

Durisdeer Parish Church

THE village of Durisdeer is as picturesque as its name might suggest, nestling as it does at the foot of the green Lowther hills six miles from Thornhill. The name is probably derived from the Gaelic dubhras—a blackwood and doire—a copse. Johnson in his *Place Names of Scotland* defines as follows, dorus doire—entrance to the forest. The name has changed in spelling throughout the years. The following variations have been noted. Dorisdeir (1320); Doresder (1329); Dorysder (1401); Durisder (1430); Dusdere (1566); Dursdyer (1660); Disdeir (1721). The Rev. Dr. Stewart Thomson has made the attractive suggestion that the interpretation might be—the door of the daer, i.e. the Daer Water. The village is situated with its kirk on the east side of the parish. A hundred years ago the population would be in the region of 100, today there are under 30 residents. A pleasing feature of the present day scene is that the old cottages which comprise the village are being rapidly purchased and renovated and brought up to date, for use as holiday homes. Some of those incomers look forward to retiring to these houses. At one time the weaver's shuttle would be heard in the white-washed houses. Though sheep still graze on the surrounding hills all is quiet now, and the main road passes lower down the valley through the Dalveen Pass; and the hamlet, which once had a smithy and an inn, is left to slumber with its memories. The village has links with Robert Burns, and Daniel Defoe. The charms of Durisdeer have been captured in song by Lady John Scott, and in poetry by Alice V. Stuart.

The kirk within the village can be seen from the Edinburgh road, its grey tower standing out against the background of Scots pines which crowd the promontory on which the kirk stands. In a gorge below, the Kirkburn splashes downwards to meet Carronwater which flows into the river Nith, at Carronbridge. The village and kirk are easily accessible and no longer remote in the true sense, largely because of the motor car age. From Durisdeer the old Roman road runs northwards into Lanarkshire two miles distant. Pilgrims, royal and otherwise, passed this way en route for Whithorn and St. Ninian's Church. The earthwork of a Roman Fort is situated a mile or so above the village on this

Roman road or, so called, the Well or Wald Path. The kirk is most inconveniently situated for most of the parishioners, and this creates its own problems, which are common to many other rural congregations.

Ramage, in his history of Drumlanrig and the Douglasses, tells us that the kirk of Durisdeer is first mentioned in the books of the monks of Kelso, in the 13th century. The Abbot there seems to have been quite powerful, having jurisdiction as far north as Arbroath Abbey. In the 14th century the rectory of Durisdeer was under the surveillance of the Bishop of Glasgow. The kirk was probably dedicated to St. Cuthbert whose well on the Kirkburn may still be found. The chronicler wrote that "within the kirk of Durisdeer in 1556 the baron John Douglas, son of Archibald of Coshogle, had to appear after the murder of Hugh Douglas of Dalveen, and there before the altar bare his sword before and to the relatives of the dead man, in order to end a family feud."

The date of the present church building is 1699. An old sundial carved in a stone above the South door has this date on it. The Rev. George Wallace, minister of the church in the early part of the 19th century, gives the date 1720 in the second *Statistical Account* of the parish. Sir John Clerk of Penicuik noted in his *Journie to Galloway in 1721*, recently transcribed and edited by W. A. J. Prevost of Edinburgh, that on his homeward way he took the road by Disdeer (old spelling) having a mind to see their new church. It is known that a mason, John Fair, rebuilt the church around 1717 and it is likely that the original date stands.

The plan of the kirk is the orthodox T shape, but on the north side is the Queensberry Aisle and on the west side a square building formerly used as a school, and disused since 1874. The interior of the kirk is simple and purposeful. There are a number of box pews scattered throughout the building. These are rarer in Scottish kirks nowadays, for much re-seating has been done in the last century. An interesting feature of some of these pews is that the haffit between the pews can be removed, and part of the seat lifts out to complete the table. Were some of the box pews used by the poor or were they designed for family sittings? Another ingenious design is the hinged book-boards of the pews. At Communion seasons the sloping board can be lifted through 45 degrees by a hinged triangle of wood, to form a table for the white cloth. There are three lofts or galleries, two of them called after farms (presumably the farmer and his family and the workers at the farm used that gallery) and the third is

known as the Duke's loft for it contains the Drumlanrig Castle seat. The pulpit, in the centre of the kirk, is decorated with red velvet, and the fall is of the same material. On the floor of the pulpit is the shaggy coat of a black-face sheep thoughtfully placed there to keep the occupant's feet warm in winter. Attached to the pulpit there are two pieces of 18th century hand-wrought iron work. One is thought to be an hour-glass stand; the other is a baptismal bracket which would hold a bowl. Children presented for baptism were held up to the minister, who performed the rite without moving from his stance in the pulpit.

