

LADYKIRK PARISH CHURCH

There is but one Ladykirk in the Church of Scotland. It is situated ten miles west of Berwick, on the Scottish bank of the Tweed. Opposite, on the English side, is the village of Norham with its ancient Castle. The church is one of the few pre-Reformation churches in Scotland and is still the Parish Church and place of worship. It was founded by King James IV in A.D. 1500, the year of the Papal Jubilee. It is as difficult to keep the story of James, our King, out of this, as it was for Mr. Dick to keep King Charles' head out of his great Memorial.

The story is that King James IV on one occasion was almost drowned in a deep Pool or Steill of the river, just below the bank at this place. He may have been returning from a foray into England. The King ascribed his deliverance to 'Our Lady of the Steill' and he vowed that he would erect a church in honour of the Virgin Mary, promising it should never be destroyed by fire or water; therefore it was built entirely of stone on the height above the River. It has a commanding situation, and from its Tower there is an extensive view of the Merse. The word Steil has become 'Sheil' in Ladykirk Sheil and Pedwell Sheil, the deep pools where the salmon fishermen cast their nets. Records show that the building was begun in March 1500 and in the Royal Treasurer's Accounts there are several entries from that year of payments to the workers and those who had oversight of the work. In those entries it is called the Church of Upsetlington, which was the ancient name of the Manor and district. Though the derivation is uncertain, it probably means the 'toun' on the upper ground. Certain it is, we are on historic ground, on the debatable land of the Marches. It was also known as the Kirk of Steil, in memory of its foundation. But the official name from the time it was dedicated to the Virgin Mary has been 'the Church of Our Lady' or 'Our Ladykirk', and through the changes of the Reformation, and of Episcopal and Presbyterian Successions, the name has remained without alteration.

The building of the church extended over several years and, with the exception of the Tower, appears to have been completed before Flodden. It was visited by the King on several occasions. From early Scottish Records we are able to piece together useful information concerning the actual construction. King James entrusted the oversight of the work and payment of the workers to Sir Patrick Blackadder, Knight, who belonged to a distinguished Border family. It is interesting to learn that he was a kinsman of Archbishop Blackadder,

