

The Cathedral Kirk of Brechin

“BRECHIN—A Cathedral City”—this notice at the outskirts of our small Angus burgh, lying approximately half way between Perth and Aberdeen, reminds the traveller of our heritage. On civic occasions we are proud to speak of our citizenship of the City and Royal Burgh of Brechin ; on Saturday evenings, football fans are familiar with the varying fortunes of our Football Team, Brechin City, whose ground is known as Glebe Park (once the perquisite of the Minister of the First Charge). With a population of less than 7,000 people, we may be a small burgh, apprehensive of what the Wheatley proposals will do to our community, but both natives and incomers are proud to be Brechiners and conscious that for close on a thousand years, the spiritual centre of our community has been the Cathedral.

The first reference to this centre of Christian Life and Worship is to be found in the Pictish Chronicle, when in the reign of Kenneth II (971-995), it is recorded, “*Hic est qui tribuit magnum civitatem Brechne Domino.*” It seems likely that prior to this date there was already a religious community in existence, established by the Celtic Church. We can say then that the Church in Brechin was established in the Dark Ages and some time after King Kenneth’s gift of lands to the Culdee community, the famous Round Tower of Brechin was erected about 1000 A.D.

With the advent of reform and re-organisation of Scottish Life undertaken by St. Margaret’s sons, Brechin with its decayed Culdee community, endowed with lands, was ripe for redevelopment. Sometime before King David’s death in 1153, Brechin became one of the six new sees erected in his reign, along with Glasgow, Ross, Aberdeen, Caithness and Dunblane. The new diocese was very small, comprising only about twenty parishes mostly in North Angus, and for the next 400 years, twenty bishops held the see from Bishop Samson to Bishop Hepburn who died on the eve of the Reformation.

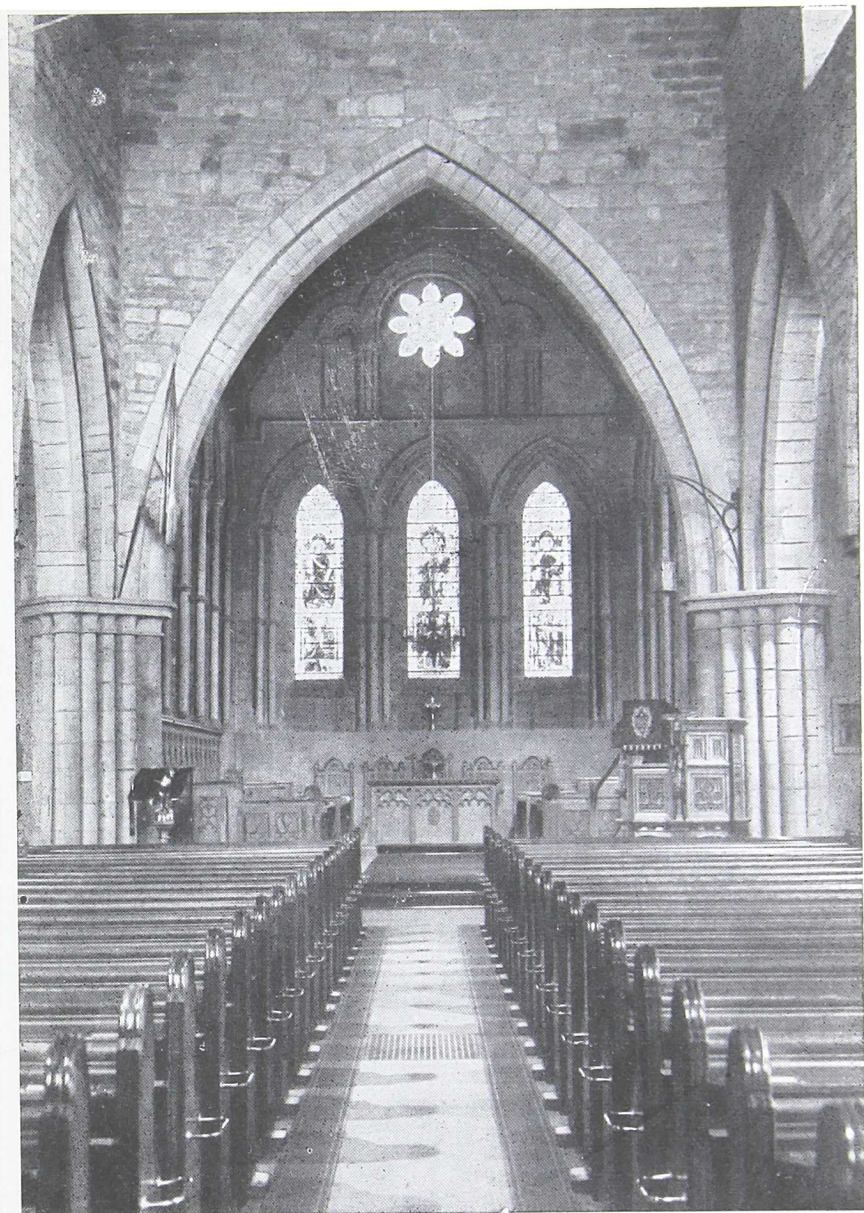
Until the Restoration in 1900, it was thought that the existing building was the original mediaeval structure. However, in the excavations carried out then, it was discovered that underneath the south west respond there was an arch of small stones and along with other stones excavated from the