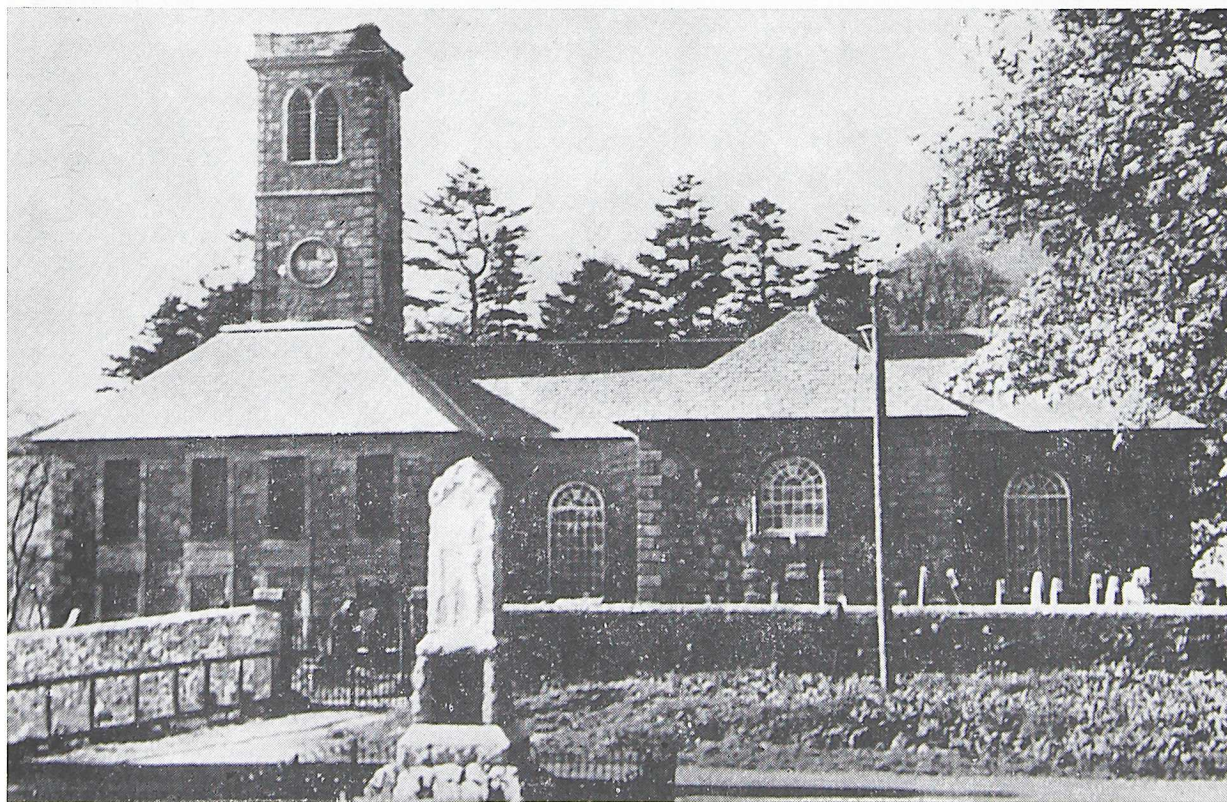
The wood-work throughout the kirk is of yellow pine. This was until recently overlaid by dark varnish but has now been restored. The Communion Table is of oak and was gifted in 1934 by the Rae family of Gateslack. The Baptismal Font was presented by the Harveys of Marr in 1954, and a Table Lectern by Wm. Teenan, B.Sc., of the School-house. The lectern is the work of a local craftsman. A flower stand in wrought-iron is at present in the making by another local craftsman. This will be in keeping with the artistic wrought-iron screen which divides the Queensberry Aisle from the kirk. At one period there had been access from the kirk to the Aisle. The pulpit, now in the centre of the kirk, must then have been to the side. A minister's door, now filled in, can be seen on the north wall of the building. In 1957 the whole building was re-roofed under professional advice and supervision, and electric lighting was installed. Until then the kirk had no lighting, but a large oil-lamp used to hang from a hook high above the minister's head. The good man of those days must have taken a considerable risk when he stood in his pulpit. About the same time as the re-roofing, the interior of the kirk was decorated. Once again this work was done by a local painter who worked lovingly on the walls and pews. The Artistic Committee of the Synod of Dumfries were consulted on the colour scheme. The walls are an off-grey colour. The cost of these improvements was considerable, but the congregation rose to the occasion. They were much helped by friends throughout the country who responded to an appeal which was made in the correspondence columns of the national press. The Pilgrim Trust donated £400 and The Baird Trust £100.

