

Symington Parish Church

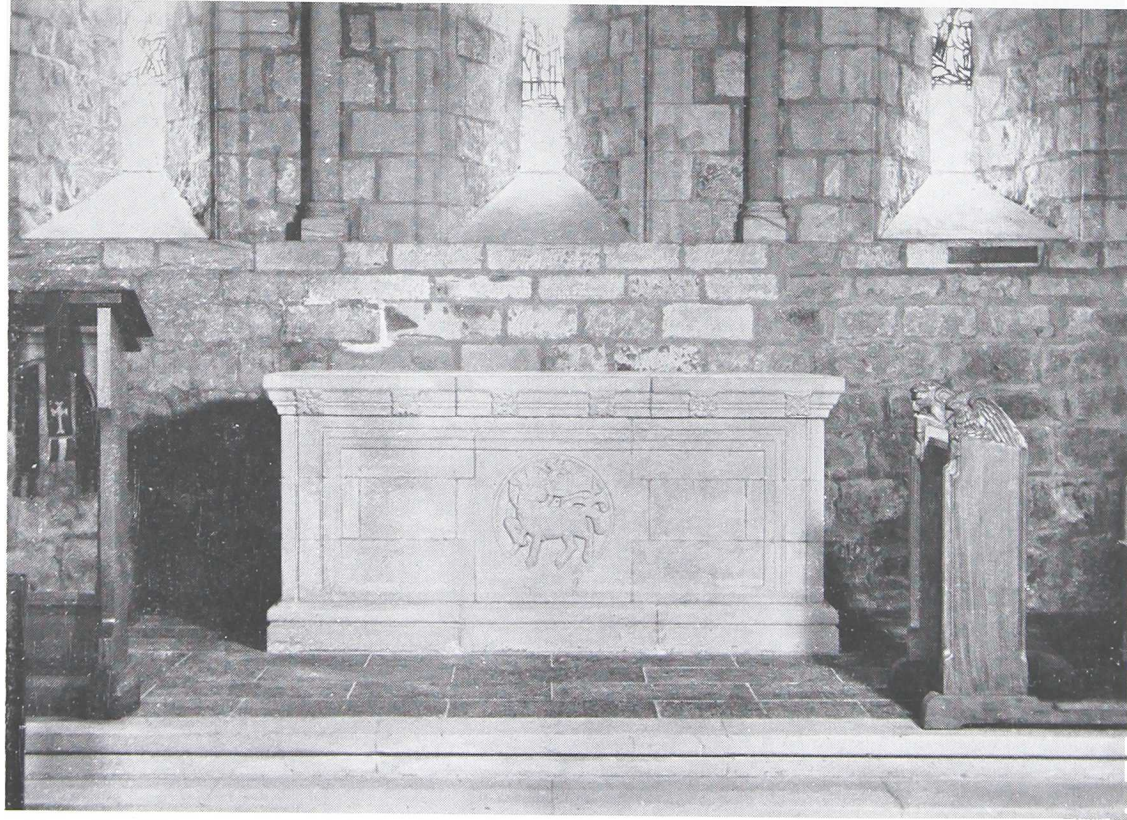
THE Church of Symington is amongst the oldest and the most beautiful of the churches of Ayrshire and its story goes back to Norman times. When David I. ascended the throne in 1124, having married an English Countess, Matilda the widow of the Earl of Northampton, we are told that he was followed by no fewer than a thousand Anglo-Normans.

One of them, Hugh de Morville, became his High Constable and was given vast grants of land. He possessed the greater part of Cunninghame and under his auspices we find a large number of families, many of whom afterwards rose to high feudal distinction, settling in that district. Among them was one, Simon Loccard, who held properties in Lanarkshire and Ayrshire and who, records show, held the lands of Symington in 1165 under Walter the High Steward. It was this Simon who founded the church in 1160 and who gave the name to the village and parish.

From the beginning it appears that the church was well endowed, because we find Simon's son, Malcolm, giving the monks at Paisley, in pure alms for the soul of Walter, the son of Alan, six acres of land "in villa Symonis de Kyil". Various further references are to be found in connection with these "lands", and in the *Retours*, in an entry of October, 1690, they appear as "terris dominicalis". The church was dedicated to the Holy Trinity and in Masoun's Notarial Book we find a reference to the "Trinitie landis", a name still associated with certain ground in the parish to this day.

Little more is known of the history of the church from its foundation until 1252, when we find it being granted to the Convent of the Trinity or Red Friars at Feil or Faile in Kyle. And it appears that this Order, instituted in 1198 by St. John of Malta, with a mission for the redemption of Christian slaves from the infidels ("Tertia vero pars refervetur ad redemptionem captivorum, qui sunt incarcerati pro fide Christi a Paganis"), was responsible for supplying the ministry of Symington, right up to the Reformation.