BRECHIN CATHEDRAL: THE WEST FRONT AND ROUND TOWER



BRECHIN CATHEDRAL: THE NAVE AND CHANCEL



BRECHIN CATHEDRAL : THE CHANCEL



BRECHIN CATHEDRAL: THE AULDBAR STONE

ruined wall of the Chancel, these would indicate that a Norman Church had originally stood on or near the present site.

This building was demolished in the early 13th Century to make way for one built in the pointed style. Dedicated to the Holy Trinity, the present Cathedral was erected and an original consecration cross can still be seen on the exterior south wall of the Chancel. For the next 300 years this building was the seat of the Bishops of Brechin and was administered by a Chapter of 14 canons. Here the daily offices were sung and, on Sundays and Feast Days, the citizens of the small burgh which grew up round the Cathedral gathered for the worship of God. After 1560 Brechin lost much of her prestige as a cathedral city, the church lands were alienated by the bishop, Alexander Campbell, but the Cathedral Kirk now modified for Reformed Worship (the Chancel Arch was blocked up and the pulpit placed between two pillars on the south side of the nave) remained and continued to be used as the Parish Church. John Hepburn, a relative of the former Bishop, became the first minister of Brechin in 1561.

In the mid 17th century, the population had grown both within the burgh and in the extensive landward parish so that it was deemed necessary to establish a second charge. From 1650 to 1942 the collegiate ministry continued and for most of the time worked well until the middle of the last war when the two charges were united before the Rev. James Anderson was inducted as sole minister.

In the 16th century, both before and after the Reformation, the fabric of the Cathedral suffered from neglect but in the following century much was done to preserve it. Lofts for the Heritors, Town Council, the Guildry Incorporation (which celebrated its Tercentenary in 1966) and the Trades were erected besides other seating accommodation. By the end of the 18th century, however, drastic action had to be taken. In 1806 the Heritors, the Council, the Incorporation and private seat holders decided to "restore" the Kirk, now commonly called Brechin Parish Church. "The north and south transepts were removed, new aisles were built on each side of the Nave, and one immense, abominable ugly roof made to cover the whole" (Black). The late Dr. W. Douglas Simpson described the roof as like a bivvy tent! Certainly the mediaeval Nave was saved but the restored building, seating 1200 with lofts on 4 sides has come about through the destruction of the ancient porch and transepts.

Brechin Parish Church in the 19th century was a typical "dreich" and drab Scots Kirk. Typical of the thinking of the early 1800's was the architect's suggestion that the Round Tower should be demolished and the stones used for the restoration. Fortunately, the Laird of Brechin Castle, Lord Panmure, had a sense of our heritage. He threatened to hang the first man to remove a stone!