The Queensberry aisle contains the exuberant monument to James, Second Duke of Queensberry and First of Dover, and his Duchess. The monument is in black and white marble and was sculptured by the Flemish artist Van

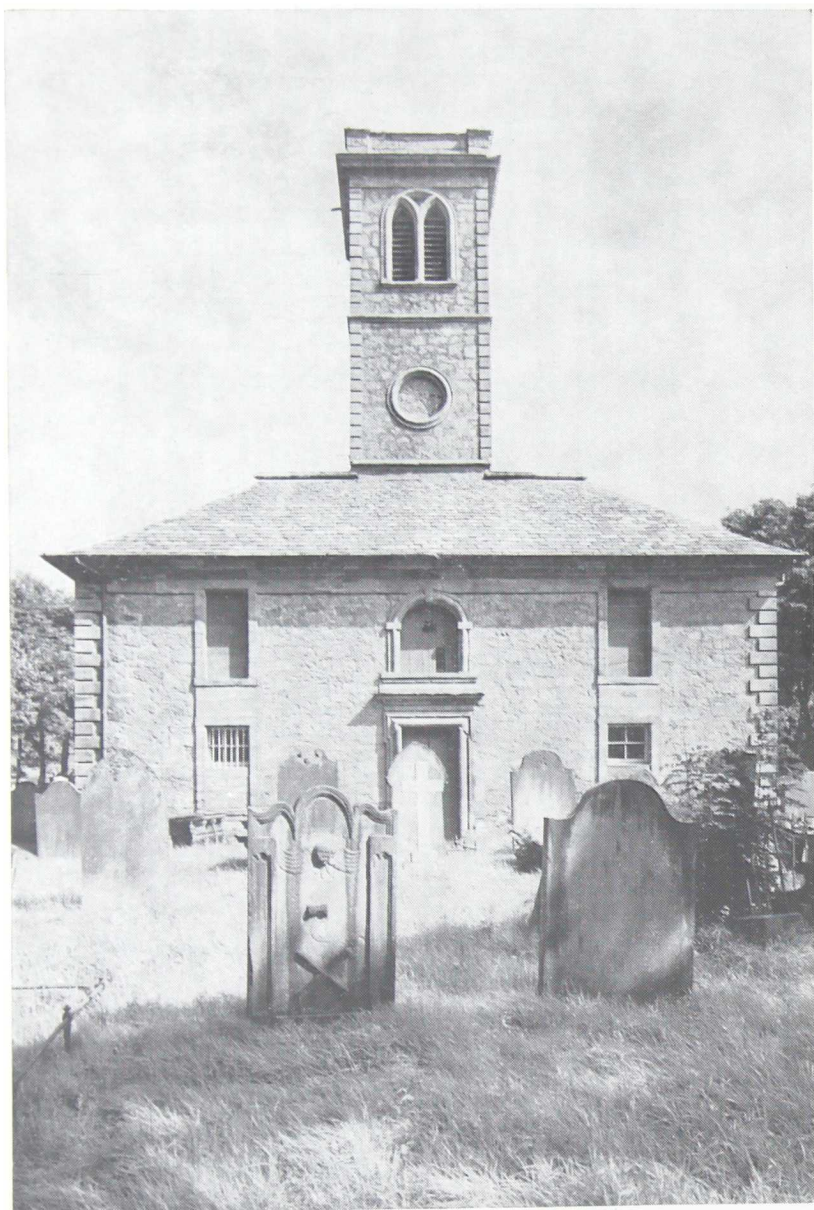
Nost who worked in London, and was one of the best sculptors of his day. A model of the tomb is preserved in Drumlanrig Castle, a beautiful piece of work and of great rarity, being one of the earliest known of the few surviving models for British tombs. The Baldacchino in a central position over the vault is said to be the responsibility of the 1st Duke who contracted with his architect James Smith to build a mausoleum on to Durisdeer kirk. It is supported by twisting columns reminiscent of St. Peter's in Rome.