Chalmer's *Caledonia* records that "the cure was served by a vicar pensioner, who had a settled income, and a glebe; and the minister and brothers of Fail enjoyed the



SYMINGTON PARISH CHURCH
(Holy Table, Lectern and Prayer Desk)



SYMINGTON PARISH CHURCH
(Elders' Stalls)

remainder of the tithes and revenues". In Bagimont's Roll, as it stood in the reign of James V., the "vicarage of Symonstoun in the deanery of Kyle" was taxed at £2 13s 4d, being a tenth of the estimated value.

But it is not until we come to 1566 that the record of ministers is complete. In that year we find Sir John Millar, Vicar, and he is succeeded by Thomas Carrington, Reader, in 1567. In 1574 we again find John Millar, this time as Reader and he is followed by Robert Montgomerie, who was formerly minister of Stirling and Archbishop of Glasgow, in 1587. Then in 1598, William Wallace, M.A., is presented to the vicarage by James VI., and he is followed by Robert Montgomerie, M.A., in 1636. Montgomerie, however, was deprived in 1642 and is succeeded in that year by John Gemmill, M.A.

He too, however, appears to have found things difficult, because he is accused of preaching and baptizing irregularly and of refusing to conform to Episcopacy and is confined to his parish. James Whyte is admitted in 1667. John Gemmill is, however, granted an indulgence by the Privy Council, and in 1669 we again find him minister. In 1670 he, together with other Presbyterian ministers, is sent for by His Majesty's Commissioners to consult in order to an Accommodation, and William Blair becomes minister in 1685. He was deprived in 1690, having by this time been translated to Sorn. John Gemmill returns in 1687 under the Toleration and dies the Father of the Church in 1705. In that year William Wallace is minister, but only for a short period, and is succeeded by George Crawford in 1709. Then comes John Cochrane in 1712, George Reid in 1723, and Richard Cunningham in 1733. The latter was succeeded by his son Alexander Cunningham in 1761 and in a short time we find that he appears to have made quite a reputation for himself, since we note that he is libelled in 1765 for "leaving the parish in 1762, taking up his residence in Edinburgh till December last, attending the theatre, obscene conversation, tippling, drinking to excess, etc.". The prosecution, however, was withdrawn and he died in 1783. He was followed by William Logan in 1784 and in 1802 we find Alexander Flockhart, and in 1809 Thomas Smith Wharrie.

In 1840 George Orr is minister and in 1843 he joins the Free Church, becoming minister of Symington Free Church in that same year. John Davidson becomes minister in 1844 and is followed by Peter Constable Lyall in 1878, and

by John Gage Boyd in 1906. Ordained to the Original Secession Church, the latter ministered to the parish for forty years and was succeeded as Colleague and Successor by the writer.

But if little is known at the moment of the ministers prior to the Reformation, still less is known of the history of the church. Few records remain, and although the parochial registers were kept as far back as 1642 they are very irregular until about 1780. So far as can be discovered the church during the early period consisted simply of a nave and chancel, and traces are still to be seen of what appears to have been a chancel arch. The windows were small and the whole appears to have been dark, and by the middle of the eighteenth century it had become too small for the needs of the parish ; so in the year 1750 we find the church undergoing extensive repairs. It was furnished with new pews which are described as " being all painted ", and the roof seems to have been given a flat ceiling, plastered over. The walls at this date were good, and so were the timbers which formed the roof, these being of oak and said to have been grown in the parish, where at this time there was no natural wood.

The smallness of the church probably accounts for the fact that in 1797 we read of additions being made by building out the north side to form a transept with gallery above, and by adding two other galleries, one over the East end and the other over the West end. The pulpit was placed in the middle of the South wall, the church at this period having the plan of an inverted " T ". Access to these galleries, which was given to the three large mansions in the parish, Coodham, Rosemount and Dankeith, was by outside stairs. Thus we read in the *Statistical Account* of 1842 that " the Church can now accommodate with ease, four hundred people ".

It would also appear that part of the walls at least was covered with plaster. But it is only when we realize at what cost this increase in seating was achieved that we marvel that the church was not ruined beyond repair. For it seems that the East window with its beautiful Norman stonework was covered over and part of the top of the centre arch removed in order to make a doorway into the gallery. The window itself consists of three lights, the actual opening being only some seven or eight inches, yet widened out inside the church in the treatment of the stonework to some twenty-one feet. Dr. MacGregor Chalmers, under whose

skilled direction the original restoration work was carried out, said of the unknown craftsman who had created the windows, "that if he had done nothing else, he could have died content".