As the years passed, however, the dream of restoring the Cathedral to something of its ancient glory grew. Alexander Gardner, minister of the Second Charge (1843-93) cherished such a dream. In his will, he made provision for the erection of a new quoad sacra church and parish (the Gardner Memorial opened in 1899). This overcame the obvious difficulty that any scheme of restoration would result in a considerable reduction in seating accommodation. Under the leadership of the Rev. John Alexander Clark, inducted to the First Charge in 1892, definite plans began to be made. In December, 1897, the scheme was launched when the Right Honourable James Campbell of Stracathro was elected Chairman of the Restoration Committee and Dr. John Honeyman was appointed Architect. In January, 1900 the actual work began and for more than two years the congregation worshipped in the City Hall. Before the end of 1900, however, while the Cathedral was roofless, a great company gathered in the Kirkyard for the funeral of Mr Clark, whose untimely death, at the age of 41, is still spoken of by elderly Brechiners. His name is forever associated with the Restoration. The Cathedral, and from then on the old name was once again used, was re-opened for public worship on 23rd April, 1902 when the sermon was preached by the Moderator, the Right Rev. James Mitchell, D.D.

Such, in brief, is the story of the Cathedral Kirk till the beginning of this century.

THE CATHEDRAL TO-DAY

The Nave

The Nave consists of five bays and is about 84 feet long, but the west bays are blocked to the head of their arches with the organ loft, so the general impression of length is somewhat destroyed. Despite the various changes of the centuries, the Nave retains its characteristic features practically intact from the early 13th century. On entering the Nave for the first time, visitors are struck by certain inconsistencies of construction. The four pillars in the North arcade are far more elaborate than these on the South

arcade. Obviously the builders departed radically from the original design and adopted a much inferior one. Whether this was due to the death of the master mason or more likely financial stringency (and how often this has happened in Scotland), we cannot say.

The Nave is lit by 4 clerestory windows on each side placed above the pillars rather than the usual practice of above the point of the arch. The clerestory walls support the Nave roof and the original decorated carvings, despite their age, look well preserved. The timber roof dates from the 1900 Restoration. On the North side of the Chancel Arch have been fixed two carved stones of interest. One is the heraldic arms of Bishop George Shoreswood (1454-63), the other is the "St. Mary Stone", dating from the 11th century, in the centre of which is a carved relief of the Virgin and Child. Near this is the font, of undistinguished polished granite.

The Chancel

After the Chancel Arch was blocked up at the Reformation, the Chancel became a ruin as well as becoming a quarry in the 17th century. By 1900 all that remained was an ivy-covered wall, which fortunately supported the mutilated remains of 3 tall lancet windows on the north side and one similar window on the south side. Dr. Honeyman's great achievement was to take down the wall which had blocked the Chancel Arch for so long and to reconstruct the Chancel around these surviving fragments. The restored Chancel now consists of five lancet windows on each side and at the east end, a new wall consisting of three windows of the same design, the middle one being surmounted by a small rose window. The restored Chancel is designed in the early pointed style, in keeping with the original 13th century Nave.

Hanging from the Chancel roof is the "hearse" or brass chandelier, presented by Andrew Lamb, the first Jacobean Bishop, in 1615. The "hearse" is believed to be of early 16th century Flemish workmanship. For three centuries and more, it hung from the Nave roof; fitted first with candles, it was later adapted for gas, then electricity. In 1950 after careful cleaning and restoring, it was hung in the Chancel, now once more fitted with candles. These are always lit at the various Christmas Services.

At the Restoration, the Woman's Guild gave the Communion Table and Pulpit. The minister's and elders' chairs were gifted later. On the front of the Table is an enlarged reproduction of the seal of the mediaeval Chapter—

representing the Trinity. The Chancel pews, two on each side, were assigned at the Restoration to the Town Council and the families of the principal heritors, one of whom still regularly uses this privilege. On Civic occasions, the Town Council sit in their pew on the north side and the Guildry Incorporation on the south side. On Communion Sundays, the elders sit in their pews and after receiving the sacrament take the elements to the congregation seated in the Nave and Aisles.