The Duke commemorated in marble received the honour of a seat in the House of Lords for his part in cementing the union between the Scots and English Parliaments. At that time seats in the House of Lords for Scottish peers were reduced in number. The daughter of James, Duke of Queensberry married Francis Scott, Earl of Dalkeith afterwards The Duke of Buccleuch ; on the death without issue of the 4th Duke of Queensberry in 1810, their grandson succeeded to the Dukedom of Queensberry, thus uniting the two dukedoms.

Behind the Duke and Duchess in marble are some ornaments and Corinthian pillars with four cupids in different actions. One mourns the dead ; another holds a torch which is being extinguished in the dust ; and the other two are holding scrolls. The following is a recent translation of the Latin inscription on the memorial made by Mr. David West, Lecturer in Humanity at Edinburgh University for Mr. Prevost : “ Of Mary Duchess of Queensberry and Dover, who on her father's side was descended from the illustrious families of Burlington and Cumberland, but on her mother's from those of Somerset and Essex, who tempered the brilliance of her descent with the sweetness of her character and enlarged it by greatness of mind, who made her austerer Virtue attractive and amiable by the pure charms of her intelligence and beauty. To her adoring husband, while he was tossed by the changing of Fate, she was a glory in prosperity, in moments of doubt she was his support, in adversity his consolation, the sacred repository of his secret cares and plans. To this incomparable wife, James Duke of Queensberry and Dover has ordered that this memorial be erected with this hope and one consolation, that under this marble where he has laid these ashes, he is soon to lay his own. Died London October 2nd 1709.” Another inscription reads : “ In the same tomb, with the ashes of his beloved wife, James Duke of Queensberry and Dover has desired