It was in 1919 that the work of restoration was begun, due to the initiative of the Rev. John Gage Boyd. The ceiling and all plaster work was removed revealing the walls and windows. The gallery over the East window was taken down, as was also that over the West doorway. The original beams, still in an excellent state of preservation, were revealed and a new front put on the North gallery. The outside stairways were also removed, with the exception of that still leading to the North gallery. The work was carried out as a memorial to the men from the parish who fell in the first world war and was dedicated by the Very Rev. Dr. Wallace Williamson in November, 1919.

Although the interior of the church had been restored to much of its ancient beauty, a few things still remained to be done, and further work of restoration was carried out in 1950. The Chancel of the church was crowded by the placing of two pews on either side of the Communion Table. The Table itself was too small for the proportions of the church and the organ console was badly placed. After long consultation it was unanimously agreed by the Kirk Session to formulate a plan into which subsequent gifts might fit, but as a result of generous donations the whole work was enabled to be completed at once.

The pews beside the Communion Table were removed and the platform extended to the whole width of the Chancel. A beautiful Table in Blaxter stone, designed by T. J. Beveridge, F.R.I.B.A., was gifted in memory of the late Sir Henry Houldsworth, Bart., of Coodham, and this was placed on a platform of Caithness flags. In addition two sets of Elders' Stalls, in groups of four, also in Blaxter Stone, were donated in memory of the late Andrew Arthur, Esq., of Rosemount. A Prayer Desk in oak was gifted in memory of the late Rev. John Gage Boyd, thus completing the furnishings of the Chancel.

During the alterations care was taken to preserve the old Piscina stone in the South window of the Chancel, and also to re-inter the bones of Simon Loccard, which it is said were discovered buried beneath the Chancel during the first restoration. The ashes of the late Rev. John Gage Boyd were also buried in the Chancel and the positions marked by two simple crosses on the pavement.

The space in front of the Sanctuary was widened by removing two pews in front of the pulpit, and the flooring was laid in oak. The organ console was removed to the gallery, where the organ pipes had been placed originally, thus turning it into an organ loft. It is here that the Choir now sit. Opportunity was also taken by the Kirk Session to overhaul and renew the heating system, and finally, thanks to another donation, the aisles and part of the Sanctuary floor were covered in rich carpeting. The Church was re-opened and dedicated on Easter Sunday, 1950, by the Very Rev. James R. Forgan, D.D., in the presence of a crowded congregation and many representatives of the Presbytery.

The glory of the church is rendered even more beautiful by the quality of the stained glass. The three lights in the East window represent the Nativity, the Crucifixion, and the Ascension, and are the work, as are all the windows, of the late Dr. Douglas Strachan. Of these East windows William Wilson, R.S.A., R.S.W., has remarked: "I must confess my own particular love for the charm and simplicity of the tiny windows set in the deeply-splayed Norman arches of some of our earliest churches, such as Symington in Ayrshire and St. Margaret's Chapel on the Castle rock. So perfect are they in their setting, the architectural relationship is as complete as the windows in Chartres".

The window in the South wall of the Chancel represents the Last Supper. A memorial window in the south wall, erected to the memory of Officers and Men of the Ayrshire Yeomanry who died in the Great War, 1914-19, represents Christ preaching to the multitude from a boat, in Galilee, whilst another window has as its subject the meeting on the road to Emmaus. The window above the West door is particularly beautiful and shows the risen and glorified Lord, whilst a small window in the North wall represents the breaking of the alabaster box of ointment, and the text it bears is "Simon I have somewhat to say unto thee".

On entering the church the visitor is struck by the height and the steeply pitched roof with the old timbers, still in an excellent state of preservation, supporting it. High up in the angle formed by the roof at the East end there is enclosed in a box the works of the clock, with the pendulum and weights hanging down in full view of the congregation. Owing to the difficulty experienced in gaining access to the clock for winding and regulating purposes, another generous donor has enabled an electric movement to be installed in

the vestry with a slave drive to the clock, the face of which is seen from outside the church and which provides the village with its time. It is hoped, however, to retain the weights and pendulum in their present position as a link with the past.

Meantime, research into the past history of this ancient church still goes on and it is hoped some day to complete a little further the information which at the moment is very limited. But although the knowledge of the past history of the church and parish is meagre, the knowledge that for nearly eight hundred years Christian worship has continued uninterruptedly in this place provides a strong inspiration and also a great respect for those who built so well in bygone days.

THOMAS RITCHIE.