The Aisles and Transepts

The aisle walls are modern, built like all the restored parts of sand stone from the Ardovie quarry. The original walls were demolished at the unfortunate 1807 restoration when new walls were constructed to provide wider aisles. In 1900 these in turn were taken down and the present walls built on their foundation. In mediaeval times there were a number of side altars there, dedicated to various saints. The west end of the south aisle wall is broken by the protrusion of the Round Tower base and in this corner there now stand the Aldbar Stone and the glass case containing the sacramental vessels.

One of the most tragic features of the 1807 reconstruction was the demolition of the two transepts. In pre-Reformation times there stood in these, the altar to Our Lady and on the north, the altar of the Holy Cross. At the Restoration, Dr. Honeyman rebuilt the south transept as it appeared in old engravings. This was not possible for the north transept because room had to be found there for extra seatings. Instead he designed a much larger transept, rectangular in shape and in the pointed style harmonizing with the latest mediaeval building. This transept has always been known as the Queen's Aisle in memory of Queen Victoria who died during the Restoration. In 1951, it was converted into a side chapel and screened off by a wrought iron grille. With accommodation for about three dozen worshippers, the Queen's Aisle is now used for occasional services such as small marriage and communion services.

The Exterior and Towers

It seems likely that the mediaeval masons followed the old tradition of building the west door at the same time as the early pointed work of the Chancel and the east end of the Nave. Certainly the west front is very old and by 1951, the stone work was showing only too clearly the ravages of 700

years' weathering. Then as a result of an appeal by the Society of Friends and a generous grant of £500 from the Pilgrim Trust, a scheme of preservation was carried out which seems to have been effective.

The Cathedral Tower of Brechin has been described as "the completest and best remaining example of its kind in Scotland". It rises to 70 feet, divided unequally by three string courses. The base up to the first was built during the 13th century and the walls are 5 feet thick. During the following century the tower rose from the first string course to the bartizan or battlemented parapet. Finally the rather squat spire, octagonal in shape and 58 feet high was added. At the north east end of the tower there rises a narrow angular turret which finishes in a small octagonal spire of its own. The door at the foot of the turret opens onto a narrow spiral stair of 111 steps which lead to the platform enclosing the base of the spire. Here is placed the clock which strikes the hours on the "meikle bell" in the belfry and the quarters on the two "little bells" in the spire. The clock dates from the 1807 restoration, replacing a mid-17th century one. The great bell is about 300 years old and was recast in 1780. The room in the base of the Tower is now the vestry. About 15 feet square it was originally the chapter house, and after 1560 it was used for long years as the Session House. Above the vestry is a large chamber where the Kirk officer rings the bell, not only to call the faithful to worship on the Lord's Day but during the week to call the city curfew at 8 p.m. and on Saturday at 10 p.m.

Brechin, however, is most famous because it has one of the Two Round Towers in Scotland, the other being at Abernethy, Perthshire. To-day, the Round Tower stands at the south west of the Cathedral into the wall of which the base projects; prior to the 1807 restoration it stood detached. To-day the Round Tower is 86 feet high or 106 feet to the apex of the octagonal cap. The base is 15 feet in diameter and the interior is divided into 7 storeys with a series of wooden ladders and platforms. It was built originally as a watch tower and place of refuge at the time of the devastating raids of the Vikings about 1000 A.D. In recent years, the Ministry of Works, who have responsibility for its care and maintenance, renovated the exterior stonework; the surface was cleaned of all scaling and crumbling stone, and the pointing renewed. Now with a new weather-vane, the Round Tower presents a very attractive appearance and as our Session Clerk and local historian, Mr David

Boath Thoms has written in the Guide Book, "The Ministry has set it on the second millenium of existence in perhaps the best condition it has ever known".