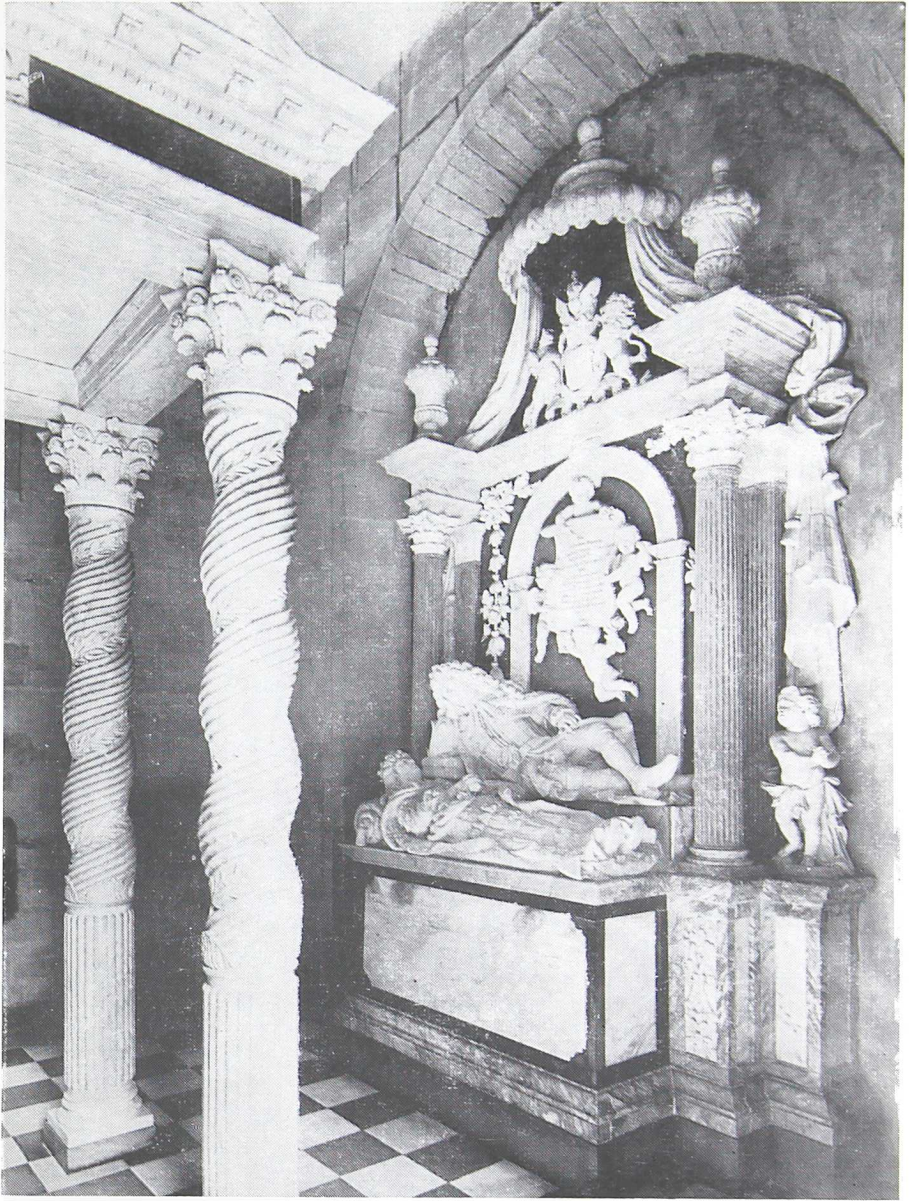


DURISDEER PARISH CHURCH: WITH OLD SCHOOL ATTACHED



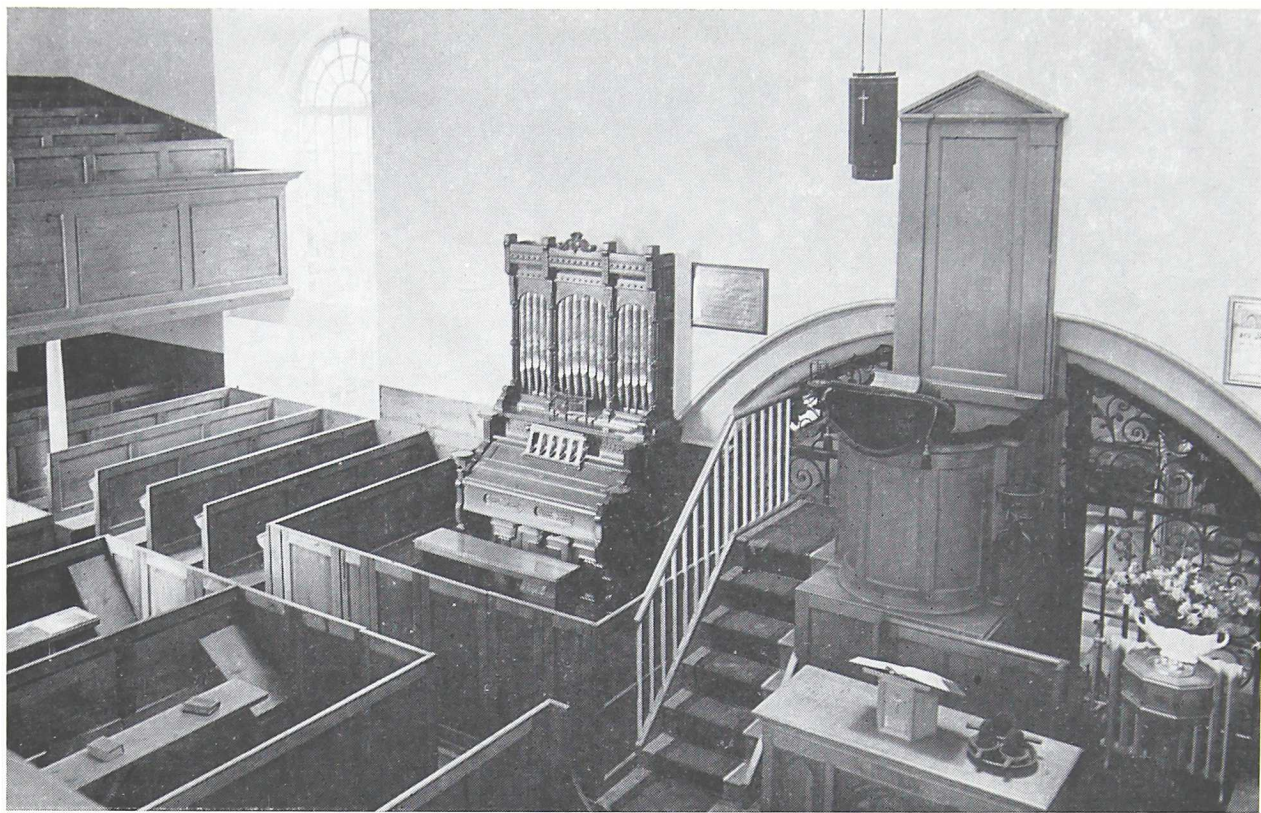
DURISDEER PARISH CHURCH :
FROM WEST, SHOWING OLD SCHOOL BUILDING

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DURISDEER PARISH CHURCH : QUEENSBERRY TOMB

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DURISDEER PARISH CHURCH : INTERIOR

his own to be mingled (a man) who having arrived to such and so great a pinnacle of honour and high employments, as no subject before has reached, yielded to Fate at London 6th July, in the year of Christ our Redeemer 1711."

