial halls. This was the Sir Oliver Sinclair who, having been placed by the king in command of an expedition into England, was deserted by the barons and taken prisoner, a blow from which the unhappy monarch never recovered.

In 1650 the work of desecration and destruction begun at the Reformation was continued by Cromwell and his Ironsides, who halted here on their way to Tantallon and used the Church as a stable for their horses.

The parish was embroiled in the troubles of the covenanting days, and in 1678 Blackadder held his last conventicle on the hill behind the Church. The soldiers were sent from the Bass to disperse the meeting, and there was bloodshed. Two cairns on the hilltop are said to mark the graves of Covenant martyrs.

Within the sanctuary where the high altar had stood there was erected in 1691 the Laird's Pew, a classical structure like a fourpost bed.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century a notable reaction had set in to the perfervid zeal of the “killing time.” Irreligion and immorality were rampant. The chancel was found to be sufficient for the needs of the

parish, and a wall was built separating it from the nave, which for a time was made to serve as the parish school, a door being cut through the west wall.

In 1760 the then minister of Tynninghame died, causing a great change in the history of both parishes. The ecclesiastical buildings of Tynninghame were declared to be in so ruinous a condition as to be regarded as irreparable, and permission was sought by the then Earl of Haddington to have the two parishes united. This was granted, and the people of Tynninghame were ordered to repair to Whitekirk for the ordinances and the sacraments. The partition wall was removed. The people of Whitekirk continued to sit in the chancel (looking west), while the newcomers were admitted to the nave, and the pulpit was placed between them. The Earl of Haddington introduced into the North Transept the beautifully carved loft in which he had sat in the Church of Tynninghame. But as yet no worthy provision had been made for the needs of the Laird of the third ancient parish (Auldham), and in 1832 a small north aisle was added in which was inserted a small loft resembling a Dutch cabinet. In peace and tranquility this order continued till in 1914 some fanatical women called suffragettes burnt the shrine which even felons had not dared to destroy. But God, who makes the wrath of men and even of women to praise Him, caused this lamented act of madness to serve two salutary ends. It swept out the foolish innovations of three centuries and left the mediaeval structure almost unharmed; and it so stirred the feelings of all classes of the people that they could not rest until this shrine so dear to Scottish hearts was worthily restored.

The restoration, begun at once under the guidance of the late Sir Robert Lorimer, was sufficiently advanced for the Church to be reopened for worship on St. Luke's Day, 1917. There is much to be done yet, and whatever goes into Whitekirk must be representative of the best the age can do. Let us hope and pray that in Scotland pious hearts and devoted hands may still be found to fulfil this sacred duty.

The Church is built of red ashler, and is cruciform in plan, the chancel inclining towards the south. There is a massive central tower, square in form and in three storeys, and a beautiful south-west Porch. This Porch had been altered in the fifteenth century. The panel above the arch had contained an image of the Virgin and Child. The western niche may have contained an image of St. Andrew,



and the eastern one an image of St. Peter. On the stone benches running along the lateral walls are what might be cup marks or holes for the sharpening of arrow heads, and on the lateral walls themselves are masonic signs.

Within the building one senses eternity and peace. Its simple beauty and rugged strength are eloquent of spiritual truth. There is both rounded and pointed work, suggesting that an earlier building had been transformed into a Gothic Church. Many changes in the masonry are discernible. The square end speaks of Celtic influence, not so likely from Mayenne as from Iona through Lindesfarne and Coldingham. The piscina has been blocked up. A doorway driven through the south-east window in the middle of the fifteenth century reminds one of Melrose, Roslin, and Corstorphine. The tracery of this window survived the fire of 1914.



Before the fire the vaulted roof under the Tower had a central shield-shaped boss charged with two crosses, the Saltire of St. Andrew on the north and the Latin Cross on the south. Unfortunately this shield was completely destroyed and was not restored.

Outside the building, in the east angle of the Porch and nave, lies the matrix stone of a memorial brass. About a century ago during a rearrangement of the interior furnishings this stone was found under the pavement of the Church and was removed to its present site. It had an effigy carved upon it, but now lies broken and defaced. It is believed to have been quarried at Tournai in Belgium, probably in the fourteenth century, and is one of only four known to exist in Scotland.

On the east wall of the Church there has been inserted above the Rose Window a panel on which is carved a shield, said to be that of "Abbot" Crawford of Holyrood.

The Granary, which stands on the high ground about a hundred yards to the north of the Church, is reputed to have been the tithe barn of the parish, and is the only one in Scotland still existing in any state of preservation. It is a long narrow structure containing two storeys with a garret in the roof. The western end is the remains of an old keep or strong tower with massive walls containing an

inside staircase. This building was extended eastward at a later date. (In the west corner of the south wall, three courses below the eaves, is a panel containing a figure supporting a shield.) It is probable that some part of the edifice was erected by Sir Oliver Sinclair out of the stones of the pilgrims' houses. It is now used as an agricultural shed.

The site of Our Lady's Well has been lost. About a hundred and twenty years ago it was sacrificed to the needs of an unhallowed agriculture. Drains and ditches left the pilgrim not a drop to drink. It was filled in and ploughed over. But the presumed site is still marked on the Ordnance Survey Map. It is to the east of the Church, about seventy-five feet to the south of the road, at a point to the north-east of the more northerly of the two grassy knolls in the field known as Our Lady's Field.

JAMES TINDAL SOUTTER.