The Stained Glass

Maybe fortunately, there was no stained glass installed in the Cathedral prior to the Restoration. But when the Cathedral was re-opened for worship, Brechiners not only saw the beautifully restored Chancel but the windows all containing stained glass, designed by Henry Holland. The north and south sides depict the Gospel story, the east end windows represent the Ascended Christ as the eternal Prophet, Priest and King, and above in the small rose window, the Agnus Dei. The two windows on each side of the Chancel Arch also had stained glass installed at the Restoration. The Rev. A. D. Tait Hutchison, minister of the Second Charge (1893-1942) drew up a scheme of stained glass for the restored Cathedral but by the end of his ministry, only two other windows had been installed, one in the south transept by William Morris in 1907 and another in the south aisle by Herbert Hendrie in 1932. The tremendous effort of the Restoration and the years of depression which badly affected Brechin no doubt account for this. However, Mr Hutchison's proposals were not forgotten and under the inspired leadership of the Rev. James Anderson who became minister of the Cathedral in 1942, a whole new series of windows were installed from 1949. In that year, the War Memorial Window, designed by Dr. Douglas Strachan was unveiled. In the next ten years, three other windows were installed in the Aisles, three in the Queen's Aisle, the wonderful west window behind the organ loft (on the theme of the "Te Deum"), the three narrow windows in the vestry and the eight Clerestory windows (all depicting Scottish saints). These modern windows have mostly been designed by the doyen of Scottish stained glass artists, William Wilson, but there are two in the English style by Hugh Easton. That the scheme was so wonderfully and well-nigh completed was due to the generosity of certain individuals, and the continuing interest of the Woman's Guild.

The Organ

The first mention in the Kirk Session Minutes of a proposal to install an organ was in July, 1877. Within a year a three-manual organ built by Peter Connacher & Co.,

Huddersfield, had been installed in the old Guildry Loft in front of the Chancel Arch. It is interesting to note ninety years afterwards that the cost was about £800 and that there were 45 applicants for the post of organist at £90 per annum. At the Restoration the organ was dismantled and re-erected at the west end, partially obscuring the fine west window, and tubular-pneumatic action was substituted for the original tracker action. In 1927 the organ was divided in two blocks with the console mid way between. By the beginning of the 1950's, it was obvious that the organ was in need of complete overhaul. Though the possibility of a rebuild was considered, the more modest scheme of a thorough cleaning was adopted and certain alterations made. This remedial work certainly staved off the day of restoration but by the mid sixties, it became abundantly clear that it could be delayed no longer. In 1967, an Organ Restoration Committee was formed and under the dynamic convenership of Mr J. S. Ross, an appeal for £7,000 was launched. After negotiations with Messrs. Rushworth and Dreaper of Liverpool, it was decided in 1968 to proceed with a scheme for a comprehensive rebuild of the organ with a new modern console and a modern electro-pneumatic action, which made a much fuller use of the existing pipe work and certain necessary additions including the restoration of the trumpet stop. Work began in early October and on Sunday, 9th February, 1969 the restored organ was rededicated by the Very Rev. Nevile Davidson, D.D. Two months later, the opening recital was given by the organist of Chester Cathedral and by mid summer after a fete held at Careston Castle, the final accounts were paid.

Other Matters of Interest

At the south west corner of the Cathedral visitors will find much of interest. Recently, the Aldbar Stone was erected there. This is a typical example of Pictish-Christian monuments dating from the 9th-10th centuries. It stood originally in the kirkyard of Aldbar, about 3 miles south west of Brechin. The front of the stone consists of a Celtic Cross, with two ecclesiastics standing on each side of the Cross shaft. The back is divided into four panels. The top shows a pair of ecclesiastics ; the second represents the figure of the boy David killing the lion, and alongside his symbols, a shepherd's staff, a harp and horned sheep ; the third depicts a horseman bearing a round shield and in the bottom panel, an animal with a double set of legs—a Pictish way of indica-

ting two animals abreast. Nearby there is another ancient carved stone—a recumbent hogsback of dark reddish sandstone and a mediaeval font standing on a 19th century base. There is also a collection of various carved mediaeval stones.