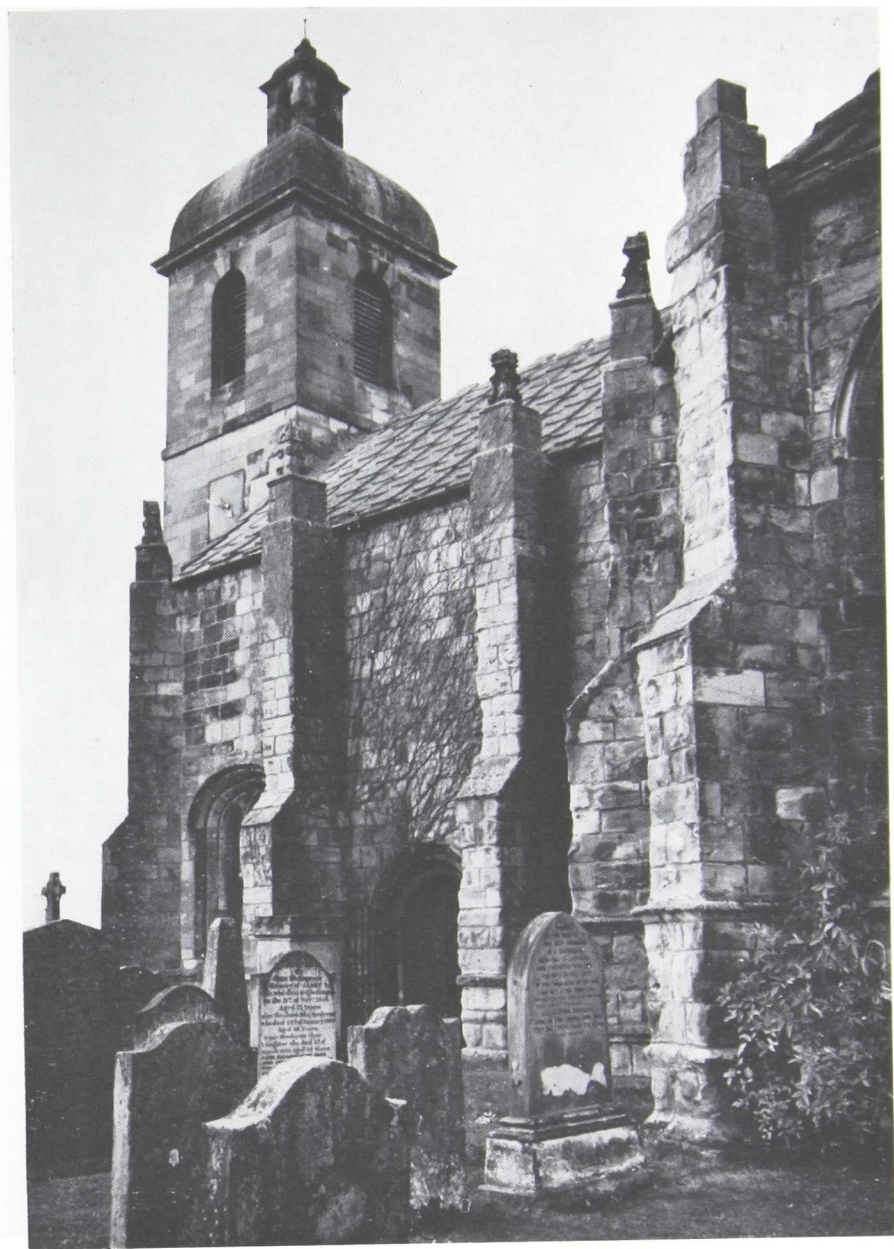


Plate A. LADYKIRK PARISH CHURCH

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and, about the same time, the Blackadder Aisle was being built in the Cathedral of Glasgow. On 21 August 1501, £483 was paid to Sir Patrick for 'the thack of the Kirk of Steil'. This may have reference to the roof or thatching, or to the building generally. By the year 1504 the oversight of the work had passed to George Kerr, the laird of Hutton Hall. These men, if not architects, could be described as Clerks of Works; they were also responsible for payment to the masons. A record in the Treasurer's Accounts for the year 1511 names George Ellis as the mason, and the church is still 'bigging'. Other workers are mentioned by name, and one, Nicol Jackson. Master Mason, received £2 on one occasion for an 'ailed rest' or sprained wrist. That stone from a near-by quarry was used we learn from the fact that the quarriers, who dug out the local stone, got 'drink-silver' on one of the Royal visits. Stone from the same quarry was used in the restoration of Swinton Church and also for the inner walls of the National Shrine at Edinburgh Castle.

It is very difficult to estimate the original cost of such a building. A sum of £1200 is mentioned and this at the beginning of this century might be considered as being equivalent to £12,000 or £15,000. Glass was a dear commodity and there are entries for payments to Thomas Peblis, glass wricht. There is a reference also to battens for the scaffolding, and to lime brought from Eyemouth.

King James was present at the Service in 1505, when the Chancel had been built, and, at this time, he made gifts to the Church. One was 'ane frontaill of an altar of annes Work'! and, for the priest, a chasuble and an alb. The chasuble is described as of white damask having a crimson cross of satin – and the Royal Arms embroidered on it. Tradition has it that King James paid a last visit to the completed church in 1513 just before Flodden, and while he was engaged in besieging Norham Castle.

Architecture (see Plate A)

The architecture of the church belongs to the third or late Gothic period, which is sometimes called 'Scottish Gothic'. It also reflects the influence of French craftsmanship, and in view of the Alliance this would be the case. The church is cruciform in plan, the Chancel and Nave being built from East to West with North and South Transepts adjoining the Nave near the centre of the church. The Chancel and Transepts have semi-hexagonal apsidal terminations. There is a Tower at the West Gable; the lower part belongs to the original building, but the upper part, in the form of a belfry, was built in 1741. This campanile is in the Classical style and is the work of William Adam; this belfry forms a complete contrast to the Gothic, yet it is an outstanding landmark in this part of the Merse.

There were three entrances, a door leading into the Nave, one into the Chancel, which was the priest's door, both in the South wall, and one door on the North wall; these doors are all semi-circular in the Arch-head. It is generally agreed that the roof is the most remarkable feature of the whole building. The early records show, at different dates, payments for the thacking of the Kirk. 'Thacking' could be of any material, and in this case the roof was made of overlapping free-stone slabs. The heaviness of the stone necessitated the building of eighteen buttresses, round the walls of the church. There are actually three separate roofs, one covering Nave and Chancel and a roof over each transept. These two do not mitre into the main roof, but terminate into walls, extending from the Nave.