On the walls of the mausoleum there are various stone carvings whose significance is difficult to interpret. Skulls and cross bones and hour glasses are in prominence amongst these. "The Marbles" which are sought out by many visitors every year, are called by George Hay, in his *Architecture of Scottish Post-Reformation Churches*, "the finest thing of its kind in Scotland"; and he goes on to say that in his opinion "there are few buildings in which Baroque magnificence and Presbyterian decency are so happily combined." Mr. Hay thinks that Sir William Bruce, who was consulted regarding nearby Drumlanrig Castle, may have had something to do with this synthesis. It is interesting to note in connection with this theory, that recently the writer had some correspondence with the Rev. Dr. Cotesworth P. Lewis, Rector of Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, Virginia, U.S.A., whose little church appears to have architectural similarities with the kirk of Durisdeer. It transpires that Bruton Church was designed by "that redoubtable Scot" the Hon. Alexander Spotswood, then Royal Governor of Virginia. Evidently he was an amateur architect of real competence, receiving inspiration from the work of Sir Christopher Wren. Bruce was the contemporary and Scots counterpart of Wren. Have these two churches, so far apart, a common architectural ancestry?

The Queensberry Aisle is of ashlar with a high lead-covered ogival roof. The Church's walls are of rubble intended for harling. The windows of the Church are large, with wooden sashes and of clear glass. On the west side of the kirk is a two-storey block which was originally Ducal retiring rooms; then latterly used as a school. From the centre of it rises the tower of the church which is square and without a spire. The timber spire was removed in the middle of the 19th century. An interesting feature of the tower is that the schoolroom fire-places have flues concealed in the walls. With the recent change-over in the church to oil-fired heating none of the chimneys is now in use. For almost a hundred years the windows of this part of the kirk have been blocked in with stone, and the considerable space inside disused, dark, and dismal. Early this year the Kirk Session received news of an offer by a local gentleman who wished to

remain anonymous, but whose identity has become known in the person of Mr. John Gladstone, of Capenoch, to open up the windows and re-floor the upper area. This magnificent gesture will enable the congregation to have a hall and suite of rooms brought into service, all under the same roof. The work is expected to begin in May or June 1966. The West door, entrance to this part of the building, was, we believe, the original entrance to the kirk. It has a fine moulding. The old School reminds us of our Reformation heritage, and the close links the Church has always had with education. Inside the West door there still stands a pail of water where travellers to the service can quench their thirst. In a past day many of the parishioners would have considerable distances to walk. One can also visualize the shepherd's dog, lying at his feet, while the diet of worship was in progress. Why were the windows of the old school blocked up? Legend has it that the schoolmaster would not leave his premises, when the State school was built; the window tax is a more likely reason.

Other notable features of the kirk are the bell which hangs in the tower. This present bell was struck at White-chapel bell foundry in 1895. It weighs $3\frac{1}{2}$ cwt., and was gifted to the congregation by the then Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry. Two pewter plates survive. The silver Communion plate is made up of two cups made in 1620 by George Robertson of Edinburgh, who made that city's mace. In 1874 His Grace gifted two other chalices and a flagon in silver to match the original two cups. Wall decorations include two plaques commemorating the fallen in the Wars; two family plaques; and two plaques—memorials to former ministers of the parish. One of these remembers Rev. David Jardine, minister of the parish for thirty-five years; his daughter is Lady Taylor of Aberdeen. The other is to Rev. James Campbell, whose ministry was from 1930 to 1953.

The kirk has many visitors, and names in the Visitors' Book include Her Majesty The Queen Mother; The Princess Margaret and Lord Snowden; Her Grace The Duchess of Gloucester; The Earl and Countess of Athlone; Lord and Lady Dalkeith.

Durisdeer is set in covenanting country. Daniel McMichael who was shot dead by Sir John Dalziel at Dalveen, is buried against the kirk wall. The congregation hold a Conventicle every year at Kirkbride, high above the Enterkin Pass, the scene of Covenanting episodes. The scattered congregation which comes from both sides of the river

Nith, is employed mostly in Agriculture and Forestry. The kirk members, who number 200, are justly proud of their little kirk with its famous tomb. They do not, however, only look back to their heritage, but are forward-looking and try to play their part in the wider work of the Church, and in present day developments in methods of evangelism.

JAMES W. SCOTT