To the east of the Aldbar Stone there is a glass case containing the Sacramental Vessels. The Cathedral is fortunate in possessing four 17th century Cups. The four are identical in style and form, and are beautifully proportioned pieces of silverware, plain and free of ornamentation apart from the moulded foot. They all bear the town mark of Dundee, along with the letters “ R.G. ” (i.e., Robert Gairden of a famous Dundee silversmith family).

The first cup is inscribed

Ad celebrandum sacrum synaxin

Calix ecclesie Brechinensis 1631

It may well be the cup which the congregation provided in response to the 1617 act which enjoined parishioners to provide cups for their parish kirk. The other three cups similarly inscribed were given by the Bishop of the time, David Lindsay (1619-1634) in the same year and by the parish minister, Alexander Bisset in 1643 and his successor William Raitt in 1648.

Few kirks can claim that their patens were gifted by the beadle but Brechin Cathedral can. The old mortification board above the Vestry Door contains this interesting information

“ 1660. John Mill, kirk officer, gave three tin basins for serving in the administration of the Sacraments. ”

These pewter patens along with two pot-bellied flagons of 1680 are also in the case. In addition, there is also a hand bell of the same century, the silver Baptismal dish of 1807 given by a son of the manse of Brechin and the four 1880 cups which are copies of the 17th century ones. In the vestry, there are also four cups from the 1902 Restoration (in memory of the Rev. John A. Clark) and the individual communion set introduced in 1957. Since then both methods have been used but every year we still use these four cups on certain occasions as our forebears have done for over three centuries.

The Society of Friends of Brechin Cathedral

Reference has already been made to the Society of Friends. The Society was founded by the Rev. James Anderson in 1947 and since then has done much to adorn and improve the amenity of the Cathedral, as similar

societies have done for other historic kirks. Among its gifts have been the Case for the Sacramental Vessels and the Commemorative Bronze Tablet (unveiled by that noted ecclesiastical historian, my old professor, G. D. Henderson, during his moderatorial year in 1955) containing the names of the Bishops and Ministers of Brechin from 1150 to the present day. In the recent organ restoration appeal, the Society both from its funds and by members' individual contributions gave generously. The Annual Meeting is held prior to the festival on Trinity Sunday. In most years a paper is delivered and many of these are published in the 18 books of the Society which have so far appeared. These cover many aspects of the ecclesiastical history of Brechin and North Angus. The most recent deals with the 18th Century Brechin Seceders. The Society also publishes the Cathedral Guide and the companion booklet on the Cathedral Stained Glass

In the foregoing, I have tried to describe the Cathedral, its history and present day appearance. In doing so I have leaned very heavily on the authorities listed below, in particular on the writings of the Session Clerk, Mr D. B. Thoms. Annually about 2,000 visitors sign their names in the visitors' book and there must be many more who visit the Cathedral each year. But first and foremost, the Cathedral is the place of worship for a congregation numbering about 1,400 members. Like any other "auld kirk" congregation in a small Scottish burgh, the membership is drawn from all sections of the community. There is a faithful core of active members numbering some hundreds and there is a large number of others who though they may not attend very frequently are yet proud to claim the Cathedral as their kirk. Dr. Walter William Coats, who was minister of the First Charge for the first 40 years of this century was a devoted member of the Church Service Society and in fact was President in 1928 when the first Annual was published. He set a standard of orderly and reverent worship which his successors have sought to maintain. On civic occasions, like the Kirkin' o' the Council and Remembrance Sunday, the Town Council and other bodies come to the Cathedral. The end of term services of Brechin High School are also held within her ancient walls. One innovation introduced since 1966 has been the provision of an early morning service at 9.15 a.m. during the summer months. Quite a number of

the congregation have welcomed this. At the same time the four Church of Scotland congregations have been seeking ways of working more closely together. As a result of a proposal from the Cathedral Kirk Session, we now have regular united Thanksgiving Services on Sacrament Sundays in the four kirks in town. Obviously, the needs of our age demand of the Church in Brechin considerable rethinking and re-formation. What the future may hold is uncertain for our Ancient City and her people, but the Cathedral Kirk and her Towers stand as symbols of these truths which do not change—that in every age God calls for man's worship and the service of his life.

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