Internally the roofs are pointed Barrel Vaults of the style employed in the late Gothic period. This type of roof and the apsidal terminations of Chancel and Transepts are the features which show most clearly the influence of 'the Auld Alliance' with France. The church was built completely of stone, not a particle of wood was used in its erection, and, until a hundred years ago, the pews or seats were stone benches. A series of transverse ribs relieve the baldness of the Barrel Vaulting. A good and concise description of the church is to be found in MacFarlane's *Geographical Collections* dated circa 1720 and later, published by the Scottish Historical Society. It states that the length is 90 feet, the breadth 23 feet, and the height 40 feet. (These figures are approximately correct.) 'It is built in the form of a Cross, having two "Isles" (transepts), one on the North, the other on the South. And the circumference (external) by reason of the aisles and twenty buttresses, and a little square steeple (unperfected) on the West end, is $157\frac{1}{3}$ yards. It is built of a good firm freestone, within and without after the Gothic manner, and is one of the best vaults and finest pieces of architecture of any church, excepting Cathedrals, in the Island.' The buttresses are required to support the weight of the roof. At the West gable, on the north side, there is the tower referred to in MacFarlane's account. Within the church, a square-headed door leads into the Tower and, by a newel stair with very worn steps, access is gained to the first and second floors where there are the Priest's rooms of pre-Reformation days. One room contained a fireplace, and the other had a window, now built up, which commanded the view of the altar at the Chancel. The Tower was completed in 1743 by the addition of a campanile. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the tower was used as a prison by the Baron Baillie, and one may assume the majority lodged there would be poachers and vagrants. In 1861 the stone benches were removed and pews were installed; the Communion Table and Pulpit were placed in a central position at the opening to the South Transept. On the West gable there is a bust representing King James IV, by Mr.

Handasyde Ritchie, a well-known sculptor of the nineteenth century, and below it there is a Latin inscription recording the foundation in 1500 and the restoration of 1741. This was undertaken by Mr. William Robertson, Laird of the Parish, and Mr. Coutts, Banker.

In the Chancel there is a dole chest or Alms Chest bearing the date 1641. It was presented to the church in 1880. Carved on it is the name of St. Nicholas' Church, Liverpool. On the front of the chest is a carving of the Flight into Egypt and around it are Biblical texts and one which is not Biblical. It reads, 'God's worst is better than the world's best'. At one time over the North door of the Nave there was a stone with the Royal Arms of Scotland, surrounded by the Collar of the Garter. On the floor of the church there is a very old stone with paint markings on it, and it is just possible that this may be the same stone. That, however, is pure surmise.

Old Session Records

One volume dating from 1696 reveals much interesting information about the life and activity of the parish. An early minute (1698) refers to a collection that had to be taken for the bridge over the river Cart at Paisley. There is recorded the fact that at the time of the Revolution Settlement, the Episcopalian Minister, Mr. Cranfurd, was pensioned off 'out of tenderness to the old man'. This is an exceptional example of kindness to the 'outed minister'. Reference is also made to his successor, Mr. Gullane, who earlier had suffered for his Covenanting principles. After his death it is noted that his widow and Mrs. Erskine, widow of the Chirnside minister, were left in extreme poverty and each received a pension of £5 from the respective parishes. Mrs. Erskine was the mother of Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, founders of the Original Secession Church.

Under the Presbyterian regime the Kirk Session exercised a strict watch over the moral life of the parish. Communion vessels and tokens were purchased in 1716. The tokens and one ancient paten with the name 'Redpath 1716' are still in existence. About that time there is an order for a Stool of Repentance, and from Kirk Session Records we find that it was in frequent use. Besides the usual offences noted in Session Records, there are other sins for which the offenders were brought up for censure. For instance, the swearer is admonished; and 'the man who bled another on the Sabbath day'. A reflection of the times is the admonition passed by the Session in 1712 on two women who took a dead sheep out of the flooded Tweed and skinned it on the Sabbath day. A man who helped them was severely reprimanded. The women pleaded that they were starving. Another minute refers to the herd boy who broke the Sabbath day whistling to his dog. He is recommended to read his book, i.e. his Bible.

As was the case throughout Scotland, the Kirk Session were responsible for the care of the poor and the disbursement of charity. From the church records, the beneficiaries were a 'mixed bag'. Poor Probationers, distressed Episcopal ministers, and Highland bursars are remembered. The widows of fishermen, people who had their houses burnt, a poor man escaped from the Turks, all received aid and a Turk 'who turned Christian and was brought to the parish for the people to see' received liberal help from the Session. The Old Session Records, though confused and incomplete, yet provide invaluable aid and are a source of information about the Parish and its parishioners.

In the Church there is a Roll of 'Parsons of Ladykirk Parish' which was formed in 1600 from the Union of the parishes of Upsetlington and Horndean. It brings out several interesting features, beginning as it does from 1159. There are the names of the pre-Reformation incumbents, 'Andrew, Parson of Upsetlington, William, Provost of Upsetlington and names of Norman origin, such as Henry de Strivelyn and Richard de Tavernant'. Soon after the Reformation you find that there are still 'Readers' serving the parishes. This was customary because of the paucity of ordained ministers. In 1567 you note 'Andrew Winchester, Reader, Upsetlington', and, in 1573, 'David Douglas, Reader, Horndean'. Then there come the parsons who served during the Episcopal regime where you have the interesting entry: '1607, John Home, rector of St. Mary's, Ladykirk', followed by 'David Hume, M.A.'. From 1694 the Presbyterians are well established and the names emerge from the shades and become real people, such as Samuel Kilpatrick, 1697, who kept a stern outlook over his flock and who in later life was so stout, he had to be carried across to the church. In 1712 George Redpath was the incumbent and it was in his time that pewter Patens and pewter Tokens are acquired. A box of these communion tokens bearing the date 1716 survives and there is one ancient lead Paten much the worse for the wear. This Paten belongs to the same period and at one time had the name of 'George Redpath' on it. From 1741 to 1786 John Tod exercised a long, notable and disputatious ministry. He fought with Presbytery and Synod, with the lairds and with the village dominie (schoolmaster). Lady Nairne, the song, writer has left a humorous sketch of him of which I quote a verse,

The callants a' fear John Tod, John Tod,	(young men)
The callants a' fear John Tod.	(youngsters)
If they steal but a neep	(turnip)
The laddie he'll whip	
And its unco weel done of John Tod.	(very)

He's weel respectit, John Tod, John Tod,
 He's weel respectit, John Tod.
 He's a terrible man
 But we'd a' hae wrang,
 If he sud leave us, John Tod, John Tod. (wrong)
 If he sud leave us, John Tod. (should)

So the succession continued; some were worthy of their office, some not so worthy, which was one reason for the building of a Secession Church in Horndean. One Assistant at the beginning of the nineteenth century was Hew Scott, author and originator of the 'Fasti'. There was the Rev. G. Hume Robertson, the sporting parson, who was a descendant of a noted Covenanter, executed in the 'killing times'. There was a distinguished Sanskrit Scholar, the Rev. John Stevenson, D.D. A stained glass window in the North Transept commemorates a son of the Rev. John Dobie; this son was Professor of Oriental Languages in Edinburgh University.

Ladykirk Estate has been in the family of Askew-Robertson for more than 200 years and, as chief heritors, they deserve a mention in any record of Ladykirk Church. They have been improvers and restorers of the building over the generations and their work and their gifts have also been 'thank offerings' for the mercies of God.

In concluding this brief 'history' may I recall the words of the late Very Rev. Professor James Cooper, D.D., in a beautiful sermon which he preached in the church in 1913, entitled 'Kindness to the Dead'? Recalling the commemoration of King James IV, he wrote: "He is worthy for whom Thou shouldest do this, for he loveth our nation and hath built us a synagogue" (Luke 7:5). King James IV was the builder of this venerable sanctuary, the holy and beautiful house, wherein for over 400 years, our forefathers have worshipped. It remains a standing witness amid all the changes of these changeful centuries, to the things in our religion which cannot be shaken. Long may it stand to fulfil its sacred purpose. Long may a congregation convene within its walls, to hear the same gospel, to receive the same sacraments, to confess the same Creed, to sing the same Psalms, and unite in the same Lord's Prayer.'

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